



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. As with all HA2015 materials, the Feinstein International Center welcomes feedback and criticism from all quarters. Please contact the author at ghansen@islandnet.com or the HA2015 Lead Researcher Antonio Donini at antonio.donini@tufts.edu.

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Taking Sides or Saving Lives: Existential Choices for the Humanitarian Enterprise in Iraq

Humanitarian Agenda 2015 Iraq Country Study

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Acronyms

CCISUA	Coordinating Committee for International Staff Unions & Associations
CERP	Commander's Emergency Response Program (US)
CPA	Coalition Provisional Authority
COIN	Counter-Insurgency Operations (US)
DART	Disaster Assistance Response Team (US)
DFID	Department for International Development (UK)
DSRSG	Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary General
EC	European Community
ECHO	European Community Humanitarian Office
FICSA	Federation of International Civil Servants Associations
HOC	Humanitarian Operations Center (US military)
IASC	Interagency Standing Committee (U.N.)
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IFJ	International Federation of Journalists
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross/Red Crescent Societies
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IRCS	Iraqi Red Crescent Society
IRFFI	International Reconstruction Facility for Iraq
IRIN	Integrated Regional Information Network
JNEPI	Joint NGO Emergency Preparedness Initiative
MNF	Multi-National Force–Iraq
NCCI	NGOs Coordination Committee in Iraq
OCHA	[United Nations] Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
PDS	Public Distribution System
SRSR	Special Representative of the Secretary General
UNAMI	United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq
UNCT	United Nations Country Team
UNDSS	United Nations Department of Safety and Security
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WFP	United Nations World Food Programme

“Helping others is a moral obligation, an Iraqi tradition.”

Interview in Sadr City

I. The Study

Greg Hansen is an aid worker and independent researcher based in British Columbia, Canada. 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.

1. Introduction

Iraq places the frailties and fault-lines of the humanitarian enterprise in stark relief. Perhaps more than any other highly politicized context, Iraq has fuelled a defensiveness and sense of existential threat among many in the humanitarian profession. And yet, while Iraqis have paid long and dearly for the flaws in the international humanitarian apparatus, evidence from ground-level suggests that pronouncements of the demise of principled humanitarian action are premature. Iraq may provide the strongest affirmation yet of the endurance of the Dunantist ethos and of the principled practice of humanitarianism.

2. Purpose

This country study on Iraq was conducted between late October 2006 and May 2007 as part of the *Humanitarian Agenda 2015: Principles, Power and Perceptions* project of the Feinstein International Center, Tufts University.¹ It is based primarily on field research conducted in and around Iraq in November and December 2006. Its purpose is to convey findings about perceptions of humanitarian action among Iraqis at the community level, and among humanitarian actors in the region. The report feeds evidence from Iraq into the broader efforts of the project to discern the major challenges facing the humanitarian enterprise worldwide over the coming decade.

For those working in or on Iraq’s humanitarian crisis, the goal of this report is to begin parsing the successes and failures of recent years by listening to local perceptions and beliefs. The hope and expectation is that this will illuminate how the choices made by the aid apparatus have been felt and understood at ground level by Iraqis in need and among those engaged in humanitarian efforts. The report also draws upon the collective humanitarian experience in Iraq of the research team and the author’s previous work in the region for the Feinstein Center’s Humanitarianism and War Project since 2004.

¹ The preliminary report on the findings of the HA2015 research as well as all the country case studies are available online at fic.tufts.edu

The study posits a series of recommendations for operational, donor, and policy actors at a time when a renewed humanitarian response in Iraq struggles to gather a sustainable momentum. The recommendations contained here have been updated since the release of our earlier Briefing Paper in January 2007.

Scope

There is an abundance of opinion and analysis on Iraq: for several years it has been the highest profile political story worldwide.² While much has been written about Iraq from other perspectives and from a distance, this study is focused upon what Iraqis and aid workers believe to be true about the way the humanitarian apparatus has functioned or malfunctioned in Iraq, and why. Where possible and helpful, evidence from ground level is placed in larger context in the study by referring to the choices and views of key decision-makers and others who have, in one way or another, changed the humanitarian landscape in Iraq. Primarily though, the intent from the beginning of this study has been to place a premium on listening to the voices of those most affected and afflicted by decisions taken elsewhere.

Iraq has been a laboratory for elaborate experimentation in the past several years. Over the course of this study, these experiments raised many questions for which our evidence provided inadequate answers. A host of issues emerged that appeared relevant to the work but could not be thoroughly pursued due to time and access constraints or because of the specific focus and methodology of our study. For example, what empirical evidence exists that would validate or invalidate the immense role played by commercial aid and security contractors who now receive billions of dollars to perform in Iraq and elsewhere? What empirical evidence exists to validate or invalidate the increasing emphasis in military doctrine and operations on “hearts and minds” activity? What have been the human impacts of these operations in the short, medium, and long term? These and several other issues are flagged at the end of the study in the form of questions needing further research.

Readers seeking an analysis of political events, the sanctions era or Iraq under occupation are referred to the excellent resources in the selected reading list at the end of this report. Additional resources providing a greater depth of analysis of the security implications for

² Alertnet, World Press Tracker, www.alertnet.org

humanitarian action in Iraq are also included in the list of further readings.

3. The Context

The Iraqi population has suffered for decades from the effects of autocratic rule, a succession of wars, and a harsh international sanctions regime. By the time of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003, the cumulative effects of these experiences had left the country with a frail infrastructure and weakened social fabric which, precipitated by the invasion and ensuing occupation, ultimately gave way to inter-communal strife and social fragmentation, with severe humanitarian consequences. In the early summer of 2007, Iraq is a deeply divided nation and a failing state that is unable to provide for the safety and welfare of its population.

Concurrent with a series of seismic shifts in the political landscape, the humanitarian lay of the land has been transformed dramatically and repeatedly over the past one-and-a-half decades. International humanitarian actors have been confronted with a succession of difficult and often elemental choices about whether and how to engage, how to situate themselves in relation to political actors, and how to adapt—or not—to increasing insecurity for aid operations and personnel. Several seminal and inter-related phases can be discerned:

Sanctions Era

From the early 1990s, a small-scale international humanitarian presence of the ICRC and a modest number of mostly-European international humanitarian NGOs and solidarity organizations was mainly geared toward ameliorating the humanitarian impacts of sanctions on Iraq administered by the U.N. under the Oil-for-Food Program. Aid operations were conducted with a high profile and were often accompanied by assertive humanitarian advocacy at the international level. During this period, two U.N. Humanitarian Coordinators and other senior U.N. staff resigned in protest over the humanitarian fallout of the sanctions. The security environment was un-threatening, but scrutiny from the Saddam regime was intense. In the northern Kurdish areas of Iraq between April and July 1991, U.S. forces initiated Operation Provide Comfort, a major military effort to assist Kurdish refugees from northern Iraq, to provide protection for civilian relief operations, and, later, to deter further attacks.

Contingency Planning, Schism in the Humanitarian Community

Contingency planning and pre-positioning of emergency stocks by aid agencies commenced in late 2002 in anticipation of the U.S.-led invasion. This sparked an immediate reaction. Some agencies

expressed strong reservations toward the perceived imminent instrumentalization and militarization of humanitarian action, while others took an overtly political stance by objecting to the prospect and (in their view) illegitimacy of the war in addition to the risk of providing it with a humanitarian imprimatur. Preparedness measures were regarded as prudent humanitarianism in some quarters, while in others such steps were seen as making war both more likely and more viable for invasion forces. The U.N. issued a preparedness appeal for \$193 million in late 2002, with strong donor response.

Some in the community counseled caution or recusal³, but preparations for a massive humanitarian response occurred in parallel to, and often in close cooperation with, the buildup of invasion forces. Coalition forces established a Humanitarian Operations Center (HOC) in Kuwait ostensibly to facilitate information sharing and joint planning with humanitarian agencies. USAID's DART team was co-located with the HOC, and the HOC's services were used heavily by several large U.S.-based NGOs and the OFDA-funded Joint NGO Emergency Preparedness Initiative (JNEPI). Concerns were heightened in much of the humanitarian community when the HOC eventually claimed the authority to confer (or deny) permission for entry into Iraq by aid agencies once the invasion occurred.⁴

While the ICRC and a small number of mostly-European international NGOs stayed present and operational, nearly all other international aid workers and organizations withdrew from Iraq days before the invasion in March 2003. Those who remained were operational up to and throughout the invasion. Assistance and protection activities were conducted with high profile. Several aid workers died in untargeted incidents.

³ See Larry Minear, *Agencies should resist being taken for granted in Iraq*, Reuters Alertnet, (17 January, 2003). <http://www.alertnet.org/thefacts/reliefresources/577630.htm>. During a U.N. contingency-planning conference in early 2003, officials from the World Health Organization explicitly raised the concern about contingency planning for an avoidable war.

⁴ There is no shortage of excellent background on this schism and its aftermath. For a representative sampling of views and perspectives, see Larry Minear, *A Moment of Truth for the Humanitarian Enterprise*, Foreign Policy In Focus, July 9, 2003), at <http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2003/0307humanitarian.html>; Rony Brauman & Pierre Salignon, *Iraq: in Search of a "Humanitarian Crisis"*, Ideas and Opinions from MSF, (2004), at http://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/publications/ideas/opinion_ronybrauman.cfm; Dr. Stuart Gordon, *Military-Humanitarian Relationships and the Invasion of Iraq (2003): Reforging Certainties?*, Journal of Humanitarian Assistance, at <http://www.jha.ac/articles/a137.htm>; and Nicholas Torrente, *Humanitarian Action Under Attack in Iraq*, Harvard Human Rights Journal Vol. 17, (2004), at <http://www.law.harvard.edu/students/orgs/hrj/iss17/torrente.pdf>

Invasion/Aid Scale-up

A massive scale-up in international humanitarian, reconstruction, development, political, and military presence occurred in the immediate aftermath of the invasion and was concurrent with the consolidation of the U.S.-led occupation. The U.N. issued a Flash Appeal for \$2.2 billion in April 2003 covering 6 months of humanitarian operations, with strong donor response and allocations from Iraqi oil revenues. The anticipated humanitarian crisis did not materialize on the expected scale. Preparedness activities were re-directed to ameliorating needs emerging largely from weak infrastructure, the effects of widespread looting, interruption of social supports, and, increasingly, the gutting of line ministries by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA)'s de-Ba'athification program.

Although the environment was chaotic, aid operations were conducted with a high profile and in relative safety. The schism among humanitarian organizations deepened: the NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq was formed in April 2003 by a group of mostly European humanitarian NGOs as a forum for information exchange independent of the coalition. Massive CPA reconstruction spending commenced, with a high incidence of corruption from the outset. Japanese and other occupation forces described their military missions in explicitly humanitarian terms. U.S. forces were provided with millions of US\$ cash seized from Saddam's palaces to fund the Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP), later to be funded by U.S. Congressional spending bills.

First Targeted Attacks

The U.N. headquarters in Baghdad was truck-bombed in August 2003 with heavy loss of life, soon followed by a similar bombing of the ICRC Delegation. The bombings led to the withdrawal of some organizations, including all U.N. agencies, but not the ICRC or a majority of humanitarian NGOs, for whom the security environment was difficult to read. U.N. programs were closed or turned over to NGOs and national staff. Aid operations continued with both high and low profile presence. Massive infusions of funding for reconstruction continued, fuelling increased corruption.

Spreading Insecurity in the Central & Southern Governorates

By March/April of 2004, increased targeted attacks and kidnappings of international and national humanitarian staff caused further reductions in programming and international presence and community-wide adoption of low-profile modalities with the exception of organizations actually or effectively embedded with the MNF. Journalists were similarly targeted. Journalistic access and the mobility of non-embedded reporters were much reduced. In the spring

and summer, U.S. military and American military contractors attempted to subdue resistance in Fallujah and Najaf, leading to heavy fighting and humanitarian fallout, the latter leading to spontaneous cross-communal humanitarian efforts from the population and emergency responses from some international humanitarian actors.

On 8 June 2004, U.N. Security Council Resolution 1546 formalized the reliance of U.N. agencies on the MNF for security, presence and mobility. Sovereignty was nominally restored to Iraq by the Coalition Provisional Authority on June 30 2004. Donor funding for humanitarian programs was much reduced in mid-2005 by important non-coalition donors such as ECHO, on the stated grounds of insecurity and lack of humanitarian access and operability. This led to further reduction in the scale of humanitarian programming and presence. Virtually all remaining humanitarian organizations transitioned with difficulty to remote control, management, or support modalities. Targeted attacks on aid agencies continued, along with an increase in crime. Armed resistance to the MNF and government forces/police was increasingly organized and effective. Infrastructure and rebuilding efforts were frequently targeted, resulting in high security costs for the reconstruction effort and the deployment of increasing thousands of private security contractors. Massive funding for reconstruction continued, along with increased corruption.

Deepening Humanitarian Crisis

Marked most notably by the bombing of the Samarra shrine in February 2006, a sharp escalation in inter-communal violence was characterized by indiscriminate attacks on markets and symbolic places, often with heavy losses in civilian lives, accompanied by increasingly organized attacks on MNF and government forces, death squads targeting members of other communities, and reprisal attacks. Inter-communal and intra-communal violence and social upheaval was most profound in Baghdad and the central governorates, but gradually spread to the southern governorates. Both sets of tensions were increasingly evident in line ministries, some of which effectively became partisan fiefdoms and battlegrounds over the spoils of reconstruction. Criminality also increased and often appeared connected to inter/intra-communal violence, exacerbating an already grim security situation.

The combined effects of fragmentation and the responses to them— notably the division of neighborhoods and an exponential increase in checkpoints—led to a sharp increase in humanitarian consequences including reduction in access to basic needs and services and growing displacement and refugee flows. Incremental failure of the Iraqi state was increasingly evident due to targeted attacks against key line

ministries and assassinations and kidnappings of ministry officials, leading to increased “brain drain” and dramatic reductions in the reach, effectiveness, and credibility of national structures.

Militias and ad hoc neighborhood associations increasingly stepped in to fill protection and social welfare gaps. Humanitarian presence of some operational agencies continued but with very low profile. This rendered most humanitarian action all but invisible to the population. Journalistic access for non-embedded reporters fell off sharply. Donor funding for humanitarian action was increasingly scarce. Major donor pledges for reconstruction continued, accompanied by continuing corruption.

Growing Recognition of the Humanitarian Crisis, Re-assertion of Humanitarian Roles

Initially overshadowed by media focus on the plight of the MNF and on debates over changes to U.S. strategy, the scale of displacement and refugee flows became more widely acknowledged in early 2007. Concern was particularly acute over the potential political fallout of refugee flows into Jordan and Syria.

At the request of the U.N. Secretary General, the U.N.’s Humanitarian Coordinator for Iraq and U.N. OCHA led a process of defining a new strategic framework for asserting the U.N.’s humanitarian responsibilities in Iraq, placing renewed emphasis on neutrality, impartiality, and independence for humanitarian action. In mid-April, UNHCR hosted a high-level conference in Geneva to muster greater international support for a renewed humanitarian response.

