

## **The Problem Never Ends – Iraqi Protection Issues**

By: Brian Terranova

Iraq, along with the rest of the Middle East, is accustomed to the appearance of refugees and the protection needs that are linked with them. For the past sixty years, the Middle East has experienced the flight of thousands of Palestinian refugees from Israel and Israeli-occupied territories, particularly the West Bank and Gaza Strip. But within the past decade, the Middle East has experienced a new group of refugees and displaced persons, that of the Iraqis. Predictably, Iraqi refugees have been fleeing to the same countries that the Palestinians escaped (and are still escaping) to and have met the same kind of resistance the Palestinians experience. The reasons for this are obvious: countries neighboring Iraq are proximate to the conflict and most Iraqis lack the financial means to emigrate farther. Since the beginning of the 2003 Iraq war the primary Middle Eastern host countries, namely Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, and Egypt, have received the bulk of Iraqi refugees, estimated at over two million.<sup>1</sup> Most refugees reside illegally in their host countries and thus are unable to turn to these host governments for help. Due to restrictive immigration policies, Iraqi refugees fear arrest and deportation back to Iraq; hence only a small portion of the two million has received legitimate and sufficient living assistance from the governments of these countries. The basis for this denial of assistance is not due to a lack of compassion but rather as a result of the incapacity, inability, and lack of resources to counter the refugee crisis.

Moreover, the acting Iraqi government led by President Jalal Talabani and Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has only contributed minimally to help ease the refugee burden of its neighboring countries. While oil revenue for 2008 was an estimated \$80 billion, the government has only

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<sup>1</sup> "Iraqis Head Home in Drives, Despite Violence." *All Headline News*. Online. May 24, 2009. <http://www.allheadlinenews.com/articles/7015254839>

donated a fraction of this amount to the countries hosting its exiled citizens.<sup>2</sup> A meager contribution of a few million dollars hardly meets the growing protection needs of these refugees, who have experienced great tragedies at home as well as abroad due to the ongoing conflict and violence in Iraq.

Needless to say, Iraqis refugees are in a precarious situation that begs humanitarian assistance. But in order to develop and apply efficient and effective humanitarian aid, it is critical to understand the protections issues that most Iraqis face. On a daily basis, Iraqi refugees encounter numerous problems that hinder their ability to survive, such as struggling financially to provide food and shelter, a lack of employment, and a lack of medical care. Although these issues affect all Iraqis, more often than not women bear the brunt of the refugee crisis. In these circumstances, a majority of Iraqi males have been casualties of war and are usually targeted for arrest and detention in their country of refuge. Therefore women are left to be the primary breadwinners and caretakers of families. Although Iraqis experience similar protection issues throughout Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, and Egypt, each country still takes different measures towards Iraqi refugees and it is important to recognize the abuses Iraqis endure.

This paper will explore the Iraqi refugee situation to provide an analysis of the protection needs and issues that Iraqis experience in their host countries. Focusing in general on the Iraqi male experience in these countries, the paper will also outline the overall effects of protection issues on women and children, with a section of this paper devoted to their struggles of leading a family and the extreme measures they take in order to provide for their loved ones. The final section of the paper will argue that a humanitarian policy proposal of a “temporary dignified status” may be the

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<sup>2</sup> Cohen, Roberta. “Iraq’s displace: Where to turn?” *American University International Law Review. The Brookings Institution*. Vol 24, Issue 2. Fall 2008. Online. 11/15/2008.  
[http://www.brookings.edu/articles/2008/10\\_iraq\\_cohen.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/articles/2008/10_iraq_cohen.aspx)

necessary means to ease Iraqi refugee hardships throughout the Middle East. Only through humanitarian action will the root causes of the Iraqis' problems be solved.

### **Protection Needs: Outlined by Country of Refuge**

Iraqi refugees are migrants who are forced to abandon their country of origin to seek refuge across international borders. As such, they are categorized and entitled to protection and assistance under the United Nations Refugee Convention and Protocol; yet not all countries, specifically Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt, honor or abide by these two accords. Therefore, these Iraqis face protection issues, which are defined as the lack of “rights [a person has] outside their country who can no longer benefit from the protection of their government.”<sup>3</sup> Protection issues can encompass many facets of everyday life but most importantly include such elements like access to security, food, and shelter, as well as having access to employment and healthcare. As we will see, Iraqis throughout the Middle East experience quite a few protection issues. Nevertheless, the Iraqi refugee situation is unique; rather than residing in refugee encampments, most Iraqi refugees have situated themselves in apartments and buildings in cities like Amman, Cairo, and Damascus, which has produced an “urban refugee situation.” The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has labeled fleeing Iraqis *prima facie* refugees, meaning the Iraq War is a large enough conflict that no one individual needs to undergo screening to determine whether he can be considered a refugee or not. Interestingly, many Iraqi refugees are educated, middle class citizens who would be able to contribute positively to the society in which they reside if given a chance. While each Iraqi who escapes to a different country is inevitably seeking asylum, Jordan, Lebanon,

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<sup>3</sup> “Meeting the Rights and Needs of Refugee Children.” *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit*. Oxford, U. K. May 2002. pg vi.

For a complete list of protection needs and the embodied rights of refugees, please see the United Nations Refugee Convention of 1951.

