Humanitarian implications of the wars in Iraq

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Abstract

The current situation in Iraq could be described as a "war on civilians", for it mainly affects the livelihood and well-being of the civilian population, while serious security problems prevent the Iraqi people from leading a normal life. Going beyond the direct victims of the conflict, this article deals with the daily problems faced by Iraqi society, namely the lack of security in terms of housing, education and health care, as well as protection for the more vulnerable such as women and children. The forcible eviction of many Iraqis is, however, the main problem threatening the basic cohesion of Iraqi society.

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A country of rich diversity

Iraq is a country of rich diversity that goes far back in history. Its current social and political structure has its roots in Mesopotamia, a land of tribal, religious and evolving cultural interaction for more than seven thousand years. Settlement in Mesopotamia began around 6500 BC and represents the nucleus of the present Iraqi nation.[1] Naturally those settlements were first established on the banks of rivers or close to other natural resources, where people had easy access to water and open land that provided food for them and their animals. The eventual growth of these settlements into primitive communities coincided with the emergence of a number of ruling powers in that area, ranging from local to regional and continental dynasties. Locally developed civilizations, such as those of

the Babylonians, Sumerians, Akkadians, Hittites and Assyrians, together with regional and continental ones such as the Hellenic, Sasanian, Turk–Mongol, Persian and Ottoman civilizations, have all played a role in influencing or shaping significant aspects of Iraqi history and the population's social characteristics.

The advent of Islam in the area of present-day Iraq and the establishment of an Islamic empire in the seventh century introduced a new, decisive dimension of belief and loyalty among the local communities. The already existing mixture of ethnic and other groups lived together with various tribes that emigrated north from the Arabian Peninsula and largely adopted the new religion they brought with them. As these tribes became the forefront of the Islamic empire in its drive towards the neighbouring empires of Persia to the east and Byzantium to the west and north-west, more and more tribes were encouraged to immigrate and settle in the area, forming one large community of which Islamic Arabism began to be the dominant feature. The regional powers used Islamic governance and authority to rule the country; the population's overwhelming acceptance of and support for Islam made their presence and task relatively easy and they too were accepted by broad sections of society. The spirit of Islam, with its principles of goodwill, peace and social justice, created the social harmony, cohesion and environment that enabled the population to overcome the problems and friction associated with rival entities and ethnicities.

However, changes in the form of the Islamic empire, together with the development of diverse religious schools of thought and the struggle for power that subsequently took place, gave rise to renewed ethical and patriotic sensibilities among the population and created competitiveness and friction within the area of present-day Iraq. The iron grip of the state, regardless of its identity and nature, always meant *inter alia* oppression and deprivation of freedom for the population. It created "winners" and "losers" among the ruling parties, who avidly sought local support for their religious or sectarian ideas.

The end of the First World War and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire launched the country into a new phase of self-governance, and the "oil age" seemed to promise wealth and prosperity to the nation. Unfortunately, this was not achieved. Nine decades of self-governance, four as the Iraqi Kingdom and five as the Republic of Iraq, did very little to put human needs first and to give the utmost priority to what the Iraqi people themselves or future generations deserved. The search for political and national unity was beset by strife and bloodshed and, regardless of the authority installed, struggles of an anti-authoritarian nature occurred, particularly after Iraq was declared a republic in 1958. Under the slogan "revolution rather than evolution", Iraq was wrecked by several military coups and four forced handovers of power in the ten years from 1958 to1968. The average level of state education, health and social welfare programmes has always been below the standard of a nation endowed with such a wealth of natural resources and a human aptitude for development and progress.

1   Edmund Ghareeb, *Historical Dictionary of Iraq*, Scarecrow Press, United States, 2004, p. xvii.

Two decades and three wars

Within two decades, from 1980 to 2003, Iraq went through three wars: the horrific Iran–Iraq War in 1980–8; the 1990–1 Gulf War, followed by thirteen devastating years of embargo and international sanctions; and the 2003 Iraq War, with its ongoing ripples of new conflicts.

The humanitarian implications of these wars are immense and tragic: traces are visible in every aspect of the structure and cohesion of Iraqi society. Millions are reported to be victims of them, including 1 million widows and 5 million orphans.[2] Young men and women born during the eighties were enrolled in the *Qadisia* army – an Iraqi name given to the Iran–Iraq War in reference to the historic Battle of Qadisiya in AD 637 between a Muslim Arab force and the army of the Persian Empire. Like the teenagers born during the harsh years of the sanctions, their personalities and behaviour still bear the scars and trauma of that time.

