

## Chapter 19

# Humanitarian Work in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Historical Development and New Challenges

*Dilshad H. Khidbir*

*Contributors: Mariette Hägglund and Awat Mustafa*

While for the most part of history, the Kurds have been portrayed as “objects of history,”<sup>1</sup> post-2003 Iraq has boosted their chance to become active subjects instead. The relatively stable situation of the Kurdistan Region compared to the rest of Iraq, has earned the country labels such as “safe haven,” “beacon of democracy,” “the other Iraq”<sup>2</sup> and so on. A more recent label has been “safe sanctuary for refugees and displaced people” that can be found in media discourse of KRI-based outlets as well as foreign media.<sup>3</sup> It goes without saying that the region deserves this description; as following the intensification of sectarian conflict in other parts of Iraq, the region has welcomed waves of displaced people (starting with Christians) from southern and central parts of Iraq since as early as 2006. As it will be explained in the coming sections, as the conflict intensified in other parts of Iraq, the region had to house the increased number of displaced people until it reached a peak as the result of the major military operations to retake the city of Mosul in October 2016 that forced hun-

---

<sup>1</sup> Andreas, Wimmer, “From subject to object of history: the Kurdish movement in Iraq since 1991.” *Kurdish Studies* 2, no. 1 (2002): pp. 115-129.

<sup>2</sup> Anna Fifield, “Kurdistan: the other Iraq,” *Financial Times*, November 11, 2008, accessed August 07, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/42830d96-b016-11dd-a795-0000779fd18c>; Mark Mackinnon, “Iraqi quagmire spurs independence movement in Kurdistan,” *The Globe and Mail*, July 3, 2014, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/iraqi-quagmire-spurs-independence-movement-in-kurdistan/article19459212/?page=all>; accessed July 07, 2017, Daniel Schorn, “Kurdistan: the other Iraq,” *CBC News*, February 16, 2007, accessed July 1, 2017, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/kurdistan-the-other-iraq/>;

<sup>3</sup> Florian Neuhof, “Flight to safety: Sunnis flee Baghdad for sanctuary in Iraqi Kurdistan,” *The National*, June 15, 2015, accessed July 7, 2017, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/flight-to-safety-sunnis-flee-baghdad-for-sanctuary-in-iraqi-kurdistan/>; Mohammed Aber, “Kurdish Sanctuary for Christian Refugees,” *Institute for War & Peace Reporting*, December 3, 2009, accessed July 7, 2017, <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/kurdish-sanctuary-christian-refugees>.

dreds of thousands more civilians to flee their homes and seek safety in the Kurdistan Region.

This chapter is dedicated to the humanitarian situation of the KRI from 2011 up to the present time. The chapter will start with a historical overview of the humanitarian narrative in the region that dates back to the 1990s, when the region was hugely dependent on humanitarian assistance provided by external humanitarian organizations, foreign governmental- and inter-governmental agencies. There has been a departure from the previous phase to a new and substantially different phase where the region turned into a safe haven for refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) from neighboring Syria and other parts of Iraq. The ISIS assault on Iraq that started in 2013 and culminated in 2014 with the invasion of major cities such as al-Anbar, Tikrit, and Mosul, represents a significant period in the humanitarian history of the KRI as the region had to open its doors for large numbers of displaced families from conflict-ridden areas.

Perhaps, the military operations to liberate Mosul represent the most volatile period in the history of the KRI, which resulted in the arrival of hundreds of thousands of families to shelter camps near major cities and urban areas in the region. For this, the period deserves special attention. As the Barzani Charity Foundation (BCF) has been a major humanitarian player responding to the unprecedented humanitarian needs of the post-Mosul operation, the foundation will be given due attention and taken as an example for home-grown charitable organizations.

Therefore, this chapter is a narrative of the humanitarian situation in the KRI focusing on the period right before and following the ISIS assault on Iraq and the KRI. The data used in this chapter is drawn from secondary sources, BCF field observations, and data collected through records from other active NGOs in the KRI and a number of personal interviews with a selected number of humanitarians.

