

- The Iraqi Refugee Crisis -

Slide One: Iraqi Refugee Crisis

There are currently over 5 million displaced Iraqis: about half are refugees in Syria and Jordan, as well as other neighboring countries, while the other half are internally displaced. Before we explore the refugee crisis in further detail, let's look at what caused it.

Slide Two: Cause of Crisis

Before the most recent US invasion, Iraq had been under sanctions since the end of the first Gulf War in 1991. The country was devastated – in economic and humanitarian terms – first by the Gulf War, then by the sanctions, then by the current war. The U.S. invaded Iraq on March 19, 2003. 21 days into the war, Saddam Hussein's regime fell.

In May of 2003, Former President Bush remarked that the "mission was accomplished."

However, almost 6 years later:

- Over 5 million Iraqis are displaced
- Anywhere from 100,000 to 1 million are dead
- The relative stability in the country is due to ethnic segregation

Slide Three: Impacts of US War and Occupation

As for the actual number of deaths due to the war, no one has an accurate figure. Regardless, the war has created an environment in which some hundreds of thousands have been killed. The most recent estimate is that about 1 million Iraqis have been killed. **Why do you think the estimates vary so widely?**

To provide a bit of perspective: A group of gravediggers working in just ONE graveyard buried 40-50 people DAILY for a year and a half. That's 21,000 to 27,000 in ONE graveyard for a mere quarter of the 6 years of war thus far.

Slide Four: Impacts of US War and Occupation

The impact of the war on youth has been immense:

- From 1990 to 2005, infant Mortality rates increased 150%
- In 2005 alone some 122,000 Iraqi Children died before reaching 5.
- In 2009, child malnutrition stands at 22%
- 28% of Iraqi children suffer some degree of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. **What is PTSD?**
This is something that US soldiers are suffering from as well. It affects many people who have experienced war.

Slide Five: Impacts of US War and Occupation

Education is another aspect of life that has been completely changed because of wars in Iraq. From the 1973 Oil Boom until the 1991 Gulf War, Iraq had one of the best educational systems in the developing world, with literacy rates among the highest in the Arab world. Until 1991, education was mandatory for

all children. Both men and women could attend from elementary to grad school FOR FREE. However, as a result of the first Gulf War, the sanctions and the current war and occupation, there has been a devastating impact on school systems and class attendance.

The severe poverty that Iraqis now face has been driving Iraq's boys and young men into the militias out of desperation. This is because the militias buy the youth and their family's loyalty by providing needed medicine, food, and other necessities.

Other Iraqi youngsters have been swept up by the U.S. military and sent to prisons, usually without charge, as one way of preventing them from joining militias. In 2008, Fox News reported that the U.S. military is holding 500 juveniles suspected of being "unlawful enemy combatants" in detention centers in Iraq.

In short, the war has taken away their education, striped them down to poverty and given them few options: militias or jail.

Slide Six: Psychological Impacts

According to the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) offices in Amman, Jordan which conducted an interview with the registered Iraqis:

- 80% reported being witness to a shooting
- 68% reported interrogation or harassment (with threats to life) by militias
- 77% reported being affected by shelling/rocket attacks
- 72% reported being witness to car bombing
- 23% of Iraqis in Baghdad have had a family member kidnapped
- 75% have had a family member or someone close to them murdered
- 80,000 Iraqis need artificial limbs

Slide Seven: Iraqi Displacement

The displacement of Iraqis is the largest refugee crisis in the world.

The Vice President of the International Rescue Committee explains, "Because they are not huddled together in a camp or traveling as a group across a windswept plain, these refugees are not receiving the attention and help they deserve from the international community. Much of the reporting about them has been wrong, perpetuating myths that they are wealthy or that the crisis is over and that many are returning to their homes in Iraq...many of the refugees have been severely traumatized and now lead desperate lives in foreign cities such as Damascus, Amman, Cairo, and Beirut."

Despite the supposed success of the surge, forced migration from Iraq continues to occur. **What was the surge? What are some reasons why people have said "the surge worked"?**

Slide Eight: Over 5 Million Iraqis Displaced

The current displacement figure is estimated at 5.4 million. To put it in perspective, this is almost twice the size of the Chicago population! At its peak, there were over 3,000 Iraqis displaced every day, or 83 per hour.

It is thought that approximately 1/3 of the refugees fled generalized violence while 2/3 fled from targeted religious, political, or ethnic persecution, and, in many cases, were forced to leave their property.

