The humanitarian crisis in Iraq continues to be one of the largest and most complex in the world, with over 3 million Iraqis displaced since 2014 and the country hosting nearly 250,000 Syrian refugees. The needs of these displaced populations as well as of Iraqis indirectly affected by the crisis are enormous. According to the 2017 Humanitarian Response Overview, 11 million Iraqis will need humanitarian assistance in 2017. This number includes an estimated 3.2 million that may need assistance with food as well as 1.5 million individuals expected to face severe food insecurity. In response to these needs, humanitarian actors continue to provide life-saving assistance to those most affected by the crisis while laying a foundation for post-conflict development through interventions aimed at early recovery and resilience.

Humanitarian assistance efforts in the first quarter of 2017 were largely focused on the needs of populations displaced from operations to retake Mosul from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). From the beginning of operation in October 2016 to 30 March of this year, approximately 368,000 Mosul residents had been displaced. These newly displaced populations, comprised of households that have already exhausted their coping capacities following years of conflict, have primarily sought refuge in camps, where they have had access to vital humanitarian assistance. Approximately 81,000 of these residents who fled have returned to the city, where they have had to contend with the destruction brought about by the conflict as well as wait for markets and services to rebound. That said, already in April, with the consolidation of government control of east Mosul, markets are quickly restarting, to the point that multisectoral cash programming is commencing. However, for the residents of Mosul that remained throughout the fighting, particularly in the western half of the city, ensuring basic levels of access to food has been a struggle, with markets experiencing severe shortages and channels for humanitarian aid cut off.

Throughout operations to retake Mosul, a sharp contrast was visible in terms of food needs between western and eastern Mosul, with western neighborhoods still under ISIL control reporting high prices or commodities that are simply unavailable. At the end of March, nearly all commodities were no longer available and rice, sugar, and wheat flour were only available in several neighborhoods or only sporadically. In newly accessible areas of Mosul, residents have continued to rely upon humanitarian aid, but markets have once again emerged as the main source of food. While markets in accessible areas have resumed operation and prices have fallen and stabilized, the population has limited purchasing power leading to the widespread use of coping mechanisms and purchasing of food on credit. Thus, access to food remained a problem despite the fact that the cost of a food basket in eastern Mosul had fallen dramatically and was nearly identical to the prices found in Nineveh as a whole.

At the same time, outside of Mosul and other areas of Iraq that are still affected by high-intensity conflict, a number of positive developments related to food security could be observed. A range of food commodities were widely available in markets, including in areas recently affected by fighting, and on a national level, food became more accessible for vulnerable households as prices fell or stabilized. Differences between areas relatively unaffected by conflict and “hotspot areas” persisted, however, with localized disturbances and distortions resulting from increased demand following population movements.

A strong winter cereal harvest has been projected, based on favourable rainfall and weather conditions, which will likely mean that Iraq’s cereal import requirements will remain stable for the next year. At the same time, major long-term challenges persist in restoring the agriculture sector’s productivity, particularly in areas most affected by the crisis. Ongoing conflict in key wheat and barley producing areas in Nineveh, Kirkuk, and Salah Al-Din will continue to disrupt recovery efforts. In recently recovered areas, limited access to seeds, inputs and infrastructure will continue to pose long-term challenges in restoring production to pre-crisis levels. The government, in the meantime, has continued to provide fertilizers and pesticides in secure areas to ensure production continues.

Accordingly, ensuring the food security of the country’s population will continue to involve the provision of urgent assistance as well as resilience and recovery interventions. For the country as a whole, macroeconomic instability, dependence on oil prices, sectarian violence, and political uncertainty pose long-term challenges for food security. At the same time, one of the best means of addressing these destabilizing factors is to restore the productive base of areas of the country most affected by conflict. Meeting the needs of conflict-affected populations – IDPs, returnees, and residents of hard-to-reach areas – remains a challenge.

1 WFP defines the following governorates as hotspot areas: Anbar, Ninewa, Salah Al-Din, Kirkuk, Diyala, and Baghdad.
areas – will be of utmost importance as they remain most vulnerable to food insecurity. IDPs have been most adversely affected, with increasing numbers reporting poor or borderline food consumption scores and resorting to negative coping strategies. These households, and particularly ones living in hard-to-reach areas, earn less and pay more for basic food commodities. They also have less access to the Public Distribution System (PDS), the government’s rationing system, as well as humanitarian assistance due to the conflict.

