

The Iraqi Red Crescent

by Jamal Al-Karboli

The Iraqi Red Crescent Society (IRCS) is among the few organisations working to assist displaced persons throughout Iraq.

The IRCS is an independent national humanitarian society. One of the oldest Red Crescent societies in the region, it was founded in 1932 and recognised by the International Federation in 1934. We uphold international humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality and non-

discrimination on grounds of religion, denomination or political belief.

The IRCS has 15 administrative, financial or operational divisions and branches in each of Iraq's 18 governorates. There are 135 branch offices offering humanitarian

services. We have a staff of 3,200 and 100,000 volunteers – 10,000 of whom are active. The society owns four hospitals – including maternity, surgery and children's hospitals in Baghdad – with a total of 300 beds and runs an artificial limb centre in Mosul and two centres for the rehabilitation of war casualties in Basra. Storage facilities are available in all governorates and we have three large strategic warehouses. The IRCS works in close cooperation with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and with UN agencies, especially WHO, UNICEF and UNHCR.

Our activities, like those of other National Societies, are, of course, not confined to responding to wars or natural disasters. At times of peace we focus on such activities as attracting young volunteers, youth camps, first aid training, seminars to increase awareness of how to reduce road accidents, vaccination campaigns, blood donations, water and sanitation and provision of medical supplies and services in remote areas of Iraq.

Sadly, as a result of the tragic circumstances in Iraq, most of our activities, attention and resources are today directed towards emergency response to the needs of Iraqis at home or in neighbouring countries.

Family from Fallujah at Al-Khadraa' displaced persons camp (established by the Iraqi Red Crescent), near Baghdad.



Among the activities we undertake are:

- evacuation and rescue services and first aid to victims of violence and explosions
- establishing emergency camps for those displaced by conflict or whose houses have been destroyed and providing them with food parcels, hygiene kits, blankets, kitchen sets and jerrycans
- organising blood donation campaigns to support acute-care hospitals
- exhuming and identifying bodies discovered in mass graves
- providing artificial limbs, wheelchairs and other equipment for victims of conflict
- provision of emergency first aid kits, blood bags, body bags, blankets, bed sheets, and stretchers, painkillers and anaesthetics
- food assistance packages: with support from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the Red Crescent Societies of Kuwait, Iran and the United Arab Emirates we have distributed food to over 700,000 vulnerable families.
- provision of drinking water to displaced people
- liaison between families and the estimated 18,000 prisoners currently being held by the occupation forces and the roughly 34,000 detained by the Iraqi authorities: we have facilitated exchanges of tens of thousand of letters and arranged phone calls, thus reassuring relatives – in Iraq and abroad – that their loved ones were alive and well.

Red Crescent workers and volunteers have paid a high price as they carry out their duties. They have been exposed to death, injury, kidnapping and imprisonment at the hands of armed men, militias

and terrorists. Our aid convoys have been attacked on 30 occasions and 13 Red Crescent facilities have been attacked – and damaged or destroyed – by occupation forces. We have problems with some Iraqi insurgents, but in general most of them respect our work and understand our role. We face far greater problems with the American forces as they, often aggressively, search our premises and damage our facilities. We have to spend much time explaining about the Red Crescent. Many US soldiers fail to realise that we are recognised members of the international humanitarian movement, despite the fact we use the Muslim Red Crescent symbol. In spite of these difficult circumstances, however, the Iraqi Red Crescent Society remains committed to assisting our fellow Iraqis to the best of our abilities.

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