



Scottish Refugee Council **Policy Position**

The Treatment of Iraqi Refugees and Asylum Seekers

The current situation

According to the latest United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) estimates, there are 2 million Iraqi refugees in neighbouring countries in the Middle East, mostly in Syria and Jordan. 2.2 million others have been displaced internally within Iraq.

Another 40-50,000 Iraqis are fleeing their homes every month, adding to those already seeking refuge in Syria and Jordan, whose governments are struggling to meet their needs.

Schools, hospitals, public services and infrastructure in these countries are now seriously overstretched.

Syria has offered school places to 32,000 Iraqi children, but hundreds of thousands of young refugees in the region cannot be offered an education. UNHCR is currently referring 10,000 Iraqis a month to Syrian doctors and health care facilities, but thousands more are suffering because they cannot get proper medical help.

The pressure on these countries is so great that they are beginning to impose visa and passport restrictions, effectively closing their borders to Iraqis trying to escape persecution.

Syria and Jordan have still received next to nothing in bilateral help from the world community, despite all of the expressions of support and concern from governments during the UNHCR-sponsored Iraq displacement conference in Geneva in April 2007.

UNHCR has called for a resettlement programme to provide humanitarian assistance and relieve some of the pressure in the area, a call Scottish Refugee Council supports. UNHCR has also increased its programme budget in this region from \$60m to \$123 million, however it says that this is just a fraction of the support needed to meet the need.

180,000 of the 2 million Iraqis in neighbouring countries have been registered with UNHCR and 15 per cent of these are considered to need special assistance. UNHCR has referred 12,000 of these – those considered most vulnerable – to third countries for resettlement, including 8,000 to the United States. More than 20 per cent of these resettlement cases are classified as women at risk.

Other people considered most at risk include survivors of violence and torture, unaccompanied children, minority religious and ethnic groups and those who worked for the coalition forces during

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the invasion, such as interpreters, cooks and cleaners. There is also particular concern about the position of Palestinian refugees some 15,000 of whom are trapped in Iraq or stranded in makeshift camps on the borders of Iraq and Syria.

Iraqi Refugees in Europe

In addition to those Iraqis who have fled to neighbouring countries to escape the conflict and those who have been resettled through the UNHCR programme, thousands have also applied for asylum in Europe.

According to the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE), since 2005, the number of asylum claims lodged by Iraqi citizens in Europe has increased by 77 per cent.

But within the EU, Sweden is one of the only countries recognising Iraqi asylum seekers as refugees or in need of international protection. Sweden receives almost half of Iraqi asylum seekers to Europe. Last year, it received 8,950 and granted asylum to 91 per cent.

The Netherlands, in contrast, allowed only 25 per cent, Germany 11 per cent and Greece refused all applications. Earlier this year, Sweden appealed to its neighbours to share the burden.

Of the 950 Iraqis who applied to the UK for asylum in 2006, only 90 were granted some form of leave to remain.

ECRE has highlighted the great disparities between European countries in their treatment of Iraqi asylum seekers and refugees and presented guidelines aimed at making policies more coherent, consistent with international standards, and supportive of countries in the region.

The international community is calling on Iraq's neighbours to keep their borders open to refugees, yet the UK is responding by making it increasingly difficult for Iraqi refugees to get to the UK to claim asylum, by refusing the applications of the small numbers who do get here and where possible, deporting them back to Iraq.

The UK Government forcibly returned 38 Iraqis to the northern region of Iraq in February 2007. The remainder who are here but cannot be returned, are being forced into homelessness and destitution in the UK as refused asylum seekers.

In a snapshot survey of destitute asylum seekers in Scotland carried out by Scottish Refugee Council in 2006, Iraqis were the largest group.

Recommendations

As active members of ECRE, we have called on EU member states to:

- develop a coherent EU policy that offers a significant number of resettlement possibilities in Europe for Iraqi refugees;
- allow access to protection at their borders;
- guarantee that no one will be forcibly returned to Iraq;

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- enable Iraqi asylum seekers whose applications have been rejected to live in dignity until conditions are conducive to return; and
- provide technical and financial assistance such as for health care and education, to neighbouring countries to assist refugees in the region.

Scottish Refugee Council is calling specifically on the UK Government to:

- increase the capacity of its Gateway resettlement programme so that a number of the most vulnerable refugees from Iraq can be resettled in the UK;
- stop forcibly returning Iraqis to any part of the country – including northern Iraq – until there is an effective and sustainable infrastructure to uphold human rights and the right of law;
- grant discretionary leave to remain - with access to health, housing, employment and education - to Iraqis who do not qualify for refugee protection or humanitarian protection; and
- increase funding to UNHCR to address the serious humanitarian needs of Iraqi refugees and internally displaced persons.

This is a position shared by other Refugee Councils throughout the UK, by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

It also mirrors recommendations of the Iraq Commission, an independent, cross-party enquiry facilitated by the Foreign Policy Centre (FPC), in partnership with Channel 4.

Further reading and sources

www.unhcr.org/iraq.html

www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/immigration1.html

www.unhcr.org/publ/PUBL/461e4a6c2.html

www.ecre.org/resources/policy_papers/829

www.fpc.org.uk/publications/iraqcommissionreport

www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/pub/Researchreports

www.stillhuman.org.uk

Contact: Gary Christie
Policy & Research Manager
Scottish Refugee Council
Tel: 0141 248 9799
gary.christie@scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk