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Return and Reintegration Prospects for Iraqis Coming Back From Al Hol

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This Findings Report, and the research that supported it, were undertaken as part of 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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Photo 1: A., 16-years old participant in the 100cameras led photography training, Mosul, 2023. (This photograph was altered to fit the report dimensions)¹

Key findings

Experiences in the Jeddah-1 Rehabilitation Centre (J-1)²:

- **Female-headed households are less likely to be able to complete all the requirements to leave the Centre while in J-1 (e.g., what is commonly referred to by Iraqis as *tabriya*³ — which here means the process of filing a complaint against their Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) affiliated male relative, which they cannot do in J-1).** While there are efforts to support document acquisition or renewal in J-1, support is uneven, with some governorates requiring returnees to come back to their area of origin to get identification. Acquiring documents once they return is also more difficult for female-headed households, as they are less informed about the process than their male counterparts, have fewer resources to be able to hire a lawyer to navigate the process, and may be unable to travel alone due to safety issues and cultural norms. All of these factors disadvantage female returnees, especially those who head a household. Many of the challenges faced by female-headed households and returnees in J-1 more broadly, are shared by those who have been displaced internally and who are perceived as ISIL affiliated.
- **Female-headed households are disproportionately affected by the sponsorship requirement, with 63 per cent of them not having a sponsor, while only 12 per cent**

¹ Many of the young people who participated in this training – and their caregivers – assented/consented to attributing their names to the photos they took. In an effort to balance protection concerns, different levels of comfort with attribution, and providing attribution of artistic work, this report uses the photographer’s first initial.

² Jeddah-1 is often referred to as a “camp”, particularly by its residents, although it is officially named Jeddah-1 Rehabilitation Centre.

³ This process has meant different things at different times to different populations. This process is examined in further detail on p. 16.

of their male-headed households report this as an issue. There have been reports of female heads of household falling into exploitative relationships with would-be sponsors, especially when they are unable to return to areas of origin.

- **Female-headed households who have been in J-1 for more than one year are more likely to be facing community acceptance issues, and there is little hope that they can return to their areas of origin.** Of long-stay female heads of household in J-1, 64 per cent said they will not be returning to areas of origin, while only 18 per cent of long-stay male heads of household said this.
- **The dramatically improved safety environment of J-1 (compared to Al Hol) has a positive impact on child residents' psychosocial well-being.** Children between 15 and 17 showed significant improvement in their mental health metrics the more they spent time in J-1. As many as 49 per cent said they never feel anxious about their lives now, and the more they spend time in J-1, the more hope they have for the future. Only a tiny minority of children (4 per cent) who have been in the Centre for more than one year said they never feel hopeful about the future.
- **Civil documentation continues to be the biggest issue for children in J-1 and after they return and it has knock-on effects on access to education, and thus potential livelihoods. In the absence of a solution to this problem, there are fears among returnees and those who receive them that the barriers created by the lack of civil documentation will drive further grievances and undermine reintegration.** There are significant concerns that if children have their opportunities taken away from them – particularly due to the knock-on effects of the lack of documentation upon return - that they will exist on the margins of society, aggrieved, where they will be at greater risk of exploitation-including by criminal gangs and armed groups.
- **Children demonstrated how much they are in need of an outlet to work through their conflict experiences and address the daily stressors that weigh on their lives today.** Through the participatory research exercises, adolescents spoke of the conflict-related traumas caused by displacement and loss, but also of the challenges they face today, such as bullying at school because of the discrepancy between their age and learning level. Even when they have supportive families and friends, it is clear that they need other safe spaces to process their experiences – with mental health professionals as well as their community and peers.
- **In addition to having their own conflict-related trauma, children bear witness to the daily struggles of their parents and caregivers, who are not always able to fully support them as they themselves grapple with their experiences and the challenges of return.** Some of the children interviewed spoke of not wanting to burden their adult family members with their own sadness.
- **Long-stayers' inability to leave J-1 is often due to the specific situation in their areas of origin.** The majority of returnees from Al Hol have the initial intention of returning to their areas of origin, but the situations there - armed group control, level of destruction, and lack of community acceptance - impact their ability to return home. Data shows that a large majority of long-stayers interviewed for this round of research in J-1 are from Anbar (83 per cent), suggesting there may be particular challenges or

obstacles to return to that governorate. Qualitative interviews also demonstrated the specific challenges to returning to some towns and villages in Salahadin province.

- **Long-stayers also demonstrate weaker social networks and community ties as compared to the J-1 population as a whole.** Given the importance of social networks and familial and community ties in meeting requirements to leave the Centre and successfully reintegrate, this partially explains the factors that lead to long stays in J-1.

In areas of return:

- **Access to documentation and basic services, especially education, continues to be a struggle in areas of return not only for those Iraqis who have returned from Al Hol (via J-1), but also for those displaced internally.** Challenges in procuring documentation for children – especially those born after 2014 – remain significant and, in turn, impact the ability of young people to enrol in school. Challenges with access to other basic services, such as healthcare, are due to the lack of development in areas and impact not only the prospects of receptivity to return and reconciliation but the well-being of the host community as well.
- **Dire economic conditions and lack of livelihood opportunities are top concerns for returnees, as they are for community members.** Female heads of household have a more difficult time supporting themselves and their families due to the cultural expectations that women should be stay-at-home mothers and housewives. Some female heads of household have found work in factories where managers exploit their lack of options and stigma, while others need to rely on charity to support their families. Some boys in female-headed households work to support their mothers and siblings when their mothers cannot find sufficient employment.
- **Female heads of household have few marketable skills or job history, nor do they have strong support networks to help them – all of which impede their return and economic reintegration and can have implications for that of their children.** The survey data showed that only 10 per cent of female heads of household in J-1 said that they ever worked for income prior to 2014. These numbers are in contrast to male heads of household, 55 per cent of which said they did work for income in the same period. In addition to their poor work prospects, female heads of household also reported receiving considerably less financial and other support from family and friends as compared to male heads of household.
- **Issues with familial and community acceptance disproportionately affect women and female heads of household.** For example, 37 per cent of returnee women reported being criticized for their experience in the war, while only 1 per cent of men reported this.
- **In areas of return, community members have little information about the returns process.** Nor did they differentiate between *most* different types of returns. Community members generally reported not understanding the difference between IDP returns and returns from Syria. When discussing formal returns through J-1 versus informal returns by people who bypassed the return architecture, however, about a quarter of survey respondents expressed discomfort with the latter group. Community respondents demonstrated middling levels of trust in the government-run returns process, including

sponsorship, security screening, and *tabriya* (i.e., a complaint in front of an investigative judge) – and trust was noticeably lower in Anbar.

- **Male community members were generally less supportive than women of providing reintegration support for returnees.** This hesitance appeared to be driven, at least in part, by resource competition concerns in areas facing dire economic conditions in areas of return.

Acknowledgements

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Background

About MEAC

Why and how 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 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 why and how 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

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 of their political or practical implications for the UN and its partners.

About this Report

This report is based on quantitative, qualitative, and participatory research conducted from March to June 2023 with Jeddah-1 residents and Centre staff, former Jeddah-1 rehabilitation centre residents, community members and community leaders in Mosul and Qa'im. Two additional participatory research pilot trainings with young Iraqis who are perceived as ISIL affiliated were also conducted during this time and feed into this report and provide the visuals that accompany it. This research builds on several related studies MEAC ran in 2022 that examined the reintegration of internally displaced Iraqis who were perceived as ISIL affiliated (done with the support and partnership of IOM Iraq, UNDP Iraq, and the Swiss FDFA).

The report presents data about the return and reintegration experiences of Iraqis who are returning to their country after years in Al Hol. These surveys and interviews are conducted at different points in returnees' journeys. In addition, surveys and qualitative research were conducted in communities receiving a large number of returnees from Syria – Mosul and Qa'im – to better understand community receptivity to return. The analysis herein of these unique data

sources will 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

Al Hol Camp, where more than 56,000 displaced persons—primarily women and children—have been confined under deteriorating humanitarian and security conditions for several years, has been identified as one of the most urgent and complex humanitarian crises in the world today. High levels of crime and violence in the camp are a daily threat to the safety of camp residents and staff, and conditions for camp residents have been described by some experts and court rulings as amounting to inhumane and degrading treatment, especially in the case of children.⁴ Given the exceptional humanitarian and security concerns, finding a durable solution to the Al Hol crisis, primarily by repatriating residents to countries of origin, is a top priority for the international community.

Since May 2021, the Government of Iraq (GoI) has committed to a repatriation process of its remaining citizens in the Al Hol camp. An estimated 25,500 Iraq nationals remain in Al Hol today, making up over half of the camp’s total population. Iraqis in the camp include those who were displaced prior to 2014 and during the military campaign against ISIL in Iraq, along with those who arrived during the battle to liberate Baghouz, the last ISIL stronghold in North East Syria (NES) in late 2018/early 2019. To date, the GoI has organized ten rounds of repatriations from Al Hol to Iraq, repatriating a total of 5,562 individuals to the Jeddah 1 (J-1) Rehabilitation Centre in Ninewa.⁵ Of the 5,562 people who have been repatriated to J-1, 3,364 individuals have departed the Centre towards areas of origin or secondary locations.⁶

MEAC and its partners seek to follow this returning population – and the reintegration trajectories of other populations perceived as affiliated with ISIL - over the long term. The goal of this study is to understand life in Al Hol and the repatriation process, unpack the different experiences in the J-1 rehabilitation centre, and follow returnees’ reintegration progress in areas of return. The evidence collected, and analytical outputs produced from it are intended to inform policy and practice on returns and reintegration to improve outcomes and build peace.

⁴ OHCHR, “[Syria: UN experts urge 57 States to repatriate women and children from squalid camps.](#)” [Press Release](#), 08 February 2021; International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, “[The European Court of Human Rights Sitting on the Fence?: Its Ruling and Impact on the Repatriation of European Children from North-East Syria.](#)” 16 September 2022.

⁵ IOM data as of 06 July 2023, last repatriation trip included 04 June 2023.

⁶ IOM data as of July 2023.

This report focuses primarily on Iraqis returning to their country after time spent in Al Hol camp in Northeast Syria. The report is based on surveys, interviews, focus groups, and participatory research with Iraqis who are at different stages of the return and reintegration journey – primarily those who are current residents of the J-1 Rehabilitation Centre in Ninewa for those returning from Al Hol Camp who are perceived as affiliated with ISIL,⁷ and former residents of J-1 who have settled back in their community of origin or a third location. Although this population of returnees face specific challenges during the return and reintegration process, many of their experiences mirror those of other families with perceived affiliation who are returning home after a period of displacement. Although returning IDPs within the country are not addressed in this report in much detail, it is important to contextualize these findings within the body of research that exists on durable solutions for returnees and IDPs.⁸

Among those Iraqis who have returned from Al Hol and through J-1, the report places particular attention on three subsets: female-headed households, children, and long-stayers in J-1 (i.e., those who have been living in the Centre for more than one year). For each category, specific barriers to departing J-1 and returning to areas of return are explored, such as challenges procuring civil documentation, securing a sponsor, housing, and livelihoods, as well as the dynamics within social networks and community relations. In light of these challenges, reintegration prospects for these populations are discussed. Finally, a section dedicated to the experience of returnees in Qa'im and Mosul discusses challenges faced by these returnees thus far, including access to basic services, livelihood opportunities and community perceptions of returnees in those areas.

Methodology

Prior Rounds of Data Collection

MEAC launched the study in 2022, and in its first year, ran a series of quantitative and qualitative studies to understand public sentiment around different populations with perceived ISIL affiliation and how it changes over time, as well as to illuminate the return pathways and reintegration progress of different groups and cohorts of “ISIL families”:

⁷ United Nations, “[Secretary-General's remarks to press outside Jeddah Rehabilitation Centre in Iraq](#),” 02 March 2023.

⁸ For some relevant research on IDPs and returns see: IOM Iraq, [Obstacles to returnee reintegration in Iraq: safety, security and social relations](#) (Baghdad: IOM, 2021); IOM, [Legal Needs Assessment](#) (2023); IOM Iraq, [Poverty and precarity: a comparison of female and male-headed households in districts of return](#) (Baghdad: IOM, 2023); IOM, [Women and Reintegration](#) (forthcoming).

- In February-March 2022: Randomized community surveys in Basra and Tal Afar (N=807).
- In June-July 2022: Randomized community survey and surveys with UNDP beneficiaries (IDPs with perceived ISIL affiliation) in Al Qaim (Anbar governorate), Habaniyya (Anbar governorate), Tooz (Salah al-Din governorate), and Muhalabiya (Nineveh governorate) (N=1,882).
- June 2022: A survey with J-1 residents (N= 223) and 29 key informant interviews (KIIs) with J-1 stakeholders and ten focus groups with J-1 residents)
- In September 2022: A phone survey with former J-1 residents (N=60) and 19 KIIs with key stakeholders in areas where J-1 residents have returned (e.g., mukhtars, security actors). Followed by 60+ key informant interviews with IDPs, local authorities, mukhtars, tribal leaders, and other influential stakeholders who have a vantage point on returns and reintegration.

Latest Rounds of Qualitative Data Collection

In March 2023, as part of the MEAC’s longitudinal research on the return and reintegration journeys of Iraqis with perceived ISIL affiliation and Iraqis returning through the government-facilitated returns process from Al Hol camp in North East Syria, 213 residents of J-1 rehabilitation centre were surveyed. Surveys were carried out face-to-face with enumerators of the same gender. The sample was randomly recruited in line with a quota system to ensure the representation of subpopulations of interest. The sample is made up of 88 male (41 per cent) and 125 (59 per cent) female respondents (including 54 female heads of household), of which 84 were children aged 15-17 years old (39 boys and 45 girls), in line with the current gender balance in J-1, which is 60 per cent female, 40 per cent male.

Survey Sample			
Men	Women	Boys (15-17)	Girls (15-17)
88	125 (including 54 female heads of household)	39	45

The general objective of the survey was to understand the differences between new arrivals to the J-1 Centre and long-term residents (long-stayers henceforth), and as such, the sample included 158 residents who had arrived at J-1 within the past three months (74 per cent of the overall sample), and 55 residents (26 per cent) who had lived in the Centre for more than 12 months. Respondents originally came primarily from the governorates of Anbar, Salah al-Din, and Nineveh but also from Baghdad, Erbil, Kirkuk and Sulaymaniyah. Given the specific

interests in sub-populations (e.g., those who get stuck in J-1 long term), this sample is reflective – but not entirely representative - of the J-1 population (i.e., it was purposefully selected to capture these specific experiences).

