

Not wanted anywhere

Conflict-affected communities at growing risk in Iraq



© INTERSOS: A young boy walks through Nimrod camp

More than two years since victory was declared over the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), millions of vulnerable Iraqis are still at risk. Unable to return safely home, blocked from accessing basic services like water, healthcare and education, and without means to rebuild their homes and lives, the outlook for many is bleak. Massive recovery efforts are still ongoing, but urgent action is required to address the immediate needs of millions of vulnerable families.

Their stories rarely make the news outside of Iraq. Fading international attention and reduced funding for the crisis, coupled with increasing political instability inside Iraq, puts the 1.5 million displaced families, and the 4 million returnees, in increasing danger and risks tipping the country back into crisis.

This is not the time to look away. Fragile peace requires robust action. Political, humanitarian, development, reconciliation and stabilization efforts – local, national and international – should not only prioritize the immediate protection of displaced persons and returnees but make sustainable solutions a priority.



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What is happening in Iraq?

The ISIL conflict resulted in the deaths of thousands of people. Women and children were enslaved and traded for sex and marriage, homes and properties were destroyed en masse, vast areas of land were (and remain) contaminated with explosives, disappearances and displacement became the new norm – aiding the disintegration of an already strained social fabric.

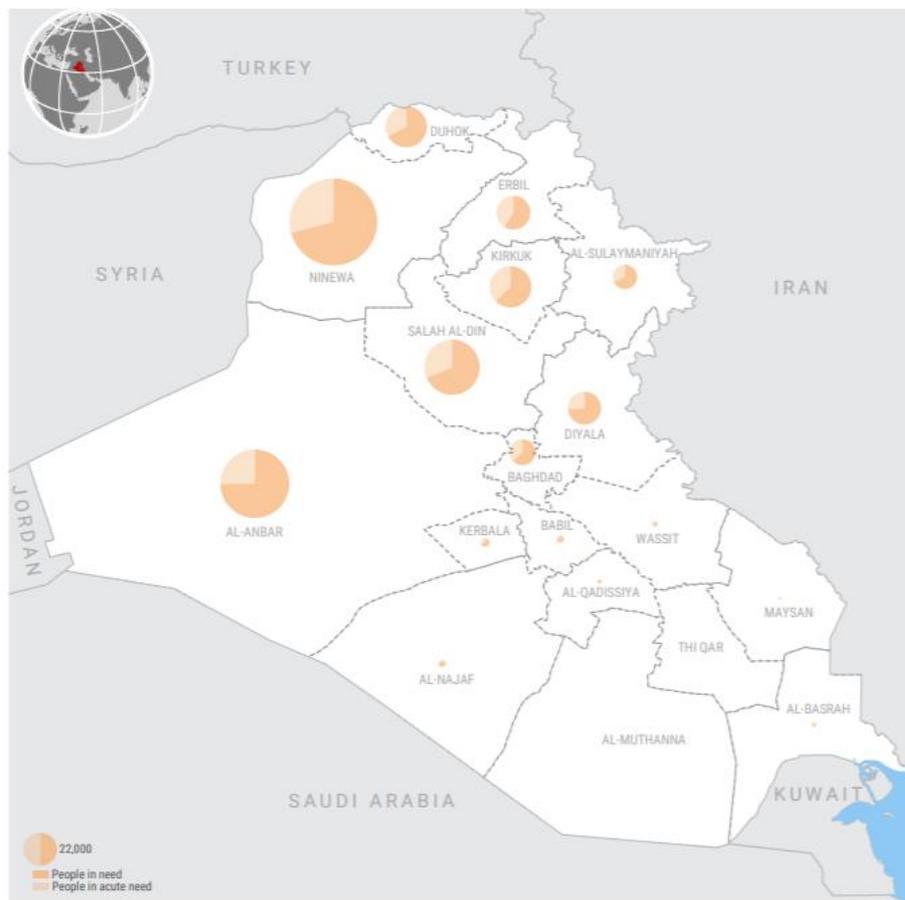
Since the declared defeat over ISIL in December 2017, Iraq has been dealing with the vast human, societal and material tragedies of the conflict.

