

Round four: July 2021

Between a pandemic and a hard place: Durable solutions elusive for Iraq's most vulnerable



The humanitarian context in Iraq remains fragile, nearly three years since the official end of military operations against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). People face protracted displacement and unemployment, lack social cohesion and basic infrastructure, and continue to live with political and economic uncertainty. Iraq is still home to 1.2 million internally displaced people (IDPs) and 246,000 Syrian refugees.¹

The COVID-19 pandemic has claimed almost 17,000 lives and aggravated existing vulnerabilities.² Containment measures, including curfews and movement restrictions, increased unemployment and cut access to essential services. More recently, government-led camp closures have left thousands with nowhere to go, unable to make safe or dignified returns to their areas of origin.³

To understand how affected people feel about the humanitarian response, Ground Truth Solutions (GTS) partnered with the Iraq Information Centre (IIC) to interview 575 IDPs, 210 returnees,⁴ and 139 refugees across Iraq between January and April 2021.

Key findings

- Despite feeling respected by aid providers (98%), over one-third (35%) of respondents do not feel their opinions are considered in decision making.
- Less than half (41%) know how to use feedback or complaints mechanisms. Two-thirds, however, say their communities are able to report aid worker misconduct.
- People lack information on available aid and services and how to find jobs.
- Over one-third of respondents (38%) say their urgent needs in food, shelter, and health services are unmet, calling for more cash assistance.
- One-third of the people we spoke to were affected by recent camp closures and are worried about losing assistance.

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¹ World Food Programme. 2021. "Iraq." <https://www.wfp.org/countries/iraq>

² World Health Organization. 2021. "Iraq situation." <https://covid19.who.int/region/emro/country/ig>

³ OCHA. February 2021. "Humanitarian needs overview: Iraq." https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/iraq_hno_2021_humanitarian_needs_overview_-_feb_2021.pdf

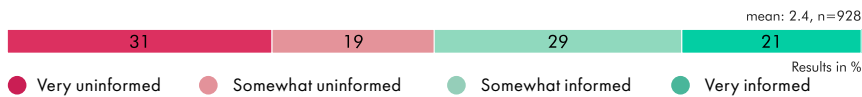
⁴ Refers to a person who was displaced since 2014 but has returned to their location of origin in Iraq.

People want information on available support

Since the onset of the pandemic, aid actors have prioritised risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) to help contain the virus. Millions of people have accessed messaging on COVID-19 risks and preventative measures through volunteer networks and video, audio, and social media channels.⁵ These strategies seem to have worked and people have had adequate information on the virus, according to findings from an earlier GTS assessment.⁶

Information needs have probably shifted, however, as people struggle to make ends meet. Containment measures have caused a surge in unemployment and a significant drop in both in-kind and cash assistance across the country.⁷ Half of those we surveyed want information on available aid and services and how to access them, as well as guidance on finding work.

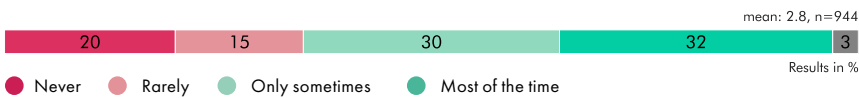
Do you feel informed about the aid and services available to you?



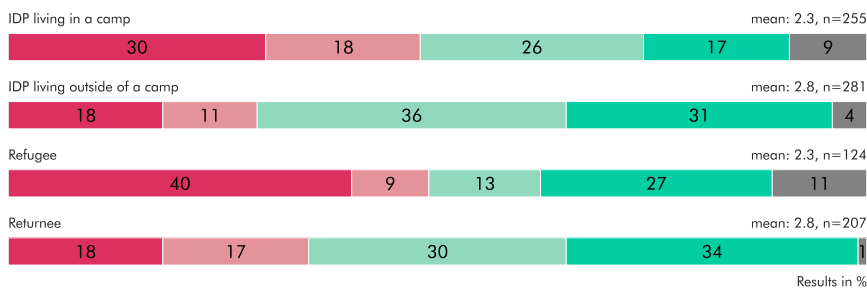
We surveyed respondents, by telephone, who had previously contacted the IIC. As such, more than half of the people in this survey say they prefer hotlines when receiving and providing feedback to aid agencies, which is higher than we would expect if asking the question face-to-face. Still, even those who have been proactively using hotlines often believe in-person dialogue is more effective. "Most of the hotlines are closed and useless," a male returnee from Salah al-Din told us, "I prefer to communicate with organisations face-to-face."

