

Iraqi Refugees: is the UK doing the right thing?

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British regular forces have long left Iraq, but the problems created for Iraqi refugees by the post-invasion conflicts continue to pose challenges for UK policy-makers. [Avery Hancock](#) looks behind the headlines at the continuing plight of many thousands of refugees from the conflict, and at the UK's stance on accepting its share of the consequential burdens for EU member states.



Between Nick Clegg's recent [gaffe](#) at the Dispatch box in which he said the Iraq war was illegal, the further vilification of Tony Blair at the [Chilcot](#) inquiry, and David Miliband's [lamentations](#) that the Labour party has been 'punished enough about Iraq', one could be forgiven for thinking that it is UK politicians who are suffering the fallout of the war more than anyone else.

This June, 42 Iraqi men were placed on a removal flight to Baghdad, several of whom claim to have been [beaten](#) into submission by UKBA agents. These men join the over 5,000 Iraqis have been [forcibly removed](#) from the country since 2005 and sent back to Iraq. According to [Amnesty International](#) some of these removals are in defiance of UNHCR guidance against forced removals to Baghdad and other dangerous areas of the country and exposes returned asylum-seekers to abuse and violence.

In recent years, the number of Iraqis who have become refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs), has risen to 4.7 million out of a population of 30 million. The UN Refugee agency (UNHCR) believes that the [majority](#) of the 2 million externally displaced refugees are living in neighbouring Syria and Jordan, with an additional 2.7 million displaced within the country. The scale of the refugee crisis took the international community by surprise as it was not the initial invasion of 2003 that sparked a mass exodus but rather the sectarian violence that embroiled the country following the 2006 bombing of the Al-Askari mosque in Samara.

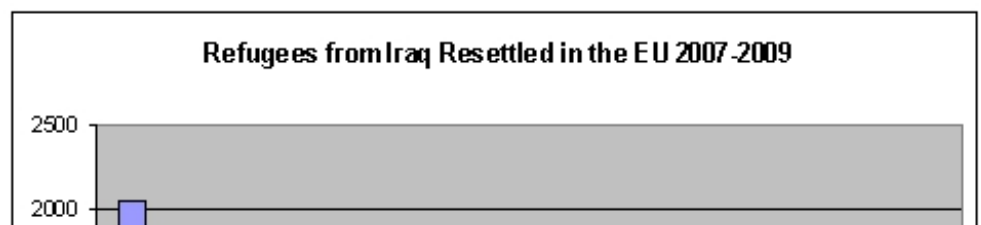
According to a new [report](#) by two humanitarian organisations working in the region, the situation for Iraqi refugees remains precarious and only around 80,000 refugees and IDPs have returned home. Although violence has declined in Baghdad and the north (Kurdistan), UNHCR does not encourage refugees to return to the country due to high levels of sectarian violence, indiscriminate attacks on civilians, suicide bombs, and extra-judicial killings. Religious, social and other minorities have been particularly targeted. They are unable to return home and lack the legal status to remain in Jordan and Syria, where they are treated as 'guests' without the right to work and are open to exploitation and further [trauma](#). Recognizing the strain on Jordan and Syria's capacity to integrate almost 3 million refugees, UNHCR continues to encourage third countries to permanently resettle Iraqis and provide what they call 'durable solutions' to the displacement crisis.

The UK was one of only 7 EU countries that had a resettlement programme operating when the 2006/2007 refugee crisis hit. The Gateway Protection Programme, a scheme designed to resettle Iraqis that were employed by the British Army (and therefore especially vulnerable to attack), settled 69 Iraqis in 2007, 355 in 2008, and 432 in 2009. But it was Sweden, Finland and France who initially selected the most Iraqis for resettlement and who pushed for a more coherent European policy, which emerged in European commission Council conclusions reached in November 2008.

The [conclusions](#) invited Member States to take in particularly vulnerable Iraqi refugees 'on a voluntary basis' and 'in light of the reception capacities of Member States and the overall effort they have already made as regards reception of refugees'- and set a target of 10,000 refugees. The report notes that by 2009 five new countries including Germany, Belgium, and Italy had begun accepting refugees under ad hoc schemes, and that overall numbers increased- from 1,144 in 2007 to 5122 in 2009. As the chart below shows, however, Sweden, France, Germany and the UK continue to bear most of the burden.

Source: IRC and ICMC, 2010

My second chart below shows that while the EU's contribution has been rising, it is still relatively small in global terms, with the US taking on nearly three-



quarters of UNHCR-selected refugees compared to the EU's share which is one fifth of that.

Source: IRC and ICMC, 2010

Keeping aside any moral arguments that the UK should bear more responsibility for the post-invasion violence and displacement in Iraq than other countries, there is a case for a more equal distribution of refugees across Europe. As we've seen in mass migrations from [Afghanistan](#) and other conflict-afflicted countries, the disparity in legal protection offered by European states creates a chaos of rules and regulations that leaves refugees vulnerable to third-party traffickers and places unfair strains on receiving countries.

A new Joint EU Resettlement [programme](#) aims to coordinate Member States resettlement operations, thereby reducing the waiting period for refugees in limbo and easing the burden on developing countries that bear the brunt of refugee crises.

For each refugee settled the European Commission will continue to make available 4,000 Euros available for each resettled person. The UK and most other European countries have not yet made use of this fund which could be used to offset initial housing and subsistence costs.

If the UK and other countries engage with and strengthen the resettlement programme – which involves settling refugees already identified by UNHCR in Iraq and the region, it is possible that the numbers of Iraqis who claim asylum on arrival in Europe could decrease. Between 2007 and 2009 over 38,000 Iraqis accounted for 17% of all asylum applications in the EU, making it the largest country of origin for refugees. In the UK principal asylum applications (excluding dependants) have averaged around 2,000 per year since 2003, although only about 10% have been granted full refugee status or humanitarian leave to remain.

Now that the Gateway Protection Programme is [closed](#) the Home Office and UKBA will have to examine the options for dealing with the issue. One option is to continue accepting a trickle of refugees each year and deporting large numbers in the hope that the public does not pick it up as the next 'Gurkha' cause. Another, more humane option, would be to work with European partners to manage the number of refugees the UK can support.

