

## **Protection of Civilians in Mosul: Identifying Lessons for Contingency Planning**

*A Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC) and InterAction Roundtable*  
October 17, 2017

### **Introduction**

In order to inform civilian protection efforts in future operations in Iraq and other countries, this closed-door, invitation-only roundtable discussion in June 2017 brought together Iraqi embassy officials, US policymakers and military officials, and humanitarian actors with experience in Iraq to critically reflect on the measures taken to address protection concerns during the Mosul military operations and subsequent displacement. Discussions explored the conduct of hostilities; planning for displacement; coordination between military, government, and humanitarian actors; and the implications of harm to civilians for stabilization and recovery. This report highlights key lessons identified and offers reflections on contingency planning in complex urban operations and further measures needed to reduce civilian harm. While based largely on the comments of participants during the roundtable discussion, this report also draws on external reports for additional background.

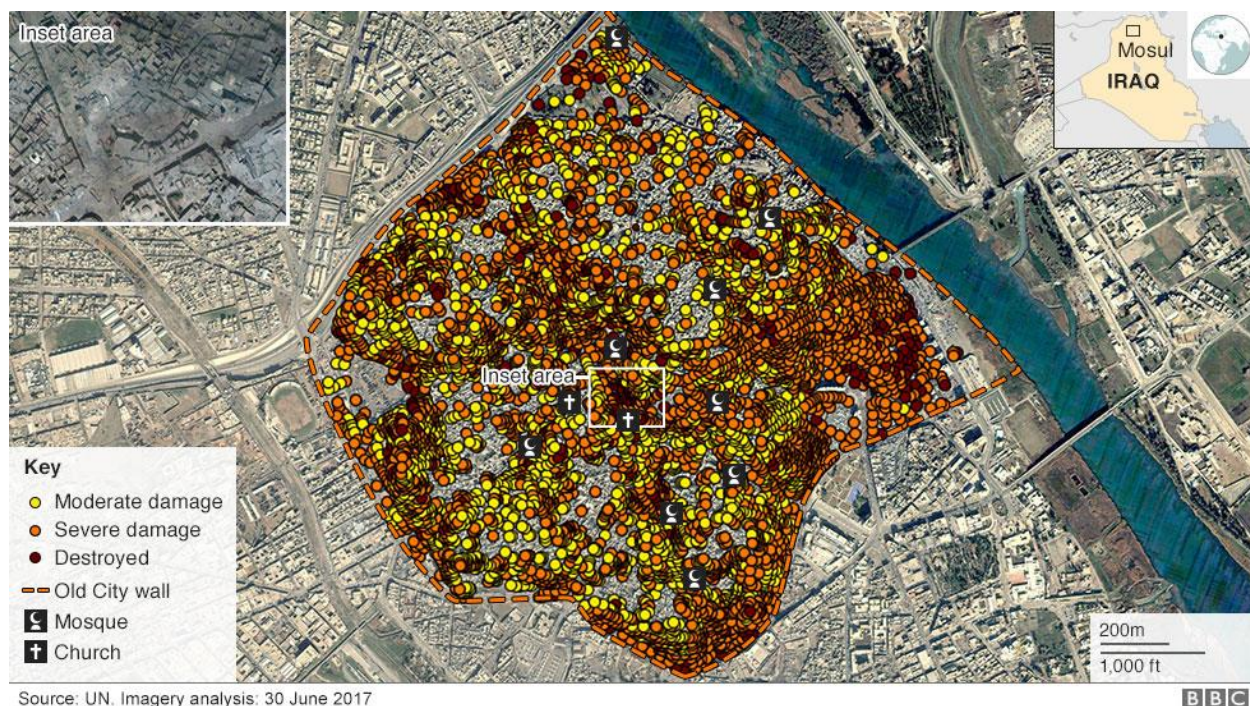
### **Military Operations in Mosul and Impact on Civilians**

Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, had a pre-conflict population of around 2.5 million with a diverse ethnic and religious composition. While the city is majority Sunni Arab, the population also included Assyrian, Turkmen, Yazidi, Armenian, and Shabak communities.<sup>1</sup> Eastern Mosul, bordered by the Tigris River, is more demographically diverse and affluent than the western side, which contains the historic Old City—including the 12th century Grand Mosque of al-Nuri from where Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the so-called caliphate in June 2014 (the mosque was destroyed by the Islamic State in the last days of the west Mosul battle in July 2017).<sup>2</sup>

After three years of Islamic State rule, Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and Kurdish Peshmerga forces, with air support from US-led Coalition forces, began offensive operations on Oct. 16, 2016, to reinstate Iraqi control over the Mosul governorate. The US-led Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR)—comprising Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, the United Kingdom, and others—conducted air strikes as well as trained and advised ISF. The Iraqi-organized forces included 30,000 Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), People's Mobilization Forces (PMF),<sup>3</sup> and Kurdish Peshmerga forces.<sup>4</sup> The battle inside Mosul city (both eastern and western) was led by ISF. The PMF and Peshmerga forces were not involved in military operations inside Mosul, but some units held territory around the city.

East Mosul was retaken on January 18, 2017, and operations to retake western Mosul commenced on Feb. 19, 2017. Western Mosul's dense population of 750,000-800,000 people, old buildings, and narrow streets made military operations challenging and placed civilians at heightened risk. On July 10, 2017, Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi declared victory over the Islamic State in Mosul.<sup>5</sup>

