

The world must shoulder Iraq refugee burden

by Mukhaimer Abu Jamous

The presence of large numbers of Iraqi citizens is costing Jordan an estimated one billion dollars per annum. Like other neighbouring states, we require urgent assistance to enable our national institutions to continue to provide services to Iraqi citizens residing in Jordan.

Jordan is connected to the Iraqi people by ties of historic neighbourly relations and continuous interaction between the two peoples that we are committed to maintaining. We stand by our neighbouring country, hoping that it will overcome its difficulties, maintain the integrity of its land and people and regain peace so that it may resume its role in building stability and prosperity in the region.

Jordan has been a destination for hundreds of thousands of Iraqi citizens, representing all sectors of the Iraqi population, who have always found it a safe and welcoming refuge over many decades. The developments of the past four years have led to a large increase in the number of Iraqis residing in Jordan. The manner in which Jordan deals with Iraqi citizens

within its territory is based upon the long-standing relationship between the two countries and the Jordanian leadership's political will which believes that the provision of humanitarian services and care to the furthest extent possible is crucial.

However, this is constrained by the capabilities of our country and its resources. The Kingdom faces serious pressures in terms of natural resources, infrastructure and economic capacity, not to mention what it has historically shouldered as a result of the continuous waves of refugee inflow, especially of Palestinians. Jordan has, however, ensured that Iraqis seeking a safe haven are given a preferential opportunity to do so. In practical terms, Iraqi citizens benefit from many of the services which Jordanian

citizens access. One example of many is that Jordanian public schools receive Iraqi children in return for a nominal fee at all stages of schooling. Similarly, Jordan also provides health services to the Iraqi community at all Ministry of Health facilities and even preventative health care free of charge.

The provision of these services has resulted in a great burden being placed on the government budget, as many commodities and services are still highly subsidised by the government. It is worth indicating that a government subsidy to the water and energy sectors does not differentiate between citizen, visitor or resident in Jordan. This pressure is magnified when we recall that Jordan is among the world's most water-deprived countries.

The increasing demand on all services has resulted in the rise of inflation and pressure on our national economy. Such pressure leads to an increase in the cost of living for all Jordanians, particularly affecting the most vulnerable groups in our society.

Iraqi refugees
in Jordan.



UNHCR/P. Sands

The deteriorating security conditions currently on the ground in Iraq, in addition to the increasing numbers of people coming from Iraq into Jordan, increase the security pressures on my country. This has led to a great increase in expenditure on precautions and security contingency measures in order to maintain the integral and indispensable element of stability which Jordan seeks to ensure for its people and for those residing on its territory.

Initial estimates indicate that the general cost of the presence of the large numbers of Iraqi citizens on our national economy is no less than \$1 billion per annum. In order to discover the real magnitude of

the pressure to which our national economy is subject, and in order to determine the needs created by the presence of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis in Jordan, the government has contracted the Norwegian think-tank FAFO¹ to carry out a survey. This will determine the number of Iraqis in Jordan, analyse their real situation and assess their needs. We are grateful to the Norwegian government for financing this study.

The government will convey the report's findings to friendly countries, international organisations and all interested parties in order to secure the international community's support and assistance for Jordan in providing the best forms of

care and support for Iraqi citizens. We are hopeful that the international community will stand by our side in this humane cause. We are hopeful that our efforts will be supported with economic assistance that will allow our national institutions, and particularly our education and health services, to continue to provide all types of services to Iraqi citizens residing in Jordan.

We believe that no effort towards easing the suffering of Iraqis living outside of Iraq is a substitute for regaining stability and the national reconciliation of its people. Jordan will continue to cooperate with the Iraqi government to find means for Iraqis residing in Jordan to sustain their relationship with their home country. We continue to look for ways to include these citizens in whatever assistance their government is able to provide while facing these unique circumstances.

Jordan has repeatedly affirmed its commitment to continue its cooperation with UNHCR in accordance with the Memorandum of Understanding signed in 1998. The international community must take into consideration that fact that host countries have not played a part in the circumstances that led to the current humanitarian crisis.

We need international political will to support UNHCR to relocate recognised and registered refugees to third countries. Assistance must also be provided to help Iraqis remain in their own country, particularly in areas where security can be provided in cooperation with the Iraqi government. Doing so would encourage Iraqis to remain in Iraq by facilitating their transfer from dangerous areas to safer ones until normal conditions return to their places of residence.

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1. www.fafono