

Security and Displacement in Iraq

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Responding to the Forced Migration Crisis

Contrary to all expectations, the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 did not immediately trigger massive refugee flows. The anxious aid workers massed on the border packed up and left, heading to more urgent crises. In February 2006 the bombing of the al-Askari Mosque in Samarra dispelled that calm. The destruction of the Shiite shrine precipitated an eruption of sectarian violence throughout the country. Since then, millions of Iraqis have fled their homes, and displacement has become a central strategy in the civil war. Similar to the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, militant groups have engineered these colossal population movements to consolidate their power and expand their territorial claims. Despite the evidence from past refugee crises, responses to the Iraqi crisis have thus far ignored the grave security threat it poses at home and in neighboring states. Understanding the potential for massive and protracted displacement crises to destabilize international security is essential if policymakers hope to prevent the manipulation and militarization of the displaced Iraqis.

In March 2008 the International Organization for Migration estimated that 2.4 million Iraqi refugees had fled the country, primarily to Jordan and Syria, and 2.7 million more remained displaced within Iraq.¹ Initially, the displaced Iraqis received a sympathetic reception in their new locations.² With no solutions in sight, however, the host governments, both within and outside Iraq,

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1. International Organization for Migration, "IOM Emergency Needs Assessments, Post-February 2006 Displacement in Iraq," March 15, 2008.

2. I use the term "displaced" to refer to both refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). The 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees defines a refugee as "[any person who,] . . . owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country." The United Nations "Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement" define IDPs as "persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights, or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border."

have begun to fear the risks posed by the crisis. With their welcome worn thin, displaced Iraqis have encountered increased resentment and restrictions on their activities.

In such desperate circumstances, the refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) have become susceptible to political manipulation by extremists. In Iraq, militant groups, such as that of Muqtada al-Sadr, have already capitalized on this opportunity, offering shelter and protection to the traumatized exiles. Aid workers report that militant groups have increased their recruiting in IDP settlements, in some cases exchanging humanitarian aid for new recruits.³ Kristèle Younès of Refugees International explains that individual refugees and IDPs do not inherently pose a security threat, but that under such wretched conditions, their “loyalties can be bought.”⁴ Human Rights Watch (United Kingdom) Director Tom Porteous warns, “Unless this crisis is addressed, we may well look back in 10 years’ time and see the seeds of the next generation of terrorists.”⁵

Even if the displaced Iraqis do not join militant groups, their mere presence will continue to exacerbate political tensions. Extremist leaders have already used the displacement to further their agenda of sectarian cleansing. In essence, militants consider the displaced Iraqis as pawns and bargaining chips in their conflict with the Iraqi government and U.S. forces. The sheer magnitude of the displacement crisis has further discredited the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki by confirming its inability to maintain law and order. As a concentrated and vulnerable group, the displaced make easy targets for attackers. Although they fled their homes to escape conflict, the displaced may find their new accommodations even more dangerous. Such attacks could provoke a spiral of further displacement and sectarian violence.

Refugee flows also increase the risk that conflict will spread across international borders. In some cases, the militarization of refugees can lead to international war and regional destabilization.⁶ The governments of Jordan and

3. Various nongovernmental organization representatives, interviews by author, Washington, D.C., September 20–25, 2007.

4. Kristèle Younès, Refugees International, interview by author, Washington, D.C., September 25, 2007.

5. Quoted in Ruth Gidley, “Where Will Iraq—and Its Refugees—Go Next?” Reuters Alertnet blog, June 22, 2007, <http://www.alertnet.org/db/blogs/1264/2007/05/22-162514-1.htm>.

6. Examples include the 1990 attack against Rwanda led by Rwandan Tutsi refugees in Uganda, the 1996 Rwandan invasion of Zaire to eliminate the security threat posed by the Rwandan Hutu militants who had taken shelter among the refugees, and the influx of 10 million refugees into India, which prompted the Indian invasion of East Pakistan in 1971.

Syria fear that Iraq's refugee crisis will facilitate the operations of al-Qaida-affiliated groups and lead to a rise in Islamic militancy. Iraqi militant groups, both Shiite and Sunni, have established offices in exile, which could provide a staging ground for future militant activity against secular Middle East governments and perhaps Western states.

The history of the Palestinians demonstrates the dangers of protracted refugee crises. The United Nations currently recognizes nearly 4 million Palestinian refugees, some of them the grandchildren of refugees who fled Israel in 1948. Over the decades, the impoverished refugees coalesced into a highly organized and militant state-in-exile. Considering its past, Jordan, with a population of only 5.7 million (more than half of whom are Palestinian refugees), views the Iraqi refugees as an existential threat.

Four policies are necessary to prevent the wide-scale militarization of displaced Iraqis. First, international donors must provide a massive infusion of humanitarian aid. Second, host states and the Iraqi government should resist the temptation to build camps to house the displaced. Third, despite the difficulties caused by the refugees' presence, the displaced should not be sent home against their will. Any voluntary refugee repatriation needs to ensure that returnees can claim their property or receive adequate compensation for their losses. Finally, Western states, and especially the United States, need to expand and expedite the resettlement process, especially for vulnerable Iraqis such as those who were once U.S. employees.

In many refugee crises, states offer humanitarian aid as a way of avoiding political commitments while appearing to "do something." In the case of Iraq, however, humanitarian assistance actually plays an essential role in mitigating potential security threats posed by the crisis. Refugees and IDPs are mainly concerned about food, shelter, health care, and education. Thus, in the short term, meeting these basic needs will dilute the influence of militant groups and pacify anxious host states.

As the crisis drags on, hosts are considering housing the displaced in camps or even forcibly expelling them. Camps would isolate and impoverish the refugees and IDPs, making them easy targets for attack and susceptible to military recruitment. Their forced return to Iraq, or expulsion from the hosting area within Iraq, would greatly multiply deaths from malnutrition and disease, and would likely trigger further sectarian violence.

The long-term solution to the displacement crisis is political stability in Iraq that facilitates a peaceful return home. Most of the Iraqi refugees and IDPs acknowledge, however, that if they do return, it will be in the distant future. Se-

curity gains following the U.S. military surge in Baghdad encouraged the return of around 60,000 Iraqi refugees in late 2007. Although this represented only a tiny percentage of the total refugee population, the Iraqi government hailed this movement as proof of its growing stability. Yet a mismanaged and premature return process represents perhaps the greatest threat to Baghdad's newly acquired calm. The Iraqi government has not offered a comprehensive plan to settle property disputes, protect returnees to minority areas, and provide essential services. Such an unorganized return process will likely fuel resentment and has already led to further displacement. At worst, higher levels of returnees could reignite the sectarian violence that drove these Iraqis from their homes in the first place.

Continued instability in Iraq is likely to impede any quick resolution of the displacement crisis. Indeed, ongoing violence continues to force Iraqis from their homes. These people, rejected within Iraq and barred from neighboring states, literally will have nowhere to go. If millions of Iraqis remain impoverished and unable to return to their homes, eventually the displacement crisis will destabilize not only Iraq but the entire region.

