

# IN SEARCH OF SAFETY

- How Iraqis risk their lives trapped in conflict or trying to escape
- Learning from Anbar in time for Mosul

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NORWEGIAN  
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# IN SEARCH OF SAFETY

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**Front cover:** Newly displaced families from Fallujah residing in Ameriyat al Fallujah.

*Photo: Karl Schembri/NRC*

**Opposite page:** A newly displaced family seeking shelter from the scorching heat in a displacement camp in Ameriyat al Fallujah. *Photo: Karl Schembri/NRC*

**Back cover:** Hundreds of displaced Iraqis from Fallujah seen stranded in Ameriyat al Fallujah, just before the Bzeibiz Bridge, waiting to be allowed into Baghdad. *Photo: Karl Schembri/NRC*



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In May and June 2016, an estimated 85,000<sup>1</sup> people fled from locations in and around Fallujah City, following operations by the Iraqi military to retake those areas from ISIS. These civilians are now mostly living in makeshift camps in Ameriyat al Fallujah, Habaniyah Tourist City and Khalidiya, and in host communities in other parts of Anbar governorate, as well as a limited number in Baghdad governorate, having undergone a gruelling journey towards safety.

This journey has involved numerous obstacles to movement and associated protection risks, including threat to life.

However, the recent events in Anbar and the resulting humanitarian consequences for civilians will be dwarfed by the access and protection challenges civilians will face when the anticipated military operations on Mosul begin, with over ten times as many people expected to flee.

We have an opportunity now to learn the lessons of Anbar to minimise the risks facing civilians and to prepare ahead of Mosul.

## Lack of Access to Safety

The recent events in Fallujah reflect a much larger displacement trend within Iraq since the start of 2015. Military operations, such as those in Ramadi and Heet in Anbar governorate in December 2015 and March 2016, and in Tikrit in Salah al Din governorate in 2015, have left hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians struggling to access safety and humanitarian assistance. In trying to reach safety, civilians have faced various challenges.

First, ISIS – and occasionally other armed actors – prevent people from leaving. They do so by making threats against civilians, killing those trying to escape, confiscating documents and through harassment, amongst other means. As a result, civilians face terrible conditions, including ongoing violence and a lack of food and water. Some of Fallujah's population has been forced to survive on dates and to drink unsafe water from agricultural wells or the river.

Second, civilians have not been able to access genuinely safe routes away from conflict and violence. Those who do manage to escape often encounter further threats to their lives on their way to relative safety as routes are contaminated with unexploded ordnance and are sometimes patrolled by ISIS or other armed groups. Even once civilians do manage to escape these dangers, they face subsequent impediments to



**Above:** Newly displaced families arriving in Kilo 18 camp.  
*Photo: NRC/Dureed Sa'ady*

their freedom of movement and swift onward access to protection and assistance, such as challenges faced at checkpoints and security screening procedures.

Understanding the trends and risks as recently observed in Anbar governorate, and their wider implications, provides opportunities for all responsible parties to apply what has been learnt now and to mitigate any such risks ahead of the anticipated operations in Mosul.



**Above:** Children, women and the elderly make up most of the population in the displacement camps in Ameriyat al Fallujah.

*Photo: Karl Schembri/NRC*

## Operational Challenges in the Recent Fallujah Response

In addition to the protection challenges that civilians face in fleeing conflict and violence, aid agencies and the Iraqi authorities have struggled collectively to meet the needs of civilians. Since the start of the military operations in Fallujah, the humanitarian community has struggled to secure the right donor resources, gain stable and secure access to the displacement camps inside Anbar, and scale up sufficiently to meet the needs of more than 85,000 displaced Iraqi civilians from the city and surrounding areas. The current appeal for Iraq is only 38% funded, despite the significant need and periodic but significant peaks in displacement.

Displaced civilians living in camps and host communities in Anbar have not been able to access sufficient quantities and quality of food, drinking water, shelter, medical supplies or protection services, such as psychosocial support and child protection. Additionally, there has been a shortage of latrines and a lack of basic provision for their use by women such as gender segregation. The main challenges faced by aid agencies are the lengthy bureaucratic procedures necessary to establish a presence and gain access, ongoing security challenges in Anbar governorate, limited donor funding and the difficulties of supporting a large number of people arriving in a short space of time.

## Looking Ahead towards Mosul

The crisis in Fallujah (and Anbar more broadly) represents a test case for the Iraqi government and the international community; together they need to implement preparedness measures to reduce the protection challenges that civilians are facing, guide them towards safety, and ensure adequate assistance – both on their journey and in displacement – ahead of anticipated military operations in Mosul.

Today we have an opportunity, while the attention of the world is on events in Iraq, to invest in robust humanitarian planning and preparedness, to provide much-needed protection assistance to the Iraqi community, and to ensure the building blocks are in place for a stable and peaceful future Iraq.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Recommendations

### ALL PARTIES TO THE CONFLICT:

- Must immediately cease all human rights and IHL abuses; and the Government of Iraq must investigate and take appropriate action where there are credible allegations of violations;
- Should immediately halt any actions that prevent civilians from fleeing to safety, in line with their obligations under international humanitarian law (IHL).

