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UNHCR Country Portfolio Evaluation: Iraq

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
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This evaluation covers UNHCR country operations in Iraq between 2018 and 2019, in the post-conflict transition period. The purpose of the evaluation is to examine results achieved in the areas of protection, inclusion and durable solutions, and to look at UNHCR Iraq's strategic positioning during this period. The overall goals are learning and accountability, to support and inform UNHCR Iraq's ongoing efforts in transitioning from emergency programming to interventions aimed more specifically at durable solutions. Where relevant, the evaluation seeks to highlight the main features in the operational environment that either constrain or enable efforts in the transitional period. The evaluation covers the three largest (in terms of numbers) persons of concern (PoC) groups served by the operation, i.e. refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and returnees, in both federal Iraq and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).

An adverse context

Over two years after the conclusion of military operations against Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Iraq, the bulk of UNHCR operations in the country remains geared to emergency, with only a fraction of activities squarely aimed at durable solutions. This is not a matter of choice or policy, but rather one of necessity: the volume of acute humanitarian needs remains significant across the country.¹ The "post-conflict" period has not, so far, enabled the hoped-for transition from emergency response to recovery and development programming. Political instability and armed violence in Iraq remain widespread. The beleaguered federal government has not engaged substantively in joint recovery and reconstruction planning with its UN counterparts. Public service provision remains highly erratic, with limited budget sources and inadequate capacities at the provincial and district levels. Most tellingly from a humanitarian standpoint, almost 1.4 million people in Iraq are still forcibly displaced. Many of those who have returned live in highly precarious conditions, in terms of both their physical and their economic security.

Limited engagement on the part of the federal government is hampering progress towards durable solutions.

The evaluation found that the current political environment severely constrains opportunities to support the federal government in its compliance with international standards. With substantial advisory input from UNHCR, the federal Ministry of Interior (MoI) drafted a refugee law in 2018. However, the bill's adoption was stalled by political unrest, and it has not been reintroduced since. The federal government has also formally adopted a range of policy frameworks on IDPs. Despite strong advocacy by UNHCR and others, these have so far failed to gain traction. A number of *ad hoc* government decisions taken in the past year have contravened the principles laid out in this body of policies.

¹ Of the 5.2 million highly vulnerable people who needed protection assistance in Iraq in the aftermath of the conflict with ISIS, well over half continue to do so today. In comparison with 2018, the target caseload for protection in the 2020 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) has declined by only 25 per cent. It now stands at slightly over 1.6 million people. Source: 2018 Humanitarian Response Plan – Iraq, Advance Executive Summary, February 2018, and Humanitarian Response Plans – Iraq, 2020 Humanitarian Programme Cycle.

In view of securing durable solutions for IDPs, cooperation with the federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (Fed-MoLSA) is strategically key. However, adverse political conditions have so far prevented UNHCR from engaging with this ministry substantively. Fed-MoLSA has been slow to buy into technical work championed by UNHCR and aimed at providing a basis for harmonized beneficiary targeting in cash-based and ministry-led social protection programmes.

More promising is UNHCR's joint programme with the federal government to provide civil documentation to Iraq's many undocumented IDPs. This intervention fulfils an urgent need, while also improving long-term prospects for the improved security and self-reliance of IDPs. However, it has only recently begun to be mainstreamed, and still needs to be significantly scaled up to become commensurate with the scale of need.

In KRI, which hosts most of the country's refugee population, conditions are much more favourable to the compliance of local authorities with international standards, and to the roll-out of interventions geared to the inclusion of displaced groups. UNHCR has proactively sought to leverage this more favourable environment, by engaging closely with KRI authorities at both regional and governorate levels.

In KRI, as in federal Iraq, slow economic growth, limited private sector development and high unemployment are limiting opportunities for economic inclusion among displaced groups. The phasing out of livelihoods support to host communities, agreed this year by UNHCR and other UN humanitarian agencies, may make it difficult to sustain what gains have been achieved in social cohesion².

Programme delivery in KRI is generally well executed.

The evaluation found that despite severe obstacles, UNHCR's response to the emergency needs of protracted refugees in KRI had successfully met standards. There is evidence that addressing these needs is becoming increasingly difficult, given growing budget constraints.

The evaluation found that UNHCR's response to the sudden-onset influx of Syrian refugees into KRI, in October 2019, had been delivered in a timely and effective way. This is despite the fact that some participating non-governmental organizations (NGOs) reported a lack of operational clarity and direction in the early stages of the response, owing mainly to the overlapping coordination mechanisms led by UNHCR and OCHA in KRI.

² For a discussion on the meaning of social cohesion and its programming implications in contexts of forced displacement, see for example, *Social Cohesion and Forced Displacement: A desk review to inform programming and project design*, World Bank Group, June 2018.

