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Would Iraqi Refugees Please Disappear

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Would Iraqi Refugees Please Disappear

Abstract

I am grateful to Joseph Huff-Hannon for drawing our attention vividly and movingly to the plight of Iraqi refugees, its magnitude and cruelty. There are more than two million Iraqi refugees, with an estimated 50,000 per month added to the total. Many are languishing in terrible conditions in such neighboring countries as Syria and Jordan. These states, neither of which are notable as places of refuge, lack the capabilities for humane treatment even if their governments were altruistically inclined. Many Iraqis cannot even find such refuge, and remain hapless nomads in search of a sanctuary country. The U.S. refusal to do more than make nominal gestures toward admitting a pitiful few Iraqis is a dimension of the Iraq War that is so scandalous that most otherwise decent people ignore the issue altogether.

Keywords

Human rights, Iraq, War, Refugees, Displaced peoples

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Would Iraqi Refugees Please Disappear

by Richard A. Falk

I am grateful to Joseph Huff-Hannon for drawing our attention vividly and movingly to the plight of Iraqi refugees, [its magnitude](#) and cruelty. There are more than two million Iraqi refugees, with an estimated 50,000 per month added to the total. Many are languishing in terrible conditions in such neighboring countries as Syria and Jordan. These states, [neither of which are notable as places of refuge](#), lack the capabilities for humane treatment even if their governments were altruistically inclined. Many Iraqis cannot even find such refuge, and remain hapless nomads in search of a sanctuary country. The U.S. refusal to do more than make nominal gestures toward admitting a pitiful few Iraqis is a dimension of the Iraq War that is so scandalous that most otherwise decent people ignore the issue altogether.

This eerie silence is likely to haunt any future understanding of the American role in Iraq, and add gravitas to those who offer dark explanations of what really motivated the invasion and occupation of the country. If refugee policy were established as a test of humanitarian credibility, it would certainly add weight to skepticism about the claims of the Bush presidency—aside from its search for weapons of mass destruction—that a secondary goal was [to liberate the Iraqi people](#) from the truly brutal dictatorship of Saddam Hussein. It hardly qualifies as “liberation” if the intervening nation cannot create the minimal conditions of stability required to keep people from fleeing their homes, and enduring the dreadful fate of most refugees. It is a rarely discussed failure of the American policy that so many of the most-highly skilled and financially endowed Iraqis risk life and limb to escape from their country, or failing that, relocate internally away from the combat zones (there are reportedly as many [internally displaced](#) Iraqis as refugees, with an additional million expected by the end of 2007).

The U.S. Government and public should certainly be ashamed of its [currently miniscule program](#) for the admission of Iraqi refugees. This unwillingness to do more to help Iraqi refugees is certainly by itself dismaying and discrediting, but the deeper issue here is the degree to which this scale of displacement, given a pre-war total Iraqi population of 27.5 million, is a decisive indicator of what a disaster the Iraq War has become *for Iraq*. Almost all of the American concern about the war continues to be associated with the adverse consequences *for us*. The imperial mind tends to be narcissistic: It always insists that its power is deployed for the benefit of others, but when things go wrong, the primary victims are kept at a safe distance so that the metropole is spared the anguish of confronting the havoc that it has caused. Consciously or not, this refusal to acknowledge the suffering brought upon the people of Iraq seems mainly to explain why our government lacks the decency to admit Iraqi refugees in far larger numbers.

The refugee issue highlights some other questionable aspects of the American role in Iraq, as in a nested Russian doll that embodies a generally heartless occupation so far as Iraqis are concerned. Perhaps, more disturbing than the callous disregard of the refugees, is the treatment of Iraqi casualties. Early in the occupation, General Tommy Franks dismissed inquiry about Iraqi civilian deaths with the nasty quip, “we don't do body counts.” It is appropriate to personalize American deaths and injuries in the war, but to exhibit indifference to Iraqi civilian losses confirms ugly suspicions of racism and imperial mentality. It conveys to Iraqis, and for that matter to anyone who stops to think, that Iraqi casualties have no bearing on how the United States assesses its

approach to the occupation, which is better conceived of as the unfinished, and likely unfinishable, Iraq War. The best estimate by expert, neutral NGOs is that more than one million Iraqi civilians have perished so far. This is a huge figure that if admitted would go a long way to discredit the purported mission.

In recent months, under pressures from Democrats in Congress, the Bush presidency has agreed to evaluate its Iraq policy by reference to no less than 18 so-called “benchmarks.” Not one of these looks at the trends affecting the people of Iraq—for instance, there could be a benchmark involving a decline in the outflow of Iraqis, another on the per-month figures of those internally displaced, and certainly one on the rise and fall of Iraqi civilian casualties. One would search in vain for such benchmarks. The benchmarks are mostly connected with diminishing the American combat role and determining whether the Maliki leadership is capable of producing policy results desired in Washington, especially making the oil industry open to foreign investment and relying on the Iraqi army and police to do more of the fighting, killing, and dying, thereby relieving American troops of that role.

Huff-Hannon is to be commended for writing so well about the plight of Iraqi refugees, but he fails to connect these dots, and therefore does not convey the extent to which the deplorable treatment of Iraqi refugees is an aspect of a far wider pattern of disregard of Iraqi well-being that has had such a devastating effect on Iraq ever since the invasion was mounted in March of 2003. By now, it requires only modest intelligence to understand that as bad as Saddam Hussein was as an oppressive leader, the American-led occupation of Iraq is far worse, at least for the people of the country. For me, this is the primary message of the Iraqi refugee crisis.

As citizens, we should insist that our government adopts a more responsible refugee policy. Yet, more importantly, we should interrogate an approach to military intervention that is supposed to benefit a foreign society and yet makes no effort to assess the losses inflicted on its people. These losses are immense aside from the refugees.

Richard Falk is Albert G. Milbank Professor Emeritus of International Law at Princeton University and Visiting Distinguished Professor in Global and International Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. His most recent book, The Great Terror War (2003), considers the American response to September 11, including its relationship to the patriotic duties of American Citizens. In 2001 he served on a three person Human Rights Inquiry Commission for the Palestine Territories that was appointed by the United Nations, and previously, on the Independent International Commission on Kosovo. He is the author or coauthor of numerous books, including Human Rights Horizons: On Humane Governance: Toward a New Global Politics; Explorations at the Edge of Time; Revolutionaries and Functionaries; The Promise of World Order; Human Rights and State Sovereignty: A Study of Future Worlds; and This Endangered Planet. Falk also acted as counsel to Ethiopia and Liberia in the Southwest Africa Case before the International Court of Justice.