



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

TOWARDS DURABLE SOLUTIONS TO DISPLACEMENT

Understanding Social Acceptance of Returnees in Post-ISIS Iraq

NOVEMBER 2021

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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