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United States Department of State  
and the Broadcasting Board of Governors  
Office of Inspector General

# Middle East Regional Office

## Status of U.S. Refugee Resettlement Processing for Iraqi Nationals

Report Number MERO-IQO-08-02, July 2008

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PREFACE

This report was prepared by the Office of Inspector General (OIG) pursuant to the Inspector General Act of 1978, as amended, Section 209 of the Foreign Service Act of 1980, the Arms Control and Disarmament Amendments Act of 1987, and the Department of State and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, FY 1996. It is one of a series of audit, inspection, investigative, and special reports prepared by OIG periodically as part of its oversight responsibility with respect to the Department of State and the Broadcasting Board of Governors to identify and prevent fraud, waste, abuse, and mismanagement.

This report is the result of an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the office, post, or function under review. It is based on interviews with employees and officials of relevant agencies and institutions, direct observation, and a review of applicable documents.

The recommendations therein have been developed on the basis of the best knowledge available to the OIG, and have been discussed in draft with those responsible for implementation. It is my hope that these recommendations will result in more effective, efficient, and/or economical operations.

I express my appreciation to all of those who contributed to the preparation of this report.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "H. W. Geisel", written in a cursive style.

Harold W. Geisel  
Acting Inspector General



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY . . . . .	1
Results . . . . .	1
Additional Issues for Consideration . . . . .	2
Management Comments . . . . .	3
BACKGROUND . . . . .	5
U.S. Refugee Resettlement Process . . . . .	6
IRAQI REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT PROGRAM . . . . .	9
Program Management . . . . .	10
Syria . . . . .	11
Jordan . . . . .	12
Egypt . . . . .	14
Turkey . . . . .	15
Lebanon . . . . .	17
Others Countries . . . . .	19
REFUGEE PROCESSING IN BAGHDAD . . . . .	21
CONCLUSION . . . . .	23
APPENDIX I – SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY . . . . .	25
APPENDIX II – REFUGEE SCREENING PROCESS . . . . .	27
APPENDIX III – ENTITIES WITH REFUGEE RESPONSIBILITIES . . . . .	29
APPENDIX IV – ACRONYMS . . . . .	31



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Iraqi refugee crisis has engendered considerable media coverage, congressional interest, and advocacy group comment about the adequacy of the Department of State's (Department) efforts to resettle Iraqi refugees into the United States. With an estimated refugee population of more than 2 million, critics question why so few Iraqi refugees have been resettled in the United States since the start of the war — 4,238 Iraqi refugees, as of April 1, 2008. Historically, less than one percent of registered refugees are resettled in third countries worldwide. The preferred durable solution is repatriation, followed by integration in the country of asylum. However, for those Iraqi refugees in dire need of protection and who cannot realistically return home, resettlement in third countries is necessary.

## RESULTS

The Refugee Crisis in Iraq Act of 2007 requires the establishment of a refugee processing mechanism, referred to as an overseas processing entity (OPE) in Iraq. For planning purposes, officials at Embassy Baghdad are assuming that, based on an annual processing target of 6,250 individuals, an OPE operation of more than 30 staff will be established.

As a result of a number of factors identified during this review, OIG recommends that the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) conduct an analysis of a smaller-scale OPE operation (4-7 staff members) for Embassy Baghdad, one geared toward addressing the relatively limited number of compelling cases that are unable to be processed out of Amman.

The U.S. Government is on track to meet, and possibly exceed, its goal of resettling 12,000 Iraqi refugees in the United States in FY 2008. As of April 1, 2008, 2,630 Iraqi refugees have arrived in the United States, and another 5,820 have been approved for refugee status but had yet to travel. The Department projects more than 8,000 Iraqi refugees will be interviewed by Department of Homeland Security Citizen and Immigrant Services (DHS/USCIS) adjudicators for refugee resettlement by June 30, 2008. (The average approval rate for a United Nations High Commis-

sioner for Refugees (UNHCR) referral obtaining U.S. Government refugee status in the region is 70 percent.) OIG believes when the 2,630 who have arrived and 5,820 who are approved (but yet to travel) are added to the several thousands of possible new arrivals, the total should meet or exceed the administration's FY 2008 goal of 12,000.

An important caveat is the continued cooperation of the Syrian Government and a stable security environment in Lebanon to conduct refugee processing operations. There are currently large-scale Iraqi refugee processing operations in Syria, Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon, with smaller programs in Egypt and other countries in the region. Initially, however, the U.S. Government was not well-positioned to respond to the Iraq refugee crisis. As a result, in FY 2007, the U.S. Government admitted only 1,608 Iraqi refugees. Nonetheless, within several months, the Department's implementing partners and UNHCR hired and trained local and international staff, established processing operations, and prepared thousands of cases for presentation to USCIS refugee adjudicators.

## ADDITIONAL ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

Under U.S. law, refugees must establish they have a well-founded fear of persecution, or have suffered past persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. Officials from U.S. embassies and international organizations in the region have pointed out that there is a large class of Iraqi refugees who were forced out of Iraq by generalized violence, rather than specifically targeted persecution and who are in dire circumstances and in need of resettlement. Such vulnerable cases, including destitute women and children at risk, fail to meet the U.S. criteria for refugee status, yet are unable to return to Iraq. These officials noted the common scapegoating of Iraqis for the increasing costs of food, fuel, and other basic necessities, especially in Jordan and Syria. With the inability to legally work, Iraqis are depleting their savings and facing impoverishment. UNHCR does not refer such cases to the U.S. refugee admissions program for resettlement, but there is rising concern in the region that the situation is resulting in resentment and increased tension in refugee communities because of the perception that the United States is unwilling to accept Iraqis based on such economic vulnerability. OIG believes consideration should be given to granting parole for vulnerable Iraqis unable to establish they are refugees under the Immigration and Nationality Act. In comments to a draft of this report, PRM noted that parole does not provide resettlement benefits which these vulnerable individuals would likely need.



