



BACKGROUND

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Iraqi Refugees: Showing Moral Leadership in Congress

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There is no greater test for American leadership - in Iraq, and the world - than how we treat those who risk their lives to help America. In our slow response to Iraq's refugee crisis and refusal to offer a lifeline to Iraqis who have worked for us, we are failing that test. It's time for Congress to lead on this challenge.

A Growing Crisis

According to the UN, violence has driven 2 million Iraqis out of their country, and 1.9 million are displaced within Iraq. That's 1 in 7 Iraqis. Projected to the U.S. population, that would be 43 million Americans. And the numbers will grow: some 50,000 Iraqis abandon their homes every month. For those leaving, the options are limited. U.S. allies Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have not opened their doors. Most Iraqi refugees are in Jordan (roughly 800,000) and Syria (roughly 1,200,000), but they are generally not permitted to work. The budget for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) - which has the lead in confronting this crisis - is so low that in 2006 there was less than a dollar spent for each Iraqi refugee in Syria.

The most vulnerable Iraqis are those who have served side by side with America: the interpreters, contractors, office workers, and community liaisons committed to building

a stable and democratic Iraq. For their efforts, they are targeted as collaborators by Sunni insurgents, al Qaeda, and Shiite death squads. In parts of Iraq, helping

Americans can be a death sentence. One Iraqi who translated for the U.S. military testified at a January Senate Judiciary Committee hearing: "Many Iraqis were purposely killed in public market squares in front of hundreds of people in broad daylight as cruel examples of what could happen to local Iraqis who assisted U.S. and Coalition forces. The killings were gruesome."

Our Response To Date: Nil

Given that the most vulnerable Iraqis are those who committed to helping Americans, and given that many of these Iraqis performed services that saved American lives, one would think securing our Iraqi friends would be a top priority. One would be wrong.

Since 2003, only 692 Iraqis have been resettled in the United States, with 202 admitted in 2006. In the six months leading up to March 2007 - when sectarian violence reached new depths of brutality - we admitted 68 Iraqi refugees. During that period, we welcomed more refugees from Somalia, Iran, Myanmar, and Cuba. There is a program that enables

Talking Points

- ◆ Fewer than 700 Iraqi refugees have been resettled in the United States since the beginning of the war, even though Iraqis who work with America have been targeted for assassination.
- ◆ The President won't extend a lifeline to these Iraqis because it would mean admitting his Iraq policy has failed. Congress must lead.
- ◆ To help those who have helped America, Congress should identify Iraqis who have worked with us, make visa and asylum applications available within Iraq, and greatly increase caps on the number of Iraqis permitted entry to the United States.
- ◆ The bipartisan "Responsibility to Iraqi Refugees Act of 2007" provides a vehicle for action in the House.
- ◆ America must not ignore the debt it owes to those Iraqis who have sacrificed so much to help us.



Special Immigrant Visas to be granted to Iraqi translators - but it is capped at 50. In fact, according to the U.S. Department of State the United States resettled just one Iraqi refugee last month. The waiting list for translators to get to the U.S. runs for years - without action, many may die waiting.

We have made no systematic effort to identify Iraqis who have helped America in Iraq. For those who want to seek safe-haven on our shores, it is not possible to get a U.S. visa in Iraq, or in Syria - the country with the most Iraqi refugees. As Iraqis are stranded in neighboring countries or displaced within Iraq, America shamefully joins in sending a message to Iraqis aptly described by George Packer: "unwelcome all over the world."

There are belated efforts to address this crisis. The Administration has indicated that it will authorize resettling up to 7,000 Iraqis in the U.S in 2007. In February, the State Department launched an Iraqi Refugee and Internally Displaced Task Force. The U.S. is contributing \$18 million to UNHCR's 2007 budget. The Administration has asked for \$15 million more for Iraqi refugees and internally displaced persons in the supplemental. But these actions, though welcome, constitute little more than a drop in a rapidly overflowing bucket.

Congressional Leadership

President Bush is unlikely to lead on this issue: extending a hand to fleeing Iraqis would mean acknowledging the failure of his Iraq policy, and he is not one to admit mistakes. Yet where the President does not lead, Congress must step up. At stake is our moral debt to those who have risked their lives to work with Americans. At stake is our credibility to take responsibility for events that our country has initiated. At stake is the success of counter-insurgency efforts in Iraq and beyond - if people who help America cannot trust us to be there when the bill comes due, how can we expect to find partners?

Since the United States cannot admit all Iraqi refugees, we must begin by helping those who have helped us.

First, we must identify - and give priority - to Iraqis who have worked for the U.S. military and U.S. government, or with certified contractors, international institutions or NGOs.

Second, we must enable prompt action to process applications for visa or asylum at our Baghdad embassy, and in southern and northern Iraq, and increase the Iraqi government's capacity to issue passports.

Third, we must lift caps on the numbers of Iraqis to be resettled in the United States.

Fourth, we must prepare for the worst - a large-scale evacuation of Iraqi civilians should the Green Zone collapse, or should America choose to leave.

Congress can seize opportunities to lead. In the House, the bipartisan *Responsibility to Iraqi Refugees Act* co-sponsored by Representatives Blumenauer, Schakowsky and Shays lays out a roadmap for accomplishing most of the goals outlined above, while creating a badly needed Special Coordinator for Iraqi Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons in the State Department. In the Senate, Senator Kennedy has been leading efforts to shine a light on this issue, and to allow more Iraqis entry to the United States.

Meanwhile, U.S. attention and resources must focus on the refugee crisis in the region, which could threaten the long-term stability of the Middle East. Congress should fully fund requests to fund UNHCR - which has asked for \$60 million for this purpose in 2007 - and other refugee relief organizations. Already, Congress has shown leadership by including \$45 million for Iraqi refugees in the supplemental. A broader diplomatic initiative must rally international donors to support countries harboring large Iraqi populations.

There is a precedent - albeit a grim one. In 1975, the United States resettled more than 130,000 Vietnamese in the United States. Tens of thousands of Cambodians, Lao, and Hmong also came. President Gerald Ford said, "To do less would have added moral shame to humiliation." Wherever you stand on the Iraq war, we must stand with those who have stood with us. Anything less would be unworthy of America.

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