

**Rapid Assessment of IDPs in Erbil City
In Search of Alternative Approaches to Shelter and Settlement
Findings & Recommendations
September 2014**



IDP families find themselves living in Um-al Noor Church basement.

OVERVIEW

It is estimated that more than 860,000 Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) have recently flooded the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)¹. This is in addition to over 210,000 Syrian refugees who arrived in the last year. Many newly displaced Iraqi families are located in urban areas, living in overcrowded communal spaces, public buildings, and in parks or open spaces, overloading capacities of government and international agencies to provide support. In conjunction with assessments conducted by other agencies, Shelter For Life International (SFL) undertook a rapid shelter assessment in the greater Erbil area. **The goal was to assess the feasibility of alternative shelter opportunities in the suburbs of Erbil city.**

Based on interviews with IDP families and an assessment of five existing communities around Erbil city, SFL concludes that **appropriate and affordable housing is immediately available in communities surrounding Erbil City and occupation by IDPs would not have a significant impact on the rental market.** SFL recommends a test program aimed at resettling IDP families from congested public buildings and open spaces. Such a program could be rapidly scaled up and replicated throughout KRI.

SFL's observations indicate that this action will have the following crucial outcomes:

- Reduce vulnerability quickly and effectively before the rapid onset of a harsh winter
- Make use of excess, affordable housing in Erbil, without substantial impact on rental prices
- Improve / winterize partially completed housing in exchange for reduced rental rates
- Provide a short-term emergency shelter solution that leads to long-term marketplace integration: IDP families will be able to participate in livelihood activities within the next year

¹ IOM. Iraq IDP CRISIS Situation Report No. 11 (12 September 2014)

BACKGROUND

Population displacement in Iraq is a country-wide phenomenon. Continued fighting and ISIS actions indicate that additional population displacements are likely². The KRI has received a large proportion of IDPs because of a perception of increased security, as well as family or ethnic ties.

SFL's rapid assessment focused on IDP families in the Ainkawa quarter of Erbil. Because this is a primarily Christian neighborhood, it has attracted a large number of Christian IDPs. According to the Mayor of Ainakwa, the quarter is hosting over 40,000 displaced families. Surveys show that over 60% of these families are living in communal spaces³ including schools, churches, commercial wedding halls, clubs, and even parks and open spaces.

Authorities in Erbil intend to move at least 10,000 people to two tented camps⁴. Although IDP camps can provide a number of advantages, including ease of delivering humanitarian aid, camp settings may not be the best option for every displaced family. In particular, many families arrive in urban settings with significant resources such as financial savings and job skills. To utilize their resources, these families would prefer to integrate into local markets, especially since they do not expect to be able to return home in the near future, if ever.

The Shelter Cluster and the Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM) Cluster were established in August 2014, after the UN declared the internal displacement of Iraqis a Level 3 humanitarian crisis, the highest classification⁵. In coordination with the Shelter and CCCM Clusters, REACH conducted a survey of shelter and NFI, which is intended to guide the humanitarian responses of UN agencies and NGOs.

Between August 18 and September 4, SFL conducted a rapid assessment of shelter opportunities in and around Erbil City. This assessment is intended to complement the REACH survey, and establish a broader range of shelter solutions. The need for shelter is viewed in the context of settlement, which takes into consideration NFI, Wat-San, Livelihood and Protection issues. In light of this context, the assessment was undertaken to determine if alternative modes of shelter and settlement were feasible in this urban setting.

METHODOLOGY

The problems facing these IDPs have been well documented in REACH surveys and other assessments. The SFL assessment set out to study parallel solutions to the shelter needs of IDPs.

SFL took an ethnographic approach to the assessment. Semi-formal group interviews were conducted with IDP families in communal spaces, tents, and hotels. The team spent longer periods of time with a smaller sample size. This enabled the team to delve deeper into the issues facing IDPs and the reasons behind their problems and the resources and strategies that the IDPs themselves were considering. This type of assessment is intended to complement the extensive efforts of other agencies who are establishing statistical data for the analysis of the current humanitarian situation.

Livelihood is a critical component of appropriate shelter solutions. Because of this, marketplace dynamics and IDP skills and resources were taken into consideration. SFL relies on the Emergency Market Mapping Analysis (EMMA) toolkit to help determine the market status, including opportunities and gaps. Although a full EMMA analysis was not possible in this context of rapid assessment, the EMMA principles were used to guide the process. The three "strands" outlined in the EMMA toolkit are the gap analysis, market analysis, and response analysis.

