

IRAQ HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

Introduction

Since the start of 2014, there has been widespread conflict and displacement in Iraq, which has escalated in recent months largely as a result of the advance of the armed group calling itself Islamic State (IS, formerly ISIS).¹ More than 1.45 million people have had to flee their homes since January due to fighting, insecurity and attacks on civilians, including minority groups.² Reports of atrocities including mass killings, summary executions, rape, kidnapping and other forms of violence against civilians highlight the severity of the situation.

While there has been deliberate targeting of minorities, including Christians and Yazidis, it is clear that all Iraqis are under threat and people from all religious and ethnic backgrounds are among those affected. Humanitarian actors and services such as the health and education systems are under pressure as they try to meet the needs of such large numbers of people, on top of an existing refugee crisis (there were, and remain, more than 200,000 Syrian refugees in Iraq).³

Christian Aid outlines here its position on the crisis, the action needed and some of the steps that will alleviate the situation of the Iraqis affected by this crisis.

Action is needed to:

- ensure there are sufficient levels of funding and access so that life-saving humanitarian assistance can reach people in need for the duration of what is likely to be a long-term crisis
- ensure all actors prioritise the protection of civilians and take steps to guarantee their safety and their ability to exercise their rights
- support the people of Iraq and take steps to try to resolve the crisis in the long term.

Context for the crisis

Recent conflict

The lead up to the current crisis in Iraq is complex. It has been characterised by insecurity and poor and unaccountable governance, and tensions have been heightened by the conflict in neighbouring Syria.⁴ Since the fall of Mosul on 9 June, armed groups – predominantly led by the group Islamic State (IS),

but in some areas also including Ba'athists, tribal militias and members of the former regime and military – have taken control of large swathes of three Iraqi provinces: Ninewa, Salah ad Din and Diyala. Much of Anbar Province has been under IS control since January.

While the situation is in flux, as of 15 August the cities of Mosul, Tikrit, Tal Afar, Beiji, Quayyara, Sinjar, Suleiman Bek, Rashad, Hawija, Riyadh, Falluja and Saqlawiyah, were under the control of armed groups.⁵

Fighting, insecurity and reports of deliberate targeting of civilians, including minority groups, with violence, intimidation and atrocities has led to massive internal displacement. Iraq now has one of the largest internally displaced populations (IDPs) in the world; more than 1.45 million people have been forced from their homes since January this year, and approximately 560,000 of these have been displaced from Anbar Province. Following the fall of Mosul, an additional 650,000 people are estimated to have been displaced.⁶ This is on top of the thousands of refugees who were already in Iraq from across the region.

On the invitation of the relevant Iraqi government authorities, both from the Iraqi federal government and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), a number of international military forces have supported both the provision of humanitarian aid and the delivery of military assistance to government forces in the past weeks.

'More than 1.45 million people have fled their homes since the start of the year'

Current humanitarian impact

On 12 August, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Principals declared a 'level 3' emergency – the highest level – to intensify the response in recognition of the scale and complexity of the crisis. It is believed to have affected more than 1.5 million people in total, including displacing 1.45 million and the thousands of families – including women, children and elderly people – who were trapped on Mount Sinjar in early August, having fled armed groups.⁷

The UN reports the following particular areas of need:⁸

Protection – recently updated estimates put levels of displacement across the country at 1.45 million,

including 200,000 people who recently arrived in the area administered by the KRG. Many displaced people lack documentation, belongings or financial resources, and some are in need of psychosocial and mental health support. There are increasing reports of incidents of sexual violence and abuse against women and children with significant reports from Mosul, Najaf and Karbala, and reports of kidnapping of women in Sinjar District. In addition, the lack of access or assessment is restricting provision of protection in central and southern governorates.

Shelter – most of the 400,000 people recently arrived in the KRG area require urgent shelter.⁹ Non-food items (such as blankets, cooking utensils and hygiene kits) are needed for people living in unfinished buildings and open areas. Some 40,000 people living in schools urgently need alternative shelter so that schools can reopen in September. Additional reports are that more than 14,000 internally displaced families in Karbala are living in mosques, unfinished buildings and tents.

Food security – large numbers of internally displaced people are in need of food assistance, especially in Dohuk and Erbil Governorates. Those who have just arrived, having left their homes days before, are in urgent need of food, and host communities are experiencing food shortages and price increases. Public distribution is limited, particularly in areas controlled by armed groups. More than 1.5 million displaced people, host communities and other people affected by the crisis have received food assistance since June.

Water and sanitation – many of the 1.45 million internally displaced people throughout Iraq are in need of water, hygiene supplies and sanitation facilities. This includes specific requests for drinking water and sanitation facilities to support approximately 80,000 people in Najaf Governorate, approximately 5,000 people in Baghdad, 200,000 people in Dohuk Governorate, and 20,000 in Erbil.

Health – existing health facilities in host communities are overwhelmed by the numbers of people arriving each day. Newly arrived families include those with specific health needs, such as elderly people, people with disabilities and children under five, and in some areas fighting and violence have left many people wounded and in need of medical treatment. Some health provision is taking place with 10 mobile clinics in Dohuk that see around 200-300 patients a day, two mobile clinics recently started in Erbil that see around 150 patients a day, and increased provision of medical supplies to hospitals.

Significant constraints include:

- **Insecurity and targeting of civilians** – the deliberate targeting of civilians by armed groups led by IS violates international law, generates fear and creates massive displacement of families and whole communities. It exposes displaced communities to a range of health, food, water and protection risks, and places substantial strain on the host communities. All parties to the

conflict have a responsibility to ensure the protection of civilians and access to humanitarian assistance.

