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Reintegrating Iraqis Returning Home After Conflict: Lessons from Variation Between Four Communities

DR. MARA REVKIN · BENJAMIN KRICK · DR. RAED ALDULAIMI

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Contents

4 Background

- 4 About MEAC
 - 4 About this Series
 - 4 About this Report
-

6 Barriers to the Return and Reintegration of Iraqis with Perceived or Actual ISIL Affiliation in Iraq

11 Methodology

12 Overview of Study Locations

- 14 Al Qaim
 - 17 Habbaniya
 - 18 Tuz Khurmato
 - 21 Mahalabiya
 - 26 What Drives Attitudes Toward Returnees?
 - 26 Conflict Experiences and Current Views on Risk
 - 28 Attitudes Toward Return Process
 - 28 Government-Led Security Screening Process
 - 29 Government-Led Sponsorship (“Kafala”) Process
 - 31 Tabri’yya
-

33 Perceptions and Receptions of Different Returnee Profiles

36 Policy and Programme Implications

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

This report highlights variation in community attitudes toward the return and reintegration of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and other Iraqi returnees from Syria who are perceived as having family or other ties to the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Generally, this population continues to face significant social and economic barriers to return and reintegration into their communities of origin. In addition, important local level variation determines reintegration progress. Interviews and original survey data collected by MEAC in four locations with significant numbers of recent returnees reveal important differences in community attitudes toward reintegration. The following key findings point to community-level factors important for reintegration outcomes and should be taken into account in the design of evidence-based programming and policies concerning migration management, peacebuilding, and social cohesion in post-ISIL Iraq:

- A history of conflict in the community, including territorial control by ISIL and physical harm by the group, and present insecurity, likely affects attitudes toward IDPs and other Iraqis returnees from Syria.
- Ethnic and religious fractionalization and contested authority also may influence attitudes to returns.
- Trust in the different authorities involved in the returns process – the federal government, local and tribal authorities – may influence how communities view returnees.
- Communities often judge returnees by their past actions during the conflict. However, unless they know the returnee personally, community members are often unaware of the person's specific history, whether they have been through a formal reintegration process, and/or received any support before they resettled back in the community. Notably, some community members are less comfortable with returnees from specific camps, namely the Al-Hol camp in Syria, as those living there have been exposed to ISIL for a longer period of time.

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 local variation in community attitudes concerning the return and reintegration of displaced persons with perceived or actual ties to the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). It studies four towns: Al Qaim (Anbar governorate), Habbaniyah (Anbar governorate), Tuz Khurmato (Salah al-Din governorate), and Mahalabiya (Nineveh governorate), Iraq. These four towns were selected because these areas have a notably high number of IDPs who have returned from camps inside Iraq. These areas have also received - and are still receiving - two other categories of returnees: (1) Iraqis who are returning from Al Hol camp in Syria through the formal Government of Iraq-run process and (2) "informal" (and "semi-formal") Iraqi returnees from Syria who have returned to Iraq outside of the formal repatriation process -- usually through irregular border crossings, sometimes facilitated by

smugglers.¹ This report focuses on community attitudes toward returnees in general and briefly discusses some findings on these two specific groups.

Return and reintegration of Iraqis with perceived ISIL affiliation—returning from within Iraq or abroad—is crucial for post-conflict peacebuilding and stabilization. However, the return of this population presents particular challenges as this population is heavily stigmatized and host communities have legitimate security concerns about returnees. Some host communities have seen larger numbers of returns, and some communities are more comfortable and supportive of these returns than other places, corresponding to improved outcomes including the sustainability of returns and indicators of social and economic reintegration and social cohesion. Documenting these variations is a crucial first step in the process of designing and targeting evidence-based programs and assistance for the ongoing process of return and reintegration of displaced Iraqis with perceived or actual ties to ISIL both from within Iraq and from northeast Syria, including Al-Hol camp.

The report assesses variation in attitudes toward reintegration and related outcomes in these four towns based on a set of indicators developed by the global MEAC program and tailored to the Iraq context. This report is based on quantitative data from a face-to-face survey of 1,073 respondents conducted by MEAC in 2022 in partnership with UNDP in four sub-districts: Al Qaim and Habbaniyah in Anbar governorate, Mahalabiya in Nineveh governorate, and Tuz Khurmato in Salah al-Din governorate. The quantitative household data included in this report includes only randomly sampled respondents, it does not include individuals who were referred through UNDP programming. The report describes and analyzes variations in host community attitudes toward returnees with reference to relevant differences in their experiences with conflict and attitudes toward the Iraqi government and security forces. Since the survey data analyzed in this report was collected in 2022, it does not reflect recent events in Iraq, Syria, and the broader region.

¹ While there are nuanced differences between informal and semi-formal returnees, for the purposes of this report, they are considered part of a broader category of returnees who have not gone through a formal return process. For more analysis on the types of returnees bypassing the formal return process see Schadi Semnani, Jente Althuis, Muqadas Samarrai, Melisande Genat, Noor Mohammed, and Siobhan O'Neil, "[Shadow Crossings: Informal Returnees from Al Hol](#)," Findings Report 35, UNIDIR, Geneva, 2024.

Barriers to the Return and Reintegration of Iraqis with Perceived or Actual ISIL Affiliation in Iraq

Prior to analyzing the variation in local responses to returnees, this section provides a short overview of different returnee populations that are often perceived as ISIL-affiliated:

IDPs with perceived affiliation to ISIL

Between 2014 and 2017, ISIL carried out an armed insurgency across Iraq. At the height of its power, the group controlled most major Iraqi cities in the governorates of Nineveh, Anbar, and Salah al-Din, imposing its harsh authoritarian system of governance on more than 5 million people.² Many residents of areas occupied by ISIL fled when the group arrived, but some remained during ISIL's control for diverse reasons: livelihood limitations, social networks, family structures, lack of information, threat perceptions, ideology, and — particularly in the early days — a perception that the quality of governance provided by ISIL would be better than that of the Iraqi government at the time.³ In Mosul, particularly, there was an initial impression that ISIL's reign marked a relative improvement over the preceding period of rule by former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's Shia-dominated government, during which the predominately Sunni population complained of economic neglect and sectarian discrimination, including frequent arbitrary arrests and harassment at checkpoints.⁴ After ISIL's territorial defeat in 2017, these “stayers,” (civilians who lived under ISIL rule for an extended period of time, more than three years in some areas), were widely perceived by other Iraqis as “collaborators,”⁵ even if they did not actually join or support the group.

Among suspected “collaborators,” families of ISIL members are particularly stigmatized because of their close proximity to the group. Many of these families were displaced in the military offensive to liberate Anbar, Nineveh, and Salah al-Din and are still living in camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs) more than six years after the military defeat of ISIL, fearing

² Eric Robinson, Daniel Egel, Patrick B. Johnston, Sean Mann, Alexander D. Rothenberg, and David Stebbins, [“When the Islamic State Comes to Town: The Economic Impact of Islamic State Governance in Iraq and Syria,”](#) RAND, September 2017.

³ Mara Revkin, “Competitive Governance and Displacement Decisions Under Rebel Rule: Evidence from the Islamic State in Iraq,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 65, no. 1 (2021).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Kristen Kao and Mara R. Revkin, “Retribution or reconciliation? Post-conflict attitudes toward enemy collaborators,” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 67, no. 2 (2023).

violent retaliation if they return home. Revenge killings and attacks on the property of suspected ISIL members, collaborators, and their family members were common in the early stages of Operation Inherent Resolve, the U.S-led international coalition's military campaign to defeat ISIL.⁶ Fear of revenge was a major deterrent to return for IDPs with perceived or actual ties to ISIL. In the Hajj Ali IDP camp in Nineveh, displaced widows of ISIL members interviewed in December 2017 said that they hoped to stay in the camp indefinitely because they believed that they and their children would be safer there than in their former homes in Hawija. One of the women, whose brother's house in their village near Hawija was attacked with grenades as a result of his family ties to the group, said, "I am afraid that if I return, my neighbours will kill me in my sleep."⁷

In 2020, Iraqi authorities estimated that more than 300,000 individuals perceived as having family ties to ISIL, of whom the vast majority were women and children, were still displaced in camps across 10 different Iraqi governorates.⁸ As of February 2024, seven years after the Islamic State's territorial defeat in Iraq, more than 1.1 million Iraqis were still displaced from their areas of origin.⁹ Even when they can return home, many civilians with perceived or actual ties to ISIL face significant challenges rejoining their communities and adjusting to normal life.

Although the frequency of violent revenge attacks has diminished in the years since ISIL's defeat, civilians with perceived or actual ties to ISIL remain highly stigmatized and face steep social and economic barriers including: discrimination by prospective employers, challenges accessing essential services, profiling by security forces and militias, sexual harassment and exploitation, and bullying in schools.¹⁰ Families with perceived ISIL association often struggle to find employment both because they have experienced long gaps in employment or education that make them uncompetitive or ineligible for many jobs and because they experience discrimination by employers.¹¹ In recent years, children have faced difficulty enrolling in school due to missing civil documentation, a common problem in formerly ISIL-controlled areas due to the group's intentional destruction of government-issued documents.¹² Even with recent efforts to allow returnee children, who lacked documentation, back into the classroom, those who attend school report facing bullying, sometimes so severe that they feel

⁶ U.S. Department of Defense, "[Operation Inherent Resolve](#)," (last accessed April 22, 2024).

⁷ Interview with "Laila" (40, widow of an ISIL member from a village near Hawija) in the Hajj Ali IDP camp in Nineveh, Iraq) conducted by Mara Revkin in December 14, 2017, quoted previously in Mara R. Revkin, "[After the Islamic State: Balancing Accountability and Reconciliation in Iraq](#)," *United Nations University* (May 2018), p. 33.

⁸ Hisham al-Hashimi, "[ISIS in Iraq: The Challenge of Reintegrating 'ISIS Families'](#)," *New Lines Institute* (July 7, 2020).

⁹ International Organization for Migration, "Displacement Tracking Matrix: Iraq," (last accessed March 4, 2024).

¹⁰ Philip Issa and Salar Salim, "[IS legacy of guilt weighs heavily on Iraqi widows, children](#)," *Associated Press* (April 24, 2019).

¹¹ Mara Redlich Revkin and Delair Jabari, "[West Mosul - Perceptions on return and reintegration among stayees, IDPs and returnees](#)," IOM Iraq (June 30, 2019).

¹² Human Rights Watch, "[Iraq: School Doors Barred to Many Children](#)," (August 28, 2019).

compelled to drop out.¹³ IDPs have reported keeping their daughters out of school in areas of return to avoid harassment and bullying by other students.¹⁴ Many of these challenges are faced by Iraqis returning from Al Hol Camp – or further afield – in Syria, who also encounter particular struggles related to their return journey.

Formal Returnees from Syria

In addition to the challenge of reintegrating stigmatized Iraqis who were displaced internally, a separate population of Iraqis displaced to Al Hol Camp in Northeast Syria, a “closed camp” where in 2022 more than 56,000 individuals with varying degrees of exposure to ISIL resided, have been confined under deteriorating security and humanitarian conditions since 2019 and some for even longer.¹⁵ In May 2021, the Government of Iraq (GoI) began a process of repatriating more than 30,000 Iraqi nationals living in Al Hol. Camp residents have varying degrees of association with ISIL including:

- No association with ISIL at all prior to their displacement to Al Hol Camp, to where Iraqi refugees have been fleeing the conflict with ISIL since 2014.
- Family ties to ISIL (like a father, or more distant connection, like a cousin).
- Civilians who are perceived as “collaborators” due to cooperating with or working for ISIL in civilian roles (e.g., municipal workers, engineers, teachers) whether voluntarily or involuntarily in response to economic duress or physical coercion.
- Civilians who stayed in areas occupied by ISIL (“stayers”) and may not have cooperated directly enough to be perceived as “collaborators” but are nonetheless still stigmatized as a result of their involuntary exposure to the group’s governance and propaganda.

