



Iraq: more challenges ahead for a fractured humanitarian enterprise

By Greg Hansen¹

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UNHCR staff are briefed by US troops near Hurriyah on the situation of displaced persons, September 2008. Photograph by Dan Martin.

The war in Iraq has gone on longer than World War I and, while violence diminished in the second half of 2007, nothing has been resolved. The differences between Shia and Sunni, the disputes within the respective communities, and the antagonism against the US occupation are all as great as ever.

Patrick Cockburn, *Moqtada al-Sadr and the Fall of Iraq*, 2008²

¹ Greg Hansen is an independent researcher based in Amman, Jordan. He has worked since 1994 with a wide variety of humanitarian organizations in the Caucasus, south Asia, the Middle East and elsewhere. Hansen has tracked humanitarian policy and operations in and around Iraq since early 2004.

² Patrick Cockburn, *Moqtada al-Sadr and the Fall of Iraq*, Faber and Faber, London, 2008, p253.

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The Feinstein International Center develops and promotes operational and policy responses to protect and strengthen the lives and livelihoods of people living in crisis-affected and -marginalized communities. The Center works globally in partnership with national and international organizations to bring about institutional changes that enhance effective policy reform and promote best practice.

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Introduction

Despite a relative reduction in the level of violence in Iraq, as of December 2008 Iraqis continue to face serious and persistent threats to their safety and welfare due to a mix of ongoing conflict, lack of access to basic services, spotty performance of Iraqi line ministries, serious inefficiencies in the humanitarian apparatus itself, and inadequate operational capacity of aid actors on the ground. There is a strong likelihood of additional violent conflict in Iraq for years to come. Humanitarian action that can adapt to a changing Iraq as the Multi-National Force-Iraq (MNF-I) draws down will be needed for the foreseeable future.

There are an estimated 2.4 million displaced Iraqis and some 2 million Iraqi refugees in neighbouring countries. Displacement in Iraq has slowed somewhat as violence has ebbed in some parts of the country. However, despite government incentives and political pressures for the return of Iraqis who have fled their homes, the pace of return (an estimated 180,000 so far³) indicates low confidence among some of the most victimized Iraqis regarding the extent and durability of security improvements. In areas experiencing the most dramatic security gains, aid agencies report that compared with two years ago when the main preoccupation was with security, the main demand is now shifting to greater access to basic services such as water and health. Tentative improvements in the security situation in some areas have resulted in increased expectations.

Since late 2007, few parts of Iraq have been truly off-limits to organizations that have made the changes and investments required for effective operations in reasonable safety at bearable cost. Humanitarian actors that are not under the MNF-I umbrella are to some degree present and active in all governorates, even in locations where conflicts are ongoing and insecurity

is most acute. While some operational humanitarian organizations have adapted well through effective management of security and operational challenges, operational capacity still lags behind access: many accessible needs are not being adequately met.

The recently signed Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) means that the gradual withdrawal of the MNF-I is now a certainty. Some humanitarian organizations are situated advantageously to sustain and even scale up their operations as the context evolves over the next months and years. Others are now faced with the urgent need to either adapt their *modus operandi* to a changing Iraq, or to leave. Without a more streamlined and independent operational modality, the UN's humanitarian apparatus is seriously disadvantaged by the shrinking of the MNF-I umbrella on which it depends. It may struggle to be an effective humanitarian actor in the months and years to come.

Purpose and Scope

In our June 2007 study, *Taking Sides or Saving Lives: Existential Choices for the Humanitarian Enterprise in Iraq*⁴, we explored the themes of universality, implications of terrorism and counter-terrorism, coherence, and security (see Box 1). We aimed to identify systemic strengths and weaknesses in the humanitarian apparatus, and assess the outcomes of the choices made by its various actors. This Briefing Paper provides humanitarian practitioners, policymakers and donors with a review of new developments in the Iraqi context for humanitarian action since mid-2007. It takes a forward-looking approach, anticipating new and emerging challenges and calling attention to lessons that have been learned and spurned by various agencies in their efforts to adapt to the changing context.

Acronyms

CAP	Consolidated Appeal
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDP	Internally displaced person
JCC	Joint Coordinating Committee
JMOCC	Joint Military Operations Coordinating Committee
MNF-I	Multi-National Force - Iraq
NCCI	NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq
OCHA	UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
PRT	Provincial Reconstruction Team
PSP	Private Security Providers
SOFA	Status of Forces Agreement
SOT	Sector Outcome Team
UNAMI	UN Assistance Mission for Iraq
UNDSS	UN Department for Security and Safety
UNHCR	UN High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	UN Children's Fund
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organisation

³ Based on data collected by UNHCR and partners from various sources, IDP Working Group Update, September 2008, p8.

⁴ Greg Hansen, *Taking Sides or Saving Lives: Existential Choices for the Humanitarian Enterprise in Iraq*, Humanitarian Agenda 2015 Iraq country study, Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, June 2007. <https://wikis.uit.tufts.edu/confluence/display/FIC/Humanitarian+Agenda+2015-Iraq+Country+Study-Taking+Sides+or+Saving+Lives-Existential+Choices+for+the+Humanitarian+Enterprise+in+Iraq>.

Humanitarian Agenda 2015 -- Four Crosscutting Themes

Research conducted by the Humanitarian Agenda 2015 project has been organised around four cross-cutting themes, which permeate the Iraq case in profound ways:

Regarding **universality**, our earlier research confirmed a clear and unambiguous resonance between Islamic or Iraqi understandings of the ideals of humanitarian assistance and protection, on one hand, and the 'Dunantist' or principles-based humanitarian ethos underlying many western-dominated humanitarian institutions. As we noted, however, humanitarian ideals have the potential to unite, but humanitarian practice divides. The visible parts of the humanitarian enterprise in Iraq tend to be those that have embedded with an unpopular belligerent. Meanwhile, humanitarian actors that have striven to adhere to more principled approaches tend to keep low profiles, to the extent that their activity is largely hidden from view. Little progress has been made in bridging cultural divides, knowledge gaps and perceptual differences.

We observed in mid-2007 that local and international manifestations of **terrorism and counter-terrorism** had created a toxic and dangerous political environment for humanitarian actors, serving to increase the scale of civilian needs in Iraq while decreasing the capacity and willingness of humanitarians to respond. Aid agencies have tried to adapt to this environment in markedly different ways: some by investing more in acceptance, outreach and creative programming, and others by becoming bunkerized and isolated from beneficiary communities. The present review observes that humanitarian responses are seriously impaired when agencies lose their proximity with affected people and their communities.

Our earlier country study on Iraq also noted the dangers inherent in pursuing **coherence** between political, military, and humanitarian agendas. As US-led forces in Iraq prepare to scale down their presence and eventually leave, we note that substantial parts of the international humanitarian apparatus will have to adapt or leave.

Finally, the earlier study observed that the **security** of humanitarian actors had dominated discourse and decision-making on the humanitarian response in Iraq since the summer of 2003, to the extent that security constraints routinely trumped the humanitarian imperative in many agencies. That remains the case for several humanitarian actors, including those in the UN system. We also noted, however, that many operational agencies regarded neutrality in Iraq not as an abstract notion but as an operational necessity to protect themselves and their beneficiaries from targeted attack. Organizations that are known to be neutral will now have an important comparative advantage for remaining active in Iraq as the MNF-I scales down.

The first section of this paper provides an overview of developments in the humanitarian landscape, questioning the current narrative of success and progress prevailing in western capitals and media coverage of Iraq. It calls attention to the risks posed by increasing politicisation of internally displaced person (IDP) and refugee returns, the fragmentation of the humanitarian

community, and serious flaws in the UN's humanitarian apparatus. The second section is a review of key lessons learned by operational actors. It highlights the ways that successful agencies have adapted their activities to an insecure and politically-charged environment, describing the shortcomings of remote programming and low-profile approaches. The third section describes

dysfunctional coordination architecture for the humanitarian response in Iraq. The fourth section surveys the implications for humanitarian actors of the SOFA, with a view to anticipating the measures needed to ensure optimum preparedness for the humanitarian enterprise as its operating environment changes with the drawdown of US forces. The conclusion describes the dilemmas for donors that arise out of their multiple obligations to good humanitarian donorship, and a call is made for a comprehensive and high-level review of the UN's humanitarian performance in Iraq.

