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War in Iraq: An Impending Refugee Crisis? Uncertain Risks, Inadequate Preparation and Coordination

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As military and diplomatic plans develop for a US-led attack against Iraq, there has been little public discussion about the possibility of a mass exodus of Iraqi refugees as a consequence of this conflict. Nor has there been any consideration given to the implications of a refugee crisis on the security and stability of Iraq's immediate neighbors in the Middle East. This is surprising, because for the last decade or more there have been massive cross-border flows of Iraqi refugees to neighboring states, creating regional instability and imposing social and economic strains on host countries. Iraqi nationals have also been among the highest number of asylum seekers in Europe. There is also surprisingly little public discussion of the current state of preparedness for a humanitarian crisis in Iraq. Yet, as past humanitarian crises clearly demonstrate, early planning for the uncertainties of military action, especially a refugee crisis, is essential.

It is impossible to predict with any degree of certainty that there will be a new Iraqi refugee crisis as a consequence of a possible war. The exact extent of any refugee problem will ultimately be determined by the manner and duration of a military campaign and the extent to which it might produce internal political upheavals in Iraq both during and after the conflict. While these risks are hard to quantify at this stage, what is clear is that the mechanisms and resources needed to respond to worst-case scenarios are not yet in place and the lack of coordination and contingency planning between the military and international and non-governmental agencies to date is a cause for great alarm. In addition, Iraq's neighbors, many of

whom already host tens, If not hundreds of thousands of Iraqi refugees, are loath to accept greater numbers. In the event of war, the responsibility for dealing with refugees and the internally displaced is likely to fall increasingly on international aid agencies that are hamstrung by resource shortages, have limited or no experience in the region, and have only limited ability to operate in areas that may be subject to military action and chemical or biological weapons.

How likely is a new refugee crisis in Iraq?

Both past experience and current patterns of forced migration in the region suggest that the numbers of refugees resulting from any large-scale military attack against Iraq, and the upheaval that could follow Saddam Hussein's overthrow, could be substantial. During the 1990-91 Gulf War, all of Iraq's immediate neighbors experienced huge refugee fall-out from the conflict. For example, following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, some 2 million foreign nationals, displaced by the Iraqi occupation and fearing impending war in the Gulf, fled Kuwait and Iraq, and flooded nearby countries like Jordan and Yemen. In the immediate aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War, Shi'as in the south and Kurds in the north spontaneously rose up and attempted to overthrow the Iraqi government. Saddam Hussein suppressed the revolts, leaving at least 30,000 dead and displacing more than a million people. Some 700,000 crossed into Iran and about 350,000 massed on Iraq's border with Turkey. Turkey flatly refused to honor its obligation under the 1951 Refugee Convention not to return Kurdish refugees to Iraq and closed its border to them. NATO governments accepted the Turkish military view that a mass influx of Kurdish refugees would destabilize Turkey's national security and pushed through a UN Security Council resolution that approved military intervention by a US-led force to stem the refugee flows and restore stability in northern Iraq.

Since the early 1990s, the Iraqi government has relied upon a policy of deliberate expulsion of people from their homes in order to stamp out and punish political opposition and seize oil-rich areas and valuable land. In the north, there have been systematic efforts to ‘Arabise’ the predominantly Kurdish districts of Kirkuk, Khanaqin and Sinjar. To secure control of this strategically and economically vital oil-rich region, the government expelled Kurds, Assyrians and Turkmen – sometimes entire communities – from the cities and surrounding areas. In the south, Baghdad has carried out campaigns of suppression against the Marsh Arabs and other Shi’a, destroying villages and draining marshlands to hasten depopulation. Hundreds of thousands of IDPs remain without basic resources. There are well over a million internally displaced persons in Iraq, with an estimated three quarters of a million in northern Iraq alone.

In addition, over the last decade, between 1 and 2 million Iraqis are estimated to have fled Iraq. Most live in countries bordering Iraq or in the region, the largest numbers, over 250,000 in Jordan, 200,000 in Iran, and 40,000 in Syria. There are also tens of thousands of Iraqis who live in Lebanon and Turkey. The Iraqis are in addition to the huge numbers of Palestinians who live in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria and the Afghans and other refugees living in Iran and Turkey.

Assistance to refugees in these countries does not meet minimum international standards. In some cases, refugees’ freedom of movement is severely restricted; they are vulnerable to police harassment, beatings, sexual violence, extortion, arrest, detention and possible deportation; they cannot return home for fear of punishment; their chances of being offered resettlement in the US, Canada, Australia or Europe are extremely slim; they cannot integrate

with local populations in the Middle East; they are refused permission to work; they live in limbo. It is not surprising that rather than remain in limbo many Iraqis choose to put their lives and the lives of their families at risk by engaging the services of human smugglers in order to try to reach the shores of Western countries to apply for asylum. The lack of safe refuge in the region, therefore, contributes to the so-called asylum crisis in Europe and elsewhere.

