

Iraq's Hidden Refugee Crisis

A Ground Truth Interview with Advocate Sean Garcia

In late December, EPIC visited the office of Advocate **Sean Garcia** at Refugees International (RI) to learn more about his findings from a recent visit to the Iraqi refugee strongholds of Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan. During the interview, we discussed the challenges facing Iraqi refugees and stateless persons, the poor international response to the crisis, and the economic and security conditions that will be needed in Iraq to enable refugees to return safely to their homes.

epic: When was your last field mission to the Middle East, and what did you learn about Iraq's refugee crisis?

Sean: Last November we spent a full month in Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan, interviewing Iraqi refugees for ten days at a time. These three countries are home to the vast majority of Iraqi refugees, with 750,000 in Syria, 750,000 in Jordan, and 50,000 in Lebanon. The remaining 250,000 are scattered widely throughout the region.

The majority of our time was spent in Beirut, Damascus, and Amman, and what we found was really quite interesting. Iraq is—or was—a middle- to upper-income country with a highly educated, mainly urban-dwelling population. Once they escaped their homeland, many Iraqis moved to these cities because they felt more comfortable, more at home. However, having limited resources, many Iraqi refugees are living among the urban poor and, at best, in very tenuous living conditions.

Because they are guests in a new country, Iraqis have found it difficult to make ends meet, living off of savings which expire very quickly, usually in less than five months. We found people with months of back rent and no electricity because they could not afford to pay for it. Most people we spoke to had to rely on charity and assistance from the very limited NGO network that is providing humanitarian support to Iraqis in host countries.

epic: From your research, which groups are leaving Iraq?

Sean: Actually, we found that there are large numbers from every group leaving, but some countries receive more from specific groups of Iraqis. Jordan, for example, receives more Sunnis and Syria more Shiites, while Lebanon receives mostly

Iraqi Christians. However, in a more general sense, we found significant numbers of all of these groups in all three countries. People are really just getting out to wherever they can at this point.

One of the most interesting things we found was that, despite the attention given to Christian refugees being targets of violence, we did not find the targeting any more extreme than that towards a Sunni living in a Shiite area or vice-versa. The violence is equally as extreme towards all three groups.

However, Palestinians are being targeted severely. They are one of the minority groups we found to be especially vulnerable. This is because they are not being granted entry into Syria, Jordan, or Lebanon at this time.

Unable to return to Iraq, in many cases they are literally stuck in limbo between the borders of Iraq and the borders of Syria or Jordan.

epic: What would you say are the top reasons that people are leaving?

Sean: What we found was kind of an interesting split. If you talk to people who left in the past year or before, they'll say that they were fleeing very direct, targeted violence against themselves or their families. In most cases, these people left because of kidnappings, tortures, assassinations, rapes, and bombs at their homes and workplaces. They fled personal violence which was either sectarian-related or financially motivated.



Sean Garcia came to Refugees International (RI) in August 2006 to work in the advocacy department and has spent most of his time traveling to locations that house refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). On these missions, Sean meets with UN officials, NGOs, local governments and with the refugees themselves. Using what he learns he then lobbies the U.S. government, the UN, and the EU to address the crises and improve conditions for refugees and IDPs. In February RI staff will go to northern Iraq to gather information on the IDPs there.

Some of the sectarian violence even had professional overtones. For example, many Iraqi hair dressers left because they were being targeted for cutting men's beards in public. We met a painter who was targeted because he was painting the human form, a blasphemous act according to the Islamic militias which have control over much of Iraq. In these cases, while the violence was sectarian in nature, it was really geared toward their profession.

Doctors, teachers, architects and other people who comprised Iraq's intelligentsia were also frequent targets. They were being targeted because they are part of the community infrastructure and not because of their sectarian affiliation .

The interesting thing we see now is that people are leaving not only because they are the direct targets of violence but because of the general nature of the sectarian violence in Iraq. We asked people if they received direct death threats, if family members were kidnapped, or if they were personally affected by bombs. Many told us 'no', but that they had seen how their neighbors were targeted, and that when they were told to leave and threatened with violence, they simply left. Their experiences in Iraq told them that if they didn't leave they would be killed.

epic: How have Iraqi refugees been received by the governments and locals of neighboring countries?

