



Humanitarian Agenda 2015 (HA2015) is a policy research project aimed at equipping the humanitarian enterprise to more effectively address emerging challenges around four major themes: universality, terrorism and counter-terrorism, coherence, and security.

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Coming to Terms with the Humanitarian Imperative in Iraq

Humanitarian Agenda 2015 Briefing Paper

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“ I suspect we will look back in amazement on these years, as much for their poverty of global spirit as for the unspeakable acts we are witnessing. This is a time in which life-saving compromises are denounced in the name of moral virtue. An astonishing cynicism greets expressions of the humanitarian instinct. Our public space is replete with armchair apostles espousing a philosophy of endless war. It is hardly too much to say that Mr. de Mello and the other UN workers who died yesterday are martyrs to a venal age.¹

Purpose and Scope

Highlighting major changes in the context in Iraq and rapid deterioration of the humanitarian situation, this brief report summarizes an Iraq country study to be issued in final form later this month as part of the *Humanitarian Agenda 2015: Principles, Power and Perceptions* (HA 2015) initiative, an independent research project of the Feinstein International Center, Tufts University. Following a series of observations about how humanitarianism is currently perceived in Iraq, this report highlights findings regarding the operational environment, donor environment, and strategic policy environment. The interviews conducted comprise a valuable compilation of field-based evidence, provided at a time of mounting access difficulties and diminishing awareness of the situation on the ground. In addition to extensive interviews, the report draws heavily upon work conducted in the region and the regular monitoring of developments by the Humanitarianism and War Project in 2004 and 2005, thus spanning a three-year period.² It concludes with 20 recommendations for the UN system, Red Cross / Red Crescent Movement, humanitarian NGOs, the NGOs Coordinating Committee in Iraq (NCCI) and donors. An Arabic translation will be posted to our website on completion.

The HA 2015 project conducted fieldwork for six weeks in and around Iraq between the end of October and mid-December 2006.³ As with all

¹ Paul Knox, *Modern Martyrs to a Venal Age*, The Globe and Mail, (20 August, 2003).

² See *Humanitarian Action in Iraq – Emerging Constraints and Challenges*, Humanitarianism and War Project, 27 April 2004, http://hwproject.tufts.edu/new/pdf/Hansen_report_Iraq_final.pdf.

³ HA 2015 focuses on the challenges and compromises that are likely to affect humanitarian action worldwide in the next decade. The project is funded by contributors to the Feinstein International Center, including the Ford Foundation, UN OCHA, and the Canadian, Dutch, Danish and Australian Governments. The issues under study are organized and analyzed around four interrelated themes: the *universality* of humanitarianism, the implications of *terrorism and counter-terrorism* for humanitarian action, the trend toward *coherence* between humanitarian and political agendas, and the *security* of humanitarian personnel and the beneficiaries of humanitarian action. Country studies provide the basis for analysis. Studies completed so far include Afghanistan, Burundi, Colombia, Liberia, Northern Uganda, the Sudan and the Occupied

HA 2015 country studies, the approach was evidence-based and inductive with a primary focus on local perceptions of the humanitarian enterprise. Some 225 semi-structured conversations and interviews were held, most with beneficiaries of assistance and others at the community level, individually and in focus groups. Those interviewed included Iraqis from various social strata across the spectrum of Shia, Sunni, Kurdish and other communities. The team of four researchers was comprised of three Iraqis from various religious communities, and the author.⁴ Geographic coverage inside Iraq included Basrah, Amarah, Kut, Najaf, Baghdad, Abu Ghraib, Fallujah, Baqoubah, Kirkuk, Mosul, Suleimaniya and Erbil. Additional perspectives were gathered through interviews with Iraqi and international humanitarian staff, conflict analysts and regional specialists in Iraq and Jordan.⁵

It is now widely acknowledged that the political situation in Iraq is dire.⁶ This report suggests that preoccupation with the political aspects of the crisis, and most recently with the trial and execution of Saddam Hussein, has eclipsed the humanitarian situation. Present trends point to an imminent large-scale humanitarian crisis due to incremental collapse of the Iraqi state, escalating violence, increasing mobility constraints for the population and humanitarian actors, and the rapid erosion of vital social supports. There are serious deficiencies in the state's ability to provide for the safety and welfare of its population, and due to continuing violence and the extent of politicization of key line ministries, there is little likelihood of a reversal in downward trends in the foreseeable future.

Despite the deterioration of the situation during the past three years, little attention has been paid by the international community to the impaired capacity of the international humanitarian apparatus to respond commensurate with evolving risks and threats to the survival and well-being of Iraq's population. Although the UN Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI) and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) launched a new contingency planning

Palestinian Territories. Others planned for completion in 2007 include Nepal, Sri Lanka, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Iraq. Completed country studies and a preliminary report, *Humanitarian Agenda 2015: Principles, Power, and Perceptions*, are available on the project's website at: <http://fic.tufts.edu/?pid=32>. A final report will be issued later in 2007.

⁴ The Iraqi team has chosen to remain anonymous out of consideration for their safety.

⁵ A more comprehensive description of the approach and methodology specific to Iraq will be forthcoming in the full country study, which will be available in Arabic and English on the Center's website in late January 2007.

⁶ See, for example, Baker, James A., Hamilton, L., et al, *The Iraq Study Group Report*, (December, 2006), and Crisis Group Middle East Report No. 60, *After Baker-Hamilton: What to do in Iraq*, (19 December, 2006).

exercise in December, 2006, serious donor, systemic and strategic policy shortcomings will continue to impede or negate a meaningful humanitarian role for the UN and others in Iraq, if these shortcomings are not urgently addressed. This interim report, which seeks to fill the gap in available data and analysis of the current and pending humanitarian crisis, is being circulated to call attention to needed dialogue and action.

In recent years, much of the discourse and decision-making on humanitarian action in Iraq has been tainted by cynicism, exceptionalism and a sense of powerlessness in the UN system and the larger humanitarian community.⁷ And although policy, donor and operational constraints on the viability, effectiveness and security of aid operations and personnel are serious, the final analysis finds them to be surmountable problems. A successful humanitarian response in Iraq will be predicated upon renewed creativity, flexibility and assertiveness in policy, donor and operational responses that are—to the extent possible—depoliticized, safeguarded against instrumentalization and acutely attuned to the changing context.

