CORE
COVERAGE, OPERATIONAL REACH, AND EFFECTIVENESS

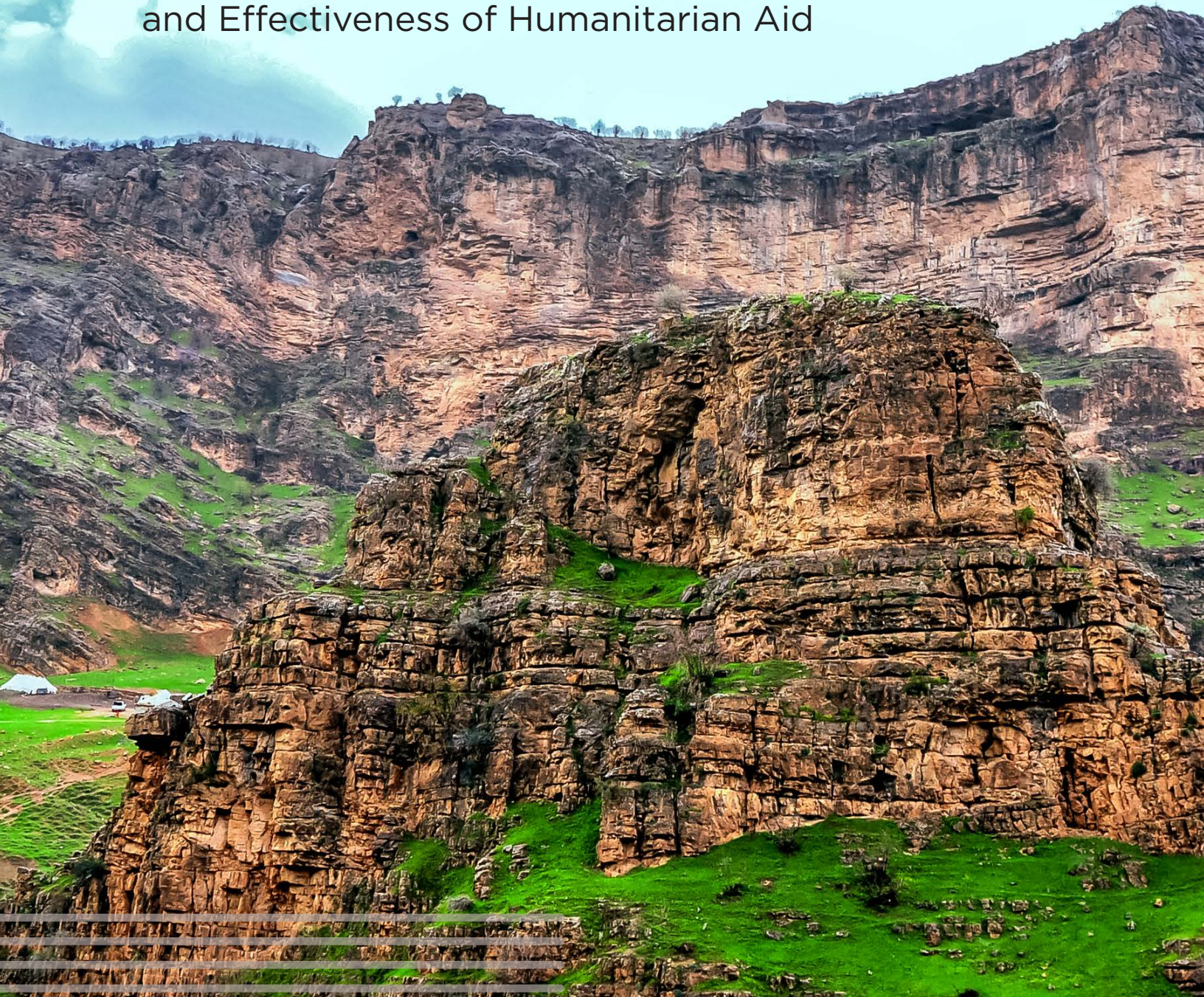# Humanitarian Access SCORE Report: Iraq

Survey on the Coverage, Operational Reach, and Effectiveness of Humanitarian Aid

Humanitarian Outcomes

Humanitarian Access SCORE Report: Iraq
Survey on the Coverage, Operational Reach, and Effectiveness of Humanitarian Aid

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SCORE reports

Under the CORE research programme, supported by USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (USAID/BHA), Humanitarian Outcomes is studying how aid reaches people in hard-to-access emergency contexts. In partnership with GeoPoll, the project conducts remote telephone surveys of crisis-affected people on their perceptions of the effectiveness of the aid response and the access challenges in their areas. Combined with key informant interviews with humanitarian responders and other contextual research, the survey results help to identify the humanitarian providers and practices that have achieved the greatest presence and coverage in difficult environments.

This SCORE report features findings from a survey of 502 people in the central and northern governorates of Iraq (62% men, 38% women) conducted in May 2021. A follow-up survey of 120 of those respondents in June 2021 (58% men, 43% women) probed further into the results. Live operators for GeoPoll conducted the surveys in Iraqi Arabic and Kurdish. Humanitarian Outcomes researchers conducted anonymous interviews with 20 key informants among the humanitarian organisations working in Iraq, as well as donor government representatives.

Full survey results and additional information on the SCORE research methodology, including an interactive dashboard of response data, are available at www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/projects/core.

Summary

Iraq is a post-conflict humanitarian context, which, while no longer contending with major conflict and extreme insecurity, is marked by low humanitarian presence and coverage of needs. Of the estimated 4 million Iraqis who require humanitarian assistance, the coordinated humanitarian response plan (HRP) has targeted only 1.5 million, and so far reached only 0.6 million of them as of June 2021.

In the years since ISIS forces in the country were beaten back, insecurity and volatility have continued, but are much less of an operational constraint on aid organisations than they once were. Instead, a complex combination of political and organisational challenges in post-conflict Iraq constrains humanitarian access, including the Iraqi government's relations with the international community, divergent priorities for aid and recovery, high operational costs, and a legacy of risk aversion owing to one of the most catastrophic acts of violence committed against the United Nations.

Iraqis surveyed in the northern and central governorates (where most displaced and returning people in need are located) confirmed the limitations and obstacles to accessing humanitarian access in their responses.
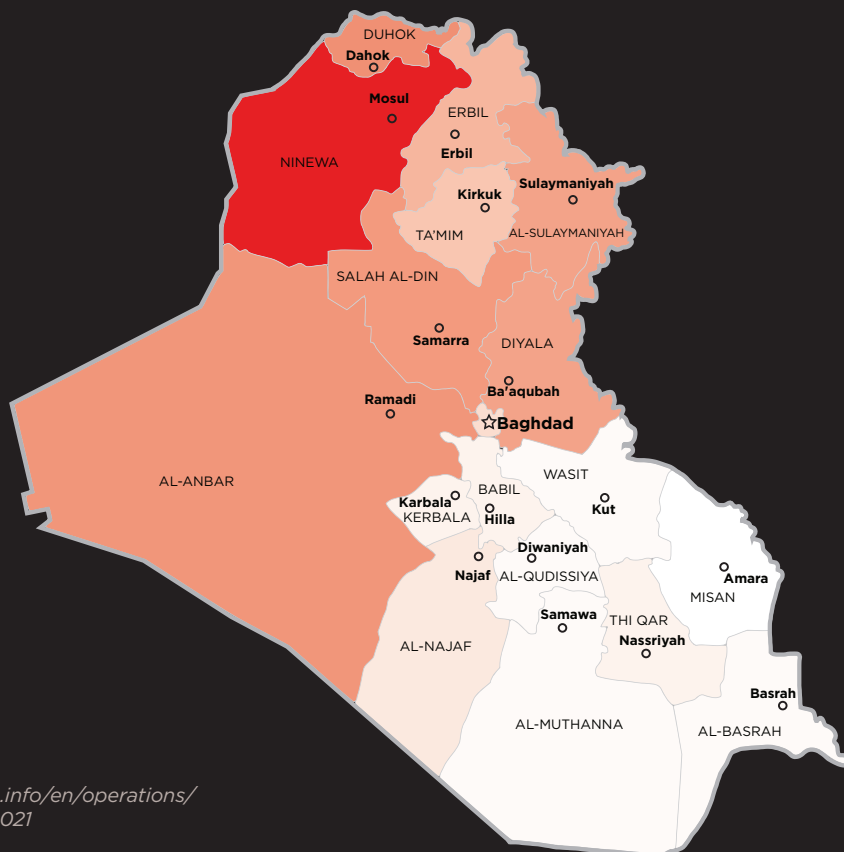
- Not enough aid is getting to the people and places where it is needed.
  A total of 71% of respondents reported needing aid while only 19% had received it.

