KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG

April 2021

Iraq's internally displaced: A protracted crisis

Over the decades, the situation of internally displaced people in Iraq has morphed into a complex, protracted crisis. What are its specifications and possible solutions?

Anne-Sophie Bauer

For more than two decades, Iraq has experienced consecutive waves of internal displacement. Although many individuals returned to their areas of origin after the defeat of the terror organization Islamic State (IS), at present around 1.2 million Iraqis remain in displacement across the country. Given that many of them are dependent on humanitarian assistance for survival, especially the recent closure of internally displaced people camps across Iraq has raised again old, unresolved questions of reconstruction, reconciliation and return. The need for a better understanding of IDPs' characteristics and behavior as well as a reassessment of their precarious and protracted situation of displacement is thus more urgent than ever.

Background of internal displacement in Iraq

As a result of consecutive crises including political persecution under the regime of Saddam Hussein (1979-2003), the US-led invasion in 2003, sectarian violence and the occupation by the terror organization IS (2013-2017), Iraq has a complex and on-going history of internal displacement. Before the fall of the Saddam-regime in 2003, displacement mainly affected those opposing his rule. After that, increasing sectarian violence and fighting of militias for control of specific areas caused more than 1 million Iraqis to flee their homes[1]. The bombing of the Al-Askari Mosque in Samarra and its violent aftermath in February 2006 is remembered as a particularly horrific event, forcing hundreds of thousands of families into displacement and ratcheting the total number of IDPs up to 2.7 million. This wave of displacement, thus, was a deliberate policy of sectarian cleansing, put in place by armed militias, rather than a mere by-product of conflict[2].

More recently, in 2013, internal displacement started with the arrival of the IS terror group. Once their fighters captured large swaths of north-western Iraq in a period of a few months, especially minorities such as Christians and Yazidis faced severe persecution. In 2017, in a second stage and as a result of the conflict between coalition forces and Daesh[3], Iraq saw unprecedented levels of internal displacement, which has far-reaching ramifications until the present. More than a million people were displaced from the major northern city of Mosul alone and

[1] See Ferris, "Remembering Iraq's Displaced", March 18, 2013. This and all following sources have lastly been retrieved on March 30th, 2021.
[2] See Ferris, "Remembering Iraq's Displaced", March 18, 2013. This and all following sources have lastly been retrieved on March 30th, 2021.
[3] Daesh stands for 'al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham' (The Islamic State in Syria and Iraq) and is the Arabic acronym for the terror organization Islamic State.

at the height of the conflict, more than 5.8 million Iraqis had fled their homes across Iraq. Lastly, in addition to man-made causes, 37.000 individuals became internally displaced after fleeing natural disasters such as floods and earthquakes in 2019[4].

Yet, the first half of 2018 also marked a turning point; for the first time in four years the number of people returning to their area of origin (AoO) exceeded the total number of those that remained in displacement[5]. Especially after Daesh had lost control over vast territories, Iraq has now entered a period of low-intensity conflict in which more than 4.8 million Iraqis were able to return to their AoO[6]. However, during 2019, the pace of return has slowed down, raising new questions regarding the push and pull factors preventing or motivating IDPs' return[7]. As of March 2021, around 1.2 million IDPs remain in camps or informal housing[8]. To adjust appropriately to the new context of protracted displacement in a post-conflict country, humanitarian NGOs have increasingly emphasized the need of shifting towards respective long-term strategies rather than mere emergency responses[9].

IDP population

The large majority of the 1.2 million IDPs continues to live in informal housing arrangements – by March 2021, it was 1.018.212 individuals. This includes IDPs living in rented apartments and hotels but also in uninhabitable housing such as abandoned sites and religious buildings. An additional 187.555 individuals were counted as residents of the remaining 28 IDP camps across Iraq, most of which sprang up during the height of fighting between Iraqi forces and the IS in 2017[10].

