



How to Confront the Iraqi Refugee Crisis

A Blueprint for the New Administration

Released in December 2008

BLUEPRINT
FOR THE NEXT U.S. ADMINISTRATION

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Human Rights First believes that building respect for human rights and the rule of law will help ensure the dignity to which every individual is entitled and will stem tyranny, extremism, and violence.

Human Rights First protects people at risk: refugees who flee persecution, victims of crimes against humanity or other mass human rights violations, victims of discrimination, those whose rights are eroded in the name of national security, and human rights advocates who are targeted for defending the rights of others. These groups are often the first victims of societal instability and breakdown; their treatment is a harbinger of wider-scale repression. Human Rights First works to prevent violations against these groups and to seek justice and accountability for violations against them.

Human Rights First is practical and effective. We advocate for change at the highest levels of national and international policymaking. We seek justice through the courts. We raise awareness and understanding through the media. We build coalitions among those with divergent views. And we mobilize people to act.

Human Rights First is a non-profit, nonpartisan international human rights organization based in New York and Washington D.C. To maintain our independence, we accept no government funding.

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“As I’ve said many times, we must be as careful getting out of Iraq as we were careless getting in.”

President-elect Barack Obama, July 2008

“[...] we will launch a major humanitarian initiative to support Iraq’s refugees and people. But Iraqis must take responsibility for their country. It is precisely this kind of approach—an approach that puts the onus on the Iraqis, and that relies on more than just military power—that is needed to stabilize Iraq.”

President-elect Barack Obama, March 2008

Introduction

Since the United States invasion of Iraq in 2003, millions of Iraqis have fled their homes. Today an estimated 750,000 to 2 millionⁱ Iraqi refugees live in unstable situations in urban centers in the Middle East. For a more detailed discussion of different estimates of Iraqi refugee numbers, please read the footnote at the end of this blueprint. Palestinian refugees who were living in Iraq have been refused entry by all of Iraq’s neighbors, and 3,000 are now stranded in camps along the Iraqi-Syrian border. Another 2.7 million Iraqis are internally displaced persons (IDPs) within their country; 1.7 million of these IDPs have fled their homes since 2003.

Forced migration from Iraq continues to occur, although at far lower levels than in 2006 and 2007. UNHCR in Syria reports that it has registered around 12,500 refugees who left Iraq in 2008. The recent brutal persecution of Christians in Mosul and tensions over Kirkuk and other disputed areas underscore the reality of ongoing gross human rights violations in Iraq and the potential for new refugee and IDP flows.

Preliminary surveys suggest about one-third of the displaced population fled generalized violence, while two-thirds fled targeted religious, political, or ethnic persecution, and in some cases were forcibly expelled from their property.ⁱⁱ In neighboring countries, Iraqi refugees have encountered both hospitality and hostility. For the most part, they enjoy freedom of movement and access to subsidized public health care and education, particularly in Syria. However most refugees cannot obtain work authorization and many refugees lack legal residence rights. In the past two years, as Iraqi refugees have exhausted their savings, the cost of living in host countries has rapidly risen. Human Rights First has observed the beginnings of frustration and fatigue among host communities in Syria as well as serious anti-Iraqi and anti-Shi’a discrimination in Jordan. With time, these tensions could aggravate instability in the region.

Based on field interviews conducted in Jordan in September 2007 and Syria in October 2008, Human Rights First believes that a high percentage of Iraqis who register with UNHCR do not see return to Iraq as a realistic option for the foreseeable future, and hope that

registering with UNHCR will provide a path to resettlement in a third country. In the past two years, the United States has resettled about 15,000. In addition, 64,500 Iraqis made applications for asylum in industrialized countries in 2007 and the first half of 2008, primarily in Sweden, Germany, and Greece.

The situation for IDPs in Iraq is desperate. Problems include access to food rations, clean water, education, health care, income, and safe housing. Provincial leaders in safer regions of Iraq have prevented IDPs from entering their governorates and recently expressed desires to forcibly expel IDPs. Most IDPs rent shelter or live with extended family. A small percentage live in camps, and significant numbers of extremely vulnerable IDPs in Baghdad and other areas are squatting on public lands. The Iraqi government is pressing for imminent eviction of these IDPs, but lacks a clear plan for their alternative shelter.

Iraqi Government Policy

Beginning in late 2007, Iraqi government policy toward its displaced populations shifted. The government launched a campaign to encourage—and pressure—displaced Iraqis to return to their homes. This has led the government to take some positive steps, including helping IDPs vote in upcoming provincial elections and issuing an order evicting people occupying homes they do not own. However, the government has also employed troubling strategies to pressure the return of refugees. In 2007, Prime Minister Al Maliki encouraged the Syrian and Jordanian governments to adopt tighter visa regimes that make it much more difficult for Iraqis to seek asylum in these countries. Earlier this year, the Prime Minister discouraged the German government from resettling Iraqi religious minorities. According to Iraqi, Syrian, and UN sources, the Iraqi leadership disapproves of efforts to provide assistance to the displaced, believes the refugees reinforce perceptions of insecurity and state failure in Iraq, and questions the patriotism of refugees and IDPs who fear return.

