



**Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
Hearing on the Humanitarian and Human Rights Crisis in Iraq
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**Statement of
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On behalf of the International Rescue Committee (IRC), I would like to thank Co-Chairmen Wolf and McGovern as well as the other Commission members for holding this important hearing and for asking the IRC to testify.

While the conflict in Iraq and international efforts to defeat the Islamic State (IS) have been headline news, the impact that the violence has had on the lives of Iraqis and efforts to aid them has only been a footnote in this story. Over 1.9 million people have been displaced from their homes inside Iraq since December of last year¹. A more proactive approach must be taken to provide life-saving assistance and prevent them from suffering at the hands of a second “disaster”—the oncoming winter.

Whole of Iraq Picture

Before exploring the humanitarian implications of the recent violence, we need to open the aperture to view the larger picture of displacement in Iraq. While the violence that has occurred since June of 2014 to date has uprooted 1.5 million people from their homes², this was on top of a significant number of displaced people already living in Iraq.

Between December 2013 and May 2014, up to 472,000 people were displaced in Al-Anbar province alone by armed conflict³: a figure that went largely unnoticed by the international community. The violence was triggered by measures taken by the Government of Iraq (GoI) that were perceived as sectarian and subsequent fighting between federal Iraqi forces and militia groups. Nearly 230,000 of the 3.2⁴ million Syrians fleeing violence in their own country have sought refuge in northern Iraq. Finally, there were a remaining 1.1⁵ million IDPs who were

¹ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre. Iraq IDPs Figures Analysis. <http://www.internal-displacement.org/middle-east-and-north-africa/iraq/figures-analysis>

² Ibid

³ Ibid

⁴ UNHCR. Syria Regional Refugee Response Information Sharing Portal. <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

⁵ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre. Iraq IDPs Figures Analysis

displaced during the American-led war in Iraq and the sectarian violence that was unleashed during that period.

This complicated “patchwork” of displacement must not be forgotten, and those forced to flee the violence of IS this year must be considered as one further component of a multi-layered humanitarian crisis that already existed in Iraq. A holistic response that addresses the needs of all displaced people in Iraq must be pursued.

KRI: Hosting Limitations

An estimated 930,000⁶ of the newly displaced have fled to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). In the Dohuk governorate alone this is 430,000⁷ people, with some communities reporting three IDPs or refugees present per every person in their community. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the people of the KRI deserve credit for opening their doors to host so many people and doing their best to assist them. They have largely let these people access medical systems, shelter in parks and schools and hook up to electricity lines. However, the numbers are just too large for even the most generous of hosting communities to handle.

The lack of available and adequate housing is the most pressing issue with an estimated 516,000⁸ people in the KRI alone in need of shelter assistance. There simply aren’t enough dwellings for people to reside in; not everyone has families that can host them or can afford to stay in a hotel or apartment even if there was a room available. As a result rents have doubled in Erbil. IDPs who can’t afford these skyrocketing rents have resorted to hunkering down in half-constructed buildings with no walls or insulation, under bridges, in parks and in public buildings like elementary schools.

With temperatures dropping, the risks presented by exposure to cold weather conditions grow, with averages in the KRI between three and 41 degrees Fahrenheit during the winter months. An estimated 450,000 people—including 225,000 children—need warm winter clothes and shoes⁹. Many families had to flee at a moment’s notice, without time to bring items with them that would protect them from the cold. The UN Office of Coordination for Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)

⁶ United National Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). Iraq Crisis Situation Report No. 20. <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Iraq%20Crisis%20Situation%20Report%20No%20%208%20to%2014%20November%202014.pdf>

⁷ Ibid

⁸ UN OCHA. Briefing Paper on Response and Funding Gaps—Winterization, 3 November 2014. <http://www.humanitarianresponse.info/system/files/documents/files/Winterisation%20%20in%20Iraq%20-%20Briefing%20Paper%20-%2003%20November%202014.pdf>

⁹ Ibid

estimates that there is a funding gap of \$173.1 million¹⁰ in winterization support that must immediately be addressed to prevent people from suffering from exposure to the elements.

The school year had to be delayed across the KRI twice due to sheer numbers of IDPs seeking shelter in local schools. The school year finally began on October 22 in Sulaymaniyah and Erbil governorates, and schools in the most impacted governorate, Dohuk, were only recently evacuated. With few shelter options, the question remains as to where to “evacuate” the IDPs. Due to the housing crunch, hasty construction of camps across the three governorates of the KRI has been ongoing. It is not clear whether the camps will be up to international standards in time for the worst winter months. Furthermore, they likely could only house one-third of the displaced population in the KRI if all were constructed, leaving a large question mark regarding the shelter options for over 600,000 remaining IDPs. As one family sheltering in a school told the IRC: “even though we don’t have full services here, we feel safe. The locals are telling us we ‘have to go to the tents’ [i.e. camps]: but winter is coming and with all of these small children, the conditions will be too harsh for us.”