### THE GOVERNMENT OF IRAQ, INCLUDING NATIONAL, REGIONAL AND LOCAL STRUCTURES:

- Should take steps to ensure freedom of movement for civilians, in line with its obligations under national legislation and facilitate access to protection and assistance without discrimination;
- Should avoid communicating to the civilian population that safe routes exist where there are ongoing security challenges, such as the presence of mines and armed actors. In cases where it is anticipated that civilians will try to access routes towards safety, steps should be taken to ensure appropriate communication with civilians, decontamination and sustained protection of the routes;
- Should consider requesting the deployment of a UN monitoring team to areas where civilians face acute protection threats, such as holding areas for people awaiting screening and zones controlled by non-state armed groups.

### THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY, IN PARTICULAR THE US-LED COALITION:

- Must take immediate steps to ensure respect for international human rights and IHL and to hold all parties accountable to these standards, in order to counter impunity and help deter future violations;
- Should deploy an adequately resourced UN monitoring team to support the Government of Iraq in its efforts to protect civilians, and ensure the UN monitoring teams work closely with civil society, women, youth and religious leaders on protection of civilians in Iraq;
- Must ensure that there is the required humanitarian funding and resources to be able to offer immediate aid, safety and protection to people who are displaced as a result of military operations.

### THE UN AGENCIES AND THE INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN AGENCIES:

- Must scale up preparedness measures by pre-positioning emergency stock and consider additional staffing and resource capacity ahead of Mosul operations;
- Must significantly scale up protection programming, monitoring, reporting and advocacy efforts in Iraq and support local Iraqi aid organisations to do likewise;
- In particular, the OCHA should increase their civil–military coordination capacity so they are able to go beyond de-confliction and take active steps towards increasing stable and secure access for aid organisations to reach affected populations.



Section of upper map outside Iraq and its border ©Wikimedia user MapMaster  
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# INTRODUCTION

In the wake of recent military operations in Anbar, the Iraqi government has reiterated intentions to carry out military operations in the city of Mosul and surrounding areas in the near future. Mosul is Iraq's second largest city and its population is believed to be around 1.2 million people.<sup>2</sup> It is thought that around 600,000 people will flee towards neighbouring areas including the Ninewa Plains and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in the event of military operations.<sup>3</sup> A significant number are also expected to flee towards Syria's north-eastern region and beyond the border.

This large-scale displacement will present even greater challenges than we have seen in recent months in Anbar governorate.

Military operations, such as those in Ramadi and Heet in Anbar governorate in December 2015 and March 2016, and in Tikrit in Salah al Din governorate in 2015, have left hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians struggling to access safety. Across all these locations we have seen that civilians face enormous difficulties. ISIS and, in some cases, other armed actors have often threatened or even killed civilians trying to escape their areas of control. Documents have been confiscated and impediments imposed on civilians' freedom of movement; for example, through challenges at checkpoints and screening facilities. Moreover, while not the primary focus of this report, administrative hurdles along with inadequate funding and contingency planning by some donors and aid agencies have left Iraqi civilians with insufficient access to aid in displacement.

It is therefore critical that lessons are learned from the trends and challenges evident in Anbar to allow for better informed and better prepared planning and response to upcoming military operations in Iraq.

## Methodology

The analysis in this report is based on on-the-ground monitoring, key informant interviews and discussions with other NGOs undertaken since December 2015. Safety and security concerns mean that international NGOs have a limited presence in south-central Iraq, which presents significant challenges to undertaking research of this nature, particularly in Anbar. Some of the names of the people interviewed have been changed for their protection.

The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and the International Rescue Committee (IRC) have been working in Iraq since 2010 and 2003 respectively, delivering humanitarian assistance to people in need, covering nearly all governorates of Iraq. Combined, NRC and IRC provide shelter, water and sanitation, education, livelihoods, information and legal assistance, and support for children's and women's protection to some 750,000 Iraqis.

**Below:** IDPs from Fallujah wait in the scorching sun to be allowed into Baghdad, 11 June 2016.

*Photo: Karl Schembri/NRC*



# NO WAY OUT: BARRIERS TO ESCAPING ACTIVE CONFLICT AND BESIEGED AREAS

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“ Families are calling for help.  
We just want to leave the city [Fallujah].  
We just want to leave. ”

UM AHMED (AGE 40), FALLUJAH CITY

Across large areas of Iraq, hundreds of thousands of civilians have effectively been living under siege. Civilians trapped in cities such as Fallujah have witnessed serious food and water shortages, a scarcity of medical supplies, and extreme price increases of up to 800%.<sup>4</sup> There are reports of ISIS only allowing families who are considered loyal to them to access food and other basic goods.<sup>5</sup> Yet the use of starvation tactics represents a violation of international humanitarian law (IHL), which prohibits the use of such tactics as a weapon in armed conflict.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, there are reports of ongoing abuse and mistreatment of women and girls in ISIS-held areas of Iraq, including violence against them and restrictions on their freedom of movement. Protection concerns extend also to males living under ISIS control, including brutal punishments and executions.<sup>7</sup> Limited access makes it difficult to determine exact conditions in Mosul, which is the second largest city in Iraq, however similar conditions may be present.