Sean: It differs from country to country. In general, their reception by the locals in all three locations is still somewhat warm, but their welcome is quickly being worn out. For example we heard complaints from many Syrians about Iraqi refugees who are draining limited economic resources. They told us that they feel for Iraqi refugees and their difficult situation but they do not want any more to come. In Jordan, we found a similar level of sympathy, but they too complained about Iraqi refugees driving-up real estate prices and overwhelming the school systems. So the local populations are getting fed-up with the stresses that the refugees are putting on their economy.

At the government level we found varying responses. In Syria, Iraqi refugees are still welcome, but only for a limited time. The Syrian government lets people into the country but only grants three month visas. They are also scaling back the availability of free public services to Iraqi refugees. For example, in January 2005 the government said that it can no longer provide Iraqis with free healthcare, as it does for the entire Syrian population.

Jordan has gotten a lot more extreme. We have been hearing lately that the Jordanian government is increasingly closing its borders, and that men between the ages of 18-35 have been turned away due to terrorist concerns. Because the three hotel bombings in Amman in November 2005 were perpetrated by Iraqi citizens, Jordan has decided to eliminate worry by labeling Iraqi men between the ages of 18-35 as terrorists. This is a huge problem because we are finding that inside Iraq men between these ages are the greatest targets of violence.

Jordan is also taking strides to ensure that Iraqi refugees do not stay permanently. We have heard reports that border guards are turning away the elderly because they feel that senior citizens will come and stay permanently.

There are also reports that Jordan refuses entry to those who come with more than a suitcase. Whereas in the case of Syria refugees bring truckloads of possessions with them, those fleeing to Jordan are basically coming in with very few belongings because they fear that bringing any more will be cause to keep them out. If Iraqi refugees are granted entry to Jordan, they are not entitled to receive free public services. Iraqi children are not allowed to attend public schools, and medical care must be paid for out-of-pocket. To make matters worse, Jordanian visas only allow for a three-month stay

and are only renewable for one month. After their time has expired, Iraqi refugees face harsh, selective deportation.

epic: Is Jordan the only country deporting Iraqis?

Sean: No, we've seen Lebanon deporting Iraqis as well, citing similar reasons. Syria is really the only exception—it is the only large host country that has not started deporting. However, we are getting indications that Syria is growing more and more concerned about the surging Iraqi population. Syria, with its weak economy and high unemployment rate, is very poorly equipped to host refugees, and the international community is providing almost no support for them. When we were there we didn't see any international organizations operating on the ground to provide humanitarian assistance to Iraqi refugees. The United Nations High Commissioner Office for Refugees (UNHCR) in Syria had a budget of just \$700,000 to host 750,000 refugees—that's about a dollar a year per a person. So the Syrian government has basically had to go it alone.

Without any assistance from the international community, Syria may be forced to close its border. This would deal a devastating blow to Iraqis trying to escape as Syria currently has the only open border in the region. To make matters worse, trapping Iraqis inside Iraq would dramatically increase

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sectarian violence because people would be unable to escape their attackers.

epic: Do you know the reasons why these countries aren't willing to grant refugees permanent status?

Sean: There are a few reasons. At the top of the list is that none of the host countries signed the 1951 Geneva Convention on the rights of the refugee, so there is no legal framework to compel these countries to recognize refugees.

Secondly there is a complex political dynamic in the region that dates back to the Palestinian conflicts. All three countries—Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria—are hosts for Palestinian refugees, which comprise a large portion of their populations. When they agreed to host Palestinians in 1948 and 1967, they did so after being promised by the international community that it would be a temporary arrangement. Well, 60 years later, they are still 'temporarily' hosting almost three million refugees, and because of this they are very wary about committing to another "temporary agreement" put forth by the international community.

Apart from that experience and the problem of not having a legal framework, one must also look at a country like Jordan where almost 40 percent of the population is comprised of Palestinian refugees and consider the problem posed by the three quarters of a million Iraqi refugees that are coming in. With a population of only 6 million people, this influx of refugees has made Jordanians a minority in their own country. In Syria almost ten percent of the population is refugees. Introducing Iraqis into the mix is also in many cases throwing off the balance of local sectarian populations creating further sectarian tensions in the host countries.

