



Operation Safe Haven Iraq 2009

An Action Plan for Airlifting Endangered Iraqis Linked to the United States

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Executive Summary

Tens of thousands of Iraqis have served with the U.S. military and other organizations during the past five and a half years as translators, drivers, construction workers, engineers, and office workers. A disturbing trend has emerged: extremists and militia groups are targeting the estimated 30,000 to 100,000 U.S.-affiliated Iraqis as traitors for working with Americans. In many cases, the lives of these Iraqis and their families are in imminent danger. Many have become refugees or internally displaced persons within Iraq. These Iraqis urgently need and deserve America's help, and the Obama administration should act quickly to remove them from harm's way.

Yet these Iraqis have been stuck until recently in a resettlement process lasting anywhere from six months to two years. Because of bureaucratic red tape, current U.S. policies do not adequately address the security concerns of U.S.-affiliated Iraqis. The Obama administration should initiate an immediate airlift—Operation Safe Haven Iraq 2009—of U.S.-affiliated Iraqis in need of protection as the best course of action for urgently addressing this problem.

The United States has a moral obligation to protect U.S.-affiliated Iraqis who risked their lives in service to the United States in Iraq. The Special Immigrant Visa program and the Iraq in-country refugee processing program are meant to expedite processing of U.S.-affiliated Iraqis. Both programs represent a step in the right direction, but an airlift would importantly move the majority of refugee processing out of the region while violence, though diminished, continues in Iraq.

The fate of U.S.-affiliated Iraqis deserves attention and action even as larger questions of U.S. troop withdrawal from Iraq are debated. Based on current SIV legislation allocations, an estimated 25,000 U.S.-affiliated Iraqis could benefit from an airlift over the course of five years—and likely many more, as this number does not include family

members. U.S.-affiliated Iraqis are the most documented refugees in the world; they had to receive security clearances to work with Americans in Iraq and must prove that they worked with Americans for a minimum of one year to qualify for the SIV program. Yet no comprehensive list of these Iraqis exists. Compiling such a list will be a necessary step in executing an effective airlift.

Many of the United States' coalition partners—including Great Britain, Denmark, and Poland—have already airlifted Iraqis who assisted their forces for permanent resettlement in these countries. Examples of previous United States airlifts and expedited refugee processing provide a model for action, including those for Kosovar Albanians in 1999, Iraqi Kurds in 1996, and South Vietnamese in 1975.

Despite the compelling reasons and models for action, legitimate concerns exist about this type of airlift operation:

Security: U.S.-affiliated Iraqis have already received security clearances to work with Americans, but some Iraqis could potentially harbor ill-feeling toward the United States. However, these Iraqis are seeking to leave the country because they have been labeled as traitors and want the opportunity to find safety and security in the United States, which makes this highly unlikely. The airlift model will greatly accelerate processing time, while keeping the American public safe by conducting processing outside of the United States mainland.

Cost: An airlift would require the United States to pay for travel costs to a third location, temporary housing and benefits during processing, and U.S. resettlement benefits after processing. The costs, while large, are not prohibitive. The transportation costs associated with an airlift would be around \$100 million for 40,000 Iraqis. Projected U.S. resettlement costs for SIV Iraqis plus their families is \$75 million annually.

Brain drain: Some argue that offering U.S.-affiliated Iraqis protection in the United States removes Iraqis from the country they could help rebuild. However, a brain drain has already occurred because of the size and scope of displacement in Iraq. And targeted Iraqis cannot be asked to rebuild their country if their lives are in imminent danger.

The safety of U.S.-affiliated Iraqis must be a priority action item in President-elect Obama's overall Iraq policy. The following six-step course of action for 2009—Operation Safe Haven Iraq 2009—is modeled after current airlifts by coalition partners and best practices from past airlifts. Initial in-country security processing should take four weeks to eight weeks and longer-term processing following the airlift and before U.S. resettlement should take about three months to four months. One possible location for processing is Guam, which possesses preexisting infrastructure and has status as a U.S. territory, but the Ahmed Al Jaber air base in Kuwait is also a possible processing center and has the advantage of being in the region.

Step 1: Appoint a White House coordinator for Iraqi refugees and internally displaced persons. President-elect Obama should appoint a White House coordinator for Iraqi refugees and IDPs as outlined in the Kennedy-Biden-Durbin-Hagel-Smith legislation—a bill to develop a policy to address the critical needs of Iraqi refugees. The coordinator’s responsibilities would include overseeing the airlift.

Step 2: Conduct an audit and review of current efforts. Full-time, dedicated embassy staff throughout the region from various U.S. government agencies must conduct a thorough audit and create a comprehensive list of U.S.-affiliated Iraqis through the SIV and traditional refugee assistance programs.

Step 3: Finalize security background checks. U.S. agencies should increase resources and personnel to conduct in-country security background checks of U.S.-affiliated Iraqis in Iraq and throughout the region.

Step 4: Order the commencement of the airlift. Once Iraqis are identified, the military should fly Iraqis in small, staggered groups to a third location.

Step 5: Implement and follow up on third-country expedited processing for Iraqi refugees. The White House coordinator should convene agencies such as the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of State, and the Department of Health and Human Services, which would be engaged in the expedited processing of U.S.-affiliated Iraqis and oversee smooth coordination between U.S. government agencies and the military.

Step 6: Facilitate relocation and placement in the United States. U.S.-affiliated Iraqis should be flown to the United States, where some can be funneled into Arabic language-critical jobs. Once the situation in Iraq has improved and U.S.-affiliated Iraqis feel confident about their safety, the expectation is that some of them will return to Iraq.

Protecting U.S.-affiliated Iraqis is a moral and strategic imperative. It is a way for the United States government to thank Iraqis who made their work possible in Iraq and to improve America’s standing in the world. The region is watching to see what happens to this particular group of Iraqis, and America will have difficulty finding new allies if regional actors perceive the United States as turning its back on those with whom it worked most closely. Congress has signaled with broad bipartisan support its intent to protect these Iraqis, but they are still at risk due to bureaucratic inertia. The Obama administration can overcome these hurdles with a presidential order for an airlift in 2009.

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