

TOO MUCH TOO SOON **DISPLACED IRAQIS AND THE PUSH TO RETURN HOME**

By Daryl Grisgraber



Summary

The battle against the Islamic State (ISIS) in Iraq is in its late stages, but in the aftermath of the conflict new challenges arise. There are 11 million people in Iraq who need humanitarian assistance. The original causes of their vulnerability—conflict and displacement—may be lessening, but their unmet daily needs remain. The various elements of rebuilding Iraq are still developing, but there is general agreement among the numerous parties interested in Iraq’s reconstruction that solutions to the plight of the country’s 3.2 million internally displaced persons will be a critical component of Iraq’s future development.

With so many internally displaced people (IDPs) in Iraq, IDP returns are a subject of much discussion. Internal displacement is a long-standing issue in Iraq: between 2006 and 2008, as many as 2.5 million people were displaced as a result of sectarian violence that followed the U.S.-led invasion, and while many returned to their homes in subsequent years, some three million have been newly displaced as a result of ISIS activity since 2014. They live in camps, in informal settlements, in rented accommodation and in host communities throughout the country.

The ten-year reconstruction plan for Iraq announced by the Prime Minister in late June includes a goal “to return all displaced persons to their places of origin,”¹ and in some locations, local authorities have shown themselves eager to start that process. However, there are serious concerns about how, when, and where these returns can or should take place.

IDP returns of various natures – spontaneous, voluntary, and allegedly forced – are already happening in Iraq, though they are ill-advised under most circumstances. Although Refugees International (RI) believes this is generally the case and that most of its observations and conclusions apply to the broad population of IDPs in Iraq, the focus of this report is people who were uprooted by the ISIS activity that began in earnest in 2014 (and who represent a majority of Iraq’s current IDP population). Members of this recently displaced population are going home, but in many cases it is much too soon. Physical safety is the most fundamental problem: areas of return, especially the ones most recently taken from ISIS, are heavily contaminated with improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and mines. There is widespread fear of revenge and retribution killings by and of religious and political groups that perceive others to be their enemies. Moreover, potential returnees are sometimes unwelcome by security forces and local authorities who are unwilling to protect people they consider their opponents, or sympathizers with their opponents.

The basic necessities of daily life are hard to come by while displaced, and even more so upon return. Shelter is practically non-existent in some of the areas most damaged by ISIS and by the fight to rout ISIS, access to clean water is a challenge for both IDPs and returnees, and medical services and electricity are not readily available in many places. Earning money to pay for the materials and services so crucial for returnees is hardly possible until the nascent reconstruction of Iraq begins bearing fruit.

In the midst of this situation in which humanitarian needs are difficult to address, some IDPs are returning spontaneously simply because they are tired of being displaced. Others are being encouraged or pressed to return by *de facto* incentives like salaries, compensation for lost property, and promises of non-food items (NFIs) and building materials to start over, or in some cases, by outright eviction. Faced with poor conditions and a lack of protection in many of the IDP camps and settlements, such offers and pressures can be hard to resist, even when security conditions are questionable and the elements of a dignified return are not in place.

Given that the fight against ISIS continues and Iraq faces an ongoing economic crisis, the Iraqi government has not been able to designate significant funding for humanitarian assistance to the displaced nor ensure that returns occur only when people feel ready. Even while the debate about safe returns occurs, internal displacement continues, both because of ongoing fighting and because people who cannot go home are sometimes being sent to new locations: in some places,

*Cover Photo: Area retaken from ISIS, Salahaddin governorate.
Photo to Right: Area retaken from ISIS, Salahaddin governorate.*

the local governments are insisting that IDPs must leave, sometimes in order to make room for newer, more vulnerable people, and sometimes for reasons known only to themselves. These attempts to orchestrate returns according to ideas other than the generally-accepted international standards have the potential to leave vulnerable people even more exposed to risk, further destabilize Iraq, and make the country's reconstruction even more challenging.