Syria, and Egypt do not grant this form of protection and they rarely accommodate Iraqis for their conditions. Once in the country of refuge Iraqis experience impoverishment, such as lack of employment opportunities and social services, further preventing them from regaining stability and a sense of normalcy in their lives. They live off their monetary savings, which depletes quickly as they pay for necessities including food and water without the prospect of replenishing their savings through employment. Some professionals including doctors, engineers, and teachers are able to work in their respective country of refuge; but other than in Lebanon, it is forbidden for Iraqis to be gainfully employed.<sup>4</sup> Most Iraqi refugees are impoverished and either pay rent to live in overcrowded apartment buildings or become homeless, traveling from one abandoned building to the next. Their future has nothing to offer and they are quickly becoming a “waste of human capacity.”<sup>5</sup> Most problematically, the economies and social services of Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, and Egypt are already strained and this urban refugee situation exacerbates pre-existing economic and social tensions between the public and has also generated new resentments toward Iraqis.

### **Lebanon**

Lebanon hosts around 50,000 Iraqi refugees, seventy-seven percent of which have entered illegally either on their own or by way of a smuggling service.<sup>6</sup> Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, and subsequently views Iraqis not as refugees but as illegal immigrants who, as such, are targeted for arrests, fines, and deportation.<sup>7</sup> Iraqis can register as refugees with UNHCR and some 8,000 individuals have done so; however registering does not grant any

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<sup>4</sup> Roberta Cohen. Et al.

<sup>5</sup> “Five Years Later, A Hidden Crisis: Report of the IRC Commission on Iraqi Refugees.” *The International Rescue Committee*. March 2008. Online. 12/1/2008. [http://www.theirc.org/resources/2008/iraq\\_report.pdf](http://www.theirc.org/resources/2008/iraq_report.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> “Iraq: Rhetoric and Reality: The Iraqi Refugee Crisis.” *Amnesty International*. June 5, 2008. Online. 12/52008. <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE14/011/2008/en>

<sup>7</sup> “Rot Here or Die There: Bleak Choices for Iraqi Refugees in Lebanon.” *Human Rights Watch*. December 3, 2007. Online. 11/27/2008. <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2007/12/03/rot-here-or-die-there>

recognition with the government.<sup>8</sup> To be recognized as a refugee with the Lebanese government, an Iraqi must register with the office of General Security.<sup>9</sup> This process creates a problem as well as an environment of fear because an Iraqi must reveal himself to General Security by openly and willingly stating that he is a refugee and resides in Lebanon illegally. By doing so, General Security officials can arrest and detain Iraqis on the spot,<sup>10</sup> which is a merciless consequence of availing oneself of the assistance of the Lebanese government.

Throughout Lebanese society, the police generally display a tolerant attitude toward Iraqis, but at times they question, apprehend, and detain illegal Iraqi refugees on the streets. Spontaneous arrests give way to fear of being in public that in turn creates a barrier to Iraqis' self-reliance as Iraqi families lack the security and confidence to search for work or buy victuals. It is mainly male Iraqis who take the brunt of police abuse as they are the ones who are out on the streets looking for work to support their families, but it is hard to come by an employment-sponsored visa in Lebanon due to the problematic economic situation and an estimated unemployment rate of twenty percent.<sup>11</sup> There are numerous non-Iraqi foreign workers in Lebanon that many employers choose to employ rather than Iraqis because they can be paid lower wages.<sup>12</sup> Iraqi males who are able to find employment are usually made to pay the visa fees which amount to over US \$1,000 and experience exploitation from the employer that includes working long hours, being denied any form of social security, and not being paid the minimum wage of US \$200 a month.<sup>13</sup> Too often, employers exert their power by threatening to revoke an Iraqi employee's visa or informing the police that the Iraqi

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<sup>8</sup> "Iraq: Rhetoric and Reality: The Iraqi Refugee Crisis." et al.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> "Lebanon Unemployment Rate" *CIA World Factbook*. Updated December 15, 2008. Online. 12/15/2008 <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/le.html>.

<sup>12</sup> "Rot Here or Die There: Bleak Choices for Iraqi Refugees in Lebanon." et al.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

is residing illegally in Lebanon.<sup>14</sup> These forms of exploitation are able to exist because Iraqis have no recourse with Lebanon's policing authorities due to a general fear of discrimination and unprompted apprehension.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, finding employment for a male Iraqi is difficult, and therefore Iraqi women and children are usually put to work because they have a lower risk of being questioned and arrested due to cultural circumstances.<sup>16</sup> However, exploitation, including sexual misconduct, occurs in the case of women, which will be discussed later in the paper.

Once arrested, Iraqis who cannot pay the fines are then detained for a period of time that corresponds to the amount they have been fined, where one day in jail equals repayment of about US \$10.<sup>17</sup> For example, if an Iraqi is fined US \$100 and cannot pay this, they will be imprisoned for approximately 10 days. Iraqis are also penalized with jail time for not paying the initial arrest fees and thus may spend an indefinite period of time in detention.<sup>18</sup> An Iraqi has two options when in detention: he can choose to be imprisoned indefinitely or "voluntarily" return to Iraq.<sup>19</sup> On one hand, as most Iraqis believe that detention is better than facing sure death in Iraq, they opt for the former.<sup>20</sup> But on the other hand, because detention has nothing to offer, an estimated 104 Iraqis have chosen to return to Iraq.<sup>21</sup> Both UNHCR and the international community have stated that Lebanon is ultimately coercing Iraqis to choose return because life in prison is deplorable and there is no prospect of release.<sup>22</sup> Coercion is a major violation of a refugee's right of survival and places helpless Iraqis back in Iraq where they face the persecution and fear that caused their initial departure.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> "Iraq: Rhetoric and Reality: The Iraqi Refugee Crisis." et al.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> "Rot Here or Die There: Bleak Choices for Iraqi Refugees in Lebanon." et al.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> "Iraq: Rhetoric and Reality: The Iraqi Refugee Crisis." et al.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

