



The Politics of Refugee Advocacy and Humanitarian Assistance

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Sen. Edward Kennedy speaks with Elen Sauerbrey, assistant secretary of state for population, refugees and migration, before a hearing on the plight of Iraqi refugees, January 16, 2007. JAY MALLIN/BLOOMBERG NEWS/LANDOV

Despite advance warnings of entrenched conflict and the displacement of tens of thousands of people, in 2003 the Bush administration embarked on a regime-changing war in Iraq with little consideration of the human costs. The Iraq war has created a flow of forced migrants, both within and across national borders, numbering around four million people, or approximately 15 percent of Iraq's population. This ongoing forced migration dwarfs original expectations among humanitarian organizations and is considered the largest forced migration in the region since the Palestinian diaspora of 1948. Iraqis now constitute the third largest refugee population in the world, following Afghans and Palestinians.¹ Some suggest that after internally displaced persons are taken into account, Iraqis make up the largest displaced population in the world today.²

Nonetheless, until late 2006 the Iraqi displacement crisis attracted little attention in the media or in the vast literature that has emerged about the war. Analysts appear more

interested in tracing the vicissitudes of US policy and the rise of ethnic and sectarian conflict than the lived social consequences of the war. Non-governmental organizations—now often the front line of provision for vulnerable populations in wartime—also have seemed caught unawares by the scale of the displacement. More troubling, however, has been the belated response and limited role of the United Nations and, most importantly, the US government and its coalition partners, in developing policies and programs for those who have fled Iraq or been displaced from their homes and communities within the country.

Efforts to provide temporary assistance to Iraqi refugees in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, the countries hardest hit by the exodus of refugees, have been beset with challenges posed by the war and US policy failures. The challenges are compounded by the inability of Iraq's neighbors to confront the consequences of absorbing some two million refugees without formally recognizing them or seeking extensive international assistance. Increasingly, the plight of Iraqi refugees has been politicized, as concerns about humanitarian assistance overlap with the US and other governments' efforts to prosecute a

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“war on terror.” Thus, Iraqi forced migrants find themselves vulnerable on multiple fronts—unable to seek permanent resettlement in significant numbers in the West, blocked from fuller integration in neighboring countries and at risk of repatriation to Iraq despite a raging civil war.

Recently, several international human rights and refugee advocacy organizations, including Refugees International, Human Rights Watch and Refugee Council USA, have led efforts to reinvigorate debate about, and funding and support for, the growing numbers of Iraqi refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). Without the efforts of these NGOs, little attention would be paid to the issue. International NGOs have been the most important actors in calling for accountability and setting a more just policy for Iraqi refugees and IDPs, yet even they are constrained by the politics of humanitarian assistance in the Middle East.

The Crisis That Wasn't

In the run-up to the US-led invasion, a number of NGOs warned that a humanitarian disaster marked by mass displacement of Iraqi civilians was likely to unfold. At the time, several leading humanitarian organizations formed a Joint NGO Emergency Preparedness Initiative for the Iraq Consortium to deal with an expected flow of refugees. Funded by the US Agency for International Development, organizations like the International Rescue Committee, International Medical Corps, World Vision, Save the Children and Mercy Corps met to plan and coordinate humanitarian assistance in Iraq (and elsewhere) after the invasion was launched. The UN expected more than a half-million Iraqi refugees to flee the country, while some US officials also prepared for an exodus of Iraqis.³

Following the start of the war, however, the massive displacement did not develop. While extensive looting, crimes of retribution, kidnapping and other “invisible” acts of ethnic and religious cleansing occurred, the hallmarks of “humanitarian crisis” largely failed to materialize in the first two years after the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime. Thus, despite a growing insurgency, US and international efforts to “reconstruct” Iraq included funding to assist the tens of thousands of “returnees” who had fled Iraq in the Hussein years and who the US expected to pour back into their homeland from Jordan, Syria, Turkey and Iran. While some return migration occurred—the US government estimates 250,000 people—a significant number of Iraqis were already fleeing the country or being displaced within Iraq. Yet, until 2006, State Department funding for NGOs providing reconstruction and relief support in Iraq prioritized the needs of “returnees.”⁴

Recognizing “Humanitarian Crisis”

Given the steady flow of Iraqi refugees by 2005, it remains puzzling why it took so long for the global community to recognize the mounting humanitarian problem. Numerous

NGOs were operating in Iraq, after all, and many of these organizations had earlier planned for a refugee crisis. The oversight seems due in part to the fact that prior to the upsurge in displacement in 2006, few organizations were actually tracking IDP and refugee flows. One exception was the US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants. Their annual survey found that nearly 900,000 Iraqi refugees existed at the beginning of 2006, an increase of more than 500,000 people from the previous year.⁵ By the end of 2005, according to UN agency estimates, more than one million Iraqis were also internally displaced.⁶ At an April 17, 2007 conference in Geneva, UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres attributed the relative invisibility of the refugee crisis to the trend of refugee settlement in cities such as Amman and Damascus, asserting that the Iraqi refugees make up the “biggest urban caseload ever dealt with.”

