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MEAC Findings Report 23

How Information Ecosystems Affect Conflict Transitions: Experiences from Al Hol and Iraq

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MANAGING EXITS
FROM ARMED CONFLICT

CONTENTS

KEY FINDINGS

- **Al Hol returnees were more likely to trust information coming from authorities when two conditions were met**: If the information shared consistently matched their lived experience and that of people they knew, and if the official who shared the information treated them with dignity and respect.

- **People with weak social connections to Iraq were at a significant disadvantage** since informal connections were the backbone of information ecosystems (e.g., phone calls with, or visits from, relatives who live in their community). Those with access to a wider range of information sources were better equipped to make decisions about returns and could more easily navigate issues like sponsorship and civil documentation.

- **Female heads of household were disadvantaged on several accounts**: they typically had weaker social ties (including to family), and they faced social norms that prevented them from approaching male information brokers.

- **Fear of being perceived as empathetic to the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) restricted the flow of information and communication more broadly**. Iraqi residents of Al Hol were acutely aware that they were under scrutiny by the Iraqi security apparatus, and that their ability to get a security clearance hinged on them not being perceived as threatening, which in turn, inhibited how and what they communicated.

- **The visitor centre in Jeddah-1 and unrestricted access to mobile phones were vital for the reliable flow of information**, since they both enabled Al Hol returnees to rekindle or strengthen relationships that subsequently became a valuable source of information.

- **Sometimes government sources inadvertently undermine the trust of returnees and let rumours go unaddressed, allowing them to gain greater significance.** This included situations when the information provided by official (government) sources did not match the lived reality of returnees, and when information was provided in an unpredictable and infrequent way.

- **There was no organized information campaign by the government and no 'whole-of-government' position** on returns from Al Hol, which enabled contradictory views to emerge between government actors that muddied public understanding of the return process and potentially undermined community acceptance. Media engagement by the government about Al Hol returns is haphazard and does not appear to be shaped by an intentional strategy, thus undermining community acceptance. Competing information about the return process itself makes it difficult to understand, which creates a barrier to community acceptance.

- **Mukhtars and tribal leaders played a vital role in communicating information about Al Hol returns with the wider public.** Their active engagement was a strength of the information ecosystem since it offered a way for community members to engage with official sources of information and thereby reduce their reliance on rumours.

- **Rumours emerged due to gaps, contradictions, and shortcomings in official information sources**. Incidents that generated rumours (such as arrests) were rarely addressed by government authorities, and there were no steps taken by the government to demonstrate such incidents would not happen again.

- **Protracted confinement in Jeddah-1 is linked to poor access to information**. The main reasons people were unable – or unwilling – to depart the Jeddah-1 camp were difficulties renewing civil documentation and a desire to wait for family members who were still in Al Hol. Both issues have a strong connection to information: Jeddah-1 residents often do not know how to renew civil documentation or how long it will take family members to return from Al Hol. This uncertainty affects their decision-making and causes them to prolong their stay in Jeddah-1.

This Findings Report, and the research that supported it, were undertaken as part of UNU-CPR and UNIDIR's Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) project. MEAC is a multi-donor, multi-partner initiative to develop a unified, rigorous approach to examining how and why individuals exit armed conflict and evaluating the efficacy of interventions meant to support their transitions. While the Findings Report benefited from feedback from MEAC's donors and institutional partners, it does not necessarily represent their official policies or positions.

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Background

About MEAC

How and why do individuals exit armed groups, and how do they do so sustainably, without falling back into conflict cycles? These questions are at the core of UNU-CPR and UNIDIR's Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) initiative. MEAC is a multi-year, multi-partner collaboration that aims to develop a unified, rigorous approach to examining how and why individuals exit armed conflict and evaluating the efficacy of interventions meant to support their transition to civilian life. MEAC seeks to inform evidence-based programme design and implementation in real time to improve efficacy. At the strategic level, the cross-programme, cross-agency lessons that will emerge from the growing MEAC evidence base will support more effective conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts. The MEAC project and accompanying case studies are supported by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Switzerland's Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA); the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO); the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs; the UN Development Programme (UNDP); and the International Organization for Migration (IOM); and is being run in partnership with the Secretariat of the Regional Strategy for Stabilization, Recovery and Resilience; UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO); UNICEF; and the World Bank.

About this Series

The MEAC findings report series seeks to put evidence about conflict transitions and related programming into the hands of policymakers and practitioners in real time. The reports present short overviews of findings (or emerging findings) across a wide range of thematic areas and include analyses on their political or practical implications for the UN and its partners.

About this Report

This report is based on findings drawn from a number of quantitative and qualitative studies in Iraq. This includes a large-scale survey of 1,882 respondents in four areas of Iraq that were occupied by ISIL: Muhalabiyah (Nineveh), Tuz (Salah al-Din), Al Qaim (Anbar), and Habbaniya (Anbar), conducted in July 2022 in partnership with, and with support from, UNDP Iraq. It draws heavily on research conducted with Iraqis returning from Al Hol camp in Syria through Jeddah-1 camp, with access facilitated by IOM Iraq and support from the Swiss FDFA. That component of the study consisted of a survey of 223 respondents currently residing in Jeddah-1 camp; 60 former residents of Jeddah-1 camp; and key informants in Jeddah-1 and areas of return. These research components took place between June and September 2022. The report presents data about information ecosystems – the type and sources of information available and how they interact – that are present in Al Hol camp in Syria, Jeddah-1 camp in Iraq, and areas of return. It examines how information, misinformation, disinformation, and rumours affected decision-making and transition outcomes

associated with the return and reintegration trajectories of Iraqis from Al Hol. This data may be useful to the UN, the Government of Iraq, and NGO partners working with Al Hol returnees, as well as efforts to support reintegration, community reconciliation, and broader peacebuilding efforts. While the research presented herein is focused on the journeys of Iraqis who had been in Al Hol, many of the findings may speak to issues impacting other nationals, both in the camp and in their countries of origin following repatriation. The report ends by presenting key policy and programmatic implications of these findings.

Introduction

Information Flows During Conflict Transitions

Information Flows and Decision-making in Crises

Access to information is of crucial importance during crises and in their aftermath. Crisis environments sharpen the need for effective communication, since people in crises are required to make life-altering decisions at a time when information is sparse and of poor quality, and where they face deep uncertainty regarding the future.[1] Access to information is particularly vital during the return and reintegration phase of displacement since without adequate, quality information, decisions such as repatriation cannot be considered completely voluntary and displaced persons are unable to fully understand the options available to them or exercise their rights.[2] In a vacuum of trustworthy information, people will be more likely to circulate and believe negative stereotypes about displaced persons (and other marginalized groups)[3] which may aggravate tensions and lead to outbreaks of violence.[4] These potential consequences highlight the compelling need to understand how information ecosystems function during crises and how displaced Iraqis access, interpret, and use information during their return and reintegration journeys. This report aims to contribute to such an understanding.

