

**Testimony of**

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**Before**

**House Foreign Affairs Subcommittees on International Organizations,  
Human Rights, and Oversight and House Foreign Affairs  
Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia**

**On**

**No Direction Home: An NGO Perspective on Iraqi Refugees and  
IDPs**

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I am Anastasia Brown, director of refugee programs for Migration and Refugee Services (MRS) of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (MRS/USCCB). MRS/USCCB is the largest refugee resettlement agency in the United States. Working with over 100 dioceses across the nation, we provide resettlement assistance to approximately 15,000 to 20,000 refugees each year, helping them with job placement, housing, and other forms of assistance to ensure their early self-sufficiency.

I would like to thank Chairmen Ackerman and Delahunt, as well as Ranking Members Pence and Rohrabacher, for the invitation to speak with you today on the Iraqi refugee population. The U.S. Catholic Bishops hold a special concern for the Iraqi refugee population. A delegation of Catholic bishops visited the Middle East in July, 2007, to assess their plight in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria. In addition, a member of the Bishops' staff visited Jordan and Syria earlier this year on a project with the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) to identify service gaps for vulnerable Iraqi refugees, including unaccompanied refugee minors, vulnerable women who are heads-of-households, and refugees with specific medical or psychological needs, just to name a few.

Mr. Chairman, I ask that the reports of the U.S. Bishops' mission in July, 2007, and the reports of the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) and the USCCB be included in the hearing record.

Mr. Chairman, it is the view of the U.S. Bishops that much more needs to be done to meet the human needs of the estimated 2 million Iraqi refugees and 2.5 million internally displaced. Others on the panel will address the plight of the internally displaced. My testimony today will focus upon Iraqi refugees, the majority of whom are located in

Jordan and Syria. In my testimony, I would like to outline four areas that need to be addressed in the immediate future in order to avoid further deterioration of the refugee situation and to alleviate further human suffering:

- The Administration and Congress must increase efforts to deliver basic humanitarian assistance to Iraqi refugees. Not only will this require the provision of more funds, but it also will require more diplomatic initiatives to ensure that the global community also contributes much needed assistance;
- The Administration must step up efforts to make available resettlement opportunities for vulnerable Iraqi refugees, both in the United States and in other countries;
- Special attention must be paid to extremely vulnerable populations, including unaccompanied refugee minors, women heads-of-households, and other groups;
- Specific needs, such as health services (including mental health), education, and basic food and shelter, must be addressed. Protection within host countries is also deteriorating, as refugee families without formal legal status remain at risk.

## **I. Overview of the Iraqi Refugee Crisis**

We are grateful, Mr. Chairman, for the work that your two subcommittees have done to highlight the humanitarian crisis in Iraq. I am sure that you would agree that, despite your efforts, one of the most under reported stories of the Iraq war has been the

humanitarian crisis it has spawned. While Washington has debated the “surge” and other aspects of U.S. military involvement in Iraq, the stories of close to 5 million displaced Iraqis have gone largely untold.

It is estimated that more than 2 million Iraqi refugees<sup>1</sup> are located in surrounding countries, mostly in Syria and Jordan. As many as 2.5 million are displaced from their homes but remain within Iraq. In my interviews with refugees I was struck by the high number of Iraqis who have experienced direct persecution or threats to themselves or a close family member.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 77 percent of the Iraqi refugees surveyed in Syria have endured aerial bombardments, 80 percent have witnessed a shooting, 68 percent have been harassed by militias, and 75 percent knew someone close to them who had been killed. Disturbingly, 23 percent have been kidnapped, 22 percent have been beaten by insurgents, and 16 percent have been tortured.

Individual accounts of persecution have been harrowing. Former employees of the U.S. military in Iraq, working as interpreters, drivers, or cooks, have fled because of fear of imminent death or because of the murder of a family member. Religious and ethnic minorities have endured similar persecution.

