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Iraqi Refugees: Critical Needs Remain Unmet

Over 1.8 million Iraqi refugees are currently spread throughout the Middle East, with the largest concentrations in Syria and Jordan and sizable populations in Lebanon and Egypt.

The governments of these host nations are reluctant to publicly acknowledge a growing refugee crisis and therefore provide Iraqis with no official status and few social services. The international community is similarly in denial over the existence of an Iraqi refugee crisis, and has provided few resources to address the needs of this expanding population. It is essential that host nations, supported by donor governments and the UN, establish programs aimed at responding to the needs of Iraqi refugees.

OVERVIEW

While many refugees from Iraq come from comfortable backgrounds, all face challenges that quickly plunge them into a subsistence existence. Many Iraqis have their savings drained before even leaving the country by paying ransoms for kidnapped family members. On a recent mission to Syria, Jordan and Lebanon, Refugees International documented dozens of stories of kidnappings for extortion, forcing families to sell businesses, homes, cars, and other assets to meet kidnappers' demands. Many families had suffered multiple kidnappings, further draining resources. These Iraqis fled the country to escape further kidnappings, often associated with sectarian violence, or the death threats that often followed the kidnappings.

Middle class Iraqis' resources are being further depleted by their inability to work legally in host countries. Though they have marketable skills, having worked as doctors, teachers, architects, blacksmiths, hair dressers, they are barred from practicing their trade. Work in the informal sector is hard to come by, and many Iraqis who are able to work despite their undocumented status report workplace

abuses, including a failure to receive payment. Additionally, many Iraqis are afraid to work for fear of having their papers checked and then being deported back to Iraq. These circumstances have plunged the Iraqi middle class amongst the urban poor in Damascus, Amman, and Beirut.

IRAQI REFUGEES' MAIN NEEDS

Iraqi refugees live overwhelmingly in urban areas, which makes it harder for aid organizations to identify and reach them. Though they have similar needs to the urban poor, they also have special needs stemming from their refugee experience. Legal status continues to be the biggest obstacle for Iraqi refugees [Please see the RI bulletin Iraqi Refugee Crisis: International Response Urgently Needed at www.refugeesinternational.org].

The number one need of Iraqi refugees is housing assistance. Partially due to the large influx of Iraqis seeking shelter in limited housing markets, rents in Damascus, Amman, and Beirut have increased in the past three years, and constitute the largest single expense for Iraqi families. Though many families that RI met with were living in basic conditions – with outdoor plumbing, poor insulation from cold and heat, little or no cooking facilities, and inadequate bedding – they were often behind on rent. Many families were without electricity and behind on other utilities and bills as well.

Access to education for children is the second greatest need. Syria allows Iraqi children to attend public schools but many families can not afford the school supplies and uniforms required for their children to attend. Despite

this liberal policy, 30% of Iraqi children between 6 and 11 do not attend school in Syria, and some children take jobs to support their families. The state of education in Jordan is more restrictive than in Syria. While the country does not deny Iraqis access to schools, the government conditions it on the availability of space and gives headmasters case-by-case authority to admit or deny children access. The best option for Iraqis in Jordan is to send their children to private school, but most cannot afford tuition. Lebanon does not allow Iraqis to attend public schools at all, forcing parents to enroll their children in private schools.

Iraqis' medical needs are also largely unanswered in all three countries. In Jordan, medical services are limited to emergency care. Syria gave Iraqis free access to medical services until 2005; since then they have been required to pay. All medical services in Lebanon are private. Though local NGOs do provide clinic services for Iraqi refugees in all three countries, demand far outpaces supply. Furthermore, due to a lack of money, many clinics funded by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) are only authorized to provide free medical care to Iraqis officially registered as refugees before 2003.

An area of particular concern for the refugees is access to mental health services. All Iraqis RI spoke with had suffered either direct violence or witnessed violence against family members and in their communities. One Iraqi in Amman said, "The sight of dead people in the streets of Baghdad has become so common that my children are more likely to be surprised and scared by a dead dog than a dead person." In cases of kidnapping, mental and physical torture was common. Despite evidence that mental trauma is widespread among the refugee population, there is little attention given to mental service needs. Private services are also insufficient. One man who had been kidnapped in Iraq and was currently living in Beirut told RI, "My doctor gave me antidepressants and told me that if I didn't feel better in a week, there was nothing he could do for me."

INSUFFICIENT NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE

Host governments are clearly stretched thin and no longer have the capacity to provide medical, education, or other services to Iraqis without international support. Similarly, domestic NGOs and service providers do not have adequate funding to provide support to the growing refugee population. UNHCR is not able to fund implementing partners to provide services either. Since it remains difficult for international NGOs to legally register with

Syria and Jordan to provide services, there is little international presence responding to the needs of Iraqis, and little evidence that international NGOs have plans to begin operations in the region.

REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDS:

- ❑ International donors fully fund UNHCR's 2007 appeal for Iraqi refugees. The US government should take a lead in this funding process, and consider funding more than its traditional 25% share of UNHCR's request.
- ❑ Bilateral financial assistance provided to host countries by western governments include specific earmarks for services for Iraqi refugees.
- ❑ UNHCR prepare additional appeals to address the needs of Iraqi refugees, and solicit funding from international donors to meet these needs.
- ❑ UNHCR work with host governments, with support from UNICEF and the UN Development Program, to devise a strategy to expand domestic educational and medical services so that they can address the needs of the Iraqi refugee community. Until then, UNHCR and international donors should expand their support for local organizations that subsidize education and provide clinic services for Iraqis.
- ❑ UNHCR work with its implementing partners to ensure that adequate mental health services are available to Iraqi refugees
- ❑ UN World Food Program work with UNHCR to provide food support for Iraqis in order to allow them to free up resources to cover housing costs; UNHCR should also consider allocating funds for housing subsidies for the most vulnerable families.
- ❑ International NGOs address the Iraqi refugee crisis, and work with UNHCR and host governments to obtain legal status to do so.
- ❑ UNHCR monitor housing, education, and medical services to ensure that discrimination by nationality, ethnicity, religion, or other factors is not limiting service to Iraqi refugees in need.

Advocates Kristele Younes and Sean Garcia recently returned from a mission to Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon assessing the situation for Iraqi refugees