

Fleeing Occupied Iraq: Poverty Gets the Survivors

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DAMASCUS, Apr 26 (IPS) - More than a million Iraqis were lucky enough to flee into Syria. But in this relatively safe haven, there is no getting away from poverty.

Mohammad Saleem ran a successful supermarket in Baghdad. "I was leading a comfortable life with my family, despite the 13 years of UN sanctions," Saleem told IPS in Damascus. "My four sons worked together to keep our supermarket running, and so we passed the dark sanctions period successfully. The big suffering started with the 2003 occupation that brought closed roads and reduced income for people."

The day came when they were told by militias to leave within 24 hours, he said. "It is not possible for us to start over in Syria, and so my brother is selling our property piece by piece so that we can survive."

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates there are 1.5 million Iraqis in Syria. But the economy of Syria itself is struggling under U.S. sanctions. Jobs for refugees on the black market bring no more than 100 dollars a month.

And expenses have risen. "I paid 300 dollars rent when I came here in early 2005," said Dr. Shakir Awad. "In 2006 I had to rent a smaller flat for the same amount of money because rent went up after more Iraqis fled for Syria when sectarian evictions escalated in Iraq. My assets started to dry up, and I have started selling my property back home to maintain a minimal living standard."

A very large number of Iraqi refugees live on charity from Syrians.

"My Syrian landlord was generous enough to keep the same flat rent," Ikhlas Fadhil, a 35-year-old Iraqi woman with two little girls told IPS. "My husband and son were killed by American marines on the highway near Fallujah, and I had to bring my six-year-old daughter for treatment here. I thought things would be better in a year or less, so I sold all my jewellery for 5,000 dollars. I spent all of it in a year, and now I am living on charity."

Treatment for her daughter is being taken care of by the U.S.-based NGO, No More Victims.

The Syrian government does not allow Iraqis in Syria to work legally, and an increasing number of refugees have taken to prostitution. While there are no precise figures, refugees speak of many cases of families who left their belongings back home, and now have no means to support themselves - and whose women have taken to prostitution.

"There are small Iraqi associations and NGOs that fundraise for what they call special cases like widows and other vulnerable families," Numan Fadhil, an Iraqi sociologist who now

works as a trader in Syria told IPS. "But the problem is that most Iraqi refugee families are vulnerable due to the long-term nature of their refugee status, and the unemployment."

With every passing day the situation seems to get worse. "It (the refugee crisis) needs a major international effort far beyond UNHCR's (the United Nations Refugee Agency) current modest assistance to maintain survival for people who were well off before the whole world decided to execute them by sanctions and occupation," said Fadhil.

UNHCR officials have told IPS that they are under-funded and understaffed.

Maki al-Nazzal, our correspondent in Syria, works in close collaboration with Dahr Jamail, our U.S.-based specialist writer on Iraq who has reported from the region for more than four years.

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