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IRAQ'S DISPLACED: A STABLE REGION REQUIRES STABLE ASSISTANCE

The next two years will be defining ones for the future of Iraq and the United States' legacy in the region. It would be a grave mistake for the U.S. Government to diminish efforts to protect and assist Iraq's displaced. A reduction of funding and diplomacy on the issue could undermine stated U.S. foreign policy goals and lead to the creation of a second large-scale protracted displacement crisis in the Middle East. Current programs are creating unity in Iraq by helping people return home to their villages and by providing assistance to the most vulnerable. These achievements will be jeopardized without ongoing U.S. support.

CONTINUE SUCCESSFUL U.S. PROGRAMS

Over the last several years the U.S. government has made significant contributions to protecting, assisting, and finding solutions for Iraq's displaced. In Jordan and Syria U.S. funding has helped to refurbish and build new classrooms and train teachers to absorb Iraqi students. Most Iraqis have also enjoyed access to primary and even secondary healthcare. Because of U.S. funding and diplomacy, Iraqis have not been forced into camps and arbitrary detention and involuntary return has been minimal.

Inside of Iraq, in large part due to the recently improved security situation, U.S. funding and support has helped thousands of Iraqi internally displaced persons (IDPs) return to their destroyed villages and restart their lives. The so-called "Diyala Initiative" has helped religious minorities and other Iraqis safely return to villages where there was extreme violence and destruction and has contributed to conflict prevention and peace and reconciliation. The Initiative's enduring success can be attributed in part to strong coordination and cooperation between UN agencies, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Government of Iraq, and U.S. donor support. Attempts to achieve similar levels of success in southern Baghdad are underway but are clearly dependent upon ongoing U.S. support.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- In Fiscal Years 2011 and 2012 the U.S. Congress should maintain the Migration and Refugee Assistance (MRA) account at 2010 levels to continue initiatives that have effectively assisted displaced Iraqis.
- The Government of Iraq must develop a comprehensive plan of action for Iraq's displaced, and the implementation of the plan must be supported by the U.S. and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR).
- The U.S. Government and the United Nations must continue to revise their security protocols to increase their freedom of movement and access to Iraqi communities.
- The U.S. Government should support micro-finance, vocational training, and other programs aimed at skills training and job opportunities for refugees in the Middle East.
- The U.S. Government and UNHCR must increase their protection efforts aimed at Palestinian refugees from Iraq, including third country resettlement opportunities.

Tens of thousands of the most vulnerable IDPs and other Iraqis living as squatters in slum areas are finally receiving basic assistance to improve their squalid living conditions. Scattered amidst garbage dumps and pools of stagnant and polluted water, some of these Iraqis are finally able to stay dry from the winter rains, watch their children play in safe spaces, and drink clean water. U.S. government funding has facilitated the distribution of this basic assistance and has also supported those agencies providing legal aid, including groups working to prevent evictions.

U.S. resettlement of Iraqi refugees has been an important method to share responsibility for resolving the displacement crisis and must continue. The U.S. Department of State has successfully resettled almost 60,000 Iraqi refugees since 2007 and needs continued funding to help resettle some of the 18,000 to 20,000 additional Iraqis that UNHCR has identified as in need of resettlement in 2011 alone. The U.S. Government recently increased the reception and placement grant to help refugees better integrate into U.S. communities, where they are struggling to find jobs, pay rent, and purchase basic necessities. It will thus be more costly in the coming years for the U.S. to maintain its current resettlement levels for Iraqis.

As the U.S. Congress debates the Fiscal Year (FY) 2011 Continuing Resolution and considers the FY2012 budget and appropriations bill, it is critical that Congress at least maintain current FY2010 funding levels for the Migration and Refugee Assistance (MRA) account. The House of Representatives is currently proposing to cut about 40% from MRA. If this moves forward, Congress will have severely impaired the U.S. government's ability to respond to the ongoing displacement crisis and to contribute to ongoing peace and reconciliation in Iraq.

In 2010, the State Department Bureau for Population, Refugees and Migration spent just over \$300 million to assist and protect 1.5 million displaced Iraqis inside the country and the roughly 200,000 Iraqi refugees registered with the UNHCR throughout the region. By comparison, it is estimated that the U.S. will spend \$25 billion to \$30 billion over the next five years to fund diplomatic activities in Iraq, most of which will fund private security contractors. If funding levels drop to 2008 levels as many Members of Congress propose, the U.S. will be unable to effectively help Iraqis voluntarily return home or find solutions for Iraqis living as squatters in slum areas. Without a clear commitment to displaced Iraqis, Jordan, Syria, and other countries in the Middle East hosting refugees may feel abandoned and less willing to protect and assist refugees who remain in exile. This could lead to a rise in detention and forced return.

