



WFP Rapid Food Needs Assessment – refugees fleeing Iraq into Syria

January 29 to February 8, 2007

Summary

WFP began a three month emergency response operation (EMOP 10576) on the 1 January 2007 to support UNHCR assist 6,645 vulnerable Iraqi and Palestinian refugees in Syria with basic rations in response to evidence of an increasing number of vulnerable refugees from Iraq entering Syria. It is believed Syria is hosting between 500-700,000 refugees, with reports of over a thousand arriving every day over the last eight months as a result of the escalation in violence in Iraq. What until now has been a somewhat silent contained exodus, is becoming a matter of urgency for both the Syrian authorities and the international community as the number of Iraqis leaving their homes to escape violence increases.

The UNHCR January 2007 appeal hopes to raise USD\$60 million to provide much needed support both in Iraq and in the neighbouring countries¹ of Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt and Turkey where an estimated 2 million are seeking refuge. A joint UNHCR/UNICEF/WFP assessment of Iraqi refugees in Syria during the last quarter of 2005² concluded that of those that had registered with the UNHCR to obtain a Temporary Protection letter³ a large majority (82%) had adequate food consumption patterns.

A food security consultant was deployed to the WFP Syria Country Office (29 January–8 February 2007) to assess the food needs of the increasing number of new arrivals from Iraq and to advise WFP on the most appropriate food aid response.

Overall, the rapid assessment concludes that it is increased violence and fear of persecution that continue to drive people out of Iraq into Syria. Those fleeing from their homes over the last six to eight months, are entering Syria with less resources and less time to prepare their departure from Iraq than those arriving over the last few years. This means they are crossing the border and being totally reliant on their available cash and social networks to pay for their housing, medical, food and non-food needs whilst in Syria. The recent increased cost of living in Syria means that the poorer newcomers will be unable to fend for themselves for as long as the earlier arrivals, as rental prices have more than doubled from \$80 to \$160-200 for a one room house, food prices are up 25-30% and more and more refugees compete for under paid jobs in the labour market that they are legally not allow to work in. However, it also means that a small proportion of refugees who have been in Syria for more than a year, still unable to work legally, will be unable to meet their monthly expenses⁴.

The assessment estimates that 15 per cent of those registering with UNHCR in Syria (45,000 register in the first week of February) are unable to meet their expenses for more than three months from the date of arrival in Syria. It was not possible to ascertain the level of food insecurity of those not registered. Food insecurity is caused by limited purchasing power for Iraqis who have settled in Syrian cities and towns as many report they were unable to sell their assets before departure due to individual threats on their lives and are reluctant to show any evidence of their plans to leave their homes so as to avoid sectarian violence. In the case

¹ There are an additional 54,000 in Iran since the 1990s assisted by UNHCR.

² UNHCR/UNICEF/WFP Assessment of the Situation of Iraqi refugees in Iraq (March 2006)

³ Interim measure provided by UNHCR initially developed to prevent deportation of Iraqis regardless of them being eligible for refugee status. Temporary protection does not exempt refugees for the Syrian immigration procedures for temporary residency in Iraq, and in 2005 UNHCR was receiving an average of 400 applications per month, whereas in 2007 6,000 per month are expected.

⁴ Monthly per capita expenditure among refugees was estimated at almost USD\$100 in 2005, significantly higher than the Syrian upper poverty line of USD\$ 42 reported by UNDP. Refugees have considerably higher housing costs than poor Syrians.

of the 654 Palestinian refugees from Iraq who have been grouped in El Tanf and El Hol in makeshift camps near the Iraqi border, food availability as well as access are the issue, as they have no means of supporting themselves.

There is currently limited formal assistance being given to vulnerable refugees fleeing Iraq. For the Iraqis, informal support networks through the Iraqi refugee community and the Syrian population are very likely the most effective means of support for those who need it. The UNHCR has more than doubled the number of refugees registered from 20,000 to over 53,000 in the last few months. During the second week of February UNHCR faced a sudden surge in numbers wishing to register spurred by fears of new Syrian government visa regulations and rumours arising from the visit of the High Commissioner for Refugees. The number on the waiting list climbed to 72,000 in one week prompting UNHCR to revise year end estimates of registered refugees to 200,000.

UNHCR refers vulnerable households to Syrian Arabic Red Crescent (SARC) health clinics, and to charitable organisations who can provide some food and non-food items as well as social support. Whilst there has been a three month waiting period to register in the past UNHCR is upgrading the system and expects to dramatically increase the number registered each month to absorb a rapidly rising caseload. The registration process assesses the refugees vulnerability and need for medical and food assistance. This assistance is limited by the low number of implementing partners available to the UN (the Syrian government strictly regulates and restricts the registration of NGOs in the country). WFP food commodities will be channelled through these organisations and through the local authorities outside Damascus in the Governorates of El Hassake and Deir-ez-Zour.

