



Middle East
Research Institute

IN IT FOR THE LONG HAUL: A NEW RESPONSE FOR IDPs IN THE KURDISTAN REGION OF IRAQ

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About MERI

The Middle East Research Institute (MERI) engages in policy issues contributing to the process of nation building and democratisation in the Middle East. Through independent analysis and policy debates, our research aims to promote and develop good governance, human rights, rule of law and social and economic prosperity in the region.

MERI was established in 2014 as an independent not-for-profit organisation based in Erbil, Kurdistan Region of Iraq. For more information, visit [**www.meri-k.org**](http://www.meri-k.org).

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Cover Image: Displaced family heading towards Khazir transit camp, 2014 (Tiril Skarstein, NRC/Flyktninghjelpen).

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Executive Summary

Since the onset of the current conflict in Iraq in early 2014, there have been approximately 3.2 million people internally displaced —two thirds of which have been displaced for more than one year. Over one million of these internally displaced persons (IDPs) have sought protection in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, which already hosts almost 250,000 Syrian refugees as well as other IDPs from previous regional conflicts. As the conflict in Iraq moves from its second to third year, international and local stakeholders have begun to recognise the need to prepare for what may well become a protracted crisis. To better understand the challenges posed by increasingly protracted displacement and identify opportunities in alleviating said crisis, the Middle East Research Institute (MERI) convened a roundtable discussion with relevant stakeholders on the future of IDPs sheltered in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

While there is general consensus amongst all stakeholders that the positive resolution of this, or any, displacement crisis is the eventual return of IDPs to their communities of origin, given the current climate in Iraq this is not feasible in the immediate-term. As such a key finding from this meeting was that the current emergency-focused response must shift to a more nuanced, long-term, collaborative approach, focused on promoting **self-sustaining livelihoods and cohesion among IDP and host communities in the foreseeable future while laying groundwork for voluntary, safe, dignified, and informed returns in the longer-term**. Three pillars, underpinned by sensitivity to gender, age, religion, and ethnicity, should sustain this new approach by:

- Primarily, fostering co-existence and resilience within host communities so that displaced populations are able to pursue independent and sustainable lives in the foreseeable future.
- While, investing in better conditions in the areas of origin to facilitate voluntary returns in the longer-term.
- And finally, establishing and respecting an acceptable standard in terms of human rights and welfare that should be guaranteed to both the displaced and host communities. This latter pillar is cross-cutting to the two pillars above.

A major component of this approach centres on *advancing independent and sustainable lives in areas of displacement*. Policy and programming in this regard involves building upon the concept of resilience by creating self-sufficient livelihoods for the displaced and host communities as well as self-sustainable delivery of public goods and services. Interventions to this end prevent the population from becoming excessively dependent on the State or donors by developing incentives and opportunities for individuals to move from an assisted life to a self-sufficient one. The presence of IDPs can support this given that they help expand market opportunities, which could contribute to the economic recovery of the region. In conjunction with this, guaranteeing human security must remain a key priority, extending standards of protection, human rights and welfare to the whole of the population, independent of identity or origin.

In terms of challenges the Kurdistan Region of Iraq faces in bringing about this socio-economic change, the biggest relates to the fact that the region in general has struggled to generate sufficient employment opportunities for the people already living here and most work within the informal sector. The arrival of IDPs then has worsened job competition and requires action at the policy level to expand and diversify the region's business base. Linked with economic hardship, social tensions between communities are on the rise. This tension also takes on a political dimension, as local authorities are wary of potentially permanent socio-demographic changes in the region. Finally, the influx of IDPs has highlighted a critical educational gap for a whole generation of children that threatens their future likelihood of having independent livelihoods.

Another aspect of this new approach, though one that will invariably take place in the much longer-term, is *facilitating IDPs' return to their communities of origin*. Return is a gradual process whereby families gain confidence over time that there are no physical security risks to going home, that it is possible to resume their previous livelihoods, and that the rule of law is established and will be maintained in their communities of origin. Ensuring these factors entails both stabilisation of the liberated areas and reconstruction of physical and social infrastructures in these areas. While some areas in Iraq are liberated, civilian and military plans have not been thoroughly implemented, limiting the scope of return in the immediate-term and delaying reconstruction for many years. Compounding the complexity of return is the risk of retaliation against those going back along ethnic-religious lines by

militias or even neighbours and *stayees*. This is important to consider because involuntary returns have the potential to threaten the security of returnees and are thus a violation of international humanitarian law. A final, pragmatic point is that most of the IDPs in the Kurdistan Region are originally from areas still under ISIS control or where military operations are still taking place, thus making it nearly impossible for them to return at present.