As combat operations intensified, from October 2016 to the end of June 2017, nearly 900,000 civilians fled the city, with 705,000 from western Mosul alone, according to UN OCHA.<sup>6</sup> In the Mosul campaign, there are no comprehensive, publicly available estimates of civilian deaths that distinguish between those attributable to the Islamic State, ISF, and the Coalition. At the end of September 2017, the Coalition had acknowledged 735 civilian deaths from their operations in Iraq and Syria since the beginning of operations against the Islamic State in 2014, out of a possible 1,250 civilian casualties.<sup>7</sup> Similar data is not available from ISF in Iraq, however. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Airwars estimate civilian casualties from Coalition airstrikes to be closer to 5,500 in both Iraq and Syria.<sup>8</sup> Amnesty International estimated that at least 5,800 civilians were killed in the fight for west Mosul alone (from a combination of Coalition, ISF, and Islamic State attacks),<sup>9</sup> and Iraqi officials note anywhere from 3,000-4,000 civilian deaths in Mosul.<sup>10</sup> Destruction of buildings and infrastructure is widespread, with UN Habitat estimating that over 5,000 residential buildings in the old city of Mosul were severely damaged or destroyed by July;<sup>11</sup> this destruction impacts recovery, restoration of basic services, and long term stabilization of the city.<sup>12</sup> The image below depicts damage in western Mosul at the end of June 2017.<sup>13</sup>



The UN-led humanitarian response is a large and complex operation, with more than 1.7 million people having received assistance since the beginning of military operations. Of the nearly 900,000 people who fled Mosul since October 2016, half of displaced families sought safety in 19 camps and emergency sites, with others living with families and in host communities.<sup>14</sup> As of early August, over 79,000 have returned to western Mosul and 90 percent of those who fled eastern Mosul have returned to that part of the city.<sup>15</sup> More than 838,000 people remain displaced from Mosul and surrounding areas.<sup>16</sup>

The concept of operations for Mosul, agreed to by Iraqi and Coalition forces, focused on the protection of civilians. Coalition trainers worked with elite Iraqi forces on conducting urban operations and civilian protection. Comprehensive humanitarian contingency planning, resource mobilization, and response preparedness measures by humanitarian actors under the leadership of the UN's Humanitarian Coordinator saved lives and eased the impact of the conflict in Mosul on civilians. Despite this investment in contingency planning, funding to implement plans was delayed, slowing staff recruitment, scaling up of teams, and building camps before IDPs arrived.

Fighting in Mosul affected civilians in three key ways:

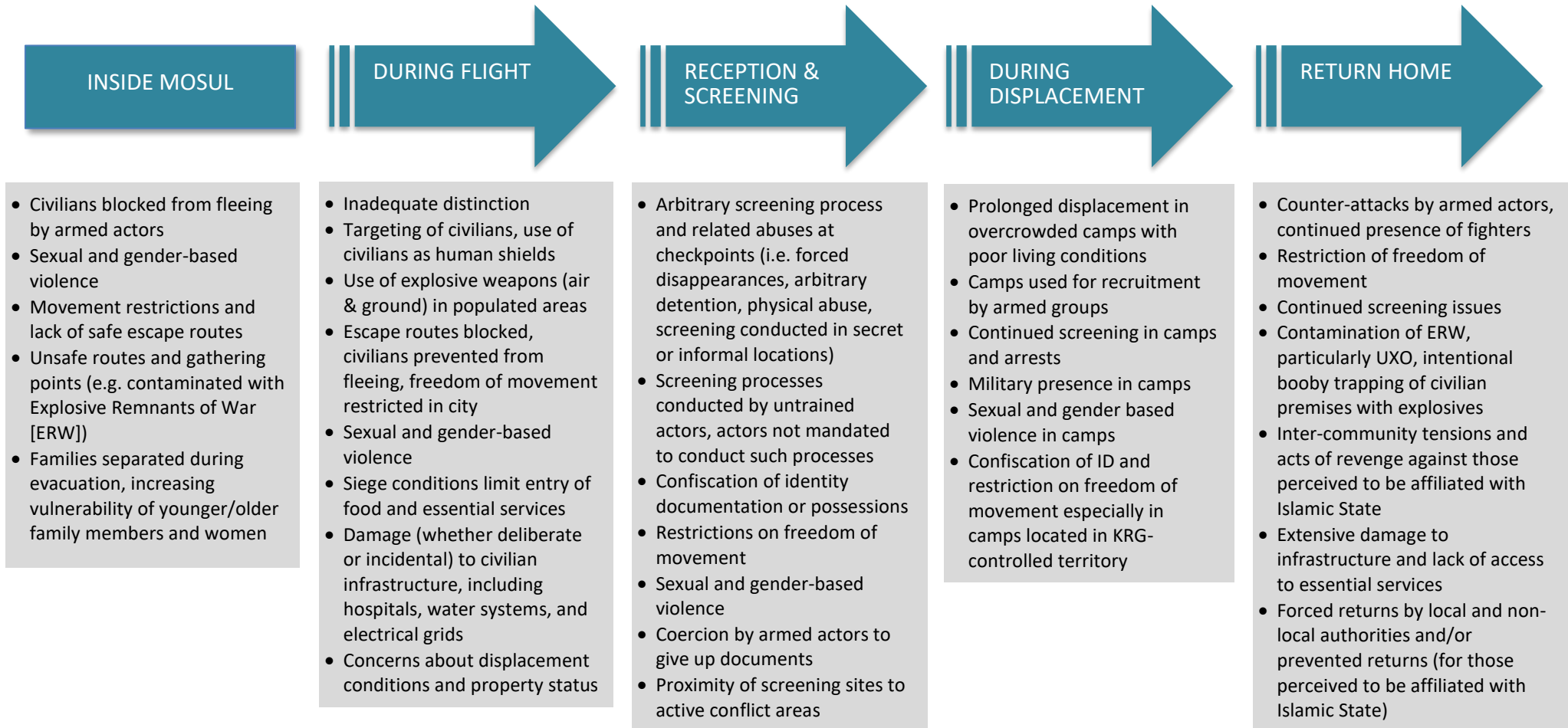
- **Tactics of Islamic State fighters:** The Islamic State booby-trapped buildings and roads, forced civilians into areas of fighting, used people as human shields, killed anyone attempting to escape, and regularly denied civilians access to medical care and food once the operations began.<sup>17</sup> In both east and west Mosul, the Islamic State retaliated against civilians by shelling them with Katyusha rockets and armed drones if they welcomed ISF or moved towards ISF-controlled areas.<sup>18</sup>
- **Choice of munitions:** The choice of weapons used in densely populated areas had a significant effect on civilians and their property. The use of chemical weapons, mortars, rockets and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) by the Islamic State,<sup>19</sup> as well as Coalition and ISF use of large bombs, artillery, rockets, and mortars with wide-area effects in densely populated areas, increased civilian harm. While the coalition for the most part used guided munitions and calibrated bombs to reduce collateral damage, the population density and Islamic State tactics such as booby-trapping buildings increased the risk of civilian harm. Thus, more could have been done to reduce such risk (see, for example, the March 2017 al-Jadidah coalition airstrike that killed over 100 people<sup>20</sup>). Some units of Iraqi forces used improvised rocket-assisted munitions (IRAMS) and unguided artillery, all of which are imprecise and increased harm to civilians.<sup>21</sup>
- **Complications for civilians wishing to stay or flee:** Civilians faced complex choices between staying in Mosul and fleeing, with both decisions potentially incurring life-threatening consequences. People feared what would happen to them and their property if they fled their homes, but they also worried about staying in locations surrounded by active fighting. Civilians' decision-making about whether to flee or not may have been complicated by instructions from the Iraqi government, but it is unclear how influential these instructions were in people's decisions. Early in the military offensives in both eastern and western Mosul, the Iraqi government instructed civilians to "stay and shelter" in eastern<sup>22</sup> and western Mosul,<sup>23</sup> but later changed these instructions<sup>24</sup> to recommend people flee via "safe" corridors. However, the Islamic State mined the routes and shot at civilians trying to flee. The lack of safe exit routes from the city proved extremely hazardous to civilians in the latter part of the military operations, especially considering indiscriminate Islamic State tactics. Three months after fighting started in October 2016, an estimated 200,000 people had fled the city, a smaller number than expected. The majority of displacement occurred from west Mosul in May and June of 2017 at the height of fighting, with civilians exposed to great risk as they fled under fire.

