

# Iraq: a humanitarian crisis of catastrophic dimensions

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Five years of the US-led war and occupation of Iraq have created a humanitarian crisis affecting all aspects of Iraqi society. This catastrophe is illustrated by the millions of Iraqis either killed or displaced, the daily toll of death and violence, the fracturing of families and communities, and the crumbling of basic infrastructure and social services.

The destruction of Iraqi society—an act that the WSWs has termed “sociocide”—stands as one of the most terrible crimes of the modern period, for which every faction of the American political establishment bears a heavy guilt. This brutal violence has been propelled by one basic aim: to advance the interests of the American corporate establishment by seizing control of Iraq’s territory and material resources. (See “Five years after the invasion of Iraq: A debacle for US imperialism”)

The most stunning indicator of destruction in Iraq is the number of people who have been killed. Last year, the British-based polling agency ORB put this figure at 1.2 million, which substantiated an earlier figure published in the medical journal *Lancet* by scientists from Johns Hopkins University. Beyond deaths, however, the daily toll of the occupation is present in the disintegration of some of the most basic requirements of modern life.

Several recent reports document aspects of this tragedy. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has collected together some statistics and interviews in a new study titled, “Iraq: No Let-up in the Humanitarian Crisis.” As the report notes, “Five years after the outbreak of the war in Iraq, the humanitarian situation in most of the country remains among the most critical in the world.”

Many Iraqis have no access to one of life’s basic necessities: clean water. A lack of qualified staff to operate and repair water and sanitation facilities, exacerbated by rising prices and poor security conditions, has led to a severe water crisis. According to the ICRC study, many of these facilities have effectively collapsed in some parts of Iraq. In some areas, large influxes of displaced persons have placed additional strains on already limited services.

The average monthly Iraqi salary is now estimated at US\$150, according to the ICRC. This, however, refers only to those who receive a salary. By some estimates, unemployment in Iraq is as high as 50, 60, or even 70 percent. With drinking

water costing about one dollar for 10 liters, families would need to spend at least \$50 a month on water alone—or about a third of their income. Facing this impossible situation, many—especially the most poor—turn to unsafe water sources.

An ICRC water engineer in Basra commented, “At night, most people pump their water directly from the network. That makes the water pressure drop too low to reach all the areas that the network is supposed to cover. In addition, people sometimes pump sewage, thus contaminating the water tanks they have at home.”

The quality of the water supply is affected by outdated networks of pipes that do not protect against contamination, the breakdown of equipment and an unreliable electricity supply. The distribution of chlorine, essential for sterilizing drinking water, is restricted because it can be used in bomb making.

In many areas—including parts of Baghdad, Salaheddine, Diyala and Ninewa—untreated water is pumped directly from rivers or wells. Sanitation systems in many cases have deteriorated to such an extent that drinking water is in danger of being contaminated by raw sewage. This resulted in a widespread outbreak of cholera in 2007, a threat that still exists.

Unreliable supplies of electricity and repeated power shortages are widespread across Iraq. Parts of Baghdad, where temperatures can reach 50 degrees Celsius (122 degrees Fahrenheit) in the summer, have only one hour of electricity available a day. A similar situation exists in Anbar province.

Abu Samer from Baghdad told the ICRC, “To get six hours of electricity per day by connecting to a private generator, I have to pay at least \$50 dollars [a month].” “Sometimes I have to queue for a whole day to buy 20 litres of fuel,” said Ibrahim Kasseem from Ramadi. “But queuing is dangerous. You never know if there will be a bombing.”

A number of factors contribute to the scarcity of electricity, including insufficient supplies of refined fuel, poor maintenance, the failure to carry out repairs to boost capacity, and sabotage. In addition to the suffering of residents, the severe lack of electrical power means water-treatment plants, hospitals and other facilities need to rely on generators, which themselves often fail due to a growing shortage of refined fuel.

Many Iraqis do not have access to the most basic health-care services. The ICRC notes that there are presently 172 public

hospitals with 30,000 beds, while 80,000 beds are needed. Most of these hospitals were built more than 30 years ago, and are in substandard condition. Drugs and other essential items are also lacking. There are some private clinics and hospitals, but these are unaffordable for the vast majority of Iraqis.