## **Historical Background of Humanitarian Work in KRI**

After the events of 1991 that triggered the March uprising, which is considered the starting point for the current KRI as an administrative and political entity, the Kurdistan Region experienced intensive humanitarian action to assist the returned population of the region that had fled to the mountains fearing the Ba'ath regime's retaliation following its recapture

of Peshmerga liberated areas of Iraqi Kurdistan. Major UN agencies and other international humanitarian organizations, both governmental and non-governmental, were involved in large-scale humanitarian efforts of the 1990s.<sup>4</sup>

After the region established its first democratically elected self-government called the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), it faced a double embargo from the Iraqi central government and the UN,<sup>5</sup> which left it with few choices to survive economically. As it has been argued, external aid<sup>6</sup> was a vital life-line for the people in KRI up until the late 1990s when the Oil for Food Program (OFFO) was activated<sup>7</sup> through which the region received 13 percent of revenues from the program.<sup>8</sup> The humanitarian assistance began immediately after the mass exodus of more than 1,800,000 civilians who found their way to the mountainous borders of Turkey and Iran and continued after the return of Kurdish refugees to their homes under the UN resolution 688.<sup>9</sup> The external aid proved so important in the history of the KRI that Denise Natali considered it the main factor behind the creation and maintenance of the KRI as a “quasi-state” political-jurisdiction.<sup>10</sup>

Following the end of the era of the Kurdish fratricide (i.e., the domestic armed conflict) that lasted between 1994 and 1998 and culminated with the unification of the two separate KRGs in 2006, the socio-economic situation of the KRI was gradually improving. The 2003 Iraq war provided an opportunity for the Kurds to become active subjects of history after long years of inactive existence on the international political scene. While the military contribution of the Kurds to the U.S.-led regime change in Baghdad was a significant aspect of the post-2003 conditions of the international arena at the time, the new political arrangements following the

---

<sup>4</sup> Michel Leezenberg, “Humanitarian Aid in Iraqi Kurdistan,” *Cahiers d'études sur la Méditerranée orientale et le monde turco-iranien*, 29 | 2000, 31-48, accessed July 6, 2017, <http://cemoti.revues.org/613?lang=en>

<sup>5</sup> The United Nations imposed a range of economic sanctions on Iraq following the Iraqi government's invasion of the state of Kuwait on August 2, 1990. The sanctions were imposed through the UN Resolution 661 on August 4, 1990. (Joy, 2010, pp. 20-21)

<sup>6</sup> Denise Natali, *The Kurdish Quasi-State: Development and Dependency in Post-Gulf War Iraq* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2010), XIV

<sup>7</sup> The program was activated in 1996.

<sup>8</sup> UN, “Oil For Food, About the Program,” United Nations, November 04, 2003, accessed July 5, 2017, <http://www.un.org/Depts/oip/background/>.

<sup>9</sup> Leezenberg, *Humanitarian Aid*

<sup>10</sup> Natali, *The Kurdish Quasi-State*, xxii

war that granted the KRI a new status assisted in the development of a more stable, more democratic and more prosperous Kurdistan Region within the whole of Iraq.

### **Post-2011 Syrian Refugee Influx**

Following the unrest and military conflict that started in 2011 and were triggered by the Arab Spring, large numbers of Syrians fled their homes and sought refuge in neighboring countries. While the majority of Syrian refugees took refuge in neighboring Jordan and Turkey, comparably significant numbers found their way to Iraq, most of who arrived in the major urban areas of the KRI. The influx of Syrian refugees, mostly from the Kurdish northern areas of Syria, reached a staggering 234,262 individuals at the end of June 2017, a proportion of whom are sheltered at nine camps in the three major KRI cities of Erbil, Duhok, and Sulaymanya in addition to camps in Kirkuk and Germyan.<sup>11,12</sup> While most Syrian refugees are sheltered in large refugee camps, a small number of them managed to accommodate themselves in urban areas inside cities and towns of the KRI. The increased assault by the ISIS against Kurdish-populated areas in Syria resulted in growing numbers seeking safety in the KRI. Events such as the ISIS assault on Kobane back in 2014 meant that more Syrian refugees will find their way to the KRI seeking safety and shelter.