The underlying assumptions behind the government's aggressive returns campaign appears to be that circumstances in Iraq have changed and that refugees can now avail themselves of national protection.

However, UNHCR, the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq, and the U.S. State Department Senior Coordinator for Iraqi Refugee Issues have affirmed that refugees continue to require international protection, given ongoing violence and political instability in Iraq.

While violence in Iraq has dropped markedly since summer 2007, the UN describes Iraq today as “fertile ground” for continuous human rights violations, with the absence of rule of law and impunity for violators compounding the problem. According to the UN and the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, religious and ethnic minorities in particular remain targets for extreme violence. Of equal concern, the UN reports that violence and threats against women, intended to force them to adhere to certain cultural and religious norms, are a more serious problem today than ever before.

The ongoing need for international protection of refugees is most clearly illustrated by the persecution that some refugees and IDPs have experienced when they have attempted return. Internally displaced Iraqis are returning home at a slow but increasing pace. UNHCR believes 39,000 returns took place in September 2008, primarily IDPs moving within Baghdad governorate. Both the pull factor of improved security and push factors related to cost of living and impoverishment appear to be behind the return movement. For each of the past eight months, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) has reported on returns that led to secondary displacement and persecution. In Baghdad, in November alone, the IOM reported that three women were killed in their home two days after returning, six returnee families were killed in the Dora neighborhood, and a man was killed while assessing the security in his neighborhood.

Polling data also suggest that many displaced Iraqis do not feel safe in their original areas. Eighty percent of IDPs displaced within their governorate have said they are interested in eventually returning to their original location, but only half of IDPs who fled to different governorates expressed interest in returning to their original area. No comparable data exist for refugees, because most questioned by UNHCR state they have no plans to return. In an ABC/BBC poll taken in February

2008, 60 percent of Iraqis interviewed said their freedom to live where they wished without persecution was quite bad or very bad. The Iraqi government must provide assistance to IDPs and to refugees who do not feel safe in their areas of origin.

United States Policy

Even as Iraq has been the focus of U.S. policy in the Middle East, the violent displacement of millions of Iraqis has been dealt with in an *ad hoc* manner and barely acknowledged by the Secretary of State and the President. This failure to take responsibility for a key human consequence of the war in Iraq has contributed to negative perceptions of the United States in the region. The new administration should signal its commitment to helping Iraq and its neighbors recover from the long-term consequences of the war by appointing a White House Coordinator for Iraqi refugees, as Vice President-elect Joe Biden and Senator Edward Kennedy have recommended. In major Iraq speeches, President-elect Obama should affirm U.S. commitment to assisting displaced Iraqis.

President Bush's fiscal year 2008 and 2009 budget requests for international affairs included no dedicated funding for assistance to Iraqi refugees and did not increase the funding level of the global Migration and Refugee Assistance (MRA) account. Congress responded by appropriating an additional \$500 million for emergency refugee assistance in FY 2008 and \$350 million in bridge funding for FY 2009. As a result of these congressional interventions, U.S. humanitarian assistance for Iraqi refugees in FY 2008 was strong—almost \$400 million.

The new administration must work with Congress to ensure additional supplemental funding is made available in FY 2009 as needed, and should include funding for Iraqi refugee and IDP assistance in the international affairs budget for FY 2010, increasing the overall request for the MRA account to ensure that assistance for Iraqis does not undercut important programs in Africa and Asia. Funding should also be increased for the International Disaster and Famine Assistance (IDFA) account, which funds overseas aid to IDPs.

The U.S. refugee admissions program increased resettlement of vulnerable Iraqi refugees from 1,608 in FY 2007 to 13,823 in FY 2008. With broad bipartisan support, Congress also established a refugee processing program inside Iraq and a special immigrant visa (SIV) program for Iraqis persecuted due to work with the U.S. government, U.S. military, or U.S. government contractors. The new administration should increase resettlement of particularly vulnerable refugees, establishing a two-year target of resettling 60,000 Iraqis, and encouraging other countries to resettle an additional 25,000. This would provide resettlement within two years to all 85,000 refugees in immediate need of resettlement according to UN estimates. Resettling Palestinian refugees from Iraq should be a priority, along with full implementation of the SIV and in-country processing programs.

