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## **Iraq: From a Flood to a Trickle Neighboring States Stop Iraqis Fleeing War and Persecution**

<b>Summary .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Recommendations .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Jordan .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Egypt .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Palestinian Refugees from Iraq .....</b>	<b>18</b>

## Summary

Now that the international community is finally beginning to pay attention to the existence of an estimated 2 million Iraqi refugees in the Middle East, Iraq's neighbors are closing off escape routes, leaving another 2 million internally displaced persons and untold numbers of other war-affected and persecuted Iraqis trapped and denied the fundamental right to seek asylum in other countries. As high-level government officials meet in Geneva today for the International Conference on Addressing the Humanitarian Needs of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons inside Iraq and in Neighboring Countries convened by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Iraq's neighbors are refusing entry, imposing onerous new passport and visa requirements, and literally building fences to keep out further refugees. And the legal status and living conditions for those who have managed to escape the armed conflict in Iraq is becoming more precarious by the day.

Conference participants should not only focus on apportioning humanitarian aid to Iraqis who have managed to escape or are displaced within Iraq, but should uphold the right, enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, of all people to seek asylum in other countries by insisting on the right of Iraqis still clamoring to get out of Iraq to flee to neighboring countries for safety. The Conference should call on neighboring states to scrupulously observe the fundamental principle of *nonrefoulement*, including non-rejection at the border and ports of entry, and to admit at least temporarily all Iraqi asylum seekers and Palestinian refugees residing in Iraq who seek asylum at their borders. The valid security concerns of neighboring countries can be addressed, in part, by registering asylum seekers and providing them legal status, as well as by providing them the means to live in safety and dignity.

Human Rights Watch recently traveled to Jordan and Egypt to assess the situation of Iraqi asylum seekers and refugees (Syria denied visas to the Human Rights Watch researchers). In November 2006 Human Rights Watch published a 106-page report about the status of Iraqi refugees in Jordan, "The Silent Treatment: Fleeing Iraq, Surviving in Jordan" (<http://www.hrw.org/reports/2006/jordan1106/>), and a separate report, "Nowhere to Flee: The Perilous Situation of Palestinians in Iraq"

(<http://hrw.org/reports/2006/iraq0706>), on the conditions facing Palestinians in Iraq and those who have fled to Jordan and Syria, but there have been significant developments in Jordan since then. In other surrounding countries, the numbers of Iraqi refugees allowed in are so small and their situation so hidden that meaningful research into their situation cannot be conducted: Saudi Arabia is building a US\$7 billion high-tech barrier on its border with Iraq to keep Iraqis out; Kuwait is equally categorical in its rejection of Iraqis. Asked about its policy toward Iraqi refugees, Dr. Ahmad al-Salim, a high-ranking official in the Saudi Ministry of Interior, told Human Rights Watch in late November, “We do not take refugees. Why cannot the U.S. solve the situation?” Circumstances of refugee flight have largely spared Turkey and Iran from significant influxes, in marked contrast to the 1991 Persian Gulf War when hundreds of thousands of refugees were at their doors.

Notwithstanding restrictive measures they may be taking to prevent the entry of asylum seekers, the countries that are bearing the brunt of the Iraqi refugee crisis are not the ones responsible for creating it. The responsibility to provide and maintain asylum for Iraqi refugees cannot be allowed to rest on the recipient countries alone. As the two countries that undertook a war that has directly caused thousands of deaths, widespread fear and suffering, and forced displacement, and that precipitated a sectarian conflict that has caused additional violence, persecution, and displacement on a massive scale, the United States and the United Kingdom have a particular responsibility both to refugees living in the region and those still seeking refuge. While the willingness of the United States, belatedly, to resettle up to 7,000 Iraqi refugees this year (though only 3,500 are projected to be admitted), especially those being targeted because they worked for U.S. forces, is a welcome beginning, it represents a tiny fraction of the refugees in the region and, by itself, is not adequate burden sharing and does little to address the broader problem. The UK has not even committed to admit Iraqis under threat for having worked for British forces in Iraq, much less provided meaningful support to meet the humanitarian needs of refugees in the region.