An Evolution of Needs

The number of deaths due to conflict in Iraq since March, 2003, range from a minimum of 53,000 civilians “killed by military intervention”⁸ to

⁷ Cynicism was more than evident in the recent rush of coalition governments and others to denigrate the results of an Iraq mortality study conducted by The Lancet. See an account of this by Checci, Francesco, *Iraq Death Toll*, Reuters Alertnet, (12 October, 2006) at www.alertnet.org/thefacts/reliefresources/116066724942.htm. Also see Burnham, G., Lafta, R., Doocy, S., and Roberts, L., *Mortality after the 2003 invasion of Iraq: a cross-sectional cluster sample survey*, The Lancet, Vol. 368, No. 9545, (21 October, 2006), <http://thelancet.com>. In regards to exceptionalism, in 2004 NCCI’s Executive Coordinator was asked to make regular (sometimes weekly) liaison visits to Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) premises in Baghdad, at considerable personal risk, on behalf of members who did not want to be seen entering CPA facilities. In considering accusations of an anti-American bias within NCCI, a 2004 evaluation noted: “Management of real and perceived neutrality and impartiality is a veritable minefield in settings as politically charged as Iraq, where relatively minor lapses can have major consequences. It bears mentioning, however, that neutrality and impartiality in Iraq have taken on rather unique meanings in the prevailing conditions of severely constrained humanitarian space. In virtually every other conflict in the world, the practice of neutrality by humanitarian organizations ... means establishing working contact with *all* combatants to safeguard and expand humanitarian space and to minimize the effects of war on the civilian population. The case of Iraq has been exceptional: most humanitarian agencies, NCCI included, have established working contact with only one set of combatants which, strictly speaking, is a departure from real and perceived neutrality and impartiality.” See Hansen, Greg, *Independent Evaluation: Iraq NGOs Coordination and Security Office*—(ECHO/IRQ/210/2003/05029), (June, 2004). The sense of powerlessness referred to in the UN system has been evident in numerous interviews with UNAMI and UNCT officials between 2004—2006, who often cited mandate constraints, “pressures” and “political imperatives” as justifications why more could not be done to assert the humanitarian imperative and more principled responses.

⁸ www.iraqbodycount.org

more than 650,000 “excess Iraqi deaths” resulting from conflict.⁹ Growing insecurity and incremental failure of the state have already combined to push some 1.6 million Iraqis into Jordan and Syria. At least 1.8 million more have been displaced inside Iraq according to UNHCR estimates. The World Food Programme (WFP)’s most recent reckoning of food security, conducted in May, 2006 just as inter-communal violence was escalating, estimated that over 4 million Iraqis were already food insecure and an additional 8.3 million, or nearly 32% of Iraq’s population, were at risk of food insecurity if not provided with a daily ration under the Public Distribution System.¹⁰

Our recent research indicates that for those who have stayed in the central and southern governorates, security is increasingly understood in terms of safe access to markets, medical facilities, schools, jobs, social services and extended family. Violence and the threat of it have proscribed the ability of many Iraqis to move to other governorates, towns, and neighborhoods. Being out of the home means exposure to unpredictable dangers, and people in the worst-affected areas are increasingly housebound. On the other hand, in some areas, staying in the home can turn the inhabitants into targets. In many areas the police and Iraqi military are believed to be unable to provide protection or, worse, are suspected of being active participants in inter-communal violence. In response, people often minimize movement because it entails traveling through police checkpoints manned by members of another community. Insecurity and mobility constraints have also resulted in a degradation of essential infrastructure, with faltering maintenance of water and sanitation systems and electrical grids. Commerce is increasingly challenged by rising costs and long wait times for fuel, unpredictable electricity supply, increased business costs for running generators, reduced customer traffic in violence-prone areas, and targeting of business owners and their families for kidnapping motivated by ransom payment.

⁹ Burnham et al., op.cit.

¹⁰ UN WFP and Central Organization for Statistics and Information Technology (COSIT), *Food Security and Vulnerability Analysis in Iraq*, WFP, (11 May, 2006). For an extensive collection of documentation on the humanitarian situation as of late October, 2006, see NCCI, *Iraq Humanitarian Crisis: Documents of Reference*, (28 October, 2006),

http://www.ncciraq.org/article.php3?id_article=1309.

Insiders vs. Outsiders: June 2004

During US military offensives in Fallujah and Najaf in 2004, many Iraqis responded spontaneously to help people in need by gathering truck and carloads of food and other essential goods in their neighborhoods for distribution through mosques in the stricken cities. Many Shia helped out in Fallujah, and many Sunni did the same in Najaf. During this period, international humanitarian NGOs held regular meetings in Baghdad to coordinate their responses to the two emergencies and to trade information on needs, stocks and access. The meetings were well-attended, almost exclusively by international staff. One such meeting was attended by a well-educated and traditionally-clothed local Imam with a proven history of defusing tensions between communities and helping international humanitarian organizations gain smoother access to conflict-stricken areas. A Shia, he offered to facilitate access to Fallujah using contacts among local Sunni clergy, and had been invited to attend the meeting by an experienced international NGO that had worked with him extensively. He was asked to leave the meeting after three international aid workers objected to his presence. Asked after the meeting why they objected, one of the aid workers said: "These are the terrorists that are attacking us."

—Meeting observed by the author in
June 2004

I. Perceptions of Humanitarianism in Iraq

The following findings summarize the key messages heard from the communities and individuals interviewed:

There is no wholesale rejection of the humanitarian ethos in Iraq.

We heard no evidence of a generalized antipathy toward humanitarian ideals. On the contrary, most of those with whom we spoke expressed unequivocal solidarity with the goals and ideals of humanitarian work, sympathy with the efforts of "good" humanitarian work, and often a visceral understanding of specific humanitarian principles such as neutrality, impartiality and independence. Although humanitarian ideals are in general warmly embraced in Iraq, we also heard with consistency that humanitarian action that falls short of the ideal is recognized as such, and is prone to rejection.

There is widespread understanding of what principled

humanitarian action is—and is not. We heard repeatedly that there are strong strains of Islamic teachings and Iraqi traditions in the Fundamental Principles and the IFRC / NGO Code of Conduct. Many of the Iraqis with whom we spoke equated specific humanitarian principles with Qu'ranic verses about "good" charity. A senior cleric in Najaf described humanitarian principles as, "...beautiful, but only a small part of Islam".