- On the whole, people perceive the aid presence to be declining, and humanitarian conditions to be worsening.

- The Iraqi government is simultaneously the largest provider of aid in the country and the biggest obstacle to aid reaching where it is needed. After government-imposed restrictions, respondents said the next largest impediment was that the response efforts are not prioritising the most affected areas.

- NGOs as a group were far less visible to the public than other aid providers, such as UN agencies and International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement actors. This may reflect the longstanding low-profile operational approach adopted by many NGOs, especially international ones, since the early days of the post-invasion response.

Aid actors have mostly aimed their coordination and advocacy efforts at addressing the bureaucratic constraints on their access and limited aid programming, like the cumbersome processes for travel and work authorisations. Larger issues of humanitarian access remain to be tackled, however, including fostering greater understanding and respect, frankly addressing claims and perceptions of partiality and favouritism, and creating a more permissive environment for humanitarian action.

At the same time there is evidence that the low coverage is also due partly to self-imposed constraints by the humanitarians, including limiting the target population to internally displaced people (IDPs) and returnees, an overly restrictive security risk management system imposed by the UN, and the reluctance of some NGOs to expand their programming outside of camps and familiar areas. Consequently, the most present and effective actors were those organisations, often local ones, that were relentlessly proactive and communicative with authorities, seeking solutions or workarounds. This comes through in the population survey as well, with respondents saying that the best thing aid actors could do to improve access would be to consult more with communities and work with local authorities.
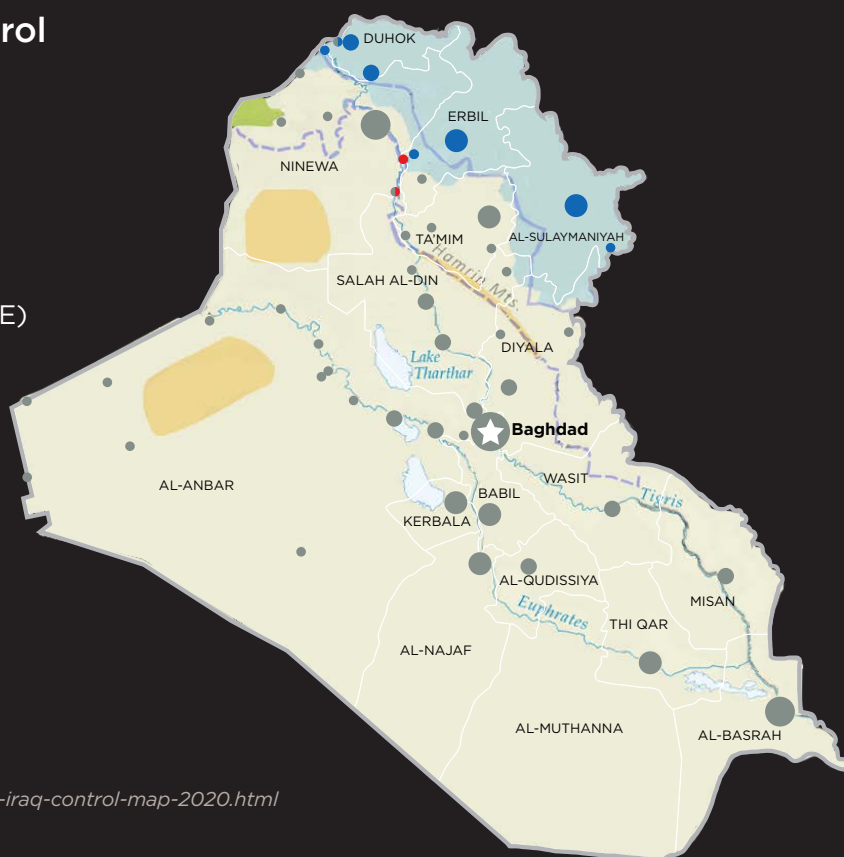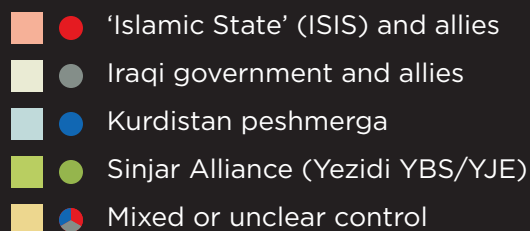
Humanitarian presence in Iraq

Number of humanitarian organisations operating

1   42

*Source: OCHA, https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/
iraq/iraq-humanitarian-operational-presence-3w-2021*

Approximate territorial control
As of 10 January 2020

- 🔴 'Islamic State' (ISIS) and allies
- ⚫ Iraqi government and allies
- 🔵 Kurdistan peshmerga
- 🟢 Sinjar Alliance (Yezidi YBS/YJE)
- 🔴🔵 Mixed or unclear control

Source: https://www.polgeonow.com/2020/01/isis-iraq-control-map-2020.html

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The crisis in Iraq

The humanitarian crisis in Iraq is characterised by protracted displacement from lagging recovery and rehabilitation efforts, and protection needs from continued pockets of armed conflict, mainly in the north. Both are areas in which humanitarian actors can make little impact in the absence of political and development solutions.

The humanitarian needs in Iraq are less severe than they were at the high point of ISIS's power and control over territory in 2016, when an estimated 10 million Iraqis were in need of relief aid, but as of 2021, 4.1 million IDPs and returnees continue to have humanitarian needs for food, shelter, health care and other forms of assistance.[1] The economic impact of Covid-19 further exacerbated needs and vulnerabilities among the populations displaced by conflict or struggling to reintegrate in their communities and build livelihoods.

With the battle of Mosul receding, the common narrative among government and international officials in Iraq is that aid must now begin to shift from North to South, and from acute humanitarian needs to more development-oriented programming and durable solutions. Interviewees for this research, many of whom work for NGOs that do both humanitarian and development work, expressed a sense of being in an awkward and uncertain transitional period at present, where the humanitarian scope of action is being reduced while development funding and initiatives have not yet really started. One described it as a chicken-and-egg conundrum, where agencies say they are waiting for donors to provide more development funding and donors say they are waiting for 'development partners to step up'.

According to one UN interviewee, the narrow targeting of recipients within people in need is due neither to donor fatigue nor insecurity/access issues, but serves as 'a message to the government on what needs to be done', that is, what sort of needs must be prioritised. In the humanitarians' view, the Iraqi government is not following through on its commitment to provide durable solutions to displacement, and in the past has used the pot of humanitarian aid to fund large programmes outside of what could be considered emergency relief assistance.

In any event, the scope of the humanitarian response has been tightly circumscribed in the UN-led humanitarian response plan (HRP), limited to displaced and returning Iraqi and Syrian refugees in the northern half of the country. The UN Humanitarian Coordinator in Iraq has called upon aid organisations to scale up their operations and move them out of the camp settings where many of them have focused, to assist returnees and the communities absorbing them.[2, 3]

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[1]   UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). (2021a). *Iraq humanitarian needs overview (February) 2021.* https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/iraq-humanitarian-needs-overview-february-2021

[2]   UN OCHA. (2021b). *Humanitarian response plan Iraq,* p.5, Humanitarian Programme Cycle 2021. https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/iraq_hrp_2021_humanitarian_response_plan_-_feb_2021.pdf

[3]   In October, 2020 the Iraqi government announced that the displaced persons camps would be closed by the end of the year, though some have remained open, reclassified as 'informal'.

