



Displaced Iraqis and Refugees: A Growing Crisis

The conflict in Iraq has created one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world. War, sectarian violence, and a breakdown in the rule of law have displaced 2.7 million Iraqis within their country. As many as another 2 million are refugees in surrounding countries such as Jordan, Syria, and Saudi Arabia. Iraqis now constitute the second largest refugee population after the Afghans in Pakistan and Iran.



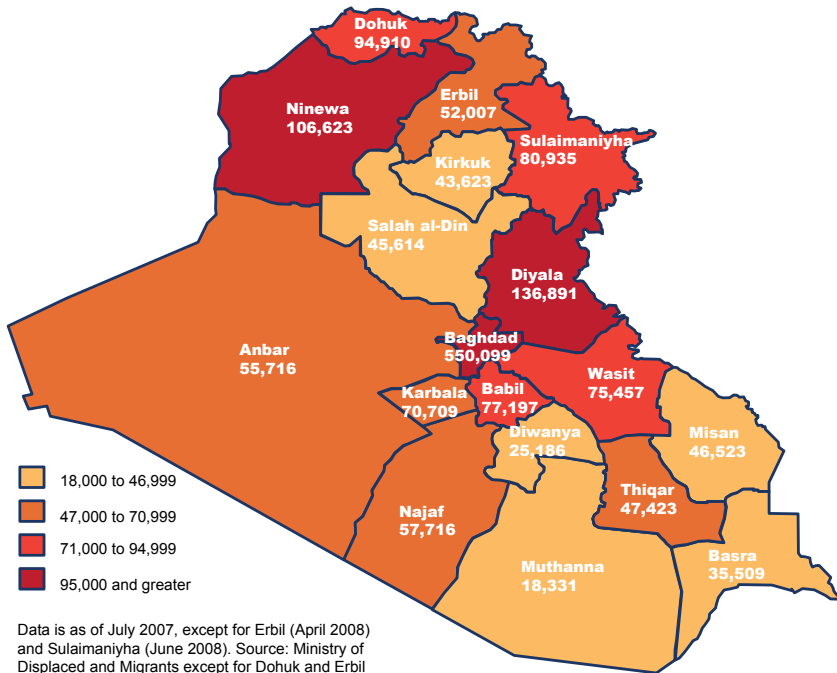
A child hides behind his mother at a camp for Iraqi internally displaced people.

In fact, violence and displacement are not new to the people of Iraq. The eight-year long Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s was devastating, affecting every level of society and leaving at least one million dead, wounded, or prisoners of war. Many civilians left their communities along the Iran-Iraq border and these areas became minefields. Hundreds of thousands also left Iraq during and after the 1991 military operation Desert Storm. The exodus continued due to the hardships of living under economic sanctions.

Saddam Hussein's regime also used displacement as part of official policy, particularly targeting the Kurdish population. At the time of the U.S. led invasion in 2003, there were already 1 million mainly Kurdish displaced Iraqis. In addition, 34,000 Palestinian refugees had been sheltering in Iraq for years, along with other smaller minorities.

As with the majority of refugee crises caused by conflicts, it is the displaced and refugee women and children who are the most severely affected. When husbands, fathers, and brothers have been killed, kidnapped, or put in detention, the women are left to look after themselves and their families.

Numbers of Internally Displaced Iraqis Per Province.



Data is as of July 2007, except for Erbil (April 2008) and Sulaimaniya (June 2008). Source: Ministry of Displaced and Migrants except for Dohuk and Erbil (Directorate General of Displaced and Migrants) and Sulaimaniyah (Security Offices).

There are very few employment opportunities for them and they live with a constant sense of insecurity. Many girls are not allowed to go to school because of fears for their safety.

Displaced and Living in Fear

After the bombing of the al-Askari Mosque in February 2006, sectarian violence uprooted hundreds of thousands of Iraqis from their homes. Civilians were forced out at gunpoint or chose to leave in search of safety. Material and economic destruction contributed to the creation of impossible living conditions. Militia groups often deliberately target basic services. Even today, in Baghdad the municipal sewage system barely functions and according to the United Nations Children's Fund, "over 600 workers from the Ministry of Municipalities and Public Works have been killed in 2005 attempting to repair these networks."¹

The scale and consequences of displacement in Iraq are shocking:

The scale and consequences of displacement in Iraq are shocking:

- One in five Iraqis has suffered some type of displacement since 2003.
- Four million people in Iraq lack access to sufficient food.²
- Thirty-five percent of Iraqi children under the age of 5 suffer from acute or chronic malnutrition.³
- More than 6 million people across southern and central Iraq lack essential medical care.⁴
- Seventy percent of Iraqis – and 66 percent of children under the age of 5 – do not have regular access to safe drinking water.⁵

- Net enrollment in primary school has fallen from 86 percent in 2003-2004 to 46 percent in 2006-2007.⁶

Before 2006, 1.2 million Iraqis were displaced, but since February 2006, that number has jumped to almost 2.7 million, with an estimated 1.5 million additional individuals being forced from their homes.⁷ Because they still reside within Iraq's borders, however, they are not protected by the universally recognized 1951 Refugee Convention, a set of principles providing for the protection and care of refugees.⁸ Instead, as internally displaced people, they are protected under the "Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement," which establishes only the minimum standards for treatment of IDPs.