Recommendations

- The international donor community must ensure that funds for humanitarian aid to Iraqi IDPs – including returnees still in need of assistance – continue to flow even as the transition to stabilization activities happens. This will require full financial and coordination support for the UN plan for early recovery – the support phase that comes between emergency humanitarian assistance and long-term development – as this includes continuing attention to humanitarian needs.
- The government of Iraq – including the Ministry of Displacement and Migration, the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, and the Ministry of Trade – should put more resources into creating acceptable conditions for IDP returns. The government should also increase resources for reconciliation programs implemented in partnership with local and international groups, and donors must make funding such programs a priority.
- The international community, particularly the United States and United Nations, must continue to support the government of Iraq in its response to IDPs to ensure that returns are safe, voluntary, and dignified, and that humanitarian assistance before and after return remains an integral part of the response, even as more donors and aid groups shift focus to development activities.
- The 2018 Humanitarian Response Plan, being developed by officials of the UN, international agencies, and NGOs in coordination with the government of Iraq, should include IDP returns as an area of focus, with an emphasis on avoiding premature returns in all areas. This would build on the 2017 Humanitarian Response Plan's recognition of IDP returns as an essential element of humanitarian response. Assistance in obtaining civil documentation for IDPs and returnees, and in resolving housing, land, and property issues, must also be high priorities.
- Given current overall circumstances in Iraq, the government of Iraq and provincial and local authorities should not force or pressure IDPs to return. Any *de facto* incentives must be coupled with accurate information to potential returnees on conditions in their home areas.



Background

The events of the past several years in Iraq are not the country's first major displacement crisis but may well be its largest and most complex. When the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq began in 2003, roughly one million IDPs were already living across the country. Following the invasion, and the sectarian strife and generalized violence that ensued, those numbers increased by a million and a half over the course of five years. In addition, two million people fled the country entirely. With greater stability around 2008, some IDPs did return home, but more than one million people remained displaced during the ensuing six years, many of them heavily dependent upon humanitarian aid that could not cover all of their needs.

Since January 2014, when the Islamic State (ISIS) began taking over significant amounts of territory in Iraq, millions more people have been forced to flee, millions have returned home, and millions are currently stalled in internal displacement with no certainty of what the future might bring. Today, there are 3.2 million IDPs in Iraq, most of whom have been displaced since mid-2014. More than two million more people have now been classified as returnees –IDPs who have gone back to their area of origin. Eleven million people – including IDPs –need humanitarian assistance of some kind.

Assistance to all of these IDPs has been a work in progress over the years. Those IDPs who were able to enter and remain in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) – currently estimated at 840,000 –have been arguably more protected and better served than those who landed in central and southern Iraq. Humanitarian agencies have better access to vulnerable populations in the KRI due to the more stable security conditions and a regional government that has been more willing to facilitate the work of international and local aid groups than the central government in Baghdad.

By contrast, IDPs in the rest of Iraq have struggled to obtain access to the aid and services they need, and humanitarian actors have been heavily restricted in what they can offer them. Iraqi civil society, sometimes in partnership with international groups, has been doing an admirable job of

finding ways to reach IDPs and host communities in the most dangerous areas, but they will need ongoing support to be able to continue their programs. Ongoing fighting – largely between the Iraqi armed forces and ISIS – in the central and southern governorates created a hostile operating environment for those groups that would normally work directly with vulnerable populations.

Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement²

Principle 30

All authorities concerned shall grant and facilitate for international humanitarian organizations and other appropriate actors, in the exercise of their respective mandates, rapid and unimpeded access to internally displaced persons to assist in their return or resettlement and reintegration.

The latter situation has changed somewhat in the past two years. Aid agencies and their staff members have increased their presence in Baghdad in order to more effectively reach those in need in the center and south of the country and to maintain working relationships with the government of Iraq, which has the authority to grant approvals for their work. Last year's liberations of Fallujah and Ramadi from ISIS further encouraged humanitarian assistance by improving security conditions on the roads and in IDP settlements, allowing aid workers to safely reach more people.

Even more recently, the liberation of Mosul, ISIS's last major stronghold in Iraq, allowed a flood of assistance from both local and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to pour into the city and its surrounding region in the north after three years of devastating siege. The remaining offensives against ISIS will be intense but governments and humanitarians expect the displacement to be smaller than the more than one million individuals who left during the Mosul operations, simply because the areas still to be retaken have smaller populations.

