

Backgrounder on Palestinian Refugees from Iraq

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With a few notable exceptions, the international community has largely failed to respond to the urgent and particular needs of Palestinian refugees from Iraq. These refugees continue to be systematically targeted inside Iraq, denied asylum and protection by neighboring countries and the larger international community, and confined to inhospitable border camps. Palestinians are living under extremely hostile conditions and are in need of immediate access to asylum and voluntary durable solutions, including repatriation, local integration, and third country resettlement.

Palestinian refugees in Baghdad live with little protection from the Government of Iraq or the international community. At the time of the 2003 invasion, there were an estimated 34,000 refugees from Palestine who had lived as guests in Baghdad since 1948. These refugees were granted permission to work and access services, but they could not own property or garner citizenship. Since the start of the war, despite their refugee status, as non-Iraqis and non-citizens, Palestinians have been afforded little protection inside Iraq. In addition, because of their vulnerable circumstances, Palestinians have been especially targeted by a wide variety of armed groups who have threatened, detained, killed, and tortured many of them. Moreover, there has been no targeted aid or other assistance to these people in several years.

Palestinians refugees are among the few groups from Iraq that have been systematically denied asylum. Despite their vulnerability and great need, and unlike hundreds of thousands of other refugees from Iraq, Palestinians attempting to seek asylum in neighboring countries have largely been denied entry, especially to urban centers. They have instead been confined to desert border camps. While the Jordanian camp was recently closed, three such camps remain in and around Syria. One camp, Al-Tanf, is located in the no-man's land between Iraq and Syria. These refugees are stranded at the border and have been repeatedly denied asylum. Refugees with chronic illnesses, including cancer, have been denied access to treatment. Similarly, over 1,900 Palestinians living in Al-Walid also have little access to services beyond the camp. The 300 Palestinians in Al-Hol can access health care and education but must otherwise live in the camp. This differs radically from the 300,000 other Palestinian refugees who have lived in Syria with full access to jobs and services.

Palestinian refugees are subjected to deportation. A few thousand Palestinians from Iraq were able to enter Syria clandestinely. Of 700 families, one in three households is female-headed. There are also many children. In recent weeks about two hundred of these refugees have been deported to Al-Tanf Camp. Unlike other refugees from Iraq, Palestinians are actively being targeted and deported.

The future of Palestinians from Iraq remains bleak. Though they are refugees from 1948, Palestinians living in border camps are under the UNHCR mandate rather than the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). UNHCR has long advocated that these refugees are the most vulnerable refugees from Iraq and are therefore in need of immediate durable solutions. Until now Israel has not granted safe passage to allow some of them to reunite with family members in

the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Currently, there are no local integration options available to them, as they remain stranded in confined camps. Moreover, they cannot return safely to Baghdad. Finally, only Brazil and Chile have graciously agreed to protect some of these refugees. While there is some new interest by a few European countries to possibly consider protecting Palestinians, the U.S. should be leading the effort to help facilitate permanent solutions for these refugees—many of whom have been violently uprooted and displaced for the second or third time.