

Rumour versus information

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Central to Iraqi refugees' efforts to resolve the question of their immediate future is their access to good information about resettlement and return.

A study conducted in Jordan in 2009¹ shows that a lack of information and transparency contributes to a dynamic of despair among the displaced and exacerbates conditions that motivate them to give credence to hearsay in making decisions about their future.

Regional governments in the Middle East firmly assert that local integration is not an option

for Iraqi refugees. Yet according to the findings of the study, answers to queries about the resettlement adjudication process, conditions in countries of resettlement, and the reality awaiting repatriating Iraqis do not flow freely. Those who manage these durable solutions – UNHCR, IOM, embassies and government departments – are hesitant about refugees being informed about such issues, particularly when it comes to

resettlement. They feel that a greater flow of information could pose challenges to managing the refugee population and could give rise to increased numbers of fraudulent resettlement claims. While mass information campaigns have been used as a tool to mobilise refugee communities toward repatriation or local integration,² this strategy is less used to inform about resettlement.

To the agencies that facilitate durable solutions for Iraqis in the Middle East, information about resettlement and about repatriation are unequal

in their political sensitivity. While information about repatriation is sensitive in that, if incorrect, it could endanger a returnee, some see information about resettlement as potentially threatening the integrity and stability of the screening process.

Embassies in particular express concern that detailed knowledge among Iraqis about the conditions in different countries of resettlement would encourage them to make comparisons and then pursue their ideal, despite the fact that refugees do not have a choice over which country UNHCR refers them to. At the same time, UNHCR has a policy not to inform excluded Iraqis that they will not be referred for resettlement.

Providing information

Iraqis displaced in the urban areas of Syria, Jordan and elsewhere in the Middle East have access to a variety of media, and families often congregate around the television for news about home. TV advertisements may appear in the near future, updating Iraqi refugees about the option of return. For now, though, some NGOs have initiated efforts to print flyers and create Facebook pages to spread awareness among Iraqis about the repatriation programme supported by the Iraqi Ministry of Displacement and Migration.

The question remains as to whether Iraqi refugees give credence to this information when it is seen as coming from sources that they may not trust, such as the Iraqi government or humanitarian or UN agencies. While there are no mass information campaigns in the context of Iraqi displacement that deal with the topic of resettlement, 80% of this study's respondents had approached UNHCR, IOM or various embassies to attempt to learn more about conditions in countries of resettlement and the resettlement process.

Despite the numbers of Iraqis being resettled, a large number of those displaced are still uncertain about their immediate future and have been for years. Different rumours circulate amid different communities and there are no programmes that reach out into urban neighbourhoods to monitor the changing dynamic of

refugees' queries about their options for the future.

As examples, during the interviews on which this article is based, 20% of all respondents claimed to believe or to have heard rumours that the more one exaggerates one's story during a resettlement adjudication hearing, the more likely one is to be accepted for resettlement. The most common set of rumours involved the fear that Iraqi refugees would be cut off from assistance and would then be forcibly returned to Iraq. Nearly 40% of respondents had heard negative rumours about life for Iraqis resettled in the United States. Several respondents cited rumours about mistreatment of those who return.

The primary sources of information were other displaced Iraqis in their community, followed by information from Iraqis who had already resettled, who had repatriated, or who had remained in Iraq. As a result, knowledge among respondents tended to be more accurate about extremely local issues such as the conditions on the streets in Baghdad in areas where relatives lived or neighbourhoods in particular American towns where friends had resettled; more general information was less accurate.

Information provision in an urban setting

Not all of the challenges to providing information are specific to an urban setting. In protection guidelines for camp contexts, UNHCR cites many of the same challenges.³ However, information provision to refugees in an urban setting does require a different set of strategies from those commonly used in camp settings.

Information activities dealing with resettlement can try to avoid contributing to the rumour mill as much as possible by disseminating knowledge through more intimate means, such as counselling sessions, dialogue groups attended by information experts, and information resource centres open to all Iraqis. While making more transparent the details about the resettlement process and conditions in different resettlement countries, one-to-one sessions with counsellors or advocates must also instil awareness in refugees of the risks

involved in resisting the standard resettlement referral process.

With communities of Iraqi refugees divided and often far from UNHCR offices, outreach requires careful strategies, and the diffuse dynamic of urban refugee situations requires an outreach effort that extends beyond the capacity of UNHCR alone. Mass information campaigns are required but both humanitarian and advocacy NGOs have a role to play for more individualised, smaller-scale arenas for information provision. Humanitarian NGOs typically are in regular contact with large numbers of Iraqis and these organisations can incorporate the task of providing information into their existing structure. Case managers from humanitarian organisations can receive new queries as well as distribute accurate details about durable solutions to large numbers of people. Such NGOs also often collaborate with refugee-led organisations, which may be more aware of information needs and which may be able to disseminate important details more widely than international NGOs. Advocacy groups playing the role of official representatives in the adjudication process may be better equipped to give more direct and concentrated legal advice to smaller numbers of refugees; these groups are also well positioned to call for greater transparency from those international bodies managing the durable solutions process.

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The opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the author and do not reflect those of CARE or any other organisation mentioned.

1. Adam Saltsman, 'Facing an Uncertain Future: Improving CARE's capacity to provide displaced Iraqis in Jordan with information on resettlement and return', November 2009.

2. UNHCR has supported a diversity of information campaigns in many rural and urban displacement contexts, such as Thailand and Africa's Great Lakes region.

3. UNHCR, 'Operational Protection in Camps and Settlements: A reference guide of good practices in the protection of refugees and other persons of concern', Solutions and Operations Support Section, Division of International Protection Services, 2006. <http://www.unhcr.org/448d6c122.html>