Against this backdrop of ongoing and large-scale displacement, more than two million IDP returns have been recorded.³ However, there is serious concern on the part of humanitarians and international donors as to whether the returns meet international standards; that is, are they

safe, voluntary and dignified.²⁴ As far back as 2014, Refugees International (RI) was already hearing talk on the ground of forced and coerced returns. In addition, there was speculation that local officials would likely prevent IDP returns in some areas in an attempt to politically or demographically control the makeup of the resident population.

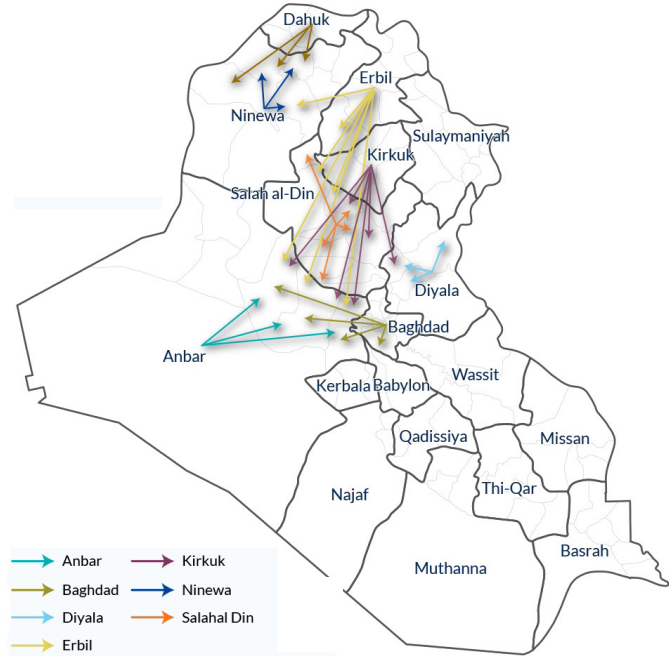
“All returns [in Iraq] are premature. No areas are ready to receive people.”

— NGO staff member in Iraq

Beyond the issues of humanitarian access and safe return for Iraqi IDPs, the government of Iraq’s capacity to provide and facilitate the necessary level of humanitarian assistance during displacement and after return is uncertain. For years, the government’s main concern has been the fight against ISIS. However, there has been a parallel shortage of both attention and funding by the government of Iraq for the humanitarian response to those affected by the anti-ISIS military campaigns, whether people were displaced or not. To be sure, the military action has in many cases generated a flurry of international interest in the humanitarian and human rights conditions in that location. But in general (with Mosul as a notable exception), once a city has been liberated and those who wanted to leave have left, the focus has quickly shifted to the next conflict site and preparing for the anticipated needs. There has been much less regard for the ongoing humanitarian needs in places that were destroyed by conflict and are not in any way ready to have people return. At the moment, humanitarian assistance in Iraq is heavily reliant on international involvement – both financial and operational. Even where Iraqi local and national groups are carrying out the work on the ground, they often depend upon funding and support from the international groups.

With Mosul liberated after two years of preparation and military action, it would be easy to think that the time has come to shift from humanitarian aid in Iraq to long-term reconstruction activities. This is the very conversation that is occurring now, and looking ahead to reconstruction is a pragmatic change of focus. But the humanitarian emer-

Major returnees’ movements from last governorates of displacement to district of return



**Map courtesy of the International Organization for Migration*

gency has not ended, and will continue as long as the 11 million people in Iraq who need humanitarian assistance are not able to improve their situations.

With the government of Iraq currently relying heavily on outside actors to provide assistance to IDPs, the international donor community must ensure that funds for humanitarian assistance to Iraqi IDPs – including returnees still in need of assistance – continue to flow even as the transition to stabilization activities takes place. This will require full financial and coordination support for the UN plan for early recovery – the support phase that comes between emergency humanitarian assistance and long-term development –which includes continuing attention to humanitarian needs. At the same time, the government of Iraq must put more of its resources into creating acceptable conditions for IDP returns and into reconciliation among communities.

Considerations for Return

The circumstances of return for Iraqi IDPs differ depending upon the person's place of origin. RI spoke with dozens of IDPs in Anbar, Baghdad, Erbil and Salahaddin governorates while in Iraq. Though each individual or family had specific worries and considerations, a handful of basic concerns are consistent across the groups with which RI spoke: Is the place of return secure? Is there a way to make a living there? Are services being restored? Some IDPs with whom RI spoke said they would return even absent positive answers to these questions, but many others were understandably cautious about leaving their current situation for one that might be even worse.