The humanitarian presence

It appears that even the needs of the narrowly defined population are not being adequately covered by the humanitarian operational presence. The HRP targets 1.5 million people to receive humanitarian aid of the 4.1 million assessed as 'in need'. As Figure 1 illustrates, Iraq has the lowest percentage of the population in need targeted by humanitarian aid (37%) of the five contexts covered by this research to date. And as of the end of June 2021, just 40% of those people in need had been reached.[4]

Figure 1: Comparison of contexts
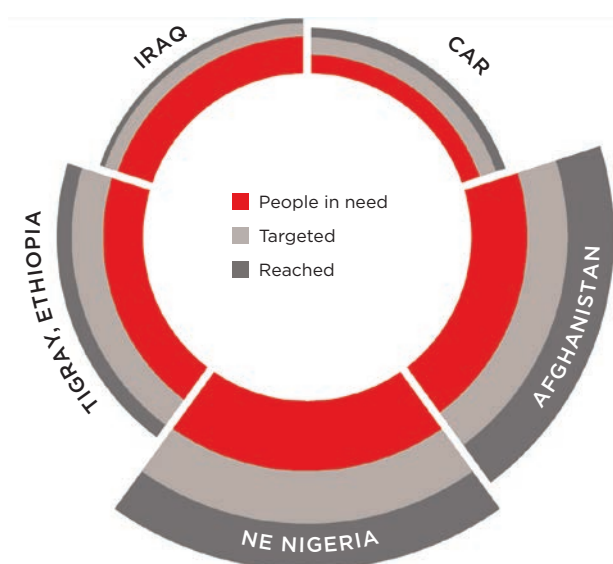
Source: OCHA: Central African Republic 2019 HRP, Afghanistan 2020 HNO, NE Nigeria 2020 HRP, Ethiopia Tigray, Iraq 2021 HRP.

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, along with UN humanitarian agencies and several international and local and national NGOs, have maintained a longstanding operational presence in Iraq going back to the 1980s. During the years following the US-led invasion in 2003, and prior to the defeat of ISIS in Mosul in 2017, humanitarian access and coverage were heavily constrained because of high levels of insecurity. The roughly six million people displaced by the Mosul conflict prompted a surge in humanitarian funding and personnel, including a level 3 (system-wide) emergency response scale-up activation in 2017, and since that time the coordinated humanitarian response in Iraq has received over a billion dollars in international aid flows each year (Figure 2).

[4]   UN OCHA. (2021b).

Figure 2: Funding flows to humanitarian organisations operating in Iraq, 2003–2020
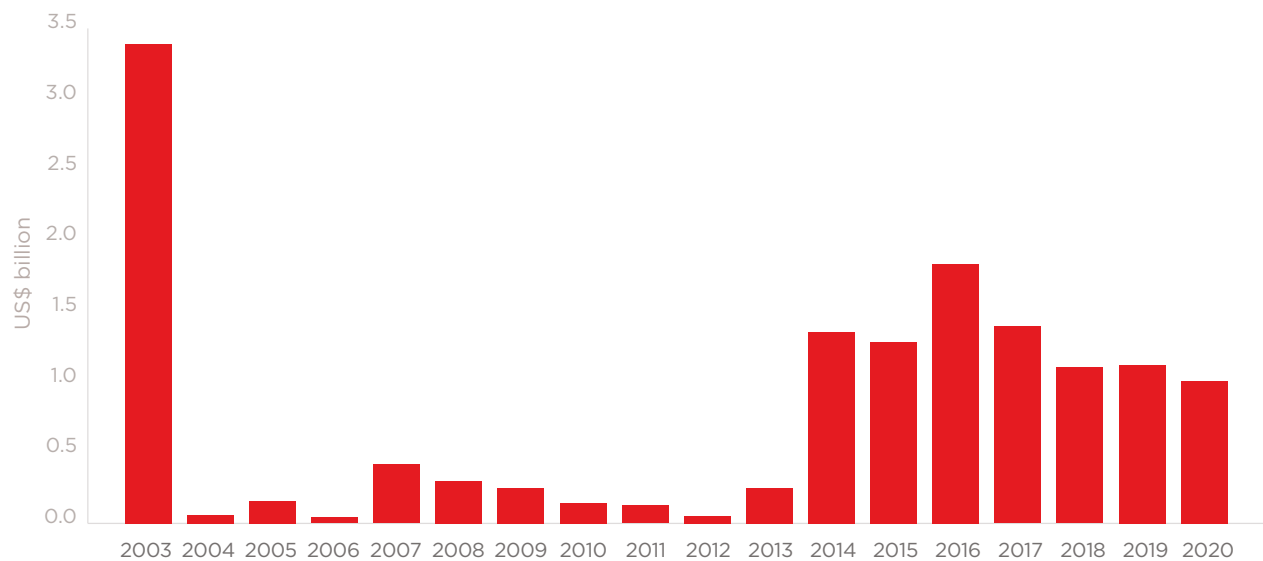
Source: Financial Tracking Service (FTS), accessed 30 June 2021

Despite the sustained high levels of humanitarian funding, in the survey we conducted with Iraqis in the north and central governorates, people's perceptions echoed the shortfalls in humanitarian coverage: 71% of respondents reported needing aid, while only 19% of them had received it (Figure 3).[5]

Figure 3: Need vs. receipt of aid among SCORE respondents
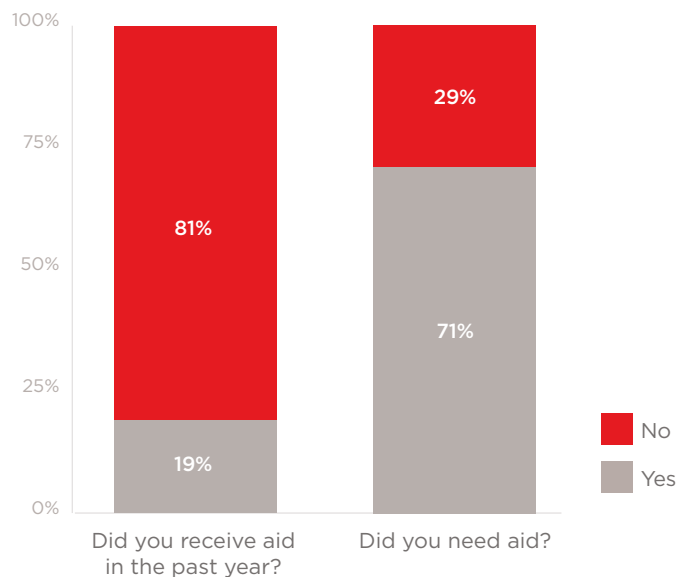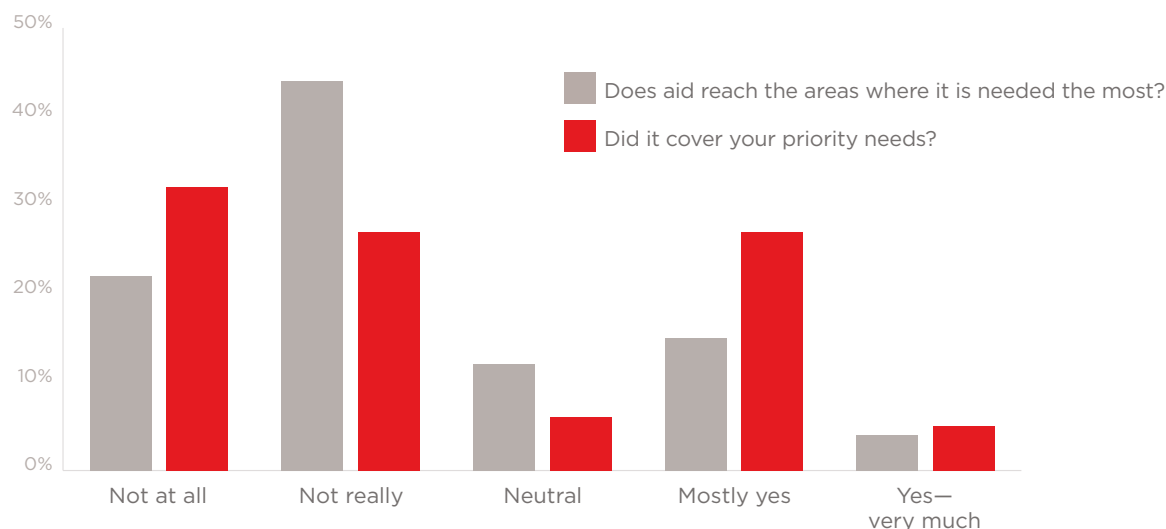

Source: Survey on Coverage, Operational Reach, and Effectiveness (humanitarianoutcomes.org/projects/core)

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[5]   The survey reached 502 respondents in 63 districts across the central and northern governorates of Iraq (Al Anbar, Baghdad, Diyala, Dohuk, Erbil, Kirkuk, Nineveh, Saladin, and Sulaymaniyah). It targeted these areas as they contain the bulk of the humanitarian caseload.