In delineating areas of opportunity and the ensuing challenges regarding IDPs in the Kurdistan Region, the following recommendations emerged for key stakeholders to ensure that a rights-based, equitable, and sustainable strategy will move forward:

- Kurdistan's regional authorities should recognise that there is no short-term solution to this increasingly protracted displacement crisis and that voluntary return is one component of a much longer-term vision. To this end, authorities must be open to, endorse, and take the lead in facilitating policies, based on sound evidence, that first and foremost ensure the rights, livelihoods, and social cohesion of IDP and host communities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.
- The humanitarian and development community should also shift focus to ensure rights, livelihoods, and social cohesion by complementing emergency assistance with longer-term resilience-based development programming. This cohesive transition from humanitarian to recovery development assistance should align with the new Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) strategy as well, ensuring an inclusive, comprehensive, and coordinated approach.
- The international donor community should recognise that this new approach will require longer-term funding and support. Such support should be conditioned upon stakeholders' gradual and successful implementation of rights-based and resilience-focused policy and programming.
- The diplomatic community in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq should play an active role in advocating to local political actors through appropriate dialogue and policy platforms that such an approach is necessary.

Rationale

- Since the onset of the current conflict in Iraq in early 2014, there have been approximately 3.2 million individuals internally displaced out of a total population of 35 million people. Over one million of these internally displaced people (IDPs) sought protection in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, which additionally hosts approximately 250,000 Syrian refugees as well as other displaced families from previous regional conflicts. At present, one out of six residents in the region is a displaced person. In some districts, the ratio can rise to one out of three. Although the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the international community have extended significant material and infrastructure assistance, **the current approach to the humanitarian crisis is not sustainable in the long-term.**
- The presence of IDPs in the Kurdistan Region was perceived to be a temporary challenge. The dominating vision of the regional authorities and the international community was that the issue would be resolved as soon as the counter-offensive against ISIS liberated the areas from which the IDPs originated, thus allowing for their return. However, the humanitarian crisis is now approaching its second year and with it comes new challenges. What if a quick solution is not attainable in the short run? What if the IDPs are unable to return? What if Iraq's internal conflict is not resolved within months or years?
- Two humanitarian response plans have been put forward during this period, the second being even more focused on emergency life-saving aid than the first plan. However, it is not clear for how long the KRG and the international community can maintain an emergency-focused response. In addition, the scale of the crisis dwarfs any generosity and funding. In summary, internal and external factors in Iraq surrounding the crisis are reinforcing **the push for a shift from a pure emergency response to a more nuanced long-term approach to the crisis.** These factors can be summarised as follows:
 - Diminishing aid funds from the donor and the international community. Humanitarian community programs have been largely underfunded since the onset of the crisis, with the latest plan, launched in Brussels in June 2015, receiving less than half of the funds requested.

- Expected protracted stay of the displaced population in Iraq and Kurdistan. There is consensus that, even if the violent conflict decreases, the ability to pursue former livelihoods in the areas of return will be severely undermined.
- Lack of a solid financial basis of the KRG to match the humanitarian support that refugees and IDPs are receiving currently from the international community. In this sense, the KRG cannot substitute for the humanitarian partners; therefore capacity building for the KRG and for civil society needs to be promoted.
- The Middle East Research Institute (MERI) convened a round table to evaluate current scenarios and develop policy options to prepare for what may well become a protracted displacement crisis in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region in particular. The round table gathered ministers and senior KRG representatives, heads of diplomatic missions of donor countries, and officials of United Nations agencies who are based in the region. The key message from the discussion is summarised in the box below.