As in any refugee crisis, the wider international community has a collective responsibility to share the burden that should not fall simply on those countries that happen to be located at the receiving end of a mass refugee exodus. The preamble

to the 1951 Refugee Convention notes that “the grant of asylum may place unduly heavy burdens on certain countries” and that refugee solutions “cannot therefore be achieved without international cooperation.” On the occasion of this critical, high-level international conference on the situation of Iraqi refugees and internally displaced persons, Human Rights Watch calls on all governments to heed the call of the Refugee Convention and join not only to address the humanitarian needs of Iraqi refugees and internally displaced persons, but their protection needs as well.

Human Rights Watch recognizes and applauds the openness and tolerance that Jordan and Syria, in particular, generally demonstrated toward Iraqi refugees for the first several years of the war, particularly by allowing asylum seekers to enter and remain. Both countries have limited resources and competing social needs both from their own citizens and from the hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees whom they have hosted. Both also have legitimate security concerns and understandable interests and sovereign rights in the management of immigration.

Today, however, there is a discernable hardening of response among all the neighboring countries who have played reluctant host to these refugees, and, in some particular cases, certain countries have taken restrictive measures (in some cases based on particularly odious religious discrimination) that seriously undermine asylum and violate fundamental principles of refugee protection, most notably the principle of *nonrefoulement*—the international customary law and treaty prohibition on the forcible return of persons to a place where they would face the risk of persecution or torture or serious threats to their lives and freedom because of indiscriminate violence and ongoing armed conflict. The obligation to respect the principle of *nonrefoulement* applies to the rejection of asylum seekers at borders and ports of entry when their rejection would subject them to such harms.

## Recommendations

### *To All Countries Bordering Iraq*

- Scrupulously observe the fundamental principle of *nonrefoulement*—including non-rejection at the border and ports of entry.
- Admit at least temporarily all Iraqi asylum seekers, Palestinian refugees, and Iranian Kurdish refugees residing in Iraq, who seek asylum at your borders.
- Cooperate with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in the registration of Iraqi asylum seekers and refugees.
- Provide renewable residency permits and work authorization for Iraqis registered by UNHCR.
- Ensure the right of all children, regardless of residency status, to free and compulsory primary education, as guaranteed in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- Ensure compliance with the principle of family unity by allowing and facilitating the exit of family members from Iraq and their entry to countries of asylum where their relatives are located.
- Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Syria should accede to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, and Turkey should drop its geographical limitation to the Convention and Protocol. In consultation with UNHCR, all countries in the region should establish domestic refugee laws and build infrastructures for processing asylum claims and providing protection for refugees.

### *To Other Members of the Arab League*

- Contribute quickly and generously both bilaterally and through UNHCR to meet the humanitarian and protection needs of Iraqi and Palestinian refugees from Iraq in Jordan, Syria, and other countries of first asylum, as well as internally displaced people inside Iraq.
- In a spirit of humanitarian solidarity with fellow Arab League members shouldering the double burden of Palestinian and now Iraqi refugees, and in order to convince those countries to maintain first asylum for Iraqi and new

Palestinian refugees from Iraq, consider a significant program of refugee resettlement to provide for more equitable burden sharing in a region that has deep cultural and historical ties with the Iraqi and Palestinian people.

*To the United States and the United Kingdom*

- Acknowledge your particular responsibilities for Iraqi refugees and internally displaced persons by contributing quickly and generously both bilaterally and through UNHCR to meet the humanitarian and protection needs of Iraqi and Palestinian refugees from Iraq in Jordan, Syria, and other countries of first asylum, as well as internally displaced people inside Iraq.
- Institute significant refugee resettlement programs not only to identify refugees of special humanitarian concern because of their ties to the United States or the United Kingdom, but also to preserve asylum and the right to seek asylum in neighboring countries.
- As a matter of urgency, facilitate the evacuation of Palestinian refugees seeking to leave Iraq. Encourage Israel, in the absence of a resolution of the broader Palestinian refugee issue, to allow Palestinian refugees from Iraq to return at least to areas now administered by the Palestinian National Authority. Offer to resettle Palestinians from Iraq to the United States and the United Kingdom who are unable or unwilling to return to their places of origin.
- Provide temporary or permanent asylum, as appropriate, to Iraqi asylum seekers on your territory and at your borders and ports of entry, and scrupulously observe the principle of *nonrefoulement*.
- Urge the governments of neighboring states not to deport Iraqi asylum seekers and refugees and Palestinian refugees from Iraq fleeing persecution and violence. While providing financial and resettlement support to these countries, insist that they keep their borders open to these refugees and asylum seekers and that refugees and asylum seekers fleeing Iraq be treated in accordance with international standards.

