

Iraq's refugees: ignored and unwanted

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Abstract

The article provides a brief overview of the scale and characteristics of Iraq's refugee population as well as their protection and assistance needs in asylum countries. It also reviews their relative impact on neighbouring states and the sustainability of recent returns.

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Despite recent notable improvements in the security situation inside Iraq and the beginning of limited returns, it is unclear whether this significant change will be sustainable, given the failure to address the underlying causes of the displacement and the undeniable difficulties that returnees are facing upon their return. A contributing factor to the return has been the lack of adequate international assistance and attention to those displaced, which has forced hundreds of thousands of Iraqis to become impoverished and increasingly vulnerable. Many of those refugees who have returned had little choice; they either took the opportunity of improved security conditions inside Iraq, however fleeting, or faced increasing destitution and indignity. At the same time the welcome mat is wearing thin as Iraqi refugees overwhelm the basic infrastructure of their host communities, raising concerns about the potential for further destabilization of the region. If Iraq does not awake from its nightmare of sectarian violence, particularly when multinational forces are being phased out,¹ the international community will not have the option to continue to ignore the mounting humanitarian needs of Iraq's displaced.

* The article has been provided in a personal capacity and does not necessarily reflect the views of the organization.

Refugee numbers

While acknowledging that refugee estimates are open to interpretation and debate, it appears that there are at least 2 million Iraqi refugees in the region, with another 2 million internally displaced. The fact that refugee figures are often used as an indicator of progress, or lack thereof, in Iraq makes dealing with displacement figures even more contentious. What is clear is that the current displacement is the largest displacement crisis in the Middle East since 1948. The generally accepted figures include more than 1 million Iraqis in Syria, 450,000–500,000 in Jordan, 200,000 in the Gulf States, 50,000 in Lebanon, 40,000–60,000 in Egypt, 60,000 in the Islamic Republic of Iran, and another 10,000 in Turkey.² Of this total UNHCR has registered over 227,500,³ or some 10 per cent of the estimated population of Iraqis in the region. It should be noted that hundreds of thousands of Iraqis had left Iraq prior to 2003, either as a result of persecution or discrimination or in search of better economic, health or educational opportunities.⁴

- 1 The Multi-National Forces in Iraq (MNF-I) consists as at December 2007 of United States (154,000), United Kingdom (4,500, to be reduced to 2,500 in spring 2008), Georgia (2,000, to be reduced to 300 in summer 2008), Australia (550 combat troops and 1,000 personnel engaged in Iraq-related operations; all 550 combat troops to be removed by mid-2008), South Korea (933, to be reduced to 600), Poland (900, planned withdrawal mid-2008), Romania (397), El Salvador (280), Bulgaria (155), Albania (120), Mongolia (100), Czech Republic (99, to be reduced to 20 in summer 2008), Azerbaijan (88), Denmark (50), Armenia (46), Macedonia (40), Bosnia & Herzegovina (43), Estonia (35), Kazakhstan (29), Moldova (11), Latvia (7), Fiji (as part of UNAMI) (223). Withdrawn (and date of withdrawal): Nicaragua (February 2004); Spain (late April 2004); Dominican Republic (early May 2004); Honduras (late May 2004); Philippines (around 19 July 2004); Thailand (late August 2004); New Zealand (late September 2004); Tonga (mid-December 2004), Iceland (2004), Portugal (mid-February 2005); Netherlands (March 2005); Hungary (March 2005); Singapore (March 2005); Norway (October 2005); Ukraine (December 2005); Japan (July 17, 2006); Italy (November 2006); Slovakia (January 2007); Lithuania (August 2007). Information available at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Multinational_force_in_Iraq, and http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3873359.stm (last visited 20 February 2008).
- 2 Figures are derived from government estimates and cross-checked with independent surveys where possible. Given the urban character of the Iraqi refugee population it is extremely difficult to obtain precise figures. As an example, on 1 October 2007 the Foreign Minister of Syria told the UN General Assembly that there were “1.6 million Iraqi refugees in Syria”. Other estimates have considerably lower figures.
- 3 UNHCR registration figures: this figure includes 150,000 in Syria, 52,000 in Jordan, 10,000 in Lebanon and 10,500 in Egypt respectively. In addition there are 54,000 Iraqis from pre-2003 in Iran, with another 3,000 registered new arrivals.
- 4 In early 2003, UNHCR estimated a total of more than 30,000 Iraqis in Syria, while more than 250,000 were estimated to be in Jordan. At the time of the 1991 Gulf War, Jordan was the only country that accepted Iraqis. Since that time it is believed that the population of Iraqis in Jordan has never gone below 130,000. According to a recent survey by the Danish Refugee Council/UNHCR in Lebanon, 30 per cent of respondents arrived prior to 2003. According to the Brookings Report commissioned by UNHCR on Syrian refugees, two waves of Iraqi refugees have come to Syria over the past 25 years. The first wave came in the 1970s and 1980s; many of those refugees were Sunnis who opposed the Saddam Hussein regime, while others were Shia fleeing persecution. Following the first Gulf War and the Iraqi government's repression of Shia in the south, the Syria–Iraq border remained closed throughout the 1990s and only reopened in 2001–2. The second wave of Iraqi displacement began in 2003 as a result of the US invasion. Information available at www.brookings.edu/papers/2007/0611humanrights_al-khalidi.aspx (last visited 20 February 2008).

Table 1. *Registration (as of 31 December 2007, UNHCR had registered over 227,500 Iraqis in the region), cumulative numbers*

	Estimated Iraqi population	Total registered	Cases	Female principal applicant	Registered in 2007	Average case size
Syria	1.0–1.5 million	147,050	39,096	21.6%	106,528	3.5
Jordan	450–500,000	51,229	24,077	26.7%	31,210	2.0
Lebanon	50,000	9,721	5,306	6.0%	6,432	2.0
Turkey	5–10,000	4,276	2,157	21.3%	3,091	2.0
Egypt	20–40,000	10,132	3,959	27.2%	8,169	2.5
Iran	60,000+	3,673		9.0%	3,305	
GCC*	200,000+	1,816	767			2.5

*Gulf Co-operation Council (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates).

