

**“Stuck” in Egypt: Iraqi refugees' perceptions of their prospects for
resettlement to third countries and return to Iraq**

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Introduction

This qualitative research report on Iraqi refugees in Cairo was initiated as a result of a larger survey that took place in the summer of 2008 under the auspices of the Center for Migration and Refugee Studies (CMRS) at the American University in Cairo and the Information and Decision Support Center (IDSC) of the Egyptian government, covering 1004 Iraqi households in. This particular report will address Iraqi refugees' aspirations for resettlement and return through three focus group discussions that were held in October 2008 with Iraqi refugees living in the areas of Nasr City and Sixth of October City in Cairo, Egypt, as well as interviews held with employees of the UNHCR Cairo office, IOM Cairo office and Iraqi embassy in Cairo.

The results of the focus group discussions reinforce the survey results that most Iraqis have no plans to leave Egypt in the near future. Furthermore, the qualitative data points to the fact that the majority of Iraqi refugees in Cairo are "waiting" with no concrete plans and feel "stuck" in Egypt.¹ Many feel that this is not their final destination, but instead the place where they will wait for the futures to be decided. This report will show that neither resettlement to a Western country, nor return to Iraq is seen as a possibility for most Iraqis in Egypt.

Background

Estimates of the Iraqi refugee population in Egypt vary from as many as 70,000 according to UNHCR² to 150,000 according to Refugees International.³ Most recently, the CMRS/IDSC survey on Iraqis in Egypt estimated that 15-20,000 Iraqis are living in Egypt, a significantly lower number than previous estimates.⁴ Iraqis in Egypt are concentrated primarily in Cairo and its surrounding area including Sixth of October City, Nasr City, Rehab City, Haram, Maadi and Heliopolis, with a smaller proportion located

1 Focus group discussions, October 10 & 11, 2008.

2 'Statistics on Displaced Iraqis around the World' UNHCR September 2007. <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/opedoc.pdf?tbl=SUBSITES&id=470387fc2>

3 'Egypt: Respond to the needs of Iraqi refugees' Refugees International, April 12, 2007. <http://www.refugeesinternational.org/content/article/detail/9974/>

4 Iraqis in Egypt, Center for Migration and Refugee Studies & Information and Decision Support Center IDSC, forthcoming 2009.

in Alexandria and other governorates outside of Cairo.

Initially, Iraqis were able to enter Egypt with a one-month tourist visa that they could extend for an additional time period. However, in late 2006 it became increasingly difficult for Iraqis to obtain Egyptian visas because of tightened regulations, reportedly due to security concerns.⁵ Egypt is a signatory to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees but has reservations on their rights to work and to access public services. Iraqis can obtain an asylum seeker's card from the UNHCR office in Cairo, which grants temporary refugee status, however many have not yet done so. As of October 31, 2008, 10,243 Iraqis had registered with the UNHCR.⁶

According to the CMRS/IDSC survey, out of 1004 heads of households surveyed about their future plans, 77 asserted they intend to leave Egypt shortly and 927 said they have no plans to leave for the time being. Out of the 77 who intend to leave, only 16% of them took actual steps to leave like acquiring a visa to another country, sending some family members abroad or selling properties in Egypt. Out of the 1004 families, 4 had been accepted for resettlement abroad.⁷ The focus groups provided a forum for Iraqis to elaborate on these results.

Most recently (November, 2008), the Iraqi government announced a plan to provide free transportation via private government-funded airplane leaving Cairo for Baghdad for those wishing to return. According to an embassy official at the Iraqi embassy in Cairo, five planes were scheduled to depart and those who wished to return registered with the embassy for these planes. Each plane held 235 individuals. However, the last plane could not be filled with only 168 names registered, so it did not depart and was in fact canceled due to a problem that was not explained by the official.⁸ This means a total of 940 Iraqis departed Egypt with these arrangements. This was a part of the Iraqi government's \$195 million initiative to encourage Iraqis to return, which includes the

⁵ Egypt: Respond to the needs of Iraqi refugees' Refugees International, April 12, 2007.
<http://www.refugeesinternational.org/content/article/detail/9974/>

⁶ UNHCR Fact Sheet Egypt, October 2008.

