

Why GAO Did This Study

The estimated number of Iraqis who have been internally displaced since February 2006 is about 1.6 million, and numerous Iraqis are in neighboring countries. Tens of thousands of Iraqi families have returned home and the number is slowly increasing. GAO examined (1) conditions in Iraq that pose a challenge to the reintegration of displaced Iraqis, (2) actions the international community is taking to address these conditions and reintegration, and (3) the extent to which the international community has an effective reintegration strategy. GAO analyzed reports and data, met with officials from the U.S. and Iraqi governments and international and nongovernmental organizations, and did fieldwork in Geneva and Baghdad.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that (1) the Secretary of State (State) and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Administrator assist Iraq in developing an effective integrated international strategy for reintegrating displaced Iraqis; (2) State and USAID make publicly available an unclassified version of the current U.S. strategy; (3) State encourage UNHCR to share primary data collected and take advantage of the IAU efforts; and (4) State and USAID work with UNHCR and others to inventory and assess the operations of the various assistance centers to determine and achieve an optimal framework. The Department of State and USAID concurred with our recommendations.

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DISPLACED IRAQIS

Integrated International Strategy Needed to Reintegrate Iraq's Internally Displaced and Returning Refugees

What GAO Found

Several issues impede the return and reintegration of displaced Iraqis. Although the overall security situation in Iraq has improved since 2006, the actual and perceived threat across governorates and neighborhoods continues to impede Iraqi returns and reintegration. Problems in securing property restitution or compensation and shelter have made it difficult to return and reintegrate. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) reported that 43 percent of the internally displaced that it surveyed did not have access to their homes, primarily because their property was occupied or destroyed. IOM also reported that one-third of the heads of returnee families it assessed were unemployed. Iraq continues to lack adequate access to essential services—that is, food, water, sanitation, electricity, health services, and education. Moreover, insufficient government capacity and commitment cross over each of the problem areas and serve as a deterrent to returns and reintegration.

The international community has taken action to address the impediments that displaced Iraqis face, but the extent to which these efforts will result in reintegration of displaced Iraqis is uncertain. International and nongovernmental organizations, supported by U.S. and other donor funding, have initiated projects. However, the extent to which these projects specifically target and affect reintegration is not consistently measured. The Iraqi government has initiated efforts to encourage returns and reintegration. However, progress in this area has been limited due to insufficient commitment and capacity, according to international and U.S. officials.

Iraq, the United States, and other members of the international community do not have an integrated international strategy for the reintegration of displaced Iraqis. The international community lacks integrated plans because Iraqi Ministry of Displacement and Migration planning efforts stalled due to limitations of authority, capacity, and broader Iraqi government support, according to U.S. and international officials; the United Nation's (UN) strategy and plans have not specifically focused on reintegration; and an unclassified version of the current U.S. government strategy has not been made publicly available. This situation has hindered efforts to efficiently assess the needs of internally displaced Iraqis and returnees. Moreover, the international community has not yet reached an agreement on goals and expected outcomes for reintegration. Also, the UN has not integrated data on returnee needs from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) into its new Inter-Agency Information and Analysis Unit (IAU), which was established to provide a central point for collecting and assessing data, and UNHCR is not taking advantage of IAU resources and coordination efforts. Furthermore, it is difficult for stakeholders to effectively delineate roles and responsibilities and establish coordination and oversight mechanisms. One area with significant potential for inefficiencies is in the establishment and operation of numerous assistance centers and mobile units across Iraq by various entities to assist returnees, the internally displaced, and other vulnerable Iraqis.