



Dibaga IDP camp, northern Iraq  
(Christy Delafield/Mercy Corps)

# TOWARDS DURABLE SOLUTIONS TO DISPLACEMENT

Understanding Social Acceptance of Returnees in Post-ISIS Iraq

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# Executive Summary

A record 82.4 million people have been displaced by conflict and violence across the world today, and facilitating their return to their places of origin is one of the most complex but urgent challenges facing governments, donors, and aid organizations. In Iraq, the takeover of large swathes of territory by the Islamic State (ISIS) in 2014, and the subsequent military campaign to oust it, displaced six million people. Since the Iraqi government declared victory over ISIS in 2017, it has made the return of internally displaced persons (IDPs) to their home areas a priority. Numerous barriers remain, however, and as a consequence, nearly 1.2 million IDPs have not yet returned. Securing durable solutions to displacement in Iraq is not only a humanitarian imperative; it is vital for ensuring peace, stability, and economic prosperity moving forward.

While some of the barriers to sustainable return and reintegration of IDPs relate to humanitarian needs, a major impediment is a lack of social acceptance of returnees. Individuals and communities have refused to welcome or live alongside returnees who they perceive, rightly or wrongly, as being supporters of ISIS or complicit in its atrocities. This is a particular challenge in Iraq's ethnic and religious minority communities, which were systematically persecuted by ISIS in the areas it controlled. Members of the Yazidi minority – who have faced discrimination and marginalization throughout Iraq's history – were especially targeted. Under ISIS, the Yazidis endured a campaign of mass killing, forced conversion, and sexual slavery that is widely recognized as genocide. Many now resist the return of Sunni Arab residents whom they may hold responsible for ISIS's crimes. Ending displacement will therefore require not only rehabilitating infrastructure, services, and livelihoods. It will also require repairing the social fabric within and between communities.

These issues threaten to prolong Iraq's displacement crisis, deny survivors of violence the support they need, exacerbate intergroup tensions, and trigger revenge attacks and further fighting. Understanding the factors that drive social acceptance of returnees – particularly within persecuted communities – is therefore crucial not only for policy and program interventions that aim to end displacement, but also those seeking to build social cohesion, promote reconciliation, and prevent future conflict in Iraq. To this end, Mercy Corps conducted a survey of more than 500 Yazidi households in Sinjar and IDP camps in Duhok governorate to explore the conditions under which they were more or less likely to accept returnees.

## Key Findings

### Returnees' movement patterns during ISIS rule shapes their social acceptance more than ethno-religious identity.

In an experiment that randomly varied characteristics of a hypothetical male returnee, survey respondents were significantly less likely to accept returnees who did not flee ISIS and instead stayed in their communities and lived under its rule, regardless of the returnee's ethno-religious identity. Respondents were only moderately more accepting of Kurdish returnees than Sunni Arab returnees, indicating that identity group differences were not the primary factor driving social acceptance. Whether a returnee was a *stayer* or a *leaver* under ISIS had a far greater effect: **both male and female respondents were nearly twice as likely to accept leavers than stayers.**

**Returnees:** individuals who fled their homes and then returned.

**Leavers:** returnees who left their communities when ISIS took control.

**Stayers:** returnees who stayed and lived under ISIS and then left later (e.g., after their community was retaken from ISIS).

## **A sense of shared victimhood under ISIS makes Yazidis, especially men, more likely to accept Sunni returnees.**

Despite the historical oppression and recent persecution Yazidis have faced, we found that reminding them that Sunnis also suffered under ISIS significantly increased their willingness to accept Sunni returnees into their community. This effect was mostly observed among *male* respondents, regardless of how much violence they reported experiencing during the conflict. Yazidi men who were exposed to an “inclusive victimhood narrative” – one that emphasized the shared suffering of their community and Sunni communities – accepted Sunni returnees at a higher rate (52 percent) than those who were not exposed to this narrative (38 percent). **Yazidi women respondents, however, were much less likely to accept Sunni returnees, and exposure to an inclusive victimhood narrative had a much smaller effect on acceptance** (15 percent, compared to nine percent for women who were not exposed to an inclusive victimhood narrative). This highlights important gender differences in social acceptance of returnees.

## **Yazidi respondents who were displaced with Sunnis and interacted with them more frequently were more likely to accept them into their communities.**

There was a **strong relationship between whether respondents fled with Sunnis – and reported more frequent interactions with them – and their willingness to welcome Sunni returnees**, even when controlling for respondents’ age and gender. This may indicate the importance of intergroup contact, which many conflict management interventions aim to facilitate, in influencing social acceptance of out-group returnees. These results also potentially reinforce the effects of shared suffering. Interviews with community leaders suggest that Yazidis who were displaced with Sunnis may have observed the hardships they endured directly, increasing feelings of empathy and solidarity – possibly making these respondents more sympathetic to Sunni returnees.

## **Implications and Recommendations**

These findings suggest that **even among a heavily persecuted population in a highly polarized sectarian environment, it is possible to improve the prospects of social reintegration and peaceful coexistence**. Further research is needed to identify the mechanisms underlying our results and better understand people’s responses, especially women. This has important implications for donors, policymakers, and practitioners seeking to facilitate durable solutions to displacement, support survivors of violence – including survivors of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), most of whom are women and girls – and contribute to stability in Iraq. Ensuring the sustainable return of the displaced requires sensitizing communities in areas of return and prioritizing restorative justice and trauma-informed peacebuilding activities that aim to broker intergroup reconciliation, assist survivors, and help returnees reintegrate.

In Iraq, authorities have focused more on screening and vetting the displaced than on preparing communities, local organizations, and government agencies for their return. Moving forward, Iraqi officials and community leaders should be supported by international donors and humanitarian and development practitioners in advancing IDPs’ prospects for a safe and sustainable return. These initiatives should:

**Correct the misperception that living under ISIS rule equals support or collaboration.** Our findings [confirm reports](#) that there is a common tendency to assume that those who did not flee ISIS were supporters or collaborators of the group. The Iraqi government, civil society groups, and international and national organizations need to make a concerted effort to debunk these blanket associations. Iraqi officials should clearly communicate the process they use to vet returnees and proactively seek to address people’s

questions and concerns. Providing consistent, credible, and clear information to communities about life under ISIS rule – including why people stayed – will be essential. In other contexts, Mercy Corps has found that [trusted authorities](#) such as [religious leaders](#) can be highly influential in shaping people's views on reintegration and reconciliation. In Iraq, these authorities should take the lead in countering misperceptions and reducing stigma.

**Promote inclusive perceptions of victimhood by facilitating spaces for dialogue about the experience of different groups under ISIS.** We show that fostering inclusive perceptions of victimhood through narratives that emphasize both in-group and out-group suffering can improve people's willingness to accept out-group returnees. This offers a promising avenue for reconciliation in Sinjar and elsewhere in Iraq. Such narratives must recognize the atrocities that Yazidis and other minorities endured under ISIS rule, and be conscious not to create false equivalencies between the experiences of different groups. By sharing these experiences through intergroup dialogues, public awareness campaigns, and other social initiatives, domestic and international actors can help promote a sense of shared hardship – and shared resilience – and help lay the groundwork for peaceful coexistence in the post-ISIS era.

**Establish restorative justice and trust-building mechanisms at the local level.** Government officials and community leaders must ensure that judicial processes for suspected ISIS affiliates and vetting procedures for returnees are as fair and transparent as possible. In Ninewa, they should also develop locally-rooted restorative justice mechanisms that aim to promote accountability, facilitate truth-telling, and empower survivors of ISIS to move forward with their lives. Restorative and community-based justice should focus on approaches – mediation, truth-telling circles, public commemorations, and other locally relevant strategies – that aim to both hold perpetrators accountable and dismantle the stereotypes and beliefs that contributed to their actions. These mechanisms should also seek to repair relations between Sunni and minority communities through constructive and sustained intergroup contact. Conflict resolution and reconstruction activities should arrange for different groups to work together in rebuilding their communities, and make a particular effort to include recent returnees as well as individuals – including men, women, girls, and boys – from marginalized and oppressed groups. Pairing intergroup collaboration with activities that promote inclusive perceptions of victimhood may provide a more effective combination for improving social cohesion, promoting peaceful coexistence, and reducing the risk of future inter-group violence.

**Increase investments in trauma-informed and gender-sensitive peacebuilding.** Given that female respondents were much more reluctant to accept returnees than male respondents, any peacebuilding effort in Iraq should begin by exploring and understanding gender differences in attitudes regarding social reintegration and reconciliation. Donors should also expand their investments – including multi-year funding – in interventions that are sensitive to individual and collective psychosocial needs. Mercy Corps has found that [psychosocial support \(PSS\) and trauma healing](#) can both help people feel safer in their community and improve social trust between groups. These activities should serve as a foundation for efforts to forge intergroup reconciliation and social acceptance in Iraq, and have at their core a gender-sensitive approach. For women and girls who are survivors of CRSV or other ISIS-inflicted violence, both the type and intensity of PSS interventions needed may differ, and they may be a prerequisite for any intergroup contact or community-level reconciliation activities. Women and girls must also have opportunities to shape how restorative justice and peacebuilding activities are designed, and to develop and participate in individual and collective empowerment programs, which have been shown to counteract social alienation and other negative consequences of CRSV. This will require strengthening support to, and representation of, local women-led organizations and efforts.

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An Iraqi Yazidi girl in a refugee camp in Greece (Sara Hylton/Mercy Corps)

## Introduction

### A Fragile Peace and a Fraught Return

Between 2014 and 2017, conflict in north and central Iraq – including the takeover of large swathes of territory by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the subsequent international military campaign to oust it – displaced more than six million people. Since the Iraqi government declared victory over ISIS in 2017, it has made the return of internally displaced persons (IDPs) to their home areas a priority.<sup>1</sup> Over the past year, the government has closed and consolidated IDP camps, which has sometimes resulted in coerced departures and forced people to move back to their areas of origin with little preparation and inadequate provisions.<sup>2</sup>

Despite efforts by both Iraqi authorities and international organizations to promote and facilitate return, ending the country's displacement crisis has proven elusive. While more than 4.8 million people have returned across eight governorates, many have struggled to rebuild their homes, recover their livelihoods, and reintegrate back into their communities. This has undermined the sustainability of return and led some returnees to uproot again, resulting in numerous cases of secondary displacement. And nearly 1.2 million IDPs have yet to return at all, further jeopardizing Iraq's stability and economic recovery.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> While some people displaced during the ISIS conflict fled to neighboring countries – such as Syria and Turkey – and became refugees, or sought asylum in Europe, a vast majority of them were uprooted within Iraq as IDPs.

<sup>2</sup> Amnesty International 2019; Human Rights Watch 2019.

<sup>3</sup> IOM DTM 2021.

Some of the barriers to ending displacement relate to humanitarian needs, including a lack of housing, damaged infrastructure, insecurity, and a dearth of livelihood opportunities and public services in areas of return.<sup>4</sup> Aside from these logistical and structural factors, a major impediment to the sustainable return and reintegration of IDPs is a lack of social acceptance of returnees. Such resistance reflects the social divisions that have taken root or deepened in Iraq as a result of the violence meted out by and in response to ISIS.<sup>5</sup> Of particular concern is the common perception that some IDPs and returnees are (or were) affiliated with ISIS. Individuals and communities have refused to live alongside returnees who they perceive – rightly or wrongly – as being supporters of ISIS or complicit in its atrocities.<sup>6</sup> Securing durable solutions to displacement will therefore require not only rehabilitating infrastructure, services, and livelihoods, but also restoring the social fabric in affected areas.

The lack of *social acceptance* – or the willingness of individuals and communities to welcome and live alongside returnees – is a particular challenge in Iraq’s minority communities, especially in Ninewa governorate. Ninewa is one of the most diverse regions of the country, and one of the worst affected by conflict and displacement during the ISIS conflict. Driven by its Sunni extremist ideology and an attempt to purge the region of non-Islamic influences, ISIS systematically targeted and persecuted ethnic and religious minorities, including Assyrians, Yazidis, Christians, and Shabak. These communities faced discrimination and marginalization well before 2014, and ISIS’s abuses compounded their experience of oppression and stoked fear and resentment of the local Sunni Arab population. This has stymied return in ethnically and religiously-mixed areas both by discouraging members of minority groups from returning and by causing them to resist the return of displaced Sunnis. These issues threaten to prolong Iraq’s displacement crisis, deny survivors of violence the support they need, exacerbate intergroup tensions, and trigger revenge attacks and further fighting.

Understanding the factors that influence social acceptance of returnees – particularly within persecuted communities – is therefore crucial not only for policy and program interventions that aim to secure durable solutions to displacement, but also those that seek to build social cohesion, facilitate reconciliation, and prevent future conflict in Iraq.

To this end, Mercy Corps conducted a survey of more than 500 Yazidi households in the Sinjar District of Ninewa and in IDP camps in Duhok governorate to explore the conditions under which they were more or less likely to accept returnees. The Yazidis endured a campaign of mass killing, forced conversion, and sexual slavery under ISIS that has been widely recognized as genocide.<sup>7</sup> Many survivors resist the return of Sunni Arab residents who they may hold responsible for ISIS’s crimes. Compounding their concerns in recent months has been the repatriation of hundreds of Iraqi families from Syria’s al-Hol displacement camp, many of whom are believed to be ISIS collaborators and supporters.<sup>8</sup> By generating evidence about the conditions that facilitate Yazidis’ acceptance of returnees, this study seeks to inform the design and implementation of policies and programs that will not only help secure durable solutions to displacement in Iraq, but also contribute to bolstering its fragile post-ISIS peace.

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<sup>4</sup> IOM 2019c, 2020a, 2021a, 2021b.

<sup>5</sup> Some of these divisions took root under the regime of former President Saddam Hussein or the decade of armed conflict in Iraq that followed the 2003 U.S. invasion and preceded ISIS’s rise.

<sup>6</sup> Human Rights Watch 2021; IOM/Social Inquiry 2018.

<sup>7</sup> CEP 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Mednick 2021.



Sinjar Mountain, Ninewa, Iraq  
(Shutterstock)

## Rationale

As the number of people uprooted by conflict and violence has surged to a record-breaking 82.4 million worldwide, addressing forced displacement has become a major political and policy issue.<sup>9</sup> Of the three durable solutions to refugee and IDP situations – return to their place of origin, integration into their host community, or resettlement to a new country or region – return has become the one preferred by most governments and international policymakers.<sup>10</sup> As such, donors are increasingly using humanitarian and development assistance to directly fund or help facilitate the return of migrant populations around the world, including the forcibly displaced.<sup>11</sup>

These efforts have lacked a strong basis in research and evidence. According to one review of academic and policy literature, “issues of return and repatriation remain significantly under-researched.”<sup>12</sup> A better understanding of these issues is critical to inform strategies and policies for securing durable solutions to displacement. This has much broader implications: the return of refugees and IDPs can play a key role in the reconciliation and coexistence of communities or it can trigger new tensions.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, it has become a central pillar of peacebuilding, economic recovery, and transitional justice in post-conflict societies.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> UNHCR 2021. These figures do not include people displaced by climate change or natural disasters.