In March 2023, a survey with 253 randomly selected community members in Mosul (52 per cent) and Qaim (48 per cent), two communities that have received J-1 returnees. Respondent ages ranged from 15 to 77. Of those surveyed, 115 respondents (45 per cent) were male, and 138 respondents (55%) were female.

In April 2023, phone surveys were completed with 203 former residents of J-1 who had returned to their place of origin or a third location. Of these, 55 had been interviewed during the first round of data collection (in June 2022), and 148 had not been surveyed previously as part of this project. The sample was made up of 129 female respondents (including 97 female heads of household) and 74 male respondents. Respondents came from the governorates of Anbar, Nineveh, Salah al-Din, Baghdad, Erbil, Kirkuk and Sulaymaniyah.

Qualitative Data

In May and June 2022, qualitative interviews were conducted with residents of J-1, returnees in Mosul and Qa'im, as well as community leaders there. In Mosul, focus group discussions were also conducted with community members. The chart below details the number of interviews and types conducted in each location.

Location	Type of respondent/group	Male	Female
J-1	Resident KIIs	3	4
	Resident FGDs	4	5
	Leaders KIIs	2	3
	I/NGOs KIIs	8	
Mosul	Returnees KIIs	0	8
	Community leaders KIIs	10	4
	Community members FGDs	2	2
Qaim	Returnees KIIs	13	6
	Community leaders KIIs	6	

Participatory Research with Young Iraqis

Two participatory research activities were also conducted with children. A photography training, delivered by 100Cameras and its local partner Progress in Peace allowed children to share process their experiences and share their perspectives through photography. In addition, research training with a similar age group was delivered by Bridge and MEAC, through which children gained basic research skills. Both interventions were designed as ways to engage young people on topics of reintegration and peacebuilding – at times indirectly - to ensure that action research that will inform the return and reintegration policies and programmes treats young people as partners, not just research subjects. The findings from these two activities are subjects of separate reports, but occasional insights from those activities were pulled into relevant sections of this report.



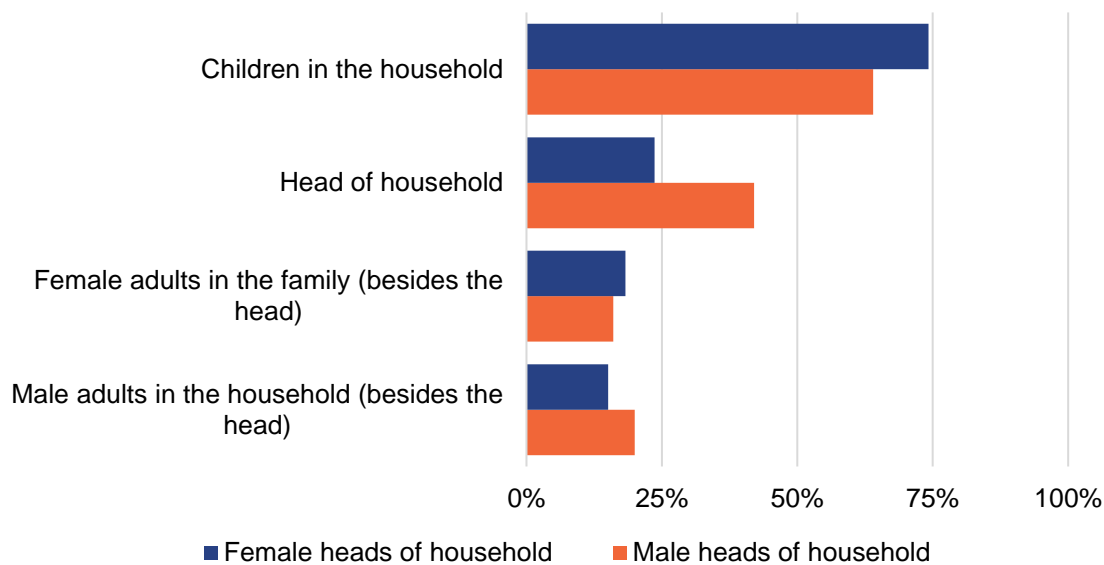
Photo 2: 100cameras facilitator photograph of students at the training in Mosul

Returning to Iraq from Al Hol: Experiences in J-1

Iraqis in Al Hol camp have been returning to Iraq in official convoys since March 2021. The following year, in March 2022, the GoI formalized the process for systematically registering Iraq

families in Al Hol who wished to return to Iraq. The registration is being done based on residents' Al Hol ID numbers, starting with the lower numbers and ascending (lower numbers indicating earliest arrivals to Al Hol) and is carried out by an inter-agency committee established by the GoI. The committee travels to Al Hol and interviews families who wish to return, collecting information about the family so as to be able to establish identity, as many do not have civil documentation. These individuals' names are checked against databases of known ISIL members. Those who pass this vetting process, i.e., it is confirmed that there are no charges pending against them, are repatriated to the J-1 Rehabilitation Centre in Ninewa, Iraq, during an official trip organized by the GoI. It must be noted that those who do not pass the aforementioned vetting process in Al Hol are currently not allowed to return. The GoI has stated its intention to inform these individuals of the charges against them and give them the option to voluntarily be repatriated into the justice system, but this has, so far, not happened. Thus, all those who have been repatriated to J-1 to date have not been accused of any crimes.

FIGURE 1 – WHO IS MISSING DOCUMENTATION?



The inter-agency registration committee/delegation has tried to mitigate some of the challenges that have arisen with the registration process as it stands. For example, partners in Al Hol camp have advocated prioritizing the registration (and repatriation) of vulnerable cases, such as unaccompanied and separated children, those residing in the “safe area” (due to threats against them) and medical cases, which the committee has worked to do. The committee, with the help of INGOs in the camp, has also tried to prevent family separation in the registration process, as this has been a major cause of protracted displacement in J-1.

Initially, there was significant misinformation about the return process among Iraqis in Al Hol, including misinformation about what return to communities of origin may look like. As more families have returned and the process has become more formalized, misinformation among Iraqis in Al Hol has decreased. Increasingly, Iraqis have said they received information about the return process directly from the Iraqi committee/delegation in Al Hol and other Iraqi authorities, from families in Iraq and from families who have returned before them.⁹ INGOs in Al Hol have also conducted outreach among Iraqis in the camp to provide them with information about return and have set up an information desk where Iraqis could ask questions.¹⁰ Misinformation, however, continues to be a problem in areas of return and among the broader population. These communities are not engaged in the return process and are unaware of the requirements and pre-conditions set by the GoI for these families to return, as the GoI does not have an organized information campaign to improve public understanding of the process.¹¹ Improving information flow continues to be key in ensuring successful reintegration.



*Photo 3: H., 17-years old participant in the 100cameras led photography training, Mosul, 2023.
(This photograph was cropped to fit the report dimensions)*

⁹ 57 per cent of J-1 residents said they were given information about the returns process from the Iraqi delegation that visits Al Hol and 18 per cent said from local authorities from Iraq, 16 per cent said from families in Iraq and 5 per cent from other returnees.

¹⁰ Interview with INGO in Al Hol (remote, February 2023)

¹¹ Jacqueline Parry and Yousif Khalid Khoshnaw, with Siobhan O’Neil, “[How Information Ecosystems Affect Conflict Transitions: Experiences from Al Hol and Iraq](#),” *MEAC Findings Report 23* (New York: United Nations University, 2022).

MEAC's research with this population and other families with perceived ISIL affiliation returning after displacement in Iraq has found that certain sub-populations may face additional challenges in their return and reintegration – women, particularly female heads of household, and children.¹² Moreover, there have been discussions among key stakeholders in the repatriation process that subsequent returnee cohorts will become more “difficult” with time. The analysis that follows builds off earlier research and seeks to respond to these practical concerns in order to inform effective policy and programming to support return, reintegration, and community reconciliation in Iraq.

New Cohorts of Returnees from Al Hol

The survey data does provide some initial insight as to how returnee cohorts from Al Hol who go through J-1 may differ over time and what this might mean for return and reintegration policy and programming. As expected, based on the order in which the GoI is repatriating its citizens, the data indicates that earlier J-1 returnee cohorts had a larger percentage of people that entered Al Hol before 2018 (84 per cent as compared to 44 per cent in new arrivals cohorts). That is to say that earlier J-1 cohorts were comprised of those who came to the Al Hol camp before the influx in 2018/2019 of people fleeing the last battle in Baghouz and who are generally seen as refugees rather than ISIL affiliates. An analysis of J-1 residents interviewed in June 2022 compared to those who were living in the Centre in March 2023 suggests that the recent returnee cohort had greater proximity to the conflict. The recently returned cohort is more likely to report having family members who were detained, tried, and prosecuted for armed group affiliation (11 per cent of the 2022 cohort versus 26 per cent of the 2023 cohort). Those surveyed by MEAC in 2023 also seem to have higher conflict exposure, which here is measured with respondents reporting having been beaten, tortured, or shot during the conflict. For example, the 2023 cohort was 26 percentage points more likely to report having been beaten, tortured, or shot during the conflict than the cohort interviewed in June 2022. Yet, when the data is disaggregated by date of arrival to J-1, the differences across cohorts become less clear or are explained by other factors.

The difference in conflict exposure (here: reports on having been beaten, tortured, or shot) is not necessarily explained by differences between cohorts but rather by differences within them. The higher conflict exposure in the second cohort comes almost entirely from long-stayers in J-1, people who were already in the Centre when MEAC conducted its first cohort survey. That

¹² See Jacqueline Parry and Yousif Khalid Khoshnaw, with Siobhan O’Neil and Juan Armando Torres Munguía, “[Coming Home: The Return and Reintegration of Families with Perceived ISIL Affiliation in Iraq](#)”, UNIDIR, Geneva, 2023; 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).

is to say, the second cohort surveyed is not full of more “difficult cases,” but rather, it included a focus on long-stayers, people who struggle to meet the exit requirements and have been in the Centre for more than one year. These residents have been more exposed to conflict, and that conflict exposure could be associated with factors that make it hard to leave the Centre. Likewise, the second cohort surveyed – driven primarily by long-stayers in the Centre – were more often from Anbar (49 per cent versus 31 per cent of the 2022 cohort), which may partly account for higher conflict exposure rates between cohorts. Anbar was significantly affected by the ISIL insurgency. By 2014, 80 per cent of the governorate was controlled by ISIL, and in addition to the extreme violence meted out by the group, the battle to defeat the insurgents led to many casualties and extensive infrastructure damage.¹³ It is important to recognize that greater proximity to ISIL (real or perceived) and more conflict violence exposure may impact community receptivity to return and indicate greater needs in terms of psycho-social and trauma support.

To really understand if cohorts are indeed becoming more “difficult” with time – or perhaps, more accurately, to assess if needs profiles differ within and across subsequent cohorts of returns - it will be important to continue this comparative analysis as new cohorts arrive in the J-1 Centre, and to follow up with all of them over time. This longitudinal approach will allow practitioners to understand reintegration challenges down the road and frontload policy and programming to proactively address them. To this end, MEAC will continue to add new cohorts of J-1 residents with each new study round.

As for reported barriers to return, those remained fairly consistent across the two cohorts, but this, too, may change over time. Anecdotal evidence from discussions with those working in J-1 also provides some insight into the changes in the Centre as each new group of Iraqis is repatriated. There seems to be a sense among residents of J-1 that newer cohorts are “more extreme”, but complaints came from both sides- newcomer women and those who have been there a while, each complaining about the other controlling them, or being immoral or too extreme.¹⁴ These complaints need not be taken at face value, but rather, they may be indicative of dynamics from Al Hol being transposed in J-1. There have also been some incidents lately that may indicate some ISIL sympathizers are living in the Centre.¹⁵ Yet, when asked how new residents change their behaviour once in the Centre, respondents in the 2023 cohort were in agreement that as new returnees adapted to life in their new environment, ‘their psychology and beliefs changed,’ and they ‘moved away from ideas of war’ and ‘violent thoughts.’ Even

¹³ European Union Agency for Asylum, “[Anbar – Assessment by Governorate](#),” June 2022.

¹⁴ Information from side discussions with respondents and MEAC researchers.

¹⁵ A Tik Tok video filmed from inside J-1, and posted on ISIL propaganda channels, showing the arrival of buses from Al Hol stating that “sisters” have arrived against the backdrop of ISIL propaganda hymns, was brought to the attention of authorities in June 2023. In response, authorities searched tents and found two ISIL flags; two people were also arrested, one was later released. Smart phones have been banned from J-1 in response.

those perceived as different and more extreme appear to be responding positively to the environment in J-1, a sign that perhaps with time and in the right environment and with support, people with different needs profiles can acclimate to life in Iraq and move on from conflict.

Female-Headed Households

Al Hol camp, and consequently J-1, has a very high percentage of children and women, and of the latter, many of whom are the heads of household. The majority of those who arrived at Al Hol camp in or after 2018 were fleeing the military campaign against ISIL in Syria, primarily from the town of Baghouz. Families who chose to flee the town were separated by the authorities - with women and children sent to Al Hol and men taken to detention centres. A large proportion of the husbands and male family members of women and children in the camp are missing, dead, or in detention, and the camp's make-up is primarily women and children. Of the currently 579 households residing in J-1 Centre, 441 of those households are female-headed households (76 per cent). Given the disproportionately high number of female-headed households within this population, understanding the specific challenges and barriers facing them is key to identifying how best to support their reintegration. The following section will shed light on the experiences of female-headed households, with a particular focus on challenges. Procuring civil documentation, issues with sponsorship, and prospects for reintegration once they have departed J-1.

