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Contact:
Maureen Lynch

Iraqi Refugees in Syria: Silent Exodus Leaves 500,000 in Need of Protection and Aid

Little known to the rest of the world, the recent war in Iraq has created large numbers of refugees who have fled to Syria, escaping the lawlessness, harassment, and persecution that has followed.

Iraqis, some accused of supporting the Americans, cite attacks, kidnappings, and threats of murder by insurgent groups upon themselves and their families as reasons for their flight. "I was threatened that if I didn't quit [a job with U.S. supported employer], they would kill me. For our security, I brought my family to Syria," one recent arrival told Refugees International (RI). Others were maimed by the war, lost family members, and could not find employment, making the likelihood of their survival alone amidst the general insecurity in Iraq a near impossibility.

Now totaling an estimated 500,000, only a small fraction of these refugees have approached the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) to apply for temporary protection from *refoulement*. Although not a signatory to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, Syria laudably entered into an agreement with UNHCR immediately prior to the war to provide temporary protection to Iraqis as a means of ensuring their safety during the attacks in Iraq. Syria is also the only Arab country with such open borders, permitting refugees from Iraq to enter freely and obtain legal temporary residence for up to six months.

UNHCR told RI that providing temporary protection to Iraqi refugees is preferable to conducting individual refugee status determinations in this case, as many of the Iraqis in Syria would not meet the strict legal definition of a refugee. They would likely have their applications for refugee status denied and would risk deportation to situations of severe insecurity. Providing temporary

protection to everyone who registers helps ensure that all will be protected from deportation to Iraq and potential persecution regardless of whether they fall within the narrow confines of refugee law. In cases of extreme vulnerability, UNHCR conducts individual refugee status determinations necessary for referring individuals for urgent resettlement to safe third countries.

Despite these efforts, Iraqi refugees in Syria continue to face problems. The primary concern is that UNHCR does not have the resources to register all 500,000 refugees, and to date has only managed to register slightly over 22,000 in Damascus at the current rate of approximately 60 families per week. Nearly half of these registered refugees are Christians, although Christians comprise only about 5 percent of the population in Iraq. The disparity is attributed to recent fears incurred by the church bombings. There are presently no UNHCR officials on the Iraqi border able to assist with their registration upon entry.

Iraqi refugees have taken refuge in many cities and villages throughout Syria, though primarily in and around Damascus. Immigration procedures require refugees to exit the country after six months before re-entering to obtain new residence, imposing particular hardship on poorer Iraqis who must find means to cross the border at least twice per year. This also poses difficulties as some are refused entry back into Iraq due to fears that returnees may be potential insurgents. UNHCR temporary protection, however, allows Iraqis to avoid deportation should they be found in violation of local immigration laws.

While they are able to travel freely, some Iraqi refugees in Syria face prolonged and growing consequences of socio-economic hardship, evidenced by labor exploitation, limited access to health care, and prostitution. Unable to obtain work permits, most Iraqis work in the informal sector or remain unemployed, leading to uncertainties about their financial futures, frustration, and despair. One unemployed media executive stated, "Until now I am without a job. I am experienced in my job and wish to find work because I feel lost without work." Although Iraqi children in Syria have the right to public education, schools are at their full capacity. In addition, families are expected to provide uniforms and books, so the costs and the difficulty of obtaining proper documentation from Iraq result in high drop-out rates and increase vulnerability to child labor.

UNHCR provides some social services in the way of health care through its implementing partners to the most vulnerable of Iraqi refugees, but such services are far from adequate to meet the considerable need. Compounding this problem, the Syrian government elected to limit public health services to Syrian nationals starting in 2005.

The Iraqi women forced into prostitution in order to survive risk detention and deportation for this "moral offense." Trafficking is common, as families send their female members to Syria to work as prostitutes and send remittances back to Iraq. Consequently, it is now difficult for young women between the ages of 15 and 40 to enter Syria unless accompanied by a male relative.

The Syrian government and UNHCR are in great need of support for their protection and humanitarian programs, which are only the first steps in ensuring the security of Iraqi refugees. Once perceived to be a temporary issue, protection of Iraqi refugees in Syria is proving to be a protracted problem that will require attention and resources from the international community.

REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDS:

The Government of Syria

- ❑ Refrain from implementing immigration laws which compel Iraqi refugees to leave Syria.
- ❑ Repeal restrictions on Iraqi refugees' access to public health care and legal employment.
- ❑ Support civil society organizations in providing social services for Iraqi refugees.
- ❑ Avoid deporting Iraqi refugees for residency violations, regardless of UNHCR status.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees

- ❑ Expand services to ensure full protection, assistance, and registration of all Iraqi refugees.
- ❑ Ensure visible presence throughout the country, especially at border crossings.
- ❑ Support enhancement of public schools and clinics' capacities to receive Iraqi refugees.
- ❑ Press third safe countries to open resettlement to Iraqi refugees.

Resettlement and Potential Donor Countries

- ❑ Open and expand resettlement programs to receive vulnerable Iraqi refugees.
- ❑ Provide funding for humanitarian aid, education, and health care for Iraqi refugees.

International Organizations and NGOs

- ❑ Increase their presence in Syria to assist Iraqi refugees with humanitarian aid.
- ❑ Increase interagency coordination to provide a higher level and more cost-effective and coordinated assistance for Iraqi refugees, including those staying in villages.

Refugees International Research Director Maureen Lynch visited Syria in October, accompanied by Perveen Ali, a Cairo-based consultant.