

Testimony of
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Violence and Displacement in Iraq:
The World's Fastest Growing Refugee Crisis
Testimony by
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I want to thank: the Committee for holding these hearings on the Plight of Iraqi Refugees, a growing humanitarian problem that has not been addressed effectively.

Violence in Iraq is forcing large numbers of Iraqis to flee for their lives. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that more than 1.7 million Iraqis have fled their homes and moved to other parts of Iraq to escape sectarian conflict, political reprisals or the general sense of insecurity that is increasingly prevalent in South and Central Iraq. In addition, UNHCR estimates that another two million Iraqis have left the country.

Today, one in every eight Iraqis is displaced, but the dislocated population is growing rapidly—an estimated 40,000 to 50,000 people a month are leaving their homes and communities in Iraq and moving to other, safer areas within the country. In addition, up to 100,000 people a month are leaving the country. This is the fastest growing refugee crisis in the world.

Syria and Jordan are absorbing the greatest number of Iraqi refugees; each country is hosting about 750,000. Others are finding refuge throughout the Middle East, with growing numbers going to Lebanon, Egypt, Yemen and Turkey. Syria and Jordan have tried to be gracious hosts, but the refugee influx is straining their economies. The host countries need help, and increasingly the refugees need direct assistance.

Right now the Iraqi refugees are a regional challenge, giving the Middle East another problem to solve. But as the numbers grow, more and more Iraqis will attempt to settle in the U.S. and in Europe. In Amman, Jordan, and Damascus, Syria, many Iraqis told my colleagues at Refugees International late last year that they are trying to purchase fake travel documents that would allow them to go to Europe. Most Iraqis don't expect to be able to return home soon. Even a senior Iraqi foreign service officer working at the Iraqi embassy in Lebanon told us: "Why should I go back? I watch the news."

The violence in Iraq is both extreme and indiscriminate. Many are fleeing to escape sectarian violence in the face of de facto ethnic cleansing—both Sunni and Shi'a are leaving mixed neighborhoods because they no longer feel safe outside of their own communities. Christians are

leaving as well, because they also are threatened. Thus, the Chaldean community, one of the oldest Christian sects, is rapidly diminishing. A UNHCR study found that the religious grouping among Iraqi refugees in Syria largely mirrored their share of the population in Iraq, although Christians and other minorities were slightly over represented.

Two groups are particularly vulnerable-people who have worked for U.S. or Western employers and Palestinians. Many who worked for the U.S., either the military or other public and private agencies, are seen as occupiers themselves. When my colleagues were interviewing Iraqi refugees in Amman, they encountered Yasir, who had worked as a security officer for several western civil society agencies in Baghdad. Last July he and his son were in front of their house, when gunmen fired 10 shots at them from a speeding car, severely injuring Yasir. He says that he was targeted because he worked for international aid organizations. Yasir learned from his neighbors that the gunmen had heard that he survived the attack; four days later he fled to Jordan.

Palestinians are vulnerable because they received special treatment from Saddam Hussein, who often moved Shi'a out of their houses to give Palestinians a place to live. Seen as Saddam loyalists, they are attacked by almost all factions and in need of rescue and resettlement. Their statelessness furthers their vulnerability. There are still about 15,000 Palestinians in Iraq.

Most of the Iraqis who have left the country are middle class; they need enough means to reach the border and get out. Neither Syria nor Jordan, which house the largest Iraqi populations, have signed the 1951 Refugee Convention, so people find it difficult to get official refugee status. They generally enter the host country as tourists, business people or guests, generally arriving in Syria with three month visas or in Jordan with authority to stay for six months. Most are urban refugees, living in Damascus or Amman, sometimes on their own, often with family members or friends. Many arrive in a state of shock. One Iraqi told Refugees International that "my son is more shocked by the sight of dead dogs than dead people."

Syria and Jordan have been generous to refugees and deserve international recognition for accepting them in large numbers. But the burdens of the large refugee population are an increasing strain. Real estate prices and rents are rising quickly in Damascus and Amman; schools and hospitals are crowded. Jordan has tightened its borders since bombings in Amman in November 2005, and it is particularly difficult for Iraqi men between the ages of 18-35 to enter. Deportations are becoming more common countries, refugees are finding it difficult to get jobs.

As refugees use up their resources, many need food, shelter and other assistance. But the largely urban refugee populations are difficult to reach, particularly since many refugees are reluctant to register with the UNHCR or local authorities as refugees for fear of deportation.

There are encouraging signs that the world is beginning to recognize and respond to the growing Iraqi refugee problem. Until now, however, the response has been slow and inadequate. Last year, for instance, the UNHCR budget for Iraqi refugees in Syria was \$700,000-less than one dollar per refugee.

The U.S. has a special obligation to help, since the violence in Iraq and the growing displacement comes in the aftermath of our invasion and occupation. Translators and others who

had to flee for their lives after working for the U.S. deserve an opportunity to be resettled in the U.S. or other countries so that they can live in safety. The State Department, along with the UNHCR, is working on programs to protect the most vulnerable. Those programs need fast and adequate funding, so they can be put in place immediately.

The UNHCR has plans to spend \$60 million on displaced Iraqis this year, more than twice what it spent last year, and it has developed a comprehensive regional program. However, other UN agencies haven't mobilized yet to provide food, shelter, medical care and educational support for an increasingly stressed refugee community that is taxing the resources of host countries. The US government should fully support UNHCR's. Normally, we contribute 25% of their budget. Because of our role in the conflict, we should consider doubling that contribution for Iraqi refugees.

Finally, host countries, particularly Jordan and Syria, need multilateral and bilateral assistance in shouldering the burden of the refugee population. This means programs to resettle the most vulnerable refugees to third countries, and help in sharing the costs of those who stay. The worst outcome would be to see Syria and Jordan close their borders to Iraqis, removing a safety valve that is saving lives. "Iraqis who are unable to flee the country are now in a queue, waiting their turn to die," one Iraqi told us.

The U.S. and Iraq are finding it difficult to stop the violence in Iraq. Until they do, the flood of refugees will continue. While we don't yet know how to stabilize Iraq, we do know how to protect and support refugees. We must start now.