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UPDATE ON HUMANITARIAN ISSUES AND POLITICS IN IRAQ

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The Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement provides periodic updates on humanitarian issues in Iraq, with a particular focus on the factors behind the growing displacement crisis. The Project has recently completed a large field-based study of Iraqi displacement patterns to Syria, and many of its findings are presented here.

In recent months, American media coverage of Iraq has largely focused on the US military's redoubled efforts to "clear and hold" the cities of Anbar and several neighborhoods in Baghdad. The urban warfare of the so-called "surge" has become a significant factor of recent displacement, as street fighting and air strikes have pushed thousands from their homes. While there are indications that the "surge" and related operations, such as the recent US program to arm Sunni tribes, have managed to dampen some aspects of the civil violence, there is little to suggest that the strategy is paving the way to durable stability.

Violence is fracturing the nation of Iraq, and Baghdad is losing its grip on the country. The South is being divided into Shi'a fiefdoms, the West is becoming the territory of Sunni tribes, and the Kurdish North has established de facto independence. As control decentralizes in Iraq it may prove increasingly difficult for humanitarian organizations to provide comprehensive aid. Should this fragmentation continue, and Iraq partition into three or more regions, the resulting displacement could be enormous.

Assessing the humanitarian situation in Iraq is made difficult by the dangerous circumstances that confront journalists and humanitarian researchers on the ground. What we do know of the situation, however, is frightening.

1. Displacement is massive

The current conflict in Iraq has created the largest population displacement in the Middle East since the displacement of Palestinians in 1948. UNHCR reports that at least two million Iraqis have fled the country since 2003 and another two million have been displaced within Iraq's borders.¹ Approximately 1 in 8 Iraqis has been forcibly uprooted. UNHCR estimates that 40-60,000 Iraqis are leaving their communities each month; if trends continue, an additional half a million people will be displaced in the next year.² The Iraqi Red Crescent anticipates twice that many.³

2. Disquieting trends

Since the bombing of the al-Askari Mosque in February 2006, sectarian violence has become the leading cause of displacement.⁴ This displacement has further contributed to the sectarian polarization in the country as people are being forced from mixed communities to single-sect ones. "[I]n essence, people flee to areas where they feel safer. Shi'a go to Shi'a areas. Sunnis go to Sunni areas. Kurds go to the northern provinces and Christians go to parts of Ninewah province. (And most of those who can leave the country do.) The result is that hard-line authorities then hold sway over cleansed territories."⁵ Displacement is not just an accidental by-product of the conflict. As we have seen in other parts of the world, displacement itself has become an objective in the military struggle – a way of consolidating territorial control.⁶

Moreover, unlike earlier periods, when Iraqis left their homes temporarily for safety during a military operation, there are indications that a growing number of Iraqis do not anticipate returning to their homes in the near future. The International Medical Corps reports, for example, that many people are selling their homes as they flee.⁷ The International Organization for Migration (IOM) reports that 45% of displaced Iraqis indicate that they plan to return to their communities, 25% want to stay where they are

¹ UNHCR: "Iraq Situation Update" 19 June 2007.

² UNHCR: "Humanitarian Needs of Persons Displaced Within Iraq and Across the Country's Borders," 18 April 2007, p. 4.

³ IRCO, Disaster Management Department: "Report on IDPs in Iraq," 7 March 2007.

⁴ Ashraf al-Khalidi and Victor Tanner, "Sectarian Violence: Radical Groups Drive Internal Displacement in Iraq," Occasional Paper, Brookings Institution-University of Bern Project on Internal Displacement, October 2006.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁶ There have been many news reports on this. See for example, Ned Parker and Ali Hamdani, "How Violence is Forging a Brutal Divide in Baghdad," *The Times* (UK), 14 December 2006. "Sunni Arabs Flock to Falluja to Escape Baghdad Violence," *Los Angeles Times*, 4 January 2007.

⁷ This has had a dramatic effect on the real estate market. See International Medical Corps, "Iraqis on the Move: Sectarian Displacement in Baghdad," January 2007.

and another 28% want to resettle in a third country.⁸ Brookings researchers in Syria found that the vast majority of Iraqi refugees believe it would be impossible to return home in the near term.

