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Coming Home: The Return and Reintegration of Families with Perceived ISIL Affiliation in Iraq

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MANAGING EXITS
FROM ARMED CONFLICT

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KEY FINDINGS

- Across the country, and particularly amongst those who had lived in ISIL-occupied territory, there was a strong preference for the Government to lead the return process and relatively high trust in the security screening process. Local and tribal leaders informally play an important role, and one that could be strengthened.

- For a minority of families with perceived Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) affiliation – and specifically, those viewed as more proximate to the group – the return process introduces new risks or even insurmountable barriers to return.

- There is a need to revise the return process to ensure it is feasible for those who remain displaced and to better utilize the return process to set people up for successful reintegration.

- There is a continued need for programming that can support reintegration in a holistic way, including by placing it in the context of rebuilding social networks and promoting community reconciliation and social cohesion.

- Families with perceived ISIL affiliation are not a homogenous group; there is a subset of families who are treated as more proximate to ISIL and demonstrate greater vulnerability and higher barriers to reintegration.

- A community-based approach remains imperative for any stabilization or durable solutions intervention in part because non-affiliated community members show high rates of vulnerability.

- Lack of trust in institutions is influencing the way families with perceived ISIL affiliation protect themselves and seek justice and is pushing them away from government mechanisms, which could have long-term implications for their integration into Iraqi society.

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 UNIDIRR'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.

About this Series

MEAC's case studies and findings report series seek 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 data collected from June to July 2022 from a total of 1,882 respondents collected in four key locations, each of which was occupied by ISIL: Al Qaim (Anbar governorate), Habaniyya (Anbar governorate), Tooz (Salah al-Din governorate), and Muhalabiya (Nineveh governorate). The sample was divided into two roughly equal halves: those who had benefited from UNDP support (810 persons or 43 per cent) and a randomized household sample from the same areas (1,072 persons or 57 per cent). In addition, qualitative interviews were carried out in the same four locations between July and November 2022 with key stakeholders (local authorities, tribal leaders, mukhtars) as well as 60 survey respondents to explore the survey findings in greater depth.

The four locations were chosen because they are the sites of community-based reconciliation and reintegration programming delivered by UNDP Iraq. Amongst other objectives, the programmes seek to support the return and reintegration of families perceived as having ISIL affiliation and to support the communities that receive them. The report presents data about community experiences pre-, during, and post-war, and examines what community experiences, perceptions, and preferences mean for reintegration prospects for those families perceived as having ISIL affiliation. This data may be useful to UN and NGO partners working in the region to bolster their early recovery programming, as well as efforts to support reintegration, community reconciliation, and broader peacebuilding efforts. The report ends with an examination of key policy and programmatic implications of these findings.

Introduction

By the time the war with ISIL ended in December 2017, there were some 5 million Iraqis displaced within the country. To date, most internally displaced persons (IDPs) have returned, but for many, this was not an easy homecoming. While all IDPs face challenges coming home, one group that has faced specific challenges due to the way they are identified by their communities are those families who are perceived to have supported ISIL, often due to the behaviour or affiliation of a family member. Emotions run high in some areas regarding their return. One mukhtar summed up common feelings: "In our area, victim families are concerned about these families returning; others are concerned about instability if they return; and others believe that the children of these ISIL families will carry the ideology of their [ISIL] parents." [1]

In other areas, such fears are balanced pragmatically; one returnee asserted that: "There is a high level of acceptance here, because we all have an interest to live together. We do not discriminate between families who had members tied with ISIL so long as they disavow them because if they become isolated from the community, they may join ISIL again."[2]

These widely different attitudes raise questions about the varied reintegration experiences of these families: Will they be accepted back in their community? Are they able to shed the identification placed on them as "ISIL families"? Or does stigma and discrimination follow them and prevent them from truly leaving the conflict behind? Five years after the end of the war with ISIL in Iraq, this report considers these questions, and what reintegration looks like for families with perceived ISIL affiliation.

The Perception of ISIL Affiliation in Iraq

Between 2014 and 2017, ISIL carried out an armed insurgency across Iraq that led to the occupation of 20 major Iraqi cities with a civilian population exceeding 5 million.[3] Those who chose to remain and live under ISIL occupation did not necessarily support the group, but were compelled by diverse reasons: livelihoods, social networks, family structures, lack of information, threat perceptions, ideology, and – particularly in the early days – a perception that the quality of governance under ISIL would be better than that provided by the Iraqi state.[4] Yet there were some who did collaborate with ISIL in various ways, from simply paying taxes or continuing to fulfil civil service functions (e.g., management of water and sanitation facilitation) to enforcing ISIL's strict moral code and committing

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[1] MEAC, *Interview #5 conducted with mukhtar in Anbar,*(Anbar, September 2022).
[2] MEAC, *Interview #15 with returnee in Anbar,* (Anbar, November 2022).
[3]Eric Robinson, Daniel Egel, Patrick B. Johnston, Sean Mann, Alexander D. Rothenberg, David Stebbins., *When the Islamic State Comes to Town: The Economic Impact of Islamic State Governance in Iraq and Syria* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2017).
[4] Mara Revkin, "Competitive Governance and Displacement Decisions Under Rebel Rule: Evidence from the Islamic State in Iraq," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* Vol. 65, No. 1 (September, 2021).

horrific acts of violence. A challenging issue for Iraq's post-war recovery is how to respond to those who are perceived to have supported ISIL and whose communities reject or resent their return.

Families with perceived affiliation to ISIL (even when due to a relatively distant familial connection) can find their return to their communities blocked by security actors,[5] experience community rejection and stigmatization,[6] and are at high risk of revenge attacks and violence.[7] Female returnees who face this accusation are also at a higher risk of sexual and gender-based violence, particularly female-headed houses and those in rural areas.[8] Even when families manage to obtain a security clearance and their community accepts their return, the process of reintegration can be extremely challenging. Families can be discriminated against in terms of obtaining jobs, accessing public services (including education for their children), maintaining freedom of movement, or in socializing. There are also psychological barriers to reintegrating if you consider yourself non-affiliated and yet are treated by the wider community as affiliated. While this in no way undermines the significant challenges that victims of ISIL violence face in rebuilding their lives, it is clear that families with perceived ISIL affiliation face barriers to transitioning to 'civilian life' that are not faced by other residents, and which need to be addressed for the sake of Iraq's long-term peace.[9]

The government of Iraq (GoI), UN agencies, and their partners are taking steps to support the return and reintegration of families with perceived ISIL affiliation who have been displaced within Iraq. Today, five years after the end of the military campaign against ISIL in Iraq, this report examines how the return process is structured and the types of reintegration assistance provided to families with perceived ISIL affiliation. It considers whether these processes effectively support the transition that diverse families must go through in order to reintegrate into 'civilian life.' The report aims to understand how much reintegration "progress" families with perceived ISIL affiliation have made, and the challenges and sources of resilience that influence their progress. In doing so, it aims to identify ways the GoI, UN, their partners, and other humanitarian and early recovery actors can better design, implement, and/or evaluate programming to support conflict transitions in Iraq.

