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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Hounded by Insurgents, Abandoned by Us

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THE crisis over Iraq's refugees is the first major policy issue in which Iraqi civilians are front and center. We debate how the surge looks today or how oil will be distributed tomorrow on the banks of a swelling river of human misery: two million Iraqis who couldn't bear to live in Iraq anymore, and another two million displaced internally but too poor to flee.

This week, representatives from dozens of countries and international nongovernmental organizations have gathered in Geneva to discuss what might be done in the wake of the largest population shift in the Middle East since 1948. The world is asking what George W. Bush, who started the war in Iraq and presides over the country that historically accepts more refugees than any other, will do for these desperate people.

Many of them will most likely be denied refuge in the United States because, under the Patriot and Real ID Acts, they are tarred with having provided material support to terrorists — in the form of ransoms paid to kidnappers to secure a family member's release. Last month, Congress tried to create a waiver for those who provided material support "under duress." Lamentably, it was killed by Senator Jon Kyl, who said he'd respond with legislation to "provide relief from terrorism-related immigration bars to ... groups that do not pose a threat to the United States."

Are we so imprecise in our fifth year of this war that our government cannot distinguish between those who worked and ate alongside us and a member of Al Qaeda?

Consider Rita, an Iraqi Christian woman who worked for the Coalition Provisional Authority and helped manage the TIPS Hotline, which Iraqis can call to share critical information about wanted terrorists or pending attacks on the

United States military. Her supervisor, Bernard Kerik, wrote in a recommendation letter that her “courage to support the coalition forces has sent an irrefutable message: that terror will not rule, that liberty will triumph, and that the seeds of freedom will be planted into the great citizens of Iraq.”

But Rita’s courage was repaid by insurgents who abducted her 16-year-old son at gunpoint on his way to school one August morning. Terrorists demanded \$600,000 for his release. She doesn’t know how much her husband ultimately paid the kidnappers because he divorced her, blaming her work for the American government for the calamity that had befallen the family. He took her traumatized son and daughter to Syria, and she hasn’t seen or heard from them since. When the death threats became unbearable, she fled to Jordan.

Appallingly, Rita’s family cannot be resettled in the United States because of the material support bar. Unless the secretary of homeland security himself applies a waiver for her, she’ll never reach American soil. Does this woman, who lost everything because she worked for the Americans, who had a security clearance from our government to work in its embassy, pose a threat to the United States? If she does, then who doesn’t?

After all this time, we see hearts and minds as bombs and guns. If we cannot recover such basic distinctions, then we have surely lost more than the war.

Five years before we invaded Iraq, one senator had the remarkable foresight to speak about our responsibility to any Iraqis who might help the United States: “If we would have people in Iraq, or elsewhere in the world, trust us and work with us, then we need to take care that the United States maintains a reputation for trustworthiness and for taking care of its friends.” He was even more direct about what was at stake: “The world will be watching and judging how America treats people who are seen to be on our side. We cannot afford to foster a perception of unfairness that will make it more difficult for the United States to recruit supporters in the future.” So spoke Senator Kyl in 1998.

I thought I had witnessed the depths of our government’s inability to rapidly help Iraqis during the year that I worked for the United States Agency for International Development in Baghdad and Falluja. That was until I went to

Washington in February with a list of all of my former Iraqi colleagues who are now refugees because they helped us.

While the State Department bureau in charge of refugee resettlement has been trying feverishly to respond belatedly to the crisis, it is not equipped or authorized to act expeditiously. In her Jan. 16 testimony to the Senate, the assistant secretary of state for population, refugees and migration, Ellen Sauerbrey, said that the plight of Iraq's refugees was the bureau's "very top priority." More than two months later, she reported to the House that it could take six months (and likely longer) before our Iraqi friends might find refuge here.

What kind of superpower can't convert its "very top priority" into a program that starts saving its allies' lives before their visas expire and they are forced to return to Iraq? Rita is on my list, which has grown to include hundreds of former colleagues and others who endured similarly shattering fates because they believed in America enough to help us in Iraq. They wonder if they chose poorly when they signed on with us, and they are rapidly losing hope that the United States will offer them a life preserver before it's too late. Those who paid ransoms for their lives or those of their loved ones are scared to explain in their asylum applications the chief reason they fled their country, because they worry it will disqualify them — a perverse indication of the extent to which our government has lost its way since we invaded.

This is not an issue President Bush can delegate anymore. His bureaucracies are moving perilously slowly. They need the leadership of an American president. How will the United States help those whose belief in us cost them their country? We need to honor the sacrifice of these Iraqis — and start recovering the moral credibility our country forfeits each day they go without our help.

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