



**UNIDIR**

**MANAGING EXITS**  
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# Shadow Crossings: Informal Returnees 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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## Key findings

- **Defining informal returnees:** In addition to the formal returnees being repatriated by the Government of Iraq (GoI) from Al Hol, other Iraqis in North East Syria - both from the camp and those living in towns and cities - are returning home in other ways. For the purposes of this Report, informal returnees are defined as those specifically *leaving Al Hol* Camp and returning to Iraq informally, bypassing the official GoI return process.
- **Pathways to return:** A number of informal return pathways were identified through this research, but most informal returnees employ smugglers to help them leave Al Hol Camp and cross the border back into Iraq. Others chose to be smuggled into Turkey and then after acquiring a one-time re-entry document from the Iraqi consulate in Turkey, they crossed the border to Iraq.
- **Needs and access to basic services:** Informal returnees face similar challenges to formal returnees and IDP returnees, in particular with civil documentation, access and integration into the education system, and finding appropriate shelter and livelihood/employment opportunities. However, formal returnees have had a period of six months or more in Jeddah 1 Rehabilitation Centre where some are able to begin the process of acquiring new documents, giving them a head start on their reintegration journey once they have returned to areas of origin. Moreover, formal returnees have access to a return and reintegration grant, which informal returnees do not, giving the former a financial boost, albeit a small one, to help with shelter and livelihoods upon return.
- **Community acceptance:** Given the fact that the community at large generally is not aware of how individuals and families returned, at first glance it would seem informal returnees are not more vulnerable to community stigma than other types of returnee populations. However, those interviewed for this research spoke of the harassment they were subjected to by the community and authorities upon return, as they went through a security clearance process. Informal returnees also appear to lack civil documentation at even higher rates than other returnee populations, which reduces their mobility and increases their economic and security vulnerability. Many more informal returnees reported self-isolating as they continued to fear the community's perception of them. As for community leaders, they do know the difference between formal and informal returnees and some have refused to allow informal returnees into their communities altogether.

# Background

## About MEAC

How and why do individuals exit armed groups, and how do they do so sustainably without falling back into conflict cycles? These questions are at the core of UNIDIR's Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) initiative. MEAC is a multi-year, multi-partner collaboration that aims to develop a unified, rigorous approach to examining how and why individuals exit armed conflict and evaluating the efficacy of interventions meant to support their transition to civilian life. MEAC seeks to inform evidence-based programme design and implementation in real time to improve efficacy. At the strategic level, the cross-programme, cross-agency lessons that will emerge from the growing MEAC evidence base will support more effective conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts. The MEAC project benefits from generous support by the German Federal Foreign Office (GFFO); Global Affairs Canada (GAC); the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA); and the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs; and is run in partnership with UNICEF; and the International Organization for Migration (IOM); the UN Development Programme (UNDP); UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO); the World Bank; and United Nations University Centre for Policy Research (UNU-CPR).

## 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 primarily on qualitative research on different return and reintegration trajectories of Iraqis coming back to their country after a period of time in Syria, including in Al Hol Camp. The research was conducted from November 2023 to February 2024 in Ninewa and Anbar provinces and included interviews and focus groups with residents of the Jeddah 1 Rehabilitation Centre (J-1) in Ninewa, where formal returnees from Al Hol spend time before

they return to their area of origin.<sup>1</sup> The research team also interviewed service providers in the Centre. In areas that have received large numbers of formal and informal returns, specifically Mosul (Ninewa) and Rummanah, Qaim, Haditha, Ana, and Rawa (Anbar), interviews and focus groups were conducted with formal and informal returnees, community leaders, and community members.

The statistics presented in the report come from the survey data collected in three separate surveys between November and December 2023, which will be fully explored in a subsequent report.<sup>2</sup> One survey was with J-1 residents (n=229), and another was with former J-1 residents who have since resettled elsewhere, primarily in Anbar, Ninewa, and Salahaddin provinces, but also in Erbil, Kirkuk, and Baghdad provinces (n= 198). Finally, community members were surveyed in Mosul (Ninewa) and Qaim, Rummanah, Ana, Rawa, and Haditha (Anbar) to understand if and how perceptions of returnees have changed over time (n= 484).<sup>3</sup>

This MEAC findings report spotlights the trajectories of informal returnees, what barriers they face and how their reintegration progress may differ from those formally returning through the Government of Iraq-led process and the wider IDP returnee population.

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<sup>1</sup> As highlighted in several MEAC reports, some residents of the Centre have a hard time meeting exit and/or return requirements and ended up staying in the Centre for longer periods of time. There are people who have been pushed out of the Centre after long stays, but have not found anywhere where they are allowed to go, leaving them particularly vulnerable and often encamped in informal settlements near the Centre or in urban centres like Mosul. Schadi Semnani, Siobhan O'Neil, Mélisande Genat, and Yousif Khoshnaw, "Return and Reintegration Prospects for Iraqis Coming Back From Al Hol," *Findings Report 32*, UNIDIR, Geneva, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> All statistics reported are rounded to the nearest whole number. Missing data and statistics on respondents who select "refused to answer" are only reported when these are higher than expected or conceptually relevant.

<sup>3</sup> The full community survey includes 491 respondents. Since respondents for the community survey are randomly recruited, these samples sometimes include returnees. For this report, 7 randomly recruited returnees (formal and informal) are dropped from the analysis to ensure the findings accurately reflect community experiences and perceptions.

# Introduction

More than 3 million Iraqis were internally displaced during the war against ISIL between 2014 and 2018, with at least another 260,000 fleeing to neighbouring countries.<sup>4</sup> Tens of thousands of them were displaced across the border to Syria, in particular those who lived in governorates along the Syrian border, Anbar and Ninewa. Some of these displaced families were associated with ISIL and were displaced with the group as Coalition forces retook the cities in towns in the region. Many others were simply fleeing the Coalition offensive and had nothing to do with the group. Some of these Iraqi refugees settled in Syrian towns and cities, and others took refuge in camps, including Al Hol and Roj camps,<sup>5</sup> which were sheltering Iraqi refugees before 2018. Many more were taken to Al Hol camp during the 2018 battle for Baghouz, the last Syrian town under ISIL control. Some of the Iraqis who ended up in other parts of Syria during the war now want to come home but face a plethora of challenges in doing so, as there is no “formal” way for the Iraqis in North East Syria (outside of Al Hol) to make their way back over the border to Iraq.

