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# Return to Dry Lands: How Agricultural Decline Impedes Post-Conflict Reintegration in Iraq

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## Key findings

- Climate change and environmental pressures are taking a nationwide toll on Iraq's ecosystems, natural resources, and agricultural livelihoods.
- Climate change interacts with other key factors shaping agricultural decline, including longstanding governance challenges.
- In rural Al-Anbar and Salah Al-Din, farmers and herders report acute constraints on water, land, and essential agricultural inputs, which are eroding their livelihoods.
- While most farming and herding communities in the area are struggling, those who returned from displacement face additional economic, security, and bureaucratic challenges which complicate their reintegration.
- Women's specific reintegration barriers extend into the agricultural sector.

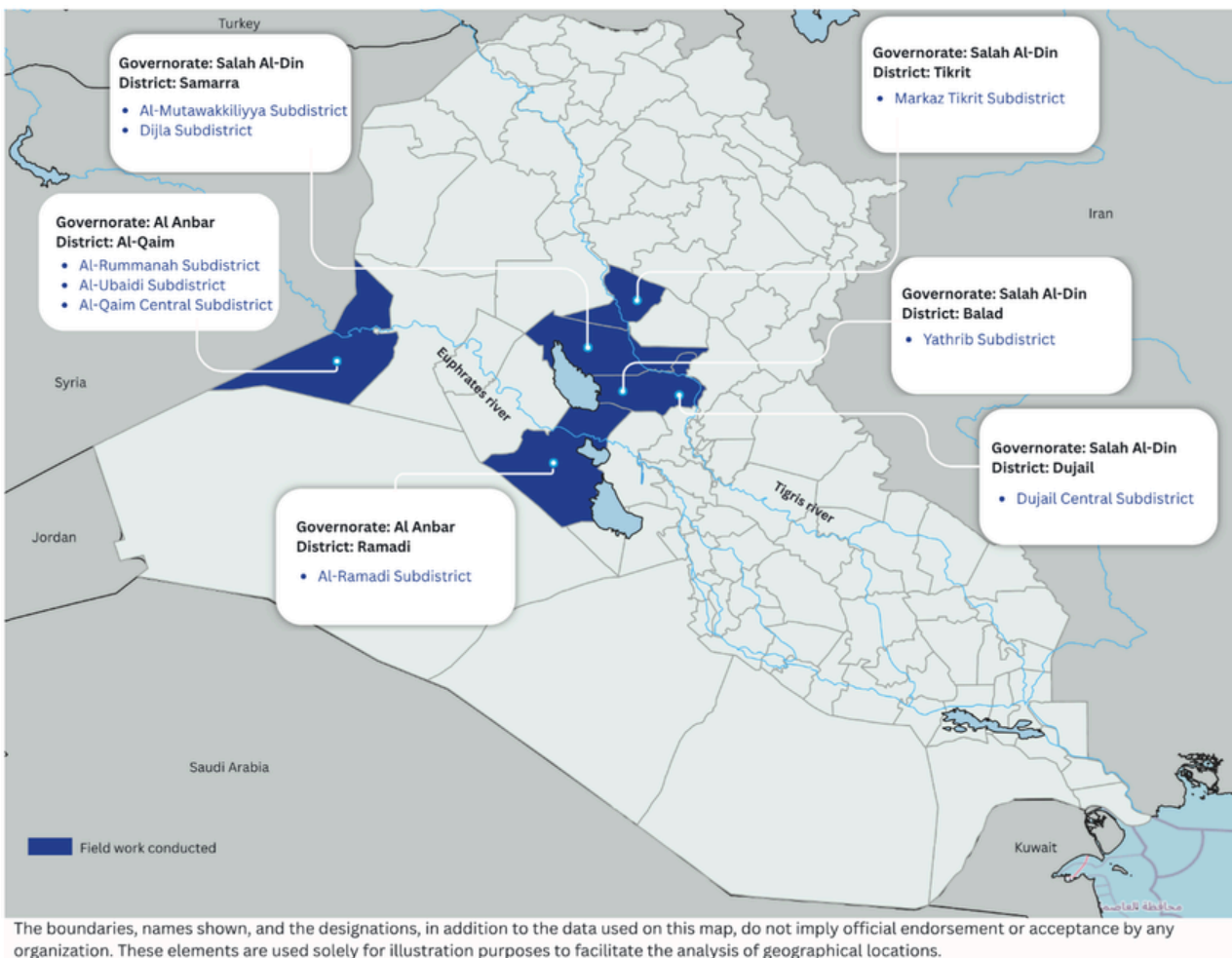
## Introduction

Years after the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant's (ISIL) territorial reign collapsed, its legacy continues to shape everyday life across Iraq. The conflict caused extensive destruction of infrastructure and housing, damaged industries and local markets, and left many communities with lingering social wounds. Moreover, continued displacement within Iraq and across the Syrian border means many Iraqis are still waiting to return home, while those who have managed to do so often struggle to rebuild their lives in communities that were themselves deeply affected by the conflict.

Against this backdrop, most Iraqi returnees from Al-Hol camp in Syria pass through Iraq's Al-Amal Rehabilitation Centre (formerly known as Jeddah-1) before resettling in their home communities or elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> As they are often perceived as ISIL-affiliated – whether due to family ties or simply

because they had come from ISIL-controlled areas – they often face distinct challenges upon their return. To better understand their reintegration journeys and needs, the Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) project has been conducting a longitudinal survey and qualitative research with current and former Al-Amal Centre residents as well as with their communities of return since 2022.

A subset of MEAC's latest qualitative fieldwork, conducted between December 2024 and January 2025, focused specifically on rebuilding lives in agricultural settings, examining the challenges farmers and herders face in rural, agriculturally dependent areas of Al-Anbar Governorate (focusing on Al-Qaim and Ramadi Districts) and Salah Al-Din Governorate (including Balad, Dujail, Samarra, and Tikrit Districts). To explore these issues, MEAC conducted two focus group discussions and 32 semi-structured interviews with returnees and



**Figure 1: Locations of qualitative fieldwork**



community members engaged in farming or herding as well as with local government officials working on agricultural issues. Across these conversations, a bleak picture emerged: Agricultural livelihoods have become increasingly unviable in several regions of Iraq, affecting not only returnees who seek to rebuild their lives there, but entire communities still recovering from years of conflict.

