



## **IRC Commission on Iraqi Refugees: Statement of the Commissioners**

A major humanitarian crisis, largely hidden and ignored, is engulfing Syria and Jordan.

Iraqis of different religions, ethnicities, and backgrounds have been fleeing death, kidnapping, and protracted violence. Because they are not huddled in camps these refugees do not get the attention and help they deserve from the U.S. and the international community. Many have been severely traumatized and lead desperate lives in Damascus and Amman. Compounding the problem, some reporting has perpetuated myths that they are wealthy or more recently that the crisis is abating and they are beginning to return to their homes in Iraq.

Neither the U.S. nor the rest of the world is paying sufficient heed: external help provided by regional countries and major international donors has been half-hearted and woefully insufficient.

In February, we traveled to Jordan and Syria to examine the refugee situation. With some 1.6 million refugees now present within their combined borders, these two countries have shouldered most of the refugee burden despite the domestic political resentments of doing so. We met with senior officials from the governments of Jordan, Syria, Iraq and the United States, with UN representatives, and with many refugees themselves in Jordan and Syria.

We came away sobered and depressed by the plight of the refugees and with the urgent need to prevent the situation from deteriorating further. They have been severely traumatized; many families have had members kidnapped, tortured, and/or murdered. Large numbers suffer from fear, anxiety, and deep depression. We also witnessed the practical problems they face: dwindling savings, an inability to afford housing or heat, limited availability of healthcare and few or no legal ways to earn money. While access to education has improved in both Syria and Jordan, many Iraqi families still keep their children away from schools to send them to work. Many also fear that because of their uncertain and precarious legal status sending their children to school will lead to the entire family being discovered and detained or deported. Women and children are expected to earn money, thus risking exploitation and sexual abuse. The ever-present fear of detention and deportation forces many of them to live hidden from society. Worse, many feel they have no future, and that their lives and those of their children are hopeless.

Many Iraqi refugees are educated and were leading middle class lives in Iraq. The chasm between where they were and where they are now is deep and wide. There are only three alternatives they can pursue: return, remain, or resettle. In fact, none of these is a good option. It is still too dangerous for many to go back, they cannot afford to remain as they become increasingly destitute, and yet only a very few will be resettled in other countries.

While the International Rescue Committee is a global organization, our commission is composed exclusively of Americans because we believe the United States has a special responsibility to Iraqi refugees, indeed if only to help restore its credibility. The violence they flee is an unplanned-for byproduct of the American invasion of Iraq, and its chaotic aftermath. Thousands of Iraqis are in danger because they worked for Americans – U.S. officials, the U.S. military, journalists, contractors and aid agencies. Many refugees need the type of aid that the United States has been a leader in giving. While American aid to Iraqi refugees has recently increased, the United States has paradoxically done far less than usual in response to this humanitarian crisis, not more.

These refugees also look to wealthy countries in Europe and the Middle East for help. Only a couple of European countries, notably Sweden and Denmark, have provided real help quickly. The Swedish Government has admitted a large number of asylum seekers into Sweden; the Danish Government issued visas to all former employees and their families in Iraq and relocated them to Denmark. Middle Eastern countries have provided almost no aid to their fellow Arabs, nor has Iraq helped its own citizens struggling abroad.

Some countries maintain that this problem is an American responsibility and that there are far fewer refugees than have been reported. Either response does nothing to help the dire refugee situation. We agree that Americans must lead in providing aid, but the scale of this humanitarian emergency requires a concerted international response. We also need to recognize that the duration of this refugee crisis is indeterminate, requiring a significant multi-year international commitment.

The piece-meal, business-as-usual approach to refugee assistance will not work. It is clear to us that the major governments and international agencies involved in the crisis must come together and take a comprehensive look at ways to help Iraqis refugees as well as Jordan and Syria. It is both a humanitarian and political imperative.

In our report we make several recommendations, but a single first step could lead to better consideration of all the rest: we call for a high-level conference of regional countries and interested donors, chaired by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, to examine the plight of Iraqi refugees, to pledge to help them in a systematic, coordinated manner, and to consider action that would facilitate the safe, voluntary return of many. This conference would build on previous efforts led by UN High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres. But this conference should include government ministers who can grapple with some of the diplomatic and political aspects of the crisis, not just the humanitarian ones.

Through our experiences on the ground, we have concluded that the world has simply not received (or internalized) the message that the conditions these refugees find themselves in are deplorable and declining and that the crisis will, in all probability, endure for an uncertain number of years. Their situation is worse than we have been led to believe and help is needed on an urgent and sustained basis.

We suggest three major facets of that international response:

**AID:** Displaced Iraqis need more aid for at least the next 2-4 years and aid delivery needs to be more effective and efficient. The U.S. has the principal responsibility, but this burden should not be borne solely by the U.S. . European countries and the Gulf States also must contribute.

**RETURN:** The best solution for most of the refugees is safe, voluntary return to their homes in Iraq. That is necessary for Iraq's future. The international community must work somehow more cooperatively to help create conditions in Iraq that will allow for the eventual return of many refugees and displaced people to their homes.

**RESETTLEMENT:** A sizable population of Iraqis will not return under any circumstances for sectarian reasons or because they are too traumatized or based on their belief that their lives are at risk for assisting coalition forces and companies. Their plight calls for the international community to resettle more in third countries. Again, the U.S. must lead.

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