

IMPLICATIONS OF THE IRAQI REFUGEE CRISIS

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Iraq's refugees tell heartbreaking tales of suffering, displacement, and shattered dreams, but these refugees represent more than mere human interest stories. Collectively, the outpouring of millions of Iraqi refugees into just a few neighboring countries poses a dramatic security threat to the Middle East, and there is no sign that the threat is going away.

In the lead-up to the Iraq War, most of the U.S. government discussion about refugees assumed that refugee flows would be sudden, massive, and brief. When more than a million Kurds fled Iraq into Turkey and Iran in 1991 to avoid Saddam's wrath, camps were set up within days. The U.S. military dropped food and supplies and provided protection for those trapped within Iraq's borders. A few months later, the crisis was over, and refugees returned to their homes.

Iraq's refugees now are not like the refugees then. They have fled slowly, not suddenly. They live in capital cities such as Damascus and Amman, not in open fields or encampments. And they are not peasants or

laborers who can eke out a living on meager resources; they are white-collar workers with education and training but little future in their homeland.

Iraq's refugees show little sign of returning home, and it is no wonder why. Iraq continues to unravel, and life is especially dangerous for the cosmopolitan petit bourgeoisie whom many assumed would inherit post-Saddam Iraq. Today's Iraq is no place for a doctor or a professor, especially one with a young family. Sectarianism plays a role as well. Perhaps half of the refugees are Sunni Arabs, a group that represents about a fifth of the Iraqi population but had been the backbone of Saddam's regime. They see their country sliding not only into Shi'a control, but into rule by a Shi'a mob that is bent on revenge.

In many ways, however, fleeing the country provides only a brief respite. Few refugees are allowed to work in their new homes, and savings are running out. Children are sometimes barred from school, and others go to schools bursting at the seams. Health

care, when it is available, is often expensive. The refugee flow has dramatically boosted housing prices, raising costs for the new émigrés but also squeezing the young and the working class in countries such as Syria and Jordan who see affordable housing sliding beyond their grasp.

The refugee flows are massive, and they are squeezed into a small number of countries. Syria alone claims to have more than 1.5 million Iraqi refugees—representing about 8 percent of its population—mostly concentrated in the Damascus area. Syria's pan-Arab conceits meant that many new arrivals never had to show passports upon entry because they were fellow Arabs who were merely from another part of the “single Arab nation.” The Syrian economy is far from booming: foreign subsidies have dried up, the country's small oil reserves are fast depleting, and foreign investors balk at penetrating a government bureaucracy that is slowly reforming but remains profoundly opaque. Some Iraqis maintain businesses back home while living in the safety of Damascus, but despera-



tion forces many more into prostitution and other crimes. Syria periodically raises the possibility of cutting off the refugee flow or pushing Iraqis out, but doing so would require a dramatic shift in the ruling party's pan-Arab ideology. The government seems caught yet determined to muddle through.

Difficult as Syria's problems are, Jordan's are even more dire. Jordan has accepted 750,000 Iraqis, who now constitute more than 10 percent of its population. When combined with the 60 percent of Jordanians of Palestinian origin, the ruling Hashemites and their East Bank Jordanian allies have become an even smaller minority in their own country. Jordan had always been more homogenous than Syria, but the influx of hundreds of thousands of Shi'a Arabs has put an end to that.

Jordan's problem is that it not only has to manage the influx of Iraqis, but has to do so with a crisis brewing on its western border. With the rise of Hamas in the Palestinian territories and the determination of the Fatah-led government to squelch it, instability there leeches into Jordan's majority Palestinian community. The peril increases as U.S. policymakers and others push for deepening Jordan's connections to the West Bank as a way of improving conditions in Palestine and supporting Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas against Palestinian hardliners. It may all work out well, but the danger is that Jordan falls prey to seething crises on its eastern and western borders.

Other countries have taken smaller numbers of Iraq's refugees—Egypt reportedly has 100,000, which has little impact on a population of 80 million, while Lebanese worry that the few thousand they have accepted could upset the fragile sectarian balance in the country. But many countries have taken few refugees or none. It is here, perhaps, that the United States is leading by example. The United States accepts 70,000 refugees per year *worldwide*, and only a small

fraction have been from Iraq. Post-September 11 security concerns are partly in play, but more important is a reluctance to admit the magnitude of problems in Iraq and the likely permanence of refugees' displacement.

For too long, the Iraqi refugee problem has been seen merely as a humanitarian problem. It is that, but it is also a strategic one. Hundreds of thousands of increasingly desperate, unassimilated refugees can do dramatic things, and among them is threatening the stability of their new homes. Assimilating these populations has its own challenges, especially in essentially authoritarian systems with limited resources and existing patronage networks.

For the United States, the strategic implications of Jordanian instability are clear, so deep is the military, intelligence, and diplomatic cooperation with that country and so important is Jordan's role in Arab-Israeli peacemaking. Instability in Syria is feared less, although it could make that country even more hostile to U.S. interests. In addition, few have contemplated the long-term impact of violent extremists mixed into these refugee populations, networked throughout the region and representing a new and virulent threat to their host societies.

No amount of money or time will make this problem go away. It is an international problem, and it will require international cooperation. More refugees will need to be absorbed outside of the Middle East, and lives will need to be put back together. There will need to be extensive screening of migrants and robust intelligence cooperation. Making all of this work will require leadership, and the United States has not led nearly as much as it needs to. ■