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CORRECTION TO THIS ARTICLE

A Feb. 4 article said that about roughly a third of Jordan's population of 5.9 million are Palestinian refugees. The proportion includes Palestinian refugees and their descendants.

War in Iraq Propelling A Massive Migration

Wave Creates Tension Across the Middle East

By Sudarsan Raghavan
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AMMAN, Jordan -- Inside his cold, crumbling apartment, Saad Ali teeters on the fringes of life. Once a popular singer in his native Baghdad, he is now unemployed. To pay his \$45 monthly rent, he borrows from friends. To bathe, he boils water on a tiny heater. He sleeps on a frayed mattress, under a tattered blanket.

Outside, Ali, 35, avoids police officers and disguises his Arabic with a Jordanian dialect. He returns home before 10 p.m. to stay clear of government checkpoints. Like hundreds of thousands of Iraqi refugees here, he fears being deported. Six months ago, near his home in Baghdad, two men threatened to kill him. Singing romantic songs, they said, was un-Islamic.

So when his pride hits a new low, he remembers that day.

"Despite all the hardships I face here, it is better than going back to Baghdad," said Ali, long-faced with a sharp chin, who wore a thick red sweat shirt and rubbed his hands to keep warm. "They will behead me. What else can I do? I have no choice."

As the fourth year of war nears its end, the Middle East's largest refugee crisis since the Palestinian exodus from Israel in 1948 is unfolding in a climate of fear, persecution and tragedy.

Nearly 2 million Iraqis -- about 8 percent of the prewar population -- have embarked on a desperate migration, mostly to Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, according to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees. The refugees include large numbers of doctors, academics and other professionals vital for Iraq's recovery. Another 1.7 million have been forced to move to safer towns and villages inside Iraq, and as many as 50,000 Iraqis a month flee their homes, the U.N. agency said in January.

The rich began trickling out of Iraq as conditions deteriorated under U.N. sanctions in the 1990s, their flight growing in the aftermath of the 2003 U.S.-led invasion. Now, as the violence worsens, increasing numbers of poor Iraqis are on the move, aid officials say. To flee, Iraqis sell their possessions, raid their savings and borrow money from relatives. They ride buses or walk across terrain riddled with criminals and Sunni insurgents, preferring to risk death over remaining in Iraq.

The United Nations is struggling to find funding to assist Iraqi refugees. Fewer than 500 have been resettled in the United States since the invasion. Aid officials and human rights activists say the United States and other Western nations are focused on reconstructing Iraq while ignoring the war's human

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fallout.

"It's probably political," said Janvier de Riedmatten, U.N. refugee agency representative for Iraq, referring to the reason why the world hasn't helped Iraq's refugees.

"The Iraq story has to be a success story," he said.

For decades, Jordan welcomed refugees. Roughly a third of its 5.9 million residents are Palestinian refugees. According to the United Nations, 500,000 to 700,000 Iraqi refugees live in Jordan, but aid officials say the actual number is nearer to 1 million because many Iraqis live under the radar. Jordan's tolerance has waned, however, since a group of Iraqis bombed three hotels in November 2005, killing 60 people, according to Iraqis, aid officials and human rights groups. The government fears that Iraq's mostly Sunni Arab refugees could remain in the country permanently or become recruits for Iraq's insurgency.

Now, the exodus is generating friction and anger across the region, while straining basic services in already poor countries. Iraqis are blamed for driving up prices and taking away scarce jobs. Iraq's neighbors worry the new refugees will carry in Iraq's sectarian strife.

"The Jordan government does not want to encourage Iraqis to stay for a long time," said Gaby Daw, project officer for the Catholic charity Caritas Internationalis, one of the few aid agencies assisting Iraqi refugees.

Into their new havens, Iraqis are bringing their culture and way of life, gradually reshaping the face of the Arab world. But the cost of escape is high. Feeding the bitterness of exile is a sense that outside forces created their plight. Many Iraqis here view the U.S.-led invasion that ousted President Saddam Hussein as the root of their woes.

"We were promised a kind of heaven on earth," said Rabab Haider, who fled Baghdad last year. "But we've been given a real hell."

Sad Goodbyes

The road out of Iraq begins on Salhiye Street in Baghdad.

On Jan. 13, knots of Iraqis waited to board 14 buses to Syria. Inside a travel agency, Raghed Moyed, 23, sat solemnly with her 12-year-old brother, Amar. It had become too dangerous for her to attend college, so she was heading to Damascus to continue her education. As she sat, her head bowed, she recalled the previous night, when she bade farewell to her friends.

"It's really sad," said Moyed, her voice cracking as tears slid down her face. "I cried the whole way from the house to here. I don't want to leave Iraq, but it is hard to stay."

