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# THE UN'S HUMANITARIAN TRANSITION FROM EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE TO DEVELOPMENT FUNDING IN IRAQ

## THE POLITICS OF DELIVERING AID IN A COUNTRY OF PROTRACTED POST-CONFLICT DISPLACEMENT



Alannah Travers



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The UN's Humanitarian Transition from  
Emergency Assistance to Development Funding  
in Iraq: The Politics of Delivering Aid in a Country  
of Protracted Post-Conflict Displacement

Alannah Travers

## About the Author

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## Abstract

At the end of 2022, the United Nations transitioned its role in Iraq from ‘individual assistance’ provided by humanitarian partners to ‘system building,’ handing over the primary obligation to the state to deliver adequate humanitarian support. While anticipated, decreased international humanitarian funding in Iraq has significant repercussions for internally displaced persons (IDPs), including those with perceived affiliation to ISIS, and in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), where all Yazidi IDP and Syrian refugee camps are based. To better understand the impact of the UN transition in Iraq, this research paper contextualises the situation in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region, considering potential longer-term implications on three affected populations: Iraq’s displaced Yazidi community, Iraq’s remaining IDPs – including those impacted by the closure of Jeddah 5 Camp – and Iraq’s Syrian refugee population. Iraq is one of the only countries that has operated a transition from the UN-led cluster coordination system in this manner.

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## Executive Summary

Humanitarian needs in Iraq have decreased since the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was declared defeated in December 2017. In recent years, the United Nations has said that it is time for Iraqi and Kurdish officials to take responsibility for the remaining aid response. Iraq's government has closed federal camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs), but 23 IDP camps remain in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), which is also home to around a quarter of a million Syrian refugees and nine refugee camps (UNHCR, 2024). This paper considers the potential impact of the transition on Iraq's displaced and refugee populations, assessing the challenges and opportunities that displaced communities and humanitarian actors face in Iraq today.

In December 2022, the UN officially shifted from 'emergency' support to 'development' funding in Iraq, deactivating the UN-led cluster coordination system, a framework established by the UN to enhance coordination and collaboration among humanitarian actors in response to complex emergencies and disaster situations. The system aims to streamline the delivery of humanitarian assistance by organising various sectors or 'clusters' responsible for specific areas of intervention, such as food security, health, shelter and protection. Under the cluster coordination system, designated UN agencies take the lead in coordinating efforts within their respective sectors, working closely with governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and other humanitarian partners. Despite multiple actors expressing concerns over a lack of consultation, transparency, and inclusion in the UN transition process, the Camp Coordination Camp Management (CCCM) Cluster, previously led by UNHCR, was closed at the end of 2022 (UNHCR, 2022).

While UN aid has not ended completely in the country, and NGOs continue to work where they can, they now face different funding requirements. International actors are encouraging Iraqi and Kurdish authorities towards a government-led, development-guided solutions approach. This move is based on the assessment that it is time for the government to assume its responsibilities towards its citizens through development approaches by providing basic public services; but the KRI and federal authorities have different, often conflicting, approaches.

A durable solution is defined as being achieved when IDPs no longer have specific assistance and protection needs that are linked to their displacement. The Iraq Durable Solutions architecture was established in 2020, under the leadership of the Deputy Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General, Resident Coordinator, and Humanitarian Coordinator, spearheaded by the Durable Solutions Task Force. Operating alongside the existing Inter-Agency Standing Committee humanitarian clusters, the Durable Solutions Coordination Mechanism aimed to unite UN agencies, NGOs, and other stakeholders to assist the Government of Iraq in executing its National Plan for Returning IDPs Back to their Liberated Areas (Republic of Iraq, 2020). A year before the transition took place, the government issued a National Plan on Internal Displacement, launched in partnership with the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework, with the closure of camps as a key objective (UN OCHA, 2023). In June 2022, the UN Secretary-General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement identified Iraq as a focus country for durable solutions (Action Agenda on Internal Displacement, 2022).

Iraq's humanitarian transition is an important step in its post-conflict reconstruction, yet, if mismanaged, bears serious consequences. Some aid groups worry that the humanitarian transition was too fast and has left gaps for vulnerable populations in Iraq, which they are concerned Iraqi and Kurdish actors are not equipped to respond to. Furthermore, the response to IDPs and refugees in Iraq differs, with refugees having been primarily managed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), rather than the cluster system, which was coordinated by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). In seeking to answer the question of whether the Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) will be able to meet needs following the transition, this paper examines the politics and the feasibility of delivering humanitarian assistance in a country of protracted post-conflict displacement, political disagreement, and in a context of competing demands.