4. The Current Situation

The humanitarian crisis in Iraq is now dire and is worsening at an alarming rate but remains largely overlooked or ignored in political circles. Threats to the safety and well-being of the population are eclipsed by media coverage of the political situation, preoccupation with the changing fortunes and disposition of American military forces, and rancorous political divisions in the U.S. over exit strategies and funding for the war, which in U.S. policy circles continues to be cloaked in the phraseology of the Global War on Terror. Survival is increasingly difficult for Iraqis in much of the central and southern governorates where the human costs steadily mount from continuing U.S. military action, multiple insurgencies, escalating inter-communal violence, and intra-communal struggles for power. As the Iraqi state fails by increments, the humanitarian situation is increasingly characterized by a severe protection emergency, increasing material needs, mass forced migration, serious under-capacity for providing assistance, and donor

reluctance to underwrite humanitarian operations inside the central and southern governorates.

Estimates of the number of deaths due to conflict in Iraq since March 2003, range from a minimum of 53,000 civilians “killed by military intervention,”⁵ to more than 605,000 “excess Iraqi deaths” resulting from conflict as of June 2006.⁶ At the time of writing the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that some 2 million Iraqis have fled to neighboring countries as refugees. Nearly 2 million more are estimated to have been internally displaced, although this figure includes persons displaced during “Arabization” efforts under the previous regime. Some governorates claim to have reached saturation in their ability to absorb forced migrants: new arrivals are reportedly being turned away in some locations.

Our research inside Iraq indicates that for those who have stayed in the central and southern governorates, security is increasingly understood as safe access to markets, medical facilities, schools, jobs, social services, and extended family. Basic services have often moved beyond reach, either moving farther away or becoming more difficult to get to in safety. 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. 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 and ad hoc checkpoints manned by members of another community.

Insecurity, mobility constraints, and brain drain have also resulted in a degradation of essential infrastructure and public services, with faltering maintenance of water and sanitation systems, electrical grids, and irrigation. Unclean water and use of untreated water from improvised sources in urban areas is a frequent concern among those interviewed. Inflation has led to harsh price increases for some essentials such as cooking gas. Commerce is increasingly challenged by rising costs and long wait times for fuel, unpredictable electricity supply, increased business costs for running generators (hitting

⁵ www.iraqbodycount.org

⁶ G. Burnham, R. Lafta, S. Doocy, and L. Roberts, 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>.

pharmacies, grocery stores, welding shops, internet cafes, and bakeries particularly hard), reduced customer traffic in violence-prone areas, interruption in customary internal trade routes, and targeting of business owners and their families for kidnapping motivated by ransom payment.

The “Internally Stuck” and Peripheralization of the Humanitarian Response

In political circles and within the international humanitarian apparatus itself, there is an emerging disproportionate focus on Iraqis who have fled as IDPs or refugees.⁷ Many IDPs and all refugees are relatively more accessible to current assistance and protection efforts than those who have remained in the worst-stricken areas. Little attention is so far being paid to preventing forced migration from occurring. Conditions facing the “internally stuck”, those who have opted to stay in their homes or are unable to move and are therefore mostly hidden from view, are perhaps much more worrisome as access to essential needs and services becomes increasingly difficult in much of the country, and as social supports such as the Public Distribution System (PDS) for food rations collapse.

The PDS

The World Food Programme’s most recent reckoning of food insecurity in Iraq, released in May, 2006 before inter-communal violence and humanitarian access became markedly worse, estimated that over 4 million Iraqis were already food insecure and an additional 8.3 million people, or nearly 32% of Iraq’s population, were at risk of food insecurity if not provided with a daily ration under the PDS.⁸

Our research inside Iraq in November and December 2006 suggested that problems with the PDS were serious and increasingly widespread, particularly in the central governorates. Near Fallujah, where war-related poverty is widespread, distributions of the ration had been interrupted by targeted attacks on trucks carrying food to local

⁷ The developing situation is reminiscent of a similar tendency toward peripheralization of humanitarian response during the first war in Chechnya, where the geographic area was far smaller. Most aid agencies, including the U.N., dealt with the effects of the war on its periphery among Chechens who had fled to neighboring republics, while neglecting needs inside Chechnya. Only the ICRC and about 6 INGOs were operational inside. See Greg Hansen and Robert Seely, *War and Humanitarian Action in Chechnya*, Humanitarianism and War Project, OP26, Thomas J. Watson Institute for International Studies, Brown University, 1996. http://hwproject.tufts.edu/publications/electronic/e_op26.pdf

⁸ U.N. 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 February 2007, see NCCI, *Iraq Humanitarian Crisis: Documents of Reference*, (updated February 2007),

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



Iraqi woman reading a Red Cross message. © ICRC

distribution points, killing several drivers, forcing changes to previous distribution routes, and cessation of deliveries to some areas. Several interviewees in various locations in Iraq spoke of being unable to collect their ration because they had fled their homes without their ration cards.

Subsequent reports confirm the increasing frailty of the PDS and call its continued usefulness into serious question. Current monitoring of food security is spotty at best, and there is concern among some in the humanitarian community that government and WFP claims about their monitoring capacity have become overstated as fragmentation and insecurity have deepened.

Insecurity and Operationality

Against the backdrop of a growing civilian death toll, at least 88 Iraqi and international humanitarian and human rights workers have been killed in conflict in Iraq between March 2003 and May 2007.⁹ 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. 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 humanitarian community. This impairs effective coordination, stifles discussion of common strategies, and inhibits the ethos of transparency associated with humanitarian work.

⁹ NCCI website, <http://www.ncciraq.org/>.

“I don’t have money to leave Iraq. All my savings were stolen by Iraqi soldiers when they raided my home in December 2005. I went to a police station to seek help to recover my money, but the only answer I got was that I should be thankful to be alive because Saddam’s followers were being killed every day.”

**–Baghdad resident to IRIN,
March 2007**

“With constant moving to flee sectarian violence, [the elderly] have problems getting their pensions. And their monthly food rations are practically impossible to get as relatives are afraid to go to distribution centres and be targeted by insurgents or militants”

–IRIN, February 2007

“Our mission is to keep peace in our neighborhood. We keep in contact with the other vigilantes in the neighborhood to make sure there is no danger. Should something untoward happen, we start putting our defence mechanisms in motion.”

**–Retired fireman and father of five in Baghdad, to IRIN,
February 2007.**

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.

Dramatic Changes in the Operating Environment

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 as new power structures crystallize in some locations. 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. This trend was heard by the research team with consistency.

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 consolidate their control over local territory or neighborhoods, new power structures are increasingly discernible through close localized monitoring of developments.

Experienced aid workers in the region feel that this consolidation of localized control is likely to lead, over time, to localized increases in humanitarian access for experienced and trusted agencies that have Iraqi and international staff equipped with the requisite political skills. A small number of operational organizations have already begun to explore and, in a few cases, to capitalize on such opportunities for expanding presence and activity, with the hope and expectation that access can be expanded progressively outwards from well-chosen access points. Until now the approaches and gains remain tentative and experimental, but the strategy shows strong promise in some locations.

5. Overview of Findings

As with all HA 2015 country studies, our broader findings are organized around four crosscutting themes which permeate the Iraq case in profound ways. Regarding the first theme of **universality**, the research confirms a clear, unambiguous resonance between Islamic or Iraqi understandings of the ideals of humanitarian assistance and protection, on one hand, and the Dunantist or principle-based humanitarian ethos underlying many western or northern-dominated humanitarian institutions.

Despite the similarities in humanitarian values, attitudes and understandings about the ideals of humanitarian action, however, our findings are strongly suggestive of two solitudes that have not yet found ways to communicate and work together in a systematic and respectful way. **In other words, humanitarian ideals have the potential to unite, but humanitarian practice divides.** With the exception of the persistent efforts of the ICRC, relatively little energy and few resources have been expended by the humanitarian enterprise in Iraq on bridging cultural divides, knowledge gaps and perceptual differences. Crucially, in spite of the potential for increased mutual learning and collaborative action, shared efforts to expand and maintain humanitarian space are still in the earliest exploratory stages. To the detriment of those now in acute need in Iraq, shortcomings on both sides of the divide conspire with the toxic political environment for humanitarian action to prevent more collegial and productive relationships from emerging in practice.

Much of this toxicity accumulates from local and international manifestations of **terrorism and counter-terrorism**, which together serve to increase the scale of civilian needs and to decrease the capacity and willingness of humanitarians to respond to needs. A caveat is necessary: the phraseology of “terrorism” has been appropriated for political purposes with such consistency in Iraq that it has lost its usefulness as a descriptor. But there is no doubt that indiscriminate attacks against civilian objects such as mosques, markets, pumping stations, and electrical grids have sewn widespread fear and hardship in Iraq. Targeted attacks against the U.N., ICRC, Iraqi Red Crescent, and NGOs have likewise had profoundly negative effects on humanitarian response capacity. The research highlights the extent to which attempts by the humanitarian apparatus in Iraq to adjust to these hostile aspects of the environment have been maladaptive and counterproductive in humanitarian terms.

The human costs of such maladaptations call into particular question the wisdom of **coherence** between political, military and humanitarian agendas. Our research confirms that Iraqis are neither stupid nor

lacking in a sense of right and wrong, and yet, as Iraqis themselves explained it to our research team with consistency and clarity, that is precisely how they often understand the assumptions underlying humanitarian action that has been instrumentalized in the service of an occupying force or some other political/military objective. The Iraq case demonstrates the dangers inherent in shackling and subordinating a humanitarian response to a military or political agenda that is subject to changing fortunes. In Iraq, as elsewhere, combatants fall in and out of favor with local populations, sometimes suddenly and in unanticipated ways. Combatant priorities are governed not by humanitarian interests but by political imperatives, force protection constraints, and the needs of the military mission. Political interests likewise often ebb and flow in dramatic fashion in post-invasion Iraq. Humanitarian action that is tied to such fleeting interests and preoccupations is a dubious proposition at best.

The *security of humanitarian actors* has dominated discourse and decision-making on the humanitarian response in Iraq since the summer of 2003, to the extent that security constraints routinely trump the humanitarian imperative. Conversations with donors or U.N. agencies about programming in Iraq are impossible without first dwelling at length on the security implications for staff. Often the conversation goes no further, partly for valid reasons: the complex of risks in Iraq presents daunting challenges. However, the astonishing risks being taken by Iraqi aid workers—very often in lieu of international staff—and the ways that security is understood by Iraqis at the community level are seldom acknowledged. The level of violence that had been experienced by many of those whom we interviewed was astounding.

Perhaps the second most significant finding of the study is that neutrality is not an abstract notion in Iraq but is regarded as an essential protection against targeted attack by communities and most remaining humanitarian organizations alike. The implication is that injudicious affiliations or perceived affiliations with political and military actors can be toxic for humanitarian action and aid workers. As the study shows, there are major implications of the security decisions taken by aid agencies for Iraqi communities and their acceptance of humanitarian actors.

6. Methodology

Preparations for the country study began in early October 2006 with identification and development of the team and preparation and translation into Arabic of project information and adapted survey instruments.¹⁰ Fieldwork commenced inside Iraq in late October, and continued for seven weeks into early December. The team consisted of three Iraqis from various religious communities and the author/lead researcher. The Iraqi researchers were selected for their prior exposure to humanitarian work and connections to various communities. Iraq presented formidable obstacles to conducting field-based research of this sort. Conditions deteriorated sharply just as fieldwork was drawing to a close, and the window of opportunity closed just as the team finished. Out of safety concerns, the Iraqi researchers have chosen not to be named, but they were pivotal in the compilation of the study and pursued the work with enormous dedication. Researchers were strongly encouraged not to take additional risks for the sake of their work beyond the substantial risks they already faced in their day-to-day lives. They were also given a free hand to select people for interviews and were encouraged to start with those they knew then work outwards as conditions permitted. Their access to various strata of Iraqi society was excellent.

Our research team included one woman, allowing for far better access to female interviewees than would otherwise have been the case. About 30% of our interviews were with women. Interviews were held with people who were chosen for different perspectives: teachers, displaced persons, unemployed men, engineers, a fruit seller, women with children, policemen, cab drivers, elders, spectators at a football match, university professors, a doctor and nurse at a hospital, functionaries in the local electricity department, merchants, a car market owner, students, clergy, widowed mothers and Iraqi aid workers. Those interviewed included Iraqis from various social strata across the spectrum of Shia, Sunni, Kurdish and other communities, and it was evident that many were in need of assistance or protection or both. Geographic coverage inside Iraq included Basrah, Amarah, Wasit, Kut, Najaf, Baghdad (including Mahmoudia, Karrada, Sadr City, and Doura), Abu Ghraib, Fallujah, Baqoubah, Kirkuk, Mosul, Suleimaniya, and Erbil. While a few interviews were conducted through Skype voice-chat, most were held over tea in homes and offices.

¹⁰ Survey methods common to all HA 2015 country studies can be viewed at <http://fic.tufts.edu/downloads/SurveysMethodsfinal.pdf>

As with all HA 2015 country studies, the approach was evidence-based and inductive with a primary focus on local perceptions of the humanitarian enterprise. In sum, the team conducted 225 semi-structured conversations and interviews, 165 of which were held inside Iraq at the community level, most with people who would not normally be accessible to persons perceived to be affiliated with the MNF. Apart from one focus group of 17 participants, interviews were conducted confidentially and in private settings. The focus group held in Suleimaniyah by the author comprised participants of mixed backgrounds from all over Iraq who were attending a training sponsored by the NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq (NCCI). A small focus group for operational humanitarian agencies was held at the NCCI office in Amman.

In order to delve more deeply into the universality issues, one of our researchers with excellent access to the al-Hausa seminary in Najaf conducted 27 interviews there with a range of clergy and students, including senior clerics. Additional perspectives were gathered through interviews with Iraqi and international humanitarian staff of NGOs, UNAMI and the U.N. agencies, conflict analysts, donors, and regional specialists in Iraq and Jordan. At the conclusion of the interview phase inside Iraq, the researchers gathered for several days with the lead researcher in Amman to share experiences and findings and to discuss patterns and differences in what was heard by the team.

A caveat

A number of INGOs cautioned the team before the research commenced that local perceptions of humanitarian action in Iraq would undoubtedly be conditioned by the extremely low profile of the humanitarian community in Iraq. Their concern was well-founded, as many interviewees reported having no direct contact with the aid apparatus. The low visibility of humanitarian efforts in Iraq, relative to most other conflict settings in the world, should be borne in mind as perceptions are discussed throughout the study.

Action-oriented aspects of the research

More by circumstance than by design, our research had several action-oriented aspects. In Najaf, our researcher took time to describe and explain the “western” humanitarian apparatus and the IFRC/NGO Code of Conduct to clergy before hearing them out on how these constructs resonated or not with Islamic practices of charity. Additionally, following completion of the field research inside Iraq, we provided input from our findings to a UNAMI Emergency Working Group meeting and their contingency planning process and provided

numerous informal briefings on our findings to a range of humanitarian officials and a small group of donors in Amman.