People who are displaced within Iraq have sought refuge with family and friends in sectarian-friendly areas, but this welcome is wearing thin and some local authorities are restricting the arrival of more internally displaced persons (IDPs). Brookings researchers found that most southern governorates (Basra, Muthanna, Dhi-Qar, Kerbala and Babylon) have restricted the entry of displaced people who do not have relatives in the governorate, do not belong to local tribes or do not have kin with whom they can live. Babylon makes an exception only for professionals, and Kerbala for displaced who have money. Muthanna is reportedly paying non-local displaced to leave the governorate. These moves reflect the displaced overload in the South, with overcrowded schools, strained basic services, rising rental prices, and a growing resentment towards new arrivals among locals.

Most of the current violence occurs in towns and cities, which serve as battlegrounds for coalition forces fighting insurgents, and are the primary site of sectarian violence.⁹ Internal displacement, therefore, is largely urban. Iraqis are fleeing urban areas for other urban areas, often more than once. About 80% of the country's displaced come from Baghdad, and within Baghdad almost 85% of resettled families come from other Baghdad neighborhoods.¹⁰ In this massive reshuffling of Iraq's urban population, the various sects are divided and the bridges are, quite literally, destroyed.¹¹

While most of Iraq's governorates have established some camps for IDPs, they tend to be in remote areas or lack basic services.¹² Due to the cultural stigma attached to living in camps and their overall poor conditions, most Iraqi families view camps as an absolute last resort. The IOM estimates that only one to two percent of all post-Samarra IDPs live in camps, the majority of them in Ninewah province.¹³ There are more cases of IDPs building improvised housing on vacant public lands, or taking over or squatting in abandoned buildings and military bases. The Iraqi government is reportedly seeking to evict these squatters.¹⁴ Squatter buildings often lack basic utilities and are vulnerable to violent attacks.¹⁵ Often, militants who aim to homogenize neighborhoods, resettle the displaced of their sect into the vacated homes of the opposing sect. Thus, the displaced

⁸ International Organization for Migration, "Iraq Displacement: 2006 Year in Review," 2007, p. 9.

⁹ See Global Policy Forum: "War and Occupation in Iraq," June 2007, chapter 6: "Attacks on Cities."

¹⁰ International Medical Corps, p. 3.

¹¹ See, for example, Ibon Villedabeitia and Mussab Al-Khairalla "Iraqis Fear 'Bridge Wars' is Plot to Divide Baghdad," *Reuters*, 15 April 2007.

¹² Living conditions in the camps vary. Some camps are inadequate, lacking security, electricity and toilets. See IOM: "IDP Camp Assessment Report," June/July 2007.

¹³ IOM: "Emergency Needs Assessment," 17 May 2007. IOM: "Baghdad IDP Needs Assessment," May 2007, pg. 3. Ninewah hosts 80,000 IDPs. See UNHCR: "Iraq Situation Update," 19 June 2007.

¹⁴ National Public Radio, "Baghdad Squatters Face Deadline to Leave," 20 February 2007. UN-IRIN: "New Security Plan Could Make More Homeless," 15 February 2007.

¹⁵ IRCO, Disaster Management Department: "Report on IDPs in Iraq," 7 March 2007.

often become involved in the conflict they are trying to escape. In short, there are few safe places for the displaced to go.

3. Violence and economic insecurity

Violence is the driving cause of displacement and unfortunately it is getting worse. “The situation is hardening. Violence is reaching deeper into society. More and more people have ties to radical groups. In many neighborhoods, it is a case of either being with them or against them. And if the latter, the consequence is to flee or, often, to be killed. And once kin and loved ones join a radical group, the whole family is entrapped.”¹⁶

Assassinations are endemic and frequently target those individuals who are central to a functioning community: doctors, teachers, merchants, religious leaders. Kidnappings are also on the rise. Reports indicate that the number of ransom kidnappings has reached 40 per day in Baghdad.¹⁷ The average ransom may be as high as \$30,000; a massive amount in a country with a per capita GDP just over \$1,000. As reported in the *New York Times* in late 2006, a classified US government inter-agency report claims violent criminal activity in Iraq has allowed the insurgency to become financially self-sustaining. The report says that insurgents are raising between \$70 million and \$200 million annually through illicit activities, including \$25 to \$100 million through oil smuggling and up to \$36 million through kidnappings.¹⁸ Another recent report indicates that militants of the Mahdi Army – who do not receive a regular salary – support operations through fencing victims’ property, especially stolen cars.¹⁹ As with much of the violent activity in Iraq, the line between criminals and militants is murky.