## Methodology

This research is fieldwork and interview-based, employing a comprehensive methodology to gather insights from key stakeholders and affected communities.

1. Literature Review: A thorough literature review was conducted to understand the historical context and UN humanitarian efforts in Iraq, previous humanitarian transitions, and identified gaps in existing research.
2. Selection of Sites: Field sites in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq were selected to ensure the inclusion of Yazidi IDPs, Iraqi IDPs, and Syrian refugees to account for different perspectives, as well as informal settlements in federal Iraq.
3. Key Informant Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants, including UN representatives, local NGOs, government officials, and community actors, to gather insights into policy changes, programming shifts, and on-ground impacts, over a period of two years.
4. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): FGDs were conducted with affected communities to capture experiences and perceptions regarding the UN humanitarian transition, illustrating clear gaps in communication.
5. Data Analysis: Qualitative data collected from interviews and FGDs was analysed, identifying trends, challenges, and points of contention around the transition.
6. Ethical Considerations: Informed consent and the safeguarding of participants' identities and locations were sought and maintained throughout.

## Humanitarian Stats in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region:

- 1,098,913 Iraqi IDPs (IOM, 2024).
- 631,174 Iraqi IDPs in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRG, 2024).
- 179,067 Iraqis in official IDP camps, before the transition (UNHCR, October 2022).<sup>1</sup>
- Approximately 160,000 Iraqis in 23 IDP camps in the KRI (UNHCR, 2024).
- 91,338 Syrians in refugee camps, out of 282,620 Syrian refugees in Iraq (UNHCR, April 2024).

## The Humanitarian Situation in Iraq

In December 2022, five years after Iraq declared victory against ISIS, the United Nations-led cluster system, responsible for coordinating with humanitarian partners in Iraq, was deactivated. The system was created in 2014 to respond to the humanitarian crisis caused by ISIS, which left 11 million in need of aid; by the time of system closure, the humanitarian situation in Iraq was significantly better than at the peak of the conflict and in the immediate aftermath. Nevertheless, there are lasting serious humanitarian needs because

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<sup>1</sup> These are the last available statistics from the final CCCM Cluster data before responsibility was handed over to the government in December 2022, including the population of Jeddah 5, which was closed in April 2023.



of protracted conflict – and ongoing displacement caused by conflict – among those who have been unable or unwilling to return to their places of origin, including members of Iraq’s Yazidi community, IDPs from former ISIS-affiliated territories, and Syrian refugees.

Over the past year, the UN has concluded its transition from providing emergency assistance towards investing in longer-term development in the country; moving away from directly supporting the majority of IDP and refugee camps as it shifts from ‘individual assistance’ to ‘system building’ (UN OCHA, 2023). Local and international NGOs have scaled back aid, and camp management now rests predominantly with Iraq’s federal and regional government authorities. Humanitarian funding in Iraq has steadily decreased in recent years, from a height of nearly \$1.8 billion in 2016 to just \$265 million in 2022. Yet needs in Iraq are complex, and support is still required (Travers, 2023). The argument that proponents of the transition make is that remaining needs are better categorised as ‘development,’ as issues of access to water, electricity, and quality education, for example, also occur among populations of Iraq that were not directly affected by the ISIS conflict.

According to the last Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) conducted in 2022, 2.5 million people in Iraq were estimated to be reliant on some form of humanitarian assistance, including almost 1.2 million IDPs and more than a quarter of a million Syrian refugees (UN OCHA, 2022). UNICEF estimates that nearly one million people (including 463,760 children) were in acute humanitarian need in Iraq in 2023 (UNICEF, 2023). Over 270,000 registered Syrian refugees live in Iraq; a third of whom are spread across nine refugee camps in the semi-autonomous KRI (UNHCR, April 2024). UNHCR Iraq estimates that approximately 300,000 Yazidi IDPs are currently displaced from Sinjar, nine years after fleeing their homes in 2014. Around 132,000 of them live across 15 camps in Duhok and Nineveh governorates, according to Duhok Directorate of Migration and Crisis Management data (July 2023).

The KRI hosts the overwhelming majority of displaced Yazidi IDPs and Syrian refugees in Iraq – with UNHCR funding currently being phased out. But thousands of non-Yazidi Iraqi IDPs are also still displaced in 2024. One of the last formal IDP camps in federal Iraq, Jeddah 5, which had been focused on transitioning Iraqis with perceived affiliation to ISIS from Syria’s Al-Hol camp, was closed in April 2023, continuing the pattern of major and rapid camp closures in federal Iraq following the defeat of ISIS (Loveluck, and Salim, 2021). Many of those still displaced live in informal sites such as farms, outbuildings, and tents across the country – including on the outskirts of Erbil, the capital of the autonomous administration (Rudaw English, 2023).