The legal status of Iraqis in Syria has become the most crucial issue for refugees. Recent changes by the Syrian authorities on visa formalities and visa extension procedures came into place on 20 January 2007, creating an atmosphere of utmost panic among refugees who fear deportation and the splitting up of their families. At the time of writing it appears the new measures are being put in place by the authorities. This is leading Iraqi families to try and register their school age children into local Syrian schools in the hope of being granted a longer term visa in country⁵. Informal work opportunities available to the refugees are diminishing and therefore affecting their cash flow and purchasing power. Field work revealed that some refugees are considering returning to Iraq despite the security risks, or wanting to seek refuge along the border rather than crossing it, as they have no homes to return to in Iraq and do not want to not seek refuge in the Internally Displaced People (IDP) camps. Some refugees hope for resettlement arrangements as the only solution.

The assessment concludes that:

- Food access for both Iraqi and Palestinian refugees (in Al Hol and Al Tanf) is dependent to economic status, family composition and level of violence experienced in Iraq. Purchasing power is related to cash flow rather than ability to get credit. Refugees, unlike poorer Syrian households appear not be credit worthy among shop keepers and even their own community.
- Refugees registering with the UNHCR upon arrival in Syria over the last few months are more vulnerable than those who entered two or three years ago because they are leaving Iraq very rapidly, bring less cash with them, and are competing for accommodation and illegal work opportunities in Syria to maintain themselves.
- New arrivals are spending their money more quickly than they anticipated as the cost of living in Syria has recently become more expensive than in Iraq. Households reported spending twice as much money on food in Syria, with the better off families spending USD \$3 per person per day and the poorest reducing their spending to USD\$0.50 (this is very close to the market value of a full WFP food ration of basic commodities). This is true of both rural and urban areas.

⁵ The 2005 joint assessment estimated 30% of Iraqi school age children had not registered in schools. As of end of January 2007, 22,000 are said to be registered by the Syrian authorities – source UNHCR

- Refugee profiles are extremely diverse in terms of place of origin, access to accommodation in urban or rural settings, informal work opportunities and social support networks. Those registering with UNHCR, are increasingly motivated by medical assistance offered and hopes it will support their legal claims as asylum seekers. Registration to date is focused in Damascus and El Hassakeh.
- More information is required on whether households can afford to register their child in a Syrian school, as registration helps with visa extension claims.
- A new category of vulnerable refugee is forming among some of those who have been in country for more than a year as they now need to find more money per month to make ends meet than a year ago.
- Remittances are an effective coping mechanism for part of the refugees, but depend on the household's personal circumstance.
- The assessment cannot conclude whether registration is more attractive to those with material needs than the better off refugees.

The assessment does not make any conclusions about the nutritional status of the refugees. Whilst the quality of the diet has undoubtedly deteriorated for many refugees since they left Iraq, it is not possible to gauge what their nutritional status was before their arrival, and therefore impossible to discern between nutritional deficiencies due to poor quality diets whilst in Iraq or in Syria.

1. Introduction and Assessment Rationale

The level of violence induced displacement in Iraq has escalated over the past 12 months to alarming levels resulting in almost 4 million Iraqis leaving their homes since 2003. This silent exodus can no longer go unnoticed as Iraq's neighbours are beginning to show signs of strain caused by the influx of refugees seeking safety. IOM reported 58,495 displaced in January 2007⁶ due to violence and persecution. UNHCR has registered more than 5,000 refugees in Syria during the same time period⁷. This is a great increase on the average monthly registration figures of 400 reported for 2005 and half of 2006 but is far fewer than the 18,000 per month that they estimate they will be processing in the future as needs grow, awareness of assistance programmes spread and visa measures are tightened.

The number of Iraqis residing in Syria remains unconfirmed but has informally been estimated by officials to amount to between 500,000 and 700,000. The UNHCR Temporary Protection regime has now registered 53,000 individuals, and has 72,000 on a waiting list. The number is increasing exponentially, having doubled by January from 20,000 registered at the same time last year – and surged by 40,000 in one week alone in mid-February due to fears of new Syrian government visa regulations and rumours arising from the visit of the High Commissioner for Refugees. Aside from this unprecedented rush for registration, peaks in registration are usually due to particular conflict related events in Iraq. The increasing number of bombings in September and October 2006 targeting civilian areas in Baghdad has led to a dramatic increase in the number of Iraqis seeking refuge in Syria, particularly from Baghdad and the Anbar province largely populated by Sunnis. Syria has, unlike other countries in the region, maintained an open border policy for Iraqis since the outbreak of the third Gulf War and has as such complied with the basic human rights principle of admission of asylum seekers. UNHCR statistics show the first wave of refugees were more likely to be of Christian origin, but since the summer of 2006, the number of Muslims registering in Syria have overtaken the Christian and Sabians (who now make up less than a third of those registered).

The crisis was compounded when the movement of Iraqi-Palestinians began to Syria. The situation of Palestinians in Iraq became particularly dire after the bombing of a revered Shi'ite shrine in Samarra on 22 February, which triggered a wave of sectarian violence. It appears Shi'ites are heading to the safer southern regions, and Sunnis are choosing to leave Iraq as they have less choice on where to go and feel safe. In addition, 305 Palestinians were initially allowed to enter Syria but are restricted to El Hol Camp while a subsequent group of 340 have been denied entry and have been stranded in the no man's land on the Iraqi border since early summer of 2006. 150 were denied exit from Iraq altogether and are being assisted by UNHCR. It is estimated that there are an additional 15,000 Palestinian refugees in Iraq and another 15,000 from Sudan, Turkey, Iran and Syria⁸ who may come under similar targeted persecution as the Palestinians. Border crossing into Syria is still a desirable option for refugees, however they need a valid passport (approx cost US\$500) and the funds to pay for the taxi ride and living expenses in Syria.

