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From Al Hol to Hope: Navigating Return and Reintegration Challenges

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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

- The inability to procure or renew civil documentation continues to severely impact the return trajectories of Iraqis returning to their country after time in Al Hol. Respondents from female-headed households in Jeddah-1 Rehabilitation Centre (J-1) remain significantly more likely to report that their family members are missing documentation, especially children. While there has been considerable investment in documentation support in the Centre, governorate policies and practices, in particular changes or lack thereof in administration and judges at the local level, appear to present continued challenges for those trying to acquire or renew documents in some areas of return.
- It appears that finding a sponsor is getting easier for J-1 residents. A large majority of residents no longer cite difficulties finding a sponsor as a barrier to leaving the Centre. The type of support offered by sponsors, however, continues to vary enormously, ranging from simply satisfying the minimum requirement of providing transport from the Centre to the area of return to broader support (e.g., help facilitating community acceptance).
- Amongst surveyed J-1 residents, there has been an increase in reported support networks (financial and non-financial) and optimism in how they anticipate they will be received by their community upon return. The latter may be driven by feedback from previous returnees who have had positive experiences, but are thought to vary by gender, governorate, and family background.
- Reported participation in activities and services in J-1 has increased. In particular mental health and psychosocial support, and skills training have been accessed and considered useful. Considerable challenges remain regarding the participation of women residents, as well as frustrations with the provision and quality of education and medical services.

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; UNICEF; and is run in partnership with 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 examines the return experiences of Iraqis who have been repatriated back to their country after years in Al Hol Camp in Syria. It draws on original qualitative research and surveys with a sample of residents of the Jeddah-1 Rehabilitation Centre in Ninewa (J-1) in March 2023 and with a different sample of residents in November-December 2023. The report examines how the return process and reintegration prospects have evolved for different cohorts of returnees, with a particular focus on how long returning cohorts stay in the Centre, whether they access services there, and how perceptions of the expected familial and community receptivity have shifted over time.

Introduction

This report examines a key stage of the return process for those Iraqis who are coming back to their country after years in Al Hol Camp in Syria. The MEAC Project has used quantitative and qualitative research to understand how the process has evolved with time and the different challenges and perspectives of returning cohorts in order to inform evidence-based policy and practice to promote reintegration. This report draws on two surveys conducted in Jeddah-1 Rehabilitation Centre in Ninewa (J-1) in March 2023 with 213 then-residents and a November-December 2023 survey with a different sample of 229 then-residents. The report also draws from interviews and focus group discussions conducted with residents, section leaders, and service providers conducted in November and December 2023 to complement the quantitative data. The report begins by providing a background on the population looking to return to Iraq and the return process. It then highlights changes over time in the return process, specifically focusing on the time different cohorts spend in J-1. It addresses barriers to leaving the Centre, if and how they have changed over time, and how the governorate of origin affects residents' ability to meet requirements to leave the Centre. It also discusses J-1 residents' perception of what awaits them upon return, particularly with regard to the reception they will receive from family and community. Finally, it explores the utilization of services in J-1 and how gender dynamics impact access to services, before examining the policy and programming implications of the findings.

Background

The war against Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) between 2014 and 2018 led to millions of Iraqis being displaced, with more than 260,000 fleeing to neighbouring countries.¹ Tens of thousands of these Iraqis who had lived in Anbar and Ninewa, governorates that border Syria, were displaced across the border. Some of these displaced Iraqis were fleeing the violence as Coalition forces retook control over the region and had nothing to do with ISIL. Others were associated to different degrees with ISIL and fled with the group into Syria.

Ultimately, some of these Iraqi refugees settled in towns and cities along the Syrian border, while others took refuge in camps, including Al Hol and Roj,² which in 2018 were sheltering Iraqi refugees. Later after the battle for Baghouz in early 2019, the last Syrian town under ISIL

¹ UNHCR, "[Iraq Refugee Crisis Explained](#)," November 2019.

² 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 Gol. All of the returnees interviewed by MEAC at Jeddah-1 over the last two years have come from Al Hol.

control, many more were taken to Al Hol Camp. Soon after, Al Hol became a closed camp, and residents were no longer able to leave.

At its peak in late 2018/early 2019, Al Hol Camp housed close to 80,000 people - Syrians, Iraqis and third country nationals from all over the world. Iraqis made up the largest national demographic in the camp, but for years there was no official route out for them to leave it. Since May 2021, however, the Government of Iraq (GoI) has organized 16 official convoys repatriating Iraqis from Al Hol Camp via the J-1 Centre (with – at the time of publication - the last one run in June 2024). According to IOM data as of July 2024, to date, the GoI has returned 9,514 Iraqis from the estimated 30,000 that were in Al Hol Camp in 2019 to J-1.³

J-1 residents are supposed to stay in the Centre for 3 to 6 months.⁴ According to IOM data as of July 2024, 39 per cent of households in J-1 had been in the Centre for more than 6 months.⁵ Of the 9,514 individuals who were returned from Al Hol to J-1 Centre, 6,258 had left J-1 for areas of return in Iraq at the time of writing this report. More than 3,000 individuals remain in the Centre, awaiting clearance to leave for their area of origin or one chosen for return. The majority of Iraqis in Al Hol and J-1 are from three governorates – Anbar, Ninewa and Salahadin.⁶ Special attention is paid to the particular dynamics in those areas throughout the report.

Methodology

The MEAC Project seeks to understand how the return process from Al Hol has evolved over time and with different cohorts of returning Iraqis. This particular report focuses on how the return process, experiences of different camp cohorts, and prospects for reintegration evolve over time by analyzing quantitative data collected in J-1 in March 2023, and, in another round of survey work, in November and December 2023.⁷ Qualitative interviews and focus group discussions conducted concurrently with the December round of surveys are also included herein to provide additional context to the statistical findings. The breakdown of respondents for both surveys and the qualitative research are detailed below in Tables 1 and 2.

³ IOM tracking data, as of July 2024.

⁴ “Based on information received from the Government of Iraq delegation during registration and screening in Al Hol, most returnees expect to spend three to six months in Jeddah-1.” Dr. Jacqueline Parry and Yousif Khalid Khoshnaw, with Dr. Siobhan O’Neil, Dr. Juan Armando Torres Munguía, and Melisande Genat, [“The Road from Al Hol Camp: Reflections on the Iraqi Experience,”](#) Findings Report 24, United Nations University, Geneva, 2022, p. 24.

⁵ IOM tracking data, as of July 2024; These residents arrived on convoy 6-13; Dates of each convoy are as follows: Convoy 11, September 2023; Convoy 12, November 2023; Convoy 13, December 2023; Convoy 14, March 2024; Convoy 15, April 2024; Convoy 16, June 2024.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Henceforth referred to as ‘the March 2023’ and ‘the December 2023’ cohorts.

TABLE 1 – BREAKDOWN OF FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS (FGDs) AND KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

	Type of respondent/group	Male	Female
Focus Group Discussions in J-1	Resident FGDs	5	6
Key Informant Interviews in J-1	Resident KIIs	5	16
	Section Leaders KIIs		4
	I/NGOs KIIs	10	

TABLE 2 – DEMOGRAPHIC BREAKDOWN OF RESPONDENTS SURVEYED IN J-1

	March 2023	November - December 2023
Sample size	213 respondents	229 respondents
Governorate of birth ⁸	Anbar – 38 per cent Ninewa – 24 per cent Salahadin – 33 per cent Baghdad – 2 per cent Diyala – 2 per cent	Anbar – 40 per cent Ninewa – 23 per cent Salahadin – 30 per cent Baghdad – 5 per cent Kirkuk – 2 per cent Diyala – 1 per cent
Gender	59 per cent female	61 per cent female
Age	39 per cent children ⁹	36 per cent children
Female-headed households	61 per cent	56 per cent
Average household size	5.2 household members	6 household members
Arrival convoy to J-1	December 2021 – February 2023 (arrival convoy 4-9)	February 2023 – November 2023 (arrival convoy 9-12)
Length of stay	31 per cent of respondents in J-1 for 6 months or more	16 per cent of respondents in J-1 for 6 months or more

This report compares the group of J-1 residents interviewed in March 2023 with the December 2023 cohort. All statistics in the report are derived from these surveys unless otherwise stated.¹⁰ The two surveyed groups have a slightly different composition as seen in Table 2

⁸ Any statistics provided in this report are rounded to the nearest whole number. Disaggregations by percentage thus do not always add up to 100 per cent.

⁹ “Children” includes any respondents under the age of 18 at the time of interviewing.

¹⁰ The analysis in this report is supported by previously referenced IOM tracking data of J-1 as of April 2024, and as of July 2024.

above.¹¹ Specifically, there is some variation in the percentage of women, number of children, female-headed households and length of stay in J-1 across the two groups. Although these numbers are representative of the makeup of residents in J-1 at the time of interviewing,¹² the differences across groups need to be taken into account when comparing them, especially with the aim of understanding trends and causes of changes over time. Where possible, comparison between the groups is further supported with statistical analysis. Details of regression models and method are provided where causal relationships are discussed.