The widespread violence and lawlessness has precipitated an economic decline. UNDP found in 2006 that 54% of the population is living on less than US\$1 a day although the Iraqi government maintains the figure is lower. The World Food Program in May of last year reported that 4 million Iraqis are food-insecure with over 8 million more at risk and dependent on daily rations provided by the Public Distribution System.²⁰ Unemployment is variously estimated as between 25 and 60%.²¹ The Iraqi casualties have a clear economic impact, particularly as most of the casualties are male in a society where the participation of women in the labor force is low. When a family loses a male relative or when he suffers a serious injury, there are economic consequences for the family’s ability

¹⁶ Brookings’ Iraq researchers in UNHCR: *Refugees*, April 2007, p. 8.

¹⁷ Brookings Iraq Index, April 2006, p. 18. (www.brookings.edu/iraqindex)

¹⁸ Burns, John and Kirk Semple, “Iraq Insurgency Has Funds To Sustain Itself, U.S. Finds,” *New York Times*, 26 November 2006. The report was produced by an inter-agency working group which included the CIA, the FBI, the DIA, the State Department, the Treasury Department and the military’s Central Command. For more on the oil racket see James Glanz and Robert F. Worth, “Attacks on Iraq Oil Industry Aid Vast Smuggling Scheme,” *The New York Times*, 4 June 2006.

¹⁹ IraqSlogger: “Stolen Cars Finance Militia Operations: Fenced Autos Fetch \$2,000 on the Black Market; Few Live to Complain,” 28 June 2007.

²⁰ World Food Program/Central Organisation for Statistics and Information Technology (COSIT): “Food Security and Vulnerability Analysis in Iraq,” May 2006. UNAMI: “Humanitarian Briefing on the Crisis in Iraq,” 2 May 2007, p.2.

²¹ IOM: “Iraq Displacement,” p. 17. See also, Brookings Iraq Index, 21 May 2007, p 40.

to survive. The Iraqi Red Crescent reports that nearly 80% of Iraq's IDPs are women and children.²²

Many of the displaced interviewed by the Brookings team in Syria left because their livelihoods collapsed in Iraq. This group included shopkeepers, market sellers, transporters, craftsmen and artisans, technicians, small business owners, and others. They left, either because their businesses were physically destroyed or because their businesses folded due to the impact of the violence on markets, infrastructure, transport and communications – not to mention the general decline in purchasing power.²³ Shops and factories have proven to be stationary targets for insurgents, and many owners have been forced to flee from the mounting expenses of blackmail and protection money.²⁴ Furthermore, much of the violence has targeted specific occupations considered un-Islamic by the radical groups, both Sunni and Shi'a: barbers, alcohol shop owners, cigarette salesmen, etc. Other individuals that have faced elimination campaigns are prominent professionals seen as lynchpins of society: college professors, intellectuals, journalists, lawyers, physicians (especially specialists) and others.²⁵

In Iraq there are many wars. The numerous parties to the violence – US forces, Iraqi army and police units, insurgents, militias of all stripes, tribal factions, international terror groups, criminal gangs, looters – are all fighting overlapping and interconnected struggles. At the moment, none is strong enough to dominate, and all believe their cause profits through warfare. Until either of these factors change, the violence will continue.

4. Humanitarian assistance

The security situation in Iraq has made it nearly impossible for international aid organizations to conduct their work. Most agencies moved their international staff out of Iraq after the 2003 bombing of the UN headquarters in Baghdad and now conduct 'remote management' of their operations. Assistance provided by coalition military and civilian forces is often viewed with suspicion. International and local humanitarian workers alike have been targeted by armed militias.²⁶ Indeed, the kidnapping of staff of the Iraqi Red Crescent led it to suspend its operations in Baghdad for about a month – at a time when it was providing assistance to almost a quarter of a million people.²⁷ Local

²² IRCO, Disaster Management Department: "Report on IDPs in Iraq," 7 March 2007.

²³ For an illustration of this situation see UN-IRIN: "Life as a Street Seller – Dodging Bombs," 20 November 2006.

²⁴ Interview, Sunni businessman blackmailed by Badr Brigades, Syria, March-April 2007. See also Dan Murphy, "Death Squads Deepen Division in Baghdad," *Christian Science Monitor*, 8 May 2006.