Information Flows and Returning From Al Hol

This study examines information flows surrounding the return and reintegration of Iraqis from Al Hol camp in Syria. Since the defeat of ISIL, over 30,000 Iraqis have remained confined in Al Hol camp in north-east Syria, some of whom are perceived to be associated with ISIL.[5] Since May 2021, and

[1] Rianne Dekker, Godfriend Engbersen, Jeanine Klaver, and Hanna Vonk, "Smart refugees: How Syrian asylum migrants use social media information in migration decision-making," *Social Media + Society,* Vol. 4, No.1 (March 2018).
[2] Melissa Carlson, Laura Jakli, and Katerina Long, "Rumours and Refugees: How Government-Created Information Vacuums Undermine Effective Crisis Management," *International Studies Quarterly,* Vol. 62, No.3 (September 2018).
[3] Andrew Gardner, "Rumour and Myth in the Labour Camps of Qatar," *Anthropology Today*, Vol. 28, No. 6 (December 2012).
[4] Melissa Carlson, Laura Jakli, and Katerina Long, "Rumours and Refugees How Government-Created Information Vacuums Undermine Effective Crisis Management," *International Studies Quarterly,* Vol. 62, No.3 (September 2018).
[5] International Centre for Counter-Terrorism and IOM Iraq, Roundtables on Prosecution, Reintegration, and Rehabilitation (2022).

in line with the 2021 *Global Framework for United Nations Support on Syria / Iraq Third Country National Returnees,*[6] the Government of Iraq (GoI) has repatriated at least 920 Iraqi households (comprising around 3,749 individuals) from Al Hol.[7] After reaching Iraq, each person spends a mandatory period of time in Jeddah-1 camp where security clearances and other administrative processes are initiated which, once complete, enable them to return to their place of origin or another location of their choosing. Throughout this process, Iraqis must make a host of critical decisions: whether to return to Iraq; whether to travel as a family unit or separately over time; whether to return to their place of origin or another location; and how to manage return requirements such as identifying a sponsor or disavowing a relative. Making these decisions is often fraught with uncertainty and people must navigate a host of information sources, competing messages, and gaps in information to understand their options and predict the costs and benefits associated with each one. Moreover, it is not just the Al Hol residents who must make difficult decisions: communities that receive the Al Hol returnees must also decide how much risk they present; whether to allow or reject their return; what conditions to impose upon them; and how to interact with returnees. Community members must sift through a tide of competing information and rumours as they decide what part they will play in this return and reintegration process.

Research Focus

This study seeks to understand how information ecosystems affect decision-making throughout the return and reintegration journeys of Iraqis returning from Al Hol, and what impact information ecosystems have on reintegration outcomes. The primary policy objective of this report is to understand the role that information plays in supporting full and sustained reintegration outcomes after conflict, so as to help the UN and its partners better design, implement, and evaluate transition programming.

Misinformation, Disinformation, and Rumours

To this end, the report examines different types of information that arose throughout the transition journeys of Iraqis returning from Al Hol:

- **Misinformation**, by which this report means false, misleading, or out-of-context information shared *without* an intent to deceive.
- **Disinformation**, which involves purposefully sharing false or inaccurate information *with* the intent to deceive; and
- **Rumours,** which are 'claims of fact' about people, groups, events, and institutions that move from one person to another and garner credibility, not because direct evidence is known to support them but because other people seem to believe them.[8] Rumours may turn out to be true, partly or entirely false, or may remain unresolved.

[6] To address the situation in Al Hol, in September 2021, the Government of Iraq, together with the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre (UNCCT) of the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) jointly launched the *Global Framework for United Nations Support on Syria / Iraq Third Country National Returnees* (Global Framework).

[7] According to figures provided by the Iraqi Office of the National Security Advisor in October 2022.

[8] Melissa Carlson, Laura Jakli, and Katerina Long, "Rumours and Refugees How Government-Created Information Vacuums Undermine Effective Crisis Management," *International Studies Quarterly,* Vol. 62, No.3 (September 2018).

The report puts special emphasis on understanding the impact of rumours, given that the deficit of other information sources has increased their influence over decision-making processes and transition outcomes.

Methodology

This study utilized a mixed methods approach, including key informant interviews with stakeholders in Jeddah-1 camp and areas of return; focus group discussions with residents of Jeddah-1 camp; surveys with current and former residents of Jeddah-1 camp, returnees displaced within Iraq, and community members in four locations; and a desk review of relevant media and social media materials in Arabic, Kurdish, and English. Details of the field research included:

- Survey A – In July 2022, surveys were conducted in partnership with UNDP Iraq with 1,882 respondents in four areas of Iraq that were occupied by ISIL: Muhalabiyah (Nineveh), Tuz (Salah al-Din), Al Qaim (Anbar), and Habbaniya (Anbar).[9]
- Survey B – In August 2022, a survey was completed with 223 Jeddah-1 residents who had returned from Al Hol camp in Syria, with access facilitated by IOM and support from the Swiss FDFA.
- In July 2022, ten focus group discussions were conducted with Jeddah-1 residents.
- Survey C – In September 2022, phone surveys were completed with 60 former Jeddah-1 residents who had returned to their area of origin or another location.
- In September 2022, 19 interviews were carried out with key stakeholders in areas where Jeddah-1 residents have returned or are likely to return. This included 11 mukhtars, three tribal sheikhs, and a small number of other key political and security actors.

Information Ecosystems in the Al Hol Transition Process

Understanding Information Ecosystems

Information flows differ significantly from one setting to another, and an understanding of these differences is vital to understanding how people access, make sense of, and act on information in a

[9] Roughly equal numbers were drawn from each location.

specific situation. A useful analytical tool – the information ecosystem – was introduced by Internews in 2015 to understand how local communities exist and evolve within information systems. An **information ecosystem** refers to: *complex organizations of dynamic social relationships through which information moves and transforms in flows, and which includes information infrastructure, tools, media, producers, consumers, curators, and sharers*.[10]

This concept recognizes that information is inherently social, and that the social dimensions of information help explain a community's unique information challenges and needs, and why some environments favour certain information flows over others. It also recognizes that an information ecosystem is not a static entity; by its very nature it is constantly evolving and changing, and any impact on one element has ramifications for the wider system. This conceptualization is valuable because it can support the design of interventions that are responsive and adaptive to a particular situation and needs at a given time.[11]

This report begins by analysing the information ecosystems present throughout the Al Hol return and reintegration process, in three phases: (1) Al Hol camp in Syria; (2) Jeddah-1 camp in Iraq; and (3) communities of return. This study presents a consolidated analysis of eight critical dimensions of information ecosystems, as articulated by the Internews framework, which are:

1. Information needs;
2. Information landscape;
3. Production and movement of information;
4. Dynamics of access to information;
5. Use of information;
6. Impact of information;
7. Social trust; and
8. Influencers.

Together, these eight dimensions help us to understand the information ecosystem in each place and how it shaped decision-making and reintegration journeys.

