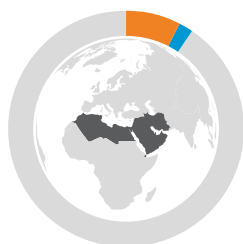
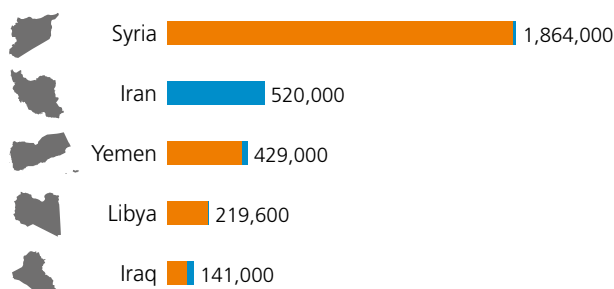


## MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA



Conflict 2,566,000  
Disasters 631,000  
9.6% of the global total

### 5 COUNTRIES WITH MOST NEW DISPLACEMENTS



The Middle East and North Africa region (MENA) accounts for more than a quarter of people internally displaced by conflict and violence globally. The vast majority are in Syria, Yemen and Iraq, three countries embroiled in protracted conflicts that have triggered mass population movements

Other countries in the region unaffected by conflict displacement are hosting large numbers of refugees. Whether displaced in their home countries or abroad, most people live in protracted conditions, and ongoing violence and disasters put many at risk of secondary displacement. The situation represents a major barrier to development in MENA and a driver of further instability and risk.<sup>105</sup> Around 12.5 million people were living in internal displacement as a result of conflict and violence across the region as of the end of the year.

There has been an overall increase in the number of new displacements associated with conflict and violence in the region over the last decade, and particularly since the 2011 Arab spring (see Figure 12). There were 2.6 million recorded in 2019. Figures for Iraq were slightly lower than the decade average as the country's conflict wanes, but the fighting in Syria is far from over and more new displacements were recorded in 2019 than in 2018 (see Syria spotlight, p.35).

MENA is also prone to natural hazards, and Iran was particularly hard hit in 2019. Flooding triggered more than 600,000 new displacements in the region. Severe winter weather including cold snaps, snowstorms

and floods also forced people to flee their homes in Algeria, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia, but data on disaster displacement in the region is sparse and estimates of its scale are conservative. These hazards often strike vulnerable communities, including people already displaced by conflict. Humanitarian agencies have worked to make displacement sites more resilient, but secondary displacements triggered by floods and storms still took place in Iraq, Syria and Yemen.<sup>106</sup>

### Syria

The Syrian conflict, now in its tenth year, triggered 1.8 million new displacements in 2019, mostly the result of military offensives in the north-east and north-west of the country. Around 6.5 million people were living in internal displacement as of the end of the year. Another 5.6 million people have fled the country, meaning that more than half of its pre-war population has been displaced.<sup>107</sup>

Clashes between the Syrian Democratic Forces and ISIS in Hajjin and Baghouz in the eastern governorate of Deir ez Zor triggered around 125,000 new displacements in the first quarter of the year. More than half of those who fled made for Al Hol camp in Al Hasakeh, stretching its capacity to its limits.

The now failed de-escalation zone established in the border areas between Idlib and Hama in 2018 also became a conflict and displacement hotspot in 2019.<sup>108</sup> Shelling triggered about 100,000 new displacements

between January and April, followed by an escalation in fighting that continued for the rest of the year.

Idlib governorate became the main theatre of conflict and the scene of a major humanitarian crisis, the result of extremely limited access and the fact the Turkish border was and still is closed, leaving people with few if any options to escape the fighting.<sup>109</sup> Turkey's widely condemned incursion into north-eastern Syria also triggered more than 220,000 new displacements in just over two weeks, mainly from Kurdish border towns (see Syria spotlight, p.35).

Flooding in several areas of the country triggered 17,000 new displacements in March and December, mainly in Al Hasakeh and Idlib governorates.<sup>110</sup> Most of the people affected were IDPs living in camps who were forced into secondary displacement when their tents and personal belongings were swept away.