### **ISIS Assault and IDP Crisis**

The ISIS assault on major cities in southern and central parts of Iraq has forced hundreds of thousands of civilians to leave their homes and seek safety elsewhere. As a relatively safer zone, the KRI was an ideal sanctuary for the many civilians who affected by the war with ISIS and consequent military operations. The capturing of such cities, towns and villages (Falluja, Ramadi, Mosul, Tikrit, Tala'afar, Sinjar, and other Nineveh areas) resulted in new waves of displacement, most of whom arrived at the gates

---

<sup>11</sup> UNHCR, "Iraq Situation Response, Funding Update as of 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2017", <http://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/unhcr-iraq-situation-response-2017-funding-update-3-july-2017>," Relief Web, July 3, 2017, accessed July 7, 2017, <http://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/unhcr-iraq-situation-response-2017-funding-update-3-july-2017>.

<sup>12</sup> According to the UNHCR data sources, 38 percent of Syrian refugees are sheltered at camps while the remaining 62 percent live in urban areas inside major cities, town and rural areas. UNHCR, Iraq Situation Update.

of KRI where they were received by fighting Peshmerga forces and dispatched to shelter camps, sites and residential areas inside major KRI cities and towns.

### *Mosul Liberation*

The large majority of IDPs arrived in KRI following intensive and long-lasting military operations to retake the city of Mosul and other towns and villages within the Nineveh province. While the actual Mosul military operation started on October 17, 2016, the operation preceded by earlier operations to retake a number of towns and villages belonging to the Nineveh province (such as Makhmour, Gwer, and a number of villages surrounding the area). Huge numbers of IDPs were sheltered in four camps set up in Dibaga near Erbil, which by the end of September 2016 were accommodating more than 42,000 individuals.<sup>13</sup>

In a report titled “Mosul Flash Appeal” which was released on July 20, 2016 by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA),<sup>14</sup> the UN agency warned that the then-anticipated Mosul operation would result in the displacement of more than one million civilians. To prepare for the unprecedented influx of IDPs from Mosul, major humanitarian stakeholders began intensive emergency preparedness’ efforts. The first wave of displaced families from areas near the city of Mosul arrived at the BCF-run Khazir M1 camp<sup>15</sup> that had been set up prior to the start of the military operations. As the military operation intensified, the number of displaced families fleeing their homes in Mosul towards safe areas in the KRI increased significantly, as by the end of December 2016 there were a staggering 116,490 IDPs.<sup>16</sup> Additional shelter sites had to be set to accommodate the growing number of IDPs from Mosul and surrounding areas. At the time of the writing of this chapter (July 2017), the fighting is still ongoing inside the city of Mosul, and there are five shelter sites constructed to receive Mosul IDPs, all on the borders

---

<sup>13</sup> BCF, Internal Report, September 2016, raw data, KRI, Erbil.

<sup>14</sup> UNHCR, “Iraq: Mosul Flash Appeal [EN/KU/AR],” ReliefWeb, July 20, 2016, accessed July 6, 2017, <http://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/iraq-mosul-flash-appeal-enkuar>.

<sup>15</sup> Rudaw, “Families are reunited as IDPs flee Mosul,” *Rudaw*, December 25, 2016, accessed July 4, 2017, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/251020169>.

