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**MANAGING CHAOS—THE IRAQI REFUGEES  
OF JORDAN AND SYRIA AND INTER-  
NALLY DISPLACED PERSONS IN IRAQ**

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STAFF TRIP REPORT  
TO THE  
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS  
UNITED STATES SENATE

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## LETTER OF TRANSMITTAL

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APRIL 8, 2008.

DEAR COLLEAGUES: There are as many as 2 million Iraqi refugees in Jordan and Syria, the vast majority of whom have been displaced from their homes since the war in Iraq began in 2003. Another 2 million refugees are displaced inside Iraq. In January 2008, we directed two of our staff members, Sharon Waxman of Senator Kennedy's staff and Perry Cammack of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, to visit Jordan and Syria and report on the conditions of Iraqi refugees and on American and international efforts on their behalf.

Their findings suggest a startling lack of American leadership in a crisis that much of the international community considers a result of our intervention in Iraq. Acknowledging that the war in Iraq has resulted in one of the greatest humanitarian crises of the post-cold-war era is a bitter pill to swallow. Ensuring that this refugee population receives the humanitarian treatment and dignity that it deserves requires American leadership of a kind not seen to this point.

We believe that more must be done by the United States to deal with this crisis. An appropriate action by President Bush at this time would be to appoint a senior official in the White House to coordinate our overall policy on the Iraqi refugees and internally displaced persons. As President Ford stated in appointing the late Julia Taft to be Director of the Interagency Task Force on Indochina Refugees, our country's response to the refugee crisis caused by the Vietnam war was "a reaffirmation of American awareness of the roots and ideals of our society."

We hope that this report and the recommendations contained in it will be useful to our colleagues in Congress and to the public in considering this important issue.

Sincerely,

EDWARD M. KENNEDY,  
*Chairman, Senate Judiciary,  
Subcommittee on Immigration,  
Refugees and Border Security.*

JOSEPH R. BIDEN, Jr.,  
*Chairman, Senate Committee  
on Foreign Relations.*



## **MANAGING CHAOS—THE IRAQI REFUGEES OF JORDAN AND SYRIA AND INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS IN IRAQ**

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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

In January 2007, we traveled to the Middle East and spent 2 days in Jordan and 3 days in Syria evaluating the status of Iraqi refugees and the American and international responses to their plight. This report is based on meetings in Washington, DC, Amman, and Damascus with senior American, Iraqi, United Nations, Jordanian, and Syrian officials, humanitarian workers, refugee experts, and, most importantly, Iraqi refugees. The Iraqi refugee crisis is not limited to these two countries; Iraqi refugees are dispersed inside Iraq and throughout the entire Middle East and beyond. Since approximately 80 percent of these refugees are thought to reside in Jordan or Syria, we made them the focus of our trip and study. However, many of our conclusions are pertinent to the wider region. Our key findings are:

- The influx of as many as 2 million Iraqi refugees to Jordan and Syria has created an enormous burden on these countries and is a massive humanitarian crisis that will require sustained international attention for many years. The number of new arrivals, although down sharply since the summer of 2007, still exceeds the number of returnees. Refugees report little or no desire to return to Iraq anytime soon, if ever, and those who have returned cite economic desperation as the primary factor.
- American leadership is fundamental to rallying the international response. The international community generally views the Iraqi refugee crisis as a direct result of our intervention in Iraq and humanitarian assistance professionals see the American response as far from commensurate with the magnitude of the problem. The United States should, as a matter of policy, fund 50 percent of the United Nations and other international organizations' emergency appeals for Iraqi refugees and internally displaced persons rather than its standard 25 to 30 percent contribution. Dramatically increasing American support for the refugees will increase our ability to solicit contributions from the international community and demonstrate a commitment that will make it easier for host countries to increase legal protections.
- The administration should appoint a high-level White House coordinator to oversee the United States humanitarian response. This person should immediately design and implement a more robust assistance effort for Iraqi refugees and internally displaced persons. The coordinator should be responsible for soliciting international donor contributions, coordinating the response with international and nongovernmental organi-

zations, and ensuring that U.S. assistance supports a cohesive international strategy.

- The goals set by the Bush administration to resettle 7,000 Iraqi refugees in the United States in fiscal year 2007 and 12,000 Iraqi refugees in fiscal year 2008 have created expectations among the refugees and an obligation to meet those expectations. Despite the clear need, the United States resettled only 1,608 Iraqis in fiscal year 2007 and will be hard-pressed to meet this year's goal. Most experts agree that Syria, host to the most vulnerable Iraqi community, should be the primary target of U.S. resettlement efforts, and the administration needs to think more creatively about alternative mechanisms to increase our processing ability there.
- Host countries, such as Jordan and Syria, should take steps to regularize the legal status of Iraqi refugees on their soil. It is unreasonable to expect Jordan and Syria to permanently integrate Iraqi refugees into their societies. However, only small fractions of Iraqis are working or attending schools and many are running out of resources. Their status needs to be regularized so they can work legally and come out of the shadows. Without these changes, economic and psychological pressure on the refugee community will increase. Increased marginalization could breed radicalization unless proactive steps are taken to provide refugees with increased educational and economic opportunities.