² IOM. Iraq IDP CRISIS Situation Report No. 11 (12 September 2014)

³ REACH. Displacement of Christian Communities from Ninewa Plains (3 - 7 August 2014)

⁴ UNHCR Iraq. Operational Update: Internally Displaced Persons (1 – 15 September 2014)

⁵ REACH. Iraq Internal Displacement Crisis Assessment Report (10 September 2014)

Based on EMMA toolkit, the assessment focused on the following:

1. Understanding the IDP families' context

- Semi-structured IDP group discussions – 5 IDP locations were randomly selected within Ainkawa as a sample of different living conditions. These locations were two wedding halls, a church, a makeshift tent site, and a hotel in which a number of IDPs were staying. The process was to invite families to join a group discussion and establish a rapport through open-ended conversations. Discussions did not follow a particular set of questions, but took an unhurried approach of listening to participants, testing assumptions, and inviting responses.
- Interviews with key informants – the team met with the Mayor of Ainkawa, as well as shopkeepers, merchants, taxi drivers and hotel employees.

2. Identifying a broader range of shelter opportunities

- Visual survey – the SFL team walked and drove through various neighborhoods and housing developments to visually evaluate the occupancy and condition of houses.
- Interviews with key informants – the team spoke with residents of the target communities and several shopkeepers. While making observations, the team randomly encountered three IDP families as they were seeking rental housing. They were able to spend an hour interviewing these families about their needs and goals.
- Interviews with local officials – additional meetings were conducted with the respective Mayors and Chiefs of Police of Kasnazan and Beneslaw, as well as other neighborhood officials.
- Interviews with housing developers and managers – the team also held meetings with the developers of three separate housing developments outside of Erbil.

In addition, SFL attended UN coordination meetings and took meetings with UN agencies and other NGOs.

OBSERVATIONS

SFL's findings and those of the aid community make it clear that the current living situation of most IDP families is untenable. This assessment sought to uncover the reasons behind the vulnerabilities and to ascertain the plans and desires of the families. The IDPs do not expect to be able to return to their places of origin. Because their own neighbors reported them to ISIS, they fear returning to those areas even if Peshmerga forces retake the communities. "We cannot be certain that those neighbors [in our places of origin] will not harm us," stated one individual.

In addition to verifying the risks faced by IDPs, the following four points were consistently observed throughout the interviews.

1. IDP families must be relocated from congested communal spaces before winter, but camp settings may not be appropriate or desirable to every family.

Families living in public buildings face the risk of pending evictions. Many are living in schools and will need to vacate soon so that classes can resume for millions of Iraqi children. Although the government has postponed the start of school by a month and may even extend it another month, the commercial buildings (wedding halls, clubs, etc) have already begun notifying the IDP families to vacate the buildings. None of the families interviewed had found an alternative living situation. When asked if they would consider moving to one of the planned camps, they were hesitant to do so. They indicated that they had security concerns about the camps, especially with the camp's location being so close to a main road.

2. IDP families have resources, skills, and a desire to establish self-supported lives.

Discussions with the IDP families revealed that many individuals are well-educated, skilled laborers, and in a few instances may possess wealth that is temporarily inaccessible to them. One of the primary barriers to accessing their resources is the lack of national identification cards. Interviewees indicated that they did not

have their ID cards with them because of the hastiness with which they evacuated their homes. Individuals cannot access their bank accounts without a government issued ID. This is complicated by the fact that duplicate IDs can only be issued in the place of origin. The Ministry of the Interior is in the process of developing an alternative method to establish identification and issue ID cards. The likelihood of resolving the ID card issue is very high, but will not happen for several months. In the meantime, most displaced families have no way of accessing financial assets and require short-term assistance.

Qader (a pseudonym) is from Qaraqush of Hamdania and lives in one of the wedding halls. He said he owns approximately \$3million worth of cattle, on top of his ranch and property. However, he and his family left their home with only the clothes on their backs. In frustration, Qader stated that even though he has wealth and money in the bank, he is poor and cannot access his funds. When asked what he might do if/when he accesses some of his assets or his funds in the bank, he said that he will move to a different part of Erbil and rent or buy a house for his family.

Three brothers from Mosul were construction contractors. They moved their families to the basement of one of the churches. When enquired about their living situation, one of the brothers said that he does not wish to remain in this temporary place for long and prefers to restart their business in Erbil, as they wait for their eventual return to Mosul.

One English-speaking mother expressed a common sentiment: “I don’t want to live in a situation where someone else gives me the place I sleep or the food I eat.”

The two brothers and a son-in-law told the story of their exit from Hamdania. They were part of the first wave of IDPs, when Christian minorities were given the ultimatum to convert, leave or pay Jazi’ia, a tax that is imposed on non-Muslims. Their bus was stopped by an ISIS checkpoint. The soldiers entered into a confrontation with some of the people in the bus. In anger, one of the soldiers pulled the two year old grandson from the arms of one of the two brothers and shot the baby in front of the rest of the passengers.