This brief examines the drivers of agricultural decline in these areas and how they further complicate the reintegration of those repatriating from Syria via Al-Amal Centre, including women and female-headed households. Understanding the challenges to returning to agricultural livelihoods is key to designing effective reintegration strategies and mitigating economic and social strain within communities of return, especially amid evolving political and security dynamics in the region. The insights from desk-based and qualitative field research presented herein are further supported by summary statistics from MEAC's most recent survey data from late 2024 and early 2025, when MEAC completed a repeat survey with 239 returnees and 259 community members across Iraq, and added a new sample of 127 community members and 217 residents of Al-Amal to its panel study.

## **1. Climate change and environmental degradation are taking a nationwide toll on Iraq's ecosystems, natural resources, and agricultural livelihoods**

Beyond Al-Anbar and Salah Al-Din governorates where the qualitative research took place, Iraq as a whole is experiencing profound climatic and environmental stress marked by rising temperatures, prolonged droughts, declining river flows, desertification, and increasingly frequent sandstorms and flash floods. These shifts are contributing to severe water scarcity, reduced crop yields, and accelerating land degradation, estimated at nearly 100,000 acres of agricultural land lost annually.<sup>2</sup> Long-term analysis of daily temperature extremes across Iraq has documented statistically significant

increases in both maximum and minimum temperatures over recent decades,<sup>3</sup> and under a high-emissions scenario, regional projections indicate temperatures could exceed 56°C, exposing the population to life-threatening heat conditions.<sup>4</sup> Research has further identified a “scissors effect” in Iraq’s agricultural sector, whereby declining water availability and simultaneously rising crop water demand erode the viability of irrigated agriculture, making the current trajectory of land loss structurally self-reinforcing.<sup>5</sup> With the already struggling agricultural sector employing roughly one-fifth of the country’s workforce, these changes place mounting pressures on large swaths of the population, particularly communities that are entirely dependent on farming, herding, and riparian livelihoods.<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, Iraq’s dominant oil sector compounds these stresses by contributing to environmental degradation and climatic changes through high emissions; water, soil, and air pollution from leaks, spills, and gas flaring; and extensive water consumption in a country already experiencing acute scarcity.<sup>7</sup> Petroleum extraction uses vast amounts of water, pollutes water sources, and has led to saltwater intrusion into freshwater aquifers in parts of southern Iraq.<sup>8</sup> Together, these factors contribute to the loss of agricultural land, public health risks from air and water pollution, and environmental displacement as marshes dry up and rural livelihoods decline.<sup>9</sup>