Although the majority of respondents feel somewhat (12%), or very (86%) respected by aid providers, one-third (35%) do not feel their opinions are considered. Refugees and IDPs in camps feel less listened to than other population groups.

Do you feel aid providers take your opinion into account when providing support to your community?



Breakdown by population group

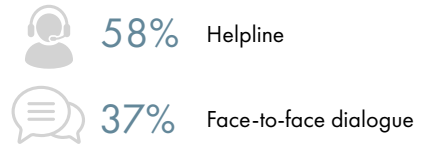


⁵ World Health Organization. 2020. "COVID-19 summary of annual report: Iraq." https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Iraq_WHO_COVID19_summary%20report_2020_Final.pdf

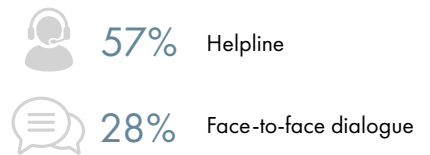
⁶ Ground Truth Solutions. August 2020. "Iraq: How the most vulnerable contend with COVID-19 – and restrictions to keep them safe." https://groundtruthsolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/COVID_19-report--Iraq--Round-2.pdf

⁷ World Bank Poverty and Equity Global Practice Team. 2020. "Iraq high frequency phone survey." <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Iraq-High-Frequency-Phone-Survey-IH-FPS-to-Monitor-Impacts-of-COVID-19-Results-from-August-September-and-October-2020-Rounds.pdf>

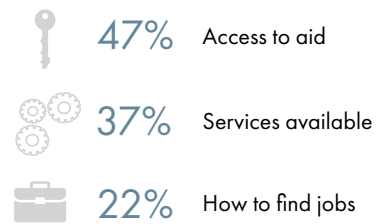
How would you prefer to receive information about aid/services?* ‡ (n=944)



How would you prefer to provide feedback or suggestions to aid agencies?* ‡ (n=944)



What information do you need?* (n=447)



* Only the top responses are shown. Percentages do not total 100 because respondents could choose multiple options.

‡ As this survey was administered via phone, findings around communication preferences may be biased.

Awareness of feedback mechanisms is limited

Despite having engaged with the IIC, 59% of people do not know how to make suggestions or complaints to aid agencies. This may indicate a preference towards more direct communication with service providers, lack of awareness around the IIC’s purpose, or both.

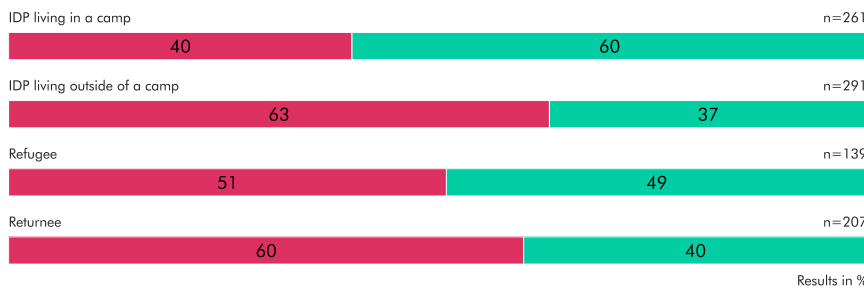
Women (39%) are less aware of feedback mechanisms than men (51%). This is concerning, because interruptions to essential services like protection, livelihoods, mental health, and legal assistance have exacerbated vulnerabilities.⁹ Female-headed households appear to be at heightened risk of GBV, and many are resorting to negative coping mechanisms – including child marriage and transactional sex – to make ends meet.¹⁰ Not listening to women and responding to their basic needs can have dire and unpredictable consequences.

