



# NOWHERE TO RETURN TO

Iraqis' search for durable solutions continues

THEMATIC REPORT

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

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Summary . . . . .	5
1. Introduction . . . . .	7
2. Methodology . . . . .	9
Mixed methods approach . . . . .	9
Limitations. . . . .	11
3. Displacement and onward movement . . . . .	12
Displacement waves . . . . .	12
Displacement patterns . . . . .	13
4. Experiences of displacement . . . . .	16
'Sweden is the best' . . . . .	16
'Jordan is very expensive' . . . . .	18
'I dream of leaving Iraq' . . . . .	20
5. Experiences of return . . . . .	22
Motivation to return . . . . .	22
Conditions on return. . . . .	24
Prospects for durable solutions. . . . .	28
6. Continued displacement . . . . .	30
Barriers to return . . . . .	30
Future intentions. . . . .	31
7. Conclusion and recommendations . . . . .	32
Annex: Survey demographics . . . . .	34
Notes. . . . .	35

# SUMMARY

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In its 2017 Global Report on Internal Displacement, IDMC set out to better understand the relationship between internal displacement and cross-border movements.<sup>1</sup> This case study on Iraq forms part of the resulting Invisible Majority thematic series. It examines drivers of displacement and the onward movement of people within and across borders, provides better understanding of their priorities and preconditions for return, and explores obstacles to their achievement of durable solutions.<sup>2</sup>

As part of this case study, we conducted more than 300 interviews in Iraq, Jordan and Sweden. The research cannot claim to be representative, but it offers a useful snapshot of displacement along the entire displacement continuum, including internally displaced people (IDPs), refugees, returning IDPs and returning refugees. The following provides an overview of the key findings, which are discussed in more detail in the main body of the report.

## | MANY REFUGEES WERE PREVIOUSLY INTERNALLY DISPLACED

We have previously argued that internal displacement is ground zero for refugee crises.<sup>3</sup> The research for this report supports this. More than half of the refugees and returning refugees we surveyed had been internally displaced before leaving the country, many of them various times. Most had been displaced as a result of Iraq's conflict with Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), either during the group's initial invasion of the region or the fierce battles that led to its defeat. Most also said they had eventually left the country because of a lack of perceived opportunities for durable solutions within it. The main barrier to cross-border movement appears to be IDPs' inability to afford the cost of travelling outside Iraq.



*A view of Mosul's Old City. Photo: NRC/Tom Peyre-Costa, July 2018*

## | DIFFICULT HOSTING CONDITIONS CAN LEAD TO PREMATURE RETURNS

Many of those displaced have since returned. As of October 2018, almost a year after ISIL's defeat, more than four million returns had been recorded.<sup>4</sup> Improved security has made returns possible, but our research suggests they are in fact mostly motivated by poor conditions in host communities. This is true not only in Iraq, but also in neighbouring countries and further afield. Just as IDPs in camp and non-camp settings face significant humanitarian needs, difficult conditions abroad - such as limited freedom of movement in Syria, lack of access to livelihoods in Jordan and lengthy asylum procedures in Norway - were found to influence refugees' decisions to return, at times prematurely.

## | RETURN DOES NOT ALWAYS CONSTITUTE A DURABLE SOLUTION

Return does not always mean an end to displacement. Many returning refugees have been unable to go back to their areas of origin for reasons including lack of documentation, cost of travel or lack of housing. Nor are durable solutions guaranteed when people are able to return to their areas of origin. Many returning IDPs and refugees have found their housing damaged or destroyed, basic services unavailable or livelihood opportunities lacking. In the face of these challenges, further cross-border movement is likely. A quarter of the returning IDPs and refugees we surveyed said they aspired to leave the country.

## | REMAINING IDPS ARE EITHER UNWILLING OR UNABLE TO RETURN

More than 1.89 million people remain internally displaced in Iraq, either unable or unwilling to return.<sup>5</sup> Many aspire to local integration because of the lack of economic opportunities and access to services in their areas of origin, but IDPs also reported financial cost, lack of housing and movement restrictions as important barriers to return. Perceived affiliation to ISIL appears to be a particular concern.

Efforts to understand when, how and why IDPs cross borders should not be used to legitimise the closing of

frontiers or other policies to contain them. People have a fundamental right to freedom of movement, which includes being able to move within and beyond their own country.<sup>6</sup> Those who face threats to their lives and safety because of conflict and persecution have the right to seek asylum in another country.<sup>7</sup> Internal displacement is a pressing issue in its own right, and internal displacement should be recognised and addressed whether it is linked to cross-border movements or not.

Based on the findings of this report, we put forward the following recommendations to inform data collection, policy and programming for durable solutions along the displacement continuum:

### | DATA:

- Undertake consistent, longitudinal and interoperable monitoring of refugee returns from neighbouring countries and further afield alongside existing tracking of internal return movements
- Disaggregate data further to include information about property conditions in the case of returns to former habitual residences
- Monitor returning refugees and returning IDPs more consistently after their return to assess the sustainability of their situations

### | POLICY:

- Interpret the high number of returns cautiously, with increased awareness that they do not in and of themselves constitute durable solutions
- Debate the implications of financial incentives for voluntary refugee returns
- Increase advocacy for refugees to be supported in their host countries, including access to the labour market, to avoid premature and unsustainable returns

### | PROGRAMMING:

- Undertake holistic durable solutions programming that includes IDPs, returning IDPs and returning refugees from neighbouring countries and further afield
- Increase financing and support for reconstruction of housing and infrastructure in support of durable solutions
- Focus on "unblocking" returns for those willing but unable to return because of administrative, financial or other barriers
- Explore opportunities for local integration for the remaining displaced population



# 1

# INTRODUCTION

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Akram is originally from Zummar, a rural town in northern Ninewa governorate.<sup>8</sup> He and his family were internally displaced twice after the arrival of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in 2014, before crossing the border into Syria in 2015. After two years in a refugee camp, Akram was eager to return to Iraq following ISIL's defeat to regain access to his land and livelihood. Kurdish forces, however, blocked his return to Zummar. He and his family currently live in an internal displacement camp in Hamam Al Alil, waiting for an opportunity to return. They were internally displaced. They were refugees. Now they are internally displaced again.<sup>9</sup>

The relationship between internal displacement and cross-border movement is not well understood. It is clear though that many if not most refugees start their journeys as internally displaced people (IDPs), and that many refugees return to a life of internal displacement, as illustrated by Akram's complex journey. There are currently

For the purpose of this report, the term "refugee" is understood to include any person compelled to leave their country of origin because their lives, safety or freedom are at risk. This includes not only refugees formally recognised as such, but also people in refugee-like situations such as asylum seekers and vulnerable migrants.<sup>10</sup>

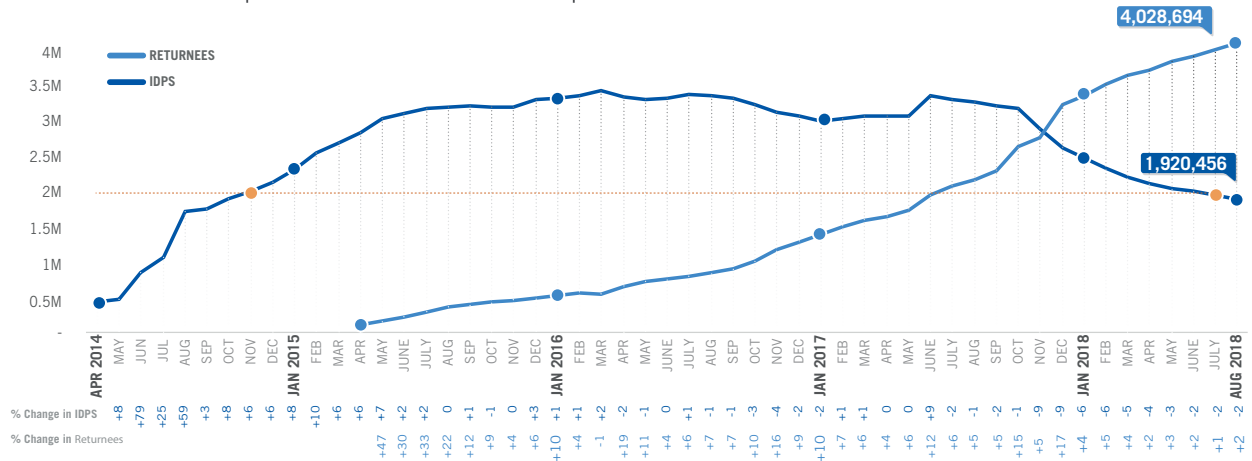
68.5 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, of whom 40 million are IDPs.<sup>11</sup> There is not enough data, however, to determine how many IDPs become refugees or how many refugees and migrants return to a life of internal displacement.

Nor is there sufficient understanding of the processes that lead from internal to cross-border displacement and migration, or the vulnerabilities that contribute to protracted displacement or onward movement when



*Hamam Al Alil 2 camp, Ninewa, Iraq*

FIGURE 1: Internal displacements and returns in Iraq<sup>14</sup>



people return to their countries of origin. This leads to disjointed and ineffective policies and programmes, and undermines opportunities for durable solutions.

Since the end of combat operations against ISIL in Iraq, over four million IDPs have returned to their areas of origin, far surpassing the 1.9 million still internally displaced (see figure 1).<sup>12</sup> Iraqi refugees, though fewer in number, have also returned to their country. At least 20,000 did so between October and December 2017, most of them from neighbouring Syria.<sup>13</sup>

Ninewa governorate has received the highest number of returnees at more than 1.4 million, most of them concentrated in Mosul district.<sup>15</sup> Whether they have been able to achieve durable solutions, however, is uncertain. Given the scale of destruction, the World Bank estimates that the reconstruction of Mosul will take close to a decade.<sup>16</sup> Hundreds of families have returned only to leave again.<sup>17</sup> Across Ninewa, thousands more are living in unfinished buildings, informal settlements, religious buildings and schools.<sup>18</sup> Existing research suggests that the main barriers to durable solutions are lack of housing and services, limited livelihood opportunities and continued insecurity.<sup>19</sup> Extortion, threats and attacks against returnees have also been reported, at least some of them based on ethnicity and allegations of affiliation with ISIL.<sup>20</sup>

Given these challenges and information gaps, this study – which forms part of our Invisible Majority thematic series – analyses the relationship between internal displacement, cross-border movements and durable solutions in Iraq.<sup>21</sup> Its objectives are:

- ▮ To examine drivers of displacement and the onward movement of IDPs within and across borders
- ▮ To better understand IDPs' and refugees' priorities and preconditions for return
- ▮ To examine obstacles to durable solutions for returning IDPs and refugees, and assess the risk of further displacement as a result of them
- ▮ To provide concrete policy and programming recommendations to inform a principled, do-no-harm framework on durable solutions across the displacement continuum



## 2

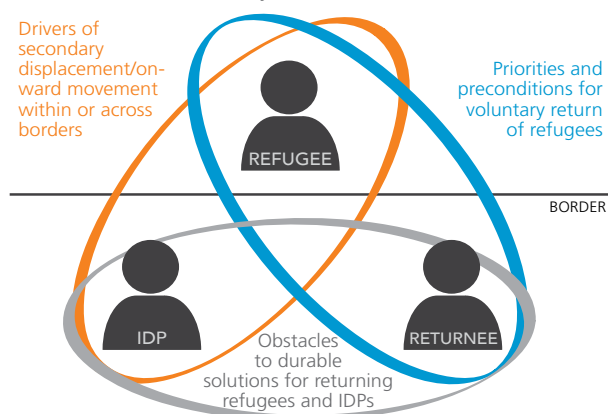
# METHODOLOGY

## MIXED METHODS APPROACH

In order to comprehensively analyse the relationship between internal displacement, cross-border movements and durable solutions, and to maximise the breadth and depth of the information collected, a mixed methods approach was adopted that included a preliminary desk review, qualitative interviews and a household survey.