The Iran–Iraq War

The Iran–Iraq War took a very heavy toll: at least 1 million Iraqis were killed, wounded or held as prisoners of war, and hundreds of thousands remain unaccounted for to this very day.[3] Around 5 million Iraqis were thus directly affected as parents, brothers, sisters, wives, sons or daughters.[4] Iraq suffered deep and devastating wounds at every level of society: no ethnic or religious group, no sectarian or regional element, was spared. These wounds inflicted on one third of the population left a lasting mark on the ethics and values of the nation for generations to come.

The enormous scale of the social devastation that resulted from deaths, injuries and displacement, and the bereavement of widows and orphans is without precedent in the memory of contemporary Iraqi society. The scene of coffins being transported on top of vehicles travelling individually or in convoys to the burial grounds became a standard feature of traffic in large cities. The burials were followed by three days of funeral rites and gatherings organized by families and tribes of the deceased to pay their respects. Provinces bordering on Iran, such as Basra, Meesan, Diyala and Wassit, became part of the battleground, and shelling or combat activities were part of urban daily life. Civilians paid the price of the militarization of the cities in various ways, while people left vast areas of those and other provinces along the Iraq–Iran border. They were replaced by minefields and mass graves of unidentified soldiers. The infrastructure of major cities in the

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2   Statement by the Deputy President of the Iraqi Red Crescent Society on the suffering of Iraqi women and children as part of the social implications of Iraqi society in general, due to the recent situation. Press conference, October 2007.

3   See Global Security, ''Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988)'', available at www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/iran-iraq.htm (last visited 11 February 2008).

4   This figure does not include cousins and other close relatives who are considered as brothers and sisters in a society of close ties and relationships.

southern provinces – Basra, Umara, Baquba and Kut – was severely damaged, a loss compounded by the emigration of the professional class. Male civilians were enlisted to serve in the military as army reservists or to join the militias as part of the national mobilization, thus depriving the civilian population of normal professional services and facilities to an even greater extent. Around 1 million people had to be called in from Arab countries, mainly Egypt and Morocco, to compensate for the labour shortage, particularly in the service sector.[5]

The period between 1982 and 1988 was marked by the diversion of all funds to defence of the national territory. The hysterical celebrations in the streets of Iraq's cities and towns when the ceasefire was declared in August 1988 were a clear sign of the enormous burden the war had been for the population. But the stirrings of hope, with its dreams of reconstruction, were short-lived.

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the UN economic sanctions

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait startled and shocked the nation. The overwhelming majority of the Iraqi people found the morality of invading an Arab country difficult to understand, as did some officials, who tried indirectly to distance themselves from it, despite the continuous propaganda coming from all directions.[6] The Iraqi army's crushing defeat by the US-led international forces in a 43-day military campaign was a tremendous blow to the already exhausted nation. The level of anger and humiliation resulted in a backlash of social and community revulsion, especially in the Shiite- and Kurdish-populated areas. The subsequent prolonged years of economical sanctions overrode these feelings as society faced the challenge to survive in the midst of an international embargo. The collective destruction of the infrastructure and services severely diminished the quality of life, and the Iraqis' basic requirements could no longer be covered. Destroyed power plants, oil refineries, communication and transport networks and sewage treatment plants disrupted the people's normal living conditions.[7] Hundreds of thousands of Iraqi children and members of other age groups died due to malnutrition and a lack of health services or elementary medical facilities.[8] Hospitals were understaffed and under-equipped; the efforts of doctors and nurses were hampered by the lack of equipment such as X-ray and lung and heart machines.[9] Drugs thought potentially liable to dual use or deliberate misuse were

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5   Iraqi Ministry of Planning, Annual report of the Central Statistical Directorate, 1989.
6   There are privately circulated stories among Iraqi senior and intermediate government employees about the Defence Minister, Saadi Tauma Al Jiboori, claiming that he only knew of the Iraqi invasion of neighbouring Kuwait the morning after, on hearing the national broadcast as he was driven to his office at the Defence Ministry.
7   Peter Sluglett and Marion Farouq Sluglett, ''Iraq'', in Joel Krieger (ed.), *Oxford Companion to Politics of the World*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1993, p. 435.
8   Quoted in Barton Gellman, ''Allied air war struck broadly in Iraq: Officials acknowledge strategy went beyond purely military targets'', *Washington Post*, 23 June 1991. See also Thomas J. Nagy, ''The secret behind the sanctions: how the US intentionally destroyed Iraq''s water supply', *The Progressive*, September 2001.
9   John Pilger, *Iraq: Paying the Price, Impact of Sanctions*, available at www.johnpilger.com (last visited 11 February 2008).

