Middle East and North Africa Programme
Workshop Summary

CHATHAM HOUSE
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Internal Displacement in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Impact, Response and Options

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In partnership with the Institute of Regional and International Studies, American University of Iraq, Sulaimani

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Introduction

The following is a summary of a workshop, co-hosted by Chatham House's Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Programme and the Institute of Regional and International Studies (IRIS) at the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani, on the topic of internal displacement affecting the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).

This is an under-reported issue. While it is difficult to assess the accuracy of available figures, it is estimated that as many as one in three people in the KRI are displaced.

The workshop, held in Sulaimani on 16–18 May 2016, brought together local civil society, academics, international NGOs, UN agencies, representatives of displaced communities, and policymakers. The aims of the workshop were to: understand the situation of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the KRI; analyse the social, political and economic impact of the IDP crisis for the KRI; and to consider options for improving the effectiveness of response at the local, national and international levels.

The meeting was held under the Chatham House Rule,[1] and the views expressed are those of the participants. This summary is intended to serve as an aide-memoire for those who took part, and to provide a general summary of discussions for those who did not.

Key points that emerged from the discussion are:

- The response of the central government in Baghdad, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Erbil and the international community to Iraq's displacement crisis remains inadequate. **There is a need for a national plan to respond to the IDP crisis** that will tackle large-scale national policies such as education. **But political disagreement between Baghdad and Erbil is hindering the development of solutions at this level.**

- **Return should be seen as one of the options for IDPs, but not as the only solution:** While the KRG deserves great credit for its acceptance of such large numbers of IDPs, the authorities continue to operate on the assumption that IDPs will return 'home' once conflict is over. Such perceptions undermine displaced peoples' right to choose between return and settlement. Those displaced by conflict seek to settle where they can find sustainable livelihoods, peaceful living conditions and access to services. Experience from other displacement crises indicates that many do not return to their former home.

- **There is a critical need to plan ahead for future displacement associated with the continuing campaign against ISIS.** The current campaign in Fallujah and the anticipated campaign in Mosul – Iraq's second largest city and home to some 600,000 people – will inevitably generate further waves of IDPs. Given the proximity of Mosul to the KRI, it is highly likely that large numbers will flee there. The workshop found no evidence of planning or provision for this on the part of the KRI.

- **The response must recognize the chronic nature of the displacement, and extend beyond emergency relief.** In every year since 2003 Iraq has been among the 10 countries worldwide with the highest count of IDPs. Despite this, insufficient attention and support are

[1] When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.

being provided to programming that acknowledges the long-term implications of displacement in the KRI. Greater support for livelihoods programming and initiatives that seek to reduce social tensions is required.

- **Support should be allocated on the basis of needs, rather than ethnicity or category (IDP, refugee, host):** Such an approach is more likely to reduce social tensions and increase resilience. While not presented as an ideal solution, some participants suggested that the KRI should look into the potential to agree quotas for support for vulnerable host communities, as in Jordan.

- **The response would benefit from being benchmarked against international standards,** as identified in the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Framework for National Responsibility, and the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.[2]

The scale of the crisis and the nature of the response

According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), there are twice as many IDPs as there are refugees worldwide. Of the 8.6 million people estimated by the IDMC to have been displaced as a result of violent conflict in 2015, more than half were displaced in three countries in the Middle East: Yemen, Syria and Iraq.

Assessing the scale of the crisis is difficult, as IDPs are constantly on the move. None the less, as of April 2016 over 3.3 million Iraqis were estimated to be internally displaced, of whom 1 million were located in the KRI, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM). In contrast to displacement in many other countries, a relatively small proportion of IDPs in the KRI are living in camps (Erbil 6 per cent; Duhok 37 per cent; Sulaimani 13 per cent). IOM notes that most Iraqi IDPs intend to settle in their current location; for example, 80 per cent of IDPs in Sulaimani said they would prefer to stay.[3]

The international response to the displacement crisis in the KRI is faced with the familiar challenge of applying international standards to individuals who fall under national jurisdiction. But the situation is further complicated at all levels in the case of the KRI by the ambiguity of the relationship between the Kurdish authorities and the government in Baghdad. One participant stated that, as of 2014, coordination between the UN, the KRG and local and international NGOs was inefficient both at horizontal and vertical levels; agents worked without clear responsibilities; trust in the coordination system was low; and competition for funds prevented organizations from cooperating with each other and sharing information.