Despite the horrific conditions, families living in areas held by ISIS are prevented from fleeing. ISIS has employed several tactics to enforce its control over the civilian population, including the threat of or direct use of violence, often at checkpoints. In December 2015, during the military offensive on Ramadi in Anbar governorate, civilians were forced to remain in the city and some allegedly used as human shields, according to reports in the international media.<sup>8</sup> Many of those trying to escape were killed by sniper fire. During the military operation to retake Fallujah in June 2016, there were several reports of ISIS fighters moving civilians from house to house or to different neighbourhoods.<sup>9</sup> Civilians trying to leave the city across the Euphrates River risked being shot.<sup>10</sup> Subsequent reports indicate that ISIS members also burned boats to prevent civilians from crossing the river to safety.<sup>11</sup>

## Living under ISIS

“ The situation was horrifying.  
We were living without water or food.  
We drank water from the river and  
we ate rotten dates and yogurt.  
We had some livestock, which we  
slaughtered and ate, but no rice or  
no flour. Nothing. Armed men were  
all around us and did not allow anyone  
to get out of the city. We spent six to  
seven months trapped without food.  
Everything was banned and we had  
to survive on whatever we had left. ”

ZAHRA (AGE UNKNOWN), FALLUJAH DISTRICT

## Escaping ISIS by crossing the Euphrates

“ We headed to Zawba'a [a town close to the Euphrates River] and the people there drove us to a crossing point over the river close to a wooden bridge. They helped us cross the river. However, as soon as we reached the river, ISIS fighters started shooting at us. Sixteen people from our group were killed. My daughter is in hospital now as she was wounded during the chaos. ”

HASNA (AGE 50), MOTHER OF SEVEN,  
ZAWBA'A TOWN, FALLUJAH DISTRICT

## NO WAY OUT: BARRIERS TO ESCAPING ACTIVE CONFLICT AND BESIEGED AREAS



**Above:** Iman was eight months pregnant when she had to escape her home village of Al Hsai together with her four children due to heavy fighting. "We escaped by foot during the evening with no idea where to go". *Photo: Becky Bakr Abdulla/NRC*

In addition to violence, ISIS has reportedly confiscated legal documents to limit freedom of movement. Families have told the IRC and NRC that ISIS members had confiscated the civil ID cards of people trying to leave Fallujah City prior to the May and June 2016 military operations.<sup>12</sup> Other families from Fallujah have said that they had to hand over documents proving ownership of property or other assets, either as a disincentive to leave or as assurance of return.<sup>13</sup>

While the restrictions on leaving are severe, there are reports of some individuals being allowed to travel from ISIS-held areas to access emergency medical care in other parts of Iraq. However, this is conditional on obtaining a medical certificate, reportedly costing at least US\$100 and therefore too expensive for most families.<sup>14</sup> Even these limited exemptions are granted inconsistently, with frequent changes to procedures.<sup>15</sup>

An additional concern for those trying to flee is the well-founded fear that they may face abuse at the hands of other armed groups, even if they manage to leave ISIS-held areas. Human Rights Watch's preliminary investigations into the treatment of Fallujah's displaced found that civilians faced ill treatment and harassment by different armed groups under the umbrella of the Popular Mobilisation Forces.<sup>16</sup> There are also reports that the

screening procedures at Iraqi military checkpoints and at reception sites outside of ISIS-held territory are a deterrent for people wishing to leave, as displaced persons (particularly young men) fear being detained or arrested. In some cases, this has led to women and children fleeing without their husbands, brothers and other male members of their family.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, civilians may be forced to stay behind in ISIS-held areas because of their economic circumstances and/or concerns for their families. Those with young children or elderly or disabled relatives are often unable to undertake the difficult and life-threatening journey to safety. Others choose to stay to protect their property, assets or livelihoods.

These immense difficulties demonstrate the almost impossible decision Iraqi civilians are forced to take when trying to leave or to stay behind in ISIS-held areas. Yet in some cases it appears that populations who have had to remain inside these areas for longer periods of time are treated with more suspicion than others once they are finally able to flee,<sup>18</sup> often due to their assumed affiliation to or support for the group. Those living in Mosul are likely to face similar decisions and challenges in the coming months, making it imperative to recognise that civilians who remain inside the city, even after military operations have begun, should not be assumed to be sympathisers of armed groups.

# DANGERS OF FLIGHT: LACK OF SAFE ROUTES AWAY FROM CONFLICT

Despite the risks, people are trying to leave conflict areas when they can. However, options are extremely limited and even potentially life-threatening. Civilians may either try to use government-designated ‘safe routes’ or attempt alternative means of accessing safety. Both options present serious challenges.

