

# Iraq: growing needs amid continuing displacement

by Andrew Harper

**Seven months after over 100 country representatives gathered in Geneva to address the Iraq displacement crisis, the humanitarian situation has markedly deteriorated. Expectations that highlighting the burdens of Iraq's neighbours would result in financial and political support have been dashed. Support provided – relative to humanitarian needs – has been negligible.**

Every hour, around 50 to 100 Iraqis are being forced to leave their homes. UNHCR believes that some 4.5 million Iraqis – one in six of the population – have now left their homes, up to half a million of them since the Geneva meeting. Regional asylum states, particularly Syria which hosts some 1.6 million Iraqis, have become disenchanted with unfulfilled assurances. Following a number of threats, Syria introduced a visa regime for Iraqis in October. This decision, the first time that Syria has taken such an action against a fellow Arab state, has effectively closed the last remaining avenue of escape for desperate Iraqis.

Internal flight is also becoming harder. Relatively safe provinces have now exhausted their capacity to absorb more IDPs. Most of Iraq's 18 governorates are imposing informal and formal restrictions on IDP entry and residence, denying entry to civilians trying to escape the fighting or denying them aid once they have arrived. Local authorities or, in some cases, non-state actors are applying movement restrictions and denying many new IDPs access to subsidised food assistance, fuel and basic protection. Recent outbreaks of cholera have strengthened the resolve of many authorities to deny entry to 'outsiders'. Internal displacement is taking on a more permanent and increasingly desperate character. The

sale or abandonment of property and the departure of entire families and, in some cases, communities indicate that this population movement is likely to be long-term.

insecure areas in Baghdad toward neighbourhoods with improved services and security, as well as to locations with family, ethno-religious or tribal links outside the city. However, movements are not purely toward homogeneous areas, due to mixed marriages and increasing formal and informal restrictions on movement which limit the options available. As Iraq's neighbours impose more restrictive entry requirements, there is likely to be more pressure on internal displacement toward the north and those governorates offering better security and basic services.



*The long queue inside the immigration centre, Syria 2007.*

Shi'ites from western Baghdad are replacing Sunni families in eastern Baghdad. Sunnis from the south are moving to the north or are fleeing Iraq altogether. Shi'ites from Sunni strongholds are moving to the southern regions. Kurds and Christians are fleeing to the north. The predominant trend in displacement is, and is likely to remain, movement from highly

Most IDPs reside with family and friends but, due to the increased restrictions on IDP movement and growing social and economic vulnerability, IDP camps and self-built shelters have appeared. There are more and more makeshift camps in abysmal conditions, with terrible sanitation and water supply, very little or no health care and no schools. While only 1% of IDPs are now living

*In a cramped basement in Syria's Saida Zeinab neighbourhood, Iraqi and Syrian volunteer teachers give free catch-up classes to Iraqi school children in the hope that they will be able to join Syrian students at the start of the school year.*



UNHCR/M Bernard

in tented camps, an additional 20% are estimated to be in other types of collective settlements ranging from disused army barracks and warehouses to slum-like spontaneous dwellings. Often, IDPs are forced to move multiple times as they again become caught up in the cycle of violence or as local authorities force them to move out of public buildings or away from urban areas. Some IDPs who have been encouraged to return following a lull in the level of violence, or who have been attracted by financial incentives, have found their homes occupied or ruined and have been forced to move on again. While the government has reported the return of over 3,000 families to Baghdad, and thousands more from abroad, this may have been triggered not only by a perceived improvement in security but also by a lack of options.

The UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI)<sup>1</sup> estimates that 15 million Iraqis are extremely vulnerable. Twenty-three per cent of children in southern Iraq are chronically malnourished. Nineteen per cent of

refugees registered with UNHCR in Syria report having significant medical conditions and 14% of those registered in Jordan have been identified as having special needs. Many displaced Iraqis have been exposed to terrifying experiences of terror and violence, with approximately 22% of Iraqis registered with UNHCR reporting personal traumatic events. This, compounded by the difficulty of daily life, has led to high rates of psychological fragility and distress.

### **Iraqis in neighbouring countries**

The countries neighbouring Iraq, particularly Syria and Jordan, have demonstrated remarkable generosity in receiving such large numbers of Iraqis, despite already hosting hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees for over 60 years. UNHCR is fully aware of the strain that large numbers of Iraqis hosted by Syria and Jordan has put on their economy, resources, infrastructure and social structures. The massive influx of Iraqis into urban centres has overwhelmed the absorption

capacities of the infrastructure and social services of the host countries.

UNHCR has now interviewed some 140,000 Iraqis in Syria. Despite having more than 30 registration staff, the massive demand on UNHCR has meant that Iraqis wishing to be interviewed still face a five-month wait. Including those waiting to be interviewed, UNHCR Damascus has registered over 200,000 Iraqis. In Jordan, following the introduction of strict entry restrictions in late 2006, which reduced the flow of Iraqi refugees, the waiting period has been reduced to two weeks. The number of Iraqis registered is close to 50,000. In Egypt and Lebanon, which also have strict entry requirements, UNHCR offices have registered 10,000 and 9,000 Iraqis respectively.