Iraqis who do not opt for return are placed in Lebanese prisons that are both overcrowded and underfunded.<sup>23</sup> As there are no specific rules regarding the treatment of illegal Iraqis in prison, they are usually placed in cells with Lebanese criminals with no suitable place to sleep except on the cold ground, either side by side or head to toe.<sup>24</sup> They very rarely have the freedom to go outside and Lebanese prison guards verbally abuse detainees and pay them no heed on requests for medical services.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, detainees need family members to bring hygienic products such as toothbrushes and soap, but during these visits, family members may undergo physical and verbal harassment, abuse, or even their own arrest as they too are in Lebanon illegally.<sup>26</sup> As outside of prison, Iraqis need to fend for themselves because there are no assistance plans to help imprisoned individuals nor does UNHCR have much influence in Lebanon against the use of detention. Iraqi prisoners had a brief opportunity in February 2008, when Lebanon granted a three-month amnesty to all illegal Iraqis, including detainees, in order for them to try to find an employer who would sponsor them for a yearlong employment visa and ultimately, a path to legalization.<sup>27</sup> However, only ten percent of the previously detained Iraqis found employment and within the past year, there have been reports that Lebanese police are again beginning to arrest Iraqis.<sup>28</sup>

Iraqi children living in Lebanon do not encounter as severe a situation as their elders. They are able to attend school, though many are intimidated by the different curriculum and the harassment they receive from Lebanese school children.<sup>29</sup> In general, many Iraqi families cannot afford to send their children to school because they do not have the disposable income to pay for the

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> "Iraq: Rhetoric and Reality: The Iraqi Refugee Crisis." et al.

<sup>28</sup> "Iraqi Refugees: Plan for Ongoing Support in an Unstable Region ." *Refugees International*. October 20, 2008. Online. 12/2/2008. <http://www.refintl.org/policy/field-report/iraqi-refugees-plan-ongoing-support-unstable-region>

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

cost of school supplies including books, stationary, uniforms, or transportation.<sup>30</sup> As a result, families would rather employ their children for the much-needed financial support work brings. In Lebanon, about forty percent of Iraqi children between the ages of 6 and 17 work illegally instead of attending school.<sup>31</sup> Just as their elder counterparts, children can be exploited for labor and not paid wages; however they are not profiled for arrest as Iraqi adults tend to be and thus are more capable of being employed.

### **Jordan**

Jordan hosts approximately 500,000 Iraqi refugees and is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention nor does it recognize UNHCR card-holding refugees. Instead, Iraqi refugees are viewed as guests, temporary visitors or illegal immigrants. After the initial invasion of Iraq and during the first three years of the war, Jordan opened its borders and turned a blind eye toward refugees, but after the November 2005 hotel bombings in Amman planned by Al Qaeda operatives in Iraq, the Jordanian government began to systematically close its borders to helpless Iraqis and deport others that were apprehended inside Jordan for illegal entry.<sup>32</sup> The government views the growing refugee crisis in its territory as a security concern and has vowed to take immediate and forceful action if attacked again.<sup>33</sup> Although there has yet to be another major terrorist attack in Jordan, the government has implemented restrictive immigration policies that not only impede Iraqi entry in the country but also make it difficult for legal migrants to retain their status. Moreover, Jordan implemented a policy in May 2008 requiring all Iraqis to apply for visas in Iraq before traveling outside of the country, and has since been turning away all Iraqi refugees via land or air

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> "Rot Here or Die There: Bleak Choices for Iraqi Refugees in Lebanon." et al.

<sup>32</sup> "Iraq: From a Flood to a Trickle: Neighboring States Stop Iraqis Fleeing War and Persecution." *Human Rights Watch*. April 2007. Online. 11/28/2008. <http://www.hrw.org/legacy/backgrounder/refugees/iraq0407/>

<sup>33</sup> "Iraq: Rhetoric and Reality: The Iraqi Refugee Crisis." et al.

crossing.<sup>34</sup> Yet even prior to this visa requirement, Jordanian border guards denied Iraqi refugees entry into the country based on appearance, which included age, specifically males between 17 and 35, and assumption of religion, namely being a Shi'a or Christian.<sup>35</sup> Even Iraqis with valid Jordanian visas have also been denied entry due to these immediate judgments of appearances.

Most Iraqis in Jordan overstay their visas because visa renewal consists of leaving Jordan and re-applying at the border, which due to the discrimination and restrictive immigration policies more often than not becomes a failed attempt at the border.<sup>36</sup> Iraqis fear that if they either try to leave Jordan and come back, they may be deported for merely being of Iraqi nationality or for residing illegally in Jordan because their visa has expired. When Iraqis are denied entry, either initially or after they have received a valid visa, they are separated from their families who remain in Jordan, which leads to anxiety on both sides.<sup>37</sup> This occurs because the remaining family members are not informed that their loved one has been denied entry and are unable to find them for fear of the same result. The denied Iraqi is also not sure what may become of his family nor have another place to go to seek refuge. These denials of entry are violations to fundamental human rights that the Jordanian government can grant but chooses not to. Such neglect endangers the lives of Iraqis as they are forced to return to the violent conditions in Iraq that threatened their existence in the first place.

For the Iraqis who reside in Jordan, employment is not authorized by the government and as in Lebanon, Iraqis are forced to use their savings or rely on outside sources as their only means for survival.<sup>38</sup> It is reported that forty-two percent receive money transfers from family members still in

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<sup>34</sup> "Iraq: Rhetoric and Reality: The Iraqi Refugee Crisis." et al.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Frelick, Bill. "Iraqis denied right to asylum." Eds. Marion Couldrey and Tim Morris. Forced Migration Review. June 2007. Oxford, UK: Refugee Studies Centre.

<sup>37</sup> Frelick. et al.