Moreover, pluralities in north and central Iraq perceived that humanitarian aid was not reaching where it is most needed and not covering their basic needs (Figure 4). A lack of services and assistance in the areas of origin of displaced people is also seen as a key barrier to return. Surveys by REACH found only 5% of IDPs intending to return in the three months following data collection. In addition to damage to shelter, insecurity fears and a lack of livelihood opportunities, 49% reported that no basic services were available in their areas of origin and large percentages of people (60%–78%) reported that humanitarian assistance was not provided in their area of origin.[6]

Figure 4: Reach and relevance of aid

Source: Survey on Coverage, Operational Reach, and Effectiveness (humanitarianoutcomes.org/projects/core)

Opinions and explanations differ among the humanitarian actors interviewed for the report on what accounts for the limited coverage. One interviewee said the narrow definition itself 'is creating the access problem'. Others point the finger at agencies too complacent or risk-averse to extend their programming outside their comfort zones. While there may be some truth to these charges, real and daunting challenges to humanitarian access remain in terms of the political and security environment, as well as organisationally within the humanitarian sector (see next section).

But it warrants noting that relatively few humanitarian organisations are operational within the HRP. According to the most recent operational presence (3W) data from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), active humanitarian partners in the coordinated response include only 61 individual organisations (30 international NGOs, 26 national NGOs, 4 UN agencies, and the ICRC).

As is the case in most humanitarian crises, food was far and away the most prevalent form of aid people reported receiving in Iraq (Figure 5). Unlike many other crises and hard-to-access contexts covered by this research, however, non-material aid (in the form of cash and/or vouchers) was reported as the second most common type of aid received. Initiated in 2014, multi-purpose cash assistance (MCPA) has been used widely across the humanitarian sector for addressing urgent household needs, and may have partly offset the limitations in humanitarian access and coverage by quickly and efficiently getting cash into the hands of needy people. It is unclear, though, if survey respondents had received their cash assistance from the government safety net or from the coordinated humanitarian response, or some combination.

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6   REACH. (2020). *Intentions survey, areas of origin, IDPs in formal camps.*
     https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/intentions-survey-idp-areas-origin-march-2020
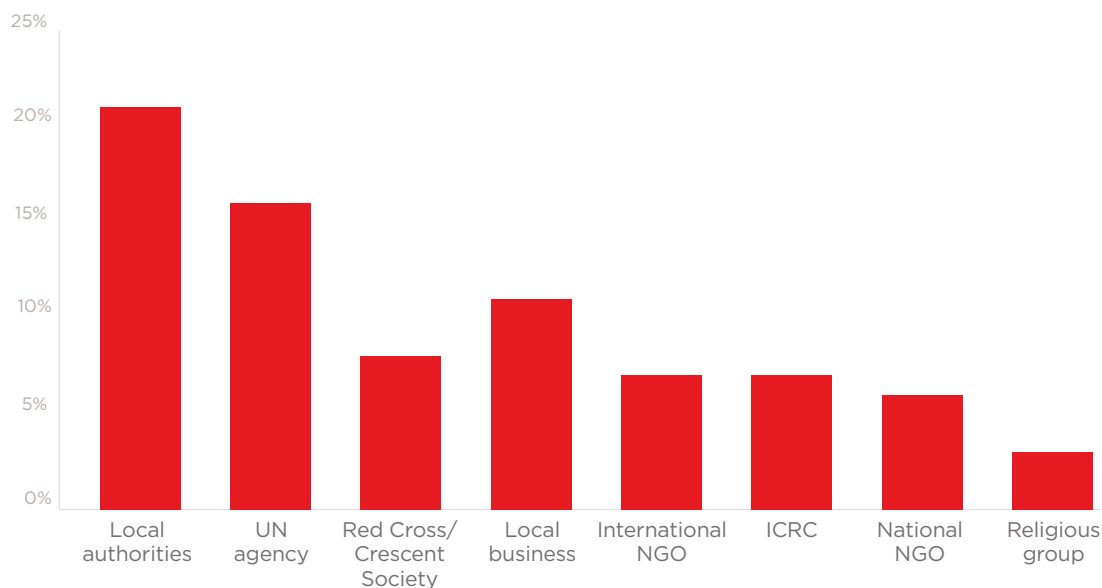
Figure 5: Types of aid provided
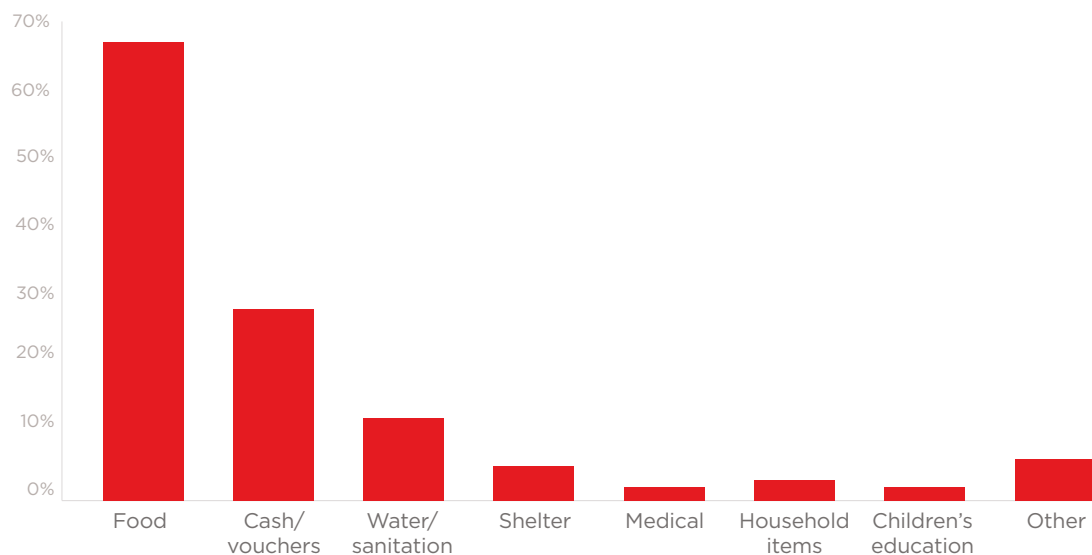
Source: Survey on Coverage, Operational Reach, and Effectiveness (humanitarianoutcomes.org/projects/core)

Most people who received aid reported that it came from local authorities, followed by UN agencies, local businesses, and Red Cross/Crescent entities (Figure 6). NGOs, both national and international, appeared far down the list of aid providers. This may or may not reflect their absence in the areas surveyed, but may have something to do with an intentional lack of visibility for security reasons. Similar to Afghanistan, many NGOs working in post-invasion Iraq have maintained a low-profile approach, often removing branding from vehicles and facilities for example, for fear of being targeted by militants who associate them with their political adversaries.