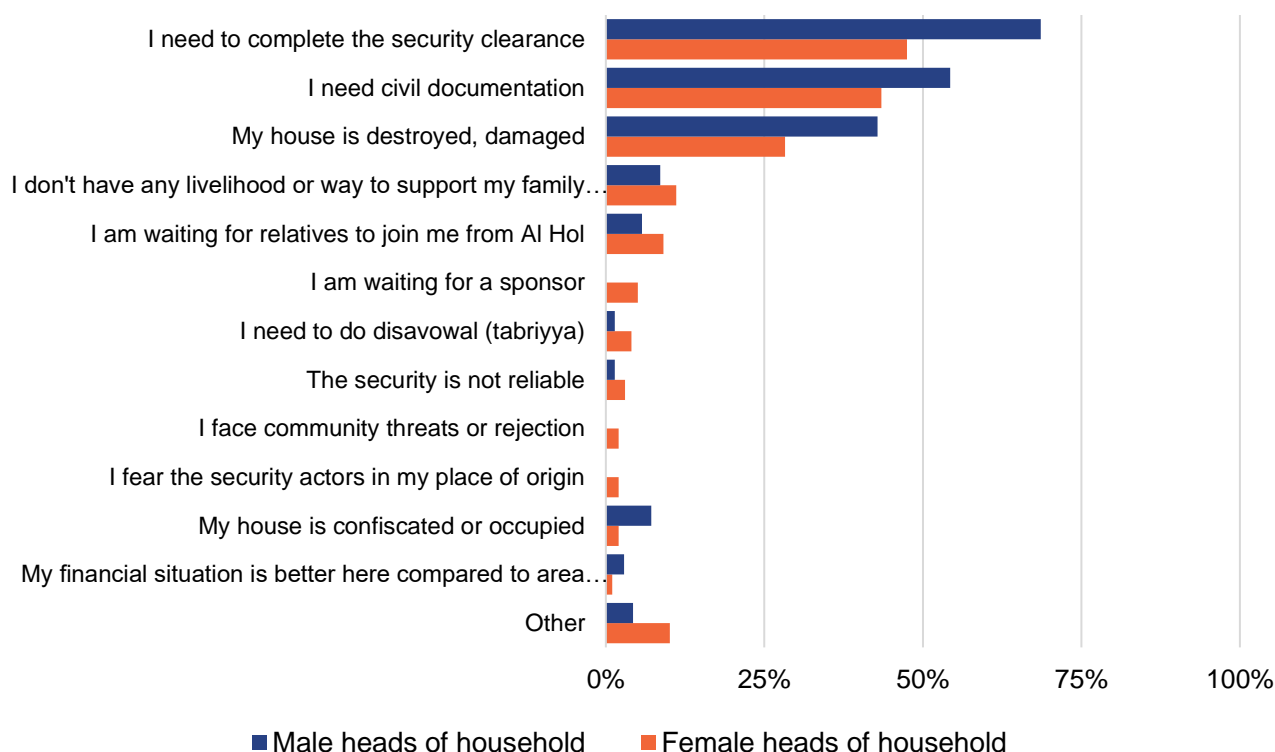


*Photo 4: H., 17-years old participant in the 100cameras led photography training, Mosul, 2023.
(This photograph was cropped to fit the report dimensions)*

Leaving J-1 and Gendered Experiences

Women – particularly female heads of household and, thus, their entire families – face particular challenges in exiting the J-1. As seen in Figure 1., civil documentation, damaged/destroyed homes, waiting for family to join from Al Hol, and looking for a sponsor were mentioned by both men and women alike as reasons for prolonged stays in J-1. Some of these issues, however, appear to impact female heads of household more than male heads of household. Beyond logistical issues or meeting return conditions, female heads of household in J-1 are also more likely to report facing stigma and community resistance. Female heads of household in the Centre were also the only ones to report having issues with community acceptance (9 per cent) (before they had even arrived in the community), attributed to their perceived ISIL affiliation as well as their marital status. Focus group discussions with women revealed that women returnees felt there were many obstacles and difficulties for family members of ISIL fighters but that this treatment was so much worse for women with no male relatives.¹⁶

FIGURE 2 – WHAT IS THE REASON WHY YOU HAVEN’T RETURNED YET?



¹⁶ MEAC, FGD #1 with women in male-headed households, long-stayers (J-1, May 2023)

Civil Documentation

The inability to procure civil documentation, renew documentation, or the issuance of incorrect documents continues to hinder the return process, for IDPs and returnees from Al Hol alike, as extensively documented in other work.¹⁷ Lack of documentation significantly affects people's odds of successfully reintegrating into their areas of return, especially children, given the centrality of having proper documentation in order to access basic services.¹⁸ Those who have lived in areas under ISIL control or have been displaced by conflict across Iraq or across the border may have lost or destroyed¹⁹ documentation during displacement or may not have been able to acquire any official documentation for new life events, such as marriages, births or death, that took place while living in areas outside of the control of the GoI or the Government of Syria (GoS). The process of acquiring lost or new documents is rife with legal complications as well as physical and monetary ones, as individuals need to go in person to the office in their district of origin in charge of civil documentation to apply for new documents.²⁰ Female heads of household were particularly disadvantaged by certain aspects of the document renewal/acquisition process, and consequently, children of female headed households, especially with death or missing fathers.

Some of the challenges to renewing documentation appear to disproportionately impact women, especially those with no male head of household- who have fewer resources, both financial and social, to draw on to overcome them. These challenges included the prohibitive cost of a lawyer needed to navigate the civil documentation renewal or application process or the dangers of travel to the office that issues documentation, combined with cultural barriers to women travelling alone.²¹ Some female respondents interviewed in J-1 said they feared, being kidnapped or even killed if they tried to access certain areas under armed groups control. IDPs in need of civil documentation also cited many of the same reasons for delays in acquiring much needed civil documents.²²

¹⁷ 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); Norwegian Refugee Council, "[Iraq: Five years on from the end of the conflict, up to one million Iraqis lack essential identity documents](#)," 14 September 2022; Norwegian Refugee Council, "[Paperless people of post-conflict Iraq](#)," (2019); Norwegian Refugee Council, "[Barriers from Birth: Undocumented Children in Iraq Sentenced to a Life on the Margins](#)," (2019); Norwegian Refugee Council, "[Life in the margins](#)," (2022); IOM, *Legal Needs Assessment* (2023).

¹⁸ Norwegian Refugee Council, "[Barriers from Birth: Undocumented Children in Iraq Sentenced to a Life on the Margins](#)," (2019)

¹⁹ Some people destroyed their documents on purpose upon being caught by Kurdish forces in Syria.

²⁰ These findings align with those in IOM's 2023 legal assessment of challenges faced by IDPs and returnees, which found that 'opaque processes, inaccessible institutions and prohibitive costs, alongside logistic issues like lack of funds to access transportation services to visit relevant sites where civil documents are issued, challenge returnees and IDPs access to documentation'. See, IOM, *Legal Needs Assessment* (2023).

²¹ MEAC, KII with returnee women in Mosul.

²² IOM, *Legal Needs Assessment* (2023).

Women whose husbands are missing (or dead without an official death certificate) and with whom they do not have a GoI-issued marriage certificate, the legal hurdles to obtaining civil documentation are enormous. For women with missing husbands, they would need to first obtain a “missing persons” verdict, followed by a curatorship document that authorizes someone to act legally on behalf of convicted persons, missing persons, and persons with mental illness [the latter requirement would also need to be met by women whose husbands are dead but not officially documented with a certificate). These processes have multiple requirements that are difficult to meet under the best of circumstances and cannot be realistically met by people who are in J-1 centre with no or limited opportunities to move freely.

As a result of these challenges, most women respondents surveyed in J-1 said it would not be an option for them to acquire documentation once they left the Centre, so they absolutely needed to do so before leaving J-1. Some sub-districts have sent mobile teams to J-1 to process documentation, which appears to have helped facilitate some returns. For J-1 residents from sub-districts who have not sent teams, and for which travel to reach their offices is seen as dangerous, many have not been able to renew or acquire new documents at all.²³

A few respondents who had been able to acquire new documents reported mistakes - spellings and their listed religion - on their new IDs that they said will cause them problems as they leave J-1 and try to rebuild a life. Some of these respondents believed these mistakes purposeful, but the research team was unable to triangulate these allegations. As documented in other MEAC reports, lacking civil documentation “undermines virtually all transition outcomes, including access to education, access to livelihoods, socio-economic status, mental health, and social inclusion.”²⁴

While not a formal requirement of the GoI, women are often required by local leaders to divorce and/or perform *tabriya* (e.g., the process of filing a complaint against their ISIL affiliated male family member in front of an investigative judge) before getting access to civil documentation or being allowed to return to their communities. It must be noted that the central government has stated that *tabriya* should no longer be required of women, but this position does not appear to have changed matters on the ground at the local level yet.

²³ MEAC, FGD #2 with women in female-headed households, long-stayers (J-1, May 2023); MEAC, FGD #1 with women in male-headed households, long-stayers (J-1, May 2023)

²⁴ 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).

Tabriya, as it is used in this context, is the colloquial term to describe the filing of a complaint in front of an investigative judge to support future prosecution of male relatives thought to be affiliated with ISIL. Historically tabriya was a tribal practice that amounted to disavowing a relative with regard to one's tribe, a process that had no legal implications and was primarily a tribal/community process. This difference is particularly important to make as tabriya, as it is currently being implemented, does have legal implications (rather than community acceptance/reintegration ones) and can be used to secure death sentences for those in prison. It is also important to note that community members in areas of return were ambivalent about the importance of this process as part of the reintegration of returning families—with some saying it showed repentance and at the same time saying it was not important. Technically, tabriya can be asked for men and boys, but in practice it is used almost exclusively required of women.

The pressure to cut ties with associated husbands becomes increasingly important as women progress along the return pipeline. This issue was explored in both the survey, focus groups, and qualitative interviews. In the survey of current J-1 residents, not many women reported feeling pressured to divorce their husbands or do *tabriya*, although it should be noted that those who did report feeling pressured were all from Anbar province. In areas of return, however, about half of the returnee women who had formerly been residents of J-1 reported feeling pressured to divorce or do *tabriya*.²⁵ In the interviews and focus groups with returnees, all women mentioned needing to do *tabriya*. One woman said that doing *tabriya* when your husband was dead was ok, but that if the husband is missing or in prison, women were more hesitant to go through the process, given the potential ramifications (e.g., how the husband would react if he found out and the potential legal ramification of “admitting” one’s relative’s association with a terrorist group while he is in detention awaiting trial, as it may mean the death penalty or life sentence for that person). *Tabriya* serves primarily to support prosecutions, and when required to return, it forces women into the position of either incriminating their male relatives or staying in limbo – likely in J-1 – without the prospects going to their area of origin. One woman with three sons in prison said she refuses to do *tabriya* against them, as this may further incriminate them, so she does not think she will ever be able to go back home.²⁶ Women

²⁵ The question is phrased in the present tense, so it is possible that historically others have felt pressure, but that pressure has waned, either because they relented and divorced their husband or did *tabriya*, or because those pressuring them gave up or moved on.

²⁶ MEAC, KII with J-1 leader #2 (J-1, May 2023)

with missing or detained (rather than dead) husbands, sons or brothers may face even more issues in acquiring documentation or returning home.²⁷ Of note is the fact that focus group discussions with men and women in Mosul demonstrated mixed feelings about the importance of *tabriya* process as requirement for return, which may indicate that it is not of huge importance for some communities of return. Women interviewed seemed to place more importance on it, saying it shows repentance, but also seemed comfortable if women did not do it.²⁸ Men generally did not feel it was useful or helpful.²⁹ .

Doing *tabriya* is not straightforward or easy to do, even for those women who want to do it. Women in J-1 are not able to do *tabriya* in J-1. They must go, in person, to a court a secure two witnesses that could attest to the male relative's affiliation with ISIL.³⁰ As these women are not allowed to leave the Centre and sometimes find it difficult to secure two witnesses to validate their *tabriya*, this adds yet another woman-specific barrier, even if an informal one, to acquire the documents needed to facilitate their exit from J-1. .

Women are not only pressured to divorce their husbands and/or do *tabriya* on them and other male relatives, but some are also put in the impossible position of being asked to abandon their children, particularly male ones, to one set of grandparents, as a condition to return home. There have been reports about returning women– particularly those thought to have borne the children of ISIL fighters – being pressured by their families to give up their children as a prerequisite to return. This demand may not always come directly from the family but may be innately felt by the mother who knows she will not be able to remarry – and thus ensure she is supported - if she returns with her children. It may also be a brother who warns her sister to only return with female children (and leave the male ones behind) to avoid tribal retaliation. In the survey of current J-1 residents, however, no women said they had been pressured to give up their children as a pre-requisite for being able to return home, although 66 per cent of women did say that their parents were “never supportive” of their children. That latter statistic may indicate how prevalent this view is among families of returnee female-headed households; even if it is not presented as a formal prerequisite to return, such sentiments certainly hint at a lack of familial receptivity and place an additional psychological burden on mothers and their children. This is a sensitive issue, and it is possible that posed as a direct survey, respondents may underreport familial demands to abandon their children. Indeed, in a number of semi-structured interviews, and once trust is established between the interviewer and the interviewee, many women eventually divulged such experiences. For example, one woman

²⁷ MEAC, FGD #2 with women in female-headed households, long-stayers (J-1, May 2023)

²⁸ MEAC FGD, Women above 31 years old (Mosul, June 2023); MEAC FGD, Women 18-30 years old (Mosul, June 2023)

²⁹ MEAC FGD Men above 31 years old (Mosul, June 2023); MEAC FGD Men 18-30 years old (Mosul, June 2023)

³⁰ It must be noted here that INGOs are also unwilling to facilitate the *tabriya* process due to its problematic nature (due to its social and potentially legal impact) and do not want to be seen as endorsing it.

said that her only living relative was her brother, who refused to sponsor her and allow her to return unless she gave up her children.³¹ This woman, and others in similar circumstances, finds herself in an impossible situation: to give up her children or never be allowed to return back to her community. Without a sponsor – and familial support and community acceptance more broadly – the prospects for the successful reintegration of women and their children are low.

Sponsorship

The Ministry of Migration and Displacement, which manages J-1 and the arrival and departure procedures, requires every family who wishes to leave the Centre to secure a sponsor that agrees to pick them up from J-1. There are two types of sponsorship, a GoI-required sponsor needed to leave J-1 and a second – sometimes enforced - sponsor needed to settle in the area of return. The sponsor needed to leave the Centre has become relatively easy, as a sponsor could sponsor multiple families, or families who have already left can sponsor newly departing families. It is the second type of sponsorship, the one needed to settle elsewhere, which is a bit more difficult. Traditionally this sponsor is a family or community members who can vouch for the returnee family in the community of return and can take responsibility for assisting them in the reintegration process – specifically in brokering community acceptance and potentially assisting with livelihood opportunities or support. In some areas, this sponsorship is strictly enforced- for example, in the KRG- in other areas, the requirement is not strict or is being removed, for example, in Mosul. It is this second type of sponsorship that has been difficult for some J-1 families to secure, especially those with no willing or available family, to secure one.