Al Hol Camp Information Ecosystem

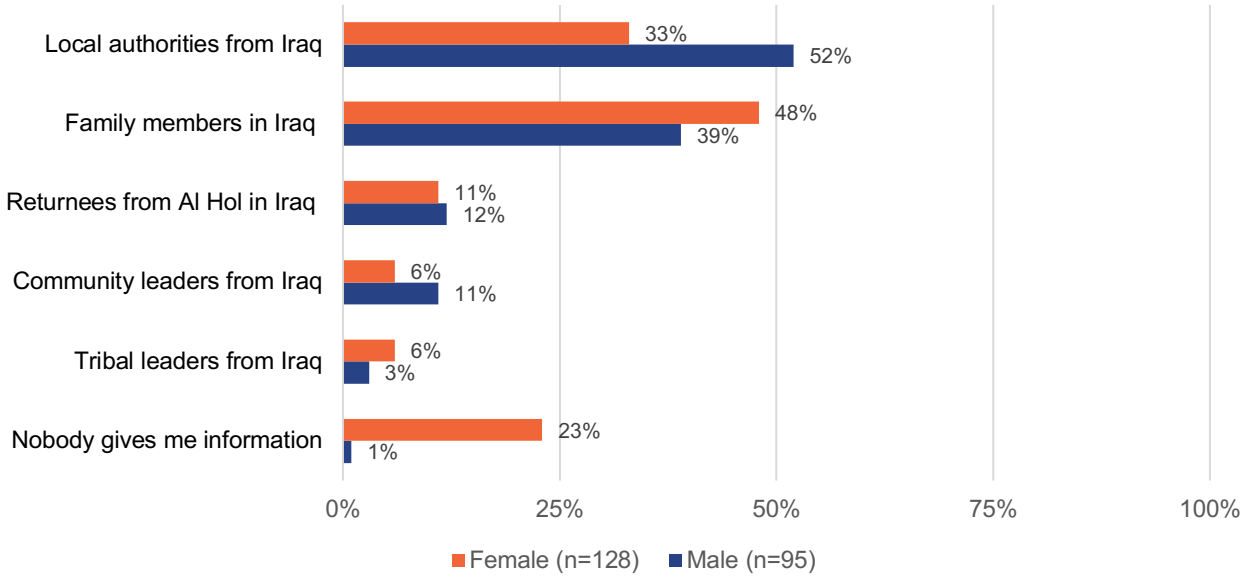
Overview

The Al Hol information ecosystem was based on three key sources: the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF); GoI delegation; and relatives and friends. The GoI delegation was the primary source of information about the return and reintegration process and was generally viewed as trustworthy and reliable; however, fear of being perceived as empathetic to ISIL restricted the two way flow of information with the GoI. The SDF was not a preferred or trusted source of information due to power dynamics that worked against residents. Relatives and friends – including former Al Hol residents who had returned – were described as the most accurate and responsive sources of information. People with weak social connections to Iraq were at a significant disadvantage since informal

[10] Internews, *Why Information Matters*? (2015)
[11] Ibid.

connections were the backbone of the information ecosystem. Female heads of household were marginalized on several accounts: they typically had weaker social ties (including to family), and they also faced social norms that prevented them from approaching male figures even when they were key information brokers.

Figure 1 – "Which sources of information do you rely on most when deciding where and when to return?"

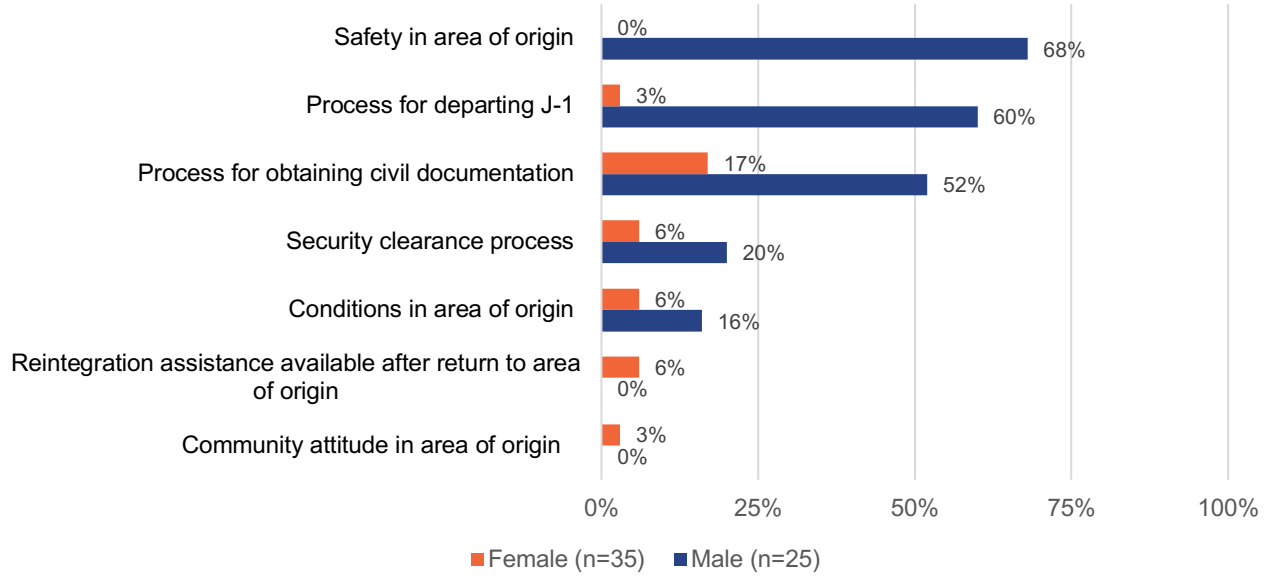


Information Needs

While most respondents felt they received adequate information about the general steps involved in return, there were some gaps and areas of uncertainty:

- How long people would need to stay in Jeddah-1 camp before receiving permission to leave
- Process for departing Jeddah-1 camp
- Process for obtaining civil documentation
- The extent to which security clearances would be respected
- Safety in areas of return
- Whether their return would be tolerated or supported, and specifically, if they were likely to be rejected or attacked
- Conditions in areas of return (e.g., housing, schooling, livelihoods, services, and security).

Figure 2 – "What topics do you wish you had more information about before you returned?"



Actors in the Information Ecosystem

The information ecosystem in Al Hol camp was shaped primarily by three actors: the SDF, GoI delegation; and relatives and friends of Al Hol residents. These are discussed in turn.

Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)

The SDF control and manage Al Hol camp. They did not conduct formal information campaigns but rather shared information with residents during daily interactions, most of which were securitized, such as daily security patrols or larger security campaigns. The high-anxiety environment in Al Hol, created by poor security, frequent security campaigns, and the risk of arrest, detention, and assault, contributed to low trust between the SDF and Al Hol residents and did not support a transparent and reliable flow of information. According to numerous accounts, the SDF informed Iraqi Al Hol residents that there was a high risk of arrest, detention, and revenge attacks should they return, information which deterred residents from returning until other returnees revealed this to be misinformation.[12]

GoI Delegation

Beginning in early 2021, the GoI stationed a delegation in north-east Syria to register Iraqis in Al Hol who wished to return. They also conducted security clearances, oversaw the return process, and answered any questions from Iraqi Al Hol residents. According to our recent survey, the GoI was the most prominent source of information on the return process, with nearly two-thirds of Al Hol returnees relying on the delegation for information. Most Al Hol returnees expressed trust in the GoI delegation, on two grounds: first, because the information shared by the delegation matched the experiences of actual returnees; and second, because respondents said the GoI was generally respectful, treated them with dignity, and recognized them as citizens. One limitation of the GoI delegation as an

[12] This point was made in almost every interview and focus group discussion held with Jeddah-1 residents in July 2022. MEAC, *interviews and focus group discussions with Jeddah-1 residents*, (Jeddah-1, July 2022).

information source was that Iraqi residents of Al Hol were acutely aware that they were under scrutiny by the Iraqi security apparatus, and that the denial of a security clearance would prevent them from returning to Iraq. This appears to have inhibited the free flow of information as people were cautious about presenting themselves as non-threatening. In addition, some female residents reported that a member of the delegation tried to remove their face veils and spoke poorly to them,[13] suggesting that persons perceived as supportive of ISIL may not have received equal treatment by all delegates.

Relatives, Friends, and Al Hol Returnees

Al Hol residents had unrestricted access to mobile phones and were able to communicate with relatives and friends in Iraq. Relatives and friends were considered the most trustworthy source of information by Al Hol returnees, in part because they were present in communities of return and therefore knew the reality first-hand. Those who did not have strong or supportive family networks in Iraq missed out on this vital source of information, and some respondents said this undermined their ability to weigh the veracity of different sources. Women were disproportionately affected: 91 per cent of men and only 68 per cent of women were in contact with family members in Iraq prior to returning to the country. It is possible that access to information provided by family and friends helped to create realistic expectations about the return process. Asked if their experience of return matched the information they received pre-departure, one-quarter of female respondents answered, “not at all,” versus zero men. This may reflect the lower rates of social connectedness amongst women. Although residents demonstrated low trust for each other while in Al Hol, due to the pervasive fear and anxiety in the camp, Al Hol residents trusted the information from those who had returned to Iraq, since they were going through a common experience.

Jeddah-1 Camp Information Ecosystem

Overview

While general information about the return process was available in Al Hol camp, information needs intensified once people arrived at Jeddah-1 camp and started to make arrangements to re-settle in their – or another – community. Those with access to a wider range of information sources were better equipped to make decisions about their return and could more easily navigate issues like sponsorship and civil documentation. While official sources of information were available to everyone, and most Jeddah-1 residents considered Ministry of Migration and Displacement (MoMD) a reliable information source, the most vital source of information for most people was friends and family in areas of return. Not only did friends and family provide updated information based on first-hand experience, they also actively sought information from other sources such as local authorities on behalf of the returnees. This put people with weak social ties at a significant disadvantage since they not only missed out on this more targeted information but also having contacts who could speak and advocate for them. Comparing returnee experiences at different points of the return process highlights how the value of information from a single source can shift over time. The information provided by MoMD in Al Hol has not matched people’s experience after they arrive in Jeddah-1 (e.g., the ability to renew civil documentation, or the timeframe to depart Jeddah-1 camp). As such, current

[13] MEAC, *Focus group discussion with women in Jeddah-1 camp*, (Jeddah-1, July 2022).

Jeddah-1 residents are relying less on advice from MoMD than they previously did and more on advice from other returnees and relatives, as well as on rumours.

Information Needs

While most respondents felt they received adequate information about the general steps involved in the return process, there were some notable gaps and areas of uncertainty:

- Requirements of the return process: Eleven per cent of female and 6 per cent of male respondents did not feel they had sufficient information about the return process. The most common gaps in information were the process for obtaining civil documentation,[14] the process for departing Jeddah-1,[15] and safety in the area of origin.[16]
- Timeline for departure from Jeddah-1 camp: Residents expected to spend a maximum of six months (but more likely three months) in Jeddah-1 camp before returning to their place of origin. However, many have spent over 12 months with no prospects for departure.
- Timeline for family reunification with members still in Al Hol camp: 37 per cent of female and 12 per cent of male respondents who had relatives in Al Hol did not know when they would arrive to Jeddah-1 camp. Many had delayed returning to their communities of origin in order to wait for their relatives to arrive from Al Hol, with no end in sight.
- Location of detained or missing family members: Twenty-seven cent of female and 3 per cent of male respondents with missing or detained family members did not have sufficient information on their whereabouts.
- Process for renewing civil documentation: Only one-third of women and one-quarter of men said that the process to obtain civil documentation was clear to them. One-third of women missing death certificates for their husbands did not know the process for obtaining a death certificate.
- Conditions in areas of return: Of the concerns highlighted, safety was the most pressing (mentioned by almost two-thirds of respondents). Other concerns noted included housing, schooling, livelihoods, and access to services.

Actors in the Information Ecosystem

The actors in the information ecosystem surrounding returns shift depending on a person's location. Upon arrival to Jeddah-1 camp, the SDF is no longer a relevant actor, and rather than relying on the GoI delegation, returnees look to the MoMD for advice. The information ecosystem in Jeddah-1 camp was shaped primarily by three actors: the MoMD; tribal leaders and Mayors in areas of return; and relatives and friends.

MoMD

MoMD manages Jeddah-1 camp and facilitates all returns from Jeddah-1 to community locations. Most Jeddah-1 residents expressed trust in MoMD because the information they provided was generally accurate, and because MoMD generally treated Jeddah-1 residents respectfully. However, although MoMD was viewed as a reliable information source, one shortcoming identified by focus

[14] Reported by 62 per cent of men and 33 per cent of women.
[15] Reported by 33 per cent of men and 10 per cent of women.
[16] Reported by 28 per cent of men and 3 per cent of women.

group participants was that updates were irregular and unpredictable in terms of timing. As one Jeddah-1 resident put it, there are: "no gaps in information, but no updates, we just wait,"[17] or as another put it: "There is only patience and *Insha'Allah*."[18] While this irregular information flow may be manageable in the short term, as confinement in Jeddah-1 becomes protracted, it is likely to push residents to seek alternative sources of information and undermine their trust in MoMD and the State more broadly.

In addition, over time, some inconsistencies have emerged between the information provided by MoMD and the experience of Jeddah-1 residents and returnees. This includes the time spent in Jeddah-1 camp, and the ability to renew civil documentation. The inconsistency between MoMD's advice and reality has pushed Jeddah-1 residents to rely more on advice from other returnees and relatives, as well as on rumours. There is a risk that this could erode trust in MoMD and the State more broadly and undermine their influence over decision-making in the return process.

Tribal Leaders and Mayors in Areas of Return or Relocation

Some tribal leaders and Mayors visited Jeddah-1 camp to reach out to their constituents and advise whether communities were willing to accept their return. Tribal leaders were considered a valuable source of information, but their responsiveness varied based on the camp resident's profile: tribal leaders were perceived as highly responsive to family members and would not only provide information but also actively try to negotiate their return; whereas residents without a (family) connection would simply be advised if return was possible or not. Female heads of household were particularly disadvantaged due to weak social ties and were less likely to rely on tribal leaders as a source of information.

