

**NGO Statement on Iraq
ahead of the July meeting of the members of the global coalition to counter ISIL**

As the members of the global coalition to counter ISIL meet in Washington D.C. this week, 28 non-governmental organizations working to provide assistance and protection for civilians affected by the conflict in Iraq share the following concerns and recommendations:

Considerations for protecting civilians and ensuring access to assistance during military operations

First and foremost, as required by international humanitarian law, we remind all armed actors of their responsibility to protect civilian life and civilian objectsⁱ and ensure access to life-saving assistance for those caught up in ongoing and future military offensives in Iraq.

Since the beginning of the military operations to counter ISIL, civilians trapped under siege-like conditions in areas such as Ramadi, Fallujah, and Mosul have experienced extreme risks from starvation, use as human shields and death at the hands of ISIL snipers, and relentless coalition and Iraqi airstrikes and artillery barrages.

Although the city of Mosul has been declared 'retaken' by the Iraqi government, civilians are still not out of harm's way. As seen in east Mosul, it could take weeks for Iraqi forces to regain full control over the city, and longer still for explosive hazards to be cleared. Even then, ISIL sleeper cells are likely to persist, and attacks—like those seen in previously retaken areas of Mosul—continue to threaten the lives of civilians.

As military action continues, coalition and partner forces must exercise distinction, proportion, and precautionⁱⁱ in their operations across the country, while protecting civilians and facilitating their access to safety. In addition, it is imperative that any measures by actors to facilitate access to safety for civilians do not put them at further risk of harm—such as the use of banned weapons, white phosphorous, and explosive weapons in populated areas; inadequate communication on available options of safe routes and areas; or inability to guarantee and maintain genuine safety.

Coalition and partner forces must also apply these principles in the expected offensives in Hawija, Tal Afar, and western Anbar. Civilian protection and access to assistance must be prioritized in the planning and implementation of military operations, and the role of impartial humanitarian organizations and their operational space must be respected by all armed actors. The needs are severe for those who have already fled and for the approximately 150,000 civiliansⁱⁱⁱ thought to be trapped in these areas. These populations will need support, not distrust, after surviving years of living under ISIL. It is therefore critical that military actors liaise with the humanitarians working on the ground to ensure assistance is accessible and that protection concerns are properly monitored and addressed.

We are gravely concerned by reports that civilians are experiencing further protection risks and human rights abuses by armed actors on all sides of the conflict, including sexual exploitation and abuse, confiscation of documentation, child recruitment, discrimination or exclusion from entitlements, eviction, arbitrary arrest and detention, torture, disappearance, execution, and different forms of collective punishment. We strongly urge all parties in the conflict to refrain from perpetrating, allowing, or ignoring other actors' use of excessive force, abuse of power, or any action that violates Iraqi civilians' human rights, regardless of real or perceived ISIL-affiliation. Such abuses not only harm civilians, but serve to underscore historical grievances and undercut prospects for reconciliation.

Considerations for prioritizing investment in inclusive recovery and reconciliation efforts

We cannot wait for the military offensives to conclude before we start planning for, and investing in the future of Iraq. We urge coalition partners and the international community to consider the ongoing assistance and protection needs which will remain beyond the military campaign. It is critical that early recovery and resilience initiatives are prioritized now by donors, humanitarian and development actors, and international and local leadership.

One third of Iraq's population, 11 million people, are anticipated to require humanitarian assistance in 2017. Current funding levels are inadequate to meet even the prioritized needs, as evidenced by the Humanitarian Response Plan which is only 42% funded^{iv}. Ensuring sustained funding so that civilians have access to principled assistance and protection during the current conflict and its immediate aftermath will greatly contribute to the longer-term recovery and reconciliation of communities.

