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Contacts:

Ken Bacon and Kristèle Younès

IRAQ: PREVENTING THE POINT OF NO RETURN

The number of displaced Iraqis remains high, both inside the country and in neighboring ones. They remain reluctant to go back due to lack of security, the creation of ethnically cleansed neighborhoods, and poor government services. However, since the only realistic solution for the majority of displaced Iraqis is to return, the Government of Iraq, the United States, and the United Nations need to work together to establish safe conditions. The government needs to increase the effectiveness of education, health care, and employment programs. The U.S. and the UN need to maintain funding for humanitarian programs, while the UN expands its presence in the country significantly.

RETURNS MUST NOT BE FORCED OR POLITICIZED

Since November 2007, the Government of Iraq (GOI) has been actively encouraging the return of displaced Iraqis. However, in its strategy to encourage returns, the Government of Iraq has failed to take political, social and economic reality into consideration and examine the country's capacity to absorb large numbers of returns. Instead, it has made the return of displaced Iraqis a component, as opposed to a consequence, of its security strategy. Large returns, the government reasoned, would create the impression that security in Iraq was better and would win popular and international support for its military and political actions. Yet for returns to be sustainable, they must occur when suitable conditions are met. The politicization of returns will only lead to further displacement and humanitarian needs.

In Syria, Jordan, and Egypt the GOI has made buses and planes available to help refugees return to their country and has provided them with a small sum upon their return home. Iraq went as far as violating international refugee law by asking Syria to close its borders to refugees at the end of 2007, when the number of people fleeing was still significant, because of fears that the large number of

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- The U.S., other donor governments, and the UN should provide financial and technical assistance to the government of Iraq to address the needs of the displaced, the returnees and the root causes of displacement.
- The U.S. and the UN should work with the Government of Iraq to improve basic services throughout the country.
- The U.S. should fund at least 50% of current and future UN appeals to address the needs of vulnerable Iraqis and continue bi-lateral aid and development programs.
- The U.S. should engage Syria, Jordan and other host countries to find durable solutions for vulnerable groups who will not be able to return.
- The UN should review and adapt their security measures in Iraq to allow for more access.
- UNAMI should support the immediate implementation of OCHA's Iraq Field Coordination framework.

refugees gave a bad image of the security situation inside the country.

As for the internally displaced, they too can receive assistance to vacate the houses they are occupying – in some cases illegally -- and return to their original homes, provided they were displaced between January 2006 and December 2007. This has the effect of excluding many Sunnis, who fled their homes in 2004 and 2005.

Pressure on the displaced to return to their homes continues today. Refugees International recently met with Iraqi officials, who all expressed the desire to see the “IDP file” closed in 2009, as there are “no longer reasons to be displaced” in Iraq. As a result, internally displaced people are no longer being registered as the government hurries to make the displacement problem disappear.

Moreover, Prime Minister Al Malik’s Shi’a government has little sympathy for the largely Sunni refugees in neighboring countries. Syria and Jordan state that almost two million such refugees are still in their countries, but the Government of Iraq states that there are no more than 400,000, and fewer have registered with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). According to a UN diplomat in Baghdad, the Prime Minister sees all refugees as “traitors” or “baathists” who prefer “getting money without working” rather than helping to rebuild their country.

Returns remain a trickle rather than the solution of choice for most displaced. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), around 50,000 families (250,000 people) have returned, mostly to Baghdad, and mostly from within the country. Only 8% of these returnees were refugees from neighboring countries. In addition, a survey by IOM shows that 61% of the 2.6 million internally displaced would eventually like to return, but don’t feel ready to do so now. The remaining 39% would either like to integrate in their current communities, or resettle somewhere else. If the post-2006 population movements aren’t reversed, there will be serious consequences for the political future of Iraq, as entire neighborhoods and cities will remain homogenous.

ADDRESS THE OBSTACLES TO RETURN

Returns are the most effective way to gauge lasting improvements in Iraq, as refugees and internally displaced people are often the best informed about the conditions in their places of origin. The low numbers demonstrate that major obstacles and challenges need to be addressed before mass returns can take place. Assistance to returnees, property restitution, and the provision of basic services are essential

for Iraqis to return home and rebuild their lives. According to UNHCR and the U.S. embassy in Baghdad, many who have returned to Iraq from neighboring countries have now become internally displaced, unable to go back to their homes. They seek shelter in neighborhoods reflecting their religious sect, and avoid neighborhoods where they are the minority and might feel threatened.

