

# IRAQ'S NEW REALITY

REPORT I



*THE IMPACT OF CONFLICT ON MINORITIES,  
REFUGEES, AND THE INTERNALLY DISPLACED*



STIMSON



The Centre for International  
Governance Innovation  
Centre pour l'innovation dans  
la gouvernance internationale



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Dear Colleagues,

At this critical juncture in Iraq's history, the Stimson Center and the Centre for International Governance Innovation are partnering to explore the linkages between Iraqi reconstruction, security and a political process of national reconciliation involving all Iraqis. Our goal is to help shape a better understanding of the Iraqi situation and to generate new thinking about Iraq for policymakers.

This project, entitled Iraq's New Reality, includes a series of workshops held in Canada and the United States, gathering leading experts to examine these key issues. A report summarizing the discussions and offering recommendations to parties involved in the Iraq situation will follow each workshop.

This report is based in part on the first workshop of the series, held at CIGI in Waterloo, Canada on June 10, 2009. It benefitted from working papers and presentations by Dr. Joseph Sassoon of Georgetown University, Nabil Al-Tikriti of the University of Mary Washington, Ellen Laipson of the Stimson Center and Ambassador Mokhtar Lamani of CIGI.

Future workshops and reports by the Stimson Center and CIGI will address the issues of security in Iraq, governance and the federalism option, and Iraq's relations with its neighbors.

It is our hope that, at this critical juncture in Iraq's history, this project can explore and shed light on Iraq's new realities and prospects for stability.

Sincerely,

Ellen Laipson



Ambassador Mokhtar Lamani



## Overview

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Several years of war, internal violence, and unrest have taken a severe toll on the Iraqi population. As US troops withdraw and Iraq begins the next chapter in its history, it is important to consider the status of the country's most vulnerable populations and the challenges they face. There are approximately 5 million displaced Iraqis, over 2 million living outside of the country as refugees and more than 2.8 million internally displaced (IDPs). Baghdad itself remains divided by partition walls, and eleven out of eighteen governorates have taken measures to restrict IDP movement.

### Iraq's Minorities

Iraq has always been a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society, home to many minority and micro-minority communities that have been in existence for thousands of years, even if the former regime's narrative focused on Iraq's unity as an Arab country with Sunni Arabs and the Ba'ath Party as the dominant political actors. The vitality of this cultural, religious and social mosaic has been particularly threatened since the war began in 2003. As victims of post-2003 violence, which included being targets of extremist groups and criminal gangs, many of these communities have been internally dispersed or have fled the country. In some cases those who have remained are forced by extremists to pay a *jeziya*, or an unofficial tax imposed on non-Muslims, and face continued intimidation and violence. Some now fear they will be unable to preserve and reconstitute their way of life. For example, more than 80 percent of the Mandaean population and 60 percent of the Iraqi Christian population have been forced to flee to other regions within Iraq or to other countries.

These minority communities also play a role in the broader struggles for identity and territory in the new Iraq. One such example is the Turkmen living in the region around the disputed city of Kirkuk. Pressured by Arab and Kurdish political and interest groups, the Turkmen are now internally divided over whether or not Kirkuk should officially become a part of Iraqi Kurdistan. This division benefits the larger political parties with a stake in the future of Kirkuk at the expense of a more cohesive Turkmen community.

### Iraqi Refugees and Displaced

Since 2003, the political and security landscape within Iraq has forced millions of people to flee their homes. With scarce resources available to support these individuals, concerns have grown over their future, both inside and outside of Iraq. The government of Iraq has not yet developed robust policies to provide services to refugees or to facilitate voluntary repatriation.

Iraqi refugee receiving countries, namely Jordan and Syria, appear determined to avoid replicating the circumstances in which Palestinian refugees became permanent features of their political landscapes. Indeed, countries have taken care not to create camps for Iraqis, but rather to bring them directly into their cities. However, Iraqis in the region do still face problems: lack of access to the economy, health care, education and other basic services, as well as competition over scarce resources with the local population are all enduring challenges.

Iraqis who are now refugees in countries outside the Middle East, particularly in Europe and the United States, face similar problems of integration and opportunity, albeit to varying degrees. The judicial and immigration apparatuses of Western states subject Iraqis to evolving quota systems, varying criteria for asylum, scarce dedicated resources and shifting national policies and attitudes. The refugee policies of some Western countries have also been criticized for having sectarian undertones, as countries like France and Germany announced plans to accept certain quotas of Iraqi Christian refugees,<sup>1</sup> seemingly at the expense of other minority or ethnic groups. As for the United States, as of September 2007 62 percent of Iraqis admitted into the United States were Christian.<sup>2</sup>

One of the more revealing and under-acknowledged realities of the new Iraq today is that the middle and educated classes have all but disappeared from the country. Iraq had experienced a “brain drain” of the professional classes during the Saddam Hussein-era, particularly during the 1990s when war, hyperinflation and sanctions took their toll on the economy. However the scale of the post-2003 brain drain has been unprecedented. Finding themselves the targets of criminal gangs for robberies, kidnappings and assassinations as well as the total collapse of the state and basic services, many of these individuals were driven from Iraq, with the biggest waves of out-migration occurring in 2004-2005. As a result, Iraq has experienced dramatic losses in qualified educators and medical staff, including mental health providers, among others.