Since May 2021, the Iraqi government has repatriated 10,241 individuals to the Jeddah 1 Rehabilitation Centre, a closed humanitarian Centre in Nineveh governorate south of Mosul administered by GoI with the support of the UN and other humanitarian organizations.¹⁶ The most recent group of 706 individuals (181 households) returned in October 2024.¹⁷ Of the 10,241 who have come to the Centre from Al Hol, over 8,100 individuals have since departed the Centre to return to their areas of origin or other locations.¹⁸ An estimated 23,000 remain in Al Hol Camp in Syria amid deteriorating security and humanitarian conditions.¹⁹ UN Secretary-

¹³ Philip Issa and Salar Salim, “[IS legacy of guilt weighs heavily on Iraqi widows, children](#),” *Associated Press* (April 24, 2019).

¹⁴ Oxfam, “[Protection Landscape in Diyala and Kirkuk Iraq](#),” (March 5, 2020).

¹⁵ Mara R. Revkin, “When Do ‘Closed Camps’ Become Prisons by Another Name?” *Yale Journal of International Law*, Vol. 47 (2022), p. 57.

¹⁶ IOM tracking data, as of November 2024.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ This represents almost half of the camp’s total population in 2022 of more than 52,000, including approximately 18,000 Syrians and around 8,000 Third Country Nationals. Exact numbers are difficult to come by. These are estimates at the time of writing by organizations that work with and in the camp.

General António Guterres warned in September 2021 that camp residents “have now spent more than five years without basic services in increasingly dire conditions” and “they are routinely denied human rights.”²⁰ Most are missing civil identity documents and many of the children in the camp were born without birth certificates and are therefore at risk of statelessness.²¹ Many of these individuals are believed to be wives, children, and other relatives of ISIL members, and there are a number of ISIL supporters and organized “sleeper cells” that operate in Al-Hol Camp and throughout northeast Syria.²² The ISIL supporters and affiliates in Al-Hol are believed to comprise a minority of the camp’s total population, but they have contributed to collective stigmatization of the camp population in addition to threatening the security of other camp residents.²³ Violent crime is widespread, including arson attacks and more than 100 murders since 2021 that were believed to be perpetrated by ISIL affiliates and/or other organized criminal actors in an effort to recruit through intimidation and coercion.²⁴

“Informal” and “Semi-Formal” Returnees from Al Hol and Elsewhere in Syria

In addition to Iraqis from Al Hol who return to their country via the formal return process operated by the Iraqi government, there are also camp residents and Iraqis who were living in other locations in Syria, who have returned through “informal” and “semi-formal” channels. For the purposes of this report, “informal returnees” are those Iraqis who left Al Hol camp in or after 2018, when it became a closed camp and returned to Iraq bypassing the government-led process that began in early 2021. “Semi-formal returnees” are Iraqis who are sponsored by Shaykh to return from the Syrian towns they are living in. Tribal leaders facilitated this return through informal security vetting.²⁵ These populations have been smaller and harder to identify than formal returnees.

The four locations detailed in this report are believed to have received varying numbers of formal, semi-formal, and informal returnees from Syria. There are indications that informal returnees share many of the same vulnerabilities as formal ones (e.g., lack of civil

²⁰ Remarks of UN Secretary-General António Guterres at the launch of [the Global Framework on United Nations Support on Syria and Iraq Third Country National Returnees](#), (September 29, 2021).

²¹ Of the more than 30,000 Iraqis in the camp in 2019, 70 percent were not in possession of valid documentation. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, [Syria: Humanitarian Response in Al Hol Camp, Situation Report No. 5](#) (July 5, 2019).

²² See for example Campbell MacDiarmid, [“Inside Al-Hol, Where Guards Helpless Against Islamic State Death Squads Preying on Syrian Refugees,”](#) *The Telegraph* (March 16, 2021).

²³ Media coverage regularly describes the camp’s population, of whom around 80 percent are children, as “a ticking time bomb”—a term that humanitarian actors criticize as sensational and dehumanizing. Gordon Lubold & Michael R. Gordon, [“A Ticking Time Bomb’: In Syrian Camps, Fears of an Islamic State Revival,”](#) *Wall Street Journal* (March 25, 2024).

²⁴ [“More than 100 murders in 18 months in Syria’s al-Hawl camp, UN says,”](#) *AFP* (June 28, 2022).

²⁵ Schadi Semnani, Jente Althuis, Muqadas Samarrai, Melisande Genat, Noor Mohammed, and Siobhan O’Neil, [“Shadow Crossings: Informal Returnees from Al Hol,”](#) Findings Report 35, UNIDIR, Geneva, 2024., p. 8.

documentation), but their ineligibility for government assistance including cash grants²⁶ and heightened risk for exploitation due to their frequent reliance on smugglers enhance their vulnerability. Given that most are living in remote areas of western Anbar and Nineveh along the Syrian border where UN actors have less programming, their access is even further reduced than other returnees who have resettled in more central and urban areas.

The returning stigmatized populations displaced in Al Hol, around Syria, and internally within Iraq present a challenge for the Iraqi government and the international community. In an effort to aid policymakers and practitioners who are working to support the return and reintegration of these populations, this report examines local variation in communities' readiness to accept the return and reintegration of returnees. The report details quantitative household survey data collected by MEAC and additional qualitative interviews conducted by the authors with respondents in four different sub-districts that have received high numbers of returnees: Al Qaim and Habbaniyah in Anbar governorate, Mahalabiya in Nineveh governorate, and Tuz Khurmato in Salah al-Din governorate. These four communities vary significantly across several attributes that previous research and our findings suggests are important for understanding differences in reintegration outcomes including: ethnic and religious diversity including the presence of minority groups that were selectively targeted by ISIL, the nature and duration of exposure to ISIL (whether partially besieged or completely occupied and for how long), the extent of harm and destruction caused by ISIL and counter-insurgent forces, proximity to Iraq's porous border with Syria (a major route for irregular migration and trafficking), and the strength of Iraqi government and security institutions relative to other local authorities including militias and tribes.

As the Iraqi government prepares to close the remaining IDP camps in Iraq where thousands of Iraqis are still displaced by the end of 2024,²⁷ there is an urgent need for evidence-based guidance to inform UN and Iraqi government programs and policies that seek to build trust and social cohesion in communities experiencing the return or relocation of returnees. The findings highlighted in the report reinforce that successful reintegration depends not only on the willingness, readiness, needs, and risks of returnees but also on features of the receiving communities including demographics, attitudes, geography, history, and local institutions and authorities. The report focuses primarily on the evidence around the acceptance of a general population of returnees with perceived ISIL affiliation (with an occasional specific metric on a particular sub-population), and the results are likely relevant for thinking about how to address

²⁶ In November 2021, Iraqi national intelligence authorities requested that the Ministry of Migration and Displacement's (MOMD) office in Anbar stop registering returnees from Al-Hol (presumably informal) for return cash grants over concerns that these grants would encourage more returns "and may have negative impacts on the security situation," in another indication that GoI authorities may be becoming more concerned about informal returns. Iraq National Protection Cluster, "Minutes of Meeting (11.03.21)." This decision was later reversed.

²⁷ Ammar Aziz, "[Deadline for Closing IDP Camps Extended](#)," *Kirkuk Now* (Aug. 6, 2024).

community acceptance of IDPs with perceived ISIL affiliation or formal, semi-formal, and informal returnees from Syria.

Methodology

This report is based on the following sources of data:²⁸

- A randomized face-to-face household survey of 1,073 respondents conducted in June-July 2022 in four communities. These communities were among areas in which UNDP was engaged in reintegration programming at the time of the survey because these locations experienced considerable displacement during the conflict with ISIL and have seen high numbers of returns since then: Al Qaim (Anbar governorate), Habbaniyah (Anbar governorate), Tuz Khurmato (Salah al-Din governorate), and Mahalabiya (Nineveh governorate).²⁹
- Interviews with key informants conducted in Anbar in 2024 to facilitate our interpretation of the 2022 survey data.³⁰
- Data from the International Organization for Migration's Displacement Tracking Matrix and J1 population tracker.³¹
- Qualitative evidence from local Iraqi news sources (Arabic and English).

The four communities included in this report vary notably across several attributes that previous research suggests are important for understanding differences in reintegration outcomes. A summary of this variation is included in Table 1 below and in Table 2 in the section that follows.

²⁸ All statistics in this report are derived from MEAC data collected in 2022 unless otherwise stated. Percentages reported exclude respondents who refused to answer questions unless this number exceeds 5 per cent of all answers or is notably high for a subset of the respondents (e.g. geographically). Percentages are rounded to whole numbers. The sum of answer options per question therefore does not always add up to 100 per cent.

²⁹ The analysis excludes a group of nonrandomly selected respondents drawn from a roster of UNDP beneficiaries who took the same survey as the random community sample and are included in UNIDIR's previous reports using this data. See 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) and Jacqueline Parry and Yousif Khalid Khoshnaw, with Siobhan O'Neil and Juan Armando Torres Munguía, "[Coming Home: The Return and Reintegration of Families with Perceived ISIL Affiliation in Iraq](#)," (UNIDIR, Geneva 2023). The report limits the analysis to the random sample because the UNDP beneficiary sample was predominately female and many were from communities other than the four that are the focus of this study. The beneficiaries were targeted for support from UNDP and were largely made up of IDPs with perceived ISIL affiliation and community members who had been identified as particularly vulnerable.

³⁰ Duke University's Institutional Review Board granted approval for our original interviews and for use of the MEAC and UNDP survey data on August 31, 2023 (Protocol #2023-0565).

³¹ International Organization for Migration, [Displacement Tracking Matrix](#); Iraq (last accessed April 24, 2024); IOM tracking data, as of November 2024.

TABLE 1 – SURVEY SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

	Al Qaim	Habbaniyah	Mahalabiya	Tuz Khurmato	Total
Sample size	282	221	346	224	1073
Gender balance	47% female 53% male	52% female 48% male	44% female 56% male	52% female 48% male	48% female 52% male
Lived in area during period ISIL was in charge ³²	76%	7%	82%	11%	61%
Displaced as a result of the conflict ³³	74% (204 out of 276)	81% (81 out of 100)	93% (316 out of 339)	74% (108 out of 146)	82% (709 out of 861)

Overview of Study Locations

The four locations examined provide interesting variation in their demographics and experiences in the war, allowing for an analysis of contextual factors that may influence receptivity to those Iraqis with perceived ISIL affiliation who are returning to their communities: Qaim, Habbaniyah, and Mahalabiya are all Sunni Arab majority communities, whereas Tuz Khurmato is ethnically mixed with a large Turkmen population. Qaim and Mahalabiya were captured and controlled by ISIL for significant periods of time, whereas Habbaniyah was never fully captured and Tuz Khurmato was only occupied briefly. Occupied or not, each community

³² This question was only posed to respondents whose area was attacked and occupied by ISIL between 2014 and 2017 (98 per cent in Qaim, 46 per cent in Habbaniyah, 98 per cent in Mahalabiya, 66 per cent in Tuz Khurmato). The percentage in the table indicates the respondents who stated that their area was attacked by ISIL *and* that they lived in the area during this occupation.

³³ This question was only posed to respondents whose area was attacked and occupied by ISIL between 2014 and 2017. These statistics thus only provide a rough indication of the percentage of respondents who are or have been IDPs. Furthermore, these statistics do not indicate whether a respondent has returned home or is secondarily displaced. Out of the 709 respondents whose area was attacked and occupied by ISIL and who were displaced, 673 stated that they had returned to their area of origin at the time of interviewing. Only 36 respondents (5 per cent of all displaced respondents) did not return to their area of origin and was thus secondarily displaced at the time of interviewing.

was impacted and victimized by the conflict in different ways. The locations also vary in their proximity to the Syrian border, and the influence of different militia groups.

