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DISPLACED IN IRAQ: LITTLE AID AND FEW OPTIONS

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Front cover: Displaced people at a camp in Anbar province.
This page: Displaced children at a camp in Baghdad.

INTRODUCTION

Iraq has been the site of significant internal displacement for well over a decade. However, this displacement has increased dramatically over the last two years as the security situation in central and south Iraq has deteriorated. Armed conflict at the beginning of 2014 drove hundreds of thousands of people out of Anbar's two main cities of Fallujah and Ramadi into the surrounding areas and to other provinces. By the end of that summer, when the Islamic militant group known as ISIS took over the districts of Mosul and Sinjar in Ninewa province, the number of IDPs reached 1.7 million.

Today, there are 3.2 million internally displaced people (IDPs) in Iraq. They are living in rented accommodations, unfinished buildings, and makeshift camps, often without adequate food, water, or medical care, wondering when it might be safe to go home. Of the 3.2 million displaced, 2.3 million are in central and south Iraq. However, the humanitarian response in that region of the country is very much in development right now. There is an urgent need for a more accurate and detailed picture of the IDPs' locations and needs, for better humanitarian access to many locations, and for adequate funding to get the work done. Since humanitarian actors have no control over the security situation in the country, they need to look more closely at ways to deliver aid under the current security conditions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ❑ UN agencies and their international non-governmental organization partners need to immediately strengthen their presence in Baghdad to coordinate and communicate more easily with each other and the Iraqi government.
- ❑ The Iraqi government should immediately improve the Public Distribution System re-registration process for internally displaced persons so they can continue receiving their monthly food rations in new locations.
- ❑ The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs should work with its partners to find innovative ways to deliver aid in besieged and hard-to-reach areas and, where possible, should adapt successful models from other situations and regions for the Iraq context.
- ❑ The U.S. government should expand humanitarian-specific capacity-building programs for local Iraqi groups providing help to IDPs.
- ❑ The U.S. government should find ways to support local Iraqi volunteer groups doing humanitarian work, including consideration of using umbrella organizations for training and follow-up.
- ❑ The U.S. Agency for International Development should make a formal commitment to keep its mission in Iraq open in order to responsibly carry out training and follow-up as an ongoing part of its civil society building work in the country.

**This report looks at the IDP population in central and south Iraq and does not include analysis of the refugee response.*

**The phrase central and south Iraq in this report refers to the area outside the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).*

**Place names in this report refer to governorates (rather than cities) unless otherwise noted.*

BACKGROUND

Right now in Iraq, 2.3 million internally displaced people (IDPs) in the central and south provinces of the country struggle to get by with extremely limited humanitarian assistance. Attention to and assistance for the hardships and suffering of IDPs in Iraq over the past few years have focused mainly on those in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), an area of the country that is stable and where aid providers can often function with fewer challenges to their safety. But many IDPs outside the KRI live in locations that are dangerous to travel to or off-limits entirely for aid agencies due to the unpredictable security situation. One consequence of this inability of humanitarian groups to maintain consistent operations is that far less is known about specific humanitarian needs for those in the central and south provinces of the country.



In August of 2014, RI visited the KRI and witnessed the huge numbers of IDPs living in makeshift collective shelters, camping in public parks, and squatting in abandoned buildings (see RI's report [Waiting For Winter: Displaced Iraqis in the KRI](#)) as winter approached. While the humanitarian situation for the region was indeed critical, most people suspected that things were even worse in central and south Iraq. But no one knew for sure, because no one could safely travel there to see.

At that same time, many international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) moved their centers of operation out of Baghdad and into Erbil, in the KRI. This move served a practical purpose: groups wanted to make the most of providing support in areas they had access to, and the majority of the people who were in need of humanitarian aid and who could be reached without so much danger to service providers were in the three provinces of the KRI.

Far less humanitarian assistance was reaching people in central and south Iraq, partly because there was little concrete information about their needs and how to deliver aid, and partly because active conflict made it practically impossible for humanitarian organizations to operate in those areas. Negotiating for humanitarian access to ISIS-controlled areas has always been a sensitive issue: donors and implementers alike did not and do not want to be mistaken for supporters of an armed conflict by appearing to have special connections to any side. However, reluctance to negotiate with such groups has resulted in extremely limited access to the vulnerable civilian populations in their territory.

In August 2015, an RI team traveled to Anbar, Babil, and Baghdad governorates to assess the needs of IDPs there, and to learn more about the humanitarian response in central and south Iraq.

