

IRAQ

After ISIL the real challenge begins

SPOT LIGHT

As the campaign to reassert government control over territory held by ISIL gathered pace in 2016, so too did the deepening of Iraq's humanitarian crisis. The widespread military offensives taking place against the group caused almost 660,000 new displacements. Around 3 million have fled their homes since 2014.⁴¹

How the security situation develops and the humanitarian and development sectors respond to this latest phase of Iraq's crisis will go a long way to determining whether IDPs will be able to rebuild their lives in a sustainable way, or whether they will be exposed to a new phase of violence and secondary, potentially longer-term displacement.

Anbar and Salah Al Din governorates witnessed the greatest number of returns in 2016. The security environment in the newly retaken areas

remains fragile, however, and government oversight and control is still limited. Other armed groups have filled the vacuum left in ISIL's wake, and those trying to go back to their homes have faced numerous challenges and protection risks.

Efforts to re-screen returnees have tended to be irregular and rarely monitored, and there have been credible reports in both governorates of abductions, detentions and the torture of people suspected of affiliation with ISIL. Others have been barred from returning to their homes altogether or have had them demolished or appropriated to be used as forms of compensation. Returnees also face the danger posed by unexploded ordnance, an absence of basic services and a lack of livelihood and education opportunities.⁴²

Qayyarah was retaken from ISIL by Iraqi forces on 2 August 2016 and was declared as the base for future operations to retake the city of Mosul. ISIL set fire to oil wells south of Mosul. Photo: NRC/Wolfgang Gressmann, September 2016



As in previous years, there are also serious concerns that many returns are not voluntary – or lasting. Three thousand displaced families in Tikrit were threatened with eviction in February in a case of collective punishment after some individuals were accused of being ISIL informers. In Kirkuk, more than 4,300 displaced families have been expelled since the International Organization for Migration (IOM) began tracking displacements from the governorate on 1 September 2016. Sixty-two per cent returned to their home areas, but the remainder were pushed into secondary displacement. Of those who returned, 995 families went back to Fallujah in Anbar and 994 to Al Shirqat in Salah Al Din.

Such displacements advance the need to develop a national framework for IDPs' return in line with the IASC framework on durable solutions, which would guarantee their fundamental rights, establish operational principles and facilitate coordination and support.

The battle for Mosul began in late 2016, and by January 2017 the Iraqi government said it had driven ISIL from the eastern half of the city. Within weeks, 30,000 of the 180,000 or so people who were displaced by the offensive began returning to the city, but they have faced similar difficulties to those who have gone back to Anbar and Salah Al Din.⁴³

State forces were pulled quickly out of east Mosul and deployed to the offensive to retake the west of the city, but a month after the east was declared to be in government hands, very few police units had returned. Other armed groups have filled the security vacuum, and in the lawless environment there have been widespread reports of arbitrary arrests, disappearances, extortion, the imposition of random curfews and movement restrictions, and assaults and threats against humanitarians.

Some families who tried to return have gone back to the camps where they were sheltering, and others have postponed their return to the city. By February, the number of people leaving because of insecurity and limited access to basic services and livelihood opportunities was higher than the number returning.

Should ISIL continue to cede territory there are fears that international attention and the will to continue supporting Iraq will wane. A decrease in funding for humanitarian work would be likely to form part of such a trend, hampering efforts

to resolve the country's crisis, including the many challenges associated with IDPs' return to their homes.

It will also be important to ensure that stabilisation efforts, which currently focus on large infrastructure projects and the restoration of public services, are shaped by engagement with local communities to establish a parallel focus on needs at the household level.

The complex situation that people affected by the conflict face across Iraq means that 2017 could prove to be just as tumultuous for the country as previous years. The number of people fleeing military operations to retake western Mosul increased rapidly in the early months of the year, with critical needs reported among displaced families living both in and out of camps. As of April 2017, more than 450,000 people had been displaced during the six months since the launch of the campaign to retake Mosul. The real challenge for Baghdad and the international community of securing the safety and dignity of all civilians starts now.⁴⁶