

**FAILED RESPONSIBILITY: IRAQI REFUGEES IN SYRIA,  
JORDAN AND LEBANON**

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## **FAILED RESPONSIBILITY: IRAQI REFUGEES IN SYRIA, JORDAN AND LEBANON**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

A refugee crisis was feared before the coalition invasion of Iraq in 2003, but it came later than anticipated, and on a greater scale. It started not because of the military action, but two years later, when American efforts to rebuild the country faltered, violence escalated, and civilians became the targets of insurgent groups and sectarian militias. And while exact numbers are uncertain, the scale of the problem is not in dispute: today, Iraq's refugee crisis – with some two and a half million outside the country and the same number internally displaced – ranks as the world's second in terms of numbers, preceded only by Afghanistan and ahead of Sudan. While the security situation in Iraq shows progress, the refugee crisis will endure for some time and could worsen if that progress proves fleeting.

In managing the problem of the refugee wave that has washed over Jordan, Syria and (to a far lesser extent) Lebanon, and severely strained these resource-poor states, the international community and the Iraq government have failed in their responsibilities. The refugees have confronted distressing conditions, as savings dwindled, and hosts toughened policies. Host countries must provide adequate services and protection. But donor countries and Iraq bear the greater responsibility, to assist both the refugees and the host countries.

Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis became displaced since 2005, with a significant spike after the Samarra shrine bombing in February 2006. Up to five million Iraqis – nearly one in five – are believed to have deserted their homes in a bid to find safety and security. About half took refuge as internally displaced persons (IDPs), either in the Kurdistan region, which has remained peaceful, or in any other place within the country that was relatively sheltered from violence. The other half – those who could afford both the journey and upfront costs – fled as refugees to neighbouring countries, especially Jordan and Syria.

While initially welcoming of their Iraqi brethren, Syria and Jordan soon began placing tough restrictions on refugee entry. Moreover, by either design or

default, they provided few basic services and opportunities for employment, adequate health care or children's education. Despite some overt signs of refugee opulence, notably in Amman – stirring envy and resentment among the local population – the result has been growing pauperisation of Iraqis, whose savings are being depleted, while alternative sources of income, whether from local employment or family remittances, are likely to dry up. With little to lose and nothing to look forward to, refugees could become radicalised and more violent; crime, which already has reached worrying levels in host countries, could rise. The principal host countries, whose socio-economic capacities are being stretched, will bear an increasingly costly burden; this, in turn, could exacerbate tensions between host and refugee populations.

If Jordan, Syria and Lebanon can be faulted for unfriendly treatment of refugees at border crossings and lukewarm assistance once they have entered, they should, nonetheless, be credited for having agreed to receive so many Iraqis in the first place and allowing them to stay at great cost to their own societies. By contrast, it is difficult to give the Iraqi government any credit at all. Flush with oil money, it has been conspicuously ungenerous toward its citizens stranded abroad. No doubt there are senior former regime figures among the refugees, but this does not excuse callous neglect of overwhelmingly non-political people who loyally served Iraq rather than any particular regime.

The approach of the international community, especially states that have participated in Iraq's occupation, has been equally troubling. Western nations have been happy to let host countries cope with the refugee challenge, less than generous in their financial support, and outright resistant to the notion of resettlement in their midst. Although it has contributed more than most, the U.S., whose policies unleashed the chaos that spawned the outflow, has clearly failed in its own responsibilities: downplaying the issue, providing far less assistance to host countries than needed and admitting to its own shores merely a trickle of refugees

and only after unprecedented security checks to which asylum seekers from other nations are not subjected.

Recent improvements in Iraq's security situation could lead some to lower their interest in the refugee question on the assumption that massive returns are imminent. This would be wrong. Even under today's circumstances, returning can be extremely perilous: safety remains uncertain, public services inadequate, and many houses have been seized by others, destroyed or are located in neighbourhoods or villages now dominated by militias of a different sect. There is no indication that large numbers of refugees have returned because of a positive reassessment of security conditions. Far more than improved conditions at home, it is unbearable conditions in exile that appear to have been the determining factor in most returns.

It would be reckless to encourage Iraqis to return before genuine and sustained improvement takes place. For the vast majority of refugees, returning home is the only viable solution, but that will not happen soon. In the meantime, the international community – especially countries that bear responsibility for the war and the post-war chaos – has an obligation to do more both to assist refugees in host countries and to welcome additional Iraqis on their own soil.

This is a humanitarian tragedy, but it is more than that. Rich in oil, Iraq today is bankrupt in terms of human resources. It will take decades to recover and rebuild. Because most refugees come from what used to be the (largely secular) middle class, their flight has further impoverished Iraq and potentially deprived it of its professional stratum for a decade or more. The period of exile should be used to teach refugees new skills to facilitate their eventual social reintegration and contribution. There is every reason to assist host countries in that endeavour.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **To the Iraqi Government:**

1. Assume its responsibilities toward citizens turned refugees by assisting them through direct or indirect (via UN mechanisms or host countries) financial support; cooperation with UN agencies providing food and health assistance; and aid to host countries and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in providing school uniforms and basic school materials.
2. Increase dramatically its pledged support to neighbouring host countries, including by reallocating funds from past budget surpluses.

3. Design a mechanism to support refugees willing to return by:
  - (a) ensuring that Iraqi embassies provide up-to-date and objective security assessments on specific areas, along with advice as to whether conditions are favourable for return;
  - (b) establishing local committees to which returning refugees can turn for state support and arbitration (on issues such as property claims or employment); and
  - (c) dedicating a portion of positions within the state administration to refugees willing to return and advertising these through Iraqi embassies.
4. Refrain from encouraging large-scale return before security conditions permit and the afore-mentioned mechanism is functioning.
5. Allow and facilitate refugee participation in provincial council elections.
6. Allow and facilitate the transfer of funds derived from pensions and other allowances accruing to (former) state employees residing abroad.
7. Monetise the Public Distribution System, facilitating access to resultant entitlements within Iraq and to Iraqis abroad in cooperation with UNHCR and the World Food Programme (WFP).

### **To the U.S. Government:**

8. Assume its responsibilities toward Iraqi citizens turned refugees as a result of the conflict by:
  - (a) disconnecting the refugee issue from other political considerations and making financial support to refugees in Syria consistent with the level of support extended to those in Jordan;
  - (b) exerting pressure on and providing assistance to the Iraqi government to assume its responsibilities as described above;
  - (c) stepping up the resettlement of Iraqis interviewed successfully by the Department of Homeland Security, starting with those found especially vulnerable under UNHCR criteria and those who worked for the U.S. military or companies, such as translators;
  - (d) removing security checks and requirements for Iraqi asylum seekers that exceed existing standard procedures and making available more and better functioning U.S. contact offices to process asylum claims throughout Iraq, where possible; and

- (e) initiating cooperation programs with host countries regarding civil service training, scholarships and exchange agreements with foreign universities.

**To Other Members of the International Community, including the European Union (EU) and wealthy Arab States:**

- 9. Offer financial support to host countries and UNHCR, make such assistance transparent and monitor program implementation, express readiness to accept resettlement of significant numbers of Iraqis found by UNHCR to be especially vulnerable, refrain from returning refugees to unsafe areas in Iraq and conform repatriation advice to that issued by UNHCR.

**To the Syrian, Jordanian and Lebanese Governments:**

- 10. End forcible deportations and announce that Iraqis not found guilty of criminal offences other than visa irregularities will not be forcefully repatriated.
- 11. Assume a more tolerant attitude toward Iraqis entering the job market, including those seeking white-collar jobs.
- 12. Take steps to prevent exploitation of women and children, particularly involving prostitution.
- 13. Enhance efforts to ensure that Iraqi children attend school by:
  - (a) making clear and repeated statements that this is a state priority;
  - (b) initiating an information campaign on refugees' rights to, and opportunities for, education and medical care;
  - (c) operating dedicated places for Iraqis to access relevant information and from where local authorities manage the registration and transport of children attending school outside the areas where the existing educational infrastructure is most congested; and
  - (d) refraining from any measure ending parental residency during the summer break.
- 14. Expand health-care services to Iraqis, especially the most vulnerable and the chronically ill.

**To the Syrian Government:**

- 15. Design a refugee policy consistent with the need to protect and offer legal status to the most vulnerable and threatened by:
  - (a) creating a specific category of Iraqis eligible for a visa based on an assessment of the threats to which they are exposed and setting up adequate structures at its Baghdad embassy and border points to examine such cases, at a minimum delivering visas of restricted validity pending further checks; and
  - (b) legalising the status of those already in Syria and genuinely threatened in Iraq.
- 16. Facilitate access and accelerate procedures for international NGOs with proven expertise working either on local capacity building or turn-key projects in coordination with the local Red Crescent Society.

**To the Jordanian Government:**

- 17. Legalise the status of Iraqi refugees already in Jordan who are genuinely threatened in Iraq.
- 18. Institute proper screening procedures at the borders for Iraqi asylum seekers, regardless of their confessional background, and protect their right to due process.
- 19. Allow Iraqis to establish charity organisations, especially organisations that serve fellow Iraqis, perhaps modelled on the Lebanese experience.

**To UNHCR, WFP, the UN Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI) and International Organization for Migration (IOM):**

- 20. Earmark UN Trust Fund for Iraq monies to UNHCR for aid to Iraqi refugees.
- 21. Facilitate the monetisation of Iraq's Public Distribution System, providing Iraqis with ATM cards or, when not feasible, establishing cash-disbursement offices in Iraq and abroad.
- 22. Provide up-to-date security assessments to Iraqis abroad on specific areas in Iraq, along with advice as to whether conditions favour return.

**Amman/Baghdad/Beirut/Damascus/Brussels,  
10 July 2008**

## FAILED RESPONSIBILITY: IRAQI REFUGEES IN SYRIA, JORDAN AND LEBANON

### I. INTRODUCTION

Up to five million Iraqis – nearly one in five – are believed to have deserted their homes in a bid to find safety and security away from the violence that continues to engulf vast areas of their country.<sup>1</sup> Among them, approximately half have become “internally displaced persons” (IDPs),<sup>2</sup> individuals who have relocated within Iraq, joining relatives in somewhat more stable regions or settling in makeshift accommodations such as deserted government buildings and improvised camps.<sup>3</sup> The other half have left Iraq altogether, finding temporary safety as refugees but also, quite often, socio-economic hardship in neighbouring

countries.<sup>4</sup> Today, according to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), Iraq’s IDP and refugee crisis ranks as the world’s second in terms of numbers, preceded by Afghanistan but ahead of Sudan.<sup>5</sup>

In the run-up to the 2003 war, international humanitarian organisations and outside observers warned of the likelihood of massive refugee movements. Their timing was wrong – the outflow occurred far later than anticipated. Still, their prediction was correct and their forecast, if anything, somewhat optimistic. The outpouring of refugees took place not as a direct result of the U.S. invasion but rather some years into the occupation, especially after the February 2006 bombings of the al-Askari shrine in Samarra, which triggered a sectarian civil war. It has since exceeded most analysts’ original estimate.<sup>6</sup>

The magnitude of the IDP and refugee crisis reflects continued failure to restore the requisite security for large numbers of Iraqis to return. Of course, not all IDPs or refugees were targets of violence. Some have committed gross human rights violations; others migrated essentially for economic or business reasons. That said, as countless tragic stories attest, a clear majority fled as a consequence of a conflict in which they have no stake but of which they were made victims due to their ethnic or religious identity, employment by U.S. or other foreign forces or personal wealth.

In the second half of 2007, violence subsided significantly, a result, inter alia, of the U.S. surge, Sunni

<sup>1</sup>“Statistics on Displaced Iraqis around the World, Global Overview”, UNHCR, September 2007, at [www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/openssl.pdf?tbl=SUBSITES&id=470387fc2](http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/openssl.pdf?tbl=SUBSITES&id=470387fc2).

<sup>2</sup>In April 2008, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimated there were approximately 2.7 million IDPs: 1.2 million before the February 2006 Samarra bombing and 1,504,000 since. “IOM Emergency Needs Assessment: Post February 2006 Displacement in Iraq”, 15 April 2008. A UN official confirmed those statistics, adding that of the 1.2 million pre-February 2006 IDPs, 190,000 became displaced between April 2003 and February 2006; the remainder already had been displaced by the time of the 2003 Iraq war, mostly inside the Kurdistan region and in the southern marshlands. Crisis Group telephone interview, UN official, Amman, 4 May 2008.

<sup>3</sup>The number of IDPs continues to climb, but reported increases could be due not only to actual additions but also to more efficient registration. For example, an IDP report of March 2008 states: “The large difference between the current and last estimation (as of 31 December 2007) of total IDPs in the country (around 300,000 individuals more) is mostly due to improved entry of previously registered IDPs in the Central MoDM database for Baghdad and Ninewa as well as to some new displacement”. “Internally Displaced Persons in Iraq”, IDP Working Group, update, 24 March 2008. A UN official echoed this: “IDP figures have gone up [since October 2007], but primarily as a result of better registration. Higher numbers do not necessarily imply fresh displacements, although there have also been new displacements”. Crisis Group telephone interview, UN official, Amman, 30 April 2008.

<sup>4</sup>In an undated report, the UNHCR estimated that four million Iraqis remained displaced from their homes: “some 2.2 million” IDPs and “up to 2 million” refugees. See “2008 Iraq Situation Supplementary Appeal”, UNHCR.

<sup>5</sup>The figures are vigorously debated and cannot be confirmed. That said, there is little doubt that the refugee crisis ranks as one of the most serious in terms of numbers and humanitarian consequences.

<sup>6</sup>A confidential 10 December 2002 UN memo predicted the invasion would cause 900,000 IDPs and 1.45 million refugees. At the time, UNHCR prepared for the possibility that 600,000 people would flee Iraq. See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°12, *War in Iraq: Managing Humanitarian Relief*, 27 March 2003, p. 3.

Arab reaction against al-Qaeda in Iraq and Muqtada al-Sadr's unilateral ceasefire.<sup>7</sup> This welcome development has been accompanied by the return of some refugees, albeit not necessarily to their original homes; in other words, some returned only to become IDPs. Likewise, the rate of internal displacement has decreased – partly as a result of Iraq's governorates closing their own borders – and limited numbers of IDPs also are known to have returned to their original homes.

However, this remains far from a sustained trend toward normalisation. As yet, there is no indication that large numbers of refugees have returned based on a positive reassessment of security conditions.<sup>8</sup> Among returnees, unbearable conditions in exile appear to have weighed as much as, if not more than, improved conditions at home. Under present circumstances, returning can be perilous in more ways than one: security remains uncertain and public services inadequate, while houses have been seized by others, destroyed or are located in neighbourhoods or villages now dominated by militias of a different sect. Moreover, potential returnees fear they could be barred from going back to their present safe haven if and when conditions deteriorate once more; indeed, host countries that earlier welcomed refugees have since sealed their borders. In light of the above, it would be reckless in the extreme to encourage Iraqis to return before genuine and sustained improvement takes place.

In short, the refugee crisis is likely to endure and could worsen. This presents daunting challenges. Refugees' savings risk running out, and alternative sources of income, whether from local employment or family remittances, could dry up. With little to lose and nothing to look forward to, refugees could become radicalised and more violent; crime levels, which already have reached worrying levels in countries such as Syria, could rise. The principal host countries, whose socio-economic capacities already are being stretched, will face an increasingly costly burden; this, in turn, could exacerbate tensions between host and refugee populations.

More ominously, host-countries' overstretched capacities combined with inadequate responses from the U.S. and the wider international community mean Iraqis likely will be denied refuge in neighbouring countries

if the violence soars. Until now, Syria and to a lesser extent Jordan have assumed the role of a buffer, absorbing much of the outbound flux. This posture ought not be taken for granted; nor should it be assumed that conditions in Iraq will not dramatically worsen. One should consider, therefore, what might have occurred had the Syrian and Jordanian borders been closed at the height of the sectarian conflict and what could happen if violence again escalates. The most likely future options would be massive refugee camps in the desert along the border or a supersized IDP crisis.

Although the refugees' immediate suffering should be a priority concern, longer-term considerations also deserve attention. The refugee issue is part of the broader picture of how to invest in and replenish Iraq's human resources, which have been depleted by years of sanctions, warfare and post-war mismanagement. Many refugees belonged to Iraq's middle class and fled precisely because they were non-sectarian and unaffiliated with any militia, therefore lacking the necessary protection. Indeed, much of the qualified middle class now lives in exile and is stuck in professional stagnation; its children attend school in alarmingly small numbers. Rather than being helped to prepare for their return, both parents and youth are ignored and left to waste. Yet, they remain an indispensable resource for Iraq, whose educational system has been eviscerated and where blanket de-Baathification removed entire layers of experienced managers.

Rich in oil, Iraq today is bankrupt in human resources and requires decades to recover and rebuild. The period of exile should be used to teach refugees new skills to facilitate their eventual social reintegration. There is every reason to assist host countries in that endeavour.

This report focuses on Iraqi refugees and the reception they have received in their host countries. It does not deal with the IDP issue, which, while created by the same push factor of sectarian war, has given rise to a distinct set of problems that the Iraqi government alone can and will need to address.

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<sup>7</sup>See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°72, *Iraq's Civil War, the Sadrists and the Surge*, 7 February 2008; Crisis Group Middle East Report N°74, *Iraq after the Surge I: The New Sunni Landscape*, 30 April 2008; Crisis Group Middle East Report N°75, *Iraq after the Surge II: The Need for a New Political Strategy*, 30 April 2008.

<sup>8</sup>"Internally Displaced Persons in Iraq", op. cit.

## II. A DURABLE CRISIS

### A. ASSESSING THE NUMBERS

Estimates of refugee numbers vary widely.<sup>9</sup> Among major host countries, Syria is said to have welcomed around 1.5 million<sup>10</sup> although some Western observers believe the number to be much lower. Similar discrepancies exist concerning Jordan, where the government uses a much higher figure for planning and operational purposes than an independent research institute arrived at.<sup>11</sup> According to UNHCR, between 20,000 and 50,000 Iraqis live in Lebanon;<sup>12</sup> Lebanese authorities claim there are 60,000 to 100,000.<sup>13</sup> Some

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<sup>9</sup>Two points should be noted. First, the term “refugee” is used somewhat loosely since, technically, a person qualifies as a refugee only if determined by UNHCR to have a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion. In addition, all these figures include the roughly 500,000 Iraqis who fled their country prior to 2003 – people fleeing Saddam Hussein’s regime; individuals migrating for work or business-related questions; spouses of non-Iraqi Arab nationals; and others. In Iran, for instance, the vast majority of arrivals pre-date the U.S. invasion. See “Humanitarian Needs of Persons Displaced within Iraq and across the Country’s Borders: An International Response”, UNHCR, 30 March 2007. According to a Jordanian official, “The Iraqis didn’t just come after 2003. The real start was in 1991 [during and after the Gulf War]. Then Operation Desert Fox [a 1998 operation in which U.S. forces bombed targets suspected of concealing weapons of mass destruction] caused a second wave of Iraqis to come to Jordan”. Crisis Group interview, Amman, 18 October 2007. In Syria, too, the number of Iraqis increased throughout the 1990s, rising to what were then unprecedented levels in 2001, when the country reopened its borders with Iraq. Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, Damascus, 27 October 2007.

<sup>10</sup>UNHCR and Syrian government sources consistently put the figure at this level, but the basis of calculation remains unclear. Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, December 2007.

<sup>11</sup>“Iraqis in Jordan: Their Number and Characteristics”, FAFO, UN Population Fund and Government of Jordan, November 2007, at [www.fafo.no/ais/middeast/jordan/IJ.pdf](http://www.fafo.no/ais/middeast/jordan/IJ.pdf). Crisis Group interview, humanitarian official, Amman, October 2007. Crisis Group email communication, Jordanian foreign ministry official, 9 May 2008. For a discussion of the discrepancy, see further below

<sup>12</sup>Crisis Group interview, UNHCR official, Beirut, October 2007; see also [www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/opendoc.pdf?tbl=SUBSITES&id=470387fc2](http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/opendoc.pdf?tbl=SUBSITES&id=470387fc2).

<sup>13</sup>Crisis Group interviews, Lebanese officials, Beirut, 10, 22 October 2007.

70,000 Iraqis reportedly live in Egypt<sup>14</sup> and roughly 57,000 in Iran.<sup>15</sup>

The uncertainty and wide variations have several explanations.<sup>16</sup> Some refugees are hesitant to come forward, fearful of host governments’ reactions and uncomfortable with the term’s negative connotation, preferring to describe themselves as “temporary visitors” who can care for themselves and their families.<sup>17</sup> For their part, host countries and international organisations lack the institutional capacity to keep track of arrivals and departures. In Syria, Jordan and Lebanon, immigration authorities may have precise numbers of Iraqis entering through land crossings and airports but for a long time failed to synchronise them due to administrative ineptitude and computer systems that are not compatible from one entry point to the next.<sup>18</sup> Human trafficking and illegal migration presents another problem, mainly in Lebanon and, to a lesser degree, Syria.

Different administrative bodies employ different accounting methods, thereby further skewing results; for example, some Jordanian border authorities register only one passport per Iraqi adult, neglecting to include children travelling on the same document.<sup>19</sup> Departures are even less meticulously computed, meaning that at any given time the number of Iraqis living in a host country – together with the number of new arrivals – tends to be inflated.<sup>20</sup> Finally, governments juggle competing interests in making their assessments. While claiming higher refugee numbers

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<sup>14</sup>“Statistics on Displaced Iraqis”, op. cit.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>The FAFO report, op. cit., pp. 7-8, highlighted some of the methodological difficulties in reaching reliable numbers.

<sup>17</sup>Crisis Group interviews, exiled Iraqis, Damascus, Amman and Beirut, September-November 2007.

<sup>18</sup>Crisis Group interviews, Jordanian, Lebanese and Syrian officials, Amman, Beirut and Damascus, October-November 2007. Syria has now developed a computerised and centralised system enabling it to keep a day-to-day count of all entries and departures. Crisis Group interview, senior ministry of interior official who shared up-to-date data, Damascus, April 2008.

<sup>19</sup>Crisis Group interview, Jordanian official, Amman, 18 October 2007.

