

## Highlights

- Administrative Impediments to Humanitarian Access
- Early Warning of Food Insecurity Facing Iraq
- Gender and Protection During COVID-19
- COVID-19 response in Iraq
- Iraq Information Centre Marks Fifth Anniversary
- Displacement in Iraq – Special Rapporteur’s Report to Human Rights Council



Delivering health and hygiene promotion activities for displaced people in informal camps in Salah Al-Din. [Photo Credit: Sorouh Foundation]

## Administrative Impediments to Humanitarian Access

The suspension of the national-level access authorization mechanism in November 2019 and continued absence of a replacement process remains a countrywide access impediment for humanitarian operations. Its impact has increased over time and has hindered the ability of humanitarian organizations to respond to humanitarian needs. By January 2020, at least 2.2 million Iraqis in need of assistance were conservatively estimated to have not been assisted due to the access process suspension, as more than 4,000 missions had to be cancelled over a two-month period (December 2019 – January 2020). Over time, the cumulative impact of these access restrictions on operations has increased and have been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic and related containment measures. As a result, humanitarian organizations have made local ad hoc access arrangements with governorate authorities to facilitate access to Iraqi people in need, with, in some places, up to nine separate letters now required to assure physical access to certain areas.

The NGO Coordination Committee for Iraq (NCCI) and OCHA have been working with the National Operations Centre (NOC) to identify procedures that would better facilitate access. From March to June 2020, the government directed that all access requests for NGOs come through the United Nations. A pilot process was set up whereby NCCI assisted NGOs to prepare applications for movement permissions and OCHA submitted them to the NOC.

The pilot process was extended through the end of June 2020. At the end of the pilot period, 81 per cent of 154 applications had been granted NOC access letters, however, overall 56 per cent were missing the required accompanying letter by the Joint Operations Command or were so delayed that the window of time of eligibility was no longer relevant to project implementation or monitoring. Without a direct link to NGOs, application processing was also significantly delayed,

**154** approval requests

NGOs application requests for NOC Access letter approval

**21%** organizations denied

NOC access letters

**28** days to approval

average number of days from OCHA submission to NOC access letter approval

**700+** hours

NCCI required to prepare application requests

**16** days to accept receipt

average number of days for NOC to accept receipt of application requests from OCHA

**1.3K+** communications

times NCCI communicated with NGOs when preparing applications

**57%** OF NGOS DID NOT OBTAIN ACCESS AUTHORIZATION

NGOs did not obtain national access authorization due to lack of Joint Operations Command access letters, including 46% of organizations that were approved by NOC.

Overview of access pilot process: *Administrative Impediments to Humanitarian Access (July 2020)* can be accessed here: <https://bit.ly/2PDRF5k>

averaging 28 days per application from time of submission until the final NOC access letter approval. By the end of the pilot process on 30 June 2020, there was still no federal access request procedure. Further to meetings with the Humanitarian Coordinator, on 25 July, the Office of the Prime Minister issued a circular to relevant parts of the Government, noting the NOC access letter as the only approval required in federal territories to access areas of work.

NGOs also face other access challenges resulting from secondary impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Earlier in the year, the Government ordered that the issuance of most visas be temporarily stopped, in order to reduce the influx of people to the country and slow the spread of COVID-19. This order remains in place and as of end July, some 561 international staff with NGOs (around 40 per cent of all NGO international staff) are in need of visas. This includes 331 NGO staff members with expired visas in need of renewal (both inside and outside Iraq) as well as an estimated 230 new staff waiting for visas, delaying their deployment to Iraq. If the order is not reversed by the Prime Minister, projections show this figure rising to 721 by the end of September and to 930 by end of year, when 80 per cent are projected to be without a valid visa. These delays in visa issuance exacerbate access and movement obstacles, as NGO international staff are unable to request internal movement authorization without a valid visa.