<sup>38</sup> "Iraq: Rhetoric and Reality: The Iraqi Refugee Crisis." et al.

Iraq; yet as employment declines in Iraq, money transfers quickly become fewer and of smaller amounts.<sup>39</sup> Unfortunately, the Jordanian economy as a whole is in shambles and employment opportunities are not much better than in Iraq. Unlike Lebanon, Iraqis are not authorized to work in Jordan but some do work illegally, albeit for low wages and physically demanding labor, such as construction or housekeeping.<sup>40</sup> Although most are unable to work and survive on their savings, the Jordanian public blames Iraqi refugees for the high inflation rate,<sup>41</sup> soaring prices of commodities, rise in gasoline prices, and even the unavailability and rise in prices of apartments.<sup>42</sup> In addition, Iraqi men are targeted for apprehension by the local police due to the assumption that they are most likely to be involved with terrorist groups working against the Jordanian government. Once arrested, Iraqis must pay a fine; but if one cannot pay, he is then detained but usually released soon after.<sup>43</sup> Many Iraqis who have been released from jail have accrued fines that amount to over US \$700 a year,<sup>44</sup> and with no means of earning an income along with depleted savings, many are unable to pay. For those who cannot pay the fines and are again apprehended by the Jordanian police, they are then forcibly removed from the country.<sup>45</sup>

The combination of these factors, along with minimal assistance from the Jordanian government and international community, has created a very dire situation for Iraqi refugees in Jordan. Most Iraqis are able to live in small apartments or rented houses, sometimes with other families, but close living quarters and a lack of freedom to travel outside the house leads to

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> "Jordan's inflation rate at 13.31 per cent in first six months." *Monsters&Critics.com*. July 15, 2008. Online. 12/14/2008.

[http://www.monstersandcritics.com/news/business/news/article\\_1417155.php/Jordans\\_inflation\\_rate\\_at\\_13.31\\_per\\_cent\\_in\\_first\\_six\\_months](http://www.monstersandcritics.com/news/business/news/article_1417155.php/Jordans_inflation_rate_at_13.31_per_cent_in_first_six_months)

<sup>42</sup> Cohen. et al.

<sup>43</sup> "Iraq: From a Flood to a Trickle: Neighboring States Stop Iraqis Fleeing War and Persecution." et al.

<sup>44</sup> "Iraq: Rhetoric and Reality: The Iraqi Refugee Crisis." et al.

<sup>45</sup> "Iraq: From a Flood to a Trickle: Neighboring States Stop Iraqis Fleeing War and Persecution." et al.

household tensions and has resulted in increased domestic violence cases.<sup>46</sup> Another major factor that worsens Iraqi living standards in Jordan are the high trauma rates and few free health clinics that offer help. These clinics, which often lack essential equipment and medicines,<sup>47</sup> serve the needs of most Iraqis, who are unable to pay for visits to private health clinics. For those few Iraqis who are able to secure an appointment, there is virtually no access to secondary or specialist healthcare options thereafter.<sup>48</sup>

In Jordan, Iraqi refugee children are allowed to attend school but classrooms are overcrowded and educational standards have dissipated due to teachers taking on double shifts to accommodate the extra 24,000 Iraqi children.<sup>49</sup> As in Lebanon, Iraqi children are harassed and bullied by native Jordanian children.<sup>50</sup> At some schools, students are required to present previous educational documentation from Iraq to verify enrollment. Those who cannot obtain this documentation usually do not attend school.<sup>51</sup> Some Iraqi children are also forced to work to provide for their families, as it is easier for a child, rather than an adult, to work illegally in Jordan.<sup>52</sup>

## **Syria**

Most estimates place the number of Iraqi refugees in Syria around 1.4 million, approximately ten percent of its population.<sup>53</sup> However, as Syria is not a signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention, Iraqi refugees face ongoing protection issues. Due to their inability to obtain Syrian visas because the government restricts visa issuance, many Iraqis have been in Syria illegally

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> “Five Years Later, A Hidden Crisis.” et al.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. AND “Iraq: Rhetoric and Reality: The Iraqi Refugee Crisis.” et al.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> “Iraq: Rhetoric and Reality: The Iraqi Refugee Crisis.” et al.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Cohen. et al.

for years and are not recognized as refugees by the Syrian authorities.<sup>54</sup> As violence escalated in Iraq toward the end of 2007 and beginning of 2008, Syrian officials realized that Iraqis would not be returning home in the near future. Growing public dismay with the refugee situation in Syria supported the government's enforcement of restrictive immigration policies.<sup>55</sup> Further, in the autumn of 2007, with the support of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, Syria closed its borders and restricted entry as well as visa access to Iraqi refugees.<sup>56</sup> Again in the spring of 2008, Syria imposed more visa and residency restrictions and hardened its stance on the refugee situation.<sup>57</sup> These restrictions were implemented partly because Syrian nationals blame Iraqis for the faulty economy and inflation, including the rise of unemployment to approximately ten percent, the rising price of rents, food, fuel, and water, as well as strains on electricity.<sup>58</sup> Additionally, many poor Syrians attribute their problems to the Iraqi refugees; especially the well-to-do Iraqis who have money to afford apartments while local Syrians are evicted for not covering the payment of rent.<sup>59</sup> Although there are no documented cases of such, these perceptions put Iraqis at risk for violence and discrimination at the hands of Syrians, and open the possibility of Iraqis being forced out of the country.

Iraqis are not permitted work visas in Syria and are forced to take up illegal employment or resort to crime to earn money for survival. Since 2007, there has been a twenty percent increase in crime in predominately Iraqi areas, with "new-to-Syria" crimes such as kidnappings for ransom

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<sup>54</sup> "Failed Responsibility: Iraqi Refugees in Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon." *International Crisis Group*. Middle East Report N77. July 10, 2008.