## Yemen

Conflict and violence triggered 398,000 new displacements in Yemen in 2019, almost double the figure for the previous year, which was partly influenced by improved data collection and access. Most displacement took place in Al Dhale, Hajjah and Hodeidah governorates. For many of the people affected it was not the first time they had fled, each displacement heightening their vulnerabilities.

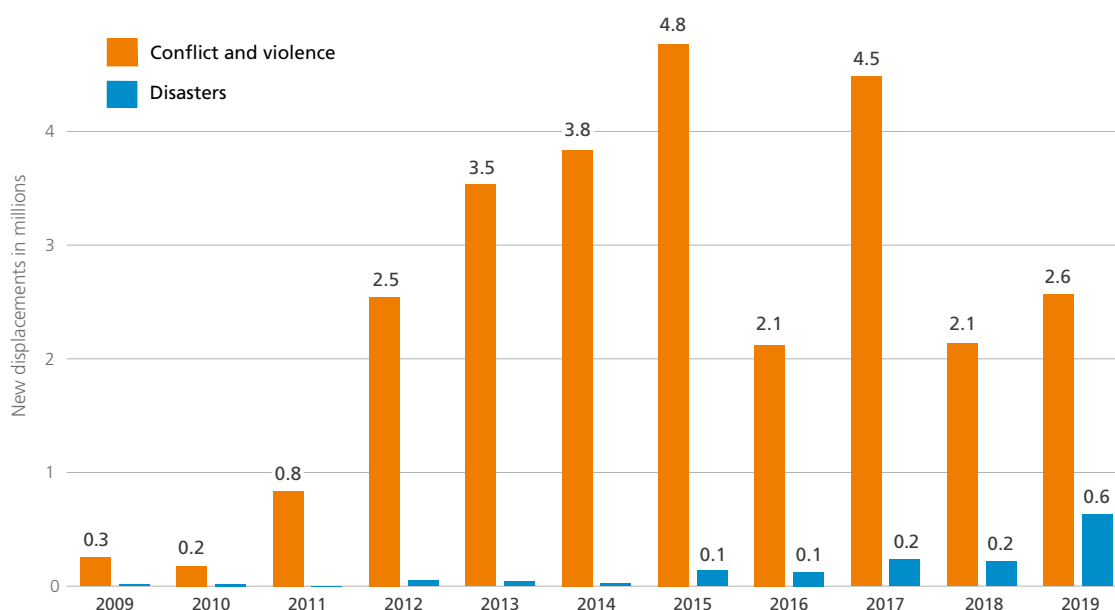
Efforts to reach political solutions helped to relieve the situation in some areas of the country. The internationally-recognised government and Ansar Allah, also known as the Houthi movement, signed the Stockholm Agreement in December 2018 to establish a demilitarised zone around Yemen's main port of Hodeidah.<sup>111</sup> It was not until May that fighters began to withdraw, but when they did the number of new displacements in the area dropped from 31,000 in the first five months of 2019 to 8,000 during the rest of the year.<sup>112</sup>

The end of the year also brought new hope as the wider conflict also showed signs of de-escalating. The Southern Transitional Council (STC), a political group that emerged in 2017 demanding the establishment of an independent federal state in southern Yemen, signed a power-sharing deal with the government in November. Saudi Arabia separately agreed a truce with Ansar Allah the same month.<sup>113</sup>

Riyadh for its part eased restrictions on Yemeni airspace to allow people to be flown out of the rebel-held capital Sana'a for medical treatment abroad. Ansar Allah announced that attacks on Saudi Arabia would be halted in return, and a broader initiative between the two sides to further pacify the situation was under discussion in December.<sup>114</sup>

Despite these promising developments, Yemen's crisis is still the world's most acute. Nearly 80 per cent of the

FIGURE 12: New displacements by conflict, violence and disasters in Middle East and North Africa (2009-2019)



population were in need of humanitarian assistance at the end of the year, and 3.6 million people were living in internal displacement, an increase of more than a third on the figure since 2018.<sup>115</sup>

