

First-Hand Report from the Middle East

Refugee Crisis Spreads Region-Wide

And now Lebanon: Since the article below was written, the situation in the Middle East has proved even more volatile. In less than two weeks, Israel has destroyed the infrastructure of an entire nation. With full U.S. approval, Israeli warships have blockaded Lebanon's harbors. Israeli planes have bombed Lebanon's cities, highways, airports and power plants. Hundreds of civilians have died, more than a thousand have been injured. The United Nations estimates that between half a million and a million Lebanese – the majority poor Shi'a - are now refugees in their own country.

It is bad enough that the U.S. war in Iraq has created almost a million refugees. Now as the *New York Times* reports (July 22), the U.S. is speeding up delivery of bombs to Israel, fueling a new refugee crisis in Lebanon. And beneath it all burns the generations-long crisis of the dispossessed Palestinians, like an underground oil-field fire that everyone forgets until the next inevitable and deadly explosion.

To take immediate action to protest Israel's attacks on Gaza and Lebanon, see the information and action proposals at: <http://www.endtheoccupation.org/article.php?id=1215> -Rebecca Gordon

Falling Dominos? Conflict in Iraq Threatens Regional Stability

Three War Times staff members recently returned from Jordan and Syria where they met with people and groups, mostly Iraqi, to hear their experiences and views of the U.S. occupation of Iraq. They were part of a June 12-20 delegation of peace activists organized by Global Exchange, and they will be sharing what they learned in a series of messages to War Times listmembers (and others – please forward this to friends!) over the coming months. Below is one staff member's observations; for others, please go to <http://happening-here.blogspot.com/>

By Rebecca Gordon

Regular followers in this country of events in Iraq have become accustomed to daily reports of bombings, kidnappings and assassinations. When one day's news so closely resembles the next, it is tempting to assume that life Iraq has reached a sort of deadly equilibrium – that things can and will limp along in more or less the same way indefinitely.

My recent experiences traveling with two other *War Times* organizers in Jordan and Syria gave me a chance to see and hear from Jordanians, Syrians, and Iraqis. We concluded that the situation is much more volatile, not only in Iraq itself, but in the region as a whole. Perhaps most important, the trip introduced us to ordinary Iraqis, now refugees, whose lives my country has made worse than precarious.

Iraqi refugees seek safety in Jordan and Syria: The first thing any taxi driver in Amman will tell you is that the Iraqis have driven up property values in his city. "The rich ones came first," he'll say, "and they brought their money with them." Within a few months of the beginning of the war in Iraq, the cost of an apartment in Jordan rose 20 percent. After the rich, came the poorer Iraqis, who began displacing Jordanians and even cheaper Egyptians as construction laborers and restaurant workers. Downtown Amman is now full of Iraqis, whom Jordanians immediately recognize by their accents – and by Iraqi men's penchant for plaid short-sleeved shirts. Your driver will inform you, with some resentment, that there are now a million Iraqi refugees in Jordan.

In fact, no one knows how many Iraqis now live in Jordan. The *New York Times* reports that the United States Committee for Refugees and Immigrants has suggested that last year 644,500 Iraqi refugees were living in Syria and Jordan together. Certainly more have arrived in the first six months of 2006. The commonly-quoted “million” is an overestimate, but does suggest a Jordanian feeling of inundation. Jordan’s entire pre-war population was only around five million.

This is not the first time Jordan has absorbed large numbers of refugees. A brief sketch of Jordan’s population, economy and recent history puts the present influx of Iraqi refugees in perspective. Between 65 and 70 percent of Jordan’s five million residents are actually Palestinian refugees or their descendents. Relationships between the Palestinians and the Jordanian government have not always been easy, and the 1970s saw violent clashes between armed Palestinians and Jordan’s army. Today many Palestinians have integrated into Jordanian society and economic life, but others continue to live in a dozen or so refugee camps, which are still run by the United Nations.

The displaced Palestinians arrived in successive waves following the partition of Palestine in 1947-48 and again after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. In fact, Jordan itself was one of the biggest losers in the 1967 war, relinquishing much of the – much disputed - territory it had occupied by force since 1949. The Jordan River, which had once flowed through the middle of its land, became the country’s *de facto* western border. Jordan lost east Jerusalem – a major source of tourist income — and most of its productive agricultural land, which lies on the western bank of the Jordan.