<sup>10</sup> Bradley 2013; Toft 2007; Vlassenroot and Tegenbos 2018. *Refugees* describe people displaced by conflict, violence, and persecution who cross a state border, while *IDPs* refer to people who flee their homes but remain within their country.

<sup>11</sup> Tesfaye et al. 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Tegenbos and Vlassenroot 2018: 3-4.

<sup>13</sup> Hall et al. 2018; Lischer 2015; Psaltis et al. 2019; Schwartz 2019.

<sup>14</sup> Black and Gent 2006; Blattman et al. 2014; Tegenbos and Vlassenroot 2018.

Research that has explored return after displacement mostly focuses on the intentions of refugees and IDPs regarding return, and the various “push” and “pull” factors that influence their return decisions.<sup>15</sup> Governments and international organizations often focus on humanitarian and economic factors, such as the availability of shelter, services, and livelihood opportunities at return locations. Yet some of the most formidable barriers to return are political and social, not material.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, for return to constitute a durable solution, it must entail the reintegration of the displaced back into their communities.<sup>17</sup> **Return is therefore not a linear event but a dynamic and multidirectional process.**<sup>18</sup> To understand the drivers and consequences of this process, we need to look beyond why people *decide* to return home or not. We must also examine why and to what extent they are *permitted* to return and reintegrate or not. In other words, we need to understand the factors that influence social acceptance of returnees in their community or area of origin.

## The Iraq Context

Iraq is a canonical case of these dynamics. In 2014, ISIS seized territory in eastern Syria and western Iraq and declared the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate in the areas it controlled. In Iraq, the caliphate covered nearly a third of the country, including Ninewa governorate and parts of Anbar and Salahaddin. ISIS’s systematic persecution of ethno-religious minorities and harsh governing tactics – along with its military offensives and counteroffensives by the Iraqi army; Kurdish fighters from Iraq, Syria, and Turkey; and a U.S.-led coalition – triggered waves of mass displacement. Among those who fled were Sunni Arabs, ISIS’s primary constituency, along with Assyrians, Yazidis, Kurds, Christians, Turkmen, and Shabak. These minority groups were targeted by ISIS fighters; killed and expelled as part of a campaign of ethno-religious cleansing. The displaced fled to camps and urban centers in Ninewa, Anbar, Baghdad, and Kirkuk, along with Duhok, Erbil, and other areas controlled by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

After Iraqi and coalition forces expelled ISIS from its territories and the government declared victory in 2017, many IDPs began to return to their homes. The damage to infrastructure inflicted by ISIS and by Iraqi and coalition airstrikes, tenuous security due to the presence of multiple armed groups, and a general lack of reconstruction slowed the return process. But even as security and infrastructure improved, many IDPs have been prevented from returning – or have suffered secondary displacement after attempting to return – due to their real or perceived affiliation with ISIS. Those with relatives who joined ISIS, or those who simply lived in ISIS territory or shared its predominantly Sunni Arab identity, have been branded as sympathizers and rejected by their communities.<sup>19</sup> Many have been denied the security clearances that Iraqi authorities and local community leaders require in order to return to their home areas and reclaim their property.<sup>20</sup> Even those who were able to return have been met with hostility and violence. According to a report on return in Anbar, “perhaps the most common and persistent threat to returnees’ safety and well-being is the proliferation of violence and retributive acts perpetrated against returnees for their perceived links with ISIS.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> E.g., Alrababa’h et al. 2020; Arias et al. 2014.

<sup>16</sup> Tegenbos and Vlassenroot 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Black and Gent 2006.

<sup>18</sup> Macdonald and Porter 2020.

<sup>19</sup> IOM 2020b.

<sup>20</sup> Human Rights Watch 2021.

<sup>21</sup> Saieh et al. 2018: 15.

**Tensions are particularly acute in demographically mixed areas.** The targeting of ethnic and religious minorities by ISIS has led many of these communities to fear returning to areas that are also populated by Sunni Arabs – who they see as complicit in ISIS’s crimes – or it has caused them to reject the return of Sunnis outright. Ninewa, one of Iraq’s most diverse governorates, claims both the country’s largest share of remaining IDPs<sup>22</sup> and the highest number of people who have been re-displaced after attempting to return to their homes.<sup>23</sup> In Ninewa, the Yazidis – Iraq’s second largest religious minority – were especially targeted by ISIS.<sup>24</sup> When ISIS fighters overran the Yazidis’ ancestral home of Sinjar in August 2014, they killed between 2,100 and 4,400 Yazidis; abducted between 4,200 and 10,800; and displaced up to 400,000.<sup>25</sup> Thousands of Yazidi women and girls were kidnapped and sold as sex slaves, which ISIS used as a recruiting tactic through an organized trafficking system. Recognizing the gendered aspect of what has been broadly labeled a genocide, in March 2021 the Iraqi parliament passed the Yazidi Female Survivors Law, which acknowledges the sexual violence perpetuated by ISIS and provides financial support to victims. Since Kurdish Peshmerga forces retook Sinjar in 2015, dozens of mass graves containing the remains of Yazidis have been found.<sup>26</sup>



**The targeting of ethnic and religious minorities by ISIS has caused them to fear returning to areas populated by Sunni Arabs, or it has led them to reject the return of Sunnis outright.**

After the expulsion of ISIS from Sinjar, the return of the district’s residents was slow and sporadic. Sinjar suffered extensive damage to homes and infrastructure and continues to lack basic services. While many Yazidis remain displaced in camps and urban areas, tens of thousands of people have returned to Sinjar in recent months, particularly as security conditions improved and COVID-19-related lockdowns made life increasingly difficult in the camps.<sup>27</sup> The Iraqi government has also attempted to expedite the return process, closing 16 displacement camps since November 2020 alone.<sup>28</sup> This has created a tense and tenuous situation. Sunni Arab residents of Sinjar – who many Yazidis blame for supporting ISIS and assisting its assault on their communities<sup>29</sup> – have also returned or attempted to do so. Some Sunni communities have faced reprisal attacks by Yazidi militias and Kurdish forces, sowing fear and distrust on all sides while “exposing how [ISIS]’s incursion has created divisions between communities that had coexisted for decades, turning one village against another and making enemies of former friends.”<sup>30</sup> As a result, donors, policymakers, and practitioners have recognized that the social acceptance of returnees will be key to ensuring both the durability of return and the viability of peace and recovery in post-ISIS Iraq.

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<sup>22</sup> Meaning that of the roughly 1.2 million IDPs remaining in Iraq, nearly half are originally from Ninewa (but may be displaced elsewhere).

<sup>23</sup> IOM DTM 2021; IOM 2021a.

<sup>24</sup> According to the U.N. Human Rights Council in June 2016, “no other religious group present in ISIS-controlled areas in Syria and Iraq has been subjected to the destruction that the Yazidis have suffered.”

<sup>25</sup> Cetorelli 2017; OHCHR 2016; Salloum 2020.

<sup>26</sup> UNAMI/OHCHR 2018; Human Rights Watch 2019.

<sup>27</sup> Arraf 2020b.

<sup>28</sup> Human Rights Watch 2021. In October 2020, the KRG and the Iraqi government announced an agreement to pave the way for returnees through investments in stabilization and reconstruction.

<sup>29</sup> Frantzman 2018; Kullah 2020. Initially, many Sunni Arabs did welcome ISIS as “liberators” from Iraq’s Shi’a-dominated government, who they saw as corrupt, ineffective, and sectarian (The Associated Press 2015).

<sup>30</sup> Coles 2015. See also The Associated Press 2015.

# Explaining Social Acceptance of Returnees

Like research on return more broadly, studies of return in Iraq have largely focused on the intentions and actions of IDPs and returnees regarding their own movement decisions.<sup>31</sup> This research has identified different obstacles that not only hinder return, but also limit the ability of the 4.8 million IDPs who have returned to their areas of origin to effectively reintegrate back into their communities. In addition to a lack of access to livelihoods, property, and adequate standards of living, these obstacles include intergroup tensions and social discord.<sup>32</sup> As a result, several studies have started to explore the factors that influence social acceptance of returnees in Iraq.<sup>33</sup> Yet these studies take place in predominantly Sunni Arab areas. As explained above, the acceptance of returnees is a particular challenge in ethnic- and religiously-mixed areas. The International Organization for Migration sums up this challenge well: “the [ISIS] crisis and the specific targeting of minority groups further eroded trust between communities...and compounded decades-long grievances among groups that persist after [ISIS]’s departure.”<sup>34</sup> The return of the displaced and the repairing of intergroup relations are therefore inextricably intertwined.

To understand social acceptance of returnees in this context, two main factors emerge from the existing literature. The first pertains to the *characteristics of returnees* and the second relates to *perceptions of victimhood*. We describe each of these in more detail below, drawing on the literature on return and intergroup conflict from Iraq and beyond. We then highlight three additional factors that could also directly or indirectly influence the likelihood of social acceptance, particularly of people from other ethnic or religious groups: the extent to which individuals identify with their group, the degree to which they have interacted with other groups, and their personal experience with conflict and violence. These are not necessarily exhaustive, as other factors may also play a role in social acceptance beyond what is examined in this study.

## Characteristics of Returnees

Armed conflicts in diverse societies typically deepen group solidarity and polarize group identities.<sup>35</sup> When these conflicts fall along ethnic or religious lines, displaced people are less likely to return to demographically mixed areas.<sup>36</sup> War trauma and exposure to violence is associated with more negative attitudes towards other groups,<sup>37</sup> while feelings of insecurity lead people to seek safety and security within their group – often resulting in the ethno-religious segregation of communities in the wake of conflict.<sup>38</sup>

In Iraq, Yazidis and other persecuted minorities may therefore reject the return of IDPs based on their group identity. Indeed, some reports indicate that non-Sunni Arab communities consider all Sunni Arabs to be potential ISIS supporters and collaborators.<sup>39</sup> A Yazidi man told one researcher, for instance, that “the government must prevent the Arabs from coming back and living in our areas, because they are the reason for the arrival of ISIS to these areas; they betrayed us.”<sup>40</sup> Such sentiment has a broader historical context:

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<sup>31</sup> IOM 2019a, 2019b, 2020.

<sup>32</sup> IOM 2021a, IOM 2021b.

<sup>33</sup> IOM 2019c; 2020b.

<sup>34</sup> IOM 2019a: 4.

<sup>35</sup> Bulutgil 2015, 2016; Lichtenheld 2015.

<sup>36</sup> Camarena and Hägerdal 2020.

<sup>37</sup> Biruski and Penic 2014; Hirsch-Hoefler et al. 2016; Mironova and Whitt 2018.

<sup>38</sup> Lichtenheld and Ogbudu 2021.

<sup>39</sup> Cockburn 2017; Frantzman 2018.

<sup>40</sup> Local Sunni Arab communities have felt this too: according to a Sunni tribal elder interviewed by Kullah (2020), “we used to be like brothers, but now the Yazidis stay away from us...They can’t distinguish between civilians and [ISIS] members.”

well before ISIS, Yazidis and other minorities were discriminated against and targeted for violence, particularly by Sunni Arab extremist groups.<sup>41</sup> This may have given rise to *collective blame*: the tendency to hold in-group members responsible for the harmful acts perpetrated by particular individuals.<sup>42</sup> Victims think in-group members indirectly encouraged perpetrators, benefitted from their actions, or failed to intervene or restrain them.<sup>43</sup> Researchers have shown that collective blame can play an important role in intergroup aggression by encouraging retribution.<sup>44</sup> This leads to the following hypothesis:

- People will be less likely to accept Sunni Arab returnees than returnees from other ethno-religious groups.



Kawergosk Displacement Camp, Erbil, Iraq  
(Cassandra Nelson/Mercy Corps)

Other research suggests that social acceptance of returnees does not just hinge on their identities, but also their behavior during ISIS rule. There are reports that Iraqis who stayed in ISIS-held territory rather than fleeing to areas controlled by the KRG or the Iraqi government are considered collaborators, due to a “widespread assumption” that “mere residence in [ISIS]-controlled territory is an act of support.”<sup>45</sup> This is consistent with the concept of *guilt by location*, or the idea that people’s physical locations and movements during wartime provides information about their loyalties and affiliations – where one is signals what side they are on.<sup>46</sup> A study by UNDP in Sunni-dominated Anbar governorate, for example, found that in some communities, the perception that “those who stayed under [ISIS]’s occupation” are actually affiliated with the

<sup>41</sup> Human Rights Watch 2009.

<sup>42</sup> Lickel et al. 2006; Manchi Chao et al. 2008.

<sup>43</sup> Denson et al. 2006; Lickel and Onuki 2015.

<sup>44</sup> Krahe 2020; Lickel et al. 2006.

<sup>45</sup> Revkin 2018: 9; see also Taub 2018.

<sup>46</sup> Lichtenheld 2020.

group “makes communities more inclined to reject the return of [these] IDPs.”<sup>47</sup> This leads to the following hypothesis:

- People will be less likely to accept returnees who stayed and lived under ISIS than returnees who fled its territories.

Finally, it is possible that social acceptance depends on the *extent* and *type of collaboration* with ISIS. While UNDP found that some communities rejected all IDPs who lived under the group, it also discovered that in other communities, “there is a more precise understanding of what affiliation involved, depending on the roles and actions undertaken within [ISIS]: if the IDPs had no decision-making power and did not commit violence against the community, they are more likely to be accepted.”<sup>48</sup> In a survey of residents in Mosul, Kristen Kao and Mara Revkin similarly found that variation in individual culpability shaped preferences for punishment: respondents were more forgiving of janitors and cooks than for ISIS fighters.<sup>49</sup> Both of these studies took place in Sunni communities, however. The question is whether out-group members, particularly minorities who were heavily victimized by ISIS, are as discerning of ISIS collaborators as Sunni in-group members. This suggests the following hypothesis:

- People will be less likely to accept returnees who actively collaborated with ISIS.

## Perceptions of Victimhood

Besides the identities and behavior of returnees, research on social psychology suggests that perceptions of victimhood may also influence social acceptance. Multiple studies have shown that even in intractable conflicts (such as Israel-Palestine), fostering “inclusive perceptions of victimhood” – through narratives that emphasize the suffering of all sides – can reduce aggression and increase people’s willingness for reconciliation.<sup>50</sup> First, inclusive victimhood increases one’s ability to empathize with and recognize others’ suffering, which is key to forgiveness.<sup>51</sup> Second, it emphasizes commonalities and enhances perceptions of similarity with others, which leads to more positive attitudes towards out-groups.<sup>52</sup> Third, inclusive victimhood can reduce “competitive victimhood,” where groups prioritize their own suffering and dismiss the suffering of others.