### ***Immediate and Long-Term Impact of Military Operations***

Civilians face a multitude of risks both during active conflict and long after fighting concludes. In Mosul, the combination of intense urban fighting and the lack of safe exit routes from Mosul made for dangerous journeys for those who chose to flee. For those who stayed, the tempo of fighting, the targeting of civilians who tried to flee through sniper attacks by the Islamic State, and mortars, rockets, and large bombs used by all parties in densely populated neighborhoods contributed to injuries, death, trauma, and destruction of vital infrastructure. The illustration below details some of the risks facing civilians as they remained in their homes, chose to flee the city, passed through screening sites and checkpoints, found temporary shelter in displacement camps and host communities, and ultimately began returning to their homes. Actual patterns of displacement are highly varied for different populations and across contexts; the diagram below is necessarily simplified to represent the types of risks faced by populations in and fleeing Mosul.

# PROTECTION RISKS FACED BY CIVILIANS AT ALL STAGES OF MOVEMENT

Civilians face protection risks if they experience displacement—from the decision to leave home, through displacement in a host community or camp, to when they return home. People face tough choices with only limited information and reaching safety is often a dangerous process. Even once they exit areas of active conflict, civilians continue to face risks to their safety, security, and well-being, including upon returning home.



## LONG-TERM PROTECTION CONSEQUENCES OF CONFLICT

Protection risks persist for years and sometimes decades after a conflict, with far-reaching effects on recovery for individuals, families, and communities.

- Damaged or destroyed civilian infrastructure
- Civilian areas contaminated with explosive remnants of war (ERW)
- Long-term consequences of widespread sexual violence
- Disruption in education and school cycles
- Destruction or loss of livelihood assets, infrastructure and agricultural land
- Widespread trauma and psychosocial impacts, including due to physical injury and harm
- Damaged social fabric, including mistrust between social groups
- Reintegration of those participating in the conflict, including children forcibly conscripted



Defeating the Islamic State is not enough to ensure a peaceful future for Iraqis; roundtable participants expressed concerns about the need for long-term investment by stakeholders to secure stability, justice, accountability, and good governance. This includes ensuring civilians feel safe participating in a post-Islamic State Iraq. The government of Iraq has articulated concerns about the challenges of the “day after” the Mosul operation; in a speech preceding the launch of the western Mosul offensive, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi reinforced the Iraqi forces’ mission to “liberate people before land,” entailing house-to-house operations while taking precautions to avoid civilian casualties, reflecting Iraqi government concerns about the conduct of the military offensive against the Islamic State.<sup>25</sup>

*“The dangers are clear, analysts and Iraqis say. Sunnis are at risk of becoming a dispossessed and resentful underclass in lands they once ruled, creating fertile conditions for a repeat of the cycle of marginalization and radicalization that gave rise to the Islamic State in the first place.”<sup>26</sup>*