Part of the increase in the number of IDPs is the result of better geographical coverage in terms of data collection, but it also reflects the continuing scale of displacement as local response capacity is overwhelmed and humanitarian access deteriorates.<sup>116</sup> More than half of the country's displaced households live in rented accommodation, but 35 per cent live in vulnerable conditions in informal settlements, collective centres, public buildings, tents and even out in the open.<sup>117</sup> The de-escalation of fighting in some parts of the country has also increased the risk of IDPs being evicted, as happened in the city of Marib.<sup>118</sup>

Disasters triggered 31,000 new displacements in 2019. Twelve of the country's 22 governorates experienced heavy rainfall that led to flash flooding in mid-May.<sup>119</sup> The floods destroyed tents in displacement settlements, triggering around 3,000 secondary displacements. The rains intensified at the end of July, and further flooding triggered 13,000 new displacements in the weeks that followed. Most western governorates were affected, but Hodeidah and Al Mahwit were the hardest hit. IDPs and host communities lost their homes, shelters, livestock and livelihoods.<sup>120</sup>

Flooding also damaged displacement sites in Aden city, Tuban in Lahj governorate and Khanfir in Abyan in September, triggering 15,000 secondary displacements.<sup>121</sup> Storms struck the country in the latter part of the year, but displacement figures were hard to come by. Cyclone Kyarr hit in October and was the most powerful on the Arabian-peninsula in 12 years. Cyclone Maha in November and Pawan in December also hit the country.<sup>122</sup>

## Libya

The conflict between the Libyan National Army (LNA) and the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli intensified in 2019. Around 215,000 new displacements were recorded as a result, three times the figure for the previous year and the highest since 2014. Most of the fighting took place in and around the capital after 4 April, when the LNA's commander, Khalifa Haftar, launched an offensive on

the city.<sup>123</sup> The conflict triggered as many as 170,000 new displacements as people fled to safer neighbourhoods, the Nafusa mountains and various locations along the north-west coast. Almost a half of those displaced were under 18, and most sought shelter with host families.<sup>124</sup>

Fierce fighting between the two parties spread to the southern city of Murzuq in August. It included heavy aerial bombardments and numerous attacks on residential neighbourhoods, leading to one of the largest losses of civilian life since the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011.<sup>125</sup> Almost all of the city's 33,000 inhabitants fled the area. There was also heavy fighting around Tripoli toward the end of the year, and around 451,000 people were living in internal displacement as of 31 December.

The events of 2019 suggest that the war in Libya has entered a new phase. What used to be a low intensity conflict now involves the use of sophisticated weaponry including guided missiles and drones, despite a UN arms embargo on the country. The increasing number of foreign mercenaries fighting on both sides has also enhanced their military capabilities. As the conflict escalates, several countries have called for a ceasefire and raised concerns about growing foreign interference.<sup>126</sup> The German government hosted a summit in Berlin in January 2020 in an effort to limit such interference and shore up the UN arms embargo. An agreement was reached among foreign powers, but the situation in Libya remains extremely fragile.<sup>127</sup>

Severe flooding in the municipality of Ghat and surrounding areas of south-western Fezzan region triggered more than 4,600 new displacements in early June. The floodwaters were up to two metres deep in some areas, and caused severe damage to infrastructure and farmland vital to local livelihoods.<sup>128</sup> A third of the people displaced sought refuge in collective shelters, and the remainder in schools or with friends and relatives.<sup>129</sup> There was no further information available about their conditions.

## Iran

Disasters triggered more than 520,000 new displacements in Iran in 2019, by far the highest figure in the region. Torrential rains and floods between mid-March and mid-April caught local people and the water management authorities by surprise, particularly as they

A girl stands at a displacement site where her family is constructing a hut in Abs, Hajjah governorate, Yemen.  
Photo © UNHCR/Ibrahim Al-Ja'adi, May 2019



came after a long period of drought.<sup>130</sup> The rains began in the northern province of Golestan before moving to south and west, bringing floods to 28 of the country's 31 provinces.

The disaster was described as the worst to hit the country in more than 15 years. More than 2,000 towns and villages, home to more than 10 million people, were affected.<sup>131</sup> Golestan received about 70 per cent of its annual rainfall in 24 hours, and the provinces of Lorestan and oil-rich Khuzestan were also hard hit. The government struggled to react quickly enough to the threat the rains posed, and had to release water from dam reservoirs that flooded farmland and in some cases densely populated areas.<sup>132</sup> Around 180,000 people were still living in displacement at the end of the year as a result of the disaster.