²⁵ "Professors and intellectuals:" It is reported that more than 230 university professors have been assassinated and 3,000 have fled the country since 2003. See IraqSlogger, news report: "Blood on Textbooks: Campuses Under Fire," 16 April 2007. "Journalists:" See Reporters Without Borders: "2007 Annual Report – Middle East: Graveyard of Freedom," pp. 140-141. "Lawyers:" According to the Iraqi Lawyers Association at least 210 lawyers and judges have been assassinated since March 2003. See UN-IRIN: "Justice Delayed as Lawyers Live Under Threat," 30 April 2007. For a description of the plight of the medical corps see section below, "The consequences of displacement".

²⁶ Since the beginning of the war nearly one hundred aid workers have been assassinated. See José Riera and Andrew Harper, "Iraq: The Search for Solutions," pg. 10. *Forced Migration Review*, June 2007.

²⁷ UN-IRIN: "Iraq: Displaced Urge Iraqi Red Crescent to Return," 8 January 2007

staff of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are working valiantly from their homes to assist needy Iraqis but their ability to move around the communities they serve is increasingly restricted – both by violence and Iraq’s severely crippled infrastructure. The NGO Coordinating Committee in Iraq reports that humanitarian efforts are also encumbered by politicized funding and overly bureaucratic distribution systems.²⁸

There is a very real danger that the vacuum in humanitarian assistance will be filled by armed militias who provide relief as a way of increasing their control over territory.²⁹ The government’s Public Distribution System is reportedly not functioning well, particularly in providing rations to displaced persons whose addresses are different than those on the ration cards.³⁰ UNHCR estimates that 47% of displaced persons do not have access to the distribution system’s services.

Funds to support humanitarian work in Iraq are limited. The International Organization for Migration, for example, only received enough funding to meet 25% of its Iraq budget in 2006. Many traditional humanitarian donors see the humanitarian crisis in Iraq as the result of US government action and thus as a US responsibility. Other donors view Iraq as a resource wealthy country and emphasize funding poorer nations.

5. Particularly vulnerable groups

In this climate of generalized violence and insecurity, there are groups of particular concern, notably the Christian, Palestinian, Mandaean-Sabean and Kurdish communities.

After the 2003 invasion, pressure mounted on Christian communities.³¹ Many Christians had been governmental employees under Saddam, which gave them an (undeserved) reputation as servants of the regime. Christians were also associated with the international presence, and many did indeed work for foreign organizations and even the coalition forces. Radicals also targeted a typically Christian livelihood, the sale of alcohol, and Christian women for not wearing full Islamic dress.³² Moreover, Christians don’t have the tribal structures that can help protect them in times of high insecurity. Many Christians left Baghdad after the spate of church bombings in 2004.³³ Many who fled have crossed into Syria and settled in Damascus and Aleppo.

²⁸ NCCI: Weekly Highlight 26 Apr 2007: Editorial. See also, NCCI officials quoted in UN-IRIN: “Bombs and Bureaucracy Behind Missing Medicines,” 22 May 2007.

²⁹ Wong, Edward and Damien Cave, “Baghdad District Is a Model, but Only for Shiites,” *New York Times*, 22 May 2007. UN-IRIN, “Iraq: Fighters Fill Humanitarian Vacuum,” 14 February 2007. UN-IRIN, “Iraq: Armed Groups Occupying Hospitals and Kidnapping Doctors,” 13 February 2007.

³⁰ IOM, *Iraq Displacement*, p. 17.

³¹ There is a wide literature on the post-2003 plight of Christians in Iraq. For a snapshot see Al-Atraqchi, Firas, “Fighting Robs Iraq of Christian Heritage,” *Al Jazeera*, 8 June 2006, (<http://english.aljazeera.net/English/Archive/Archive?ArchiveID=22771>); UN-IRIN, news report: “Baghdad Christians Flee as Violence Against Them Mounts,” 3 May 2007.

³² Interviews, Iraqi Christian refugees, Jaramana (Damascus), March-April 2007. See also Constable, Pamela, “In Iraq, Booze Becomes a Risky Business; Fundamentalists Blamed for Wave of Attacks on Shops, Owners,” *The Washington Post*, 21 July 2004.

³³ Al-Khalidi, Ashraf and Victor Tanner, “Sectarian Violence: Radical Groups Drive Internal Displacement in Iraq,” Brookings, October 2006, p. 23.