⁷ Iraqis in Egypt, Center for Migration and Refugee Studies & Information and Decision support Center IDSC, forthcoming 2009.

⁸ Interview with official at Iraqi embassy in Cairo, Egypt, November 3, 2008.

provision of 1 million Iraqi dinars (around \$850 USD) to each family and a free plane ticket.⁹

The October 2008 UNHCR Fact sheet states that “A total number of 1,701 Iraqi persons have closed their files with UNHCR during 2008, with a view to depart Egypt, mostly to return to Iraq.”¹⁰ The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has been involved in repatriating Iraqis through the Assisted Voluntary Repatriation program, but information on this program was unavailable to the public. From January 2009, UNHCR was expected to take over registration of Iraqis in Egypt who wish to repatriate.

With regards to resettlement, the United States is the largest country of resettlement for Iraqis. The IOM runs the U.S. Overseas Processing Entity (OPE) responsible for resettlement. IOM reports that since October 2006, 775 Iraqis living in Egypt have been interviewed for resettlement to the U.S., with 75% of those applicants having been referred by UNHCR. From October 2006 to September 2008, a total of 318 Iraqis were resettled successfully to the United States from Egypt, a relatively small number.¹¹

Methodology

Qualitative data was collected through three focus group discussions on October 10 and 11, 2008, each with between nine and thirteen participants, mixed gender, from a variety of age and religious backgrounds, and residing in two neighborhoods which contain many Iraqis in Egypt, Sixth of October City and Nasr City. Participants were recruited through a gatekeeper and had not participated in the quantitative survey conducted earlier in the year.

All focus group sessions were recorded with permission and participants were orally read an informed consent agreement before each session, to which everyone agreed. All discussions were conducted in Arabic with translation into English. Data was

9 ‘Iraqi refugees reject return offer’ Bauer, Shane. Al-Jazeera. 2 November 2008 on <http://english.aljazeera.net/focus/2008/10/20081029821544903.html> and Ministry of Displacement and Migration, Government of Iraq, Press Release No. 620, September 14, 2008, www.modm-iraq.net.

10 UNHCR Fact Sheet- Egypt, October 2008.

11 OPE Cairo Activities Report 2007-2008.

kept in a safe place and only the researchers had access to it.

Some limitations of this study include its small size, which was meant to be exploratory in nature, and in no way representative of the views of all Iraqis in Egypt. Instead, the researcher wished to find out more qualitative information about Iraqis' plans for the future in a less-structured format than the CMRS/IDSC survey, which did not provide Iraqi respondents with an opportunity to express the nuances of planning for the future. It is possible that the researcher and translator may have played a role in influencing the outcome of the focus group discussions. The main researcher was American by background, and this may have caused some respondents to exaggerate the direness of their situation in order to in some way obtain help from the researcher. It is a common misperception in Egypt that foreigners have some sort of influence or power in international politics, and particularly within the United Nations with regards to resettlement. Furthermore, the translator was Egyptian, which may have caused some informants to hold back information with the worry that the information may somehow get back to the Egyptian government and affect their legal status or security in Egypt. One additional worry was that a group of Iraqis who did not previously know each other may not trust each other enough to speak freely. However, almost all of the informants contributed to the discussion in a seemingly open and enthusiastic nature.

Demographics

All focus group participants were asked to fill in the demographic details form (See Appendix 2), which is presented and analyzed below. The total number of focus group participants was twenty-nine, fourteen men and fifteen women, ranging in age from 23 to 58 years old. The majority of the participants were within the age range of 40-50.

		Age				Total
		20-30	31-40	41-50	51-66	
Gender	Male	2	1	8	3	14
	Female	2	5	7	1	15
Total		4	6	15	4	29

The majority of the participants, fifteen out of twenty-nine, arrived to Egypt in 2006. Seven arrived in 2007 and five in 2005. No one in the sample came to Egypt after

2007. The timing of their arrival corresponds with restrictions in obtaining visas. All participants were from Baghdad except for one man from Mosul. Two participants did not reply to whether they registered at UNHCR or not. All remaining participants except for one woman, a total of 27, are registered at UNHCR and have yellow cards.

