Iraq

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Views

Syrians in Iraq: Refugee response within a major humanitarian and political crisis

WFP/Abeer Etefa

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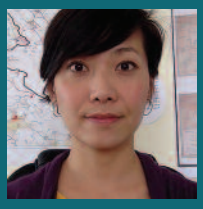

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About the Syria Needs Analysis Project (SNAP): ACAPS and MapAction established SNAP in January 2013, a project aimed at supporting the humanitarian response in Syria and neighbouring countries by providing an independent analysis of the humanitarian situation of those affected by the Syrian crisis. ACAPS (Assessment Capacities Project, www.acaps.org) is dedicated to improving assessments of humanitarian needs in complex emergencies and crisis through the provision of context-specific information and analysis. MapAction (www.mapaction.org) is an international NGO whose mission is to assist responders to humanitarian emergencies by providing mapped information and other information management services that enable rapid situational assessment and decision making.

This article was completed in early October 2014.

With about 215,000 Syrian refugees[1] or less than 7% of the total registered number of Syrian refugees in the region, Iraq hosts the smallest number of Syrian refugees. Iraq has generally welcomed these refugees in ethnic solidarity to the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KR-I), where the vast majority of Syrians reside. Partly as a result of this as well as due to the unique complexities of operating in the KR-I, the international response to the Iraq refugee influx has been somewhat neglected compared to other neighbouring countries in the region. However, the June offensive by the Islamic State (formerly known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, ISIL) and various Iraqi groups have put the war-torn country back into the spotlight and re-ignited sectarian violence, as well as fears across the region. As the latest wave of conflict and displacement in Iraq takes its toll, – threatening to break Iraq apart and further fuel the conflict in Syria – the humanitarian response will be further challenged by deepening insecurity, uneasy acceptance of aid agencies by parties to the conflict and complex geopolitical interests.

Since the Syria Needs Analysis Project (SNAP) began remotely analysing the Syrian refugee situation in Iraq, as well as other host countries in the region, in January 2013, a lack of information and shared assessments on the unfolding situation was evident (for more on SNAP's work, (see page 156). Despite the relatively low number of NGOs operating in the area, the humanitarian situation appeared largely under control, with the authorities of the KR-I taking the lead and investing an estimated USD 120 million[2] in the construction of camps and the provision of water and other services. While Syrian refugees, who were largely of Kurdish origin, were initially welcomed by the local population in 2012, the KR-I authorities became increasingly concerned with the impact on its security and booming economy, and closed the border in May 2013.[3] In central Iraq, where the situation was more volatile, the border crossings had been closed in 2012, but about 9,000 Syrians,[4] primarily from Deir-ez-Zor governorate, had fled to Iraq and were hosted in a camp and urban areas around the border town of Al-Qa'im. Due to its remote location and insecurity, only a handful of agencies worked in the area and since the Islamic State' takeover in June, access has been virtually impossible.

As the conflict escalated in 2013, particularly in Aleppo and Damascus where a number of Kurdish communities reside as well as between Kurdish and opposition armed groups in eastern Syria in mid-2013, IDPs began to congregate on the Iraq-Syria border. As humanitarian conditions deteriorated, the KR-I authorities opened the border in late August, leading to an influx of 60,000 Syrians in one month. The KR-I and aid agencies were overwhelmed by the influx but managed to stabilise the population and establish new camps. In the subsequent weeks and months, the border crossings were again closed and dozens of new international aid agencies also arrived in the KR-I to help with the response. While new funding was made available for the refugee influx, aid levels levelled off in early 2014 even though the refugee population had swelled nearly threefold in the past year. Although some NGOs considered longer-term pro-

1 UNHCR Refugee Response Portal, accessed 8 October 2014.
2 Amnesty International, 3 January 2014. http://livewire.amnesty.org/2014/01/03/life-getting-harder-for-syrian-refugees-in-iraqi-kurdistan/
3 UNHCR, 16 December 2013. http://www.unhcr.org/syriarrp6/docs/syria-rrp6-iraq-response-plan.pdf#B
4 UNHCR Refugee Response Portal, accessed 13 July 2014. http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/settlement.php?id=178&country=103&region=85

gramming for refugees,[5] there was little traction among local authorities for this type of programming, leading to a number of aid agencies deciding to scale down either due to the lack of funds or other implementation challenges.