## ‘Safe routes’

In an effort to provide safe passage for those trying to flee conflict areas, particularly those under ISIS control, the Iraqi government has attempted to establish ‘safe routes’. These routes are, in theory, protected by Iraqi security forces and communicated to civilian populations living in ISIS-held areas by, for example, dropping leaflets over cities under ISIS control. For instance, on 25 March, the Iraqi government distributed information on three exit routes for civilians in Fallujah to flee the city.<sup>19</sup>

However, civilians are often unable to access the routes in the first place, due to the restrictions on freedom of movement largely imposed by ISIS, as described above; moreover, the routes themselves are anything but safe. According to Human Rights Watch, ISIS continued to block civilians from leaving Fallujah long after the establishment of ‘safe routes’ out of the city.<sup>20</sup> Those who did manage to leave and access the ‘safe routes’ faced ongoing risks to their lives created by the presence of armed actors, ongoing fighting, and the difficult terrain.<sup>21</sup> The fact that ‘safe routes’ are being publicly communicated to affected populations via the media means that ISIS and other armed groups are also well aware of them. According to key informants, after the Iraqi authorities declared so-called ‘safe corridors’ out of Fallujah on 26 March, ISIS used speakers in mosques and on vehicles to broadcast the message that anyone attempting to flee would be killed immediately.<sup>22</sup>

An additional life-threatening challenge in using ‘safe routes’ is the continued presence of mines and other explosive devices. For example, on 10 June 2016, 26 people were injured and one man killed by mines and improvised explosive devices on the road used by families fleeing Al Hsai, Albo Fadhil, Albu Tukan and Nassaf (Fallujah) as they headed towards Al Salam junction.<sup>23</sup>

## Using ‘Safe Routes’

“ 42-year-old Leila and her family spent two months trying to escape from Fallujah. Each time she was forced to turn back when she came across ISIS fighters. Eventually she was able to flee with her two sons and three daughters, all under the age of eight. They walked for an hour through agricultural water channels to avoid being seen. As they approached the Al Salam junction ISIS fighters opened fire on them. Leila was shot in her shoulder; her two year-old son, Omar, whom she was holding was also hit. Omar was killed on the spot. In the commotion, Leila’s other children were separated from her. Another person fleeing with Leila and her family stepped on an explosive device and didn’t manage to cross the intersection. ”

AS TOLD TO NRC BY AHMED, LEILA’S COUSIN,  
WHO WAS STAYING AT HABANIYAH DISPLACEMENT  
CAMP TO HELP FALLUJAH CIVILIANS GET OUT  
AT THE END OF AL SALAM JUNCTION

A recent interagency assessment has also found the route between Kilo 18 and Ramadi/Khalidiya continues to be unsafe due to the presence of mines.<sup>24</sup> Efforts to decontaminate these ‘safe routes’ in advance of their announcement have been minimal or completely absent, presenting considerable danger to life.

## DANGERS OF FLIGHT: LACK OF SAFE ROUTES AWAY FROM CONFLICT

### Alternative Routes

Given the challenges in leaving locations held by ISIS or areas of active conflict, and the unsafe conditions on routes towards relative safety, many are compelled to pay smugglers in order to help them escape. Smugglers can also help families navigate difficult terrain for hundreds of miles on circuitous routes to find safety, which some choose to take for lack of alternatives. Indeed, there are reports that families are travelling all the way out to the Syrian border (west of their area of origin and deeper into ISIS-held territory) in order to loop back round to the east to head towards Baghdad or other areas. Some Iraqis from Anbar and Nineva are also fleeing in increasing numbers into neighbouring Syria as they have nowhere else to go. The routes chosen by smugglers often also require travel over difficult terrain, including walking through open desert for several days. This makes it much harder for young children, the elderly, the handicapped or the sick to undertake them.<sup>25</sup>

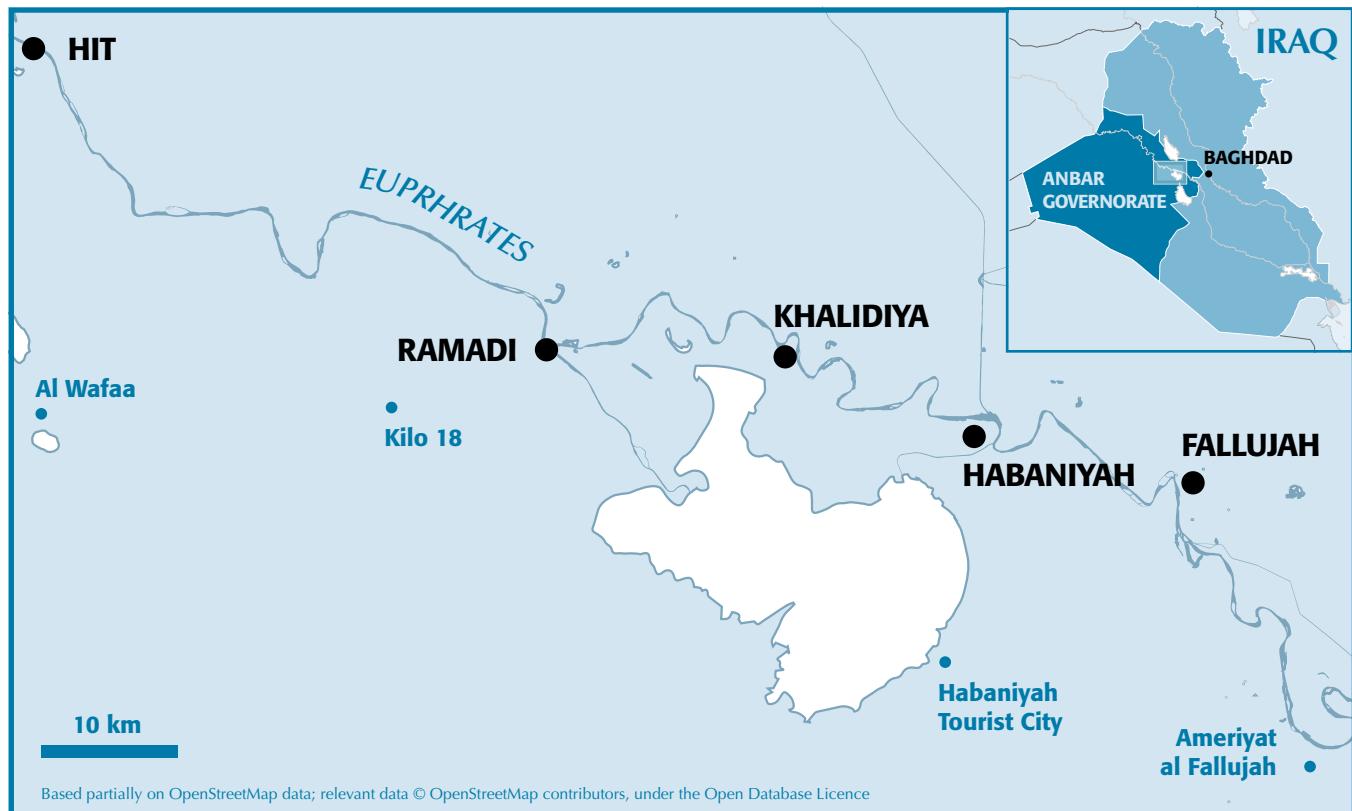
Using smugglers is expensive. Smugglers' fees range between US\$500 and US\$3,200 per family, depending, among other factors, on the city of origin.<sup>26</sup> In addition, those choosing to use smugglers often have to pay transport cost of US\$800 to US\$1,200.<sup>27</sup> These fees are too expensive for many families.