Discussions throughout the workshop highlighted that the issue of poor coordination persists, despite the creation of the Joint Crisis Coordination Centre in the KRI in mid-2015. As a consequence, support to IDP groups is uneven. Many IDP camps lack regular water and electricity supply (cuts can last up to 12–16 hours a day) and health services. In response, the majority of NGOs work on assistance (food, medicine, winter clothing and tents), but developing self-reliance and income generation among IDPs is too often neglected, with implementers arguing that they lack the necessary funds to do so. Meanwhile, job opportunities for IDPs in the camps are limited, and vocational training, especially for women, is scarce.

[2] Details of the Framework for National Responsibility and the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement are available in, *inter alia*, the *Handbook for the Protection of Internally Displaced Persons*: https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/IDP%20Handbook_FINAL%20All%20document_NEW.pdf.
3 For more detailed data on internal displacement in Iraq, see IOM's Displacement Tracking Index: http://iomiraq.net/dtm-page.

Social impacts of internal displacement in the KRI

Internal displacement affects many aspects of social life for both IDPs and host communities, but there is a disproportionate impact on vulnerable groups such as children, women and young people. Participants emphasized the importance both of understanding the specific ways in which different groups are affected, and of developing appropriate policies to respond to their needs.

Children

Children constitute the majority of the IDP population in the KRI. In the whole of Iraq there are some 3.25 million children affected by the displacement crisis. Of these, an estimated 90,000 IDP children are in camps, and 1.2 million outside camps; and some 1.05 million children are in areas under armed opposition groups' control.

The most significant needs of children are access to health and education. But participants also emphasized the need for psychological care to address traumas suffered by children as a result of conflict. These may arise from being forced to leave their home, from family separation – as a result of death or parents working elsewhere – or from heightened levels of stress in households. It was also pointed out that girls in female-led households are likely to be married early if they are not in school. One participant stated that some children want to be able to work in order to bring income to their family; if this is not formally allowed, children will often find other ways through so-called 'hidden work'.

Although limited in scale, there have been some successes in responding to these challenges. The establishment by UNHCR of mobile child protection centres in camps, and by UNICEF of mobile and static Child Friendly Spaces, has provided vital services for children's wellbeing. However, there are potential areas for improvement. Participants suggested that a long-term foster system for unaccompanied or separated children should be developed.

Education

Approximately 30 per cent of children outside of camps and 50 per cent of those in camps have access to education. Children fall out of education for many reasons. Some quit school or do not receive adequate education for 'practical' reasons, such as their school being damaged or in poor condition, high transport costs, or lack of qualified teachers. Others struggle because of language or dialect barriers – for example, Arab children can have difficulties with education in Kurdish schools – differences in the curriculum, or overcrowding – with high pupil-to-teacher ratios meaning that some schools running as many as four shifts per day. It was noted that recruitment to armed groups can follow an end to schooling.

Some participants noted that educational curricula provided by international and local organizations can run counter to the traditions of IDP communities. Some IDP families are reluctant to allow their girls to attend school. Parent–teacher associations aim to increase mutual awareness about educational practices and to enable a better learning environment for children, but their effectiveness is limited and they continue to exclude mothers and illiterate parents. Despite these challenges, the KRG has introduced summer schools in an effort to ensure that children remain occupied. In addition, a system provided by the KRG education ministry has given opportunities for IDPs who cannot physically attend school to take exams. These policies were welcomed by workshop participants, but the continuing absence of an education plan for IDPs was identified as a critical gap.

Women

Displacement can fragment social structures, as the absence of male family members may lead to deprivation of income, social protection and support (from extended family and neighbours). Often, this means that women carry the heaviest burden of displacement. There are more than 1.6 million widows and an even greater number of female-headed households among IDPs in Iraq. IDP women are often victims of entrenched structural gender discrimination, which affects their daily lives in camps and towns. They are also more likely to be affected by livelihood deprivation, lack of education and access to health services than men. Proof of identity is required in order to receive available services, but in most cases men hold on to such documentation, with the result that women are often unable to access services in the men's absence.

