



Anbar IDPs in Baghdad fear for their safety

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Displaced families who have fled the ongoing violence in Iraq's troubled Anbar Province say anti-Anbar hostility is leaving many too scared to register with the authorities, pushing them into the shadows and cutting them off from aid and public services.

"We don't want to tell anybody that we are from Anbar... Whenever they see someone from Anbar, they arrest them... We are scared," said Sara*, who fled with her family from the violence, now in its sixth month, to the northern periphery of Baghdad last month.

"We were very scared for our children [in Fallujah] because we could see the planes firing rockets, one rocket after the other, mortars, artillery... I took my children and we hid under the staircase... [But] here we're worried about my husband being arrested," she said.

Internally displaced persons (IDPs) say men are singled out for harassment, but families also report being too afraid to access healthcare services, send children to school, and sign up at the Ministry of Migration and Displacement (MoMD).

Aid agencies have also raised the alarm about growing protection concerns for the IDPs from Anbar, who now number close to 435,000, according to the latest MoMD figures.

"The problem seems to be particularly serious in Baghdad where IDPs from Anbar are reported to be harassed or being labelled as 'terrorists'," a UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) report noted.

Aziza*, a widow with six children, told IRIN she left Anbar in February, travelling first to Samarra and then to Baghdad governorate, where she is now staying with her sister and her family; a total of 17 people sharing one room.

"There is a crisis in Anbar. There is nothing... No food, nothing. The situation is very bad," the 42-year-old explained. "We didn't bring anything with us... We left in a difficult time... We barely made it out."

Aziza, whose husband died during the civil war strife in Anbar in 2006, said: "We didn't register because we are scared to say we are coming from Anbar to this place. We are scared for our children."

Registering would give displaced families access to a monthly cash stipend of US\$240, but fears of repercussions are widespread, including falsely-applied terror charges that could blacklist their entire family. For the same reason, people are also staying away from schools and health centres.

In one district of Baghdad, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) received reports that out of 900 Anbar IDP families residing in the area, some 200 had said they were afraid to go to the MoMD to register.

When families do register, they often send the women - not the men - to do the paperwork, for fear the men would be picked up by the authorities.

Due to not being registered, Aziza said she had not received any government aid, nor had she been able to claim her husband's pension, her previous source of income.

An Iraqi aid worker, Abu Khaled,* providing relief for some of the displaced through a local NGO, said tribal and family links were helping to provide basic food and shelter, but beyond that, he said life was very difficult.

"People need more than food and water. They need a doctor, they need to be able to move around and go to shop and to go school," he said.

"On the security side, the army and the security forces are circling the area, checking IDs; insulting those from Anbar," he added. "At any time, they can take your son or brother away from the area and never bring him back again. That's the problem."

Revealing accents

According to UNHCR, the lead agency for humanitarian protection, some Anbar IDPs were even changing the way they spoke, to avoid their accents revealing their identity.

"In our assessments, some IDPs stated that they are afraid of possible reprisal from their own communities in the eventual return to the place of origin, others fear that approaching MoMD or any other authorities may lead to possible repercussions as perceived by them, including being targeted by some armed groups by virtue of their Anbari origin," UNHCR's Senior Durable Solutions Officer in Iraq, Hinako Toki, told IRIN.

However, while some people from Anbar were deliberately not registering, others, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), were struggling to do so because of a lack of documentation proving they were residents of Anbar and thus eligible for support as IDPs.

"In Baghdad... IDPs were required to provide documents issued in Anbar in order to register; however, many residents of Anbar had their official documents issued in Baghdad over the last 20 years, causing difficulties to prove Anbar residency," IOM's April Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) noted.

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The study, the second in a detailed series of assessments on those displaced from Anbar, also reported that at 31 percent of the 108 sites the IOM looked at in Baghdad, IDPs reported "restriction on movement". Additional restrictions were likewise observed at sites in the provinces of Erbil, Karbala, Kirkuk and Nineveh.

Overall the DTM said 18 percent of all the 607 locations (109) it had assessed outside of Anbar had groups of IDPs where no one was registered and it cited reports from Dhi Qar, in the south of

the country, claiming that "security forces" were refusing to allow Anbar IDPs in unless they had a local sponsor in the governorate.

"Some families had therefore entered the governorate illegally and were moving continuously out of fear of deportation," said the report.

Aid access

New York-based lobby group Human Rights Watch (HRW) has accused the government of failing the population of Anbar both by blocking aid to those still inside the province and allowing sectarian tensions to disadvantage those seeking shelter in other governorates.

Erin Evers, Iraq researcher for HRW, said the "utter lack of trust from both sides" due to escalating sectarian tensions was stopping people in need from getting aid and support.

"Not only Sunnis from Anbar," she said, "but Sunnis from Baghdad, the Baghdad belt and other areas firmly believe that the government is out to persecute them, even to eliminate them from parts of the country.

"That's a major obstacle for them getting aid - the government doesn't want to aid people it claims are 'terrorists', and displaced persons are terrified to subject themselves to government procedures to receive what little aid the government promises."

The government of Iraq has not responded directly to HRW's accusations, but it has repeatedly defended its military actions which, it says, are necessary due to the presence of militants from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

Critics, however, point out that only a portion of those who have taken up arms in Anbar are with ISIL; many are Sunni militants who claim discrimination and mistreatment at the hands of the Shia-led government.

The UN has also called for better aid access. In a statement this week the special representative of the UN Secretary-General for Iraq (SRSG), Nickolay Mladenov, referred to the "deteriorating conditions in Fallujah" and said "continued fighting, including shelling, often hampers the delivery of badly needed emergency aid...

"As the Iraqi Security Forces continue their efforts to restore law and order in Anbar, they should ensure that the fight against terrorism is conducted in accordance with Iraq's international and constitutional human rights obligations," he said.

According to Iraq Body Count, a UK-based independent tracking database, 4,369 people have been killed by violence in the country since 1 January this year.

Despite the escalating needs, however, funding for the Anbar crisis remains limited, with the UN's Strategic Response Plan to date having raised only \$10.5 million of its \$103 million target.

*names have been changed

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