delivered with delays and were often unavailable.[10] In order to meet their basic needs and continue a life in dignity, many people had to sell their belongings and personal heritage. The impact of sanctions on the Iraqi population was growing perceptibly. Global concern about the situation resulted in the Oil-for-Food Programme, which aimed at alleviating some of this suffering. However, the short-lived programme did not tackle the deep humanitarian problems, but created grey areas, corruption and political manipulation at the expense of human distress.

The impact of the war since 2003

Without giving Iraqi society time to recover, a new episode of war started after 2003. Security again became the most important issue in contemporary Iraq, which explains the intense publicity and coverage it receives. The growing and ever-present danger led to massive displacement, social and political instability and human suffering.[11] Despite the media reports of dozens of people killed every single day[12] and that Iraq has the world's highest ratio of security personnel to citizens,[13] the lack of accurate and credible information on civilian casualties clearly demonstrates the uniqueness and complexity of this issue. It will not, however, be considered here. Instead, the focus will be on some of the daily problems with which the Iraqis have to contend – in education and health care, as well as protection for the more vulnerable groups such as women and children – owing to their far-reaching effects and future implications. The lack of security and the inability to meet basic needs are further reasons why Iraqis are on the move, both within and outside the country.

Education

More than a decade of international sanctions and total embargo on Iraq ended in 2003, leaving the educational system severely affected at all levels. Various international bodies alerted the world to this rapid decline in educational institutions, and with it the inability to meet basic requirements and continue providing the necessary competent graduates to serve in important professions in the country. The brain drain accompanying the sanctions contributed significantly to the weakness of these institutions.[14] Under pressure to fill some of the gaps, the Iraqi authorities responded by creating a postgraduate programme that capitalizes

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10 ''Iraq sanctions: humanitarian implications and options for the future'', *Global Policy Forum*, 6 August 2002, ch. 4, available at www.globalpolicy.org (last visited 11 February 2008).

11 Social and political security is such a complex issue that to deal with it would go way beyond the scope of this article. Despite its importance, any consideration of it is therefore deliberately avoided here.

12 See Beth Osborne Daponte, ''Wartime estimates of Iraqi civilian casualties'', in this issue.

13 Abbas Al-Bayati, a member of the Iraqi parliament and the Defence and Security Committee, interviewed by *Al Khaleeg* Arabic newspaper, December 2007.

14 See, e.g., UNICEF, ''Iraq Watching Briefs – Overview Report'', July 2003, available at www.unicef.org/french/evaldatabase/index_29697.html (last visited 20 February 2008).

on the highly qualified professors left in the country in order to produce academics for duties requiring a high level of education, including medical professionals. Needless to say, under the conditions prevailing in Iraq it was an uphill struggle.

Higher-level education

After 2003 another massive brain drain began when the lives of Iraqi academics were pervaded by a constant fear of being murdered. This fear of imminent death has become a widespread phenomenon in academic circles: in a recent survey, it was voiced by 91 per cent of respondents.[15] The Iraqi Minister of Higher Education has stated that 296 academic staff members were killed in 2005 alone,[16] while according to international agencies for humanitarian affairs, 180 teachers have been killed since 2006, 100 have been kidnapped and over 3,250 have fled the country.[17] This is yet another loss, in addition to the damage inflicted on the academic institutions burned and looted after April 2003. The obvious result is that the young generation of Iraqis, more than half of whom are under 30, are robbed of their teachers, doctors and future opportunities. Students are now not taught by tenured professors but by teaching assistants.[18]

Primary and secondary education

Furthermore, the Iraqi Ministry of Education has stated that only 30 per cent of the 3.5 million children of school age are attending classes, compared with 75 per cent for the previous year.[19] At least 110 children were killed and 95 injured in 2005 in attacks on schools. This number does not include those killed or injured on their way to or from school.[20] An international agency reports that the number of teachers in Baghdad has fallen by 30 per cent, while another estimates that 22 per cent of Iraq's student population (about 1 million children of primary school age) are not attending school, of whom 74 per cent are females.[21] Only 79 per cent

