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IRAQI REFUGEES IN EGYPT

Howaida Roman

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Iraqi Refugees in Egypt

HOWAIDA ROMAN

National Center for Social Research, Cairo, Egypt

CARIM

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European University Institute
Badia Fiesolana
I – 50014 San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)
Italy

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CARIM

The Euro-Mediterranean Consortium for Applied Research on International Migration (CARIM) was created in February 2004 and has been financed by the European Commission. Until January 2007, it referred to part C - “*cooperation related to the social integration of immigrants issue, migration and free circulation of persons*” of the MEDA programme, i.e. the main financial instrument of the European Union to establish the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. Since February 2007, CARIM has been funded as part of the AENEAS programme for technical and financial assistance to third countries in the areas of migration and asylum. The latter programme establishes a link between the external objectives of the European Union’s migration policy and its development policy. AENEAS aims at providing third countries with the assistance necessary to achieve, at different levels, a better management of migrant flows.

Within this framework, CARIM aims, in an academic perspective, to observe, analyse, and predict migration in the North African and the Eastern Mediterranean Region (hereafter Region).

CARIM is composed of a coordinating unit established at the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies (RSCAS) of the European University Institute (EUI, Florence), and a network of scientific correspondents based in the 12 countries observed by CARIM: Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey and, since February 2007, also Libya and Mauritania. All are studied as origin, transit and immigration countries. External experts from the European Union and countries of the Region also contribute to CARIM activities.

The CARIM carries out the following activities:

- Mediterranean migration database;
- Research and publications;
- Meetings of academics;
- Meetings between experts and policy makers;
- Early warning system.

The activities of CARIM cover three aspects of international migration in the Region: economic and demographic, legal, and socio-political.

Results of the above activities are made available for public consultation through the website of the project: www.carim.org

For more information:

Euro-Mediterranean Consortium for Applied Research on International Migration
Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies (EUI)

Convento

Via delle Fontanelle 19

50014 S. Domenico di Fiesole

Italy

Tel: +39 055 46 85 878

Fax: + 39 055 46 85 762

Email: carim@eui.eu

Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies

<http://www.eui.eu/RSCAS/>

Abstract

In the last two decades, Egypt has become host to many different kinds of migrants from both North and South. In the 1990s, Egypt witnessed a massive inflow from Africa, while the Iraqi migration began after the American-led invasion in 2003.

This paper looks at the situation of Iraqi refugees in Egypt, and tackles; first, the causes of Iraqi migration in Egypt and trends within that migration; second, the living conditions of Iraqis in Egypt including the question of access to services and rights; third, the problems that Iraqis experience there; fourth, the way that civil society and international assistance deal with Iraqi refugees. Finally, the paper proposes some recommendations that would improve the situation of Iraqi refugees.

Résumé

Au cours des deux dernières décennies, l’Egypte a accueilli des flux migratoires divers provenant du nord et du sud. L’on note particulièrement les flux migratoires provenant de l’Afrique pendant les années 90 suivis par l’arrivée des réfugiés irakiens suite à l’invasion américaine de l’Irak en 2003.

Ce papier met en exergue la situation des réfugiés irakiens en Egypte et analyse les dynamiques, causes et tendances de cette immigration.

Il met également en lumière les conditions de vie des réfugiés irakiens et les problèmes que ces derniers affrontent en Egypte. En outre, le papier analyse comment la société civile égyptienne et les organisations internationales traitent de la question des réfugiés irakiens en Egypte. Finalement, quelques recommandations fondamentales qui permettraient d’assurer une meilleure gestion du problème et d’améliorer la situation des réfugiés irakiens sont proposées.

Introduction

Over two million Iraqi refugees are supposed to have fled their country since the American-led invasion that overthrew the regime of Saddam Hussein. Although the largest concentrations are in Syria and Jordan, many have settled in Egypt. Estimates, not proper censuses, have been produced and sources are not always clear, nor scientifically validated.¹ Jordan and Syria, who are not signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention, consider Iraqis *guests* rather than refugees fleeing violence. Considering them as guests has meant they are bound to depart for another country or to return to their homeland eventually. By comparison, other countries with common borders with Iraq such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Turkey and Iran have allowed very few Iraqis in.² The influx of Iraqis into neighboring countries has created the largest refugee population in the region after the Palestinian refugees.

The biggest difficulty in studying Iraqis in Egypt is the contradiction in estimates and figures. The criteria for coming up with estimates are different. There is a mix between refugees and migrants, in other words, between those that request formally the refugee status and those that do not formally request refuge. Another difficulty is the lack of research and studies tackling the question, in comparison to the many studies that focused on different African nationalities. The available materials on Iraqis refugees in Egypt are confined to very few studies, newspaper articles, information websites and other not strictly academic sources...One empirical study has recently been issued by the Center for Migration and Refugees Studies (CMRS) in collaboration with the Information and Decision Support Center (Egyptian Cabinet) IDSC, entitled "Iraqis in Egypt, A Statistical Survey in 2008". This study is considered the most scientific one on Iraqis in Egypt.³

Therefore, this paper aims to rebuild and analyze the knowledge available as raw materials in an integrated and scientific form. In other words, it seeks to identify the profile of Iraqi refugees by looking at:

- The causes of Iraqi migration to Egypt;
- The forms of Iraqi movements to Egypt;
- The experiences of Iraqi in Egypt, including their access to basic services;
- The role of Egyptian non-governmental organizations in helping and supporting Iraqi refugees;
- International assistance for Iraqis in Egypt.

Causes of Iraqi Migration to Egypt

Iraq became a country of mass emigration in the early 1990s. Public infrastructure in Iraq, heavily damaged during the 1991 Gulf war, has been disintegrating ever since through years of neglect, due to a shortage of spare parts for maintenance and repair, and due too to a shortage of funds to pay staff salaries. Water and sanitation facilities have suffered greatly for more than a decade due to serious energy shortages caused by damage to the electricity grid. Even prior to the latest conflict, sixteen million Iraqis were dependent on food aid under the UN Oil for Food Programme.⁴ So, the rates of chronic malnutrition in Iraq were worrying: 11 percent in the North and 23 percent in the Centre and South of the country.