Many internally displaced people fear returning because returnees have been killed. Local security officials and staff of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) confirmed that there have been incidents of intimidation or murder in many areas, and these stories spread quickly throughout the population. Refugees International visited the Sunni area of Amriya, where a Shi’a family was killed when it tried to return. We heard of similar incidents happening throughout the country, to Sunni, Shi’a and others.

Besides the fragility of the security situation, there are many other obstacles to return. The improvements in security have not translated into improvements in the provision of services. According to assessments conducted by international and national aid agencies, refugees and IDPs who have returned need shelter, electricity, water, employment and non-food items. Healthcare is also a major issue: there are 18,000 healthcare workers in Iraq today compared to 36,000 in 2000.

Humanitarian organizations have designed programs to target some of these needs. For instance, IOM designed a returnee food and non-food basket, and seeks to assist returning families by including them in its community assistance, water/sanitation, health and education programs. Similarly, UNHCR included assistance to returnees in its 2008 and 2009 programs, while both international and local NGOs stand ready to assist in many areas of Iraq. As for the government, it announced assistance to returnees amounting to around \$800 per family, which is neither sufficient nor being efficiently distributed.

Despite these initiatives in assisting returnees, the systems are currently not in place to handle a large number of returnees. The infrastructure of the country needs to be rebuilt and there is no unified process to deal with returning internally displaced people or refugees. As in the post-conflict Balkans, property disputes are a key issue, and many returnees are unable to go home since their houses are occupied by others. Property disputes will linger for many years to come and are likely to spark renewed violence. For now, they are being handled by the Iraqi army on orders from the Prime Minister’s cabinet dealing with the eviction of “squatters,” many of them internally displaced themselves.

Many people will still not return until they feel the root causes of the conflict have been addressed. They need to feel accepted by the community and provided with security guarantees. Baghdad, and indeed the rest of Iraq, resembles a large military base today. Each neighborhood is sealed off by walls, and people are unable to move freely when they choose.

Areas are currently protected by the army or by “awakening groups,” militias created by the US army, who were eventually supposed to be integrated into the Iraqi armed forces and police. With a few exceptions, this hasn’t happened yet, making the situation unsustainable. Absent a political reconciliation process and an efficient disarmament, demobilization and reintegration program, these groups will remain as armed militias with the same political agenda and strong grievances. The possibility for resumed violence is also present along the disputed boundaries between the Kurds and the central Iraqi Government. A political solution is vital to ensure there won’t be large-scale confrontations.

IMPROVE GOVERNMENT SYSTEMS AND SERVICES

Inside the Government of Iraq, sectarian bias remains strong, and political pressure on the Government to address its own sectarianism and rampant corruption must be maintained. According to senior U.S. officials in Baghdad, “there isn’t one Government in Iraq”, but a collection of factions, each pursuing its own agenda. Sunnis still largely feel disenfranchised and under-represented, and mistrust towards the Shi’a-dominated Government is present at all levels of society. The Ministry of Displacement and Migration is run by Shi’a Kurds, whose first priority has been the resettlement of refugees coming back from Iran. Most advisors to the Prime Minister are Shi’a. IDPs feel it is much easier for displaced Shi’a than for displaced Sunnis to gain assistance. Similarly, many Iraqi NGOs working in Sunni areas report having trouble registering with the Government of Iraq. One NGO representative told us that when she went to the government NGO office to register her organization, she was asked why she works in “these areas,” referring to the Sunni neighborhoods of Baghdad.

Sectarianism is not the only problem with the government of Iraq. Corruption is rampant, making it extremely difficult for the government to effectively deliver assistance and for international and national NGOs to operate. The World Food Program (WFP), which delivers food assistance to hundreds of thousands of displaced Iraqis, had its cargo seized by Iraqi police who alleged that the food was rotten. Refugees International met with many local and interna-

tional groups operating in the city of Hilla, in Babel, who complained about the incompetence and youth of the local head of the Ministry of Displacement and Migration. He was allegedly appointed because of his links to the Governor and constantly tried to intimidate agencies into distributing assistance to his friends and family.

The government has nevertheless tried to take a few positive steps to address displacement. The creation of returnee assistance centers in Baghdad provides legal and financial assistance to returnees. Unfortunately, the government interrupted the payment of \$800 to returnee families in October, and it is unclear when assistance will resume. This situation is unlikely to improve in the near future, given the financial difficulties that the Government of Iraq is currently experiencing. The fall in oil prices has had a severe impact on the Iraqi national budget, which went from a planned \$82 billion to less than \$60 billion for 2009, with further cuts planned.