Methodology

This research draws primarily on evidence from 45 semi-structured interviews and conversations with current and former humanitarian practitioners since the summer of 2008. Participants were from international and Iraqi NGOs, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), UN humanitarian agencies and donors in Iraq, Amman and elsewhere. Interviews with aid workers inside Iraq were held online and by telephone. The paper also incorporates data gathered during research for a lessons-learned exercise earlier in 2008⁵, which interviewed 56 humanitarian staff from a broad spectrum of 25 operational humanitarian agencies in Iraq. Interviews were supplemented by a review of aid agency documentation, earlier reviews of humanitarian action and by other research recently conducted in the region by the author. The paper thus takes into account developments over a five-year period.

A draft of this paper was circulated for comment to UNAMI, UNHCR, NCCI, the ICRC and some donor agencies. Some of the comments received are reflected in the final product. As with all Feinstein Center products, we invite feedback from all quarters. Readers are encouraged to send their comments and criticisms to the author at ghansen@islandnet.com and to the Humanitarian Agenda 2015 (HA2015) Project Director Antonio Donini at antonio.donini@tufts.edu.

⁵ Greg Hansen, Focus on Operationality Briefing Papers, NCCI, January 2008. <http://www.ncciraq.org/spip.php?rubrique316>

1. Scepticism About the Prevailing Narrative of Success

While acknowledging that violence in Iraq has decreased over the last two years, most humanitarian practitioners view the narrative of success and progress currently prevailing in western capitals and media as premature, subject to serious setbacks and motivated largely by political agendas⁶. Despite tentative improvements, Iraq remains a highly unstable and conflict-prone country where, on a typical day, there are dozens of attacks in the central and southern governorates, frequently involving civilian deaths and injuries. For the moment the need for humanitarian assistance and protection has stabilized, but at a level that remains high. Operational agencies are focusing more on water and sanitation, rehabilitation of schools and clinics, and transferring expertise to Iraqis. But serious gaps remain and the likelihood of renewed large-scale violence is high. There are clear indications that the presence and activity of humanitarian actors will be needed in Iraq for several years. Some humanitarian agencies maintain stocks of pre-positioned emergency goods in strategic locations inside or near to Iraq to ensure rapid response to sudden increases in needs. The ICRC maintains its largest emergency medical stocks worldwide in the Iraq operation.

Although violence has diminished, the improvements are not necessarily durable. Open warfare persists in the governorates of Ninewa, Kirkuk

⁶ As writer James Denselow observes, "...it seems that the paradigm of success has become so prevalent that few challenged the celebration by war advocates of a month (last June) in which "only" 460 Iraqis lost their lives through violent death. How is this so? With media coverage at an all-time low, politicians are able to fill in the gaps with their own stories of success." James Denselow, "Delusions of success", *The Guardian*, August 1 2008. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/aug/01/iraq.usa>

Table 1

Related Factors in the Reduction and Renewal of Violence

Factors Credited with Reducing Violence	Seeds for Renewed Violence
Completion of displacement of communities from their homes and exchanges of populations from and between many formerly mixed areas.	A poorly managed and politicized effort to return IDPs and refugees to their homes prematurely, or in ways that shift demographic realities on the ground, risks igniting flashpoints for violence resulting in secondary displacement and deprivation.
Ceasefire order by Moqtada al-Sadr over the Mehdi Army militia.	Tactical withdrawals from clashes with the MNF-I in Sadr City and with Iraqi Forces in Basra have allowed the Mehdi Army to remain a powerful armed force that can be mobilized quickly. Strong antagonism remains between the Mehdi Army and another powerful Shia militia, the Badr Brigade. There is considerable cross-fertilization between the Badr Brigade and the Iraqi Forces.
Formation of loosely-knit cadres of mostly-Sunni fighters in "Awakening Councils", (al Sahwa) or "Sons of Iraq", to oppose extremist Sunni groups loosely referred to as "al-Qaeda in Iraq".	Renting the quiescence and temporary loyalty of "Awakening" groups has effectively armed a host of new Sunni militias which are strongly antagonistic toward the Shia-dominated government. There is intense scepticism about plans for the integration of "Awakening" fighters into the Iraqi police and military, and reluctance in the Shia-dominated government to keep them on the payroll.
The MNF-I's surge strategy, entailing a temporary increase in the number of US combat troops and in spending for military civil-affairs activity, allowed for increased military operations aimed at stemming opposition and inter-communal violence. Implemented in accordance with new US counter-insurgency doctrine, the surge has combined aggressive military measures with billions of US dollars spent on military civil affairs activity aimed at creating a more permissive environment for a military presence. One outcome of the surge was the erection of concrete barriers and checkpoints to isolate several neighbourhoods of Baghdad.	The US presence has deterred some intra-communal and inter-communal violence in some areas. As the US withdraws, violence is likely to resume or increase in areas where Iraqi Forces are ineffective or partial. Reduction in civil affairs activity may mean that those Iraqis who financially benefited from the US strategy will be cut off, with unpredictable results. The separation barriers in Baghdad, whatever their alleged beneficial effects, have caused acute disruptions for Baghdadis and are deeply resented. As long as the barriers are allowed to remain in place, they will continue to isolate communities from one-another making genuine reconciliation more elusive.
Gradual improvement in the reliability and conduct of Iraqi police and military at checkpoints in some areas have made movement between some areas relatively less risky than in the recent past.	Resumption of open hostilities between militias is likely to draw unreliable Iraqi Forces into the fray.

(Tameem), and Diyala. The population in most of the remaining parts of the central and southern governorates remain at risk from the effects of rekindled latent conflicts. As depicted in Table 1 below, virtually all of the factors that are credited with reducing violence also contain the seeds of renewed violence. Latent power struggles between militias and the government, and between militias themselves, pose continuing threats of reverting back into open large-scale warfare in a context where the national military and police forces still demonstrate conflicting loyalties. Unresolved conflicts over oil revenues and Iraq's internal boundaries similarly threaten to explode. The possibility of fracture along Arab-Kurdish lines is illustrated by recent heightened tensions in the area of Khanaqin northeast of Baghdad and, at a political level, between Prime Minister al-Maliki and the Kurdish leadership.

Humanitarian Funding

The UN's Consolidated Appeal (CAP) for Iraq in 2008 requested a total of \$274,253,721 and was 67% subscribed by mid-November, with the US, Iraq and the UK committing 30.1%, 21.8% and 6.5% respectively for a total of 58.4%. 6.3% or \$11,636,655 was allocated from the UN's Central Emergency Response Fund. The European Commission Humanitarian Aid department (ECHO) pledged just 0.2% or \$583,090 to projects listed in the Appeal, although it provided \$15,000,000 to agencies inside Iraq (predominantly the ICRC) and \$15,000,000 to organizations working among Iraqi refugees outside.

Total funding requests for 2008, including both the 2008 CAP and requests for additional contributions such as those from the ICRC and bilaterals, amounted to a total of \$424,589,843. As shown in the table below,

excerpted from the 2009 CAP, according to the UN Office for Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Financial Tracking Service, the US, Iraq and the UK committed 48.8%, 11.3% and 7.2% respectively. In the 2009 CAP, the UN has appealed for a doubling of resources: \$547.3 million, including \$192.3 million for assistance inside Iraq and \$355 million for assistance to refugees outside. ECHO funding for Iraq in 2009 has not yet been decided.

While the US, UK and Iraq itself accounted for the greatest share of humanitarian funding (67.3%) in 2008, it is unclear whether aid resources from these countries will continue on the same level in the coming years as the military and political involvement of the US and UK phases down.

