



# PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

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The Middle East Institute

## “Iraq’s Refugee and IDP Crisis: Human Toll and Implications”

MEI Boardroom, 1761 N St. NW  
Monday, August 11, 2008 12pm

The Middle East Institute invited **Dr. Phebe Marr** and **Elizabeth Ferris** to discuss the Iraqi dislocation within and beyond its border and its effect on political stability in Iraq and the region. Dr. Phebe Marr is a former professor at National Defense University. Elizabeth Ferris is co-director of the Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement and Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution. **Amb. Wendy Chamberlain**, President of MEI, moderated the event.

**Dr. Phebe Marr** discussed the long term consequences of the Iraqi refugees for Iraq and the region. Marr warned that refugees are more susceptible to alienation and discontent, and therefore are **more likely to be recruited by radical organizations**, if not adequately integrated into their host country or unable to return to Iraq. Because many come from ethnically mixed regions of Iraq, and many are moving to countries that share the same ethnicity, the crisis could **lead to further ethnic division in Iraq**. In addition, Iraq could see a “brain drain” that would take a generation to repair, and would weakened the state and heighten the influence of poorer cities, including Sadr City.

**Elizabeth Ferris** argued that resolution of the refugee crisis “holds the key to Iraq’s future,” in regard to its political stability. Ferris recommended that policy makers consider how reintegration and its burden Iraqi government and U.S. military resources as well as its impact on political stability. Ferris emphasized the need to ensure that return/integration is a voluntary decision. In addition, Ferris **recommended encouraging the return of refugees by improving governance in Iraq**, including health services, schools, and infrastructure, and the creation of a commission to quickly adjudicate claims disputes over refugee property that has been confiscated.

When asked how to facilitate the desire for reconciliation, Marr instead argued that leaders need to **first work towards non-violent co-existence and accommodation**, and noted that some level of this is already occurring at a local level.

In regard to Palestinian refugees who had been living in Iraq, Ferris argued that they are most vulnerable because they are seen as “benefitting unduly from the Saddam regime” and face backlash from within Iraq. In addition, many host countries are hesitant to integrate them into their communities, leaving many with nowhere to go.

In regard to recommendations for U.S. policy, both speakers acknowledged that while it is important to allow refugees resettle in the U.S., policymakers should entice refugees to voluntarily return to Iraq in order to help rebuild their country.