The remainder of this article is structured in three main sections. The first section lays out the conditions that are conducive to refugee manipulation and militarization. It then characterizes the wider security implications of displacement crises. The second section applies that general framework to the Iraq crisis, clarifying how manipulation and militarization have undermined security within Iraq and across the region. The third section presents recommendations for mitigating, and in some cases preventing, these security threats.

Refugees and the Spread of Conflict

Like the Iraqis, millions of people around the world have fled their homes to escape violence and persecution. In 2006 the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported a global total of 9.8 million refugees and 12.8 million internally displaced persons.⁷ Contrary to their expectations of sanctuary, many refugees and IDPs continue to experience security threats in their new locations. In some cases, forced displacement functions as

7. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "2006 Global Trends: Refugees, Asylum-seekers, Returnees, Internally Displaced, and Stateless Persons" (Geneva: UNHCR, July 2007), <http://www.unhcr.org/statistics/STATISTICS/4676a71d4.pdf>. Figures do not include Palestinian refugees served by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency.

a strategy of war. Political and militant groups may use the crisis to their advantage by manipulating the refugees and IDPs using strategies such as inciting fear among them and treating them as demographic bargaining chips.

Although both refugees and IDPs are vulnerable to manipulation and militarization, refugee crises pose a greater risk to the spread of conflict across borders. In some instances, manipulation leads to the militarization of the refugee population. For insurgent groups, a displaced (and concentrated) population provides international legitimacy, a shield against attack, a pool of recruits, and valuable sources of food and medicine. In essence, refugee camps can function as rear bases for rebels who attack across the border. The refugee-sending state may pursue the refugees across the border, subjecting them to military attack.⁸ As the cross-border attacks escalate, the risk of international war grows. The refugees may also instigate conflict within the receiving state by upsetting a fragile ethnic balance or by undermining the government. Eventually, nationwide destabilization may result as more states are drawn into the conflict.⁹

MANIPULATION OF REFUGEES

The conventional view of displacement crises emphasizes their humanitarian characteristics. The revised U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual indicates a change in traditional attitudes toward displacement, however. The manual warns, "An insurgency often creates many groups of internally displaced persons and refugees on short notice. . . . Nongovernmental organizations and other civilian agencies normally furnish this support to internally displaced persons and refugees. However, conditions may prevent these agencies from providing these services quickly. Furthermore, in [counterinsurgency] operations, internally displaced person and refugee security may take on heightened military importance. Traumatized and dislocated persons may become vulnerable to insurgent threats and recruitment."¹⁰ The displaced populations most vulnerable to manipulation have often fled targeted violence; that is to say, they are victims of persecution. There are two main ways that militant leaders can manipulate a displaced population for strategic

8. The term "sending state" refers to the country from which the refugees fled; "receiving state" describes the country that hosts the refugees.

9. See Sarah Kenyon Lischer, *Dangerous Sanctuaries: Refugee Camps, Civil War, and the Dilemmas of Humanitarian Aid* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005), chap. 1.

10. U.S. Army and Marine Corps, *The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), chap. 8, par. 8-41.

ends. The first is by forcibly moving people to gain territory or resources. The second is by encouraging a security dilemma mentality among the displaced population.¹¹

In the first type of manipulation, the refugees and IDPs play a mostly passive role. Essentially, militant groups force people to flee their homes as part of a larger strategy. This demographic engineering often takes the form of ethnic cleansing. Militants decide to homogenize the territory under their control as a way of securing their position. Using violence or threats of violence, militants expel the “undesirable” group from the territory. Usually, the expulsion is followed by an influx of members of the “desirable” group. That inflow may be voluntary or coerced. The shared experience of persecution often strengthens the bonds among the forcibly displaced and may increase their receptivity to militant propaganda.

As their fears grow, refugees and IDPs realize they cannot return home until they are protected from their persecutors. In such a situation, leaders may exaggerate or distort the nature of the violence that caused the displacement. This strategy is particularly effective among refugees who are isolated in camps. By convincing the refugees that they must defend themselves against further threats, their leaders can encourage political, and even military, activity among the displaced. Without alternative sources of information, the refugees believe that they are acting in self-defense, when in reality opponents view their behavior as threatening. Over time, a leadership emerges that unites the refugees behind a highly organized program of political and military action and may even form a state-in-exile.¹²

MILITARIZATION OF REFUGEES

The militarization of a refugee population occurs when combatants infiltrate the refugees’ camp, often forming a de facto state-in-exile. Refugees may voluntarily support the militants, or they may be coerced into doing so. Militarization is more likely to occur the longer the crisis continues because state-in-exile groups gain strength over time. The longer it takes to isolate and disarm the militants, the more time the group has to organize and grow. In exile, the militants improve their security situation vis-à-vis the sending state. They often have greater freedom to raise funds and develop alliances. Time in

11. See Stephen John Stedman and Fred Tanner, eds., *Refugee Manipulation: War, Politics, and the Abuse of Human Suffering* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2003), chaps. 1, 6.

12. On state-in-exile refugee groups, see Lischer, *Dangerous Sanctuaries*, pp. 24–28.

exile gives leaders the opportunity to expand their popular support. As a crisis drags on, discouraged refugees may begin to believe that the only escape from an interminable situation is through violence.

The effects of the militarization of refugees include the spread of political violence across borders, clashes between the refugees and the receiving state, and conflict between the receiving and sending states. Cross-border violence takes the form of attacks between the sending state and the refugees, including bombing and shelling of camps, hot-pursuit raids across the border, and insurgent attacks launched from a refugee camp. Such violence threatens the territorial integrity of the receiving state and may lead to international war.

Conflict between the refugees and the receiving state is likely if the receiving state views the refugees as a security threat or if the receiving state is allied with the sending state. Ethnic or factional violence that erupts among refugees can spread conflict to the receiving state. This often occurs when refugee groups include members of different ethnic groups or competing political parties. Such violence threatens the stability of the receiving state, which may already have only a tenuous hold on political order. A related type of violence occurs when the refugees create an unstable ethnic balance in the receiving state that encourages a previously oppressed minority to confront the state.¹³

At the highest level of militarization, refugee crises can serve as catalysts for interstate war or unilateral intervention. In some instances, international war occurs when refugees use exile to launch an invasion of their home state. Interstate war becomes more likely if the receiving state supports the military activity. Another type of international war occurs when the receiving state perceives the refugees as a threat, regardless of their political or military activity. The receiving state may attack the sending state as a way to expel the refugees. The sending state may also launch preemptive war against the receiving state if it views the refugee crisis as a grave enough threat.

Unlike refugee crises, the militarization of IDPs primarily affects the stability of their own state, with secondary effects on neighboring states. During a civil war, different regions of the state experience varying levels of violence and resulting vulnerability to destabilization.¹⁴ An influx of IDPs may upset ethnic balances within a region and incite conflict. There is also the possibility

13. On refugee flows and the increased risk of civil war, see Idean Salehyan and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, "Refugee Flows and the Spread of Civil War," *International Organization*, Vol. 60, No. 2 (Spring 2006), pp. 335–366.