The IRC recommends the use of camps to house refugees and IDPs only as a last resort: believing firmly that people should be able to choose where they live, have access to markets and public facilities, and enjoy freedom of movement. Recognizing the rapid onset of cold weather and the dearth of options for safe housing, we would encourage the Government of Iraq (GoI), the KRG, United Nations agencies, international donors and humanitarian non-governmental agencies to do everything they can to find creative alternative housing options and avoid sending Iraqi IDPs to camps where many don’t want to go. Immediate action is paramount; it’s a race against time and one where lives hang in the balance.

Protection Challenges for IDPs

Given the volume of IDPs that have streamed in to northern Iraq and the resulting strains placed on local infrastructure, there have been incidences of them not being allowed to enter. This is particularly true of Sunni Arab men of fighting age. While ethnic and religious minorities have been the targets of some of the most horrific violence by IS, it is clear that all Iraqis have suffered at their hands, as well as a result of GoI and international military action. Not allowing these individuals to flee is a violation of the Iraqi constitution, which calls for unimpeded freedom of movement, and places people directly in harm’s way.

Once in safe governorates, other protection challenges include families not being able to access assistance provided through Iraq’s Public Distribution System (PDS). The PDS provides a monthly food ration that is critical to many poor and vulnerable Iraqis. Since IDPs fled, many have not

¹⁰ Ibid

been able to connect back to the system as the ration cards they use are associated with their original residence. This has left the very people who need PDS rations most without basic food staples. Similarly, for the many IDPs who were unable to take their official IDs with them when they fled, the GoI must provide ways to recover duplicates or newly issued papers, which are vital both to receive assistance and access services, such as enrollment in schools. The GoI must move immediately to untangle bureaucratic hurdles that prevent IDPs from accessing critical services owed to them by their government.

Area-based Response

There are 230,000 Syrian refugees also impacting the same KRI governorates hosting the new waves of IDPs, further compounding the strains that hosting communities face. The United Nations humanitarian system as well as individual bilateral donors often do not handle “mixed” populations—meaning IDPs and refugees (as well as vulnerable host communities)—out of the same agencies and offices. This means that there is a risk of responding unevenly to the needs of one population instead of the other, even if they are living side by side. Furthermore, the impact on the residents and public service systems in the KRI of hosting so many refugees and IDPs is significant. Rents have increased, schools have been occupied, medical offices are short on supplies and other public services are strained from the pressure of so many new users.

Given these facts, the IRC would encourage an “area based response”—meaning looking at the existing needs of whole areas to assess the type of interventions required to assist displaced people (of any profile) and the communities hosting them. This involves a different way of working: by both considering the needs of IDP and refugees holistically, but also looking at ways of strengthening government social services so they can be used by these displaced groups without placing an undue burden on local residents.

First, agencies and offices that work with refugees and IDPs must jointly assess needs, plan responses and allocate resources. Second, support must be provided to the KRG to make sure that they can manage some of the response through their own systems: benefiting not only the people that they are hosting, but protecting their own population from the shocks that accompany such a significant inflow of people into their territory. This support should come in the form of adequate and timely budget support and payments to the KRG by the central GoI, which has been an ongoing problem and source of contention. The international community must further bolster the KRG’s ability to strengthen their health, education, safety and other systems by supplementing these resources.

Central Iraq: Little Known

The majority of humanitarian response has been focused on responding to the needs of IDPs who fled to the KRI. There is little information making it out about the situation of those who remain

in central Iraq: whether they live in “contested” areas where there is continued active fighting or those controlled by IS and other armed groups. There are accounts of pockets of civilians trapped in parts of central Iraq and people who have had to flee multiple times as the location of fighting shifts. These people have very little to live on and are receiving no assistance from the GoI or the international community. The fact of the matter is that central Iraq has become a sort of “black hole.”

Given that we know that many civilians who were not able to flee or are trapped are in need of assistance, the United States and the rest of the international community must redouble efforts to assess their needs and find creative ways of getting assistance to them. We simply can’t leave large parts of the country—where needs could be massive—unaddressed. While it can be difficult to get aid into areas controlled by a group such as IS, all efforts must be made to allow impartial humanitarian aid organizations, working through local communities, to get critical assistance—like food, medical supplies and other essential items and services—to innocent civilians that desperately need it.

While there has been military involvement on the part of the United States, the Kurdish Peshmerga and federal Iraqi forces to drop assistance into these areas, military involvement in delivering assistance should be a last resort to prevent militarization of aid efforts and the conflation of military and humanitarian objectives.

Broken Iraqi Resettlement Pipeline

A far less known “victim” of this year’s violence in Iraq is the pipeline of Iraqis that were waiting to be resettled to the United States. Processing of P-2 visas in Iraq has ground to a near halt due to the evacuation of non-essential consular and Citizen and Immigration Services staff from the Embassy in Baghdad.

An estimated 20,000 Iraqis are queued for P-2 visas—which are a special category of visa established for Iraqis that worked for US forces in Iraq or are closely related to such people, were employed by other organizations or media outlets that were perceived to be associated with the US mission or were applying to join family members already living in the United States. Similarly, there is a backlog of Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applications, a designation that was specifically set up to assist Iraqis that worked for US forces and now face danger due to this association.

