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**The Brookings Institution—University of Bern  
Project on Internal Displacement**

# **Iraqi Refugees in the Syrian Arab Republic: A Field-Based Snapshot**

*by*

**Ashraf al-Khalidi,  
Sophia Hoffmann  
and  
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رحت لبیت اللہ و جیت  
مثل بیٹی ما لقییت

I went to the House of God and returned,  
Yet I found nothing like my home.

- Iraqi proverb\*

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\* The 'House of God' refers to the *Ka'ba*, the holy shrine in Mecca.

## About the Authors

**Ashraf al-Khalidi** is the pseudonym of an Iraqi researcher and civil society activist based in Baghdad. Mr. Khalidi has worked with civil society groups from nearly all parts of Iraq since the first days that followed the overthrow of the regime of Saddam Hussein. His contacts within Iraqi society continue to span the various sectarian divides. He publishes under this pseudonym out of concern for his safety. He is the author, with Victor Tanner, of “Sectarian Violence: Radical Groups Drive Internal Displacement in Iraq,” a Brookings occasional paper (October 2006).

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## **Executive Summary**

In the past four years, the number of Iraqis who have been displaced by violence, both within Iraq's borders and in neighboring countries, has increased drastically. Of the estimated two million Iraqis who have sought protection in neighboring countries, at least 1.2 million to 1.5 million are presently in Syria. This study, part of a project funded by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees that will assess patterns of Iraqi displacement inside Iraq and throughout the region, focuses on Iraqis who have come to Syria since 2003. Subsequent research will examine internal displacement in Iraq and the situation of Iraqis in other countries of the region. The research was carried out by a team of international and Iraqi researchers in March-April 2007 and is based on several hundred interviews with Iraqis living in Syria, as well as with Syrians, Palestinians and international officials.

Two waves of Iraqi refugees have come to Syria over the course of the past 25 years. The first wave came in the 1970s and 1980s, many of them Sunnis who opposed the Saddam Hussein regime. Others were Shi'a fleeing persecution. Following the first Gulf War and the Iraqi government's repression of Shi'a in the South, the Syrian-Iraq border remained closed throughout the 1990s and only re-opened in 2001-2002. The second wave of Iraqi displacement began in 2003 as a result of the US invasion. The study focuses on this second wave of Iraqi refugees and traces the milestones of displacement within the period of 2003-2007.

The Iraqis who have come to Syria in the past four years come primarily from urban areas and represent diverse sectarian backgrounds, including Sunni, Shi'a and Kurds as well as minority groups of Christians (who are over-represented as refugees in Syria compared to their numbers in Iraq), Sabean-Madeans and Palestinians. Both Sunni and Shi'a Iraqi radical groups, especially the Ba'thi resistance, are also present in Syria.

Iraqis in Syria reported numerous reasons for leaving their country. Many left as a direct result of conflict, mostly from the rising sectarian violence but also from fighting between the insurgents and the Multinational Forces (MNF) allied with the Iraqi military. Individuals also left because they perceived themselves to be at risk for one reason or another – because they worked with the former regime or for the MNF, or because their ethnicity or occupation had become a target in the new violence. Others left for economic reasons – because they could no longer make a living in Iraq or because their homes had been taken by others. Many came because they had family members in Syria or needed health care which was not available in Iraq. In some cases, Iraqis came to Syria with their entire families while in other cases, individuals or some members of a family would be sent to Syria for their safety.

Iraqis sought refuge in Syria, rather than in other countries, for a number of reasons: geographic proximity, simple entry requirements, easy access to services, common language, the low cost of living and often the presence of family or friends in Syria.

Most Iraqis use buses and collective taxis to reach Syria although the roads are increasingly dangerous. People are not only targeted by sectarian militias, but are also attacked by bandits and looters seeking financial gain. Entry into Syria is relatively easy although Iraqis need to leave the country periodically to renew their entry stamps.

Iraqis fleeing overland to Syria generally do not bring much money with them because they fear looters on the road. Once in Syria, many rely on *hawala* transfers from friends and family in Iraq. And, as the situation in Iraq worsens, many Iraqis send money back to kin at home. While Syrians generally believe that the Iraqi refugees are rich, in fact wealthy Iraqis are a small minority of those living in Syria. Most Iraqis arrive with limited funds that often run out before steady employment can be secured, and many Iraqis must periodically make dangerous return trips to Iraq to sell off cars and other valuables. The situation is made worse by the fact that Iraqis are not allowed to work. Consequently, unemployment is high among the Iraqis, even if some have managed to work with a Syrian partner or for Iraqi-run businesses. Some Iraqis continue to draw government pensions and food rations, which are usually transferred to them in Syria – in cash or in kind – with the help of friends or family in Iraq. Many Iraqi families have stayed in Syria longer than they intended and the situation grows worse as their resources run out. Iraqi refugees have turned to both child labor and prostitution as coping mechanisms.

The largest area of Iraqi concentration in Syria is the greater Damascus urban area where they have established communities in specific neighborhoods, many of which have thriving businesses. Sectarianism has not spilled across the border. Most of the neighborhoods in which Iraqis settle are mixed. Unlike other refugee crises, most of the Iraqis who fled are skilled or have access to some finances. They do not live in tented camps or collective centers, but like most Syrian urban dwellers, in apartments. Unlike in Jordan, few Iraqis buy property in Syria, and prices for real estate and rents for apartments are increasing.

In terms of access to services, Iraqis who have the means to do so visit private doctors and clinics. Poorer Iraqis can only visit the Syrian public health service for emergency and primary health care and most poor Iraqis rely on Syrian Red Crescent clinics. Syrian charitable organizations also provide some health services. Religious affiliation seems to have no impact on the quality of health care Iraqi refugees receive.

Syrian elementary and secondary schools are open to Iraqi refugee children who can attend Syrian schools at no cost. But admission can be arbitrary, and they have to pay for supplies and uniforms (around 5,000 LS per year or \$100). However, the Syrian Ministry of Education estimates that only 30,000 Iraqi children are enrolled in schools – a very low rate of registration.

The only real assistance that most Iraqis receive comes from the Syrian state. UNHCR is stepping up its assistance for refugees in the country, particularly for health services. There are very few self-help organizations within the Iraqi refugee community. The economic impact of the refugees on Syria has been substantial, but has probably not been

all negative. The deterioration of relations between ordinary Syrians and their Iraqi guests is a cause for concern.

In the region, Syria has been the most open country to Iraqi refugees, allowing them to enter without stringent visa requirements, to come and go, to settle freely and to access basic services. Although many of the Iraqis have managed to survive in Syria, the study concludes that there are three challenges: the condition of a small core of highly vulnerable Iraqi refugees, the likely increase in the number of Iraqis coming to Syria, and a possible hardening of Syrian policies.

While it is clear that many of the Iraqis would like to return to their country, the overwhelming majority of Iraqis in Syria do not think that it will be safe enough to return in the near future and many believe that it will never be safe enough. The international community should work with Syrian authorities to help meet the needs of the refugees.

## Introduction

Displacement in Iraq has a long history. The Saddam Hussein regime forcibly displaced over a million Iraqis, if not more. The Iran-Iraq war also caused massive displacement. In 2003, some of these displaced returned. Others fled Iraq when US-led coalition military forces took over the country. Still others were displaced as a result of coalition military activities. With the bombing of the Shi'a shrine in Samarra in February 2006 and the increase in sectarian violence, many more Iraqis were forced to flee. Presently there are an estimated two million, and possibly more, Iraqis in countries in the region and another two million Iraqis displaced within Iraq's borders.<sup>1</sup>

This research project, funded by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), will examine the patterns of Iraqi displacement both inside Iraq and throughout the region. The research is being conducted in two phases. This first phase, which is reported here, focuses on Iraqis in Syria. The second phase will look at internal displacement inside Iraq and Iraqis in Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt.

The research was carried out under the auspices of the Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement which has conducted several studies on Iraqi displacement in recent years. *The Internally Displaced People of Iraq*, an October 2002 occasional paper by John Fawcett and Victor Tanner, found that more than one million people had been deliberately expelled from their homes by the state policies of Saddam Hussein.<sup>2</sup> In March 2006, the Brookings-Bern Project also organized a conference on the particular situation of the displaced Marsh Arabs in Southern Iraq. And in October 2006, the Project published *Sectarian Violence: Radical Groups Drive Internal Displacement in Iraq* by Ashraf al-Khalidi and Victor Tanner. This last report found a sharp increase in the number of internally displaced people as a result of the explosion of sectarian violence that followed the bombing of the Golden Mosque in Samarra in February 2006.

## How This Report was Researched

In conducting the present study, the Project worked with a team of international and Iraqi researchers under the day-to-day supervision of a senior Iraqi researcher. The research team included Iraqis from various parts of the country and sectarian backgrounds. The research was carried out in March-April 2007 and is based on several hundred interviews with Iraqis living in Syria as well as with numbers of Syrians, Palestinians and international officials. The Iraqis interviewed represented a rough cross-section of the

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<sup>1</sup> UNHCR: "Strategic Framework for Humanitarian Action in Iraq," April 2007, p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Fawcett & Tanner's figure of one million serves as a low-end estimate; some sources put the figure closer to 1.5 million refugees. See also Congressional Research Service: "Iraqi Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons," March 2007, pp. 5-6; ICG: "Iraq Backgrounder: What Lies Beneath," October 2002, pp.6-8.

refugee community in the main areas of refugee settlement in Syria, including more than 20 neighborhoods and suburbs of Damascus. The data represent the broad spectrum of economic class, sectarian affiliation, age, and place of origin found within the Iraqi refugee community.<sup>3</sup>

## **Background: Violence and Displacement in Iraq**

The current refugee disaster in Iraq is not a new development. Forced displacement has been a consistent feature of recent Iraqi history, and the people of Iraq have suffered in consequence. Over the past three or four decades, large numbers of Iraqi civilians have been forced from their home areas by wars, uprisings and government-sponsored policies of ethnic cleansing and forced resettlement. The regime of Saddam Hussein displaced people by the hundreds of thousands – especially Shi‘a and Kurds – as a tool for political and social control.

### **The 2003 Invasion**

The US-led invasion of April 2003 also began under the sign of mass displacement. Aid agencies warned, and governments in the region feared, that the invasion risked triggering a massive exodus of Iraqis.<sup>4</sup> This did not happen. But as the political and security situation steadily deteriorated in subsequent years, large numbers of Iraqis found themselves forced to move in search of security. In the last four or so years, forced displacement, both within and outside of Iraq, has been the result of two main triggers: fighting between the Multi-National Force (MNF) and its Iraqi government allies and the insurgents, and sectarian violence. There is little international attention to the displacement caused by the MNF and insurgent fighting, most of which has occurred in Sunni areas in Anbar and Nineweh governorates. The lack of attention may be due to the fact that the displacement is hard to measure, given the insecurity that reigns in the areas of origin, or because there is generally little focus on the impact of MNF operations on the Iraqi population. There were also substantial numbers of Shi‘a displaced by fighting between US forces and the Mahdi Army in Najaf in summer 2004, but most of the displaced have since returned.

The other driver of displacement is the sectarian violence. This violence has many roots in the deep scars the Saddam Hussein regime left on relations between Sunni and Shi‘a, and especially on the terrible repression of the Shi‘a in the 1980s and 1990s. The violence started unevenly. Initially, it was mostly the work of radical Sunni insurgents seeking to undermine the US occupation and the political process, to counter what they perceived as Shi‘a domination after the fall of the former regime, and to create a general sense of lawlessness and chaos. Shi‘a neighborhoods and residents were frequently

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<sup>3</sup> For a more complete breakdown of the identity of the interviewees, see the Annexes below.

<sup>4</sup> For pre-invasion predictions, see UNOCHA: “Flash Appeal for the Humanitarian Requirements of the Iraq Crisis - Six-Month Response,” March 2003. For an example of the post-invasion revision, see UN: “The Revised Humanitarian Appeal for Iraq,” June 2003.

targeted with bomb attacks and killings. Yet, broadly speaking, Shi'a political groups displayed a remarkable degree of restraint. There were few wholesale attacks on Sunni neighborhoods, even if some radical Shi'a death squads targeted former members of the former regime and prominent Sunnis in general (former officers, professionals, intellectuals), and sometimes ordinary citizens.

### **Samarra and After...**

Everything changed, however, with the February 2006 bombing by Sunni insurgents of the al-Askari mosque, a holy Shi'a shrine in the town of Samarra, north of Baghdad. Shi'a militiamen, mostly from the Mahdi Army, responded with stunning violence, storming through Sunni neighborhoods in Baghdad and elsewhere, randomly slaughtering Sunni residents, torching Sunni businesses and defiling Sunni mosques. That, in turn, led to yet more retribution against Shi'a civilians by radical Sunni militias. After a brief lull, when the parties seemed to stare into the abyss before them and step back, violence resumed.

Since then the violence has increased. In the summer of 2006, the violence took on a shockingly brutal new form with daylight assaults on civilian neighborhoods by heavily armed gunmen who pulled people from homes, vehicles and stores and executed them. Shi'a militiamen attacked the Sunni section of Jihad in Baghdad on July 9 (40 deaths reported). Sunni militiamen rampaged through the town of Mahmudiyya in North Babil on July 17 (50 Shi'a reported killed).<sup>5</sup> In March 2007, a new, grim milestone reminiscent of ethnic cleansing in the Balkans was reached when gunmen from both sides started torching Sunni and Shi'a homes in Muqdadia, a town in Diyala governorate.<sup>6</sup>

Car and truck bombs and mortar attacks are the weapons of choice of the Sunni radical groups. Death squad assassinations and kidnappings are the hallmark of the Shi'a militias, who have also started using mortars.

Kidnapping warrants a special mention: the abduction of people for ransom has become a major feature of the insecurity of daily life in Iraq. Kidnapping and political violence are closely related. At the local level, the relationship between neighborhood thugs and the radical political groups is often blurred. 'Ordinary' criminals will often seek to 'sell' abductees to political groups who can then either use them for political effect or try to obtain a ransom. For radical groups on both sides of the Shi'a-Sunni divide, ransom-motivated abduction is key to financing their operations. In late 2006, the *New York Times* reported claims by a classified US government inter-agency report that violent criminal activity in Iraq had allowed the insurgency to become financially self-sustaining. The report said that insurgents were raising between \$70 million and \$200 million annually through illicit activities, including \$25 to \$100 million through oil smuggling

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<sup>5</sup> Al-Khalidi, Ashraf and Victor Tanner, "Sectarian Violence: Radical Groups Drive Internal Displacement," Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement, October 2006, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> Cave, Damien, "In New Tactic, Militants Burn Houses in Iraq," the *New York Times*, 12 March 2007.

and up to \$36 million through kidnappings.<sup>7</sup> The increase in abductions has been exponential. In January 2004 there were an average of 2 kidnappings per day in Baghdad, and at the end of that year the number had risen to 10. By March 2006, however, Baghdad averaged 30-40 kidnappings per day.<sup>8</sup> Many Iraqis believe that the number of kidnappings has ballooned since.<sup>9</sup> Kidnappers now target all levels of Iraqi society, including middle class and even poor people. The average ransom is estimated to be \$30,000 – an enormous sum for most Iraqis whose annual per capita income is just over \$1,000. Poorer people are ransomed for paltry sums, which may nonetheless be unaffordable. Family members and friends borrow money, and sell property, jewelry, cars and appliances.<sup>10</sup> In many cases, they turn to ‘their’ radical groups for help and, if the situation takes a turn for the worse, they often look to these groups to avenge their loss – thus indebting themselves to the radical and criminal groups who are at the origin of the violence and in turn strengthening them.<sup>11</sup>

This violence and lawlessness has triggered a massive wave of displacement, both within the country and outside. The current number of people displaced inside Iraq is estimated to be two million. The overall refugee caseload in neighboring countries is currently estimated at two million as well, but could be higher. All communities have been affected. These figures make the current displacement crisis in Iraq one of the gravest in the world.

