

# Iraqi Refugee and IDP Assessment Summary Report

American Friends Service Committee

January 2008

Iraq has suffered through three wars in the last 20 years. The attack by the United States in 2003 and the removal of the Iraqi government has led to five years of intense chaos and violence, ethnic and communal cleansing, and terrible suffering. An estimated two million refugees are in neighboring countries, primarily Syria and Jordan, and more than an additional two million are internally displaced within Iraq. The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) was involved in Iraq during the sanction period between the 1991 Persian Gulf War and the present war and only pulled out in 2005 when conditions became too dangerous for expatriates to live in Iraq. AFSC has invested deeply in advocacy in the United States against the war and in education about the costs of the war. Because of the massive refugee and internally displaced persons (IDP) problem and the desire to have the advocacy and educational program grounded in work with Iraqis in the Middle East, AFSC appointed this assessment mission to study the situation and to make recommendations about how AFSC could serve the refugees and IDPs.

## Terms of Reference

The terms of reference given to the assessment team included:

1. Identify potential partners to implement a humanitarian assistance program and assess their capacity.
2. Identify a priority list of programs that AFSC can and should support.
3. Analyze the political realities among and surrounding the refugees.
4. Collect first hand testimony and pictures to serve for education and fundraising.

## Assessment Process

The six person team assembled in Amman, Jordan, and began working on November 8, 2007. A total of eight days were spent in Jordan and four days in Syria including travel days from Amman to Damascus and return. In Jordan, the team interviewed several UN agencies, international NGOs, Jordanian national NGOs, and Iraqi refugees—both elites and common persons.

In Syria interviews were conducted with UN agencies, local charities, and Iraqi refugees. International NGOs have not yet been able to register and work in

Syria, although the government has selected eight to work in cooperation with the Syrian Red Crescent Society.

In Jordan we interviewed several Iraqi NGOs as well as UN agencies and INGOs that work with IDPs within Iraq. A list of the agencies and persons interviewed is in Appendix I.

In addition to collecting information on the needs of refugees in Jordan and Syria and the services being provided them, the team sought to understand the political and economic contexts, particularly the policies and regulations of the governments of Jordan and Syria that affect the refugees. We also sought to understand the political and conflict situation in Iraq, and met with several sets of Iraqis leaders about a current AFSC peace-building effort.

## Findings

### Number of Iraqis in Jordan & Syria

The problem of refugees in Jordan and Syria is a massive one that is causing a significant burden on the economies and societies of both countries. There is considerable uncertainty as to the actual numbers of refugees in both countries, but whatever the precise number it is large as a percentage of the population of each country. While some estimates of the number of refugees in Jordan range as high as 750,000, several knowledgeable people said that the number may be more like 350-400,000. A study commissioned by the Jordanian government and conducted by the Norwegian Research Institute Fafo was released after the team departed from Amman. This study concluded that Iraqi refugees in Jordan number between 450,000 and 500,000. The number is critical to the Jordanian government because the level of international assistance is calculated according to the estimated refugee population.

In Syria, the number of refugees is thought to fall between one and one and a half million although one source estimated two million. Several people said that refugees have been returning to Iraq from Syria and that some neighborhoods that had housed refugees are now empty. The real reasons for returning are unclear. Some believe that the improvement of the security situation in Iraq led to repatriations. Others blame the strict policies of host governments preventing refugees from working for their livelihood and the depletion of savings for forcing refugees to return to Iraq in order to feed their families.

### Legal status of Iraqi refugees in host countries (Jordan & Syria)

Neither Jordan nor Syria is a signatory of the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees which guarantees refugees certain minimal rights. Neither government refers to the Iraqis in their country as “refugees,” but rather as “guests.” Syria has been

more flexible in accommodating Iraqis than Jordan, which probably accounts in part for the larger number of refugees in Syria.

