



Policy Brief

Displacement, Migration, Return: From Emergency to a Sustainable Future

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The regime change in 2003 and the sectarian war that ensued thereafter has plunged Iraq into an abyss of violence and lawlessness from which it has not yet fully recovered. In lockstep with this instability came large-scale internal displacement and migration. While displacement has become protracted and reached endemic proportions causing difficulties to the prospects of return, the magnitude of Iraqis leaving abroad has also increased. But what is the relationship between displacement, migration and return in the context of Iraq? When and under what circumstances does displacement turn into migration (or return)? Answers to these questions can inform serious attempts to address displacement in and migration from Iraq.

As the Islamic State (IS) has been defeated in military terms, addressing the consequences of displacement should become a priority. This could occur in parallel to a process whereby the necessary mechanisms to prevent further displacement waves are identified. The challenges Iraq faces in the next years are many, ranging from reconstruction to justice and national reconciliation. In one way or another, displacement cuts across these and other challenges and therefore addressing its consequences may have positive spill-overs into other areas, too.

Background

Following the IS's onslaught on Iraqi territories in June 2014, more than 3 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) fled their homes in search for a secure place. Of these, around 1.3 million found refuge in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). In parallel to new waves of displacement, Iraqis were also choosing to migrate abroad. In 2015, for example, Iraqis were among the top three nationalities reaching Europe through the Mediterranean routes, after the Syrians and [Afghans](#). Especially since 2017, a large number of IDPs are returning to their place of origin: as the process intensifies, the security, political and economic conditions of the liberated areas remain still unstable and unpredictable.

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Migration is then the alternative option to return, a process that has unfolded in Iraq in parallel to new waves of displacement. Although it is problematic to determine when a displacement crisis ends, the return of IDPs is often seen as the end of displacement and thus must be prioritized once conditions allow. While the process of return is ongoing, it still poses important questions on the security, political and economic conditions of the return, which are ultimately influenced by how the crisis is interpreted.

To address the relationship between displacement, migration and return, the study combined quantitative and qualitative analyses based on: (a) 500 questionnaires distributed among the IDP population in KRI (Erbil, Duhok and Suleimaniyah governorates) between May and June 2017; (b) 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted with IDPs in KRI between June and July 2017, over and above interviews with key informants; and (c) discussing preliminary results of the study during a workshop in Erbil on 23 July 2017 with local, national and international actors, including governmental and non-governmental organizations.

Displacement-Migration-Return: What we Know

The data suggests that more than half (55%) of the IDPs wished or planned to migrate abroad, however, only a minority of these (23%) had concrete plans to do so. People of younger age groups (26-35y), particularly those who had no or low level of education were more likely to wish to leave Iraq. As for identity, Yazidis and Christians were more represented among those who wished or planned to leave Iraq. The presence of family members, relatives or friends as well as the confidence of receiving a refugee status in any particular country appeared to be among the most important pull factors. As for the push factors, leaving Iraq was mostly due to a perception of insecurity and a lack of economic opportunities

When comparing respondents who wished/planned to leave Iraq to those who didn't, the most significant variance is found in relation to expectations about the future. In relation to the political, security and economic future of Iraq (expressed in the next 5 years), respondents who wished/planned to leave Iraq held more pessimistic views. Conversely, the study finds that socio-political (i.e., relations between IDPs and hosting communities) and socio-economic (i.e., income level and employment status) factors are less significant in determining IDPs' wish/plan to leave the country. Where socio-political and socio-economic factors do not directly influence IDPs' intentions, they then contribute to an overall sense of uncertainty.

Uncertainty is the overarching concept that can best grasp the condition of displacement in Iraq, despite its necessary vague connotation. It has a political, social and economic dimension and it is articulated differently in relation to migration, continued displacement or return. With reference to migration, the prospect of an improved security abroad is counterbalanced by a possible loss of social connections and a lowering of socio-economic status. As for continued displacement, at least among IDPs residing in KRI, a secured assistance system is weighed against the meaning of citizenship in the region. The militarization of communities, tensions between Baghdad and Erbil, and contested undermined status of many places of origin have negatively impacted the prospects for return among the IDPs.