FIGURE 1 – LOCATIONS OF SUB-DISTRICTS INCLUDED IN THE SURVEY

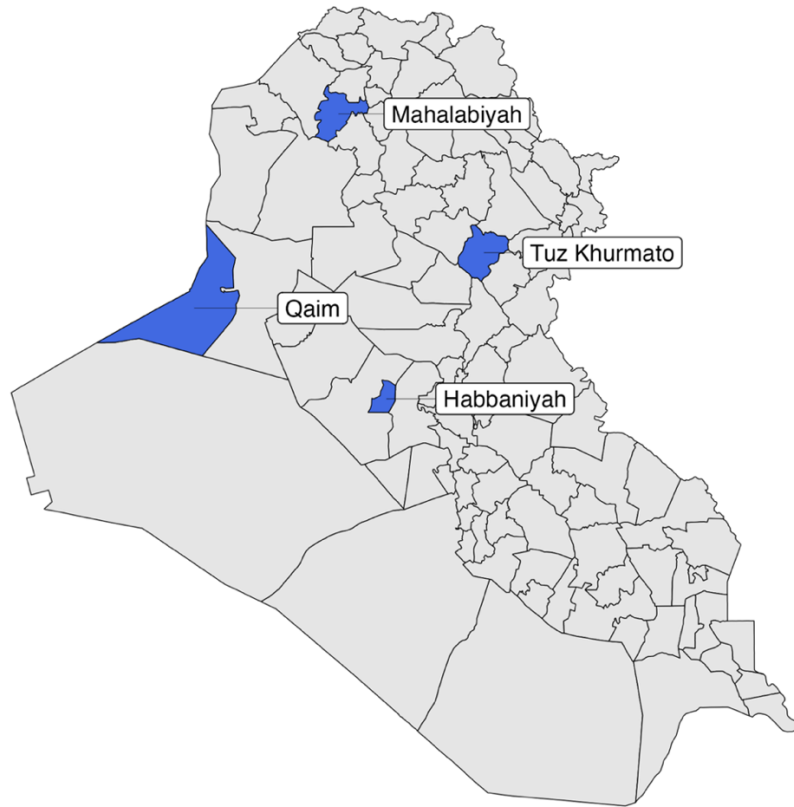


Table 2 describes key dimensions of variation in contextual and historical factors including degree of urbanization, exposure to ISIL, and the number of residents displaced and returned. Of the four sub-districts, Qaim had received the most formal returns (around 105,000) and Habbaniyah had received the least (around 25,000) at the time of writing this report.³⁴

³⁴ International Organization for Migration (IOM)'s Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) data.

TABLE 2 – DIFFERENCES IN DEMOGRAPHICS AND OTHER KEY INDICATORS ACROSS 4 COMMUNITIES

Sub-District	Qaim	Habbaniyah	Mahalabiya	Tuz Khurmato
Governorate	Anbar	Anbar	Nineveh	Salah ad-Din
Demography	Sunni Arab Majority	Sunni Arab Majority	Sunni Arab Majority	Mixed
Community Captured by ISIL	Yes	Partially (Siege)	Yes	Partially (Siege)
Duration of ISIL Control	3 years, 4 months	N/A	3 years	N/A
Urbanization	Small City	Small City	Town	Small City
Population (2018 estimate)³⁵	109,000	139,000	39,000	122,000
Total IDPs Living in Location (Returnees from Camps or Other Locations)³⁶	105,960	25,494	30,588	59,208

Al Qaim

The district of Qaim is a major urban center in western Anbar governorate near the Syrian border with a predominately Sunni Arab population.³⁷ Situated on the Euphrates River, Qaim’s economy relies primarily on agriculture, cross-border trade, and the oil and cement industries. Qaim is more tribal and less urbanized than other nearby urban centers in Anbar (Anah, Hit, and Rawa) with close economic, familial, and tribal ties to neighbouring Syria.³⁸ Qaim also has a history of grievances with Iraq’s central government.³⁹ Since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2012, the border area between Qaim and the nearby Syrian city of al-Bukamal has been

³⁵ 2018 population estimates from [City Population](#).

³⁶ International Organization for Migration, [Displacement Tracking Matrix](#); Iraq (last accessed April 24, 2024).

³⁷ There is no reliable district-level data on ethnic and religious demographics, but Anbar’s population is estimated to be at least 90% Sunni Arab. Returns Working Group, [“Anbar Return Process Mapping,”](#) (August 2020), p. 1.

³⁸ Kheder Khaddour, [“Much More Than a Border,”](#) Carnegie Middle East Center (September 2, 2019).

³⁹ Interview by Raed Aldulaimi with an academic from Baghdadi, Anbar (September 2023).

an active hub for local and foreign fighters crossing between Iraq and Syria,⁴⁰ human trafficking of migrants,⁴¹ and illicit smuggling of weapons, narcotics, oil and other goods.⁴² In recent years, Qaim has been a focal point of the long-running proxy conflict between the U.S. and Iran through its backing of Kata'ib Hezbollah and Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), a former militia group that was formally incorporated into Iraq's state security forces in 2016.⁴³ In February 2024, U.S. airstrikes targeted missile warehouses in Qaim in retaliation for a drone strike on an American military base in Jordan.⁴⁴ Iraqi government forces have a limited presence other than the PMF and other Iran-backed militias, some of which participate in cross-border smuggling and human trafficking. Tribal authorities are heavily involved in local governance and security provision including permissions for returns.

ISIL captured Qaim in June 2014. During the conflict, Qaim's location on the border with Syria (only 7 kilometers from the first major urban center in Syria, al-Bukamal), made it a strategic supply route and a key stronghold for ISIL. The group's crimes against the civilian population of Qaim during that occupation are one factor that may contribute to resentment and fear of returnees with perceived or actual ties to ISIL. One particular wound for the community is ISIL's abduction of more than 500 men from the Al Bu Nimr tribe in Gharbia, whose fates remain unknown. The men are believed to have been summarily executed and buried in the desert.⁴⁵

In November 2017, Qaim was recaptured by Iraqi forces—the last major urban center retaken from ISIL as the group retreated across the border into Syria.⁴⁶ Many properties remain damaged or destroyed, and others have since been occupied by militias or other civilians, hindering returns and leading to property disputes.⁴⁷ The known presence of ISIL "remnants" in Anbar and their periodic attacks have contributed to anxiety about the possibility of a future ISIL resurgence.⁴⁸

Qaim has received large numbers of returnees – both from within Iraq and from across the border in Syria. Qaim and other towns in Western Anbar are believed to have received a

⁴⁰ Kheder Khaddour & Harith Hasan, "[The Transformation of the Iraqi-Syrian Border: From a National to a Regional Frontier](#)," (March 2020).

⁴¹ UNODC, "[Migrant Smuggling in Asia and the Pacific: Current Trends and Challenges](#)" (July 2018, Volume II) p. 32.

⁴² Husham al-Hashimi, "[ISIS on the Iraqi-Syrian Border: Thriving Smuggling Networks](#)," (June 16, 2020).

⁴³ Mustafa Salim & Missy Ryan, "[Iraq gives militias official status despite abuse claims](#)," *Washington Post* (November 26, 2016).

⁴⁴ Jane Arraf, "[The likely targets of the U.S. air strikes in Iraq and Syria](#)," NPR (Feb. 2, 2024).

⁴⁵ Interview by Raed Aldulaimi with an Iraqi academic from Qaim, Anbar (October 26, 2023). See "[Islamic State Executes 70 Sunni Tribesmen in Iraq](#)," *BBC* (October 5, 2015).

⁴⁶ U.S. Central Command, "[Iraqi Forces Liberate Qaim, Key Border Crossing](#)," (November 3, 2017).

⁴⁷ Salam Aljaf, Iraq: Armed Groups Obstructs the Return of IDPs from Qaim, and the Costs of Renting Worsen their Conditions (19 February 2020),

⁴⁸ European Union Agency for Asylum, "[Country Guidance: Iraq 2021](#)," (January 2021).

significant number of informal returnees as a result of their proximity to the Syrian border.⁴⁹ The town of Baaj in Nineveh near Sinjar is also believed to have received a significant number of informal returnees.⁵⁰ A significant number of female-headed households with family ties to ISIL, both returnees from Syria and IDPs who had previously been displaced in camps in Iraq, are believed to be living in informal settlements around Qaim.⁵¹ In other areas with significant returns of IDPs with perceived or actual ties to ISIL, such as Mosul, returnees have increasingly resorted to living in informal sites—abandoned buildings, tents, or other makeshift structures—when they are unable to secure formal housing for reasons including inability to afford property or rent, lack of documentation, stigmatization or rejection by communities, or being targeted for eviction by local authorities on the basis of their suspected ties to ISIL.⁵² Interviewees reported that some neighborhoods and villages in and around Qaim have been completely closed to returnees with perceived affiliation by certain armed groups, who have reportedly shot at or threatened those who have attempted to return.⁵³ Security actors in Qaim tend to be suspicious of IDPs with perceived or actual ties to ISIL, and fear that they may be members of “sleeper cells.”⁵⁴

Despite these challenges, the recent round of interviews⁵⁵ and previous interviews by MEAC researchers⁵⁶ suggest that Qaim has recently received a significant number of informal returnees from Al-Hol camp in Syria whose presence may affect reintegration dynamics. Interviewees cited Qaim’s receptivity to returnees in comparison with other communities and its close proximity to a porous border that is primarily controlled by Iranian-backed militias involved in smuggling networks as factors in the large number of informal returns to Qaim. Some informal returnees have crossed the porous border in Western Anbar where Qaim is located, but others went first to Mosul or other cities before later moving back to Qaim. Although qualitative evidence suggest the presence of a positive feedback loop in which the large number of returns to Qaim with relatively few adverse security incidents can increase receptivity to returns, the survey data – which predated many of the informal returnees

⁴⁹ In August 2020, a tribal sheikh in Karbala reported that “hundreds of women and children without men but who were the wives and children of IS fighters have arrived in Qaim in recent months from the Al-Hol camp” without the involvement of the international community or Gol authorities. Shelly Kittleson, [“Tribal assassinations spark Iraqi-Syrian border concern,”](#) *Al-Monitor* (Aug. 10, 2020); Schadi Semnani, Jente Althuis, Muqadas Samarraï, Melisande Genat, Noor Mohammed, and Siobhan O’Neil, [“Shadow Crossings: Informal Returnees from Al Hol,”](#) Findings Report 35, UNIDIR, Geneva, 2024.

⁵⁰ Tahsin Qasim, [“Al-Hol returnees regret homecoming to derelict Nineveh village,”](#) *Rudaw* (Nov. 19, 2020).

⁵¹ REACH, [“Rapid Assessment on Returns and Durable Solutions: Markaz Al-Kaim Sub-district - Al-Kaim District - Al-Anbar Governorate,”](#) (February 2022).

⁵² Paula Garcia, [“Ignoring Iraq’s Most Vulnerable: The Plight of Displaced Person,”](#) Center for Civilians in Conflict, April 2021, p. 10.

⁵³ MEAC Community Leader KII #10 (Anbar, February 2024); MEAC Community Leader KII #15 (Anbar, February 2024)

⁵⁴ Interview by Raed Aldulaimi with a journalist from Anbar (September 11, 2023).

⁵⁵ Interview by Raed Aldulaimi with an Iraqi academic from Qaim, Anbar (October 26, 2023).

⁵⁶ MEAC Interview 2 with a male respondent from Qaim interviewed by MEAC in 2022.

interviewed – suggests that many Qaim residents still have significant security concerns related to ISIL-affiliated returnees.

Of the four sub-districts, Qaim had the highest percentage of respondents (45 per cent) who said they are “very concerned” about the return of ISIL-affiliated returnees⁵⁷ and also the highest level of discomfort (89 per cent) with the prospect of their children attending school with the children of ISIL-affiliated returnees.⁵⁸ Reintegration challenges in Qaim may be related to the sub-district’s geographic proximity to Syria, where the remnants of ISIL remain active, and the harm caused by ISIL’s occupation and the resulting military operations.

Habbaniyah

The sub-district of Habbaniyah is a small city in the governorate of Anbar located between the cities of Ramadi to the West and Al-Fallujah to the East. The population is predominately Sunni Arab with very small minorities of Christians, Shia Arabs, and Kurds. Habbaniyah was at times threatened by ISIL and some areas of its eastern outskirts were attacked and besieged, but the town itself was never fully captured. The city, however, was very close to the front lines and two major cities captured by ISIL: Fallujah, which was controlled by ISIL from January 2014 to June 2016,⁵⁹ and Ramadi, which was briefly captured by ISIL. Habbaniyah was a center of resistance against ISIL and an important staging ground for Iraqi forces during the battle to retake Ramadi in June 2015.⁶⁰ The Iraqi and U.S. governments provided weapons and training at a military base near Habbaniyah, which they did not want to fall into ISIL’s hands.⁶¹

Habbaniyya has experienced a high rate of returns, although not as high as other locations surveyed. At the time of writing, at least 25,494 returnees reside in the sub-district. These include 500 families with perceived ISIL affiliation who returned to Habbaniyya in 2022 after a UNDP-facilitated peace agreement signed by tribal authorities.⁶²

⁵⁷ Out of all 282 Qaim community members who answered this question, 40 per cent said they are “somewhat concerned” and only 10 per cent said they are “not concerned at all” when asked “How concerned are you about the return of people who are accused of having family ties to ISIL in this area?” 5 per cent refused to answer the question.