14. See Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

that militants will move with the IDPs and engage in violence in their new locations. This may draw a previously peaceful region into the civil war. By spreading and exacerbating violence, the militarization of IDPs indirectly affects the security of border states.

Strategies of Displacement in Iraq

The magnitude and nature of the Iraqi displacement crisis increase the risks of manipulation and militarization of the refugees and IDPs. As yet, large-scale sectarian violence has not spread to the displaced population. Although militant groups have established a presence in Jordan and Syria, both receiving states have threatened harsh measures against any perceived security threats. Thus, there is still time to avert the high levels of militarization that have afflicted many other displaced populations.

PERSECUTION AND FLIGHT

As of March 2008, the International Organization for Migration estimated that 2.4 million Iraqis had crossed international borders, including around 500,000 into Jordan and 1.2–1.4 million into Syria. Other refugee-receiving states include Egypt, Iran, Lebanon, and Turkey. More than 80 percent of the refugees originated from Baghdad, with half identifying themselves as Sunni and around 25 percent as Shiite. Within Iraq, 2.7 million people are classified as IDPs, 1 million of whom fled after the bombing of the al-Askari Mosque in February 2006. The majority of displaced Iraqis, of all sects and religions, cite persecution as the impetus for their flight.¹⁵

The March 2008 statistics include the displacement that occurred during the regime of Saddam Hussein. Before 2003 there were two main refugee movements out of Iraq. These occurred in the 1980s, prior to and following the Iran-Iraq War, and after the 1991 Gulf War. At the time of the 2003 U.S. invasion, between 1 and 2 million Iraqis lived outside Iraq, including 300,000 who had obtained refugee status. Most receiving states did not recognize the Iraqis as refugees, with the exception of Iran (which hosted 200,000 refugees). Between 2003 and 2006, more than 300,000 Iraqis returned home, mainly from Iran.¹⁶

15. International Organization for Migration, "IOM Emergency Needs Assessments, Post-February 2006 Displacement in Iraq."

16. U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, *World Refugee Survey, 2002* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Committee for Refugees, 2002), pp. 170–173; and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Statistics on Displaced Iraqis around the World," September 2007, <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/openssl.pdf?tbl?SUBSITES&id?470387fc2>.

As of 2003, there were still about 1 million Iraqis who had been internally displaced during the regime of Saddam Hussein. The 800,000 Kurdish IDPs present in the northern governorates of Dohuk, Erbil, and Sulaymaniyah resulted primarily from Saddam's Arabization program and Anfal campaign in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Arabization involved the deportation of hundreds of thousands of Kurds from the oil-rich regions in northern Iraq to so-called collective settlements. During the genocidal Anfal campaign, the government killed 150,000–200,000 Kurds and displaced many times that number. Other IDPs in the north left their homes to escape Kurdish infighting among competing political parties. Persecution of the Shiite displaced 100,000 Iraqis from the southeastern marshlands. Since 2006, an additional 200,000 IDPs have arrived in the Northern Provinces.¹⁷

In addition to the sheer numbers of displaced people, the characteristics of the population create further significant problems. Particularly damaging to Iraqi society has been the massive flight of the professional class since the 2003 invasion. At the beginning of the crisis, the first people to leave Iraq were those with sufficient resources to survive abroad. Targeted threats against professionals also induced this "brain drain." The Iraqi Medical Association reports that 50 percent of doctors have left Iraq. An Oxfam/NCCI (NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq) study states that at least 40 percent of Iraq's professional staff has left the country since 2003. More than 230 university professors have been assassinated, and 3,000 have fled the country since 2003. In 2007, deans of three major universities in Baghdad reported that teacher populations had fallen by 80 percent.¹⁸

Nearly all recently displaced Iraqis, both Sunni and Shiite, cite various

17. Figures for total IDPs before 2003 vary from 600,000 to 1.1 million. David Romano, "Whose House Is This Anyway? IDP and Refugee Return in Post-Saddam Iraq," *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (December 2005), p. 433; U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, *World Refugee Survey, 2002*, pp. 170–173; Jane Chanaa, "Iraq," Forced Migration Online: Research Guide, July 2003, <http://www.forcedmigration.org/guides/fmo015> (last updated November 2007); United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Statistics on Displaced Iraqis around the World"; and Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, "Iraq, Population Figures and Profile," statistics as of 2007, [http://www.internal-displacement.org/idmc/website/countries.nsf/\(httpEnvelopes\)/FE5FB119916249D5802570B8005A748A?OpenDocument](http://www.internal-displacement.org/idmc/website/countries.nsf/(httpEnvelopes)/FE5FB119916249D5802570B8005A748A?OpenDocument) (accessed July 21, 2008).

18. Elizabeth Ferris and Matthew Hall, "Update on Humanitarian Issues and Politics in Iraq," Report of the Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement (Washington, D.C., and Bern: Brookings Institution and Universität Bern, July 6, 2007), p. 5 n. 25; Elizabeth Ferris, "Security, Displacement, and Iraq: A Deadly Combination," Report of the Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement (Washington, D.C., and Bern: Brookings Institution and Universität Bern, August 27, 2007), p. 9; NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq and Oxfam, "Rising to the Humanitarian Challenge in Iraq," Briefing Paper, No. 105 (July 2007), p. 15; and International Medical Corps, "Iraqis on the Move: Sectarian Displacement in Baghdad" (Santa Monica, Calif.: International Medical Corps, January 29, 2007), p. 7.

forms of persecution as the impetus for their flight.¹⁹ These experiences of persecution include murder, torture, or abduction of a family member; personally targeted threats, such as gunmen at the door, warnings from neighbors, threatening letters, phone calls, and text messages (for example, one letter warned: “We give you 48 hours to leave this area. . . . Remember 48 hours only from the time you receive this paper—and then death.”²⁰); threatening graffiti, such as, “No Shiite after today,” scrawled in predominantly Sunni neighborhoods; rumors of impending violence (which are seen as a more reliable source of information than the media); generalized fear of attack by the majority group in a mixed area; and violence against community leaders. As one Iraqi waiting at the Syrian border lamented, “There isn’t an Iraqi here who wants to enter and hasn’t lost a brother or father, or received a threat.”²¹ Such experiences foster the belief among the refugees that they will never return home.

In a stereotypical crisis, refugees live in tattered tents in remote, inhospitable terrain, surviving on meager humanitarian aid. Unlike most displaced groups, the majority of Iraqis have fled cities and have congregated in urban centers, rather than camps. Jordan and Syria have not established camps for the Iraqis, in part because neither state has granted them refugee status. Within Iraq, less than 1 percent of IDPs live in camps.²² Most live crowded in with family or friends or in abandoned buildings and public spaces. This pattern could change as refugee and IDP flows increase and host areas exceed capacity.