Today, NGOs and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) relate the same basic narrative about the humanitarian situation in Iraq: The swell of refugees and displaced persons only became apparent following the bombing of the al-‘Askariyya shrine in Samarra’ in February 2006. The mainstream media has echoed this account, suggesting further that the bombing and ensuing collapse of security actually triggered the mass exodus and internal displacement. Others, however, say that a surge in refugees to neighboring countries was evident a year earlier.

In any case, the February 2006 bombing does seem to have awakened human rights and humanitarian organizations to the developing disaster. That spring, Human Rights Watch led a fact-finding trip to Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, and later that year, Refugees International initiated its own investigations in those countries. These “field visits” entailed conducting interviews with refugees and local NGOs, government officials and UNHCR staff. The findings prompted both NGOs to shift significant resources for investigation and advocacy from other regions to Iraq and its neighboring countries. Moreover, their reports, in turn, have catalyzed other NGOs, UNHCR and Congress to begin to address the consequences of Iraqi displacement.

Despite these efforts, international NGOs still struggle to make this largely invisible and unpopular problem visible in the West. As late as March 2007, Refugees International complained that “no Iraqi, US or UN institution is taking the displacement crisis seriously enough to mount an effective response.”⁷ Nonetheless, the sustained advocacy of these NGOs appears to be paying off: Media campaigns and lobbying of Congress and the UN have helped to rejuvenate debate on questions of humanitarian relief and refugee resettlement policy. Since the November 2006 release of a Human Rights Watch report on Iraqi refugees in Jordan, there has been a noticeable increase in mainstream media coverage of the refugee issue.

In May 2007, Refugee Council USA organized the first meeting of an Iraqi Refugee Work Group. The goal of the ad hoc coalition of US-based NGOs is to “better facilitate broad-

based advocacy” on the Iraqi refugee crisis. Members of the working group now meet regularly to coordinate media and lobbying efforts, attend Bush administration meetings on the refugee crisis and “build grassroots support for the growing needs facing Iraqi refugees and IDPs.”

As with any coalition, the ultimate success of this working group will hinge on its ability to transcend individual organizational goals and instead form consensus around key policy recommendations and public education strategies. In its few months of existence, the coalition appears to be building that capacity. For example, the group has drafted a sign-on letter seeking Congressional support for increased humanitarian aid for Iraqi refugees and IDPs. The coalition is also seeking increased bilateral assistance from the international community to Jordan and Syria, as well as other countries with large numbers of Iraqi refugees. In addition, they have pressured the Bush administration formally to resettle greater numbers of Iraqi refugees in the United States. These efforts are likely responsible for the administration’s announcement of new, higher targets for Iraqi refugee resettlement.

Several NGO representatives interviewed for this article argue that only through grassroots consciousness raising and advocacy is there any hope that more just refugee policies (including resettlement programs and broad and substantial funding for humanitarian assistance) will be developed in the US and other donor countries.

State of Denial

Until recently, the State Department and other US policy-making bodies largely ignored the mounting numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons, tending to attribute most displacement to the legacy of the deposed Iraqi regime. Following the November 2006 Congressional elections, when Republicans lost majorities in the House of Representatives and Senate, several committees chaired by Democrats opened hearings on various dimensions of the war, including the plight of refugees and IDPs.

The hearings marked a key shift in the way the war and its consequences are being addressed in US politics. At a special session on Iraqi refugees, Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-MA) noted that the US bore a “heavy responsibility” for what he called an “extraordinary human tragedy.” He and other senators criticized the Bush administration’s neglect of the issue and called for greater efforts to assist and resettle vulnerable Iraqi refugees. Kennedy asserted that the US “should work urgently with Iraq’s neighbors, especially Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, who are bearing the greatest refugee burden. Prompt action is essential to prevent destabilization of the region and to relieve suffering and save lives.”

But at UNHCR meetings held with NGOs and US government representatives in the spring of 2007, the Bush administration continued to claim that the refugee problem

“predates the current conflict.”⁸ When UNHCR held ministerial meetings in Geneva on the Iraq refugee crisis, Paula Dobriansky, undersecretary of state for democracy and global affairs, admitted that “Iraqi displacement is a serious problem,” but also repeated references to the “sizable number of Iraqis during the time of Saddam Hussein who left.” She called on the international community to address the “humanitarian concern” through “coordinated action,” her understatement contrasting sharply with urgent calls from NGOs and the UNHCR to develop a comprehensive program for assistance and resettlement for a growing population of refugees.

The Bush administration is now scrambling to implement a limited number of humanitarian programs, both within Iraq and in neighboring countries. The State Department’s Bureau for Population, Refugees and Migration has lobbied the Syrian and Jordanian governments to accept international NGOs who will partner with local humanitarian organizations such as the Red Crescent. State also encouraged the Jordanian government to allow Norway’s Fafo Institute for Applied International Studies to conduct a survey, yet to be released, of refugee needs in Jordan. NGOs have been calling for a systematic assessment of conditions facing refugees, as they have been working with only an anecdotal, “grassroots” sense of the unfolding humanitarian problem. In a key policy shift, State recently dedicated a large proportion of its humanitarian assistance toward grants to international NGOs working in Jordan and Syria, another indication of the impact of advocacy by these groups.