3. Affordable, vacant housing is available in surrounding neighborhoods.

The assessment of only five communities adjacent to Erbil City shows that many families can be immediately relocated to other existing communities of Erbil.

Beneslawa, Daratoo and Kasnazan

These three sites were formed in 1988, when displaced Kurds from Kirkuk were given land in Erbil. In 2003, many of these families returned to Kirkuk to reclaim their original homes. The homes they left in Erbil are generally occupied by just one family member who remained to guard against squatters. In conversation with the residents, it is clear that the houses are available and that the owners would welcome renters.

The average monthly rent rate for a 200m² (slightly over 2,000 square feet), two-story unit is \$600. The houses are large enough that up to four families could share them and still fall within SPHERE minimum standards. Sharing the space makes the house more affordable to most IDP families. The SFL team estimates that at least 1,000 and



This map shows Ainkawa in relation to the three sites surveyed.

probably as many 5,000 houses in these three neighborhoods are immediately available for rent and occupation by IDP families.

Residential Housing Developments

The team also viewed two separate real estate developments and met with the developers and managers of these sites. It was discovered that there is considerable excess housing capacity at these sites.



Mid-rise apartment building

One such site is called Golan City and is a fifteen minute drive north of Ainkawa. This housing development was constructed by an Iraqi investor. The manager of the site explained that the development has 70% occupancy. A number of families from Ainkawa have already moved to this housing development as renters. The rental rates for this site were quoted at \$600/month for a 200m² unit. While the team was visiting with the management, two families currently living in one of the public buildings in Ainkawa came to the office to discuss the availability of rental units for their families.

There are also a large number of low-to mid-rise apartment buildings that are completely vacant. One particular building was six stories, with ten units on each floor. The building is mostly completed, but is in need of improvements such as doors and windows and paint. The team was told that many low and mid-rise buildings exist in the surrounding areas of Erbil. These buildings require renovations before being habitable, but are indicative of the substantial surplus housing that is available in greater Erbil.

The local authorities in each of the target sites expressed their willingness to allow the settlement of displaced families in their respective jurisdictions, particularly Christians, Yazidi, and other minority groups.

4. Some of the available housing is in need of winterization.

The SFL team counted at least 30 such houses on just two streets of Kasnazan and Beneslawa. According to residents, this is the case in all three neighborhoods, as well as surrounding communities not yet surveyed. Most of these houses are not habitable but could be upgraded to minimum standards for approximately \$2000. Rent on these unfinished units would only be \$200 - \$300, and could still support up to four families.

SFL estimates that winterizing takes approximately four days per unit. It is possible to organize multiple groups of construction laborers, where each



Example of a house in Beneslawa. On the right is a completed house, and on the left are two in need of upgrades.

group upgrades a specific number of units per week, making it possible to upgrade and winterize several hundred shelters within a two-month period of time.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the rapid assessment conducted, SFL makes the following short-term recommendations:

1. Relocate suitable IDP families to nearby, surveyed communities in greater Erbil, and utilize currently available shelter opportunities.

The SFL team estimates that there are least 1,000 and probably as many 5,000 housing units in these three neighborhoods alone are immediately available for rent and occupation by IDP families. SFL recommends a preliminary relocation of 500 – 1,000 families to available housing in these nearby communities. An assistance profile may include cash transfer rental subsidies, and minor shelter upgrades and winterization supports. A rent subsidy program would encourage families to relocate and give them the purchasing power to negotiate a fair rent with prospective landlords. The flexibility given to IDP families through a rent subsidy distribution is in line with the recommendations and findings of the Cash Working Group. Given the distance from congested areas currently occupied by IDPs and substantial underutilized available housing in the surveyed communities, SFL does **not** expect a significant and broader inflationary impact on rental prices to result.

2. Conduct an additional, comprehensive shelter opportunity assessment in greater Erbil.

The SFL team conducted a brief survey of only a few sample communities surrounding Erbil and identified substantial vacant or underutilized residential space. In addition to the planned IDP camps, SFL recommends a comprehensive assessment of existing, available housing units – including those requiring minor upgrades and finishings – which could be utilized to shelter IDPs. SFL further recommends a programmed resettlement of appropriate families from congested public spaces and temporary and unsuitable quarters.

It is critical to emphasize the urgency and necessity of taking action prior to the onset of winter. It is also important to note that an undetermined number of IDP families in Erbil may only need temporary shelter and settlement assistance until they have access to their own assets or are able to establish income generating activities.

Based on follow-up surveys and initial program results, this program could be scaled up to assist additional IDP families in Erbil, and replicated elsewhere in KRI, including Dohuk and Sulimaniyeh.