Markets

- Based on government consumer price indices (CPIs), WFP VAM monitoring, and the Joint Price Monitoring Initiative (JPMI), prices in Iraq were largely stable throughout the quarter on national and regional levels. The national CPI 2 in March was 104.5% (using a 2012 base year). Aggregated prices in March 2017 were 0.6% lower than over the previous year (March 2016). In March, the price of a basket of food commodities increased by (1.7%) over February, prompted by seasonal increases in the price of vegetables (6.7%), fruits (7.7%), and oils and fats (0.1%). Prices for other food categories fell, however, in keeping with trends observed over the past year. For example, comparing March 2016 with March 2017, fish prices were 14.9% lower, meats had fallen by 1.9%, and cereals had decreased by 1.8%.

- In March, The Kurdistan CPI 96.5% (using a 2012 base year), reflecting an increase of 0.7% over March of last year. Prices fell most sharply in Erbil, which already had the lowest prices of the three governorates, and where a decrease of 0.8% was recorded in March.WFP-VAM monitoring 3 recorded price decreases in January and February, which were partially erased in March as prices rose once again. On a governorate level, however, important geographic disparities remained, particularly between less conflict-affected areas and hotspot governorates. Combined with lower levels of access to assistance, lower wages, and less favourable terms of trade, higher prices, households living in these governorates faced challenges accessing food.

- The JPMI 4 observed slight month-on-month increases in the Survival Minimum Expenditure Basket (SMEB), a basket of food and non-food items (NFI) such as cooking fuel. At the same time, fewer shortages were reported and prices in secondary markets became relatively more expensive in relation to central district markets.

Figure 1: Price Indices: Monthly Trends

With regard to market functionality, data collected for the JPMI recorded fewer shortages this quarter than in past rounds of monitoring as the number of markets without staple commodities fell sharply from January to February and remained stable in March. This may be due in part to a heavy and potentially increasing reliance on imported food and NFI items, rising from 86% of items on sale in January, to nearly 96% in March, with store owners reporting that nearly all of the goods available on their shelves were imported. A trend observed in previous months in which prices tended to be higher in primary markets than in secondary markets appears to have also been reversed; by March, the JPMI observed that prices were generally higher in a majority of secondary markets, and in most cases, were higher across a range of goods.

Data collected by WFP-VAM highlighted reduced prices for individual commodities as well as whole baskets of food, highlighting a trend towards market stabilization and integration. Differences amongst individual governorates were still significant, but tended towards declining prices. For example, food baskets in Erbil became the cheapest in the country at IQD 632, 60% of the cost of the same basket in the most expensive governorate, Najaf (IQD 1091). Elsewhere, small decreases in cost in Anbar and Baghdad coincided

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with small price increases in Nineveh, Salah-al Din, Kirkuk, and Diyala. Similarly, Nineveh, Sulaymaniyyah, Thi-Qar, and Diyala all exhibited irregular price trends. In February, prices went up by 6% in Sulaimaniyah and Thi-Qar while Dahuk has decreased by 30% before rising again by 29% in March.

While a trend towards greater market integration is a positive development, there is still limited convergence in prices between hard-to-reach areas and others nationally. Spikes in demand in December in Kirkuk following new waves of displacement and in Anbar governorate following returns, placed strains on markets; however, prices were able to stabilize within months. Hard-to-reach areas most affected by conflict, faced high prices while low wages persisted, severely affecting populations’ purchasing power. At the end of March, unskilled laborers in hotspot (conflict-affected) governorates earned approximately 16% (IQD 3,789) less than unskilled laborers elsewhere. While terms of trade showed a relative improvement throughout the quarter, there were consistent differences in the terms of trade between Mosul and the rest of the governorate, with unskilled workers paid 40% less on average at the end of February. By March, unemployment in western Mosul had become so severe that it was no longer possible to calculate terms of trade. The burden of prices in Mosul and other conflict-affected areas are compounded by the fact that households in these areas are less likely to receive goods (rice, wheat flour, vegetable oil, sugar and baby milk formula) provided through the PDS due to disruptions of the supply chains and government cut-offs.

Conflict and Displacement

According to IOM’s Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM), 6 by the end of March 2017, 3,058,626 individuals had been displaced since the start of the crisis in January 2014; just over half of the total (1,639,584) had returned home. The burdens of hosting displaced households continued to be unevenly distributed, with seven governorates (Nineveh, Dahuk, Kirkuk, Erbil, Baghdad, Salah al-Din, and Anbar) out of 18 hosting 84% of IDPs.

Insecurity continues to shape displacement in two major ways: on the one hand, remaining pockets of high-intensity conflict, particularly western Mosul, have, and will continue to generate large-scale additional displacements. On the other, ongoing attacks in more relatively calm areas now under government control discourage returns and prevent displaced households from returning and/or resuming their pre-crisis livelihood activities.