Additionally, one of the most pressing concerns that arose in every RI meeting in Iraq – whether with IDPs, government officials, aid agencies, or host community members – was a distinct fear of retribution and revenge behavior. Even people who were not necessarily afraid for their personal safety were nonetheless scared of the chaos and violence that could be sparked by people taking the law into their own hands.

Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement

Principle 28²

1. Competent authorities have the primary duty and responsibility to establish conditions, as well as provide the means, which allow internally displaced persons to return voluntarily, in safety and with dignity, to their homes or places of habitual residence, or to resettle voluntarily in another part of the country. Such authorities shall endeavour to facilitate the reintegration of returned or resettled internally displaced persons.
2. Special efforts should be made to ensure the full participation of internally displaced persons in the planning and management of their return or resettlement and reintegration.

Gathering information on what conditions are like in a place of return is currently an *ad hoc* process for IDPs. While the United Nations, humanitarian and human rights groups, and some government authorities are

“Revenge attacks have begun. East Mosul was a mixed area and people are returning. West Mosul is already a disaster.”

— NGO staff member in Iraq

warning people of dangers like IEDs, lack of services like electricity seems to become known mostly by word of mouth.

RI heard from a number of IDPs and service providers that many displaced families might send one person back home in advance of relocating the entire family. People speak to friends, relatives and acquaintances who had either stayed in or already returned to their home city, or to people who had traveled there and returned. If the information they received seemed promising, they send an individual to verify the living conditions and see if their homes and properties are still intact. In the event that they are not, people either stay in displacement, or establish two “bases” – one where they live and one in their place of origin, where they work on conditions that might permit return. In this way, IDPs can remain registered and receive essential assistance and services in the displacement location, while improving their return site and readying it for their return.

Security

The decision not to return most often involved a real or perceived lack of security at home. For example, RI heard numerous stories of people living in Erbil who had returned or were planning to return soon to east Mosul, in Ninewa governorate. The area had been religiously and ethnically mixed, and IDPs said they were fairly comfortable going back to it and trusting that neighbors would still treat each other as neighbors. While the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) responsible for maintaining public safety may not be universally popular, many people nonetheless told RI that they would be relatively comfortable living in an area under ISF jurisdiction, and that the ISF was the ‘least bad actor’ among the various security entities.

The situation was quite different for IDPs from and in Salahaddin governorate. In one internal displacement camp RI visited in Tikrit, a majority of people were from Salahaddin governorate and less than an hour away from home. Many of them had been displaced multiple times over a two to three year period, and they had specifically made the effort to live in that particular camp because it was close to their homes. They regularly received news of their city of origin, and there had even been repeated preparations for returning there each time they received word that the local government was ready to receive people. But each time, in the end, the fact that multiple militias controlled different parts of their city meant that they were not going to return until they received some assurance that they were welcome and would be safe. They told RI that the only people who trusted the militias were the militia members' own families, many of whom had already returned. However, everyone else was waiting for some semblance of the previous local government to emerge and be given power.

In addition, the contamination of land and property with mines and improvised explosive devices is a significant issue. As was true during RI's mission to Iraq one year ago, mines and IEDs present a huge risk to returnees. While some clearance has taken place and more is underway, the government –even in partnership with other actors –will be hard-pressed to keep up with the desire of IDPs to simply be at home, regardless of the conditions. Plenty of injuries and fatalities have already occurred in areas of return, and there are almost certainly more that never get reported.⁵ Financial and practical constraints prevent the government from carrying out faster humanitarian clearance, but some people simply don't want to wait.

Livelihoods

Second only to security concerns – and just barely – the opportunity to make a living is a major issue for IDPs considering return. While life in a camp or settlement is undeniably difficult, a number of IDPs with whom



IDP family in Anbar governorate.



RI spoke were able to obtain money through odd jobs, or even travel back and forth to urban areas each day for employment. Compared to a situation in which so many people had lost jobs or been unable to work under ISIS, living in displacement had the advantage of offering some minimal self-sufficiency.