Relatives and Friends

Relatives and friends were considered the most trustworthy and responsive source of information by camp residents. In both Al Hol and Jeddah-1 camp, the decision to allow residents unrestricted access to their phones was a decisive factor in enabling communication between residents and their relatives and friends in the area of planned return. In addition, the Jeddah-1 Visitor Centre played a key role in facilitating face-to-face meetings and enabled returnees to rekindle or strengthen relationships that subsequently became a valuable source of information. Those who did not have strong or supportive family networks in Iraq missed out on this vital source of information.

Information Ecosystems in Communities of Return

Overview

Community decision makers (such as mayors, mukhtars, and tribal leaders) and community members relied on different information sources to decide how they felt about Al Hol returnees and how to interact with them. There was no organized information campaign by the Government and no 'whole-of-government' position on returns from Al Hol, which enabled contradictory views to

[17] MEAC, *Interview #25 with section leader in Jeddah-1 camp*, (Jeddah-1, July 2022).
[18] MEAC, *Interview #10 with prominent camp figure in Jeddah-1 camp*, (Jeddah-1, July 2022).

emerge between government actors that muddied public understanding of the return process and potentially undermined community acceptance. In the absence of a national communication strategy, information – sometimes conflicting in message or tone - was shared by different actors at the provincial, district, or neighbourhood level in different ways. Mayors emerged as the main hub of information in most communities. Mukhtars and tribal leaders then played a vital role in communicating information about Al Hol returns with the wider public, including to the families of victims, and encouraged the sharing, understanding, and weighing of information by hosting small meetings aimed at increasing community tolerance of the returns. This active engagement was a strength of the information ecosystem since it offered a way for community members to engage with official sources of information and thereby reduce their reliance on rumours.

Information Needs

Information about the return and reintegration process varied according to the specific profile of the person. Key gaps in information for community decision makers included:

- Timeline for return of constituents from Al Hol.
- Assistance that would be provided to communities (if any) to support reintegration.

Key gaps in information for community members included:

- Understanding of the profile of Al Hol returnees – for example, understanding how security clearances are issued and how this determines who is allowed to return.
- Limited knowledge of what happens in Jeddah-1 camp, although some form of 'rehabilitation' was thought to take place.

Actors in the Information Ecosystem

Community Decision Makers

The mayor's office was the hub of each information ecosystem. One tribal leader explained how the ecosystem worked: "the security intelligence (istakhbarat) advises the mayor about returns from Al Hol and shares their names. The mayor then coordinates with tribal leaders, and we [tribal leaders] speak to the community. We aim to prepare the ground for return through awareness sessions on coexistence and acceptance…"[19]

Tribal leaders typically communicated with Jeddah-1 residents as to whether their return would be accepted or rejected by the community. This would occur during a visit to Jeddah-1 camp, through bilateral communication over the phone, or indirectly through family members in the community. In addition, tribal leaders and mukhtars informed people in the community of the planned returns. Specifically, they would inform the relatives of the returnee as well as the families of victims in the community of the planned return, and in many cases they would hold small meetings to discuss community concerns and "solve problems before they happen."[20] Mukhtars and tribal leaders were able to play this role because they are "close to the people" and therefore able to meet with members of the community and encourage tolerance for returns.[21] As one mukhtar explained: "Mukhtars and

[19] MEAC, *Interview #10 with mukhtar in Anbar* (Anbar, September 2022).
[20] MEAC, *Interview #16 with tribal leader in Anbar* (Anbar, September 2022).
[21] MEAC, *Interview #7 with mukhtar in west Nineveh* (Nineveh, September 2022).

tribal leaders are the linkages between the Mayor and security actors (on the one hand] and the people [on the other]. We meet with everyone in the community and talk about coexistence, and also about helping needy people [such as Jeddah-1 returnees]."[22]

This active engagement was a strength of the information ecosystem. By bringing people together, mukhtars and tribal leaders provided a way for community members to engage with official sources of information – and not only receive that information passively, but actively discuss what it meant for them – which likely reduced their reliance on rumours and enhanced their trust in the return process.

Community Members

Communities were made up of people who had highly varied experiences during the war with ISIL. They included victims of ISIL, people who lived under ISIL occupation, and families whose members are accused of joining ISIL. This contributed to varied attitudes towards Al Hol returnees, although overall, concern was high: many community members were more concerned about the return of Al Hol residents than the return of Iraqis accused of ISIL affiliation who were only displaced within Iraq.[23] This heightened fear was driven by concerns that these specific returnees were more proximate and engaged with ISIL and thus a risk to the community, as well as by higher levels of distrust.[24] These suspicions and tensions create a high demand for information about the return process, since gaps in information may encourage rumours that stoke fears and prejudices. A key concern of Al Hol returnees was to increase community acceptance of their return: 40 per cent of male respondents in Jeddah-1 stated that in order to make them feel safer after returning to the community, the UN should conduct social cohesion activities, and another 36 per cent said the UN should encourage community acceptance.

Rumours in the Al Hol Transition Process

Why Focus on Rumours?

Rumours played a key role in decision-making across return and reintegration trajectories from Al Hol. The absence, unreliability, and contradictions between official sources of information led people to rely on rumours – which sometimes turned out to be more accurate than official sources. This section interrogates why and how rumours emerged, and why people relied on them. In doing so, this report builds on existing scholarship which recognizes that displaced people rely on rumours not because they are 'irrational' or 'gullible,' but because they live in uncertain conditions and need to

[22] MEAC, *Interview #16 with mukhtar in Anbar* (Anbar, September 2022).
[23] Jacqueline Parry and Yousif Khalid Khoshnaw, with Siobhan O'Neil and Juan Armando Torres Munguía, "Supporting the Reintegration of Families with Perceived ISIL Affiliation in Iraq," forthcoming.
[24] Jacqueline Parry and Yousif Khalid Khoshnaw, with Siobhan O'Neil and Juan Armando Torres Munguía, "The Road Home from Al Hol Camp: Reflections on the Iraqi Experience," forthcoming.

make sense of their options when they lack access to alternative and official sources of information.[25] Displaced people are not passive in this process but develop their own strategies to vet and verify information, such as relying on trusted social ties, triangulating multiple sources, or comparing the information with their personal experience.[26] Within such a context, rumours are not necessarily nefarious but often emerge unintentionally or without malice,[27] enabled by an absence of good quality official information.[28] Examining how and why rumours emerged in the Al Hol transition process reveals how gaps in information influenced the way people navigate the information ecosystem, and how the GoI and UN can improve the reliability of information available.

