

Refugees Served by RSC MENA (with emphasis on those from Iraq)

This profile of the RSC Middle East and North Africa (International Organization for Migration [IOM] Middle East and North Africa) Cultural Orientation (CO) program includes sections on caseload, CO classes, and general environment for CO attendees, and considerations for domestic resettlement agencies.

Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region

The IOM MENA program provides CO to refugees being processed through Amman, Jordan; Damascus, Syria; and Baghdad, Iraq, as well as in other locations in the region. Since the start of the program in FY 2007, IOM MENA has provided USCO to over 31,451 refugees. Of those refugees receiving USCO, over 90% are from Iraq; the rest are from Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Congo, Liberia, and Ivory Coast, with a small number of stateless Palestinians.

Caseload

With regard to refugees from Iraq, classes have contained a high percentage of Christian refugees as well as Muslims. There are numerous bilingual participants in each class, although fewer in Syria than in Jordan. Many of the refugees provided CO in Jordan have a high level of education. In addition, many refugees in Jordan have some savings.

Of the non-Iraqi refugees, the vast majority are low level migrant workers from the African continent who have fled the violence of the Libyan conflict and sought safety in Egypt and Tunisia. English language proficiency is far lower among the African caseload when compared to the Iraqi caseload.

CO Classes

CO classes are held at IOM office space in Amman, Baghdad, Cairo, and Damascus, and in ad hoc sites in Sallum, Egypt; Zarzis, Tunisia; and other countries throughout the region. Average class size is 25 participants, and all members of the refugee family who are over 14 years of age are invited. Class length is 20 hours over a 4-day period in Amman, Cairo, and Damascus. In Baghdad, classes are 10 hours in length provided over a 2-day course for security and logistical concerns.

The IOM Middle East curriculum was revamped and made specific to Iraqi refugees in 2010, focusing mostly on helping refugees develop healthy attitudes toward resettlement and self-sufficiency. Major components of the curriculum cover topics such as the role of the Resettlement Agency, Employment, Education, Housing, Money Management, Transportation, Health Care, Rights & Responsibilities, U.S. Laws, and Cultural Adjustment. Teaching methodology is highly active, student-centered, and

participatory, and includes group work, real life case studies, and role plays.

During CO class, particular emphasis is given on early employment as a means to both self-sufficiency and community integration. Having received numerous questions on the issue, IOM USCO staff stress that doctors, lawyers, and teachers will not be able to practice their current professions since their licenses will not be recognized in the United States. Refugees are informed that, with guidance, they can research what they need to do in order to become re-certified, and refugees are discouraged from attempting to live off savings or public assistance instead of seeking early employment.

Refugees in general inquire about many topics and have many questions on all aspects of resettlement but one topic of major interest to refugees is family re-unification. Refugees are told to inquire with their resettlement agency staff upon arrival about the possibility of being reunited with their family members. Many Iraqi refugees also inquire about the possibility of returning to the Middle East in the near future to visit but CO staff discourages refugees from visiting Iraq before obtaining a Permanent Residency Card accompanied with a valid refugee travel document.

Other questions often heard in CO class include: “How will we pay for everything?,” “How will we be treated as Muslims? What about as Arabs and specifically Iraqis?,” and “Will we find halal food?” In addition, the Selective Service is an area of great concern in each class; refugees are very anxious that it means that they will have to serve in the military.

General Environment for CO Attendees

Iraqi refugees in the region are mostly urban refugees who live in rented apartments and houses rather than in refugee camps. Most Iraqi refugees in the region are accustomed to modern life amenities such as satellite T.V., Internet (both at home and in commercial establishments such as coffee shops), cell phones, and computers, including high end laptops. Refugees tend to expect that they will be provided with such items upon arrival into the USA but IOM CO staff stresses to refugees that the resettlement agencies will provide them with basic but critical items such as basic furniture, bedding, and kitchen items. Refugees are informed that items such as computers, cell phones, Internet service, and satellite T.V. are not provided by resettlement agencies.

In Jordan, one particular stressor involves overstaying residency permits, which results in a 1.5 JD fine per day (U.S. \$2 per day). This fine is covered by UNHCR upon departure for some refugees, with the condition that refugees are not allowed to re-enter Jordan for five years if they cannot afford to pay the fine from their own money or need UNHCR to pay the fee on their behalf.

In general, Iraqi refugees are not allowed to work in Jordan, Syria, and Egypt (in Jordan, small numbers of professional Iraqis are allowed to work as doctors or engineers if they are sponsored by a Jordanian employer). Many do work illegally in order to cope with the ever-increasing cost of living in the region.

Education is accessible to Iraqi children free of charge up to the 12th grade. Post secondary education is available but can be expensive. Iraqi refugees have access to public health facilities such hospitals and clinics but do have to pay if they visit private doctors' clinics.

Considerations for Domestic Resettlement Agencies

Many refugees report that they have heard that Iraqi refugees are struggling in the U.S. There have been a number of cases that have withdrawn their applications for resettlement or not shown up for their flights, or even returned from the USA back to Jordan or even Iraq. Adding to the refugees' fears are reports of the slow economy in the USA and high unemployment numbers. Many Iraqi internet chat rooms and web blogs highlight such fears, and resettlement agencies should be aware of Iraqi refugees' fears regarding resettlement.

As with other refugee groups, many Iraqi refugees may be suffering from post-traumatic stress, as a consequence of being victims of or witness to violence and having suffered the loss or disappearance of loved ones.

For non-Iraqi refugees, fears of living in a very advanced and industrial society are always exhibited by refugees during CO. Many African refugees ask "Why should an American hire me?" or "How can I find a job?" CO staff always reassure the refugees that honest and hardworking individuals are always welcome in the USA and self sufficiency is valued very highly in the American society.