## **2. Climate change interacts with other key factors shaping agricultural decline, including long-standing governance challenges**

While climate change is one factor in Iraq’s agricultural decline, it intersects with other key drivers of the crisis such as weak natural resource management, inadequate electricity and water infrastructure, as well as past and ongoing security dynamics. Decades of conflict, underinvestment, and limited governance capacities have left the country with substandard infrastructure and outdated irrigation practices.<sup>10</sup> According to estimates by the

Norwegian Refugee Council, nearly 70 per cent of farmers still rely on water-intensive flood irrigation rather than more efficient sprinkler or drip technologies, fueling a vicious cycle of water depletion and forcing authorities to make difficult and often contentious decisions about water allocation.<sup>11</sup> Water governance is further complicated by the influence of tribes, militias and other power brokers in some areas, a reminder that even though the conflict and ISIL’s control of water infrastructure has ended, security actors may still influence resource access.<sup>12</sup> An added transboundary risk stems from Iraq’s reliance on the Tigris and Euphrates rivers (whose flows have declined by 30-40 per cent over the past four decades) for nearly all of its water supply, without effective water-sharing agreements with neighboring states Syria, Turkey, and Iran.<sup>13</sup> Hydrological trend analysis of the Tigris Basin confirms that declines in streamflow correspond structurally to upstream dam construction rather than natural variability alone, representing irreversible changes to the basin’s water budget.<sup>14</sup> The absence of a formal basin-wide water-sharing framework leaves Iraq without legal recourse as upstream infrastructure decisions continue to be made without multilateral governance mechanisms, compounded by complex water-energy-food interdependencies created by dam construction across the basin.<sup>15</sup> Together, these factors have progressively undermined agricultural productivity, which, combined with increased competition from cheaper food imports, have contributed a decline in GDP per capita in agriculture, forestry and fishing.<sup>16</sup>

As a result of these cumulative impacts, the food and livelihood security of farming and herding communities in Iraq has come under increased pressure, heightening tensions over dwindling natural resources and pushing growing numbers of people out of agriculture and into cities in search of alternative income sources.<sup>17</sup> Among returnees interviewed in MEAC’s latest survey, 41 per cent indicated that they had not returned home to the community they lived in before the conflict started.<sup>18</sup> Whereas some still intend to return someday if possible, many noted that they relocated to urban areas in search for better livelihoods. Although not

all these returnees originate from the agricultural sector, this indicates the increase in urban influx, which strains municipal services and drives competition over limited economic opportunities, harbouring risks of social unrest.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the experience in neighbouring Syria, where prolonged drought (2006-2010) drove mass rural-to-urban displacement that amplified existing social tensions and contributed to conditions preceding the outbreak of civil war, serves as a cautionary tale for how climate/livelihood-related urbanization can undermine social cohesion.<sup>20</sup>

For those Iraqis who stayed in or returned to rural areas to rebuild agricultural livelihoods, specific difficulties emerge. Drawing on first-hand accounts of returnees, agricultural communities, and local government officials in Al-Anbar and Salah Al-Din governorates, the next sections examine the challenges farmers and herders there face as a result of the compounding effects of climate change, governance issues, as well as past conflict and ongoing security dynamics.

### **3. In rural Al-Anbar and Salah Al-Din, farmers and herders report acute constraints on water, land, and essential agricultural inputs, which are eroding their livelihoods**

Agriculture has traditionally been the backbone of the rural areas in Al-Anbar and Salah Al-Din governorates covered by MEAC's qualitative research, accounting for about 60-90 per cent of economic activity according to respondents.<sup>21</sup> Production has focused on strategic crops such as wheat, barley, and corn, alongside seasonal vegetables, fruit orchards (particularly in Salah Al-Din), and livestock herding. However, interviewees reported a sharp decline in agricultural activity following the ISIL conflict. Displacement forced many farmers and herders to abandon land and livestock, while damage to infrastructure and farms, combined with a reduction in government support and persistent climatic pressures, have constrained access to key resources: water, land, and agricultural inputs such as seeds and fertilizer.<sup>22</sup>



Amid these scarcities, sustaining productive rural livelihoods has become increasingly difficult for farmers and herders in these areas.

