

## Overcrowding in Limbo: Iraqi Refugees in Arab States

By Chantal Berman

Of the myriad consequences of the Iraq war, few are as large-scale, long-term, and broad in geographic scope as the Iraqi refugee crisis. The flight of one in five Iraqis over eight years has played a large role in the desecration of Iraq's social fabric, not least by hollowing out Iraq's moderate middle class.<sup>1</sup> It has also impacted politics and livelihoods in nearby Arab states, which have historically played host to some of the largest refugee populations in the world. While few Arab governments are signatories to the UN Refugee Convention, most have been tolerant of Iraqi influx, and some have integrated an astonishing volume of Iraqis since the onset of the crisis. Others, such as the Gulf monarchies, have consented to resettle only the wealthiest and most well connected Iraqis,<sup>2</sup> and still others have denied them recognition altogether.

The majority of Iraqis displaced from 2003-2005 were professionals and former Ba'ath party operatives with adequate skills and savings to maintain their livelihoods abroad – at least for a few years. The rise in generalized sectarian violence following the Samarria mosque bombing of 2006 produced a massive wave of poorer, less educated migrants whose displacement presents a far greater fiscal and social challenge to host states and societies. Most Arab governments introduced new restrictions on Iraqi migration during this period of greatest violence in Iraq, redirecting much of the subsequent flow into Syria, the last state to effectively shut its borders in late 2007.

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<sup>1</sup> Reinoud Leenders, "Getting the 'Ladder of Options' Right – The Illusive and Real Security Fallout of the Iraqi Refugee Crises." Middle East Institute (Sept. 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Sassoon, *The Iraqi Refugees: The New Crisis in the Middle East* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009) pp. 96-98.

Contrary to Western concerns for the “spillover” of Iraq’s sectarian conflict into neighboring states, Iraqi refugee communities have been overwhelmingly peaceful.<sup>3</sup> Yet high levels of influx compounded by a dearth of sustained international support have overwhelmed provisional infrastructures and undermined the livelihoods of urban working classes in host states, leading in some cases to broad popular resentment of Iraqi refugees. These impacts have been most severe in Jordan and Syria, where the ratios of Iraqi refugees to nationals are highest. With third-country resettlement options limited and the prospect of “return” captive to Iraq’s slow rehabilitation, the status quo is likely to persist or deteriorate in years to come.

Home to more than a million Palestinians since 1948, Jordan has a lengthy and mixed historical record of integrating refugees into its political and economic life.<sup>4</sup> Jordan considers contemporary Iraqi migrants as “asylum seekers,” a legal step down from *prima facie* refugee status bestowed upon them by UNCHR.<sup>5</sup> Although Jordan announced an open border with Iraq in 2003, an Amman hotel bombing carried out by several Iraqi nationals in 2005 lead the monarchy to begin placing creative restrictions on Iraqi entry, such as a moratorium on single Iraqi males aged 17-35,<sup>6</sup> and a requisite \$150,000 deposit per family in a Jordanian bank. The latter policy has attracted a small class of wealthy Iraqi exiles, the so-called “Mercedes refugees” who have invested in property and businesses in Amman.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Madona Mokbel, “Refugees in Limbo: The Plight of Iraqis in Bordering States,” MERIP No. 244 (December 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Geraldine Chatelard, “Jordan: A Refugee Haven.” Migration Information Source (August 2010), p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Patricia Weiss Fagen, “Iraqi Refugees: Seeking Stability in Syria and Jordan.” Institute for the Study of Migration (2007,2009) p. 15.

<sup>6</sup> Patricia Weiss Fagen, p. 9

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Sassoon, *The Iraqi Refugees: The New Crisis in the Middle East* (London;

Among Iraqi refugee host states, Jordan has received perhaps the highest level of international assistance, including more than \$500 million in direct bilateral aid from the United States.<sup>8</sup> In 2007, the regime opened schools and certain varieties of medical care to Iraqis regardless of their residency status. Yet drastically rising costs of housing and basic goods, in addition to an exacerbated scarcity of water and menial jobs, have precipitated a steady decline in Jordanian public opinion vis-à-vis the Iraqi refugees.<sup>9</sup> As of 2008, Iraqis hoping to migrate to Jordan must first seek visas in Baghdad. Visa renewal has also become more difficult, resulting in a greater number of Iraqis with irregular status.<sup>10</sup> Out of an estimated 450,000-500,000 total refugees,<sup>11</sup> only 30,800 Iraqis were registered with UNHCR as of January 2011, leaving the vast majority with unclear legal status and likely low levels of social protection.<sup>12</sup>

