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IRAQI REFUGEES: A LOT OF TALK, LITTLE ACTION

The situation for Iraqi refugees in the Middle East continues to deteriorate, while the scale of the crisis continues to dwarf the international response. As the number of displaced Iraqis has reached an unprecedented level – more than 4.5 million – Iraq’s neighbors have increased restrictions on the refugees. These restrictions are at least partially a response to the lack of support received from the United States and other donor governments, as well as the government of Iraq itself, to lessen the tremendous burden that the host countries are assuming.

Given the humanitarian needs of the displaced and the risk of regional destabilization in the Middle East, the United States must demonstrate more concretely and more vigorously than it has to date that the displacement crisis is of paramount concern. The U.S. must engage at all levels with the countries of the region, including Syria, and must also lead donor efforts to provide bilateral and multilateral assistance to support host countries in dealing with these large influxes. The United Nations has an important role to play as well, and needs to improve its overall response and coordination mechanisms.

1. *Engaging at All Levels*

Iraqi refugees in Egypt, Syria and Lebanon are facing political obstacles to receiving basic assistance. Pre-existing security and political policies of the host governments are impeding the humanitarian response. In Lebanon, the history of internal sectarian violence, as well as Lebanon’s stated policy of not serving as an asylum country, has led the government to deny Iraqis any rights or access to services. In Egypt, internal concerns over mass poverty among its citizens and rampant unemployment have resulted in a policy of indifference to the needs of Iraqi refugees, who are misperceived as wealthy compared to the majority of Egyptians.

United States political support and diplomatic initiative in responding to the assistance needs of Iraqi refugees remains conspicuously absent. Three of the four primary host countries have close ties to the United States government, yet coordinating an effective large-scale response to the crisis from these allies in the region is not on its Middle East political agenda. Meanwhile, U.S. diplomatic relations with Syria remain estranged even while Syria has played a positive role in hosting the largest number of Iraqi refugees. The U.S. government and other donors have also failed to approach the Arab League on the issue, forcing the institution to resort to a televised campaign to gather funds to respond to the needs of the displaced. Finally, the absence of a regional, senior-level representative from the U.S. State Department Bureau for Population, Refugees and Migration gives the impression that the U.S. government does not take the refugee issue seriously.

Policy Recommendations

1. The U.S. immediately appoint a senior PRM official to be based in the region and charged with coordinating both the assistance and resettlement components of its response;
2. The U.S. immediately appoint an ambassador level diplomat to be based in Syria;
3. The U.S. and other donors provide earmarked bilateral assistance to countries hosting large numbers of Iraqi refugees, either directly or through a Trust Fund established by the UN or the Arab League;
4. The U.S. fund all pending UN appeals at a level of 50% or more;
5. The UN country teams make responding to Iraqi refugees needs a priority, with the UN resident representatives acting as coordinators of the overall national UN response and as liaisons with the diplomatic and donor communities.

2. Improving Protection for Iraqi Refugees

Sectarian violence within Iraq continues to force Iraqi civilians to seek refuge in surrounding countries and has prevented the return of Iraqis already living abroad. Fewer refugees are actually able to leave Iraq, and Iraqis are increasingly finding themselves with nowhere to go. Syria has imposed visa restrictions on Iraqis crossing the border at the request of the Government of Iraq. Furthermore, Iraqi refugees increasingly in need of protection are often not able to get it in countries of first asylum. As the number of Iraqis who fled their homes reached unprecedented levels, Iraq's neighbors, overwhelmed and concerned about their own stability, have started imposing a variety of measures and restrictions on refugees. In some cases, Iraqi refugees have resorted to paying smugglers to reach safety, and in other cases Iraqi families are separated by cumbersome visa restrictions. In an effort to crack down on Iraqis in Lebanon illegally, the Lebanese government has taken to detaining Iraqis, placing them in jail with common criminals. Additionally, reports are emerging of Iraqis being strongly encouraged to return to Iraq from Syria. Meanwhile, in all three countries, Iraqis traumatized by the violence and fearing deportation sometimes avoid registration with UN agencies and other service providers, leaving them increasingly vulnerable to detention and to a worsening humanitarian situation.