The United States has a special obligation to ensure that durable solutions—voluntary repatriation to Iraq, local integration, or third-country resettlement—are available to displaced Iraqis. The Bush administration has maintained that repatriation to Iraq will be the solution for the vast majority of refugees, and that when security in Iraq improves refugees will return. The new administration should take a more nuanced approach to durable solutions, working with UNHCR to understand which groups of refugees are most interested in eventual repatriation. For some groups, such as religious minorities and households headed by women, voluntary repatriation will be extremely difficult even if security continues to improve. For example, the leader of the Mandaean religious community has said he sees no possible future for his people in Iraq due to the extreme persecution Madaeans have experienced there. Individual Madaeans interviewed by Human Rights First have made the same assertion. Refugee women interviewed by Human Rights First in Syria had survived sexual and gender based violence and described limits on their freedom to work and to dress as they chose in Iraq. Honor crimes and trafficking pose additional threats, particularly for women who lack supportive family networks. Third-country resettlement is an important durable solution for these groups. If resettlement is carried out thoughtfully with the support of refugee host governments, it could help the United

States push for a third durable solution: local integration for a residual population of Iraqi refugees in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Egypt. At present, discussion of local integration with refugee host governments is likely to be counterproductive; however, the State Department should make increasing integration prospects a long-term goal.

Finally, as responsibility and authority are transitioned to the Iraqi government, the United States must pressure the Prime Minister and others to respect the rights of refugees, IDPs, and returnees and to abandon their efforts to pressure Iraqis to return.

Conclusion

The Obama administration should assume a leadership role in developing and implementing a comprehensive plan to respond to the Iraqi displacement crisis. By improving diplomatic relations in the region, reaching out to the international community, and putting pressure on the Iraqi government to offer its own funds in support of its people, the United States can use its political leverage to engage other countries in sharing this burden.

Such an effort will help hundreds of thousands of Iraqi families preserve their future—and their country's future—and will help rehabilitate the U.S. reputation in the region.

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Summary

Human Rights First recommends that the new administration adopt a comprehensive international approach to deal with the Iraqi refugee crisis. This approach should include the following four strategies:

1) INTEGRATE REFUGEE AND IDP PROTECTION AND ASSISTANCE INTO THE BENCHMARKS FOR POLITICAL PROGRESS IN IRAQ.

- Establish “Refugee Benchmarks” including respect for the principle of voluntary return and assistance targets. If the Iraqi government does not change its policies and practices in order to meet these benchmarks, the United States should shift its focus away from building the capacity of the Iraqi Ministry of Displacement and Migration and instead direct assistance to nongovernmental organizations and international organizations working most closely with refugees and IDPs.

2) PROVIDE HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE TO IRAQI REFUGEES—AND INCREASE ITS IMPACT.

- Build assistance for Iraqi refugees into the President’s FY 2010 budget. Request at least \$1.44 billion in funding for the Migration and Refugee Assistance (MRA) account, and increase funding for the International Disaster and Famine Assistance (IDFA) account.
- Within the first 100 days of the new administration, secure additional funding for Iraqi refugee resettlement and overseas assistance for FY 2009.

- Over several years, fulfill the campaign commitment to provide \$2 billion in aid for Iraqi refugees in neighboring countries and for displaced Iraqis inside Iraq, bilaterally or through UN appeals.
- Take steps to ensure accountability and coordination in the programming and distribution of aid funds to UN agencies, NGOs, and host governments.
- Conduct a review of existing State Department and USAID-funded humanitarian assistance and development programs that target refugees and IDPs, to assess aid effectiveness and gaps in programming. Note also an anticipated Government Accountability Office report on refugee assistance.
- Work with UN agencies, international organizations, and NGOs to develop longer-term goals and multi-year humanitarian assistance and development programs for displaced Iraqis.
- Develop a long-term strategy, in coordination with the UN, international NGOs, and local NGOs, to advocate for more-secure legal residence rights and some form of work authorization for displaced Iraqis in countries of first asylum.
- Keep diplomatic channels with Syria open to ensure that necessary aid reaches Iraqi refugees, contingent on Syria’s continued willingness to work with international NGOs, to allow audits, and to improve transparency.
- Press the government of Jordan to improve transparency with regards to the funding it receives from the UN for the education and health sectors. In general, press the government of Jordan to improve information-sharing practices.
- Press the government of Iraq to immediately provide at least \$100 million in humanitarian aid to Syria and Jordan, bilaterally or through UN appeals.
- Apply diplomatic pressure on donor countries and the Gulf States, regardless of their position on the war in Iraq, to provide aid for Iraqi refugees and IDPs, bilaterally or through UN appeals.

3) LEAD RESETTLEMENT OF IRAQI REFUGEES.