Influenced by the pan-Arab ideologies of the ruling Ba'ath party, Syria has traditionally proffered open borders and generous state welfare benefits to nationals of other Arab countries.<sup>13</sup> "Open door" policies for Iraqi refugees persisted until 2007, at which point an estimated 2,000 Iraqis entered Syria each day.<sup>14</sup> As in Jordan, public dissatisfaction with the adverse economic effects of refugee hosting – real and imagined

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New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009)

<sup>8</sup> Natalie Ondiak and Brian Katulis, "Operation Safe Haven Iraq 2009: An Action Plan for Airlifting Endangered Iraqis Linked to the United States," Center for American Progress (January 2009).

<sup>9</sup> Patricia Weiss Fagen, "Iraqi Refugees: Seeking Stability in Syria and Jordan." Institute for the Study of Migration (2007,2009) p. 15

<sup>10</sup> Mohamed Y. Olwan, "Iraqi Refugees in Jordan: Legal Perspective" Euro-Mediterranean Consortium for Applied Research on International Migration" (2009) 3

<sup>11</sup> Norwegian Research Institute (FAFO), "Iraqis in Jordan in 2007: Their Number and Characteristics" (2007) pp. 3-5

<sup>12</sup> UNHCR, "2011 Country Operations Profile – Jordan" <<http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/page?page=49e486566>>

<sup>13</sup> Uri Davis, *Citizenship and the State: A Comparative Study of Citizenship Legislation in Israel, Jordan, Palestine, Syria and Lebanon*. Reading: Ithica Press (1997) pp. 119–131.

<sup>14</sup> Mohamed Kamel Dorai, "Iraqi Refugees in Syria," The Forced Migration & Refugee Studies Program (October 23, 2007), p. 4.

– ultimately drove the state to curb Iraqi influx. Unlike Jordan, Syria has received scarce assistance from Western powers – a clear byproduct of Assad’s opposition to American policies in the region – and the regime is highly restrictive of international non-profit work. As a result, Syrian state and society have borne the burden of Iraqi influx with virtually no help. Yet Iraqis in Syria continue to benefit from public primary and secondary education (albeit with very low turnout among Iraqi schoolchildren), from clinics (albeit inadequate in capacity) funded jointly by the state and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent,<sup>15</sup> and from Syrian subsidies on gasoline, food, and other essential goods.<sup>16</sup> These comparatively generous social policies have resulted in the region’s largest population of Iraqis refugees; while no extensive polling of Iraqis in Syria has been carried out to date, most estimates of their numbers fall between 1-1.5 million.

Lebanon, by contrast, holds one of the worst refugee integration records in the Middle East. Since 1948 some 400,000 Palestinian refugees and their descendants have been deprived of rights due to fears that their permanent settlement would upset the country’s contentious sectarian balance. Roughly 50,000 Iraqi refugees are similarly denied all civic and social rights and services; they are instead considered “illegal migrants” and live in constant fear of detainment and deportation. As of August 2010, 36 Iraqi refugees remained in Lebanese prisons for “illegal” status,<sup>17</sup> down from some 500 in the fall of 2007.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Kelly O’Donnell and Kathleen Newland, “The Iraqi Refugee Crisis: The Need for Action” Migration Policy Institute (2008), p. 13.

<sup>16</sup> Patricia Weiss Fagen, p. 18.

<sup>17</sup> UNHCR, “Lebanon Fact Sheet” (July 2010)

<sup>18</sup> Kelly O’Donnell and Kathleen Newland, p. 17.

Whereas unskilled laborers have “extremely limited”<sup>19</sup> access to work in Syria and in Jordan, Lebanon’s free market economy provides more ample opportunities for work in the informal sector, however insecure and underpaid such positions may be. Lebanon therefore attracts an overwhelming number of single young Iraqi men, who are more likely to be employed as laborers and also more vulnerable to detainment.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, because the Sunni dictatorships of Jordan and Egypt have been particularly restrictive of Shi’a migration<sup>21</sup> – a tendency that says more about the prejudices of these governments than the security risks posed by Shi’a Iraqis – a disproportionate share of Shi’a refugees have migrated to Lebanon, a country with a large Shi’a population and strong Shi’a political establishment. Lebanon is the only Arab state where the majority of Iraqi refugees are Shi’i.<sup>22</sup>