The Government of Iraq (GoI) and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) have not been capable of (or willing to) addressing such uncertainty; rather they have contributed to a governance of uncertainty. This is best illustrated by the absence of a comprehensive framework for managing displacement and return in both KRI and federal Iraq. Interviews with key stakeholders have confirmed this point, indicating a general sense of confusion, if not contradictory statements, around displacement, return and resettlement.

What's Next? Identifying Policy Recommendations

The main finding of the study centres on the contention that a major determinant of IDPs' decision to migrate is their expectations about the political, economic and security future of Iraq. While such finding does not warrant changes to any set of specific policies, it does nonetheless lead to advising national and international efforts to develop and implement a comprehensive policy framework capable of addressing displacement in its many aspects and various manifestations. A comprehensive policy framework to displacement needs to consider the multiple factors that contribute to IDPs' condition of uncertainty, which include both socio-political and socio-economic factors. It follows that achieving this objective is dependent upon reaching a political settlement in the country. At the same time, however, addressing the challenges of displacement can contribute to achieving national reconciliation by easing tensions at the societal and political levels.

While some priorities can be identified, it is important to note that they are not completely new; rather, they are the exacerbation of previously unresolved issues. In formulating policy recommendations, the study calls for the development of solid policies at the international, national and local levels on three key pillars:

- a) Understanding displacement in Iraq as a chronic condition, rather than a sudden crisis;
- b) Understanding the destabilizing potential of recurrent, protracted and unresolved displacement waves;
- c) Understanding displacement as a diversified phenomenon.

Based on these pillars, the report recommends ways through which international, regional, national and local actors can contribute to solving or at least mitigating the negative impact of displacement. The report identified three priority areas:

- i. The elaboration and implementation of a national policy framework for displacement capable of addressing its multiple manifestations.
- ii. The adoption of facilitation (without active encouragement) measures that can decrease the prevalent uncertainty among the population.
- iii. The inclusion of displacement in the broader process of physical and social reconstruction of Iraq.

Additionally, international, national and local actors should be aware that the implementation of a comprehensive framework for managing displacement could enhance the legitimacy of the government. Displacement is, in the end, a national obligation for which Iraqi and KRG authorities need to take utmost responsibility for. If national and local

authorities demonstrate willingness and capacity to assist IDPs to stay (integration), return or resettle, they would send positive signals to the population and restore a degree of state–society trust that is fundamental to avoid further tensions.

Priority Areas:

A. A national policy framework: the development of a national policy framework can benefit from activating the National Policy on Displacement, passed by the Iraqi government in 2008. The document is widely recognised to be comprehensive and in line with international standards as identified in the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1998. Efforts should therefore be aimed at transforming this or a similar framework into an implementable work-plan. Implementation necessitates the strengthening of the Ministry of Displacement and Migration as well as dedicating a budget to the realisation of the framework, which should reflect the commitment of solving displacement issues over the following years. In order to guarantee the success of such framework, National actors (Gol, KRG, and provincial authorities) should:

1. Avoid politicizing displacement and IDPs' movement. While displacement requires a political solution, national actors should avoid turning it into a further point of contention. As minorities have been particularly affected by the politicization of displacement, positive messages should be signalled, stressing an Iraqi citizenship that is inclusive of all its component;
2. Separate territorial control from its demography. Sufficient guarantees should be in place so that the resolution of territorial disputes does not create further tensions, inducing the relocation of an already vulnerable population. Monitoring and sanctioning political discourses and behaviours that undermine this objective could serve as a step towards avoiding new waves of displacement;
3. Address displacement as part of wider country's strategies and plans, for instance in the formulation of the next National Development Plan (2018-2022). The resolution of displacement-related problems should become a transversal issue amongst top national priorities. This requires a solid collaboration between the Ministry of Displacement and Migration and other ministries at the regional and national levels in Iraq.