<sup>20</sup>For instance, until its October 2007 introduction of a visa requirement, Syria required Iraqis to periodically re-enter the country at the Syrian-Iraqi border in order to extend their stay. As a result, Iraqis regularly crossed the border gates, only to immediately re-enter. This artificially boosted the number of entrants.



could lead to more significant outside assistance, it also could fuel greater local disquiet.<sup>21</sup>

Published UNHCR figures – which comprise only “UNHCR registered refugees and asylum seekers” – are much lower than the estimates the agency provides informally. As of March 2008, it had registered only 182,701 Iraqis as refugees or asylum seekers in Syria, 52,758 in Jordan and 10,020 in Lebanon.<sup>22</sup>

Independent research has faced its own hurdles. Syria reportedly rejected foreign proposals to investigate the refugee population and is said to have halted a limited survey of living conditions;<sup>23</sup> instead, it approved a more modest UN Development Programme (UNDP) study of refugee needs, the results of which are yet to be made public.<sup>24</sup> An aid worker involved in assisting Iraqi refugees in Syria said:

The authorities simply don't want outsiders looking into their kitchen. This tendency only worsened as a result of the foreign pressure on Syria on issues including Lebanon, the tribunal looking into the assassination of [former Lebanese prime minister] Hariri and Israel's September 2007 military strike.<sup>25</sup>

Although Jordan asked Norway's Institute for Labour and Social Research (FAFO) to conduct a survey of the number and composition of Iraqis living in the country, controversy erupted when the figure turned out lower than expected. In its executive summary, the FAFO study stated there were “450,000-500,000 Iraqi residents” in Jordan in May 2007. In its chapter, “The number of Iraqis in Jordan”, however, the report stated: “The sample survey conducted by the Norwegian research Institute Fafø in cooperation with the Department of Statistics (DoS) estimated Iraqis at 161,000”. It then concluded:

Given the major discrepancies in figures, the Jordanian government's technical team was tasked with reconciling the various and contradictory estimates of the size of the Iraqi community and has

concluded that the number of Iraqis in Jordan is estimated at 450,000-500,000.

In other words, the Jordanian government came up with the higher figure to which FAFO then agreed, despite its own lower estimate.<sup>26</sup>

Statistical variations and uncertainties aside, the number clearly is huge and represents one of the world's largest conflict-induced displacements of people.<sup>27</sup> The most significant outflow occurred after the February 2006 bombing of the al-Askari shrine in Samarra, which plunged Iraq further into a bloody blend of sectarian conflict, insurgency warfare and criminality. From then on, the number of Iraqis fleeing insecurity, violence and persecution skyrocketed. As of November 2007, over 70 per cent of the Iraqis in Syria had been there for less than a year;<sup>28</sup> in Jordan, 77 per cent of Iraqis arrived between 2003 and 2007, with most coming after 2006.<sup>29</sup>

## B. OVERALL SOCIAL AND HUMANITARIAN CONDITIONS

For the most part, refugees rely chiefly on personal savings and remittances from relatives in Iraq and elsewhere; unable to generate their own income<sup>30</sup> or – as a result of host-country employment restrictions – to work, they face gradually depleting resources. According to a November 2007 survey, some 37 per cent of those living in Syria said their main source of income was their savings,<sup>31</sup> while over 75 per cent received

<sup>21</sup> Crisis Group interviews, aid workers and government officials, Amman, October 2007.

<sup>22</sup> Respectively: “Syria at a Glance”, UNHCR, April 2008; “Jordan Fact Sheet”, UNHCR, April 2008; and “Lebanon Fact Sheet”, UNHCR, 14 March 2008.

<sup>23</sup> Crisis Group interviews, aid officials, Damascus, October-November 2007.

<sup>24</sup> Crisis Group interview, UNHCR official, Damascus, November 2007. Moreover, UNHCR commissioned the French company Ipsos to conduct limited surveys among Iraqi refugees in Syria, some of which are quoted in this report.

<sup>25</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, humanitarian worker, 20 November 2007.

<sup>26</sup> See “Jordanian official objecting to FAFO methodology – FAFO defends its methodological choices”, [www.fafø.no/ais/mideast/jordan/IJ\\_7Q.pdf](http://www.fafø.no/ais/mideast/jordan/IJ_7Q.pdf), p. 8; Crisis Group interviews, Jordanian and foreign aid workers, Amman, October-November 2007. While the original contract was between FAFO and UNHCR, the government intervened and took the UN agency's part.

<sup>27</sup> UN High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres cited in Madona Mokbel, “Refugees in Limbo: The Plight of Iraqis in Bordering States”, *Middle East Report*, no. 244, September 2007.

<sup>28</sup> “IPSOS Second Survey on Iraqi Refugees”, Damascus, November 2007.

<sup>29</sup> “Iraqis in Jordan”, op. cit.

<sup>30</sup> Only 23 per cent of Iraqi households in Jordan can count on investment-generated income, primarily related to real estate, *ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> “IPSOS Survey on Iraqi Refugees, Preliminary Results”, Damascus, November 2007.

support from relatives back home.<sup>32</sup> In Jordan, the FAFO report concluded:

The majority of Iraqis lives on savings or receives transfers; forty two percent receive such transfers from Iraq. This makes a large segment of Iraqis in Jordan at risk of becoming vulnerable with the depletion of savings, or deterioration in the security situation in Iraq that may affect the transfers of funds that support a significant portion of the Iraqi community in Jordan.<sup>33</sup>

Refugees who first rented accommodation in more expensive downtown areas of Amman, Damascus and southern Beirut were forced, as a result of skyrocketing costs fuelled in part by their own demand for housing, to move to more peripheral areas. Significant numbers have ended up in Palestinian refugee camps or slums, including those in and around Damascus (Yarmuk, Falestin, Tabbala, Hajr al-Aswad, A'idin, Qudsaya, Artuz and Jdaida); in the north east area of Amman (al-Zarqa and al-Wehdat); in Beirut (Burj al-Barajneh) and in Sidon (Ain al-Hilweh).

That said, to date, and with only few exceptions, specific refugee camps have not been established, both because of the associated social stigma and because host governments have discouraged it. (The exceptions are the al-Tanf and al-Walid camps that house Palestinian refugees from Iraq at the Iraqi-Syrian border; the Ruweished camp in Jordan's eastern desert, which was shut down in November 2007; and a makeshift camp at the Iraqi/Jordanian border that hosts Iranian-Kurdish refugees). However, as conditions worsen, incomes deplete and larger numbers of Iraqis drive up rent even in poorer neighbourhoods, refugee camps could become a distinct possibility. Should conditions in Iraq deteriorate once more, neighbouring states might erect camps at their borders rather than allow refugees to join their compatriots in-country.<sup>34</sup>

Financial hardships are measured in health, nutritional and educational problems. Refugees have difficulty seeking treatment for chronic medical conditions (which affect roughly 57 per cent of those in Syria and 11 per cent of those in Jordan), including tuberculosis and diabetes. While medical care in Syria is virtually free for citizens and non-citizens, in Jordan it is not and less than 10 per cent of Iraqis there have

health insurance.<sup>35</sup> Lack of resources is one important reason for low school enrolment among refugees in Syria, Jordan and Lebanon.<sup>36</sup> While malnutrition is less prevalent, it appears to be affecting an increasing number of poor refugees in Syria. In February 2008, the World Food Programme (WFP) and UNHCR provided food handouts to 145,000 of the most vulnerable refugees there; that number is expected to increase by tens of thousands during the year.<sup>37</sup>

### C. A SPILLOVER EFFECT?

As refugees entered Iraq's neighbouring countries, some observers worried that they would bring along their homeland's sectarian divisions and violence.<sup>38</sup> So far, such fears have not materialised. Evidence of any spillover effect has been scant, and there are remarkably few incidents of clashes involving refugees in Jordan, Syria or Lebanon, even among those living in confessionally-mixed areas. As discussed below, this partly has to do with host countries' strict policies and tight supervision, but other factors are also at play.

Perhaps most importantly, the Iraq conflict at its core has been less a sectarian struggle than a competition for power and resources waged by parties that manipulate ethnic and confessional identities to promote their ends.<sup>39</sup> Refugees interviewed by Crisis Group expressed near-unanimous weariness of and disgust with the sectarian conflict, along with disappointment at

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<sup>35</sup> "Iraqis in Jordan", op. cit., p. 20.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid; "IPSOS Survey on Iraqi Refugees", op. cit. Although schooling in Syria is free, including for Iraqis, many parents cannot afford the cost of transport and supplies (uniform and writing materials).

<sup>37</sup> "UNHCR takes part in mass aid distribution in Syria", Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), 12 February 2008.

<sup>38</sup> See, eg, Daniel L. Byman and Kenneth M. Pollack, "Iraqi Refugees: Carriers of Conflict", *Atlantic Monthly*, November 2006, and "The Mideast Domino Theory: What's Next?", *The Washington Post*, 23 August 2006; "The Iraq Study Group Report", Iraq Study Group led by James Baker and Lee Hamilton, 2006, recommendations 65 and 66; Elizabeth Ferris, "Security, Displacement and Iraq: A Deadly Combination", The Brookings Institution, 27 August 2007; Rhoda Margesson, Jeremy M. Sharp, Andorra Bruno, "Iraqi Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons: A Deepening Humanitarian Crisis?", Congressional Research Service Report for Congress, 3 October 2007, p. 8; and Mokbel, "Refugees in Limbo", op. cit.

<sup>39</sup> See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°52, *The Next Iraqi War? Sectarianism and Civil Conflict*, 27 February 2006.

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<sup>32</sup> "Rapid Emergency Needs Assessment for the Iraqi Displaced in Syria", Syrian Arab Red Crescent Society, Damascus, March 2007.

<sup>33</sup> "Iraqis in Jordan", op. cit., pp. 3-4.

<sup>34</sup> Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian workers, Damascus, Beirut and Amman, October-November 2007.

Iraqi parties and leaders of all stripes.<sup>40</sup> An Iraqi historian in Amman said:

I have met Shiites, Kurds, Sunnis, whatever – and I am a Sunni [Arab]. People tell me that the Sunnis have done this or that, and then they invite me for coffee. Of course, they talk about Sunni-Shiite problems; of course they rant in front of you. But that is all that they do. It's their way of making sense of their lives and of their past. But have you heard of anyone being killed for sectarian reasons in Amman? Have you heard of people mobilising against other communities?<sup>41</sup>

It also is the case that, in numerous instances, refugees have settled in areas where their particular sectarian group predominates. Sayyida Zaynab, a suburb in south eastern Damascus that hosts a Shiite shrine, draws many Shiites; by contrast, Jaramana and Sahnaya in western Damascus have a strong percentage of Sunnis; and Christians along with other minorities have shown a preference for the Damascus neighbourhoods of Jaramana, Saidnaya, Masakin Barza and Kashkoul. In Lebanon, Shiites tend to settle in Beirut's southern suburbs, Christians in the Metn and Sunnis in Tripoli, Jounieh and the Shouf.<sup>42</sup> In Jordan, the overwhelming majority of Iraqis are Sunni.

This pattern is due above all to practical considerations, as newly arriving refugees seeking accommodation in an unfamiliar environment rely on family and tribal-based connections.<sup>43</sup> Traumatized by violence in their home country, several told Crisis Group that they avoided contact with other Iraqi families, particularly if they belonged to a different sectarian group. This observation was echoed by local humanitarian workers, who have sought in vain to create stronger community bonds among refugees in order to facilitate aid delivery.<sup>44</sup>

The demographic composition of Iraq's refugees provides another possible explanation for the lack of a spillover effect. With the notable exception of those who fled to Lebanon, women, under-age children and

the elderly – ie, those less likely to engage in strife – are disproportionately represented; there also are large numbers of middle-class professionals (academics, doctors and members of the intelligentsia), who appear less prone to sectarian radicalisation and by and large have been victims rather than perpetrators of violence at home.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, one of the characteristics of Iraq's civil war has been the extent to which the better educated have been targeted by militia leaders from all confessional groups – including their own – for financial reasons, out of spite or in order to stifle any potential challenge to their political supremacy.<sup>46</sup> Ironically – and tragically – large segments of the middle class in which so many hopes were invested at the dawn of the occupation now reside abroad.

This does not mean there is no reason to worry. Analysts and experts have noted correlations between, on the one hand, radicalisation and violence among refugee populations and, on the other, socio-demographic factors, most of all poverty as well as the presence of young, unemployed males.<sup>47</sup> In this regard, increased

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<sup>40</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Iraqi refugees, Amman, Damascus and Beirut, October-November 2007.

<sup>41</sup> Crisis Group interview, Iraqi historian, Amman, 13 October 2007.

<sup>42</sup> Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian workers and Iraqi refugees, Beirut, October-November 2007. See also "Iraqi Population Survey in Lebanon", Danish Refugee Council, Beirut, November 2007, pp. 27, 49-50.

<sup>43</sup> Crisis Group interview, Faleh Abd al-Jabar, Iraqi Institute for Strategic Studies, Beirut, 10 October 2007.

<sup>44</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Iraqi refugees and foreign aid workers, Beirut and Amman, October-November 2007.

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<sup>45</sup> Iraqis in Lebanon are mainly young single males; 60 per cent are 29 or younger, 68 per cent of males are single. See Danish Refugee Council, *op. cit.*, pp. 31, 58. Only 8.6 per cent of Iraqis in Lebanon have a university degree, *ibid.*, table A3.2, p. 93. As of November 2006, Jordan barred the entry of single Iraqi men between the ages of seventeen and 35. "Backgrounder: Jordan", Human Rights Watch, April 2007. Since 2003, 40 per cent of Iraq's "professional class" reportedly has left the country; this includes over 3,000 university lecturers. Ashraf al-Khalidi, Sophia Hoffmann and Victor Tanner, "Iraqi Refugees in the Syrian Arab Republic: A Field-Based Snapshot", The Brookings Institution, June 2007. Approximately 50 per cent of Iraq's 34,000 registered physicians also are said to have fled since that year. "Rising to the Humanitarian Challenge in Iraq", Oxfam and NGOs Coordination Committee in Iraq, July 2007, p. 12. According to one survey, 31 per cent of the refugee population in Syria holds a university degree. "IPSOS Survey on Iraqi Refugees", *op. cit.* Almost half of all Iraqi adults living in Jordan have at least a bachelor's degree or equivalent. "Iraqis in Jordan", *op. cit.* That said, populations in Jordan and Syria also include large numbers of former Baathist military and intelligence officers. Some are known to have engaged in violence; many possess the know-how and have sufficient grievances to prompt violent behaviour. So far, they have for the most part chosen to lie low in their host countries because the heart of the conflict is in Iraq, not abroad, and they may fear host government reactions.

<sup>46</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Iraqi activists, Amman, October 2007. Also disproportionately represented among Iraqi refugees are Christians, who do not possess armed militias in Iraq and constitute roughly 3 per cent of the total population. "The World Factbook 2007", Central Intelligence Agency, 19 June 2007.

<sup>47</sup> For an overview, see Beth Elise Withaker, "Refugees and the Spread of Conflict: Contrasting Cases in Central Africa",

destitution and unemployment among Iraqi refugees are worrying factors, and some observers warn against the possibility of young male refugees joining al-Qaeda type militant groups.<sup>48</sup> Still, overall, a humanitarian worker said:

We are not in a Great Lakes situation where refugees clearly were a destabilising factor, where no one was in control and, most importantly, where they included a large number of armed people or *génocidaires*. None of these factors applies here.<sup>49</sup>

#### D. PREDICTING FUTURE TRENDS

Iraqis' decisions about leaving their country or, if they already have fled, returning home depend on different factors, of which the two most critical are conditions in Iraq and in host countries: the worse the circumstances in Iraq, the more likely its citizens are to flee; the better, the more likely they are to return. The same pattern holds true with regard to conditions in Syria, Jordan or Lebanon.

The decrease in violence in parts of Iraq that began in 2007 contributed to well-publicised instances of return. According to unconfirmed figures from the country's border authorities, over 200,000 Iraqis returned from Syria between August and November 2007.<sup>50</sup> However, the data should be treated with caution. Assuming the figures are accurate, they include routine cross-border movements by Iraqi business people, truck drivers and officials; refugees interviewed by Crisis Group also indicated they were taking advantage of the relative lull in Baghdad to visit relatives or check their property without contemplating, for now, a permanent return.

The Iraqi Red Crescent has provided much lower estimates.<sup>51</sup> According to official Syrian statistics, 365,093

refugees left and 286,145 entered between 1 October 2007 and 23 April 2008,<sup>52</sup> suggesting a net decrease in the country's Iraqi population of under 80,000. Baghdad residents interviewed by Crisis Group in November and December 2007 claimed that few or no refugees had yet returned; while many may have gone to Baghdad, they apparently did not settle in their original place of residence.<sup>53</sup>

Nor should the reduction in violence, however welcome, or the appeal of returning home be exaggerated. The country remains extremely dangerous, with enduring sectarian, anti-coalition, criminal and other forms of violence, all of which contribute to an overall sense of precariousness. The vast majority of refugees interviewed in Syria, Jordan and Lebanon made clear that they would return only when security conditions allowed, adding they had no idea when that might occur.<sup>54</sup> In one indication of continued insecurity, the number of IDPs rose by several thousand in the final months of 2007<sup>55</sup> and rose again in Baghdad during violence in Sadr City in April 2008.<sup>56</sup> In February 2008, a majority of Iraqis polled within Iraq advised their compatriots abroad against returning due to security conditions.<sup>57</sup>

Insofar as eleven of eighteen governorates in effect closed their internal borders as of early 2007 to prevent the arrival of new IDPs,<sup>58</sup> many Iraqis have had

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<sup>52</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior interior ministry official, Damascus, April 2008.

<sup>53</sup> IOM reported in March 2008 that just over 13,000 families had returned to their original homes throughout Iraq (an estimated 78,000 individuals). Of these, 17 per cent were returning refugees; the remainder were IDPs. Also, of these 13,000 families, 59 per cent returned to homes in Baghdad. The IOM found, however, that for many "return has not brought ... relief from the humanitarian crisis they experienced in displacement. Many have returned to find their houses destroyed and their livelihoods gone. The majority report food, fuel, and non-food items as priority humanitarian needs". "Assessment of Iraqi Return", IOM Monitoring and Needs Assessments, March 2008.

<sup>54</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Iraqi refugees, Amman and Beirut, October-November 2007, and Damascus, April-May 2008.

<sup>55</sup> UNHCR spokesperson Jennifer Pagonis at press briefing, "Iraq: UNHCR cautious about returns", Geneva, 23 November 2007.

<sup>56</sup> The IOM reported that 500 families were displaced from the Sadr City slum during violence there. "Post-February 2006 Displacement in Iraq", IOM Emergency Needs Assessments, 1 May 2008.

<sup>57</sup> "Iraqi Poll March 2008", ABC News, BBC, ARD, NHK, at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/14\\_03\\_08iraqpoll\\_march2008.pdf](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/14_03_08iraqpoll_march2008.pdf), p. 20.

<sup>58</sup> See "Iraqi refugee resettlement continues to lag behind targets", Refugees International, 4 February 2008; and "Inter-

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*Journal of Asian and African Studies*, vol. 38, nos. 2-3, 2003; Howard Adelman, "Why Refugee Warriors are Threats", *Routes: A Journal of Peace Research and Action*, no. 4, 1996.

<sup>48</sup> Crisis Group interviews, foreign humanitarian workers and state officials, Damascus, Amman and Beirut, October-November 2007.

<sup>49</sup> Crisis Group interview, humanitarian worker, Amman, 21 October 2007.

<sup>50</sup> Cited by UNHCR spokesperson William Spindler at press briefing, "Iraq returns latest", Geneva, 7 December 2007.

<sup>51</sup> According to the Iraqi Red Crescent, nearly 50,000 Iraqis returned between mid-September 2007 and late January 2008. "Iraqi Returnees from Syria", 19 February 2008, at [www.iraqredcrescent.org/Returnees\\_update\\_3\\_EN.pdf](http://www.iraqredcrescent.org/Returnees_update_3_EN.pdf). The number of returnees from Jordan appears negligible. Crisis Group email exchange, UN official, Amman, February 2008.

no choice but to seek refuge abroad. In addition, many refugees were evicted from their homes in confessionally-mixed areas of Baghdad; because these are now often occupied by IDPs or armed groups, they have no place to which to return. Some refugees argue that the decrease in fighting largely reflects the armed groups' consolidated control over various "cleansed" neighbourhoods, thereby making return all the more difficult.<sup>59</sup> An Iraqi with temporary legal residence in Jordan who returned from Baghdad in November 2007 said, "the [current security] situation in Baghdad remains on the brink. Many refugees cannot return home, especially if they lived in mixed neighbourhoods. Baghdad has become divided into de facto sectarian ghettos".<sup>60</sup> The mass exodus of professionals also has had a ripple effect, leading others to leave due to the collapse of the nation's basic infrastructure as well as health-care and education systems.<sup>61</sup>

Among those who returned, several did so less because of improvements in Iraq than to deteriorating host country conditions, including depleted savings and real or perceived hostility from host governments and citizens.<sup>62</sup> Among a sample of Iraqis returning from Syria after the latter toughened its residency conditions, only a minority told UNHCR they were acting on the basis of improved Iraqi conditions.<sup>63</sup> Some refugees residing illegally in Jordan and Syria stressed that, given more stringent restrictions on entry into neighbouring states, they now insisted upon greater security enhancements in Iraq before deciding

to return.<sup>64</sup> Another side effect of tougher entry requirements has been an increase in forging and smuggling of documents required for entry into Syria, Jordan and Lebanon.<sup>65</sup>

Altogether, this complex picture helps explain why many refugees resent Iraqi officials touting reports of returns as evidence of a significant turnaround in security,<sup>66</sup> especially since those same officials, as well as their U.S. counterparts, often failed to mention earlier refugee outflows as indicators of insecurity.<sup>67</sup>

Overall, preparations should be made for three broad trends and scenarios:

- Limited numbers of new refugee flows due to relative calm in Baghdad and host countries' tighter border restrictions, coupled with limited number of returns due to continued uncertainty over sustainability of the security improvements and fear of being barred from re-entry into host countries. Under this scenario, the international community's failure to extend significant assistance to host countries would make the latter all the more reluctant to offer a safe haven role were the situation in Iraq to deteriorate anew.
- Deteriorating humanitarian conditions for internally displaced and other Iraqis seeking to flee, given the virtual closure of Iraq's national borders and tight restrictions on inter-governorate movement. UN humanitarian sources anticipated several hundred thousand additional IDPs should there be a sharp security downturn.<sup>68</sup>

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nally Displaced Persons in Iraq – Update", Cluster F (UNHCR, IOM, UNICEF, WHO, WFP, UNAMI, UNOPS, UN-Habitat, UNFPA, UNDP, ILO and UNIDO), 19 September 2007.

<sup>59</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Iraqi refugees, Amman and Damascus, October 2007. A number of humanitarian workers echoed this assessment. Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, October 2007.

<sup>60</sup> Crisis Group email interview, Iraqi in Jordan, 16 November 2007. While there has been a certain degree of sectarian homogenisation of Baghdad neighbourhoods, the dominant problem has been their control by sectarian militias, which has made life difficult for residents, especially those of the opposing sect.

<sup>61</sup> Syria's toughened entry and visa requirements explicitly exempt Iraqis seeking medical treatment. Syrian handout stipulating conditions and exemptions for visa applications, on file with Crisis Group, October 2007. Iraqis who went to Syria for this purpose are known to have remained in the country, overstaying their visas. Crisis Group interview, foreign humanitarian worker, Damascus, November 2007.

<sup>62</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Iraqi refugees, foreign aid workers, Damascus and Amman, October 2007.

<sup>63</sup> UNHCR spokesperson Jennifer Pagonis at press briefing, op. cit.