Returnees and IDPs outside of camps are less likely to know how to give feedback. This may be partially explained by their distance from aid infrastructure and staff, but gaps in the humanitarian response may have heightened this disparity. The 2020 Humanitarian Response Plan failed to reach one-third (32%) of out-of-camp IDPs and 26% of returnees with assistance due to COVID-19 restrictions and a lack of partners.¹¹

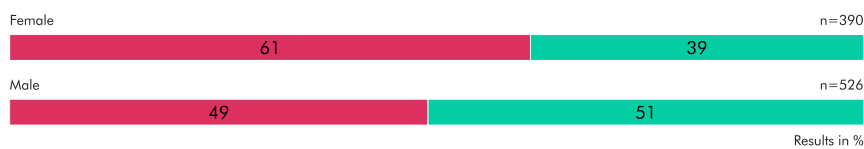
Do you know how to make suggestions or complaints about the aid/services you receive?



Breakdown by population group



Breakdown by gender



Although knowledge of feedback mechanisms is limited, two-thirds of respondents say that community members are able to report mistreatment or abuse by humanitarian staff. There are differences: only 56% of those in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) feel they can report misconduct compared to 70% in South Central Iraq. IDPs and refugees find this to be more challenging than returnees.



“Help them hear us, so that they know we are here in this small village and that we exist.” – Female returnee, Ninewa, age 45

⁸ OCHA. December 2020. “OCHA Iraq humanitarian bulletin.” https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/december_2020_humanitarian_bulletin_final.pdf

⁹ OCHA (December 2020).

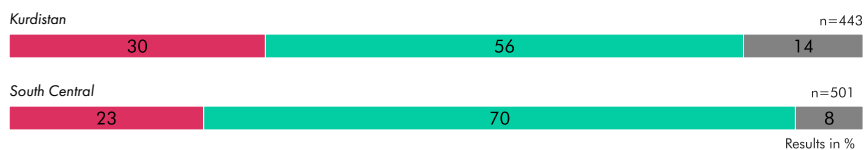
¹⁰ OCHA (December 2020).

¹¹ Iraq Inter-Cluster Coordination Group. March 2021. “2020 HRP Gap Analysis.” <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/iraq/document/2020-hrp-gap-analysis-iccg-final>

Do you think people in your community feel able to report instances of abuse or mistreatment by aid providers?



Breakdown by region



Amid uncertainty, people call for cash and more reliable services

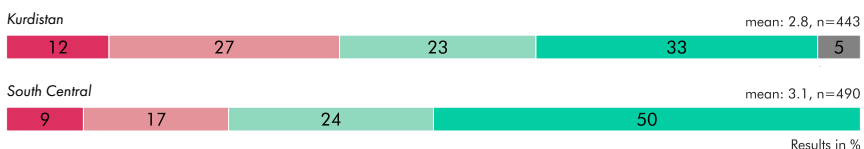
Most people (71%) believe aid goes to people who most need it but this response varies by legal status and location. Only half (47%) of refugees say aid is targeted fairly, and people in the Kurdistan Region find aid less fair than those in South Central Iraq. "Some aid is not delivered properly and transparently," said one male returnee in Anbar.

Concern about fairness may be linked to food assistance: a separate study reported that around half of returnees and 60% of refugees say food assistance is unfairly allocated.¹² Only one-third of Syrian refugees reportedly consume sufficient food, many relying on finding cheap goods or borrowing from others.¹³ In this study, the majority of those who raised complaints about the quality of food aid were in-camp IDPs in the Kurdistan Region.

In your opinion, does aid go to those who need it most?



