

Iraq's Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons: The Untold Story

By

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While largely absent from mainstream media coverage of the war, the needs of Iraqis displaced by the war have been a major concern to the humanitarian community. But the presence of some 2.2 million Iraqi refugees in the region and around 2.3 million Iraqi internally displaced persons (IDPs) is not just a humanitarian concern. It could well have consequences for the entire region and for those concerned about security, stability, and reconciliation inside Iraq. This is the largest displacement of people in the Middle East since the uprooting of Palestinians in 1948 with one out of six Iraqis now living outside their communities.

Although data are incomplete, let me briefly summarize what we know about this displaced population. Let's start with numbers.

Around 1 million Iraqis who had been internally displaced under the Saddam Hussein regime remained displaced after the US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003. Since then another 1.2 or 1.3 million Iraqis have been displaced within Iraq's borders. People have left their homes because of sectarian violence, coalition military operations, and general insecurity. Since the bombing of the al-Askari mosque in February 2006, sectarian violence has become the leading cause of displacement.¹

The best estimates today are that there are some 2.25 million internally displaced Iraqis and over 1.5 million Iraqis in Syria, 500-750,000 in Jordan, 80-100,000 in Egypt, 40,000 in Lebanon, and 200,000 in the Gulf (including Saudi Arabia.) With the exception of a few hundred Iraqi Palestinians, none of these refugees live in camps. This is an urban refugee situation – just as inside Iraq, it is an urban IDP situation. In fact, this is the largest urban refugee situation in the world. While there are many positive aspects to the Iraqi dispersal among the host country's population rather than concentrated in camps, one of the clear consequences of the urban nature of the displacement is that it is less visible. It is harder to get a handle on the conditions facing urban IDPs and refugees and even on their numbers. It is more difficult to organize humanitarian assistance to people who are often 'in hiding.' I find it shocking that there has been so little

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media attention to Iraqi displacement and that it has been so invisible in the current US political debates about the 'surge.'

Refugees: The Regional Dimension

In the Middle East, only Iran, Egypt and Yemen are signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention which means that Iraqis in most neighboring states are not considered refugees with the rights and responsibilities entailed by this status. Host governments are concerned about the economic impact of a sudden increase in population, about the strain on their public services, and about social stability. They are also worried about the possible spillover of the Iraqi conflicts and the possibility that a long-term presence of the refugees could exacerbate social problems. Regional reactions to the Iraqi refugees are also deeply conditioned by the region's experience with Palestinian refugees over the past 59 years. It is noteworthy that throughout the current emergency, neither Jordan nor Syria facilitated the movement of Palestinian Iraqis – a terribly vulnerable group – into their countries; rather they were confined to small camps in the virtual 'no-man's land' between borders. The memory of Palestinian refugee camps in Arab consciousness is undoubtedly a factor in the urban settlement pattern of Iraqi refugees in Jordan and Syria. Urban refugees – like urban IDPs – are less visible than those living in camps.

Today, Iraq's neighbors have largely closed the borders to Iraqis. With a few exceptions for skilled professionals and business people, Iraqis are not able to leave the violence in their country.

Most of the refugees are living in Jordan and Syria. In both countries, there are reports of rising prices for basic necessities and of overstretched public services. Although governments of both countries allow Iraqis to attend public school, the percentage of Iraqi children who actually do so is less than 30% - a fact that UNHCR and UNICEF are trying to address. In both countries, there is growing popular resentment of the presence of the Iraqis and reports of exploitation of Iraqi labor and of increasing prostitution by desperate Iraqi women. There are also reports that in both Jordan and Syria, Iraqi refugees are growing resentful of the host states for not doing more.

Unlike refugees in other parts of the world, the Iraqis who came to Syria and especially to Jordan did not arrive penniless. Particularly in the initial months following the US-led invasion, the wealthy left early, buying up apartments and real estate. As the demographics of the refugee flow changed and increasing numbers of poorer people began to arrive – and as the savings of those arriving earlier dissipated—there was increasing stress on public services in both countries. In Jordan especially, there are concerns about the strain the Iraqis place on already limited water supplies.

At present, humanitarian assistance for Iraqis in Jordan and Syria is increasing and the humanitarian community is gearing up to try to meet the basic needs of the Iraqis and to decrease the strain on the Jordanian and

Syrian governments. But funding has been inadequate for multilateral efforts and especially for bilateral support to Jordan and even more especially for Syria. It is in the international community's interest to ensure that the Iraqi refugees receive adequate assistance.