## **Water scarcity and power outages hamper irrigation**

Iraq's water crisis is strongly felt in the two governorates, which rely almost entirely on the Euphrates (Al-Anbar) and Tigris rivers (Salah Al-Din) for their water supply. Declines in river and groundwater levels, linked to scarce and increasingly erratic rainfall, have made traditional flood irrigation progressively less viable.<sup>23</sup> In addition, a local government expert noted that drainage and irrigation systems – which rely on electric pumps – deteriorated when the power supply was cut during ISIL occupation, which dried out pipes, increased soil salinity, and forced more people to rely on groundwater by digging wells, often hindered by difficult approval processes.<sup>24</sup>

Before the conflict, the government had supported transitions to modern irrigation systems such as sprinklers and drip irrigation, but subsidies have since become limited and sporadic.<sup>25</sup> As a result, and given the high upfront investment, only relatively wealthy farmers have been able to adopt more efficient irrigation technologies. Persistent power outages and the high cost of fuel for generators as an alternative continue to impede irrigation practices, a key challenge for agricultural productivity that was consistently raised by farmers and herders across all interviews.

## **Land degradation and access restrictions affect agricultural production**

Interviewees in Al-Anbar and Salah Al-Din confirmed that under the conditions of depleting water resources and rising temperatures, soil quality is degrading and the amount of fertile land for farming and grazing is shrinking, affecting crop yields and the number of livestock that can be sustained across both governorates.<sup>26</sup> In response, some farmers with sufficient capital sold their land to buy smaller plots closer to the river, as one expert in Al-Anbar noted.<sup>27</sup> Others have reportedly adapted by shifting to more

drought-resistant crops and tree varieties that can better withstand high temperatures, such as olives and palms.<sup>28</sup>

Land quality and access are further impacted by the legacy of the armed conflict. Several interviewed farmers and herders who were displaced during the ISIL occupation reported that their land and pastures had been seized, destroyed or left uncultivated in their absence, complicating a swift return to agricultural production.<sup>29</sup> As a government official in Salah Al-Din noted:

The ISIL invasion and its aftermath were the worst periods for farmers and herders. When ISIL took over, all agricultural activity stopped. Farmers sold or lost their livestock. During the military operations, many farmlands and homes were destroyed. People spent their savings on basic needs. Since the area mainly consists of orchards that take a long time to recover, most farmers shifted to cultivating quick-yield crops like wheat to generate income before restoring their orchards.<sup>30</sup>

While active conflict has ended, access and security constraints persist. In some areas across the two governorates, militias and other local security actors operating checkpoints restrict farmers' and herders' movements, limiting access to remote farmland and grazing areas and impeding the recovery of agricultural livelihoods of those affected.<sup>31</sup>

## **Security measures and high costs limit access to essential agricultural inputs**

Beyond checkpoints restricting mobility and land access, broader security measures also limit the availability and movement of essential agricultural inputs, including fertilizer, seeds, and livestock. Returnees and long-term community members alike consistently identified the lack of fertilizer as a key constraint on their work.<sup>32</sup> While the shortage stems from multiple factors – including transport restrictions across governorates, regulatory controls due to security concerns over the use of fertilizer in explosives, and supply chain disruptions and informal taxation linked to militia activity – it



represents a major barrier to production on increasingly depleted land.<sup>33</sup> Again, coping with supply shortages is often easier for those with greater financial means. As a community farmer from Al-Anbar explained: “Everyone is struggling here because we cannot bring in agricultural supplies or livestock without paying money at some checkpoints as taxes, and we do not have enough money.”<sup>34</sup>