Research was conducted with different populations across the displacement continuum, including Iraqi IDPs in areas of displacement and areas of return, returning refugees, and refugees in Jordan and Sweden. As illustrated in figure 2, the focus on these populations provides insight into different research objectives.

FIGURE 2: Research objectives



Ahead of data collection, a thorough desk review was conducted to identify research and information relevant to the study. This included an in-depth analysis of progress toward durable solutions against indicators of physical, material and legal safety, in line with the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC)'s criteria.

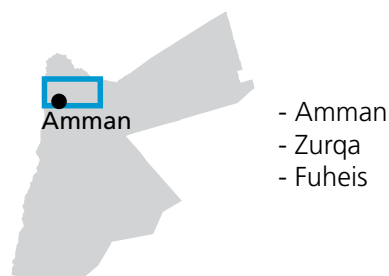
The presence of the population groups to be studied was mapped based on data provided by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the International Organisation of Migration (IOM), the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and other institutions. Fieldwork locations were selected based on accessibility, the presence of NRC or local partners and potential risks to researchers and study participants. Adjustments were made during data collection in Iraq to account for the shifting security environment, which led to alternative fieldwork locations being selected (see figure 3).

FIGURE 3: Fieldwork locations

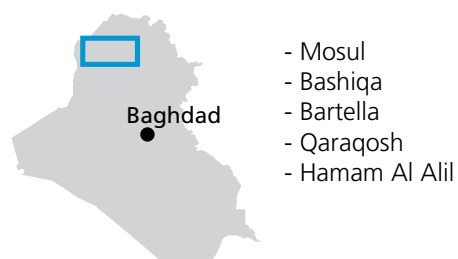
### | SWEDEN



### | JORDAN



### | IRAQ



Given the challenge of conducting research with hard-to-reach populations in such different settings, it was decided probability sampling would be too resource-intensive. Respondents were identified instead through a convenience sample combining non-probability techniques including elements of snowball sampling, drawing upon the local knowledge and social networks of researchers, partners and participants. Efforts were made to maximise diversity in terms of participants' age, gender, ethnicity, religion, location and socio-economic background (see annex).

Local enumerators conducted the household survey using KoboToolbox, a mobile phone application developed by the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative for research in challenging environments. Ahead of data collection, the enumerators in each country underwent two days of training on the objectives and wording of the survey, use of the software, and qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques.

The survey questionnaire was organised into five sections. Questions varied somewhat depending on the type of respondent, but were as standardised as possible to enable comparisons across populations. This included:

- | **Demographics:** personal characteristics such as age, education and religion
- | **Displacement:** overview of causes and journeys undertaken
- | **Hosting circumstances:** such as living conditions, economic opportunities, access to services and security in host community
- | **Original circumstances:** such as living conditions, economic opportunities, access to services and security in community of origin
- | **Pursuit of durable solutions:** barriers and opportunities, including personal aspirations and access to property restitution mechanisms

A total of 313 surveys were conducted. To supplement the survey findings with qualitative data, the enumerators were asked to make notes of any stories shared by respondents. The researcher also conducted a focus group discussion with female IDPs in Iraq, and 30 semi-structured interviews with stakeholders including local authority officials, community leaders and NGO staff. The interviews reflected the structure of the survey, examining the causes of displacement, conditions in host areas and communities of origin locations and barriers and opportunities for durable solutions.

TABLE 1: Surveys by location

	Population	Surveys
Iraq	Returning refugees	25
	IDPs in displacement area	34
	IDPs in return area	76
Sweden	Refugees	62
Jordan	Refugees	116
Total		313



*Data collection in Jordan*

## LIMITATIONS

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This study's main limitation is that the sample is not representative of the wider displaced population. The results presented are valid only for the research participants, and should not be generalized to displaced Iraqis more broadly. In other words, to say that X% of the refugees who participated in this survey were internally displaced before leaving Iraq does not mean that X% of Iraqi refugees were previously internally displaced, and should not be understood to mean that X% of all refugees are first internally displaced. For that reason, few statistics are provided in this report.

Despite these limitations, our findings offer a valuable snapshot of the respondents' knowledge, experiences, attitudes and aspirations. The lessons learned may also be used cautiously "to speak to or to help form a judgment about other situations".<sup>22</sup>

The potential for bias in responses is also an issue. Some respondents may have tailored their responses in the hope it would help them receive benefits or assistance. Others may have been wary of providing honest or complete answers to certain questions for fear of real or perceived threats to their personal safety, such as forced return. In an effort to mitigate this issue, as part of obtaining informed consent, the participants were made fully aware of the research objectives, providing assurances of anonymity and clarifying that participation carried no direct benefits.

# DISPLACEMENT AND ONWARD MOVEMENT

## DISPLACEMENT WAVES

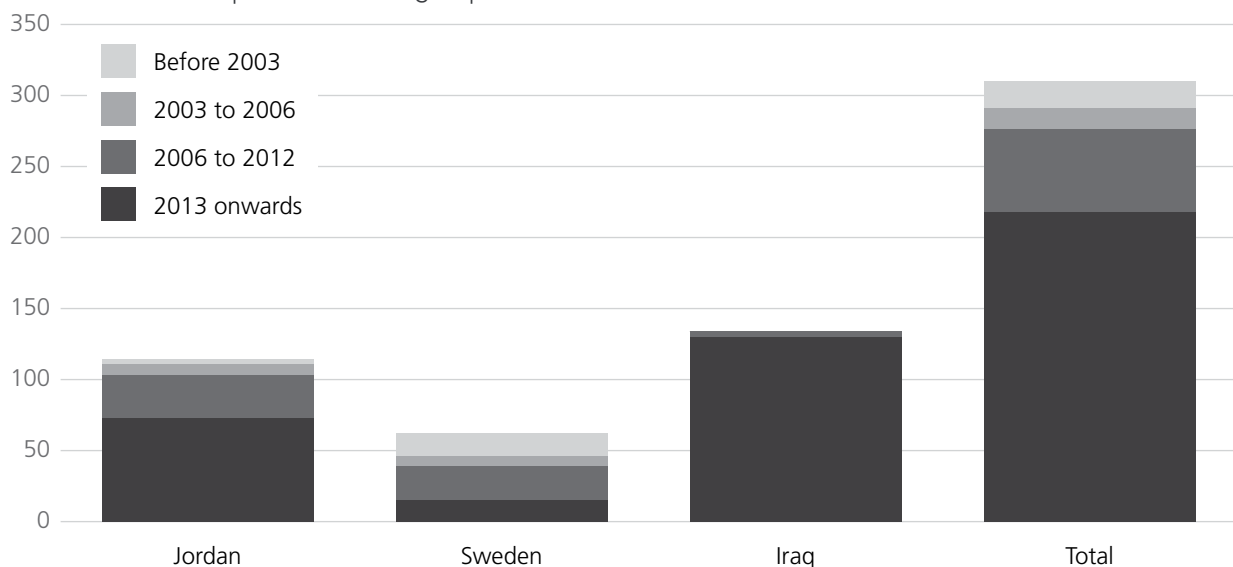
Following a steady flow of displacement caused by the harsh, discriminatory regime of former president Saddam Hussein, Iraq has suffered three major waves of displacement. Many supporters of the Baathist regime fled the country following the US invasion of 2003, and large numbers of people were displaced as a result of sectarian violence between 2006 and 2008. The latest crisis was prompted by the emergence of ISIL, resulting in the displacement of around 5.9 million people.<sup>23</sup> In Ninewa and particularly in Mosul this latest wave took place in two phases, during ISIL's invasion of the region in late 2013 and operations against it in late 2016 and 2017.<sup>24</sup>

Partly because of the fieldwork locations selected, the majority of those who participated in the research had

been displaced from 2013 onwards (see figure 4). Only four of the 135 participants in Iraq had fled before the emergence of ISIL. More diversity was found among the sample in Jordan and Sweden, where a number of respondents had been displaced in previous waves, particularly as a result of sectarian violence. Conflict and persecution were unsurprisingly the most common causes of initial displacement reported.

Born the son of a Kurdish political activist in the late 1980s, the first ten years of Milad's life were marked by recurrent displacement because of threats to his father's life before the family was accepted for resettlement in Sweden in 1997.<sup>26</sup> Ali, meanwhile, fled the country after his politician father and journalist brother were arrested and killed by the government.<sup>27</sup> In addition to persecution, another common cause of movement in the period was the growing economic crisis, made

FIGURE 4: Year of displacement among respondents<sup>25</sup>



worse by the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s and the first Gulf war in the early 1990s.