⁵⁸ Out of 153 Qaim community members with children who answered this question, only 10 per cent said “Yes” when asked “Are you comfortable if your children go to the same school as the children from these families?” (referring to families who are accused of having ties to ISIL). 1 per cent refused to answer the question.

⁵⁹ Jared Malsin, “[Iraq Liberates Fallujah from ISIS. Now the Hard Part Begins.](#)” *Time* (June 27, 2016).

⁶⁰ Nick Paton Walsh and Hamdi Alkshali, “[Bullets fly on ISIS front line as Iraqis prepare for battle.](#)” *CNN* (June 9, 2015).

⁶¹ Hamza Mustafa. Council of Anbar: “Falling of Amriyat al-Falluja Opens the Gates of Baghdad for IS,” *Al-Sharq al-Awasat* (October 17, 2014).

⁶² UNDP, “[UNDP, with local and national authorities and community leaders, celebrates successful community reintegration in Habbaniyah, Anbar.](#)” (October 30, 2022).

In Habbaniyahh, only 22 per cent of respondents said they were “very concerned” about the return of families who are accused of having ties to ISIL, a much lower number than in Qaim.⁶³ When asked how they feel about their children attending school with the children of ISIL-affiliated returnees, 63 per cent said they were not comfortable with this, a much lower number than that reported in Qaim.⁶⁴ Security concerns appear to be less acute than in Qaim for reasons that might include Habbaniyahh’s greater distance from the Syrian border and stronger presence of Iraqi government and security authorities. Habbaniyahh is also farther from the lucrative cross-border black market trade in which militias are heavily involved. As a result, militias are much less present in Habbaniyahh in comparison with Qaim and other areas of western Anbar. Habbaniyahh also experienced significantly less harm than Qaim during the conflict due to never being fully occupied by ISIL. Since Habbaniyahh was a center of resistance against ISIL, it is also possible that the community feels less threatened by ISIL-affiliated IDPs.

Tuz Khurmato

The sub-district of Tuz Khurmato is the seat of government of the larger district of Tuz located in the north-eastern part of Salah al-Din Governorate. It is among the disputed territories and has been under the joint control of Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), and local Iraqi police, who have clashed periodically in recent years.⁶⁵ Of the four sub-districts included in the study, Tuz Khurmato is the only one that is ethnically and religiously mixed—the other three communities are predominately Sunni Arab. In contrast, the majority of Tuz Khurmato’s population are Shia Turkmen, the third largest ethnic group in Iraq after Arabs and Kurds, who trace their roots to the Ottoman Empire and view Tuz Khurmato as their historic cultural capital.⁶⁶ Tuz Khurmato also includes significant minorities of Sunni Kurds and Sunni Arabs. There is a long history of ethnic tensions between Shia Turkmen and Sunni Kurds, who live in separate neighborhoods,⁶⁷ predating the conflict with ISIL. Under the former regime of Saddam Hussein, Tuz Khurmato was targeted by an “Arabization” campaign that included forced displacement and ethnic cleansing of non-Arab minorities including Turkmen, Kurds, and Yazidis in an effort to demographically engineer an Arab majority.⁶⁸

⁶³ However, out of 221 respondents who received this question, 16 per cent refused to answer. 29 per cent said they were “somewhat concerned,” and 33 per cent was “not concerned at all.”

⁶⁴ Out of 121 respondents with children in the district, 7 per cent refused to answer the question and 31 per cent said they were comfortable with this.

⁶⁵ Human Rights Watch, “[Iraq: Fighting in Disputed Territories Kills Civilians](#),” (Oct. 20, 2017)

⁶⁶ Mac Skelton and Zmkan Ali Saleem, [Iraq’s Disputed Internal Boundaries After ISIS Heterogeneous Actors Vying for Influence](#), LSE Middle East Centre Report (February 2019), p. 16.

⁶⁷ Salam Khoder, “[Iraq: The separating walls of Tuz Khurmato](#),” *Al Jazeera* (April 18, 2016).

⁶⁸ Rizgar Ibrahim, “[Tuz Khurmato: A Town That Once Suffered Under Iraq’s Arabization Is Now at Iran’s Mercy](#),” Washington Kurdish Institute (December 19, 2017).

Parts of the larger district of Tuz were briefly captured by ISIL in July 2014.⁶⁹ Although ISIL was expelled relatively quickly by the end of 2014 by a collection of forces including the PMF and Kurdish Peshmerga, the fighting caused significant damage. An IOM assessment found that more than half of all houses in the district of Tuz Khurmato were destroyed.⁷⁰ There was also significant damage to agricultural land, which had previously been the lynchpin of the local economy. Despite never fully capturing Tuz Khurmato (although it did capture parts of the larger district of Tuz), ISIL's atrocities against Shia Turkmen were traumatic for the community. ISIL subjected Shia Turkmen and other minority groups to particularly severe violence. As many as 1,300 Turkmen women,⁷¹ including from Tuz Khurmato,⁷² were abducted and subjected to sexual slavery by ISIL, contributing to fears of ISIL and resentment of Sunni Arabs who were perceived as collaborators. During the military operations around Tuz Khurmato against ISIL, PMF forces reportedly destroyed houses and properties of Sunni Kurds and Arabs and left behind sectarian graffiti,⁷³ contributing to mutual resentment between Shia and Sunni groups.

Since its liberation from ISIL, control over Tuz Khurmato has been contested along ethnic and sectarian lines. From late 2014 until 2016, the district was split between PMF and Peshmerga control, although the territory under their influence has shifted over time. Kurdish security forces were dominant in the northern parts of the central sub-district, including parts of the district capital, Tuz Khurmato, while a range of Shia PMF forces controlled the remainder of the district.⁷⁴ In October 2017, a major outbreak of violence occurred when the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)'s parliament accused Shia PMF forces of ethnic cleansing and other human rights violations against Kurdish residents of Tuz Khurmato.⁷⁵ Kurdish forces and the PMF eventually agreed to divide political and territorial control of the district.⁷⁶ The security situation in and around Tuz Khurmato remains tense as a result of contestation between these different forces and reports of underground ISIL activity. Since ISIL's territorial defeat, remnants of the group have reportedly been hiding in the Hamreen mountains near Tuz Khurmato, occasionally emerging to conduct suicide bombings, arson attacks on farmland,⁷⁷ and kidnap civilians.⁷⁸

⁶⁹ Rebecca Collard, ["ISIS Lays Siege to Iraqi Turkmen Village."](#) *Time* (August 24, 2014).

⁷⁰ IOM, [Urban Displacement in Federal Iraq](#) (2021), p. 30.

⁷¹ Goran Baban, ["Turkmen women call to uncover fate of 1300 missing Turkmen abducted by ISIS."](#) *Kirkuk Now* (February 4, 2021).

⁷² Ali Taher Al-Hamoud, ["Iraqi Turkmen: The Controversy of Identity and Affiliation."](#) Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (August 2021).

⁷³ Human Rights Watch, ["After Liberation Came Destruction: Iraqi Militias and the Aftermath of Amerli"](#) (September 2014).

⁷⁴ András Derzsi-Horváth, ["Iraq after ISIL: Tuz."](#) Global Public Policy Institute (August 16, 2017).

⁷⁵ UNAMI (the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq), [Summary of UNAMI Findings](#) in Tuz Khurmato (December 23, 2017).

⁷⁶ Alarab, [Tuz Khurmato as an Example of the Ethnic and Sectarian Violence in Post-IS](#) (August 19, 2016),

⁷⁷ ["ISIS bombing kills 5, injures 10 who were extinguishing fire in disputed Kirkuk: source."](#) *Kurdistan 24* (May 25, 2019).

⁷⁸ ["Daesh/ISIS kidnaps farmers in Tuz Khurmato countryside."](#) *MENA Affairs* (March 22, 2021).

Tuz Khurmato has one of the highest IDP to host population ratios of urban areas in Iraq— as high as 14 IDPs per host community member in some neighbourhoods —and 80 per cent of IDPs are Sunni Arab.⁷⁹ At the time of writing, 59,208 returnees reside in the district (see Table 2). However, many IDPs from the sub-district have been unable to return home for reasons including lack of housing and active opposition by community members or security forces who have physically blocked returns in some cases.⁸⁰ Sectarian tensions and political struggles in Tuz Khurmato have hindered the return of some displaced Iraqis with perceived ISIL affiliation as well as those from Al Hol.⁸¹ In some cases, Sunni IDPs from Tuz have been barred from returning by local Shia militias.⁸²

In post-ISIL Tuz, there are concerns over inadequate service provision including electricity and access to water needed for farming, weak social cohesion, and insecurity, particularly in more rural areas of the sub-district. Security concerns include frequent disputes over land ownership, often along ethnic and sectarian lines. Tuz Khurmato's status as one of Iraq's disputed territories has led to both gaps in security and frictions between different security forces, particularly the predominately Shia PMF and Kurdish security forces.⁸³

Of the four sub-districts, Tuz Khurmato had the second-largest number of respondents who said they were “very concerned” about the return of ISIL-affiliated returnees (39 per cent) after Qaim. A high percentage of respondents (25 per cent) refused to answer this question in Tuz Khurmato, indicating the sensitivity of the issue and suggesting that the actual level of concern may be higher than reported.⁸⁴ Respondents in Tuz Khurmato also had the second-highest level of discomfort with the prospect of their children attending school with the children of ISIL-affiliated returnees after Qaim.⁸⁵ These concerns are likely driven by several features of Tuz Khurmato's demography, geography, and experience with the recent conflict including its history of ethnic and sectarian tensions, its disputed territorial status, and ISIL's atrocities against the Turkmen minority in particular.

⁷⁹ Based on data collected by IOM in 2020; IOM, [Urban Displacement in Federal Iraq](#), p. 30.

⁸⁰ IOM, [“No Way Home: An Assessment of Barriers to Sustainable Return and Reintegration In Locations of No Return,”](#) (January-March 2022), p. 4.

⁸¹ Al-Hashimi, [“ISIS in Iraq.”](#)

⁸² Garcia, [“Ignoring Iraq's Most Vulnerable.”](#)

⁸³ [Erica Gaston, “Local Forces, Local Control.” Global Public Policy Institute \(Apr. 28, 2018\) and “ISIS attack village, kidnap three near Tuz Khurmato,” Rudaw \(Dec. 24, 2018\).](#)

⁸⁴ Out of 224 respondents who received this question, 13 per cent said they were “somewhat concerned”, and 24 per cent said they were “not concerned at all.”

⁸⁵ Out of 159 respondents with children in this area, 65 per cent said they were not comfortable with their children going to school with those of ISIL affiliated families, 27 per cent said they were, and 8 per cent refused to answer the question.

Mahalabiya

Mahalabiya is a sub-district of Mosul District in Nineveh Governorate, roughly one hour from Mosul city. Its population of around 40,000 is predominantly Sunni Arab with a small Turkmen minority. The area is remote with limited infrastructure and services. Mahalabiya was captured by ISIL in 2014 and retaken by government forces in 2017. During that period, Mahalabiya was a strategic position for ISIL because the terrain and proximity made it a good deployment point for attacks on Mosul.⁸⁶ Mahalabiya experienced significant collateral damage during ISIL's occupation and residents remain concerned about the need for reconstruction and economic development, as well as long commute times for access to schools and other essential government services.⁸⁷

Mahalabiya has seen significant returns since the end of the conflict. At the time of writing, an estimated 30,588 returnees were living in the sub-district,⁸⁸ including some from Al-Hol Camp in Syria.⁸⁹ Despite the high rate of returns, support for reintegration of ISIL-affiliated returnees is mixed. Although 44 per cent of respondents stated that they were “not concerned at all” about the return of ISIL affiliated families, almost as many respondents were “somewhat concerned.”⁹⁰ Of the four sub-districts, Mahalabiya had the highest percentage of respondents who said they would be comfortable with their children attending the same school as children of ISIL-affiliated returnees (39 per cent). However, a majority of 60 per cent thus said they would not be comfortable with this, indicating the persistence of stigmatization of children across Iraq.⁹¹ These findings suggest a positive feedback loop in which the large number of returns to Mahalabiya with relatively few adverse security incidents may increase receptivity to returns, although there is still significant reticence to overcome. Although Mahalabiya stands out among the four sub-districts as having the highest level of support for reintegration of ISIL-affiliated returnees, a majority of the community still has concerns. Opposition is likely driven by concerns about security and the potential for returnees to further strain the sub-district's already inadequate infrastructure and services.