As with many of the other return requirements, the sponsorship requirement disproportionately affects women. Currently, 63 per cent of female-headed households sampled in J-1 reported not having a sponsor, while only 12 per cent of male-headed households said they did not. Women in the Centre widely acknowledged that female heads of household faced particular difficulties finding sponsors. Female heads of household who have been in J-1 for over a year (long-stayers) were less likely to have a relative as a sponsor as compared to male heads of household.³² I/NGOs working with J-1 residents expressed concern that when women were unable to find a family member to sponsor them in their areas of origin, some fall prey to predatory relationships with unknown sponsors.³³ This concern was echoed in the majority of the female focus group discussions conducted in J-1 centre.³⁴ Some women in J-1 said that

³¹ MEAC, FGD #4 with women, female-headed household, short-stayers (J-1, May 2023); MEAC, KII leader # 2 (J-1, May 2023)

³² 67 per cent of women HoH had relatives as sponsors while 88 per cent of male HoH.

³³ Interview with service provider (J-1, May 2023)

³⁴ Exploitative sponsorship relationships were mentioned by women in 3 out of the 4 FGD conducted in the camp with women and by two female section leaders in the camp as well, with stories of women either having to work for free on farms in exchange for sponsorship or, in some cases, they agreed to marry their sponsor to get out of J-1.

when women are unable to find a sponsor, they may strike a deal with an employer to sponsor their exit from the Centre or even marry an individual in return for his sponsorship. Women in one FGD mentioned these women are sometimes asked to pay 300-500 USD up front to the employer-turned-sponsor and will then have to work for the person for free for a while to repay them for having sponsored them,³⁵ others mentioned women agree to work for free on farms in exchange for sponsorship, raising serious concerns about possible exploitation.³⁶ Another long-stay resident of J-1 also mentioned that, especially for those women looking to move to other locations (not their areas of origin), exploitative sponsor relationships are rampant.³⁷ Most women wished the sponsorship requirement would be removed, as it has been problematic for many of those returning – particularly disadvantaging women and rendering them even more vulnerable - and creating a lot of anxiety among those who are unable to secure a sponsor.³⁸

Returning Home?

The data shows that recent arrivals to J-1 — men and women alike — generally plan to return to areas of origin rather than move to third locations. The intention to return home, however, may change over time, in particular for two main reasons: lack of community acceptance and damaged or destroyed housing. Female-headed households, who are disproportionately affected by community acceptance issues, are often unable to return home and also find it more difficult to move to a third location, leading to long stays in J-1. Amongst long-stayers (those who have been in J-1 for more than one year), female heads of household are significantly less likely than male heads of household to be able to return home: as many as 64 per cent of these long-stay female HoH said they would not be returning to areas of origin, while only 18 per cent of long-stayer male HoH said this. Female heads of household reported the inability to return home was one of the main reasons female heads of household stay in J-1 for extended periods of time. Given the plethora of issues women face in areas of origin, including the especially strong stigma female heads of household are subjected to and the fact that women are less able to move to a third location, find a job and sustain a household, female heads of household indicated a preference to staying in J-1 rather than leaving to another location when they were unable to return home.³⁹

The inability to find viable housing – and/or repair a damaged or destroyed home – contributes to lengthy stays in J-1, but again the issue appears to disproportionately impact women. It is

³⁵ MEAC, FGD #1 with women in male-headed households, long-stayers (J-1, May 2023)

³⁶ MEAC, FGD #2 with women in female-headed households, long-stayers (J-1, May 2023); MEAC, FGD #1 with women in male-headed households, long stayers (J-1, May 2023); MEAC, FGD #5 with women in female-headed households, new arrivals (J-1, May 2023); MEAC, FGD #4 with women in male-headed households, new arrivals (J-1, May 2023); MEAC KII J-1 leader #1 (J-1, May 2023), MEAC KII J-1 leader #3 (J-1, May 2023).

³⁷ J-1 resident 1 (J-1, May 2023)

³⁸ MEAC, FGD #2 with women in female-headed households, long-stayers (J-1, May 2023); J-1 resident 1; MEAC, FGD #1 with women in male-headed households, long-stayers (J-1, May 2023); J-1 leader 1 KII (J-1, May 2023)

³⁹ 56 per cent of long-stayer women who will not return to areas of origin intend to remain in J-1.

unclear if such property seizures impact female heads of household at the same rate as male heads of household. Regardless, male heads of household are better positioned to retake control of familial property with their stronger social networks and without the restrictions that come from the cultural expectations for women.

Prospects for Reintegration: Livelihoods and Social Networks

One of the most obvious challenges faced by female-headed households is that, often, women have little to no work experience, given the cultural expectations around women as mothers and housewives, which undermines their prospects for finding employment upon return. The depressed economies in areas of return also make it particularly difficult for anyone to get a job, let alone women with no work history and few marketable skills. Female heads of household overwhelmingly reported not knowing how they would be able to meet the most basic needs of their families. The survey data showed that only 10 per cent of female heads of household in J-1 said that they ever worked for income before 2014 (primarily in agriculture and tailoring). These numbers are in contrast to male heads of household, 55 per cent of which said they did work for income prior to 2014.

Given the fact that most women never had income-generating work, and many are returning to areas that severely lack job opportunities (see returnee section below), female-headed households often need to depend on family or charities to financially support them in meeting their most basic needs upon return. Other research suggests that IDPs face similar economic challenges.⁴⁰ This is particularly problematic as female heads of household – regardless of whether they have come back from Al Hol or returned after a period of internal displacement⁴¹ – also suffer from weaker social networks and community ties, making it even more difficult to support their families if they cannot work themselves and have few people to turn to for support.

⁴⁰ A similar finding was found among IDP returnees, wherein over half of returning female-headed households were unable to make ends meet or are barely able to do so and need to depend on family members and charity. See IOM Iraq, [Poverty and precarity: a comparison of female and male-headed households in districts of return](#) (Baghdad: IOM, 2023).

⁴¹ This was found in a prior MEAC study. Jacqueline Parry and Yousif Khalid Khoshnaw, with Siobhan O’Neil and Juan Armando Torres Munguía, "[Coming Home: The Return and Reintegration of Families with Perceived ISIL Affiliation in Iraq](#)", UNIDIR, Geneva, 2023.



Photo 5: S., 14-years old participant in the 100cameras led photography training, Mosul, 2023.

Having a strong social support network is key for return and successful reintegration, but J-1 residents across the board seem to have weak social networks.⁴² A large majority of current J-1 residents (76 per cent) reported not receiving support from family and friends currently and little to no expectation that anyone would help them upon return.⁴³ Again, female-headed households appear further disadvantaged. Currently, only 22 per cent of female-headed households are being assisted by family members, as opposed to 42 per cent of male-headed households. No female head of household reported receiving support from friends, while 24 per cent of male heads of household did. When asked if they could ask anyone to lend them money in case of an emergency, 52 per cent of female heads of household said never, while only 15 per cent of male heads of household said never. Similarly, 30 per cent of female heads of household say they never have anyone to turn to for advice or support, compared to only 9 per cent of male heads of household who reported this. Cultural expectations of women as mothers and housewives, along with economic conditions in areas of return, women's lack of employable skills and work experience, and their overall weaker support networks, means that female heads of household face significant barriers in providing for their families upon return.

⁴² 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).

⁴³ Over 76 per cent of respondents do not expect to receive any support with reintegration, 72 per cent are not being assisted by anyone currently.

Children

The section above detailed some of the gendered experiences – and structural and cultural barriers women face – in the return process. It is also essential to examine the experiences of Iraqi children, who comprise about 60 per cent of the Iraqi population in Al Hol, who are coming home after years in North East Syria, including some who have never stepped foot in their country before. Over 60 per cent of the population of J-1 is under 18 years of age⁴⁴, and they face very specific challenges and opportunities in their return and reintegration. For many children, life in Al Hol was terrible and arriving at J-1 marks a significant improvement in their lives (for adults too). This is a positive step, but the path beyond the Centre is full of obstacles for children.



*Photo 6: H., 17-years old participant in the 100cameras led photography training, Mosul, 2023.
(This photograph was cropped to fit the report dimensions)*

Children’s Mental Health in J-1

Multiple rounds of data collection and qualitative interviews point to the positive effect of – at least initially – the J-1 Centre environment on residents’ feelings of safety and well-being.⁴⁵ By all accounts, the improvement in the conditions from those in Al Hol is enormous. This appears true for everyone, but particularly for children. Support for children in J-1 includes health,

⁴⁴ IOM data as of July 06, 2023

⁴⁵ Dr. Jacqueline Parry and Yousif Khalid Khoshnaw, with Dr. Siobhan O’Neil, “[Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Children from Families with Perceived ISIL Affiliation: Experiences from Iraq and Al Hol](#),” *MEAC Findings Report 20*, (New York: United Nations University, 2022).

nutrition, and education, as well as mental health and psychosocial support (MHPS), among other programming. In focus group discussions, girls described never being allowed to leave their tents in Al Hol, not even to go the toilet at night. They talked of being scared that they would be beaten or at least screamed at by the Syrian security forces, especially the women. They explained that they were now able to sleep at night or anytime during the day without worrying.

The impact of the shift from Al Hol to J-1 on anxiety and outlook has been documented in prior MEAC studies.⁴⁶ The latest round of surveys reinforces the earlier finding that the camp environment – particularly when it came to security - in J-1 contributes to improvements in mental health and well-being metrics. These improvements are significant, particularly for younger residents (between the ages 15-17) and provide a view into the impact of the J-1 environment on children’s well-being and outlook. For example, 86 per cent of children said they felt less stressed when they arrived at J-1 as compared to their time in Al Hol, and 90 per cent said that their stress levels decreased as they spent more time in J-1. As many as 49 per cent said they never feel anxious in their lives now, and only a small minority said they still felt stressed most of the time (12 per cent in J-1). Continued anxiety and stress may be higher among particularly disadvantaged children, discussed later in this section.

Children and adults agreed that the improvement in the environment in J-1 was responsible for the shift in behaviour and outlook for J-1 residents: people became less aggressive, anxious, and closed off. Regardless of age, people talked about shedding distrust and beginning to socialize in a way they had not in Al Hol. Interestingly, in describing this behavioural shift in open-ended survey answers, adults spoke generally, but several children spoke about aggressive behaviour *towards them* decreasing. This small but noticeable disparity raises the question of whether children bore the brunt of adult stress and anxiety in Al Hol. This is an important reminder that while the behavioural shift that accompanies the improved conditions in J-1 was nearly universally recognized by returnees, the impact of that shift may be more significant for some groups, particularly those like children and women⁴⁷ who often bear the brunt of interpersonal violence exacerbated by armed conflict situations.

⁴⁶ 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).

⁴⁷ Uche Eseosa Ekhatior-Mobayode, Lucia C. Hanmer, Eliana Rubiano-Matulevich, and Diana Jimena Arango, "[The effect of armed conflict on intimate partner violence: Evidence from the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria](#)," *World Development*, Vol.53, (February 2022).

While young people talked about the positive impact of the improved security and Centre conditions, being back in school, and making friends in J-1, it was clear that they wanted to get on with a “normal” life. When asked how long they would ideally stay in J-1, children were clear – as short as possible. They, like adults, were tired of being in J-1. Yet, for young people, who



Photo 7: S., 18-years old participant in the 100cameras led photography training, Mosul, 2023.

have never seen anything other than war and camps, there was resentment that their ‘youth was being stolen from them’ and that it was time for them to “use their lives” to do things, “develop themselves” and finally experience joy. So, while the J-1 experience has been positive for many children, the benefits it has inferred are likely to diminish with time if young people cannot establish lives outside the Centre gates.

Even Weaker Support Systems

The discussion above focused on how female heads of household had weaker support networks, but it bears emphasizing that children returning from Al Hol often are doubly disadvantaged when it comes to their support systems. Only 30 per cent of children surveyed in J-1 were with both of their parents. Most children were there with their mother (63 per cent). A handful were just with their fathers or with no parents at all (just under 4 per cent for each). Given that children’s returns to their area of origin are usually brokered by their parents, those with no parents or only a mother – who herself has a weak network – have poorer prospects of going home.

Lack of Documentation and its Impact on Future Opportunities

Despite these positive indicators of improved mental health outcomes for child residents, more needs to be done to ensure the upward trend continues. Civil documentation is the single biggest issue facing children in J-1 and areas of return. Seventy per cent of families who said they are missing some form of documentation have said it is their children's documentation that they are missing, making them the largest group with documentation issues. Without documentation, a child's prospects for successful reintegration are greatly reduced.⁴⁸ Most importantly, the lack of documentation undermines a child's access to education, a cornerstone for ensuring economic reintegration in the future.

Unlike adults who once had an Iraqi ID and need it renewed, many young children returning from Northeast Syria, as well as those born in or after 2014 that stayed in Iraq, have never had an ID and face particular challenges in getting one. Over half of current J-1 respondents (57 per cent) have children born on or after 2014, when ISIL began administering large swaths of territory in Iraq and Syria and issuing documentation to civilians living under their control. The documentation these families would have received while living under ISIL is not recognized by the GoI, which has left a large number of children without legal status or citizenship. As many as 93 per cent of respondents who have children born during those years said their children do not have Iraqi Government-issued birth certificates. Without a government-issued birth certificate, and particularly if they have a missing/dead father, these children have a very difficult time acquiring identification as they are unable to prove lineage.⁴⁹ Some changes have been made to the practice of the lineage law as

A girl from KRG shared in a focus group that she is entirely on her own in the camp as her father and brothers were in prison in Syria or escaped to Turkey, and her mother is elsewhere in Iraq and has remarried. Her stepmother (the second wife of her father) is in J-1 but has no interaction with her as she "does not want her." She thinks she will go and live with her grandmother, but she also does not have documents and is being asked to do tabriya against her father in prison before returning but did not think the Kurdish forces who control the area would allow her back. Her only hope was convincing a potential sponsor of her stepmother in the camp to also sponsor her departure, but she conceded this was unlikely as she did not know the person and so could not negotiate with that potential sponsor directly, and her stepmother was unlikely to help her. The social mores about child – and particularly a girl child – interaction with adults make it extremely difficult for an unaccompanied child to negotiate their exit from the camp.