Formal Returnees in Jeddah-

1

As the MEAC Project has documented in other publications, there are several ways in which Iraqis who have been living in Al Hol (or other parts of Syria) have returned back to their country. Often referred to as “formal returnees,” Iraqis who go through the Iraq government-run return process apply to return in Al Hol and must meet several security requirements before they are repatriated to Iraq. Returnees from Al Hol are first taken to Jeddah-1 Rehabilitation Centre in Ninewa, where they readjust after the difficulties of the Camp and can access services with the aim of eventually easing their re-entry and reintegration into Iraqi life. On average, residents should spend 3 to 6 months in J-1 as they prepare to return home, but both IOM and MEAC data show that the time spent in the Centre is often longer. In addition to basic services (e.g., food, water, shelter and sanitation) in the Centre, there is education, legal support to acquire or renew civil documents, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), based on need. To eventually leave the J-1 Centre, residents need to obtain a local security clearance and have a sponsor that will pick them up from J-1 and take them to their area of return - whether it be their area of origin or another location.

Barriers to Leaving Jeddah-1

J-1 residents continue to face barriers to leaving the Centre and returning, despite some indications of enhanced support to address them in the Centre. Key barriers include

¹¹ The MEAC sample includes data on residents originating from Baghdad, Diyala, and Kirkuk (for the December 2023 cohort). Due to the small number of respondents from these governorates and the previously noted focus on Anbar, Ninewa, and Salahadin, summary statistics regarding residents from Baghdad, Kirkuk and Diyala are not interpreted in the analysis. Respondents from these governorates are, however, included in regression models.

¹² MEAC’s December 2023 survey data on resident’s governorate of origin shows a distribution similar to estimates of the overall population provided by IOM tracking data as of April 2024.

sponsorship requirements and the need for security clearance, acquiring civil documentation, securing housing, and ensuring community and/or familial acceptance. When asked which conditions are difficult to fulfil, all respondents who reported that they still need civil documentation in the December 2023 survey stated that they are facing difficulties acquiring or renewing it, confirming that this is a notable challenge for residents. Considerable difficulties are also faced by those who state that they still have to acquire a security clearance. Although many J-1 residents were in the process of organizing sponsorship at the time of interviewing, a much smaller proportion of this group noted that they are encountering difficulties doing so.¹³

Documentation

Returnees at different points of their return and reintegration process continue to point to challenges in procuring civil documentation as one of the most prevalent barriers to returning to “normal life.” A number of agencies in J-1 assist residents with renewing and acquiring documents, with the goal of having all J-1 residents acquire or renew at least one form of documentation before leaving the Centre.¹⁴ In December 2023, 69 per cent of J-1 residents said that not everyone in their household possessed the necessary civil documentation. This was 67 per cent in March 2023.¹⁵ This lack of documentation severely impacts if and when families can leave J-1. While procuring documentation is not an official prerequisite to departure, it is a de facto requirement for most residents and service providers alike, as documentation is essential for facilitating movement across checkpoints and for registration with authorities upon return.¹⁶

MEAC’s earlier research has shown that female heads of household were particularly disadvantaged by certain aspects of the document renewal/acquisition process, and consequently, their children, especially those with dead or missing fathers. Female headed households have fewer resources, both financial and social, to draw upon to overcome the barrier to acquiring or renewing documentation. 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.

¹³ Respondents were asked, out of the conditions they listed as still needing to fulfill, to indicate with which conditions they were having difficulties (“Are any of these conditions difficult to fulfil so far?”). 100 per cent of respondents who had yet to acquire civil documentation found this difficult. This was 81 per cent for ‘security badge’, 80 per cent for ‘security clearance by joint operation of your governorate,’ 75 per cent for ‘security clearance by local authorities in your area of origin,’ 75 per cent for ‘disavowal’, and 41 per cent for ‘sponsorship.’

¹⁴ MEAC, *Interview with legal services in Jeddah* (Ninewa, November 2023).

¹⁵ 30 per cent said that they did have all necessary civil documentation in December 2023. In March 2023, 30 percent said that they did, and 3 percent said that they did not know.

¹⁶ MEAC, *KII #22 with J-1 resident (J-1, November/December 2023)*; MEAC, *KII #6 with J-1 resident (J-1, November/December 2023)*.

For women who do not have a Gol-issued marriage certificate and whose husbands are missing (or are dead but without an official death certificate), the legal hurdles to obtaining civil documentation have historically been enormous. For women with missing (or dead, but not officially documented) 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 or missing persons. These processes have multiple, difficult-to-meet requirements that J-1 centre residents, with no or limited opportunities to move freely, struggle to fulfil. In 2023, circumstances for residents of the J-1 center improved with the introduction of on-site visits from judges and a more accessible process for authenticating marriage contracts, which specifically has helped alleviate a major obstacle for women residents.¹⁷ However, there are indications of entrenched resistance to facilitating documentation for them, particularly while they are in J-1. A public prosecutor at the governorate level stated that “...the directions of the Supreme Judicial Council call for facilitating the procedures but ... [local] judges don’t follow the instructions of the Supreme Judicial Council.”¹⁸ Several J-1 service providers confirmed that lawyers in the Centre had recently started processing the *bitaqat sakan* (place of residence cards) but there are strict requirements that exclude a large number of women, specifically those whose husbands are missing, in jail, in Syria, or dead, and who are neither divorced nor have the status of widows.¹⁹ In addition, lawyers in the Centre are also unable to assist those residents who have no documents and children born after 2014, which results in almost all of these younger children leaving J-1 still undocumented.²⁰

Although no clear trends are visible when directly comparing documentation rates across the March and December 2023 survey samples, a regression model comparing respondents from female- and male-headed households based on when they arrived in J-1 (by convoy number) does indicate some changes in access to civil documentation over time.²¹ Taking into account the length of time someone has spent in J-1 and the number of children born after 2014 (which would impact documentation access as explained above), the regression model shows that respondents from female-headed households are indeed significantly more likely to have at least one family member missing documentation than respondents from male-headed

¹⁷ It is important to note that the on-site visits from the judges to the camp remain infrequent, and challenges associated with prerequisite document acquisition persist, which together have led some J-1 residents to express dissatisfaction with the process despite some improvements. MEAC, Males FGD #4 (J-1, November/December 2023).

¹⁸ MEAC, *KII # 8 with community leaders*, (Anbar, January 2023).

¹⁹ MEAC, *KII #1 (a, b, c) with J-1 service providers*, (J-1, November/December 2023).

²⁰ Ibid. Out of all respondents from the December 2023 cohort who stated that they have children born after 2014, 85 per cent said that children in their household are missing documentation.

²¹ A probit regression model was run with a binary independent variable for respondents from female- versus male-headed household, and a binary dependent variable for ‘does everyone in your family have documentation?’ The model accounts for number of children born after 2014 (assuming it is more difficult to acquire documentation for children born after 2014, who would not have been able to get Gol birth certificates in ISIL-occupied territory) and the length of stay in J-1 (assuming a longer stay means the resident has had more time to start the process of acquiring necessary documentation).

households.²² However, the model also indicates that this gender gap is slowly closing over time. There are smaller differences in missing civil documentation between respondents from male and female-headed households who arrived at the Centre on more recent convoys when compared to earlier ones. Although this is partially explained by a slight positive trend showing that it has become easier to acquire documentation for respondents from female-headed households, the closing of this gap is driven primarily by a small increase in difficulties in male-headed households procuring documentation. It is not clear what might be driving this shift.²³

The general trend is that getting the *whole* family documented in J-1 is *not* getting easier with time despite the increase in documentation support in the Centre over the same period. Upon first glance, it appears that the rate of undocumented children reported by Centre residents rose between March and December 2023.²⁴ One particular difference of note that could be driving this shift is that households in the December sample on average had more children born after 2014 and had spent less time at the Centre at the time of the survey than the March 2023 sample, both of which would have made it more difficult to have all family members documented by the time they were interviewed.²⁵ To the latter point, according to lawyers in J-1 who were interviewed in Centre, they cannot process applications for undocumented children born after 2014, who should in theory be eligible for documentation but the procedural complexities and extensive time required make it practically impossible.²⁶ It is unclear if anything else has happened over the intervening eight months that made it even less likely for children across family types to be able to acquire documentation,²⁷ but it is a worrying trend, as the lack of documentation arguably has the most detrimental impact on children's lives.

The types of missing documentation have remained the same across the period in question. In December, birth certificates (74 per cent), national unified ID cards (61 per cent), nationality

²² This finding supports the direct comparison of Centre residents from female- and male-headed households in December 2022, when "67 per cent of female headed households and 47 per cent of male respondents in Jeddah-1 camp reported that someone in their family was missing documentation." 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), p. 22. This discrepancy – albeit not as large – was seen again in a straight comparison of Centre residents in December 2024, which shows that the percentage of respondents from these groups who have at least one family member missing documentation are 74 per cent and 63 per cent amongst female- and male-headed households respectively.

