

U.S. Humanitarian Assistance in Response to the Iraq Crisis

Testimony of
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for the
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Human Rights and International Organizations
and the Middle East and North Africa
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Thank you, Chairman Smith, Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Bass, Ranking Member Deutch, and Members of the Subcommittees, for holding a hearing on this important issue and for your strong support for our humanitarian programs. The Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration depends on and benefits from your support all year round.

In June, the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) announced that for the first time since World War II, the number of refugees, asylum seekers, and displaced persons worldwide exceeds 50 million people.

The list of complex crises is long, and many people need and deserve aid. Your two subcommittees are already well aware of crises in Africa and the Middle East. In Africa, we see instability and violence in the Central African Republic and South Sudan, refugees from these countries and others seeking sanctuary and the spread of Ebola. In the Middle East, we are in the fourth year of the Syria crisis and also have witnessed conflict in Gaza this summer. We welcome the opportunity today to discuss the situation in Iraq, particularly for minorities, our response to it, and how it relates to our response to the Syria crisis. The Population, Refugees, and Migration bureau, as you know, funds and supports the UN and other international aid agencies but also plays an important role in State Department and interagency deliberations on humanitarian crises and we appreciate being included on this panel. My remarks will focus on efforts to get aid to displaced people fleeing the violence in Iraq.

The Advance of ISIL

Since the beginning of the year, relentless and ruthless attacks by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) have driven an estimated 1.8 million Iraqis from their homes, forcing them to seek safety in more than 1,600 locations throughout Iraq and in neighboring countries, including Syria. The UN estimates that the violence this year has affected more than half of Iraq's population. ISIL gained a foothold in Syria 18 months ago and has consolidated control of vast

swaths of Deir ez Zour, Al Hasakah, and Ar Raqqa governorates during the past year, intermittently threatening Aleppo. Many of the horrors ISIL is inflicting on Iraqis now have been inflicted on Syrians over the past year.

ISIL first seized control of Fallujah and other parts of western Iraq (Anbar Province) in January. It then in June swept into the north-central provinces (Salah ad-Din, Kirkuk, and Diyala) and reached Ninewa Province of northwest Iraq. In Ninewa, ISIL militants overran Iraq's second largest city, Mosul, and areas to its northwest and east, where hundreds of thousands of people who belong to religious and ethnic minorities were living.

Protecting minorities in Iraq

According to the State Department's 2013 International Religious Freedom Report, approximately three percent of Iraq's population is composed of Christians, Yezidis, Sabean-Mandaeans, Baha'is, Kakais, and a very small number of Jews. In addition, Iraq has sizable Turkmen and Shabak minority communities, many of whom reside in northern Iraq. Prior to the 2014 conflict, there were an estimated 500,000 Christians and 500,000 Yezidis living throughout Iraq, with large communities living in Ninewa.

Now, most members of religious minority communities have fled Ninewa. In just one week in August, 200,000 Yezidis from Ninewa's Sinjar district fleeing ISIL advances poured into the Kurdish region. Many fled with little more than the clothes on their backs. In the Kurdish region, they joined hundreds of thousands other displaced Iraqis, including approximately 100,000 Christians, who escaped the brutal occupation of Mosul and nearby communities. UNHCR estimates that the Kurdish regions of northern Iraq now host more than one million people, a mix of displaced Iraqis (850,000) and Syrian refugees (215,000).

While the United States strives to help all vulnerable people in war-torn areas, we know that minority communities can face special peril. This is certainly true of the Christians, Yezidis, Shabak, Turkmen, and other minorities who are being targeted by ISIL forces. ISIL has demonstrated unbounded bigotry and brutality toward ethnic and religious minorities. Its atrocities include mass killings, beheadings, abductions, forced conversions, forced marriages, and rape. My colleague from the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor will discuss ISIL's human rights abuses in more detail.

The U.S. Government has long focused on the rights and safety of Iraq's vulnerable populations, including religious and ethnic minorities. And that is especially true today. The U.S. Embassy in Baghdad and Consulate in Erbil are in daily contact with the Iraqi government, the UN and other humanitarian organizations in Iraq to ensure that they can reach, protect, and aid displaced Iraqis – including minorities. Our Consulate in Erbil has regular and ongoing contact

with community leaders. The Consul General in Erbil, Joe Pennington, reports that displaced Christian communities are receiving aid. Numerous religious and political leaders have confirmed this.