### **Getting Worse?**

The fear is that the situation could grow worse. In early summer 2006, field research by the Brookings Institution in Iraq concluded that full-scale civil war had not yet erupted. In conversations across the country, ordinary Sunni and Shi‘a seemed to agree, then, that the conflict was between radical extremists, and that civilians were targets and victims in the violence. Six to eight months later, by early 2007, the Iraqi researchers who had led Brookings’ 2006 research have come to a different conclusion: “The situation is hardening. Violence is reaching deeper into society. More and more ordinary people have ties to the radical groups. In many neighborhoods, it is a case of being either with them or against them. And if the latter, the consequence is to flee or, often, to be killed. And once kin and loved ones join a radical group, the whole family is entrapped.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Burns, John and Kirk Semple, “Iraq Insurgency Has Funds To Sustain Itself, U.S. Finds,” the *New York Times*, 26 November 2006. The report was produced by an inter-agency working group which included the CIA, the FBI, the DIA, the State Department, the Treasury Department and the military’s Central Command.

<sup>8</sup> Brookings Iraq Index, April 2006, p. 18. ([www.brookings.edu/iraqindex](http://www.brookings.edu/iraqindex))

<sup>9</sup> Personal communications, numerous Iraqis living in Iraq, 2006 and 2007. All the Iraqi researchers for this research – who are both Sunni and Shi‘a – have had friends and family be the victims of kidnappings.

<sup>10</sup> For a snapshot of the kidnapping industry, see: Semple, Kirk and Hosham Hussein, “Kidnapped in Iraq: Victim’s Tale of Clockwork Death and Ransom,” the *New York Times*, 7 May 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Personal communications, numerous Iraqis living in Iraq, 2006 and 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Al-Khalidi, Ashraf and Victor Tanner, “Iraq Bleeds,” *Refugees* (the UNHCR magazine), April 2007, p. 8.

Should wholesale organized conflict break out between Shi'a and Sunni with the use of heavy artillery and armor against urban neighborhoods, or should rural tribes become more heavily involved in the violence, displacement could increase exponentially.

Displacement could also increase if intra-sectarian tensions and violence against minority groups continue to grow as they have in the past six months. Since the fall of 2006, several southern cities have witnessed pitched battles between the rival Shi'a militias of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and the Mahdi Army.<sup>13</sup> More recently, violence between Sunni insurgent groups has increased in Anbar, Salah ad-Din and Diyala governorates, pitting more traditional tribal elements against al-Qaeda-affiliated groups.<sup>14</sup> These clashes involve considerable violence against civilians and will contribute to the general atmosphere of lawlessness and insecurity which in turn fuels refugee flows.

Syria, because of its proximity to Iraq and the mix of political and social factors that make it relatively welcoming to Iraqis in search of a haven, should expect to receive a large proportion of future outflows of refugees from Iraq.

## **Iraqi Refugees in Syria**

It is estimated that there are 1.2 million Iraqi refugees in the Syrian Arab Republic.<sup>15</sup> Recent reports from the UN suggest the number might be as high as 1.4 or 1.5 million.<sup>16</sup> Of these, not all are refugees in the pure sense of the word. Some have come to seek an income and some maintain close ties to Iraq, even traveling back and forth between the two countries. But the majority have fled violence in Iraq and cannot return home. For many, their situation is growing increasingly precarious as the cost of living in Syria rises and their resources diminish.

There is little systematic information on the Iraqi refugees in Syria. The only assessments to date are a March 2006 joint assessment by UNHCR, UNICEF and the World Food Programme (WFP), and an unpublished 2007 paper by the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Other efforts to collect data are underway. The reasons for the paucity of concrete figures include the sudden onset of the crisis, the lack of existing capacity within the Syrian government and UNHCR Syria, and the highly political nature

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<sup>13</sup> See Semple, Kirk, "Militias Battle for Iraqi City as Shiite Rivalry Escalates," the *New York Times*, 21 October 2006.

<sup>14</sup> See Raghavan, Sudarsan, "Sunni Factions Split With Al-Qaeda Group: Rift Further Blurs Battle Lines in Iraq," the *Washington Post*, 14 April 2007.

<sup>15</sup> UNHCR Syria Situation Report 3 May 2007. The Syrian Government has also reportedly estimated the Iraqi refugee population at 1.4 million. See UHCR, news report, "UNHCR Gives Syria US\$2.06 Million to Boost Health Care Facilities and Skills," 1 May 2007.

<sup>16</sup> "1.4 million:" Personal communications, UNHCR and UNICEF officials, Damascus, March 2007. "1.5 million:" Personal communication, UNHCR senior official, Geneva, May 2007.

of the problem. In the meantime, this paper aims to give those concerned by the Iraqi refugee crisis in Syria a snapshot of the conditions of this exile.

### **Timeline of Arrivals Since 2003**

Two waves of Iraqi refugees have come to Syria over the course of the past 25 years. The first wave came in the 1970s and 1980s. Some of them were political refugees, many of them Sunni, who had fallen out with Saddam Hussein and were seeking asylum with the rival Ba‘thist regime in Syria. Others were Shi‘a fleeing Ba‘thi persecution. Following the first Gulf War and the Iraqi government’s ferocious repression of the Shi‘a *intifadha* in the South, the Iraq-Syria border remained closed throughout the 1990s. It only re-opened in 2001-2002, and at first only for businessmen who were sponsored by chambers of commerce in both countries. Gradually more people were able to cross. Many engaged in petty trade, traveling back and forth between the two countries.

The current crisis is the second wave. It, too, has also evolved along a number of milestones.

- The invasion in 2003 sparked some limited displacement, but nothing like the doomsday scenario predicted by many aid agencies prior to the war.<sup>17</sup> The people who moved then were mostly rich Iraqis with strong ties to the former regime.
- The next milestone was the mounting violence in Anbar governorate in 2004. Fighting between US forces and Sunni insurgents – and the US sieges of Falluja, first in April-May and then especially in November 2004 – led to a large number of Sunni refugees, many of whom went to Syria. After US Marines took Falluja in November, the town was for all intents and purposes closed. Residents needed to register to enter the town, which was heavily damaged. Life there was close to intolerable for lack of basic services, trade and ordinary living conditions.<sup>18</sup>
- The other impact of the November 2004 battle for Falluja is that it forced the insurgents to leave the town. Many moved to Baghdad’s western neighborhoods (Khadhra’, Amiriya, Hay al-Jaami‘a and Mansuur). This increased both the level of military operations in those areas and overall sectarian tension in Baghdad, which in turn led to more displacement out of Baghdad.
- In 2004, the hardening of both Sunni and Shi‘a militant groups in their areas of control in Iraqi towns – especially the large towns – led many secular and often more affluent families to move abroad, away from the increasingly hard-line

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<sup>17</sup> See UNOCHA: “Flash Appeal for the Humanitarian Requirements of the Iraq Crisis - Six-Month Response,” March 2003; and UN: “The Revised Humanitarian Appeal for Iraq,” June 2003.

<sup>18</sup> See Constable, Pamela, “U.S. and Iraqi Forces Seal Off Fallujah as Operation Looms,” the *Washington Post*, 6 April 2004; Peterson, Scott, “Next Fallujah Battle: Hearts, Minds,” the *Christian Science Monitor*, 16 November 2004.

religious atmosphere in their home areas which threatened their lifestyles. This was true of both Sunni and Shi'a.

- A further milestone was the string of church bombings in Baghdad in August and November 2004. Many Christians fled to Mosul and also to Syria following those attacks, thought to be the work of hard-line Sunni groups.<sup>19</sup> In 2004, Christian and Sabean communities in southern Iraq also came under pressure from radical Shi'a groups, and many Christians and Sabeans left towns like Basra, Amara and Nasiriyya for Syria.
- The major turning point, however, was the bombing of the Shi'a shrine in Samarra in February 2006. As noted above, that attack led to the end of Shi'a restraint. Shi'a revenge attacks on Sunni neighborhoods, mostly by the Mahdi Army, marked the beginning of reciprocal, retaliatory sectarian violence which, in turn, has led to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis. Intra-sectarian violence (Sunni-Sunni and Shi'a-Shi'a) between radical groups is also becoming a factor in the displacement of populations as it adds to the insecurity and dislocation of everyday life in Iraq, forcing people to leave. In Syria, the increase in the numbers of Iraqi refugees following the Samarra attack was clear.
- Another milestone is the US-led Security Plan and the so-called 'surge' in US forces in early 2007. The implementation of this Plan has forced many Iraqis associated with anti-MNF groups to leave the country – in Syria, there has been an increase in people connected to both the Sunni insurgency and the Shi'a Mahdi Army. Others fled simply because they anticipated an increase in fighting between US forces and insurgents.
- Finally, to a smaller extent, a spate of incidents in the latter half of 2006 and early 2007 between Iraqi Kurdish forces on the one hand and Yazidi and Assyrian communities in and around Mosul has reportedly led to a small influx of Yazidis into Syria.

In summary, different sectarian and economic groups began coming to Syria at different points in time. Before the war, there were already Shi'a refugees, people who were employed in Syria and traveled to and from Iraq. After the war, the first to come were members of the former regime, many but not all of whom were Sunni and most of whom were wealthy. Then came wealthier and secular Shi'a, because of lifestyle changes, as well as Christians and Sabeans. In 2006 a massive influx of poor Shi'a arrived. Finally, in early 2007, there has been a small influx of both Sunni and Shi'a who feared that the US surge could lead to more violence. Now, the perception is that, as a result of the degradation of the security situation, both Sunni and Shi'a are coming and that, increasingly, those arriving are poor.

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<sup>19</sup> See Zoepf, Katherine, "Christians Flee Iraq as Attacks on Them Rise; Many Move to Syria to Escape Extremists," the *New York Times*, 5 August 2004.

## **Iraqis in Syria: Who Are They?**

### *Urban:*

The majority of the Iraqi refugees in Syria come from urban areas in Iraq. The reason for this is twofold. First, many of the Sunni refugees who fled fighting between insurgents and MNF and Iraqi forces in Anbar, Nineweh and Salah ad-Din were urban dwellers because the violence occurred mostly in the towns – Ramadi, Falluja, Habbaniya, ar-Rutba, al-Qaim, Tal Afar, Tikrit and others – and rural populations were at less risk. These people left because of the violence from both sides: the MNF and the radical groups. Second, much of the sectarian violence occurred in the mixed Sunni and Shi‘a areas which are, or were, overwhelmingly urban. These include Iraq’s largest cities: Baghdad (Iraq in miniature), Mosul and Basra. It also includes mixed towns in northern Babil governorate (Yusifiyya, Latifiyya, Mahmudiyya), in Salah ad-Din governorate (Balad, Dujail, Samarra), and Diyala (Muqdadiya, Baquba). In recent months, there are reports that sectarian – as opposed to political – violence has been on the rise in Kirkuk.

### *Mixed:*

The Iraqis in Syria represent all the communities of their home country, and hail from most of its regions. Most of the refugees are from Baghdad – from all the city’s diverse communities. After that, the largest ‘geographical’ group is that of Sunni Iraqis from Anbar and Salah ad-Din in particular and from Sunni cities and neighborhoods in general. Most Sunnis prefer living in Syria to being displaced in Sunni areas. The Sunni areas offer little in the way of security or economic opportunity, and many urban, moderate or secular Sunnis do not want to live under the sway of Salafi insurgent groups. Then there are Christians from Baghdad, Mosul and Basra, and Sabeans from Baghdad, Basra, Amara, and Nasiriyya.

Until recently, very few Kurds have come to Syria. Kurds in the northern governorates (Erbil, Dohuk and Suleymaniya) had little reason to leave. Iraqi Kurds fleeing south and central Iraq have normally, until recently, preferred to go to the Kurdish areas of Iraq, both because they are well received and also because they believe that Syrian Kurds suffer harassment by Syrian authorities. However, in April and May 2007, larger numbers of Iraqi Kurds began to cross the border. Iraqis in Syria say this is linked to tensions between Turkey and the president of the Kurdistan Regional Government, Mas‘ud Barzani, over the presence of PKK forces (Turkish Kurdish insurgents) in northern Iraq, and fears among Iraqi Kurds of a Turkish intervention.<sup>20</sup> Many of the Kurds seem to be crossing into Syria in the hope of obtaining third-country resettlement through international channels. Iraqi Kurds in Erbil on the other hand, contacted by phone, say their people were leaving to seek a better life and not because of the security situation.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Personal communications (phone), Iraqi refugees in Syria, May 2007.

<sup>21</sup> Personal communications (phone), Iraqi Kurds in Erbil, May 2007.

In May 2007, UNHCR reported an unexpected influx of Kurdish men at the refugee registration center in Douma, Syria. The men registered for asylum interviews in Douma and returned to northern Iraq. Because the men were able to return freely to their homes, UNHCR officials do not believe they are refugees in a strict sense, but rather asylum-seekers. UNHCR has delayed their interviews until August 2008 to stem a potential further exodus of Kurds.<sup>22</sup>

#### *The Shi'a:*

It may come as a surprise that so many Iraqi Shi'a have sought refuge in Syria – a country with a broad Sunni majority. Why did they not go to the Shi'a-majority areas of southern Iraq, or even Iran? According to numerous interviews with Shi'a Iraqis in Syria, there are several answers to this. First, like many other Iraqi refugees, Iraqi Shi'a leave their country for Syria not only to seek security but also in the hope of better economic conditions – work opportunities in Iraq are, of course, very limited, even in the relatively stable areas of the South. Second, again like other Iraqi refugees, many Shi'a go to Syria in the hope of obtaining asylum or resettlement in third countries, something they cannot do in Iraq. Third, many urban moderate or secular Shi'a do not want to live under the strict religious laws of the South, or under the control of the different radical Shi'a groups that control most of the South. People from Baghdad, especially, are used to a freer life. Fourth, over the past six months, most southern governorates (Basra, Muthanna, Dhi-Qar, Kerbala and Babylon) have restricted the entry of displaced people who do not have relatives in the governorate, do not belong to local tribes or do not have kin with whom they can live. Babylon makes an exception only for professionals, and Kerbala for displaced who have money. Muthanna is reportedly paying non-local displaced to leave the governorate.<sup>23</sup> These moves reflect the displaced overload in the South, with overcrowded schools, strained basic services and rising rental prices. Moreover, rising intra-Shi'a tension and even fighting between the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and the Mahdi Army make the South “increasingly unappealing” for Shi'a fleeing violence elsewhere in Iraq.<sup>24</sup> Lastly, and this is important, Shi'a Iraqis do not move to Iran because the vast majority feel more comfortable in an Arab country, where people speak Arabic. (Also, more prosaically, Iran requires an entry visa for Iraqis, while Syria does not.)

