

Hearing on Sectarian Violence in Iraq and the Refugee Crisis: Testimony by Dana Graber Ladek, Iraq Displacement Specialist, International Organization for Migration

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The Displacement Crisis

Iraq is experiencing the worst human displacement of its history, with over 2.2 million persons displaced within its borders and an additional two million who have fled the country to the surrounding region. This mass displacement is fast becoming a regional and ultimately international crisis.

Although there are many internally displaced persons (IDP) in Iraq displaced over the past several decades, since the 22 February 2006 bombing of the Samarra Al-Askari Mosque the primary driver of displacement has been sectarian violence. IOM assessments, which cover nearly 700,000 of an estimated 1,058,424 people displaced since February 2006, find that 88% of IDPs say they were targeted due to their religious/sectarian identity. General crime, lawlessness, and military operations are also factors producing displacement.

Although sectarian violence emphasizes religious identity, it is as much a political as it is a religious type of persecution. Religious identity is important because it is associated with power blocs that are competing for political and resource control.

Population Movement Patterns

The bulk of Iraqi displacement occurs from or within Baghdad: 69% of IDPs surveyed by IOM reported Baghdad as their place of origin. IOM assessments find that overall, Iraqi IDPs tend to move from mixed communities to religiously and ethnically homogenous communities: Shias tend to move southward, and Sunnis northward towards the central or upper-central governorates. Within large cities like Baghdad or Baquba, IDPs tend to move within the city to homogenous neighborhoods. Despite this larger trend, there are exceptions: in recent weeks, a large group of Sunni IDPs found refuge in a predominantly Shia neighborhood in Baghdad.

The religious profile of the displaced population reflects that of the country at large: 65% of those surveyed are Shia, 31% are Sunni, 4.4% are Christian, and other minority groups (Sabeen Mandeian and Yazidi) less than 1%. The vast majority (93%) of assessed IDPs are Arab, with 4% Assyrian, 2% Kurd, 1% Turkmen, and Chaldeans and Armenians less than 1%.

Many Iraqis who have the ability to leave the country are doing so, with the majority of them becoming refugees in neighboring Jordan and Syria. Both of these countries are planning to introduce visa plans that heavily restrict refugee entry. This, along with this year's increase in Iraqi local authorities' restrictions on inter-governorate movement within the country, is likely to force population flows into new areas as displacement continues.

The Humanitarian Assessment

The prolonged nature and increased scale of displacement has produced a serious humanitarian crisis in Iraq. Displacement deprives families of their income and resources, rendering them unable to provide for themselves in their new locations. Displacement also strains the host communities who share their services and resources with the displaced.

SHELTER is a top priority need reported by IDPs. Of those IDPs assessed by IOM, 58% rent, 18% stay with a host family or relatives, and up to 25% live in camp or group settlements. As rent prices rise, savings run out, and the burden increases on host households, many IDPs are seeking more sustainable living arrangements. An increasing number of IDPs are living in settlements or camps, posing serious challenges for the short-term delivery of aid and longer-term implementation of durable solutions.

FOOD is also a top priority need reported by IDPs. Much of the Iraqi population depends upon the government's PDS rations, but there is a widespread lack of access to these distributions due to political manipulations, limited resources, logistical difficulties, and insecurity. IOM assessments find that the situation is especially dire among the displaced, with 81% of those assessed reporting no or intermittent access to PDS rations.

EMPLOYMENT is a key sector requiring long-term durable solutions. Much of the immediate IDP humanitarian need is due to loss of income

during displacement, and the crisis may worsen as prolonged displacement exhausts the finances of those IDPs who so far have been able to support themselves. IOM assessments find that IDPs consider employment an extremely important priority need, since it will allow them to provide for themselves and begin to rebuild their lives.

HEALTH CARE has deteriorated greatly in Iraq due to the exodus of qualified professionals, a severe shortage of medication and equipment, and damage to medical facilities. Many of the displaced live in substandard conditions and lack basic services, increasing their risk of disease. IOM assessments find that 34% of IDPs cannot access required medications, and 12.4% have no access to health care.

WATER & SANITATION is a growing concern among many of the most vulnerable IDP and host community groups, particularly those in camps or neighborhoods where basic services are either non-existent or overwhelmed. Many IDPs rely on water trucking or host community generosity for water, while others have no potable water and drink from rivers or drainage ditches. Of those IDPs assessed by IOM, 16% reported that they do not have regular access to water.

EDUCATION is an important issue for IDPs, half of whom are under the age of 18. Host community schools are severely overcrowded due to the influx of IDP children, exacerbating social tensions. In IOM assessments, IDPs frequently manifest their education concerns by requesting both school rehabilitation/expansion projects and income generation schemes that will allow families to support themselves without keeping children home from school to work.

Meeting the Humanitarian Need

IOM is a lead organization in the delivery of emergency assistance and Community Assistance Projects (CAPs) within Iraq. In Iraq, IOM projects have reached 5 million beneficiaries since 2003; emergency distributions have reached 52,000 families since 22 February 2006. Despite security limitations, IOM has been able to deliver aid and implement projects throughout Iraq by coordinating closely with partners on the ground. The IOM IDP Monitoring & Needs Assessment Programme provides in-depth assessment data and analysis on Iraqi displacement, regularly disseminating reports that inform the humanitarian community and other stakeholders. The IOM Ministry of Migration and Displacement Capacity Building Programme works closely with the Iraqi Ministry of Displacement and Migration (MoDM) to build its capacity and formulate Iraqi government policy toward migration issues

Although international awareness of the Iraqi displacement crisis has grown considerably in the past year, donors have been slow to respond and funding remains insufficient. IOM has received barely 20% of its \$85 million funding appeal for 2007-2008. IOM has received \$6 million from the U.S. government for 2007. Lack of funding remains the primary constraint on IOM's ability to reach beneficiaries.

The Way Forward

IOM assessments find that 55% of IDPs intend to return to their place of origin, 23% intend to integrate in their place of displacement, and 19% intend to resettle in a third location. As insecurity continues and communal divisions harden, increasing numbers of IDPs may settle permanently; however, the fact remains that the majority of the displaced intend to move again.

In this environment of continuing insecurity, humanitarian agencies must be able to meet the short-term emergency needs of extremely vulnerable Iraqis, while implementing durable solutions projects that assist IDPs in rebuilding their lives. Failure to do so will exacerbate the humanitarian dimension of a massive displacement crisis that is already guaranteed to have economic, social, and political reverberations in Iraq and the region for years to come.