Displacement before 2003 tended to affect those opposed to Hussein's regime, but the demographics shifted after his fall. For Sara, who comes from a wealthy Sunni family in Baghdad, everything changed. The family decided to flee after receiving a letter containing a bullet and giving them 72 hours to leave. A bomb was also denotated outside their home, as a result of which Sara's youngest child lost their hearing in one ear. "During Saddam, everyone respected everyone. Shia, Sunni and Christian all lived in the same neighbourhood," she said.<sup>28</sup>

Persecution increased during the sectarian violence of 2006 to 2008. Many stories of kidnappings were reported, particularly but not exclusively by minority groups. Lana and her family fled their home in Baghdad after an attempt to kidnap her 13-year-old son.<sup>29</sup> Rahma's ten-year-old son was taken by armed militia, and reportedly killed. Only five years after leaving Iraq did she find out he had survived.<sup>30</sup> Miriam's husband was kidnapped and held for ransom, prompting them to flee the country after his release.<sup>31</sup> Lana, Rahma and Miriam are Christian, but Schead, a Sunni, also left the country after her husband was kidnapped and released.<sup>32</sup> Threats also led displacement. One member of the Sabbaen-Mandaen religious community fled his home after armed militia members told him: "If you want to live, leave."<sup>33</sup>

The dynamics of displacement changed again with the emergence of ISIL in late 2013, when the group captured large swaths of north-western Iraq in the space of a few months. Given its persecution of minorities, displacement was particularly widespread in the diverse governorate Ninewa, which was home to large numbers of Christians, Yazidis and other groups. As Sami explains: "When ISIL entered Ninewa, they stole and looted ... and we were afraid for our lives and our people."<sup>34</sup>

Others decided to remain in their homes despite the threats and dangers. Afraid of losing their property and belongings or unable to pull together the resources to flee, they faced widespread human rights abuses. One female enumerator compared her life under ISIL to house arrest. Attempts to flee also carried a heavy cost. The day after Kuthaiba smuggled his family from Mosul to Syria, ISIL confiscated his property, blew up his home and murdered two of his brothers.<sup>35</sup>

Displacement in Ninewa intensified during operations against ISIL in late 2016 and 2017, particularly in Mosul. After the eastern part of the city was retaken, fierce fighting was concentrated in western areas until the city was retaken in July 2017. This led to large-scale displacement from the west to the east of the city and beyond. More than a million people were displaced from Mosul during the operations.<sup>36</sup>

| "When the retaking operations began we escaped from ISIL toward the east side. We were shot at several times. We fled with only the clothes we were wearing, we didn't take any food with us. It took us a whole day to get to the east, where we were received by the Iraqi army. After the liberation, we returned to our homes. We were shocked. My house was booby-trapped ... I asked the demining unit to clear it of mines ... but when I re-entered it was empty. I didn't find any of my stuff, everything had been stolen." Iraqi IDP in Mosul, 2 September 2018.

## DISPLACEMENT PATTERNS

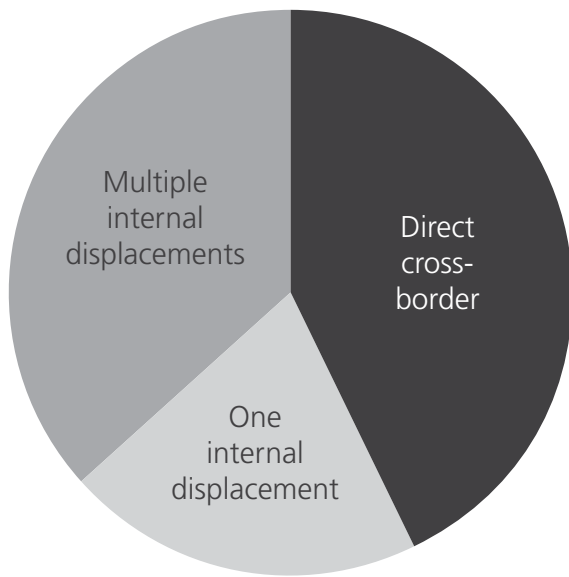
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Displacement in Iraq has been far from linear. Almost 60 per cent of internally displaced respondents had fled more than once. Their stories reveal the complex journeys they had to undertake in search of safety, each movement heightening their vulnerabilities and exhausting their limited coping strategies. Milad remembers that his family often went hungry. "My father used to go hunting wild boar. Even for Muslims, it was a matter of survival."<sup>37</sup>

In the absence of safety and opportunities for durable solutions, many repeated internal displacements eventually led to cross-border movements. Marwa and her family had hoped to remain in Iraq, but after three years in a leaking caravan in Erbil in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq they made the decision to cross into Jordan.<sup>38</sup> More than half of the refugees and returning refugees surveyed said they had been internally displaced before leaving the country, most of them more than once.



**FIGURE 5:** Internal displacement of refugees and returning refugees



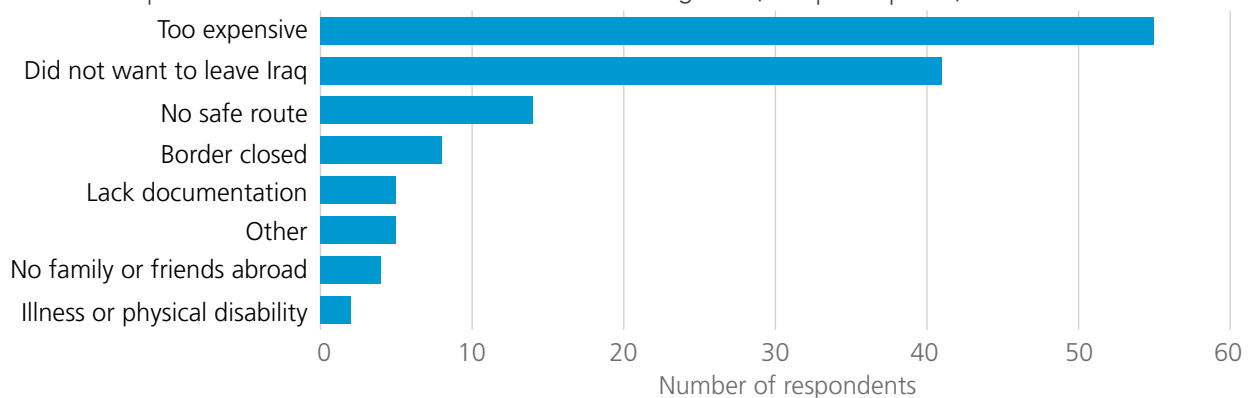
Zain, originally from Ba’aj, tried to flee ISIL locally four times, but when the group took control of the whole area he crossed the border into Syria.<sup>39</sup> Kasim and his family, originally from Ramadi, fled from neighbourhood to neighbourhood as ISIL advanced throughout the city. When it fell, they moved to Sulaymaniyah in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq before eventually leaving the country.<sup>40</sup> Mahmood, from Baghdad, escaped to his sister’s home in Qaraqosh after being threatened by a local armed group. When ISIL captured Qaraqosh he decided to return to Baghdad, but the same group tracked him down again and he was forced to flee the country.<sup>41</sup>

A number of respondents said they had decided to cross borders because of administrative requirements in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, which prevent IDPs from obtaining legal residency unless they have a sponsor.<sup>42</sup> Noor and her family fled their home in Baghdad when a local militia tried to forcibly recruit her teenage son. They initially sought refuge in Babylon, but the militia tracked them down and they fled to Erbil. The sponsorship requirements, however, meant they were unable to remain in the region, so they crossed into Turkey and made their way north to Sweden.<sup>43</sup>

Iraqis were the third largest group arriving in Europe in 2015, after Syrians and Afghans.<sup>44</sup> There are currently thought to be around 260,000 Iraqi refugees worldwide.<sup>45</sup> The number of IDPs who cross borders is unknown, but a study conducted in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in 2017 found that nearly a quarter of those surveyed had concrete plans to leave the country, driven by perceptions of insecurity and lack of economic opportunities.<sup>46</sup> Among the 110 IDPs surveyed for this report, half reported the financial cost of movement to have been a barrier to cross-border movement; more than a third of IDPs reported that they had had no wish to leave the country.

Difficulty in securing safe passage to the border was another barrier. One respondent trying to escape Mosul said they had travelled on “a secret road at night” to cross the border to Syria.<sup>47</sup> Another said they had been walking toward the border with Syria for a week when “we were attacked by ISIL who pointed their weapons at us and forced us to return to Iraq”.<sup>48</sup>

**FIGURE 6:** Reported barriers to cross-border movement among IDPs (multiple response)

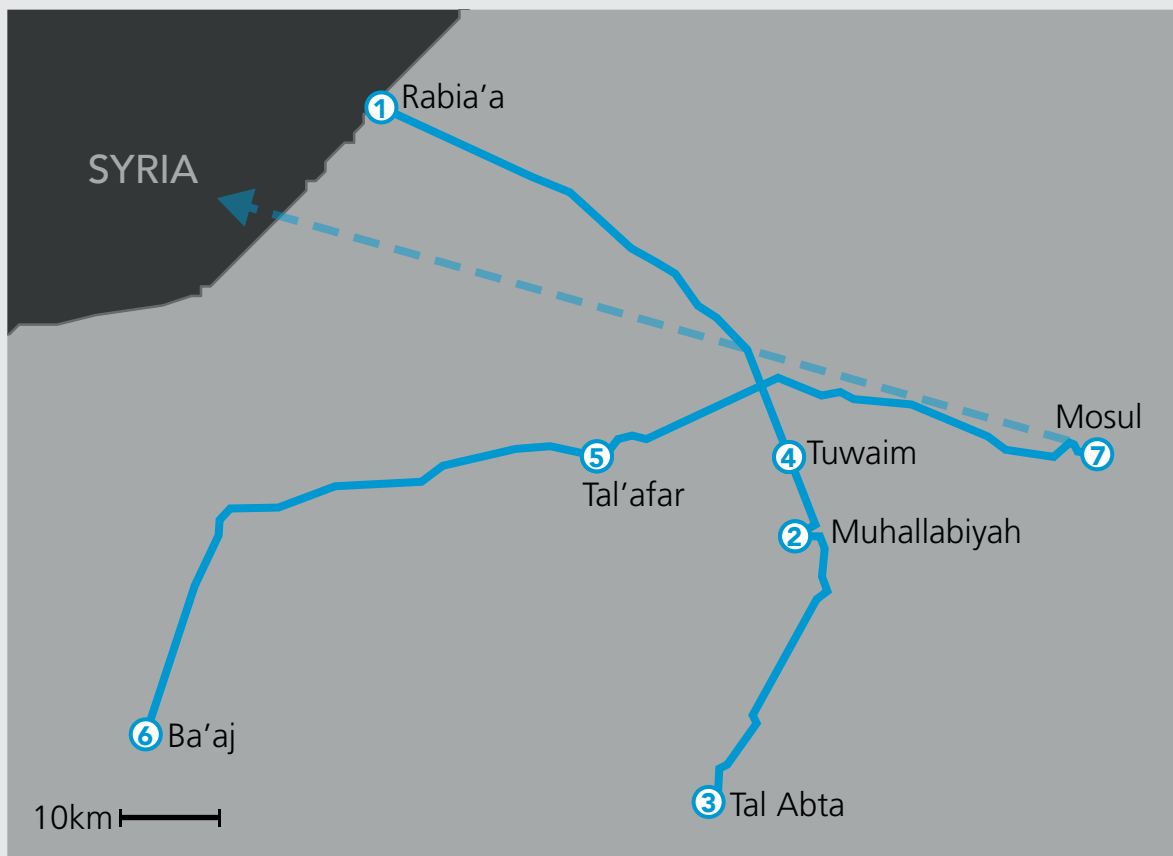


## A COMPLEX JOURNEY TO SYRIA

Yasmeen and her family were forced to flee their home in Rabi'a'a in August 2016 during military operations against ISIL. After failing to find safety in Iraq, they decided to cross the border into Syria. The journey took about a month. They have now returned, but are living as IDPs in the Hamam Al-Alil camp:

"We fled to Muhallabiyah, but because of the conflict and the pressure ISIL put on us we moved on to Tal

Abta and then to Tuwaim because of heavy shelling. We contracted a smuggler to get us out of Iraq to Syria. We went to Tal'afar and from there to Ba'aj, where ISIL detained us. They took all our identity documents and forced us to go to Mosul ... After that, we met the smuggler again and he moved us to a village in the desert where we stayed for two days. He told us to pay the full amount for our passage, but because we didn't have the money, he sent us back to Mosul. Eventually one of the sheikhs paid the money and we were finally taken to the Syrian border."<sup>49</sup>



A complex journey to Syria

# 4

## EXPERIENCES OF DISPLACEMENT

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### 'SWEDEN IS THE BEST'

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Sweden has one of the highest Human Development Index scores in the world and a strong reputation for liberalness. It is often portrayed as one of the most suitable countries to seek asylum. "Sweden is the best," as one refugee put it.<sup>50</sup> Our research among 62 Iraqi refugees, asylum seekers and vulnerable migrants, however, suggests a more mixed picture.



