

Op Ed: Sally Daghlian, Chief Executive, Scottish Refugee Council

Today, Issa Jafer Al-Saed, Loay Mohammed Al-Tahar and Akram Moaiy'd Kalaf - three former Iraqi interpreters for the UK army who were forced to flee to Syria after receiving death threats - appealed to Tony Blair not to abandon them and thousands of other Iraqi refugees facing an uncertain future in neighbouring countries.

These men are being turned away from the gates of the British Embassy in Damascus. The government has washed its hands of any responsibility for their safety and welfare.

Despite waging war in Iraq, so far the UK has done nothing to allow Iraqi refugees displaced by conflict the chance to resettle here – including people, like these interpreters, who have shown great loyalty and service to the UK in Iraq.

The UNHCR (the UN refugee agency) estimates that 40,000-50,000 people a month are now fleeing their homes in Iraq, adding to the estimated two million Iraqi refugees in the region, most of them in Syria and Jordan whose governments are struggling to meet their needs.

The situation is so bad that countries in the region are threatening to close their borders and to turn away people fleeing violence and persecution.

The United States has announced that it will resettle 7,000 refugees from Iraq. But at a time when the international community is calling on Iraq's neighbours to keep their borders open to refugees, the UK is responding by deporting Iraqis back to a country riven apart by sectarian and political violence.

In Britain, there is a growing number of Iraqis who have been refused asylum, but as a result of the continued violence in Iraq, are unable to return home. They are being forced into homelessness and destitution in the UK.

Over the next two days, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, António Guterres, is convening an international conference in Geneva to highlight the plight of the growing numbers of Iraqi refugees and internally displaced people in the Middle East.

On the occasion of this conference, Scottish Refugee Council – along with Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the British Refugee Council – is urging the UK government to take a lead in Europe by immediately announcing a programme to resettle some of the 2 million Iraqi refugees currently living in the most difficult conditions in countries neighbouring Iraq.

We are also calling on the government to give leave to remain - with access to health, housing, employment and education - to Iraqi asylum seekers in the UK whose claims have been refused.

The refugee crisis will not be solved by the UK alone, but our government is well placed to take a lead in Europe and the world. We urge them to use this week's Geneva conference to signal a change of heart in their approach to Iraqi refugees, by announcing a more generous, more principled, more coherent, and more far-sighted set of UK policies.

In the words of Issa Jafer Al-Saed, Loay Mohammed Al-Tahar and Akram Moaiy'd Kalaf, the three Iraqi interpreters fearing for their lives:

"Like thousands of other Iraqi refugees, we are in an increasingly desperate situation. We have no life here but face death if we return to Iraq.

"We urge the UK government: do not abandon us. We ask them not to betray our belief in their promises, but to do what is in your government's power to help us and other refugees who have fled Iraq in fear for their lives"

We have a moral responsibility to do so.

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