Table 2. *Percentage registered with UNHCR by religion (as of 31 December 2007)*

Of the total registered	Sunnis	Shia	Christians	Islam unspecified	Sabeen-Mandean	Yezidis
Syria	53.3%	21.8%	17.0%	2.1%	4.6%	0.9%
Jordan	56.0%	26.0%	15.0%	1.0%	1.0%	0.1%
Lebanon	30.0%	57.0%	12.0%	0.7%	0.1%	0.1%
Turkey	35.9%	6.3%	18.8%	31.0%	n/a	n/a
Egypt	n/a	n/a	2.0%	98.0%	n/a	n/a

Characteristics of the Iraqi refugee population

Iraqi refugees largely come from an urban background and have gravitated in exile to the region's largest cities, particularly Damascus, Amman, Cairo and Beirut. When Iraqis first arrived, most brought resources with them and many were not in need of assistance. They did not register with UNHCR and they were not housed in camps, and they remained hidden and anonymous in their respective urban sanctuaries. Several years on, that situation has changed and hundreds of thousands of refugees are no longer able to look after themselves. While they are not starving, many see their lives wasting away as their savings and assets are exhausted and they sink into idleness and poverty. All face a terrible choice: should they return home, with all its hazards, or remain in exile, without access to stable employment and basic services? As their vulnerability increases, so does the push factor for families to return to Iraq.

It should be noted that in reviewing the data derived from UNHCR registration figures in this paper, there is likely to be a bias towards the most vulnerable and minorities. While many Iraqis who still have the means to support their families will hesitate to register, those in most need, particularly those who see little prospect of returning to Iraq even if the situation were to improve or

those with support networks in the West (such as many Christians and Sabeen Mandeans), will approach UNHCR for assistance and protection. For almost all refugees, registering with UNHCR and subsequently queuing for assistance is both a humiliating and a demeaning experience.

Of the 250,000⁵ Iraqis refugees registered with UNHCR across the region, the following are some of their main characteristics:

- Over 80 per cent originate from Baghdad, with fewer than 5 per cent fleeing from each of the following provinces: Ninewa, Diyala, Kerbala, Basrah and Anbar. In Egypt 93 per cent of those registered originate from Baghdad. In Lebanon the proportion is just over 60 per cent. The urban origin, particularly Baghdad, of the refugees is hardly surprising given that much of the sectarian violence has occurred in the mixed Sunni and Shiite areas, which are overwhelmingly urban. These include Iraq's largest cities: Baghdad, Mosul and Basra. It also includes mixed towns in northern Babil province (Yusufiya, Latifiyya, Mahmudiyya), in Salah ad-Din province (Balad, Dujail, Samarra) and in Diyala (Muqdadia, Baquba).
- 75 per cent to 90 per cent of Iraqis reside in the region's capitals, making this the world's largest urban refugee population.
- Some 50 to 60 per cent of those registered are Sunnis, with Shiites representing less than 25 per cent of the total in each country. The exception is Lebanon, where close to 60 per cent of those registered are Shiite. The proportions of Christians (15–18 per cent) and Mandeans (3 per cent) registered are much higher than their relative proportions in Iraq, where their combined totals are less than 5 per cent. Recent registration figures highlight a growing proportion of Sunnis and a decreasing number of Christians (from Baghdad, Mosul and Basra) and Sabeen Mandeans (Baghdad, Basra, Amara, and Nasiriyya).⁶
- The gender breakdown across the region for all Iraqis is approximately 53 per cent male to 47 per cent female, with the notable exception of Lebanon.⁷ The average case size increased throughout 2007 as entire families, rather than individuals, registered; 20 per cent of families cited females as the principal applicant.
- The proportion of vulnerable Iraqis registering has increased. UNHCR is identifying larger numbers of severe medical cases and chronic illnesses, survivors of torture and trauma, children or adolescents at risk, women at risk and older persons. In Damascus 36 per cent of those registered are identified as having specific needs. Many displaced Iraqis have been exposed to terrifying experiences of terror and violence, with approximately 22 per cent of Iraqis registered with UNHCR reporting personal traumatic events. This,

5 By 21 February UNHCR had registered almost 250,000 Iraqis, including 165,000 in Syria.

6 This could indicate that those minorities who could have fled have now fled and the remaining population to be displaced inside Iraq has decreased.

7 According to UNHCR registration figures, 72 per cent of Iraqis registered in Lebanon are male. The majority is of working age and may have been attracted to Lebanon by the availability of "informal" work.

compounded by the difficulty of daily life, has led to high rates of psychological fragility and distress. Many Iraqis who crossed into Syria, and to a lesser extent Jordan, have special needs due *inter alia* to chronic illnesses or injuries or their situation as survivors of torture and trauma, children or adolescents at risk, women at risk, and disabled and older persons.

A convenience sample survey conducted by UNHCR found that among Iraqi refugees registering with UNHCR between 31 October and 25 November 2007, the prevalence of depression and anxiety was high – 89 per cent and 82 per cent (n=384) respectively. Every survey respondent reported experiencing at least one traumatic event with the mental health and trauma data analysed by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), based in Atlanta. Among respondents,

- 77 per cent reported being affected by air bombardments and shelling or rocket attacks;
- 80 per cent reported being witness to a shooting;
- 68 per cent reported interrogation or harassment by militias or other groups, with threats to life;
- 22 per cent had been beaten by militias or other groups;
- 23 per cent had been kidnapped;
- 72 per cent had been eyewitnesses to a car bombing;
- 75 per cent had someone close to them who had been killed or murdered.

Although respondents were asked questions about any exposure to such events in the previous ten years, virtually all reported events dated from 2003 to the present. All the reported events took place within Iraq itself. Respondents were also specifically asked about torture. Of the 120 surveyed,

- 16 per cent reported being tortured (a finding similar to the figure reported in the UNHCR database of 135,000 refugees),
- 61 per cent reported being beaten with fists and 58 per cent with other objects;
- 18 per cent reported being given electric shocks;
- 5 per cent had objects placed under their nails;
- 6 per cent had burns inflicted.

Syria survey

A survey undertaken by UNHCR Syria⁸ and IPSOS Market Research in November 2007 of 754 families, comprising 3,553 family members, indicated that

- most of the refugee population are well educated, 31 per cent have completed a university education, and fewer than 3 per cent are uneducated or illiterate;

8 Sister UN Agencies UNICEF, UNFPA and WFP all contributed questions to be included in the research, and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) added the Hopkins Checklist Depression Scale (HSCL-D) and Harvard Trauma Questionnaire (HQD).

- 33 per cent only have funds to last for three months or less and 24 per cent are relying on remittances from relatives abroad to survive;
- the children of 46 per cent had to drop out of school, with 10 per cent of children working;
- 19 per cent could not afford treatment for their illnesses and 17 per cent have a chronic illness;
- 96 per cent rent accommodation, with 62 per cent paying between US\$100 and US\$300 per month; and
- 63 per cent had family abroad, 34 per cent of whom were in Sweden, 24 per cent in the United States, 16 per cent in Australia, 13 per cent in Germany and 13 per cent in the United Kingdom.