<sup>16</sup> UNHCR, “Iraq Situation: UNHCR Flash Update - 26 December 2016,” Relief Web, December 26, 2016, accessed July 6, 2017, <http://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/iraq-situation-unhcr-flash-update-26-december-2016>.

between the cities of Erbil and Mosul. The total number of individuals sheltered at these camps now reaches a staggering 70,622 individuals.<sup>17</sup>

The KRG's policy was to accommodate all new IDPs in the major shelter camps, in order to limit their entry into urban areas. The decision is understandable, for, as mentioned earlier, cities, towns and villages were already overwhelmed when the actual Mosul liberation operation began. According to a report issued in April 2016 by the UNHCR, KRG and other humanitarian stakeholders, the total number of IDPs and refugees arrived to KRI in just two years equaled to 30 percent of the entire KRI population.<sup>18</sup> As expected, public infrastructure and services were under immense pressure, deteriorated because of the economic crisis facing the KRG, which partly resulted from the central Iraqi government's decision to withhold all fiscal transfers that KRI was entitled to from the Iraqi federal budget.

## **BCF As a Home-Grown NGO**

Perhaps one of the most active humanitarian organizations during the war with ISIS has been the BCF. While prior to the start of the Mosul military operation in October 2016, the Duhok governorate hosted the largest number of refugees and IDPs with the most amount of shelter camps, the Mosul operation led to a dramatic increase in the number of IDP camps from March 2016 to the present day. Most IDP camps within the Erbil governorate were managed by the BCF in 2016 and until 2017, when besides the old and new IDP camps; the Foundation also took on the responsibility of managing all refugee camps within Erbil.<sup>19</sup>

### *Historical Background*

BCF was founded in Erbil in August 2005, with Masrour Barzani as the Chairman of the Board of Founders. As a legal organization endorsed by both the Iraqi government and the KRG, the BCF faced numerous humanitarian challenges ever since its foundation. The 2003 Iraq liberation war

<sup>17</sup> According to the BCF Data Management Unit, July 15, 2017.

<sup>18</sup> UNHCR. "Displacement as Challenge and Opportunity Urban Profile of Refugees, Internally Displaced Persons and Host Community Erbil Governorate, Kurdistan Region Of Iraq." April, 2016, Erbil: UNHCR.

<sup>19</sup> The camp management project is conducted in collaboration with Erbil Joint Crisis Coordination Center (formerly known as the Erbil Refugee Council).

sparked a long-lasting sectarian conflict, massive security disruptions, and devastating political and social consequences. The protracted conflict almost equally affected people from all sections and components of the Iraqi society. However, the displacement has affected mostly civilians from ethnic and sectarian backgrounds such as (Sunni Arabs, Yezidi Kurds, Christians, Shabaks, and Shi'ite Turkmen). As the safest, most welcoming and the most peaceful part of the country, the Kurdistan Region was the first choice for the displaced people after they were forced to leave their hometowns. Therefore, combined with domestic needs in the Kurdistan Region, the continued waves of displacement from other parts of Iraq and neighboring Syria necessitated the establishment of a domestic charitable organization such as the BCF to address the growing humanitarian needs in the Kurdistan Region and post-2003 Iraq.

Recognizing its significant efforts in the humanitarian sector, the United Nation's Economic and Social Council granted the BCF a consultative status in April 2016. The BCF is also the only focal point for the Sphere Project in the Kurdistan Region and the whole Iraq.

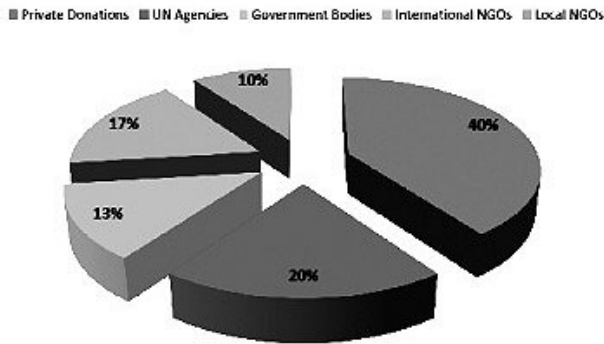
### *The Scope of BCF's Work*

As a response to the humanitarian situation in Iraq, the KRI, and the neighboring region, the BCF focused on essential relief assistance to reach the vast numbers of IDPs, refugees, and people in need among the Kurdish host community. While food,<sup>20</sup> shelter, and protection have been primarily directed at IDP and refugee communities, the majority of BCF's education and care efforts have targeted the host community, mainly through such projects such as orphan care, care for the disabled, and educational assistance to schools.