In some governorates, joint efforts by Iraqi institutions, humanitarians and development actors have seen substantial progress: delivery of humanitarian aid, creation of compensation schemes, return of displaced people, resumption of services, reconstruction of destroyed infrastructure, creation of laws and the reinstatement of the rule of law.

However, some groups of people still urgently need protection and substantive support to meet their basic needs and begin to recover and rebuild lives that have been shattered by conflict.

Safe, dignified, voluntary returns

About 4 million people who fled during the conflict have returned to their homes or surroundings. Some did so voluntarily and are benefitting from important progress in the resumption of basic services and reconstruction of infrastructure, such as bridges and roads. Others, who were forced or coerced to return following the rushed closure of IDP camps at the end of 2019, are living in precarious conditions. Some families with perceived ISIL affiliation are unable to return home due to hostile resistance from their community, still more had homes completely destroyed by the conflict and have nowhere to



go. These factors have forced large numbers of already vulnerable families into secondary or even tertiary long-term displacement. The resources of the Iraqi government should be directed to this group to avoid prolonging their displacement and the subsequent risks. Humanitarian and development actors should play their role in supporting the governmental efforts.

Challenges of returning home

Those who do return home continue to face challenges with limited access to basic services and livelihoods, danger from unexploded bombs and mines, and communities marred by suspicion and distrust. To enable people to return home safely and rebuild their lives, the following steps are essential:

First, actors should work to ensure that all returns are safe, dignified and voluntary. This includes giving displaced people the option to integrate into their area of displacement as well as to return to their area of origin. Returnees need to be and feel safe. Areas should be free of unexploded ordinances and returnees should be supported to reintegrate socially and economically in their environment. Community engagement based on human rights standards and practices, including by law

enforcement and security actors, is crucial in order to build trust between communities and institutions and contribute to the feeling of safety.

Second, returnees and their surrounding communities need increased support in livelihoods and basic services, including functioning water, electricity, healthcare, schools, and houses.

The government of Iraq has created seven complementary grants to enable return, however the disbursement of these grants is extremely limited and hampered by a complex bureaucratic process, more often than not, there is no corresponding budgetary allocation in the ministries. This needs to be reversed. Humanitarian and development actors must strengthen cooperation and support to Iraq in addressing these two stabilization factors as a way to ensure sustainable returns.

Displaced whose return requires reconciliation and political agreements

Though hard to estimate, it is believed that hundreds of thousands of displaced people across the country are blocked from returning home. Most of these families are perceived to be affiliated with ISIL. Deep grievances are held against them and if these remain unaddressed, there is a substantial risk of renewed conflict.

A number of these families are reportedly in camps with severe restrictions on freedom of movement inside and outside the camp, including needing permission or escorts to access essential medical care. IDPs without civil documentation are unable to pass through checkpoints and return home or to access basic services including healthcare and education. Without documentation, an entire generation of Iraqis are growing up without access to education, facing exclusion from society and at-risk from extremism.

The situation is complex. Closing or transforming the camps to centers with detention-like conditions will not work, nor will forced and/or premature returns. The complexity must be addressed, with efforts made to pave the way for reconciliation in areas where this is possible.

Minority communities very reluctant to return

The conflict had a heightened impact on regions with large minority populations. Many thousands were abducted and

killed, others were held captive or sold, including women and children held in sexual slavery and domestic servitude. Many remain captive, at risk of extreme violence, others escaped and now deal with the trauma from their tents.

The issues faced by minorities are long-standing. The defeat of ISIL is only one step among many needed to address the concerns of communities that are vulnerable to attack, subject to deeply entrenched discrimination and excluded from economic, political and social life.

