

Iraqi and Bhutanese Refugees: A Brief History

October 2014

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Two of the largest refugee populations I encountered throughout my experience in the IFMC in Charlottesville were the Bhutanese refugees coming from Nepali refugee camps and the Iraqi refugees displaced during both the Gulf War and the more recent Iraq War. With that in mind, below I recount a brief overview of the conflicts that led to the displacement of these refugees.

Bhutan

The Bhutanese refugee population consists primarily of inhabitants of southern Bhutan. This group was referred to in Bhutan as the *Lhotshampa*, which is Dzonghka (national Bhutanese language) for “southerners”. This population is ethnically Nepali (language, culture, and religion) due to their origination and migration from Nepal initially during the late 1800s but largely during the early 1900s.

The Bhutan House, the Dzong (i.e. traditional administrative, religious, and military center) overseeing the south of Bhutan (and led by the Dorji family) settled these large numbers of Nepali workers in the southern regions of the country with the aim of expanding the country’s agricultural production. As the Nepali population in the south of Bhutan grew, this region of Bhutan ultimately became the primary national source of income. From this growth in southern Bhutan came the eventual concerns from the Bhutanese government that the size of the Nepali population would threaten Bhutan’s national identity. Up until the departure of large numbers of Nepali refugees at the end of the 20th century, ethnically Nepalese inhabitants of southern Bhutan claimed to constitute approximately 65% of the population, while the Bhutanese government places the estimate at closer to 15%. Studies of the language distribution in Bhutan as of 2006 estimate Nepali to be spoken by 40%, while Dzonghka (the official national language) is only spoken by 25% of the population. A language map of Bhutan is pictured below.



This cultural divide and fear for the Bhutanese national identity by the Bhutanese government are what led to rising tensions in Bhutan, even within the Bhutanese government between the king who was concerned by the increasing number of Nepalis and the Dorji family who were settling more Nepalis in Bhutan.

In an effort to de-emphasize Nepali culture, the government put in place new policies which required the adoption of traditional northern Bhutanese garb in public places. They also implemented two “Citizenship Acts” in 1958 and 1985 which put a hold on legal immigration to slow the tide of Nepalis coming to work in the south of Bhutan. These marked anyone who could not prove citizenship that pre-dated the first Citizenship Act as an illegal immigrant, while granting citizenship to those who could prove their long-term presence in Bhutan.

Following the census in 1988 (the first ever in Bhutan), the number of ethnically Nepalese citizens of Bhutan became even more evident, leading to more stringent attempts of enforcing Bhutanese tradition throughout the country, including the withdrawal of Nepali as a language taught in school to reinforce Dzonghka’s place as the formal national tongue. In response, the Nepali populations began formally protesting what they felt was clear discrimination, which only led to tightening of the government’s grip over the south of Bhutan, in fear of either a Nepali uprising to overthrow the Bhutanese government or secession of the south of Bhutan, the nation’s most profitable region. Thousands of citizens of southern Bhutan fled to India, and eventually to refugee camps in southeast Nepal as the conflict between the ethnically Nepalese and the Bhutanese government turned violent.

This violence escalated in 1990 when the Bhutan People’s Party (branded as terrorists by the government of Bhutan and as freedom fighters by the Nepali Congress Party) led protests and marches through southern Bhutan denouncing the suppression of Nepali culture and demanding equal rights for all citizens of Bhutan regardless of ethnicity. These protests quickly escalated into violent clashes with the Royal Bhutan Army leading to arrests of hundreds of Nepali citizens. The instability and insecurity of the region led to the exodus of the ethnically Nepali populations, with estimates of up to 100,000 people fleeing by 1996 into several of the seven refugee camps in southeast Nepal managed by the Nepali government in collaboration with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Iraq

There has been a steadily increasing number of refugees leaving Iraq since the 1980s in the setting of multiple conflicts in the region. This began in 1980 with the Iraqi invasion of Iran following years of dispute over the Iraq-Iran border, in an attempt by the Iraqi government to take advantage of the disorganization in the wake of an Iranian revolution. However, within the first two to three years of the war, following Operation Beit Al-Moqaddas (literally “Operation House of the Holy One”), Iran had slowed the Iraqi advance and turned the war around, forcing the violence into Iraq. Following the end of the war in 1988, the borders were restored to their pre-conflict state, negating any gains in territory by the Iranians.