For Iraqi refugees in the Middle East, lack of access to the economy, health care, education and other basic services, as well as competition over scarce resources with the local population are enduring challenges.

## The Problems of Displaced Iraqis

### Iraqi Refugees in the Middle East

Iraq is the second largest source of refugees in the world today, after Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup> Definitive numbers of Iraqi refugees in the region are in dispute, but commonly used statistics place over 1.2 million in Syria, 500,000 in Jordan, 200,000 in the Gulf and more are residing in Egypt and Lebanon. Some experts do believe these figures are inflated. Also significant is that the Iraqi refugee population is also made up of a large number of circular migrants, who return to Iraq for short periods of time and then leave to go back to their country of displacement. This occurs for several reasons including economic drivers, such as trying to operate or restart businesses, changes in the security situation in their area of origin, and regular travel to check in on family members, neighbors and friends. It is also important to note that many Iraqis who have attempted to return have experienced secondary displacement after finding that their neighborhoods were either still too dangerous or that basic services were insufficient to support them.

**Iraqi minority communities fear that the recent diaspora into the region and beyond may ultimately lead to a near or total loss of their way of life.**

Conditions for Iraqi refugees vary between countries, but there are several challenges that seem to be common denominators for Iraqis in the region. One of the more palpable examples is the level of economic opportunity available to refugees. Refugees in

Syria, Jordan and Lebanon, who comprise the majority of the refugee population in the region, do not have access to local labor markets. These states viewed the majority of refugees coming into their countries as a temporary phenomenon while they waited to travel to Europe or North America or back to their homes if the situation in Iraq were to improve. As a result of already high levels of local unemployment and strained resources, as in the case of Syria, as well as a general anxiety about the long-term presence of refugee groups, particularly for Jordan and Lebanon, many end up spending all of their savings and are forced to find ways to make a living in the grey or black markets. Others also begin to operate within a reverse remittance paradigm, where family members who may still be in Iraq send financial support to those in residence elsewhere in the region. The economic restrictions have been particularly difficult for female Iraqi refugees, as many are widowed and without any financial support. As a result they become targets for the illegal sex trade.

Access to basic services including health care and education is uneven and generally insufficient. Several countries have complained that Iraq has not provided enough, or in some cases any, financial support for hosting refugees. For individual Iraqis, these state-to-state tensions over resources

don't bode well for future improvements in their quality of life during displacement. For the host governments, the long-term existence of large numbers of unemployed or underemployed Iraqis and non- or under-educated youth creates a potential threat to their internal stability, including the transplantation of sectarian tensions and strains on general law and order. It is important to note that there is a slightly different narrative occurring in the Gulf, however. As labor importing countries, many of the Gulf states are seeing opportunity in the Iraqi refugee population, particularly the educated, professional classes, and so Iraqis may fare better there than in the Levant.

For Iraq's minority communities, living as refugees poses the additional challenge of preserving their historical and cultural heritage. They fear that the recent diaspora of community members into the region and beyond may ultimately lead to a near or total loss of their way of life. Therefore some are seeking resettlement as a community rather than at the individual and family level.

## Iraqi Refugees in the United States

There has not been massive immigration of Iraqi refugees into the US due to the emphasis on providing assistance to refugees in the region. As a result, since 2003 the US has admitted only slightly more than 30,000 Iraqis. Although criticized for being too small during the first few years of the war in Iraq, the Bush Administration's quota for the number of Iraqi visas issued did significantly increase in 2007-2008. The 2009 quota for Iraqis to be admitted into the US is 17,000. Nevertheless, US bureaucracy poses a very real challenge to meeting this target. Lengthy security checks and a systemic backlog, as well as a lack of separate channels for Iraqis, significantly delay the process. Furthermore, refugee resettlement inside the US is not a federal government function. While refugees do receive a modest 6-month stipend, it is largely decentralized and dependent upon the work of civil society and community-based organizations. Another acute reality is that Iraqi refugees who have made it to the US today are arriving in a recession economy, and are therefore finding it even more difficult to find employment and become self-sustaining.