Although there are many similarities between the pressures on Jordan and Syria, there are also some important differences. Let me turn briefly to some of the political dynamics which are apparent in both countries.

Jordan

First of all, Jordan is by far the largest host to Palestinian refugees. In fact, Palestinian refugees and descendants of refugees make up some 70% of Jordan's population. If the present estimates of the number of Iraqis living in Jordan (500-750,000) are true, this translates into an additional 15% of the Jordanian population. In addition to the economic and social pressure on Jordan of responding to this additional population, there are security concerns, particularly fears of Islamic militancy, especially of al-Qaeda affiliated groups coming out of Iraq. Jordan, a largely Sunni nation, is concerned about Iran's support for Shi'a militants and more generally about the impact of Iraqi Shi'a refugees on its own sectarian situation. About 25% of the Iraqi refugees entering Jordan are Shi'a and there are reports that Iraqis arriving at Jordan's airport or border are asked about their sectarian identity. The Jordanian government largely closed its border with Iraq two years ago, allowing only a small number of Iraqis to enter and further tightening it in January 2007. The Jordanian government has made it clear that it will never allow Jordan to become a staging ground for initiating problems within Iraq.

Syria

Syria has long prided itself on its commitment to Arab unity and solidarity, as manifest in its welcome of nearly 200,000 Lebanese fleeing the Israeli attacks in the summer of 2006. Syria's generous response to the Iraqi refugees may stem from its commitment to Arab unity, but undoubtedly has political underpinnings as well. However, The Syrian public's resentment toward the Iraqi population seems to be growing. The subsidized Syrian economy is buckling under the pressure of as many as 1.5 million additional people and many are worried that the country's infrastructure will not be able to sustain the government's generosity for much longer. Moreover, Damascus fears that Iraqis will bring sectarian rivalries and even sectarian violence with them into Syria. Citizens don't want to be drawn into these battles. As of July 2007, Shi'a make up about 24% of the Iraqi refugees in Syria, Christians constitute another 20% and Sunnis are the largest group, about 50%. Although many Iraqi refugees are trying to distance themselves from overtly sectarian groups, there is concern that without sufficient

humanitarian assistance, Iraqis may feel that they have few alternatives to recruitment by the militias.

When host governments are concerned about security threats associated with refugees, they tend to respond by deporting the refugees. This is now happening in Jordan and Lebanon. Unfortunately, deporting refugees back to Iraq is likely to increase the number of IDPs as many are afraid to return to their homes. If the war continues for years and the displacement of Iraqis becomes protracted, it is likely that the presence of the Iraqi diaspora will have political consequences for many years. There may come a time when governments in the region begin large-scale forced deportations of Iraqis back to Iraq, even if the war continues.

In recent months, there have been reports that refugees are voluntarily returning from Syria and perhaps from other places. There are conflicting reports about how many have returned. While the government indicates that more than 40,000 have returned since October, other estimates are considerably lower. The Iraqi government and the US military forces argue that people are returning because the security situation has improved dramatically. UNHCR and IOM, on the other hand, argue that most are returning because they face serious financial difficulties in Syria and increasingly restrictive visa policies. The Iraqi government has offered the inducement of an \$800 grant to those who return. There is a very real danger that the returning refugees are joining the ranks of the internally displaced. Reports are fragmentary and anecdotal, but seem to suggest that many of those returning are not going back to their homes and communities, but rather are living in areas where they feel safe, and particularly where they are not a sectarian minority. There is a danger that the refugee problem will become an internal displacement problem.

IDPs in Iraq

First, like the Iraqi refugees in neighboring countries, Iraqi IDPs live in urban areas. Some 80% of the IDPs in the country are from Baghdad, many of whom have moved to other neighborhoods in the capital city. Internal displacement is also a national problem. Every one of Iraq's 18 governorates has registered internally displaced persons. As in other IDP and refugee situations, some 80% of the IDPs are women and children. One of the consequences of the high Iraqi casualties in the last 4 years – the vast majority of whom have been male -- has been the fact that many households are now headed by women in a context where female participation in the labor force has been low.

Again like the Iraqi refugees, the overwhelming majority of IDPs are not living in camps. They are renting houses, living with family and friends, or living in abandoned buildings. Only 1- 2 percent of IDPs are living in tented camps, but the pressure to establish more camps is growing – with serious security implications which I'll discuss in a few minutes. The

fact that Iraqi IDPs are living among the urban population and are not concentrated in camps is undoubtedly one of the reasons that they have received so little media attention.

