



**Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
The Battle for Mosul: Protection Issues
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I would like to begin by expressing my appreciation to the co-chairs of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, Congressmen Joseph Pitts and James McGovern. Your leadership in organising regular open debates on important global human rights and humanitarian challenges is very welcome.

Thank you for your invitation to brief you here today on the unfolding humanitarian crisis in Iraq. I am speaking on behalf of the Norwegian Refugee Council, one of the leading humanitarian non-governmental organisations in the world responding to the needs of people forced from their homes by conflict. We have been active in responding to the Iraq crisis in all its dimensions from the outset. Our response to internally displaced persons in Iraq is today our biggest operation in a single country with a 2016 annual budget of over \$50 million. We operate from 5 offices- in Erbil, Baghdad, Dohuk, Anbar, Kirkuk and provide shelter and water and sanitation assistance to displaced people. We provide in-kind assistance, cash assistance to displaced households, and education and legal services in the areas of housing, land, and property rights and civil documentation.

On the eve of the height of the military operations to retake control over the city of Mosul and its surrounding villages and communities, I stand here before you today first and foremost as an aid worker, living and working in Iraq. I feel privileged and humbled to be received by you today as I bring to you a piece of the realities on the ground in Iraq- an account of my experiences as a firstline responder to different emergencies in Iraq and my expectations and – more importantly – my concerns for what is yet to come.

Iraq has been faced with a humanitarian crisis that is possibly one of the most complex humanitarian emergencies in the world today, with an estimated 10 million people in need of immediate humanitarian support. Almost 3.4 million people have been displaced across the country since January 2014. Most recently, the world bore witness to mass displacement from the city of Fallujah, a city in the province of Anbar. Together with my colleagues, I spent 6 weeks on the ground, providing life-saving assistance to people in need of food, water, medical care, a roof over their heads, and protection.

Collectively, we struggled to provide aid and assistance to the 85,000 civilians who managed to flee conflict and violence from Fallujah. I spoke to families who had not had a proper meal in months due to besiegement of the city. I spoke to men and women who had left family members behind who could not or would not flee out of fear of what awaited them. I spoke to those who had lost family members as they tried to access the so-called safe routes or cross the Euphrates river in search of safety.

Prior to Fallujah, we provided support to people who had fled Ramadi, Heet, Tikrit, and Mosul city – both when ISIS first took over large parts of Iraq and once again to those who had to flee ISIS-held territory when the Iraqi Security Forces set out to retake control over those cities. But nothing we have done so far has even come close to the scale and magnitude of what is upon us today with the battle for Mosul on our doorstep.

Access to safety

With the military operations moving rapidly towards the city of Mosul itself, already causing high numbers of displacement in the Mosul corridor, we are concerned about the estimated 1.5 million people that are trapped inside the city. How will they be able to flee conflict and violence and how will they be protected during armed conflict and in displacement?

Past experiences from Fallujah, Ramadi, and other major towns, as well as reports from the population indicate that, in reality, safe routes do not exist. So-called safe routes have proven so far ineffective and potentially harmful. This is both because civilians are often unable to access the routes in the first place (1) due the restrictions on freedom of movement imposed by ISIS and (2) because the routes themselves are anything but safe due to the presence of armed actors, including non-state actors, and ongoing fighting. (3) An additional life-threatening challenge in using 'safe routes' is the continued presence of land mines and other explosive devices.

White flagging policy

For Mosul, the worst-case scenario is that at least 700,000 people will flee the city in search of safety, but there are no identified safe routes in place to allow people to escape. Instead, people have been told to remain in their homes and put a white flag on their house or carry a white flag whilst on the move to indicate their civilian nature. This practice was used in Fallujah as well, and rather than provide safety, it invited ISIS fighters to enter civilian homes for protection, or forced civilians to move with them from location to location. The promotion of the 'white flagging policy' indicates that authorities consider civilians staying in their homes as a method to protect them or to limit displacement, rather than secure their safe exit and provide protection and assistance to those in need.

