

Stuck in Syria, With No Way Home

By Jonathan Finan and Jennifer Rikoski
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DAMASCUS

On our last day in Syria, our interpreter, Sameer, asked us a favor.

"Please tell my brother not to go back to Baghdad," he said. "He'll be killed."

Sameer, 29, had spent 17 months as a translator for the [U.S. Army](#) in his native Iraq before fleeing the country two years ago after someone nailed a death threat to his family's door. He is in the final stages of a Byzantine process that we hope will lead to his resettlement in Texas. But his older brother, Duried, has been waiting for an interview with the international agencies that determine Iraqi refugees' fates. He is running out of patience, hope and money.

"I can survive here maybe three more months," Duried later told us over tea in Sameer's small apartment, echoing a sentiment we heard from dozens of Iraqis in Syria. "After that, I cannot even pay rent. Honestly, what choice do I have?"

Damascus is the epicenter of the Middle East's gravest humanitarian disaster since the Palestinian refugee crisis of 1948. We traveled there this spring to learn more about the plight of Iraqi refugees and the international community's tepid response. Unlike its neighbors, who have imposed strict visa requirements, Syria has done little to discourage the flow of migrants across its border and hosts an estimated 1.4 million Iraqis -- almost two-thirds of the post-invasion diaspora. With no legal status or right to work, their prospects are bleak. The wealthy and well-connected found their way to richer countries, and Syria's dysfunctional relations with the West have hamstrung efforts to provide assistance.

The countries best positioned to help are paralyzed by petty politics and legitimate alarm at the daunting scope of the problem and are allowing the crisis to fester. Much of the Middle East -- including Jordan, which once welcomed hundreds of thousands of Iraqis -- has now closed its borders, concerned that, like the Palestinians who 60 years ago fled what is now Israel, the Iraqis might never leave.

The United States, which is more responsible for the burgeoning humanitarian disaster than any other nation, has pledged \$208 million -- the equivalent of a rounding error in a war costing hundreds of millions a day. In 2008, Washington agreed to take in 12,000 Iraqis -- just one-fifth the U.S. target for refugees from Bhutan. Sweden, which played no role in the Iraq invasion, has accepted 40,000 Iraqis since the war began, while the United States has resettled slightly more than 5,000.

Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised; in all his public speeches about the war, [President Bush](#) has virtually never mentioned Iraqi refugees. Recent legislation expands refugee resettlement for Iraqis affiliated with the United States and allows them to apply directly at U.S. embassies. But it will be of no use in Syria, which requires all Iraqis to go through the [U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees](#) (UNHCR) and prohibits giving preference to those who aided the Americans in Iraq. Because of this inaction, hundreds of thousands of Iraqis in Syria face the same sad dilemma: protect their families as refugees outside Iraq or provide for them by returning.

Media reports suggest that Iraqis are returning because of declining violence. But a recent [United Nations](#)-sponsored survey refutes this myth, finding that 46 percent of those who left "can no longer afford to live in Syria," while just 14 percent returned because "they heard that the security situation has improved."

The refugees we met who are considering going back cited financial hardship as the main reason, though most said that returning at all was unthinkable. Another U.N. survey, conducted in February, found that only 4 percent of refugees in Syria plan to return. Absorbed into ramshackle apartments rather than makeshift camps, most Iraqis are barred by law from working and survive on their dwindling savings. Duried, who in Baghdad ran a prominent construction company, hasn't earned a penny since he left.

Already, Iraqi women and girls are turning to prostitution and young boys to black-market labor. In Sayyida Zainab, a Damascus neighborhood whose main road has been dubbed "Iraqis Street," we met Tutu, 11, and his brother Baha, 13. They dropped out of their Syrian school two years ago to work for a bus company. "It breaks my heart," their mother, Bassaad, told us. "But it's the only way I can get money."

As a single mother, Bassaad also receives a small stipend from UNHCR. But most of the Iraqis we met expressed deep frustration with the international organizations that handle their cases. It is easy to understand why. One year ago, with more than 1 million Iraqis already in Damascus, UNHCR -- which registers refugees, provides humanitarian aid and recommends some for resettlement in other countries -- had an apartment-sized office and a staff of about 25. Since then, it has moved into a three-story building and quadrupled its staff. But refugees still endure unacceptable delays.

The [U.S. Department of Homeland Security \(DHS\)](#), which screens Iraqis selected for resettlement in the United States, is also woefully shorthanded. For months, the Syrian government refused to grant DHS the necessary entry visas for its staff, complaining that the Americans planned to resettle only Iraqis who "collaborated" with the war effort. In November, Syria finally admitted a 10-person DHS team -- on the condition that all refugees first go through UNHCR, keeping the process painfully slow. Only 974 Iraqi refugees entered the United States in April, according to the [State Department](#) -- well short of the pace required to meet this year's target.

When he announced a massive relief and resettlement effort for Iraqi Kurds in 1991, the first President Bush called such a project part of the "American tradition" to "do everything in our power to save innocent life." Today, his son's near silence -- fueled, it seems, by a desire to avoid acknowledging the implication that Iraq is still many years from stability -- stands in stark contrast.

The United States must start by sharply increasing humanitarian aid to countries with the largest refugee flows -- earmarked and audited to avoid concerns that these funds might be diverted to undesirable purposes. It should also pledge to increase its resettlement target to at least 50,000 Iraqis from Syria alone in 2009 (still less than 5 percent of its refugees).

For its part, Syria should reverse its policy of requiring that all resettlement applications go through UNHCR, allowing Iraqis with ties to the U.S. mission to apply directly for resettlement and special visas. Syria should also increase the number of visas granted to DHS screeners and foreign nongovernmental organizations providing humanitarian aid.

Other Western countries, even those that opposed the invasion, must also do more. France, for example, offered to resettle just four Iraqis from Syria in 2008, according to UNHCR. Such parsimony -- reflecting the chasm this war has opened between the United States and its oldest allies -- punishes only the guiltless.

But regional support is also critical. Far from being oil-rich emirates, the three countries with the largest Iraqi refugee populations -- Syria, Jordan and Egypt -- have a combined gross domestic product (roughly \$170 billion) that is one-tenth the size of California's. Other Arab countries with abundant resources -- particularly close U.S. allies or those that receive military support -- should be pressured to help ease the burden.

When Sameer, our interpreter, asked us to tell his brother not to leave Syria, we didn't know what to say. We could point to little evidence of anyone, anywhere, who was preparing to meet the enormous challenge the Iraqi refugee crisis poses, and we did not want to provide false hope. But we also knew that by returning to Iraq he would be gambling with his life.

In the end, we told Duried that he was better off relying on the international community to wake from its slumber than on the caprice of gunmen who dominate his homeland. We hope we were not wrong.

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