Table V: Iraq 2008 (incl. Iraqi refugees in neighbouring countries)

Donor	Funding	% of Grand Total	Uncommitted Pledges
Values in US\$			
United States	207,083,325	48.8 %	-
Iraq	48,000,000	11.3 %	-
United Kingdom	30,647,902	7.2 %	-
Allocations of unearmarked funds by UN agencies	26,073,042	6.1 %	-
Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF)	16,636,309	3.9 %	-
Norway	13,772,778	3.2 %	-
European Commission (ECHO)	13,702,615	3.2 %	17,962,675
Sweden	13,524,296	3.2 %	-
Netherlands	8,108,000	1.9 %	-
Australia	7,596,359	1.8 %	-
Germany	6,609,203	1.6 %	-
Canada	6,557,069	1.5 %	-
Ireland	4,948,210	1.2 %	-
Finland	3,867,983	0.9 %	-
Private (individuals & organisations)	3,141,296	0.7 %	-
Japan	3,000,000	0.7 %	-
Denmark	2,244,934	0.5 %	-
Belgium	1,555,210	0.4 %	-
Switzerland	1,544,866	0.4 %	-
United Arab Emirates	1,371,540	0.3 %	-
Kuwait	1,000,000	0.2 %	-
Carry-over (donors not specified)	925,672	0.2 %	-
Italy	655,976	0.2 %	389,403
Various (details not yet provided)	500,000	0.1 %	-
Greece	467,290	0.1 %	-
Others	1,055,964	0.2 %	-
Grand Total	424,589,843	100 %	18,352,083

NOTE: "Funding" means Contributions + Commitments + Carry-over
Pledge: a non-binding announcement of an intended contribution or allocation by the donor. ("Uncommitted pledge" on these tables indicates the balance of original pledges not yet committed).
Commitment: creation of a legal, contractual obligation between the donor and recipient entity, specifying the amount to be contributed.
Contribution: the actual payment of funds or transfer of in-kind goods from the donor to the recipient entity.

Source: 2009 UN Consolidated Appeal for Iraq and the Region, November 2008.

Returns of Displaced Iraqis and Refugees

Some 4.4 million Iraqis have fled their homes because of violence and insecurity in Iraq, most since the invasion in 2003. Only 3%, or about 180,000 Iraqis according to estimates⁷, have so far returned. An estimated 9% of these have returned from refuge in other countries, with the vast majority of returnees going back to their homes from other places inside Iraq where assistance and protection are far less assured.

The government of Iraq has been encouraging returns with cash grants of approximately \$800, rental subsidies and restitution for lost property. Camps for IDPs have been closed by the Iraqi Forces in response to a government edict requiring IDPs or “squatters” to leave government property. A prime-ministerial order was given in August requiring all individuals

occupying the houses of displaced persons to leave within one month, following which evictions were to be conducted. A governmental Return Cell was recently established to manage pending returns and to provide tangible support for returnees.

There is a concern shared by many humanitarian professionals that because returns are regarded as a barometer of security conditions in Iraq, political pressures for return are increasing. However, as in many other settings, including Afghanistan, the Balkans and the Caucasus⁸, premature returns pose extreme risks to those who are enticed or decide of their own volition to go home before their neighbors are ready to receive them (see Box 2). Data is not gathered on returnees who are re-victimized and forced into secondary displacement in Iraq, but several gruesome attacks on returnee families underscore the dilemma facing humanitarian

agencies. On one hand, there are grounds for facilitating a return as soon as safely possible in order to avoid the entrenchment of displacement and the institutionalization of the demographic divisions that ratify inter-communal cleansing. On the other hand, there is an acute risk that as pressures mount on the humanitarian community to begin facilitating returns, returns will be neither safe nor sustainable. It is far from certain whether the localized and relative reduction in violence of the recent past will persist. The potential for further bloodshed from rushed returns is high, and there is a strong likelihood that those who are convinced to return prematurely may again be displaced. Accordingly, there will be a continuing need for humanitarian agencies, particularly the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), to resist political pressures and assess conditions in places of potential return from a purely humanitarian perspective.

Box 2

Is Sectarianism Finished?

Lots of people in Baghdad have lost their houses. One in nine Iraqis—probably the real figures are higher—is a refugee inside or outside the country. They can't get their houses back. People are moving—Sunni who have come from tough Sunni areas—Shia the same, maybe some of them have gone back but otherwise you don't go back to a mixed area if you've lost your house. It's even a mistake to inquire too closely about what's happened to your house, because people who've taken your house may go for you, or you think that's true. There are a lot of revenge killings—someone's taken your house, you can't get it back, you have them killed. And so there have been real demographic changes on the ground. You can't reverse something like that with words.

Sectarianism, are we through the worst? We might be in some ways, it's difficult to tell. There have been some very bad bombings recently. There haven't been tit-for-tat killings as we had before. People are exhausted. But reducing sectarianism, I think it's very difficult to do, there's just been too many people being killed and there have been real demographic moves. It's very difficult to put those in reverse. But you can see what Iraqis think about the situation because refugees are not coming back. You hear optimistic stuff from the Iraqi government or from the Americans or the British but if this was true people would be coming back. They're not having a great time in Damascus, they are running out of money, they can't get jobs, but they're not coming back, and some of them that do come back, they go back to Damascus or Amman.

Patrick Cockburn of *The Guardian*, veteran Iraq journalist and author, speaking at the Frontline Club, London, 3 April 2008.

⁷ IDP Working Group Update, September 2008.

⁸ See, for example, Larry Minear and Neil MacFarlane, *Armed Conflict In Georgia: A Case Study in Humanitarian Action and Peacekeeping*, Occasional Paper No. 21, Humanitarianism and War Project, Brown University, 1996. <http://www.watsoninstitute.org/pub/op21.pdf>

A Fractured Humanitarian Enterprise

The humanitarian enterprise in Iraq remains a loose constellation of several sets of actors: the ICRC, Dunantist-leaning international and Iraqi NGOs operating through direct implementation or remote programming from Amman, Iraqi NGOs, international NGOs and non-profits that are dependent in varying degrees upon, or affiliated with, the MNF-I, and the UN agencies (UNHCR, the Children's Fund (UNICEF), World Food Programme (WFP) and the World Health Organization (WHO) and OCHA). Sharp differences over humanitarian principles persist between agencies striving to remain at arms length from the MNF-I (and, in some locations, from Iraqi authorities) in order to safeguard their ability to operate, and the UN agencies, some international NGOs and non-profit corporations that remain reliant on the MNF-I for security and other forms of support. There are sizeable variations among humanitarian actors in the degree of proximity they have to affected Iraqis and their communities. While no humanitarian actor moves freely among needy populations in the central and southern governorates—at least not in the high profile manner typical of aid responses in other conflict areas—some have found better ways than others to ensure that they stay connected with communities and do not become isolated and aloof from the populations they are meant to assist and protect. Further, in a climate of shrinking donor resources for humanitarian action in Iraq, stark contrasts in value for money are readily apparent: organisations that have maintained closer connections with communities are better placed to mount appropriate and well-targeted responses more quickly and with greater effectiveness.

The “Canal Hotel Syndrome” and the UN’s Faltering Humanitarian Apparatus

The true measure of success for the UN is not how much we promise, but how much we deliver for those who need us most.

Ban Ki-moon, UN Secretary General's Acceptance Speech
3 October 2006

UNAMI, which has a predominantly political mandate, has made important strides in preparing the way for provincial elections in late January 2009 and is active in resolving disputes over internal boundaries and other pressing political conflicts. However there is a widespread perception both inside and outside the UN that UNAMI's preoccupation with the political aspects of its mandate has impaired the UN's humanitarian roles by diluting focus and inhibiting latitude to act. The senior management of UNAMI sees the UN's humanitarian role in terms of providing an entry point into communities in support of UNAMI's political mandate and as an instrument for restoring the UN's credibility in Iraq⁹. But the reverse does not hold: UNAMI's tendency to instrumentalize humanitarian action in support of its political tasks has not been matched by a readiness to harness its unique political apparatus to safeguard or facilitate humanitarian efforts. The predictable result is that other parts of the humanitarian apparatus in Iraq are often loath to be associated too closely with UN efforts because the UN is seen as co-opted and ineffective. Although there is widespread recognition within UN agencies that the UN needs Iraqi and international NGOs to function as its operational arm, the added value to other parts of the humanitarian apparatus of the UN's humanitarian role is far less clear.