15 Ismail Jalili, *Iraq's Lost Generation: Impact and Implications*, 2007, available at www.naba.org.uk/content/articles/HR/IraqHRM/Jalili_Report2007_Iraq_LostGeneration.pdf (last visited 11 February 2008).
16 Dirk Adriaensens, *Iraq's Education System In on the verge of Collapse*, available at http://uslaboragainstwar.org/article.php?id=13364 (last visited 11 February 2008).
17 UN Office for Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs, cited in ibid.
18 Stephen Glain, "The quiet exodus from Iraq", *Newsweek International*, 16 April 2007, available at www.stephenglain.com/Articles.htm (last visited 11 February 2008).
19 "Iraqi academics at grave risk", *Education International*, 1 January 2007, available at www.ei-ie.org/en/article/show.php?id=56&theme=statusofteachers (last visited 11 February 2008).
20 According to Mohamed Abdul Aziz, a statistician at the Ministry of Education, cited in IRIN, "Iraq: Children's education gravely affected by conflict", available at www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=70697 (last visited 11 February 2008).
21 Report released by Save the Children in 2006, available at www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=70697, and a joint study by the Ministry of Education and the UNICEF in 2007, available at www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=70697 (last visited 11 February 2008). See also United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), UN–Iraq Reconstruction and Development Update, January–April 2007, available at www.uniraq.org/documents/UN_Iraq%20Reconstruction%20&%20Development%20Update%20January-April%202007.pdf (last visited 20 February 2008).

of all Iraqis of primary school age are now officially enrolled in school, compared with 93 per cent in Jordan and 96 per cent in Syria. This is especially shocking when compared with the figures of 1980 – before the Iran-Iraq War – when school enrolment stood at 99 per cent.[22]

International assessments say that around 90 per cent of children in Iraq are suffering from learning impediments related to the atmosphere of fear they are living in.[23] Many schools have closed down because of security problems, such as the targeting of teachers, bombings, and kidnappings.

Health

Reports indicate that the Iraqi health system used to be the best in the region.[24] Currently, violence threatens health in Iraq and the country has some of the worst statistics for diarrhoea, measles, respiratory infections, malaria and under-nutrition affecting 30 per cent of children under five, contributing to excessive rates of infant and child mortality.[25] Even tuberculosis and cholera have re-emerged after having long disappeared.[26] Despite the fact that health spending rose from US$16 million in 2002 to US$1 billion in 2005, in some areas dirty water and diarrhoea still claim children's lives. One in ten Iraqi children suffers from a chronic disease, and 50 per cent of the children are malnourished.[27] There are reported to be one million cripples and disabled people in Iraq, an increase of 30 per cent since 2003.[28] Drug usage is on the increase; the Iraqi Ministry of Health has warned that drug abuse is rising steadily among men and women of all ages in Iraq, especially in the capital, Baghdad, where numbers have doubled in the past year, and in the south of the country, where they have tripled.[29] According to the Iraqi Medical Association, which licenses practitioners, about 10 per cent of Baghdad's total force of 32,000 registered doctors – Sunnis, Shiites and Christians

22 Ibid.
23 A study by the Association of Psychologists in Iraq in 2006 found that 92 per cent of children had learning impediments. See: "Rising to the humanitarian challenge in Iraq", Joint report of Oxfam International and the NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq (NCCI), released on 30 July 2007, available at www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/policy/conflict_disasters/downloads/bp105_iraq.pdf (last visited 11 February 2008).
24 USAID report quoted by Eli Stephens, *Health Care in Iraq, Then and Now*, 3 April 2006, available at www.lookingglassnews.org/viewstory.php?storyid=5613 (last visited 11 February 2008).
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 American Friends Service Committee, "Iraq living the nightmare", December 2006, available at www.afsc.org/iraq/documents/living-the-nightmare.pdf (last visited 11 February 2008).
28 Hussain Ali, "One million handicapped in need for assistance", 9 July 2007, available at www.daralhayat.com (last visited 12 February 2008).
29 IRIN, "Iraq: Traumatized young Iraqis turn increasingly to hard drugs", 11 October 2005, available at www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=25576 (last visited 11 February 2008). For drug dealers, business is booming as heroin and cocaine is freely flowing through neighbouring countries using a network of gangsters for smuggling. Unfortunately, very limited resources are available for treatments and medications to help those already hooked; only four out of sixteen planned specialized clinics to handle the addiction problems in Iraq are actually being built; none are open yet. Only less than a handful among the thousands of NGO's in Iraq are functioning on this line of activity.