In January, in response to developments in Iraq, we made an effort to bring our findings to bear on key decisions that were about to be made by circulating a Briefing Paper, “*Coming to Terms with the Humanitarian Imperative in Iraq.*”¹¹ The Briefing Paper summarized findings and recommendations and was circulated widely in U.N. circles and among donors, policymakers, operational agencies, and think-tanks. Also in January, the author and a team from HA2015 and the Feinstein Center conducted briefings on the Iraq research for two days in New York and Washington, DC. Approximately 50 U.N. staff and participants from other agencies took part in a briefing and discussion convened by the acting Emergency Relief Coordinator at U.N. OCHA. Similar briefings and discussions were held at the ICRC Delegation to the U.S., the U.S. Department of State, USAID, the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee and the U.S. Institute of Peace. In February, the Briefing Paper was circulated to a large number of Western and Middle-Eastern embassies. Feedback on the Briefing Paper was actively encouraged, and some of the comments received are reflected in this report.

In April and May, return visits to the region allowed for closer tracking of developments in the humanitarian situation and responses to it.

¹¹ Greg Hansen, *Coming to Terms with the Humanitarian Imperative in Iraq*, HA 2015 Briefing Paper, Feinstein International Center, January, 2007. <http://fic.tufts.edu/downloads/HA2015IraqBriefingPaper.pdf>

“Reports that say that something hasn’t happened are always interesting to me, because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns—the ones we don’t know we don’t know.”
—Donald Rumsfeld at a press conference at NATO Headquarters, June 2002.

“Donors repeatedly complain that the quality of information available about humanitarian needs in Iraq is not good enough. And for that reason we do nothing? When traditional needs assessments are impossible due to insecurity and mobility problems, how rigorous does the data need to be? How rigorous was it in April 2003? When, if ever, will the start button get pushed?”
—Aid worker with an operational agency active in the south.

II. The Findings

1. The Perceptions and Knowledge Gap

Aid workers in Amman often lament the lack of media coverage of deteriorating conditions for the population in Iraq and the preponderance of focus in western media on the changing fortunes of the MNF. However, the dangers facing Iraqi and international journalists are increasing as mobility constraints worsen. Iraq has been the most dangerous conflict in the world for news staff since 2003. The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) reported on December 31, 2006, that 68 media staff, most of whom were Iraqis, were killed in 2006 alone.¹² Although there have been some important exceptions such as the work of IRIN¹³, 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 growing crisis. Recent field research by Refugees International, which has termed Iraq “the world’s fastest growing refugee crisis”, has also helped to place the scale of the developing refugee and displacement problem in sharper focus.¹⁴

Within the humanitarian apparatus inside Iraq and on its periphery, the field of vision, connection to community, and geographic scope of humanitarian organizations has decreased tremendously since early 2004. Being housebound in Baquba, or confined to MNF facilities, or to one’s office in Amman, all have the same detrimental effect on the ability of Iraqi and international staff to see options for doing more or doing things differently.

The trend was already in motion as early as the summer of 2004 when there was a noticeable decline in the 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 three 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

¹² *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>.

¹³ See U.N. OCHA’s Integrated Regional Information Network’s middle east coverage at <http://www.irinnews.org/ME.asp>

¹⁴ Iraq: The World’s Fastest Growing Refugee Crisis, (4 December, 2006), www.refugeesinternational.org

The knowledge and perceptions gap is a constant impairment among Iraq's dislocated aid community in Amman. Distance and increasing fragmentation inside Iraq isolates aid workers from reliable information. However, there is no credible excuse for the astonishing lack of curiosity about the Iraqi context among some aid staff. In a meeting about Iraq's longstanding Public Distribution System (PDS) for food aid, an Amman-based field officer with some four years of experience with WFP's Iraq program did not know whether Iraq's train system was operating or which food warehouses were open and accessible. In a UNAMI Humanitarian Working Group meeting in late 2006, a long-serving U.N. program officer didn't know what a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) was.

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. Nearly all agencies interviewed for the study reported difficulties with staff recruitment and retention in Iraq as "brain drain" and the dangers facing local aid workers increase.

Much of the information generated by (and for the consumption of) the humanitarian community and donors comes from the so-called "Green Zone" and other MNF and government facilities. These bastions, typically surrounded by several layers of blast walls, 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, U.N. agencies, and other organizations ensconced within these facilities, there are almost no possibilities for moving beyond their walls without heavy MNF or private security escort. As a result, there are almost no opportunities for key decision-makers in the mainstream 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 three northern governorates, but aid workers with closer connections to communities speak with bemusement about "the Baghdad Bubble" and are often astonished at the blinkered and sometimes skewed character of the "Green Zone Mentality".

In one illustration of this, an instructive record of "key issues" raised on December 5, 2006, during discussions in the "Green Zone" of the Inter-Agency Coordination Meeting of donors (notably comprised of the EC Delegation, DFID, USAID, the Japanese Embassy, Danish Embassy, Italian Embassy, UNAMI, the U.S. Marine Corps, and the Baghdad Provincial Reconstruction Team), made no mention of humanitarian issues or escalating violence. According to the record, discussion was limited to mention of working groups on elections and constitutional issues, capacity building workshops, renewed Japanese commitment to reconstruction efforts, and so on.

The knowledge and perceptions gap is a constant impairment among Iraq's dislocated aid community in Amman. Distance and increasing fragmentation inside Iraq isolates aid workers from reliable information. However, there is no credible excuse for the astonishing lack of curiosity about the Iraqi context among some aid staff. In a meeting about Iraq's longstanding Public Distribution System (PDS) for food aid, an Amman-based field officer with some four years of experience with WFP's Iraq program did not know whether Iraq's train system was operating or which food warehouses were open and accessible. In a UNAMI Humanitarian Working Group meeting in late 2006, a long-serving U.N. program officer didn't know what a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) was.

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 U.N.'s Security Information Report of December 1, 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."¹⁵

"Even poor people can help to bury the bodies."

-Interview outside Baghdad

"Iraqis want to help others. They're human. They have feelings. It's what Islam teaches."

-Interview in Baghdad

"During the attacks on Fallujah, poor people who had nothing went to donate their blood."

-Interview west of Baghdad

2. Universality

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

The research team 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 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.

One senior clergyman in Najaf mentioned with evident warmth the successive visits to Najaf by former U.N. SRSG Sergio Vieira de Mello, before his death in the bombing of the U.N.'s Baghdad headquarters. De Mello was remembered with affection in Najaf for his readiness to listen. Following audiences with Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, de

¹⁵ *United Nations Security Information Report, Ref./SIAU/Daily 01 Dec 06*, U.N. Safety and Security Unit, (1 December, 2006).

Mello was given the honor of being taken to the tomb of the Imam Ali, one of the most revered shrines in Shia Islam. In recognition of the tentative readiness among senior clergy to engage more closely with principled humanitarian institutions, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has recently opened a small office in Najaf in order to respond more effectively to needs, while availing itself of opportunities for greater outreach.

Insiders vs. Outsiders¹⁶

June 2004

During U.S. military offensives in Fallujah and Najaf in 2004, many Iraqis responded spontaneously to help people in need by gathering truck- and car-loads of food and other essential goods in their neighborhoods for distribution through mosques in the stricken cities. The scale of the assistance provided was huge and cut across communal lines with ease. 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.”

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?”

There is widespread understanding among Iraqis 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. In several conversations, people spoke with evident pride about how they

¹⁶ Meeting observed by the author in June 2004, and private communication in December 2006.

Zakat is one of the 5 pillars of Islam. It refers to the obligation to give a proportion of one's wealth to help the needy. Its basis is in the Holy Qu'ran:

Alms are for the poor and the needy, and those employed to administer (the funds); for those whose hearts have been (recently) reconciled (to truth); for those in bondage and in debt; and for the wayfarer: (Thus is it) ordained by Allah, and Allah is full of Knowledge and Wisdom.
—Qu'ran 9:60

Those that give their wealth for the cause of God can be compared to a grain of corn which brings forth seven ears, each bearing a hundred grains. God gives abundance to whom He will; God is munificent and all-knowing.

Those that give their wealth for the cause of God and do not follow their almsgiving with taunts and insults shall be rewarded by their Lord; they shall have nothing to fear or to regret.

A kind word with forgiveness is better than charity followed by insult.

God is self-sufficient and gracious.

[continues...]

or someone known to them had helped meet the assistance needs of stricken civilians, sometimes from another religious community, during attacks in 2004 by the U.S. military on Fallujah and Najaf. 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". The strong resonance between Islamic understandings of "good" charity (or help that is given in accordance with Islamic teachings) and principled humanitarian action underscores the importance of motives, such as providing assistance based on need alone. An Iraqi physician and NGO worker described his understanding of "genuine" humanitarian action this way: "You have to demonstrate allegiance to and solidarity with victims. Are you going to do it genuinely, and speak about it as you are living it? Or are you going to say the right things—use instrumentalized impartiality—to gain access?"

Assistance and protection roles of mosques and clergy. The many clergy engaged in conversation by our research team were particularly open to discussing similarities and differences between Islamic traditions of helping, such as the practices of *zakat* and *sadaqah*, and the humanitarian ethos that underpins much of the western or northern-dominated humanitarian apparatus. Some were candid in pointing out what they felt were the limitations of Islamic institutions in administering obligatory and voluntary donations. Others lamented the need to do things more "systematically" so that humanitarian efforts mounted by mosques and other faith-based community groups could do more effective work on a scale comparable to international NGOs. As one Imam put it, "al-Hausa [the seat of the Shia tradition in Iraq] still doesn't understand that we can use this big number [from the collection of *zakat*] for big projects." There was a sentiment expressed by some that it was time to focus on providing assistance to the needy in another way. Mention was made of the more systematic uses of *zakat* by Islamic institutions in neighboring Iran, where large projects were possible.

On the protection side of the agenda, we heard several examples of local Imams intervening to resolve disputes over the allocation of resources, such as frequently now arise between groups of displaced persons and host communities. In one instance, a cleric calmed local residents who were protesting the provision of a school building for IDP housing, appealing on humanitarian grounds through Islamic teachings for greater understanding. In several interviews, the research team heard of clerics intervening with authorities on behalf of needy people entitled to various forms of assistance from local authorities. In

Believers, do not mar your almsgiving with taunts and mischief-making, like those who spend their wealth for the sake of ostentation and believe neither in God nor in the Last Day. Such men are like a rock covered with earth: a shower falls upon it and leaves it hard and bare. They shall gain nothing from their works. God does not guide the unbelievers.

But those that give away their wealth from a desire to please God and to reassure their own souls are like an orchard on a hill-side: if a shower falls upon it, it yields up twice its normal produce; and if no rain falls, it is watered by the dew. God takes cognizance of all your actions.

Would any one of you, being a man well-advanced in age with helpless children to support, wish to have his orchard, an orchard planted with palm trees, vines and all manner of fruits, and watered by running streams—blasted and consumed by a fiery whirlwind?

—Qu’ran, 2:261–2:266

others, interviewees described how local imams had opened channels with local sub-offices of the Ministry of Migration and Displacement (MoDM) to ensure that current lists of displaced persons were properly filed and processed.

Several clerics noted that Iraqis had traditionally sought refuge and guidance in religion and specifically in revered religious leaders who were now losing influence to more militant clerics and “opportunists”. Since the 2003 invasion, the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Iraq’s most senior Shia cleric, has issued edicts encouraging Shia participation in elections and forbidding reprisal attacks on Sunni communities. In failing health, al-Sistani is perceived by analysts in the region to be careful not to squander his declining influence by asking for more than can be achieved. The same tendency was reported among clergy at community levels, in various parts of Iraq. Increasingly, “pressures” are being exerted on mosque committees and religious offices to conform more with the wishes and demands of religiously-inspired political groups and militias.

In Najaf, many of the clergy who were consulted on these issues were, on one hand, open to the theoretical possibility of increased cooperation with the international aid apparatus. However, in many cases their enthusiasm was tinged with mistrust, evident in the examples they gave of low-quality or insensitive work by “NGOs”. Quite often, however, it was not clear whether they were discussing local or international NGOs, commercial contractors, or authorities: these distinctions were thoroughly blurred, and it was apparent that their direct contact with “outsider” agencies had been limited at best. In addition, clergy sometimes responded hotly and with injured pride to the question of whether their own assistance efforts would accept “foreign” donations, even from other Muslims.

The tempered readiness to engage with the international humanitarian apparatus was also evident in conversation with a senior Imam in Erbil and resonated as well with the accounts given by operational NGOs regarding cooperative relationships they had variously nurtured with local mosques in Kirkuk, Sadr City, and Fallujah in order to better enable local distributions of emergency relief items. In the south, near Basrah, a European NGO began in late 2003 to cultivate a “friendly, neighborly relationship” with the Imam in the mosque down the street from its office, and, when insecurity began to increase, the Imam gave an explicit warning during Friday prayers that the NGO was there to help and must not be touched. In each case, forethought and time were invested in building relationships with Imams through respected local contacts. Initial approaches by the NGOs were self-consciously

To be charitable in public is good, but to give alms to the poor in private is better and will atone for some of your sins. God has knowledge of all your actions.

–Qu’ran, 2:271

“Flexible religious leaders can control some things for the next several months, but after that? It will be very hard for them to intervene [to moderate the behavior of militias].”

–An Imam in Baghdad.

“If a mosque brings and introduces an NGO, it will be trusted, but if the municipality brings the NGO, it will be distrusted.”

–Interview near Baghdad.

deferential, but trust emerged with time, familiarity, and good performance by the NGOs in living up to their undertakings with quality work. The NGOs that had these experiences spoke in glowing terms about the access to communities provided by mosques but also recognized that even with trusting relationships, the possibilities for greater cooperation with Islamic structures were limited by the lack of adequate systems.

Concerns have been raised in the international aid apparatus about the impartiality of Islamic institutions and mosques as aid providers in Iraq.¹⁷ Not surprisingly, these concerns have been heightened by increasing communal divisions. By logical extension, and recalling experience in other conflicts, increasing sectarian divisions infers less impartiality and greater politicization in resource allocation. Interviews at community level yielded mixed perceptions of the role of mosques and clergy in ensuring that assistance was based on need. Many established mosques continue to maintain lists of vulnerable individuals in their communities, such as widows and other groups. Some respondents felt strongly that their Imam knew best who in their community was most in need and, as the most trusted and respected member of the immediate community, was the best possible arbiter of targeting decisions and, in any case, much better than NGOs, city councils, or parties. As with the protection activities of mosques, the research team heard of increasing pressures on mosques and clergy from parties and militias, leading to increasing biases in allocations of assistance.

The Ethos/Practice Gap

Apart from the resonance between Islamic teachings and the western or northern humanitarian ethos, strong evidence emerged that 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 was frequently contrasted by Iraqis with the realities of aid in their communities and tempered by suspicions about the intentions and motives of agencies on the ground. Behavior of individual aid workers and aid providers had left stronger negative impressions among those interviewed than positive impressions.

¹⁷ See Theo Murphy, *Civil Society and Islamic Aid in Iraq: Unseen Developments and Threats*, Overseas Development Institute (ODI), London, October 2004. www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/0/a18638f8c12f66d585256f3800530e81.