There are not enough qualified doctors and other medical staff, particularly in Najaf, Missan, Anbar, Wasit and Babil. Doctors, nurses and their families are often threatened and are in danger of being kidnapped or killed. According to Iraqi government sources, more than 2,200 doctors have been killed and more than 250 kidnapped since the US invasion. At least 20,000 of the 34,000 doctors registered in 1990 have fled the country.

Another shocking index of the humanitarian crisis in Iraq is the preponderance of refugees, both those displaced within the country and those who have left its borders. An estimated 4 million Iraqis, or 14 percent of the population, have been either internally displaced or have fled to neighboring countries, where they struggle to eke out an existence.

The *Wall Street Journal* reports that aid agencies estimate more than 2 million Iraqis are now displaced inside the country, due to both sectarian violence and fighting between US soldiers and insurgents. About 60 percent, or about 1.2 million, of these internal refugees are children.

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), an average of 60,000 Iraqis were leaving their homes every month in 2006, many of them fleeing to Jordan and Syria. The Iraqi Red Crescent Organization says that there are still about 2 million Iraqi refugees living in these two countries.

Facing mounting social costs from this influx of refugees, Jordanian and Syrian authorities have begun to tighten visa rules and are sending many back to Iraq, where they no longer have a place to live. They must move into overcrowded homes with relatives or find other accommodations.

The Red Crescent has built about 40 refugee camps across Iraq since 2003, but these are basically tent cities, often with no running water, electricity or proper sanitation and garbage collection. The Iraq government's Ministry of Migration set up a few other camps. Most of these camps are now shut down, and fewer than 1 percent of displaced Iraqis currently reside in them.

Those displaced persons unable to move in with friends or relatives try to find new homes in unfamiliar neighborhoods; some squat in abandoned buildings. Many of these refugees are unable to take advantage of aid from charitable agencies and are not registered to receive food rations provided by the government. Most are unemployed, putting increased financial strain on those family members who can find work.

Thousands of Iraqi families have been torn apart, with many losing their male breadwinners to violent deaths, incapacitating injuries or illnesses. Many women do not know whether their husbands, brothers or sons are alive, dead or imprisoned. Tens of thousands of prisoners, the majority of them men, are

currently in detention, according to the ICRC. The largest detention center, Camp Bucca, near Basra in the South, is run by the US-led Multinational Forces in Iraq. It houses more than 20,000 inmates.

Violence continues on a daily basis, claiming the lives of Iraqi civilians in sectarian bombings, and at the hands of the US military and Iraqi police. According to the Associated Press, from November 2006 to August 2007, an average of 65 Iraqis died—or were found dead—each day from violence.

That number dropped to a two-year low this January, when an average of 20 Iraqis died each day. These numbers have since begun to climb. In February, approximately 26 Iraqis died from violence, and so far in March that number has grown to an average of 39 a day.

These figures certainly underestimate the daily toll of death and destruction, which continues every day. On March 3, two car bombs killed 24 people in Baghdad. And on March 6, two massive bombs claimed the lives of 68 people in Baghdad's Karradah neighborhood.

On Monday, a bomb exploded near the shrine of Imam Hussein, a Shia pilgrimage center in Karbala. The death toll for that bombing now stands at 52. The bombing coincided with a surprise visit to Iraq by Vice President Dick Cheney, who commented on the US operation, "If you look back on those five years it has been a difficult, challenging but nonetheless successful endeavor ... and it has been well worth the effort."

On March 13, the London *Timesonline* reported the death of a 10-year-old Iraqi girl killed by US gunfire in Diyala province, north of Baghdad. US troops shot the girl after firing a warning shot at a dirt mound where they claimed a woman had been acting suspiciously.

The young girl was discovered behind the mound of dirt, suffering from a gunshot wound. Soldiers treated her at the scene and called for emergency assistance, but she died en route to the hospital. Many similar civilian casualties undoubtedly go unreported.



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