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<sup>64</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Iraqi refugees, Amman and Damascus, October-November 2007.

<sup>65</sup> Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian workers and state officials, Amman and Damascus, October-November 2007.

<sup>66</sup> Citing the return of Iraqi refugees, an Iraqi official said, "we are simply living in a better and obvious security situation", cited by CNN, "Iraqi Officials Say Thousands of Refugees Return Home", 7 November 2007. Although similarly claiming strong advancements in security conditions, U.S. officials have been more careful in portraying Iraqi returns as evidence.

<sup>67</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Iraqi refugees, Amman and Damascus, November 2007. Testifying before the U.S. Congress in September 2007, General David Petraeus, the top U.S. military commander in Iraq, did not mention refugee flows in his assessment of the security situation. However, he warned against future "ethno-sectarian displacement and refugee flows" in the event of a "rapid [U.S.] withdrawal [from Iraq]". See General David H. Petraeus, Commander, Multi-National Force in Iraq, "Report to Congress on the Situation in Iraq", Washington DC, 10-11 September 2007, p. 8.

<sup>68</sup> Crisis Group interviews, UN officials, Amman and Damascus, October 2007.

- Potential concentration of prospective refugees at Iraq's borders. Unable to exit their country or find a haven within it, increasing numbers of Iraqis could gather at the borders in hopes either of gaining admission to Syria or Jordan or receiving international humanitarian assistance. While still considered remote (due to insecurity, the long distance by desert road between Baghdad and the western borders, the presence of armed groups at the borders and resistance to living in refugee camps), this possibility nonetheless worries UN officials and neighbouring states.<sup>69</sup>

### III. JORDAN: IMPACT AND RESPONSE

#### A. STEMMING THE TIDE

Jordan long has been a favourite destination for Iraqis, both during and after Saddam's rule. Iraqis came for temporary visits or prolonged stays, political or business reasons and, more recently, in order to escape their homeland's violence. Perhaps as a result of this long tradition, the influx that began in 2003 and intensified as of 2005 initially alarmed neither Jordanian officials nor the public.<sup>70</sup>

Still, Jordan's hospitality has its limits. Even Iraqis fleeing violence were not granted refugee status; instead, they were referred to as "guests" and at times treated far worse than that. Affluent Iraqis (eg, investors and professionals) generally could obtain a residency permit (*iqama*) on a yearly and renewable basis but only a minority among them received longer-term status. All others – the vast majority – obtained three- to six-month residency permits subject to renewal and without work authorisation. After 2005, renewal of such temporary permits became virtually impossible. As a consequence, Jordan only allowed in Iraqis who met the stringent *iqama* requirements – such as possessing major in-country investments or depositing \$150,000 in a local bank – in addition to a trickle of officials and others invited to attend training programs or conferences sponsored by the UN or other international organisations. For the bulk of potential refugees, in other words, this has meant a closed-door policy.

Iraqis faced other obstacles. As of November 2006, Jordan barred the entry of Iraqi single men between the ages of seventeen and 35.<sup>71</sup> Border authorities also began insisting that applicants produce a new passport – the so-called G-series – which is both difficult and costly to obtain, purportedly to address the problem of forged travel documents.<sup>72</sup> Even Iraqis with formal UN invitations have found it increasingly difficult to enter.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Crisis Group interviews, UN officials, government officials, Damascus and Amman, October 2007.

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<sup>70</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Jordanian officials, Amman, October 2007.

<sup>71</sup> "Backgrounder: Jordan", op. cit.

<sup>72</sup> Since 2007, Iraqis have been required to hold a so-called G passport to travel to several Arab and European countries, purportedly to cut down on forgery. Crisis Group interview, international humanitarian worker, Amman, 13 October 2007.

<sup>73</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Iraqi NGO activists and UN officials, Amman, October 2007. "Jordanian immigration is holding back more and more Iraqis at the border, even if they have invitations for workshops and training programs. One

More serious are reports of Iraqis being turned away without screening or due process to determine refugee status at the border or at Queen Alia International Airport in violation of the principle of non-refoulement.<sup>74</sup> Iraqis also allegedly are being forcibly repatriated for lacking legal status,<sup>75</sup> although officials explain that for the most part they turn a blind eye to those who are there illegally.<sup>76</sup> They also point out that, beginning in September 2007, Iraqi children have no longer required legal residence status in order to attend local government schools.<sup>77</sup>

In 2007, Jordan repeatedly promised that it would introduce a procedure allowing Iraqis to apply for visas from abroad. Officials argued this would spare Iraqis the need to travel to one of their country's entry

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Iraqi came with a letter saying he was invited by the Queen [of Jordan]. Yet he was denied entry by a customs officer who said, simply, 'I am the Queen!'", Crisis Group interview, foreign humanitarian worker, Amman, 13 October 2007. A Crisis Group consultant travelling from Iraq to a European country where he is a part-time resident was turned back by Jordanian authorities at the airport transit zone, although he had never intended to enter Jordanian territory. He was locked in a room with other Iraqis waiting to be deported back to Iraq and was allowed to pursue his journey only after Crisis Group obtained higher-level intervention.

<sup>74</sup> Article 33(1) of the 1951 UN convention relating to the status of refugees states: "No Contracting State shall expel or return ('refouler') a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion". Although Jordan is not a party to the convention or its 1967 Protocol, it has an obligation under international customary law to abide by the principle of non-refoulement. On application of this principle, see UNHCR ExCom Conclusion 99 (LV), "General Conclusion on International Protection", 8 October 2004, at [www.unhcr.org/excom/EXCOM/41750ef74.html](http://www.unhcr.org/excom/EXCOM/41750ef74.html). For a more detailed discussion see N. Coleman, "Non-Refoulement Revised: Renewed Review of the Status of the Principle of Non-Refoulement as Customary International Law", *European Journal of Migration and Law*, vol. 5, no. 1 (January 2003). For its applicability to Iraqi refugees arriving at Jordanian borders, see "The Silent Treatment: Fleeing Iraq, Surviving in Jordan", Human Rights Watch, November 2006, pp. 24-30.

<sup>75</sup> In 2004, Jordan reportedly deported as many as hundreds of Iraqis monthly. See "Jordan", U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, 2004, at [www.refugees.org/](http://www.refugees.org/).

<sup>76</sup> Crisis Group interview, Jordanian official, Amman, October 2007.

<sup>77</sup> Many Iraqis dismissed the move as too little, too late. One said, "well, excellent my son can go to school now. But how am I going to feed him if I don't have the right to work? How can I bring my boy to school if I face deportation if I am caught on the way?", Crisis Group interview, Amman, 14 October 2007.

points only to be turned away for failure to meet its stringent requirements.<sup>78</sup> In mid-April 2008, Jordan finally announced that, beginning 1 May, any Iraqi wishing to enter the country would need to obtain a visa prior to arrival, and applicants should first turn to a private courier company with offices throughout Iraq, TNT,<sup>79</sup> which would forward their requests to the Jordanian government.<sup>80</sup>

## B. POLITICAL AND SECURITY CONCERNS

Jordanian officials justify their restrictive entry policy principally on security grounds. The 9 November 2005 bombing of three Amman hotels, for which Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's al-Qaeda in Iraq claimed responsibility,<sup>81</sup> caused massive destruction and killed 60 people. It often is described as a watershed event, triggering fears of additional terrorist attacks by Iraqis. In its wake, Jordan imposed more stringent border controls.

A massive influx of Iraqis also is seen as further straining the nation's fragile political-demographic makeup, with 1.78 million Palestinian refugees and a population whose majority is widely believed to be of Palestinian origin.<sup>82</sup> Prominent Jordanians, striving to defend their social, economic and political privileges, are wary of financial burdens represented by new refu-

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<sup>78</sup> Crisis Group interview, Jordanian official, Amman, October 2007. Iraqi drivers bringing their compatriots to the border described the Jordanian immigration officers' "horrendous treatment": "The treatment is always unfriendly, often provocative and humiliating. Any sign of dissatisfaction or objection will cause immigration officials to stamp your passport so as to permanently deny you entry". Crisis Group interviews, Amman, 15 September 2007. Crisis Group staff witnessed cases of Iraqis being verbally abused by Jordanian immigration officials. In one instance, a woman inquired at the border about visa conditions for her mother, whom she claimed was ailing and could find treatment only in Jordan. The answer was: "She'll get two days". The woman tried to explain that the treatment could not be completed in 48 hours but was told dismissively: "Two days in our country is a benediction for people like you".

<sup>79</sup> TNT Post B.V. is a Dutch-owned international courier company.

<sup>80</sup> *Jordan Times*, 15 April 2008.

<sup>81</sup> See extracts of a videotape attributed to al-Zarqawi in which he claimed responsibility: MSNBC News, 18 November 2005, at [www.msnbc.msn.com/id/10097871/](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/10097871/).

<sup>82</sup> "UNRWA Registration and Statistical Bulletin", UNRWA Department of Relief and Social Services, Amman, 2006. The proportion of Palestinians in Jordan is highly contested but is generally estimated at roughly 60 per cent. See Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°10, *The Challenge of Political Reform: Jordanian Democratisation and Regional Instability*, 8 October 2003, p. 8.

gees.<sup>83</sup> Security and demographic arguments at times overlap, with references to the violent confrontation with Palestinian militants during “Black September” in 1970. An Iraqi activist said:

The Jordanian government is looking at Iraqi refugees through the prism of their past experience with Palestinians. They have had it: from 1948 to 1967 they have coped with waves and waves of Palestinian refugees. So Iraqis are not allowed to organise politically. Just like with the Palestinians, they allow the rich and wealthy to help fund the country’s infrastructure, but they won’t let the poor take their resources, let alone become politically active.<sup>84</sup>

Some Jordanians also worry about the presence of Iraqi Shiites (even though they constitute only 17 per cent of those coming to the Kingdom)<sup>85</sup> at a time of heightened anxiety concerning Iran’s regional influence and the emergence of a so-called Shiite crescent supposedly threatening the Sunni world.<sup>86</sup> Fear was first triggered by the January 2005 Iraqi elections in which Shiite Islamist parties prevailed and intensified in the wake of the 2006 war in Lebanon, which boosted Hizbullah’s standing and renewed fears of Shiite militancy, including on Jordanian soil.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Jordanian officials, Amman, October 2008.

<sup>84</sup> Crisis Group interview, Iraqi refugee, Amman, 13 October 2007.

<sup>85</sup> See “Iraqis in Jordan”, op. cit. Among registered refugees, the percentage is closer to a quarter. See “Iraqis Registered at UNHCR BO Amman”, UNHCR, 18 October 2007.

<sup>86</sup> King Abdullah II claimed in December 2004 that the repercussions of Iran’s influence in Iraq could be felt throughout the region and could lead to a “crescent” of Shiite movements or governments stretching through Iraq and into Syria, Lebanon and the Gulf, altering the traditional sectarian balance of power. “If Iraq goes Islamic Republic, then ... we’ve opened ourselves to a whole set of new problems that will not be limited to the borders of Iraq....Strategic planners around the world have got to be aware that is a possibility”. *The Washington Post*, 8 December 2004. The perception that Iraq’s government was becoming increasingly sectarian added to the concern. “Sunni politicians no longer are influential. The Sunni community in Baghdad is being evicted. We are concerned that Iraq is losing the components that made a country. If we take all those refugees, you will end up with something else in Iraq, and we are afraid of what that will be. And then there is our fear of a hegemonic Iranian role”. Crisis Group interview, Jordanian official, Amman, 18 October 2007.

<sup>87</sup> Crisis Group interview, Jordanian official, Amman, 18 October 2007.

The government reacted nervously to any expression of Shiite identity. Authorities allegedly sought to prevent Iraqis from visiting the shrines of Imam Ali Ibn Abi Taleb and Ja’afar al-Tayyar, two historical Shiite figures, barring the relevant bus company from transporting them.<sup>88</sup> Tellingly, practically all Iraqis and Jordanians interviewed by Crisis Group asked not to be quoted when talking about Iraqi Shiites. Anecdotal evidence suggests various forms of official and more informal harassment and discrimination: a prohibition on opening *huseiniyat* (Shiite houses of prayer); teachers telling Shiite children they are not true Muslims; preachers giving Friday sermons in support of jihadis in Iraq (at a time when these were explicitly targeting Shiites); popular use of the derogatory term *rafidin* (“rejectionists”) to describe Shiites; and border officials often asking entering Iraqis whether they are Sunni or Shiite.<sup>89</sup>

Viewing the refugee issue chiefly from a security angle, Jordan responded accordingly. It bolstered its police and security services, reportedly by hiring an additional 15,000 employees since 2005.<sup>90</sup> Although officials claim that the “Iraqis-in-Jordan file” is managed by the ministries of planning and social development, foreign aid workers and human rights activists assert that key decisions – from granting permits to overseeing assistance – rest with the interior ministry and secret service, which regularly call in Iraqis for questioning.<sup>91</sup> Applicants for residency are not informed of the grounds for denial of their applications, which leaves them in limbo. Moreover, Iraqis say they are barred from setting up charity organisations,

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<sup>88</sup> Crisis Group interview, Iraqi activist, Amman, 13 October 2007.

<sup>89</sup> All these examples are based on Crisis Group interviews with Iraqi refugees, Amman, 2006-2007. Reportedly, border officers also have tried to establish Iraqis’ sect by virtue of their names, a measure that is wholly unreliable. For example, many Iraqis named Ali are Shiite but not all are; the same, in reverse, is true for Omar. Crisis Group interviews, Sunni Iraqi named Ali and Shiite Iraqi named Omar, both of whom faced questions relating to their names when entering Jordan, Amman, late 2006.

<sup>90</sup> Crisis Group interview, Jordanian official, Amman, 21 October 2007. Other factors undoubtedly played a part in this decision, but Jordanian human rights activists and officials alike told Crisis Group that this surge was directly connected to the Iraqi influx. Crisis Group interviews, Amman, October 2007.

<sup>91</sup> Crisis Group interviews, human rights activists and foreign aid workers, Amman, October 2007.



offering informal assistance to fellow refugees or engaging in political activity.<sup>92</sup>

Jordan's concerns should not be belittled. The prospect of a massive refugee influx, particularly given the antecedent of the hotel bombings, simultaneous violent crises in Iraq and Israel/Palestine and an uneasy demographic makeup, understandably has prompted heightened security. Measures taken after the hotel bombings might well have avoided further terrorist attacks, clashes among Iraqis or between them and the local population.<sup>93</sup> Still, the entry restrictions, tight surveillance of Iraqi expatriates and various heavy-handed tactics are liable to stir resentment from a population whose docility cannot be assumed to be permanent. The fear of an Iranian hand or Shiite militancy seems grossly exaggerated; Shiites are a relatively small minority of Iraqis in Jordan: most are secular, and all tend to keep a low profile.

In some ways, the presence of a large contingent of Iraqis, some of whom have ties to powerful family or tribal networks and others to various insurgent groups, could prove politically beneficial. It could expand Jordan's reach and influence insofar as they are potential intermediaries or information providers. Already, the regime has taken some credit for the U.S. shift in policy toward Iraq's Sunni Arabs, claiming it helped broker contacts with al-Anbar leaders who frequently visit Amman or whose tribes straddle the border.<sup>94</sup> Moreover, U.S. and British officials have met insurgency leaders in the Jordanian capital.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup>Crisis Group interviews, Iraqi refugees, Amman, October 2007. In response, a Jordanian official said, "theoretically they are allowed to set up charities or relief NGOs, but they have to register as a charity with the ministry of social development. They are also advised to contact the Hashemite Charitable Society to streamline their activities. These are two avenues they have to go through to coordinate their efforts. As long as you don't create parallel structures in Jordan, you are allowed to set up an NGO. This is because parallel structures generally tend to become permanent. And again, you are not dealing with a country that has failed institutions". Crisis Group interview, Amman, 21 October 2007. At the same time, the government has allowed the presence of known Iraqi insurgents or insurgency sympathisers, while closely monitoring their activities.

<sup>93</sup>A Jordanian official took pride in the absence of violent reactions against Iraqis in the aftermath of the hotel bombings, attributing this to strict law enforcement measures. Crisis Group interview, Amman, 18 October 2007.

<sup>94</sup>Crisis Group interviews, Jordanian officials, Amman, October 2007.

<sup>95</sup>See *Al-Dustour*, 13 November 2007; *The Sunday Telegraph*, 11 November 2007.

## C. ECONOMIC BURDENS AND BENEFITS

The economic and financial impact of the refugee presence is mixed. In arguing for greater international assistance, the regime stresses the liabilities, including inflationary pressures associated with growing demand (the rate of inflation reached nearly 7.5 per cent in early 2007 compared to 3 per cent in 2006), as well as the rising cost of social services and state subsidies for basic consumer goods.<sup>96</sup> According to government sources, the influx of refugees costs the country \$1 billion per year,<sup>97</sup> while reducing the availability to Jordanians of scarce resources such as water.<sup>98</sup>

Ordinary citizens tend to blame Iraqis for a host of difficulties, from rising housing and fuel costs to overcrowded class rooms. In the words of a Jordanian, "even as we sit here, our drinks are getting more expensive because of the Iraqis. Welcome to refugee camp Jordan!"<sup>99</sup> Against this backdrop, positive assessments have become rare.<sup>100</sup>

The actual balance sheet is far more nuanced. Refugees clearly are a budgetary burden, but the overall economic impact appears relatively small. Ibrahim Saif, an economist at Jordan University, argues that the rise in fuel, food and housing costs has other prin-

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<sup>96</sup>See "Jordan: Fifth Post-Program Monitoring Discussions", International Monetary Fund (IMF), August 2007, at [www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2007/cr07284.pdf](http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2007/cr07284.pdf).

<sup>97</sup>The government did not provide a detailed breakdown or explain its methodology in reaching this figure. According to an official, it reflects a rough calculation – a \$4.5 billion annual budget serving 5.5 million Jordanian citizens and 750,000 Iraqis. Crisis Group interview, Amman, October 2007. In February 2008 Suhair al-Ali, the Jordanian minister of planning and international cooperation, reduced the estimated budgetary cost of the refugee crisis to \$2.2 billion for 2005-2007. "Cost of hosting Iraqis estimated at JD1.6 billion", Government of Jordan, Amman, 13 February 2008. This may reflect the government's reduction in its estimate of Iraqis in-country, following FAFO research published in November 2007 (see above).

<sup>98</sup>Crisis Group interviews, Jordanian officials, Amman, October 2007. Jordan ranks as one of the ten water-poorest countries in the world. See, "Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan – Country Strategic Opportunities Programme", International Fund for Agricultural Development Rome, November 2007, p. 1.

<sup>99</sup>Crisis Group interview, Jordanian citizen, Amman, 15 October 2007.

<sup>100</sup>An official nonetheless said, "The arrival of the Iraqis had a positive impact in that they brought a level of tolerance. The Iraqis make Amman look more like Beirut; it is becoming more cosmopolitan, a real city. People are more accepting of other traditions, habits and accents". Crisis Group interview, Amman, 18 October 2007.

cial causes, such as the loss of preferential and subsidised access to Iraqi oil,<sup>101</sup> skyrocketing international oil prices, exports of domestic food items to Iraq, rising costs of food imports and unfavourable exchange rates.<sup>102</sup> According to Saif:

The general perception in Jordan is that Iraqis are responsible for all our economic woes over the last two to three years. On the other hand, the Iraqis say they are responsible for economic growth in Jordan as a result of increased investment. We challenge both arguments. Jordanians exaggerate the burdens and fail to take into account the benefits. For their part, the Iraqis exaggerated the benefits. So we deconstructed two myths.<sup>103</sup>

Among the hidden benefits is the fact that many Iraqis are well educated and now staff hospitals and universities, while providing valuable know-how to local businesses.<sup>104</sup> Iraqis also have injected significant cash into the economy, using their savings and, in some cases, continued transfers from Iraq of pensions and family remittances. Although it is hard to quantify the amounts – such transfers typically are informal and unregistered – they likely helped finance Jordan's trade deficit while boosting domestic demand.<sup>105</sup> Whether this can be sustained is a different matter and depends on Iraqis' ability to replenish their savings through investments or salaried employment and on their continued access to financial resources back home.

Overall impact aside, there is little question that the benefits and burdens have been unevenly distributed, a fact that inevitably shapes perceptions. Increasing housing prices helped a small number of real estate developers and owners as well as landlords; conversely,

it hurt a much larger number of tenants and others entering the housing market.<sup>106</sup> Likewise, higher demand for consumer goods benefited some importers and local producers, while harming the salaried lower and middle classes, which faced rising prices.<sup>107</sup> In short, the influx of refugees worsened Jordan's lopsided income distribution, which had already been exacerbated by economic reforms emphasising privatisation, reduction of social services and subsidy cuts.<sup>108</sup>

#### D. THE POLITICS OF PROTECTION AND AID

Jordan's relationship with UNHCR has long been uneasy. In 1998, the agency signed a memorandum of understanding with the government allowing it to interview and identify refugees; in exchange, UNHCR was to resettle any refugee to a third country within six months.<sup>109</sup> Under the memorandum, Jordan also agreed to abide by the principle of non-refoulement, barring, in the words of the 1951 UN convention relating to the status of refugees, involuntary return to "the frontiers of territories where ... life or freedom would be threatened on account of ... race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion". Since that year and as of 31 March 2008, UNHCR has identified 52,758 Iraqi

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<sup>101</sup> In the 1990s, Iraq sold oil to Jordan on exceptionally favourable terms, accepting payment in goods which promoted domestic production. Crisis Group interview, Ibrahim Saif, Amman, 21 October 2007.

<sup>102</sup> See Ibrahim Saif and David M. DeBartolo, "The Iraq's War Impact on Growth and Inflation in Jordan", Centre for Strategic Studies, University of Jordan, 2007, at [www.jcss.org/UploadEvents/83.pdf](http://www.jcss.org/UploadEvents/83.pdf).

<sup>103</sup> Crisis Group interview, Ibrahim Saif, Amman, 21 October 2007. Jordanian officials challenged Saif's conclusions, accusing him of trivialising the economic difficulties. Ibid; also Crisis Group interviews, Jordanian officials, Amman, October 2007. Some media accounts were similarly hostile. See, eg, "Study belittles impact of Iraqis on inflation, growth in Jordan", *Jordan Times*, 6 July 2007. Others were more favourable. See, eg, "Iraqi Refugees and the Economy", *Jordan Times*, 2 October 2007.

<sup>104</sup> Crisis Group interviews, aid officials, Amman, October 2007.

<sup>105</sup> The flip side is that transfers of hard currency from Iraq likely contributed somewhat to the Jordanian dinar's depreciation.

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<sup>106</sup> Significantly, many young Jordanian males have been unable to buy or rent an apartment – or, at a minimum, buy or rent them in neighbourhoods they had contemplated -- due to skyrocketing housing prices. Doing so is a critical prerequisite for marriage; a young man's inability to provide a home for his future wife inevitably reduces his appeal to the bride's family. Crisis Group interviews, Jordanian citizens, Amman, throughout 2007.