#### INTRODUCTION

Although several hundred thousand refugees fled Iraq in the years before the war began in 2003, the overwhelming majority of the displacements have occurred since February 2006, when large-scale sectarian violence erupted in the aftermath of the al-Askariyah mosque bombing, a sacred Shiite shrine in Samarra. According to United Nations and United States data, over 2 million Iraqi refugees have fled their country and over 2 million more are internally displaced persons (IDPs) inside Iraq.<sup>1</sup> Given the security challenges in Iraq and the difficult working environments in the region, reliable data on Iraqi refugees and internally displaced persons do not exist, and some estimates have placed the total number of displaced Iraqis as high as 5 million. An estimated 80 percent of the refugees are in Syria or Jordan with smaller populations in Egypt, Lebanon, and beyond. Officially, there are 1.5 million in Syria and 500,000 in Jordan, though some observers think the actual numbers may be lower.<sup>2</sup>

Whatever the precise numbers, these refugees are significant burdens on both countries. Jordan and Syria are middle-income

<sup>1</sup>The Department of State estimates that there are 2–2.4 million refugees and 2.2–2.4 million IDPs. Source: Department of State, "Iraq Weekly Status Report," March 5, 2008, <http://www.state.gov/p/nea/rls/rpt/iraqstatus/c24957.htm>. The 1951 International Convention on Refugees defines a refugee as "a person who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted is outside the country of their nationality." IDPs while not protected by the 1951 Convention, are defined by the United Nations as those who have been forced to leave their homes, but who have not crossed an international border.

<sup>2</sup>In Jordan and Syria, we heard numbers both significantly higher and lower than the official estimates. According to Refugees International, there are additionally approximately 130,000 Iraqi refugees in Egypt, 57,000 in Iran, 50,000 in Lebanon and a total of 200,000 in Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia.

countries lacking the petroleum wealth of many of their neighbors.<sup>3</sup> Refugees are a sensitive issue in the Arab world. There are some 4.25 million Palestinian refugees in the Middle East, most of them children and grandchildren of those originally displaced, and the issue is particularly acute in Jordan, where a majority of the population is believed to be Palestinian.<sup>4</sup> The internal security agencies in both countries have concerns about the security risks posed by Iraqi refugees, given the violence in Iraq and the terrorism threat throughout the region. These are not hypothetical concerns. In November 2005, coordinated suicide bomb attacks by Iraqis at three hotels in Amman, Jordan, killed at least 60 people and injured more than 100 others.

The flow of refugees out of Iraq has slowed since last fall, although there are no reliable data. In the aftermath of the November 2005 Amman bombings, Jordan gradually restricted Iraqi entry. By early 2007, very few Iraqi refugees could enter Jordan. Syria began severely restricting border access in October 2007, although significant numbers of Iraqis continue to seek refuge in Syria. Additionally, the reduction of violence in Iraq and possibly the increasing difficulty in moving between internal Iraqi provincial borders have reduced the rate of displacement inside Iraq. Sectarian cleansing has effectively been completed in many neighborhoods of Baghdad and elsewhere, homogenizing local populations and reducing sectarian fault-lines. But the consensus in the region is clear and unequivocal. Humanitarian needs will continue to increase for the foreseeable future and assistance will be required for some time, even if Iraq's violent and political conflicts are resolved.

#### THE CRISIS THROUGH IRAQI EYES

The most important part of our trip was the opportunity to interact with Iraqi refugees.<sup>5</sup> Iraqis in Syria and Jordan form invisible communities that only reluctantly make themselves known to the authorities and humanitarian workers. They typically live in cramped, barely heated basement apartments in neighborhoods that show no outward signs of an Iraqi presence. They are diverse in terms of ethnicity, religious affiliation, and geographic and socioeconomic background. Those individuals who left Iraq earlier in the conflict were wealthier in the aggregate, and less desperate than newer arrivals, who are disproportionately located in Syria.

The vast majority live in urban centers—Damascus and Amman—where they seek to keep as low a profile as possible for

<sup>3</sup> Although the Iraqi refugee communities are coming under increasing financial strain, the net financial flows are thought to be out of Iraq and into host countries, particularly Jordan. Iraqis able to deposit \$150,000 in Jordanian banks have a relatively easy time gaining residency, which apparently was the case for significant numbers in the early years of the war, though newer arrivals usually have far fewer resources. Nonetheless, many refugees—44 percent of those in Jordan, according to the FAFO's survey—receive remittances from Iraq. See FAFO, "Iraqis in Jordan 2007: Their Number and Characteristics," <http://www.fafon.org/ais/middeast/jordan/IJ.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Officially, 1.8 million of Jordan's prewar population of 6 million is registered by the United Nations as refugees, although most experts believe Palestinians actually constitute between 50 and 60 percent of the population. Syria, with a prewar population of about 20 million persons, has about 440,000 registered Palestinian refugees. For official numbers, see United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). <http://www.un.org/unrwa/publications/>

<sup>5</sup> Our interactions with Iraqis, facilitated primarily by UNHCR in both Jordan and Syria, included home visits, focus group discussions, visits to schools and health clinics and observations of UNHCR registration and U.S. immigration interviews.

fear of deportation. We were told repeatedly that both cities are expensive for refugees. Said one refugee: “Our rent and heating bills keep going up. We simply don’t have enough money.” As a result of dwindling resources, secondary movements are increasingly common. In Jordan, Iraqis are now migrating from the wealthier neighborhoods of West Amman to the less affluent East Amman, and from East Amman to still more affordable suburbs and villages beyond. In Syria, most Iraqis are thought to live in the vicinity of Damascus, but increasing numbers are moving outside the capital where it is less expensive.

The refugees’ greatest concerns are their lack of legal status and inability to work legally without risking deportation or exploitation. They are tolerated but not welcomed, and face declining, and often desperate, economic conditions.<sup>6</sup> In both countries, Iraqis complain that employers harass and refuse to pay refugees who, because they work illegally, have no legal recourse. For many Iraqi men, their refugee status is a symbol of shame—for relying on humanitarian assistance, for not being able to provide for their families, and for having been displaced in the first place. More worryingly, the presence of hundreds of thousands of angry and idle young men provides potentially fertile ground for extremist ideologies. As one refugee said, “If we don’t take care of them, someone else will.”

Iraqis told us they want safer access for their children at local schools. Some mothers told us their children fear attending school because of harassment and ridicule. Iraqi children are also blamed for overcrowding in schools, although their numbers remain relatively low. Concerned parents often forbid them from playing outside or showing themselves publicly. Jordan and Syria have theoretically opened their health care systems to Iraqis for primary care, but in practice, Iraqis told us they are turned away and are reluctant to seek it.

