

Hearing on Sectarian Violence in Iraq and the Refugee Crisis: Remarks by Senator Gordon Smith (R-OR)

September 19, 2007 Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for inviting me to this meeting of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. I'm honored to testify before you today on the plight of refugees in Iraq.

Since the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, violence has grown to an appalling level. The looting of Baghdad immediately after its liberation was a harbinger of the lawlessness which today grips much of the country.

In spite of this chaos, our men and women in uniform have done a superb job in Iraq. They have suffered many casualties, and have borne their burden with admirable courage.

But if Americans have suffered, Iraqis have also had their share of tragedy. Iraqi civilians have borne the brunt of incredibly brutal violence. Al-Qaeda in Iraq has committed a pantheon of atrocities, from murdering children to the recent atrocity against the Yazidi community.

In addition to Al-Qaeda, faceless sectarian death squads hunt the country. Americans may have grown numb to the daily reports of bodies dumped by the side of the road, or in rivers, or in alleys, but Iraqis haven't. For them, the nightmare is reality.

To escape this violence, millions of Iraqis have left their homes. The UN estimates that more than two million Iraqis have fled the country, and 2.2 million are internally displaced. Over half of those two and a quarter million have recently left since the Samarra mosque bombing in February 2006.

These refugees come from all walks of life, but especially from Iraq's most vulnerable groups. Human-rights organizations estimate that Christians, who constitute less than 3 percent of Iraq's population, make up at least 20 percent of the refugees. Sabaeans, a tiny sect within Iraq, make up 5 percent of refugees. These minorities are often targeted by Islamic extremists for murder, rape, or forced conversion. Unsurprisingly, many choose to leave.

The refugees do not only come from minority populations. Estimates indicate about 45 percent are Sunni, and 25 percent are Shia. Iraqis of every stripe are fearful for their lives. Tragically, the UN states that two to two-and-a-half hundred thousand of these Iraqis are school-age children.

These children and their families have left home for different reasons, but their reasons have a common thread. In a survey by the United Nations, sixty-three percent of Iraqis said they had left their neighborhoods because of direct threats to their lives. Twenty-five percent left because they had been forcibly removed from their homes. These threats are often based on religion.

Sectarian violence is today the leading cause of refugee displacement. The effect has been to segregate Shia Iraqis and Sunni Iraqis, both nationally and locally. In Baghdad, some Sunni neighborhoods are walled off to protect them from the attacks of their countrymen. In the south of Iraq, threats from Shia militias have forced Sunnis to move to the north and west. The Shias from these areas have likewise fled Sunni death squads and Al-Qaeda.

In a front-page article this past Monday, The New York Times described how the sectarian violence and ever-present fear of death have fundamentally changed Iraqis and their society. Mixed marriages have become rare. Many Iraqis leave; and those who stay behind in a mixed neighborhood live constantly on the edge of a knife.

Hatreds lasting a thousand years are difficult to reconcile. Our country, which is a mere 231 years old, has difficulty enough with our old disagreements. We have solved some and continue to wrestle with others.

Nobody, however, has helped us reconcile these conflicts. Americans resolve American problems; and today, Iraqis need to resolve Iraqi problems. US soldiers cannot solve sectarian hatreds.

By some reports, our current strategy, the "troop surge," is making things worse. The Iraqi Red Crescent estimates that as many as 100,000 Iraqis have been leaving their homes since February, at the beginning of the "surge." This is not the fault of our soldiers, but rather a natural fear of more violence.

Nevertheless, it seems like folly to me to use American troops to police Sunni and Shia Iraqis who hate each other. The refugees we see today, in a large part, are due to the Iraqis' inability to resolve this hatred. The mission US troops are on today seems misguided. We certainly need to fight al-Qaeda and train the Iraqi army. We do not need to be trying to force a political compromise that isn't there.

One of the tasks the United States needs to embrace more fully is the responsibility for the suffering of ordinary Iraqis.

While we cannot necessarily treat the disease, we can help treat the symptoms.

America owes a debt to those Iraqis who have been affected by the war. We also owe a special debt to those Iraqis who have worked with American forces. To this end, I cosponsored S.1104, a Senate bill to increase the number of Iraqis and Afghans who could be admitted to the United States. That is one step.