Key characteristics of the registered Iraqi refugee population are:

- Over 80% originate from Baghdad.
- Over half are Sunnis, with Shi'ites representing less than 25% of the total in Jordan and

Syria: in Lebanon, by contrast, close to 60% are Shi'ites.

- There is a disproportionately high proportion of Christians.
- The average case size has increased in recent months as entire families flee.
- The number of vulnerable people has increased: UNHCR is identifying larger numbers of severe medical cases, survivors of torture and trauma, and women at risk

Iraqis now represent almost 10% of the populations in Syria and Jordan. As a consequence of this surge in populations, the prices of basic – often state-subsidised – commodities such as food, fuel and water have increased significantly. Electricity generation capacity in certain parts of Damascus cannot cope with the added refugee-imposed demand. Already overcrowded schools now have up to 60 students per class. Many Jordanian and Syrians can no longer rent or buy apartments due to price increases. Medical and health care facilities in some areas in Damascus cater for more Iraqis than Syrian nationals. Both host communities and state security agencies are aware that Iraqis are changing the character of their societies and fear that their presence may ignite sectarian and ethnic conflict. It is imperative that the international community does not ignore the increasing plight of the most vulnerable who, without adequate assistance, may have no other option but to return to Iraq, become increasingly destitute or be drawn towards extremist causes.

Both Syria and Jordan have estimated the costs of hosting the Iraqi refugees at some \$1 billion per year. Despite the lack of substantive assistance, Jordan, for the first time, opened up its public schools to Iraqi children in September 2007. Syria continues to allow Iraqis to access its education system. It is hoped that, by the end of the school year, some 100,000 Iraqi children in Syria and another 50,000 in Jordan will be enrolled.

From discussions with government officials, it is understood that Iraqi refugees currently living in Syria will not be forcibly returned to Iraq.

The most pressing concern for Iraqi refugees at present is what they should do when their visas expire. In the past, they would visit the Syrian border to renew their visa for three months. UNHCR hopes Syria can establish centres within the country where refugees could renew their visas. The Syrian government has made it clear that the visa restrictions have been imposed due to the massive pressure it faces hosting Iraqi refugees. The challenge will be to ensure that Syria and other regional states receive significant bilateral support so that they can continue to support the Iraqi refugees living in the country – and, it is to be hoped, offer refuge for those Iraqis who need to flee Iraq in the future.

### Surviving with little or no outside aid

Despite UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies putting in place assistance and protection programmes, the vast majority of refugees continue to survive with little or no assistance from the international community. In conjunction with partners, UNHCR in Syria has provided 50,000 Iraqis with food assistance and 140,000 have been treated at UNHCR/Syrian Red Crescent-supported health clinics, 100 schools have been renovated and the number of Iraqi children attending school has doubled to 60,000 (leaving an estimated 340,000 other school-age refugees still lacking schooling). In Jordan, UNHCR programmes target and prioritise vulnerable individuals and families, persons with specific needs or who are considered to be at 'heightened risk'. It is intended that by the end of 2007 around 70,000 Iraqis will directly benefit from the UNHCR assistance programmes which include food, non-food items, cash, psychosocial counselling, education assistance and health services. Given the needs, this remains far too little. The primary providers of assistance remain the Syrian and Jordanian governments, supported by their respective Red Crescent movements.

The only durable solution being pursued for Iraqis is resettlement. While resettlement programmes represent a valuable and high-profile demonstration of international burden sharing, fewer than 5,000 out of the 20,000 referrals that UNHCR will make are likely to

benefit from it before the end of the year. At least 15% of cases referred for resettlement are women at risk, with another 10% being survivors of torture and trauma. For the over 99% of Iraqi refugees who are unlikely to benefit from resettlement, long-term assistance and protection programmes in their countries of asylum are urgently required.

The international community – and not just neighbouring states – has a responsibility towards the huge number of displaced, impoverished, alienated and disenchanted Iraqis who have been displaced by an international conflict but left largely to fend for themselves. An effective humanitarian response needs to be all encompassing and with a long-term perspective, taking into account the needs of not only those displaced but also their host communities. On a positive note, the UAE has announced a \$10 million contribution to UNHCR's programme for Iraqis in Syria – roughly the equivalent of the combined contributions from all Gulf States to UNHCR over the past decade. Brazil's decision to accept over 100 Palestinians stuck in a desolate camp on the Jordanian-Iraqi border for over four years is another concrete example of a non-traditional partner recognising the extent of the humanitarian catastrophe in Iraq and coming to the fore to assist. Sadly, despite persistent appeals by UNHCR and other agencies, around 10,000 Palestinians remain trapped in Baghdad and in grave danger from hostile militias.

If the displacement situation in Iraq and the strain on neighbouring states are to be stabilised, and possibly reversed, it is critical that the international community give the same level of attention as it afforded the post-2003 invasion reconstruction and development phases. Responses to the assistance and protection needs of the millions of displaced Iraqis need to be immediate and massive. Given the lack of durable solutions, they may also have to be long-term.

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