*The small town of Strängnäs, home to two research participants*

There has recently been a shift in attitudes reflected in stricter migration policies, most notably the so-called Temporary Law of 2016. Those granted refugee status or subsidiary protection now receive only temporary rather than permanent permits, and those denied asylum find it more difficult to obtain humanitarian protection.<sup>51</sup> "In the past year, Swedish refugee politics have turned into some of the most restrictive in our history," said one Caritas staff member.<sup>52</sup>

Increasing numbers of ordinary Swedes perceive refugees as a threat to their society, and according to one council worker in Malmö anti-immigration voices are often loudest: "There are few of them, but you hear them a lot because they make a lot of noise."<sup>53</sup> <sup>54</sup> An interviewee from Refugees Welcome Stockholm agreed: "The minority who are against refugees are very loud, very good at spreading their opinions."<sup>55</sup>

The refugees interviewed for this study nevertheless consider security in Sweden to be high. On a scale of one to ten, they gave the country an average score of 8.3. "Security here is very strong ... There are lots of cameras," said Ibrahim.<sup>56</sup> Local authorities in Malmö and Södertälje, however, said that refugees were often targeted and disproportionately affected by organised crime because they live in poorer neighbourhoods. Lana said she sometimes heard gunshots, and that her daughter's house was recently broken into.<sup>57</sup>

Only a fifth of respondents who arrived after 2013 said they had very good relations with their host community, compared with half of those who arrived before 2003 (see figure 7). This may reflect the time it takes for refugees to integrate, but it could also be indicative of declining hospitality.

FIGURE 7: Respondents' relations with their host communities

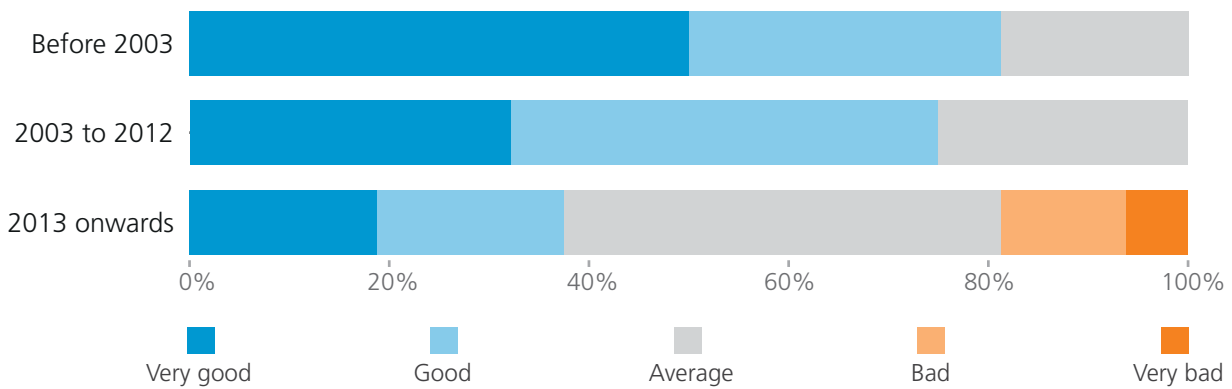
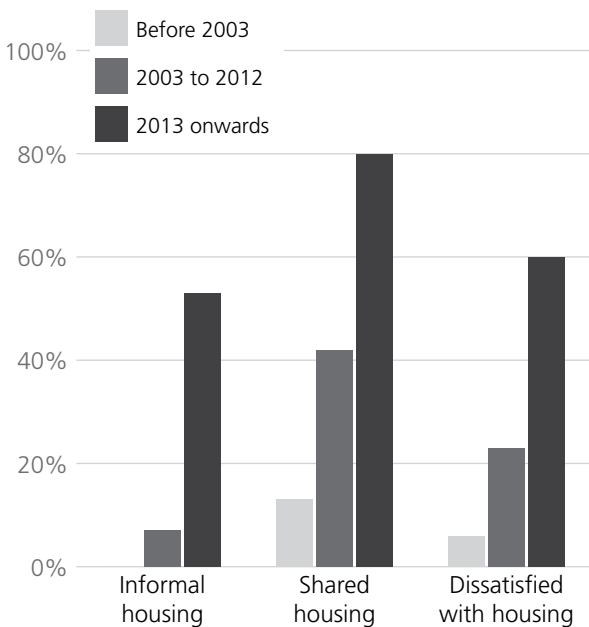


FIGURE 8: Refugees' housing by date of arrival



Shifting perceptions and experiences are also apparent in terms of access to housing, and tenure security is lowest among recent arrivals. Nearly half of the respondents who arrived in Sweden after 2013 only have informal living arrangements, and one said they felt at risk of eviction. Recent arrivals are also much more likely to be sharing their accommodation with other families, often in overcrowded apartments. Many of those who arrived after 2013 said they were dissatisfied with their housing (see figure 8).

Housing shortages are a challenge for nationals and refugees alike, but the latter are particularly vulnerable. The mayor of Södertälje worries that “there are too

many people in too few apartments”.<sup>58</sup> Milad, who arrived as part of an earlier wave of displacement, felt the large number of recent arrivals had contributed to housing shortages. “It’s difficult to get a house because there’s no housing available, too few houses for too many people. Before it was the opposite,” he said.<sup>59</sup> Ali said housing was one of the main challenges he had faced in Sweden. He has only been able to secure a one-year contract, and does not know how he will find another apartment.<sup>60</sup> Ibrahim is currently sharing a room with another migrant. “Two months here, two months there. There is no stability,” he said.<sup>61</sup>

Housing shortages and lack of income among newcomers contribute to segregation, with many refugees and asylum seekers living in socioeconomically vulnerable estates built in the late 1960s.<sup>62</sup> This represents a challenge in terms of education. Mustafa’s five children are struggling to learn Swedish because the majority of students in their school do not speak the language.<sup>63</sup> “There are some schools in Sweden where no one has Swedish as a first language,” said one Malmö council worker.<sup>64</sup> This in turn has a negative impact on employment prospects. “Some people have a hard time finding jobs ... because they live in segregated areas and don’t have to speak Swedish,” the mayor of Södertälje said.<sup>65</sup>

Despite the language difficulties, more than half of the research participants in Sweden were employed. Over a quarter, however, said they found it difficult to survive on their income. Others receive support from the state. Fareeda gets 1,800 Swedish krona (\$200) a month from the migration agency, but struggles to meet her basic needs. “If I have lunch, I will not have dinner,” she said.<sup>66</sup>



Iraqi shops in Malmö

The healthcare system is also under stress. Despite performing highly on most other health indicators, Sweden has the lowest spending on inpatient services and the lowest number of hospital beds relative to population size in the EU.<sup>67</sup> Many respondents highlighted a lack of available doctors and long waits for an appointment. “Sometimes, I don’t even bother going to the clinic”, said Milad.<sup>68</sup> Some believe the situation has deteriorated since the start of the recent refugee crisis, but waiting times were the subject of debates and policy initiatives well before the increase in arrivals.<sup>69</sup> Asylum-seeking children have full access to the Swedish health system, but their adult counterparts and irregular migrants only have access to acute care and maternal services.<sup>70</sup>

Asylum-seeking children are also granted full access to the Swedish school system.<sup>71</sup> Milad, who arrived in Sweden as a child, was surprised at the lack of corporal punishment. “In Iraq, they beat us if we didn’t do our homework,” he said.<sup>72</sup> Milad also felt opportunities for higher education were significant:

“It doesn’t cost you anything to become a doctor. You can get a loan from the government and pay it back when you have an income.”<sup>73</sup>

## ‘JORDAN IS VERY EXPENSIVE’

Jordan has one of the highest numbers of refugees in the world relative to its population size. It is home to more than two million registered Palestinians and more than 650,000 refugees from Syria.<sup>74</sup> Despite the country’s tradition of hospitality, however, Iraqis who seek refuge in Jordan face complex and numerous challenges.

Jordan is not a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention and does not recognise Iraqis as refugees. Instead they are treated as “guests” who are prohibited from seeking employment. Iraqis can only work legally if they are business owners who qualify as investors, or if they have sufficient money and connections to get special dispensations from the Jordanian professional syndicates.<sup>75</sup>

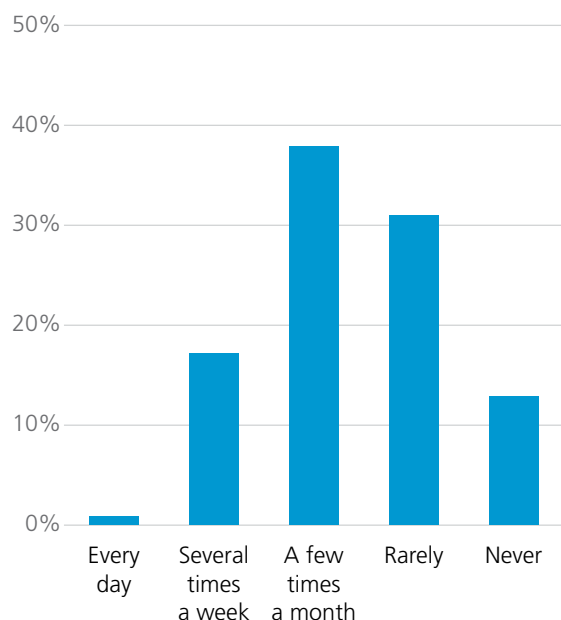
The only option for the majority is to work illicitly, which means a “game of cat and mouse” with the authorities and the risk of deportation.<sup>76</sup> It also means low pay and no protection against workplace exploitation. “If you work undercover, maybe you will not get your salary. They will just tell you to go away,” said one survey respondent.<sup>77</sup> “How can you sue someone for not paying your salary if you’re not allowed to work?” asked one NGO staff member.<sup>78</sup>

Lack of access to employment was by far the most significant concern among the 116 refugees we surveyed. More than two-thirds said they had no income source in Jordan, and very few receive assistance. Even those



who do receive limited support from UNHCR are often unable to make ends meet, which in some cases has led to food insecurity. More than half of the research participants said they experienced hunger at least once a month (see figure 9).