²³ Respondents from male-headed households reported 60 and 63 per cent missing civil documentation in March and December 2023 respectively.

²⁴ Respondents who stated that at least one person in their household was missing documentation were asked to list which member was missing documentation. In December, 81 per cent of this group of respondents in female-headed households said children were undocumented. In March 2023, this was 74 per cent. For respondents from male-headed households, this was 89 per cent in December 2023 and 64 per cent in March 2023.

²⁵ In the March 2023 sample, 25 per cent of respondents had children born in 2014 or later. In the December 2023 sample this was 45 per cent.

²⁶ MEAC, *KIIs #1 (a, b, c) and KII # 3 with J-1 service providers*, (J-1, November/December 2023).

²⁷ Some challenges are likely to have remained constant over time, such as the difficulty in establishing a child's lineage in the absence of his/her father.

certificates (61 per cent) and civil status documents (60 per cent) were all reported missing at high rates, similar to the rates reported in March.²⁸ Public Distribution System (PDS) cards, or ration cards, however, seemingly became a much larger issue for the later survey sample: 57 per cent of respondents surveyed in December 2023 stated that someone in their family is missing the card compared to only 21 per cent in March 2023. Regional differences are also stark, with December residents from Ninewa and Anbar reporting having PDS cards at much lower levels than the March sample.²⁹ Female headed households in areas of return have also complained that their undocumented children are not “counted” when it comes to the PDS support allocated to families. This was confirmed by lawyers in J-1 Centre.³⁰ One woman from Ninewa said that *mukhtar* in her community was boycotting J-1 and J-5 women and refusing to stamp their paperwork, so women have PDS applications (amongst other things like a hard time doing *tabriya*).³¹ She said there were talks of removing him, and NGOs and local tribe authorities had pressured him to relent, so she expressed some hope that the issue – in her community at least – might be solved at some point.³² This means that women who are dependent on this aid to feed the children in their care are often not receiving enough to cover the family’s needs, sometimes only enough to cover a few members of a large family.³³ Given the PDS card is required to access support like food baskets and a monthly stipend, the impact of not being able to acquire this document before leaving J-1 cannot be overstated. This is especially the case for those with little to no familial support in areas of return.

In addition, over time, there appears to have been a shift in which governorates present the greatest challenges for procuring documentation.³⁴ In the March 2023 survey, respondents from Ninewa seemed to have an easier time procuring documents than residents who were from Anbar and Salahadin.³⁵ In the December 2023 sample, however, residents from Anbar

²⁸ Other documentation reported missing in December were PDS cards (57 per cent), marriage certificates (28 per cent), death certificates (9 per cent), and divorce certificates (3 per cent). In March, documentation reported missing included civil status IDs (82 per cent), nationality certificates (68 per cent), birth certificates (50 per cent), national unified IDs (30 per cent), PDS cards (21 per cent), marriage certificates (20 per cent), death certificates (12 per cent), divorce certificates (1 per cent).

²⁹ In December, 70 per cent of those from Ninewa said they did not have a PDS card, compared to only 16 per cent in the March cohort. Some - but not all - of this change could be explained by the higher number of respondents from female-headed households and the higher number of respondents with children in Ninewa in December 2023 when compared to the March sample (45 per cent of respondents in Ninewa came from female-headed households and 47 per cent of respondents reported having children in March, compared to 57 and 52 per cent respectively in December). Yet, these differences across samples would only explain a *part* of the large decrease in PDS cards and thus suggests there are other factors impacting access to PDS cards.

³⁰ MEAC, *Kills #1 (a, b, c) with J-1 service providers*, (J-1, November/December 2023).

³¹ MEAC, *FG #2 with women over 35-years-old in J-1*, (J-1, November/December 2023).

³² *Ibid.*

³³ MEAC researcher and MEAC, *Kills #1 (a, b, c) with J-1 service providers*, (J-1, November/December 2023).

³⁴ To renew or acquire new civil documentation, Centre residents need to travel to apply at the Civil Affairs Directorate in their area of origin. Some, but not all, governorates occasionally come to the Centre to allow residents to renew/apply there, but the disparity of mobile application services by governorate, and differences in practice across them, appears to impact documentation access levels.

³⁵ In March 2023, 37 per cent of respondents in Ninewa said that everyone in their household has civil documentation. Among those from Anbar and Salahadin only 28 per cent said yes at the time.

were the most likely to say they all had the necessary documents (34 per cent) as compared to those from Ninewa (29 per cent) and Salahadin (21 per cent). Although a tentative trend is visible when comparing the two survey groups, quite a bit of the variation is driven by the gender and age distributions in the samples themselves, particularly the increase in the number of female-headed households from Anbar in the December survey compared to the March survey.³⁶ It would be premature to draw conclusions about any change in governorate policies and practices to facilitate documentation for returnees based on this data, but other research points to continued challenges in some areas of return.

Centre residents and legal service providers in J-1 said the enduring challenges in getting documentation faced by some residents were due to stark regional-, provincial- as well as district-level variations, often driven by the amenability of the individual judges presiding over document renewal cases. This seemingly bureaucratic process is actually very much driven by the local personalities involved.³⁷ The individuals working in the civil administration offices can also block or facilitate the process of getting documents. One woman living in J-1 in December 2023 was advised she needs to visit her area of origin to renew documents, but she is convinced the staff at the personal status administration office would reject her request. They know her and her family (which was the target of a tribal vendetta) and would simply block the process from going forward.³⁸ She was not alone, in focus groups with women in J-1 several shared similar stories, including one who explained that some people from her village went to the local personal status administration where officers refused to process any of their documents. She was told that these employees have had their sons killed by ISIL and that they block anyone from that village who seeks to renew documentation so they can return, so she does not expect to be able to renew her documents.³⁹ Another woman highlighted how for a few the power of local officials to make documentation decisions can be an advantage. She relayed that her father-in-law was a well-known religious leader in the community and is well connected, and she expected to be able to renew her documents due to their personal connections, even in light of missing original documents and having a son imprisoned for his role in ISIL.⁴⁰

³⁶ In March 2023, 40 per cent of respondents from Anbar came from female-headed household whereas in December 2023 this was 44 per cent. Considering female-headed often face more difficulties in accessing documentation, the shift in their distribution by governorate across the two samples might be driving (part of) this trend.

³⁷ MEAC, *Interview with legal services in Jeddah* (Ninewa, November 2023); MEAC, *KII #17 with J-1 section leader* (J-1, November/December 2023); MEAC, *KII #18 with J-1 section leader* (J-1, November/December 2023).

³⁸ MEAC, *KII #13 with J-1 resident* (J-1, November/December 2023)

³⁹ MEAC, *FGD #1 with female heads of household* (J-1, November/December 2023)

⁴⁰ MEAC, *FGD #2 with women over 35-years-old* (J-1, November/December 2023)

Recently, some districts have been identified as being particularly difficult in terms of documentation renewal/acquisition; other service providers listed.⁴¹ Lawyers working in J-1 highlight that local personal status administrators come up with various excuses to reject applications, such as ‘the register is damaged’ or documentation ‘is missing or illegible,’ but they suspect that certain offices must have lists of families with perceived or actual association to ISIL who are barred by local authorities or tribes.⁴² This is a widespread problem.

Over time, there is an apparent shift in the particular barriers that impede documentation acquisition for J-1 residents and how they impact respondents from certain governorates. The particular challenge posed by not having original documents as a barrier to fulfilling conditions to return declined across the March and December surveys, and especially for residents who come from Anbar.⁴³ For example, in March 2023, 60 per cent of respondents from Anbar said not having original documents was a problem for them, while in December 2023, only 26 per cent of Anbar respondents said this was an issue.⁴⁴ Not having original documents was an issue mostly for J-1 residents from Salahadin and Ninewa governorates.⁴⁵ The decline in these numbers may be attributed to the policies implemented by some local administrations in Anbar, which permit returnees without civil documents to use the J-1 document, an official departure letter issued from MOMD by J-1 Centre Management, which allows them temporary unrestricted movement for a few days.⁴⁶ Once the J-1 document expires, returnees are required to remain within their designated places of residence and are restricted from leaving their villages or sub-districts, though they can continue their daily activities freely within these areas. Additionally, it has been reported in qualitative interviews that the civil administration office in Anbar facilitates the renewal of documents efficiently. This information has likely reached new residents in J-1, leading them to perceive the lack of civil documents as less of a significant challenge that earlier cohorts in the Centre.

⁴¹ MEAC, *KII #1 (a, b, c) with J-1 service providers*, (J-1, November/December 2023). Lawyers working on documentation illuminated the fact that Ishaqi, Dujail and Samarra in Salahadin governorate reject the most applications for renewal. Moreover, a number of districts in Ninewa are also known to reject applications at very high rates, including Ba’j, Qahtaniyya, Hatra, Tal Abta, and Qayrawan. Tal Afar was previously a much easier place to renew documents, but the judge in charge recently changed according to service providers, and that has led to a major shift in approval rates. Dibaga and Makhmur (Erbil) apparently have never processed any of the applications.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ In March, 56 per cent of female headed households and 45 per cent of male headed household said not having original documentation was an issue, while in December 37 per cent of female headed households and 27 per cent of male headed households said this is a challenge.