Arrival to Egypt		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	2005	5	17.2	17.2	17.2
	2006	15	51.7	51.7	69.0
	2007	7	24.1	24.1	93.1
	no response	2	6.9	6.9	100.0
	Total	29	100.0	100.0	

The responses to the level of formal education were also instructive in terms of gender. The figures show that the level of education among men is higher than women. However, in general the total number of those who finished undergraduate education and above were twenty-three out of twenty-nine, which indicates a high level of education among the sample as a whole.

		Gender		Total
		Male	Female	
level of education	Secondary	0	4	4
	Trade school	0	1	1
	Part of university	0	1	1
	Undergraduate Ed.	9	8	17
	Graduate Ed.	4	1	5
	no response	1	0	1
Total		14	15	29

All participants were married except for two men who were never married. There were two widowed women, one within the age range 20-30 and the other within 40-50. Twenty-five of the participants had children, except for the two unmarried men and two married couples who did not have any children. The figures revealed that the majority have children and are living in Egypt with their immediate families.

		Number of children						Total
		1	2	3	4	5	NA	
Marital status	Never Married	0	0	0	0	0	2	2
	Married	2	6	9	4	2	2	25
	Widowed	1	1	0	0	0	0	2
Total		3	7	9	4	2	4	29

Only one man did not respond to the question of religion. Twenty-six out of the twenty-eight that responded were Muslims and two were Christians, one woman and one man. However, two out of the twenty-nine did not respond to the question of “Ethnic group”. Responses illustrated variations in interpretations of the meaning of ethnicity, and no choices were offered to the question. The majority indicated Arab as ethnicity but many referred to religious sects such as Sunni for Muslims and Catholic for Christians.

Ethnic group		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Arab	16	55.2	55.2	55.2
	Sunni	9	31.0	31.0	86.2
	Catholic	2	6.9	6.9	93.1
	no response	2	6.9	6.9	100.0
	Total	29	100.0	100.0	

Planning for the Future: Return or Remain?

Almost all participants stressed the fact that return to Iraq is impossible and that the chance for resettlement to another country is extremely slim. This leaves people with only one option: to remain in Egypt. However, some felt that eventually they would be ‘forced’ to return to Iraq, because it would at some point become impossible to afford staying in Egypt.

Out of twenty-nine participants, only 3 said that they were thinking of returning. “Running out of money” was the most common reason mentioned in favor of return because Iraqis in Egypt are primarily living off of remittances and savings and many cannot work to replenish their income.¹² In addition, many mentioned that the UN has done little to support them monetarily while they are forced to wait here in Egypt.

¹² Iraqis in Egypt, Center for Migration and Refugee Studies & Information and Decision Support Center IDSC, forthcoming 2009.

Another secondary reason mentioned for return was the way that Iraqis are treated in Egypt, by Egyptians but also by the United Nations. Commonly mentioned was the fact that they just want to live somewhere where they can receive their human rights, and Egypt and the UN does not allow them to access their rights. Rights they mentioned include the right to education and to employment, both of which Egypt has made reservations to in the 1951 Refugee Convention. Many people felt that they had no clear way to stay in Egypt or to go to another country.

Another common theme in all of the focus group sessions was the role that international relations played in local refugee and returnee situations. One man said that there is pressure from the Iraqi government on asylum countries to make Iraqis return to Iraq because they want to avoid a bad impression of the Iraqi government. One man mentioned that the media had explained that the conditions in Iraq were better, but it is not true. He felt that the free airplanes and airplane tickets to Iraq are an incentive to return, but that Iraq is not safe for return in reality.

One man felt that Arab countries have a political interest to return Iraqi refugees to Iraq. Another man agreed, stating that because of politics between states and public opinion, host countries are trying to return Iraqi refugees to Iraq.

One woman controversially stated that all Iraqis will definitely return to Iraq eventually. Many disagreed with her, especially two Christians, who stated that return to Iraq will never be possible for them. Reasons identified for the impossibility of return include: poor security in Iraq, conflict between sects, intervention of other countries inside Iraq, poor living conditions and lack of services and infrastructure in Iraq, and individual and group/minority targeting.