This is not meant to create false equivalencies or gloss over the unique harms inflicted on certain groups, as invalidating the experience of those who suffered the most carries its own risks. But when collective narratives of intergroup violence exclusively stress in-group victimization, they fuel further conflict and dim the prospects for peaceful coexistence.<sup>53</sup> The idea that inclusive perceptions of victimhood can lead to mutual forgiveness has underpinned truth and reconciliation programs in multiple post-conflict societies, including Rwanda and South Africa.<sup>54</sup> But can narratives that promote and reinforce these perceptions have a similar effect in the Iraqi context? Can they alter the willingness of groups that have experienced

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<sup>47</sup> UNDP 2020: 5.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Kao and Revkin 2021.

<sup>50</sup> “Inclusive perceptions of victimhood” and “inclusive narratives of victimhood” are terms of art that come from a large literature on social psychology (e.g., Adelman et al. 2016; Noor et al. 2015; Shnabel et al. 2013; Vollhardt, 2009, 2012, 2013). Although we use these terms in the report to ensure a dialogue between this literature and our own research findings, we acknowledge that they risk reinforcing a perception of the displaced and other war-affected individuals as helpless victims. We reference these terms because they describe important (and useful) social science concepts, but this is in no way meant to detract from the agency and resilience of research participants and their communities.

<sup>51</sup> Vollhardt 2009.

<sup>52</sup> Gaertner and Dovidio 2000; Bar-On and Kassem 2004; Nier et al. 2001.

<sup>53</sup> Noor et al. 2012; Schori-Eyal et al. 2017; Vollhardt 2009, 2012.

<sup>54</sup> Rim et al. 2011; Tutu 1999.

oppression and violence to accept the return of out-group members who share the identities of their attackers? We hypothesized the following:

- People who are exposed to inclusive victimhood narratives will be more likely to accept out-group returnees than people who are not exposed to these narratives.

## **In-group Identification, Out-group Contact, and Experience with Violence**

Three other factors may also contribute to social acceptance of returnees in Iraq, either directly or by influencing the relationships proposed in the hypotheses above. The first is the extent of *in-group identification*. The social psychology literature indicates that people who identify more strongly with their group are more likely to engage in retributive acts against out-group members.<sup>55</sup> Such individuals may be more inclined to engage in collective blame or embrace competitive rather than inclusive perceptions of victimhood, affecting their willingness to accept returnees. For example, a study on the integration of IDPs into host communities in Baghdad and Sulaymaniyah found that hosts with more positive views of diversity and a stronger sense of national identity were more likely to accept IDPs, while those with negative views of diversity and a stronger sense of group identity were less accepting.<sup>56</sup> This leads to the following hypothesis:

- People who identify more strongly with their group identity will be less likely to accept out-group returnees, while those who identify more strongly with their national identity will be more likely to accept them.

The second factor is the extent of *out-group contact*. Individuals who have interacted with Sunni Arabs more frequently may generally be more open, tolerant, and trusting – and thus more willing to accept Sunni Arabs into their communities. This idea is predicated on the contact hypothesis, which indicates that an important antecedent to intergroup forgiveness is intergroup contact.<sup>57</sup> If people from different groups get to know each other under certain conditions (e.g., through cooperation in pursuit of a common goal), it will help dispel negative stereotypes, decrease prejudice, and improve intergroup perceptions. Aspects of the Iraq context may not be conducive to the contact hypothesis – due to differences in group status and the extent of violence and instability that the country has suffered in recent years<sup>58</sup> – but studies have found that intergroup contact has the strongest impact when it involves close living arrangements.<sup>59</sup> Since many Sunni Arabs were also displaced during the ISIS conflict, often alongside other ethno-religious groups, those who fled and lived with Sunnis in the close quarters of a displacement camp may be particularly likely to accept them into their communities. This leads to the following two variations of the contact hypothesis:

- People with more frequent out-group contact are more likely to accept out-group returnees.
- People who were displaced with out-groups are more likely to accept out-group returnees.

A third factor that could directly or indirectly influence social acceptance is people's personal experience with conflict and violence. Some research has shown that the more people are exposed to violence in wartime, and the more hardships they endure while grappling with displacement and other consequences of conflict,

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<sup>55</sup> Lickel et al. 2006; Noor et al. 2008.

<sup>56</sup> IOM 2019c.

<sup>57</sup> Hewstone et al. 2006; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006; Paluck et al. 2018; Mousa 2020.

<sup>58</sup> Some studies find that in violent settings, intergroup contact does not improve attitudes about out-groups and can worsen them (Paolini et al. 2010; Enos 2014). Other work shows that the impact of contact depends on group status (Ditlmann and Samii 2016).

<sup>59</sup> Paluck and Green 2009.

the more they display negative attitudes towards out-groups.<sup>60</sup> Exposure to violence and hardship is associated with an increased sense of vulnerability and mistrust, which causes individuals to seek protection from their ethnic or religious communities and adopt more intolerant and exclusionist attitudes regarding other groups.<sup>61</sup> Victimization can also amplify parochial communal norms,<sup>62</sup> including a general suspicion of outsiders,<sup>63</sup> further reducing the likelihood of social acceptance of other groups. It is also possible for the opposite to be true: due to war weariness, people who have experienced violence may seek peace with former perpetrator groups and be more inclined to accept them, not less.<sup>64</sup> That said, we proposed the following hypothesis:

- People who faced greater exposure to violence and suffered greater hardship during the ISIS conflict are *less* likely to accept out-group returnees.

All hypotheses tested in this study are summarized in Table 1.

TABLE 1: HYPOTHESES REGARDING SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE OF RETURNEES

<b>Returnee Characteristics</b>	<i>Identity</i>	Less acceptance of Sunni Arab returnees
	<i>Movement patterns</i>	Less acceptance of returnees who stayed and lived under ISIS
	<i>Collaboration</i>	Less acceptance of returnees who actively collaborated with ISIS
<b>Perceptions of Victimhood</b>	More acceptance of out-group returnees when exposed to inclusive narrative of victimhood under ISIS (shared suffering across groups)	
<b>In-group identification</b>	Less acceptance of out-group returnees when in-group identification is strong	
<b>Out-group contact</b>	More acceptance of out-group returnees when out-group contact, including during displacement, is high	
<b>Experience with violence and conflict</b>	Less acceptance of out-group returnees by those who faced greater exposure to violence and hardship	

<sup>60</sup> Beber et al. 2014; Danielidou and Horvath 2006; Hall et al. 2018; Mironova and Whitt 2018; Suzuki et al. 2021.

<sup>61</sup> Canetti-Nisim et al. 2009; Eidelson and Eidelson 2003; Hadzic et al. 2020; Suzuki et al. 2021.

<sup>62</sup> Mironova and Whitt 2018.

<sup>63</sup> Allison 2017.

<sup>64</sup> Hazlett 2017. Also see Hartman and Morse (2020), who find that individuals exposed to war-related violence are more likely to host refugees fleeing conflict.



A Yazidi refugee in Greece  
(Sara Hylton/Mercy Corps)

## Research Design

To test these hypotheses, Mercy Corps conducted a survey of 511 Yazidi households from Sinjar District between March and April 2021. Sinjar – located west of Mosul in Ninewa, partly bordering northeast Syria – was the epicenter of ISIS’s attacks on the Yazidi population in Iraq. Prior to the arrival of ISIS in 2014, the district had a population of approximately 420,000, with a majority Yazidi and the rest Sunni Arabs, Kurds, Sunni and Shi’a Turkmans and Shabaks, and Christians.<sup>65</sup> Hundreds of thousands of people from Sinjar District were displaced during the ISIS conflict, though the precise number is unknown. By April 2021, some 111,000 people had returned to the area and nearly 36,000 remained displaced, either in IDP camps in Duhok in the Kurdish Region of Iraq (KRI) or in non-camp settings in Ninewa.<sup>66</sup> Returnees include tens of thousands of Yazidis along with Sunni Arabs and members of other ethno-religious groups.

Because of its ethnic and religious diversity, and the atrocities perpetrated against the local Yazidi population, Sinjar presents an especially difficult context for achieving durable return and reintegration after displacement.<sup>67</sup> Promoting social acceptance of Sunni returnees among Yazidis is a particular challenge. The Yazidis are a closed community with a long history of persecution and oppression dating back to the Ottoman Empire. Even before the collective trauma exacted by ISIS, they were marginalized and routinely

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<sup>65</sup> Abouzeid 2018.

<sup>66</sup> IOM 2021c.

<sup>67</sup> In a qualitative study of social acceptance of returnees in Anbar, IOM (2020b) found that communities that experienced high levels of violence were less willing to accept the return of IDPs with perceived ISIS affiliation because they saw them as a direct threat to the community. Few communities experienced as much violence during ISIS’s rule as Yazidis from Sinjar.

attacked by other groups, including Sunni Arab extremists, making them increasingly wary of outsiders.<sup>68</sup> Therefore, understanding how to improve the prospects of social acceptance of outgroup returnees among this population likely has implications for refugee and IDP return elsewhere. If particular factors prove promising among Yazidis from Sinjar, then they could also have potential in other, similarly challenging contexts. Thus while this research focuses on a specific group in a specific district of Iraq, its findings may be transferrable to other settings and populations – especially heavily victimized minorities who are asked to live alongside in-group members of those who persecuted them.

## Methodology

Our survey focused on Yazidis from Solagh, a collection of 13 villages located two kilometers east of Sinjar city.<sup>69</sup> Since the return process is ongoing and population movements remain fluid, we sampled respondents from three areas: returnees who have gone back to their villages in Solagh, returnees who have moved to Sinjar city, and IDPs who remain displaced in camps in Dohuk. Through field visits and interviews with community leaders, local authorities, and other key informants, we calculated estimates for the number of households in each area – including all 13 villages in Solagh – and constructed a sample that was proportionate to the estimated population in each area and village (see Annex 1). We deliberately oversampled returnees in Solagh due to the difficulty of identifying and accessing respondents in Sinjar city and IDP camps in Dohuk.

In Solagh’s 13 villages, a team of enumerators used a “random walk” sampling procedure. Starting in the center of each village, the enumerators walked in a random direction and sampled every other household. While they attempted to randomly select a respondent within each household, many households deferred to an older male household member to respond to the survey. In Sinjar city and IDP camps in Dohuk, Yazidi respondents were identified through snowball sampling and surveys were mostly conducted by phone.<sup>70</sup> Figure 1 provides a breakdown of survey respondents by area and gender. Because of cultural norms that discourage women from speaking



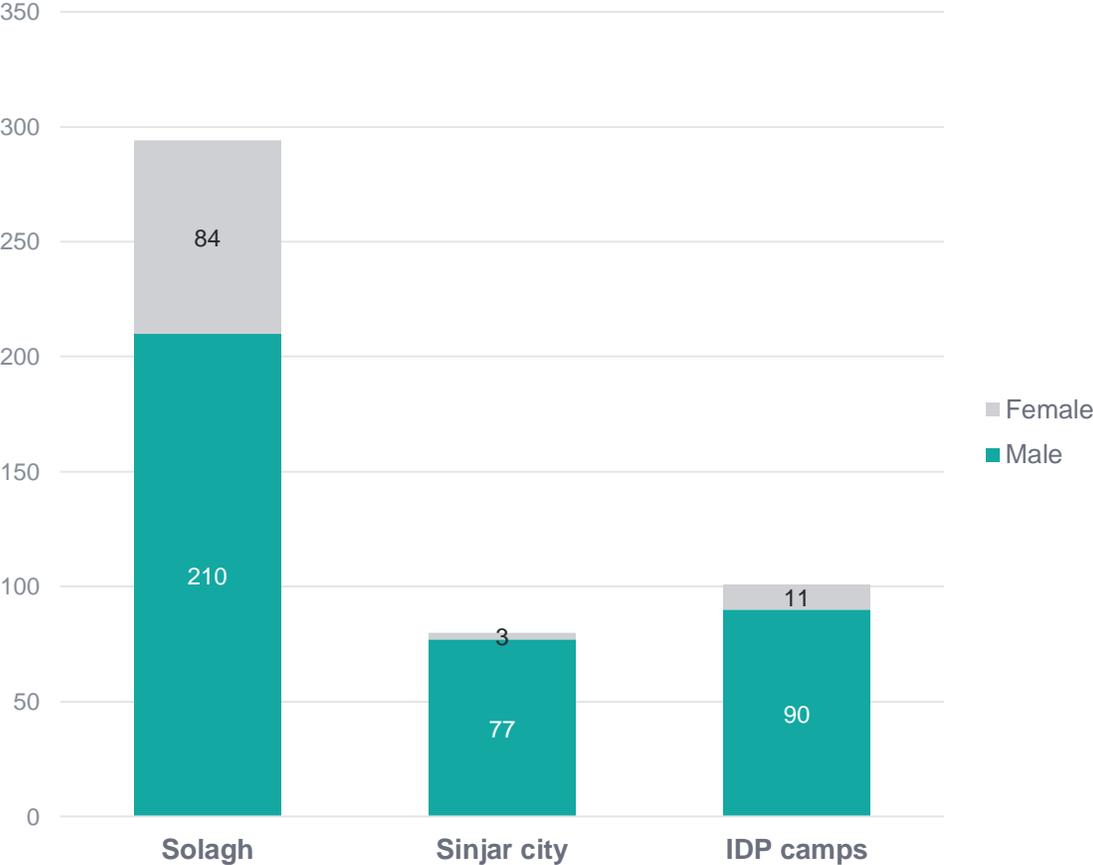
<sup>68</sup> Maisel 2008.

<sup>69</sup> In 2020, a mass grave was discovered in Solagh that contained the remains of dozens of Yazidi women who were killed by ISIS because they were considered too old to be sold into sexual slavery (Arraf 2020a).

<sup>70</sup> Sampled IDP camps include Qadiya camp, Persfi camp, Shariya camp, Khaki camp, Kaberto camp, Essean camp, Europa camp, and Domiz camp.

with strangers and men, and the fact that in some returnee households, men returned before women and children, our sample skews heavily male (78 percent).

FIGURE 1: NUMBER OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS BY AREA AND GENDER



## Survey Experiments

The survey included two experiments to better understand the factors that influence whether members of the Yazidi community would accept returnees, particularly Sunni Arabs.

### Characteristics of Returnees

The first experiment asked people about a hypothetical 35-year-old male civilian who had previously fled Sinjar and now wants to return. We randomly manipulated three key characteristics about this hypothetical civilian, focusing on movement patterns and ethno-religious identity in order to test the hypotheses outlined in the previous section. While we would have preferred to also manipulate other characteristics of the returnee – such as gender, age, and family status – the relatively small size of our sample ( $n = 511$ ) limited the number we could evaluate experimentally. The three characteristics we randomly manipulated included:

1. Whether the hypothetical civilian fled Sinjar after ISIS invaded the area (*leavers*) or remained and lived under ISIS rule (*stayers*);

2. Whether the civilian was a *Kurd* or a *Sunni Arab*. Kurds are a pseudo in-group for the Yazidis, so we generally expected respondents to have more positive views of them.<sup>71</sup>
3. Whether the civilian stayed under ISIS rule and worked in a government sector for ISIS (*collaborator*).

