

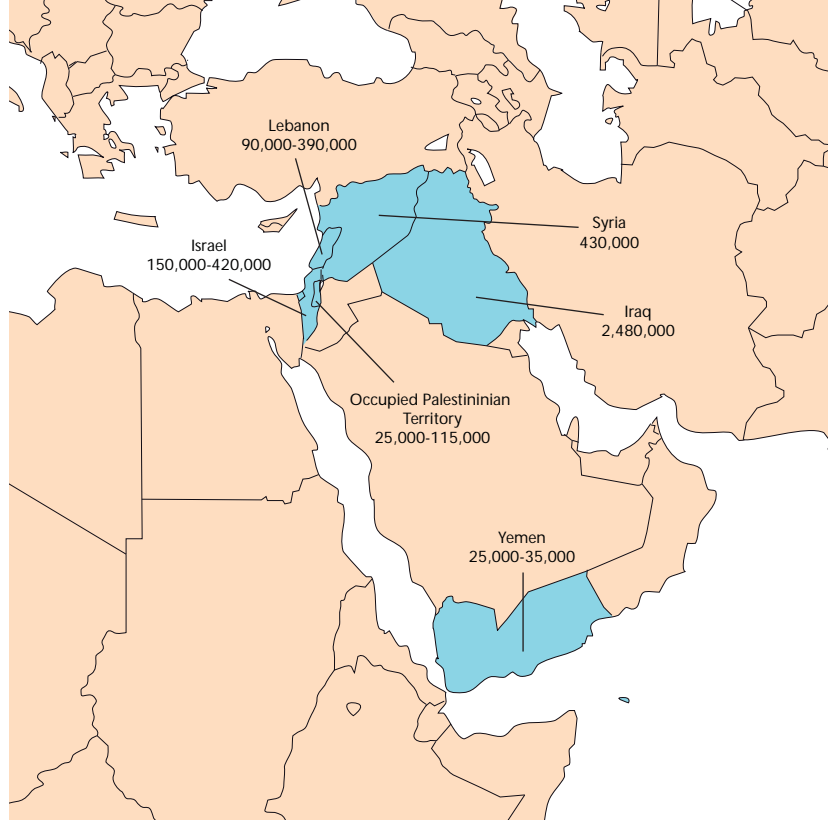
Political stalemates and  
deepening humanitarian  
crises



## Internal Displacement in the Middle East

The Middle East region continued in 2007 to host diverse groups of internally displaced people with differing levels of humanitarian needs, some newly displaced by conflict and violence, and others who had been waiting for generations for a durable solution to their plight. It was a year in which continuing violence and deepening humanitarian crises brought international attention to displacement across the region. Ongoing conflicts and accompanying widespread human rights violations causing large-scale forced displacement included the internal conflict and sectarian violence across Iraq, intermittent fighting in northern Yemen, generalised violence and the continued effects of occupation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT), and internal conflict between the Lebanese army and militant extremists based in the Nahr al Bared camp in northern Lebanon.

In a number of countries, people were displaced in a context of regional political instability, poverty and underdevelopment. New displacements overshadowed situations of longer-term displacement in Syria, Iraq, OPT, Lebanon, and Israel. In these countries people



were unable to return home or find other durable solutions due to numerous factors, including the disputed sovereignty and occupation of their areas of origin; difficulties in accessing compensation for lost property and asserting property ownership; the continuing heritage of conflict including damaged infrastructure and unexploded ordnance; and obstructive regional and international policies.

### Developments in internal displacement

At the end of 2007, the Middle East was home to an estimated IDP population of 3.5 million, including 2,480,000 in Iraq, 430,000 in Syria and up to 390,000 in Lebanon, 115,000 in OPT, 35,000 in Yemen, and between 150,000 and 420,000 in Israel. The region hosted nearly twice as many refugees, with the refugee population passing seven million as over one million people fled across the border from Iraq. The figures for many of these countries, however, were not based on systematic national IDP assessments during the year, and in many instances they remained subject to dispute.

### New displacements and ongoing conflicts

During 2007, up to 900,000 people in the region were newly internally displaced, as existing conflicts intensified and new ones flared up. In some cases the displacement was only temporary, and in others more long-lasting.