- **Humanitarian access** – access remains the most critical constraint to the provision of adequate humanitarian aid and the assessments required to identify and respond to specific needs. This includes both inaccessibility of conflict areas and insecurity in camps, which in some cases is limiting access for the distribution of aid (for example, Garmawa and Khazir camps in Ninewa.)

Christian Aid partners' response

Our long-term partners in Iraq, who have already been responding to the ongoing displacement of communities, have been providing vital humanitarian relief to communities displaced in recent weeks.

Our partner REACH is distributing food and non-food items, including hygiene materials, to families who have arrived in the KRG. REACH is scaling up its efforts to respond to the growing and desperate crisis that is sweeping across parts of the country.

Our partners continue to support displaced communities in Sinjar, Dohuk, Kirkuk, Karbala and Sulaimaniyah. They are providing food and non-food items, including children's clothes and hygiene kits, and have also been doing work to mitigate tensions between displaced and host communities.

For more details about our work and our partners in the Iraq crisis, please go to christianaid.org.uk/Iraq

'Christian Aid utterly condemns the deliberate targeting of civilians... and condemns all discrimination on the basis of identity'

Regional context

The recent crisis in Iraq follows months of growing humanitarian need and increased displacement. Some of these people have now been doubly displaced, and have been forced to move from the first place they sought refuge due to spreading violence and lack of access to assistance.

The recent conflict must be understood in the context of both the conflict in neighbouring Syria and the instability and lack of inclusive governance that has characterised Iraq in recent years. Fighters from organisations such as IS are in control of parts of the border between Iraq and Syria, and military equipment and militia cross freely between both countries. The cross-border incursion by IS in recent months and the multiple credible reports of systematic human rights abuses by these groups highlight the international dynamics of the current conflict and how the situation in Syria significantly impacts the whole region. However, internal divisions within Iraq in recent years have provided a foothold for IS to exploit for its own objectives.

The response required to address the crisis – recommendations

Christian Aid utterly condemns the deliberate targeting of civilians and committing of atrocities against civilians. We condemn all discrimination on the basis of identity and believe it is imperative that all Iraqis are protected from efforts to deprive them of their right to practise their religion freely and express their political beliefs.

Addressing the immediate and the medium- and long-term humanitarian needs

1. Humanitarian access

Many people are still struggling to access the humanitarian assistance that they need. There is limited access for humanitarian agencies in some conflict-affected areas, and in others limited funding has restricted the availability of assistance. All parties to the conflict have a responsibility to ensure that people in need are not prevented from accessing humanitarian assistance, and the UN and government need to prioritise ensuring access for communities who are currently unable to receive aid.

2. Emergency funding

We welcome the £13m in humanitarian assistance committed by the UK government,¹⁰ as well as humanitarian support from Irish Aid and other donors. The crisis in Iraq requires substantial international aid, and the existing provision of basic services must be supported and scaled up to manage the increased demand due to displacement. Host communities and their local government structures must be supported with aid and expertise. International aid agencies, UN and local and national organisations providing aid must be supported and funded to work together to provide effective immediate aid and ensure appropriate long-term response and recovery.

3. Protection of civilians

Protection of civilians and respect for their rights in accordance with international law must be maintained by all agencies. This includes where people are at particular risk for practising their right to political expression and freedom of religion.

We call for the rapid provision of protection and shelter in safe settings for all internally displaced people, especially vulnerable groups, and for the rapid documentation and verification of human rights abuses as part of establishing the first steps of holding perpetrators accountable.

Our position in all conflicts is that any military intervention should happen in accordance with

international law, which requires that all military groups prioritise the protection of civilians in their actions.¹¹ Any military interventions in the Iraqi context, whether at the invitation of the appropriate authorities, must ensure that civilians are protected and does not lead to a worsening of the humanitarian crisis. There must be a clear distinction maintained between military intervention and the provision of humanitarian assistance.

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4. Resolving the crisis

The current crisis will not be resolved in the long term by military action. We believe it is for all the people of Iraq to determine the political direction and political shape of Iraq.

In addition to providing suitable aid, we call on the UK and Irish governments and the wider international community to use the diplomatic means and channels available to them to strengthen accountable and inclusive governance, and to offer support to Iraqi government structures at national, regional and local levels, to ensure all voices in Iraq are included in decision making.

Endnotes

1. Islamic State (IS) was formerly known as Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS). It changed to its current name on 29 June 2014.
2. UN OCHA Iraq IDP Crisis, Situation Report no.8, 16-24 August 2014, reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/OCHA%20Iraq%20Situation%20Report%20no8.pdf
3. There are 217,886 refugees from Syria. Figure from UNHCR, data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=103
4. More detailed analysis includes the International Crisis Group Briefing from 20 June 2014, crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Iraq/b038-iraq-s-jihadi-jack-in-the-box
5. UN OCHA Iraq IDP Crisis, Situation Report no.7, 9-15 August 2014, reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/OCHA%20Iraq%20Situation%20Report%20no7.pdf
6. Ibid.
7. While numbers of people could not be independently verified, they are believed to be over tens of thousands, and were sustained mostly because of food from air drops.
8. See note 2.
9. See note 5.
10. gov.uk/government/news/iraq-uk-government-response
11. See 'Iraq formally asks US to launch air strikes against rebels', bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-27905849 and 'Iraqi Kurdish leader Barzani seeks weapons to fight IS', bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-28730618