The appropriate way to deal with the economic, social and security implications of a protracted stay of the IDPs requires a change in the current approach, allowing international stakeholders alongside the federal and regional authorities to work collaboratively **to promote self-sustaining livelihoods and cohesion among IDP and host communities in the foreseeable future while laying groundwork for voluntary, safe, dignified, and informed returns in the much longer-term.** Three pillars, underpinned by sensitivity to gender, age, religion, and ethnicity, should sustain this new approach by:

- Fostering co-existence and resilience within host communities so that displaced populations **are able to pursue independent and sustainable lives** in their new refuge for the foreseeable future.
- Investing in better conditions in the areas of origin **to facilitate voluntary returns** in the longer-term.
- Establishing and respecting **a standard in terms of human rights and welfare** that should be guaranteed to the displaced and host communities. This latter pillar is cross-cutting to the two pillars above.

Displacement Trends¹

- The vast majority of the 3.2 million IDPs in Iraq are originally from three governorates: Anbar (1.36 million displaced); Niniwa (1.03 million people displaced); and Salahaddin (0.40 million people displaced). Two thirds of the IDPs have been displaced for more than one year —2.05 million people were displaced between January and September 2014.

Figure 1. Trends of Internal Displacement in Iraq Since April 2014



Source: IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix.

- The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (Duhok, Erbil and Sulaimaniya) hosts 27% of the total IDPs displaced in Iraq since 2014, or 873,000 people, mostly from Niniwa and Anbar. Most of the IDPs entered the region between June and December 2014. Since then, stricter entry controls drastically prevented the access of new displaced families through Kurdish-controlled checkpoints.
- In the governorates of Sulaimaniya and Erbil, around 83% of the IDPs live in rented houses, followed by vulnerable locations (7%), IDP camps (6%), and with host families (4%). The situation is more critical in Duhok Governorate, with 34% of the displaced people living in IDP camps, 31% in vulnerable locations, 27% in rented accommodations and 8% with host families. For the aggregate of the Kurdistan Region, 20% of the IDPs reside in the camps.
- For the whole period, only 402,660 individuals (56,587 families) previously displaced have returned to their locations of origin, half of which have done so in the last 3 months.

¹ Data from the IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix, Round XXX (available 13 October 2015).

This population for the most part has returned to Salahaddin (Tikrit in particular), from Kirkuk or other parts of Salahaddin Governorate. Those displaced in areas of the Kurdistan Region, and Iraq as a whole, however have not sought to return in any sustained way, indicating that while return now is possible for a small segment of the displaced population, the majority cannot go back to their home communities for the foreseeable future.

Fostering Independent and Sustainable Lives in the Areas of Displacement

What Does This Involve?

- **Self-sufficient livelihoods and self-sustainable services.** Within the current context, IDPs are quickly exhausting, or already have exhausted, personal reserves (financial, human, and social capital), thus gradually becoming fully dependent on assistance from the State and donors. Fostering independent and sustainable lives for the displaced populations in the Kurdistan Region involves building on the concept of resilience. In practical terms, it implies that the overall system is able to meet and sustain acceptable social, economic, and environmental conditions without humanitarian relief. In other words, the communities should have the capacity to sustain their livelihoods (*self-sufficiency*) and the national system is able to meet and maintain the delivery of public goods and services (*self-sustainability*). This concept applies for host communities as well given that many at this stage are themselves feeling the negative impacts of economic downturn and displacement through depletion of reserves and resources—and this in turn has detrimental implications for displaced-host community relations if left unresolved. Recent research on how to foster resilience for refugees in the Kurdistan Region² highlighted three principles, which are also valid for the IDPs' situation: (i) provision of direct livelihoods support to host and displaced communities; (ii) capacity building within Kurdistan's local authorities; and (iii) advocacy for key policy changes that currently limit livelihood opportunities.

² Middle East Research Institute, August 2015. Pathways to resilience for Syrian refugees living in camps in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