– left or were driven from work in 2005.[30] Similarly, 30,000 physicians were registered in Iraq's main medical syndicate, or union, before the war. In 2007 there were 8,000.[31] With the departure of so many, it will take years to rebuild the Iraqi health system.

Poverty and health

Poverty influences health in more ways than one. An estimated 60 per cent of the Iraqi population are unemployed. It is also estimated that one third of Iraqis are living at or below the poverty line, with 5 per cent suffering from extreme poverty and around 69 per cent of Iraqi families affected by non-availability of food.[32] Only 20 per cent of households said they had any savings. Around 70 per cent of the population lack regular access to clean water, and only 60 per cent have access to the public food distribution system[33] that provides about 80 per cent of the recommended daily calorie intake in the form of wheat, rice and beans. No meat, vegetables or fruit are included. The Iraqi Red Crescent Society report in December 2006 stated that malnutrition in Iraq has risen to 16 per cent, compared with 12 per cent in 2005.[34] Other reports put chronic child malnutrition at 21 per cent.[35]

Women

Women are the hardest hit by the situation in Iraq. Apart from being directly targeted or accidentally affected, there is a third dimension to their suffering, rooted in the social position of women in society. It is very widely accepted and recognized in Iraqi society that the man is the family breadwinner, or is at least the person responsible for the family. For every man killed in the conflict there is a mother, a sister and possibly a wife and daughter to grieve and have to cope with the effects of his absence on her livelihood and the loss of the assurance provided by his presence in her life. For every man injured, crippled or maimed, the woman in the family has to bear the responsibility of taking care of him and tending to his needs.

The generation of women who felt the direct impact of the Iraq–Iran War are still suffering from its after-effects. For the hundreds of thousands of young males killed during that war, a similar number of girls within the same age group were left unmarried and now have to endure the social and personal consequences

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30 Sabrina Travernise, ''Facing chaos, Iraqi doctors are quitting'', *New York Times*, 30 May 2005.
31 Glain, above note 18.
32 Humam Al Shamaa, Professor of Economics at Baghdad University, *Iraq File*, Issue 140, May 2005.
33 WHO, ''Violence threatens health in Iraq'', press release, 17 April 2007, as reported on www.uslaboragainstwar.org/article.php?id=13361 (last visited 10 January 2008). Only 19 per cent of the population has access to a good sewage system, some 60 per cent of Anbar and Baghdad suburbs are using river water. The output of nationwide water projects in early 2007 was less than half of pre-war levels.
34 Iraq Red Crescent Society report on malnutrition in Iraq, December 2005.
35 Ibid.

in a society that worships marriage. Much the same number of widows have to struggle to earn a living and to look after the children. The maternal mortality ratio among women in Iraq is five times higher than in neighbouring Jordan, a ratio that has increased by 65 per cent since 2003, although it was already strikingly high as a result of the international sanctions.[36] Hundreds of thousands of women have to live with the tremendous social consequences and long uncertainties associated with missing persons and prisoners of war. In addition, at least half of those displaced or seeking refuge are women and have to put up with that burden, aggravated by further suffering in a male-centric society.

In Iraq today, threats and violence are often directed against women, for armed groups find them easy targets when seeking to score against an opposition group, while women in detention have to face the risk of torture or ill-treatment, including sexual abuse.[37] Iraqi women, who are particularly affected by the atmosphere of fear and violence, have been unable to play their normal part in education, employment and civil society or political decision-making. Attacks on women political leaders and activists have forced some of them to avoid public appearances and to wear bulletproof vests.[38] Sexual violence and rape increased sharply after 2003, but reporting on it declined at a later stage for fear of reprisals against women or their families.[39]

Two thousand kidnappings of women have been reported since 2003,[40] and in view of the stigma surrounding the rape of women, it can be assumed that the real number is far higher. These incidents lead to the withdrawal of women from the public scene to such an extent that very few women are found driving cars in Baghdad, whereas before a woman driving a car was a common feature of traffic in Iraq. Prior to the occupation, women accounted for 79 per cent of employees in the service sector and 44 per cent in the professional and technical sectors. At present only 14 per cent of women are employed, compared with 68 per cent of men, and 11 per cent of households are headed by women.[41]

