

World Vision

TRAPPED!
UNLOCKING THE FUTURE OF
IRAQI REFUGEE CHILDREN



Foreword

“Now, we are living life in a very limited way. I wish you could have seen us in Iraq. In one moment, everything changed; suddenly they called us traitors and crusaders. We lost everything”

A father of five children who was working as a civil engineer for the US army in Baghdad.

Iraqi children are among the most distressed refugee populations worldwide. Years of daily violence continues to wreak untold damage to their physical and mental health, shattering young lives. Without legal status, psychological rehabilitation, proper education and medical assistance, this devastated and scattered generation is trapped with little hope for the future unless meaningful assistance is provided by the international community.

Up to two million Iraqis are dispersed across the Middle East, including in Jordan, Syria, Egypt and Lebanon. Combined with the four million Palestinians who have sought refuge in the last half century, the Iraq crisis has converted the Middle East into the largest refugee-hosting region in the world.

An unseen generation of young refugees is hiding across the region. They are trapped in their homes, unable to attend school, and carry the psychological scars of untold violence.

Without proper assistance, the implications for regional stability are far reaching and will be felt socially, politically and economically for years to come.

WorldVision is joining the call to end the entrapment of these families – in particular the children. With no end in sight to the current conflict, these children will become a lost generation if the international community does not respond appropriately and significantly.

Dave Robinson

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This paper is based on interactions with more than 100 Iraqi refugee families living in Amman, Jordan. It was carried out with the support of World Vision's local partners in March and April 2007. The names of those who shared their stories with us have been changed to protect their identities. A comprehensive report detailing the situation faced by Iraqi refugee children will be released later in 2007.



“I wanted to be a doctor, but I don’t know what will happen if I cannot go back to school”

Hadir, aged 14. Her informal school was shut down last month and like many Iraqi families, her parents cannot afford to send her to a school in Jordan.

A generation’s education at risk

The UNHCR estimates there are now 540,000 extra children of school age dispersed across the region.

Many of the Iraqi refugees of school age suffer major gaps in their education or are not being educated at all.

Ambiguous legalities keep Iraqi refugee children out of the classroom. Jordan is not a signatory to the *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*, and thus lacks a legal framework to formally recognise refugees. Most Iraqi asylum seekers have no legal status in Jordan and most of the children do not attend public schools.

With overcrowding in Jordanian schools, refugee children are among the first to be turned away.

Children fortunate enough to be admitted into the public school system are also at risk. No law guarantees a chair in the classroom for Iraqi refugee children.

With little or no income and dwindling financial reserves, private education is out of reach for the majority of Iraqi families in Jordan.

A limited number of refugee children are being supported by NGOs, either through fee-paying assistance or through provision of formal and informal education programmes. But resources are scarce.

“My son sells mobile phone cards for US \$1 a day. Of course it is illegal, but he is 15 years old and has no access to education. With his father dead, he is now head of the family”

An Iraqi widow with three other children to support.

Despite these challenges some refugee children get permission to sit in on classes. They receive no certification and no official advancement. They are not allowed to sit for exams or use school materials. Yet at least they are learning and hope one day to be admitted into the class.

Lacking education, children will work at increasingly younger ages. Child labour is already a growing problem in the refugee communities, with a significant number engaged in casual work. As family savings dry up and situations become more desperate, Iraq's refugee children will be under increasing pressure to find jobs, risking exploitation.

Simply put, more schooling solutions are needed. Jordan's school system is overcrowded, requiring teachers to work double shifts to

accommodate Jordanian school children. With hundreds of thousands of Iraqi children waiting on the sidelines, a change in legal status is not enough.

In addition to the hundreds of thousands of refugee children in the region, UNHCR estimates an additional 9,000 teachers are needed to address this education crisis.

School is crucial for refugee children to regain a sense of normality. Creating a daily structure and routine in a safe environment helps address psychological needs, and provides the social interaction and development these young refugees sorely lack.



“I was scared because I thought any minute he would catch me and cut my head off. I ran a lot but the man was a good runner”

12-year-old Salah, recalling a kidnap attempt.

Trapped in a climate of fear

It is hard to find a family among Iraqi refugees where a child has not been exposed to violence. Many have witnessed gruesome events: murders, bomb blasts, break-ins, and beatings. Children who are victims of kidnapping bear a particularly heavy psychological burden.