⁴⁸ The impact of lack of documentation for children is documented by NRC and IOM among others. See: IOM, *Legal Needs Assessment* (2023); Norwegian Refugee Council, "[Paperless people of post-conflict Iraq](#)," (2019).

⁴⁹ "According to existing directives by the Ministry of Education registration requires several types of civil documentation, including the identification cards of both parents and the student. In the case of a deceased father, an official death certificate must also be provided to the school administration, proving the circumstances of the death. There are no provisions in place to address the absence of civil documentation for fathers who are missing or detained." The United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *The Right to Education in Iraq: The legacy of ISIL territorial control on access to education*, (Baghdad: OHCHR, UNAMI, 2020), p.11

of April 2023 so that children are able to get nationality and IDs.⁵⁰ From surveys conducted in areas of return, about half (48 per cent) of the returnees still have someone in their family missing documents, and of those missing documents, 86 per cent are missing their children's documents. This means that four out of ten children who leave J-1 and return to areas of origin/return are still without documentation. Estimates of the total number of undocumented children across Iraq are difficult to obtain, but one estimate says that between 300,000 and 400,000 children are undocumented, Iraq-wide.⁵¹ At a minimum, 45,000 Iraqi children across camps are missing documentation.⁵² UNHCR, UNICEF and IOM have been providing legal services in J-1 to help families through the process of acquiring documentation for their children, however, legal hurdles continue to exist.

The concerns about ID-related barriers to education are high because the children who are returning from Northeast Syria are suffering from a major education deficit. Since 2014, when ISIL began to administer their areas, most children have had little to no access to meaningful education⁵³ in the communities in which they lived or in Al Hol camp (where there were limited education opportunities). While in J-1, most – but not all - children have access to education - either to accelerated learning through local NGOs and to government schools run by the Ministry of Education inside the Centre. However, the schools are not able to accommodate all the children in J-1, and that continues to leave a gap in this essential service.⁵⁴ Even though not everyone had access, in general – across focus groups and key informant interviews and casual interactions on the side of interviews - there was a sentiment among parents in J-1 that they and their children feel much better now that the children are attending school compared to the situation in Al Hol. This was reinforced by the children presenting their school grades to the researcher during their parents' interviews, who were proud to show their school reports and good grades.⁵⁵

The issue of access to education becomes even more pressing when children leave J-1 and go to communities of origin/return. Many children leave the Centre without documentation which makes it very difficult – if not impossible - for them to enter government schools. Some schools do allow children to attend school even if they do not have proper documentation, but they do

⁵⁰ SJC, "[Addressing the problem of proving marriage and lineage of children \(families of terrorist ISIS fighters\)](#)," 27 April 2023.

⁵¹ Estimates by UN agencies working on this.

⁵² Norwegian Refugee Council, "[Barriers from Birth: Undocumented Children in Iraq Sentenced to a Life on the Margins](#)," (2019).

⁵³ Sever per cent of current camp residents said their children went to school under ISIL, but the education provided was limited to religious education and military training. Attending school under ISIL ensured that children would not make gains on any subjects taught as part of formal education, and many were affected by the extremist ideology and violence an ISIL education would have exposed them to. See, Iraqi Institute for Development, "[Education in Mosul under the Islamic State \(ISIS\)](#)," (2015-2016); Deslandes-Martineau Marion, Patrick Charland, Hugo G. Lapierre, Olivier Arvais, Chirine Chamsine. Vivek Venkatesh, Mathieu Guidère, "[The programming curriculum within ISIS](#)." *PLoS One*. Vol 17, no.4; (April 2022).

⁵⁴ Informal discussions with service providers (May and June 2023)

⁵⁵ MEAC, FGD #1 with women in male-headed households, long-stayers (J-1, May 2023)

not let them sit for exams.⁵⁶ This has been the interim solution to prevent a large number of young children from continuing to miss out on their education. Some returnees report that other schools do not allow these kids to attend at all (in Mosul, in this case).⁵⁷ Some young girls interviewed in J-1 expressed how unfair it was that they, children, were being punished for the actions of their relatives and that they would not be able to acquire documents or go to school.⁵⁸ They strongly felt the injustice of the situation and said it would create a generation of poor youth unable to access government services or jobs.⁵⁹



*Photo 8: H., 17-years old participant in the 100cameras led photography training, Mosul, 2023.
(This photograph was cropped to fit the report dimensions)*

Concerns about Long-term Grievances

As mentioned above, children’s mental health improves when they arrive in J-1, and the data shows that it seems to continue to improve over time. Of children who recently arrived at J-1, 17 per cent say they never feel hopeful about the future, compared to only 3.8 per cent of children who had been in the Centre for more than one year. This change over time shows that living in a safer environment where children can reengage in education or life skills training and

⁵⁶ MEAC interview with school director (Mosul, June 2023)

⁵⁷ Returnee KIIs, Mosul

⁵⁸ MEAC, FGD #6 with J-1 resident girls, ages 15-17 (J-1, May 2023)

⁵⁹ MEAC, FGD #6 with J-1 resident girls, ages 15-17 (J-1, May 2023)

spend more time positively interacting with their peers, their hopes for the future rise. They may feel that they are getting the support they need to reintegrate into schools and their peers' social lives once they return to communities of origin/return. One girl interviewed in the Centre said that the more she stayed in J-1, the more friends she was able to make,⁶⁰ something children were clearly craving after years in Al Hol, where families feared for their safety and reportedly never allowed their children to leave the tents.

This change in attitude and hope for the future bodes well for the future of these children, however, there are significant concerns that if children have their opportunities taken away from them – particularly due to the knock-on effects of the lack of documentation - that they will become aggrieved and be at increased risk of exploitation - including by armed groups. Potential resentment against the State is not limited to just documentation related disadvantages. Women in Mosul spoke about a growing phenomenon of children whose fathers are in jail developing a growing hatred for the Iraqi State, in particular the army. In addition to the punishment of their fathers, the children perceived the Iraqi State as further isolating them by not allowing them to get documents and attend school. Participants of a focus group of girls in J-1 agreed that 'they were being collectively punished,' they pleaded that 'children should not pay for the mistakes of their relatives, ' especially when it came to withholding documentation that would allow them to go to school and build a life for themselves.⁶¹ These frustration, women interviewed in Mosul said, could lead to "very worrying things" (the suggestions being criminality) and should be addressed.⁶² Mothers of such children sometimes expressed fears that they may soon "lose control over their teenagers." Men in Mosul also said that isolating these children even more by stigmatizing them and refusing to provide them with documentation is a big mistake, as children are victims.⁶³ It forces these children "onto the street" to beg and commit petty crimes, such as theft.⁶⁴ They also spoke of young teenage boys having to work in factories or undertake other menial jobs to support large families and not making nearly enough to make cover basic needs. This was something witnessed first-hand during the course of the participatory research – one of the boys in the research training course arrived after working long hours with his mother to collect scrap metal, covered in dirt, and proceeded to fall asleep. The men in Mosul worried that young boys in such situations are becoming 'suicidal' not because of stigma but because of financial stress.⁶⁵

Children's Perspectives

⁶⁰ FGD J-1 resident girls, ages 15-17

⁶¹ MEAC, FGD #6 with J-1 resident girls, ages 15-17 (J-1, May 2023)

⁶² MEAC, FGD #2 with younger women (Mosul, June 2023)

⁶³ MEAC, FGD #4 with older men (Mosul, June 2023)

⁶⁴ MEAC, FGD #3 with younger men (Mosul, June 2023)

⁶⁵ MEAC, FGD #3 with younger men (Mosul, June 2023)

In addition to surveys and focus group discussions with children, two participatory research exercises with young people fed into this research. Through both a participatory research training for youth (with the local NGO, Bridge) and a photography intervention (with 100cameras and local partner, Progress in Peace) that focused on socio-emotional growth [both held in Mosul], the needs and ambitions of young Iraqis perceived as affiliated with ISIL became apparent. It was clear from both programmes that young Iraqis who carry the perception of affiliation with ISIL desperately need an outlet to process their experiences and a space to connect with trusted confidants and their peers. One boy in the photography training expressed when facing difficult situations, “To be heard is what [we] need.” Two girls in the research training said that the days spent with their peers sharing and learning in a safe space have been “some of the most beautiful days of their lives.” Girls and boys spoke of being bullied at school- some because of the disconnect between their age and learning level, others because of their particular background. Some described having a limited support network within their family and their communities to lean on. A number of children were actively discouraged from pursuing their education, something that was already a huge challenge, given how behind they were. Many of the participants were part of female-headed households, and they spoke of the hardships their mothers endured to support their large family. One young boy came to class covered in dirt from head to foot, as he had been out with his mother for hours, collecting scrap metals to sell. These children are not blind to the hardships of the adults in their families, all the while dealing with their own traumas with no safe place to go to talk about them. The experiences of these children are similar to some faced by those currently in J-1 and harken others that likely will follow them to their area of origin or another area of return; that is if they can meet the requirements to leave the Centre.

Long-Stayers

J-1 was created with the intention of being a transitional centre for people returning from Al Hol camp in Syria, where they could re-acclimate and get the help and documentation to help with their return and reintegration into their community of origin/return.⁶⁶ Officially, returnees are meant to remain in the J-1 Centre for 3 to 6 months, during which time they are given the opportunity to readjust to life in Iraq and are able to access legal services to renew/acquire civil documentation, mental health and psycho-social support, and education for children (accelerated or traditional government school).⁶⁷ Residents can also reconnect with family members and friends through the visitor’s centre in J-1 to re-establish social ties that may help facilitate their return to their area of origin and promote reintegration progress.

⁶⁶ The Camp has often been described as “...a ‘Rehabilitation Centre,’ suggesting that some form of targeted programming aimed at disengaging individuals from ISIL takes place there; however, to date, no formal rehabilitation programming has taken place due in part to a lack of resources.” See, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism and IOM Iraq, Roundtables on Prosecution, Reintegration, and Rehabilitation (2022).

⁶⁷ Previous interview with Ministry of Migration and Displacement (Erbil, February 2023)

In reality, many Iraqi returnees spend a longer period in J-1. Based on IOM data from 2022, the average length of stay in J-1 has been about 5.5 months, with a significant minority of the population staying in the Centre for more than one year. Departure from J-1 is intended to be voluntary. Once a family has met the departure requirements and is ready to leave the Centre, they can apply with the Ministry of Migration and Displacement (MoMD). In recent months, however, there has been a heightened level of anxiety among J-1 residents, especially long-stayers, that to make room for incoming families from Al Hol, they may be forced to leave J-1 before they have met all the necessary requirements for return to their area of origin or are ready. There have been reports of families pressured to leave who had nowhere to go and found themselves on the street or in informal settlements. One family who was allegedly pressured to leave J-1 came back and settled in the neighbouring camp, J-5, as readmission to J-1 is prohibited.⁶⁸ J-5, however, was recently closed, and residents were forced to leave (which is part of a larger trend with other IDP camps in Federal Iraq (not the Kurdish region)). As pressure mounts on the GoI to expedite returns from Al Hol, families may be pushed to leave J-1, which would undermine their prospects for successful reintegration. One woman who has been living in J-1 for two years and who is waiting for her husband, who is still in Al Hol, asked if the authorities would actually “have the guts to kick me and my kids out when they see I really have nowhere to go, and they see I am sitting there on the side of the road.”⁶⁹

Given all this, the phenomena of “long-stayers” merits further attention. It is necessary to better understand what causes certain families to get stuck in the Centre while others are able to depart after a few short months. This section of the report will focus on this group of J-1 residents, who have been in the Centre for more than one year, and who continue to find it difficult to meet all of the departure requirements and fear being forced to leave before being ready to do so.

Barriers to Leaving J-1

The data shows that long-stayers and those who have been in the Centre for a short amount of time have the same barriers to return: the need for security clearance, access to civil documentation, damaged or destroyed housing and waiting for family members still in Al Hol camp. However, at some point, some residents overcome the barriers while others do not. Some specificities of certain families’ profiles may impact their ability to meet the departure requirements – mainly pertaining to the situation in their areas of origin. When returnees arrive at J-1, they overwhelmingly state they want to return to their areas of origin when they arrive in J-1, but certain locations are more problematic. Centre residents from these areas of origin are

⁶⁸ Previous interview with INGO working in the camp (J-1, February 2023)

⁶⁹ J-1 resident 1; J-1 resident 2

more likely to be stuck in J-1 for longer periods of time as they try to figure out how to meet return requirements or alternative destinations. The overall distribution of governorates in which J-1 residents in the cohort surveyed in March 2022 were living prior to leaving Iraq is 31 per cent from Anbar, 53 per cent from Ninewa and 15 per cent from Salahadin. The long stayers, however, are more likely to have been living in Anbar right before they left Iraq (83 per cent), suggesting that returning to Anbar is more difficult. A number of issues seem to be affecting those from Anbar, including more difficulty in acquiring civil documentation, armed groups controlling the area, and delayed security clearances, among other challenges. Multiple respondents from Salahadin also spoke of barriers to returning to certain villages in that province. Some specific factors in areas of origin that seem to be affecting returns in all provinces are conflict damage (i.e., level of destruction of homes), the current status of control (type of armed groups controlling the area) and if the district has sent mobile teams for documentation to J-1. Some respondents also spoke of tribal vendettas affecting their families, in particular. One woman from a community in Salahadin province said that her tribe had officially expelled her and her relatives from their tribe, along with 113 other families, in 2019, so she would never be able to go back.⁷⁰

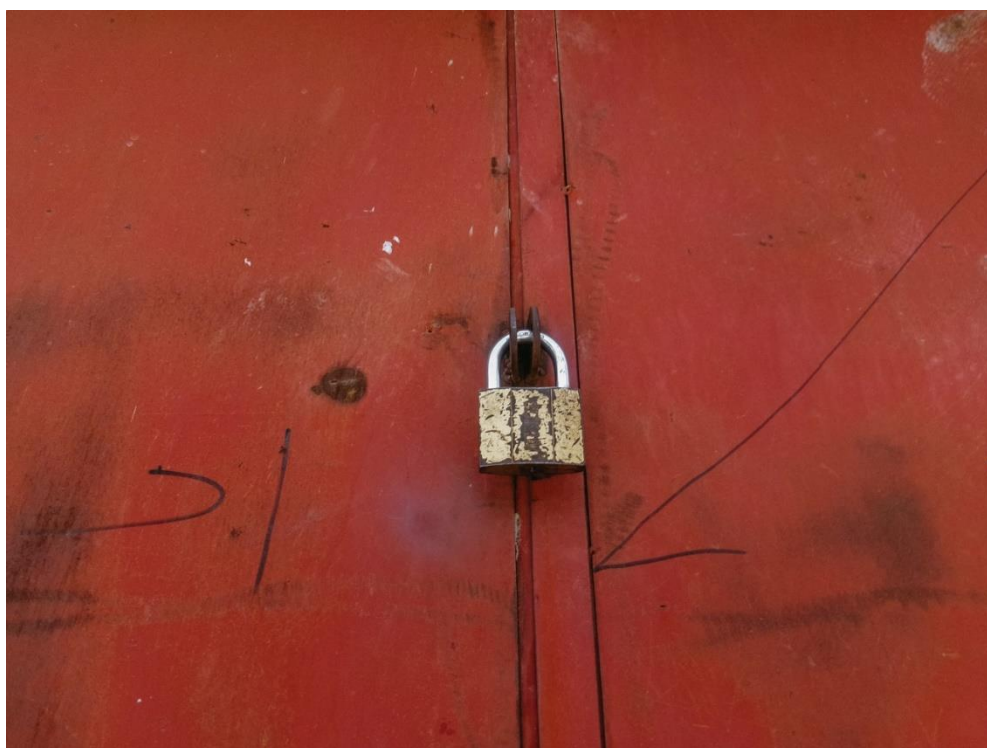


Photo 9: A., 16-years old participant in the 100cameras led photography training, Mosul, 2023.