Operations to retake Mosul were the main focus of fighting as well as humanitarian efforts throughout the first months of 2017. Eastern Mosul was retaken by the Iraqi Security Forces on January 24, however, the number of individuals displaced from Mosul rose sharply in March as military operations to re-take western half of the city expanded. According to DTM, as a result, an additional 85,000 individuals were displaced from Mosul in March alone, joining the more than over 367,878 Mosul residents that had been displaced since October. While displacement from the western part of the city has accelerated, returns to the eastern part of the city have occurred with 80,628 Mosul residents having returned home.

As the map and chart below shows, the highest concentration of security incidents throughout January and March was in Nineveh governorate, due primarily to the Mosul operation, followed by Baghdad, Anbar, Diyala, and Salah Al-Din. The nature of security incidents varied significantly by governorate, however, with ones recorded in Baghdad being largely attributable to IEDs, crime, and bombings rather than combat.

Map 1: Concentration of Security Incidents

5 DTM-IOM data and reports. http://iraqdtm.iom.int/
Throughout the fighting, most IDPs have fled towards camps in eastern and southern Nineveh where humanitarian actors have been working to build facilities and pre-position aid in anticipation that displacement numbers will continue to rise. While early trends in displacement saw IDPs seeking refuge in camps to the south and east of the city, some have also begun to seek refuge in parts of eastern Mosul with friends or relatives or in abandoned homes.

While addressing the needs of those displaced from Mosul has dominated response efforts, fighting in other parts of the country has continued to force families to flee their homes. In addition to Mosul, Kirkuk saw a spike in displacement due to military operations in Al Hawija district, with 14,910 individuals leaving in March alone, according to DTM. Most IDPs from Al Hawija have fled to Kirkuk, Salah Al-Din and Erbil governorates.

Large-scale displacements have been occurring at a time when IDP returns have also accelerated. Return movements to Anbar, particularly to the districts of Heet, Ramadi, and Falluja also picked up in the first months of 2017. At the end of March, nearly half of IDP returns (47%) within Iraq have been to Anbar, with the district of Falluja accounting for 40% of these, based on DTM data. As of 30 March, more than 765,000 residents of Anbar had returned home, seeking to rebuild their homes and livelihoods but placing severe strains on infrastructure and services, including markets, in the process of doing so.

At the same time, as major military operations to retake Mosul wind down in the coming months, remnants of ISIL in accessible areas as well as new threats to security stemming from political uncertainty and conflict between previously-allied groups may serve to further destabilize the security situation. Preventing a return to conflict and ensuring security will be key factors in allowing IDPs to return home and resume their livelihoods. That said, stabilizing areas affected by recent conflict will remain a challenge for the foreseeable future, including in the more secure parts of the country, where ISIL attacks have underscored the group’s ability to threaten areas that are considered to be relatively secure.

Agricultural Production

While precipitation levels were below long-term averages in January and February throughout most of the country, above average rainfalls throughout December, particularly in the northern governorates, replenished soil moisture and created favourable conditions for planting and growth. Based on Agricultural Stress Indices compiled throughout the quarter, in general, croplands exhibited low to moderate moisture stress, with improvements in vegetation growth brought about by favorable rainfalls. Despite a favourable national trend, by late February, southern parts of Sulaymaniyah were affected by moisture stress, followed by Nineveh, Anbar and parts of Dahuk in March.

Map 2 Agricultural Stress Index-Third Dekad of March 2017

Harvesting was expected to start in April 2017 for crops planted in December. Despite favourable conditions,
areas affected by conflict are expected to face challenges stemming from insecurity. Late planting in Nineveh and Salah Al-Din, particularly in light of ongoing fighting, will likely delay harvests. Along similar lines, with favourable growing conditions present throughout the quarter in many areas of the country, conflict and challenges associated with return and recovery will be the main factors affecting production. While increasing rates of IDP returns, particularly to Anbar and parts of Nineveh, bodes well for restoring production, the scope and scale of destruction and damage to agricultural sector and continued insecurity will mean that returning to pre-crisis production may take time.

Map 3: March Rainfalls in Comparison with Long-term Averages

Accordingly, programming to support agriculture has focused on restoring the infrastructure that will allow households to resume and rebuild their livelihoods. For example, partners have focused on sponsoring cash-for-work activities aimed at repairing and restoring irrigation infrastructure and to stabilize and restore herds. However, another factor that may limit yields is a lack of high quality inputs. Reports of famers using uncertified or low-quality seeds as well as shortages and high prices for fertilizers and pesticides may also play a factor in harvests.