⁴⁴ Although the number of female headed households interviewed in March and December was comparable (40 and 44 per cent respectively), the number of children born after 2014 was much higher in the December sample. In March, 28 per cent of respondents had children born after 2014, whereas in December this was 37 per cent.

⁴⁵ In December 2023, 40 percent of J-1 residents from Salahadin and 35 per cent of residents from Ninewa reported that they did not have original documents.

⁴⁶ This document is two-sided; on the front side there is the departure letter, on the reverse side, there is the JOC security clearance, which includes a “security telegram number” that allows J-1 residents to move freely and pass through checkpoints for a limited period, typically up to one week. Additionally, the J-1 document serves verifies their status as returnees and allows them to receive humanitarian assistance targeting Al Hol returnees from IOs/INGOs in their places of return.

The survey data suggests the financial burden involved also does not appear to be as significant a hurdle to procuring documents for the December 2023 Centre residents as it had been for the March 2023 residents.⁴⁷ This decline in returnee responses that the costs involved were preventing them from acquiring documentation is likely a positive sign that IO/NGO legal services in the Centre and the related information provided there are having an impact (although service providers admit they are only able to process a very small percentage of the claims),⁴⁸ which may help some residents avoid using expensive (and at times, exploitative) lawyers to work on their documentation issues. That said, the qualitative interviews undertaken alongside the surveys suggest that corruption and bribery within the governmental sector remain issues that can create costly barriers for returnees attempting to renew their documents. Additionally, a lawyer working to assist in document acquisition/renewal in the Centre reported that applications for the unified ID (*muwahada*) are on hold since May 2023. That same month, Gol J-1 residents were reclassified resulting in an increased fee of 250,000 (IQD) required for each ID, which, J-1 lawyers protested, none of these J-1 families would be able to pay.⁴⁹ The issue has been under negotiation since, but the prospects of additional charges for key documents is daunting for families with little means and many gaps in household documentation. While the potential added cost is potentially problematic for J-1 residents, the far bigger challenge to obtaining a unified ID is ensuring each member of the family has the prerequisite documents.

Ultimately, the research produces a mixed picture, where some previously identified challenges to obtaining documentation may be easing for certain subsets of the returnee population, but some endure, especially for hard cases – children born after 2014; women with dead, missing, or imprisoned husbands, particularly if those marriages were never recognized by Gol; and those with no original documentation. Despite the investment in legal support services in J-1 itself, many documentation outcomes appear to be driven by local, and even personal, decision-making. Certain districts remain opposed to returns and will not process documentation applications. Some that were once reliable for processing applications from J-

⁴⁷ In March, 15 per cent of respondents from female-headed households and 14 per cent of male-headed households said the cost impacted their ability to fulfill conditions to return. In December, however, 3 per cent of respondents from female-headed households and 7 per cent of respondents from male-headed households said this.

⁴⁸ MEAC, *KII #1 (a, b, c) with J-1 service providers*, (J-1, November/December 2023). One lawyer in the Centre said their organization is working on a few cases to get marriage certificates, which are needed to support other documentation requests, but they only process about 5 per cent of the actual cases in the Centre as it takes an enormous amount of time. When the husband is imprisoned, missing, or dead, are often told it is almost impossible for told them to get these documents, and that they will have to do it outside of J-1, where the process is still extremely complicated and expensive (at least 2 million IQDs) for such cases. This means most women won't be able to do it.

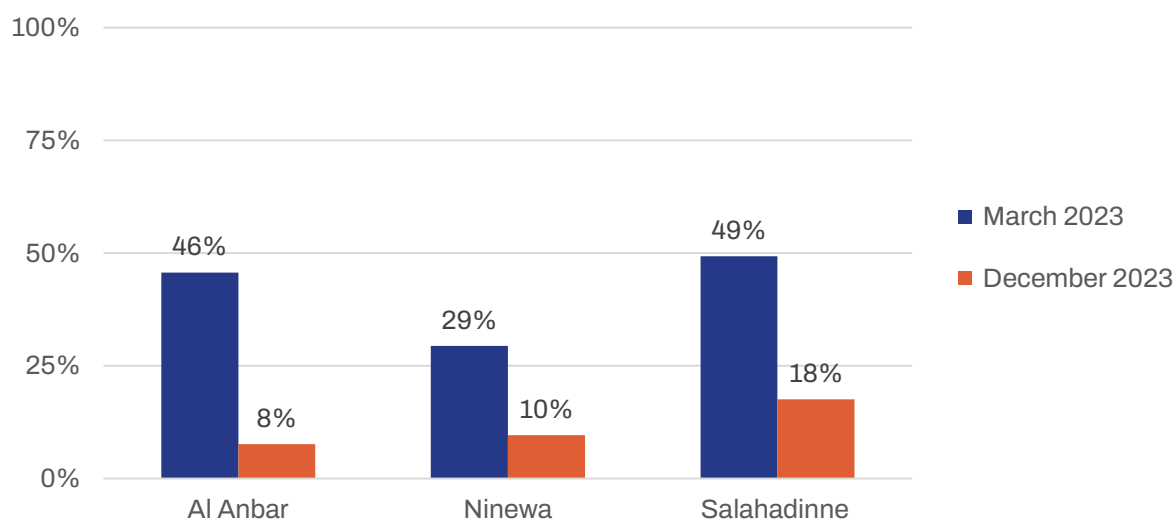
⁴⁹ MEAC, *KII #1 (a, b, c) with J-1 service providers*, (J-1, November/December 2023).

1 residents have shifted with the arrival of new judges or personnel and seemingly overnight have become impossible to get documentation from.

Sponsorship

Documentation is not the only de facto requirement for leaving J-1. Sponsorship⁵⁰ seems to be less of a problem for the cohort of J-1 residents than it had been in March 2023. Only 11 per cent of December 2023 respondents said they did not have a sponsor as opposed to 42 per cent of respondents in March. This is particularly striking as the group of residents who had been surveyed in December included fewer long-stayers than the March 2023 cohort, which means the former had even less time to set up a sponsor.⁵¹ As seen in Figure 1, when surveyed in December 2023, then residents from Anbar were most likely to have a sponsor, with only 8 percent saying they did not have one, as opposed to 10 percent in Ninewa and 18 percent in Salahadin.

FIGURE 1 – J-1 CENTRE RESIDENTS WITHOUT A SPONSOR



⁵⁰ “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...in other areas, the requirement is not strict or is being removed... 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.” 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, p. 24.

⁵¹ 31 per cent of respondents from the March 2023 survey had been in J-1 for more than 6 months at the time of interviewing, compared to 16 per cent of J-1 residents surveyed in December 2023.

The improvement in sponsorship rates may be due to changes in the sponsorship requirements, although the qualitative research raised conflicting accounts in this regard. One section leader interviewed in J-1 said that sponsorship requirements are flexible and that everyone should be able to find a sponsor. They gave the example of a man from Salahadin who came a few days prior to pick up four families he had sponsored from the area.⁵² The section leader did acknowledge that some people may be embarrassed to reach out to family and friends to ask for sponsorship, but that in the end everyone should be able to find one.⁵³ A few families interviewed in J-1, however, provided a different perspective, suggesting that new sponsorship requirements have made it *more* difficult for some residents to get a sponsor. The new requirement – that a sponsor cannot be someone who has spent time in J-1 themselves - serves as a barrier to getting a sponsor.⁵⁴ Some residents said that their entire family was with them in Al Hol and then J-1 and that outside of this family they would not know who else to ask to sponsor them.⁵⁵ Despite this new restriction, the quantitative data suggests that a large majority of residents are no longer citing sponsorship as a barrier to return.

Beyond vouching for them and facilitating their physical return, the types of support provided by sponsors to returnees vary enormously. There are sponsors that provide returnees with support while they are in the Centre and will continue to do so upon return. On the other end of the spectrum, there are those who do the minimum required, meeting the returnee at J-1 on the day of the departure to sign paperwork for their release. When the sponsor is a close family member, this person often visits their relatives in J-1 and many have said they are brought clothing and toys for the kids and sometimes money (albeit in line with the limits put in place by the Ministry of Migration and Displacement (MoMD)) by family-member sponsors.⁵⁶ Others have said that their sponsor will help them a bit by trying to generate community acceptance for them once they return, but that they accept nothing else from them.⁵⁷ Sponsorship is widely used throughout Iraq in different contexts (e.g., ensuring court appearances and guaranteeing loans). In these other applications, the sponsor becomes responsible if the individual in question fails to meet their obligations. and could potentially play an important role in a family's reintegration journey. However, in this case, it is at times transactional and bureaucratic in nature and is only a "ticking the box exercise", the restrictions around which may stall the returns of some Iraqis coming through J-1 (albeit not as many with earlier cohorts of returns).

⁵² MEAC, *KII #18 with J-1 section leader* (J-1, November/December 2023)

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ MEAC, *KII #25 with J-1 resident* (J-1, November/December 2023); MEAC, *KII #10 with J-1 resident* (J-1, November/December 2023).