Perhaps the most dynamic humanitarian efforts of the BCF can be found in its successful practice in the Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM) sector. As explained above, the foundation has invested

---

<sup>20</sup> BCF's emergency response operation has been the provision of ready-made meals for fleeing Yezidis in early August 2014 following the ISIS assault on the city of Sinjar and other Yezidi populated areas. Within 45 days and in collaboration with the World Food Program (WFP), BCF provided more than 9 million ready-made meals for over 100,000 individual IDPs who had fled their homes seeking shelter at various locations within the Duhok governorate. Adair Ackley, "Saving Lives and Responding Rapidly to Iraq Food Crisis | WFP | United Nations World Food Program - Fighting Hunger Worldwide," UN World Food Program, August 19, 2014, accessed July 7, 2017. <https://www.wfp.org/stories/saudi-arabia-contribution-saves-lives-and-allows-wfp-rapidly-respond-food-crisis-iraq>; Musa Ahmad, "Current Humanitarian Situation," interview by author, June 22, 2017.

**Figure 1. Sources of funding for BCF's humanitarian work in 2016<sup>21</sup>**

immensely in this sector through undertaking management tasks at all IDP and refugee camps within Erbil Governorate. In addition, in collaboration with major stakeholders in the field, including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Erbil Joint Crisis Coordination Center (EJCCC), International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs), NGOs, donor countries, and national and local charitable corporations and people, the BCF has successfully managed 15 shelter camps within Erbil while committing to humanitarian work in other shelter camps located throughout the KRI. A map showing all shelter camps in the Kurdistan Region, including those managed by the BCF in 2017 is provided at the end of this chapter.

In terms of funding, the BCF, as a non-governmental and non-profit organization, relies on various legitimate sources such as partnering with UN agencies (UNICEF for example), INGOs, donor countries, and most importantly donations from local private corporations and individuals. Drawn from its 2016 annual report, followed are some graphs that demonstrate the main working sectors of the foundation, primary beneficiaries, and main funding sources.

<sup>21</sup> BCF, *Barzani Charity Foundation Annual Activities Report-2016*. 2016, Erbil, KRI: BCF.



**Figure 2. Total numbers of beneficiaries from all sectors of BCF work (2016 and the first half of 2017)<sup>22</sup>**

Working sectors	Beneficiaries in 2016	Beneficiaries in the first 6 months of 2017
Food	2,978,913	2,971,282
NFI	1,290,249	1,435,475
WASH	406,111	522,361
Education	8,924	27,667
Disabled Care	607	998
Orphan Care	10,734	8,403
Livelihoods	6,050	12,548
CCCM	9 Camps	15 camps
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>5,758,176</b>	<b>5,152,457</b>

**Figure 3. Beneficiaries from BCF activities from all three communities (2016 and the first half of 2017)<sup>23</sup>**

Beneficiary communities	2016		The first six months of 2017	
	Individuals	Families	Individuals	Families
Host	478,664	90,314	183,918	28,257
IDP	4,098,311	788,088	4,602,386	884,423
Refugee	451,084	73,768	350,753	68,367
Total	5,028,059	1,006,086	5,152,457	985,474

Source: data was collected from BCF's Data Management Unit, in July 2017.

Reading through the data presented in Figures 1-3, we can see a dramatic increase in the population of beneficiaries in 2017 compared to 2016. While the total number of beneficiaries in 2016 amounted to 5,758,176 individuals, the first six months of 2017 witnessed approximately similar number of beneficiaries compared to 2016 as a whole. The dramatic increase in the number of beneficiaries can be explained by the sharp increase in the number of displaced people who arrived at major shelter camps managed by the BCF. While we see a significant increase in refugees from 2016 to the first half of 2017, the figures for people in need among the host community (locals) reached by the BCF saw a significant decline

<sup>22</sup> BCF, Internal Report, July 2017, raw data, KRI, Erbil

<sup>23</sup> BCF, Internal Report, July 2017, raw data, KRI, Erbil

compared to the disproportionate increase in beneficiaries among the two other communities (refugees and IDPs).