Understanding Perceived Affiliation to ISIL

Defining what it means to be 'affiliated to ISIL' is difficult. Iraq's 2005 Anti-Terrorism Law, which sets the framework for prosecutions, is exceptionally broad and treats those who provided basic support to Islamic State members, such as cooking or selling vegetables, on par with those who committed

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[5] Blocked returns are commonly enforced by security actors on the ground, usually on the grounds of the IDPs families not possessing the required documentation (usually a security clearance) to leave the area if displacement or re-enter the area of origin. See IOM Iraq, *Protracted displacement in Iraq: Revisiting categories of return barriers* (Baghdad: IOM, 2021).

[6] IOM Iraq, *Tribal Justice Mechanisms and Durable Solutions for Families with a Perceived Affiliation to ISIS* (Baghdad: IOM, 2020).

[7] Human Rights Watch, "Iraq: Looting, Destruction by Forces Fighting ISIS," 16 February 2017.

[8] Oxfam, "Community perceptions of Sexual and Gender Based Violence", 29 July 2021.

[9] As discussed further in the Methodology section, attempting to understand the reintegration challenges these families face does not imply that the UN believes these families were in fact combatants or acted in the service of ISIL. Rather, the intention is to understand the range of diverse reintegration challenges derived from different wartime experiences, so as to better tailor reintegration programming.

violence,[10] a perspective that is not typically shared by ordinary Iraqis. Rather, at the community level, perceptions of ISIL affiliation are typically focused on those who held senior roles under ISIL or committed serious crimes.[11] Communities typically attribute responsibility at the family level which means that the perception of affiliation extends to first- or second- degree relatives, even reaching up to fourth-degree relatives in some communities.[12] The opaque nature of these determinations has also created opportunities to use accusations of ISIL affiliation as a form of currency, and there are also cases where imputations about joining or supporting ISIL have been leveraged to exact revenge on personal enemies.[13]

The precise number of families with perceived ISIL affiliation is difficult to quantify, in part because humanitarian agencies do not record this perceived status and in part because the concept itself is defined differently in each community and has changed over time. As a ballpark figure, in mid-2018 some estimates placed the number at several hundred thousand.[14] Such a large population inevitably includes families with diverse wartime experiences and varied (perceived) proximity to ISIL – some may have close relatives detained under terrorism charges for committing violence, for instance, whereas others may have a distant relative accused (without charge) of less serious offences. In addition, locations also vary in their tolerance and treatment towards those with perceived affiliation, with issues such as revenge attacks, social exclusion, and community rejection varying widely.

Methodology

In order to understand the return experiences and the reintegration progress of Iraqis with different degrees of perceived ISIL affiliation (and understand how support can further that progress), a mixed methods approach including a large-scale survey, qualitative interviews, and a desk review (including of media ad social media) was employed. Specifically:

- The primary data source for this report is a survey conducted from June-July 2022 with 1,882 men, women, boys, and girls from Al Qaim (Anbar governorate), Habaniyya (Anbar governorate), Tooz (Salah al-Din governorate), and Muhalabiya (Nineveh governorate). This sample was comprised of:
    - 95 per cent adults, 5 per cent children
    - With an equal gender split[15]

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[10] UNAMI and OHCHR, *Human Rights in the Administration of Justice in Iraq: Trials under the anti-terrorism laws, and implications for justice, accountability, and social cohesion in the aftermath of ISIL*, (Baghdad: UNAMI AND OHCHR, 2020), p. 1 and p.10.

[11] However, in some communities less serious involvement with the group has also led to the perception of affiliation. For more information see: IOM Iraq, *Managing Return in Anbar: Community Responses to the Return of IDPs with Perceived Affiliation* (Baghdad: IOM, 2020).

[12] IOM Iraq, *Tribal Justice Mechanisms and Durable Solutions for Families with a Perceived Affiliation to ISIS* (Baghdad: IOM, 2020).

[13] Mara Revkin, "After the Islamic State: Balancing Accountability and Reconciliation in Iraq" In *The limits of punishment: Transitional justice and violent extremism*, United Nations University and Institute for Integrated Transitions (New York: 2018).

[14] See: Interaction, "Moving Forward Together, Leaving No One Behind: From Stigmatization to Social Cohesion in Post-Conflict Iraq," 31 October 2018.

[15] Data was collected by a team of Iraqi enumerators who live in these respective areas. In all locations, male enumerators interviewed male respondents and female enumerators interviewed female respondents.

- ○ Roughly half the respondents lived in ISIL territory and half did not.[16]
- ○ Roughly half the total sample had benefited from the support of UNDP's Community-based Reconciliation and Reintegration in Iraq" (C2RI), which seeks to strengthen community readiness to accept the returning families through dialogue, reconciliation, and mediation sessions, and assessing the needs of returnees in Nineveh, Salah al-Din, and Anbar governorates. The C2RI programme targets both families with perceived ISIL affiliation who have returned to their place of origin,[17] as well as unaffiliated but vulnerable community members, and seeks to ensure a minimum of 50 per cent of its recipients are women.
- ○ The other half of the sample was comprised of randomly chosen respondents from the surrounding communities.
- In order to dig further into the survey findings, 60 semi-structured phone interviews were completed with survey respondents after the survey was completed (split equally across gender and locations) to better understand some of the themes they had identified.
- Key informant interviews were also carried out in areas of return with local authorities, mukhtars, tribal leaders, and other influential stakeholders who have a vantage point on returns and reintegration.

In order to capture the diversity within the population of families with perceived ISIL affiliation, the MEAC study sought to understand degrees of real or perceived proximity to the group. MEAC's tools collected data around a set of indicators of proximity to ISIL. While the MEAC project does not attempt to identify whether or not a person is in fact affiliated to ISIL, it does recognize that there is significant variation in how respondents (and their families) are perceived and treated throughout the return and reintegration progress, based on the community's perception of their proximity to ISIL. This approach recognizes that when influential actors (including the government, local authorities, security actors, or community members) perceive an individual or family as ISIL affiliated, regardless of whether or not that perception is true, this likely has social, economic, logistical, and legal consequences that impact reintegration progress.

For the purpose of the analysis in this report, any respondent who lived under ISIL occupied territory _and_ had at least one of the following experiences is considered as more proximate to ISIL – or at least perceived as such:[18]

- The respondent was detained because an authority, security force, or other actor suspected them of being with ISIL, even if it's not true.
- A close relative was sentenced, detained, or convicted due to (false) accusations related to ISIL association.
- Required to disavow a relative

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[16] 48 per cent and 52 per cent respectively.
[17] It is important to note that although UNDP provides targeted assistance to families with perceived ISIL affiliation, this does not imply that the UN believes these families were in fact combatants or acted in the service of ISIL.
[18] Due to the relatively small sample size and the complexity of how proximity metrics interact, the study did not distinguish between those with greater or fewer proximity markers within this category (i.e., to further identify those with 'high' or 'low' perceived proximity to ISIL, based on the number of markers they had).

- Unable to obtain a security clearance.

It is important to clarify that this analytical approach does not suggest that only people who are perceived as more proximate to ISIL need reintegration assistance. Rather, recognizing that there is significant variation amongst the population perceived as ISIL affiliated, this approach sought to allow for a more nuanced understanding of what reintegration means for this population, and to understand the elements of their profile that may influence their reintegration journey. Proximity is not the only measure of potential need. While those who are perceived as more proximate to ISIL are the most visible amongst this population, there are some who are less proximate but still face similar barriers to reintegration as a result of their identification. This methodology allowed for the examination of the differences in reintegration progress between UNDP beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries; and between those who are perceived as affiliated to ISIL (with different degrees of affiliation) and those who never lived in ISIL territory.