More than five years after the bombing in Baghdad of the UN's Canal Hotel headquarters, the UN's humanitarian agencies are still shackled to their MNF-I minders by draconian, one-size-fits-all security

policies, and hobbled by a culture of victimhood and risk aversion. Security decisions are highly centralized and are taken far away in New York by the UN Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS), which approves or rejects all movement of international staff with an average turnaround time of 21 days. UNDSS has consistently required that UN agencies in Iraq follow high profile deterrent and protective strategies¹⁰. While such strategies may be suitable for safeguarding UN political staff moving between military bases and other protected facilities, they are far less suitable for facilitating humanitarian operations in the safest possible conditions. Only token consideration is given to the counterproductive and maladaptive aspects of such approaches in Iraq. There is no evidence that the UN agencies are able or willing to give due consideration to how greater emphasis on acceptance and effectiveness could enhance the safety of UN humanitarian operations in Iraq. They have effectively acquiesced in UNAMI's integrated mission rather than acting on their own mandates. As such, the UN's humanitarian apparatus is only marginally closer to being an operational humanitarian actor inside Iraq than it was three years ago. As one experienced former UN agency staffer put it,

New York seems to be very much trying to control the Iraq [humanitarian] operation, and is seemingly still in shock after the Canal Hotel bombing in 2003. No one is willing to take any risks and push the operation back into the field - instead playing it 'safe' from Amman and from within the Green Zone, though the danger of being perceived as a part of one side in the conflict seems to me much more of a danger and a major hindrance for effective project implementation.

The UN's security policies and practices in Iraq are markedly different from agencies that have far greater operationality and less isolation from vulnerable people and communities. One striking contrast is that few organizations apart from the UN require their staff to live and work in facilities that

⁹ Telephone interview with the SRSF Staffan de Mistura, September 2008.

¹⁰ Our Iraq country study also noted the pressures brought to bear by the UN Staff Association against a greater UN presence in Iraq. Hansen, *Taking Sides*...p60.

are frequent military targets in an ongoing war. Most humanitarian actors in Iraq, large and small, adopt a “light footprint” which entails a diffused presence with unobtrusive facilities and activities that do not attract unwanted attention. All but a few agencies reject MNF-I protection and all other aggressive deterrent strategies or highly visible protective strategies, investing instead in knowing the context, forging relationships, emphasizing effective work and building tolerance and acceptance in communities. Most also decentralize their security decision-making to the field so that it remains responsive to changes in the context while avoiding the institutionalization of security postures at unsuitably high—or low—levels.

At the strategic level, much-anticipated improvements in the UN’s humanitarian role have largely failed to materialize following the UN’s elaboration in early 2007 of a new strategic policy framework for humanitarian action. Aid workers from throughout the humanitarian community, as well as several donors, overwhelmingly expressed disappointment at the evident inability of the UN’s now-sprawling, expensive and convoluted aid bureaucracy in Amman and Baghdad to make meaningful and consistent progress in improving its own humanitarian response capacity and effectiveness on the ground. In summarizing a long list of complaints and grievances, it would not be an exaggeration to say that in the view of most of those interviewed for this review, much of the UN’s aid apparatus in Iraq gives the impression of a Potemkin Village: an impressive illusion, with little of substance behind it.¹¹ Attention is focused on flying the UN flag rather than on leveraging expanded access by virtue of its presence.

Some notable exceptions to the overall pattern were heard during the course of interviews. UNICEF’s nascent IMPACT

programme is broadly regarded as a hopeful and positive development. The UNAMI Human Rights Reports of 2007 and early 2008 were widely applauded for being both forthright and comprehensive in an extraordinarily politicized context. However, when a former UNAMI insider was asked why the reports were now being issued only sporadically with long gaps in between, the explanation was that UNAMI’s human rights role had been plagued with problems in 2008. The office had been allowed to fall into disarray and, as a result, a carefully-laid system of human rights reporting, monitoring, NGO relations, and interviewing victims had collapsed.

Interviews generally yielded a litany of complaints about the choices made by senior UN management, particularly in regard of increasingly dysfunctional and wasteful coordination architecture and an extraordinarily difficult partnering environment. UNHCR Iraq, which intends to double its budget to \$81 million in 2009, was singled out for harsh criticism from partners, several former staff and others for running disjointed and out-of-touch offices in Amman, Kuwait City and Baghdad that, in the views of those interviewed, have been more concerned with placating UNHCR’s main donor—the US—than with responding meaningfully and in a timely way to urgent needs for assistance and protection. In the words of one experienced aid worker familiar with UNHCR,

My reading of the UNHCR operation in Iraq is that it was more or less a non-operational operation, with very few positive impacts on the ground except for some very ad hoc non-food item distributions and a very symbolic and very basic shelter programme... in Sadr City after the heavy fighting that took place there earlier this year. UNHCR management was mostly sitting in Baghdad, with no access to the daily operations of the Amman office, and

*thus were in effect remotely managing the operation in Iraq (from the Green Zone, which is about as far away from the real Iraq as Amman, maybe even further—in Amman you at least have access to Iraqis living in Amman) as well as remote managing the UNHCR office in Amman.*¹²

The former head of mission of an important UNHCR partner confirmed this view, adding that he had recommended to his headquarters earlier in 2008 that they suspend partnership with UNHCR.

Throughout 2008, UNAMI and the UN agencies have frequently spoken of their intentions to increase the scale of their humanitarian presence in Iraq. Given that there has been no significant reduction in the UN’s security posture anywhere in Iraq for several years, UN claims that it has beefed up its presence of international humanitarian staff inside the country ring hollow for many observers. International staff are still required to move, live and work behind blast walls under high profile armed guard provided by the MNF-I or the UN’s own protection details.

In our earlier country study we noted that some humanitarian organisations had successfully increased the scale of their operations as insecurity increased, without resorting to deterrence measures. “Acceptance strategies”, we observed, “do not render humanitarian workers immune from targeted attack in Iraq but do contribute to greater adaptability and longevity of humanitarian programs.”¹³ Acceptance is fragile in Iraq, and is subject to being lost if an organization performs or behaves poorly. As one aid worker recently cautioned, accepted organizations strive for “passive tolerance” if an active embrace isn’t forthcoming from the community. Tolerance needs to be carefully managed, and a major part of that is ensuring that an organization is effective at what it does.

¹¹ The term “Potemkin Village” refers to a hollow construct or façade that is meant to give observers the mistaken impression of substance. It derives from the story of idyllic false villages allegedly constructed by General Potemkin for the benefit of Empress Catherine the Great during her travel through the Crimea in the late 1700s.

¹² UNHCR’s High Commissioner, António Guterres, announced the shift in UNHCR’s management from Amman to the Green Zone and an intensification of UNHCR’s work in Iraq on February 18 2008 at the end of a visit to Baghdad and the region. UNHCR’s partners at the time were reportedly not consulted about the decision to make the shift.

¹³ Hansen, *Taking Sides...*, p50.

On the other hand, there is clear evidence that affiliation with “the occupier”, bunkerization, and aggressive deterrent strategies are counterproductive to perceptions of neutrality, acceptance and effective operations. The UN’s current preoccupation with shifting humanitarian management functions to the Green Zone and its stated intention of “increasing its footprint in Iraq” are badly out of step with the evidence of what works and what does not work in Iraq, not least because the Green Zone and other such heavily-protected facilities are the most frequently attacked places in all of Iraq, and the least accessible to Iraqis.