Seeking Refuge in Neighboring Countries

In addition to the massive displacement of civilians within Iraq, another 2 million Iraqis are sheltering in neighboring countries such as Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Iran, Lebanon, Turkey, and the Gulf States. Many of the refugees are not allowed to work in their host countries and are now running out

The Story of Lafta

Lafta was born in Baghdad city in 1955. His father was executed by the Ba'ath regime due to suspicion of being connected to a prohibited party. He was also harassed for the same suspicion. But his life changed for the worse after the bombing of the shrine in Samara. Unable to leave his home within the 24-hour deadline given by a militia group, masked gunmen broke into the house, kidnapped five of his six children and tortured him and his wife. They fled to Najaf, moving from place to place. Then the local governor's office evicted all displaced persons sheltering in government buildings. He is now living in a tent in a deserted area south of the city. When asked about his life, Lafta said, "I lost everything. I now suffer from a very tragic emotional and financial situation. I don't want anything from this life, just to find my children or at least their bodies."



Lafta (left) tells his story to an IRD staff member.

Queen Noor Acknowledges IRD at UNHCR Conference

On June 25th, 2008 at UNHCR's annual gathering of NGO partners in Geneva, Her Majesty Queen Noor of Jordan highlighted the work that IRD does in partnership with the Jordanian Red Crescent (JRC) and the Noor Al Hussein Foundation (NHF), the Jordanian NGO of which she is president.



Queen Noor meets with IRD staff in 2007.

of the small savings they brought with them when they left Iraq. Many are also afraid to make use of the few services that are available to refugees for fear that it will bring them to the attention of authorities.

Although refugees are guaranteed all rights accorded to them in the 1951 Refugee Convention, none of the receiving countries, with the exception of Egypt, is a signatory to the convention. Customary international law forbids *all* countries from forcibly returning (*re-foulement*) refugees, but many Iraqis still remain fearful of being deported back to Iraq.

The common notion of tent camps housing large numbers of refugees does not apply in the case of Iraq because the Iraqi refugee crisis is an urban crisis (an increasing phenomenon throughout the world). Most of the refugees rent small apartments in low-income sections of the city, which makes it exceedingly difficult to determine the total number of refugees with any degree of certainty. Together with internally displaced Iraqis, they constitute the largest urban refugee population in the world.

Iraq is itself a host country for refugees. Before 2003, it had been harboring 34,000 Palestinians—22,000 in Baghdad alone—along with Turks, Iranian Kurds, and Iranian Ahwazis. Many Palestinians had been living in Iraq since 1948, receiving benefits and protection from the government. After Saddam Hussein's fall, they became the target of harassment from Iraqis who associated them with the Ba'athist regime. Many were evicted from their homes and fled to the border areas of Jordan and Syria.⁹

The Iraqi government has been criticized for not doing more to help its own citizens, especially given its large financial reserves. Part of the problem lies in the lack of capacity of the agencies concerned: Ministry of

Displacement and Migration, Ministry of Trade, Ministry of the Interior, and Ministry of Education. At the same time, however, there have been allegations of sectarianism in the distribution of aid.¹⁰

Iraqi refugees and IDPs face many of the same challenges and hardships. They have been uprooted from their homes, have lost their livelihoods, have witnessed extreme violence, and have, in most cases, lost family members. Women risk becoming victims of gender based violence while children are at risk of becoming malnourished. All face a loss of control over their lives and uncertain futures.

IRD in Iraq

In response to the crisis of displacement within Iraq, IRD is implementing relief programs for displaced Iraqis in 10 of Iraq's 18 governorates through its *Humanitarian Assistance Intervention (HAI)*. Through these programs, IRD has assisted upwards of 2.5 million persons to date, providing relief supplies, water and sanitation facilities, primary health care services, income generation activities, training, and local capacity building, shelter and legal assistance and protection.

One HAI program has improved the water supply system for thousands of people in Al-Sa'edi, a large quarter in the Al-Qasim sub-district of the governorate of Babil (south of Baghdad), where 35 percent of the population are internally displaced. These families fled from many locations as a result of sectarian and political violence. Some are now living with their relatives while others are in rented houses or living in public buildings. The existing water system for the area, located on the Al-Qasim River, had suffered from years of neglect and was badly in need of rehabilitation. IRD repaired the water supply plant from the bottom up, and it now supplies water to 5,000 people including 300 families who had no previous access to the water network and had been using unsafe water from the river. The average quantity of water per family will soon be enough to meet drinking and other domestic needs.



