Our debate about Iraq is often stuck in black and white: success versus failure, staying versus going. But as this debate plays out, the far-reaching consequences of war are already unfolding. One consequence is Iraq’s catastrophic refugee crisis.

One out of every eight Iraqis has been displaced by violence -- some 1.9 million Iraqis inside their country, and more than 2 million as refugees in neighboring states, primarily Syria and Jordan. An additional 40,000 to 50,000 Iraqis leave their homes each month. By the end of 2007, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) projects a total 2.3 million to 2.7 million internally displaced persons in Iraq. Most are fleeing sectarian violence in Baghdad and adjoining areas of central and southern Iraq to seek the relative safety of areas where they are not an endangered minority.

The implications of this unfolding humanitarian crisis are grave. Professionals and skilled workers are leaving the country. The standard of living is falling, despite efforts to rebuild infrastructure and restore basic services. More children are unable to attend school. Many teachers have left the country. Malnutrition is increasing. Access to health care is hard to come by.

Refugees are also a major burden on neighboring countries, which cannot integrate huge numbers of Iraqi refugees. Syria, a country of 18 million, hosts 1.2 million Iraqis. Much smaller Jordan (5.5 million) hosts another 750,000. All of Iraq’s neighbors have a strong interest in the restoration of stability in Iraq so refugees can return home: the greater the refugee crisis, the greater the chance of spreading violence and instability.

By their own admission, UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies lack resources to cope with the problem. Inside Iraq, the immediate priority is the protection of displaced people and the provision of food, shelter and access to water and sanitation. The focus is on the most vulnerable: female-headed households, the elderly, children and families without resources. Because of the violence, humanitarian agencies must rely on Iraqi staff and local agencies to implement and monitor understaffed and under-funded assistance programs.

Outside Iraq, the key challenge is to keep borders open and ensure that Iraqis are
not forced back into danger. Most Iraqi refugees in Syria and Jordan settled in urban areas and initially relied on networks of friends and relatives for support. But their resources are running out, and frictions with host communities are growing. The priority should be supporting overburdened institutions in host countries. For example, 30 percent of Iraqi children in Syria are not attending school, and those in overcrowded schools lack chairs or textbooks.

Compared to the cost of war, the cost of helping refugees is not great. The United States is spending about $9 billion a month in Iraq. UNHCR requested $30 million for Iraq in 2006. The United States provided $8 million, and UNHCR fell $6 million short of its funding goal. UNHCR is requesting about $60 million for 2007. The United States has contributed $18 million and has indicated a willingness to provide an additional $15 million. This is a contribution that we must make.

In 2006, Iraqis were the largest single group of asylum seekers in industrialized countries, submitting 22,000 asylum applications. In the 11 years between the first Gulf War and the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the United States resettled more than 30,000 Iraqi refugees. Yet since April 2003, the United States has resettled a total of 692 Iraqi refugees, even though the most vulnerable Iraqis are often those who have assisted us -- translators, contractors and embassy workers who are targeted by insurgents, terrorists and death squads for "collaborating" with the U.S. government within Iraq.

The United States bears a heavy responsibility for events in Iraq. We must respond with more urgency, resources and competence to help the millions of refugees and displaced persons suffering so much. We should fully fund requests from UNHCR and other agencies. We should expand resettlement programs for Iraqi refugees, giving priority to those who have worked closely with the United States. We should press for greater international contributions to support neighboring states overburdened with Iraqi refugees. And we should sustain a regional diplomatic initiative -- with all of Iraq's neighbors -- to confront this crisis.

We must find a way to end the war in Iraq responsibly. In the meantime, a failure to address the plight of Iraqi refugees and displaced persons will lead to greater human suffering, chaos and instability in Iraq and the region. Surely, the United States can do more to help Iraqis who have been forced to flee violence.

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