## Iraqi Refugees in Europe

In the early years of the war, European states tended to have more liberal policies towards refugees than the United States. Sweden was by far the most accepting, taking in over 33,000 Iraqi asylum seekers from 2003 to 2007. Once granted residency, refugees were also provided with 18 months of access to Swedish language and vocational training as well as a monthly stipend. Germany, Greece, the Netherlands and the UK also accepted over 10,000 each during the same period.

However, the escalation of sectarian violence in Iraq following the Samarra bombings in 2006 dramatically increased the number of refugees seeking asylum in Europe. This in turn forced coun-

tries to re-evaluate their capacity to provide assistance to those fleeing the war. Even in Sweden, domestic politics and tensions over resources led to a contraction in the number of Iraqis accepted for asylum.

## The Internally Displaced

As a result of the sectarian violence that brought the country to the brink of civil war in 2006 and 2007, the demographics of many individual neighborhoods and provinces have been significantly reshaped. Those that have made the decision to return to Iraq today are generally returning to neighborhoods where their religious or ethnic group maintains a majority, rather than their place of origin. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), of the 270,000 families that have been displaced since February 2006, only 49,432 have returned.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, IDP receiving provinces have been similarly affected by demographic shifts. While repatriation and internal migration are still ongoing processes, there are important trend lines that are emerging.

**Sectarian remapping of neighborhoods has profound implications for the future of Iraq.**

For example, Baghdad today is significantly more homogenized and assumed to be primarily Shi'a. Near the Iraqi Kurdish border, IDP movements north have now made the Yazidi community a minority in an area where only a few years ago they were a majority. This new reality is seen in other provinces throughout the country as well, although to varying degrees.

This sectarian remapping has profound implications for the future of Iraq, although it remains to be seen how this will affect the sectarian consciousness of the population as well as the country's political balance and culture.

## Prospects for 2009-2010

New flare-ups of violence, the perceived dominance of political sectarianism in public policy, and the absence of comprehensive and balanced government policies towards refugees are likely to mean that the middle class and Iraqi minority communities will not soon return in any significant numbers. The resulting effects of these realities on Iraq's long-term prospects for recovery and development remain to be seen. The longer these fundamental issues remain unaddressed, the more likely it is that the sectarian divide and demographic remapping of the country will become more deeply entrenched in society, both physically and psychologically. However there are some key issues that the government and the population can and should address in order to shape more positive outcomes for Iraq in the coming decade and beyond.

Today, the fabric of Iraqi civil society is vulnerable. While Iraq has much healing to do, there can be no social or physical reconstruction without security and there can be no true sense of security without a national reconciliation project. Early attempts at achieving justice have fallen short – as exemplified by the hasty execution of Saddam Hussein, which was widely perceived to be sectarian-motivated. Unlike the South African experience, Iraq has no F.W. De Klerk who will step forward, accept responsibility and apologize to society for the previous regime and no Nelson Mandela to make the grand gesture of forgiveness. Currently, a psychology of victimhood and revenge, or at least the perception thereof, is common among Iraqi political elites and has ignited a system of reactions and reprisals along sectarian lines that may be difficult to reverse if not addressed. This, along with the absence of strong, national leadership for the effort, has hindered the beginnings of a real and inclusive national reconciliation process to date.

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## Iraqi government priorities

Some Iraqis today are exploring the possibility of returning home, whether that be from within the country or from the region. However, a highly unstable security situation, a shortage of viable housing, enduring sectarian tensions and the resulting transformation of neighborhoods and lack of government attention all present serious challenges to those returning. Furthermore, those who do attempt a return generally fall into one of three less than ideal categories; they have exhausted their savings and, can no longer sustain themselves abroad; their area has been completely cleansed into a homogeneous neighborhood controlled by the militias of the sect they are from; or they returned but found the situation untenable and have been forced to flee again.

To date, Iraqi policymakers do not appear to have reached a consensus on promoting Iraqi returns. Many in the government, including Prime Minister Maliki, have emphasized other priorities, including providing services and support to those currently in Iraq, before looking towards bringing refugees home. In 2008, the Iraqi government announced an initiative to encourage Iraqis to return, but evidence of significant success is scarce. Other attempts at addressing the issue have been problematic, including accusations that they excluded large portions of the population that had been previously displaced, including most of the educated and professional classes that left Iraq before 2006 and the Saddam Hussein-era displacement. Further undermining these efforts are the accusations of sectarianism made by critics who charge that the process favors Shia returnees over other groups in order to strengthen the ruling coalition's political base.<sup>5</sup>

