

IRAQ

Migration and displacement: a growing and multifaceted problem

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Pervasive violence has militarized and polarized society. Daily life has become a nightmare. Kidnappings and killings are widespread, forcing millions of Iraqis to abandon their homes and seek sanctuary in safer areas within the country or abroad, the largest and fastest migration in modern history. The country urgently needs an assessment of real needs by a partnership of government agencies, UN organizations and international and local NGO's, with the support of local communities.

In any country, human security involves far more national security. It has economic, nutritional, social, gender and political dimensions, and encompasses individuals, local communities and the nation as a whole. Those who lack subsistence, are marginalized or subjected to violence, who have lost their freedom or face any kind of danger as individuals or as members of a group are all deprived of human security.

The waves of migration from Iraq started in the early 1950s with the deportation of the Jews. For more than two decades in the 1970s and 1980s the State pursued a policy of displacing the Kurds, not only as a punishment but also to change the ethnic composition of Iraqi Kurdistan, particularly in Kirkuk. During the same period, the Government deported hundreds of thousands of Iraqis of Iranian origin to Iran.

At the same time, the Government unleashed an aggressive campaign against political dissidents. This led to a massive wave of emigration that included many artists, intellectuals and scientists. During the 1990s, economic sanctions, the declining economy and deteriorating living standards compelled thousands of scientists to seek employment in other countries, inside and outside the Arab region. Prior to the regime's collapse, the number of Iraqi émigrés was already approaching two million.

The largest displacement in modern history

After the occupation of the country in 2003 by the US-led forces, insecurity skyrocketed with the emergence of militias and sectarian-based violence, including revenge killings. The plague of assassination soon spread striking down university lecturers, doctors, engineers, managers and financial experts. Between April 2003 and May 2006, more than 102 doctors were assassinated, according to the Ministry of Health, and many more were threatened or kidnapped. This led to yet another mass exodus.

Violence flamed even higher after February 2006, when the criminal demolition of the Imam Al-Askari shrine, one of the holiest Shi'ite sites, set off fierce sectarian violence and massive,

forced migration. Karbala Province had more than 18,000 displaced families; the provinces of Salahadin, Najaf and Anbar Provinces each had 12,000; 50,000 more fled to Iraqi Kurdistan. The number of internal refugees seeking shelter in Baghdad and other provinces was similar if not higher. By the end of the year, the number of internally displaced Iraqis had climbed to 2.3 million, according to UN estimates. Tens of thousands more had fled the country. In the same year, Iraqis topped the list of asylum seekers in the industrialized countries, averaging 8,100 applications a monthly.

Syria has absorbed a great number of the refugees than any other country, more than one million, while Jordan has taken in more than half a million. The influx has strained the infrastructure of these two countries and many others, particularly in the housing, health services and education sectors. While those who had already gained entry were receiving assistance, the host countries introduced more strict entry procedures to limit the number of additional refugees.

A similar pattern emerged within Iraq. Some provincial authorities imposed more stringent procedures to limit the number of displaced people. For example, Dehuk, Arbil and Sulaimaniya required displaced Iraqis to register at the Ministry of Immigration to become eligible for assistance. This violates a government decree issued in July 2007.

Although the total number of refugees can only be guessed, the UN Commission for Refugees has estimated that by December 2007 2.5 million Iraqis were still in the country and 1.9 million were living elsewhere. Combined, these 4.4 million refugees represent 15% of the entire population, by far the largest and most rapid migration in modern history. The actual numbers could be far higher, since many Iraqis who abandoned their homes have not registered as displaced or refugees.

The nightmare of daily life

“Daily life is a nightmare for Iraqis and that is driving them to escape,” a Red Cross spokesperson lamented. “Although it is difficult to foresee what will happen, things appear dire and what we can see is deteriorating living conditions”.

A spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees described what this has meant for some of the most vulnerable members of society: “Due to violence, many people escape from the multi-sectarian areas even before they are forced to do so... Children stopped going to school ... their parents cannot find work ... the number of street children is on the rise ... child labour is on the rise ... there are children collecting garbage”.

Religious minorities such as Christians, Sab'is, Shabak and others have become particular targets, subjected to threats and personal violence, as well as attacks on their shrines in Basra, Baghdad and other places. More than 10,000 Christian families moved to Ninevah and many thousands more to Arbil in Iraqi Kurdistan. In addition, thousands of Palestinian residents who had supported the old regime moved from their homes after being attacked.

Terrorist groups have also targeted women, subjecting them to assassinations and kidnappings, as well as violent imposition of *hijab* (a code of modesty in dress that requires women to cover everything except their face and hands in public) and restrictions on their participation in public life.

Problems faced by the émigrés and the displaced

- **Loss of income:** A majority of the émigrés and displaced lose their major or only source of income. Many are robbed of their savings and valuables before emigrating. This frequently impels them to compete with locals in the job market, accept low wages or work in the black market.
- **Abrupt termination of education:** Uprooting children from their environment inevitably affects their education. Many are unable to resume their studies for financial reasons, others because local schools cannot absorb them. Some go to school in camps, but receive a lower standard of education there. In roughly half of the refugee families surveyed by Iraqi Al-Amal in Karbala, Salahadin and Ninevah provinces, some or all the children were not attending school.
- **Deterioration of environmental and health services:** Straitened finances or the absence of services cause a rapid deterioration in health. The camps lack the most basic health services. A survey by the Iraqi Al-Amal Association found that 50% of the families had no access to medicine.
- **Housing:** Every displaced person is, in essence, homeless. A majority of displaced Iraqis live in deplorable conditions (three persons per room). In some cases, six to eight people share a single tent.
- **Psychological effects:** People who have been driven from their homes typically lose family members, neighbours and friends and suffer from alienation, fear, anxiety, uncertainty and homesickness. The difficulty of adapting to a new environment and resuming a normal life will cause lasting psychological scars.