Both countries—but especially Jordan—are concerned that the Iraqi refugees not become a permanent, long term presence like the Palestinian refugees who for years have outnumbered Jordanian citizens. From the beginning, Jordan has required Iraqis to secure visas that need to be renewed from outside Jordan, and many refugees have overstayed their visas and are illegally in Jordan. This causes fear of being deported, and many are afraid to venture out of the house in which they live. Syria did not require Iraqis to have visas for entry until recently. The change in the policy of Syria likely reflects a view that the large number of refugees is a real burden—prices of basic needs have increased 40-60 percent--and Syria is not prepared to host 1.5 million refugees for 10-20 years.

### **The resettlement status of Iraqis in Jordan & Syria**

The number of Iraqis who have been resettled as refugees is quite small. There are no exact figures of how many refugees were resettled in third countries after fleeing to Jordan or Syria. However, an estimated number of less than 7,000 recognized Iraqi refugees have been resettled from Jordan in the four years since the collapse of Saddam's regime. The number is much less in the case of resettlements of refugees from Syria since resettlement countries have limited access to interview refugees in Syria. However, International Organization for Migration (IOM), which processes refugees for the United States and some other countries, has greatly expanded its staff to enable quicker processing. Also, an agreement between the governments of Syria and the United States to allow American officials to process refugees within Syria was recently reached.

### **The psycho-social status of Iraqis in host countries**

Many of the refugee families that we interviewed, especially those in Syria, report terrible experiences of violence, with family members kidnapped and or killed. Most refugees left Iraq because of the violence, after family members or friends had been killed, or after receiving direct threats. The amount of trauma they have experienced is vast, and there is a great need for trauma healing work.

We observed a blend of fear, anger, and hopelessness as well as resilience that enables survival. Most do not expect the situation in Iraq to stabilize for five to ten years, and most with whom we talked want to resettle in third countries. This is an unrealistic dream, given the low numbers of refugees from the Middle East most countries are willing to accept.

### **Health situation in the host countries (Jordan & Syria)**

Iraqi refugees in Jordan and Syria receive free child vaccinations, and they have access to health facilities in both countries but in Jordan have to pay a higher

price than Jordanian citizens. Iraqis living in Syria seem to be in a better situation in regard to low cost of health treatments since they are treated as Syrian citizens. However, many medications are not available in Syrian pharmaceutical stores due to economic sanctions imposed by a few western states. On the other hand, medications and health treatments are available and accessible in Jordan but are quite costly for Iraqis since they have to pay a higher price than Jordanians for health services and have limited financial resources due to work restrictions on them. Treatment of chronic diseases like diabetes and cancer is very costly and difficult for Iraqi refugees, but some have left Iraq because of needing treatment they could not find in Iraq.

### **The status of education for Iraqis in host countries (Jordan & Syria)**

Syria has allowed Iraqi children to attend government schools from the beginning, while in Jordan they were not allowed to until a ruling just this past August allowing them to begin attending government schools this current school year. Many Iraqi school children are not attending schools due to lack of financial support by their families. Therefore, they end up skipping schools in order to keep food on the table. In Syria, children who fail to attend school for two years consecutively lose their chance to continue free education in public schools.

### **Financial status of the Iraqi refugees in the host countries**

Neither Jordan nor Syria issues work permits to refugees. Almost all employment is thus illegal and the problem of earning a livelihood was raised by nearly all refugees that were interviewed. Many, particularly those in Jordan, are well-educated and hold university degrees. The primary request of virtually all we met was for recognition as refugees and for the right to work.

The need for assistance will increase the longer the refugees are in Jordan and Syria. Some respondents reported that a good number of the first influx of refugees who went to Jordan were wealthy and invested in property and had large savings on which to live. However, currently many of the Iraqi refugees residing in Jordan are poor, but relatively better off than the Iraqis in Syria. The poorer ones went to Syria where the cost of living is lower, and the government was more welcoming of them. People are exhausting their savings and do not have legal means of earning their livelihood. A larger, more effective and comprehensive program of assistance will be needed as long as the refugees are denied work permits enabling them to earn their livelihood. A repeated problem that was identified was the payment of rent, and the first request was to be given work permits so that they could earn an income. Another ongoing problem identified is the expense of caring for people with chronic diseases like cancer and diabetes.

