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## Iraqi Volunteers; Iraqi Refugees: What Is America's Obligation?

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Statement before the House Foreign Affairs Committee Subcommittee on Middle East and South Asia

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Chairman and distinguished members of the Committee. It is an honor to appear before you today to discuss 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 partnerships, we are providing assistance to the neediest refugees and are seeking durable solutions for all of them. In keeping with international norms, past experience and the wishes of many individual refugees, it is often most appropriate to provide assistance and protection to refugees in the region until such time as it is safe to return home. However, we also are actively pursuing resettlement to the United States for some who require this important form of international protection.

Before discussing our overall response, let me brief you on my recent trip to Egypt, Syria and Jordan. It was a productive, useful trip. All governments expressed their willingness to continue to offer assistance to Iraqis in need. In Egypt I met with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who told me the 100,000 or so Iraqis they host are straining their already overburdened education and health systems. The Egyptian Government expressed security concerns because of the number of Iraqis entering on false documents. In Syria, I met with Deputy Foreign Minister Mikdad. He described the strain that more than one million Iraqis are putting on Syrian Government services, such as health and education, and noted some of the social and economic consequences of the influx of Iraqis, such as crime, high rents, and rising prices. He also expressed concern about the security implications of the Iraqi presence. He said that Syria would accept international assistance and prefers to work through UN organizations. He left the door open to NGO activity as well.

The Jordanian Government also indicated its willingness to continue to help Iraqis. Officials said public schools were open

to some Iraqis and indicated a need for international support to their education and health systems to cover the additional burden. However, Jordanian officials also expressed their security concerns, citing the 2005 bombings in Amman that were conducted by Iraqi extremists. In addition, we consulted closely with UNHCR and international NGOs throughout the trip. UNHCR has begun to ramp up its operations in the region, as have other international organizations and partner NGOs.

Since 2003, the Administration has provided more than \$800 million to support the World Food Program (WFP), UNHCR, ICRC, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and a range of NGOs. Inside Iraq, these programs have provided direct assistance and reintegration support to returning Iraqi refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Iraq, and third country national refugees. For Iraqi refugees outside Iraq, we have helped meet basic humanitarian needs. Humanitarian programs reinforce America's reconstruction and security efforts in Iraq. Our 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 thousands of victims of conflict. These programs helped many of the 300,000 Iraqi refugees who returned home between 2003 and 2006 to reintegrate into their own communities and helped many of the estimated two million IDPs inside Iraq to meet basic needs.

However, due to the increase in sectarian violence in 2006, this trend has reversed, with many Iraqis fleeing their homes to other areas of Iraq and to neighboring countries. Most displaced Iraqis have found refuge with host families. UNHCR estimates that between 600,000 to 700,000 Iraqis have become displaced within Iraq since February 2006 joining an already 1.2 million internally displaced and that another 2 million Iraqis are in countries bordering Iraq, though a large percentage of them had left Iraq prior to 2003. 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.

Anecdotal reporting from NGOs in the region indicate that many Iraqi children in these countries do not have access to schools or adequate health care, despite the stated willingness of hosting governments to allow access. We need better information on the situation and needs of Iraqis in these countries, particularly their protection concerns. The Government of Jordan on March 22 signed an agreement with a Norwegian NGO to conduct a survey of Iraqis in Jordan, which will help guide the international community in focusing assistance and protection activities. The Government of Syria is considering a similar survey of Iraqis.

Although these surveys will be important tools, we are not waiting for precise numbers before addressing the needs of vulnerable Iraqis in neighboring countries. In February, Secretary Rice established the Iraqi Refugee and Internally Displaced Task Force, led by Paula Dobriansky, Under Secretary for Democracy and Global Affairs, to focus and coordinate USG response and efforts. We are increasing 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, beginning with the \$20 million appropriated in the full-year Continuing Resolution. We have already contributed 30 percent or \$18 million to UNHCR's FY2007 Iraq Appeal of \$60 million. An additional \$15 million is included in the President's FY07 supplemental request and we will monitor recent refugee and displacement needs and identify additional funding if necessary. The Administration will also continue to help expand the capacity of the international community to address the new needs.