International actors (western governments, the UN, international donors, NGOs) should:

4. Recognize and uphold the government of Iraq in coordination with KRG, as the primary authority responsible for addressing displacement in Iraq. International actors should advocate for the need to frame their activities within a national framework, without which their assistance could become less productive;
5. Provide assistance (financial, technical and/or otherwise) to ensure that a national policy framework on displacement is not only designed but also implemented in all its components. This is especially important giving that the previous National Policy for Displacement in 2008 has made clear that implementation is the most demanding phase.

B. Facilitation: A durable solution for the displacement crisis can be facilitated by setting in place the proper conditions for a stable legal system that guarantees the rights of all Iraqi

citizens. While this is a long-term goal across Iraq including KRI, measures can be taken in the short term to achieve such goal. Reducing uncertainty among IDPs or previously displaced people is key to facilitating a progressive return to a more stable environment. To this end, national actors (GoI, KRG, and provincial authorities) should:

6. Improve IDPs' access to official information regarding displacement, return and resettlement that can clearly communicate the objectives and measures of a national framework for displacement. In order to enhance state-society trust, verbal communication could serve as an important tool to mend the condition of mistrust between the government and the IDPs. Local authorities at the governorate or district levels can facilitate this process, providing that they operate within a national framework, without which the country runs the risk of creating further inconsistencies.

7. Facilitate bureaucratic/administrative procedures to obtain any pertinent and necessary documentation. Although the displacement crisis is subsiding, documentation remains a key aspect in addressing the ramifications of displacement (e.g., land and house property documentation).

International actors (western governments, the UN, international donors, NGOs) should:

8. Assist national actors in circulating official information regarding displacement, return and resettlement, filling eventual gaps and avoiding duplication. Civil society organizations can concentrate their work among those communities that show less degree of trust towards official authorities;

9. Assist national actors in facilitating the bureaucratic/administrative procedures to obtain documentation. During the emergency, some civil society organizations have already demonstrated their capacity to work on legal/administrative procedures for IDPs. Their role can be further strengthened in this new phase.

C. Physical and social infrastructure: Iraq cannot afford to fail the task of rebuilding the newly liberated areas, hometowns of most IDPs and now the destination of most returnees. Learning from previous mistakes, corruption and waste of resources should not be allowed to mar reconstruction efforts. In this regard, transparent mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating such efforts should be introduced, covering both the implementation and management of resources. Iraqi authorities should consider the dire housing situation and the limited infrastructure capacity which predates the crisis of 2014. In some cases, restoration of services, a key tenet of stabilisation efforts currently implemented in the country, would not be sufficient as pre-IS conditions were already failing a large part of the Iraqi society. Among the much-needed services, education is a top priority. Despite the negative projections about the future, IDPs continue to regard children's education as a priority. As some interviews pointed out, the importance of education is often considered as a driver of IDPs' movement. While it is important to guarantee IDPs' access to education facilities, the entire sector needs to be strengthened to better integrate it in the social and economic development of Iraq. To this end, national actors (GoI, KRG, and provincial authorities) should:

10. Include displacement in broader peace-building and development policies beyond a short term stabilization objective. While not discrete objectives, it is important to pay

attention to the timing and the sequencing of stabilization, reconstruction, peace-building and development processes.

11. Make sure that the reconstruction efforts targeting the newly liberated areas are framed within a national vision or plan and integrated at the country level. Such vision or plan should include enough space for bottom-up initiatives at the local level, where civil society organizations can inform and implement projects in accordance with national prerogatives.

International actors (western governments, the UN, international donors, NGOs) should:

12. Transition from humanitarian to development assistance without decreasing the level of attention allotted to Iraq while also favouring a long-term engagement. This should ensure the availability of appropriate resources to plan and execute reconstruction beyond stabilization efforts;

13. Promote an understanding by which the relationship between stabilization and return should be more than the latter being a mere consequence of the former. Similarly, promote an understanding of reconstruction as a balanced effort where economic incentives are proportionate to political and social initiatives;

14. Target stabilization and reconstruction efforts to those areas within the country where conflict dynamics are not only of a social nature (the realm of social cohesion intervention) but also of a political nature (the realm of a country-wide political settlement). In the cases where obstacles impeding the return are of political or security nature, the international community should pressure national authorities to ease them.

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