

Rising to the humanitarian challenge in Iraq

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More than two million Iraqis are estimated to have fled to neighbouring countries. Syria has around 1.4 million Iraqi refugees, Jordan 750,000, the Gulf States 200,000, Egypt 80,000 and Lebanon 40,000.⁴⁵ Approximately 40,000–50,000 Iraqis are leaving their homes to seek safety inside or outside Iraq on a monthly basis. According to Refugees International, Iraq now represents the fastest-growing refugee crisis in the world.

Minorities fleeing persecution are adding to the growing numbers of refugees and displaced people. Christians – who comprise between 8 and 12 per cent of the Iraqi population – are increasingly reported to be experiencing discrimination in accessing the labour market or basic social services, and are particularly fearful of attacks by militia. Of the 1.5 million Assyrians living in Iraq before 2003, half have left the country and the remaining 750,000 are trying to move to safer areas. Iraqi Yazidis, numbering some 550,000, are also facing violent assaults and threats, as are Iraq's Turkmens and Kurds, as these groups are seen by some as being affiliated to foreign powers.

Iraq is also losing its educated public-service workers in massive numbers. Reports indicate that some universities and hospitals in Baghdad have lost up to 80 per cent of their professional staff. At least 40 per cent of Iraq's professional class, including doctors, teachers, and water engineers, have left since 2003.

Many women have tried to flee to neighbouring countries to find work, in order to secure an income for their families back in Iraq. UNHCR has found numerous cases where young women have been promised jobs in Syria, only to arrive and find themselves being exploited by sex traffickers.

Providing shelter for Iraqi refugees is an international obligation that is legally binding for signatories of the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol relating to the status of refugees. The burden should not fall solely on regional governments such as those of Jordan and Syria. It is imperative that the international community, particularly the USA and the UK, meet their responsibilities to provide refuge for those fleeing insecurity and violence in Iraq, and to provide assistance to refugees who remain in the region.