Sameer Humfash, the travel agent, watched her cry. By his estimate, 50 to 60 families were fleeing each day on the buses lined up outside. Nowadays, Iraqis were heading mostly to Syria, he said.

"They are not letting Iraqis in at the Jordanian border," interrupted Ahmed Khudair, one of Humfash's employees.

Humfash makes all his passengers sign waiver forms that read: "I am traveling on my own responsibility

http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/03/AR2007020301604_p... 7/30/2008

and God is the only one that protects us." On the roads to both Jordan and Syria, Sunni insurgents have dragged Shiites from buses and executed them. Humfash stays in radio contact every hour with the bus driver, usually a Syrian. He always asks three questions, he said:

"How is the road?"

"Did they take any passengers?"

"Did they hurt any passengers?"

Angst at the Border

Along the Iraq-Jordan border Jan. 16, a brisk wind howled across the barren landscape. It was 1:45 p.m. Until recently, hundreds of cars and buses filled with Iraqis would have been lined up to enter Jordan. On this day, there were four vehicles. A Jordanian border security official said many Iraqis were afraid to travel through Anbar province, one of Iraq's most violent regions.

Abu Hussam al-Khaisy, an Iraqi taxi driver, offered another explanation. The day before he had brought a family of seven Iraqis to the border, but Jordanian officials, he said, denied them admission with no explanation.

"They are not giving permission to enter because they are scared about security," said Khaisy at a restaurant in Ruwayshid, a Jordanian rest stop about 55 miles from the border. In other instances, he said, officials have turned away young Iraqi men who could take jobs away from Jordanians.

Today, the government is making it increasingly difficult for Iraqis to reside legally in Jordan. It views Iraqis as temporary visitors, not refugees, and has not sought international assistance. Human rights activists and U.N. officials have accused Jordan of shutting its border to many Iraqis fleeing persecution and deporting others.

Nasir Judah, a government spokesman, said Jordan has kept its door open to Iraqis even as they have become a burden on Jordan's economy and natural resources. In recent years, the influx was largely unregulated, but now tighter security measures are needed, he said. Iraqis, he added, have tried to enter Jordan using fake passports and identity cards.

"There are no mass deportations of Iraqis," Judah said. "Otherwise the numbers would be dwindling, and they are not."

On this day, Khaisy was driving Abu Wisam al-Azzawi, 35, back to Baqubah, a city about 35 miles northeast of Baghdad. Two months ago, members of Azzawi's immediate family were refused entry into Jordan, even though he owned a car dealership in Amman. Azzawi still remembers his son, on the Iraq side of the border, pleading through the cellphone: "Daddy, don't leave us."

Now, he was planning to fetch them from Baqubah and take them to Syria.

"I haven't told my family I am coming back," said Azzawi, before getting into Khaisy's maroon Caprice Classic in Ruwayshid. "Maybe I am not going to see them."

"Maybe I will get killed on the road."

Seeking Safety, Aid

Outside the restaurant, two sport-utility vehicles passed by, heading to Amman. One, with large red-checked bags on its roof, carried Abu Saif al-Ajrani's family. The other vehicle carried their life's possessions.

The Jordanians let them in after the family waited more than 24 hours at the border. It helped that Ajrani's father was Jordanian. At night, they arrived in Amman near a place refugees call Iraq Square, where taxis drop off recent arrivals. Two relatives, whom the family had not seen in five years, met them. There were hugs and kisses, and praises to God.

"I feel psychologically relieved. You can see it is very safe," said Ajrani, waving his hands at the cars flowing by. "But I have left my family, friends, my neighbors, my memories back in Baghdad. The first day there is security, I will go back."

Then he declared he would find a job the next day. "From the border to here, we felt like we had entered paradise," he said.

Widad Shakur, 53, said that when she arrived in Amman in October, she felt the same way. A Shiite Muslim, she fled after Sunni extremists threatened to behead her daughter, a teacher. But Iraq's chaos is never far away. A week ago, Shakur learned that a Sunni family had occupied her house. Now, she cannot sleep at night.

And she cannot afford to return to Iraq. Her daughter, a saleswoman, earns barely \$300 a month, half of which goes to their rent. "I wish I was a bird and I could fly back to my house," said Shakur, as tears welled in her eyes.

"Who expected it would turn out like this -- Sunni against Shia?" she continued. "We were like brothers. Why is this happening?"

She has a more pressing problem. Her legs hurt, she said. But she cannot afford a doctor. She worries that seeking help at a Jordanian hospital might lead to deportation, even though she has a three-month residency permit.

"I don't know whether we have the right to go to it or not," said Shakur, who wore a black, sequined head scarf. "I am afraid to go there."