MANIPULATION BY MILITANTS

The displacement crisis is both an effect and a cause of Iraq’s violence. When sectarian violence produces displacement, the resulting sectarian polarization can lead to further violence and displacement. As Ashraf al-Khalidi and Victor Tanner argue, “The violence gives the radical groups their *raison d’être*. The

19. Walter Kälin, “A Tragedy of Increasing Proportions: Internal Displacement in Iraq,” *Forced Migration Review*, Special Issue, June 2007, p. 14. For examples of persecution, see Ashraf al-Khalidi and Victor Tanner, “Sectarian Violence: Radical Groups Drive Internal Displacement in Iraq,” Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement (Washington, D.C., and Bern: Brookings Institution and Universität Bern, October 18, 2006), p. 27; and Nir Rosen, “No Going Back: Little Relief in Sight for Millions of Displaced Iraqis,” *Boston Review*, Vol. 32, No. 5 (September/October 2007), pp. 19–26.

20. Ashraf al-Khalidi and Victor Tanner, “The Remorseless Rise of Violence and Displacement in Iraq,” *Refugees*, No. 146 (April 2007), p. 9.

21. Quoted in Rosen, “No Going Back,” p. 20.

22. Kälin, “A Tragedy of Increasing Proportions,” p. 15. See also International Organization for Migration in Iraq, General Library, updates on the IDP situation, http://www.iom-iraq.net/library.html#IDP_mid07_review.

displaced are pawns they use to further their agendas—which are strikingly similar. They seek to consolidate ‘their’ territory by expelling the ‘others.’ They try to keep some of ‘their’ people in the territory of the ‘other’ so as to maintain a claim on the local resources.”²³ In Baghdad, formerly mixed neighborhoods have become unmixed as militants on all sides mount organized campaigns to segment the city into closed neighborhoods based on sectarian affiliation.

In carrying out this demographic engineering, the militant groups employ strategies that discourage future return. For many refugees and IDPs, the traumatic effects of violent displacement, as well as the loss of property, eliminate the hope of return. The International Medical Corps warns that “the enmity surrounding the current violence [in Baghdad] is serving to cement these [population] movements.”²⁴ In turn, that hardening of sectarian-based population patterns further strengthens the position of radical groups.

Increasingly, Iraqi refugees and IDPs are arriving destitute in their new locations. In insecure areas the property market has collapsed, leaving the displaced unable to sell their homes. Conversely, in safer areas prices have skyrocketed, putting housing out of reach for many Iraqis. In some instances, sectarian organizations have given properties abandoned by a family of one sect to newly arriving families of another sect.²⁵ As in the Balkans, these housing patterns create a domino effect that will immensely complicate refugees’ and IDPs’ return and assignment of property rights. In Bosnia many refugees attempted to return home after the war, only to find families of a different ethnic group occupying their house. Those squatter families in turn refused to leave, claiming that their homes had since been occupied.

In theory, the Iraqi Ministry of Trade and the Ministry of Displacement and Migration are responsible for displacement issues. In reality, few IDPs receive any government assistance. The government has continually downplayed the magnitude of the crisis to hide its failure to cope. As Nir Rosen states, “Iraqi authorities are in denial about the extent of the violence and displacement, preferring to view the problem as small scale and temporary. They are reluctant to initiate a process that could enshrine the displacement, potentially encouraging internally displaced persons to view their new homes as permanent.”²⁶

23. Al-Khalidi and Tanner, “The Remorseless Rise of Violence and Displacement in Iraq,” p. 8.

24. International Medical Corps, “Iraqis on the Move,” p. 18.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

26. Rosen, “No Going Back,” p. 25.

The IDP crisis has exacerbated persistent food shortages in the most heavily affected areas. For food rations, most Iraqis rely on the Public Distribution System, one of the few government programs from Saddam's era that has remained functional. Under the strain of massive population movements, the system has rapidly deteriorated. Fewer than 50 percent of IDPs are able to collect their rations. To access the Public Distribution System, an IDP must register in his or her new location and show proof of displacement. Provincial governments have used such impossible bureaucratic hurdles as a way to discourage further IDP inflows.²⁷

Many local governments and residents have begun to resent the drain on already meager social services caused by the IDP presence. The British nongovernmental organization (NGO) Ockenden International reports that "in the three governorates where Ockenden works, IDPs (new and old) represent 61% of the population, while returning refugees represent 16% and the host community 23%."²⁸ As this crisis drags on, citizens will increasingly view the Iraqi government as incompetent and irrelevant.

The government's failure to address the displacement crisis has created an opportunity for militant groups to increase their influence by distributing assistance. For example, Muqtada al-Sadr has opened storefront offices across Iraq (including nine in Baghdad).²⁹ Following the pattern set by Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza, the Sadrists offer social services and humanitarian aid to Shiite residents, as well as protection by militia members. The al-Sadr offices have distributed aid to IDPs in the squalid camps set up by the Iraqi Red Crescent Society (IRCS).³⁰ This strategy will undoubtedly win the gratitude of many desperate residents, but also further undermine the Iraqi government. The expanded role of the militant groups will also likely draw more IDPs into the ranks of the militants. Already, anecdotal evidence points to a rise in both voluntary and involuntary recruitment among displaced populations.³¹

27. José Riera and Andrew Harper, "Iraq: The Search for Solutions," *Forced Migration Review*, Special Issue, June 2007, p. 10; Elizabeth Ferris, interview by author, Washington, D.C., September 21, 2007; and Kálin, "A Tragedy of Increasing Proportions," p. 14.

28. Ockenden International works in the governorates of Kerbala, Missan, and Wassit. Olivier Beucher, "Vital Role of Legal Assistance for Displaced Iraqis," *Forced Migration Review*, Special Issue, June 2007, p. 49.

29. Alissa J. Rubin, "Cleric Switches Tactics to Meet Changes in Iraq," *New York Times*, July 19, 2007; and IRIN, "Ministering Militias," Reuters AlertNet, February 14, 2007.

30. International Organization for Migration in Iraq, "IDP Tent Camp Assessment Report, Iraq," October 2007.

31. Various nongovernmental organization representatives, interviews by author.

MILITARIZATION AT HOME AND ABROAD

As discussed earlier, the risks of refugee militarization include the spread of political violence across borders, clashes between the refugees and the receiving state, and conflict between the receiving and sending states. Under extreme circumstances, militarization can lead to international war and regional destabilization. Militarization becomes more likely over time, as refugees lose hope and militant groups coalesce in exile.