Our support for UNHCR's refugee protection mandate and our bilateral diplomatic efforts with host governments have been and will remain essential tools in preserving the principle of first asylum, maintaining humanitarian space in refugee hosting countries and ensuring that assistance reaches vulnerable refugees. This was the thrust of my recent trip to the region. Jordan and Syria have been hosts to Iraqis for many years and have largely kept their borders open as people continued to flow out of Iraq. 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 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. 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. Since April 2003 we have resettled 692 Iraqis in the United States. Following the 9/11 attacks, for security reasons, the United States instituted an enhanced security review of existing Iraqi resettlement cases that effectively halted their admission until this requirement was lifted in 2005. Since then, resettlement of Iraqi cases has resumed, but only small numbers of referrals had been received until recently. Now, we have acted aggressively to expand our ability to offer more Iraqis refuge in the United States during 2007. One element of this expansion has been to boost UNHCR's resettlement operations. In the last two years, we provided an additional \$900,000 of funding targeted to support UNHCR resettlement operations in the region. These expanded operations have increased registration efforts, thereby allowing UNHCR to identify more vulnerable cases and boosting the number of referrals to our program and those of other resettlement countries.

The design of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program allows substantial flexibility regarding the number of Iraqis (or any other nationality) the United States can resettle in any given year. The constraints we face for Iraqi refugees are the same as those that affect our resettlement program in other parts of the world. Challenges include: identifying those in greatest need from among so many; rapidly expanding the processing infrastructure; and conducting multi-stepped security checks. Clearly security checks are of fundamental importance in processing refugees from this region. Given the large numbers of Iraqis in Syria and Jordan, with some estimates as high as 1.5 million, the U.S. and other third country resettlement programs will play a small but important role in the international community's overall effort to meet Iraqi refugee needs. We are working closely with UNHCR to prioritize U.S. resettlement for vulnerable Iraqi refugees in Jordan, Syria and other countries. At the same time, we are quickly building up our processing infrastructure in the appropriate locations. Processing of newly referred Iraqi cases is already underway in Turkey, Syria and Jordan and will accelerate and expand into other countries as more cases are referred.

I want to recognize some of the special populations that have received attention 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.

We also recognize the dangers that certain individuals in Iraq might face due to their association with the United States and the management issues associated with recruitment and retention of Embassy local staff in demanding environments such as Iraq. Existing legislation created a program that allows Special Immigrant Visas for up to

50 Department of Defense translators per year. The Administration is currently working to identify the best way to broaden our existing authorities to address such situations involving local staff. We are also working with Embassy Baghdad to determine how best in practice to provide urgent protection to individuals at immediate risk because of their association with the USG. We are collaborating with the Department of Homeland Security and other involved agencies in this regard.

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 2 million internally displaced persons and another 44,000 third country national refugees in Iraq. The U.S. Government continues to support UNHCR, ICRC, and key NGO programs inside Iraq to assist communities with new internally displaced persons, recently returned refugees, and other victims of violence. For example, we support important programs of the ICRC that upgrade hospitals throughout the country and provide medical services to those who are innocent victims of the armed insurgency. We also fund and provide 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 funded 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.

In addition, the U.S. Agency for International Development, the lead USG agency on IDP issues, continues its strong support to protect and assist internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Iraq. USAID is also providing assistance to host communities bearing the burden of increasing IDP's. Because the steady increase in displacements will require additional funding in 2007, the President has requested \$45 million in FY 2007 supplemental funding for USAID to support IDPs in Iraq.

Mr. Chairman, we appreciate your interest in Iraqi refugee issues and look forward to working closely with you as we seek to expand protection for these Iraqis, third-country national refugees, conflict victims, 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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