Iran is also prone to frequent and powerful earthquakes because of its location at the junction of the Eurasian and Arabian tectonic plates.<sup>133</sup> Three major earthquakes struck the country in 2019, triggering 14,000 new displacements. The most powerful was a 5.9 magnitude quake on 8 November which triggered 13,000 new displacements in East Azerbaijan province.

## Palestine

The West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza recorded 1,500 new displacements in 2019, bringing the number of IDPs in Palestine as of the end of the year to 243,000. Housing demolitions, forced evictions, the confiscation of property and acts of violence perpetrated by Israeli settlers and the military all forced people to flee their homes in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Violence also flared up in Gaza in early May and mid-November, leading to the destruction of many homes and the displacement of hundreds of people.<sup>134</sup>

More Palestinian houses were demolished in East Jerusalem in 2019 than in any of the past 15 years, and people living in Area C, East Jerusalem and Hebron are at high risk of eviction.<sup>135</sup> Reports of settlement expansion, settler violence and access restrictions also increased during the year.<sup>136</sup> The establishment of Israeli settlements in Palestine, including East Jerusalem, constitutes a violation of international law, but the number of such projects is expected to rise.<sup>137</sup> The political landscape in Israel and the content of a US plan for the Middle East announced in early 2020 raise concern about an increase in expulsions and displacement in the West Bank.<sup>138</sup>



## Iraq

Conflict in Iraq waned in 2019 and the number of new displacements fell to 104,000 as a result. The number of people living in displacement as of the end of the year also declined to 1.6 million from two million in 2018 and 2.6 million in 2017.<sup>139</sup> This illustrates the commendable efforts the government has made to reduce the phenomenon.

That said, 78 per cent of the country's remaining IDPs have been displaced for more than three years, and the pace of returns slowed in 2019 as a result of insecurity, social unrest and a lack of livelihood opportunities and basic services in some areas (see Iraq spotlight, p.37).<sup>140</sup>

Storms and flooding triggered more than 37,000 new displacements along the course of the Tigris river during the year. The Tigris, the Euphrates and their tributaries burst their banks and flood the surrounding plains and urban areas every year. The country has an extensive network of dams and canals that are key to energy generation and irrigation in otherwise arid and semi-desert areas, which may have contributed at increasing flood risk.<sup>141</sup> Storms also affected several governorates bordering Iran.<sup>142</sup>

Water scarcity is also a problem in southern Iraq, where shortages increase pollution and undermine people's livelihoods. Around 34,000 people were estimated to be displaced in January 2019 from the four governorates of Basra, Missan, Muthanna and, Thi-Qar because of water shortages. Many of those affected moved to urban areas, and the scale of displacement has shaped the landscape of some mid-sized towns and cities. For example, new arrivals from rural areas have fuelled rapid population growth and urbanisation in Basra city over the last decade as agricultural livelihoods have dwindled. Its water and sanitation infrastructure, however, has struggled to cope.<sup>143</sup>







*A displaced man from Hawja town, at the Laylan camp in Kirkuk, Iraq.  
Photo: NRC/Alan Ayoubi, February 2019*