- Resettle Iraqis who have risked their lives by working for the U.S. military, government, contractors, or U.S.-based nongovernmental and media organizations, and who have been targeted as a result, and their families.
- Lead an international effort to resettle—within two years—the 85,000 Iraqi refugees whom the UNHCR has identified as extremely vulnerable, in keeping with our historic role as a nation that protects refugees.
- Increase resettlement of Palestinian refugees from Iraq trapped in border camps and eliminate a duplicative DHS pre-screening requirement for this group.
- Appoint a new Senior Advisor to the Secretary of Homeland Security for Iraqi refugee issues who does not have collateral duties.
- Increase funding, which is currently inadequate, for assistance to refugees after they have arrived in the United States through the Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement.
- Publicly state that though individual refugees may choose to return and will need assistance, Iraq does not meet the conditions necessary for general repatriation of refugees; this echoes the assertions of UNHCR. Press other refugee-receiving countries to adopt the same position.

4) APPOINT A WHITE HOUSE COORDINATOR FOR IRAQI REFUGEES.

- Appoint a White House Coordinator for Iraqi Refugees with the rank of Ambassador-at-large, as proposed by Senators Kennedy, Biden, and Clinton. Such a position was first proposed by Senators Kennedy, Biden, and Clinton. The coordinator should be responsible for ensuring that plans to assist Iraqi refugees and to develop long-term solutions are integrated into the new administration's broader policy and strategy in Iraq and implemented across all of the relevant federal agencies.

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Details

1) INTEGRATE REFUGEE AND IDP PROTECTION AND ASSISTANCE INTO THE BENCHMARKS FOR POLITICAL PROGRESS IN IRAQ.

Forced migration was a result—and arguably one primary objective—of the communal violence that overwhelmed Iraq in 2006 and 2007. Complex patterns of persecution and violence in Iraq led to increasing homogenization in neighborhoods, cities, governorates, and the country as a whole, and caused many who supported the Coalition efforts to flee in search of refuge.

Some refugees fled the generalized violence of war in Iraq but most experienced targeted persecution. Although Iraqis of all backgrounds have experienced persecution and displacement, a disproportionate number of Iraqi refugees identify as Sunni Muslim or come from Iraq's smaller religious and ethnic minority groups: Chaldaean and Assyrian Christians, Mandaeans, Yazidis, Turkmen, Shabaks, and others. Religious minorities comprise 18 to 20 percent of UN-registered refugees but were just 3 to 4 percent of the total Iraqi population; 55 percent of UN-registered Iraqi refugees identify as Sunni Muslim. Professionals and secular-leaning Iraqis of all religious backgrounds may also be overrepresented among the refugee population. The makeup of the internally displaced population appears to more closely reflect the overall Iraqi population, although the smaller religious minorities are again overrepresented.

While terrorist groups, insurgents, and other non-state actors have been responsible for considerable generalized and targeted violence, the Iraqi government

has also played a role. As the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom reported in 2007, some Iraqi government institutions—in particular the local police, national police, Ministry of Interior, and Ministry of Health—were directly responsible for extrajudicial killings, torture, and persecution. This violence especially affected Sunni Muslims, who were profiled as insurgents or targeted outright for their religious beliefs. According to the Commission, Shi'a militias linked to prominent political parties carried out what amounted to a systematic campaign of displacement and sectarian cleansing, with smaller religious minority groups caught in the middle of the sectarian battles. While Western media reports tend to describe government institutions and political parties as “infiltrated” by militias, many refugees interviewed by Human Rights First perceive the militias as tools employed by political parties to encourage violence and displacement for political benefit.

As security has improved in Iraq and the central government attempts to exert its authority over the country, it has launched a campaign to encourage refugees and IDPs to return. Human Rights First views the way this campaign has been carried out as unhelpful and potentially harmful for refugees and IDPs in the long term. Much of the discussion surrounding the government's return policy has focused on the issue of property disputes. Developing a system to resolve property disputes, while important, does not address the many other underlying conditions in Iraq that could make returns impermanent at best and a source of further instability at worst. These conditions include but are not limited to a general climate of lawlessness and impunity, the continued perception of sectarian loyalty in the government, the lack of protection for minority groups, the presence of militias, and the conflict over Kirkuk and disputed territories.

In 2008, the current Iraqi government formally adopted a national policy on displacement drafted with the assistance of the UN Assistance Mission to Iraq. The policy lays out the rights of the internally displaced and of refugees inside Iraq, and comports with the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement and international refugee law. However, policy has not always translated to practice. For example, in August

2008, the IOM said that militias were illegally selling houses that belonged to displaced persons in Baghdad, Diyala, Kirkuk, and Ninewa, reportedly with the support of Iraqi security forces.

Some Iraqi refugees believe that Iraqi government efforts to encourage the return of refugees have a sectarian element to them. Refugees in the region have pointed out to Human Rights First that though the government was supposed to open two reception centers for returning refugees and IDPs, one in predominantly Shi'a east Baghdad and the other in predominantly Sunni west Baghdad, only the east Baghdad center has opened. UNHCR confirmed this information. Other refugees believed that the return efforts and the eviction plan were connected to the provincial elections.