2. Adapting to the Iraqi Context

Quite apart from changes in the external environment, the more important evolution in the humanitarian response in Iraq has been the degree to which successful operational agencies have learned from experience, mustered the needed creativity and dexterity, and adapted themselves to the challenges posed by a singularly politicized and threatening environment. No organization has escaped the need to grapple with the risks and threats posed by the Iraqi context. The complexities have afflicted all agencies, but some organizations have adapted to the context with good results. Others have not. The contrasts between successful and unsuccessful agencies are remarkable and rich with learning potential about what tends to work well in Iraq and what does not.

If, as it is already showing signs of doing, the narrative of success in Iraq translates into dwindling donor support for humanitarian action, then aid effectiveness and value-for-money are going to become increasingly important factors in donor decisions about how scarce resources are applied. Donors will need to look much harder to determine which agencies have demonstrated real comparative advantage in adapting to the Iraqi context, and lend their support to humanitarian actors that have adopted operational and security modalities that work

for rather than against their effectiveness. Iraqis at risk cannot afford to have their safety and welfare jeopardized by wasteful spending of increasingly tight resources on agencies that ignore hard evidence about how to work effectively in reasonable safety at bearable cost.

The abilities of some agencies to operate effectively in the existing context—notably the ICRC, several international NGOs, the International Organization for Migration and little-known Iraqi NGOs—have increased substantially over the past several years. More than humanitarian access or insecurity for aid workers, which pose difficult challenges in every context of violent conflict, the primary challenge in Iraq is to find ways to adapt operations to the context so that they take full advantage of access opportunities and localized increases in humanitarian space. Indeed, the most successful agencies have not been passive consumers of humanitarian space but have invested heavily in creating their own humanitarian space by understanding the local contexts where they work, re-establishing proximity to victims and their communities, and demonstrating their neutrality and effectiveness. But these improvements have still been insufficient. Much of the humanitarian apparatus has lacked sufficient flexibility for adapting to rapidly-changing contexts in Iraq and absorbing sudden shocks. In a situation somewhat reminiscent of Darfur between 2003-2005,¹⁴ characterized at the time by a similar state of disarray within the humanitarian enterprise if not under the same constraints of working in low profile, many accessible needs are not being met. Serious gaps remain in terms of geographic coverage, adequacy of the assistance provided, and consistency across sectors.

Two complexities in Iraq make it more difficult to match operational capacity with needs. First, only the most competent operational agencies have found ways to overcome the prevailing loss of proximity to affected Iraqis and their communities that results both from remote programming, low profile modalities and from

bunkerization. Both of these reactions to insecurity for aid workers have come to resemble humanitarianism on life support. Second, coordination efforts in Iraq have been uncommonly dysfunctional due to the fragmented nature of the humanitarian apparatus and, particularly, the failure of the UN coordination and security models to adapt to the Iraqi context.

The Changing Effectiveness of Remote Programming

As insecurity for aid workers increased between 2003 and 2005, nearly all humanitarian organizations that decided to continue their operations changed their operational modality from direct implementation to some form of remote programming. This involved international staff managing the activities of Iraqi staff from a safe distance in Amman, Kuwait or Erbil. As inter-communal and intra-communal violence spread in Iraq in 2006-2007, more Iraqi aid workers and NGOs found their own mobility impaired or simply ended by acute insecurity, such that their own fields of view and geographic scope of activity in the country fell off sharply. Consequently, many Iraqi NGOs were also forced to engage in remote programming. Different forms of the modality were adopted first as an alternative to programme suspension or closure, and can be credited with keeping the flow of vital assistance moving even during the most violent crisis periods.

Whilst remote programming options have kept the aid pipeline into Iraq open, it has been an increasingly imperfect and inefficient way to work. Figure 1 below traces the changing effectiveness of remote programming from peak quality in early 2006 through a period of decline which accelerated with the explosion of violence in 2006-7. This decline in effectiveness reflects that it has proved enormously difficult for international managers and Iraqis themselves to maintain a store of the “soft skills” of humanitarian professionalism that are indispensable to successful operations in Iraq.

¹⁴ See Larry Minear, *The International Response to the Darfur Crisis, 2003-2005*, Remarks prepared for delivery to the ALNAP Biannual Meeting, Brussels, December 8 2005. http://www.alnap.org/meetings/pdfs/lminear_darfur_dec05.pdf

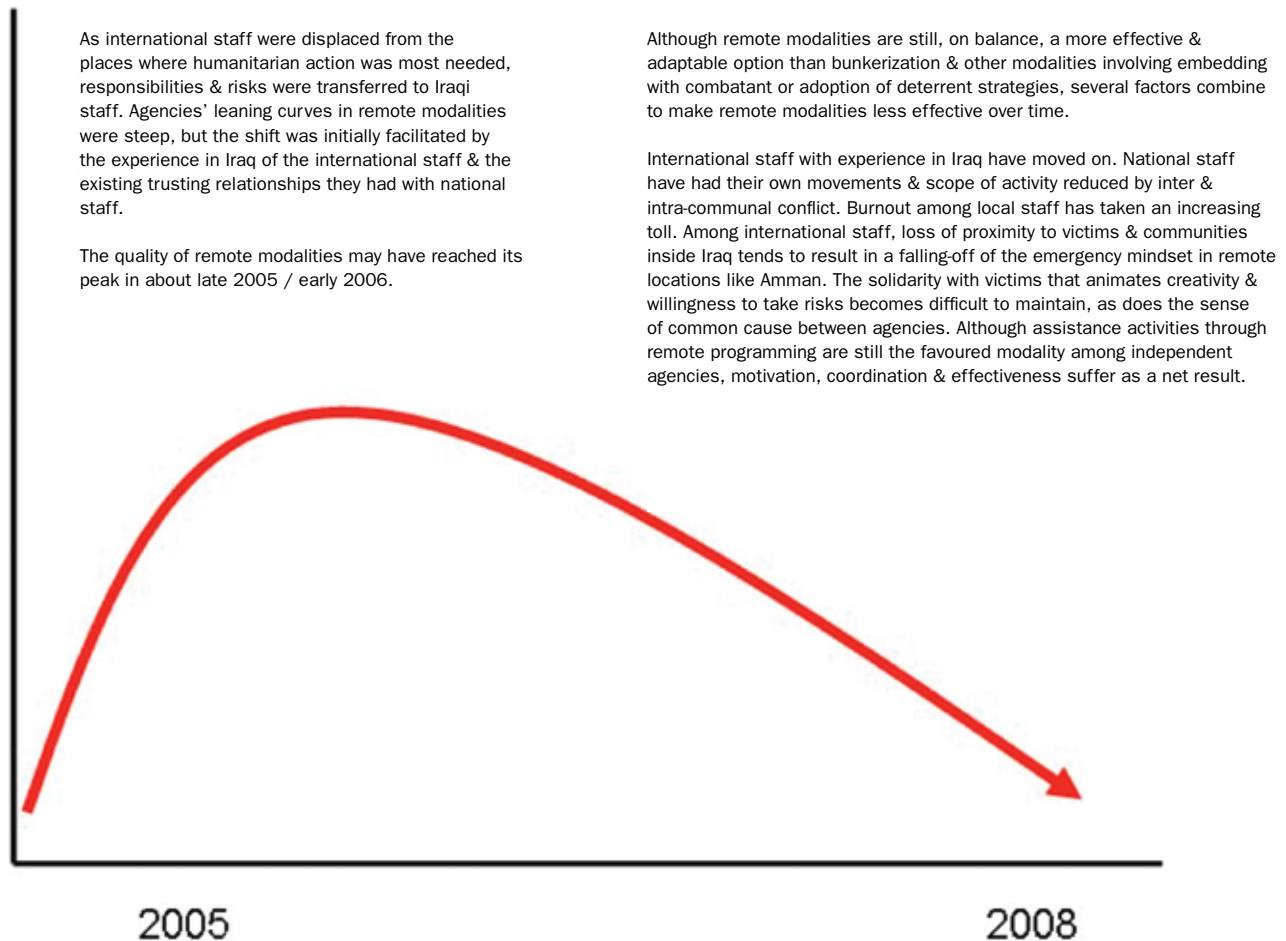
Visibility and 'Footprints' of Humanitarian Agencies

