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## The many causes of internal displacement in central and northern Iraq: Consequences and recommendations

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Coping with displacement is one of the greatest challenges facing the nation of Iraq on its path to establishing a stable and democratic state. The former state policies of expulsion and repression combined with the effects of assorted wars and clashes resulted in large-scale displacement. Today, there are approximately 900,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) throughout the country. Only by recognizing the many and varied causes of displacement can the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) design and implement resettlement programs that serve the needs of displaced Iraqis as well as the country overall. The lack of guidance and coordination by the CPA concerning the issue of displacement is troubling. How this issue is resolved will be an indication of whether pluralism and democracy in Iraq will take root. The integrity of the nation depends on finding just solutions for the varied displaced populations and communities.

### **Causes of Displacement**<sup>1</sup>

1. Arabization: The policy of "Arabization," i.e., forcing ethnic Kurds, Turkmen and Assyrians from their homes to replace them with Arabs, began in the 1930s. This campaign was carried out by various Iraqi regimes to secure the Kirkuk oil fields as well as scarce arable land in the region. Arabization resulted in ethnic cleansing primarily through bureaucratic repression such as rules prohibiting non-Arabs from owning land, attending school and engaging in certain business practices. Violence was also used but to a lesser extent than state-sponsored discrimination. Governments expelled non-Arabs from their homes and land and gave incentives to Arabs to leave their homes of origin to take over confiscated properties.
2. Anfal and Genocide: In the 1980s Saddam Hussein began a concerted effort to subdue Iraqi Kurdistan by destroying villages and displacing people, particularly in rural areas. After being expelled from their homes and having their villages razed, displaced Kurds were forced to live in "collective towns" where they were completely dependent on the Iraqi regime for the basics such as food, shelter and water. This was followed by al-Anfal, the genocidal killing of Kurdish villagers by bulldozing them into mass graves and using chemical weapons on them.
3. The Gulf War: Immediately after the Gulf War in 1991, the Kurds in the North rebelled. Although the US government encouraged this uprising, it refused to support it and Iraqi forces swiftly quelled the uprising. Fearing further chemical attacks and seeing no Allied support, two million Kurds, in turn, fled to Turkey and Iran.
4. Political Clashes in Kurdish Areas: Disputes between the two main Kurdish factions, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), turned violent in 1994. This resulted in expulsions and the flight of party sympathizers who happened to live in opponent party-controlled areas; intermittent military clashes also took place. This state of affairs lasted for three years until an agreement was signed in Washington. In addition to clashes between the KDP and PUK, fighting between Iraqi Kurdish armies in

the north and the Turkish-Kurdish rebel group, the PKK (the Worker's Party of Kurdistan) has resulted in the displacement of 15,000 people.

5. Iran-Iraq Relations: Many of the Iranian Kurds who fought in the Iran-Iraq war, as well as those who were political opponents of the Iranian regime, fled from Iran to Iraq. More than 12,000 of these Iranian Kurds, for instance, have been living in the Al Tash Refugee Camp in Ar Ramadi for more than 20 years. In addition to the displacement of Iranian Kurds, Iran-Iraq relations also resulted in the displacement of Iraqi Kurds. In the 1970s, Saddam Hussein began to expel Kurds who, in response, fled to Iran. Hundreds of thousands of expelled Iraqi Kurds were supported by the Iranian government until 1975 when Iran and Iraq signed the Algiers Agreement. This Agreement weakened Iranian support for Iraqi Kurds. Over time, many of these people returned to Iraq, but not to their original homes.

6. Ethnic Discrimination: While the Palestinians were a favored and protected group under the former regime, hundreds of families have been displaced since the arrival of Coalition forces in Iraq due to local resentment of their favored status. Landlords who, under the former regime, were forced to accept below-market rents or no rent at all from Palestinians living on their properties have either forcefully evicted their Palestinian tenants or demanded rents so high that the Palestinians could not afford to stay.

7. Economic Displacement: The recent conflict in Iraq resulted in economic hardship that, in turn, has caused the displacement of Iraqi citizens. Like the Palestinians, Iraqis have been evicted from their homes for failure to pay the rent. Many Iraqis lost their jobs as the result of the recent war and have been unable to find new ones. Consequently, they have left their homes in search of a better life in other parts of Iraq or as economic refugees in other countries.

8. Political and Military Prisoners: During Saddam Hussein's regime, thousands of Iraqis were imprisoned or executed for their alleged crimes against the state. Families of these prisoners, particularly political prisoners, were frequently blacklisted by the government. Their property was confiscated. Wives lost their jobs. Children were not allowed to complete their education. With the fall of the government, political prisoners were released. Extended families who had initially cared for the families of political prisoners could no longer bear the burden of doing so and requested that wives and children return to their husbands and fathers. Because these families have no means of survival, they are forced to squat in abandoned buildings and live off humanitarian assistance.

