

Iraqi refugees in Syria

by Faisal al-Miqdad

Since spring 2003 the region has seen a massive migratory movement from Iraq into its neighbouring countries. Syria is the primary destination of refugees due to the historical relations between the two countries, and because the regulations in force do not require them to obtain an entrance visa.

Syria has offered Iraqi refugees care and assistance, and continues to do so, in spite of the limited nature of its material resources. At the start of 2007 UNHCR estimated that the number of Iraqi refugees in Syria exceeded 1.2 million, a huge influx to a country with a population of 18 million. This heavy number of arrivals has had an extreme effect on all facets of life in Syria, particularly on the services which the state offers to citizens. There has been a sharp increase in the cost of living and the unexpected weight of numbers has had dramatic impacts on the infrastructure and the economy.

The sudden increase in the population has led to a rise in costs in all areas of life. The prices of foodstuffs and basic goods have gone up by 30%, property prices by 40% and rentals by 150%.

Water consumption has increased by 21%. The additional cost to the Syrian government of supplying Iraqi refugees with drinking water and sanitation alone came to \$6.8 million last year. There are so many Iraqi refugees that they have become a burden on the labour market. In 2006 Syria's unemployment rate was 18%.

The human health needs of the Iraqi arrivals are mounting, in particular among women, children and the elderly. The Syrian government is endeavouring, with what resources it has, to meet their needs, including carrying out necessary surgical operations, health care interventions, vaccinations against epidemics and childhood immunisations. It should be noted that health services and medical care are

free of charge in all government hospitals and public clinics.

This has led to a health care crisis and shortage of hospital beds. Teaching hospitals alone estimate the costs of treating Iraqi refugees in 2006 at approximately \$163,000. The Syrian Red Crescent spent some \$60,000 on providing treatment and surgery to around 730 Iraqis in 2006. There is a pressing need to equip two 200-bed hospitals and to set up clinics to supply the 1.2 million Iraqis with the necessary medicines and equipment.

Basic education in Syria is free and the cost of higher education is usually nominal. As a result there has been a steady rise in enrolment, leading to school and classroom overcrowding which has adverse repercussions on equality of access to learning and education and on the health of students and teachers. Inability to absorb more pupils is likely to lead to a rise in school drop-out rates. Accordingly there is a pressing need to enlarge the existing schools and build about 100 more schools, so that all these students can be assimilated in order to prevent instances of



Many Iraqi refugees live in the Sayyida Zeinab quarter of Damascus.

An Iraqi family fills out form to register as refugees at UNHCR's centre outside Damascus.



Julien Lemery/IRIN

drop-out. The total cost is estimated at approximately \$60 million.

According to UNHCR, the number of Iraqi refugee families in Syria without a breadwinner is estimated to be around 27%. The situation of female-headed households is grave. The war in Iraq has resulted in new circumstances never previously common in Syria or Iraq. Conditions have forced some families to work in prostitution or to encourage their daughters to work in this field – something offensive to the customs of both Syrians and Iraqis.

Harsh living conditions have also led to the spread of child labour and increased drop-out rates. There is an insufficient provision of cultural and recreational centres, nursery schools and playgrounds. There is also an urgent need to provide appropriate care for the elderly and for the very large number of new arrivals with disabilities, more than a third of which are attributable to war injuries. There is a pressing need to support these disadvantaged families, and to create homes to care for the victims of war and displacement, the elderly and children, particularly orphans and people with disabilities. They need physical, mental and social support to prepare them for return to their original

communities once the war has ended and conditions are stabilised.

Overcrowding and the reduced standard of living have brought about a rise in crime of more than 20% in areas with concentrations of Iraqi refugees. We are witnessing kinds of crimes previously unknown in either Iraq or Syria – kidnapping, ransom demands and blackmail, as well as the involvement of organised crime in prostitution, killings and intimidation. In 2006 the Syrian police and security authorities thus had to spend an additional \$15 million on maintaining law and order.

Conclusion

Iraqi refugees constitute a numerically enormous mass of humanity in comparison to the number of the inhabitants of the region. Certain agencies estimate that the number of refugees in states neighbouring Iraq is greater than the total number of refugees in all the countries of the European Union. Syria's economy and infrastructure are buckling under the great weight of the burden.

The relief and aid which Syria has offered to Iraqi refugees in its territory over the past two years (2005-06) alone has amounted

to \$162 million. In light of the continuing rise in incoming Iraqi refugee numbers, it is estimated that the cost of humanitarian, health and education support for Iraqi refugees over the next two years will exceed \$256 million.

It is necessary, in our view, that the international community acknowledge:

- the need to find political solutions to the crisis in Iraq
- the tragic reality that more than four million Iraqis have been displaced and strengthen the international relief effort required to meet the crisis
- the burdens thrust on neighbouring states
- the risk that any further deterioration in the situation will lead to even greater number of displaced people with implications for the entire region
- the urgent need to provide financial support to cover the cost of providing services to Iraqi refugees in Syria and also to build the capacities of governmental and non-governmental organisations such as the Syrian Red Crescent
- the need to provide necessary financing for UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies working to help migrants and refugees in the neighbouring countries
- the importance of offering assistance and funding to support the right of Iraqi refugees and migrants to return to their homes and creating appropriate circumstances for them to do so.

The Iraqi authorities and the foreign troops present on Iraqi territory must urgently shoulder responsibilities placed on them under international law to ensure protection, security and services to all residents of Iraq, including those groups that are weakest and most exposed to danger and persecution, such as the Palestinian refugees.

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