## MANAGEMENT COMMENTS

In response to the Office of Inspector General's (OIG) recommendation that Embassy Baghdad consider establishing a smaller OPE operation than currently planned for (4-7 staff versus more than 30), PRM/Embassy Baghdad reported that OPE-Baghdad started processing refugees May 10. The OPE is projected to consist of a dedicated 15-16 person unit in OPE/Cairo, from which smaller teams of International Organization for Migration (IOM) caseworkers and support staff (4-7 person teams) will rotate into Baghdad's International Zone to handle all aspects of processing (identity verification, document intake, photographs) that must be accomplished in face-to-face interviews.

OIG considers all comments received responsive to the intent of the recommendation and that technical corrections have been made as applicable. Since the comments were in track change format on a report draft and were technical in nature, they were not included in the appendix of this report.

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## BACKGROUND

Estimates as to the total number of Iraqis that have crossed into neighboring countries both before and after the March 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq vary according to sources. The current generally accepted figure for Iraqis living in the region is more than two million. The majority who fled reside in Syria and Jordan, with lesser numbers in Egypt, Turkey, Lebanon, and other countries in the region — United Arab Emirates, Yemen, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. UNHCR, based largely on host country accounts, estimates the following refugee populations:

- Syria — 1.2 million to 1.4 million
- Jordan — 450,000 to 500,000
- Lebanon — 50,000
- Egypt — 20,000 to 40,000
- Turkey — 5,000 to 10,000
- Gulf States — more than 200,000

Iraqi refugees represent the largest urban caseload in the history of the UNHCR, which brings unique challenges of identifying and registering Iraqis who often choose to remain hidden due to fears of deportation and personal security. Of the estimated two million Iraqi refugees, only 244,000 have come forward to register with UNHCR as of April 2008. This probably reflects both an unwillingness to register and the likelihood that the official refugee figures are somewhat too high. The presence of these large numbers of Iraqis has also put a strain on the receiving countries' economies, resources, and infrastructure, especially in Syria and Jordan, which suffer from a general lack of natural resources, especially water.

Most Iraqi refugees have no realistic hope of permanent resettlement in their host countries; Syria, Jordan, Egypt, and Turkey have publicly stated that integration is not an option. Therefore, for the great majority of Iraqi refugees the most durable solution is to return to Iraq when the security situation permits. For those in dire need of protection and who cannot realistically return to Iraq, UNHCR will recommend resettlement in third countries.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> UNHCR refers less than one percent of its registered refugees for resettlement worldwide. The preferred durable solution is repatriation, followed by integration in the country of asylum. There are approximately 15 countries worldwide that accept refugees for resettlement, with the United States, Canada, and Australia the largest recipients of refugees. The United States by far takes the largest number, more than half.

## U.S. REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT PROCESS

Each year, the President consults with Congress to determine the number of refugees the U.S. Government will attempt to resettle in the United States. For FY 2008, up to 80,000 refugees worldwide were authorized for resettlement, of which 28,000 were allocated to the Near East/South Asia region.<sup>2</sup> The Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) is responsible for managing the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP). A regional refugee coordinator posted to Embassy Cairo manages refugee admissions from the region, while a refugee coordinator posted to Embassy Baghdad is responsible for in-country processing and embassy referrals from within Iraq.<sup>3</sup> Two additional refugee coordinators, one of which will replace the current Cairo-based position, are slated for Embassy Amman in summer 2008. In addition, Embassy Baghdad added two refugee coordinator positions which include a Senior Coordinator for Iraqi refugees.

PRM works closely with the UNHCR, U.S. embassies in the region, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to identify individuals in need of access to USRAP. The process begins with a referral to a regional refugee coordinator, who forwards the referral to OPE. Working under a cooperative agreement with PRM, IOM processes Iraqi refugee cases out of offices in Damascus, Amman, and Cairo. Similarly, the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) processes Iraq refugee cases from offices in Istanbul and Beirut. OPE and PRM coordinate with USCIS to schedule an interview, as USCIS officers are not posted in the region and make periodic circuit-ride visits to regional program sites to adjudicate refugee cases.

OPE prepares each case by gathering biographic information, information about family relationships, and the persecution story, and collects information necessary to perform certain security checks. The case is then presented to the USCIS adjudication officers who interview the refugee applicants and determine whether the applicant is eligible or conditionally eligible for refugee status and admission

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<sup>2</sup> There is an additional unallocated reserve of 10,000 slots for use as needed upon notification to Congress.

<sup>3</sup> With passage of the Refugee Crisis in Iraq Act of 2007 (P.L. 110-181 §§ 1241 et seq.) it is no longer necessary for certain categories of Iraqis to be referred by UNHCR to gain access to the USRAP. Categories eligible for processing without referral include Iraqis who: (1) work/worked for the U.S. Government, in Iraq; (2) work/worked for a media or nongovernmental organization headquartered in the U.S. or for an organization or entity closely associated with the U.S. mission in Iraq that has received U.S. Government funding; (3) spouses, children and siblings of individuals described in the categories above, or of an individual eligible for a Special Immigrant Visa as a result of his/her employment by or on behalf of the U.S. Government in Iraq, including if the individual is no longer alive, provided that the relationship is verified; and (4) Iraqis who are members of a religious or minority community who have been identified by the Secretary of State as a persecuted group, with close family members in the United States.

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into the United States.<sup>4</sup> The case is then returned to the OPE, which coordinates the out-processing that includes security clearances, medical examinations, cultural orientation, and travel arrangements. If the security background check and medical examination results in no adverse findings, the refugee and eligible family members are cleared for departure. Once in the United States, the Department provides initial “reception and placement” services through a network of voluntary agencies. In addition, the Office of Refugee Resettlement in the Department of Health and Human Services funds social service, medical, and other benefits for a limited transition period.

See Appendix II for a flow chart depicting the refugee screening process and Appendix III for further description of the agencies and organizations involved.

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<sup>4</sup> Section 101[a] [42] of the Immigration and Nationality Act defines the term refugee for purposes of the USRAP as “any person who is outside any country of such person’s nationality....., and is unable or unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of that country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.”

