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Contexts: The Case of Iraqis in the Middle East**

Patricia Ward

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## **Evolving Roles of National and International NGOs in Protracted Urban Refugee Contexts: The Case of Iraqis in the Middle East**

*By Patricia Ward*

The Iraqi refugee population in the Middle East is receiving less interest from donors and policymakers as their plight enters into a protracted phase, as defined by UNHCR (Chatelard 2011). With the American declaration in late 2011 that the Iraq war is over, and with the crisis in Syria continuing to develop, the international donor community is shifting its interest away from the Iraqi case. As funding decreases, international relief organisations are reassessing their role and relevance in the post-emergency assistance context; some are choosing to operate within a development agenda framework, while others are choosing to exit completely. The former may lead to overlap with other organisations, both national and international, already working on development issues, and competition for development assistance may increase accordingly. In cases where non-governmental organisations (NGOs) leave, gaps in services may arise if this occurs in an *ad hoc* or rash manner. Serious implications thus exist regarding how such evolving roles and ‘exits’ from the region will impact the protection space for the Iraqi population, especially in consideration of the diverse Middle East and North Africa (MENA) host country contexts and urban spaces in which refugees reside. This article explores the overall challenges of addressing urban refugee situations within the MENA region and uses the case of Jordan to highlight how NGO capacities, funding, coordination mechanisms, host country policies and relationships with UNHCR may impact refugee protection space within transition and protracted contexts. The author subsequently provides recommendations for both academics and practitioners to address these challenges in the future.

UNHCR and NGOs face numerous challenges when operating in urban settings, specifically with regards to: the phenomenon of ‘invisible refugees’; registration processes; obtaining resources to assist refugees from protracted situations in an urban context; assisting refugees without creating parallel structures that jeopardise the well-being of the urban poor from the host country; and effectively navigating strained relations between UNHCR and the host government in some cases (Crisp *et al.* 2009; Fábos and Kibreab 2007; Jacobsen and Landau 2005). Identifying refugees via registration processes can sometimes negatively stigmatise the refugee in the urban space, and there is sometimes no incentive for the refugee to register in the first place. UNHCR must also consider long-term solutions while simultaneously trying to move refugees towards independence.

Assessing the case of Jordan provides insight into such challenges. Over the past year, UNHCR Jordan has been shifting its partnerships to national NGOs and working with international NGOs in a more informal, non-partnership manner. UNHCR has largely justified this shift as an attempt to move towards a more national, community-based approach to address the needs of a protracted population, with training, personnel turnover, and access to resources as some of the major obstacles they encounter in implementing projects. For example, the majority of national NGOs interviewed could not offer comparable salaries to those of international NGOs working on the Iraqi issue, leading qualified staff in national organisations to take positions in international NGOs during the crisis period. Thus, national NGOs in Jordan are, to a certain extent, still in the process of ‘catching up’ to their international counterparts.

Most NGOs, both international and national, are also used to working within one-year funding cycles, making sustainability and strategic planning difficult. Coupled with this cycle is the fact that national NGOs tend to, as is often the case for NGOs in the global South, bend their organisations' missions and projects to meet the objectives and agendas of the donors, even if they contradict their mandate and the needs on the ground (Washington 2010). With donor interests shifting away from the Iraqi issue and the continuation of one-year funding grants, it may be difficult for NGOs to establish strategic, long-term plans for the Iraqi population in Jordan. Even well-established, national NGOs who may not face sustainability challenges to the same extent as other NGOs may encounter the challenge of being responsible for the implementation of *too many* projects due to overwhelming donor trust and investment in these select organisations.

It is also important to consider how such UNHCR partnership shifts affect coordination mechanisms that are in place to minimise overlap in service distribution to beneficiaries. From the author's own field research, international and national NGOs alike almost always noted UNHCR working group meetings as the main source of coordination. Nevertheless, it is often the case that overlap and competition still exist in the field in terms of service distribution and funding, respectively<sup>1</sup>. Concurrently, no streamlined process exists for this transfer of responsibilities from international to national NGOs. International organisations have sometimes advocated for multi-year periods to coordinate successful transitions; yet this is not required (Skopec *et al.* 2010). With different actors now in leadership positions, how beneficiaries perceive this shift and trust these new actors accordingly must also be taken into account.

