

Iraqi Refugees: Questions and Answers

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1. Why are Iraqis being resettled to the U.S.?

During the Saddam Hussein Regime, and especially following the First Gulf War in 1991, the United States resettled Iraqi refugees, especially the Kurds and others who were associated with the U.S. Government, totaling around 20,000 between 1992 and 1997. Other refugees were absorbed into the economies of the Gulf States and the region in general. Some went to Europe, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. While there were indeed refugees, there was not a mass influx like exists today. Since 2003 the U.S. has resettled only a few hundred Iraqi refugees.

Though many Iraqis were reluctant to leave the country after the 2003 U.S. invasion, the number of Iraqis seeking asylum in neighboring countries swelled dramatically in early 2006 as violence continued to escalate throughout the country. There are now an estimated 2 million Iraqi refugees in Jordan and Syria and throughout the Middle East and the Gulf and another 2 million who have been displaced within Iraq.

UNHCR estimates that 2,000 Iraqis are newly displaced per day. By the end of 2007, estimates are that the number of displaced Iraqis will have grown to 5.5 million. This huge influx constitutes the largest refugee crisis in the Middle East since the Palestinian exodus from the Creation of the State of Israel in 1948.

2. Are Iraqi Refugees Subjected to Thorough Security Screenings?

Every individual refugee has to undergo rigorous security, background, and health checks before they can benefit from the participation in the U.S. Refugee Program. First, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) must determine that the refugee is not excludable for having committed acts against humanity or war crimes.

If the person is referred to the U.S. Resettlement Program (USRP), a U.S. government-approved and funded resettlement organization meets with the refugee and compiles the personal data and background information. The case is then forwarded to the U.S. Embassy.

The U.S. State Department then runs the name through a standard name check to ensure that the name check did not find any record of security or other concerns. The U.S. embassy in the host country then schedules an interview for the refugee with an officer of the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services (BCIS) within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). A specially trained officer then travels to the host country to conduct a detailed interview with the refugee to determine if the person qualifies as a refugee under U.S. law. If the refugee qualifies for the program, the officer approves the application and forwards it to the U.S. State Department for final processing. The refugee is then fingerprinted and photographed. These photos are

checked against embassy records at several points in the admissions process to ensure that there has been no substitution of applicants.

Before refugees from Iraq can have their cases processed, the case is first referred to the FBI and CIA for a further security review called a Security Advisory Opinion. If the person is cleared by the FBI and CIA, the case is submitted to the State Department for final approval for admission.

For refugees who are considered for resettlement because they have close relatives in the United States, BCIS checks the files of the relative to ensure that all of the information matches with the applicant's claims. Upon arrival in the U.S. at one of the designated airports, a BCIS officer will again interview the refugee and compare the refugee with host country U.S. embassy records to ensure the person arriving is the same person who was screened and approved for admission. The BCIS officer will also issue the refugee photo identification that confirms his or her identity and authorizes his or her employment in the U.S.

In addition, the U.S. Government has introduced new, enhanced security procedures for this population to ensure the integrity of the USRP is maintained.

3. Are Iraqis educated? Do they speak English? What are their typical occupations?

Prior to the UN Sanctions and the current conflict, Iraq had one of the most highly educated, urban populations in the Middle East. There was a large middle class of professionals and a strong university system. Today, some of the most vulnerable groups being persecuted in Iraq include intellectuals, doctors, teachers, engineers, and other professionals. Many of these professionals speak English well. In addition, there are many successful Iraqi businessmen and other tradesmen.

4. Is U.S. the only country taking in Iraqi refugees? Are other countries sharing the responsibility?

To date the U.S. pledged to resettle up to 7,000 Iraqi refugees in calendar year 2007. It is likely however that only 2,000 will be processed in fiscal year 2007. Canada will accept approximately 5,000 and Australia will take around 1,000. In addition there are currently thousands of Iraqi asylum seekers in Europe. At an April 2007 Conference on Iraqi refugees in Geneva, the U.S. pledged that it could take up to 25,000 Iraqi refugees.

One of the most vulnerable groups of refugees from Baghdad is the Palestinians, who have been denied asylum by most all of the world's countries. These are families consisting of men, women, children, and the elderly. Brazil agreed to take 100; Canada was taken around 30; New Zealand accepted some on a humanitarian basis; and the U.S. has taken only four.

5. Are there any specific ethnic or religious groups among Iraqi refugees that have been singled out for resettlement in the U.S.?

The Iraqi refugees that will be resettled to the U.S. will include all ethnic and religious groups. Though Iraq is primarily Arab and Islamic, there are many other groups who have also sought asylum in neighboring countries, including Chaldeans, Assyrians, Mandaeans, Palestinians, Sudanese and other populations living in Baghdad prior to the war. Much of the current Iraqi population in the U.S. is Shiite, Kurdish, Chaldean, and Mandaean, which is also the populations we anticipate will be among the first arrivals.

6. Will Resettlement Solve the Iraqi Refugee Crisis?

As a humanitarian leader, the U.S. pledge to resettle some Iraqi refugees is a welcomed first step. Still, it is equally important that the U.S. continue to show its leadership in the region by responding to the humanitarian needs of those refugees and internally displaced persons who will not be resettled.

The influx of desperate refugees has put great strains on refugee receiving countries. In some cases, they have closed or threatened to close their borders to additional refugees. Many refugees do not have legal status in their countries of asylum. Deportations are on the rise and tensions are growing among refugees and between refugees and host communities.

Many refugees are poor and are struggling to survive in poor urban areas in Amman, Damascus, Beirut, and Cairo. Since refugees are not allowed to work legally in these countries, they have no safe way to provide for their families. A number of refugee families are headed by women, and there are increasing reports of women and girls engaging in prostitution to survive and of children working to help their families survive. There are also reports of domestic violence due to the pressures of living without legal status, the inability to work, and the lack of access to basic services. Moreover, few children have access to schooling.

Resettlement will help alleviate this crisis, but it is not the only solution to the problem. The U.S. will need to exert its leadership to ensure that the relevant international organizations and non-governmental organizations are properly funded in order to respond to the growing needs of this population.