Humanitarian principles are also well understood in Iraq partly because they are frequently seen in the breach, and in ways that engender resentment: we heard a litany of examples of aid being provided in ways that illustrated instrumentalization, politicization and militarization of humanitarian activity by Iraqi as well as international actors. The prevailing acceptance of humanitarian ideals is frequently contrasted with the realities of aid in their communities, and tempered by suspicions about the intentions and motives of agencies on the ground. Residents of areas afflicted by intense military activity spoke of being "insulted" by the appearance of aid agencies alongside "those who occupy us", or of organizations motivated by a wish to "put a nice face on the occupation". Others spoke with evident anger of rejecting outright the assistance offered by military forces shortly after military action.

Neutrality is not an abstract notion in Iraq. Our research indicates an acute readiness among Iraqis to distinguish between aid providers that have taken sides, and those that have not; however, readiness does not necessarily equate to ability. Insecurity for Iraqis in the

Insiders vs. Outsiders: Late 2006

The same local leader visited Amman in late 2006, long after virtually all international humanitarian organizations had evacuated their international staff from central and southern Iraq. Since 2004, he had worked hard to defuse emerging tensions between Shia and Sunni communities in Baghdad, and to help meet the assistance and protection needs of people in his area. He was well-known for his work and had received a number of explicit death threats. In Amman, he was approached by junior staff of several international humanitarian organizations that had no active presence in Iraq but were exploring options for gaining access to populations in need amid the increasing violence. Their question was, “What can you do to help us?” rather than, “What can we do to help you?”

—Private communication in December 2006.

central and southern governorates often engenders acute suspicion of the motives and affiliations of others. In most cases, those with whom we spoke did not ascribe impure motives to organizations or aid workers simply because of their particular national origin. Rather, the affiliation of a person or an organization is more important, and will be scrutinized: affiliation with the “occupiers”, the MNF, the government or, increasingly, with a particular sect, party or militia.

The current proclivity for scrutiny among the Iraqis we interviewed is rooted in genuine safety concerns. Real and perceived neutrality was frequently cited by recipients of assistance and by observers as an essential protection against targeted attack by armed actors of various stripes. It underscores that humanitarian principles are a preoccupation of many in local communities and not an element of secondary or derivative importance valued only by humanitarian practitioners themselves. Lack of adherence to humanitarian principles, and blurred distinctions between the range of actors and roles in Iraq, now have serious consequences for beneficiary communities and Iraqis involved in humanitarian efforts. Since 2004, the ability of aid workers to be *seen* to do principled work have been severely diminished by security threats and ensuing low profiles adopted by nearly all Iraqi and international humanitarian organizations. The costs of low profile modalities and blurred roles are described in more detail below.

II. The Operational Environment for Humanitarian Action

Against the backdrop of a growing civilian death toll, some 81 Iraqi and international humanitarian and human rights workers have been killed in conflict in Iraq between March, 2003, and late 2006.¹¹ Murders, kidnappings and other incidents have afflicted aid workers from a broad range of international and Iraqi humanitarian organizations reflecting an equally broad spectrum of security strategies, programming modalities and adherence to humanitarian principles. The differential impacts on the security of indigenous and international agencies and personnel are discussed below.

Virtually all organizations interviewed for the study reported accelerating decreases in humanitarian access in recent months throughout the central and southern governorates, and related declines in access to reliable information. Insecurity and uncertainty have engendered a culture of secrecy among many actors in the

¹¹ NCCI website, <http://www.ncciraq.org/>.

humanitarian community. This impairs effective coordination, stifles discussion of common strategies and inhibits the ethos of transparency associated with humanitarian work.

Many agencies also report increasing stresses and inter-communal tensions within their own staff, with resulting declines in effectiveness. Yet, astonishing risks are being borne by increasingly overburdened Iraqi staff and their families, and a handful of experienced and adaptable international organizations continue to cope within the confines of diminished capacity. Remote management and flexible partnership arrangements with Iraqi organizations keep some channels open, although donor funding for humanitarian action has been insufficiently responsive to creative and contextually nuanced adaptations to a hostile environment. Staff morale is being undercut at a critical time in some agencies by uncertainties about program continuation.

The operating environment is changing rapidly and dramatically. Our research confirms a discernible trend in the consolidation of social welfare offices within militias and parties, introducing new, but, paradoxically, perhaps more manageable access challenges than have hitherto existed in Iraq. Protection and assistance gaps left by the incremental failure of the state and the absence of an appropriately scaled humanitarian presence are being filled by militias and parties throughout the central and southern governorates. The pattern is similar to that evident in many other conflicts—Lebanon comes most recently to mind—where armed groups take up social burdens or exploit needs to gain legitimacy. Increasingly, Iraqis are looking to militias and ad hoc neighborhood organizations as their option of first resort when seeking protection and assistance. As non-state actors crystallize, new power structures are increasingly discernible through close monitoring of developments. This consolidation of localized control is likely to lead to localized increases in humanitarian access for experienced and trusted agencies that have Iraqi and international staff equipped with the requisite political skills.

Program Survival and Insecurity for Humanitarian Operations and Personnel

In 2004, staffs of approximately 30 international NGOs in Iraq were asked: “If your office received a credible report of an imminent threat, would you approach the nearest coalition compound, or the nearest mosque?”¹² Answers were evenly divided.

¹² The question was posed by the author during an evaluation visit.