None of the families I spoke with in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey or Syria indicated that they thought they would ever be able to return to Iraq. Even if they do wish to return, prospects do not look bright, as it is unsafe to return to Iraq anytime in the near future. Integration into Syria, Jordan, or other host countries also is problematic. These countries are overburdened with the number of refugees in their cities. A third option,

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<sup>1</sup> Under international law, a person who has fled persecution in their home country and crossed an international border is a refugee. A person who has fled persecution and remained in their home country is an internally displaced person.

resettlement to a third country such as the United States, has not been offered in sufficient numbers to protect the most vulnerable.

The United States and the global community have been slow to grasp the magnitude of the displacement issue or to respond to it adequately. Politically, the United States has claimed that other countries need to do more to alleviate the suffering; other nations have claimed that the United States and Iraq have not shown enough leadership. The facts demonstrate that neither the United States nor the rest of the world have done enough to address the problem, with the situation deteriorating each day.

According to the Department of State, since 2003 the United States has contributed \$500 million for humanitarian assistance for both Iraqi refugees and displaced. This represents a miniscule fraction of the more than \$500 billion spent on the Iraqi war. In the Fiscal Year 2008 supplemental spending bill, for example, the Bush Administration has requested only \$30 million for Migration and Refugee Assistance supplemental request.

The rest of the world also can do more. According to the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Iraq ranks as the second-lowest funded crisis per-affected person. Of the \$261 million requested by the United Nations for Iraqi refugees for 2008, seven countries, other than the United States, have contributed a total of \$10.2 million. Many of the Gulf Arab States have contributed nothing to the effort, explaining that they will not commit funds until Iraq itself gives more help to its own people.

Host countries, such as Jordan and Syria, are showing the strain, asserting that their governments have already spent \$1 billion each on Iraqi refugees. Initially these two countries kept their borders open to the inflow of refugees, but have shut them periodically and at times denied entry to Iraqis. Educational and health care systems have been overwhelmed, partly because of the arrival of new refugees.

More troubling, Iraqi refugees and their families remain at risk in these countries. Families that fled with money or resources are now finding it difficult to purchase food and shelter. Men are not venturing out to find work for fear of deportation, leaving children who otherwise should be in school to scrounge for jobs and money. Health care for mental health problems or cancer---high among this population---is becoming inaccessible.

Some groups are particularly vulnerable. With their husbands either dead or in another country searching for work, women with children are at risk. Orphaned children are susceptible to human traffickers and smugglers. I will speak more specifically to these groups later in my testimony.

### **The Plight of Religious Minorities**

Mr. Chairman, among the most vulnerable refugee groups are the religious minorities of Iraq, predominately Christian groups. Before the war, between 800,000 to one million Christians—Chaldean Catholics, Assyrians, and Armenians---lived in Iraq. A smaller religious minority, the Mandeans, who numbered about 60,000 in 2003, are extremely vulnerable. But now, current surveys show that at least half of the Christian population has fled their homes to other parts of Iraq or to neighboring countries. According to UNHCR, one-quarter of those registered as refugees from Iraq are Christians.

The stories of Christian persecution are chilling. Many Christians in Iraq have been forced to choose between conversion to Islam or death, while converts to Christianity have been killed or tortured. A delegation from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, visiting the Middle East in 2007, heard about one convert to Christianity who was “crucified” on a tree by insurgents. The delegation was also told that any Iraqi who made the sign of the cross in public would receive death threats.

The recent kidnapping and death of Archbishop Paulos Faraj Rahho, archbishop of Mosul, has only added to the fear of Iraqi Christians, particularly Chaldean Catholics. Such a high profile victim sends a signal that no Christian is safe within Iraq.

Legislation enacted into law in January of 2008 makes religious minorities a special priority for resettlement in the United States, yet to date the Administration has not announced implementation of special processing for this group. Religious communities here have come forward with lists of families known to have fled Iraq, but to date the only processing available to them is either through UNHCR referral or access through lengthy and burdensome family-based procedures.

All of us hope that resettlement to a third country is not the long-term solution for the plight of religious minorities in Iraq. These ancient communities deserve the right to remain in their homeland and maintain their religious identity. The Holy See continues to urge protection for religious minorities within Iraq. There is no doubt, however, that for some, resettlement outside of the region may be their best option.