- **Resilient in-camp populations.** As a response for the most vulnerable families displaced from conflict areas, 26 camps have been built for IDPs since 2014 in the Kurdish-controlled areas (which include parts of Niniwa, Kirkuk and Diyala governorates), adding to the 9 camps previously built for Syrian refugees. They currently shelter 20% of the IDPs in the region. However, managing camps is a big administrative and financial burden: maintenance costs are high as all services—from shelter and protection to health and education—have to be provided and tailored for the specific populations’ needs, with most of the camps sheltering more than 10,000 individuals. In addition, it is claimed that this type of encampment engenders a dependency syndrome on assistance among the displaced population. The alternative endorsed by international agencies is to transform the camps into more sustainable settlements, integrated within the national systems, where inhabitants can have the incentives and opportunities to move from an assisted life to a self-sufficient one.
- **Resilient out-of-camp population.** The most critical element is that the vast majority of IDPs (80%) are living within the host community, in urban areas. Many of them are in extremely vulnerable dwelling conditions and in very dispersed locations, making the provision of direct assistance a complex exercise. A step forward in this situation requires creative solutions for the out-of-camp populations, finding new ways of providing assistance that can also contribute to the economic recovery of the region, such as multi-purpose cash assistance and individual income-generating activities and opportunities.
- **Human security.** The main priority of the regional authorities must remain the protection of the people currently residing in the Kurdistan Region. This means that a re-thinking of the overall humanitarian strategy should not come at the expense of human security, but rather enhance current efforts in this area. Firstly, policies that minimise threats to physical security while balancing other strands such as economic security should be fostered. Secondly, extending adequate standards of protection, human rights and welfare to the whole of the population, independent of the ethnic-religious belonging must be considered.

Challenges Ahead

- **Economic paralysis and job competition.** The Kurdistan Region of Iraq has historically struggled to create jobs its inhabitants in the private sector. Employment rates have been relatively low. While 65% of the adult male population is employed³, slightly less than half of it works in the private sector, mostly informally. Among the adult female population, only 4% is employed, most of them for the government. Hence, it becomes extremely complex to open employment opportunities in the private sector for new-comers (only 16% of the IDP households have a member employed). This situation is aggravated by the current economic paralysis in the region, which brought reported unemployment levels in host communities to 12%⁴. Overall, there is increasing competition for jobs available in the informal economy. The predominance of informality and the absence of proper protection and rights in the labour market has created winners and losers of the crisis: evidence available⁵ suggests that, while wages for informal workers have decreased, the rents for white-collar workers and business managers have increased. Job competition, exacerbated by IDPs, combined with general prejudices (such as that IDPs are able to work for less thanks to an “assisted” life) is usually pointed to as the cause of the region’s economic woes. This, however, shadows other dynamics such as the persistent underdevelopment and informality of the private sector.
- **Obstacles to employment generation.** The idea that providing vocational training to individuals will solve their employment difficulties is contested. The concentration of efforts into training for the displaced population is only a partial response —sometimes inefficient. The problem is not only a supply of skills (i.e. individuals not having the necessary skills for the employment market) but also demand of skills (i.e. not enough base of businesses actually requiring workers or diversified skills). This requires identification of the obstacles in the different economic sectors and, from a policy perspective, removal of them in order to generate a wide and diversified business base. It also requires exploration of the linkages that can be created between the humanitarian

³ Kurdistan Region Statistics Office, 2014. Labor force report for Kurdistan Region in 2012.

⁴ World Bank, February 2015. Kurdistan Region of Iraq: economic and social impact assessment of the Syrian conflict and ISIS crisis.

⁵ United Nations Development Programme, July 2015. Host community impact assessment, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

response and the national and international private sector and investors —for instance, through market-driven asset reconstruction, or through social entrepreneurship, which aims to resolve social problems through market-oriented strategies and business development.

Elements for further discussion:

- *How is the labour market in the Kurdistan Region responding to the sudden presence of IDPs? Is there any existence of discrimination against IDPs, including with respect to ethnicity, religion, gender, and/or age? Which obstacles prevent IDPs from accessing jobs?*
 - *Which obstacles prevent the expansion of the private sector and the availability of employment opportunities in the Kurdistan Region? What is the role played by elements such as market oligopolies, informal economy, and juridical insecurity or credit access? Where can investment promote growth?*
 - *To what extent does vocational training prepare for the future economic integration of individuals? How could programming in this area be improved? To what extent would this make return more difficult?*
 - *How is the absence of an inclusive and functional economy decreasing the willingness of families (displaced and host community) to remain in this area and not seek migration to Europe?*
 - *If it is certain that having an “assisted” life allows IDPs to work for a lower wage, can incentives be provided to move towards a self-sufficient life without putting their livelihoods or survival at risk?*
- **Increasing social tensions.** Tensions are increasingly difficult to manage between IDPs and the host community as well as between the various displaced communities. Social tensions and conflict are much more likely in those districts that either have a higher concentration of IDPs in relation to local population or who are currently facing economic and social hardship. Populations that are especially economically vulnerable remain the most prone to engaging in forms of conflict. However, beyond the social tensions of economic origin, there are other tensions linked with socio-political issues, such as the presence of different ethnic-religious communities with historic grievances in Iraq. This latter kind of social tension requires different interventions.