These access constraints are compounded by rising costs of supplies and weakened state support.<sup>35</sup> Since the conflict, prices for seeds, machinery, fertilizer, fuel, livestock, and fodder have increased sharply, while government assistance – for example via electricity provision, input subsidies, and veterinary services – falls short of needs according to local experts.<sup>36</sup> Across all interviewed groups, respondents consistently identified high costs, frequent power outages, and the lack of government support as the primary drivers of their agricultural struggles. While climatic shifts were mentioned and undoubtedly contribute to resource scarcity, respondents more often attributed their challenges to immediate economic and governance-related pressures.<sup>37</sup> In Salah Al-Din, for example, 94 per

cent of surveyed community members indicated that they faced some or a lot of difficulty in meeting their basic needs.<sup>38</sup> Although only a small part of these respondents came from agricultural backgrounds, of which most had already transitioned to other industries before the conflict started, this indicates the enormous economic challenges faced by nearly all Iraqis in these regions. Having enough financial capacity to (re)invest in required material, fertilizer, or land needed to rebuild or maintain a viable agricultural business remains unattainable for most.

Among Al-Amal returnees surveyed, a substantive number were involved in farming, herding or fishing before the conflict started.<sup>39</sup> However, only a few went back to the sector after they left Al-Amal Centre, noting reasons like insufficient capital to purchase livestock, land, or equipment, difficulties accessing land, or the absence of male family members.<sup>40</sup> This suggests that returnees with prior farming or herding experience face particular struggles in navigating the agricultural challenges outlined, which the following section examines in greater depth.

## 4. While most farming and herding communities in the areas studied are struggling, those who returned from displacement face additional economic, security, and bureaucratic challenges which complicate their reintegration

Across Al-Anbar and Salah Al-Din governorates, all groups interviewed by MEAC reported that resource constraints impeded their agricultural activities. This included returnees from Syria, individuals who returned from a period of internal displacement, community members who had never left, and local government officials who work on agricultural issues (many of whom farm themselves). Respondents described widespread economic hardship and difficulty meeting even basic needs from agricultural livelihoods. However, distinct challenges emerged for returnees in the agricultural sector, clustering around several interrelated areas: lack of capital, stigma and discrimination, securitization, and missing civil documentation. These factors not only make it harder for returnees to navigate agricultural challenges but also affect their reintegration prospects more broadly.

### Lack of capital impedes returnees' efforts to restart agricultural livelihoods

While the conflict affected everyone, displacement stripped many returnees of virtually all of their productive assets, whether they were lost during displacement or were the reason they left in the first place. Land was destroyed or abandoned, livestock was lost or sold to survive, and equipment was looted or left behind. As a result, many return with little or nothing to rebuild from. A returnee from Syria lamented: "Generally, all returnees found their farms ruined, livestock gone, and they have no funds to rebuild their former livelihoods. Farming is costly compared to other sectors, and our houses in the area were completely destroyed."<sup>41</sup> Faced with high input prices and reconstruction costs, most simply lack the capital to resume farming or herding – a reality confirmed by both men and women returnees across the interviews in the two governorates.

Government and international support have not been sufficient to fill this gap. In Al-Anbar, some experts noted that the government buys wheat from farmers at fixed prices, while smaller-scale farmers and herders receive little formal assistance. Limited initiatives by international organizations and local NGOs (such as livestock distribution, small grants, or cash-for-work projects) were mentioned, but their scale fell far short of demand.<sup>42</sup> In Salah al-Din, support was described as even more limited, with respondents indicating a need for increased assistance for returnee farmers and herders.<sup>43</sup>

As a result, access to capital and alternative income has become a key dividing line shaping who can maintain agricultural livelihoods. Households that managed to keep some income during the conflict, or those that can rely on secondary livelihoods, are better positioned to cope, while those who spent prolonged periods in camps or in displacement with no opportunity to earn or save return at a relative disadvantage.<sup>44</sup> The same returnee from Syria differentiated the level of disadvantage faced by different types of returnees, explaining: "Returnees from the camps – especially those who spent time in Syria or Al-Jada [Al-Amal Rehabilitation Centre] – face the biggest challenges. Many people were displaced within Iraq and could still work."<sup>45</sup> While it is difficult to verify whether cross-border returnees are worse off than returnees from internal displacement, the interviews indicate that returnees in general struggle to rebuild productive assets.<sup>46</sup> Community members, while affected by the same economic, climatic, and conflict-related pressures, were better positioned to navigate these challenges if they had savings, support networks, and diversified sources of income.