In the context of ongoing violence, compounded by decades of politically motivated displacement and mistrust of central government authority, Iraqi refugees understandably have little faith that their government will provide protection, or even accurate security information, to them. If return is ever to be a viable long-term solution, the government of Iraq must demonstrate its concern for the welfare of displaced Iraqi populations, a willingness to provide humanitarian assistance and accurate information about security, and respect for the principle of voluntary return. The proposed White House Coordinator for Iraqi Refugees (described in Recommendation 4) and the U.S. ambassador in Baghdad should work to integrate efforts to assist IDPs and refugees into broader efforts to address minority protection, political participation, and ethnic and sectarian tensions in Iraq.

Recommendation:

- Establish “Refugee Benchmarks” including respect for the principle of voluntary return and assistance targets. If the Iraqi government does not change its policies and practices in order to meet these benchmarks, the United States should shift its focus away from building the capacity of the Iraqi Ministry of Displacement and Migration and instead direct assistance to nongovernmental organizations and

international organizations working most closely with refugees and IDPs.

Benchmarks should include:

- Prime Minister Al Maliki publicly acknowledges that refugee and IDP returns should be strictly voluntary;
- Iraqi embassies in Syria, Jordan, and other countries provide accurate information about security and assistance programs to refugees who inquire about return;
- The government of Iraq spends at least \$150 million of its own funds on IDP assistance, and the Ministry of Displacement and Migration develops a mechanism for distributing aid equitably to different confessional and ethnic groups;
- The government of Iraq provides at least \$100 million to assist refugees in Jordan and Syria;
- The government of Iraq discusses with Jordan and Syria more flexible visa and border policies that would allow “go and see” trips for refugees interested in return but not yet confident of their safety;
- With the assistance of UNHCR and UNAMI, the government of Iraq develops and implements a plan allowing IDPs and refugees to vote in the scheduled 2009 national elections;
- Iraqi security forces—national police, army, local police, and Sahwa groups—do not engage in or profit from the sale of homes belonging to displaced Iraqis. This benchmark is particularly important as these security forces implement Prime Minister Al Maliki’s order to evict squatters; and
- The government of Iraq establishes and begins to implement a procedure to help displaced Iraqis to document their property claims. In the long term, restitution for lost property should not be conditioned on return to Iraq.

2) PROVIDE HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE TO IRAQI REFUGEES—AND INCREASE ITS IMPACT.

Hundreds of thousands of displaced Iraqis are living in difficult circumstances in urban centers in Jordan, Syria, Egypt, and Lebanon. The life savings of many middle- and lower-income Iraqis are rapidly disappearing, exhausted by months or years of displacement. UNHCR food provisions become increasingly necessary as families cannot afford to buy food independently. Children are forced to forgo education for employment in the informal economy; on a recent mission to Syria, Human Rights First researchers interviewed several mothers whose teenage sons worked 60- or 70-hour weeks in restaurants to support their extended families. Iraqis who work illegally are vulnerable to exploitation or other employer abuse. Some Iraqi women have been forced to turn to prostitution in order to survive. Compounding these dire circumstances—and creating pressure on host governments—are the global economic crisis, a two-year drought, and dramatic increases in food and fuel prices in the region.

In the past year, the United States has significantly improved its funding of humanitarian aid appeals for Iraqi refugees and IDPs—it contributed \$398 million in FY 2008, up from just \$171 million in FY 2007. The United States must continue this commitment in the coming years, and apply diplomatic pressure on other donor countries, as well as on the government of Iraq, to increase their own aid levels to meet the serious needs of displaced Iraqis. Further, the United States has failed to seriously engage on diplomatic levels with countries in the region to address structural issues that prevent aid from reaching many who greatly need it. Without U.S. leadership on these humanitarian efforts, displaced Iraqis will languish, increasingly desperate, undermining U.S. moral authority and contributing to instability in the region.

Recommendations:

- **Build assistance for Iraqi refugees into the President's FY 2010 budget. Request at least \$1.44 billion in funding for the Migration and Refugee Assistance (MRA) account, and increase funding for the International Disaster and Famine Assistance (IDFA) account.**

For the past several years, the Presidential budget request for the MRA account, which funds the overseas assistance and refugee resettlement programs of the State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration, has remained constant at around \$800 million. With MRA funded at this level, PRM's base budget for Near East assistance is only about \$100 million. In FY 2008, PRM received significant emergency supplemental MRA appropriations from Congress for Iraqi and other refugee emergencies. As a result, PRM was able to increase overseas assistance to the Near East to almost \$500 million, and it ended the year with a total budget of \$1.44 billion. Given the increasing needs of Iraqi refugees, as well as the importance of PRM's Africa program, the 2010 budget request for MRA should at the very least match PRM's 2008 obligations.