Women have to wear headscarves and Islamic dress as a protective measure to reduce exposure and conform to the general religious trend in society. This also applies to non-Muslim communities. Failure to do so can leave them open to accusations of non-conformity with Islamic law, which normally means that they are killed and dumped in the streets. The reverse trend, demanding women's rights and social equality and justice, has continued to make itself heard, albeit confined to very few cases and a specific political content. ''Religious'' values have tremendously influenced codes of conduct in society and in public life, and

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36 ''Iraq living the nightmare'', above note 27.
37 Henia Dakkak, ''Confronting sexual violence and abuse of Iraqi girls and women'', *Forced Migration Review*, special edition on Iraq, June 2007, pp. 39–40, available at www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/Iraq/full.pdf (last visited 12 February 2008).
38 Amnesty International, ''Iraq: Decades of suffering, Now women deserve better'', 1 March 2005.
39 Fadhil Mishaal reporting from Baghdad, www.iraq-ina.com, 7 October 2007, and Katherine Zoepf, ''Iraqi refugees turn to the sex trade in Syria'', *New York Times*, 29 May 2007.
40 Zoepf, above note 39.
41 Ibid.

have rapidly gained ground in what used to be a distinctly liberal society in the region. ''Crimes of honour'' have claimed the lives of hundreds of women in Kurdistan and other parts of Iraq that enjoy relative peace and security. Only recently a women's rights organization reported victims of this kind of crimes in Kurdistan and similar numbers of suicide attempts.[42] Official reports from Basra gave an average of eight women a month being killed in the past five months for the same reason: for ''disobeying'' the Islamic dress code.[43] Academic institutions, where girls are forbidden to attend classes unless dressed in the Islamic way, leave a clear field for these kinds of practice.[44]

Children

Several generations of Iraqi children have gone through three wars and devastating sanctions since 1980. One-eighth of these children face death before reaching the age of five and one-ninth suffer malnutrition, twice the recorded figure for pre-2003.[45] At present, fewer than one third of all Iraqi children have access to safe water, while fewer than 75 per cent of them are regularly attending schools, and enrolment has dropped to as low as 30 per cent.[46] Thousands of children are roaming the garbage dumps trying to glean a living; thousands more are begging or stealing for the same purpose. In major Iraqi cities such as Baghdad and Basra there are particularly numerous children deprived of their basic rights and prey to despair.[47] The young men and women currently involved in gangster crimes or other vicious and violent activities are the children of the Iran–Iraq War or the sanction years. The atmosphere of insecurity and violence that surrounds the daily lives of these children negatively influences their current and future behaviour and psychological development.[48]

Displacement

Iraq had already experienced several waves of expulsion and displacement, varying in nature and scale, before 2003. The biggest wave of people leaving Iraq occurred during and after 1991, due to the terror inspired by the military operations or the

42 As reported on www.iraq-ina.com and www.iraq4allnews.com , October 2007 (last visited 20 February 2008).
43 Nadia Al-Ali, ''Iraqi woman and the pressures she is facing'', *Forced Migration Review*, above note 36, pp. 40–2.
44 Ibid.
45 Leila Beling, ''Iraqi children are paying the price of war'', *Forced Migration Review*, above note 36, pp. 42–4.
46 UNICEF appeals to help Iraqi children, 23 May 2007, available at www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=22660 (last visited 12 February 2008).
47 Special report on the suffering of Iraqi children in Basra, published in Arabic on www.akhbaar.org, 25 July, 2007.
48 Through their search for a job, children as young as eight years old are exposed to involvement in illegal activities, exploitation, sex and pornography, or trading in arms and alcohol.

acute hardships of life under the subsequent sanctions imposed on Iraq from 1991 until 2003. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis had to leave, seeking a better life or political refuge in various countries around the world, especially the industrialized countries.[49] The resulting brain drain had particularly serious repercussions for academic and technical circles in Iraq. For patriotic and political reasons, this problem could not be acknowledged. Signs of it were clearly visible, however, in the quality of the public health services and university output.

