The Iraqi Refugee Crisis in Regional Context

Ellen Laipson
The Stimson Center

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Thank you for giving me the opportunity to address your subcommittee on the issue of Iraqi refugees. The plight of the more than a million Iraqi refugees has significant consequences for the Middle East region, as well as for the future stability and identity of the Iraqi state. How the refugees are treated is also seen as a test of US leadership, and a measure of US ability to manage the consequences of the decision to oust Saddam Hussein.

I approach this issue not as a refugee expert per se, nor as someone directly involved in the many laudable humanitarian programs that support refugee needs. I look at the refugee issue from a broad political perspective, as it relates to the future of Iraq, the stability of the neighboring countries that have received large numbers of Iraqi migrants, and the larger challenge of regional security.

Seen from this broader perspective, the potential implications of the refugee issue are profound. At one extreme, it is worth pondering whether the Iraqi refugees will come to be seen as the next Palestinians: a large population movement caused by political upheaval and war that has the potential to change the politics of the region for generations, reshaping the demographic and political balances in some of the key countries of the region, including Syria and Jordan. Even if that scenario does not play out, the drama of the spontaneous flow of Iraqis away from their homes has huge consequences for Iraq itself; the tragic loss of cultural diversity and coexistence in many urban neighborhoods and remote villages, the brain drain of well-trained professionals,

and the uncertainties for political loyalties and national identity that are provoked by this abrupt shift in the demographic make-up of the country.

My comments today will offer some reflections on how to think about the Iraqi refugee problem, and about refugees and other forms of migration. I will then address three key questions:

1. What are the current conditions and policy concerns regarding Iraqi refugees in Syria, Jordan, and other Middle Eastern states?
2. What are the prospects for large-scale return of Iraqi refugees?
3. What are the long-term implications of the Iraqi refugee crisis for Iraq, its reintegration in the region, and regional stability?

How to think about the refugee crisis

There are a number of definitional issues that should be recognized: the unplanned movement of people from crisis zones does not always mean they can be easily categorized for purposes of the international community's responses, nor are numbers often reliable or based on deeply scientific methods. In the case of Iraq, we do not know for certain how many Iraqis left the country during different phases of the crisis; it is often cited that as much as 20% of Iraq's population has moved since 2003, half within the country and half across its international borders. A new U.S. Institute of Peace report[1] on Iraq's displaced reminds us that there was mass displacement of Iraqis

[1] US Institute of Peace, Deborah Isser and Peter Van der Auweraert, *Land, Property and the Challenge of Return for Iraq's Displaced,* USIP Special Report No. 221, April 2009.

during the rule of the Ba-ath party and Saddam Hussein. Some of those Iraqis are now moving within Iraq back to their place or origin, while others have been returning from international places of temporary residence or asylum. This will add another dimension of complexity with respect to eligibility for various kinds of support for return, including housing and employment support once back inside Iraq.

Since 2003, Iraqis left the country in two waves: one in the early period of chaos and uncertainty, and a much larger wave provoked by the outbreak of sectarian fighting in February 2006. The flow of Iraqis across the borders to neighboring Syria and Jordan in particular was largest in 2006 and began to taper off in 2007, when conditions began to improve gradually inside Iraq, and receiving countries developed more formal policies for those seeking to come for safety and work. The number of Iraqis who have left since 2003 is not known; officially the commonly used arithmetic is 1.2 million Iraqis in Syria, 500,000 in Jordan, 200,000 in the Gulf countries, and some tens of thousands in Egypt and Lebanon. But NGOs and experts on the ground considered those figures to be swollen by as much as 30-40 percent.

Migration experts, such as those at the American University of Cairo's Center for Migration and Refugee Studies, point out that there is sometimes not a clear distinction between an economic migrant and a refugee. A person or family can choose to leave their home when conflict or chronic instability makes it hard to earn a living. They leave in search of a more normal life, both in terms of livelihood and safety. The receiving country may consider the person an economic migrant; the decision to self-declare as a

refugee is also not a simple proposition for a middle class person who hopes to quickly acquire a home and a job, not to live as a ward of local charities or the international community.

One's status can also change over time. In the case of the Iraqis in Syria, for example, many came as "guests" of the Syrians, and were able to finance their temporary residence in Syria's cities. But over time, absent promising conditions in Iraq to lure them back, these same families deplete their savings, find no employment in the local economy, and reluctantly find themselves applying for services and subsidies that oblige them to register as refugees. The UN High Commissioner on Refugees is now encouraging Iraqis to register, in order to facilitate access to basic human needs programs, including financial support for food, housing, health and education.

