

Hard Times for Iraqis Fleeing Unrest Elsewhere

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People returning from other Arab countries say they are excluded from government assistance programme.

Iraqis returning to their own country to escape the revolutions sweeping other parts of the Middle East can expect little government help with resettlement, even if they arrive back with nothing.

Ali Hamid, an engineer who spent nine years working in Libya, is now back in Iraq with no job or home, after he getting out of Tripoli in March as the country descended into chaos.

He left his financial assets and property behind, and now lives with relatives in a small, over-crowded house in Baghdad's Zafarniyah neighbourhood.

"I lost everything I had in Tripoli – over 20,000 US dollars as well as my car and furniture – all gone in a moment," he said.

When he arrived in Baghdad, Hamid applied for assistance from Iraq's immigration ministry, and was told he was only eligible to receive a one-off payment of 250 dollars because he had left Iraq voluntarily.

Analysts say there are thousands of Iraqis in Hamid's position, who have returned from Libya, Syria, Egypt, Yemen and Tunisia, and are urgently in need of help after losing everything they had.

They are not covered by legislation passed in 2009 which offers benefits like housing, monthly payments, and public-sector jobs to people who left Iraq to escape rising violence after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003.

The immigration ministry says those who left Iraq of their own accord either before or after 2003 can apply only for a single payment of 250 dollars.

"We are not responsible for all the Iraqis who have returned, since not all of them were forced to leave home. Some left to find better jobs or for other reasons," deputy immigration minister Asghar al-Mosawe told IWPR.

Mosawe said there were no precise figures for the number of people returning and applying for government support, nor was there a plan to extend help to those who did not qualify under the 2009 law.

Ministry sources who asked to remain anonymous told IWPR that the authorities never anticipated an event like the mass uprisings across the Arab, or the implications for Iraqis forced to come back to the country.

Muwafak Abdul-Majid believes he should qualify for assistance because when he left Iraq prior to 2003, he was forced to rather than choosing to do so.

"I left Iraq in 2002, when the then regime shut every door in my face and I was unable to get a job because of my communist beliefs. My uncle was executed in the 1980s," he said. "Don't I deserve a chance to be hired like other Iraqis who left after 2003?"

Abdul-Majid, an Arabic teacher, left his job in the Yemeni capital Sanaa and came back to Baghdad to apply for a government job under the 2009 law, but was offered only the 250-dollar payment.

Unable to support his family if they return to Iraq, he fears for their future in Yemen.

Abdullah al-Sijri, a member of parliament who works on human rights issues, Sijri said most Iraqis trying to escape Libya and Yemen had received support on the ground.

"The biggest problem was in Libya because Iraq didn't have an embassy there, so all our contacts with Iraqis went through our embassy in Tunisia," he said. "Nevertheless, we were able to get many Iraqi families out of Tripoli and Benghazi before the fighting intensified."

Iraqis caught up in the mounting unrest in neighbouring Syria are particularly vulnerable as their government does not regard conditions there as dangerous.

Sijri said the situation in Syria was not as urgent as that in Libya or Yemen.

"Syria is still not dangerous for Iraqis," he said. "Many Iraqis are still going there in spite of the situation."

That is small comfort to Imad Jalil, who moved his family to Syria in 2006 to escape sectarian in Iraq. He returned in July this year after witnessing the brutal crackdown against Syrian protesters.

He left after seeing armed groups loyal to the governing Baath party targeting civilians in Nitaf, and left his property and most of his possessions behind.

"The scene reminded me of the sectarian killing I had lived through in Baghdad," he said. "I thought things were getting worse so I decided to close up my business there and return to Baghdad."

Once again, the immigration ministry said he did not qualify for assistance.

Luis Caro Bandar Mansur, a member of the Iraqi parliament's committee for immigrants and displaced persons, warned that many more people would be coming back if the situation in Syria deteriorated further or Libya became more dangerous following the end of Muammar Gaddafi's regime.

He acknowledged that the 2009 law failed to cover all eventualities and needed to be revised.

"No one expected that Arab states would collapse all of a sudden, or that there would be a need to support thousands more Iraqis," he said. "That doesn't justify the government leaving them with no support to rebuild their lives."

The parliamentarian said the terms applying to people who emigrated under the pre-2003 administration could also be looked at again. At the moment, those who were stripped of citizenship by Saddam's regime qualify for the full assistance package.

"When the immigration law was passed by the previous parliament, we didn't think of the problem facing Iraqis who left before 2003 because of the poor economic situation," he said, adding that this category "could be added into the law".

The politician added a note of caution, saying, "An hour's work takes months in Iraq. But we do need to support all Iraqis who have been caught up in the chaos of the Arab uprisings."

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