

Exodus from Iraq: 'Not Our Country To Return To'

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DAMASCUS, Mar 3 (IPS) - More Iraqis continue to flee their country than the numbers returning, despite official claims to the contrary.

Thousands fleeing say security is as bad as ever, and that to return would be to accept death.

"Return to Iraq?" asks 35-year-old Ahmed Alwan, an Iraqi engineer now working at a restaurant in Damascus. "There is no Iraq to return to, my friend. Iraq only exists in our dreams and memories."

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported September last year that there are between 1.2 and 1.4 million Iraqi refugees in Syria alone.

Most, like Alwan, do not intend to return.

"I shall never return to Iraq until the last American soldier and Iranian mullah leaves," Alwan says. "It is their country now, not ours. The only thing that might take me back is when I decide to fight for Iraq's real liberty."

Iraqi refugees in Syria speak of lack of security back home, lack of services, fear of the future, mistrust of Iraqi politicians, and loss of homes. Most are simply too afraid to return.

A UNHCR report issued last month contradicts reports by mainstream media in the U.S., and claims by the Bush administration, that more Iraqis are returning to their homes than the number leaving.

The report says that from February 2006-October 2007 Syria received between 30,000-60,000 refugees each month. Immigration officials at al-Tanf on the border say the daily average for those entering Syria from Iraq in late January was over 1,200, while the daily average crossing back was less than 700.

"Many assassinations take place all over Iraq, including Baghdad, and military operations are still being carried out the same way as 2004 and 2005," Nayil Mufeed, a security advisor with a mobile phone company in Baghdad told IPS. "We have advised our employers that moving out of Baghdad to Amman is a definite necessity in such a fragile security situation."

"Even if we believed that security is better in some areas, we know it is worse in other areas, and that it changes suddenly from one place to another," Farooq Munim, a retired school headmaster from Mosul, now a refugee in Syria told IPS.

“My city, Mosul, was safe for those who have no connection with Americans or government intelligence, but now it is not safe for anyone after the explosion at the Zinjilly neighbourhood that was carried out by Peshmerga (Kurdish militias) and Americans to justify the new surge against the city.”

Mosul city, 300 km north of Baghdad, is under a major siege by the U.S. military supported by the Kurdish militia and Iraqi troops from southern Iraq. The city, a Sunni stronghold, has been a target for Kurdish militias attempting to cleanse it of its Arab majority in order to support claims that it is a Kurdish city.

Many Iraqis in Syria say they will not return for fear of detention.

“They (U.S. military) say Fallujah is safe now while over 800 men are detained there under the worst conditions,” 25-year-old Omar, whose name is on a list of wanted persons by the local police, told IPS. “I am wanted by Fallujah police just because I helped some foreign journalists who visited the city to cover the American crime in 2004, and I showed them eyewitnesses who testified that there were Iraqis who helped the Americans destroy our city. At least 750 out of the 800 detainees are not resistance fighters, but people who refused to collaborate with occupation forces and their tails.”

Iraqis commonly refer to Iraqis who collaborate with occupation forces as “tails of the Americans.”

For Iraqis who do return home, the reasons usually have little to do with any perception that things are improving.

“If you do not mention my name and my company, I will tell you all about Iraqis returning home,” a passenger transport company manager in Damascus told IPS. “People just move back and forth to check their property, cash their pensions and salaries and for other necessities, but the media make it look like people returning home.”

“Some people did go back when they had nothing to spend any more, especially after the Iraqi government promised to pay them money on return,” said the manager. “Many of them came back to Syria when they found that all those promises were just lies. On the other hand, Iraqis from the north and south are still fleeing because of the military operations everywhere in Iraq.”

Another UN survey of Iraqis returning to their country found that “46 percent were leaving Syria because they could not afford to stay, 25 percent said they fell victim to a stricter Syrian visa policy; and only 14 percent said they were returning because they had heard about improved security.”

Others do not return for financial reasons.

“It is cheaper here than in Iraq,” Hanan Jabbar, a 38-year-old housewife who fled to Syria five months ago told IPS. “A litre of kerosene costs a dollar back home, while it’s 10 cents here. That is just one example for how impossible life now is in Iraq. My kids go to school safely and play like other children now without me worrying to death about them. God bless Syria and Jordan for having us, and God damn America and all its allies for doing all this to us.”

On many streets of Damascus today one finds more Iraqis than Syrians, partly because

Syrians are at work while most Iraqis are unemployed. They hang around Internet cafés, tea houses and on the streets, looking out for any kind of work.

“I took my family back home in January,” Rasool Mussa, a shopkeeper from Baghdad now a refugee in Damascus told IPS. “The first night we arrived, Americans raided our house and kept us all in one room while their snipers used our rooftop to shoot at people. I decided to come back here the next morning after a horrifying night that we will never forget.”

Maki, our correspondent in Damascus, works in close collaboration with Dahr Jamail, our U.S.-based specialist writer on Iraq who has reported extensively from Iraq and the Middle East

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