SNAP missions to Iraq found the operational environment in the KR-I to be much more complex than hitherto understood. While the environment in the KR-I is relatively 'unrestricted' and secure, compared to non-Kurdish areas of Iraq and other host countries, the context poses additional challenges not experienced in other countries. First and foremost, while all neighbouring countries have influenced and been influenced by the Syrian conflict, Iraq's internal divisions and regional allies bring an additional layer of geopolitical interests resulting from the deepening split between Sunni and Shia populations since the 2003 US-led invasion, the increasing autonomy of the KR-I from the central Iraq government, and Turkey and Iran's interests with the KR-I in relation to their respective Kurdish populations. In relation to Syria, the situation is further complicated by the fact that Kurdish areas in eastern Syria are administered by a Kurdish political party, which has a historically intense rivalry with the dominant political party currently in power in the KR-I.

Secondly, while the KR-I appears to be one cohesive entity and is often treated as such by the aid community, the reality is that its governance and administration structures are highly de-centralised and each governorate has its own set of policies regarding Syrian refugees. For example, Dohuk governorate, which hosts the lion's share of Syrian refugees within Iraq, has been issuing residency permits to both camp-based and urban refugees, while Erbil and Sulaymaniyah governorates have generally adopted a more restrictive position towards Syrians, and had largely stopped providing residency permits to urban refugees since in early 2013 in a bid to persuade them to move to camps. In addition to providing legal status to rent homes, residency permits also allow the holder to work legally, hence, they are sought after by refugees, both in and outside of camps. Since mid-2014, UNHCR succeeded in all three KR-I governorate to agree to a common policy on residence permits and fast tracking permits for Syrian registered with UNHCR, although some minor administrative issues persist.

Despite its oil wealth and semi-autonomous status, the KR-I remains dependent on Baghdad to access revenues from oil resources. This arrangement is further complicated by various political disputes regarding the sharing of oil wealth and territories claimed by both Baghdad and the KR-I. Despite these long-standing disputes, Iraq's political leadership has also been politically dependent on the Kurds in order to form a coalition government. In late 2013, KR-I made a deal to export some of its oil out through Turkey, a move Baghdad claimed was illegal, as revenues did not go through the central government. As a result, Baghdad cut off budget payments to the KR-I in March, leading to delayed salary payments of many civil servants.[6] The KR-I's budget crisis also affected the government's ability to maintain the camps, which it had established and maintained, with teachers and health workers reporting significant delays in the payment of salaries. New camp facilities, such as schools, had been built but were unable to start classes due to lack of KR-I financing to hire teachers.[7]

The KR-I authorities have expressed their wish for Syrian refugees to reside in one of the eight established camps. As a result, the needs of urban refugees have been neglected and little comprehensive information on their status was known until a recent needs assessment was undertaken by REACH. According to UNHCR registration figures, just over 40% of Syrian refugees are residing in camps in KR-I. In the largest Syrian refugee camp, Domiz, food aid was being distributed for over 75,000 people in March, however, verification efforts have revealed that more than 20,000 beneficiaries were actually residing outside the camp and have now been taken off of beneficiary lists.[8] To date, UN agencies have primarily targeting refugees resding in camps with little official UN assistance going to urban refugees. In late 2013, local authorities in Erbil instructed aid agencies not to provide non-food items, cash or shelter assistance to Syrian refugees outside of the camps, even during the winter.[9] Similarly, Dohuk authorities did not currently permit NGOs to provide cash assistance or gender-based violence programming for non-camp refugees. While there has been some room for manoeuvre for aid agencies to negotiate with local authorities, the restrictions have largely discouraged UN agencies from significant expansion of aid activities into urban areas.