Thus, each wave of refugees has presented political challenges to a Jordanian government coping with a diminished economy and fewer agricultural resources. No surprise, then, that the government's response to the growing Iraqi refugee crisis has been to discourage Iraqis from entering Jordan. In recent months, Jordan has made it harder for Iraqis to obtain entry visas; thus, as life inside Iraq becomes ever more precarious, Iraqis find it ever more difficult to leave. Many Iraqis spend two or three days waiting at border crossings, only to be denied entrance by arbitrary and capricious officials. Those who are allowed to cross must return to Iraq every three months to renew their visas. This is a dangerous undertaking in itself, especially for the poorer majority who cannot afford a seat on one of the three flights a day between Amman and Baghdad. Life is indeed hard for the Iraqi refugee in Jordan.

The different waves of refugees have also brought challenges to Jordan's political, economic, and even territorial stability. Western observers with whom *War Times* spoke in Amman noted that Iraq’s violent internal conflicts have “not yet” spilled over into Jordan – but said they expected it might happen at any time, as communities of Sunni and Shi’a, along with a few Iraqi Christians, emerge in Jordan.

The *War Times* travelers spent most of our time in Jordan, but 48 hours in Syria suggest that the situation there is similar. If anything, it is harder for Iraqis to enter Syria, or to find work if they do get in. In addition, Iraqis fall under intense scrutiny by the Syrian secret police.

Inside Iraq – coming to a boil: Western observers we met in Jordan, both diplomats and policy analysts expressed a disturbing pessimism about the immediate future of Iraq. More than one put the chances of a full-scale civil war at “fifty-fifty.” Joost Hilterman of the International Crisis Group outlined three steps he considered must be taken within the next few months if the situation is to be stabilized. These are: creation of a real government of national unity, one which includes the real political and military forces in the country; revise the constitution to address concerns about regional autonomy and national unity; and fully integrate the Iraqi security forces, under professional, non-sectarian command. Hilterman and other observers argue that only the continued presence of external military forces – the United States and its remaining allies - can create the stability and political space

that will allow Iraqis to take these steps. They acknowledge, however, that the daily brutality and incompetence of the occupation have cost United States whatever moral or political legitimacy it may once have had at least in some parts of Iraq. Indeed, some Iraqis we spoke with saw U.S. forces as nothing more than another dangerous militia, mostly devoted to protecting themselves. Regardless of whether the United States *ought* to stay and fix what we have broken, nothing we have done in Iraq to date suggest that we have the *capacity* to do so.

Conflict with Iran: Bush administration officials have occasionally accused Shi'a Iran of teaming up with Iraqi Shi'as to make mischief in Iraq. In fact, several people told us that in Iraq, Arab ethnic identity trumps religious unity. Iraqis have not forgotten the 1980's war that decimated a generation of young men on both sides of the Iran-Iraq border. Suspicion of Iran runs deep in Iraq. Both Shi'a and Sunni Iraqis told us is that they see the hand of Iran behind much of the violence in Iraq.

More than once we heard what seems like an odd accusation to U.S. ears: that Iran conspired with the United States in the February 2006 destruction of the Askariya shrine in Samarra, one of Shi'a Islam's holiest sites. So deep is their suspicion of Iran that Iraqis of all stripes easily believe that their two great enemies must be friends.

There is little affection between Iran and most of the Arab world. Some Iraqis we spoke with suggested that U.S. military action against Iran over its nuclear ambitions might well have the unintended consequence of igniting a regional Arab-Iran conflict.

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The Palestine-Israel conflict underlies everything else the United States touches in the Middle East. Almost everyone we spoke to in Jordan and Syria emphasized this point. It is almost impossible to overstate the depth of hatred people in the Arab world feel for the state of Israel. When our Syrian guide saw the Hebrew script on the wedding ring of a delegation member, he produced a bandaid to help her cover the offending letters. "You have to understand," he explained, "that people who see it will assume you are Israeli, and that would be dangerous for you." Until the Palestinian people cease to be stateless refugees in their own and other people's lands, lasting peace remains a dream anywhere in the region.

Conclusions and implications for the U.S. peace movement: The situation in Iraq and the surrounding region is more unstable than the daily news would suggest. The desperate situation of Iraqi refugees threatens the political and economic stability of Jordan, and to a lesser extent, Syria. A weak and illegitimate government and an unpopular occupation may not hold off for much longer the centrifugal forces of sectarian and ethnic division. And under all of it the Palestinian-Israeli conflict seethes.

The experiences of Iraqis who risk their lives to get into Jordan and Syria reminded us of the thousands who risk their lives each year crossing the southern deserts of our own country. The circumstances are different, but in both cases, it is the actions of the United States that have driven people out of their homes and across hostile borders.

Apart from one recent story in the *New York Times*, people in this country have heard almost nothing about the desperate plight of Iraqi refugees. Certainly we must continue to demand that the United State pull out of Iraq. But the refugee situation gives people in this country yet another responsibility. As we continue to oppose the war, we must also demand that the United States accept moral and legal responsibility for the refugees its actions have created.