⁸⁶ “[Learn About Mahalabiya that IS Lost in Tal Afar](#),” *ah-Hadath* (May 20, 2020).

⁸⁷ UNDP Iraq, “[Championing community acceptance for returning families in Mahalabiya, Nineveh](#),” (Jul. 27, 2022).

⁸⁸ Of 38 locations assessed by IOM in the subdistrict of Mahalabiya, 5 (13 per cent) have reported that all displaced individuals from there have returned, 21 (55 per cent) have reported that most displaced individuals have returned, 9 (24 per cent) have reported around half of returned, 3 (8 per cent) have reported that less than half have returned; International Organization for Migration, Displacement Tracking Matrix; Iraq (last accessed April 24, 2024).

⁸⁹ “[14800 Families with Ties to IS are Waiting to Return](#),” *Alamada*, (November 8, 2020).

⁹⁰ Out of 346 respondents in the area who received this question, 42 per cent said they were “somewhat concerned,” 11 per cent said they were “very concerned,” and 2 per cent refused to answer the question.

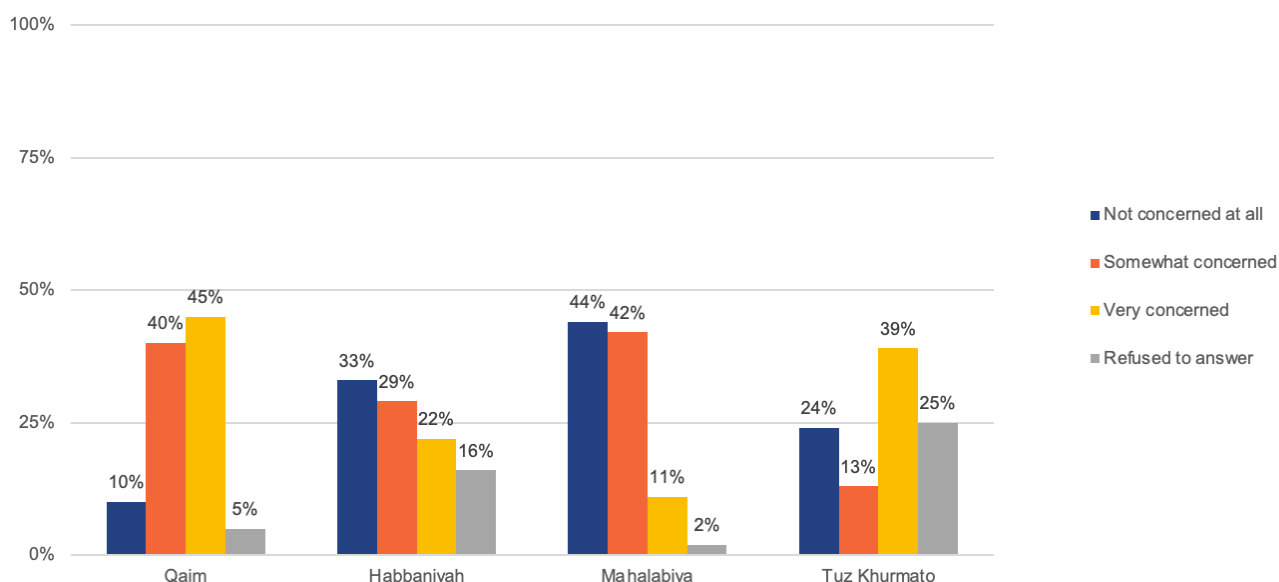
⁹¹ A total of 225 respondents with children in this area received the question. 1 per cent refused to answer the question.

Reintegration Attitudes: Variation in Return Dynamics and Support

The section that follows examines differences in receptivity to return across the four locations described above. Drawing on survey data and qualitative research, the report looks at different metrics of receptivity to returnees alongside experiences and perceptions of community members. Furthermore, the report examines the conflict experiences and current risks faced by each community, all of which are relevant for and may influence attitudes toward reintegration of ISIL-affiliated IDPs and returnees from Syria.

Receptivity to returnees with perceived family ties to ISIL varies widely in Qaim, Habbaniyah, Mahalabiya and Tuz Khurmato. Figure 2 summarizes the previously discussed perceptions of returning ISIL affiliated families per community. The high rate of refusal to answer in Tuz (25 per cent) is notable and suggests that this question was more sensitive there making it more difficult to interpret. It is possible that questions about returns are more sensitive in Tuz Khurmato due to the persistence of inter-communal tensions between different ethnic and religious groups since ISIL’s territorial defeat and the different security forces that share power in this and other territories disputed between the federal government and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Setting aside the high refusal rates in Tuz Khurmato, as mentioned before Qaim stands out as the sub-district with the greatest concerns about returnees.

FIGURE 2 – “HOW CONCERNED ARE YOU ABOUT THE RETURN OF PEOPLE WHO ARE ACCUSED OF HAVING FAMILY TIES TO ISIL IN THIS AREA?”



In contrast, Mahalabiya—a suburb of Mosul that was recaptured from ISIL several months before Qaim—is the least concerned about returnees. This may reflect that Mahalabiya has the

strongest Iraqi government presence among the four sub-districts included in this study, and the highest level of trust in the government's security screening process. Recent research in Mosul showed a similar trend, that community members were not particularly concerned about community safety because they had a lot of trust in the security apparatus there.⁹² It might also reflect the prevalence of returnees with perceived or actual ties to ISIL with relatively few adverse security incidents. One interviewee in Mosul suggested that communities with the largest numbers of ISIL-affiliated returnees often do a better job of reintegrating them than communities with fewer such returnees because the prevalence of ISIL affiliation reduces the stigma around this population and builds empathy and trust as more IDPs return without security incidents.⁹³

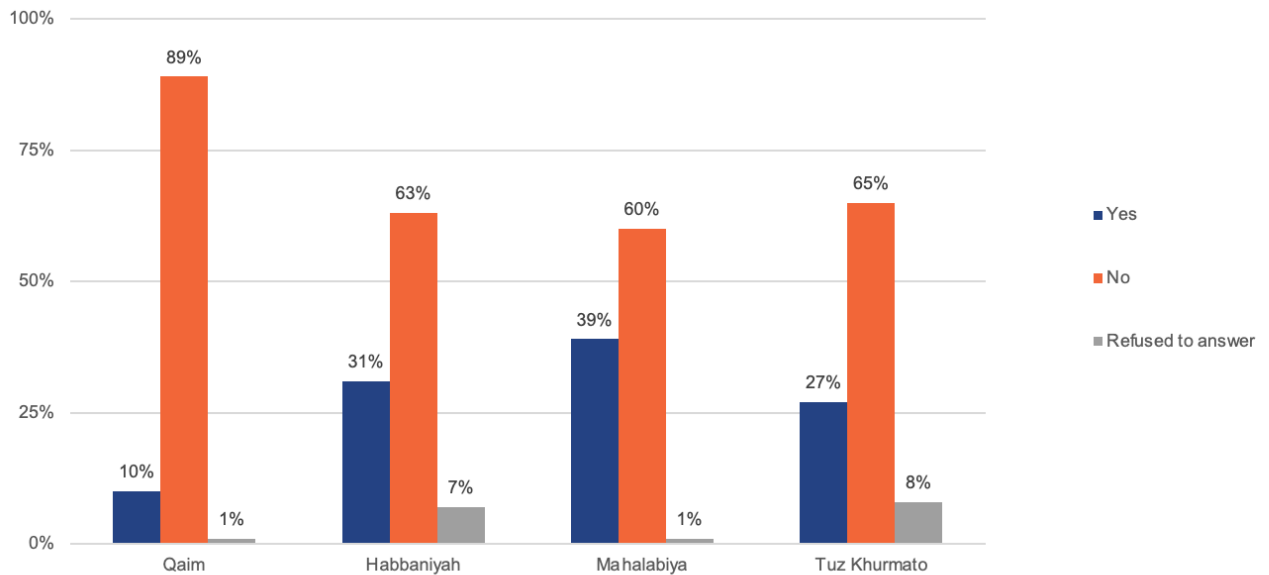
Given the relative rarity of arrests and security incidents involving returnees with family ties to ISIL in recent years as compared with the height of the military operation to defeat ISIL in 2017—when suspected ISIL collaborators were being arrested en masse⁹⁴—the persistence of these fears despite significant improvements in the security situation indicates continuing distrust and stigmatization of returnees. Stigmatization is not limited to adults and also extends to children. Figure 3 summarizes the previously discussed results on respondents' level of comfort with the prospect of their children attending the same school as children of ISIL-affiliated returnees. A majority of respondents in all four sub-districts said they would not be comfortable with their children attending school with children of returnees with the highest level of discomfort reported in Qaim (89 per cent not comfortable).

⁹² MEAC Community Leader KII #7 (Mosul, November 2023); MEAC Community Leader KII #1 (Mosul, November 2023); MEAC Community Leader KII #10 (Mosul, November 2023); MEAC FGD #2 Men (Mosul, November 2023); MEAC FGD #4 Women (Mosul, November 2023)

⁹³ Interview with an Iraqi researcher in Mosul, August 2023.

⁹⁴ Mara R. Revkin, "[After the Islamic State: Balancing Accountability and Reconciliation in Iraq](#)," *United Nations University* (May 2018), p. 22.

FIGURE 3 – “ARE YOU COMFORTABLE IF YOUR CHILDREN GO TO THE SAME SCHOOL AS THE CHILDREN FROM THESE FAMILIES?”

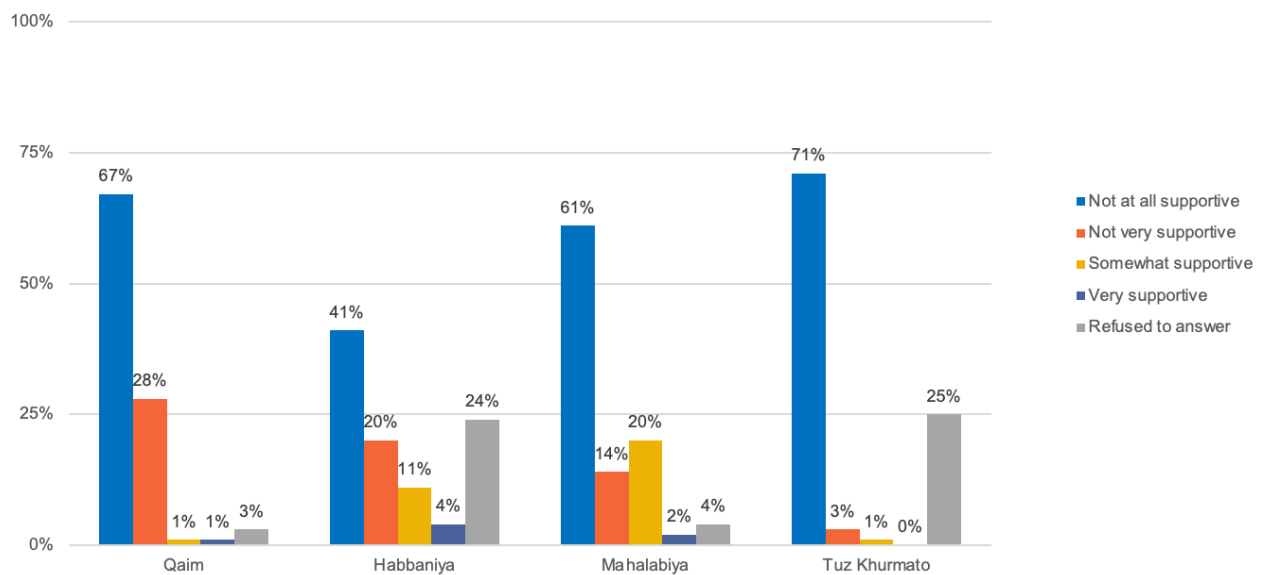


As with the general question about returnees, the population in Qaim is more uncomfortable with returnees of all ages.

