



# Iraqi Palestinians stuck on the Syria-Iraq Border

## **WHY ARE THEY DIFFERENT?**

A visit to refugee camps in the middle of the desert at one of the world's most conflictive borders has left a lasting impression on Dr GRAHAM THOM, Refugee Campaign Coordinator for Amnesty International. He describes his experience.

Last November I joined a group of people from different non-government organisations (NGOs) from around the world and visited Palestinian refugees from Iraq in three refugee camps in the desert on the Syria-Iraq border. The horrendous plight of this group, numbering a little more than 3000, has been consistently raised by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and others, since 2006. For the refugees in the Al Tanf, Al Waleed and Al Hol camps, resettlement in another country is their only option. However, they are stuck there. They cannot go forward but they cannot go back to Iraq either.

Given the compelling nature of their cases, coupled with the increased commitment by states to resettle other refugees fleeing Iraq, I wondered why it was so difficult to convince governments to take Iraqi Palestinians. Would other minorities fleeing Iraq, be left stranded in such appalling conditions for such a long time? I truly doubt it. So what is it about simply being Palestinian that complicates their cases so much?

First it is important to explain why thousands of refugees are fleeing Iraq and why this group alone has become trapped in these camps. Like other minority groups in Iraq, with the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, the approximately 30,000 Palestinians in Iraq soon found themselves targeted by militias and others, and as a result suffered horrendous forms of persecution and violence. Unlike other minorities, however, the Palestinians were not Iraqi citizens, despite the fact that for more than 60 years most of the Palestinian families have called Iraq home. The majority of Palestinians trapped in the camps were originally from Haifa. Their families had fled with retreating Iraqi troops at the end of the first Arab-Israeli conflict in 1948. Like millions of other Palestinians who fled this conflict and found themselves in neighbouring countries, they were not allowed to become citizens of their new countries of settlement. Though they were allowed to stay, they had to retain their Palestinian identity documents.

Following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, both Syria and Jordan welcomed thousands of Iraqi refugees to their countries, although recently certain visa restrictions have been imposed. However, their welcome was not extended to Iraqi residents with Palestinian identity documents. Syria, which currently has an estimated 522,100 Palestinians living within its borders to whom it has granted significant rights, has clearly stated it is not open to receiving anymore Palestinians from neighbouring states. Thus, despite the extreme violence suffered by Palestinians in Iraq, for Syria 3000 more Palestinians are in fact 3000 too many. So in the camps the families remain.

Al Waleed camp with a population of 1,525 is situated two kilometres inside Iraq. To get there we drove from Damascus for four hours into the middle of the desert, through a truly barren and desolate landscape. Then we drove seven kilometres through the no-man's land that divides Syria and Iraq. In the middle of this emptiness lies the Al-Tanf camp, which is located on a thin strip of land (more like a ditch) between a busy highway and the long three-meter high border wall.

### Would other minorities fleeing Iraq, be left stranded in such appalling conditions for such a long time?

In April 2007 journalist Rubert Colville described the Al Tanf camp as a "hell-hole" and Al Waleed as "much worse". It is difficult to comprehend what could be much worse than a hell-hole, until we arrived in Al Waleed.

Because of the difficulties UNHCR has experienced in gaining access to the camp, planning and infrastructure have been seriously compromised. Built along a busy highway, the camp is strewn with rubbish, with open sewer pits dotted amongst the tents. In fact the conditions in the camp have deteriorated to such an extent and so many people were sick, that the UNHCR has been forced to build a new camp on the other side of the highway. It has a water treatment facility and

toilet blocks. However, having survived over two years in the camp already, the thought of having only progressed 200 meters sideways must be heartbreaking.

Since we were in Iraq's territory during our visit to the camp, we were escorted by US marines which are part of a Multinational Force. They kitted us out in blue flak-jackets and helmets. The head of the Iraqi security forces in the region also joined us, so we had Iraqi security personnel. After seeing the camp we sat in the school building, the only permanent structure available, where we met members of the Refugee Committee. With limited outside assistance they had formed to help coordinate the running of the camp. We sat against one wall and they sat facing us on the other. On either side we were flanked by the US and Iraqi armed security personnel.

Each refugee took turns to describe why they had been forced to flee; how they survived the conditions in the camps and to plead for their future. The men described the circumstances in which militants had beaten them in front of their wives, their colleagues were murdered and their wives threatened, shot and injured. Women described how their

husbands were arrested, detained and tortured, sons kidnapped and a brother who was still missing. Many broke down recounting the violence they had faced but one woman, formerly a school teacher, sitting opposite the senior Iraqi security official, remained calm as she detailed how officials from the Ministry of the Interior had detained and tortured her husband over a two-day period. The head of security for the region is also the most senior Ministry of the Interior (MOI) official and the person responsible for their security in the camps. Fortunately he takes this role very seriously and was genuinely praised during our visit for the efforts he had made. Still, the courage of this teacher in telling her husband's



story in front of Iraqi security personnel and the MOI official was extraordinary. We were only just learning how complicit other MOI officials in Iraq had been in turning the local population against the Palestinians.

It was clear however that the refugees felt they had nothing to lose. We were the first delegation from NGOs to visit them and they were not

and lives needed to be saved.