We then asked respondents whether they would be comfortable with (a) the returnee moving back to Sinjar (for respondents who had returned) or to their IDP camp (for respondents who remain displaced); and (b) the returnee becoming their neighbor. The purpose of this experiment was to see what characteristics of a potential returnee made respondents more or less likely to accept their return - their ethno-religious identity; whether someone had fled or stayed under ISIS rule; or whether someone had actively collaborated with ISIS (or a combination of these). Using an experimental approach allowed us to assess the causal impact of these different characteristics on people's willingness to accept them into their communities.

## Inclusive Perceptions of Victimhood

Our second experiment explored the extent to which invoking a shared sense of victimization and promoting an inclusive perception of victimhood influences the willingness of Yazidis to accept Sunni returnees. We randomly assigned respondents to either receive a “control” prompt or a “treatment” prompt. The prompts were read as follows:

**Control prompt:** “I would like to ask you some questions about your opinion toward Sunni Muslims.”

**Treatment prompt – “Shared Suffering”:** “I would like to ask you some questions about your opinion toward Sunni Muslims. Like your community, many Sunni Muslims lost and suffered through a lot because of ISIS. Their homes were destroyed, they were displaced, and many of them were killed, abused, and imprisoned by ISIS.”

We then asked respondents their opinions about whether Sunni Muslims should be fully welcomed into their community, and whether they would like to have a Sunni Muslim as their neighbor.<sup>72</sup>

## Observational Measures

In addition to testing experimentally the impact of returnee characteristics and inclusive victimhood narratives on respondents’ comfort with returnees and willingness to accept out-group returnees, we also used several observational measures to explore the impact of other factors that could directly or indirectly influence these outcomes, and potentially mediate the role of these experimental factors.

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<sup>71</sup> Yazidis are ethnically Kurdish and typically speak the Kurdish language – some even identify as Kurdish – and in Iraq, many of them have been integrated into Kurdish political structures (Allison 2017; Salloum 2020). The Yazidi are often referred to as the “original Kurds,” and many believe that Yazidism was the main Kurdish religion before most Kurds converted to Islam. Moreover, it was Kurdish fighters who helped fight ISIS as Sinjar was retaken from ISIS in 2015, and it was Kurdish authorities and communities in Dohuk, Erbil, and elsewhere who took in many Yazidi IDPs and helped provide shelter, security, and aid while they were displaced. While many Yazidis do cast blame on Kurdish (Iraqi) Peshmerga forces – which had taken control of Sinjar in mid-2014 – for failing to protect them during ISIS’s incursion into the region, after the attack, the Turkish Kurdish rebel group PKK ended up rescuing up to 35,000 Yazidis trapped on Sinjar Mountain, winning the gratitude of Yazidi leaders (Shelton 2014).

<sup>72</sup> We did not specify age, gender, or other traits, and only referenced “Sunni Muslims” or “a Sunni Muslim” generally.

- For *in-group identification*, we examined two survey questions that indicate the extent to which being (a) a Yazidi, and (b) an Iraqi is an important part of how respondents see themselves.
- For intergroup contact, we examined how often respondents reported *interacting with Sunni Muslims*, and whether they had been *displaced with Sunni Muslims*.<sup>73</sup>
- For experience with conflict and violence, we examined two measures. The first, *exposure to violence*, captures the frequency with which respondents reported personally experiencing or witnessing rocket or mortar fire, shots fired by small arms (e.g., rifles), bombings, physical assaults, or instances of abduction, imprisonment, or forced labor.<sup>74</sup> The second, *hardship in displacement*, is a self-reported measure of how tolerable respondents' overall situation was while they were displaced.<sup>75</sup>

## Estimation

For the survey experiments, balance tests indicate that we achieved good balance in terms of gender, age, and displacement status across treatment and control groups (see Annex 2). To analyze the results, we use differences in means, comparing the average responses of the treatment and control groups for each outcome. For binary (yes/no) outcomes, the mean corresponds to the percentage of respondents who answered in the affirmative (e.g., the percentage who said they were comfortable accepting a returnee into their community).<sup>76</sup> We also employ regression analysis to estimate the effects of the experiments, with robust standard errors. In the regression models, we control for respondents' gender, age, employment, and displacement status (IDP or returnee). For this variable and the other observational measures described above, we interacted them with both treatments to test for heterogeneous treatment effects. We also investigated whether the treatments had heterogeneous effects across gender, age groups, and respondents with different displacement status.

## Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, ongoing population movements and the lack of reliable, village-level population data precluded the use of simple random sampling, and we therefore cannot claim that our findings are representative of all Yazidis in Sinjar or the broader population. Since many male respondents considered themselves to be the “heads of their households,” the median age of our sample (35 years) is relatively high. Moreover, while we achieved good gender balance across treatment and control groups, the survey sample as a whole was male dominant, as more than three-quarters of the sample are men. Still, we found important gender differences in our results, and we control for respondents' gender and age in our analysis – and examine heterogeneous treatment effects across these demographic categories.

Second, because this research focuses on a particular population in a particular setting, we cannot claim that our results generalize to other contexts. Further studies are needed to evaluate whether, and to what

<sup>73</sup> These two variables are only very moderately correlated ( $r = 0.11$ ). Again, we did not specify age, gender, or other traits, and only referenced “Sunni Muslims” or “a Sunni Muslim” generally.

<sup>74</sup> We asked whether and how frequently respondents experienced or witnessed each of these acts of violence both when ISIS attacked Sinjar in 2014 and afterwards. See Annex 4 for details.

<sup>75</sup> We asked respondents to describe their overall situation while in displacement: “extremely hard”, “hard”, “tolerable”, “ok”, or “good”. This survey measure was taken from Suzuki et al. (2021).

<sup>76</sup> In the Results section, we report the findings of two-tailed t-tests, although all of the results are substantively similar when estimating a Mann-Whitney (nonparametric) test.

extent, our findings travel elsewhere. Yet as we explained in the beginning of this section, the fact that this study takes place in a particularly difficult context for return and social acceptance gives us confidence that our findings are transferrable to some extent beyond the specific population under investigation.

Third, fixed attributes of the hypothetical returnee for the first experiment – that he was described as a 35-year-old male – may have influenced people’s responses, particularly women. As noted above, because of the small sample size we did not manipulate the gender, age, or other characteristics of the returnee in order to limit the number of treatment items. The effect of the returnee’s movement patterns or ethno-religious identity on social acceptance may have differed if the returnee was described as old, younger, or female. That said, Kao and Revkin find in their survey experiment in Mosul – in which they manipulate the gender of a hypothetical ISIS collaborator – that respondents did not levy more lenient punishments for women (regardless of respondents’ gender), as male and female collaborators were seen as equally culpable.<sup>77</sup>

Fourth, asking about perceptions of other groups and people’s willingness to accept returnees is sensitive in nature. Respondents may not have answered honestly and felt pressured to give positive responses (creating bias due to social desirability). Yet the results for the most sensitive questions exhibit significant variation and illustrate that people expressed negative views of other groups: 57 percent of respondents said that a Sunni should not be welcomed into their community, and 41 percent said they would “not like” or “really not like” having a Sunni as a neighbor.

We also tried to address these concerns by including a list experiment in the survey that sought to indirectly elicit respondents’ views of Sunnis. A list experiment seeks to overcome social desirability bias by providing respondents with a list of statements. Instead of asking them which statement on the list they agree with, they are asked *how many* statements they agree with. This way, respondents do not have to reveal their attitudes about sensitive issues, but still provide indicators of their perceptions. Our list experiment included a statement about whether respondents are upset by the idea of interacting with Sunnis. The results, which are presented and described in Annex 3, indicate that 48 percent of respondents are upset by the idea of interacting with Sunnis – which is on par with the percentage who responded negatively to the direct questions referenced above. This provides some validation of our outcome measures and should assuage concerns that social desirability significantly biased our findings.

Finally, while our research design allows us to assess *whether* particular factors affect social acceptance of returnees, it does not tell us *why* and *how*. Further research, particularly qualitative research, is needed to identify the mechanisms underlying our results and help us better understand people’s responses, especially women. In the next section, we propose some possible explanations when discussing the findings, drawing on other studies from Iraq and elsewhere. But these are merely suggestive, and additional research will be required to verify or invalidate them and deepen our understanding of these issues.

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<sup>77</sup> Regardless of respondents’ gender (Kao and Revkin 2021).



A refugee camp in Greece  
(Sara Hylton/Mercy Corps)

## Findings

Overall, 38 percent of respondents both said that Sunni Muslims should be welcomed into their community and that they would “like” or “really like” having a Sunni as their neighbor. Women were much less accepting than men, however. 13 percent of female respondents were willing to welcome Sunnis and would like to have them as a neighbor, compared to 47 percent of male respondents.<sup>78</sup> Interestingly, IDP respondents were more accepting of Sunni returnees than respondents who had returned to Solagh or Sinjar city. 65 percent of IDPs said Sunnis should be welcomed into their community, compared to 31 percent of non-IDPs. These findings suggest important differences in social acceptance by gender and displacement status.

## The Effect of Returnee Characteristics

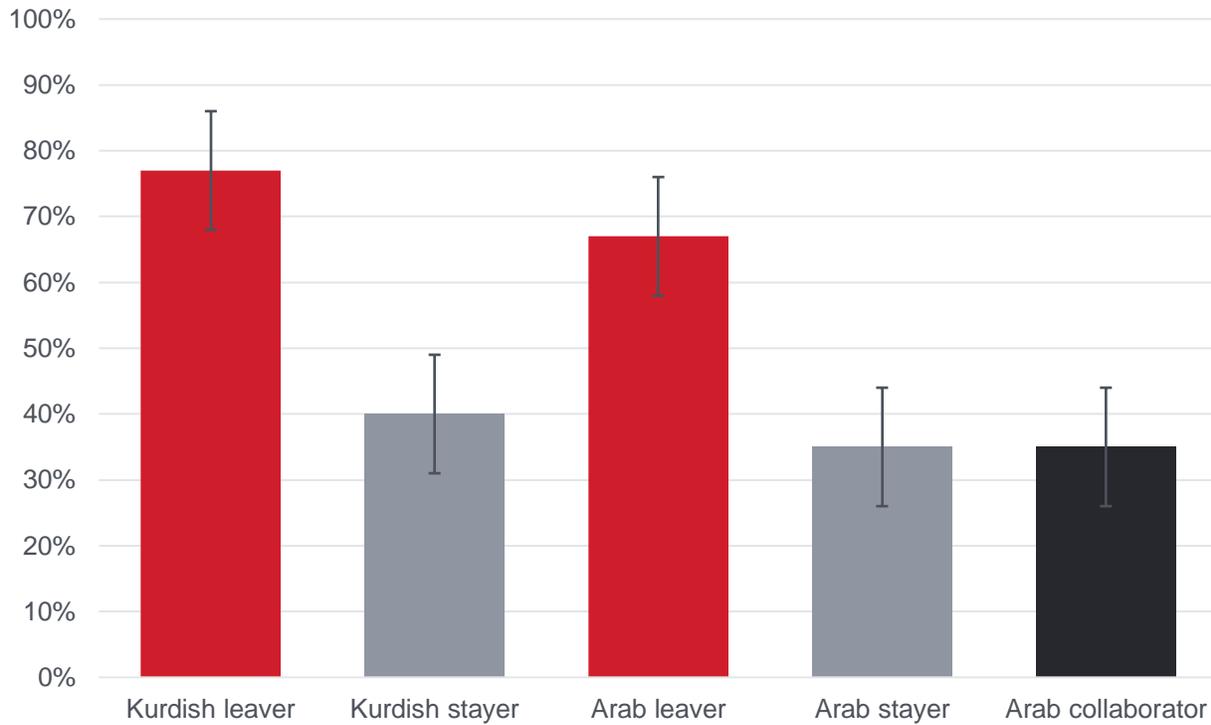
The results of the first survey experiment demonstrate that particular characteristics of a (male) returnee’s profile have a substantial bearing on whether respondents feel comfortable with them returning to their area. Specifically, **returnees’ movement patterns during ISIS’s rule is the most influential factor shaping social acceptance** (Figure 2). Nearly twice as many respondents were comfortable with a male *leaver* (72 percent) than a male *stayer* (38 percent) returning to Sinjar.<sup>79</sup> In fact, the proportion of respondents

<sup>78</sup> Those willing to welcome Sunni returnees were slightly older – with a median age of 38, compared to 34 for those unwilling to welcome them – indicating that younger respondents were somewhat less accepting of returnees.

<sup>79</sup> There was a similar split in whether respondents were comfortable with having *leavers* (68 percent) and *stayers* (38 percent) as a neighbor. In both cases, these differences were highly statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ).

comfortable with accepting a *stayer* was similar to the number who were comfortable accepting the return of a male (Arab) *collaborator* who actually worked for ISIS (35 percent).

