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The Plight of Iraqi Refugees

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Before the Senate Judiciary Committee

Washington, DC

January 16, 2007

[Gouvernement Printing Office Full Committee Report \(PDF 8.5 MB\)](#)

As Prepared

Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the Committee. It is an honor to appear before you today to discuss issues involving displaced Iraqis and Iraqi refugees. I welcome the opportunity to detail some of the actions the Administration is taking to provide protection and assistance for Iraqis in neighboring countries of first asylum and for populations inside Iraq. The Administration shares your concern about the current situation facing Iraqi refugees and is committed to helping improve conditions for them in countries of first asylum. We are working closely with host governments in the region, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Through these partners, we are providing assistance to the most needy refugees and are seeking durable solutions, including resettlement to the United States, for those who require this important form of international protection.

Since 2003, the Administration has provided more than \$800 million to support WFP, UNHCR, ICRC, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and a range of NGOs that provide direct assistance to returning Iraqi refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Iraq, and third country national refugees inside Iraq and Iraqi refugees outside Iraq to help meet basic humanitarian needs and support reintegration programs. U.S. Government support has increased the capacity of Iraqi government ministries working with refugees and internally displaced persons, provided training to non-governmental organizations serving refugees, and assisted numerous victims of conflict. These programs helped reintegrate many of the 300,000 Iraqi refugees who returned home between 2003 and 2006 and helped many of the 500,000 IDPs inside Iraq.

However, due to the upsurge in sectarian violence in 2006, this trend has reversed, and at present more Iraqis are fleeing their homes to other areas of Iraq and to neighboring countries then are returning. UNHCR estimates that between

1 to 1.4 million Iraqis are in countries bordering Iraq, though a large percentage of them had left Iraq prior to 2003. We believe the current population of Iraqis in Jordan and Syria is a mixture of the Iraqis who departed before 2003 and newer arrivals. Many organizations, including UNHCR, have raised concerns about new arrivals and growing numbers of Iraqis in these countries, though neither UNHCR nor the governments of Jordan or Syria have definitive figures on the size of the population. UNHCR has argued that the refugee crisis it predicted would occur, but did not materialize after the invasion in 2003 is now upon us.

Although we lack firm figures on how many Iraqis are seeking refuge in neighboring countries we do know that many left with minimal resources and are living on the margins. Other than alRuwaished, which shelters a stable population of third country nationals from Iraq, Jordan and UNHCR have not established refugee camps. Anecdotal reporting also indicates that many Iraqi children in these countries do not have access to schools or adequate health care. We need better information on the needs of Iraqis in these countries, particularly their protection concerns. We are encouraging the Government of Jordan to allow a comprehensive survey of the needs of Iraqis in Jordan that would guide the international community in focusing assistance and protection activities. UNHCR is planning to conduct a similar survey in Syria. We hope our partners will be able to complete these surveys in the very near future.

However, we are not waiting for precise numbers before responding to the needs of vulnerable Iraqis in neighboring countries. Rather, we are continuing our support to UNHCR and NGO programs benefiting Iraqis in these countries. In 2006, the U.S. provided nearly \$8 million of UNHCR's operational budget for Iraq, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. In 2006, we also provided \$3.3 million in funding to the International Catholic Migration Commission to assist the most vulnerable Iraqis in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. In 2007, we are expanding support for these and similar programs serving needy Iraqis in neighboring countries. But our ability to respond to the growing needs depends on receiving sufficient resources. The President's FY 2007 request for Migration and Refugee Assistance included \$20 million for Iraqi humanitarian needs. The Administration will continue to monitor the recent refugee and displacement situation and the ability of the international community to address the increased needs.

Our support for UNHCR's protection mandate and our diplomatic efforts with host governments is essential to preserve the principle of first asylum and ensure that assistance reaches vulnerable refugees. We continue to press all governments in the region to keep their borders open to those with a fear of persecution and allow assistance and protection to reach these populations. Jordan and Syria have been generous hosts to Iraqis for many years, and have largely kept their borders open as people continued to flow out of Iraq in 2006. Both Jordan and Syria are also hosts to sizeable Palestinian refugee populations, and we recognize the additional burden Iraqi refugees place on these countries. We are working with UNHCR and host governments to see how we can help bolster their capacity to provide protection and assistance so Iraqis do not over-stretch social service networks and these governments' ability to continue to receive Iraqis seeking asylum.

