

The EU should help Iraqi refugees

by Gunilla Carlsson and Tobias Billström

There are strong humanitarian reasons and close ties that underpin a Swedish commitment to Iraq. More than 100,000 Iraqis are living in Sweden and the numbers are rising. Europe could do more to provide humanitarian assistance and assist Iraqi refugees.

Despite political progress in Iraq, sectarian violence continues to claim new victims. While the eyes of the world have been on the conflict, its humanitarian consequences have largely been ignored. For quite some time now, we have witnessed an exodus of Iraqis from their own country as well as internal displacement on an unprecedented scale. The continuing influx of Iraqis to Syria and Jordan puts a heavy burden on their socio-economic structures, particularly in the housing, education and health sectors. A worsening situation would constitute a threat to the stability of these countries and could lead to an increase in secondary movements towards Europe. A collapse of the reception capacity of receiving countries would make the refugees even more vulnerable.

The Geneva conference convened by UNHCR in April has raised wider international awareness of the dire humanitarian situation of displaced Iraqis and, it is to be hoped, galvanised political will to address the situation. The states in the region have committed themselves to greater cooperation to comprehensively address the consequences of Iraqi displacement. Syria and Jordan, which have shown remarkable solidarity and borne a heavy burden, have begun to assess the humanitarian needs of their Iraqi population. The Iraqi government has stated that it will take concrete initiatives, in concert with neighbouring states, to improve access to hospitals and schools for displaced Iraqis. To be sure, the Government of Iraq is responsible for the protection of its citizens, including the internally displaced,

but it needs support and assistance. Addressing the humanitarian needs in Iraq and improving the Iraqi government's capacity to deliver is also closely bound up with the future stability of Iraq.

The efforts of the states in the region to find solutions to the Iraqi displacement crisis now need to be complemented with a firmer international response. While taking into account the political and security concerns associated with the present situation, we need to find better ways to channel international support to ensure continued protection and assistance for the displaced Iraqis. The newly adopted UN Strategic Framework for Humanitarian Action in Iraq¹ lays the groundwork for stepping up humanitarian aid inside Iraq. In addition, together with states concerned, we should explore mechanisms to also increase aid to those Iraqis who have left the country. This is indeed a situation in which the interests of the region and that of the European Union converge. Further concerted action to improve the situation of the many Iraqis who have fled their homes

will prevent the refugee situation in the region from developing into an outright humanitarian crisis, that could in turn lead to a mass exodus from the region.

The security situation has complicated but not stopped delivery of Swedish assistance. In fact, Sweden was the fourth largest donor of humanitarian support to Iraq and Iraqi refugees in neighbouring countries in 2006.² Support has been given through the Swedish Red Cross and the ICRC and through the Swedish organisation, Qandil,³ which is primarily focusing on water and sanitation projects and the primary health care needs of displaced people in the Kurdish provinces. Sweden also supports the work of the Mines Advisory Group (MAG)⁴ to remove landmines and raise awareness of the landmine problem. We have provided considerable assistance for reconstruction, democratic governance, election organisation and infrastructure. We are keen to increase the capacity and organisational development of civil society in Iraq. To this end, the Jarl Hjalmarsson Foundation⁵ is about to start a project in northern Iraq

in order to promote equal and full political participation of women.

Sweden alone receives as many Iraqi asylum seekers as the rest of Europe. Sweden and other member states, as well as the European Commission, have made substantial contributions to UNHCR's work to protect and assist Iraqi refugees but additional burden sharing is required. The strategic use of pooled resettlement capacity would be one way to share the burden and maintain a temporary 'protection space' in host countries. In order to benefit the reconstruction of Iraq, this will have to be accompanied by an active return policy. While the Iraqi diaspora can play an instrumental role in rebuilding Iraq, it is of major importance for the country's future that it is not drained of its most skillful citizens, many of whom have already left Iraq or are about to do so. The Swedish Migration Board and AGEF⁶ have thus entered an Agreement on return to Iraq. The main aim is to facilitate reintegration and support returnees to the three northern governorates of Iraq. The programme consists of assessment and job placement, salary and training measures, as well as qualification courses.

A lasting solution to the Iraqi refugee situation can only come about through a stabilisation of the situation in Iraq and long-term support to the Iraqi government to enable Iraqis to live in peace and security, build democratic institutions, respect human rights and create conditions for the displaced to return. This will not be possible without a comprehensive international response to sustain protection and assistance to Iraqi refugees and IDPs. The European Union should play an important role in this vital humanitarian endeavour.

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1. [www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004CE90B/\(httpDocuments\)/ECE544FA61A7C12572C200375BF5/\\$file/pdf_Strategic_Framework_for_Humanitarian_Action_in_Iraq.pdf](http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004CE90B/(httpDocuments)/ECE544FA61A7C12572C200375BF5/$file/pdf_Strategic_Framework_for_Humanitarian_Action_in_Iraq.pdf)

2. OCHA, Financial Tracking Service

3. www.qandil.org

4. www.mag.org.uk

5. www.hjalmarssonstiftelsen.se

6. Association of Experts in the Fields of Migration and Development Co-operation. www.agef.net

Many internally displaced people now live in rough conditions.

