

The Syrian Arab Republic's Official Perspective on Iraqi Refugees Submitted to the United States Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (Helsinki Commission), for a Public Hearing on Iraqi Refugees Entitled "No Way Home, No Way to Escape," Scheduled for Thursday, July 22, 2010

The Iraqi refugee exodus is the largest in the history of the Middle East as 4.5 million Iraqis have been displaced, including both internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees. The refugee crisis will not end until a more stable Iraq emerges.

The culture of Syria as a safe haven for groups and individuals fleeing persecution, conflicts and wars has been a prominent feature of our national identity. We currently host 1.2 million Iraqi refugees. Despite major challenges to our social and economic infrastructures, we have diligently and promptly responded to the exodus of refugees following the invasion of Iraq to the present. According to the Institute for the Study of International Migration (ISIM), the "Syrian experience is a vanguard experience for the international community as it is learning and developing techniques to deal with large-scale urban refugee populations."

- 1- Indeed, the refugee population in Syria has been protected against all forms of ethnic, sectarian, religious and political discrimination. They have been accepted and embraced, regardless of their backgrounds or beliefs.
- 2- They have been granted full freedom of mobility inside and outside of Damascus.
- 3- Syria opened up access to its educational and healthcare systems.
- 4- Recently, we have opened the public and private sectors for refugees to gain work permits.

Concurrently, our societal, developmental and economic challenges have been exacerbated by hosting 1.2 million Iraqis (together with half a million IDPs from Syria's Occupied Golan, and hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees.) There is mounting pressure on the Syrian population that threatens our government's continued hospitality and openness towards the refugees. Therefore, offering near-future solutions for the crisis is essential for maintaining a balanced environment that sustains mutual cooperation and support between the Syrian population and the Iraqi guests.

While we are opening all our resources to alleviate the pressures on the refugees, many potential venues for supporting our humanitarian efforts have been impeded due to the sanctions imposed on Syria by the U.S. In addition, the U.S. plan to withdraw from Iraq does not take into consideration the magnitude of the refugee crisis. Approximately one

in five Iraqis has become a refugee or was displaced. The equivalent number in terms of the American population would be over 50 million men, women and children. Indeed, more than 70 % of the displaced were professionals and technocrats: doctors, scientists, professors, teachers, actors, and artisans, in addition to workers in the vast government bureaucracy.

Their return is fundamental for any hopes to rebuild Iraq and restore its national identity. Therefore, the Syrian government supports and fully endorses voluntary repatriation of all Iraqis. We will not force Iraqis to leave- their return to Iraq or resettlement elsewhere is entirely voluntary. Repatriation is compromised as a result of political instability in Iraq, and the current IDP displacement could increase the number of refugees in Syria and in neighboring countries, magnifying instead of resolving this urgent problem.

We believe that humanitarian and political solutions must go hand in hand. Most Iraqis cannot return to their homes and face a new set of barriers if they do. In reality, many of those who are able to return back find that their homes have been bombed or that their houses have been inhabited by new families.

Complicating matters, the U.S. and Iraq have not acknowledged the magnitude of the refugee crisis. Both governments should assume primary responsibility and work on creating the conditions for the refugees' return. A strong, national unity government would lead to security and stability. Only then will humanitarian efforts be sustainable and meaningful.

Honorable Members of the Commission, we have been consistently firm in our political position: we believe in the sovereignty of Iraq, and in the right of the people to determine their future. We have strongly and consistently opposed the war in Iraq. Nonetheless, we remain determined in seeing the emergence of a stable, secure and unified Iraq. Hosting 1.2 million refugees has been a major challenge. The responsibility is immense, and we call upon the international community and in particular the U.S. and Iraq to resolve the crisis.

The devastating consequences of the war on Iraq and throughout our region will persist as long as there remain refugees. We believe we can create the conditions for a better future. We acknowledge the major role the U.S. has to play and remain committed to our role as a partner for peace and will work closely with the governments of Iraq and the U.S. to rebuild Iraq and ensure conditions for peace, stability and prosperity.