Facilitating Return and Reintegration

For Iraqis who were displaced during the ISIL conflict to return home, they need to meet several key steps. First, in order to return to their place of origin or move to a third location, people who lived in ISIL occupied territory are required to complete an administrative process established by authorities in that area. Although the process varies between provinces (and even districts) it typically requires a security clearance issued at the provincial level by an assortment of security and political actors,[19] and – for those with perceived ISIL affiliation – the need to identify a sponsor and potentially disavow any relatives accused of supporting ISIL.[20] Although not a requirement, in practice, tribal leaders and mukhtars often reach out to victim families and the wider community to gage attitudes and encourage acceptance pre-return; peace agreements may be signed to facilitate returns; community leaders host meetings post-return to further encourage community cohesion; and international actors may provide resources or support to local actors and deliver reintegration assistance to returned families.

These processes and practices – security clearance, sponsorship, disavowal, community meetings, and reintegration assistance – are the core return and reintegration steps families with perceived ISIL affiliation must – or are expected – to fulfil to return home (or settle in another community).

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[19] These actors rely on various judicial and security databases that contain names of accused ISIL members, as well as information provided by prominent security actors or tribal leaders. In 2018, new expedited security clearance procedures were instated, processed at the local level by local government authorities. These local security clearances can take many different forms but are typically granted after investigations conducted by various security actors, in coordination with the respective *mukhtar* of each area. See: IOM Iraq, *Tribal Justice Mechanisms and Durable Solutions for Families with a Perceived Affiliation to ISIS* (Baghdad: IOM, 2020).

[20] Ibid. and UNHCR, *Relevant Country of Origin Information to Assist with the Application of UNHCR's Country Guidance on Iraq* (2021).

Understanding these requirements and their impact on reintegration outcomes is key to strengthening reintegration prospects.

Facilitating Return

Currently, the GoI leads the return process for Iraqis trying to return to their communities after displacement within the country (and for those returning from Syria). The Government's leadership role is widely supported across the country, particularly amongst those who lived in ISIL-occupied territory.[21] People trust the government-led security clearance process more than any other tool to facilitate returns and affirm that a returning family does not pose a risk to the community.[22] This is important because the return process offers a strategic opportunity to strengthen – or potentially undermine – the relationship between returnees and the GoI. Wartime experiences have already shaped trust in government institutions: ordinary community members report higher trust in government after the war,[23] whereas those who are perceived as more proximate to ISIL have lost trust over time.[24] Returning to one's community is such a seminal moment that the way the state treats returnees – and the communities that receive them - is likely to have long-lasting impact on trust in state institutions as well as the state-citizen relationship more generally. Another MEAC study completed with Iraqis returning from Al Hol found that the GoI's recognition of returnees as Iraqi citizens and the respectful and dignified treatment they received was vital to building their trust both in the return process and in the government more broadly.[25]

A key state-supported step to facilitate return is disavowal, a process which for some may help ease acceptance of returnees (and trust in the Government facilitating them), but for many – especially those involved, may prove disruptive to building (or restoring) trust in the Government. Disavowal refers to a formal, state-related process that takes place in front of a judge (known in legal terms as 'notification of offence') and involves a person severing all ties with any relative accused of supporting ISIL.[26] Female heads of household are usually required to disavow husbands who are missing or imprisoned, and there are instances where they have also had to disavow imprisoned or missing sons, including children. Women subject to this requirement repeatedly complained about compulsory tabriyya and had diverse reasons for not wishing to go through the disavowment process.

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[21] Over 60 per cent of all respondents preferred the Iraqi government to take the lead decision-making role in the return process. People who lived in ISIL territory had an even stronger preference for the government taking the lead (81 per cent versus 64 per cent of those who did not live in ISIL occupied territory)

[22] Just over half of all respondents trusting a security clearance to ensure that a family did not pose a risk to the community and was able to return.

[23] Before the war, 75 per cent of persons without proximity markers felt that the government 'always' or 'sometimes' applied the law equally and fairly for all people, and this increased slightly after the war to roughly 80 per cent.

[24] Before the war, 77 per cent of those who are perceived as more proximate to ISIL trusted that the government applied the law equally and fairly for all people 'always' or 'sometimes', and this dropped to 71 per cent after the war.

[25] Jacqueline Parry and Yousif Khalid Khoshnaw, with Siobhan O'Neil, Juan Armando Torres Munguía, and Melisande Genat, "The Road Home from Al Hol Camp: Reflections on the Iraqi Experience," *MEAC Findings Report* 24 (New York: United Nations University, 2022).

[26] This process is often referred to colloquially as *tabriyya*, which refers to a similar process of disavowal that takes place with a tribal framework; however, in the current return context, the legal (not tribal) process is used exclusively (or almost exclusively; in our study, we did not come across any instances of tribal disavowal).

While disavowal is regularly demanded as part of the return process, only one-third of the public wanted returnees to complete disavowal and only 20 per cent of ordinary community members trusted the disavowal process to ensure a returnee was not a threat.[27] This indicates fairly low trust in the process and suggests that if authorities were to stop imposing disavowal, it may not necessarily undermine community acceptance of returnees.

While the process of return is government-led, key local stakeholders such as tribal leaders and mukhtars play a vital role in facilitating access to the return process. This is particularly visible in the case of tribal facilitation of returns, and sponsorship. One returnee described how tribal support can determine if return is feasible: "The tribal leaders inform members in the community that [the returnee] is coming back and asks them if they agree with his return or not. If the community members say no, the tribal leaders inform the person who wants to return that the tribe will not cover them. That means that if the person returns, they will be solely responsible for their own family's protection. In this case the person will not return because he would fear revenge [since tribal leaders will not protect them from such attacks taking place]." [28]

Local leaders are also central to the sponsorship process. Sponsorship is a common requirement of the return process – particularly if someone wishes to move to a third location. It is a formal process whereby a community member with good standing commits to 'sponsor' the returning family and vouch for their behaviour, and may be considered responsible (socially, not legally) should a member of the family become involved in terrorist activities after return.[29] Mukhtars and tribal leaders sometimes agree to sponsor their constituents, although this is more likely if there is a family connection; more often, a sponsor is a relative who holds a respected position such as a government employee or a member of the security forces.[30] Although sponsorship is much more common than disavowal, it has similar rates of trust in the community, with roughly 35 per cent of respondents wanting returnees with perceived ISIL affiliation to obtain a sponsor in order to return.

Sponsorship has undoubtably enabled a large number of people to return and is a straightforward process for those who have access to a suitable sponsor. One returnee described how the process worked in one successful case: "Our neighbour's uncle was an Emir ('Prince' or senior leader) of ISIL and killed many innocent people, although this [returnee] family were far away from him. The village was against their return because they knew what the uncle did, so the mukhtar made a small meeting to convince the families, who finally agreed. Then he helped this family by signing a statement [for the local authorities] that they won't make any trouble, and that he will check the situation from time to time to ensure it remains safe."[31]

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[27] 42 per cent of people who lived in ISIL occupied territory versus 19 per cent of those who did not live in ISIL occupied territory trusted the disavowal process.
[28] MEAC, *Interview #7 with returnee in Anbar*, (Anbar, November 2022).
[29] For more information on sponsorship generally, see: IOM Iraq, *Tribal Justice Mechanisms and Durable Solutions for Families with a Perceived Affiliation to ISIS* (Baghdad: IOM, 2020).
[30] Based on qualitative interviews carried out for this study.
[31] MEAC, *Interview #50 with returnee in Anbar*, (Anbar, November 2022).