<sup>107</sup> Insofar as inflation causes interest rates to rise, it diminishes risks for banks and depositors while making credit more expensive. Because they are paid less than their Jordanian counterparts, Iraqi professionals lowered salary expenditures in hospitals and universities while simultaneously reducing employment opportunities for Jordanians. The relatively few Iraqi children who attend private schools generate income for their owners; however, most go to public schools, thereby drawing on the state's budget and leading to overcrowded classrooms.

<sup>108</sup> Although no reliable data exists, there is evidence of significant and growing levels of poverty and income inequality. A World Bank survey found that 14.2 per cent of the population lived below the poverty line. Jordan's Gini coefficient (measuring income inequality) increased. See "Country Assistance Strategy for the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan FY 2006-2010", World Bank, September 2006; "Jordan Poverty Assessment", The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and the World Bank, December 2004.

<sup>109</sup> Memorandum of Understanding Between the Government of Jordan and UNHCR, April 1998, cited in "Silent Treatment", op. cit., p. 42.

refugees (the majority related to the current crisis)<sup>110</sup> who, inasmuch as Jordan refuses their permanent resettlement, are officially considered to be mere “asylum seekers”, awaiting third-country resettlement. Only 1,594 were resettled in 2007 and 1,037 in 2008 through 15 April.<sup>111</sup> As for many of the others, a Jordanian official said:

If someone produces a paper saying he is a registered asylum seeker with UNHCR, we probably will allow him to extend his stay. We guarantee this unless the individual in question is involved in matters considered to be a direct threat to our national security or has engaged in criminal activity. Generally, anyone who is registered as an asylum seeker can stay until a final determination is made. The Jordanian government has not deported people who enjoy this status.<sup>112</sup>

Although UNHCR still is interviewing Iraqis, Jordanian officials tend to dismiss the possibility that the number of refugees will increase.<sup>113</sup> They argue that since only some 50,000 Iraqis so far have approached the UN agency (the majority since the end of 2006), most must know they cannot convincingly claim to have a well-founded fear of persecution.<sup>114</sup>

The slow registration process provides Jordan with added reassurance, given the six-month deadline stipulated in the memorandum of understanding. Accordingly, UNHCR’s December 2006 decision to declare that all Iraqis, save those originating from the Kurdistan region, were “prima facie refugees”<sup>115</sup> triggered angry protests from the Jordanian government, which saw it as both a way to circumvent the understanding (predicated on individual determinations of refugee status) and a powerful incentive for Iraqis to come to Jordan.<sup>116</sup> The controversy eased somewhat with

UNHCR’s February 2007 replacement of its chief representative in Jordan and with a compromise under which the agency maintained its prima facie designation policy in principle but in practice interviewed all Iraqis individually.<sup>117</sup> In return, Jordan has adhered to an “extremely tolerant policy toward UNHCR’s failure to resettle designated refugees within a six-month period”.<sup>118</sup> What this implies for Iraqis seeking refugee status remains unclear and has caused considerable confusion among officials.<sup>119</sup>

Levels of aid provided to refugees present another problem. There is little doubt that international assistance has been inadequate, and Jordanian officials also emphasise Iraqi expatriates’ lack of generosity.<sup>120</sup> That said, the government’s own restrictions play a significant part as well. Jordan discourages Iraqis from offering charitable help to fellow citizens, most likely out of fear that this might take on political overtones.<sup>121</sup> Jordanian NGOs also are barred from providing large-scale assistance, a reflection of the country’s more general restrictions on associational life.<sup>122</sup> International humanitarian organisations, including their Jordan-based branches, together with UNHCR’s implementing partners likewise face difficult regulatory obstacles.<sup>123</sup> Further complicating matters, the government has made it clear it will not tolerate “parallel structures” under which NGOs target Iraqis to the exclusion of less fortunate Jordanians.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>110</sup>“Jordan Fact Sheet”, UNHCR, April 2008.

<sup>111</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, UN official, Amman, 4 May 2008.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid. According to UNHCR, Jordan deported two or three Iraqis who fell under the agency’s refugee or “asylum seeker” status. Crisis Group interview, Amman, 21 October 2007.

<sup>113</sup> Crisis Group interview, Jordanian official, Amman, 21 October 2007.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> “Return Advisory and Position on International Protection Needs of Iraqis Outside Iraq”, UNHCR, 18 December 2006. Prima facie refugee determination signifies that all Iraqis except those coming from the Kurdistan region would, given the security situation and systematic violations of human rights in Iraq, be considered “refugees” without in-depth and individualised status determination.

<sup>116</sup> Crisis Group interview, Jordanian official, Amman, 21 October 2007.

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<sup>117</sup> A foreign humanitarian worker said, “although UNHCR already thinks that the Iraqis approaching it are refugees, it interviews them all in order to maintain good relations with the Jordanian government”. Crisis Group interview, Amman, 21 October 2007.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> A senior official insisted, “there are no Iraqi refugees in Jordan”, throwing into question the need for a refugee agency presence and the assumption behind the memorandum of understanding. Crisis Group interview, Amman, 16 October 2007.

<sup>120</sup> “We don’t see wealthy Iraqis contributing to the basic needs of Iraqis coming to Jordan, despite the conditions in which they live. This is strange and the question has often been raised”. Crisis Group interview, Jordanian official, Amman, 18 October 2007.

<sup>121</sup> According to Iraqis and humanitarian workers, several Iraqi charity initiatives have been blocked by the authorities. Crisis Group interviews, Iraqis and foreign aid workers, Amman, October 2007.

<sup>122</sup> A notable exception is al-Mizan, a Jordanian NGO providing legal assistance to Iraqis. Some Christian churches and their charity branches also help Iraqi refugees.

<sup>123</sup> Crisis Group interviews, foreign NGO representatives, Amman, October 2007.

<sup>124</sup> Crisis Group interview, Jordanian official, Amman, 21 October 2007.

The government has made some welcome efforts. Thus, in a policy reversal, it now allows Iraqis without residency documents to attend its public school system. But these and other positive steps notwithstanding, access to certain basic facilities remains insufficient, including health-care services and the job market.<sup>125</sup> Over time, the government is likely to face mounting pressure to permit cash-strapped Iraqis to work.<sup>126</sup>

Jordan faces three dilemmas. First, the government is inclined to simultaneously downplay the scope of the refugee problem for domestic reasons and highlight it for purposes of attracting international aid. This is illustrated by conflicting official claims regarding the number of refugees: in 2005-2006, Amman was awash in rumours that a million or more Iraqis had entered the country; the government did little to discourage and at times encouraged such guesswork. From 2006 onwards, however, Jordan played down the crisis, citing estimates lower than UNHCR's;<sup>127</sup> a precipitating factor might have been a human rights report criticising the government for failing to care for the refugees.<sup>128</sup> As donors began underscoring the problem, and particularly in the aftermath of the April 2007 donors conference on Iraqi refugees in Geneva,<sup>129</sup> the government's estimates once more grew dramatically. They decreased yet again as FAFO completed its survey indicating that far fewer Iraqis resided in Jordan.

Secondly, the government is both eager for international aid and wary of providing refugees with services that might encourage long-term settlement or, worse, convince those still in Iraq to cross into Jordan. Thirdly, Jordan's restrictions on refugee protection and assistance over time could create the very risks to stability those policies are designed to avoid. As a humanitarian worker put it, "if Iraqis' options [in

Jordan] run out, and they can't sustain their livelihoods, their self-restraint may vanish. This could breed all sorts of security problems".<sup>130</sup> Although security agencies have successfully quelled unrest in the past, in part through their ubiquitous presence within families, tribes, communities and Palestinian refugee camps, they may be ill-equipped to deal with criminality or unrest among Iraqi refugees, who lack a social base and do not belong to indigenous social networks.

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<sup>125</sup> In a November 2007 agreement with the Jordanian ministry of health, UNHCR pledged to provide Jordan with equipment and medicine to support public primary health care. In exchange, Iraqis in Jordan, regardless of their legal status, gained access to public primary health care at the same rate as uninsured Jordanians, ie, 30 per cent of cost (the rest being covered by the government. By contrast, insured Jordanians pay only 20 per cent of their health care costs). Immunisation is free. Crisis Group telephone interview, UN official, Amman, 4 May 2008.

<sup>126</sup> Officials refuse to discuss this option, rejecting the idea of Iraqis becoming quasi-permanent residents and invoking the country's high domestic unemployment rates. *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> Crisis Group interview, UN official, Amman, October 2007.

<sup>128</sup> Crisis Group interview, humanitarian official in Amman, October 2007. The report in question was from Human Rights Watch. See "Silent Treatment", *op. cit.*

<sup>129</sup> See [www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/events?id=45e44a562](http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/events?id=45e44a562).

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<sup>130</sup> Crisis Group interview, foreign aid worker, Amman, 21 October 2007.

#### IV. SYRIA: IMPACT AND RESPONSE

In September 2007, Syria introduced a visa requirement for Iraqis, a sharp and controversial break from its longstanding policy toward Arab nationals. The decision reflected the depth of the refugee crisis. Syrian authorities, international relief organisations, NGOs and others each put forward their own, highly different numbers; none at this point is verifiable. While the regime and UNHCR claim there are 1.5 million refugees, others suggest there could be as few as 300,000.<sup>131</sup> More scientific and reliable studies are necessary; still, the controversy over numbers aside, there is little question that Syria faces a serious problem and that to date answers have been inadequate.<sup>132</sup>

The visa requirement was symptomatic of a significant shift in Syria's assessment. As discussed below, many observers saw this chiefly as a cynical ploy: by signalling it no longer would welcome refugees, the

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<sup>131</sup> A European observer argued that the starting point should be the number of Iraqi children attending Syrian schools. "The official Syrian number is approximately 50,000 kids. Given that number, and even assuming that not all children attend school, the figure of 1.5 million appears highly inflated and wholly unrealistic". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, February 2008. Another pointed to the number of Iraqis Syria claimed had entered at the height of the crisis. "Even if 20,000 Iraqis came in every month, it would take six years to reach 1.5 million – and that is not even counting those who might have left in the interim". Crisis Group interview, European observer, Damascus, February 2008. In March 2007, the Syrian Red Crescent assessed that roughly 20,000 to 30,000 Iraqis were coming in every month, "Rapid Emergency Needs Assessment for the Iraqi Displaced in Syria", March 2007. Syrian border authorities reached a similar estimate in the period up to October 2007. See *al-Watan*, 11 November 2007.

<sup>132</sup> "At this moment we can't deal with one million Iraqis. Why would it be important to know if there are a few hundreds of thousands more? We still wouldn't be able to deal with them". Crisis Group interview, UN official, Damascus, 25 October 2007. This line of argument is fully accepted by some donors. Crisis Group interview, member of an International Rescue Committee delegation, Damascus, 21 February 2008. A Syrian official expressed anger at attempts to minimise the impact of problem: "The UK recently experienced a crisis: word circulated that some 500,000 foreigners lived in the country. 500,000 out of a population of 60 million, and that caused an uproar! People were clamouring that their country and their communities couldn't withstand the burden. Our population is much smaller, and we took in all these Iraqis in a remarkably short period of time. We had to make space for 60,000 Iraqis in our schools. Do you know they are now working double shift in some of our schools to cater to all of them?" Crisis Group interview, senior Syrian official, Damascus, 28 November 2007.

regime sought to increase pressure on the U.S. and Iraqi governments to shoulder their responsibilities. That may form part of the explanation.<sup>133</sup> But there were other more significant causal factors, namely a situation that had become increasingly difficult to bear coupled with growing domestic tensions.

##### A. AN UNTENABLE CRISIS

Until 2007, Syria adopted a largely passive approach toward refugees, characterised by inertia rather than initiative. Following its tradition, the regime allowed any Arab visitor – Iraqis included – to enter. A Syrian official noted that the principle endured even during the regime-threatening conflict with the Muslim Brotherhood in the late 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>134</sup>

Prior to accepting Iraqis, Syria had welcomed several other waves of refugees. Beginning in the late 1940s, over 400,000 Palestinians entered the country; since then, they have lived in better conditions than in most other host countries.<sup>135</sup> Over 100,000 Lebanese fled during the 2006 war and took advantage of this open-door policy, returning home once the fighting ended.<sup>136</sup> In like manner, a large number of Iraqis crossed the border as civil war raged in their homeland.

Many observers insist that Syria's policy reflected political calculations, the presence of refugees being used as leverage to deter the U.S. from destabilising the regime; force it to engage with Damascus on other political issues; attract international funds; deepen its influence in Iraq; or even expose the Syrian people to the heavy costs of the Iraqi model.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> The plight of Palestinians fleeing Iraq, denied access to Syrian territory and parked in camps in Tanf, in the middle of the desert, almost certainly is a cynical means of making a political statement, ie, that Palestinians should find refuge in Palestine only.

<sup>134</sup> "Our border policy is not something new, and we paid the price for it in the past. We had our own 'al-Qaeda' long before anyone else, with bombings on our soil and sectarian killings perpetuated by the Muslim Brotherhood. In Hama, we found all kinds of weapons short of tanks: heavy machine guns, grenade launchers, explosives, etc. All this had been smuggled in. We had trouble controlling our borders at the time, but still we refused to alter our policy". Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, Damascus, 25 September 2007.

<sup>135</sup> See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°22, *Palestinian Refugees and the Politics of Peace Making*, 5 February 2004.

<sup>136</sup> See [www.unicef.org/emerg/index\\_35381.html](http://www.unicef.org/emerg/index_35381.html).

<sup>137</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomats, Damascus, September-October 2007. A Syrian human rights activist said, "Surely pan-Arabism is not the main reason for the Syrian government's open-door policy. There are many other

There is truth to the claim. Pro-democracy Syrian intellectuals and activists say that the U.S. failure in Iraq, epitomised by the refugees, significantly reduced their margin of manoeuvre and political resonance.<sup>138</sup> Syria made every effort to place discussions with the U.S. on the refugee issue within a broader bilateral context, expressing deep frustration when this did not succeed.<sup>139</sup> And, hoping to extract other concessions, Damascus for a time withheld visas for officials from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) due to interview Iraqi asylum seekers.<sup>140</sup>

Yet, although Syria clearly sought to exploit the refugee crisis to push Washington toward renewed engagement,<sup>141</sup> this is not a full explanation. Until recently, Syria had no genuine refugee policy; prior to April 2007, officials appeared not to worry about the number of Iraqis who crossed the border, where they settled, what challenges they might pose or how long

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reasons such as satisfying the U.S., luring the Europeans into breaking Syria's isolation, attracting foreign aid and extending its network in Iraq by controlling the Iraqis here. I see it as a political calculation". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 26 September 2007.

<sup>138</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Syrian intellectuals, Damascus, September 2007.

<sup>139</sup> Syria was irritated by the fact that the mid-March 2007 visit by Ellen Sauerbrey, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees and Migration, remained focused on the refugee crisis and did not develop into a broader dialogue. Crisis Group interviews, Syrian officials and journalists, Damascus, October 2007. "On Iraq, we are extremely disappointed. The U.S. hasn't taken our efforts into consideration in any way, neither with respect to the borders nor regarding the refugees. They know how much we did to facilitate the interviews of refugees by the department of homeland security people. Instead they continuously attack Syria. Obviously, although we have made a 100 per cent effort, we haven't had 100 per cent results. But at a minimum, we expect recognition for whatever results we have had". Crisis Group interview, senior Syrian official, Damascus, 2 April 2008.

<sup>140</sup> "Syrians objected to DHS visas, arguing that we lack a political umbrella to address all other bilateral issues". Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, 28 October 2007. Syrian officials also reportedly balked at the U.S. focus on Iraqis who previously had "collaborated" with the occupation. Crisis Group interview, UN official, Damascus, 25 October 2007.

<sup>141</sup> The Bush administration recalled its ambassador to Syria in February 2005, and Syria's ambassador to the U.S. is largely shunned by American officials. Forcefully rejecting this argument, a Syrian official said, "the spirit with which we greeted the Iraqis derived from pan-Arabism. It never crossed our minds to discriminate according to sex, age, ethno-confessional background or wealth. We acted above all out of solidarity, as a humanitarian and pan-Arab duty". Crisis Group interview, senior interior ministry official, Damascus, 24 April 2008.

they might stay. Those who displayed some concern seemed unable to suggest, let alone implement, practical solutions. Indeed, few even contemplated the possibility of a prolonged presence.<sup>142</sup> Officials seemed to view Iraqis in much the same way as they viewed Lebanon's 2006 refugees: temporarily absorbed before departing as suddenly as they arrived. Early on, both Syrian and foreign observers expressed surprise at the regime's inertia, arguing that it could have done far more to attract international attention to, and therefore assistance for the refugees.<sup>143</sup>

More generally, for a long time Syria appeared not to have devised any clear Iraq policy beyond rhetorical denunciations of the war, the occupation and the Iraqi government; dismissal of the elections and political process as if neither had occurred; lax border control; and relatively passive support for the insurgency. In fact, and in large measure due to the historic rift between the Baath party's Syrian and Iraqi branches, Syrian officials' knowledge of Iraq is highly superficial. For decades, their understanding has been based primarily on interaction with the pre-and post-2003 exiled opposition.<sup>144</sup> In sharp contrast with the Palestinian and Lebanese files, in other words, the regime was largely unfamiliar with Iraq. Until very recently, it had not even clearly distributed responsibilities

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<sup>142</sup> When told by Crisis Group that the refugees likely would remain for several years, a senior official on his way to a meeting on this issue appeared visibly surprised. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 26 June 2007. Most officials rule out a scenario under which refugees would settle in for the long run. An economist said, "I find it reassuring to think that none of these refugees really want to stay in Syria. Either they hope to go back to Iraq some day or they aspire to travel to the West". Crisis Group interview, Syrian economist, Damascus, 10 September 2007.

<sup>143</sup> "The government is not marketing this as it should. There is no worldwide campaign to tell people we have more than a million refugees". Crisis Group interview, Syrian economist, Damascus, 1 November 2007. "I am surprised that the Syrian government hasn't used the refugee crisis more to underscore U.S. failures in Iraq, or as a cash cow. The initial response was 'we will just deal with all these ourselves'". Crisis Group interview, UN official, Damascus, 25 October 2007.

<sup>144</sup> "For most of nearly three decades, interaction between Syrians and Iraqis was minimal to say the least, restricted to political fugitives from each country residing in Baghdad and Damascus. Anyone who is someone in Iraq today was a resident of the Syrian capital; that includes Nouri al-Maliki, Jalal Talabani, Massoud al-Barzani and Ibrahim al-Jaafari. But neither country had an embassy in the other's capital, there were no formal visits, no cultural exchanges and no telephone lines linking the two. Syrians wanting a travel permit would get the words "All Arab countries except Iraq" stamped on their passports". Sami Moubayed, "Iraqi Refugees ... The Road to Damascus", *al-Hayat*, 30 September 2007.

among officials dealing with the question.<sup>145</sup> A Syrian official acknowledged:

It's not clear that we even had a comprehensive Iraq policy. We had a rather romantic approach, based almost entirely on our satisfaction over the fact that the U.S. had failed, a failure that validated all our predictions and warnings and reduced the threat posed by the Bush administration's hostile policies. Only with time did the other, more constructive pillar of our approach – which is the absolute need to preserve Iraq's unity – come to dominate and shape our policy.<sup>146</sup>

A more coherent policy finally emerged between 2006 and 2007, not so much a result of U.S. pressure as a reaction to the Iraqi conflict's metamorphosis and the concomitant evolution of the Syrian regime's threat perception. Whereas during the war's early stages it was most concerned about the heavy U.S. troop presence, this changed with the dramatic deterioration of the situation in Iraq, the growing risk of partition, mounting regional sectarian and ethnic tensions, the spread of jihadi militancy and the worsening refugee crisis.

Syria's priorities changed accordingly. They no longer were chiefly guided by the desire to embarrass and undermine the U.S. and its allies. Instead, the imperative became preservation of Iraq's unity and protection of the regime from the war's potential aftershocks. One important consequence was Syria's decision to diversify and balance its relations with a wide spectrum of Iraqi political forces. A Syrian businessman commented:

Syria is structurally condemned to strike a balance between Iraq's various constituents. It has a majority Sunni population, which broadly sympathises with the Iraqi resistance; as a result, while it may want to curb its activities somewhat, it cannot simply betray the insurgency. Syria has strong ties to Iran, yet at the same time, it does not want Iran to take over Iraq and detach it from the Arab nation. As a consequence, it must reach out to the Shiites. Finally, Damascus does not want to worsen its

own Kurdish problem by alienating Iraq's Kurds.<sup>147</sup>

Damascus gradually normalised ties with Baghdad, even at the cost of recognising the legitimacy of a government born of the U.S. occupation.<sup>148</sup> It bolstered border controls and kept a closer eye on armed opposition members residing in Syria, though it did not expel them.<sup>149</sup> And it initiated a dialogue with the full range of Iraqi actors. The deepening refugee crisis further reinforced this new approach. In the words of a senior Syrian official:

The notion that the Iraqis might remain as the Palestinians did is a nightmare for the Syrian leader-

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<sup>147</sup> Crisis Group interview, Syrian businessman, Damascus, 16 September 2007.

<sup>148</sup> This recognition initially caused some turmoil within Iraq's armed opposition. "The resistance cares about Syria's position. [Foreign Minister] Walid al-Muallim's visit to Baghdad was seen by the resistance as a source of concern. Syria should stay away from the Arab project of dividing the resistance". Crisis Group interview, Iraqi journalist with extensive access to the insurgency, July 2007. "The armed groups issued harsh statements as a result of Talabani's visit to Damascus, from where he thanked Syria for its assistance in fighting terrorism. That the regime would let him say that was troubling to some; it was one more factor, in addition to enhanced border controls and the announcement of tougher measures on refugees. All this created a climate of tension, but I doubt it will last. Syria fights terrorism, and that's not something new, and it also remains firm in its calls for a U.S. withdrawal. Damascus differentiates between terrorism, embodied by al-Qaeda in Iraq, and legitimate resistance to the occupation. That's long been the case. Also, the armed groups' statements were a way of demonstrating that they are their own masters and not Syrian puppets". Crisis Group interview, senior Iraqi figure with extensive access to Syrian officials, Damascus, February 2007. A Syrian official explained: "Syria's balanced stance toward Iraq is logical. We are attached to Iraq's unity and that of the Iraqi people. We wish to see emerge a government that may stabilise the country". Crisis Group interview, senior interior ministry official, Damascus, 24 April 2008.

<sup>149</sup> An official detailed some of these efforts: "We now have patrols along the border 24/7. We built 557 permanent surveillance posts, interspaced with mobile positions. We erected an earthen berm three metres high, as a way of clearly demarcating the border. We exchange information and coordinate closely with the Iraqi side, through liaison officers. Also, any Arab expressing a desire to travel to Iraq legally must seek approval from his embassy. All in all, the progress has been remarkable. There remains a little smuggling but on a small scale. This is due to the usual problem of dealing with cross-border tribes. At the last security meeting, held a couple of weeks ago, we received ample praise even from Iraq". Ibid. Iraqis who previously made the most of Syria's lax border control said that things had changed dramatically in 2007. Crisis Group interviews, September 2007.