In contrast to the previous survey in May 2007, in which 73 per cent said that they expected family members to join them, in November only 36 per cent had that expectation. Significantly fewer Iraqis are registering with UNHCR in the hope of being resettled (27 per cent in May, 15 per cent in November), whereas many more state that the primary reason for registering is to receive the UNHCR Refugee Certificate (24 per cent in May, 40 per cent in November).⁹

Jordan survey

In Jordan, a survey conducted by the Norwegian Research Institute (FAFO)¹⁰ in conjunction with the government in mid-2007 placed the number of Iraqis at 450,000 to 500,000. The survey also indicated that

- the majority of Iraqis have arrived as family units and 77 per cent of them arrived after 2003. The average size of an Iraqi family is 4.1 persons. Two-thirds of families have children under 18 years of age;
- 20 per cent of families are female-headed families and are often found among the poorer population;
- only 35 per cent of those surveyed were registered with UNHCR;
- Sunni Muslims represent over 60 per cent, 17–18 per cent were Shiite, 12–15 per cent Christian and 5 per cent others, including Sabean-Mandean and Yezidis;
- 22 per cent of Iraqi adults are employed;
- the Iraqi population has a higher prevalence of chronic diseases;
- only 22 per cent of the poorest section of the Iraqi community surveyed had a valid residence permit; 56 per cent overall had a valid residence permit;
- 42 per cent survive on remittances from Iraq. This means that a large segment of Iraqis in Jordan are at risk of becoming vulnerable with the depletion of savings and/or cessation of transfers;

9 It is worth noting that registration figures reached a three-month high in January 2008, following the announcement by UNHCR of an expanded food and cash assistance programme. It is clear that in an urban environment, refugees will determine the effectiveness of assistance and protection being offered before deciding whether to register.

10 See http://www.faf.no/ais/middeast/jordan/Iraqis_in_Jordan.htm – 8k (last visited 20 February 2008).

- 20 per cent plan to emigrate to a third country, with 58 per cent having no intention of returning to Iraq;
- 95 per cent of those Iraqis who wish to return to Iraq will do so only when the security situation improves.

Lebanon survey

A similar survey of 1,020 Iraqi households comprising 2,033 individuals was conducted by the Danish Refugee Council in Lebanon,¹¹ where it is estimated that there are 50,000 Iraqis. The results indicated that

- 78 per cent of Iraqis entered the country illegally and 60 per cent were 29 years of age or younger;
- of children aged from 6 to 17, only 58 per cent were enrolled in schools;
- 10 per cent of the Iraqis surveyed are suffering from chronic illnesses;
- the majority of Iraqis in Lebanon – 78 per cent – live in the Lebanon Mountains, while 20 per cent live in the south and in the eastern Bekaa valley;
- finally, more than half of the respondents reported never feeling safe in Lebanon.

The protection needs of Iraqis

Since January 2007 UNHCR has granted refugee status on a prima facie basis to all Iraqi nationals from central and southern Iraq. Its offices throughout the region hold registration interviews to confirm the origin of Iraqis and their degree of vulnerability, facilitate their referral for protection and assistance, as well as assessing whether the applicant should be excluded. The granting of prima facie status is based on the following assumptions:

- (a) Individuals from central and southern Iraq who flee targeted human rights violations or generalized violence will not find an internal flight alternative in those areas. This is due not least to the reach of both state and non-state actors, as well as the grave security situation prevalent in central and southern Iraq. In addition, an individual who relocates to an area other than that of his/her origin will probably face serious and continuing difficulties, given the lack of protection from local authorities, communities or tribes, ethno-religious hostilities and lack of access to even the most basic services.
- (b) The targeted and extreme forms of violence underpinned by religious, ethnic or perceived political affiliations clearly amount to persecution within the meaning of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol (hereinafter referred to as “the 1951

11 See www.drc.dk/index.php?id=1689-48k (last visited 20 February 2008).

Convention”).¹² The fact that persecution could be the act of state or non-state agents does not alter this conclusion. As pointed out earlier, there is no feasible internal flight alternative available for the vast majority of those displaced, and thus flight out of Iraq is the only option for them to find safety.

- (c) Even where an individual may not face targeted persecution or the risk thereof at the personal level, the generalized violence and the lack of effective law, order and security throughout most of central and southern Iraq provides a basis for valid claims for international protection. The fact that the authorities are not in a position to extend protection meaningfully and the general lack of internal flight alternatives anywhere in the country reinforce this conclusion.
- (d) The need for international protection resulting from generalized violence has been recognized in regional instruments and the practice of UNHCR. Regional instruments provide wider criteria for the refugee definition than that contained in the 1951 Convention. UNHCR’s mandate has likewise been extended in a number of UN General Assembly Resolutions to include persons who flee situations of armed conflict and generalized violence.¹³ The Executive Committee, in ExCom Conclusion No. 22,¹⁴ has recognized that large-scale influxes could give rise to refugees within the meaning of the 1951 Convention, as well as individuals who are compelled to seek refuge due to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order in part of, or the whole of, the country of origin. The conclusion calls for all such persons to be “fully protected”.
- (e) In view of the objective situation there, Iraqis who leave the central and southern parts of their country and are unable and/or unwilling to return there can be presumed to have international protection needs, making them persons of concern to UNHCR. The size of the outflow as a whole makes individual refugee status determination clearly unrealistic at the present time. While there may indeed be individuals who, if subject to personal refugee status determination, would not meet the refugee criteria or be excludable, the vast majority fall within both the 1951 Convention criteria and those of the extended definition. On this basis, Iraqis from central and southern Iraq who have fled the country as a result of the events which have taken place since April 2003 should be considered as refugees on a prima facie basis.
- (f) Individuals who left prior to the events in 2003 or those whose initial departure may have been unrelated to the present circumstances could, if

12 1951 Convention and Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees, Article 1A: “the term “refugee” shall apply to any person who: ... (2) ... owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it”.

13 See www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/refworld/rwmain/opendocpdf.pdf?docid=46deb05557 (last visited 20 February 2008).

14 Protection of Asylum-Seekers in Situations of Large-Scale Influx, (No. 22 (XXXII) – 1981), see www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/excom/opendoc.htm?tbl=EXCOM&id=3ae68c6e10 (last visited 31 January 2008).

they are unwilling or unable to return, also have valid claims *sur place* to international protection on the basis of the current conditions as summarized in this article.

