



**THE BROOKINGS-BERN PROJECT
ON INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT**



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**UNIVERSITÄT
BERN**

HUMANITARIAN ISSUES AND POLITICS IN IRAQ

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14 FEBRUARY 2007

I'm delighted to have the opportunity to talk with you today about the connections between humanitarian issues in Iraq and the larger political/military dimensions of the war, with a particular focus on displacement. There is a lot we don't know about the humanitarian situation as access is difficult for researchers and humanitarian personnel alike. The Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement is presently working on a comprehensive field-based study on Iraqi displacement which should provide a few more answers to what is presently an uncertain situation. But what we do know is quite frightening.

1. Displacement is massive

UNHCR reports that there are around 2 million Iraqis living outside of Iraq and another 1.8 million who are displaced within their country.¹ This is the largest displacement in the Middle East since the displacement of Palestinians in 1948. Approximately 1 in 8 Iraqis has been forcibly uprooted and the uprooting continues. People are leaving their homes because of coalition military operations, sectarian violence, generalized insecurity and above all, fear. Since the bombing of the Samarra Mosque in February 2006, the indications are that sectarian violence has become the leading cause of displacement.² And the displacement is contributing to the sectarian polarization in the country as people are being displaced from mixed communities to single-sect ones. "[I]n essence, people flee to areas where they feel safer. Shi'a go to Shi'a areas. Sunnis go to Sunni areas. Kurds go to the northern provinces and Christians go to parts of Ninewah province (And most of those who can leave the country do.) The result is that hard-line authorities then

¹ UNHCR, "Supplementary Appeal: Iraq Situation Response," Geneva: UNHCR, January 2007, p. 3.

² Ashraf al-Khalidi and Victor Tanner, Sectarian Violence: Radical Groups Drive Internal Displacement in Iraq, Occasional Paper, Brookings Institution-University of Bern Project on Internal Displacement, October 2006

hold sway over cleansed territories.”³ Displacement is not just an accidental by-product of the conflict. As we have seen in other parts of the world, displacement itself has become an objective in the military struggle – a way of consolidating territorial control.⁴

2. Disquieting signs

The pace of displacement seems to be increasing. UNHCR estimates that 40-50,000 Iraqis are leaving their communities each month;⁵ if this continues, this means an additional half a million displaced people in the next year. As al-Khalidi and Tanner, show, there are also indications that people are adapting “pre-displacement” strategies, sleeping in different places at night or changing their patterns of behavior during the day in a kind of micro or daylight displacement.⁶

Moreover, unlike earlier periods, when Iraqis left their homes temporarily for safety during a military operation, there are indications that a growing number of Iraqis do not anticipate returning to their homes in the near future. The International Medical Corps reports, for example, that people who are leaving their homes are trying to sell them with dramatic effect on real estate values.⁷ The International Organization for Migration (IOM) reports that 45% of Iraqis indicate that they plan to return to their communities, 25% want to stay where they are and another 28% want to resettle in a third country.⁸ But IOM notes that the longer the displacement lasts, the less likely people will be to go home.

People who are displaced within Iraq have sought refuge with family and friends in sectarian-friendly areas, but this welcome is wearing thin and some local authorities are trying to restrict the arrival of more internally displaced persons (IDPs). The flood of new arrivals creates resentment as prices increase and public services are strained. The internal displacement in Iraq is largely urban. Iraqis are fleeing urban areas for other urban areas. About 80% of the displaced come from Baghdad.⁹ While most of Iraq’s governorates have established some camps for IDPs, they tend to be in remote areas or lack basic services. There are more cases of IDPs taking over or squatting in abandoned buildings and military bases and reports that the Iraqi government is seeking to evict these squatters.¹⁰ But there are few safe places for the displaced to go.

3. Violence and economic insecurity

This displacement is taking place not only in a context of widespread violence and insecurity, but also in one of economic decline. UNDP found in 2006 that 54% of the

³ Ibid., p. 29.

