Iraq’s central government and the KRG should collaborate substantively with aid organizations to ensure ongoing support for meeting IDPs’ humanitarian needs.

Implementing such a plan will become more challenging once the urgency of the situation has passed. Just as the Syrian refugee crisis has been repeatedly overshadowed by more current events, the displacement crisis of Iraqis could soon become yesterday’s news. But the hardships for the displaced will go on. And as in the Syrian refugee response, assistance to the host communities and support for national systems like health and education will play a vital role in ensuring that IDPs are able to find safety in the region for as long as they need to do so.

Another important aspect of the long-term response for Iraqi IDPs will be funding. The IDP movements in Iraq prompted a unique response earlier this year: in a very welcome gesture, the government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia gave a large donation to the United Nations to address the needs of the displaced. However, this generous contribution will not cover all of the humanitarian need moving forward, and regional leaders as well as the European Union should follow Saudi Arabia’s example and provide financial support to the humanitarian response.

Until it is safe for the IDPs to return to their places of origin, the Iraqi government in conjunction with the KRG, and with the support of the international community, must commit to assisting them for as long as necessary.

Daryl Grisgraber and Michel Gabaudan traveled to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in September 2014 and assessed the humanitarian response to the newly arrived internally displaced population.

LONG-TERM RESPONSE: THE FUTURE OF THE IDPs

Many of the IDPs’ RI spoke with expressed doubt about returning to central Iraq, and there were frequent inquiries about emigration to Europe and the United States. With the current high level of sectarian tension, they simply don’t feel like their homes can be safe again. Thus, considering the future options of the IDPs is an essential element of the humanitarian response.

After the immediate need for adequate shelter is addressed, the displaced in the KRI will continue to require support. Establishing camps for the IDPs and maintaining them at the proper standards can only happen if there is a well-organized and well-funded plan. The displaced will also need to find ways to support themselves and meet their own basic needs, to continue their education, to find ways to create income, and to keep their displaced communities as cohesive as possible. Iraq’s central government and the KRG should collaborate substantively with aid organizations to ensure ongoing support for meeting IDPs’ humanitarian needs.

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WAITING FOR WINTER: DISPLACED IRAQIS IN THE KRI

About 850,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) have fled the conflict in central Iraq to seek safety further north in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). They are scattered across the KRI in a variety of temporary housing situations: though a small number of them are in camps, most live informally in local schools, unfinished buildings, and public parks. Half a million of them are in the city of Dohuk alone. The great majority of these 850,000 internally displaced are members of religious minorities – Christians from the Ninewa Plains and Yazidis from the Sinjar area, in particular. As humanitarian agencies scramble to meet their needs, there must be a plan for longer-term support that reflects the increasingly complex and unpredictable environment in the country as a whole: an environment that is likely to result in more displacement. Iraq’s central government, donor governments, and aid agencies must make providing adequate shelter to IDPs the highest priority over the next several weeks.

BACKGROUND

Since 2003, Iraq has seen a tremendous amount of forced displacement both across and within its borders. Historically a haven for refugees from Iran and Turkey, the country also became the site of a massive internal displacement crisis during the American-led occupation. That crisis has not still been resolved.

Additionally, over the course of the past three years, approximately 215,000 Syrian refugees have arrived in the KRI seeking safety from the conflict. They are mostly – but not exclusively – Syrian Kurds. Many of them traveled great distances across Syria in order to seek refuge in a place where the language and customs would be familiar to them. As in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, the humanitarian response to the Syrian refugees in the KRI has been a challenging one. The host communities and local and regional government officials have been generous and
welcoming, but it has been hard to keep up with the sheer numbers of people arriving.

Donor funding for the five countries involved in the UN’s Syrian refugee response is far behind needs, and Iraq has consistently had one of the largest shortfalls in support. The current UNHCR appeal to fund work in Iraq is only 33 percent covered. The Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) nonetheless welcome a steady stream of Syrians fleeing the conflict, and has lately been permitting Syrian refugees from Kobani to enter via Turkey.

This year also witnessed several waves of displacement of Iraqis to the KRI after incursions by the group known as the Islamic State (or ISIS). Many, though not all, of those fleeing violence in Anbar in January and the takeover of Mosul in June by the Islamic State group have since returned home. However, hundreds of thousands who fled recent attacks close to the border with Syria remain. The Islamic State group’s advances in Iraq are not well understood to be a systematic campaign to seize control of more territory, and thus more recent displacement from some of the regions closer to the KRI’s border is likely to be longer-term.

As it has been with the Syrian refugees who have arrived in recent years, the Kurdish community in the KRI has been generous and supportive of the recently-arrived IDPs. In September, an RI team traveled to the KRI and met with IDPs, almost all of whom acknowledged that they got by – particularly with regard to food, water, and electricity – because of help from their neighbors. Local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community groups were distributing some food and water, the IDPs were allowed to run electrical lines to their various shelters from nearby buildings, and the local police were even patrolling and distributing some food and water, the IDPs were allowed to construct on an as-needed basis to assist in the delivery of humanitarian supplies in time for winter. Partners in the U.S.-led coalition could also be supportive in ensuring that supplies are available to be passed on to aid agencies.