After 2003 the deteriorating security situation again forced Iraqis to move. Since the very early days of the occupation the international community had expected the ensuing human catastrophe,[50] but used off-the-shelf plans to handle it, not understanding or anticipating its nature, extent and momentum. Some of the international agencies and humanitarian organizations, for example, installed camps that failed to attract any attendant staff because of bad planning and logistical miscalculations. Although local authorities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) tried to register the number of refugees and internally displaced persons, they failed to show the true size of the problem. A large proportion of those people did not register but preferred to stay with their extended family or relatives, or make their own arrangements to find shelter. Politicization of the displacement issue is becoming the main reason for the lack of that basic assessment, which is needed to determine the nature and scale of the problem and then take the requisite steps to diminish human suffering.

The Samara shrine bombing in February 2006 was eventually the political earthquake that unleashed the sectarian violence which in turn started a massive human tsunami. People were either forcibly evicted at gunpoint or took their own consciously ''forced'' decision to leave, under the shadow of the same gun. Nowadays, ''accepted'' figures of around 4.5 million (2 million outside Iraq[51] and 2.5 million inside[52]) are quoted by various Iraqi and international bodies. Considering that family, community and tribal links in Iraq are among the most significant components of its social structure, this displacement has an extreme impact on society, for it affects many more millions of people than those who have actually left.

49 Adel Murad, Iraqi ambassador to Romania, Report presented to UNHCR conference in Bucharest, 17 October 2007.

50 Various humanitarian organizations concerned with preparations for the anticipated outbreak of war on Iraq between January and May 2003. They expected people to flood out of the main cities, Baghdad in particular, to avoid air raids and other attacks, as was the case in 1991 when hundreds of thousands of civilians had to leave their cities and seek temporary shelter with relatives and other members of their tribe in nearby safe, untargeted cities and towns. These masses of people used their common sense in judging the risks associated with certain cities or areas within a particular city, according to the presence of key government targets or vital military or industrial installations there.

51 UNHCR report 2007; International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IRCS) report, September 2007.

52 IRCS report to UNHCR's International Conference on Iraqi refugees and displaced persons, Geneva, 17–18 April 2007.

Various players and stakeholders, both inside and outside Iraq, have been unable to come up with any real, sound and durable humanitarian solution. The worst approach is that of politicizing it in a way that evades or misrepresents the main problem, namely the human aspect. Even the names assigned to these millions of individuals have become part of the world of legal terminology because of the implications of their displacement for the host countries outside Iraq or for internal political interests inside Iraq. Appellations such as ''displaced'', ''migrants'', ''immigrants'', ''refugees'', ''guests'', ''settlers'', and many others that sometimes carry harsh connotations have been used to describe these ''evictees'', a term the author of this article finds more appropriate. Naturally, each one of these terms has legal implications that serve a particular political aim or understanding of the situation.

Internally displaced persons (IDPs)

Individuals and families forced to leave their homes and neighbourhoods and find alternative accommodation elsewhere in the same city or in other cities within the country normally choose their place of refuge according to ethnic or religious and sectarian considerations. To begin with, these evictions are largely a temporary phenomenon. Most statistics take the Samara shrine bombing in February 2006 as the starting point for this process of internal displacement, but there is more than one indication that it began as early as the fall of the regime in 2003.[53] The great majority of the evictees come from mixed ethnic and mixed sectarian areas like the centre of the country[54] and in particular Baghdad.

The eviction of Shiites or Sunnis[55] from mixed areas and communities where they are a minority deprived of protection leads to the establishment of separate ghettos and cantons that destroy the cohesion of Iraqi society, linked as it is to ethnic and religious ties between tribes and clans and groups or families. These social relations are the glue that binds together these groups and communities to form a nation. The suffering of such evictees thus affects their communities and social structures at ''home'' and is never confined to the individual.

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53 Nir Rosen, ''Anatomy of a Civil War – Iraq's descent into chaos'', *Boston Review*, November/December 2006, available at http://bostonreview.net/BR31.6/rosen.php (last visited 12 February 2008).
54 Ibid.
55 Religious minorities like the Christians were also severely harmed; many of these communities have been on the move, especially the professionals and the most enlightened among them. Eviction of Christians has reduced their numbers tremendously. Their population percentage has slid down, placing them on the third rank of religious groups in Iraq after the Muslims and Yazidi in the past three years. Before that, they ranked second. Throughout history, these religious communities have represented the ''salt and pepper'' of social harmony in Iraq and were an essential element of social cohesion, particularly in some cities and communities.