The population is extraordinarily traumatized, greatly contributing to their sense of vulnerability. We met a few Iraqis in Jordan who had fled Baathist persecution in the 1990s. However, almost all of the refugees we interacted with had arrived within the last two years. Most had experienced the violent death or disappearance of an immediate family member, typically a father or a son. In some cases, families were given only hours or even minutes to prepare for departure. A mother we met in a Damascus health clinic told us that her son had seen so much death and destruction in Iraq that he would not leave her side. A woman in Amman relayed terrifying details of her kidnapping by militia members. A family told us their 8-year-old son had seen a man assassinated on the street. We saw art drawn by young children depicting scenes of insurgents, American tanks and murdered children.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Good economic data does not exist for Syria. FAFO surveyed Iraqi refugees in Jordan and found that despite severe international economic sanctions on Iraq between 1990 and 2003, 63 percent of the refugees reported being worse off economically than they were before the war. 18 percent reported being better off, so clearly a small minority has managed to benefit from the relocation. See FAFO, “Iraqis in Jordan 2007: Their Number and Characteristics.” <http://www.fafon.org/ais/middeast/jordan/IJ.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup>According to an IPSOS survey of Iraqis who were in the process of registering with UNHCR in Syria, 89 percent suffered from depression and 82 percent suffered from anxiety. Additionally, “68 percent reported interrogation or harassment by militias or other groups with threat to life . . . 23 percent had been kidnapped, 72 percent had been eye witnesses to a car bombing, and 75 percent knew someone close to them who had been killed or murdered. Note that because of the convenience sampling methodology used, the results are not necessarily representative of

Iraqis complain of ostracism, discrimination, and exploitation by host communities. The refugee community is rife with rumors of Iraqis being rounded up, detained, and expelled. Refugees told us repeatedly that they feel scape-goated for a variety of perceived and real socioeconomic grievances, from rising real estate prices and high inflation to an alleged rise in criminality and prostitution. We heard stories of neighbors threatening to report Iraqis to the authorities for expulsion.

Human trafficking, domestic violence, and prostitution are on the rise, particularly in Syria. Some refugee women expressed concern about sexual exploitation of those working illegally. In Amman, we observed a classroom discussion of 7- and 8-year-olds on “why domestic violence is harmful.” According to one international worker: “An increasing number of women in Syria are choosing prostitution. It’s far more lucrative than the \$150 monthly stipend from the United Nations.”<sup>8</sup>

Iraqis referred to the U.S. Government by UNHCR for resettlement complain of excruciating delays and are often exasperated by the process. One man we met in Syria had worked for the United States in Baghdad in 2004, and he has family in the United States. He had been waiting for more than 6 months for a Department of Homeland Security interview and felt lost in the bureaucracy and abandoned by the process. He did not know how to obtain information for his application, either from the U.S. Government or the United Nations. “First we fled chaos in Iraq,” he said, “and now we are waiting, always waiting.”

The refugees are also disappointed with the Iraqi Government. Rather than as an ally or advocate, the Iraqi Government is seen with hostility. In the words of one Iraqi, the Iraqi Government “hates the refugees because we are a shameful reminder of its failures.” The refugees say the Iraqi Embassies in Jordan and Syria are unresponsive, unreliable, and unsympathetic to their troubles. Embassies are unable to provide humanitarian assistance or pensions. It costs about \$25 dollars to renew a passport even for refugees, which for a family of six or eight can be prohibitively expensive.

The refugee community feels profoundly aggrieved at the turn their lives have taken, and many are palpably despondent about their future. Mothers despair that there is “no joy” in their children’s lives. Some Iraqis believe that, over time, the host governments will gradually ratchet up the pressure against them until they are forced back into Iraq against their will. Others simply expect to run out of money. In the words of one woman: “Our children are lost, waiting for the situation in Iraq to improve. They are not in school and they lack any opportunities. If our children are not educated, who will rebuild Iraq?”

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either the total refugee population or registered refugee population. See, IPSOS, “Second IPSOS Survey on Iraqi Refugees,” January 22, 2008, <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/opedoc.pdf?tbl=SUBSITES&id=4795f96f2>.

<sup>8</sup> Because of cultural sensitivities, fear and the criminality involved, data on prostitution simply does not exist. Estimates are as high as 50,000, although we did not hear figures this high during our visit. See Hassan, Nil, “50,000 Iraqi refugees forced into prostitution,” *The Independent*, June 24, 2007.

## RETURNEES—A TRICKLE OR A FLOOD?

Beginning last fall, great attention was paid to reports that tens of thousands of refugees had begun returning to Iraq from Syria. The Iraqi Government claimed last December that 60,000 Iraqis had returned, while the Iraqi Red Crescent estimated the figure at 47,000.<sup>9</sup> Some interpreted these reports as evidence that the Iraqi refugee crisis was beginning to abate, a narrative that the Iraqi Government readily promoted.

A precise accounting of the returnees proved impossible in Syria during our visit, but it seems clear that the rate of returns subsided in January and February. A recent UNHCR report cited Syrian data that 1,200 Iraqis entered Syria daily in January compared with 700 who returned to Iraq.<sup>10</sup> The International Organization for Migration estimated that as of late February the number of new displacements remained somewhat above the level of returnees.

For the foreseeable future most officials and Iraqis believe the flow of returnees is likely to be only a trickle. According to UNHCR, 72 percent of the returnees cited economic necessity or expired visas as the primary reason for returning,<sup>11</sup> while only 14 percent of the returnees cited improving security. As many as 50 to 70 percent of the returnees were unable to return to their homes.<sup>12</sup>

In February, the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, Antonio Guterres said, “We have clear criteria for the promotion of returns—those criteria are not met by the situation in Iraq now.”<sup>13</sup> This view is strongly held among humanitarian relief professionals, and we concur. Effective repatriation requires significant planning to ensure that returnees have access to housing, jobs, and the like. Most of all, it requires a stable security environment, which is lacking in Iraq. Large-scale Iraqi repatriation in the present conditions not only endangers the lives of returnees, it risks reigniting sectarian conflicts.