Damaged or destroyed housing appears to prolong stays in J-1.⁷¹ Among long-stayers, 50 per cent said their home was damaged or destroyed, as opposed to 27 per cent of short-stayers.

⁷⁰ MEAC FGD #2 female-headed households, long stayers (J-1, May 2023)

⁷¹ Damaged and destroyed housing is also prolonging displacement for IDPs. See IOM Iraq, [Poverty and precarity: a comparison of female and male-headed households in districts of return](#) (Baghdad: IOM, 2023); IOM Iraq, [Progress toward durable solutions in Iraq: A pilot project in Ninewa governorate](#) (Baghdad: IOM, 2023).

Armed groups controlling certain areas are also reportedly living in the homes of those displaced or have closed off entire areas where no one can return to – situations that affect a large number of villages across the country and thwart returns from J-1, but also those displaced internally.⁷² A woman from Salahadin, who has been in J-1 for more than one year, said that various armed groups had taken over the family's house and land and that they would never get it back or even be able to sell it. Another long-stayer from Salahaddin who is unable to return home said her area is under the control of the PMF and that their land was stolen and sold to other people using fake property title deeds. She said many people's homes are occupied or sold in this way, which she believes will cause tribal disputes in the future and potentially new cycles of violence in Iraq. The control of areas by armed actors was mentioned by a number of respondents as being problematic for return. One section leader in J-1 said that those families that are from areas that are currently under PMF control - specifically parts of Anbar and Salahadin - may find it more difficult to return. Also, people in J-1 from Anbar have a more difficult time acquiring civil documentation because sub-districts in Anbar have not sent mobile civil documentation teams to J-1 to help facilitate the issuance of civil documentation for people from those regions. For the long-stayers, acquiring civil documentation was the most difficult requirement to fulfil, while for the others in the Centre, it was the second most difficult requirement to fulfil.⁷³

Given the importance of strong social networks and community ties for successful reintegration, understanding the status of social/familial networks of J-1 residents could provide some insight into how to tackle future reintegration challenges. As mentioned above, J-1 residents generally reported not receiving much support from family and friends and seem to have little to no expectation that anyone, family, or institutions, would help them upon return. For long-stayers, the responses indicate even weaker social networks to fall back on. When asked if they currently receive financial support from anyone, 76 per cent of long stayers say they have no one that provides them with support. Of those that are receiving support, they say it comes from Centre management or NGOs. By contrast, short-stayers are nine percentage points less likely to say no one provides them support. Finally, 50 per cent of long-stayers said they would *never* have anyone to ask to lend money in case of emergency, while only 36 per cent of short-stayers said never. These statistics reinforce the importance of social networks in helping J-1 residents meet the requirements to leave the Centre.

Strong social networks are key to securing a sponsor, a key requirement for leaving J-1. Only 44 per cent of long-stay heads of household reported having a sponsor, while 58 per cent of short-stay heads of households have a sponsor. Short stayers were more likely to have a family

⁷² IOM Iraq, [Reimagining reintegration: an analysis of sustainable returns after conflict](#) (Baghdad: IOM, 2023).

⁷³ Returning IDPs have faced similar challenges with documentation in Anbar and Salaheddin and with returning to areas under the control of certain armed groups.

member as a sponsor (92 per cent of short-stayers with sponsors v. 82 per cent of sponsored long-stayers). It must also be noted that often, being able to secure a sponsor is tied to having civil documentation, as potential sponsors know that issues with documentation will create problems at checkpoints for the family and potentially themselves, issues they feel they may not be able to manage. A number of interviewees said that they do have a family member who would be willing to sponsor them *only* if the entire family has documentation, a very difficult condition to meet for many in J-1.⁷⁴

The challenges in particular areas of origin, along with weak social networks, have led some J-1 residents to give up on returning to their area of origin. Those who have been stuck in the Centre for over the year are less likely to say that they will return, as compared to short-stayers.⁷⁵ Of those J-1 residents who say they will not be returning to their areas of origin are roughly split between the desire to stay in J-1 (permanently?) or relocate to third locations.⁷⁶ Families know, however, that with the pressure to make room for new arrivals, staying in J-1 permanently is not a realistic option.

Given the challenges to return facing long-stayers, they are also more likely to feel hopeless about the future. Mental health and well-being metrics bear out the loss of hope that comes with the inability to meet exit requirements. As many as 14 per cent of long-stay residents said they never feel hopeful about the future, compared to only 3 per cent of short-stay residents. Arriving in J-1 seems to be a big relief for everyone, as an overwhelming majority of respondents (87 per cent) said that their stress levels decreased when they arrived at the J-1 Centre. Over time, stress levels also seemed to continue to decrease, as reported by 90 per cent of respondents. When asked how often they feel anxious in their lives now, 45 per cent of residents said never. These percentages are the same for short and long-stayers, potentially indicating that the J-1 environment is free of many of the daily stressors present in Al Hol, but that with each passing month, residents begin to lose hope about building a life beyond the Centre fence.

Returnees

The 3,364 individuals who have left J-1 to areas of origin or return to date continue to face a number of challenges in the reintegration process. Although to leave the J-1 Centre, they would have passed security clearance, secured a sponsor, and identified a home to return to, many continue to face significant challenges in areas of return, including access to documentation and basic services, dire economic conditions and little to no livelihood opportunities, and weak

⁷⁴ J-1 resident 2

⁷⁵ 84 per cent of short-stayers say they intend to return to areas of origin, while 66 per cent of long-stayers say they will return home.

⁷⁶ A slightly higher number of respondents say they intend to stay in J-1.

social networks and low community acceptance. Consistent with other populations, women, girls, and female heads of household are disproportionately affected by all of the aforementioned challenges. Community acceptance, especially for female heads of household, is a particularly difficult barrier to overcome, and it significantly affects reintegration outcomes for themselves and their children.

Civil Documentation and Basic Services

Like those who were not as far along their return journey (i.e., those people currently in J-1), civil documentation remains the biggest issue for returning families, including returning IDPs, despite the plethora of organizations trying to provide documentation support in and outside of the Centre. A survey of returnees in areas of return suggests that documentation acquisition is difficult across areas of return. The data does, however, indicate that the same gendered challenges in procuring identification persist after people leave J-1. Female returnees have a more difficult time renewing documents in areas of return than male returnees.⁷⁷ The main barriers to renewal partially overlap with those cited by J-1 residents, particularly the cost of the process, but also the length of the process. Female respondents, however, were disproportionately affected by their lack of knowledge about the process- 27 per cent of female respondents said they lacked information, while only 8 per cent of male respondents reported not having enough information about the process. A gender disparity in information about return requirements was found in an earlier MEAC study⁷⁸ and appears to persist along the entire return pipeline from NES to areas of return in Iraq as well as for returning IDPs, whose similar struggles have been documented in other studies.⁷⁹ Even those female returnees who managed to renew documents without paying a lawyer spoke of the cost of transportation to and from the civil administration offices, often in different towns, as being prohibitive, as is the issue of the time it takes to get the process done- over several visits. One woman was told to go to the office in her husband's jurisdiction, which she is unable to do due to cost.⁸⁰ Another woman who went to Baghdad three times to do the DNA test for her children had to spend the night in the street next to the administration office, as she had nowhere to go.⁸¹ Although both male heads of household and female heads of household experience financial hardship upon return, the latter still face greater challenges - both due to the requirements - particularly for those married or born under ISIL, or victims of GBV with no documented lineage as well as

⁷⁷ 51.3 per cent of women were unable to renew documents, while only 24.5 per cent of men were unable to renew.

⁷⁸ Jacqueline Parry and Yousif Khalid Khoshnaw, with Siobhan O'Neil, "[How Information Ecosystems Affect Conflict Transitions: Experiences from Al Hol and Iraq](#)," *MEAC Findings Report 23* (New York: United Nations University, 2022).

⁷⁹ For example, see IOM, *Legal Needs Assessment* (2023); IOM, *Women and Reintegration* (forthcoming).

⁸⁰ Returnee KII 3, Mosul

⁸¹ Returnee KII 1, Mosul

cultural norms and lack of skills in getting paid work - making the costs associated with documentation even more out of reach for them.⁸²

As mentioned previously, one additional barrier to return for married girls and women, in terms of acquiring documentation, is the process of doing *tabriya* in court and divorcing their husband if he is perceived as being an ISIL member. NGOs in J-1 are unable to assist women who need to undergo *tabriya* as part of the process, as there are ethical considerations in terms of do no harm, and so these women need to wait until they leave the Centre to do so, which means they face an added burden not faced by boys and men in trying to complete the documentation process in J-1 before departure.⁸³

Lack of basic services was also high on the list of challenges reported by returnees (55 per cent of female respondents, 70 per cent of male respondents). Returnees were asked about if they felt their access to services was the same as for other community members, and 80 per cent of the respondents said yes, which is a positive indication that most returnees can access *some* services (exceptions are described below). For those who perceived that they did not have equal access, they said this was primarily because their particular area had no services or that they were too far away from those services.

Very few people said their lack of access to services has anything to do with discrimination or their status as ISIL-affiliated returnee families, but education was a notable exception,. Many attributed their children's lost education, economic struggles, and lack of documentation to their conflict experience, including their time in Al Hol, and it was clear that these often combined to compound their other problems. More than a third of returnee families with children did not have all of their children in school. Twenty-five per cent of returnees with children said that none of their children were attending schools and 13 per cent said some were attending school. Most of those who reported that their children were unable to attend school said this was because of a lack of documentation. A significant portion of returnees (22 per cent), overwhelmingly women, also said they are unable to send their children to school due to financial costs associated with school- school supplies and transport to school- but also because that child, usually male, will not be contributing to household finances if he is at school. Many returnee families are struggling economically right now, and this is likely to continue if there are continued barriers to accessing education for their children, which will limit their economic opportunities in the future.

⁸² Similar findings have been identified in research with returning IDPs in Ninewa. See, IOM Iraq, [Progress toward durable solutions in Iraq: A pilot project in Ninewa governorate](#) (Baghdad: IOM, 2023).

⁸³ J-1 resident interviews, women; Returnee KII, women

Returnees also face some challenges in accessing medical care. A large portion of male respondents (35 per cent) spoke of the financial cost of medical care, making it out of reach for many, as free hospitals are not fully equipped to treat more difficult illnesses, and the hospitals that can, are too expensive. Some female respondents spoke of a lack of documentation (16 per cent) impeding health care access. For example, two women residents of J-1 with disabilities⁸⁴ said they were turned away from the Gayyara hospital in Ninewa, where they were told by hospital staff that they could not be treated without some sort of documentation.⁸⁵ However, another returnee in Mosul said that her family's lack of documentation does not cause a problem at hospitals, only for school enrollment and checkpoints.⁸⁶ Another, still, explained that for surgeries and other major medical interventions, documentation would be necessary but not for other regular medical services.⁸⁷ Transportation and distance from health clinics were also mentioned as an obstacle to receiving medical care, as well as the lack of availability of certain procedures and services in local hospitals, as returnees tend to settle in poorer, less serviced areas.

Economic Conditions and Livelihood Opportunities

Reintegration progress is hindered for all returnees due to the limited economic opportunities in areas of return. Male and female returnees alike reported that the lack of jobs and, relatedly, poverty were the top concerns in areas of return. Nearly 95 per cent of male respondents and 81 per cent of female respondents stated that lack of jobs is the biggest issue in these areas. Every interview in Qaim mentioned the fact that there are so few jobs available to the population and that large families of 10 or more members were usually supported on one individual's salary or pension.⁸⁸ Female-headed households and those without a working-age male have an ever more difficult time supporting their families and have to rely on charities to survive. One female head of household interviewed said a local charity pays her rent, and another charity provides her and her family with food and other commodities, as she is unable to provide for her family herself.⁸⁹ One of the sisters is entitled to a pension, but she is unable to register for it because she lacks proper documentation.⁹⁰ Lack of documentation for women and their children greatly impacts their ability to access social support (PDS cards),⁹¹ which renders them even more economically vulnerable than male heads of household.

⁸⁴ Camp residents can be referred outside the camp for some medical needs (but such requests need to go through an approvals process).