*To All Donor Governments and the International Community*

- Contribute quickly and generously both bilaterally and through UNHCR to meet the humanitarian and protection needs of Iraqi and Palestinian refugees

- from Iraq in Jordan, Syria, and other countries of first asylum, as well as internally displaced people inside Iraq.
- Provide both temporary and permanent asylum, as appropriate, to Iraqi and Palestinian refugees fleeing war and persecution in Iraq who seek asylum in the territories, borders, or ports of entry of any country, and scrupulously observe the principle of *nonrefoulement*.
  - Provide third-country resettlement possibilities for Iraqi refugees, Iranian Kurdish refugees, and Palestinian refugees from Iraq in order to maintain at least temporary asylum in Jordan, Syria, and other countries in the region that are struggling to cope with the influx of refugees from Iraq.
  - Urge the governments of neighboring states not to deport Iraqi asylum seekers and refugees and Palestinian refugees from Iraq fleeing persecution and violence. While providing financial and resettlement support to these countries, insist that they keep their borders open to these refugees and asylum seekers and that refugees and asylum seekers fleeing Iraq be treated in accordance with international standards.

## Jordan

Jordan now hosts an estimated 800,000 Iraqi nationals, the vast majority of whom are refugees, though only a minute fraction have been so recognized. The conferring of refugee status does not make a person a refugee; rather, such status, when granted, declares the person to fulfill the criteria of being a refugee, something which necessarily would occur prior to being formally recognized. In the absence of formal recognition, a refugee or asylum seeker (a person seeking refugee recognition) is no less deserving of protection.

The Jordanian authorities choose to regard the Iraqis variously as “guests,” “temporary visitors,” or “illegal aliens.” Jordan is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and has no refugee law or asylum procedures. For the first three years of the war, Jordan remained generally tolerant of the large numbers of Iraqis crossing its border and staying in its territory, preferring to benignly ignore the population, essentially looking the other way and letting the Iraqis fend for themselves.

Both popular and governmental attitudes changed after November 2005 when three Iraqis set off bombs which killed 60 people in three prominent hotels in Amman. Since that time, the authorities have made it more difficult for Iraqis to renew temporary residence permits and remain legally in the country. They have stepped up immigration enforcement efforts both in the interior and at the border.

Ironically, Jordanian government attitudes hardened further in late 2006 and early 2007 in an apparent negative reaction to a spike of positive international awareness and interest in Iraqi refugees and the first expressions of interest by governments outside the region in helping Jordan care for the large and growing Iraqi refugee population.

The Jordanian authorities had a particularly negative reaction to a UNHCR policy shift announced on January 1, 2007, when UNHCR said that “in view of the objective situation of armed conflict and generalized violence in Iraq” and recognizing that



because of “the large numbers involved, individual refugee status is not feasible,” UNHCR “considers these persons as refugees on a *prima facie* basis.”

According to recent refugee testimonials confirmed by other travelers, such as truck and taxi drivers, Jordan has all but stopped the entry of Iraqi nationals at its border crossing with Iraq and is turning away many—if not most—of the Iraqis attempting to arrive by plane.