However, if someone has poor family relations and weak social networks, this process can be burdensome, potentially risky, and inaccessible.[32] Sponsorship only works when the sponsor's assurance is credible, and this requires some degree of connection. As one female returnee explained: "because the mukhtar knows us for 18 years it makes his word credible for us."[33]

Yet not all returnees are equally able to access and procure sponsors. MEAC's research highlights that female heads of households are often at a double disadvantage since they are more likely to have weak social networks and are often prevented by social norms from speaking directly to male community leaders, both of which encumber their efforts to connect with potential sponsors or those who could facilitate connections to them. One female respondent also raised concern about the sponsorship system enabling sexual exploitation of women, noting that: "I think many women have been used by the ones who sponsored them to return, whether it was for money or sexual abuse. [34]

Sponsorship is fundamentally about assuring the community that a returnee does not pose a security threat and will not destabilize the area due to an ongoing connection to ISIL. Community members are more sensitive to this issue if their area continues to experience security incidents linked to ISIL. One returnee explained, "If an area is safer, it will be easier to find a sponsor."[35] This can create an additional barrier for returnees with perceived affiliation whose area of origin remains unstable.

Facilitating Reintegration

The global MEAC initiative aims to understand how individuals reintegrate to 'civilian' or 'community' life after a period of conflict. It focuses on people who are oriented towards conflict in their actions, associations, identity, or – particularly in the case of this report – the way they are identified by others. Families with perceived ISIL affiliation face steep barriers to reintegrating back into their communities (or new ones) due to their identification as being affiliated with ISIL (directly or indirectly) or supportive of its goals and/or ideology (whether or not that belief is accurate). Reintegration in this context requires not only addressing vulnerabilities related to displacement, but also tackling issues that perpetuate a conflict-related identity. That is, how does the process of reintegration – and the structures or actors that support it – help or hinder families with perceived ISIL affiliation transition away from identification as an 'ISIL family', or at least reduce the impact of being identified as such? This is undoubtably a lengthy process that requires holistic attention (including on issues such as transitional justice which are beyond the scope of this report) but this report sketches some key issues in the way reintegration is currently approached.

The findings from the present study demonstrated that the way that return is facilitated can set someone up for successful reintegration, or it can undermine their reintegration prospects. A sponsor who is abusive or takes advantage of a returnee, for instance, not only affects an individual's return

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[32] Jacqueline Parry and Yousif Khalid Khoshnaw, with Siobhan O'Neil, Juan Armando Torres Munguía, and Melisande Genat, "The Road Home from Al Hol camp: Reflections on the Iraqi experience," *MEAC Findings Report* 24 (New York: United Nations University, 2022).
[33] MEAC, *Interview #35 with returnee in Anbar,* (Anbar, November 2022).
[34] MEAC, *Interview #36 with returnee in Mosul,* (Mosul, November 2022).
[35] MEAC, *Interview #35 with returnee in Anbar,* (Anbar, November 2022).

process but their long-term reintegration prospects. Equally, the extent to which family members or community leaders engage in the pre-return phase to encourage community acceptance will have a lasting impact on the way a family is treated and viewed within the community long-term.

Arguably the most influential factor on the return trajectory of an "ISIL family" and their shedding of that identification is the strength of a returnee's social network. While community leaders such as tribal leaders and mukhtars play a key role in encouraging community cohesion and acceptance towards families with perceived ISIL affiliation, the degree to which they play this role depends in part upon their personal (or second-, even third- degree) connection to the returnees (as well as other factors such as wider community attitudes towards the returns.) Even within the same location, respondents had markedly different connections to tribal leaders and, as a result, different experiences with their support. Some respondents reported to have no contact with their tribal leader throughout the return and post-return phase, despite living in a tribal society such as Anbar. Others, by contrast, had a close affinity, with one female returnee describing: "We trust the tribal leaders since we have one place of origin, one blood, we are cousins and relatives, so we know if we ask for their support, they will help us…blood can't become water." [36]

Another male returnee described the holistic support some tribal leaders provided: "Tribal leaders try to find returnees a job, and they request public service provider offices like the Department of Electricity and Municipalities to provide them with water and power." [37]

Not everyone has active support from their tribe; in fact, most people in the study did not receive tangible support from a tribal leader during their process of return, nor after they came back. The impact of such support - when it does exist - is significant, as the above vignette demonstrates. This suggests that the GoI and UN could help improve reintegration prospects by helping returnees to expand and strengthen their social connections even prior to return. This could include steps such as ensuring returnees have the resources for communication (such as access to phones and credit); identifying common spaces where meetings could take place; facilitating dialogue and meetings between returnees and key stakeholders in areas of return (particularly for people such as female heads of household who may struggle to reach out to male community leaders directly); and engaging community leaders in dialogue to encourage them to consider supporting their constituents.

Another key factor influencing the way community identification of returnees can shift during the reintegration process is the use of social media. There is an opportunity for the GoI and UN to use strategic communications – particularly through social media - to shape the public narrative about returns by ensuring that accurate information about the returns process is available. Clear, proactive communication about the process may help encourage greater tolerance towards returnees. At present, the GoI does not have a communication strategy regarding the return of families with perceived ISIL affiliation, and communication is haphazard and does not appear to be shaped by any intentional strategy. This is a lost opportunity since there are many strengths to the returns process: relatively high trust in the government-led process and use of security clearances to

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[36] MEAC, *Interview #32 with returnee in Anbar*, (Anbar, November 2022).
[37] MEAC, *Interview #1 with returnee in Mosul*, (Mosul, November 2022).

facilitate return; low incidence of revenge attacks; and cohesive action between government, community leaders, and tribal leaders. The GoI could use media platforms to leverage existing success in the return and reintegration process to garner support for returnees who face more complex barriers to return, such as persons with greater perceived proximity to ISIL; those with weak social networks who struggle to secure a sponsor; or families from areas of endemic insecurity.

A multi-prong strategic communications campaign around returns could also help to create an environment more conducive for tribal leaders, mukhtars or other key stakeholders to connect with and support the return of families with perceived ISIL affiliates. At present, community leaders must carefully weigh the risks of facilitating the return of families with perceived ISIL affiliation, lest they themselves be perceived as siding with ISIL supporters over the victim families, or as introducing new threats to the community. As one returnee suggested: "Tribal leaders cannot do much about returnees [with perceived ISIL affiliation] because they are afraid that media or social media will present them as supporters of ISIL families. Tribal leaders are afraid of damaging their reputation in their own area [if they are perceived as supporting so-called ISIL families].[38]

The returnee argued that with more public engagement by trusted stakeholders, these challenges might be overcome. The returnee stated: "This is why it is important for the UN to engage more in events with authorities and tribal leaders, so they make the return issue visible to the public. I am sure the tribal leaders like to help people to return, but they are afraid to talk about it publicly, but it would be easier for them if they are supported by the UN and authorities."[39]