⁴ There have been many news reports on this. See for example, Ned Parker and Ali Hamdani, “How violence is forging a brutal divide in Baghdad,” *The Times* (UK), 14 December 2006. “Sunni Arabs flock to Fallouja to escape Baghdad violence,” *Los Angeles Times*, 4 January 2007

⁵ UNHCR, Supplementary Appeal, p. 3.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ International Medical Corps, *Iraqis on the Move: Sectarian Displacement in Baghdad*, January 2007.

⁸ International Organization for Migration, *Iraq Displacement: 2006 Year in Review*, 2007, p. 9.

⁹ International Medical Corps, p. 3.

¹⁰ “National Public Radio, “Baghdad Squatters Face Deadline to Leave,” 20 February 2007. IRIN, “New security plan could make more homeless,” 15 February 2007.

population is living on less than US\$1 a day although the Iraqi government maintains the figure is lower. The World Food Program in May of last year reported that 4 million Iraqis are food-insecure with over 8 million more at risk and dependent on daily rations provided by the Public Distribution System.¹¹ Unemployment is variously estimated as between 40 and 60%.¹² The Iraqi casualties have a clear economic impact, particularly as most of the casualties are male in a society where the participation of women in the labor force is low. When a family loses a male relative or when he suffers a serious injury, there are economic consequences for the family's ability to survive. The breakdown of day-to-day routines, such as children staying home from school and the constant insecurity in traveling to shop or work is creating stress for large numbers of Iraqis.¹³

4. Humanitarian assistance

In other countries with large numbers of internally displaced people, international humanitarian agencies provide assistance until conditions change sufficiently for people to return to their homes. But Iraq is the worst place in the world right now for international humanitarian agencies to operate. Most agencies moved their international staff out of Iraq after the 2003 bombing of the UN headquarters in Baghdad. Assistance provided by coalition military and civilian forces is often viewed with suspicion. International and local humanitarian workers alike have been targeted by armed militias. Indeed, the kidnapping of staff of the Iraqi Red Crescent led it to suspend its operations in Baghdad for about a month – at a time when it was providing assistance to almost a quarter of a million people.¹⁴ Local staff of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are working valiantly from their homes to assist needy Iraqis but their ability to move around the communities they serve is increasingly restricted. Local mosques are reportedly providing assistance to needy people in their communities.¹⁵

There is a very real danger that the vacuum in humanitarian assistance will be filled by armed militias who provide relief as a way of increasing their control over territory.¹⁶ The government's Public Distribution System is reportedly not functioning well, particularly in providing rations to displaced persons whose addresses are different than those on the ration cards.¹⁷ Funds to support humanitarian work in Iraq are limited. The International Organization for Migration, for example, only received enough funding to meet 25% of its Iraq budget in 2006. Many traditional humanitarian donors see the humanitarian crisis in Iraq as the result of US government action and thus as a US responsibility.

¹¹ World Food Program/Central Organisation for Statistics and Information Technology (COSIT), Food Security and Vulnerability Analysis in Iraq, May 2006.

¹² IOM, Iraq Displacement, p. 17.

¹³ International Organization for Migration, "Bleak prognosis on Iraqi displacement in 2007," 26 February 2007.

¹⁴ Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), "Iraq: Displaced urge Iraqi Red Crescent to return," 8 January 2007/

¹⁵ Greg Hansen, "Coming to Terms with the Humanitarian Imperative in Iraq," Humanitarian Agenda 2015 Briefing Paper, Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, January 2007.

¹⁶ IRIN, "Iraq: Fighters fill humanitarian vacuum," 14 February 2007. IRIN, "Iraq: Armed groups occupying hospitals and kidnapping doctors," 13 February 2007.

¹⁷ IOM, Iraq Displacement, p. 17.

5. Particularly vulnerable groups

In this climate of generalized violence and insecurity, there are groups of particular concern, notably the 20,000 or so Palestinians living in Iraq who are especially vulnerable to violence and who find little willingness by neighboring countries to allow them to enter their territories.¹⁸ Iranian Kurds living in Iraq have also faced particular difficulties as have Iraq's various minorities. There are some 325,000 Iraqis who returned to Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein – of whom 75% report that reintegration has been difficult and 25% have been displaced again. There are also reports that those who have worked with US forces are vulnerable to persecution and attack.