Since May 2021, the Government of Iraq (GoI) has organized 14 official convoys repatriating Iraqis from Al Hol back to Iraq. Through this process, the GoI has returned 8,199 Iraqis from the estimated 30,000 that were in Al Hol camp as of early 2019, when it became a closed camp and residents were no longer able to leave.<sup>6</sup> In addition to these estimated 30,000 Iraqis who resided in Al Hol camp (a 2019 figure), an unknown number of Iraqis currently living in Syrian towns and cities. In 2022, the GoI was in talks with authorities in Syria to set up official registration centres in North East Syria so that those Iraqis living there who wished to return could register to do so.<sup>7</sup> This plan does not seem to have come to fruition. However, over the past few years, there have been return trips organized by tribal Shaykhs, as well as by individual parliamentarians. While not part of a federal government formal process, these sponsored returns have at least the tacit approval of the GoI, and the involvement of high-ranking elected officials gives an air that these are at least “semi-official” in nature. It is unclear how many people have returned in this way, as these returnees are not taken to a central location in Iraq before returning to their areas of origin like those returning from Al Hol who transit through J-1. Rather, the semi-formal returns appear to be taking place on an ad hoc basis led by influential Shaykhs. Moreover, in addition to the formal process and the semi-formal process described

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<sup>4</sup> UNHCR, “[Iraq Refugee Crisis Explained](#),” November 2019.

<sup>5</sup> As of January 2023, there were thought to be a few hundred Iraqis in Roj Camp, but the Camp is primarily for foreigners, and Roj is not part of the official return process from by GoI. All of the returnees interviewed by MEAC at Jeddah-1 over the last two years have come from Al Hol.

<sup>6</sup> IOM, Jeddah-1 rehabilitation centre demographics.

<sup>7</sup> Author interviews (Iraq, February 2023)

above, a number of returnees from Al Hol have returned “informally”, through smuggling routes.

The report will focus on the informal returnee population. The report will discuss how informal returnees have made their way back to Iraq and whether the manner in which they returned affects their reintegration prospects. There is particular attention to their access to basic services and civil documentation, as well as the stigma associated to their return path and community receptivity to them.

## Methodology

This report draws its findings primarily on qualitative data collected between November 2023 and February 2024 in the Ninewa and Anbar provinces. The goal of the qualitative interviews was to better understand the experiences of informal returnees, as they compare to those of formal returnees and to understand community perceptions vis-à-vis this particular sub-section of returnees with perceived affiliation to ISIL. It is important to situate these findings in the broader context of returnees, both formal ones coming through the Jeddah-1 rehabilitation centre and IDP returnees, all of whom face similar challenges and barriers to reintegration.

Location	Type of respondent/group	Male	Female
J-1	Resident KIIs	5	16
	Resident FGDs	5	6
	Section Leaders KIIs		4
	I/NGOs KIIs	8	
Mosul, Ninewa	Formal returnee KIIs		6
	Informal returnee KIIs		4 (3 of which were “semi-official” returnees)
	Community leaders KIIs	4	6
Qaim and Rummanah, Anbar	Community members FGDs	2	2
	Formal returnees KIIs	9	8
	Informal returnee KIIs	4	7
	Community leaders KIIs	13	
Ana and Rawa, Anbar	Community members FGDs	2	2
	Formal returnee KIIs	0	4
	Informal returnee KIIs	1	3
	Community leaders KIIs	2	
Haditha, Anbar	Community members FGDs	2	1
	Formal returnee KIIs	0	3
	Community leaders KIIs	1	
	Community members FGDs	0	0



# Informal Returnees

The next section starts with a definition of the informal returnee phenomenon as it is defined for the purpose of this Report. Then, the Report will examine the pathways to return, as described to the research team by informal returnees themselves. The Report then looks at informal returnees' access to services and their reception by the community. It concludes by examining the policy and programming implications of the findings presented herein.

## Defining Informal Returns

For the purposes of this report, “informal returnees” are those Iraqis who left Al Hol camp in or after 2018, when it became a closed camp and returned to Iraq bypassing the government-led process that began in early 2021. For the purpose of this report, the semi-official repatriations of Iraqis living in Syria towns and cities, who are sponsored by Shaykhs, are not considered informal returnees. As noted above, some tribal leaders have facilitated the return of their fellow tribesmen, who go through some type of security vetting (although it is unclear what that vetting entails (see footnote below)),<sup>8</sup> before they return home. Interviews suggest that these semi-official returns use al-Yaroubia crossing, in Rabia, which is not generally open to the public. According to semi-official returnees, they were given permission to pass thereby relevant – but unspecified - authorities. The “semi-formal” returnees interviewed by MEAC were families of mixed Syrian-Iraqi couples, who had moved across the border to Syria when war conditions in Iraq became too difficult and decided to return to Iraq when the war with ISIL was over.<sup>9</sup> These families do not fall under the “informal returnees” category for the purpose of this Report.

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<sup>8</sup> There have been recent discussion of Shaykhs facilitating “returns” which some have described as “informal returns. For example, in late 2022, Naif McKayf, a powerful Shammar shaykh from Rabia, a member of the Iraqi Parliament, sponsored 50 families to return from Syria. He has sponsored many other families from Rabia on a tribal basis (most families are also Shammar tribesmen), he has done this a number of times, including in 2023. The family we spoke to that returned in this way said they heard about this sponsorship program through friends and decided to register. It took a few months during which they were screened and then they were allowed to return. Another family that came through Naif McKayf’s sponsorship program heard of it on social media. A page was created with a number to call. They registered and it took about a year before they were informed they could cross back. They have relatives who returned in 2019 to Iraq through a similar tribal sponsorship program. That time it was Ahmad Madlul, a Shammar member of the Parliament who organized it. Families who returned at that time were first sent to the Hamam al-’Ali camp for a few weeks where they were screened. They were later allowed to return to Baaj and Rabi’a, where they were from.

<sup>9</sup> MEAC, *Semi-Formal Returnee KII #1* (Mosul, November 2023); MEAC, *Semi-Formal Returnee KII #2* (Mosul, November 2023); MEAC, *Semi-Formal Returnee KII #3* (Mosul, November 2023)



## Pathways to Return

Individuals and families living in Al Hol camp have been making their way back to Iraq informally since before the formal process began in 2021. A number of informal returnees interviewed for this research returned to Iraq in 2019 and 2020, before the government began to repatriate Iraqis from the camp. They did so because they did not know if and when they would ever be allowed back into the country.<sup>10</sup> Others have been coming back informally despite there being a formal return process because that process is very slow. To date, only 8,199 people have been repatriated in the three years it has been running. The official return process is at times, unpredictable; it has been suspended multiple times with no clear timeline communicated as to when it would start up again.<sup>11</sup> The pace and uncertainty of repatriation, along with the extremely harsh living conditions and safety concerns in Al Hol have pushed people to leave informally.<sup>12</sup> Others still, have left informally for personal reasons, with some women leaving the camp to join their husbands in Turkey.<sup>13</sup>

