



The Plight of Extremely Vulnerable Iraqi Refugees

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Thank you for holding this briefing and bringing attention to such an important topic. I appreciate being invited me to serve on this panel and having the opportunity to discuss the plight of Iraqi Christians and other extremely vulnerable Iraqi Refugees.

The International Rescue Committee was founded in 1933 and 2009 will be our 75th anniversary. Since World War II, the agency has responded to virtually every major refugee crisis the world has seen. Today the IRC is an internationally recognized relief and development agency operating in 25 countries to aid people and communities affected by war, civil conflict or oppression. In the United States, the resettlement network that I manage helps thousands of newly arrived refugees rebuild their lives annually.

As you know, my organization is well placed to address the issue of people fleeing Iraq in that we have operations inside Iraq and Jordan and we resettle Iraqi refugees in the United States. I also serve as the Chairman of the Refugee Council USA, a coalition of 19 US nongovernmental organizations involved in resettlement and protection of refugees, asylees, and asylum seekers.

I would like to use this opportunity to discuss the needs of and challenges for the Iraqi Christians with whom we work but also address the full range of highly vulnerable Iraqis in Iraq and the region, and underscore the importance of helping them wherever they may be -- in Iraq, in countries hosting refugees and here in the United States.

Introduction to the Crisis

First, it may be useful to outline the dimensions of the overall crisis. There are over two million Iraqis displaced inside Iraq and another one-to-two million or more refugees who have fled to neighboring countries. Most are in Syria or Jordan but some have fled to Turkey, Egypt and Lebanon.

I realize that saying the number of refugees is one-to-two million is using a rather large range. You should know that it is difficult to pinpoint with precision the number of refugees. In part, this is because many have overstayed their visas in the countries to which they have fled, and live in fear of discovery or forced return to Iraq. They are hidden in cities and survive on remittances from family or handouts from neighbors. They may keep the children inside and away from prying eyes – or they are forced to send the children out to work and support the family. Either way, most are afraid of being sent back to Iraq.

In mid-February, I accompanied the IRC Commission on Iraqi Refugees to Syria and Jordan. I commend to you the report of the Commission that provides much more information about the humanitarian crisis than I can provide in this briefing.

This Commission of eminent IRC board members, overseers and an important donor met with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and other senior officials from the governments of Syria, Jordan, Iraq and the United States. We also met with representatives of the United Nations. Most importantly, we met with Iraqi families, including religious minorities.

For example, one family in Amman was Mandeans. Mandeans, also called Sabians, are monotheists who follow the teachings of John the Baptist. The family was headed by a widow whose husband had been murdered. One of her daughters had been sexually assaulted. Now the widow, two or three of her married children and several grandchildren were living in a small 3-room apartment. The widow has severe health problems and no way to pay for health care – she depends on charity. This family does not want to go back to Iraq, the scene of so much sadness in their lives.

As this story illustrates, it is important to remember there are several other vulnerable groups are deserving of our care and attention. These include women at risk, children and adolescents, survivors of violence and torture, the “orphaned” elderly, and refugees with urgent medical needs.

Why, For Some, Resettlement is the answer

We must face the fact that a large number of Iraqis cannot return safely to Iraq under any circumstances. These refugees do not plan to repatriate and may equate return with death. In the trips I have taken to the region, I have repeatedly met refugees who had loved ones decide to go back to Iraq and then were never heard from again.

Some of the governments that are now sheltering this large influx of refugees have opened their schools to Iraqi children and have registered relief agencies to provide services to Iraqis. Nonetheless, refugees may also feel vulnerable in their current country of refuge because they may have overstayed visas, or fear

that the authorities will find a pretext to send them back to Iraq, or simply fear their neighbors.

Resettlement in San Diego

In the United States, the IRC is one of several agencies that work as partners with the US government in resettling refugees from abroad. Right now we are very active in helping Iraqi refugees.