With community acceptance as the driving force behind successful reintegration, many local stakeholders emphasized that the UN specifically needed to adapt its approach to reintegration assistance. Rather than dealing primarily with local government officials (such as Mayors or civil administration) as is usually the case, it is vital to collaborate closely with mukhtars and tribal leaders, given their influence and involvement in the return process and the efforts they make to encourage tolerance within the community. Multiple stakeholders shared the view expressed by one tribal leader in West Nineveh, that for reintegration to be successful, "it should be led by tribal leaders and mukhtars and not by the government itself,"[40] since they take the lead on issues that affect social cohesion. Mukhtars and tribal leaders visit the relatives of victims to "prepare the ground for return,"[41] and often host community meetings to encourage coexistence and try to solve problems as they arise.[42]

In that regard, a mukhtar from Anbar summarized a common piece of advice: "For reintegration to be successful, it's vital that the UN cooperates with mukhtars and tribal leaders more closely, because they are the ones who have influence in the community, and they play a better role than

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[38] MEAC, *Interview #5 with returnee in Tuz*, (Tuz, November 2022).
[39] MEAC, *Interview #5 with returnee in Tuz*, (Tuz, November 2022).
[40] MEAC, *Interview #6 with mukhtar in west Nineveh*, (Nineveh, September 2022).
[41] MEAC, *Interview #9 with tribal leader in Anbar*, (Anbar, September 2022); MEAC, *Interview #19 with religious figure in Anbar*, (Anbar, September 2022); MEAC, *Interview #12 with mukhtar in Anbar*, (Anbar, September 2022).
[42] MEAC, *Interview #16 with mukhtar in Anbar*, (Anbar, September 2022).

the government in solving community issues. The government is applying laws only [whereas mukhtars and tribal leaders deal with social issues]."[43]

These findings indicate that while the GoI remains the key actor in the return process which lays the groundwork for reintegration, there is opportunity – and even necessity – for community actors to be further engaged in the process. Community actors can play a key role not only by addressing social cohesion and offering a stronger social safety net for returnees, but also as conveyors of key messages in media or as influencers in social media. This requires the UN and partners to identify credible local actors who can bridge complex intracommunity relations, such as those between victim families and families with perceived ISIL affiliation. Building relationships should start as early as possible, since the relationships with community actors that can enhance reintegration progress would also benefit the return process and should ideally be formed in the pre-return phase.

Measuring Reintegration Progress

Understanding the transition that someone oriented toward conflict or identified as such (e.g., due to having a family member with real or perceived ISIL affiliation) goes through when they return 'home' is complex. A returnee's reintegration into civilian Iraqi life involves not only resolving vulnerabilities linked to displacement, but also a shift in how they are viewed by the people around them.[44] In the case of Iraq, this means that families shed the orientation – real or perceived - towards ISIL, and can reach the economic, social, mental, and civic well-being standards of the community to which they return. The MEAC framework and corresponding assessment tools were specifically designed to measure conflict exit transitions.

Unlike other tools, MEAC's toolkit was specifically designed to assess transitions out of conflict and measure reintegration progress by looking at a core set of conflict orientation outcomes. These outcomes reflect scholarly research and insights from across a wide range of fields, as well as core values and goals that the United Nations tries to promote in its programming.[45] In addition to individual outcomes around conflict orientation, the MEAC initiative collects metrics associated with

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[43] MEAC, *Interview #5 with mukhtar in Anbar*, (Anbar, September 2022).

[44] The IASC Framework on Durable Solutions for IDPs (IASC Framework) sets out key principles and criteria for the achievement of a durable solution following conflict and is commonly used to judge progress towards the reintegration of IDPs. However, while the IASC Framework is a valuable tool to measure the reintegration outcomes of IDPs generally, it does not capture the full breadth of transitions that take place for people whose lives were defined in some way by conflict, such displaced Iraqis who are identified by others as affiliated with ISIL. However, many of the benchmarks in the MEAC framework mirror those of the IASC Framework, and the two frameworks can be used concurrently. The IASC Framework sets eight benchmarks against which to judge progress towards a durable solution, which are: (1) safety and security; (2) adequate standard of living; (3) access to livelihoods; (4) restoration of housing, land and property; (5) access to documentation; (6) family reunification; (7) participation in public affairs; and access to effective remedies and justice.

[45] Examples of core outcomes of interest include degree of identification with the armed group and the extent to which the social networks is made up of active group affiliates.

reintegration progress (either as signals of it or factors that contribute to it),[46] including economic well-being, social well-being, psychosocial well-being, civic recognition and participation, and access to services and institutions. Together, the core conflict orientation outcomes and well-being indicators help create a picture of the reintegration progress a returnee has made.

The following sections present the findings on the MEAC core outcomes and well-being indicators. Later sections consider what these findings mean for reintegration assistance.

Perceived Conflict Orientation

Of primary concern for families with perceived ISIL affiliation is their ability to re-orient their lives away from conflict and how they are viewed by their communities. MEAC's survey data clearly show that when returnees return to their – or another – community, they face a significant challenge in shifting those perceptions. Almost everyone in the four locations surveyed reported concern about the return of families with perceived ISIL affiliation.[47] This concern was driven by a lack of trust, fear that the families would continue to support ISIL, fear that they would introduce security risks to the community, and fear that they would put the reputation of the community at risk.

This concern can translate into discrimination, making it difficult for returnees to integrate into daily life. The study showed that people who are perceived as more proximate to ISIL were slightly more likely to be treated poorly in a shop or market[48] and more likely to report that people acted like they did not trust them.[49] While proximity clearly impacted discrimination rates, the differences with non-proximate respondents were relatively small. Given the potential stigma linked to admitting such experiences, it is likely that these rates are under-reported. People with more perceived proximity to ISIL, however, were also far more likely to report that people express critical or negative perceptions of them because they do not agree with the experience they had during the war. Roughly 50 per cent of all people who are perceived as more proximate to ISIL reported that both family members[50] and community members[51] were critical or negative, more than double the rate of persons who never lived in ISIL territory.

This lack of acceptance extends to the children of these families. Only one-quarter of community members were comfortable with their children attending school with other children from families with perceived ISIL affiliation. In addition, people from families with perceived affiliation were more likely

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[46] For example, it is not always clear if having a job outside an armed group signals a transition away from the armed group, or by supplanting armed group income, actually helps drive that transition.

[47] Roughly three-quarters of all respondents were concerned about the return of families with perceived ISIL affiliation. Those who did not live in ISIL territory were more likely to express stronger concerns than those who lived under ISIL occupation.

[48] 7 per cent versus 4 per cent of those who never lived in ISIL occupied territory.

[49] 12 per cent versus 6 per cent of those who never lived in ISIL occupied territory.

[50] 48 per cent of people who are perceived as more proximate to ISIL stated that family members were critical or negative, compared with 21 per recent of those who didn't live in ISIL territory and 29 per cent of those who lived in ISIL territory but didn't have proximity markers.

[51] 45 per cent stated that other people in their area were critical compared with 21 per recent of those who didn't live in ISIL territory and 30 per cent of those who lived in ISIL territory but didn't have proximity markers..

to report that teachers 'never' treat their children fairly at school.[52] While discrimination is difficult at any age, for young children who have recently returned after a long period of displacement, experiencing it at school which is meant to be a safe place – or not being able to access school at all, as discussed later - is potentially even more problematic and may have repercussions for reintegration stretching into adulthood.