“[In Saddam’s time...] we lived inside a system of security and the military. Everyone was a spy.”

–Iraqi staff member of a humanitarian NGO.

Residents of areas afflicted by intense military activity held aid organizations and foreign and local aid workers in far lower estimation than in less-affected areas. In the worst-hit areas, people spoke of deep suspicion of local and international aid workers, who were regarded as “spies”. In the south, it emerged in interviews that suspicion of international aid workers increased following the “capture” of two British soldiers traveling in an unmarked car in Arabic clothing.¹⁸ Also in the south, aid workers employed by Danish organizations were singled out for additional suspicion in some of those whom we interviewed, due to the uproar over cartoons in the Danish press that were perceived to have mocked Islam. Mention was made in three interviews north and east of Baghdad of how towns or neighborhoods had been bombed shortly after visits by perceived “aid” agencies that had distributed coffee, chocolate, and neckties. Others mentioned 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 U.S. Marines shortly after military action in Fallujah.

As strong as it is, the resonance between Islamic and Iraqi ideals of assistance and protection and the Dunantist traditions underpinning much of the international humanitarian apparatus is overlaid with a pervasive unfamiliarity with western or northern humanitarian action. Only a small handful of international aid organizations were present and operational in Iraq prior to the 2003 invasion. Their working environment was characterized by deep ambiguities even then. According to Iraqi and international aid workers who were active in humanitarian agencies before the current war, the regime of Saddam Hussein and the prevailing political intrigues surrounding Iraq helped to promulgate widespread suspicion of foreigners, and the role of UNICEF, while often resolutely humanitarian, was tainted by its association with the U.N.-administered sanctions regime. Objective information about the motivations and roles of aid agencies was in short supply.

Commenting on this lack of awareness in 2004, an international staff member of NCCI put it this way: “We have never explained who we are—as humanitarians—to the Iraqis; we have never sought their acceptance or their invitation to operate in the country. We have never

¹⁸The Guardian (UK), *British tanks storm Basra jail to free undercover soldiers*, September 20, 2005.
http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk_news/story/0,3604,1573935,00.html

“Fighters believe that because UNICEF is delivering the [vaccine] drops we are supporters of the U.S. forces. They do not know the difference between UNICEF and the U.S. and consider us as Iraqis working for a foreign company. This is what makes this job dangerous for us. Iraqis do not believe that there is any organization which is neutral and people lump you on whatever side they want. Some of our colleagues have been beaten. Some, especially women, have been accused by fighters of being government followers and because they go out to work, they are also accused of being prostitutes. There are also allegations that our vaccine drops are contaminated with some poison from the U.S. forces. ... I have had enough and I cannot stand it anymore because it is becoming increasingly dangerous. We could lose our lives any time and there is no appreciation of what we do. Maybe when all aid workers stop working in Iraq, people will understand how important we are and how protected we should be.”
–UNICEF national staff person in Baghdad, IRIN, December 2006.

explained how we operate and why we operate differently from the coalition forces or other players.”¹⁹

Interviews also revealed that the ethos/practice gap was aggravated to some extent by the behavior and cultural insensitivity of some international aid workers when their presence in the central and southern governorates was still viable. Some, for example, were cited in interviews for dressing inappropriately, not knowing that a man should not extend a hand to a woman, failing to keep promises, and distributing Christian religious tracts and coloring books. On the other hand, examples of positive behavior also emerged in interviews: east of Baghdad, aid workers believed by interviewees to be from Qatar or the UAE were remembered for being polite and sympathetic, as were representatives of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC).

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 central and southern governorates often engenders acute suspicion of the motives and affiliations of others in a context where the “wrong” affiliations can be toxic and life-threatening. 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 real or perceived 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 has been severely diminished by security threats and ensuing low

¹⁹ Greg Hansen, *Humanitarian Action in Iraq: Emerging Constraints and Challenges*, Humanitarianism and War Project, Feinstein International Center, April, 2004. http://hwproject.tufts.edu/new/pdf/Hansen_report_Iraq_final.pdf.

“Because the bombers [of the U.N. Headquarters in Baghdad] played on the vulnerability of relief workers—the fact that we are soft targets without much in the way of armed protection—the magnitude of Tuesday’s attack will force a rude awakening. The realization that has been creeping up on us has now asserted itself full force. We can no longer rely on the promise of protection given to us by the Geneva Conventions. For whatever set of reasons, our nimbus of invulnerability has evaporated. It is no longer reasonable to criticize and deride aid workers who feel compelled to use armed guards for protection. Without taking such pragmatic steps, we will be forced to withdraw and leave the embattled civilians we have traveled across the world to assist. The only question now is whether the changes humanitarians must make in the way we operate will steer us away from our core principles of independence and impartiality, or make us more determined to stick to them.”

**—Sheri Fink, former Medical Director of IMC in Iraq, April–July 2003
From an op-ed in the Wall Street Journal, 21 August 2003**

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.

3. Terrorism and Counter-terrorism

The “with us or with the terrorists” mentality that has infused the “Global War on Terror” has been felt in strange ways by humanitarian actors in Iraq. In 2004, it was inconceivable to all but the ICRC and a very small number of NGOs to even consider the possibility of making contacts with non-coalition armed groups in order to increase or maintain humanitarian access. That reluctance is beginning to change as Iraq becomes increasingly fragmented and as local power structures, such as militias, crystallize. In some areas, these structures may constitute the only guarantor—or controller—of access. NGOs in particular now increasingly recognize the need to identify and establish contact with militia leaders, parties, and insurgent groups as a first essential step toward asserting and safeguarding humanitarian space in local areas.

The schisms that began to develop in the humanitarian apparatus in 2001 and grew markedly worse in 2003 are alive and well among agencies engaged in and around Iraq in 2007. Iraq has been a seismic event for virtually all humanitarian organizations in the theatre, and the tectonic plates underpinning their various philosophical leanings seem to have shifted for the duration. Discussions with U.N. agencies and NGOs regarding the implications of terrorism and counter-terrorism continue to elicit strong emotions and substantial resentment. Dunantist-leaning organizations remain bitter over successive compromises, in their view, of principle to pragmatism in the Iraq context, and argue that the choices made and paths followed by the U.N. system and many NGO colleagues have had severe consequences for the entire humanitarian apparatus.²⁰

Meanwhile, the evidence from ground-level in Iraq suggests that many of the attempts by the humanitarian apparatus to adjust to the fallout from terror/counter-terror and insurgency/counter-insurgency have ultimately proved maladaptive and self-defeating when measured against the gains and losses felt by the population. Some aid workers suggest that program suspension or closure by some agencies helped

²⁰ “For a helpful discussion of the typology of humanitarian organizations and how they situate themselves in relation to humanitarian principles and political contexts, see Abby Stoddard, Humanitarian NGOs: Challenges and Trends, HPG Briefing No. 12, Humanitarian Policy Group, July 2003. <http://www.odi.org.uk/HPG/papers/hpgbrief12.pdf>.

“The world is full of lies but the lies themselves don’t know they’re lies because they’re the children of lies and the grandchildren of lies.”

–Representative of a major donor, commenting in 2004 on the difficulties of parsing the Iraqi context.

“They are needed. Their work is needed. And if they are driven out, then the terrorists win.”

–Colin Powell on withdrawal of the ICRC and other civilian humanitarian organizations from Iraq following the bombing of the ICRC headquarters in Baghdad, 27 October 2003.

to foster a climate of impunity for those under arms on all sides and served to confirm the perception that “western” interests were political and military but not humanitarian. Many describe a growing malaise and loss of motivation among the humanitarian community when much of it was displaced to Amman by insecurity. Some aid organizations are seen by others to have become instruments in the “Global War on Terror” by embedding with controversial military forces, confirming for some the perception that the humanitarian community had been wholly compromised.

Pragmatist or Wilsonian organizations in Iraq are known to the more Dunantist groups as “embeds,” and their compromises of principle to pragmatism have resulted in serious fault-lines among assistance agencies since the beginning of the 2003 invasion. Surrender of principle to pragmatism has indeed ruled out working contact with the “other” sets of combatants in Iraq for many essential elements of the humanitarian apparatus—affiliated, embedded, or not—and has decreased possibilities of winning “terrorists,” insurgent groups, or militias over to greater adherence to their obligations under international humanitarian law. For agencies of all stripes, going underground with humanitarian action has undermined possibilities of building relationships and acceptance among the population. For the pragmatists, working behind blast walls or from armed and armoured convoys has, in most of the central and southern governorates, shut down genuine access to communities, and has filtered information through distorting lenses: distortions thus become the reality to key decision-makers in the humanitarian apparatus.

Humanitarian Principles, “Anti-Americanism,” and

Exceptionalism. As early as 2003, for those whose sympathies, security, or paychecks lay with the coalition, the exercise of neutrality, impartiality, and independence in Iraq came to be understood as “anti-Americanism” when the assertion of humanitarian principles brought aid workers into disagreement with the policies and practices of coalition forces, their political masters, or clients. Fear of perceived anti-Americanism and, in some cases, of being cut off from U.S. funding sources, effectively led to exceptionalism²¹ where criticism of coalition forces, particularly American forces, often tended to be muted in comparison with that typically meted out to combatants in other conflicts. Exceptionalism was evident, for example, during a UNAMI

²¹ “Exceptionalism” refers to a belief or expectation that a particular state, society, institution or time period should be exempt from prevailing norms and principles.

emergency working group meeting in Amman in 2004 when an NGO complained of having one of its clearly-marked water tankers fired upon by U.S. troops. The U.N. chair of the meeting suggested that the preferred course of action would be to educate NGO drivers more thoroughly about the need to keep their distance from coalition assets, rather than making a demarche to the coalition encouraging it to exercise greater fire discipline and more respect for civilian objects.

Exceptionalism in the posture of many aid agencies toward the coalition became commonplace even among some Dunantist-leaning organizations. In 2004, NCCI's Executive Coordinator was asked to make regular 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."²²

Implications of Terrorism/Counterterrorism for the U.N. in Iraq

Following the destruction of the Canal Hotel and the loss of 22 U.N. and NGO staff, the Security Council passed Resolution 1502, which characterized the attack on the U.N. as a violation of international humanitarian law. The U.N. responded to the bombing and a subsequent smaller attack by suspending programs and withdrawing staff from Iraq, effectively cutting off any meaningful assistance to a population suffering ever more acutely as living conditions in Iraq deteriorated. Some NGOs followed suit, but others stayed on to continue programs in lower profile. As for the U.N., it would eventually re-establish a limited presence in Iraq but only by effectively

²² Greg Hansen, *Independent Evaluation: Iraq NGOs Coordination and Security Office* - (ECHO/IRQ/210/2003/05029), June, 2004.

“For FICSA and CCISUA, just one staff member is one staff member too many in Iraq.”

–Letter from U.N. Staff Associations in NY to Kofi Annan, November 2004.

“Long gone are the days when U.N. staff were immune from such violent acts. Instead, the U.N. regrettably has become a direct target, one that is particularly prone to attacks by ruthless extremist terrorist factions.”

–Letter from U.N. Staff Associations in NY to Kofi Annan, November 2004.

embedding itself with coalition forces. UNICEF and UNHCR made efforts to keep programs operating through networks of home-based local staff and local partner organizations. IOM, a partner of UNHCR, established similar networks for monitoring needs and assisting where possible.

At the strategic policy level of the U.N.’s humanitarian posture in Iraq, the implications of the terrorism/counterterrorism mix have been profound. As we noted in the preliminary report of the HA 2015 project:

“Placing a function that draws its legitimacy from the U.N. Charter (or the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) within a management structure borne of political compromise in the Security Council is questionable and possibly self-defeating”.²³

The experience of Iraq puts the political/humanitarian tension in sharp relief. With UNSC Resolution 1546 of June 2004, U.N. humanitarian agencies had their security and coordination arrangements with a belligerent or occupying force dictated by the Security Council. Making no distinction between UNAMI and the various members of the UNCT, Resolution 1546 formalized the reliance of the entire U.N. system in Iraq on the MNF. At least five factors combined to produce this result.

First, the U.N. system was still reeling from the shock of the Canal Hotel bombing of August 2003. Second, the U.N.’s security apparatus was in disarray: fallout from two investigations into causes and culpability in the bombing was still intense, and staff often reacted with paralysis.²⁴ Third, the U.S. administration’s justifications for the preemptive invasion of Iraq had not yet been fully discredited, and misplaced optimism prevailed regarding the chances that the U.S.-led coalition could keep Iraq minimally stable and governable. Fourth, extreme pressure to step up U.N. activity in Iraq was being brought to bear on the Secretariat, and on Kofi Annan himself, by the U.S. Fifth, U.N. staff associations in New York were voicing harsh objections to any further U.N. presence in Iraq and were insisting on a zero-risk environment.

²³ Antonio Donini et al, *Humanitarian Agenda 2015: Principles, Power and Perceptions, Preliminary Report*, Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, p.33.

²⁴ See: *Report of the Independent Panel on the Safety and Security of the U.N. Personnel in Iraq*, 20 October 2003, <http://www.un.org/News/dh/iraq/safety-security-un-personnel-iraq.pdf> and *Report of the Security in Iraq Accountability Panel (SIAP)*, New York, 3 March 2004, <http://www.un.org/News/dh/iraq/SIAP-report.pdf>

Now western leaders have appropriated the rhetoric of humanitarian intervention as part of the military lexicon: tough on terrorism and tough on the causes of terrorism. Poverty and injustice are recognized as factors that nurture terrorism. From there the Bush administration took a major leap to the assertion that U.S. NGOs should consider themselves a branch of the government's anti-terror effort. The consequences of this approach are obvious—NGOs are associated with U.S. military policy, and where that fails, so does the humanitarian effort. —The Guardian, July 13, 2004.

Resolution 1546 effectively shackled and subordinated the U.N.'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.²⁵ It also set the stage for the use of coalition forces—widely perceived as unfriendly belligerents by many Iraqis—for humanitarian efforts as an expedient of first resort, rather than as an option of last resort in accordance with international U.N. guidelines which coalition governments had themselves helped to draft prior to the invasion.²⁶ The Resolution "...Requests Member States and international and regional organizations to contribute assistance to the multinational force, including military forces, as agreed with the Government of Iraq, to help meet the needs of the Iraqi people for security and stability, humanitarian and reconstruction assistance, and to support the efforts of UNAMI."²⁷

Importantly, the Resolution appropriated the language of the "Global War on Terror" in its description of armed groups not somehow affiliated with the MNF or the new government installed by the occupation. There was no recognition in the Resolution that several different insurgencies were being waged against coalition forces by a wide variety of actors that could be discerned even in mid-2004. It made no distinction between the different armed actors hostile to the MNF and affiliated authorities: all were "terrorists".