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<sup>145</sup> A Syrian official said, "Syria long did not really have an Iraq policy. Syria was in a wait-and-see mode. As often, there was no decision-making mechanism. Rather, different constituencies were pulling our policy in different directions, and ultimately the president acted as arbiter". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 19 September 2007.

<sup>146</sup> Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, Damascus, 10 September 2007.

ship and people. We hope to see the problem solved in the near future but are under no illusion. It won't be tomorrow or the day after. We have been working with the Iraqi government on a number of tracks to foster a solution. These include national reconciliation. They also include security cooperation, a field in which we achieved significant success in the aftermath of meetings between Iraq and Syria at the ministerial and security levels. We captured many suspects and handed them over to their respective countries. A third track is to better control the border and entry points. This goes both ways; we also are concerned now about infiltration and smuggling back into Syria.<sup>150</sup>

The belated emergence of these preoccupations can be seen in Syria's approach to the refugee crisis. It took until April 2007 for the regime to appoint a high-level official – Faysal Muqdad, the vice minister for foreign affairs – to oversee the file.<sup>151</sup> A fully computerised and centralised system to keep track of entries and departures at the border was developed and became fully operational only later that year.<sup>152</sup>

At the same time, the Syrian population became increasingly hostile toward refugees. In some ways, the Iraqis had a positive economic impact, boosting consumption<sup>153</sup> and reinvigorating the housing market.<sup>154</sup>

But there also were real downsides. They seldom could invest in productive and worthwhile ventures; higher demand for subsidised goods (such as petrol, gas, electricity and water) weighed heavily on the state budget;<sup>155</sup> and inflationary pressures came at great cost to low- and middle-income families. A Syrian journalist explained: "It's quite simple: the presence of refugees was a boon to real estate, industrial or commercial owners, all of whom could raise their prices or broaden their clientele. By contrast, it significantly impoverished consumers".<sup>156</sup> Inflation had various side effects: no longer able to pay the same rent as their Iraqi counterparts, some Syrian families were summarily evicted; housing difficulties in turn could seriously compromise marital prospects, as home ownership can be considered a prerequisite for matrimony.<sup>157</sup>

Further complicating matters, a government-announced series of long-overdue reforms aimed at cutting back subsidies coincided with the height of refugee-related anxieties. Experienced by many Syrians as the cause of all their social ills, the Iraqi presence in reality mainly helped to reveal them.<sup>158</sup> A Syrian journalist described the atmosphere that prevailed at the time the regime introduced the visa requirement:

Increasingly, we are witnessing the emergence of two social classes in our country: the very wealthy, who drive phenomenally expensive cars and all

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<sup>150</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior Syrian official, Damascus, 14 November 2007.

<sup>151</sup> A UN official said, "We suffered from the absence of a central authority in Syria to deal with or coordinate its response to the refugee issue. If we wanted anything to be done, we had to be in touch with several ministries: education, health, directorate of immigration, ministry of Red Crescent affairs and so forth". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 25 October 2007.

<sup>152</sup> "Now, all entries and departures are kept track of by a computerised system centralising information provided by all border points. Thus I can tell you that since 1 October 2007 and up until yesterday, 286,145 Iraqis entered Syrian territory and 365,093 left. Obviously, we had to expand our staff and hardware. We based ourselves on the old system and developed it. We still lack technology, but you would be surprised by our efficiency. For example, we have no system to detect fake travel documents. But our people uncover many cases, simply because they know the lay of the land and can tell if a story holds water or not". Crisis Group interview, senior ministry of interior official, Damascus, 24 April 2008.

<sup>153</sup> "From a strictly economic perspective, the influx had some positive effects. Officials constantly try to promote tourism. These Iraqis come here, rent flats, spend money and ultimately will leave. Why not consider them as tourists?" Crisis Group interview, Syrian economist, Damascus, 10 September 2007.

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<sup>154</sup> According to the IMF, "the economic recovery underway since 2004 has gained momentum, benefiting from inflows from Iraqi refugees and abundant liquidity in the Gulf region... Growth was driven in part by the impulse from the influx of Iraqi refugees, which is likely to have had a significant first round impact on aggregate demand, which was amplified by a wealth effect associated with the boom in real estate and rental prices". Available at <http://imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2007/cr07288.pdf>.

<sup>155</sup> According to a human rights advocate, "the Syrian government subsidises a number of goods such as oil products, bread, electricity, water and education. The government pays about 60,000 SYP [over \$1,200] a year per student. The Iraqis send their kids to Syrian schools and pay nothing. Moreover the Syrian government has to build new schools and hire more teachers to cope with the influx". Crisis Group, Syrian human rights advocate, Damascus, 26 September 2007. Beside the fact that refugees consume subsidised goods in Syria, officials complain that these goods are smuggled into Iraq, where prices are much higher. Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, Damascus, 25 September 2007.

<sup>156</sup> Crisis Group interview, Syrian journalist, 15 September 2007.

<sup>157</sup> "Three years ago I could buy a house, now I can't, and I can't get married if I don't buy a house". Crisis Group interview, Syrian middle-class employee, Damascus, 3 October 2007.

<sup>158</sup> "The refugee issue has been invoked to blame the Iraqis for whatever is going wrong in the country". Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, Damascus, 10 September 2007.



others who can barely get by. The influx of Iraqis has only further deepened this chasm. Tensions are rising in an unprecedented manner. People are alarmed by the economic reforms and prices are only getting higher. Everybody fears that, reassuring discourse aside, radical reforms are around the corner, including the suppression of subsidies that are vital for the less well-off. Ordinary Syrians tend to attribute all their problems to the Iraqis: housing costs, the rise in prices, increased labour competition, even the elimination of subsidies. I fear the street might explode. In fact, violent incidents such as brawls or even killings remain marginal but already are on the rise.<sup>159</sup>

Although clashes involving Iraqis were both rare and quickly brought under control,<sup>160</sup> tensions nonetheless became cause for worry.<sup>161</sup> Anecdotes and rumours filled the streets, a sure sign of popular anxiety.<sup>162</sup> In the eyes of some Syrians a large number of the “eight million Iraqis”<sup>163</sup> living in their country were guilty of serious crimes. These trends, and the authorities’ subsequent response, suggest Syria’s capacities as a host country were being stretched to the limit.

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<sup>159</sup> Crisis Group interview, Syrian journalist, Damascus, 1 October 2007.

<sup>160</sup> Syrian journalists mentioned several gang-related clashes and the politically motivated assassination of a Baathist figure. Crisis Group interview, Syrian journalists, Damascus, September-October 2007. “We’ve witnessed an increase of criminality but also the emergence of previously unknown forms of criminal activity, such as kidnappings and forgeries of both documents and currency. Syria took measures to protect its people and its Iraqi guests [ie, refugees]. We have begun making precise inventories of where Iraqis dwell and congregate and what are the specific needs of various locations, and that includes their security needs”. Crisis Group interview, senior ministry of interior official, Damascus, 24 April 2008.

<sup>161</sup> “The refugee issue has become an enormous problem, not just an economic one, but a political and security one. I, for instance, live in Masakin Barza. Relations between Syrians and Iraqis are ok, because things are under tight control. But prejudices and resentment are building up to a troubling extent”. Crisis Group interview, Syrian resident of Masakin Barza, Damascus, 3 October 2007.

<sup>162</sup> “Someone from the city Dair Zor told me that an angry crowd stopped a lorry on the highway leading to the Iraqi border – a major thoroughfare for exports to Iraq. The lorry was filled with vegetables. The people told the driver that those vegetables would go to Syrians and not Iraqis, and they pillaged the goods”. Crisis Group interview, Syrian journalist, Damascus, 15 November 2007.

<sup>163</sup> A taxi driver insisted this was the real number. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 8 October 2007.

## **B. THE SEPTEMBER 2007 TURNING POINT**

Throughout 2007, the political establishment grew increasingly worried about risks of instability related to the growing presence of Iraqis. The security apparatus had long viewed the refugees as potential U.S. spies,<sup>164</sup> jihadi militants or, more simply, troublemakers.<sup>165</sup> Officials also feared that Iraqis might carry the germs of religious or ethnic strife. According to a Syrian journalist:

Since Saddam’s fall, Syria has witnessed a series of unusual incidents related to ethnic and sectarian tensions that previously had remained latent. These include a Kurdish uprising triggered by a clash between Arab and Kurdish soccer fans; fights opposing Christians and Muslims in Hasaka, Druze and Bedouins in the south, as well as Alawites and Ismaelites in the north of Damascus.<sup>166</sup>

Saddam Hussein’s December 2006 execution, with ugly sectarian overtones, reportedly triggered disturbances in Syria.<sup>167</sup> Seeing large numbers of Iraqis gather to mark certain events worried local security

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<sup>164</sup> An Iraqi officer claimed, “Syrian security officers arrested an Iraqi who was discreetly taking pictures of former Iraqi officials with his cell phone during Friday prayers and on the street. Rumour had it that he was paid \$100 per photograph”. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 20 October 2007. “There are vivid discussions among Syrian officials about the refugees’ negative impact. Some blame them for rising inflation, prostitution and AIDS and claim the U.S. has been using Iraqis as spies. All this leads to pressure on the regime to take action. As a result, Syria is considering a more discriminating policy in order to weed out criminals and spies while offering asylum to those who deserve it”. Crisis Group interview, senior Iraqi figure with access to Syrian officials, Damascus, February 2007.

<sup>165</sup> Crisis Group interview, Syrian officials, Damascus, September-October 2007.

<sup>166</sup> Crisis Group interview, Syrian journalist, Damascus, September 2007. A Syria-based Iraqi politician remarked, “Syria fears that any political or social activity undertaken by Iraqis will be patterned along sectarian, ethnic or even geographic lines. This is intolerable for the regime. The spread of sectarianism from Iraq into Syria would present a serious threat”. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 1 November 2007. A Syrian journalist added: “Before, sectarianism was hidden. Now it appears more vividly and palpably among Syrians, even among secularists and liberals. Everyone seems to be retreating back to his own community. People who in the past never did are now wondering about their own sectarian identity”. Crisis Group interview, Syrian journalist, Damascus, October 2007.

<sup>167</sup> Crisis Group interview, Syrian journalist, Damascus, October 2007.

officials.<sup>168</sup> According to a Syrian journalist, apprehension within the security establishment was such that in August 2007 it sent a list of questions to all relevant institutions regarding the impact of the refugee crisis and began lobbying for the visa requirement.<sup>169</sup> The refugees' perceived economic cost also played an important if not central part.<sup>170</sup>

Overall, a Syrian official explained:

The visa decision was taken progressively and for a number of reasons. Basically, we are overwhelmed and an increasing number of voices within the apparatus were urging that we stop the flow. Besides the economy, numerous factors played a role. The ministry of interior rang the alarm bell, because our border officials no longer could cope. Other ministries joined in. Frustration played a part as well: even though we kept our doors open for Iraqis, the rest of the world was not giving us any credit. Worse, we were being blamed both domestically and abroad, accused of not doing enough, of having nefarious intentions and so forth.

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<sup>168</sup> "You should have seen the Iraqis in Jaramana [a Damascus suburb and key refugee location] after Iraq's football team won the Asian Cup [in July 2007]. There's just no way our security apparatus can manage such a crowd if it gets out of control". Crisis Group interview, Syrian journalist, Damascus, 25 September 2007. Asked how he and his colleagues could cope with such a large and rapid influx of refugees, a security official responsible for interviewing residency applicants feigned to collapse in his chair as a result of sheer exhaustion. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 16 December 2006.

<sup>169</sup> Crisis Group interview, Syrian journalist, Damascus, October 2007.

<sup>170</sup> In the words of a Syrian official, "The decision was taken exclusively for economic reasons. The population influx was just unsustainable. For instance, we'd been fighting to bring our birth rate down because we could not continue with our own population growth rate. And suddenly we get this massive influx, not simply of children – which would give us some time to react and find ways to provide for them – but also of adults. Even children posed a problem: we planned to build schools based on our own birth rate and nearly overnight we had to take in new pupils by the tens of thousands". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 10 September 2007. "The deputy prime minister in charge of economic affairs, Abdallah Dardari, took the lead in terms of underscoring the refugees' economic impact, and the issue was discussed in the cabinet. Each minister presented a paper on how Iraqis affected his domain, For example, the minister of housing and construction wrote about inflation in the real-estate sector while the minister of education raised issues related to schools and teaching". Crisis Group interview, Syrian human rights advocate who conducted extensive fieldwork on the refugee issue, Damascus, 26 September 2007.

Even Iraq's government criticised us, claiming we were hosting refugees hostile to it.<sup>171</sup>

The decision to impose a visa was not made without a fight. The Baath party leadership in particular resisted it, mainly invoking ideological concerns.<sup>172</sup>

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's September 2007 visit apparently was decisive. Syrian officials raised the visa issue with him, expecting he would object and seek alternative means of alleviating refugee-related burdens. Iraqi President Jalal al-Talabani had used that approach in January 2007, promising to help Syria with a series of measures that, to date, remain unimplemented.<sup>173</sup> At the time, Syria decided not to introduce a visa requirement, instead making Iraqi refugees' living conditions somewhat more difficult.<sup>174</sup> However, Maliki's September 2007 posture caught Syria by surprise and removed any lingering doubt. A Syrian official said:

The idea of introducing a visa was presented to Maliki as a way of reminding him of both his responsibilities as prime minister and Talabani's January promises. His response was "you're most welcome to introduce the visa". We were taken aback. Privately, members of the Iraqi delegation

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<sup>171</sup> Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, Damascus, 25 September 2007. "[Iraqi Prime Minister] Maliki sees all refugees as oppositionists. It's true that all those who are here criticise him and blame him at least in part for their exile". Crisis Group interview, Iraqi politician based in Syria, Damascus, 31 October 2007.

<sup>172</sup> A senior official claimed: "This was not an easy decision. We debated it extensively within the Baath Party command. There was a lot of resistance but things simply could not continue the way they were". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 13 September 2007. Some members of the leadership suggested that Syria adopt the principle of reciprocity, demanding visas from citizens of Arab states that themselves demand visas from Syrians. Advantages would be twofold: first, Iraq would not be singled out; secondly, Syria could impose the requirement on Gulf citizens, some of whom have been found to transit through Damascus on their way to Iraq. A UN official said, "Syria held great pride in the fact it was the only Arab State to stick to a pan-Arab border policy. Even after the September shift, the government continued to debate this". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 25 October 2007.

<sup>173</sup> For instance, the Iraqi government reportedly pledged to sell oil at a preferential rate. Crisis Group interview, Syrian economist and government adviser, Damascus, 27 September 2007.

<sup>174</sup> In particular, Syria granted Iraqi refugees a one-month residency permit which could be extended for two months. At the expiration of that three-month period, they had to leave the country but could return for a new three-month stay. Prior to that, Iraqis would obtain a three-month residency permit automatically renewable at the border.

went so far as to berate the refugees as “cowards”. As a result of Maliki’s approach, we lost all hope that the Iraqi government would stand up to its responsibilities and carry its share of the burden.<sup>175</sup>

On 3 September 2007, Syria announced that, effective one week later, any Iraqi wishing to enter the country would need a visa. A brief dust-up between the two governments ensued. Maliki’s office, perhaps intent on demonstrating that it cared for the refugees’ well-being, claimed it had sent an emissary to Damascus and convinced its neighbour to suspend the decision. Syria issued a categorical denial.<sup>176</sup>

The Syrian decision’s improvised character quickly became apparent. The government seems not to have anticipated any potential repercussion. Embassies and border authorities were not given instructions regarding how to deal with visa requests or exceptional circumstances, such as medical emergencies. In Damascus, Iraqi taxi and truck drivers, who play a vital role in bilateral commercial relations, were at a loss for several days, fearing that they would be stuck in their home country if they returned there. The government did not take account of difficulties many Iraqis would face in seeking access to the Syrian embassy in Baghdad. And it gave no indication it had contemplated the risk that many Iraqis in Syria would choose to reside their illegally rather than return home.<sup>177</sup> On 13 September, the government suspended the measure, pur-

portedly due to Ramadan;<sup>178</sup> in reality, it needed time to organise implementation.<sup>179</sup>

Several weeks later, the government unveiled details of its new policy discreetly, almost ashamedly, as if wanting to reserve the ability to modify them. In an undated and unsigned document, with neither letterhead nor formal identification, it laid out directives that came into force on 17 October 2007. The document lists categories of people qualifying for a three-month, \$50 visa.<sup>180</sup> These categories aside, well-connected Iraqis also can receive visas.<sup>181</sup>

Syria’s policy went through several phases. Initially, visas only could be obtained at its Baghdad embassy.

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<sup>178</sup> “Syria to drop visa demand for Iraqis during Ramadan”, Agence France-Presse, 13 September 2007.

<sup>179</sup> According to a Western diplomat, “the decision to delay the visa requirement results from a combination of factors, most of which relate to Syria’s unpreparedness. The government had not issued any instruction, whether to border authorities or to embassies abroad. They were not ready to deal with a sudden increase in visa requests. Nor did Syrian officials expect that so many well-connected Iraqis would use their ties to try to game the system”. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 30 September 2007. A Syrian official put it as follows: “The main reason for the postponement had nothing to do with Ramadan. When a government takes a decision as brutal as this one, families find themselves split apart. The deferral was one way of allowing them to reunite”. Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, Damascus, 19 September 2007.

<sup>180</sup> The categories include: 1) business people, members of chambers of commerce, industry and agriculture, and their spouses and children; 2) members of institutions related to education and scientific research, along with their spouses and children; 3) students registered at Syrian universities, learning institutions and schools, and their parents; 4) truck and taxi drivers shuttling between the two countries; 5) expatriates provided they enjoy valid residence in the country they officially live in; 6) Iraqi women married to non-Iraqis eligible for a Syrian visa; 7) Iraqi men married to non-Iraqis eligible for a Syrian visa, and their children; 8) Iraqi men married to a Syrian and their children, as well as children born out of a previous marriage; 9) Iraqi women married to an Iraqi legally resident in Syria and their children; 10) persons transiting through Syria, having been granted a third country visa; 11) persons seeking treatment in Syria and who can present a medical prescription ratified by the Iraqi ministry of health, the Iraqi ministry of foreign affairs and the Syrian embassy in Iraq; 12) experts and technicians on official mission; and 13) artistic groups, sport teams and trade unions.

<sup>181</sup> A Syria-based Iraqi politician said, “the Syrians are understanding. I have had no problem intervening on behalf of specific cases. All I have to do is pick up the phone”. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 31 October 2007. One Syrian figure with extensive ties to Iraq boasted that he had facilitated the delivery of “thousands” of residency permits for Iraqi refugees. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 17 May 2008.

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<sup>175</sup> Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, Damascus, 11 September 2007. “People were finding it difficult to accept that, with 1.5 million Iraqis already in Syria, the borders were left wide open. We decided that the breaking point would be when Syria couldn’t provide Iraqis with the same level of services it provides Syrians. During Maliki’s visit, we raised the issue once again. He welcomed the introduction of a visa and even requested us to take this measure, arguing that ‘we need to keep the Iraqis in Iraq, not out of Iraq’. We implemented the measure, but it was a very difficult decision for Syria to take. We strongly believe that any Arab can come to Syria at will”. Crisis Group interview, senior Syrian official, 14 November 2007.

<sup>176</sup> “Syria denies dropping Iraqi visa plan”, Agence France-Presse, 7 September 2007. A Syrian official denied that Iraq had even sent an envoy. Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, Damascus, 11 September 2007.

<sup>177</sup> A Syrian official admitted: “We haven’t looked into all this, no decisions have been made. You see, first we just had to stop the flow. We couldn’t go on like this. Only afterwards will we see about how to manage those who are already here. One thing is sure, we won’t be expelling them”. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 11 September 2007.

Subsequently – and reportedly at the urging of high-level Iraqis – the government authorised delivery at border posts<sup>182</sup> and, for a time, it seemed most Iraqis could fit into one category or another, if only by purchasing a forged medical certificate in Iraq. A UN official commented:

The introduction of a visa requirement initially translated into a total sealing of the border. The visa was only obtainable at the embassy in Baghdad, which made it impossible for most Iraqis. Then, not long after, it became available at the border and to an increasing extent at the discretion of border authorities. Formally, thirteen categories of eligible Iraqis were introduced, but in practice anyone capable of proving that he needed medical assistance in Syria would be granted access directly at the border.<sup>183</sup>

However, as described below, Syria later hardened its policy once again.

### C. THE CURRENT SITUATION

The net effect of these decisions essentially has been to stabilise the situation. The refugee influx dropped markedly, but the outflow – which had sharply risen immediately after the visa requirement was first introduced<sup>184</sup> – quickly diminished as well. According to UNHCR, approximately 1,500 Iraqis enter Syria from Iraq every day, which is about equivalent to the

number who leave.<sup>185</sup> Many who depart are precisely those Syria would prefer not to host – Iraqis lacking resources or residency status.<sup>186</sup> Even so, significant challenges remain, and Syria's capacity to meet them is inadequate.

Claiming (without substantiation) that they are spending over \$1.5 billion per year to care for the refugees,<sup>187</sup> officials complain about the inadequacy of international assistance. A Syrian intellectual described a sense of frustration:

Iraqi refugees are costing the Syrian state no less than \$1 billion per year. To date, the only state-sponsored assistance to Syria comes from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation: \$1 million. Although the U.S. has pledged \$153 million to Jordan, Syria and Lebanon to help deal with their refugee problem, none of that has been delivered to Damascus. UNHCR has provided \$10 million worth of aid for health and education out of a 2007 budget of \$123 million. The bulk of the burden has been, and continues to be, shouldered by the Syrian government and tax-payer. Although since 2003 the U.S. has given \$700 million “to help Jordan offset the economic dislocation it faces due to the conflict in Iraq”, no comparable payment has been made to Syria. Other Western governments which also bear responsibility for the chaos in Iraq, such as Australia, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, Denmark, Japan and Great Britain, have been unwilling to help Syria adequately support its Iraqi refugees.<sup>188</sup>

Syria's state institutions have not benefited from any noteworthy foreign aid. This largely reflects Western anger at Syria's regional policies, in particular the crisis in U.S./Syrian relations. Syrian officials do not conceal their anger:

We keep reminding the U.S. that without this war there would be no refugees. The U.S. is not meeting its responsibilities. Although they spent something like \$600 billion on military expenditure, their contribution to the humanitarian aspects of this crisis has been risible. They claim to be funding UNHCR, but UNHCR is not the one shouldering most of the burden. The U.S.'s Iraqi friends have promised much and delivered little. We only

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<sup>182</sup> Another Syria-based Iraqi political leader commented, “Maliki was only too glad to see that people from Mosul or Tikrit would have to go to Baghdad to get their visa: it's a way of controlling things. So I lobbied the Syrian government to allow visa delivery at the border”. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 26 October 2007.