⁵⁵ MEAC, *KII #10 with J-1 resident* (J-1, November/December 2023).

⁵⁶ MEAC, *KII #2 with J-1 resident* (J-1, November/December 2023); MEAC, *KII #5 with J-1 resident* (J-1, November/December 2023); MEAC, *KII #9 with J-1 resident* (J-1, November/December 2023); MEAC, *KII #8 with J-1 resident* (J-1, November/December 2023).

⁵⁷ MEAC, *KII #4 with J-1 resident* (J-1, November/December 2023); MEAC, *KII #3 with J-1 resident* (J-1, November/December 2023).

Security Clearance

In addition to needing a sponsor, J-1 residents are given a departure letter as a permission to leave the centre only after they have received security clearance. The security clearance issued from J-1, the by the Joint Operations Command (JOC), which coordinates the work of the security departments in Iraq. This clearance includes a "Security telegram number," which serves as a temporary clearance that facilitates the passage and arrival of J-1 residents to their destinations. Upon arrival, residents are required to present a copy of this temporary clearance to the Mukhtar to initiate a subsequent security clearance process known as "secure stance". This procedure involves the Mukhtar gathering information on returning families by filling some forms with information about the returnees and coordinating with various authorities, including Emergencies, Military Intelligence, the Anti-terrorist Office, and the local National Security Office. Additionally, the local administration requires the presence of the sponsor and *tabriya* (judicial clearance) document. These clearances seem to have become more difficult to acquire for the latest surveyed cohort compared to the cohort surveyed in March 2023. Half of the respondents in December 2023 said they are finding it difficult to get a JOC security clearance, which is necessary for passing through checkpoints.⁵⁸ Moreover, the survey data⁵⁹ – and qualitative research – indicate that acquiring security clearance by local authorities could have also gotten more difficult.

It is useful to detail the multi-step security clearance application process. The current process for obtaining security clearance in J-1 begins with the Centre Management, which submits a list of individuals who have completed their rehabilitation period to the National Security Service (NSS) Office in Baghdad. This list is subsequently forwarded from NSS Baghdad to the NSS J-1 Field Team for verification and then returned to the NSS Baghdad Office with NSS J-1 feedback. The approved names on the list are then sent to the Ministry of Migration and Displacement (MOMD) and the Joint Operations Command (JOC) for final approval. Upon approval by the JOC, a "security telegram number" is issued. This security number is shared with MOMD and disseminated to relevant security departments running checkpoints across Iraq, including the North Operations Centre (NOC), Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), NSS,

⁵⁸ There is no notable difference between respondents from female- and male-headed households for this statistic in December 2023. In March 2023, 29 per cent of respondents said this was a requirement difficult to fulfil, with 27 and 32 per cent for female and male headed households respectively.

⁵⁹ In March 2023, 24 per cent of J-1 residents said this was an issue, while in December 2023, 33 per cent said this was posing an issue. There is some local variation by area of origin in the December sample. Respondents from Anbar were most likely to say this was an issue (37 per cent), followed by Ninewa (33 per cent) and Salahadin (25 per cent). This document is two-sided; on the front side there is the departure letter, on the reverse side, there is the JOC security clearance, which includes "security telegram number" that allows J-1 residents to move freely and pass through checkpoints for a limited period, typically up to one week. Additionally, the J-1 document serves verifies their status as returnees and allows them to receive humanitarian assistance targeting Al Hol returnees from IOs/INGOs in their places of return.

Intelligence, etc. The purpose of this clearance is twofold: to fulfil the administrative requirements necessary for residents to obtain the departure letter⁶⁰ and to ensure safe passage through checkpoints during their journey to their area of origin or return. This clearance procedure is followed by another security clearance that returnees need to obtain from their place of destination.

Housing

It is not only meeting the J-1 exit requirements, but also the expected challenge of restarting their lives in their areas of origin that weigh on Centre residents. Historically, finding adequate housing upon return has been one of the main concerns of returnees. Many have had their homes damaged or completely destroyed by the war or have even had their homes taken from them. Given their financial vulnerability, renting has not been an option for many, and even for those who have been able to afford it, landlords are not always willing to rent to ISIL-affiliated families.⁶¹ In looking across the two surveys, however, it is clear that with time it has become easier for families in J-1 to identify a home to live in upon return. Whereas only 46 percent of families in the Centre in March 2023 had found a place to live when they came home, a much higher 69 percent of families who were in the Centre in December of that year had done so by the time they were interviewed. Moreover, in the March survey, respondents from female-headed households were less likely to have found a home, which was not the case when Centre residents were surveyed in December 2023.⁶² The improvement for this demographic, however, does not change the reality that male heads of household are generally better positioned to retake control of familial property with their stronger social networks and awareness of their rights, and without the restrictions that come from the formal, customary norms and cultural expectations for women.⁶³ As a result of these challenges and constraints, a number of women J-1 have ended up in informal settlements, such as Intisar in Mosul, which is predominately comprised of female headed households with perceived ISIL affiliation.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ This document is two-sided; on the front side there is the departure letter, on the reverse side, there is the JOC security clearance, which includes “security telegram number” that allows J-1 residents to move freely and pass through checkpoints for a limited period, typically up to one week. Additionally, this document serves verifies their status as returnees and allows them to receive humanitarian assistance targeting AI Hol returnees from IOs/INGOs in their places of return.

⁶¹ MEAC, *KII #20 with J-1 section leader* (J-1, November/December 2023); MEAC, *KII #17 with J-1 section leader* (J-1, November/December 2023); MEAC, *KII #4 with J-1 resident* (J-1, November/December 2023); MEAC, *KII #8 with J-1 resident* (J-1, November/December 2023).

⁶² In March 2023, 39 per cent of respondents from female-headed households said they had identified a home, compared to 58 percent of respondents from male-headed households. In December 2023, 74 percent of respondents from female-headed households and 64 percent of respondents from male-headed households had found a place to live.

⁶³ Daniel Gorevan and Sanne Boswijk, with Alexandra Saieh, Naomi Johnstone, Helen Baker and Asmaa Noori, [Broken Home: Women’s Housing, Land and Property Rights in Post-conflict Iraq](#) (Oslo, Norway: Norwegian Refugee Council, 2020).

⁶⁴ MEAC researcher.

Given the importance of shelter arrangements for return timelines and reintegration progress, this is a positive development. However, some of those interviewed said they had made shelter arrangements for the initial period only, hoping that once they got on their feet, they would be able to organize sustainable accommodations on their own, demonstrating that the statistics may not tell the whole story. Indeed, it is possible that the 69 per cent of families⁶⁵ that had found housing in December 2023 may have included short term arrangements. Such arrangements, often with relatives, can be stressful for returnees; one resident worried about the burden they would be placing on the family members who have accepted to take them in.⁶⁶ Despite the overall positive trend, finding long-term, adequate housing does remain an issue for families perceived to be affiliated with ISIL. It is a particularly difficult problem to address, given the high levels of destruction in many areas in Iraq, which reduces the housing stock available, which is grossly insufficient in light of the high shelter needs among the population as a whole.

Social Networks

Finding housing is often easier when returnees have familial and social networks to lean on. As found in earlier research, returnees in J-1 – particularly those from female-headed households - are, overall, less likely to have strong social networks and support systems, which makes all aspects of return and reintegration all the more challenging. MEAC's research has found that in J-1, female-headed households received less support generally and were much more likely to report they had no one to rely on for financial assistance in an emergency.⁶⁷

There has been significant investment in bolstering the social networks of returnees to help ease the transition to their area of origin or another location. These include efforts to reunite J-1 residents with their families and friends in Iraq through programs such as the visitor's centre in J-1 and tribal engagement programs. MEAC's survey data shows an overall improvement in how residents report support networks.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Respondents from female- and male-headed households combined.

⁶⁶ MEAC, *KII #8 with J-1 resident* (J-1, November/December 2023)

⁶⁷ As documented in a 2023 MEAC publication on J-1 residents, which drew on a June 2022 MEAC survey in J-1 Centre: "A large majority of current J1 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. 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." 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, p. 27.

⁶⁸ When asked if respondents have someone to turn to for money in case of an emergency, 46 per cent of respondents from female-headed households said they never have anyone to turn to compared to 28 per cent of respondents from male-headed households in the March 2023 cohort. In December, this was 48 per cent and 47 per cent respectively. When asked if respondents have someone to turn to for non-financial support, 53 per cent of respondents from female-headed households and 59 per cent of respondents from male-headed households said yes in December 2023. In March, this was 35 per cent and 28 per cent respectively.