At the same time, we need to take into consideration that civilians may not want to seek safety elsewhere for a variety of reasons. The people of Mosul have seen what we have seen and they carry a well-founded fear that they may face abuse at the hands of non-state armed groups, even if they manage to leave ISIS-held areas. Some fear destruction or booby-trapping of their homes in their absence or the potential abuse they may face at checkpoints and security screening facilities. Others may not want to go to displacement camps, especially with the knowledge that they will have to stay there, often in sub-standard conditions, until it is safe for them to return.

Cross-line assistance

These obstacles to people's willingness and ability to leave the city necessitates a shift in our approach towards a humanitarian response inside of Mosul, which will be incredibly challenging. The humanitarian community will be exposed not only to physical risks that may prevent us from providing aid during armed conflict, but there is no guarantee that we can actually access the city. Several factors play a role here, for instance the possibility that parts of the city will be under military siege, and thus inaccessible. Other factors include the presence of armed actors, uncertainties around who is in control of the city, and whether there will be an opportunity to negotiate access, and the possibility that access routes are unsafe because of unexploded ordinance.

Given the humanitarian consequences for the civilian population associated with the military operations to retake Mosul, it is imperative that we recognise their direct causal relationship. We have to acknowledge that retaking the city of Mosul will not fit a single mold. The operations will not follow a linear time-line and tactics may change. As such, the humanitarian consequences do not occur in a void. Displacement cannot be predicted or prevented, and depending on the humanitarian costs, humanitarian actors will have to adapt their response.

We therefore have to be flexible in our approach and identify common trends that we can address such as:

- Ensuring safe exits out of the city for those who want to leave and where it is not possible to do so, communicate to people that there are no safe routes out of the city. Effective communication channels and early warning systems must be established to ensure civilians are warned about locations where hostilities are ongoing to adapt to the changing environment.
- Protection of civilians must be at the core of the military operations- first and foremost to protect civilian lives, but also to ensure that they are not forced to seek protection from ISIS (e.g. flee with ISIS or be forced to side with ISIS for fear of being abused at the hands of non-state armed groups). The UN and the US-led Coalition must extend their support to the Iraqi Security Forces in conducting security screening in a responsible and dignified manner that does not lead to further marginalisation of an entire population group that is already stigmatised by having lived under ISIS.

Similarly, humanitarian planning does not fit one single mold, nor does it follow a linear time-line.

Mass displacement is one scenario; people staying put inside Mosul is another. We may indeed see a combination or a sequence of events. Yet again we must adopt a flexible approach and not be blind to the realities on the ground. I still remember the mass influx of displaced people into urban areas in 2014 when ISIS first took over large parts of Iraq. People were staying everywhere, with relatives, in unfinished buildings, in schools and mosques. The reality then was that we could not accommodate all displaced people in humanitarian camps and with as many as 700,000 people coming out of Mosul, we must be prepared to provide for them, using all available building stock. While it may be the preference of the authorities to limit displacement by encouraging people to stay in their homes, or to restrict people's movement far from their areas of origin, and confine people to camps, reality will demand a much more pragmatic response. This necessitates a rapid shift away from focusing only on an "in camp response."

The people from Mosul and its surrounding areas have lived for more than 2 years under ISIS-control and on the eve of the height of the battle to retake Mosul, the international community cannot fail these people.

We cannot confine them to their homes to limit displacement, as it gives them a false sense of security and protection. Instead, we must ensure their safe exit away from conflict and violence.

We cannot expose them to the risks of potential ill-treatment at the hands of militia groups. Instead, we must protect them and ensure that the security screening is done in a manner that is respectful and dignified, rather than further set them apart.

We cannot allow them to be confined to sub-standard living conditions in emergency camps, which will only encourage them to return pre-maturely. Instead, we must be allocated the necessary land and financial resources to either build properly serviced camps or open the possibilities to shelter people in all available building stock, such as public buildings, religious buildings, warehouses, and other unused housing options.

We cannot allow them to be treated with suspicion and hostility. Instead, we must learn the lessons from the swift gains made by ISIS, commonly understood to be a result of a feeling of Sunni marginalisation.

Collectively, we must prevent a similar pattern that allowed for ISIS' successes in first place from repeating itself in the future. Instead, the foundations upon which to rebuild the peaceful and stable Iraq we all aspire towards are laid today with the protection of civilians at the heart of the military operations and humanitarian response.