

Iraq's Other Tragedy: 2 Million Refugees

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

Four years into the war, it is impossible to say how many Iraqis have died. The occupying forces do not keep such statistics, and the local authorities are so swamped at the morgues and hospitals, that they cannot guarantee accurate figures.

Now, there is another category of Iraq War statistics, and it is somber: the number of Iraqis driven from their homes, and either displaced internally, or scrambling for refuge in some neighboring country. Here, too, the statistics are unreliable, since many flee clandestinely, and do not register in their exile land; but the dimensions are daunting. According to the United Nations, 727,000 Iraqis have been displaced internally since the February 2006 bombing of a Shi'ite shrine. About 470,000 have registered with the Ministry of Displacement and Migration, since the beginning of the war. About 160,000 have sought refuge in the Kurdish region. It is estimated that the exodus of Iraqis since 2003, is the largest such refugee stream since the Palestinians were driven off their land in 1948: an estimated 2 million have fled, and, by the end of this year, that will rise to 10% of the entire population (today, about 27 million).

The consequences, for both Iraq and the countries to which refugees have fled, are devastating. For Iraq, it means a further brain drain, as the most highly qualified members of the workforce flee. For the host countries, it means enormous economic strains, social tensions, and, in some cases, religious/ethnic strife.

Syria Under Pressure

The country which has been most overwhelmed by the number of Iraqi refugees is Syria, followed by Egypt, Jordan, and Iran, then Europe, and faraway lands like the United States, Canada, and Australia. Jordan, with 800,000 Iraqis, has halted the inflow. When rumors spread, in mid-February, that Syria would curb the influx, refugees organized a demonstration in front of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) office in Damascus. The Syrian government estimated in mid-March that there are already 1.5 million Iraqis in the country. According to Laurens Jolles, the representative of the UNHCR in Damascus, somewhere between 10,000 and 40,000 refugees cross the border each month. Other estimates put it at 50,000 per month.

The crisis there has become so grave that even the Bush Administration has had to violate its own ban on contacts

with Syria, by sending a State Department representative to talk to government and UN officials there. After that visit, during which the U.S. representative also met with the UNHCR personnel, led by António Guterres, the number of Iraqis to be granted asylum in the U.S. was raised to 7,000, from 435.

The reasons for the mass exodus should be obvious: First is the well-grounded fear of being killed randomly, by suicide or car bombs. Then, there are fears of sectarian violence: Sunnis, particularly those in any way associated with the Ba'ath Party or former administration, are political and sectarian targets, just as Shi'ites are, from the opposite side. Particularly targeted are Christians, who are mainly Chaldeans, but also the gnostic Mandaens. Of the original 30,000 who lived in Iraq, there are now only 13,000. One Mandaer interviewed by the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* explained: "Our women are without veils, our men are traditionally goldsmiths, and we have our own language. All this creates bad blood."

Iraqis with money are profiled for kidnappings; numerous exiles have reported that they had had family members kidnapped, often children, and had been forced to pay high ransoms. In more cases than not, even after the ransom had been paid, the abducted family member was found dead. One Iraqi refugee told the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* that she had paid \$40,000 to free her kidnapped husband, only to discover soon after that he had been beheaded. Another woman reported that her daughter had been kidnapped; when her husband left to sell his grocery store, to raise the ransom, he didn't return. A phone call informed her that the store and her husband's car were burning. She fled with a son, without news of her daughter.

Iraqi Arabs who flee to Syria have a three-month sojourn permit, with the possibility of a three-month extension. Following the permit's expiration, the refugee usually returns briefly to Iraq, and starts all over again.

The strain on Syria's economy is profound. The UNHCR estimates that it needs \$60 million to deal with the refugee flow, \$15 million of which is for Syria. Thus far, according to varied reports, Japan has pledged \$3 million, and Jordan, \$1 million. But this comes nowhere near the sum required. Syria's health system is totally unable to cope with the new demands, and cannot cover the costs of health care for such a huge number of people. The UNHCR and the Red Crescent (the Islamic counterpart to the Red Cross) have set up two new clinics. According to Caritas, many doctors reportedly provide free care, or give discounts for X-rays and other treatment. Although Iraqi children are allowed to attend Syrian schools, the schools too are totally overwhelmed.

Some refugees are so poor, that they are forced into prostitution or other criminal activities. A prostitute can earn \$60 a night, whereas a seamstress earns \$50 a month. According to Sister N., director of a Christian order interviewed by the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*: "Children are up until 3:00 a.m. in the winter, wearing flip-flops, and cleaning houses. Former

professors are begging for a kilo of rice." And the rich? They are not so few in number. Some can afford to buy million-dollar villas, or apartments costing a few hundred thousand dollars. The massive influx of refugees has placed such pressures on the housing market, that an unprecedented speculative construction boom has resulted, driving prices of existing homes for sale and apartments for rent, into the stratosphere. Rents have gone up in some areas by 300%. The poor, including Syrians who had made ends meet prior to the refugee crisis, have found their rents raised, and cannot any longer cope.

Ethnic-Religious Destabilization

One of the most insidious features of the refugee crisis is the impact on the delicate social balance in Syria. To appreciate the nature of this phenomenon, one has to first consider the ethnic/religious makeup of Syria. According to an in-depth study published in the German weekly *Die Zeit* on Feb. 22, out of a population of 18 million, 70% are Sunnis, 16% Shi'ites (Alawites), and 10% Christians. In addition, there are an estimated 150,000 Kurds, largely unregistered. Within each religious denomination, there are further subdivisions. Among the Christians, there are 11 confessions: five Orthodox groups, five Catholic and one Protestant. And there may be religious differences among the same ethnic community: For example, there are Armenian Orthodox as well as Armenian Apostolic and Armenian Catholic communities. In addition, the Muslims are also divided into five sects. Religious tolerance in Syria has been a trademark in the country's 6,000-year history. The condition of Christians, according to church representatives, continues to be very good under the Bashar al-Assad government.

Now, with the refugee stream from Iraq, this complex religious/ethnic mosaic is being affected. According to Pater Metri Hadji-Athanasios, a Greek Catholic priest, who studied at the Sorbonne in Paris and in Belgium, it is not to be excluded that the Bush regime may aim deliberately to destabilize Syria along ethnic/religious lines, through the refugee crisis. If the feared event of a total disintegration of Iraq along ethnic/sectarian lines takes place, this crisis could explode overnight.

Given this grave situation, it is not only absurd but criminal for the Bush Administration to exclude Syria from direct talks, aimed at stabilizing the Iraq situation. As mentioned above, Washington was forced recently at least to send an envoy to talk about the refugee crisis. But managing the crisis, is no solution. The only solution, four years after the dreadful war began, is to put an end to the conflict, with a carefully planned, phased troop withdrawal, within the context of a regional security arrangement, supported by the United States. Syria's role in this process, along with Iran's, is vital, not only because of the refugee plight which the war has created, but because of the political, as well as ethnic/religious experience Damascus could contribute.