The majority of Iraqis we met expressed no desire to return to Iraq anytime soon, if ever.<sup>14</sup> The psychological wounds are still fresh and the sense of loss profound—of home and material livelihood, of community, and of a connection to Iraq. Many feel they have nothing to return to; others have concluded that the security situation remains too tenuous and uncertain. Militia groups still operate with impunity and many refugees question whether security gains can be sustained. Because of sectarian cleansing, many

<sup>9</sup>Agence France Press, “More Iraqis heading to Syria than returning home,” February 7, 2008.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid. We received similar information from Syrian officials.

<sup>11</sup>See, UNHCR, “UNHCR Syria Update on Iraqi Refugees,” February 2008, <http://www.uniraq.org/documents/UNHCR%20Syria%20Update—04.02.08.pdf>. In November 2007, the Iraqi Government began paying \$800 to refugees who returned to Iraq. Most experts agree that the vast majority of returnees are from Syria, where Iraqis often receive an exit visa prohibiting their return.

<sup>12</sup>70 percent according to a UNHCR official in early February; 50 percent according to an IOM official in late February.

<sup>13</sup>United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “SYRIA: Not safe enough for Iraqi refugees to return—UNHCR chief,” February 15, 2008.

<sup>14</sup>The FAFO study found that 58 percent of all Iraqi refugees in Jordan—and 72 percent of those who had registered with UNHCR—had no intention of returning to Iraq. The lower the household wealth the more resistance there was to returning; nearly 79 percent of the poorest quintile of Iraqis did not intend to return. Of those who expressed some desire to return, fewer than 4 percent expected to return within the next year and 95 percent expected to return only when the “situation allows for it.” See FAFO, “Iraqis in Jordan 2007: Their Number and Characteristics,” <http://www.fafno.no/ais/middeast/jordan/IJ.pdf>.

feel that they will never be able to return to their old homes. We heard reports of Iraqis who had been killed upon their return home. As one Iraqi put it, "My family in Iraq says it's not time to return. We have nowhere to return to. Our home has been overtaken by militias."

#### THE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

For the foreseeable future, only a minority of Iraqis will return home. Barring dramatic changes in resettlement patterns, less than 5 percent appear likely to be resettled in the West. Thus, the majority of refugees will remain, for now, where they are, mostly in Syria and Jordan. Addressing their needs and relieving the pressure on the host governments will require a more sustained and coordinated international humanitarian response.

Jordan and Syria represent different environments for humanitarian relief. Jordan has excellent relations with the United States and other donor countries. As a longtime recipient of American and other bilateral foreign assistance, Jordan has a relatively good capacity for coordination of assistance with the various donors. The United Nations and many international and nongovernmental organizations are working in Jordan. On the other hand, given its large Palestinian refugee population, Jordan is cautious about taking steps that might suggest permanent integration of the Iraqi population. Iraqi children were only allowed to attend school beginning in September 2007, and most refugees have no legal status in Jordan.<sup>15</sup>

Nonetheless, there has been an encouraging evolution towards pragmatism in Jordan's approach. When it closed its borders in early 2007, Jordan was hesitant to even acknowledge that it had a refugee problem. Since then, it has become more open to international humanitarian assistance efforts for Iraqis, so long as they do not lead to the creation of parallel systems of social services. This means that while geographic areas with high concentrations of Iraqis can be targeted, humanitarian benefits must be available to both Jordanians and Iraqis alike.

Syria has been relatively accommodating to the Iraqi refugee population. It has roughly three times the number of refugees as Jordan and the refugees are generally in worse economic condition. Even now, although the borders are closed to most Iraqis, Syria remains more accessible to Iraqis than other countries in the region.

However, Syria's extreme political isolation and the nature of the ruling regime greatly hamper international humanitarian efforts. No direct American bilateral assistance programs exist in Syria, and European donors have their own concerns about dealing directly with Syria. Its civil society is extremely limited and tightly controlled. Religious charities are able to perform limited humanitarian work, but Syria poses an extremely difficult environment for international nongovernmental organizations to operate in.<sup>16</sup> As a

<sup>15</sup> See footnote 3.

<sup>16</sup> There is some hope that a long-awaited memorandum of understanding announced during our visit between the Syrian Government and a number international nongovernmental organizations, including one American organization, will finally allow them to begin to be more active.

result, there are few international humanitarian organizations operating beyond the United Nations system.

International attention to the crisis began in earnest with the April 2007 UNHCR conference on Iraqi refugees and internally displaced persons held in Geneva, Switzerland. In 2007, UNHCR budgets in Jordan and Syria increased by approximately a factor of ten, to more than \$70 million for the two countries, not counting additional emergency appeals for health and education. This growth continues—the Department of State estimates that almost \$900 million has been requested for emergency humanitarian appeals for Iraqi refugees regionally and internally displaced persons within Iraq in 2008.<sup>17</sup>

But humanitarian assistance can only be provided for those willing to accept it, and only a small fraction of refugees have registered with UNHCR for humanitarian assistance. Because most Iraqis are in hiding, the actual needs of the refugee community far exceed the level of humanitarian services actually delivered. There is an inherent tension in the appeals process. On the one hand, appeals create expectations for donors, and UNHCR is acutely aware that the expectations will be hard to meet. On the other hand, emergency appeals test the willingness of donors, and international organizations are concerned that programs will be underfunded. Some officials privately admit that the emergency appeals are based, in part, on “what the donor market will bear” rather than the anticipated needs of the refugees.