Since November 2006 refugees and other travelers have been reporting that Jordanian officials have been turning away single Iraqi men and boys between the ages of 17 and 35 at the border. Recent accounts, however, indicate that Jordan has been applying the bars to entry much more widely. In some cases, it is turning Iraqis away at ports of entry for failure to produce the new G series passports, a more tamper-resistant document than previously issued, but which Iraqis can only obtain from the Ministry of Interior by paying large sums of money, putting up with long waits, and enduring political and religious scrutiny by the issuing authorities. In other cases, border guards ask Iraqis about their religious identity and reject those who are or appear to be Shi`a. In some cases, Iraqis who had legal residence in Jordan and valid travel documents but who returned to Iraq were subsequently prevented from reentering Jordan, resulting in separation from their families.

A Christian man from Baghdad who used to work for the Red Cross as a driver told Human Rights Watch that he fled to Jordan with his wife and four children in June 2006 after his son was injured by a car bomb and he received a threatening note saying, “You are an unbeliever. Your wife is a whore. We will pursue you to the last days of your life.” Recently, however, his wife and youngest son returned to Baghdad because her father had just had a heart attack. They subsequently tried to return to Jordan via the overland route on March 27, 2007, but despite having valid travel documents, Jordanian guards turned them away at the border. “My wife told the border guards that she has three small children in Amman, but they told her ‘You might be a refugee,’ and turned her away. I think they wouldn’t let her in because her other children were here in Jordan.”

That a border official would deny entry to a woman and child *because* he thought they were refugees is a perversion of the right to seek asylum and other fundamental human rights principles. If government officials are intentionally separating families—as suggested by this and other accounts—this would violate additional fundamental rights of families and children.

After being rejected at the border and making her way back to Baghdad, the same woman tried to fly to Jordan with her son, but when she arrived at the airport in Amman, the immigration official refused her entry, saying that the computer showed that she had been rejected at the land border. “We still have a valid temporary residence permit in Jordan and no fines,” her husband said. At the time of the interview, however, the man only had two days left before his three-month permit would expire.

A 40-year-old Sunni woman whose husband was murdered and dismembered in front of her eyes before she was brutalized and gang-raped by eight men arrived from Baghdad by plane in July 2006 (She showed Human Rights Watch scars on her feet, knees, legs, back, stomach, head, and face). She said that Jordanian immigration authorities admitted only two Iraqis from the plane and returned all the others to Iraq. The woman said that the only reason they allowed her to enter was because she had a visa for Morocco in her passport and told them that she was transiting there. Others also report problems at the airport. A well-to-do Iraqi in his 50s told Human Rights Watch about re-entering Amman after attending a conference in the United Kingdom:

Every two months, it seems the [Jordanian] government changes the rules. Eight months ago, I went to England. At the airport, I was questioned by Jordanian intelligence. They said, “You are an Iraqi. Why are you coming back?” I told them my wife and daughter were here. My only protection was that I was traveling with an American. If I was alone, I’m sure they would have deported me to Iraq. They wrote in my passport that I could only stay two weeks. I am now here illegally. This month the policy has changed again. They give the few Iraqis whom they accept at the airport only a 72-hour transit visa that

cannot be renewed. If you arrive at the airport without proper documents, the Jordanian authorities take you into custody and send you to Iraq.

It used to be that you could simply renew your residency permit by going to Syria. Now if you go to Syria, you cannot come back. Even people going from Iraq to Syria can't enter Jordan.

Other recent travelers confirm the difficulty of entering Jordan by land or air, including not just entry controls but the dangerous journey itself. A 77-year-old man from Najaf demonstrates why new Shi`a arrivals are so rare. The grey-bearded man, wearing traditional clothing, does not profess to be a refugee. He tried to enter Jordan overland in November 2006 for medical treatment, but was turned away at the border. When he arrived at the border he said, "They wouldn't let anyone in at all. They didn't ask for the G passport; they just turned us all back. I said I came for medical treatment, but they turned me away."

