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Iraqi displacement crisis: a humanitarian disaster

Motion for a resolution

tabled by Mr Mevlüt ÇAVUŞOĞLU and other members of the Assembly

This motion has not been discussed in the Assembly and commits only those who have signed it

Lost in discussions of continuing military surges, the pace of troop drawdowns and political benchmarks are millions of displaced Iraqi women, children and men. Their plight is a human tragedy, the scale of which exceeds any record number of people fleeing from violence and war worldwide.

However, few mainstream public debates over the Iraq war give displacement issues the attention they deserve. One of the reasons is that the Iraqi victims are largely invisible to the Western media. Also, because of the security situation, UNHCR and other agencies are not in a position to monitor the safety of the internally displaced and returnees.

Iraq's displacement crisis is massive. An estimated 2 million Iraqis have fled their homes since the US-led invasion in 2003, with many heading to neighbouring countries such as Jordan (750,000) and Syria (1.5 million), leading to overcrowded camps. Another 2.7 million are internally displaced. This adds on to the 1 million internally displaced and almost half a million refugees who fled the Saddam Hussein regime before 2003.

Although the pace of displacements may have somewhat slowed, the situation in Iraq remains too unsafe for Iraqis to return home. Their resources are running out and the international assistance has been inadequate.

Coping with the enormous needs of the Iraqi refugees is far beyond the capacities of host countries in the region. As a result, Jordan and Syria have virtually closed their borders to Iraqis seeking safety. In both countries there are concerns about the social impact and economic costs of the presence of the refugees. Their governments are also worried about the security implications of hosting so many Iraqis. Reports of increasing destitution among the refugees are linked to fears that desperate men may join insurgent groups, just as desperate women are increasingly turning to prostitution.

On the other hand, there are also fears that if the refugees were to return too soon and *en masse*, they would be a de-stabilising force for Iraq itself, particularly given the tremendous potential for conflicts over property.

Yet no western government wants Iraqi refugees. For many European governments which had opposed the war, the humanitarian consequences have been seen as the US responsibility. European governments have accepted few refugees for resettlement; in 2007, only 1,650 Iraqis were resettled in the EU countries. However, reflecting the geographical proximity of Iraq, large numbers arrive in search of asylum, and Europe cannot ignore it. Almost 40,000 Iraqis asked for asylum in Europe in 2007 – twice the number in 2006. Virtually all of them arrived via smugglers or other irregular means, given that there are no legal routes to Europe for Iraqis fleeing persecution.

For Iraqis seeking protection in Europe, their fate depends on where they go. Sweden leads the way in Europe when it comes to accepting Iraqi refugees, taking in 18,600 last year, whereas the approval rate of asylum claims in Slovenia or Greece in 2007 was zero, despite the over 4,000 demands of asylum.



Meanwhile last year, the German government began revoking asylum that it had granted to Iraqi refugees in the 1990 – Iraqis who had sought protection from the Saddam Hussein regime. According to Germany, they were no longer in need for protection. About 18,000 Iraqis – one-third of those in Germany – lost their protected status. In May 2007, these revocation procedures were suspended although those whose status had been revoked were not restored.

Some European governments such as Denmark, Greece, Poland, Sweden and the United Kingdom practice forcible returns. Even Sweden is gradually closing its doors after Sweden and Iraq signed a Readmission Agreement in February 2008 that permits Sweden to forcibly return asylum-seekers whose claims were denied. Many European governments have opted for offering financial assistance to support Iraqis choosing to return voluntarily to their country, though few have accepted the offer.

The new EU Asylum and Immigration Pact to be adopted in October will be creating better conditions to enable refugees to return back to Iraq rather than for increasing their numbers in Europe. These policies are targeted at keeping Iraqis in the region and to this end providing more financial resources to assist them in Syria and Jordan.

The present and future Iraqi displacement has the potential to change the Middle East landscape in unpredictably adverse ways. If policy-makers in the capitals of Europe and the US, the UN system and the non-governmental world do not think strategically about Iraqi displacement now, the implications for security in the region and beyond could be equally far-reaching. Hence addressing Iraq's displacement crisis is not just a question of compassion but a fundamental security issue.

In the light of the above, the Assembly urgently calls on the European Union to:

- put humanitarian issues high on the agenda for Iraq;
- include a humanitarian perspective in its long-term planning and strategies for Iraq;
- press the government of Iraq to assume its responsibilities to protect and assist those displaced within their borders and to explore ways of supporting its citizens in exile;
- mobilise more humanitarian assistance for Iraq's war-affected civilian population;
- reaffirm their commitment to the protection of Iraqi refugees and to agree on the establishment of an EU resettlement programme; adopt the conclusions on receiving Iraqi refugees into EU countries;
- work in close collaboration with the United Nations and its humanitarian agencies;
- work with the UN, the Government of Iraq and other international actors to plan for durable solutions for the displaced, with a particular focus on planning for returns and for property restitution or compensation.

The Assembly recalls the voluntary principle of return of all refugees and displaced persons and recommends that the member and observer states of the Council of Europe:

- respect the Geneva Refugee Convention of 1951 and do not carry out any deportations to Iraq as long as a stable security situation has been restored;
- commit themselves to facilitating the safe and honourable return of Iraqi refugees and displaced persons to their homes;
- provide the necessary resources for responding to the enormous needs of Iraqi refugees and displaced persons, including allocating adequate financial means and assistance to the UNHCR for the work on behalf of Iraqi refugees outside their country;
- consider encouraging the creation of a function of a UN Humanitarian Coordinator for Iraq who would be mandated to work with government agencies to ensure that humanitarian assistance is provided, that policies are coherent and consistent, and that the return of Iraqi refugees isn't stonewalled by bureaucratic impediments

Signed (see overleaf)

*Signed*¹:

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1. ALDE: Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe
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SOC: Socialist Group