The displacement of Iraqis is taking place in a context of high unemployment, decreased access to basic food rations, and declining standards of living. A majority of Iraqis do not have access to clean water or basic sanitation.² Shortages of electricity in some parts of the country cause serious hardships. Transportation within the country has become difficult as a result of the war; it's dangerous for people to go to work when they have jobs and it's difficult for businesses to keep going because of the difficulties in getting supplies. Although data are limited, it is likely that IDPs are more likely to be unemployed than those who are not displaced and less likely to be able to access the Public Distribution System (PDS) through which most Iraqis receive food rations. This has clear indications for families and friends who are hosting IDPs. Their resources are stretched by the presence of the displaced in their communities.

Freedom of movement for Iraq's IDPs, and for Iraqi citizens generally, is getting increasingly limited. According to International Office of Migration (IOM), 11 of Iraq's 18 governorates have closed their borders to IDPs, at least to those who do not originate from the governorate. They argue that their infrastructure and social services are over-stretched.

In most other large-scale situations of internal displacement, humanitarian NGOs and UN agencies provide assistance to IDPs. But humanitarian assistance inside Iraq is difficult. Most international agencies moved their international staff out of Iraq after the 2003 bombing of the UN headquarters in Baghdad. Assistance provided by coalition military and civilian forces is often viewed with suspicion. International and local humanitarian workers alike have been targeted by armed militias. Local staff of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are working valiantly, often from their homes, to assist needy Iraqis but their ability to move around the communities they serve is increasingly restricted.³ The NGO Coordinating Committee in Iraq reports that humanitarian efforts are also hindered by politicized funding and overly bureaucratic distribution systems.⁴ Local mosques are reportedly providing assistance to needy people in their communities.⁵ There is a very real danger that the vacuum in humanitarian assistance will be filled by armed militias who provide relief as a way of increasing their control over territory.⁶ When hospitals or clinics are controlled by a particular sectarian group, it makes it difficult for people from other groups to access medical care there.⁷

Within this context, we can make several some observations about the complicated relationship between internal displacement and security in Iraq.

1. Internal displacement is both a consequence and a contributing factor to sectarian polarization. Internal displacement, as we have seen in conflicts in other parts of the world, is not an accidental by-product of the fighting, but rather a key strategy between armed

groups seeking control of territory. The sectarian geography of Iraq is changing as a result of the displacement, with likely long-term consequences for the country.

2. While it is easier (though more expensive) to provide public services in camp settings, there are security concerns about establishing camps on a large scale. There is the concern that if large camps were to be established, it is likely that they would be organized along sectarian lines, making them clear targets for attack by armed militias of other sectarian groups. Moreover, given the high unemployment and poverty rates in Iraq, large camps could become accessible places for recruitment of young men and children into militias and thus increase the already horrific violence in the country. It is likely that militias would take on the administration of the camps, controlling food distribution and access to services. As we have seen in other camp settings, relief items can be used to support militant groups.⁸ The humanitarian community has generally taken the position that camps should be avoided at all costs, but there are increasingly few safe places for the displaced to go.
3. The vulnerability of IDPs – particularly the need for jobs and money – makes IDPs susceptible to recruitment in militias who provide regular paychecks. Recent reports indicate that Iraqis are joining the insurgency because of a need for money – rather than ideological conviction. Although there is no evidence that IDPs are being recruited in a greater proportion than other Iraqis, the fact that they have less access to employment and to food rations makes them particularly vulnerable.
4. The refugee exodus has meant even greater hardship for those who remain. The recent Oxfam/NCCI report, for example, estimates that 40 percent of the country's professional class has left the country since 2003 and cites the Iraqi Medical Association's report that 50% of the 34,000 doctors registered in 2003 have left the country.⁹ Among the refugees, these are the people who are most likely to have the means, will, and capacities to remain outside their country. As one UNHCR official noted, "the ones who have left Iraq are its 2 million best and brightest."¹⁰
5. There is an obvious connection between internal and external displacement. When people can not get the services they need internally, they will seek them in other countries. Our research in Syria revealed that many left Iraq because they could not get medical care. An Iraqi man reported, for example, that he feared that his pregnant wife would be unable to get to a clinic for the delivery and so they moved to Syria. Another reported that the lack of drugs to treat a family member's cancer was his motivation for leaving the country.¹¹ UNHCR reported that – before the Syrian-Iraqi border was effectively closed – increasing numbers of Iraqis

were arriving with serious medical conditions, which would seem to be an indication that people are leaving because they can't get services.