In recent years, federal government policy has been to close Iraq’s remaining IDP camps, seeking to return those remaining in displacement to their areas of origin for reasons including potential demographic shifts, budgetary constraints, and threats to national security – a concept that is complicated by local dynamics and hostile reactions to those with perceived ISIS-affiliation. Iraq’s judiciary has processed at least 20,000 terrorism-related cases; thousands of these individuals are serving sentences in Iraq, some facing execution, having been convicted under anti-terrorism laws in trials where fair trial guarantees were

not properly observed (UNAMI and OHCHR 2020). Sustainable returns in Iraq require necessary accountability efforts, including provisions to support victims of violent conflict in affected displaced communities and adequate guarantees to prevent false accusations, torture and judicial abuse against those with perceived affiliation who return to their areas of origin (Human Rights Watch, 2017). This should not stop at criminal accountability, but also include truth-telling, reconciliation and guarantees of non-repetition. An accountable judicial process has become all the more urgent as executions have resumed (HRW, 2024).

In August 2023, Iraq's Ministry of Migration and Displacement (MoMD) stressed their intention to end the issue of displacement by setting an arbitrary deadline for the return of Iraq's IDPs to their places of origin by 10 September 2023. The following month, an MoMD official told local media that those who do not return will no longer be considered IDPs (Kurdistan 24, 2023). Although residents remained in the KRI's IDP camps beyond that date, the federal government's intention to close the remaining IDP camps persists, as a new date looms (Government of Iraq, 2024). In February 2024, the Erbil office of the MoMD called for the implementation of the Iraqi government's decision to close all camps before 30 July 2024. 'The dossier and subject of IDPs must end,' Ali Abbas, spokesperson for the MoMD, told a local Kurdish media outlet (Rudaw English, 2024). The KRG's continued response is that it wants to find a solution to the issue of displacement and camps, but not through arbitrary deadlines or forced camp closures (Rudaw English, 2024). In March, the MoMD took the stand-off to Iraq's Federal Supreme Court, with MoMD Minister Evan Faeq Jabro filing a lawsuit against key KRG leadership for refusing to shut down displacement camps in the KRI (Rudaw English, 2024).

As part of their push to close camps in the KRI, the federal Council of Ministers voted in early 2024 to suspend education funding for displaced IDP children in the KRI, stopping all federally funded education ahead of the July deadline to close camps (Rudaw English, February 2024). An estimated 770,000 displaced children in Iraq were deprived of their right to education in 2023, and this decision would increase this figure (Shafaq News, 2024). Time and time again, teenagers ask how they can study abroad, or even at local universities, with no clear pathways to continue their post-camp education (interviews in camps).

## Filling the Emergency Aid Gap

According to international law, governments bear full responsibility for citizens and refugees within their territories. Humanitarians step in only when state capacity is overwhelmed, such as during the ISIS conflict. Iraqi authorities should now provide emergency support for remaining camp residents. This is complicated by the reality that Iraq's official IDP and refugee camps are mostly based in the semi-autonomous KRI, and are therefore under the authority of the KRG who look towards the federal government and international community to maintain funding, arguably shifting the displacement problem into a Kurdish problem.

'The living conditions in camps in Duhok must be improved drastically; better quality public services and the possibility to upgrade their shelters on their own, that would lead

to better inclusion in surrounding communities,' says Jean-Nicholas Beuze, the UNHCR's Representative in Iraq. In 2023, Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) services had already been taken over by authorities across most of the camps in the KRI, with UNICEF no longer maintaining a direct role as the previous cluster lead. But access to water in Iraq and the KRI is a serious and worsening issue, due to the privatisation of water and, according to the KRG, because of the lack of funding from Baghdad; this is therefore not only a humanitarian issue, but an urgent political issue, demanding quality public services that are affordable and accessible to all.

In late 2022, Dindar Zibari, the KRG's International Advocacy Coordinator, was firm that the KRG's budget shortages meant it couldn't accommodate the funding gap left by the UN's shift – blaming camp closures on federal Iraq. 'A request has been made by authorities to our international counterparts and NGOs, to continue their financial support for the wellbeing of refugees and IDPs in the camps,' he said. 'What we are seeing right now is because of the procedures that Baghdad has started in terms of the closures of the camps, and the decreasing number of international NGOs providing support and assistance.' The federal government does, still, provide some funding for humanitarian needs in the KRI, but has not allocated a specific budget to the KRG for the services they provide in camps.