The consequences for returnees lacking the funds to rebuild agricultural livelihoods were visible throughout the interviews. According to local experts, most were unemployed and some remained in displacement camps longer than they needed to due to a lack of resources to return.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, previous MEAC research found that some returnees chose to extend their stay in Al-Amal due to insecure economic and housing conditions in their intended



area of return, preferring to rely on the support provided in the Centre than return home to precarity.<sup>48</sup> Others have relocated again or never returned to their home communities in order to look for work elsewhere, engaging in daily labour, construction, small trade, or, particularly in the case of women returnees, relying on charity and social welfare where available.<sup>49</sup> When returnees resume agricultural livelihoods, they often do so at a small scale or as day laborers on others' farms given their limited means. While a few gradual recovery stories were shared in the interviews, they were rare, and even those who have managed to rebuild face new challenges, including declining market prices due to Iraq's heavy reliance on food imports.<sup>50</sup>

### **Securitization dynamics restrict returnees' access to agricultural inputs, especially fertilizer**

In addition to lacking capital for a successful return to agricultural life, MEAC's interviews and focus group discussions also suggest that returnees from Syria face disadvantages at security checkpoints, further limiting their access to essential agricultural inputs. Both returnee and community respondents noted that while some groups are able to bring fertilizer and other goods into the area, others are not.<sup>51</sup> On the one hand, a part of this disparity is, again, economic, as transporting restricted goods often requires paying bribes or paying smugglers, placing returnees with limited financial means at a disadvantage. Another dimension of the unequal treatment at checkpoints, however, is the securitization and stigmatization of returnees.

Returnees from Al-Hol are often perceived as having been affiliated with ISIL, often due to familial ties, and are therefore subject to heightened scrutiny – if not outright discrimination – by local security actors. Fertilizer, considered a dual-use item due to its potential application in improvised explosives, is especially sensitive in this regard. Several interviewees specified that returnees were prohibited from transporting fertilizer and risked beatings or other penalties if they attempted to do so.<sup>52</sup> Combined with returnees' existing financial

constraints, these security-related barriers limit their ability to access essential inputs, rebuild productive assets, and resume sustainable farming and herding livelihoods.

## Stigma and discrimination affect returnees' land access and mobility

Discriminatory treatment at checkpoints and by local security actors not only affect returnees' access to agricultural inputs, but also their broader mobility and, in some cases, even access to their farmland. Observations from the fieldwork in Salah al-Din indicate that the presence of militias and other security actors in certain areas has created a climate of fear that deters some displaced families from returning and hampers agricultural recovery.<sup>53</sup> While a number of returnees reported they were able to access their fields or grazing areas, there were also cases which may point to wider worrying patterns.<sup>54</sup> For example, two women returnees in Salah Al-Din, both wives of former ISIL fighters, reported that their homes and farmland had been seized by local security actors and that they were threatened with detention if they tried to reclaim them.<sup>55</sup> While this type of stigmatized threat and settling of scores in Iraq has impacted many different returnees, in this particular case, the women impacted would be more disadvantaged in dealing with this situation than returning men would have been. When they were interviewed, the two women in question had resettled in the city of Samarra and were working as a house cleaner and shop employee, respectively, as returning to farming was not possible as long as their farmland was confiscated.<sup>56</sup> They both indicated that other families with perceived ISIL ties are unable to return to their land for similar reasons. Findings from MEAC's 2024 survey may lend support to these accounts, finding that many returnees, especially women, whose families previously rented or owned land indicated that they could not access or reclaim this upon returning to Iraq.<sup>57</sup> Overall, restricted access to land stands as one of the key structural barriers preventing affected returnees from resuming farming or herding upon their return, and may point to wider dynamics of collective punishment of families perceived to be associated with ISIL.<sup>58</sup>

## Missing civil documentation

A cross-cutting challenge that reinforces both economic and security-related barriers for returnees is their lack of civil documentation. As highlighted in previous MEAC research, returnees frequently face difficulties obtaining or renewing national IDs, birth certificates, and other essential documents, even when they have received support in the application process.<sup>59</sup> MEAC's research suggests that the lack of civil documentation affects returnees' ability to rebuild their farming or herding professions – in three main ways. First, the lack of identification adds to the mobility challenges in an already highly securitized environment, making it even more difficult for returnees to pass through checkpoints and transport agricultural goods. Second, missing documentation limits access to basic services including healthcare, education, social welfare, and other support. To the latter point, one woman returnee in Salah Al-Din reported having been unable to access grants and livelihood support from an international organization due to missing papers.<sup>60</sup> If such bureaucratic barriers extend to government or international support programmes in the agricultural sector, they risk excluding returnees from the limited initiatives that do exist. Third, missing civil documentation can restrict access to formal employment. Not only government agencies, but increasingly also private-sector employers have begun requiring identification for legal and administrative reasons. As a result, returnees who are seeking to diversify their income streams are often confined to informal daily wage labour that rarely generates enough income to allow for savings or reinvestment into farming or herding – a vicious cycle in which alternative income sources fail to translate into longer-term recovery. As one returnee summarized:

