



Operation Safe Haven Iraq 2009

An Action Plan for Airlifting Endangered Iraqis Linked
to the United States

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Center for American Progress



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Executive summary

Tens of thousands of Iraqis have served with the U.S. military and other organizations during the past five and a half years as translators, drivers, construction workers, engineers, and office workers. A disturbing trend has emerged: extremists and militia groups are targeting the estimated 30,000 to 100,000 U.S.-affiliated Iraqis as traitors for working with Americans. In many cases, the lives of these Iraqis and their families are in imminent danger. Many have become refugees or internally displaced persons within Iraq. These Iraqis urgently need and deserve America's help, and the Obama administration should act quickly to remove them from harm's way.

Yet these Iraqis have been stuck until recently in a resettlement process lasting anywhere from six months to two years. Because of bureaucratic red tape, current U.S. policies do not adequately address the security concerns of U.S.-affiliated Iraqis. The Obama administration should initiate an immediate airlift—Operation Safe Haven Iraq 2009—of U.S.-affiliated Iraqis in need of protection as the best course of action for urgently addressing this problem.

The United States has a moral obligation to protect U.S.-affiliated Iraqis who risked their lives in service to the United States in Iraq. The Special Immigrant Visa program and the Iraq in-country refugee processing program are meant to expedite processing of U.S.-affiliated Iraqis. Both programs represent a step in the right direction, but an airlift would importantly move the majority of refugee processing out of the region while violence, though diminished, continues in Iraq.

The fate of U.S.-affiliated Iraqis deserves attention and action even as larger questions of U.S. troop withdrawal from Iraq are debated. Based on current SIV legislation allocations, an estimated 25,000 U.S.-affiliated Iraqis could benefit from an airlift over the course of five years—and likely many more, as this number does not include family members. U.S.-affiliated Iraqis are the most documented refugees in the world; they had to receive security clearances to work with Americans in Iraq and must prove that they worked with Americans for a minimum of one year to qualify for the SIV program. Yet no comprehensive list of these Iraqis exists. Compiling such a list will be a necessary step in executing an effective airlift.

Many of the United States' coalition partners—including Great Britain, Denmark, and Poland—have already airlifted Iraqis who assisted their forces for permanent resettlement in these countries. Examples of previous United States airlifts and expedited refugee processing provide a model for action, including those for Kosovar Albanians in 1999, Iraqi Kurds in 1996, and South Vietnamese in 1975.

Despite the compelling reasons and models for action, legitimate concerns exist about this type of airlift operation:

Security: U.S.-affiliated Iraqis have already received security clearances to work with Americans, but some Iraqis could potentially harbor ill-feeling toward the United States. However, these Iraqis are seeking to leave the country because they have been labeled as traitors and want the opportunity to find safety and security in the United States, which makes this highly unlikely. The airlift model will greatly accelerate processing time, while keeping the American public safe by conducting processing outside of the United States mainland.

Cost: An airlift would require the United States to pay for travel costs to a third location, temporary housing and benefits during processing, and U.S. resettlement benefits after processing. The costs, while large, are not prohibitive. The transportation costs associated with an airlift would be around \$100 million for 40,000 Iraqis. Projected U.S. resettlement costs for SIV Iraqis plus their families is \$75 million annually.

Brain drain: Some argue that offering U.S.-affiliated Iraqis protection in the United States removes Iraqis from the country they could help rebuild. However, a brain drain has already occurred because of the size and scope of displacement in Iraq. And targeted Iraqis cannot be asked to rebuild their country if their lives are in imminent danger.

The safety of U.S.-affiliated Iraqis must be a priority action item in President-elect Obama's overall Iraq policy. The following six-step course of action for 2009—Operation Safe Haven Iraq 2009—is modeled after current airlifts by coalition partners and best practices from past airlifts. Initial in-country security processing should take four weeks to eight weeks and longer-term processing following the airlift and before U.S. resettlement should take about three months to four months. One possible location for processing is Guam, which possesses preexisting infrastructure and has status as a U.S. territory, but the Ahmed Al Jaber air base in Kuwait is also a possible processing center and has the advantage of being in the region.

Step 1: Appoint a White House coordinator for Iraqi refugees and internally displaced persons. President-elect Obama should appoint a White House coordinator for Iraqi refugees and IDPs as outlined in the Kennedy-Biden-Durbin-Hagel-Smith legislation—a bill to develop a policy to address the critical needs of Iraqi refugees. The coordinator’s responsibilities would include overseeing the airlift.

Step 2: Conduct an audit and review of current efforts. Full-time, dedicated embassy staff throughout the region from various U.S. government agencies must conduct a thorough audit and create a comprehensive list of U.S.-affiliated Iraqis through the SIV and traditional refugee assistance programs.

Step 3: Finalize security background checks. U.S. agencies should increase resources and personnel to conduct in-country security background checks of U.S.-affiliated Iraqis in Iraq and throughout the region.

Step 4: Order the commencement of the airlift. Once Iraqis are identified, the military should fly Iraqis in small, staggered groups to a third location.

Step 5: Implement and follow up on third-country expedited processing for Iraqi refugees. The White House coordinator should convene agencies such as the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of State, and the Department of Health and Human Services, which would be engaged in the expedited processing of U.S.-affiliated Iraqis and oversee smooth coordination between U.S. government agencies and the military.

Step 6: Facilitate relocation and placement in the United States. U.S.-affiliated Iraqis should be flown to the United States, where some can be funneled into Arabic language-critical jobs. Once the situation in Iraq has improved and U.S.-affiliated Iraqis feel confident about their safety, the expectation is that some of them will return to Iraq.

Protecting U.S.-affiliated Iraqis is a moral and strategic imperative. It is a way for the United States government to thank Iraqis who made their work possible in Iraq and to improve America’s standing in the world. The region is watching to see what happens to this particular group of Iraqis, and America will have difficulty finding new allies if regional actors perceive the United States as turning its back on those with whom it worked most closely. Congress has signaled with broad bipartisan support its intent to protect these Iraqis, but they are still at risk due to bureaucratic inertia. The Obama administration can overcome these hurdles with a presidential order for an airlift in 2009.

The problem: Iraq's displacement crisis

The U.S. military, government agencies, private contractors and subcontractors, and non-governmental organizations hired tens of thousands of Iraqis to help Americans and other foreigners on the ground in Iraq following the start of the war in 2003. These included Iraqi translators, drivers, construction workers, engineers, and office workers—all of whom were necessary for the United States and its partners to carry out their missions. Extremist groups branded these Iraqis working with the United States as traitors, and in many cases their lives and the lives of their families are in imminent danger. The surge has correlated with a decline in daily violence, but it has not reduced the stigma of U.S.-affiliated Iraqis “collaborating” with Americans.

There are an estimated 30,000 to 100,000¹ U.S.-affiliated Iraqis, many of whom are currently displaced from their homes. A 2008 Congressional Budget Office report estimated that there are approximately 76,000 Iraqi contractors supporting U.S. operations in Iraq.² These U.S.-affiliated Iraqis reflect the displacement patterns of the broader Iraqi refugee population: some have been displaced within Iraq, and others have fled to Syria and Jordan. Still others have remained in Iraq and gone into hiding.