700,000 of these new displacements were in Iraq, where large numbers of people continued throughout 2007 to be forced to leave their homes and communities. Violations of international humanitarian law were perpetrated by all parties to the conflict, and inter-communal violence following the February 2006 attack on the Al-Askari shrine in Samarra continued through much of 2007. There were signs that the massive rate of displacement began to abate towards the end of the year, and some families were reported to have returned home. However it was unclear whether this was due to improved security in certain areas resulting from the "surge" strategy of the US-led Multi-National

◀ A displaced girl in Northern Iraq.  
*Photo: Astrid Sehl, NRC*



Force and Iraqi Security Forces, or because IDPs had exhausted their funds and coping mechanisms and the sectarian homogenisation of previously mixed areas had been completed<sup>38</sup>. Estimated numbers of these early returnees varied. The Iraqi government reported the return of 6,000 displaced families, principally back to the governorate of Baghdad. Though there was a measurable improvement in the security situation in late 2007, the considerable level of ongoing violence cast doubt on the sustainability of any widespread return process, and UN agencies and the Iraqi authorities generally agreed that the conditions were not yet appropriate for large-scale returns. Particularly intense displacement due to sectarian violence continued in mixed areas, for example in Baghdad and Diyala, as both Shiite and Sunni Arabs fled their homes for safety in areas where their sect was in the majority. Other groups, including Kurds, Christians, Palestinians, and Sabean-Mandean, also continued to be forced from their homes by intimidation and threats.

There were also situations of secondary displacement in areas of Iraq from which 1.2 million people had been displaced by Saddam Hussein's government. For example, the return of Kurds to Kirkuk and surrounding areas led to the displacement of the Arabs who had originally been relocated there, while some Kurdish returnees were displaced for a second time. In December 2007, Turkish military incursions against the Kurdish PKK in northern Iraq provided another source of displacement for around 4,500 people in the north-

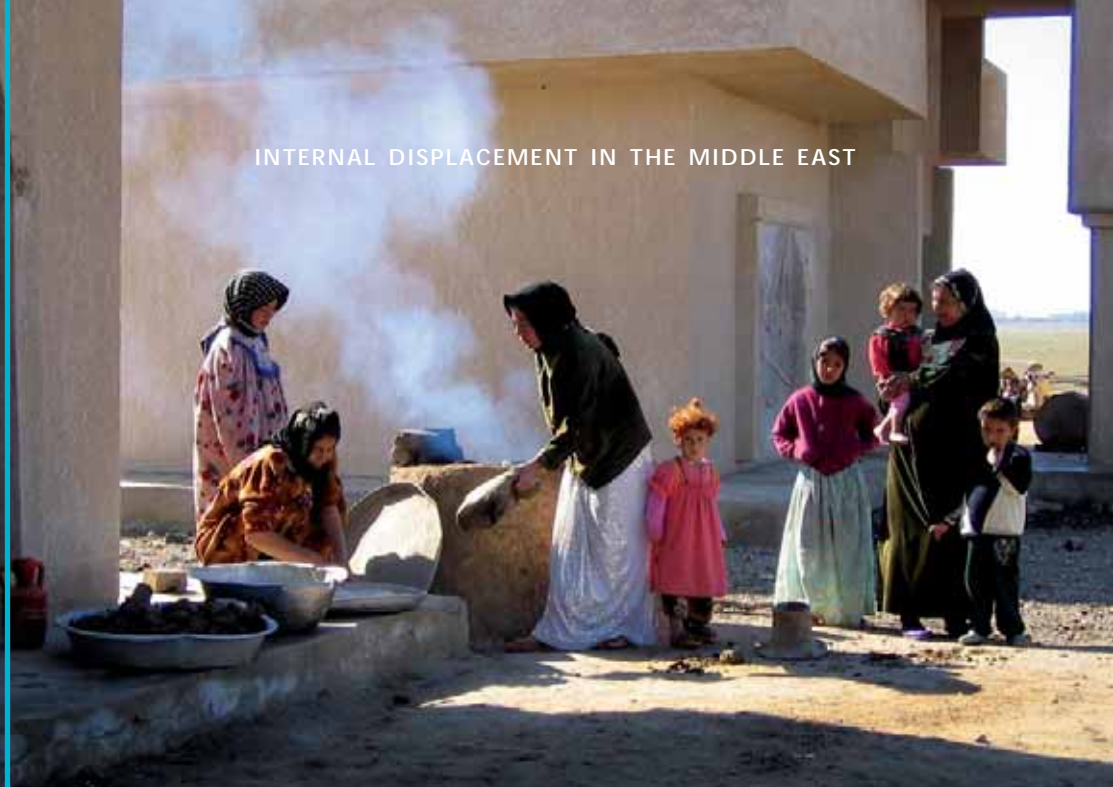
ern governorate of Dohuk, and highlighted the risk of further displacement in Iraq's Kurdish regions.