Job opportunities require documentation. Passing through checkpoints can't be smooth without an ID. Also, getting grants from organizations is impossible without an ID. Enrolling children in schools is not possible without documentation.<sup>61</sup>



Taken together, missing civil documentation emerges as a key barrier not only to agricultural recovery, but also the ability of returnees to adapt to the changing environment and find work in another sector and to reintegration more broadly – which could have implications for generations to come if challenges are not addressed.

## 5. Women's specific reintegration barriers also extend into the agricultural sector

Reintegration in Iraq has a distinct gendered dimension. Female-headed households comprise the majority of returnees from Al-Hol, as many of the returning women were married to ISIL fighters who are now detained, deceased, or missing. Women face several structural and cultural barriers to reintegration that make it even harder for them to effectively transition back into Iraqi society (e.g., gendered hurdles to procuring or renewing civil documentation, lower levels of knowledge of the return process, weaker social networks, more care responsibilities). Furthermore, cultural expectations that women remain within the domestic sphere limit

their access to employment, including in sectors such as agriculture. Consequently, some women reportedly seek remarriage to improve their social and economic standing.<sup>62</sup> Many women rely on informal, small-scale activities such as baking, sewing, knitting, or hairdressing that can be done in the home; or do not work and depend on charity and government welfare as primary income sources.<sup>63</sup> MEAC's research on returnees' economic well-being indeed finds that members of female-headed households in Al-Anbar and Salah Al-Din often depend on charity.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, women often do not have land titles in their name and lack capital and access to labor, which raises questions about whether they can realistically reclaim or manage agricultural land within existing property systems and gender norms. Combined with high rates of missing documentation, and the related mobility and economic challenges this brings, women face an even more complicated return to farming or herding. Overall, women returnees navigate intersecting economic, social, legal, and cultural barriers that make sustainable reintegration, including in agriculture, particularly challenging.

## Conclusion

Amid climatic and environmental pressures, governance challenges, conflict legacies, and ongoing security dynamics, Iraq's natural resources and agricultural livelihoods are under increasing strain. While these challenges broadly affect rural populations across Al-Anbar and Salah al-Din, MEAC's findings indicate that returnees are particularly disadvantaged, with their limited productive assets, agricultural inputs, and mobility impeding their ability to successfully adapt.

Stabilizing rural livelihoods in Iraq – a tall order amidst the climatic and conflict impacts discussed in this brief – will require sustained, coordinated support that addresses both agricultural systems and the specific barriers returnees are facing. Revitalizing agricultural production will hinge on improving access to seeds, machinery, and fertilizers (in ways that align with existing security requirements); easing restrictions on the movement of inputs and livestock; rehabilitating water and electricity infrastructure; and strengthening practical knowledge on climate adaptation. At the same time,

returnees' longer-term reintegration will require more holistic efforts to restore housing; improve access to civil identification and basic services; and expand opportunities for income diversification to enable broader economic and social participation.

Without such support, rural hardship is likely to continue driving migration toward urban areas, adding pressure on public services, housing, and labor markets. MEAC's interviewees already reported rising prices, unemployment, and growing competition for jobs linked to recent return movements. Uneven access to economic and natural resources risks exacerbating existing inequalities, fueling tensions over land and water, and creating social divisions within agricultural communities and beyond. By contrast, more inclusive and sustained support can not only help improve reintegration outcomes for returnees but also strengthen social cohesion and overall community well-being in affected areas. In doing so, such efforts will contribute to broader peacebuilding outcomes and reinforce the foundations for diversified, adaptive, and resilient development across Iraq.