Thus far, large-scale sectarian conflict has not emerged among the refugees. Many refugees state that they fled the violence and do not want to replicate it in exile. Some refugees report that sectarian threats have followed them across national borders. For example, one refugee recounted that in 2006 he received a call on his cell phone saying, "We killed your brother, and you're next. No matter what country you go to, we will find you." Other examples include threatening text messages sent from Iraq to refugees in Jordan and Syria.³²

The governments of both Jordan and Syria have made clear that they will respond harshly to any militant action among the refugees. Elizabeth Ferris comments that "the reactions to the Iraqi refugees are deeply conditioned by the region's experience with Palestinian refugees over the past 59 years."³³ Receiving states, especially Jordan and Syria, fear that "unable to return home, running out of savings, carrying with them sectarian grudges and many with military experience, Iraqi refugees may yet destabilize much of the region."³⁴ In addition, hosts worry that the huge economic burden imposed by the crisis will cause violence between locals and refugees.

Militant leaders present a greater threat to political order than do ordinary Iraqi refugees. Radical groups, both Shiite and Sunni, have established offices in exile, which could provide a staging ground for future militant activity. Field research by the Brookings Institution found that "in the past one to two years . . . people linked at a lower level to both Sunni and Shi'a radical and insurgent groups have begun coming to Syria, some as refugees. . . . What is unclear, however, is the extent to which these people remain part of their organizations once in Syria. Active members of the radical groups—again, both Sunni and Shi'a—come to Syria to procure goods and especially to contact non-Iraqi insurgents headed for Iraq."³⁵

In Jordan, the demographic shift caused by the Iraqi influx exacerbates exist-

32. Al-Khalidi and Tanner, "The Remorseless Rise of Violence and Displacement in Iraq," p. 12.

33. Ferris, "Security, Displacement, and Iraq," p. 10.

34. Rosen, "No Going Back."

35. Ashraf al-Khalidi, Sophia Hoffmann, and Victor Tanner, "Iraqi Refugees in the Syrian Arab Re-

ing domestic tensions involving Palestinians, who make up more than half of the Jordanian population. Ferris warns that “the potential for unrest or even civil war in Jordan is not insignificant if the presence of Iraqis becomes protracted or if the Iraqis in any way challenge the sovereignty or territorial integrity of the state.”³⁶ Because Jordan is not a signatory to the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention, it is not obliged to follow the convention’s mandates. Given that the government considers the Iraqis illegal aliens rather than refugees, the Iraqis continually face the threat of deportation. In February 2008 Jordan introduced visa restrictions that require Iraqis to apply for a visa in Iraq, rather than at the Jordanian border crossing. In addition, border officials regularly refuse entry to men between eighteen and thirty-five years old and also reportedly turned back many Shiite would-be refugees. Sixty-eight percent of the refugees in Jordan are Sunni.³⁷

Initially, Syria offered a warmer welcome to Iraqis than did Jordan. Although Syria is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, the government opened its borders to the Iraqis and allowed them access to state-provided social programs. In response to the growing economic and social stresses, however, Syria closed its previously porous border in late 2007. The Syrian government began issuing one-month visas (which are renewable for two additional months). Iraqis are required to reenter Iraq and obtain a new visa if they want to remain in Syria.³⁸ These restrictions have worsened the situation for Iraqis in Syria and will undoubtedly increase the IDP population within Iraq.

The crippling costs inflicted by the refugee crisis have undermined the Syrian economy, which, in turn, has heightened local resentment of Iraqis and dissatisfaction with the government. As Syria’s deputy foreign minister asserts, “There has been a sharp increase in the cost of living. . . . The prices of foodstuffs and basic goods have gone up by 30%, property prices by 40%, and rentals by 150%.”³⁹ Crime rates have also skyrocketed. Once in Syria, many

public: A Field-Based Snapshot,” Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement (Washington, D.C., and Bern: Brookings Institution and Universität Bern, June 2007), p. 34, pp. 16, 40.

36. Ferris, “Security, Displacement, and Iraq,” p. 14.

37. Statistics as of May 2007. Kristin Dalen and Jon Pedersen, “Iraqis in Jordan: Their Number and Characteristics” (Oslo: Fafo, November 15, 2007), p. 34; and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Iraq Situation Report—March 2008,” <http://unhcr.org>.

38. Amnesty International, “Iraq: Rhetoric and Reality: The Iraq Refugee Crisis,” Report MDE/14/011/2008, June 2008, p. 9.

39. Faisal al-Miqdad, “Iraqi Refugees in Syria,” *Forced Migration Review*, Special Issue, June 2007, p. 19.

refugees survive on hawala money transfers from relatives in Iraq. In addition, the refugees still have the right to their food rations in Iraq. Sometimes family members have been able to collect the rations and pay drivers to ship them to Syria.⁴⁰

A potential contributor to violence is the geographical concentration of the refugee populations. In both Jordan and Syria, refugees have duplicated Iraqi neighborhoods in exile. These neighborhoods offer Iraqi food, shops, money transfers, and other services that cater to the refugees. For example, in one Damascus suburb, Iraqis have nicknamed neighborhoods after their hometowns.⁴¹ In Jordan, refugees have congregated in the Zarqa neighborhood, commonly known as “a hotbed of radicalism.”⁴² Thus far, these neighborhoods have avoided sectarian violence. This could easily change should radical groups strengthen their hold among exile groups.

Like external refugee movements, massive internal displacement could encourage violence in previously stable areas within Iraq. Naturally, victims of persecution flee to areas that seem safer and more stable. The northern governorates of Dohuk, Erbil, and Sulaymaniyah, for example, have remained relatively peaceful thus far. Because of that stability, those Kurdish-run governorates host around 200,000 IDPs from the south. This rapidly growing Arab population disrupts the agenda of the Kurds, who aim to establish an autonomous Kurdish region and reverse Saddam Hussein’s Arabization policy. Rather than reaching a safe haven, the IDPs find themselves unwelcome, unemployed, and desperate for basic necessities. Resentful and overwhelmed provincial governments have threatened to close their borders to additional IDPs, creating a desperate mass of people with nowhere to go.

HUMANITARIAN DILEMMAS

In Iraq, humanitarian NGO personnel face unprecedented security threats, which have greatly hindered efforts to assist the displaced population. These organizations, which have worked successfully and openly in most of the world’s most brutal conflict zones, find themselves unable to operate in Iraq. In most crises, humanitarian NGOs emblazon their logos prominently and engage in public fundraising campaigns. In Iraq, by contrast, “aid workers working for or in partnership with international NGOs do not advertise where the

40. Al-Khalidi, Hoffmann, and Tanner, “Iraqi Refugees in the Syrian Arab Republic,” p. 37.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

42. Ferris, “Security, Displacement, and Iraq,” p. 13.

aid is being brought from or who their partners are, nor do they communicate information on their programs or interventions."⁴³ Since the U.S. invasion, ninety-four Iraqi and international aid workers have been killed.⁴⁴

The danger to NGO and UN employees is so great that virtually no international staff remain in Iraq. A few organizations have a presence in the central south regions and in the north, but even there, international staff make only short visits to check on their local staff. Most NGOs work out of Jordan and Kuwait and attempt to manage their operations remotely. In late 2007 UNHCR had one international staff person in the north and one in Baghdad. In February 2008 the organization increased its international staff in Baghdad to five.⁴⁵

