

# Desperate plight facing millions of Iraqi refugees

Oscar Grenfell  
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Nearly five years after the US-led invasion of Iraq, there is no end in sight to the difficulties facing Iraqi refugees in neighbouring countries such as Syria, Jordan and Lebanon. Facing government harassment, unemployment and a lack of basic essentials where they are, or the prospect of returning to sectarian violence, looting and economic hardship in Iraq, these refugees are caught between the proverbial rock and a hard place.

Since March 2003, at least 4.2 million Iraqis have been displaced—2.2 million fled their homes but remained in Iraq and 2 million left the country altogether. Between 1.4 and 1.7 million are in neighbouring Syria, while Jordan, Egypt, Iran, Lebanon and Turkey all have a significant number of Iraqi refugees.

The precarious situation confronting Iraqi refugees is conveyed by an Ipsos survey published in November and entitled “Iraqi Refugees in Syria”. According to the survey, 37 percent of the 754 individuals interviewed listed savings as their primary source of income, while 24 percent relied on remittances, 12 percent on pensions and only 24 percent on a salary. Some 33 percent expected their money to run out in less than three months and another 53 percent did not know how long their money would last.

Financial insecurity has forced many refugees to take desperate measures to survive, including prolonged professional fasting or turning to prostitution. Children are also affected, with an estimated 10 percent of Iraqi children in Syria forced to work for an average daily income of \$1 or less.

An article published by the UN newsagency IRIN on July 4 entitled “Iraq-Syria: Starving to Survive: Iraqi Refugees Resort to Desperate Measures” features the story of Fatima Ahmaji, a mother of two whose husband was killed in Iraq. Unable to find regular employment, she fasts from dawn to dusk for wealthy clients who missed days of fasting during Ramadan.

“I am here in Syria jobless, how can I survive and look after my children? I should and must work.” Fatima told IRIN. “I feel very weak, I’m exhausted, and I suffer especially from headaches. Some days I have to eat and make up the fast later, but I shouldn’t because I’ve given my oath.” She receives just \$60 a month.

According to the Red Crescent, 45,913 Iraqi refugees have returned home since mid-September, including 38,736 to Baghdad. The figures are considerably less than those of the Iraqi government, which reported that over 60,000 refugees had returned from Syria and Jordan.

Iraqi government officials have been quick to claim that improved security conditions in Iraq were encouraging refugees to return. The results of the UNHCR report released on November 22 suggest otherwise. The survey of 110 Iraqis in Syria found that only 14 percent said they were returning to Iraq because they believed security had improved. The overwhelming majority—70 percent—cited financial and visa difficulties in Syria.

According to Sybella Wilkes, a UNHCR spokesperson in Syria: “The majority of people are going back either because they’re running out of savings and making ends meet has finally become impossible, or for the first time we’re finding that people are not able to renew their visas, and they’re getting an exit stamp in their passports.”

The Syrian government introduced new regulations last October, preventing the renewal of three-month visas on expiry. Instead of visas, refugees found exit stamps put in their passports. Those who stay in Syria illegally risk police persecution and imprisonment.

An IRIN article published in November cited the comments of a refugee waiting near the Iraqi embassy in Damascus. “I have no money because I’m not allowed to work. Also my official visa has run out and the Syrian government won’t renew it,” he explained. The man and his family planned to return to Iraq in the immediate

future.

Those who do return also confront major problems. A Refugees International press release in December commented: “Many will not be able to go back to their homes, as sectarian cleansing has created a ‘balkanised’ nation, and will join the ranks of the millions displaced within Iraq. Internally displaced people are running out of places to go, as 11 out of Iraq’s 18 governorates have closed their internal borders, unable to cope with the influx of displaced.”

Many refugees return from neighbouring Arab states to find that their homes have been destroyed, looted or occupied by some of the 2.2 million internally displaced people. These problems are particularly acute in Baghdad where 1.2 million displaced persons live.

An article published by the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) in December cited the case of Amira Abdul-Wahab, a widowed mother of two, who recently returned to Iraq after fleeing to Syria in 2006 to escape sectarian violence. A Sunni, she told IWPR that she found people occupying her home. “I was shocked when they refused to leave, claiming that Shia militias had settled them in the house,” she said.

The plight of Iraqis forced to flee their homes highlights the absurdity of the Bush administration’s claims to be helping the Iraqi people. Under pressure to do more for refugees, the US increased its resettlement quota earlier last year to the modest figure of 1,000 a month. In reality, the flow of Iraqi refugees into the US remains a trickle—a mere 245 were admitted nationwide last December.

The US occupation of Iraq has produced a flood of refugees not witnessed in the Middle East since 1948 when millions of Palestinians were driven from their homes by Zionist gangs. Palestinian refugees, impoverished and treated as second-class citizens, have become a permanent feature of the Middle East. Now millions of Iraqis are confronting a similar fate.



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