For many Iraqi refugees, the climate of fear has continued after fleeing Iraq. They fear for the future of their children. They fear being forced to return to the violence. Others fear those who murdered family members or kidnapped children in Iraq will find them in Jordan.

Children absorb this climate of fear. They fear they will be separated from their families; that tomorrow their parents will be sent back to Iraq. They worry that they too will be forced to return. Many of the children interviewed by World Vision suffered from bed-wetting, sleeplessness, regular nightmares and even panic attacks. Others expressed constant loneliness despite their crowded living conditions.

Those who have directly experienced violence are particularly vulnerable. One boy interviewed was kidnapped and held for 14 days. He no longer eats enough and is constantly sick. He is underweight and his mother fears for his life.

Instead of attending school, most children stay in their homes all day. Fear of deportation keeps families indoors and restricts children from forming relationships outside the family. These young refugees are spending their childhoods in frustration and boredom, afraid to venture outdoors, with few friends, and minimal opportunities for social interaction.

World Vision is concerned that the explosive ingredients of grief and frustration are fuelling increased domestic violence. Refugees interviewed spoke of family violence and admitted to a growing feeling of anger.

The psychological challenges experienced by refugee children have come to the attention of local organisations. Yet without adequate resources, little is being done to address this suffering.

“Just take my children and leave me here in Jordan. Please, I want them to have a future”

Miriam, an Iraqi widow, pleading for a future for her four children.

Children's health at risk

Many Iraqi refugee families simply cannot afford basic foods to keep their children healthy.

Daily essentials are being priced out of reach of refugees. Milk is now so expensive that many families resort to watered-down yoghurt to feed their children. Meat and fruits are becoming luxury items, once considered staples.

The results of poor diets are revealed in the clinics serving Iraqi refugees in Jordan. Children exhibit symptoms of diabetes, anaemia, and recurrent influenza due to poor diets.

Most refugees are unable to access long-term medical assistance. What services are available are stretched to capacity. Crucial medical procedures and surgery are simply not available to most.

Easing the burden

There is no end in sight to the massive displacement wrought by the extreme and continuing violence in Iraq. Already, two million people have fled their country. An additional 40,000 to 50,000 persons join them each month (UNHCR).

Given the magnitude of this refugee crisis, the international community must share some of the burden. Iraq's neighbouring countries have shown tremendous hospitality towards these desperate refugees and should not be left to shoulder this burden alone.

The international community must open its doors to significantly increased numbers of Iraqi asylum seekers. Support for host governments is a necessary part of the solution, but increased admissions are vital to relieving the growing pressure within the region. The responsibility of the international community does not stop at Iraq's borders.



Conclusion

These exiles are among the most drastically war-affected populations worldwide. The people fleeing Iraq have experienced a uniquely brutal level of mental and physical violence, and now find themselves in limbo.

Children are among the most vulnerable and defenceless of all, and desperately need the basic assistance the international community can provide.

A snapshot of the experiences of these refugee children is sobering: 20 years of sanctions and war – wholesale devastation of society and country – epic ongoing violence involving daily kidnappings and ransoms, home invasions and beatings, suicide bombings and murder. This pattern is repeated daily, and has forced the largest exile of people in the region in half a century.

As the violence and flight continues, it is the poorest and youngest who will suffer the most. In the name of these Iraqi refugee children and their families, we ask that the following measures be immediately taken to provide crucial support:

Provide Iraqi children with desperately-needed education solutions:

- Immediately fund education solutions for Iraqi refugee children across the region and ease the burden of host countries.

- Ask host countries to permit the implementation of informal and formal educational solutions for Iraqi children, accommodating reasonable and responsible alternatives provided by the NGO community.
- Ensure official recognition of past schooling, allowing for grade advancement.

Provide Iraqi children with proper health care, for both their physical, psychological, and emotional needs:

- Fund clinics addressing the special health needs of children while easing the burden of host countries.
- Explore measures for mental health care targeting the special needs of children, some of whom have suffered extraordinary levels of mental and physical violence unusual for such a young population.

Provide a “way out” for vulnerable Iraqi children and their families:

- Establish reasonable “certification” procedures for this population in exile – including the children – by providing a form of recognised status and expedited processing.
- Provide expanded admissions to other countries, particularly for families with children. Presently, they are trapped – they cannot go back to Iraq and they cannot move forward.



World Vision

More information:

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