Before the 2003 US-led invasion there were about 30,000 Palestinians in Iraq. UNHCR now estimates that the population has been reduced to roughly 12,500. Palestinians are targeted in Iraq because of the preferential treatment they received under Saddam and because, as Sunni, they are caught up in the sectarian violence, mostly in Baghdad.³⁴ Many of the Palestinians came to Iraq in 1948 or are descendents of those who were pushed from their homes by the creation of the Israeli state. As such they never received Iraqi citizenship and therefore do not have the necessary paperwork to pass through Iraq's innumerable checkpoints. Furthermore, the Palestinians in Iraq are for the most part not registered with the UN. As a result of the violence against them, many Palestinians fled for the borders, but found little willingness for neighboring countries to let them in.³⁵ As insurgents focus on pushing Palestinian families out of Anbar province, a growing pocket has formed on the Iraqi side of the border with Syria, in a camp called Manteqat al-Walid.³⁶ UN officials say there are nearly 1,000 Palestinians in al-Walid, living in very poor conditions.³⁷ More than 300 hundred Palestinians are also currently situated in the camp at Al Tanf, in no-man's land between the Iraqi and Syrian borders, and another 300 are camped at El Hol, just across the Syrian border.

The Sabean-Mandean community is a small monotheistic community centered in southern Iraq and Iran. They are neither Christian nor Muslim. They do not proselytize: the only way to become Sabean is to be born to two Sabean parents. Many Sabeans left Iraq in the 1990s, fleeing intense discrimination. In Iraq they were famous as goldsmiths and jewelers. Their reputation as wealthy merchants put the community at heightened risk for ransom kidnappings.³⁸ Following the 2003 invasion, they quickly became targets for both armed gangs and radical groups (the two often blurring), both in Baghdad and in Basra.³⁹ Unlike the Kurds, the Sabeans have no traditional home area so many Sabeans have moved to Syria. Their spiritual leader, Dr. Abdul-Sattar al-Hilu left Baghdad and now lives in Damascus' Jaramana neighborhood, where many other Sabeans live. The Sabeans form a tight-knit community with high degree of solidarity; they formed an unofficial society in Syria, *al-Jamiyya al-Mindaiyya*.⁴⁰

Numerous groups of Turkic/Kurdish heritage have faced heightened persecution since 2003. Many Kurds from Baghdad have fled north to Kurdish strongholds. The northern oil-rich city of Kirkuk has witnessed increased sectarian violence against Kurdish neighborhoods as different warring parties seek to gain dominance.⁴¹ Similar violence is

³⁴ See also, HRW: report, "Nowhere to Flee: The Perilous Situation of Palestinians in Iraq," September, 2006, pp. 7-10, 12-16, 23-28.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ UN-IRIN news reports: "Militants Force Palestinians to Leave Anbar," 24 April 2007, and "Palestinian Refugees Despair After Year Marooned Between Iraq and Syria," 3 May 2007.

³⁷ Personal communication, UNICEF official, May 2007.

³⁸ Interviews, Sabean refugees, Jaramana (Damascus), March-April 2007.

³⁹ Minority Rights Group International: "Assimilation, Exodus, Eradication: Iraq's Minority Communities Since 2003," February 2007, pp 18-19.

⁴⁰ Interviews, Sabean members of the association, Jaramana (Damascus), March-April 2007.

⁴¹ Minority Rights Group International: "Assimilation, Exodus, Eradication: Iraq's Minority Communities Since 2003," February 2007.

taking place in Mosul.⁴² Kurds in the extreme north are also at risk as fighting between the PKK and the Turkish army has escalated.⁴³ As with other minority groups, Kurds who have worked with US forces are especially vulnerable to persecution and attack.

6. A regional issue

The massive displacement of Iraqis is, of course, a major concern in the region. Recent reports indicate that the number of refugees in Syria alone has reached 1.4 million.⁴⁴ Another 750,000 are in Jordan and smaller numbers exist in several other countries in the region.⁴⁵ In the region, only Iran, Egypt, and Yemen are signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention which means that Iraqis living in neighboring states are not considered refugees with the rights and responsibilities entailed by this status. Governments fear that the Iraqis may not only stay a long time, but that Iraq's conflict may spill over into their countries.⁴⁶ Presently the Iraqis are dispersed within the population rather than being housed – and assisted – in camps. Some governments, such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and, recently, Jordan have essentially closed their borders to Iraqis.