Al Hol camp's size and safety concerns prevent camp staff from being able to roam freely through the camp, thus making it impossible to keep an up-to-date registry of all camp residents. If/when a family/individual informally leaves the camp, it can take a long time before camp management finds out that a tent is empty or that individuals from a certain family have left- if they ever find out at all. As such, there is no up-to-date, accurate data on the number of Iraqis in the camp, making it very difficult to know how many have left informally. Moreover, those who have left informally have not all returned to Iraq. Of those who have returned to Iraq, only the individuals who have returned to their areas of origin will potentially be accounted for, as community leaders are likely to know about their return. Some informal returnees have gone to Turkey and remained there and others, still, have gone to the Kurdish Regional of Iraq (KRI) or elsewhere in Iraq for work opportunities or to "start anew" where no one will know them. Given all of this, it is nearly impossible to know how many people have actually left Al Hol informally and what percentage of this population has made its way back to Iraq.

There are widespread reports of active smuggling of people and things in and out of Al Hol camp, with the help of the Syrian Democratic Forces, who guard the camp.<sup>14</sup> Informal returnees interviewed for this Report explained the process: Camp residents can pay about \$4,000 per

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<sup>10</sup> MEAC, *Returnee KII #8* (Anbar, February 2024); MEAC, *Returnee KII #24* (Anbar, February 2024)

<sup>11</sup> MEAC, *Returnee KII #25* (Anbar, February 2024)

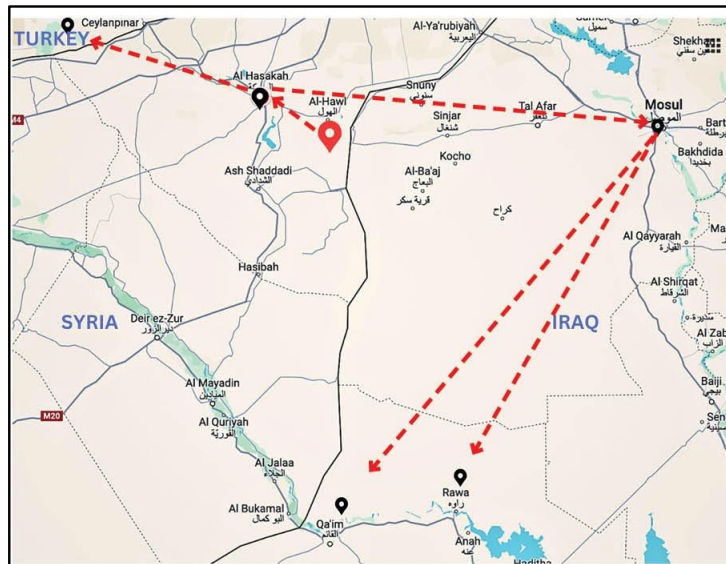
<sup>12</sup> MEAC, *Returnee KII #22* (Anbar, February 2024); MEAC, *Returnee KII #16* (Anbar, February 2024); MEAC, *Returnee KII #6* (Anbar, February 2024)

<sup>13</sup> MEAC, *Returnee KII #20* (Anbar, February 2024)

<sup>14</sup> Daraj, "[Syria: Smuggling Out of the Hell of Al-Hol](#)," 25 May 2021.

person to be smuggled out of the camp to Al Hassakah City, which is about an hour away from the Iraq border.<sup>15</sup> From there, smugglers can take individuals to Turkey or to Mosul in Iraq. Some Iraqis have chosen to go to – and remain in - Turkey, particularly men who believe (or know) they are wanted in Iraq. Others have transited through Turkey as a way to get back to Iraq. In this case, returnees have gone to the Iraqi Embassy in Turkey<sup>16</sup> saying that they lost their passport and have requested travel documents to return to Iraq. The Consulate provides these people with “white papers”- a document that will allow for a one-time re-entry to Iraq.<sup>17</sup> There are many Iraqi refugees in Turkey, so this is a system developed to allow these refugees, who may not have documents, to return home. As long as the individual is not wanted by Iraqi authorities, and does not think they will be arrested upon re-entry to Iraq, those smuggled out of Al Hol camp have been able to use this process to return to Iraq. A few other respondents left Al Hol for other parts of Syria for medical treatment, and there is no follow-up to ensure they returned to the camp. Given that there is no follow-up, some respondents said that residents in the camp try to bribe medical staff to refer them for outside medical treatment. Once out of Al Hol, they were able to smuggle themselves to Turkey and continue on to Iraq from there.<sup>18</sup> One interviewee who was sent to Damascus from Al Hol for medical treatment went directly to the airport in Damascus instead and took a flight back to Iraq.<sup>19</sup>

**FIGURE 1 – PATHWAYS TO RETURN**



<sup>15</sup> MEAC, *Returnee KII #3* (Anbar, February 2024)

<sup>16</sup> Some interviewees said “the Embassy” while others specified “the Consulate.” It is possible that some interviewees did not make the distinction and it was indeed the Consulate. There are three Iraqi consulates in Turkey, and it interviewees did not specify which one they used.

<sup>17</sup> MEAC, *Returnee KII #31* (Anbar, February 2024); MEAC, *Returnee KII #30* (Anbar, February 2024); MEAC, *Returnee KII #25* (Anbar, February 2024); MEAC, *Returnee KII #22* (Anbar, February 2024); MEAC, *Returnee KII #16* (Anbar, February 2024); MEAC, *Returnee KII #6* (Anbar, February 2024).

<sup>18</sup> MEAC, *Returnee KII #17* (Anbar, February 2024); MEAC, *Returnee KII #2* (Anbar, February 2024)

<sup>19</sup> MEAC, *Returnee KII #32* (Anbar, February 2024)

Those who decide to go directly to Iraq from Hassake city are smuggled through the border all the way to Mosul. One particular respondent reported having been arrested upon arrival in Mosul. He spent over a year in prison there but was finally able to return home after paying a hefty fee to facilitate his release.<sup>20</sup> For those who avoid detection in Mosul, smugglers usually take people from there back to their specific area of origin in Anbar, assisting them through local checkpoints, as many are undocumented.<sup>21</sup> It is widely reported that on the Iraqi side of the border, armed are running the smuggling operations.<sup>22</sup>

## Needs and Access to Services

It must be noted that most of the reintegration challenges described below affect not only informal returnees but formal and semi-formal ones and IDPs with perceived ISIL affiliation as well. Moreover, issues with access to basic services, poverty and lack of livelihood options were mentioned by all interviews as affecting the host communities as well as returnees. For example, those living in informal settlements in Mosul, host and returnee populations alike, have a high rate of out-of-school kids due to poverty, as children need to work to help financially support the family.<sup>23</sup> Houses of ISIL victims in Anbar, like those of returnees, are also in need of rehabilitation. As one group of young men in Mosul concluded, the returnees are “not worse off than us, we all need employment and better services.”<sup>24</sup> Given the near-universal challenges, the particular differences in the lived experiences of informal returnees and other populations in Anbar and Ninewa are highlighted in the sections below.