- (g) The protection situation in the countries of the region in which large numbers of Iraqis are present varies. Turkey, Iran and Egypt are signatories to the 1951 Convention, although UNHCR regularly undertakes individual refugee status determination under its mandate as needed in light of the absence of functioning national refugee status determination mechanisms. Syria, Lebanon and Jordan are not parties to the 1951 Convention and there is no structured protection regime for the protection of and assistance to Iraqis. In these three countries, Iraqis are permitted entry and stay on the basis of national legislative provisions relating to foreigners generally.¹⁵ As a result, only short periods of legal stay are possible. Many Iraqis thus eventually fall into a situation of unlawful stay. Beyond permitting short stays, no specific supportive services are provided and Iraqis are left to fend for themselves. This leaves large numbers without possibilities for lawful work, some becoming increasingly destitute as they run out of resources. Many women and children are reported to have resorted to prostitution to survive. There are also reports of person-trafficking out of the region. While Iraqis may be able to access health facilities in Syria there are reports that, in Jordan, some are apprehensive of approaching government health centres for fear of being identified as “illegal”. Their unlawful status and the accumulation of unpaid fines¹⁶ has also reportedly created reluctance to notify law enforcement agencies of common crimes committed against them and they therefore become increasingly exposed to criminal elements.

The impact of the Iraqi refugees on neighbouring states

The countries adjoining Iraq, particularly Syria and Jordan, have demonstrated remarkable generosity in receiving such large numbers of Iraqis despite already hosting hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees for over 60 years. Both Syria and Jordan have estimated the costs of hosting the Iraqi refugees at up to US\$1 billion per year.¹⁷

15 Jordan introduced a visa requirement for Iraqis in mid February 2008.

16 In Jordan, people who overstay their visas are charged 1.5 Jordanian dinars or just over US\$2. For every year overstayed the fine is up US\$761. As part of the introduction of the visa regime, those Iraqis who wish to leave permanently will be fully exempted from accumulated fines, while those who wish to stay will have two months to rectify their residency and will have their fines halved. Iraqis who leave Jordan and intend to return or new arrivals will have to obtain a visa from offices that will be opened in Iraq.

17 Mukhaimer Abu Jamous, secretary-general of Jordan's Interior Ministry, said in April 2007 that 750,000 Iraqi refugees were costing his government \$1 billion a year, stretching to the limit the resources of a country of just 5.6 million. On 12 February Agence France-Presse (AFP) reported: “Hosting our Iraqi brothers depletes the infrastructure and has cost the government more than 1.6 billion dinars (2.2 billion dollars) during the past three years”, Planning Minister Suheir al-Ali told visiting UN High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres.

According to Syria's Prime Minister the influx of 1.5 million Iraqis equals the burden of 300,000 Syrian families who consume US\$1billion dollars a year in diesel, electricity, water and sanitation, and household gas.¹⁸ Prices for oil, electricity, water and kerosene have gone up by 20 per cent, low standard rents have tripled since 2005 and subsidies have been scaled down. If the situation is difficult for Syrians, it is catastrophic for the most vulnerable Iraqi refugees, particularly single-female-headed households, the sick and the elderly. In Jordan, which already lacks water for its own population, authorities estimate that Iraqis are putting an unsustainable strain on the on the Jordanian water sector. Furthermore, the demand for fuel has increased by approximately 9 per cent. Since Jordan imports 97 per cent of its oil needs, this is leading to rising prices for an overstretched supply. While Jordan has accommodated more than 24,000 Iraqi students through the assistance of UNHCR and other donors, it predicts that by 2010 there may be from 50,000 to 100,000 Iraqi students in Jordanian schools. In addition both Jordan and Syria point to an urgent need to expand their respective health, transport, sanitation and security services.

Apart from the economic and social impact of hosting up to 2 million Iraqis, authorities throughout the region claim that there is a marked rise in criminality, including prostitution, and remain concerned about the possibility that a long-term presence of the refugees, perhaps bringing their sectarian rivalries with them, could exacerbate social problems. In Lebanon, ongoing political instability makes many Lebanese wary of hosting another refugee population whose prospects of returning to their home country in the short term appear remote.

Difficult legal environment for Iraqis in the region – access to territory

Throughout the region the legal status of Iraqi refugees is ambiguous. States scarred by decades of hosting Palestinian refugees without sufficient international recognition or support, compounded by security concerns, do not recognize Iraqis as refugees or offer them any comparable legal status. Until recently most states in the region did not require Iraqis to obtain a visa but upon arrival provided a two- to three-month entry permit, which in many cases was easily renewable. The description of fellow Arabs as refugees was viewed negatively, as Iraqis were welcome as "guests". Clearly, with an overwhelmed social infrastructure and a lack of international solidarity, a general feeling of resentment has been developing in Syria and Jordan. Restrictions, at first informal and subsequently formal, began to be introduced vis-à-vis Iraqis wishing to enter neighbouring states.

18 See Xinhua news agency article, 27 August 2007.

Jordan

Jordan had introduced tougher entry requirements, in particular for single males, following the multiple suicide bombings in Amman in November 2005 which killed sixty-three people. Especially during the early phases of the influx, many Iraqi professionals – including doctors, university professors and businessmen – found it relatively easy to obtain Jordanian residence permits. However, hundreds of thousands of other Iraqis have only been given two-month tourist visas which have to be renewed by exiting and re-entering the country or else a fine of \$2 is paid for each day overstayed.¹⁹ In mid February 2008, Jordan introduced visa requirements for Iraqis. While the introduction of visas is another unfortunate indicator of an increasingly restrictive asylum space, the move largely regularizes the existing restrictive entry procedures introduced in late 2006, particularly for young Iraqi males, which resulted in Syria being the only remaining escape route for Iraqis.²⁰

Syria

In an attempt to stem the influx of Iraqis, estimated at up to 2,000 per day, Syria introduced a visa requirement for Iraqis in October 2007.²¹ This was the first time that Syria had imposed any visa requirement on a fellow Arab state and underscored its increasingly desperate position. Up to that point Iraqis could enter on a valid passport and were allowed to stay for a renewable period of three months. Syria simultaneously hardened its stance vis-à-vis Iraqis wishing to renew their three-month visa, calling into question the legal residence of over 1 million Iraqis and overnight creating a push factor for refugees to return. The Syrian government has made it clear that it had been impelled to take these steps by the massive pressure it faces hosting Iraqi refugees. Refugees say they are now being given an exit stamp when they try to renew their visas, with many unwilling to risk imprisonment by staying on illegally. From discussions with government officials, it is understood that Iraqi refugees currently living in Syria will not be forcibly returned to Iraq. The most pressing concern for Iraqi refugees at present is what they should do when their visas expire. In the past, they would go to the Syrian border to renew their visa for three months. UNHCR hopes that Syria can

19 Prior to the introduction of the new visa requirements Iraqis who entered Jordan, for whatever reason, were usually granted a two-week stay. When it was over, they would file an application at the Jordanian Interior Ministry and obtain another month of temporary residence from the Directorate of Residency and Borders. Temporary residence could then be extended to a maximum of two months for a 20 dinar fee and a mandatory medical check-up. It would be extremely rare to get another extension unless one has investor or businessman status and a minimum of 50,000 dinars (\$70,000) in a Jordanian bank.

