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Title:

Death of Iraq's middle class: The country's best and brightest have fled, demolishing hope for the country's future

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On a blistering June afternoon in 2003, I sat in the Baghdad office of the president of al-Mustansiriyya University, the historian Taher al-Bakaa.

I was there as part of group of Middle East scholars to assess the condition of Baghdad's universities and libraries in the wake of the war. Outside, students were celebrating graduation. Inside, huddled around a fan, we talked about past dictators and tyrants, and about how al-Bakaa would now revitalize his campus, which had been looted and burned just after the fall of the city two months before.

There was an infectious confidence in al-Bakaa and others whom I met that **Iraq's** universities would play a positive role in the rebuilding of the country and re-establishing links with the West.

But today, Al-Bakaa lives in Boston as one of more than 1.5 million refugees who have fled the war. In Baghdad this week his campus was bombed, and more than 60 students waiting for buses to take them home were killed.

The new refugees

This new refugee crisis dwarfs earlier ones in the Middle East, including that of the Armenians in 1915 and the Palestinians in 1948 and 1967. Beyond the basic numbers, what makes this crisis such a challenge is that a large portion of the refugees are from **Iraq's** middle class.

And just as those earlier refugee crises sent shock waves throughout the Arab world, this crisis will have an impact on the stability and viability of **Iraq** and the surrounding countries for decades to come.

Our normal image of the refugee -- malnourished, languishing in dusty camps -- doesn't apply here. **Iraq's** middle-class refugees are its teachers, doctors, college professors, scientists, bureaucrats, technicians and entrepreneurs, the very people upon whom the future of that country depends.

They are leaving for multiple reasons, but chiefly because of the violence, which the UN estimates claimed more than 34,000 lives last year, and the rational fear that the new **Iraq** will be run by religious demagogues intent on turning back the clock on issues of religious equality, their daughters' access to education and professional lives, and freedom of thought and expression.

In the old **Iraq**, mixed middle-class marriages of Sunnis and Shia were common; now these are dead. The sectarian designation of one's co-workers at the office was rarely a topic of polite conversation or had much relevance, and now has become the touchstone for most forms of social interaction.

Iraq's middle class is fleeing at such a rapid rate that over 40 percent has left since 2003. Add this to this torrent a slow trickle of **Iraq's** educated classes from the 1970s forward, and we've reached a point where virtually everyone who could leave has left or fled to Kurdistan. For all intents and purposes, **Iraq's** middle class is near death, and what is left is just a pale shadow of its former self. It has ceased to be a relevant feature of Iraqi society.

In **Iraq**, the loss of this class means the loss of the basis of civil society and the disappearance of those Iraqis who would be committed to non-sectarian politics.

Welcomed . . . for now

In the greater Middle East, at least for the moment, these new middle-class refugees have been welcomed. A good example is the recently established Syrian International University for Sciences and Technology, which has filled its teaching staff with Iraqi scientists and professors. These refugees have also pumped the equivalent of billions of dollars into the moribund economies of their neighbors as they buy homes and businesses. But every course taught in Syria by an Iraqi professor means little to an Iraqi student sitting in an empty classroom; every dinar spent in one of Amman's upscale shopping malls is one less to pay for goods or services in Baghdad.

On the other side of the equation, these refugees constitute a volatile addition to already unstable societies. Iraqi refugees are treated either as tourists or illegal aliens in their neighboring host countries. It is assumed that their residence is temporary. But past refugee crises suggest that most refugees, especially those from the middle class, never go home. Disenfranchised and stateless, they will be increasingly resented by their hosts as

competitors for resources, jobs and political power. **Iraq's** middle class refugees will then become the raw material for a new generation of extremists, angry and intent on violence directed not just against enemies in **Iraq** and the Middle East, but also against those of us in the West whose actions made them refugees in the first place.

U.S. responsibility?

The U.S. government has a moral and legal responsibility for **Iraq's** refugees. This is already recognized in special programs established to help certain Iraqis -- primarily interpreters and others whose service to the U.S. would endanger their lives -- come to America.

However, only a tiny fraction of those needing refugee status have been admitted to the U.S. While publicly officials cite concerns about national security, another explanation for this resistance is that expanding this program would be interpreted as an admission of failure in **Iraq**.

Nevertheless, key to any solution is creating conditions that will allow Iraqis safety, but not preclude return. In the near term, the U.S. should offer unlimited extensions of temporary visas to Iraqis. In the long term, the U.S. should be prepared to absorb a large portion of this refugee population.

The central irony of the middle class refugee applies here as well. They make their homelands poorer by leaving, but make our societies richer in coming.

Caption:

Photo: Ghaith Abdul-Ahad/Getty Images / Fundamentalists, the poor and militias full of people like this Shiite fighter loyal to Muqtada al-Sadr and wearing a bandana with a symbol of martyrdom, may be all that's left in **Iraq**.

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