U.S.-affiliated Iraqis are just one subset of a larger displacement crisis. The plight of displaced Iraqis received less attention than the security and political challenges in Iraq until recently.³ A number of recent policy reports⁴ have begun to examine the effect of war on the Iraqi people, and displacement numbers are startling. The long-term implications of this displacement are tremendous and far reaching.

Violence in Iraq since 2003 has displaced an estimated 5 million Iraqis⁵: 2 million are refugees,⁶ the majority of whom remain in the region, and 2.8 million are internally displaced persons.⁷ Accurate refugee numbers are extremely difficult to obtain, and there are disputes over the actual figures. Nevertheless, nearly one-fifth of the prewar Iraqi population is thought to be displaced across all religions and ethnic groups.

Two million Iraqis have become refugees since 2003. Prior to 2003, 1.2 million Iraqis were internally displaced. The February 2006 bomb-

Key

IDP	internally displaced person
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
SIV	Special Immigrant Visa
AFB	Air Force Base
NGO	non-governmental organization
SAO	Security Advisory Opinion
CLASS	Consular Lookout and Support System
USCIS	U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services
PL	Public Law
S	Senate
HR	House of Representatives Bill
ICE	Immigration and Customs Enforcement
INA	Immigration and Nationality Act
MoDM	Ministry of Displacement and Migration
IOM	International Organization for Migration
OPE	Overseas Processing Entity
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation

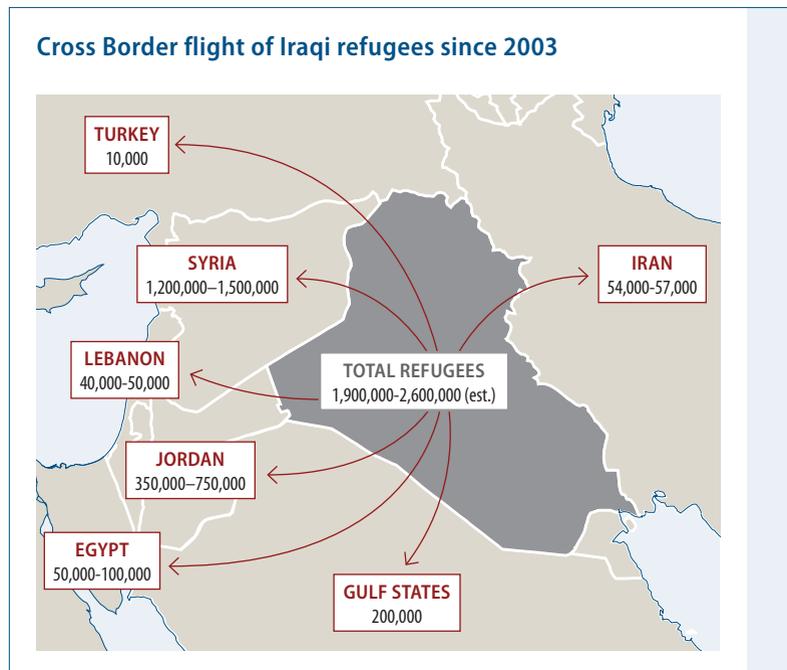
ing of the al-Askari Mosque in Samarra marked the beginning of an increase in sectarian violence.⁸ The conflict devolved into a civil war, and ethnic strife caused a rapid increase in internal displacement, with nearly 1.5 million additional people forced from their homes between 2006 and 2007.⁹ The economic situation, as well as violence and insecurity, continued to deteriorate in Iraq. Standards of living fell below pre-war levels throughout 2006 and 2007, and unemployment remains rampant despite the decline in violence in 2008.¹⁰ Additional displacements in 2008 were reduced to a rate of less than 1 percent of the Iraqi population, but the situation remains dire.

An estimated 500,000 Iraqis fled Iraq prior to 2003.¹¹ The United States resettled between 1,000 and 4,000 Iraqi refugees every year throughout the 1990s.¹² These Iraqis who fled Saddam Hussein’s regime illustrate that displacement has been a long-standing problem in Iraq and adds complexity to the current refugee situation.

The majority of displaced Iraqis since 2003 have ended up in neighboring countries and other parts of the Middle East. Syria and Jordan host the most Iraqi refugees—about 2 million between them.

Syria and Jordan both adopted more restrictive entry policies in 2007, effectively closing their borders to further influxes of Iraqis. The two countries tightened their borders in part because they already host sizable numbers of Palestinian refugees and fear that displaced Iraqis are adding to domestic economic, social, and political pressures. Both Syria and Jordan claim that the presence of Iraqi refugees costs their countries \$1 billion each annually.¹³ What’s more, many Iraqis have seen their job skills atrophy, as they are unable to find work in either country.¹⁴

The massive challenges associated with the broader displacement of millions of Iraqis require more effective policy responses, including greater funding for humanitarian support and a sustainable power-sharing resolution to Iraq’s internal conflicts in order to facilitate the peaceful return of Iraqis to their homes. The government of Iraq’s Ministry of Displacement and Migration, or MoDM, has a major role to play in solving the displacement crisis, but its response has thus far been anemic. According to Iraqi Minister for Displacement and Migration Dr. Abd Al-Samad Rahman Sultan, the MoDM lacks institutional capacities including administrative legacy, institutional knowledge of the field of migration and displacement, and certainty about the role the ministry can play in Iraq.¹⁵



Source: http://www.nytimes.com/imagepages/2007/08/09/world/middleeast/20070810_REFUGEES_GRAPHIC.html; Rhoda Margesson, Jeremy M. Sharp, and Andorra Bruno, "Iraqi Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons: A Deepening Humanitarian Crisis?" (Washington: CRS Report for Congress, 2008); <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/openssl.pdf?tbl=SUBSITES&id=470387fc2>; <http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/world/iraq/bal-iraqbox1228,0,6419132.graphic>.



AP PHOTO/BASSEM TELLAWI

The government of Iraq promised \$25 million in assistance to Syria and Jordan in 2007, which took a year to procure.¹⁶ The Iraqi government allocated \$200 million in 2008 to persuade IDPs and refugees to return home, but as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and other advocacy organizations have pointed out, Iraq is still too insecure for safe return.¹⁷ The MoDM has yet to lay out a coordinated return strategy for displaced Iraqis. Such a strategy must build on the work and recommendations of the numerous actors working on Iraqi displacement issues—including international organizations, regional governments, the Iraqi government, and the U.S. government—in order to address long-term, durable solutions for all Iraqis.¹⁸ The first step in addressing the larger crisis is to more quickly resettle U.S.-affiliated Iraqis.

Thousands of Iraqi refugees gather outside the offices of a U.N. refugee agency in Damascus, Syria to register their names in hopes of obtaining refugee status. Syria's adoption of more restrictive entry policies in 2007 raised fears among refugees that Syria would not allow them to remain in its territory.

