

# Iraq Action Days: Background on the Iraqi Conflict and Displacement



## Iraq Five Years Later

Five years after the US-led invasion of Iraq, the country is still in disarray. The human rights and humanitarian situations are disastrous, a climate of impunity has prevailed, many people are unable to make a living, and the displacement crisis continues to escalate. Despite the heavy presence of U.S. and Iraqi security forces, Iraq is one of the most dangerous countries in the world, with hundreds of Iraqis killed every month.

Armed groups responsible for indiscriminate bombings, suicide attacks, kidnappings, and torture act with impunity. Since early 2006 violence has intensified and become more sectarian, with Sunni and Shi'a armed groups targeting followers of other faiths and driving whole communities out of mixed neighborhoods. This has contributed to the displacement of millions of people, many of whom are now refugees in Syria, Jordan, and other neighboring countries.



*Photo by Jane McBee (Faces of Iraq/EPIC)*

Conditions for women have also worsened. Many have been targeted for abduction, rape or killing. A survey conducted by the WHO in 2006-2007 in Iraq found that 21.2 percent of Iraqi women had experienced physical violence. Economic conditions also remain very poor, with most Iraqis suffering from lack of food, shelter, water, sanitation, education, healthcare and employment.

Eight million Iraqis are in need of emergency assistance, with children the worst hit. The UN reports that one in four Iraqi children are "chronically malnourished" and only one in three Iraqi children under the age of five have access to safe drinking water. The UN also reports that more than one million Iraqis have no decent shelter and over one million Iraqis have no access to regular income.

The predominantly Kurdish region of northern Iraq has been more stable with fewer acts of violence and has seen growing economic prosperity and foreign investment. However, here too there continue to be serious human rights violations, including arrests for peaceful political dissent, torture, ill-treatment, the death penalty and the killing of women in so-called honor crimes.

## A Closer Look at Iraq's Humanitarian Crisis

The increasingly desperate humanitarian situation of Iraqis displaced inside their country has been largely ignored by the rest of the world. Governments have paid lip service to the needs of the displaced, but real and on-going commitment to support them has not matched this dire and deepening crisis.

In response to the situation, U.S. based non-governmental organizations are providing lifesaving water, medical supplies, and other forms of emergency assistance to Iraqi civilians, including in the war-weary southern Iraqi provinces of Basra, Maysan and Wassit. Funding by the U.S. government, including through the Community Action Program (CAP), has been essential.

## The Situation of Refugees in Neighboring Countries

While Iraqis have fled to many countries including Lebanon, Egypt, Iran and Gulf States, the vast majority of Iraqi refugees reside in Syria and Jordan. The willingness of Syria and Jordan to host so

many Iraqi refugees is commendable and stands in contrast to the small numbers taken by United States and European Union.

Unfortunately, Jordan and Syria—and in fact most of the neighboring countries as well as much of the world, have imposed strict visa restrictions on Iraqis wishing to enter. The overall effect of these measures will be a closed border for those needing to flee Iraq and obtain protection. Irrespective of whether or not these countries are signatories to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, they are nonetheless obliged under international customary law and general human rights law to observe the principle of *non-refoulement* and not return anyone to a situation where they would face serious human rights abuses. Implicit in this principle is the requirement not to reject at the border anyone in need of international protection.

### **International Response to Iraq's Humanitarian and Human Rights Crises**

Despite this critical situation, the response of many in the international community, including countries that participated in the war, has been inadequate. Relief, in the form of financial and other assistance, and facilitating the resettlement of refugees, has not been efficient or enough. Countries have provided much less assistance than they could and should contribute, and many have not made any contribution to the resettlement of refugees. Worse, the authorities in some states outside the region, especially in Europe, have been actively putting people's lives at risk, including through forcible returns to Iraq, cutting off basic assistance to rejected Iraqi asylum-seekers while they remain in their countries, and revoking refugee status.



*Photo by James Harney (Faces of Iraq/EPIC)*

The need for immediate support for Iraqi refugees and the countries that host them is urgent. The international community has a responsibility to assist these host countries in addressing and managing this crisis.

### **Update on the Resettlement of Iraqi Refugees in the United States**

On February 5, 2007, Secretary of State Rice established a senior-level State Department task force to address the plight of Iraqi refugees and IDPs. After announcing that the U.S. would accept up to 7,000 Iraqi refugees in fiscal year 2007, on March 6, 2007, former Assistant Secretary of State Ellen Sauerbrey stated, "There's no cap or quota on compassion. There's no limit on the number of refugees that we will consider for resettlement."<sup>1</sup> In April 2007, Assistant Secretary Sauerbrey asserted the U.S. "could resettle up to 25,000 Iraqi refugees" this year.<sup>2</sup> This task force was later replaced by the appointment of Ambassador James Foley Senior Coordinator of Iraqi Refugee Issues within the State Department and Lori Scialabba as Special Adviser to the Secretary of Homeland Security for Iraqi Refugees within the Department of Homeland Security. Their stated goal is to ensure that the U.S. meets its commitment of bringing in 12,000 Iraqi refugees this year.

In fiscal year 2007 the U.S. resettled only 1,608 Iraqi refugees, out of the 7,000 goal, and only 2,627 refugees out of the 12,000 goal have been resettled thus far in fiscal year 2008. Legislation to ensure the U.S. resettles extremely vulnerable Iraqi refugees went into effect in January 2008; however, the government is moving too slowly to implement the protections afforded through this legislation in a meaningful way.

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<sup>1</sup> [Iraqis Being Processed for Refugee Status](#), 06 March 2007, Bureau of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State.

<sup>2</sup> [Transcript of Press Conference](#) by the U.S. Delegation to the UNHCR International conference on Iraqi Refugees and IDPs.