<sup>183</sup> Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 15 May 2008. Pressed to explain why Syria introduced a visa requirement at all if it was so easy to get one, an official responded: “We grant residency to anyone requiring treatment in Syria and medical assistance is free. We grant it to anyone whose children go to a Syrian school, where tuition is also free of charge. We host anyone whose life may be at risk if he were to go back to Iraq. In a sense, the visa wasn't so much a way of sealing the border as an attempt to organise, keep track of the flow and optimise our response”. Crisis Group interview, senior interior ministry official, Damascus, 24 April 2008.

<sup>184</sup> In a November 2007 UNHCR/IPSOS poll of Iraqis living in Syria, 46.1 per cent said they or people they knew were returning because they could no longer afford to live in Syria; 25.6 per cent claimed they were forced to leave because their residency status had expired; only 14.1 per cent suggested that the security situation had improved to the point where they felt they could go home. “Syria Update”, UNHCR, March 2008.

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> In a November 2007 survey, 71.7 per cent of those who left fell in one of those two categories. Ibid.

<sup>187</sup> See *Al-Hayat*, 22 October 2007.

<sup>188</sup> “Sami Moubayed, “Iraqi Refugees ... The Road to Damascus”, *Al-Hayat*, 30 September 2007.

received token help from countries like Norway, Denmark or Sweden. Help from major potential donors has not been forthcoming. Even the \$10 million promised by the UAE [United Arab Emirates] hasn't been delivered. All this is linked to attempts to isolate and pressure Syria, thus blurring the line between politics and humanitarian issues. Also, some European states say "why should we pay for the mistakes made by the Americans?"<sup>189</sup>

There is another aspect, which is Syria's own ambivalence about foreign help – eager for the international recognition and engagement it would imply, yet fearful of the practical consequences it might entail. On the one hand, officials complain of insufficient assistance; on the other, they argue they would not know how to handle an abundant inflow of aid and worry about its potential domestic consequences. Although they self-servingly stress that their greatest concern is the risk of corruption, the Syrian bureaucracy's overall disorganisation and inertia seem to be the key problem.<sup>190</sup>

By their own admission, even UN agencies – which, by common design, have become the chief recipients of donor assistance<sup>191</sup> – extend insufficient help to Syria.<sup>192</sup> In March 2007, UNHCR provided food to fewer than 150,000 Iraqi refugees in Syria, health care

to 200,000 and school supplies to 15,000.<sup>193</sup> According to its 2008 estimates, it would have to double the volume of assistance to meet existing needs.<sup>194</sup>

The Syrian Red Crescent faces a similar situation: despite remarkable growth, it still falls far short of what is needed. A Western aid worker said, "the Red Crescent's budget went from \$250,000 in 2006 to \$10 million today, and it continues to grow, because UNHCR keeps channelling funds through it. But it lacks the capacity to cope with its colossal challenge".<sup>195</sup>

Moreover, any foreign NGO wishing to work in Syria in principle must partner with the Red Crescent Society, which has imposed rather prohibitive conditions.<sup>196</sup> The international NGOs' heretofore extremely limited role is unlikely to expand over time. Prior to the crisis, Syria had virtually no experience interacting with NGOs, humanitarian or otherwise, and a hard time grasping the very concept.<sup>197</sup> Officials deeply distrust organisations which, in their minds, might harbour an anti-regime agenda<sup>198</sup> or inspire local NGOs to ramp

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<sup>189</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior Syrian official, Damascus, 14 November 2007. EU member states committed a combined total of €10 million to assist refugees in Syria in 2007. "Contribution financière des Etats Membres de l'EU pour les réfugiés irakiens en Syrie depuis le 1er janvier 2007". EU internal document, received by Crisis Group, November 2007. And: "Five Years Later, A Hidden Crisis", report of the International Rescue Committee (IRC) Commission on Iraqi Refugees, March 2008, p.8, at: [www.theirc.org/resources/2008/iraq\\_report.pdf](http://www.theirc.org/resources/2008/iraq_report.pdf).

<sup>190</sup> "We will be accountable and transparent. We definitely have no problem with donors checking how funds have been utilised. The pace is slow on our side because this is something new to us, because we want the Iraqis to go back to Iraq and because many projects simply take time". Crisis Group interview, senior Syrian official, Damascus, 14 November 2007.

<sup>191</sup> "Syria doesn't want the responsibility of directly receiving funds from donors. This is why a channel was chosen – in effect UNHCR". Crisis Group interview, senior Syrian official, 28 November 2007.

<sup>192</sup> Although some Iraqis may be returning to Iraq or finding refuge elsewhere, the impoverishment of those who remain presents a growing challenge to UN agencies. "A majority of Iraqi refugees came to Syria with their savings and are running out of money. So they send their children to work, creating a child labour issue, become homeless, encourage their sisters and daughters to turn to 'survival sex' [ie, prostitution] or engage in other forms of criminality". Crisis Group interview, UN official, Damascus, 26 September 2007.

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<sup>193</sup> "Syria Update", op. cit. That said, those numbers have been rising. In April, 300,000 Iraqis benefited from health assistance and 180,000 from food handouts; UNHCR's target is to serve 300,000 beneficiaries by the end of 2008. Crisis Group interview, UN official, Damascus 15 May 2008.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Crisis Group interview, Western aid worker, 20 November 2007.

<sup>196</sup> As of March 2008, regulations included the requirements that NGOs share a common bank account with the Red Crescent Society (the approval of both parties being necessary for any disbursement), that the Red Crescent enjoy oversight of the NGOs' recruitment process and that 2 per cent of the NGOs' budget be paid to the Red Crescent in compensation for "expenses" related to the partnership. Negotiations over these issues are ongoing. Crisis Group interviews, UN official and Western diplomats, Damascus, 15 March 2008.

<sup>197</sup> The confusion of Syrian officials was on display when they described the Syrian Red Crescent Society, which is entirely funded by the government and falls under the supervision of a "state ministry for the Red Crescent", as an NGO. Crisis Group interview, Syrian officials, Damascus, November 2007.

<sup>198</sup> A senior official commented: "We think there is a role for NGOs. But we should mainly rely on local NGOs. In fact, much is being done by our principal Syrian NGO, the Red Crescent. If foreign NGOs want to help, they are most welcome. We have set up an accreditation system. But we will only welcome real NGOs, not political and dubious ones, not NGOs which come here to scrutinise and interfere. Some tend to abuse their mandate, as happened in Darfur. The idea that Iraqi NGOs might be established has also circulated, but we will not allow NGOs based on sectarian foundations". Crisis Group interview, senior Syrian official, Damascus, 14 November 2007.

up their own independent activities.<sup>199</sup> A Western diplomat summed up the problem:

We are facing a unique situation. Iraqis in Syria often come from the middle class, can integrate themselves with the local population and typically are first-time refugees. There is no need for tents or water buckets. It is a very unusual case from a humanitarian point of view. It also is a real novelty for Syria. Syrian officials do not know the NGO world and don't trust it. The Red Crescent fears that if anything goes wrong, they will be held responsible and in any event lack the capacity to manage this skyrocketing activity. Until recently, it only had fifteen full-time employees and no clear procedure to deal with NGOs. The Red Crescent took the position that it would not accredit NGOs unless they were fully funded, while the NGOs needed the accreditation in order to raise funds. In short, all of this generated mistrust, misunderstanding and frustration.<sup>200</sup>

#### D. TREATMENT OF REFUGEES

For the most part, the U.S. and others have focused on Syria's reported hosting of several Iraqi Baath Party members. This certainly is the case, though it is only a partial picture.<sup>201</sup> Numerous other groups have found refuge, including some of the more vulnerable minori-

ties, such as Christians and Sabeen-Mandean.<sup>202</sup> There are few reports of discriminatory treatment: any governmental repression appears as harsh toward nationals as it is toward Iraqis.<sup>203</sup> That means that Iraqi politicians residing in Syria must scrupulously watch what they say and in particular feel compelled to laud President Bashar al-Assad in admiring prose.

Iraqis also officially are barred from working in Syria,<sup>204</sup> making them easy prey for exploitation. Women are particularly vulnerable, sometimes having no alternative but to resort to prostitution; in Damascus, ad hoc brothels where Iraqi women, including young girls, work for a living operate with troubling impunity and appear to be proliferating.<sup>205</sup> Some security officials and members of the police reportedly engage in extortion, demanding compensation in exchange for residency permits, though evidence remains anecdotal.<sup>206</sup> More worryingly, the government decided in late April or early May 2008 to harden its stance toward refugees, making it more difficult to obtain a visa and denying residency to Iraqis already in country.<sup>207</sup> A

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<sup>199</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Syrian journalists, Damascus, September-October 2007. There are more legitimate arguments, too, such as concern over the usefulness of small-scale international NGO projects. An official said, "international NGOs willing to work in Syria need a local counterpart, and local NGOs are not up to the task. International NGOs could actually make themselves most useful by transferring expertise and helping to build local capacities rather than coming in with small-scale projects that neither make a big difference in themselves nor develop our own ability to respond". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 28 November 2007.

<sup>200</sup> Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Damascus, 30 September 2007. By mid-March 2008, only three NGOs had received full accreditation (Première Urgence, Danish Refugee Council and International Medical Corps), while over twenty others were waiting for approval. Mercy Corps and the International Rescue Committee reportedly were granted clearance to operate through their own contacts. Crisis Group interview, UN official, Damascus, 15 March 2008.

<sup>201</sup> "As Baathists we tend to feel safer in a country led by the Baath party. I fled Iraq with my family after being threatened simply because I used to belong to the party, as so many other people. The only reasonable choice was to come to Syria". Crisis Group interview, Iraqi Baathist, Damascus, 25 September 2007.

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<sup>202</sup> Christians and Sabeen-Mandean comprise, respectively, 15 per cent and 4.1 per cent of UNHCR-registered Iraqis in Damascus – percentages far higher than their share of the Iraqi population as a whole. "Syria Update", UNHCR, June 2008.

<sup>203</sup> "There is no harassment of Iraqis qua Iraqis. Some abuse occurs – but it is no different from what happens to Syrian citizens". Crisis Group interview, Syrian human rights activist, Damascus, 26 September 2007. There are periodic reports of politically-motivated expulsions (eg, of former U.S. "collaborators"), and some Iraqis appear to have been sent back arbitrarily, but these seem to be exceptions.

<sup>204</sup> "Residency, and work permits occasionally are granted on professional grounds, but numbers don't exceed 5,000. Most Iraqis work illegally, something we tolerate". Crisis Group interview, senior interior ministry official, Damascus, 24 April 2008.

<sup>205</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, May 2008.

<sup>206</sup> Crisis Group interview, Western human rights researcher, Damascus, 6 March 2008.

<sup>207</sup> "More and more people are being turned down. There clearly is a desire to restrict the number of entries and ensure strict enforcement of the thirteen categories. Refugees are now being pressed to leave, although we've seen no systematic or forceful effort to expel them. Even parents of children going to Syrian schools won't see their residency extended beyond July. So they will have to leave, and there is no guarantee they will be able to come back. We have assurances from the ministry of foreign affairs and ministry of interior that this will not happen, but who knows". Crisis Group interview, UN official, Damascus, 15 May 2008. In May 2008, Crisis Group witnessed the rejection of a number of Iraqis who previously would have been accepted without question.

senior Baath party official said that this decision was taken at the highest level and would not be rescinded.<sup>208</sup>

This hardening reflects the regime's slow, hesitant and incremental efforts to manage and take control of the crisis. That said, while minimising the risk of abuse is understandable, Syria has yet to design a system in which the most vulnerable people can obtain protection and legal status; instead, it is mechanically enforcing categories unrelated to actual security threats.<sup>209</sup>

There is a broader point which relates to Iraq's future. In many ways, Syria has become a de facto sanctuary for Iraq's human resources, welcoming a large number of middle class families at a time when Baghdad was witnessing horrific violence, and other borders were sealed. But adult refugees are mostly idle, and children's attendance rates at school reportedly are very low due to the educational system's congestion in parts of the country where Iraqis congregate, the parents' depleting resources and a general sense of their precarious condition.<sup>210</sup> Worse, to expel them when nothing has been planned on the other side of the border to facilitate their social reintegration would further deplete an asset critical to Iraq's future reconstruction. Syria should bear this mind; even more importantly, the Iraqi government and the U.S. have the responsibility to provide sufficient assistance to Syria pending the establishment of adequate resettlement conditions in Iraq.

## V. LEBANON: IMPACT AND RESPONSE

### A. SMALLER IN NUMBERS BUT A POTENTIALLY GROWING PROBLEM

Lebanon has attracted far less attention than other host countries chiefly because of the relative magnitude of its Iraqi refugee problem. Approximately 50,000 have come and, unlike in Syria or Jordan, they are concentrated in areas (such as Beirut's southern suburbs) largely disconnected from the rest of the country.<sup>211</sup> Again in contrast to its counterparts, the Lebanese state does not provide significant social services, whether for citizens or refugees. Moreover, political leaders and opinion-makers have had other, far more serious preoccupations, ranging from the political crisis that roiled the country until June 2008 to confrontation with Fatah al-Islam, a radical Islamist movement.<sup>212</sup>

Still, it would be wrong to ignore the real problems. From a strictly humanitarian viewpoint, Iraqis arguably face greater hardship in Lebanon than elsewhere.<sup>213</sup> A large number has lingered in the country for years, including many prior to 2003.<sup>214</sup> More and more are entering illegally (human traffickers bring them through the mountains across the Syrian-Lebanese border in exchange for up to \$6,000)<sup>215</sup> or overstaying

<sup>208</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior Baath party official, Damascus, 10 May 2008.

<sup>209</sup> A Syrian official stressed that any Iraqi exposed to threats could easily obtain a visa at the Syrian embassy in Baghdad. When pressed on how this embassy would cope with a rise in demands should violence flare up, he answered: "Every problem will find its solution". No contingency planning seems to be taking place. Crisis Group interview, senior interior ministry official, Damascus, 18 May 2008.

<sup>210</sup> Crisis Group interview, UN official, Damascus, May 2008.

<sup>211</sup> Of these, approximately 59.7 per cent are believed to be Shiites; 13.2 per cent Sunnis; 20.4 per cent Chaldean; 3.7 per cent Assyrian; and 1.4 per cent Syrian Orthodox. See Danish Refugee Council, op. cit., p. 48.

<sup>212</sup> See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°69, *Hizbollah and the Lebanese Crisis*, 10 October 2007; and Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°20, *Lebanon at a Tripwire*, 21 December 2006. A member of parliament said, "we haven't been paying much attention to the Iraqis living here. They don't cause trouble. They have their own citizenship, unlike the Palestinians. They don't seem to have a political agenda. And there has been no Iraqi-related terrorism. So only very few Lebanese are aware of the fact that there are up to 60,000 Iraqis in the country. People only will begin noticing if and when they become a problem. For now, it is a non-issue". Crisis Group interview, Farid al-Khazen, Beirut, 10 October 2007.

<sup>213</sup> For details on humanitarian conditions of Iraqis in Lebanon see Danish Refugee Council, op. cit.

<sup>214</sup> About 30 per cent of Lebanon's Iraqis arrived before 2003. Ibid, p. 63.

<sup>215</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Iraqi refugees, Beirut, October-November 2007. It is estimated that over half of all Iraqis in Lebanon have been smuggled this way. See *ibid*. Detection of illegal entrants reportedly has risen of late, probably a by-product of German assistance to Lebanon to better patrol its

their visas.<sup>216</sup> Forced deportations to Iraq also are growing. Iraqis are barred from working – although many claim to find employment, albeit temporary and poorly paid – and visas typically last only a few weeks.<sup>217</sup> Added to this, Lebanon's physical and political absorptive capacity likely is lower than either Jordan's or Syria's given population size, pre-existing tensions surrounding the large Palestinian refugee population and the delicate sectarian balance.

Anecdotal evidence suggests Lebanon's appeal could grow. Refugees assert it is more difficult to find work in Syria, a factor whose importance rises as savings run out.<sup>218</sup> One indicator is the disproportionately high number of single young men among Lebanon's Iraqis, primarily workers who leave their families at home or in Syria and spend as little as possible on accommodation and basic necessities.<sup>219</sup> Christians and Shiites with family ties and religious networks in Lebanon also are prone to move there. Given the relative number of refugees, some Iraqis believe they stand a better chance of third-country resettlement if applying from Lebanon – a conviction reinforced by the fact that U.S. officials in Beirut process applications for U.S. resettlement at a far steadier pace than their Damascus counterparts.<sup>220</sup>

Syria's tightening refugee policy combined with continued lack of employment opportunities likely will further boost the number of those departing that country for Lebanon.<sup>221</sup> Finally, human traffickers carrying Iraqis to other destinations, including Europe, are be-

lieved to be more active in Lebanon than in Syria, a relatively minor but nonetheless relevant factor in the refugees' calculus.<sup>222</sup>

To date, Lebanon has experienced only few Iraqi-related incidents of violence. Refugees – particularly those denied legal status – generally have kept a low profile, and local officials typically evince little worry in this regard.<sup>223</sup> That said, the stringent visa policy has led many Iraqis to enter illegally and remain in hiding.<sup>224</sup> The composition of the Iraqi population – disproportionately single, young, male and therefore classically more prone to violence and unrest – fuels other fears.<sup>225</sup>

## B. STATE AND SOCIETAL ASSISTANCE

The Lebanese state has largely ignored the refugees' plight. Other than the General Security Organisation, no ministry, department or agency currently is responsible for this issue. Awareness and interest grew somewhat only when it became clear that foreign aid was available, though even this quickly ebbed as officials understood that one consequence of accepting it was to be held responsible for the refugees' fate.<sup>226</sup> In contrast to Syria and Jordan, Lebanon has not opened its health or educational institutions to refugees – a reflection of both the rudimentary state of social services and the ongoing political crisis.<sup>227</sup>

The flip side is that Lebanon has been far more open than others to private, non-governmental initiatives, whether local or foreign. An official remarked:

There are no concerns here about a parallel structure emerging or of these organisations playing a

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Syria borders. Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian workers, Beirut, October-November 2007.

<sup>216</sup>From the late 1990s onwards, Lebanon has adhered to a relatively restrictive visa and residency policy, displaying little tolerance for Iraqis who enter in contravention of its rules. However, Iraqis can obtain a temporary visa at the border if they deposit \$2,000 and show a hotel reservation. In Baghdad, Iraqis must deposit \$10,000 in an Iraqi bank in order to obtain a visa. According to Lebanon's General Security Organisation (*al-Amn al-'Am*), in 2006 over 60,000 visas were granted to Iraqis in this manner. For more details see, "Rot Here or Die There: Bleak Choices for Iraqi Refugees in Lebanon", Human Rights Watch, November 2007, pp. 16 ff.

<sup>217</sup>Ibid.

<sup>218</sup>Crisis Group interviews, Iraqi refugees, Beirut, October 2007.

<sup>219</sup>Single young men constitute 68 per cent of the Iraqi male refugee population in Lebanon. See Danish Refugee Council, op. cit.

<sup>220</sup>Crisis Group interview, UNHCR official, Beirut, October 2007.

<sup>221</sup>Ibid. See also Danish Refugee Council, op. cit., p. 23. Humanitarian workers and Lebanese officials claim that the number of Iraqi entrees rose following Syria's October 2007 announcement of a more stringent policy. Crisis Group interviews, Beirut, October-November 2007.

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<sup>222</sup>Crisis Group interview, humanitarian workers, Beirut, October-November 2007.

<sup>223</sup>Crisis Group interviews, Iraqi refugees, Lebanese officials, Beirut, October 2007.

<sup>224</sup>An Iraqi observer remarked that the country's sectarian and political organisations served as substitutes for strong central monitoring. He referred in particular to Hizbollah's purported surveillance of Shiite Iraqis in the Dahyah neighbourhood. "Hizbollah exerts a strong moral influence over them. The movement has neighbourhood-watch committees and is well organised. Iraqis who live there do not have a private life. The movement knows where they go, where they live, whether they have a girlfriend". Crisis Group interview, Faleh Abd al-Jabar, Iraqi Institute for Strategic Studies, Beirut, 10 October 2007.

<sup>225</sup>Crisis Group interviews, NGO officials, Beirut, October 2007.

<sup>226</sup>Crisis Group interview, Lebanese official, Beirut, October 2007.

<sup>227</sup>Ibid.



political role as in Jordan and Syria. It's a mirror image of what the government told NGOs who wanted to help with relief and reconstruction in the South after the 2006 war: "Just pick your village!" No one is coordinating; it is total *laissez-faire*.<sup>228</sup>

Lebanon also stands out as a place where Iraqis have been allowed to set up charities to help their brethren. Iraqi religious institutions, political groups and NGOs provide relief and are planning to widen the scope of their activities. Iraqis used Chaldean and Assyrian churches to set up support networks for their co-religionists; the Lebanese branch of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's office, led by Hajj Hamed al-Haffaf, similarly offers charity to Iraqi Shiites; Muhammad Sa'id Ghrawi, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq's (ISCI's) representative in Syria and Lebanon, distributes food.<sup>229</sup> A former Iraqi municipal officer established the Iraqi Relief Organization to provide help in Baalbak and Tyre. Acting in his personal capacity, Jawad al-Haeri, Iraq's ambassador, requested a license for another charity.<sup>230</sup>

Most of these organisations lack capacity and, being relatively new, are not particularly efficient. Partly as a result, refugees also rely on more experienced Lebanese groups – Christian churches, Hizbollah-affiliated charity organisations such as Al-Imdad and other Shiite organisations, including those run by Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah and the Higher Shiite Council.

While Lebanon's more tolerant attitude is largely welcome, there also is a risk that Iraqi and local humanitarian aid could become politicised, all the more so given the country's highly polarised climate. Nor should non-governmental work be seen as a substitute for state assistance. Lebanon's Iraqi refugees have suffered from governmental and international neglect, failing to receive minimal protection or assistance and at constant risk of deportation or arrest.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

<sup>229</sup> Crisis Group interview, humanitarian worker, Beirut, 5 November 2007.

<sup>230</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Jawad al-Haeri, Iraqi ambassador to Lebanon, Beirut, 10 October 2007, and Lebanese official, Beirut, 9 October 2007.

## VI. IMPLICATIONS FOR IRAQ

### A. THE REFUGEE CRISIS AND THE IRAQI CONFLICT

Triggered by the violence in Iraq, the refugee crisis indirectly helps sustain and finance it. Armed groups whose actions led Iraqis to flee eagerly seized the properties they abandoned, either allocating them to supporters and co-religionists or selling them to generate funds.<sup>231</sup> Such large-scale expropriation likely will fuel future strife if and when refugees return and try to reclaim their homes.<sup>232</sup> As refugees fled, they often were robbed by armed militias and criminal gangs or charged levies at unofficial checkpoints manned by armed groups.<sup>233</sup> Moreover, the exodus contributed to the sectarian homogenisation of formerly mixed neighbourhoods; this enabled armed groups to consolidate their control, recruit new fighters and levy taxes and fees to bankroll their violent activities. All in all, militias and armed groups exploited the refugee crisis for self-enrichment and war racketeering.

