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Iraqi Refugees: Resettle the Most Vulnerable

Since 2003, almost two million Iraqis have fled their country as a result of violence, and several hundred thousands more have been displaced within Iraq.

Many have fled their homes after being personally targeted by armed militias because of their religion, profession, ethnicity or perceived affiliation with western organizations, the US government in particular. With the violence showing no signs of slowing down, solutions need to be found for those whose lives are in danger.

For the vast majority of the displaced, the immediate and medium-term solutions involve temporary protection in safer regions of Iraq, or in surrounding countries. But since Iraq is a strong familial and tribal society, many of the displaced feel that they will never be able to return home as revenge would be carried out against them and their families. For them and other vulnerable Iraqis, resettlement is the only available option. Because of its limited resources, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has been unable to refer large number of cases for resettlement, and western countries, with the notable exception of Sweden, have largely been reluctant to be proactive in the matter. It is essential for donor countries to build the UNHCR resettlement unit's capacity and to increase the number of Iraqis they are willing to resettle.

VULNERABLE GROUPS IN NEED OF RESETTLEMENT

Palestinians

Although the violence in Iraq is so extreme that all civilians are at risk regardless of their religion or ethnicity, certain groups are particularly vulnerable. One such group is the Palestinians of Iraq. Many have been in Iraq since 1948,

have children and grandchildren born there, and consider that country their permanent home. During Saddam Hussein's rule, Palestinians received special privileges. Palestinians were given subsidized housing, often to the detriment of Iraqis who were evicted or forced to rent their property to Palestinians free of charge.

Perceived as loyal to Saddam Hussein and the Baath party, Palestinians are now targeted by all factions in Iraq. Their vulnerability is increased by the fact that they are stateless and have nowhere to go. Some have tried to flee the country and are now living in a no-man's land in between Syrian and Iraqi borders (see Refugee International's "Syria: Urgent Appeal for Palestinians fleeing Iraq" <http://www.refintl.org/content/article/detail/9660/?mission=9573>). UNHCR has unsuccessfully tried to negotiate their admission into an Arab country or resettle them. Despite the sensitivities linked to the resettlement of Palestinians outside a comprehensive peace agreement with Israel, there is no other immediate solution for the Palestinians from Iraq. The UN estimates that around 15,000 remain in Iraq and are in imminent danger.

Especially vulnerable Iraqis

Vulnerability is extremely difficult to assess. Most of the Iraqis fleeing their country are in a dire situation. As their resources run out, they find themselves deprived of any legal status in their countries of asylum, with no right to work. Resettlement, however, can only be an option in extreme cases of vulnerability, as it is impossible --- both for lack of resources and political will --- to resettle all civilians fleeing

Iraq. UNHCR is currently in the process of establishing categories to help assess vulnerability. Such a list would include but is not limited to the following: victims of severe trauma or violence; religious or ethnic minorities who are targeted; unaccompanied children; medical cases; stateless persons; Iraqis connected to governmental or international organizations; and Iraqis at immediate risk of refoulement. Refugees International welcomes the development of such criteria, as it will help UNHCR prioritize needs and assist the most vulnerable first. These criteria should also serve as a basis for resettlement countries undertaking their own assessments, and for NGOs and others to facilitate referrals to UNHCR and embassies.

Iraqis associated with the US government or organizations

This UNHCR category is of particular relevance to the United States. As anti-American and anti-western sentiments grow in Iraq, many Iraqis are being targeted for their affiliation with Coalition forces, US government, US NGOs or other western organizations. Refugees International met with a woman whose son was kidnapped because she worked with the Coalition Provisional Authority. When she arrived in Jordan, she sought help from the US embassy, only to hear that they couldn't do anything for her. A man who was shot three times because of his work for western NGOs told RI, "I was trying to help people. Now, nobody is here to help me." Because of its role in Iraq, the US has a moral obligation to assist all refugees. For this particular category, however, Refugees International believes that the obligation should be inscribed in law. To date, the only measure taken by the US to assist Iraqis targeted because of their affiliation to the US is to allow the Pentagon to resettle 50 translators per year. This measure is insufficient, as many more are at immediate risk of violence or have already been attacked.

RESETTLEMENT FIGURES

Largely under-funded and faced with a lack of political will from western countries, UNHCR was only able to resettle 1,500 Iraqis in the past three years. This number represents a tiny percentage of the refugees who are in need of immediate resettlement. Although UNHCR has now increased its resettlement projections to 4,500 people in 2007, the needs remain higher. It is essential that western countries, and the US in particular, acknowledge that the region is overburdened and can not handle this refugee crisis without the assistance of the international community, including support for resettlement. Whereas after the first Gulf War the US resettled tens of thousands of Iraqis, it has only resettled hundreds since 2003, when the threat civilians face

is actually much more severe. Moreover, US embassies are technically allowed to process resettlement applications themselves, but the policy until now has been to let UNHCR handle all referrals, which puts the understaffed agency in an impossible situation.

REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDS:

- ❑ UNHCR complete and share its vulnerability criteria with all relevant actors, including donor governments, resettlement countries' embassies and NGOs, and others who can assist in identifying vulnerable cases;
- ❑ UNHCR continue its plans to resettle the most vulnerable first;
- ❑ Resettlement countries make generous commitments to UNHCR regarding the number of refugees they can admit each year so that it can plan properly;
- ❑ The US government fund at least 50% of UNHCR's budget for the Iraqi refugee response to demonstrate its willingness to lead efforts to respond to the humanitarian crisis caused by the war in Iraq;
- ❑ The US government readjust the existing 2007 Department of State budget to provide the necessary resources to resettle Iraqis. These resources should not come at the expense of resettlement activities in other parts of the world
- ❑ The US government immediately design and implement a plan to provide asylum to Iraqis whose lives have been threatened for their connections to the US government, US media outlets, and US NGOs. Other countries with a presence in Iraq should do the same for those who work with their nationals.
- ❑ The US government design and implement short term security plans that can provide shelter in Iraq to Iraqis who have been targeted with violence because of their association with US entities.

Advocates Kristele Younes and Sean Garcia assessed the situation for Iraqi refugees in the Middle East in November 2006.