Reintegration Support

As might be expected given the levels of discomfort with returnees with perceived ISIL affiliation (including children), there is little support for financial or other programmatic assistance for the return and reintegration of this population. A majority of respondents in all four locations reported that their community was *not* supportive of these returnees receiving assistance with the highest levels of opposition in Qaim (95 per cent opposed) and Tuz Khurmato (74 per cent opposed, see figure 4). Both Habbaniyah and Mahalabiya stand out for having noteworthy minorities in favor of providing assistance to returnees (15 per cent and 22 per cent respectively). Host communities in these and other areas affected by returns often express frustration with the perceived support provided to returnee populations. There are perceptions that support is going exclusively or disproportionately to returnees, who are sometimes perceived as complicit in ISIL’s crimes.

FIGURE 4 – “HOW SUPPORTIVE ARE PEOPLE WHO LIVE IN THIS AREA TOWARDS ASSISTANCE PROVIDED TO FAMILIES WITH TIES TO ISIL?”



In Qaim, opposition to assistance for returnees may be influenced by grievances with the slow pace of reconstruction and poor quality of infrastructure and services. Some interviewees in Qaim expressed concerns about perceived inequalities in assistance between returnees, who are thought to be receiving aid from international organizations, and host communities, which do not receive any or as much assistance but still have significant needs for reconstruction and economic redevelopment.⁹⁵ This general dynamic is likely to be felt beyond Qaim, but the resulting reticence to support returnees still remains highest in Qaim and may be driven by additional factors including the large numbers of returns to Qaim, the duration of ISIL’s control (Qaim was the group’s last major stronghold in Iraq), and proximity to the border with Syria where remnants of ISIL remain active.

In addition to variation in local approval of GoI, IO, or NGO support for returnees, the four sub-districts vary considerably in the willingness of community members to provide support for returnees. When asked if ordinary members of the community — not NGOs or authorities — do anything to support families coming back from Jeddah-1 Centre, notable minorities in Habbaniya and Mahalabiya said yes. In Habbaniya, 18 per cent of respondents said that ordinary community members occasionally provide food and essential non-food items (e.g., blankets) to returnees, as did 11 per cent of respondents in Mahalabiya.⁹⁶ Support from

⁹⁵ Interview 1; MEAC Community Leader KII #9 (Anbar, February 2024).

⁹⁶ “Do ordinary community members (not organizations) do anything to support families with perceive ISIL affiliation to reintegrate?”

community members to returnees was lower in Qaim (7 per cent) and lowest in Tuz Khurmato (0 per cent). These findings are consistent with the lower levels of support for reintegration of ISIL-affiliated IDPs observed in Qaim and Tuz Khurmato.

Across all four metrics measuring receptivity to returnees, respondents in Qaim consistently and by large margins are the least receptive to Iraqis with perceived ISIL affiliation returning to their community.

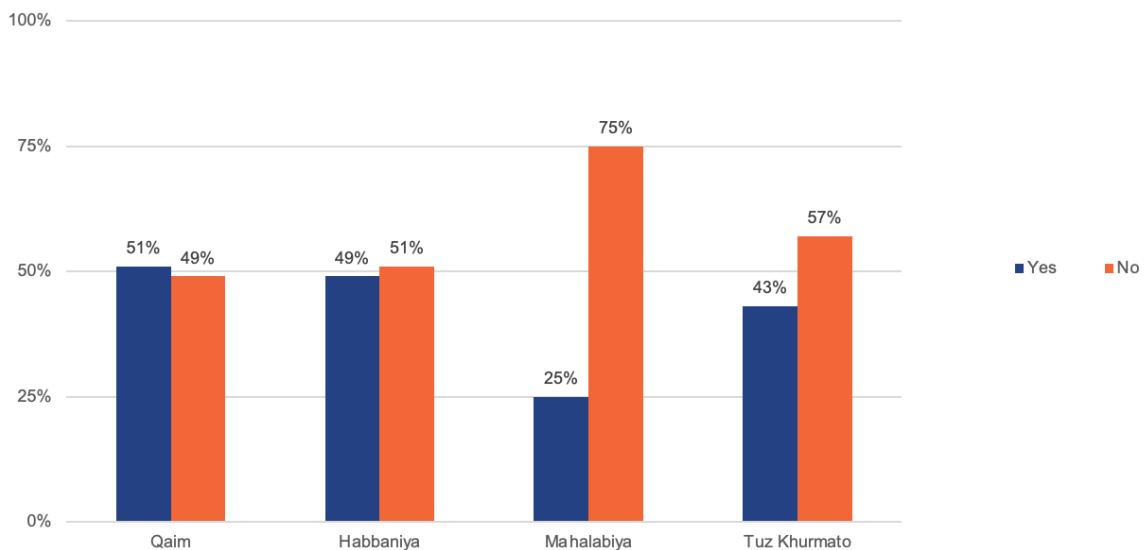
What Drives Attitudes Toward Returnees?

Examining the differences across the four locations highlights some of the factors that may be impacting receptivity to returnees with perceived ISIL affiliation, namely, 1. conflict history and current risk perceptions, and 2. trust in the return process. The section that follows examines the impact of the conflict on respondents from Qaim, Tuz Khurmato, Habbaniya and Mahalabiya and their perceptions of the various steps in the return process – both formal and customary.

Conflict Experiences and Current Views on Risk

The survey data suggests that wartime experiences, demographics, and the influx of returnees have a substantive impact on how communities evaluate the risk of returnees and the level of support for their reintegration. Qaim suffered significantly under ISIL's rule. The majority of Qaim respondents had lived under ISIL and had more exposure to the group's violence than other populations surveyed. Over half of respondents in Qaim who stated that their area was attacked and occupied by ISIL reported that they had at least one close relative killed during the conflict, the overwhelming majority of them caused by ISIL (figure 5).

FIGURE 5 – FOR RESPONDENTS WHOSE AREA WAS ATTACKED AND OCCUPIED BY ISIL: “ARE YOU AWARE IF ANY OF YOUR CLOSE RELATIVES WERE KILLED AS A RESULT OF THE CONFLICT?”



Qaim’s suffering, combined with the continued insecurity and weakness of state institutions to address the threat are factors that help to explain the general lack of receptivity to returnees. With its proximity to the Syrian border, where remnants of ISIL continue to operate and from where it periodically conducts attacks, Qaim remains conflict affected. In and around Qaim, the Iraqi government is weak, and its authority is disputed (e.g., challenged by the PMF and other militias).⁹⁷ Overall, residents of Qaim are the most concerned about revenge attacks related to the war – a fear presumably associated with returnee populations among the four sub-districts. Qaim respondents are least supportive of providing assistance to these returnees of the four locations.

Like in Qaim, Tuz Khurmato’s conflict history contributes to the lack of receptivity to returnees. Tuz Khurmato’s Turkmen community was targeted by ISIL with extreme violence and persecution including the enslavement of hundreds of Turkmen women. Severe grievances against ISIL and the sub-district’s long history of ethnic and sectarian conflict between its Kurdish, Arab, and Turkmen populations – divisions that are very much entrenched today – likely contribute to opposition to the return of ISIL-affiliated returnees.

While Habbaniya was significantly impacted by the conflict, its unique role in the fight against ISIL may mitigate the impact on receptivity. Habbaniya was a center of Sunni Arab resistance

⁹⁷ Raed Al-Hamid, [“ISIS in Iraq: Weakened But Agile.”](#) *New Lines Institute* (May 18, 2021).

against ISIL in western Anbar, which may explain why respondents appear to feel less threatened by returnees than in other sub-districts. This intersection between conflict history and current security dynamics is important. When security threats remain or conflict violence occurred along ethnic fault lines that remain intertwined with current security dynamics, past harms are likely experienced differently and vigilance to threats may be heightened.

Attitudes Toward Return Process

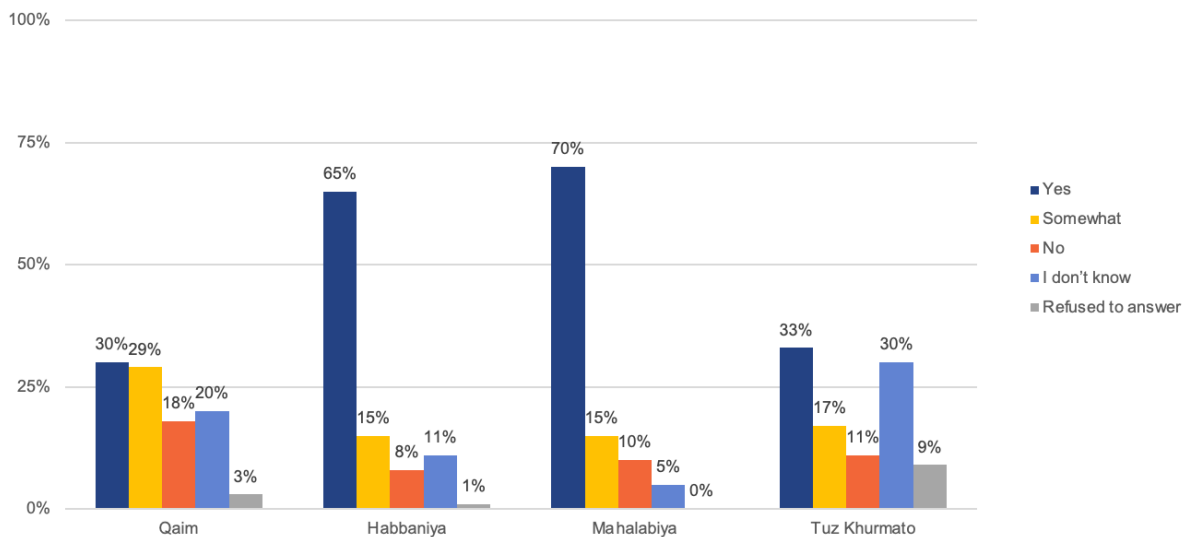
Attitudes towards the return process, what it entails, and who manages it may impact receptivity to returnees. This section first briefly summarizes the various reintegration mechanisms currently in use: (1) the Iraqi government-led process of security screening, (2) the sponsorship (“kafala) process in which the Ministry of Migration and Displacement facilitates endorsements by local kafa’il (sponsors) with support from and coordination with local authorities including tribal actors, and (3) “tabri’yya,” the practice of disavowing an ISIL-affiliated family member in order to be exonerated by one’s tribe. Interaction between views of these processes in each location and receptivity are then explored.

Government-Led Security Screening Process

While it has evolved over the last few years, there have been various screening processes required for Iraqis returning home after time in Al Hol Camp in Syria or from IDP camps within Iraq. Screening processes usually include a questionnaire and the collection of biometric data, which are checked against databases with names of suspected ISIL affiliates. Should an applicant’s name show up on one of these databases, they are refused permission to return and may also be arrested and detained pursuant to the federal Anti-Terrorism Law. There are concerns about the accuracy of names on the database of known individuals with alleged affiliation to ISIL and individuals may fail background checks due to similarities in the spelling of names.

There are large variations in levels of trust in the government-led screening process for returnees across the four locations. Trust is lowest in Qaim (only 30 per cent of respondents) and Tuz Khurmato (only 33 per cent) compared to 65 and 70 per cent of respondents in Habbaniyahh and Mahalabiya respectively (Figure 6).

FIGURE 6 – “DO YOU TRUST THE SECURITY SCREENING PROCESS THAT IS FOLLOWED BY THE GOVERNORATE TO DETERMINE WHETHER A PERSON IS DANGEROUS OR NOT, AND WHETHER THE PERSON CAN RETURN?”