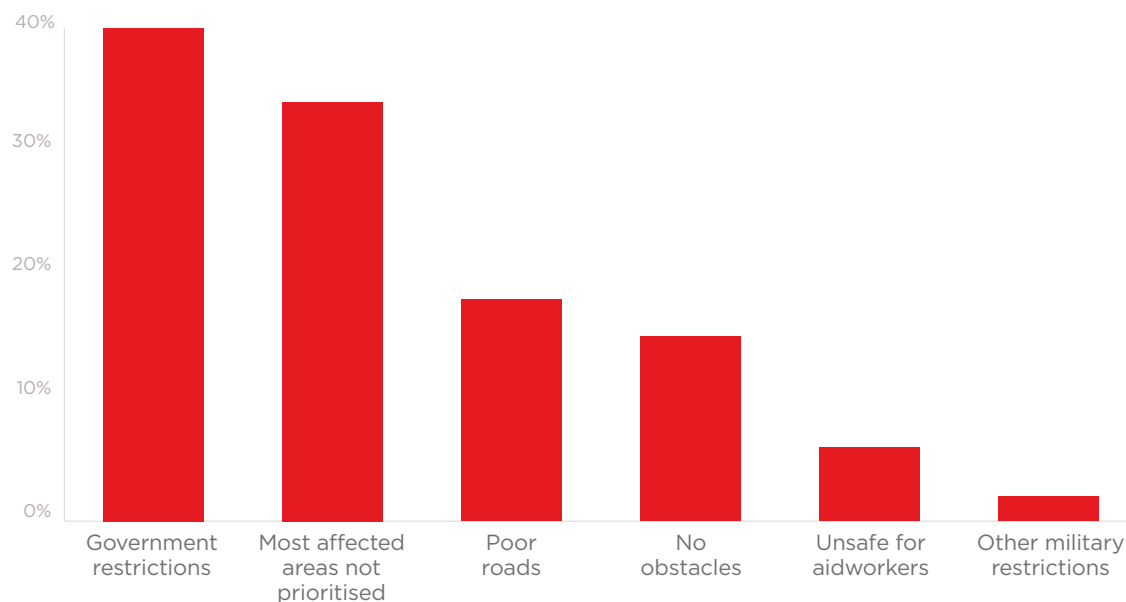## Figure 6: Who provided the aid you received?

Source: Survey on Coverage, Operational Reach, and Effectiveness (humanitarianoutcomes.org/projects/core)

Obstacles to access

The reasons why Iraq remains an access-constrained humanitarian context have shifted over the years from widespread violence and insecurity to political and organisational complexities. Interviewees and survey respondents agree that, today, government restrictions represent the primary obstacle to humanitarian aid getting where it needs to go (Figure 7). Relatedly, the second biggest obstacle cited was that 'the most affected areas were not prioritised'.

The 2021 HRP finds that almost half of the districts covered by the previous year's plan had medium or high levels of access difficulties as at November 2020. 'Between 1 January and 31 October 2020, humanitarian organisations reported 593 incidents of being denied access or otherwise hindered from reaching vulnerable people in need in Iraq; these incidents were mostly administrative restrictions, and directly delayed or denied aid to an average of 470,000 beneficiaries per month'.[7]

Figure 7: What prevents aid from reaching where it is needed most?

Source: Survey on Coverage, Operational Reach, and Effectiveness (humanitarianoutcomes.org/projects/core)

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[7]   UN OCHA. (2021b).

Political and bureaucratic obstacles

Political and bureaucratic obstacles have genuinely restricted aid agencies' ability to reach project sites and to move essential goods and supplies. Cumbersome procedures for securing the government-issued travel authorisations, permits, visas, and NGO registration certificates, along with heavy reporting requirements, all cause significant delays and hinder organisations' ability to operate, reach project sites, and move essential goods and supplies. As one interviewee put it, 'everything takes forever'.

To make matters worse, the government cancelled the previous administrative system in 2020 without putting new procedures in place—a situation which, combined with Covid-related travel restrictions, led to serious delays and challenges to aid operations.[8] A new system for issuing access letters was agreed to in late 2020 and reportedly has led to significant improvements. However, during the time that the national system was not functioning, individual governorates and militias had put in place their own systems. It has taken some time for the new national system to be accepted as the only and overriding requirement, and there remain some issues with its acceptance at a local level. NGOs and the government are currently engaged in discussions about new demands on the part of the government for regular and detailed reporting from aid agencies, which NGOs see as problematic.

There have been some differences between Iraqi and international NGOs and UN agencies in terms of when access letters are required at local levels, but all types of organisations have faced challenges. Interviewees noted that, even though the system has improved, Iraq remains a context in which Byzantine bureaucracy is an entrenched part of how the system operates. Agencies need to respect the sovereign authority of the government to enforce rules in areas such as visa requirements and have invested in capacities to manage requirements and the relationships needed to navigate bureaucracy as successfully as possible. However, bureaucracy continues to slow operations and constrain effectiveness as well as taking considerable time and resources to manage.

The Government of Iraq also suspended the national visa application process for foreign NGO staff in February 2020. This resulted in hundreds of NGO aid workers being unable to obtain new visas or renew expired visas.[9] Foreign staff with expired visas were also unable to receive national access authorisation. A new system is now in place but visa challenges remain a large impediment for international agencies as the long break means that there is a large backlog.

Challenges of corruption and diversion also constrain access. Agencies face regular demands from authorities at different levels and the proliferating militias for aid to be inappropriately diverted or programmed. This can range from the day-to-day demands for bribes or diversion at checkpoints to requests to share beneficiary lists, to add people to lists or to hire people with connections to powerful authorities. Saying no to these demands risks delays to programming (as aid is blocked at checkpoints) and at the more extreme end threaten to close down organisations or refuse them permission to operate in certain areas. Human Rights Watch also reported on the arbitrary arrest and detention of aid workers who provided services to families with actual or perceived ISIS ties, a finding that was echoed by interviewees.[10]

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[8]   Paradoxically, some organisations found it easier to move during the pandemic, making use of the exemption letter provided for emergency aid responders in place of the standard issue authorisations.

[9]   UN OCHA. (2021b).

[10] Human Rights Watch (HRW). (2019). Iraq: Officials arrest, abuse, harass aid workers, 25 February. https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/02/25/iraq-officials-arrest-abuse-harass-aid-workers

The Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) implemented strict measures to limit the spread of Covid-19, including lockdowns, movement restrictions and curfews. Prohibitions on movements across governorates severely limited access to project sites and the ability to move critical supplies. Exemptions were granted but inconsistently applied, and the HRP notes that 'All humanitarian clusters suspended, adjusted, or reprogrammed some activities prioritsed in the 2020 HRP' and 'clusters pivoted to remote mechanisms for coordination, implementation of programmes and response monitoring'.[11]

Humanitarian coordination and advocacy challenges

The focus of humanitarian aid agencies' coordination and advocacy efforts on access over the last two years has been on bureaucratic obstacles; particularly the dilatory procedures for getting visas and in-country travel authorisations from the government. But some working in the Iraq aid response speak of a broader political sense in which aid is impeded; humanitarian actors are working in a context of overall shrinking space for civil society in Iraq, and disrespect for the principles of impartial and independent humanitarian action. Interviewees from aid agencies perceived an increasing desire by the government to control what NGOs do, to increase reporting demands, and to interrogate their impact and operations as a means of control. The government's mistrust of aid agencies and claims of proliferating 'fake NGOs' were seen as getting more problematic and exacerbated by political tensions relating to upcoming elections.

Existing coordination mechanisms through OCHA, the access working group, and the NGO Coordination Committee for Iraq (NCCI) were seen as effective in advocating to the government on day-to-day access challenges, particularly those relating to bureaucratic obstacles. The focus on bureaucratic obstacles to access, however, has taken up much of the time of coordination meetings and the attention of the access working group. Other access challenges and some of the broader, strategic questions about the role of humanitarian assistance in the post-conflict Iraq, and how humanitarian needs are being assessed and defined, have been less of a focus.

It has been difficult for agencies to engage in advocacy on access issues due to hostility and mistrust of international aid agencies on the part of the government. NCCI was suspended in 2020 in what was seen by interviewees as retaliation for its strong advocacy on access constraints, and has only recently had permission to reinstate operations.

Understandable hostility and tensions exist on the part of governing authorities in Baghdad and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) about where agencies are most focused and it has led to a general atmosphere of mistrust. Given this, aid agency staff interviewed saw a need for 'more sustained and careful engagement with government' and a previous 'neglect of talking to government properly'. The fact that many aid agencies still have their main office in Erbil creates a distance from the government of Iraq in Baghdad. Interviewees noted the challenges of getting out of an 'Erbil bubble' particularly in the context of Covid-19, bureaucratic and security-related travel restrictions, and the difficulties this has created in building relationships and trust at local and national levels.