WFP has been monitoring the changes in the influx of refugees in liaison with UNHCR in preparation to support the food needs of the most vulnerable should figures exceed 5,000 people. The WFP Syria office obtained funds for a three month EMOP to provide food assistance to 6,645 registered vulnerable refugees from Iraq through UNHCR's implementing partners. WFP deployed a food security consultant for 10 days to assess the food needs of those arriving in Syria from Iraq and to advise WFP on the most appropriate food aid response. This report outlines the results of the rapid assessment.

2. Assessment Objectives and Methodology

⁶ International Organisation for Migration report 5 February 2007

⁷ UNHCR registration figures – 2 February 2007 personal communication

⁸ UNHCR 2007 Supplementary Appeal

This rapid emergency needs assessment (29 January to 8 February 2007) was carried out by the WFP Consultant with support from the Syria Country Office Team.

Objectives

To assess the food needs of newly arrived refugees fleeing Iraq into Syria.

Methodology

- Secondary data analysis
- Key informant interviews with WFP and UNHCR staff, Syrian Arabic Red Crescent Society and Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour
- Discussions with the refugee population from Iraq located in Damascus and in the north-eastern Governorate of Al Hassakeh along the Iraqi border through:
 - i) Three sample group interviews with refugees attending UNHCR Refugee Centres in Damascus (Masaken Barzeh, Jaramana, Saida Zaynab), including a group with only women.
 - ii) Sample interviews with people who are seeking to register with UNHCR and/or agencies providing assistance to refugees (SARC, Caritas and religious charities)
 - iii) 20 Household visits in Damascus (4 neighbourhoods) and in the village of El Hol and the towns of Al Hassake and Rayoubia, in the north-east of Syria.
 - iv) Visit and interviews with Palestinian refugees fleeing Iraq hosted at El Hol camp (Al Hassakeh Governorate) since June 2006
- Data collection on prices to gauge the cost of living in areas that host refugee populations.

Methodological limitations:

- Access to refugees not registered with UNHCR was not possible during this assessment. It is assumed that non-registered refugees constitute a wealthier or more food secure group than those who register. This assumption may no longer be valid with the changes to visa regulations in Syria, which may make registration more attractive to refugees as a way of gaining refugee status, whereas in the past registration was associated with access to health care and partial social support through charitable organisations for urban areas, and partial food and non-food item assistance in the northeast of Syria.
- The assessment timing coincided with a change in the entry visa regulations for refugees crossing the Iraqi-Syrian border. On the 20 January the Government of Syria declared entry visas would be limited to 15 days and six month extensions would no longer automatic, imposing a one month gap before renewals through re-entry into Syria. These changes have led to panic among refugees who fear deportation. The refugees who arrived in Syria in the past, have been able to prolong their stay by crossing the border for a mere few hours. The surge of newcomers arriving in the summer of 2006 are likely to be up for visa renewals and at risk of deportation, perhaps encouraging them to keep a low profile.
- The assessment team prioritised Damascus because half the refugees are thought to live there. The north east of the country was also visited because the northern border route has been deemed to be the safest of the three entry routes into Syria from Iraq and because UNHCR is present to facilitate interviews with Iraqis and the Palestinians in El Hol camp. Field visits were not conducted to other cities and rural areas in Syria hosting refugees due to time constraints.
- Fear of deportation also meant that little information was obtained on informal labour opportunities for refugees. Illegal work is considered to play a major role in the coping capacity of the poorer sectors of the population, who are engaged in cheap informal labour. No information was obtained on how better off Iraqis have been able to run businesses and earn a living whilst in Syria either, although it is known that some do so successfully.

- The qualitative nature of the assessment allows for general impressions on the severity of the food needs at the time of writing and caution must be taken not to over extrapolate the results in view of the volatile situation regarding refugee movements to and from the border at the moment. Different population groups are likely to respond in different ways to the changing situation in Syria.

3. The Food security of those fleeing Iraq

Decades of conflicts, economic sanctions and the recent violence have had serious effects on the living conditions of Iraqis. Rising unemployment, disruption of economic activities and dependence on food aid through a public distribution system, have all but destroyed the country's food security. A WFP and Government of Iraq Food Security and Vulnerability Analysis that took place in May 2006, concluded that 4 million Iraqis were food insecure (15.4 per cent of the population) and a further 8.3 million were highly reliant on the food rations from the Public Distribution System (31 per cent of the population).

Before the Gulf War, Iraq was able to import two thirds of its food requirements making it one of the countries with highest per caput food availability in the region. Total average dietary energy supply per capita in 1990 at 3,372 kcal, falling to 2,250 between 1991-5⁹ and probably diminishing further today. Iraq's largely urban population (estimated at 67% by UNDP) has traditionally been used to a diet based on animal proteins, wheat, rice and potatoes and various fruits and vegetables with a higher meat and rice content than its neighbours Syria and Jordan. The diet of Iraqis has been far from adequate under the oil for food programme and subsequent aid programmes in terms of micro-nutrient content and proteins, which has health implications in terms of chronic and acute diseases.