Within the country, the Iraqi Red Crescent Society is the only group with a truly national presence and a relatively neutral orientation. This has not spared the organization from violence, however. Militants have repeatedly attacked IRCS aid convoys and facilities and kidnapped staff from its Baghdad offices.⁴⁶ As the sectarian conflict continues, some observers claim that the IRCS favors Shiite areas over Sunni ones. Many aid organizations are concerned about its neutrality and willingness to cooperate with other agencies.⁴⁷

Even from the relative safety of Jordan and Syria, aid agencies face numerous hindrances to their operations. Because of their lack of legal status in Jordan, many refugees stay hidden for fear of deportation. Aid workers report that some Iraqis literally will not venture into the streets. Obviously this complicates attempts to deliver humanitarian assistance. In Jordan, aid organizations must balance their mandates to provide humanitarian assistance with the need to avoid triggering a mass deportation.⁴⁸

Syria, too, has been wary of international NGOs and UN agencies. The government requires NGOs to operate under the Syrian Red Crescent, which in es-

43. Marion Couldrey and Tim Morris, eds., "Delivering Is Never Remote: NGOs' Vital Role," *Forced Migration Review*, Special Issue, June 2007, p. 28.

44. Figure as of September 2007. NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq homepage, <http://www.ncciraq.org/>.

45. Wendy Young, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, interview by author, Washington, D.C., September 25, 2007; and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Iraq Situation Update—March 2008."

46. Jamal Al-Karboli, "The Iraqi Red Crescent," *Forced Migration Review*, Special Issue, June 2007, p. 49.

47. In sharp contrast to virtually all other humanitarian organizations, the Iraqi Red Crescent has hired a lobbying firm in Washington, D.C., to press for greater funding. Various nongovernmental organization representatives, interviews by author.

48. *Ibid.*

sence means under government control. The government has mandated that UNHCR can assist only Iraqis who have registered with UNHCR. Registration provides refugees temporary protections and gives them the right to assistance from the Syrian Red Crescent. It also offers a possibility for third-country resettlement. Relatively few Iraqis, however, are registered with UNHCR. As of April 2007, there were only 77,000 registered refugees (out of a total population of 1.2 million). By May 2008, increased funding allowed UNHCR to register a total of 194,273 refugees in Syria. Part of the explanation for the shortfall is that UNHCR has limited resources to process registrations, and many Iraqis are suspicious of the process.⁴⁹

Despite the difficult operating conditions, humanitarian organizations have been trying to coordinate their efforts to meet the needs of the displaced. One such effort is the NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq, based in Amman, which represents around 300 local and international NGOs.⁵⁰ Many international organizations have found it expedient to partner with local NGOs, which can operate more easily and unobtrusively. Of all the groups, local mosques and religious offices experience the fewest security problems when carrying out humanitarian activities.⁵¹

Preventing the Spread of Violence

The longer that millions of Iraqis remain unable to return to their homes, the more likely that the displaced population will become involved in political violence. In past conflicts, such as Afghanistan in the 1980s and Rwanda in the mid-1990s, peacemakers mistakenly took a wait-and-see attitude and avoided addressing the refugee crises in those countries until a peace settlement had been reached. During their many years in exile, Afghan mujahideen organized the refugees into a state-in-exile, successfully launching an insurgency from their bases in Pakistan. Following the Rwandan genocide, Hutu militants established a state-in-exile among the Hutu refugees in Zaire. Rather than dissipating over time, the state-in-exile strengthened, eventually precipitating an international war between Zaire and Rwanda.

49. Al-Khalidi, Hoffmann, and Tanner, "Iraqi Refugees in the Syrian Arab Republic," p. 29; and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Syria, "UNHCR Syria Update—May 2008," <http://www.un.org.sy/publications/UNHCR%20Syria%20Update%20May%202008.pdf>.

50. NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq homepage, <http://www.ncciraq.org/>.

51. Greg Hansen, "Iraqis Defend Humanitarianism," *Forced Migration Review*, Special Issue, June 2007, p. 31.

The lessons from past crises emphasize the need to pay attention to the displacement issue while the situation is still fluid. The Migration Information Source warns that “internal displacement [in Iraq] is taking on a more permanent and increasingly desperate character.”⁵² The quick stabilization of violent areas of Iraq will prevent further population movements, and may even facilitate return. For example, in the wake of the U.S. military surge, some IDPs quickly returned to Ramadi in Anbar Province.⁵³ The factor of time in contributing to refugee-related violence means that a speedy response is essential to defusing a potentially disastrous situation.

MASSIVE HUMANITARIAN AID

In the immediate term, international donors should meet the basic needs of the displaced Iraqis. Field interviews by Refugees International predicted that “failure to address humanitarian needs would have dramatic impacts on security inside Iraq and reinforce the control armed groups now have over the enclaves they claim as their own.”⁵⁴ These needs include clean water, sanitation, medical care, and adequate food and shelter. Another urgent problem is the lack of education for displaced children. To prevent resentment by local residents, assistance should benefit both the local and displaced populations.⁵⁵ As a first step, meeting basic needs will have an immediate impact in stabilizing the crisis.

Donor states, and especially the United States, should channel funding in two directions—bilateral aid to affected states and contributions to international organizations. Many wealthy states, especially in Europe, express reluctance to assist in what they perceive as a bailout of the George W. Bush administration. To counter that sentiment, the United States needs to jumpstart the process with a large commitment in hopes that reluctant Europeans will follow suit.

52. Andrew Harper, “Where to Now? Decreasing Options for Displaced Iraqis,” Migration Information Source (Washington, D.C.: Migration Policy Institute, September 27, 2007), <http://www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/display.cfm?id?644>.

53. Peter Apps, “Iraq Humanitarian Crisis Grows Despite U.S. Surge,” September 19, 2007, <http://in.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idINIndia-29620520070919>.

54. Kristèle Younès and Nir Rosen, “Uprooted and Unstable: Meeting Urgent Humanitarian Needs in Iraq” (Washington, D.C.: Refugees International, April 2008), p. 21.

55. Some observers claim that recipient states have misused donations meant to help the Iraqis. Nicholas Seeley, “In Jordan, Aid for Iraqi Refugees Is Often Redirected,” *Christian Science Monitor*, July 2, 2008.

America's hostile relationship with Syria obviously precludes the possibility of U.S. bilateral aid. A possible solution is for the United States to donate generously to Jordan and other refugee-hosting states, while encouraging European Union support for Syria. The Syrian government has been using the refugee issue as a bargaining chip, as evidenced by its initial refusal to supply visas to U.S. Department of Homeland Security officials to process resettlement cases. At the same time, the refugees threaten to crush the Syrian economy and exacerbate domestic political tensions. Bearing that in mind, it seems reasonable for donors to request greater independence for humanitarian organizations as a condition for funding.