¹ Philippe Fargues & Saeed El Masry, "Iraqis in Egypt, A Statistical Survey in 2008", www.aucegypt.edu/ResearchatAUC/rc/cmrs/pages/default.aspx.

² See FMO Research Guide, available at www.forcedmigration.org/guides/fmo015

³ See Fargues and El Masry, "Iraqis in Egypt, A Statistical Survey in 2008", op.cit.

⁴ FMO Research Guide, available at www.forcedmigration.org/guides/fmo015.

Since the imposition of sanctions, Iraqi healthcare has suffered from a lack of equipment and a lack of the drugs needed to treat acute and chronic illnesses. Healthcare has also become increasingly centralized – the Oil for Food Programme put the Iraqi government in control of the distribution of humanitarian supplies – and less sensitive to the specific needs of different population groups.

Operation Iraqi Freedom compounded the shortfalls of the already weak infrastructure that the Iraqi people had endured since sanctions were imposed. With a devastated infrastructure, conflict and civil disorder undermining relief and reconstruction efforts, Iraqis face immediate threats to their health, nutrition, livelihoods and security. In the long term, establishing social and economic justice and security will be essential if the Iraqi people can resume a sense of normalcy and peace and those that want to return can do so. The security vacuum that has characterized post-war Iraq to date has led to a breakdown in essential services including electricity, safe water and shortages in medical supplies and access to treatment facilities.

Apart from the damage to physical infrastructure, the professional class has been targeted leaving a dire shortage of doctors and medical specialists as well as teachers and university staff. According to the Brookings Institution out of 34,000 doctors: 12,000 have left Iraq, 250 have been kidnapped, and 200 killed since 2003.⁵

Up to 8 million people are classified as being vulnerable, according to an estimate based on information gathered by the Iraq UN country team: 2 million are estimated to be refugees/asylum seekers, nearly 2 million are estimated to be internally displaced persons (IDPs), and 4 million are estimated to be acutely vulnerable due to food insecurity.

There has been a severe decline in living standards and a massive increase in the unemployment rate – some estimates put the figure as high as 60 percent, 54 percent of the population is living on less than 1 US dollar a day and 15 percent of these on less than half a US dollar a day. Acute malnutrition rose from 4.4 percent in 2003 to 9 percent in 2005.

The World Food Programme's (WFP) most recent reckoning of food insecurity in Iraq, released in May 2006, before inter-communal violence and humanitarian access became markedly worse, estimated that over 4 million Iraqis were already food insecure and an additional 8.3 million people, or nearly 32 percent of the population, were at risk if not provided with a daily ration under the public-distribution system. This is an increase from the estimated 2.6 million which were found to be extremely poor in WFP's 2004 Baseline survey. Many Iraqis are forced to sell their Public Distribution System (PDS) food rations to buy fresh food, medicine or to pay for house rental. Research undertaken inside Iraq in November and December 2006 suggested that problems with PDS were serious and increasingly widespread, particularly in the central governorates. As NCCI explains, the combination of military operations, sectarian and political violence, criminality and lawlessness, has devastating humanitarian consequences for Iraq's civilians in terms of death, injury, illness, displacement, denial of fundamental human rights, destruction of homes, vital facilities and infrastructure, as well as for humanitarian actors seeking to meet their needs in terms of a decrease in available resources, ability to respond in a timely manner, and to access populations in need.⁶

According to the UNAMI Human Rights Report covering January to March 2007 attacks against religious and ethnic minorities continued unabated in most areas of Iraq, prompting sections of these communities to seek ways to leave the country. Religious minorities in Iraq are regular victims of discrimination, harassment and persecution, with incidents ranging from intimidation to murder. Christians are increasingly experiencing discrimination in the labour market and the (basic) social services, and are fearful of being attacked by Islamic militias. Of the 1.5 million Assyrians living in Iraq before 2003, half have left the country and the remaining 750,000 are trying to move to safer

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

areas. Iraqi Yazids, numbering some 550,000 are also facing violent assaults and threats, as are Iraq's Turkomans and Kurds. At the start of 2007, Iraq came after Somalia in the list of countries whose minorities find themselves most at risk of persecution and even mass killing.⁷

While civilian casualties are often concentrated in and around Baghdad, violence is common across many of the southern and central governorates. Estimates of deaths stemming directly or indirectly from the US-led invasion range from 67,000 to 655,000, the majority being young men. In 2006, an average of 94 civilians were killed violently in Iraq each day. According to Iraq's Health Minister, for every person killed about three have been wounded.⁸

Since the beginning of the conflict, the security situation has continued to deteriorate and millions of Iraqis are now displaced. As the conflict in Iraq is now aggravated by religious and ethnic terrorism, entire communities are being forced to leave their homes for fear of persecution.⁹

According to a survey on Iraqi refugees in Egypt, carried out by CMRS at the American University in Cairo in collaboration with Government Information and Decision Support Center (IDSC) and funded by the Ford Foundation, the reasons that prompted Iraqis to leave Iraq are as follows: 84% security concerns, 61% direct threats to their safety and 4% economic hardships.¹⁰

In conclusion, the causes pushing Iraqis to flee Iraq could be summarized in two main categories: the need for security, and the search for basic rights such as work, education, health care

Trends of Iraqi Movements to Egypt

Escaping death threats, torture, kidnappings and military attacks, thousands of Iraqis fled to Egypt and settled in the Cairo suburbs, Alexandria and smaller governorates. The handful of Iraqi refugees that had already been arriving in Egypt since 2001 quickly turned to a flood following the Samarra bombings in February 2006. Early arrivals, immediately following Saddam's fall, were mostly Sunni, but now include significant numbers of Iraqi Shi'ites and Christians. Some traveled via Jordan and Syria, moving on in the expectation that the cost of living in Egypt would be lower. All hoped that Egypt would simply be a transit stop. Human traffickers have begun exploiting their desperation, allegedly charging \$14,000 per person to reach Europe.