3. Meeting Humanitarian Needs

According to an International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) study conducted last June, at least 25% of Iraqis living in Syria are in need of a broad range of humanitarian assistance. NGOs in all countries report that the humanitarian situation of the refugee population is rapidly deteriorating. Yet Iraqis across the region face the misperception that they are financially capable of supporting themselves, while being hosted by governments concerned about the economic burden placed on ministries and agencies providing basic services. Iraqi refugees in Syria who are receiving assistance are receiving much of it through the Syrian ministries of Education and Health, as well as through the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, an official government agency. The Syrian government insists that the Syrian Arab Red Crescent oversee all humanitarian response, but the agency is overwhelmed by the needs and lacks the necessary capacity. The refugees are putting a great strain on an overburdened system, and it is clear that the existing health and education infrastructure is insufficient to meet the needs of the Iraqis. In Egypt, Iraqis are struggling to obtain basic services as the Egyptian government has not allowed access to public systems and international NGOs cannot expand their work to Iraqis.

Throughout the region, delays in fully funding UN and other multilateral appeals, as well as the lack of earmarked bilateral assistance, are leaving Iraqis in desperate need of food assistance, education and health services. Access to mental health support is practically nonexistent and badly needed for a highly traumatized population.

4. Improving UN Response and Coordination

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has taken the lead in responding to Iraqi refugee needs in all affected countries. Other agencies have recently started planning and implementing programs, but the response remains insufficient. In Lebanon, UNHCR remains the only UN agency that is actively responding to needs, but it requires support. In Syria and Egypt, different appeals have been submitted by various UN organizations, many of which were issued with little coordination and consultation within the UN country team. In all countries, the UN resident representatives have not taken a strong role in ensuring that the overall response is coordinated and that appeals are funded by donors. This has resulted in some UN agencies having all their budgetary needs met while others are paralyzed by lack of funding.

5. Improving Resettlement Processes

Despite the US government's promise to resettle 7,000 Iraqi refugees in FY 07, only 1,608 were admitted by September 30; only 450 were admitted in October towards an FY 08 goal of 12,000. UNHCR has referred 12,607 cases to the U.S., and will continue to refer more in the future. Until now, the processes have been unforgivably slow, leading to large numbers of vulnerable Iraqis becoming more destitute as they anxiously wait for their interviews or final approval. In particular, UNHCR is extremely concerned about the limited numbers of slots available for medical cases. With the U.S. Refugee Coordinator for the region based in Cairo and in charge of 15 countries, the U.S. lacks the human resources needed to improve its response and reach its resettlement targets.

Advocates Kristele Younes and Jake Kurtzer just returned from a one-month assessment of conditions for Iraqi refugees in Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt.

IRAQI REFUGEES: KEY FACTS ON THE POLITICAL RESPONSE

Iraqi refugees in Egypt, Syria and Lebanon face a multitude of political obstacles to receiving basic assistance. Host governments are citing pre-existing security and political considerations as a justification for a lackluster humanitarian response and deteriorating security climate. The U.S. must increase its diplomatic efforts to encourage a greater response to Iraqi refugees by appointing an ambassador level diplomat in Syria and appointing a senior PRM official in the region who is charged with coordinating assistance and resettlement.

- ❑ In Syria, the continued diplomatic embargo by the United States of the Syrian government is severely hampering the humanitarian response, and the ability of the US government to lead the international response to the crisis. To this point, Syria has demonstrated a great commitment to the humanitarian needs of the Iraqi refugee community. However, the Government of Syria has not yet signed Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) with the 8 international NGOs invited to implement humanitarian assistance programs. Meanwhile, the continued lack of an ambassador level diplomat from the US has impeded the ability of the US government to coordinate with the UN, NGOs and Syrian ministries that are responding to the needs of displaced Iraqis.
- ❑ Regionally, an effective humanitarian response needs to be coordinated among the host countries and donor nations. The Arab League is a natural mechanism for coordinating a response for the refugees, yet the US government has not engaged them on the issue of the humanitarian response. Recently the Arab League has announced a diplomatic initiative to respond to the needs of displaced Iraqis. This initiative is long overdue but a welcome step. The US and EU donors, as well as Gulf States and other Arab nations must immediately work to develop an effective mechanism for donor coordination and fund distribution.
- ❑ To demonstrate political success in reconciliation, the Government of Iraq irresponsibly requested that Syria close its borders to Iraqi civilians fleeing violence. UNHCR grants Iraqis *prima facie*