Outside of the Middle East, the number of Iraqis seeking asylum in the West has increased steadily in recent years. Between 1989 and the end of 2001, 277,500 Iraqis applied for asylum in western countries, mostly in Europe. Of these, the largest numbers went to Germany (84,500), followed by the Netherlands (40,900), Sweden (36,800) and the United Kingdom (23,800). The numbers of arrivals of Iraqis in Europe have continued to rise in recent years but the pattern of where Iraqis apply for asylum has changed. While Germany (37,900) continued to receive the largest number of Iraqi asylum seekers between 1999 and the end of 2001, the United Kingdom (15,700) overtook other EU countries in numbers of Iraqi asylum applicants. Iraqis are now the largest national group of asylum seekers in Europe and the UK.

The alarming size of Iraq's populations of internally displaced people, refugees and asylum seekers in the West underscore the fact that, even without a war, there already exists a world-wide Iraqi refugee crisis. Just last week it was reported that thousands of Iraqi citizens are daily lining up outside the Interior and Security ministries in Baghdad seeking permission to leave and to obtain the documents required to travel abroad. In the event of a new war, the numbers of fleeing Iraqis is likely to increase even more dramatically. In the more populous central regions, general living conditions have deteriorated continuously over the past decade.

According to UNICEF and other UN agencies, the vulnerable elements of Iraqi society suffer disproportionately from the effects of UN sanctions. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, especially children, have died from malnutrition and disease in the past decade. Hundreds of thousands more are in a weakened and highly vulnerable state as a result of the general collapse of the country's health services and water system. The majority of the country's population (20 million people out of a total population of 23 million) receive food rations through the UN Oil for Food Program. 6 to 7 million Iraqis are critically dependent on this source for survival. While the program is administered by the UN in northern Iraq, it is implemented in the center and south by the Iraqi government. It is likely that these supplies will be seriously disrupted when war breaks out. Renewed conflict might also result in further damage to the water, power, health and sanitation infrastructures and could also interrupt vital supplies of fuel and medicines. Military action could, therefore, push large numbers of people, already on the margin of survival to try to flee the country.

In certain scenarios, the danger of large-scale refugee and IDP movement is significant. A prolonged bombing campaign, aimed to break the will of the Iraqi regime, might cause great hardship, and could lead to the mass flight of civilians and military deserters.

There is also a real risk of internal and external population movements following Saddam Hussein's ouster. These could be exacerbated should the immediate post-Saddam period also see inter-ethnic and religious disorder and civil strife. Most of the persecution that has been carried out in Iraq has been at the local level. It seems likely, therefore, that at least some Iraqis will try to carry out acts of retribution against their well-known Sunni oppressors. Given that Saddam

Hussein has no obvious successor, it is also a clear possibility that violent conflicts will break out, and lead to population movements among Iraq's polarised majority Shi'a, Kurdish and Sunni communities, its minority Turkmen and Chaldean and Assyrian Christians, or its fragmented exile opposition groups. Should the effects of any conflict spread – possibly as a result of the disintegration or fragmentation of the Iraqi state, the use of weapons of mass destruction by Iraq, or anti-Western unrest breaking out in neighboring countries in response to a US attack – refugee movements and internal displacements may occur on an even larger scale. This possibility is already worrying Iraq's neighbors.

What are the probable regional implications of a new Iraqi refugee crisis?

The spectre of renewed conflict and new refugee flows has already greatly heightened regional concerns about future instability. Past experience suggests that the initial response of the international community will be to insist that refugees remain in the region so as to facilitate their early repatriation after the Iraqi regime falls. But Iraq's neighbors have limited capacity and inadequate infrastructure to absorb or to host large numbers of refugees. Given the severe economic crises and environmental degradation facing many of these countries, it is unrealistic to expect these governments to provide refugees with essential goods and services not even available to their own citizens. Thus, it is unlikely that these countries will be able to provide adequate protection and assistance to large numbers of refugees for a prolonged time without extensive international assistance.

In any upcoming conflict, geographical factors will probably determine the direction of refugee flows and the regional response to displacements inside Iraq. The most densely

populated areas of the country are in the center and in the east, adjoining the regions bordering Iran and Turkey – the countries to which many refugees will try to flee. Both countries are already overburdened with refugees and migrants and would be reluctant to assume responsibility for more refugees.