Elsewhere, fighting in Yemen between the government and followers of the late Shi'ite dissident Sheikh Badr Eddin al-Houthi displaced tens of thousands of people in the northern province of Saada. The number of people affected was difficult to gauge as the conflict made the remote mountainous area even more inaccessible, but a UN assessment suggested between 25,000 and 27,000 people displaced in late 2007.

In northern Lebanon, the army's siege of Nahr al Bared camp for Palestinian refugees in the summer of 2007, which aimed to force out members of the militant Fatah al-Islam group, led more than 30,000 residents to flee into other camps including the nearby Beddawi camp. Nahr al Bared was virtually destroyed by the fighting, and the vast majority of its displaced inhabitants remained at the end of 2007 in other camps, with overcrowding and competition for scarce resources exacerbating tensions between communities. By early November, between 700 and 1,000 families had returned to Nahr al Bared, of which only 500 families were considered to have returned permanently. Meanwhile, in southern Lebanon and in Beirut, perhaps 100,000 people remained displaced from the 2006 war between Israel and Hizbollah which at the time had forced up to one million people from their homes, or in some cases from the civil war which ended in 1990.

Insecurity continued to cause displacement in Israel and OPT. Sporadic rocket attacks from Gaza struck

◀ Informal IDP settlements  
in Diyala Province, Iraq,  
October 2007.  
*Photos: NCCI*



Israeli towns through the year, and in May forced around 10,000 inhabitants of Sderot to seek refuge in Eliat. They returned after the immediate threat had receded, although Sderot remained subject to continuing rocket attacks up to the end of 2007.

Policies implemented by the government of Israel led to the displacement of two distinct groups. Bedouin communities in the Negev region living in “unrecognised villages” (making up about half of the Negev’s Bedouin population of 140,000) continued to risk displacement due to the government’s five-year plan to move them into permanent settlements. In May, some 100 residents of the village of Al Twazil were made homeless when the authorities demolished their tents and shacks.

In OPT, the deteriorating security situation and policies of occupation including restrictions on people’s movement, the demolition of homes and appropriation of land continued to cause displacement. There are no reliable figures on the number of people displaced in this way, but over 44 per cent of respondents to a 2006 survey seriously feared losing their home or their land and being displaced or uprooted<sup>39</sup>. The construction of the West Bank Wall, and its associated regime of land and property confiscations, permit systems, check-points and gates, also continued during 2007 to force people to move as their lives and livelihoods became untenable. More than 56 per cent of the Wall was built by November 2007, including 64 per cent in Jerusalem. The Palestinian Bureau for Statistics had estimated that

at the end of May 2005 nearly 15,000 people had already been displaced since the start of construction in 2002, and it was predicted in 2006 that the continued construction of the Wall would affect 27,520 Palestinian residents west of the Wall, 247,800 people east of the Wall who would be completely or partially surrounded, and 222,500 in East Jerusalem<sup>40</sup>.

### Ongoing displacement and return

Return movements of those displaced prior to 2007 remained limited throughout the Middle East in 2007. Insecurity, destruction of homes and infrastructure in areas recovering from conflict, and difficulties in re-establishing livelihoods have remained significant obstacles for many.

Virtually all the Israelis displaced in mid-2006 by rocket attacks from Gaza had returned by the end of 2006, as had the 300,000 who fled Hizbollah rocket attacks on northern areas. In Lebanon, people displaced by the 2006 war continued steadily to return to their homes in the south of the country. By late 2007, an estimated 90 per cent had returned leaving between 40,000 and 70,000 people still displaced. A significant percentage of those who returned though were at risk of being displaced again due to the devastation caused by the war, and the continuing presence of unexploded cluster bombs. In Beirut and its suburbs, most people displaced since the 2006 war or before were living in overcrowded areas without essential health and social services, with the poorest in makeshift shelters.

The West Bank Wall dividing the Palestinian community of Abu Dis in East Jerusalem, June 2007.

Photo: Anne Paq, Activestills



### Minority groups, discrimination and displacement

Throughout the region minorities faced a greater risk of being displaced, on the basis of their identity. In Iraq, minorities were singled out. As well as Sunni and Shi'a families living in communities in which they were a minority, Palestinians, Christians, Assyrians, Sabeen Mandeans, Shabaks and Feali Kurds all became victims of violent displacement. Inter-ethnic tensions increased between some groups, for example between Arab, Turkoman, Kurdish and Yezidis communities, while others such as the Marsh Arabs remained particularly impoverished and marginalised.