The U.S. government's response to U.S.-affiliated Iraqis

Based on current estimates, the number of U.S.-affiliated Iraqis who currently work or have worked directly for the U.S. military, government, media, contractors, and subcontractors ranges from 30,000 to 100,000 people.¹⁹ An August 2008 Congressional Budget Office report estimated that 76,000 Iraqis work as contractors for the United States.²⁰ These estimates are sizable, but already-enacted SIV legislation covers a large percentage of these people.

The State Department and the Department of Homeland Security announced on September 30, 2008 that they had resettled 13,823 Iraqi refugees to the United States during the 2008 fiscal year, exceeding their 12,000-person goal. This number demonstrates that the United States has dedicated more resources and attention to the plight of Iraqis in need of immediate protection and made concerted efforts to address the displacement crisis.

Current and recent legislation supporting Iraqi refugees

Congress has led initiatives that address the Iraqi refugee crisis—passing several pieces of legislation, and offering up several more—that are aimed at offering solutions to the problems.

Refugee Crisis in Iraq Act: The Senate, under the leadership of Senator Edward Kennedy (D-MA), introduced the Refugee Crisis in Iraq Act (S. 1651) in June 2007.²¹ The bill's language and intent was passed as S. 2829 in January 2008, which made technical corrections to the 2008 National Defense Reauthorization Bill. It was enacted in June 2008 as PL 110-242.²² The legislation outlines U.S. Refugee Program Priorities generally as well as the new visa—the special immigrant status for certain Iraqis, or SIV. It created an in-country refugee processing program for Iraqis still in Iraq and calls for the United States to protect or immediately remove anyone from Iraq that is applying for a special immigrant visa if the secretary of state determines that they are in imminent danger. It also calls for a minister counselor for Iraq who would work to coordinate the work of the various U.S. agencies processing displaced Iraqis in Baghdad.

Bill to Develop a Policy to Address Critical Needs of Iraqi Refugees: Senators Kennedy, Gordon Smith (R-OR), Joseph Biden (D-DE), Chuck Hagel (R-NE), Benjamin Cardin (D-MD), Robert Casey Jr. (D-PA), and Dick Durbin (D-IL), along with Representative Howard Berman (D-CA) and 13 other representatives,²³ introduced legislation (S. 3177, H.R. 6328) to establish a White House coordinator for Iraqi refugees and internally displaced persons in June 2008.²⁴ The coordinator's responsibilities include

developing and implementing protection, resettlement, and assistance; coordinating government agencies; and ensuring that budgets are sufficient for the humanitarian situation in Iraq. This position would work closely with the Iraqi government and UNHCR and raise the profile of this issue within the United States and Iraq.

Support for Vulnerable and Displaced Iraqis Act: Senators Casey, Jeff Bingaman (D-NM), Cardin, and George Voinovich (R-OH) introduced legislation (S. 3509) in September 2008 that focuses on the regional dimensions of the Iraqi refugee crisis.

Iraqi Refugee and Internally Displaced Persons Humanitarian Assistance, Resettlement, and Security Act of 2008: Senator Hillary Clinton (D-NY) and Representative Alcee Hastings (D-FL) introduced legislation (S. 3541, H.R. 6496²⁵) in September 2008 that describes the link between the humanitarian and security implications of displacement. This bill calls for the creation of a special coordinator for Iraqi refugees and IDPs within the Executive Office of the President. In terms of funding, the legislation states that there is \$700 million that Congress can authorize for appropriation during 2009-2011 for humanitarian assistance to Iraqi refugees and IDPs. An additional \$500 million is authorized to be appropriated for fiscal year 2009 for Jordan to provide humanitarian assistance to Iraqi refugees. The legislation also calls for a 100 percent increase in federal personnel processing Iraqi refugees in Iraq and throughout the region by September 30, 2009.

The Bush administration deserves credit for taking steps to address the situation. U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker wrote a cable in September 2007 titled “Iraqi Refugee Processing: Can We Speed It Up?” that was extremely critical of the major bottlenecks in Iraqi refugee processing.²⁶ He helped to raise the profile of issues related to refugee processing. The Bush administration also appointed two senior officials to oversee Iraqi refugee issues: Ambassador James Foley as senior coordinator for Iraqi refugee issues at the State Department in 2007, and Lori Scialabba as associate director of refugee, asylum, and international operations at U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services at the Department of Homeland Security.

Yet these recent advances in policy have come after the United States failed to meet refugee resettlement targets in 2006 or 2007. The modest 2007 Iraqi resettlement target was 5,000 people, but the United States resettled only 1,608. And the United States resettled fewer than 8,000 Iraqi refugees between March 2003 and 2007.²⁷ The government has fallen woefully short of the quotas set up specifically for U.S.-affiliated Iraqis; only 600 of the intended 5,000 SIVs were issued in FY2008. And only 200 of the nearly 1,700 names referred to the State Department from the most comprehensive list of U.S.-affiliated Iraqis, maintained by the List Project to Resettle Iraqi Allies, were admitted in 2007 and 2008.²⁸ There is still a projected one-year waiting list for U.S.-affiliated Iraqis seeking SIVs, and the process remains slow. UNHCR has identified protection and resettlement needs for 80,000 to 90,000 Iraqis in the region.²⁹

Stuck in Iraq: A marked man hiding in Iraq

Stories from U.S.-affiliated Iraqis

Yousif and his family have lived in fear since his nephew was killed and his daughter was abducted over one year ago. Yousif has worked as an interpreter for the U.S. Army since 2003, and he and his family have been harassed, stalked, and shot at because of this affiliation. To make matters worse, Yousif has been stuck in the middle of the sectarian and ethnic cleansing in Iraq because he is a Christian.

Yousif is a man in his early fifties, and his story is one of sacrifice and tragedy. Soon after he began his work as an interpreter for the U.S. Army in 2003, a local mosque named him as a collaborator and he became a marked man. Yousif continued to work with the U.S. military despite staggering personal sacrifices. The lethal consequences of his affiliation began with the assassination of his nephew in September 2004. Yousif's house was shot in January 2008 while he and his family hid inside. Yousif and his family are continually forced to move from neighborhood to neighborhood in Iraq, yet the militias find them each time.

Yousif's daughter Alia was abducted on her way to class in December 2007 and has not been found or returned. The only information Yousif has managed to find out is that she was smuggled out of Iraq to Syria and sold to traffickers. The insurgents have demanded \$50,000 in exchange

for his daughter's return, yet Yousif can't be sure that they even know where Alia is anymore. He is frightened that speaking to anyone about the abduction will get her killed. Yousif continues to receive phone messages and letters threatening his life and the lives of his wife and son. This tragedy stems from his association with the United States, and yet he is still stuck in Iraq.

Yousif was at a loss for how to navigate the complicated process of applying for resettlement, and the American military had misplaced the paperwork he initially submitted. Yousif was rapidly losing hope. However, in June 2008, Yousif contacted the List Project to Resettle Iraqi Allies. The List Project and one of their partnering law firms, Proskauer Rose LLP, began working on his case. The majority of the Iraqis on the List have extensive documentation and are able to produce badges that are only issued after security checks. But the process remains slow. His paperwork was finally gathered and submitted in September 2008 after weeks of persistent work by the law firm. It will likely take at least one year before Yousif makes it to safety in America.