Preventative health care at a clinic for Iraqi mothers and children in Jordan.



Children play in a camp for internally displaced Iraqis.

IRD in Jordan

An estimated 400,000 to 500,000 Iraqis are living in Jordan, of which some 60 percent have exceeded their visa limits. Most of the refugees live in poor neighborhoods of Amman while others live in the areas of Irbid, Madaba, Karak, and Zarqa. They have little or no access to employment while the costs of living have increased over the last year. Vulnerable groups such as female-headed households and families without remittances are finding it very difficult to provide for their families. These factors together have placed the families under considerable stress, causing them to depend heavily on NGO assistance.

The *Strategic Health Support Program (SHSP)* is one IRD's programs serving Iraqi refugees in Jordan. Extensive surveys with the Iraqi refugees concluded that health care is their biggest concern after food and shelter. The SHSP provides primary health care services to refugees in Amman, Irbid, and Zarqa. Through the program, IRD has been able to build trust among the refugees and is making significant in-roads into the often disbursed and misunderstood Iraqi refugee community. The program is expanding to reach out to more refugee families, and to provide secondary health care, medicines, and laboratory services in addition to primary care.

IRD trained a volunteer force of predominately women to assess the physical and psycho-social health of entire households and to increase outreach to vulnerable Iraqis. IRD is building an advanced psycho-social care center in the Noor Al Hussein Foundation's Institute for Family Health, which will be the first of its kind in Jordan. With the largest ongoing outreach program in Jordan, the SHSP has proved to be an integral part of overall donor efforts to assist Iraqi refugees.

The poverty, exploitation, and abuse faced by Iraqi refugees is mainly due to lack of employment. In response, IRD has begun a livelihood support program that provides vocational training and income generation opportunities.

The Future

At some point in the future, the situation in Iraq will be such that displaced Iraqis will have to decide whether or not to return home. Although the most desired solution may be for refugees and IDPs to return to their homes, in many cases that will simply not be possible. According to the International Organization for Migration, nearly 60 percent hope to return home, 22 percent wish to remain where they are, and 17 percent prefer to resettle in a third country.

The U.S. government has, unfortunately, been less than welcoming to Iraqi refugees. In contrast to the more than 100,000 Vietnamese who were resettled in the United States after the Vietnam War, the Department of State recently announced it plans to resettle only 17,000 Iraqis in 2009. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that 90,000 will be in need of resettlement in 2009.¹¹

The massive humanitarian crisis of Iraqi refugees and displaced requires much more international attention and commitment. For now, support must be given in the places where they have sought refuge. IRD is committed to working with displaced Iraqis and refugees and providing them with the resources and the tools they need to regain a measure of control over their lives.

Policy Recommendations

- Making humanitarian aid to displaced Iraqis and refugees one of the central pillars of U.S. foreign policy in Iraq.
- Strengthening assistance and collaboration with the Iraqi Ministry of Displacement and Migration and other relevant ministries to enable the Iraqi Government to address the worsening plight of IDPs and refugees.
- Increasing assistance to countries hosting Iraqi refugees.
- Supporting comprehensive legislation to address the needs of Iraqi refugees, returnees, and IDPs.



An Iraqi boy watches construction work.

Endnotes

1. Elizabeth Ferris, “The Looming Crisis: Displacement and Security in Iraq,” Brookings Policy Paper Number 5, August 2008, p.3.
2. Food Security and Vulnerability Analysis in Iraq, World Food Programme and Central Organization for Statistics and Information Technology, Iraqi Ministry of Planning and Development Cooperation (May 2006), p. 2.
3. Iraq Body Count, at <http://www.iraqbodycount.org/analysis/numbers/2007/>.
4. Food Security and Vulnerability Analysis in Iraq, World Food Programme and Central Organization for Statistics and Information Technology, Iraqi Ministry of Planning and Development Cooperation (May 2006), p. 2.
5. Iraq Consolidated Appeal – 2008 (February 2008), pp. 9-10.
6. Ibid.
7. IDP Working Group, “Internally Displaced Persons in Iraq – Update (March 28, 2008).
8. The UN’s Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement” serve as an international standard to guide governments, UN agencies and other international organizations. http://www.reliefweb.int/ocha_ol/pub/idp_gp/idp.html.
9. Gabriela Wengert and Michelle Alfaro, “Can Palestinian Refugees in Iraq Find Protection?” Forced Migration Review, Issue 26, August 2006.
10. Kristele Younes and Nir Rosen, “Uprooted and Unstable: Meeting Urgent Humanitarian Needs in Iraq.” Refugees International, April 2008, p. 6.
11. Refugees International press release, “U.S. Goals for Iraqi Refugees are Inadequate,” September 15, 2008.