FIGURE 2: PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS COMFORTABLE WITH RETURNEE COMING BACK<sup>80</sup>



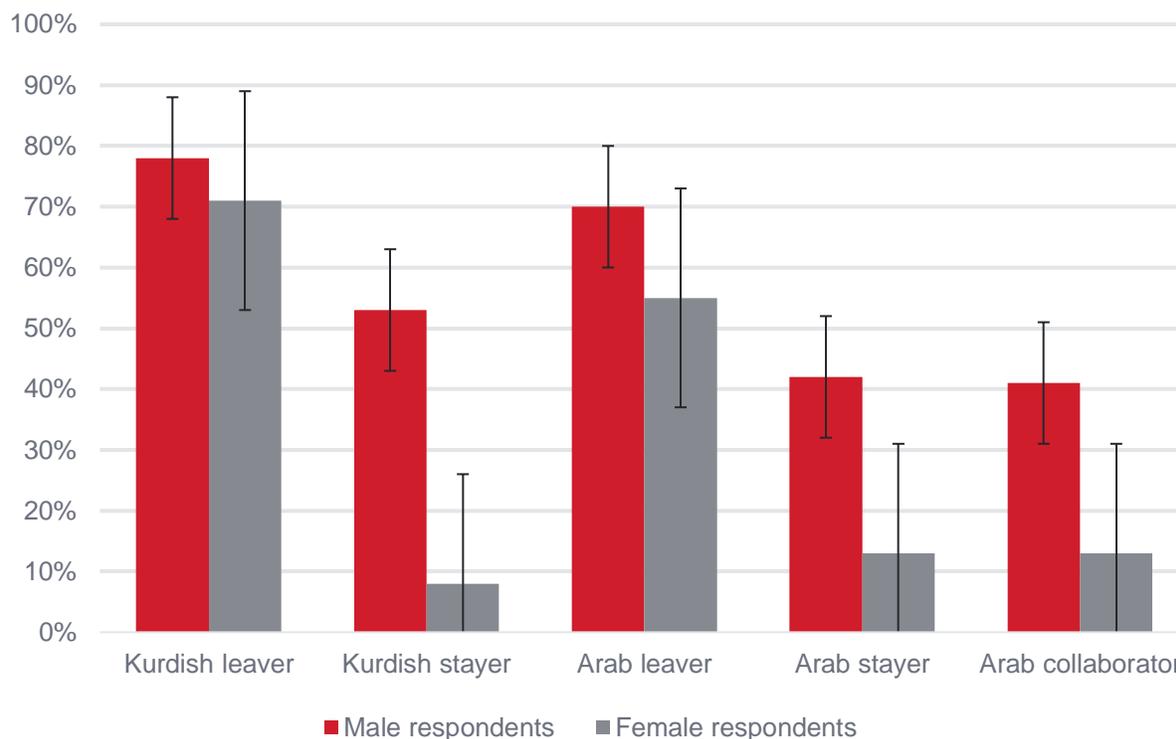
Ethno-religious identity had a moderate effect on social acceptance, but not nearly as strong as movement patterns. Overall, respondents were less comfortable with a male Sunni Arab returning to Sinjar (52 percent) than a male Kurd (60 percent).<sup>81</sup> In other words, the level of respondent acceptance of a Kurd who simply stayed and lived under ISIS (40 percent) was only slightly higher than that of a Sunni Arab who actively collaborated with ISIS (35 percent). Regression analysis confirms these results: being a *leaver* (versus a *stayer*) has a substantively larger and statistically stronger effect on reducing a returnee’s likelihood of social acceptance than the returnee’s ethno-religious identity (see Tables A5-A7 in Annex 5).

Figure 3 provides the results of the experiment disaggregated by gender. It shows that **the gap in social acceptance between stayers and leavers for female respondents (10 percent versus 62 percent) was nearly twice as large as the gap for male respondents (47 percent versus 74 percent)**. Given that the survey sample contains much fewer women ( $n = 110$ ) than men ( $n = 401$ ), these comparisons should be met with caution. Still, women were generally less comfortable than men with a (male) returnee moving back to Sinjar, regardless of the returnee’s profile.

<sup>80</sup> Sample size for each hypothetical returnee: Kurdish leaver = 111; Arab leaver = 104; Kurdish stayer = 94; Arab stayer = 95; Arab collaborator = 79. The findings for whether respondents were comfortable having the returnee be their neighbor were substantively similar and are therefore not shown here for ease of interpretation.

<sup>81</sup> Similarly, respondents were less comfortable with a Sunni Arab returnee being their neighbor (49 percent) compared to a Kurd (59 percent). But only this finding was statistically significant, not the one on returning to Sinjar.

FIGURE 3: PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS COMFORTABLE WITH RETURNEE COMING BACK, BY GENDER



These results demonstrate that respondents – particularly women – were much less accepting of returnees who lived under ISIS rule, regardless of their ethno-religious identity. Critically, our experimental approach shows that individuals’ movement patterns have a *causal* effect on the likelihood of social acceptance. This seems to confirm reports from Iraq that people who did not flee territories taken over by ISIS and stayed behind are considered to be ISIS affiliates or accomplices even if they did not actually support or collaborate with the group.<sup>82</sup> Respondents (both men and women) were no more likely to accept a returnee who stayed under ISIS than they were to accept a returnee who had actually worked for ISIS – suggesting that they interpreted *whether the returnee left or stayed to be an indicator of collaboration itself*. Moreover, this information trumped concerns about returnees’ ethnic and religious identity.

This is a troubling finding, given numerous testimonies by those who lived under ISIS that they were not allowed to leave or were forced to provide assistance to ISIS fighters through fear and coercion. Yet this dynamic is not unique to Iraq. In other countries, armed conflicts – even those with strong ethnic and other identity dimensions – have created new social divisions based on whether and where people were displaced.<sup>83</sup> In Iraq, the tendency for respondents to reject stayers could reflect a proclivity to cast equal blame on *anyone* who associated with ISIS. In a separate survey question, we asked respondents whether they thought that every person involved with ISIS should be held accountable, or whether only ISIS fighters and leaders should be held accountable. As illustrated in Figure 4, a vast majority of respondents – including 80 percent of men and 66 percent of women – said that every person involved with ISIS should be held accountable. Thus, any effort to improve inter-group relations, promote reconciliation, and facilitate the

<sup>82</sup> Revkin 2018; Taub 2018.

<sup>83</sup> Including Burundi (Schwartz 2019), El Salvador (Todd 2010); Guatemala (Manz 1988) and Rwanda (Turner 2015).

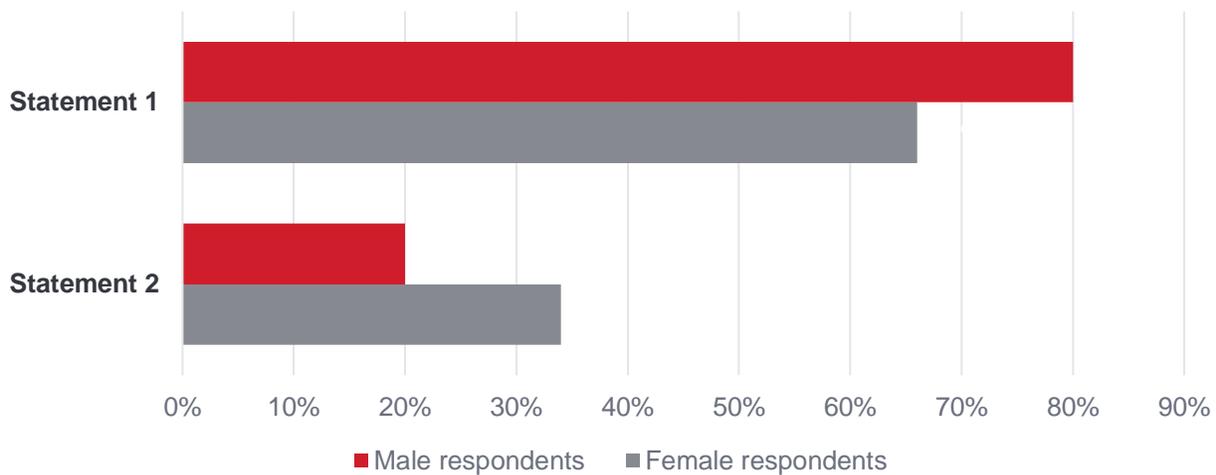
return of the displaced in mixed communities must aim to dispel the perception that people’s movement patterns in particular, and passive acts of compliance under ISIS in general, reflect support for or collaboration with ISIS.

FIGURE 4: RESPONDENTS’ VIEWS ON ACCOUNTABILITY (N = 508)

Which of the following statements comes closest to describing your view:

**Statement 1:** “Every person involved with ISIS should be held accountable, no matter their status.”

**Statement 2:** “Only ISIS fighters, leaders, and those who planned or supervised violence should be held accountable; individuals who were just following orders and working as civilians should not be prosecuted.”



## Inclusive Perceptions of Victimhood

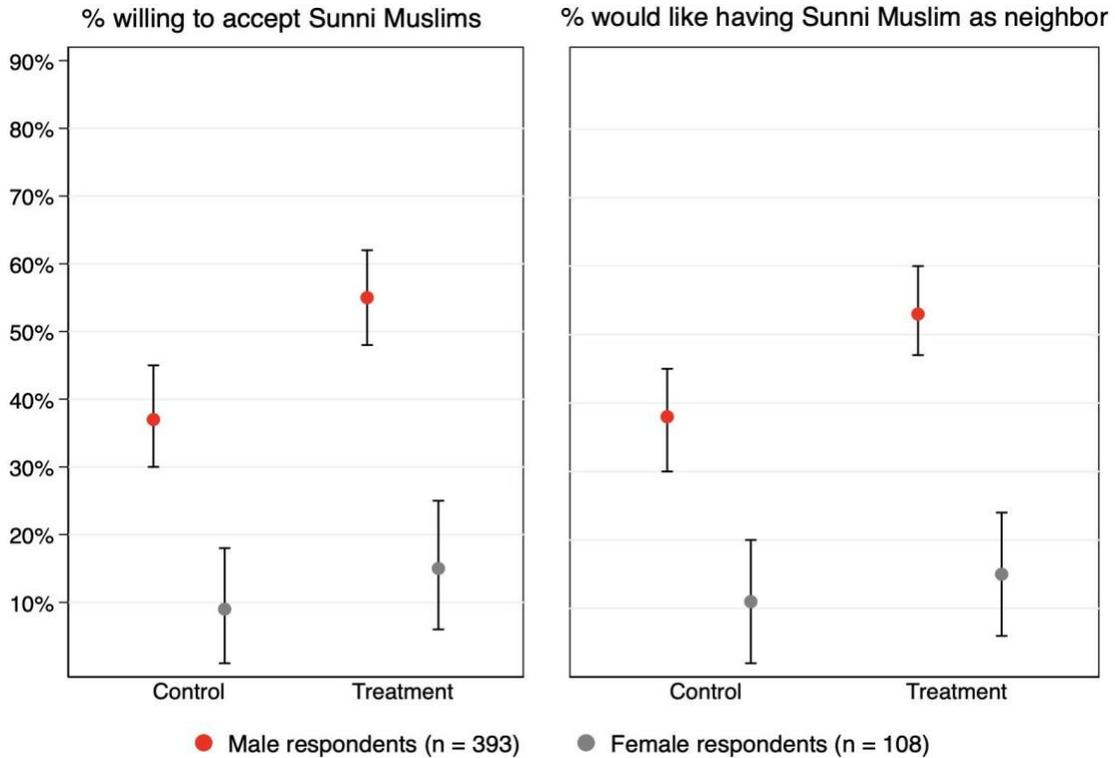
Our second survey experiment seeks to understand how the prospects of social acceptance can be improved. Does imparting a sense of shared suffering – promoting an “inclusive sense of victimhood” among Yazidis by reminding them about Sunnis’ victimization under ISIS – make them more likely to accept Sunni returnees?

To answer this question, we compare social acceptance of Sunni returnees between respondents who were exposed to a narrative emphasizing the shared suffering of Yazidis and Sunnis under ISIS (the “treatment” group) and respondents who were not (the “control” group). Figure 5 shows that **exposure to the inclusive victimhood narrative had a significant effect on respondents’ willingness to accept returnees – but only among male respondents**. Men who received the treatment were 15 percent more likely to say that Sunni returnees should be fully welcomed into their communities (53 percent in support) than men who were not exposed to the inclusive victimhood narrative (the “control” group – 38 percent in support). Similarly, men in the treatment group were 13 percent more likely to say they would like to have a Sunni as a neighbor (52 percent in support) than men in the control group (39 percent).<sup>84</sup> Promoting inclusive perceptions of

<sup>84</sup> For both questions, these results were statistically significant (p < 0.05).

victimhood by invoking shared suffering therefore increased the rate of social acceptance of returnees from more than a third to over half of male respondents.

FIGURE 5: EXPERIMENTAL RESULTS, INCLUSIVE PERCEPTIONS OF VICTIMHOOD



For female respondents, however, invoking shared suffering had a much weaker effect. As with the findings on returnee characteristics, women in general were less accepting of Sunni returnees: in the control group, female respondents were nearly four times less likely than male respondents to accept Sunnis into their community. The difference in social acceptance between treatment and control groups was also relatively modest. Women who were exposed to an inclusive victimhood narrative were willing to accept Sunnis into their community at a higher rate (15 percent) compared to women in the control group (9 percent) and they were slightly more willing to have a Sunni as a neighbor (15 percent, compared to 11 percent for control), but these differences were not statistically significant. The shared suffering treatment, then, had only a modest impact on female respondents' willingness to accept Sunni returnees.

Overall, these results indicate that **promoting inclusive perceptions of victimhood can help improve out-group attitudes – and social acceptance of out-group returnees – among Yazidi men, but not necessarily Yazidi women.** This offers a promising avenue for return, reintegration, and peacebuilding programs in these communities. If these programs incorporate truth and reconciliation processes that reveal the extent to which different groups suffered under ISIS, clarify misperceptions regarding Sunni complicity, and create opportunities for accountability and restorative justice, they can help encourage social acceptance and facilitate peaceful coexistence.

**For female respondents, invoking shared suffering through inclusive victimhood narratives had a much weaker effect on social acceptance than for male respondents. This indicates that gender-sensitive and gender-focused programs will be needed to address the particular barriers to acceptance of returnees among women.**

More contextually sensitive research exploring women’s attitudes and perspectives is required to explain the gender differences we find in our survey responses. They could be a product of the particular fear and trauma that Yazidi women and girls have suffered as a result of the violence they faced under ISIS, including CRSV. The organization adopted ideologically-motivated policies that sanctioned the use of sexual violence, including sexual slavery and child marriage, especially against Yazidis.<sup>85</sup> Various studies have documented the resulting trauma. One found that 80 percent of participants – all displaced Yazidi women – met the criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).<sup>86</sup> Another study of 300 female ISIS survivors in Germany

discovered that 53 percent suffered from depression, 39 percent experienced anxiety, and 28 percent suffered from dissociation.<sup>87</sup> In general, victims of sexual violence face a higher risk of PTSD and related conditions compared to victims of other types of violence, which can be compounded by the social stigma and fear of ostracization that many survivors encounter.<sup>88</sup> This trauma could help explain the reluctance among Yazidi women to accept returnees – particularly *male* returnees, as proposed in our experiment – into their communities. While further investigation is needed, one in-depth qualitative study of Yazidi women found that self-enclosure and resistance to outsiders acted as a coping strategy to help them manage their trauma:

“The most common point among Yazidis was intensive doubt and resistance to change and getting support from other cultures. Throughout their history, being exposed to oppression, exclusion, and massacre has inclined Yazidis to become a highly self-enclosed society, and the last genocide [by ISIS] might have contributed much more [to] their distrust of others...The Yazidi women were very protective of their own culture, and carefully guarded against perceived cultural intrusion; the women thought that their presence was made possible only by the long-standing protection of their culture from intervention of others.”<sup>89</sup>

## Group Identification, Contact, and Experience with Violence

Finally, we explored whether in-group identification, out-group contact, and exposure to wartime violence and hardship influence social acceptance of returnees. Figures 6, 7, and 8 display crosstabs for each of these factors and the willingness of respondents to accept Sunni Muslim returnees back into their community. Multivariate statistical results using regression analysis are provided in Annex 5 (Tables A8-

<sup>85</sup> Revkin and Wood 2021.

<sup>86</sup> Ibrahim et al. 2018.

<sup>87</sup> Kizihan 2018.