The KRG has long supported the voluntary return of refugees and IDPs, and said that it will continue to uphold the principle of asylum for refugees whether or not it receives help. In a decision not linked to funding, KRG Minister of Interior Rêber Ahmed announced in July 2023 that displaced families living in Hassansham camp, which falls within KRG territory despite being in the federal Iraq province of Nineveh, could return to their nearby villages. Many families in the camp had previously been blocked from returning to their original homes and farmland (HRW, 2019).

In the remaining camps, Awat Mustafa, a representative of the Barzani Charity Foundation (BCF), says his organisation also does not expect to be filling the funding gap. BCF is aligned with the KRG and carries out work in camps; it is mainly funded by the KRG Ministry of Interior's Joint Crisis Coordination Centre (JCC) through a partnership with UNHCR. In the immediate aftermath of the UN's transition, in January 2023, BCF said it was operating in 30 IDP and refugee camps (counting a now-closed transit facility as a camp) in the KRI and serving a total of 247,616 people. 'The KRG dedicates roughly \$2.3 daily per individual for refugee support, amounting to an annual total of approximately \$842 million for about one million people,' said the Director General of the JCC, Srwa Rasul (KRG, 2024).

UNHCR Iraq's strategy is for the Iraqi authorities and the KRG to assume joint responsibility for the country's humanitarian issues. 'We have to count on the support of the Iraqi authorities themselves,' Jean-Nicholas Beuze said in the run-up to the transition. 'We have been telling the authorities about the transition since before I arrived [in November 2021].' Funding was already steadily declining. In 2021, UNHCR requested \$350 million dollars to assist Syrian refugees and displaced Iraqis, but received [just] \$200 million (Travers, 2022). As of January 2024, just 2 percent of UNHCR's funding request for Iraq had been covered (\$3.8 million out of a requested \$203.6 million) (UNHCR, 2024).

'Part of the step is trusting that government authorities will take responsibility for these people,' Beuze said in November 2022. Now, UNHCR's focus is to connect the 23 remaining IDP camps and nine Syrian refugee camps to existing public services and advocate for better refugee protection. UNHCR says it supports the closure of IDP camps as a general practice when viable alternatives are offered, including the safe and voluntary return of IDPs to their areas of origin, relocation to other communities within the country, or local integration in areas of displacement (UNHCR, 2024).

'A lot of the Yazidis have told me, "You want me to return, but there has been no real justice, or no real reconciliation around what has happened ten years ago in Sinjar",' Beuze explained to local media in March 2024 (Rudaw English, March 2024). 'We need to respect the will of different people... the trauma, and the lack of services upon return, the lack of livelihood opportunities, the lack of a sense of security means that they feel that it is not a good time to return to Sinjar. That does not mean that in the long-term they will not return, but we need to do it in a pace and timely manner according to the free and informed consent.' According to Dr Kanar Hidayat, Director General at KRG's Ministry of Planning (MoP), part of the challenge in the region has been the nature of needs. 'There are IDPs, refugees, and sometimes I have visited, yesterday, a camp and seen that people are coming back to the camps,' Hidayat explained in early 2024 (Crowdcast, 2024). 'Due to no jobs, no income, no services in their own areas, they come back to the camps.'

The media office of Iraq's Prime Minister, Mohammed Shia al-Sudani, maintains that the government is developing an integrated plan for the issue of IDP camps and, responding to pressure from the international community to facilitate durable solutions and returns, Iraq's President Abdul Latif Rashid in August 2023 restated that the government's intention is to end displacement within a timeframe that does not exceed December 2024. In March 2023, the MoMD spoke of ending displacement within an even shorter period, raising concerns, as such returns to date have not been sustainable. The subsequent closure of the Jeddah 5 IDP camp in April 2023 was in-line with what officials had been warning, but one year on, IDP camps in the KRI remain.

## The Displaced Yazidi Community

While 80 percent of the six million Iraqis who fled their homes between 2014 and 2017 have now returned, over one million remain displaced; some are struggling to reintegrate due to perceived ISIS affiliation and others, including the Yazidi community, are unable to return home due to political instability. ISIS controlled over a third of the country at one stage, and it is the area of Sinjar that successive Iraqi governments have failed to rebuild despite promises, including the 2020 Sinjar Agreement, for the normalisation of conditions in Sinjar (HRW, June 2023). The area is home to competing mayors and actors including Iraqi security forces, Kurdish separatist groups, and Yazidi, Iranian-backed and Turkish militias (Crisis Group, 2022), with most engaged actors conceding that the Sinjar Agreement is all but dead.