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## IRAQI REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT PROGRAM

The U.S. Government is on track to meet, and possibly exceed, its goal of resettling 12,000 Iraqi refugees in the United States in FY 2008. In FY 2007, the U.S. Government admitted only 1,608 Iraqi refugees. At the start of 2007, the USRAP had little refugee processing capability in the two major asylum countries — Syria and Jordan. Within several months, UNHCR and the Department’s implementing partners — IOM and ICMC — hired and trained local and international staff, established processing operations, and prepared thousands of cases for presentation to USCIS refugee adjudicators. Currently there are large-scale Iraqi refugee processing operations in Syria, Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon, with smaller programs in Egypt and other countries in the region.

The Department projects more than 8,000 Iraqi refugees will be interviewed by USCIS refugee adjudicators for refugee resettlement between April 1 and June 30, 2008 — the end of the third quarter. (The average approval rate for UNHCR referrals obtaining U.S. Government refugee status in the region is 70 percent.) OIG believes when the 2,630 who have arrived and the 5,820 have been approved (but yet to travel) are added to the several thousands of possible new arrivals, the total should meet or exceed the administration’s FY 2008 goal of 12,000. An important caveat is the continued cooperation of the Syrian Government and a stable security environment in Lebanon to conduct refugee processing operations. Table 1 shows Iraqi refugee admissions activity in the region for FY 2008 as of April 1, 2008.

Table 1: Iraqi Refugee Admissions Activity, October 1, 2007- April 1, 2008

FY 2008 Referral Goal (by April 30)	12,850
Total Referrals Received	11,852
Total Pre-screened/DHS ready	3,866
Total DHS Interviewed	8,779
Pending Final Decision	2,020
Denied	939
Approved (but not departed)	5,820
Total Arrivals in U.S	2,630

Source: Department of State, Refugee Processing Center

Note: Totals for interviewed, denied, approved, and arrived in 2008 include some individuals referred in 2007.

## PROGRAM MANAGEMENT

Historically, the United States received few referrals for refugee resettlement from the Middle East region from UNHCR, far fewer than other regions such as Africa and East Asia. For that reason, with the exceptions of Turkey and Egypt, which had established OPEs dealing primarily with Iranian and Sudanese refugees respectively, the Department had relatively little processing infrastructure in place in the region when the Iraqi resettlement program was announced in February 2007.<sup>5</sup> The most immediate problem facing the Department was capacity building writ large — while there were small OPEs in Istanbul and Cairo, there was no permanent OPE presence in Damascus or Amman, sites of the greatest congregation of Iraqi refugees, nor was the UNHCR actively engaged in registering refugees. There also was no permanent USCIS presence in the region.

Based upon numerous discussions with Department, DHS, OPE, and UNHCR officials, and OIG's direct observations of OPE operations in Amman and Istanbul, the Iraq refugee admissions program is working efficiently in Jordan, Egypt, Turkey, and the other smaller sites in the region. In Syria, the tenuous bilateral relationship between the U.S. and Syrian Governments has resulted in difficulty obtaining visas for USCIS refugee adjudicators and limitations on IOM staffing and operations. OIG was unable to obtain visas to conduct fieldwork in Syria but, according to officials with first-hand knowledge of the Damascus refugee processing situation, resettlement operations are proceeding but not at the optimal level of efficiency given the size of the refugee population in Syria. As reported during interviews with U.S. Government and ICMC officials directly involved in managing the admissions program in Lebanon, the difficult security environment in Beirut has significantly diminished the ability to process Iraqi refugee cases there. (See discussions below for more detailed country descriptions of the Iraq refugee resettlement program.)

UNHCR pledged to provide 12,850 Iraqi refugee referrals between October 1, 2007 and April 30, 2008, and PRM anticipates several thousand additional referrals by September 30, 2008. Of the approximately 244,000 Iraqi refugees registered with the UNHCR in the region, 11,852 had been referred for resettlement to the United States, as of April 1, 2008.<sup>6</sup> (In addition, in FY 2007, 11,787 individuals were referred to the USRAP for resettlement.) According to PRM and OPE officials,

<sup>5</sup> Prior to the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003, the U.S. Government and international humanitarian organizations anticipated and prepared for a major refugee and internally displaced crisis. The quick resolution of initial combat operations precluded this event. However, in late 2004 and throughout 2005 and 2006, massive displacement began to play out. According to knowledgeable observers of the Iraq crisis, the Department during this period was following a more positive narrative of the situation in Iraq and was slow to respond to the emerging refugee situation.

<sup>6</sup> Sources of referrals to USRAP as of April 1 in FY 2008 include: UNHCR - 11,051; regional embassies - 225; direct access (PRM) - 295; Priority 2 (individuals of special concern) - 280; and nongovernmental organizations - 1.



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given the time needed for out-processing, applicants for resettlement should have their DHS interview by June 30 (end of the third quarter) in order to complete out-processing and arrive in the United States by the end of the fiscal year. Individuals referred, interviewed, and approved after June 30 will most likely be resettled in FY 2009.

It is noteworthy that in addition to the establishment of a robust refugee processing infrastructure in the region over the last year, on average, the total processing time for Iraqi cases is significantly less than for other refugee cases worldwide. According to data obtained from the Department's Refugee Processing Center for October 1, 2007 to March 25, 2008, the average Iraqi refugee processing time from referral to arrival in the United States is 222 days. During this same period, the worldwide average for processing refugees was 452. The Middle East regional average, excluding Iraqi refugees was 458.

## SYRIA

The Iraqi refugee population in Syria is the largest in the region with UNHCR estimating between 1.2 and 1.4 million. UNHCR has registered approximately 162,000 Iraqis for assistance and possible resettlement as of April 2008. Demand for registration by refugees is heavy with waiting periods of two to three months for appointments with UNHCR officers. The registration of refugees occurs at UNHCR's central office in Damascus and a remote facility in the Damascus suburb of Douma, with a combined staff of 180 employees. Because of Syrian Government actions and requirements, refugee resettlement processing is more complicated and less efficient than elsewhere in the region. In FY 2007, 242 Iraqi refugees were resettled in the United States from Syria. As of April 1, 2008, 347 Iraqis had departed for the United States and 2,152 had been approved for resettlement by USCIS and were undergoing final outprocessing.