20 See <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2007/10/16/syria17265.htm> (last visited 20 February 2008).

21 The new regime, explained in a regulation issued by the Ministry of the Interior on 6 September, entered into force on 10 September. On 13 September, the first day of Ramadan, the Syrian government announced that entry restrictions for Iraqis would be lifted for the duration of Ramadan. UNHCR observed that some 5,000 persons used this opportunity to cross the border into Syria.

establish centres within the country where refugees could renew their visas, particularly for the most vulnerable and those with children at school.

Egypt

Iraqis can obtain temporary permission to stay in Egypt but do not have easy access to jobs, health care or schools. Like Iraqis throughout the region, they live on the fringe of society. Many of them live in and around Cairo, with a large concentration in Sixth of October City (where UNHCR has just relocated its office), a 30-minute drive from the capital. On the basis of the registration and documentation issued by UNHCR, Iraqi refugees are granted six-month renewable legal residence permits by the government of Egypt and are effectively protected from *refoulement* (forced return). Unfortunately, however, as with most other countries in the region, this does not entitle them to work or have access to basic services.

UNHCR's response

The Syrian and Jordanian governments, supported by their respective Red Crescent societies, remain the primary providers of assistance to Iraqi refugees. While UNHCR and its partners have substantially increased their respective programmes, they are still extremely modest compared with the tremendous needs. Despite its limited capacity, UNHCR and its partners had achieved the following by the end of 2007, including programmes set up for 2008.

- The number of Iraqis registered with UNHCR throughout the region increased from 60,000 in 2006 to almost 230,000 by the end of 2007. While registration or any certificate provided by UNHCR does not confer formal status recognized by the government, it does entitle the vulnerable refugees to access international assistance, with the possibility of a small number being accepted for resettlement.
- The number of resettlement referrals submitted by UNHCR increased from fewer than 1,000 in 2006 to some 21,500 by the end of 2007. While resettlement programmes represent a valuable and high-profile demonstration of international burden-sharing, fewer than 5,000 of the 21,500 referrals made by UNHCR departed before the end of the year. At least 15 per cent of the cases referred for resettlement were women at risk, while another 10 per cent were survivors of torture and other traumatic events.
- In collaboration with the World Food Programme (WFP), some 155,000 refugees will benefit from food aid in February 2008, a dramatic increase from 51,000 during November–December. If sufficient resources are provided, this figure will climb by the end of December 2008 to 362,800, or some 91 per cent of UNHCR's projected registered caseload. The composition of the food basket of basic and complementary foods reflects closely what Iraqis have been receiving inside Iraq.

This is in response to the consistent feedback from Iraqis that they wish to have the same ration as in Iraq.

- To date, needy refugees have had to queue outside the UNHCR offices in Damascus to receive their financial assistance but a cash assistance programme through cash dispensers (ATMs) was recently set up in Damascus to target the most vulnerable 7,000 families. This number is expected to increase rapidly, as UNHCR is currently identifying up to 100 new very needy cases each week, especially female-headed households, widows and people with disabilities and chronic illnesses. Each eligible family will receive US\$100 a month in financial assistance, plus US\$10 for each dependent. The programme will cost around US\$1.5 million a month. Unfortunately the cost of a modest apartment in Damascus is between US\$200 and US\$300 per month, so even this assistance is not sufficient to keep the most vulnerable out of poverty and only marginally reduces the strength of the push factor on Iraqis to return.
- In collaboration with the national Red Crescent societies and health ministries in Syria and Jordan and the Jordanian Ministry of Planning and International Co-operation, UNHCR supported more than ten primary health centres and Red Crescent clinics. This support facilitated some 250,000 medical consultations in the second half of 2007. In Syria, more than 20 per cent of consultations resulted in hospitalization, with 15 per cent of these requiring surgery and/or long-term treatment. Agreements were also reached with hospitals in Syria and the King Hussein Cancer Foundation in Jordan to enable Iraqis to access what would normally be prohibitively expensive cancer treatment.
- In conjunction with the relevant ministries of education, UNICEF and UNHCR supported efforts to double the number of Iraqi children attending publicly run schools in Syria and Jordan. By the end of 2007 more than 43,000 Iraqi children in Syria and 25,000 Iraqi children in Jordan were attending school, with some 28,000 being provided with school uniforms.
- Several safe houses or women's refuges for survivors of rape and domestic violence were established and supported, and UNHCR Beirut opened a new centre for the rehabilitation of victims of torture and violence for refugees and asylum seekers.
- UNHCR outreach teams undertook ongoing house visits and community consultations to identify the extent of the problem of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), with referrals of identified survivors for psycho-social support and material assistance.
- UNHCR intervened on behalf of hundreds of Iraqis in detention, particularly in Lebanon (including securing the release of at least 70 refugees in 2007²²).

22 In February 2008 an agreement was reached with Lebanese authorities to release up to 600 detained Iraqis and to regularize their status. The decision will likely benefit thousands of Iraqis in Lebanon considered to be residing illegally in the country.

- Distribution of non-food items such as heaters and blankets was launched in January 2008 for over 100,000 refugees in Syria. Similar programmes were also undertaken in Jordan and Lebanon.
- Offices throughout the region have been reinforced to facilitate the identification and referral of the most vulnerable Iraqis for appropriate assistance and protection response. In 2007 the number of national and international staff throughout the region increased to over 350.

Challenges in the provision of assistance and protection

The very nature of the urban refugee caseload has meant that assistance has often been responsive to Iraqis in need coming forward themselves. The concept of requesting assistance is seen by many as dishonourable and demeaning to their family's name. While UNHCR and its partners are expanding their outreach, identifying those most in need is extremely difficult. In addition it has been difficult for many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to receive authorization to work directly with Iraqi refugees. This has meant that the scope for assistance, support and outreach to the refugee community, normally extended through NGO partnering, is seriously circumscribed. The implementation of strict visa regimes and the likelihood that increasing numbers of Iraqis will choose to stay illegally in neighbouring countries will create its own protection problems, with the sustainability of stay becoming ever more precarious as access to public services and the informal market is impeded.

Detention and *refoulement*

Until the recent agreement was reached with the Lebanese authorities, Iraqi refugees in Lebanon had enjoyed only very limited protection, many living in fear of imprisonment or forced return. UNHCR's protection challenges there were the greatest in the entire region. While in March 2007 there were fewer than 100 Iraqi refugees in detention in Lebanon, by December 2007 this number had increased dramatically to over 600 as a direct result of the proliferation of checkpoints due to the worsening security situation. Half of those refugees had been detained beyond the duration of their original sentence. The conditions of detention are bad. Prisons are overcrowded, health is substandard and prison violence targeting Iraqis was often reported. There was, seemingly, no provision for judicial review of administrative detention, which had the effect of leaving detainees without any legal remedy. Iraqis were sometimes released after UNHCR's intervention but not regularly, reliably or quickly. Given the increasing potential for arrest, many Iraqis refused to leave their homes unless absolutely necessary, and often did not approach UNHCR or the authorities. In comparison, Syria and Jordan combined detained fewer than 50 Iraqis in 2007. In Egypt the few detention cases involve asylum seekers from Iraq arriving or attempting to depart without valid documentation (including visas).