The question, while loaded, was used to begin a conversation with staff about how their organizations approached security. Insecurity has led to a dramatic downsizing of humanitarian presence and programming in Iraq. Although many humanitarian organizations have withdrawn—less than one-half of those organizations remain truly operational in Iraq—there is no discernible pattern among them in their differential approaches to security. Some withdrew in response to devastating targeted attacks or explicit threats; others were not attacked, but judged continuing operations as untenable, not worth the risks against humanitarian impact, or not cost-effective. Conversely, other organizations have continued to implement humanitarian programs, even after suffering devastating attacks, by adapting to changing conditions. Still others have experienced no incidents and have also stayed. Organizational culture may account for outcomes of the adapt/withdraw decision more than any other single factor. This will be explored in greater depth in the forthcoming country study, but the following conclusions can be drawn from experience so far:

There are doubtful benefits to populations in need in Iraq when humanitarian organizations opt for a bunkerized approach to security, or “embed” themselves with MNF forces. Some agencies that have withdrawn have relied relatively more heavily upon protective and deterrent strategies than on acceptance strategies.¹³ There is no evidence that bunkerizing or aggressive security postures have been either a guarantor of program survival or a useful tool to gain access to people in need.¹⁴

Some organizations that originally accepted protection from the MNF, or appear to have done so by visibly hardening their compounds or using private security contractors, have since withdrawn from Iraq on the stated grounds of insecurity of personnel, or insufficient humanitarian impact weighed against high security costs.

In most of Iraq—less so in the 3 northern governorates—co-location with MNF forces, or accepting MNF or other visible armed escorts,

¹³ Acceptance strategies entail convincing others that there is no need to harm you, and good reasons to safeguard you. Protective strategies involve the defense of people and premises, or becoming a “hardened target.” Deterrence strategies use counter threats of retaliation through diplomacy, armed guards or military force. See Koenraad van Brabant, *Operational Security Management in Violent Environments*, Humanitarian Practice Network, Good Practice Review No. 8, (June, 2000).

¹⁴ In one instance, a local councilman complained to our research team of never having an honest conversation with a visiting aid agency that repeatedly arrived in his office under escort from well-armed western security contractors. Others with whom we spoke rejected as “dangerous” the possibility of approaching bunkerized or escorted humanitarian organizations for fear of being perceived, rightly or wrongly, to be sympathetic with the MNF.

renders many Iraqis for whom the neutrality (or affiliations) of aid is important, at least partly inaccessible. Wholesale reliance for security on the MNF or private western contractors implies—or corroborates—a commonality of purpose between some aid agencies and military forces. Many Iraqis at the community level find such coherence unacceptable and, in the words of one beneficiary, “un-humanitarian.” Likewise, there is little doubt among Iraqis as to the political allegiances and purposes of social welfare offices operated by, or under the armed protection of, various militias and parties. However, in many areas such offices are becoming welcome providers of life-saving assistance.

Critically, the reliance on the MNF by UN agencies and others calls into question the fate of aid operations, if and when co-location and mobility arrangements are changed or ended due to reassignment or withdrawal of MNF forces and private security details.

Acceptance strategies do not render humanitarian workers immune from targeted attack in Iraq but do contribute to greater adaptability and longevity of humanitarian programs. Some Iraqi and international NGOs that have taken an independent course in their approach to security, relying relatively more heavily on relationships and acceptance of their work by communities, have also decided to cease operations. However, others have stayed to continue vital programs. Flexible agencies that have invested considerable time and resources into understanding local (in addition to national) contexts and trends, building relationships and supportive networks, and nurturing staff professionalism, appear to have a comparative advantage in Iraq over less rooted agencies.

There is no substitute for presence. The low visibility of assistance and protection efforts in Iraq confounds misperceptions about humanitarian work and the lack of acceptance of humanitarian organizations. Humanitarian action in Iraq has gone steadily more underground since the bombing of the UN’s Baghdad headquarters in August 2003 and, soon thereafter, the bombing of the ICRC office in the city. Insecurity for aid operations and personnel grew steadily worse through 2004 and 2005, leading to the evacuation of virtually all international staff in the central and southern governorates to safer locales, and widespread adoption of a low-profile presence and remotely controlled, managed or supported operations. Attacks targeted Iraqi staff with much greater frequency in 2005 and 2006 due to the near-absence of foreign aid workers and the far greater exposure of national staff.

Transparency—the practice of being open to scrutiny—is usually understood by humanitarian organizations as a necessary foundation for building the community relationships that are essential for effectiveness, accountability and differentiation from providers of instrumentalized assistance. The “Western” or “Northern” humanitarian presence in Iraq has diminished in scale, but it has also become “hidden” to the extent that it is virtually invisible to populations in the central and southern regions. Local humanitarian organizations do only somewhat better, and are not immune to serious difficulties. The Iraqi Red Crescent Society (IRCS) maintains virtually country-wide presence and programs, often with high profile. In December, 2006, a large number of IRCS staff were kidnapped from the central Red Crescent office in Baghdad, compelling a temporary suspension of work in the city. Although many of the kidnap victims are still being held, IRCS programs in the remainder of Iraq have so far continued.

Aid workers in Iraq and Amman use the terms “covert”, “surreptitious”, and “furtive” to describe the extremes to which low-profile humanitarian operations have been taken by international and Iraqi organizations in response to threats and attacks. The low-profile approach provides a greater measure of safety for humanitarian workers, and has arguably bought agencies more time and more access. However, the benefits have come at an immense cost to acceptance. Our research among Iraqis indicates that perceptions of the humanitarian enterprise are far more positive among those who report direct contact with local or international assistance or protection work than among those whose impressions are formed second-hand through rumor and media.

Those who have received assistance from local or international humanitarian organizations or have seen them at work generally feel more positively disposed toward the humanitarian community than those who have only heard about it. We also found that those that had been exposed to assistance activities before humanitarian organizations adopted low profiles tended to remember the names of the organizations well.

Low profile modalities increasingly hinder relations between staff and between agencies. Inter/intra-communal tensions are increasingly reflected within humanitarian organizations, even among staff of different backgrounds who have worked well together for years. Working relationships are under increasing strain as low profile approaches dictate that staff work from their homes, with less frequent face-to-face contact within and between organizations. Lack of trust

between Iraqi staff, as also between Iraqi staff and international staff in remote offices, was identified as a challenge by a number of organizations in late 2004. The trend has deepened for many agencies whose staffs are increasingly confined to their own neighborhoods or communities.

Perceptions of communal bias in decisions over resource allocation and personnel management are also becoming a pressing problem. Some organizations are in the early stages of addressing the issue but have been isolated in their efforts due to community-wide reticence in talking more openly about the problem and how it might be addressed. For the moment, then, agency staffs reflect the make-up and tensions of the wider community, intentions to the contrary notwithstanding.