**FIGURE 9:** Frequency of hunger among respondents



Refugees agree that “Jordan is very expensive”.<sup>79</sup> The majority said they found it either difficult or impossible to survive on their income, and none were able to live comfortably. Salma receives 100 dinars (\$140) a month from UNHCR. “It is not enough for living expenses, rent, water, electricity and my children’s requirements,” she said.<sup>80</sup> Munira receives 80 dinars, “not enough for rent, water and electricity”.<sup>81</sup>

Many respondents said they were asked to pay rent in advance, and landlords often charged them higher than normal rates.<sup>82</sup> “Many are under stress because of the threat of being kicked out of their homes because they haven’t paid the rent,” according to one NGO. “Most live in substandard accommodation, sometimes sharing rooms or unfinished buildings with other strangers to share the cost.”<sup>83</sup> Many live in poorer neighbourhoods of Amman such as Al Hashemi Al Shimali, but some with better resources live in more middle-class areas such as Khelda or Gardens.

Lack of income also has significant health implications, given the cost of healthcare for Iraqis. Faizah, whose

son died of cancer in Jordan, said: “The reason for his death was the lack of adequate health insurance for Iraqi refugees in Jordan, and our inability to afford the treatment.”<sup>84</sup> Many respondents expressed similar sentiments. Salma, whose children suffer from acute anaemia, said she did not have enough money to treat them, and Mohammed said he was unable to afford treatment for his epileptic child. Nor are Zainab and her husband, who both suffer from chronic diseases including diabetes, hypertension and osteoporosis, able to receive appropriate treatment.<sup>85</sup>

Refugees’ inability to work has negative implications for their mental health, causing what NGO staff referred to as secondary trauma.<sup>86</sup> Rami, who holds degrees in medicine and genetics and used to work as a consultant to the Iraqi health ministry, reflected on his changed circumstances: “It’s wracking me inside,” he said.<sup>87</sup>

Frustration among Iraqis in Jordan is high, particularly because Syrian refugees have easier access to work permits and are perceived to receive more assistance from the international community.<sup>88</sup> One family, whose assistance from UNHCR suddenly stopped recently, complained: “The Syrians leave for resettlement in just a few months, but we’ve been here for years. The UN has forgotten about us. We don’t get any support.”<sup>89</sup>

Safety represents a thin silver lining. The majority of respondents said they felt relatively safe in Jordan, returning an average score of 6.5 out of ten. More than



*A view of Amman, Jordan*

three-quarters said they trusted the Jordanian police. According to one researcher, Iraqis in Jordan tend to feel that “Jordan is a place where there’s security ... where there’s order. It’s not like Iraq”.<sup>90</sup> NGO staff, however, highlighted a correlation between refugees’ financial difficulties and domestic violence, which they said often increased when the head of household experienced “unbearable pressure”.<sup>91</sup>

## ‘I DREAM OF LEAVING IRAQ’

Given the significant challenges Iraqis face in exile, is it worth seeking refuge abroad? Based on the experiences of the 34 IDPs surveyed in their areas of displacement in Ninewa, the answer is probably yes. Given the financial resources, many would have left the country already. “I dream of leaving Iraq,” said one.<sup>92</sup>

Hamam Al Alil 2 camp is home to more than 4,000 displaced families.<sup>93</sup> Accommodation is in often crowded tents. The tents have electricity, but power cuts are common. Those we visited were equipped with lightbulbs, fans and in some cases televisions, the fans being indispensable with summer temperatures as

high as 50C. According to one focus group participant, however, conditions can be even worse at other times of the year: “Difficulties increase in the winter. The tent ... cannot withstand wind and rain.”<sup>94</sup>

Public standpipes provide water, and each sub-section of the camp has one male and one female latrine. As of May 2017, there was around one latrine for every 37 people.<sup>95</sup> One respondent said they were suffering from an intestinal disease because of poor quality drinking water.<sup>96</sup> NGOs provide healthcare services, but an IDP with high blood pressure said there was no appropriate treatment available. Others highlighted the lack of dentists and ophthalmologists.<sup>97</sup>

Food assistance is provided, but IDPs complain about the lack of fruit and vegetables. Kasim, a former farmer, had been growing tomato plants outside his tent, but they died under the desert sun. Instead, he sometimes sells items NGOs provide to supplement his food rations by buying fresh produce from the camp’s small market.<sup>98</sup> Zain had a similar experience in Al-Khazer camp: “We didn’t have any income, so we had to sell any aid provided by the humanitarian organisations.”<sup>99</sup>



*Hamam Al Alil 2 camp, Ninewa*



Inside a tent in Hamam Al Alil 2 camp



Latrines in Hamam Al Alil 2 camp

Camps are at least secure. The IDPs we interviewed in Hamam Al Alil gave safety an average score of 8.2 out of ten. Those living outside camps also scored safety quite highly, at 7.7 out of ten. The fact that these scores are higher than in Jordan highlights the subjective nature of security perceptions.

More than half of the IDPs outside of camps said they lived in incomplete, damaged or public buildings, often shared with other families:

| “After the liberation, I returned to my house and found it completely destroyed, just a pile of stones. So I went to live in a school. It’s been a year since I came here. I live with ten families. Each family lives in a classroom where there are no services, doors or windows. It is so cold here, it’s not a life.” IDP in Mosul, 3 September 2018.

| “We went to Duhok and lived in an unfinished building, where we spent the winter without doors and windows. We used to sit on the floor. We lived with ten families in this building, which had no services, water or electricity. Sometimes we fell ill but there was no money to see a doctor.” IDP in Bashiqa, 4 September 2018.

Others have been able to take refuge with friends or relatives, or to rent accommodation, but nor are these options without challenges. Ahmed, who is renting a home in another neighbourhood of Mosul while he waits for his own to be rebuilt, is constantly on the search for daily labour to pay the rent. “My family are in a poor economic situation, and we can’t afford \$160 a month,” he said.<sup>100</sup> Dina, who fled to Erbil after ISIL captured the city of Qaraqosh, rented accommodation in the Christian neighbourhood of Ainkawa with 19 other IDPs. The owners, however, who had been exploiting the situation by increasing the rent, eventually evicted them.<sup>101</sup>



# EXPERIENCES OF RETURN

A year after the victory against ISIL, more than four million of those internally displaced since January 2014 have returned to their sub-district of origin. Almost all are thought to have returned to their homes, but how many found them damaged or destroyed is unclear. According to IOM staff, preliminary feedback suggests that many have in fact returned to buildings so badly damaged they should be considered critical shelters. Others are living in rented accommodation, with host families, in informal settlements or in public, abandoned or unfinished buildings.<sup>102</sup>

Despite data limitations, the tracking of returning IDPs has been remarkably consistent. The same cannot be said, however, of returning refugees. The Iraqi government reports that around 27,000 had returned from Syria and Turkey as of March 2018, predominantly from al-Hol Camp in Syria to Ninewa.<sup>103</sup> Another 1,300 at least are known to have returned from Syria to Jed'ah camp in September.<sup>104</sup> According to IOM staff, around 10,000 refugees returned to Iraq with the organisation's support in 2017, from countries including Austria, Bulgaria, Germany, Serbia and Turkey. More than 9,000 are thought to have returned from Germany alone over the past three years, making it the main country of return under IOM's programme.<sup>105</sup>



*Bus Returning 105 Iraqi Refugees from Turkey, August 2018<sup>106</sup>*

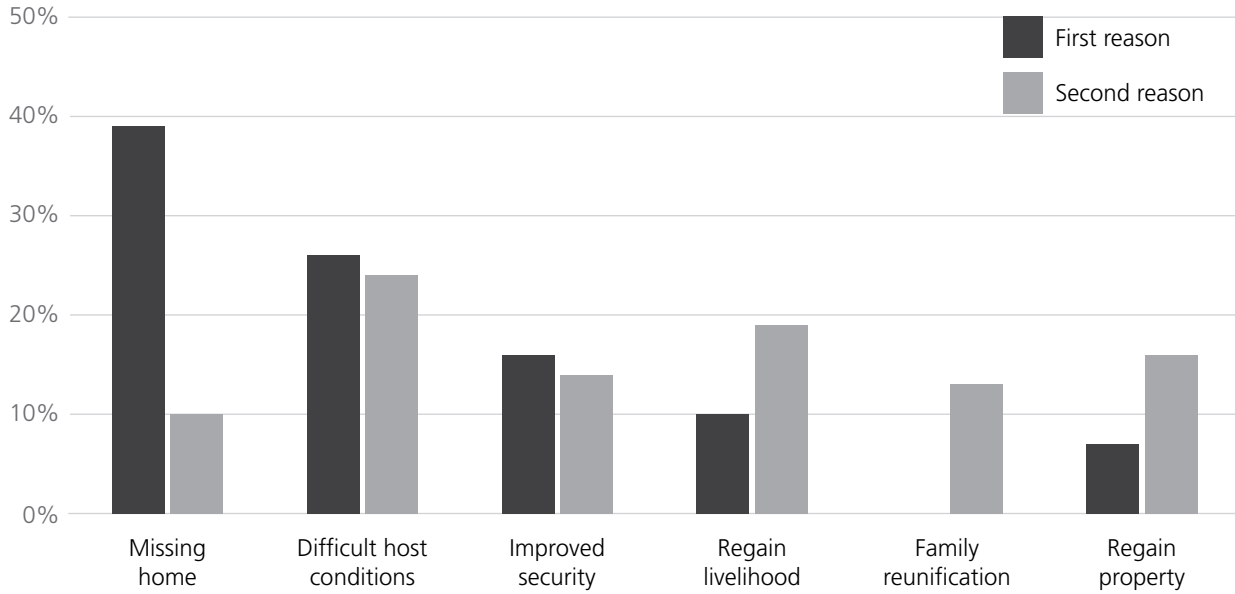
Little is known about the conditions returning refugees face, or the extent to which they or returning IDPs have been able to achieve durable solutions. The high number of returns has been lauded as an accomplishment and an indicator of renewed peace and stability, but people's physical return to their areas of origin does not in and of itself constitute a durable solution.