While security challenges have prevented a large-scale rehabilitation of the agricultural sector, import requirements for wheat will remain largely stable or fall in 2017. Production of wheat and barley, two of Iraq’s most strategic crops, have reportedly surpassed pre-crisis levels. For example one million metric tonnes of wheat is projected for harvest in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). The KRI in particular has dramatically increased production over the past couple of years; however, disputes over sales to other parts of Iraq and limited storage capacity may limit benefits of increased harvests to domestic food security. At the same time, the Ministry of Agriculture has continued to encourage production by paying favorable prices for wheat produced in areas under central government control, both to move away from a dependence upon imports and to stimulate livelihoods opportunities.

Livestock holdings have been particularly affected as a result of the conflict with herds subject to abandonment as households have fled. Animals have also been stolen by armed groups, and distress sales to generate cash or alleviate the burdens of having to feed and care for flocks and herds. Based on preliminary findings of a recent agricultural needs assessment carried out by FAO in newly accessible areas, the proportion of households engaged in livestock as well as average holdings have dropped dramatically. Households need to replace their herds in order to resume livestock production; however, they also need security and a measure of confidence that they will not lose their animals again. Accordingly, security was one of the most commonly-cited needs identified in the assessment, particularly in more conflict-affected areas, surpassing the need for feed, shelter, and pastures, as well as pre-crisis challenges such as insufficient access to vaccines and veterinary care.

Accordingly, in more stable areas, interventions have focused on addressing long-term needs related to inputs. These include supplying fodder and vaccines to pastoralists and setting up mobile veterinary clinics to assist pastoralists in the rural areas and IDP camps where they relocated with their stock; supporting backyard poultry by rehabilitating poultry houses and replacing egg incubators; and distributing bee hives and honey extraction equipment.

**Nutrition and Health**

Results of a SMART survey conducted in January 2017 of IDPs in new camps and emergency centers in northeastern Iraq indicated acceptable levels of acute malnutrition amongst children under five, based on World Health Organization (WHO) cutoff points. A survey of 560 children showed a prevalence of global acute malnutrition of 3.2%, based on weight-for-height scores and/or oedema with rates of malnutrition equal among boys and girls. Overall, 2.7% of children were moderately malnourished (2.9% of boys and 2.5% of girls). Another 0.5% were severely malnourished with rates of 0.4% for boys and 0.7% for girls.

Based on Mid-Upper Arm Circumference (MUAC) measurements of 517 children also conducted by nutrition partners as part of the same study, 2.7% of children were considered malnourished with higher rates...
among girls (3.1%) than boys (2.3%). More boys were severely malnourished with 0.8% of the total exhibiting MUAC scores of less than 115 mm and/or oedema, while 1.6% were moderately malnourished. All girls exhibiting malnutrition (3.1%) exhibited moderate malnutrition with MUAC scores between 115 mm and 125 mm.

A nutrition screening of 5,883 recently arrived children 6-59 months in Hamam Alil and Jadaa IDP camps took place from 11-29 March. The screening included MUAC measurements and observation of bilateral oedema. Overall 1.24% children were identified with severe acute malnutrition (MUAC < 11.5 CM) and 150 (2.60%) cases of children with moderate malnutrition (MUAC < 12.5 CM). The children received therapies and screening will continue.

A lack of safe water for the residents of western Mosul raised concerns that the population would be vulnerable to outbreaks of waterborne diseases such as acute watery diarrhea. Acute diarrhea was one of the major causes of morbidity in Mosul IDP camps throughout the quarter and was the cause of 5-7% of weekly referrals throughout the quarter.

According to Early Warning Alert and Response Network (EWARN) data, rates of consultations related acute diarrhea tended to be higher in IDP camps (2.8%-5.4% of weekly cases) than in refugee camps (1.5-5.6% of weekly cases). In IDP camps, referral rates for acute diarrhea were consistently higher than during the same period last year, while in refugee camps, rates that were largely similar to those seen last year were observed. A large spike in consultations underscored the strain on the health system placed by the operations in Mosul. Levels of weekly reported consultations were consistently two to three times higher than levels reported last year, and exceeded 100,000 for several weeks during the quarter.

As of April, nearly 20,000 children under age five had been provided with access to growth monitoring (nutrition screening) services. Over 3,000 babies of conflict-affected families were benefitting from newborn health services. Nearly 4,200 mothers and child caretakers had received infant and young child feeding (IYCF) counseling for appropriate feeding. Within the context of the Mosul response, nearly 66,000 had access to nutrition services.

8 WHO EWARN Data. http://irq-data.emro.who.int/ewarn/