The U.S., the international community, and the UN need to provide financial and technical assistance to the government of Iraq to address the needs of the displaced and the returnees, as well as displacement’s root causes. A comprehensive, inter-ministerial system is needed to establish the rule of law, which is essential for Iraqis to feel safe and return to their homes. The development of a stronger civil society sector would be a big help. Finally, the international community must work with the Government of Iraq to create jobs. With a 30% unemployment rate, Iraq’s economic future is compromised. So is its security, as most of the unemployed are young men who are vulnerable to recruitment by militias and other armed groups.

The U.S. has made a huge investment in Iraq. The \$862 million the U.S. devoted to development and other projects by provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs) last year dwarfed spending by the UN, but the PRT projects often aren’t coordinated with the government and UN programs and priorities. U.S. development spending needs to continue with better planning and follow-through.

SUPPORT THE UN’S WORK IN IRAQ

Lack of access continues to impede the UN’s work in Iraq. Restrictions placed on UN staff by the UN Department for Safety and Security (UNDSS) are unreasonable given the current security climate, and need to be adapted to regional and local realities. The north of Iraq is widely recognized as being safe, and many areas of the center and the south can also be safely accessed by personnel from international organizations. Iraqis interviewed by Refugees International

throughout the country expressed a desire to see the UN return and function fully in the country. Refugees International believes that measures can be taken to guarantee the safety of staff while allowing them increased access.

Humanitarian needs in Iraq remain large, yet the suffering is barely known because the aid community is unable to get a comprehensive picture of conditions for the people. On its three-week assessment mission, Refugees International visited groups of displaced Iraqis in Baghdad and elsewhere who lived in unsanitary conditions, were not registered with the Ministry of Displacement and Migration, and had never received assistance from any UN agency or NGO. The gaps in the provision of humanitarian assistance are immense.

The UN and aid organizations must work together and establish better coordination and reporting systems to ensure that there is knowledge of and a response to the conditions of vulnerable Iraqis. One effective way to improve coordination would be through the implementation of the Iraq Field Coordination (IFC), a UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) initiative that would place staff in every Governorate to gather, analyze and share relevant information and ensure humanitarian coordination. The IFC should be supported by the UN Mission to Iraq, and established as soon as possible.

UN agencies and NGOs are trying to address the main needs by designing several types of programs, some targeting basic needs and others looking at longer-term development, such as job training for widows. UNHCR is working with local NGOs to provide protection and assistance to the most vulnerable by establishing a larger presence in the country, while UNICEF is launching its IMPACT program, addressing the needs of some of the poorest communities in Iraq.

These organizations and others who are working in Iraq need financial and political support. At the end of 2008, the UN launched an appeal for \$547 million to meet the needs

of Iraqis both in and outside of the country. Contributions to this appeal have been insufficient to date. Refugees International urges the U.S. to lead by example and fund 50% of the overall appeal. The U.S. plays a special role in the region, and this needs to be translated into the prioritization of humanitarian assistance as well.

FOCUS ON THE MOST VULNERABLE

As efforts continue to stabilize and rebuild Iraq, special attention needs to be given to the most vulnerable, and durable solutions need to be found. The stateless Palestinians of Iraq remain one of the most vulnerable groups, and are the subjects of discrimination and attacks by many factions. The hundreds who sought shelter in the camps of Al-Tanf and Al-Waleed at the Syrian border with Iraq must be resettled immediately and the criteria applied should be the same as for Iraqis. According to the UN, there are 10,000 to 12,000 left in Iraq. For this population, resettlement to a third country is likely to be the only durable solution.

The U.S. and the international community must also turn their attention to Iraqis who will not be able to return home, whether they are refugees or internally displaced. They may be too vulnerable to return, or have reasons to fear for their safety. Either way, there are currently no plans to address their needs and plan for their future. The U.S. must engage Syria, Jordan and other host countries on finding durable solutions for these particularly vulnerable groups. As for the 39% of internally displaced Iraqis who don't plan to return home, they will need assistance to either integrate in their new communities or resettle elsewhere. The political implications for the future of Iraq must be carefully considered, while respecting the will of the displaced.

Refugees International President Ken Bacon, Senior Advocate Kristèle Younès and consultant Nir Rosen assessed the situation for displaced people inside Iraq in March 2009.