Most residents heard rumours about the return process.[29] These fell into several common topics:

- **Arrest**: Male residents feared being arrested at checkpoints once they departed Jeddah-1 camp based on reports by a small number of returned Jeddah-1 residents. This led some residents to prefer to relocate to Erbil, where the security forces are consolidated and there is, therefore, less risk of arrest.[30]
- **Civil documentation**: Although MoMD advised that the only way to issue missing documentation is to visit the personal status administration in each area of return, residents generally believed this was impossible without a bribe, due to the reported experience of Jeddah-1 returnees.
- **Child separation**: In the survey with Al Hol returnees, 50 per cent had heard that women would be forcibly separated from their children. Specifically, the rumour said that women with missing or deceased husbands and undocumented children would be separated from their children upon return, especially if the husband's family rejects them.
- **Forced disavowal**: Women with missing or detained husbands (or sons) accused of ISIL affiliation complained that other women were forced to disavow relatives even though they did not want to.

[25] Sophie De Feyter, "'They Are Like Crocodiles Under Water': Rumour in a Slum Upgrading Project in Nairobi, Kenya." *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (January 2015).
[26] Rianne Dekker, Godfriend Engbersen, Jeanine Klaver, and Hanna Vonk, "Smart refugees: How Syrian asylum migrants use social media information in migration decision-making," *Social Media + Society,* Vol. 4, No.1 (March 2018).
[27] For example, someone may hear about or observe an incident and draw conclusions or 'lessons learned' that spur a rumour; other times, rumours may develop from pre-existing, prejudiced beliefs that convince people of specific claims of fact. See: Derya Ozkul and Rita Jarrous, "How do refugees navigate the UNHCR's bureaucracy? The role of rumours in accessing humanitarian aid and resettlement," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 42, No.10 (May 2021).
[28] Ibid.
[29] 85 per cent of male respondents and 52 per cent of female respondents.
[30] MEAC, *Interview #17 with Jeddah-1 camp resident*, (Jeddah-1, July 2022); MEAC, *Interview #20 with Jeddah-1 camp resident* (Jeddah-1, July 2022); MEAC, *Focus group discussion with women in Jeddah camp*, (Jeddah-1 July 2022).

How and Why Did Rumours Emerge?

Rumours emerged due to gaps, contradictions, and shortcomings in official information sources, outlined below.

Assumptions Based on Unaddressed Incidents

A common reason that rumours emerged or gained traction was that someone heard about or observed an incident and in the absence of other information or information that addressed what they saw, they drew a wider conclusion.[31] For example, Jeddah-1 residents would hear about the arrest of another (former) resident and speculate that this could happen to any one of them. People did not consider that these were rumours, even though the information was not officially verified, because they were based on actual events. As one camp leader explained, "there is a fear of arrest, but this is not unfounded,"[32] while two other camp residents emphasized that this fear "is not a rumour, it's reality."[33] While many of these rumoured arrests undoubtedly took place, the assumption that it could happen to all residents was not necessarily true, since it may have been influenced by the person's individual profile. However, since incidents such as these were rarely addressed by government authorities, there was no official explanation as to why such incidents happened and this encouraged single instances to grow into wider assumptions. There were also no steps taken by the government to demonstrate how such incidents could be prevented in the future (e.g., by ensuring that security clearances were respected by all security actors) or how people could protect themselves.

Jeddah-1 residents often weighed these rumours with 'counter rumours' – or rumours of conflicting outcomes. For example, considering a 'counter rumour' would be weighing the fact that although one person was arrested, another made it home without a problem. However, this did not 'solve' a rumour but merely introduced a competing source of information to help people adjust their assessment of the risk that they personally faced. In the long-term, this is likely to undermine trust in the state as it pushes people to rely even more on rumours as a means of verifying information.

Lack of Trust in Sources of Official Information

Rumours also emerged due to the perceived unreliability of certain official information. For example, the SDF told Al Hol residents they would be rejected or attacked on return,[34] a prediction that was disproven as returns took place. In a second example, MoMD advised Jeddah-1 residents that they could renew the civil documentation at the civil status department in their area of return. This has proven impossible for many returnees, and by the time they got to Jeddah-1 roughly one-quarter of the Al Hol returnees surveys knew someone who had departed Jeddah-1 and was unable to renew

[31] This basis for rumours is also recognized in the scholarship. See Derya Ozkul and Rita Jarrous, "How do refugees navigate the UNHCR's bureaucracy? The role of rumours in accessing humanitarian aid and resettlement," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 42, No.10 (May 2021).
[32] MEAC, *Interview #20 with prominent camp figure* (Jeddah-1, July 2022).
[33] MEAC, *Interview #27 with prominent camp figure* (Jeddah-1, July 2022); MEAC, *Interview #24 with prominent camp figure* (Jeddah-1, July 2022).
[34] This was reported in 8 separate focus group discussions held with Jeddah-1 residents in July 2022, as well as multiple interviews with Jeddah-1 residents during the same period.

their documents in their place of origin.[35] This unreliability pushed people to rely more on unofficial sources of information from relatives and other returnees, a trend that is concerning because when people are forced to rely on rumours it can exacerbate low levels of trust in authorities further, and lead them to withdraw even more from formal structures.[36]

A wider issue is how pre-existing lack of trust in Iraqi institutions affects the information ecosystem. In public statements, MoMD states that it "refuses to take revenge" on Iraqi Al Hol families and that the rule of law requires that MoMD must rely on the judiciary for criminal matters, whereas MoMD is responsible for "rehabilitating" those without security or legal issues.[37] While the affirmation of the rule of law is very positive, survey data suggests that Iraqis – and especially families with perceived ISIL affiliation – have very low trust in courts and, to a lesser extent, authorities.[38] This raises the question about the inroads information and communications campaigns can have with low trust populations to get ahead of, or address, rumours around the return process.

Inconsistent Policy Implementation and Public Messaging

Governments may inadvertently fuel rumours when officials or different parts of government deviate from official policies.[39] Governments may have good reasons to pursue informal policies, particularly because they often have short-term advantages. However, over time, informal deviations from official policy increase the perception that decisions are arbitrary and discriminatory and may therefore fuel new rumours.[40] Within the Al Hol return process, inconsistency between what officials say will happen and what actually happens in practice is undermining trust in authorities and encouraging rumours. This is seen with the process of renewing civil documentation, where advice given by MoMD to renew documents in areas of origin is contradicted by reports that returnees who try to renew their documentation are unable to do so. It is also seen in the reports of arrests of returned (or returning) Jeddah-1 residents by provincial security actors, despite the returnee being granted a security clearance.[41]

A second issue is that there is no 'whole-of-government' policy or strategic narrative on the return of Al Hol families. As a result, different parts of government often share messages that contradict each other: one part emphasizing Al Hol returnees as citizens deserving empathy, and another stressing their status as criminals or security threats. These competing narratives often play out in the media. For example, MoMD consistently asserts that the Al Hol return process is strictly managed from a