For the most part, the unequal treatment and community critique did not translate into physical threats. The majority of families with perceived ISIL affiliation felt safe in their area and did not experience threats, which is a positive sign for reintegration. However, a minority did experience security concerns. Roughly 5 per cent of families with perceived ISIL affiliation had been threatened 'sometimes' in the past month,[53] and people who are perceived as more proximate to ISIL were 4 percentage points less likely to consider all members of their family safe in their area. This a small but noticeable difference. Respondents perceived as proximate to ISIL said their common fear was false accusations, suggesting that an accusation of ISIL affiliation remains a hot issue in many communities.

The fear of revenge attacks was on everyone's mind, not just those with perceived ISIL proximity. Among respondents, fear of revenge attaches was reported most amongst those who did *not* live in ISIL territory,[54] a surprising finding that may indicate that these community members were alert to the desire for revenge amongst members of their own community (rather than fearing revenge attacks themselves). In any case, it suggests that the risk of revenge attacks remains real and likely continues to affect the ability of returnees to function and engage with the community and thus, trust-building more broadly.

People utilized different coping mechanisms to deal with their fears. Those perceived as more proximate to ISIL were much more likely to stop socializing outside the house and limit their movements as much as possible. While this may reduce risk, it sustains a family's social isolation from the community – a real problem in light of already limited social networks, discussed in section 2.5 – and one that may generate new vulnerabilities. Indeed, it is hard to make reintegration progress when you cannot physically integrate into economic, social, and civic life. Community members who did not live in ISIL-occupied territory said that in the face of these fears they still socialized but some armed themselves and others thought about relocating. The fact that those with perceived ISIL affiliation did not acknowledge gun ownership may not reflect reality, but a fear of acknowledging weapon ownership given the scrutiny they experience from security actors. In addition, returnees – unlike those in the community who were never seen as affiliated to ISIL - have few opportunities to leave the area given the complex demands of relocation for them (such as the need to have a sponsor.)

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[52] 7 per cent versus 4 per cent of those who never lived in ISIL occupied territory.
[53] Specifically, 5 per cent of people who are perceived as more proximate to ISIL and 3 per cent of those who lived in ISIL territory were 'sometimes' threatened during the past month (versus 0.5 per cent of those who did not live in ISIL territory).
[54] One-third of people who did *not* live in ISIL-occupied territory feared revenge attacks.

Social Networks

The lack of strong social networks is a key factor in the return and reintegration journeys of Iraqis with perceived ISIL affiliation. Those who are perceived as more proximate to ISIL were particularly disadvantaged in terms of social networks and were more likely to say they are 'always' excluded from social gatherings, as well as family gatherings.[55] While reported social exclusion rates were still relatively low even for those with perceived proximity to the group, the affected minority are left isolated and without important social safety nets to help them cope with emergencies. For example, 28 per cent of persons who are perceived as more proximate to ISIL did not know anyone, they could ask for a loan in an emergency, almost double the rate of those who did not live in ISIL territory.[56]

Strong social networks may also help with community acceptance, since family members or community leaders may encourage trust and support within the wider community. By the same token, a returnee who does not have any supportive family or friends will have to generate trust and support on their own, which given the widespread concern around returns can be difficult.

Socioeconomic Well-being

Of all the indicators related to reintegration progress, there was the smallest difference in the socioeconomic well-being of community members and families with perceived ISIL affiliation. Almost everyone in the four target communities was struggling to make ends meet, both ISIL-affiliated and non-affiliated community members. Over 80 per cent of all respondents faced difficulty in meeting their daily needs and over 50 per cent said they were worse off now compared to pre-2014. That is to say, most families with perceived ISIL affiliation are economically vulnerable – and so are most community members. At the programming level, this finding underlines the importance of community – based programming that includes community members in any socioeconomic programming aimed at supporting families with perceived ISIL affiliation, since their struggles are similar and singling out one group is likely to generate resentment. More strategically, this finding highlights the intrinsic connection between reintegration and economic development and the need to generate economic opportunity to allow entire communities to reconcile and build peace.

Delving closer into the individual experiences of respondents, it becomes clear that certain factors are associated with higher economic well-being regardless of perceived affiliation or proximity. The data showed that differences in socioeconomic well-being appeared *within* people of the same category. That is, a minority of community members and a minority of families with perceived ISIL affiliation did well financially, typically due to access to employment income and house ownership. This affirms the need to develop eligibility criteria for financial or livelihood support based on individual needs rather than an assumption that all families with perceived ISIL affiliation are

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[55] 11 per cent versus 7 per cent of those who didn't live in ISIL occupied territory. Another 5 per cent of those who are perceived as more proximate to ISIL also said they were 'always' excluded from family activities.
[56] 28 per cent of those who are perceived as more proximate to ISIL and 20 per cent of those who lived in ISIL territory did not know anyone they could ask for a loan in an emergency, compared with 17 per cent of those who didn't live in ISIL territory.

universally vulnerable. The finding also speaks to the importance of owning certain types of assets, which may alleviate some household costs and provide the stability needed to make economic gains.

Psychosocial Well-being

Despite evidence of stigmatization and some discrimination against individuals perceived as affiliated or more proximate to ISIL, these experiences do not appear to currently be driving differences in psychological functioning. Rather the survey data suggest that across the different populations of respondents, many people were struggling with mental health. There was no significant difference between individuals who are perceived as more proximate to ISIL – who might be expected to struggle more with mental health given the higher barriers to reintegration – and other groups. The experience of war and the post-war recovery period has affected people who had diverse wartime experiences: roughly half of all respondents felt 'a lot of anxiety' and experienced intrusive thoughts about bad things that had happened at least 'sometimes.' One surprising finding was that people who fled ISIL's arrival were most likely to feel a lot of anxiety and experience intrusive thoughts. While the study cannot offer a clear reason for this, it suggests that the experience of long-term displacement has a significant impact on psychosocial well-being, perhaps because protracted displacement severely depletes resources.

Relationship with Institutions

Trust in government institutions is a key factor in facilitating reintegration progress, since it indicates that a family is being treated as an equal citizen and is willing to rely on official forms of justice and protection. This report considers three outcome metrics: access to civil documentation; access to services; and interaction with local authorities.

Families with perceived ISIL affiliation were more likely to report that someone in the household was missing civil documentation.[57] Children were most affected: of families who are perceived as more proximate to ISIL, 22 per cent had children with expired documentation that they had been unable to renew (compared to only 3 per cent of other families). The inability to renew civil documentation significantly undermines reintegration progress as it reduces the person's ability to engage in many aspects of formal life (e.g., the economy, health, and social services), thus relegating them to informal and illegal spaces and enhancing their vulnerability to recruitment or exploitation by those actors that operate in them, including traffickers and criminal and armed groups.

While there were no consistent trends in denial of services, both families with perceived ISIL affiliation and ordinary community members reported significant gaps in service provision. The key difference between them was that people who are perceived as more proximate to ISIL were more likely to report that the reason for their lack of access to services was discrimination. They were also more likely to report that their area had no services, which may indicate that people who are perceived as more proximate to ISIL live in areas that are isolated or neglected by the government.

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[57] 5 per cent versus 2 per cent of those who did not live in ISIL occupied territory.

Even if factually inaccurate, the absence of services needs to be addressed transparently if the government is to avoid groups such as ISIL exploiting grievances and encouraging people to think that the gap is intentional.