This backdrop points to the assumption that those fleeing Iraq are not necessarily the poorest in Iraq, as considerable means are required to pay for a passport and transport across the border. However, it is most likely the case that the poorest leaving Iraq are coming and staying in Syria as restrictions and costs of reaching and settling in other countries are far greater.

While it was certainly the case that many of those fleeing at the beginning of hostilities since 2003 were coming with enough resources to be self sufficient, the escalation of violence and targeted persecution witnessed over the last year in Baghdad and some other provinces, means more and more households are fleeing for their lives with little time for making arrangements to sell off their assets or pass responsibility to family members. More Iraqis are resorting to leaving the country, some in the hope of being resettled elsewhere. However, the high cost of fleeing, depletes refugees of their life long savings, making them more vulnerable and food insecure than they have ever been in their own country. It is assumed that some of the poorer Iraqis fleeing violence are remaining in-country and perhaps heading for the 30 IDP camps in Iraq because they cannot secure safe passage across the border. However, there is evidence of some Iraqis departing quickly due to death threats and not being able to bring their families with them.

3.1 Food availability and markets in Syria

Syria is a lower-middle income country with economic growth rates since 1999 falling behind population growth¹⁰. The oil sector provides half the government's revenues, and agriculture contributes to about 30 per cent of Gross Domestic Product as well as employment opportunities, especially for the female workforce.

Food production in Syria is divided into five distinct agro climatic zones making agricultural and livestock production systems dependent on rainfall patterns. Farming is based on a

⁹ FAO/WFP 1997 report

¹⁰ World Bank Syria Country Brief, www.Worldbank.org/wbsite/external/countries/meanest/syria

mixture of irrigated (25%) and rain fed (75%) agriculture. Subsistence farming is subject to climatic variations including erratic rainfall, and according to the latest figures taken from the Syrian Agricultural statistical records there has been little change in the 3 million hectares dedicated to rain fed farming between 2000 -2004, with wheat and barley as the main crops. Syria is a food deficit country and imports more food than it exports. The average cereal production during the last four years is 219.000 MT, importing over 140,000 MT and exporting 70,000MT per year¹¹. The main imports are sugar, maize, barley and tea. Its main exports are sheep, cotton lint and wheat, followed by non alcoholic drinks and olive oil.

Average per capita daily kilocalorie consumption in Syria according to FAO 2003 data is 3,060 kcals per person per day for a population of 17.4 million people. This is an improvement on the 2,830 kcals in 1990. However recent UNDP estimates this to be slightly closer to 2,800, and has estimated that the national average cost for 1,000 kcals of the typical food basket based on two thirds cereals and small amounts of fresh meat, milk and eggs and fresh fruit and vegetables is 15 Syrian pounds (USD\$0.30)¹². This means a theoretical expenditure of USD\$0.62 per person per day or \$10.60 per month to meet the average 2,100 kcal requirements per day from the appropriate food sources. The market value of the WFP food ration distributed in the past to rural food insecure households is estimated at \$USD20 per household per month for basic commodities (flour, pulses, oil, salt), representing about 50% of household expenditure on food as families supplement the basic ration with fresh produce purchases, in order to diversify their food intake.

This means that refugees from Iraq just like Syrians are able to find most of the food commodities they are used to in their diet locally as there is a well served market network. Small shops are to be found all over the country, and larger wholesale markets exist in all main towns and cities.

3.2 Household access to food in Syria

In Syria, access to food is dependent on economic status and employment status which is related to education level. Two million Syrians (11.4% of the population) are food insecure are living under the USD\$2 per day poverty line¹³. Rural poverty is more widespread than urban poverty and the north eastern governorates (35.8%) have the highest percentage of poor as well as the highest income inequality levels. WFP assessments report that poor households spend more than 70% of their total monthly expenditure on food, the poorest spending as little as \$1 per person per day and supplementing this with some home grown foods¹⁴.

Food prices have been fairly stable over the past decade (Consumer Price Index 106% since 2000) especially the basic and tinned commodities, but more recent signs of economic recession and inflation have increased food prices by 25-30 per cent. Fresh produce including animal products such as meat, milk and eggs and fruits and vegetables tend to fluctuate more and the Government of Syria is attempting to control food outlet prices. Food prices appear to be quite similar throughout the country for packaged foods such as tinned food, processed cheese, rice, pasta pulses and tea and coffee. Damascus is perceived to be more expensive than other cities, however, no significant differences were noted during this assessment. See annex 2 for more details of basic commodity prices.

People fleeing into Syria from Iraq tend to look for accommodation in urban centres to maximise their chances of finding informal work. Those with relatives or friends will chose to stay in the same neighbourhood or village. Those staying close to the border usually do so

¹¹ FAO FAOSTAT figures for 2005

¹² UNDP 2005 data

¹³ UNDP 2003-2004 data

¹⁴ WFP Livelihood and Food Security Profiles of WFP beneficiaries in Syria – September 2005

because they know someone or because they know the city will be expensive. Access to food for refugees in Syria is therefore dependent on location of residence and purchasing power. Unemployment among refugees is related to their refugee status rather than their educational qualifications, as many highly skilled refugees resort to underpaid manual labour as a means to secure some income in the informal markets in construction, the retail industry and home help work.