²⁵ The hierarchy of UNAMI activity in Iraq was enumerated in UNSC Resolution 1546 as follows:

- (i) assist in the convening, during the month of July 2004, of a national conference to select a Consultative Council; (ii) advise and support the Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq, as well as the Interim Government of Iraq and the Transitional National Assembly, on the process for holding elections;
- (iii) promote national dialogue and consensus-building on the drafting of a national constitution by the people of Iraq;
- (b) and also:

- (i) advise the Government of Iraq in the development of effective civil and social services;
- (ii) contribute to the coordination and delivery of reconstruction, development, and humanitarian assistance;
- (iii) promote the protection of human rights, national reconciliation, and judicial and legal reform in order to strengthen the rule of law in Iraq; and
- (iv) advise and assist the Government of Iraq on initial planning for the eventual conduct of a comprehensive census. U.N. Security Council, S/RES/1546 (2004), 8 June 2004.

²⁶ 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 U.N. OCHA, *Guidelines for Humanitarian Organizations on Interacting with Military and Other Security Forces in Iraq*, (20 October, 2004), <http://ochaonline.un.org/DocView.asp?DocID=2071>. See also U.N. 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.

²⁷ Ibid.

4. Coherence and the Political/Military/Humanitarian Relationship

“We’re doing a humanitarian assistance operation here,” said Captain Joshua Schneider, a native of Phoenix and the staff maneuver adviser to the Iraqi Army for military transition team 0632. “We’ve brought generators, blackboards, book bags, filled with school supplies like pens and pencils and notebook paper, and activity books for school.” About sixty Iraqi soldiers were part of the operation.

“The reception has been very good,” Schneider added. “The teachers and Iraqi soldiers are building stronger relationships, and that’s only going to help this area.”

“It makes me feel all warm and fuzzy inside, helping the children,” said 1st Lt. Kevin Grilo, a native of Millington, N.J., and the executive officer for Troop A. “If we give them the ability to learn and get an education, they’re less vulnerable to other influences—like extremist views.”

Platoon leader 1st Lt. Adam Robison, a native of Columbus, Ohio, was also upbeat about the mission. “Seeing the kids respond to us handing out toys and book bags is always great—they are so happy. It’s like we’re Santa Claus to them,” Robison said. “I think doing missions like this with the Iraqi soldiers allows people to see that they (the soldiers) care and that they’re starting to take responsibility for their country so they can start taking over.”

U.S. Central Command Press Release, April 4, 2007.



A cartoon by Steve Bell, appearing in *The Guardian* on March 20th, 2003, the start of the U.S. invasion.

“By deliberately targeting the Baghdad delegation of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) on 27 October, 2003, using a car bomb displaying a protective emblem recognized by 191 States, what message were you sending us? How should we, indeed, how could we respond? If we could engage in dialogue with you, we would attempt to convince you that: We are neither allies of nor dependent on Coalition forces or the United Nations. We try to conduct our humanitarian work in an impartial and independent manner. I say ‘try’ because the politicized world in which we find ourselves can cause us to be perceived in a biased way. While there are some who would like to be perceived to be doing humanitarian work so as to further their political aims, the ICRC is apolitical and humanitarian—or perhaps I should say that it takes part in ‘politics’—in the original, noble sense—so as to further humanitarian aims. We are neither with you nor against you...”

–Harald Schmid de Grunneck, ICRC Maghreb regional delegate, in L’Humanitaire Maghreb, 6 December 2003.

The research team heard strong indications that life-saving assistance and protection efforts in Iraq have been tainted by association or mis-association with a range of often-flawed activities motivated by military or political objectives. Genuine humanitarian relief efforts have occurred simultaneously and often in the same space as a range of well-resourced political, reconstruction, and development activities that have been explicitly instrumentalized and underwritten by MNF governments and others to shore up the occupation and the structures which followed on from it. The rush to consolidate the occupation and then to hand power back to an ill-equipped Iraqi state often led to an evident insensitivity to local realities and blindness to the hierarchy of needs.

Our researchers heard numerous complaints of governance, democratization, and similar activities that were perceived in local communities as inappropriate, poorly timed, unresponsive to local needs, unfocused, or all of these. One example was provided by an Iraqi woman who had attended a workshop on women’s rights, democracy, and constitutional issues, apparently provided at a time of acute unmet basic subsistence needs in a war-stricken area that was rife with egregious human rights violations. The workshop was provided by an Iraqi service-provider NGO on contract to an international NGO, itself apparently funded by the U.N. Describing the usefulness and cost-effectiveness of the exercise, and the lavishness of the lunch that was provided to participants, her comments were caustic:

“Women from poor rural areas were taken by bus to the workshop then back home again. They hired women and girls with humble education from the cities to come and talk to them about women’s rights, human rights and democracy, the things we see being completely destroyed here every day. The rural women understood nothing that was told to them. For them it was like a picnic. I asked [the facilitators], how much did this cost? They gave a number that would be enough to distribute food to more than one-hundred families! I asked them, why is this money not spent to make relief projects for needy people? They answered, ‘The NGO pays for this activity, not to feed the poor.’”

By the accounts of U.N. humanitarian officials, the subordination of the humanitarian functions of UNAMI to its essentially political role has had some disturbing outcomes in practice. In a conversation with a UNICEF staffer in late 2004 when Iraq was readying for the U.N.-facilitated elections, he described being told by his headquarters to justify why programs in Iraq should not be suspended for the duration of the election and the lead-up to it. Officials at headquarters, he explained, were acting on concerns in DPA that the entire elections

According to UNICEF, 1.5 million Iraqis died due to 13 years of economic sanctions on Iraq, mandated by the U.N. Security Council and administered by the U.N. Oil for Food Program. 600,000 of these were children.

process could be jeopardized if a U.N. staff member or facility was attacked in the weeks leading up to the vote.

More recently, a senior U.N. humanitarian official noted, "There is a certain understanding in UNAMI and the U.N. Country Team that political aspects of the mission take precedence". A mid-level staffer was more blunt, saying in December 2006 that growing concerns about the current humanitarian crisis in Iraq were being "...overshadowed by the political preoccupation of UNAMI." These views are widely shared among humanitarian NGOs. As one aid worker put it, "The U.N. focuses on the political situation in Baghdad."

The new U.N. Strategic Framework for Humanitarian Action in Iraq²⁸, released in April 2007, has generally been received as an earnest attempt to re-assert the U.N.'s humanitarian role and to protect it against politicization. It also asserts a stronger coordinating and leadership role for the U.N.'s Humanitarian Coordinator for Iraq, in keeping with the U.N.'s humanitarian reform agenda. Early indications from the UNCT have suggested strong resistance from the headquarters of WFP, UNICEF and WHO to the Humanitarian Coordinator's enhanced role and the U.N.'s re-assertion of a more neutral and independent humanitarian posture.

Has the U.N. Crossed the Rubicon?

Our evidence is mixed as to whether the U.N. has already crossed the point of no return in terms of its image and acceptance among Iraqis as a humanitarian actor. UNICEF, which continues to distribute some of its standard items marked with the UNICEF logo through the Iraqi Red Crescent, had relatively good name recognition among several of those whom we interviewed in Iraqi communities and appeared to be better known than most other organizations as an agency that did humanitarian work for children around the world. In a handful of our interviews specific mention was made of past UNICEF work in local neighborhoods, along with the ICRC, Red Crescent, and a few small European NGOs.

One international staffer with UNICEF felt that most Iraqis readily recognized the UNICEF name from its long history in Iraq and was certain that UNICEF was understood by Iraqis "somehow separately" from the U.N. Another from UNICEF in New York took the opposite

²⁸ United Nations and Partners, Strategic Framework for Humanitarian Action in Iraq, (April, 2007). [http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004CE90B/\(httpDocuments\)/2062ECE544FA61A7C12572C200375BF5/\\$file/pdf_Strategic_Framework_for_Humanitarian_Action_in_Iraq.pdf](http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004CE90B/(httpDocuments)/2062ECE544FA61A7C12572C200375BF5/$file/pdf_Strategic_Framework_for_Humanitarian_Action_in_Iraq.pdf)

“We get tired of promises and promises and talk and talk.”

–Comment heard during an assessment visit, related by a UNHCR field officer.

“Last month, my term as chairman of the donor committee for the International Reconstruction Fund Facility for Iraq (IRFFI) expired, and I left the job despondent. I have no real expectation that Iraq can be reconstituted as a viable entity, whatever is done. Many of my colleagues, Iraqi and international, have privately shared that view for some time. We knew we were working in a glass bubble, isolating ourselves from the carnage on the ground. That sense of hopelessness weighs increasingly heavy.”

–Michael Bell, from a commentary in the *Globe and Mail*, May 6 2007

“UNAMI isn’t an integrated mission, it’s a dis-integrated mission. We have offices in 3 countries. Our decisions are taken by offices in Amman, Kuwait City, Baghdad, and New York.”

–Senior official of UNAMI

view, suggesting that the U.N. would not be able to overcome the stigma attached to it by Iraqis because of the U.N.’s administration of the sanctions regime and the suffering associated with the Oil-for-Food Program before the 2003 invasion.

It was evident from some of the comments heard in Iraqi communities that many were familiar with the humanitarian work of the U.N. in other countries through media exposure. But as one woman asked, “Where are they now?” The withdrawal of the U.N. following the Canal Hotel bombing is well-known in Iraq, as is the role of the U.N. in managing the sanctions regime. It would be a stretch to expect Iraqis to appreciate the inherent tensions that prevailed inside the U.N. system during the sanctions period and doubtful that many would remember two successive U.N. Humanitarian Coordinators and the head of WFP in Iraq quitting in protest over the sanctions and their harmful humanitarian effects.

Problematic perceptions or misperceptions cut both ways in the rocky relationship between the U.N. and Iraq, at all levels. One junior Jordanian employee of UNAMI was shockingly blunt when speaking about her Iraqi colleagues in a conversation about security issues: “They can’t be trusted. They love blood too much.” In similar unguarded fashion, and again in a conversation about how to clear the U.N.’s security logjam in Iraq, a mid-level western staffer of DSS in New York felt the problem lay with “the Arab mentality, their culture.” Another U.N. employee who had been based in Iraq before and after the Canal Hotel bombing summed up the U.N.’s relationship with Iraq this way: “It’s like a jinx”. The perceptions gap was acknowledged in 2004 by the incoming Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Iraq, Ashraf Qazi, who commented: “There is every reason for the Iraqi people to see the U.N. mission in Iraq as a mission in their service and for them, and it will be my job to strengthen that impression there.”²⁹ An experienced UNHCR official questioned whether there had been any change for the better since then in how the U.N. was viewed by Iraqis, given the ongoing close affiliation with the MNF: “It’s eroded the moral soap-box we used to be able to stand on.”

Donor Failure

The extent of politicization in donor behavior is a recurring complaint of operational humanitarian agencies. Donor responsiveness to lifesaving assistance and protection work in Iraq has gone through several

²⁹ Statement in a U.N. news conference, quoted in U.N. Information Centre Newsletter, <http://www.un.org.pk/unic/newsletters/NEWSLETTER040727.htm>.

“Civil society in Iraq was dead on birth. One of the biggest mistakes that was made here has to do with accountability. We’ve had enormous problems cultivating consistent local partnerships with the different standards of accountability from donor to donor here. In Iraq, some donor funding has high standards of accountability—the usual level. Other donors have zero accountability. We’re dealing here with a vast pool of “shadow” NGOs that were created after the invasion. Some donors don’t know how to recognize them. How do we hold local partners accountable for good work when donors expect nothing from them? The partners hear about the lax standards elsewhere and complain about our ‘too stringent’ standards. Which kinds of programmes and donors do you think they’ll go with? The local NGO sector was spoiled by this in the couple of years after the invasion. There was too much money around, and not enough accountability.”
—Senior program manager with

phases since 2003. In the months prior to the U.S.-led invasion, donors committed generous funding to a preparedness appeal for \$193 million launched by the U.N. in anticipation of a massive displacement and refugee crisis that did not then materialize. Following the invasion, funding for major humanitarian programs, including a U.N. Flash Appeal for \$2.2 billion in April 2003, 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 2004, ceased funding new humanitarian activity in Iraq in April 2005, and closed its Iraq office in Amman the following July. 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 pledging €6 million to the U.N. Development Group’s Cluster F for refugees and displaced persons, and €4 million to the ICRC’s protection activities.

Funding problems compelled some operational NGOs to withdraw from Iraq completely from late 2005, even up until early 2007 when it was clear that a renewed humanitarian response was necessary. 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.

One senior U.N. manager put it this way: “There is an environment of denial among donors that reconstruction has been less than successful. There is resistance against the idea that there is a humanitarian problem in Iraq because it’s seen as an admission of failure. Iraq has long been sitting on a budget surplus, which is inevitable for a failing state which donors still regard as a construction site. Couple that with a die-hard assumption that Iraq is a developed, middle-income country that is awash in fungible donor funding and oil wealth.”

“How could reconstruction efforts succeed embedded in chaos?”

–Michael Bell, former Chairman of the IRFFI, from a commentary in the *Globe and Mail*, 6 May 2007.

Donors have indeed been generous with funds earmarked for reconstruction. The International Reconstruction Facility for Iraq (IRFFI), to which 25 donors have pledged some US\$2 billion and the International Compact for Iraq are structured to channel funds through U.N. agencies, the World Bank, and the tottering and often corrupt structures of the Iraqi state. Yet these funds are not easily accessible, or at all accessible, to emergency humanitarian programs. Attempts by U.N. humanitarian officials in 2006 to raise the profile of humanitarian problems in IRFFI discussions “made people nervous”.

“You Are All Corrupt”

Donors have often accepted far less rigorous standards for needs assessment, monitoring, and evaluation of reconstruction programs than for life-saving humanitarian programs. Widespread perceptions of corruption and waste undoubtedly account for part of the credibility gap facing operational humanitarian agencies among Iraqis. While not strictly speaking a coherence issue, it was the rushed expressed need of much of the international community to consolidate the occupation of Iraq which led to creation of a rich donor pool and a climate of impunity for its use and misuse. Misuse of resources by a variety of actors has conditioned the way that Iraqis understand assistance. 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, abandoned half-finished construction projects, 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 perception that reconstruction efforts have been wasteful was not limited to Iraqis, nor only in the central and southern governorates. During discussions among humanitarian officials about urgent needs among flooded-out Kurdish villagers in December 2006, it came to light that the Kurdish authorities had no capacity to assist the caseload, despite years of development assistance and a recent boom in private investment. As one U.N. official noted, “You mean to tell me that after

**“We don’t want to pollute our organization with your money.”
—An Iraqi NGO’s response to an offer of funding from a U.S.-based NGO/contractor hybrid organization embedded with the MNF and U.S. State Department.**

“There is no objection to taking their money”. Full text of response from Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani in answer to a question from the author regarding whether it was *haram*, or forbidden, to accept money from American sources. Based on what was heard by the research team at ground level, his response was at odds with prevailing sentiments, especially in areas afflicted by intense military activity.

15 years of technical assistance from the international community they don’t even have the means to look after 10,000 of their own people?”³⁰

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 disturbing donor failure. Aid agency staff in the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement, U.N. 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. NGOs spoke of being incensed at a multi-million dollar pledge from the Iraqi Government to Lebanon in the summer of 2006, when funds for their own emergency assistance programs were “stuck” in ministries. Other managers identified a lingering sentiment, among some donors and even within one U.N. agency’s headquarters, that individual MNF governments—and pre-eminently the United States itself—should bear primary responsibility for underwriting a humanitarian response.