Although it usually gets little attention in the midst of conflict, property issues are key to both durable solutions for refugees and IDPs and to resolution of the conflict. One of the greatest obstacles to the return of refugees and especially IDPs is the issue of property restitution or compensation. Twelve years after the Dayton peace agreement, there are still 500,000 Bosnian refugees and IDPs for whom return is difficult, primarily because of property disputes and housing. And the research shows that conflicts over property are an important source of renewed conflict. Remember that in over half of all conflicts resolved by some kind of peace agreement, fighting breaks out again. Property issues have turned out to be incredibly complex.

What can be done to minimize the security risks of large numbers of internally displaced persons and refugees?

- Ensuring that IDPs have livelihoods. For IDPs, this means ensuring that they have the documentation they need in order to work, to enroll their children in school, to access health services, and to receive food rations through the Public Distribution System and pensions to which they are entitled. For refugees, it means ensuring that humanitarian assistance is sufficient to meet their needs, that their children can go to school, and that they have access to health care.
- Urging the Iraqi government to incorporate the *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement* into national legislation and policies upholding the basic human rights of Iraqi IDPs, including freedom of movement and non-discrimination.
- Urging the governments of host countries to allow Iraqi refugees to enter their countries and to ensure that their immediate needs are met.
- Encouraging Iraqi NGOs and international agencies to increase humanitarian assistance to refugees, IDPs and host communities in the places where they are now living.
- Resisting the temptation to establish refugee and IDP camps on a large-scale with the security problems this would bring and considering more creative ways of ensuring that the displaced have adequate shelter.
- Taking measures to protect the property rights of Iraqi refugees and IDPs. Specifically, the government should stress that all rights to property will be upheld and those who are currently displaced will not be penalized for being away from their homes. Secondly, the government should implement a mechanism for displaced Iraqis to register their properties now in the expectation of having them returned in the future.

Notes

¹ Ashraf al-Khalidi and Victor Tanner, "Sectarian Violence: Radical Groups Drive Internal Displacement in Iraq," Occasional Paper, Brookings Institution-University of Bern Project on Internal Displacement, October 2006.

² Oxfam, NCCI, "Rising to the Humanitarian Challenge in Iraq," Briefing paper, July 2007.

³ See for example, "Iraq: Aid work becoming more risky in Baghdad," IRIN, 22 August 2007.

<http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/IRIN/5d3472e807f9397c54bc4c1978e690d0.htm>

⁴ NCCI: Weekly Highlight 26 Apr 2007: Editorial. See also, NCCI officials quoted in UN-IRIN: "Bombs and Bureaucracy Behind Missing Medicines," 22 May 2007.

⁵ Greg Hansen, "Coming to Terms with the Humanitarian Imperative in Iraq," Humanitarian Agenda 2015 Briefing Paper, Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, January 2007.

⁶ Wong, Edward and Damien Cave, "Baghdad District Is a Model, but Only for Shiites," *New York Times*, 22 May 2007. UN-IRIN, "Iraq: Fighters Fill Humanitarian Vacuum," 14 February 2007. UN-IRIN, "Iraq: Armed Groups Occupying Hospitals and Kidnapping Doctors," 13 February 2007.

⁷ Cave, Damien, "In Baghdad, Sectarian Lines Too Deadly to Cross," *The New York Times*, 4 March 2007.

⁸ See for example, Peter J. Hoffman and Thomas G. Weiss, Sword & Salve: Confronting new Wars and Humanitarian Crises. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, Publishers, 2006, pp. 103-111. For an example of the way in which militants have used distribution of water as a way of extortion, see www.iraqlogger.com/index.php/post/3834/Militants_Use_Water_as_Weapon.

⁹ Oxfam and NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq, *Rising to the Humanitarian Challenge in Iraq*, July 2007, pps. 15, 12.

¹⁰ Cited in Amira El Ahl, Volkhard Windfuhr, and Bernhard Zand, "Iraq's Elite Fleeing in Doves," *Der Spiegel*, 20 August 2007.

¹¹ Ashraf al-Khalidi, Sophia Hoffmann and Victor Tanner, "Iraqi Refugees in the Syrian Arab Republic: A Field-Based Snapshot," Occasional Paper, Brookings Institution-University of Bern Project on Internal Displacement, June 2007.