IDPs who had owned businesses before fleeing, or who had worked farmland that was now laced with mines and IEDs left by ISIS, were skeptical about their earning prospects if they were to return before safety, services, and infrastructure had been restored. For many of them, rebuilding a home or renting accommodation was simply not possible without a way to make an income. And even for people who were willing to return to places without water or electricity, for example, just to be near home, the inability to earn money in many places was a deterrent.

Civil Documentation

Numerous IDPs told RI about their struggles to obtain the documentation they need in order to access services as IDPs or make the trip home. Many IDPs either left their personal documentation behind when they fled, lost it *en*

route, or had it destroyed by ISIS. It is possible to have the papers replaced but the process is usually slow and often has to be initiated in Baghdad, which is out of reach for many. Without personal documentation, IDPs are generally not eligible for services from NGOs, cannot register for their monthly food distributions, cannot get permission to travel, and cannot register births and marriages, to name a few challenges. A number of humanitarian and human rights group have recognized the problem and have begun implementing projects to help people replace civil documentation, but the numbers in need of this service are enormous and there is not enough assistance to go around.

A related issue is the question of housing, land, and property (HLP), and the ability to prove ownership upon (or before) return. So much documentation was destroyed under ISIS, and though the group has sometimes issued its own documents, such as for births, these documents are not likely to be recognized by the government of Iraq. As a result, hundreds of thousands (or more) of people will have to either replace their paperwork or find alternate ways to prove what is theirs. Some international groups are developing creative ways of verifying who owned what

but it is currently happening only on a small scale, as opposed to through a countrywide system overseen by the government.

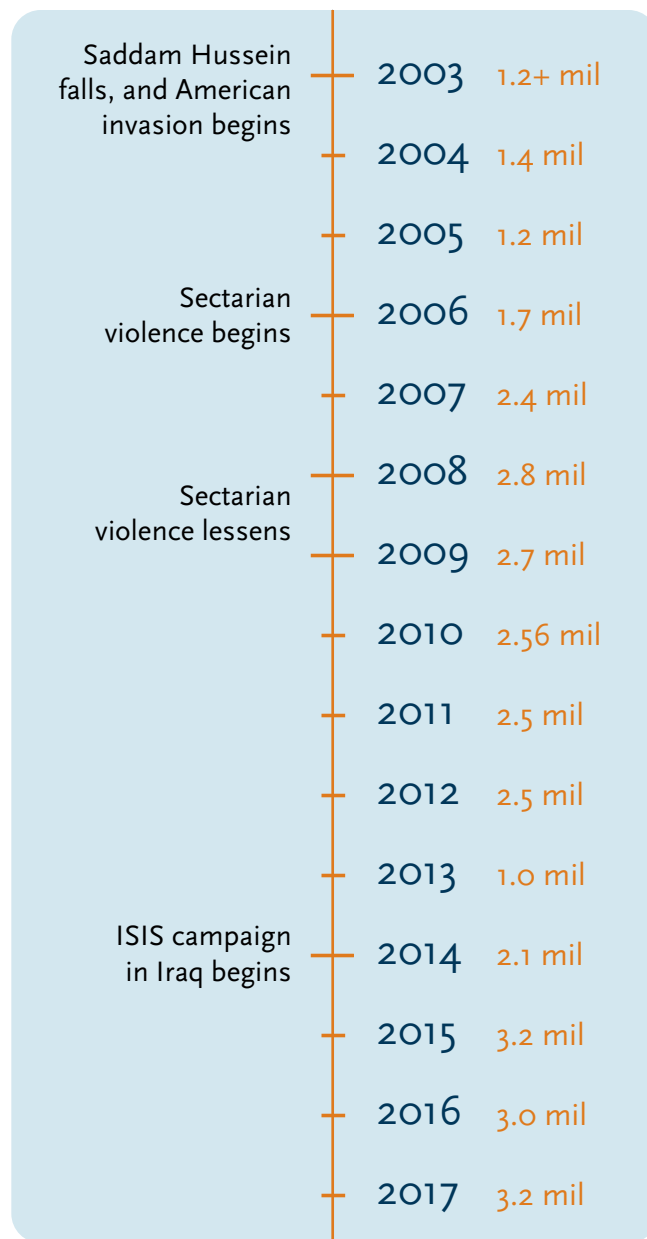
Once documentation has been re-established there is the additional step of applying to the government for compensation for destroyed property. RI was told that some people who returned home were told by authorities they could not file a compensation claim. In addition, some were told they could file a claim upon return, traveled to their home areas and then were not able to do so. In light of the fact that the government's current compensation mechanism is still handling cases that are decades old, and does not have any funds to distribute, it will be difficult for people to return to places where they cannot formally claim what is theirs and have their ownership rights protected.