Elements for further discussion:

– *What are the dynamics and linkages between economic vulnerability and threats to social cohesion? How do political disputes interact with this? What approaches can be taken to address more deep-seated historic grievances in this current climate?*

- **Inclusiveness versus security.** There is a perceived trade-off between facilitating the *inclusivity* and *co-existence* of the IDPs in the Kurdistan Region, on the one side, and the *internal security* of the region on the other side. There are seemingly contradicting aims between the KRG and humanitarian actors: while the KRG prioritises internal security and puts restrictions on some displaced communities, humanitarian actors are actively promoting that IDPs should be safely sheltered in the Kurdistan Region, with adequate services and opportunities. These positions are, however, evolving and must converge —e.g. Erbil’s Governor recently dismissed the idea that accommodating the large number of IDPs poses a security threat to the Kurdistan Region based on a thorough examination of potential security challenges⁶.

Elements for further discussion:

– *To what extent does such a trade-off between social and economic inclusivity of IDPs and internal security in the Kurdistan Region exist? How can this trade-off be reduced?*

– *In the current context of Iraq, would threats to internal security disappear if there were no IDPs or camps?*

- **Socio-demographic changes.** The presence of IDPs from the rest of Iraq is also heavily inter-linked with longer-term political implications in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Sheltering displaced communities is altering the ethnic-religious make-up of the territory. Although not openly put on the table, this is strongly shaping current discussions for a change in the long-term strategy. In order to facilitate this change, the Kurdistan Region should recognise that their society is changing —as happens frequently in history with past displacement waves. However, it is very difficult for the Kurdish authorities to accept long-term inclusiveness of non-Kurdish IDPs under the current scenario in Iraq

⁶ KRG Cabinet statement, 18 September 2015. “Erbil Governor: IDPs pose no security threat”. Available at: <http://gov.krd/a/d.aspx?s=040000&l=12&a=53703>

with risks of a disintegration of the country and an open conflict for the disputed territories⁷.

Elements for further discussion:

- *How can political incentives be provided in Iraq, and in the Kurdistan Region in particular, to ease the social and economic inclusivity of IDPs despite such political implications?*
- **Aid coordination and the necessary role of the authorities.** The KRG has had a secondary role since the beginning of the current crisis, ceding the response initiative and the leading voice to OCHA and other humanitarian partners. This has created parallel systems on the ground and hindered integration between the actions of humanitarian partners and the policies of the government. The KRG needs to become the central player in endorsing a resilience-based approach. It needs support in building adequate and accountable institutional structures and rights-based policies to face the needs of host and displaced families, with focus on those most vulnerable in these communities, for the next years to come. Finally, it also needs to gradually take major responsibility in delivering some of the services currently delivered by humanitarian partners, as part of the integration into the national systems. However, severe budgetary restrictions are permanently postponing this change of strategy. Other obstacles relate to the poor relations between Erbil and Baghdad, as well as internal disputes and fragmentation among Kurdish parties.

Elements for further discussion:

- *How can obstacles be overcome to prevent a primary role by the KRG in the current crisis and in the required change of strategy?*
- *How can efforts be integrated between the humanitarian community and the authorities? In which areas is coordination between all the stakeholders suffering?*
- *How best can the gradual hand over of services provided by NGOs to the KRG be facilitated?*

⁷ Recent laws in Iraq have aggravated the refusal for such long-term co-existence with IDPs in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, such as the law that grants displaced individuals the right of residency in their new governorate if they have been displaced there for more than 5 years.

- **Stress and constraints on public goods and services.** The short-term humanitarian response has not taken into account the stress posed on the existing socio-economic infrastructure, including housing and public services. The service capacity was not completely adequate even for the local community before the arrival of displaced families. Hence, the humanitarian crisis has only intensified underlying issues, which include inadequate investment in the past, a lack of buffer capacity, and weak development policies in sectors such as housing, electricity and water supply, education, etc. Current infrastructure cannot adequately sustain the rapid increase in population.