Note: All names have been changed to protect the identity of these Iraqis.

Routes to protection

U.S. law allocates enough slots to bring U.S.-affiliated Iraqis to the United States through the SIV and U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program. Presidential political will is needed to ensure that U.S.-affiliated Iraqis are more quickly able to clear the current bureaucratic hurdles.

The U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program

The processing of refugees to the United States takes place abroad.³⁰ Refugees must prove a “well-founded fear of being persecuted,” as outlined in the 1951 Refugee Convention. The State Department handles overseas processing and USCIS at the Department of Homeland Security makes final arrangements regarding eligibility for U.S. admission.³¹ The State Department prioritizes refugees as follows:

Priority 1: Compelling refugee cases and individuals where no durable solution exists. These refugees are referred to the U.S. refugee program by UNHCR, non-governmental organizations, or specific U.S. embassies.

Priority 2: Groups of special humanitarian concern to the United States. U.S.-affiliated Iraqis are covered under this category as defined by the 2008 National Defense Authorization Act, including Iraqis employed by the U.S. government in Iraq; Iraqis who were or are employed in Iraq by media or NGOs headquartered in the United States, or an entity closely associated with the U.S. mission in Iraq that received U.S. government funding; and Iraqis who are members of a persecuted religious group and have close family members in the United States.

Priority 3: Family reunification cases involving spouses, unmarried children under 21, and parents of persons admitted to the United States as refugees or granted asylum.

The president of the United States determines worldwide refugee admission numbers each year. This number was 80,000 people in 2008, with 28,000 spots allocated for the Near East and South Asia, and 10,000 designated “unallocated reserve,” which can be used to help to refugees from any country.³²

Iraqis register first with UNHCR. Once Iraqis are referred to the United States, they are interviewed by an overseas processing entity contracted by the United States. The OPE is the International Organization for Migration in Iraq, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt. After the file is started, refugee names are forwarded to the Department of State.³³ U.S. resettlement processing begins when the State Department's Consular Lookout and Support System checks refugees. CLASS contains information about people ineligible to receive a visa, including individuals who are suspected or known terrorists. The State Department must obtain a Security Advisory Opinion for certain applicants from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which includes checking into more databases. Iraqis also go through enhanced security screening procedures as established by the Department of Homeland Security, and the State Department presents the applicants designated for priority processing to DHS's USCIS, which conducts in-person interviews, does fingerprinting, and confirms family relationships. USCIS makes final determinations about whether individuals are eligible for refugee status and U.S. admission.³⁴ Successful candidates are referred back to OPE, which schedules medical exams and matches refugees with resettlement agencies in the United States. IOM provides cultural orientation and arranges travel.³⁵

In-country refugee processing began in Iraq in June 2008, which allows Iraqis to establish their "well-founded" fear while they are still within Iraq. This novel approach gives both U.S.-affiliated and non-U.S.-affiliated Iraqis the opportunity to stay in Iraq without having to cross a border to Syria or Jordan, where they likely would be unable to work.

Special Immigrant Visas

Special Immigrant Visas were originally created by the Refugee Crisis in Iraq Act (later PL 110-242) and intended to grant legal permanent resident status to Iraqi and Afghan translators. There is no "well-founded fear" provision in order to be eligible for this program. The National Defense Authorization Act of FY2008 broadened the definition of SIVs. To qualify for a SIV, an applicant must:

1. Be a national of Iraq
2. Have been employed by or on behalf of the U.S. government in Iraq on or after March 20, 2003 for an aggregate period of not less than one year
3. Have provided faithful and valuable service to the U.S. government, documented in a letter of recommendation from the employee's supervisor
4. Have experienced or be experiencing an ongoing serious threat as a consequence of employment by the U.S. government
5. Be able to clear a background check and appropriate screening as determined by the DHS
6. Be otherwise eligible to receive an immigrant visa and admission to the United States for permanent residence

The SIV program will allow 5,000 Iraqis per year to enter the United States over the next five years—25,000 total from FY2008 to FY2012. Immediate family, which includes spouses and children, are also eligible and they do not count toward the 25,000 cap. The SIV process circumvents and streamlines refugee processing. U.S. government agencies can directly refer Iraqis that have worked for them to the Department of Homeland Security and the U.S. State Department without needing referrals from a third party for the refugees. And DHS is authorized to grant legal permanent resident status.

The National Defense Authorization Act of 2008 required the secretary of state and the secretary of homeland security to establish or use existing refugee processing mechanisms in Iraq and the region to administer SIV processing. SIV processing has been occurring in Baghdad since June 2008 at a rate of 150 per month.³⁶ Of the 5,000 allocated spaces, only an estimated 600 Iraqis received SIV status in FY2008.³⁷

No way out: Fleeing to Jordan and ultimate return to Iraq

Stories from U.S.-affiliated Iraqis

The threats that Alia and Hamada faced after working as interpreters for the U.S. Army's 10th Mountain Division and the National Democratic Institute for three years were so terrifying that in 2006 they packed their lives into a suitcase and fled Iraq.

The young married couple entered Jordan illegally, where they immediately applied to be resettled to the United States and wrote to the List Project to Resettle Iraqi Allies for help. They kept to themselves, rationed out their life savings, and prayed for a helping hand from the United States since Iraqis cannot obtain work permits anywhere in the Middle East.

Alia and Hamada waited for the next 18 months. The List Project began to push the couple's case with officers at the State Department, and it progressed slowly through the system. Alia and Hamada allowed themselves to hope and considered a life in America free of death threats or the possibility of being forced back to Iraq, where their colleagues continue to be hunted, kidnapped, tortured, and assassinated.

During this time, Alia got pregnant. She and Hamada waited, clearing hurdle after hurdle, patiently retelling their story to the array of officers who struggled to move their application through a labyrinthine resettlement process.

After successfully clearing the penultimate step of the process—approval from the Department of Homeland Security—all they had left was to pass a medical test and they would be on their way. Alia and Hamada were elated at the prospect of refuge in America, but were terrified of one aspect of the medical test—a chest X-ray for Alia used to check for tuberculosis.

Knowing that an X-ray might be a risk for her unborn child, Alia and the List Project inquired about whether or not the X-ray might be waived or an alternate method utilized. She only had a few months before it would be unsafe to fly, so Alia faced an impending deadline. She was terrified at the uncertainty of delivery in a Jordanian hospital, where her husband might be arrested or denied care because she was illegal. Days, weeks, and months passed, yet the couple could not get the waiver and their dream of living in safety in the United States crumbled.

The couple and their unborn child were forced to return to Iraq because of a tuberculosis test and bureaucratic red tape. They delivered their baby in hiding and remain in fear of the continued threat faced by those who signed up to help the United States.

Note: All names have been changed to protect the identity of these Iraqis.