### Housing

As is the case for many Iraqis regardless of their manner of return, securing shelter is a major challenge for many returnees. Housing rehabilitation, along with general financial support, were the single most important needs upon return.<sup>25</sup> Many of the returnees live in the homes of other family members.<sup>26</sup> A quarter of the informal returnees MEAC interviewed moved into their damaged homes, for lack of a better option.<sup>27</sup> One female respondent was living alone with her

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<sup>20</sup> MEAC, *Returnee KII #3* (Anbar, February 2024)

<sup>21</sup> MEAC, *Returnee KII #8* (Anbar, February 2024); MEAC, *Returnee KII #18* (Anbar, February 2024)

<sup>22</sup> Interviewees mentioned the PMF and specifically, Katibet Hezbollah. MEAC, *Community Leader KII #11* (Anbar, February 2024); MEAC, *Community Leader KII #15* (Anbar, February 2024).

<sup>23</sup> MEAC, *Community Leader KII #3* (Mosul, November 2023)

<sup>24</sup> MEAC, *FGD #1 Young Men* (Mosul, November 2023)

<sup>25</sup> MEAC, *Returnee KII #3* (Anbar, February 2024); MEAC, *Returnee KII #16* (Anbar, February 2024); MEAC, *Returnee KII #22* (Anbar, February 2024); MEAC, *Returnee KII #15* (Anbar, February 2024); MEAC, *Returnee KII #7* (Mosul, November 2023)

<sup>26</sup> MEAC, *Returnee KII #18* (Anbar, February 2024); MEAC, *Returnee KII #20* (Anbar, February 2024)

<sup>27</sup> MEAC, *Returnee KII #3* (Anbar, February 2024); MEAC, *Returnee KII #6* (Anbar, February 2024); MEAC, *Returnee KII #22* (Anbar, February 2024);

children in their damaged home - with no windows, doors, or furniture. Her husband lives in Turkey and she has no contact with him, let alone any financial support from him.<sup>28</sup> Another family whose own home was too damaged to live in reported living in the home of relatives who are still in Al Hol, knowing that they would need to vacate the home once that family returns.<sup>29</sup> The situation of formal returnees is not significantly better. Up to 16 per cent of those surveyed in areas of return in November-December 2023 reported they still live in damaged homes,<sup>30</sup> more than twice the rate of the larger community (7 per cent).<sup>31</sup> Some IDP returnees (and community members in areas of return) have benefited from UN assistance in repairing their homes,<sup>32</sup> but the returnees from Syria do not appear to receive this type of support. While it is difficult to compare given the methods and sample sizes involved, it does appear that informal returnees are impacted by housing damage at an even higher rate than other returning populations.

## Documentation

Documentation challenges facing informal returnees mirror those of other undocumented returnees, with children being the most likely family members to be undocumented. The one palpable difference is that those returnees coming through Jeddah-1 have often had the opportunity to start the process of issuing/renewing documentation in the Centre. International organizations and some governorate offices have been supporting documentation in the Centre,<sup>33</sup> improving the chances that those transiting the Centre will acquire at least one form of documentation before leaving it. Thus, upon return, formal returnees generally receive all their documents sooner than informal returnees, who need a longer time after return to acquire documentation. Only one-quarter of the informal returnees interviewed said that they had all their documents; the rest had at least one or more children and/or other family members missing documents.<sup>34</sup> This is compared<sup>35</sup> to 63 per cent of formal returnees surveyed back in their areas of return who said they had all their documents.<sup>36</sup> Among community members

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<sup>28</sup> MEAC, *Returnee KII #31* (Anbar, February 2024)

<sup>29</sup> MEAC, *Returnee KII #3* (Anbar, February 2024)

<sup>30</sup> MEAC, *Survey with former J-1 residents back in areas of return* (November 2023)

<sup>31</sup> MEAC, *Survey with Community Members* (November and December 2023)

<sup>32</sup> IOM, *Durable Solutions Programming and UNDP Community-based Reconciliation & Reintegration in Iraq* (C2RI) programming in areas of return.

<sup>33</sup> "Since the start of UNHCR's civil documentation efforts in J1 in May 2021 (with the start of the repatriations), 384 Iraqi Nationality Certificates, 209 National Unified IDPs, 17 Proofs of Birth and seven Marriage Certificates were issued for J1 returnees." UNHCR, "Iraq Factsheet," August 2023, p. 3.

<sup>34</sup> MEAC, *16 Returnee KIIs* (Anbar and Mosul, November 2023 and February 2024)

<sup>35</sup> It has to be noted that there is both a methodological and sample disjoint in this comparison. First, the estimate about informal returnees comes from semi-structured interviews, whereas the datapoint on formal returnees comes from a survey. Second, both formal and informal returnees have returned at different times. Informal returnees included in this analysis have returned between 6 weeks and 3 years ago. Formal returnees included in this analysis have returned between 9 months and 3 years ago. This means that there is range of return durations in each group. Variation in access to documentation could be impacted by duration in area of origin/return.

<sup>36</sup> MEAC, *Survey with former J-1 residents back in areas of return* (November 2023)

surveyed, 98 per cent said they have all their documents.<sup>37</sup> As previously documented, returnees are disproportionately affected by the documentation issue, with informal returnees being more affected than formal ones, as they will not have had the opportunity to begin the process in J-1 with the help of INGO's legal teams.