Meanwhile, the perception among Iraqis of waste and corruption among international actors and their own authorities has been thoroughly validated, not least by investigations of the U.S. Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction (SIGIR). The scale of carelessness has been staggering. As the Guardian put it:³¹

A culture of waste, incompetence and fraud may be one legacy the occupiers have passed on to Iraq’s new rulers more or less intact. [SIGIR] found that nearly \$9bn in Iraqi oil revenues could not be accounted for. The cash was flown into the country in shrink-wrapped bundles on military transport planes and handed over by the ton to Iraqi ministries by the Coalition Provisional Authority. . . . The money was meant to demonstrate the invaders’ good intentions and boost the Iraqi economy [. . .] but it also fuelled a cycle of corruption left over from Saddam Hussein’s rule.

³⁰ Reconstruction failures, waste and corruption have been well-documented, not least by the US government’s own watchdog agency for Iraqi reconstruction, SIGIR. See <http://www.sigir.mil/>. See also James Glanz, *Rebuilt Iraq projects found crumbling*, New York Times, (29 April, 2007).

<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/29/world/middleeast/29reconstruct.html?em&ex=1177905600&en=a67968402ef90a34&ei=5087%0A>

³¹ Julian Borger and David Pallister, The Guardian, 2 December 2006. See also the SIGIR website, <http://www.sigir.mil/>.

The need for perceptibly neutral donor funding

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 U.S. coalition—proved acceptable. Going one step further, an MSF worker pointed out that his organization would “refuse on principle any funding from institutions related to violence”. 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.

An Iraqi NGO’s “Rules for Donors”³²

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.”

³² Discussion with the research team, December 2006.

In order to be acceptable, donations:

- must not be from countries which occupy Iraq and directly or indirectly destroyed its infrastructure;
- must not be from organizations which have illicit aims of changing the values and traditions of Iraqi communities;
- should be from independent, neutral and non-political organizations, national or international;
- must not be conditional on changing our organization's way of doing things;
- must not aim to change the morals and values which come from the religious structures and ethics of Iraqi communities;
- must not aim to promote acceptance of the occupation forces;
- must not require us to enter the "Green Zone" in Baghdad;
- 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.

Militarized Humanitarianism?

The distinctions between military and humanitarian activity have been threatened from a number of different directions in Iraq. Prior to and during the invasion in 2003, many humanitarian organizations were alarmed by the extent of attempted military involvement in humanitarian efforts. The U.S. military established "Humanitarian Operations Centers" (HOCs) in Kuwait City before the invasion, and later in Baghdad, for the stated purposes of "coordinating" humanitarian action and liaising with the humanitarian community. Reflecting pre-existing differences in aid agency attitudes toward interaction with military forces, some NGOs—of all nationalities—eschewed all contact with the HOCs, while others welcomed it.

Concurrent with the build-up of U.S. forces in Kuwait, in January 2003, 5 large U.S.-based NGOs (World Vision, Save the Children-US, IRC, Mercy Corps, and IMC) accepted a USAID-OFDA grant to form the Joint NGO Preparedness Initiative (JNEPI), with the objective of preparing NGOs for a major relief operation in Iraq once combat operations started. Using staff seconded from the implementing agencies, JNEPI worked in Amman, Kuwait City, and Washington, opening an Amman office in mid-March.

Friction emerged almost immediately between the members of JNEPI and other, mostly European NGOs, some of which had already been present and operational inside Iraq for years. As JNEPI's final report notes, "The specter of a U.S.-funded NGO consortium/coordinating

body hung over the growing NGO community in Amman for over a month.”³³

When the Baghdad HOC began attempting to assert a coordinating role in early April, several NGOs conspicuously opted out of HOC-sponsored meetings with humanitarian actors and also moved further away from JNEPI, forming the NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq (NCCI) as a platform for agencies that were concerned about preserving the distinctions between military forces and civilian humanitarian actors. NCCI was gradually formalized with a principles-driven charter and, with funding from ECHO, OCHA, and other sources, grew rapidly through 2004 and into 2005, eventually providing coordination services to the majority of international humanitarian NGOs operating in Iraq. JNEPI fizzled into near-irrelevance and eventually closed in the summer of 2003, while the HOCs ultimately proved relevant only to a small minority of operational humanitarian actors that were engaged in joint planning and operations with coalition forces. Over time, the HOCs were increasingly engaged in coordinating ad hoc assistance efforts of individual soldiers and units.

Soon after the invasion, U.S. forces also initiated the Commander’s Emergency Response Program (CERP), a pool of discretionary cash available to field commanders for quick-response civic action or “hearts and minds” activities, including “humanitarian” assistance.³⁴ The program has not been carefully scrutinized for its impact on humanitarian space and corruption, but the sums involved are now enormous. Originally funded out of cash seized from Saddam Hussein’s palaces, the CERP is now formalized in U.S. counter-insurgency doctrine and underwritten by U.S. military spending bills. CERP funding was US\$753,000,000 for FY 2006 alone, dwarfing the worldwide budgets of all but the largest humanitarian agencies.

Also of concern, as in Afghanistan, is the renewed emphasis being placed by coalition forces on Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) in Iraq. While American PRTs are ostensibly now managed by the U.S.

³³ Save the Children (US), *Joint NGO Preparedness Initiative (JNEPI) Final Report*, 2003.

http://www.ncciraq.org/IMG/JOINT_NGO_EMERGENCY_PREPAREDNESS_INITIATIVE_-_JNEPI_-_Final_Report.pdf.

³⁴ See Lt. Col. Mark S. Martins, The Commander’s Emergency Response Program, *Joint Forces Quarterly*, Issue 37, 2nd Quarter 2005. http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/jfq_pubs/0937.pdf. See also 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.

State Department, they are located within military compounds. A March 2007 memorandum of understanding between the U.S. Defense Department and Department of State makes no mention of a humanitarian role for the PRTs, but, as with the CERP, their impact, if any, on humanitarian space has not been scrutinized. The conventional wisdom among humanitarian agencies in Iraq is that the PRTs are not particularly active and thus not a threat. However, the “surge” strategy of U.S. forces includes a doubling of the number of PRTs, and the addition of neighborhood variants on PRTs in urban areas. Accordingly, there is strong potential for blurred distinctions between military and civilian roles, and developments appear not to be monitored by the humanitarian community.

Using the media, Japanese and Korean forces in Samarra and Erbil have actively promoted their roles in the occupation and its aftermath as essentially “humanitarian,” likewise leading to strong potential for blurred distinctions between military hearts-and-minds efforts and genuine humanitarian action. Other contingents have also periodically attempted to portray their presence as essentially humanitarian. There is no evidence that the humanitarian community has scrutinized these attempts in any detail nor called military forces to account. Evidence of blurred distinctions between military and civilian roles heard by the research team at ground-level gives ample cause for concern.

The perceived neutrality, impartiality, and independence of genuine humanitarian action is 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 U.N. 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, religious offices and mosques 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.³⁵ 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.

5. Security

Two dynamics work in tandem to undermine the welfare of communities and the safety of aid operations and personnel in Iraq. The first dynamic is war and violence, which cuts off access to basic services and isolates people in their homes and neighborhoods or forces them to flee. The second dynamic is aid agency responses to targeted attacks or the threat of them. For some agencies, adaptation has meant bunkerization, withdrawal, closure, or becoming embedded with the MNF. 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 deepening reductions 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 humanitarian community. This impairs effective coordination, stifles discussion of common strategies and inhibits the ethos of transparency associated with humanitarian work. At the request of its member NGOs, NCCI has maintained a strict policy of not sharing contact lists outside of the organization. Such a basic tool of coordination may be taken for granted in most other contexts, but the potential risks of disseminating information on “who is doing what, where” are believed by most NGOs to outweigh the value of being more open and transparent.

As mentioned previously, many agencies also report increasing security-related stresses and inter-communal tensions within their own staff, with resulting declines in effectiveness. Iraqi staff and their

³⁵ 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”. Cedric Turlan Kasra Mofarah, *Military action in an urban area: the humanitarian consequences of Operation Phantom Fury in Fallujah, Iraq*, ODI - Humanitarian Practice Network, (8 December, 2006).

families continue to bear astonishing risks, and a handful of experienced, flexible and adaptable international organizations continue to cope within reduced capacities. Remote management and flexible partnership arrangements with Iraqi organizations keep some aid flowing, although donor funding for humanitarian action has generally been unresponsive to creative and contextually nuanced programming adaptation. Staff morale is being undercut at a crucial time in some agencies by uncertainties about donor funding and program continuation.

Organizations that remain operational inside the central and southern governorates of Iraq have almost universally adopted low-profile presences and various remote management modalities in their efforts to maintain programming. Though far from ideal and fraught with difficulties, these modalities have become increasingly necessary for continuing operations over time as the security threats facing “outsiders” have increased in the places where humanitarian action is most needed. International aid organizations were the first to adopt the new measures, but as inter-communal fragmentation continues, “outsiders” increasingly includes many Iraqis from different communities, leading some larger Iraqi organizations to follow suit. There is a general hope and expectation among agencies that remote management will be a bridging measure until higher-profile activity and more conventional programming becomes possible on a localized basis.

A typology of remote management modalities has evolved over time in Iraq, with successively greater degrees of sophistication.³⁶ Humanitarian action by **remote control** is generally seen as a reactive stance taken in response to an insecure environment as an alternative to, and the last available option before, program closure. Under remote control, all or nearly all decisions are taken by international managers who have been re-located to a safe environment. Decisions of internationals are implemented by nationals. Limited resources and time are invested in transferring skills and otherwise developing the capacities of national staff. Control over resources is retained by international staff, where possible, and limited monitoring occurs.

The **remote management** modality is also generally seen as a reactive stance taken in response to an insecure environment to enable existing programs and projects to continue. However, it entails a temporary and

³⁶ Greg Hansen, *Humanitarian Action by Remote Programming in Iraq*, NCCI Workshops Report, 16 December, 2004. See also Hakim Chkam, *Distance Challenges Faced by NGOs in Iraq*, Interviews and Workshop Report, NCCI, August, 2006. http://www.ncciraq.org/IMG/pdf_NCCI_-_Distance_Challenges_Faced_by_NGOs_in_Iraq_-_Report_-_Aug06.pdf.

partial delegation of authority and responsibility to national staff following the re-location of international staff to a safer environment. It is assumed that lines of authority and decision-making will return to “normal” once conditions have stabilized. Remote management usually entails a moderate investment in skills transfer and capacity building for national staff and in development of procedures and protocols to enable better communications, accountability, and effectiveness. Although temporary, it is consistent with many of the features of developmental approaches to relief assistance and can therefore be regarded in a somewhat more positive light than “remote control”. Remote management is not for newcomer agencies but an option for those with a certain depth of experience in the context and some reliable organizational infrastructure already in place.

Remote support of humanitarian operations is a more proactive, conscious strategy that is consistent with long-term plans to hand over decision making and authority to national staff and/or local organizations. It is developmental by design. It involves full investment in mentoring, skills transfer, and capacity building consistent with planning for eventual handover. For example, Iraqi staff participate fully in meetings with donors, implementing partners and coordinating bodies. Senior international managers have national counterparts who receive additional mentoring. Although its main thrust is on building local capacity for humanitarian action, it is almost coincidentally practical for continuing implementation of assistance programs amid deepening insecurity and uncertainty in external events. The remote support modality assumes a high level of experience, sophistication, and organizational infrastructure in the context and a determination to adapt with changing conditions.

Remote partnership arrangements take remote support a step further. They entail an equal partnership and even greater handover of responsibility to local actors. Two organizations come together and contribute different resources to jointly address a common problem or issue, with one organization present and operational inside Iraq and the other outside (or without key staff present inside).

Security Postures. In 2004, staffs of approximately thirty 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?”³⁷ Answers were evenly divided. The question,

³⁷ The question was posed by the author during an evaluation visit.

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 canvassed in 2004 remain truly operational in Iraq—there is no discernible pattern among them in their 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 and, ultimately, the value placed by the organization on the fundamental principal of humanity, appears to account for outcomes of the *adapt/withdraw* decision more than any other single factor. Although the evidence is not clear-cut, organizations of Dunantist or faith-based leanings generally have demonstrated a greater willingness to adapt than others. The variables are many and would merit much more in-depth study, but an attempt is made in the following section to probe the *adapt/withdraw* decision somewhat further.

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.³⁸ 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. 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. Some organizations that originally accepted protection from the MNF, or appear to have done so

³⁸ Acceptance strategies entail convincing others that there is no need to harm you, and good reasons to safeguard you. Protective strategies involve the defence 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).

“[Security for U.N. staff] . . . is not only the first consideration—it is the first priority, the second priority and the third priority.”
—U.N. SRSRG for Iraq, Ashraf Qazi, July, 2004.

“The U.N. agencies are a victim of their own assumptions about security and their management structure. For some reason they can’t have a different-shaded approach to security from place-to-place.”
—Comment from an ICRC Delegate on UNAMI

“When MSF staff asked the doctors how the organization could best help, they were told that it would be suicidal for them to invite MSF into their hospitals. MSF’s traditional proximity, one of its firm principles, could lead to the murder of the very doctors the organization wanted to help.”
—Paul Foreman, former Head of Mission in Iraq,

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.

The U.N.’s security apparatus in Iraq is particularly dysfunctional. The conventional wisdom among aid workers in the three northern governorates, where risks are generally regarded as relatively low and freedom of movement unconstrained, was that the U.N.’s security posture at its compound in Erbil was absurdly out of step with the actual level of risk. Until early 2007, staff were confined to the compound, which is surrounded by three layers of blast walls guarded by three layers of armed guards—Kurdish Peshmurga fighters on the outside entrance, Korean troops manning the second layer, and Fijians guarding the final entrance. International staff were not allowed out of the Erbil compound under any circumstances except with explicit approval on a case-by-case basis from the U.N.’s Department of Safety and Security (DSS) in New York. U.N. security reports refer to vague MNF-issued warnings of increased threats from Islamic militant organizations without independent U.N. corroboration, adding to the vague and pervasive sense of vulnerability expressed by some U.N. staff. “We’re a target because we’re the U.N.,” said one. That may be eminently true, as it was when the Canal Hotel was destroyed, but passive acceptance of such perceived vulnerability will do little to make the U.N. any safer in Iraq. As one seasoned aid veteran put it, *“At some point, individual staff need to say to their headquarters and staff associations, no, this isn’t what we want. Living in a bunker doesn’t help us do our job.”*

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

“You need to have a relationship in place already that can be activated in a crisis. Contacts often rest on a trusting relationship between individuals.”

—An Iraqi aid worker

“It’s risky to organize trainings inside Iraq now. We could be faced with 25 dead, or 25 ransoms.”

—Staff-member of an international NGO

withdrawal of MNF forces and private security details. As of late 2006, UNAMI was about to embark on a reduction of staff levels in Baghdad from 90 to 55 personnel, including 15 substantive officers, only 5 of whom were to be humanitarian or human rights officers, and 40 support and security staff.