### Use of Smugglers

“ We were smuggled out via the desert road. We were scared ISIS would follow us and we would get slaughtered. We did not know how to get to the main road; we just relied on smugglers and on God. ”

FIRAS FLED WITH MEMBERS OF HIS TRIBE USING SMUGGLERS. THE JOURNEY, WHICH WOULD NORMALLY TAKE 1.5 HOURS, TOOK THEM MORE THAN 10 HOURS.

Looking ahead to the anticipated operations on Mosul, it is likely that civilians will face similar obstacles in trying to reach safety. Learning now from the difficulties and risks faced by civilians in Anbar governorate is essential if we are to better protect and assist the hundreds of thousands who will seek to flee.



Based partially on OpenStreetMap data; relevant data © OpenStreetMap contributors, under the Open Database Licence

# STUCK IN TRANSIT: CHECKPOINTS AND SECURITY SCREENING

Irrespective of the route taken to escape, civilians leaving active conflict areas face a series of obstacles to their freedom of movement. These include checkpoints controlled by a variety of armed actors, as well as subsequent screening procedures.

## Checkpoints

Along the designated 'safe route' between Kilo 18 and Khalidiya there are reportedly some 20 checkpoints manned by various security forces.<sup>28</sup> Typically, it seems that procedures at these checkpoints involve officials or armed men checking documentation before allowing travellers to continue.<sup>29</sup> At some checkpoints, particularly those held by non-government armed actors, it is believed that more strict procedures may apply.

## Screening Facilities

Those who are able to pass the checkpoints are also subject to security screening procedures thereafter. The stated rationale for these procedures is that there is a security risk that ISIS members or sympathisers may be infiltrating groups of civilian internally displaced persons (IDPs). For this reason, all males of fighting age (considered ages 14 to 65), and sometimes boys and elderly men, are screened, while women and girls are forced to wait or are transported to other locations.<sup>30</sup> Those men who do not pass the initial screening process risk being detained. This often results in – at least temporary – family separation.<sup>31</sup>

There are a number of concerns related to the manner in which screening facilities and processes are currently being conducted. For example, irrespective of which particular actor is in charge, the procedures at screening facilities are often unclear and inconsistent, varying across location and time. This means that it is difficult to predict if an individual will be held for hours, days or even longer, while this process takes place. It also often unclear where individual people are being held.<sup>32</sup>

Notwithstanding how confusing these screening procedures can be, most people do not have access to legal representation and the right to appeal a decision. Access to basic humanitarian services during screenings is also often very limited. The screening locations are largely inaccessible to aid agencies, and basic water, sanitation, medical and other services are often not available to those being held.<sup>33</sup>

Reports from those who have completed the screening process or waited for family members to be processed, and from some humanitarian agencies, indicate that people often lack food, water and medical care. They are also often forced to live in cramped conditions without appropriate shelter, such as in Al Wafaa camp which, at the height of displacement in April 2016, housed 12,000 individuals, mostly those who were waiting for family members to be screened.<sup>34</sup>

Current conditions in screening facilities holding IDPs from Fallujah are no better, with reports of cases of dehydration and diarrhoea, as the water is unfit for drinking.<sup>35</sup> Cramped conditions in high summer temperatures along with a lack of water and coolers are worsening the situation. As of June 2016 it was taking 10 to 13 days for people to be cleared, making this even more concerning.

Moreover, as we have seen from the waves of displacement following military operations in Anbar, the locations of these facilities and camps can themselves be problematic. While the camps in Habaniyah Tourist City are in what can be considered a safe location, others such as Kilo 18 and Al Wafaa (areas where both camps and screening facilities are present) are located in close proximity to fighting.