## Endnotes 1/4

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- [11] NRC, "[Iraq: Drought Slashes Seasonal Harvest, Water and Food Supply](#)"; Al Jazeera, "[Iraq's Water Wars – Part 1](#)," *People & Power*, 20 September 2023. Video, 25 min., 20 sec.
- [12] MEAC, interviews with men government experts (Rummanah and Qaim, Anbar Governorate, Iraq, 22 December 2024); MEAC, Focus group discussion with men returnees (Salah Al-Din Governorate, Iraq, December 2024); Tobias von Lossow, "[Water as Weapon: IS on the Euphrates and Tigris](#)," *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik*, 12 January 2016.
- [13] "[Turkey, Syria and Iraq: Conflict over the Euphrates-Tigris](#)," *Climate Diplomacy*, accessed March 23, 2026; United Nations Iraq, "[Climate Change: The Biggest Threat Iraq Has Ever Faced, but There Is Hope to Turn Things Around](#)," 12 November 2022.
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- [15] Aysegül Kibaroglu, and Sezin Iba Gürsoy, "[Water-Energy-Food Nexus in a Transboundary Context: The Euphrates-Tigris River Basin as a Case Study](#)," *Water International* 40, No.5–6 (2015), 824–838; Neda A. Zawahri, "[Stabilising Iraq's Water Supply: What the Law of International Watercourses Can Offer](#)," *Third World Quarterly* 27, No.6 (2006), 1167–1184.
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## Endnotes 2/4

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[37] MEAC's research presents the perceptions of interviewees, who do not always attribute certain challenges they face to climatic shifts and may focus on the acute manifestation of a problem, for example, the lack of electricity or cost of fuel to run an irrigation system rather than the progressive decline in flood irrigation options.

[38] "Which of the following best describes your household's income now?" Answer options: We face a lot of difficulty meeting our needs; we face some difficulty meeting our needs; Our income and savings are enough to cover our expenses without difficulty; Our income and savings are more than enough to cover our expenses.

[39] "In 2014, right before the conflict started, did you or your family farm, fish, or herd to make a living?" Answer options: Yes; No, I don't farm, herd or fish, Refused to answer. 18 per cent of returnees answered 'yes'.

[40] "Today, do you or your family farm, fish, or herd to make a living?". Answer options: Yes; No; Refused to answer; "Why are you not farming, fishing, or herding today?". Open-ended question.

[41] MEAC, interview with a man returnee (Salah al-Din Governorate, Iraq, 9 January 2025).

[42] MEAC, interviews with men government experts (Al-Qaim, Al-Anbar Governorate, Iraq, 18 and 22 December 2024); a man government expert (Al-Qaim, Al-Anbar Governorate, Iraq, 22 December 2024).

[43] MEAC, interviews with men government experts (Yathrib and Tikrit, Salah al-Din Governorate, Iraq, 9 and 12 January and 2 February 2025).

[44] MEAC, interviews with men government experts (Rummanah, Al-Qaim, and Ramadi, Al-Anbar Governorate, Iraq, 18, 19 and 22 December 2024; Yathrib, Salah al-Din Governorate, Iraq, 12 January 2025) and a man returnee (Rummanah, Al-Anbar Governorate, Iraq, 18 December 2025).

[45] MEAC, interview with a man returnee (Salah al-Din Governorate, Iraq, 09 January 2025).

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[56] Ibid.

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[60] MEAC, interview with a woman returnee (Samarra, Salah Al-Din Governorate, Iraq, 5 January 2025).

[61] Ibid. While regulations on children’s access to schooling started to change in 2022 (see “[IOM Welcomes Decisions by Directorates of Education in Salah al Din and Ninewa to Protect Children's Right to Education](#)” press release, 27 February 2022) and allowed children to attend without documentation, fear of stigmatization, lack of knowledge on this policy change, and a failure to implement the new rules by local administrators continue to affect school attendance of returning children. This also was historically true in Al-Amal Centre, where in MEAC found in December 2023 that “out of 103 respondents who said that one of the children in their household is missing civil documentation, 60 said that this affects their children's ability to attend school, which may also speak to the type of current access they have to schooling and/or future concerns about continued attendance.” See Semnani et al., “[From Al Hol to Hope.](#)”

[62] MEAC, interview with a man community leader (Tikrit, Salah Al-Dinh Governorate, Iraq, 7 January 2025).

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