### **The Catholic Response**

The Catholic Church, both internationally and in the United States, has responded to the needs of Iraqis displaced within the country and regionally. Within Iraq, Caritas Iraq is one of a few nongovernmental agencies working with the displaced and other vulnerable Iraqis. Several religious orders, including the Jesuits, Dominican sisters, and Maronites are serving vulnerable groups, including women and children at risk.

In neighboring countries, including Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) are assisting refugees and processing them for resettlement in third countries. In the United States, Migration and Refugee Services (MRS) of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) is working with local dioceses to help resettle Iraqi refugees.

The U.S. bishops have been outspoken in their efforts to win more relief aid and resettlement numbers for Iraqis. Bishops of the USCCB Committee on Migration have traveled to the region to assess the conditions of Iraqi refugees and have reported their findings to Congress and the Bush Administration. MRS also recently produced a report on unaccompanied Iraqi refugee children and other vulnerable refugee groups. Both reports can be accessed at <http://www.usccb.org/mrs/tripreport.shtml>.

In addition, the U.S. Catholic Coalition for the Protection of Displaced Iraqis, consisting of several U.S. Catholic agencies and religious orders, recently was formed to coordinate Catholic advocacy efforts in the United States.

## **II. Refugee Admissions**

Mr. Chairman, Iraqi refugees, especially vulnerable groups, currently have no durable solution available to them. Clearly, more must be done to open resettlement opportunities to them.

Mr. Chairman, the State Department pledged to try to resettle 7,000 Iraqi refugees in FY 2007 and 12,000 refugees during FY 2008. We believe that these target goals are insufficient to the need. We had recommended that at least 25,000 refugees be resettled in 2007 with significant increases for this fiscal year. Unfortunately, the United States has been slow to reach its already modest targets.

As of March, the UNHCR had referred approximately 24,000 cases to the United States for consideration for resettlement. However, to date a little over 4,000 have been resettled in the United States, despite pledges to relocate a larger number. For the first half of the fiscal year, for example, the United States has welcomed only 2,627 of the 12,000 promised to be resettled this budget cycle. Last fiscal year, the United States resettled 1,608 refugees out of a target of 7,000. Clearly, our government must do more.

The arguments heard as to why the process has taken this long is that the US needed to build an infrastructure where none existed, and that the government of Syria would not issue visas for interviewing officers. Both of these statements are true. However it is also true that the infrastructure put in place is not adequate to the need, that the outreach for identification of refugees for resettlement has been insufficient, and that the goals and actual numbers realized are insufficient to indicate any real burden sharing to the countries of first asylum.

In February of 2007 we asked the UNHCR to do the unthinkable, they stepped up to the plate and referred over 15,000 people for resettlement within ten months. This included building an infrastructure where none existed. In the same period of time the US admitted only 2,616 refugees. The attitude appeared to be more ‘business as usual’ than that of extraordinary operations. In fact, so few people departed that the UNHCR began to question the wisdom of continuing referrals.

Mr. Chairman, the reality is that the needs of Iraqi refugees require that the United States resettle many times the 12,000 pledged for this year. Currently, at least 1,000 refugees enter Syria each month, so the 12,000 target merely maintains the status quo and does not relieve pressure on the host countries. In our estimation, Mr. Chairman, the United States must resettle, at a minimum, 60,000 refugees each year in order to improve the situation. This is a conservative estimate, as UNHCR called for the resettlement of 80,000-90,000 out of Syria alone this year.

Mr. Chairman, we are capable of meeting this number, but it would require a larger commitment of diplomatic and financial resources. In fact, there is precedence in U.S. history for staging a large resettlement program for specific populations. For example, in 1975, near the end of the Vietnam War the United States resettled close to 135,000 Vietnamese refugees. During the Orderly Departure Program (ODP) in 1992, at least

10,000 persons were interviewed and processed each month. These efforts helped saved thousands of lives. In response to the refugee crisis in Kosovo, the United States processed and admitted over 14,000 refugees within a six-month period.

In order to duplicate that effort, the United States would have to commit at least 42 USCIS officers interviewing 20 days a month, requiring larger infrastructure and facilities for both USCIS and the Overseas Processing Entity (OPE). In addition, UNHCR, with our help, would need to increase their capacity in order to refer 10,000 refugees a month.