In addition to remote programming, low profile modalities have also become the norm in Iraq since 2004 when nearly all humanitarian organizations in the central and southern governorates went steadily more underground. Agencies adopted low visibility and "covert" approaches to premises, vehicles, staff and programming. The NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq (NCCI) still does not have the permission

of its membership to share its membership list. Basic information about who does what where has been and remains closely guarded, and the absence of such a basic coordination device as a who/what/where matrix has had a stunting effect on coordination efforts. In terms of presence inside Iraq, some agencies and their staff go to the extreme of disguising their premises as businesses or professional offices, and many staff of international organizations feel compelled by the perceived lack of safety to misrepresent themselves as employees

of a government department in places where authorities are better accepted in the community than aid agencies. Recalling the situation in former Yugoslavia, where aid agency staff had several sets of different calling cards printed for use on different sides of the conflict, staff of several western-based agencies disguise the origins of the assistance they provide, not revealing the home country or name of the organization they work for.

Figure 1
Changing Effectiveness of Remote Programming in Iraq



Based on interviews with operational agencies using remote programming modalities

Loss of Proximity to Affected Iraqis and Their Communities

The costs of losing proximity to vulnerable Iraqis and their communities are often underestimated and have far-reaching implications for aid effectiveness, accountability, sustainability under changing conditions, and value for dollar. One of the unanticipated effects of remote programming has been the inadvertent institutionalization, over time, of the geographic and psychological gaps between those in remote management roles and their counterparts on the ground inside Iraq. This happens in a few different ways. Some agencies write clauses into their contracts for international staff forbidding travel inside Iraq. Some agencies classify Amman and Kuwait as sought-after family postings where aid workers can conduct their lives in a normal fashion that is rare in the humanitarian profession. As one experienced remote-programming veteran put it,

Amman seems to be well on its way to sail up as a new Nairobi (serving South Sudan, Somalia and any other conflict in the Horn of Africa), offering a luxurious and easy life for expats assigned to different 'Iraq operations'. People can keep busy in workshops, working groups, seminars, meetings, report writing/reading, liaison activities, and whatever other gatherings.

The point here is not that aid workers in such settings are not making important contributions – many certainly work extremely hard and make every effort to stay connected to beneficiary communities across the geographic and psychological gaps. But the quality of the contributions made by remote managers can suffer because the emergency mindset that comes from living and working among people in need is more difficult to maintain at a distance.

An even more serious consequence of isolation from beneficiary communities is the loss of knowledge of operational contexts that is so essential in Iraq for informing programming decisions about where, when, with whom and how to engage in humanitarian operations. Thorough context analysis has proven to be a necessary condition for identifying access opportunities in Iraq and finding ways to exploit them effectively in reasonable safety. It also informs aid agencies how to become known *by* communities. The evidence from Iraq is that aid workers in bunkers or managing from safe distances become out of touch with and unknown to the communities they need to rely upon for at least passive tolerance—if not active acceptance or facilitation—of their work.

Box 3

Whither the Use of Private Security Providers?

Changes to the security umbrella provided to security contractors by the MNF-I are very likely to result in a reduction in the number of security companies in Iraq, as few western-based companies will be able to build the necessary level of tolerance in Iraq enabling them to operate. Companies favouring high-profile tactics (aggressive convoy and facilities protection) will be at a disadvantage compared with companies offering lower profile protective services (plain cars, discreet weapons, unobtrusive facilities).

Contrary to some accounts,¹⁵ the use of private security companies has largely been rejected by aid agencies in Iraq. Private security providers (PSPs) are numerous and figure prominently in the coalition-funded reconstruction and nation-building effort. Research conducted on the use of PSPs by humanitarian agencies in Iraq¹⁶ (part of a broader study conducted by the Center on International Cooperation and the Humanitarian Policy Group of the Overseas Development Institute) showed that PSPs have been used by a small minority of humanitarian agencies. When PSPs are used by humanitarian organizations the PSP role is typically circumscribed and low profile. In exceptional cases, some agencies have employed PSPs as an alternative to accepting military escort from the MNF-I, or to gain smoother access to otherwise inaccessible donors and authorities that have opted to situate themselves inside a security bubble in the Green Zone in Baghdad.

In contrast to the majority of humanitarian organizations, agencies engaged in US-funded reconstruction activities that are affiliated with the US counter-insurgency effort and whose programming necessitates the movement of large amounts of cash about the country have had the active support of major donors to employ PSPs for armed protection of facilities and staff.

Most operational organizations in Iraq have successfully employed unobtrusive, in-house acceptance and protective strategies. Few have used PSPs in risk/threat assessment, advisory or training roles. There is a widespread sentiment in the humanitarian community that use of PSPs would be a net liability for humanitarian security. The majority of active humanitarian organizations reject both the need for PSPs and the form of security that they provide.

¹⁵ See, for example, Patrick Cullen, *Iraq: Armed Humanitarianism*, International Relations and Security Network, March 5, 2008. <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/Current-Affairs/Security-Watch/Detail/?ots591=4888CAA0-B3DB-1461-98B9-E20E7B9C13D4&lng=en&id=54134>

¹⁶ See Abby Stoddard, Adele Harmer and Victoria DiDomenico, *The use of private security providers and services in humanitarian operations*, HPG Report 27, September 2008. <http://www.cic.nyu.edu/internationalsecurity/docs/hpgreport27.pdf>

Cautious Movement Back to More Effective Modalities

The low profile and remote programming approaches have paid dividends in the short term in a context where aid worker insecurity is high due to blurred distinctions between combatants and aid agencies and where misperceptions about affiliations with “the occupier” or with the host authorities can be deadly for aid staff and their beneficiaries. The benefits of working invisibly, however, need to be balanced against the short, medium and long-term costs to humanitarian space. Aid agencies face a dilemma: unless they work with greater visibility, it is difficult to foster an understanding of the differences between instrumentalized aid activity and neutral, needs-based humanitarian action, and nearly impossible to encourage the greater acceptance by communities needed to enable scaled-up activity. However, increasing the visibility or scale of the activity can draw unwanted attention to an aid actor and result in increased security problems.

In recognition of the costs of covert humanitarian action and remote programming, some agencies have already begun raising their heads above the parapet in carefully chosen locations. A number have taken a selective approach to displaying their organization’s signs at distributions or placing logos on vehicles. A few have resumed sending international staff back to parts of the central and southern governorates without resorting to the deterrent strategies likely to lead to problematic misperceptions about an affiliation with the MNF-I. Several organizations keep a continuous watch on a variety of indicators in their operational environments that help them with judgements about whether a local setting is ripe for an increase in the scale of activity or visibility.¹⁷

3. Dysfunctional Coordination

Iraq’s bewildering coordination architecture for humanitarian action is spread across several geographically and psychologically isolated locations and is infused with strong political undercurrents. While there is a veritable frenzy of ongoing coordination activity in Amman, the Green Zone and other hermetically-sealed locations, a recurring complaint from operational aid workers on the ground is that they feel out of touch with, and unsupported by, structures established and maintained at great expense to facilitate their work. It is a common observation that the meetings, discussions and processes taking place in Amman have become far more self-referential over time. Meeting minutes from gatherings in the Green Zone suggest that those laboring behind the blast walls are even more out of touch than before with the challenges and opportunities that are evident to those working in the field, and more lacking in points of reference to how humanitarian action in Iraq is actually done in practice by the perceptibly independent and neutral organizations that will be well-placed to remain active as the US drawdown proceeds.