Only one man said that he made concrete plans to return to Iraq, no matter what; he is planning to get a job in his city of origin and return after his son completes the current school year in Egypt. He said that he wanted to set an example for his son that he is not scared even though he knows he might die. Two others were considering return, but had made no concrete steps. One couple said they were waiting for the security situation to improve and had not applied for resettlement because eventually they plan to return. Another man said that he was considering returning alone, without his family, to work.

Out of those who discussed the possibility of return, some planned to return to their own houses, where a relative or neighbor had been keeping watch or residing while they are away. Others said that it would be necessary to switch neighborhoods because of sectarianism. One man mentioned that Baghdad would be too difficult to return to because of the violence there and would move to the North part of Iraq and another participant agreed, saying that he would go anywhere but Baghdad.

Those who knew other Iraqis who had returned, said that most regretted it and tried to leave Iraq a second time. It was commonly mentioned that once you return to Iraq, you must close your UNHCR file and you cannot leave Iraq for five years after that date because of a stamp in your passport. Some mentioned that there are ways to get around this, in particular by getting a second passport. Others mentioned that once one leaves Egypt, it is impossible to return because the Egyptian authorities put the returnee's name on a list at the airport. It is important to mention here that many of these beliefs about returning to Iraq that were expressed by the participants are not substantiated by any evidence, but seem to be rumors that have spread among the Iraqi communities residing in Cairo. The website of the Ministry of Displacement and Migration does not mention this policy of returnees signing an agreement not to leave Iraq, but the key informant of this study said that he believes that when one receives the sum of money from the Ministry, a paper must be signed agreeing to stay in Iraq for three years in order to ensure that people are not just returning to take the money and then leave again. It is clear that these rumors have spread quickly into different communities in Egypt and possibly in Jordan and Syria as well, and are influencing decision-making with regards to return.

Finally, several people discussed the fact that returnees are now targeted upon return because of the fact that they had once been refugees. Many mentioned targeting happening as early as arrival at the airport or on the airport road, and car bombs in front of returnees' houses within days of return were also discussed as serious threats that returnees have experienced.

Resettlement & UNHCR/IOM

Throughout the focus group discussions, one of the main reasons that surfaced for the impossibility of resettlement to a third country and for remaining in Egypt was the belief that the UNHCR is different in Egypt than in other countries, especially within the Middle East region. In addition, the notion that Iraqis receive different and less preferential treatment at the UNHCR in Egypt than other refugee populations with regards to resettlement was prominent.

One man stated that Jordan is better for Iraqis in terms of resettlement. He said that Sudanese and Somalis have a better chance to be resettled from Egypt than Iraqis. Another man agreed, stating that other nationalities at the IOM, such as people from African countries, are resettled after 2-3 years but only Iraqis who were employed by the U.S. have a chance at resettlement. Another woman from a different session also made this point. One woman disagreed, stating that she knew a family that had been resettled in less than a year and they had no member employed by the U.S., implying that the process is somehow corrupt and that the rules are applied inconsistently. Many others in all three sessions agreed that the US was unfair in not considering for resettlement those Iraqis who were persecuted but NOT previously employed by the U.S. One person mentioned that the only country Iraqis are being resettled to is the U.S., unlike other refugee groups. He questioned why countries such as Australia and New Zealand do not offer resettlement opportunities to Iraqi refugees like they do for other refugees. Another woman asserted her perception that the UNHCR is slower (in processing resettlement applications) for Iraqis than for other refugee groups in Egypt.

One woman felt that the conditions for resettlement were different in different countries and she wished that they had been explained more clearly to her. She stated that in some countries like Egypt, Iraqis who had been members of the Baath party or served in the military were excluded from resettlement, while in other countries, such as Jordan and Syria, this was not an issue. One woman asked, “Do you have no right to live just because you were a soldier?”¹³ Many people felt that the UNHCR and resettlement countries that make the conditions for resettlement, did not properly understand that it was obligatory to serve in the military in Iraq, and this needed to be clarified.

¹³ Focus group discussions, October 11, 2008.