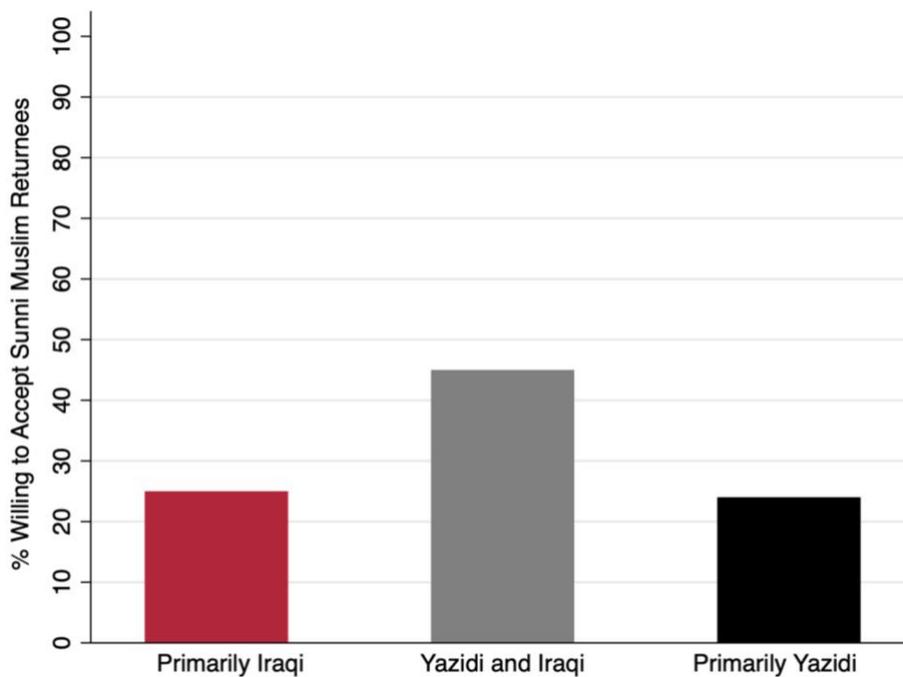
<sup>88</sup> Campbell and Wasco 2005; Norris et al. 2003. Studies have found that histories of sexual victimization help explain why women are nearly twice as likely as men to develop PTSD (Cortina et al. 2006). One study comparing the long-term effects of conflict-related sexual violence in World War II survivors compared to other types of violence found that women who experienced sexual violence reported greater severity of PTSD and anxiety but also greater “post-traumatic growth” (Kuwert et al. 2014).

<sup>89</sup> Erdener 2017.

A10).<sup>90</sup> Along with identifying a potential *direct* relationship between these factors and social acceptance, the regression models include interaction terms to assess whether there might be an *indirect* relationship, with these factors possibly influencing people’s responses to inclusive narratives of victimhood (the second survey experiment).

Figure 6 demonstrates that respondents who identified more strongly with their Yazidi identity were less likely to welcome Sunnis than those who identified more strongly with their Iraqi identity, and those who identified with *both* their Yazidi and Iraqi identities. When controlling for gender, age, and other respondent demographics in the regression analysis, these differences were not statistically significant for whether respondents welcomed Sunnis into their community (Table A8, Annex 5) but they *were* significant for whether respondents said they would like having a Sunni as a neighbor (Table A9, Annex 5). This suggests that stronger in-group identification may have a bearing on respondents’ willingness to live next to Sunni returnees – but not on their willingness to accept returnees into their town or village. Moreover, there is no evidence that the extent to which respondents identified with their group (or their nationality) influenced their response to the inclusive victimhood narrative. Overall, **group identification was only moderately associated with social acceptance.**

FIGURE 6: GROUP IDENTIFICATION AND SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE



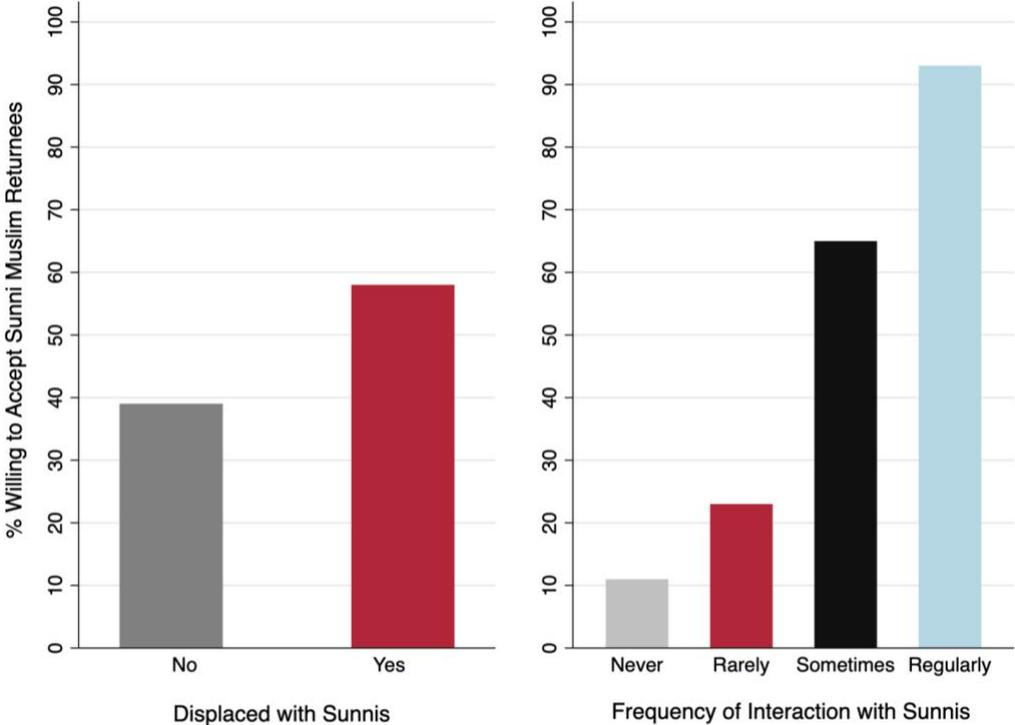
While the results for group identification were somewhat mixed, **intergroup contact was strongly linked to social acceptance.** According to Figure 7, respondents who fled with Sunnis and reported more frequent contact with them were much more likely to welcome Sunni returnees into their community. In the regression analysis, these relationships were highly statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ), even when controlling for gender, age, employment, and IDP status.<sup>91</sup> Unlike some of our other findings, these results are only based

<sup>90</sup> The findings for whether respondents would like having a Sunni as a neighbor were very similar to those presented here. Annex 5 displays regression tables for both outcomes.

<sup>91</sup> The results for our control variables further indicate that female respondents are less likely to accept returnees, while IDPs are *more* likely to accept them (both are statistically significant at the 0.001 level).

on correlations, so we cannot claim that being displaced with Sunnis or interacting with them more often *causes* respondents to accept Sunni returnees.<sup>92</sup> Still, these relationships potentially lend support for two of our hypotheses.

FIGURE 7: INTERGROUP CONTACT AND SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE



First, the results could further bolster our claim that a sense of shared suffering increases respondents’ likelihood of accepting returnees from other groups. Individuals who fled alongside Sunnis may have directly observed the hardships they faced and potentially bonded over their struggles, increasing feelings of empathy and a greater recognition of the commonalities between those whose lives were upended by ISIS. This, in turn, could have made respondents more sympathetic to Sunni returnees. This finding is also consistent with our results on *leavers* versus *stayers*, and the notion that those who fled areas taken by ISIS – including Sunni Arabs – are seen as less suspicious and potentially threatening than those who remained.

Second, the relationships illustrated in Figure 7 support the contact hypothesis, which proposes that intergroup interactions can improve social cohesion by alleviating the perceived threat posed by out-groups and dismantling negative stereotypes, reducing prejudice, and increasing acceptance of others.<sup>93</sup> But intergroup contact is only thought to work under certain conditions. It needs to be cooperative, endorsed by group leaders, place participants on equal footing, and entail a common goal. Interactions between Yazidis, Sunnis, and other groups – particularly as they collectively endured forced displacement – may have met at least some of these conditions. Yet it is unclear whether facilitating intergroup contact after ISIS, even under

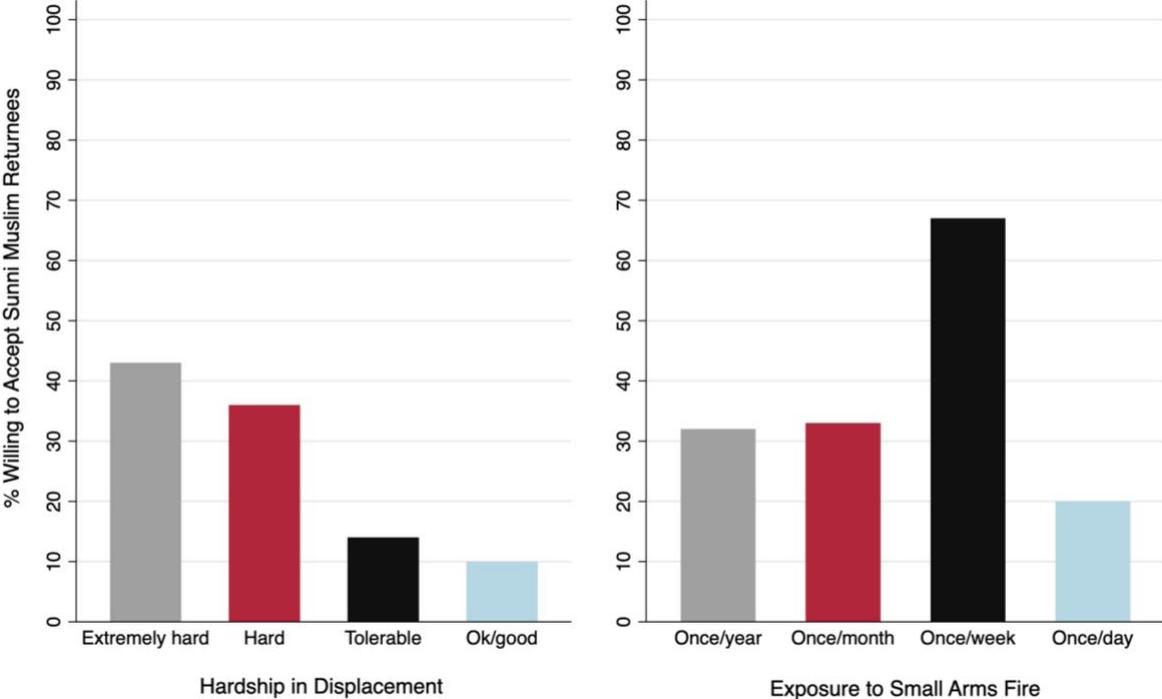
<sup>92</sup> Interacting these variables with the inclusive victimhood narrative treatment (see Annex 5) indicates that there is no statistically significant difference in these measures between the treatment and control groups, suggesting that intergroup contact did not strongly influence individuals’ responses to the treatment.

<sup>93</sup> Allport et al. 1954.

ideal circumstances, can actually change people’s views and encourage them to live in demographically mixed communities. One recent study, which brought Iraqi Christian men displaced by ISIS together with Muslim men to play on the same soccer teams, found that while Christian’s behavior towards their Muslim teammates improved, there was no meaningful impact on intergroup attitudes or behavior towards Muslims outside of the soccer league.<sup>94</sup> Thus the extent to which social cohesion can be built through intergroup contact – a linchpin of many peacebuilding programs – needs to be further explored in the Iraqi context.

Finally, we find some evidence that people’s experience with conflict influences social acceptance of returnees. Contrary to expectations, respondents who reported facing greater hardship in displacement were *more* likely to welcome Sunni Muslim returnees, not less (see Figure 8). This applied to both male and female respondents; on average, women reported somewhat lower levels of hardship than men.<sup>95</sup> **Yet respondents who experienced more violence were less likely to accept returnees**, whether out of fear, resentment, or enmity. Figures 8 and 9 show levels of social acceptance based on how frequently respondents said they personally experienced or witnessed three types of violence: small arms fire (shooting); bombing; and abduction, imprisonment, or forced labor. In general, greater exposure to violence was associated with less willingness to welcome Sunni returnees. Yet this varied somewhat depending on the type of violence. While those exposed to bombing and abduction, imprisonment, and forced labor on a daily or weekly basis were much less accepting than those who were exposed monthly or yearly (Figure 9), this trend did not hold for those exposed to small arms fire (Figure 8).

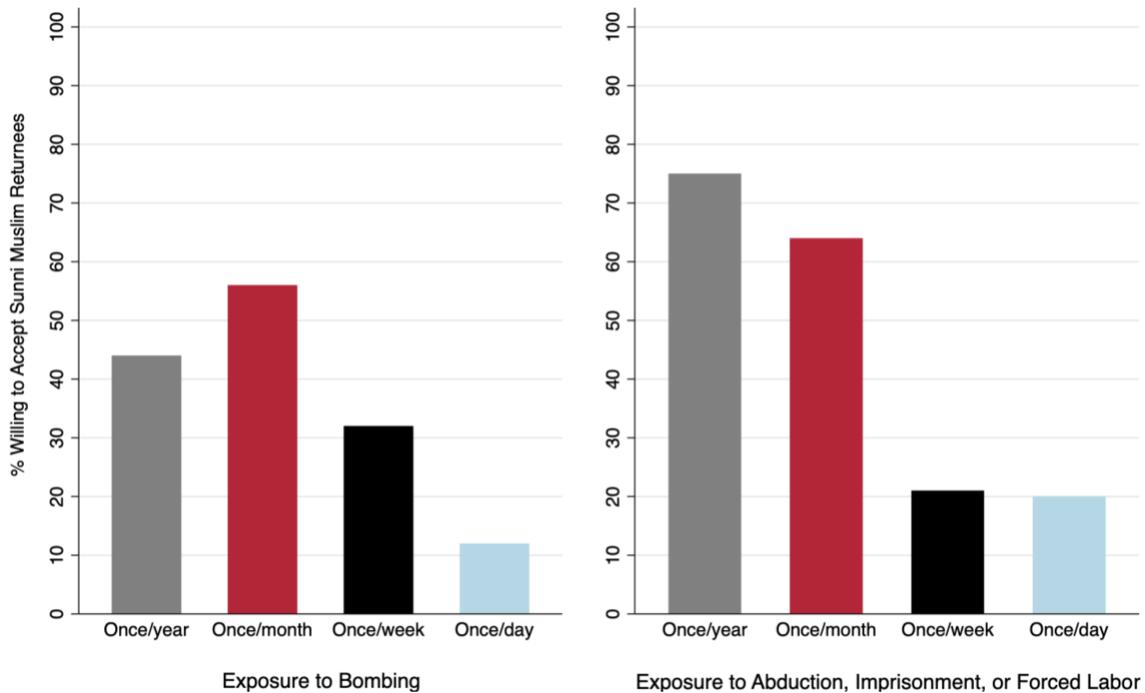
FIGURE 8: EXPERIENCE WITH HARDSHIP/VIOLENCE AND SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE



<sup>94</sup> Mousa 2020.