## SPOTLIGHT

## SYRIA

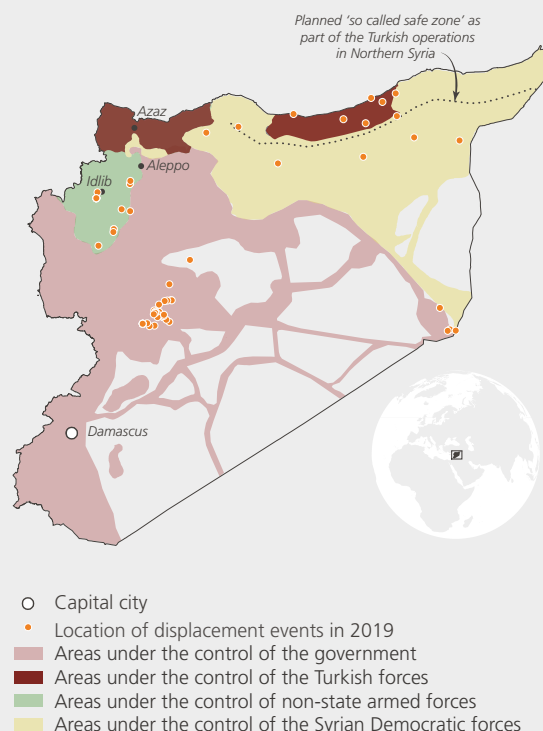
## No safe place to return to

The Syrian government continued to make territorial gains in the country's nine-year civil war in 2019.<sup>144</sup> A series of military offensives against non-state armed groups pushed the number of new displacements recorded during the year to 1.8 million, compared with 1.6 million in 2018 and 2.9 million in 2017. The figure is one of the highest annual totals since the conflict began. About 6.5 million people were living in internal displacement as the year drew to a close, many of them in dire conditions.

The most intense offensives of 2019 were those in the north-western governorate of Idlib and north-eastern areas of the country bordering Turkey. Each triggered the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people, many of whom had already been displaced a number of times. The situation in Idlib was of most concern. The government had planned to retake parts of the governorate by force in 2018, but fears of the humanitarian crisis it might trigger led Iran, Russia and Turkey to mediate a ceasefire.<sup>145</sup> Idlib remained one of the last areas controlled by non-government forces, including Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, a listed terrorist organisation.<sup>146</sup>

The agreement did not hold, however, and the governorate - home to three million people, half of whom are IDPs - became the scene of unrelenting attacks that triggered mass displacement. Women and children, who make up more than three-quarters of Idlib's population, were particularly affected.<sup>147</sup> The Syrian army, backed by its allies, intensified its airstrikes and ground attacks toward the end of the year, and many people had to move a number of times in search of safety.

Several hospitals were bombed in clear violation of international law, and one airstrike hit a displacement camp in Qah, near the Turkish border, which was hosting about 4,000 IDPs.<sup>148</sup> Around 284,000 new displacements were recorded across the governorate in December alone. The figure of 1.2 million for the year as a whole accounted for 67 per cent of the total nationwide, and the situation continued to deteriorate in early 2020.<sup>149</sup>



\*Sources: Institute for the Study of War (ISW) as of situation report 17-28 December and Reuters, 2019. Displacement data: Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme, IDP task force.

Another major development took place in the north-east of the country, home to 710,000 IDPs.<sup>150</sup> After the US announced the withdrawal of its troops in October, Syrian Democratic Forces fighters in the area found themselves with little military or diplomatic backup. Turkey launched a military operation known as Peace Spring soon after. Ankara said the main objective of the operation was to establish a "safe zone" inside Syria of about 3,600 square kilometres where refugees living in Turkey would potentially be returned and resettled.<sup>151</sup>

The Turkish army crossed into Syria in a widely condemned offensive that triggered more than 220,000 internal displacements, mostly of people living in Kurdish border towns, and 17,900 cross-border displacements into northern Iraq.<sup>152</sup> Around 75,000 people were still displaced in Syria as a result of the offensive as of 26 November. The majority were living with host communities, others in informal settlements and collective shelters.<sup>153</sup>

Operation Peace Spring was also intended to protect Turkey's southern border from the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), labelled by Ankara and other countries as a terrorist group.<sup>154</sup> Many people died during the offensive, and serious human rights abuses committed by the Turkish forces against the local population were reported.<sup>155</sup>



The ensuing challenges are far from over. Refugees forcibly returned to Syria from Turkey will struggle to achieve durable solutions in a region that most are not originally from, and where conditions are already extremely precarious for the large number of IDPs who have been living there for years.<sup>156</sup> The Turkish government claims there is no refolement, but others argue that refugees are being sent back to a war zone.<sup>157</sup>

Forcible returns from other countries have also been reported, but are very difficult to monitor. IDPs trying to return to their homes in north-eastern and north-western Syria face many challenges as a result of the Turkish incursion and subsequent changes in local community dynamics and demographic makeup. Some have been prevented from returning as a result.