In view of the potential risks of detention, the majority of Iraqis in Lebanon and those with expired permits elsewhere do everything possible not to be noticed, aware that host governments see them as illegal residents. Without legal status throughout the region, Iraqi refugees are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse by employers and landlords, who act in the knowledge that Iraqis have no recourse to the authorities when their rights are violated. Moreover, the constant fear of being arrested and detained forces Iraqi refugees to adopt coping mechanisms that have further undesirable consequences. For example, since children are less likely to be detained than their parents, some Iraqi refugee families opt to send their children out to work to provide for the family instead of sending them to school. Most Iraqis released from detention are returning to Iraq, as this has become the only means of being released. Others are choosing to return because of the fear of being arrested by the authorities, rather than feeling that there is an improvement in the security situation.

The position of European states vis-à-vis Iraqi refugees

With the continued efforts by the European Union (EU) to secure its external borders, access to the territory of EU member states and therefore to the asylum procedures is extremely difficult. This affects Iraqis just as it affects others seeking protection. The principal route for Iraqis to enter the EU continues to be via Turkey into Greece, but it is by no means a safe one. In recent months there have been consistent, troubling and well-documented reports of push-backs of Iraqis from Greece to Turkey and from Turkey to Iraq.

In 2006 Iraqis were the single largest group of asylum applicants in the EU, representing about 9.5 per cent of all asylum claimants there. The same is true for the first nine months of 2007, but the proportion is growing: during the first nine months of 2007 (data not yet complete), it rose to 20 per cent. If the current trends continue, the number of applications from Iraqis in the EU in 2008 is likely to be around 36,000 – twice as many as in 2007, notwithstanding EU efforts to prevent irregular crossing of its external border. In 2007 the main increases were in Sweden, where 14,000 applications were made during the first nine months of 2007, compared with 9,065 during the whole of 2006. This represented more than half of all applications by Iraqi asylum seekers in the entire EU. In Greece there were 4,483 applications during the first nine months of 2007, compared with 1,415 in 2006. Greece has not recognized protection status for any Iraqi refugees and the United Kingdom's rate of recognition for Iraqis in 2006 was just 12 per cent, despite UNHCR's recommendation that all Iraqi asylum seekers from central and southern Iraq should be considered refugees on the basis of the 1951 Convention criteria.

On 12 July 2007 the European Parliament adopted a second resolution on the humanitarian situation of Iraqi refugees (the first was on 15 February 2007). The resolution included a number of provisions relevant to the protection of Iraqis in the EU, including *inter alia* calling on member states to “overcome their

position of non-action regarding the situation of Iraqi refugees and to fulfil their obligations under international and Community law". Unfortunately the Council of the European Union, at its meeting of ministers of foreign affairs on 15–16 October 2007, adopted conclusions on Iraq which made no mention of protection within the EU.²³ Given the lack of serious humanitarian consideration by the majority of member states to the plight of Iraqi refugees, it is hardly surprising that those countries in the region that have to bear the brunt of the refugee disaster have also started to close their doors.

Asylum and resettlement

UNHCR exceeded its 2007 target of 20,000 by referring more than 21,500 Iraqis (6,854 cases) for resettlement by the end of 2007. In 2007, referrals were made to sixteen resettlement countries, including 15,400 to the United States – which received 72.5 per cent of all referrals made.²⁴ Almost 20 per cent (17.5 per cent) of those cases referred for resettlement are women at risk, with another 10 per cent being survivors of torture and trauma. Others considered for resettlement include torture victims, urgent medical cases, female-headed households, members of minority groups and people associated with international organizations. Even if all resettlement targets were met, this would only provide a durable solution for less than 1 per cent of the estimated 2 million Iraqi refugees in the region. In 2007, resettlement departures offered a durable solution for fewer than one quarter of 1 per cent.²⁵

As the International Rescue Committee recently noted in its report on Iraq's refugees, the response of the majority of states to the crisis in Iraq has been strikingly ungenerous. The numbers of Iraqis accepted globally on refugee resettlement programmes between 2003 and 2006 actually fell.²⁶ Although the resettlement response is speeding up as more Iraqis complete the process, the number of those who have actually departed is still unacceptably low. Referrals, where they are not matched by departures, have created a high level of expectation

23 See www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/refworld/rwmain?docid=4697795d2 (last visited 20 February 2008).

24 Other countries accepting significant resettlement referrals included Australia with 1,871, Canada with 1,512, Sweden with 938, UK with 295, New Zealand with 266, Finland with 255, Netherlands with 236, Brazil with 108 (mainly from Jordan's Ruweyshid camp), and Denmark with 69.

25 Some 8,000 Iraqis were referred by UNHCR's office in Amman, 7,702 by UNHCR Damascus, 3,280 by UNHCR Ankara, 1,464 from Beirut, 319 from Cairo and 500 by other offices, including those in the United Arab Emirates. Following the strengthening of UNHCR offices and an immense effort by teams throughout the region, all UNHCR offices exceeded their ambitious 2007 targets for referrals. This is quite a significant achievement, given that fewer than 1,000 Iraqis were referred for resettlement in 2006 and only 672 in 2005. The monthly departure list received from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) indicates that 4,575 refugees departed in 2007 (figures at end-November). The main countries of departure include the United States, 2,378; Canada, 747; Sweden, 745; Australia, 456; and Netherlands, 122.

26 According to UNHCR sources only 404 refugees were resettled to third countries in 2006, compared with 1,425 in 2003.

among the refugees. Frustration is increasing and is giving rise to staff security concerns. There is not only the problem of delayed departures, but also quite a significant rejection rate on referrals (over 30 per cent in the case of some major resettlement countries).²⁷ UNHCR continues to believe that resettlement needs for Iraqi refugees in the Middle East remain considerable, ranging between 80,000 and 100,000 persons.