Unlike Jordan and Syria, the Iraqi government, with a large budget surplus, has the financial resources to address the displacement crisis. The central government lacks the capability to disburse this money, however. Before committing additional funding, the United States should ensure that the government has used its current funds in an efficient and unbiased manner. Thus, it is essential to help the Iraqi government strengthen the institutions responsible for addressing displacement and reconstruction issues.

In addition to bilateral aid, donors should fully fund the appeals made by UN agencies, such as UNHCR, the United Nations Children's Fund, and the World Food Programme. The massive outflow of refugees after February 2006 caught the aid community by surprise. Most UN agencies had, at best, a minimal presence in neighboring states, but they have since responded to the crisis by significantly expanding their operations. Donor states were even more sluggish in responding to urgent appeals for funding. Virtually every aspect of the humanitarian response remains woefully underfunded. For example, Jordan and Syria have agreed to allow Iraqi children to enroll in school, but inadequate facilities mean that only a small fraction of refugee children actually attend. UN agencies hope to build more schools for both refugee and local children, but they require additional funding to do so. Another program is the UNHCR initiative, which has issued 4,000 ATM cards to vulnerable Iraqi women heads of household. This project will require \$1.5 million per month to continue. The United States, in particular, has a responsibility to increase its share of contributions from the usual 25 to 30 percent. Despite its resentment of U.S. policy in Iraq, the European Union should also enlarge its role in humanitarian aid and reconstruction.⁵⁶

56. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Iraq Situation Update—March 2008."

NO CAMPS

Unlike most refugees, Iraqi refugees are not housed in UN-run camps, but have established themselves informally in urban areas. Some provincial authorities have suggested building camps for internally displaced Iraqis on the outskirts of overwhelmed cities. Other observers have suggested containing potential refugees in camps, or “catch basins,” on the Iraqi side of the border as a way to prevent the spread of conflict.⁵⁷ Currently less than 1 percent of Iraqi IDPs live in camps. The existing IDP camps consist of overcrowded tents with no potable water, electricity, sanitation facilities, or medical care.⁵⁸

Establishing camps would be a disaster from both humanitarian and security perspectives. Ferris explains, “Iraqis resist living in camps because of the lack of privacy, close family ties, and perhaps also because of the historic association of camps with long-standing Palestinian camps in the region.”⁵⁹ Humanitarian and advocacy groups active in Iraq concur regarding the negative aspects of camps.

The location of camps would likely be in inhospitable terrain lacking sanitation infrastructure. Residents of catch basins at remote and arid border crossings would suffer intolerable conditions. Camp residents would be unable to pursue any attempts at self-sufficiency, thus depending solely on humanitarian assistance. The costs of maintaining the camps would dwarf the funding required to maintain the displaced in their current locations.

Camps would pose a heightened security risk, as the residents would become easy targets for attack. Desperate residents might also become more likely to engage in political violence, especially because the camps would undoubtedly be divided along sectarian lines. In a camp for IDPs in Najaf, the International Organization for Migration reported that “unemployment, overcrowding, and lack of privacy are causing significant tension among the camp’s inhabitants.”⁶⁰ Past refugee crises have demonstrated the many difficulties in providing protection for refugee and IDP camps. Considering the inability of the Iraqi government and U.S. military to protect and assist the dis-

57. Daniel L. Byman and Kenneth M. Pollack, “Things Fall Apart: Containing the Spillover from an Iraqi Civil War,” Saban Center for Middle East Policy Analysis Paper, No. 11 (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, January 2007), pp. 44–47.

58. On border camps, see Ferris, “Security, Displacement, and Iraq,” pp. 7–8; International Organization for Migration in Iraq, “IDP Tent Camp Assessment Report, Iraq”; and various nongovernmental organization representatives, interviews by author.

59. Ferris, “Security Displacement and Iraq,” p. 7.

60. International Organization for Migration in Iraq, “IDP Tent Camp Assessment Report.”

placed population, camp residents are particularly susceptible to manipulation and militarization.

NO FORCED RETURN

In most refugee crises, the ideal outcome is peaceful repatriation. The same holds true for Iraq. In the near future, however, large-scale return is not a viable option. Thus, aid agencies recommend focusing on stabilizing the humanitarian situation and alleviating the pressures on the host states. Under more stable humanitarian conditions, political actors can address possible repatriation scenarios.

The clashing interests of regional actors complicate any plans for return. Citing the economic, political, and security risks posed by the refugees, Jordan and Syria demand that they return home as soon as possible. The Iraqi government has expressed conflicting attitudes toward return. On one hand, the Iraqi government is wary of mass repatriation because it is completely unprepared to accommodate returnees. Yet the ongoing crisis indicates government weakness and instability. Thus, the Iraqi government officially promotes repatriation, and even encouraged the Syrian government to enact more stringent visa requirements for Iraqis, at the same time that it lacked the resources to manage a peaceful and voluntary return. In June 2008 the government of Nouri al-Maliki pledged \$195 million for repatriation, a step lauded by Ambassador James Foley, the senior U.S. coordinator for Iraqi refugee issues, as “commendable” but “only the tip of the iceberg.”⁶¹

Although the overall displacement numbers have steadily increased, statistics for voluntary return improved in late 2007. In some areas, such as Anbar governorate, refugees and IDPs returned home as security improved. Iraq’s Ministry of Displacement and Migration reported an increase in the number of IDP families returning to their former homes during 2007, with more than 3,200 families registered as returnees between January and October.⁶² The International Organization for Migration stated in March 2008 that 78,000 displaced Iraqis had returned to their original homes, although many found them destroyed. Of these returnees, only 17 percent were refugees and the remain-

61. Reuters, “U.S. Says Iraq Should Promote Refugees’ Return,” Reuters AlertNet, June 3, 2008, <http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/N03271447.htm>.

62. International Organization for Migration, “Tension in the North Poses Additional Burden on Internally Displaced,” IOM Press Briefing, November 2, 2007, <http://www.iom.int/jahia/Jahia/pbnAF/cache/offonce?entryId?15750>.

der were IDPs.⁶³ In 2008, aid agencies noted a drop in the numbers of returns. A UNHCR survey found that 70 percent of the refugees who returned from Syria had become internally displaced within Iraq.⁶⁴

The Iraqi government has not developed a mechanism to adjudicate property disputes, one of the most crucial aspects of a managed return.⁶⁵ To facilitate return, local and national authorities must enact appropriate protections for private property. At the very least, the Iraqi government should emphasize its support for existing laws that protect property titles. The Brookings Institution recommends that “the Iraqi authorities should secure, back up, and protect all registered data on property title and transactions. It may be worth considering temporarily suspending legal transfers of property rights in areas experiencing severe sectarian conflict.”⁶⁶

The postwar response to ethnic cleansing in Bosnia offers one example of return and restitution policies. Following the 1995 peace agreement, the United Nations administration established laws that entitled anyone who was wrongfully displaced to return and reclaim their property. During the war, the UN Security Council passed repeated resolutions confirming the temporary nature of the displacement. By 2004, around 200,000 abandoned homes had been reclaimed by the families who had left during the war. Owners were permitted to stay in their former homes or resell them.⁶⁷

In response to the continuing sectarian violence, some policymakers and analysts have advocated partitioning Iraq along sectarian lines.⁶⁸ In theory, such a separation would reduce violence by providing security and stability for each group. Most partition proposals have ignored the pivotal role of the displacement crisis. Virtually all humanitarian organizations oppose the idea of partition, given that it inevitably involves further forced displacement.⁶⁹ Such an undertaking would doom many refugees to permanent exile, including the

63. International Crisis Group, “Failed Responsibility: Iraqi Refugees in Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon,” Middle East Report No. 77, July 10, 2008, p. 7.

64. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Iraq Situation Update—March 2008”; and Younés and Rosen, “Uprooted and Unstable,” p. 14.

65. In 2004 the Coalition Provisional Authority established a mechanism for adjudicating property rights violations that occurred under the Baathist period.

66. Rhodri C. Williams, “Applying the Lessons of Bosnia in Iraq: Whatever the Solution, Property Rights Should Be Secured” (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, January 8, 2008), p. 5.

67. *Ibid.*, pp. 2–3.

68. Peter W. Galbraith, “Partition Is the Only Way, Iraq,” *International Herald Tribune*, October 22, 2007; and Reidar Visser, “Historical Myths of a Divided Iraq,” *Survival*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (April/May 2008), pp. 95–105.

69. Various nongovernmental organization representatives, interviews by author.

roughly 1.3 million members of ethnic and religious minority groups. Even more important, partition would divide many families, because a majority of Iraqis have both Shiite and Sunni relatives. The Iraqi government estimates that 2 million of Iraq's 6.5 million marriages are between Arab Shiites and Arab Sunnis.⁷⁰ Such refugees and IDPs who returned would, in fact, be returning to a new location, due to officially ratified sectarian divisions. As in Bosnia, repatriation would signify a return to one's country, but not one's home. Considering those dangers, observers fear that partition would create a resentful displaced population, determined to exact justice and retribution for their losses.

ENLARGE AND ACCELERATE THE RESETTLEMENT PROCESS

As the magnitude of the Iraq displacement crisis has grown, so too has attention to refugee resettlement policies. Despite the refugees' increasing numbers, the United States, along with most European countries, have offered resettlement to only a handful of displaced Iraqis.⁷¹ Between 2003 and 2006, the United States admitted 770 Iraqi refugees.⁷² In response to political pressure, the Bush administration agreed to admit 7,000 Iraqis in fiscal year 2007. During that period, however, only 1,608 Iraqi refugees arrived in the United States for resettlement.⁷³ During the first seven months of FY 2008, the United States admitted 4,742 Iraqi refugees, casting doubt on whether the resettlement program would reach its stated goal of 12,000 for FY 2008.⁷⁴ Insufficient funding and a cumbersome bureaucracy have drastically delayed U.S. processing of Iraqi refugees.

Although resettlement does not provide a solution for the vast majority of displaced Iraqis, it offers haven to a subset of particularly vulnerable groups. Iraqis who worked for the U.S. forces (e.g., as drivers and interpreters) face probable murder if they return to Iraq. The U.S. Congress has established the

70. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "UNHCR's Eligibility Guidelines for Assessing the International Protection Needs of Iraqi Asylum-Seekers" (Geneva: UNHCR, August 2007), p. 55.

71. Sweden provides the exception, having admitted 18,000 Iraqi asylum seekers between 2003 and 2007. In 2008, however, Sweden introduced more restrictive asylum and resettlement policies.

72. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Statistics on Displaced Iraqis around the World"; and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Iraq Situation Update—March 2008."

73. Office of the Spokesman, "Fact Sheet: United States Humanitarian Assistance for Displaced Iraqis" (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State, November 9, 2007), <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2007/nov/94849.htm>.

74. Reuters, "U.S. Says Iraq Should Promote Refugees' Return."

Special Immigrant Visa program to resettle Iraqis who were U.S. employees in Iraq. Other vulnerable groups include victims of torture, members of minority groups, and medical cases. An expanded resettlement program also stands as a symbol of U.S. concern for displaced Iraqis. Such a public and generous commitment could encourage reluctant European states to follow suit.

Conclusion

The Iraq displacement crisis is not a stable situation. Every day, the media report new statistics about population movements in the region. Those details, though important, do not alter the larger political and security risks posed by the crisis. The refugees in Syria will continue to devastate the Syrian economy and create political tensions regardless of whether their numbers increase or decrease, even by hundreds of thousands. Militants will continue to recruit among the internally displaced as long as the IDPs' living conditions remain intolerable. Concerns about the manipulation and militarization of the displaced population are unlikely to abate in the near future. Even if the Iraqi government manages to impose political order, the negative effects of violence and sectarian cleansing will persevere. The demographic changes created by the crisis mean that many of the displaced will never return to their actual homes. In addition, the government will find it difficult to entice the professional class to return.

Considering the improbability of any rapid resolution to the displacement crisis, concerns have arisen over the prospect of increased refugee flows and about the sustainability of the situation in Jordan and Syria. It is unlikely, however, that the flow of refugees will increase significantly, because both Jordan and Syria have essentially closed their borders. Border restrictions will only tighten as the crisis continues.

Even without an influx of more refugees, the situation is not sustainable over the long term. As noted by Gil Loescher and James Milner, "Long-term refugee populations are a critical element in ongoing conflict and instability, obstruct peace processes, and undermine attempts at economic development."⁷⁵ There are two scenarios if the Iraqi refugee crisis becomes protracted. The first is that receiving states will force the refugees back into Iraq, probably by means of police or military action. Forced return, or "refoulement," vi-

75. Gil Loescher and James Milner, *Protracted Refugee Situations: Domestic and International Security Implications*, Adelphi Paper, No. 375 (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 8.

olates international law, but the international community would have little leverage to prevent this. Massive refoulement would greatly exacerbate the IDP problem.

Second, as is already evident, the refugees' living conditions are deteriorating further over time. As their savings run out, the refugees are turning in desperation to crime, prostitution, and child labor.⁷⁶ If this continues, increasing numbers of refugees will become slum dwellers living on the fringes of society. Tensions between local residents and refugees could erupt in violence, threatening political order.

The fluidity of the crisis can help avert the dangers of manipulation and militarization. There is still time to mitigate many of the security threats posed by the crisis. A rapid infusion of humanitarian assistance will weaken the militants' influence among the IDPs. High levels of aid will also defuse some of the host states' resentment by repairing their social and economic infrastructure. Before warehousing the refugees in camps, donors and hosts should seek urban solutions to the housing crisis. Camps, even if initially conceived of as a temporary measure, will increase security threats and discourage efforts to resolve the crisis. The ideal solution to this crisis is a rapid and peaceful repatriation. The longer millions of Iraqis remain displaced, the less likely the chances are that they will ever return home.

76. International Crisis Group, "Failed Responsibility," p. 25.