

Research, Advocacy & Public Policy-Making

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From Baghdad through Beirut: Linking Research to Policy for Iraqi Refugees in Lebanon

Background

A recent qualitative study investigated the experiences, living conditions, and coping mechanisms of Iraqi refugees in Lebanon. The study was an opportunity for Iraqis to talk openly about their experiences, concerns, and problems. It also explored the implications of the study's findings on a receiving country such as Lebanon and its state policies.

According to recent estimates by the Danish Refugee Council and the United Nations Higher Council for Refugees (UNHCR), 50,000 Iraqi refugees now reside in Lebanon. Iraqi refugees who leave their homes to escape life-threatening violence and aim to seek asylum in the West must stop in a neighboring Arab country like Lebanon to prepare their resettlement papers. Many Iraqis suffer from the lack of an asylum system in Lebanon, as well as in other countries in the region, and struggle with entry requirements that are almost impossible to fulfill. Barriers to legal entry may result in them being smuggled into transit Arab countries, such as is the case for Lebanon, where many are smuggled after entering Syria legally. Once in Lebanon, or in other neighboring Arab countries, Iraqi refugees are either forced to reside in a transitory state- as illegal migrants with very limited rights- or are forced to return to back Iraq.

What are the conditions and hardships that Iraqi refugees face in Lebanon?

The study indicates that Iraqi refugees in the southern and eastern suburbs of Beirut suffer silently. Their illegal status in Lebanon requires them to stay mostly hidden, and makes them vulnerable to exploitation with no recourse against landlords or employers in case of wage-theft or abuse. It also puts them at an additional risk of imprisonment, and makes it difficult for them to find employment and to maintain financial independence. Iraqi refugees speak of severe psychological problems including anxiety and suicidal ideation and attempts. They exhibit hopelessness, and report sleeping problems, decreased appetite, and continuous crying.

What are the causes of these hardships?

These hardships are caused not only by the series of traumatic experiences of war in Iraq, but are also an outcome of state neglect and harsh living conditions in Lebanon which manifest in:

- violence in schools
- financial hardships
- humiliation, persecution, and detention by the authorities
- social and legal discrimination and exploitation
- poor transparency and lengthy resettlement procedure
- mistreatment by staff processing their paperwork
- inadequate quality aid
- costly residential fees

Their "illegal immigrant" status is perpetuated due to a lack of political will to develop an equitable policy towards all refugees, scarce resources and inadequate coordination among NGOs, and a slack and severely back-logged global resettlement process.

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Research and Policy Memo #3

Research, Advocacy and Public Policy-making in the Arab World (RAPP)

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How do they cope?

Families' coping and adaptation depend on the conditions they left Iraq in, how they reached Lebanon, which urban area they came to, and their social support networks (see Table 1). The study found that the Muslim Iraqis are mostly in the southern suburbs of Beirut while the Christians reside in the eastern suburbs. The participants reported that relief agencies in the eastern suburbs are supportive, create venues for the families to meet and help find housing nearby. The Lebanese residents are also welcoming. The paperwork for the Christian refugees is processed quickly. In contrast, the Muslim Iraqis reported feeling the sectarian divide in the southern suburbs and fearing police persecution more. Their coping is less effective because their communal social networks are weak and the NGO outreach offers very little social support and effective interpersonal communication. Their paperwork is fraught with ambiguity.

Table 1: Differences in Social Support and Coping between Suburbs

	Household closeness	Social Support				Coping
		Agencies		Outings	Family Support	
		Formal	Informal			
Eastern Suburbs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	High
Southern Suburbs	No	Yes	No	No	No	Low

Policy Implications

This study implicates how Lebanese authorities should perceive and manage transit migration. The state needs to relax its entry requirements, create temporary status IDs for war-affected refugees, waive resident fees, and allow temporary work permits to reduce the financial burden on Iraqi refugees. There is a need for the state to review its policies about asylum seekers and to operationalize its memorandum of understanding with UNHCR to protect transit migrants' human rights and avoid discrimination, persecution, and forced repatriation.

Though determined globally, UNHCR policy should alleviate the anxiety of applicants by providing clearer information on the bureaucratic processing of resettlement. All agencies dealing with refugees will benefit from improved communication skills training, which in turn may improve the level of the refugees' trust of the relevant agencies and their operations.

Based on this research, a number of other recommendations can also be made:

1. There is a need for training staff on interpersonal communication skills and on specific effects and circumstances of the Iraqi refugee crisis to engage in more meaningful interaction with refugees and to be more empathetic towards their conditions.
2. Relief agencies need to evaluate the services they provide by participatory methods to allow refugees to voice their opinions about the health and social services they receive and better plan their programs.
3. Iraqi refugees should not be treated only as recipients of aid but also as agents who can participate in defining their needs and finding appropriate responses to them.
4. Agencies need to pool their resources and to improve coordination in order to offer assistance, promote refugee health, better meet their needs, and create venues for them to meet to develop social support networks.
5. Receiving countries need to accelerate processing of the applications and provide transparent guidelines and clarity. ■

Research Approach

Who? Iraqi refugee families of Muslim and Christian faiths

How? 5 focus group discussions (6–10 participants in each), 38 in-depth interviews in Arabic. Informal interviews with relief agencies
By a research team of 4, led by Dr Jihad Makhoul

When? Over a 1 year time period (2009–10)

Where? In the southern and eastern suburbs of Beirut.