The second camp we visited was the Al Hol camp in the north of Syria in Hassakah province. While there were a number of similarities with Al Waleed there were also a number of significant differences. Because the Governorate of Hassakah was a contributing partner the physical environment was slightly better. Smaller numbers (only 380 residents,

provided by the Syrian government, and includes education, health care, social support and microfinance opportunities. So despite the children in the camp being able to access local schools, Syria has made it very clear that there is no possibility of local integration for those in Al Hol. They are not entitled to work and they must reside in the camp.

The refugees in Al Hol cannot

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going to miss the opportunity to tell the world what was going on. In describing the conditions in the camp they spoke about the scorching summers with sand storms and temperatures over 50 degrees Celsius, and the freezing winters, where snow had collapsed tents and left women without fingers due to frost bite. To make matters worse there were snakes and scorpions, serious flooding and, the constant barrage of trucks on the highway causing pollution and dust, and exacerbating their health problems. The strain of camp life was already taking its toll on families leading to, amongst other things, marriage breakdowns.

For many the worst thing of all was the lack of water. Despite all they had endured, when it comes to day-to-day survival, trapped in the desert, water takes on a whole new significance. This is something I had not previously comprehended or appreciated. For the residents of Al Waleed water had to be trucked to the camp. Unfortunately the organisation responsible for providing the water had switched its priorities to getting the new water treatment facility set up across the road, so for a considerable period before we arrived the refugees were having to have water trucked in at their own expense. It looked more like tea than water and was clearly not fit for drinking. At best each individual had one litre per person per day to drink, cook and wash. This would have to be sacrificed if a tent caught fire

which included over 100 children) also meant the camp could be better organised. Though very basic, the refugees had been able to spend their money to make their accommodation a little sturdier. It was nice not to have to walk through rubbish, escorted by men with machine guns and watch children play near sewer pits. The sense of isolation remained however, the feeling of being trapped in a desert camp, with extreme temperatures and no future. Talking to the refugees we were again confronted by stories of persecution, violence, torture, and family members being threatened and killed. While basic health care is provided to those in the camps, it is the long-term psychological impact, from both past and present experiences, that is most worrying. Nearly one in six people in the camp is a survivor of violence or torture.

Refugees in the Al Hol camp have been stuck there since September 2005. This was the oldest of the three and the only camp from which no-one had been resettled in another country. The residents wanted to know why this was the case. It was also the only camp inside Syria, where in theory, Palestinian refugees are supposed to fall under the mandate of United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). This was not however the case. A condition of the Syrian government, allowing the refugees into the country was that they would not be able to access UNRWA. For other Palestinians in Syria UNRWA services complement those

understand why they are treated differently from other refugees fleeing Iraq, why they are different from the other Palestinians in Al Waleed and Al Tanf and why they are different from the other Palestinians in Syria. They pleaded with us again and again for a future, a future where they were treated as equals.

Refugees in Al Tanf, the last camp we visited, also impressed upon us how they simply wanted a “smiling future”. UNHCR reports indicate that there are currently 856 people living in this camp. The absurdity of its location is difficult to comprehend for those visiting it - let alone for those forced to live there. Stuck in a thin strip of no-mans land between Syria and Iraq, the camp is a daily reminder, particularly for those refugees that are stateless, that they don't belong anywhere, that they are in fact different. Despite the harsh conditions and the various degrees of danger, UNHCR has no choice but to help them the best they can in this surreal environment. Syria won't let them in and it is too dangerous for them to go back. They are Palestinians!

The refugees again recounted the violence they endured in Iraq. An old man described how his brother was shot and how his son was detained twice, the second time they stabbed him, leaving him badly scarred. Forced to flee, the elderly, the young, the sick, all live in tents in a ditch only meters from a busy highway. The camp was completely flooded in November 2008



and two children were killed by passing trucks. Last January, a pregnant woman was killed when fire engulfed her tent. A number of reports have documented the deteriorating psychological impact it is having on the refugees, particularly on children that are stuck there.

The Syrian authorities continue to arrest Iraqi Palestinians who have entered Syria illegally to Al Tanf. Hence, while some resettlement has occurred, -303 residents have departed for Sweden, Chile and Switzerland- the camp itself continues to grow.

If the international community could assist in emptying the camps by accepting some residents into their own countries, then a meaningful discussion could then take place on how best to protect the remaining number of Iraqi Palestinians living in these camps.

Being a Palestinian in the Middle-East is complicated. International and regional political agendas, beyond your control,

have a direct and profound impact on your day- to-day life. Wherever you turn it appears you are unwanted.

In the past, issues relating to who should be responsible for Palestinians such

to those countries normally associated with resettlement.

A solution needs to be found. The situation facing those in the camps was clearly untenable three years ago.

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as these, UNHCR or UNRWA, has also led to further complications (fortunately for the Iraqi Palestinians UNHCR and UNRWA are cooperating as best they can). Being both a refugee and stateless, is unfortunately a reality faced by a number of ethnic/national groups who are in need of international protection. However, for Palestinians, both political and logistical difficulties have conspired to leave them particularly vulnerable and “unattractive”

It continues to get worse. Recently an increasing number of countries, including Australia, have signalled their willingness to work with UNHCR to resettle those trapped on the border. They deserve a future. As human beings they are entitled to certain basic human rights and a level of human dignity and respect. They should not have to wake up day after day asking “why are we different?” ■