[35] 23 per cent of male respondents and 19 per cent of female respondents amongst current Jeddah-1 residents.
[36] Melissa Carlson, Laura Jakli, and Katerina Long, "Rumours and Refugees How Government-Created Information Vacuums Undermine Effective Crisis Management," *International Studies Quarterly,* Vol. 62, No.3 (September 2018).
[37] Voice of Iraq, ""MoMD" refuses to take revenge on the families of Al-Hol camp and confirms the rehabilitation of 270 people," 19 July 2022.
[38] Jacqueline Parry and Yousif Khalid Khoshnaw, with Siobhan O'Neil and Juan Armando Torres Munguía, "Supporting the Reintegration of Families with Perceived ISIL Affiliation in Iraq," MEAC Iraq, forthcoming.
[39] Steven Maynard-Moody and Michael Musheno, "State Agent or Citizen Agent: Two Narratives of Discretion," *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory,* Vol.10, No. 2 (April 2000).
[40] Melissa Carlson, Laura Jakli, and Katerina Long, "Rumours and Refugees How Government-Created Information Vacuums Undermine Effective Crisis Management," *International Studies Quarterly,* Vol. 62, No.3 (September 2018).
[41] While the study did not seek to verify whether or why arrests of Jeddah-1 returnees had taken place, numerous reports of arrests were received during interviews and focus group discussions with Jeddah-1 residents and key informants. This included: MEAC, *interviews #22 and #26 with section leaders at Jeddah-1 camp* (Jeddah-1, July 2022), and MEAC, *interviews #4 and #6 with service providers at Jeddah-1* (Jeddah-1, July 2022).

security perspective, noting that: “The return of the displaced families [from Al Hol] did not come randomly, but rather came after a comprehensive discussion to develop a robust plan;” [42] and later, that: “it was proven that they had no security problems, and that the process was not random, but rather it was decided to return them after a comprehensive and extensive assessment under the supervision of the Iraq Security Agency.”[43]

MoMD also spoke publicly of the programming in Jeddah-1 camp, noting that it is coordinating with MoE and that: “[MoMD is] supporting the implementation of the rehabilitation programme, seeking to change the ideology of women and children, and to ingrain a spirit of patriotism in their mind, and rehabilitate them through various activities like technical workshops and awareness.”[44]

On the other hand, some local authorities utilize Facebook to oppose returns and undermine the effectiveness of the return process. For example, Anbar's Advisor for Relief Affairs at the Governorate Office stated that families from Al Hol are not welcome to return there.[45] There are other examples of political figures who have made direct accusations that the returnees are ISIL affiliates.[46]

Whilst public discussion about the Al Hol returns is necessary and valuable given that it relates to important issues of post-conflict justice, reconciliation, and citizenship, the current debate is haphazard and does not appear to be shaped by any intentional strategy. Moreover, competing information about the return process itself – such as how security clearances are issued or the type of programming in Jeddah-1 – makes it difficult for community members to understand and form opinions about the process, which in turn, creates a barrier to community acceptance.

Restricted Information Dissemination

Governments may inadvertently fuel rumours by restricting information about their policies.[47] While the GoI does not necessarily intend to restrict information on the Al Hol return process, it does not appear to have any public communications strategy. MoMD occasionally makes public statements regarding returns from Al Hol, but there is no strategic narrative or sustained information sharing. This gap in information allows alternate voices and rumours to flourish, as discussed in the earlier section. This is additionally concerning because poorly managed information flows can also create space for informal brokers to exploit rumours,[48] a tactic that ISIL used in previous years.[49]

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[42] Sky News Arabia, “The "disaster camp"... Iraq ends the first chapter of the Syrian al-Hol,” 28 May 2021.
[43] Kirkuk Now, “Al-Jada’a camp displaced between embrace and rejection. Will they become a time bomb in Iraq?” 4 June 2021.
[44] Al Mada paper, “After the rehabilitation program for ISIS families, there is an effort to close Al-Jada’a camp,” 3 April 2022.
[45] Anbar Monitoring Platform, *Facebook page*, 5 February 2022.
[46] Kirkuk Now, “Al-Jada’a camp displaced between embrace and rejection. Will they become a time bomb in Iraq?” 4 June 2021.
[47] Melissa Carlson, Laura Jakli, and Katerina Long, “Rumours and Refugees How Government-Created Information Vacuums Undermine Effective Crisis Management,” *International Studies Quarterly,* Vol. 62, No.3 (September 2018).
[48] Ibid.
[49] For example, in and around Tikrit, ISIL utilized rumours related to water scarcity and loss of agricultural livelihoods as a recruitment tool. It spread claims that water and agricultural policies were intentionally designed to harm Sunni farmers and leveraged the associated grievances to generate support. Research suggests that ISIL was thereby able to gather markedly more support in water-deprived communities than in better-resourced, nearby communities. National Geographic, “Climate change and water woes drove ISIS recruiting in Iraq,” 14 November 2017.

How Do Information Ecosystems Affect Transitions?

Al Hol returnees and people in areas of return sought, evaluated, and weighed different pieces and sources of information and made decisions that affected both the return and reintegration process. In this way, the information ecosystem played a decisive role in the 'success' of the transition out of Al Hol. This section considers the impact that information, misinformation, disinformation, and rumours had on decision-making and transition outcomes.

Impact on Decision-making

Rumours, misinformation, and disinformation all had a direct impact on the decision-making of those returning from Al Hol. Rumours shared by relatives or other returnees in areas of return were particularly influential since Jeddah-1 residents tended to trust these personal contacts. Numerous Al Hol residents who had registered to return later changed their minds after hearing reports from areas of return. One Jeddah-1 resident explained that: "Information can affect people, for instance when some people heard reports of Al Hol returnees facing long stops at checkpoints, or getting arrested, they changed their minds and will not return any more."

Information coming from key stakeholders in areas of return was equally influential. The advice shared by political figures and tribal leaders during their visits to Jeddah-1 often influenced the decision to return. For example, one service provider in Jeddah-1 recalled that: "some mayors from Anbar visited Jeddah-1 and called the residents terrorists and also identified some residents by name, who they said were terrorists… This caused some families to change their intention to return, although they gave different reasons for doing so [to avoid people thinking they were one of the 'terrorists' implicated in the mayor's speech].[50]

Protracted Confinement in Jeddah-1 Camp

Returnees are expected to spend up to six months in Jeddah-1 camp based on an estimate given by the GoI delegation. Some camp residents, however, are still in Jeddah-1 a year after arrival: 8 per cent of a recent survey had spent at least 11 months in Jeddah-1; half of the respondents were female heads of household.[51] Reasons for getting stuck in Jeddah-1 are often tied to access to information, and female heads of household were frequently disadvantaged due to bigger information gaps. The most common reason that people had not departed Jeddah-1 camp was the need to renew civil documentation, and female heads of household were less likely to know how to

[50] MEAC, *Interview #8 with service provider in Jeddah-1 camp* (Jeddah-1, July 2022).
[51] A survey of 213 residents carried out in July 2022 by the MEAC team found that one-quarter had resided in Jeddah-1 for at least six months, and of these, one-third had spent at least 11 months in Jeddah-1 (equating to 8 per cent of the overall survey sample). For more details, see: Jacqueline Parry and Yousif Khalid Khoshnaw, with Siobhan O'Neil and Juan Armando Torres Munguía, "The Road Home from Al Hol camp: Reflections on the Iraqi Experience," forthcoming.

do this.[52] The second most common reason was waiting for relatives to join from Al Hol camp, and here, again, female heads of household were less likely to know when relatives who remained in Al Hol would arrive at Jeddah-1.[53] Women were also more likely than men to have insufficient information about missing or detained relatives.[54]