## **New Humanitarian Challenges**

While the humanitarian situation of the large IDP communities sheltered in major camps in the KRI still remains volatile and treated within the framework of “relief assistance,” the anticipated military outcomes of the ISIS war dictates a move towards a new phase of humanitarian work, one that will include economic activities to ensure self-reliance.

According to a testimony from a member of BCF’s board of directors,<sup>24</sup> the economic crisis has negatively affected refugees, forcing some families who have been living in their own homes to seek accommodation and shelter inside camps. We will outline a number of points to consider in this regard.

### *The Future of Refugees and IDPs in the KRI*

As the war against ISIS seems to be drawing to an end,<sup>25</sup> there remains a fundamental question to be answered: what is the future of the large number of IDPs and refugees in the KRI? The anticipated new era with the end of ISIS and the upcoming referendum in the KRI requires clear and robust plans to address the newly emerging issues. Undoubtedly, the reconstruction, security, and reconciliation are the most pressing issues for the post-ISIS humanitarian era. Reconstruction is vital to allow the hundreds of thousands of IDPs and refugees to return home. In the meantime, security is fundamental for a voluntary return of people to their homes. The long-lasting conflict that devastated the social structure along sectarian, religious and ethnic lines requires long-term solutions to rebuild peace, trust and coexistence.

Therefore, the stakes are very high and requires coordinated efforts among major shareholders, including political, social, religious, and humanitarian actors. Undoubtedly, the war on terror needs to transform its mechanism to address the root causes of the chronic and destructive sectarian conflict that has been rampant in the region since 2003. Arguably,

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibrahim Samin, “Refugee Issues”, interview by author, July 6 2017.

<sup>25</sup> At the time of preparing this chapter, in July 2017, Haider al-Abadi, the current Iraqi Prime Minister, arrived in Mosul to announce the full takeover of Mosul by the Iraqi forces.

in the post-ISIS era, rebuilding trust and reconciliation may prove to be more challenging than defeating terror and reconstructing homes.

### ***The Social Dimension of the Crisis***

While there are no comprehensive studies examining the issue of refugee and IDP return, a 2016 study conducted by UNHCR in collaboration with the Erbil Governorate revealed that 25 percent of refugees and 11 percent of IDPs were unwilling to return to their homes and intend to stay in the KRI.<sup>26</sup> Paradoxically, this reality is combined with another pressing issue, which is the issue of integration of IDPs and refugees within the host communities. As we can hardly find any reliable academic accounts addressing this problem in the KRI as a whole, the few studies that we have come across suggest that certain IDP communities face grave difficulties to integrate with their host community and/or with other communities.<sup>27</sup> The situation is not much better when it comes to Syrian refugees but it is arguably less challenging compared to some IDP communities (such as Sunni Arabs and Christians). These communities seem to prefer maintaining their cultural space within other communities (especially the majority Kurdish host community). Generally speaking, the issue of integration and social cohesion remains among the most important areas that need special attention and strategic planning by major stakeholders in the KRI including the KRG, the humanitarian community, and civil society. The fear on a potential demographic imbalance hitting the KRI articulates itself in the public and intellectual discourse of the host community.<sup>28</sup> For these reasons and more, the future of refugees and IDPs in the KRI demands urgent action not only from the part of the host KRG but also from the central Iraqi government, the UN, and the wide international community.

### ***The Economic Dimension of the Crisis***

Perhaps one of the determining variables in the humanitarian crisis in the KRI has been the coincidence of the start of the economic crisis that hit the KRI, combined with the massive increase in the number of IDP

---

<sup>26</sup> UNHCR, "Displacement as a Challenge," p.51.