It is also important to note that to address the needs of a refugee population, it is often necessary to treat them as a collective, as a group with shared requirements. But refugees are individuals and families, each with deeply personal and unique stories and perspectives. Resolving the refugee crisis must take into account that people will respond differently to the traumatic experience of fleeing their country, and will not all embrace the services provided by relief organizations or the incentives offered by Iraq or receiving countries for those migrants to return. The long-term solution, therefore, will require a

range of options for the refugees, not a policy based on an assumption that they are a cohesive or like-minded cohort.[2]

Current Conditions and Concerns

The environment in which Iraqi refugees find themselves in early 2009 in the neighboring Arab states is affected by a range of factors: the global economic downturn and its local impact, the history and legacy of Iraq's relations with each host country, and the host government's views of the changing situation in Iraq and prospects for return. It is also affected by the behavior of the Iraqis themselves. It is important to note that no major Arab country has created "refugee camps" for the Iraqis. Some Arab cities, however, now have neighborhoods where Iraqis cluster, with restaurants and customs that have an Iraqi character. In other cases, Iraqis choose to move together to small rural enclaves and avoid the cities where they may be subject to discrimination or run afoul of security authorities.

Some of the early concerns about Iraqis bringing sectarian politics or violence with them appear to have abated. Local security services have attempted to screen out Iraqis with a clear political agenda, and for the most part, there are few instances of Iraqi refugees, migrants and guests causing conflict or law and order problems in their countries of temporary residence. Local populations, however, perceive the Iraqis in a somewhat hostile way, considering them responsible for inflation, for high real estate

[2] For a useful discussion of different and simultaneous options for Iraqi refugees, see The International Rescue Committee, *Five Years Later, A Hidden Crisis,* Report of the IRC Commission on Iraqi Refugees, March 2008.

prices, and even for water scarcity. This suggests that conflict or competition over resources will remain a concern for host countries.

A quick snapshot of the situation in key Arab states may be useful[3]:

Syria Overall, Syria is viewed by the aid community and political analysts to have been the most generous and accommodating of the regional states towards Iraqi refugees. The government in Damascus considers the Iraqis to be "guests" and does not formally take a position on repatriation. Syria received a larger share of Christian refugees than other neighbors, and it is widely assumed that the Christians, many from small villages in northern Iraq, are not likely to return, even if security conditions improve in Iraq. The Christian Iraqis receive support and services from various local and international Christian non-governmental organizations, and are somewhat integrated at the social level.

Economic conditions for Iraqis in Syria, however, are dire. Many have depleted their savings or proceeds from selling homes and businesses in Iraq, and are not able to seek formal employment in the Syrian labor market, where unemployment is already high. The strain on resources is considerable, and the international NGO community finds itself serving both the Iraqi refugee population and Syrians who are also in need of food, education and housing support.

[3] I am grateful for a draft paper by Sara Sadek, *Iraqi "Temporary Guests" in neighboring countries: Challenges and Prospects of Integration*, Center for Migration and Refugee Studies, American University in Cairo. Discussion paper prepared for a Stimson Center-AUC-AUB workshop on migration held in Beirut March 16-17, 2009.

The Syrian government remains relatively confident that the refugee problem is manageable. Syrian officials would like more financial support from Iraq, which Damascus complains has not lived up to its promises to help finance the basic needs of Iraqis in Syria, and from the international community, but they seem to take a long-term view. The leadership realizes, nonetheless, that unemployed and under-educated refugees in Syrian cities could, over time, become a virtual "bomb" for Syria, and for Iraq, should they return.[4]

Jordan Jordan has been more nervous about the presence of Iraqi refugees, has more stringent policies for screening who is eligible to enter, and has felt a more direct impact of the influx on its relatively smaller population and infrastructure.

Jordan provides Iraqis with asylum-seeking status, rather than refugee status granted by the UN High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR) as it provided in most other countries, once the refugees register. They are given a six-month visa with no authorization to work, although affluent Iraqis who can deposit $150,000 in Jordanian banks have been given longer residence permits.

Jordan is also worried about the long-term impact of sectarian consciousness of a Shia refugee population in a Sunni majority country. Jordan sees the refugee crisis from

[4] See US Institute of Peace-Stimson Center joint report *Iraq, its neighbors and the Obama Administration: Syrian and Saudi Perspectives*, a working paper on a study mission in January 2009, p. 8.

the perspective of its own history, hosting Palestinians who now form about half of the Jordanian population, and its once-close relationship with Baghdad.

