



The Brookings Institution–University of Bern  
Project on Internal Displacement

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BERN

FOR RELEASE TUESDAY, OCTOBER 18, 2006

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## ***SECTARIAN VIOLENCE DRIVES INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT IN IRAQ***

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**WASHINGTON, D.C., October 18, 2006** – The sharp rise in sectarian attacks, abductions and killings that followed the bombing of the holy Shi’a shrine in Samarra’s Golden Mosque in February 2006 has presented Iraq with an explosive problem: sectarian-induced displacement, according to a report released today by the Brookings Institution–University of Bern Project on Internal Displacement.

In the new report, *Sectarian Violence: Radical Groups Drive Internal Displacement in Iraq*, co-authors Ashraf al-Khalidi and Victor Tanner and their Iraqi field team analyze the rise in sectarian violence in Iraq’s cities since the February bombing of the Shi’a mosque in Samarra and how the violence, threats, and intimidation of extremist groups are driving hundreds of thousands Sunni, Shi’a and other ethnic groups from their homes.

“Driving the violence and displacement are Sunni and Shi’a extremist groups. Their goals are to consolidate their territory, maintain some of their people in the territory of the other, and pose as both protector and provider -- forcing people to rely on them rather than the government,” says Roberta Cohen, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and co-director of the Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement. “Displacement patterns vary. For the most part, the displaced consider any chances of returning home slim because they see their displacement as reflecting more than temporary insecurity but deep-seated political divisions within the country.”

Although government figures claim that 234,000 Iraqis have fled their homes since February, the actual number of persons fleeing is far higher since many displaced persons do not register and tracking numbers is highly politicized. Since 2003, more than 800,000 have fled Iraq seeking refuge abroad.

Sectarian violence has begun to change the social and demographic makeup of many of Iraq’s cities, helping to fragment Iraq along religious and ethnic lines. Both Sunni and Shi’a have little confidence in the government’s ability to protect them. At the local level, although towns with more effective forms of government experience less sectarian violence and displacement, radical armed groups, the report concludes, “are succeeding” in carrying out their goals.

Key findings:

- The social and demographic makeup of many Iraqi cities is beginning to change, helping to fragment Iraq along religious and ethnic lines. Since the Samarra bombing, Shi'a restraint has diminished, and Sunni Arabs have been fleeing to Sunni areas (the displaced group that has grown the most); Shias have been fleeing to Shia areas; Kurds have been fleeing to the Northern provinces and Christians to parts of Ninewah province. Formerly mixed towns have become Sunni or Shi'a.
- The displaced consider any chances of returning home slim. They see their displacement as a reflection of deep-seated political divisions in the country.
- More than 234,000 people have fled their homes and become internally displaced since February (government figures) as a result of violence, threats, fear, rumors and intimidation; the number is considered much higher -- three to four hundred thousand (since many do not register, and tracking the numbers is politicized). Hundreds of thousands more are teetering on the edge of displacement. Additional hundreds of thousands have fled the country.
- Voices of moderation, such as of the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, are waning. Intolerance and mistrust are spreading, especially among the youth. Street slang in cities is becoming increasingly violent, and tribal groups on both sides appear to be growing restless, which could add a more popular and rural dimension to the sectarian violence.
- There are different patterns of displacement. In addition to people fleeing to areas where they feel safer, others remain at home but sleep in different places at night (nighttime displacement), or don't go to work or school (pre-displacement), or become displaced more than once (repeat displacement). There is also administrative displacement (deliberate transfers).

The report is based on four weeks field research by an Iraqi team, whose members must remain anonymous out of concern for their security. Co-author Victor Tanner is a consultant who has worked with civil society groups in Iraq and conducts assessments, evaluations and field-based research specializing in violent conflict. He worked with an Iraqi researcher and civil society activist using the pseudonym of Ashraf al-Khalidi.

The report is the second of the Brookings-Bern Project's occasional papers on Iraq. The first, *The Internally Displaced People of Iraq*, by John Fawcett and Victor Tanner, published in October 2002, found that more than one million (Kurds from the North; Shi'a, including Marsh Arabs, from the Center/South; and minority Turkmen and Assyrian Christians) had been deliberately expelled from their homes by the state policies of Saddam Hussein. It provided detailed recommendations for resolving the displacement for a successor government aspiring to stable and democratic rule.

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