



Statement of

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before

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on

**No Way Home, No Way to Escape:  
The Plight of Iraqi Refugees and our Iraqi Allies**

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Chairman Cardin, Chairman Hastings, thank you for your continued commitment to Iraqi refugees and for holding this hearing today. Catholic Relief Services is pleased to offer this testimony on the urgent matter of Iraqi refugees in the Middle East. My name is Sean Callahan, and I am the Executive Vice President for Overseas Operations of CRS. Operating in more than 100 countries around the world, CRS is the international humanitarian agency of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, representing the nearly 70 million members of the U.S. Catholic community. In my testimony today, I will present the urgent humanitarian needs on the ground for Iraqi refugees based on CRS' work in the Middle East; highlight the special security concerns for Christians and other minorities in Iraq as the US begins to withdraw troops; and urge the US government to develop a comprehensive plan for a durable solution for all Iraqi refugees and IDPs.

The magnitude of the Iraqi refugee crisis cannot be overstated. It remains one of the most urgent global humanitarian crises, with Iraqis representing one of the largest displaced populations in the world in an insecure region. Nearly 2 million refugees have fled Iraq, and nearly as many remain displaced within the country. As the US prepares to withdraw many of our troops, we must recommit ourselves to responding to this humanitarian crisis.

The international community, led by the United States, has provided basic humanitarian assistance to these refugees and also has resettled a small number to third countries. Despite these efforts, a longer-term solution to this mass displacement remains elusive. Too many Iraqi families fear returning home but are unable to permanently integrate into their host countries. Moreover, the potential security vacuum that could accompany the US troop withdrawal will exacerbate the already precarious security situation within Iraq for especially vulnerable groups such as Iraqi Christians.

The United States has a special responsibility to the Iraqi people, to those displaced within the country and the refugees found in the region. After his recent visit to the region, esteemed advocate for human rights and humanitarian concerns Cardinal McCarrick, Cardinal Emeritus of the Archdiocese of Washington, DC, stated, "As a moral matter, we cannot claim victory in Iraq [while] at the same time millions of persons have lost their homes, with little hope for reclaiming them." **CRS therefore urges the US government to do the following: 1) develop a regional plan in consultation with relevant actors to ensure durable solutions for the millions of Iraqi refugees and displaced persons; and within that plan, 2) develop an emergency response plan in case of an upsurge in violence after US troop withdrawal; 3) continue to support assistance for global refugee resettlement and support programs; 4) provide funding where refugees are; and 5) continue to support host populations in order to lessen growing tensions between local and refugee populations.**

## I. The Refugee Reality on the Ground: Significant Need Remains

CRS supports humanitarian responses to Iraqi refugees and IDPs through local partners in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt and Iraq including our Caritas partners in the region and the Good Shepherd Sisters. Our private assistance funds to Iraqis exceed US\$1 million this fiscal year and they are growing.

As you saw during your visit with us in January, Representative Hastings, CRS and its partner agency, Caritas Lebanon Migrant Centre (CLMC) provide humanitarian, educational, vocational, and legal and health services (including psycho-social services) to more than 20,000 refugees per year. More than 11,000 have been reached through CLMC's unique caseworker outreach model in which tailored action plans for families meet individual needs and help to integrate refugee families into their communities. It is from this experience that we draw this testimony.

Refugee families struggle daily to make ends meet. Sunni, Shi'ia, and Christian families have entered Lebanon via Syria, usually overstaying visas or circumventing immigration authorities. Due to a lack of financial reserves, most families live in cramped, unhealthy conditions and daily worry about finding low-paying grey-market jobs to pay mounting food, shelter, education and healthcare costs. Many Iraqi refugees suffer from debilitating illnesses such as diabetes, hypertension, kidney problems and cancer, but lack access to affordable or adequate health care. Moreover, there is little space to address the multiple sources of trauma experienced by Iraqi refugees: from the violence witnessed in Iraq, to adapting to a new country, to deciding upon their future. As the global economic downturn continues, local communities increasingly resent the resources afforded to refugee families, which only adds to the stress of the refugees.