Another aspect of our response to Iraqi refugee needs in the region is a planned expansion of our U.S. resettlement program. Given the large numbers of Iraqis thought to be in Syria and Jordan, with some estimates as high as 1.4 million, the U.S. and other third country resettlement programs will play a small but important role in meeting the needs of Iraqi refugees. For that reason, we are working closely with UNHCR to prioritize U.S. resettlement for the most vulnerable Iraqi refugees. The U.S. has been resettling Iraqi refugees since the mid-1970s. To date the U.S. has resettled more than 37,000 Iraqis, the vast majority of whom were victims of Saddam Hussein's regime. As the numbers of Iraqis arriving in Jordan and Syria increased in 2006, we have acted aggressively to expand our ability to offer more Iraqis refuge in the United States. In 2006, we provided \$400,000 of funding targeted to support UNHCR



resettlement operations. These expanded operations will increase registration efforts to help identify vulnerable cases and boost the number of referrals to our program and those of other resettlement countries. We have provided an additional \$500,000 for this purpose in 2007. We have no quota on the number of Iraqis who can be resettled to the United States as refugees. The process of resettling Iraqis is the same as resettling refugees in need of protection from other parts of the world. This process includes identifying those in greatest need from among so many, conducting adequate background security checks, completing personal interviews with adjudications, and coordinating the transportation and logistics for individuals approved for resettlement. In processing eligible Iraqis for resettlement in the United States, we will remain vigilant in preventing terrorists from gaining admission to this country.

I want to recognize some of the special populations that have received notice from humanitarian organizations in 2006 – minority populations in Iraq and Iraqis who have worked closely with the United States in Iraq. Some have called for special protection and programs for these people, including religious minorities such as Christians, who have fled Iraq or those who have worked for the American government or U.S. organizations or companies. Many of these Iraqis are in refuge in Jordan, Syria, or Turkey and may be unable to return to Iraq because they fear for their lives. We intend to ensure that these special populations receive the same consideration and access to the U.S. resettlement program as others and we are encouraging them to contact UNHCR to make their needs known.

I want to take a moment to talk about important programs the U.S. Government supports inside Iraq. While recent reports have highlighted the conditions of Iraqis in neighboring countries, we must not forget populations of concern still inside Iraq. UNHCR and the Iraqi government estimate there are as many as 1.7 million internally displaced persons and another 44,082 third country national refugees in Iraq. The U.S. Government continues to support UNHCR, ICRC, and key NGO programs inside the

country that assist communities with new internally displaced persons, recently returned refugees, and other victims of violence. For example, we support important programs of ICRC that upgrade hospitals throughout the country and provide medical services to those who are innocent victims of the armed insurgency. We also provide resources and diplomatic support to programs that seek to protect, assist, and provide durable solutions for Palestinian, Turkish, and Iranian refugees inside Iraq. In 2005 and 2006, we supported the movement of over 3,000 Iranian Kurdish refugees from the Al Tash refugee camp near the strife-torn town of al Ramadi to a safe area in Northern Iraq – providing permanent housing, employment programs, and local integration support. We are also working closely with UNHCR and the governments of Iraq and Turkey to enable the voluntary return of more than 10,000 Turkish Kurdish refugees from the Mahkmour refugee camp to their home villages in Turkey.

The U.S. Agency for International Development continues to support the protection and assistance requirements of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Iraq, mostly through non-governmental organization. These NGOs work closely with new IDPs to provide life-saving and sustainable assistance throughout the country. The Administration will continue to implement existing programs and monitor the displacement situation.

Mr. Chairman, we appreciate your leadership on Iraqi refugee issues and look forward to working closely with you as we seek to expand protection for these Iraqis, third-country national refugees, and IDPs and ensure that the vulnerable among them receive assistance, access to social services, and, for the most vulnerable, the opportunity to resettle to a third country. Thank you for the opportunity to address the Committee. This concludes my testimony. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.



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