The most urgent task is to provide support to enable Iraqis living in neighboring countries, particularly Syria and Jordan, to remain there. The socio-economic burden on those two governments is immense and international assistance could provide some needed support. In Jordan this influx has increased the national population by 15%. As an illustration, this would equate to 45 million immigrants crossing into the United States in three years. This large demographic shift in such a short period has put considerable pressure on the Jordanian economy.⁴⁷ In Syria, public schooling is free for all Iraqi children and families have access to state subsidized goods such as bread, fuel, municipal water and electricity. This comes at a cost of tens if not hundreds of millions of dollars a year to the Syrian government.⁴⁸

But the reality is that most governments in the region have closed the door to all but a handful of Iraqis fleeing the violence of their homeland. The international community owes a debt of gratitude to the Syrian and Jordanian governments for allowing desperate Iraqis to remain on their territories. The international community, starting with the United States, needs to support these two governments and to publicly acknowledge the contributions they are making to a serious humanitarian challenge. Maintaining first

⁴² Wong, Edward, "Strife in North Iraq as Sunni Arabs Drive Out Kurds," *The New York Times*, 30 May 2007.

⁴³ See UN-IRIN: "Hundreds Flee Homes as Turkish Forces Battle Kurdish Fighters," 21 June 2007.

⁴⁴ Personal communications, UNHCR and UNICEF officials, Damascus, March 2007.

⁴⁵ UNHCR: "Statistics on Displaced Iraqis Around the World," April 2007.

⁴⁶ See for example, Daniel L. Byman, Kenneth M. Pollack, Things Fall Apart: Containing the Spillover from an Iraqi Civil War, Analysis Paper, no. 11, The Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, January 2007.

⁴⁷ See for example, UN-IRIN: "Iraqis Cause Black Market for Jobs," 28 March 2007.

⁴⁸ Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs: "Paper presented by the Government of Syrian Arab Republic to the International Conference on Addressing the Humanitarian Needs of the Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons inside Iraq and in the Neighboring Countries," April 2007.

asylum in the region is essential to meeting the humanitarian needs of Iraqis who are desperate to escape the violence that is tearing their communities apart.

In the months before the military operations began in March 2003, humanitarian agencies carried out contingency planning where plans were made for the arrival of 600,000 refugees with a projected UNHCR budget of about \$130 million. UNHCR is currently preparing an appeal for \$115 million,⁴⁹ but this isn't enough to meet the concerns of host governments in the region. In June of this year Refugees International called on the US government to increase the budget for displaced persons to \$290 million.⁵⁰

7. The consequences of displacement

The effects of this massive displacement of Iraq's citizens for the future of the country are many. Ethnic cleansing is reshaping Iraq's sectarian geography. The sectarian conflict is hardening and many of Iraq's minority groups have left – or are trying to leave – the country.

The broad depletion of the professional class discussed above, will have serious consequences for efforts to re-build Iraqi society. In one dire indicator, the International Medical Corps reports that populations of teachers in Baghdad have fallen by 80%.⁵¹ Perhaps even more frightening for the future of Iraq is the state of its medical corps. Violence has pushed Iraq's health care system to its breaking point.⁵² Hospitals are facing a massive shortage of both medical supplies and competent staff. At the outset of the war Iraq had 34,000 registered doctors; since then 2,000 have been killed and only 12,000 have remained in country.⁵³ The Iraqi government now reports that “almost 70 percent of critically injured patients with violence-related wounds die while in emergency and intensive care units due to a shortage of competent staff and a lack of drugs and equipment”.⁵⁴ Numerous people with chronic health conditions (especially diabetes and cancer) or serious injuries have left Iraq to seek health care. An Iraqi man interviewed by the Brookings team in Syria reported that he left Baghdad when his wife became pregnant, noting that there were too many uncertainties surrounding a delivery in Baghdad.⁵⁵ Also, insecurity often makes it very hard for people to access hospitals that might be under the control of an ‘opposing’ group.⁵⁶

Iraq's next generation has been deeply impacted by the war. UNHCR estimates that half of all IDPs are children. Violence has orphaned tens of thousands and many have turned to begging or prostitution as a survival strategy. Out of fear for their safety, parents often do not send children to school. In Syria, where schooling is free and available for the

⁴⁹ UNHCR: “Iraq Situation Update,” 4 July 2007.

⁵⁰ <http://www.refugeesinternational.org/content/article/detail/10045>

⁵¹ International Medical Corps, p. 7.