The mass exodus jeopardised Iraq's stability in yet another way. Many who left are professionals and administrators from the middle class. A shortage of such skilled labourers and managers inevitably hinders reconstruction.<sup>234</sup> The reverse also is true: among those who remained are many who benefited from patronage or political protection. Having taken *de facto*

<sup>231</sup> Armed groups reportedly engaged in quasi-real-estate activity. See *The Washington Post*, 21 September 2007. See also "Iraqis on the Move: Sectarian Displacement in Baghdad", International Medical Corps, January 2007, p. 9.

<sup>232</sup> See John Fawcett and Victor Tanner, "The Internally Displaced People of Iraq", The Brookings Institution, October 2002; and David Romano, "Whose House is This Anyway? IDP and Refugee Return Policies in Post-Saddam Iraq", *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 18, no. 4 (2005). U.S. military sources acknowledged that a large-scale return could undermine recent security gains. See *The New York Times*, 30 November 2007.

<sup>233</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Iraqi refugees, Beirut, Amman and Damascus, September-November 2007.

<sup>234</sup> Some Iraqis believe this to be a reason why militias have targeted professionals. "There has been a campaign to exterminate Iraqi professionals. Most of them, irrespective of sectarian background, are senior professionals and academics. There are a lot of dirty hands in this. There also may be a class component to this hatred: they were given stipends and privileges during Saddam's days. But, more importantly, it has become a means of war, a way of crippling anything in the country that functions". Crisis Group interview, Iraqi academic, Amman, 13 October 2007.

control of the state's mid-management levels, they will not readily relinquish their gains. In other words, the refugee crisis further politicised the bureaucracy. Overall, these dynamics have given rise to a vicious economic cycle: violence triggers flight, flight hampers reconstruction, and faltering reconstruction in turn fuels violence.<sup>235</sup>

Politically, too, consequences are pernicious. To begin, the (now largely exiled) middle class probably represents Iraq's best bulwark against sectarian politics. Moreover, the disproportionate number of Sunni Arab refugees<sup>236</sup> arguably will interfere with one of the stated goals of the planned provincial elections – to boost that constituency's local political participation and make up for its January 2005 electoral boycott.<sup>237</sup> Although for now it remains unclear whether Iraqis residing abroad will have the right to vote, absentee participation during the two rounds of elections in 2005 was very low;<sup>238</sup> it could well decrease as

refugees in illegal or ill-defined status fear bringing their presence to local authorities' attention.<sup>239</sup>

On the flip side, a number of Iraqis expressed hope that, given its relative distance from the conflict and infrequency of intra-Iraqi conflicts abroad, the refugee community might develop a more tolerant, open-minded political attitude. In time, they said, it could become an effective counterweight to the growing sectarianism, corruption and violence now bedeviling their nation.<sup>240</sup> Yet, however seductive and worthy of encouragement, the prospect of credible political groupings emerging abroad is small. As described above, host governments (with the possible exception of Lebanon) have been wary of allowing independent Iraqi political activity. Iraq's post-2003 history also offers a cautionary tale about the possibility of creating alternative political groupings in exile. Formerly exiled politicians failed to gain popular legitimacy and consequently have been severely hobbled in their ability to govern.

## B. THE IRAQI GOVERNMENT: INEFFICIENCY AND INDIFFERENCE

Refugees are virtually unanimous in charging their government with apathy or, worse, deliberate neglect toward their fate. As some see it, this reflects Baghdad's belief that they are predominantly ex-Baathists and former regime elements, both Sunni and Shiite, who oppose the new order.<sup>241</sup> While there may be some truth to the claim, reality is more complex. The government took a number of controversial steps to discourage departures, particularly of professionals, such as doctors or university lecturers, for example withholding diplomas, certificates and transcripts required for finding employment abroad.<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>235</sup>For an earlier version of this vicious circle, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°30, *Reconstructing Iraq*, 2 September 2004, p. 18.

<sup>236</sup>Estimates of the confessional breakdown of the refugee population are either lacking or unreliable. Still, what data exists amply backs this point. UNHCR registration records suggest that 57.1 per cent of registered Iraqi refugees and asylum seekers in Syria are Sunni (of whom less than 1 per cent are Kurd), 19.5 per cent Shiite and about 20 per cent Christian, Yezidi or Sabeian-Mandean. "Syria Update", UNHCR, June 2008. In Jordan, Sunni Arabs are estimated to represent some 68 per cent of the registered refugee population and in Lebanon 13.2 per cent. Taken together, this suggests that some 62 per cent of registered refugees in the three host countries are Sunni Arab – far more than the proportion of Sunni Arabs among Iraqis as a whole. Many of these estimates do not distinguish between Sunni Arabs and Sunni Kurds. However, the refugee population counts relatively few Kurds; most of the Kurds who fled lived in Baghdad and sought safe haven with relatives in the Kurdistan region.

<sup>237</sup>See Crisis Group Report, *Iraq after the Surge II*, op. cit.

<sup>238</sup>Turnout in the January 2005 elections to choose a transitional government and the December 2005 elections for a national assembly was 58 and 75 per cent respectively. See Kenneth Katzman, "Iraq: Elections, Government and Constitution", Congressional Research Service (CRS), report for Congress, 11 September 2005. Of the estimated 1.2 million Iraqis then residing abroad, only 265,148 (22 per cent) voted in January 2005 and 320,000 (27 per cent) in December 2005. Figures presented by IOM and Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq. See [www.iom-iraq.net/ocv.html](http://www.iom-iraq.net/ocv.html); and BBC, 16 December 2005. The percentages may be somewhat higher since there might have been fewer than 1.2 million Iraqis residing abroad.

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<sup>239</sup>"The Sunni vote will shrink, I think, by at least 25 per cent because a majority of refugees are Sunni Arabs". Crisis Group telephone interview, Ali Allawi, former Iraqi minister of finance and defence, 26 September 2007.

<sup>240</sup>"An Iraqi leadership in exile, drawn from the refugee population, may arise. People are disillusioned with the corruption of those now in power in Baghdad. They may consider setting up an alternative leadership in exile; there's already a lot of talk about this. But no one wants to repeat the mistakes of the past, such as drawing in foreign powers to change the political equation in Iraq. We have to be careful about what we do now", *ibid*.

<sup>241</sup>Crisis Group interviews, Amman, September-October 2007.

<sup>242</sup>In March 2007, the ministry of education reportedly froze the issuance of medical degrees to discourage the flight of hospital staff. The prime minister's office distanced itself from the policy. See Karin Brulliard, "Iraq Reimposes Freeze on

Administrative ineptitude and corruption, more than deliberate policy, also may explain both inadequate refugee assistance and gratuitous bureaucratic obstacles hampering Iraqis' ability to obtain passports or documents required to travel, get married or find a job abroad.<sup>243</sup> In some cases, officials may have preferred to ignore the problem not out of ill will toward refugees but due to embarrassment at what their numbers said about governmental performance. A similar phenomenon likely explains Baghdad's inflated assessment of returnee numbers and eagerness to encourage people to come back, even under unsafe conditions.

Most troubling in the eyes of Iraqi refugees have been efforts by officials and political leaders to convince neighbouring states to introduce tough entry and visa requirements, thereby both restricting access and rendering the status of those who have fled more insecure. Iraqi leaders encouraged Syria and Jordan to impose stricter visa procedures, purportedly to give immigration authorities advance warning and minimise the risk that their citizens would be turned back at the borders.<sup>244</sup> Many refugees suspect less generous motives: an attempt on the part of officials and political leaders to minimise hassles when themselves crossing into Jordan and Syria or an effort to increase the Iraqi interior ministry's control and patronage over the visa allocation process.<sup>245</sup>

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Medical Diplomas in Bid to Keep Doctors from Fleeing Abroad", *The Washington Post*, 5 May 2007. The government later apparently reversed its policy. Crisis Group interview, Iraqi physician, Amman, October 2007.

<sup>243</sup> Foreign officials were quick to criticise Iraqi bureaucratic hurdles. "The Iraqi government is acting as if nothing is going on in its country, focusing on other issues we have with them, such as extradition. They don't acknowledge the seriousness of the situation". Crisis Group interview, Lebanese official, Beirut, 23 October 2007. A Jordanian official expressed similar views. Crisis Group interview, Amman, 21 October 2007.

<sup>244</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Sa'ad Hayani, Iraqi ambassador in Jordan, Amman, 17 October 2007, and Jawad al-Haeri, Iraqi ambassador in Lebanon, Beirut, 10 October 2007.

<sup>245</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Iraqi refugees, Amman, September-October 2007, and Iraqi politicians and foreign humanitarian workers in Amman, October 2007. If increasing the interior ministry's control was the objective, it failed. Jordan rejected the ministry's suggestion that it pre-screen applicants. "The Iraqi interior ministry will not play a role in the visa procedure. We know who they are, and there's no way we will involve them. We want all Iraqis to be able to access the procedure". Crisis Group interview, Jordanian official, Amman, 18 October 2007. The phrase "we know who they are" refers to ISCI, a Shiite Islamist party which has controlled the ministry since the January 2005 elections and turned it into a instrument of sectarian politics. See Crisis

Some Iraqis are equally critical of their embassies and consulates in neighbouring countries which, they allege, are staffed by political cronies with strong ethnic or sectarian biases and scant interest in the refugees' plight. Many say they have to pay bribes to obtain passports;<sup>246</sup> others avoid embassies altogether when they believe that the interior ministry controls consular affairs or that the ambassador represents a particular faction.<sup>247</sup> Several refugees claimed that embassy staff favoured certain confessional or ethnic groups and provided host governments with the names and whereabouts of Iraqi nationals suspected of criminal wrongdoing or illegal residency, some of whom subsequently were deported.<sup>248</sup> More broadly, Iraq's diplomatic missions abroad appear not to have undertaken any significant initiative to improve their citizens' lot or remind host governments of their international legal obligations.<sup>249</sup>

Iraq's government has been both reluctant and late in providing refugees with humanitarian assistance. Only in April 2007, at the donors conference in Geneva, did it finally pledge \$25 million for refugee aid, of which \$15 million was allocated to Syria, \$8 million to Jordan and \$2 million to Lebanon.<sup>250</sup> Although this was supposed to be an initial payment that would stimulate a more massive contribution, nothing of the like materialised: Syria received the funds nearly a year later and doubts much more is on the way,<sup>251</sup> while Jordan declined the offer as a pittance.<sup>252</sup> The

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Group Middle East Report N°70, *Shiite Politics in Iraq: The Role of the Supreme Council*, 15 November 2007.

<sup>246</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Iraqi refugees, Damascus, Amman, October 2007.

<sup>247</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Iraqi refugees, Beirut, October 2007.

<sup>248</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Iraqi refugees, Damascus, October-November 2007.

<sup>249</sup> During a December 2007 state visit to Jordan, one of Iraq's two vice-presidents, Tariq al-Hashimi, reportedly said he was "relieved over the Jordanian stand not to describe Iraqis in Jordan as refugees". PETRA Jordanian News Agency, 11 December 2007.

<sup>250</sup> See "Chairman's Summary, International Conference on Addressing the Humanitarian Needs of Refugees and IDPs Inside Iraq and in Neighbouring Countries", Geneva, 17-18 April 2007.

<sup>251</sup> "At long last, we received the Iraqi pledge of \$15 million a few weeks ago. And that was it". Crisis Group interview, senior Syria official, Damascus, 2 April 2008.

<sup>252</sup> "The Iraqi government offered \$25 million. Syria received \$15 million and Lebanon \$2 million. The \$8 million earmarked for Jordan were rejected by the Kingdom, which saw the amount as preposterous given the needs. This initial deposit was supposed to lead to much larger and sustained support for the refugees. There definitely is a need for the Iraqi government to live up to that commitment". Crisis Group interview, UN official, Damascus, 15 May 2008. The

government also has shown far more interest in encouraging refugees to come home than in bettering their living conditions abroad. In late 2007, state-owned television repeatedly broadcast segments touting security improvements as an inducement; embassies in neighbouring countries urged expatriates to return because “it’s better for them, since they are only suffering here”.<sup>253</sup> In November, Iraq’s embassy in Damascus, claiming there had been notable security progress, organised free coach rides home.<sup>254</sup>

The ministry of displacement and migration has been offering one million Iraqi dinars (\$850) to returning refugee families, although many appear hesitant given that their passports are stamped with a notice reading: “Not to travel for five years”.<sup>255</sup> Yet, while encouraging returns, the government has done little to prepare for potential disputes that await, as refugees or IDPs seek to reclaim their properties; it also has lagged in efforts to provide aid or alternative shelter to needy returnees.<sup>256</sup> According to UNHCR, only a third of a

group of 30 families returning from Syria on Iraqi government buses moved back to their original homes.<sup>257</sup> U.S. battalion commanders complained that, as a result of government inefficiency, they had to improvise solutions to property disputes.<sup>258</sup>

Migration Minister Abdul Samad Rahman acknowledged in December 2007 that the government was unable to handle large flows of returning refugees.<sup>259</sup> By the end May 2008, when the government allocated \$195 million for resettlement, 70 per cent of the returnees had not been able to resettle in their own homes.<sup>260</sup> It is highly doubtful that this amount will be sufficient to encourage Iraqis to return if the government fails to use it to provide alternative shelter.

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Jordanian government suggested that the \$8 million be transferred to UNHCR instead; as of early July 2008, this had yet to take place. Crisis Group email communication, Jordanian foreign ministry official, 9 May 2008.

<sup>253</sup> Crisis Group interview, Jawad al-Haeri, Iraqi ambassador to Lebanon, Beirut, 10 October 2007. He added: “Now people have nothing to eat or they are sent to prison. I ask them: what has been the benefit of your staying here?”

<sup>254</sup> The bus service was suspended after coordination problems surfaced between Iraq’s ministries of transport and defence. Reuters, 16 December 2007. UNHCR’s concerns about the safety of returning Iraqis might also have played a role in the decision. Crisis Group interview, foreign aid workers, Damascus and Amman, October-November 2007. Some refugees alleged that the repatriation effort targeted Shiites in particular. Crisis Group interviews, Iraqi refugees, Damascus and Amman, October 2007. Bus trips were mainly advertised in the Damascus neighbourhood of Sayyida Zeinab, where Shiite refugees predominate. However, it also is the case that Shiites, many of whom are among the poorest refugees, were more likely to take advantage of free transportation. See “Iraq government busses refugees home from Syria”, UNHCR, 28 November 2007.

<sup>255</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Iraqi refugees and officials, Amman, December 2007. In February 2008, the ministry of displacement and migration reported that 3,982 returnees had applied for assistance and another 944 requests were being processed; payments had yet to be made. See “IOM Emergency Needs Assessment: Post February 2006 Displacement in Iraq”, IOM, 15 February 2008.

<sup>256</sup> A February 2007 security plan presented by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki stated that people illegally occupying Baghdad homes should be evicted following a fifteen-day grace period. The plan failed to take into account that many illegal occupants are themselves IDPs. See IRIN, 15 February 2007. In November 2007, Iraqi politician Ahmad Chalabi was appointed chairman of the Baghdad Essential Ser-

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vices Committee. The agency oversees, in coordination with U.S. embassy staff and the U.S. military, the restoration of basic services in Baghdad and is charged with developing plans to provide assistance to returnees, including settling property disputes. See “Quarterly Report and Semi-annual Report to the United States Congress”, Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, 30 January 2008, p. 8; and *The New York Times*, 30 November 2007.

<sup>257</sup> Reuters, 16 December 2007.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid.

<sup>259</sup> Associated Press, 4 December 2007.

<sup>260</sup> Reuters, 3 June 2008, which quoted Ambassador James Foley, U.S. senior coordinator for Iraqi refugees, as saying, “it’s fairly clear the government was not prepared to provide returnees with housing, with essential services”.

## VII. INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE

### A. A DELAYED AND LACKLUSTRE REACTION

The international community displayed public recognition of the severity of the problem only belatedly. While humanitarian organisations and a handful of donor states worked hard to avert a full-blown crisis, on the whole the response has been and remains inadequate, leading many refugees to feel abandoned. A majority claim not to have received any international assistance whatsoever,<sup>261</sup> and many accuse the U.S. and European countries of deliberately neglecting the issue in order to downplay the extent of the Bush administration's Iraqi fiasco.<sup>262</sup> Others argue that the absence of refugee camps has enabled the international community and Western media to look the other way.<sup>263</sup> The tight-fisted attitude of Arab governments, including wealthy Gulf states, is attributed to several factors: a belief that this is a U.S. responsibility; a desire not to further encourage Sunni Arabs to leave the country and bolster the Shiite majority; and strained relations with Syria.<sup>264</sup>

Most donor countries believe the U.S. should shoulder the lion's share of the financial burden. In 2007, the European Commission allocated €50 million in "humanitarian and structural support" to address the plight of Iraqis in Syria and Jordan, of which €10 million targeted the most vulnerable refugees and €40

million was meant to help the two host countries cope with increasing public service demands.<sup>265</sup> As of November 2007, European Union (EU) member states combined had committed a mere €10 million to assist refugees in Syria and virtually nothing for those living in Jordan.<sup>266</sup> Gulf states were even less generous, with the exception of the UAE and Kuwait which gave, respectively, \$10 million and \$500,000 to UNHCR's Iraqi refugee operations.<sup>267</sup>

In contrast, and in addition to its general funding of 30 per cent of UN refugee assistance efforts, in 2007 the U.S. gave UN agencies approximately \$123 million in humanitarian assistance for Iraqi IDPs and refugees.<sup>268</sup> It also provided \$18.5 million to NGOs assisting refugees in Syria, Lebanon and Jordan.<sup>269</sup> Congress appropriated a further \$200 million for emergency assistance to Iraqi and Palestinian refugees.<sup>270</sup> In April 2008, the U.S. claimed to have spent \$500 million on Iraqi refugees since 2006, including \$208 million in the first three months of 2008 alone.<sup>271</sup>

<sup>261</sup> According to surveys, most refugees (and IDPs) say they are not receiving any international assistance (68 per cent in Syria and 89 per cent in Lebanon). See IPSOS Survey on Iraqi Refugees and Danish Refugee Council, both op. cit.

<sup>262</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Iraqi refugees, Amman and Damascus, October-November 2007. "Evidently, international support to Iraqi refugees is weak and ineffectual. Most countries are trying not to embarrass the U.S. on this issue by highlighting its failed policies and responsibility for the tragedy". Crisis Group interview, Saleh Mutlaq, Iraqi parliamentarian and leader of the National Dialogue Front, Amman, 11 October 2007.

<sup>263</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Iraqi refugees, Amman and Damascus, October-November 2007.

<sup>264</sup> Crisis Group interviews, international humanitarian workers, Iraqi observers and local journalists, Amman, Beirut and Damascus, October-November 2007. Perhaps in response to this criticism, in January 2008 the Arab League launched a fundraising and public awareness campaign, "Arabs Hand-in-Hand with Iraqis", aimed at assisting Iraqi refugees in Arab countries. In September 2007, the Arab League had opened a special account for this purpose. See Arab League statement, 19 September 2007, at [www.arableagueonline.org/las/arabic/details\\_ar.jsp?art\\_id=5170&level\\_id=944](http://www.arableagueonline.org/las/arabic/details_ar.jsp?art_id=5170&level_id=944).

<sup>265</sup> "European Commission allocates 50 million Euros to alleviate plight of Iraqi refugees in Syria and Jordan", European Commission, Brussels, 13 December 2007. It allocated an additional €7.8 million to assist more than two million IDPs within Iraq. "Boosting Humanitarian Aid to Victims of the Iraqi Crisis", European Commission, ECHO, 14 December 2007, at [http://ec.europa.eu/echo/field/iraq/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/echo/field/iraq/index_en.htm).

<sup>266</sup> "Contribution financière des Etats Membres de l'UE pour les réfugiés irakiens en Syrie depuis le 1er janvier 2007", EU internal document providing breakdown of financial contributions for assistance to Iraqi refugees in Syria, received by Crisis Group in November 2007. In February 2008 the European Commission extended its ongoing aid program for Syria's health sector by granting an additional €9 million to build health-care centres and hospitals in areas affected by the flow of Iraqi refugees. See "EU Funding of the Syrian Health Sector affected by Iraqi Refugees", the European Commission's Delegation to Syria, 18 February 2008, at [www.delsyr.ec.europa.eu/en/whatsnew\\_new/detail.asp?id=338](http://www.delsyr.ec.europa.eu/en/whatsnew_new/detail.asp?id=338).

<sup>267</sup> Crisis Group interview, UNHCR official, Amman, 21 October 2007; and information provided by UNHCR-Jordan by email, 27 December 2007. For details on UAE contributions see "Iraq: UNHCR gratefully acknowledges UAE donation", a summary of UNHCR spokesperson Jennifer Pagonis at press briefing, op. cit.

<sup>268</sup> "Briefing on Iraqi Refugee Issues", U.S. Department of State, press conference by Ambassador James Foley and Ms. Lori Scialabba, 29 November 2007.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid.

<sup>270</sup> "Briefing on Developments in the Iraqi Refugee and Special Immigration Visa (SIV) Admissions Programs", U.S. Department of State, 4 February 2008, at [www.state.gov/p/nea/rls/rm/100030.htm](http://www.state.gov/p/nea/rls/rm/100030.htm).

<sup>271</sup> "U.S. Humanitarian Assistance for Refugees and Internally Displaced Iraqis", U.S. government, 15 April 2008.

U.S. assistance, nonetheless, pales in comparison to the magnitude of the crisis – not to mention overall U.S. spending on Iraq to date (some \$630 billion).<sup>272</sup> Most UN agencies and other international organisations are struggling to fund their activities at the requisite level. UNHCR is an exception, with contributions covering over 90 per cent of its appeals,<sup>273</sup> but even in this case most refugees claim not to be receiving any support, suggesting the agency's budget for Iraqi refugees (approximately \$127 million in 2007)<sup>274</sup> falls short of actual need. In May 2007 UNICEF launched a \$42 million appeal to help Iraqi children within and outside Iraq, and in 2008 it budgeted nearly \$37 million for this purpose, yet by June 2008 it still faced a shortfall of 70.3 per cent.<sup>275</sup>

Donor fatigue partly explains lacklustre funding, as vast amounts have been solicited for the combined UN/World Bank Iraq Trust Fund (\$1.4 billion in pledges, a majority of which has been disbursed).<sup>276</sup> In addition, many Western donors are reluctant to channel aid directly to host states, particularly Syria. Whereas the U.S. is motivated in large part by political factors,<sup>277</sup> European officials argue that Syrian institutions “lack the absorptive capacity”, in other words

are inefficient and corrupt.<sup>278</sup> They therefore would rather provide funds to international NGOs, an option resisted by Syrian officials, who characterise it as foreign interference.<sup>279</sup>

The international community's interest grew in early 2007 and reached a high point in April of that year at the time of the Geneva donors conference. Since then, aid has grown significantly, although amounts disbursed remain insufficient and prospects uncertain. Interest could drop as quickly as it rose; there is a risk donor countries might seize on periodic reports of refugee return as evidence of a diminishing problem.<sup>280</sup>

Given the scope of the crisis, donor countries led by the U.S. and the EU and its member states should significantly boost their contributions. These should be targeted to both international agencies such as UNHCR and host governments. One useful mechanism would be to channel assistance through the UN Development Group Trust Fund for Iraq and earmark it to UNHCR.<sup>281</sup> The international community also should press Iraq's government to make available a much larger share of its unspent oil revenues and channel some of it to UNHCR, the Iraqi, Syrian and Jordanian Red Crescent societies and neighbouring host states.

