

# Millions of Iraqis displaced

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As many as 2 million Iraqi citizens are still refugees in neighbouring countries and at least 1.6 million are classified as internally displaced persons (IDPs). Despite the US occupation forces and Iraqi government claiming that the security situation has “stabilised”, most of the people who fled their homes are too terrified to return.

The ongoing humanitarian crisis was outlined in a report published this month by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), which focussed on IDPs. The IOM figure of 1.6 million affected persons is based on information provided by the Iraqi Ministry for Migration and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), which controls the country’s three northern provinces. It is most likely an underestimate as it only includes those forced from their homes after February 22, 2006—when the bombing of the Shiite Al-Askariya mosque triggered widespread communal violence.

The IOM was able to gather statistics on 221,878 displaced families, made up of 1,331,268 individuals. Of these families, 63.1 percent—some 840,000 people—were forced from their homes in Baghdad. A further 18.6 percent of the total, nearly 250,000 people, fled from the volatile province of Diyala. Most of the remainder were displaced from the provinces of Nineveh (6.1 percent), Salah ad Din (3.3 percent), Kirkuk (3 percent), Anbar (2.7 percent), Basra (1.6 percent) and Babylon (1 percent).

The victims of displacement come from every ethnic and religious grouping in Iraq. Families who identified themselves as Shiite Arabs made up 56.8 percent of the total. Sunni Arabs comprised 30.8 percent. Kurds of the Sunni faith made up 4.1 percent. The rest were members of Iraq’s smaller communities—Sunni and

Shiite Turkomen, Assyrian, Chaldean and Armenian Christians and Kurdish Yazidis.

In 66.1 percent of the cases, no adult-age member of the displaced families had employment. They were utterly dependent upon state food relief or the assistance of relatives, charities or non-government organisations. In Kirkuk and Qadisiya provinces, IDP unemployment is 98 percent and 99 percent respectively.

The IOM briefly described the living conditions facing the displaced in each of Iraq’s 18 provinces. Insecure, substandard and overcrowded housing, food shortages, unsafe water supplies, no electricity and lack of education and health services were common. In some provinces, IDPs were living in crude shanty towns on the outskirts of towns, with no services at all.

The raw statistics can only hint at the psychological trauma produced by such mass displacement. In most cases, people fled either US military operations or the ethno-sectarian violence that erupted in 2006. Rival Shiite and Sunni militias in Baghdad and other cities used wholesale terror to purge entire suburbs of people belonging to different religious or ethnic groups. Large numbers of the displaced have endured injuries, witnessed the death of family members and suffered the loss of irreplaceable property.

In testimony to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations on March 31, academic Nabil Al-Tikriti described the impact of ethnic cleansing under the US occupation:

“Communal consolidation has progressed to such an extent that Iraq has already evolved somewhat from a mosaic patchwork of geographically mixed sectarian

clusters into the rough outline of three large regions coinciding with the majoritarian ethno-sectarian identities of Shi'i Arab, Sunni Arab, and Kurdish. Those who either refuse to or are not allowed to fit within these majoritarian identities have mostly been forced out.”

As a consequence, he noted, virtually all the Sabaeen-Mandaean and Shabak communities have left the country, along with at least half the Chaldean and Assyrian Christian population.

Large numbers of better educated and secular Iraqis, some of whom were members of Saddam Hussein's Baath Party, fled the country in the first years of the occupation as they faced persecution from the US military and the Shiite fundamentalist parties that assumed power after the invasion. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), for example, estimates that one third of the adult Iraqi refugees residing in Syria have a college degree. As a result, the number of health professionals in Iraq has fallen from 36,000 in 2000 to just 18,000, according to an April 7 report by Refugees International. Large numbers of public servants, academics and teachers also left.

There are 1.2 million Iraqi refugees in Syria, 500,000 in Jordan, 200,000 in other Gulf states and upwards of 50,000 in both Lebanon and Egypt. Relief agencies and charities report that after years of exile, conditions for many of the refugees are dire. Whatever money or assets they had has been spent, and in most of the host countries the Iraqis are not legally allowed to work. Social problems are inevitably growing.

A UNHCR report this month stated that it registered an average of 13 cases of sexual and gender violence per week against Iraqi refugee women in Syria between January and August 2008, including “rape, forced prostitution, trafficking, forced marriage, domestic violence and sexual exploitation”. Factors contributing to the problem included widespread post-traumatic stress disorders within the refugee community and low incomes.

Nevertheless, for most refugees there is little

incentive to return to Iraq. The Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has cancelled even the pitiful assistance previously offered to prospective returnees from Jordan—transport and \$600 cash. Government revenues have contracted sharply due to deflated oil prices.

Many refugees still fear political or religious persecution, others know their homes have been seized and for most, there is no guarantee of work. Overall unemployment in Iraq is more than 30 percent and will soar higher as the global recession wreaks its impact.

As economic conditions worsen, there is the real danger that the desperate bourgeois regimes in the Middle East will make long-suffering Iraqi refugees the scapegoats for the growing economic and social crisis and begin forced repatriations. The plight of the refugees and displaced persons is one more reminder of the criminal character of the US-led invasion of Iraq.



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