THE WHOLE-OF-IRAQ APPROACH

In response to the worsening situation [in Iraq], the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Principles [sic] agreed to a L3 system-wide activation on 12 August [2014] noting the linkages to the Syria crisis, with an emphasis on “a whole of Iraq” approach and with the full knowledge of the limitations of what humanitarians can achieve in the country. Although the United Nations and its humanitarian partners have been responding with all its humanitarian aid tools to the crisis, in coordination with the Iraqi government, the crisis continues to exceed the capacity of the national authorities and the international community to respond.

-United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Iraq Humanitarian Needs Overview.
25 September 2014¹

The surface-level connection between the ISIS offensive in Syria and the ISIS onslaught in Iraq has led to a tendency to address the humanitarian situations in the two countries as one problem that could—perhaps even should—have one solution. But after two years of large-scale displacement of Iraqi civilians and the resultant two years of inability to gain access to most of those in central and south Iraq, it is clear that the strategy for providing humanitarian aid in that part of the country must be tailored to what is happening there. There are certainly parallels between the needs of Iraqi and Syrian IDPs, and the world’s inability to meet them. But a significant difference between the two contexts is the fact that Iraq has an internationally-recognized and internationally-engaged central government that is therefore responsible for the IDPs within its borders. Cross-border aid from central and south Iraq’s neighbors is not likely to be forthcoming, as the political and humanitarian conditions driving aid from Syria’s neighbors into that country are not replicated around Iraq’s borders.

“We can’t even get half the money to not meet the international standards.”

-Donor government official

In the summer of 2014, not long after many humanitarian agencies based in Baghdad relocated large numbers of staff members to Erbil after the ISIS offensive on Mosul, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) designated Iraq as an L3 crisis. This is the highest level of humanitarian crisis, and is intended to trigger additional resources to address the situation. The L3 designation put emphasis on the whole-of-Iraq approach. The intent of the approach is to avoid a situation in which help goes only to those in areas that are easier to access because they are controlled by sympathetic authorities or are physically safe. Put simply, aid must reach people based on their vulnerability, not on their geographic location. Where dangerous conditions make it difficult to deliver relief items and services, new and perhaps unconventional ideas would be in order. The IASC acknowledged that this would be easier said than done.

For two years now, the humanitarian assistance that has reached people in central and south Iraq has been sporadic and inadequate. After agencies moved their centers of operation out of Baghdad in 2014, it became more difficult for them to do a first-hand assessment of the needs on the ground and to plan an approach to aid delivery. While the whole-of-Iraq approach was recognized as essential, the coordination meetings that happened in Baghdad were difficult and expensive for KRI-based staff members to attend, and the few groups that remained based in Baghdad did not have the combined resources to do a



Displaced woman in a camp in Baghdad.

large-scale assessment and provide accordingly, even without the added complication of the security challenges. The annual, multi-agency analysis of the countrywide humanitarian situation results in a humanitarian needs overview to help inform the plans of humanitarian actors. It is a useful general document, but does not offer the sort of detail needed to support planning for specific populations.

Aid in ISIS-besieged places stopped entirely in some cases, and aid to hard-to-reach areas often depended upon a provider just happening to have knowledge of the locations and needs of populations—often because of connections with local individuals—rather than on a systematic evaluation of the situation. Aid groups also must negotiate access to these places, sometimes with local or national Iraqi government authorities and sometimes with armed actors. The fear of being perceived as connected to the latter limits how much effort humanitarians are willing and able to put into such negotiations.

By contrast, the generally good access to displaced populations in the KRI, and the presence of so many international actors in that region, made it easier for the groups to work together to provide an evaluation of needs and plan for meeting them. Security is a real concern in central and south Iraq and access is genuinely difficult and sometimes dangerous. Nonetheless, the UN agencies and the large INGOs that are meant to offer assistance need to immediately strengthen their presence in Baghdad to coordinate and communicate more easily with each other and the Iraqi government, to make realistic plans for continued service beyond the KRI, and to have enough human resources in the area to deliver aid in the moments when it is possible.



Open sewage on the ground floor of an abandoned building where IDPs are seeking shelter in Anbar.



Abandoned project to install a water system in an IDP settlement in Anbar.

CONDITIONS AND ASSISTANCE

At every IDP settlement/camp RI visited in central and south Iraq, IDPs and camp organizers² told of how single incidents of aid had arrived from either the Iraqi government or international organizations, along with promises of more in the future, but those promises never panned out. The Iraqi government, various UN agencies, and INGOs are providing one-off assistance, but not returning to settlements for follow-up or additional support. As one volunteer camp administrator told the RI team during its visit to Baghdad, “Everyone is working... but there’s no plan.” Most IDPs RI spoke to felt they had had the opportunity to ask for what they needed from camp managers, and camp managers indicated they had been able to ask either INGOs or UN agencies in turn, but no support was forthcoming in response.