One participant stated that camps are like prisons for women and girls, as they are not able to do anything. Most women lack language skills, limiting their ability to work or integrate. Financial difficulties mean that girls are more likely to enter early marriage, and women are also vulnerable to abuse, abduction, trafficking and torture. As a result of atrocities committed by ISIS, many Yezidi, Arab and Shabbak women experience psychological problems. Furthermore, livelihood deprivation has led to cases of women seeking income through prostitution.

Workshop participants argued that women are poorly served by the current response. Many stated that there is insufficient understanding of women's specific needs in relation to health, maternity and hygiene. Health support for women, including mental health, was said to be lacking. Some participants noted that pregnant women do not have maternity services near their camps.

Vocational and linguistic training for women is also scarce. While sewing training and provision of cash for products in some camps has been useful in generating income, such schemes fail to assure sustainable livelihoods after international organizations have left. However, one initiative that was commended by workshop participants was the development of a mothers' group to provide day care for the children of working mothers inside a camp, thereby enabling women with children to continue to work. Participants recommended that women should be granted more agency through the response to the IDP situation: women should be included in councils and committees at all levels of the response management to ensure that their issues are heard.

Social tension

Many workshop participants stated that displacement is creating social tension among communities. In the camps, there are tensions between people from different communities, and segregation – ostensibly to reduce tension – is a problem. One participant reported that forced population movements are hampering social integration between groups, and in some cases triggering social tension between host and displaced communities. It was stated by one participant that displacement is changing the demographic composition of the region, with certain geographic areas being allocated to specific sects or groups.

Some participants argued that the KRG must take the lead in fostering integration among communities.

Registration and mobility

The need for relevant documentation was identified as a critical impediment to the ability of IDPs to be mobile and receive services, particularly when moving between areas administered by different

authorities. In the disputed territories, access to government services is often affected. One participant argued that, for political reasons, IDPs have been prevented from returning to areas where they could live and have access to education.

Inadequacy of data

The paucity of government data was also highlighted. Participants considered that the government database should be improved, and that better training should be provided to staff in collecting, collating and analysing data. Some participants stated that privacy and risk assessment are mostly ignored in the collection of data, and that interviews at which data are gathered are usually conducted with sheikhs, mukhtars and community leaders. The environment for data collection is not conducive for IDPs to share information accurately or state their real feelings and thoughts.

Impacts of internal displacement on livelihoods in the KRI

Workshop participants discussed the economic challenges facing IDPs and host communities, explored programmes designed to support the livelihoods of vulnerable persons, and examined the issues of return and integration of IDPs into host communities. Discussions indicated that the IDP crisis in the KRI is regarded locally as something that can be held separate from broader economic development and societal change. Participants argued that this was a misconception, and a critical flaw that hampers the KRI's ability to enable a comprehensive response that goes beyond the humanitarian crisis.

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) research points to an increasing need for livelihoods support. Overall, 3 million people in Iraq consider livelihood to be their biggest problem, of whom 44 per cent live in the KRI. (It should be noted that not all are IDPs.) Experience from displacement crises across the world illustrates the centrality of livelihoods in calculations over return.

The economic impact of displacement on host communities in the KRI is significant.[4] The influx of IDPs has increased competition over already limited job opportunities. Many IDPs are willing to work for lower wages, and Arabic-speaking IDPs may find jobs in humanitarian organizations. The presence of IDPs has also led to increased competition in the housing rental market, with multiple families often sharing homes. Local residents complain that this has pushed prices up. Public services have also been stretched: participants noted that public hospitals are struggling to respond to the demands of a bulging population.

Workshop participants considered that these legitimate concerns had gone largely unaddressed by the response's approach to the impact of the IDP crisis on livelihoods. Few of the host communities in the KRI receive support from the government or from international organizations for the challenges arising from this situation.

A number of participants made the case that more comprehensive responses are required in view of the reality that IDPs, refugees and host communities live together. There was strong agreement that vulnerability should be the main criterion for inclusion in livelihoods programming, and that such programming should therefore also include vulnerable host communities. However, one participant noted that, as a consequence of funding shortages, the vulnerability criteria were set so that the NGO community had no option but to focus only on those most desperately in need; this was one of the reasons

[4] *The Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Assessing the Social and Economic Impact of the Syrian Conflict and ISIS*, available at http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2015/04/24/090224b082df93dc/1_0/Rendered/PDF/The0Kurdistan00an0conflict0and0ISIS.pdf.

host communities had received so little support. Indeed, as funding remains largely restricted to emergency needs, incomes are declining and vulnerability is increasing. Participants reported that some IDPs are requesting to move to camps because they can no longer afford to pay rent.