*Protection:* In Jordan and Syria, full-fledged efforts are underway by UNHCR to register Iraqi refugees (for a renewable period of 6 months to provide for better monitoring), provide benefits, and resettle the most vulnerable. UNHCR’s protection efforts for Iraqi refugees have been focused on three key areas: Protection from forcible returns, nonpenalization for illegal entry, and access to basic services. The humanitarian services offered to refugees include food, health services, stipends for the neediest, and legal advocacy. As of February 2008, UNHCR had registered 50,000 Iraqis in Jordan and 170,000 in Syria.<sup>18</sup> In Jordan, reregistration outpaces new registrations, while in Syria, the registrations continue at a rapid rate.

The assistance is appreciated by refugees and is having a significant impact for those accepting it. As one humanitarian worker put it, “the level of discontent has stabilized” and several Iraqis noted that their personal situations had improved markedly as a result of the assistance. It is hoped that continuing expansion of humanitarian assistance in both countries will draw increasing levels of registration. However, large numbers of Iraqis are so fearful of exposure to government authorities and deportation that they do not take advantage of the assistance benefits potentially available to them. As long as their status prevents them from working legally,

<sup>17</sup>The emergency appeals consists of \$261m for UNHCR, \$209m for other U.N. agencies, \$93m for the International Committee of the Red Cross, \$208m for other non-U.N. international organizations, including the International Organization for Migration, and \$120m for nongovernmental organizations. Source: Department of State.

<sup>18</sup>Jordan and Syria are not signatories of the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention, so UNHCR registration does not carry formal legal protections from the host government. UNHCR does have memoranda of understanding with both countries and the 6-month renewable registration allows UNHCR better access to the refugees, provides information about the community as a whole, and allows for individual cases to be tracked.

their frustration will continue to increase. As the principal nexus between the refugees and international assistance efforts, UNHCR is working with Jordan and Syria to ensure availability of protection.

*Education:* A large focus of U.S. and U.N. efforts in both Jordan and Syria has been on increasing Iraqi children's school attendance. In July 2007, a \$129 million UNHCR–UNICEF joint appeal was launched to get Iraqi refugee children into schools. Syrian schools have been open to Iraqi children, and Iraqi families with children in Syrian schools can register with the Syrian Government for 1-year visas. In Jordan, Iraqi children without legal residency did not have access to schools until September 2007.

Iraqi enrollment rates, reflecting the confidence refugees feel in publicly asserting themselves, are a useful proxy indicator of their emotional well-being and sense of security. Although there are thought to be as many as 500,000 school age children among the refugee population in the two countries, only about 25,000 Iraqi children are in schools in Jordan and 45,000 in Syria. Iraqis cite grave concerns that a “lost generation” of uneducated and under-educated youth is being created that will be ill-prepared to be economically productive.

Certainly, psychological trauma and the fear of deportation are important factors in the low enrollment numbers. But Iraqi refugees also cite host community intimidation and child labor. Although school is free in both Syria and Jordan, for some Iraqi families the indirect costs, including uniforms, school supplies, and transportation, are prohibitive.

Iraqi children's problems do not end once they arrive in school. There are linguistic differences between the Iraqi and Levantine Arabic dialects, different curricula, and difficulties caused by the fact that Iraqi children have often been out of school for extended periods of time. Iraqi children can face severe ostracism by their local classmates, sometimes to the point of withdrawing from school. One mother told us that a teacher had publicly ridiculed her daughter for being a Shiite after the execution of Saddam Hussein. Unless teachers are trained and sensitized to the challenges facing Iraqi children, efforts to encourage greater participation in schools will be unlikely to succeed.

*Health:* Both Jordan and Syria have, in principle, opened their primary health care systems to Iraqi refugees, but government officials admit that Iraqis cannot depend on the public systems. The Syrian Ministry of Health reported that because the government does not make distinctions among their “Arab brothers,” it does not keep statistics on the number of Iraqis seeking medical treatment at the 2,100 health clinics and hospitals throughout the country.<sup>19</sup> In Jordan there is better data on the refugees' access to medical assistance, although more information is needed regarding the health needs for refugees of both countries.

With the increase of humanitarian assistance for refugees, primary health care access improved significantly in 2007 for refugees in both Syria and Jordan. Private health care clinics have been es-

<sup>19</sup>It seems likely that the Syrian Government would, in fact, have data on such a closely watched population.

established in the past year by nongovernmental organizations and charitable organizations in Jordan, and by the Syrian Red Crescent in Syria, where nongovernmental organizations are far more restricted. In both countries, these facilities provide free, or nearly free, primary health care assistance for refugees, as well as for locals.

Nonetheless, the health needs of the Iraqi population remain significant. Access to secondary health care is limited and the costs are generally prohibitive. Health professionals in the two countries cite chronic diseases such as hypertension, diabetes, and cancer as significant concerns. Although the prevalence of these diseases is difficult to quantify, it is beyond the scope of the primary health care clinics to systemically treat them. The Iraqi refugee population also suffers from a high prevalence of psychological ailments, such as post-traumatic stress disorder and clinical depression, which the Jordanian and Syrian health care systems are not equipped to treat properly. Pharmaceutical costs, even for generic drugs, are expensive and modern medical procedures such as dialysis and cancer treatment are not widely available. Emergency obstetrics are often classified as secondary, rather than primary, health treatments.

*Food:* The United Nations estimates that the number of Iraqis in Syria with critical food shortages increased five-fold between December 2006 and December 2007, to approximately 30,000. The food situation in Jordan is less dire, but public health professionals in Jordan reported some evidence of malnutrition among Iraqi children. Food assistance has been increasing. Since 2006, the World Food Programme (WFP), the food assistance agency of the United Nations, has distributed food to Iraqi refugees in Syria every 2 months, with the United States providing about a quarter of the commodities distributed. The vast majority of registered refugees in Syria receive food distributions, and WFP hopes to increase the reach of the program to 350,000 refugees by the end of the year. To accomplish this goal it will require a substantial increase in donor support.