6. A regional issue

The massive displacement of Iraqis is, of course, a major concern in the region. Presently some 1 million Iraqis are living in Syria, another 700,000 in Jordan and smaller numbers in several other countries in the region.¹⁹ In the region, only Iran, Egypt, and Yemen are signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention which means that Iraqis living in neighboring states are not considered refugees with the rights and responsibilities entailed by this status. Governments fear that the Iraqis may not only stay a long time, but that Iraq's conflict may spill over into their countries.²⁰ Presently the Iraqis are dispersed within the population rather than being housed – and assisted -- in camps. Some governments, such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have essentially closed their borders to Iraqis.

The most urgent task is to provide support to enable Iraqis living in neighboring countries, particularly Syria and Jordan, to remain there. The socio-economic burden on those two governments is immense and international assistance could provide some needed support. Syria and Jordan have allowed hundreds of thousands of Iraqis to enter their countries in spite of the consequences of this on their economies and social institutions. Conditions for Iraqis in these two countries are far from perfect and humanitarian agencies are concerned about their lack of legal status and access to basic social services. But the reality is that most governments in the region have closed the door to all but a handful of Iraqis fleeing the violence of their homeland. The international community owes a debt of gratitude to the Syrian and Jordanian governments for allowing desperate Iraqis to remain on their territories. The international community, starting with the United States, needs to support these two governments and to publicly acknowledge the contributions they are making to a serious humanitarian challenge. Maintaining first asylum in the region is essential to meeting the humanitarian needs of Iraqis who are desperate to escape the violence that is tearing their communities apart.

¹⁸ Human Rights Watch, Nowhere to Flee: The Perilous Situation of Palestinians in Iraq, September 2006

¹⁹ Human Rights Watch, The Silent Treatment: Fleeing Iraq, Surviving in Jordan, New York: Human Rights Watch, November 2006.

²⁰ See for example, Daniel L. Byman, Kenneth M. Pollack, Things Fall Apart: Containing the Spillover from an Iraqi Civil War, Analysis Paper, no. 11, The Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, January 2007.

In the months before the military operations began in March 2003, humanitarian agencies carried out contingency planning where plans were made for the arrival of 600,000 refugees with a projected UNHCR budget of about \$130 million. Last month, UNHCR appealed for \$60 million,²¹ but this isn't enough to meet the concerns of host governments in the region.

7. The consequences of displacement

The effects of this massive displacement of Iraq's citizens for the future of the country are many. Ethnic cleansing is going on and Iraq's sectarian geography is being re-shaped. The sectarian conflict is hardening and is being reinforced by the demographic changes resulting from displacement. For example, many of Iraq's minority groups have left – or are trying to leave – the country. The departure of many professionals will have serious consequences for efforts to re-build Iraqi society. The International Medical Corps reports that populations of teachers in Baghdad have fallen by 80%²² and medical personnel seem to have left in disproportionate numbers.

8. What is to be done?

Obviously the most desired outcome for Iraq is the restoration of security so that people can return to their homes and resume their lives. As that does not seem likely in the immediate future, the international community – and particularly the US government – have a responsibility to protect and assist the Iraqis who are victims of this conflict. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, which is planning an international conference on Iraq, should appeal for much more funding to support host governments and provide assistance to Iraq's internally displaced. And the US government should pay the lion's share of this cost. Given the monumental price tag of the war effort, contributing a fraction of that amount to help the victims of the conflict seems reasonable. The announcement that the US would resettle 7,000 Iraqi refugees was a welcome symbolic gesture, but a much more generous offer would send a signal to governments in the region that the international community, and the US, are doing their share.

²¹ UNHCR, "Supplementary Appeal," p. 3.

²² International Medical Corps, p. 7.