Elements for further discussion:

- *Which public goods and services require additional investment or urgent action to alleviate social hardships, specifically examining needs based on a combination of factors including gender, age, ethnicity and religious affiliations, etc.?*
- *How can the accommodation crisis that is affecting both displaced and locals inhabitants, be solved?*

- **Educational challenges for a whole generation.** The humanitarian crisis is generating a worrying educational gap in the Kurdistan Region, especially for the displaced youth, which is not being satisfactorily addressed. Human capital is a key element for prosperous societies. As such, protracted displacement may risk the future resilience and sense of inclusion of those individuals unable to receive education now —especially since 50% of the IDPs in Kurdistan Region are children under the age of 18. An assessment carried out in December 2014 showed that only 25% of displaced children were regularly attending some form of education at least 4 days a week⁸.

Elements for further discussion:

- *Which specific measures in the education response can be put in place to address the shortcomings?*
- *How can the response within national systems best be integrated so that it becomes a lasting solution?*

⁸ REACH Initiative, September 2015. Data overview for the HNO process, Iraq.

Facilitating Voluntary Returns

What Does This Involve?

- **Voluntary, dignified and safe returns.** The vast majority of IDPs displaced in Kurdistan stated that they are willing to return to their area of origin as soon as the conflict is over. However, this presents multiple obstacles that need to be addressed, from physical security risks to widespread challenges in resuming previous livelihoods. Proper conditions must first be in place: return is only possible if it is voluntary, informed, dignified, and safe. Return must be understood as a gradual process, where families are building confidence over time, not as a sudden movement. At the same time, forced returns —illegal under international humanitarian law— must be monitored and negotiations with the stakeholders should aim to prevent these practices.
- **Stabilisation and reconstruction.** Facilitating returns also implies a re-doubling of efforts to stabilise the areas of origin that are liberated or that they may be liberated in the short term. All stakeholders must collaborate in planning and funding efforts in order to rebuild (and strengthen) communities that have been destroyed, in terms of physical, social, and governance structures and systems. Stabilisation contributes to a reduction in the chances of exclusion, frustration, or competition with other groups upon return. At the same time, this nurtures certain interdependence and interconnectivity among the diverse groups across the same value chain, as well-being ends up depending on what each distinct community delivers to the whole.

Challenges Ahead

- **Destruction of livelihoods and rule of law in liberated areas.** Civilian-military plans have not been thoroughly implemented in the areas already liberated, limiting the scope of returns. Such plans aim to maintain the area as habitable, through keeping intact the socio-economic infrastructure, re-building key facilities, de-mining, maintaining the operation of public services and re-establishing a fair rule of law and order. In short, instability and absence of services is not currently encouraging families to go back. Far from improving, the prospects of return may deteriorate if, on the one hand, the international community is engaging in much more destructive air strikes (if

counter-measures are not put in place) and on the other hand, the funding gap for reconstruction and stabilisation increases. Reconstructing these areas and putting adequate conditions in place may take years, particularly considering economic and rule of law mechanisms may not have been strong in these areas pre-conflict to begin with. As a result, this process requires the participation of different stakeholders, not only regional authorities but also the private sector —as past experiences suggest.

Elements for further discussion:

- *What are the conditions under which families would gradually and willingly return to their areas of origin? What is the perception they have on the situation there versus the reality?*
 - *How can rule of law and development actors coordinate efforts and funding so that infrastructure creation and the establishment of rule of law complement one another? How can the participation of the private sector in reconstruction efforts be fostered in order to accelerate the process? What do they need for investment? Which linkages can be created through the involvement of the diplomatic community in the region?*
 - *What partnerships or support can be leveraged with macro-financing institutions for large-scale infrastructure projects or income-generating campaigns? How can these institutions further help the coordinated improvement of the rule of law?*
 - *Could micro-finance schemes have a role to play in the search for other proven best practices in the region where this may have proved successful?*
 - *What role should the KRG have in order to contribute to the stabilisation and rule of law in the liberated areas —without being a negative actor?*
- **Retaliation and threats to security by militias.** The ability of IDPs to return to their respective home communities is also affected by the risk they may face of retaliation along ethnic-religious lines by militias (including Shi'a and Kurdish groups) controlling liberated areas or access to it, or even from their previous neighbours upon return. Apart from threats to physical security, retaliation also tends to destroy livelihood assets —such as houses, businesses, crop fields or livestock— that displaced families may have in their area of origin. Overall, retaliation actions are pushed by a greater goal, which is

to be able to claim the liberated area for a specific ethnic-religious group —instead of doing so through other means based on the rule of law.