Table 2: Syria — Refugee Admissions Activity, October 1, 2007- April 1, 2008

FY 2008 Referral Goal (by April 30)	3,900
Total Referrals Received	3,614
Total Pre-screened/DHS ready	946
Total DHS Interviewed	3,311
Pending Final Decision	914
Denied	245
Approved (but not departed)	2,152
Total Arrivals in U.S.	347

Source: Department of State, Refugee Processing Center

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From June through mid-November 2007, USCIS refugee adjudicators were unable to obtain visas to enter Syria resulting in backlog of resettlement applications. At the time of OIG's fieldwork, a seven-person USCIS team scheduled to process cases from March through May was short two officers — the team leader and fingerprint specialist — due to the inability to obtain entry visas. Since the start of FY 2008, the USCIS circuit rides to Damascus have resulted in fewer numbers of personnel and less time adjudicating cases compared with Amman, the other major Iraqi resettlement processing center in the region.

In addition, OPE operations in Damascus have been constrained by workspace and staffing issues. In 2007, the Department funded new office space for OPE staff to conduct resettlement processing activities and for USCIS refugee adjudication interviews. However, the Syrian Government has refused to permit the colocation of OPE and USCIS activities and has required USCIS interviews be conducted out of UNHCR's office space. According to OPE and Embassy Damascus officials, the cramped workspace limits the efficiency of processing operations. Furthermore, the Syrian Government requires that all 35 Damascus-based OPE staff members be local-hire Syrian citizens and refuses IOM's professional expatriate staff from entering the country to supervise operations or conduct training. The net result, according to IOM and Department officials, is fewer cases are being prepared and adjudicated in Syria than would be the case if the government allowed normal refugee processing to occur.

## JORDAN

UNHCR estimates Jordan has 450,000-500,000 Iraqi refugees and reports approximately 53,000 have come forward and registered — 33,000 since the post-March 2003 invasion period. In FY 2007, 537 Iraqi refugees were resettled in the United States from Jordan. As of April 1, 2008, 1,421 Iraqi refugees had departed for the United States and another 2,457 were approved refugee status by USCIS and undergoing final out-processing.

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Table 3: Jordan — Refugee Admissions Activity, October 1, 2007-April 1, 2008

FY 2008 Referral Goal (by April 30)	4,300
Total Referrals Received	4,385
Total Pre-screened/DHS ready	1,257
Total DHS Interviewed	3,551
Pending Final Decision	876
Denied	218
Approved (but not departed)	2,457
<b>Total Arrivals in U.S.</b>	<b>1,421</b>

Source: Department of State, Refugee Processing Center

The actual number of Iraqis in Jordan continues to be a subject of debate with estimates as low as 130,000 to greater than 750,000. Based upon a number of factors, including NGOs' views, UNHCR registrations rates, and lower than expected numbers of Iraqi student enrollments in 2008, Embassy Amman officials suggest that the number is no higher than the official estimate, and may possibly be lower. Demographic data from a November 2007 report indicates the majority of Jordan's Iraqi population is composed of families who arrived in 2004 and 2005 from Baghdad and now live in Amman.<sup>7</sup> (However, several NGOs report that increasing costs and depleted savings have pushed some Iraqis outside the capital where the cost of living is lower.) The report also indicates Iraqi refugees possess a high level of education and employment rates. Despite these advantages, the majority of Iraqis live on savings and remittances from Iraq, making them economically vulnerable.

As a result of Jordanian concerns about security (the November 2005 Amman hotel bombings were committed by Iraqis) and the socio-economic impacts of the influx of refugees, Jordan's borders are effectively closed to most Iraqis. Since 2007, the Jordanian and Iraqi Governments have been working to develop a visa regime that would ensure Iraqi travelers a high degree of confidence that they would not be denied entry upon arrival in Jordan or at the border. In April 2008, the Jordanian Government announced that this visa system would commence soon, requiring Iraqis to apply for a visa at a variety of locations throughout Iraq. In addition, the U.S. Government continues to benefit from good cooperation with the Jordanian

<sup>7</sup> Iraqis in Jordan: Their Number and Characteristics, Norwegian Research Institute Fafo, November 2007

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Government, including the ability to arrange for the entry into Jordan of a significant number of Iraqis of special interest to the U.S. Government. These Iraqis may enter Jordan for processing for resettlement through the OPE in Amman or for special immigrant visa processing at the Embassy, as long as those that enter depart for the United States or return to Iraq if their application is denied.

OIG observed during several visits that the 48 professional staff members of the IOM/OPE were efficiently managing the refugee admissions process in Jordan. As of April 1, OPE had prescreened and presented 3,551 individuals for USCIS interviews and outprocessed 1,421 Iraqis for flights to the United States, the largest screening and arrival totals in the region. However, UNHCR officials based in Amman cautioned that their office was not equipped to become the default referral point for refugees to compensate for a shortfall in refugee admissions from Syria or Lebanon. These officials noted they recently added five additional staff members to locate Iraqis for possible referral but have met limited success, and are concerned that Iraqis scattered throughout are reluctant to come forward and identify themselves.

## EGYPT

UNHCR estimates there are 20,000-40,000 Iraqi refugees in Egypt. UNHCR pledged to provide 350 referrals by April 30, 2008, and as of April 1 had put forward 311 for possible resettlement. In FY 2007, 28 Iraqi refugees were resettled in the United States from Egypt. As of April 1, 2008, 104 Iraqi have departed for the United States, and 122 had been approved for resettlement by USCIS and are undergoing final out-processing.