In federal Iraq, the planned scale-up of UNHCR's protection activities in areas of IDP return is both needs-based and supportive of durable solutions.

The evaluation found that, in federal Iraq, opportunities for the viable integration of IDPs in their areas of displacement are currently limited. UNHCR's assistance to this group is well planned, designed and delivered. It aims mainly to address urgent needs, which remain considerable. Rightly, given the few prospects for successful integration outcomes, UNHCR's livelihoods support to IDPs in federal Iraq is limited in scope, and is not primarily intended to enable long-term integration.

More broadly, UNHCR has successfully balanced its robust advocacy against camp closures and forced IDP returns, with a protection strategy that acknowledges the reality of returns – voluntary and otherwise – as the more likely long-term scenario for many IDPs. This strategy is centred on the scale-up of protection activities in areas of return. These activities address clear and urgent protection needs and may also contribute to a safer environment more conducive to the voluntariness of returns in the long term.

Against the backdrop of this strategy, community-based protection (CBP) has a critical role to play. CBP is a priority programme area within UNHCR Iraq operations; however, the evaluation found evidence that it is currently under-resourced.

UNHCR's positioning on transition has earned it recognition from development actors, but has not so far led to substantive cooperation with them.

In terms of strategic positioning, the evaluation found that UNHCR has proactively engaged with development actors, in view of exploring opportunities for partnerships in transition programming. It has also been a prominent and respected participant in related forums, such as the Priority Working Group 1 (PWG 1) of the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF).

To date, however, these engagement efforts have not led to operations-level cooperation on a larger scale. Development actors have suggested a range of specific avenues for cooperation during this evaluation; however, their generally light operational footprint appears to be a significant obstacle to programme-level partnerships with UNHCR on the ground.

Limited progress in expanding from emergency to development programming also owes to the fact that the federal government is currently largely absent from related consultations. Given that transition relies heavily on linkages between humanitarian assistance and public service delivery, most agencies interviewed for this evaluation considered the federal government a critical third party in transition planning. Its limited engagement was noted as a major obstacle to the transition process.

Notably, limited government engagement was cited as the main reason for the lack of progress so far in social protection reform, and in UNHCR's championing of a new approach to enable harmonized beneficiary targeting across humanitarian cash programmes and the federal government's social protection system.

Most respondents viewed UNHCR's withdrawal from the co-leadership of the Cash Working Group (CWG) as natural, following its five-year tenure in the role. Subsequent discussions have since led to the appointment of the World Food Programme (WFP) as the chair of the CWG. While these steps to ensure continuity in the CWG's co-leadership are welcome, the evaluation found that cash actors lacked clarity on UNHCR's plans and future involvement in cash and social protection workstreams in Iraq, notably with regard to the maintenance of its highly significant technical contribution in the area of targeting, and its broader participation in ongoing CWG efforts to build a unified cash system.

UNHCR's prominent role in cluster coordination gives it a firm platform for advocacy on critical protection issues; however, the processes and rationales implied in its messaging on these issues is sometimes not well understood.

The evaluation found that UNHCR was an effective and forward-leaning actor in cluster coordination. However, several interviewees reported that it tended to prioritize its protection agenda over the protection activities of other clusters or sub-clusters. While UNHCR views its focus on its own protection agenda as part of promoting the centrality of protection, interviews conducted for this evaluation suggested that a more collegial and participative approach was advisable to ensure that protection was indeed mainstreamed across multiple clusters and areas of activity.

In its advocacy drives, UNHCR must reckon with a highly complex protection environment, as well as the United Nations' dense and equally complex architecture for humanitarian governance. Its approach to advocacy is rigorously by the book. On matters relating to IDPs, it entails a lengthy process of validation by other stakeholders involved, notably Humanitarian Country Team members. The multiple iterations in messaging inherent in this process have made it difficult for some key external stakeholders to gain a clear understanding of the final message. This is compounded by the fact that the issues at hand are technically complex. In some cases, collective messaging was also garbled by a perceived lack of alignment in the positions of UNHCR and the Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator (RC/HC).

Conclusions and recommendations: A need to regroup and consolidate around UNHCR's core areas of operational competence

The current "post-conflict" landscape in Iraq is defined by two main traits: (1) the volume of urgent humanitarian needs remains high, notably in the area of protection; and (2) the feasibility of development programming continues to be very limited. In federal Iraq, where the overwhelming majority of UNHCR's target caseload is located, prospects for durable solutions continue to be remote.

Two other features of the Iraqi context are: (1) the federal government's failure so far to take on a greater share of the country's recovery burden and (2) mounting donor expectations that it should demonstrate a firmer commitment to do so. Future donor funding is contingent on greater government participation in the aid effort and may therefore decline in the current conditions.