<sup>55</sup> "Failed Responsibility: Iraqi Refugees in Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon." et al.

<sup>56</sup> "Iraq: Rhetoric and Reality: The Iraqi Refugee Crisis." et al.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Cohen. et al. AND "Syria's unemployment rate." *Mundi Index*. Online. 12/14/2008.  
[http://indexmundi.com/syria/unemployment\\_rate.html](http://indexmundi.com/syria/unemployment_rate.html)

<sup>59</sup> "Failed Responsibility: Iraqi Refugees in Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon." et al.

taking place.<sup>60</sup> Iraqis who are arrested and convicted of a crime or even accused of a crime are at high risk of deportation.<sup>61</sup> Like Lebanon and Jordan, Iraqi males are targeted for arrest due to discrimination and profiling. Therefore the majority of Iraqi males decide not to participate in illegal work and subsequently women and children are forced to be the providers of the family.<sup>62</sup> Many women have no other choice but to work in Syria's thriving sex industry as strippers or prostitutes. As such they are exploited and sexually abused and as in other countries, they cannot report abuse to the local authorities as they are not legal immigrants. Children, on the other hand, are able to attend public schools but there is a low attendance rate. An estimated 47,000 Iraqi children out of 250,000 attend class in Syria.<sup>63</sup> The children who do attend school are often bullied and made to feel unwelcome by local Syrian students. Other reasons for neglected education include costs of transportation, uniforms, supplies, and families opting to employ their children.<sup>64</sup> There are reports that some schools require registration and verification of status and this has resulted in reporting illegal Iraqis to the police.<sup>65</sup> .

Iraqi refugees in Syria are increasingly registering with UNHCR and are eligible to receive food, medical, and monetary assistance.<sup>66</sup> Public health clinics offer treatment and more Iraqis utilize these public services than do Syrians,<sup>67</sup> but availability is limited and secondary treatment is nearly impossible to obtain, hurting those Iraqis with chronic diseases or deep trauma.<sup>68</sup> UNHCR developed an agreement with the Ministry of Health where Iraqis in desperate need of medical

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<sup>60</sup> al-Miqdad, Faisal. "Iraqi Refugees in Syria." Eds. Marion Couldrey and Tim Morris. Forced Migration Review. June 2007. Oxford, UK: Refugee Studies Centre.

<sup>61</sup> "Iraq: Rhetoric and Reality: The Iraqi Refugee Crisis." et al.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Cohen. et al.

<sup>64</sup> Cohen. et al.

<sup>65</sup> "Five Years Later, A Hidden Crisis." et al.

<sup>66</sup> "Iraq: Rhetoric and Reality: The Iraqi Refugee Crisis." et al.

<sup>67</sup> Harper, Andrew. "Where to Now? Decreasing Options for Displaced Iraqis." *Migration Information Source*. September 2007. 11/28/2008.

<sup>68</sup> "Iraq: Rhetoric and Reality: The Iraqi Refugee Crisis." et al.

attention can have access to emergency and surgical care at hospitals, as long as they are able to repay the hospital for their treatment.<sup>69</sup> This is indeed progress on the medical front, but the requirement to pay prohibits many Iraqis from seeking assistance at hospitals due to their financial instability.

## **Egypt**

Estimates vary regarding the number of Iraqi refugees residing in Egypt, placing the figure anywhere from 40,000 to 150,000. Egypt, a country that does not recognize Iraqis as refugees, is the only country of the four that is a signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention. In the initial stages of the Iraq War, Egypt allowed Iraqis to escape to its land and gave them relative ease to obtain and renew visas. But in 2006, Egypt implemented restrictive visa policies in which Iraqis had to apply for, interview, and be granted a visa in Iraq before traveling.<sup>70</sup> Most Iraqis do not have the money or means of transportation to apply for a visa and the restriction has “choked” the direct refugee route from Baghdad to Cairo.<sup>71</sup> Families have been separated because some members are able to obtain a visa whereas others cannot.<sup>72</sup> Egypt also engages in deportation, but not strictly back to Iraq. If an Iraqi transits through Jordan or Syria to get to Egypt, border guards will deny him entry and will send him back to the country from which he transited.<sup>73</sup> At first glance, this procedure seems a bit humanitarian as the Egyptian authorities are not sending the Iraqi directly back to a war zone. However, immediately after being sent into Jordan or Syria, refugees may be denied access by these governments and forced to return to Iraq.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> “Iraq: From a Flood to a Trickle: Neighboring States Stop Iraqis Fleeing War and Persecution.” et al.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

Iraqi refugees who reside in Egypt are encouraged to register with UNHCR in order to receive nominal assistance. Approximately 15,000 were registered by January 2009.<sup>75</sup> UNHCR registrants are eligible for basic health services and will grant the most vulnerable families minimal financial aid.<sup>76</sup> Medical assistance is rare, and though at times Iraqis are granted treatment in government-sponsored hospitals, this is not on a consistent basis.<sup>77</sup> Although police have willingly and knowingly arrested illegal Iraqis and tried to deport them, UNHCR registration cards offer protection from deportation as UNHCR can successfully intervene on a pending case with the Egyptian government.<sup>78</sup> Further, registration allows Iraqis to obtain education stipends for their children to help pay for private schooling because this form of schooling is the only one available for Iraqi students in Egypt.<sup>79</sup> But this stipend is minimal and most Iraqi children are not able to attend private school because of their overall impoverishment, as parents face dwindling savings and no source of income.<sup>80</sup> Iraqis are permitted to work in Egypt, but with a forty percent poverty rate and a ten percent unemployment rate, it is rather difficult to find gainful employment, especially when many Egyptian employers refuse to hire Iraqis.<sup>81</sup>

## **Women**

Iraqi refugee women face dire consequences of the war in Iraq. To date, there have been between 92,000 and 102,000 citizen casualties in the Iraq War most of which have been men.<sup>82</sup> This has created a large number of refugee women single-handedly running the household and

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<sup>75</sup> "Iraq." *UNHCR Iraq*. *UNHCR Online*. <http://www.unhcr.org/cgo-bin/texis/vtx/page?page=49e486426>

<sup>76</sup> "Iraq: Rhetoric and Reality: The Iraqi Refugee Crisis." et al.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> "Five Years Later, A Hidden Crisis." et al.