The level and sustainability of returns

While the reported level of violence is down, returns appear to have been triggered as much by the exhaustion of refugees (and their savings) as by the introduction of stringent visa and residency restrictions in neighbouring countries. Given the lack of resettlement opportunities and limited opportunities for local integration, the only truly durable solution for the majority of Iraq's refugees will eventually be their voluntary repatriation to a safe and stable Iraq. But in the absence of significant political progress there, this will remain a long-term objective. Although exile in neighbouring countries may be safer, it is certainly not better, and the vast majority of Iraqis still want to return to Iraq when the conditions permit.²⁸

While border guards report tens of thousands crossing per month, this includes all categories of Iraqis and not only returning refugees. Despite the hardship of exile, the perilous nature of life in Iraq means that there has not been the flood of returnees that some had predicted: the numbers of Iraqis entering Syria at the end of 2007 were in excess of those returning, although it is important to note that a large number of Iraqis continue to cross the border to and from Syria for business (drivers, merchants, etc.) and may not necessarily be fleeing the violence. Some Iraqis also travel through Syria to further destinations, for instance for the Hajj, Umrah and Ashura festivals, or because onward flights are cheaper from there. In addition, December saw Iraqis travelling to join family members (either in asylum or back in Iraq) for the Eid festival and Christmas.

Baghdad may now be safer than it was, but many Iraqis continue to worry that the gains of the US troop surge are temporary and predicated on a massive US presence. They point out that Iraq's political leadership has failed to use the relative calm to engineer any real reconciliation between the majority Shiites and the Sunnis. While US troops have battled al Qaeda in Baghdad, Anbar and Diyala, the Iraqi parliament has made little progress on critical legislation in more than a year. And partly because of widespread government corruption, improvements in basic services such as electricity, water and fuel have lagged behind security gains.

27 If we compare the departures with UNHCR submissions to these countries, we find that Sweden has a high ratio – around 80 per cent of persons submitted to Sweden have already departed. The ratios for the other top five countries are Netherlands, 51 per cent; Canada, 49 per cent; Australia, 25 per cent; and United States, 16 per cent).

28 The notable exception being religious minorities, particularly Christians and Sabeen Mandeans, who appear more hesitant to return.

So while there is a trickle of refugees going home, many Iraqis continue to leave Baghdad.

On 3 December 2007 the Iraqi Red Crescent Society stated that between 25,000 and 28,000 Iraqi refugees had returned home between mid-September and the end of November, the majority of them – some 20,000 – returning to Baghdad. In addition, the Iraqi Ministry of Displacement and Migration states that some 10,000 internally displaced Iraqi families have returned to their homes – mainly in Baghdad. Unfortunately many of those who have returned were unable to go back to their old neighbourhoods because they are now run by sectarian militias or have been looted and destroyed. The said Ministry is, however, still overloaded with property dispute cases from Saddam Hussein's time, when thousands were forcibly relocated, and lacks the requisite mechanisms to settle the new cases. Priority would be given to those who wish to return from neighbouring countries, such as Syria and Jordan, where Iraqi exiles are living in difficult conditions.

Initial surveys and calls received by UNHCR's hotline in Damascus indicate that the reasons for such movements are mixed. UNHCR staff have spoken to a wide range of refugees before they left Syria, and some said they were returning for one or more of the following reasons:

- security had improved, and they want to be reunited with family and friends;
- unable to work and lacking adequate assistance, they have exhausted their savings and feared the winter period when the cost of living rises sharply;
- ability to access food rations and other government services;
- residency pressures: their residence permit has expired and cannot be renewed;²⁹
- desire to collect income, pension or rent, or check on (or sell) properties, following rumours that unclaimed properties would be confiscated by the government – they then hope to return to Syria;
- a lack of assistance and/or timely opportunity for resettlement;
- returning to Iraq for the start of the (delayed) school year.

Consistently there is, however, a real concern among the returnees about longer-term security, and many say that they are only returning to areas where they feel secure because of the local security arrangements in place. According to a report released on 22 November 2007,³⁰ UNHCR found that only 14 per cent of respondents said that they were returning to Iraq from Syria because they believed that the security situation had improved, as opposed to 70 per cent who cited financial and visa reasons. A similar review in Egypt, where refugees have to deregister with UNHCR prior to returning to Iraq, found that many were stating that they had no future in Egypt without access to employment and/or education for their children. In Lebanon the situation is similar: a survey of 41 refugees who

29 Families unable to pay for the renewal of their visas in Syria have chosen to return to Iraq instead of remaining in Syria illegally – or have received an “exit stamp” when they have attempted to renew their visas.

30 See www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/opendoc.pdf?tbl=SUBSITES&id=4795f96f2 (last visited 20 February 2008).

asked that their files be closed so that they could be repatriated revealed that their decision to return was largely related to the cost of living in Lebanon (61 per cent) and fear of arrest due to their illegal status (56 per cent).³¹ Fewer than 30 per cent attributed their main decision to return to improved security in Iraq. Perhaps tellingly, there have so far been few returnees from Jordan, the preferred destination of educated, middle-class Iraqis.

The vast majority of the returning refugees have returned to the capital, Baghdad, where their well-being is far from assured.³² Returnees are finding an altered landscape, with neighbourhoods largely ethnically homogenous, reshaped by sectarian strife and blast walls, where many find their homes torched, looted, destroyed or occupied by squatters. This has resulted in secondary displacement as many have been forced to find sanctuary elsewhere, leading to a rise in the number of internally displaced.³³ The brewing housing crisis extends to millions who abandoned their homes but stayed in Iraq. In Baghdad alone, more than 300,000 people are estimated to have left one neighbourhood for another, as Sunnis fled west and Shiites to the east, often moving into recently evacuated houses. UNHCR has also received reports that Palestinians who had already been subjected to discrimination and violence have been displaced by returnees.

While the Iraqi government,³⁴ as well as UNHCR, is providing some funds and materials to assist returnee families, the needs are far in excess of what has

31 Multiple answers were possible.

32 On 27 November a convoy organized by the Iraqi Ministry of Transport for an estimated 800 returnees left Damascus. UNHCR and partner agencies subsequently interviewed 30 families who returned on the convoy, as well as commissioning a Rapid Assessment which covered some 6,000 internally displaced persons and refugee returnee families in 27 districts (eleven governorates) throughout Iraq. The main findings were *inter alia* that the majority of returnees (84 per cent) originated from and were returning to Baghdad Governorate, 30 per cent returned to their places of habitual residence, and 70 per cent to alternative places as a result of secondary displacement; 62 per cent of the respondents returned definitively to Iraq. Others undertook “go and see” visits to explore the security and employment situation. Others returned to collect remittances and/or school documents for their children and then go back to Syria. Others went to collect their pensions or food rations.

