

# US occupation turns 3.7 million Iraqis into refugees

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The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) reported this month that the US invasion and occupation of Iraq has forced one out of every eight Iraqis to flee their homes—more than 3.7 million people. The agency described the refugee crisis caused by the Iraq war as the worst in the Middle East since the ethnic cleansing that accompanied the creation of Israel in 1948. The Zionist military and paramilitary death squads drove an estimated 711,000 Palestinian Arabs from their land.

UNHCR estimates that two million Iraqis are now living outside the country—including those who left before 2003 but have failed to return due to the country's catastrophic situation. Some 50,000 Iraqi émigrés returned in 2005, but just 1,000 came back last year.

Another 1.7 million Iraqis have been internally displaced. At least 500,000 people fled their homes in 2006 as a result of US military repression and the dramatic rise in sectarian violence between rival Shiite and Sunni militias in the wake of the destruction of a prominent Shiite mosque in Samarra last February. It is thought that 80,000 to 100,000 people are joining the ranks of internal and external refugees each month.

The cause of the refugee crisis is the political, economic and social collapse in Iraq after close to four years of US occupation. The UN Human Rights Office report for the period November 1, 2006 to December 21, 2006, stated: "The civilian population remains the main victim of the prevailing security situation, characterised by terrorist acts, action by armed groups, criminal gangs, religious extremists, militias, as well as operations by security and military forces. The resulting insecurity, sectarian prejudice, and terror negatively and comprehensively affect the enjoyment of basic rights and freedoms by the population at large. In addition, growing unemployment, poverty, various forms of discrimination and increasingly limited access to basic services, prevent most citizens from realizing their economic, social and cultural rights."

The UN specifically condemned the actions of the US military: "Armed operations by the Multinational Forces-Iraq [the official title of the US-led occupation forces] continued to restrict the enjoyment of human rights and to cause severe suffering to the local population. Continued limitations of freedom of movement and lack of access to basic services such as health and education are affecting a larger percentage of the population and depriving it of basic rights for extended periods of time."

Many Iraqis have felt they had no choice but to leave the country. While there are no precise numbers, up to 800,000 are taking refuge in Syria; another 700,000 in Jordan; 100,000 in Egypt; 40,000 in Lebanon; 50,000 in Iran and a large number in Turkey.

The Iraqi refugees are being accorded no rights. The Jordanian monarchy labels them as "temporary visitors". It has not made any request for international assistance and is not cooperating with agencies such as UNHCR. Only 21,000 Iraqis in Jordan have been registered by the UN and just 800 have been recognised as refugees eligible for international resettlement.

Syria has also rejected calls for Iraqis on its territory to be recognised as refugees and is treating them as tourists or illegal immigrants. Iran has sealed its borders to any more Iraqis, while the Gulf States, such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, are refusing to allow them to enter their territory at all. While doing nothing to assist refugees, Saudi Arabia has allocated \$500 million to construct a fence along parts of its 1,000-kilometre border with Iraq, to prevent "terrorists" and "illegal immigrants" from entering. The fence will have security gates, guard posts and electronic movement sensors.

The majority of Iraqi émigrés live in considerable hardship and a significant proportion are sinking into complete poverty. Jordan charges Iraqis for all services, including a \$US225 fee for a one-year work permit. Many families are reportedly sharing small apartments and paid

employment is difficult to obtain. Syria has now begun charging refugees for health care and also limits their ability to work. More than 10 percent of Iraqi families in Syria are headed by women due to the death, imprisonment or disappearance of their men. UNHCR noted this month that there are increasing reports of female Iraqi refugees being forced into prostitution.

The strain of the inflow on Jordan is leading to an ever-more restrictive attitude toward the Iraqi refugees, who now make up 10 percent of the population. This would be equivalent to the US taking in 30 million refugees. Fearful of political unrest among the desperate émigré community, Jordan has begun blocking entry to males aged between 17 and 35. It is refusing to renew the visas of Iraqis already within its borders and has stepped up deportations. As a result, Syria has become the primary destination for Iraqis seeking to escape the carnage at home, with an estimated 40,000 entering the country each month.

Many of those who have fled are secular Iraqis. It is believed that 40 percent of the professional middle class has left the country since 2003. Many held positions in Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime and have been persecuted by the US occupation. They also face death or abuse at the hands of both Sunni and Shiite religious fundamentalists. Members of Iraq's Assyrian Christian minority have also left the country in large numbers. An estimated 750,000 Christians have fled since the US invasion.

The US and British governments—which bear the responsibility for the war and the subsequent humanitarian disaster—have refused to do anything about the crisis. The US has accepted a total of just 466 Iraqi refugees since 2003. According to the British Home Office, 160 Iraqis were accepted by Britain as refugees in 2005. The applications of another 2,685 were rejected. In the third quarter of 2006, the period for which the most recent statistics are available, the Blair government accepted only 10 Iraqi refugees, while rejecting the applications of 165.

The other major European powers have been equally restrictive. Draconian regulations ensured that only 230 Iraqis were allowed to enter Germany last year and just 13 into France. Sweden, by contrast, granted asylum to 8,951 Iraqis in 2006. The Australian government—one of the main supporters of the Iraq war—accepted 1,834 refugees from Iraq in 2005-2006, from more than 20,000 applications.

Within Iraq, hundreds of thousands of internally

displaced persons (IDP's) are relying on their extended families or charitable networks to survive.

There are close to 80,000 IDPs in the majority Sunni Arab province of Anbar, which borders Syria and Jordan and is a major focus of the anti-occupation insurgency. Many of the displaced have had their homes destroyed by the US military during its operations to suppress the anti-US fighters in cities like Ramadi and Fallujah. Others are Sunnis from Baghdad and other areas seeking to escape sectarian persecution at the hands of the militias and security forces loyal to the Shiite parties that dominate the pro-US government. There are some 50,000 displaced in Baghdad itself.

This month, Mohammed Rubaie, a displaced Sunni in Baghdad, told the *Los Angeles Times* that in October he was confronted by “two gunmen dressed in black, with the police backing them up. They were saying, ‘Sunnis you should leave now. It's the last warning to you all. We're going to burn your houses one by one. When our neighbour's house was burnt, I felt it was time for us to leave’”.

Large numbers of Shiites have fled to the predominantly Shiite-populated southern provinces of Iraq to escape equally brutal violence by Sunni extremists. Nearly 40,000 arrived in Karbala last year alone. Other southern provinces reported a 10-fold increase in the number of displaced persons seeking housing and assistance.

The escalation of the war set in motion by the Bush administration this month, which involves a massive increase in the violence in Baghdad, will inevitably force many more Iraqis to flee. UNHCR, however, is expecting to have just \$US60 million and limited staff this year to respond to the already enormous existing crisis.



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