Unsatisfactory response

Given the magnitude of displacement and its disastrous consequences, the response of the Iraqi Government has been less than satisfactory. Inadequacies have failure to provide safe havens for the displaced people and inadequate support to the host provinces, particularly in education and health services. The Ministry of Migration is poorly funded. The registration process, mandatory to obtain Government assistance, is at best slow; sometimes it shuts down entirely, in some cases for long periods.

Iraqi NGOs, despite their recent origin and limited capacities and resources, have done their best to alleviate some of the hardship faced by the displaced people. However, due to the deteriorating security conditions and the difficulty in reaching the displaced, the NGOs are able to serve just a small percentage of the displaced.

International support has not been sufficient either. The poor security conditions have made it difficult, if not impossible, for the UN and the major international organizations to act in many cases. Even so, slow bureaucratic procedures have also hindered the international response, and assistance that has been provided has not necessarily corresponded to the greatest needs.

Lessons to be learned

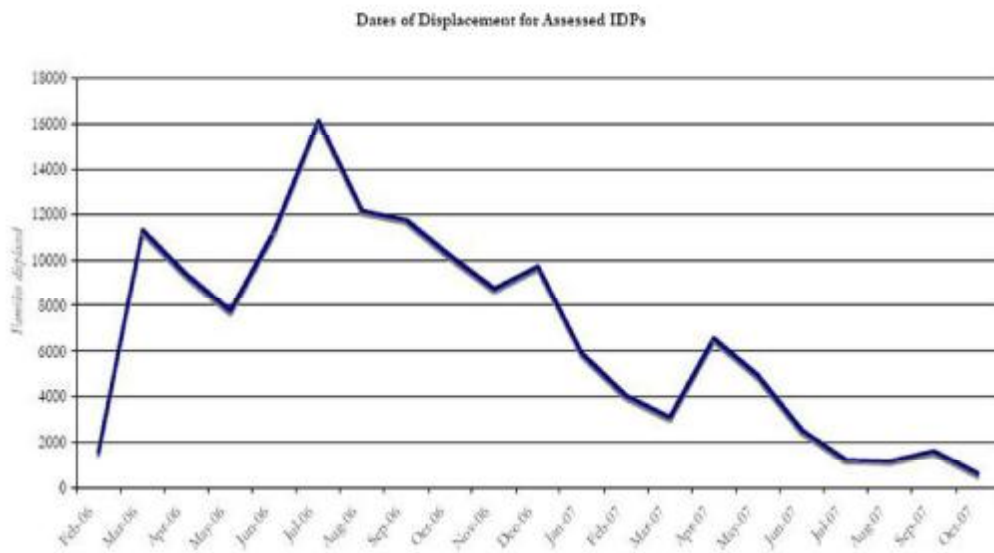
- Any effort to mitigate the suffering of refugees and displaced people must be based on a careful assessment of needs. Furthermore, a sustainable, effective campaign can only be established through a partnership between government agencies, UN organizations and international and local NGOs acting with the support of local communities. It will also require building the capacity of the local communities and NGOs.
- The participation of young people, currently beleaguered by a culture of violence, in re-building programmes is crucial, so that they can develop their constructive capacity.
- Emergency actions must be linked to sustainable development programmes. Otherwise, violence will erupt again and again. One of the aims of the emergency aid must be the stabilization of society.
- The emergency aid must include basic provisions and services, including food, health, education, electricity, water, housing and, above all, safe haven.
- Human catastrophes have the greatest impact on women and children. Providing for their safety and needs must be a paramount objective.
- The people served must be provided with education on human rights issues and conflict resolution and be given an opportunity to participate in the social democratic process.
- Finances, management, beneficiaries and the selection of partners in any activity, whether concerned with relief or development, must be transparent.

BOX: Main causes of migration and displacement

- Sectarian strife: Sectarian violence by the militias and other armed groups is the cause of forced migration. Departures are usually preceded by threats, kidnappings and killings. In some areas, sectarian violence is responsible for 90% of the migrations if not more.
- Violence: Iraq has many violent factions, each with its own agenda:
 - The militias and armed groups of diverse types and allegiance (Al Qaeda, etc.)
 - Government forces
 - The multi-national forces
- The militias and armed groups perpetrate violence in many forms and impose their own rule, independent of any control by the central government. At the same time, the Government and multi-national military often use excessive force against civilians, including killings and home demolitions, forcing people to flee.
- Non-tolerance: Armed groups are usually intolerant. Many people are forced to choose between hiding their true beliefs and fleeing.
- Culture: Groups with Islamist tendencies have resorted to violence and banned cultural clubs, entertainment establishments and intermingling of the sexes in their areas of influence. Wearing the *hijab* becomes compulsory, not a choice. Those who fail to obey risk assault or death.



FIGURE 1.



source: INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR MIGRATION

FIGURE 2.