Iraqis who worked for the United States in Iraq can qualify for either the SIV program or the U.S. Refugee Assistance Program. Both programs operate in Iraq, Amman, and Damascus and offer resettlement benefits for up to eight months once Iraqis arrive in the United States; both include resettlement assistance, entitlement programs, and other benefits.

Problems in the protection process

Various lawmakers and government agencies are working to address the Iraqi refugee crisis, but the process is not happening quickly enough. Refugee processing through the U.S. Refugee Assistance Program takes a minimum of six months but often takes up to two years. This delay puts individuals whose lives and families are threatened at considerable risk. U.S. policies do not adequately address the urgency present in many applicants' cases. SIV processing should, however, decrease the Iraqi refugee processing time to about nine weeks.³⁸ SIV processing and in-country refugee processing began in June 2008, and a minister counselor for Iraqi refugees and internally displaced persons is now in Baghdad overseeing displacement issues in-country.

Resettlement of U.S.-affiliated Iraqis also continues to be delayed due to bureaucratic red tape despite legislation specifically addressing U.S.-affiliated Iraqis. The Department of State and the Department of Homeland Security are not working together effectively or efficiently on this issue. Refugee processing is cumbersome; it includes fingerprinting, job checks, name checks, interviews,³⁹ and medical inspections. Members of Congress argued in a letter to President Bush on June 20, 2008 that the current system for dealing with Iraqi refugee resettlement is riddled with "structural complications and procedural inefficiencies."⁴⁰ It also states that in Baghdad "logistical and security issues prevent access to the Green Zone for many applicants and contribute to complications with assisting applicants with medical conditions."⁴¹

SIVs are currently being processed at a rate of about 150 people per month.⁴² The State Department has full-time consular staff in Baghdad, Amman, and elsewhere in the region, but DHS has no personnel posted in Baghdad to deal with the refugee portfolio. DHS's USCIS instead deploys staff to the region to conduct "circuit rides" where they interview Iraqis who are potentially eligible for U.S. protection. USCIS deployed staff on 29 circuit rides in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Turkey, and Baghdad during FY2008, but only two to Baghdad had occurred by September 2008.

Inadequate staffing and funding is another factor inhibiting effective SIV processing in Baghdad. Only about five people presently make up the overseas processing entity that works to process refugee applications.⁴³ There is an estimated one-year backlog at the embassy in Baghdad. A 2008 report by the State Department evaluating the SIV program notes that resources were insufficient and recommended that the Bureau of Population,

Refugees, and Migration and the Bureau of Consular Affairs should verify the staffing and resources needed to “efficiently and effectively manage the SIV programs in Iraq.”⁴⁴ The report noted that additional staff—up to five in Amman and two in Baghdad—and physical changes to their workspace will be necessary to process SIVs. The report also stated that SIV processing is occurring using PRM’s current refugee account, but that “the bureau may be underestimating the case size and thus the overall cost of the resettlement program.”⁴⁵

SIV processing takes less time than the traditional U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program, but there is clearly a problem with effective implementation due to lack of staff and resources. The program is operational and has legislative support, but its funding is coming from the already strained State Department, which makes it difficult for the program to do what it was intended to do—allow refugees to be processed more speedily.

Until recently, the United States treated U.S.-affiliated Iraqis as though they belong within the traditional U.S. refugee resettlement process. This approach was misguided. U.S. policy must prioritize the cases of those Iraqis who are in harm’s way because of their affiliation

A death threat with knife enclosed typical of the types of explicit and direct threats that US-affiliated Iraqis receive. It reads:

In the name of Allah the Merciful the Compassionate and those who are transgressors will know what kind of result they shall return to'

To the Agent [Name], we shall slaughter you with this knife of Righteous-you infidel- and shall behead your (rotten head) and throw it to the garbage, where it belongs.

– Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice Brigades



FURNISHED BY THE LIST PROJECT TO RESETTLE IRAQI ALLIES

with the United States. It is a moral and humanitarian duty to make sure they can leave Iraq quickly and safely and find permanent protection. Helping U.S.-affiliated Iraqis is also a strategic imperative. In order to be successful in Iraq, the United States must be able to continuously recruit Iraqis. If the United States abandons Iraqis to fates unknown, Iraqis will see the United States as callously using Iraqis for its own purposes.

Violence in Iraq has decreased in recent months,⁴⁶ but U.S.-affiliated Iraqis' lives are still in danger, with extremist groups still threatening Iraqis affiliated with Americans. Some U.S.-affiliated Iraqis have not been hired into Iraqi government agencies because of the stigma of "collaboration" with the Americans.⁴⁷ The United States must take responsibility for these Iraqis and act on a large scale. An improved security situation is no excuse for U.S. inaction on its moral responsibility. The resettlement of Iraqis so far has been a trickle, but this report proposes an aggressive response to bring U.S.-affiliated Iraqis out of harm's way.

The solution: Implementing an Iraqi airlift program

Existing laws and regulations provide the resources necessary to implement a protection program for the estimated 30,000 to 100,000 U.S.-affiliated Iraqis who might seek to benefit from it. Operation Safe Haven Iraq 2009 can help address those in immediate need of protection, particularly in light of the large numbers and significant bureaucratic challenges. Two useful models for planning such a program exist: airlifts of Iraqis occurring in other European countries and past U.S. operations dealing with similar displacement situations.

Iraqi resettlement programs in European countries

Large-scale airlifts and resettlements of other coalition-affiliated Iraqis are currently occurring in European countries. Denmark, the United Kingdom, and Poland conducted airlifts to remove from danger Iraqis who helped them and offered them permanent resettlement as troops drew down throughout 2007 and 2008.

A new U.S. administration could implement an airlift based on these European models and quickly and efficiently remove U.S.-affiliated Iraqis from Iraq as the first step toward U.S. resettlement. The U.S. government should start this airlift as quickly as possible.

Iraqi asylum and resettlement efforts by coalition forces

Country	Size of the coalition force	Number of coalition-affiliated Iraqis offered asylum or resettlement
Denmark	480 troops	370
United Kingdom	7,100 troops	1,000-1,500 (estimated)
Poland	900 troops	100
United States	140,000 troops	Unknown

Source: "Asylum" for 1,500 Iraqi interpreters" *The Telegraph*, available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1578849/%27Asylum%27-for-1%2C500-Iraqi-interpreters.html> (last accessed December 2008); "Polish Government Approves Aid for Iraqis" *Poland.Pl*, August 20, 2008, available at http://www.poland.pl/news/article,Polish_government_approves_aid_for_Iraqi,id,342519.htm (last accessed December 2008); U.S. Government Accountability Office, "Securing, Stabilizing and Rebuilding Iraq. Progress Report: Some Gains Made, Updated Strategy Needed" (2008).