### **Specific Long-term Consequences**

- Damaged or destroyed civilian infrastructure:** According to the UN, “of the 54 residential districts in the western half of Mosul... 15 are heavily damaged and at least 23 moderately damaged,”<sup>27</sup> and repairs are likely to cost more than \$1 billion USD.<sup>28</sup> UN Habitat estimated in June that 10 percent of road infrastructure in west Mosul was damaged, compared to 2 percent of the road infrastructure in the eastern part of the city.<sup>29</sup> Of the total damage to buildings and structures in west Mosul, 86 percent were residential buildings.<sup>30</sup> The massive damage is reminiscent of the Blitz of World War II, according to a Médecins Sans Frontières’ (Doctors Without Borders) coordinator in east Mosul.<sup>31</sup> With hospitals destroyed or non-operational, injured civilians are not able to access the care they desperately need. The destruction of water networks in Mosul also impedes return of civilians; as of late August, two water treatment plants in Mosul city are not functional, and most other plants are running at lower capacity.<sup>32</sup> Whole neighborhoods do not have access to clean water, and many others experience limited access due to the strain on the entire system.
- Contamination of explosive remnants of war (ERW):** Following three years of occupation by the Islamic State, Mosul is heavily booby-trapped and contaminated with unexploded ordnance, with many explosives still buried under destroyed buildings and rubble. High failure rates of improvised weapons, in addition to the estimated 10 percent failure rate of Coalition and ISF weapons, means the city is littered with ERW.<sup>33</sup> According to US and UN officials, the triggering devices used on the Islamic State’s improvised explosive weapons are some of the most complex de-mining teams have ever seen, often involving various anti-tampering mechanisms and triggers undetectable to metal detectors.<sup>34</sup> The Islamic State placed landmines “like a carpet” throughout the countryside and roads surrounding Mosul,<sup>35</sup> resulting in civilian deaths as people fled from the city and neighboring villages.<sup>36</sup> Munitions were also strategically planted around key infrastructure.<sup>37</sup> Some bomb-removal experts estimate that it could take 25 years to clear explosives from west Mosul.<sup>38</sup>
- Widespread trauma and psychosocial impacts:** Children in Mosul are showing signs of “toxic stress” after years of Islamic State occupation, suffering from severe psychological damage.<sup>39</sup> Most have seen dead bodies, blood in the streets, family members killed in front of them, relatives shot by snipers or blown up by landmines, and homes being bombed. Save the Children reports that 90 percent of children suffered the loss of a loved one.<sup>40</sup> Humanitarian aid workers receiving displaced people from Mosul described individuals as looking like they had “gone through an experience like hell,” and said leaving the city was like “coming back from the afterworld” because these people had witnessed horrific violence.<sup>41</sup>

- **Effects of sexual or gender-based violence:** The Islamic State's acts of sexual violence, slavery, torture, and forced marriage of minority populations has been well-documented.<sup>42</sup> Survivors of these types of violence need not only immediate health and psychosocial care, but long-term support to overcome trauma and care for their mental health. In a conservative society like that of Mosul and its environs, the stigma associated with sexual assault can make it very difficult for survivors to reintegrate into their communities, meaning they require carefully designed services and assistance.
- **Disruption in education and school cycles:** During the three years of Islamic State control and months of operations to re-take Mosul, at least 1 million children did not attend school,<sup>43</sup> with at least 70 percent of displaced Iraqi children missing an entire year of school.<sup>44</sup> As of mid-September 2017, at least 110 schools reopened in west Mosul and an estimated 81,000 children returned to the classroom, despite the dangers of unexploded ordnance and unsafe drinking water.<sup>45</sup> More than 430 schools in east Mosul have reopened, serving at least 450,000 students.<sup>46</sup> Additionally, delays in the return of teachers, as well as suspensions for their salaries, hinders re-opening schools. Some children will not return to school as they have become their families' sole income-generators after the loss of parents or other relatives.<sup>47</sup> Loss of education can contribute to cycles of poverty and continued trauma.
- **Loss of livelihoods, property, and agricultural land:** The widespread destruction of markets, commercial structures, factories, and agricultural land surrounding Mosul will have lasting impacts on the city and its people, as well as Iraq as a whole. With west Mosul's central wholesale market destroyed and government salaries slowly returning for many civil servants, displaced people returning to the city are relying on cheap imported goods and open-air markets.<sup>48</sup> Ninevah governorate is one of Iraq's richest provinces in terms of agricultural production, and damage to Mosul and the surrounding areas will impact Iraq's economy for months and years to come.<sup>49</sup>
- **Inter-communal tensions and breakdowns in social cohesion:** Mosul's residents do not fully trust each other, and despite the declarations of victory over the Islamic State people worry that operatives remain in the city. On the eastern bank of the Tigris, an old fairground currently operates as a screening station and judgment center for those suspected to be fighters.<sup>50</sup> Retaliatory attacks against the Sunni Arab population, possibly amounting to collective punishment, are reported in some areas.<sup>51</sup> Family members

*"At great cost in lives and property, Iraqis have shown that they can defeat the Islamic State militarily. But whether they are up to the political challenges to bring the country together again—or even get the lights turned on in Mosul, or bring the displaced back home, for that matter—is another question entirely."*<sup>52</sup>

of anyone affiliated with the Islamic State are reportedly not being allowed to return home and facing harassment in IDP camps and by authorities. Setbacks in resettling displaced people, as well as the lack of trained police forces and concerns about PMF with disparate political alliances patrolling in parts of Mosul, could exacerbate tensions with the local and central governments, and make reconciliation and stabilization more challenging.

## Protection of Civilians Considerations in Military and Humanitarian Planning

As the fight against the Islamic State continued through major Iraqi cities in 2016, humanitarian and military planners prepared for the Mosul offensive, widely understood to be planned for October. Produced by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), in consultation with Iraqi government officials, the *Joint Humanitarian Contingency Plan: IDP Support for the Nineveh Liberation Operation* contained the main objective: "Prepare and guide the government and humanitarian partners for a well-coordinated, effective and timely response to the predictable large new waves of population displacement and movement to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) from Mosul and neighboring districts besieged by ISIS."<sup>53</sup> The Kurdish Ministry of Interior's Joint Crisis Coordination Centre (the government-humanitarian coordination platform for the Kurdistan Regional

Government) facilitated UN and NGO inputs into the plan. A second plan, also titled “IDP Support for the Nineveh Liberation Operation” and known as the Nineveh Liberation Plan (NLP), was produced by ISF in October, but did not include input from the humanitarian community. Its main objective was to prepare ISF for the possibility of massive displacement from Mosul, with a goal to ensure that the necessary resources and coordination were in place to address that displacement.

The US-led Coalition supports the ISF and its partner forces on the ground. Much of the Coalition planning for the Mosul operation involved building ISF capacity to clear areas and fight the Islamic State, through training, providing intelligence, and fire and technical support. Through the Combined Joint Operations Center, led by ISF, the Coalition participated in planning and preparing for the offensive. In an effort to reinforce civil affairs capacity, US Central Command (CENTCOM) added a dedicated civil affairs staff to its Kuwait base in August 2016. Much of the planning conducted by the Coalition and Iraqi forces focused on the composition of forces that would enter and secure Mosul, but the makeup of the fighting force was not finalized until September 2016 (just one month before the operation commenced) and continually changed as operations unfolded. The original plan involved Kurdish Peshmerga forces liberating areas around Mosul city, followed by the Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service (CTS), who were trained on conducting complex urban operations within populated areas, and other Iraqi Army divisions.<sup>54</sup> The Iraqi government helped determine the composition of the fighting force and participated throughout the planning process.