After being turned away at the border, the group proceeded back to Baghdad. They were traveling in a convoy of two large sport utility vehicle "taxis" that are the only vehicles that drive passengers to Jordan (Jordan has not allowed private cars with Iraqi license plates to enter the country since January 2006). About 150 kilometers from the border, gunmen forced the two vehicles to stop and made the passengers get out. The gunmen asked the passengers if they were Sunni or Shi`a, demanded to see their passports, and tested them by asking them to recite certain prayers. "If they had seen my passport, I would have been killed," the man said. He told them that he was a Sunni and that he had lost his passport; they didn't search him. He said that except for himself and his elderly wife, the gunmen forced all the passengers, also Shi`a, to lie on the ground and shot and killed them. "I'm an old man. They might have respected that," he said. He begged the gunmen to spare the life of the driver so he could take them back to Baghdad.

On March 16, 2006, the elderly man flew to Amman alone. "When we came by land, they wouldn't accept us, so I came alone because we knew they wouldn't accept us both." At the airport, he said that the Jordanian authorities sent back the other

Iraqis on his plane. After providing proof of his appointment for medical treatment and a guarantee from a Jordanian sponsor who was willing to pay the equivalent of US\$2,000 for his treatment, they issued him a three-month residency permit. He said that he would return to Iraq overland when his visa expires because he needs to rejoin his wife and he cannot afford another plane fare. “I am afraid, but I must go back,” he said.

A Christian professional from a predominantly Sunni Arab town (his profession and the name of the town are withheld to protect family members still there) was compelled to flee in late 2006 after militants kidnapped and murdered his father, a religious leader, and threatened his own life. “I was threatened in 2003 and 2004 as a [profession withheld], but I stayed,” he said. “But now, it is connected to my family. Now it is not just about losing my own life. We are not just afraid, but a specific event forced us to leave Iraq.” Together with his female family members and carrying proper travel documents, he arrived at the airport in Amman in late 2006. On the day of his arrival, Jordanian authorities rejected every Iraqi passenger from two airplanes, he said. He subsequently managed to enter Jordan through a professional connection, but could not bring his family, and is now staying in Jordan illegally. “I tried to bring my family in February, but they refused them at the airport.” He has registered with UNHCR, but when he told them about his family, a UNHCR official told him that they were not able to help because his family was still inside Iraq. He said:

I can't go back to Iraq. I am on a death list. My family is under threat. My stay in Amman is not protected. They will return me back to Iraq whenever they want. That is the danger. I have entered Jordan many times before this happened. But now, this is not just a trip. I am under a real threat. Returning to Iraq will mean my death.

Various sources told Human Rights Watch that Jordanian border officials are now specifically turning away Shi`a asylum seekers. One man said that when his parents—one Sunni, the other Shi`a—arrived at the Jordanian border, they permitted his Sunni mother to enter, but refused his Shi`a father entry and put a red stamp

(barring future entry) in his passport. Not wanting to be separated, they returned to Baghdad together. “They called us from the border,” he said. “They were crying.” A Sunni refugee in Egypt, who Shi`a militants in Baghdad had persecuted, witnessed border guards barring Shi`a from entering Jordan when he crossed into Jordan in June 2006 on his way to Egypt. He said:

It wasn't easy to get into Jordan. We had troubles at the border....They don't let in Shi`a....They ask what religion you are. If you say you are a Sunni, it is okay. If you say you are a Shi`a, you are not admitted. They let us in with a one-week residence permit, but only because my daughter was sick.

In addition to rejections at the border crossing and the airport, Iraqi refugees in Jordan report that police and immigration authorities conduct many more sweeps than in the past, arresting people in parks, work places, and neighborhoods where Iraqis are concentrated. Arrests appear to be taking place in larger numbers and expulsions are increasingly swift.

An Iraqi woman in Amman told Human Rights Watch that Jordanian police arrested three of her friends on April 7, 2007, at a factory where they were working illegally. The police promptly took them to the border. “Everything happens really quickly,” she said. “People are afraid to walk downtown, even with a UNHCR document. The police raids are not just in factories and work places, but they pick people up from the street.”

An Iraqi cleric said, “Government officials are now catching people. Until a few months ago, only men who were working illegally were at risk. It is painful for us now to see woman caught by the police. It is a great shame from a Middle Eastern point of view. In the Jabal Hussein neighborhood [where many Iraqis live], I recently saw the police catch a young man. He shouted in the street, “I don't want to be killed.”