Poor Syrian households and vulnerable Iraqi households therefore have different profiles in terms of access to employment and food access. The food expenditure patterns of the very poor are none the less similar, as 70-80% of their monthly expenditure is allocated to food. Typically a family of five spends a minimum of USD\$3 per day (about USD\$100) on food, to which cooking costs must be added. Most families reported spending closer to \$USD 200 on food per month to meet their needs as the food is easily available and it is difficult to deprive family members of food that can be seen, despite efforts to budget. Transport and telephone costs make up the bulk of the non-food expenditure, and some households have considerable medical expenses although these are 80% subsidised through SARC clinics for vulnerable families that have been referred by UNHCR.

3.3 Food consumption and nutritional status of refugees in Syria

The traditional diet in Middle Eastern countries is similar, with wheat and pulse based products complimented by meat and dairy products, fresh fruit and vegetables and sugary drinks and sweets. Food consumption patterns have clearly been disrupted for the refugees as now have to purchase all their food needs in Syria, as opposed to relying on the failing Public Distribution System in Iraq. Refugees reported consuming less meat and rice products in Syria than at home because they were too expensive. All refugees are drinking tea and eating bread on a daily basis and reported relying on bread more than they were used to. The most coveted foods were reported to be rice and meat. During the assessment it was noted that some households' food stocks were so limited that they were unable to offer traditional hospitality to visitors¹⁵.

Some refugees were able to bring their cooking utensils with them, however, most are still relying on a gas stove to do their cooking. UNHCR is able to provide some stoves for the Palestinians and some Iraqis in El Hassakeh area, enabling them to cook the food rations being received by UNHCR up until now¹⁶. Cooking facilities are on the whole fairly spartan and the price of cooking fuel and heating fuel was identified as an issue for households who may be resorting to cold meals to limit their fuel consumption.

The assessment does not make any conclusions about the nutritional status of the refugees. Whilst the quality of the diet has undoubtedly deteriorated for many refugees since they left Iraq, it is not possible to gauge what their nutritional status was before their arrival, and therefore impossible to discern between nutritional deficiencies due to poor quality diets whilst in Iraq or in Syria. It is assumed infant feeding habits are similar to other middle eastern populations and as is iron deficiency related anaemia related to high phytate consumption from tea.

The role of food assistance

Food commodities are distributed to registered refugees through charitable organisations and the UNHCR have been directed at households deemed as vulnerable through Community Services screening mechanisms and criteria. Up until the end of 2006 the food assistance was

¹⁵ Middle eastern hospitality involves offering guests some form of food or drink when visiting. The household visits purposively focused on more vulnerable families, so the field observations are only indicative.

¹⁶ No up to date statistics on on-food item distribution were obtained during the assessment.

designed to provide a broad range of commodities for a small number of refugees (less than 5,000) and was often accompanied by social support rather than just being a food distribution system.

Despite the appropriate targeting of food assistance so far, there are probably more than 100,000 families who have not attempted to register (53,000 registered or awaiting registration, 500-700,000 believed to be in country). Of those registered to date, approximately 15 per cent have been identified by UNHCR community Service screening staff as in need of food assistance. It is assumed that those registering so far have more precarious material needs than those choosing not to register. This means registered refugees are more likely to be food insecure than non-registered refugees.

The joint UN assessment in late 2005 estimated 1.3% of all the refugee population in Syria had poor dietary intake and 17% had marginal dietary intake. Assuming these figures are similar today, and we extrapolate to the current estimated number of refugees in country, at least 6,000 refugees (1.3% of 50,000) would have an inadequate dietary intake in Syria today qualifying for food assistance. Food insecure newcomers entering Syria in 2007 would need to be added to this figure to get an updated estimate.

The assessment confirms that the refugees receiving food assistance genuinely benefit from this type of income transfer as it reduced household expenditure. The same applies to the Palestinian refugees in El Hol and Al Tanf who have limited alternative food sources. The limited presence of local community based organisations in Syria and the fact there are no international non-government organisations present in country, mean that formal support for refugees is affected by the capacity to deliver programmes. This can be seen though a soup kitchen programme run in the Jaramana neighbourhood of Damascus which caters for vulnerable Syrians and Iraqis alike, but has more people on the waiting list than on the programme¹⁷.

The situation for the rural population in the north east of the country is less clear as rural poverty affects Syrians and refugees who have arrived in Iraq during the Gulf War as well as newcomers. The latest refugees who chose to settle in the bordering Governorates usually have some family connection which allows them to seek support from relatives. Food assistance to this group provides a legitimate income transfer but does not necessarily recognise the risk of increased vulnerability of hosting families.

UNHCR and WFP's increased case load as of the first of January 2007 is requiring a different mode of distribution so as to be able to cater for the needs of increased numbers of eligible refugees. WFP rations provide basic commodities and need to be complemented with additional foods stuffs so that the 2007 distribution system does not compromise the diversity and quality of the food being distributed so far due to the increased case load.