In one Baghdad settlement, a request from a volunteer administrator to the Iraqi government for 1,000 tents resulted in the actual delivery of 100. While this was helpful (if partial), the IDPs were thus forced to share overcrowded tents. A food ration of wheat that covered 400 families in the same settlement was

“People don’t just need eating and drinking. They need hope and solutions.”

-Camp manager in an IDP settlement, Baghdad governorate

never replenished after the first delivery. The camp still lacks electricity, water, and a proper sanitation system—residents were using portable toilets at the time of RI’s visit. The volunteers had also identified more than 100 people with disabilities, but were not able to offer any specialized services. Even with these challenges, some of the IDPs told RI how they had come there after having been at another camp in Anbar, because this one had better services.

Through its Ministry of Migration and Displacement (MoMD), the Iraqi government provides some support to IDPs, but it covers only a fraction of the needs. While the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has fairly recently announced its inability to continue to assist IDPs in its jurisdiction without significant international assistance, the Iraqi government has never been able to keep up with the central and south IDP population in the first place.

Even an essential social safety net, like the Public Distribution System (PDS) that provides monthly food support to huge numbers of Iraqis³, has not been adjusted to keep serving the same people in new locations. Some IDPs told RI that they had had little trouble registering their new locations with the PDS and had received at least one set of rations, but most indicated that the re-registration process was slow, opaque,



Displaced living in camps in Baghdad.



and ineffective. Aid agencies are sometimes able to fill in the gap while people wait for their new registrations, but many more people are simply going without food rations. The Iraqi government should immediately improve the re-registration process for IDPs so that they can continue receiving their monthly food rations even in new locations.

IDPs are further made vulnerable by the inability to provide for themselves. Job opportunities are scarce to begin with, and there is often a fear of venturing out into the more urban areas where work might be found. Though RI spoke to a few people who were able to find occasional work, or to move to locations where they had friends and family to create support networks, many others indicated that they are simply afraid to leave the IDP settlements for employment or any other reason. They felt that Baghdad was much too dangerous a place to show up in as an unfamiliar face. Besides hindering access to any occasional work opportunities that might be available, the danger—real or perceived—meant many children were not in school and people were declining to get health care even where they were eligible to use the national systems.

The fear for their own safety appears more acute among Sunni refugees from Anbar who have been forced to relocate to Baghdad. They are routinely suspected of having ISIS sympathies simply because of their place of origin, and some spoke of having been

pushed out by local residents in Shia areas. Thus, they were now experiencing their second displacement. While plenty of IDPs in Baghdad would like to move on, they don't because of the fear of having to travel through that province to reach another location they might consider safer.

RI visited multiple camps in Anbar, Babil, and Baghdad that had either no or unaffordable electricity, no reliable clean water source, poor sanitation, and practically nonexistent medical care. The camps also have inadequate food and shelter. There are new arrivals in camps every day, but there is simply no way

“There is no real interest in the displaced.”

-Camp manager in an IDP settlement, Baghdad governorate

to provide for everyone in need by using the current systems and what few plans seem to exist.

At one IDP camp that RI visited in Anbar, an organizer pointed out a puddle of sewage several inches deep in the entryway of a nearby abandoned building that had been the first shelter in the camp. The sewage had been running down from higher floors, and the camp's organizer estimated that there was one latrine for every 120 people, while international standards recommend one toilet for every 20 users. They had requested more, but so far none had been delivered. A plan for a Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) system was initiated by the Iraqi government but not carried out. Mobile medical units were physically put in place, but not staffed or opened.



An IDP camp located on land donated by a private landowner, Baghdad.

The camp is managed by an energetic team of IDPs who do their best to solve problems, but the lack of presence of the Iraqi government, the UN, and INGOs made it practically impossible for the camp to meet even basic humanitarian standards. And the reality is that that lack of presence is due in significant part to security concerns. In addition to being in Anbar province generally, where ISIS controls large chunks of territory, its location between Ramadi and Fallujah puts it uncomfortably close not only to ISIS territory but also to the ongoing violence in both those cities. One INGO with a long history of programs in Anbar told RI that it no longer sends westerners into the province for their own safety. With organizations feeling so cautious about who can reasonably travel to such an area, and with actual fighting happening so close by, it is not surprising that humanitarian aid is in short supply. It is, however, a problem that must be remedied.