Finally, communication between the authorities running screening centres and IDPs being screened is inconsistent or entirely absent, meaning that few civilians understand the procedures and waiting times involved. Most telling is that, when approached, one of the first things many female IDPs in displacement camps ask is whether any information is available regarding the whereabouts of their male family members.<sup>36</sup>

The challenges described above not only delay the arrival of civilians to relative safety, but they may also serve to increase community tension by fuelling perceptions of discrimination. Ahead of Mosul – and in order to mitigate these risks – there is still time to consider ways to improve screening processes to allow civilians to pass through more quickly and in a dignified manner.

# REACHING RELATIVE SAFETY: CHALLENGES TO PROVIDING ASSISTANCE IN DISPLACEMENT CAMPS

Having faced numerous challenges in accessing relative safety, IDPs continue to encounter difficulties once they arrive in displacement sites.

Women and children who have become separated from their male family members en route or during screening processes, face a number of associated challenges and risks in displacement. Men are traditionally the household breadwinners and are also responsible for getting access to basic services for their families; this presents real difficulties for women in their absence.

Most IDPs end up in displacement camps in three main locations in eastern Anbar: Ameriyat al Fallujah, Habaniyah Tourist City and Khalidiya. New camps continue to be constructed to house the growing numbers of IDPs. Conditions in these camps vary considerably and often depend on the ability of humanitarian organisations to access them. IDPs living in Ameriyat al Fallujah, where some humanitarian agencies are currently operating, have better access to basic services than in areas such as Al Wafaa and Kilo 18, which are in close proximity to conflict activities. In Habaniyah Tourist City, as of mid-June, there were no water and sanitation facilities in three of the new camps.<sup>37</sup>

Conditions in camps are often overcrowded, with the number of new arrivals outstripping the ability of the authorities and aid agencies to accommodate people. In late June 2016, for instance, camps in Ameriyat al Fallujah and Habaniyah Tourist City were completely full.<sup>38</sup> Overcrowding is also forcing multiple families to reside in the same tent, affecting women and girls' freedom and privacy.

In the wake of Fallujah, the humanitarian community has faced challenges in meeting the needs of the large influx of IDPs, due in part to bureaucratic barriers and a lack of sufficient preparedness. In order to gain access to Anbar aid agencies must complete a number of procedures, beginning with registration in Baghdad, followed by securing a letter from the Baghdad National Operations Centre in order to operate in Anbar. They must then obtain a facilitation letter for each individual needing to cross the Bzebib Bridge into Anbar governorate. While the need for a system of registration is clear, the current procedures are time consuming and impact on the ability to respond quickly.



**Above:** Newly displaced families from Fallujah arrive in camps in Ameriyat al Fallujah.

*Photo: NRC/Iraq*

The Fallujah response has also demonstrated the need for sufficient preparedness for the arrival of large numbers of IDPs. There are relatively few international organisations present in Anbar governorate. This, combined with the centralised structure of coordination (led from Erbil and Baghdad), meant that agencies struggled to react quickly enough. Although non-food items such as hygiene kits, mattresses, blankets and jerry cans have now arrived in camps in eastern Anbar governorate and coordination has stepped up considerably, the humanitarian community needs to act on lessons learned to consider how to more quickly scale up in areas where IDPs may displace to. This includes capacity building, including pre-positioning and quick release of stocks, and also securing improved access to civilian populations and areas of displacement. In the case of Fallujah, the humanitarian community had relatively little notice of the impending operations; however, with foreknowledge of the intended operations more can be done now for Mosul.

# CONCLUSION

The events in Fallujah of May and June 2016 have revealed, once again, the shocking lack of protection for civilians fleeing violence in Iraq. Hundreds of thousands of civilians remain trapped in ISIS-held areas or areas affected by military operations.

For those able to flee, each stage of their journey away from conflict and violence presents considerable protection risks. Moreover, examining the trends to date, there is a real risk that the obstacles facing civilians in fleeing conflict and violence can easily feed into existing perceptions of discrimination based on ethnicity and other factors. Thus, the journey to safety is not only devastating for the individuals involved but can also serve to aggravate underlying drivers of conflict in the country.

Responsible parties need to learn from past mistakes and act now to prepare better for Mosul to ensure that civilian protection is at the heart of military planning, and that the resourcing and funds are in place to respond to the needs of Iraqi civilians when the fighting intensifies and in its aftermath.

**Below:** An elderly woman from Fallujah collapses in the searing heat at Ameriyat Al Fallujah camps. More than 62,000 civilians fled during the Iraqi forces' military operation to retake Fallujah from ISIS, but aid agencies struggled with the influx of displaced people as a severe lack of funding hindered the delivery of essential aid.