IMMEDIATE NEEDS: WINTER

During its September mission to the KRI, RI staff met a displaced woman named Mina, who was living in an abandoned lot next to an unfinished building in the center of the town of Erbil. When asked what she and her family of twelve would do when winter set in, Mina turned her hands palms up, looked at the sky, and said, “God will know.” Mina and her family were living in a shelter made of crumbling cinder blocks so small that some members of the family had to sleep outside. The children had no shoes to wear. The weather was still warm when RI’s team spoke to them, but there was a definite understanding that winter was approaching quickly and the family would not be prepared.

Mina and her relatives are typical of many of the IDPs who have come to the KRI in the past two months. They had left their homes in the bordering governorates to the south when members of the Islamic State group made it impossible for them to stay. Scrambling to flee the violence, they had brought almost nothing with them beyond the clothes on their backs. Unable to afford a hotel or rent an apartment, they had simply taken up residence where they could find space – in this case, an empty lot full of rubble from a halted construction project. In the unfinished building nearby, more IDPs walked back and forth across floors – even several stories up – that were unfinished. Unable to afford a hotel or rent an apartment, the IDPs lived mostly in tents, sometimes with as many as sixty people to a room, at night it becomes impossible to walk between the mattresses on the floor, though during the day they are nearly piled against a wall to help keep them clean.

In addition to shoring up unfinished buildings and providing heaters and fuel to those living in collective shelters, the plan relies significantly on constructing camps and relocating IDPs to them, especially those who currently reside in schools and open spaces. While camps are not an ideal response for sheltering and supporting displaced people, in emergency situations like these they can be necessary.

Those IDPs living in schools will be a high priority for relocation to camps; the plan is to get the school year up and running by mid-November. But even after the school buildings are emptied they will need rehabilitation, and this will take time. The other high priority group for moving to camps will be those who are currently living in the open air across the region. Winter in a camp can provide the advantages of weather-resistant shelter – either tents or caravans – functional sanitation systems, and better access to health care and medicine. However, it is important to keep in mind that whether or not camps are a feasible shelter solution for IDPs will depend upon how rapidly they can be built, and upon their being built to proper standards and maintaining freedom of movement for the residents.

SHORT-TERM RESPONSE: SHELTER

The KRG and the United Nations have cooperated on the Immediate Response Plan (IRP), a plan that delineates the needs of the IDPs over the next sixty days. The IRP estimates that the cost of meeting these needs will be about $300,000,000 USD. There is an appropriate emphasis on shelter in the plan, as so many of the IDPs are living in open spaces or in inadequate situations that will not provide real protection during the winter months.

Inside buildings, IDPs often share one bathroom among 60 or more people, and cooking facilities may be a single gas burner placed in a common hallway. In one school RI visited, corrugated sheet metal placed vertically near a corner of the building served as a bathing area, and residents tried to warm water in used bottles placed in the sun just outside. With thirty to forty people to a room, at night it becomes impossible to walk between the mattresses on the floor, though during the day they are nearly piled against a wall to help keep them clean.

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Many of the IDPs RI spoke with were not aware of how relocation to a camp might in fact improve their living conditions. The most common concern was that spending the winter in a tent made only of plastic sheeting would not provide adequate protection. There was also a lack of understanding of what other assistance might be available in a camp, such as medical care and educational programs for children. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) should immediately implement a public education campaign for IDPs on the relocation to camps in order to minimize misinformation and to create a better understanding of available services.

ONGOING BASIC NEEDS: WHOSE RESPONSIBILITY?

While many of the IDPs RI met with confirmed having received a food parcel or mattresses and blankets from community groups or local authorities when first arriving in the KRI, most indicated that no further assistance has been forthcoming, in spite of the fact that many NGOs are undertaking needs assessments. Other than occasional support from a humanitarian agency, people are making ends meet by sharing resources, borrowing money, and through the goodwill of their Kurdish host communities.

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IMMEDIATE NEEDS: WINTER

During its September mission to the KRI, RI staff met a displaced woman named Mina, who was living in an abandoned lot next to an unfinished building in the center of the town of Erbil. When asked what she and her family of twelve would do when winter set in, Mina turned her hands palms up, looked at the sky, and said, “God will know.” Mina and her family were living in a shelter made of crumbling cinder blocks so small that some members of the family had to sleep outside. The children had no shoes to wear. The weather was still warm when RI’s team spoke to them, but there was a definite understanding that winter was approaching quickly and the family would not be prepared.