On a similar note, other participants felt that the UNHCR treated Iraqis in Egypt differently than in other countries and compared to other refugee groups with regard to living assistance. For example, many people commented that in other countries Iraqis get food and education assistance. Another common assertion was that Iraqis are not allowed to form community associations like the Sudanese are and this impacts their prospects for obtaining their rights in Egypt. One man said that if services were available in Egypt, his family would like to stay in Egypt. However, he felt that refugees were more respected in the West and that the UN is better in European countries.

Others felt that Iraqis were not being treated as refugees because there is a stereotype that all Iraqis are rich, that they come to Egypt to start businesses and that Iraq is an oil country, so they must have money. One man pointed out the fact that just because someone is rich, does not mean that he is not a refugee.

In conclusion, many people blamed the UNHCR for their troubles. It was clear that some were not aware of the fact that under international refugee law, it is actually the host country's responsibility to protect refugees and provide them their rights. However, some did make the distinction, saying that there is a problem with the Egyptian laws and recognizing the fact that Egypt has problems of its own and cannot afford to allow Iraqis to have permission to work.

With regards to Iraqis' perceptions of UNHCR policy on resettlement, it is important to realize that if Iraqis perceive more "African" refugees, specifically Sudanese refugees, as successfully obtaining resettlement, it could simply be because there are more of them. According to UNHCR's September 2008 Factsheet, there were more than twice as many Sudanese refugees registered with UNHCR than Iraqis; 23,342 Sudanese compared to 10,191 Iraqis.¹⁴ However, of those referred for resettlement between January and 30 September, 2008, 76.7% were Iraqis, for a total of 458 persons.¹⁵ It is true that more Iraqis are referred for resettlement to the United States than other countries due to the Direct Access Program and the U.S.'s policy on its responsibility for Iraqi refugees, but countries such as Canada and Australia are accepting small numbers of Iraqi

¹⁴ UNHCR Fact Sheet- Egypt, October 2008.

¹⁵ Ibid.

refugees as well. Finally, there is some logic behind the perception that the UNHCR functions better in other countries such as Jordan and Syria and that Iraqis have a better chance of resettlement from those countries. There are many more Iraqis living in Jordan and Syria and as such they are more visible and are considered more of a burden on their host countries, so Jordan and Syria are priority countries for resettlement. From October 2006 until September 2008, 6,271 Iraqis were resettled from Jordan and 4,879 from Syria, as compared with 318 from Egypt.¹⁶

Alternatives to resettlement and return

Given the results of the CMRS/IDSC survey and the focus groups, it would seem that many Iraqi refugees in Egypt have not taken concrete plans to leave Egypt in the near future, especially through resettlement or return to Iraq. Throughout the course of the focus group discussions, several alternative strategies for leaving Egypt were mentioned.

Family reunification was mentioned as one method of leaving Egypt. In the first session, participants mentioned relatives in Greece, England, California, Austria and Belgium. The man who had relatives in Belgium had applied twice for family reunification but was refused both times.

Direct application to embassies was also mentioned as a strategy for leaving Egypt. Some had applied for immigration or asylum through Switzerland, France, Spain and Canada, but no one had any success with this strategy. One man had obtained his pilot's certificate in France and so applied to emigrate to France, but he is still waiting for a reply. One man felt that countries are more welcoming to 'illegal' immigrants and low-skilled workers than to those who apply legally and have high skills, such as many Iraqi refugees.

The topic of smuggling came up in one of the sessions as an alternative method to leave Egypt. One couple mentioned that if they had known they would be waiting so long for resettlement, they would have used their money to pay for a smuggler. Now, they do not have enough money to consider smuggling as an option for leaving Egypt. One woman had heard of someone who was smuggled from Syria to Egypt, landing finally in

¹⁶ OPE Cairo Activities Report 2007-2008.

Holland. Another woman knew a woman who had been arrested in the airport with a fake passport, trying to go to Sweden. One woman said that, “Egypt is like a prison because you cannot return and there are no visas to other countries. Smuggling is the only option.”¹⁷ Although the smuggling of Iraqis out of Egypt has not gained much attention either in the media or among academic circles, Geraldine Chatelard (2005) has studied the smuggling process out of Jordan, especially with regards to religious networks.¹⁸ As more and more Iraqis in Egypt become frustrated by the UNHCR and the IOM, smuggling may become more common.