Refugees

The exodus of Iraqis to Syria and Jordan is one of the biggest movements of civilians since the Second World War.[56] About 2.5 million Iraqis currently reside outside Iraq.[57] Despite the fact that they are commonly called ''refugees'', many of them are not treated as such within the meaning of the 1951 Refugee Convention, for most of the host countries do not have refugee legislation and are not party to the relevant international treaties. Indeed, some are going so far as to obstruct or restrict the already limited facilities and services offered to these people by international organizations.[58]

The majority of Iraqi political entities and figures seem to adopt a stance of keeping these millions where they are until security improves and seem to discourage finding any long-term solutions. This is said to be justified by the need for them to rebuild the country.[59] They may also be considered as potential voters to give their support at the appropriate time. The latest episode of returnees to Iraq is another example of politics benefiting through a media exercise from the relative security improvement, but without any real interest in the future of those people once they are back in Iraq. Most of them are thereby changing from ''refugee'' to ''IDP'' status; both terms come within the wider concept of evictees.[60]

The host communities raise concerns and express displeasure, to say the least. They fear that these friendly intruders will be a burden on their already endangered resources, job opportunities and social fabric. The rejection by communities in Iraq of these millions goes against ethical principles and is detrimental to relations with the host communities. The constant drain on their already scarce resources and job opportunities is a ticking bomb that can only do more harm and create more suffering.

56 Jose Rierra and Andrew Harper, ''Iraq: looking for solutions'', *Forced Migration Review*, above note 36, pp. 10–14.

57 A figure widely cited in international institutions, reports and studies. It is accepted and used without any challenge to its accuracy, despite the fact that no individual country/countries have conducted any survey for this purpose.

58 Amnesty International, ''Millions in flight: the Iraqi refugee crisis'', 24 September 2007, available at http://archive.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGMDE140412007?open&of=ENG-369 (last visited 12 February 2008). See also Human Rights Watch, ''Iraq: from a flood to a trickle. neighboring states stop Iraqis fleeing war and persecution'', April 2007, available at http://hrw.org/backgrounder/refugees/iraq0407/ (last visited 12 February 2008).

59 Laith Kubba , former spokesman for the Iraqi government and now a senior director at the National Endowment for Democracy in Washington, as quoted in Glain, above note 18.

60 Interviews with a number of Iraqi returnees from abroad to Iraq – to Baghdad – who would like, but are unable, to return to their homes and have to take shelter with friends and families, i.e. change from refugee to IDP status. Reasons given ranged from the fact that their houses were occupied by people displaced from other areas to the lack of assurances of improved security in their mostly mixed sectarian neighbourhoods.

Conclusion

The political dimension of the conflict puts a tremendous burden on the civilian population in terms of human suffering, the lack of understanding of it and the price they have to pay. Medical services, food supplies, emergency shelters and other emergency measures that can be offered to the victims of the conflict are subject to political manipulation at different levels by all the groups involved. The suffering is used in various ways to place opponents at a disadvantage, but without alleviating the victims' actual distress. Media coverage falls short of reflecting the real picture of events in Iraq. This is the result of a deliberately created vacuum in the actual presence of news and media agencies on the ground; it is also the consequence of the abduction and killing of hundreds of reporters and journalists for that purpose. In the same way, international humanitarian organizations have been targeted by acts of violence and terror campaigns in order to drive them out of the country. Awareness of the nature and magnitude of the problem has subsequently become blurred and sensitivity to it has diminished and is now subject to third-party reporting, which may come with biased, compromised or questionable deliverables.

Iraqi society today seems to be in danger of losing its basic structure of social justice and harmony, as the pillars of education, health services and caring for the weak and vulnerable are gradually undermined. The resulting misfortunes are widespread across all ethnic, sectarian and religious groups. The eviction phenomenon, however, is the worst crime perpetrated against Iraqi society. All key players inside Iraq strongly condemn it and distance themselves from it, despite clear evidence that some of them are directly or indirectly responsible for it.

Historically speaking, suffering is not new for Iraqi civilians. Nevertheless, this latest phase is unprecedented in the country's memory. Within the brief space of only a few years, the recent conflict has created far-reaching implications and deep divisions that seriously endanger the basic cohesion and unity of society and may leave it beyond repair. It is extremely difficult to predict how much time will be necessary to rehabilitate the damaged infrastructure and service facilities and to restore social harmony. While the first may take years or even decades, the second will definitely take generations and above all a firm commitment and dedication to steering society on to the appropriate track.