With only essential Embassy staff present in Baghdad, only the SIVs are being processed. However, with IS violence and the activities of militias in various areas in and around Baghdad, it has become incredibly dangerous for Iraqis to attend interviews at the US Embassy. No other consulate locations in Iraq are currently processing SIVs or P-2 visas, meaning that the few people making it to the interview process with the skeletal staffing at the US Embassy face a difficult

tradeoff between the danger of traveling to their interview and the potential longer-term safety of resettlement in the United States.

In order to surmount these obstacles, the IRC would strongly recommend opening interview facilities for P-2 visas and SIVs in alternate safe locations. Possibilities include, but are not limited to, Basra for those living in the south of Iraq and Erbil for those living in the north. Without making arrangements to adapt to the current obstacles to safety and security in Iraq, the US risks leaving some of the most vulnerable Iraqis—some of whom served this country—in harm's way. Furthermore, the pipeline will continue to be log-jammed, making it difficult to add other vulnerable Iraqis—like religious minorities that have faced unspeakable violence in central Iraq—to the queue.

Conclusion and Recommendations

As Secretary of State Kerry noted at a conference of Foreign Ministers held earlier this month to discuss IS, it may take years of collective international efforts to successfully defeat the group. Given the terror they have wrought and the conflict that has resulted between IS and a variety of state and non-state groups, it is likely that we will not see significant movements of IDPs back to their homes in the near future.

The international community, the GoI and the KRG and UN agencies will therefore need to prepare themselves for a new layer of protracted displacement in Iraq. Given this fact, the IRC would make the following recommendations:

- Address displacement in all of Iraq. Make efforts to holistically assess and design a response to displacement in all areas of Iraq for people displaced during different periods of violence. Addressing only the needs of the IDPs created by IS' campaign of violence would ignore the larger picture and the needs of millions of other displaced Iraqis.
- Fund the existing \$2.2 billion Iraq Strategic Response Plan. While the World Bank categorizes Iraq as a "lower middle income country", the displacement crisis is more than the GoI can effectively manage and assistance is not getting to those who need it most. The inability to handle the scale of the crisis is compounded by Iraq's budget crisis and current low petroleum prices. The international community must not assume that all of the needs of Iraqis will be met by the GoI, otherwise, significant gaps in life-saving assistance will result. Only 29% of the UN Strategic Response Plan has been funded.
- Encourage the Government of Iraq to meet obligations to its own citizens. While the GoI cannot manage the response on its own, it does ultimately shoulder the responsibility of caring for its own citizens. Great efforts should be made to provide public assistance to displaced people through Iraq's PDS system and other channels of support. Furthermore,

the GoI must provide timely and adequate budget support to the KRG, which is shouldering a significant burden of IDPs in its governorates.

- Urge Iraqi leaders to allow freedom of movement. Iraqi leaders in the country's safer governorates must uphold the Iraqi constitution by allowing freedom of movement into their territories. While the burden of hosting influxes of IDPs –on top of refugees in some cases—is understood, not allowing certain individuals and families to flee into safer territory could have disastrous consequences.
- Make rapid and intense efforts to address the shelter crisis. A laser-like focus must be placed on addressing the dearth of adequate shelter for IDPs in the KRI in the coming weeks. Winter is on the doorstep and without significant efforts to find adequate housing and provide IDPs with winterization assistance, lives are on the line (again). These efforts should keep an eye toward longer-term solutions given the prospect of IDPs returning to their homes in central Iraq in the near future is low.
- Respond to needs by area, not by population. Some areas of Iraq's north are hosting IDPs and refugees, which is also putting a strain on local host populations. UN agencies and international donors must break out of the mold of addressing the needs of specific populations and work together to look at those present in an entire area. Not only would it prevent some groups from receiving assistance while others don't, it may present a more efficient and effective approach to addressing the impacts of a complex and multi-layered displacement crisis.
- Support the strengthening of public service provision in the KRG. Humanitarian assistance is important, but it won't be enough to address the full needs of displaced people. The KRG has allowed displaced Iraqis to use their services, but their systems cannot handle all of the additional traffic. Given that we are facing a medium to long-term crisis, efforts should be made to strengthen health, education and other public service systems in the KRG for use by IDPs and to ensure that the burden isn't unbearable for host communities.
- Assess and address humanitarian needs in central Iraq. The needs of people remaining or trapped in contested or IS-controlled areas of Iraq should not be ignored. UN agencies and international donors must make efforts to assess needs and to work with impartial humanitarian aid organizations to get assistance to people who need it.
- Get creative in repairing the resettlement pipeline to the US. New staffing arrangements at the US Embassy and consulates and alternate locations for interviews of Iraqis applying for P-2 visas and SIVs must be found to ensure that refugee processing continues. Iraq has become an even more dangerous place for those at risk given their previous affiliation or perceived association with the US mission in Iraq. Keeping the resettlement process moving is a lifeline to these individuals and one that has been almost completely severed in recent months.