A bigger step would be moving to alleviate the overall refugee issue. I have been working with Senator Kennedy to pass S.1651, a bill which would enable Iraqi refugees of special attention (like religious minorities) to be admitted to the United States. It would increase the visas we make available to Iraqis, as well as allow refugees to be directly processed in Iraq.

In a diplomatic cable dated September 7th, U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker complained to the State Department about bottlenecks in the refugee process. Among other problems, the ambassador noted that refugees often faced up to a two year delay to enter the US, an unnecessarily long wait. He urged action. I heartily agree.

I know better than many Americans how difficult it is for religious minorities to thrive in this world. It is difficult in the United States. It is far harder in the Middle East. The condition of these minorities in Iraq is thus of special interest to me. If we owe a debt to Iraqis, I hope that this legislation plays a small part in repaying that debt.

Though America may bear overall responsibility, these refugees are not only a concern of the United States. Other countries, willing or not, are involved as well. Iraq's neighbors have perhaps the most pressing concerns about the refugee issues, because these nations often wind paying the bill. Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt have so far borne the brunt of the refugee crisis.

Jordan, which has a population of 6.1 million, hosts up to 750,000 Iraqi refugees. Lebanon, with a population of 3.9 million, hosts between 40,000 and 200,000 Iraqis. Syria, with a population of 19.3 million, supports an estimated 1.2 million refugees. Egypt carries a lesser but still significant burden.

Each of these countries faces significant structural pressures as a result of their decision to support these Iraqis. Jordan, for example, has an estimated 1.8 million Palestinian refugees in addition to the Iraqis. Jordan thus now has the largest refugee-per-capita ratio on earth.

Because of Amman's delicate political situation we must make every effort to ensure that the financial and social strain does not stress Jordanian society, and make similar efforts with the other states.

The final status of externally displaced Iraqis must also be resolved within a reasonable time frame. These refugees' suffering must not be prolonged as a political weapon by their host countries with which to attack enemies. America has a national moral commitment to resolving the Iraqi refugee issue as quickly as possible.

Unfortunately, unconscionable delays have often prevented Iraqis from reaching safety.

The current refugee process requires potential refugees to leave Iraq before registering with United Nations refugee authorities. This journey is long, and especially hazardous.

Once Iraqis reach these authorities in Jordan, Syria, and elsewhere, a fresh purgatory awaits them. They must wait up to 6-8 months to be registered as refugees, and another 6-8 months to be designated as ready for resettlement. They are afterwards referred to the US and other final destination nations. These countries then have their own refugee processing systems, with their own delays.

Meanwhile, Iraqis usually lack access to basic social services. Given the large amount of children, the lack takes on an extra urgency. The NGO Human Rights First noted that America's funding for grossly inadequate. The United States gave \$10 million to Jordan in the War on Terror Supplemental for Fiscal Year 2008.

In comparison, the United States gave Jordan \$700 million in 2003 to offset the cost of the Iraq war. The United States is also spending \$9 billion per month overall on the Iraq war overall.

Surely there is some additional funding available for the men, women, and children who are most affected by the violence in Iraq. It is America's moral duty.

We still have many questions to answer about solutions to the refugee crisis. Should we give economic aid to all countries which harbor refugees, such as Syria, or condition that aid on the treatment Iraqis receive? How can we expedite the relocation of Iraqi refugees? How can we prevent so many Iraqis from having to travel to other countries before they reach sanctuary in the United States and elsewhere? Should we focus our effort within international organizations, such as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and UNICEF, or should we repay our debt bilaterally?

America historically has an honorable record in alleviating the plight of refugees from its wars. After the collapse of South

Vietnam, for example, the United States absorbed an estimated 135,000 South Vietnamese refugees. In comparison, between 2003 and mid-2007, fewer than 800 Iraqis were admitted to the United States. Whether our effort is by ourselves, with allies, or with international organizations, more clearly needs to be done.

The plight of religious minorities is nowhere easy. It is most difficult in a war zone, in a region where they are already persecuted. The situation in Iraq is thus a humanitarian hazard of the first concern, particularly for those who bear overall responsibility.

Thank you for your time today. It has been an honor to testify before you.