UNHCR and existing refugee NGOs in Egypt were ill prepared for the unexpected influx of Iraqi refugees.¹¹ UNHCR has reported that the size of Iraqi migration in 2004 and 2005 represented 70% of overall migration and that it threatened the social coherence of Iraqi society. Moreover, children have represented a significant percentage, perhaps 48% of all Iraqi migrants.¹²

The UN estimates that more than two million Iraqis are now refugees in neighboring countries and more than 1.9 million have fled for safer areas within Iraq. Of these internally displaced people IDPs, more than 730,000 have fled since the Samarra Shrine bombing in February 2006, which intensified sectarian violence.¹³

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Refugee International, "Iraq and Egypt: February Mission to Assess Displacement of Iraqis", February 2001, www.refugeesinternational.org/category/country/iraq?page=4.

¹⁰ See *Daily News* Egypt, 18.11.2008

¹¹ See Lynn Yoshikawa, "Iraqi Refugees in Egypt", FMR 29, available at <http://www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR29/54.pdf>.

¹² See *Daily News* Egypt, 18.11.2008

¹³ Refugee International. "Time to Acknowledge and Address the Displacement Crisis", February 2007, available at www.refugeesinternational.org.

Wary of the massive influx experienced in Syria and Jordan, the Egyptian authorities have reportedly closed their door to new Iraqis and have not granted those Iraqis who made it to Egypt any official status or any access to social services. Iraqis who have made their way to Egypt have arrived on one-month tourist visas that they extend in Cairo for additional months.

During 2006 it became more difficult for Iraqis to obtain Egyptian visas through travel agencies in Baghdad, forcing Iraqis to go to Jordan or Syria. Unlike Syria and Jordan, Egypt is a signatory to the 1951 convention relating to the status of refugees, but it signed the convention with reservations on provisions granting refugees the right to work and access to public services. Iraqis are able to obtain asylum seeker's cards from the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Many Iraqis in Egypt have run out of savings, are in an irregular situation, and now fear having to return to Iraq. Although very few NGOs provide legal aid and offer meager financial assistance, Iraqis are mostly left to fend for themselves, just as in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon.¹⁴

The Egyptian authorities routinely renewed tourist visas for Iraqi nationals in Egypt until last 2006. The Egyptian Ministry of Interior is now becoming stricter in renewing tourist visas, telling Iraqis that if they wish to remain in Egypt they should register with UNHCR-Cairo. In early January 2007, the Egyptian authorities began imposing highly restrictive new procedures for Iraqis seeking entry.

Previously, Iraqis still in Iraq could obtain a tourist visa by giving their passports to a travel agent in Baghdad who would take the passports to the Egyptian consulates in Damascus or Amman for processing. Now, however, the Egyptian authorities are requiring face to face interviews by at least one family member at their consulates, and the numbers are dropping because Iraqis cannot get to Syria or Jordan. There is no Egyptian diplomatic post in Baghdad. The result of the new procedures has meant a significant drop in new Iraqi arrivals as well as split families.¹⁵ It is worth mentioning that residence can be granted to Iraqis that have investments in Egypt, estimated at 50,000 US Dollars.¹⁶

The estimates of the number of Iraqis in Egypt are debatable and vary according to various sources. While the Egyptian Foreign Ministry estimated in April 2008 that there are 100,000 to 150,000 Iraqi refugees of all ages living in Egypt and that around 11,000 had registered with UNHCR as asylum seekers and refugees.¹⁷ The gap between these two figures has revealed poor UNCHR coverage.¹⁸ Given the large numbers of people involved, and the comparatively few that have applied for refugee status, this means that between 60,000 and 140,000 Iraqi refugees in Egypt are living without legal recognition.¹⁹

The exact number of Iraqis seeking refuge in Egypt is likewise unknown. There are figures suggesting that the number of Iraqi arrivals decreased sharply due to governmental restrictions and financial difficulties facing Iraqis. With a view at covering knowledge gaps concerning the presence of Iraqis in Egypt, the survey carried by CMRS at the American University in Cairo in collaboration with the Government Information and Decision Support Center (IDSC) has covered 1,004 Iraqi households. The survey reveals that 62% of those interviewed arrived in Egypt in 2006. An estimate of Egypt's total Iraqi population based on an extrapolation from UNHCR records and the percentage of those surveyed who said that they were registered with UNHCR puts the population at between 15,000 and 20,000 (this figure has been mentioned in the survey of IDSC and CMRS based on data from UNHCR).²⁰ Based on entry data in Egypt²¹ it is claimed to be between 100,000 and 150,000, while, as

¹⁴ FMO Research Guide, www.forcedmigration.org/guides/fmo015.

¹⁵ Human Rights Watch, "Iraq from a Flood to a Trickle: Egypt", available at www.hrw.org.

¹⁶ Philippe Fargues & Saeed El Masry, "Iraqis in Egypt, A Statistical Survey in 2008", op.cit

¹⁷ *Al Ahrām Weekly* 10-16 April 2008.

¹⁸ See Fargues and El-Masry who found a coverage of 64% by UNHCR).

¹⁹ See *Al Ahrām Weekly* 10-16 April 2008.

