

From Fast Death to Slow Death: Palestinian Refugees from Iraq Trapped on the Syria-Iraq Border

Summary Report of an International NGO Delegation

November 20, 2008

Having fled killings, kidnappings, torture, and death threats, about 3,000 Palestinian refugees from Iraq are currently stranded in three camps along the border between Syria and Iraq. Denied asylum and refugee rights, they are extremely vulnerable in poorly situated camps. The Syrian government and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) are both open to third country resettlement on humanitarian grounds and on the basis of individual choice. Therefore, the challenge now lies with both traditional and emerging resettlement countries, in collaboration with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, to accept these Palestinian refugees from Iraq for resettlement, allowing the inhospitable camps to be closed.

Background

The Palestinian community in Iraq dates from 1948, when a group of 5,000 people accompanied an Iraqi army unit operating in Palestine back to Baghdad after they were forced to flee from their homes, mainly from villages near Haifa, during the conflict that erupted from Israel's founding. Additional Palestinians went to Baghdad after being expelled from Kuwait in the aftermath of the first Gulf War in 1991. At the time of the American invasion of Iraq in March 2003, the total number of Palestinians in Baghdad was approximately 34,000.

The consequences of the American intervention proved disastrous for the Palestinians. As the communal violence and the insurgency grew, armed militias and even the government's own Ministry of Interior considered the Palestinians to be a community that lacked allegiance to Iraq and was perceived to have been protected by Saddam Hussein. They were no longer considered to be refugees but foreigners and their residency papers were not renewed. Palestinians who largely congregated in the neighborhood of Baladiyat in Baghdad were increasingly targets of violence, kidnapping, and death threats.

Virtually all of the refugees either directly experienced or have relatives who experienced deeply traumatic events. In the words of one Palestinian who worked for foreign companies as a water engineer, "We saw things that we never saw before and hope never to see again." Another young man described his treatment by the Iraqi police: "They asked me where I was from, and I said Palestine. 'That's going to be a problem for you,' they told me, 'Come with us.' I was beaten up and tortured."

By 2006 the situation had become untenable for many in Iraq, and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, including members of the

Policy Recommendations

- ❑ Both traditional and emerging resettlement countries should prioritize and rapidly resettle Palestinian refugees from the three border camps.
- ❑ Following the recent European Commission mission to the camps, European Union member states should commit to resettlement, with a focus on Al Tanf.
- ❑ The United States should create a processing priority two (P-2) for Palestinians from Iraq and immediately take steps to begin the interview process in Al Waleed at the nearby military base.
- ❑ Canada and Australia should make a firm commitment to the resettlement of the Palestinians from Iraq and readily approve private sponsorship and family linked cases when such opportunities are available.
- ❑ The U.S. should use its in-country processing mechanism to resettle persecuted Palestinians who remain in Baghdad.
- ❑ UNHCR should prioritize the completion of Refugee Resettlement Forms for all Palestinians in the camps and forward the completed forms to officials from potential resettlement countries.

Palestinian community, sought refugee in neighboring countries. Unlike Iraqi citizens, however, Palestinians were denied entry to Syria and Jordan, except for a small group placed in Al Hol camp just inside the border of Al-Hassakah Governorate in the far northeast of the country. A second group ended up in a camp in the seven kilometer long no-man's-land between Syria and Iraq at Al Tanf, while a third group was blocked from entering this zone and were placed in a camp at Al Waleed, on the Iraqi side of the border. Nearly 3,000 Palestinian refugees from Iraq are stranded in these camps, with about 4,000 living illegally in Damascus. It is believed that about 10,000 Palestinian refugees remain in Baghdad.

Situation in the Camps

Al Hol was originally built by the Syrian government for refugees it anticipated would flee from Iraq during the first Gulf War. It now houses about 340 Palestinians. Its location in Syria provides a measure of protection and stability compared to Al Tanf and Al Waleed. The problems stem from the camp's extreme isolation and the restrictions placed by the Syrian government on the rights of the residents to travel and work. The Palestinians here had their travel documents confiscated by the Syrian government upon arrival. The residents are quite frustrated with their isolation and the fact that although they were the first group to leave Iraq they have yet to benefit from resettlement opportunities.

Al Tanf, with a population of 940, is one of the worst situated refugee camps in the world. It lies in the no-man's-land between Syria and Iraq. It is completely exposed on one side to a highway, where trucks alternately speed by or sit idle for hours at a time waiting to make the border crossing. The site itself is in a culvert about 10 feet below the highway, making it a flood plain when it rains heavily. While about 300 people have been resettled out of the camp over the past year, the camp population is actually increasing as Palestinian refugees from Iraq are forced out of Damascus into the camp due to deportation by the Syrian authorities, severe economic hardship, and the lure of a solution to their tenuous situation.

Al Waleed, located inside Iraq just across the border from Al Tanf, was the last of the three camps to be established when the Iraqi authorities decided to prevent Palestinians from leaving Iraq altogether. With a population of 1,750, it is the largest of the three. Like Al Tanf, it is located along the highway and has the added disadvantage of being close to a Multi-National Forces (MNF) military base, which does not provide security for refugees. Conditions in the camp have been abysmal, with poor shelter and lack of water and sanitation facilities, but UNHCR has just facilitated the transfer of the residents to a new camp on the other side of the highway. The school and health clinic remain in the original location, however, and the worry is that children will risk the dash across the highway rather than using an underpass that requires a round trip walk of nearly a kilometer. But the

fundamental problem with Al Waleed is that it is in Iraq, where Palestinians remain highly vulnerable to violence from militias and the government.

Resettlement

The high degree of trauma suffered by Palestinian refugees, their lack of legal status, the refusal of neighboring countries to grant them asylum, and the poor conditions in the camps all argue for third country resettlement as the best near-term solution for the camp population. A solution to their plight is urgent, and despair and frustration are growing as they remain in limbo. "If we are unwanted, then just kill us all," a 24-year-old man told a member of the delegation. A woman teacher added, "We've gone from running from fast death in Iraq to slow death in the camps."

Third country resettlement offers hope, and is a real possibility. First and foremost, both the Syrian government and the PLO offer no objection to resettlement, leaving opting for it as the individual decision of the refugee. Each has formally recognized that resettlement in no way undercuts the exercise of the right of return. Second, both traditional (Sweden) and emerging (Chile, Brazil, Iceland) resettlement countries have accepted members of this community in the last year with generally positive results. The Palestinian diaspora is vast, and there are strong networks of inter-communal support and solidarity.

A 10-country delegation of European Union member states recently visited Syria with a focus on Al Tanf. A logical and feasible solution to the resettlement challenge would be for these countries to empty Al Tanf, for non-EU member states such as Canada and Australia to focus on Al Hol, and for the United States to take the lead on Al Waleed, given its location inside Iraq. This comprehensive solution is the best way forward to end the slow death of Palestinian refugees from Iraq in the camps, and the international community needs to commit urgently and resolutely to make it happen.

The following organizations just completed a one-week assessment of the situation for Palestinian refugees from Iraq and endorse the contents of this summary statement [institutions in alphabetical order]:

Canadian Council for Refugees
Citizen International, Malaysia
Dutch Council for Refugees
Flemish Refugee Action, Belgium
Human Rights First
Muslim Care Malaysia
Muslim Student Union, Malaysia
Netherlands Refugee Foundation
Refugee Council of Australia
Refugee Council USA
Refugees International, USA
Secretariate Assembly of Muslim Scholars Asia
Society of Citizens Assistant Migrants, Czech Republic