<sup>79</sup> Knickmeyer, Ellen. "An Iraqi Exodus." *Washington Post*. September 7, 2008. Online. 12/2/2008. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/09/06/AR2008090602665.html>

<sup>80</sup> "Iraq: Rhetoric and Reality: The Iraqi Refugee Crisis." et al.

<sup>81</sup> "Egypt's unemployment rate." *Index Mundi*. Online. 12/2/2008.

[http://indexmundi.com/egypt/unemployment\\_rate.html](http://indexmundi.com/egypt/unemployment_rate.html) AND Knickmeyer, et al.

<sup>82</sup> "Iraqi Civilian Casualties." *Iraq body Count*. <http://www.iraqbodycount.org/>

taking care of children. This situation is incredibly difficult in a region where women are viewed as inferior and more importantly, where there is very little work or social assistance for refugees. In order to support their families, most women—and even their children—find that the only employment available that pays a decent salary is in the exploitive sex-worker field of prostitution or dancing. Iraqi women can voluntarily join this type of work, but many of the sex workers are forced into the sex industry. Many Iraqi women are either trafficked into the sex industry in Syria or recruited by currently participating female family members. One prevalent form of sex work that involves trafficking is “temporary marriage” or “marriage of pleasure.”<sup>83</sup> Traffickers promise young Iraqi girls viable employment abroad and pay their families a meager sum in order to arrange temporary marriages.<sup>84</sup> Subsequently, these girls enter short-term marriage contracts that leave them emotionally distressed, pregnant, or infected with a sexually transmitted disease upon termination of marriage.<sup>85</sup> Fifteen percent of widowed Iraqi women participate in “temporary marriages” or other types of sex work as a way of generating income for their families.<sup>86</sup> Additionally, one-fifth of all women less than 18 years of age have disappeared since the onslaught of the war in 2003 and it is believed that they have been trafficked abroad.<sup>87</sup>

In some cases, Iraqi men force their wives or daughters into this industry, with reports showing that girls as young as six years old have been found to be working in Syrian nightclubs.<sup>88</sup> Syria possesses the most nightclubs that employ Iraqi refugee women; but in Jordan, prostitution

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<sup>83</sup> Dakkak, Henia. “Tackling Sexual Violence, Abuse, and Exploitation.” Eds. Marion Couldrey and Tim Morris. *Forced Migration Review*. June 2007. Oxford, UK: Refugee Studies Centre

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> “Iraqi Refugee Women and Youth in Jordan: Reproductive Health Findings.” *Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children*. September 2007. Online. 12/2/2008.

[http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWFiles2007.nsf/FilesByRWDocUnidFilename/SIRU-77P4N6-full\\_report.pdf/\\$File/full\\_report.pdf](http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWFiles2007.nsf/FilesByRWDocUnidFilename/SIRU-77P4N6-full_report.pdf/$File/full_report.pdf)

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Damon, Arwa. “Iraqi Women: Prostituting Ourselves to Feed Our Children.” *CNN*. Online. August 16, 2007. 12/2/2008. <http://www.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/meast/08/15/iraq.prostitution/index.html>

takes place on the streets, in the woman's home, or in other private settings.<sup>89</sup> There are even reports that taxi drivers "pimp out" Iraqi women to male passengers.<sup>90</sup> The younger the female the higher the price, which is a tempting reason for fathers who are not able to work to prostitute their young daughters.<sup>91</sup>

Of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt, Syria possesses the largest sex industry, with over 50,000 Iraqi refugee women employed.<sup>92</sup> On the street, these women ask their male clients if they would "like a cup of tea"—code language for some sort of sexual pleasure.<sup>93</sup> In the nightclubs, Iraqi women are employed for the equivalent of US \$10 a night to dance and parade around the venue.<sup>94</sup> Male sex tourists from mainly Gulf States, particularly Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, frequent these clubs.<sup>95</sup> Iraqi women make most of their money after hours when they leave with male customers. On average, women earn about US \$50 to \$70 a night, well above the Syrian daily minimum wage.<sup>96</sup> A woman's body is her only marketable asset in Syria<sup>97</sup> and this "survival sex" is the only route to earn a good income to support a family, especially if the woman is the head of the household.<sup>98</sup> Ultimately, prostitution can be seen as a "measure of desperation."<sup>99</sup> Interviews with Iraqi women have stressed that they considered themselves mothers first and foremost, but will sacrifice their bodies if need be in order to keep their children alive.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> "Refugees Turn to Prostitution." CBS News Report by Elizabeth Palmer. *YouTube* Video. Online. 12/14/2008. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X2TCDVxqIV4&feature=related>

<sup>92</sup> "Iraqi Prostitutes- Syria." *YouTube* Video. Online. 12/14/2008. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OPYcCf5hoEQ>  
<sup>93</sup> Zoepf, Katherine. "Desperate Iraqi Refugees Turn to Sex Trade in Syria." *New York Times*. Online. May 29, 2007. December 12, 2008. [www.nytimes.com/2007/05/29/world/middleeast/29.syria.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/29/world/middleeast/29.syria.html)