- **Within the first 100 days of the new administration, secure additional funding for Iraqi refugee resettlement and overseas assistance for FY 2009.**

PRM currently has two main sources of funding in FY 2009—a \$823 million base budget (the MRA funding level established by the Continuing Resolution) and \$350 billion in supplemental bridge funding. The new administration should thank Congress for providing the bridge funding and ask appropriators to increase the CR level or provide further supplemental MRA funding to ensure that PRM receives at least the FY 2008 level of \$1.44 billion for FY 2009.

- **Over several years, fulfill the campaign commitment to provide \$2 billion in aid for Iraqi refugees in neighboring countries and for**

displaced Iraqis inside Iraq, bilaterally or through UN appeals.

- Fund up to 50 percent of UN appeals relating to displaced Iraqis, including the 2009 Iraq Consolidated Appeal; and
 - Ensure that adequate funding is available to meet the education needs of displaced Iraqi children, through NGOs that provide informal and non-formal education, through UNICEF, through education ministries of host governments, and through private or community-based schools.
- **Take steps to ensure accountability and coordination in the programming and distribution of aid funds to UN agencies, NGOs, and host governments.**
 - **Conduct a review of existing State Department and USAID-funded humanitarian assistance and development programs that target refugees and IDPs, to assess aid effectiveness and gaps in programming. Note also an anticipated Government Accountability Office report on refugee assistance.**
 - **Work with UN agencies, international organizations, and NGOs to develop longer-term goals and multi-year humanitarian assistance and development programs for displaced Iraqis.**
 - **Develop a long-term strategy, in coordination with the UN, international NGOs, and local NGOs, to advocate for more-secure legal residence rights and some form of work authorization for displaced Iraqis in countries of first asylum.**
 - Press for UN and NGO programming in the short term to address housing insecurity and livelihoods for refugees; and
 - Make any direct bilateral assistance to host countries contingent on clear steps toward residence rights and work authorization for refugees.

- **Keep diplomatic channels with Syria open to ensure that necessary aid reaches Iraqi refugees, contingent on Syria's continued willingness to work with international NGOs, to allow audits, and to improve transparency.**
- **Press the government of Jordan to improve transparency with regards to the funding it receives from the UN for the education and health sectors. In general, press the government of Jordan to improve information-sharing practices.**
- **Press the government of Iraq to immediately provide at least \$100 million in humanitarian aid to Syria and Jordan, bilaterally or through UN appeals.**
- **Apply diplomatic pressure on donor countries and the Gulf States, regardless of their position on the war in Iraq, to provide aid for Iraqi refugees and IDPs, bilaterally or through UN appeals.**

In FY 2008, the U.S. State Department funded 65 percent of UNHCR's Iraqi refugee appeals; generally the United States funds only up to 30 percent of UNHCR appeals. Assistance from other countries has been extremely minimal. PRM believes that potential donor countries have refused to contribute to UN Iraqi refugee appeals to send a message to the United States regarding responsibility for the war in Iraq and to signal disapproval of U.S. policy in the region. The new administration will be better positioned to convince other states to assist Iraqi refugees because of the distance it will have from President Bush's Iraq policy.

3) LEAD RESETTLEMENT OF IRAQI REFUGEES.

Though the long-term durable solution for most Iraqi refugees will be return to Iraq, there are tens of thousands of Iraqis who will never be able to go back to their country, and others who live in such difficult present circumstances that they need immediate protection. UNHCR has identified 85,000 Iraqi refugees as

extremely vulnerable. These include Iraqis with real and perceived ties to the United States; religious and ethnic minorities, including the Chaldaean and Assyrian Christians, Mandaeans, Yazidis, and Turkmen; refugees from other countries who formerly lived in Iraq, including Palestinians, Sudanese, and Iranians; women, including widows and girls at risk of sexual and gender-based violence, trafficking, and discrimination; children, including orphans and unaccompanied minors; and elderly Iraqis with serious medical needs. Many among these groups need immediate resettlement.

In FY 2006, the United States resettled only 202 Iraqis through the United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP). In FY 2007, that number increased to 1,608, still woefully inadequate. In FY 2008, thanks in large part to bipartisan concern over Iraqi resettlement in Congress and the appointment of State Department Senior Coordinator for Iraqi Refugee Issues Ambassador James Foley, the United States admitted 13,823 Iraqi refugees. The Bush administration announced that the United States will aim to resettle at least 17,000 Iraqis in FY 2009. With a functional resettlement infrastructure finally in place in the region, and the need of the refugees persistent, the new administration can and should increase that number to at least 30,000.