Overshadowed by these events, the implementation of Law 10, which is officially intended to expedite the expropriation of land for reconstruction and “redesign of unauthorised illegal housing areas”, began to take effect in 2019.<sup>158</sup> People’s knowledge of the administrative procedures required to claim their property rights tends to be limited.<sup>159</sup> Many IDPs who lost deeds and other documents during their displacement have

found it is too late to do so as a result.<sup>160</sup> Their inability to exercise their property rights effectively means they are unable to return, or at least not sustainably, even if reconstruction is under way in their home areas.

Civilians, including IDPs and returning refugees, continue to bear the brunt of Syria’s civil war. As the fighting enters its tenth year, mass displacement continues to take place, and millions of people already displaced lack livelihood opportunities and access to basic services. The voluntary return of refugees may be delayed until the situation improves, but hundreds of thousands of IDPs are going back home or trying to do so, which highlights the need to establish conditions conducive to safe and dignified returns.

The current focus on lifesaving humanitarian assistance is still vital given the depth of Syria’s ongoing crisis, but it should not overshadow the need for peacebuilding initiatives and longer-term support for those trying to achieve durable solutions. Without a resolution to the conflict and a reconciliation process that includes all of the country’s ethnic groups and religions, displacement will not be brought to a sustainable end.



*Iman fled with her family to seek safety eight years ago. “If only we can go back to what we used to”, she said, gazing at the cracks in her damaged house and hoping that one day she could go back home. Photo © UNHCR/Antwan Chinkdji, June 2019*



## SPOTLIGHT

## IRAQ

## Solutions to displacement within reach

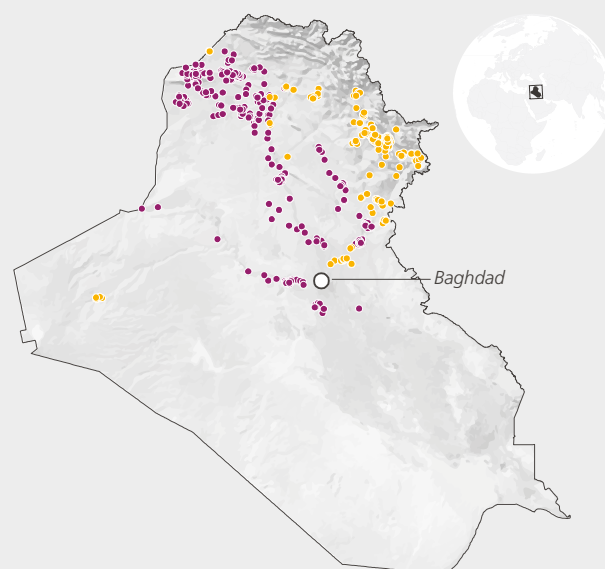
Decades of dictatorship, a foreign invasion, years of internal conflict and more recently the war against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) made Iraq one of the countries most affected by internal displacement in the world. Since the battle against ISIL officially concluded in December 2017, however, there have been signs that the situation is improving and that many IDPs are going back to their homes.

Displacement figures dropped over the last two years to reach an all-time low in 2019, when 104,000 new displacements and more than 1.6 million people still living in internal displacement were recorded. This illustrates the significant progress the government has made in addressing the phenomenon, and sets an example for other countries.

That said, insecurity and social unrest persist, and the pace of returns slowed in 2019 as a result. More than three-quarters of the country's IDPs have been displaced for more than three years.<sup>161</sup> Many obstacles remain to their achieving durable solutions and new challenges are emerging, which reinforces the need to step up peacebuilding and reconstruction efforts.

Military operations against remaining ISIS pockets continued across north-central and western governorates in 2019, in response to attacks against both government and civilian targets.<sup>162</sup> Large tracts of agricultural land across 11 governorates were destroyed by fires, which ISIL is thought to have lit to deter IDPs from returning home.<sup>163</sup> Low-intensity sectarian violence between Shia and Sunni militias continues across the country, as do tensions between the Kurdish regional government and the authorities in Baghdad.<sup>164</sup> The national government still struggles to exert control over some areas of the country, where insecurity prevails.