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> "Iraqi Girls as Young as 6 Working as Prostitutes in Syria" NBC Report by Richard Engle. *YouTube* Video. Online. 12/14/2008. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eIoqaWNDw3c>

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Damon, Arwa. "Iraqi Women: Prostituting Ourselves to Feed Our Children." *CNN*. Online. August 16, 2007. 12/2/2008. <http://www.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/meast/08/15/iraq.prostitution/index.html>

The vulnerability of Iraqi female sex workers leads to exploitation and abuse, including incidents of gang rapes and male customers not paying.<sup>101</sup> Numerous Iraqi women experienced rape while in Iraq, as domestic militias and groups constantly used this tactic to induce fear and powerlessness. And while working in their host countries rape is also prevalent. It must be noted that not all Iraqi refugee women participate in sex work, but others find employment as domestic servants, maids, or waitresses. However, as this work is still illegal it leaves these women susceptible to sexual abuse and exploitation by their employers.<sup>102</sup> Because of legal systems and cultural mores, when a women reports that she has been raped, she is seen as the culprit and the one who provoked the incident.<sup>103</sup> In Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, and Egypt, Iraqi females do not have any recourse with the police when it comes to these types of ill-treatments. An Iraqi woman who reports rape has three options: She can marry the rapist, be imprisoned for her own protection, or face murder from her family for dishonoring them.<sup>104</sup> (Please note the third option is not always exercised by the family, but it is a threat in many cases.) These options offer no protection to raped women, and as one Iraqi woman stated, “I would rather be dead than tell anyone I have been raped.”<sup>105</sup> Moreover, if an Iraqi woman tells a doctor that she was raped, the doctor may be obliged by law to contact the police.<sup>106</sup> Such laws keep women from sharing what happened or seeking proper care. Host countries do not have medicines available for the prevention of pregnancy or the transmission of diseases and Iraqi women who are impregnated when raped have their child taken

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<sup>101</sup> “Iraqi Girls as Young as 6 Working as Prostitutes in Syria” NBC Report by Richard Engle. et al.

<sup>102</sup> Chynoweth, Sarah and Ada Williams. “Iraqi Refugee Women and Girls in Jordan: Few Options for Rape Survivors.” *Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children*. Online. November 2, 2008. 12/14/2008.

<http://www.womenscommission.org/special/jordan/110308.php>

<sup>103</sup> Ibid .

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

away from them and placed into an orphanage if the rape is reported to the police.<sup>107</sup> Therefore most women resort to unsafe abortion practices or pay large sums of money for illegal abortions.<sup>108</sup>

### **Temporary Dignified Status**

It is doubtful that Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, or Egypt will accommodate the refugees indefinitely. It is interesting to note that although Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt have shouldered the burden of Iraqi refugees for the past five years, not one country has developed a plan for integration.<sup>109</sup> Therefore, Iraqi refugees are left with virtually two options: repatriate to Iraq or apply for third country resettlement. Unfortunately, resettlement is geared toward the most vulnerable and needy refugees, thus leaving the majority of Iraqis with the former option. For example, UNHCR has resettled approximately 30,000 refugees altogether,<sup>110</sup> with around 5,000 resettled in 2007 and 17,000 in 2008.<sup>111</sup> This is successful but much more needs to be done in regards to resettlement.<sup>112</sup> On the other hand, repatriation is becoming more utilized, most likely due to the increased security situation that took place in the autumn of 2008. To date, approximately 409,000 refugees<sup>113</sup> have returned to Iraq but unfortunately the conditions for return have been deteriorating and UNHCR deems them unfavorable for return.

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Chynoweth, Sarah, Mary Jane Escobar-Collins and Megan McKenna. "Terrible Things Happened to Me: Violence Against Iraqi Women and Girls." *Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children*. . Online. June 19, 2007. December 8, 2008. <http://www.womenscommission.org/special/jordan/061907.php>

<sup>109</sup> Cohen, Roberta. et al.

<sup>110</sup> "The Continuing Needs of Iraq's Displaced." *The Iraq Situation*. UNHCR. Online. <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/iraq?page=intro>

<sup>111</sup> Lavee, Carole "Number of Iraqis recommended by UNHCR for resettlement hits 50,000" *UNHCR*. 12/12/2008. Online. 12/14/08. <http://www.unhcr.org/news/NEWS/49426cfb4.html>

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> "Iraqis Head Home in Drives, Despite Violence." et al.

What is primarily needed for Iraqi refugees is a “temporary dignified status”<sup>114</sup> that will grant them equal rights and allow access to employment, education, and healthcare. Many Iraqi adults are educated and hold university degrees, but as refugees, they are not given the opportunity to utilize their knowledge and experience in their fields of expertise. Further, if women were permitted to work legally in countries like Syria and Jordan, they would be less inclined to resort to sex work.<sup>115</sup> Obviously high unemployment rates and labor force discrimination in the host countries present Iraqi refugees with problems for finding work, but temporary dignified status will offer a chance to break the barriers to self-reliance, stabilize lives, and reverse the destitution Iraqi refugees experience. This, in turn, could help them accumulate wealth and confidence to prepare for the future. Moreover, as it is unacceptable for young children to be working on the streets illegally, temporary dignified status would make education for children a priority. Children without opportunities for improvement are the most susceptible to extremist ideologies since their futures are dismal. Host countries should be wary of this and thus should encourage Iraqi children to attend school and foster friendships with their own citizens.