At an estimated 150,000,<sup>23</sup> Iraqi refugees make up just 17% of refugees in Egypt,<sup>24</sup> the vast majority of which are Sudanese. Iraqis seeking refugee status in Egypt must first pass through Amman or Damascus for an interview, making their passage more difficult due to the latter’s current restrictions on Iraqi entry.<sup>25</sup> The recent popular overthrow of former President Mubarak has shed light on the severity of Egypt’s socioeconomic problems, including high unemployment and high inflation coupled with stagnant wage levels. Yet the number of Iraqis relevant to the populations of Cairo and Alexandria is small, and unlike in Syria and Jordan, these refugees have little impact on

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<sup>19</sup> UNHCR, “UNCHR Syria” (August 2011) <<http://www.unhcr.org/4c907abd9.html>>

<sup>20</sup> Danish Refugee Council, *Iraqi Population Survey in Lebanon*, (November 2007) pp. 58-60.

<sup>21</sup> Joseph Sassoon, 85-91

<sup>22</sup> Danish Refugee Council, p. 29.

<sup>23</sup> Lynn Yoshikawa, “Iraqi Refugees in Egypt,” *Forced Migration and Refugees* (2008)

<sup>24</sup> UNHCR, “2011 Country Operations Profile – Egypt” <<http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/page?page=49e486356>>

<sup>25</sup> Lynn Yoshikawa

the overall economy. Egypt has signed the UN Convention on the Rights of Refugees but with numerous reservations, including extreme limitations on formal employment.

Access to schooling and healthcare for refugees in major cities is also low.<sup>26</sup>

Aside from Egypt, Turkey is the only Iraqi host state to have signed the UN Refugee Convention, albeit with bizarre geographical reservations. Turkey does not recognize persons of non-European origin as refugees, resulting in complicated legal status for some 6,600 Iraqis currently registered with UNCHR.<sup>27</sup> The actual number of Iraqis residing in Turkey is likely far higher, with many preceding the 2003 invasion; Saddam Hussein's brutal policies of "Arabization" in the Kurdish north lead to hundreds of thousands of Iraqi nationals displaced to Turkey in the 1980s and 90s.<sup>28</sup> Many Iraqis today hope to pass through Turkey en route to claim asylum in Europe, yet Turkish border security has been strict, as Ankara fears further politicization of Turkey's own large and somewhat embattled Kurdish minority.<sup>29</sup> Amnesty International reported in 2008 that Iraqis arriving at Turkey's borders were regularly denied entry and denied access to UNHCR representatives.

As in Turkey, many persecuted Kurds and Shi'a Iraqis in Iran predate the fall of the Hussein regime,<sup>30</sup> and a limited number have migrated since 2003. As of January 2011, UNHCR estimated 47,900 Iraqis in Iran.<sup>31</sup> Like Jordan, the Islamic Republic is

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<sup>26</sup> UNHCR, "2011 Country Operations Profile – Egypt" <<http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/page?page=49e486356>>

<sup>27</sup> UNCHR, "2011 Country Operations Profile – Turkey" <<http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/page?page=49e48e0fa7f>>

<sup>28</sup> Omer Karasapan, "Gulf War Refugees in Turkey," MERIP No. 156 (Winter 1989)

<sup>29</sup> Julie Peteet, "Unsettling the Categories of Displacement" MERIP No. 244 (Fall 2007)

<sup>30</sup> David Romano, "Whose House is this Anyway? IDP and Refugee Return in Post-Saddam Iraq," *Journal of Refugee Studies* Vol. 18, No. 4 (2005)

<sup>31</sup> UNHCR, "Islamic Republic of Iran" Global Report 2009 <<http://www.unhcr.org/4c08f2639.html>>

well accustomed to large-scale refugee hosting, having absorbed some 2.6 million Afghans fleeing the Soviet occupation in the 1980s.<sup>32</sup> Tehran also plays a large role in Iraqi political and economic life, where it competes with the United States for influence over Iraq's fractured political apparatus. Due to Iran's isolation from refugee-resettling states such as the US, and due to low international recognition of Iran's role as a refugee host, aid and resettlement levels for Iraqis living in Iran are pitifully low. A mere 30 refugees from Iran were resettled internationally in 2009.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Sassoon 98

<sup>33</sup> UNCHR, "2011 Country Operations Profile – Islamic Republic of Iran," <<http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/txis/vtx/page?page=49e486f96>>