These are sizeable differences, and again, Qaim, followed by Tuz Khurmato, stands out from Habbaniya and Mahalabiya. This is likely due to the presence and control of the State in these locations. Qaim has a relatively low penetration of the State, with tribes and local militia yielding significant power in the area. This lack of state presence and disputed authority translates into particularly low trust levels in the government-led security screening. Likewise, in Tuz Khurmato, low trust in the screening process may be driven by contestation and shifting control between different security actors in this disputed territory. In contrast, Mahalabiya, has more trust in government and the security apparatus due to its strong presence in the area.

Government-Led Sponsorship (“Kafala”) Process

“Kafala,” meaning “sponsorship,” is regulated by the Code of Criminal Procedures (1971),⁹⁸ and has often been required by government authorities, tribal leaders,⁹⁹ mukhtars and communities as a necessary condition for some returnees with perceived affiliation to ISIL.¹⁰⁰ Under this mechanism, individuals with perceived ties to ISIL seek the sponsorship of a local tribal leader, security official, or other local leader or, more recently, a male relative who serves as their guarantor (“kafeel”) and can attest to the community that they have renounced their

⁹⁸ Criminal Procedure Code 23 of 1971, as amended to 14 March 2010, art. 109-120.

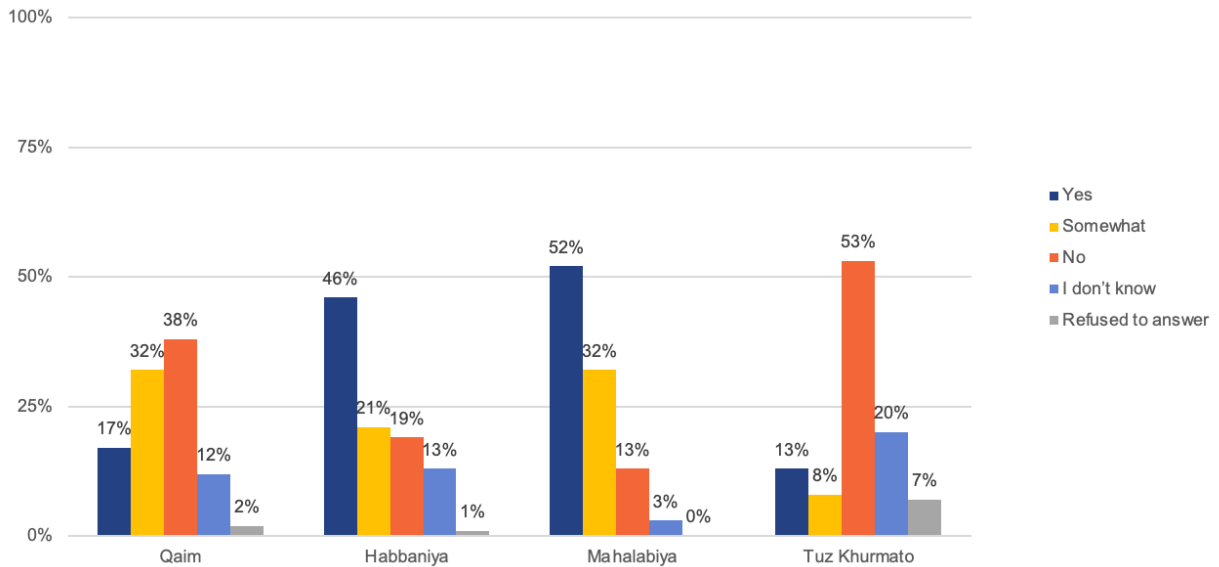
⁹⁹ Jacqueline Parry and Olga Aymerich, [“Local Peace Agreements and the Return of IDPs with Perceived ISIL Affiliation in Iraq.”](#) World Bank Policy Research Working Paper No. 9916 (January 2022).

¹⁰⁰ IOM, “Protection Snapshot: Jeddah 1 Camp Return,” (Oct. 2021), p. 1.

ISIL-associated family members and do not pose a threat.¹⁰¹ “Kafala” is understood to be retroactive and does not hold sponsors responsible for future harm caused by their sponsors, but it does create an obligation for them to report suspicious behaviour to authorities.¹⁰²

As with the screening process, trust in the sponsorship varies across locations. Public trust in a kafeel’s endorsement is very low in Qaim, and even lower in Tuz Khurmato (Figure 7). In Qaim, lower levels of trust in the kafala process could reflect variations in local tribal allegiances with ISIL during the conflict. Although some tribes resisted ISIL, others collaborated, and some kafeel (sponsors) may be perceived as too sympathetic to ISIL-affiliated returnees who might present security risks.¹⁰³ Low levels of trust in the kafala process in Tuz Khurmato may reflect ethnic and sectarian dynamics, particularly the concern that sponsorship might be driven by in-group loyalties rather than genuine confidence that a returnee poses no threat to the community.

FIGURE 7 – IF SOMEONE HAS A SPONSOR (KAHEEL), DO YOU TRUST THE SPONSORSHIP PROCESS TO ENSURE COMMUNITY SAFETY?



¹⁰¹ In Tikrit, tribal sheikhs personally sponsored a number of displaced families with perceived ties to ISIL from their tribe and signed a document vouching for them for security actors. Haley Bobseine, [“Tribal Justice in a Fragile Iraq,”](#) The Century Foundation (Nov. 7, 2019).

¹⁰² Melisande Genat, “Tribal Justice Mechanisms and Durable Solutions for Families with Perceived ISIL Affiliation,” IOM-Iraq (2020), 15.

¹⁰³ Rochelle Davis, Salma Al-Shami, Grace Benton, Jake Moran, Caila McHugh, Nicole Ruggiero, Moez Hayat, [“Comparing the experiences of internally displaced persons in urban vs. rural areas: Findings from a longitudinal study in Iraq, 2015-2017,”](#) Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (2019), p. 18 (noting that some IDPs have reported that they do not feel safe returning to rural areas of western Anbar due to the dynamics of tribal allegiances with ISIL).

Research suggests that the perception of sponsors by host communities is mixed (as well, it should be noted, by returnees themselves). MEAC interviews in Anbar in 2022 found that some community members have negative attitudes toward sponsors, including the view that they are “supporting killers.”¹⁰⁴

Tabri’yya

In recent years, tribal justice mechanisms have been employed to facilitate local reconciliation and reintegration. One key example is the practice of “tabri’yya” referring to the renunciation or disavowal of an ISIL-affiliated family member in order to be exonerated by the tribe.¹⁰⁵ The most common participants in “tabri’yya” are women with male relatives who joined ISIL, and they are often pressured and harassed¹⁰⁶ to undergo the process by community leaders, including mukthars and tribal leaders,¹⁰⁷ as a necessary condition for returning to their areas of origin,¹⁰⁸ obtaining documentation, or accessing essential government services.¹⁰⁹ Although intended to exonerate participants, tabri’yya often has the unintentional counterproductive consequence of further stigmatizing women and their children, and in some cases, have been used in courts as evidence to prove their affiliation with extremist groups.

Although not an official requirement of the Gol, tribes have adapted the tabri’yya mechanism and linked it to the formal justice system through a mechanism, “ikhbar” (meaning “notification of an offence” and commonly interpreted as “denunciation”), that has a basis in Iraqi law.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁴ 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. 29, citing MEAC, Interview #19 with religious figure in Anbar (Anbar, September 2022).

¹⁰⁵ Melisande Genat, “Tribal Justice Mechanisms and Durable Solutions for Families with Perceived ISIL Affiliation,” IOM-Iraq (2020).

¹⁰⁶ According to a woman from Tel Afar interviewed by CIVIC, “woman from Al-Ayadiyah, Tal Afar, living in an IDP camp told CIVIC, “To get a security clearance I would have to go to Tal Afar and Mosul and do *tabree’a* [spelled tabri’yya here]. I would have to go to the office of the *istikhbarat* [intelligence] but I heard of women going there alone and being treated badly by the officers there. They harass them and try to take advantage of them. I can’t go alone there.” Garcia, [“Ignoring Iraq’s Most Vulnerable.”](#)

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁰⁸ A woman from Qaim interviewed by Human Rights Watch reported that the PMF confiscated her security clearance and told her that she would need to make *ikhbar* against a relative in order to get the document back. Belkis Wille, [“Iraq: Not a Homecoming,”](#) Human Rights Watch, (Jun. 14, 2019).

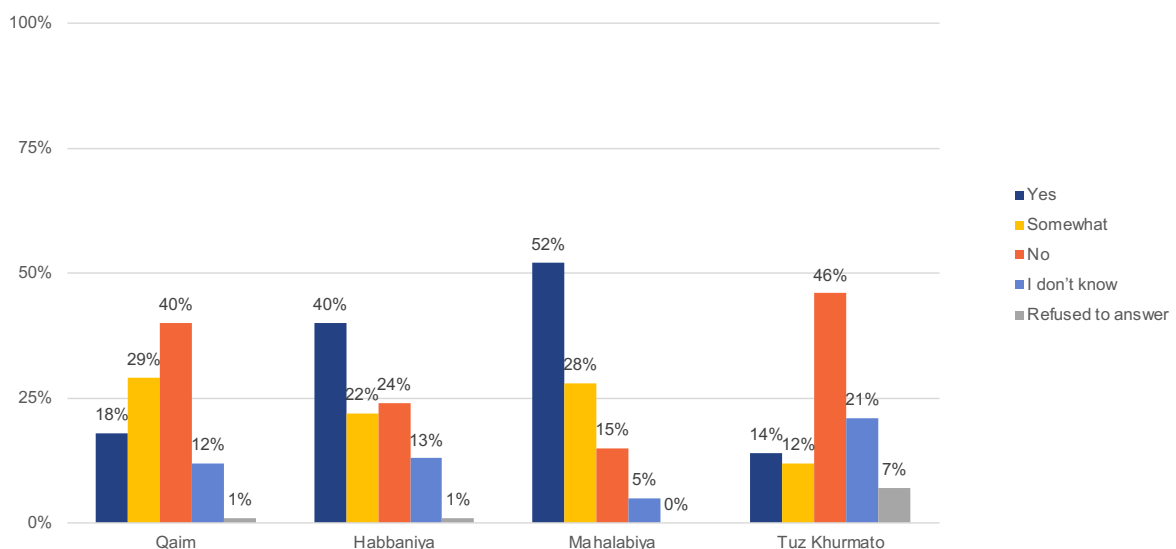
¹⁰⁹ National Protection Cluster, *Critical Protection Issues*, 19 January 2021.

¹¹⁰ Specifically: the Iraqi Criminal Procedure Code No. 23 (1971), the Iraqi Penal Code No. 111 (1969), and the Anti-Terrorism Law (2005). The Anti-Terrorism Law, which is considered by Iraqi judges to be the most relevant and prevailing legislation regulating the application of *ikhbar* in the post-ISIL context, states that individuals who report to the authorities “information that contributes to the arrest of the criminals or prevents the execution of the operation *shall be pardoned*” (emphasis added). Anti-Terrorism Law (2005), “Article 5: Waiver of Punishment, Legal Excuses and Extenuating Legal Circumstances,” para. 1. Note: The legal provisions are understood as exonerating the individual who makes *ikhbar* from any criminal responsibility for past actions related to the offence. The law does not provide further details about the procedure but in practice, authorities and tribal leaders have interpreted it to encourage (sometimes under pressure, as noted below) individuals with a relative accused of ISIL affiliation to make an “*ikhbar*” statement in front of an investigative judge, which initiates a criminal complaint and triggers an arrest warrant for the relative for prosecution under Article 4 of the Anti-Terrorism Law. Melisande Genat, “Tribal Justice Mechanisms and Durable Solutions for Families with Perceived ISIL Affiliation,” IOM-Iraq (2020). Note: In exchange,

Tabri'yya and ikhbar, as applied in the post-ISIL context, can have a number of problematic consequences for returnees, but while acknowledged, it has been widely assumed that communities are at least supportive of these processes, or beyond that, actually demand them as a requirement for return. The survey results, however, question this assumption.