Staff of the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad visited schools and community centers in Baghdad where dozens of Shia, Sunni, Shabak, and Yezidi families sought refuge after fleeing from Mosul, the Ninewa Plains, and Diyala Province. Each family benefited from relief items provided to them by UNHCR and other international organizations.

In Washington, New York, and Geneva, the United States is working with UN headquarters staff and donors to speed the delivery of aid. We are working with the diaspora community to gather and share information on the needs of displaced persons.

June through August, 2014

The United States has taken extraordinary measures to aid imperiled civilians. When ISIL drove thousands of Yezidis up Mount Sinjar and encircled them, stranding them without food, water, or even shade, President Obama said, “When we face a situation like we do on that mountain – with innocent people facing the prospect of violence on a horrific scale, when we have a mandate to help – in this case, a request from the Iraqi government – and when we have the unique capabilities to help avert a massacre, then I believe the United States of America cannot turn a blind eye. We can act, carefully and responsibly, to prevent a potential act of genocide.”

Between August 7 and 13, the U.S. military conducted seven airdrops of emergency supplies to the besieged Yezidis on Mount Sinjar. The militaries of the United Kingdom and Australia later joined these efforts. In total, the United States delivered more than 114,000 ready-to-eat meals and more than 35,000 gallons of safe drinking water—supplies that many displaced persons carried onward as they departed for safer areas. Concurrent with these aid deliveries, the U.S. military conducted targeted airstrikes against ISIL positions, allowing Iraqi and Kurdish security forces to try to roll back ISIL’s gains in the area.

In a second instance, when ISIL surrounded and besieged the town of Amerli, attempting to starve the town’s Shia Turkmen population, the U.S. military, joined by the UK, Australia, and France, supplemented aid flights conducted by the Iraqi government, dropping more than 7,000 ready-to-eat meals and 10,545 gallons of water to the town’s residents, whom the UN and other aid agencies could not reach. At the same time, Iraqi and other security forces launched an offensive to dislodge ISIL from the area, eventually breaking the more than 70-day siege.

While military deliveries of humanitarian aid are a last resort, these were

desperate situations, where people were in mortal danger, cut off from assistance by land. Airdrops were the only possible means of getting them life-saving aid. In Iraq, we responded to a specific request by the Iraqi government to augment efforts by its security forces to supply humanitarian assistance to Iraqi citizens under siege by ISIL. The Syrian regime, on the other hand, is a primary perpetrator of violence against its citizens and prevents aid organizations from reaching people in need. Further, without the consent of the Syrian regime, similar airdrops could put those performing the airdrops at risk.

We have also faced challenges because families have had to flee multiple times as the places where they initially sought refuge turned into battle grounds. In late June, for example, clashes between ISIL and Kurdish Peshmerga forces drove thousands of Christians from their homes in the Hamdaniyah district of Ninewa to the Kurdish regions. When the clashes died down, some Christians (17,000-to-20,000) returned home, but were forced to flee a second time in August when ISIL again advanced on their communities.

Since the end of July, an estimated 30,000 Shabak and Turkmen Shia households fled from the Ninewa Plains. They first went north to the Kurdish regions, and then moved again to the Shia-majority governorates of southern and central Iraq. Despite sharing religious beliefs with their new hosts, these tens of thousands of Shabak and Turkmen have no established links with their host communities and are dependent on aid.

The Overall U.S. and International Response

To aid civilians fleeing from ISIL, humanitarians have launched what UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres described it as, “The largest single aid push we have mounted in more than a decade.” UNHCR and other aid agencies have been present in the Kurdish regions of Iraq helping Syrian refugees since 2012, and UNHCR continues to be a key part of this global effort. On August 19, the first of UNHCR’s chartered cargo jets arrived in Erbil with 100 tons of emergency relief supplies to be distributed throughout Iraq for displaced Iraqis who were living in unfinished buildings, in parks, or by the roadside.

The United States was one of the first donors to contribute to humanitarian relief efforts in Iraq, committing \$12.8 million in June to help international aid organizations respond to the fall of Mosul and the crisis in Anbar. And we continue to support the massive aid operation underway to save lives and ease suffering for hundreds of thousands of Iraqis.

Total U.S. government humanitarian funding for Iraqis in fiscal year 2014 has now reached more than \$138 million. This includes programs for the nearly one million Iraqis still displaced by the sectarian violence that raged in Iraq from 2006-2008. It also includes funding for programs for Iraqis who have fled to

neighboring countries.