<sup>27</sup> UNHCR, *Displacement as a Challenge*, pp.26-27.

<sup>28</sup> MERI, *In It for The Long Haul: A New Response For IDPs In The Kurdistan Region Of Iraq*. Erbil, KRI: Middle East Research Institute. October 2015. Accessed July 7 2017, <http://www.meri-k.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/IN-IT-FOR-THE-LONG-HAUL-A-NEW-RESPONSE-FOR-IDPS-IN-THE-KURDISTAN-REGION-OF-IRAQ.pdf>.

arrivals to the region. As the major economic crisis was triggered by plummeting oil prices in 2014 and cuts in fiscal transfers to the KRG in February 2014,<sup>29</sup> the crisis hit the KRI on all levels of government and society. The massive shortcomings in the KRG budget meant not only equally large reduction in salaries of the huge number of government employees, but also limited KRG's ability in humanitarian response towards the influx of newly-arrived IDPs. The economic crisis not only negatively affected the public and community contribution to humanitarian efforts in the region, but also significantly increased the number of people in need. After losing a substantial portion of their monthly income, many host families are now in a desperate need of food and financial assistance to afford a decent life. Faced with the urgent and ever-increasing humanitarian crisis of IDPs and refugees in Iraq and the KRI, the concerned humanitarian community may have overlooked the hardship faced by many families within the host community, consequently, directing the bulk of their assistance to IDPs and to a lesser degree to the refugees.

Consequently, this fixed humanitarian policy will have a two-fold effect on the host communities: firstly, it will lead to underestimating the impact of the economic crisis on average citizens and will likely exclude them from assistance and development programs; and secondly, the continued uneven distribution of resources resulting from the lack of salaries for the host people while it is available to the most IDPs, will widen the economic gap between the two communities. As the previously cited study suggested, the economic gap may consequently create social tension and resentment between the two affected communities.<sup>30</sup>

### *A New Phase of Humanitarian Work*

As the war settles down and new political, social, and economic developments emerge in the KRI (especially on the issue of the referendum for independence), the humanitarian community is required to adapt to the new phase of humanitarian work in the KRI. It goes without saying that the humanitarian community cannot continue supplying the hundreds of thousands of IDPs and refugees who reside in the KRI with relief assistance alone. With the decreased funding resources secured by major humanitarian agencies, the focus should be shifted towards livelihood projects

---

<sup>29</sup> World Bank, *The Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Assessing the Economic and Social Impact Of The Syrian Conflict And ISIS*. Washington DC: World Bank Group. 2015, p.5.

<sup>30</sup> UNHCR, *Displacement as Challenge*, p.27.

and promoting economic performance of the IDPs and refugees. Here, the burden falls not on the KRG alone, as the communities at stake are coming from Iraq and neighboring Syria as well. Therefore, other stakeholders need to get involved to address this issue.

## **A Decline in Funding**

Perhaps another, more visible, challenge that is affecting humanitarian work in the KRI in particular and in Iraq as a whole, is the gradual but steady decline of funding. The decline has hit the humanitarian community on three levels: UN affiliated agencies, international NGOs and donor institutions, and national NGOs. One may find an outstanding example of the decline in UN's Iraqi humanitarian response budget. While already by the end of November 2016, the UNHCR's funding gap had stood at 57 percent,<sup>31</sup> seven months into the following year (2017), the funding crisis is still hampering the humanitarian response in the KRI and wider Iraq. The required budget for UNHCR's Iraq response for the year 2017 has been estimated at 578 million dollars. However, so far, only 21 percent of the required funding has been received which amounts reaching 123.9 million dollars. This will leave the UN agency with a staggering 541.1 million dollar-gap in its budget.<sup>32</sup> In early July 2017, the World Food Program (WFP) announced major cuts in its food stipend program to IDPs in the KRI due to major shortcoming in its funding. The decision has been putting more pressure on the KRG, which has experienced a strained economic downturn since 2014.<sup>33</sup>