The perceived neutrality, impartiality and independence of genuine humanitarian action is gravely threatened in Iraq by blurred distinctions between military, political, commercial and humanitarian roles. Our fieldwork in different regions of Iraq confirms that it is now often virtually impossible for Iraqis (and sometimes for humanitarian professionals) to distinguish between the roles and activities of local and international actors, including military forces, political actors and other authorities, for-profit contractors, international NGOs, local NGOs and UN agencies. In some of our conversations it was clear that commercial contractors affiliated with the MNF had been mistaken for humanitarian NGOs. In many other interviews it was completely unclear what kind of agency or agencies were being discussed.

Conversely, assistance provided by local religious charities and mosques was often readily distinguished from assistance provided by other actors and, in many of our interviews, was described as vital. In contrast with nearly all other actors, mosques and religious offices are sometimes—but not always—able to provide assistance in relatively more open and visible ways. Local Islamic charities and mosques were identified in many of our conversations as the preferred option of first resort for those needing assistance or protection.¹⁵ However, we heard several examples of “pressures” being exerted on local religious charities to conform more to the wishes and priorities of parties and militias.

¹⁵ Our findings are consistent with a “lesson-learned” identified in a retrospective on humanitarian responses to Fallujah, wherein “Religious actors are most likely to have access to the population, even during heavy fighting”. Turlan, Cedric and Mofarah, Kasra, *Military action in an urban area: the humanitarian consequences of Operation Phantom Fury in Fallujah, Iraq*, ODI - Humanitarian Practice Network, (8 December, 2006).

“Lack of Courage”? Some Iraqi staff of local and international humanitarian NGOs lament the “lack of courage” of the international humanitarian apparatus, arguing that international organizations have not done enough to remain operational on a scale commensurate with needs. Under current conditions, however, they also frequently discourage visits by international aid workers; such visits can entail acute risks for Iraqi facilitators. Some international NGO staff in Amman with several years of experience inside Iraq recognize the potential risks of a foreigner’s presence to Iraqis and to the programs they implement. However, they also observe with hindsight that humanitarian actors could have been more creative and assertive in “pushing through” the spate of attacks against aid workers in 2003 and 2004, and insist upon the need for close monitoring of the rapidly-changing situation in order to exploit new opportunities for increased access and activity.

The opposite view of the involvement of international aid workers in Iraq is also frequently held, particularly among international staff with limited experience in conflict areas, or among those with little or no direct exposure to Iraq outside of hardened facilities. Since 2004, there is a much stronger tendency among international humanitarian staff (as well as among donors and policymakers) to treat insecurity in Iraq as a nebulous, generalized, persistent and insurmountable challenge, rather than as a series of serious incidents, each of which can be analyzed, placed into (often localized) context, and used as a spur to adaptation. Inadequately nuanced understanding of the dynamics of insecurity has possibly become a rationalization in some organizations for reduced assertiveness, creativity and engagement. There has been a sharp decline since early 2004 in the number of international humanitarian workers in Amman with any depth of experience in the country: only a handful remains.

Physical and psychological distance from the action also extracts a high cost on the motivation and emergency mindset of some international staff. This was evident as early as 2004 as agencies began to withdraw their international staff from the country. Isolation from communities in need was even then taking a toll on the sense of solidarity with affected populations that, for many aid workers, animates creative problem-solving and the willingness to take risks. However, of late the problem has deepened considerably and now even affects some Iraqis working with humanitarian organizations in Amman. Movement constraints inside Iraq may now mean that more Iraqi aid workers are cut off from the communities they have been working to help.

Constricted Access to Populations in Need and Diminishing Reliable Information

The field of vision, connection to community and geographic scope of humanitarian organizations is decreasing at an alarming rate. As early as the summer of 2004 we noted the diminishing quality and timeliness of information available to humanitarian organizations. Our research in late 2006 confirms serious and increasing mobility constraints for Iraqis in all but the 3 northern governorates, particularly since February of that year. These constraints further impair the work of humanitarian organizations by narrowing their fields of view inside Iraq and the geographic coverage of their work. Where once an organization had physical access to entire cities, governorates or regions, access for assessment, monitoring and delivery is often now reduced to local areas or neighborhoods known to be relatively safe for the particular aid workers concerned. Critically, relationships between Iraqi staff and local communities are being impaired or negated at a time when nuanced understandings of community dynamics are becoming much more necessary for negotiating access and making wise decisions about proportionality.

The Baghdad Bubble. The so-called “Green Zone” and all other MNF and government facilities are increasingly inaccessible to all but a chosen few Iraqis, assuming their willingness to risk the dangers involved in being seen to enter. While some Iraqi staff of international organizations opt to take these risks on a daily basis, their ability to continue to do so is increasingly tenuous as the security situation deteriorates. For the international staff of donors, UN agencies and other organizations ensconced within these facilities, there are almost no possibilities for moving beyond their blast walls without heavy MNF or private security escort. As a result, there are almost no opportunities for key decision-makers in the mainline humanitarian apparatus to inform their decisions with first-hand knowledge of conditions in Iraq, and few opportunities to speak with Iraqis who reject entry into such facilities. Some make genuine efforts to reach out to Iraqis visiting Amman, Damascus or the 3 northern governorates, but aid workers with closer connections to communities are often astonished at the blinkered and sometimes skewed character of the “Green Zone Mentality”.¹⁶

¹⁶ By way of example, a record of “key issues” raised on 5 December, 2006 during discussions in the “Green Zone” of the Inter-Agency Coordination Meeting of donors (including the EC Delegation, DFID, USAID, the Japanese Embassy, the Danish Embassy, the Italian Embassy), as well as UNAMI, the US Marine Corps, and the Baghdad Provincial Reconstruction Team, makes not a single mention of any discussion of humanitarian issues or escalating violence. According to the record, discussion was limited to mention of working groups on elections and constitutional issues,

There has been a consistent lack of media attention to the humanitarian extremity of Iraqis. Aid workers in Amman often lament the lack of media coverage of the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Iraq and the preponderance of focus in western media instead on the changing fortunes of the MNF. However, the dangers facing Iraqi and international journalists are also increasing as mobility constraints worsen—it has been the most dangerous conflict in the world for news staff since 2003. The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) reported on 31 December that 68 media staff, most of whom were Iraqis, were killed in 2006 alone.¹⁷ Although there have been some important exceptions such as the work of IRIN¹⁸, media coverage of the humanitarian situation has been severely constrained by limitations on journalistic access. Persistent efforts by NCCI in 2005 and 2006 have only lately been able to attract greater donor attention to the humanitarian situation. A recent initiative by Refugees International has also helped to place the scale of the developing refugee and displacement problem in sharper focus.¹⁹