A child whose family receives monthly food assistance from WFP in As-Salamiyah camp, November 2019.  
[Photo Credit: WFP]

## COVID-19 Impacts Food Security in Iraq

As Iraq's COVID-19 case numbers grew at a rapid rate during July, the secondary impacts of COVID-19 became more apparent. Government measures aimed at containing transmission of the coronavirus and preventing the health-care system from becoming overwhelmed, had secondary impacts across all strata of Iraqi society, particularly among the most vulnerable. Movement restrictions, closures of businesses, disruption to education and declining oil prices have put pressure on the Iraqi economy and created rising unemployment and household financial hardship for all Iraqis. For Iraqis in acute need of humanitarian assistance, COVID-19 movement restrictions have led to barriers in accessing livelihood income and some delays in receiving cash assistance.

Food security organizations have been monitoring global and national changes in food trade, production and prices, as well as access to local markets, household food consumption and coping strategies, to assess Iraq's food security during the pandemic. To date, despite an increase of pressures, domestic production, prices and access to markets have remaining largely stable and government distribution schemes and safety nets have successfully reduced the impact of rising unemployment in the short term, according to the report [Food Security in Iraq - Impact of COVID-19](#) published in July. Nevertheless, around 4.8 million people (12 per cent of the population) have reported using negative coping strategies to meet their food needs. The report made a series of recommendations including strengthening social safety nets and increasing food availability to reduce food insecurity. FAO, WFP and the World Bank continued to monitor food security during the pandemic in the [Iraq COVID-19 Food Security Monitor Weekly Updates](#).

Despite the relative stability from April to June, FAO and WFP issued an early warning for Iraq's food security forecast in the [FAO-WFP early warning analysis of acute food insecurity hotspots](#) also published in July. The report highlighted political instability coupled with a likely economic crisis due to declining oil prices as contextual factors exacerbating food insecurity, noting that the potential aggravation of conflict dynamics could lead to increasing food insecurity, caused by disruptions to food assistance networks and possible further population displacement.

## Gender and Protection During COVID-19

Years of socioeconomic and political instability have led to a deterioration in the rights, well-being and representation of women in Iraq. Prior to the pandemic, gender inequality in Iraq was among the highest in the world, ranking 152<sup>nd</sup> (of 153) in the Global Gender Gap Index 2020 rankings. The pandemic has compounded existing inequalities, and a [Gender Analysis of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Iraq](#) conducted by Oxfam has shown that women and girls are more at risk and withstand more pressure during this pandemic, despite men accounting for two-thirds of reported COVID-19 deaths.

The Oxfam gender analysis shows that women in Kirkuk, Diyala and Sulaymaniyah face an increased burden of domestic work and caring responsibilities, a heightened risk of domestic and gender-based violence (GBV) and a greater loss of economic livelihoods and autonomy. They also face greater difficulty in accessing health and support services (including GBV services) due to restrictions on movement and constrictive social norms and are able to access less information on COVID-19 than men. There are financial barriers to women accessing COVID-19 prevention materials or menstrual hygiene items, increasing among displaced and returnee populations. Access to sexual and reproductive health services has become extremely limited, putting women at risk of preventable pregnancy-related complications and unwanted pregnancies.



COVID-19 has exacerbated existing gender and protection issues for women and children in Iraq. [Photo Credit: Abbie Trayler-Smith]

In tandem, the National Protection Cluster's joint monitoring exercise, measuring the protection impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on conflict-affected and displaced communities in Iraq, released round four of its findings in July which showed that the top five protection risks affecting women and girls during the pandemic are: psychological trauma, stress and anxiety; lack of specialized services for women; lack of safe space and privacy; lack of access to sexual and reproductive health; and violence and abuse within the household. Most respondents reported that protection issues affecting displaced children have worsened significantly or very significantly since the beginning of the pandemic. Lack of access to education; trauma, stress and anxiety; child labour; and violence, abuse or neglect within the household are the main protection risks affecting children.

## COVID-19 Humanitarian Response in Iraq

The [COVID-19 Addendum to the 2020 Iraq Humanitarian Response Plan](#), published in July, includes a number of adjustments to the existing humanitarian response to ensure that the new vulnerabilities associated with COVID-19 are addressed, while adapting the existing response to the risks and challenges posed by the outbreak in Iraq and the associated changes in the operating environment.