In Yemen, certain minorities were particularly affected by the ongoing conflict in the north, such as a small Jewish minority which was evacuated from Saada to the capital Sanaa following threats by the Houthi tribe, while in Israel, displaced Arab Israeli and Bedouin communities continued to be affected by discriminatory policies.

### IDPs' rights and related protection needs

#### Security and freedom of movement

New or continuing conflict in several countries in the region severely restricted the physical security and freedom of movement of displaced people and people at risk of displacement. In Iraq, the widespread violence affected the personal security of Iraqis across the country, and most displaced people cited the general violence and sectarian attacks and intimidation as the

primary reasons for their displacement. Local armed groups maintained a climate of fear, and kidnappings, extra-judicial killings, and destruction of properties led to large-scale movements of communities. Violence between Sunni and Shiite groups predominated, while attacks against members of minorities including Christians and Palestinian refugees were reported. There were continued reports of members of the Multi-National Force and Iraqi security forces using excessive force and committing human rights violations, enforcing severe restrictions on civilian movements, evicting residents and demolishing their homes during military operations.

The fighting in Yemen's northern province of Saada in mid-2007 gave rise to concerns for the security of affected communities. There were also concerns for humanitarian workers in the area, particularly after an ICRC/Yemeni Red Crescent convoy carrying relief supplies for displaced families was attacked in May 2007.

In northern Lebanon, the army's siege of the Nahr al Bared camp, which aimed to force out Fatah al-Islam militants, presented immediate danger to thousands of residents inside the camp, who were for periods unable to escape the bombardment as the casualty count grew. Eventually they were able to seek refuge in other overcrowded refugee camps in Saida and Beirut. When they sought to return to Nahr El Bared many faced harassment at army checkpoints.

Policies driven by authorities' quest for security in some cases increased the insecurity of IDPs and people at risk of displacement. Displaced communities in

Iraq faced increasing restrictions to their movements, and by the end of 2007, at least 11 governorates had restricted the entry of IDPs, and in certain cases governorates refused to register IDPs coming either from within their territory or from other areas. These restrictions coincided with growing tensions over increasingly scarce resources between displaced and host communities. In some cases, these measures were reportedly designed to control the demographic make-up of governorates and hence the outcome of future elections. In OPT, where security continued to deteriorate during 2007, restrictions on move-

ment between sections of the West Bank and between the West Bank and Gaza were unprecedented in their "scope, duration and in the severity of the damage"<sup>41</sup>.

Mines and other unexploded ordnance continued to plague the region. Unexploded ordnance affected the security and movements of civilians in Yemen, in south Lebanon, in the area of separation between the occupied Golan and Syria proper, and in Iraq where an unknown number of unexploded munitions presented a lethal legacy of conflicts dating back to the Second World War.

### The Middle East's protracted displacement situations

Various groups in the Middle East had in 2007 been living in displacement for many years, and in some cases several decades, and their prospects of returning or finding other durable solutions remained limited.

In Lebanon, significant numbers of people had still found no durable solutions since being displaced during the civil war which ended in 1990 or the Israeli occupation of parts of the south until 2000; their return was blocked by a lack of adequate compensation and reconciliation processes. In the absence of any reliable survey, estimates of their numbers ranged from less than 17,000 to as many as 600,000.

In Iraq an estimated 1,200,000 people remained internally displaced after being forced from their homes during the forty-year rule of Saddam Hussein. The policy of "Arabisation" had led to the expulsion of non-Arabs including Kurds, Assyrians and Turkmen from the oil-rich region of Kirkuk, while the government had also uprooted Shiites in southern provinces, including Marsh Arabs and groups who had opposed the government during the 1991 Gulf War. The 2003 invasion and the subsequent collapse of the government enabled some of these people to return home, but many people's hopes were still frustrated in 2007 due to lack of housing and infrastructure in their areas of origin and the general deterioration of security in the country.

Other groups were still trapped in displacement forty years or more after they were first forced from

their homes. In Syria the situation of Syrian Arabs displaced from the Golan Heights during the Six Day War in 1967 remained unresolved, with their eventual return tied to political developments in the region. The Syrian government estimated that around 430,000 people remained displaced in 2007, including the descendants of the original IDPs. They had largely integrated in their current places of residence across Syria, but many continued to express a wish to return to the Golan, while contact with their relatives still living in the occupied Golan became increasingly restricted.

Another largely undocumented group was the 120,000 Syrian Kurds who had lost their nationality rights in the early 1960s, of whom many also lost rights to their property, which was seized without compensation. The nature of the displacement and the current IDP status of these stateless people remained uncertain, but it was clear that they had only limited freedom of movement and irregular access to public services, livelihoods, political and legal processes and property ownership.