#### *Minorities:*

Three minority groups – the Christians, the Sabeen-Madeans and the Palestinians – warrant a specific mention.

*Christians:* Christians form an important part of the Iraqi refugee population in Syria – a far larger proportion than they did in Iraq. A number left Iraq in the 1990s, both because

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<sup>22</sup> UNHCR Syria Situation Report 3 May 2007.

<sup>23</sup> International Organisation for Migration (IOM): Update on Needs and Statistics, 17 April 2007, *passim*; personal communications (phone), Iraqis in Iraq, May 2007.

<sup>24</sup> Personal communication (email), Dana Graber of IOM, 3 May 2007.

of the economic crisis and as a result of a Saddam-era faith-based campaign (*al-hamla al-imaniyya*) which brought forth a novel element of religious intolerance. After the 2003 invasion, pressure mounted on Christian communities.<sup>25</sup> Many Christians had been governmental employees under Saddam, which gave them an (undeserved) reputation as servants of the regime. Christians were also associated with the international presence, and many did indeed work for foreign organizations and even the MNF. Radicals also targeted a typically Christian livelihood, the sale of alcohol, and Christian women for not wearing full Islamic dress.<sup>26</sup> Hard-line Islamic groups began referring to Christians as *nasaara*, which was perceived as threatening.<sup>27</sup> Recent news from the traditionally mixed neighborhood of Dora indicate that radical Sunni insurgents are asking local Christians to pay a monthly \$100 *jizya* (a head-tax that non-Muslims historically paid in Muslim states) to the “Mosque,” or leave. If they leave, they are not allowed to take furniture or belongings unless they pay a fee of up to \$5,000.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, Christians don’t have the tribal structures that can help protect them in times of high insecurity. Many Christians left Baghdad after the spate of church bombings in 2004.<sup>29</sup>

In Syria, they tend to settle in neighborhoods where there are Syrian Christians (Jaramana, Saidanaya, Kashkoul in Damascus; Aleppo; Hasaka and Qamishli in northern Syria). But they claim they have received little help from their Syrian brethren. Many Christians have relatives in the West and hope to move – though there is a very strong feeling among the various Iraqi Christian denominations, as well as among Sabean, that leaving Iraq will lead to the disappearance of their communities and their distinct identities.<sup>30</sup>

*Sabeans:* The Sabean-Mandean community is a small monotheistic community centered in southern Iraq and Iran. They are neither Christian nor Muslim. They do not proselytize: the only way to become Sabean is to be born to two Sabean parents. Many Sabean left Iraq in the 1990s, fleeing intense discrimination. They have strong communities in Australia, Sweden and Holland. In Iraq they were famous as goldsmiths and jewelers, and their reputation as wealthy merchants put the community at heightened risk for ransom kidnappings.<sup>31</sup> Following the 2003 invasion, they quickly became targets for both

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<sup>25</sup> There is a wide literature on the post-2003 plight of Christians in Iraq. For a snapshot see Al-Atraqchi, Firas, “Fighting Robs Iraq of Christian Heritage,” *Al Jazeera*, 8 June 2006, (<http://english.aljazeera.net/English/Archive/Archive?ArchiveID=22771>, accessed June 2007); UN-IRIN, news report: “Baghdad Christians Flee as Violence Against Them Mounts,” 3 May 2007.

<sup>26</sup> Interviews, Iraqi Christian refugees, Jaramana (Damascus), March-April 2007. See also Constable, Pamela, “In Iraq, Booze Becomes a Risky Business; Fundamentalists Blamed for Wave of Attacks on Shops, Owners,” the *Washington Post*, 21 July 2004.

<sup>27</sup> *Nasaara* is the plural of *nasraani*, a Koranic term for Christians. But it is now used by the radical groups in Iraq in a highly pejorative way, which threatens Christians, who prefer their term (*masiih*, pl. *masiihiin*).

<sup>28</sup> Personal communication (email), Baghdad resident, May 2007.

<sup>29</sup> Al-Khalidi, Ashraf and Victor Tanner, “Sectarian Violence: Radical Groups Drive Internal Displacement in Iraq,” Brookings, October 2006, p. 23.

<sup>30</sup> Interviews, Iraqi Christian refugees, Syria, March-April 2007.

<sup>31</sup> Interviews, Sabean refugees, Jaramana (Damascus), March-April 2007.

armed gangs and radical groups, both in Baghdad and in Basra.<sup>32</sup> Unlike the Yazidis of Sheikhan (northwestern Iraq), the Sabeans have no ‘tribal’ home area that is exclusively theirs. Many Sabeans moved to Syria. Their spiritual leader, Dr. Abdul-Sattar al-Hilu left Baghdad and now lives in Damascus’ Jaramana neighborhood, where many other Sabeans live. Many have opened groceries and alcohol shops. The Sabeans form a tight-knit community with high degree of solidarity; they formed an unofficial society in Syria, *al-Jam‘iyya al-Mindaiyya*.<sup>33</sup>

Both Iraqi Christians and Sabeans have generated hostility in more conservative Syrian circles because of their involvement in selling alcohol.

*Palestinians from Iraq:* There were about 30,000 Palestinians in Iraq. They are targeted in Iraq because of the preferential treatment – perceived or real – they received under Saddam and because, as Sunni, they are caught up in the sectarian violence, mostly in Baghdad.<sup>34</sup> The Palestinians in Iraq are for the most part not registered with the UN. As a result of the violence against them, many Palestinians came to Syria. At first, the Syrian government let them in. Some who entered Syria between 2003 and 2005 live in northern Syria, while most moved to the Yarmouk Palestinian ‘camp’ (in fact, a suburb), near Damascus, and other parts of Damascus. Many Palestinians entered Syria on Iraqi papers – and some continue to do so, although fewer.<sup>35</sup>

In early 2006, the Syrian government changed course, restricting the entry of Palestinians coming from Iraq. In April-May 2006, UNHCR, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) organized a convoy to Syria for Palestinians who had been stranded on the Iraqi-Jordanian border, where Jordanian authorities had refused them entry. After negotiations with the Syrian government, these people were allowed into Syria and then settled in a camp at al-Hol, near Hasaka, in northeastern Syria.<sup>36</sup> They have access to some local services such as schools. Observers point out that Hamas, which had swept to victory in the January 2006 Palestinian parliamentary elections, played a proactive role in resolving the deadlock around the Palestinian refugees blocked between Iraq and Jordan.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Minority Rights Group International: “Assimilation, Exodus, Eradication: Iraq’s Minority Communities Since 2003,” February 2007.

<sup>33</sup> Interviews, Sabean members of the association, Jaramana (Damascus), March-April 2007.

<sup>34</sup> See also, Human Rights Watch, “Nowhere to Flee: The Perilous Situation of Palestinians in Iraq,” September 2006, pp. 7-10, 12-16, 23-28.

<sup>35</sup> Phone interviews, UNICEF official in Syria and Palestinian rights activist in Washington DC, May 2007.

<sup>36</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Nowhere to Flee: The Perilous Situation of Palestinians in Iraq,” September 2006, p. 40; email communication, UNHCR official, May 2007. Observers told us that Hamas officials played a role in these negotiations.

<sup>37</sup> Phone interview, Palestinian rights activist, Washington DC, May 2007. See also: “Over 200 Palestinian Refugees Arrive in Syria After Two-Month Wait,” *Deutsche Press Agentur*, 09 May 2006.

Following this episode, several hundred Palestinians left Iraq in the belief that the Syrian government had adopted a more welcoming policy.<sup>38</sup> Most were refused entry and ended up blocked in at-Tanf, on the Syrian side of the no-man's land between Syria and Iraq. They are in a tented camp, in very poor conditions. In late April 2007, a fire destroyed living spaces and injured 28 in the settlement.<sup>39</sup> There are currently around 350 refugees in at-Tanf.<sup>40</sup> Many Palestinians are being denied entry altogether. As Iraqi Sunni insurgents focus on pushing Palestinian families out of Anbar governorate, a growing pocket has formed on the Iraqi side of the border, in a camp called Manteqat al-Walid.<sup>41</sup> UN officials say there are nearly 1,000 Palestinians in al-Walid, living in very poor conditions.<sup>42</sup>

Palestinians in Syria are very concerned about the plight of the Palestinian refugees in Iraq, though they have little to offer in the way of concrete assistance.<sup>43</sup>

*Presence of Iraqi radical group members in Syria:* Numerous sources confirm that both Sunni and Shi'a radical armed groups have people in Syria. The Ba'athi resistance is without doubt the group with the strongest presence. From the early days of the US-led invasion, US officials stated their belief that senior leaders of the Ba'athist resistance were operating out of Syria. In one example among many, a "senior Ba'ath party organizer and Saddam Hussein aide, Mohammed Younis al-Ahmed, has been named by western intelligence officials as one of the key figures directing the Sunni insurgency from his hiding-place in neighboring Syria."<sup>44</sup> The presence of senior Ba'athist leaders in Syria is widely accepted, including in the Arab press.<sup>45</sup> A former Iraqi police officer who had worked for the new government in Iraq told our interviewers in Syria, "I saw some of the people who threatened me [in Iraq] here. I am really afraid. I don't know if they were following me or it's just a coincidence. I try my best not to mix with Iraqis."<sup>46</sup>

In the past one to two years, however, people linked at a lower level to both Sunni and Shi'a radical and insurgent groups have begun coming to Syria, some as refugees (though

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<sup>38</sup> Phone interview, Palestinian rights activist (Washington DC), May 2007, based on the latter's field interviews with these Palestinians.

<sup>39</sup> UNHCR news report, "Fire Sweeps Through Al Tanf Camp, Injures 28 Palestinian Refugees," 25 April 2007.

<sup>40</sup> Personal communications, UNHCR and UNICEF officials, May 2007.

<sup>41</sup> UN-IRIN news reports: "Militants Force Palestinians to Leave Anbar," 24 April 2007, and "Palestinian Refugees Despair After Year Marooned Between Iraq and Syria," 3 May 2007.

<sup>42</sup> Personal communication, UNICEF official, May 2007.

<sup>43</sup> Interviews, Palestinians long established in Syria, Yarmouk, near Damascus, March-April 2007.

<sup>44</sup> Beaumont, Peter, "Saddam Aide in Exile Heads List of Most Wanted Rebels," the *Observer*, 17 October 2004.

<sup>45</sup> See for example a report on *al-Arabiya* on an Iraqi Ba'ath party leadership meeting in Syria in early 2007: "The conflict between the two wings [of the Iraqi Ba'ath party]," *al-Arabiya* Arabic web service <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2007/01/22/30977.htm>, accessed 11 May 2007.

<sup>46</sup> Interview, Syria, March-April 2007.

numbers likely remain low). There are several explanations for this, according to Iraqis interviewed. More and more ordinary Iraqis are tied to the radical groups, often without choice, whether as 'fighters' or because family members have joined the groups. These people, too, are affected by the violence and the resulting hardships. They left for many of the same reasons as ordinary refugees and have the same problems and aspirations. At least one person known as a member of the Sunni insurgency was granted asylum in a western European country. What is unclear, however, is the extent to which these people remain part of their organizations once in Syria. Active members of the radical groups – again, both Sunni and Shi'a – come to Syria to procure goods and especially to contact non-Iraqi insurgents headed for Iraq.<sup>47</sup> Some come for rest-and-recuperation, or even to check up on whether other members of the group are living cleanly, in keeping with strict Islamic instructions. One Sunni person interviewed reported seeing the member of the Mahdi Army who was responsible for displacing him. In early 2007, Iraqis interviewed in Syria reported seeing more members of sectarian militias, both Sunni and Shi'a, who came to Syria to avoid the so-called US surge and the Baghdad Security Plan.<sup>48</sup> However, it should be stressed again that the great majority of Iraqi refugees in Syria – and indeed elsewhere – are victims of violence, and not perpetrators.

What emerges from this picture is that ethnicity is not always a relevant criterion in establishing categories among the Iraqi refugees in Syria. There is a danger in seeing Iraq through a sectarian prism. Many people left for reasons that were not sectarian in nature. Once in Syria, sectarian identity becomes less of a factor in the day-to-day life of the Iraqis. This may be encouraged by the softer sectarian divides in Syrian society. Sectarian identity is not worn as openly in Syria as it is in Iraq today. Neighborhoods are not organized on a communal basis the way they often are in Iraq. Among the refugees, ethnicity and religion only play a determining role inasmuch as they help determine the economic position (e.g., rich Sunni Ba'athists), the economic activity (e.g., Sabians and Christians selling alcohol) or how hard it is to travel to and from Iraq (more dangerous for Shi'a).

### **Reasons for Departure**

The refugees left for different reasons which can be broken down into the following categories:

#### *People who left because of sectarian and other violence:*

This category comprises Iraqis from all confessions. Varying degrees of violence were involved in the decisions of Iraqis to leave their communities. Some people left because of general sectarian violence, even if they were not directly threatened: because their neighborhoods were emptying, their co-religionists were leaving, and people were afraid

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<sup>47</sup> Personal communication with an Iraqi who, while in jail in Damascus on immigration charges, met several Sunni Iraqis whose role it was to escort non-Iraqi *mujahidiin* to the border, Baghdad, 2006.

<sup>48</sup> The above paragraph is based on numerous interviews and personal communications from Iraqi refugees, Sunni and Shi'a, in Damascus, March-April 2007.

of future violence. Other Iraqis were directly threatened by radical armed groups for sectarian reasons, and left in response to those threats. Some people left after radical groups already visited violence upon them and family members were lost. Our interviews offered an endless list of crimes – murders, abductions, torture and beatings, direct and indirect threats.

Many Sunnis and Shi‘a also decided to leave because they did not want to live under the restrictive religious and social edicts imposed by radical groups, even of the same community. So Sunnis are leaving hard-line Sunni areas and Shi‘a are leaving hard-line Shi‘a areas.

Many Christian (Chaldeans, Assyrians and others) and other minorities (Sabeans-Mandeans, Yazidis) left because of a general hardening of radical religious groups who targeted their livelihoods and imposed draconian restrictions on how they could worship or even live their everyday lives. Local rights groups in northern Iraq also report that Iraqi Kurdish authorities have intimidated Yazidi and Assyrian communities in their areas of control.<sup>49</sup>

Finally, many people have left because of general lawlessness; they risk being killed or injured by random violence or being targeted for abduction.