In addition to the focus on force composition and capacity, the Coalition planning included pre-positioning a variety of “first response” measures, including providing medical kits to public sector health facilities, placing supplies in areas of anticipated displacement, and developing plans to repair key civilian infrastructure if damaged. Few humanitarian actors were aware of these positive efforts to prepare for the humanitarian consequences of the military operation, however. Where possible, Coalition forces coordinated with humanitarian actors via UN-led, civil-military coordination mechanisms, but stayed within the policy that civilian organizations and not the Coalition would provide humanitarian aid directly to the population.

Prepared by the UN with input from NGOs, the humanitarian contingency plan identified necessary preparations, resources, and coordination structures, and was based on the Iraqi government’s NLP.<sup>55</sup> According to individuals involved in these planning discussions, the plan included outlines for screening IDPs at mustering sites, entailed ISF or Peshmerga directing people through frontlines and between mustering and screening points, assignments to temporary shelters and camps, registration of families, and provision of humanitarian assistance at all displacement points.

Humanitarian planning was based on the assumption of large displacement flows away from the Mosul area as military operations advanced, with humanitarian corridors, mustering points, and settlement processing sites set up to receive the influx of IDPs (as per the ISF NLP). While the official plan focused on massive displacement from Mosul, some NGOs prepared for the possibility of prolonged military operations and scenarios where people were trapped within the city. These preparations included planning for cross-line activities (delivering assistance across conflict lines), advocating for increased funding, communicating with military actors on displacement coordination and assistance, and scaling up existing programs. However, inter-agency humanitarian planning devoted less attention to the potential for protracted siege-like scenarios.

## Lessons from Mosul Operation on Minimizing Civilian Harm

### *Strategic Priorities in Mosul Operation*

- **Objectives of the Iraqi government:** While both the Coalition and the Iraqi government sought to defeat the Islamic State, the Iraqi government also placed a premium on ensuring conditions for long-term stability following the group’s removal. This had implications for Coalition and Iraqi forces’ respective

expectations regarding the pace of operations and the potential consequences on civilian infrastructure and civilians—especially considering Islamic State tactics of mingling among civilians. The pace of operations also had implications for humanitarian actors who were liaising with Iraqi civilian officials on early recovery, rebuilding, and restoration of basic services. Humanitarian actors have a unique opportunity to support the Iraqi government’s long-term investment in rebuilding communities after the fighting has stopped, and show increasing willingness to link the protection of civilians during conflict with the long-term stability of post-conflict communities.

### ***Pace of Operations and Impact on Civilians***

- **Pace of operations between east and west Mosul operations:** The pace of operations had an impact on displacement and civilian harm in Mosul, especially as the fight moved from east to west Mosul. Following the conclusion of operations in east Mosul in late January 2017, some Iraqi officials wanted to take a longer pause to rest and reorganize before starting operations in the western half of the city. This was largely due to the high casualty rates suffered by the most competent forces, the CTS, which lost over 40 percent of its soldiers.<sup>56</sup> According to roundtable participants, the decision to start the campaign in west Mosul two weeks after the conclusion of the eastern operation was “a difficult discussion” driven by concern that the Islamic State was on the run but would become more entrenched and stronger if ISF did not move forward. CTS however, was still in the process of preparing soldiers for the battle. As shaping operations for the west began, the Federal Police, who were untrained for urban combat, led the fighting in several areas. CTS and other ISF units were also involved in west Mosul.
- **Tempo of west Mosul operation:** Despite changes in the composition of ISF-affiliated forces during the Mosul operations, the tempo of fighting was not calibrated to allow for civilian harm mitigation. While ISF and the Coalition battle plans were described as centered on the protection of civilians, some members of the Coalition, including commanding general of Coalition forces Maj. Gen. Joe Martin, held the view that “the best way to protect civilians is to defeat ISIS,”<sup>57</sup> but as the tempo of the operations in densely populated west Mosul intensified, reports of civilian harm also increased. There was also a perception by some involved in the military operations that civilians remaining in Mosul’s old city were mainly families of Islamic State fighters or sympathetic towards the group, potentially resulting in less of a focus on their protection.<sup>58</sup>

An internal review of the US battle plan against the Islamic State in early 2017<sup>59</sup> led to a subsequent transition from “attrition” to “annihilation” by May 2017.<sup>60</sup> Decision-makers faced difficulty updating the battle plan in a timely matter to respond to operational realities. Following the al-Jadidah strike in west Mosul in March 2017, which resulted in over 100 deaths, the Iraqi government temporarily paused airstrikes, but these resumed to support advancing forces as the Islamic State remained entrenched. In contrast to operations in Tikrit, Fallujah, Ramadi, and east Mosul, by May, Islamic State fighters were concentrated in a 12-square kilometer area of the old city of west Mosul alongside thousands of civilians who were prevented from leaving.<sup>61</sup> Islamic State fighters’ exit from Mosul was blocked and they were unable to leave the old city towards open areas near the Syrian border away from civilian-populated areas—a tactic to reduce civilian harm used by Iraqi commanders in previous operations. According to US Envoy to the Coalition, Brett McGurk, the goal was to corner the remaining Islamic State fighters in western Mosul and prevent

#### **Adaptation of pace and tactics to minimize impact on civilians**

*In contrast to the Mosul operation, in 2016, Prime Minister Abadi slowed the advance of operations in Fallujah to evacuate more than 82,000 civilians. The campaign was paused so Iraqi special operations teams could negotiate with tribal leaders affiliated with the Islamic State to allow civilians to leave. These efforts tangibly reduced civilian harm in the military operations to retake Fallujah.*



their escape.<sup>62</sup> In the last few weeks of the battle, concerned for civilians' and soldiers' safety, ISF advanced 100 meters a day through the densely-populated old city, conducting slow, house-to-house operations, with Iraqi and Coalition air support.

