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Confronting Iraq's Exodus

By Massimo Calabresi

The war in Iraq has driven nearly 4 million people from their homes. As many as 2 million have fled the country, in what Refugees International calls the fastest-growing crisis in the world. As detailed in the stories that follow, the burden of coping with this exodus has fallen most heavily on Iraq's neighbors, such as Syria, Jordan and Iran, who have absorbed the vast majority of exiles. But the war's reverberations are being felt beyond the Middle East, in places as seemingly distant and incongruous as Sweden, which has taken in more than 11,000 Iraqis since 2005.

The U.S., however, has been reluctant to open its doors, admitting just 18 Iraqi refugees in 2005 and 202 in 2006. In February the State Department announced that it would admit up to 7,000 more, giving special consideration to those Iraqis who worked for the U.S. government. But that's still just a fraction of the number of Iraqis in need. And although the Bush Administration has offered to cover about a third of the \$60 million that the U.N. says is needed for the refugees, the U.S.'s European and Arab allies think Washington should cover far more of the costs resulting from what they view as America's war.

So why the parsimony? U.S. officials argue that resettling Iraqis will accelerate the country's brain drain. Admitting large numbers of Arabs also raises anxieties among some Americans that terrorists could slip in--even though refugees are among the most exhaustively screened migrants. But Bush Administration critics say the biggest reason Washington has been slow to act is that doing so would be an admission of failure in Iraq. Says Harold Koh, dean of Yale Law School and former Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor: "If the U.S. government were to do an active resettlement regime for Iraqi refugees, it would be conceding that its own rhetoric about the situation in Iraq becoming safe and stable anytime soon is a fantasy."

The U.S. has been cool to refugees before. In World War II, Secretary of State Cordell Hull infamously declined to accept Jewish Holocaust refugees, adhering instead to prewar immigration quotas. Thirty years later, the U.S. watched as a crisis built ahead of the April 1975 collapse of South Vietnam, in part because 54% of Americans were against admitting Vietnamese who were fleeing the communists.

In both cases, U.S. leaders calculated that the country's national interests trumped its moral responsibilities. But in Iraq, a more magnanimous stance toward refugees would help the U.S.'s broader interests. It would be good propaganda in the Arab world, where the U.S. image needs burnishing. It would be a tool to counter one of the root causes of terrorism: regional instability caused by mass migration. And it would provide Washington with a basis for talks with Iran and Syria, whose help the U.S. needs to stabilize Iraq. Despite the recommendations of the Iraq Study Group, the Bush Administration has refused to negotiate directly with either country. But Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has taken a first step toward engagement, announcing that the U.S. will participate next month in talks on Iraq's future that will include representatives from Iran and Syria.

Tackling the refugee crisis may be the Bush Administration's best chance to repair some of the damage to U.S. prestige caused by the Iraq war. After the fall of Saigon, Congress bucked public opinion and embraced its obligation to Indochinese asylum seekers, using refugee aid to countries like Thailand and Laos to build relationships and counter the spread of communism.

Opening the doors to Iraq's departed would be smart as well as moral. And it would allow this generation of Americans to live up to George Washington's pledge that "America is open to receive not only the opulent and respectable stranger, but the oppressed and persecuted of all nations and religions."

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