The fall of Mosul to the Islamic State and armed Sunni groups in June, followed by offensives on a number of towns in northern Iraq and along the Syrian border has led to a massive humanitarian crisis and dramatic consequences for the whole region. The conflict led to the displacement of over 1.25 million people between June and October, according to IOM,[10] with some Iraqis even fleeing across the border to Syria and thousands more to Turkey and Jordan. Minorities, particularly, Yazidis and Christians, have been severely persecuted and subjected to summary executions, siege tactics, and gender-based violence. Millions more have been affected by violence and shortages of food, water and fuel. Most IDPs originated and fled within the northern governorates of Ninewa and Salah Al-Din, but over 700,000 reportedly entered the KR-I and thousands more to disputed territories which are now largely under Kurdish control. The IDP influx to the KR-I has overwhelmed the limited and generally weak public services available, diverted attention from the Syrian refugee response, and heightened tensions. These factors have contributed to at least 10,000 refugees returning to Syria in recent months, despite increasing insecurity and limited access to aid in areas of return. This latest displacement comes on top of the Syrian refugee influx; over half a million displaced from Anbar governorate this year, about one million IDPs and returning refugees and about 100,000 stateless people. While there are common drivers of conflict fuelling one another in both Syria and Iraq, Iraq's humanitarian crisis presents a formidable challenge in its own right and should not be conceived of as simply an 'appendage' to the current Syrian crisis.

To date, the international humanitarian community has gained limited acceptance by the Islamic State, both in Syria and in Iraq, and when access has been established, aid agencies are subject to strict conditions. Western donors are concerned that aid could be diverted to groups labelled as terrorists and counterterrorism-related restrictions may further impede humanitarian access to those in need. The legacy of remote management of humanitarian operations in Iraq (which began in the 1990s) persists and will continue to hamper an expanded presence of humanitarian organisations, as well as their ability to monitor needs and account for aid. While Saudi Arabia contributed USD 500 million to UN agencies for the Iraq crisis,[11] thereby addressing ongoing concerns about lack of funding from western donors, attention and funding will inevitably decline, and the Iraqi government must take responsibility for the protection and well-being of its people. In the past efforts to ensure that these responsibilities are transferred to, and undertaken by, Iraqi authorities failed as witnessed in the post-Saddam Hussein era.

SNAP's aim has been to build a common situational awareness of the humanitarian situation in Iraq to inform decision makers. However, the unfolding crises in Iraq have made this task infinitely more complex. The response and coordination architecture has become fragmented between those responding to the IDP crisis through the cluster system and those operating in through UNHCR's refugee response coordination mechanisms. Donors also mirror the fragmentation with different funding mechanisms for refugees and those affected by Iraq's internal crisis. With over one million Iraqis displaced this year alone, it will be increasingly difficult to maintain and work through these bureaucratic and institutional divisions and prioritise funding according to the assessed humanitarian needs. The process of mainstreaming the response and coordination remains unclear, but SNAP established a presence in Erbil in August to support decision makers with independent analysis of this highly complex crisis in order to inform the difficult decisions which lie ahead.

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5 NGO interviews, Erbil, 5-9 May 2014
6 Wall Street Journal, 23 May 2014. http://online.wsj.com/
7 UNHCR, 6 May 2014. http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNHCR-Iraq_Syrian_Update_1-15_Apr_14 _2 .pdf UNHCR, 13 April 2014. http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/download.php?id=5256
8 World Food Programme, 24 March 2014. http://reliefweb.int
9 NGO interviews, 5-9 May 2014.
10 Displacement Tracking Matrix, IOM, 3 October 2014.
11 New York Times, 1 July 2014.