Importance of Social Networks

According to a recent MEAC study, Al Hol returnees with weak social networks found it harder to meet the departure requirements for Jeddah-1 and had greater difficulty reintegrating, as detailed in another MEAC report.[55] Social networks make a vital difference to both rehabilitation and reintegration, since they are the primary way that returnees access accurate information about return conditions, connect with key stakeholders to facilitate the return process, and receive support to reintegrate into their community or another one.[56] Female heads of household were disproportionately affected: they were less likely to be in contact with family members prior to return[57] and experienced less family support compared to men.[58] In addition, unlike men, female heads of household could not rely on friends for support.[59]

Risk of ISIL Utilizing Rumours to Exploit Grievances

While ISIL's principal tool for expanding its influence has been brute force, its deftness for propaganda must not be forgotten. In an attempt to build credibility and establish legitimacy, ISIL used social media to garner support and recruit fighters.[60] ISIL continues to portray itself as an agent of change and promises to settle accounts for the perceived sufferings of others.[61] In Iraq, ISIL exploited grievances held by Sunni communities against the authorities in Baghdad and capitalized on the political vacuum created by a weak state and the failure of the government to address core sociopolitical grievances and the marginalization of particular segments of the population.[62] Grievances create a permissive operating environment that armed groups like ISIL exploit.[63]

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[52] 37 per cent of female-headed households were unclear on the process of obtaining civil documentation, versus 11 per cent of men.
[53] 39 per cent of female-headed households versus only 12 per cent of male respondents said they didn't know when family members would return from Al Hol to Jeddah-1.
[54] 30 per cent of female-headed households stated that they had insufficient information about the status of their missing or detained relatives, versus only 3 per cent of men.
[55] Measured by the fact that those who had been stuck in Jeddah-1 for over a year had significantly weaker social networks than those who had already managed to return. See: Jacqueline Parry and Yousif Khalid Khoshnaw, with Siobhan O'Neil and Juan Armando Torres Munguía, "The Road Home from Al Hol camp: Reflections on the Iraqi Experience," forthcoming.
[56] Ibid.
[57] 91 per cent of male Jeddah-1 respondents were in touch with family members versus only 75 per cent of female heads of household amongst the sample of current Jeddah-1 residents.
[58] 57 per cent of male Jeddah-1 respondents versus 47 per cent of female Jeddah-1 respondents stated that they could rely on family members for financial support, and 57 per cent of male Jeddah-1 respondents versus 51 per cent of female Jeddah-1 respondents stated that they could rely on family members to feel accepted.
[59] 69 per cent of male Jeddah-1 respondents expected to rely on friends for financial support and to feel accepted, versus only 3 per cent of female Jeddah-1 respondents.
[60] James P. Farwell, "The Media Strategy of ISIS", *Survival*, Vol. 56, No. 6, (November 2014).
[61] Ibid.
[62] Houda Abadi, "ISIS Media Strategies: The Role of Our Community Leaders Contributor," *A Guide to Preventing Extremist Narratives: Paving the Path to Peace*, (March 2016).
[63] United States Institute of Peace and Wilson Center, *The Jihadi Threat: Isis, Al Qaeda, and Beyond* (Washington, DC: 2017).

There is a risk that certain elements of the return journey will create grievances amongst the Al Hol returnee population, and if these grievances are not resolved, they may be exploited by ISIL in future. Specifically, there is an urgent need to resolve discrepancies in information around how to renew civil documentation for children. Without civil documentation, Al Hol returnees are unable to access education, move through checkpoints, access formal work, or legally get married. While this issue requires policy change beyond information sharing,[64] reliable information is a key method for countering rumours and potential exploitation. A second issue that demands attention lest it becomes a source of propaganda for ISIL is the risk of indefinite detention in Jeddah-1 camp. As noted earlier, timely, good quality information is essential for people to navigate their departure and meet requirements such as obtaining a sponsor or influencing community acceptance.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are drawn from the report's findings.

- **The GoI, with the potential support of relevant UN agencies, should develop a communications strategy related to the return of Iraqis in Al Hol**. The communications strategy should identify key messages to be shared, identify the audience and message conveyors, and provide a framework to engage government actors at the national, provincial, and district levels in strategic communications.

- **The GoI and UN agencies should address policy gaps and inconsistencies that are prompting reliance on informal sources of information (rumours)**. It will not be enough to simply develop a communications strategy and disclose policies; rather, what is needed is greater transparency, feedback (to compare policies with reality), and policy revisions that are clearly communicated. For example, addressing inconsistencies in the policy of issuing civil documentation, as well as the reliability of security clearances to prevent arrests after leaving Jeddah-1.

- **Linked to the above, the GoI and UN should proactively address rumours** by identifying topics where there is a lack of consistent information; providing regular and consistent information on those topics; engaging directly with Jeddah-1 residents and returnees to provide accurate information about those topics and answer questions they may have; and taking steps to address policy inconsistencies.

- **The GoI and UN agencies should develop a feedback loop to ensure that official messages regarding return and reintegration are consistent with the reality returnees experience**. This would involve monitoring the process of return and reintegration, identifying discrepancies

[64] See Jacqueline Parry and Yousif Khalid Khoshnaw, with Siobhan O'Neil and Juan Armando Torres Munguía, "The road home from Al Hol camp: Reflections on the Iraqi Experience," forthcoming.

with the information provided, and updating public messages accordingly. It would also require action to address the underlying reason for the discrepancy.

- **The GoI and aid organizations should (re)design and expand their communication policies related to Jeddah-1 camp and return from Al Hol**. They should consider addressing inconsistencies in information provision for key issues that affect reintegration, such as the method for renewing civil documentation, the timeframe for departing Jeddah-1 camp, and the timeframe for family reunification from Al Hol.

- **The GoI and the UN should expand their use of social media to promote community acceptance of the Al Hol returnees**. At present, much of the information on social media is negative, and it is difficult to find reliable information about the return process (such as security checks and time spent in Jeddah-1). A more strategic use of social media could offer a way to engage communities, create a consistent understanding of the process, and identify and respond to concerns about returns.

- **Respectful and dignified treatment of returnees should remain a key principle of the return process since it is a pre-requisite for returnees to trust authorities and the information they convey**. If the SDF is to be involved in information dissemination, it would need to adapt its wider treatment of Iraqis in Al Hol.

- **Other settings should learn from the positive communication practices of the Al Hol return process, such as the Jeddah-1 visitor centre and access to cell phones**. Strong social relations were essential for a successful transition out of Al Hol, and returnees who could actively connect with family, friends, community leaders and other returnees were often better equipped to make decisions, had more options available to them in terms of how return was facilitated, and received more support reintegrating.

- **The GoI and UN should take targeted action to address the concerns of female heads of household and engage them in information provision**. Female heads of household face higher barriers to return than men, and also face barriers to accessing information, which undermines their decision-making capacity and reintegration journey.

MANAGING EXITS
FROM ARMED CONFLICT