*Groups at risk for one reason or another:*

Here again, these groups include people from all communities. Some refugees related to the former regime (Ba‘th party members, governmental officials and military officers) felt threatened by radical Shi‘a groups and the new Iraqi government. Some people, usually members of radical groups on either side of the sectarian divide left because they were wanted by the Iraqi government or the MNF.

Many young men left Iraq in order to avoid being caught up in the violence, either as victims or as perpetrators. A young Sunni Kurd interviewed in Syria was a student in Baghdad when the Mahdi Army forced him from his Shi‘a neighborhood into a Sunni area. In his new neighborhood Sunni militants put pressure on him to join the insurgency. In 2006 he fled Iraq altogether and resettled in Jamarana, Damascus.<sup>50</sup>

Some refugees left because they had worked with the new Iraqi government, with the MNF or with any international entity, including contractors and NGOs, and were branded as collaborators by radical groups on both sides.<sup>51</sup> Affiliation with these organizations

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<sup>49</sup> For an illustration of such case see, “Kurds Block Assyrians, Shabaks From Police Force in North Iraq,” 24 June 2006, from the Assyrian International News Agency ([www.aina.org](http://www.aina.org)). For recent developments in Kurdish-Yazidi relations see Kasim, Zeyad, “Showdown Looming in Basrah, Residents Say Yazidi Rioters Burn KDP Headquarters Near Mosul,” *IraqSlogger*, 1 May 2007.

<sup>50</sup> Interview, Jamarana (Damascus), March-April 2007.

<sup>51</sup> For an examples of this see Packer, George, “Betrayed: The Iraqis Who Trusted America the Most,” the *New Yorker*, 26 March 2007; Jamail, Dahr, “Refugees Speak of Escape from Hell,” *Inter Press Service News Agency*, 11 April 2007.

need not be deep to attract unwanted attention – an Iraqi man interviewed in Syria reported he was forced to leave following rumors that he had sold furniture to Americans. A Sunni woman told our researchers, “The Americans used to raid our house so frequently [you’d think it] was an office within the Ministry of Defense! The problem is they started to say hello to my son whenever they came to the area. People thought he was working with them.”<sup>52</sup>

Some refugees are people whose occupation puts them at risk with the radical groups, both Sunni and Shi’a: barbers, alcohol shop owners, etc. Others are college professors, intellectuals, journalists, lawyers, physicians (especially specialists) and other prominent professionals on both sides who faced elimination campaigns in Iraq.<sup>53</sup> Many affluent people left Iraq for fear of being kidnapped for ransom, or because they had already been abducted in the past.<sup>54</sup>

Finally, some refugees fled because of tensions within families that boiled over as a result of the general lawlessness, e.g., domestic disputes, property disputes, and so on.

*Groups who left because of fighting between insurgents and the MNF and Iraqi government military:*

At the outset of the war, MNF military operations were the primary cause of population displacement, and fighting between MNF and Iraqi army on the one hand and Sunni insurgents remains a major cause for displacement today.<sup>55</sup> MNF offensives in Falluja in November 2004 alone accounted for more than 200,000 displaced.<sup>56</sup> Though fighting between the MNF and insurgents continues to disrupt neighborhoods, the deteriorating security situation means that most of this activity – and the displacements it causes – escapes media attention.

Current reports from Baghdad indicate that the US ‘surge’ and resulting offensives against suspected insurgents is creating displacement, for instance in Sadr City.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Interview, Syria, March-April 2007.

<sup>53</sup> “Professors and intellectuals:” It is reported that more than 230 university professors have been assassinated and 3,000 have fled the country since 2003. See IraqSlogger, news report: “Blood on Textbooks: Campuses Under Fire,” 16 April 2007. “Journalists:” See Reporters Without Borders: “2007 Annual Report – Middle East: Graveyard of Freedom,” pp. 140-141. “Lawyers:” According to the Iraqi Lawyers Association at least 210 lawyers and judges have been assassinated since March 2003. See UN-IRIN: “Justice Delayed as Lawyers Live Under Threat,” 30 April 2007. “Physicians:” see below, “*Other reasons for departure.*”

<sup>54</sup> Youssef, Nancy A., “In Baghdad, Wealth is an Inviting Target; Affluent Hide Riches to Thwart Criminals,” *Knight Ridder Foreign Service*, 18 June 2006.

<sup>55</sup> Numerous personal communications from Iraqis living in Anbar governorate (2006-2007) and with Iraqi refugees in Syria, March-April 2007.

<sup>56</sup> UNAMI Iraq Situation Report 15-28 November 2004.

<sup>57</sup> UN-IRIN, “Families Begin to Flee Baghdad Suburb as US-led Forces Strike,” 07 May 2007.

The groups that have left are mostly Sunni from Anbar and Nineweh governorates, and also Sunni urban-dwellers from certain towns in Salah ad-Din, Diyala and northern Babil governorates. It is worth noting that many see themselves as sectarian refugees because they view the Iraqi government as a Shi'a entity and the MNF as its ally. Some Shi'a around Najaf were displaced by the fighting between the US and Mahdi Army in the summer of 2004, but most of those have returned.

*People who left for economic reasons:*

These include refugees who left because their livelihoods collapsed in Iraq: shopkeepers, market sellers, transporters, craftsmen and artisans, technicians, small business owners, and so on. Many have left because their businesses were physically destroyed or folded due to the impact of the violence on markets, infrastructure, transport and communications – not to mention the general decline in purchasing power.<sup>58</sup> Shops and factories are a stationary target for insurgents, and many owners were forced to flee from the mounting expenses of blackmail and protection money.<sup>59</sup> Others who left Iraq for economic reasons include individuals with large businesses and capital for whom Syria offered an opportunity. However, many of the businessmen who came to Syria already had ties in that country, and therefore moved there. (Many who did not have ties to Syria moved to Jordan, where the business environment is more rewarding for large investors.)

*Other reasons for departure include the following:*

- Some Iraqis who were forced to flee mixed neighborhoods left the country after discovering their homes had been commandeered by militants or were occupied by other displaced people. An elderly Sunni man interviewed in Syria reported that his family fled their Shi'a neighborhood in Baghdad after being branded a Wahhabi. When the family attempted to return they found their home had been given to a displaced Shi'a family by militants intent on homogenizing the neighborhood.<sup>60</sup>
- Some refugees came to Syria because they had family members there. Others left Iraq because a member of their family obtained asylum in a third country and they planned to join them through Syria.
- Many Iraqis came to Syria to obtain health care. Violence has pushed Iraq's health care system to its breaking point.<sup>61</sup> Hospitals face massive shortages of both medical supplies and competent staff. At the outset of the war, Iraq had

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<sup>58</sup> For an illustration of this situation see UN-IRIN: "Life as a Street Seller – Dodging Bombs," 20 November 2006.

<sup>59</sup> Interview, Sunni businessman blackmailed by Badr Brigades, Syria, March-April 2007. See also Dan Murphy, "Death Squads Deepen Division in Baghdad," the *Christian Science Monitor*, 8 May 2006.

<sup>60</sup> Interviews, Syria, March-April 2007.

<sup>61</sup> For a description of this situation, see Médecins Sans Frontières: "Iraq: A Health Care System Overwhelmed," September 2006.

34,000 registered doctors; since then 2,000 have been killed and only 12,000 remain in country.<sup>62</sup> The Iraqi government now reports that “almost 70 percent of critically injured patients with violence-related wounds die while in emergency and intensive care units due to a shortage of competent staff and a lack of drugs and equipment.”<sup>63</sup> Numerous people with chronic health conditions (especially diabetes and cancer) or serious injuries left Iraq to seek health care. An Iraqi man interviewed in Syria reported that he left Baghdad when his wife became pregnant, noting that there were too many uncertainties surrounding a delivery in Baghdad.<sup>64</sup> Also, insecurity often makes it very hard for people to access hospitals that might be under the control of an ‘opposing’ group.<sup>65</sup>

- A large number of Iraqis continue to come and go to Syria for business (drivers, merchants, etc.) Some Iraqis travel through Syria for onward travel, for instance for Hajj and Umra, because onward flights are cheaper from there. These are not refugees *stricto sensu*, but some end up not returning to Iraq.

### Why Syria?

Syria, with Jordan, hosts the largest caseload of Iraqi refugees. Why is it that so many different Iraqis – people of different religions and sects, from different home areas, with different levels of wealth and different reasons for leaving – have chosen Syria? A number of different factors are at play.

*Geographic proximity:* One of the most important factors is that Syria is close to Iraq, with a common border. It is easier to get to Syria than to Jordan, as the road to Amman crosses the width of the highly volatile Anbar governorate. Shi‘a especially cannot safely drive the road to Amman, and even Sunnis who do not have strong connections in Anbar do not like to take the road. The overland roads to Syria on the other hand, while not secure, are safer. Syria is especially attractive for people who have businesses or family members in Iraq and want to come and go.

*Simple entry requirements:* A second critical factor is that it is easier for Iraqis to enter Syria than any other country. Syria does not require a visa for Iraqis (or other Arabs) to enter the country. The Syrian government adheres to a strong commitment to pan-Arab solidarity, which it feels compelled to uphold. And, much like the government of Albania during the crisis in Kosovo, the government feels that it cannot be perceived as betraying prior commitments, even as the refugee burden increases.

A related issue is that, at the Syrian border, the whole family can be sure it will be admitted. In other countries, admittance is far more arbitrary: border authorities may

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<sup>62</sup> Brookings Iraq Index, April 2007, p. 42. ([www.brookings.edu/iraqindex](http://www.brookings.edu/iraqindex))

<sup>63</sup> World Health Organisation, news release: “Violence Threatens Health in Iraq,” April 2007.

<sup>64</sup> Interview, Syria, March-April 2007.

<sup>65</sup> Cave, Damien, “In Baghdad, Sectarian Lines Too Deadly to Cross,” the *New York Times*, 4 March 2007

admit some members of a family and turn others away.<sup>66</sup> There are also reports that in Jordan, Iraqis are asked by immigration and security officials at the border whether they are Sunni or Shi'a.<sup>67</sup> Shi'a in particular find this very humiliating, as the question is usually directed at them. This does not happen with Syrian authorities.

*Easy access to services:* Another factor is that Syrian services are more open to Iraqis than services in other countries. For example, Iraqi refugees can enroll their children in Syrian schools, even if many end up not doing so. Health services are also more accessible. (See the *Health* and *Education* sections below.)

*Employment and low cost of living:* Economic factors also play an important role. It is easier for the refugees to find small jobs in Syria than it is in Jordan, where Iraqi refugees who have jobs sometimes report difficulties getting paid at the end of the month. The cost of living is also lower in Syria than in many other neighboring countries.<sup>68</sup> This explains why, generally speaking, Iraqi refugees in Syria are poorer than in other countries: most are low or middle-income, and were already hard hit by years of sanctions in the 1990s.

*Other reasons:* Finally there are also more intangible factors at play, but that come up repeatedly in conversations with Iraqi refugees and which are clearly important. First, Syrians have a better reputation with Iraqis than do many other Arabs. For many Sunnis, Syria is not seen as pro-US the way some other Arab countries are. For many Shi'a, Syrians did not receive from the Saddam Hussein regime the preferential treatment they believe many Jordanians and Palestinians received (although some Syrian political opponents did receive preferential treatment). More broadly speaking, and despite many complaints, Iraqis know that they are treated better in Syria than they are elsewhere. Iraqis and Syrians have similar living conditions, which makes them closer. Iraqis feel the Syrians lack the arrogance they perceive from other, better-off Arab societies, for instance in the Gulf.

Second, there is a clear knock-on effect to the displacement in Syria: the establishment of refugee communities leads to the arrival of more refugees as people establish livelihoods, bring families and encourage friends to come. Interestingly, however, the Iraqi diaspora from the 1970s and 80s has remained fairly closed to the newcomers, and has not done much for them. This may be because their motives for departure from Iraq were different but also because long-term Iraqi refugees in Syria probably want to avoid being seen by their Syrian hosts, both official and private, as part of this new wave of refugees.

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<sup>66</sup> Interviews, Jordan and Iraq, March 2007.

<sup>67</sup> Interviews, Jordan and Iraq, March 2007. See also Human Rights Watch: "Iraq: From a Flood to a Trickle: Neighboring States Stop Iraqis Fleeing War and Persecution," April 2007, p. 10.

<sup>68</sup> World Bank: "2006 World Development Indicators," pp. 246-248

## Getting to Syria

The majority of Iraqis use buses and collective taxis to reach Syria. The cost of the bus fare from Baghdad to Sayyida Zeinab in Damascus is about \$20 per person. Taxis, usually large GMC four-wheel vehicles, ask for \$100 to \$150 per person, depending on the security situation on the road.<sup>69</sup> In May 2007, drivers started checking the weight of the luggage travelers bring with them, limiting it to 35kg or so. This is a real problem for refugees who hope to come with their Iraqi food rations.<sup>70</sup>

The market for international ground transportation has multiplied in recent years and dozens of new transportation offices have opened across Baghdad, especially in the Alawi and Hafedh al-Qadhi neighborhoods. There are also offices in Anbar, Mosul, Kirkuk, Tikrit, Diyala, Samarra and other Iraqi cities. In Damascus, buses and GMC taxis arrive at Sayyida Zeinab. This is where most Iraqis 'land' in Syria.

Inside Iraq, there are two main roads to Syria. The first one goes directly from Baghdad to Ramadi to ar-Rutba to at-Tanf to Damascus. The border station is called al-Walid. This road journey from Baghdad to Damascus takes 12 to 14 hours, while in the past it took only seven to eight hours. Few Shi'a use this road through Anbar governorate because it is highly dangerous and many people have been killed on it. Some people manage to make it safely by shadowing an American military convoy. Shi'a from the south used to travel from Kerbala straight north-east to Ramadi and then on to the Syrian border, but that road has become too dangerous now. Some Shi'a youth pretend to be Sunni, memorizing the names of well-known people from Sunni tribes and imitating the Ramadi accent.<sup>71</sup>

The second road goes from Baghdad to Balad to Tikrit to Mosul (Rabiaa) to Qamishli in Syria and is known as the Shi'a Road. The border station is called al-Yaarubiya. Recently, Shi'a have started traveling to Mosul through Kirkuk. It takes 14 to 20 hours to reach Aleppo (with an additional three hours to Damascus), sometimes longer. Recently, this route has also grown more dangerous, and many people, especially Shi'a, have been killed.

This insecurity is not new. These western roads were notorious for looters even before the fall of the former regime. But now the insecurity is due to attacks by insurgents (*mujahidiin*), who aim to kill, as well as armed bandits (*sallaba*), who aim to loot. The line between the two often blurs, as the same groups or individuals may often carry out both sets of activities, with the determining factor being the identity of the victim. If the victim is a Shi'a, then it is murder (and robbery to follow); if the victim is a Sunni, simple

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<sup>69</sup> Interviews, transportation office staff in Sayyida Zeinab and Jaramana (Damascus), March-April 2007.

<sup>70</sup> Interviews, Iraqi refugees, Sayyida Zeinab (Damascus), March-April 2007. We only heard of this in Sayyida Zeinab, which is the arrival point for buses from Iraq.