Apart from expanded resettlement, the passage of the Refugee Crisis in Iraq Act in January 2008 marked a significant commitment to U.S.-affiliated Iraqis in danger. Among other important provisions, it provided for 5,000 special immigrant visas (SIVs) each year for five years to Iraqis who worked for the U.S. government, military, or contractors; SIV recipients receive Lawful Permanent Residence status—green cards—in the United States. The United States issued just 870 SIVs in FY 2008 (through August 31, 2008). The new administration should make real the commitment to U.S.-affiliated Iraqis by ensuring that the SIVs are available to all eligible Iraqis in need, and to their families.

Finally, while the State Department was able to increase its funding of overseas refugee assistance in 2008 and to increase refugee arrivals in the United States, funding for post-arrival assistance programs has lagged behind. The rapidly growing Iraqi resettlement program contributed to an overall strain on the resources of

resettlement agencies and the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR, part of the Department of Health and Human Services), while drawing considerable national attention to the program—and its shortcomings. Resettlement agencies estimate that for at least the past ten years, key parts of the ORR budget have not been adjusted to take inflation into account. In addition, the Match Grant program, which helps refugees transition into employment, is currently provided to only about 30 percent of eligible refugees.

Recommendations:

- **Resettle Iraqis who have risked their lives by working for the U.S. military, government, contractors, or U.S.-based nongovernmental and media organizations, and who have been targeted as a result, and their families.**

The U.S. government should fully implement the Refugee Crisis in Iraq Act of the National Defense Authorization Act of 2008, taking all necessary steps to:

- Allocate 5,000 special immigrant visas (SIVs) each year for five years to Iraqis who worked for the United States government, military, or contractors;
- Continue processing inside Iraq for Iraqi refugee and SIV applications. In-country refugee processing capacity should be expanded by increasing staffing levels for the Cairo-based IOM team working on in-country refugee processing. In-country SIV processing capacity should be expanded by increasing the staff of the Senior Coordinator for Refugees and IDPs at Embassy Baghdad;
- Ensure that U.S. contractors in Iraq provide accurate information about SIV and resettlement opportunities to their local staff, and that the State and Defense Departments also begin to make this information widely available; and
- Ensure that refugee and SIV applications are processed expeditiously, without compromising security checks, by requiring government

agencies and contractors to verify employment of their Iraqi staff in a timely manner.

■ **Lead an international effort to resettle—within two years—the 85,000 Iraqi refugees whom the UNHCR has identified as extremely vulnerable, in keeping with our historic role as a nation that protects refugees.**

- In the first 100 days of the new administration, announce a goal to bring to the United States 30,000 Iraqi refugees in FY 2009, and 30,000 in FY 2010—this would mean processing 2,500 Iraqi refugees per month, an achievable target; and
- Urge other traditional resettlement countries (e.g. Canada, Australia, the Netherlands, Norway), emerging resettlement countries (e.g. Brazil, Chile), and the European Union to increase their quotas for Iraqis and resettle the remaining 25,000 extremely vulnerable refugees. An EU council recently announced a voluntary resettlement goal of 10,000 Iraqi refugees.ⁱⁱⁱ

■ **Increase resettlement of Palestinian refugees from Iraq trapped in border camps and eliminate a duplicative DHS pre-screening requirement for this group.**

- Instruct the State Department and DHS to work with UNHCR to produce a group referral for all Palestinian refugees from Iraq living in the extremely unsafe Al-Waleed camp just inside Iraq;
- Eliminate an unnecessary and discriminatory DHS prescreening requirement that increases processing time by several months for Palestinians. Pre-screening is not necessary as a security step, as DHS interviews in person all refugees that have been referred by UNHCR, runs full security checks, and can reject refugees who do not meet security requirements;
- Immediately process those Palestinians for resettlement, as well as the Sudanese refugees

in Iraq, who are already designated of special humanitarian concern to the United States; and

- Initiate a diplomatic effort with the international community to ensure immediate resettlement of the 1,200 Palestinians from Iraq who are stranded in the Al-Hol and Al-Tanf desert camps along the Iraqi-Syrian border in dire and dangerous conditions.

■ **Appoint a new Senior Advisor to the Secretary of Homeland Security for Iraqi refugee issues who does not have collateral duties.**

At present, the DHS Senior Advisor for Iraqi Refugee Issues is also Associate Director of Refugee, Asylum and International Operations for United States Citizenship and Immigration Services.

■ **Increase funding, which is currently inadequate, for assistance to refugees after they have arrived in the United States through the Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement.**

- Increase funding for the Match Grant program so that it reaches a higher percentage of eligible refugees; and
- Consider proposals for inflation recapture for ORR programs that have not had their base funding adjusted for five to ten years.

■ **Publicly state that though individual refugees may choose to return and will need assistance, Iraq does not meet the conditions necessary for general repatriation of refugees; this echoes the assertions of UNHCR. Press other refugee-receiving countries to adopt the same position.**

4) APPOINT A WHITE HOUSE COORDINATOR FOR IRAQI REFUGEES.