Table 4: Egypt — Refugee Admissions Activity, October 1, 2007- April 1, 2008

FY 2008 Referral Goal (by April 30)	350
Total Referrals Received	311
Total Pre-screened/DHS ready	14
Total DHS Interviewed	180
Pending Final Decision	16
Denied	42
Approved (but not departed)	122
Total Arrivals in U.S.	104

Source: Department of State, Refugee Processing Center

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The Cairo Mission of IOM was established in 1991 during the first Gulf War, and the OPE component for PRM began in 1998. Cairo is the management “hub” for IOM activities in the region. OPE Cairo was actively processing a caseload of mostly sub-Saharan African refugees from Sudan (and some Somalis) up until 2005-06 when a peace agreement for southern Sudan resulted in a UNHCR policy shift from resettlement to repatriation, which in turn led to a downsizing of the OPE operation. In early 2007, the decision to begin large scale resettlement of Iraqi refugees led to an increase in staff size and processing capabilities for OPE Cairo and the expansion of IOM/OPE remote sites in Damascus and Amman. OPE Cairo also supports a large part of the out-processing for Damascus and Amman operations, including coordination of medical examinations, updating information into the worldwide refugee admissions program system (WRAPS), and ensuring security checks are complete and updated.

Initially, the Egyptian Government maintained a welcoming policy toward Iraqi refugees following the March 2003 invasion of Iraq. OPE officials attributed this to the manageable number of Iraqi refugees entering Egypt whose presence was not viewed as a burden or drain on resources. From 2003 to 2005, the Egyptian Government allowed Iraqis to enter Egypt on one-month renewable tourist visas. However, Iraqis were not able to work or access public services, making it extremely difficult for Iraqis to remain in Egypt without an independent means to support themselves. In late 2004 through 2005, as a response to factors unfolding in Iraq, the number of Iraqi refugees entering Egypt increased quickly. The Egyptian Government responded by tightening procedures for Iraqis seeking to enter Egypt, essentially stopping the movement of Iraqis into the country. According to OPE records, all Iraqi refugee cases processed for resettlement in Cairo arrived in Egypt prior to 2006.

## TURKEY

Official UNHCR estimates state there are 5,000-10,000 Iraqi refugees in Turkey, though Embassy Ankara officials believe a more accurate number is 6,000-8,000. Currently, 4,800 Iraqis have come forward and formally registered with UNHCR and are receiving assistance. In FY 2007, 665 Iraqi refugees were resettled in the United States from Turkey. As of April 1, 2008, 595 Iraqi refugees had departed for the United States, and another 733 were approved refugee status by USCIS and undergoing final out-processing. Also, another 1,055 individuals had completed prescreening and were ready for USCIS interviews. Based upon OIG’s analysis of projected referrals, cases currently in the pipeline, and approval rates, the Department will resettle

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more than 2,000 Iraqi refugees from Turkey into the United States in FY 2008. This number of resettlements will significantly reduce the size of the Iraqi refugee population in Turkey.

Table 5: Turkey — Refugee Admissions Activity, October 1, 2007- April 1, 2008

FY 2008 Referral Goal (by April 30)	2,000
Total Referrals Received	1,732
Total Pre-screened/DHS ready	1,055
Total DHS Interviewed	1,243
Pending Final Decision	165
Denied	345
Approved (but not departed)	733
<b>Total Arrivals in U.S.</b>	<b>595</b>

Source: Department of State, Refugee Processing Center

ICMC, based in Istanbul, operates the OPE that processes refugee applications, prepares cases for USCIS adjudication, and undertakes outprocessing responsibilities — requests for security clearances, medical examinations, cultural orientation classes, and travel documents. ICMC has been active in Turkey since 1969 and engaged with Iraqi refugees since the first Gulf War in 1992. OIG observed that ICMC’s 45 professional staff members were effectively managing the surge of Iraqi applications. In FY 2006, ICMC screened 1,023 individuals. In FY 2007, after the U.S. Government’s change in policy to focus on Iraq refugees, ICMC screened 3,081 individuals — triple the usual caseload.

UNHCR has pledged to provide 2,000 referrals by April 30, 2008. ICMC officials were confident they would reach this goal, and all referrals made before April 30 would be processed and individuals found eligible resettled in the United States by the fourth quarter — July through September. For referrals received into June, the ICMC officials believed they would be able to resettle these cases in FY 2008 as long as the DHS interviews were completed by the beginning of July. Finally, the ICMC officials said that even though their target is 2,000 Iraqi departures from Turkey for FY 2008, they believe they will process an additional 200 individuals (10%) by July.

Refugee processing activities are limited to ICMC offices in Istanbul because of limits imposed by the Turkish Government on refugee movements and places of residence. Refugees by law are required to stay in one of 26 designated satellite

cities in Turkey, but many stay in Istanbul and Ankara illegally due to employment opportunities. One of the main obstacles facing Iraqi refugees are overstay fines and residence fees that Turkish authorities require them to pay before granting exit permits for resettlement. In response to U.S. Embassy Ankara appeals, the Minister of Interior in late February issued instructions that fines for being in-country illegally be waived for Iraqis departing for resettlement.

Finally, prior to the Department's emphasis on focusing energies on processing and resettling the maximum number Iraqi refugees, the Iranian Baha'i was the dominant caseload for OPE in Turkey — about 1,000 individuals a year.<sup>8</sup> In 2007, ICMC stopped processing Iranians in April and did not restart working with that caseload until the end of the fiscal year. As of April 1, 2008, Iraqis comprised 76 percent of individuals prescreened by the OPE. ICMC reports that since UNHCR is on track to exceed its target of 2,000 referrals by April 30, it appears UNHCR is redirecting some of its resources toward the preparation and submission of referrals for the non-Iraqi caseload.

## LEBANON

UNHCR estimates there are approximately 50,000 Iraqi refugees in Lebanon, of which about 10,000 have formally registered with UNHCR as refugees. UNHCR pledged to provide 1,900 referrals by April 30, 2008, and as of April 1 had put forward 1,489 for possible resettlement. In FY 2007, 80 Iraqi refugees were resettled in the United States from Lebanon. As of April 1, 2008, 119 Iraqi refugees had departed for the United States, and another 220 were approved refugee status by USCIS and undergoing final outprocessing. Another 478 individuals had completed prescreening and were ready for USCIS interviews.