## **Concluding Remarks**

The chronic and destructive armed conflict that raged throughout the Kurdistan Region pre- and post-1991 has turned the Kurdish population into humanitarian objects. This is true up to 2003, when the Kurdistan Region became a safe haven and a sanctuary for displaced people fleeing

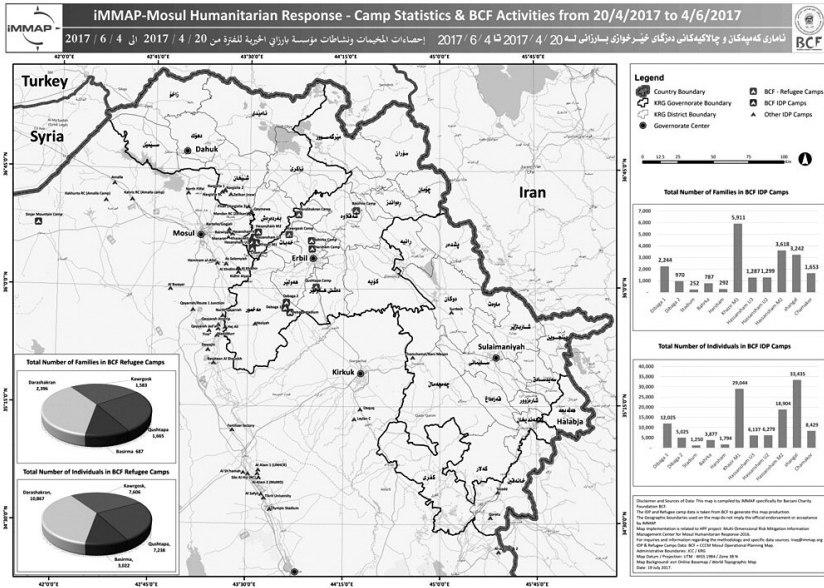
---

<sup>31</sup> Mays, Al-Juboori and Hassin, Ahmad. *Humanitarian Challenges in Iraq's Displacement Crisis*. Ceasefire Center for Civilian Right and Minority Rights Group International. 2016. Accessed July 9 2017, [http://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/MRG-report-A4\\_english-DECEMBER-2016\\_WEB-2.pdf](http://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/MRG-report-A4_english-DECEMBER-2016_WEB-2.pdf).

<sup>32</sup> UNHCR, Iraq Situation Response

<sup>33</sup> Rudaw, "Food aid for IDPs outside of camps to be reduced in Kurdistan, Iraq," *Rudaw*, July 3, 2017, accessed July 7, 2017, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/030720177>.

**Figure 4. Distribution of refugee and IDP camps in the KRI including BCF-managed camps<sup>34</sup>**



violence in other parts of Iraq and refugees forced to leave their homes from the neighboring Syria starting in 2011. As we entered a new era in 2013, overwhelmed by the ISIS phenomenon, the Kurdistan Region now faces a new reality. Peshmerga forces had to fight against ISIS barbarism on the front lines. The ISIS war did not challenge the KRG on a military level alone but also exacerbated the already volatile economic situation, partly triggered by the Iraqi central government's blockage, this time through cutting the KRG's share of Iraq's federal fiscal transfers beginning in February 2014.

As we witness the demise of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, old challenges remain, in addition to the new ones. The humanitarian crisis that hit the KRI in 2011 had significant effects on the socio-economic conditions of the region as a whole. Unfortunately, the crisis seems to pose serious new challenges to the region as it moves to a new phase following the planned referendum in September. In order to prepare for the post-ISIS era, the

<sup>34</sup> Map courtesy of BCF and iMMAP, July 2017.

KRI needs to address the humanitarian challenges alongside the obvious political, social, and economic ones. This chapter may serve as a guiding foundation for policy-makers and researchers for more in-depth research, along with long and short-term policies to address the volatile political and humanitarian situation in the KRI and Iraq as a whole.