Women who returned informally, much like those who came through J-1, have greater difficulty acquiring documentation. This is particularly the case for key documents like marriage and divorce certificates. The process can take upwards of a year to complete, even with the assistance of an IO/NGO.<sup>38</sup> One newly arrived informally returned woman described her feeling of despair in the face of highly complex procedures to get marriage and divorce certificates and birth certificates for her children that she is not even planning on attempting to do so.<sup>39</sup> While J-1 can provide an advantage in (re)acquiring documentation, there are limits depending on the types of documents sought. Often, female heads of household coming from Jeddah-1 are not able to begin the process of getting marriage, divorce, or birth certificates in the Centre as these documents often require *Tabriya* or other procedures that cannot be done while in J-1. So even formal returnees need to start the process from scratch upon return, just like informal returnees.<sup>40</sup>

Men who returned informally spoke of the difficulty in getting a federal government security vetting which is a pre-condition to getting documentation.<sup>41</sup> Returnees coming through J-1 do not have this issue as a security clearance was a departure requirement from J-1 and so before return, they have already secured one. Some returnees, including formal ones, never get a local clearance to return to their areas of origin due to tribal vendettas or the presence of certain armed groups who forbid families from returning, creating major challenges in acquiring the basic documentation necessary to issue documents for themselves and their children.<sup>42</sup>

It must be noted that some of the informal returnees, in particular those without young children, said they were able to renew all their documents upon return to their area of origin.<sup>43</sup> Of those who had their documents, most said they only took a few months to renew, they renewed them without a lawyer, but that they had to pay a bribe to push their paperwork through the process.<sup>44</sup> Certain documents are reported to be of greater importance and thus the time it takes to (re)acquire them weighs more heavily on the individual/household. Respondents reported that

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<sup>37</sup> MEAC, *Survey with Community Members* (November and December 2023)

<sup>38</sup> MEAC, *Returnee KII #17* (Anbar, February 2024); *Returnee KII #30* (Anbar, February 2024)

<sup>39</sup> MEAC, *Returnee KII #31* (Anbar, February 2024)

<sup>40</sup> MEAC, *J-1 Service Provider KII #1* (Ninewa, November 2023)

<sup>41</sup> MEAC, *Returnee KII #2* (Anbar, February 2024)

<sup>42</sup> MEAC, *Returnee KII #32* (Anbar, February 2024)

<sup>43</sup> MEAC, *Returnee KII #18* (Anbar, February 2024)

<sup>44</sup> MEAC, *Returnee KII #8* (Anbar, February 2024)

the ration card is of particular importance for female-headed households as will be described further in the livelihood section.<sup>45</sup>

## Education

As is the case with all other returnee populations, whether they are formal or informal returnees from Syria or IDPs, young children, especially those born in or after 2014, are the most difficult to procure documents for. The biggest repercussion of being undocumented is being denied access to school enrolment.<sup>46</sup> Despite the directive from the Ministry of Education to enrol children even if they lack documents, some school directors still refuse to do so.<sup>47</sup> One school director interviewed in Mosul admitted that she refuses to enrol children who she knows have returned from Al Hol camp specifically, but does not prevent the enrolment of other undocumented children.<sup>48</sup> Another school director in Mosul said that she has been enrolling undocumented returnee children this year - although she had been refusing to do so last year - because NGOs have exerted pressure on her to do so by accompanying these families to schools and providing a letter from the Ministry of Education requiring the school to register the children.<sup>49</sup> One woman said that she was finally able to register her son in school because a UNICEF representative accompanied her to the school and put pressure on the school administration to comply with the request.<sup>50</sup>

## Livelihood and Employment

Employment continues to be difficult for all returnees, with financial assistance being unanimously the most pressing need upon return. Informal returnees all said they have trouble covering their basic needs, just like formal returnees, of which 79 per cent of which said they have a lot of difficulties and 16 per cent said they had some difficulty meeting their needs.<sup>51</sup> Among the wider community in these locations, 24 per cent said they have *a lot* of difficulty meeting their needs while almost 38 per cent said they have *some* difficulty meeting their needs, demonstrating the overall financial hardship present in the communities to which returnees are coming back to – albeit not quite at the level experienced by returnees.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> MEAC, *Returnee KII #2* (Anbar, February 2024)

<sup>46</sup> MEAC, *Returnee KII #20* (Anbar, February 2024); MEAC *Returnee KII #8* (Anbar, February 2024); MEAC, *Returnee KII #30* (Anbar, February 2024)

<sup>47</sup> UNICEF, "[Iraq Humanitarian Situation Report](#)," December 2018; NRC, "[Barrier from birth: undocumented children in Iraq sentenced to a life on the margins](#)," April 2019.

<sup>48</sup> MEAC, *Community Leader KII #5* (Mosul, November 2023)

<sup>49</sup> MEAC, *Community Leader KII #6* (Mosul, November 2023); MEAC, *Returnee KII #7* (Mosul, November 2023)

<sup>50</sup> MEAC, *Returnee KII #7* (Mosul, November 2023)

<sup>51</sup> MEAC, *Survey with former J-1 residents back in areas of return* (November 2023)

<sup>52</sup> MEAC, *Survey with Community Members* (November and December 2023)

Some returnees – regardless of how they returned – face specific barriers to getting jobs because of their past perceived involvement with ISIL.<sup>53</sup> One informal male returnee who used to be employed by the health directorate in Anbar was dismissed from his job in 2018 for his perceived involvement with the group at the time (which he insinuated was assumed because he had been in Syria) and despite attempts to get his job back, he has not succeeded.<sup>54</sup> However, most returnees said that the biggest barrier to getting a job was the lack of employment in areas of return, with 82 per cent of formal returnees attributing their inability to find employment to the lack of jobs in the area.<sup>55</sup> Economic woes impact everyone, although not to the same extent; 37 per cent of community members said the lack of job opportunities in their community was the main barrier to finding employment<sup>56</sup> The difference, however, is that the coping mechanisms developed by community members to deal with this issue - finding work in nearby cities and towns - are not necessarily available to returnees who are undocumented or for those who fear encounters with local authorities and armed groups at checkpoints.<sup>57</sup> As the documentation issue appears to impact informal returnees more than any other returnee population (e.g., IDPs, formal returnees from Al Hol), they likely have the least economic mobility to manage the lack of jobs in their areas of return, and thus, are rendered particularly vulnerable.

Female heads of household suffer multiple barriers to financial stability. Without adult, male breadwinners in the household and alternate caregivers in the family, and in the context of the highly conservative region of Iraq, female heads of household either cannot find work, are stigmatized for going to work, or cannot leave small children at home unattended while they work.<sup>58</sup> Many of the female heads of household interviewed said they depend on their ration cards to get by and need the provided food baskets to feed their families.<sup>59</sup> Sometimes it takes upwards of a year to acquire a ration card, depending on the complexity of the individual returnee's situation, which represents a huge burden on these households.

