

Report: Iraq social and refugee crisis is worsening

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According to a report issued last week by the human rights organization Amnesty International, the plight of nearly 5 million Iraqis displaced from their homes since the American invasion of 2003 is worsening in nearly every respect.

The report observes the “crisis has steadily increased in size and complexity.” One in eight Iraqis is now internally displaced or a refugee.

Amnesty International notes that the trend of reduction in Iraqi deaths in the second half of 2007 has reversed, with nearly 2,000 Iraqis killed in March and April because of the US-backed Iraqi government’s campaign against the Madhi Army in Basra and Sadr City in Baghdad.

“The wider human rights situation in Iraq remains dire,” the report continues. “People are being killed every month by armed groups, the Multinational Forces, Iraqi security forces, and private military and security guards. Kidnappings, torture, ill-treatment and arbitrary detentions pervade the daily lives of Iraqis. Violence against women and girls, including rapes and killings in ‘honour crimes,’ is reportedly on the rise.”

The report cites the atrocious living conditions in most of Iraq as an additional factor driving people to flee the country. According to Oxfam, in 2007 70 percent of Iraqis had no access to clean drinking water and 43 percent were living on less than a dollar a day. Child malnutrition has increased from 19 percent in 2003 to 28 percent last year.

About half of Iraqis who have fled their homes remain in other parts of Iraq because of the increasing restrictions on leaving the country. Denial of access to refuge abroad is at least in part due to the actions of the Iraqi government, which—along with its American masters—has a vested interest in reducing the number of people fleeing the country.

The report, for example, notes that one factor in the Syrian government’s decision to introduce stricter visa requirements for Iraqis crossing the boarder was “the request of the Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.”

Earlier this month the senior US coordinator for Iraqi refugee issues, Ambassador James Foley, encouraged the Iraqi government to step up its efforts to repatriate Iraqis, although he admitted that the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that 70 percent of those returning to Iraq were unable to resettle in their own homes. Foley said, “It’s fairly clear the government was not prepared to provide returnees with housing, with essential services.”

Amnesty’s report makes the case that no place in Iraq can be considered safe, including the northern region controlled by the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). Political tensions between Kurds and Arabs exist, and there are repeated Turkish incursions in the Kurdish-controlled areas. Many internal refugees from central and southern Iraq are putting a strain on the resources of the KRG.

The bulk of Iraqi refugees have fled to Syria. Although no official census has been taken, some estimates place the figure at 1.5 million.

Protection for Iraqi refugees in Syria is precarious. Some manage to obtain temporary visas and others register with UNHCR.

The majority, however, has no official status and is subject to deportation back to Iraq at any time. In particular, Iraqis who have been arrested, or even simply accused of minor crimes, are subject to expulsion. These include misdemeanors necessary for survival, such as possession of forged documents or illegal entry to Syria.

Most Iraqis in Syria have been there since 2006, and what funds they brought with them are now vanishing. Increasing numbers are dependent on food aid. A 20-percent increase in the price of food since late 2007 in Syria, as well as a decrease in government food subsidies, has increased need.

As Iraqi families in Syria fall further and further into poverty, child labor has been on the rise. The report estimates that only 43,794 of 200,000 school-age refugee children were enrolled in school in 2007. While many of them are denied places by the school authorities because of overcrowding, or cannot attend because of long commutes or difficulties with the curriculum, more and more children are working to help support their families.

Iraqi refugees in Syria have access to the public health system, but the system itself cannot meet their needs. Iraq families are often required to make a financial contribution for treatment that they cannot afford. In addition, Iraqis in Syria suffer from a much higher incidence of trauma because of their experiences in Iraq and have complex psychological needs that go untreated.

Five hundred thousand Iraqi refugees reside in Jordan (8 percent of the population). Here, if anything, the situation is even worse than in Syria. Access to Jordan is also highly restricted. The report observes that young men in particular are turned back at the border. In May the Jordanian government instituted new visa requirements, forcing Iraqis to apply for visas before they travel to Jordan.

Most Iraqis in Jordan have no legal status. Iraqis with no residence permit must pay US\$761 for every year that they are without official status. Further, Iraqis are not permitted to work. As in Syria, Iraqis in Jordan are becoming poorer every week. Some work illegally, the report says, “where they are reported to be vulnerable to low pay, exploitation, and arbitrary dismissals.” Rents are also on the rise, and Iraqi families are now sharing apartments and, in many cases, rooms with others.

As in Syria, education of children is a problem because of child labor and because Iraqi children are required to have their school documents from Iraq with them.

Emergency medical care for refugees has been restricted recently, and Iraqis with serious medical conditions in Jordan have no or limited access to treatment. Iraqis have access to private clinics, but for the vast majority the cost of these clinics makes treatment there impossible.

The report says that 77 percent of the 50,000 Iraqis in Lebanon are there illegally, although the government has recently announced a plan to regularize their status. To achieve legal status, a refugee is now required to pay a fee of the equivalent of about US\$630 and a sponsor willing to put up an equivalent of US\$1,000 guarantee. Most Iraqis in Lebanon are

living in poverty. About 40 percent of Iraqi children “aged between six and 17 did not enroll in school because of the high tuition fees and the need to work.”