Slide Nine: Refugee Statistics

The countries hosting the largest numbers of Iraqi refugees - Syria, Jordan, and so on - are not signatories to the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees. **What does this mean?** The refugees usually reside there illegally or they are there officially only as visitors. Therefore, most cannot obtain work authorization and many refugees lack legal residence rights.

In the past two years, as Iraqi refugees have exhausted their savings, the cost of living in host countries has rapidly risen. This is causing upper and middle class people to descend into poverty. Meanwhile, their children are allowed only limited access to health care and education.

Slide Ten: Inside Iraqi

Of those still in Iraq, an estimated 8 million civilians need urgent assistance, 4 million have food insecurity, and 2.7 million are internally displaced, meaning they are still living in Iraq, but not in their own homes or communities. Over 60% of the internally displaced are from Baghdad.

Slide Eleven: Iraqi Refugees in Jordan

Jordan has taken in around 500,000 Iraqi refugees. As a result, Jordan has received international funding for the education of Iraqi students. However, only a small percentage of Iraqi children actually go to school, because their families cannot afford to transport them to school, because many of the children must work illegally to help support the family, and because families feel afraid in their new environments and so they keep their children close.

Slide Twelve: Iraqi Refugees in Jordan

Refugees have no legal status in Jordan, and it costs up to \$100,000 U.S. dollars to gain a residency pass!

Jordan is condemned for recognizing Iraqis simply as visitors and thus not extending the same rights received by other refugees. A recent report states, "The majority of Iraqi refugees in Jordan overstayed their visas and live in fear of deportation. In an effort to remain invisible, they largely confine themselves to the crowded and decaying apartments where they have settled in the poorest urban neighborhoods. They are becoming increasingly impoverished, as they are unable to work legally, are running out of savings and can't afford the high cost of living. Jordan has little means to accommodate the newcomers, especially when it comes to health and education services, so the Iraqis are increasingly

dependent on humanitarian assistance. They face a precarious and uncertain future--having no legal status in Jordan, unable to return home anytime soon amid ongoing violence, and with little chance of resettlement elsewhere.”

Slide Thirteen: Iraqi Refugees in Syria

Syria is another country that has taken in Iraqi refugees. They have accommodated roughly 1.5 million of them, but 55% of the Iraqi men in Syria are unemployed and over 1/3 of the Iraqi families there do not even have a man in the household. This leaves them particularly vulnerable. **Why?**

Syria is considered a “rogue nation.” **What does that mean?** Therefore, there is little international help offered to help Syria accommodate the Iraqi refugees living there.

Slide Fourteen: Women and Children

Women and Children make up the largest percentage of displaced Iraqis, and they are the most vulnerable to the deteriorating conditions, particularly as they are forbidden to work in their communities without work visas and often face social scrutiny if they do. Thousands of women have turned to prostitution as an economic means to survival.

Slide Fifteen: Iraqi Refugees in the United States

From 2003 until 2007, fewer than 800 Iraqi refugees were admitted into the US. Critics argued that the United States is morally obligated to assist many more, particularly those who worked for American agencies or contractors that placed them in danger. **Why do they think we are morally obligated?**

Slide Sixteen: Iraqi Allies at Risk

Some youngsters agree to carry guns and to man checkpoints for the U.S. military.

Because some Iraqis were hopeful that the US invasion and overthrow of Saddam’s regime would bring about a positive change for their country, several thousand, perhaps tens of thousands, of them allied with the U.S. Coalition in some manner.

It is estimated that 122,000 Iraqis and their families assisted the U.S. These Iraqis have been branded as traitors by many and have received death threats. Therefore, it is especially pressing that they be resettled in the U.S. as soon as possible. Yet, considering they represent at most 5% of total refugee population this is only a start.

The U.S. has now increased the number of Iraqi refugees allowed to resettle in the U.S. In 2008, 12,000 were resettled here, and it has been said that the goal is to admit a minimum of 17,000 in 2009. **Does that sound like enough to you?** This still pales in comparison to the 500,000 admitted by Jordan and 1.5 million admitted by Syria, two countries with far fewer resources than the U.S.

Slide Seventeen: Rebuilding: What Will It Cost Iraq?