#### U.S. HUMANITARIAN EFFORTS

American leadership is essential to sustain and expand the international humanitarian response to this refugee crisis. Much of the international community believes that the crisis is a result of the U.S. intervention in Iraq. It was clear in our meetings with foreign diplomats that many donors remain unconvinced that the United States gives Iraqi refugees a sufficiently high priority.

Currently, there is no coherent strategic vision at the highest levels of the U.S. Government with respect to refugees and internally displaced persons. No one has responsibility for ensuring an overall humanitarian response and strategy within the U.S. Government, with the United Nations, and with the international community.

On assistance, the administration has requested insufficient funding for Iraqi refugees and internally displaced persons. In fiscal years 2005 and 2006, the administration requested no funding for Iraqi refugees, although Congress provided \$67 million and \$75 million, respectively. In fiscal year 2007, the administration requested \$90 million in supplemental appropriations, a level that

was increased to \$224 million by Congress. In the current fiscal year, \$274 million has been provided, although an additional fiscal year 2008 supplemental request of \$30 million is pending.<sup>20</sup> The fiscal year 2009 Federal budget request notes that “the administration will continue to review humanitarian assistance needs, including costs related to Iraqi displaced persons and Afghan refugees, as needs become better known.”<sup>21</sup> However, Department of State officials have privately admitted that the fiscal year 2009 request includes no funding for Iraqi refugees or internally displaced persons, meaning that the Congress will need to add additional funds or the next administration will need to request supplemental funding.

The Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) at the Department of State is the lead U.S. Government agency for refugees. The majority of PRM’s funding goes toward the operating budgets and emergency appeals of international organizations such as UNHCR and the International Committee of the Red Cross. The Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) within the Agency for International Development takes the lead on internally displaced persons and works directly with partners on the ground—contractors, nongovernmental and international organizations—typically through a competitive bidding process. Greater structural cohesion between the two offices is needed. While the cooperation between the two agencies is good, there is the potential for coordination problems, especially as populations under each agency’s mandate are sometimes blurred, and it can be difficult to distinguish among refugees, internally displaced persons, and returnees. Additionally, because OFDA is an implementing agency, there is some concern that appeals targeting Iraqi internally displaced persons directly could be underfunded.

In Syria, the United States limited and poor relations with Syria are undermining the humanitarian response. One nongovernmental organization told us it would not accept U.S. Government money because it would compromise their work with the Syrian Government.

#### RESETTLEMENT

There is a clear perception in Amman and Damascus that the United States has not committed sufficient resources to resettlement given the magnitude of the problem. As of March 2008, approximately 4,900 Iraqi refugees had been resettled in the United States since the war began in 2003. By contrast, Sweden, a country with about 3 percent of the population of the United States, admitted nearly twice that number of asylum seekers in 2006 alone and received 18,500 asylum applications in 2007.<sup>22</sup> The administra-

<sup>20</sup> Source: Analysis provided for the authors by Rhoda Margesson, Specialist in International Humanitarian Policy at Congressional Research Service, March 2008. Funding for Iraqi refugees and IDPs comes through a number of funding streams, including Migration and Refugee Assistance, Emergency Refugee and Migration Assistance, International Disaster and Famine Assistance, P.L. 480 Title II Food Assistance, Economic Support Funds, and Iraq Relief and Reconstruction Funds.

<sup>21</sup> Source: The Migration and Refugee Assistance (MRA) account of the Department of State’s Function 150 international affairs budget request to Congress, FY2009, <http://www.state.gov/s/d/rm/c6112.htm>.

<sup>22</sup> Admittances of Iraqi refugees to the United States are as follows: FY03: 294, FY04: 65, FY05: 198, FY06: 202, FY07: 1608, FY08 (through 2/20): 1646. Sources: FY03–FY06: Depart-

tion's promises to resettle 7,000 Iraqi refugees in the United States in fiscal year 2007 and 12,000 Iraqi refugees in fiscal year 2008 have created expectations, particularly among the refugees, and the United States has an obligation to meet those expectations. The fact that the U.S. Government resettled only 1,608 Iraqis in fiscal year 2007 while more than 20,000 cases were referred by the United Nations has created deep skepticism about American efforts with the international community host governments, and the refugees.<sup>23</sup>

The Departments of State and Homeland Security have senior coordinators for refugees working mostly on resettlement issues. Their appointments have corresponded with increases in the rate of resettlements to the United States. However, decisions on key policy issues have been delayed, sometimes for months, and the refugees have suffered as a result.

The Department of State has not sent permanent senior staff to either Jordan or Syria to oversee the refugee effort, as required by law, and the Department of Homeland Security has not hired additional staff or permanently stationed staff in the region to expedite processing. Within the United Nations system, there is frustration that the United States has not put more emphasis on resettlement numbers. One U.N. official was very blunt: "What your government needs to understand is that resettlement is about protection for the most vulnerable."

*Implementing the New Refugee Law:* More than 250 interpreters working for the U.S. Government or U.S. contractors have been killed since 2003 and thousands more have risked their lives. In February, the United States temporarily ceased processing special immigrant visas for these Iraqis, because the annual quota of 500 had been exceeded.<sup>24</sup> However, the FY 2008 Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 110-181), signed into law January 28, 2008, authorizes 5,000 special immigrant visas yearly for Iraqis and their families who have worked for the U.S. Government in Iraq.

The law requires in-country processing in Baghdad, Damascus, and Amman for Iraqis with a close tie to the United States and special immigrant visas for Iraqis who have worked with our government for a year. It also requires the Secretary of State to appoint senior refugee coordinators in each embassy to coordinate visa processing and address other needs of refugees. The new refugee law requires an assessment of videoconferencing to conduct interviews, an option that would require more extensive use of consular officers.