Among the four sub-districts, there is considerable variation in trust in tabri'yya as a means for signaling whether returnees still have ties to the group and may be a threat to the community. Again, the same general pattern appears. Trust in tabri'yya was considerably lower than in Qaim and Tuz Khurmato. In Qaim there were twice as many respondents, and in Tuz Khurmato three times as many respondents who said they did not trust the tabri'yya process compared to those who trusted it. The low level of trust in tabri'yya in these locations may reflect tensions between tribes that resisted ISIL and others that collaborated in Qaim, as noted above, and deeper divisions between different ethnic and religious communities in Tuz Khurmato. In Mahalabiya, most respondents said they trust tabri'yya (52 per cent said 'yes' and 28 per cent said 'somewhat'). Trust was also relatively high in Habbaniya (40 per cent said 'yes' and 22 per cent said 'somewhat').

FIGURE 8 – “DO YOU TRUST THE TABRI’YYA PROCEDURE, BY WHICH THEY PLEDGE TO SEVER ALL BONDS WITH THEIR ISIS RELATIVES?”



the denouncer is entitled to receive a document from the court—known as a tabri'yya declaration—which enables him or her to obtain a security clearance. Human Rights Watch, [“Iraq: Camp Expulsions Leave Families Homeless, Vulnerable,”](#) (Dec. 2, 2020).

In Qaim, distrust of tabri'yya may be driven by the significant number of particularly vulnerable women in this community who are more likely to be adversely affected by tabri'yya. Interviewees noted that Qaim has a large population of widows and female orphans due to ISIL's recruitment of and violence against men.¹¹¹ In Tuz Khurmato, distrust of tabri'yya probably reflects the lesser influence of tribal authorities in this multi-ethnic disputed territory in comparison with where tribal authorities are stronger.

The lower trust levels in the official return requirements – like security screening – to more informal ones, like tabri'yya in Tuz Khurmato and Qaim, likely contribute to the lower levels of receptivity to returnees with perceived ISIL affiliation. In Qaim particularly, there appears to be lower trust in all levels of authorities involved in different aspects of the return process. When asked a series of questions about whether they felt their family was treated fairly by the courts and judiciary, local authorities, local security forces, and tribal authorities, respondents from Qaim gave strongly affirmative answers at far lower levels than those from the other locations.¹¹² The perception about how respondents themselves are treated by all types of authorities, combined with the lack of and disputed state presence, likely contributes to lower levels of trust in the return process. This – especially considering continued insecurity – is associated with lower acceptance levels for returnees in Qaim compared to elsewhere.

Perceptions and Receptions of Different Returnee Profiles

This publication has largely drawn on data that broadly defines returnees with perceived affiliation to ISIL, but there is the possibility that communities of return differentiate and discriminate amongst different returnee profiles. There has been a specific concern that informal and semi-formal returnees may be perceived as posing additional security concerns for host communities because they have not undergone the same security clearance process and adjustment period in Jeddah-1 Center as those who return through the formal repatriation process. To date, there has been little research on informal returnees due to the sensitive nature of their return and the possible security implications of drawing attention to their

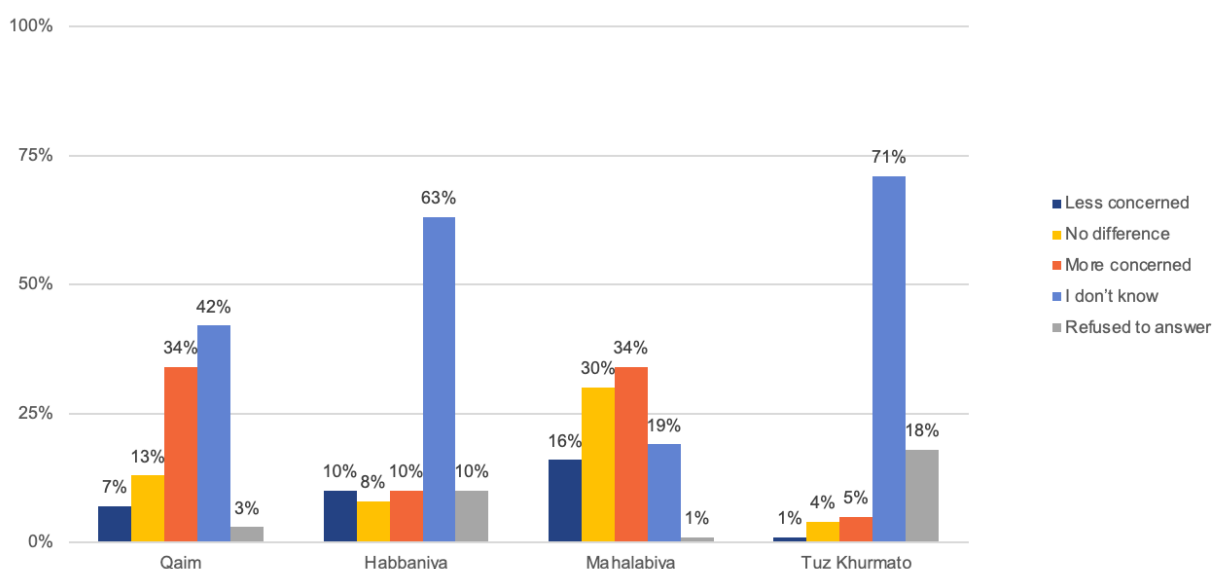
¹¹¹ Interview with a local women's rights advocate in Qaim (May 22, 2024).

¹¹² The rate at which respondents in Qaim answered "always" from a scale of "always," "sometimes," or "never" to the following questions was 18 to 58 percentage points lower than those in Habbaniya, Mahalabiya, and Tuz Khurmato. Questions: "Do you feel that your family is treated fairly by the courts and judiciary of the Iraqi Government?", "Do you feel that your family is treated fairly by local authorities?", "Do you feel that your family is treated fairly by tribal authorities?", "Do you feel that your family is treated fairly by local security forces?"

presence in communities, with a few exceptions, including another recent MEAC report.¹¹³ There are, however, some indications that informal – and possibly also semi-formal returnees, discussed in more detail above, are viewed differently. There have been reports, for example, of informal returnees being targeted by revenge attacks.¹¹⁴

The survey data is mixed on how the publics in Qaim, Habbaniya, Mahalabiya, and Tuz Khurmato differentiate between these different returnee populations – IDPs, formal returnees from Jeddah-1, and semi- and informal returnees from Syria (including from Al Hol). As seen in Figure 9, most respondents across three of the four communities, when specifically asked to compare returnee profiles, say they don't know. Among respondents who did differentiate between profiles, those in Qaim reported being a lot more concerned about the return of Iraqis from Al-Hol in comparison with IDPs who were displaced internally in Iraq. Responses were more varied in other locations.

FIGURE 9 – “PLEASE IMAGINE THERE ARE PEOPLE FROM YOUR AREA WHO LIVED IN AL HOL AND NOW WANT TO RETURN HERE TO THEIR PLACE OF ORIGIN. ARE YOU MORE OR LESS CONCERNED ABOUT THE RETURN OF THESE IRAQIS FROM AL-HOL CAMP, IN COMPARISON WITH IDPs WHO WERE DISPLACED INTERNALLY IN IRAQI CAMPS?”



¹¹³ Schadi Semnani, Jente Althuis, Muqadas Samarrai, Melisande Genat, Noor Mohammed, and Siobhan O’Neil, [“Shadow Crossings: Informal Returnees from Al Hol.”](#) Findings Report 35, UNIDIR, Geneva, 2024.

¹¹⁴ Iraq National Protection Cluster, “Minutes of Meeting (14 May 2020),” p. 2.

When asked what they thought of informal returnees compared to formal returnees from Al Hol, respondents were not sure. 56 per cent said they did not know, 16 per cent said there is no difference between the groups, the community sees them the same, and 6 per cent said it is mixed, it depends on the profile of the returnee.¹¹⁵ This is consistent with qualitative interviews conducted by MEAC, finding that many residents of receiving communities have limited information about the different processes for return. Unless they knew of them personally, people in communities of return often do not know the details of a returnee's return process.

Although community leaders understand the difference between formal and informal returnees, the community leaders confirmed that the community at large does not. Rather, community members primarily judge returnees based on their known history and past actions in the community, not on how they returned. During focus group discussions, this point was corroborated by community members themselves, who said they were unaware of the formal return procedures and also added that they judge families and individuals by what role they were known to have played in the community while ISIL controlled it.¹¹⁶

When they knew little about a particular returnees' actions during the conflict, "...there is a sizeable minority that differentiates amongst returnees based on the particular return path they have taken..."¹¹⁷ that is, to the extent they know about it. This provides some evidence to support the concern that informal returnees may face greater stigma and rejection from communities of return, but the geographic variation highlighted in this report suggests community response may differ by conflict experience, current insecurity, and trust in return processes (and the authorities involved in them). This raises the possibility that a differentiated response to community engagement around the return of displaced Iraqis with potential perceived affiliation to ISIL is required.

¹¹⁵ Only 14 percent said the community is less comfortable with informal returnees. 3 per cent said that the community is more comfortable with informal returnees, and 6 per cent refused to answer the question. The full question asked was: "The Iraqi government is allowing some Iraqis in Al-Hol to return to Iraq after undergoing a security screening, and they are then required to spend a transitional period in the Jeddah 1 camp before they are allowed to re-enter society. Separately, some Iraqis are returning from Al Hol without the government's permission by crossing the border informally. Some people return directly from Al Hol, and some people spend a period of time in Jeddah-1 camp and then return. Do you think there is a difference between these two groups of people, in terms of how comfortable the community feels towards them?"

¹¹⁶ Schadi Semnani, Jente Althuis, Muqadas Samarrai, Melisande Genat, Noor Mohammed, and Siobhan O'Neil, "[Shadow Crossings: Informal Returnees from Al Hol.](#)" Findings Report 35, UNIDIR, Geneva, 2024, p. 18.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 19.

Policy and Programme Implications

Reintegration is a two-way street, and investment needs to be made in preparing communities to receive returnees of all profiles. Given how levels of receptivity are affected by community dynamics – experience in the war, the role of the state vs. tribes and militias in the location, number of returnees, and their experience with them – it is clear that a blanket approach to community outreach is not likely to be effective. Interviewees for this research and other MEAC research have made it clear, time and again, that reintegration support cannot only focus on those returning after war. The successful reintegration of returnees can only happen when the host community is supported, when their experience in the war is acknowledged, and their lack of basic services and access to livelihoods is addressed. Return and reintegration programming must take into account the specificities of local communities and their internal dynamics, and support must encompass host community members and returnees to be effective. This leads to a few rather simple policy recommendations:

First, be aware of potential variations in receptivity to returnees by the community and consider the factors that may be contributing to them, including conflict experiences, continued insecurity, experience with returnees, the strength of the state, and disputed authorities.

Second, when working with communities and local leaders to facilitate the return and reintegration of Iraqis with potential perceived ISIL affiliation, ensure to craft context-specific messages and programming tailored to their experiences, perceptions, and needs. For example, in places where the state is strong, it may be useful to engage in information campaigns about the official return processes. This approach may not work as well in places where control is disputed, illicit activity and ISIL remnant violence occurs, and the state is weak.

Third, to navigate local dynamics, it is essential to work with hyper-local partners to ensure conflict sensitivity and situational awareness of local dynamics.

Fourth, it is important to caution on tailoring engagement and programming to some local practices for return. For example, even in communities where tabri'yya is trusted, the process, as applied in the post-ISIL context, can have a number of problematic consequences for returnees: a written record that could potentially be used against him/her in state courts, stigmatization; coerced divorce or re-marrying with implications for child custody; loss of inheritance rights and the potential for abuse by individuals making false claims to settle scores

against personal enemies.¹¹⁸ Even when there are security arguments and claims of public demand used to justify local practices like tabri'yya, they are not always accepted equally by community residents.¹¹⁹ There are some indications that it can undermine reintegration by stigmatizing those who do it. The concerns about tabri'yya highlight that while a localized approach is important, it is important to balance the needs of beneficiaries, local communities, and local authorities and security forces to ensure tailored and rights-based approaches that do not harm.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.; Haley Bobseine, ["Tribal Justice in a Fragile Iraq,"](#) The Century Foundation (Nov. 7, 2019).

¹¹⁹ Across all four communities surveyed, women have significantly less trust in tabri'yya than men (29 per cent compared with 36 percent).

MANAGING EXITS FROM ARMED CONFLICT



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