This year will mark a decade since approximately 400,000 Yazidis fled the genocidal campaign wrought by ISIS in Sinjar in August 2014. The transition is expected to impact those



remaining in displacement camps, with focus turning to the need to de-militarise the transnationally contested district (Ali Saleem, Zmkan, 2024). While it is federal policy to encourage the return of displaced Yazidis to Sinjar, they are aided by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) Iraq. Iraq's federal government is offering one-time cash grants of 4 million Iraqi dinars (around 3,000 USD) per family to assist displaced Yazidis with relocation or local integration, but residents argue this is not enough to sustain important, long-term support (Interviews with families in Sharya IDP camp, Kabartu IDP camp, Khanke IDP camp, Sheikhan IDP camp, and IDP settlements in Erbil). The instability amid political contestation in Sinjar continues to prevent the return of many, who are choosing to remain in their camps or informal sites, or risk travelling abroad for asylum.

Data from 2022 suggests that Yazidi returns have decreased as Turkish airstrikes add to the multitude of threats they face, and conversations across various IDP camps over a period of years suggest that a lack of public services and jobs are also key factors preventing communities from choosing to return (The New Humanitarian, 2022). The Sinjar Agreement between representatives of federal Iraq and the KRG – designed to facilitate reconstruction and stabilise the area – has not borne results. Indeed, Sinjar presents a clear case study for understanding the weaknesses of state response to humanitarian displacement in circumstances of domestic and regional power struggles, at the intersection of trafficking to Iran, Lebanon, and Turkey; and it is here that the international community should focus efforts. As the homeland of a minority group in Iraq, Sinjar has been underserved in public services, jobs, and development for decades.

Another measure deserving attention is the Yazidi [Female] Survivors Law (YSL), passed by Iraq's parliament on 1 March 2021 (Travers, 2022). After almost a year of preparations, the online application process was launched in early September 2022.<sup>2</sup> The YSL is intended to provide a reparations framework for survivors of ISIS crimes, including women and girls from several minority communities who were subjected to sexual violence and Yazidi child survivors who were abducted before the age of 18. It requires its own source of sustainable funding – and the political will – for successful implementation. In a ceremony held on 1 March 2023, the General Directorate for Survivors' Affairs (GDSA) distributed the first monthly payments under the YSL; and as of February 2024, 1,651 survivors were approved to receive payments according to figures from Iraq's Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MOLSA), with 25 billion IQD (around 19 million dollars) allocated towards the YSL in Iraq's new budget (Smith, 2024).

The implementation process of the YSL has faced criticism for a later requirement for survivors to file criminal complaints and submit investigation documents with their applications (HRW, 2023). But despite concerns, gradual progress is underway and international attention can keep this on Iraq's agenda (HRW, 2023). The YSL is a rare framework for public accountability which, should it be successful, would enable Iraqis to hold successive governments accountable. It is also a humanitarian response not imposed by international actors but ratified through Iraq's political process.

<sup>2</sup> The online link for setting an appointment at the Sinjar or Mosul offices of the General Directorate for Survivors' Affairs is <https://ysl.ur.gov.iq>

## Iraqi IDPs – The Jeddah 5 Camp Closure

In accordance with the federal government's approach to closing IDP camps, many assumed that the transition would result in the inevitable closure of the IDP file in the country. The shutting of the Jeddah 5 IDP camp in federal Iraq in 2023 raised questions about how the continued transfer of Iraqis from Al-Hol camp in northeast Syria will be processed. There are also concerns as to whether authorities – in place of UN-coordinated aid – are willing and able to resettle families with perceived affiliation to ISIS in safety and dignity in their places of origin, although the file is handled mainly by the MoMD and National Security Advisory (NSA) with additional funding.

The last official IDP camp in federal Iraq, Jeddah 5, was home to 1,566 Iraqi residents, almost two-thirds children, when orders were given to abruptly close it in 2023.<sup>3</sup> On March 23, the MoMD sent a letter to IOM Iraq, which had maintained coordination of humanitarian aid in the camp, informing them that the camp would be shut in 60 days. On March 28, the most recent camp closure plan was announced to local leaders in southern Mosul, requesting that they lead the acceptance of returnees. On April 17, security actors entered the camp and gave orders for all Iraqi IDP families to depart. Residents and aid workers describe being caught off guard by the request to leave within two days, with many families reporting leaving without cash grants, or even their few belongings (Travers, 2023).