Moreover, there has been a change in the familial and community support available to female-headed households in J-1. Previously, respondents from female-headed households reported having poor social networks as compared to other residents in J-1, with less familial or other support to draw from, but this seems to have improved since March 2023.⁶⁹ The percentage of respondents from female-headed households who said nobody helps them also dropped over the same time period.⁷⁰ This bodes well for this particularly vulnerable sub-population of J-1. Practitioners regularly highlight and research has repeatedly demonstrated that this group has faced greater challenges in reintegrating back into their communities than male-headed households.⁷¹ That said, something the statistics may not convey is the different post-Centre trajectories of female- and male-headed households and how this impacts support. Qualitative research highlighted that many male-headed households do not go back to their areas of origin due to tribal opposition and related threats, whereas female-headed households are more likely to try to do so (if they are allowed). Differences in trajectories and the support networks available to new families v. those who are returning to their original communities where they know and are related to many people, may partially explain some of this evolution, especially as views towards women who are perceived as ISIL affiliated seem to be shifting.

Female-headed households returning from displacement- from Syria or from displacement within Iraq- have generally faced greater challenges reintegrating socially due primarily to the stigma of being a divorced/unmarried woman, who was presumed to have been married to an ISIL member. There is also stigma that comes from the reality that returnee women are less likely to be able to find a job or a way to support themselves and their families once they return, so they are seen as a financial burden or, in some locations, there are assumptions that they will engage in sex work to support their families.⁷² MEAC's latest qualitative research, however, shed some light on what seems to be a softening of people's positions vis-à-vis these women. Over time it appears that community members are seeing women returnees more as victims, who are struggling to meet the basic needs of their families.⁷³ This in no way means that the overall challenges facing female-headed households have eased, but only that family and

⁶⁹ The percentage of members of female-headed households who said that their family helps them reconnect and/or feel accepted was 49 in March 2023 and 64 in December 2023, a 15-percentage point increase. For male-headed households, this was 57 per cent in March 2023 and 63 per cent in December 2023.

⁷⁰ In March 2023, 38 per cent of female headed households said nobody helps them reconnect and/or feel accepted at all compared to 30 per cent in December 2023. For male headed households, this was 17 per cent in March 2023 and 27 per cent in December 2023.

⁷¹ In addition to MEAC's reports on the subject, cited herein, see also, UNICEF, "[Humanitarian Action for Children in 2024 – Iraq](#)," and IOM, "[Women Navigating Durable Solutions to Displacement from Ninewa Governorate March 2024](#)," (Baghdad: IOM, 2024).

⁷² Schadi Semnani, Siobhan O'Neil, Mélanie Genat, and Yousif Khoshnaw, "[Return and Reintegration Prospects for Iraqis Coming Back From Al Hol](#)," Findings Report 32, UNIDIR, Geneva, 2023, p. 45-46.

⁷³ MEAC FGD #3 *Young Women* (Mosul, November 2023); MEAC FGD #3 *Men* (Qaim, February 2024); MEAC FGD #4 *women* (Qaim, February 2024)

communities seem to be providing more support, and there are some signs that they are becoming more sympathetic to this particular population, with time.

Residents' Perception of Community Acceptance

Overall, there has been a clear improvement in residents' anticipated reception by family and community upon return. In December 2023, 67 percent of respondents from female-headed households and 73 percent of respondents from male-headed households said they expect to be fully accepted by people in the area they intend to return to, which suggests an improvement compared to the expectations of those surveyed in the Centre in March 2023.⁷⁴ A similar increase can be identified in Centre residents feeling accepted by their family,⁷⁵ who are key in facilitating community acceptance for returnees.⁷⁶

Similar to how residents anticipate being received in their communities once they return, expectations for the treatment they will receive from authorities there have improved over time. In December 2023, more than 60 per cent of respondents expected to *always* be treated fairly by authorities.⁷⁷ This improvement in expected treatment is likely to have been caused by hearing about the experience of friends and family who have already returned. Prior research by MEAC had found that the J-1 visitor centre and the ability to contact family and friends with mobile phones while in the Centre have helped facilitate information flows about conditions back in areas of return, which has helped residents make return decisions.⁷⁸ This finding was reaffirmed by the latest rounds of interviews in the Centre as residents spoke of the promising news they have heard from those who have left Jeddah-1 before them, which led them to look forward to returning and made them are less afraid.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ In March 2023, 46 per cent of respondents from female-headed households and 41 per cent of respondents from male-headed households said they felt fully accepted. Furthermore, in December only 2 per cent of respondents from female-headed households and none of the respondents from male-headed households said they feel they will not be accepted at all when they return, while in March this was 10 per cent and 4 per cent respectively.

⁷⁵ In March 2023, 62 percent of respondents from female-headed households and 58 per cent of respondents from male-headed households said they felt fully accepted. This had increased in December 2023 to 82 and 88 respectively.

⁷⁶ For example, see Randolph Rhea's book which concludes that "the family is a key stepping stone in the process of social reintegration through the expansion of social networks." Randolph Wallace Rhea, *A Comparative Study of Ex-Combatant Reintegration in the African Great Lakes Region: Trajectories, Processes, and Paradoxes* (Washington DC: The World Bank, 2014), p. 25.

⁷⁷ Respondents are asked three separate questions on how they expect to be treated by different authorities: "When you return, do you expect to be treated fairly by [local authorities/tribal authorities/local security forces]?" In the December 2023 survey, 62 per cent of respondents expect to *always* be treated fairly by local authorities and for tribal authorities and local security forces, this was 65 and 68 per cent respectively. In March 2023, 33 per cent of all respondents expected to *always* be treated fairly by tribal authorities and 37 per cent expected to *always* be treated fairly by local security forces. A direct comparison for treatment by local authorities is not available.

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 MEAC, *KII #22 with J-1 resident* (J-1, November/December 2023).

Returning to Areas of Origin

Despite this clear improvement in respondents' anticipated reception by family and community, and the treatment they expect upon return, the Centre's residents in December 2023 were *less* likely to say they intend to return to their area of origin as compared to those residents surveyed in March 2023 (who had lower expectations for their reception).⁸⁰ There is some regional variation with those in Anbar most likely to say they intend to return home (74 per cent) and those in Salahadin least likely to say they intend to return home (50 per cent). The intentions reported by respondents are more or less in line with the return trajectories that have been reported by returnees and INGOs tracking returns. IOM's tracking data shows that 77 percent of the families who departed J-1 as of July 2024 have gone back to their areas of origin. For Anbar, this was 79 percent compared to 65 percent of those from Salahadin. Within governorates, there can be significant variation: For example, while 81 percent of departed Centre residents from Ninewa have returned, certain sub-districts like Mosul have extremely high rates of return (most all departed families have returned) compared to Sinjar and Hatra, where less than half of those former residents who left the Centre having returned.⁸¹

These numbers are in line with what is known about the level of community acceptance in certain governorates and districts, but do not explain why the most recent cohort in the Centre reports being less likely to choose to go back to their home communities than the cohorts before them. When asked if there was anyone opposing their return in areas of origin, the majority of respondents said no.⁸² This may indicate that housing, local authority acquiescence, and community acceptance may not be the only factors in the decision to return to the area of origin.

Qualitative data sheds some light on how return decisions are being made. Although tribal vendettas and community acceptance continue to be a big factor in the decision-making process, other factors such as livelihood opportunities and access to services also play a major role.⁸³ In addition, the prospect of moving someplace where returnees are not known to the community is a draw for some. The Kurdish Region is a strong preference for many respondents because it provides them a start "fresh" start.⁸⁴ One younger respondent in the Centre who intends to move to the Kurdish Region said she made this choice because she

⁸⁰ In March 2023, 79 per cent of respondents said they intend to return, while in December 2023, 66 percent of respondents said they intend to return to their area of origin. This is a 12-percentage point decrease.

⁸¹ IOM tracking data, as of July 2024.

⁸² 90 per cent of respondents said 'nobody' to the question "Is there anyone opposed to your return to your area of origin?" 6 per cent of respondents said tribal leaders were opposed to their return. Other answer options included were local authorities, community leaders, family members, and other Iraqi returnees from Al Hol. In March 2023, 78 per cent of respondents said nobody was opposed to their return to their area of origin.

⁸³ MEAC, *KII #25 with J-1 resident* (J-1, November/December 2023).

⁸⁴ MEAC, *KII #10 with J-1 resident* (J-1, November/December 2023); MEAC, *KII #22 with J-1 resident* (J-1, November/December 2023)

heard that women had more freedom there and wanted to find out what that meant.⁸⁵ Some have also made their decision to relocate based on family members that are willing to take them in, but who live elsewhere.⁸⁶ Others who are from villages that have been completely destroyed or have been shut off to returning families have chosen to relocate to areas where other returnees from their village eventually settled,⁸⁷ as having a social network is important for employment and reintegration in general.

Services in J-1

Perhaps one of the most promising changes across the two rounds of surveys (March and December 2023) is the increase in respondents reporting that they are accessing services while in the Jeddah- Centre. There has been a large increase in reported participation in activities or accessed services. In March, 58 per cent of residents said they *never* participated in activities.⁸⁸ In December, however, only 26 per cent of respondents said they *never* participated, with no major discrepancy between male and female respondents.⁸⁹ The most accessed services by December 2023 residents were 1) MHPSS (59 per cent accessed this service), 2) skills training (56 per cent) and 3) educational courses (33 per cent).⁹⁰ Women were more likely to use MHPSS services, while men were more likely to access skills training and educational courses.⁹¹ According to respondents who did participate in services, MHPSS and skills training were ranked the two most useful services.⁹² The qualitative interviews provide further detail about the various services and activities in the Centre that were received by residents and shed light on some of the remaining barriers to accessing some of those services, especially for women.