refugee status, indicating an extreme level of violence within Iraq. At such time, it is highly irresponsible for the Iraqi government to encourage the closure of the last avenue of refuge. The US as the primary ally of the Iraqi government must engage with Iraqi officials to ensure that there remains an avenue of refuge for vulnerable Iraqi civilians.

- ❑ In Egypt, Iraqis are offered short term safety from the violence, but the status of their long term needs is in limbo. Iraqis in Egypt face a misperception that they are wealthy and don't need support. While it is true that some Iraqis arrived to Egypt with financial means to support themselves, their inability to work has led to the depletion of resources. Iraqis in Egypt are not allowed entry into the public school or health systems and there are no food support programs to speak of for Iraqis.

The government of Egypt has refused to give Iraqis refugee status similar to other refugee populations of magnitude in the country. International NGOs that are currently operating in Egypt and have the skills and capacity to respond to the needs of refugees are being denied the opportunity to extend their work to Iraqis. As the US increases its diplomatic efforts on Iraqi refugees, officials should urge the Egyptian government to allow Iraqis access to work and live -- similar to the "Four Freedoms" agreement that Egypt signed with Sudan -- and to allow international NGOs to serve Iraqi refugees.

IRAQI REFUGEES:

KEY FACTS ON INCREASING ASSISTANCE AND PROTECTION

Displaced Iraqis are in desperate need of assistance and protection. Host countries do not have the resources to provide basic services to Iraqis, leaving them in dire need of education, healthcare and financial assistance. Moreover, Iraq's neighbors, overwhelmed and concerned about their own stability, have started imposing restrictions on refugees. To improve the stability of the region and meet Iraqi refugees' needs, the U.S. should fund all pending UN appeals at a level of 50% or more. The U.S. and other donors, including Iraq, must also provide earmarked bilateral assistance to countries hosting large numbers of Iraqis either directly or through a Trust Fund established by the UN or the Arab League.

- ❑ **Syria, Lebanon and Egypt do not allow Iraqis to work.** As a result, Iraqis are becoming increasingly vulnerable and needs are growing as resources are depleted. In Lebanon, single young men have become an unlikely vulnerable group, as they often come to the country alone in search of employment and do not receive assistance from NGOs who focus on women and families. In all countries, the humanitarian community is concerned by the growing numbers of children working. This, and the fact that public schools are often not open to them in Lebanon and Egypt, helps explain the small number of Iraqi children attending school. Some single mothers are also forced to resort to prostitution to feed their families.
- ❑ **Many Iraqis do not seek help out of shame or fear, and it is difficult for aid agencies to identify them.** As Iraqis generally come from an urban, educated environment, they find it extremely difficult and humiliating to adapt to a refugee situation. Moreover, many Iraqis have had to flee targeted persecution in Iraq because of their sectarian background or profession. Some continue to be threatened in their country of asylum by the same people or militias who targeted them in Iraq. Most do not go to the police for fear of drawing attention to themselves or being deported.
- ❑ **Iraqis have very few options left when they flee for safety.** 10 out of the 18 Governorates within Iraq have closed their internal borders, unable to cope with the large numbers of displaced flooding their towns. Syria was the only country left with an open door policy until it imposed visa restrictions at the Iraqi border in October - making it almost impossible for most to cross it. Now, Syria allows Iraqis in for a fee of \$50 per person, making it difficult for destitute Iraqis to enter. Refugees International was also told that Syrian police officials and aid workers have advised some refugees to leave when they found their visa expired. This contributes to a climate of fear amongst refugees, making it impossible for victims of violence to start the healing process.
- ❑ **Authorities in Lebanon, host of an estimated 50,000 Iraqis, have been systematically arresting and detaining those who are in Lebanon illegally** since the May 2007 events in the Palestinian camp of Nahr-el-Bared. The majority of Iraqis living in Lebanon do not have valid residency papers and many had to pay smugglers to enter Lebanon illegally. According to UNHCR, at least 538 Iraqis were detained in Lebanon in October 2007, including 209 who had completed their sentences. Refugees International visited the Roumieh prison in Beirut, where over 400 Iraqis are currently detained. Of those interviewed, all had been arrested for illegal entry or an expired visa. None of them wanted to return to Iraq. One of them even said that he "would sooner move to Darfur." Detained Iraqis in Lebanon still only have the choice between detention with common criminals and return to war-torn Iraq.