²⁰ *Daily News*, Egypt 18.11. 2008

of April 2008, only 11,000 have registered with UNHCR. According to the present survey, refugees registered with UNHCR represent 64% of all Iraqi refugees, the total number would, therefore, be around 17,000.²²

In November 2006, Egypt stopped issuing entrance visas to Iraqis; Unverifiable sources report that Iraqis have been leaving Egypt due to financial collapse starting from 2008.²³

The Situation of Iraqi Refugees in Egypt

Iraqi refugees in Egypt, Syria and Lebanon are facing various political obstacles to receiving basic assistance. The security and political considerations of the host governments are impeding the humanitarian response. In Lebanon, the history of internal violence pushed the government to deny any rights or access to services. In Egypt, internal concerns over mass poverty among its citizens and rampant unemployment have resulted in a policy of indifference to the needs of Iraqi refugees, who are misperceived as wealthy when compared to most Egyptians.²⁴

Some of the Iraqis in Egypt came with resources and have succeeded in opening businesses and obtaining residency. But many others have run out of savings. Many have become in an irregular situation, and fear having to return to Iraq.²⁵

Iraqi refugees have concentrated in October City (third, fourth, seventh and eighth districts), Al Haram in the Giza Governorate, Madinet Nasr, Heliopolis, the El Sharkia Governorate, Alexandria and Mansoura Governorates.²⁶

Refugees from any country who are registered with UNHCR as refugees or asylum seekers receive a Yellow UNHCR Card which gives them temporary residence in Egypt, and certain types of protection and access to limited medical and financial assistance. Refugee children also receive educational assistance.²⁷ Nevertheless, it should be noted that the majority of Iraqi refugees suffer from the absence of any humanitarian or social services either from UNHCR or any other group, and stress their need for assistance in health care, housing, education and work.

The government of Egypt has not given Iraqis refugee a status similar to other large refugee populations in the country. International NGOs that are currently operating in Egypt and that have the skills and capacity to respond to the needs of refugees are being denied the opportunity to extend their work to Iraqis.

According to an American source, Iraqi Shiites would not be free to practice their ceremonies openly in Egypt, which is a majority Sunni country. The same source indicates that the main reason cited by Egyptian officials for the new restrictions placed on Iraqi refugees is concern over security, as Iraqis are viewed as potential perpetrators of violence and terrorism, who may therefore threaten Egypt's security and fragile economy.²⁸

As the US increases its diplomatic efforts on Iraqi refugees, officials have urged the Egyptian government to allow Iraqis access to work and better living conditions – similar to the "Four

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²¹ Fargues and El Masry, "Iraqis in Egypt, A Statistical Survey in 2008", op.cit.

²² Fargues and El Masry, "Iraqis in Egypt, A Statistical Survey in 2008", op.cit.

²³ "Iraqis in Egypt", available at www.iraqisinegypt.org/index.html.

²⁴ Refugees International Bulletin, "Iraqi Refugees: a Lot of Talk, Little Action", November 14, 2007, available at www.refugeesinternational.org/category/country/iraq?page=6

²⁵ See Refugee International, "Egypt: Respond to the Needs of Iraqis", op.cit.

²⁶ Fargues and El Masry, "Iraqis in Egypt, A Statistical Survey in 2008", op.cit.

²⁷ Iraqis in Egypt, available at www.iraqisinegypt.org/index.html

²⁸ Refugee International, "Egypt: Respond to the Needs of Iraqis", op.cit

Freedoms" agreement that Egypt signed with Sudan – and to allow international NGOs to give assistance to Iraqi refugees.²⁹

Access to education

As mentioned before, Iraqis struggle in Egypt to obtain basic services as the Egyptian government does not allow access to public systems and international NGOs cannot expand their work to Iraqis.³⁰ Most Iraqi parents register their children in private schools in Egypt. Palestinians and Sudanese children can enroll in certain public schools, but Iraqi children can do so only if there is no private school in the area. This means that school can cost more for an Iraqi child than for some other refugee populations. For the academic year 2007-2008, some 6,900 school-age refugee children of all nationalities (elementary middle and secondary education) received UNHCR education grants which partially cover their education costs. Of these 6,900 refugee children, 2,621 were Iraqi. Of these Iraqi children 202 were enrolled in public schools and 2,419 in private schools. According to the Egyptian Ministry of Education, of a total of 4,209 Iraqi children in education (from kindergarten to secondary school), 3,903 attend private schools and 306 attend public schools. This number is consistent with an enrollment rate of 86% and a total school age population (5-19 years) of 5,823 children found by AUC/IDSC statistical survey, a fact which indirectly gives credit to their estimate of the total Iraqi population in Egypt at 16,853. (ie. Far from the 150,000 claimed by unverified sources).

There are several problems that face Iraqi students arriving in Egypt often in the middle of the school year such as an unfamiliar curriculum. For example, while Iraqi students begin learning English in the fifth grade, Egyptian students begin English in kindergarten in private schools and from the first primary year in public schools. Iraqis must also make the switch to learning about Egypt's geography and history rather than the geography and history of their own country. The Arabic spoken in Egypt is also different from that spoken in Iraq. But many Iraqis have become familiar with the Egyptian dialect from Egyptian television. Another barrier to education in Egypt is the problem of overcrowding, which threatens to keep more children out of school.³¹ In fact, dozens of angry Iraqis protested in December 2006 at the Ministry of Education after schools had expelled their children because their visas were no longer valid.³²

In September 2007, UNHCR carried out an information campaign called "Back to School" to inform Iraqi refugees, other groups of refugees and asylum seekers about their education grants. In October 2007, UNHCR did an analysis of private school tuition in the type of schools where refugees and asylum seekers were enrolling their children. UNHCR has found that Iraqi families pay between 1,200 and 2,500 Egyptian pounds for their children's tuition. UNHCR offered an education grant of 1,800 LE to parents with three or more children attending private schools.³³

International NGOs working on behalf of children in Egypt such as Save the Children are finding it difficult to develop a plan to satisfy the needs of Iraqi children because it seems impossible to determine how many Iraqi children are in Egypt and what they need.³⁴

²⁹ Refugees International Bulletin, "Iraqi Refugees: a Lot of Talk, Little Action", op.cit.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Setarreh Massihzadegan, "Iraqis Refugees in Egypt Seek Secure Education", *Migrate here and there*, June 2007, www.immigrationhereandthere.org/country_of_origin/iraq

³² US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, www.refugee.org

³³ Iraqis in Egypt, available at www.iraqisinegypt.org/index.html.