## MOTIVATION TO RETURN

Improved security in people's areas of origin is often taken as the main factor that influences their decision to return, but our research for this report does not support this perception. Less than a fifth of the returning IDPs surveyed, and only one returning refugee cited improved security as their main motivation for voluntary return. Both groups said their prime motivation for returning was homesickness. "I returned to Bartella because I missed my house," said Fadhil.<sup>107</sup> Difficult conditions in host communities or countries were the second most important reason. Returning refugees also cited family reunification as an important factor, while returning IDPs were more likely to have been motivated by a desire to regain their former property and livelihood.

IOM found that many returning IDPs had experienced "discomfort, harassment and discrimination in their area of displacement, which could have promoted a faster return".<sup>108</sup> A report in Anbar found that poor conditions in camps were prompting IDPs to return prematurely to their areas of origin.<sup>109</sup> Research for this study revealed similar reasons for return: "Despite the lack of job opportunities in Mosul we had to return because of the severe shortage of food aid in the camp", said Amer<sup>110</sup> Sivan and his family, meanwhile, returned to Bashiqa because they had run out of money to rent accommodation in Dohuk.<sup>111</sup>

FIGURE 10: First and second reasons for return among returning refugees and IDPs



Refugees returning from camps in Syria report particularly difficult hosting conditions. Dilshad said: “We lived in a prison, not a camp. They treated us like animals ... We had to hold demonstrations many times demanding to return to Iraq because of the poor living conditions in the camp.”<sup>112</sup> NGO staff in Syria made similar observations: “People are returning because of course they want to go home, but also because they are not happy with the services and, perhaps more importantly, the fact that they are virtual prisoners in the camps here.”<sup>113</sup>

Conditions for refugees in other neighbouring countries appear to have been better than for those in Syria, but higher cost of living and limited income still influenced some to return. Saleen had hoped he and his family would be resettled in the US, but they returned to Iraq to get healthcare for her daughter, who suffers from a heart disease. Treatment in Jordan was too expensive.<sup>114</sup> Armin left Iraq in the hope of a better future for his children, but had to ask them to leave school and work to help the family make ends meet in Lebanon.<sup>115</sup> According to one NGO in Jordan:

“Pressure of unmet basic needs here, caught between a rock and a hard place, pushes them to make the tough decision to return ... They return because of the hopeless situation here, they feel they don’t have any other option.”

Others made similar points. A community leader in Jordan said: “People are returning to Iraq because they’re broke here, they don’t have any income.” For those with the means and qualifications to do well in Iraq, “It’s a gamble, security versus financial stability ... In Iraq there’s no security, but there’s financial stability to support your future. In Jordan it’s the opposite. They see it as a choice.”<sup>116</sup>

Although Europe is a coveted destination for Iraqi refugees in neighbouring countries, those who return from the continent are often disillusioned. One study found that the denial of asylum and long delays in application procedures featured prominently in decisions to return, along with broader disenchantment about their living conditions: “Many returnees reported that they were staying in temporary accommodation, such as camps, for longer than they had anticipated. This, combined with the inability to work, meant that many returnees became increasingly hopeless and sometimes suffered from anxiety, depression or other mental health problems as a result.”<sup>117</sup>

Participants in the research for this study pointed to the stark contrast between expectations set by smugglers and friends and the reality on the ground as having influenced their decision to return:



| “I didn’t know I would have to wait. Some of my friends said you can stay in Norway six months and get a Norwegian passport, work and study. But it was different. I stayed 11 months, but nobody called me [for the interview]. It was difficult because I was sitting alone just waiting for them to call me.”<sup>118</sup>

IOM also said that many of those who participated in its assisted return programme were rejected asylum seekers.<sup>119</sup> This echoes previous UNHCR findings that “delays in asylum procedures and corresponding delays in obtaining a secure legal status, access to services and access to family reunification” were major reasons for return.<sup>120</sup>

Family matters are indeed another powerful incentive. REACH found that issues such as reunification and caring for ailing relatives were the second most important motivation for return.<sup>121</sup> This was confirmed by IOM: “Sometimes they return because their mother is ill, to be with their family.”<sup>122</sup>

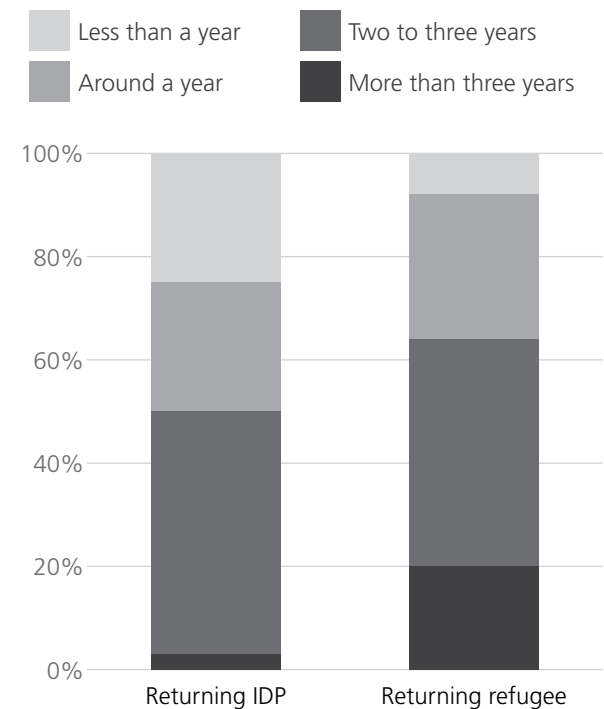
Serkan spent seven years living in the UK. As the youngest sibling, however, and the only one to be single, it fell upon him to return to Iraq to look after his elderly mother when his father passed away. When asked why he went back, he said: “Because of my parents. If not for my parents, I would never have come back to Iraq.”<sup>123</sup> Wathiq returned from the UK for similar reasons: “My mother, she’s quite old, and she’s alone ... I’m trying to negotiate with my brothers to come back so I can leave again, but for them it’s quite difficult. They have wives and children.”<sup>124</sup>

Even in the absence of illness, parents can influence people’s decision to return. Amjed returned from Jordan because his mother “used to cry every day on the phone”.<sup>125</sup> Karam said delays in his asylum application combined with family issues influenced his return: “I wanted to stay in Norway, but my parents said to come back, that they couldn’t live without me.” The promise of \$3,000 and a free plane ticket from IOM also helped to sway the decision, he said.<sup>126</sup>

## CONDITIONS ON RETURN

The majority of returning refugees and IDPs surveyed had returned in 2017 or 2018 after an average of two years in displacement. Returning refugees tended to have been displaced for longer, and a quarter of returning IDPs said they had been displaced for less than a year (see figure 11).

FIGURE 11: Duration of displacement



Returning refugees generally consider themselves well informed about conditions in Iraq, but more than a third of returning IDPs said they were not well informed about the situation in their areas of origin (see figure 12). Television, family and friends, and the internet were the top three sources of information reported. None of the 25 returning refugees surveyed had received any government information from either their host country or Iraq, and neither returning refugees nor returning IDPs had received information from the UN or NGOs.

Many respondents said they had returned to continued insecurity, with returning refugees more negative about the situation they had encountered than returning IDPs. The former gave security in their areas of origin an average of only 5.4 out of ten, the latter 7.3 out of ten. “Iraq isn’t stable, there are always problems”, said one former refugee who had returned from the UK.<sup>136</sup>

## RETURNS FROM EUROPE

Refugees who return to Iraq from neighbouring countries appear to receive little if any support, but a number of programmes exist for those returning from Europe, many of whom are economically vulnerable because of the cost of migration. IOM supports voluntary returns from various European countries by covering travel costs and providing cash assistance and in-kind reintegration support such as business placements, vocational training and start-up funding.<sup>127</sup>

The European Technology and Training Centre (ETTC), which is funded by Germany and the EU, also supports Iraqis returning from Europe to facilitate their reintegration. This includes help in accessing housing, services and livelihoods.<sup>128</sup> Hader, who returned from the UK, secured a job with ETTC itself.<sup>129</sup> The German Centre for Jobs, Migration and Reintegration offers similar support, particularly in securing employment.<sup>130</sup>

Reintegration support helps to make returns more sustainable, but there is concern that financial incentives undermine the principle of voluntariness. In some cases it appears that asylum seekers who choose to withdraw their application before the procedure is complete receive more financial assistance than those whose application has been denied.<sup>131</sup> Given the extent to which many refugees struggle economically in their host countries, this may encourage the premature and potentially unsafe return of people with very legitimate asylum claims.

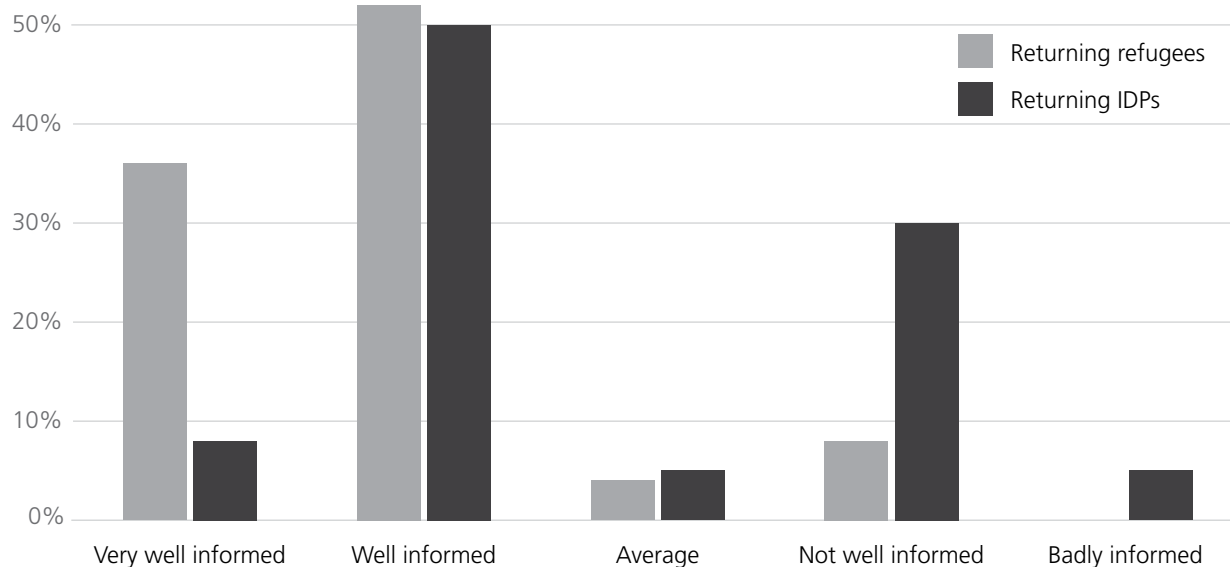
A recent IRIN investigation also found evidence that the UK’s Home Office had put pressure on asylum seekers to withdraw their applications and return “voluntarily” to their countries of origin.<sup>132</sup> As one academic study noted, “there is a rather fine line between facilitating voluntary return and encouraging it. The latter at times appears to run the risk of being perceived ... as shading towards involuntary return”.<sup>133</sup>



‘Voluntary’ returns (IRIN 2017)<sup>134</sup>

UNHCR’s current position on return to Iraq is that states should “refrain from forcibly returning any Iraqis who originate from areas of Iraq that are affected by military action, remain fragile and insecure after having been retaken from ISIS, or remain under control of ISIS. Such persons, including persons whose claims for international protection have been rejected, should not be returned either to their home areas, or to other parts of the country”.<sup>135</sup> States should also refrain, we argue, from encouraging such returns.