<sup>71</sup> Interviews, Shi'a refugees in Syria (March-April 2007).

robbery will do. Beyond robbery, Sunnis report being at risk for political and tribal reasons as well, which reflects growing intra-Sunni tensions.<sup>72</sup> A Sunni man interviewed in Syria reported that his bus was intercepted by insurgents en route to the border. The insurgents removed all Shi'a from the bus and also him, because he comes from a mixed Shi'a-Sunni tribe. Fortunately his family was able to persuade the insurgents to release him.<sup>73</sup> Also, Sunnis from certain areas (Qaim, Haditha, Rawa, and Ana, for instance), have been kidnapped and sometimes killed by Sunni insurgents because the latter consider them affiliated with the Iraqi Islamic Party with whom they are in conflict (the Iraqi Islamic Party, though radical, is in the Government). Sunni refugees interviewed also report that insurgents are intimidating Sunnis to not leave the country, telling them they should stay to fight the Americans and the *safawiyyin* (a disparaging term for Shi'a which refers to the Persian Safavid dynasty).<sup>74</sup>

The insecurity begins even in the western part of Baghdad, from Abu Ghraib westward. The most notorious area on the road is called Kilo 160 (80 kilometers north of Ramadi). Sheikh Abdul-Sattar Abu Risha of the Anbar Salvation Front, a Sunni tribal coalition seeking to counter al-Qaeda's influence in the governorate, is reported to be trying to clear the road of insurgents and looters. People report seeing the bodies of insurgents hanging from overpasses.<sup>75</sup>

People are targeted based on information the insurgents-cum-looters obtain from drivers and travel companies who may inform them, for payment, about who is on the road. Because of that, people usually try to travel with drivers they know or who come recommended. Most vehicles are registered with travel companies, but people usually don't go to these offices unless they know the driver. (The same is true of people who want to go to Baghdad airport – that fare is \$50, and sometimes more, from any location in Baghdad.) Passengers stop only one time on the road to eat. Some of them bring food from their houses and avoid the restaurants for fear of attack.

There are also a number of flight connections from Baghdad, Basra and Erbil to Damascus; return air fares cost about \$600. There are usually two flights a day from Baghdad. People who can enter Iran sometimes fly from that country to Syria, which costs far less.

### **Where in Syria are the Iraqis?**

The largest area of Iraqi concentration in Syria is the greater Damascus urban area. Iraqi refugees have also settled in the following towns: Aleppo (*halab*) in the north-west (probably the largest Iraqi community outside of Damascus); in the central Syrian towns of Hums and Hama; in the Mediterranean ports of Lataqia (*ladhaqiyyah*) and Tartus; in

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<sup>72</sup> Interviews, Damascus, March-April 2007.

<sup>73</sup> Interview, Syria, March-April 2007.

<sup>74</sup> Interviews, Syria, March-April 2007.

<sup>75</sup> Personal observation by two of our researchers (June 2006) and by a third (early 2007).

the eastern desert town of Deir az-Zour; and in the northeastern towns of Hasakah and Qamishli.

Few areas of Iraqi settlement have an overwhelmingly sectarian identity, with the exception of Sayyida Zeinab in Damascus which, as a Shi'a shrine, exerts a strong pull on Iraqi Shi'a. Other than that, there may be areas with a Shi'a, Sunni or even Christian majority, but no area completely dominated by one group. Often people settle in a place because they know someone there – someone who had moved to Syria before the war, or earlier in this crisis – and that person helps the newcomer by finding him a place to stay. But overall, the refugee population remains mixed.

*Damascus:*

The greater Damascus urban area, which includes Damascus town and rural Damascus governorate (*muhafadhat riif dimashq*), has by far the largest concentration of Iraqi refugees in Syria. The Syrian government estimates that around 79 percent of the Iraqi refugees live in the Damascus area.<sup>76</sup> Several reasons explain this concentration. First, the Damascus suburb of Sayyida Zeinab is where many bus- or taxi-rides from Iraq end, making it the first point of arrival for many Iraqi refugees. Second, Damascus long offered opportunities for employment, as well as a wide array of rental options, at least initially – comfortable but pricey housing for the better off, as well as more popular neighborhoods with more moderate rents. Third, there is a cumulative effect: Iraqis went to neighborhoods where they could find other Iraqis. Fourth, most embassies, including the Iraqi embassy, are in Damascus, as are most international agency offices, including that of the UNHCR. Finally, while the reach of authorities is strong everywhere in Syria, the residents of Damascus enjoy perhaps a greater degree of autonomy than do people elsewhere in Syria. A former officer of the Iraqi Ba'th party who now lives in a suburb of Damascus told interviewers his family moved to the area “so that no one could know where we live and harm us.”<sup>77</sup> Independence and anonymity are attractive to newly-arrived Iraqi refugees and they can find a measure of both in Damascus.

In and around Damascus, the areas of large Iraqi concentration are the following: Jaramana, Sayyida Zeinab, Masakin Berza, Qudsiya and Yarmouk. These areas are largely popular areas where refugees settled because of affordable housing.

*Jaramana:* Jaramana is about a 20-to-30-minute cab ride south of the center of Damascus. It is a crowded, busy area with a downtown feel, organized along a broad main road, between two roundabouts that act as landmarks. It is full of movement and people and is particularly animated at night. Iraqis from all backgrounds live and work there. The shops that line the main road are dominated by travel companies – all advertising travel to Iraq – and by restaurants and food shops. There are also hair

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<sup>76</sup> Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs: “Paper presented by the Government of Syrian Arab Republic to the International Conference on Addressing the Humanitarian Needs of the Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons inside Iraq and in the Neighboring Countries,” April 2007, p. 4.

<sup>77</sup> Interview, Harasta (Damascus), March-April 2007.

dressers, music shops and some clothes shops. Walking down the street, the impression is that the majority of the population is Iraqi and that at least half the shops are Iraqi.

Before the Iraqi influx, Jaramana was an area for Druze, Christians and people who in general could not afford central Damascus. Iraqis have settled there because the rents are affordable and because local people there were willing to rent to Iraqis. Many Christians and Sabeans settled in Jaramana because it was a mixed neighborhood and was not very conservative. Jaramana was also a good choice for refugees who planned on opening shops where alcohol could be sold. Later on, Iraqis moved there because it was known as an Iraqi neighborhood – and in fact, it had become one.

The feel in Jaramana is very Iraqi. One area is nicknamed Falluja. There is some concern on the part of the authorities that the area was becoming too Iraqi, and in March 2007, the authorities forced many Iraqi businesses to remove explicit references to Iraqi names in their signs and advertising. Many shops thus covered their names with newspaper and scotch-tape.

*Sayyida Zeinab:* Sayyida Zeinab is a 15- or 20-minute cab ride south from the city center. It is the site of a famous Shi'a shrine to Zeinab, the granddaughter of the prophet Mohammed, and has long been a center of Shi'a life in Syria, as well as an important center for pilgrimages. The Iraqi refugees in this neighborhood are predominantly Shi'a, and it has a strong Iraqi Shi'a flavor to it – a cross between the Shi'a religious centers like Najaf or Kerbala and the markets of popular Shi'a neighborhoods like Sadr City in Baghdad. The Iraqi Shi'a there are mostly poor or rural – people who tend to be more religious.

Sayyida Zeinab has a poorer, more popular feel than Jaramana. The roads and buildings are in worse repair. People throng the streets. Street food is for sale everywhere. Narrow market lanes are crowded with large stalls of cheap clothes and household wares. The impression is that the vast majority of people living there are Iraqi. Shops have Iraqi names and there is much Shi'a-religious wares for sale – portraits of Ali and his lion and of Hussein, tapes of Shi'a religious songs (*husseiniyyat*) and small disks of holy Kerbala earth to lean one's forehead against during prayer. Travel companies with fleets of GMC vehicles parked in front advertise trips to Baghdad and other places in Iraq. There are far fewer women on the street than in most of Damascus. One Iraqi said, his voice full of regret, that all of Baghdad is like this now – conservative, tense and poor.<sup>78</sup>

For Syrians, the place feels very un-Syrian. As a Syrian, if you do not work in Sayyida Zeinab, there is little reason to come to the neighborhood if you are not Shi'a.

Other areas where financially better-off Iraqi refugees have settled include the following:

- *Yarmouk* was originally a Palestinian settlement, now a close Damascus suburb that is organized around the *mestashfa filistini*, the Palestinian Hospital. Until

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<sup>78</sup> Personal communication, Iraqi refugee, April 2007.

recently, this was an overwhelmingly Palestinian district. Now it is considered the third Iraqi settlement in Syria, after Jaramana and Sayyida Zeinab. It is crowded and popular, but has a more established feel than the other two areas.

- *Masakin Berza* is a well-to-do suburb north of Damascus, where many of the wealthier Iraqis live in the four-story apartment blocks. There is no visible sign of their presence (no Iraqi shops or restaurants).
- *Qudsiya* is an informal settlement north-west of Damascus that is built on the sides of Mount Qasiun. Many Iraqis came here because of the varied and not very tight-knit population, including Central Asian and Caucasus Muslims who came after the fall of the Soviet Union, and because rents are cheap. Two local streets carry Iraqi nicknames – Falluja street and Karrada street (after the famous shopping street in central Baghdad).
- Other areas include Damascus neighborhoods and suburbs such as Saidanaya, at-Tal, Dhahiyat al-Asad, al-Mazza, Kashkoul, Adhra and Zabadani. There are also places in Damascus where Iraqi refugees are not allowed to settle by the authorities for security reasons because they are near national and political institutions.

#### *Other Cities:*

Aside from Damascus, Iraqis refugees have settled in Aleppo, Homs, Hama, Lataqia, Tartus, Hasaka, Qamishli and Deir az-Zour.

*Aleppo* is the main town of northern Syria, near the Turkish border, with historical trading ties to Mosul. It is a town of industries and small factories. Aleppo is both less crowded and less expensive than Damascus, which is why some Iraqis who first settled in the capital then moved to Aleppo. Aleppo also attracts families that are more conservative who do not wish to live in the busy quarters of the capital. The majority of the Iraqis in Aleppo are Sunni, from all social backgrounds – poor, middle class and wealthy. The Sunnis tend to come from Nineweh (Mosul and Tal Afar) and Salah ad-Din, rather than Anbar or Diyala. Many Iraqi Christians have also chosen to settle in Aleppo because of its large Christian population.

Aleppo has longstanding commercial ties with Iraq. Iraqi merchants used to export raw materials from Aleppo to Iraq, where they were then used in factories. Now, Iraqis export semi-finished and consumer goods to Iraq. Numerous businessmen and merchants who deal with the Iraqi market live in Aleppo.

*Homs* and *Hama*, middle Syria towns, have Sunni-majority Iraqi populations, mostly poor and low-middle class people. Shi'a refugees state that they do not feel welcome in Homs and Hama; landlords, for instance, will ask whether a prospective tenant is Sunni before agreeing to rent their property to him.

*Tartus* and *Lataqia*, both on the Mediterranean, have both Shi‘a and Sunni Iraqis, though the Sunnis tend to be more involved in business. Tartus is attractive to Iraqis because it offers an environment of relative harmony. A Sunni man from Anbar told interviewers, “We are strangers here, and I don’t think any reasonable person will look here for sectarianism. We ran away because of it. There is no harassment here.”<sup>79</sup>

The *Deir az-Zour* and *Abu Kamal* area of eastern Syria are areas with strong tribal connections that reach across the border (tribes such as the Kubaisa, Rawi, Uqaidat and Ani). There are many cases of intermarriage between Iraqis and Syrians, and local Syrians are known to have looked after their Iraqi kin. The (Syrian) inhabitants of these areas are known in Syria to have been very pro-Saddam.

In the towns of *Hasaka* and *Qamishli*, as well as in the village of *Sahnaya* (near Damascus), many of the Iraqis are Christian, mostly poor or lower middle class who went to these towns because of their sizable Syrian Christian minorities.

## How Iraqis Live in Syria

### Documentation

#### *Syrian documentation*

When Iraqis enter Syria, their passports are stamped with an entry stamp. As Arabs, they do not require a visa, but they are given a ‘tourism’ entry, according to what is stamped on the passports. This is important because it precludes them, in theory, from working.

Before February 2007, the initial admittance was valid for three months, and could be renewed once, for three months, at the Directory of Immigration and Passports, if the proper documents were provided (passport, rental lease, etc.), according to most of those interviewed. When the extension expired, the person had to travel to the border, exit, and re-enter. This was – and is – both disruptive and costly, and can be dangerous, especially for Shi‘a who have to spend time in insurgent-controlled territory. It is also a lucrative source of business for Iraqi and Syrian travel companies, who arrange the travel (some companies even arrange travel to Beirut, but this is very expensive).<sup>80</sup>

In late January or early February 2007, the Syrian authorities began implementing a different set of regulations that were far more restrictive.<sup>81</sup> They reduced the validity of the entry stamp to two weeks, renewable for another two weeks, but the real rub was that the refugee had to spend a month outside Syria before being allowed to re-enter. After

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<sup>79</sup> Interview, Tartus, Syria, March-April 2007.

<sup>80</sup> Interview, Damascus, April 2007.

<sup>81</sup> For details and reactions see “Iraqi Refugees Protest Syria’s Alleged Visa Restrictions,” the *International Herald Tribune*, 5 February 2007; and Adas, Basil, “Team to Visit Syria Over Visa Rules,” *Gulf News*, 6 February 2007.

both Iraqi and international protests, the Syrian government reversed its decision and reverted to a system with a one-month admittance on the border) and a first two-month renewal (in the beginning it reportedly was two weeks with a two-and-a-half months renewal). Then it was thought that the authorities would go back to issuing three-month renewals, to bring the total back to six months as before, but many Iraqis say that the authorities are not renewing for the full three months.<sup>82</sup> The renewal is obtained at the Directory of Immigration and Passports. Most immigration services require small perquisites to officials, and some Iraqis pay up to 500 SL (\$10), a hefty sum, to cut the long lines.

If a refugee has a written lease and pays a rental tax (roughly one-third of the rent), he or she can get an *iqama* or residency which is valid for the initial month and can be renewed twice, once for two months and then for three months. Many refugees do not want to pay this tax, or cannot get a written lease from their landlords, and travel regularly to the border to ‘refresh’ their entry stamp.

Finally, it is important to note that rules and procedures within the Syrian bureaucracy often lack clarity and consistency. When asked, different people (ordinary Syrians, refugees, UN officials, including UNHCR) give differing accounts of the procedures. The lack of clarity probably stems mostly from how the rules are applied. According to a knowledgeable international official in Syria:

“Authorities, at different levels, may react with inconsistency – because they have power, or maybe because they may want something in return from the refugee. It must also be said that the application of the rules may change from one day to the next in response to changes in the security situation. The compounded factors – the expectations of the refugee, the attitudes of the authorities, the government’s security concerns – make for a feeling of uncertainty, even instability for the refugee. This in turn explains why so many refugees do not renew their papers and end up in an illegal status. The refugees are vulnerable.”<sup>83</sup>

### *UNHCR registration*

Registration with UNHCR is valuable for several reasons. First, it gives the registered refugee a temporary protection letter which ensures, in theory, that the refugee cannot be deported. (Syria is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee convention, which means that the temporary refugee protection is not enforceable.) Second, registration makes possible some reimbursement for health expenses through the Syrian Red Crescent. Third, it opens the door for resettlement.