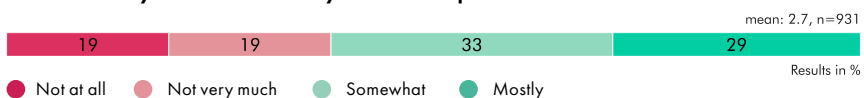
Breakdown by region



Almost two-thirds (62%) of people say aid meets their needs, although men are far less likely (36%) than women (73%) to believe this. Respondents in the Kurdistan Region see this more negatively than those in South Central, and IDPs in camps seem to have more unmet needs than other groups (in line with the 2021 Humanitarian Needs Overview, which reports that in-camp IDPs are least able to meet their basic needs).¹⁴ Income-related vulnerabilities are also more prevalent for this group: two-thirds have taken on debt.¹⁵

Similarly to previous rounds, there is a strong preference for cash (70%) over in-kind assistance (6%).

Does the aid you receive cover your most important needs?



¹² FAO, WFP, IFAD, and World Bank. 2020. "Food security in Iraq: pact of COVID-19." <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Food%20Security%20in%20Iraq%20-%20Impact%20of%20COVID-19%20issue%203%20-EN%20final.pdf>

¹³ FAO, WFP, IFAD, and World Bank (2020).

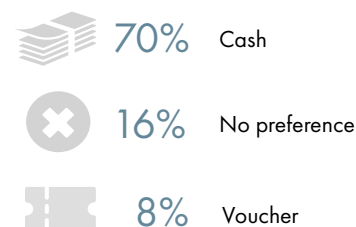
¹⁴ OCHA (February 2021).

¹⁵ OCHA (February 2021).



"In many cases, the mukhtar† and organisations do not deliver aid to the most needy families." – Male IDP, Ninewa, age 21

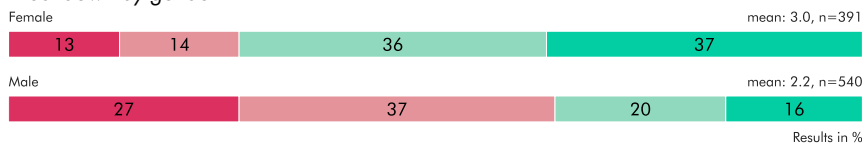
How would you prefer to receive assistance?* (n=944)



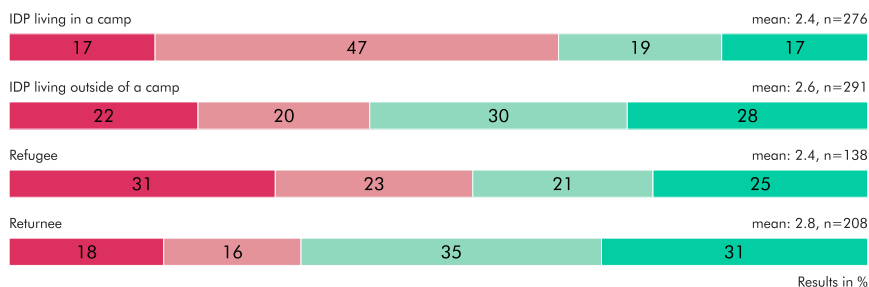
† A mukhtar is neighbourhood or village representative who plays a key role in maintaining the bridge between people and authorities. Communities often refer to the mukhtar to resolve issues and voice their concerns.

*Only the top responses are shown. Percentages do not total 100 because respondents could choose multiple options.

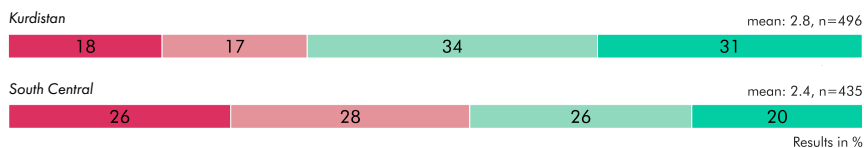
Breakdown by gender



Breakdown by population group



Breakdown by region



The poverty rate in Iraq is expected to rise by between 7–14% in the short term due to COVID-19, increasing the numbers of the country’s poor to 12.4 million.¹⁶ People tell us they need money to cover unmet needs, but they also need more reliable services.