Although sustainable reintegration after return is encompassed by a development response and is not necessarily an emergency humanitarian issue, there are risks of individuals falling through the cracks. Families who returned to Qayyarah have reported no financial aid, or follow-up contact. The government's response to Jeddah 5 and the lack of support for IDPs forced to reintegrate into their areas of origin suggests that a mix of impatience and communal mistrust continues to guide the state's reaction to those who remain displaced – an attitude in fitting with the MoMD's push for the closure of all remaining IDP camps in the KRI (Government of Iraq, 2024). UNHCR says the remaining needs of forcibly displaced populations in Iraq are largely driven by socio-economic factors, human rights deficits and the absence of the rule of law (UNHCR, 2024). Until these issues are addressed, sustainable returns seem a long way off.

'We continue to urge for solutions that fit the needs of displaced Iraqis,' Imrul Islam, Advocacy Manager for the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) in Iraq, said in April 2024. 'While most Iraqis may want to return home one day, for some, return is simply not an option in the near term. Because integration (into local communities) and resettlement (to third locations) is often deprioritised, many IDPs have been forced to live in "informal sites" on the outskirts of cities, effectively excluded from services in unsafe conditions.'

Access to documentation is one major challenge to dignified returns, and requires urgent attention, with around one million Iraqi IDPs and returnees estimated to lack civil documentation (NRC, 2022). Among households previously living in Jeddah 5, data suggests

<sup>3</sup> This is according to International Organization for Migration (IOM) data as of mid-April 2023, before the closure of Jeddah 5 camp. UNHCR Data earlier back, from 10 November 2022, implies that the camp had already reduced by over half at this point.

that at least 13 percent were missing key civil documentation, with nearly one in five households reporting that a lack of documentation was due to civilian and/or security actors' refusal to issue documentation (REACH Initiative, 2023). In an already vulnerable situation where accessing basic services is a struggle, IDPs feel abandoned. NGOs in Iraq struggle to offer legal assistance with lack of access to documentation and emergency cash for protection in a dwindling funding environment where development actors have yet to step up (Interviews with returnees).

While the MoMD promises a settlement grant, those who have returned recently report not receiving any funds, highlighting discrimination between different IDP groups depending on the date of their return. This is both unfair and challenges the sustainability of these returns, where some may decide to return to camps or informal settlements to benefit from these grants. Progress will depend on whether and how the Council of Ministers' proposed package on IDP solutions is implemented, including an agreement to reserve two percent of new public service positions for IDPs, and a Ministry of Transport programme to provide taxi jobs for those who return to their areas of origin (Government of Iraq, 2024).

## The Syrian Refugee Population

An oft-forgotten yet substantial percentage of those still requiring humanitarian assistance in Iraq are Syrian refugees, displaced by conflict in their own country and seeking safety and a more stable existence in the KRI (NRC, 2023). More than 245,000 registered Syrian refugees live in the KRI; over 90,000 reside across nine refugee camps (UNHCR, April 2024). 72,000 Syrian refugees in Iraq were reliant on life-saving food and cash assistance in 2022 (WFP, 2022).

In just one refugee camp – Kawergosk – UNHCR handed responsibilities over to local authorities in mid-2022, as it began shifting priorities in Iraq (Rudaw English, 2022). Inam Jabali Jasm, Kawergosk's Camp Manager and BCF employee, described the steady decline in international provision since she took up the role three years ago. Funding has shifted, services are reducing, and most of those in Kawergosk have lived in their make-shift homes for over ten years, she explained in November 2022. In Kawergosk, Ayaz Dara Ahmed, 28, explained how the UN-funded programme that used to provide his family with fuel allowances had been cut. 'The funding started to shift before COVID,' he said in February 2023. 'During COVID, the NGOs didn't pay any attention to Syrian refugee camps... afterwards, the WFP stopped its support – now, fewer than five percent of the people in Kawergosk receive support from them.'

Ayaz has lived in Kawergosk for almost a decade with his parents and younger siblings after fleeing their home in northern Syria. There, he was just a few months away from completing his studies in veterinary medicine, but has struggled to find work in the KRI, and feels his future in the region is increasingly uncertain. A visit to the camp in February 2024 found an even more concerning situation, including a lack of water supplies. 'If we continue like this, we will see huge waves of illegal immigration in the coming months,'

Ayaz says. His mother, Nafia, used to work in the camp as a nurse before the health centre was closed, a decision the family attributes to UNICEF funding cuts. With services now managed by local authorities, they need to leave the camp to seek treatment. 'I wish the situation would stabilise in Syria so we could return home or be recognised as legal refugees here so we could begin living our lives,' Nafia says. In a survey conducted by UNHCR in 2023, 94 percent of Iraq's Syrian refugees indicated that they did not intend to return to Syria in the next year (UNHCR, 2024).