There was no change in the situation of the tens of thousands of Arab villagers in Israel displaced since the 1948 war. Many still wanted to return to their original homes, but their prospects of return were dim. In the south of the country, Bedouin communities, many already displaced for several generations, endured continuing pressure to leave their land. Based on various considerations, estimates of their numbers ranged between 150,000 and 420,000.



Distributing water bottles to IDPs in Baghdad, September 2007.  
*Photo: NCCI*

### Security of displaced women

Displaced women and girls in the Middle East faced particular risks and challenges in Yemen, OPT and Lebanon, and particularly in Iraq. Female headed households were extremely vulnerable, with many displaced after fathers and husbands were killed, as witnessed in Iraq as well as in Lebanon. The situation for women in OPT continued to deteriorate through 2007, with the increased level of violence between political factions contributing to the further “collapse of women’s protection”<sup>42</sup>. There was a notable rise in unattended births and miscarriages. Primarily owing to closures and delays at checkpoints and the barrier, almost 30 per cent of pregnant women in the West Bank had difficulties accessing appropriate medical care, with at least 68 pregnant Palestinian women giving birth at checkpoints since 2000, leading to the death of four women and 34 miscarriages<sup>43</sup>.

Displaced women in Lebanon reportedly suffered from poor access to health services, psychosocial support and legal assistance, and they continued to be exposed to various forms of violence, and principally domestic violence, after the 2006 war ended<sup>44</sup>. Palestinian women in Nahr al Bared camp also indicated poor access to support services and high exposure to violence including harassment by members of the army<sup>45</sup>.

Protection of women’s rights in Iraq continued to deteriorate, as their legal status and protection mechanisms were undermined by increasing religious extremism in some areas. There was an increase in reported incidents of intimidation and displacement of women and children linked to sectarian and generalised violence. Violence against women included “honour crimes”, rape, domestic violence and sexual exploitation, while reports in some governorates indicated that groups of displaced women had been forced into prostitution as a source of income for their families. In Basra alone, Iraq’s second largest city, 133 women were killed by late 2007 as a result of “honour killings” or by religious extremists for “violating Islamic teachings”<sup>46</sup>.

### Violence towards displaced children

Across the region, displaced children were exposed to violence and trauma during their displacement with little access to psychosocial support. Those that could still access education endured overcrowding and in some cases discrimination in schools.

Many of Iraq’s displaced children witnessed extreme violence and intimidation towards parents, families and friends. An average 25,000 children per month were displaced in 2007, and by the end of the year, approximately 75,000 children were living in camps or temporary shelters. Hundreds of children lost their

lives or were injured, and thousands more were drawn into child labour, association with armed groups or homelessness as their family's wage-earner was kidnapped or killed.

In Lebanon, children bore the brunt of the 2006 war, with over 400,000 displaced, while the siege of Nahr al Bared alone caused the displacement of over 5,000 children. They continued to show signs of trauma and stress in 2007, as did children exposed to conflict related violence in Israel and OPT. Children returning to their homes in the south of Lebanon were also at risk from unexploded ordnance, and by the start of 2007, at least 90 children had been injured and four killed in explosions since the war ended. Similarly, children in families who had returned to Nahr al Bared camp were at high risk due to unexploded ordnance and collapsing buildings.

## IDPs' access to the basic necessities of life

The access to basic necessities such as food, drinking water and shelter of the Middle East's displaced populations varied widely in 2007. While in OPT, and most notably Iraq, the humanitarian crisis facing IDPs deepened, some long-term displaced groups, such as Syrians displaced from the Golan, shared the living conditions of their non-displaced neighbours. Meanwhile, IDP communities such as those in Yemen and Lebanon faced specific challenges in achieving adequate living conditions.

It was only in March 2007 that the UN acknowledged the humanitarian crisis in Iraq, through the Secretary General's opening remarks to a meeting on the International Compact with Iraq<sup>47</sup>. Military operations and the escalation of sectarian conflict following years of sanctions and war led to a continuing deterioration of living conditions, and the public health, water, sanitation and electricity infrastructure were insufficient to meet the basic needs of the population. Many Iraqis had been forced to flee to areas where public services were limited or non-existent, and as displacement lengthened, host communities increasingly struggled to share limited resources with displaced populations. Displaced people reported that a wide range of their needs were unmet, including shelter, food and employment, followed by water, proper sanitation, and health care, legal assistance and

education. One of the priority needs identified by IDPs across the country was housing, with many living in temporary housing which left them extremely vulnerable to homelessness and secondary displacement. The threat of eviction grew for those renting housing whose resources were dwindling, and for those in public buildings or property, and in some areas groups of IDPs continued to be evicted to make way for the return of others, despite the lack of alternative shelter. The effects of the lack of income grew more acute throughout Iraq and particularly in the south, and IDPs increasingly faced destitution.