Humanitarian actors are increasingly sensitive to the dangers of stirring social conflict through the provision of livelihoods support. A policy of 'do no harm' exists with regard to livelihoods, and participants noted that some programmes have alleviated social tensions by including local communities in interventions. There was general agreement over the need to scale-up such interventions, yet participants saw little prospect that this would happen. Participants from international organizations noted that the humanitarian framework through which they operate does not see livelihoods as an immediate priority. They expressed concern that the limited resources available are channelled to emergency aid, with no exit strategy for replacing that aid with livelihoods support.

Symptomatic of this, in the view of participants, was cash for work. Although effective, this was deemed to be a short-term solution only. More sustainable have been programmes that provide support for home-based small enterprises – especially for women and for female-headed households. One successful example was a project in Kirkuk, where women formed a small-scale cooperative and created a value chain with donor support. Participants felt that more could be done to build on such initiatives. There was also broad agreement on the need to introduce more courses and training in vocational skills to camps.

Political impacts of internal displacement in the KRI

The absence of a political settlement between Erbil and Baghdad has politicized the response to the displacement crisis, particularly concerning the issue of return and the continued contestation of disputed territories. One workshop participant argued that the post-2003 political settlement of ethnic and sectarian quotas (*muhasasa ta'ifia*) has turned populations into strategic assets: population transfers have become a vehicle for attempts to divide the population into three groupings (Sunni, Shia, Kurd) and change facts on the ground.

Another participant stated that the distribution of 'sign-up' papers in Jalula and Rabiya (the sovereignty of which is disputed between Baghdad and Erbil) is a good example of such practices. By the participant's account, the papers ask people to pledge allegiance to the KRG before returning to these areas. An account was also given of the authorities only allowing supporters of certain parties to go back to Sinjar.

Participants regarded events in Sinjar, where ISIS attacked and committed a series of atrocities in 2014, as indicative of the lack of accountability in Iraqi politics. They noted that no military force in the country was held accountable for retreating from Sinjar, mainly because of political divisions.

None the less, participants did identify some positive developments, including signs that displacement has served to humanize the 'other' and has generated opportunities for interaction and solidarity between different communities which have responded without regard to sectarian affiliation. The KRG built on this human interaction and sense of hope when, in August 2014, it prevented a protest to demand the forcible return of Arab Iraqis. The KRG warned anyone joining this demonstration would be arrested, and the protest did not take place.

Despite the increase in solidarity between groups from different ethnic and sectarian backgrounds, the political response has also had the effect of exacerbating divisions between communities. There is deep social upheaval in Kirkuk, for example. The fact that Iraqi Arabs are still being paid government salaries while Iraqi Kurds are not is causing resentment among Kurds. Underlying this is the lack of political will

at national level to overcome sectarian divides and work collectively to discuss difficult issues. What the KRG and the authorities in Baghdad want of each other was regarded by political experts as being mutually unacceptable.

Some participants suggested that a summit organized with international support could put pressure on the KRG and Baghdad to communicate what they want from each other. Others argued that previous such attempts have failed, and that a reconciliation conference would be unlikely to achieve anything. It was suggested that a better approach could be confidence-building between communities at the grassroots level. There are some examples of small-scale successes and political deals whereby returnees have received guarantees of good treatment, and these could be used as models for bigger such arrangements (such as in Mosul and Ramadi), in the view of some participants.

Others made the case that cooperation between international actors could be used to develop contingency planning for Mosul and other areas, building on lessons learned from past repopulations and military operations. Participants considered that the political establishment needs to support the humanitarian response, and vice versa. Otherwise, it was warned, such issues are likely to be exacerbated in future, potentially leading to civil war.

Participants also suggested that NGOs' advocacy on transparency and accountability should be depoliticized. Representatives of different communities in the same governorate should be heard in any decision-making processes to overcome segregation and tension at community level. Regular mechanisms should be established to prevent recruitment to military groups, but also to transition militants and seek to reintegrate them into society.