Most agreed that if their rights were respected in Egypt and if services were provided, they would prefer to stay in Egypt until Iraq is safe for return. Many people had suggestions that would assist Iraqis to stay in Egypt successfully. One man felt that, “Our only hope is to find an agency to help support us and to get our rights from the UN, like the Sudanese. Waiting is turning into years.”¹⁹ Others suggested forming a community association, having neighborhood representatives both as delegates to UNHCR and to the Iraqi embassy to articulate their concerns and needs. One man mentioned the fact that so many Iraqi teachers and doctors were in Egypt and if they were only given the right to work, they could provide many of these much needed services for themselves *and* contribute to the economy. Many wanted more involvement of the Iraqi government and the Oil-for-Food program was often mentioned as a means to raise money for refugees.

Conclusion

According to the participants, Iraqis are very resourceful and have many useful skills. Many want to stay in Egypt, but feel that the Egyptian government is not making it possible for them to remain in the long term. Resettlement was felt to be unlikely for most in Egypt and other ways to relocate to Western countries were also perceived to be difficult, if not impossible. Some are turning to more dangerous routes to leave, such as

¹⁷ Focus group discussion, October 11, 2008.

¹⁸ Chatelard, G. (2005) ‘Iraqi asylum migrants in Jordan : conditions, religious networks and the smuggling process’, in G. Borjas and J. Crisp (eds.), *Poverty, International Migration and Asylum, Studies in Development Economics and Policy*, Palgrave Mcmillan, Basingstoke, pp 341-370.

¹⁹ Focus group discussion, October 11, 2008.

clandestine migration or returning to an unstable and unsafe Iraq. Many Iraqis do not have plans to leave Egypt in the near future. It is problematic to focus solely on resettlement, which assists very few, is often time-intensive, and lacks transparency. Furthermore, temporary measures such as education stipends and medical assistance from Caritas, without the rights to work and attend public schools, do little to ameliorate the deteriorating situations of Iraqis in Egypt. Therefore, long-term measures for protection and assistance in host countries must be developed.

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Appendix 1: Discussion guide questions

- 1) What is better for you in terms of socioeconomic and living conditions: (staying in Egypt, returning to Iraq, settling in a third country) and why?
- 2) What is the probability that you stay in Egypt?
- 3) What is the probability that you resettle in a third country?
- 4) Have you ever thought about returning to Iraq generally and your place of origin specifically?
- 5) Did you take any concrete steps regarding: return, staying in Egypt (integration) and resettlement?
- 6) What do you know about the conditions in Iraq now?
- 7) How do you know that?
- 8) Do you have any property, investment, immediate family members in Iraq now?
- 9) From what you hear, what do you think are the challenges of returning? For this question, issues related to financial means, transportation, security in Iraq generally and in place of origin specifically, employment in Iraq, social reintegration, and children education and future should be covered. The facilitator should make sure to expand this list in order to cover all the concerns of the research participants.
- 10) If a program was created to assist you returning (providing job placement, financial assistance for transportation and other settling expenses, etc) would you be interested to explore this option at all?
- 11) What exactly would you like this program to include?
- 12) What alternatives are you thinking of if you decided not to return to Iraq?
- 13) What do you know about resettlement?
- 14) How do you know that?
- 15) Do you know anyone who has been resettled?

Appendix 2: Demographic Questions

1. Name (Optional)
2. Age
3. Gender
4. Religious Affiliation
5. Ethnic Group
6. Marital Status
 - a. Never Married
 - b. Married
 - c. Widowed
 - d. Divorced
 - e. Other
7. Where is your family?
8. What city are you from?
9. When did you arrive in Egypt?
10. Have you registered with UNHCR?
 - a. If yes, what card do you have?
 - b. If no, why not?
11. Do you have children in Egypt?
 - a. If yes, how many? _____
And how old?
12. Are there others living with you in Egypt?
13. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
 - a. Elementary Education
 - b. Secondary Education
 - c. Specialized Trade School
 - d. Part of University
 - e. Undergraduate University
 - f. Other _____