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<sup>8</sup> Baha'i faith, is a religion founded in Iran in the mid-19th century by Mirza Hoseyn 'Ali Nuri, who is known as Baha' Ullah. After Islamic fundamentalists came to power in Iran in 1979, the 300,000 Baha'is there were persecuted by the government.



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Table 6: Lebanon — Refugee Admissions Activity, October 1, 2007- April 1, 2008

FY 2008 Referral Goal (by April 30)	1,900
Total Referrals Received	1,489
Total Pre-screened/DHS ready	478
Total DHS Interviewed	325
Pending Final Decision	25
Denied	80
Approved (but not departed)	220
<b>Total Arrivals in U.S.</b>	<b>119</b>

Source: Department of State, Refugee Processing Center

An ICMC suboffice is responsible for processing Iraqi refugee applications for resettlement. Staffed by a permanent caseworker and an administrative assistant, and augmented by temporary personnel from ICMC/OPE Istanbul, ICMC normally prescreens approximately 100 individuals a week. With the Department’s emphasis on resettling Iraqis, ICMC temporarily stepped up its operations in Lebanon and is attempting to prescreen 250-300 individuals per week. However, working in Lebanon presents significant challenges that undermine the resettlement operation. According to Department and ICMC officials, the tenuous political and security situation in Beirut often results in the shutting down of processing operations. Bombings, assassinations, and frequent street protests result in UN and U.S. Embassy security officials frequently canceling processing operations and instructing staff to stay at home. According to ICMC officials, it is difficult for both staff and the refugees to navigate in such an environment.

Furthermore, because of the security situation, lodging and office space availability for USCIS refugee officers is extremely constrained. In addition, the logistics of bringing refugees to and from the interview site pose challenges. Similarly, due to security considerations, OPE officials are occupying limited office space on UN-HCR’s compound in Beirut, which limits the effectiveness of their prescreening and outprocessing responsibilities. Finally, OIG learned in mid April that OPE recently obtained Internet connectivity with the WRAPS server, which will enable the office to update USCIS results, obtain immediate access to security clearances and other reports, and request “assurances” from voluntary agencies in the United States that they are prepared to receive refugees ready to depart. OIG believes this new capability addresses an obstacle noted during our discussions with ICMC officials in February and will positively increase the efficiency of processing operations in Beirut in the future.



## OTHER COUNTRIES

UNHCR estimates more than 200,000 Iraqi refugees are scattered among the Gulf States and other countries in the region, including United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Yemen, Bahrain, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. UNHCR pledged to provide 400 referrals by April 30, 2008, and as of April 1 had put forward 321 for possible resettlement. In FY 2007, 74 Iraqi refugees were resettled in the United States from these countries. As of April 1, 2008, 44 Iraqi refugees had departed for the United States, and another 136 were approved refugee status by USCIS and undergoing final out-processing.

Table 7: Other countries — Refugee Admissions Activity, October 1, 2007- April 1, 2008

FY 2008 Referral Goal (by April 30)	400
Total Referrals Received	321
Total Pre-screened/DHS ready	116
Total DHS Interviewed	169
Pending Final Decision	24
Denied	9
Approved (but not departed)	136
<b>Total Arrivals in U.S.</b>	<b>44</b>

Source: Department of State, Refugee Processing Center

ICMC manages the registration and resettlement activities for the Department in Yemen, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates. IOM is responsible for processing refugees in Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf States as needed on a temporary duty basis. Due to security concerns and an emphasis on processing cases at the other main locations, the Department was not always able to coordinate USCIS circuit rides to process cases for these countries. For example, a USCIS circuit ride scheduled for April/May to process 50 individuals in Yemen was cancelled due to the security situation there. (This is the second delay of a circuit ride in Yemen due to security concerns in FY 2008.) However, in December 2007 a USCIS team adjudicated 110 Iraqi and other nationality cases in United Arab Emirates, and another team was scheduled to interview 66 individuals in Kuwait in April 2008.

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## REFUGEE PROCESSING IN BAGHDAD

In 2007, the Department and DHS agreed to conduct in-country refugee processing for Iraqis employed by the U.S. Government. Subsequently, the Refugee Crisis in Iraq Act of 2007 required the establishment of a refugee processing mechanism in Iraq.<sup>9</sup> In early March 2008, four staff members from IOM/OPE Cairo traveled to Embassy Baghdad to pre-screen 31 cases of current embassy employed staff (and their families) for a total of 84 people. In mid March, two USCIS circuit riders arrived in Baghdad to conduct interviews; they approved two cases, conditionally approved 26 cases, and placed three cases on hold. According to embassy officials, these first refugee adjudications in Baghdad were a successful and useful exercise because it resulted in processing a small number of compelling refugee applicants and for the lessons learned for possible larger-scale in-country processing in the future.

As of mid April, the Department had not yet decided the target number of individuals for in-country processing or the size of the OPE operation in Baghdad. However, according to embassy officials, Ambassador Crocker has advocated processing as many cases as possible out of Baghdad. During OIG's visit to Baghdad in February, a senior embassy official said that for planning purposes, they were assuming an annual processing target of 6,250 individuals and an OPE operation of more than 30 staff.

OIG has identified a number of factors that indicate a smaller-scale OPE operation (4-7 staff members) geared toward addressing the relatively limited number of compelling cases that are unable to process out of Amman,<sup>10</sup> is more appropriate for Baghdad. OIG based this upon: (1) its analysis of the legislative requirements; (2) discussions with officials from PRM, the Bureau of Consular Affairs, and U.S. embassy officials in the region responsible for managing refugee and visa programs; (3) its review of OPE operations in the region; and (4) its previous experience examining similar orderly departure programs in Vietnam, Russia, and Cuba.

- The Refugee Crisis in Iraq Act of 2007 requires the establishment of a refugee processing mechanism, it does not mandate the scale of the operation

<sup>9</sup> Public Law 110-181, section 1242.