President-elect Obama has said that he is committed to ending the war in Iraq responsibly. In the coming years, one of the key challenges the United States will face in Iraq is how to leave while providing a secure future for millions of Iraqi refugees and IDPs. It is not yet clear whether the Iraqi government will prove to be a partner in this effort or an obstacle to it.

Appointing a White House Coordinator for Iraqi Refugees would help the President-elect to signal to the Middle East that he is committed to dealing with the human consequences of the war. Left unaddressed, the refugee crisis may contribute to sectarianism in the region as a whole, and internal displacement will continue to undermine stability in Iraq. The situation is a complex emergency, and strategies to deal with it must be part of the administration's broader strategy for a responsible withdrawal. Taking these steps will require coordination of policies and activities across several U.S. government agencies.

The coordinator should be responsible for ensuring that appropriate policy toward Iraqi refugees is integrated into U.S. strategic and operational plans in Iraq.

There is strong congressional support for a White House Coordinator. Senators Kennedy and Biden proposed the idea of a White House Coordinator in April 2008 and introduced legislation to create the position in June. The bill was cosponsored by Senators Hagel, Smith, Durbin, Casey, and Cardin. Senator Clinton also introduced legislation underscoring the serious challenges posed by the Iraqi displacement crisis and the need to better coordinate policy across government agencies.

Recommendation:

■ **Appoint a White House Coordinator for Iraqi Refugees with the rank of Ambassador-at-large, as proposed by Senators Kennedy, Biden, and Clinton.**

The coordinator's responsibilities should include working with the Department of Defense, the State Department Iraqi refugee coordinator and the DHS Iraqi refugee coordinator, PRM, UNHCR, and Embassy Baghdad to push for a responsible Iraqi government policy on refugees and IDPs. He or she should:

- Advocate with refugee host governments on the issues of residency rights and work authorization, and with donor governments to increase humanitarian assistance and refugee resettlement;

- Ensure that refugee benchmarks are integrated in U.S. military and diplomatic engagement on political progress in Iraq;
- Ensure adequate budget requests and work with Congress to ensure sufficient appropriations;
- Improve coordination among government agencies responsible for refugee processing, assistance, and resettlement, including the State Department, USAID, the Department of Homeland Security, and the Office of Refugee Resettlement of the Department of Health and Human Services;
- Review domestic assistance available to Iraqi refugees;
- Integrate efforts to assist IDPs and refugees into broader efforts to address minority protection, political participation, and ethnic and sectarian tensions in Iraq; and
- Ensure implementation of all of the recommendations in this blueprint.

Conclusion

It is in the strategic interest of the United States to find long-term solutions for displaced Iraqis, to guard against forced or premature return of refugees to Iraq, and to improve the conditions of their lives in countries of first asylum. It is also a moral responsibility that the United States should uphold a result of the war. Securing educational opportunities for children and youth and access to livelihoods for adults are particularly critical.

The international community must ensure that Iraqi refugees in large urban centers in the Middle East can support themselves, live in dignity, and pursue opportunities for a better future. To date, Iraqi refugees have not proved to be “carriers of conflict” as some security experts and refugee host governments feared. But many refugee families are coping with impoverishment, family separation, untreated trauma, lack of opportunity, discrimination, and domestic violence. If these problems are not addressed they could exacerbate tensions in the region and pose security risks.

Finally, as refugees are some of the primary victims of the sectarian and communal violence that destabilized Iraq in 2006 and 2007, they should be included in long-term efforts promoting reconciliation. Refugees’ fears must be dealt with seriously and their rights and choices must be respected.

i There is disagreement among humanitarian NGOs, UN agencies, and the governments of Jordan and Syria over the likely numbers of Iraqi refugees living in these two countries. The Jordanian government has said that half a million Iraqi refugees live in Jordan, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Syria says that 1.2 million have sought refuge there. However, Syria and Jordan have allowed few statistically significant population surveys, and they have limited UNHCR's outreach to unregistered Iraqis. To date, UNHCR has registered 54,000 Iraqi refugees in Jordan and 220,000 Iraqi refugees in Syria. It is challenging to evaluate the different estimates of refugee numbers; Human Rights First currently finds lower estimates that place the total number of Iraqi refugees at around 1 million to be more credible.

UNHCR fears that pressing host governments about their estimates could jeopardize its ability to protect refugees in Syria and Jordan. Conversely, other international NGOs suggest that lower numbers may in the long term be used to pressure host governments to extend work rights to Iraqi refugees. The issue of refugee numbers will have to be dealt with carefully by the new administration.

ii The UN refugee agency, UNHCR, recognizes both groups as refugees under its mandate, either according to the 1951 Refugee Convention or under the expanded definition as persons fleeing armed conflict.

iii Their conclusions are available here:

http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/jha/104360.pdf



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