1. Average UNHCR partner food ration/persons/day in 2006

3,185 kcal/ per person per day

85g protein (11% of energy) and 84g fat (24% of energy)

Based on 14 different commodities (see table below)

2. WFP EMOP 10576 food ration / person / day Jan-march 2007:

2,168.25 kcal/ per person / day

58g protein (11% of energy) and 30g fat (12.5% of energy)

Based on 5 commodities

Rice 241g; wheat flour 250g, red split lentils 60g, corn oil 25g and salt 5g

¹⁷ Run by Ibrahim Khalil church – 600 hot meals prepared three times a week

Informal support to refugees by neighbours, distant relatives and sympathisers is undoubtedly a major form of in-kind transfer for vulnerable families. It is not possible to quantify this support, but its importance and the likelihood that it will continue to be a source of food for vulnerable refugees must not be neglected.

The role of remittances from relatives outside Iraq and Syria is equally important and yet difficult to quantify are the ways in which salaried Iraqis are still able to access their payments or the food rations from the Public distribution system.

It is these informal factors that have allowed the vast majority of the people fleeing Iraq to fend for themselves without becoming dependent on others. The escalation in the number of refugees will strain this type of support. In Syria, there is already evidence of attributing increased prices and crime rates to the presence of the refugees. This may undermine the informal support mechanisms in place to date.

4. Conclusions

This rapid food needs assessment has aimed to evaluate the food needs of people fleeing into Syria from Iraq in view of the steady escalation in violence and targeted persecution. Over 1.8 million Iraqis are believed to have left Iraq since March 2003 and between 500 - 700,000 of these are believed to be in Syria with very different food security and residence status. The refugees are not a homogenous group and those crossing the border over the last eight months have been subjected to more violence and targeted threats and have had to flee with less time to prepare their departure.

No official figures have been released by the Syrian government despite immigration procedures being processed at the border and in Damascus. Refugees need a valid passport to enter Syria¹⁸ and recent tightening of regulations by the Government of Syria as of 20 January on entry and registration procedures are unlikely to produce the release of updated records on the number of refugees. Planning for assistance will continue to be based on estimates. This assessment focused on the food needs of the most recent arrivals and the most vulnerable people, however was only able to access refugees who have registered with UNHCR.

In view of this, the following categories of people are deemed to be in need of food assistance:

1. Newcomers entering Syria since June 2006 with no support links in Syria:

- Palestinians fleeing Iraq and being grouped in camp-like situations. 645 Palestinians have been identified so far and relocated to two border locations (El Tanf and El Hol camp).
- Iraqis fleeing violence and targeted persecution with genuine fear for their lives and unable to sell their assets and make arrangements to leave with the necessary resources to be self-sufficient when they enter Syria
- Iraqis crossing into Syria Iraqis who have lost their homes, businesses and livelihoods, as well as those fleeing from the insecurity and strenuous living conditions of living in a war zone.

2. Iraqi refugees entering Syria between 2003 and 2006 who have depleted assets:

- The rise in the cost of living, the increased competition for illegal low paid work, the new visa requirements and the greater cash flow among newly arrived refugees, means that the more vulnerable refugees who have been in Iraq for some time now, will find it more difficult to make ends meet, and slide into destitution.

¹⁸ During field visits refugees reported having to pay USD\$500 for a passport and finding it increasingly difficult to access Baghdad to issue a new passport.

3. Potential newcomers:

- Non-Iraqi refugees choosing to leave Iraq. It is estimated there are 15,000 Palestinians still in Iraq, 150 at the border refused entry into Syria and being supported by UNHCR and in addition, 16,110 Turks, 11,960 Iranians, 870 Syrians and 142 Sudanese still in Iraq who may feel threatened.
- Returnees who fled Iraq during the Gulf war and who have returned to Iraq who may be at risk of being targeted and need to flee again (estimated at 300,000).

Loss of income is the main cause of food insecurity for the refugees who have left their homes and country to escape violence and appalling living conditions caused by the fighting. Refugees are not legally allowed to work in Syria, and must therefore rely on the cash they come into the country with and what ever links they have with family members who can cash wages, pensions, food distributions and sell assets. These sources of income have become more precarious as large parts of the Iraqi infrastructure, services and security start to fail. The Governorate of Anbar and Baghdad seem to have been particularly hard hit.

Obtaining a visa to stay and finding affordable accommodation are the two main concerns for the refugees regardless of their financial status. The property rental market has undergone significant price rises, one room homes now costing USD\$200 per month instead of USD\$70 and only short term contracts being awarded to refugees for fear of non-payment. The poorer refugees soon run out of savings even if they are cutting down their expenditure to the minimum and hardly leave their homes.

The assessment has not been able to quantify how many people are sliding into abject poverty based on the existing data. However, it has tried to identify the causes of food insecurity and the profiles of the most food insecure so that they can be targeted through the UNHCR registration and screening programme. 15 per cent of registered refugees appear to be in need of food assistance. The current EMOP 10576 WFP food ration (240g rice, 250g wheat flour, 60g lentils, 75g oil, 5g salt per person per day) has an approximate market value of less than USD\$20 per person per month. This is considered to be equivalent to the amount of money poor Syrians in rural areas spend on food per month according to WFP assessment reports. It is also similar to the 300 Syrian pounds (USD\$6) worth of food vouchers per person per week given to some refugees through Caritas to be redeemed in a shop in Jaramana neighbourhood. None of these rations are considered adequate by the refugees who wish to complement the basics with meat and dairy products, fresh produce, beverages and sweets.