Six key concerns regarding an airlift of U.S.-affiliated Iraqis

Security

Security concerns tied to the airlift and protection of thousands of Iraqis are paramount. Some believe that U.S.-affiliated Iraqis could be “carriers of conflict” who might exhibit a propensity for violence outside of Iraq.⁴⁸ But the possibility that U.S.-affiliated Iraqis carry feelings of resentment toward the United States is highly unlikely. These individuals took jobs with U.S. government agencies and contractors likely knowing that some risks existed. What’s more, they went through extensive background checks during which their prospective employers examined their potential as security risks.

Those requesting resettlement must have a letter from a U.S. supervisor and clear an additional background check. These Iraqis have been called “the most documented refugees in the world.”⁴⁹ Since they are being targeted by their own countrymen, their overriding desire is for safety. It is the United States’ responsibility to thoroughly examine these refugees, but we should not doubly condemn those who have been targeted by not allowing them to leave.

Even if some individuals may be unfit for an airlift program, this does not mean that an airlift should not be attempted. No one wants to become a refugee, especially these Iraqis who believed that the United States could rebuild their country.⁵⁰ The U.S. refugee resettlement process’ procedures and security screenings should not be a reason for individuals to remain at risk.

Cost

The main costs associated with an airlift would be transportation out of the country and housing and benefits once refugees are resettled in the United States. The United States has provided more than \$1 billion in humanitarian assistance to displaced Iraqis since 2003.⁵¹ U.S. humanitarian assistance to Iraqis in FY2008 totaled \$398.27 million, up from \$171 million in 2007. This money provided Iraqis inside and outside of Iraq with food, shelter, education, and other assistance.⁵² The FY2009 supplemental provided \$350 million, nearly 50 percent more than the Bush administration requested to respond to the urgent humanitarian refugee admissions requirements. This amount is less than the cost of one day of U.S. military operations in Iraq.

One rough estimate, based on the cost of transportation of 20,000 Kosovo Albanians to Fort Dix, New Jersey in 1999, places transportation costs for 40,000 U.S.-affiliated Iraqis at approximately \$100 million.⁵³ According to State Department refugee and consular officers in the region and previous experience with similar programs, they “believe the average case size will be close to three individuals resulting in an annual resettlement cost of nearly \$75 million.”⁵⁴

Brain drain

According to some analysts, Iraqis affiliated with the United States are likely more sympathetic to democracy and therefore essential to rebuilding Iraq’s civil society. The United States could be contributing to a massive brain drain by bringing U.S.-affiliated Iraqis to the United States. Yet others point out that brain drain has already occurred.⁵⁵ Refugees with means are always the first to leave in a crisis. Skilled Iraqis in Syria and Jordan have seen their skills atrophy, and return is not a realistic possibility for many. Close to 90 percent of Iraqis in Syria said they did not have plans to return to Iraq, and 95 percent of Iraqis in Jordan said they would not return until the security situation improves.⁵⁶ There are also cases in which Iraqis have not been hired by Iraqi government agencies because they are seen as “collaborators.”

Many U.S.-affiliated Iraqis cannot return to Iraq for the time being. Some of Iraq’s best-skilled individuals may end up resettled in the United States or elsewhere, where their skills can still be put to good use. And many may return once Iraq is safe again. It is better to offer Iraqis a new life elsewhere than allow them to face fear, intimidation, reprisal, and possible death at home.

Legal issues

The United States must hold adjudication and admissibility to consistently high standards, as outlined in the Immigration and Nationality Act. SIV and the U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program outline the legal status of refugees, and these guidelines should be followed closely. The legal status for bad actors needs to be predetermined so that if they are deemed inadmissible at any point during the process, they either can be sent back to Iraq or detained on U.S. territory. Transit will also pose legal questions that will need to be resolved by the various agencies coordinating the airlift and their lawyers.

Six key concerns regarding an airlift of U.S.-affiliated Iraqis (continued)

Employment

U.S.-affiliated Iraqis have already worked with U.S. government agencies and affiliated contractors, and they have essential language skills that could be harnessed immediately in the United States. Arabic will continue to be an essential language for the U.S. government and defense contractors. The federal government could design a job program that allows Iraqis to be funneled into government agencies upon their arrival in the United States. This would be a way of “giving back” to those Iraqis who made U.S. efforts possible in Iraq, while harnessing the value of their skills as linguists and experts on many aspects of Iraqi and Middle Eastern affairs. The U.S. government loosened its security clearance and hiring requirements in November 2008 to allow immigrants to work for intelligence agencies.⁵⁷ U.S.-affiliated Iraqis potentially have much to offer once they have found safety in the United States.

Capacity

Resettling tens of thousands of refugees is a large task, but this is not a reason to prevent refugee resettlement and protection for all eligible

U.S.-affiliated Iraqis. The United States has resettled large numbers of refugees when there has been political will to do so. SIV and refugee status allow immigrants to permanently resettle in the United States. There may be a time in the future when Iraq stabilizes and Iraqis choose to return. But this future date is not for the United States to decide, especially while it maintains an ongoing presence in Iraq. The government of Iraq needs to play a role in creating safe conditions for return.

Prioritization

Some advocacy organizations have expressed concern about focusing on specific subsets of refugees. But U.S.-affiliated Iraqis have been attacked because of their direct involvement with Americans. America’s moral duty toward these Iraqis is therefore much greater. We must engage in policies that tackle the problem systematically in order to tackle the large scale of Iraqi displacement, and prioritizing U.S.-affiliated Iraqis is the best first step.

United Kingdom⁵⁸

Prime Minister Gordon Brown announced a program in August 2007 to offer permanent resettlement to Iraqis who had worked with British troops for a minimum of 12 months in Iraq following significant public pressure to assist Iraqi interpreters.⁵⁹ There were basically two options for these Iraqis: a one-time financial package of approximately \$8,000 for those who stay in Iraq, or permanent resettlement to Britain. The resettlement scheme was not conceived as a means to place the burden of proof on Iraqis to prove a “well-founded fear.” Instead, it was designed as a way to reward faithful service to British troops in Iraq. The initial airlift of Iraqis from Basra to a military base in Oxfordshire began in April 2008. Only about 30 percent of those British-affiliated Iraqis eligible for the scheme chose permanent resettlement, which is expected to amount to about 600 U.K.-affiliated Iraqis and their families (1,000 people to 1,500 people total) at a cost of £25 million.⁶⁰

Poland

Polish troops pulled out of Iraq in October 2008. There were about 900 Polish troops in the coalition and only about 100 Polish-affiliated Iraqis working as translators and drivers. Polish-affiliated Iraqis were offered resettlement with access to Polish benefits or a one-time cash payment of approximately \$40,000 if they chose to stay in Iraq.⁶¹

Denmark

Denmark's forces were in Iraq until August 2007. There were a total of 480 Danish troops in Iraq, concentrated primarily in Basra. Denmark airlifted Iraqis, including translators, to Denmark, where they offered them asylum. A total of 370 Iraqis resettled.⁶²