The report makes a special note about the myth of voluntary returns to Iraq from all countries. The widespread American and Iraqi government propaganda that the situation in Iraq is “normalizing” has led to a spate of reports after late 2007 of refugees returning to Iraq. State television has broadcast calls for refugees in the region to come back. For those who do return, the reality has been devastating

For example, the report notes, “Two highly publicized officially organized return convoys from Syria took place in November 2007, one from Aleppo and the other from Damascus. Despite an attempt to make the convoys a flagship initiative, symbolizing a recovered Iraq to which Iraqis could make voluntary, safe and sustainable returns, the reality was very much the opposite. Many of the individuals who returned found dreadful conditions. Of the 30 families who returned and were interviewed by one of UNHCR’s partners in Iraq, only a third could go back to their original homes, while two thirds became internally displaced. Some of the returnees found their property looted, occupied or destroyed. In addition, the return incentive of around US\$1,000 promised by the Iraqi government has yet to be received by the returnees, according to reports.”

It does seem clear that some refugees are retuning to Iraq, but to call this repatriation voluntary is deceptive. The report observes that the main reason for return appears to be poverty or other hardship. For example, “Information gathered about people the respondents knew who had returned showed that most had cited their inability to afford to live in Syria as the reason they had gone back to Iraq (56 per cent). Only 16 per cent had returned because they had heard that the security situation had improved. Of those, however, 59 percent wanted to leave Iraq again and return to Syria. Some 47 per cent of these could not return because they lacked the money (31 per cent) or did not have a visa (64 per cent).”

If the bourgeois governments of Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon have treated Iraqi refugees with disdain, they have, at least, admitted them in larger numbers and allowed them to stay for at least some length of time.

The same cannot be said of the wealthiest countries near Iraq. Saudi Arabia, for example, is building a wall, “complete with sensors and night vision,” along its border with Iraq to prevent refugees from entering the country. According to a recent report by UNHCR, neighboring Kuwait has accepted about 45,000 Iraqi refugees, “most of whom entered on three-month visit visas and then overstayed.” Kuwait does not recognize the right to asylum.

The conduct of Europe and the United States is even more hostile to the basic human rights of Iraqi refugees.

The report observes, “Some countries outside the region that *do* have the means to support the relatively few Iraqi refugees who have crossed into their territory have adopted policies that appear intended to make rejected asylum-seekers destitute and so encourage their ‘voluntary’ return.”

Amnesty International singles out the United Kingdom, the junior partner in the invasion and devastation of Iraq, as particularly egregious in this regard. When an asylum seeker’s appeal has been rejected, no second application is allowed and the seeker must leave the country within 21 days. Some Iraqis who have gone through this process have simply returned to Iraq.

Other European nations have curtailed the numbers of Iraqi refugees that they will admit. Since 2003 Germany has withdrawn refugee status from Iraqis protected from the regime of Saddam Hussein. “In 2007,” the report states, “5,780 new revocation procedures for Iraqi refugees were introduced. Many resulted in revocation of protection status.”

Deportations of Iraqis from Europe are now at a record high. In the UK, at the end of 2007, there had been an increase of 105 percent over the previous year.

The report points out that the United States has resettled only 753 Iraqis

between 2003 and 2006. The government pledged to take in 25,000 more refugees after 2007, but this has not been honored, and the total number of Iraqis resettled in the US is 1,608. Amnesty International believes that a newly announced target of resettling 12,000 Iraqi refugees by September 2008 is also unlikely to be met.

The primary reason for this has been US anti-terrorism laws. As the report states: “Resettlement cases headed for the USA and Australia are suffering serious delays due to the rigorous security checks to which Iraqis are being subjected in several countries. This is hindering the ability of resettlement to provide a fast and effective response to the dire situation of the most vulnerable refugees.”

The report makes a special plea for the Palestinians who have left Iraq because of violence and attacks on them due to their presumed favored status under the Baathist regime. Thousands live in dangerous and squalid camps along the Iraq-Syrian border.

Referring to one such camp, the Amnesty International report states, “Al-Waleed camp is in the Iraqi desert approximately 200m inside the Iraqi passport control. The unbearable conditions include extreme temperatures, the presence of snakes and scorpions, and serious protection issues such as the reported presence of armed non-residents entering the camp. One aid worker who has visited the camp described it as ‘hell.’”

In a related report issued last week, the United Nations Committee on Human Rights documented an increase in the number of global refugees and internally displaced persons to 67 million in 2007, up 2.5 million from a year before. About half of these have fled their homes because of natural disasters (or the inability of states to deal with disasters), and the remainder because of armed conflict. Iraq and Somalia saw some of the largest changes between 2006 and 2007 in the numbers of internally displaced persons.

Both of these countries are of considerable geo-strategic importance to American imperialism and have been the focus of recent American military action. It is noteworthy also that Colombia, which has between 2 million and 4 million internally displaced persons—by far the highest number of people in the Western Hemisphere—is a major recipient of US aid in dollars and military equipment.

The full Amnesty International report is available here.



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