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. An experienced MSF hand saw the tensions between security and the humanitarian imperative somewhat differently. He recognized that although large-scale high profile humanitarian programs were now untenable in Iraq, it was still possible to perform systematic “individual acts of medical humanitarianism” such as emergency surgery and support to medical professionals through remote operations by cultivating a dedicated team and good local counterparts.

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 U.N.’s Baghdad headquarters in August 2003 and, soon thereafter, the bombing of the ICRC office there. 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



Staff members march to honor their colleagues killed and injured in the bombing of U.N. headquarters in Baghdad.
U.N. Photo #UNE3736 by Mark Garten

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 presence and programs virtually country-wide, 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. As an Iraqi NGO worker put it, “Low profile puts us in the shadow.” The low-profile approach provides a

“Staff members seemed to want the world to feel sorry for them, the survivors, and to punish Annan for seeking to forge a bridge in support of Iraqi needs between the coalition occupiers and the rest of the international community. Increasingly, it seemed to be Annan’s political judgment, not the U.N.’s security mistakes, that some were aiming at.”
–David Malone on the fallout among U.N. staff following the Canal Hotel bombing, Commentary in the *International Herald Tribune*, October, 2004

“U.N. staff members in Baghdad volunteered to be there. They were well aware of the risks. Unlike many representatives of nongovernmental relief agencies, U.N. staffers are well remunerated and generally work in better conditions than those available to other international actors. [...] U.N. staffers, many of them highly dedicated and professional and most prepared to take personal risks in the service of their ideals, need to get a grip. We don’t need the U.N. in Denmark or Canada. We need it in difficult and often unsafe environments, where absolute security cannot be achieved.”
–Commentary by David Malone, IHT

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. The trend has deepened for many agencies whose staffs are increasingly confined to their own neighborhoods or communities. Lack of trust between Iraqi staff, and also between Iraqi staff and international staff in remote offices, was identified as a challenge by a number of organizations in late 2004 but now afflicts Amman-based organizations as well as those inside Iraq.

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.

“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. As an Iraqi aid worker observed, "In 2003 aid agencies tended to send their best people to Iraq because of the high profile of the emergency. But those people didn't fit the situation after the invasion. Now the best people are needed because the needs are more basic and acute."

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.

Our interviews with international aid workers in Iraq and Jordan suggested interesting contrasts in how their home cultures and societies regarded the humanitarian, human rights, and peacebuilding professions. A Japanese NGO worker noted the chilly and at times

hostile reception he had received on visits home after scornful media coverage there of the kidnappings and subsequent safe releases of Japanese aid and human rights workers in Iraq. He contrasted this with the outpouring of public solidarity and support in Italy for Italian aid workers and journalists that had also been kidnapped in Iraq. Likewise, a kidnapped Canadian peace building professional returned home following his safe release to be greeted by newspaper columns and letters to the editor questioning the naiveté of exposing himself and others to such acute risks.

6. Who Has the Comparative Advantage in Iraq, and Why?

The research findings from ground-level in Iraq and from within the humanitarian apparatus constitute, on balance, a strong endorsement of the Dunantist ethos and of principled humanitarian action. The findings ultimately lead to difficult questions about the characteristics of the organizations that have adapted to—or withdrawn from—Iraq's uniquely politicized and dangerous humanitarian landscape. Although a broad range of aid providers have engaged in Iraq, most are now gone or are playing supporting roles from a safe distance. The ICRC, Iraqi Red Crescent, and some Iraqi and international NGOs have remained operational, adapting to ever-changing conditions in various ways and continuing their assistance and protection efforts within the confines of reduced capacity. On the other hand, it is striking that many of the largest international NGOs, including those that were closely affiliated with coalition efforts or accepted funding from coalition governments, are now closed or are re-engaging in the humanitarian effort on the margins of Iraq itself.

Although questions about comparative advantage themselves have the potential to reinforce the schisms in the humanitarian enterprise, they are nevertheless essential questions for serious debate at this stage in the re-formulation of a humanitarian response in Iraq. Which organizations managed to continue effective and meaningful humanitarian programs in Iraq, and why? Which ones closed, and why? The variables are many, and, on the evidence, each adapt/withdraw decision was highly specific to individual organizations. Although it is beyond the scope and capability of this study to exhaustively assess the decisions and motivations of individual organizations, a number of patterns are apparent in the variables that have acted upon the adapt/withdraw decisions of a broad range of organizations.

In rough order of importance in the overall decision-making calculus, patterns in the variables (and pairs of opposed variables) that informed an organization's adapt/withdraw decisions include the following:

- Relative importance of the principle of humanity vs. security of aid personnel in organizational culture and staff outlook (with variation in how humanitarian impact is assessed against security risks and costs). Among solidarity-oriented NGOs, this was sometimes expressed in a more overtly political fashion;
- Incidence of attack(s) against the agency, the severity of attack(s), evidence of direct targeting;
- Security posture (i.e., relative weight given to acceptance, protective, and deterrence strategies);
- Affiliations (i.e., the degree of real and perceived closeness to or distance from combatants/political authorities);
- Acceptance/refusal of funding from parties to the conflict;
- Ability and readiness to adopt low-profile and remote management modalities;
- Availability of acceptable (i.e., perceptibly neutral) funding sufficient to cover time-intensive acceptance strategies and high security costs;
- Extraneous donor pressure to remain engaged (sometimes a function of concerns that the organization would be penalized in other locales for disengagement from Iraq).

An attempt to depict the orientation/status of a variety of agencies has been included as Annex B.

III. Conclusion, Recommendations, Directions for Future Research

1. Conclusion

The curtain comes down on the study at a time when increasingly dire conditions for Iraqis inside the country, as well as a growing refugee crisis outside, have compelled major actors in the humanitarian community to review their postures toward Iraq. While Iraqi aid workers, mosques, community associations, Iraqi NGOs, the Red Crescent, ICRC, and international NGOs struggle mightily inside Iraq to meet current needs, UNAMI's Humanitarian Coordinator, UNHCR, and OCHA have invested heavily in efforts to elevate the status of the humanitarian crisis within an otherwise lethargic, out-of-touch, and, at times, obstructionist U.N. bureaucracy and international community.

Grounded in a newfound emphasis on humanitarian principles, the newly-drafted strategic framework for U.N. humanitarian action in Iraq is a solid point of departure for the U.N. System based on what is currently known about needs, constraints, and opportunities. Whether the framework is now operationalized remains to be seen. At the time of writing, key U.N. agencies do not appear to have mustered the needed creativity, adaptability, assertiveness, and sense of urgency that they are known for in other contexts and which is called for by the situation in Iraq. UNICEF, the World Food Programme, and the World Health Organization have actively resisted the mandated authority of the U.N. Humanitarian Coordinator and continue to favor an outmoded approach that does not acknowledge the extent of the crisis nor the deepening weaknesses of the Iraqi state. The continued relevance of these agencies is open to serious question if they fail to take meaningful action on a humanitarian crisis that is clearly evident from their own assessments and data.

Donors also have yet to be sufficiently roused. In striking contrast to the \$2.2 billion Flash Appeal for Iraq issued in April 2003, donor responses to the present crisis have failed to sufficiently acknowledge the capacities of operational actors inside Iraq. Current funding for assistance and protection activities in the central and southern governorates is grossly out of sync with needs and with the abilities of the remaining operational agencies to meet those needs. On the evidence, EU politics continues to trump the collective humanitarian responsibilities of European countries and ECHO, as shown by the EU's recent commitment of €100 million to faltering reconstruction efforts in Iraq but a relatively paltry €10 million for humanitarian action, the bulk of it outside of Iraq among the refugee population.

In recent years, much of the discourse and decision-making on Iraq has been tainted by cynicism, exceptionalism, and a sense of powerlessness in the humanitarian community. The withering struggle to assist and protect Iraqis in an environment marked by unprecedented politicization has led many in the international humanitarian apparatus to prematurely concede the defeat of principled humanitarian action. **Evidence from ground level in Iraq serves both as a strong endorsement of the Dunantist ethos and as an indictment of the surrender to pragmatism.**

2. Recommendations

To the U.N. Secretary General and the U.N. Emergency Relief Coordinator:

1. The U.N.'s credibility as a humanitarian actor has suffered a series of grievous blows in Iraq and beyond since the onset of the sanctions era in Iraq. Member States and the U.N. System have not adequately protected the real and perceived neutrality, impartiality, and independence of the U.N.'s humanitarian roles from threats posed by severe and recurring political pressures. The result has been the failure of the U.N. to live up to its mandated humanitarian assistance and protection responsibilities in Iraq, and a weakened and defensive humanitarian stature for the U.N. worldwide.

By formally shackling and subordinating the U.N.'s humanitarian role in Iraq to the fortunes and misfortunes of the MNF-I, U.N. Security Council Resolution 1546 continues to taint U.N. efforts by association. The new Strategic Framework for U.N. humanitarian action in Iraq provides a principled and sound point of departure for a renewed U.N. humanitarian response to Iraq's humanitarian crisis. However, operationalization of the Framework requires that the U.N.'s top leadership, OCHA, and the Department of Political Affairs be far more proactive and assertive than in the past in safeguarding the U.N.'s integrity as a principled humanitarian actor. In forthcoming Security Council Resolutions on Iraq, every effort should be made to ensure that the U.N.'s humanitarian roles are de-linked from political roles and protected against instrumentalization for political and military purposes. In addition, more inspired and assertive leadership is needed from senior management of key U.N. humanitarian agencies and from the U.N. Country Team for Iraq. Inter-agency territoriality issues need to be resolved at all levels.

The U.N. Secretary-General should convene a meeting of the Policy Committee for Iraq to press the immediate operationalization of the Strategic Framework by the Executive Committee on Humanitarian Affairs (ECHA), Iraqi authorities and other Member States, taking into account the following considerations:

- The Iraqi state is failing by increments with little likelihood of a reversal in downward trends for the foreseeable future;
- Iraq's humanitarian crisis, if unaddressed commensurate with needs inside the country, will destabilize the region, create fertile conditions for further extremism in Iraq, and undermine public sentiments toward reconciliation between communities;
- There is already a pronounced trend among donors and operational agencies to peripheralize the humanitarian response, wherein the preponderance of focus is on the needs of Iraqis who have become relatively more accessible to assistance and protection efforts by fleeing their homes. There is insufficient focus on the increasingly acute assistance and protection needs of vulnerable Iraqis who have stayed, particularly those who cannot be categorized as refugees, displaced persons, or members of host communities;
- There is no single solution to the humanitarian crisis in Iraq. Responses must take into account local, more than national, realities. 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, nullifying the usefulness of the current arrangement whereby U.N. and some donor agencies rely on the MNF for their security, mobility, and presence;

- A build-up of U.S. forces is underway 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. The current military build-up is accompanied by a sharp increase in U.S. military funding for the “build” component of “clear, hold and build operations” through the Commander’s Emergency Response Program (CERP). This is further blurring 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 failing 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.
2. The U.N. Secretary-General and the Emergency Relief Coordinator should reinforce the authority of the UNAMI DSRSG/Humanitarian Coordinator with the heads of U.N. agencies and impress upon them the need for greater creativity, flexibility, and urgency in addressing the humanitarian crisis in Iraq.

To the U.N. Emergency Relief Coordinator, the Executive Committee on Humanitarian Affairs, Principals of the Interagency Standing Committee (IASC), and the UNAMI DSRSG/Humanitarian Coordinator:

3. Continue to re-assert the neutral, impartial, and operationally independent role of U.N. humanitarian agencies inside Iraq, paying particular attention to erecting needed firewalls against politicization and militarization of the U.N.’s humanitarian response. Particularly:
- If sufficient support for a common fund under the authority of the Humanitarian Coordinator is not forthcoming from the UNCT, U.N. agency headquarters, and donors, a Flash Appeal for Iraq should be initiated without further delay to act upon needs as far as they are currently known and to capitalize on existing operational capacities among NGOs and U.N. agencies;
 - Ensure that humanitarian action is not in any way conditional on political or military benchmarks;
 - Formulate stringent policies for interactions between U.N. agencies and military/security forces in Iraq and actively promote compliance with U.N. guidelines among the humanitarian community and international parties to the conflict. 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.

To the U.N. SRSG for Iraq:

4. Do more to elevate the status in political discourse of the humanitarian emergency in Iraq, in keeping with the growing severity of the crisis and the U.N.'s mandated humanitarian responsibilities under UNGA Resolution 46/182.³⁹
5. 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 independence.
6. 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 U.N.'s humanitarian responsibilities.
7. Wean the U.N.'s humanitarian apparatus from its dependence on MNF for presence, security, and mobility, including:
 - 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 U.N.'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 U.N. Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS) and discontinue reliance upon MNF escorts and flights, except as a last resort.
 - Canvas national and international UNAMI and UNCT staff regarding their willingness to undertake risks while pursuing their agencies' mandated humanitarian assistance and protection activities.
 - Engage in greater outreach with Iraq's moral/religious leaders as part of a concerted strategy to explain the U.N. presence in the country and to achieve greater acceptance of humanitarian roles.

To U.N. OCHA, al-Hausa, and the Islamic Scholars Association:

8. Building on the strong resonance between the Islamic traditions of humanitarianism found in Iraq as well as other Muslim-majority contexts, and the humanitarian ideals of international humanitarian institutions, develop and implement an outreach program to more effectively bridge perceptual, knowledge, and practice gaps between international aid organizations and Islamic institutions and Muslim faith-based civil society. In particular, explore best practices in this field and facilitate humanitarian diplomacy at all levels in and around Iraq with the goal of improving humanitarian access and the effectiveness of Iraqi and international humanitarian efforts.

To U.N. 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 U.N. humanitarian responsibilities in conflict areas, the categorical nature of the humanitarian imperative, and the different ways that risks can be managed in conflict areas. U.N. 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

³⁹ United Nations General Assembly Resolution 46/182, *Strengthening the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance of the United Nations*, (19 December, 1991).

international civil servants entrusted with assisting and protecting vulnerable populations in a war environment.⁴⁰ The security of U.N. staff is not enhanced when security procedures themselves entail wholesale compromises in the U.N.'s real or perceived neutrality, impartiality, and independence.

To the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement:

10. Continue efforts to disseminate international humanitarian law and the Fundamental Principles among all combatants and in emerging power structures. Continue outreach efforts with Iraq's moral/religious authorities.

To Operational Iraqi and International Humanitarian NGOs:

11. Recognize that participation in Flash Appeals and similar resource mobilization efforts by the U.N. does not represent a compromise of humanitarian principles and may present good opportunities for animating action.
12. 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.
13. 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.

To the NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq (NCCI):

14. 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.
15. 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.
16. 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.
17. 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.

To the Donor Community:

18. Re-calibrate funding for faltering reconstruction efforts in Iraq. 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 that place a premium on adherence to principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence.
19. Re-commit to the 23 principles of Good Humanitarian Donorship that were endorsed by major donor headquarters on 17 June, 2003.⁴¹

⁴⁰ See "Concerns about security—Letter from CCISUA and FICSA to the Secretary General of the U.N., November 2004, http://www.unspecial.org/UNS634/UNS_634_T07.html. See also a commentary by David Malone on the issue, *U.N. 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.