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[11]   Human Rights Watch (HRW). (2019). Iraq: Officials arrest, abuse, harass aid workers, 25 February.
https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/02/25/iraq-officials-arrest-abuse-harass-aid-workers

Insecurity

The bombing of the Canal Hotel headquarters of the UN humanitarian mission in Baghdad in 2003 remains the worst single attack ever perpetrated on the UN, and the casualty count from that day included many non-UN aid workers as well. The devastating impact of that attack reverberates to this day in the heavily restrictive security approach adopted by the UN Department for Safety and Security (UNDSS) in Iraq. Humanitarian agency staff interviewed nearly universally complain that, in an already constrained access environment, the inflexibility of UNDSS has added to the operational obstacles.

In fact, insecurity is considered far down on the list of access obstacles by humanitarians and survey respondents alike (see Figure 7, above). Security has indeed improved since the end of active conflict with ISIS, but over the years Iraq has seen repeated moments of rapid deterioration into extreme violence, so the threat of instability remains. Humanitarian actors continue to face serious security challenges and need to have strong and sometimes restrictive security management systems in place. Interviewees believe aid workers are less of a direct target for violence, but there are ongoing risks from armed violence from multiple militias, abductions, kidnappings, unexploded ordnance (UXO), landmines, improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and airstrikes, which continue to constrain movements and access (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Types of attacks affecting aid workers in Iraq, 2018-2020
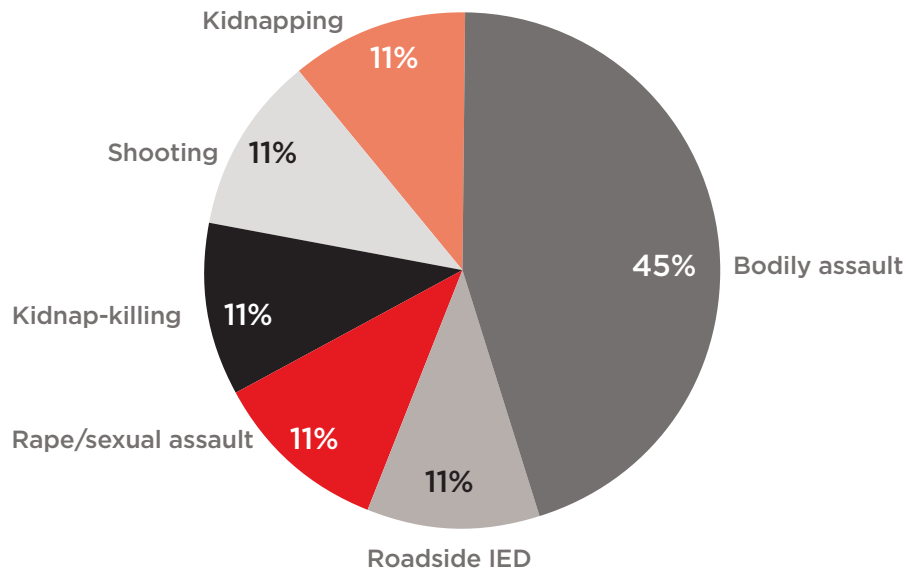
Source: Aid Worker Security Database

Aid agencies noted that there were still disputed areas with high security challenges and where access negotiations are a daily task. For example, one organisation spoke of a route where 'we have to pass eight checkpoints every time we go and come back', with different authorities and agencies manning the checkpoints at different times. The proliferation of militia groups associated with the formation of Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), created to

combat ISIS, has complicated processes of negotiating access.[12, 13] These so-called 'hybrid armed actors'—groups organised in adaptive networks rather than a cohesive, hierarchical structure, act independently of the government yet have become inextricably embedded within it at various levels of the state, thereby blurring distinctions between state and non-state actors.[14]

Interviewees noted that these units 'are not a single entity you can negotiate with', but each has different leaders, interests and incentives. It also limits the extent to which agreement reached at national levels will be adhered to at local and regional levels. An interviewee noted, 'You spend a year advocating and you get a deal, but governors are still not on board'. Interviewees also noted highly insecure areas in cities where aid agencies 'just don't go there' related to high numbers of armed groups, gang presence, organised crime and drug trafficking.

There are also legacies of the long-lasting conflict in Iraq. Anti-western (and particularly anti-US) sentiments remain an issue and agencies perceived as western can face access constraints due to anti-western views and accusations of favouritism across sectarian divides. In some areas NGOs adopt low-profile strategies and avoid branding. Staff get asked at checkpoints, 'Are you an American NGO? Do you get money from the US?'

Overall, attacks affecting civilians decreased in Iraq after the defeat of ISIS in late 2017. However, in 2020 that number nearly doubled from the previous year. There are already 419 incidents of violence registered by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) this year (2021).[15]

Figure 9: Attacks affecting civilians in Iraq, 2016–2021
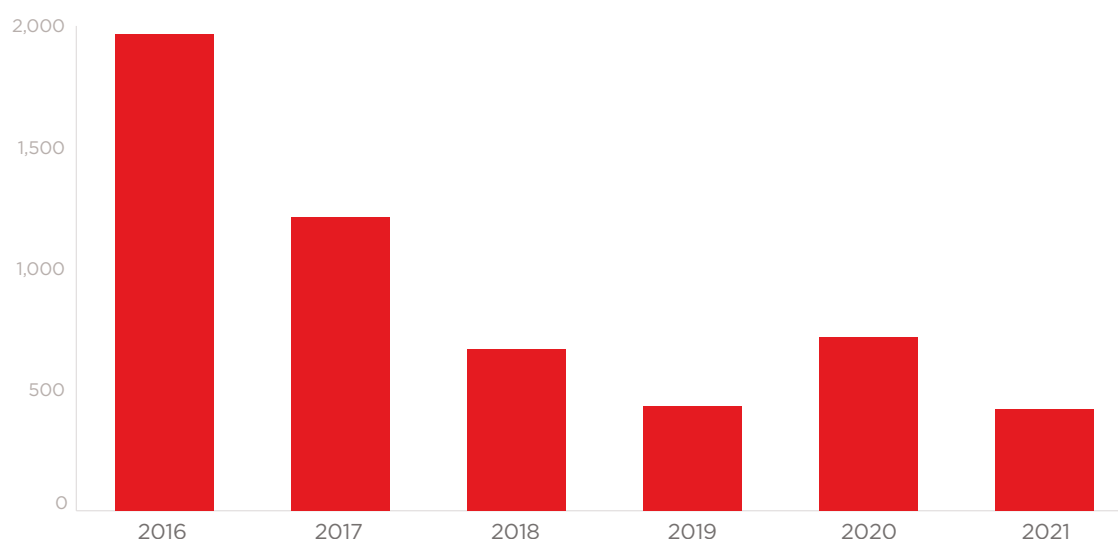
Source: ACLED

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[12]   PMF is an umbrella organisation with around 50 groups, mostly pro-government militias, reportedly over 160,000 fighters, and each with its own agenda, some of which are contradictory to the goals of the Iraqi government. Initially formed around seven (Iran-leaning) paramilitary groups, most of the militias within it are Shiite, but not all, and many of the groups were founded decades before the PMF was established. For more see: Najjar, F. (2017, 31 October). Iraq's second army: Who are they, what do they want? *Al-Jazeera.* https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/31/iraqs-second-army-who-are-they-what-do-they-want; Gaston, E. and Derzi-Horvath, A. (2018). Iraq after ISIL. Sub-state actors, local forces, and the micro-politics of control, Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi). https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Gaston_Derzsi-Horvath_2018_Iraq_After_ISIL.pdf

[13]   Newlines Institute (2021, 4 May). A thousand Hezbollahs: Iraq's emerging militia state. https://newlinesinstitute.org/iraq/a-thousand-hezbollahs-iraqs-emerging-militia-state/; Badawi, T. (2021, 22 April). Sada Iraq's resurgent paramilitaries, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.* https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/84368

[14]   Day, A. (2020). *Hybrid conflict, hybrid peace: How militias and paramilitary groups shape post-conflict transitions,* United Nations University. https://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:7631/HybridConflictFullReport.pdf

[15]   Note: this number does not include riots or protests where violence against civilians is committed by other civilians. Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). (2021). ACLED data dashboard. https://acleddata.com/dashboard/#/dashboard [accessed June 2021].