Bush administration claims to be addressing the humanitarian crisis at long last warrant skepticism. At Senate Judiciary hearings in January, Ellen Sauerbrey, assistant secretary of state for population, refugees and migration, noted that from 2003–2006 the US had allocated more than \$800 million to support UN agencies and a range of NGOs working with refugees, IDPs and returning Iraqis. To put this figure in perspective, the US spends more than \$250 million a day on the war in Iraq. One week of US war spending is more than the total annual budget for UNHCR operations worldwide. Analysis done by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in 2007 confirms how “under-funded” relief efforts are: “Iraq is the second least funded (per affected person) of the 15 most severe humanitarian crises” in the world.⁹

With the international community slow to act, Iraqis have been compelled to rely upon host country governments for most assistance. These states are ill-equipped to address the refugee crisis. According to a July 16 Refugees International press release, “The national education, health, water and sanitation systems of host countries are facing the challenge of meeting the needs of a rapidly expanding refugee population, and it is therefore the government agencies that provide these services that are in most need of international support.” Even where the Bush administration has entered

into bilateral agreements to aid specific host countries, such as Jordan, the level of proposed assistance is inadequate. A July 2007 meeting of regional governments, the US, NGOs and UN agencies failed to produce any meaningful agreements and highlighted differences between key actors over how to address the refugee problem. These disagreements further inhibit host countries in garnering sufficient international support for refugee services.

Too Little, Too Late?

While UNHCR is now more active in mustering international efforts to address refugee flows to Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt and Turkey, the impact of its work is arguably too little, too late. In none of these states are Iraqi forced migrants recognized as "refugees." Thus Iraqis, who most often have limited financial resources and have been unable to secure legal residence permits, have "disappeared" into urban centers like Amman, Damascus, Cairo and Beirut. They are often reluctant to approach host governments for assistance, cannot work legally to provide for families and, until lately, have not approached UNHCR in large numbers seeking third-country resettlement or other forms of assistance. While a number of international and local NGOs work in Jordan on behalf of refugee populations, their efforts, too, are hampered by structural constraints. For example, it has been difficult for international NGOs to gain formal permission from the Jordanian government to operate openly with Iraqis.

The Jordanian state has multiple concerns, of varying legitimacy, with recognizing Iraqis formally as refugees. It claims that in the past several years the "costs" it has borne related to the Iraqis in Jordan have amounted to approximately \$1 billion per year.¹⁰ Jordan also continues to grapple with a large Palestinian refugee population. Even without vulnerable Iraqis residing in enclaves in Amman and other cities, Jordan already has high rates of poverty, unemployment and inflation, and suffers a shortage of critical resources, such as water. Its relatively weak and aid-dependent economy has been deeply affected by the cessation of special agreements with the Hussein regime that subsidized oil costs.¹¹ The government is increasingly worried that continuing conflict in Iraq will spark terrorism or sectarian violence among Iraqi refugees in Jordan. Finally, the state does not want to create a "pull factor" by giving the impression that Iraqis can settle permanently.

Each month the Iraq war continues to force tens of thousands of Iraqis to flee their homes and communities. Two central obstacles prevent most Iraqi refugees from meeting their basic needs: the lack of international funding for humanitarian assistance—especially from the US as initiator of the war—and reluctance of host governments to develop comprehensive programs to allow Iraqis to work, get health care and enroll children in schools. NGOs continue to be at the center of advocacy for additional resources, and increasingly are calling upon the UN and

the US to negotiate with Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Egypt to allow these organizations more room to operate within host countries.

While Jordan, in the past, has supported efforts of international NGOs to promote development projects, few NGOs are able to operate legally in Amman on behalf of Iraqi refugees. Just as most Iraqis are "unregistered" and lack legal status as residents in Jordan, most international NGOs must partner with local organizations and government agencies to offer services, limited as they are, to refugees. Organizations like CARE, Caritas, Mercy Corps, Save the Children and the Near East Foundation, which have long-standing operations in Jordan, have been most successful in navigating the politics of refugee relief in Jordan. Likewise, given these groups' track records, they have also secured funding from both private American donors and the State Department to expand their efforts. In 2006, State awarded another organization, the International Catholic Migration Commission, in partnership with Caritas, \$3.3 million to assist the most vulnerable refugees in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. Key to success, reports one NGO representative in Amman, is partnering with a local Jordanian organization. Such relationships are crucial, given the lack of capacity of the state and social service and humanitarian organizations to cope with the large influx of Iraqis.

A resolution of the larger political crisis in Iraq, which is fueling conflict and human dislocation, seems unlikely any time soon. Thus, most NGOs and UN organizations now expect even larger numbers of Iraqis to be displaced in the future. The US and the international community seem more willing to address this humanitarian crisis, but insufficient resources have been committed, while UN and NGO capacity to serve Iraqis remains weak. Without added pressure on the US and the international community from a range of organizational and individual actors to address these limitations, Iraqi refugees will continue to suffer. ■

Endnotes

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2 *Guardian*, July 17, 2007.

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