- 20.** 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.)
- 21.** Implicit in much donor behavior is the notion that Iraq should adapt to the humanitarian enterprise, rather than the reverse. Donors must 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.

⁴¹ See *Principles and Good Practice of Humanitarian Donorship*, www.goodhumanitariandonorship.org/.

3. Directions for Further Research

A host of issues emerged during the country study that appeared relevant to the work but could not be thoroughly pursued due to time and access constraints or because of the specific focus and methodology of our study.

I. Talking with Terrorists

In virtually all conflicts, Iraq and Afghanistan being the two notable exceptions, working contacts with combatants of all stripes are accepted as a necessity by humanitarian agencies for maintaining and expanding humanitarian space, moderating the behavior of combatants, and otherwise protecting vulnerable populations and facilitating the provision of assistance. The various combatants that have been engaged on these matters include many that are currently classed by various political actors as “terrorist” organizations, including the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka, rebel forces in Chechnya, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Hamas in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Yet, other groups labelled as “terrorists” have not been engaged. In the cases where humanitarians have managed an interface with such groups, have there been positive effects for humanitarian work? Negative? How have counter-terrorist combatant forces reacted to such overtures by humanitarian actors? How have “terrorist” groups reacted?

II. Roles, Efficacy, and Effects of Private Contractors

Over 100,000 private military contractors currently populate Iraq, and the number is reportedly increasing. Private security contractors have become a powerful, well-resourced lobby in the United States (see for example the website of the International Peace Operations Association (IPOA) at <http://ipoaonline.org/php/>). What empirical evidence exists that would validate or invalidate the immense roles that commercial aid and security contractors are now being paid billions of dollars to perform in Iraq and elsewhere? Have their interactions with local populations been helpful or harmful? Have there been implications for humanitarian action? How have their growing roles affected the health of the humanitarian enterprise, if at all?

III. Role, Efficacy, and Effects of Military Civil Affairs, CIMIC, and “Hearts and Minds” Operations

The Commanders’ Emergency Response Program (CERP) funds available to U.S. civil affairs troops and combat officers in Iraq exceeded US\$753,000,000 in 2006 alone, more than the global budgets of many large international humanitarian agencies. What empirical evidence exists to validate or invalidate the increasing formalization in western military doctrine, operations, and budgets of “hearts and minds” activity or the “build” component of “clear, hold, and build” operations? Is there evidence of clear value added for force protection and military missions in the short, medium, and long terms? What have been the human effects in the short, medium, and long terms? On the evidence, what have been the implications for humanitarian action and actors of this kind of instrumentalized assistance?

IV. Role of the U.N. Departments of Political Affairs (DPA), Peacekeeping Operations and Staff Security (DPKO/DSS) in U.N. Decisions on Humanitarian Action

Has the “senior service” role assumed by the DPA had a net positive impact or, on balance, a negative impact on the development of high quality strategic frameworks for U.N. humanitarian action in contexts such as Iraq? Have DPA, DPKO, and DSS played constructive roles in defending humanitarian interests in the Secretariat and through the U.N.’s Executive Committee on Humanitarian Affairs (ECHA)? If not, how might this be changed in

order to optimize avoidance of harmful compromises of humanitarian principles to pragmatism or of undue politicization of U.N. humanitarian responses by Member States?

V. Keeping Donors Accountable: Roles for Operational Agencies?

In situations of donor failure (non-responsiveness, politicization, lack of accountability, corruption, intransigent bureaucracies), have operational humanitarian agencies found ways to correct donor behavior or encourage greater accountability to the principles of Good Humanitarian Donorship? Have there been repercussions for operational agencies?

VI. The Creativity & Leadership of the U.N.'s Humanitarian Apparatus

Comparing their performance in conflict areas 10 or 15 years ago with their performance now, has there been a net reduction, no change, or an improvement over the past decade in the vision, assertiveness, and leadership exercised by the U.N.'s humanitarian agencies in complex emergencies? If there has been a change, what accounts for it?

VII. Equipping Today's Aid Workers for Hostile Environments

Contexts such as Iraq often require operational humanitarian professionals to have skill-sets that have little to do with performing well in a bureaucracy, such as the ability to build constructive and trusting working relationships and acceptance with local authorities and communities in hostile environments and the ability to analyze local contexts with a high degree of acuity. Is the current breed of aid worker equipped with such skills? Are such skills valued by aid bureaucracies and reflected in their hiring and advancement practices? Can such skills be taught?

VIII. Risk, Humanitarian Professionals, and Humanitarian Organizations

Have humanitarian professionals become more risk averse than 10 or 15 years ago? If so, what accounts for the change in professional culture? What accounts for increased risk-aversion in the U.N. and other humanitarian organizations? How much do liability concerns play a role? Has there been any relationship between organizational risk-aversion and the increasing prevalence of war-risk/kidnap/ransom insurance coverage for humanitarian staff?

IX. Staff Security and the Humanitarian Imperative

How can the tension between risk management and the humanitarian imperative (or the Fundamental Principle of *Humanity*) be handled better so that staff protection and security do not become ends in themselves rather than means of maintaining access to populations in acute need?

For Further Reading

Political Analysis of the U.N. Role in Iraq

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The Sanctions Regime

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NCCI, *Humanitarian Response and Access* (Workshop Report), Amman, February 2007.

http://www.ncciraq.org/IMG/pdf_Humanitarian_Response_Access.pdf

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Alexandre Carle and Hakim Chkam, *Humanitarian Action in the New Security Environment: Policy and Operational Implications in Iraq*, Humanitarian Policy Group, London, 2006.

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Greg Hansen, *Remote Management of Humanitarian Programmes in Iraq*, NCCI, 16 December 2004.

www.ncciraq.org

Donor Behavior and Accountability

Ian Smillie and Larry Minear, *The Quality of Money: Donor Behavior in Humanitarian Financing*, Humanitarianism and War Project, Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, April 2003.

http://hwproject.tufts.edu/new/pdf/donor_behav.pdf

Principles and Good Practice of Humanitarian Donorship, 23 June 2003. www.goodhumanitariandonorship.org/.

Annex A

The following questions were developed by the research team for use as a guide to exploring issues of universality specific to the Iraqi context.

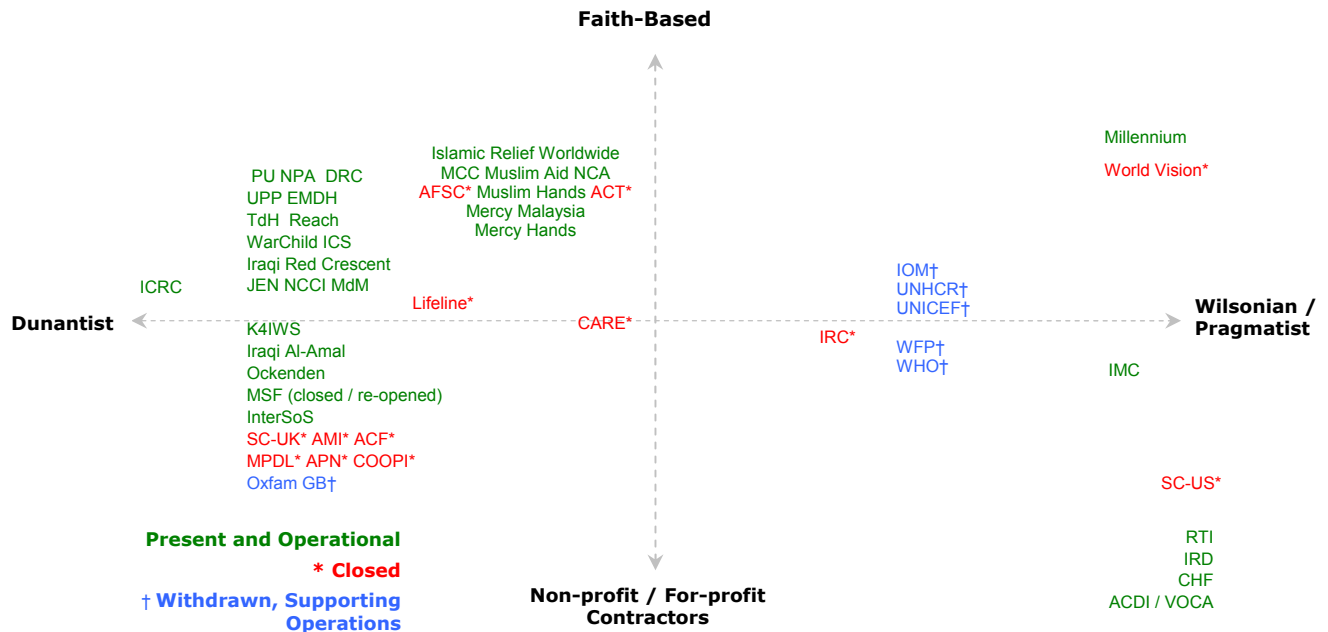
Mosques, Clerics, and Islamic Institutions in Iraq: Their Involvement with Humanitarian Action and their Relations with International Humanitarian Efforts

- When we compare Islamic teachings and practices with the Code of Conduct, professional standards, rules and practices of the western international humanitarian organizations, are they more similar than different, or more different than similar? How are they similar or different? Are they compatible? Can we speak of a universal humanitarian ethos? If not, why not?
- How important are the roles of mosques, clerics and Islamic institutions in helping to meet the urgent humanitarian needs of people today in Iraq? Examples?
- Is their role getting more important, or less important as conditions in Iraq, and relations between communities get worse? Examples?
- Do the mosques, clerics and Islamic structures which try to help people with humanitarian work in Iraq feel that they are somehow in competition with western humanitarian organizations or donors? Or, do they feel that the work of one set of actors complements the other?
- In the opinion of mosques, clergy and Islamic institutions that are doing humanitarian work, are western donors and organizations too pushy, or do the western organizations and people try to do things in ways that are more sensitive to local beliefs and traditions?
- Is there much cooperation between mosques, clergy and Islamic institutions in providing humanitarian help? Or, is there competition? How does it work? Is it formal cooperation or informal? Open competition or somehow hidden? Examples?
- How systematic is the help that is provided by Islamic institutions? Do they have programs like the western humanitarian agencies do, or is it more informal? What capacity do the Islamic institutions have to deliver humanitarian assistance in a systematic, good, consistent and fair way? Can they do good needs assessments? Can they monitor needs and evaluate assistance in an effective and thorough way? Examples?
- Is the assistance that they provide fair and neutral, or does it favor certain groups and communities? As divisions increase in Iraq is that assistance becoming more fair or less fair, more neutral or less neutral? Do they assist everyone equally, or do they assist some communities more than others? Examples?
- Do al-Hausa and other Islamic institutions in Iraq try to make assistance more neutral, fairer? How?
- How much influence do mosques, the clergy and Islamic institutions in Iraq have on the decisions about who gets assistance, where assistance is given, and how it is given? Is this influence getting stronger or weaker as the situation changes in Iraq? Examples?
- Is the humanitarian work of mosques, clergy and Islamic institutions in Iraq any more or less prone to politicization than the humanitarian work of the western aid organizations?
- Have the militias been strengthening their social/humanitarian work? How systematic is this? Should the international humanitarian organizations agree to work with them if there are no other people who can have access to people who need urgent humanitarian help?

- Are the social or humanitarian efforts of militias helping or harming the ability of mosques, clergy and Islamic institutions in their own efforts to help people? How? Examples?
- Should the international humanitarian organizations and donors try to help the mosques, clergy and Islamic institutions in Iraq meet the urgent needs of people affected by poverty or the war? How? Are there examples of this already?
- Should the mosques, clergy, and Islamic institutions in Iraq help the international humanitarian organizations meet the urgent needs of people affected by poverty or war? How? Are there examples of this already?
- What does al-Hausa think the international humanitarian agencies should do to meet the needs of people better? Should they stay away from Iraq? Should they change the way they do things? Do they consider the international humanitarian organizations to be un-Islamic or harmful in any way?
- Is there anything that the international humanitarian organizations can do to be safer in Iraq? What about individual humanitarian workers? Would some change in their own personal behavior make them safer?
- What are the opinions of mosques, clergy and Islamic institutions in Iraq about the food and other assistance that is being provided to Iraqis by armed American soldiers and other members of the coalition? What about the assistance being provided by some of the militias?
- In Iraq, has there been any connection between what people believe about the commitment of a mosque, clergyman or Islamic institution to Islamic principles about charity, and the ability of these people and organizations to get access to people who need help and to work safely?
- How would the mosques, clergy and Islamic institutions in Iraq react to the IFRC/NGO Code of Conduct used by many organizations in the international humanitarian community? Would the Code of Conduct sound foreign, or would it seem already familiar and consistent with the teachings of the Holy Quran and Hadith? Examples?
- Do the mosques, clergy and Islamic institutions understand the motivations of the international humanitarian agencies? Do they understand the difference between other foreign actors in Iraq, such as the military forces, and the international humanitarian organizations? Should we in the international humanitarian community do more to explain our motivations and the way we work to the mosques, clergy and Islamic institutions? What could we do, what should we do, and how?
- How do al-Hausa and other Islamic institutions in Iraq feel about cooperating more closely with international humanitarian organizations? Would it be risky for them? If so, how could we reduce the risk?
- Have any international humanitarian organizations tried to work more closely with mosques, clergy or Islamic institutions like al-Hausa to improve the welfare of people? Why have they done this? Why not? How have they done it? Examples?
- If international humanitarian organizations worked more closely with mosques, clergy or Islamic institutions, would this help to strengthen the mosques, clergy and Islamic institutions, or would it harm them?
- Who should lead humanitarian efforts in Iraq? The Islamic institutions? The international organizations? Someone else? Why?
- In Iraq, now that things are getting more divided between communities and neighborhoods, are mosques, clergy and Islamic institutions helping to protect people whose lives are being threatened? How? Or, are they sometimes part of the problem?

Annex B

Humanitarian Agenda: 2015 – MAPPING THE ACTORS Orientation/Status of Humanitarian & Related Organizations in Central & Southern Governorates to April 2007



Comments and criticisms on this depiction are welcome. The diagram is intended to place organizations only according to the decisions and choices they have made in Iraq, not globally. For the purposes of this diagram, organizations have been categorized to the extent possible according to objective criteria obtained through their own public documentation on Iraq and, in many cases, from interviews dating back to 2004. Criteria include the degree of cooperation with/distance from political and military actors, degree of visible acceptance/refusal of security from combatants or security contractors, and acceptance/refusal of funding from parties to the conflict. Organizational cultures often seem to determine the extent to which they adapt/withdraw decision is informed by conscious adherence to humanitarian principles (the principle of *Humanity* being chief among them)—but not wholly and by no means always. In many cases, other powerful variables have intervened, often in combination, including fatal targeted attacks and kidnappings, lack of donor support for programming, donor pressure to stay engaged or to withdraw, lack of sufficient or sufficiently neutral funding for security measures (including time-intensive acceptance strategies), willingness of staff and managers to undertake risks, individual outlooks of staff, and willingness to accept remote management modalities.