14 per cent of Iraqi IDPs assessed by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) through 2007 reported having no access to health care services, and one in three could not access medicines that they needed, while specialised care was even more difficult to obtain since many specialists had fled the country. The lack of sanitation and water forced some communities to rely on lakes, rivers or irrigation ditches for drinking water<sup>48</sup>; the cholera outbreak which affected 11 governorates in spring 2007 illustrated the impact of the deteriorating conditions. Much of the Iraqi population depended upon the government's Public Distribution System (PDS) food rations, but access to these distributions was especially difficult for displaced families unable to transfer ration locations. Only 22 per cent of all IDPs assessed by IOM in 2007 had regular access to PDS food rations, while only 56 per cent had even irregular access.

In Lebanon the cessation of hostilities in 2006 prompted large-scale returns, but in many affected areas, the unsafe and unsustainable conditions led to further displacements which reportedly affected 60 to 70 per cent of returnees. The widespread destruction in south Lebanon and in areas of Beirut made living conditions untenable, and unexploded munitions presented a constant danger and prevented farmers from accessing fields and collecting harvests. Though significant rebuilding took place through the year, much remained to be done by mid-2007.

There was no significant improvement in the living conditions of Israel's IDPs. The 70,000 Arab Bedouins residing in unrecognised villages continued to have difficulties in access to health services, water and electricity supplies and sewage facilities. In many towns and villages, long-term IDPs continued to live according to their original village, and many lived in the most impoverished and overcrowded neighbour-

hoods and received lower quality of services than those in other villages. The policy of maintaining separate “sectors” for Jewish and Arab people, in particular in the areas of housing and education, continued to heighten the divide in living standards; the lower level of education for Arab citizens continued to be a barrier to their employment, and their average income was significantly lower than that of Jewish citizens.

In OPT, there was little information on the specific living conditions of the displaced population; however 2007 witnessed continued decline of the economy, rising unemployment and poverty. The World Bank reported in mid-2007 that close to 30 per cent of all households in OPT were by 2007 living below the national poverty line, while in Gaza, 67 per cent lived below the official poverty line. In Gaza, 80 per cent relied on UN food aid<sup>49</sup>.

The World Food Programme reported that by the end of 2007, just over half of OPT’s food needs had been met. Access to medical care for Palestinians was limited due to several factors including the checkpoint and closure regime<sup>50</sup>. Shortages of essential drugs and other medical supplies were recurring and in mid-November the World Health Organization reported that Gaza had less than one month’s supply of essential drugs and necessary medical supplies. Owing to a lack of fuel and spare parts, public health conditions declined steeply as water and sanitation services struggled to function. A clear testimony to the severity of the crisis was attested in March 2007 when waste water from a treatment plant flooded the nearby Bedouin village of Um al Nasser, killing five, injuring 25 and causing the temporary displacement of over 2,000 people<sup>51</sup>.

Health care in Israel is among the most advanced in the region, yet access for displaced communities varied. Emergency services were quick to assist the communities displaced in May 2007 by rockets attacks from Gaza, including IDPs suffering from anxiety and panic attacks. The services provided to Arab Israeli towns were generally inferior, and many lacked emergency facilities. Health indicators reflect wide disparities, for example in infant mortality and life expectancy rates<sup>52</sup>, while Arab Bedouins also reported continuing government neglect of their health needs.

### Displaced children’s right to education

Throughout the region, displaced children’s access to education proved difficult if not impossible. In Iraq,

many of the 220,000 displaced children of primary school age had their education interrupted, as lack of infrastructure, cost and insecurity kept attendance low. Accessing schools in areas dominated by the opposing sect was nearly impossible; registration remained subject to availability of documentation; and the cost of supplies, books and transport from remote camps was often prohibitive. Schools were overcrowded and reportedly unable or unwilling to let IDP children attend.

In Lebanon, though most if not all children returned to school by 2007, the ongoing reconstruction meant that the capacity of the few undamaged buildings to host schoolrooms was strained. Children displaced from Nahr El Bared camp had to attend overcrowded temporary schools in Beddawi camp or near Nahr El Bared.

In Israel, Sderot’s schools were closed only temporarily following the rocket attacks in mid-2007 from Gaza, with some students leaving the town and others afraid to leave their homes, but access to education in the Occupied Palestinian Territory continued to be seriously affected by the occupation. Meanwhile, concerns and claims of discrimination persisted over the low investment in education in “unrecognised” Bedouin villages in Israel’s Negev.