Sweden

Sweden has shown enormous generosity toward Iraqis despite having no role in the Iraq war and no proximity to Iraq. Sweden did not conduct an airlift, but approximately 46,000 Iraqi refugees have sought asylum in Sweden since 2003; 18,559 applied in 2007 alone.⁶³ Prior to 2008, Sweden granted asylum to 80 percent of the cases—more than the rest of the European Union combined.⁶⁴ But Sweden has adopted more restrictions since the beginning of 2008, and asylum is now granted in only 25 percent of cases. Sweden has also started forcing certain Iraqis to return and is trying to incentivize return to Iraq by offering Iraqis money to leave.⁶⁵ Migration Minister Tobias Billström explains the growing restrictions: “Sweden did not start this war and we have done our best to help those who are fleeing. But we are a small country. We’re simply not able to help everyone.”⁶⁶

The EU announced in November 2008 that it would accept an additional 10,000 Iraqi refugees from Syria and Jordan. However, this decision to resettle Iraqis in Europe is voluntary rather than binding, so it is unclear how many countries will choose to participate.⁶⁷

Past U.S. airlift operations

The United States has engaged in airlift operations in the past. Three examples include the resettlement of Kosovar Albanians via Fort Dix, New Jersey in 1999; the airlift of Kurds out of Iraq after Saddam Hussein launched his army into Kurdistan in 1996; and the resettlement of Vietnamese refugees to the United States after the fall of Saigon in 1975.

Task Force Open Arms: Kosovar Albanians in 1999⁶⁸

Serbian police and paramilitaries attacked Pristina, the capital of Kosovo, in late March 1999, causing ethnic Albanians to flee their homes and cross into Albania or Macedonia. Vice President Al Gore announced one month later that the United States would open routes to U.S. resettlement for 20,000 Kosovar Albanians who had “close family ties [to Americans],” were “vulnerable,” or were defined by the State Department as “persons who have difficulty remaining in refugee camps for health or other reasons.” So many refugees flooded into Macedonia camps that the State Department decided to split the refugee admissions program into two components: emergency and normal refugee processing.

The emergency phase consisted of airlifting Kosovar Albanians out of Macedonia. The main security concern was that some of the Kosovar Albanians may have been perpetrators of ethnic cleansing against Serbs or that they were Serbs themselves. They went through preliminary reviews before the United States flew them to Fort Dix, New Jersey, where their cases were adjudicated and admissibility was determined. The Kosovar Albanians were then categorized as refugees under the Immigration and Nationality Act.⁶⁹

The United States offered admittance to 20,000 Kosovar Albanians in total. The cost for this operation was approximately \$100 million, plus \$40 million for transportation.⁷⁰ The vice president referred to these refugees’ admission as temporary, but return was not a precondition for admittance since they were admitted under the refugee provisions outlined in the Immigration and Nationality Act. The United States did incentivize return by offering the refugees flights back to Kosovo. About 10 percent of the Kosovar Albanians chose to return to Kosovo.

Operation Pacific Haven: Northern Iraq, 1996⁷¹

The U.S. military set up a safe haven area in the Kurdish area of Iraq to protect civilians during the First Gulf War in 1991. Operation Provide Comfort involved British, French, and U.S. troops who protected Iraqi Kurds via air patrols and ground troops; U.S. troops made up 12,000 soldiers of the 21,000 total.⁷² Saddam Hussein’s army attacked the safe haven in 1996. The United States worked quickly to evacuate 6,600 Iraqi Kurds. Those Kurds who first crossed the border into Turkey were held briefly before being transported to Guam. Security screenings took place prior to the airlift. The Turkish government did not want this large number of Kurds in their territory, prompting the rapid U.S. airlift response. Operation Pacific Haven ran from September 16, 1996 to April 16, 1997.

The military flew three groups of refugees to Guam in successive waves. Once in Guam, Iraqis lived on an annex of Andersen Air Force Base. The United States provided food, housing, clothing, medical care, and assimilation classes. The asylum processing took place in Guam in an expedited fashion and involved lawyers, the Immigration and

Naturalization Service, the State Department, and the Department of Health and Human Services. Screening consisted of background checks, medical examinations, and the designation of sponsors. The whole process took an average of 90 days to 120 days and the cost of the Guam portion of the operation was approximately \$10 million. A small caseload of approximately 80-90 Iraqis were problematic and thought to be double-agents. They were the last to be airlifted from Turkey and were stuck in Guam and/or kept in detention for a lengthy period of time before their cases were resolved.

Major General John “JD” Dallegher, commander of the Joint Task Force, said of the operation: “The cooperation between U.S. military, federal and local government, and non-government organizations and the community ensured the mission’s success. Our success will undoubtedly be a role model for future humanitarian efforts.”⁷³

A story of successful U.S. resettlement: The contribution and sacrifice of two Iraqi sisters

Stories from U.S.-affiliated Iraqis

“Iraq was like a jail, not a country” under Saddam Hussein, according to Rana, a young Iraqi woman. Rana and her sister Farah welcomed the toppling of Saddam’s government and the American invasion. Soon after the invasion, Rana and Farah, both in their twenties, graduated from a university in Iraq with degrees in computer science; however, they quickly realized that the changes brought by the war had altered their chosen paths.

Rana and Farah’s family was one of only two Sunni families left living in a Shi’a dominated city in Southern Iraq, and a Shi’a militia threatened them with death in 2003. The family was unsure of how to react and continued to live in their home until the insurgents burned part of their property. Rana and Farah moved to another neighborhood in the area to remain safe, but were repeatedly threatened at school for their religious beliefs. During this time, insurgents kidnapped Farah’s fiancé because of his affiliation with a U.S. company. Farah and her family were shown a video in 2004 of the brutality he faced and it’s believed that he was killed soon after.

Despite their family’s insecurity and personal trauma, Rana and Farah saw the American invasion as a way to help the Iraqi people and sought to assist the United States by becoming interpreters. As two Muslim women, their decision was dangerous. These women were seen as traitors by the Shi’a extremists who place utmost importance on family tradition and honor. Their family was threatened again in the months after they were

employed by the U.S. Army and U.S. companies, and the women were moved to the American base for safety. Rana and Farah were threatened three times during their work with the United States, and a bounty was put out on Rana. After learning that two sisters working at the same site were killed, Rana and Farah realized just how precarious their situation was.

The sisters left Iraq for Egypt in November 2006 after living in terror for four years. Rana and Farah realized they could never return to Iraq, and they wrote to the List Project to Resettle Iraqi Allies in desperation. Holland + Knight LLP worked tirelessly with the List Project to help them navigate the labyrinthine resettlement process.

The sisters arrived in America in May 2008. Both are proud to have worked with the United States and have started to make a life here in the United States. The List Project partners with Upwardly Global, a non-governmental organization helping highly qualified immigrants find jobs, which helped both women find work in the United States as translators and media analysts for the U.S. government. These sisters are a stunning example of the contribution that Iraqis have made to the United States; in Iraq and in the United States, they have worked to help us despite the personal trauma they endured.

Note: All names have been changed to protect the identity of these Iraqis.