### **INGOs & UN agencies' involvements in host countries**

By all accounts, the international response to the refugee situation was slow in developing. It was only after a conference in Geneva last April involving UN agencies, INGOs and governments that the effort to serve Iraqi refugees was greatly accelerated. Several agencies, both UN and INGOs, reported significant increases in personnel and in budgets since the April meeting.

In both countries, UNHCR is slowly registering refugees, either issuing them a document recognizing them as refugees and asking that they be protected or registering them as asylum seekers. In Jordan, 50,000 of the estimated 500,000 have been registered, and in Syria 130,000 of 1.5 million. Although neither government formally recognizes Iraqis as refugees nor are the two governments signatory to the 1951 conventions on refugees, there is a mutual understanding and de-facto recognition between the host governments and UNHCR. Both registering the refugees and providing them services is challenging because these are urban refugees living in rented apartments and houses or with friends and relatives and not in camps in which they are isolated. Locating them is not easy, and not all are prepared to come to UNHCR to register, especially if they have overstayed their visa.

Both UN agencies and large INGOs such as CARE International, Save the Children, Caritas, etc. are trying to provide services such as food and non-food items, assistance with education, and medical assistance. The assistance seems sporadic and certainly does not reach nearly everyone who is in need.

Numerous NGO commentators stressed that it is important that programming have some clear benefits for local Jordanian and Syrian citizens as well as for Iraqi refugees. The host countries face severe limitations that include lack of natural resources, water scarcity, inadequate infrastructure, and unemployment problems of their own. Syria also faces restricted trade. The large refugee population strains government services which in both countries have difficulty meeting the needs of their own citizens. Ensuring that programs for refugees have some subsidiary benefit to local citizens is not only a matter of lightening the burden on the governments in question, it is a matter of reducing the resentments that some citizens feel towards refugees who compete for housing and services.

Humanitarian response is in disarray due to the instability of the Iraqi political situation. People in general identify themselves within their community; therefore, there is a great need for community empowerment, education, and development. There are more than ten thousand NGOs in Iraq, but not all of them are functional or legitimate. There are around 200 NGOs created and supported by international NGO and UN agencies.

UNHCR is one of the of the UN agencies that was established in 1950. Its role is to protect, find durable solutions, and provide living in dignity to refugees all over the world. UNHCR provides several services to refugees, as follows:

- Intercede with local government on behalf of refugees and asylum seekers to protect them from deportation, but it cannot guarantee to stop deportation if the authorities decide on expulsion.
- Provide consultation to refugees in their residing country.
- Search for durable solutions for refugees through the possibilities of local integration, repatriation to home country, or resettlement to third country.

It is worth mentioning that registration by refugees with the UNHCR does not mean an automatic submission to resettlement countries. Registration means that UNHCR recognizes a person as an asylum seeker or refugee depending on the case. Resettlement is considered as one of the solutions and is limited to a small number of cases according to circumstances.

Some UN agencies stressed the need for more logistical support to help WHO carry out its task all over Iraq rather than having inexperienced NGOs importing and distributing medications randomly with limited knowledge of the health situation in Iraq.

Staff of INGOs and UN agencies seemed to agree that a substantial number of Iraqi refugees are moving from Jordan to Syria for cheaper living expenses and more relaxed policy toward refugees. They believe that there is a great need to work in a conflict prevention program between Iraqis and Jordanian children in Jordan to avoid tension in the foreseeable future.

Some NGOs work with traumatized individuals and their family, offer counseling and psychotherapy, and provide shelter for needy women. They also have a major vocational and rehabilitation training program for Iraqi refugees as well as Syrian citizens.

### **Difficulties facing Iraqi IDPs**

The situation of IDPs *inside of* Iraq is even worse. In addition to not being able to work, having to pay rent for living in a different part of the country, and facing limited services from government departments and NGOs, IDPs are also subject to targeted and random bombings and threats. However, while these conditions make it difficult for agencies to work within Iraq, access and security are constraints, not absolute barriers to NGOs working in Iraq. Economic development is important for peace-building because militias pay unemployed youth to join. Work in Iraq could begin with a focus on basic needs and later add conflict transformation and peace-building.