Civilians across Iraq in areas already retaken from ISIL continue to experience protracted, secondary, and tertiary displacement. Over 1.75 million people^v are still displaced in center-south governorates in Iraq, and even in areas where ISIL has been gone for over a year, the conditions for safe and voluntary returns are still not being met. Remaining insecurity; lack of basic services; explosive hazards contamination; and damage to homes, businesses, and public infrastructure—including schools and hospitals—all continue to pose barriers to return. In spite of these conditions, some civilians have experienced pressure to return to their areas of origin, while others have been prevented from returning^{vi}. We call on Iraqi leadership, with support from the international community, to develop and implement an inclusive durable solutions framework, which supports safe, voluntary, informed, and dignified returns, and provides for local integration solutions for displaced families who are unwilling or unable to return to their areas of origin.

Further, Iraqi authorities, local institutions, and community leaders must work together to enhance social cohesion by facilitating peaceful co-existence between communities and equitable access to resources and safety for all Iraqis. We encourage the development of a defined strategy for governance and reconciliation which clearly addresses the root causes of conflict, such as human rights violations, political exclusion, economic marginalization and discrimination, land and governance disputes, and lack of accountability. It is critical that any such strategy includes the full participation of women, youth, and minority groups.

We must work collectively to rebuild communities, not just infrastructure^{vii}. All recovery, reconciliation, and long-term support initiatives should actively engage civil society to enable self-reliance and contribute to the resilience of all Iraqis in their chosen locations. Ensuring inclusivity is critical to the sustainability of every effort towards recovery and peace.

Signatories:

1. Action Against Hunger
2. Afkar Society for Development and Relief
3. Alind Organization
4. Alkhair Humanitarian Organization
5. Al-Amal Association
6. ASB
7. Christian Aid
8. Education for Peace in Iraq Center (EPIC)
9. AL- Eslah Association for Social Development
10. Handicap International
11. Help – Hilfe zur Selbsthilfe e.V.
12. Human Relief Foundation
13. The International Rescue Committee
14. Médecins du Monde
15. Mercy Corps
16. Mission East
17. Norwegian Refugee Council
18. Oxfam
19. PAX
20. Peace and Freedom Organization (PFO)
21. Première Urgence Internationale
22. Al- Rakeezeh Foundation for Relief and Development (RRD)
23. REACH Organization- Iraq
24. Representative of Nineveh Voluntary for IDPs (RNVDO)
25. Save the Children
26. Welthungerhilfe (WHH)
27. World Vision International
28. Zhian Health Organization (ZHO)

ⁱ Customary IHL [Rule 9](#): State practice considers civilian areas, towns, cities, villages, residential areas, dwellings, buildings and houses and schools, civilian means of transportation, hospitals, medical establishments and medical units, historic monuments, places of worship and cultural property, and the natural environment.

ⁱⁱ Customary IHL [Rule 1](#): The parties to the conflict must at all times distinguish between civilians and combatants. Attacks may only be directed against combatants. Attacks must not be directed against civilians. [Rule 7](#): The parties to the conflict must at all times distinguish between civilian objects and military objectives. Attacks may only be directed against military objectives. Attacks must not be directed against civilian objects. [Rule 14](#): Launching an attack which may be expected to cause incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians, damage to civilian objects, or a combination thereof, which would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated, is prohibited. [Rule 15](#): In the conduct of military operations, constant care must be taken to spare the civilian population, civilians and civilian objects. All feasible precautions must be taken to avoid, and in any event to minimize, incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians and damage to civilian objects.

ⁱⁱⁱ ACAPS Iraq Crisis Analysis: Displacement. Latest update: 27/06/2017. Accessed: 2/07/2017.

<https://www.acaps.org/country/iraq/crisis-analysis>.

^{iv} OCHA Iraq. Accessed 2/07/2017. <http://www.unocha.org/iraq>

^v Iraq CCCM Camp overview situation. June 2017. Accessed: 2/07/2017.

<https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/57792>

^{vi} Iraq Situation: UNHCR Flash Update - 22 June 2017. <http://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/iraq-situation-unhcr-flash-update-22-june-2017>

^{vii} ICRC. I Saw My City Die: Voices From the Front Lines of Urban Conflict in Iraq, Syria and Yemen. May 2017. <http://www.alnap.org/resource/24896>