Operation New Life: Vietnam, 1975

As Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese forces on April 30, 1975, desperate South Vietnamese citizens tried to leave Vietnam fearing for their safety.⁷⁴ President Gerald Ford instituted an airlift to remove approximately 130,000 Vietnamese refugees from Vietnam between May and December 1975. In the first phase, 111,919 Vietnamese refugees transited through Guam.⁷⁵ During phase two, Americans returned 1,546 refugees to Vietnam who were deemed unfit for U.S. resettlement. The United States flew all other Vietnamese refugees to four reception camps in the United States for processing and security checks.

Adjudication was all conducted in the United States and was rather uncomplicated by today's standards. The few refugees who did not qualify were offered to other countries. Refugees were admitted on parole and could convert to green card status two years later.⁷⁶ The State Department then resettled refugees throughout the United States with remarkable coordination between civic groups, churches, and individual citizens. The entire airlift operation lasted eight months and cost \$405 million,⁷⁷ or \$1.7 billion adjusted for inflation in 2007 dollars. The United States resettled close to 1 million Vietnamese refugees after the Vietnam War.⁷⁸

A proposed course of action for 2009

The Obama administration has an opportunity to draw on lessons from past operations and measures undertaken by other coalition forces in Iraq and adopt the airlift model to bring endangered U.S.-affiliated Iraqis out of Iraq and the region. The United States should initially focus on bringing Iraqis in Iraq to safety before engaging in airlifts in the region. The current Iraqi capacity for SIV and refugee processing only exists in Baghdad, and regional embassy offices located throughout Iraq in Mosul, Kirkuk, Hilla, and Basra⁷⁹ should allow U.S.-affiliated Iraqis to register for SIV or in-country refugee processing. The majority of processing should continue in Baghdad after registration. Initial in-country security processing should take four weeks to eight weeks and longer-term processing following the airlift and before U.S. resettlement should take about three months to four months.

An airlift would be an essential step of the refugee resettlement process, and would show Iraqis America's commitment to their safety by allowing them to leave in an organized fashion. One possible location for processing is Guam, which possesses preexisting infrastructure and has status as a U.S. territory, but the Ahmed Al Jaber air base in Kuwait is also a possible processing center and has the advantage of being in the region. Henceforth, Operation Safe Haven Iraq 2009 will use best practices from past airlifts.

Six steps are necessary for the United States to effectively conduct this type of airlift with an eye to the logistical, operational, security, and legal issues that may arise.

Step 1: Appoint a White House coordinator for Iraqi refugees and internally displaced persons. President-elect Obama should appoint a White House coordinator for Iraqi refugees and IDPs as outlined in the Kennedy-Biden-Durbin-Hagel-Smith legislation—a bill to develop a policy to address the critical needs of Iraqi refugees. The coordinator’s responsibilities would include overseeing the airlift.

Step 2: Conduct an audit and review of current efforts. Full-time, dedicated embassy staff throughout the region from various U.S. government agencies must conduct a thorough audit and create a comprehensive list of U.S.-affiliated Iraqis through the SIV and traditional refugee assistance programs.

Step 3: Finalize security background checks. U.S. agencies should increase resources and personnel to conduct in-country security background checks of U.S.-affiliated Iraqis in Iraq and throughout the region.

Step 4: Order the commencement of the airlift. Once Iraqis are identified, the military should fly Iraqis in small, staggered groups to a third location.

Step 5: Implement and follow up on third-country expedited processing for Iraqi refugees. The White House coordinator should convene agencies such as the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of State, and the Department of Health and Human Services, which would be engaged in the expedited processing of U.S.-affiliated Iraqis and oversee smooth coordination between U.S. government agencies and the military.

Step 6: Facilitate relocation and placement in the United States. U.S.-affiliated Iraqis should be flown to the United States, where some can be funneled into Arabic language-critical jobs. Once the situation in Iraq has improved and U.S.-affiliated Iraqis feel confident about their safety, the expectation is that some of them will return to Iraq.

Other important factors will need to be considered. For example, discretion has been a characteristic of previous airlifts for good reason—media attention could cause public backlash. U.S.-affiliated Iraqis may also suffer trauma and likely will want to lead as quiet lives as possible in the United States.

Conclusion

Population displacements are often an inevitable consequence of war. In Iraq and other previous military conflicts, many foreign nationals who have worked for the United States have become targets for their affiliation with the United States. The United States has done the right thing in the past by swiftly removing and resettling those affiliated with the United States, but it has not yet done so in Iraq. Iraq presents a challenge to President-elect Obama, who will decide the duration of the American military and financial commitment to Iraq. The State Department wants to set a goal of allowing 17,000 Iraqis into the United States during FY2009. This number, while large, does not specifically target U.S.-affiliated Iraqis to whom the United States has a unique obligation.

The Iraqi government and parliament have agreed upon a Status of Forces Agreement, which sets a clear timeline for U.S. troop withdrawal, ending in December 2011; the issues of Iraqi displacement and resettlement will become more pressing as those withdrawals continue.⁸⁰ No honorable drawdown of America's presence can proceed without a holistic and aggressive approach to ease the displacement crisis, with special attention paid to protecting those who have helped the United States in Iraq. Displacement and its effect on regional stability must address the 5 million Iraqis who have been forced to leave their homes and the countries that now host them, and particularly the estimated 30,000 to 100,000 U.S.-affiliated Iraqis. Working to help U.S.-affiliated Iraqis now is the right first step toward developing a more comprehensive and sensible Iraq strategy and fostering a stronger long-term relationship between the United States and Iraq.

President-elect Barack Obama spoke clearly about America's obligation to those Iraqis who have helped us, saying:

"We must also keep faith with Iraqis who kept faith with us. One tragic outcome of this war is that the Iraqis who stood with America—the interpreters, embassy workers, and subcontractors—are being targeted for assassination... And yet our doors are shut... That is not how we treat our friends. That is not how we take responsibility for our own actions. That is not who we are as Americans... Keeping this moral obligation is a key part of how we turn the page in Iraq. Because what's at stake is bigger than this war—it's our global leadership. Now is a time to be bold. We must not stay the course or take the conventional path because the other course is unknown."⁸¹

President-elect Obama can take immediate action in 2009 by following the six steps for airlifting U.S.-affiliated Iraqis detailed in this report. The airlift is not something to be done with fanfare; it is a somber and serious way for the U.S. government to offer protection to those Iraqis who made its work possible in Iraq.

Endnotes

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- 8 Elizabeth Ferris, "The Looming Crisis: Displacement and Security in Iraq" (Washington: Brookings Institution, 2008), pp. 3.
- 9 Rhoda Margesson, Jeremy M. Sharp, and Andorra Bruno, "Iraqi Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons: A Deepening Humanitarian Crisis?" (Washington: Congressional Research Service, 2008), pp. 2.
- 10 Ibid, pp. 3, 4
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- 17 Lisa Schlein, "Iraqi Government Encourages Refugees, Internally Displaced to Return," *Voice of America*, October 12, 2008, available at <http://www.voanews.com/english/archive/2008-10/2008-10-12-voa10.cfm> (last accessed December 2008) and "Iraqi Refugees: Plan for Ongoing Support in an Unstable Region," *Refugees International*.
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