### **Iraqis' opinion toward sectarian violence**

Nearly all Iraqis whom we met insisted that before the US invasion there was no conflict between the different sects and ethnic groups. They pointed out widespread intermarriage among Sunnis and Shia and noted that violence

between these groups started after the invasion due to decisions and actions of outsiders. Many believe the conflict is political, not sectarian, and that its source is hunger for positions, power and resources. Their longing to have a workable political framework is intense, and the need for emphasis on tolerance and inclusion in order to build peace is widely recognized. That said, numerous people commented about how little experience Iraqis have in the practicalities of finding consensus. In the old regime, order came from above and people learned to survive simply by saying yes. Several Iraqis commented that there is a lot of talk among Iraqis about peace, but everyone expects it on their own terms.

## Recommendations

### Specific recommendations in order of priority:

1. Many of the Iraqi refugees and IDPs have experienced extreme trauma as a result of the years of war involving a foreign occupying power as well as violence between sects and ethnic cleansing. Many witnessed the killing of their loved ones, kidnapping of friends and relatives, and rape of family members. There is a large need for trauma healing and only limited resources in Jordan and Syria. We recommend that AFSC develop partnerships with several effective local NGOs to support their work in trauma healing.
2. The prisons in Iraq are considered breeding grounds for extremists where detainees suffer a great deal of trauma. We recommend AFSC explore supporting advocacy, peace-building and trauma healing with detainees and ex-detainees, for reintegrating them into society is essential to the stabilizing of Iraq. It should be recognized, however, that the security situation in Iraq, especially in Baghdad, and restrictions on the movement of ex-prisoners and detainees could make it difficult for them to attend workshops and visit rehabilitation centers inside Iraq.
3. Because of the extreme violence in the Iraq conflict, there are many people needing orthopedic rehabilitation through prostheses and physical therapy. Several NGOs are doing excellent work manufacturing and fitting prostheses in its own workshop and clinic. Assisting them would help heal the wounds of war and build on a strong AFSC heritage of work in this field.
4. The AFSC Middle East regional office has been exploring with different Iraqi leaders a process of reconciliation and peacebuilding involving a series of workshop and a major conference. This effort should be continued. If Iraq begins to stabilize, ways should be sought to support peacebuilding in Iraqi society.
5. Making a daily living was the primary concern that we heard from Iraqi refugees. The team recommends making available some funds for small loans to entrepreneurs, particularly women, in the informal economic

- sector in Jordan. The team met with an Iraqi-Jordanian woman who is conducting vocational training courses and could be very helpful to AFSC.
6. Differences between religious communities and religious sects contribute to the tension and conflict in Iraq. The team recommends that AFSC support interfaith dialogue programs and try to identify both Islamic and Christian organizations as partners.

### **Recommendations for longer term and larger work after achieving registration in Syria.**

1. The large number of Iraqi refugees of school age in Syria is putting a strain on the educational system. Syria has allowed even the earliest Iraqi refugee children to attend public schools. While schools are operating with two sessions per day, classrooms are overcrowded and teachers are stressed. There is a need to add classrooms to public schools. The team recommends that when possible, AFSC assist in providing more classrooms and schools. This will benefit both Iraqi and Syrian school children and parallels the excellent work in education that AFSC is doing in Afghanistan.
2. There is a need for environmental health, particularly garbage collection and sanitation, in communities heavily occupied by Iraqi refugees in Syria. AFSC could work directly with WHO Syria to provide garbage collection services.

## **A Final Comment**

The team was impressed in conversations with Iraqis with the importance they placed on opposition of Americans to the war. When we talked about strategies for peacebuilding in Iraq, we saw that we were given high credibility because of the several year campaign of AFSC against the war. In short, we experienced in this visit the essential unity of peace work and advocacy work and we think the AFSC constituency would benefit from hearing of this experience. Additionally, we are aware that International Program and domestic US staff are in conversation about ways to more closely integrate planning and communication between them. We think that Iraq presents an unusual opportunity for integrating international and domestic programs and strategies and hope that special attention will be paid to this.