Despite the many millions of dollars of scarce donor resources invested in UNAMI, OCHA and (to a more modest extent) NCCI for humanitarian coordination and information management, those interviewed for this review could point to little added value for the investments that have been made in the past two years. Donor and UN agency staff often voiced scepticism about how representative NCCI is of its members and how inclusive it is of the NGO community as a whole. Amid faltering member participation, perennial discussions about NCCI’s role and a dwindling sense of ownership over it among its members, few aid staff have any recall of NCCI’s active role in providing field and sectoral coordination inside Iraq following the invasion. What was asked of

NCCI in 2008 is a pale comparison to what was asked of it in 2003 and 2004 before it relocated most staff to Amman. Covert humanitarian action by many NGOs has had the obvious effect of preventing greater awareness of their work among Iraqis themselves, but also among other NGOs, donors and UN agencies. Some continue to maintain lower profiles than may be strictly necessary as local security conditions and acceptance by communities have changed. Given the impaired coordination that results from hidden humanitarianism and the implications of this for greater effectiveness and accountability, a discussion of the need for “glasnost” is long overdue.

The message I personally understood is the following: We, the UN, coordinate and monitor from secured compounds, while you -- NGOs -- go out to the field and take risks that we’re fully aware of.

Head of Mission of a UN partner
NGO on double standards between
UN agencies & NGOs

In general the UN seemed to be extremely remote from the realities in Iraq. The [Green Zone] is a heavily fortified bunker, [and the UN premises inside it are...] defended by UN soldiers and Protection Officers, body guards and mercenaries (several of whom have combat experience in Iraq with occupation forces - some have been assigned to interrogation units...). The organization is, in addition to living in the middle of different armies, travelling with US armed elements in and out of Iraq as well as in the field on official missions. Clearly the organization has taken sides politically. This way of thinking already starts at the SAIT¹⁸ training, where there is constant talk of ‘the bad guys’.

Former staff member of a UN Agency

¹⁷ See Greg Hansen, *Operational Modalities in Iraq*, NCCI Briefing Paper 2, January 2008, ‘Indicators of Safer Access’, p.6. http://www.ncciraq.org/IMG/pdf_NCCI_-_Focus_on_Operationality_2_-_Operational Modalities_in_Iraq.pdf

¹⁸ SAIT training is the obligatory security awareness induction training for all UN staff who travel into Iraq.

Operational NGOs and other actors contacted for the review were acutely conscious of UNAMI's preoccupation with the political aspects of its mandate, suspicious of its emphasis on being an integrated mission, and often scornful of the UN's much-touted increase of international staff presence in Iraq. There is a prevailing sense that because of the UN's restricted field of view in Iraq from behind the blast walls of the Green Zone or MNF-I forward operating bases in Ramadi, Mosul or Basrah, the UN's humanitarian apparatus has tended to over-emphasize its roles supporting Iraqi ministries, and has been overly influenced by assistance agencies that are accessible to it inside security bubbles. Un-embedded humanitarian actors complain that the UN agencies seem far less well-informed about—and out of touch with—the activities of operational agencies that strive to keep at arm's length from the MNF-I and work effectively with light footprints. Senior UN staff, meanwhile, speak openly about the need for NGO pragmatism and compromise of principles at a time when the hard evidence from ground level is that principled approaches have served operational humanitarian organizations like the ICRC¹⁹ and many NGOs very well.

By moving its humanitarian management functions increasingly into the Green Zone throughout 2008, the UN has been erecting more barriers to effective coordination. Many Iraqi and independent international NGOs are prevented by the prevailing political sensitivities, logistical burdens and security concerns from participating in Green Zone coordination fora. In their absence, the UN gravitates instead toward the actors most accessible to it: a few well-resourced INGOs and donors, the MNF-I,

embassies and government ministries, all situated in or adjacent to protected areas under the soon-to-be-reduced MNF-I security umbrella.

In recent months, Iraqi and international NGOs have complained about plans to hold two separate humanitarian coordination meetings in Baghdad: one out in the “real Iraq,” for staff of non-embedded humanitarian actors, the other inside the Green Zone. Although not a bad idea in theory, it rests on a reciprocal flow of information that has proved elusive. The decision was seen by some of those interviewed as segregating internationals from Iraqis, Arabic speakers from English speakers, and non-embedded agencies and decision-makers from those under the MNF-I umbrella.

Many NGOs, meanwhile, have tended to react angrily to what they perceive as mounting UN “political pressures” on them to be present in the Green Zone for coordination purposes; some major donors, notably USAID, have long insisted on Green Zone-based coordination. Many NGOs would prefer instead to pursue the needed coordination at field level or in Amman. In Amman, Baghdad and Basra however, the UN's coordination waters have been thoroughly muddied by an unclear division of labor and responsibilities between the office of the UN Humanitarian Coordinator who sits in UNAMI and UN OCHA. The OCHA office, which is supposed to be functionally managed by the Humanitarian Coordinator, has grown rapidly since its late arrival on the scene in the spring of 2007. As it has grown, confusion about the division of roles and responsibilities between UNAMI and OCHA has increased. The UNAMI Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary

General and Resident/Humanitarian Coordinator, who must devote considerable time to reconstruction and Iraq Trust Fund duties, spends only about one-quarter of his time on humanitarian matters. Meanwhile, however, UNAMI's top management has been unsupportive of a more independent role and presence for UN OCHA²⁰. Increasingly passive participation in NCCI by its members combined with fear among some UN partners of rocking the boat too vigorously has stifled criticism of the considerable pressures being brought to bear on them to fall into line with UN and USAID wishes for a more Green Zone-centric management of the humanitarian response.

In addition to Humanitarian Working Group meetings in Amman, the monthly Iraq Humanitarian Forum was established by OCHA in mid-2008, in cooperation with NCCI, as an operational coordination forum for discussions among executives on strategic matters affecting the humanitarian community. The intent was in part to create a bridge between the UN's humanitarian apparatus and other humanitarian actors, but UN agency attendance at Forum meetings has been weak. Hosted by NCCI in Amman, the Forum has so far failed to attract senior management from UNHCR, UNICEF, or WHO²¹, who typically send relatively junior staff to these sessions if they send anyone at all. The participation of Sector Outcome Team (SOT) Leads²² in Forum meetings has also been inconsistent. Yet another new initiative is the formation of a Humanitarian Country Team as required by the revised Terms of Reference for Humanitarian Coordinators.²³ Given the level of UN participation in existing coordination structures, it is difficult to see what

¹⁹ See, for example, Karl Mattli and Jörg Gasser, “A neutral, impartial and independent approach: key to ICRC's acceptance in Iraq,” *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol 90 Number 869, March 2008. http://www.icrc.org/Web/Eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/section_review_2008_869.

²⁰ In an interview with the SRSR conducted for this review, opposition to a more independent role and presence for OCHA was clearly stated. Referring to an OCHA plan to build a network of liaisons in all Iraqi governorates seconded from NGOs, the SRSR feared that “young and inexperienced” OCHA staff in the field could jeopardize the interests of UNAMI because they would be seen to represent the UN, not just OCHA, and they would tend to exceed their authority. The integrated mission, the SRSR said, was an “institutional imperative” for UNAMI: a more independent OCHA presence in Iraq would disrupt the UN's unity and anger other UN agencies.

²¹ WFP has sent its deputy head of office to one Forum meeting.

²² Sector Outcome Teams are the local variation on Clusters.

²³ The Humanitarian Coordinator is responsible for establishing and maintaining comprehensive coordination mechanisms based on facilitation and consensus building. These mechanisms should be inclusive of all the actors involved at the country level in the provision of humanitarian assistance and protection, including in particular all locally represented members and standing invitees of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee. *Revised Terms of Reference for the Humanitarian Coordinator*: <http://www.reliefweb.int/cap/newpage/Revised%20HC%20TOR.doc>

possible added value this will have amid the plethora of other coordination meetings. Meanwhile, Iraqi NGOs and the Iraq staff of international NGOs frequently complain of being isolated from and unsupported by coordination structures. SOTs meeting in Amman were described by several Iraqi and international aid workers interviewed for this review as being “out of touch” with conditions on the ground inside Iraq, and often disinterested in hearing inputs from the field.