III. The Donor Environment

In general, donors have not calibrated funding for humanitarian programs to needs and have often been careless with funding for reconstruction. Our interviews with aid agency staff and with Iraqi communities suggest some serious deficiencies in donor behavior. Aid agency staff in the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement, UN agencies, NCCI and international and national NGOs consistently raised shortages of accessible and flexible donor funding as a threat to current and planned humanitarian programs. Operational NGOs with proven track records inside Iraq are feeling the shortfalls most acutely, leading some to close down even as needs escalate.

capacity building workshops, renewed Japanese commitment to reconstruction efforts, and so on. In another example betraying good intentions and genuine apprehension at the mounting violence, but also, perhaps, a certain limitation in the field of vision, the UN's Security Information Report of 1 December, 2006, editorialized as follows: "Whether or not the situation in Iraq can be described as civil war or anarchy is irrelevant. The situation is out of control and the immediate responsibility of the MNF must be to restore order and provide at least a minimum of security to the Iraqi people. Yet, the administration balks at doing the one thing that might achieve that goal: sending in sufficient American troops to bring the violence under control." *United Nations Security Information Report, Ref./SIAU/Daily 01 Dec 06*, UN Safety and Security Unit, (1 December, 2006).

¹⁷ *Journalism Put to the Sword in 2006*, Press Release, International Federation of Journalists, (31 December, 2006), <http://www.ifj.org/default.asp?Index=4534&Language=EN>.

¹⁸ See UN OCHA's Integrated Regional Information Network's middle east coverage at <http://www.irinnews.org/ME.asp>

¹⁹ Iraq: The World's Fastest Growing Refugee Crisis, (4 December, 2006), www.refugeesinternational.org

**An Iraqi NGO's "Rules for Donors"
(Discussion with the research team,
December 2006)**

During a discussion about their work and how it was supported, the head of a relatively large Iraqi women's assistance NGO active in several of the worst conflict-affected areas spoke of how her organization had asserted its security through establishing a set of "rules for donors." The rules were motivated by concern over staff and beneficiary safety connected to the real and perceived neutrality, impartiality and independence upon which the organization depended.

The rules help to guide the organization's decisions about accepting funds from various sources, sometimes leading to rejection of sizeable offers of support from those that are considered "tainted". The NGO uses several creative means to be as self-reliant as possible, including funds generated through women's' employment initiatives to defray some of the costs of emergency relief projects.

The head of the organization recently asked, "Why do we have to act according to the habits of northern countries in our work? People feel an obligation to try to behave like westerners." **Continues...**

Donor responsiveness to lifesaving assistance and protection work in Iraq has gone through several phases since 2003. In the months prior to the US-led invasion, donors committed generous funding in anticipation of a massive displacement and refugee crisis that did not then materialize. Following the invasion, funding for major humanitarian programs continued into early 2005, with some operational agencies being actively encouraged by donors to dramatically expand their presence in the country.

However, important sources of "neutral" funding fell off sharply in mid-2005. ECHO closed its Baghdad office in May 2005, and soon after its Iraq office in Amman.²⁰ Funding problems compelled some operational NGOs to withdraw from Iraq completely. Our interviews with a range of humanitarian organizations still operational inside Iraq indicate that since the escalation of inter-communal violence sparked by the Samarah Mosque bombing in February 2006, bilateral donors and ECHO have generally been unresponsive and resistant to operational innovations on the ground. Thus, at a time when operational personnel have needed the greatest understanding and support, such has not been forthcoming.

When queried about the shortfalls, managers of a variety of humanitarian organizations often spoke of working against a persistent perception in the donor community that Iraq is awash in accessible oil wealth and donor funding for reconstruction. Yet these funds are not easily accessible, or at all accessible, to emergency humanitarian programs. The International Reconstruction Facility for Iraq (IRFFI), to which 25 donors have pledged US\$1.6 billion, and the International Compact for Iraq are structured to channel funds through UN agencies, the World Bank and the failing structures of the Iraqi state. NGOs spoke of being incensed at a donation of US\$20 million from the Iraqi Government to Lebanon in the summer of 2006, when funds for their own programs were "stuck" in ministries. Other managers identified a lingering sentiment, among some donors and even within one UN agency's headquarters, that individual MNF governments—and pre-

²⁰ ECHO's stated reasons for the closures were the inflow of large-scale reconstruction funding, coupled with what it perceived to be the impossibility of effectively conducting humanitarian operations in the central and southern governorates. Through the auspices of NCCI, the latter claim has been strenuously discounted by the NGO community in Iraq and Amman on the grounds that ECHO was well-informed of efforts underway by experienced NGOs to refine remote-management and remote-support modalities of continued operations, with promising results. ECHO is currently re-assessing the situation, recently contributing 10 million Euro to the UN Development Group's Cluster F for refugees and displaced persons. OCHA's CERF has recently committed approximately US\$4 million to work implemented by UNHCR and its partners.

Continued. . .

An Iraqi NGO's "Rules for Donors"

In order to be acceptable, donations:

1. must not be from countries which occupy Iraq and directly or indirectly destroyed its infrastructure;
2. must not be from organizations which have illicit aims of changing the values and traditions of Iraqi communities;
3. should be from independent, neutral and non-political organizations, national or international;
4. must not be conditional on changing our organization's way of doing things;
5. must not aim to change the morals and values which come from the religious structures and ethics of Iraqi communities;
6. must not aim to promote acceptance of the occupation forces;
7. must not require us to enter the "Green Zone" in Baghdad;
8. must be evaluated for their effectiveness by Iraqi women in a way that is respectful to the women we help. For safety reasons, no faces should be shown in photos taken of our projects by donors or others.

eminently the United States itself—should bear primary responsibility for underwriting a humanitarian response.

