



Canadian Council for Refugees Conseil canadien pour les réfugiés

Palestinian Refugees Forced Out of Iraq

About 3,000 stateless Palestinian refugees are stranded in dangerous camps on the Syria-Iraq border, waiting for a country to accept them for resettlement. They have been forced out of Iraq but are denied asylum anywhere else.

Who are the Palestinians forced out of Iraq?

At the time of the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003, there were approximately 34,000 Palestinians in Baghdad, some of them refugees – or descended from refugees – displaced in 1948. In the aftermath of the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, the Palestinians became targets for violence. Palestinians in Iraq have been arbitrarily arrested, detained, publicly slandered, kidnapped, tortured, attacked and killed.

What is the situation of these Palestinian refugees?

To escape persecution, many Palestinians fled Iraq. Unlike Iraqi citizens, however, Palestinians were mostly denied entry to Syria and Jordan, because they are stateless persons, with no immediate prospect of a durable solution.

They are trapped on the Syria-Iraq border, in the camps of Al Hol, Al Tanf and Al Waleed. Living conditions in the camps are extremely difficult and unsafe. There is little security or access to medical services. The camps are in the desert where there are extreme temperatures and regular sandstorms.



Photo Credits: Gloria Nafziger



“We’ve gone from running from fast death in Iraq to slow death in the camps.”

- A Palestinian refugee woman in a camp on the Iraq-Syria border



Photo Credits: Gloria Nafziger



“Make our dreams truth forever...”

- Refugee children at al-Tanf camp on the Iraq-Syria border, November 2008

A solution for the Palestinians?

Resettlement to a third country offers the only viable solution for these refugees. However, countries have been slow to offer a home to them. With conditions deteriorating in the camps, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) issued an urgent appeal in the fall of 2008 for the resettlement of Palestinian refugees.

“During my visit to the Al Tanf and Al Hol camps I spoke to men, women and children who live in some of the harshest conditions. The children pleaded to be freed from the isolated and barren desert camps. They performed a play that showed them travelling to Mars to find compassion and a safe place to live – things they are not finding on earth.”

- Gloria Nafziger, CCR Executive Committee



Photo Credits: Gloria Nafziger

Palestinian refugee children at al Tanf camp in the Iraq-Syria border region, November 2008.

What is Canada's response?

The Canadian Council for Refugees wrote to the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration in November 2008, urging that Canada resettle Palestinian refugees as requested in the UNHCR appeal. Many other organizations have sent similar requests.

Despite these calls, the Canadian government is not accepting any of these Palestinian refugees for resettlement as government-assisted refugees.

Conscious of the desperate situation of these Palestinian refugees, some civil society groups in Canada are stepping forward to offer resettlement to some of them through the private sponsorship program. They are disappointed to find that the Government of Canada is not participating in the response, as is normal practice with most other refugee groups.

“We are deeply disappointed at the Canadian government's failure to offer protection and a home to any of these refugees. The Palestinians are among the most vulnerable of those forced out of Iraq – yet the Canadian government is excluding Palestinians from consideration for any of the resettlement spaces allocated for the displaced from Iraq. This looks like discrimination – these refugees are being denied resettlement to Canada solely because they are Palestinian.”

- Elizabeth McWeeny, CCR President



What can we do?

Write to the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration:

- > Urge that Canada support the increased resettlement of refugees from Iraq, including Palestinians who are particularly vulnerable.
- > Ask that Canada resettle 50 Palestinian families from camps in the Iraq-Syria border area, and that some be sponsored by the Canadian government.



For more information:

About the Palestinians and other refugees forced out of Iraq:

ccrweb.ca/iraq.htm (including for slide show on situation of Palestinian refugees and suggestions for writing to the Minister)

About Statelessness:

Statelessness and Canada: An introduction, at: ccrweb.ca/documents/statelessnessprimerEN.pdf

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