

Iraqi refugees in Egypt

by Lynn Yoshikawa

Egypt is host to an estimated 150,000 Iraqi refugees. Initially arriving with high hopes of resettlement, their resources are now depleted, they are unable to work, their children are out of school and their community is fractured by divisions.

Escaping death threats, torture, kidnappings and military attacks, thousands of Iraqis have settled in the Cairo suburbs, Alexandria and smaller governorates. The handful of Iraqi refugees that had been arriving in Egypt since 2001 quickly turned to a flood following the Samarra bombings in February 2006. Early arrivals immediately following Saddam's fall were mostly Sunni but now include significant numbers of Iraqi Shi'ites and Christians.

Some transited via Jordan and Syria, moving on in the expectation that the cost of living in Egypt would be lower. All hoped that Egypt would simply be a transit stop. Human traffickers have begun exploiting their desperation, allegedly charging \$14,000 per person to reach Europe. UNHCR and existing refugee NGOs in Egypt were ill-prepared for the unexpected influx and Iraqi asylum seekers were initially turned away and asked to wait.

A signatory to the 1951 Geneva Convention and the 1969 OAU Convention, Egypt does not allow refugees to work without a permit and access to services is severely limited. Entry for Iraqis is becoming harder as Egypt now requires in-person interviews which are only available in Amman or Damascus. Changing visa restrictions have split families and have prevented Iraqis from returning to collect salaries or sell their assets to support themselves in exile.

Egyptians generally regard Iraqis as well-off educated professionals, an impression reinforced by the number of Iraqi restaurants, coffeehouses and internet cafes in neighbourhoods in 6th of October City (some 20km southwest of

Cairo). However, resources are running out and some families have chosen to return to Iraq, despite the enormous risks. The inability of refugees to work legally causes enormous distress among Iraqis. The only significant niche in Egypt's informal labour market is domestic work, something their wives are completely unaccustomed to doing for others. Although government decrees allow refugees to access state schools, in practice most are generally barred from government schools. Most Iraqi children are not in school as private education is costly. Any money Iraqis may have had on entering Cairo is fast disappearing in Egypt's inflation-ridden economy.

Sectarian tensions at home have spilled over into the Iraqi community in Egypt. Mistrust between segments of the Iraqi population is hampering the development of self-support networks that are lifelines for the many other refugee communities in Egypt. With children out of school, parents unable to find jobs and support families and memories of violence experienced in Iraq so powerful, mental health problems are growing.

Iraqis arrived with high expectations for resettlement. However, UNHCR's resettlement strategy prioritises vulnerable cases with immediate health and/or protection needs. As of September 2007, UNHCR had registered 9,562 Iraqis. Recognised on a prima facie basis, they are given a 'yellow card' which grants them legal residence in Egypt but which must be renewed every six months. UNHCR refers them to Caritas and Catholic Relief Services, two implementing partners, for limited financial, medical and educational support.

UNHCR and its partners all face budget constraints in addressing refugee needs. UNHCR has reduced the wait for registration documents to two months but the office remains understaffed and personnel overworked.

The local population has been generally positive towards the Iraqi refugees and sympathetic to their plight. Their ability to blend in has eased their adaptation to Egyptian society compared with African refugee groups but there are reports of some discrimination on religious grounds. Shi'ites, for example, are barred from praying in Sunni mosques and denied permission to build their own by a government which does not officially recognise their sect. Foreigners in Egypt are generally subjected to higher rents than locals and the stereotype of Iraqis as wealthy had led some to blame them for high inflation.

Syria and Jordan have been shouldering the lion's share of the impacts of the refugee flows caused by the 2003 invasion with little support from the states responsible. The danger is that Iraqis hosted by Turkey, Lebanon and Egypt will be ignored. The Arab League has rejected requests for assistance to Iraqis in the region, citing a 'lack of consensus'. The Iraqi embassy in Cairo has not yet provided any assistance for their nationals despite pledges of \$25 million from the foreign ministry. The Iraq crisis has created the largest displacement in the Middle East since 1948 and deserves the concerted action of all actors to uphold refugees' rights.

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