Nobel Prize winning Economist, Joseph Stiglitz estimates that the Iraq and Afghanistan wars combined will end up costing the U.S. \$3 trillion! Yet, we must also ask what the cost of the wars will be to the citizens of the countries where the wars are being waged.

In the US, it is generally accepted that the troop surge was successful and everything is better in Iraq, so the refugees can return now, right? Wrong.

- Many say the situation will eventually become worse as the most violent neighborhoods, especially around Baghdad, have seen a surge in ethnic cleansing.
- Any chance of returning to Iraq entails navigating drastic new realities that are potentially less hospitable than before they left. This is due to the blast walls that the US military has erected around ethnic lines in Baghdad.
- Returnees often find their homes occupied by squatters
- There are discrepancies arising over titles to houses and apartments
- Navigating the new Iraqi government bureaucracy is difficult
- The standard of living in places like Syria and Jordan are still better than returning, as Iraq lacks basic utilities and services including electricity, sewage, and sanitation.
- Due to death and displacement, thousands of households are living without breadwinners.

Slide Eighteen: What Will It Take to Rebuild Iraq?

There are many challenges facing the rebuilding of Iraq. It is estimated that 40% of Iraq's professional class has fled Iraq including doctors, nurses, teachers, engineers, etc. Salaries have dropped significantly starting with the first Gulf War and continuing today. 300,000 of the displaced are school aged children, and more and more children under 12 have left school in order to earn a living. Additionally, many parents are still too frightened to send their children to school since many children, teachers, and education personnel have been kidnapped, attacked, or killed. **What does it mean for the future if the children are not receiving an education?** This means that the future of Iraq will see even fewer educated professionals - a vital part of building a strong country. The term "brain drain" is often used to describe this situation.

Slide Nineteen: The Way Forward?

Since the Iraq War especially, the U.S. has not enjoyed the same good global reputation as it used to. One way we can help restore our good reputation is by addressing this Iraqi Refugee Crisis, taking responsibility for the huge part we played in causing it.

Before 9/11 and the ensuing stricter security measures, the U.S. accepted 100,000-120,000 refugees per year and some say we currently have the capacity to absorb up to 200,000. Former Presidents have brought in large amounts of refugees who were displaced by wars we were involved in, and this is something that needs to happen again.

Slide Twenty: The Way Forward?

The Director of the International Rescue Committee recommends the following:

- Displaced Iraqis need more aid for at least the next 2 to 4 years, and aid delivery needs to be more effective. 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.
- The best solution for most of the refugees is safe, voluntary return to their homes in Iraq. That is necessary for Iraq's future.
- A sizable population of Iraqis will not return under any circumstances because they are too traumatized or believe 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.

Slide Twenty-one: The Way Forward?

The President of the United States is the only person with the authority to accelerate the bureaucracy of refugee resettlement and, more importantly, to do away with it altogether in times of crisis.

Barack Obama's Plan states, "Barack Obama and Joe Biden believe that America has both a moral obligation and a responsibility for security that demands we confront Iraq's humanitarian crisis -- more than five million Iraqis are refugees or are displaced inside their own country. Obama and Biden will form an international working group to address this crisis. They will provide at least \$2 billion to expand services to Iraqi refugees in neighboring countries, and ensure that Iraqis inside their own country can find sanctuary."

That's what our leaders plan to do, but what can an American high school student do? What can you do?

Slide Twenty-two: What Can You Do?

Here are some important actions that YOU can take:

1. **Be aware of the situation.** Check in for the latest news at alternative news sources such as DemocracyNow.org, CommonDreams.org, AlterNet.org, and DirectAidIraq.org.
2. **Tell others what you have learned.** Share it with your friends, family, teachers, and community members. Only when the majority of people are aware of the issue and feel the responsibility that we have to the Iraqi people can we pressure our leaders to make it a priority.
3. **Become a fan of Direct Aid Iraq on Facebook and join its corresponding group.** Encourage your Facebook friends to do the same to help spread awareness of the issue.

4. **Extend the hand of friendship.** Iraqi refugees are often the target of hatred because they, too, need a share of the limited resources of the communities they are resettling in. Chances are, the Iraqi population will grow in Chicago and they will need neighbors who understand where they are coming from and are willing to help them out.

5. **Donate unneeded items from around your house.** Iraqi refugees have little to their names and need basic necessities like food, clothing, and household items. Check with the local resettlement agencies like Heartland Alliance, Interfaith Refugee Services, and Catholic Charities to see what they need.