



February 7, 2007

Senator Patrick Leahy
Chairman
Committee of the Judiciary
United States Senate
Washington, DC

Questions for the Record
Senate Judiciary Committee Hearing on
"The Plights of Iraqi Refugees"
January 16th 2007

Question: Once a family has decided to flee Iraq, how difficult is it for them to make their way across Iraq and over the border of a country that will accept them?

It is becoming increasingly difficult for families to flee Iraq. Many do not have passports and must wait weeks for their papers to be processed. As most countries around Iraq have closed their borders to refugees, most Iraqis try to make their way to Syria and Jordan, who are the most likely to admit them. Transport to Jordan or Syria is expensive, and the road is extremely dangerous, as it goes through Anbar province, one of the most volatile provinces of Iraq. Many have been kidnapped or killed trying to reach safety.

Moreover, reaching the Syrian or Jordanian borders is no longer synonymous with finding shelter, albeit temporary. Reports collected by Refugees International allege that Jordanian authorities sometimes deny entry to Iraqis they suspect are coming to Jordan to stay. Jordanians also systematically refuse entry to Iraqi men aged 18 to 35. Syria used to let all Iraqis enter for three months at the time, but it is currently issuing two-week visas.

Question: Do you believe the United Nations estimate of two million Iraqi refugees in neighboring countries is accurate?

Yes. We believe UNHCR has the best numbers, considering the lack of governmental data. However, many NGOs and local activists believe the numbers

provided by UNHCR to be conservative. During our mission in the region, we were able to witness large and continued flows of Iraqis coming through the Syrian border. Moreover, in both Amman and Damascus, we saw neighborhoods entirely taken over by Iraqis.

Question: Are host countries for Iraqi refugees providing differing treatment to refugees based on religion - are particular groups more vulnerable once they reach a country of refuge?

In both Syria and Lebanon, Refugees International did not see or hear any evidence of discrimination against Iraqis based on their religion. In Jordan however, there are reports of discrimination against the Shi'a community. Allegedly, some Iraqi children were denied access to school because they were Shi'a. We have also heard of cases of deportation of Shi'a religious leaders.

Another group of particular concern is the Palestinians of Iraq. Threatened by militias inside Iraq, the Iraqi government is unable or unwilling to protect them. These stateless Palestinians are denied entry in Syria and Jordan and must either return to Iraq, or camp on either side of the border.

Question: Are there significant differences in the way Jordan and Syria host their Iraqi refugee populations?

Until recently, Syria was much more welcoming to Iraqi refugees than Jordan although neither of these countries has ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention. Syria's borders were entirely open, and Iraqis had access to all public services. In 2005, Syria started applying restrictions as the flow of Iraqi refugees kept increasing. Iraqis now have to pay for public healthcare. Whereas Iraqis used to be granted three month visas, Syria decided in January 2007 to start giving them two week visas in the hope of discouraging new people from seeking refuge in Syria.

In Jordan, access to public services was always limited for Iraqis. Refugees International documented cases of *refoulement*, where Iraqis were sent back to Iraq when arriving at the Jordanian border. Jordan is now systematically refusing entry to all Iraqi men aged 18 to 35, and has sometimes even deported Iraqis back to Iraq. Contrary to Syria, Iraqis do not feel safe in Jordan.

Iraqis can not work in either country. As the cost of living continues to increase in both countries, it is becoming more difficult for refugees to sustain themselves.

Question: What risks does the US take by ignoring the Iraqi refugee crisis - inside Iraq, throughout the Middle East, and internationally?

This problem is the fastest growing refugee crisis in the world. Its ramifications are not only regional, they are global. Ignoring this crisis would have dramatic

consequences. On a humanitarian level, we have a moral obligation to respond to the plight of millions of Iraqis- a plight the US invasion of Iraq sparked. Failure to respond adequately and immediately would lead to a humanitarian tragedy; Iraqis displaced within Iraq and in the region desperately need our help. Moreover, should the international community and the US in particular fail to assist host countries in absorbing these refugees, the ones who have kept their borders relatively open will close them very soon, thereby removing the only pressure valve available to vulnerable civilians. This trend has already started materializing, as more Iraqis are sent back at the borders, and some are even deported.

Most Iraqi refugees interviewed by Refugees International wish to be resettled in Europe and North America. An underground industry of counterfeited passports has already flourished in places like Amman or Istanbul. In 2006, Iraqis were the most represented group of asylum seekers in Europe. Should the US choose not to respond to the crisis at a regional level, it might ultimately have to respond to it on its soil.

Question: Are there fears in countries that are hosting Iraqi refugees about instability from Iraqis entering their country through refugee flows? Are these fears justified?

Both Jordan and Syria have shown indications of concern over the instability that could eventually be caused by flows of refugees from Iraq. Jordan in particular, after three suicide bombings perpetrated by Iraqi men in November 2005, has closed its borders to men aged 18 to 35. Both countries also have to deal with their own impoverished populations, who, as real estate prices climb and health and education systems are overburdened, view Iraqis as a threat.

Fears of potential instability are justified to a certain extent. Most of the refugees that are now in Jordan and Syria are running out of resources. Many are traumatized by what they went through in Iraq, and many are angry at the US, the Iraqi government, other sectarian groups or their host country for not allowing them to work. This refugee population is generally an educated one, who is unlikely to handle a prolonged lack of legal status well. All these factors combined with the fragility of the social fabric in host countries could well lead to instability.