33 The main return area is Baghdad, but people have also returned to other places. In discussions at the community level it has been reported that people are returning, depending on their affiliation, to Sunni- or Shia-controlled areas. Sunni areas are reported to be Salah-Addin, Al-Ramadi and Samarra. Shia areas are Basra, Nasiriya, Missan, Al-Hulla and Najaf. Areas in western and southern parts of Iraq are being deemed safe by refugees, who say they can even travel through Anbar province to Baghdad quite safely now. The highest concentration of returnees is indeed in Baghdad, although reports from initial returnees indicated that the majority could not move back to their original homes and suffered secondary displacement. Baghdad’s Doura neighbourhood continues to be the main return area (this was once a Christian area, but many Christians in Syria are opting not to go back there). The general feeling is, however, that many areas in Baghdad are not safe and the security situation could change dramatically. Reported mixed areas of return are Zoyuna and Al-Mansour.

34 The Iraqi government is paying each family that returns from abroad 1 million Iraqi dinars, or about \$821, approximately enough for four months’ rent in a middle-class Baghdad neighbourhood. It is also reported that returnees will in addition receive a monthly payout of about \$120 for six months after their return. Iraq’s internally displaced are entitled to 150,000 dinars, or \$23, of government money a month. The government has aid programmes that could help, but they are often viewed with deep suspicion. To apply for the food programme the displaced would have to return to their place of origin to cancel the family’s registration with the local council, but many are afraid to enter areas from which they were displaced.

been planned or is available.³⁵ In view of the mixed results of the first organized convoy, it remains unclear whether the government will organize additional voluntary repatriation convoys from Damascus or any other neighbouring state in the near future. Refugees waiting for word of the conditions in their neighbourhoods have received “conflicting” information about those who have returned.

UNHCR's position on returns

While the reports of limited returns to Iraq are welcomed, they should not be taken as a sign that large-scale return to Iraq is possible at the present time, as the security situation remains volatile and unpredictable. Ensuring that return to Iraq can take place in safety and dignity and will be sustainable remains a challenge. Before the return of Iraqis to the centre and south can be encouraged or even promoted, there are key requirements against which the feasibility of returns is measured and which should be, or should have a reasonable expectation of being, fulfilled in the foreseeable future. From UNHCR's perspective, the core of voluntary repatriation is a return in safety and to conditions of physical, legal and material security.

The absence of accurate baseline data and the lack of comprehensive monitoring, information and reporting along routes and in areas of return make it particularly difficult to establish the extent to which current movements have been safe, dignified or voluntary. It is therefore important to obtain accurate information about return trends while providing immediate assistance to vulnerable returnees and planning for possible larger returns. To ensure that current and possible future return movements are sustainable, it is also essential that efforts be intensified to bring about reconciliation among all Iraqi factions. UNHCR cannot promote or encourage the return of refugees from abroad until the underlying causes of the violence which led to the displacement are addressed and there is a real, substantive and durable change. Until that occurs, the principle of non-*refoulement* (ban on forced return) must be respected.

Non-Iraqi refugees

Unfortunately, non-Iraqi refugees in Iraq remain forgotten and unpopular in the midst of the violence and strategic manoeuvring over Iraq. Iranians, Syrians, Sudanese and Palestinians remain trapped in the midst of a maelstrom. UNHCR has registered over 41,000 non-Iraqi refugees who are in need of continued assistance and protection. The situation of Palestinian refugees inside Iraq and in neighbouring countries is particularly desperate. Many of the 34,000-strong

35 UNHCR is contributing US\$9.5 million to a US\$11 million budget aimed at immediately helping around 5,000 families or some 30,000 individuals. The assistance includes supplies such as household items, stoves, blankets and mattresses.

Palestinian community in Iraq who had been living there since 1948 and have known no other home are believed to have fled to other countries. Many today face harassment, threats of deportation, media scapegoating, arbitrary detention, torture and murder. Despite the difficulties in leaving Iraq, UNHCR believes that the Palestinian population in Iraq may have decreased to 10,000–15,000. A group of 340 Palestinians stranded in the no-man's land between Iraq and Syria, are becoming increasingly desperate, living in tents at an insecure scorpion-infested desert site. Some have harmed themselves and gone on hunger strike, and the general level of despair is acute. In mid-November last year, after an upsurge in violence, other groups of Palestinian refugees fled Baghdad for the Syrian border with the intent of at least joining them. Knowing that the Syrian authorities would turn back any further groups of Palestinian refugees entering the no-man's-land, the Iraqi authorities refused to allow the latest groups to leave its borders and have gathered them together in an open area approximately 2 km east of the Waleed border post. This group currently consists of 1,649 people, a total of 490 families. It is critical that neighbouring states and resettlement countries provide an urgently needed humane solution for those Palestinians remaining in Iraq or trapped at its borders before more are kidnapped, raped or killed. Brazil's acceptance of over 100 Palestinians stuck in a desolate camp on the Jordanian–Iraqi border for over four years, with Chile accepting a similar number from another border camp, are concrete examples of non-traditional partners recognizing the scale of the humanitarian catastrophe in Iraq and coming forward to assist. Sadly, despite persistent appeals by UNHCR and other agencies, thousands of Palestinians remain trapped in Baghdad and in grave danger from hostile militias.

Conclusion

Meanwhile, the international community needs to acknowledge the concerns of refugee-hosting countries about the long-term nature of the Iraqi refugee crisis and address these concerns by providing meaningful assistance to governments, local and international NGOs, and international relief efforts, including through the United Nations. Countries outside the region must also offer to resettle significant numbers of the most vulnerable Iraqi refugees to relieve the burden on refugee-hosting countries in the Middle East and to help persuade them to continue to offer protection to the Iraqi refugees in their territories and at their borders. The security, political, social and financial impact on Iraq, the region and the rest of the world will be felt for many years. The Iraqi displacement is a huge and long-term challenge to the stability of the entire Middle East and must be addressed. We are witnessing the largest long-term population movement in the Middle East since Palestinians were displaced after the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. The international community has provided billions of dollars in funding for recovery and development programmes for Iraq – many of which have not been implemented because of security concerns – yet humanitarian needs

inside Iraq and in neighbouring states remain grossly neglected. UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies continue to lack the funds required to cope with the increasing needs of Iraqis and non-Iraqi refugees both within and outside Iraq. A lack of internal and external flight options will inevitably lead to ever greater vulnerability and exploitation of those most at risk. Ensuring that Iraqis seeking safety are not forced or coerced back into danger owing to a lack of assistance and protection and making sure that they are provided with access to secure and humane living conditions is the international community's responsibility, not just the responsibility of countries in the region. The year 2008 will be pivotal in determining whether the necessary conditions for the return in safety and dignity of Iraq's displaced are attained. If the international community continues to ignore Iraq's unwanted refugees and treat them as an annoying indicator of less than optimal performance in Iraq, then it will confirm a perception that where Iraq is concerned humanitarian considerations – including the provision of protection space by host countries – are not a priority. Whatever the debate on Iraq, the voluntary return of the displaced in safety and dignity and their successful reintegration has to be a primary indicator of progress. Any other indicators are secondary.