

***By Tyler E. Boudreau and Luis Carlos Montalvan***

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Today, Jordan hosts roughly half a million Iraqi refugees out of approximately two million worldwide. From our operations in Iraq, we are acutely aware of how this crisis came to be and believe that we, as a nation, bear a moral responsibility for their safety.

As American veterans of the war in Iraq and as humanitarians, we have come to Amman to see their predicament for ourselves. In response to what we regarded as inadequate measures by our government, we formed the non-profit organization Iraq Veterans Refugee Aid Association (IVRAA).

Together, with our press team, we set out on a public diplomacy mission paying visits to the American and Iraqi embassies, to the Jordanian interior and foreign ministries, to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), to NGOs, and met with local activists, and, most importantly, the refugees themselves. What we were pleased to find among all was absolute consensus on one very important point: The Iraq refugees need help now.

But the consensus, we discovered, goes even deeper. To a great extent, the approach to assistance is agreed upon, too. From the refugees to the UNHCR, to the Iraqi, American, and Jordanian governments, all concur that returning home to Iraq, once it is safe to do so, is the most favorable course of action. The differences in perspective, we found, arise from how support is rendered and the view of whether or not Iraq is now safe enough for repatriation.

The refugees say the reason they will not return to Iraq is that it is too dangerous and unlivable. And yet, living conditions in Jordan are arduous: work permits are difficult, if not impossible, to obtain. Medical insurance, school registration fees, food, rent, transportation, and other basic needs are, for most, cost-prohibitive. So the refugees wait in their tiny homes with no end in sight and no ability to help themselves.

They wait for a miracle, because that is all that is left.

Ahmed, an Iraqi father whom we spoke with, fled from Basra in the beginning of the war. He'd lost his seven-year-old son because he could not afford medical care in Jordan. Meanwhile, his twelve-year-old son, Amir, was losing his sight and hearing from depleted uranium radiation exposure resulting from Gulf War munitions.

The family lives in a poor neighborhood of Amman with only two rooms, no windows, and only a ceiling fan to cool them in the hot days and nights. "I cannot even take a cab home at night because the drivers won't come to this part of the city," said Ahmed.

The Jordanians, on the other hand, have concerns of their own. Officials we spoke to expressed concern for their country and its infrastructure, and all pointed out that Jordan has undergone as much as a 10percent increase in its population over a very short period of time.

Naser Al-Ramadin, the assistant director to the Jordanian Minister of Interior, said, "Our infrastructure is decaying, our economy is suffering and we are not receiving the amount of international support that we need. The burden of this humanitarian problem should be shared."

And Jordanian Foreign Ministry diplomat in charge of the Iraqi Refugee File, Mohammad al-Shahankari, said, "No matter what area you can imagine--education, health, electricity, water, security, and all levels of infrastructure--all of it has been impacted by the Iraqi presence."

Sylvia Braun, the Regional Program Manager of the International Catholic Migration Commission, echoed the sentiment that Iraq is too dangerous to return to: "Every Iraqi we meet says that they don't think Iraq will be safe for at least the next 10 years."

Daniel Rubinstein, the acting US Ambassador to Jordan also agreed, telling us that there is definitely a widespread fear among Iraqis. And Shahankari of the Jordanian Foreign Ministry remarked to us candidly: "Iraq will not be safe for at least five years...at least."

Thamir Salman, the Minister Plenipotentiary at the Iraqi Embassy in Amman did not fully agree, suggesting that Iraq was indeed safe enough to begin bringing refugees home. "We feel Iraqis should return to Iraq as soon as possible. We need our scientists, doctors and skilled people to help us redevelop," said Salman.

But Salman did concede that no comprehensive plan exists to receive the two million refugees and the 2.5 million more internally displaced. He also acknowledged the serious infrastructure shortfalls in Iraq and the need for more time and resources before such a large volume of people could return.

Imran Riza, head of UNHCR in Amman had a similar opinion.

"The economic, security and infrastructure conditions in Iraq are still not sufficient to accommodate the millions of Iraqi refugees who have taken refuge in neighboring countries, and probably will not be any time in the near future."

State Department officials from the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration told us that while repatriation was their focus two years ago, they now support the UNHCR position that repatriation is not presently a viable course of action. Consequently, they have turned to their efforts to resettlement and assistance in host nations.

As our discussion turned to statistics, State Department officials quickly pointed out: "We don't focus on the total number of refugees out there. We work as hard and as fast as we can to help those with the greatest need."

Since August 2008, the United States has resettled 11,187 refugees who have fled Iraq from the outset of the war. They expect to resettle approximately 4,000 more by the end of this fiscal year.

From our observations in Amman, the numbers in need are vastly higher than those presently being helped.

This is an area where IVRAA feels the US has performed poorly. This is not necessarily due to a dysfunctional process or inadequate effort on the part of field personnel; indeed we witnessed many devoted and hard-working people throughout the system from NGOs, to UNHCR, to the US departments of State and Homeland Security.

It is more because the process is new and has not yet developed to America's potential -- a potential that was demonstrated after the Vietnam War when we welcomed nearly a million Vietnamese refugees into our country.

State department officials told us that the infrastructure that is in place now to process Iraq refugees did not exist 18 months ago and, in their experience, such rapid mobilization was impressive. It strikes us that in another 18 months, even more impressive improvements could be made.

To a large extent, US targets for resettlement are driven by the capacity of this system. As part of the overall strategy to safeguard Iraq refugees, this capacity needs to be improved through increased funding so that substantially greater numbers of Iraq refugees may be granted asylum.

State Department officials agreed that if they were given a greater budget, their ability to assist Iraq's refugees would certainly improve.

But even with increased capacity, it seems evident that the US cannot or does not wish to resettle all of the Iraq refugees worldwide. And with repatriation off the table for the time-being, we must return to the issue of aid for those refugees stuck in countries like Jordan.

So, this problem must be broken down into two fundamental questions: How much help is needed? And what portion of that need is the responsibility of America?

It is clear that the Iraqi refugees continue to languish.

We have heard many tortuous explanations by various bureaucrats who would have us believe that there is no monetary figure that could ever deal with the crisis at hand. We find that difficult to believe.

As former military officers serving in the Department of Defense, we are quite familiar with the amazing things that can be accomplished with a large budget. From the discussions we've had here in Amman and at home in the US, the dollars needed to properly contend with this humanitarian issue will easily reach into the billions. But considering the rate at which the US has spent money on the war in Iraq, we don't believe this is an unobtainable goal.

It is a fact that the US remains, by far, the largest donor to this crisis, providing hundreds of millions of dollars since the war began. But, we feel that in light of our nation's integral role in the cause of the refugee situation, "giving the most" is not sufficient. Giving enough to fix the problem is what our government owes the millions in refuge.

The international community must also increase its assistance; however, responsibility ultimately rests with America.

We have met with a great deal of influential people involved with this issue and seen many of them shake their heads, shrug, and tell us the situation is hopeless. They are quick to point out all the challenges, all the limitations, and all the political strife that stand in the way of our helping the Iraqi people.

We cannot accept these excuses. We have met the Iraqi refugees, been in their modest homes and witnessed their destitution. We've held their children in our laps.

We know that America has the power to help; it needs only the heart.

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