It is true, Mr. Chairman, that diplomatic relations between the United States and Syria are problematic, but I suggest that the prospect of a large resettlement program within Syria is not unfounded. Again, the United States was able to conduct a large in-country program out of Vietnam, despite the absence of a diplomatic relationship between the two countries. UNHCR could play a crucial role of brokering "technical talks" between the United States and Syria to negotiate the terms of a large resettlement program.

Mr. Chairman, it is clear that, given the political will, the United States could significantly increase resettlement numbers for Iraqi refugees. For our part and that of other nonprofit resettlement agencies, we are prepared to handle such a caseload. Without a renewed and stronger commitment to Iraqi resettlement, vulnerable groups, including women at risk, children, and the elderly, will continue to languish in fear, with no hope for the future. Mr. Chairman, I submit the following recommendations to improve the resettlement options for Iraqis:

1. The United States must vastly increase its commitment to resettlement of Iraqis. The number of 12,000 refugees in one fiscal year equals roughly the number of refugees continuing to arrive in Syria. The UNHCR recommendation for resettlement from Syria has approached 80,000 people per year. To accomplish

this goal, the US and the UNHCR will need to demonstrate to the Syrian government exactly what is required in terms of infrastructure, including the number of caseworkers and interviewing officers required.

2. The United States must implement more aggressively the authority granted by legislation for refugees that are members of certain groups. A major outreach campaign must be launched.
3. The UNHCR in Jordan should make resettlement available to any interested registered refugees, rather than undertaking an intensive review of cases on an individual basis. With at least 500,000 Iraqi refugees in Jordan, more must be done to relieve the pressure on the government and Jordanian society.
4. Other avenues for refugee identification must be pursued. The U.S. government has held only one training for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) involved in assistance work to help them to refer refugees for resettlement. This method involves taking people who already have full time jobs and asking them to take on another responsibility. The United States should directly fund several NGO resettlement outreach projects designed to help vulnerable refugees, as the current system does not reach these refugees, who are often not able to come to the UNHCR office for multiple appointments.
5. Refugees who have paid ransoms when their relatives were kidnapped should receive expedited waivers for ‘material support’. The process for obtaining these exemptions continues to take too much time and should be streamlined.
6. Attention needs to be paid to each stage of the processing of Iraqi refugees to ensure that all steps are completed as quickly as possible. This includes preparation of cases for interview, fingerprints, medical examinations, etc.

7. Congress should enact into law H.R. 5837, legislation introduced by House Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, Refugees, Border Security, and International Law Chairwoman Zoe Lofgren (D-CA) and Representative F. James Sensenbrenner (R-WI), that would make technical corrections to two recently enacted laws that provide for the admission into the United States of thousands of special immigrants from Iraq. This measure would facilitate the admission of particularly vulnerable special immigrants from Iraq in fiscal year 2008 than waiting until fiscal year 2009.
8. Congress should appropriate \$345 million in supplemental fiscal year 2008 Migration and Refugee Assistance (MRA) and \$68 million in supplemental funding for the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) in order to ensure that the assistance, admissions, and resettlement needs of Iraqis are taken care of in this fiscal year.
9. The United States should expand “in-country” processing in Iraq to areas throughout the country where large concentrations of displaced Iraqis are located.

### **III. Vulnerable Groups**

Mr. Chairman, I would now like to speak to vulnerable individuals and groups in the Iraqi refugee population who need special attention. As stated earlier, MRS/USCCB staff, in conjunction with the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC), traveled to Syria and Jordan on separate occasions recently to assess the special needs of this refugee population.

Generally, the Iraqi refugee population registered with UNHCR has access to basic services, such as non-essential food items, health clinics, and food. As families exhaust

their resources and savings, however, these basic items could become more inaccessible. Iraqi children can attend Jordanian and Syrian schools, provided their families register with UNHCR, but there are no after school programs or supplemental programs available. There is a great need for mental health services, as a great number of men, women, and children have experienced mental and physical trauma from the war. Women and children are vulnerable to domestic and other forms of violence, as well as forced prostitution and human trafficking.