In our research in Iraqi communities we heard a remarkably consistent perception that *all* assistance efforts—international and national—are corrupt. At ground level, the wealth of riches showered on reconstruction and nation-building efforts since 2003, and the dissonance of that with the more immediate hardships of daily lives, has left many Iraqis feeling disillusioned and angry. Some with whom we spoke mentioned hearing through the media about the billions of dollars that had poured into Iraq, then raised a litany of complaints about corrupt officials and contractors, inadequate and unreliable electricity supply, skyrocketing costs for cooking fuel, shoddy school reconstruction and a wide variety of (to them) esoteric projects that left nothing tangible in their wake. One of our researchers was asked by a laborer whether talk of a "corrupt" well-known international aid official was true.

The readiness of Iraqis to scrutinize aid organizations underscores a need for donor funding for humanitarian action that can be perceived as neutral, impartial and independent. Such funding is also fundamentally important to many of the most capable international and Iraqi humanitarian organizations that continue to implement programs. Our research in Iraqi communities indicates that many Iraqis in the central and southern governorates are reluctant to be associated with assistance they perceive to be "tainted" by association with an out-of-favor combatant or political interest, less for political reasons than for security. This is especially true in areas most affected by military action. The box below illustrates the lengths to which an Iraqi NGO has gone to protect itself from potentially dangerous associations. However, important international humanitarian responders feel likewise: in 2005, one large European NGO suspended a major program when a funding agency inadvertently revealed a contentious source of its donation. Since 2003, NCCI has rejected funding from governments that were contributing troops to the MNF although ECHO funding—one perceptual step removed from EU members of the US coalition—proved acceptable. A number of small organizations—including American, European, Asian and Middle Eastern NGOs—have taken similar stances and struggle to adapt to changing conditions amid a shrinking pool of acceptable donor funding.

IV. The Strategic Policy Environment for Humanitarian Action

The following conclusions and recommendations are derived from our recent HA 2015 research findings together with earlier research conducted in the region by the Humanitarianism and War Project in 2004 and 2005.

UNAMI's mandate under UNSC Resolution 1546²¹ has created an increasingly dysfunctional strategic policy framework for humanitarian action. Resolution 1546 effectively shackled and subordinated the UN's humanitarian role to the fortunes or misfortunes of the MNF and to UNAMI's political role in facilitating the transition of Iraq away from occupation. From a humanitarian standpoint, the framework is dysfunctional and outdated: it negates a meaningful humanitarian role for the UN inside Iraq. Following the bombing of the Canal Hotel in Baghdad, mandate constraints and pressure from UN staff associations in New York left the former Secretary General with few options: there is now wholesale dependence of the UN on MNF forces for its presence, mobility and security, entailing complete reliance on militarized security strategies and ruling out any meaningful possibility for improving acceptance of the UN by local populations.

Recommendations

1. A new strategic policy framework for UN humanitarian action in Iraq should be devised by the UN Secretary General and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), incorporating the following considerations, which donor agencies should themselves support:
 - The Iraqi state is failing by increments with little likelihood of a reversal in downward trends for the foreseeable future;
 - As new non-state power structures crystallize, localized humanitarian space is likely to increase;
 - Reassignment, reduction or complete withdrawal of MNF from central and southern Iraq is likely in the medium term, calling into question the current arrangement whereby UN and some donor agencies rely on the MNF for their security, mobility and presence;

²¹ United Nations Security Council, *UN S/RES/1546 (2004)*, (8 June, 2004).

- There is a strong likelihood of a build-up of US forces in the short term. There is widespread expectation that MNF assets and assistance activities can or should be relied upon as an expedient of first resort to assist the civilian population, rather than as an option of last resort. A military build-up is likely to be accompanied by a sharp increase in US military funding for the “build” component of “clear, hold and build operations” through the Commander’s Emergency Response Programme (CERP).²² This will further blur distinctions between military and humanitarian roles in areas that are worst affected by military confrontations and most in need of genuine humanitarian responses;
- Major donors remain heavily invested in faltering reconstruction and nation-building efforts. Acknowledging the seriousness of the humanitarian situation may imply the failure of these efforts, causing donor reticence in providing adequate support for humanitarian efforts;
- The International Reconstruction Facility for Iraq (IRFFI) and the International Compact for Iraq do not provide ready access to funds for emergency humanitarian response and are prone to politicization by international and Iraqi authorities.

The UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, Principals of the Interagency Standing Committee (IASC) and the UNAMI DSRSG / Humanitarian Coordinator:

2. Re-assert the neutral, impartial and operationally independent role of UN humanitarian agencies inside Iraq, paying particular attention to erecting needed firewalls against politicization and militarization of the UN’s humanitarian response. Particularly:
 - Initiate a Consolidated Appeal for Iraq as a source of readily available funding for UN and NGO humanitarian programs that can be perceived as neutral, impartial and independent;
 - Ensure that humanitarian action is not in any way conditional on political or military benchmarks;
 - Formulate stringent policies for interactions between UN agencies and military / security forces in Iraq and actively promote compliance with UN guidelines among the humanitarian community and international parties to the

²² CERP funding was US\$753,000,000 in FY 2006. See Baker, James A., Hamilton, L., et al, *The Iraq Study Group Report*, (December, 2006), p. 87. The Study Group report calls for the CERP to be funded “generously.” For a description of the CERP and the US Military’s approach to counter-insurgency (COIN) operations, see the new COIN manual, *Counterinsurgency*, Headquarters, Department of the Army, (December, 2006), available at www.fas.org/irp/doddir/army/fm3-24.pdf.

conflict.²³ In keeping with these guidelines, which are meant to preserve and expand humanitarian space, military involvement in providing direct humanitarian assistance to the population should not occur except as an option of last resort when no civilian means are available. Military involvement in humanitarian action should not be regarded as an expedient of first resort to compensate for lack of assertiveness or preparedness on the part of the humanitarian community;

- Work more closely with UNDSS to ensure that security measures are more closely attuned to changes in humanitarian space and serve in the first instance to facilitate the work of operational agencies in the safest reasonable conditions, rather than as a means of damage limitation where risks are off-loaded to national staff and partners.