With the closure of previous camp-based services, the transition seems to have encouraged a long-standing approach among international actors, especially in the KRI, towards local inclusion of Syrian refugees and treatment on par with the rest of the population. Most services are provided by the KRG, including education, healthcare, water and electricity. As with any displaced community, some Syrians have fared better than others, with the overwhelming percentage settling outside camps. Yet, of these self-reliant individuals, many report facing exploitative labour conditions and difficulties registering for residency permits to settle in Iraq (Travers, 2022). UNHCR continues to advocate for the further inclusion of refugees into public services and policies. A major concern among Syrians is their lack of recognition as refugees and their path to citizenship in Iraq – especially for children, over 40,000 of whom are growing up in the KRI – and a perception that they are used for political expedience in the KRI. Iraq is not party to the 1951 Refugee Convention and lacks a comprehensive refugee legal framework, meaning refugees are provided with humanitarian residency permits instead. A humanitarian residency permit issued by the KRG amounts to their recognition as refugees, yet it is rare that countries have a path for refugees to become citizens.

## The Impact of The Transition on NGOS – and Broader Concerns

Many NGO workers and those involved in the transition from a local aid perspective have expressed concerns with the pace of the transition and the impact of this decision on their ability to deliver aid. Others see new opportunities, and a chance to operate differently.

The decision to wind down the humanitarian response does not represent many local views, but some NGOs have adapted to the situation better than others. Taban Shoresh OBE, founder of the non-profit organisation, The Lotus Flower, which supports women and girls impacted by conflict and displacement in the KRI, says her NGO has applied for development funding for the past few years, in light of changing funding streams. 'Lotus Flower focused on development from day one, working on long-term and more sustainable projects out of the camps,' she said in June 2023, acknowledging how difficult it is to now operate purely within camp settings. 'The funding pool and funding requirements from donors dictate where we can go,' she explained. 'Iraq is pushing people back and out. But with no homes provided, or even water and electricity in certain places, where will they go next?'

IRC Iraq has also raised concerns over the speed of the transition, 'and the way in which it will affect the most vulnerable Iraqis post-conflict,' as expressed by Samar Abboud, IRC Iraq Country Director in Autumn 2022. 'Without proper coordination and communication between stakeholders, thousands of people in need will be at risk of losing access to services and their ability to enjoy their basic rights will be threatened.'



Commenting on the situation again in January 2024, Abboud acknowledged issues with how the transition process initially unfolded when the first Durable Solutions Framework was established (Crowdcast, 2024). ‘Usually, you hand over to a government,’ Abboud said, explaining that there was not significant engagement with the government. ‘Until the government is ready to provide these [humanitarian and other] services, then the NGOs and UN and government need to still coordinate together,’ Abboud added (Crowdcast, 2024).

‘The drawdown of the humanitarian response and the dissolution of the cluster coordination system largely unfolded against a backdrop of overall political gridlock, which set the stage for an incredibly difficult transition and increased the likelihood of future instability,’ Kristin Perry, Policy and Advocacy Manager at SEED Foundation, a locally based NGO in the KRI, said in June 2023. SEED pairs urgent, life-saving interventions with long-term efforts to enhance institutional capacity and support systems strengthening. But Perry notes that this approach is not necessarily reflective of how the aid sector operates, or even what the constraints of most humanitarian funding may allow. ‘One of the challenges with the aid sector is that we tend to function very reactively. We’re quick to mobilise and deploy resources to manage an active crisis, but once we enter that transitional period between emergency response and development, lines of accountability to affected populations – and responsibility and ownership of the response – can become blurred. Available funding, technical expertise, and international attention can be abruptly rerouted in response to emerging crises elsewhere.’

The achievement of durable solutions was established as a priority during the transition and handover from international actors to government, Perry explained, and the Government of Iraq responded by escalating camp closures. SEED has long been concerned about premature and forced camp closures, as returns to date ‘have not been broadly durable or sustainable’ – leading, in many instances, to heightened vulnerabilities and secondary displacement. There is also international pressure to facilitate repatriations from Al-Hol and elsewhere, but this does not appear to be matched by commensurate demand for community preparation programming and reintegration support. In addition to creating an untenable situation for returnees, Perry flagged that this also poses challenges for local residents, many of whom receive little notice of the return of families with perceived ISIS affiliation to their areas, and may struggle to navigate the layers of trauma and fear associated with their presence. ‘If you establish the goals without clarifying the appropriate mechanism to get there, roadblocks and deficits are inevitable, particularly in a context marked by insecurity and mistrust, and weak accountability processes,’ Perry added.

