

# Fallujah and Iraq's Deepening Displacement Crisis. By Tim Eaton \*

Political and economic turmoil point to a protracted displacement crisis that will get worse before it gets better.

As the Iraqi security forces began their assault on ISIS-controlled Fallujah, the city's remaining inhabitants were advised to flee. They will join the millions of Iraqis who have been displaced by conflict, adding to a crisis that merits much more attention than it is getting, both from Iraq's politicians and the international community alike.

Overshadowed by the paranoia engendered by refugee flows, the plight of internally displaced persons (IDPs) - those who are displaced but remain within the state - receives little coverage. In Iraq, internal displacement is a chronic problem. Iraq has been in the top ten countries with the largest displaced populations every year since 2003. Some 11 per cent of its population of 37 million is currently displaced, according to the International Organization for Migration.

Despite the scale of the problem, Iraq's politicians' focus remains elsewhere, as a deepening economic and political crisis has taken hold across the country. The costs of the campaign against ISIS combined with the collapse of the global oil price, upon which Iraq's budget so heavily relies, has led to a budget deficit that could rise to \$17 billion by the end of 2016.

Meanwhile, infighting continues over Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's attempts to form a new cabinet that seeks to undermine the muhasasa system of ethnic and sectarian quotas. In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) the political balance is also in flux: last week the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan party (PUK) of the ailing former Iraqi president, Jalal Talabani, concluded a deal with the opposition Gorran party, threatening the dominance of Masoud Barzani's Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP).

While the politicians focus on combating each other, the number of IDPs will inevitably increase as a result of the Iraqi security forces' campaign to recover further territory from ISIS. Beyond Fallujah, the anticipated battle for Mosul - Iraq's second-largest city - looms large.

Mosul is home to an estimated 600,000 people, and with ISIS believed to have strong defensive positions, the battle to wrest control is likely to be long and bloody. The creation of a further wave of IDPs is expected. Officials and aid workers warn that there simply isn't the capacity to absorb the new arrivals. Little planning appears in place to avoid a humanitarian disaster.

Despite the chronic nature of displacement, Iraqi leaders continue to operate under the complacent assumption that the displaced will soon return home following an end to conflict. Experiences from other international displacement crises indicate otherwise. Those displaced by conflict seek to settle where they can find sustainable livelihoods, peaceful living conditions and access to services.

More often than not, this isn't in the places from where they were forced to flee. For many in Iraq, this means moving to the relative safety and security of the KRI. Here there is an added significance, as the influx of Arab IDPs into Kurdish-majority areas is likely to have lasting

impacts on the ethnic makeup of a federal region that is supposedly holding a referendum on independence later this year.

Thus far, there have been mixed results in terms of people returning to areas liberated from ISIS. Tikrit - liberated in April 2015 - is viewed as a success story but other experiences have been less positive. Large parts of Ramadi - liberated in May 2015 - were destroyed, leaving little to return to, while the area of Mount Sinjar lies in ruins.

With the Iraqi economy in recession, there are limited means for rebuilding these areas, let alone Fallujah. There are also allegations of social engineering, where IDPs are being prevented from returning to their homes, particularly in areas of territory disputed between the KRI and the government in Baghdad.

All these elements point to a protracted displacement crisis that will get worse before it gets better. If that is to be avoided, much greater resources will be needed.

Support from the international community has been critical in the response thus far, but funding appeals have fallen short. Humanitarian organizations say that there is insufficient funding even to meet emergency needs, let alone to develop more sustainable programming to tackle the social, economic and political impacts of the crisis.

Lessons learned from previous displacement crises indicate that under-funding is a mistake. Time is running out before the system is overwhelmed. While many things in Iraq are not predictable, the eventual assault on Mosul is not one of them. Iraq and the international community need to plan accordingly.

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