Just as the country itself, Iraq's IDP population is made up of diverse ethno-religious groups. In addition to the three main communities Sunni and Shia Arabs and Sunni Kurds, also Turkmen Shias, Shabak Shias, Yazidis, Christians and other minorities were affected by displacement. In each ethno-religious group specific characteristics, intentions and behavior regarding displacement and return patterns can be detected; while, for instance, the Yazidi population predominantly lives in camps, Turkmen and Shabak Shia IDPs are more likely to stay in religious accommodations. In terms of future prospects, Turkmen and Shabak Shias intend to stay in Iraq, whereas both Yazidis and Christians wish to emigrate; the former out of fear of a return of Daesh and the latter due to the hope of better economic opportunities elsewhere[11]. It is important to understand such group-specific behavior to tailor humanitarian initiatives and manage inter-group conflicts among IDPs. Perceived group identification and vulnerability were also found to be important factors affecting return behavior, which thus need to be taken into account when offering targeted assistance[12].

Lastly, around half of the IDPs were under the age of 18, which also points towards a heightened risk of radicalization among predominantly young camp residences, who oftentimes have suffered great losses and are susceptible to IS ideology[13]. In an interview, radicalization expert Karrar Rifaat, who is affiliated with the KAS-partner NGO Masarat, points out that inside the IDP camps, especially among families of IS members, there is a direct correlation between their socio-economic situation and the tendency towards extremism[14]. Further, a lacking sense of purpose was found among the main drivers for radicalization. Measures taken to

[4] See International Displacement Monitoring Centre, "Country Information Iraq".
[5] See REACH, "Iraq: Majority of IDPs living out of displacement camps have no intention of returning home", August 19, 2018.
[6] See OCHA Reliefweb, "Safe return", December 2, 2020.
[7] See REACH, "Iraq: Majority of IDPs living out of displacement camps have no intention of returning home", August 19, 2018.
[8] See International Organization for Migration, "Iraq IDP Master Lists", February 28 2021.
[9] See Skelton & Saleem, IRIS, "Displacement and Iraq's Political Marketplace", February 2021.
[10] See International Organization for Migration, "Iraq IDP Master Lists", February 28 2021.
[11] See International Organization for Migration, "Understanding Ethno-Religious Groups in Iraq", February 2019.
[12] See International Organization for Migration, "Understanding Ethno-Religious Groups in Iraq", February 2019.
[13] See REACH, "IDP Camp Directory", February 2020. And Kaltenthaler & Kruglanski, "Preventing Radicalization among Internally Displaced People in Syria and Iraq", March 2020.
[14] The interview was conducted by KAS with radicalization expert Karrar Rifaat on March 31, 2021.

counteract such tendencies include the establishment of representative bodies for camp residents or educational activities that provide them with meaning and agency[15].

Key barriers to return

A multitude of human rights organizations and other institutes have identified key barriers to return by surveying opinions among IDPs as well as analyzing the situation in their AoO. At present, while the majority of individuals wishes to return to their homes when the conditions are conducive, only 14% of IDPs think this will happen within the next year due to a variety of reasons as outlined below[16].

Resource and material factors

Every study on IDPs cites the lack of material resources and services of all kinds as a key obstacle to return. 48% of IDPs report that their housing, land and property (HLP) was completely destroyed or seized and that there were no basic services such as health care, education or waste disposal in their AoO[17]. Many have also lost their proof of identity or other basic documentation, which is needed to receive humanitarian assistance and limits their freedom of movement due to heightened risk of detention at inland checkpoints[18]. A general lack of livelihood opportunities such as the availability of jobs was reported by 68%[19]. Furthermore, as the crisis becomes increasingly protracted, IDPs are forced to sell their assets and, as their displacement endures, resort to negative coping strategies such as accumulating debt[20]. Aid organizations have been trying to find solutions in collaboration with local authorities, support reconstruction activities as well as providing financial aid to returnees even after they have left formal IDP camps[21]. The Iraqi KAS-partner NGO JSSOR has pointed out that alleviating resource-related pressure on returnees and receiving communities alike is needed as a first step from which their peaceful social reintegration can take place[22].

Social and security factors

Working only on material reconstruction and restoration of livelihoods is not enough to ensure a safe return for many IDPs; also discriminatory attitudes, prejudice, tribal and ethno-religious disputes between returnees and receiving communities have to be addressed. Here, host communities often divide returnees according to perceived pro- and anti-IS lines to an extent where whole families are subject to collective blame if one family member is perceived to have had ties with the IS. The reintegration of such families was found to be opposed by 62% of receiving community members, among them those that expressed their willingness to take violent revenge[23]. This has ramifications on an ethno-religious level; the KAS' Iraqi partner NGO Burj Babel points out that, for example, in the case of the Sinjar region in northern Iraq, many Yazidis were allowed to return, while Muslims (especially the Sunnis among them) are facing major obstacles due to said stigmatization[24].