- **Readiness to receive displaced people:** Government and humanitarian preparations to address displacement flows were also affected by the accelerated battle rhythm, as military operations started before camps and screening sites had been completed. Compounding the momentum of the military operations, financial resources were slowly allocated for the humanitarian response, meaning many activities were not scaled up by the time hostilities moved into Mosul. Humanitarian actors were not always able to adapt to the fluid dynamics as it became clear that alternate scenarios were playing out, especially as uncertainties abounded about how many people would flee the city for camps or host communities. In summer 2016, as shaping operations began and areas were being retaken by ground forces outside Mosul city, hundreds of IDPs were arriving at unprepared camp sites. As the east Mosul operation got underway in October 2017, up to 30,000 people fled the fighting and many were sent to IDP camps when sites were not ready.<sup>63</sup> Humanitarian actors also were not prepared for mass numbers of civilians to shelter in their homes or flee to host communities. Some humanitarian actors involved in the Mosul response noted that improved communication between military officials, whether from the Coalition or ISF, could have resulted in better preparation for spontaneous flows of people.
- **Proportion, precaution, and choice of munitions:** Despite the focus on the protection of civilians in the Mosul concept of operations, the fight in western Mosul led to more deaths, injuries, and destruction than in eastern Mosul. While official casualty numbers are not confirmed, there is significant disparity between external sources and coalition data.<sup>64</sup> ISF's approach to fighting was not uniform; for example, guidance from Baghdad limited the use of heavy weapons in Mosul, but this was more closely adhered to in east Mosul than in west Mosul.<sup>65</sup> Operation Inherent Resolve Commander US Lt. Gen. Stephen Townsend said the Coalition took "extraordinary measures to safeguard civilian lives, measuring every single time how many civilians may or may not be in the target area and what munition to employ and how can we strike that building and take out only that room and not the entire floor or the entire building."<sup>66</sup> The population density of western Mosul, narrow streets, and Islamic State tactics of using civilians as human shields, planting IEDs, and booby-trapping buildings made military operations difficult. But the use of indirect fire and large bombs in densely populated areas also led to civilian deaths and the near complete destruction of west Mosul's old city. In addition, failure to assume the presence of civilians, in combination with Islamic State tactics, led to civilian deaths, including the March 17 Coalition attack on two Islamic State fighters that resulted in the deaths of at least 105 civilians.<sup>67</sup> Choices of munitions, effective warnings, and precautionary measures, which include delay or suspension in attacks as risk to civilians increase, are critical in urban operations.

### ***Competencies and Capacities***

- **Training and capacity of Iraqi forces:** A fundamental challenge facing both ISF and their Coalition partners was maintaining suitably trained armed forces to conduct complex urban operations in areas with significant civilian presence. The elite Iraqi CTS were trained and mentored for many years by US Special Forces, and prepared for urban operations against the Islamic State, but not all units within ISF had the same competencies and capacities. During the initial phase of military operations in east Mosul, CTS suffered high casualties.<sup>68</sup> According to individuals involved with the Coalition, this resulted not only in a loss of trained soldiers, but also institutional knowledge representing years of investment that could not be quickly replaced before operations began in west Mosul. It also affected the ability of Iraqi forces to secure the area captured from the Islamic State and ensure the safety of the civilian population following operations. While the training pipeline was accelerated to train new ISF, this rush to get forces on the front line affected the competency of forces performing complex urban operations. Additionally, the Iraqi Federal Police, who were trained in wide-area security and infantry tactics but not complex

urban operations, were pushed to take the lead in the initial phase of west Mosul to support the diminished CTS. Individuals involved with the Coalition reported that US forces could not train the Federal Police because many did not meet US vetting criteria, as some commanders were implicated in gross human rights violations. When Federal Police began suffering high casualties, calls for close air support from Iraqi air forces also contributed to civilian harm in west Mosul.

- **Competencies of PMF:** The predominantly Shi'a PMF were prohibited from entering Mosul city to avoid sectarian tensions in majority Sunni Mosul,<sup>69</sup> however, due to troop shortages, PMF were present at checkpoints, whether official or informal, and in communities (including in Mosul city) where their presence was sensitive. In March, aid convoys linked to specific PMF entered Mosul city to deliver assistance, causing concerns among the Sunni population of the area that the groups wanted to capitalize on the chaos and extend their influence.<sup>70</sup> According to UNHCR, PMF participated in screening procedures at displacement sites, even when not mandated to do screenings, and reportedly confiscated identity documents of many male IDPs, causing anxiety and insecurity among those fleeing Mosul.<sup>71</sup> Human Rights Watch reported in February 2017 that some members of the PMF set up informal and unauthorized screening sites and detained men of fighting age fleeing Mosul, holding them in secret locations without communication with their families.<sup>72</sup>
- **Capacities and expertise of humanitarian actors:** Some involved in the humanitarian response indicate that humanitarian actors lacked experience with the operational realities of an intense military operation and large-scale civilian harm in urban areas. This included lack of knowledge of the types of measures that can and should be taken by parties to the conflict to minimize civilian harm, including direct engagement with parties to conflict about these measures. Engagement of this kind could be conducted through civil-military mechanisms but also through bilateral negotiations and meetings between NGOs and military counterparts. A lack of knowledge about measures to minimize civilian harm may have meant that humanitarians concentrated on immediate assistance to displaced populations to the relative neglect of efforts to address the risks people faced during the hostilities in Mosul. Additionally, operating in urban areas continues to be a challenge for humanitarian actors habituated to camp-based and/or rural operations.<sup>73</sup> A deficit of civil-military capacity within the NGO community also reportedly hindered the ability of humanitarians to directly engage with military actors. Humanitarian actors face uncertainty over the extent of legal restrictions on contact and negotiation with designated terrorist organizations. This has a "chilling effect" on efforts to negotiate access and operate in areas under the control of designated groups.<sup>74</sup>
- **Specific Civil Affairs or civil-military capacities within armed forces and humanitarian community:** The ISF's protection of civilians-centered battle plan placed international humanitarian law (IHL) concerns at its core and the humanitarian concept of operations was operationalized at all levels. This approach required an extensive investment in Civil Affairs staff trained with community-centered skills. One of the reasons CTS forces were considered well-suited for the Mosul operations was the embedded Civil Affairs presence during their training. However, this capacity was lacking on the ground during the operations. According to some in the Coalition, it is possible the Iraqi government wanted to maintain a certain level of independence from the Coalition, and so resisted increases in Civil Affairs presence. The level of Civil Affairs capacity has implications for the functioning of de-confliction mechanisms between humanitarian actors and military forces. The UN's Civil-Military Coordination unit's increased capacity enabled greater coordination between organizations working close to the front lines of the response, but did not necessarily strengthen engagement with armed actors on the protection of civilians. Some humanitarians involved in the Mosul response noted that a broader oversight role for OCHA in civil-military coordination as well as access coordination and mapping would be very beneficial for the broader response, especially in terms of ensuring engagement from non-traditional actors like the PMF. Additionally, a greater focus within the civil-military coordination unit on the protection of civilians would be beneficial for improving conditions for populations caught in conflict.

