

Iraqi Refugees: Still There

Elizabeth Ferris

Millions of Iraqis have fled their communities as a result of violence and insecurity in the eight years since the United States invaded Iraq. Together with most of those displaced by the Saddam Hussein regime, these Iraqis live in uncertain conditions throughout the Middle East.

The governments of the region have generally allowed them to remain but haven't recognized them as refugees nor given them formal residency rights. Not yet persuaded that it's safe to return to their country, they live in limbo. Some hope for resettlement to another country, some seek asylum in Europe.

But most are just waiting. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees provides some assistance to them and host governments, but agrees with the refugees that the time is not right to promote their large-scale return.

Patterns of displacement from Iraq are longstanding and complex. For years, hundreds of thousands of Iraqis fled Saddam Hussein's government as victims of persecution and violence. Most sought refuge in nearby countries, particularly Iran and Turkey, while others traveled to Europe.



UNHCR Photo/B. Heger

Iraqi refugees at a registration center of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in Douma, a suburb of Damascus, the Syrian capital.

An Initial Surge of Hope

After the fall of Hussein, Iraqis returned in droves hoping for a safe situation. However, their return was short-lived, as violence, especially sectarian, erupted, leading many returning refugees to flee again to neighboring countries. As violence escalated, particularly after the February 2006 bombing of one of Shiite Islam's holiest shrines, al-Askari mosque in Samarra, 1.5 million more Iraqis fled, mostly to Syria and Jordan.

In addition to this outflow, two million more fled their communities but remained within Iraqi borders as internally displaced people. Both groups were driven by widespread violence and fear, recounting experiences of threats, murder of relatives and kidnappings. By 2008, 15 percent of Iraq's people had been driven from their homes, whether still in the country or fleeing to neighboring areas.

There were also sectarian and religious dimensions to the flight. The fears that Iraq was moving toward Shiite rule led many Sunnis to leave the country, and indeed 75 percent of the Iraqis in neighboring countries were Sunni.

Small religious minorities—Christians, Yazidis, Sabians—were disproportionately represented among the refugees, and their communities have been sharply diminished in Iraq. Experiencing religious persecution in addition to the generalized violence, members of such religious minorities, which once flourished in Iraq, lost hope that their country would in the post-Saddam Hussein era be characterized by religious tolerance.

Savings Have Run Out

Most of the refugees fled to neighboring Jordan and Syria, which initially welcomed them as temporary guests. But as their numbers increased, Jordan and to a lesser extent Syria began to make it more difficult for Iraqis to enter. Neither Syria, Jordan nor Lebanon has signed the 1951 Refugee Convention, which means that the Iraqis are not acknowledged as refugees and have none of the rights that refugee status would bring in many countries, notably the right not to be forcibly returned to their countries.

The Iraqi refugees in Syria and Jordan are a heterogeneous group. Many of those who left initially were from the educated middle class, including many professionals and civil servants. They didn't arrive as empty-handed refugees, but brought savings to support themselves.

But as the years have passed, savings have been depleted and prospects for jobs are scarce. Iraqi doctors and computer engineers found that their credentials weren't recognized and they could not work in their professions.

Although many poor and unskilled Iraqis also fled, an assumption that the Iraqi refugees were wealthy, coupled with an assumption that they had supported Saddam Hussein (some had), meant that the Iraqi government had little incentive to assist them as refugees or to promote their return.

Unlike other large refugee flows, the Iraqi refugees never lived in camps, with the exception of a few thousand Palestinians who were housed in tents along the borders. Rather, they rented apartments or lived with family and friends in urban centers. While this meant that they avoided some of the problems of refugee

camps, it also meant that they were largely invisible to international observers, including the UN refugee agency, which was trying to assist and protect them.

Questions on Totals Persist

The UN agency offered assistance to the refugees in the region and support to Syrian and Jordanian efforts to enable Iraqis to access public schools and health services. Cash assistance was provided to groups of the particularly vulnerable. But identifying refugees dispersed among the local population proved difficult.

The agency began to try to register the refugees, particularly as critics charged that numbers were inflated. But its efforts found only 151,000 Iraqis in Syria and 31,000 in Jordan. These numbers were far lower than most estimates, which indicated over a million Iraqis in Syria and up to 500,000 in Jordan.