Therefore, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) stresses the urgent need for organized dialogue and mediation between returnees and local communities, including tribal figures with authority such as sheikhs and elders[25]. However, while many grassroots initiatives, NGOs and even international institutions such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) are working on facilitating such

---

[15] See Kaltenthaler & Kruglanski, "Preventing Radicalization among Internally Displaced People in Syria and Iraq", March 2020.
[16] See REACH, "Areas of Origin IDPs in Formal Camps", September 2020.
[17] See REACH, "Areas of Origin IDPs in Formal Camps", September 2020.
[18] See King & Ardis, Humanitarian Practice Network, "Identity crisis? Documentation for the displaced in Iraq", October 2015.
[19] See REACH, "Areas of Origin IDPs in Formal Camps", September 2020.
[20] See REACH, "Iraq: Assessing needs and gaps in formal IDP camps across the country", September 26, 2017.
[21] See Rashid, Reuters, "Nowhere to go: Displaced Iraqis desperate as camps close", November 12, 2020.
[22] The interview was conducted by KAS with Mohammed Serkal, MENA Director at JSSOR on April 1, 2021.
[23] See Rifaat & Palani, Un Ponte Per, "Preventing Violent Extremism in Nineveh", January 2021.
[24] The interview was conducted by KAS with Dhikra Sarsam, Assistant Executive Director at Burj Babel on March 28, 2021.
[25] See UNHCR, "UNHCR ramps up support to Iraqi returnees amid large-scale closure of IDP camps", November 13, 2020. And Rifaat & Palani, Un Ponte Per, "Preventing Violent Extremism in Nineveh", January 2021.

reconciliation and transitional justice, this can only lead to isolated successes as long as there is no overarching legal framework by the central Iraqi government to forestall and deal with acts of tribal vengeance[26].

Domestic and international political factors

The question of IDPs' return is not one of mere material or societal nature but carries inherent political significance, and thus requires a political solution. Small-scale political action, should, for instance, include the coordination with receiving districts so that returnees, which often lack documentation, are not turned away at checkpoints[27]. On a larger scale, there are highly complex political dynamics between a broad variety of stakeholders that must be understood, as they were found to either solidify or mitigate obstacles to IDPs' return. IDPs and their ability to go back to their AoO are used as a form of "political currency" by a multitude of local militias and other security file holders, which is played according to their interests. All of them have respective ties to various national political blocs with respective colliding economic and (geo)political interests, thus, impeding a coordinated return of IDPs. Further, those national political blocs in turn have alliances with international actors[28]. While this certainly complicates the situation, as it lifts a seemingly domestic issue on an international level, it also creates an opportunity; external actors may have the ability to influence their local allies by including IDPs on their agenda for negotiations with them. Hence, by employing the right political tools, they may be able to shift Iraqi political actors' cost-benefit calculations towards a political will of facilitating IDPs' return.

Closure of camps and returnees

In May 2018, the former prime minister Haidar al-Abadi started urging IDPs to go home to their AoO and pushed more aggressively for their return. Some formal IDP camps were closed with the stated goal of stabilizing the situation of the IDPs[29]. In 2019, the Government of Iraq (GoI) announced that the process of resolving all internal displacement ought to be completed by the end of 2020, which however was interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic[30]. Until further notice, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) announced to keep camps open and signed an agreement to facilitate the return of IDPs to the Sinjar District by improving coordination for restoring security and stability in the region[31]. Subsequently, between October 2020 and January 2021, the GoI closed 14 formal IDP camps across Iraq and around 70% of IDP households have returned to their AoO, thus being considered returnees[32]. Upon request from KAS, the Iraqi Ministry of Migration reported that 28 formal IDP camps remain open throughout Iraq by the end of March 2021, out of which 26 were located in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)[33].

