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Displaced Iraqis blocked from Baghdad



Photo: IRIN

Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis have fled the Islamic State (File photo)

BAGHDAD, 20 April 2015 (IRIN) - Thousands of Iraqis fleeing the so-called Islamic State are being prevented from entering the capital Baghdad and other cities because local officials fear IS sleeper cells could be among them.

IS militants have overtaken parts of the city of Ramadi, causing more than 4,000 families to flee the area in recent days.

At Bzebez bridge, which links Anbar and Baghdad provinces some 30 kilometres southwest of Baghdad, thousands wait at checkpoints while officials demand residents in the capital vouch for them before they enter.

“When I saw IS flags hanging on the city’s electricity poles, I knew it was time to leave,” Adel Raheem, one of those waiting at the checkpoint, told IRIN. “We had to leave everything behind, there was no time to pack.

“We were expecting to be well-treated in Baghdad, but unfortunately our hopes were wrong. We feel as if we are immigrating to another country, aren't we all Iraqis?”

Many internally displaced people know no one in the city and have therefore been stranded at the checkpoint for several days, sleeping rough with little clean water.

“I witnessed two old men dying in the middle of the desert,” Raheem added.

Among those waiting was police officer Saad al-Dulaimi, who was trying to get eight members of his family to safety in Baghdad before returning to fight IS in Ramadi.

“I want to take my family away from [the] IS threat [then] I want to fight them for the last blood drop,” he told IRIN. “I know IS [may] kill me, I don’t want be beheaded in front of my kids.”

Shakir Mahmoud, mayor of the Amiryat al-Fallujah district where the displaced were stuck, said the authorities had set up two camps that could each house 500 families but admitted more needed to be done.



Photo:

Adel Raheem/IRIN

The Bzebez bridge is packed with Iraqis fleeing Ramadi

“There is a big shortage of food, medications and baby milk,” Mahmoud said. “We can’t do it by ourselves, the government and international organisations must intervene immediately.”

Interior ministry spokesman General Saad Maan defended the move to require Baghdad residents to vouch for the displaced, a policy which was allegedly partially lifted on Sunday - though thousands are still waiting.

"The process was created to curb IS infiltration to Baghdad, otherwise they will take advantage to reorganise their [sleeper] cells,” he said.

An alternative route for those displaced by the fighting, encouraging them to go to through neighbouring Babil governorate, has also been partially blocked.

“The province has decided to prevent people between the ages of 18 and 50 from entering the city for security reasons,” said Sadiq Madlool, governor of Babil. “We ordered our security checkpoints to prevent young men from entering.”

Residents are also frightened.

“We don't want young men [from Ramadi] to enter our city,” said 56-year-old Kadhum Mohammed in Babel. “They are holding radical beliefs and IS might take advantage to infiltrate inside.”

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Theme(s): Conflict, Refugees/IDPs,