## Documentation and property rights

The lack of documentation and means to assert property rights presented immediate problems to IDPs in the Middle East. However, access to land and property for many in Iraq, OPT, Syria and Israel continued to depend on elusive political solutions.

Throughout Iraq, displaced people faced difficulties in obtaining the documentation they needed as legal advice centres struggled to meet huge demand. Their most immediate challenge was to obtain the necessary documentation to access government food rations and schools. Property and housing issues remained salient for IDPs, with IOM surveys in early 2007 revealing that over 40 per cent had had their property occupied, destroyed or used by the military.

These surveys did not address the needs of the several hundred thousand people evicted prior to 2003. The government began to address the concerns of this latter group through the Commission for the Resolution of Real Property Disputes (CRRPD) established in March

2006. By the end of 2007, despite the prevailing insecurity and its limited resources, the CRRPD had received over 132,000 claims and arrived at 37,000 decisions, though many were still subject to review. However, attempts to address current property concerns were marred by a certain degree of inconsistency, and there remained an outstanding need for a comprehensive approach to the property and housing issues facing Iraq's millions of displaced people.

In Israel, land and property issues remained central to displaced Arab and Bedouin communities. Israeli Palestinians constitute about one fifth of the population of Israel, but they own less than three per cent of land. Most of the properties of displaced Bedouins were originally confiscated through a legal process which did not recognise their traditional ownership mechanisms, as the Bedouin generally held no land titles. In 2007, Bedouin IDPs, supported by local organisations, continued to appeal to Israeli courts against land confiscation or inadequate compensation. In OPT, the UN registry set up in 2006 to handle claims of property damage resulting from the construction of the West Bank Wall was yet to begin functioning, with the Board being selected only in mid-2007 and a number of outstanding questions on eligibility criteria for compensation and modalities for assessing and validating claims<sup>53</sup>.

In Lebanon, the durable return of people displaced by the 2006 war and the earlier civil war continued to largely depend on land and property issues. Returns of those displaced in 2006 were facilitated with com-

ensation and reconstruction assistance set up by the Lebanese government as well as Hizbollah. Government figures revealed significant headway with compensation made for 94,000 out of 109,000 damaged homes, but the extent of reconstruction remained unclear, and the signs of the destruction of southern Lebanon remained apparent. This lack of progress since the end of the civil war was attributed to a number of factors, including mismanagement of funds and political rivalries, budgetary problems, the absence of suitable economic and social conditions in rural areas as well as tensions between displaced and host communities in certain areas, dating back to the civil war.

## Durable solutions for IDPs in the Middle East

Throughout the region, IDPs expressed their desire to return to their place of origin, including Arab Israelis and Bedouins in Israel, Syrians from the Golan Heights, and Palestinians displaced in OPT. In late 2007, the overwhelming majority of Iraqi IDPs surveyed said they intended to return to their place of origin.

Ultimately, the identification of durable solutions for these groups of IDPs depended on political processes enabling stability and security across the region. The conflicting parties in Iraq and northern Yemen were still far from possible reconciliation. In Israel, Syria and OPT return and sustainable solu-

A woman surveys the ruins of her home in the Old City of Jerusalem following its demolition, December 2007.

*Photo: Anne Paq, Activestills*



tions for the displaced remained unattainable in the absence of political progress on the broader Arab-Israeli conflict.

Returns in various parts of the region remained limited, uncertain, and subject to an ever changing political landscape. In the absence of greater political consensus, displacements similar to those witnessed in Lebanon and Israel in the past two years are liable to be replicated. In a number of countries in the region, durable solutions also depend on reconciliation between different communities, ethnicities and sects.

In Iraq, the families reported to have returned at the end of 2007 represented only a small fraction of the displaced, with many of those risking secondary displacement if they found their homes occupied or destroyed. The general environment remained un conducive to return and neither the government nor the international community advocated for larger scale returns. Any eventual return would need to address a vast array of issues which remain as yet difficult to reconcile, including addressing humanitarian needs associated with any return, settlement of legal disputes over property, and particularly reconciliation in light of the sectarian violence that had taken place.

The end of hostilities in Lebanon in 2006 prompted large-scale returns, yet in many affected areas, the extent of the devastation caused doubts as to whether they could be safe and sustainable. Although compensation and reconstruction programmes were in place, the signs of devastation remained apparent at the end of 2007 and many IDPs struggled to reestablish a livelihood. For those displaced from the Nahr al Bared camp, the level of destruction offered no possibility of feasible return and they continued to rely on host communities, mainly in other refugee camps.