³⁴ Ibid

Access to work

A signatory to the 1951 Geneva Convention and the 1969 OAU convention, Egypt does not allow refugees to work without a permit and access to services is severely limited.³⁵ The inability of refugees to work legally causes enormous distress among Iraqis. The only significant niche in Egypt's informal labor market where Iraqis find a place is in the domestic sector.³⁶

According to a survey by the UNHCR office in Cairo released in September 2003, that is before the largest wave of Iraqi refugees started in 2006, around 56% of all Iraqis and other refugees interviewed stated that the main problem they encounter when they look for a job is the practical impossibility of obtaining a work permit, a basic requirement in the labor market, which would allow them to work legally in Egypt.³⁷

Iraqis in Egypt are commonly believed to be relatively wealthy and so there arises the fallacy that they do not need support. While it is true that some Iraqis arrived in Egypt with financial means to support themselves, their inability to work has led to the depletion of resources. Iraqis with significant savings tend to invest their money in two kinds of economic activities: services projects such as establishing cafes, bakeries, restaurants, and production firms whether in industry, agriculture or real-estate investments. Iraqis that targeted October city and Giza urban districts, have tended to invest in services and small enterprises such as cafes, restaurants and bakeries, while those who preferred to invest in productive firms are concentrated in Shubra El Khaime and other industrial regions. In fact, the kind of economic activity identifies the place of dwelling and settlement.³⁸

Some professionals such as doctors do not have the right to practice medicine without permission from the Doctors' Syndicate. Therefore, UNHCR requested the Doctors' Syndicate to grant Iraqi doctors permission.

Access to health care

According to a UNHCR medical spokesman, Iraqi refugees have a higher rate of medical problems compared to other refugee populations such as the Sudanese and Somalis. Iraqi children also have special health problems, because of radioactive waste left over from the Iraqi war with Iran and the first Gulf War in 1991. Congenital diseases are more widespread among Iraqis as compared to other refugee populations. Economic hardships among Iraqi refugees exacerbate their health problems and the fact that non-governmental organizations, including Africa and Middle East Refugee Assistance (AMERA) and Caritas – have limited funds, has meant many have had to fend for themselves.³⁹

The CMRS & IDSC survey revealed that 36.5% of surveyed households have a member with a chronic disease, including diabetes, kidney and liver failure.⁴⁰

Moreover, psychiatric problems are also a growing cause for alarm within the Iraqi population in Egypt. Many are survivors of violence or were kidnapped. Horror stories among Iraqi refugees range from women who have lost their power of speech due to shock, to children with stunted growth, to young boys who are losing hearing and sight. In spite of all these problems, mental health care is completely neglected.

³⁵ Lynn Yoshikawa, "Iraqi Refugees in Egypt", FMR 29, op.cit.

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ *Al Ahrum Weekly*, "Hard Times", 6-12 January 2005

³⁸ Fargues and El Masry, "Iraqis in Egypt, A Statistical Survey in 2008", op.cit.

³⁹ IRIN, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, December 2008.

⁴⁰ *Daily News*, Egypt 18.11.2008.

Health expenditure is another significant outlay. Excluded from government-subsidized, almost free health care, 60% of Iraqis surveyed use private hospitals, while 7.3% do not access health care at all.⁴¹ Iraqis are offered short term safety from the violence but their long-term needs are in limbo.

Refugees have also come to Egypt as war victims with amputated limbs, others need bullets removing. Iraqis with serious, curable illnesses, which cannot be treated in Egypt, are supposed to be referred for resettlement; however, resettlement depends upon third countries' acceptance of their cases.

Access to housing

While Iraqis' relations with Egyptians are generally positive, their precarious situation in Egypt is exploited by landlords who charge them significantly more for rent than that paid by Egyptians. 22.7% of the sample of the CMRS & IDSC survey said that high rent is a major concern.⁴²

Iraqis in Egypt often live apart from other Iraqis as mistrust exists between the various sectarian groups. Therefore, they are incapable of making social networks to provide security and solidarity.⁴³

In sum, Iraqis in Egypt are not allowed entry into the public school or the health system and there are no food support programs to speak of for Iraqis. The government of Egypt has refused to give Iraqis a refugee status such as it has given to other large refugee groups in the country.⁴⁴

Egyptian Non-Governmental Organizations and Iraqi Refugees

In February 2006, fifty six representatives of nearly 50 Cairo-based non-governmental organizations met at the Townhouse Gallery of Contemporary Art in Cairo to discuss the formation of an Egyptian/refugee multicultural council (TADAMON) under the slogan 'Living Together'.⁴⁵

'Living Together' is intended to bring Egyptians and refugees of all nationalities together to work for common benefits, while overcoming issues of racism experienced by 'the other' in Egyptian society. The project's aim is to improve relations among Egyptians and the different refugee communities living together in Cairo by designing tools that build cultural and diversity awareness, leadership and problem-solving skills, and, ultimately, cooperative livelihoods, which are shared through concrete, practical applications.

Since 2005, a group of concerned organizations have worked to build Tadamon. And, today, Tadamon is an independent, non-political civil society network of 25 NGOs and CBOs working to safeguard the welfare of marginalized refugees, asylum seekers and Egyptians, and to improve mutual understanding through networking, lobbying and coordinating efforts. 'Living Together' aims to build capacity within these diverse organizations, coordinate their efforts, and raise awareness on practices for 'living together' peacefully.

Egypt has long been a host to refugees, but both Egyptians and the refugees themselves have viewed refugee stays as temporary. Refugees and particularly non-Iraqi refugees often inhabit poor Egyptian neighbourhoods in Cairo, where both populations share the same problems – crowded housing and a lack of sanitation, electricity, clean sources of water, schools, medical facilities and employment. Although both Egyptians and refugees share the same problems, the latter, many of who

⁴¹ *Daily News* Egypt 18.11.2008.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ See "Egypt: Iraqi Refugee Return Driven by Lack of Money" Reuters AlertNet, alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/IRIN/e2915135e.

⁴⁴ Refugees International Bulletin, "Iraqi Refugees: a Lot of Talk, Little Action", op.cit.