As government information regarding camp closure and its timeline have changed rapidly, many IDPs as well as humanitarian organizations have voiced their concern. It was pointed out that the enduring volatile security situation in Iraq does not allow for large-scale return, and that the conditions under which IDPs are returning are neither safe nor sustainable. New research on the evolving situation shows that almost 60% of IDPs describe their departure as involuntarily[34]. Further, in November 2020, the United Nations (UN) estimated that around one-third of IDPs were unable to stay in their AoO following camp closures, resulting in secondary displacement[35]. They are now registered as out-of-camp IDPs, according to the International Organization of Migration (IOM), often living in precarious conditions, unsafe housing or areas where explosive devices have

[26] The KAS Syria/Iraq Office itself supports and collaborates with local partners on mediation and reconciliation efforts of this kind.
[27] See King & Ardis, Humanitarian Practice Network, "Identity crisis? Documentation for the displaced in Iraq", October 2015.
[28] See Skelton & Saleem, IRIS, "Displacement and Iraq's Political Marketplace", February 2021.
[29] See Wille, Human Rights Watch, "Iraq: Not a Homecoming", June 14, 2019.
[30] See UNFPA, "Crisis in Iraq".
[31] See USAID, "Iraq - Complex Emergency", December 16, 2020.
[32] Though many of those counted as returnees by official statistics are in reality still living in displacement as their returns are inherently unsustainable, leading to further movement shortly after. See IDMC & Norwegen Refugee Council, "Nowhere to return to", November 2018. And OCHA, "DTM Emergency Tracking - Movement of Camps IDPs", January 17, 2021. And OCHA, "Iraq Humanitarian Needs Overview February 2021", March 9, 2021.
[33] The request to the Iraqi Ministry of Migration was made on March 29, 2021.
[34] See Qantara, "Iraq shuts last 'safe haven' camps for vulnerable families", November 13, 2020.
[35] And USAID, "Iraq - Complex Emergency", December 16, 2020.

not been cleared[36]. Further, no strategy was presented for families who had no prospect of returning to their AoO in the first place. They, too, find themselves in secondary displacement as they were either brought to the remaining camps or have arrived at non-camp-settings[37]. The latter means that tracing their movement and possible return becomes increasingly hard as measures to monitor and assist them in informal housing settings are limited.

Future outlook on IDPs and their return

The dynamic and rapidly changing situation of IDPs in Iraq highlights the continuous need for an in-depth understanding of the situation on the ground as well as on a policy level. Both the Iraqi government and the UN have repeatedly ensured their commitment to finding safe and durable solutions for IDPs as well as strategies for terminating IDP camps. Here, in the short-term, the closing of all IDP camps across Iraq can be expected, with the exception of camps in the KRI, where they remain open until further notice. Above all, the safe, dignified and sustainable return of IDPs to their AoO should be the overarching priority, which aid organizations and experts have stressed will require a strategic, phased approach that involves all relevant stakeholders on a local, national and international level. Wherever this is not possible, alternative options for integration and resettlement should be found as the experience of forced "returns" has shown that they are not only unsustainable in the short run, but also a driver of extremism in the long run[38]. Humanitarian agencies continue to find and adapt solutions to the ever-changing environment of post-conflict Iraq, for instance, by redirecting funding and assistance to private households settling elsewhere after camp closure[39]. However, the shift from short-term humanitarian assistance to a long-term development agenda must be accompanied by respective changes in the national legal framework as well as a shift in social and political practices. They all must facilitate return, reconstruction and reintegration of a community of IDPs that has lived in a situation of protracted displacement and without a place called home for far too long.

[36] See Norwegian Refugee Council, "NRC in Iraq".
[37] See OCHA, "DTM Emergency Tracking - Movement of Camps IDPs", January 17, 2021
[38] See Schlein, VOA News, "Aid agencies blast Iraqi decision to close IDP camps during pandemic" November 15, 2020. And Rifaat & Palani, Un Ponte Per, "Preventing Violent Extremism in Nineveh", January 2021.
[39] See Rashid, Reuters, "Nowhere to go: Displaced Iraqis desperate as camps close", November 12, 2020.

Anne-Sophie Bauer is an Intern at Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation's Syria/Iraq Office.

The interview statements represent the ideas and opinions of the interviewees and do not reflect the ideas and opinions of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. The KAS does not assume any legal or moral responsibility for inaccurate information or a lack of impartiality of opinions or ideas presented in the interviews.

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V.

Gregor Jaecke
Head of Office Syria/Iraq
European and International Cooperation
gregor.jaecke@kas.de
www.kas.de/de/web/syrien-irak

The text of this publication is published under a Creative Commons license: "Creative Commons Attribution- Share Alike 4.0 international" (CC BY-SA 4.0), https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/legalcode