Yet another path would be for Iraq to scrap its Public Distribution System (PDS), which currently is used to ration food and non-food items, and replace it with cash transfers. So-called monetisation, which has been debated since 2003, would facilitate the distribution of cash benefits to Iraqis living abroad. Opponents argue that cash handouts would exacerbate inflation, reduce purchasing power and present a logistical nightmare

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<sup>272</sup>The figure refers to estimated operational costs, including health care and disability expenditures for returning veterans. See Joseph E. Stiglitz, “War at Any Cost? The Total Economic Costs of the War beyond the Federal Budget”, testimony before the Congressional Joint Economic Committee, 28 February 2008.

<sup>273</sup>Funding statistics provided by UNHCR-Jordan by email, 27 August 2007.

<sup>274</sup>Ibid.

<sup>275</sup>“Immediate Needs for Iraqi Children in Iraq and Neighbouring Countries”, UNICEF, May 2007; “Humanitarian Update Iraq”, UNICEF, 11 June 2008, at [www.unicef.org/infobycountry/files/Iraq\\_HAU\\_June\\_2008.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/files/Iraq_HAU_June_2008.pdf). See also “Humanitarian Crisis in Iraq: Facts and Figures”, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Iraq Office, Amman, updated 13 November 2007, at [www.uniraq.org/documents/Humanitarian%20Crisis%20in%20Iraq%20Facts%20and%20Figures%20131107.pdf](http://www.uniraq.org/documents/Humanitarian%20Crisis%20in%20Iraq%20Facts%20and%20Figures%20131107.pdf).

<sup>276</sup>See [www.irffi.org](http://www.irffi.org).

<sup>277</sup>Pursuant to the Syria Accountability and Lebanon Sovereignty Restoration Act, signed into law in December 2003, U.S. bilateral assistance to Syria can resume only if Damascus ceases support for Palestinian and other groups on Washington's terrorism list, stops sending or allowing volunteers into Iraq, ends interference in Lebanon's internal affairs, halts development of weapons of mass destruction and allows UN and other observers to verify the dismantling of any such weapons. See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°24, *Syria Under Bashar (II): Domestic Policy Challenges*, 11 February 2004, p. 19.

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<sup>278</sup>Crisis Group interviews, European diplomats, Damascus, October 2007. The ministries of health and education, in particular, were singled out.

<sup>279</sup>Crisis Group telephone interview, Western aid worker, 20 November 2007; and Crisis Group interview, Samira Trad, Lebanese NGO Al-Ruwad official, Beirut, 5 November 2007. The argument does not explain U.S. and European reluctance to assist Lebanon, whose government does not object to foreign donor-NGO partnerships.

<sup>280</sup>For a critique of the international community's response to the Iraqi refugee crisis, see “Five Years Later, A Hidden Crisis”, International Rescue Committee, op. cit.

<sup>281</sup>Crisis Group interview, UN official, Amman, 16 October 2007. Currently, the facility focuses primarily on reconstruction efforts whose implementation has been slow or non-existent due mainly to security problems. This has been to the detriment of more immediate refugee-related humanitarian projects. See also Norwegian Refugee Council, op. cit., p. 14. At this point, UNHCR receives a mere \$13,420,000 out of nearly \$1.1 billion provided to the UN Development Group Trust Fund for Iraq. “UNDG Iraq Trust Fund Newsletter”, October 2007.

given the country's rudimentary banking system and widespread insecurity.<sup>282</sup> Host countries fear that, with a regular income stream, refugees would be disinclined to return; they also are concerned about resulting resentment among the local population.<sup>283</sup>

These worries cannot be lightly dismissed. Still, the PDS appears dangerously inadequate insofar as it excludes refugees. Cash handouts to the most vulnerable Iraqi refugees in Jordan and Syria are already taking place, financed and organised by UNHCR; they inevitably will spread, as the number of destitute exiled Iraqis grows.<sup>284</sup> Under a monetised distribution system, UNHCR and the WFP could systematise this process, providing Iraqis with ATM cards or, when that is not feasible, establishing cash-disbursement offices in Iraq and abroad.

## **B. INTERNATIONAL REFUGEE PROTECTION**

As a result of budgetary constraints, lack of capacity and tense relations with host states, UNHCR has had difficulty carrying out its protection mandate. Refugee registration has proceeded very slowly, a result of Iraqis' suspicion or lack of knowledge regarding attendant benefits, a shortage of registration offices and refugees' inability to get to UNHCR offices.<sup>285</sup> While

some of these problems are inevitable, mistrust of local UNHCR personnel and procedures could be mitigated by greater reliance on international staff to conduct interviews, swifter investigation into complaints and more effective, expatriate-run appeals procedures.

U.S. and Iraqi claims of security improvements notwithstanding, international agencies should avoid precipitous returns. In general, UN agencies have reacted cautiously to these assessments, repeatedly stating that refugees should not be encouraged to return as long as the situation in Iraq remains unsafe.<sup>286</sup> The provision of a UN assistance package to returnees, pursuant to Security Council Resolution 1770 (10 August 2007), has sowed confusion among refugees, unsure as to whether the offer of help amounts to encouragement to return.<sup>287</sup> A clear policy statement that rejects forced repatriation to a country still at war is needed. Such repatriations are all the more inappropriate given UNHCR's designation of all Iraq (save the Kurdistan region) as unsafe.<sup>288</sup> The UN Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI), in cooperation with the IOM, should also provide its own monthly security update, including testimonies of returnees, and make it available to Arabic.

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<sup>282</sup>See "Considering the Future of the Iraqi Public Distribution System", World Bank, Economic and Social Development Unit, Middle East Department, Washington DC, June 2005, at <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/IRFFI/Resources/ExecutiveSummary-PDSReportJune2805.doc>. However, many Iraqis already sell their rations, in whole or in part, transferring some proceeds to relatives abroad via banks or more informal networks. Crisis Group interviews, Iraqi refugees, Damascus, October 2007. Moreover, various aid organisations provide cash handouts to the most vulnerable IDPs. While the data is inconclusive, such transactions do not appear to have added significantly to inflationary pressures. (The 2007 inflation level in Iraq was 32 per cent, but has been dropping since early 2007. See "Iraq: 2007 Article IV Consultation", IMF, August 2007, p. 9).

<sup>283</sup>Crisis Group interviews, Syrian economist, Damascus, 29 October 2007, and foreign humanitarian worker, Amman, 7 October 2007.

<sup>284</sup>By late August 2007, more than 3,000 Iraqi families in Jordan had been provided with cash assistance. In mid-December 2007, UNHCR began issuing ATM cards to some 7,000 Iraqi refugee families, enabling them to withdraw \$100-\$200 per month. "UNHCR Jordan Briefing Notes", UNHCR, no date; UNHCR spokesperson Jennifer Pagonis at press briefing, *op. cit.*

<sup>285</sup>Crisis Group interviews, Iraqis and humanitarian workers, Amman, Damascus and Beirut, October-November 2007. Some refugees invited for a second, more detailed interview to assess eligibility for third-country resettlement have com-

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plained about the omnipresence of local staff, whom they suspect of corruption or of ties to host states' security services. *Ibid.* In this respect, a foreign aid official said, "Iraqis simply project their experiences in Iraq onto what they encounter here". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, 4 November 2007. More frequently, Iraqi refugees do not mention important details regarding flight reasons, leaving out their work with the U.S. or their rape at the hands of armed militias for fear of interviewers' reaction.

<sup>286</sup>"Currently, the UN is not promoting returns". UNHCR spokesperson William Spindler at press briefing, "Iraq returns latest", Geneva, 7 December 2007.

<sup>287</sup>Crisis Group interviews, Iraqi refugees, Damascus, November 2007 and by email, December 2007. UNSCR 1770 provides: "[A]ll parties should take all feasible steps to ensure the protection of affected civilians, and should create conditions conducive to the voluntary, safe, dignified, and sustainable return of refugees and internally displaced persons." Staffan de Mistura, the UN special representative for Iraq, said, "there are currently encouraging indications that limited returns are ongoing...As there are indications that both refugees and IDPs are starting to return back to their houses, we stand behind the Iraqi Government in ensuring that this initial positive return is properly assisted and implemented". "The UN to Assist the Government of Iraq on the Return of the Internally Displaced (IDPs) and Refugees", UN Assistance Mission for Iraq, Baghdad, 18 November 2007.

<sup>288</sup>See "Millions in Flight: The Iraqi Refugee Crisis", Amnesty International, 24 September 2007. In Jordan, UNHCR is viewed as having protected detained refugees from deportation by successfully negotiating their release. Crisis Group interview, humanitarian official, Amman, 21 October 2007.

### C. THIRD-COUNTRY RESETTLEMENT

For many refugees, the last remaining hope is third-country resettlement, mainly to Western countries. In 2007, UNHCR referred a little over 20,000 applications for resettlement based on eleven criteria designed to identify the most vulnerable.<sup>289</sup> While the resettlement pace increased (by 18 April 2008, another 10,667 applications had been submitted to third countries),<sup>290</sup> it remains far below demand. UNHCR estimates there are some 80,000 to 100,000 “extremely vulnerable Iraqi refugees in the Middle East in need of resettlement”, 25,000 of whom it expects to submit for resettlement in 2008.<sup>291</sup> Most requests for resettlement – nearly 24,000 – have been submitted to the U.S., which accepted 1,608 Iraqi refugees in Fiscal Year (FY) 2007 (1 October 2006-30 September 2007) and 4,742 in FY 2008 through the end of May, with more than 7,000 additional refugees awaiting a response.<sup>292</sup> Although the U.S. has set an ambitious goal of 12,000 arrivals for FY 2008, it is highly unlikely to meet that target.<sup>293</sup> This unnecessarily delays the processing of claims.

Most European countries have been even less forthcoming.<sup>294</sup> To put it starkly: under the current pace, it would take somewhere between seventeen and 22 years to resettle all remaining Iraqi refugees identified by UNHCR as eligible for referral; resettling all refugees would obviously take even longer. In response, UNHCR has slowed down rather than accelerated its referrals process because it does not want to create large backlogs and elicit false hopes of resettlement among refugees.<sup>295</sup> Iraqis also have been unable to obtain asylum by direct application, as both the U.S. and Euro-

pean states have turned them down, sent them back to Iraq in contravention of UNHCR guidelines<sup>296</sup> or failed to provide the due process required to consider their applications as stipulated by the 1951 convention.<sup>297</sup>

One of the more troubling issues involves Iraqis who have worked for coalition countries. Contrary to Denmark, which airlifted all its Iraqi personnel, the U.S. and UK have imposed numerous bureaucratic obstacles to the resettlement of Iraqis associated with the war effort; the U.S. imposes conditions that surpass in difficulty those governing asylum applicants from elsewhere.<sup>298</sup> Although U.S. officials claim that by the

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<sup>296</sup> UNHCR still considers all Iraq except the Kurdish north to be unsafe and unsuitable for returns. “Return Advisory and Position on International Protection Needs of Iraqis outside Iraq”, UNHCR, Geneva, 18 December 2006. Disregarding the advisory, a UK tribunal recently ruled that: “Neither civilians in Iraq generally, nor civilians even in provinces and cities worst affected by the armed conflict, can show they face a ‘serious and individual threat’ to their ‘life or person’”. Cited in *The Observer*, 13 April 2008.

<sup>297</sup> Although pleading with neighbouring countries to come to Iraqi refugees’ assistance, the U.S. government activated its first permanent office within Iraq to process asylum requests only in 2008. Its failure to do so earlier was attributed to security complications. See *The Washington Post*, 4 June 2008. Like the U.S., EU countries have refused Iraqi passports of the so-called “S-series”, thereby practically barring Iraqis from accessing asylum procedures in Europe. Obtaining a visa from diplomatic representations of EU states in Iraq is virtually impossible. According to UNHCR, Greece, the most common entry point into the EU for Iraqis, has failed to put in place effective procedures to evaluate asylum applications. See “UN Agency Warns Bulgaria is Clamping Down on Asylum Claims by Iraqis”, UN News Centre, 21 April 2008; Markus Sperl, “Fortress Europe and the Iraqi ‘Intruders’: Iraqi Asylum-seekers and the EU, 2003-2007”, *New Issues in Refugee Research*, research paper no. 44, October 2007.

<sup>298</sup> U.S. Department of Homeland Security, press release, 29 May 2007. An Iraqi who received death threats after working as a translator for the British armed forces in Basra spent months waiting in Damascus without any means of support, filling out forms at the UK embassy only to be told months later that he had been given the wrong ones and that the result of his application would not be known before late 2008. Crisis Group interview, Damascus and email communication, October-December 2007. In 2007, the UK granted asylum to only 30 Iraqis. It announced it would welcome 600 over the next two years. *The Guardian*, 11 October 2007. Notable is the reported fate of some members of the Kurdistan Democratic Party’s (KDP) militia, the *pehmerga*, who are already residing in the U.S. Even though the KDP ranks as one of the closest U.S. allies in Iraq, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services turned down some of its former fighters’ requests for a permanent resident green card on grounds they had been members of an “undesigned terrorist organi-

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<sup>289</sup> “UNHCR Meets 2007 Resettlement referral target for Iraqi refugees”, UNHCR, 12 December 2007.

<sup>290</sup> Of the 10,667, 8,729 were submitted to the U.S., 676 to Australia, 669 to Canada and smaller numbers to (in descending order) the UK, Sweden, the Netherlands, Norway, Denmark, Finland and New Zealand. Crisis Group telephone interview, UN official, Amman, 4 May 2008.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>292</sup> Reuters, 3 June 2008.

<sup>293</sup> “Briefing on Developments in the Iraqi Refugee and Special Immigration Visa (SIV) Admissions Programs”, *op. cit.*

<sup>294</sup> By December 2007 only 2,199 Iraqis had been resettled in countries other than the U.S., including 747 to Canada, 745 to Sweden, 456 to Australia and 122 to the Netherlands. “UNHCR Meets 2007 Resettlement referral target”, *op. cit.* Moreover, Iraqis constituted one fourth – about 23,000 – of European countries’ total (93,300) who received individual refugee status or a complementary form of protection in 2007. This is separate from and in addition to resettlement via UNHCR. “2007 Global Trends”, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

<sup>295</sup> “Five Years Later”, *op. cit.*, p. 9.



end of FY 2008 (30 September 2008), at least 12,000 Iraqis will have been admitted,<sup>299</sup> there is reason to question the assessment.<sup>300</sup>

## VIII. CONCLUSION

The refugee crisis has presented a test that virtually all involved are failing. The three neighbouring host countries have performed best. There is much in their attitude toward Iraqis that is open to question and, as time elapsed, they unfortunately have hardened their policies. Still, Syria and Jordan in particular opened their borders and provided sanctuary at significant cost to their already fragile socio-economic fabric. Nothing of the sort can be said of the Iraqi government or of those in the international community primarily responsible for the refugees' plight. The Iraqi government, neighbouring host countries, the U.S. and EU have a joint obligation to do more for the refugees' welfare.

Today, as some relatively hopeful signs emanate from Iraq, there is a temptation to downplay the problem and bank on large-scale returns. Yet, although the refugee flow has begun to taper off as a result of decreasing levels of violence, relatively few of the displaced have felt confident enough to return; those who have tend to be IDPs rather than refugees (who fear they will not be allowed to re-enter their safe havens should violence once again pick up), and those refugees who have returned have often resettled in other than their original places of residence, because they found their own homes damaged, located in hostile areas or occupied by IDPs.

There also is a real risk that such progress as there has been will prove fleeting. The surge in troop presence has contributed to the relative calm, but those numbers are expected to decrease; more importantly, the shift in Iraq is largely due to other factors, principally a decision by key military actors either to lie low as long as U.S. forces remain in the country – the Sadrists and their Mahdi Army militias – or, in the case of Sunni tribes, to tactically ally themselves with the U.S. to fight a common enemy, al-Qaeda in Iraq. Underlying political conflicts have yet to be resolved and could reignite a bloody civil war. In other words, the world must be prepared for a possible second refugee wave.

Whether neighbouring states would be able to absorb that wave is doubtful. At that point, Western nations would face their second, arguably more critical test: to help neighbouring countries care for these refugees and accept greater numbers of them for resettlement or to see states, including important allies such as Jordan or critical regional actors such as Syria, buckle under the strain of a burden that far exceeds their limited resources.

**Amman/Baghdad/Beirut/Damascus/Brussels,  
10 July 2008**

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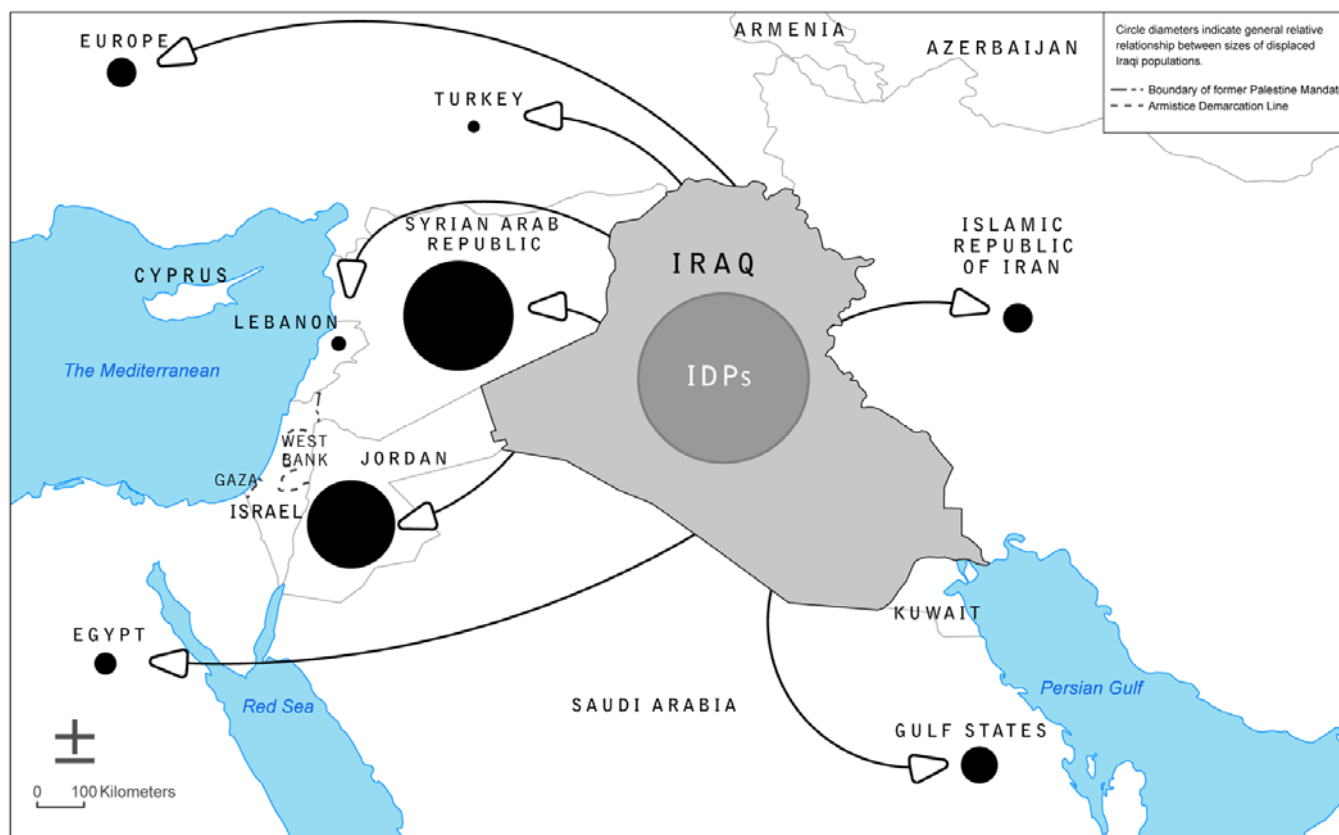
zation" that had tried to forcefully overthrow the regime of Saddam Hussein. *The Washington Post*, 23 March 2008.

<sup>299</sup> "U.S. Humanitarian Assistance", U.S. government, op. cit.

<sup>300</sup> U.S. officials blame delays on the small number of refugees referred by UNHCR as well as on Syria's refusal to provide Department of Homeland Security (DHS) officials with visas to interview resettlement candidates. Ibid. According to a UN official, while Syria did not renew visas for DHS staff after they expired in August 2007, U.S. officials had in effect only used them once, in May 2007, after which they failed to return to Damascus until the visas expired three months later. The UN official said, "they stayed for a few days and did their interviews. They left and didn't come back during the time their visas were valid". Crisis Group interview, UN official, Damascus, 3 October 2007. DHS interviews took place in Lebanon and Jordan without visa impediments, yet there, too, they lagged behind. There are only four to six DHS officers operating in Amman, none on a permanent basis. "Briefing on Iraqi Refugee Issues", U.S. Department of State, op. cit.

## APPENDIX A

### MAP OF IRAQI REFUGEE FLOWS IN REGION



This map has been adapted by the International Crisis Group from a map by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), see map ID: T OIA\_T\_DISPLACED\_002\_A5, Version: 2.0, dated 17 March 2008.

## APPENDIX B

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Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a twelve-page monthly bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in all the most significant situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports and briefing papers are distributed widely by email and printed copy to officials in foreign ministries and international organisations and made available simultaneously on the website, [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org). Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policy-makers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by the former European Commissioner for External Relations Christopher Patten and former U.S. Ambassador Thomas Pickering. Its President and Chief Executive since January 2000 has been former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans.

Crisis Group's international headquarters are in Brussels, with advocacy offices in Washington DC (where it is based as a legal entity), New York, London and Moscow. The organisation currently operates eleven regional offices (in Bishkek, Bogotá, Cairo, Dakar, Islamabad, Istanbul, Jakarta, Nairobi, Pristina, Seoul and Tbilisi) and has local field representation in sixteen additional locations (Abuja, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Belgrade, Colombo, Damascus, Dili, Dushanbe, Jerusalem, Kabul, Kathmandu, Kinshasa, Port-au-Prince, Pretoria and Tehran). Crisis Group currently covers some 60 areas of actual or potential conflict across four continents. In Africa, this includes Burundi,

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**July 2008**

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