⁸⁵ MEAC, *FGD Girls #5 15-17-years-old* (J-1, November/December 2023)

⁸⁶ MEAC, *FGD Women over 35* (J-1, November/December 2023); MEAC, *KII #1 with J-1 resident* (J-1, November/December 2023); MEAC, *KII #5 with J-1 resident* (J-1, November/December 2023)

⁸⁷ MEAC, *KII #13 with J-1 resident* (J-1, November/December 2023).

⁸⁸ For female respondents this was 56 percent, for male respondents this was 60 per cent.

⁸⁹ In December 2023, 25 per cent of men and 26 per cent of women said they never participate in any activities in J-1.

⁹⁰ Certain services that were mentioned by participants in qualitative interviews were not included in the survey and are thus not listed here, this includes legal services (e.g., support in acquiring documentation), and awareness-raising sessions provided by various I/NGOs (referred to by respondents as 'discussion sessions').

⁹¹ MHPSS services (64 per cent of female respondents vs 51 per cent of male respondents), Skills training (54 per cent of female respondents vs 60 per cent of male respondents) and educational courses (28 per cent of female respondents vs 40 per cent of male respondents).

⁹² Respondents were asked to pick the most useful service out of the ones they participated in and had the option to choose 'none'. For the respondents who stated that they participated in at least one service in J-1 in December 2023, MHPSS was seen as most useful by 45 per cent of female respondents and 36 per cent of male respondents. Skills training was seen as most useful by 39 per cent of female respondents and 42 per cent of male respondents. Other options were educational courses (seen as most useful by 17 and 21 per cent of female and male respondents respectively), and religious lectures (seen as most useful by 0 and 2 per cent of female and male respondents respectively).

Vocational training and cash for work opportunities were mentioned as one of the most coveted activities in the Centre as they allow families to save money for their upcoming relocation, specifically for transportation out of J-1, but also for initial expenses upon return. The vocational training also had the potential to teach them a new skill they could use to generate income upon return.⁹³ One woman in the Centre spoke of the training she received in fixing simple electrical appliances, which she found very useful. She can now fix air coolers, heaters, and lamps and wants to work in an electrical shop when she leaves J-1.⁹⁴ Such opportunities for women, and particularly female heads of household, are important given the hurdles they face in supporting themselves after they return. The cultural expectations of women as mothers and housewives, women's lack of employable skills and work experience, and their overall weaker support networks, mean that female heads of household face significant barriers in finding employment upon return in order to support their families.

Interviews suggest that the livelihood skills training opportunities in the Centre are limited. A few interviewees spoke of another challenge in accessing them: a lack of documentation. Those without documents are not able to access vocational training services or cash for work opportunities.⁹⁵

In the Centre, much of the support for women takes the form of awareness-raising sessions provided by various I/NGOs that respondents called "discussion sessions." In interviews, these "discussion sessions" received mixed reviews. Some spoke positively of the sessions that focused on how to deal with people upon return, including how to respond to taunts and stigma (e.g., being called "a Daeshi family").⁹⁶ Similarly, some women spoke positively about the sessions that discouraged early marriage for girls.⁹⁷ They felt they were being empowered with the information they were gaining.⁹⁸ Other sessions on hygiene and caring for the household left respondents feeling as though they were being spoken to "like children."⁹⁹ A young woman, who was attending classes where she was taught to cook, did not find them very useful.¹⁰⁰ Even when they criticized the content of the sessions, women in the Centre said they continue going to them, as it is nice to get out and socialize with other women,¹⁰¹ which was identified as

⁹³ MEAC, *KII #25 with J-1 resident* (J-1, November/December 2023); MEAC, *KII #24 with J-1 resident* (J-1, November/December 2023); MEAC, *KII #20 with J-1 resident* (J-1, November/December 2023)

⁹⁴ MEAC, *KII #3 with J-1 resident* (J-1, November/December 2023)

⁹⁵ MEAC, *KII #15 with J-1 resident* (J-1, November/December 2023); MEAC, *KII #9 with J-1 resident* (J-1, November/December 2023)

⁹⁶ MEAC, *KII #9 with J-1 resident* (J-1, November/December 2023)

⁹⁷ MEAC, *KII #7 with J-1 resident* (J-1, November/December 2023)

⁹⁸ MEAC, *KII #2 with J-1 resident* (J-1, November/December 2023)

⁹⁹ MEAC, *FGD #4 Women, female heads of households 2* (J-1, November/December 2023)

¹⁰⁰ MEAC, *KII #10 with J-1 resident* (J-1, November/December 2023)

¹⁰¹ MEAC, *FGD #4 Women, female heads of households 2* (J-1, November/December 2023); MEAC, *KII #10 with J-1 resident* (J-1, November/December 2023)

important for their (and girls') mental health.¹⁰² MEAC's research team has found that with former J-1 residents now back in the community, there are signs that these information sessions have had an enduring impact on norms and mental health awareness. For example, one MEAC researcher noted that some of those who had participated in these sessions mentioned they did not want their daughters marrying before 18 or talked about war-related trauma and an interest in accessing psychosocial support if it were available.¹⁰³

Women residents also mentioned that they attended "information sessions" when they first arrived at the Centre. These sessions gave them information about what services are on offer there and how they could access them. They found these sessions particularly useful.¹⁰⁴ It was clear that although many more are aware of services available at the Centre, there is still some misinformation about how to access them. For example, one woman in the Centre said that she did not even attempt to sign up for MHPSS services as she was told that since she has recently arrived, she would not be prioritized for these services.¹⁰⁵ Another was told the same about legal services.¹⁰⁶ Residents still get information from one another, first and foremost, highlighting the need for more official communication about what services and activities are available, to whom, and when.

Education was another Centre service that a number of respondents, adults and adolescents, complained about. During a focus group discussion with teenage boys, they discussed the quality of the education on offer with some of the boys describing it as "sub-par" and "discriminatory," especially the behaviour of some of the teachers vis-à-vis the boys.¹⁰⁷ One boy described how a teacher publicly ridiculed him for wearing sandals to school.¹⁰⁸ Similarly, during focus group discussions with women, they said the education service for their children was mediocre. The teachers changed so often that they did not have the time to get to know the students and build that rapport that would help them succeed.¹⁰⁹ Older children, those between 13-17, are among those with the lowest school attendance rates. In a focus group in J-1, teenage boys said that only about 20 boys between 16 and 18 years old actually go to school.¹¹⁰ This is a very small number given that in July 2024, there were 727 boys aged 6-17 residing in J-1,¹¹¹ but MEAC's survey data suggests participation in education activities in the Centre is

¹⁰² MEAC, *KII #20 with J-1 section leader* (J-1, November/December 2023)

¹⁰³ MEAC Researcher reflection.

¹⁰⁴ MEAC, *FGD #4 Women, female heads of households* (J-1, November/December 2023)

¹⁰⁵ MEAC, *KII #13 with J-1 resident* (J-1, November/December 2023)

¹⁰⁶ MEAC, *KII #16 with J-1 resident* (J-1, November/December 2023)

¹⁰⁷ MEAC, *FGD #7 Boys 15-17* (J-1, November/December 2023)

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ MEAC, *FGD #2 Women over 35* (J-1, November/December 2023); MEAC, *KII #23 with J-1 resident* (J-1, November/December 2023)

¹¹⁰ MEAC, *FGD #7 Boys 15-17* (J-1, November/December 2023)

¹¹¹ IOM tracking data, as of July 2024.

higher, albeit with unclear duration, consistency, quality.¹¹² One woman said her 13-year-old daughter dropped out after six months as she was not learning anything and was still unable to read or write.¹¹³ It is generally more difficult for those who have lost a considerable number of years of schooling at an older age to return to classes, and opportunities in J-1 for this age group are few and far between. There were only a few respondents who seemed satisfied with the education their children were receiving, but the general consensus was that the quality was poor, which is also the case with many public schools throughout Iraq.¹¹⁴

Medical services were mentioned as being of particularly low quality and scope in the Centre.¹¹⁵ Children with chronic diseases or other issues are often just given paracetamol by medical personnel in the Centre.¹¹⁶ Disabled children or those in need of care beyond what can be provided at J-1 (e.g., those in need of surgery) are referred externally to the Qayyara hospital, but the medical procedures available there are too expensive for Centre residents to afford.¹¹⁷

Caregiving duties for small children and elderly parents/in-laws was identified by women respondents as a major barrier to accessing services.¹¹⁸ One woman said she had high levels of anxiety and stress and wanted to access MHPSS services, but had no one with whom to leave her small child.¹¹⁹ This is a widespread impediment to accessing services and support since caregiving duties affect the majority of women in J-1, especially female heads of household.

