

Border Closures Hinder Fleeing Iraqis

By [Karen Button](#)

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Amman – As thousand of Iraqis continue to flee the violence in their country daily, the two main exit routes, Jordan and Syria, are being severely restricted.

Without warning, Syria closed its borders for three days last week citing security reasons. The move took place after Iraqi President Talabani's January visit with Syrian officials, though any link has been denied. Open for just a few days, the border has now been closed by the Iraqi government as part of the long-awaited US-backed security plan. Iraq has also closed its borders with Iran, preventing both entry and exit to both countries.

In Baghdad yesterday a three-day curfew was imposed as 2,500 Iraqi and 500 US security forces began going neighborhood to neighborhood. Today, officials announced they had sealed six areas within the city. Six car bombs exploded throughout the capital; four were aimed at Iraqi security forces and two at American forces. Later, a seventh went off at a security checkpoint.

At this time, Iraqis have only one hope as they flee continuing violence. That hope is Jordan. Thus far, Jordan's borders remain as they have for the past months—more or less open.

Attempts to actually pin down the government's border policy proved tricky. Authorities maintain that Iraqis are welcome in their country and that the border remains open. Iraqis insist there are frequent closings and indiscriminate refusals of entry.

Several white SUVs with Iraqi license plates line the parking lot of a transit company that carries passengers between Amman and Baghdad. Last year the lot overflowed with at least 100 SUVs, but ironically, as the Iraqi exodus continues to grow, today there are perhaps only fifteen vehicles standing by. Drivers say this is due to increased danger along the road as well as the gamble of entry.

A half dozen drivers at this particular company agreed to speak, but the manager remained nervous and said they had been advised by the government not to talk with journalists. He advised me not to stay, both for my safety and the safety of the drivers and then shut himself inside his office. The drivers were all willing enough to talk, yet all refused to use even their first name.

Drivers like these make weekly trips between Iraq and Jordan, carrying four to six passengers at a time. They cross terrain known for robberies where there are no checkpoints and for ID killings (those killed for having the wrong last name in the wrong area) where there are. Add to this the uncertainty of gaining entry to Jordan after traveling hundreds of kilometers and it's understandable when drivers say many people now prefer to fly, even though it costs six times more.

At the Iraqi border, some four and a half hours from Amman, one driver says it's impossible to pre-determine if Jordanian officials will allow entry. Though Iraqis worry they won't be admitted if they have the old "S" series passport, as opposed to the new "G" series, both government officials and the drivers say it doesn't matter. In general, "people are just rolling the dice and taking their chances," said the driver. "There are no regulations, it just depends on the day and the mood of the officers."

At the Ministry of Interior, however, spokesperson Ziad Zoubi insists, "the border is open 24 hours. It is closed only for shift changes. All Iraqis can enter Jordan. No one is stopping them." He says those who are sick and elderly especially are allowed in.

Zaineb disagreed. She shared a ride from Baghdad with two elderly women who she said were in their mid-late seventies. "The way they were treated was very disrespectful by the border guards. They were made to strip completely, even their underwear. And then they were refused, and weren't given any reason."

Zoubi said certain restrictions do apply. Children under 18 are not allowed without a guardian, those who have past fines for overstaying a previous visa are not admitted, and, he added, "terrorists" are not allowed. When pressed on the definition of a terrorist, Zoubi explained how easy it is to forge documents in Baghdad. "We've found a lot of forged passports since 2003," he added.

Jordan is understandably nervous. In November 2005 simultaneous explosions took place at three upscale hotels in Amman, which killed at least 67 people and injured 300. Al Qaeda in Iraq—led by Jordanian Abu Musab al Zarqawi—claimed responsibility.

At the same time, Zoubi could not or would not answer why, if documents are easily forged, are Iraqis not choosing more desirable passports since their travel is so restricted. Instead, he said, "a lot of people can pay money for a doctor report [to gain entry to Jordan] and really be a terrorist."

Zoubi said most of the refusals though are due to non-payment of previous fines. Their names registered in a data base, Iraqis are not allowed to pay when attempting to return.

Zoubi would not say how many documents are forged, nor give a figure for how many Iraqis are refused entry. But, he says, those who are allowed in can easily stay.

Iraqis claim they are able to stay for only three months, then must leave the country to gain another three months. Zoubi denies this is the case and says Iraqis need only request their stay be extended from local police stations where they can get their passports stamped. He said Iraqis are even allowed to permanently stay if they meet certain criteria—though after fifteen minutes, the only criteria I could determine was that they own a place.

Zoubi also pointed out that Jordan is generous enough to provide a return ticket for those refused entry at the airport.

"This is not true!" insists one Iraqi man, who arrived Amman by plane a month ago and is awaiting a visa to the UK. "You must have a roundtrip ticket in case we're turned away. In Syria, no. You just need a one way." A friend sitting with him agreed. The friend, who holds both American and Iraqi citizenship, had flown in two weeks prior. He claims Jordanian authorities treated arriving Iraqis very poorly, while he was simply waved through security after showing his US passport. "I know many people who were turned back at the border

and at the airport who've never been to Jordan before."

Back at the transit company, one driver says it's frustrating to him that people must travel so far without knowing what will happen. Without clear rules, he says, "It's all on the disposition of the authorities if people can enter or not."

I asked Zoubi if it wouldn't be easier for Iraqis and Jordanians both to just require a visa. "Why would we do that?" he asked in return. "Iraqis don't need a visa in Jordan."

Yet, even with all the regulatory confusion the drivers say they don't blame the Jordanians. "Look, the number of Iraqis coming in exceeds the number leaving. This is the problem," says one as others nod.

An unemployed engineer who arrived five months ago is standing nearby listening. He agrees, then adds that the burden of Iraq's refugees should not belong solely to the Jordanian government. The US, he says, needs to step up and solve the problem they created.

"What kind of democracy did the Americans bring us? It's not that I hate the Americans, but we were safe in our homes before. I didn't agree with the previous regime, but at least my children went to school. Now it's completely collapsed. Would Bush accept that his children didn't attend school? That they are refugees? This is a crystal clear issue that needs to be addressed!"

(Emphasis Added by Global Research)

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