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ment of State, Annual Proposed Refugee Admissions Reports to Congress, <http://www.state.gov/g/prm/refadm/rls/rpts/>. FY07-FY08, Department of State, Fact Sheet on United States Humanitarian Assistance for Displaced Iraqis, February 25, 2008, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2008/feb/101274.htm>. For Sweden figure, see Shelly Emling, "Sweden debating its open door for Iraqis," Cox News Service, February 10, 2008. The comparison with Sweden is for illustrative purposes only; there is an obligation under the 1951 U.N. Convention on Refugees to accept asylum seekers, whereas resettlement is discretionary.

<sup>23</sup> According to U.N. officials and refugee experts, there are thought to be roughly 100,000 Iraqi refugees throughout the region for whom resettlement may be necessary. UNHCR defines eleven categories of refugees who are prioritized for resettlement. For more information on these categories and on UNHCR's resettlement referrals, see UNHCR, "Resettlement of Iraqi Refugees," March 12, 2007. <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/opendoc.pdf?tbl=SUBSITES&id=45f80f9d2>.

<sup>24</sup> Walter Pincus, "Visas for War Zone Translators Halted," Washington Post, February 29, 2008.

At the time of our visit, that legislation had been sent to the President, but had not yet been signed into law. To our surprise, the American Embassies in both Amman and Damascus were unfamiliar with many of the specific requirements of the law. At both locations, junior officers are responsible for the refugee portfolios. Two mid-level positions will be created in Amman, but they are not scheduled to be filled until summer 2008. A decision had not been made regarding Damascus.

Despite repeated requests from Congress regarding financial requirements necessary to implement the relevant sections of the new law, embassy staff had not been asked to identify what additional resources would be necessary. The Department of State has not formally identified these needs to Congress. Likewise, despite a considerable backlog of cases referred for resettlement, the Department of Homeland Security has not stationed permanent staff in the region.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

##### *Recommendation 1: White House Humanitarian Coordinator for Iraqi Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons*

To coordinate our overall policy for displaced Iraqis and assistance within our government and with the international community, the President should appoint a White House Humanitarian Coordinator for Iraqi Refugee and Internally Displaced Persons.

- A White House Humanitarian Coordinator would be responsible for outlining the United States overall policy response to the displacement crisis in Iraq and the region. He or she must have the authority to resolve interagency disagreements on policy.
- The Coordinator would ensure unity of effort in U.S. funding and increase confidence in the Congress and the international community that priorities are being established in a methodical way and that a coherent strategy exists to consider refugees and internally displaced persons in tandem and to coordinate efforts effectively.
- The Coordinator should have a mandate to engage with the international community, host nations, and the Government of Iraq on long-term strategies for managing the crisis. This would include soliciting support from the international donor community and working toward better coordination of efforts, both between donors and within the United Nations system.
- The Coordinator should also work to increase donor confidence by addressing legitimate concerns about international humanitarian efforts. We heard frustration from donors that there is insufficient coordination between United Nations agencies, that emergency appeals have not been adequately transparent or consolidated, and that better data on the size and socio-economic profile of the refugee communities are needed. The Coordinator would complement the work being done on resettlement by the refugee coordinators at the Departments of State and Homeland Security.

*Recommendation 2: Funding*

The United States should fund 50 percent of all United Nations and other international organizations' appeals for Iraqi refugees, internally displaced persons, and for other vulnerable Iraqis.

- In 2008, a 50 percent commitment would amount to approximately \$500 million, somewhat less than one-half of one percent of the costs of annual U.S. military operations in Iraq.<sup>25</sup> Providing this level of assistance on an ongoing basis would match our resources with our moral obligation to assist those suffering and relieve the burden on host governments.

*Recommendation 3: U.S. Resettlement Policy*

The United States Government needs to put a high priority on meeting its fiscal year 2008 resettlement commitments.

- The United States Government, and the Department of Homeland Security in particular, needs to respond to legitimate security concerns. But we cannot allow fear to stand in the way of our obligation to resettle the most vulnerable.
- Although the number of resettlement arrivals to the United States has increased in recent months, meeting the fiscal year 2008 goal of 12,000 will be difficult if the Departments of State and Homeland Security are unwilling to think creatively and consider implementing alternative mechanisms. Such mechanisms include video conference interviews, third-country processing, and greater use of State consular officers to supplement the work of DHS adjudicators. In particular, processing in Syria has been problematic. The Syrian Government has been very slow in granting visas to DHS adjudicators, and the lack of access for adjudicators has affected the pace of resettlement adjudication. United Nations officials and humanitarian relief experts believe that Syria is the priority country for resettlement. Unless more effective resettlement methods are employed, the Syrian Government will continue to retain too much control over the refugee program.
- The recent halt in processing special immigrant visas underscores the need to ensure a smooth transition in the programs. Congress needs to make a technical adjustment to the new special immigrant visa law to enable the administration to clear out the backlog in the existing program by issuing some of the quota of 5,000 visas during the current fiscal year. The administration should issue policy guidance for the new special immigrant visas without delay.
- The administration should also provide information to Congress about resource needs to process refugees and special immigrant visas more expeditiously. If the Department of State needs additional consular officers to process special immigrant visas or implement the refugee provisions, they should be hired immediately. If the Department of Homeland Security needs additional resources to hire more adjudicators for the

<sup>25</sup> According to data obtained from the Department of State, the sum of all international emergency appeals for 2008 related to Iraqi refugees and IDPs is less than \$1 billion. The Congressional Research Service estimates the U.S. military costs in Iraq at roughly \$10 billion per month.

Refugee Corps, they should be provided immediately. Congressional efforts to add funding to the DHS budget for adjudicators should be supported.