Did this mean that there were many fewer refugees than first thought? Or that some of the refugees had returned home? Or that refugees were fearful of registering lest their names and contacts in a government database make it easier for them to be rounded up and sent home?

Further complicating the issue of numbers and assistance is the mobility of the Iraqi refugees, particularly those living in Syria. Iraqis routinely cross back and forth to Iraq from Syria. They return to check on property, to collect pensions, to take care of relatives and, in some cases, to work.

For all of the refugees, conditions in exile have been tough. Although tolerated by the authorities, many Iraqi families have found themselves destitute and engaging in what are euphemistically called “negative coping behaviors,” including child labor, survival sex and petty crime.

What Next for the Refugees?

Traditionally, there are three solutions for refugees: voluntary return to their country of origin, local integration in a country of refuge or resettlement in a third country. In the case of Iraqis in neighboring countries, return has been slow and local integration is impossible. Resettlement in third countries has become a favored, though limited, option.

Although the security situation has improved greatly in Iraq in the past few years, few refugees have chosen to return. The High Commissioner for Refugees has not encouraged Iraqis to return although the office does provide assistance for those who choose to do so. The 100,000 or so who have returned since 2008 have largely done so because of deteriorating conditions in exile rather than confidence that life is back to normal in Iraq.

Most refugees are afraid to return, particularly those whose homes are in places in which they would be a religious minority. The lack of jobs and services in Iraq has led many refugees to decide that they are better off—even eking out a living on the margins of society—in neighboring countries than taking their chances back in Iraq.

A particular impediment to return has been many Iraqi refugees’ loss of property. Their homes and businesses have been taken over by others and prospects for a timely resolution of claims are slim. Most of those who have returned have done so without assistance from either the UN refugee agency or the Iraqi government.

In fact, the Iraqi government has until recently not shown much support for the return of refugees.

In early 2011, the Iraqi Minister of Displacement and Migration did indicate that support for returnees would be increased, but there is still no indication that this announcement will result in significantly higher returns.

From the beginning, host countries have made it clear that while refugees would be tolerated, their presence would be a temporary measure. The Iraqis would not be allowed to stay permanently nor integrate into local society. This position had an economic basis: employment opportunities for national populations were already lacking, and absorbing large numbers of Iraqis into the labor force was economically and politically risky.

Moreover, experiences with Palestinian refugees almost six decades ago have also made the region wary. In both Syria and Jordan, the initial expressions of welcome for the Iraqi refugees have given way to resentment and xenophobia; Iraqi refugees are blamed for all kinds of social and economic problems.

Stay or Move On?

However, many refugees have rebuilt their lives in host countries; they have found jobs, registered children in schools and either rented or bought property. The UN refugee agency has tried to emphasize self-reliance as part of an interim solution, but this has been difficult to put into action in light of the restricted political and economic environment. Without meaningful, legal employment and without acceptance of their right to remain, refugees find prospects for sustainable local integration limited.

In this context, resettlement has emerged as a favored option. By mid-2010, over 100,000 Iraqi refugees had been accepted for resettlement, but the process of approving individual applications has been painfully slow. Onerous security checks mean that Iraqis accepted for resettlement must wait at least a year until they board a plane.

For Iraqis resettled in the U.S., the record has been mixed. Expectations of what life in the U.S. will be like are perhaps unreasonably high; given the U.S. economic climate, even Iraqi professionals will meet a challenge in finding entry-level jobs.

Iraqis have sought asylum in distant countries. They make up the largest group applying for asylum in Europe. Many have gone to Sweden, which had a tradition of welcoming Iraqi refugees from earlier eras and has a significant Iraqi resident population. But just as the welcome is wearing thin in the Iraq region, so too European governments are becoming tougher in admitting Iraqis seeking protection.

And so, Iraqi refugees continue to wait. Some will be accepted for resettlement and will have a chance to begin new lives. Most will continue to eke out an uncertain existence in nearby countries, waiting for evidence that conditions in Iraq will make return home a feasible choice. The Iraqi refugees will likely continue to be tolerated but increasingly resented in host countries. In a world beset by humanitarian crises, it is important to remember that the Iraqi refugees are still there. ■