Iraq's neighbors are likely to try and close their borders and tighten policies against refugees massing on their frontiers. Iran recently announced that it would bar Iraqis from entering its territory and that refugee camps would instead be set up inside the Iraqi border (parts of which remain heavily mined from past conflicts). Assistance would be channeled across the border to the refugees. Turkey, meanwhile, has described the threat of a US attack as 'a sword dangling over our heads'. Ankara fears that if Saddam is unseated, Iraq could fall apart, destabilizing the entire region, including volatile Kurdish regions in south-eastern Turkey. The Turkish military has a heavy presence on the Iraq–Turkey border and would strongly resist any increase in refugee concentrations in the mountains, or cross-border movements. Turkey has indicated plans to establish three camps for displaced people inside northern Iraq and has informed NGOs that they will not be permitted to enter the camps for the first three months. Potential host countries further west are also likely to try and turn back refugees. Recently, Jordan has indicated that it will close its borders to Iraqi refugees fleeing US-led military action.

In fact, despite this hardening of attitude against Iraqi refugees, most Arab governments will be under pressure to admit fellow Arabs and will probably be unable to turn back masses of refugees who might turn up at their borders. Consequently, new inflows of refugees will join large numbers of long-staying refugee populations who have been stranded outside Iraq, many

for over a decade. While some of these refugees will be anxious to return home after a change of regime, others will not be eager to do so because of instability and because of fears of recriminations under a new regime. Many refugees will be forced to remain in exile indefinitely. Others will choose to pay exorbitant fees to human smugglers to try to get to Europe to apply for asylum.

In the aftermath of military action, the US and the international community will have a responsibility to help the Iraqi people with security, protection and material and financial assistance. However, the recent experience in Afghanistan is not encouraging. It is questionable whether the US and international community will commit itself long enough in Iraq and guarantee its people security, human rights and adequate public services. Moreover, with so many other issues at stake, such as access to Iraq's oil, repayment of outstanding debts and reparations, and fulfilling pre-war promises to neighboring countries for access to bases and cooperation with the US military, it seems likely that the fate of Iraqi refugees will get pushed far down the list of priorities of the US and other external players with a stake in Iraq. In this scenario, international agencies will have a pivotal role to play. It is unclear, however, whether they are equipped to do so.

Will there be adequate preparation and coordination for the coming refugee crisis?

While the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) will play leading roles inside Iraq, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) will almost certainly be the lead agency in responding to a refugee crisis in neighboring countries. However, uncertainty about

the nature, intensity and duration of the conflict has complicated forward-planning. Despite these uncertainties, UN relief and humanitarian agencies are currently working on mitigation and contingency responses for a range of scenarios in Iraq and the region. The UNHCR is also in discussion with Iraq's neighbors over their preparedness to receive large numbers of refugees in the event of war.

However, the UNHCR and other UN agencies face considerable difficulties in mounting an effective emergency response to a large-scale refugee crisis in Iraq. A major problem has been that UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan prohibited discussion of any UN-wide plans to prepare for a refugee crisis in the region while the Security Council was debating UNSC Resolution 1441. The UNHCR could not, therefore, formally consult the US military regarding contingency planning nor could it appeal to donor governments for emergency planning funds.

The relatively limited resources at the UNHCR's disposal are a major problem. After several years of declining budgets, the agency's overall funding situation is precarious. Financial difficulties have led to cuts in the UNHCR's emergency fund and have seriously affected its ability to mobilize resources for unanticipated humanitarian emergencies. In many regions, the UNHCR has severely curtailed or discontinued assistance and protection programs for refugees and has cut staff positions – particularly in the field. The UNHCR lacks sufficient numbers of senior and middle-ranking professionals to lead emergency responses. Lack of surplus capacity and tight staffing will make it difficult for the UNHCR to carry out the contingency planning, staff preparedness, and stockpiling requirements necessary to respond quickly and effectively to a refugee crisis.

The UNHCR has enough food stocks in its central emergency stockpile (in Copenhagen) to feed an initial wave of 250,000 refugees. At present, it is unlikely to be able to cope with a larger outflow and will have to rely on neighboring countries' Red Crescent Societies to respond to this first wave. Should refugee flows approach the 500,000 mark, the UNHCR will need to appeal to donor governments to provide assistance and funds and to release excess stocks of food and supplies. Such appeals have not yet been made. Should refugee flows exceed 1 million, the UNHCR would find itself lacking the capacity to respond, and the UN would have to resort to extraordinary measures – such as calling upon US and other military and civil defence forces to fill the gap by providing supplies and logistics – as it did in Rwanda, Kosovo and other recent refugee crises.

A potential UNHCR response will also depend on the course of the military campaign. It seems likely that any military operation will be carried out in mid-winter where, in the mountains bordering Turkey, the temperature can drop to minus 45 degrees centigrade. If huge concentrations of refugees build up on the borders of Turkey and Iran, the UNHCR will be hard pressed to provide the shelter needed to prevent hypothermia and substantial fatalities. Also, security considerations may make it impossible for the UNHCR to operate during a military campaign. During the bombing of Afghanistan, for example, the UNHCR was unable to remain in that country. Moreover, the UNHCR is ill-prepared to deal with any possible use of WMD – its staff are not trained in the correct use of gas masks and decontaminants.

