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*“Iraqi Refugees: American Responsibility”*

One of the least publicized consequences of the Administration’s misadventure in Iraq is also one of the few that we can still make right: the plight of Iraqi refugees. On humanitarian, moral and geopolitical grounds, the United States must admit meaningful numbers of Iraqi refugees into our own country. We must also support the far larger numbers who already languish in Jordan, Syria and other countries near Iraq.

The magnitude of the humanitarian crisis is staggering. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, over two million Iraqis have fled to neighboring countries, mostly since American forces “liberated” Iraq. Another two million plus are internally displaced inside Iraq. The combined total of over four million people, forced to flee from their homes, amounts to one seventh of the Iraqi population.

And it is steadily growing. According to the High Commissioner, an estimated 60,000 Iraqis fled their homes every week – even before this week’s massive car bombing, which may speed the exodus.

Neighboring Jordan, with a population roughly the same as that of the Chicago metropolitan area, is now inundated by hundreds of thousands of Iraqi refugees. Jordan has begun to turn back Iraqis at the airport.

Many Iraqis who already managed to reach Jordan planned to stay there for only a few weeks or months en route to an affluent country like the United States. But they soon learned that they could not get visas to move on. Nor can they go back to Iraq, where their family members have often been murdered – which is why many of them fled Iraq in the first place.

So they are stuck in Jordan, usually without legal residency status. In a country with 13% official unemployment, they often find no work. One survey suggests that most live by eating through their savings and selling their assets. After a few months, many are reduced to poverty, unable to afford medical care or education for their children.

Nor is their plight in Jordan unique. Despite strong Muslim taboos, Iraqi women refugees in Syria have reportedly turned to prostitution to survive.

All developed nations need to respond to a humanitarian crisis of this proportion. But the United States has a moral obligation to do more than most. Whatever problems Iraq had before we invaded in 2003, a refugee crisis on this scale was not one of them. We created the conditions that, in turn, have created the refugee crisis. We owe it to the Iraqi people – for whose sake we claimed to bomb our way into Baghdad – to ease the consequences.

Our moral obligation is even greater toward the thousands of Iraqis who have worked for or with the US government or US organizations in Iraq. Their lives are in danger. Recently the US Ambassador in Iraq recommended setting up a special visa program to guarantee US government employees in Iraq long-term visas to the US. Otherwise, he warned, we will continue to lose essential Iraqi employees – dead or alive.

Bills have been introduced in Congress – joined by Illinois Senator Dick Durbin and Representatives Danny Davis, Jesse Jackson Jr. and Jan Schakowsky – to provide such visas and other relief. But those bills wallow in committee, with no action to date, and too few co-sponsors.

In any case visas for US government employees are not enough: the International Rescue Committee recommends a program of 20,000 visas for Iraqis each year for the next several years. However, the Department of Homeland Security recently warned Congress against adopting a large visa program for Christians and other persecuted minorities in Iraq, arguing that terrorists might slip through.

Security concerns, while important, should not entirely trump our humanitarian and moral obligations. Yet to date they have done just that. From last October through mid-July, the US granted only 133 visas to Iraqis. This paltry offering pales beside that of, say, Sweden, which in 2006 alone granted over 8000 visas to Iraqi refugees.

The refugee crisis also risks high geopolitical costs, both inside and outside Iraq. According to former Iraqi Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, “The middle class has left Iraq.” There can be no hope for a stable, democratic future in an Iraq with a vastly depleted middle class.

Outside Iraq, the refugee flows can be dangerously destabilizing. Jordan is classed as a “lower middle income” country by the World Bank. With a per capita Gross Domestic Product of only \$2,500 per year – less than one fifteenth that of the most developed nations -- Jordan cannot afford to carry America’s Iraqi refugee burden.

For example, under American pressure, Jordan agreed this month to allow Iraqi refugee children with no legal residency status to attend public schools. But Jordanian schools are already overcrowded. Without significant American aid, Jordan’s limited budget will fail to meet even the minimal educational, medical and social needs of refugees.

Fortunately, there is bipartisan support for taking at least some action to respond to the refugee crisis. Unfortunately, there is not yet enough political will on either side of the aisle. Americans need to speak up. Congress needs to hear that on this issue, doing the right thing is also the smart thing. If left to fester, the refugee crisis will come back to haunt Americans, sooner or later, in far more direct ways.

**Doug Cassel’s commentaries are generally broadcast Wednesdays during the noon hour of the Worldview program on Chicago Public Radio, 91.5 FM, and rebroadcast at 9 PM in the evening. Views expressed are personal views of the author and not necessarily those of Notre Dame Law School, the Center for Civil and Human Rights or Chicago Public Radio.**