Soon after the end of what was then referred to as the “Gulf War” (now the “Iran-Iraq” war), another war began with the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq, which has now claimed the name of the “Gulf War.” The conflict had roots in the belief that Kuwait was rightfully Iraqi territory, as they were both previously included in the Ottoman province of Basra (a name now held by the southern Iraqi city) prior to its division by the UK in the early 20th century. Additionally, the conflict was sparked by rising tensions in the wake of the Iran-Iraq war, debt owed to Kuwait by Iraq from said war, Iraqi claims that Kuwait was drilling into its oil fields, and general Iraqi government unease with western involvement in its neighbors’ policy.

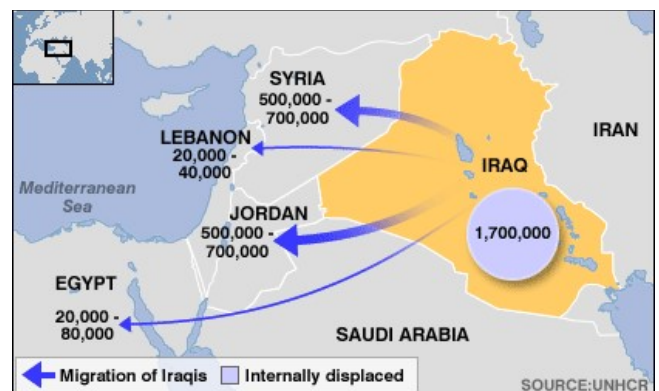
The invasion of Kuwait began in late 1990. What followed was 6 months of troops from other nations led by the US amassing in neighboring countries (primarily Saudi Arabia), dubbed Operation Desert Shield, that culminated in 5 weeks of conflict (Operation Desert Storm), the last 4 days of which (Operation Desert Sabre/Sword) were a full aerial and ground assault on Iraqi forces in Kuwait, officially ending the war. The Gulf War displaced up to 3 million refugees, primarily Northern Iraq Kurds and Southern Iraq Shi’ites (majority in Iraq, but under Saddam Hussein’s Sunni rule at the time) who fled to neighboring Jordan, Syria, Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia to re-settle in nearby cities, in fear of persecution by the Sunni government.

Years later, amid controversy regarding whether or not Iraq possessed a nuclear weapons program, the United States led a military invasion and occupation of Iraq that ultimately led to Saddam Hussein’s ouster later that year. Following his fall from power, and in the setting of the instatement of a Shi’ite government to rule, there was an effort to resettle Iraqi refugees (who had

seen persecution under Sunni rule) in their home during the early years of the war, with some success as over a quarter of a million Iraqis returned to Iraq in the first three years of the war.

In response to the new Shi’ite government, however, multiple groups arose in resistance, which led to continued violence against Shi’ites in Iraq (including bombings of notable Shi’ite mosques, such as The Al-Askari mosque in 2006), which ultimately brought the flow of refugees back into the country to a halt, and displaced even more Iraqis. Estimates place the number that had left again by the fourth year of the war around two million Iraqis, with an almost equal number displaced from their homes within the country. In 2007, in light of multiple of the neighboring countries beginning to impose restrictions on refugee numbers, an effort was made to resettle refugees in the US. Since that time, approximately 85,000 of 120,000 approved refugees have moved to multiple cities across the country as of April 2013.

In reflecting on the two conflicts above, it is clear that the demand for refugee care is huge and will only continue to grow while conflicts around the world remain unresolved. In the cases described above, those conflicts were due to persecution for “fear for national identity” in the setting of importing labor from neighboring countries in Bhutan, and persecution of majority populations by minority leadership in Iraq.



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