Many of the problems confronting the UN in planning, coordination, capacity and preparedness are duplicated at the level of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the US government and military.

The capacity and preparedness of NGOs to respond to a humanitarian crisis in Iraq is limited. One of the major problems is that very few US or international NGOs currently operate in Iraq or the neighboring region. Their absence from the region means that time and resources will be required for preparing for any response. In Afghanistan, Kosovo and other recent emergencies, international NGOs had extensive networks and presence in nearby countries from which they could mount significant responses. However, the lack of significant NGO infrastructure and presence in Iraq and the surrounding region means that relief agencies will find it difficult to meet humanitarian needs quickly.

The NGOs are also no better prepared than the UN agencies for operating in a conflict where chemical or biological weapons are employed. While a small number of US NGOs will soon be receiving initial training sessions in awareness and preparation for working in a potential toxic environment in Iraq, most NGOs are woefully unprepared in both training and equipment for providing assistance in contaminated zones.

One of the most important constraints on capacity-building and preparedness for US NGOs is the sanctions regime which is targeted against Iraq, Iran and other so-called "rouge" states. US NGOs, and even US government agencies such as the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA), are forbidden to work in Iraq without a license from the Office of Foreign

Asset Control (OFAC) of the Treasury Department. NGOs need to apply for a license to travel to Iraq and to import anything from toothpaste to computer chips to Iraq. Similar sanctions are directed against Iran, the country which is likely to host large numbers of refugees in the event of war. By preventing NGOs from traveling to Iraq and limiting their activities in Iran, the OFCA is preventing NGOs from effectively assessing the humanitarian needs of the Iraqi civilian population. The process of applying for and receiving OFCA licenses is a cumbersome process, taking 2 to 6 months to complete. In order to adequately prepare for a humanitarian crisis, NGOs need to be exempted from this process.

Perhaps the most alarming feature of the contingency planning currently taking place is the almost total lack of coordination between the US government and military, the UN agencies, and the NGOs. The US military has been unwilling to discuss its contingency plans or assumptions with US NGOs or the UN agencies. NGOs have also only started to meet with the foreign assistance agencies of the US government (OFDA and the State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration Affairs) who are themselves excluded from the military's planning and preparedness process. Consequently, NGOs are left in a void, unable to know what the other major actors are planning and prevented from making adequate contingency plans of their own because of government restrictions on their activities in Iraq and Iran.

NGOs do not know, for example, what plans are in place to provide food, medical care and other essentials to the Iraqi population should the UN's Oil for Food Program break down. They do not know what steps the US and the UN are taking to ensure that neighboring countries will assist and host fleeing civilians. They do not know what kind of interface with the UN and

NGOs the US military is planning for both during the conflict and during the post-war era. Finally, NGOs are concerned that US government funding for an Iraqi military operation include sufficient funds for humanitarian and development relief so as to prevent the US government diverting resources from Afghanistan, Southern Africa or other humanitarian emergencies. These and other uncertainties need to be urgently addressed in the pre-war planning for an invasion of Iraq.

Without dialogue among all the actors engaged in coordinating a response to a potential humanitarian emergency, NGOs risk being unprepared for a critical emergency response to the humanitarian needs of the Iraqi people. This is true for both the emergency and post-conflict phase of any operation. NGOs risk delays in mobilizing and pre-positioning food, medical goods, shelter and maintenance. Without immediate coordination, they also risk conducting duplicative and irrelevant planning and encouraging destructive competition and turf battles. One of the primary lessons of international responses to past humanitarian crises is that UN inter-agency coordination and coordination between military forces and NGOs are probably the most difficult parts of any large-scale relief operation. The cooperation and coordination of the UN, NGOs and the US military, together with the effectiveness of logistics support and the overall leadership of the relief effort are essential to the success of any refugee program. In the current situation, the prospects for overcoming these chronic management and coordination problems do not appear to be very promising.

Covering all bases

The UN Security Council Resolution 1441 on November 8, 2002 serves as a warning for Iraq to disarm. This should also be a warning to for international aid agencies and the US military to take immediate steps to develop the capacity respond to a possible major refugee crisis and its aftermath. Strategic planners for Western governments and UN agencies would be wise to take the possibility of Iraqi refugee movements seriously and to plan accordingly and develop appropriate coordination mechanisms. Refugees have constituted one of the central strategic and political challenges of nearly all Western military interventions in recent years. Not only have refugees constituted a major objective in many conflicts that engaged US, NATO and other forces but they have also disrupted military plans as well as local and regional political structures in surprising and unexpected ways. Policy planners ignore the potential humanitarian and refugee consequences of a conflict in Iraq at their peril.