*Photo: Karl Schembri/NRC*



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## All parties to the conflict:

- Must immediately cease all human rights and IHL abuses; and the Government of Iraq must investigate and take appropriate action where there are credible allegations of violations;
- Should immediately halt any actions that prevent civilians from fleeing to safety, in line with their obligations under international humanitarian law (IHL). Siege and starvation tactics should not be used to pressure warring parties to relinquish control over the territory and the population;
- Must allow the evacuation of the civilian population from areas under ISIS control or affected by military operations, prioritising pregnant women and newborns/children under five, unaccompanied and separated children, persons with serious medical conditions and persons facing protection risks, such as survivors of gender-based and other forms of violence and the elderly. Any evacuation should be carefully planned and must be voluntary, based on informed decision-making, and done without jeopardising the safety of those who remain;
- Must allow immediate, unfettered and consistent humanitarian access for aid agencies for the delivery of humanitarian services in all areas across Iraq, and in Anbar and Ninewa in particular.

## The Government of Iraq, including national, regional and local structures:

- Should take steps to ensure freedom of movement of civilians in line with its obligations under national legislation and facilitate access to protection and assistance without discrimination;
- Should avoid communicating to the civilian population that safe routes exist where there are ongoing security challenges such as the presence of mines and armed actors. In cases where it is anticipated that civilians will try to access routes towards safety, steps should be taken to ensure appropriate communication with civilians, decontamination and sustained protection of the routes;
- Must establish effective communication channels and warning systems to ensure civilians are informed about locations where hostilities are ongoing so they can adapt to the changing environment;
- Should establish formal communication channels between the humanitarian community and Iraqi government civil–military focal points to allow humanitarian concerns to be raised and addressed by Iraqi authorities;
- Should consider requesting the deployment of a UN monitoring team to areas where civilians face acute protection threats, such as holding areas for people awaiting screening and zones controlled by non-state armed groups;

- Facilitate civilians' ability to flee active conflict areas by:
  - Taking active steps to de-mine routes slated for exit to facilitate safe movement of civilians escaping besieged areas;
  - Ensuring screening processes are implemented in a manner that is transparent and timely, which allows for due process and avoids family separation as far as possible;
  - Ensuring that conditions for people who are held for security screening allow civilians to access basic facilities, such as clean water, sanitation and shelter;
  - Working with aid agencies to identify priority cases for expedited screening. Clear humanitarian criteria need to be followed to allow the most vulnerable to access safety as a matter of priority – in particular, pregnant women and newborns/children under five, unaccompanied and separated children, persons with serious medical conditions and persons facing protection risks, such as survivors of gender-based and other forms of violence and the elderly;
  - Allowing humanitarian actors access to fleeing civilians and to those waiting for screening.
- Must remove all administrative barriers which limit the work of aid agencies, including by:
  - Setting up a fast-track system to grant registration to international aid agencies, as well as visas, residency and work permits for humanitarian staff;
  - Providing facilitation letters in an expedited manner that ensures access for aid agencies to cross into Anbar governorate through Bzebiz bridge for extended time periods;
  - Ensure civil society organisations' involvement in humanitarian preparedness prior to future operations;
- Must ensure that camp minimum standards are met, including by:
  - Providing for adequate infrastructure to reduce overcrowding;
  - Taking adequate measures to mitigate risks for women and girls, such as adequate lighting across the displacement sites, securing privacy, and allowing for separate water, toilet, and shower facilities;
  - Choosing locations for IDP camps that are safe and removed from the vicinity of active conflict.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### The international community, in particular the US-led coalition:

- Must take immediate steps to ensure respect for international human rights and IHL and to hold all parties accountable for violations, in order to counter impunity and help deter future breaches;
- Should press the Government of Iraq to ensure that those fleeing conflict and violence can access safety;
- Must use their influence to ensure that warring parties respect the rights of evacuated or demobilised civilians when they reach relative safety, in accordance with IHL;
- Should deploy an adequately resourced UN monitoring team to support the Government of Iraq in its efforts to protect civilians; and ensure the UN monitoring teams work closely with civil society, women, youth and religious leaders on protection of civilians in Iraq;
- Must clarify the mechanisms for the humanitarian community to communicate protection concerns to the US-led coalition;
- Must ensure that there is the required humanitarian funding and resources to be able to offer immediate aid, safety and protection to people who are displaced as a result of military operations;
- Should press the Government of Iraq to work more closely with the UN agencies, especially UNHCR, to facilitate registration of IDP populations, with the aim of ensuring appropriate assistance in a timely manner;
- Must ensure civil society organisations' involvement in humanitarian preparedness prior to future operations.

### The UN agencies and the international humanitarian agencies:

- Must ensure that preparations are made now for camp management to be swiftly set up with a particular focus on the Ninewa Plains and other areas of expected displacement from Mosul. More localised structures for coordination should also be considered, such as Ninewa-based working groups to allow swift and efficient planning and response;
- Must scale up preparedness measures by pre-positioning emergency stock and consider additional staffing and resource capacity ahead of Mosul operations;
- Must significantly scale up protection programming, monitoring, reporting and advocacy efforts in Iraq and support local Iraqi aid organisations in doing likewise;
- Must support government actors in the planning of the safe evacuation of civilians for those who can leave insecure areas;
- Should immediately start registration processes for IDPs from Fallujah to ensure their protection and ensure that assistance can be targeted and provided at an appropriate time and in an appropriate manner;
- Must work with donors to ensure gaps in assistance in Anbar are filled, namely in protection (registration of IDPs), primary health care and nutrition, water and sanitation, and basic non-food item distributions including temporary shelter support;
- In particular, the OCHA should increase their civil-military coordination capacity so they are able to go beyond de-confliction and take active steps towards increasing stable and secure access for aid organisations to reach affected populations.