## Egypt

Now host to as many as 150,000 Iraqis, Egypt too has taken steps to stem the arrival of more Iraqi refugees. As in Jordan, this is causing separation of families, deepening the anxiety of refugees already in Egypt, and heightening the desperation of those still in Iraq trying to find a way out.

Egyptian authorities routinely renewed tourist visas for Iraqi nationals in Egypt until October or November 2006. The Egyptian Ministry of Interior is now becoming stricter in renewing tourist visas, telling Iraqis that if they wish to remain in Egypt they should register with UNHCR-Cairo. Subsequently, the UN refugee office has been seeing an increase in Iraqis seeking refugee registration. After UNHCR issues documents to them, they must go to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to receive a reference number. From there, they must go to the Ministry of Interior to put a residency stamp on their UNHCR card.

In early January 2007 the Egyptian authorities began imposing highly restrictive new procedures for Iraqis seeking entry. Previously, Iraqis still in Iraq could obtain a tourist visa by giving their passports to a travel agent in Baghdad who would take the passports to the Egyptian consulates in Damascus or Amman for processing. Now, however, the Egyptian authorities are requiring face-to-face interviews by at least one family member at their consulates, and the numbers are dropping because the Iraqis cannot get to Syria or Jordan. Because there is no Egyptian diplomatic post in Baghdad, it is virtually impossible now for Iraqis still in Iraq to obtain a visa for Egypt.

The result of the new procedures has meant a significant drop in new Iraqi arrivals as well as split families, where one or more family member has made it to Egypt, but other family members are still in Iraq.

Although Human Rights Watch is not aware of any cases in which the Egyptian authorities have deported Iraqi visa-overstayers or sent back persons rejected at the airport to Iraq, Human Rights Watch did hear of Iraqis arriving from Syria and Jordan being returned to those countries. Although relatives reported that the Syrian

immigration authorities accept the returnees, refugees in Jordan reported that Iraqis who were returned to Jordan from Egypt were apprehended at the airport and deported to Iraq.

A Sunni engineer who came from a mixed neighborhood in Baghdad left for Jordan after what he termed a “government militia” checked his identity documents at a checkpoint when he was in his car with his wife and children and threatened to arrest him on the spot. “They wanted to arrest me just because I am Sunni,” he said. He said that he had wanted to go directly to Cairo, but that the visa process was too slow. “We put in an urgent request for passports, and then we got out; we grabbed a taxi to the Jordanian border.”

He explained that he did not stay in Jordan because the Jordanians did not allow him to renew his temporary residence permit there. “You have to pay a fine of 1.5 Jordanian dinars [equal to US\$2] for every day you don’t have a residency permit in Jordan. Only rich people can stay in Jordan.” He added, “We chose Egypt because we were told Egypt is cheaper than Jordan and Syria, and because Syria has started to see some militias. There are kidnappings inside Syria. The sectarian violence has crossed into Syria.”

He said that they were able to get an Egyptian visa from a travel agent in Jordan, and that the process took about two weeks. They flew from Amman to Cairo on August 3, 2006. He said, “When we came from Jordan, we were the only Iraqis on the plane. Most Iraqis in Egypt come from Syria or directly from Baghdad.”

However, the new procedures have choked the direct route from Baghdad to Cairo. “My parents and siblings are still in Baghdad,” he said. “I have not heard anything from my parents for two or three weeks now [tears came to his eyes when he said this]. They don’t have any money to leave Iraq. They can’t get visas.”

Another man living in Cairo, who described himself as a secular Ba`thist from Haditha in Anbar province, left after U.S. forces arrested and detained him for seven months. He feared what might happen to him if they arrested him again, and also had a growing unease about the growing power of both Sunni and Shi`a militias

because of what he saw as their religious extremism. He came straight from Baghdad to Cairo on June 1, 2005. He said that it is not safe for his relatives who are still living in Iraq. “Every day they receive calls at the house with threats.” But, he said, there are problems now with getting Egyptian visas for his family members. “This is very difficult.” When asked by Human Rights Watch if his family was planning to leave, he answered, “Where are they going to go?”