Iraq is not the first complex humanitarian disaster the UN and its partners have dealt with. The UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) should work with its partners to find innovative ways to deliver aid in besieged and hard-to-reach areas, and successes in other situations and regions should be adapted as possible for Iraq immediately. In Syria, for example, INGOs are beginning to look more closely at how they can support local groups with local staff that are providing the aid that is so desperately needed.

THE ROLE OF LOCAL GROUPS

In any humanitarian crisis, local people and host communities are usually the first responders. With so much territory in south and central Iraq considered too dangerous for internationals to operate in, a good portion of the lifesaving assistance that IDPs receive is provided by Iraqi NGOs and volunteers that know the local areas and have connections and access to the communities where IDPs are living. The volunteers are often from those communities themselves.

While national and local Iraqi NGOs and groups of volunteers are providing support to IDPs in areas they can reach, the partnerships with INGOs and United Nations agencies that would normally help coordinate and fund their work have been lacking. As a result, the humanitarian response taking place in central and south Iraq is dependent upon groups with small-scale (albeit often good quality and fast-moving) operations that are struggling—for lack of funding and support—to provide adequate aid on a regular basis.

While in Baghdad, RI met with representatives of multiple groups of Iraqi volunteers who had formed teams to provide assistance to IDPs. In areas they knew and had access to, they had figured out the types of assistance IDPs needed. They raised operational funds from the public and their personal networks,

and dispensed with things like formal office space that would cost additional money. The volunteer groups then procured supplies or expertise as necessary, and travelled directly into IDP communities to offer support. For the most part, these activist groups are not registered NGOs (though a few have taken that step). They explained that the registration process has a number of specific requirements that were beyond their abilities — things like office space and equipment and having a formal board. They are also generally not in direct contact with the UN agencies, the INGOs, or the Iraqi government for their relief work. They know that these agencies and groups exist, but often do not know how to reach out to them for collaboration. These groups do, however, use social media to coordinate extensively with each other in order to bring vulnerable populations to light and to make sure they are not duplicating work amongst themselves. They are also concerned with humanitarian principles in their work, and so are interested in partnerships with organizations that uphold them and can help them learn.

During its August visit to Iraq, RI joined an Iraqi aid group on a site visit to an IDP community in Babil. The displaced

families had come mostly from Anbar, Diyala, and Salahaddin over the past 18 months, and new people arrived every week. Many were living with host families throughout the area and would congregate at a site in town to receive aid when it was available. On the day RI visited, there was a food distribution for about 70 families, a group was convened where women could discuss their particular needs, and a few members of the

“The volunteers have skills, and so do the IDPs. We asked the organizations and funders for money directly, because it’s more efficient.”

-Camp manager in an IDP settlement, Baghdad governorate

local provincial council—a governing group which helped arrange and oversee support to the IDPs—were present to talk to people about their needs and find out if there were new arrivals. Some of the young vol-

unteers engaged the children in play, while a volunteer who was also a doctor roamed the group looking for people in need of medical attention.

The members of the provincial council talked to RI about the challenges they faced in supporting the IDPs. In theory, they were supposed to get assistance from the central government for supporting the IDPs, but in practice there was little useful communication between the two. The displaced were allowed into the town’s local systems—health care, for example—but it was difficult to accommodate the large numbers of new



Aftermath of a windstorm in an IDP settlement in Anbar. Photo courtesy of an IDP living in Anbar province.



Volunteers from a local Iraqi group prepare to distribute food for IDPs, Baghdad.

people who needed services. One of the council members explained how he would sometimes personally refer people into the medical care process in order to get them attention in a timely manner even if they could not afford it.

They also spoke of how two INGOs had set up two different training initiatives intended to give IDPs possibilities for livelihoods. The INGOs had been in contact with the local provincial council to get started

and the council had welcomed them. But when the projects had failed for lack of planning and follow-up, the council was reluctant to continue

trying to establish other similar connections with aid groups. Their connection with one of the organizers of the local group had been fruitful, as RI saw, but it was not part of a systematic plan to find IDPs and connect them to groups that could help them. As was the case in the other areas RI visited, much of the available support depended upon the connections of local individuals—sometimes in official positions and sometimes not—with an aid volunteer or a staff member of a group.

The IDPs at this site repeatedly told RI that they had received no visits and no help from any organization other than the local volunteers who were hosting the RI team. It appeared that some had indeed been in contact with the provisional council

members for various issues, but their numbers were few and they indicated that adequate help was rarely available. Many of them were therefore living without a reliable source of clean water or electricity, were dependent upon food distributions, and were simply scraping by any way they could.