There were a total of five attacks directly affecting humanitarian aid workers in Iraq in 2020: two kidnappings (one which ended in the aid worker being killed), two assaults, and an IED roadside explosion.

Organisational constraints

The 2021 Humanitarian Needs Overview specifically notes that the scope of its analysis is limited to the humanitarian needs of people displaced by ISIS attacks and the military operations to defeat them, and that the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic was analysed but found not to have crossed emergency thresholds.[16] Interviewees, however, noted that needs arising from local level conflicts in other parts of the country remained under-analysed and expressed concerns with the continuing narrowness of the humanitarian footprint.

In part this was seen as a consequence of declining donor willingness to fund humanitarian operations in Iraq and increasing levels of donor fatigue, meaning that a more ambitious humanitarian footprint would be difficult to achieve. Some interviewees saw a lack of funding as the biggest constraint to greater access with just not enough being available for the work that needs to be done, especially since the defeat of ISIL.

Budget pressures also add to operational constraints in Iraq. Longstanding insecurity and the inflationary pressures of a large international footprint, including coalition military and diplomatic corps as well as humanitarian organisations, means that the costs of maintaining operations in Iraq are extremely high. One international NGO gave an example of a single guest house for some of their staff costing the organisation $100,000 a year.

There are also issues of how division between humanitarian responsibilities and development actors and financing are defined and operationalised. The 2021 HRP notes the need for peace, development and stabilisation investment to address underlying factors and that job creation, social protection and infrastructure reconstruction are among the long-term interventions needed. The narrow targeting of people in need within the HRP is partly intended as a signal to the government of Iraq, donors and aid agencies about where priority humanitarian needs lie and other areas where government and development partners need to do more in relation to durable solutions to displacement.

Interviewees, however, noted that effective coordination between development and humanitarian actors remained challenging. Interviewees also perceived an element of humanitarian actors remaining in a comfort zone and being 'stuck in a rut' in focusing their programming on camps and displacement.

Finally, the bureaucratic issues outlined above are the main agency concern and pre-occupation of the humanitarian access working group and advocacy and coordination efforts. A focus on these concerns can become a vicious cycle, as agencies spin their wheels contending with the immediate, smaller impediments, leaving little time and attention for addressing larger issues.

[16] UN OCHA (2021a).

People's access to services, help and information

As noted above, the main focus of coordination and advocacy around access has been on the bureaucratic and political challenges faced by aid agencies in relation to authorisations, visas and permits from the government. Interviewees felt that there had been less of a focus on the question of people's ability to access services and humanitarian assistance and that protection policies, debates and programming remained problematically disconnected from approaches to humanitarian access.

Barriers faced by people are the target of particular programmes of some agencies and do feature in protection strategies and approaches.[17] Agencies are supporting people to access key civil documentation needed to access assistance and services. For example, Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)'s information, counselling and legal assistance (ICLA) programming works with lawyers and paralegals to increase access to: legal identity and civil documentation; legal residency and registration; housing, land and property rights; and employment rights of IDPs, returnees, refugees and vulnerable local community members in Iraq.[18] The Humanitarian Country Team protection strategy has a particular focus on protecting the rights of people with perceived affiliation to extremists. People with perceived affiliations (often without evidence) face discriminatory denial of humanitarian assistance, institutionalised barriers in access to government services, harassment, extortion and violence.[19, 20]

The complex politics and sectarian divides within Iraq also create challenges. Aid agencies need to navigate perceptions and accusations of favouritism and be sensitive to sectarian and political tensions and possibly exclusion of particular groups in their programming. Tensions arise in multiple complex directions. The Government of Iraq sees the concentration of agencies in the north as problematic. As noted above, there are serious rights issues relating to stigma, exclusion and discrimination against people in need displaced from areas formerly controlled by ISIL, and resentments from communities and authorities who see aid being provided to such groups.

[17] Saieh, A. and Petersohn, N. (2019). *Paperless people of post-conflict Iraq: denied rights, barred from basic services and excluded from reconstruction efforts,* NRC, DRC and IRC. https://www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/reports/paperless-people-of-post-conflict-iraq/paperless_people_medium_single_pages.pdf

[18] Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC). (2021). *NRC's operations in Iraq,* Factsheet May 2021. https://www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/fact-sheets/2021/factsheet_iraq_may2021.pdf

[19] United Nations (UN). (2019). *Iraq Humanitarian Country Team. Protection strategy 2019–2021.* https://www.globalprotectioncluster.org/wp-content/uploads/190909-HCT-Protection-Strategy-FINAL.pdf

[20] International Crisis Group (ICG). (2020). Exiles in their own country: Dealing with displacement in post-ISIS Iraq, 19 October. https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/b79-exiles-their-own-country-dealing-displacement-post-isis-iraq#:~:text=19%20October%202020-,Exiles%20in%20Their%20Own%20Country%3A%20Dealing%20with%20Displacement%20in%20Post,perceived%20to%20have%20jihadist%20ties

The most present and effective aid providers

Before looking at the most present aid agencies, it is important to stress that by far the biggest provider of assistance and services in Iraq is the government, as the survey responses reflected. The government has committed 7%–12% of public spending to social protection since 2007. A Public Distribution System (PDS) provides in-kind food assistance and subsidies on other basic consumption goods to almost all Iraqis. The Social Safety Net (SSN) is the largest cash transfer programme in Iraq, benefiting around 8.2% of the population. It provides benefits to specific vulnerable groups (widows, orphans, people with disabilities and/or chronic illness, married students and older people).[21] A generous state pension scheme absorbs nearly 5% of gross domestic product (GDP) and reaches 9.6 million people—a quarter of the population.[22] The KRG has a separate legal, administrative and operational framework for social protection although its programmes (pension, PDS and a cash-based SSN) largely mirror the federal system.

This means that humanitarian actors (both national and international) are filling gaps in this system and are much smaller actors than the government, in more limited geographies, are smaller in scale and with narrower target groups. As noted above, humanitarian needs have been narrowly defined around displacement due to the conflict with ISIS which means that aid agencies are primarily focused on camps for displaced people and areas of return as those camps have started to close. To the extent that there are equal levels of need and under-analysed humanitarian needs in other parts of the country, government and local civil society responses are most important. It was not possible within the scope of this report to examine the complex landscape of local responses in areas outside the current focus of international humanitarian actors.

In areas that the SCORE survey covered, where displaced people are mostly concentrated, those who received aid were slightly more likely to report it coming from local authorities than from traditional aid providers. UN agencies were the second most mentioned category, followed by the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, and only then by international NGOs—which tend to be in first place in other access-challenged contexts. This may in part be due to the low-profile approach amongst NGOs.

The organisations named by respondents as 'most present and effective' were:

- UN agencies—UNICEF, International Organization for Migration (IOM) and UNHCR
- national NGOs—Barzani Charity Foundation (BCF)
- international NGOs—the Swedish Development Aid Organization (SWEDO), Première Urgence, Mercy Corps.

In a follow-up survey, respondents were asked to expand on why they believe these particular aid groups have been more successful than others. Their answers indicated that BCF's success was attributed in equal measure to their consultation with communities, their competence at aid delivery, and their ability to maintain good relations with government authorities. The international agencies also got high marks for competence, but the next most common

[21] World Bank. (2017). *Iraq: Systematic country diagnostic.* https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/542811487277729890/iraq-systematic-country-diagnostic

[22] Savage, E. (2020). Humanitarian cash and social protection in Iraq, CaLP case study, the Cash Learning Partnership and Meraki Labs. https://www.calpnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/ninja-forms/2/CaLP-Iraq-Case-Study-WEB.pdf

reason cited for their success was size ("they have more people and larger projects") and they were not rated as highly on community consultation and government relations as their national counterparts.