FIGURE 12: Access to information before return



Members of minority groups have particularly negative perceptions of security. "Because we're Christian, we can't feel safe", said Marwa.<sup>137</sup>

Conditions in host countries appear to influence returnees' perceptions of security in Iraq. Those who had returned from Syria gave security in Iraq an average score of 6.2 out of ten, compared with 4.3 out of ten for those coming back from other countries where security was presumably higher. Amjed, who returned from Jordan, regrets having come back to Iraq. Out of ten, safety scores "less than zero", he said.<sup>138</sup>

Only ten of the 25 returning refugees surveyed were living in their areas of origin. Six of them had spent time in Erbil, Dohuk or Baghdad after arriving in Iraq because of ongoing conflict, only returning to their areas of origin when they felt it was safe enough to do so. Insecurity was the main reason returning refugees cited for choosing not to return to their areas of origin.

Other common barriers include lack of housing, fear of persecution and absence of economic opportunities. Many of the most vulnerable are unable to afford to return to their areas of origin after the financial drain of cross-border migration.<sup>140</sup> Zain, who was transferred to Hamam Al Alil camp from a refugee camp in Syria by the Iraqi government, is unable to afford to rent a car to return to Ba'aj – let alone to live there. "We don't have money to rebuild the house," he said. Instead, he and his family remain in Hamam Al-Alil, one of a growing number of refugee families to return to a life of internal displacement.

We spoke to 15 Iraqis in Hamam Al-Alil who had been returned from camps in Syria, and thousands of other returning refugees live in similar circumstances elsewhere. "After I returned to Iraq, I found that my house was destroyed, so I had to go to Hamam Al Alil camp", Hacen said.<sup>141</sup> Yet these conditions can hardly be described as a durable solution to displacement.

## EXPLOSIVE HAZARDS

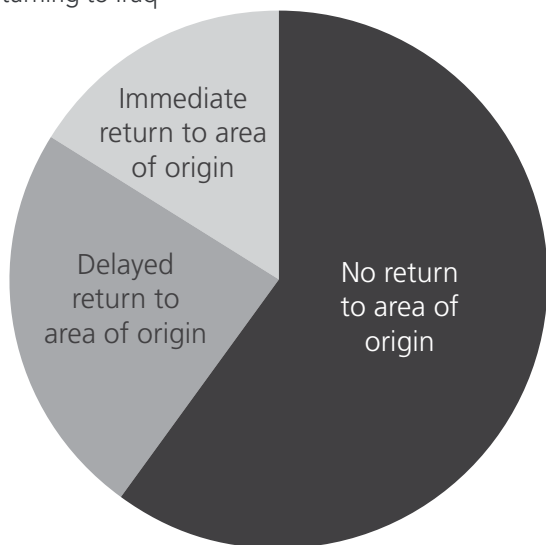
Explosive hazard contamination constitutes a major security challenge for the population of Ninewa. This includes not only explosive remnants of war (ERW), but also large numbers of victim-activated improvised explosive devices (IEDs) left by ISIL in public places and private properties with the express intention of killing and injuring returning civilians. At least 72 civilians have lost their lives to explosive hazards in Mosul district alone since July 2017. The scale of destruction undermines efforts to clear such hazards, of which there are still thought to be many in the rubble. According to Handicap International: "Clearing Mosul from explosive hazards will be the work of years, if not decades."<sup>139</sup>



Mine risk education posters in schools in Mosul



**FIGURE 13:** Interviewed refugees' trajectories after returning to Iraq



Aqueel, who has been living in a camp in Dohuk since his return from Germany, said there was “a lack of basic services like a roof on our heads, electricity, water and bathrooms”.<sup>142</sup>

Nor are durable solutions any more guaranteed for those who return to their areas of origin. Ninety per cent of respondents in a 2016 study said their property had

been damaged, and hardly any were initially able to live in their homes when they returned.<sup>143</sup> Our research for this report generated similar findings. More than half of the returning IDPs and refugees surveyed who used to own property said it had been damaged, and another third that it had been destroyed. Given the scale of the damage, some have been obliged to rent alternative accommodation while they rebuild their homes. Looting also appears to have been widespread.

“After the liberation, I returned to my home which was damaged, looted and burned out ... I now live in a house in Al-Rifae neighbourhood, but I want to return to my house. I asked my relatives who live in Al-Shifa’a neighbourhood about the situation and they told me that reconstruction is ongoing, but I can’t return because my street is destroyed and there are no water or electricity services in the area.” Iraqi IDP in Mosul, 2 September 2018.

Many have returned to live in the remains of their former homes regardless. Ten respondents said they were living in homes they described as having been destroyed. The destruction has also had concerning impacts on returnees’ psychological wellbeing. Marusha’s son killed himself shortly after their return to Bashiqa.<sup>144</sup>



*A destroyed home in Bashiqa*





A damaged school in west Mosul



A returnee's shop in Bashiqa

Returning refugees and IDPs also face challenges in accessing services, and much infrastructure, including hospitals and schools, has been damaged or destroyed. Nine of Mosul's 13 hospitals have been damaged.<sup>145</sup> Loss of skilled personnel is also an issue. Thousands of volunteers have stepped in to compensate for the lack of trained teachers, but there are significant gaps in healthcare provision. "Most doctors left for Erbil and haven't returned. If we face an emergency we have to go to east Mosul", one young man from the west of the city said.

Many returnees have lost their livelihoods. More than 40 per cent of those surveyed said they were not working because no jobs were available, and two-thirds said they found it difficult or impossible to survive on their current income. Hala and her husband used to own a shop but it was destroyed in the battle against ISIL and her husband passed away, so she now depends on her son's income as a taxi driver.<sup>146</sup> Sohan used to work as a policeman but has not had his position reinstated. "When I wanted to get back to my previous job in the police, I found myself terminated. I have asked to return to my job like my other colleagues ... but my request has been delayed. Now I have no job," he said.<sup>147</sup>

Throughout the areas of Ninewa we visited, places such as the busy shop in Bashiqa pictured above nevertheless offer tangible signs of resilience and recovery. Even in heavily damaged areas, buildings are being refurbished to house new businesses. "We try to retrieve what we earned in the past," said Sunil.<sup>148</sup>

## PROSPECTS FOR DURABLE SOLUTIONS

Few returning refugees and IDPs have been able to achieve durable solutions. Some have gone back to their homes or areas of origin, but have not been able to re-establish their lives and livelihoods. Others continue to have significant assistance and protection needs. Despite having returned, they live in de facto internal displacement. Unlike those still recognised as IDPs, however, they receive little support. Returning refugees from Syria only receive support because they become IDPs, often not for the first time, once back in Iraq.

Nearly half of the returning IDPs and refugees surveyed said they had not received any support following their return. UN agencies and NGOs do, however, play an important role in supporting returnees, particularly in terms of reconstruction. A number said they had received some help in rebuilding their damaged properties. Saleen and Amjed from the predominantly Christian town of Qaraqosh both said they had received support from religious organisations.<sup>149</sup> Another returnee said NRC had helped her to rebuild her home, and that she was now seeking government compensation for the losses she has incurred.<sup>150</sup>

Seventeen returnees said they had ongoing compensation claims related to the loss or damage of their property. Government mechanisms are in place to enable compensation for movable and immovable property as well as physical damages including injury and death of a family member.<sup>151</sup> More than \$355 million was awarded between 2011 and 2016.<sup>152</sup> The cumbersome process has, however, led to a huge backlog of cases and significant delays before compensation decisions are made.<sup>153</sup>





*A restaurant in a damaged building in west Mosul*

Claimants' lack of title deeds and the destruction of land registries during the conflict are likely to lead to further delays. According to NRC: "People who had destroyed or damaged properties on unregistered land are most likely to have difficulty in claiming compensation due to their inability to produce official documentation to prove ownership."<sup>154</sup> Less than half of the survey respondents had a deed to their property in their name, and many had no deed at all.

Access to documentation is perhaps the most pressing challenge.<sup>155</sup> Civil documents are needed not only to address property issues, but also to access services including education, healthcare and the national food distribution system. They are also a prerequisite for return, as discussed further below. As of 2017, almost 13 per cent of internally displaced families said they lacked documentation for at least one of their members.<sup>156</sup> Our research for this study generated a similar figure. Just over ten per cent of all survey participants said they were missing some of their documentation. The issue appears particularly prevalent among refugees returning from Syria. Some sources reported that documentation was sometimes confiscated upon arrival in the Syrian camps.

To complicate matters further, documents issued under ISIL, including marriage and birth certificates, are not recognised by the Iraqi government, and need to be re-registered with the authorities. Female-headed households face particular challenges, particularly if their husband has died, disappeared or is accused of affiliation with ISIL. In the absence of a husband, it is very difficult for women to fulfil administrative requirements such as registering the birth of a child.<sup>157</sup>

# CONTINUED DISPLACEMENT

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## BARRIERS TO RETURN

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If returning IDPs and refugees find it difficult to achieve durable solutions, what of the remaining displaced population? Researchers tend to agree that the majority of those who wished to return probably did so as part of the rapid wave following the retaking of areas previously occupied by ISIL. The remaining 1.9 million IDPs, however, appear to be either unwilling or unable to return.<sup>158</sup>

Half of the IDPs surveyed said they did not want to return to their area of origin, predominantly because of their concern about access to economic opportunities

and services. Lack of housing can also be a barrier to return, in particular for financially vulnerable households unable to afford the cost of rent or reconstruction. “We cannot live in rented houses, so we have to stay here,” said one IDP in Hamam Al-Alil.<sup>159</sup> Tahid, who has been living in a camp in Dohuk since his return from Germany, has not been able to return to his area of origin. “My house is destroyed and there is nowhere to go back to,” he said.<sup>160</sup>

For those who do wish to return, freedom of movement restrictions can be a significant barrier. The rules that govern moving to a new city in another part of the country or even in the same governorate are opaque.