An emerging concern is that the instability in Iraq can be exported. The biggest evidence we have seen of this is in Jordan where there are 750,000 people out of 6 million who are not allowed to work, who are severely psychologically traumatized by their experience, who are unable to provide for their own survival, and who are getting no assistance from the international community. This is a formula for a resentful refugee population that could easily turn against its host government. With all these issues it is easy to understand why these countries are very unwilling to give Iraqis permanent refuge.

epic: What are the current dynamics among the international community that are preventing refugees from receiving international aid?

Sean: UNHCR is the main coordinating body and the primary international office responsible for assisting Iraqi refugees. Up until now, it has had almost no budget to deal with Iraq's refugee crisis. In 2003, when everyone expected

a huge flow of refugees to come out of Iraq, UNHCR had a budget of \$150 million. That budget decreased significantly every year from 2003 to the present when no one saw that crisis materializing. Well, lo and behold, we now have a crisis on our hands, but today the international community is largely ignoring it. UNHCR set a budget of only \$29 million for 2006, but were given only \$20 million by international donors. The problem is a lack of urgency and political will in donor countries to deal with this situation.

At this point, UNHCR is trying to raise the alarm, and we think it is doing an excellent job, but it needs more resources to carry out its work. UNHCR has increased its budget request for 2007 to \$60 million, which is still just a third of what it had three years ago. It is also putting together very good contingency plans to deal with these flows on a regional level, as opposed to a country-by-country basis. Now it's in the hands of the donor countries to say, "We are willing to fund this."

Unfortunately, we have not seen an encouraging response from the U.S. government. While the new Congress is interested in providing adequate resources to the UN, to the governments of host countries, and to NGOs to address this crisis, the Bush administration is still keeping these budget numbers dramatically low. But we are hoping to work through it and we are seeing growing NGO interest in pushing the U.S. government to accept its responsibility in caring for these Iraqis.

We have been told by a number of European nations that they would be more than happy to contribute to this effort, but that frankly it's not only their problem. I think that until we see leadership from the U.S. and until it accepts that this refugee crisis is its responsibility, we will not see a huge international commitment to address this problem.

epic: Do you think that the U.S. is reluctant to respond to the crisis because it shows that we do not have control over the situation or that we've lost the battle?

Sean: I think that is part of it. In our conversations with U.S. government officials, we have noticed that many are reluctant to say, "These are refugee flows; these are people fleeing the chaos." Instead, while they will acknowledge that people are leaving Iraq, they claim that they don't know why. To do so would be to admit a failure of our policy in Iraq.

In addition to this political dynamic, I also think reluctance stems from budgetary concerns. People in the U.S. are upset over how much money is being spent on this war. All reports indicate that for the upcoming year, those budgets are going up, not down. If we end up sending new troops to Iraq, this will inflate the numbers further, and I think that the Bush ad-

ministration is very unwilling to add another line item on to that budget—especially one that, until right now, has received little public attention. So until people yell and scream about the refugee crisis, the U.S. will not fund it because, in the minds of our leaders, the money needs to go to the military.

epic: Has RI seen a large population returning to Iraq and, if so, what are you doing to help them?

Sean: We haven't dealt much with returning populations, simply because Iraq hasn't yet become a situation where large numbers of people have returned. But we have seen two trends that are very disturbing. First of all, some people are going back and forth between Iraq and Syria, for example, because their resources have run out. They are returning to their homes to sell cars, houses, and furniture for anything they can get to extend their stays elsewhere. But it is also dangerous because in order to survive people are returning to the very place they were targeted. It is mainly men who are going back home and we have been hearing reports that fewer and fewer are coming back with the needed resources. Many are killed or join militias when they get back to Iraq.

The second trend that we are seeing is also quite disturbing. In cases where men are direct targets of violence, oftentimes they are sending their wives and children back to Iraq because it's cheaper to support a family inside Iraq than it is to support them in Jordan or Syria. Sending women and children into the war zone is something we never want to see.