The UN SRSG for Iraq:

3. Take steps to elevate the status of the humanitarian imperative in Iraq, in keeping with the growing severity of the crisis and the UN's mandated humanitarian responsibilities under UNGA Resolution 46/182.²⁴
4. Play a more active stewardship role with all actors to protect against further instrumentalization, politicization and militarization of humanitarian action in Iraq, and to safeguard the humanitarian community's real and perceived neutrality, impartiality and operational independence.
5. Recognize that UNAMI's preoccupation with its own security since the Canal Hotel bombing in 2003 has not served the interests of those in acute need in Iraq, and has been fundamentally irreconcilable with the exercising of the UN's humanitarian responsibilities.
6. Wean the UN's humanitarian apparatus from its dependence on MNF for presence, security and mobility, including:

²³ The Iraq guidelines have not been updated since October 2004 and, in any case, are not widely known among humanitarian staff in the region. See UN OCHA, *Guidelines for Humanitarian Organisations on Interacting with Military and Other Security Forces in Iraq*, (20 October, 2004), <http://ochaonline.un.org/DocView.asp?DocID=2071>. See also UN OCHA, *Guidelines On The Use of Military and Civil Defense Assets To Support United Nations Humanitarian Activities in Complex Emergencies*, March 2003 (revised January 2006), and: Inter-Agency Standing Committee, *Civil-Military Relationship in Complex Emergencies – An IASC Reference Paper*, 28 June, 2004.

²⁴ United Nations General Assembly Resolution 46/182, *Strengthening the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance of the United Nations*, (19 December, 1991).

- Discontinue all co-location of UNAMI and UNCT staff with MNF and engage in an arm's length relationship with *all* significant combatants;
 - Request UNDSS to undertake an ongoing governorate-by-governorate review of the UN's security posture with the aim of instituting a nuanced and localized approach to prevailing risks in a constantly changing environment;
 - Request accelerated deployment of the UN Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS) and discontinue reliance upon MNF escorts and flights, except as a last resort.
7. Canvas national and international UNAMI and UNCT staff regarding their willingness to undertake risks while pursuing their agencies' mandated humanitarian assistance and protection activities.
 8. Engage in greater outreach with Iraq's moral / religious leaders as part of a concerted strategy to explain the UN presence in the country and to achieve greater acceptance of humanitarian roles.

UN Staff Associations:

9. Listen to national and international staff in UNAMI, the UNCT, and to other humanitarian organizations active in Iraq to develop a more nuanced understanding of mandated UN humanitarian responsibilities in conflict areas, the categorical nature of the humanitarian imperative, and the different ways that risks can be managed in conflict areas. UN credibility is on the line—and, justifiably or not, the humanitarian bona fides of its staff open to question—when there is insistence on zero risk or absolute protection for a chosen few international civil servants entrusted with assisting and protecting vulnerable populations in a war environment.²⁵ The security of UN staff is not enhanced when security procedures themselves entail wholesale compromises in the UN's real or perceived neutrality, impartiality and independence.

The Red Cross / Red Crescent Movement:

10. Strengthen efforts to disseminate international humanitarian law and the Fundamental Principles among all combatants and in

²⁵ See "Concerns about security - Letter from CCISUA and FICSA to the Secretary General of the UN, November 2004, http://www.unspecial.org/UNS634/UNS_634_T07.html. See also a commentary by David Malone on the issue, *UN anger over Iraq: Nobody said it would be safe*, International Herald Tribune, (1 November 2004), http://www.iht.com/articles/2004/10/01/edmalone_ed3_.php.

emerging power structures. Continue outreach efforts with Iraq's moral / religious authorities.

Operational Iraqi and International Humanitarian NGOs:

11. Strengthen peer-review networks, proactive information sharing and lessons-learning efforts, with particular focus on security management, relations with non-state armed groups, localized humanitarian access and staff relations.
12. Explore localized options for engaging in mutually-enabling relationships with selected local NGOs, religious structures, mosques and local religious charities that have demonstrated a commitment to principled assistance and protection.

The NGOs Coordinating Committee in Iraq (NCCI):

13. Re-focus on coordination of NGO emergency response inside Iraq by providing ground-level coordination services to members and others throughout the central and southern governorates. This will entail creation and careful maintenance of a flexible network of Iraqi local coordination officers.
14. Strengthen context analysis, with emphases on local power structures, identifying local interlocutors for the humanitarian community, and monitoring localized trends in humanitarian access and possibilities for higher profile activity.
15. Facilitate the strengthening of peer review networks among members, and document examples of innovation in member NGO operations regarding security, accountability, and expansion / protection of humanitarian space.
16. Monitor donor responsiveness to the humanitarian situation and their compliance with the Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative and, with member participation; report bi-annually on donor performance.

The Donor Community:

17. Urgently re-examine support to operational humanitarian organizations in Iraq with a view to increasing support now and into the medium term. Funding should be restricted to agencies with proven abilities to adapt rapidly to changes in the Iraqi context and which place a premium on adherence to principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence.

18. Re-commit to the 23 principles of Good Humanitarian Donorship that were endorsed by major donor headquarters on 17 June, 2003.²⁶
19. Re-think presence. There is no substitute for donor presence, but it should serve to establish and strengthen (rather than to prevent and weaken) relationships with Iraqi communities and with humanitarian organizations that provide assistance and protection in a principled manner. Under present and emerging circumstances, such relationships cannot be pursued effectively from the “Green Zone” or from other MNF / Government facilities, or from militarized Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs.)
20. Do more to adapt to the Iraqi context. This will entail greater donor engagement with communities and closer relationships with operational partners. Acknowledge the unique contextual challenges, particularly the severe security and mobility constraints on information-gathering, needs assessment, monitoring and evaluation. Specifically:
 - Be more receptive to unconventional partnerships with Iraqi organizations that have demonstrated their effectiveness and commitment to a principled approach.
 - Actively encourage further development of high quality peer review networks and other locally-viable means of ensuring that funds are spent wisely by operational Iraqi or international partners. Sufficient levels of due diligence can and should be pursued by triangulation of information from different sources. Serious lapses in the accountability of reconstruction efforts—and widespread perceptions among Iraqis of corruption in all governmental, international and non-governmental assistance efforts—compel high standards of accountability across the board. However, if standards are inflexibly applied in Iraq, humanitarian work will continue to falter. Local innovations such as peer review, while challenging and imperfect, can and should be taken more seriously and used with other means of information gathering.

²⁶ See *Principles and Good Practice of Humanitarian Donorship*, www.goodhumanitariandonorship.org/.