

Humanitarian Space in Iraq?

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The dire humanitarian crisis in Iraq needs to be addressed. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) announced that a major conference will be held in Geneva on April 17-18 aimed at increasing awareness of the humanitarian situation of the Iraq conflict and winning international support for addressing the problems. The attendees will include Iraqi authorities and those of neighboring countries, major refugee hosting states (e.g. Jordan and Syria), major donor countries, resettlement countries, concerned regional government organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and United Nations (UN) and non-UN partners.

The conference has three main objectives. The first is to sensitize the international community to the humanitarian dimensions of the Iraq conflict, as well as to the foreseeable needs of those who have been uprooted. The second aim of the conference is to obtain concrete commitments to tackle the humanitarian crisis. This could be achieved through increased international burden-sharing to ease the strain on the current refugee hosting states, through financial support or capacity building, through more funding for internally displaced persons (IDPs), through improving the quality of protection for the uprooted and by providing resettlement opportunities to the most vulnerable.¹ The third aim of the conference is to identify targeted responses to specific problems, including finding solutions for groups most at risk.

The total number of IDPs is estimated to be between 1.6-1.7 million.² If current levels of displacement continue the numbers of IDPs will reach 2.3-2.7 million by the end of 2007.³ In addition, close to 2 million Iraqis are displaced outside the country, mostly in Syria and Jordan. However, other nearby countries, such as Lebanon, also host significant numbers of refugees. According to UNHCR spokesperson Ron Redmond, skilled people crucial to Iraq's stability, such as doctors, teachers, and computer technicians, are included in those leaving the country.

A recent assessment conducted by the International Medical Corps states that the humanitarian situation is deteriorating at an increasingly rapid rate, and that there are few indicators that this trend will change in the short term. The assessment states, "Long-term displacement seriously reduces the ability of

¹ Redmond, Ron. UNHCR Chief Spokesperson. "Geneva Meet to Boost Awareness of Scale of Iraq Tragedy, Seek Support." *UNHCR*. February 23, 2007. at <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/iraq?page=news&id=45df1c1b4>

² It is worth noting here that many were displaced prior to 2003, but an increasing number are fleeing now.

³ "Iraq Support Update December 2006/January 2007." *UNHCR*. January 8, 2007 at <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/opendoc.pdf?tbl=SUBSITES&id=45a25dae2>

many Iraqis to sustain their livelihood, while the disruption to the lives of IDPs and restricted movements caused by sectarian fighting deny particularly women, children, and minorities of access to basic healthcare services.”⁴ The International Organization for Migration (IOM) stated that between 1500-2000 individuals are displaced every day, with the most critical areas being the Anbar and Baghdad provinces in the center of the country, and the Karbala and Basra provinces in the south.⁵ IOM states that lack of access to food is particularly acute, due to insecure transportation routes, in areas where military operations are taking place, sectarian or factional violence is prevalent, and in areas under militia control. According to UNICEF up to 4.5 million children are undernourished. Potable water, sanitation and health services are also urgently needed, especially in small cities and rural areas.

Another recent report, *Coming to Terms with the Humanitarian Imperative in Iraq* by Greg Hansen, also highlights the rapid deterioration of the humanitarian situation in Iraq.⁶ The report is based on fieldwork that was conducted in and around Iraq between the end of October 2006 to mid-December 2006.⁷ Hansen argues that international preoccupation with the political aspects of the crisis has overshadowed the humanitarian situation. According to the report, present trends point to an immanent large scale humanitarian crisis due to the incremental collapse of the Iraq state, escalating violence, increasing mobility constraints for the population and humanitarian actors, and the rapid erosion of vital social supports. Serious deficiencies in the state’s ability to provide for the safety and welfare of its population, as well as the impaired capacity of the international humanitarian agencies’ ability to respond to the evolving risks and threats to the survival and well-being of Iraq’s population are accelerating the humanitarian crisis. The report states, “A successful humanitarian response in Iraq will be predicated upon renewed creativity, flexibility and assertiveness in policy, donor and operational responses that are—to the extent possible—depoliticized, safeguarded against instrumentalization and acutely attuned to the changing context.”

In Iraq, the operational environment for humanitarian action has been significantly altered by the murders, kidnappings and other incidents that have afflicted aid workers from both Iraqi and international aid organizations. In 2003 the UN itself chose to leave Iraq after its Baghdad headquarters were

⁴ “Iraqis on the Move: Sectarian Displacement in Baghdad.” *International Medical Corps*. January 29, 2007 at http://imcworldwide.org/loc_iraq_study_jan2007.shtml

⁵ “Iraq Displacement 2006 Year in Review.” *International Organization for Migration*. at http://imcworldwide.org/loc_iraq_study_jan2007.shtml

⁶ Hansen, Greg. “Coming to Terms with the Humanitarian Imperative in Iraq.” *Feinstein International Center*. January 2007. at <http://fic.tufts.edu/downloads/HA2015IraqBriefingPaper.pdf>

⁷ The methodological approach was evidence-based and inductive with a primary focus on local perceptions of the humanitarian enterprise. Approximately 225 semi-structured conversations and interviews were held, most with beneficiaries of assistance and others at the community level, individually and in focus groups. Those interviewed include Iraqis from various social strata across the spectrum of Shia, Sunni, Kurdish and other communities.

bombed twice. Twenty five people, mostly UN staff, were killed. UN agencies have since handled Iraq from Amman, Jordan. According to Hansen's report, there is an increasing tendency among international humanitarian staff to treat the security situation in Iraq as an insurmountable challenge, and this has led to a rationalization of reduced engagement.

