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Andrew Overman: Flood of refugees shows how Iraq war has disfigured face of a region

Andrew Overman

One of the issues not sufficiently anticipated by planners of the Iraq conflict is the refugee crisis now facing the region.

War creates refugees. Bringing any stability to the Middle East will necessarily involve a strategy for dealing with a growing and increasingly hostile refugee population. Solving this problem will require a long-term commitment of time and resources. The alternative is a more explosive and restive Middle East.

Precision in refugee numbers is difficult: Conservative estimates claim that more than 1 million Iraqi refugees have found their way into Syria and Jordan. The number may be twice that.

Take Jordan, for instance.

Amman is a city of 2.2 million people. Half the population of Jordan lives in the region of Amman. Seventy percent of Jordanians are Palestinians and already consider themselves refugees. Greater Amman is home to many Palestinian refugee camps.

This refugee problem has festered in Jordan for more than 30 years and has been a flashpoint for the Hashemite ruling family. Today the war in Iraq has brought upwards of half a million more refugees into Jordan, more than 300,000 in Amman alone.

The first 30,000 or so Iraqi refugees into Jordan were oil's super-rich, who built mansions and fortresses along the highway to the Amman airport. Property values in Amman have been driven up 25 percent and in some places tenfold.

But the vast majority of refugees in Jordan are the very poor who traveled the Baghdad-Amman highway with little or nothing. They live in Amman's urban core, which even government officials admit is home to growing radical Islamic communities and schools. The average age in these makeshift refugee centers is declining. In other words, the refugee camps and corners of Amman are home to a new, younger generation who have lived a very harsh reality and tend to hold views far more radical than those of their parents or grandparents.

Naturally, crime has escalated in Amman. For the first time the city is struggling with teenage prostitution. Recently, while at dinner in Amman, we sat near two

sheiks who were surrounded by six young women not yet 18 years old. The refugee crisis is having widespread repercussions across the country and the region.

King Abdullah has tried to address the deepening divisions in his country through his "Jordan First" campaign. Government officials and army personnel sport pins that bear the name Jordan and the number 1. Billboards around the city picture the king with the slogan "Jordan First." This attempt to bring unity amid the growing tensions and numerous factions in Jordanian society may help some but is probably too little, too late.

The conflict in Iraq has disfigured the face of a whole region. Winning the peace must also include the rehabilitation of places like Amman.

Reconstruction is now a regional effort. In understanding this and acting on it, we stand a better chance a generation from now of engaging a Middle East much more at peace with itself and with the West. Our failure to understand this will have very costly long-term implications for us and our children.

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