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<sup>82</sup> Interviews, Iraqi refugees in Syria, March-April 2007, and personal communications (phone), Iraqis in Syria, May 2007. See also CRS Report for Congress: “Iraqi Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons,” March 2007, pp. 7-8.

<sup>83</sup> Phone interview, UN official, Damascus, May 2007.

At the end of April 2007, only 77,000 refugees were registered.<sup>84</sup> This was the result of UNHCR's limited resources and also the fact that many Iraqi refugees were not interested in registering, either because they did not trust the process (there were rumors among the refugees that registration could ruin chances of obtaining an onward visa to another country) or because they did not see a direct benefit. Also, knowledge about the possibility of registering was not widespread. In 2007, UNHCR plans to register 200,000 Iraqis in Syria.<sup>85</sup> The agency has opened a new registration center in Douma, near Damascus. Several thousand Iraqis show up every day, and conditions at the registration center are reported to be difficult as the police use force to control the crowd. Awareness of the registration process is clearly on the rise: more of the existing refugees are in need of the services that come with registration and the incoming refugees are generally poorer. Still, even if UNHCR achieves its goal, it will only be a fraction of the overall caseload.

It is nearly impossible for Iraqis to cross the Syrian border without papers. As a result, there are hardly no Iraqis without papers in Syria today. A UNHCR official added that many Iraqis who register with UNHCR say that they have no papers in the belief that this will give them a better shot at asylum and resettlement – so they simply pretend to be illegal.<sup>86</sup>

## **Housing**

In Syria, no Iraqis live in tented camps or the so-called collective centers (converted public buildings) that were ubiquitous during the Balkan wars. Most Iraqis live in apartments, whereas in Iraq, most middle class and even poor Iraqi families live in houses. In the 1990s, sanctions and the economic crisis – particularly the drop of the Iraqi dinar – impoverished many Iraqis, but they still owned their houses. After the 2003 war, real estate prices – both property prices and rents – rose to unprecedented levels. So, in 2004, when middle class people started to leave Iraq, they found rents in Syria to be lower than in Iraq. At that time, according to interviews, a one-family furnished apartment could be had for approximately 6,000 SL per month (\$120). Iraqis found it easy to rent their houses in Iraq and pay rent in Syria. As a result, Syrians tended to believe all Iraqis were rich.

The situation has changed dramatically in the course of 2006 and 2007. The violence in Iraq led more and more Iraqis to leave the country, and rents and property values in Iraq have dropped – though not as sharply as they had risen in 2003 and 2004. At the same time, the influx of Iraqi refugees in Syria, combined with the temporary arrival of Lebanese refugees in summer 2006, led to a sharp rise in Syrian rents. That same one-family furnished apartment is now likely to cost 15,000-25,000 SL per month (\$300-500), or more, according to interviews with residents.

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<sup>84</sup> Email communication, UNHCR official, Geneva, May 2007.

<sup>85</sup> Interviews, UN officials, Damascus, March-April 2007; email communication, UNHCR official, Geneva, May 2007.

<sup>86</sup> Interview, UNHCR, Damascus, March-April 2007.

The Syrian government estimates – without giving specifics – that since the war began real estate prices have risen 40 percent and rent is up 150 percent.<sup>87</sup> For ordinary Syrians, the perception is that rents have gone up three-fold. It is difficult to get a handle on how rents are actually moving – there are strong variations and no averages. But what is clear is that the situation has grown more difficult for poor and middle class Iraqi refugees – and for many Syrians as well.

Few Iraqis buy property in Syria, unlike in Jordan. Only annual residency-holders, who are a small minority, can buy property, though there is a reported loophole in the law whereby a non-Syrian can ‘hold’ a property, and prevent the Syrian owner from selling it.

Many leases are informal – verbal, without a written contract. This makes the Iraqi tenant more vulnerable to rent increases and deprives him of an important document (the lease) for obtaining residency. But it also means that he does not pay taxes, though many tenants would rather pay taxes – and be eligible for the *iqama* – than have to travel to the border. Syrian landlords prefer to rent furnished apartments (*shuqaq mafrusha*), in order to increase the rent. In the summer, when tourists from the Gulf come to Syria, rental prices go up.

Single Iraqi men usually live together and share the rent. People who feel especially at risk – former regime cadres, rich merchants, people who worked with the MNF or the Iraqi government – try not to mix except with people they know, and try to live away from other Iraqis. There is no squatting or homelessness to speak of because of the strict attitude of the authorities on that issue.

### **Are families together or split up?**

Whether refugees are present as families or as individuals is often the result of the initial reasons for departure. When the reason for leaving is because a member of the family is threatened – usually through association with the former regime, with insurgent groups, with the current government or with international actors – then that person normally leaves first. Whether their family joins them later depends on the seriousness of the threat and on their financial ability.

Other people who may leave for Syria as individuals are people who are seeking to make money to send back to Iraq, or young people seeking to re-settle in third countries. Many families send their daughters to Syria to try and arrange an engagement with an Iraqi living in the West. In other cases, families in violent parts of Iraq send their sons abroad so that they do not get caught up in the violence, either as victims or as perpetrators.

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<sup>87</sup> Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs: “Paper presented by the Government of Syrian Arab Republic to the International Conference on Addressing the Humanitarian Needs of the Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons inside Iraq and in the Neighboring Countries,” April 2007, p. 4.

For some high-ranking members of the Iraqi government or armed forces, it is the opposite pattern: they may send their family to live in Syria, to avoid potential attacks on them as a result of the position of the head of family, while the head of the family remains in Iraq to work. Even people of more modest means do this – we spoke to several women whose husbands were away during the week, as drivers or traders.

Many families leave together because their whole family has been targeted. This is true of people who leave because of religious tensions (Christians, Sabeans, secular families); people who leave because of the sectarian violence or the result of MNF military operations; and people who leave because their wealth or prominence made them and their family vulnerable to kidnappings for ransom. In general, wealthier people who can afford to take their families with them do so.

## Health

There are several levels of health care available to Iraqis in Syria. Iraqis who have the means to do so visit private doctors and clinics, as do their Syrian counterparts. Checking into a private hospital costs about \$40, and an appointment at a private clinic costs between \$10 and \$20.<sup>88</sup> Poorer Iraqis can access Syrian public health service, but only for emergency and primary health care – restrictions that are said to be in place since 2005.<sup>89</sup> As a result, most poor Iraqis rely on Syrian Red Crescent clinics which exist in areas where there is a high concentration of Iraqis, such as Sayyida Zeinab, Jaramana, Masakin Berza, Yarmouk (managed by the Palestinian Red Crescent), and perhaps other places. (Poor Syrians do not use the Red Crescent clinics, they use government hospitals.) These small out-patient clinics, which do not have any in-patient capacity, are crowded but relatively well-organized. When queried, clinic directors in Masakin Berza and Sayyida Zeinab said that any help would be welcome, but that they did not have any immediate shortages of equipment or medical supplies to report. The Syrian Red Crescent works very closely with national authorities.

In order to be seen at a Red Crescent clinic, an Iraqi refugee must be registered with UNHCR. This is because the Red Crescent clinics receive assistance from UNHCR, a fact that is not well known among many Iraqi refugees. UNHCR covers 80 percent of the bill up to 15,000 LS (\$300) and 40 percent beyond that. As more refugees register with UNHCR in 2007, the Red Crescent clinics could become overwhelmed. A central concern for UNHCR is the paucity of local and international implementing partners to scale up their support in the health sector.<sup>90</sup> However, in an important development, UNHCR also reports that new clinics are being established in Damascus and other cities, and that Syrian authorities have granted some international NGOs permission to work with Iraqi refugees in Syria.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Interviews, Syria, March-April 2007.

<sup>89</sup> UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP: “Assessment of the Situation of Iraqi Refugees in Syria,” March 2006, p.6.

<sup>90</sup> Interviews, Red Crescent clinics, Berzeh, Sayyida Zeinab and Yarmouk (Damascus), March-April 2007.

<sup>91</sup> Email communication, UNHCR official, May 2007.

Some poor Iraqis also visit charitable clinics, in particular those run by churches, such as the clinic in the Deir (monastery) Ibrahim Khalil, in a notably Christian area of Jaramana. The Deir Ibrahim Khalil is clean, well-organized and not crowded, and is staffed by volunteer doctors and religious personnel. It receives patients regardless of faith, and claims that it can help raise money from private donors if further treatment is needed. These establishments receive support from UNHCR similar to that received by the Red Crescent clinics, and Iraqi refugees need to be registered to receive treatment. But un-registered Iraqis can also receive initial free treatment, though it is unclear how the Deir handles them beyond the initial visit. The Deir Ibrahim Khalil also runs a soup kitchen with support from UNHCR.<sup>92</sup>

Religious affiliation seems to have no impact on the quality of health care Iraqi refugees receive, other than the extent to which it determines wealth: relatively there is a larger number of poor Shi'a refugees, and they rely on the Red Crescent clinics.

The medical problems that dominate are diabetes and conditions linked unhealthy diets in general, high blood pressure and other heart and circulatory diseases, and various types of cancer. Psychological trauma appears to be a major problem. But there are very few structures, particularly for counseling, to respond to these needs and, given the stigma of talking to a psychologist in many parts of Iraqi society, it is unlikely that such structures would be used were they in place: the shame is too great. The Deir Ibrahim Khalil clinic offered the services of two psychologists as an experiment, responding to the abundant evidence of trauma their staff was seeing among their patients, but very few people availed themselves of the services offered.

Pregnant Iraqi refugee women can give birth in Syrian government hospitals, though they have to pay a fee. The fee (about \$100) is reduced by 50 percent if the expecting mother obtains documentation from the Syrian Ba'ath Party. In private hospitals, child birth costs between \$300 and \$400. The hospitals provide a birth certificate (if the parents can provide a marriage certificate). The parents can then take this to the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and finally the Iraqi Embassy in order to obtain an Iraqi certificate.<sup>93</sup>

Also, many Iraqis come to Syria for specialized surgery.<sup>94</sup> Our interviewers spoke to an Iraqi woman who came to Syria so that her son could receive treatment for head trauma caused by an explosion.<sup>95</sup> Many people fleeing Iraq have serious medical issues and specialized treatment in private hospitals can be expensive. According to interviews in

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<sup>92</sup> Interview, Deir Ibrahim Khalil clinic, Jaramana (Damascus), March-April 2007.

<sup>93</sup> Interviews, Syria, March-April 2007.

<sup>94</sup> Many Iraqi medical specialists, both practitioners and professors, have been targets of violence. For an illustration see James Palmer, "Frequent Targets of Violence, Iraqi Physicians Flee in Doves," the *Seattle Times*, 4 April 2006.

<sup>95</sup> Interview, Syria, March-April 2007.

Syria, eye surgery costs about \$1,500, back surgery \$3,500, and the removal of kidney stones costs about \$300.<sup>96</sup>

## **Education**

Syrian elementary and secondary schools are open to Iraqi refugee children. Some people we interviewed described the process as fairly straightforward, requiring only routine procedures, including obtaining documents from the Iraqi embassy and registering with the Syrian Ministry of Education. But specific documentation is also required, especially for secondary schools, such as papers documenting the student's last classes in Iraq, a passport or birth certificate, and approval from the Iraqi National Union for Students in Syria. The process can be arbitrary: sometimes, one school may register a child in the absence of these documents and wait for the families to bring them later, while another may turn the family away. One Iraqi woman was told by a school that she had to return to Baghdad to get complete documents; she told the interviewer that she would be killed if she went back.<sup>97</sup> Some refugees report having to pay bribes to obtain various pieces of documentation.

Iraqi children can attend Syrian schools for free – though they have to pay for supplies and uniforms (estimated at about 5,000 LS per year, or \$100). If the pupil enrolls at the beginning of the year, he or she will receive free books. If enrolment takes place during the school year, the books must be purchased. In some areas such as Jaramana and Sayyida Zeinab, the arrival of large numbers of Iraqi children in local schools have exacerbated already existing problems of overcrowding and lack of infrastructure and equipment.

Despite the availability of free schooling, the Syrian Ministry of Education estimates that only 30,000 Iraqi children are enrolled in primary and secondary schools. This is very low: if one estimates the number of Iraqi refugees in Syria at one million – a conservative estimate – and one accepts the figure that children aged 5-to-18 represent close to 35 percent of the refugee total, then one could expect 350,000 children to be ready for school.<sup>98</sup> This under-registration of Iraqi children is all the more surprising as Iraqis generally tend to take education very seriously.

Several factors may explain why so few children are registered. Many children, especially teenagers, work in restaurants, markets, shops and construction firms in order to contribute to the survival of the family. This is especially true of older boys in households where the father may be absent or unemployed. Many families may also lack the requisite documents – they may be refused by the school, or unwilling to be put in a lower class which sometimes happens to children without documentation. Illegal

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<sup>96</sup> Interviews, Syria, March-April 2007.

<sup>97</sup> Interview, refugee woman, Damascus, March-April (2007).

<sup>98</sup> Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs: "Paper presented by the Government of Syrian Arab Republic to the International Conference on Addressing the Humanitarian Needs of the Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons inside Iraq and in the Neighboring Countries," April 2007, p. 6.

families who are in the country without formal permission may be reluctant to reveal this to the school for fear of increasing their visibility vis-à-vis Syrian authorities. Some families lack money for supplies and uniforms. There is anecdotal evidence that some families send their children back to Iraq for exams (or at least they used to) before returning them to the security of Syria. Psychological trauma may also play a role: social workers say some children who have witnessed violence do not want to leave the home, even to go to school, and some parents, also marked by trauma, may not be willing to let them do so.<sup>99</sup> Finally, the ministry figures may be inaccurate.

It should be noted that private schools cost about \$500 a year. These fees include neither transportation nor supplies. Syrian universities are not open to Iraqi students, unless they obtained a Syrian high school degree. Studying in a private university is expensive – \$2,500 to \$4,000 per year, depending on the department – and requires many pieces of documentation.<sup>100</sup>

The Ministry of Education has estimated that the additional burden per Iraqi child is \$600 per year. UNHCR hopes to provide assistance to 70 schools in 2007, and to build three new ones. But the absence of local or international implementing partners is a problem. Thus, despite the under-registration of Iraqi children, overcrowding is likely to remain a problem – one that the Syrian government was facing prior to the arrival of the refugees because of heavy rural migration to the cities in general and to Damascus in particular.

### **Income and Livelihoods**

#### *What Iraqis bring with them:*

Iraqis fleeing to Syria overland generally do not bring much money or jewelry with them because they fear looters on the road. Most will carry a small amount (\$50-200) to cover expenses on route, and also because looters (or insurgents demanding a *jihād* tax) will abuse them, or worse, if they have nothing on them. Once in Syria, most rely on *hawala* transfers from friends and kin in Iraq. (See section below, *Banks and hawalas*.)