## Shifting Priorities of the International Community

One of the fundamental shifts in US policy since the beginning of the Obama Administration in January 2009 has been to acknowledge the human costs of the US war in Iraq in a way that had not been done by the previous administration. In Obama's major Iraq policy speech in which he laid out his plan for ending the war in Iraq, the President was careful to acknowledge US responsibility towards Iraqi refugees and those who have been internally displaced.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the shift in US attention and although many of the tactical elements of the Obama Administration's policies towards Iraqi refugees are still in their infancy, significant expansion of US refugee policy vis-à-vis Iraq should not be expected. Key elements of US policy will remain – mainly that the US will continue to be the largest single source of revenue to international efforts to help refugees. Contributing more than 50% of the total funds given to these organizations, the US has already provided over \$1 billion through the US State Department and USAID to international organizations and major NGOs delivering services to Iraqi refugees in the region. New US policy may place increased emphasis on support for the voluntary repatriation of Iraqis back to Iraq, including working with the Iraqi government to increase the credibility and efficacy of national policies to encourage repatriation and supporting the current work of the IOM, which is working to provide returnees with small pieces of land as an alternative to returning to damaged or destroyed homes.

Improving conditions in Iraq after the US “surge” has affected European policies towards Iraqi refugees. In 2007, a Swedish immigration court ruled that there was “no armed conflict in Iraq,” allowing the Swedish government to legally begin deporting Iraqis. Switzerland, the Netherlands, Finland, and others have since enacted similar policies. In April 2009, the UNHCR explained that the guidelines for assessing the international protection needs of Iraqi asylum-seekers were being reviewed in part because of a change in the political and security landscape within the country, namely the downturn in violence following the Sunni Awakening forces turning against Al-Qaeda and the solidification of sectarian re-mapping.

## Re-establishing a Modern Iraqi Society

Given the damage that has been done to the Iraqi middle class, beginning in the 1990s and reaching crisis levels after the 2003 war, it is important to consider the fate of the next generation. There has been much reflection on the Iraqi education system of the 1960s, during which significant numbers of Iraqis were sent abroad, particularly to the West, for higher education. This then led to the significant expansion of the Iraqi middle and professional classes, and helped Iraq become a leader in the Arab world in terms of education and health indicators. Today, there are indications

that the Iraqi government recognizes the value of such a strategic investment. This year, Prime Minister Maliki announced that several thousand Iraqis would be sent abroad to receive an international education. This is an important first step: an international education program could be key to stimulating the resurgence of the middle class over the next decade. Even if only half of those sent abroad return, the impact on Iraqi society would be significant.

## The Evolving Politics of Iraq and the Concept of Citizenship

The recent elections results may indicate the beginning of a shift in Iraqi politics away from purely sectarian parties towards more broadly based coalitions. The parliament is now being seen as an institution with statutory integrity and authority, where real, substantive debates are occurring regarding the future of Iraq. While further progress at the elite level is required, especially in terms of perceived sectarian agendas, these developments should be acknowledged and supported.

The establishment of a new, modern and nationalism-based form of citizenship that goes beyond tribal or sectarian affiliation would be a positive structural move towards reconciliation and social modernization. Iraq is a multicultural state, and over time that reality can again be seen as a virtue, rather than as an impetus for division and violence. Currently, the lack of a common national dialogue in which minorities and others have a stake in shaping in the new Iraq has had destructive consequences at the economic, social and political levels. However the embracing of a national concept of citizenship, which would provide all equal status under a legal framework, could re-stimulate a sense of national identity among Iraqis and bolster a minimum level of cohesiveness among a deeply traumatized population and political elite.

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## Policy Recommendations

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- Iraq needs a national reconciliation project. Without one, the country will face continued sectarianism and violence, and risk a permanent fracture along such lines. Such a project should include all Iraqis and aim to create solutions and a modus operandi for the state that does not favor or reward individual sectarian groups, communities or political parties, but rather fosters a political and community-based culture of national identity, national pride, equal citizenship and mutual respect.
- Iraq needs to develop public policies that inculcate “citizenship” values, to develop a common national identity that transcends sectarian or ethnic affiliation. Iraq needs a cosmopolitan identity based on equal citizenship and a respect for human rights.
- The international community should promote the creation of a “Friends of Iraq” consisting of prominent representatives from the region. This group would be responsible for meeting with all Iraqi political parties and groups, and with the government. It would then provide independent advice and guidance to the Iraqi government on how to make the right links between Iraqi reconstruction, security and national reconciliation.
- The United States should provide increased funding for Iraqi refugees currently in the Middle East as well as increase opportunities for and support to resettlement in the US.

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*Prepared By  
Elena McGovern, Matt Eason and Breanne Carter*

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**The Stimson Center**  
1111 19th Street, NW, 12th Floor  
Washington, DC 20036  
Phone: 202-223-5956 | Fax: 202.238.9604  
[www.stimson.org](http://www.stimson.org)

**The Centre for International Governance Innovation**  
57 Erb Street, West  
Waterloo, ON, Canada N2L 6C2  
Phone: 1 (519) 885-2444 | Fax: 1 (519) 885-5450  
[www.cigionline.org](http://www.cigionline.org)