<sup>95</sup> 96 percent of male respondents reported that displacement was “hard” or “extremely hard,” compared to 87 percent of female respondents.

FIGURE 9: EXPERIENCE WITH VIOLENCE AND SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE



Regression analysis similarly finds that the relationship between greater violence exposure and lower social acceptance is only statistically significant for some types of violence. We should treat these findings with caution, however. Many respondents (more than half) either did not respond to these questions or said they did not know how frequently they experienced different types of violence (see Annex 4 for details). The lower response rate – and resulting reduction in sample size – may mean that the results for violence exposure are less reliable than those for other measures.

In sum, greater intergroup contact was strongly associated with higher rates of social acceptance of returnees, while in-group identification and exposure to violence and hardship yielded mixed results. Respondents who were displaced alongside – and interacted more frequently with – Sunnis were much more likely to accept Sunni returnees. While those who identified more strongly with their Yazidi identity, and those who experienced more violence, were generally less accepting of returnees, these relationships were less robust. Critically, however, none of these factors – group identification, intergroup contact, and exposure to violence and hardship – seemed to significantly influence people’s responses to the inclusive victimhood narrative.<sup>96</sup> In other words, those with high in-group identification or frequent out-group contact did not systematically respond differently to our second survey experiment compared to those with low in-group identification or infrequent out-group contact. This also reinforces the impact of promoting inclusive perceptions of victimhood, suggesting that it can increase social acceptance of returnees regardless of people’s previous social interactions or experience during the conflict.

**Greater intergroup contact was strongly associated with higher rates of social acceptance of returnees, while in-group identification and exposure to violence and hardship yielded mixed results.**

<sup>96</sup> See Tables A8 and A9 in Annex 5 for the results for interactions between these variables and the shared suffering treatment.



Sinjar City, Iraq  
(Shutterstock)

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Achieving durable solutions to displacement in Iraq is a daunting task. While multiple political, humanitarian, and economic challenges have hindered the return of the displaced, a lack of social acceptance has been a particularly formidable barrier; one that has both discouraged return and made it difficult for those who do return to reintegrate back into their communities. What factors influence people’s willingness to accept returnees? How can communities, governments, and international donors promote and help facilitate social acceptance, particularly in ethnic and religiously mixed areas? This report sought to answer these questions using experimental evidence from a context where return has been particularly fraught in Iraq: the Yazidi heartland of Sinjar in demographically diverse Ninewa governorate.

We find that returnees’ movement patterns during ISIS rule play a much greater role in influencing social acceptance than their ethno-religious identity, and that promoting inclusive victimhood narratives improves the prospects of social acceptance of out-group returnees – even among a heavily persecuted population in a highly polarized sectarian environment.

In Iraq, IDPs are facing growing pressure to go home amid concerns over the economic, humanitarian, and security consequences of the country’s lingering displacement crisis. Against this backdrop, our research has important implications for donors, policymakers, and practitioners seeking to facilitate durable solutions to displacement, support survivors of violence – including survivors of CRSV, the majority of whom are women and girls – and contribute to stability in Iraq. The sustainable return of the displaced not only requires humanitarian and development support to help them recover their lives and livelihoods. It also requires

sensitizing communities in areas of return and prioritizing restorative justice and trauma-informed peacebuilding activities that aim to defuse tensions, broker intergroup reconciliation, assist survivors, and help returnees reintegrate. To date, Iraqi authorities have focused more on screening and vetting returnees than on preparing communities, local organizations, and government agencies for their return. Moving forward, Iraqi officials and community leaders should be supported by international donors and humanitarian and development practitioners in advancing IDPs' prospects for a safe and sustainable return. These initiatives should:

- 1. Correct the misperception that living under ISIS rule equals support or collaboration.** Our findings confirm reports that there is a common tendency to associate those who did not flee ISIS as being supporters or collaborators of the group.<sup>97</sup> The Iraqi government, civil society groups, and international and national organizations need to make a concerted effort to debunk these blanket associations. Displaced people's return decisions, and communities' willingness to accept returnees, are often informed by incomplete (and sometimes inaccurate) information.<sup>98</sup> Iraqi officials should clearly communicate the process they use to vet returnees and proactively seek to address people's questions and concerns. Providing consistent, credible, and clear information to communities about life under ISIS rule – including why people stayed – will be essential. In other contexts, Mercy Corps has found that trusted authorities such as religious leaders can be highly influential in shaping people's views on reintegration and reconciliation.<sup>99</sup> In Iraq, these authorities should take the lead in countering misperceptions and reducing stigma.
- 2. Promote inclusive perceptions of victimhood by facilitating spaces for dialogue about the experience of different groups under ISIS.** We show that fostering inclusive perceptions of victimhood through narratives that emphasize both in-group and out-group suffering can improve people's willingness to accept out-group returnees. Evidence from other contexts, including Israeli-Palestine and the Turkey-Kurdish conflict, also indicates that victimhood narratives emphasizing both in-group and out-group suffering can reduce conflict.<sup>100</sup> This offers a promising avenue for reconciliation in Sinjar and elsewhere in Iraq. Such narratives must recognize the particular atrocities that Yazidis and other minorities endured under ISIS rule – and before it – and be conscious not to create false equivalencies between the experiences of different groups. But they should still seek to highlight common experiences and the extent to which many Iraqis suffered at the hands of ISIS.<sup>101</sup> By sharing these experiences through intergroup dialogues, public awareness campaigns, and other social initiatives, domestic and international actors can help promote a sense of shared hardship – and shared resilience – and help lay the groundwork for peaceful coexistence in the post-ISIS era.
- 3. Establish restorative justice mechanisms at the local level.** Government officials and community leaders must ensure that all judicial processes for suspected ISIS affiliates and vetting procedures for returnees are as fair and transparent as possible. In Ninewa, they should also develop locally-rooted restorative justice mechanisms that aim to promote accountability, facilitate truth-telling, and empower survivors of ISIS to move forward with their lives.<sup>102</sup> Research from multiple countries has

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<sup>97</sup> See, for example, Revkin 2018; Taub 2018.

<sup>98</sup> Batista and Cestari 2016.

<sup>99</sup> Blair et al. 2021; Lichtenheld and Ogbudu 2021.

<sup>100</sup> Adelman et al. 2016.

<sup>101</sup> For example, there is evidence that ISIS's practice of sexual violence included both the rape of Yazidi women and the forced marriage of Sunni Muslim women (Revkin and Wood 2021).

<sup>102</sup> Restorative justice is predicated on the belief that those involved in, or affected by, a harm should actively participate in repairing it, alleviating the suffering it caused, and preventing it from happening again (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2020).

shown that these mechanisms reduce the desire for revenge attacks,<sup>103</sup> and a recent study in Iraq suggests that they can significantly increase the prospects of successfully reintegrating former ISIS members.<sup>104</sup> Restorative and community-based justice should focus on approaches – mediation, truth-telling circles, public commemorations, and other locally relevant strategies – that aim to both hold perpetrators accountable and dismantle the stereotypes and beliefs that contributed to their actions. These mechanisms should also seek to repair relations between Sunni and minority communities through constructive and sustained intergroup contact. For example, a recent study by Mercy Corps in Anbar, Salahaddin, and Ninewa found that cash transfers combined with financial literacy that brought IDP and host communities together both improved intergroup cohesion and reduced people’s acceptance of violence against other communities.<sup>105</sup> Conflict resolution and reconstruction activities should arrange for different groups to work together in rebuilding their communities, and make a particular effort to include recent returnees as well as individuals – including men, women, girls, and boys – from marginalized and oppressed groups. Pairing intergroup collaboration with activities that promote inclusive perceptions of victimhood may provide a more effective combination for improving social cohesion, promoting peaceful coexistence, and reducing the risk of future inter-group violence.

4. **Increase investments in trauma-informed and gender-sensitive peacebuilding.** Given that female respondents were much more reluctant to accept returnees than male respondents, any peacebuilding effort in Iraq should begin by exploring and understanding gender differences in attitudes regarding social reintegration and reconciliation. Donors should expand their investments – including multi-year funding – in peacebuilding interventions that are sensitive to individual and collective psychosocial needs. Mercy Corps has found that psychosocial support (PSS) and trauma healing can both help people feel safer in their community and improve social trust between groups.<sup>106</sup> These activities should serve as a foundation for efforts to forge intergroup reconciliation and social acceptance in Iraq, and have at their core a gender-sensitive approach. For women and girls who are survivors of CRSV or other ISIS-inflicted violence, both the type and intensity of PSS interventions needed may differ, and they may be a prerequisite for any intergroup contact or community-level reconciliation activities. Women and girls must also have opportunities to shape how restorative justice and peacebuilding activities are designed, and to develop and participate in empowerment programs, which have been shown to counteract social alienation and other negative consequences of CRSV.<sup>107</sup> This will require strengthening support to, and representation of, local women-led organizations and efforts. Individual trauma-healing, combined with community-level prevention activities that aim to promote understanding of local power dynamics and gender-based violence, can support communities to take responsibility for past actions and move forward together.

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<sup>103</sup> Sherman and Strang 2007.

<sup>104</sup> Kao and Revkin Forthcoming.

<sup>105</sup> Kurtz et al. 2021.

<sup>106</sup> Kurtz 2016.

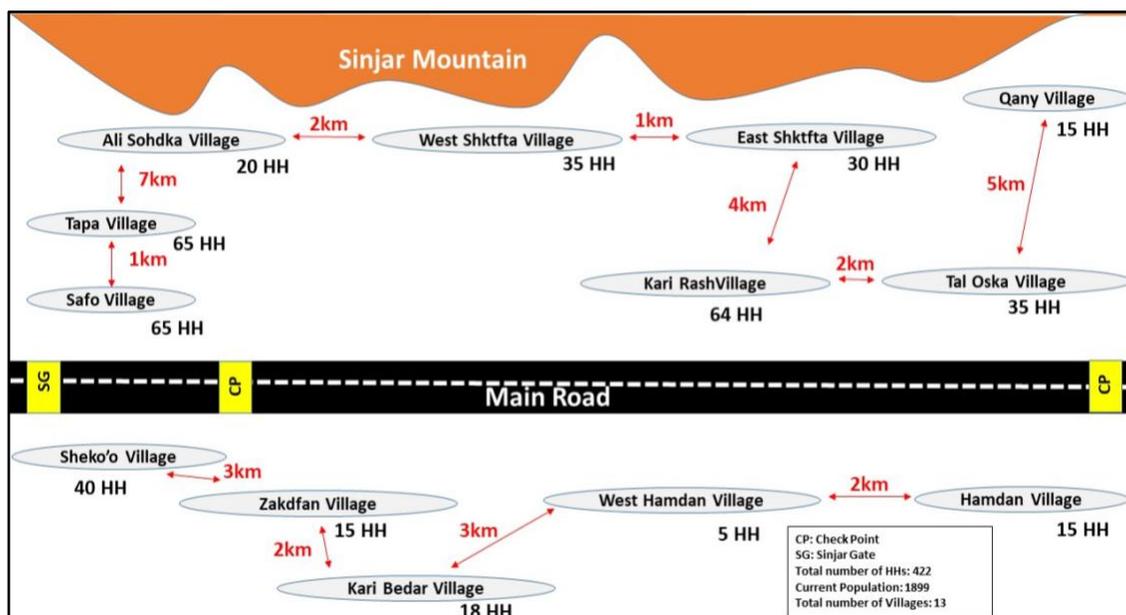
<sup>107</sup> Amisi et al. 2018.

# Annex 1: Survey Sample

Table A1: Survey Sample

	<i>Total Population</i>	<i>Total Sample</i>
<b>Village/Camp</b>	<b>Households</b>	<b>Households</b>
Ali Sohdka village	20	10
Tapa village	65	49
Safo village	65	41
Sheko'o village	40	29
Zakdfan village	15	13
Kari Bedar village	18	13
West Hamdan village	5	5
Hamdan village	15	11
West Shktfta village	35	34
East Shktfta village	30	23
Kari Rash village	64	49
Qany village	15	10
Tal Oska village	35	20
<i>Total Solagh</i>	422	307
<i>Total Markez Sinjar</i>	395	133
<i>Total IDP camps - Dohuk</i>	395	71
<b>Total</b>	<b>1202</b>	<b>511</b>

Figure A1: Simplified Sketch of Solagh and Population Estimates (Households)



# Annex 2: Balance Tests

**Table A2: Experiment 1: Hypothetical Returnee**

Returnee profile	Male	Female	Median age	IDPs
Kurdish leaver	85%	15%	34.5	27%
Arab leaver	79%	21%	35	25%
Kurdish stayer	73%	27%	35	28%
Arab stayer	76%	24%	35	28%
Arab collaborator	78%	22%	35	28%
<b>Total</b>	<b>78%</b>	<b>22%</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>27%</b>

Note: for sex, Chi2: 4.77, p = 0.30; for IDPs, Chi2: 0.45, p = 0.98

**Table A3: Experiment 2: Shared Suffering Prompt**

	Male	Female	Median age	IDPs
Control (no prompt)	78%	22%	37	26%
Treatment (prompt)	79%	21%	38	28%

Note: for sex, Chi2: 0.14, p = 0.74; for age, p = 0.67; for IDPs, Chi2: 0.29, p = 0.61

# Annex 3: Out-group Attitudes

In order to gauge the total number of respondents who harbor negative out-group attitudes towards Sunni Muslims, we used a list experiment. A list experiment seeks to overcome social desirability bias: the possibility that people will not give honest answers to sensitive questions, such as how they feel about other groups. In a list experiment, respondents are provided a list of statements. Instead of asking them which statement on the list they agree with, they are asked *how many* statements they agree with. This way, individual respondents do not have to reveal their attitudes about sensitive issues, but still provide indicators of their perceptions. In this study, respondents were provided one of two lists of statements:

*“I’m going to read you a list of items that anger or upset some people. I’d like you to tell me how many of these things upset you. Please don’t tell me which items upset you, just how many upset you.”*

**List Items: Control Group**

- 1. When your football team loses a match
- 2. Increases in the price of gasoline
- 3. Lack of rainfall

**List Items: Treatment Group**

- 1. When your football team loses a match
- 2. Increases in the price of gasoline
- 3. Lack of rainfall
- 4. When you have to interact with Sunni Muslim

Respondents were randomly assigned to receive the control group items or the treatment group items. The items were identical, except the treatment group contained the sensitive item: interaction with Sunni Muslims. By comparing the average number of responses from those who received the treatment group items and those who received the control group items, we can use the difference to estimate the number of people who selected the sensitive item.