Iraqis normally try to bring small appliances, but the recent hike in transportation costs is making this more difficult. It is also often easier to buy, for instance, a second-hand television set in Syria than to bring one from Iraq.

Iraqi-registered cars with white plates – registered before 2003 – are allowed to enter Syria. Cars with black plates – cars that entered after the invasion, called *manifest* – are not allowed to enter Syria. There is reportedly a restaurant on the road in Iraq where one can buy white plates and forged car documents.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Interview, UNHCR (Damascus), March-April 2007.

<sup>100</sup> Interviews, Syria, March-April 2007. For an example of Syrian private university tuition rates see Mamoun Private University for Science and Technology <http://www.mustonline.com/en/admission1.php?admission=payment> (accessed May 2007).

<sup>101</sup> This section is based on interviews and personal communications with Iraqi refugees in Syria, March-April 2007.

*Employment and businesses:*

Syrians generally believe that the Iraqi refugees are rich, that they come with ‘savings.’ The fact is that rich Iraqis are a small minority of the Iraqis in Syria. As noted above, the majority come with limited sums cobbled together or made through the sale of their furniture. Frequently, these funds run out before steady employment can be secured, and many Iraqis must make dangerous return trips to Iraq to sell off cars and other valuables.<sup>102</sup> The situation is made worse by the fact that Iraqis enter Syria on a tourist ‘leave to enter’ that precludes employment, meaning that any Iraqi working in Syria is violating the law.

Because of this, many Iraqis depend on precarious sources of income. Unemployment is high.<sup>103</sup> Those who have found work have integrated themselves into Syria’s labor market in many different ways. Among those we interviewed were art dealers, beauticians, electricians, imams, tailors and others. Some refugees were able to maintain their previous profession – doctors found work as doctors, bakers as bakers – while others had to adjust – taxi drivers became bakers, a former dentist opened up an internet café. For the most part securing employment involves improvisation and many people found jobs in the informal sectors of the economy: they are waiters, petty traders, construction laborers, cleaning ladies, stevedores and market workers, and so on. Iraqi businesses – restaurants, travel agencies, internet and phone services, coffee shops, etc. – open after a while, once a critical mass of Iraqis develops in an area that will ensure a steady clientele.<sup>104</sup> Iraqis are very set in their eating habits: many only like Iraqi food, and Iraqi restaurants strive as a result. Petty traders and grocers are from all backgrounds: Sunni, Shi’a, Sabeen, Christian. They sell Iraqi special food items – pickles, spices, *qaimar* (cream), fish – as well as fruit and vegetables, clothes, toys, pens and small office supplies. Some sell sweets or bean (chickpeas, *baqilla* – fava beans) in small carts, the Iraqi way. Some women work as *haffafas* – removing body hair with a small thread (*haf al-wajeh*): this is an Iraqi specialty and has grown to be in demand in Syrian and Jordanian hair salons and barbershops.

Iraqis usually work with a Syrian partner. The latter will register the company, while giving his Iraqi counterpart some form of guarantee. The Syrian partner is especially necessary for businesses that require a security permit, such as internet cafes. A former Iraqi police officer who opened an internet café in Damascus reported that despite co-owning the establishment with a Syrian he still faced harassment from the police, who

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<sup>102</sup> Interviews, Syria, March-April 2007.

<sup>103</sup> Because employment is illegal for refugees, statistics are difficult to gather and verify. However, international observers estimate that 55 percent of Iraqi men and 80 percent of women are unemployed. UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP: “Assessment of the Situation of Iraqi Refugees in Syria,” March 2006, p. 15. Nearly 50 percent of Iraqi refugees we interviewed in Syria reported that they were unemployed. See Annex table ‘Occupation in Syria.’

<sup>104</sup> Interviews, Syria, March-April 2007. See also Annex table ‘Occupation in Syria.’

have shut the café more than once.<sup>105</sup> A further problem is that the Iraqi partner has little leverage with the authorities in case a disagreement emerges with the Syrian partner. Often, Iraqi businesses pay protection money to Syrian police and authorities, because they are by definition illegal. Most Iraqi businesses only hire Iraqi employees, and most Iraqis only work for Iraqi businesses.

#### *Trade with Iraq:*

A number of Iraqi merchants do business with Iraq. With the lack of electricity and insecurity in Iraq, Iraqi businessmen have started producing manufactured goods (like water tanks, pipes, construction materials) in Aleppo and exporting them to Iraq. In fact, the Iraqi market is now filled with Syrian goods like canned food, clothes, cosmetics and even fruit. At the border, especially the northern border, there are kilometer-long rows of vehicles transporting Syrian goods into Iraq. Syrian medicines and pharmaceutical supplies have found a lucrative market in Mosul, from where they are sent to other Iraqi cities, including Baghdad. In the initial period after the US invasion, the demand for cars in Iraq created by a decade of sanctions gave rise to wild trade of second-hand cars into Iraq. Syrian and Iraqi companies imported used cars to Lataqia and Tartus, and then organized their onward transport to Iraq.

Some Iraqis continue to get rental income from properties they may have in Iraq. Normally they have an agent or *wakil* represent them, sometimes lawyers, but usually a member of the family. The money is sent back through the *hawala* system.

#### *Banks and hawalas:*

Iraqis are not allowed to open bank accounts in Syria until they have an annual residency (in Jordan, it is enough to show a valid passport). One bank, Syria al-Mahjar, is an exception, but it requires high minimum deposits. It is easy to get money into Syria through regular banking channels, but hard to get money out. Most Iraqis use the *hawala* system (money traders). *Hawalas* are theoretically authorized agents, but the majority do not have such accreditation: many ordinary Iraqi and Syrian businesses function as *hawalas*. Some Syria-based *hawala* companies have offices in Iraqi cities. The fee is usually one percent of the transfer, which is much better than western money transfer companies. In times of high demand for money from the refugees in Syria, the rates often go up.

#### *Iraqi government pensions and salaries:*

Some Iraqis continue to draw government pensions and even salaries while in Syria. Some of them travel back to Iraq to take the money personally. Others nominate an agent (*wakil*) by registering him at the Iraqi Embassy in Damascus. The *wakil* registration document is sent back to the person in Iraq, where it is registered at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Then the *wakil* can begin collecting the pension. But of course, much

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<sup>105</sup> Interview, Damascus, March-April 2007.

depends on how good the refugee's relationship is with his or her department of origin. Some government employees took long-term leave, notably for medical treatment. They need to send back a Syrian medical report, authenticated by the Syrian Ministry of Health and the Iraqi Embassy in Damascus.

#### *Iraqi food rations:*

Another resource for Iraqi refugees is Iraqi food rations, which most Iraqi families in Iraq are entitled to. Friends and family can continue to draw the rations in Iraq and will send them to Iraqis in Syria via the busses that travel between the two countries. Drivers used to take the goods for free, but then started charging about 40,000 ID (\$30) for a medium-size family three- or six-monthly ration. Just recently, they have started charging up to 65,000 ID (\$50). This is reportedly creating a serious burden for many Iraqis in Syria.<sup>106</sup>

Some Iraqis also report a swapping mechanism organized by merchants who have interests both in Syria and Baghdad. It is similar to the *hawala* (money traders), except with foodstuffs, not money: the Iraqi end of the operation will take delivery of the ration in Iraq and sell it there, while the Syrian end will give the refugee his ration, for a fee.<sup>107</sup>

### **Vulnerable Groups**

As time in exile increases, the situation grows worse for many Iraqi families. Their savings run out. Prices in Syria rise. They have remained longer than they thought they would. In some cases, they find themselves having to support family members back in Iraq after breadwinners are killed in the violence. Conversely, many refugee families are in Syria without a breadwinner – they fled because the man of the family was targeted in Iraq, or a victim of violence. The government of Syria reports that 27 percent of Iraqi refugee families arrived in Syria with no breadwinner.<sup>108</sup> The result has been high levels of child labor and increasing prostitution.

#### *Child labor:*

One way families adapt is by relying on the work of one or more of their children. Child labor is not new to Iraqis. It is traditional for a boy to help in his father's shop or on his farm. The early Ba'athist regime in Iraq enacted strict laws to send children to school. But the economic crises of the 1990s eroded these laws: there were children everywhere, selling cigarettes, cleaning shops, shining shoes or even begging in the streets. Many Iraqi children work in Syria, though it is difficult to estimate numbers. The majority of them live and work in the poor areas of Sayyida Zeinab. Many are poor Shi'a. They sell simple goods on benches: food items, children's clothes, household wares, toiletries, etc.

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<sup>106</sup> Personal communication (phone), Iraqi refugee in Damascus, May 2007.

<sup>107</sup> Interviews, Sayyida Zeinab (Damascus), March-April 2007.

<sup>108</sup> Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs: "Paper presented by the Government of Syrian Arab Republic to the International Conference on Addressing the Humanitarian Needs of the Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons inside Iraq and in the Neighboring Countries," April 2007, p. 10.

Some walk around selling lottery papers, religious booklets, shining shoes or cleaning windshields. Others offer to carry groceries for shoppers in the market. It is in fact often more about begging than selling. Many of the children are girls. Some older children work in shops and offices such transportation offices, restaurants, bakeries and so on. Some girls work in tailoring, either in factories or at home with their mothers.

Based on the children we talked to, the average daily wage for Iraqi children is about 50 to 100 SL (\$1 to 2). The relationship can be highly exploitative. Often, children say they are paid on a weekly basis, but the boss sometimes does not pay them at the end of a week's work, or pays them less than was agreed. There is of course no legal recourse in such cases. Some children work as tea-boys or errand runners in transportation offices, and they may be paid as much as \$4 to \$6 a day, but they usually work with Iraqis they know.<sup>109</sup>

#### *Prostitution:*

Another, more extreme coping mechanism is prostitution. Popular opinion in Syria has it that a rise in prostitution is linked to the incoming Iraqis. It would appear in fact that there was increasing prostitution even before the refugee crisis, both with Syrian women and women from Turkey, the former Soviet republics and Russia. Nonetheless, the arrival of many desperate refugees has meant that there are more women who are made available as sex-workers.<sup>110</sup> Sometimes the arrangement is very private – a woman needs money, and she knows whom to call to arrange a meeting with a man. Sometimes, it is far more organized. Sources describe nightclub-type arrangements where the women, some of them teenage girls, dance in front of men, who can then negotiate a price to have sex with them. Syrians and Iraqis alike say that summer tourists from the Gulf countries are among the busiest consumers of such services. In the past, prostitution in Syria was something circumscribed, accepted and almost regulated: people knew who the pimps were and how things worked. Now, organized crime, both local and foreign, is reported have a stronger hold on the industry, which seems to be growing.<sup>111</sup>

#### *Other vulnerable individuals:*

There are other vulnerable Iraqis in Syria: destitute families who do not engage in the activities above, or elderly or handicapped individuals who may not have a family or a community to rely on. For the time being, it would appear that the existing structures described above – Syrian state health and education services, the Syrian Red Crescent, various Syrian charities – are managing to assist those most in need. UNHCR even has a small cash grant program for refugees with urgent cash needs (though the fact that

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<sup>109</sup> Interviews with seven children in various neighborhoods of Damascus, March-April, 2007.

<sup>110</sup> See McLeod, Hugh. "Despair of Baghdad Turns into a Life of Shame in Damascus," the *Guardian*, 24 October 2006, and Zoepf, Katherine, "Desperate Iraqi Refugees Turn to Sex Trade in Syria," the *New York Times*, 29 May 2007.

<sup>111</sup> Interviews with two researchers working on Iraqi prostitution in Syria, and familiar with the situation in Syrian brothels, March-April 2007.

UNHCR so far only interacts with a tiny proportion of the refugees perforce means that this service is available to a limited number of refugees). But in time, with more Iraqis entering Syria, many of them poorer, this could change: the availability of services could decrease and many refugees, especially people with medical conditions, could find themselves in precarious situations.

## **Contacts with Iraq**

Most Iraqis in Syria contact Iraq every day. Phone networks are a lifeline for many refugees, but the costs present a significant burden. A former government employee from Mosul now working as a maid in Syria told interviewers she spends half of her monthly income on phone expenses.<sup>112</sup>

There used to be *thuraya* (satellite phone) offices which charged 15 SL per minute (about 30 cents), but the authorities shut them down. Now the easiest way to contact Iraq is by mobile phone. The network can become very busy when there is a large explosion or battle in Iraq, which happens every day. Some people also use the internet, but the fickle power supply in Iraq makes this difficult. People also send letters back and forth with bus and taxi-drivers, or with friends traveling.

On the Syrian side of the border, people line up for hours to return to Iraq. Refugees report paying border officials small fees (200 to 500 SL, \$4 to \$10 dollars). If the fee is not paid, there are delays. Iraqis are not searched when leaving Syria; only the fee is to be paid. On the Iraqi side of the border, procedures are easier and better organized. Iraqis are not allowed to enter Jordan from Syria via land, and are told to enter from Iraq.

## **Assistance**

The only real assistance that most Iraqi refugees receive comes from the Syrian state. Syria lets them in, unlike most other countries whether geographically near or far, and allows them to use the national education and health systems. Finally, because of the inconsistent, lax and at times corrupt implementation of work and business regulations by Syrian police, some of the Iraqi refugees are able to make a living and provide for their families. The only national organization to really provide support to the Iraqi refugees is the Syrian Red Crescent, which is closely affiliated with the Syrian authorities.

The Iraqi refugees receive little from the international community. UNHCR is making efforts to step up its support, but is stymied by the lack of partners – though, as noted above, UNHCR reports that Syrian authorities are allowing international NGOs to start work with Iraqi refugees in Syria.<sup>113</sup> At the moment, UNHCR is providing support for health costs through the Syrian Ministry of Health, the Syrian Red Crescent and Syrian Christian organizations (see above), as well as some support to schools through the Ministry of Education and NGOs, and cash support to needy refugees. But the limited

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<sup>112</sup> Interview, Masaken Barza (Damascus), March-April 2007.

<sup>113</sup> Email communication, UNHCR official, May 2007.

number of registered refugees (85,000 at the end of May 2007 for a total caseload of up to 1.5 million refugees) means that UNHCR's efforts only touch a fraction of the refugees.

There seems to be a dearth of help from national or local Syrian charitable organizations, other than a few church-based organizations and the Catholic organization Caritas. It is interesting in particular that Islamic charitable organizations (local or international) do not seem to have mobilized, either with their own funds or as an implementing partner for the Government or UNHCR.

There are very few self-help organizations within the Iraqi refugee community. The only ones are Christian and Sabeian. There are reportedly several Shi'a offices in Sayyida Zeinab: a Sistani-affiliated (*hauza*) office, a Sadr office and a Shahid al-Mihrab (SCIRI) office. They operate openly but do not provide much assistance, sometimes helping to gather money for Iraqis who want to return but cannot afford the bus fare. They mostly organize Shi'a ceremonies and register the marriages of Iraqi Shi'a. Self-help among the Iraqi Muslim refugees that seems to be limited to friends and kin. But there is little formal organizing among the refugees. It is difficult to start an association or organization in Syria, but this lack of organization is nevertheless striking. The Christians and the Sabeians on the other hand have been more active in organizing solidarity networks within their communities that go beyond extended families and circles of friends.

