

Exodus of Iraqi Refugees: Syria - The Price of Compassion

By [Felicity Arbuthnot](#)

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Syria's capital, Damascus lays claim to title of the oldest, continuously inhabited city on earth. It has absorbed strangers, or been conquered since time immemorial. From the Amorites, who settled from the Arabian Peninsular in 2000 BC., the Egyptians five hundred years later, then the Hittites, the Aramaeans, the Assyrians; the Babylonians in 572 BC., followed by the Persians, the Greeks, the Nabateans (84-86 BC) the Romans the Byzantines, the Crusaders, the Mongols, the Ottomans, to name a few. It is a city of riches in history and culture, that has seen and weathered much and now faces another challenge.

Since the illegal invasion of Iraq in March 2003, Syria (population little over eighteen million) has absorbed between 1.2 -1.5 five million Iraqis. Over one in eight of the Iraqi population are refugees from the US/UK induced bloodbath.' The biggest (displacement) since the 1948 Palestine crisis', states UNHCR Head, Antonio Guterres. Currently an average of twenty to thirty thousand a month displaced Iraqis are estimated to be arriving in Syria daily, according to the Syrian Embassy spokesman in London. The generosity of a country whose economy is less than strong, has been extraordinary.

Eighty percent of Iraqis have settled in Damascus, Syrian population (2003) just three point five million. Syria has provided free access to schools and health care. Thirty thousand Iraqi students have cost \$eighteen million, whilst subsidized bread has cost the government a further \$thirty four million. Seventy five thousand Iraqi children in Syrian schools have pushed classes up to sixty pupils, with teachers working double shifts to cope. Basic food costs have soared and average rents have tripled (for the lowest affordable rents, before the rises, many had to work two full time jobs just to cover the price of their roof.) Electricity costs have increased up to twenty seven percent, water twenty percent and kerosene seventeen percent (IRIN 28th June 2007.) Government again bears the brunt, since there are subsidies for the neediest.

Whilst wealthier Iraqis - most, frequently, having sold their home and all precious possessions - have brought money in and bought real estate, opened businesses, others have fled with next to nothing and the economic destabilization for Syrians at all levels, has been a huge price to pay for the generosity of opening their borders to their fleeing, traumatized neighbors, notwithstanding pressure from all sides: Turkey (read America) from the north, Israel (read America or tail wags dog) and Iraq (read America again.) Syria, of course, is also in the crosshairs for being accused by U.S., Alice in Wonderland-world spokespeople, of hiding Iraq's non-existent weapons of mass destruction.

Syria is also courageously attempting to tackle another problem of the desperate, an

unspoken taboo in the majority Muslim community. Prostitution – reportedly even involving children. The Syrian government has repeatedly requested financial help towards humanitarian aid from the international community to address this, along with all the other problems. IRIN (26th October 2006) Reports: “Syria is increasingly becoming a popular destination for traffickers, according to humanitarian agencies.

A report released in May by the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR), the UN’s Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the World Food Programme (WFP) spoke of “organised networks dealing with the sex trade” in Syria. It made a correlation between the deteriorating conditions of Iraqi citizens and an increase in prostitution and trafficking of Iraqi sex workers.

“It is not possible to say how big the trafficking problem from Iraq to Syria is but we know it does exist,” said Ann Maymann, a protection officer with UNHCR in Damascus. “It is something that has been kept quiet because people are afraid to talk about it.”

“Local activists in Syria say much more needs to be done to protect this vulnerable and increasingly exploited community.

“Last September, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) co-hosted a workshop with the Ministry of Interior to raise awareness on counter-trafficking.

“Maria Rumman, IOM chief of mission in Damascus, said the organization was assisting a Syrian government committee established to draft a counter-trafficking law, and was waiting for international donor funds for a proposed shelter to assist victims of trafficking. Without such a facility, she said, surveying the number of people trafficked into Syria was impossible.

“The government agrees there is a need for new legislation and for a shelter,” said Rumman. “But we have not received any reply from donors, including the US, for a year. The minute we have any donor commitment we will begin.” Traffickers and buyers of services reportedly come from the Emirates and from organized ‘mafia type’ gangs. Syria has taken on a huge burden and requested, in all, just \$sixty million (the price of one missile.) The EU promised help -but over years (jam tomorrow.) The UN High Commission for Refugees was granted \$one and a half million, states an eminent international lawyer – it was spent on their Damascus offices. The Syrian Embassy spokesman concurred with this. UNHCR have not responded with confirmation or otherwise, at the time of filing. Jordan has taken in nearing its own population in Iraqis refugees, since the bombing of 1991, during the thirteen year embargo, the decimations of 2003 and subsequent US/UK driven genocidal onslaught:

“If we were to take legal action against the British and the Americans – who created this catastrophe for all Iraqis – the problem would be how to even imagine what degree of compensation to ask for,” Abd-al Hameed added. “We have lost everything: our future, our families’ future...” His voice trailed off as he choked-back tears. In Jordan. In 1991, in different and, as ever, complex ways in the region (with usual US arm twisting) Syria and Jordan supported the US ‘allied’ bombardment by thirty two nations after Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait. Subsequently they have put out their hands to devastated Iraqis. Both are paying a huge price. The United States – population just over three hundred and two million (US Department of Census) as of July 2007 – has taken in just six hundred Iraqis since the 2003 invasion. In Britain, it is thought that seven thousand five hundred Iraqis have claimed asylum since the 2003 invasion. Last year ninety one percent were rejected, according to

the International Herald Tribune (17th May 2007.). The British Home Office is unforthcoming with exact figures. Neither Syria or Jordan have shining human rights records, but compared to the US/UK recent unimaginable atrocities, they can hold their heads as high as noblemen, in the true tradition of Pan Arab Nationalism.

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