Finally, low trust in institutions such as the courts, security actors, and local authorities is affecting the way that persons who are perceived as more proximate to ISIL behave when they need protection or justice.[58] If people perceived as more proximate to ISIL experienced crime (such as assault or robbery) they were less likely to stay than other groups that they would report it to the police, and more likely to report to tribal leaders or family members. Moreover, only 11 per cent of people who are perceived as more proximate to ISIL would report to the court, versus 32 per cent of those who never lived under ISIL occupation. If this continues over time, it may create a situation where this population is unwilling to rely on the state for protection and may turn instead to others to fulfil that function. Given the inroads armed groups – particularly ISIL – initially made by portraying the group as the un-corruptible proprietor of security and justice, it is disconcerting to see evidence that points to an opening that such groups could exploit in the future.

Strengthening Return and Reintegration Processes

Return

For many families with perceived ISIL affiliation, the process to return to their community is straightforward and accessible: the community accepts their return; if required, they find a sponsor; and they have sufficient social networks to help facilitate the process of return and encourage ongoing acceptance. While this group of people certainly face barriers to return such as lack of housing or livelihoods, returning is feasible.

However, for a minority of families with perceived ISIL affiliation – and specifically those viewed as more proximate to the group – the return requirements may be insurmountable and/or introduces new risks. People with weak social networks cannot turn to relatives or community leaders to help generate community acceptance or secure a trustworthy sponsor. Female heads of household (and potentially other profiles) are at risk of accepting sponsorship arrangements that open them up to exploitation and abuse, or alternatively, face indefinite displacement if they cannot secure one. A key reason these risks and barriers exist is because the return process requires people to utilize

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[58] Trust in government was low amongst persons who are perceived as more proximate to ISIL. Almost 20 per cent stated that the courts and judiciary 'never' treated their family fairly, while 12 per cent felt that local authorities were never fair, 9 per cent that tribal authorities were never fair, and 7 per cent that security forces were never fair. These rates were significantly higher compared to ordinary community members: only 8 per cent of people who never lived in ISIL territory felt that the courts and judiciary never treated their family fairly.

relationships to fulfil the return criteria and, while this works for most people, it puts some at a significant disadvantage.

As the number of displaced families with perceived ISIL affiliation dwindles, there is a need to revise the return process to ensure it is feasible for those who remain displaced to return and to policies to set all returnees up for reintegration "success." The findings from the MEAC study suggest several lines of action to take:

The first is to consider alternatives to the sponsorship system for those who have been unable to secure a sponsor. This may involve negotiations to do away with the sponsorship system altogether, which has happened in many communities but requires the buy-in of local authorities, tribal leaders, and local communities (including victims' families). Returnees who had gone through the process had their own ideas about how the vulnerabilities created by the current sponsorships process could be addressed. One suggested, "In the case of women there should be more monitoring and the process should be supervised by the UN itself, with a female case manager."[59]

Another female respondent suggested: "[The UN] can help female-headed households] by putting a hotline to receive calls if women [who are sponsored] face sexual harassment or any kind of harassment by their sponsor or at checkpoints, so this will make it easier to report any cases."[60] In addition to having trusted impartial parties – like the UN or others - provide a level of oversight to the existing process, there is a question working through other frameworks for returnees. One such option would be local peace agreements, which could also potentially be adapted to help people return or even relocate to another area.

The second is to take steps to mitigate risks and strengthen the protection of returnees in the sponsorship process. More should be done to protect female heads of household who engage a sponsor, such as regular monitoring to identify potential abuse or exploitation and the creation of accessible ways to report abuse or exploitation. Additional research is also needed to better understand other profiles who may be at risk (beyond female heads of household) and to identify suitable ways to respond that do not create stigma or additional risk to returnees.

The third is to enhance strategic communications around the return process and capitalize on the role media and social media could play to generate greater trust in it and encourage tolerance for those who are returning. Proactively communicating requirements and expectations around returns could help create the conditions needed to alter the sponsorship system and find solutions for the remaining displaced families. Efforts to improve community acceptance should focus on raising awareness of the government-led return process, the diversity of family profiles, and the different concerns of male and female community members. In particular:

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[59] MEAC, *Interview #36 with returnee in Mosul,* (Mosul, November 2022).
[60] MEAC, *Interview #39 with returnee in Mosul*, (Mosul, November 2022).

a) Increase awareness and understanding of the government-led process that includes security screening. Community trust is highest towards the government-led process and appears to offer the strongest opportunity to encourage community acceptance of returns.

b) Utilize public awareness and engagement campaigns to highlight the complex experiences that many families with perceived ISIL affiliation had. Community members appear to distinguish cases based on their individual experience, and while this would need to be done in a way that does not violate privacy or share identifiable information publicly, it appears that encouraging a more nuanced understanding of the background of these families would strengthen community acceptance.

c) Develop separate public awareness and engagement campaigns for men and women in the community. Men and women hold different concerns towards these families (with men more concerned about physical security and women focused on broader social and ideological issues) and different views on why people joined ISIL. If a campaign is not tailored to these specific concerns, it is unlikely to effectively address the different types of resistance men and women feel towards the families' return.

The fourth is to better utilize the return process as a means of strengthening trust between the state and families with perceived ISIL affiliation. Orienting returnees as citizens and ensuring respectful and dignified treatment would provide the foundation to do this. More direct engagement between authorities and each family to understand their return intentions and the barriers they face, as well as tangible support to help them achieve a durable solution would also help demonstrate that the state is committed to supporting the families to reintegrate as full citizens.

And finally, consider engaging the government on the disavowment requirement for return, and discuss other options that do not violate the returnees' rights that could replace it. Community trust in the disavowment process was relatively low and most community members do not expect returnees to disavow relatives. This suggests that this process is not community driven and would usually not result in community rejection if it were removed as a requirement for return.

Reintegration

Measuring a reorientation away from conflict among those returnees who have been perceived as having ISIL affiliation – and for those seen as more proximate – to the group can be difficult given the sensitives involved. More accessible is understanding how returnees are viewed and treated by those in their community. That is to say, when returnees come home, can they begin to shed their identification as "ISIL families"? To make progress in this regard, it is clear there are aspects of the reintegration response that should be strengthened and others that should be adapted.

First, it is important to recognize that shifting how returnees are perceived and received is difficult in a climate of fear. The return of families with perceived ISIL affiliation remains a top concern for most community members, especially those who did not live in ISIL territory, who are more resistant to

the return and social reintegration of these families.[61] There is a real need to address these concerns and the needs of those who suffered under ISIL occupation. Reintegration is tied to community reconciliation and healing efforts and as such, interventions in these spaces should be aligned and, where relevant, coordinated. Strategic communications around the return process – its requirement and the expectations on returnees and communities – might help influence community receptivity to returnees.

Reintegration support needs to be tailored to individual needs. An important finding of the MEAC initiative is that families with perceived ISIL affiliation are not a homogenous group; there is a subset of families who are treated as more proximate to ISIL and demonstrate greater vulnerability and higher barriers to reintegration. This group, which makes up at least 5 per cent of the wider "ISIL families" population, needs dedicated attention and support due to their greater vulnerability. That does not mean that the wider group does not require assistance; rather, the findings encourage a more nuanced understanding of the category of families with perceived ISIL affiliation and recognition of diversity within that group.