## National, regional and international responses

The national, regional and international responses to internal displacement in the Middle East remained uneven, their effectiveness undermined by factors including the lack of capacity, the absence of political will, and insecurity. Governments in the region struggled to put together the resources to provide effective protection of and assistance to people displaced

within their territories, including those which hosted significant refugee populations. At a regional level, the League of Arab States addressed displacement issues only indirectly as they affected the prevailing crisis in OPT and reconstruction in Iraq.

National initiatives had mixed results. The Lebanese government, with the support of the international community, undertook the implementation of a broad range of assistance, recovery and reconstruction activities throughout 2007. Nonetheless, the government estimated that around 50,000 people were still displaced by the 2006 war at the end of the year. In Syria, the government continued, albeit slowly, to carry out housing projects in Quneitra, which could eventually lead to the return of some 50,000 people to the town at the boundary of the occupied Golan. In Yemen, the government's policies to support the return of internally displaced people to Saada and undertake reconstruction of the war-torn region were rendered redundant when renewed fighting in mid-2007 put an end to the peace accord. In Iraq, the Ministry of Displacement and Migration assisted the displaced, and continued to work on national policy and legislation, yet remained overwhelmed by the insecurity and level of needs.

Israel's government effectively met the protection and housing needs of Israelis displaced from Sderot, while at the same time pursuing development policies in the Negev which entailed the eviction of displaced Bedouin communities from "unrecognised villages". The severity of the closure of Gaza Strip led to a humanitarian crisis of unprecedented scale and the continued construction of the West Bank Wall and associated restrictions continued to cause further displacement in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, but there was no response by the Israeli government to the plight of those internally displaced as a result.

In Iraq, international agencies, including the United Nations, continued programmes on behalf of displaced populations, though the UN continued to operate only at a minimal level because of the high insecurity. While the UN did not address the situation of the internally displaced populations in Israel or Syria, and though no international agency has an explicit mandate to protect internally displaced Palestinians, the UN provided substantial emergency assistance to vulnerable people in OPT, including those falling under the mandate of the UN Relief

and Works Agency (UNRWA). This group includes many, but not all, of those internally displaced within the Palestinian Territories. In Lebanon, UNRWA and other international agencies responded to the displacement of Palestinian refugees in the Nahr al Bared camp, and led the early reconstruction of the camp.

The plight of IDPs in the region drew some international scrutiny during the year. The UN recognised Iraq's humanitarian crisis in early 2007 – despite clear indicators during 2006 – and initial efforts were made to respond to this crisis with emergency funding and assistance. In mid-2007, the report of the UN Secretary General on the protection of civilians in armed conflict criticised Israel on disproportionate and indiscriminate use of force against civilians and civilian property, and noted the particular devastating impact of the widespread use of cluster bombs in southern Lebanon<sup>54</sup>. The UN repeatedly called on Israel based on Security Council Resolution 1701 to provide maps of the locations of remaining landmines and cluster bombs in order to facilitate their removal.

In several countries in the region, local and international non-governmental organisations, and political groups played a critical role in assisting IDPs and in advocating for their rights. In Iraq, the government struggled to meet the needs of overwhelming numbers of displaced people, which forced many to

rely on the widespread support of local aid groups, organisations and political actors. In many parts of the region, humanitarian organisations were often prevented from reaching displaced populations to deliver aid. In parts of Iraq, organisations were able to provide only sporadic assistance to IDPs because of ongoing military operations. In addition, aid groups received threats for helping displaced families of certain religious affiliations, and several were also threatened and humanitarian agency staff were targeted. In Lebanon, humanitarian access was also limited during the fighting in Nahr al Bared, preventing assistance from reaching people in the camp, while in northern Yemen access proved difficult and dangerous. In the Palestinian Territory, access conditions deteriorated at a time when humanitarian needs grew more acute. The work of humanitarian organisations in the West Bank, and most particularly in Gaza from June 2007, was severely limited by increasingly restrictive checks and delays.

The 60 per cent rise in the number of people displaced within the region in the past two years has made the issue of internal displacement one of paramount concern. However the humanitarian response to the various displacement crises of the region was in 2007 still struggling to meet the protection and assistance needs of people who had been displaced for short or longer periods.

Remains of a house in southern Lebanon destroyed by bombardment, December 2006. Although compensation and reconstruction programmes were in place, the signs of devastation remained through 2007.

*Photo: Christophe Beau, IDMC*