⁴⁵ See www.Tadamoncouncil.org/index.html.

are Sub-Saharan Africans with differing cultural norms and appearances, are treated as threats and competitors for scarce resources. Refugees, for their part, have marginalized themselves from their neighbours. These tensions have been exacerbated over the past decade or more by a development approach that seeks solely to serve the needs of refugees in these impoverished areas.

Tadamon has five goals:

1. To promote inclusive access to basic rights and services in marginalized neighbourhoods where refugees and Egyptians cohabit;
2. To cooperate with initiatives aimed at raising awareness and knowledge of the cultures and backgrounds of the different refugee groups living in Egypt;
3. To facilitate capacity building for members where necessary and to provide training and advice through and to its members, by sharing experiences, information and skills;
4. To facilitate needs assessment studies and research where possible;
5. To provide a general mechanism for the exchange of ideas, information and strategies in the field through meetings, electronic communication and other events for all or some members to develop joint projects and undertake cooperation actions.

Tadamon includes a group of various NGOs, Egyptian and African such as :

1. Al Nadim Centre for Psychological Management and Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence
2. African and Middle East Refugee Assistance AMERA
3. Al Shehab Foundation for Comprehensive Development
4. Cairo based OROMO Community Association
5. Catholic Relief Services CRS
6. Egyptian Child Rights Centre
7. Forced Migration and Refugee Studies Programme
8. Group for Human Rights Legal Aid
9. Ma'an organization
10. New Horizon for Social Development
11. Palestinian Women's Union
12. Somali Association for Refugee Affairs
13. Modern Education Centre for Sudanese

Tadamon's ambitious objectives and activities notwithstanding, it should be noted that the above list of NGOs working with Tadamon includes only Egyptian, African and Palestinian NGOs. Tadamon's agenda thereby does not tackle the Iraqi issue. In fact, by surveying the discourses and activities of some members of Tadamon through their website, the writer found that main interest is focused on African refugees.

In fact, Iraqi refugees have not sought to form any NGO perhaps because in Iraq such organisations were the victim of coercion. Another explanation published in *Al Ahrām Weekly* is that the Egyptian authorities have forbidden Iraqi refugees from setting up their own associations. Those who receive assistance from UNHCR do so via a Sudanese NGO, because "we Iraqis are forbidden to set up NGOs of our own".⁴⁶

⁴⁶ *Al Ahrām Weekly*, 10-16 April 2008

The sole NGO that expressed deep interest in the issue of Iraqi refugees is the South Center for Human Rights (SCHR) based in Cairo. SCHR has noted that the international and Arab communities are not applying effective policies to provide fleeing Iraqis with their rights as refugees.⁴⁷

Monitoring the condition of Iraqi refugees in Egypt, South Center for Human Rights found that UNHCR's Cairo office provided Iraqi refugees with the yellow cards that protect them from deportation. Some Iraqi refugees reported to SCHR that they are no longer permitted to renew their residence after the first three months period and even if allowed to stay in Egypt; they are under a threat of being deported because of their illegal residency. This is the case with all Iraqis except those who are in Egypt for investment or residency.⁴⁸

SCHR urges the Egyptian government to provide Iraqi refugees with access to public education, health care and housing at normal costs. SCHR also urges UNHCR to provide Iraqi refugees with permanent international protection by implementing the so-called group determination of refugee status, whereby each member of the group is regarded as a *prima facie* refugee. SCHR also urges UNHCR to expand services to ensure the full protection, assistance and registration of all Iraqi refugees.⁴⁹

On the other hand, Caritas offers refugees and asylum seekers access funding for health treatment. However, 15.2% of the sample in the CMRS/IDSC survey criticized its referral system. Under this system, those in need of health treatment must obtain a referral from Caritas before undergoing treatment. There is no post-treatment reimbursement⁵⁰

In conclusion, there are not enough Egyptian or Iraqi NGOs concerned with the problems of Iraqi refugees. Regarding international NGOs, there is the problem of defining the legal situation of Iraqis so that these NGOs can help them.

International Assistance

US political support or diplomatic initiatives for assisting Iraqi refugees remains conspicuously absent. Three of the four primary host countries have close ties to US government, yet coordinating an effective large scale response to the crisis for allies in the region is not on the US Middle Eastern political agenda. The US government and other donors have also failed to approach the Arab league on the issue, forcing the League to resort to a televised campaign to gather funds to respond to the needs of the displaced.⁵¹

Despite the US government's promise to resettle 7,000 Iraqi refugees, only 1,608 were admitted by September 30, 2007 and only 450 in October 2007. This has led to large numbers of vulnerable Iraqis.⁵²

In May 2008, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) initiated the "Direct Access Program" accepting resettlement applications to the U.S from Iraqis in Egypt, Jordan (with spouse and unmarried children younger than 21) who belong to one or more of the following categories:

1. Iraqis who work/worked on a full-time basis as interpreters/translators for the US Government (USG) or Multi-National Forces (MNF-I) in Iraq.
2. Iraqis who are/were employed by the USG in Iraq.

⁴⁷ SCHR, "SCHR Condemns Threatening Iraqi Refugees with Deportation from Egypt", Press Release February 28, 2007.

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ *Daily News*, Egypt, 18.11, 2008.

⁵¹ Refugees International Bulletin, "Iraqi Refugees: a Lot of Talk, Little Action", op.cit.

⁵² Ibid.

3. Iraqis who are/were employees of an organization or entity closely associated with US mission in Iraq that has received USG funding through an official and documented contact, award, grant or cooperative agreement.
4. Iraqis who are/were employed in Iraq by a US-based media organization or non-governmental organizations.
5. Spouses, sons, daughters, parents and siblings of individuals described in the four categories above or of an individual eligible for a special immigrant visa as a result of his/her employment by or on behalf of the USG in Iraq, even if the individual is no longer alive, provided that the relationship is verified.
6. Iraqis who are the spouses, sons, daughters, parents, brothers or sisters of a US citizen, or who are the spouses or unmarried sons or daughters of a Permanent Resident Alien of the United States, as established by their being or becoming beneficiaries of approved family based I – 130 Immigrant Visa Petitions.