Iraqis IRC's San Diego office, for example, has resettled 192 refugees from Iraq so far this year. Of these, 180 were Iraqi Christians. (The rest have arrived from around the globe, including Somalia, Ethiopia, Burma and Afghanistan.) IRC-San Diego expects to receive about 670 refugees this year, and over half – 350 refugees – will probably be Iraqis. While IRC has resettled the most in the city, Catholic Charities, the Alliance for African Assistance (an affiliate of ECDC – the Ethiopian Community Development Council, Inc.) and Jewish Family Services (an affiliate of HIAS) have also resettled Iraqis in the San Diego area this year.

Many are arriving from refuge in Turkey, but numbers have recently picked up of Iraqi refugees arriving from Syria and Jordan. A few come from Egypt and one family has arrived in San Diego from Lebanon.

San Diego is a population center for Chaldeans. It is the second largest Chaldean community in the United States after the Detroit area. Chaldean refugees first started being resettled in the San Diego area in the mid-1980s. Most of the community has settled in the El Cajon neighborhood, near their large and thriving church. The population in San Diego now totals between 10-to-20,000 people. The Bishop of the Chaldean church in California guides a community of 60,000 who reside mainly in three counties: San Diego, Orange, and Imperial Counties.

Our national director in San Diego, Bob Montgomery, has seen a marked increase in the level of activity in the past year among community members approaching IRC and applying to bring family members to the United States. He has had several coordination meetings with Chaldean leaders, both from the local community and from the Detroit area.

There are several advantages to resettling Iraqis in the San Diego area. First, many refugees arrive with family in the area and these relatives can help new arrivals find housing and jobs and get acclimated. Second, Chaldeans who resettle with or without close relatives in San Diego may be helped by members of the Church. Third, even for those who are not Chaldean or Christian, the El Cajon neighborhood now has a Middle Eastern atmosphere that can be familiar to new arrivals, and thus comforting and easier to navigate. After the first Gulf War, very small numbers of Shi'a refugees from Iraq arrived from the Rafa Camp

in Saudi Arabia and also came to live in El Cajon. More recent arrivals of Iraqi Muslims have also expressed a preference for living in El Cajon.

Chaldeans have a tradition of being businesspeople. This has facilitated their integration into American life and many refugees have successfully found work in small businesses. One former refugee now owns gas stations and a towing service. Refugees who have become successful businesspeople serve as role models in the community and can also help new arrivals to find work.

In terms of challenges, one challenge common to all refugee groups is the need to manage expectations. Refugees often arrive having lost everything. It is very difficult to begin life again with so little. Iraqi refugees often have led middle class lives in Iraq, and yet must start over in a very different economic situation. They may have to adjust to the type of housing and jobs that are available to new arrivals.

These feelings may be exacerbated for arrivals who have worked with US personnel in Iraq and have made sacrifices for the war effort. They may have hoped for some kind of reward for their services. Others have unrealistic expectations of what kind of services may be provided in the United States. One refugee came to San Diego suffering from terminal bone cancer and expecting a cure; instead he found out that his case was terminal.

Perhaps the most vulnerable are older refugees who arrive without family. After an initial eight months, adult refugees are expected to hold jobs and support themselves and their families. Once a refugee turns 65, he or she is eligible for SSI (Supplemental Security Income) benefits. But if a refugee is in his/her late 50s or early 60s, perhaps in poor health, and not traveling with family, he/she will have to struggle to find work, support himself and live independently. There are also long waiting lists for low-income housing. In their own culture, these people might have lived with and been supported by extended families. IRC San Diego has resettled several refugees fitting this description and we are using privately-raised funds to help them while they seek SSI disability benefits.

What IRC is doing to help the vulnerable in Iraq, Jordan, Syria

Resettlement is the best option for vulnerable Iraqis who will never go home. We realize, though, that the best option for many of the Iraqis who have fled is someday to be able to return to their homes in a peaceful and prosperous Iraq.

To aid displaced Iraqis in the Middle East, the IRC opened a regional office in Amman, Jordan in March 2007.