The U.S. government provides humanitarian aid according to greatest need, and does not discriminate based on religious, ethnic, political, or other affiliations. Our money provides displaced and vulnerable people with food, shelter, water and sanitation, and medicine. Core relief items also include mattresses, blankets, fans, kitchen sets, jerry cans and hygiene kits.

Other countries have also supported this relief effort. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia contributed an unprecedented \$500 million to the UN in June to assist those fleeing ISIL in Iraq. This Saudi contribution enabled UN agencies to ramp up quickly, airlift critical supplies, and procure and distribute shelter supplies, hygiene kits, and other basics. As this humanitarian crisis continues over the coming months, however, additional resources will be required.

Next Steps in Iraq

In addition to relief supplies, displaced Iraqis need places to live, and shelter is essential as winter approaches. Many of the displaced are living in unfinished building or schools. Others have moved into hotels or rented rooms and need cash to pay rent. UNHCR is helping to construct 26 camps for displaced persons, winter-proof existing buildings, and distribute cash to displaced people who need to pay rent for rooms in hotels or apartments.

The situation on the ground in Iraq remains fluid and dire for many civilians who do not subscribe to ISIL's ideology and thus are threatened by ISIL's campaign of terror. It may require a long term commitment. Many of those who escaped with their lives now suffer from trauma and say they no longer want to return to their homes – even if ISIL were driven out.

Areas that have come under siege – including Anbar and Ninewa – remain difficult, if not impossible, to reach. Humanitarian agencies negotiate access and deliver assistance when they can.

The United States is working hard to build a coalition of governments committed to supporting the Government of Iraq to so that it, in turn, can protect its own people, especially minority communities. Indeed, we want to help lay the groundwork for Iraqi government action under the new Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi.

Neighboring Countries

While many newly displaced Iraqis have found refuge in the Kurdish region of northern Iraq and several of Iraq's southern governorates, tens of thousands have fled to neighboring countries. Even before ISIL unleashed the latest explosion of violence this year, UNHCR reported that more than 91,000 Iraqis were registered as refugees in the region, and an unknown number were

unregistered refugees. By the end of August, an additional 50,000 refugees had fled Iraq. Counting them accurately is challenging, especially because many live hidden in cities. Their situation varies depending on the country to which they have fled.

Turkey: The number of Iraqi refugees registered or awaiting registration with UNHCR in Turkey spiked from approximately 18,000 in July to more than 70,000 in August. Embassy Ankara reported on August 28 that 10,000 Yezidis had relocated to southeast Turkey. Turkey also hosts more than 832,000 registered Syrian refugees, although the government and UNHCR estimate the total number of Syrians in Turkey to be 1.35 million. Iraqis arriving in Turkey today have to wait up to six years for comprehensive UNHCR registration and an average of another two years if they are identified by UNHCR for resettlement.

Passport-bearing Iraqis are entering Turkey through official border points. Others fleeing the violence are entering Turkey unofficially. The Turkish government and aid agencies from Turkey have focused their efforts on transporting aid into Iraq. The Turkish government is helping to build three camps for displaced Iraqis in the Kurdish region. While this is generous and needed assistance, the United States also urges Turkey to keep its borders open for those fleeing conflict to seek protection in Turkey.

Jordan: More than 32,000 Iraqi refugees were registered in Jordan with UNHCR by the end of August, approximately 4,000 of whom were Christian, Sabeen Mandaean, or Yezidi. UNHCR in Jordan has reported that the number of Iraqis registering with UNHCR is up sharply (from an average of 30 per day from January–May to 110 per day in August). While these numbers (more than 5,500 since January) are manageable and existing programs should be able to absorb new arrivals, we are watching the situation there closely. UNHCR has begun contingency planning in case many more Iraqis cross into Jordan. Jordan is already under the pressure of hosting more than 615,000 Syrian refugees. In June, after the fall of Mosul, the Jordanian Permanent Representative to the United Nations told the UN Security Council that his country could not host additional Iraqis. Currently, only Iraqis with valid visas who fly into Amman are allowed into Jordan.

Non-governmental organizations, including faith-based groups, are helping refugees meet these entry requirements and caring for them upon arrival. For example, a local U.S. government-funded organization, Caritas, is working with the Government of Jordan to welcome Christian Iraqi refugees who fled their homes in Mosul. With the Syrian Catholic Church in Erbil, Caritas is helping up to 40 refugees a day get half price discounts on the daily Royal Air Jordanian flight from Erbil to Amman. Catholic churches, schools, and community centers are currently housing 350 Christian Iraqis in six locations in Amman and Zarqa.