Concerning healthcare, there are alarming rates of sickness and disease that can easily be treated but are instead neglected.<sup>116</sup> Increased medical aid in the region is perhaps the only answer. Counseling and psychiatry services are greatly needed due to the high number of Iraqis that have been traumatized not only by the events in Iraq but by their impoverishment outside of Iraq. Temporary dignified status will allow Iraqis access to these types of social services as an open resource to alleviate their pain and suffering.

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<sup>114</sup> “County Operations Plan 2008.” *UNHCR*. Online. <http://www.unhcr.org/protect/PROTECTION/46f90afa2.pdf>

<sup>115</sup> Regarding prostitution, Jordan and Syria have begun to discuss the issue and how to resolve it, but no serious action has been taken yet. (Zoepf. et al.)

<sup>116</sup> Zoepf. et al.

Temporary dignified status would undoubtedly need to be supported by the international community as collective action is needed to ensure certain policy proposals are developed and implemented. The current aid agencies and charities on the ground in the Middle East possess limited resources, which leaves Iraqis fending for themselves in unwelcoming societies. Programs that the International Red Cross has implemented in Jordan and Syria, such as medical counseling, educating Iraqi children, expanding school capacities, and sexual violence and prostitution prevention are the types of programs that the international community would need to support and expand as a way to ensure that Iraqis benefit from a temporary dignified status.

### **Conclusion**

Protection needs of Iraqi refugees have become a major issue of survival in which the international community needs to take firm action to alleviate suffering and lessen the burdens of the host countries. The situation of Iraqi refugees does not receive much press time by the international media and perhaps more reporting on protection issues would encourage the international community to recognize the harsh experiences faced by those fleeing the war in Iraq. The major protection issue that mostly goes undetected by the international community is the need for psychiatric help and counseling. Trauma is extremely high among Iraqi refugees in that most have personally experienced or have witnessed acts of war or violence including explosions, kidnappings, abuse, or torture. In Syria, seventy-two percent of Iraqi refugees admitted to witnessing an act of violence and an even higher seventy-five percent confirmed that someone close to them had been kidnapped or murdered.<sup>117</sup> The numbers are similar in Jordan, Lebanon, and Egypt. In addition, there is a significant need for psychological support due to sexual or gender-based violence. Nearly 1,000 cases of such extreme violence have been identified in Syria and well

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

over 4,000 have been recognized in Jordan.<sup>118</sup> Many refugees experience post-traumatic stress symptoms and find it difficult to speak about what they have experienced in Iraq,<sup>119</sup> especially cases where violent acts were inflicted upon their own children or family members. Counseling is greatly needed but there is little access to this sort of help, be it sponsored by a non-governmental organization or a state-funded clinic.<sup>120</sup> The international community must address these growing problems in an effort to reduce the despair and hopelessness that countless ailing Iraqi families are experiencing.

Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, and Egypt are experiencing serious social, economic, and political problems which are the basis for their lack of political will to appropriately aid Iraqi refugees. Unemployment is already high and government-provided social services leave a lot to be desired. These four countries have also been shouldering the refugee burden since the outbreak of the war in 2003; hence the refugee presence has not improved current conditions. By evidence of their actions, the governments do not have plans for integrating Iraqi refugees into their societies. The general policy stance is that of return. These countries' political wills fall short of trying to delve into the roots of the problems as they are not physically able to control the refugee situation. These governments lack the fundamental capacity to allocate money and develop comprehensive aid programs; further each government experiences relatively high levels of corruption,<sup>121</sup> which does not bode well for developing and implementing aid programs. Rather than strengthening political support and providing the proper infrastructure to their economies, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, and Egypt find it much easier to label the refugee crisis as America's problem to solve.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> "Iraq: Rhetoric and Reality: The Iraqi Refugee Crisis." Et al.

<sup>119</sup> "From Hope to Horror." *The International Rescue Committee*. September 17, 2008. Online. 12/4/2008. <http://www.theirc.org/news/from-horror-to-hope0917.html>

<sup>120</sup> "Five Years Later, A Hidden Crisis." et al.

<sup>121</sup> "Corruption by Country." *NationMaster.com*. Online. [http://www.nationmaster.com/graph/gov\\_cor-government-corruption](http://www.nationmaster.com/graph/gov_cor-government-corruption)

<sup>122</sup> Cohen. et al.

Realistically, Iraqi refugees are only one layer of the overall security concerns that engulf Iraq, and to a larger extent, the Middle East. There is still the grave matter of internally displaced Iraqis, with forty percent unable to return to their original communities because the areas have since been religiously homogenized, thus making them a targeted minority.<sup>123</sup> Then there are the protection concerns of Iraqi Palestinians who have a considerable amount of difficulty seeking refuge in neighboring countries and do not have their own state to which to return. Future research in these two areas would compliment the knowledge of the Iraqi refugee situation and bring light to the other groups of Iraqi citizens that have been affected.

In the coming months and years, Iraq will find itself with many more problems as its citizens begin to repatriate home. As a precursor to any solution, the government will need to effectively engage with its citizens and offer channels of responsible help that will put families in positions to thrive socially and economically. The government's US \$800 grant to return to Iraq is a beginning.<sup>124</sup> And although over 400,000 Iraqis have already repatriated,<sup>125</sup> largely due to exhausted options and a more stable domestic security situation, there is still a large majority who do not see return as a viable option until security and stability can be maintained in their homeland.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Cohen. et al.

<sup>124</sup> Amos, Deborah. "Iraqi Refugees Still Too Scared to Return Home." *The Huffington Post*. December 4, 2008. Online. 12/4/2008. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/deborah-amos/iraqi-refugees-still-too\\_b\\_147777.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/deborah-amos/iraqi-refugees-still-too_b_147777.html)

<sup>125</sup> "Iraqis Head Home in Drives, Despite Violence." et al.

<sup>126</sup> Amos, Deborah. Et al.