In the face of the current displacement and the security challenges that have come with it, Iraqi civil society—including the

groups described—is more relevant than ever. However, the majority of these groups are simply not accounted for in the larger humanitarian system's estimation

of its own abilities and resources for central and south Iraq. This is an unfortunate oversight, as bringing such groups into the assessment, planning, and implementation of aid projects would increase the amount of assistance available, and create partnerships with Iraqi individuals and groups that would have access to some of the areas that are difficult for international organizations to reach.

“People came here even though there are shortages. Safety is more important than hunger.”

-IDP in Iraqi government camp

SUPPORT TO LOCAL GROUPS

Even with the international investment (particularly by the United States) in building civil society over the past decade, the NGO sector in Iraq is still immature. It began building slowly in 2003, as donors were enthusiastic about funding capacity-building of the young and direct implementation projects in areas like justice and conflict resolution. While this support helped increase the numbers of groups and the activities they carried out, it did not necessarily result in robust capacity. Now, with international attention to Iraq dwindling over the past few years, there has been less support for building civil society—including humanitarian groups.

The U.S. government should expand humanitarian-specific capacity-building programs for local Iraqi groups that are providing humanitarian assistance, or that are interested in doing so. This would be a continuation of the U.S. government's civil society building work in Iraq, but with a shift of focus (or an additional focus) on humanitarian aid. Capacity-building activities are often a component of grant funding, but there needs to be more attention to the specific content of such programs, and they must be based on the groups' stated needs. On previous missions in the Middle East, RI has spoken on many occasions with local groups that had participated in U.S. government-funded capacity-building activities for which there was little or no follow-up, such as small grants or organizational mentoring, and so the trainings were essentially wasted. This is an important lesson to be learned and improved upon in Iraq, as there is now an urgent opportunity for building humanitarian capacity in Iraq's civil society.

There is an NGO forum in Iraq that includes Iraqi groups as well as INGOs, and is meant to be a coordinating and capacity-building body. There are also a number of national Iraqi NGOs that are registered, and have solid experience in humanitarian aid. In some cases, they partner with smaller local Iraqi groups and with the groups of volunteers that are managing to provide help to IDPs. With so many of the volunteer groups eager to be formally trained, both of these structures could be effective ways to reach out to those groups for capacity-building both organizationally and operationally. The U.S. government should find ways to support local Iraqi volunteer groups doing humanitarian work through such umbrella organizations that already have working relationships with capable groups that meet security criteria. In addition, the unresolved issue of whether the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) will keep its mission in Iraq open needs to be settled immediately. USAID should make a commitment to keep its mission in Iraq open for at least five more years in order to responsibly carry out training and follow-up as an ongoing part of its civil society work in the country.

Subsequently, more Iraqi groups could eventually qualify for funding from international donors and UN-pooled funds,⁴ and their systematic inclusion in the coordination and response would bring new, much-needed information to the planning, along with better access to places that might otherwise be out of reach because of security issues.

Many IDPs, humanitarian organizations, and government officials RI spoke with during its August visit to Iraq agreed on two important points:

1. Internal displacement in south and central Iraq is most likely going to get worse, and returns on a large scale are not feasible, and;
2. Internal displacement in south and central Iraq is likely to be long-term.

Predictions about the number of additional IDPs in the coming year ranged from one million to 1.7 million, with particular concern focused on the area around Mosul, which was seen as the next most likely ISIS objective. There was also general agreement that people fleeing Mosul would not be able to get into the KRI, which has been restricting IDP entry for months now; nor would they choose to flee very far south, as it would be a longer, more expensive, and more dangerous journey because it would involve travel through central Iraq. If more displacement is an indication that the general security situation in Iraq is deteriorating, supporting the local groups that have meaningful access to the displaced is the best way of addressing humanitarian needs.

Daryl Grisgraber was in Anbar, Babil, and Baghdad governorates in August 2015.

ENDNOTES


1. http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Iraq_Humanitarian_Needs_Overview_25_September_2014.pdf
2. Most of the IDP settlements/camps RI visited are effectively self-governed. Either a settlement resident (or groups of residents) steps up and takes charge of camp coordination and management, or volunteers from the local area take on the responsibility.
3. Before the current crisis began, the PDS was the source of more than one-third of Iraqis' calorie consumption, and more than half of the poor's consumption. <http://www.irinnews.org/report/97991/less-dependent-on-food-rations>
4. In the most recent cycle of UN-pooled-fund grants, Iraqi NGOs in Baghdad noted that there was very little access to the system for groups outside the KRI. The \$20 million meant mostly for Iraqi groups was accessible only to those already involved in the clusters. The process was also conducted entirely in English.

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