<sup>10</sup> In its comments to a draft of this report, Embassy Baghdad noted that it is committed to process as many cases of special humanitarian concern in-country as conditions permit. PRM and Embassy Baghdad concurred that security and logistical challenges in Iraq would constrain the number of cases that could be processed quickly in country and that most cases would be assisted to enter Jordan for processing.

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- The processing of 84 refugee applicants in March exposed numerous logistical problems that resulted in an inefficient use of staff and resources.
  - o Travel in and out of Iraq for USCIS and IOM/OPE staff is difficult, time-consuming, and subject to suspension due to the security situation.
  - o Identifying sufficient suitable office and processing space in the International Zone is difficult.
  - o Access to the Embassy by refugee applicants is difficult. Passage through and transportation from the International Zone's checkpoints was a logistical challenge for the March caseload and is expected to be harder once non-embassy refugee applicants are processed.
  - o IOM/OPE staff are subject to UN security and other requirements. Issues to overcome, include limitations on the number of UN personnel in country, requirements of hard-covered housing and armored vehicles for transportation within the International Zone, and access to embassy and U.S. military badges.
- It is difficult and dangerous for refugee applicants from northern and southern Iraq to travel to Embassy Baghdad for processing.
- OPE Amman is an established, efficient operation with good infrastructure; accessible to many Iraqis; and more cost effective given security requirements and pay differentials for those serving in Iraq.
- OIG found similar orderly departure programs in other countries at high risk for fraud and abuse. Large scale in-country processing lacks the self-selecting filter of applicants sufficiently fearing persecution or danger that they flee the country.

**Recommendation 1:** The Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration should develop a detailed plan for establishing a refugee processing operation in Baghdad. The plan should include an analysis of a small scale overseas processing entity operation (4-7) versus a large scale one (more than 30), taking into consideration (1) the size of the vulnerable refugee population dependent on Baghdad processing and (2) future funding requirements. (Action: PRM)

## CONCLUSION

The processing of Iraqi refugees for resettlement requires close cooperation and coordination among many players, including the Department, DHS, UNHCR, the OPEs operated by the Department's implementing partners IOM and ICMC, as well as the governments in the region. After a slow start in 2007 when only 1,608 Iraqis were resettled in the United States; there is now an effective refugee processing infrastructure in place in the region. OIG projects the actual number of Iraqis arriving in the United States should meet or exceed the FY 2008 target of 12,000.

OIG observed that the refugee admissions program is working efficiently in Jordan, Egypt, Turkey, and the other smaller sites in the region. The situation in Syria, home to the largest Iraqi refugee population, remains a concern, and efforts to coax better cooperation from the government are warranted. Lebanon's difficult security environment continues to present challenges for processing cases there. Finally, the processing of a limited number of refugee cases in Baghdad in March revealed numerous issues and logistical problems that could result in an inefficient use of staff and resources if a large-scale refugee processing operation is established within the International Zone.

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## APPENDIX I – SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

The Middle East Regional Office (MERO), Office of Inspector General (OIG) initiated this evaluation on January 10, 2008, (Project No. 08MERO3001) to determine whether the Department is effectively managing refugee processing for Iraqi nationals, due to concerns over the ability of involved U.S. Government agencies and international organizations to meet the Administration's goal to admit 12,000 Iraqi refugees by the end of FY 2008.

To examine the progress made and challenges faced by the Department, OIG analyzed the President's Report to the Congress on Proposed Refugee Admissions for FY 2008 and congressional testimony by senior officials from the Departments of State and Homeland Security and the U.S. Agency for International Development. To evaluate the progress by the participating agencies and international organizations, OIG reviewed relevant documents from the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC), and independent think tanks and research organizations.

OIG also consulted with the following officials to discuss Iraqi refugee processing and the progress toward meeting the FY 2008 goal:

- In Washington, DC, OIG met with officials from the Office of Admissions, the Office of Assistance for Asia and the Near East, and the Refugee Processing Center, within PRM, who provided information on general management of refugee admissions programs, coordination with international partners, and progress and statistical reports. In addition, OIG consulted with the Refugee Affairs Division of the Department of Homeland Security on refugee adjudication programs, Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS) adjudicators' travel and interview schedules, and statistical and progress reports.
- In Jordan, Iraq, and Turkey, OIG held extensive discussions with refugee coordinator officers at the U.S. embassies, and with senior embassy and consulates officials. OIG observed refugee processing operations at OPE sites in Amman and Istanbul. In addition, OIG met with locally based UNHCR and IOM officials stationed in Jordan, Egypt, and Turkey, as well as PRM's regional refugee coordinator based at Embassy Cairo.

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- Due to travel restrictions and security concerns, OIG was unable to travel to Syria and Lebanon to examine firsthand refugee processing operations. However, OIG conducted telephone interviews, solicited information via e-mails, and obtained program documents with embassy and other officials involved in those programs.

To determine the number of Iraqi refugees that have or are expected to arrive in the United States in FY 2007 and 2008 and worldwide refugee processing averages, OIG obtained refugee admissions data from the Department's Refugee Processing Center in Rosslyn, Virginia. OIG did not verify the accuracy of the data provided, but concluded the admissions data provided were sufficiently reliable for purposes of this report.