IRAQI REFUGEES: KEY FACTS FOR IMPROVING THE UN RESPONSE

Since the beginning of this year, the UN response to the Iraqi refugee crisis, led by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), has substantially improved. Resources have increased, and many UN agencies started programs addressing the needs of Iraqi refugees, making effective inter-agency coordination a challenge. Much still needs to be done, and as needs continue to increase, it is even more vital for the whole UN system to engage more throughout the region and for the UN country teams to make Iraqi refugees a priority. In particular, the UN needs resident representatives to take a much stronger role in coordinating and leading the national and regional UN response to the needs of Iraqis.

- The Lebanon UN country team as a whole has yet to make Iraqis a priority and has not advocated with the Lebanese government for greater assistance or access to services. UNHCR remains the only UN agency active in responding to Iraqi refugees' needs in Lebanon, despite the deteriorating protection situation. Other agencies have been reluctant to get involved, concerned by the risk of jeopardizing their existing development programs. UNICEF, which is currently supporting 87 schools in the country, would be in a privileged position to provide education and assistance programs to school-aged Iraqis. Yet, despite UNHCR's direct assistance to 1,800 children and their estimate that at least 3,000 are currently enrolled in school, UNICEF was not aware of the numbers and had not done any assessment of needs for them and the many others who are not attending school. UNICEF Lebanon was not included in the regional UNICEF appeal because of a lack of communication and coordination between the different UNICEF offices.

- Despite recent initiatives in Syria, major gaps remain mostly because of a lack of coordination and leadership at the UN country team level. Iraqi refugees in Syria have started moving out of Damascus and into small urban centers as the capital has become saturated. The needs keep growing and have prompted UN agencies to react, albeit belatedly. The UN Population Fund (UNFPA), which has operated in Syria since 1971, is running clinics for Iraqis and has a proposal pending to address gender-based violence. UNICEF is now conducting large operations in

schools across Damascus and has a common regional appeal with UNHCR. The World Health Organization (WHO) launched a regional appeal to respond to Iraqi refugees' health needs. However, UN appeals are not fully funded, except for UNHCR, as donors are exasperated by the lack of consolidated appeals and overall coordination. According to a non-UN humanitarian worker based in Damascus: "There are too many appeals. Nobody knows who is doing what where." With UNHCR too busy to effectively coordinate the humanitarian response, leadership coming from the resident representative is desperately needed.

- In Egypt, the issue of Iraqi refugees is absent from the UN country team's agenda, and very little advocacy is done by the UN to improve living and protection conditions. In Egypt, as in Lebanon, UNHCR is the only agency actively responding to Iraqi refugees' needs. WHO's regional appeal includes resources for health needs in Egypt, but as no one promoted it to donors, it remains completely unfunded to date. Moreover, UN agencies seem unable to agree amongst each other and with the Government of Egypt on the real scope of the problem. According to the Egyptian government and agencies like WHO, there are more than 130,000 Iraqis in Cairo in need of various degrees of assistance. UNHCR, however, defines the problem as much smaller -- 20,000 Iraqis at most -- many of whom have enough resources to survive. This disagreement demonstrates the necessity of a common UN country team approach and understanding of the problem.