Vulnerable people fleeing into Syria from Iraq are therefore food insecure due to limited purchasing power. The food is available but not affordable. Food expenditure as a proportion of total household expenditure is normally high among low income groups. In Syria rural poor households spend up to 80% of their available income on food. However, urban dwellers must dedicate a larger proportion of their income to non-food expenses such as rent, transport and medical expenses. In the case of refugees from Iraq, expensive housing means that food expenditure is about 30% of total expenditure. This must be construed as an indication that households will run out of cash fairly quickly as they are not able to bring down their monthly costs any further. There is evidence of not sending children to school, of not leaving the house and of limiting use of cooked food among the very poor refugees so as to save money. The changes to the visa regulations will encourage more households to register their children at Syrian schools so that they avoid deportation. However, school capacity is limited and the associated costs for sending children to school (uniform, stationary, snacks) as well as the fact children attending school will no longer be engaged in informal labour to bring home some much needed income, will mean that disadvantaged refugees may chose to keep a low profile rather than send their children to school.

5. Recommendations

- The WFP food assistance programme (EMOP 10576) to the 6,645 vulnerable refugees (1 January - 31 March 2007) should be followed up with a nine month EMOP until 31 December 2007 for up to 30,000 refugees in line with UNHCR activities and estimates. Monitoring the distribution and use of the ration will be an essential component of designing the continuation of the programme, as is identifying how to support the implementing partner's increase their case load to meet demand.
- WFP should only provide food commodities for the most vulnerable refugees from Iraq. The assessment estimated that 15 per cent of those registered with UNHCR would be eligible for food assistance. The identification of those in need of food assistance is dependent on the community services team of the UNHCR and its implementing partners. UNHCR expects to register 18,000 new cases per month which would mean the equivalent of 2,500 newly identified cases per month in need of food assistance.
- In addition a planning figure of about 200 old cases who qualify for assistance should be considered as some of the refugees who have been in country longer slide into destitution. Monitoring activities should ensure the most vulnerable are receiving food assistance, distinguishing them from those who believe food assistance is a right they have been denied by having to flee from Iraq and do without the food from the Public Distribution System in place¹⁹.
- WFP should revise the ration for the new EMOP. Wheat flour is not considered the most appropriate food commodity for households as they have very limited cooking facilities and very limited purchasing power for cooking fuel. Bread is easily available and affordable in Syria, at USD\$0.40 per pack of 8 flat loaves, and households should instead be provided with higher market value foods such as rice and pasta. Iodised salt is not deemed to be a necessary commodity either as it is cheap and easily available.
- The suggested daily dry ration per person is: 450g rice , 30 oil, 60g pulses
WFP should carefully investigate the appropriate coverage and regularity of the food distribution. Monthly rations are likely to cause transport and storage difficulties for large families who would need to transport more than 100kg of food for a month and whose storage space at home may be limited. Distributions every 15 days, closer to the neighbourhood where refugees live may be more appropriate in some cases. This applies to both rural and urban areas.
- The basic food ration provided by WFP should be complemented by more nutritious foods. Tinned meat, tomato paste, fresh fruits and vegetables would be the most appropriate. The health screening activities of the UNHCR programme through the Syrian Arab Red Crescent Society may help identify specific nutritional requirements of vulnerable groups such as those with chronic diseases, children, pregnant and lactating mothers and potential micronutrient deficiencies that may need addressing.
- WFP should keep a close check on the changes to visa regulations for refugees so as to keep track of the whereabouts of vulnerable households, as keeping a low profile or moving regularly may be strategies to avoid deportation that will directly affect attendance in the programme, and undermine the ability to reach vulnerable households eligible for food assistance.
- WFP should carry out a follow up joint assessment with UNHCR and UNICEF to capture changes in living conditions of those fleeing from Iraq. The assessment should complement quantitative data with more qualitative data that will help understand the profiles of different refugee households and better identify socio-economic characteristics and available coping strategies of the most food insecure.

¹⁹ Some refugees call this right “food for our oil”.

- Due to the difficulties of collecting reliable information in Iraq, WFP should endeavour to create more synergy between the programme assisting Iraqis in Iraq and that in Syria. Context data on trigger factors for leaving Iraq and geographically focused information on food security factors collected for the Iraq programme will help the Syria programme have improved knowledge of their potential beneficiary profile. This synergy exists for contingency planning purposes and should be extended for programming purposes.
- WFP should draw up lessons learnt from programmes assisting Iraqi refugees in the past in Syria and feed these into the new programme operations. Interagency collaboration on lessons learnt would enhance the process.
- WFP should support advocacy activities that help bring more support to the vulnerable refugees in need of other types of assistance. This is especially true of the Palestinians who will be food assistance dependent whilst living in camp settings, but also of Iraqis waiting for appointments to be screened by UNHCR community service team. The psycho-social and medical needs of the refugees should not be underestimated.