Already weakened by decades of conflict and economic neglect, Iraq’s health infrastructure has deteriorated in recent months, facing surges of COVID-19 patients and shortages in medical supplies and health workers.¹⁷ Only half of respondents in an earlier GTS assessment were satisfied with healthcare during COVID-19, citing prohibitive costs, insufficient medication, and a lack of specialised care.¹⁸

The situation is complicated by ongoing government-led camp closures, which have left almost 35,000 people in limbo since October 2020.¹⁹ The vast majority did not choose to leave the camps and half reported not being able to return to their area of origin due to destroyed or damaged homes.²⁰ Around one-third of respondents in this study were affected by the closures and many voiced concern over their loss of assistance. “We are returning, but no organisation has helped us since leaving the camp. The most difficult thing for returnees is rent,” a respondent in Kirkuk told us.

Camp closures will continue in 2021. Some closures will result in unsustainable returns, so it is imperative that people access adequate and timely information to enable them to make dignified decisions. As the response evolves towards ensuring durable solutions, it will be important to continue strengthening communication and community engagement. Gaps in knowledge around complaints mechanisms – particularly among women and out-of camp communities – need to be investigated. Our findings also suggest many humanitarian call centre users are still unable to provide feedback, raising important questions around the accessibility and efficacy of such mechanisms. As the needs and preferences of people in need evolve, partners should re-evaluate and adjust their accountability plans and approaches accordingly, and in ways that allow for more meaningful dialogue.

¹⁶ FAO, WFP, IFAD, and World Bank (2020).

¹⁷ Physicians for Human Rights. April 2021. “Challenges faced by the Iraqi health sector in responding to COVID-19.” https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/PHR_COVID-19-and-Health-in-Iraq_April-2021.pdf

¹⁸ Ground Truth Solutions. January 2021. “Nearing a year of restrictions, Iraq’s vulnerable are running out of options – and trust.” https://groundtruthsolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/GTS-COVID_19-report--Iraq--R3.pdf

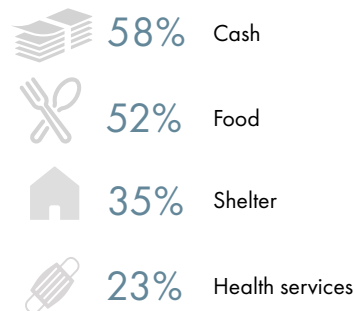
¹⁹ Human Rights Watch. June 2021. “Iraq: Inadequate plans for camp closures.” <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/06/03/iraq-inadequate-plans-camp-closures>

²⁰ CCCM Cluster and Iraq Information Centre. January 2021. “Camp departure follow-up survey.” <https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrIjoiYThmZGQzOTMtYzY5OC00M2E2LWE5ZTQtZGZlYjFjOjE0YmRliiwidCI6ImU1YzM3OTgxLTY2NjQ0NDZlNC04YTBlLTU1NDNkMmFmODBiZSIsImMiOiJh9>



“Because of the Corona pandemic, there are fewer job opportunities. We need support for our studies, medical treatment, and our basic needs.” – Male IDP, Salah al-Din, age 35

What are your most important unmet needs?* (n=944)



“We were cut off from aid after we left the camp, but we desperately need it.” – Male returnee, Anbar, age 20

*Only the top responses are shown. Percentages do not total 100 because respondents could choose multiple options.

Methodology

We used a stratified random sample approach designed to understand variations based on respondent legal status (IDPs and refugees, in and out of camps) and geographic area (KRI and South Central Iraq) using figures from the IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) returnee and IDP master lists, as well as UNHCR refugee statistics from September 2020. The following population figures were used to develop the sample.