Services and Infrastructure

Many IDPs RI interviewed in Iraq were calculating their decisions to return based partially on the services that were available in their home towns. Most often, a functioning water system, an operating electricity grid, and the availability of medical care were the basic services that people felt were necessary for them to start living a normal life. In addition, RI visited Iraq in the middle of summer, and many people mentioned that the ability to enroll their children in school – back in their home town – at the beginning of the coming academic year was of great importance to them, rather than returning in the middle of the school year and further disrupting children's studies. While many children had access to education even while displaced, families were eager to go home and start life at the beginning of the academic year.

Unfortunately, these basic services are going to take a very long time to re-establish in many areas retaken from ISIS. There has been much enthusiasm around the planned rebuilding of Mosul, along with large international donations to support the reconstruction. But Mosul is only one of numerous towns and villages that have been reduced to almost nothing, at a time when the government of Iraq still sees fighting ISIS as its number one priority and is directing resources accordingly. Places that are of less immediate interest to donors and to the government of Iraq are likely going to have to wait longer for assistance,

Timeline of recent internal displacement in Iraq



such as far-flung villages in Anbar or towns in northern Iraq where it is not clear whether the government of Iraq or the Kurdistan Regional Government is in control. This will likely result in more people remaining in their areas of displacement for longer periods of time, increasing dependence upon aid, and further delaying the rebuilding of communities, even in secure areas. It will also impede the development of social networks and a sense of solidarity and trust that is sorely lacking in Iraq currently and will be necessary for reconciliation.

Even while stabilization and reconstruction are getting started, the international community, particularly the United States and United Nations, must continue to support the government of Iraq in its response to IDPs to ensure that returns are safe, voluntary, and dignified, and that humanitarian assistance before and after return remains an integral part of the response even as more donors and aid groups shift focus to development activities.

Illustrative Cases

The actual picture of IDP returns in Iraq is complex, and socially and politically fraught. As with IDPs' plans for return, IDPs' actual practice of return varies significantly depending upon the area to which they are returning.

Security

In a displacement camp near Fallujah, a number of people with whom RI spoke had arrived the previous day from al-Qa'im, in western Anbar, after airstrikes had compelled them to flee. Some of them had first gone to another camp further west but did not want to stay there because camp management confined them to the site. They also could not obtain new identity documents there to replace the ones that had been destroyed. There was no electricity in the camp, it was extremely hot, and the family of six had to sleep directly on the ground. When security forces offered

There was no electricity in the camp, it was extremely hot, and the family of six had to sleep directly on the ground.

to take them to a different camp, they accepted. They told RI they would like to return home, and said it depended upon the condition of their house. But they could not check on their house because it was in the middle of a battle zone.

A woman in a nearby tent described how her family of 14 people fled to the desert and lived there in the open when the fight with ISIS began. They managed to cram the whole family into a car and drove through the desert at night, with no lights on, so they would not be spotted by ISIS. The first camp at which they arrived had no electricity, and the tents were too thin to provide protection from the heat. As she said this, she held up an eight-day-old baby who had made the trip with them.

In another context, IDPs in and from Anbar were happy to return but were waiting for some realistic indication that they could take up their regular lives again. With questionable security (the fight against ISIS continues in west



IDPs in a camp in Salahaddin governorate.

Anbar), few restored services, and minimal support from humanitarians who consider the area too risky to fully serve, they often felt like they were better off in a camp.

