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The Impact of U.S. Military Drawdown in Iraq on Displaced and Other Vulnerable Populations

Analysis and Recommendations

Olga Oliker, Audra K. Grant, Dalia Dassa Kaye

Prepared for the Office of the Secretary of Defense

Approved for public release; distribution unlimited

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Summary

As the United States draws down its forces in Iraq, it behooves decisionmakers to recognize that this drawdown, which started in June 2009 and continues at the time of this writing, will affect vulnerable and at-risk populations. The ways in which it does so have significant implications for the evolution of Iraq and U.S. policy interests in that country and the Middle East more broadly. Regardless of how the security situation evolves in the years to come, these issues will continue to create humanitarian challenges, and it is in U.S. interests to take steps to address them.

A number of groups are at risk because of the U.S. drawdown and withdrawal, because they have depended on U.S. forces and force presence for their security over the last six years. In addition, the drawdown may exacerbate the already precarious circumstances of displaced Iraqis, both within the country and in neighboring states. That said, appropriate policies and actions can mitigate destabilizing regional scenarios and reduce the dangers faced by these populations in the years to come.

Vulnerable Groups

Groups at particular risk as U.S. forces depart Iraq include

- tens of thousands of Iraqis and their families who are affiliated with the United States in any of a variety of ways
- smaller minorities among Iraq's permanent citizens who have relied on U.S. forces for protection[1]
- Palestinians who took refuge in Iraq under the Saddam Hussein government
- other refugee groups from outside Iraq who have taken shelter in that country over the years[2]
- the Mujeheddin e-Khalq (MEK), a cult-like dissident group from Iran that received sanctuary in Saddam Hussein's Iraq in 1991 and whose members have since lived in their own enclave, from 2003 to early 2009 under the protection of U.S. forces[3]

[1] The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) lists the following minority religious and ethnic groups as at particular risk: Shabak, Christians generally, Sabaean-Mandaeans, Yazidis, Baha'i, Kaka'i, Ahl i-Haq, Yarsan, Jews (of whom very few remain in Iraq), Kurds, Turkmen, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Armenians, and Roma (Kawliyah) (UNHCR, 2007).

[2] These include ethnic Kurds from Turkey, Iran and Syria, ethnic Arabs from Syria, and Ahwazi Arabs from Iran. A number of Sudanese refugees have recently been resettled.

[3] They are now officially an Iraqi government responsibility.

- contractors from around the world who work for U.S., other coalition, and Iraqi companies in construction, food services, and myriad other jobs and who may lack documentation.

Violence against these populations is a real danger as U.S. forces draw down. It would surely present a humanitarian tragedy to which the global community may not be able to respond in time. The United States would likely be held at least partially accountable, with detrimental results for U.S. image, credibility, and influence. It could also serve as a starting point for renewed violence in Iraq.

Ongoing efforts to assist Iraqis with U.S. ties include the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program and the Refugee Resettlement Program, now available to Iraqis with U.S. ties. There has been significant improvement in the last year in the processing of refugees, especially, and the SIV program has been expanded. Instead of having to first leave Iraq, U.S.-affiliated Iraqis can now apply to come to the United States from Baghdad. Processing for both of these programs has remained slow and complicated, however, and no plan exists for rapid evacuation, which may be needed if the security situation deteriorates.

For the other groups, the response thus far has been an effort by the U.S. government to engage Iraqi counterparts to ensure these groups' safety and security, coupled with efforts by the UNHCR to resettle some of the refugees from elsewhere who cannot stay in Iraq. Success has been sporadic.

Displacement and Drawdown

The last four decades have led to tremendous displacement of Iraqis in the face of war and tyranny. Numbers have grown exponentially, however, since the 2003 Iraq war began. Today, about 4 million Iraqis are displaced, about 2 million of them within Iraq and the rest outside that country, primarily in Syria and Jordan.

Displacement has redrawn Iraq's sectarian map, turning the multiethnic, multisectarian parts of the country into a collection of monosectarian enclaves. It has also had what will be lasting effects on social and economic structures in Iraq and in the countries to which Iraqis have fled. The deepening poverty and lack of access to resources that displaced Iraqis face will not be quickly reversed. The fact that a disproportionate number of the displaced and impoverished are women and members of female-headed households bodes poorly for Iraq's future, as this marks a historical reversal for Iraq, and effective development is consistently correlated with the economic and educational empowerment of women.

The millions of Iraqis who have been displaced as a result of the war face increasing dangers as U.S. forces draw down. If violence in Iraq worsens as and after U.S. forces draw down, as it may well do in at least some disputed and multiethnic areas, displacement will increase yet again. Whether or not violence increases in the near term, however, this displacement crisis may well breed instability in its own right. Unless these problems are addressed as part of a broad development and integration agenda, displacement will not only be long term, but it may also lead to increased risk of violence in the future, as grievances over lost land combine with perceptions of social and economic inequities between the populations hosting the displaced and the newcomers, both in Iraq and in neighboring countries. This has the potential to undermine the stability of key regional states, such as Jordan, and a range of broader U.S. regional goals.

Mitigating Measures: Recommendations for U.S. action

Although the displacement crisis will be long term, and vulnerable populations will face increased risk as U.S. forces draw down, the dangers emanating from both of these situations can be mitigated. Indeed, the drawdown of U.S. forces can potentially create opportunities for the United States to more effectively address this crisis and gain regional and international assistance to do so.

A number of specific actions and general approaches can help ensure the protection of particularly endangered populations, mitigate the destabilizing effects of mass displacement, and prevent the chronic underdevelopment that may otherwise be its result.

Lower Risk of Violence

- Where practicable and useful, adapt troop withdrawals to ensure the longest presence where violence is most likely, specifically in the regions of Baghdad, Diyala, and along the KRG border.
- Improve security for the vulnerable and those at risk of deportation in Iraq by working with Iraq, regional governments, and other key international actors.

Make Resettlement Outside of Iraq Viable for Those Who Need It

- Ensure the recently named White House–level Refugee Coordinator can be effective.
- Improve refugee processing to support continued increases in the number being accepted into the United States.
- Working with the international community, pursue and fund creative resettlement solutions in nontraditional resettlement countries.

Enable Those in Immediate Danger to Reach Safety

- Working with the international community and the Iraqi government, resettle Iraq-based refugees of non-Iraqi origin.
- Prepare for the evacuation of those who may need it with a comprehensive database and evacuation plan.
- Improve refugee processing in Baghdad.

Treat Displacement and Its Effects as a Regional Issue

- Push for more regional funding, involving Saudi Arabia and other wealthy Gulf states, particularly.
- Work with Syria bilaterally and through international partners.

Support Sustainable and Effective Development

- Ensure that troop withdrawals do not mean that development and humanitarian efforts in Iraq are curtailed by finding ways to make sure that U.S., UN, and other civilian personnel adjust security requirements to make it possible to do their work after U.S. forces draw down.

- Continue to fund and assist the humanitarian response within and outside Iraq at high levels.
- Work with countries of first refuge and the Iraqi government to emphasize durable solutions, rather than return.
- Encourage funding and aid efforts by the government of Iraq.
- Continue to work with the government of Iraq to build capacity to manage displacement.
- Recognize the long-term nature of the problem and establish mechanisms for international involvement and oversight.
- Ensure that development approaches are holistic and reflect ethnic and gender realities and needs.