	IDPs in camp	IDPs out of camp	Returnees	Refugees	Total
KRI	29,540	83,808	9,123	71,390	193,861
South Central	23,131	88,964	781,552		893,647
Total	52,671	172,772	790,675	71,390	1,087,50

Using these figures, the sample was designed to provide findings with a 90% confidence level and 7% margin of error for each population group and a 3.15% margin of error overall.

The sample frame consisted only of people who have received aid in the last year and contacted the IIC. Therefore the results can only be considered representative of the perceptions of people who contacted the IIC and should be interpreted as indicative of the overall Iraqi population in need in the selected areas. Logistical constraints did not allow for the random approaches commonly used in phone surveys – such as random digit dialling – particularly given the focus on IDPs, refugees, and returnees, who constitute a small proportion of the overall Iraqi population. Nonetheless, the sample includes different people of different population status across each location.

Survey questions

The survey tool was developed using themes commonly explored by the perception monitoring work of Ground Truth Solutions. To mitigate survey fatigue, only 12 main questions were included.

Participants

All participants were IDPs, returnees, or refugees over the age of 18. Of the total number of respondents, 42% were female and 58% were male. Respondents were selected from the IIC database of recent callers and chosen at random by IIC Information Management within the parameters set by the sample, aiming for a 50:50 gender split. In total, 1,006 individuals did not receive aid and 102 did not give their consent to be surveyed, and no interviews were conducted with either group.

Weighting

Data in this report was weighted based on the respondent's location (Kurdistan or South Central) and legal status (refugee, returnee, IDP living in a camp, IDP living outside of a camp). Weights were calculated based on demographic information outlined in the table above. Breakdowns by region were also weighted based on the population proportions in that region.

For multiple-choice and binary questions, the maximum margin of error at the 95% confidence interval lies at (+/-) 7 percentage points. Margins of error for breakdowns by status, location, and gender are larger than for the overall weighted means. Data points that did not contain the respondent's location or status (IDP, refugee, etc.) were not considered for the weighted analysis.

About this bulletin

This report presents highlights from Ground Truth Solutions (GTS) telephone surveys with 575 IDPs, 210 returnees, and 139 refugees across the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and South Central Iraq in early 2021.

Our quantitative survey with aid recipients is conducted in partnership with the Iraq Information Centre (IIC).

To see our [previous reports](#) on how affected people felt about the response to COVID-19, or findings from our [study](#) on the pandemic's effects on daily workers, visit our [website](#).

Table 1: Sampling strategy, February 2021, with achieved numbers

	IDPs in camp	IDPs out of camp	Returnees	Refugees	Total
KRI	143/+5	142/+4		139/+1	424
South Central	138	152/+14	210/+71		500
Total	281	294	210	139	924

*+/- represents number of surveys above or below original target sample.

Data collection

Data collection took place between 28 January and 29 April 2021. Surveys were conducted in Arabic.

Data collection partner

The Iraq Information Centre (IIC) is the main accountability mechanism for the humanitarian response in Iraq, implemented by UNOPS on behalf of the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT). A team of 22 operators collected the data, with two IIC supervisors managing the process.

Challenges and limitations

Duration of data collection

Data collection was significantly influenced by participant selection criteria, especially by the precondition of having received aid in the 12 months. Around 1,000 calls were placed to people who did not self-identify as aid recipients. While no interviews were conducted with them, reaching the target sample required more time and resources.

Gender balance

Women in the affected population commonly suppose that the male head of household's contact information must be provided in order to qualify for assistance. This can present challenges when targeting female respondents remotely. In this latest analysis, gender representation was more balanced in South Central Iraq (52% female/48% male) but fewer women were reached in KRI (31% female/69% male).

Author

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Recommended citation

Ground Truth Solutions, "Between a pandemic and a hard place: Durable solutions elusive for Iraq's most vulnerable," July 2021

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