The COVID-19 humanitarian response aims to prevent, mitigate and respond to the COVID-19 health emergency for 1.77 million of the most acutely vulnerable Iraqis affected by the 2014-2017 conflict with ISIL, as well as ensuring that their existing humanitarian needs are addressed in a more acutely challenging operational environment. The response plan also aims to identify and address new humanitarian needs arising for this particularly vulnerable group in the midst of the pandemic, including needs associated with physical and mental well-being, living standards and protection.

The total humanitarian response for Iraq for the rest of 2020 consists of 128 activities (113 included in the original 2020 HRP and 15 new COVID-19 activities), with a total financial requirement of \$662.2 million, including \$397.4 million for the non-COVID-19 response and \$264.8 million for the COVID-19-specific response. OCHA has maintained constant advocacy with Gol and Kurdistan Regional Government counterparts on their need to facilitate access for humanitarian actors to implement prioritized non-COVID-19 HRP activities and the COVID-19-specific humanitarian activities even during periods of COVID-19 movement restrictions.



Supporting hospital staff with food and other essential supplies in Sulaymaniyah [Photo Credit: Civil Defense Organization]





Call centre operator responding to enquiries made to the Iraq Information Centre.  
[Photo Credit: UNOPS]

## Iraq Information Centre Marks Fifth Anniversary

On 13 July, the Iraq Information Centre (IIC) marked its fifth anniversary. Operated by UNOPS on behalf of the Iraq Humanitarian Country Team, the IIC initially provided information to internally displaced Iraqis through a free and confidential hotline. Over the past five years, it has expanded its call centre and referral support to others also seeking critical information and assistance including returnees, asylum seekers, refugees and people from host communities. In 2019, the centre received more than 121,000 calls covering issues relating to urgent food or cash assistance, GBV, harassment or mistreatment by authorities, and issues relating to returns.

The IIC has also been a vital communication tool during the COVID-19 pandemic. Partnering with the humanitarian clusters, the IIC has supported SMS campaigns to deliver information on prevention measures for COVID-19 inside and outside camps across Iraq.

In addition, IIC jointly conducts an opinion survey on COVID-19 with Ground Truth Solutions to track community behaviour, which demonstrates access to information, levels of trust and risk perception. Through phone interviews conducted since April 2020 in Anbar, Duhok, Erbil, Ninewa, Salah Al-Din and Sulaymaniyah governorates, the survey helps identify tangible steps that humanitarian responders can take to improve the COVID-19 response.

## Displacement in Iraq – Special Rapporteur’s Report to Human Rights Council

In February, the Special Rapporteur for the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons, Cecilia Jimenez-Damary, visited Iraq at an official invitation from the Government of Iraq. During her visit, Ms. Jimenez-Damary met with government officials, United Nations agencies, NGOs and members of the diplomatic community. The Special Rapporteur also consulted with IDPs in and out of camp settings, including women and children, through focus group discussions and bilateral discussions.

On 9 July, Ms. Jimenez-Damary presented her report to the Human Rights Council’s 44<sup>th</sup> session. She noted that critical humanitarian and human rights challenges remain for Iraq’s 1.4 million internally displaced persons, including the ongoing need for humanitarian assistance, civil documentation and access to services. Ms. Jimenez-Damary reported that consolidation and closure of IDP camps and facilitation of returns need to be conducted in ways that safeguard the civilian and humanitarian character of camps, as well as ensuring that returns are safe, voluntary and dignified. Humanitarian access was noted as a “cumbersome, lengthy and fragmented” challenge, preventing the full delivery of assistance to acutely vulnerable people.

The report raised the prospects and challenges for the achievement of durable solutions, including the importance of scaling up stabilization efforts, development initiatives, and social cohesion and reconciliation plans as foundations for sustainable returns and prevention of further displacement.

The report can be found at <https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/44/41/Add.1>.

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