Elements for further discussion:

– *What plans should be put in place in order to prevent retaliation, maintain adherence to international humanitarian law, and provide accountability of any violations? How can the establishment and/or restoration of the rule of law and the respect of property rights help in avoiding such practices between the inhabitants?*

- **On-going conflict or occupation in most of the areas of origin.** In spite of the above, the majority of families displaced to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq are originally from the governorates of Anbar, Niniwa and, to a lesser extent, Salahaddin. Most of the districts are still under ISIS control or under on-going military operations. This dynamic situation prevents a rapid return of the families and actually threatens that they be displaced multiple times.

Elements for further discussion:

– *Which scenarios of liberation are the most realistic ones for planning purposes? What are the most crucial needs that will have to be addressed there in the short term?*

- **Risk of forced returns.** As social and economic hardship increases in the districts that shelter a large number of IDPs, the risk of forced returns increases. Local authorities in Kirkuk and Sulaimaniya are considering giving, or have already given, ultimatums to some families to return to their area of origin in a matter of months⁹. Expulsions and forced returns are a threat for the security of the displaced families due to the conditions in the area of return, as noted above. As such, they are condemned under international humanitarian law and, hence, must be prevented by all means by the stakeholders involved.

Elements for further discussion:

– *Which plans and incentives can be put in place to prevent authorities from relying on forced returns?*

⁹ OCHA, June 2015. Iraq crisis situation report No. 50.

Conclusion

As conflict and instability continue within Iraq and the wider region, debate on the future of the IDPs sheltered in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq takes on even greater urgency. In convening a roundtable with all relevant stakeholders to this issue, MERI sought to delineate key questions that need to be addressed in order to shift the response toward IDPs from emergency action to promoting self-sustaining livelihoods and social cohesion among communities in this increasingly protracted crisis. Furthermore, roundtable participants expressed concerns that without sustainable livelihoods and social cohesion, current practices with respect to IDPs are not viable in the long run given diminishing aid funds, the absence of conditions for a safe and dignified return, and the lack of a solid financial basis for the KRG to substitute assistance provision from humanitarian partners.

From this discussion, it is clear that all stakeholders have a role to play in establishing and implementing this new approach, focused on (i) fostering co-existence and resilience within the host communities; (ii) investing in better conditions in the areas of origin to facilitate voluntary returns; and (iii) establishing and respecting a standard in terms of human rights and welfare that should be guaranteed to displaced and host communities. In particular:

- **Kurdistan's regional authorities** should recognise that there is no short-term solution to this increasingly protracted displacement crisis and that voluntary return is one component of a much longer-term vision. To this end, authorities must be open to, endorse, and take the lead in facilitating policies, based on sound evidence, that first and foremost ensure the rights, livelihoods, and social cohesion of IDP and host communities in the Kurdistan Region. This involves putting into place operational and legal structures and necessary reforms to build a more resilient socio-economic system.
- The **humanitarian and development community** should also shift focus to ensure rights, livelihoods, and social cohesion by complementing emergency assistance with longer-term resilience-based development programming. This cohesive transition from humanitarian to development assistance should align with the new KRG strategy as well, ensuring an inclusive, comprehensive, and coordinated approach.

- The **international donor community** should recognise that this new approach will require longer-term funding and support. Such support should be conditioned upon stakeholders' gradual and successful implementation of rights-based and resilience-focused policy and programming.
- The **diplomatic community in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq** should play an active role in advocating with local political actors through appropriate dialogue and policy platforms that such an approach is necessary.

Taken together, these actions will go a long way toward not only ameliorating the current crisis, but also laying durable foundation for a more prosperous, peaceful, and inclusive society in the long run.