Although not related to support services, another issue about the Centre's set up was raised by a large number of interviewees in December 2023. Respondents complained about the monopoly held by the one shop owner operating in J-1. Due to his monopoly, residents believed, the owner sells fewer products at lower quality for higher prices.¹²⁰ For example, during winter, residents have a difficult time finding enough winter clothing for all their family

¹¹² Out of the December 2023 sample: 85 of the 88 people with school aged children say their children attend school, 3 people with school aged children say their children are not attending school. Out of the 83 teenagers surveyed in December (between 14- and 18-years-old), 58 said they are attending school. The self-reported rate for boys in this demographic was 73 per cent. But it is important to note, out of 103 respondents who said that one of the children in their household is missing civil documentation, 60 said that this affects their children's ability to attend school, which may also speak to the type of current access they have to schooling and/or future concerns about continued attendance.

¹¹³ MEAC, *KII #10 with J-1 resident* (J-1, November/December 2023)

¹¹⁴ UNICEF Iraq, "[Education](#)," (2024).

¹¹⁵ MEAC, *FGD #3 Women 18- 35* (J-1, November/December 2023)

¹¹⁶ MEAC, *KII #15 with J-1 resident* (J-1, November/December 2023)

¹¹⁷ MEAC, *FGD #1 Women, female heads of households* (J-1, November/December 2023); MEAC, *FGD #10 Men over 35* (J-1, November/December 2023)

¹¹⁸ MEAC, *KII #13 with J-1 resident* (J-1, November/December 2023); MEAC, *KII #15 with J-1 resident* (J-1, November/December 2023); MEAC, *KII #6 with J-1 resident* (J-1, November/December 2023)

¹¹⁹ MEAC, *KII #6 with J-1 resident* (J-1, November/December 2023)

¹²⁰ MEAC, *FGD #7 Boys 15-17-year-olds* (J-1, November/December 2023); MEAC, *FGD #8 Boys 15-17-year-olds* (J-1, November/December 2023); MEAC, *FGD #9 Men 18- 35-year-olds* (J-1, November/December 2023); MEAC, *FGD #2 Women over 35-years-old* (J-1, November/December 2023)

members at the store - he only has a few styles and sizes.¹²¹ There were frustrations with the availability of fresh food,¹²² and with the prices, which were thought to be high. Given the fact that residents can spend up to a year in the Centre, are only provided with the bare minimum to live and are only allowed to accept/receive a limited amount of money from family and friends, the lack of a competitive marketplace is viewed as particularly unfair by residents.

Considerations and Recommendations

Looking at data from different cohorts of returnees during their time in J-1 Centre in March 2023 and again in December 2023 sheds light on how the return process is improving in several ways but indicates that certain challenges remain. For example, the sponsorship requirement is seemingly not as much of a burden as it used to be for Centre residents. Over time, Centre residents appear more optimistic about how they will be received once they return to their area of origin, which is counterintuitive given that more residents say they intend to go somewhere else entirely, perhaps for a fresh start or more economic opportunities. Despite a notable investment in documentation support in J-1, challenges procuring documentation persist and are exacerbated by changes or lack thereof in administration and judges at the local level. In some cases, aspects of the return process have become even more complicated, as is clear in the respondent feedback on the security clearance process. Comparing the Centre cohort from March to the cohort from December 2023 shows that with time the percentage of Centre residents accessing services is increasing, which is positive and is a testament to donor support of the Centre. That said, the quality and equal access for women, disabled, or sick/injured residents lags behind where it needs to be. The evolving situation in the J-1 Centre and the return conditions facing those who are in the process of preparing to leave highlights how the return process could be further strengthened to enhance reintegration outcomes, and ultimately peacebuilding efforts:

Some recommendations for the return process and related programming are detailed below.

- **Continue to advocate for the easing of documentation restrictions and provide support for documentation acquisition and renewal in J-1, especially for children.**

¹²¹ MEAC, *KII #23 with J-1 resident* (J-1, November/December 2023)

¹²² MEAC, *FGD #10 Men over 35-years-old* (J-1, November/December 2023)

Although legal services exist in Jeddah-1, and while everyone is technically eligible to begin the application process while there, many people are not actually able to begin to meaningfully advance the process in the Centre, for example, those from certain governorates with no presence and especially those with no documents at all (e.g., children with no birth certificates).¹²³ There is little legal support in areas of return and thus for the many returnees who can only procure or renew documentation leaving the Centre, they do so without support and counsel. Given that documentation, along with a source of income/financial support, was reported as the most important barrier to return and reintegration into normal life, continued pressure on the relevant government agencies, **including at the provincial and district levels where individual proclivities rather than standard procedures are seen to drive many decisions**, to facilitate documentation acquisition, is critical. Over the course of MEAC's work in Iraq, numerous respondents have noted that the pressure from IOs, NGOs, and tribal authorities on recalcitrant local officials, has been central in removing obstacles to J-1 returnees reintegrating, getting access to schools, and in documentation processes.

- **Increase the availability of cash for work opportunities and vocational training, as it is the single most coveted activity and deemed the most beneficial by Centre residents - for men and women alike.** Financial assistance and job opportunities were deemed the most important form of support for returnees to increase the chances of successful reintegration upon return. Not only did Jeddah-1 residents unanimously agree that they needed more livelihood training, returnees interviewed in areas of return also pointed to financial support and livelihood opportunities as the single most important form of support for returnees.¹²⁴ Moreover, many women, especially female heads of households, will need to get a job upon return to provide for their families and given their lack of work experience and expertise, they often end up working in factories in exploitative conditions.¹²⁵ Empowering them with skills that will allow them to find alternative work will be essential.
- **Increase the scope and quality of medical services provided in J-1 Centre.** Medical services provided in Jeddah-1 are basic and do not cover the wide range of resident medical needs. Residents bear the cost of procedures, care, or medicines not available in J-1, something which is simply not attainable for the large majority of people in the Centre. Numerous respondents highlighted that even certain basic needs are not

¹²³ MEAC, *KII #13 with J-1 resident* (J-1, November/December 2023)

¹²⁴ MEAC *survey and interviews in areas of return* (Anbar and Ninewa, November/December 2023)

¹²⁵ 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, p. 43.

covered in J-1 such as adult diapers for the disabled and elderly, as well as vision care for children, which greatly impacts the latter's ability to concentrate and succeed at school. Affordable medical care that allows families to meet their basic medical needs and live in dignity is currently not being provided. Given the acute medical needs amongst J-1 residents, more should be done to improve the level of free medical care available in the Centre.

- **Reduce the requirements to access services in J-1.** For example, some respondents said that only those with documents could access cash for work opportunities. This requirement is difficult to fulfil, given the high percentage of undocumented people in Jeddah-1. Another respondent mentioned the need for a phone number to access a particular service, as INGOs required a phone number for registration, but there was no way to buy a phone or sim card in J-1, which also highlights the issues raised about the monopoly of the single market in the Centre.
- **Specifically, provide childcare services for those who want to access services.** Many women said their childcare duties interfered with their ability to access Centre services and activities. Providing childcare will benefit the women accessing support, but also in turn improve conditions for children.¹²⁶ This was clear in interviews with several women in the Centre who admitted physically abusing their children due to their high levels of anxiety and stress.¹²⁷ To alleviate the caregiving burden so that these women can access the services they need, and indirectly improve the dynamics in their families, additional childcare and elderly care support should be provided in the Centre.
- **Improving the quality and accessibility of education for all age groups, in particular teenagers.** Children between the ages of 13 and 17 are the least likely to be attending schools in the Centre, even though their education has been the most affected by the war and subsequent time in Al Hol. Providing quality remedial education that targets this age group in particular will be essential to convincing them to return to school. Ensuring qualified, empathetic teachers are in place with an adapted curriculum that is gender and age appropriate is critical to ensuring some future for these particularly vulnerable children.
- **Increase opportunities for social interaction, especially for women and girls, but also for boys.** Boredom is a huge issue in the Centre, especially for women and young

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ MEAC researcher speaking informally with women (J-1, November 2023).

girls who have less opportunity to leave their tents and socialize. Boys were unanimous in requesting more sporting opportunities. There was a general consensus that such opportunities would greatly improve mental health.

- **Allow for other markets to operate in Jeddah-1 to ensure better prices and access to basic goods.** Residents complained of the higher than market price and the limited availability of items sold in the sole market in J-1, especially with regard to clothes for winter. Jeddah-1 residents are limited in the amount of money they can have in the Centre and yet have no choice in terms of where they can shop.
- **Continue and expand information sessions on what services and activities are available in J-1 and how and when they can be accessed.** Residents found the initial information sessions very useful, but misinformation about services in the Centre still persists.¹²⁸ Thus, providing more regular information sessions, not just upon arrival, but regularly, may help dispel some misinformation and ensure even more residents access the services they need.

¹²⁸ MEAC, *FGD Women, female heads of households 2* (J-1, November/December 2023); MEAC, *KII #18 with J-1 section leader* (J-1, November/December 2023)

MANAGING EXITS FROM ARMED CONFLICT



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