In this context, UNHCR should maintain its operational focus on the most urgent humanitarian needs across Iraq, and continue to consider transition support as a secondary priority. In parallel, it should maintain its highly proactive stance in advocacy, in view of securing the greater operations-level participation of development actors in transition and durable solutions.

Given the current lack of opportunities for standalone programmes geared to durable solutions in Iraq, UNHCR should aim to further develop a “solutions-sensitive” approach to its current emergency operations there; that is, an approach that addresses immediate priorities but, where possible, collaterally contributes to long-term solutions.³ UNHCR has already set out on this path in areas of IDP returns, by designing protection interventions that meet urgent needs – and also foster inclusion and social cohesion over time. UNHCR Iraq can engage further on this path by investing more in CBP, using an approach similar to that adopted by it in Afghanistan. Central to this approach is the aim of building linkages between CBP and mutually supporting interventions in other sectors, at the local level. This is discussed in further detail in sections 4 and 5.3, containing the conclusions and recommendations of this report.

While good and open relations with the federal government are critical to the success of UNHCR operations in Iraq, the current environment is not favourable to workstreams aimed at aligning Iraqi law and formal policy with international standards. UNHCR’s efforts in this area should remain confined to *ad hoc* advocacy geared to the most pressing needs, as and when they arise on the ground. There is considerable evidence that formal laws and policy frameworks relating to PoC in Iraq are not currently backed by political will or enforcement capacity on the part of the relevant authorities. Work to further develop this body of laws and policies should be deprioritized until the right conditions are again present for meaningful results.

In parallel, UNHCR should prioritize – and continue to invest in – successful capacity-building workstreams with the federal government, such as that aimed at supporting immediate protection goals via improvements in the Mol’s delivery of critically needed civil documentation to IDPs.

As a humanitarian actor, UNHCR’s potential for empowering the main protagonists of transition and development in Iraq is significant. In engaging with the relevant counterparts, UNHCR should position itself in a supporting rather than a leading role. The general perception among interviewees was that its co-leadership of UNSDCF’s PWG 1 was in this spirit. With the possible deactivation of the clusters in 2021, UNHCR should aim to help build up PWG 1 as a meaningful platform for nexus coordination, and to continue to lead it in the same spirit. PWG 1 should become the key venue for UNHCR’s positioning on cash and social protection reform in Iraq, and for its continued involvement in related workstreams. In order to streamline and facilitate nexus coordination, UNHCR should explore the possibility of using PWG 1 as the main platform for consultations currently held by the Social Protection Forum. A merger of the Forum with PWG 1 should be considered, given that the platforms partly duplicate each other⁴.

³ A “solutions-sensitive approach” aims to foster an environment conducive to durable solutions in the long term, in a context where addressing emergency needs remains the immediate, overriding priority. For example, emergency livelihoods and protection can be solutions-sensitive, by helping over time to create better conditions for voluntary IDP returns – even if returns are not the immediate goal of related activities.

⁴ The Terms of Reference of the UNSDCF state that PWGs will be “comprised of relevant UNCT members, and relevant national partners (government, NGOs/CSOs, etc.)”. However, one UNHCR interviewee reported that currently, the government does not take part in the UNSDCF process. This source cited this as a key motive for maintaining the Social Protection Forum (SPF). Nonetheless, multiple interviewees in the evaluation stated that the government, and more specifically the federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, had stopped taking part in the SPF, which for this reason no longer convened. In these circumstances, and given that both

For the most part, UNHCR's potential for transition support derives from its existing competences and should not call for a significant expansion of its capabilities. Possible UNHCR opportunities in transition support include the collection and provision of data to inform third-party development programming, and the early inclusion of development actors in existing UNHCR programmes, in view of their eventual handover. These opportunities are discussed in further detail in sections 4 and 5.3, containing the conclusions and recommendations of this report.

In addressing urgent needs in Iraq's context of protracted crisis, the model for Area-based Programming (A2PS) recently introduced by UNHCR Iraq has potential value. This model aims to enable multi-sector, multi-stakeholder interventions at the local level, and can provide a basis for solutions-sensitive programming. However, it was not immediately clear to the Evaluation Team how the A2PS model adds concrete value to UNHCR programme models already present on the ground. A useful comparison here may be with Afghanistan, where UNHCR's CBP programmes have fulfilled a purpose similar to A2PS, by providing a basis for multi-partner, cross-sectoral interventions at the local level. Given that UNHCR Iraq aims to scale up CBP, there would be merit in clarifying how A2PS complements – rather than duplicates – the implied programme systems and architectures. Further guidance to ensure that this new model is consistent with others being developed by other UN actors may also be helpful.

these platforms have a similar thematic focus, we recommend that UNHCR advocate for the full and thorough application of the UNSDCF ToR, rather than calling for the perpetuation of the SPF. The deactivation of the SPF would contribute to a much-needed consolidation of the overall aid coordination architecture in Iraq.