There is also a general sense of frustration and mistrust among the population, which led to civil unrest in Octo-



- Capital city
- Locations where returnees face difficult living conditions including lack of access to livelihoods and basic services, safety and social cohesion
- Location of displacement events associated with conflict and violence in 2019

Source: IOM, 2019

ber.<sup>165</sup> Protesters massed in the streets of Baghdad and other cities to demand the government's dismissal. The then prime minister, Adel Abdul Mahdi, agreed to resign in early November, but the demonstrations continued. Protesters demanded the fall of the whole government, the speeding up of economic reforms and an end to Iran's influence in Iraqi politics. At least 467 protesters had been killed and more than 9,000 injured as of 30 January 2020.<sup>166</sup>

This insecurity and volatility is not conducive to sustainable returns, and the closure of a number of camps has further complicated the situation for many IDPs. While the government has set a goal of returning all IDPs to their places of origin by the end of 2020, many home areas are still insecure and lack basic services.<sup>167</sup>

In such circumstances, the closure of more than ten camps in 2019 led to the secondary displacement of many IDPs, whether to other camps or urban and peri-urban areas where they live in even more precarious conditions.<sup>168</sup> The loss of civil documentation is also a considerable obstacle to IDPs' efforts to overcome their vulnerabilities, including their access to legal protection and basic services.<sup>169</sup> Of the 462,000 people reported to have returned in 2019, we estimate that 456,000 achieved partial solutions to their displacement, but

6,000 ended up in displacement again despite their efforts to re-establish their lives in their home areas.<sup>170</sup>

The restoration of social cohesion, often overlooked in post-conflict situations, will also be vital in creating an environment in which communities from different ethnic groups and religious affiliations can coexist. ISIL previously exploited the erosion of Iraq's social cohesion to gain influence and expand, and addressing it will help to prevent the re-emergence of violence, shore up reconstruction efforts and ensure that IDPs and returnees are able to achieve genuinely durable solutions.<sup>171</sup>

The government has made commendable efforts to measure, understand and act to address what was one of the world's major internal displacement crises.<sup>172</sup> With support from the international community, it conducted damage and needs assessments to estimate the impact of the conflict and identify recovery and reconstruction needs across seven governorates.<sup>173</sup> The exercise concluded that the damage incurred ran to \$45.7 billion. The housing, health and education sectors were identified as the worst affected, which explains why many IDPs are still living in protracted displacement. Efforts are also under way to invest in community recovery and stabilisation.<sup>174</sup>

Recently, IOM and its partners developed a return index for Iraq, which helps to understand displaced people's main priorities when contemplating return and the obstacles they face, and to identify geographical areas where more investment is needed.<sup>175</sup>

Its findings confirm that the destruction of housing stock is by far the main obstacle to return. Areas where at least half of the homes have been destroyed are 15 times less likely to have returns than locations where housing remains relatively intact. Unemployment is another major factor. Families are 10 times less likely to return to areas where residents are unable find jobs, compared with locations where there is enough work. The presence of armed groups was also identified as a significant obstacle to return and other forms of durable solution.

The government launched a recovery and resilience programme in February 2018. Supported by the UN, it has helped to speed up efforts to address the social dimensions of reconstruction and create conditions that

would promote safe, dignified and voluntary returns. This has included clearing unexploded ordnance, providing IDPs with legal support and strengthening the capacity of institutions responsible for documentation, compensation, property restitution and family reunification.<sup>176</sup>

The Iraq Durable Solutions Network and the Governorate Returns Committee Secretariat were also established at the end of 2019. From its offices in Baghdad, Erbil and Mosul, the latter has the overarching objective of coordinating sustainable returns and supporting the Governorate Returns Committees, which focus on camp consolidation and closures. These institutions have a potentially vital role to play in ensuring that returns and other forms of solution are genuinely sustainable.<sup>177</sup>

The steady decline in internal displacement figures over the last two years suggests these initiatives are working, and that solutions are within reach. If the momentum is to be maintained, ongoing initiatives designed to establish lasting stability and peace will have to be sustained. As people continue to return to their home areas across the country and others try to integrate locally, it is also vital that their living conditions be monitored and improved. Investing in social cohesion and community-based responses will be key. Only by doing so will return, resettlement and local integration come to equate with bringing displacement to a sustainable end.<sup>178</sup>