One significant difference between informal and formal returnees in terms of their financial situation is that those returning from J-1 are given return and reintegration grants that amount to 1,000 USD while informal returnees are not.<sup>60</sup> Informal returnees are painfully aware of the fact that their formal counterparts receive this financial assistance upon return and there have

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<sup>53</sup> MEAC, *Returnee KII #6* (Anbar, February 2024)

<sup>54</sup> MEAC, *Returnee KII #2* (Anbar, February 2024)

<sup>55</sup> MEAC, *Survey with Former J-1 residents back in areas of return* (November 2023)

<sup>56</sup> MEAC, *Survey with Community Members* (November and December 2023)

<sup>57</sup> MEAC, *Returnee KII #18* (Anbar, February 2024)

<sup>58</sup> MEAC, *Returnee KII #7* (Mosul, November 2023)

<sup>59</sup> MEAC, *Returnee KII #16* (Anbar, February 2024); MEAC, *Returnee KII #25* (Anbar, February 2024); MEAC, *Returnee KII #30* (Anbar, February 2024); MEAC, *Returnee KII #31* (Anbar, February 2024)

<sup>60</sup> Author interviews with UN personnel (Iraq, 2022-2023)



been rumours of the informal returnees trying (and at times succeeding) to add their names to the list of returnees from J-1 so that they can benefit from these grants.<sup>61</sup> One community leader said the gap is growing between the formal and informal returnees due to the financial and other assistance awarded to formal returnees.<sup>62 63</sup>

## Other Services

Most of the respondents did say that they have the same access to government services as their neighbours, however, they tend to live in areas where basic services are more scarce and less readily available.<sup>64</sup> Although access to medical treatment is not usually denied due to a lack of documentation, appropriate medical services are not readily available in the deprived towns and neighbourhoods where returnees settle, thus making documentation, for movement across checkpoints, a barrier to receiving appropriate medical treatment.<sup>65</sup> One mother spoke of her plight in getting her disabled child the care that he needs, as she and her child still do not have proper documents, one year after returning.<sup>66</sup> Financial constraints also prevent both formal and informal returnees from seeking necessary healthcare from hospitals and clinics far away.<sup>67</sup> Given that informal returnees have greater challenges and delays in procuring documentation, it is expected that they face greater hurdles in accessing necessary medical care.

Given the fact that returnees tend to hail from particularly marginalized and economically deprived areas of the country, their reintegration is hindered by the general lack of economic activity and employment opportunities as well as a lack of basic services in areas of return. However, informal returnees face additional challenges because they lack civil documentation at higher rates than other returnee populations (e.g., IDPs and formal returnees from Al Hol) which reduces their mobility and further hinders their ability to access services. Research suggests that informal returnees are a particularly vulnerable subset of returnees, as they have not benefited from I/NGO support in the form of grants and legal support in acquiring documents.

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<sup>61</sup> MEAC, *Community Leader KII #11* (Anbar, February 2024); MEAC, *Community Leader KII #3* (Anbar, February 2024); MEAC, *Community Leader KII #2* (Anbar, February 2024)

<sup>62</sup> MEAC, *Community Leader KII #11* (Anbar, February 2024). Note: in a discussion with IO staff, a ban (since lifted) on providing assistance to informal returnees was mentioned, but the research team was unable to find official documentation to corroborate this claim.

<sup>63</sup> Certain agencies have been explicitly prohibited by the GoI from supporting informal returnees, so as not to incentivize these types of returns. The GoI has recently changed its position on the matter and is allowing agencies to target these returnees in their programming. (From discussions with UN personnel, 2023)

<sup>64</sup> MEAC, *Returnee KII #2* (Anbar, February 2024); MEAC, *Returnee KII #18* (Anbar, February 2024)

<sup>65</sup> MEAC, *Returnee KII #31* (Anbar, February 2024); MEAC, *Returnee KII #16* (Anbar, February 2024)

<sup>66</sup> MEAC, *Returnee KII #16* (Anbar, February 2024)

<sup>67</sup> MEAC, *Returnee KII #17* (Anbar, February 2024)

## Community Perceptions

While stigma is an issue for all returnees in Iraq, informal returnees appear to face greater community suspicion than formal returnees. Of the formal and informal returnees interviewed for this report, many more of the informal returnees reported having felt uneasy by the way they were treated, including experiences of having their neighbours report them to authorities.<sup>68</sup> A number of returnees underwent thorough investigation by the authorities (unspecified by interviewees but likely local security actors), during which time they felt rejected and harassed by the community.<sup>69</sup> One woman still feels uncomfortable leaving her home because when she does she hears people call her an “ISIL wife.”<sup>70</sup> One elderly couple who returned informally to Anbar reported having had issues with some of their relatives upon arrival who filed a false complaint against them, claiming that their sons and grandchildren were members of ISIL, an accusation they deny.<sup>71</sup> Some of the informal returnees, in particular the men, continue to fear being arrested based on false accusations from community members. One respondent says that because he does have a family member who was in ISIL, he is viewed as an ISIL affiliate, and he lives in constant fear that one day he will be arrested.<sup>72</sup>

Despite the initial harassment and discomfort the informal returnees reported feeling upon return, some said the situation improved over time and that they do not feel mistreated by local authorities anymore. Some expressed optimism that with time, the situation will continue to improve.<sup>73</sup> One male informal returnee who had experienced harassment upon arrival said that after the security clearance process was finalized, the situation normalized and he no longer felt particularly vulnerable in his community.<sup>74</sup>

Despite earlier research that suggested that many community members had difficulty discerning how a returnee had come back to Iraq and other details of their story,<sup>75</sup> it is clear community leaders do have visibility on those coming back. For example, community leaders interviewed in Anbar province were well aware of the difference between formal and informal returnees and they provided the MEAC research team with figures for formal and informal returnees in their communities. These estimates suggest that informal returnees compose a

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<sup>68</sup>MEAC, *Returnee KII #18* (Anbar, February 2024); MEAC, *Returnee KII #25* (Anbar, February 2024)

<sup>69</sup> MEAC, *Returnee KII #22* (Anbar, February 2024); MEAC, *Returnee KII #18* (Anbar, February 2024)

<sup>70</sup> MEAC, *Returnee KII #18* (Anbar, February 2024)

<sup>71</sup> MEAC, *Returnee KII #24* (Anbar, February 2024)

<sup>72</sup> MEAC, *Returnee KII #2* (Anbar, February 2024)

<sup>73</sup> MEAC, *Returnee KII #18* (Anbar, February 2024); MEAC, *Returnee KII #8* (Anbar, February 2024); MEAC, *Returnee KII #16* (Anbar, February 2024)

<sup>74</sup> MEAC, *Returnee KII #8* (Anbar, February 2024)

<sup>75</sup> Schadi Semnani, Siobhan O’Neil, Mélisande Genat, and Yousif Khoshnaw, “Return and Reintegration Prospects for Iraqis Coming Back From Al Hol,” *Findings Report 32*, UNIDIR, Geneva, 2023.

significant proportion of the returnee population in some parts of Anbar; estimates ranged from 20 to as high as 60 per cent.<sup>76</sup>

Not all communities are willing to accept informal (or, in some cases, any) returnees. Community leaders in one community in Anbar were clear that they would not accept any informal returnees and have only accepted individuals who have gone through the official government process via J-1.<sup>77</sup> It is unclear if any family has managed to return informally and is staying off the radar, but given the nature of smaller cities and towns in the region where everyone knows one another, it is unlikely that families could have returned undetected. In another community in Anbar, the community is adamantly opposed to having men return and is only accepting female-headed households. As a result of such a policy, one male interviewee from Anbar settled elsewhere in the country because he was unable to go back home. Not being able to return to his area of origin impacted his ability to renew/acquire documents for himself and his children,<sup>78</sup> highlighting the knock-on effects of such policies.

