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Egypt: Respond to the Needs of Iraqi Refugees

Over two million Iraqi refugees have fled their country's borders since the American-led invasion that overthrew the regime of Saddam Hussein. Although the largest concentrations are in Syria and Jordan, up to 150,000 Iraqis have settled in Egypt.

Wary of the massive influx experienced in Syria and Jordan, the Egyptian authorities have reportedly closed their door to new Iraqis and have not granted those Iraqis who have made it to Egypt any official status or access to social services. While the international community has recently begun to emerge from its own denial of the Iraqi refugee crisis, it too offers few resources to Iraqi refugees. It is crucial that Egypt, donor governments, and the United Nations begin responding to their needs.

Refugees in Egypt include more than thirty nationalities. Most are Sudanese, Somali or Palestinian. Iraqis who have made their way to Egypt have arrived on one-month tourist visas that they extend in Cairo for additional months. During 2006, however, it became more difficult for Iraqis to obtain Egyptian visas through travel agencies in Baghdad, forcing Iraqis to go to Jordan or Syria. As Egypt tightened its restrictions it was widely reported that only through costly bribes could an Iraqi obtain an Egyptian visa, and soon even that did not suffice.

Unlike Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, Egypt is a signatory to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, but it signed the Convention with reservations on all provisions granting refugees the right to work and access public services. Iraqis are able to obtain asylum seeker's cards from the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) which are similar to the temporary protection cards the UNHCR offers in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. Most Iraqis have not yet registered with the UNHCR. As of March 2006, fewer than 6,000 had registered with the UNHCR office in Cairo, although the agency believed it would be able to register up to 20,000 in 2007.

Some of the Iraqis in Egypt came with resources and have succeeded in opening businesses and obtaining residency. But many others have run out of savings and are being reduced to subsisting without any hope. Many have fallen into an illegal status and fear having to return to Iraq.

On a recent mission to Egypt, Refugees International documented cases of kidnappings for extortion prior to the departure of families from Iraq, forcing them to sell property and assets to meet kidnappers' demands. Others had been confronted with such extreme threats that they did not have time to sell their homes, businesses or cars. One Iraqi, a former business owner in Baghdad, told RI, "I had a choice between saving my house and my shop or saving my children."

All were surprised by how much more expensive life in Egypt was than they had expected. Their savings have been depleted because they are unable to work legally. Egypt suffers from high unemployment. The presence of thousands of Sudanese refugees puts a further strain on the economy and welfare system. Those without sufficient resources to open their own businesses, which by law requires an Egyptian partner, are pushed into the informal sector, where competition for work is high and salaries extremely low.

The Iraqi refugees in Egypt live predominantly in Cairo and cities built around it, though some also live in Alexandria. These are vast urban areas, which makes it harder for aid organizations to identify and reach them. Iraqis face many of the same difficulties typically associated with the urban poor. But they are also uprooted and traumatized by the violence inflicted upon them, the emotional scars and the insecurity resulting from their uncertain legal status.

Housing is one of the most pressing needs, as many had owned their homes in Iraq and now are faced with high rents without income to sustain the new costs. "I only have enough for my family to survive for a couple of months," an Iraqi man from Baghdad told RI. "After that, we will be in God's hands." In addition, Iraqi children do not have access to public schools in most of Egypt, and most cannot afford private school tuition.

Although one NGO provides legal aid and another provides some meager financial assistance, Iraqis are mostly left to fend for themselves, just as in Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. The current political environment in Egypt makes it difficult to establish an NGO, as the government is suspicious of any form of public association. Dealing with the rights and needs of Iraqi refugees will be particularly challenging for national and international NGOs as the Egyptian government is reluctant to continue hosting Iraqis.

Egypt is a majority Sunni Arab country and its President has already made statements supporting Sunnis regionally and criticizing Shiites. Within Egypt, Shiites are not free to practice their ceremonies openly. Iraqi Shiites report facing harassment as well. According to one senior Egyptian official, one reason why Egypt has shut its doors to Iraqi refugees is because it is concerned that most of these refugees are Sunnis and it does not want to facilitate Iraq becoming a Shiite state. There are also unfounded rumors in Egypt, as in elsewhere in the region, that Sunnis are converting to Shiism.

The main reason cited by Egyptian officials for the new restrictions placed on Iraqi refugees is concern over security. Iraqis are viewed as potential perpetrators of violence and terrorism who may threaten Egypt's fragile economy, which relies on foreign tourists.

REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDS:

- ❑ The U.S. and other international donors fully fund UNHCR's 2007 appeal for Iraqi refugees. The U.S. government should take the lead and support at least 50% of UNHCR's total appeal.
- ❑ The U.S. and other donors provide bilateral financial assistance to host countries, including Egypt, with specific earmarks for services for Iraqi refugees and others, including vulnerable Egyptians.
- ❑ UNHCR prepare additional appeals to address the needs of Iraqi refugees throughout the region. Appeals must be based on needs, not on expectations of what donors will provide.

- ❑ UNHCR work with host governments, with support from UNICEF, the World Health Organization and the UN Development Program, to devise a strategy to expand domestic educational and medical services so that they can address the needs of the Iraqi refugee community. Until then, UNHCR and international donors should expand their support for local organizations that subsidize education and provide medical services for Iraqis.
- ❑ UNHCR work with its implementing partners to ensure that adequate mental health services are available to Iraqi refugees.
- ❑ The UN World Food Program work with UNHCR to provide food support for Iraqis in order to allow them to free up resources to cover housing costs; UNHCR should also consider allocating funds for housing subsidies for the most vulnerable families.
- ❑ International NGOs address the Iraqi refugee crisis in Egypt, and work with their embassies, UNHCR and host governments to obtain legal status to do so.
- ❑ UNHCR monitor housing, education, and medical services to ensure that discrimination by nationality, ethnicity, religion, or other factors is not limiting services to Iraqi refugees.
- ❑ Egypt re-open its borders to Iraqi refugees, both from its embassies in Jordan and Syria and in Baghdad.
- ❑ As a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, Egypt abandon its reservations and grant refugees the full rights stipulated in the Convention.

Advocate Kristele Younes and consultant Nir Rosen assessed the situation for Iraqi refugees in Egypt in March.