Although not as frequently named by survey respondents as the above, other international groups mentioned by interviewees as being relatively effective in access included: Action contre la Faim (ACF), Danish Refugee Council (DRC), International Rescue Committee (IRC), NRC, Oxfam, REACH and World Vision. Still, interviewees sounded a repeating theme that international NGOs were clustering in over-served areas and not expanding their operations. As one said, 'Area-based coordination needs to happen, but when I got here, I saw too many NGOs on top of each other in Erbil, not getting out there'.

Good practices and strengths

Interviewees consistently mentioned the importance of sustained investments in networks and relationships at different levels (locally, regionally and nationally) as being critical to navigating political, bureaucratic and security constraints. Agencies that had made a conscious effort to invest in capacities to negotiate with the central government in Baghdad and to move out of an 'Erbil bubble' saw that as having borne dividends particularly in recent years as the Government of Iraq has started to assert greater authority. Some interviewees saw Iraqi organisations as less constrained at local levels by bureaucratic obstacles.

Interviewees also noted the need for proactive engagement and strategies to tackle obstacles. Organisations that were more passively waiting to hear about new processes were seen as more constrained, while agencies that were actively seeking support from donors and reaching out to the government to find workarounds were seen as more able to be present.

Agencies (Iraqi and international) have found that very local recruitment of people and working with volunteer groups from within areas that are hard to reach has helped to maintain access and can also help in approval processes and relationship-building with local officials.

Iraqi organisations saw alternative funding sources for instance through Zakat and local and UAE-based business people as a real strength allowing greater flexibility and funding of programmes that donors had been reluctant to fund. More generally, access to independent and flexible funding was seen as important in enabling flexibility, response to gaps and the ability to programme across the country—including in areas outside of the main current humanitarian focus. For instance, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) was able to set up treatment centres in Baghdad in response to Covid-19.

Having a spread of projects across the country, and in both Government of Iraq and KRG areas, was seen as an advantage. MSF, for instance, carried out mass casualty training in hospitals where it had not had a presence following 2019 protests. This helped them to build networks and relationships with health authorities across the country. MSF also saw working in health at secondary and tertiary levels as an advantage in a middle-income country because they were seen as bringing in valued technical expertise, which helped to build strong relationships of cooperation.

Areas for improvement

Weaknesses of the humanitarian response that were highlighted in interviews included the constraints being imposed by UNDSS on the movement of UN staff, emphasising the need to revisit these restrictions. Some agencies are finding creative workarounds to these restrictions, as they are with government constraints, but they are still fundamentally making it more difficult for key organisations to be more proximate to people.
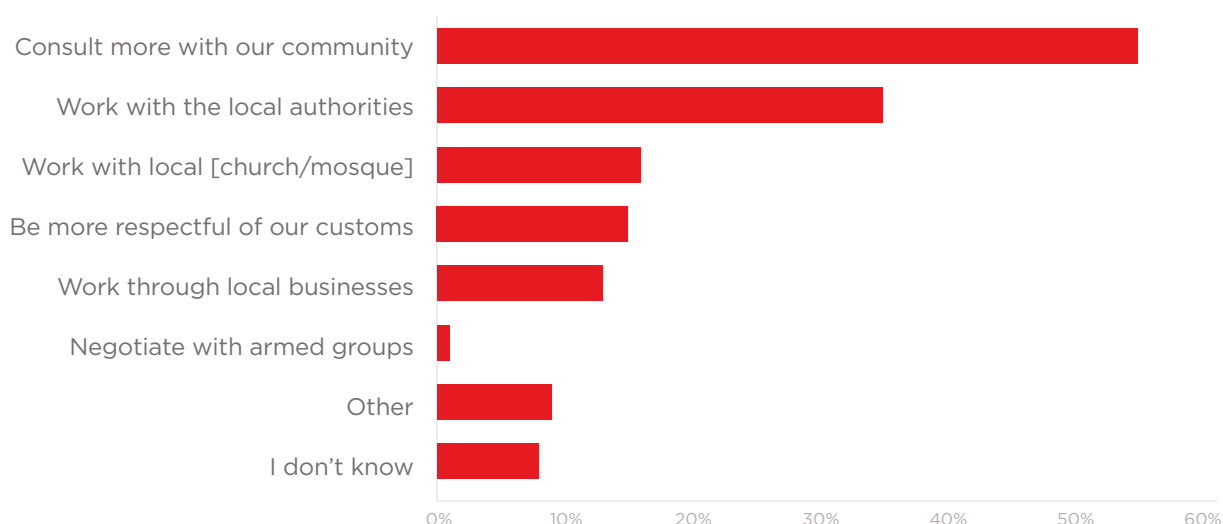
Theoretically, aid agencies maintain a coordinated stance of not paying for access through direct bribes or payments via fixers and consultants to get faster approvals for visas and authorisations. In practice, however, these payments are commonplace. And as in other contexts where paid access is the norm, the lack of transparency and frank discussion on the subject inhibits coordinated advocacy with the government to reduce the need for such practices.

There is a perceived need for the Humanitarian Access Working Group and coordination on access more broadly to move beyond a narrow focus on bureaucratic obstacles to address wider strategic access challenges. That should include analysis of the narrowness of how the humanitarian caseload is currently being defined, and a greater willingness to assess levels of need across Iraq and beyond the category of displacement. Questions of the broader operating environment, shrinking civil society and advocacy space, how aid agencies can best relate to a more assertive government, and how to mitigate access restrictions arising from corruption and diversion risks all remain under-analysed.

Iraqi organisations emphasise that processes of assessments and proposals are still very centralised and overly HQ- and internationally-led. They see greater scope to assess and value the capacities and strengths of local actors, to use local organisations to deliver better value for money, and a need to better support smaller organisations. It was seen that 'a lot of talent is being missed' and that 'aid is not doing enough to support the really local' organisations that already have access and proximity to those most in need. However, it was also recognised that there are many organisations that have certificates of registration but do not exist much beyond that (so-called 'briefcase NGOs'), which makes it harder for international organisations to judge real capacities at the local level.

For their part, the affected people surveyed seemed to understand the need for aid responders to be more locally engaged and proactive in gaining access (Figure 10).

Figure 10: What could aid providers do to improve aid getting to where it is needed?

Consult more with our community
Work with the local authorities
Work with local [church/mosque]
Be more respectful of our customs
Work through local businesses
Negotiate with armed groups
Other
I don't know

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60%

Survey on Coverage, Operational Reach, and Effectiveness (humanitarianoutcomes.org/projects/core)

Conclusion

Iraq is a long-running protracted crisis. Multiple factors continue to constrain access and make it difficult for humanitarian action to support those who need it most. Aid agencies are faced with continuing challenges of insecurity and significant bureaucratic obstacles at local and national levels. OCHA, NGO coordination bodies, donors and others have effectively tracked, reported on and advocated for resolution of core access challenges.[23]

There have been recent improvements in both security risks and bureaucratic obstacles leading to an improved access picture in recent months. That presents opportunities for discussions on access in the Humanitarian Access Working Group and other key forums to develop thinking and action around some of the other, wider questions that we have raised in this report.

Wider issues that need to be addressed should include linking debates about access with questions of how humanitarian needs are being assessed and defined, and ensuring that, even in the context of donor fatigue, agencies are ensuring that they have a comprehensive picture of where needs are most acute, and how best to respond to them. Greater discussion and coordination is also needed about how to tackle issues of corruption and diversion and demands at different levels for payments and inappropriate sharing of data and how to respond to those without compromising access.

Humanitarian actors in Iraq are facing an increasingly assertive government and need to consider how best to maintain and nurture relationships that enable access at local, national and regional levels whilst maintaining commitments to humanitarian principles. In doing that, there are also opportunities to consider how access could be improved by working more effectively with local actors in line with international commitments to localisation. Finally, there is scope to do more to advocate for greater engagement, financing and support from development actors to tackle fundamental structural and poverty issues and durable solutions to displacement.

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[23] UN OCHA. (2021c). *Iraq: Humanitarian Access Snapshot (As of 30 April 2021)*.
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