### ***Coordination, Communication, and Information management***

- **Humanitarian engagement with Coalition, other armed forces, and Iraqi civil society on the protection of civilians:** UN-led civil-military coordination was robust but with limited capacity and opportunity to engage on the part of NGOs. NGO participants reflected that they do not necessarily maintain their own communications directly with Coalition and/or ISF counterparts, which can result in weak engagement with armed actors and, in some cases, missed opportunities for NGOs to receive communications about populations' movements and to prepare accordingly.
- **Communication with civilians:** Changes in communication from the Iraqi government to civilians in Mosul about whether to flee or stay in place contributed to lack of clarity about civilians' access to safety. Government leaflets encouraged civilians to stay sheltered and hoped for a local uprising as Iraqi forces approached the city. Officials, however, did not anticipate the extent to which the Islamic State would directly harm civilians and use them as human shields, leading to a change in messaging during the operation and advising civilians to flee instead.<sup>75</sup> The change from "stay in place" to "flee when safe" was not clearly communicated, creating confusion among civilians and humanitarian actors trying to respond quickly to population displacement. Additionally, civilians lacked safe routes—mined by the Islamic State—out of the city. It appears that some humanitarian actors assumed that civilians who remained in Islamic State-controlled territories had no communication with the outside world, which was not the case. Those who fled passed information back to those who stayed, including information about problems with IDP sites, detention, housing and property issues, and safety risks along routes, all of which impacted civilians' decisions to leave or stay. A lesson identified by roundtable participants was to include the experience and expertise of Iraqi civil society actors who had more nuanced and contextualized understanding of the situation and the expectations and needs of the civilian population. For instance, Iraqi organizations repeatedly said that many civilians from Mosul would not leave their homes and move to IDP camps.
- **Analysis and information flow:** Several aspects of information collection, management, and analysis proved challenging for humanitarian actors, who struggled to understand the situation and its dynamics, and which constrained their ability to respond. The establishment of local information sources could have helped humanitarian actors assess needs and adapt to local operational challenges. According to individuals involved in humanitarian planning, some local actors did pass on valuable information—such as telling humanitarians that civilians would not likely leave their homes—but this information was not taken into consideration in collective planning. Finally, the humanitarian system lacked a strong information management role, with insufficient information collection from IDPs. This led to weak communication of protection-related information from Iraq to the headquarters of NGOs, UN agencies, and donor offices, lowering the overall awareness of the protection realities on the ground. For example, the response to gender-based violence was slow due to a lack of data, despite this being a problem common in conflict settings.

### ***Complaint Mechanisms and Investigations into Civilian Harm***

- **Civilian casualty tracking:** The Coalition tracks and publishes monthly reports on civilian casualties attributed to its operations to assess their impact on civilians and to learn how to adjust their tactics. They also received reports from external organizations including Airwars, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and national NGOs.<sup>76</sup> There are, however, significant discrepancies between Coalition reporting of civilian harm and that of external organizations, as discussed previously. No such public reporting and thorough assessments of civilian harm attributed to ISF exist within Iraqi forces.
- **Investigative processes, complaint mechanisms, and compensation:** The Iraqi government had established a National Operations Command Center, which was tasked with receiving submissions of IHL

violations. When concerns were raised on the militarization of IDP camps, and Iraqi army or PMF involvement in screenings at checkpoints were reported to the Iraqi Prime Minister, he issued orders to stop such practices. While the Iraqi government expected a high level of complaints and encouraged members of the humanitarian community to use the mechanism via the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT), few complaints have been recorded to date, according to individuals involved in the response. Humanitarian actors were unable to take full advantage of this mechanism because its use was not well understood. Allegations of summary executions and torture by some members of the ISF and PMF have been reported and the government has announced investigations, but as of this writing, results of these investigations are unknown.<sup>77</sup> The US military conducts Army Regulation 15-6 investigations into certain incidents, such as the March 2017 al-Jadidah incident where over 100 casualties were confirmed.<sup>78</sup> In some cases, unclassified summaries of investigations have been made public. No other coalition member has made public investigations of civilian harm incidents. While the US government authorized ex-gratia condolence payments for incidental civilian harm caused during its operations in Iraq and Syria, this has yet to be implemented.<sup>79</sup> Suspended since 2014, the Iraqi 2009 Compensation Law, which provides compensation to victims of terrorism, may be reinstated, but officials note concerns regarding funding for this mechanism.