Mr. Chairman, during our missions MRS/USCCB paid particular attention to the situation of unaccompanied, separated, and special needs children. As expected, children are extremely vulnerable and are easily manipulated and exploited in this situation. To date, UNHCR has identified over 5,000 children and adolescents at risk in Syria alone, about 4.1 percent of the registered population.

Unaccompanied children make up about 1 percent of the registered population, although the majority of children identified are separated from their parents, not orphaned. Nevertheless, they have varied and substantial needs, including mental health needs, shelter, and basic food and medicine. Particularly troubling are stories of adolescent girls being subjected to sexual and gender-based violence, some as part of the sex trade. Girls who are detained in juvenile facilities are subject to rape.

While UNHCR has established a Best Interest Determination (BID) process to identify and provide solutions for unaccompanied and separated children, the process is slow and has yet to produce durable solutions for these children. More resettlement slots should be made available for them, as well as a wide range of mental health, social, and basic needs services.

Iraqi refugee women find themselves alone or as a single parent with several children, as their husbands have been killed or are in another country searching for work. In Syria,

UNHCR has identified single parents and women-at-risk as persons of concern. Single women, either adolescent or young adult, are vulnerable to prostitution rings and human trafficking, while women head-of-households face challenges of meeting the needs of their children.

Mr. Chairman, I offer the following recommendations to meet the needs of these and other vulnerable groups in the Iraqi refugee population:

1. Planning must move from an emergency/ crisis mode of immediate relief to service planning for at least a two-three year period with further emphasis on arrangements for durable solutions within that time frame.
2. Outreach must become more robust and coordinated to include:
  - Information sharing with local NGO and faith-based organizations whether or not formally registered or receiving funds from a UN agency;
  - Increased use of techniques, including public information efforts, to reach all Iraqis, especially extremely vulnerable individuals and their families;
  - Increased efforts to find and inform Iraqis outside of Amman and Damascus area.
3. Service planning must continue to find ways to meet basic needs for food, shelter and medical care.
4. Services must be designed and implemented to address the serious protection needs of extremely vulnerable individuals and their families, including children, adolescents and victims of violence and torture.

5. Mental Health and Psychosocial services must be instituted and designed to reach the standards of the IASC and other international bodies.
6. Attention must be focused on the service needs of victims of gender-based violence, including women and girls forced into prostitution.
7. Capacity building efforts must increase to assist local and international organizations to meet the protection and service needs of the refugees:
  - Coordinated information sharing must be increased;
  - Staff training must be increased; and
  - Iraqi refugees must be included in service design and delivery.
8. Areas outside of Amman and Damascus must be included in protection and service efforts.
9. Resettlement must be increased with greater effort to reach out to extremely vulnerable individuals and families, including unaccompanied and separated children.
10. Efforts must be made to work with national governments to regularize the visa process and requirements to give refugees more predictability and a sense of security in their current locations.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

The reality of Iraqi refugees can no longer be minimized or ignored. Host countries are feeling the pinch, while the displaced and refugees themselves, having spent what little

savings they had, are more in need of assistance. With no possibility of safe return to Iraq anytime soon, and little prospect for resettlement to third countries, the situation could reach crisis proportions in the near future.

The United States, as the leader of the coalition forces in Iraq and as the world's lone superpower, must step up its efforts to avert this impending crisis. Without U.S. leadership, other nations are unlikely to increase their support. More assistance must be provided, resettlement options offered, and diplomacy conducted to ensure that the essential needs of the refugees of Iraq are met.

Mr. Chairman, as mentioned in my testimony, there is precedence for the United States undertaking a larger resettlement processing effort in a situation in some ways similar to the Iraq conflict. Our efforts in Vietnam, in which we resettled well over 100,000 refugees in one fiscal year, is a case in point. The United States was able to set up an in-country processing program in Vietnam, even without a diplomatic presence there. In order to at least approach that effort, the United States will need to establish large Overseas Processing Entity (OPE) operations and infrastructure and commit many more Department of Homeland Security (DHS) officers for adjudications. This can be done, provided that the political will exists to accomplish it.

Mr. Chairman, success in the Iraq war must no longer be measured only in military terms, but by how as a nation we respond to the human misery it has created.

Thank you for your consideration of our views.