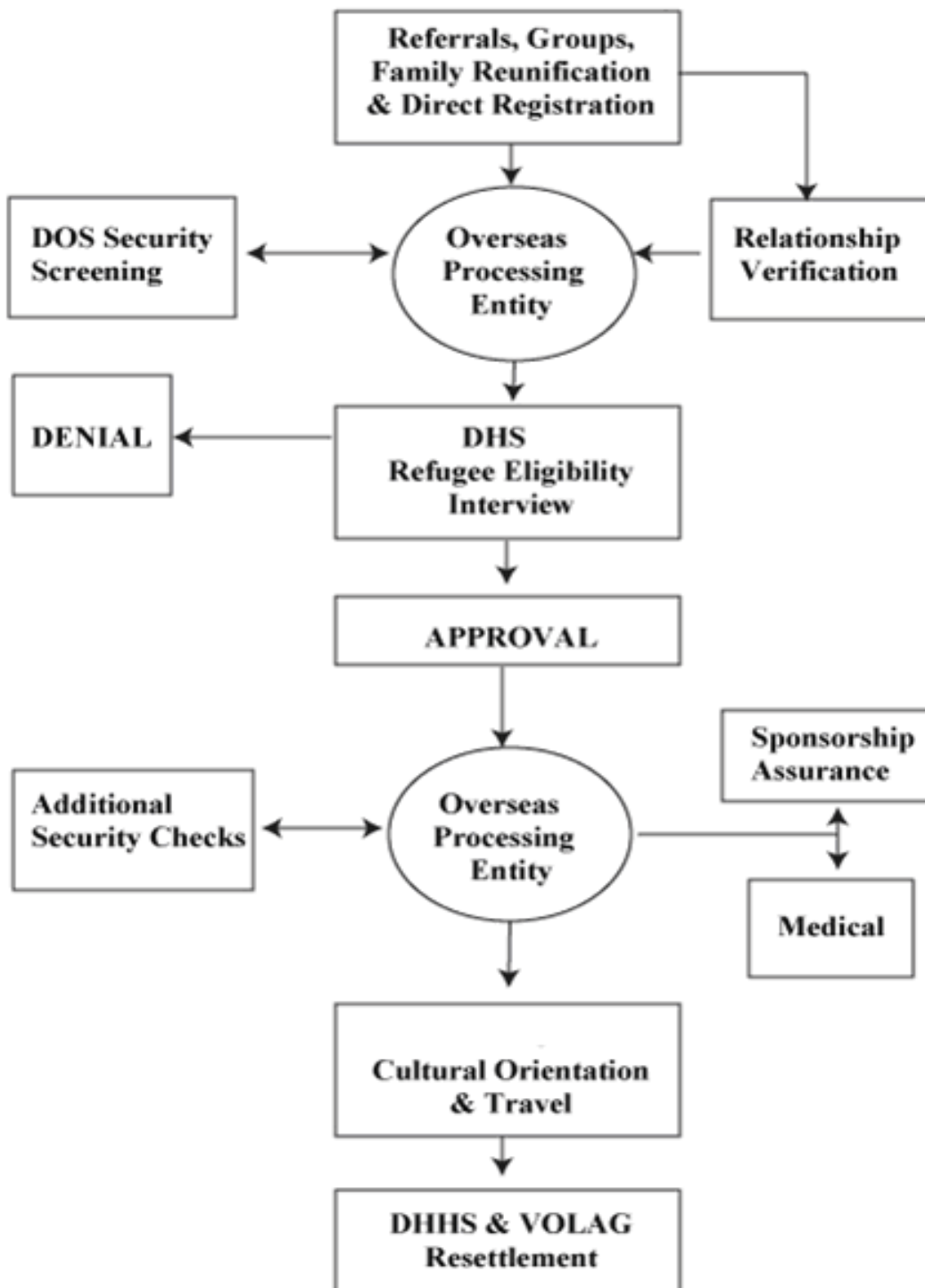
OIG conducted this evaluation from January to April 2008. The evaluation was conducted according to Quality Standards for Inspections issued by the President's Council on Integrity and Efficiency.

This report was prepared under the direction of Richard "Nick" Arntson, assistant inspector general for OIG's Middle East Regional Office. The following staff members conducted the evaluation and/or contributed to the report: Patrick A. Dickriede, Brooke C. Holmes, and Ernest J. Fischer.



**APPENDIX II – REFUGEE SCREENING PROCESS**

**REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT PROCESSING  
FOR IRAQI NATIONALS**



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## APPENDIX III - ENTITIES WITH REFUGEE RESPONSIBILITIES

### **Department of State (Department)**

The Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM) of the Department of State has primary responsibility within the U.S. Government for formulating U.S. foreign policy on population, protection, and assistance to refugees and conflict victims, and international migration, as well as administering U.S. refugee assistance and admissions programs. It also serves as the focal point within the U.S. Government for multilateral coordination of international migration programs. The bureau's Office of Admissions is responsible for setting policies and priorities and proposing numerical allocations of refugees to be admitted to the United States. The refugee processing center performs program and data functions for PRM, and maintains the worldwide refugee admissions processing system, the central data base.

### **The Department of Homeland Security (DHS)**

The Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security has the authority, granted by statute, to determine eligibility for refugee status. This authority has been delegated to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). USCIS officers staff the Refugee Corps, established in 2006, which has responsibility for adjudicating applications for refugee status and reviewing case decisions.

### **The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)**

The UNHCR is the lead international agency for global refugee assistance. The majority of those seeking resettlement in the United States are referred by the UNHCR. Referred cases are registered and vetted for interest in, and preliminary qualification for, the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program.

### **Overseas Processing Entities (OPEs)**

OPEs are Department of State contractors that carry out interviews and prepare resettlement files for USCIS officers. In addition, OPEs undertake out-processing responsibilities, including security clearances, medical examinations, and travel documents.

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### **The International Organization for Migration (IOM)**

IOM is an intergovernmental organization that provides migration management services and arranges U.S. Government-funded transportation loans and travel for refugees admitted to the United States. It undertakes processing of refugee applications in several regions of the world and is responsible for managing including sites in Cairo, Amman, and Damascus.

### **The International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC)**

The ICMC has operations in 30 countries. ICMC Turkey region covers Turkey, Lebanon, Kuwait, Yemen, India, United Arab Emirates, and Pakistan. Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan also fall under the program although currently no processing is being conducted in these countries. ICMC fields mobile teams to process refugees on site in multiple locations throughout the region.

APPENDIX IV - ACRONYMS

DHS	Department of Homeland Security
Department	Department of State
ICMC	International Catholic Migration Commission
IOM	International Organization for Migration
MERO	Middle East Regional Office (OIG)
NGO	nongovernmental organization
OIG	Office of Inspector General (Department)
OPE	overseas processing entity
PRM	Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (Department)
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
USCIS	U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service (DHS)
USRAP	United States Refugee Admissions Program
WRAPS	worldwide refugee admissions processing system



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