Egypt [5]

The relatively small cohort of Iraqis in Egypt does not generate much attention or concern from the Egyptian government, which also houses large refugee populations from Sudan, Somalia, and other African conflict zones. Many Iraqis in Egypt have legal residence, either through their economic investments or through registering with UNHCR to allow their children into the public school system.

In contrast to the large African populations in Cairo, Iraqis are perceived as wealthy migrants, based in part on the collective memory of Egyptian laborers who worked in Iraq in the 1980s. There are some social frictions over property, and Iraqis complain that they have been blocked from forming their own civil associations, reportedly on security grounds.

Lebanon

Iraqis in Lebanon face considerable obstacles to normalizing their status. They are granted refugee status by UNHCR, but this has not protected them from detention by Lebanese authorities. Many do not have residence permits and are required to pay fees to

[5] See for example their study Iraqis in Egypt: A Statistical Survey in 2008. at http://www.aucegypt.edu/ResearchatAUC/rc/cmrs/Documents/Iraqis%20in%20Egypt%20Provisional%20Copy.pdf

acquire them. They also have no access to public health and education services, or to the labor market.

Unlike the situation in Syria, Jordan and Egypt, Iraqis in Lebanon have formed community networks to survive, and Lebanon has permitted them to establish these services. Given the profound and seemingly permanent impact that Palestinian refugees have had on Lebanon, it appears unlikely that the government in Beirut will permit the Iraqis to fully integrate, and they may remain in rural enclaves, or migrate to other locales as circumstances permit.

Prospects for Return

Repatriation of Iraqis who have not already integrated elsewhere or who may achieve resettlement status outside the Middle East is an important and compelling solution. It requires a number of conditions: Iraq has to be perceived as a relatively stable and secure environment, and refugees need some assurances about their prospects for returning to their homes and for finding employment. Much of the burden for meeting these conditions resides with the Iraqi government and society, but the international community can also contribute to making this a viable option for many refugees.

The perception of security conditions inside Iraq is likely to be the most important driver of a refugee's decision to return: all the services and subsidies will not suffice if

the fundamental reason for flight has not been addressed. Iraqis in refugee status maintain contact with relatives and neighbors inside, as well as media accounts of conditions inside. They are interested in security at the national level, but also at the neighborhood level and at the family level. In 2006, families fled because of direct threats from neighbors of a different sectarian identity. They will gauge for themselves whether those conditions have changed and how much risk they are willing to take. Do they have the option of living in a more homogeneous area where sectarian dangers are reduced? Refugee experts suggest that the refugees themselves will be good indicators of when the right conditions for return prevail: Iraqis have informal networks of information and even travel back into Iraq, to appraise the situation.

Economics is also a powerful driver of the decision to return. Iraqi refugees were not able to calculate the duration of their refuge, and many would return at a lower socio-economic status than they enjoyed before their departure. The readjustment to life in Iraq may be hard, but at some point, it may be better than remaining unemployed in a neighboring country. Resuming their earlier professional lives may not be feasible immediately, but can be an aspiration that motivates them to return.

The Iraqi government offers transportation and modest financial assistance to returnees. The estimate of returnees in early 2008 was less than 100,000, a very small fraction of those displaced since 2003. In general, these services and the sustained commitment to providing them are not robust enough to have generated large numbers to date, nor are the other conditions cited above strong enough.

Long Term Prognosis

The United States has a deep and abiding interest in the stability of Iraq and its ability to resume its place as a key state in the region. The enduring presence of Iraqis with deteriorating economic conditions in neighboring states will be a painful reminder of Iraq's weakness and its internal strife, and an increasing burden on their hosts. As Iraq's neighbors adjust to new realities, and Iraq is integrated back into the region, the refugee issue has the potential to be a source of cooperation and common concern, but also an enduring source of friction. Disaffected Iraqis with few prospects of integration in host countries could be drawn to extremism or lawlessness, which will hurt Iraq and the host societies and impede prospects for regional security.

The international community needs to have a range of programs and policies for the Iraqi displaced: first and foremost, to work on conditions inside Iraq that will make return a viable and attractive option, to provide support to host countries to manage the infrastructure challenges of absorbing, even temporarily, large numbers of Iraqis, and to encourage policies that permit Iraqis to find long-term solutions, through integration when possible and resettlement to third countries, including the United States. In the end, these are profoundly personal choices. The United States needs to work strategically for stability in Iraq, recognizing that some of these societal traumas will take a very long time to heal. Refugee policies that are generous of spirit and flexible in practice will offer the most solace to a population that needs support now, and attention over time so

that Iraqis who fled war and conflict in recent years can return to play a role in Iraq's future if they choose, or find a new life elsewhere.

Thank you.