Persons who are perceived as more proximate to ISIL are more vulnerable across multiple indicators compared to other community members. They are more financially vulnerable; have weaker social support networks; have poorer mental health outcomes; are more likely to be missing civil documentation; are less likely to consider all members of their family safe in their area; are more socially isolated; and are more likely to receive threats. They feel less accepted and more judged by their community compared to other groups and are more likely to experience discrimination in the community, more likely to say they are 'always' excluded from social gatherings and twice as likely as other groups to face judgement for the experience they had during the war. The data highlight the need to understand conflict experiences and perceived affiliation with armed actors with nuance in order to proactively anticipate and address vulnerabilities and increase the chances for reintegration progress for different populations.

At the same time, the findings affirm the imperative to engage in community-based programming. Families with perceived ISIL affiliation are struggling – but so are 'ordinary' community members. The data showed that there is little difference between these populations in terms of financial insecurity and mental health (with the exception of those who are seen as more proximate to ISIL). Reintegration efforts that engage non-affiliated community members can help ensure that participation does not exacerbate stigma for "ISIL families" and can help address the broader vulnerability in the community.

With this in mind, the findings from the MEAC study suggest several lines of action to take in order to strengthen prospects for successful reintegration and a transition out of conflict:

First, there is a vital need to continue to address the lack of trust in institutions throughout the reintegration phase (in addition to during the return process). This is an essential component of

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[61] Only 5 per cent of those who did not live in ISIL-occupied territory suggested that the community is supportive of assistance, versus 15 per cent of those who lived ISIL occupied territory.

reorienting identity away from conflict, since an orientation towards the state suggests that people are treated as citizens, see the value of the state, and are less likely to rely on armed actors to provide protection and justice. For example, when faced with crime, people considered proximate to ISIL say they would avoid the police and courts and go to tribal leaders or family members for help, a situation that if it continues over time, may push this population further and further away from the state. Strengthening trust in institutions can be slow and requires multi-faceted changes. The top issues raised in this study were to ensure all returnees (in particular children) have access to civil documentation since this is the gateway to many state services; enhance service provision in under-served areas; and provide housing compensation for those whose homes were damaged during the war.

While this topic deserves its own research focus, it is worth sharing the ideas of respondents when asked how to build trust in the policy and courts, since it reveals what members of families with perceived ISIL affiliation think might be effective and acceptable. The most common explanation for the lack of trust was that tribal leaders solve problems via dialogue and without anyone going to prison – in an "amiable and sympathetic environment," whereas the police and courts were viewed as combative and meting out unnecessarily harsh punishments. Other suggestions included strengthening the interaction between tribal leaders and police to enable police to leverage the trust that already exists within the tribal system: "If you build a strong connection between the tribal leaders and the police, so that both are working on the same case, this will show people that they can trust the police too [since they already have high trust in tribal leaders]."[62]

While this type of hybrid justice may not be feasible in terms of managing individual cases, it may be possible to do outreach or community meetings jointly with community policing efforts in areas where they are active.

Returnees focused on how the police could play a greater and more publicized role in returns. Two returnees suggested giving more visibility to times the police had successfully supported a resident, with one returnee asserting that: "if we show success stories where people have been helped by courts or police, this will encourage people more [to rely on them]."[63] A community policing forum may be an appropriate avenue through which to do this. In addition, hiring police officers from the area or nearby could help establish a more consistent local force, since the frequent rotation of staff undermined local trust, as one returnee explained: "Policemen come and go, but tribal leaders remain in the area because they are from the area. This is why people trust tribal leaders more that they trust the police and courts."[64]

A second way to strengthen prospects for successful reintegration and a transition out of conflict is to focus on building or strengthening the social networks of families with perceived ISIL affiliation. This was a significant gap and one that is likely to impact many facets of reintegration, such as the existence of a social safety net, access to livelihoods (when referred by friends or relatives), and perceptions of safety. Linked to this, there is a need to use innovative ways to identify and reach

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[62] MEAC, *Interview #52 with returnee in Anbar,* (Anbar, November 2022).
[63] MEAC, *Interview #42 with returnee in Mosul,* (Mosul, November 2022).
[64] MEAC, *Interview #1 with returnee in Mosul,* (Mosul, November 2022).

families who are perceived as more proximate to ISIL who experience severe social isolation. This may involve identifying spaces they feel comfortable to access and working together with trusted community figures. In addition, consider how to strengthen the social safety net specifically for persons who are perceived as more proximate to ISIL. While everyone in the community struggled financially, the social safety net (such as having someone to borrow money from) was weaker for people who lived in ISIL territory and particularly those perceived as more proximate to ISIL.

A third way is to work on building trust between people considered proximate to ISIL and local police and other local authorities. This may involve the police working with tribal leaders to hear the concerns of local families, and then taking joint steps to address these concerns, such as the fear of false accusations; reaching out to youth and children to address their fear of revenge attacks; and sharing positive examples of assistance provided the police or local authorities to families.

A fourth way is to continue well-targeted reintegration assistance. In the study, livelihood support was by far the preferred type of support by those who had received reintegration assistance and associated with the highest rates of satisfaction.[65] However, it is important to recognize that challenges to economic reintegration are not just due to disruption to careers or negative perceptions, but they are structural for many. For those returnees who lack civil documentation, there are significant limits to how they can engage with the formal economy. In many cases. this makes it difficult to get regular, legal employment and opens people up to exploitation, including by criminal and armed actors.

A fifth way is to strengthen access to MHPSS programming and ensure that those in the greatest need get access to support. Ensure the availability of targeted activities specifically for children, given the severe wartime experiences many had, and the fact that a significant proportion do not feel safe in their current location and/or supported in school.[66]

Finally, it is important to (continue to) rely on individual assessments of socioeconomic vulnerability, while also deploying a community-based approach to socioeconomic assistance. Over 80 per cent of all respondents, regardless of their wartime experience, faced difficulty in meeting their daily needs and displacement has exhausted the resources of many families. Therefore, it is important both to target families on an individual basis according to financial need (rather than status such as 'perceived ISIL affiliate) and also to involve the wider community in any programming given the needs are very similar.

Conclusion

Coming home after being displaced by conflict is never easy. Yet, for some Iraqi families, there are additional hurdles and challenges to returning to their communities. The experiences of the families

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[65] Of those who had received livelihood support from UNDP, 53 per cent reported that it had the most positive impact on their life; of those who received skills training, 20 per cent reported it had the most positive impact; and of those who received cash assistance, 14 per cent reported it had the most positive impact.

[66] One quarter of children who lived under ISIL occupation do not consider all members of their family safe in their current location, for reasons including revenge attacks and general insecurity.

who have already come back suggest that the return and reintegration process can be strengthened to help them shed the identification as ISIL affiliated and enhance their chances of thriving in social, economic, and civic life. Support that targets vulnerabilities but is embedded in community-based programming can help ensure the most in need get assistance while the wider community is lifted up. Building on the informal roles already played by local leaders can help ensure more people can return and community concerns are addressed. Improving the strategic communications around the return process may likewise impact public receptivity to returning families. Coordinating with community reconciliation efforts can help improve the conditions for return. Overall, revising the return process to improve the chances of the remaining IDPs to make it home in a safe and sustainable way, and to better utilize the return process so it sets people up for successful reintegration would help ensure Iraq can maintain and expand its stabilization gains going forward.

MANAGING EXITS
FROM ARMED CONFLICT