Iraqi refugee life also includes significant social changes for families. CLMC social workers have noted a marked increase in domestic violence and drug use as Iraqi men in particular struggle with the psychological dimensions of being unemployed and unable to guarantee safety of their families. Children and youth have difficulties enrolling in school, either due to differences between the Iraqi and Lebanese education systems or because they must work to help support their families. Families in Syria struggle with similar differences in school systems. Iraqi women tend to be more able to find jobs than their husbands and therefore face particular burdens of being the breadwinner while also taking care of family and household, following the education of their children, and adjusting to changing familial roles. Some youth are out of school to look after younger siblings while some also work more than 10 hours a day to support their families.

The story of Bahiga Baba illustrates a common tale among the many Iraqi families CRS and our partners serve. Bahiga Baba fled from Iraq in early 2008 after years of fear. Her husband once worked with American forces and he was threatened, so the family fled. Bahiga, her husband and their five children struggled to make it in Syria. Jobs were unavailable, and soon the lack of money and the stress of refugee life prompted them to look homeward as they overcame the fear they had felt when they left.

They returned to Iraq, but the homecoming was short-lived. "People told us armed men were coming to kill us, so for a whole year we moved from house to house to stay with relatives," Bahiga says. "My kids had to leave school."

The daily stress and fear became unsustainable. Fleeing to Lebanon, the family registered as refugees with the United Nations the day after they arrived. CRS met Bahiga when she came to one of Caritas' six field offices for support. In addition to basic humanitarian assistance, Bahiga has completed 12 training classes covering child care, AIDS prevention and issues of gender violence, among other topics.

After years of living with uncertainty and fear, Bahiga Baba's story of displacement is approaching an end. Accepted for resettlement in the United States, she will soon move again—this time, she hopes, for good. "I am happy because I am leaving, and I want to leave. At the same time I'm scared because it's a new country for me," Bahiga says. "But I didn't have a choice—my children were threatened."

These are the stories of hope among the tens of thousands of refugees whom CRS and other NGOs serve. Yet significant challenges remain for *millions* of others.

Bahiga's story also illustrates how for some, Iraq will never be safe enough for return. Due to the precarious security situation the refugees I met with told me that they cannot foresee returning to Iraq. Whereas some communities began to return last year, owing mostly to depleted savings, such returns have dramatically decreased due to violent conditions on the ground. Judging from current CRS/CLMC workshops about the prospects for return to Iraq, Shi'ia populations in particular are starting to show some interest and a need for more information on the situation of their former residences, while Christian populations overwhelmingly wish support for resettlement. Sunni populations express interest in resettlement in the region. This precarious security situation may even worsen with the troop drawdown.

#### I. In Iraq Itself: Christian Population at Great Risk

In Iraq itself, insecurity continues to spur an exodus, especially among Christian populations. In May, 57 new families arrived at Caritas Lebanon, as desperate as we've ever seen them. During my recent visit I witnessed firsthand the desperation of these refugees. One woman fled to Syria with her three small children in the middle of the night upon learning that her husband had been assassinated and the entire family was threatened. Another woman's son was captured and held for ransom. The family barely scraped together a portion of the ransom by begging family and friends. When the father met the kidnappers to hand over the money, the

son was set free but the father taken in his place. The mother then fled with her remaining family, likely never to know what happened to her husband.

It is important to note that while many of the aforementioned kidnappings and murders are motivated by sectarian conflict, others are motivated by sheer criminality. Law and order, just as much as sectarian relations, have broken down seriously in Iraq. The security situation which forced them to flee has not improved. Owing to not only this lack of security but also high levels of unemployment, lack of basic infrastructure, and the segregation of communities, return is still not an option for many. Yet funding continues to focus on attempting to incentivize return to Iraq.

Christians and other minorities have been disproportionately targeted by the violence and comprise the majority of refugees entering Lebanon. They continue to be the targets of systematic violence, primarily in Mosul and Ninevah. In fact, Christian flight occurs at a rate comparable to that near the beginning of the war.