# REFERENCES

- 1 OCHA, 22 June 2016
- 2 According to the Joint Crisis Coordination Centre (JCC) Joint Humanitarian Contingency Plan
- 3 According to the OCHA's contingency planning
- 4 Acaps Briefing Note, 'Iraq: Besieged population in Fallujah', 21 April 2016.
- 5 Acaps Briefing Note, 'Iraq: Besieged population in Fallujah', 21 April 2016.
- 6 Rule 53 of the International Committee of the Red Cross customary IHL database
- 7 The UNAMI-OHCR 'Report on the Protection of Civilians in the Armed Conflict in Iraq: 1 May – 31 October 2015' documents numerous incidents of killings and abuse by ISIS in areas under their control.  
Available online at:  
[http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNAMI-OHCHR\\_%20POC%20Report\\_FINAL\\_01%20May-31%20October%202015\\_FINAL\\_11Jan2016.pdf](http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNAMI-OHCHR_%20POC%20Report_FINAL_01%20May-31%20October%202015_FINAL_11Jan2016.pdf)
- 8 Ahmed Rasheed, Huffington Post, 'As Forces Close In On Ramadi, ISIS Uses Thousands Of Civilians As Human Shields', 9 December 2015.  
Available online at:  
[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/iraq-isis-ramadi\\_us\\_56684106e4b0f290e5214423](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/iraq-isis-ramadi_us_56684106e4b0f290e5214423)
- 9 NRC teams have spoken to several families between 22 May and 16 June 2016 who attested to being moved from one house or one neighbourhood to the next, together with ISIS fighters, which often led them to take the decision to flee rather than be moved around.
- 10 NRC and IRC interviewed several families from Zawba'a area between 6 and 12 June 2016 who spoke of being targeted by ISIS during their flight across the Euphrates River.
- 11 Based on information received by IRC on 4 June 2016
- 12 Based on interviews conducted by IRC and NRC with IDP families in May and June 2016
- 13 Based on interviews conducted by NRC with IDP families from Al Qaim and Ramadi in February 2016
- 14 Based on interviews conducted by IRC and NRC with IDP families from Ramadi between January and June 2016
- 15 Based on interviews conducted by IRC and NRC with IDP families from Ramadi, Heet, Ana and Al Qaim, between January and June 2016
- 16 Human Rights Watch, 'Iraq: Fallujah Abuses Test Control of Militias', 9 June 2016.  
Available online at:  
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/06/09/iraq-fallujah-abuses-test-control-militias>
- 17 According to testimony received by IRC between January and December 2016
- 18 For instance, IDPs have reported that those who arrived into camps in Eastern Anbar from Ramadi later than December 2015 (when military operations took place) faced more restrictions on freedom of movement than those who arrived earlier. Of those who arrived later many were unable to leave the camps at all.
- 19 According to Human Rights Watch, and as reported by Acaps: '[...] on 25 March, the Iraqi government opened three exit routes for civilians in Fallujah to flee the city, but as of 7 April IS[IS] was still blocking civilians from leaving.' However, the Acaps report (written weeks before the military offensive on the city) noted that there is "no safe route to exit". See further, Acaps Briefing Note, 'Iraq: Besieged population in Fallujah', 21 April 2016.
- 20 Acaps Briefing Note, 'Iraq: Besieged population in Fallujah', 21 April 2016.
- 21 Acaps Briefing Note, 'Iraq: Besieged population in Fallujah', 21 April 2016.
- 22 Based on information received by IRC between 16 and 31 March 2016
- 23 According to information collected by IRC and reported on 11 June 2016
- 24 Interagency Rapid Protection Assessment, 'Crisis Information Report – Kilo 18 site' 14 March 2016, under the umbrella of the Protection Cluster-Iraq.
- 25 According to information received by IRC between January and June 2016
- 26 Based on interviews conducted with IDP families by NRC at Bzebib bridge between January and June 2016
- 27 Based on information received by IRC from IDP families between January and June 2016
- 28 Interagency Rapid Protection Assessment, 'Crisis Information Report – Kilo 18 site', 14 March 2016, under the umbrella of the Protection Cluster-Iraq.
- 29 According to comments made by IDP families to IRC and NRC between January and June 2016
- 30 This is the rationale for the security screening as understood by several humanitarian actors in the field and is derived from public and private statements made by the authorities.
- 31 Based on information received by IRC from IDP families between January and June 2016
- 32 According to an Amnesty International video, released on 16 June 2016, entitled 'The Human Warehouse'  
Available online at:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gKnTpMTlr58>
- 33 Based on information received by IRC from IDP families between January and June 2016
- 34 Based on information collected by NRC in April and May 2016
- 35 As confirmed by the Director of the Habaniyah Tourist City medical centre in an interview with NRC on 20 June 2016. Additional reports of water-borne diseases were also confirmed by IRC during interviews with IDP families conducted in June 2016 across various locations in Anbar.
- 36 Based on interviews conducted by NRC with IDP families in May and June 2016
- 37 According to information provided to IRC in June 2016
- 38 According to testimonies collected by IRC in June 2016



AKHTAMAR  
C L A S S I C  
S L I M S I Z E  
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