Certain categories of Iraqis in Egypt and Jordan with US affiliations may then apply directly for consideration under the US Refugee Admission Program (USRAP): namely persons described in the above categories who believe that they are at risk or have experienced serious harm as a result of association with the US Government since March 20, 2003 and who wish to be considered for resettlement as refugees in the US.⁵³

This program is confined to those have been working in the service of the US. Therefore, one can not consider such a program as an indicator of US willingness to grant resettlement to large numbers of Iraqi refugees.

It should be noted that the issue of Iraqi refugees is absent from the UN country team's agenda, and very little advocacy is done by the UN to improve living and protection conditions. In Egypt, as in Lebanon, UNHCR is the only agency actively responding to Iraqi refugees' needs. WHO's regional appeal includes resources for health needs in Egypt, but as no one promoted it to donors, it remains completely underfunded to date. Moreover, UN agencies seem unable to agree amongst themselves and with the government of Egypt on the scope of the problem. According to the Egyptian government and agencies like WHO, there are more than 130,000 Iraqis in Cairo in need of various degrees of assistance. UNHCR, however, defines the problem as much smaller, 20,000 Iraqis at most – many of whom have enough resources to survive. These divergent stances demonstrate the necessity of a common UN country team approach and a better understanding of the problem.⁵⁴

The office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has taken the lead in responding to Iraqi refugee needs in all affected countries. Other agencies have recently started planning and implementing programs, but the response remains insufficient. In all countries the UN resident representatives have not taken a strong role in ensuring that the overall response is coordinated and that appeals are funded by donors. This has resulted in some UN agencies having all their budgetary needs met, while others are paralyzed by lack of funding.⁵⁵

Much of UNHCR's work in the first three years after the fall of the previous Iraqi regime was based on the assumption that the domestic situation would stabilize and that hundreds of thousands of previously displaced Iraqis would soon be able to go home. Between 2003 and 2005, some 300,000 Iraqis did return home from Iran, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Jordan and other countries. In view of the spiraling violence and increasing displacement, in 2006, UNHCR reassessed its work and priorities throughout the region from assisting returns and aiding some 50,000 non Iraqi refugees in Iraq, to

⁵³ See "Refugee Resettlement Program for Iraqis in Jordan, Egypt and Iraq with US Affiliations", Fact Sheet, May 7, 2008, available at www.egypt.iom.int/index_ExpandedUSRefugeeResttlprog.htm.

⁵⁴ Refugees International Bulletin, "Iraqi Refugees: a Lot of Talk, Little Action", op.cit.

⁵⁵ Ibid

providing more help to the thousands who are fleeing every month. In December 2006, UNHCR's revised Return Advisory and Position on International Protection Needs of Iraqis outside Iraq and advised that no Iraqi from southern or central Iraq should be forcibly returned until such time as there is no substantial improvement in the security and human rights situation in the country. Voluntary repatriation is not considered a viable option. Given the fact that the prospect for durable solutions appeared remote, UNHCR strongly encouraged states to consider resettling vulnerable Iraqi refugees and stateless persons stranded in Jordan and Syria. Resettlement in no way jeopardizes the right to repatriate voluntarily when conditions improve. Given the absence of conditions for voluntary repatriation to Iraq and the inability of host countries to consider local integration, UNHCR has planned to submit 20,000 Iraqis for resettlement by 31 December 2007. UNHCR has already registered 150,000 Iraqis in neighboring states. Some 9,000 of the most vulnerable Iraqis have been referred to third countries for resettlement, including some 8,000 to the United States. More than 20 percent of those resettlement cases are classified as women at risk. On 12 July 2007, UNHCR announced that it is doubling its 2007 budget for hundreds of thousands of uprooted Iraqis inside their country and in nearby states to US\$123 million. UNHCR's updated appeal will focus on activities both inside Iraq and in surrounding countries.

In Iraq, the agency will boost its provision of aid supplies for up to 100,000 vulnerable people, including emergency shelter in the growing number of makeshift camps housing the increasing numbers of displaced people. It will also promote the establishment of inter-agency humanitarian aid depots to support the delivery of emergency assistance and provide life saving help to most vulnerable refugees. This will include rental subsidies for Palestinian refugees in Baghdad and aid to those stranded at the border with Syria. The agency will maintain an aid stockpile for to 300,000 beneficiaries, including for 100,000 inside Iraq.

Outside Iraq, UNHCR will focus on five areas of assistance: education, health, food, social and legal counseling and shelter. In education it is supporting the construction of 10 schools and the rehabilitation of 100 others. It is also working closely with UNICEF to increase the number of Iraqi children in schools in the region from 60,000 to 200,000 by the end of the 2007-8 school year. In the health sector, the agency will increase the number of refugee medical referrals from 10,000 a month to 20,000 by the end of the year. With the World Food Programme, it will expand food distribution for vulnerable families and in schools, and promote supplementary feeding programmes for those most in need. Eight community counseling centres have already been established and 12 more will be completed by the end of 2007⁵⁶

According to the UNHCR Cairo based office, UNHCR has provided emergency cash assistance based on needs' assessment, as well as assistance to pay school fees. Besides that, UNHCR has issued calls for Iraqis to approach its office. However, the problem is that the regional funding for assistance to Iraqi refugees is so tight that broader levels of assistance are simply impossible at this stage.⁵⁷

Regarding resettlement, out of the 2,607 individuals registered with UNHCR, nine percent are yellow-card holders and waiting for their first notification of an interview, 14% are yellow-card holders and are waiting for the result of resettlement interviews, 0.1% have been accepted for resettlement and are waiting for the departure procedures, 77.2% are yellow card holders only⁵⁸.

The main complaint of Iraqi refugees about resettlement procedures is the fact that there is a prolonged procedure in which they have to wait for long time between the several interviews. These long procedures make large numbers of Iraqis more vulnerable as their financial means deplete as they wait.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ FMO Research Guide, op.cit.