UNHCR is also arguably a relatively 'new' actor not only in Jordan, but also in the region generally. UNHCR did not have a presence in the Middle East until the mid-1990s when the agency established its first office in Cairo; later, other offices were opened in Damascus, Amman, Beirut, and Aleppo (Zaiotti 2006). Thus, the lack of institutional knowledge between UNHCR and local contexts may prove to be a challenge in meeting the needs of Iraqis and the growing numbers of urban refugees in the Middle East generally. It is, concurrently, important to highlight that UNHCR, and national and international NGOs alike are somewhat 'new' to addressing protracted urban situations. It was not until the late 1990s and 2000s, for instance, that UNHCR began to seriously acknowledge the urban refugee phenomenon, *vis-à-vis* the 1997 UNHCR *Comprehensive Policy on Urban Refugees*; the 2008 *Community-based Approach in UNHCR Operations* that includes a section entitled 'Tips on Working in Urban Situations'; and the 2009 'Challenges for Persons of Concern to UNHCR in Urban Settings' from the High Commissioner's *Dialogue on Protection Challenges*.<sup>2</sup>

Like other countries in the MENA region, Jordan is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and does not support local integration of Iraqis as a viable solution; resettlement and repatriation remain the only long-term options for Iraqis. However, resettlement procedures have slowed for

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<sup>1</sup> The UNHCR created the RAIS database in Jordan during the Iraqi crisis to facilitate communication among assistant NGOs and subsequent distribution of services to beneficiaries in a coordinated manner. The creation of RAIS represented a significant improvement, but it is critical to emphasise that late entries into the system regarding project outcomes undermines the usability of the system and subsequent service distribution efficacy.

<sup>2</sup> The 1997 UNHCR document received considerable scrutiny from the international community due to its evident discouragement of refugee movement to urban spaces; see the 1997 Human Rights Watch Report cited in the reference section for more information.

Iraqis, leaving many ‘waiting’ in Jordan. With conditions in Iraq still unstable, and local integration off the table as a long-term option (both under the law and also arguably promoted vis-à-vis one-year funding cycles), NGOs are forced to balance short-term policies and funding with long-term, protracted realities.

Such partnership and shifting NGO roles will likely evolve in very diverse ways in the MENA countries hosting Iraqis (i.e. Lebanon and Syria) due to unique internal policy frameworks and political situations in each respective host state. Though the latter may be evident, more research is needed that delves beyond the regional level of analysis to assess the particular and unique challenges associated with addressing protracted refugee situations – especially within the urban context.

Academics and policymakers must also continue to explore how changing roles of international relief NGOs in the protracted context may have both positive and negative effects on protection space for refugees, overall country development, and NGO coordination generally within each country. Increased dialogue among donors, NGOs and policymakers is thus warranted and should be encouraged in order to move closer to a strategic approach framework and multi-year funding cycles for protracted situations. In conjunction with these initiatives, international organisations such as UNHCR must continue to develop standards and baselines for addressing urban, protracted situations in a manner that allows for case-sensitive flexibility, collaboration with local hosts, and adaptability at the country level.

With an estimated 68% of all refugee situations considered protracted, and with over half of the world’s refugees now residing in urban areas, considering such recommendations is critical (Sylvester 2011). This article’s exploration of the case of Jordan emphasises the need to take such recommendations seriously within the MENA context where growing numbers of refugees reside. Such issues as national NGO capacity, funding resources, coordination and host countries’ policies and relationships with UNHCR are directly linked to the scope of the protection space for refugees. The development of a more robust information basis will thus create a fluid framework of communication and coordination between and among international and national NGOs and UNHCR that may guide future action not only in the case of Iraqis and the MENA region, but also in other protracted contexts in the global South

*Patricia Ward is a recent graduate from American University’s School of International Service in Washington, DC, where she studied International Relations, specialising in the Middle East region. Patricia is the co-founder of the American University (AU) Forced Migration Working Group and is currently conducting research on refugee assistance NGOs in Jordan, funded under the UNHCR Small Grants Programme.*

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