Humanitarian space refers to the scope for neutral and impartial humanitarian action in the midst of conflict. The practice of neutrality by humanitarian organizations means establishing contacts with *all* combatants to safeguard and expand humanitarian space, and to minimize the effects of war on the civilian population. In Iraq, however, most humanitarian agencies have established working contact with only one set of combatants, deviating from the mandated neutrality and impartiality of these organizations. In addition, some organizations have embedded themselves with the Multi-National Forces (MNF) for security purposes. Unfortunately, this has led to a perceived and real environment in which humanitarian aid is tainted by partiality and associated with political-military aims.

According to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the impartiality, neutrality and independence of humanitarian organizations in situations of armed conflict must be maintained.⁸ It is crucial to make the distinction between political action—from which military action is derived—and humanitarian action which should be solely concerned with the needs of people affected by conflict. When the lines are blurred military involvement effects civilian humanitarian activities “because any association with military missions—real or perceived—is likely to affect the way in which the population gauges the neutrality of the civilian humanitarian workers, insofar as they are—or are judged to be—no longer ‘innocent bystanders’ but rather potential parties to the conflict.”⁹ As evidenced by Iraq, mixing mandates turns humanitarian workers into perceived enemy agents and jeopardizes their personal safety. Hansen's report concurs and states that the perceived neutrality, impartiality, and independence of genuine humanitarian action is gravely threatened in Iraq by blurred distinctions between military, political, commercial and humanitarian roles.

Coming to Terms with the Humanitarian Imperative in Iraq offers twenty recommendations to improve the humanitarian crisis in Iraq. While all are worth noting, the brevity of this article dictates focusing on a few. First, a new strategic policy framework for UN humanitarian action in Iraq should be devised, one that provides for the rapidly and dramatically changing operating environment. Second, there needs to be a reassertion of the neutral, impartial, and operationally independent role of UN humanitarian agencies inside Iraq,

⁸ Studer, Meinrad. *The ICRC and Civil-Military Relations in Armed Conflict*. IRRC Vol. 83 No. 842. June 2001. 367-392. at [http://www.icrc.org/WEBGRAPH.NSF/Graphics/367-392_Studer.pdf/\\$FILE/367-392_Studer.pdf](http://www.icrc.org/WEBGRAPH.NSF/Graphics/367-392_Studer.pdf/$FILE/367-392_Studer.pdf)

⁹ Studer, Meinrad. Quote pulled from above article.

paying close attention to erecting firewalls against politicization and militarization of the UN's humanitarian response. This could be achieved in part by formulating stringent policies for interactions between UN agencies and military or security forces, and actively promoting compliance with UN guidelines among the humanitarian community and international parties to the conflict. Hansen argues that in keeping with these guidelines, which are meant to preserve and expand humanitarian space, military involvement in providing direct humanitarian assistance to the population should not occur except as an option of last resort when no civilian means are necessary. Third, the UN's humanitarian apparatus needs to be weaned from its dependence on MNF for presence, security and mobility, and there should be further engagement with Iraq's moral and religious leaders as part of a concerted effort to explain the UN presence in the country. This will encourage greater acceptance of humanitarian roles.

What does this all mean?

The key point is that the upcoming UNHCR conference in Geneva needs to serve as the catalyst for a renewed international effort to effectively address the humanitarian crisis in Iraq. Ensuring humanitarian space during times of conflict is both a legal and moral imperative. There are real men, women, and children caught in the midst of the ongoing conflict. Classifying their plight as inevitable collateral damage or resigning to the notion that the security situation is insurmountable are not options. Therefore the international humanitarian community must effectively engage all combatants and reestablish their neutral, impartial, and independent role. Civil-Military Cooperation must be such that humanitarian organizations retain their real and perceived independence so that they are able to effectively provide substantial assistance to the people in need.

In addition, all parties of the conflict—both state and non-state actors—must adhere to international humanitarian law, which states that civilians (including neutral aid workers) are not to be targeted. The complete absence of adherence to this fundamental principle undermines attempts at humanitarian aid, and further distances humanitarian workers from the population in need. Finally, political reconciliation is what is ultimately needed if the humanitarian crisis is to be halted.