To date, the IRC has dedicated \$4 million to projects that reach approximately 100,000 vulnerable individuals and our programs are expanding. Operating in cooperation with both international and local partners, the IRC currently has

programs in Jordan and Iraq. We are also providing experts to help the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) in Syria, thus helping UNHCR reach the world's largest group of Iraqi refugees.

In Jordan, the IRC is working with three international implementing partners, including CARE, the Near East Foundation, and Questscope, and focusing in East Amman, Irbid and Zarqa, the cities where most Iraqi refugees are living. Through our partners, IRC helps 15 community-based organizations that reach out to Iraqis deliver immediate support to highly vulnerable Iraqi families with much-needed cash and material assistance as well as programs to address the stress and trauma afflicting this community. They also help develop the organizational and technical capacity of the community-based partners.

Additional projects focus on educating children and youth who do not attend school -- Iraqi and Jordanian males, ages 10-18, and females, ages 14-24. This includes school dropouts and working children, as well as children with a range of special needs.

We also are operating in Iraq. IRC had extensive programs in northern, central and southern Iraq from spring 2003 until early 2005, when the deteriorating security situation forced us to close these programs.

We re-opened our Erbil office in northern Iraq in November 2007. Here we have partnered with two organizations: the Iraqi Youth League and the Improvement & Relief Organization (founded by a former IRC Iraqi staff member). Projects are intentionally designed to reach Shi'a, Sunni and Kurdish communities.

Also in Erbil, IRC is constructing six additional classrooms in an elementary and secondary school that hosts 1,100 displaced Arab children and over 400 Kurdish children.

In central Iraq, the IRC now works to improve the quality of life for 8,000 vulnerable families (approximately 64,000 people) in the municipalities of Tarmiya (Baghdad) and Dujail (Northern Baghdad). Key components include two community centers providing what we call psychosocial services, as well as community-based peace building and social cohesion enhancing activities.

In southern Iraq, in the city of Najaf, an emergency assistance winter distribution program includes the disbursement of blankets and mattresses to 6,000 internally displaced Iraqis.

Additionally, IRC is helping to strengthen the NGO Coordinating Committee for Iraq (NCCI) and its efforts to coordinate international and local NGOs. NCCI helps to organize Iraqi NGOs, prepares policy papers, advocates on behalf of the vulnerable, and disseminates information to the broader humanitarian community

including the UN and donors. IRC was a founding member of NCCI in Baghdad in 2003.

Conclusion: The Urgent Need for US Action to Help Refugees

For many years, the US Government has been the world's best supporter of refugees, but has failed to live up to that proud tradition in this case.

While a flood of Iraqis have fled their country, the number of Iraqis resettled in the United States has been a trickle. US Government officials have pledged to resettle 12,000 Iraqis in the United States this year, but we believe that something other than normal procedures should be used to respond to this crisis and that the President should announce a major government-wide effort to bring in many, many more this year and in the next few years.

Senator Kennedy spearheaded legislation to help the Iraqis that was made law in the 2008 Defense Authorization Act. This legislation increases the number of Iraqis who can come to America using special immigrant visas and put an emphasis on higher refugee admissions and help to vulnerable groups. The Administration needs to move quickly to implement the provisions of the Kennedy legislation.

We also hope Congress will provide more funding to help address the humanitarian crisis in Iraq in a fiscal year 2008 supplemental appropriations bill. For the past several years, the costs of the war in Iraq have been covered by mid-year supplemental bills. It is fitting that this vehicle be used to help those Iraqis who are displaced within their own country, the refugees who have fled, and the countries who are providing shelter to the refugees.

Finally, I also ask you not to forget the other humanitarian crises around the world, and the people who have fled these crises. In a time of budget constraints, we – governments, relief organizations, the media, the public -- sometimes choose to help select populations, while leaving others to fend for themselves.

The International Rescue Committee exists to bring the vulnerable from harm to home – whether that home is in a country of origin, or is a new home in the United States. We greatly appreciate your help in carrying out this mission.