⁵⁷ *Al Ahram Weekly*, 10-16 April 2008.

⁵⁸ Fargues and El Masry, "Iraqis in Egypt, A Statistical Survey in 2008", op.cit.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

Conclusion

Iraqis have suffered now for more than fifteen years, since the early 1990s and these sufferings only escalated after the American-led invasion 2003. Nor have these sufferings been limited to security, they have also come to be economic, political, social, and humanitarian. The reasons that Iraqis are fleeing Iraq are two: the need for security and a search for basic rights such as work, education and health care. The handful of Iraqi refugees that had been arriving in Egypt since 2001 turned into a much larger flow following the Samarra bombings in February 2006.

The main problems that face Iraqis in Egypt are the inability to access social services and a lack of financial resources. There is also the very great uncertainty that hangs over these refugees: a return to Iraq would be dangerous and resettlement opportunities in third countries are unattainable. Then too UNHCR and refugee NGOs in Egypt were ill prepared for the unexpected influx of Iraqi refugees. There is an evident lack of coordination between UN bodies working in Egypt, and a lack of resources for Iraqi refugees particularly.

Regarding the role of NGOs whether national or international, our preliminary observation has referred to the incomplete and insufficient intervention of Egyptian and international NGOs to improve the lot of Iraqi refugees in Egypt, particularly the most vulnerable categories. This observation has been accompanied by some problems: the lack of reliable data on numbers and the status of Iraqis in Egypt, and the focus on African refugees instead of Iraqi refugees, because of the idea that Iraqis have enough resources to depend on themselves.

On a larger scale, the situation for Iraqi refugees in the Middle East continues to deteriorate, while the scale of the crisis continues to dwarf the international response. As the number of displaced Iraqis has reached an unprecedented level – more than 4.5 million – Iraq's neighbors have increased restrictions on the refugees. These restrictions are, at least partially, a response to the lack of support received from the United States and other donor governments, as well as the government of Iraq itself, to lessen the tremendous burden that the host countries are assuming.

Throughout the region, delays in fully funding UN and other multilateral appeals, as well as the lack of earmarked bilateral assistance, are leaving Iraqis in desperate need of food assistance, education and health services. Access to mental-health support is practically nonexistent and badly needed for a highly traumatized population.⁶⁰

Besides that, the NGOs, whether local or international, cannot cover the bulk of Iraqi refugees' needs. Their assistance is still limited.

In the summer of 2007, the UNHCR office witnessed an increase in the number of Iraqi families wanting to close their files so as to return to Iraq. With the lack of employment opportunities and the unexpected prolonged stay, these families ran out of funds to support their living in Egypt. Added to this are the scarce opportunities of resettlement in comparison to the numbers of applications to UNHCR, IOM and different embassies. Consequently some families started thinking of returning to Iraq despite unknown conditions there.⁶¹

Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Al- Maliki gave, in early August 2008, his 83rd decree to give occupants of houses belonging to displaced families one month to evacuate them. Therefore, the flights of Iraqis from Egypt to Iraq has started at the expense of the Iraqi government, with the aim of facilitating the return of displaced Iraqis to their homes.⁶² Some Iraqis reported returning home due to a lack of alternatives,⁶³ in fact several hundred Iraqi refugees flew home from Egypt, many of those returning

⁶⁰ Refugees International Bulletin, "Iraqi Refugees: a Lot of Talk, Little Action", op.cit.

⁶¹ Fargues & El Masry, op.cit.

⁶² Iraq Updates, Cairo 12 August 2008, www.iraqupdates.com/p_articles.php/scat/43

⁶³ See Egypt: Iraqi Refugees Return Driven by Lack of Money, AlertNet, op.cit

on free flights. However, they said that they came back only because they were without financial resources after years living outside Iraq. They still feared the dangers in their homeland.⁶⁴

The international Organization of Migration IOM says that some 13,000 Iraqis have returned from nations in the region, a tiny proportion of the estimated 2.5 million Iraqi refugees, many of whom fled Iraq's turmoil after the 2003 US-led invasion. UNHCR Cairo office spokesman said some Iraqis are choosing to return because the situation has improved in their areas, but others have found themselves under pressure in the host countries as their savings and resources have been exhausted and, perhaps more importantly, only a small minority of Iraqi refugees had returned to Iraq at the time of writing.⁶⁵

Recommendations

In order to improve the situation of Iraqi refugees not only in Egypt but in the Middle East, the following recommendations are of utmost importance:

- Coordinating between assistance and resettlement components should be encouraged;
- Bilateral assistance should be offered to countries hosting large numbers of Iraqi refugees, either directly or through a trust fund established by the United Nations or the Arab League;
- The US and other international donors should fully fund the UNHCR 2007 appeal for Iraq refugees. The US government should take the lead and support at least 50% of UNHCR's total appeal;
- The US and other donors should provide bilateral financial assistance to host countries, including Egypt, with specific earmarks for services for Iraqi refugees and others, including vulnerable Egyptians;
- UNHCR should prepare additional appeals to address the needs of Iraqi refugees throughout the region. Appeals must be based on needs, not on the expectation of what donors will provide;
- UNHCR should work with host governments, with support from UNICEF, World Health Organization (WHO) and the UN Development program UNDP to design a strategy to expand domestic education and medical services;
- Egypt should reopen its borders to Iraqi refugees, both from its embassies in Jordan and Syria;
- As a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, Egypt should abandon its reservations and grant refugees the full rights stipulated in the convention;⁶⁶
- There should be space for a more effective role for Egyptian and international NGOs to support Iraqi refugees there, particularly the most vulnerable categories;
- The need to coordinate between the efforts of all concerned stakeholders, whether governmental or nongovernmental bodies and organizations, should be emphasized.

⁶⁴ Omar Sinan & Sameer Yacoub, "Iraqi Leader Gives Refugees Free Flight Home, *The Seattle Times*, August, 11, 2008, <http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com>.

⁶⁵ Ibid

⁶⁶ Refugee International Egypt, "Respond to the Needs of Iraqis", op.cit

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