*Recommendation 4: Legal Protection*

The regularization of the status of Iraqis in Jordan and Syria should be made a first-order priority for American diplomats.

- As long as Iraqis live in fear of deportation and are prohibited from working in Jordan, Syria, and other host countries, they will be increasingly dependent on the international community's humanitarian efforts. Easing labor restrictions will not be decisions that either Jordan or Syria makes lightly, but both countries should be encouraged to view this matter as linked to their own security.
- Jordan and Syria should consider offering temporary protected status or some form of guest worker program for Iraqi refugees. Allowing Iraqis to work will reduce the economic pressure and reduce risks of radicalizing the Iraqi population. Jordan already has hundreds of thousands of guest workers.<sup>26</sup> Over time these jobs could be shifted to Iraqis. In February 2008, Lebanon announced a registration program that gives Iraqis a 3-month grace period to regularize their status in Lebanon and the possibility to obtain work permits through sponsoring employers. This program could provide a model for Jordan and Syria.

*Recommendation 5: Addressing the Problem in Syria*

American diplomats in Damascus should be empowered to engage more vigorously with Syrian officials on Iraqi refugee, resettlement, and other issues.

- Though American diplomats in Syria have a narrow mandate to engage on humanitarian issues, they have been severely constrained by the Bush administration in their ability to engage with Syrian officials, undermining the United States ability to develop effective responses. Their mandate should be expanded. Skillful diplomacy must allow for continued pressure on Syria for its violations of Lebanese sovereignty and support for terrorism, while simultaneously allowing for a more robust engagement on the issue of Iraqi refugees.
- We met with senior officials in the Syrian Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Health and Education during our visit. One of these ministries apparently had not had any interaction with American diplomats since 2005. In varying degrees, these officials admitted that their capacity to deal with Iraqis refugees was limited, and they expressed openness to enhanced U.S.-Syrian cooperation on the issue of Iraqi refugees. It is difficult to assess the sincerity of these claims, but there is no convincing reason that they should not be probed.
- Bilateral American assistance to Syria is not an option. However, substantial assistance can and should continue to be provided to Iraqi refugees in Syria through United Nations and

<sup>26</sup>Jordan Times, "Work Permit Fees Raised to JD180 for Arab Nations," December 19, 1999

humanitarian assistance programs of nongovernmental organizations.

*Recommendation 6: Returnees*

Iraqis should not be encouraged or pressured to return to Iraq while conditions there remain tenuous.

- Under no circumstances should Iraqi refugees feel pressured—legally or economically—by the Syrian, Jordanian, or Iraqi Governments to return home prematurely. The hasty return of large numbers of returnees—without security, housing or employment—could have serious negative consequences. The administration must work vigorously against any such effort.
- It is important for the international community to understand that the Iraqi refugee problem is not winding down. Premature talk of return threatens to ignore the fact that humanitarian needs in Jordan and Syria are expected to grow with time. Rising economic pressures are likely to create greater needs in Jordan and Syria in the months and years to come.

*Recommendation 7: Schools*

The international community and host governments must be more proactive and innovative in developing solutions to meet the educational needs of Iraqi refugee children.

- Priority has rightly been given to getting Iraqi refugee children back in school. However, the United States, the United Nations, host governments, and the international community must be more proactive and innovative in developing solutions to meet the educational needs. While there have been some successes, the vast majority of Iraqi children remain outside the local school systems in Amman and Damascus. A number of steps can be taken on this issue:
  - Iraqi teachers and volunteers could be used to supplement the activities of local education professionals. Having Iraqi assistants in schools and classrooms with high percentages of Iraqis could help to reduce tensions between Iraqi and local children, raise the confidence of Iraqi children, and help with linguistic differences.
  - Training could be provided for Jordanian and Syrian teachers and administrators to sensitize them to the concerns of Iraqis.
  - Counseling services for Iraqi students could be expanded.
  - More vigorous public information campaigns could be considered to welcome Iraqi children to Syrian and Jordanian schools and to make clear that enrolling will not increase the likelihood of detention or expulsion.
  - Vocational and remedial education could be implemented, especially for older Iraqi students who have spent several years out of school.
  - At the university level, thought could be given to scholarship programs for refugees both in Jordan and Syria, as well as in the United States and internationally.

*Recommendation 8: The Government of Iraq*

Iraq should devote more resources to internally displaced persons within its borders and allocate more resources so that Iraqi embassies can be more responsive to the needs of refugee communities.

- The Government of Iraq should devote significantly more resources to humanitarian assistance for internally displaced Iraqis and Iraqis in the region. This assistance should be provided unconditionally through United Nations emergency appeals. At the April 2007 UNHCR conference on Iraqi refugees, the Government of Iraq pledged \$25 million to help Iraqi refugees. The amount was relatively small, but hopes were high in the U.S. Government that the decision marked the beginning of a more active policy on refugees. Yet, as of January 2008 visit, Syria had not received the funds. Jordan apparently decided to return them because Iraq insisted on working outside the United Nations framework.
- The United States and the wider international community should partner with the Iraqi Ministry of Migration and Displacement to strengthen its capacity and ensure that adequate systems are developed to provide security, housing, financial assistance and employment for Iraqis refugees and internally displaced persons who choose to return to their homes.
- Iraqi embassies need to be more responsive to refugee needs. A number of services for refugees could be administered at Iraqi embassies and consular offices, although international support may be necessary. Such services could include:
  - Payment of pensions and/or stipends in Jordan and Syria, rather than Iraq.
  - Legal support.
  - Reduced fees for passports for refugees with limited financial resources.

## CONCLUSION

The Iraqi refugee and displaced person crisis will not end for many years, and millions of Iraqis are suffering enormously. The United States Government's response to the crisis and its efforts to minimize the suffering has been slow and halting. The United States has a unique obligation to make this issue a much higher priority. We hope the recommendations in this report can result in a more proactive and effective response by our Government.