Although community leaders understand the difference between formal and informal returnees, the community leaders confirmed that the community at large does not. Rather, community members primarily judge returnees based on their known history and past actions in the community not on *how* they returned.<sup>79</sup> During focus group discussions, this point was corroborated by community members themselves who said they were unaware of the formal return procedures and also added that they judge families and individuals by what role they were known to have played in the community while ISIL controlled it.<sup>80</sup> Nearly a third said they did not know, 15 per cent said there was no difference between the groups and 14 per cent said it depends on the profile and background of the returnee.<sup>81</sup> However, 30 per cent did say that the community would be more comfortable with those Iraqis who had come through the government process. Similarly, when community members were asked if the community would feel more comfortable with returnees if they had spent some time in J-1, 54 per cent said they did not know and 10 per cent said no, while 35 per cent said yes.<sup>82</sup> Some of the male community

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<sup>76</sup> Based on MEAC research, Rummanah, was one example of a community having a particularly high level of informal returnees.

<sup>77</sup> The officials in Haditha, Anbar, said that they have 45 returnee families, all of whom have come back formally and that they would not accept informal returnees at all. The topic was not further probed in Haditha, as it seemed highly sensitive and so the team did not attempt to “find” any such returnees, given the issues it might pose if such families were identified.

<sup>78</sup> MEAC, *Returnee KII #32* (Anbar, February 2024)

<sup>79</sup> MEAC, *Community Leader KII #15* (Anbar, February 2024); MEAC, *Community Leader KII #3* (Anbar, February 2024); MEAC, *Community Leader KII #2* (Anbar, February 2024); MEAC, *Community Leader KII #13* (Anbar, February 2024)

<sup>80</sup> MEAC, *FGD #3 Men* (Qaim, February 2024); MEAC, *FGD #4 women* (Qaim, February 2024); MEAC, *FGD #2 women* (Rummanah, February 2024); MEAC, *FGD #5 men* (Rawa, February 2024); MEAC, *FGD #6 women* (Rawa, February 2024)

<sup>81</sup> MEAC, *Survey with community Members* (November and December 2023)

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

members in the focus groups did say they had heard of the camp “Jeddah” that people go through, but they have no idea who is chosen to be repatriated and how families leave the camp.<sup>83</sup> So while there is a sizeable minority that differentiates amongst returnees based on the particular return path they have taken, most respondents either do not or do not know what to think about the different processes. And there is a section of the public that judges returnees primarily on their personal conflict history (a theme that comes up frequently in the qualitative research).

Given the community’s lack of knowledge of the government-led return process, community leaders did not believe that community receptivity would be better vis-a-vis formal returnees and did not attribute possible improvement in community receptivity to additional government procedures and requirements. On the contrary, some community leaders advocated for getting rid of the *Tabriya* requirements as well as easing the security clearance process given the fact that most of the returnees are women and children and are thought to pose no threat to the community.<sup>84</sup> Others, however, believed it to be important to keep the security clearance procedures in place and to continue monitoring the families over the long term to ensure community safety, whether or not they returned formally or informally.<sup>85</sup>

All of the informal returnees interviewed in Anbar had gone back to their area of origin (rather than settled in a third location) and community leaders and community members there were clear that they would not be willing to accept returnees from other areas. In Mosul, the situation was different, as the anonymity of a larger city seems to be attracting many returnees who have been unable to return to their areas of origin in Ninewa and Anbar. One such woman from Anbar chose to move to informal settlements in Mosul fearing for the safety of her teenage son if she returned to her area of origin.<sup>86</sup>

Community leaders in Mosul were not aware of informal returnees who had resettled in the area. Some mentioned those who returned through tribal sponsorship programs (the “semi-official process described at the beginning of the report), but not those who would have crossed the border informally with the help of smugglers.<sup>87</sup> Community leaders insisted that the Iraqi state has a strong hold on security in Mosul and that all who have come back would have been

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<sup>83</sup> MEAC, *FGD #1 Men* (Rummanah, February 2024); MEAC, *FGD #7 men* (Ana, February 2024)

<sup>84</sup> MEAC, *Community Leader KII #15* (Anbar, February 2024); MEAC, *Community Leader KII #9* (Anbar, February 2024); MEAC, *Community Leader KII #7* (Anbar, February 2024)

<sup>85</sup> MEAC, *Community Leader KII #1* (Anbar, February 2024); MEAC, *Community Leader KII #3* (Anbar, February 2024); MEAC, *Community Leader KII #2* (Anbar, February 2024); MEAC, *Community Leader KII #11* (Anbar, February 2024)

<sup>86</sup> MEAC, *Returnee KII #7* (Mosul, November 2023)

<sup>87</sup> MEAC, *Community Leader KII #1* (Mosul, November 2023); MEAC, *Community Leader KII #8* (Mosul, November 2023)

screened by the security forces. Interviewees conveyed a strong sense of trust in the local security apparatus in Mosul as well.<sup>88</sup> There was not much fear of returnees expressed, rather these families were seen as poor, disadvantaged, primarily female-headed households, living in informal settlements on the outskirts of the city.<sup>89</sup> Moreover, as one community leader put it, “many people in Intesar [neighbourhood of Mosul] have ISIL relatives, so no one is in the position to discriminate against others.”<sup>90</sup> Some community members in Mosul even said it would be best for returnees to go straight home, rather than spend time languishing in a camp.<sup>91</sup>

Despite these reflections, it is clear that all returnees – including informal ones who may have resettled there - still face considerable challenges in Mosul. Some community leaders did say charities are still instructed not to provide support to families with perceived affiliation to ISIL and some landlords still refuse to rent their apartments to these families, especially if the female head of household has not done *Tabriya* yet.<sup>92</sup> Returnees in Mosul tend to live in dilapidated housing, primarily informal settlements that are threatened with removal.<sup>93</sup>

Given the fact that the community at large is generally unaware of the different return mechanisms, it could be expected that informal returnees would not be stigmatized or rejected by the community more than other returnees and acceptance might be driven by other factors (e.g. rural vs. urban areas of return). Informal returnees’ lack of security clearance upon return, however, appears to put them at a higher risk of harassment by authorities in the initial phases of return. Some community leaders have banned the return of informal returnees altogether. Moreover, the returnees themselves have reported high levels of fear and self-isolation, and have even weaker social networks and community support in their reintegration journey than other returnees.