While Perry believes that a transition would have been inevitable at some point due to the short-term nature of humanitarian aid, she says the process has not been sufficiently reflective of local voices. ‘Of course there is a need to prioritise aid in the face of limited resources, but we need to ask critical questions about the impact of rapidly withdrawing aid infrastructure from contexts that may have become functionally reliant on it. What deficits, vulnerabilities, or inequalities might that create? Obviously urgent short-term support is needed in instances, but we need to be mindful of how these interventions interface with existing systems and processes and be intentional about leveraging them in a way that supports local leadership, ensures sustainability, and minimises the impact of withdrawal.’

'I see our role as the UN moving from that UN-owned system to a nationally owned system,' UNFPA Iraq Deputy Representative, Garik Hayrapetyan said at an event in January 2024, adding that this system should include the necessary layers to provide for specific humanitarian approaches at the federal, local, and on-the-ground levels. Following the deactivation of the UN-led cluster system in 2022, SEED has worked with UNFPA Iraq to establish a new coordination mechanism for GBV protection in the KRI to replace the former UN-led National GBV Sub-Cluster. It now co-leads the coordination with MOLSA, representing a potential new model for the transitional period (SEED Foundation, 2023). Hayrapetyan highlighted the success of the new mechanism, attributing this to the KRG's political and financial prioritisation of the issue of GBV, in contrast with federal Iraq, combined with the availability of capable, local institutions like SEED, who he said could push the interim transitional mechanism process forward (Crowdcast, 2024).

## Fears of Being Left behind – and Future Steps

One of the stated goals of the transition was to move towards more durable solutions. However, as of May 2024, it is difficult to conclude that this has been achieved. While Iraq is, comparatively, one of the better-engaged countries in the region when considering proposals to support IDPs, there is still no credible long-term plan to ensure the safety and provision of those still displaced. The MoMD's intention to see the permanent closure of IDP camps in the KRI means residents are feeling pressured to leave camps as services reduce. Syrian refugees report facing similar pressures, and a lack of hope for a long-term future in Iraq. With no clear path home, they, at least, look set to remain in the KRI for now.

The UN says it will continue to support the authorities' efforts through other means than direct humanitarian assistance, and that it is working with authorities to allocate more of the country's budget for the inclusion of refugees into public services, such as healthcare and education. But while the nature of humanitarian assistance is being adapted in Iraq, many of the vulnerabilities remain. Post-conflict states require the political will and incentive to overcome their dependency on international aid, and Iraq's political leaders, including the KRG, must accept their shared responsibility for providing services and a path out of the camps, and mitigating the risks associated with a mismanaged transition. They also deserve encouragement to meet these challenges, and to be accountable for them.

Iraq's humanitarian crisis did not begin in 2014, nor did it end with the defeat of ISIS; historic conflict has inevitably impeded the healthy development of accountable institutions. Many of the remaining needs are not of a humanitarian nature, but rather due to social and economic neglect, related to lack of development, corruption, absence of rule of law, and human rights. Yet the government is moving to reduce international presence in Iraq. The decision in 2023 to terminate the UNITAD mandate in September 2024 alarmed many Yazidi and survivor organisations in Iraq. Equally, the independent mandate review of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) in November 2023 came at the request of Iraq's government, mandated by the Security Council. In May 2024, the Iraqi government formally asked the UN to wind down its political mission in the country by the end of 2025.

With the country no longer the pressing priority among the humanitarian community, Iraq's displaced and refugee populations are increasingly reliant on regional and federal authorities faced with the challenge of maintaining support for those in need, alongside other governance demands and structural limitations. With few exceptions, most actors interviewed for this paper described the transition process as too fast. Despite discussions since 2017, the decision to deactivate the humanitarian cluster system was endorsed only in August 2022, leaving a mere four months for implementation, exacerbated by Iraq's delays in forming a new government and finalising the federal budget, which hindered the handover of coordination responsibilities to government counterparts. But the question of how international and localised humanitarian aid should operate in post-conflict states, whose response is undermined by corruption, unresolved communal mistrust, intra-party power struggles and regional influence, is not time-bound.

Since the defeat of ISIS in 2017, Iraq has overcome compounding challenges to address the aftermath of protracted conflict and displacement already created by the 2003 US-led invasion. The social upheaval of the past two decades has seen some of Iraq's poorest communities elevated to positions of political power and extreme wealth, and forced formerly middle-class and prosperous families into poverty, or worse. Considering the findings on Iraq's humanitarian transition, perhaps the most helpful policy recommendation would be to prevent deteriorating the situation further.

Further research could link this study to the political dynamics in the country and the aid response in Iraq and beyond, as it continues to operate in response to humanitarian crises globally.

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Kawergosk Syrian Refugee Camp, Kurdistan Region of Iraq, 2023.

Source: Alannah Travers

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