If it continues, disjointed coordination between the various sets of actors is bound to have serious consequences for Iraqis. There have been no discussions in the humanitarian community thus far about the implications of a reduced MNF-I security umbrella for the continued operationality of agencies who are explicitly or implicitly reliant on the MNF-I for their presence, mobility and activity. Serious assistance gaps may open up in the coming months and years if large, well-resourced assistance agencies such as UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP and others are unable to successfully wean their activities from their various forms of reliance on the US presence. The problem is compounded by a distinct lack of candour from such agencies regarding the extent of their reliance on the US. Other agencies concerned about the welfare of USAID caseloads, in particular, have to play a guessing game about serious potential gaps that may emerge.

4. The Status of Forces Agreement²⁴ and Strategic Framework

Although the newly-minted agreement between Iraq and the US is commonly referred to as a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), the document combines the features of a SOFA—a routine agreement clarifying jurisdictional questions reached with the host nation wherever US forces are deployed—with the features of a security pact between Iraq and the US that provides

for the temporary presence, conduct, withdrawal and form of deployment of US troops. The Strategic Framework Agreement for a Relationship of Friendship and Cooperation between the United States of America and the Republic of Iraq was signed at the same time as the SOFA was approved, and contains somewhat more insight into how the US role in political, economic and other Iraqi affairs will look in the coming years. The documents entered into force on December 31, 2008. The SOFA is valid for three years or until Iraq or the US opts out of it, which requires advance notice of one year. In a concession to Iraqi parliamentarians opposed to the agreement, and conscious of their vulnerability in provincial elections slated for the end of January 2009, a last-minute provision subjects the agreement to a national referendum six months after its approval by parliament as a means of ensuring that US commitments are being met. However, strenuous opposition to the SOFA is still being voiced by the al-Sadr movement, and the Association of Muslim Scholars.

There is considerable latitude within the SOFA. The form of its implementation rests with a newly-elected US president who campaigned on a pledge to withdraw US combat brigades by May 2010,²⁵ and with Iraqi politicians who must placate the concerns of Iraqis, a majority of whom still regard the US military presence in their country as an unwanted occupation. The SOFA commits the US to complete withdrawal from all of Iraq by December 31, 2011. Even if Obama follows through on his pledge to withdraw US combat forces before this, it appears that the SOFA would not preclude a continuing presence of US troops in Iraq. US civil affairs troops, for example, are active in many countries where the US is not directly involved as a combatant. Thus, there is a possibility that the humanitarian community will need to continue monitoring and coordinating with US forces in Iraq throughout and perhaps following the drawdown period, even if combat brigades are withdrawn by May 2010.

Implications for Humanitarian Agencies

Over the next three years there is likely to be a mix of old and new in terms of the ways that the US military presence in Iraq shapes the humanitarian landscape. As the drawdown and withdrawal of US assets proceeds, forces will be reduced, re-assigned to other duties, re-deployed to other locations, and their missions changed such that they may no longer be available or resourced to provide the various forms of assistance upon which some aid agencies have come to rely. Organizations that have hitherto relied upon US forces for the provision of any kind of service or assistance in support of their work are likely to find the continuation of such support increasingly unreliable.

As soon as the SOFA entered into force the JMOCC was empowered to take decisions on the specific locations, disposition, type and scale of activity of US forces within the terms of the SOFA and related agreements. Decisions taken therein are likely to have direct implications for the humanitarian community. In addition, the Strategic Framework Agreement indicates that several Joint Coordinating Committees (JCCs) are to be established under the JMOCC as bodies responsible for executing and monitoring various aspects of the Agreement. The JMOCC and JCCs are thus likely to be new and extremely important foci for civil-military coordination by the humanitarian community, suggesting the need for the aid community to proactively pursue coordination arrangements before the committees get to work. At present, UN and INGO civil-military coordination is exceedingly weak and *ad hoc*, where it exists at all. New developments underscore the need for these actors to identify civil-military coordination liaisons and to empower them to represent humanitarian interests as the US drawdown proceeds. Clarification of civil-military coordination channels and identification of points of contact between the humanitarian community, the MNF-I and Iraqi Forces will need to occur without delay.

²⁴ Agreement Between the United States of America and the Republic of Iraq On the Withdrawal of United States Forces from Iraq and the Organization of Their Activities during Their Temporary Presence in Iraq, http://graphics8.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/world/20081119_SOFA_FINAL_AGREED_TEXT.pdf

²⁵ Plans for an early withdrawal were somewhat confirmed by President-Elect Obama in a press conference on 2 December 2008.

Several standing requests for information with humanitarian implications should be submitted by the humanitarian community to the JMOCC at its outset, specifically including ongoing plans and changes to the following:

1. procedures for notification of air and land movements by humanitarian actors, where necessary;
2. the scope, scale and activities of military civil-affairs, Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) and embedded PRT activity, including details of handover arrangements;
3. re-deployments or withdrawal of troops, facilities and barriers where changes may affect protection of vulnerable neighbourhoods, freedom of movement of the population and aid workers, and access to services and markets;
4. return of civilian facilities (schools, clinics, other public buildings) back to civilian jurisdiction;
5. operation and turnover of the Reconstruction Operations Center and its satellites;
6. operation of the Rhino service from Baghdad International Airport, as well as any changes in practices at transportation facilities used by the humanitarian community; and
7. practices governing entry into and movement inside Green Zone.

5. Conclusion

Contrary to the current narrative of success and progress in Iraq, the country's political health is fragile and the humanitarian situation remains critical. In the months and years to come, the security and operational challenges of responding to the needs of millions of dislocated and vulnerable Iraqis will continue to demand the best from humanitarian institutions and humanitarian professionals.

Organizations demonstrating flexibility and determination in adapting their *modus operandi* to changing conditions will continue to have a distinct comparative advantage over those that do not. As resources dwindle for humanitarian action, donors will face increasingly tough choices to ensure that Iraqis in need do not fall through the cracks of a fractured humanitarian apparatus. Faced with conflicting obligations, they will need to do a better job of discerning humanitarian actors that have dealt effectively with the complexities from those that have not. On one hand, they have collectively pledged through the Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative to support and promote the central role of the UN in providing leadership, coordination and implementation of international humanitarian action. On the other hand, they have undertaken to request that implementing organizations fully adhere to good practice and are committed to accountability, efficiency and effectiveness.²⁶

For donors that acknowledge the seriousness of ongoing needs in Iraq and are concerned about supporting effective and efficient humanitarian responses, the implications for decisions about how to channel their support to the humanitarian apparatus ought to be self-evident. Nearly six years after the beginning of the present crisis, it is abundantly clear that parts of the international humanitarian system are functioning poorly in Iraq. The management lapses, missed opportunities and waste that are occurring necessitate a comprehensive and high-level review of the UN's humanitarian performance in Iraq, with a view to fixing what has become badly broken. An overhaul is needed if the UN is to be rehabilitated as a serious humanitarian actor capable of responding effectively and efficiently in the highly politicized and insecure environments that are likely to characterize Iraq for the foreseeable future. It is in the longer-term interest of the humanitarian enterprise—and it is particularly in the interest of vulnerable people who need that enterprise to function well on their behalf—that the UN's humanitarian shortcomings are acknowledged and addressed. Iraqis—and the next victims of a politicized emergency in a difficult place—deserve better.

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**Feinstein International Center
200 Boston Avenue, Suite 4800
Medford, Massachusetts 02155 USA
(617) 627-3423**

²⁶ Principles and Good Practice of Humanitarian Donorship, 17 June 2003. <http://www.reliefweb.int/ghd/a%2023%20Principles%20EN-GHD19.10.04%20RED.doc>