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<sup>88</sup> MEAC, *Community Leader KII #7* (Mosul, November 2023); MEAC, *Community Leader KII #1* (Mosul, November 2023); MEAC, *Community Leader KII #10* (Mosul, November 2023); MEAC, *FGD #2 Men* (Mosul, November 2023); MEAC, *FGD #4 Women* (Mosul, November 2023)

<sup>89</sup> MEAC, *Community Leader KII #1* (Mosul, November 2023); MEAC, *FGD #3 Young Women* (Mosul, November 2023)

<sup>90</sup> MEAC, *Community Leader KII #10* (Mosul, November 2023)

<sup>91</sup> MEAC, *FGD #3 Young Women* (Mosul, November 2023)

<sup>92</sup> MEAC, *Community Leader KII #9* (Mosul, November 2023); MEAC, *Community Leader KII #2* (Mosul, November 2023)

<sup>93</sup> MEAC, *Returnee KII #7* (Mosul, November 2023)

# Considerations and Recommendations

The plight of informal returnees is not unlike that of formal returnees from Syria and IDP returnees with perceived ISIL affiliation. The former's financial situation is particularly dire and their lack of documentation and relatedly, lack of access to some basic services continues to prevent them from returning to a more normal life. They also suffer from community stigma as they return and attempt to reintegrate into particularly destitute areas of the country. Informal returnees, however, may have additional challenges, or encounter even bigger obstacles to reintegration, given the way in which they returned to Iraq. Certain communities will not receive them at all because they have bypassed the official return process. Many informal returnees continue to feel very frightened about going out and crossing checkpoints. This is in part driven by the high levels of missing documentation among informal returnees which curtails the economic opportunities they can pursue and the services that they can access further afield. While their needs may be particularly acute amongst returnees, singling these individuals and families out may cause more problems for them. Programming that seeks to assist informal returnees in reintegrating must take a whole-of-community approach, which will also increase the chances of reducing the resentment of recipient communities.

Some recommendations for programming are detailed below.

- **Be aware of the location-specific sensitivities surrounding informal returnees.** Through this research, it has become abundantly clear that certain locations are more accepting (and aware) of informal returnees than others. Given the sensitivities around informal returns, IOs/NGOs working with returnees must be aware of the specific biases in the locations where they operate to avoid exacerbating tensions among different subsets of returnees as well as between the host community and the returnees.
- **Prioritize shelter projects.** Improved access to safe housing would significantly improve reintegration prospects for returnees. This issue, in particular, disproportionately affects returnees, whether it be their inability to repair their damaged homes, financial hardships or landlord rejection that prevents them from renting regular apartments. This problem does, however, also affect the host population, including victims of ISIL. Comprehensive reconstruction projects to improve housing conditions for returnees and the host community alike would greatly improve the overall living

conditions in the communities of return and prevent resentment vis à vis returnees that such projects may create if they only targeted them.

- **Increase funding for legal support in areas of return.** Lack of key documentation is a major issue for both formal and informal returnees from Al Hol, as well as for IDP returnees. The need for legal support remains huge, especially in towns and cities that are attracting large numbers of returnees. IOs/NGOs working on legal support to these populations should prioritize support at areas of return, as many of these procedures cannot even be started at J-1 (and given that some people are bypassing the government return process entirely). This is especially important in cases involving children without birth certificates. Moreover, documentation challenges are often very specific to the area of origin and so lawyers with knowledge of the particular challenges of that location are crucial. Given the wide-ranging and long-term repercussions, a lack of documentation can have on the household and specifically on children, increasing legal support to all undocumented families in areas of return continues to be a top priority.
- **Continue pressure on schools to enrol undocumented children, as per the directive from the Ministry of Education.** Returnees in certain locations continue to report not being able to enrol their undocumented children in schools, despite the explicit instructions from the Ministry of Education to do so. IO/NGO pressure on specific schools, including instances where staff have accompanied families to register for school, has yielded positive outcomes. IOs/NGOs working with these families should increase their work in this respect as it has real and lasting positive impacts on children and their families.
- **Increase the number of income-generating and livelihoods programs in particularly deprived areas of return.** Host communities and returnees alike suffer from the lack of employment opportunities available in their areas, making poverty a major issue in these communities. Improving financial conditions for all would have a positive impact on reintegration prospects, especially in the poorest communities. For example, a number of respondents in Mosul said NGOs focus on West Mosul while East Mosul is poorer and more in need of support. Moreover, livelihood and income-generating programming targeting the entire community would contribute to improved host-returnee dynamics as the host community would not feel like it is competing with returnees for the very limited number of jobs available. While the goal of improving economic outcomes for everyone should be a priority, it is important to recognize that certain sub-populations face additional challenges that make it hard for them to access



economic opportunities. This is particularly true for women and for those without the documentation necessary to be mobile. In addition to documentation assistance, additional creative solutions are needed to assist those who face cultural or other barriers to entry to the job market.

- **Communicate clearly about the return process.** MEAC’s research across case studies has regularly highlighted the impact of access to information on the return process as being a key factor in community acceptance. Research suggests that communities in Iraq judge returnees based on their conflict histories, but those who settle in their area *from other areas of origin*, rarely have that information. While a security screening alone is unlikely to completely mollify communities about returnees, knowing more about return requirements at least lets them know there is a process in place and provides them with some information about accountability and security assessments made by authorities. It is clear that people are interested in knowing more about the process, as was the case of those community members interviewed in the focus groups in Anbar.<sup>94</sup>

Informal returnees from Al Hol will continue to make their way back to Iraq, despite the benefits of going through the formal repatriation process. The situation in the Al Hol camp is extremely dire, with conditions being described as inhumane by some international organizations.<sup>95</sup> The waits to return via the formal process are long and poorly communicated. In addition, there is currently no formal return process for Iraqis in Syria, but outside Al Hol. Given this reality, the GoI and those international organizations working with it to support the return and reintegration process should include this vulnerable subset of the returnee population in programming efforts. Moreover, designing programs that take into account the grievances of the community as a whole is most likely to have a positive long-term impact.

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<sup>94</sup> MEAC, *FGD #6 women* (Rawa, February 2024); MEAC, *FGD #5 men* (Rawa, February 2024).

<sup>95</sup> OHCHR, “Syria: UN experts urge 57 States to repatriate women and children from squalid camps,” Press Release, 08 February 2021.

# MANAGING EXITS FROM ARMED CONFLICT



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