Refugees are receiving food, mattresses, blankets, psychosocial assistance, and medical services. Caritas has gotten permission from the Jordanian government to bring a total of 2,000 Christian Iraqis to Jordan, and expects 570 to arrive this week.

Lebanon: As of August 31, there were approximately 7,000 Iraqi refugees registered with UNHCR in Lebanon, more than 2,000 of whom are Christian or Yezidi. Lebanon also hosts almost 1.2 million Syrian refugees. In June, Iraqis who registered at the Caritas Lebanon Migrant Center in Lebanon reported that their relatives and neighbors remaining in Iraq were planning to flee to Lebanon as soon as it was safe to do so. As of September 2, the Center reported that it had received nearly 300 Iraqi Christian refugee families and, based on reports from these refugees, it estimated another 300 to 1000 families would follow. Nearly all Iraqi Christian refugees arrive after contacting family or friends with connections in Lebanon. These family and friends assist them in finding apartments, and nearly all new refugees are settling in the Christian suburbs of Dekweneh and Fanar in the northeastern area of Beirut.

Syria: Many Yezidis who fled Mount Sinjar escaped into Syria. There, they sought shelter and protection in the Newroz Camp in northeastern Syria. While most of them have since crossed back into Iraq, and the camp's population has dropped from approximately 15,000 to about 5,000, some Yezidi families continue to arrive at the camp, including families bringing disabled members who had to wait for transportation. As of August 31, there were nearly 25,000 Iraqi refugees registered with UNHCR in Syria, of whom fewer than 3,000 were Christian, Sabeen Mandaean, or Yezidi.

Resettlement to Other Countries

While both the Kurdistan Regional Government and neighboring countries have been generous hosts, some Iraqis may need to be resettled in third countries outside the region. Many of the minorities, particularly the Yezidis, have told us that their only future lies in third-country resettlement. They hope to cross into Turkey to apply for resettlement with UNHCR.

The U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, operating both inside Iraq and in neighboring countries, has resettled more than 110,000 Iraqis since 2007. This includes a significant number of ethnic and religious minorities. As of August 31, nearly 18,000 Iraqi refugees had been resettled to the United States in Fiscal Year (FY) 2014, with a projected total of 19,500 to 20,000 by the end of the fiscal year. The chart below shows overall Iraqi refugee arrivals to the United States in the last three years.

Fiscal Year	Refugee Arrivals to the United States
2011	9,388
2012	12,163
2013	19,488
2014 (projected total)	19,500-20,000

Any Iraqi, regardless of ethnicity, religion, political opinion, or social group can seek the protection of UNHCR in a neighboring country. There, they may be considered for resettlement to the United States or another country. Nearly half of the more than 75,000 Iraqis resettled in the United States based on a referral from UNHCR are Christian.

A smaller percentage (15 percent) of the more than 25,000 Iraqis admitted directly from Iraq is Christian. This is because in-country refugee processing in Baghdad was set up to consider applications from those Iraqis who believe they are in danger because they worked for the U.S. Government, military, or another U.S.-based entity. Others are the beneficiaries of immigrant visa petitions filed by relatives in the United States. There is no special in-country refugee processing program for religious minorities. Our experts believe that such a program could make Iraqi religious minorities even more vulnerable to being targeted by extremists because they would be identified as a population of special interest to the United States.

Our ability to process applicants inside Iraq is extremely limited. In June, we had to suspend screening and eligibility interviews for applicants to the in-country program because security threats forced us to relocate our Baghdad staff. This has affected some 33,000 U.S.-affiliated Iraqis waiting to be processed. Applicants who were already interviewed by Department of Homeland Security adjudicators and approved for U.S. resettlement can complete the process. They undergo necessary security and medical checks and continue to depart Iraq for resettlement in the United States. Because we have devoted considerable attention and resources to the in-country program in recent years, we will resettle close to 10,000 Iraqis directly from Iraq this year – more than in any previous year.

Conclusion

Since 2006, sectarian fighting and tensions have made it difficult for minorities to thrive in Iraq. The campaign now being waged by ISIL has made it nearly impossible. The U.S. government will continue to use every means available to protect and assist vulnerable Iraqi civilians, including minorities. The need for humanitarian aid is enormous and the risks and challenges are daunting. But, with our help, the UN, other aid agencies, the Government of Iraq, the

Kurdistan Regional Government, and other concerned parties will find ways to save lives, ease suffering, and help those in need. Thank you again, and I welcome your questions.