*An IDP in Hamam Al Alil camp*

IDPs are required to present documents, some of which are ironically impossible to obtain without return to their area of origin.<sup>161</sup> One focus group participant in Hamam Al Alil said: “We are from Saladin. Our documents are missing. If we return, they will keep us in camps in Tikrit and we will not be able to leave without our papers.”<sup>162</sup>

Movement restrictions appear to be unequally imposed depending on IDPs’ ethnic and religious identity.<sup>163</sup> Sunni IDPs are particularly affected. Akram, who currently lives in Hamam Al Alil, tried to return to Zummar but was prevented him from doing so by Kurdish forces.<sup>164</sup> An NRC scoping mission on the Iraqi-Syrian border found that many Sunnis returning from Syria had been blocked from entering areas under Kurdish control because of their perceived affiliation with ISIL. Others have returned to destroyed villages, with allegations that the destruction of villages was caused either as retaliation, or to limit returns.

Significant numbers of men, including those returning from Syria, have been arrested for their alleged affiliation to ISIL. Their wives and children are effectively confined to camps, unable to obtain the necessary documentation and permission to return to their areas of origin, and at risk of retaliatory attacks, abuse and discrimination.<sup>165</sup> According to NRC, the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) and the International Rescue Committee (IRC): “These practices may amount to collective punishment perpetrated against people with real or perceived links” to ISIL.<sup>166</sup>

Delays in obtaining security clearance are also an important barrier to return. “The problem is that my name is similar to one of ISIL’s members, which is obstructing the procedure,” said Manar.<sup>167</sup>

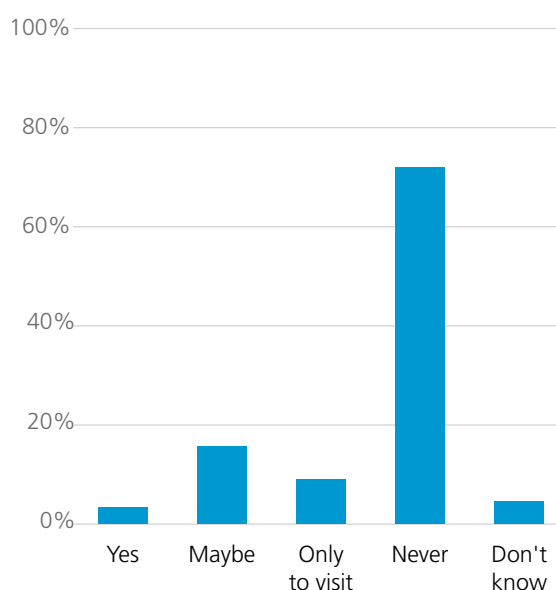
## FUTURE INTENTIONS

The majority of IDPs who do not wish to return to their areas of origin hope to remain in their host communities. “The portion of people remaining in displacement who do not intend to return home is growing,” NRC, DRC and IRC reported in February 2018.<sup>168</sup> According to REACH’s latest assessment, approximately two thirds of IDPs in camp and non-camp settings intend to remain in their current location for at least the next 12 months.<sup>169</sup> It is uncertain, however, what support will be available for them. Funding for camps is already in decline because Iraq is perceived to be moving from the emer-

gency to recovery phase.<sup>170</sup> IDPs living outside camps have received less support from the outset.

There is little appetite for return among Iraqis who fled outside the country. Milad, who was displaced a number of times as a child, feels there is simply “nowhere to return to.”<sup>171</sup> Only six of the 178 refugees interviewed in Jordan and Sweden were eager to return to Iraq, with family reunification being their main motivation. Willingness to return also appears to be partly motivated by the struggle to get by in their host country.

FIGURE 14: Refugees’ return intentions



Refugees from religious minorities are the least likely to return. Explaining his unwillingness, one Sabaeen-Mandaean in Jordan said: “One Christian went back to his house, and someone attacked him and stabbed him in the back.”<sup>172</sup> Another in Sweden also said she would never return even though her economic situation had deteriorated significantly since her arrival. “I hate Iraq ... It’s taken too many people I love,” she said.<sup>173</sup>

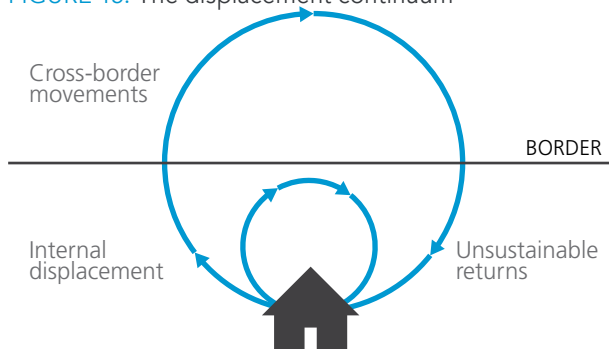
A quarter of returning IDPs and refugees surveyed said they aspired to leave the country, disappointed by the conditions they experienced upon return. Nearly a third of returnees feel pessimistic about the future. “I regret coming back. I want to go back to Norway now. Or anywhere in Europe, or America. I don’t want to spend my life in Iraq”, said Karam.<sup>174</sup> “I don’t know how long I’ll cope here. I left everything, and I don’t think I have a future here. Iraq isn’t stable, there are always problems,” said Wathiq.<sup>175</sup>



# CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To draw this study's findings together into a coherent conclusion, it helps to review them through the temporal lens of a displacement continuum (see figure 15).

FIGURE 15: The displacement continuum



More than half of the Iraqi refugees surveyed had been internally displaced before they left the country, many of them various times. Most of the displacement was driven by conflict, violence and persecution, and a lack of perceived opportunities for durable solutions in Iraq has also led to cross-border movements. For many IDPs, cost was the main barrier to cross-border movement.

Following ISIL's defeat in 2017, improvements in the security situation have enabled return. Rather than being drawn to return by stable conditions, however, many IDPs have been motivated to go back to their areas of origin by a sense of homesickness made worse by poor conditions in their host communities, including movement restrictions, food insecurity and lack of livelihood opportunities. The same is true for refugees returning to the country from abroad.

Many returning refugees and IDPs have, however, been unable to return to their former homes, or have been otherwise unable to achieve durable solutions

for reasons including damage to their property, loss of livelihoods and lack of services. Many of those counted as having returned are in reality still living as IDPs, but they receive little if any support. These returns are inherently unsustainable, and further displacement, including cross-border movement, is likely.

| "Mosul is a horrible city, a bad city. It's very difficult to live in Mosul ... If I had any chance to leave for Europe, I would be very happy. I want to leave Iraq. I am not safe here. There's no peace, only war."<sup>176</sup>

The majority of the remaining IDPs are unwilling or unable to return to their areas of origin. Some have nothing to return to following the destruction of their homes, or are unwilling to return due to lack of services and livelihood opportunities. Others are unable to afford the journey, let alone the cost of reconstruction. Others still are prevented from returning because they lack documentation or face discrimination, the latter often on account of perceived affiliation with ISIL. Insecurity also remains a barrier to return to some areas. With a shift from the emergency to recovery phase under way and little support for local integration, these people's future is uncertain.

To overcome the siloed approach to durable solutions, interoperable data along the entire displacement continuum is needed. Alongside current efforts to track and monitor internal displacement and return flows in Iraq, better tracking of refugee returns is required. So is more consistent post-return monitoring for returning refugees and returning IDPs. This should include information on property conditions for those returning to their former homes.



*Wadha fled with her family from Sinjar to Mosul and after that from Mosul to Hamam Al Alil camp 2. They returned back to Mosul for a few months but returned to Hamam Al Alil camp 2 camp. "In Mosul we were living in my uncle's house, we could not stay anymore because there were no jobs and we were two families in one house," Wadha said. She mentioned that they can not get back to Sinjar because their house is destroyed and as they are Arabs they are afraid of the Yazidi community there. Photo: NRC, August 2018*

Disaggregated information on return conditions should be used to raise awareness among policymakers that physical return does not in and of itself constitute a durable solution to displacement. Nor is it always a sign of stability in areas of origin. This report's findings also suggest that policymakers should work toward improving refugees' reception conditions, providing appropriate levels of support in host countries including access to the labour market to avoid premature and unsustainable returns. There should also be renewed debate about the implications of financial incentives for return on the principle that any such movements should be made voluntarily and in safety and dignity.

The humanitarian and development sectors should work together to promote a holistic approach to programming for durable solutions in countries of origin that encompasses IDPs, returning IDPs and refugees returning from neighbouring countries and further afield. Alongside increased financing and support for reconstruction of

housing and infrastructure, this should include opportunities for local integration for those unwilling to return to their areas of origin, and measures to "unblock" returns for those unable to do so because of administrative, financial or other barriers. A focus on displaced people accused of affiliation with ISIL should form part of wider efforts to foster long-term peace and stability.



# ANNEX: SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS

		Iraq (n=135)		Jordan (n=116)		Sweden (n=62)		Total (n=313)	
		#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
<b>Gender</b>	Female	63	47 %	45	39 %	19	31 %	127	41 %
	Male	72	53 %	71	61 %	43	69 %	186	59 %
<b>Age</b>	18-29	54	40 %	22	19 %	19	31 %	95	30 %
	30-49	64	47 %	63	54 %	31	50 %	158	50 %
	50+	17	13 %	30	26 %	12	19 %	59	19 %
<b>Ethnicity</b>	Arab	86	64 %	84	72 %	50	81 %	220	70 %
	Assyrian	13	10 %	25	22 %	0	0 %	38	12 %
	Yazidi	19	14 %	0	0 %	0	0 %	19	6 %
	Other	17	13 %	7	6 %	11	18 %	35	11 %
<b>Religion</b>	Sunni	86	64 %	57	49 %	20	32 %	163	52 %
	Shia	7	5 %	8	7 %	10	16 %	25	8 %
	Christian	18	13 %	31	27 %	9	15 %	58	19 %
	Other	23	17 %	12	10 %	12	19 %	47	15 %
	N/A	1	1 %	8	7 %	11	18 %	20	6 %
<b>Education</b>	No education	14	10 %	0	0 %	0	0 %	14	4 %
	Primary-level	59	44 %	14	12 %	7	11 %	80	26 %
	Secondary-level	28	21 %	55	47 %	20	32 %	103	33 %
	Technical	8	6 %	17	15 %	3	5 %	28	9 %
	University-level	26	19 %	30	26 %	31	50 %	87	28 %

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