Despite national and international attention, thousands of members of the Yazidi minority group remain in camps, traumatized, with limited access to services, freedom of movement, or options to move on. They are not accepted to integrate where they have sought safety, nor is relocation to an alternative location in Iraq viable.

Slowly, they are being forgotten, suffering from unaddressed trauma, the fear of future attacks, and no realistic options for the future. An improvement of their current shelter, psychosocial situation and livelihoods is an immediate must. A major political effort, supported by the Yazidi community, is needed to unlock this situation.

What can we do about it?

Immediate action is needed to address the urgent needs of the vulnerable population in Iraq:

1. Ensure the needs of displaced communities remain on top of the agenda of national politics and geopolitical priorities

Iraq is a middle-income country that has received substantive humanitarian and stabilization support. However, decades of conflict have severely impacted social cohesion, leaving a diverse population fractured and divided. Trust in government efforts to find solutions is low. Much stronger advocacy locally, nationally and internationally is required.

A reduction of humanitarian and stabilization efforts in the country will leave millions of people suffering as it stands and will risk an imminent renewed conflict. The government of Iraq with the support of the international community need to seriously prioritize finding durable solutions for the displaced, particularly those in protracted displacement.

2. Pull all efforts in one direction: solutions that last

There are many initiatives, programs and efforts currently being undertaken in Iraq. It is vital that these initiatives are fully coordinated with clear counterparts identified to address humanitarian, protection, development and stabilization needs in Iraq at local and national level.

There should be clarity on how humanitarian, development and stabilization efforts come together with a clear priority of providing protection and stability.

Iraq is a litmus test to the renewed effort in the international system for joint humanitarian and development approaches. It is much needed in Iraq. Strong and clear leadership in taking this forward is key to its success.

3. Keep up humanitarian and protection efforts and do no harm

Displaced populations in Iraq face major protection problems: lack of legal documentation, limited rule of law, disappearances, social tensions, lack of adequate shelter, pervasive gender based violence, child marriage, trafficking in persons, negative coping mechanisms, explosives contamination, major land and property issues, trauma and mental health challenges, limited attention to persons with disability, and specific challenges faced by children and youth.

Rushed solutions like non-planned camps closure and forced returns is shortsighted and harmful. Keeping people in substandard shelter, with poor services and negative psychosocial conditions, puts already vulnerable communities at greater risk. Blocking people from accessing civil documentation excludes them from society and potentially shuts out an entire generation, putting them at risk of extremism.

Scaling down humanitarian aid now will be disastrous for these communities and for the country as a whole. Addressing their protection needs must be organized across humanitarian, development and stabilization efforts with clear accountabilities and government counterparts that are supported to cope with the size and scope of the issues. Monitoring of progress and course correction need to continue until indications are much better than what they are now.

It is very important to recognize that the capacities and contexts differ from governorate to governorate and within. Plans should be localized and customized to build on the contexts and what exists.

4. Focus on local reconciliation and transitional justice, one success at a time

The recent camp closures and consolidation have highlighted the increased protection risks faced by displaced populations, particularly those who are perceived to be affiliated to ISIL, the majority of whom are women and children.

Without a comprehensive national plan, communities are left to deal with reconciliation efforts on their own. Strong political support for reconciliation and justice efforts need to be stepped up at local level with dedicated political support and enhanced policy at governorate and national level.

Trust in national authorities and hope for the future must be rebuilt on a foundation of consultation, participation and legal, policy and institutional frameworks for minority rights, which are currently limited or absent.

5- Target development and stabilization action to enable solutions that work

Iraq has benefitted from over one billion USD of stabilization and reconstruction programs that are making major positive difference in people's lives. There are return efforts coordinated through the development coordination office of the UN and governorates return committees, to name a few. These efforts need to come together and prioritize geographic locations where solutions are possible.

It is important to carve space for all feasible solutions so that displaced persons can make a choice for their future including sustainable return, local integration and settlement elsewhere in the country. ■