GOVERNMENT OF IRAQ MUST DEVELOP COMPREHENSIVE PLAN OF ACTION

The Government of Iraq is better poised than ever to take on greater responsibilities to solve the displacement crisis; however, it is still very much in its formative stages. Decision-making processes remain arduous and politically charged. The government has great difficulty in delegating authority down to the provinces, spending down budgets, and ensuring that resources reach the right place. Ongoing U.S. support is critical until the government is able to function in a more coherent and effective manner.

While most observers believe that it is simply a matter of months or a few short years before the Government of Iraq is able to transform its oil wealth into a booming economy, the Government will have to overcome many obstacles before this ever happens. In the meantime Iraqis will continue to suffer from soaring unemployment rates and lack of access to electricity, water, and sanitation for the foreseeable future. The poor, including those IDPs living as squatters in slums, will suffer the most.

Already the Iraqi security forces have sealed off many of the access points to the squatter settlements and are now controlling the movements at one central point. These actions are further segregating these vulnerable persons socially and spatially and leading to a growing sentiment among the authorities and the general population that they are the cause of many societal ills. As one Iraqi man commented, "The people living there are criminals and terrorists. They are only hoping to get free land from the government." The squatter phenomenon first arose after the 2003 U.S. invasion, so neither good government practices nor a well developed societal understanding of this issue exist.

Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, in cooperation with the Ministry of Migration and Displacement (MOMD) and all other relevant ministries, needs to develop a comprehensive plan of action for Iraq's displaced. The plan should, among other things, identify solutions for Iraq's squatters. It should be supported by the U.S., and UNHCR should assist with its implementation. To be effective, the plan must include some form of land allocation, the building of housing units, and the provision of basic services. Those squatters living on lands most valuable to the government should be prioritized.

In the meantime it is essential that the Prime Minister extend the suspension of Directive 440 which stipulates that people illegally occupying land should be evicted from state property. Without solutions in place to solve the root problem, forced evictions only shift the problem of squatters

to other locations resulting in additional displacement and further trauma to and stigmatization of the squatter population. In Wassit Province in the south one man felt so desperate after being evicted from government property that he set himself and his family on fire in attempts to end his suffering.

The Government of Iraq's comprehensive plan of action also needs to identify those locations throughout the country, but especially in Diyala and Baghdad, where efforts to encourage voluntary returns can be successful. These are often places where villages were completely destroyed by fighting between Al Qaeda and the U.S. military and where villagers do not have the means to rebuild their homes and purchase new farming equipment on their own.

Third, the plan should identify effective mechanisms for local integration of persons wishing to remain in their new locations. Many IDPs have lost or no longer have access to crucial documents that are essential for enjoying certain rights and access to basic services. IDPs need to be able to freely register with authorities and bureaucratic delays need to be minimized. By transferring their documents to their new locations, IDPs will be able to exercise their full rights and access to all services and benefits and no longer face any form of discrimination as outsiders or non-residents.

Refugees abroad are more likely to return if the comprehensive plan addresses their concerns about ongoing security threats in certain neighborhoods, access to basic services, and employment opportunities. Increased communication between the government and the refugees may help to bridge gaps, misunderstandings, and misperceptions. The generous movement policies by the Government of Syria specifically have allowed for some refugees to go to Iraq to assess conditions for themselves and then return to Syria, a very important gesture that may lead to more voluntary returns.

With continued resources and diplomatic support by the U.S. at the highest levels and guidance by UNHCR in the near-term, the Government of Iraq has the opportunity to help end Iraq's displacement crisis. Failure to do so will result in a protracted crisis guaranteed to plunge the displaced into greater destitution without access to basic rights. Surely the Middle East cannot afford a second, large-scale displacement crisis. The time to act is now.

INCREASE HUMANITARIAN ACCESS

Over the last year the security situation in Iraq has improved significantly. Local Iraqis who carry out most of the

humanitarian work move more freely and often openly identify themselves as UN staff. In Diyala Province, a place that has seen tremendous progress with international support, one local UNHCR staff person commented that, "As a result of our ability to deliver on the ground and to play an important role in the return initiative, we have a very good name here and are well respected by local and provincial authorities as well as by the people. We freely and proudly associate ourselves with UNHCR." In addition there are now several international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operating with greater access and freedom of movement and are thus making significant and important contributions towards providing greater protection and assistance to displaced and vulnerable Iraqis.

Unfortunately, U.S. government officials charged with responding to the displacement situation and the international staff of the UN continue to be largely confined to the International Zone (IZ). This heavily fortified area in the middle of Baghdad spins in its own orbit, separate and distinct from the bustling Iraqi neighborhoods that surround it. While the safety of U.S. and UN staff remains imperative, the excessive, overwhelming and even oppressive nature of the security regime currently in place is out of touch with today's security environment.