At the Royal Association for Iraq Immigrants, Salah al-Samarai had 28 pink and yellow folders stacked on his desk. They belonged to Iraqis in need of surgeries.

"I don't know what to do," said Samarai, the head of the nonprofit that helps Iraqis, as visitors waited outside his door.

In front of him sat Waad Abdul Rahim, a solemn Iraqi professor dressed in a tweed jacket. His 14-year-old daughter, Mina, needed an intestinal operation. It cost \$5,000. For the past month and a half, he has visited Samarai's office.

"I come every day, and then I go back to suffer," Rahim said. "Her life is in danger. The longer it takes, the more dangerous it is going to be."

Samarai nodded in sympathy and said, "We have four or five more-serious cases."

Most of the organization's funds come from donations, he said. He doesn't blame the Jordanian government. "It's enough they opened their doors for us to stay here," Samarai said. But he wished the international community would do more to help.

"Lots of Americans tell us we don't need money: 'You are wealthy.' I even went to the European Union. They also said, 'You don't need money.' "

A Taste of Baghdad

Rabab Haider and her husband, Ibrahim al-Shawy, live in an elegant, sunlit apartment in Amman. Along with other middle-class Iraqis, they live in a parallel Iraq. Many of their relatives and friends are here. Iraq's sectarian divisions rarely enter their lives.

The richest Iraqis can get residency permits by depositing \$70,000 in a Jordanian bank, buying property or investing. Others simply pay a \$2 daily fine for expired permits.

"I see more Iraqis here than I do in Baghdad," said Shawy, who travels every few months to Iraq, where he owns land.

Qaduri, a popular restaurant nearby, was once an institution in Baghdad. Then it was bombed. Seven months ago, its owners decided to resurrect it in Amman. Now it serves tashreeb, a traditional Iraqi stew, from midnight to noon, just as it did in Baghdad.

Next door, a sign reads that another restaurant plans to open soon. Its specialty: pacha, the dish of boiled lamb's head that Iraqis consider a delicacy.

At a recent Iraqi wedding in the upscale Bristol Hotel, an Iraqi singer sang songs and guests moved to the drumbeats of the jobee, an Iraqi folk dance. In Baghdad, with the car bombs, checkpoints and kidnappings, large weddings are all but extinct.

"You turned the clock back four years," Um Ammar, a guest who had recently arrived from Baghdad, told the groom's mother.

The singer began to hum a patriotic Iraqi hymn. In the audience, eyes filled with tears. Others sobbed.

Moments later, the singer crooned: "Baghdad."

The audience responded: "In my eyes is Heaven."

"Baghdad," the singer sang again.

"Is our one and only love," the audience sang. "Baghdad is our sole mother, may God safeguard you from the evil surrounding you."

On a January afternoon, over cake and coffee in their Amman apartment, Haider and Shawy spoke of nostalgia, guilt and uncertainty.

"What about the torment?" said Haider, a pleasant, short-haired woman with a faint British accent. "You

being safe and your people in Baghdad are not."

They have six months of savings left, Shawy said. He's sending résumés around the world.

"How long can we keep this?" asked Haider, looking at their plush sofas, the purple vase, the glass dining table.

Living in Fear

On Jan. 18, a curly-haired artist named Qais Mohammed Ateih sat inside singer Saad Ali's two-room apartment, which is nestled near a warren of shops and narrow alleys. A third Iraqi refugee, Razzaq al-Okaeli, 35, joined them. The trio spoke about being like beggars, depending on friends for meals. Ateih said he knew at least 70 Iraqis who have been deported since 2003.

In the wake of Hussein's execution in December, many Iraqi Shiites say they have been targeted because of their sect. Jordan, a mostly Sunni nation, is home to many supporters of Hussein, who was a Sunni and a benefactor of Palestinians.

"Is the government targeting us for being Shiites? No. But from individual policemen, we feel this," said Ateih, 36. "They say, 'You betrayed Saddam.' "

If they are lucky, Ateih said, they find jobs as day laborers, earning \$7 for a 14-hour workday. But Jordanian employers, they said, often exploit Iraqis. Okaeli said he recently worked for two months as an air-conditioning repairman; his employer paid him for only 10 days of work.

"They know we cannot complain to the authorities," said Okaeli, a short man with brushed-back hair and long, trim sideburns. "If we complain, we will get deported."

Ali sat on a worn brown sofa, rubbing his hands, taking in the conversation. He had hoped to earn enough money to help his parents in Baghdad. Now, when he speaks to them, he never reveals the truth.

"They are inside Iraq. They should have to worry only about themselves," said Ali, his eyes lowered at the dusty red carpet. "So I tell them I am fine."

He paused, then glanced at the tiny heater, and said, "I never expected it would be like this."

Special correspondent Yasmin Mousa in Amman contributed to this report.

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