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Iraqi Refugees: A Debt Defaulted

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Two weeks ago, Tim Arango of the *Times* wrote an expose of the Administration's failure to admit into the U.S. more than a tiny number of Iraqis who were affiliated with the U.S. in Iraq. He got the government's attention. Three days later, Senator Chuck Schumer wrote a letter to Secretaries Hillary Clinton and Janet Napolitano asking why so few Iraqis who helped America are making it here. Seven other senators wrote to Napolitano separately. "If these individuals do not deserve a visa," Schumer wrote, "it is hard to imagine who does." The Senator even went so far as to suggest the Guam option, first proposed on this blog almost four years ago.

In the first nine days of the month, before the article came out, nine U.S.-affiliated Iraqis were rejected for entry and zero were approved. In the week after the article, thirty-nine were rejected and thirty-one were approved. The good news is that the pace of decisions increased. The bad news is that it remains excruciatingly slow, and the rate of rejections is high—strangely high. Consider that, in order to work in the Green Zone and on military bases, these Iraqis already passed background checks that many of the people reading this post would probably fail. They are, in the words of Kirk Johnson, founder of The List Project, "the most heavily documented refugees on the planet."

Here's another troubling number: over the past few years almost thirty thousand such Iraqis have applied for a Special Immigrant Visa, specifically created by Congress to expedite their cases. Yet only four thousand have been processed, and of these a third have been denied.

And one more figure: until February of this year, the U.S. approved over eighty per cent of all Iraqi applicants—not just former U.S. employees—referred by the U.N. for resettlement here. Since February—when the government put in place a new "security screening" regime—the number has dropped to around fifty per cent.

What's going on?

In May, two Iraqis (who hadn't worked for the U.S. and didn't come here on Special Immigrant Visas) were arrested in Kentucky on charges of plotting to ship weapons to insurgents in Iraq. Perhaps the Iraqi couple were already on the authorities' radar when the new screening was put in place in February. Perhaps there are others on the government's radar now. Whatever the case, it's clear that, because of possible risks and threats, a process that was already troubled and inadequate has almost come to a dead stop.

The Kentucky case has spooked the agencies and removed any incentive for jittery officials to do right by the Iraqis who, at unbelievable risk to themselves and their families, supported the U.S. during the long years of war. The new screening process, like so much of the security apparatus put in place since September 11th, will create moral shame and injustice without making the country any safer. Forget the numbers—there's nothing abstract about this issue. The following stories come from Becca Heller of the Iraqi Refugee Assistance Project:

An elderly, wheelchair-bound Iraqi woman and her two daughters, who had been initially granted refugee status, were recently pulled off a U.S.-bound flight before it left Amman, then deported from Jordan to northern Iraq—simply because they had run afoul of a technical provision in the new screening regime.

A woman who worked on a U.S. base in Baghdad, and is now a refugee in Syria, applied for an S.I.V. last fall. At around the same time, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. She had her final interview at the U.S. embassy in late March, and has heard nothing since—and now she urgently needs a mastectomy.

Another woman who interpreted for the Army first applied for an S.I.V. in 2008. She had her final interview in April. Among the many glitches that delayed her case was the inadvertent removal of her daughter from the application. This woman is currently hiding in Syria.

Multiply these brief stories by the thousands, and you have one of the most disgraceful legacies of the decade since September 11th—a scandal that has only grown worse during the Obama years.

Read more <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/georgepacker/2011/07/iraqi-refugees.html?printable=true¤tPage=all#ixzz1Tsxt6RYF>