An Iraqi man in his late 20’s, living in Alexandria, voiced the growing difficulties for Iraqi nationals in maintaining Egyptian residency and family unity in the face of increasing entry restrictions. He arrived in Egypt in September 2006 and received a one-month residence permit. After he went to renew the residency permit, his problems started:

It was November 20, 2006, after Eid, the end of Ramadan, when state security came to my door. They took me and questioned me about why I had come to Egypt. I said that I had fled from the war in Iraq. They told me that Egypt does not give residence to Iraqis. They told me to go to the Passport Office. I went there in early December 2006. They told me that my application was denied. They wanted my passport so they could stamp it saying that I must leave Egypt. I grabbed my passport and ran. I have been in Egypt illegally ever since then. When I leave Egypt, I will have to pay a fine for overstaying my visa.

The man’s troubles did not end there. His wife and children had fled to Syria and wanted to join him in Egypt. They had been waiting in Syria for one month for the visa process in Egypt to be completed. In early March 2007 they flew to Cairo.

They had their tickets, and they had their visas. When they arrived at the airport in Cairo, the Egyptians denied them entry. They detained them for one night. The Egyptian authorities contacted me on my cell phone. At the time, I was at the airport waiting for my wife and children. The authorities told me I should come back to the airport the next day. I discovered that they had put my wife and children on a plane back to Syria. They were admitted to Syria when they returned there.



The man has decided to go to Syria to join his wife and children, despite having a registration interview with UNHCR in Cairo for April 16. He showed Human Rights Watch his plane ticket. He said:

There are a lot of stories like my wife's and my children's. My wife said that *all* the Iraqis who were on the same plane with her were also detained at the airport and then returned to Syria. The only Iraqi to be admitted to Egypt was someone who had already acquired residency in Egypt.

Why are Iraqis treated this way? It is not as if we are coming on holiday. We fled from what was hell in Iraq. These countries must leave their borders open. Our choice is either to get killed or to leave.

## **Palestinian Refugees from Iraq**

In September 2006 Human Rights Watch published a report on the situation of Palestinian refugees in Iraq. The title, “Nowhere to Flee,” still applies to their situation. The report documented brutal targeting of Palestinians, mostly by Shi`a militias, but showed that what distinguished Palestinians from Iraqi citizens whose lives were also threatened was their total lack of any exit. While the flow of Iraqi refugees may now be a mere trickle, the movement of Palestinian refugees from Iraq—one of the most vulnerable groups in the country—continues to be stopped cold. About 1,200 Palestinians remain stranded in three border camps strewn in the vicinity of Syria’s border with Iraq: al-Tanf, in the no-man’s land between the checkpoints separating exit from Iraq and entry to Syria; al-Walid, on the Iraqi side of the Syrian border; and Al-Hul, inside Syria.

Fewer than 100 Palestinian refugees remain at al-Ruwaishid camp in a remote desert area in Jordan’s far east, about 85 kilometers from the Iraqi border. Relative to the Palestinians stuck in Iraq or the no-man’s land, they are the “lucky” ones who arrived first—in April 2003, at the start of the war before Jordan had shut its borders completely to Palestinians. A group of fewer than 200 Iranian Kurdish refugees are encamped in the no-man’s land between Iraq and Jordan, and have also been denied entry to Jordan.

Syrian authorities allowed the 300 Palestinian refugees at al-Hul into Syria in May 2006 after they had been stranded at the Jordanian border. But shortly after that welcome transfer, as new groups of Palestinians fled toward the Syrian border, Syria, too, closed its borders to Palestinian refugees—and it has remained shut to Palestinians.

This year, following a new escalation of kidnappings and murders of Palestinians in Baghdad, hundreds of Palestinian refugees again attempted to flee to Syria, but the Syrian authorities refused them entry.

In preparation for this briefing paper, Human Rights Watch sought the permission of the Syrian authorities to visit the Iraqi Palestinian camps inside Syria, in the no-man's land, and on the Iraqi side of the border. The Syrian government not only denied this request, but refused Human Rights Watch visas to Syria to assess the situation of Iraqi refugees as well.