In yet another camp, this one located on the site of an unfinished housing development in Salahaddin, Nasim, the head of a group of four families, talked about his year in the camp after having been in four other sites. He specified that the families sharing the building are all from different tribes but from the same town further north. Life in the camp had become harder for all of them since the onset of the military offensive to retake Mosul nine months ago. Once that began, aid agencies and local officials became more concerned with addressing the immediate needs of the people fleeing that city than with sustaining people who had been displaced for years. There was not enough food or water in the camp, but living there was a better option than going home, where two different and opposing militias have wrested control of the city from the mayor and were refusing to leave. Nasim did not think his home area is unsafe for all returnees, but it was unsafe for him and his group of families because they are of a different religious background than the militias now securing the town.

Livelihoods

RI met Hawa at a camp in Anbar province, where she talked about her previous career. She had been a tailor in a village near Ramadi and had been displaced in various camps for over a year; she was repeatedly moved from one site to the next due to security concerns or changing camp capacity. Since the humanitarian preparations for Mosul had begun, her current camp had received less and less humanitarian aid as everyone anticipated the needs of the huge outflow of vulnerable people from Mosul. In Ramadi, Hawa had had her own sewing machine and was able to support her daughter, who had lost one full year of school to displacement. Hawa wanted to return and felt that her home area was acceptably safe. However, she had two complications.

First, she needed a sewing machine but had no money. A small livelihoods project by an NGO in the camp would be able to provide her with a sewing machine, but the project had not yet begun, so she had nothing and was waiting.

Second, she would likely be able to take the sewing machine with her when she left the camp, but there was no electricity in her home area, so she would have to remain in the camp to practice her trade. The Iraqi Ministry of Displacement and Migration (MoDM) had told her that the provincial government in Anbar was responsible for restoring the electricity. However, the provincial government had not yet done this, so Hawa's life was effectively stalled in the camp, though she wanted to go home and could likely be self-sufficient with minimal support.

Services and Infrastructure

In spite of the bleak circumstances, IDPs from east Mosul, with whom RI spoke in Erbil, were eager to return, and generally optimistic about prospects for rebuilding. The eastern half of the city was far less damaged than the west, and IDPs described people already re-opening businesses, aid groups being able to reach the city consistently (though not without challenges), and services being restored at a steady, if not speedy, pace. While this set of circumstances appears to be quite specific to east Mosul, it does support the idea that people are willing to return if there is something to return to.

“We can’t depend on anything about the government.”

— IDP from Salahaddin, in Salahaddin

West Mosul, however, was an entirely different situation. There, the buildings and infrastructure were mostly gone, and fighting was still occurring nearby in TelAfar. Even on the day the government of Iraq declared west Mosul liberated, clashes continued in some neighborhoods. In addition to people who left west Mosul for IDP camps or settlements, some people were beginning to depart and to crowd into east Mosul, as it was accessible and safe.

The 2018 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) being developed by officials of the UN, international agencies and NGOs in coordination with the government of Iraq, should include IDP returns as an area of focus, with an emphasis on avoiding premature returns in all areas.

This would build on the 2017 Humanitarian Response Plan's recognition of IDP returns as an essential element of humanitarian response. Assistance in obtaining civil documentation for IDPs and returnees, and in resolving housing, land and property issues must also be high priorities.

The Importance of Preventing Forcible Returns

While people in Iraq are returning when they have sufficient information to support the idea that they will be safe, other returns are problematic: people are spontaneously deciding to return whether conditions are acceptable or not because they are tired of being displaced, people are returning because they are compelled to do so by the circumstances of their displacement, or because of the actions of local authorities.

Though there have been persistent reports of people being forced to return even since the very beginning of the current displacement crisis, RI did not speak to anyone who was in such a situation. At the highest levels, the government of Iraq recognizes that IDP returns should not be forced, and RI believes that current conditions in Iraq mandate against forced return. However, there does appear to be not-so-subtle encouragement and discouragement by local officials to get people where they want them to go, and credible accounts of activities that do appear to constitute forced return.

In one interesting development related to IDPs, many Iraqi civil servants were allowed to continue their work in their areas of displacement—an important protection measure that should not be taken for granted. However, RI was repeatedly told that there have been situations in which government employees (a large proportion of the Iraqi population in general) were later told they either had to return to their place of origin or forfeit their salaries.

