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Iraqis flee to Syria to escape violence

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"We don't have a home to go to, they took it from us; we have nothing left in Iraq to go to." With these words, Um 'Omar explained why she and her five children fled from their home in Baghdad and joined the swelling number of Iraqi refugees -- now more than 1.5 million -- trying to rebuild their lives in Syria.

Um 'Omar and her children have now found shelter in a tiny apartment that they have been able to rent in Damascus. Um 'Omar's story was one of a number of similar accounts that I and my colleagues have heard since we arrived in Damascus a few days ago to look into the plight of Iraqi refugees.

Some 2,000 of Iraqi refugees are reported to cross the border into Syria each day to escape the violence -- suicide bombings, sectarian killings and other gross abuses -- that have become an everyday fact of life in Baghdad and other parts of Iraq. Our team is here in Syria to find out how the local authorities are coping in the face of this mass influx of needy people, many of them traumatised by what they have seen or experienced in Iraq.

Their sheer number is placing an enormous strain on local services -- health, education and housing provision -- and on the resources of international agencies such as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Office for Migration, as well as local relief agencies such as the Syrian Red Crescent Society.

Some parts of Damascus, such as Sayyeda Zeinab district, have virtually become Iraqi neighbourhoods, so great has been the congregation of refugees there. Happily, however, the sectarian violence that has become so widespread in Iraq, especially since the Shi'a holy shrine at Samarra was badly damaged in a bomb attack 16 months ago, is not at all evident here in Damascus.

In Sayyeda Zeinab we also met Zahra and her four grown up daughters with their children. The eldest daughter lost her husband in Baghdad in a car bomb attack. The family has so far survived thanks to some savings that they had brought with them from Iraq, but the monthly rent they have to pay is already taking its toll.

Even though there are no restrictions on access to education for Iraqi children in Syria, the family said their children do not go to school because that cannot afford to pay for their school uniforms, books etc. Other Iraqis prefer to send their children to work illegally to earn some desperately needed cash to pay for food and accommodation, while many young Iraqi girls have felt obliged to turn to prostitution to support their families.

Despite the continuing daily mass influx of Iraqi refugees into the country Syria has kept its borders open, but how long for? Amnesty International would like to see more commitment from the international community, in particular the US, EU and other rich countries, to provide substantial help to host countries like Syria and Jordan, where the number of Iraqi refugees now exceeds 750,000, and be more generous in their resettlement programmes.