According to the 2010 report of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), “only half of the pre-2003 Iraqi Christian community is believed to remain in the country, with Christian leaders warning that the result of this flight may be the ‘end of Christianity in Iraq’. In 2003, there were approximately 1.4 million Chaldean Catholics, Assyrian Orthodox, Assyrian Church of the East members, Syriac Orthodox, Armenians (Catholic and Orthodox), Protestants and Evangelicals in Iraq. Today, that number is estimated to be only 500,000” (report available at <http://www.uscirf.gov/images/ar2010/iraq2010.pdf>, 68). This, coupled with fact that all religious minorities continue to experience violence against themselves and their religious sites, has led the USCIRF to once again designate Iraq as a ‘Country of Concern’. The Iraqi legal system has been largely ineffective in redressing the violence against religious minorities.

Avoiding the extinction of Christian and other minority populations in Iraq is not only a humanitarian imperative, but also of concern for the peace of the country. Historically, Christians have played a mediating role amidst the tensions of the many religious sects in Iraq. Their presence has effectively moderated Iraqi politics and perspectives in ways that will be important for the United States’ long term interest in the region.

## II. Recommendations

This long-term humanitarian crisis will not disappear with the US withdrawal of troops from Iraq. In fact, there is reason to believe that attacks on Christians and other vulnerable groups will only worsen should a security vacuum occur after US troop withdrawal. Addressing the

plight of Iraqi refugees is not just a matter of compassion; it may have profound impacts on the stability of this already volatile region. With such high stakes, the US cannot afford anything less than a robust response. Bold and generous action by the US is a prerequisite for an ample international response. CRS urges the US government to shape its humanitarian strategy within a regional framework that incorporates the following recommendations, for short and long term solutions to the Iraq refugee crisis:

- a. **Develop a long-term regional plan in consultation with regional governments and other relevant actors to ensure durable solutions for the millions of refugees and displaced persons.** This plan should include generous US support – at least 50% of required funding - to UN, international organizations, governments in the region and NGOs implementing the humanitarian and resettlement response. It should also include continued support of the Iraqi government’s efforts to create conditions for the safe, sustainable return of all its citizens.
- b. **Continue to support long-term assistance for global refugee resettlement and support programs** through the annual appropriations process, including allocating a significant amount of that funding to meet the needs of Iraqi refugees. The current UNHCR mandate is 65% underfunded; consequently, 18,000 families in Syria and more than 3,000 in Jordan will not receive financial assistance; 30,000 family shelters will not be built in Iraq; and more than 300 families in Lebanon will not receive medical assistance, among other major gaps. A response to this funding gap, as well as an increase in resources to expedite resettlement processing, would be a major step forward to alleviate the struggles of these millions of Iraqis.
- c. **Develop an emergency response plan in case of an upsurge in violence in Iraq after US troop withdrawal.** Given the unresolved political tensions in Iraq and the ongoing violence, it is unclear how the country will respond in the absence of a robust security presence. Those currently being targeted especially Christians, may be more likely to suffer even more attacks. The US should be prepared for a possible humanitarian disaster, including another massive outflow of Iraqis. To prepare, the US government should identify priorities for both humanitarian protection and assistance. This short-term response plan should be integrated into the wider objectives of the regional humanitarian framework mentioned above.
- d. **Provide funding where refugees are.** Significant funding has been invested in Iraq itself with the aim of facilitating and building incentives for return. In fact, this trend has accelerated despite the fact that few Iraqis are returning. UNHCR and other donors should continue to provide assistance to Iraqi refugees in their current locations, expedite processing of refugees referred by UNHCR, and provide greater preparation for refugees accepted for resettlement in the US.
- e. **Continue to support host populations in order to lessen growing tensions between local and refugee populations.** With the economic downturn, all populations in host countries suffer from increased unemployment and economic uncertainty. US economic assistance to date has been welcome; and economic support to host communities should continue.