In other cases, local or provincial authorities have issued eviction notices to entire populations of IDPs in an effort to get them to move on. The justification for this action is sometimes the need to make room for newer IDPs coming

in when longer-staying IDPs are from an area that is judged to be safe. In some of these cases, local and international groups have been able to intervene and prevent the evictions and further forced displacement, but these groups told RI it is likely that many more such situations are occurring about which they never learn.

RI also learned of variations on forced return such as denied/prevented returns caused by refusal to recognize travel documentation, or simply by eviction after people have successfully made it home. One woman in an IDP camp in Baghdad told RI that she had, in fact, set out on the trip to her hometown in Ninewa. She had her documents in order (verification that she had been an IDP in Baghdad, a national ID, permission to travel), but at a checkpoint near Mosul the guards declined to let her through. Fortunately, she was able to return to the camp she had left, but was questioning whether returning was a good idea, regardless of whether or not she wanted to do so. This case not only highlights the importance of better measures to assist returnees, but also of practices to ensure people are not encouraged or compelled to undertake returns before such measures are implemented.

Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement

Principle 29²

1. Internally displaced persons who have returned to their homes or places of habitual residence or who have resettled in another part of the country shall not be discriminated against as a result of their having been displaced. They shall have the right to participate fully and equally in public affairs at all levels and have equal access to public services.
2. Competent authorities have the duty and responsibility to assist returned and/or resettled internally displaced persons to recover, to the extent possible, their property and possessions which they left behind or were dispossessed of upon their displacement. When recovery of such property and possessions is not possible, competent authorities shall provide or assist these persons in obtaining appropriate compensation or another form of just reparation.

Conclusion

“Failure to address the root causes of [the displacement that began in] 2014 will lead to a repeat.”

— UN staff member in Iraq

The situations described above not only put the rights of displaced persons at risk but also lead to returns that are not sustainable. When people are compelled to go home before they are ready, the lack of support – in whatever form – available to them may well result in their having to return to the place they just left, or in being further displaced to another location. Given current overall circumstances in Iraq, the government of Iraq and provincial and local authorities should not force or pressure IDPs to return. Any *de facto* incentives must be coupled with accurate information to potential returnees on conditions in their home areas.



Area retaken from ISIS, Salahaddin governorate.

While acknowledging that spontaneous returns of IDPs are indeed occurring in Iraq, and will likely continue, the potential – and even likely – consequences of premature returns must not be underestimated. Iraq is a country that is about to begin, yet again, to try to recover from a deadly conflict that displaced millions of people and highlighted the government’s inability to protect them. Where people want to go home badly enough, they simply will. But the government in Baghdad must take seriously its responsibility to protect its own citizens and to assure a stable future in Iraq.

The current uncertainties in Iraq demand that government authorities make careful, realistic, information-based determinations on whether IDPs can return, and then allow IDPs to choose for themselves without pressure. For those who do return, the government of Iraq must make serious and substantive efforts to aid IDPs going home, and must simultaneously take measures to create conditions conducive to return. This should include reconciliation programs in partnership with international and local groups, and donors should make funding such programs a priority.

The imminent end of ISIS in Iraq is only the beginning. If the country is to move forward in a meaningful way, humanitarian aid, reconciliation programs and a guarantee of safe, voluntary return must be provided to Iraq’s millions of IDPs.

Daryl Grisgraber and Francisca Vigaud-Walsh traveled to Iraq in July 2017. RI extends special thanks to the displaced people who shared their stories with us.

Endnotes

1. “Iraq Situation: UNHCR Flash Update - 28 June 2017,” United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), June 28, 2017, <http://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/iraq-situation-unhcr-flash-update-28-june-2017>.
2. “Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement,” United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, United Nations Publication E/CN.4/1998/53/Add.2, February 1998, <https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/GuidingPrinciplesDispl.pdf>
3. See the International Organization for Migration’s Iraq Mission Displacement Tracking Matrix, available at <http://iraqdtm.iom.int/>
4. These principles are reflected in and dictated by the *United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*, international humanitarian law, customary international law, relevant Iraqi domestic policies, and current conditions in Iraq.
5. See the Education for Peace in Iraq Center’s *Iraq Security and Humanitarian Monitor* archive at www.epic-usa.org/what-we-do/ishm/ishm-archives/.



IDPs in a camp in Anbar governorate.





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