Overall, RI is not seeing a lot of voluntary returns, and the returns that we are seeing are out of economic need, not a desire to go back home.

epic: Aside from Iraqis fleeing the country, what is happening to the stateless population within Iraq? Are they fleeing as well?

Sean: Stateless people, primarily Palestinians, are facing a complicated situation in Iraq. Pre-2003 there were about 30,000-35,000 Palestinians located overwhelmingly in Baghdad. It was never a huge community, but now we are hearing estimates that it has dropped to only 20,000 people, and Palestinians are trying to get out any way they can. There have been collective death threats against the entire Palestinian community from various militias, including Muqtada al-Sadr's militia, saying, "You are no longer welcome in Iraq. Leave or be killed."

Resentment for Palestinians runs deep among many Iraqis. Throughout Iraq, there is a common perception that Palestinians were given preferential treatment under Saddam Hussein as a gesture of solidarity against Israel. They received benefits that the general Iraqi population did not.

Now with the regime out of power, they are resented and are being targeted. The problem facing the Palestinian community is, again, that they are stateless; they have no country that will claim them as a citizen. When they reach the borders of Jordan or Syria, countries which already host very large Palestinian communities and which are very wary of increasing their numbers, they are stopped at the border and refused entry.

To complicate it further, upon exiting Iraq, their travel documents are being stamped with orders of no return, so they are also not allowed back. Because of this, many Palestinians who have tried to flee are stuck in what we call "No Man Zones," limbos between the immigration checkpoints of Iraq and the immigration checkpoints of Syria. During our last field mission, we visited the main Palestinian camp in Syria, where about 400 people are staying. We were told that on December 18th a group of 50 showed up at the Iraqi border, but they were not even allowed to leave the country, and so they are camping on the Iraqi side of the border. Two have been detained by police and tortured.

The conditions they are living under are incredibly hostile. The camps that they set up are basically tent camps between a security wall lined with barbed wire, and the highway between Damascus and Baghdad. They have no ability to provide their own food or water, and the sanitation situation is dismal. In addition, these refugees are completely unequipped to endure the extremities of desert weather. Because they are in a no man's land, the government of Syria is providing very limited access to that camp. This means that groups like UNHCR are not allowed to bring in as much food as the community needs, and they are unable to evacuate people for medical care except in extreme conditions.

epic: What conditions would there need to be in Iraq for refugees to consider returning?

Sean: During our mission, we heard some very disheartening things, which reflect the high levels of violence affecting people in Iraq. When we spoke directly with Iraqi families, we always asked them, "Would you like to return to Iraq?" We were very surprised to hear 95 percent of these people say that

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they never wanted to return to Iraq.

We heard statements like, “My home has been destroyed, my family has left, and I have nothing to return to. Why should I return?” or “The violence has been so extreme against me that I would be traumatized if I went back.” Many others would say things to the effect of, “Iraq is still a tribal country, and in a tribal country, revenge is passed from generation to generation. They didn’t get to kill me, so even if I were to go back when there is peace, that tribal system would still make my family a target of violence. I can’t go back and my children can’t go back because we’ll be targets as long as the tribal system is still the basis for Iraqi society.”

Clearly, there are some very strong concerns here. But I think that if there were peace, stability, security and a good economy, you would see a lot of these people rethinking their refusal to return, especially because they can’t support themselves where they are right now. Furthermore, at this point, there are really no realistic expectations to resettle 2 million refugees in other countries around the world, so I think these

people will have little choice in the end.

epic: How receptive has the new Congress been to RI’s advocacy efforts?

Sean: We are in a very positive moment right now with the new Congress. We have gotten a very warm reception on Capitol Hill from the leadership and from congressmen and women interested in Iraq, and there’s clearly a willingness on the part of Congress to increase funding to address the situation.

Again, one of the biggest problems we are having is that the Bush administration is not following suit. Because the budget process for 2007 is already complete, most of our efforts are focused on pushing Congress to increase funding and assistance in 2008. But frankly, we can’t wait until 2008 to address this crisis. At this point in time, pressure really needs to be put on the Bush administration to free up funds and start dealing with this problem now. If we wait until 2008, I’m afraid it will be too late.

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