Acknowledgements

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Reference documents

WFP documents:

- EMOP 10576
- VAM / COSIT Food Security and Vulnerability Analysis in Iraq, 2006
- WFP Livelihood and Food Security Profiles of WFP beneficiaries in Syria – September 2005
- WFP Iraq Operational Update 1-15 January 2007
- WFP Draft documents for Iraq and Lebanon Contingency plans, 2006-2007

Other sources:

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- Human Rights Watch <http://www.hrw.org/backgrounder/mena/iraq021203/>
- IOM Iraq IDP Camp Assessment report, November 2006
<http://www.iom-iraq.net/idp.html>
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<http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWB.NSF/db900SID/EVOD-6X9EEW?OpenDocument>
- UNDP Arab Human Development Report 2005, 2006
- UNHCR Supplementary Appeal – Iraq Situation Response, January 2007
- UNHCR Iraq operation Supplementary Appeal, April 2006
- UNHCR/ UNICEF / WFP Assessment of the situation of Iraqi refugees in Syria, March 2006
- Unpublished data – UNHCR registration statistics 2007
- Unpublished data – UNHCR food rations
- World Bank <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/MENAEXT/>

<http://www.forcedmigration.org/browse/regional/iraq.htm>

<http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004BE3B1/>

Site Visits

▪ **Damascus neighbourhoods 30, 31 January and 7 February 2007**

Masaken Barzeh, Jaramana, Sayedah Zainab, Duma, Qudsaia, Al'Zahera

▪ **Al Hassakeh 1, 2 February 2007**

El Hol refugee camp / El Hol village

El Hasakeh town

Al Qamisshly town

Yaroubia town

Key Informants

WFP Syria Country Team

| | |
|-------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Pippa Bradford | Country Representative |
| Adham Mussallam | Head of Programme |
| Marwan-Al-Ansary | Programme Officer |
| Bashar Akkad | Senior Programme Assistant |
| Afraa Nouh | Senior Programme Assistant |
| Mohamed Al-Nasser | Logistics assistant – Iraq programme |

UNHCR Syria staff

| | |
|------------------|----------------------------------|
| Laurens Jolles | UNHCR Representative |
| Pietros Mastakas | Protection Officer |
| Lina Deir Atany | Senior Programme Assistant |
| Anas Qaed | Assistant Community Service |
| Raymond Youssef | UNHCR representative Al Hassakeh |

Others

| | |
|---------------|--|
| Mona Alhurdi | Refugee Branch ' Syrian Arabic Red Crescent |
| Sister Atine | Caritas Jaramana |
| Sister Teresa | Ibrahin Khalil church Masaken Barzeh |
| Rakan Ibrahim | Central director of labour ' Ministry of Social affairs and Labour |

Assessment team

| | |
|------------------|---|
| Jacqueline Frize | WFP consultant |
| Marwa Bouka | WFP Senior Logistics Officer – Iraq programme |
| Somar Suleiman | Field assistant |

Annex A2**Sample commodity prices in markets in Damascus and El Hasakeh Governorate towns**

Prices were collected in two or three shops per location and averaged out for this table. Although there are slight variations, it was generally observed that prices were quite similar. One shop visited was run by an Iraqi refugee who purposively lowered his prices to attract clientele as buying behaviour is usually dependent on a good relation between shop keeper and buyer often extending credit for Syrians but not Iraqis.

| FOOD | DAMASCUS NEIGHBOURHOODS | | | | VILLAGE NEAR CAMP | AL HASSAKEH NEIGHBOURHOODS | |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|--------------|-----------------|----------|-------------------|----------------------------|-------------|
| | Jaramana | Syada Zayneb | Massaken Barzeh | Oudsayeh | Al-hol area | AL-azezeah Area | El hassakeh |
| Bread | 20 | 25 | 15 | 15 | 21 | 17.5 | 20 |
| Rice 1kg | 35 | 37 | 35 | 35 | 37 | 30 | 37 |
| Pasta 350g | 25 | NA | 30 | 30 | 27.5 | NA | 30 |
| Wheat Flour 1kg | 30 | 30 | 35 | 30 | 30 | 30 | 30 |
| Potatoes 1kg | 30 | 25 | 35 | 35 | 25 | 25 | NA |
| Beans 1kg | 120 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 120 | NA | NA |
| Lamb 1kg | NA | 300 | 425 | 335 | 300 | 250 | NA |
| Chicken 1kg | 72.5 | 85 | 80 | 80 | 85 | 84 | NA |
| 30 Eggs | 140 | 145 | 135 | 135 | 135 | 140 | 145 |
| | | | | | | | |
| Yoghurt 1kg | 22.5 | 25 | 22.5 | 25 | 27 | 25 | 25 |
| Olive oil 1 litre | 80 | 80 | 85 | 85 | NA | NA | 80 |
| Tomatoes 1kg | 25 | 25 | 25 | 25 | 25 | 25 | NA |
| Parsley bunch | 5 | 8 | 10 | 25 | 10 | 9 | NA |
| Oranges 1kg | 20 | 20 | 30 | 30 | 25 | 30 | 20 |
| Canned tuna 200g | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | 35 | NA |
| Mineral water 1 litre | 20 | 20 | 25 | 20 | 25 | 20 | 20 |
| Sugar 1kg | NA | 35 | 30 | 30 | NA | 30 | 35 |
| salt 1kg | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 |