⁸⁵ MEAC, FGD #3 with women with disabilities (J-1, May 2023)

⁸⁶ Returnee KII 2, (Mosul, June 2023)

⁸⁷ Returnee KII 1, (Mosul, June 2023)

⁸⁸ Returnee KII 2, (Qa'im, June 2023); Returnee KII 4, (Qa'im, June 2023); Returnee KII 5, (Qa'im, June 2023)

⁸⁹ Returnee KII 2, (Mosul, June 2023)

⁹⁰ Returnee KII 2, (Mosul, June 2023)

⁹¹ Returnee KII 8, (Mosul, June 2023)

For those returned women and girls who are able to find work, there are concerns that their economic desperation, plus the few options open to them, leaves them vulnerable to exploitation. A number of female heads of household in Mosul worked in factories to make ends meet. These factories that accept to employ women perceived to be affiliated to ISIL underpay and overwork these women. One woman said, “It is very unfair; it is exploitation,” but it is the only option they have.⁹² Heads of factories in Mosul interviewed by MEAC who hire these women admitted that the working hours are long and the pay is lower than that paid to men for the same job - women get 10,000 IQD per day while men would get 15,000 IQD.⁹³ There are numerous indications that when their mothers cannot work, male children often have to take jobs – if they exist. One female head of household in Mosul says her teenage boys work with their uncles (day labour) to support the family’s basic needs.⁹⁴

Finding jobs and making ends meet does not only affect the returnee population but the host population as well. A large majority of all community members surveyed said they face *a lot* or *some* difficulty meeting their needs.⁹⁵ Sixty-five per cent of those in Ninewa said they face *a lot* of difficulties meeting basic needs, while 61 per cent of those in Anbar said they face *some* difficulty meeting needs. The main reasons for this very much mirror the difficulties described by returnee families. 50 per cent said the lack of jobs available in the location was the main problem in trying to make ends meet (29 per cent said this was an issue for them in Anbar, while 69 per cent said this was an issue in Ninewa). Given the lack of jobs in areas of return, the potential competition over scarce jobs may explain why male community members surveyed were more likely to *not support* returnees receiving livelihood support upon return (see community perceptions below). The response of community members must be understood within the context of these areas: scarce resources (and jobs) and a precarious economic situation. Support to services and livelihood opportunities to the communities as a whole, rather than targeted to returnees, is more likely to yield successful results and better reintegration outcomes while also not doing harm or exacerbating conflicts.

Social Networks and Community Acceptance

Poor basic services, along with a lack of jobs and poverty, are affecting everyone in the areas of return examined in this study. J-1 returnees, however, are less likely to have coping mechanisms and support, in particular social networks that could provide financial support, jobs, or help with procuring documentation, thus compounding the effects of economic distress, poverty, and a lack of basic services. It is important to highlight again that sources of resilience – particularly social networks – are not evenly distributed for returnees and that

⁹² Returnee KII 1, (Mosul, June 2023)

⁹³ MEAC community leader KII #3 (Mosul, June 2023)

⁹⁴ Returnee KII 3, (Mosul, June 2023)

⁹⁵ 46 per cent said they face a lot of difficulties and 44 per cent said they face some difficulty

women and girls, particularly female heads of household, who are not as well connected and more vulnerable than their male peers.⁹⁶ For example, 40 per cent of female returnees reported never being able to ask anyone for money in an emergency, and 27 per cent of female returnees reported never being able to turn to someone for support and guidance, while only 4 per cent and 3 per cent of male returnees reported this, respectively. Beyond their own social circles, female returnees are more likely to feel unsupported or underrepresented by the government and local officials. Female returnees reported not feeling represented by community leaders in reconciliation efforts. As much as 26 per cent of female returnees said they do not feel they were represented *at all*, while only 3 per cent of male returnees said this. Female returnees also felt that the government did not acknowledge their group's past experiences of violence and suffering, with 24 per cent of female respondents saying they were not acknowledged *at all* and only 4 per cent of male respondents saying the same.⁹⁷ The disengagement from public life is not uncommon for many women and girls in Iraq, especially in some of the more conservative parts of the country, such as in these areas of return. However, female returnees are even more isolated from the community at large due to their experience in the war,⁹⁸ have less of a support network to rely on and have fewer economic opportunities to support themselves and their families, further undermining their chances at successful reintegration.

⁹⁶ IDP returnee FHH experience similarly low levels of community acceptance and support. See IOM Iraq, [Poverty and precarity: a comparison of female and male-headed households in districts of return](#) (Baghdad: IOM, 2023); IOM, *Women and Reintegration* (forthcoming).

⁹⁷ The absence of transitional justice mechanisms in Iraq as a whole was identified as a major gap in the current discussions around durable solutions. See IOM Iraq, [Reimagining Reintegration: an analysis of sustainable returns after conflict](#) (Baghdad: IOM, 2023).

⁹⁸ Other studies find that women IDPs report higher levels of judgement for the actions of other around them by their fellow community members than men IDPs do. See, IOM Iraq, [Poverty and precarity: a comparison of female and male-headed households in districts of return](#) (Baghdad: IOM, 2023).



Photo 10: I., 17-years old participant in the 100cameras led photography training, Mosul, 2023.

In addition to these challenges, the data make clear that family and community stigma encountered upon return disproportionately affects women and older girls who return. For example, returning women and men report different reactions from their families and community. As much as 37 per cent of female returnees reported always or sometimes being criticized by family about their experience during the war, while only 1 per cent of male returnees reported being sometimes criticized. Similarly, in the community, 38 per cent of female returnees reported being sometimes or always criticized, while only 1 per cent of male returnees reported being sometimes criticized. One returnee woman in Mosul said that the stigma she feels in her community is not so much her ISIL affiliation but her marital status (unmarried and working); she wishes she were given a pension so that she and her sister did not need to work and could stay in the house and avoid the community altogether.⁹⁹ The issue of being an unmarried female head of household that needs to work and be active outside the home appeared to generate more stress and stigma for many of these women than their ISIL affiliation. Male community members in Mosul actually said that, generally, community acceptance vis-à-vis ISIL affiliates is growing over time. This is something seen in other MEAC studies around the world – as populations are forced to deal with reintegration and more people return who are not seen as threats, community acceptance grows. However, these same men in Mosul highlighted that it was not that those returning were ISIL affiliates but that the real problem was the influx of “single(unmarried) women” coming back with no male relatives. There is an assumption amongst many in the community that some of these female heads of

⁹⁹ Returnee KII 4, Mosul

household who returned used sexual favours to help facilitate their return and/or engage in sex work to support themselves. Instead of viewing women as vulnerable or exploited, many in the community see them as morally depraved and stigmatize them for it.¹⁰⁰

Community Perceptions: Mosul and Qa'im

Reintegration is a two-way street. Thus, it is not only the attributes, sources of strength and support, and challenges that returnees bring with them when they come home but also how they are received by the community that will determine their reintegration progress. As such, this study sought to understand experiences with and perceptions of families returning from Al Hol, and after internal displacement within Iraq. Randomized surveys in Mosul (Nineveh governorate) and Qa'im (Anbar governorate), two areas seeing a significant return of families perceived as affiliated to ISIL, were conducted to capture current views and understand how views change over time – especially in light of 2022 surveys on receptivity in Al Qaim as well as Habaniyya (Anbar governorate), Tooz (Salah al-Din governorate), and Muhalabiya (Nineveh governorate).¹⁰¹

In the latest round of surveys, many of the questions about families perceived to be affiliated to ISIL, the return requirements, and procedures and community perceptions vis-à-vis them were met with “I don't know.” Many of the questions had up to 40-45 per cent of “I don't know” responses, clearly demonstrating the continued lack of information reaching communities of return. Qualitative interviews demonstrated the same that community members were generally unaware of the steps of the return process and were unaware of the conditions for return from Al Hol and release from J-1. Contrary to expectations, the public did not appear to make clear differentiations between most sub-populations of returnees (e.g., returnees from Northeast Syria, those who came from Al Hol and passed through J-1 and internally displaced Iraqis perceived as affiliated with ISIL). For example, as many as 41 per cent of those surveyed said they did not know if there were families whose members were accused of affiliation with ISIL in their area. The proportion was highest in Anbar, where 59 per cent of respondents said they did not know, which is surprising given that there have been a significant number of returns to the area, which have been documented in the media.¹⁰² Overall, in both Mosul and Anbar, only 14 per cent of respondents said they knew of such “ISIL families” in their communities. When asked if these families had already returned, 81 per cent said they had. Community members who believed the families had not returned believe they had not done so because of issues with community acceptance or with local authorities. Community acceptance seemed to be a bigger

¹⁰⁰ MEAC, FGD #4 with older men (Mosul, June 2023)

¹⁰¹ Jacqueline Parry and Yousif Khalid Khoshnaw, with Siobhan O'Neil and Juan Armando Torres Munguía, “[Coming Home: The Return and Reintegration of Families with Perceived ISIL Affiliation in Iraq](#)”, UNIDIR, Geneva, 2023

¹⁰² Iraqi News Agency, “[Anbar Governor: Returning about 350 families from Al Hol camp](#),” 04 September 2022.

issue in Anbar province, with 60 per cent reporting that returnees face community rejection in Anbar, while only 33 per cent reported this in Ninewa.

Interestingly, despite not knowing much about the screening process, many respondents felt able to evaluate its effectiveness. When respondents were asked about how much they trusted the return procedure- security screening process, *tabriya*, and sponsorship -overall responses were rather split, with 59 per cent of respondents saying they *did* or *somewhat did* trust the security screening process, 51 per cent saying they *did* or *somewhat did* trust *tabriya* and 50 per cent saying they *did* or *somewhat did* trust about the sponsorship process. A large minority, between 27 per cent and 29 per cent, said they did not trust any of these procedures. There were notable differences by location; respondents in Ninewa were considerably more likely to trust the process/procedures for return than those community members in Anbar.¹⁰³ Qualitative interviews further demonstrated community members' confusion (and trust) over the return process and the prerequisites put in place by the GoI. For example, community members in Mosul spoke of the importance of *tabriya* as part of the process for return, along with passing security screening by various security actors [already a prerequisite to be admitted to J-1], and said that those who do it are welcome back but that 'those who do not are probably waiting for an opportunity to escape and reunite with their husbands.'¹⁰⁴ Others did not place as much importance on *tabriya*, especially when they personally knew the women returning.

A contradiction between the importance many placed on return requirements and not knowing about them was further highlighted by the focus group discussions in Mosul. Men and women in Mosul who were aware of returnees in their community said they were not usually aware of the details of individual families - where they were coming from if they had undergone *tabriya*, etc. They said they would not ask, as it is rude to do so.¹⁰⁵ This will be different in a village where everyone knows everyone, but large cities allow for more anonymity. This is also why some families chose to move to Mosul, to remain anonymous and be able to rebuild their lives away from those who know their history or away from prying eyes. This presents a confused picture of the importance, or lack thereof, of the return procedures and how they may or may not affect reintegration in different types of areas of return (e.g., villages versus cities).

Community members in Mosul and Anbar generally did not have strongly different views on IDP returnees with perceived ISIL affiliation versus returnees from Al Hol. Across both locations, 60 per cent of respondents said there was no difference between these two groups of families with

¹⁰³ In Anbar, only 3.7 per cent per cent trust the security screening process, while 58 per cent in Ninewa had trust in the process. Similarly, 7.3 per cent of respondents in Anbar trusted the *tabriya* procedure while 40 per cent in Ninewa had trust in the procedure and 7.3 per cent in Anbar trusted sponsorship while 36 per cent trusted it in Ninewa.

¹⁰⁴ MEAC, FGD #1 with older women (Mosul, June 2023)

¹⁰⁵ MEAC, FGD #1 with older women (Mosul, June 2023); MEAC, FGD #2 with younger women (Mosul, June 2023); MEAC, FGD #3 with younger men (Mosul, June 2023); MEAC, FGD #4 with older men (Mosul, June 2023)

perceived affiliation to ISIL. Qualitative data reinforced what the survey data indicated. Focus group discussions in Mosul showed that community members do not differentiate between returnees from J-1 and J5 or other camps that house families perceived as affiliated to ISIL, such as Hasan Sham.¹⁰⁶ Nor do people in Mosul appear to interpret the length of stay in these facilities as signifying different risks to the community of return. Therefore, whether a family has spent three, six, or nine months in J-1 has little to no bearing on how the community responds to the returning family.

Contrary to expectations, this finding seems to apply to those who spent time in Al Hol as well.¹⁰⁷ After a now infamous video taken in Al Hol of children throwing rocks and calling people “Kafer” (infidel) was made public, there have been growing concerns that the Iraqi public would be hardened to this particular population of returnees. While it is clear that some negative perceptions of Al Hol do exist, time spent there does not seem to automatically influence public sentiment according to the communities surveyed and interviewed. One respondent in Mosul who did not have ISIL family members but who had spent time in Al Hol and J-1 reported having no issues in terms of community acceptance upon return. The respondent said they did not face stigma as the community knew who they were and what their family may or may not have done in the past.¹⁰⁸ Returnees seem to be identified by the community as ISIL affiliates by their individual history and actions in the community during the conflict rather than merely having spent time in J-1.¹⁰⁹ The research raises an important question - when the community does not have that information and is unwilling to ask, how will they treat returnees?

Communities did, however, express more concerns about informal returnees. When the differences between informal and formal routes of return from Northeast Syria were raised, a notable minority of community members in Mosul and Qa'im (24 per cent) did say the community would be less comfortable with informal returnees from Syria (as opposed to those who would have gone through J-1). A smaller percentage (15 per cent) said there was no difference between formal and informal returnees. This was most pronounced in Anbar, where community members were less likely to differentiate between informal and formal returnees (28 per cent in Anbar versus 4.6 per cent in Ninewa). This statistic is particularly interesting as the majority of informal returnees are currently thought to be returning to Anbar province. The randomized sample of returnees in Mosul and Qa'im did identify a few people who admitted to returning from Syria without going through J-1 (after the Centre was open), all of whom were women in Anbar. More in-depth research will be conducted on this population in subsequent

¹⁰⁶ MEAC, FGD #1 with older women (Mosul, June 2023); MEAC, FGD #2 with younger women (Mosul, June 2023); MEAC, FGD #3 with younger men (Mosul, June 2023); MEAC, FGD #4 with older men (Mosul, June 2023)

¹⁰⁷ MEAC FGD #4 with older men (Mosul, June 2023)

¹⁰⁸ MEAC KII returnee #5 (Mosul, June 2023)

¹⁰⁹ MEAC FGD #4 with older men (Mosul, June 2023)

rounds of research to identify the particular vulnerabilities of informal returnees and if/how their reintegration prospects are affected (or possibly not) by the manner in which they returned.

Even though the public in Mosul and Qa'im appear not to differentiate between internally displaced "ISIL families" and people returning from Al Hol, when prompted, they did think the latter should meet additional criteria before being allowed to return. As many as 40 per cent of survey respondents agreed. Again, there was a notable difference across survey locations: only 18 per cent of respondents in Anbar said this compared to 48 per cent of those in Ninewa, where people were also more likely to trust government-run return programmes. Of those who supported additional criteria to return from Al Hol, respondents backed additional security screenings (76 per cent said yes), psychological rehabilitation (57 per cent said yes), and disavowals of family members who joined ISIL (30 per cent said yes). Serving prison sentences, making public apologies, completing community service, or paying compensation were not thought to be useful measures. No one said they should not return under any circumstances.