The results demonstrate that negative attitudes towards Sunni Muslims are quite prevalent among respondents. As **Table A4** indicates, the difference in means between the treatment and control group items suggest that nearly half of respondents (48 percent) are upset by the notion of interacting with Sunni Muslims.

**Table A4:** Out-group attitude among survey respondents

	List experiment	Standard error
Mean number of items treatment group	2.54	0.07
Mean number of items control group	2.06	0.06
Estimated % who are upset when they have to interact with Sunni Muslims	<b>48.3%</b>	0.09

# Annex 4: Exposure to Violence

For exposure to violence, we asked respondents with what frequency, if any, they personally experienced or witnessed the following occurrences:

- Physical assault
- Shots fired by small arms (e.g., pistols, rifles)
- Bombings (e.g., the detonation of car bombs, improvised explosive devices)
- Instances of abduction, imprisonment, or forced labor

For each occurrence, we asked respondents about their exposure both at the time when ISIS came (in 2014) and after they left their homes. Summary statistics for people’s responses are provided in the table below.

	Physical assault		Rocket or mortar fire		Small arms fire		Bombings		Abduction, imprisonment, etc.	
	When ISIS came	After leaving home	When ISIS came	After leaving home	When ISIS came	After leaving home	When ISIS came	After leaving home	When ISIS came	After leaving home
Once a day	—	58 (11%)	103 (20%)	87 (17%)	154 (30%)	136 (27%)	57 (11%)	35 (7%)	63 (12%)	57 (11%)
Once a week	—	28 (5%)	32 (6%)	56 (11%)	28 (6%)	32 (6%)	31 (6%)	33 (6%)	27 (5%)	30 (6%)
Once a month	—	18 (3%)	38 (7%)	34 (7%)	30 (6%)	39 (8%)	38 (8%)	37 (7%)	24 (5%)	25 (5%)
Once a year	—	8 (2%)	34 (7%)	47 (9%)	22 (4%)	28 (5%)	32 (6%)	44 (9%)	19 (4%)	26 (5%)
Don't know or unsure	—	43 (8%)	79 (16%)	84 (16%)	89 (17%)	87 (17%)	46 (9%)	46 (9%)	38 (7%)	37 (7%)
Did not answer	—	356 (70%)	225 (44%)	203 (40%)	188 (37%)	189 (37%)	307 (60%)	316 (62%)	340 (67%)	336 (66%)
Total	—	511 (100%)	511 (100%)	511 (100%)	511 (100%)	511 (100%)	511 (100%)	511 (100%)	511 (100%)	511 (100%)

We also asked people whether the house or apartment they were living in during the time that ISIS came to Sinjar was seriously damaged or destroyed by ISIS. 21 percent of respondents said their home was damaged, 72 percent said it was destroyed, and 4 percent said there was no damage.

# Annex 5: Regression Results

Table A5: Regression Results for Experiment 1: Returnee Characteristics

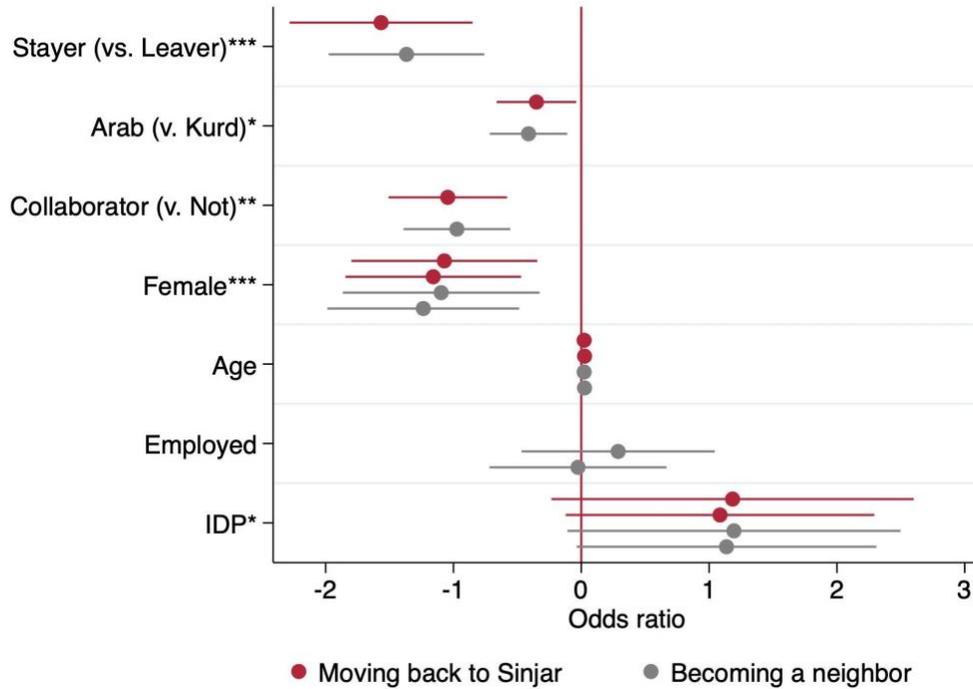


Table A6: Regression Results for Experiment 1: Moving Back to Sinjar

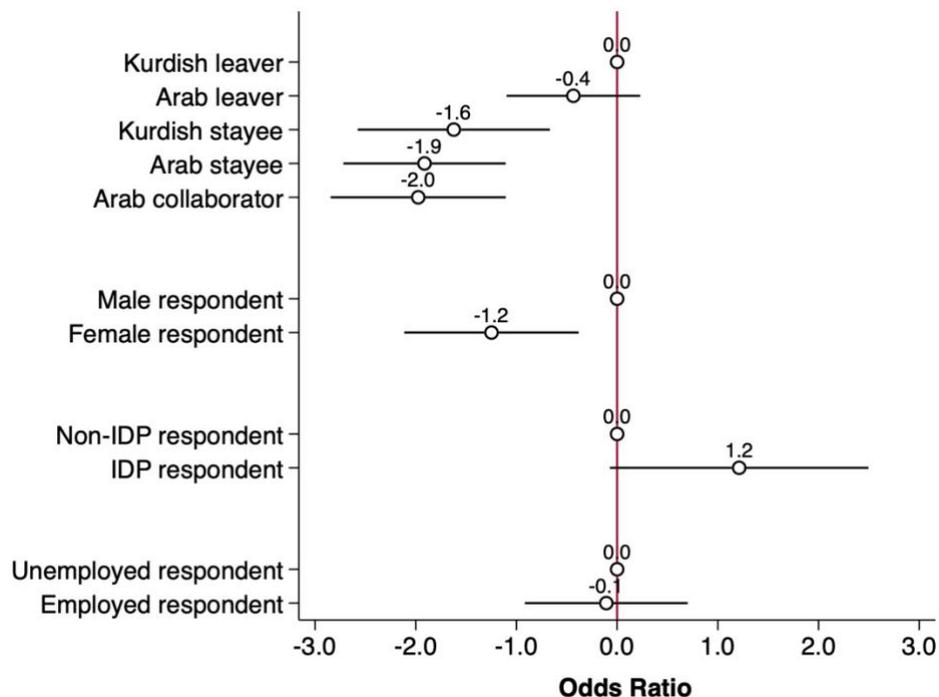
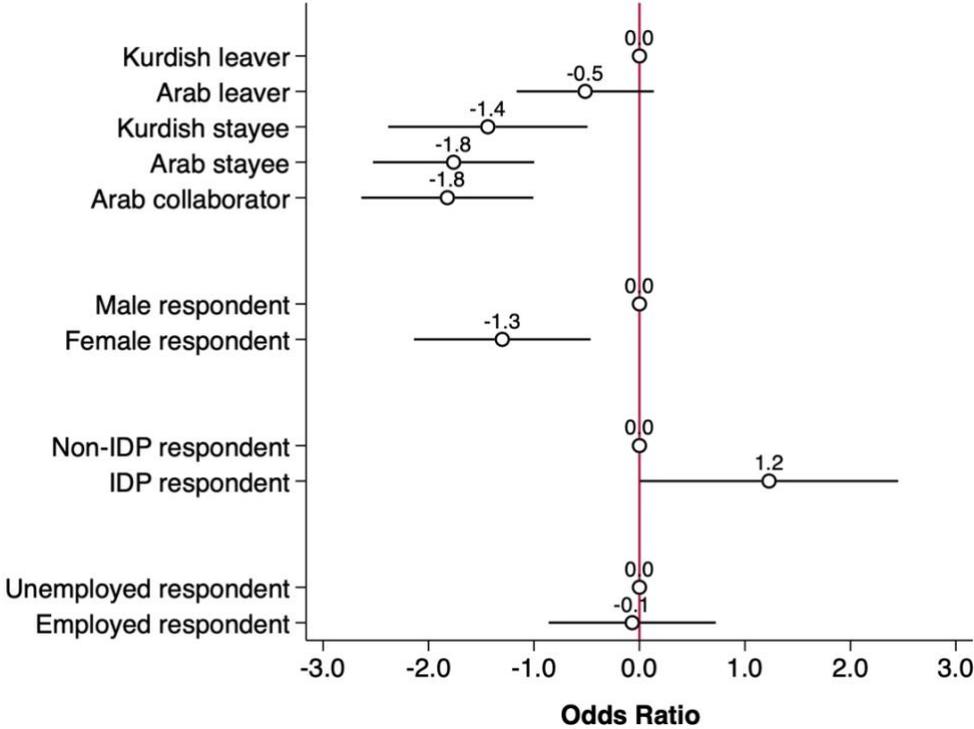


Table A7: Regression Results for Experiment 1: Becoming a Neighbor



**Table A8: Regression Results: Experiment 2: Welcome Sunni into Community**

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9
Shared suffering treatment	0.79 *** (0.21)	0.96 *** (0.24)	1.23* (1.80)	0.93 (1.00)	0.55 (0.53)	0.68 (0.85)	0.31 (0.70)	0.90 ** (0.72)	0.93* (1.08)
Displaced w/ Sunnis		1.90 *** (0.52)							
Displaced w/ Sunnis X Treatment		-0.81 (0.64)							
Yazidi identity			-0.10 (0.31)						
Yazidi identity X Treatment			-0.10 (0.40)						
Iraqi identity				0.22 (0.18)					
Iraqi identity X Treatment				-0.04 (0.24)					
Hardship in displacement					0.65 ** (0.30)				
Hardship in displacement X Treatment					-0.20 (0.40)				
Interact w/ Sunnis						1.50 *** (0.26)			
Interact w/ Sunnis X Treatment						0.02 (0.32)			
Exposure to Shooting							-0.39 ** (0.17)		
Exposure to Shooting X Treatment							0.24 (0.21)		
Exposure to Bombing								-0.33 (0.19)	
Exposure to Bombing X Treatment								0.21 (0.22)	
Exposure to Abduction									-0.34 (0.22)
Exposure to Abduction X Treatment									-0.08 (0.30)
Female	-1.90 *** (0.35)	-1.94 *** (0.37)	-1.90 *** (0.35)	-1.81 *** (0.36)	-1.84 *** (0.36)	-0.98 *** (0.38)	-2.43 *** (0.50)		-3.32 *** (0.86)
Age	0.02 ** (0.01)	-0.00 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.01)					
Employed	0.08 (0.27)	0.16 (0.27)	0.05 (0.27)	0.06 (0.26)	0.10 (0.26)	0.24 (0.31)	-0.21 (0.34)	0.13 (0.49)	0.84 (0.56)
IDP	1.60 *** (0.24)	1.82 *** (0.26)	1.58 *** (0.25)	1.58 *** (0.24)	1.68 *** (0.25)	1.80 *** (0.31)	2.22 *** (0.38)		4.27 ** (1.91)
Constant	-1.77 *** (0.39)	-2.14 *** (0.41)	-1.31 (1.46)	-2.64 *** (0.83)	-0.94* (0.52)	-5.62 *** (0.84)	0.24 (0.76)	0.01 (1.03)	-0.09 (1.03)
Observations	483	466	483	483	483	480	304	108	169
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.174	0.202	0.175	0.179	0.186	0.382	0.269	0.106	0.387

Standard errors in parentheses  
\* p<0.10, \*\* p<0.05, \*\*\* p<0.01

Table A9: Regression Results: Experiment 2: Like Having Sunni as Neighbor

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9
Shared suffering treatment	0.63 *** (0.21)	0.80 *** (0.23)	-0.47 (1.62)	1.12* (0.86)	0.83* (0.50)	1.10* (0.67)	0.46 (0.70)	1.61 ** (0.76)	0.18 (1.22)
Displaced w/ Sunnis		1.61 *** (0.47)							
Displaced w/ Sunnis X Treatment		-0.96 (0.60)							
Yazidi identity			-0.81 *** (0.27)						
Yazidi identity X Treatment			0.25 (0.36)						
Iraqi identity				0.32 ** (0.15)					
Iraqi identity X Treatment				-0.13 (0.21)					
Hardship in displacement					0.09 (0.28)				
Hardship in displacement X Treatment					0.16 (0.36)				
Interact w/ Sunnis						1.23 *** (0.21)			
Interact w/ Sunnis X Treatment						-0.22 (0.26)			
Exposure to Shooting							-0.45 *** (0.15)		
Exposure to Shooting X Treatment							0.12 (0.19)		
Exposure to Bombing								-0.29 (0.18)	
Exposure to Bombing X Treatment								-0.12 (0.24)	
Exposure to Abduction									-0.99 ** (0.34)
Exposure to Abduction X Treatment									0.30 (0.40)
Female	-1.64 *** (0.33)	-1.64 *** (0.34)	-1.68 *** (0.33)	-1.53 *** (0.34)	-1.60 *** (0.32)	-1.02 *** (0.33)	-1.31 *** (0.43)	-1.41* (0.83)	-3.16 ** (0.88)
Age	0.02 ** (0.01)	0.02* (0.01)	0.01* (0.01)	0.02 ** (0.01)	0.02 ** (0.01)	0.02* (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.00 (0.02)
Employed	0.46* (0.26)	0.52 ** (0.27)	0.34 (0.28)	0.45* (0.27)	0.46* (0.26)	0.61 ** (0.30)	0.56 (0.34)	1.51 *** (0.53)	0.86 (0.55)
IDP	1.41 *** (0.23)	1.55 *** (0.24)	1.32 *** (0.24)	1.39 *** (0.23)	1.42 *** (0.23)	1.52 *** (0.25)	1.82 *** (0.34)		4.41 ** (1.76)
Constant	-1.69 *** (0.38)	-1.91 *** (0.39)	2.03 (1.26)	-2.98 *** (0.70)	-1.56 *** (0.54)	-4.74 *** (0.72)	0.06 (0.73)	-0.35 (1.12)	1.56 (1.21)
Observations	501	483	501	501	501	498	317	134	172
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.153	0.170	0.173	0.161	0.155	0.282	0.245	0.212	0.496

Standard errors in parentheses

\* p<0.10, \*\* p<0.05, \*\*\* p<0.01

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### About Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.



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