Navigating the city and the various provinces requires vigilance and great awareness. Nonetheless, it is possible for U.S. officials and international UN staff to visit displaced communities and meet with the families who have been most affected by the war in a low profile manner. If these officials do leave the IZ, they move in a high-profile manner with heavily armed security or military escorts. Security "experts" have succeeded in keeping U.S. and international UN staff from accessing the people they are supposed to serve. They have also failed to develop relationships with local Iraqis and local authorities that are much better equipped to analyze real and potential security threats.

This is precisely the challenge ahead of the UN who is charged with weaning itself from the protection of the U.S. military to that of the Iraqi security forces and to a community-based security system. This is a welcome change, but it will not be easy. The UN Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) in New York still controls much of the decision making about security protocols in Iraq. The approach from New York tends to be overly cautious and still based on the memory of the 2003 Canal Hotel bombing in which many UN staff perished. If the UN is going to move forward in a productive way, it is essential that UN security staff in Baghdad engage in their own decision making with assistance and support from local Iraqis and based on the real threats they face.

What is most promising is that unlike the U.S., the UN will not rely on expensive and overpaid private security contractors to facilitate their movements. This is in serious contrast to the U.S., which plans to increase its diplomatic staff beyond 2011 by 9,000 people – 5,500 of whom would be for diplomatic security – as it completes its military to civilian transfer in Iraq.

SUPPORT PROGRAMS THAT INCREASE JOB OPPORTUNITIES

Solving the Iraqi displacement crisis also requires continued investments in refugee programs in neighboring countries. In the recently released Regional Response Plan for Iraqi Refugees, the international interagency contributors recognized the need to add an additional objective: alternative solutions to those who will not return or be resettled. This is a critical objective that should be fully supported by the U.S. and all international donor governments and national and international NGOs. In Damascus there has already been some progress toward implementing this objective. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)-led creation of the Damascus Training Center (DTC), in particular, is the lead institute in technical vocational training currently benefiting both Palestinian and Iraqi refugees. It is supported by the Ministry of Social Welfare, the Ministry of Education, and the First Lady of Syria.

It is effective, because the programs are attuned to market needs. New courses are not established until there is a thorough market survey. Students are taught life skills and important information about the industry in which they are being trained to work, not just the skill itself. One of the aims of the DTC is to ensure its graduates are sustainably employed, not just trained to be employed. Some students are encouraged to contribute to their own education by raising some of the funding for their training program and thereby investing in their future. As a result job success rates are high. This model should be strongly embraced and supported and replicated throughout the region for all refugees.

PALESTINIAN REFUGEES FROM IRAQ NEED PROTECTION

The efforts by the international community to find solutions for the more than 3,000 Palestinian refugees from Iraq stranded in border camps should be applauded.

There has been tremendous positive progress. Still, the international community should not forget those who continue to seek durable solutions and must prioritize efforts to address their ongoing needs. First, several hundred Palestinians remain in Al Waleed camp inside of Iraq. Most of them have been referred for resettlement; however, their cases have been pending for over a year. This highly vulnerable population has had to continue to wait inside of their tents in harsh desert conditions and in a camp with almost no services or programs. This is unacceptable. The U.S. must prioritize these cases and respond immediately with an answer as to whether or not they will be accepted.

Inside of Syria efforts are underway to address those Palestinians living in El Hol camp. This is very positive and should continue to be supported by resettlement countries. The cases that require immediate attention are the 3,000 or so living largely in Yarmouk Camp in Damascus. In December over 30 Palestinian refugees were deported to Mosul, Iraq. These individuals were picked up by Syrian security forces, detained, and forced back across the border with fake documents to ensure that the Iraqi authorities would allow them to enter. Because they are Palestinians, they will be never be able to re-enter Syria. Families are now split between the two countries. The cases of Palestinians from Iraq living in Damascus must be urgently referred for resettlement.

Lastly, UNHCR has finally begun to make efforts to profile vulnerable cases of Palestinian refugees in Baghdad and to provide assistance to many of them. UNHCR has a presence in Baladiyat, and this has helped to address ongoing protection and assistance needs. While many critical cases have been referred for follow up and for durable solutions assessments, there has been little action on these cases. UNHCR needs to continue to increase its presence and profile amongst the refugee population and most importantly act on the recommendations made about specific cases. Resettlement should be considered when warranted.

Elizabeth Campbell assessed the situation for displaced Iraqis in Beirut, Damascus, and Baghdad, Diyala, and Wassit Provinces in Iraq.