Mina and her relatives are typical of many of the IDPs who have come to the KRI in the past two months. They had left their homes in the bordering governorates to the south when members of the Islamic State group made it impossible for them to stay. Scrambling to flee the violence, they had brought almost nothing with them beyond the clothes on their backs. Unable to afford a hotel or rent an apartment, they had simply taken up residence where they could find space – in this case, an empty lot full of rubble from a halted construction project. In the unfinished building nearby, more IDPs walked back and forth across floors – even several stories up—that were unbounded by walls. So far, everyone appears to be dreadng a winter with inadequate shelter, little warm clothing, and no heaters or fuel.

Though some of the first arrivals two months ago found places to stay with relatives, friends, or acquaintances, many more came and had to seek ad hoc living situations. They have pitched tents in public parks and along the sides of roads; they have filled schools that went unused during the summer months; they are living collectively in church compounds, mosques, and local cultural centers, in abandoned lots, and under bridges. The KRG has delayed the start of the academic year twice because hundreds of schools are now serving as collective shelters for IDPs who arrived during the summer, and social tensions related to these educational delays in Dohuk and Erbil are real and increasing.

The onset of winter brings the need for reinforced or alternative shelter. For those living outdoors and in buildings without walls, thin tents – often made of light blankets – are the most common form of shelter and will offer scant protection from the elements when the weather becomes severe and temperatures get close to freezing. Humanitarian needs will consequently increase significantly over the next few months as the weather becomes cold and wet, and the aid system in place is not yet ready to respond on the scale that will be necessary. Besides a proliferation of flimsy living structures, many of the informal outdoor settlements in the cities do not have proper water supplies and sanitation systems, and the health problems that come with winter will be exacerbated by difficult hygiene conditions. There will also be challenges in medical care for communicable diseases like influenza that are spread when people are crowded into close quarters.

Without exception, aid agencies and government officials cited winter preparations as their most pressing concern for the IDPs. But they are in a rush against time to find all the people who are scattered across the KRI, and they are low on relief items. With the unexpectedly huge numbers of IDPs arriving this year, many aid organizations that had been assisting Syrian refugees used their stocks of basic supplies like mattresses and blankets to quickly help the IDPs. There is now a shortage of materials in the KRI that has been difficult to remedy in a timely manner. As a result, materials are slow to arrive and both the UN and its partners are lacking relief items, and a speedy way of receiving them. Part of the U.S. focus on the relief effort in Iraq should be providing plans on an as-needed basis to assist in the delivery of humanitarian supplies in time for winter. Partners in the U.S.-led coalition could also be supportive in ensuring that supplies are available to be passed on to aid agencies.

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The United Nations and its partner organizations and local NGOs are struggling to find and assist the IDPs in the Kurdistan region. Because the IDPs are spread out across the
three governors and are often setting themselves up whenever they find space, it can be difficult to locate the IDPs and determine their needs. Many of the local aid organizations in the KRI are quite small and have a limited area of operation, and the important humanitarian work they are doing may not be highly visible because of its modest scale. The local authorities of the municipalities are often well-informed about the IDPs’ locations, but don’t necessarily have the capacity to assist them beyond offering some initial food and shelter. They need the aid agencies to respond.

The KRG itself is having financial problems and is unable to assist on the necessary scale. About seventeen percent of Iraq’s national budget is constitutionally designated for the KRG, and must be disbursed to the region by the central government. However, Baghdad has not given the KRG its portion of the budget for many months. As a result, the KRG’s willingness to help with the humanitarian response in its jurisdiction is offset by its lack of funds. Iraq’s central government should immediately provide the KRG with its share of the national budget which has been withheld in 2014.

In response to the needs of the IDPs moving into the northern region, Iraq’s Ministry of Displacement and Migration (MoDM) began distributing cash assistance in the amount of one million Iraqi dinars (about $850 USD) to families who registered with it. However, many IDPs whom RI spoke to reported difficulty in registering. Some did not know where to go, some could not afford transportation to a place of registration, and some claimed that Ministry employees refused to register them.

In addition, many people in Iraq rely upon food aid through the Public Distribution System (PDS) to make ends meet. The system provides a package of staple food items, and the ration cards used for the system offers support based on the recipient’s place of habitual residence. The system has had difficulty functioning both in the KRI and in areas where armed opposition actors are in control. Nonetheless, the PDS database is large and comprehensive – some estimates indicate that up to 80% of the Iraqi population are registered in the PDS – and could be effectively used to provide timely food assistance to those in need).

Iraq’s central government should take up its responsibility for IDPs in the Kurdistan Region, including food aid through its Public Distribution System.

LONG-TERM RESPONSE: THE FUTURE OF THE IDPS

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Another important aspect of the long-term response for Iraqi IDPs will be providing adequate shelter. The IDP movements in Iraq prompted the government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to call for a haven for refugees from Iran and Turkey, the country also a haven for refugees from Iran and Turkey, the country also became the site of a massive internal displacement crisis during the American-led occupation. That crisis has not yet been resolved.

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