

## Displacement in a fragile Iraq

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**The post-Saddam Iraqi state enjoys only limited support from the population, excludes significant sections of its people from power, suppresses the opposition and does not protect citizens from arbitrary arrests, and corruption is rampant. There is a direct relationship between these failures and displacement in Iraq.**

It was no surprise that the 'new' Iraqi state that emerged from the wreckage after the invasion of 2003 was fragile, with serious implications for human security and displacement which are still felt today by Iraqi society. Obvious drivers of displacement in Iraq are the threats to life and health which come from general insecurity, arbitrary detention and poor service provision. Life becomes unbearably difficult and dangerous in such environments, resulting in decisions to leave. Less obvious a driver of displacement are actions intended to strengthen the state but which target vulnerable groups in society in such a way that those targetted experience a process of increasing constraint upon their daily lives and sometimes threats to their physical safety. These pressures forced many Iraqis to migrate.

Early victims of such predatory actions were those perceived – rightly or wrongly – to be associated with the old order. Some Iraqis with ID cards identifying them as residents of sites of resistance to the new order were punished. An Iraqi student I interviewed said that students in his school had their grades docked because their family names identified them as originating from such areas. The effects of a fragile state exercising collective punishment threatened the educational and livelihood opportunities of specific sections of Iraqi youth.

Palestinian refugees who had been living in Iraq for decades had their residency revoked and were re-categorised as foreigners. The idea was spread that Palestinian refugees were responsible for terrorism against the Iraqi people and attacks on Palestinians increased, compelling many of them to leave Iraq. The campaign against the

Palestinians was an example of a fragile state attempting to show its strength by targetting a group that could not fight back.

Fragile states are more prone to the fracturing effects of the privatisation of violence and these have serious repercussions for human security and displacement. With the fragmentation of the instruments of coercion the state lost both physical control over territory and the allegiance of the population.<sup>1</sup> Paramilitary groups flourished in the absence of legitimate state authority and a disintegrative cycle set in, further weakening the state in relation to private military groups. Some of these groups infiltrated state institutions and aspired to seize control of the state. Their activities transformed the spaces in people's daily lives in threatening ways, prompting decisions to leave.

For example, members of the Mehdi Army militia infiltrated the newly formed Iraqi police. The militia forced many Baghdadis from their residences with the threat of violence, it housed families displaced by opposing militias in the forcibly vacated homes, it attacked grocers and bakers in order to force target populations to flee to other neighbourhoods – so that militia members could pillage homes and re-populate areas with people loyal to them. These were manifestations of the fragility of the state in Iraqis' daily lives. They threatened human security and prompted displacement.

There are further effects of these dynamics with significance for displacement. Migration affects the context in which future migration decisions are made.<sup>2</sup> When members of kinship and other networks leave, this depletes the psychological and social

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resources of those left behind. The depletion of kinship networks contributes to the process of displacement as it reduces the support and coping capabilities available to those who remain. In a society in which the integrity of the family unit is so highly valued, those who are left behind are in turn then more likely to migrate. Many Iraqis who had not initially decided to leave were soon compelled to do so in order to rejoin other family members. The burden of living in isolation from them in a failing state was too high a price to pay.

The Mandaean – an ancient monotheistic sect – found that they could no longer practise in public the distinctive rituals essential to their identity as a community for fear of being shot at. Their priests were attacked, as were members of their community more generally. The fragile Iraqi state failed to protect them. Some believed it was unwilling to do so because they were not Muslims. The scattering of Iraq's Mandaeans across the world has intensified since 2003; their faith forbids them from marrying and procreating outside their community and thus displacement and dispersal represent an existential threat to this ancient community.<sup>3</sup>

A Mandaean priest performs a baptism.



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Too many governments perceive – or rather present – refugees as threats to their sovereignty. These governments should remember that fragile states will almost certainly produce refugees and IDPs and that states do not exist in a vacuum. The weakest of states can survive with the support of the international community and strong states can crumble if the international community invites destructive processes.<sup>4</sup> Governments should avoid imposing destructive processes on states if they wish to reduce the production of refugees which they uniformly seem to fear.

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1. See also Mary Kaldor *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era*, Cambridge: Polity Press 2012.
2. See also Douglas Massey 'Social Structure, Household Strategies, and the Cumulative Causation of Migration' *Population Index* Vol 56, No 1 (Spring, 1990) [www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/3644186](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/3644186)
3. See Ali A K Ali 'Displacement and statecraft in Iraq: Recent trends, older roots', *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies* Vol 5, No 2, 2011 <http://tinyurl.com/AliAKAli-IJCIS2011>
4. See also Zolberg et al *Escape from Violence: Conflict and the Refugee Crisis in the Developing World*, New York: OUP 1989.