The fact that there are few community-based organizations means that the refugees have to rely on institutional help – the Red Crescent, Syrian government services for health and education, even Syrian Christian charities – or themselves and their kin. As the number of Iraqis in Syria grows, as increasingly poorer Iraqis enter the country, and as the needs of those already in the country grows because of dwindling resources, institutional assistance may no longer be available to them in the same way. Charities will be overwhelmed. The Syrian government may have to cut down on the level of services they allow the refugees to access. This could open large gaps in the assistance the Iraqi refugees receive, and shift decisively the burden of assistance to the refugees themselves, just as their ability to respond is diminishing.

## **Impact on Syria**

Syria is not a rich country, and the sudden arrival of such a large number of refugees can only have had considerable impact on the country – especially when coupled with the arrival of Lebanese refugees fleeing the Israeli onslaught of the summer of 2006. Ordinary Syrians routinely say they believe there are between three and six million Iraqis in their country, which reflects the perceived impact that the Iraqi refugees have had on everyday life in Syria. In everyday conversations, Syrians complain bitterly of the rise in prices, rents and crime. The prices that have risen have been mainly groceries (but not staples like bread), transportation and rents.<sup>114</sup> The base charge for taxis in Damascus

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<sup>114</sup> See Annex table 'Prices for staple goods.'

has recently risen from 3 SL to 4 SL. Rents, as mentioned above, seem to have increased dramatically – though it is difficult to get a solid quantitative handle on the progression.<sup>115</sup> What is certain is that the issue of rent prices is an emotional issue for Iraqis and Syrians alike. The former complain of what the latter charge, and the latter complain of what the former are willing to pay. At the same time, the presence of so many Iraqis desperate for work undermines Syrians working in the informal and even the informal market. For instance, people report that an Iraqi laborer will work for a smaller daily wage than a Syrian laborer.

But this overlooks the fact that Syria was struggling with many of these issues beforehand, and might well have had to face inflation, pressure in the housing market and downward pressure on wages – even without the presence of the Iraqi refugees. At the same time, the presence of the Iraqi refugees has clearly contributed cash to the Syrian economy, and the cross-border trade to Iraq, driven mostly by Iraqis, has opened new markets for Syrian goods. All this is difficult to quantify in the absence of strong data, but it is safe to say that the economic impact of the Iraqi refugees has probably not been all negative.

While the overall impact on Syria's economic infrastructure is hard to gauge, the Syrian government asserts that the refugee influx has drastically increased the demand for state subsidized goods and services, placing significant stress on national finances. According to a paper presented to a recent international conference on Iraqi refugees by the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Iraqi refugees markedly increased Syria's domestic consumption of subsidized goods in 2006. The demand for bread rose 35 percent, costing the state \$34 million; the demand for subsidized energy spiked, including electricity (27 percent), diesel (17 percent) and cooking gas (11 percent); the demand for potable water rose 21 percent, which at 125 liters per capita cost the state almost \$7 million.<sup>116</sup> Although there have been questions raised as to the accuracy of these figures, they clearly represent the magnitude of the Syrian state's perceived burden. However, while Iraqi refugees have certainly drawn on subsidized goods, the added pressure has not shown signs of destabilizing Syria's budget. According to the International Monetary Fund, Syrian expenditures on subsidies as a percentage of GDP have remained steady over the last five years.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> There are many estimates on the recent surge in rent prices, but no comprehensive studies have been carried out. The Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs claims rents are up 150 percent. The National Organisation for Human Rights in Syria claims that rents in suburban Damascus are up 250 percent; reported in UN-IRIN, news report: "Call For Aid as Iraqi Refugees' Misery Compounds," 30 May 2007. See also Rhonda Roumani, "Iraqi Refugees Spur Housing Boom," the *Christian Science Monitor*, 22 July 2005.

<sup>116</sup> Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs: "Paper presented by the Government of Syrian Arab Republic to the International Conference on Addressing the Humanitarian Needs of the Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons inside Iraq and in the Neighboring Countries," April 2007, pp. 4-5.

<sup>117</sup> International Monetary Fund: "IMF Country Report No. 06/294," August 2006, p. 27. (<http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2006/cr06294.pdf>, accessed May 2007)

The Syrian government also claims that the Iraqi refugees are a drain public services. In terms of education, for instance, the Ministry estimates that each Iraqi child costs the budget 30,000 LS (\$600) per year.<sup>118</sup> That means that the estimated 30,000 enrolled Iraqi children (as noted above, a low rate of enrolment) cost Syria \$18 million.

One area that is deteriorating is clearly that of relations between Syrians and Iraqi refugees and mutual perceptions between them. Syrians see Iraqis as arrogant, rough, ill-mannered and hold them responsible for the (perceived) increase in crime. They resent them for ‘taking over’ local neighborhoods. And the predominantly Sunni Syrians fear the influx of Iraqi Shi‘a. Iraqis see Syrians as greedy and corrupt. What is distressing is that, according to conversations with both Syrians and Iraqis, feelings were not so hard two years or even one year ago. The explanation probably lies with the on-going influx of Iraqis, the fact that the newcomers are increasingly poor (and therefore visible), and that the refugees who have been in Syria for a while are beginning to run out of resources. But it is still striking to note that many Syrians continue to give credit to their government for living up to its pronouncements on Arab unity (*qawmiyya*) and solidarity, even though that notion has been badly battered over the last few decades. And many Iraqis still acknowledge that Syria is the country in the region where they are best treated.

## **Conclusions: View to the Future**

The Syrian Arab Republic, a country of 18 to 19 million people, has taken in, over the last three to four years, roughly one million Iraqi refugees. Many people in Syria who deal with the refugee problem, including the staff of international agencies, believe the number to be closer to 1.5 million, and possibly higher. The Syrian government itself quotes UNHCR figures of 1.2 million.<sup>119</sup>

In the region, Syria has been the most open country to Iraqi refugees. It has allowed them to enter without visa requirements, to come and go, to settle freely, to organize themselves, to open businesses (albeit on a highly precarious basis of illegality), and to access many of the health and education services available to ordinary Syrian citizens. It has afforded the refugees some sense of normalcy and predictability in lives that had in many cases become wholly unpredictable. Despite real shortcomings, notably in terms of the official corruption and harassment that Iraqis face in Syria daily, this is a remarkable act of solidarity.

One of the reasons this has been possible is because Iraqis in Syria are not like many other refugee populations in the world, who arrive in the country of asylum completely destitute. Many came to Syria with some money, and managed to make even small sums last. They brought with them the skills and resilience that Iraqis are known for, and

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<sup>118</sup> Interview, UN official, Damascus, March-April 2007.

<sup>119</sup> Syrian Arab Republic, Ministry of Foreign Affairs: “Paper presented by the Government of the SAR to the International Conference on Addressing the Humanitarian Needs of the Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons inside Iraq and in the Neighboring Countries,” April 17, 2007, p. 2.

applied them to their new life. They have survived in Syria, and in many cases done a bit better than that.

This statement, however, calls for three important caveats, regarding (i) the condition of a small core of highly vulnerable Iraqi refugees and how the condition of the general refugee population evolves in the future, (ii) the likely increase in the number of Iraqis coming to Syria, and (iii) a possible hardening of Syrian policies.

- (i) There exists among the Iraqi refugees a core of very poor people who have access to few or no resources or who have to resort to the most menial and precarious jobs and livelihoods, including having their children work. The assistance currently available to this group is insufficient. Another factor is that this vulnerable core is growing. Many Iraqis who have been in Syria for a while are running out of resources. At the same time, the cost of living – prices, rents – is increasing. It is possible that a large number of Iraqis in Syria are on the edge of far greater poverty and hardship. There are also fears that a shortage of housing could lead to homelessness.
- (ii) Given the difficult situation that prevails in Iraq, it is likely that many more Iraqis may head to Syria in the near future. A number of factors could precipitate further displacement: mounting tensions and intra-Shi'a violence in Basra and other parts of the South; the violence in Diyala; the referendum in Kirkuk; an escalation in the tension between the Kurdistan Regional Government and Turkey; further restrictions by governorate-level authorities in Iraq on where internally displaced can go. A worsening of the situation on any one of these issues could translate into large flows of new refugees – most of whom would likely try to enter Syria. If current trends are anything to go by, the newcomers will be poorer, in worse psychological and possibly physical shape, and more desperate than those who have already arrived. One possible consequence could be a shortage of housing options. This would place a large burden on the Syrian government, which could be tempted to respond with collective centers or, even worse for the refugees, camp-like accommodation.
- (iii) Under these conditions, a hardening of official Syrian attitudes – say, a reduction in the degree of access to services, restriction on the ability of Iraqis to work or on the issuance of residency papers, or restriction on where they can settle – could cause the situation of the refugees to worsen in a manner that would be hard to correct.

From hundreds of conversations and interviews with Iraqi refugees, it is clear that many would like to return to their country. The only ones to express greater ambivalence are the minorities who fear they no longer belong in Iraqi society. But it is equally clear that the overwhelming majority of Iraqis in Syria do not think that it will be safe enough to return in the near future, and many believe it may never be safe enough. That is why so

many say they do not intend to return – it is not that they do not want to, it is that they believe they can't.<sup>120</sup>

The international community should be aware of the hardships on the Syrian government. It should work with the Syrian authorities on a compromise that would make it easier for international assistance to come to Syria. The lack of community organizing means that the refugees rely on institutional help – the Red Crescent, Syrian government services, Syrian charities – or themselves and their kin. A further influx of refugees could lead the Syrian government to reduce services for refugees, opening large gaps in the assistance the Iraqi refugees receive, and shift decisively the burden of assistance to the refugees themselves, just as their ability to respond is diminishing. There should also be a far greater effort to share the refugee burden with resettlement programs, especially on the part of countries whose involvement in Iraq is heavy.

There has so far been no generalized poverty, misery or despair among the Iraqi refugees in Syria. So far. But that could rapidly change.

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<sup>120</sup> Nearly half (49 percent) of those interviewed responded “no” when asked if they intended to return to Iraq. For the complete range of answers see Annex table ‘Intend to Return?’

## Annexes

### Annex 1: Statistical Overview of Interview Data

Total interviews: 192

#### Sectarian make-up

Sunni	85	44%
Shi'a	42	22%
Christian	25	13%
Sabeen	15	8%
Kurd	4	2%
Kurd/Sunni	1	1%
“Not important”	2	1%
N/A	18	9%

#### Gender

Male	140	73%
Female	50	26%
Unknown	2	1%

#### Age

Under 18	4	2%
18 – 34	51	27%
35 – 50	81	42%
51+	30	16%
Unknown	26	14%

#### Economic Class

Poor	19	10%
Middle Class	146	76%
Wealthy	26	14%
Unknown	1	1%

#### Year of departure from Iraq

pre-2003	2	1%
2003	6	3%
2004	13	7%
2005	37	19%
2006	79	41%
2007 (through April)	10	5%
Did not respond	45	23%

**Place of Origin (by governorate)**

Anbar	10	5%
Baghdad	140	73%
Babil	2	1%
Basra	8	4%
Dhi Qar	1	1%
Diyala	6	3%
Diwaniya	1	1%
Kirkuk	1	1%
Najaf	1	1%
Ninaweh	10	5%
Salah ad-Din	7	4%
Wasit	1	1%
Unknown	4	2%

**Did your whole family emigrate?**

Yes	130	68%
No	54	28%
Did not respond	8	4%

**Reason for leaving**

Affiliation (or perceived affiliation) with the international presence	2	1%
Affiliation with former regime	7	4%
Seeking asylum	6	3%
Displaced	2	1%
Family member(s) killed	18	9%
Lack of economic opportunity	4	2%
Medical needs	5	3%
MNF military (inc. Iraqi Army) operations	15	8%
Operated liquor store	4	2%
Radical extremism	2	1%
Sectarian violence	44	23%
Self or family member kidnapped	12	6%
Self or family member threatened with assassination	29	15%
The bad situation in general	37	19%
Workplace destroyed/closed/too dangerous	1	1%
Other	2	1%
N/A	2	1%

**Intend to return?**

Rep <sup>123</sup>	Total	Total	Sunni	Shi'a	Christ.	Sabean	Kurd	S/K <sup>121</sup>	N. Inp <sup>122</sup>	N.
Yes	64	33%	35	17	3	1	3	1	2	2
No	95	49%	36	19	20	13	1			6
Not Now	12	6%	9	1	2					
Don't Know	5	3%	2	3						
Did not respond	16	8%	2	3		1				9

**Place of Residence in Syria**

Aleppo	13	7%
Al-Hasaka	1	1%
Damascus	119	62%
Deir Al-Zour	8	4%
Hums	3	2%
Lataqia	4	2%
Rif Damascus (rural Damascus)	6	3%
Tartus	5	3%
Not reported	33	17%

**Occupation in Syria**

Baker	4	2%
Barber	5	3%
Driver	3	2%
Manual labor	7	4%
Media	2	1%
Merchant	3	2%
Professional	4	2%
Real estate	3	2%
Restaurant worker	5	3%
Shop/factory worker	7	4%
Small Business owner	14	7%
Street vendor	2	1%
Student	3	2%
Tradesman	7	4%
Other	7	4%
Retired/depend on income of family member	6	3%
Unemployed	91	47%
Did not answer	19	10%

<sup>121</sup> Sunni Kurd

<sup>122</sup> "Not important"

<sup>123</sup> Did not report

## Neighborhoods within Damascus

Name	Total	Sunni	Shi'a	Christ.	Sabean	Sun/K <sup>124</sup>	N/I <sup>125</sup>	NoA <sup>126</sup>
Al-Tal	2	2						
Baghdad Street	1	1						
Baramka	1	1						
Dhaybiya	1	1						
Dwaila'	1			1				
Hamish	1	1						
Harasta	1	1						
Harna	1	1						
Jaramana	46	13	8	9	13	1	1	1
Kafar Susa	1		1					
Kashkoul	1	1						
Madhamiya	1		1					
Masaken Barza	13	2	1	10				
Mashroo' Domar	7	5	1				1	
Mazza	9	4	5					
Muhajireen	1							1
Qudsiya	7	4	2	1				
S. Zeinab	14	5	9					
Sahnaya	1			1				
Saidnaya	1			1				
Yarmouk	4	2	2					
Zabadani	4	2	2					

## Annex 2: Prices

### Prices for staple goods (50 SL ≈ \$1)

Bread (1 kilo)	15 SL
Sugar (1 kilo)	30 SL
Oil (1 liter)	50 SL
Potato (1 kilo)	30 – 40 SL
Tomato (1 kilo)	30 – 40 SL
Beef (1 kilo)	300 – 400 SL
Lamb (1 kilo)	350 – 450 SL

<sup>124</sup> Sunni/Kurd

<sup>125</sup> “not important”

<sup>126</sup> No answer