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Syria: An Urgent Appeal for Palestinians Fleeing Iraq

The situation in Iraq continues to deteriorate quickly. It has become so untenable that over 1.5 million Iraqis of all ethnic and religious backgrounds have fled to seek refuge in neighboring countries. Palestinians, who in an act of political solidarity were welcome during Saddam Hussein's rule, are particularly at risk.

With the exception of Syria, Arab countries have now closed their borders to Iraqi refugees. Despite Syria's policy of giving Iraqis safe haven, it has started refusing entry to Palestinians from Iraq. With an estimated 700,000 Iraqi refugees (and 2,000 to 3,000 more arriving every day) adding to the 450,000 Palestinian refugees already living in Syria, the country is quickly reaching its limits.

Palestinians in Iraq are perceived by many Iraqis to have been favored by the Saddam Hussein regime. As a result, they have been and continue to be major victims of the war. Iraqi Palestinians are recipients of a collective "fatwa" (or death sentence) issued by several militia or sectarian groups, and their ethnicity -- displayed on all their identification papers -- is tantamount to committing a capital crime. Many have been kidnapped, tortured and killed.

Of the approximately 30,000 Palestinians in Iraq registered in 2003 by the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), the agency mandated to respond to the needs of Palestinian refugees, the UN and other organizations now estimate that there are only 5-6,000 left in Iraq. The remaining Palestinians have either been killed or fled the country. With all borders now closed to them, Palestinians forced back to Iraq will face an almost certain death.

372 Palestinians from Iraq are now living near the Al Tanf border crossing between Iraq and Syria in a makeshift

refugee camp located in the no man's land in between both borders. They have been denied entry by the Syrian government and they refuse to return to Iraq. As a result, they have been living in increasingly desperate circumstances and uncertainty for the past six months.

Refugees International visited the Palestinian camp at the Al Tanf border crossing on November 8th and interviewed many of the families who lived there. All have stories of extreme violence and terror to share. "I left Iraq because I was so scared for my 18-year-old daughter," one mother told RI. "We decided to leave after one of her friends was kidnapped, gang-raped by 13 men, and killed. The killers then sent the video of the entire thing to her family. They told them all Palestinians would suffer the same fate."

Many of the Palestinians living at the Al Tanf border crossing have been there for months, hoping to be let into Syria or resettled to a third country. None of them is willing to consider the possibility of ever returning to Iraq. They receive little assistance, as the resources of the UN refugee agency, UNHCR, are scarce, and efforts by UNHCR and UNRWA to resettle them remain unsuccessful. Arab countries refuse to take them in, arguing that they cannot host all Palestinians from Iraq, even though fewer than 6,000 of them remain. Arab countries are also adamant these Palestinians should not be resettled in third countries, as they believe they have a right to return to

historic Palestine. But with Israel refusing to allow them into the Palestinian territories and Western countries showing little interest in their fate, these Palestinians have no one left to turn to.

An additional 97 Palestinians are currently stranded at the Al-Ruweisheid camp at the border between Jordan and Iraq. They have been there for over three years. They are completely dependent on UNHCR for survival, and are in similarly inhospitable terrain as the Al Tanf camp. This group is also in desperate need of resettlement.

REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDS:

- ❑ Donors immediately and significantly increase their funding to UNHCR and UNWRA, as well as to other agencies assisting refugees from Iraq;
- ❑ National governments assist the Syrian and Jordanian governments in absorbing Iraqi refugees that continue to arrive there in massive numbers. Syria in particular needs international support to continue to keep its borders open;
- ❑ Arab governments immediately agree to host the Palestinians stranded in Al Tanf and Al Ruweisheid, as well as other Palestinians fleeing Iraq. Should Arab countries refuse to do so, they must accept resettlement in third countries as a potential solution for these groups.
- ❑ Western governments begin to accept referrals for the resettlement of extremely vulnerable individuals, including Palestinians from Iraq seeking refuge in the future.

Advocates Kristele Younes and Sean Garcia are presently in the Middle East examining the situation for Iraqi refugees in the region.