⁵² For a description of this situation, see Médecins Sans Frontières: “Iraq: A Health Care System Overwhelmed,” September 2006.

⁵³ Brookings Iraq Index, April 2007, p. 42. (www.brookings.edu/iraqindex)

⁵⁴ World Health Organisation, news release: “Violence Threatens Health in Iraq,” April 2007.

⁵⁵ Interview, Syria, March-April 2007.

⁵⁶ Cave, Damien, “In Baghdad, Sectarian Lines Too Deadly to Cross,” *The New York Times*, 4 March 2007.

several hundred thousand Iraqi children currently there, only 33,000 are enrolled. Many children have been ensnared by the violence of the war; as victims, witnesses and even perpetrators. The World Health Organization found that 47% of children between the ages of three and ten have been exposed to a “major traumatic event” in the last two years. The Association of Psychologists of Iraq found that the majority of children are gripped by fear, especially fear of kidnapping, and that about five percent of those studied, “are in a critical state of fear that could cause mental retardation if it goes untreated.”⁵⁷ The majority of Iraq’s children are being raised without schooling, with bleak prospects for a stable and prosperous future, and in the midst of rampant violence and sectarian hatred. “The societal impact is going to be very bad,” an Iraqi child psychologist predicted recently in the Washington Post. “This generation will become a very violent generation, much worse than during Saddam Hussein’s regime.”⁵⁸

The Iraqi Red Crescent Organization states bluntly, “the overall picture is that of human tragedy unprecedented in Iraq’s history”.

8. What is to be done?

Obviously the most desired outcome for Iraq is the restoration of security so that people can return to their homes and resume their lives. As that does not seem likely in the immediate future, the international community – and particularly the US government – have a responsibility to protect and assist the Iraqis who are victims of this conflict. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees should appeal for much more funding to support host governments and provide assistance to Iraq’s internally displaced. And the US government should pay the lion’s share of this cost. Given the monumental price tag of the war effort, contributing a fraction of that amount to help the victims of the conflict seems reasonable. The Iraqi parliament should follow through on recently proposed measures to allocate three percent of annual oil revenues for refugee aid.⁵⁹

Resettlement is not the solution to Iraq’s refugee crisis, but for many endangered families there is no other option. The announcement that the US would consider resettling 7,000 Iraqi refugees was a welcome symbolic gesture, but a much more generous offer would send a signal to governments in the region that the international community, and the US, are doing their share. The US government has the capacity and the resources to handle a large influx of Iraqi refugees; all that is wanting is political leadership.

The US government has been roundly criticized for its failure to prepare adequately for the post-invasion phase of its 2003 operations in Iraq. We see a risk that the US is again focusing all of its energy on its military options – and particularly on a possible withdrawal of its troops from Iraq – without taking into consideration the long-term

⁵⁷ Quoted in UN-IRIN: “Children’s Mental Health Affected by Insecurity, Say Specialists,” 7 February 2006.

⁵⁸ Raghavan, Sudarsan, “Iraqi Youth Face Lasting Scars of War: Conflict’s Psychological Impact on Children Is Immense, Experts Say,” *The Washington Post*, 26 June 2007.

⁵⁹ UN-IRIN: “Parliament Considers Using Oil Revenue to Help Refugees,” 20 June 2007. UPI: “Iraq to Use Oil Funds for Refugees,” 13 June 2007.

consequences for Iraq of such action. If US troops are scaled down or withdrawn, planning must begin now to prevent escalation of the civil war and even greater displacement of Iraqis from their homes and communities. We need to think through what will happen in Iraq when MNF forces are withdrawn and to consider means to mitigate some of the long-term effects. Where will Iraqis fleeing increased violence go? Will Syria continue to allow Iraqis to enter its territory? Can the governorates be persuaded to open their borders to internally displaced Iraqis? Will the Public Distribution System, which provides food rations to Iraqis, be able to continue functioning? Will NGOs and the Iraqi Red Crescent Society be able to continue to provide assistance to needy Iraqis? Are there sufficient stocks of essential relief items in places where they will need to be? Too often, military options are seen as the core strategic issues while humanitarian concerns are viewed as ‘soft’ or marginal to the great issues of war and peace. And yet, the human – and the political – consequences of failing to plan for future scenarios are monumental. The reverberations from such a failure could well impact the region for generations.