## **Consequences of Displacement in the Aftermath of the War**

### **Creating the Newly Displaced**

While the horrific policy of Arabization destroyed families, property, and livelihoods while displacing hundreds of thousands of people, reversing this process, by returning those initially displaced to their original homes, will result in many of the same consequences.

Although the return of Kurds to their homes of origin to reclaim their land has been largely non-violent, several deaths have resulted from this process. The more significant issue, however, is the loss of investments made by Arabs who were resettled on Kurdish property. In several instances, Arabs formally purchased lands from departing Kurds. Even those who were provided with these confiscated lands free of charge by the former regime built new homes and improved agricultural land over the many years that they inhabited these lands.

These investments are now being lost as Arabs leave these resettled areas and return to their original homes. Moreover, in many cases, Arabs returning to their villages of origin face the problem of insufficient farmland to support their families and a lack of capital with which to rebuild their lives.

### **A Potential Food Crisis**

Lands in the north that were confiscated by the government as part of the Arabization process represent the breadbasket of the country. The process of Kurds reclaiming their previous lands began just before the harvesting season. Departing Arabs requested that they be provided with 50% of the harvest as part of a sharing agreement with returning Kurds. Bureaucratic delays and political wrangling prevented this plan from being carried out.

Newly returned Kurdish IDPs have been told by local authorities to refrain from planting the fields this autumn because of unresolved property issues. The provisional government has not yet determined who rightfully owns the land. As a result, returnees will not replant out of fear that they will not reap the benefits of their labor. This fear is fully justified considering the history of IDPs in general and the recent treatment of Arab farmers.

The decision of returnees to refrain from planting fields may have serious repercussions. As mentioned, lands in northern Iraq produce a preponderance of the country's food. In addition, the Oil-for-Food Program (that currently provides food to 60% of Iraqis) is scheduled to end in November 2003. If fields lie fallow and food assistance is discontinued, it is likely that a food crisis will occur in the near future.

### **Former Prisoners and Their Families Falling between the Cracks**

Iraqis imprisoned for political and military crimes as well as their families (including widows and their children) who have suffered displacement as a result of their imprisonment are not currently recognized as IDPs by the government. This cause of displacement is very real, yet because it falls outside of the commonly recognized reasons for displacement, it has received little attention. The UN is currently addressing the needs of this population, but the CPA or the emerging Iraqi government must grant official recognition of their plight. Only official recognition will ensure that this displaced population receives the same assistance as those displaced by the Anfal, Arabization, or other well-recognized causes of displacement.

### **Property Claims**

One of the most complex effects of displacement in Iraq is the issue of settling property claims. Whatever the reason for displacement, it resulted in the widespread involuntary abandonment of property that was, ultimately, confiscated by others. Houses built by Kurds on land that they once owned, for example, were destroyed by Iraqi forces. In their place, Arabs built new homes. Who, then, is the rightful owner of the "new" house? While it is justified for Kurds to return to their former homelands to reclaim what is rightfully theirs, what sort of remuneration should be provided to Arab farmers who built homes and farmed these lands at the behest of the former regime? What sort of compensation should be provided to Arabs who legally purchased the property of Kurds forced to move? These are just a few of the issues that need to be resolved before people can resettle and begin new lives with the assurance that their efforts will be recognized as both legal and just.

Refugees International therefore recommends that the Coalition Provisional Authority and the emerging Iraqi government:

- \* Provide equitable assistance to all IDPs, no matter what the reasons are for their displacement.

- \* Devise a strategy for return and reintegration and publicize it widely. Even if the strategy is provisional, it should be shared with all Iraqis and its preliminary nature explained to the public at large.

- \* Provide IDPs returning to their homes of origin or who voluntarily relocate to other areas permanently with food assistance, potable water, health care and financial assistance for resettlement-related needs for at least one year or until they are able to support their families.

- \* Provide agricultural assistance in the form of seeds, fertilizer, tools and farm machinery to IDPs who return to farm their land and guarantee returnee farmers that they will legally own what they harvest.

- \* Organize the provision of psycho-social counseling to those IDPs who were forcefully removed from their homes. Successful reintegration for IDPs depends not only on satisfying physical needs, but also dealing with the trauma that they have experienced.

- \* Establish a commission to investigate and redress major injustices suffered by IDPs, including loss of property and violations of basic human rights.

- \* Guarantee IDPs returning to oil-rich areas such as Kirkuk and Mosul an equitable percentage of jobs in the oil industry.

- \* Ensure that areas to which IDPs return have been cleared of unexploded ordinance.

- \* Ensure that local government officials implement the return and reintegration plans equitably. Establish a special commission or national government body to review and evaluate implementation efforts.

- \* Ensure that IDPs are represented on local, regional and national government councils. Power-sharing arrangements must be balanced to avoid exacerbating ethnic and religious tensions that will create instability.

Footnote

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<sup>1</sup> The following discussion of the causes of displacement relies heavily on the definitive pre-war study of displacement in Iraq, *The Internally Displaced People of Iraq*, by John Fawcett and Victor Tanner (The Brookings Institution-SAIS Project on Internal Displacement, October 2002).