Reintegration Support

Community members were asked their thoughts about support for returnees coming from J-1. This question was again met with a high percentage of "I don't know", with 51 per cent saying they did not know and 30 per cent saying that returnee families should be given specific support. Security screening and psychological rehabilitation were thought to be useful, with 60 per cent and 50 per cent saying returnees should get those services, respectively. Respondents in Anbar put significantly more importance on additional security screening, with 85 per cent saying there should be ongoing security screening of returnees, while only 41 per cent of people said this in Ninewa. Respondents in Anbar also put more emphasis on the need for psychological rehabilitation programmes (69 per cent in Anbar versus 56 per cent in Ninewa) and MHPSS support, with 85 per cent saying yes to this form of support, while only 44 per cent in Ninewa said yes.

Gender appears to significantly impact whether people think returnees should receive support. Male respondents were generally more likely to say that families associated with ISIL *should not* be given assistance to reintegrate. Only 50 per cent of respondents said they should receive education, with only 25 per cent of male respondents saying yes and 53 per cent of female respondents saying yes. Community members were, in large part (57 per cent), not comfortable with their children going to school with children from these families, with female respondents being more accepting than male respondents.¹¹⁰ Respondents in Anbar were 33

¹¹⁰ 49 per cent of female respondents saying they were ok with their children attending schools with children of these families and only 14 per cent of male respondents saying this.

percentage points more likely (78 per cent v. 45 per cent in Ninewa) to say they were *not* comfortable allowing their children to go to school with these family's children. Only 25 per cent of male respondents in Mosul and Qa'im said returnees should receive livelihood or employment support, while 64 per cent of female respondents said they should. A similar pattern was seen in responses about housing support and cash assistance. All of the male respondents disagreed that returnees should get family reunification support, legal assistance, or medical care. For medical care and legal assistance, 22 per cent of female respondents in these locations said they should get those forms of assistance, and 14 per cent said they should get family reunification support. Religious lectures and social activities were seen as generally less helpful to adults influenced by ISIL ideology than education courses and job or livelihood services/activities.¹¹¹

The types of activities that community members thought were important in terms of reintegration support are in line with the type of support currently being provided to returnees. It must be noted that men's general disapproval of targeted support to returnees, especially when it comes to jobs and livelihood support, likely comes from a place of resource competition and dire economic conditions in areas of return. In Anbar, where a significant portion of the returnee population is returning too, respondents were less likely to want their children to go to school with returnee children and less trusting of government-sponsored return programmes. Preventing host community-returnee tension and competition should be a key consideration in all programming targeting this population.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This report focused primarily on the specific experience of a certain subset of Iraqis who had returned to the country after spending time – often many years – in Al Hol camp in Northeast Syria. Upon return, these families spent time in J-1 Centre, where they were surveyed and interviewed by the MEAC research team. The team also followed up with former residents of J-1 who had resettled in their area of origin or another area of return. The report sought to understand the return and reintegration journeys of Iraqis coming back to their country in order to inform related policies, procedures, and programming. The report placed particular emphasis on the women, specifically female heads of household, and children, who make up

¹¹¹ 19 per cent said religious lectures would be helpful, and 13 per cent said social activities would be helpful, while 30 per cent said education courses would be helpful and 47 per cent said job and livelihood activities would be helpful.

the majority of the population, and long-stayers in J-1 who are particularly vulnerable to being forced out of J-1 before they are ready to leave, decreasing their prospects for successful reintegration. It is important to understand the specific needs of different returnee profiles in order to programmatically target the specific challenges they face at each stage of the return process. Lessons learned from recent cohorts of returnees to J-1 and to areas of return can be applied to forthcoming cohorts to strengthen the overall response as more families come back to Iraq. The following recommendations are based on the empirical findings laid out in this report. The recommendations are primarily directed at the UN and its partners working to support GOI, which as the primary duty bearer for repatriating and reintegrating its citizens in Syria, will be responsible for supporting sustained transitions to civilian life over the long term.

For female-headed households in J-1 and in areas of return:

- **Advocate for addressing the vulnerabilities of female-headed households, and in particular to assessing requirements that create gendered obstacles to return with an eye to addressing them (e.g., one or both of the sponsorship requirements).** The research found that female heads of household have a more difficult time securing sponsors, and when they do, they tend not to be family members, especially when these women cannot return to their areas of origin. The gendered nature of the sponsorship requirement and the weaker social networks and cultural prohibitions on women limit the ability of female heads of household to meet this requirement. Moreover, the sponsorship requirement to exit J-1 renders women vulnerable to exploitation by potential sponsors, a relationship dynamic that will certainly carry on in areas of return and negatively impact the family's ability to reintegrate successfully. As such, requirements that are found to create specific gendered barriers to return should be adjusted – or even removed – if they do not effectively address security concerns and disproportionately disadvantage women.
- **Discuss the negative impact of the *tabriya* requirement on returning women and female heads of household.** In many areas of return, female heads of household are required by local authorities to divorce or disavow male family members before being able to return or acquire documents. Research shows that *tabriya* may have minimal impact or importance among community members in areas of return and the central government has issued a decision against the requirement of *tabriya*. In practice, however, it does have a significant impact on the women being forced to do this – legally, logistically, emotionally and vis-à-vis her own family and that of her husband. Agencies working with returnee reintegration with the local authorities and leaders should have frank discussions within the context of the programme about the impact of this practice and if/how it may be changed or replaced by something acceptable to the

community but does not cost these women so much that it undermines their successful reintegration.

- **Provide specialized support to female heads of household in areas of return that respond to their specific needs.** For example, female heads of household have a more difficult time acquiring documents for themselves and their families in areas of return than their male counterparts. They are more likely to lack information about the procedures to attain or renew documents, have fewer resources to pay a lawyer to help them navigate the process and are constrained by cultural norms that prevent them from travelling alone. Female returnees should be specifically targeted for legal assistance appropriate to their documentation needs. Moreover, livelihood support for women should take into account their lack of skills working in the labour market and cultural norms that dictate how and when they should work, but also potentially view this as a way to empower them to be successful breadwinners. For example, efforts could be made to improve working conditions for women in factories (as was the case in Mosul) by incentivizing factory owners to improve hours and pay and stop some of the current exploitative practices in place.

For children in J-1 and in areas of return:

- **Continue to strongly advocate for the facilitation of documentation for children, especially those born after 2014.** Documentation remains the single biggest barrier to the reintegration of children in areas of return, as it hinders their access to education. It not only leads to more years of lost schooling but also to social exclusion, which in turn puts young people at risk for exploitation, including by armed and criminal groups. Some changes have been made to help facilitate access to documents, and some schools have allowed children to access schools despite the lack of documentation, but this is still not enough. Continue to advocate for the GoI to remove additional procedures that are not spelled out in law to simplify and enable the process of establishing legal identity and accessing documentation for all, irrespective of wartime experience. In addition, there should be continued advocacy for the unconditional provision of civil documentation for every child irrespective of the status of the parents union in line with international humanitarian law and international human rights law.
- **Expand opportunities for all children and youth to engage in education and/or vocational training in J-1.** Data shows that children's mental health significantly improves over time in J-1, thanks to their reintegration into schools and opportunities to socialize. However, not all children are able to access these services in J-1, a problem that affects many more once they leave the Centre. There are financial pressures on many older children, boys, in particular, to enter the workforce once they leave J-1, so

support for these older children should include livelihood opportunities to achieve sustainable socioeconomic reintegration. Investing more heavily in children overall – and particularly in remedial education that keeps them engaged and encouraged to continue their studies - will be key in ensuring that families are reintegrated successfully into the areas of return, including in economic life.

- **Link returning households – those from NES and from situations of internal displacement - to existing social safety net programmes so that they can access relevant financial and other support and ensure their children can return to school.** Some returnee families are unable to send their children to school due to financial hardship. To ensure all returnee children can actually access school, including education support (e.g., school supplies, school fees, transportation costs) as part of longer-term reintegration support in areas of return is critical. Given this issue goes beyond short-term reintegration support provided by humanitarian actors, it is essential that the GoI and governorates examine education policies to ensure tens of thousands of conflict-affected children can pursue their education in the years to come. Moreover, it is important to note that the school-aged child is, at times, the only one who can work to support the family. Therefore, more robust programming may be needed to allow these families to cover basic needs while still allowing them to send their children to school.
- **Expand children’s access to psycho-social support and socializing opportunities in J-1 and in areas of return.** Data from children as well as from participatory work conducted with returnee children in Mosul, demonstrates how much children need opportunities to work through their trauma and daily stressors. Children – like adults – have socialized more with peers in J-1, through MHPSS programming, child friendly spaces and schools but they still lack trusted outlets to process experiences, especially in areas of return. This is true both with regard to access to trained mental health professionals as well as with safe spaces to share with their peers. Expanding these opportunities, especially in areas of return and in schools, will be key to the successful return and reintegration of children.

For long stayers in J-1 and potential areas of return:

- **Strongly advocate for the need to maintain the voluntary nature of the returns process- from return to Iraq from Al Hol all the way to return to areas of origin/return.** Anxiety among long-stayers in J-1 is high, as some families seem to be pressured to leave the Centre before they are ready to do so. Given the myriad of challenges facing returnees in areas of return and the high potential for things to go wrong, allowing families to make this move when they are ready to do so is critical to

ensuring successful outcomes. Anecdotal evidence shows that families who were pushed out too early have ended up in other camps or in informal settlements in cities with their children begging on the street. The pressure to make space for the subsequent cohorts from Al Hol necessitates an engagement with local leaders to adjust the informal requirements to return in a way that can balance the need to expedite returns from J-1 and community security concerns.

- **Create an enhanced system of support for families requiring assistance in identifying a preferred and safe pathway for moving out of the Centre.** There are families that are unlikely to leave in the medium or long term and would likely join other camps or informal settlements if they were pushed out of J-1. Recognizing that this alternative is problematic and undermines the reintegration prospects of these families and peacebuilding goals more broadly, a humane and rights-respecting alternative for these challenging cases needs to be found. Creating a system for enhanced support in identifying the best pathway out of J-1 will be crucial in preventing exploitation and the creation of make-shift camps or settlements around J-1 or elsewhere. This can be done by the GoI or through programmatic support by agencies working in this space.
- **Examine the specific needs of long-stayers and assess if programmes/interventions could be developed to help them meet their needs and return.** Many of the issues facing long-stayers are related to the security and political situations in areas of origin as well as issues with community acceptance, still others are awaiting family members still in Al Hol. Clearly identifying the needs of this population will enable the UN and its partners to assist, where possible.

In communities of return:

- **There continues to be a need for a systematic communications campaign in areas of return to improve messaging around returns, reintegration, and reconciliation.** In an environment where misinformation is rife, the GoI should strive to lead the messaging on the return and reintegration process. Survey data demonstrates that most community members have no idea about the return process and procedures and generally do not trust a government-led process, this feeling being most prevalent in Anbar. Given the highly sensitive nature of this topic and the fact that returns, both IDP and refugee returns, will continue in the years to come, getting the messaging right will be key to preventing violence and promoting social cohesion and successful reintegration. MEAC's research has shown in several conflict contexts that the community is more receptive to returns of former armed group affiliates when they have

more information about the return process.¹¹² In Iraq specifically, MEAC's research concludes that the lack of an organized, whole-of-government information campaign on returns from Al Hol "enabled contradictory views to emerge between government actors that muddied public understanding of the return process and potentially undermined community acceptance... [and ultimately] undermin[ed] community acceptance."¹¹³ If done well, a strategic communications campaign on the return process could help promote reintegration and even possibly community reconciliation.

- **Advocate for government-led development and expanded service presence in these under-served communities of return.** Many returnees are coming back to economically depressed areas where there are few jobs or basic services. There is resource competition, which can fuel tensions that undermine community acceptance. To help rebuild conflict-affected areas and promote community reconciliation, efforts to bolster economic opportunities and provide medical care, security, and civil administration are much needed. Any reintegration-specific interventions are unlikely to make progress when returnees come back to areas without jobs and basic government services to sustain economic and social life.
- **All programming targeting returnees in communities must adopt a conflict-sensitive approach that includes support for the host community as well as returnees.** Precarious economic conditions and lack of jobs in areas of return affect host communities as well as returnees. Male community members surveyed for this research adopted strong stances against targeted livelihood support to returning families, as their community as a whole is suffering from similar challenges. A whole-of-community approach must be adopted in areas of return so as to avoid causing tensions between returnees and the host community. This may go beyond community reintegration approaches to livelihood skills development and require more innovative silo-breaking interventions that marry reintegration goals with economic development.
- **Include, more prominently, the participation of women (and female heads of household) in local reconciliation efforts that target the reintegration of returnee**

¹¹² For example, "Women and girls' lower hypothetical acceptance [to returning former Boko Haram associates] may be due to a gendered information gap in Borno State, where they have less access to information in the public sphere. Given equivalent information about prospective repentant returnees, the gender gap in community members' willingness to accept returnees closes, and men and boys, and women and girls' respondents become equally likely – greater than 80 per cent – to accept former Boko Haram associates, regardless of the returnee's gender." See, Zoe Marks, Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, and Rebecca Littman, "[Understanding Receptivity to Returning Former Boko Haram Associates Through a Gender Lens](#)," *Findings Report 30*, UNIDIR, Geneva, 2023.

¹¹³ Jacqueline Parry and Yousif Khalid Khoshnaw, with Siobhan O'Neil, "[How Information Ecosystems Affect Conflict Transitions: Experiences from Al Hol and Iraq](#)," *MEAC Findings Report 23* (New York: United Nations University, 2022).

families with ISIL affiliation. Women and female heads of household, specifically, lead the majority of these returnee families, but they are also the ones who feel the most excluded from local reintegration efforts and public life more broadly. Cultural and social norms notwithstanding the fact that women are directly affected by the outcomes of these processes, their inclusion in them is key. International actors supporting reintegration are well placed to push for greater inclusion of women and female heads of household in the decision-making processes that will ultimately affect them and their families disproportionately.

MANAGING EXITS FROM ARMED CONFLICT



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