## Conclusion: Ways Forward

Beyond the current fight against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, lessons from the Mosul operation will be relevant to conflicts in Afghanistan, Gaza, Nigeria, Yemen, and other locations, all of which involve fighting in urban areas. Identifying key lessons for humanitarian and military planners and adapting them to new operations is essential for preparedness to address protection needs, properly handle displacement, and reduce civilian harm.<sup>80</sup> Below are considerations for military planners and humanitarian organizations as they prepare for future responses in urban areas:

- **Clear articulation of desired outcomes from the outset will ensure all actors operate with a common understanding of strategy and goals.** For both military and humanitarian planners, beginning any scenario planning with a clear articulation of the desired outcomes, overall strategy, and objectives will assist actors to communicate with one another, anticipate how best to prioritize their own efforts to help minimize harm to civilians and address their needs. It will also help identify points of divergence and possible friction, so they may be proactively addressed.

## *Conduct of Hostilities and Precautionary Measures*

- **Improving processes to assess civilian harm and adjust tactics.** Armed forces should have processes in place, such as Battle Damage Assessments, before operations begin to allow them to quickly assess civilian harm including death, injury, and property/infrastructure damage. These assessments should capture data, including patterns of harm, to identify root causes, and information should be housed in a central database (i.e., a tracking cell) allowing for analysis to inform adjustment of tactics and improve training and policies, with the goal to reduce civilian harm. In densely populated areas, it is essential for military actors to assume the presence of civilians, even when not visible, given population movements as civilians seek safety, and factor this into decision-making on targeting and weapons choices. Armed forces should avoid the use of explosive weapons with wide area effects—such as unguided bombs, rockets, artillery—in densely populated areas. Additionally, forces should ensure that clearance for strikes and fire in populated areas, including support called in by partner forces, includes the highest level of command authority and incorporates the most up-to-date information on patterns of life and locations of civilian objects. Finally, understanding both the short- and long-term consequences of the destruction of critical civilian infrastructure should be more comprehensively studied to guide mitigation measures.

- **Adopt measures of strategic and tactical patience during operations.** Armed actors should exercise strategic patience, for example, delaying offensives to allow time and opportunities for civilians to seek safety. Tactical patience may involve, for example, taking additional time to confirm a target before retuning fire and having more situational awareness in order to minimize civilian harm.
- **Training forces should focus on protection of civilians capacities.** Building the capacities of partner forces should include protection of civilians as a core capability and should be demonstrated through trainings and exhibited in operational planning, post-harm assessments, investigations, and disciplinary procedures.
- **Engage in a regular dialogue with humanitarian actors** about harm to civilians and civilian infrastructure, with a view to identifying—and continually evaluating—measures that can be taken to minimize this harm. Existing mechanisms, like the OCHA-led civil-military coordination unit, could be strengthened to address protection of civilians issues, and can serve as important structures for dialogue between humanitarian and military actors.
- **Plans for IED/ERW clearance** should be a key pillar in the battle plan as resources are allocated to allow for quick recovery for civilians to return safely. This may include advocacy on the part of humanitarians for greater access, removal of bureaucratic impediments, and increased funding and training for demining and ERW removal.

### ***Humanitarian Action***

- **Expanded capacities of humanitarian actors.** It is imperative that humanitarian actors, NGOs and UN agencies alike, expand their skillsets and training to include preparation for future complex, protracted, urban crisis situations like Mosul. This may involve investment in information gathering and analysis capacity, extensive preparations for cross-line service delivery in urban settings, greater expertise on engaging with armed actors on minimizing civilian harm and complying with IHL, stronger engagement with local leaders or government ministries in contact with affected people, and a diverse range of interventions to reduce the risks people face during conflict. Stronger security analysis and management systems might help address attitudes of risk aversion among some responders.
- **Humanitarian contingency planning should develop all possible scenarios,** including sieges and mass displacement, and should consider local information sources during planning, including local civil society and affected people. Assumptions should be based on a nuanced contextual understanding and revisited and adapted in real time to correspond to realities on the ground. Large numbers of people may flee areas of fighting but many may be unable to flee for various reasons (e.g. being prevented from doing so, choosing to stay and guard property, fear of what they will encounter if they leave their homes, etc.). While contingency planning is vitally important, resources must be mobilized to match the final plan; without funding to scale up activities, hire staff, or prepare assistance materials, any advanced planning will be ineffective.
- **Increased information sharing within the humanitarian community would improve advocacy and awareness-raising.** Relevant and timely information from the field doesn't always make it to HQ levels where ongoing information-sharing and advocacy with relevant stakeholders can support operational response. Field actors could find easier ways of sending raw data that doesn't unduly burden them with reporting.
- **Increased direct civil-military coordination between NGOs and armed actors,** particularly on issues related to civilian protection. Strengthening mechanisms like the UN-led civil-military coordination units is critical for systematic efforts to improve access and engage with armed actors on large-scale coordination, but it is often also necessary for NGOs to maintain direct communication lines with armed actors in order to ensure acceptance for their roles, and to establish and maintain access to populations



in need. Humanitarian actors should also identify the type and scale of threats civilians face in the context of the conflict, who is vulnerable and why, and engage in a dialogue with parties to the conflict to promote the adoption of relevant measures to minimize the risk factors to civilians.

- **Protection of civilians should be a central aspect of early recovery and reconstruction phases.** Political, humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding actors should increasingly connect protection of civilians to peace and security in programming. To prevent similar outbreaks of conflict, Iraqis, and other populations emerging from conflict, need investments in post-conflict governance, rule of law, stabilization, reconciliation, transitional justice, and economic opportunities.

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### About Center for Civilians in Conflict

The mission of Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC) is to improve protection for civilians caught in conflicts around the world. We call on and advise international organizations, governments, militaries, and armed non-state actors to adopt and implement policies to prevent civilian harm. When civilians are harmed we advocate for the provision of amends and post-harm assistance. We bring the voices of civilians themselves to those making decisions affecting their lives.

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### About InterAction

InterAction is the largest alliance of international NGOs and partners in the US, with over 180 members working in every country, partnering to eliminate extreme poverty and vulnerability, strengthen human rights and citizen participation, safeguard a sustainable planet, promote peace, and ensure dignity for all people. Acting as a convener, leader, and voice of the NGO community, InterAction enables members and partners to mobilize, enhance their impact, align common interests, build community, and promote learning and innovation.

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