IRAQI RETURNEES FROM SYRIA

FOLLOWING THE 2011 SYRIA CRISIS

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CHIEF OF MISSION’S FOREWORD

“We suffer from an incurable malady: hope.”

-MAHMOUD DARWISH

The consequences of forced displacement are traumatic. When displacement becomes protracted, or a family is displaced multiple times, the resulting trauma can be deep-rooted and devastating, affecting not only material and personal well-being and safety, but also causing health problems and extreme psychological stress. Despair, abandonment and loss of dignity go hand in hand with the loss of home and sudden disappearance of all that is familiar. Iraq is experiencing the biggest displacement crisis in its long history, an ongoing tragedy that affected more than 2 million individuals in 2014 alone, turning them into internally displaced. These are, however, not the only populations seriously affected by the ongoing crisis. This study, undertaken in spring 2014, investigates the consequences of multiple displacements of Iraqi refugees who returned home from Syria.

Many Iraqis who originally fled to Syria as a result of conflict and persecution in Iraq over the past decade have been subsequently displaced by new conflict affecting the Syrian communities that originally provided them with sanctuary. As refugees in Syria they were subject to refugee protection. However, upon returning to their homes in Iraq, these Iraqis are most often not able to resume their lives within their community of origin, or even their governorate of origin.

Support, assistance and relief - always crucial in times of conflict and crisis – are often lacking for those who should expect to find sanctuary within their own country. These returnees, who are particularly vulnerable as a result of being displaced by two massive conflicts within one decade, should upon their return to Iraq be considered as internally displaced if they were not able to return to their place of origin before their displacement to Syria.

While violent conflict in both Iraq and Syria continues to displace thousands every month, and the Iraqi Government as well as the international community struggle to cope with the consequences of these crises, Iraqi returnees from Syria finds themselves ever more marginalized and vulnerable. Thus, recognition of their need for reintegration in Iraq has never been more crucial.

Based on the information gathered and analyzed in the preparation of this study, IOM Iraq has identified six areas of assistance in need of immediate, mid- and long-term responses: non-food item distribution, resettlement, the provision of psychosocial support, livelihood assistance, technical and capacity building to support national actors to implement land and property restitution and/or compensation mechanisms and further research and analysis. The suggested interventions focus not only on the immediate needs of Iraqis who returned from Syria, but also on the needs of the host communities experiencing the negative impact of mass population influx. These include both infrastructure support and support for the longer-term recovery of receiving communities, as well as the reintegration of the former refugees.

IOM will continue to monitor, track, inform and address the plight of all vulnerable populations in Iraq, including the recognition and support for the often unnoticed humanitarian needs of former refugees who have returned to Iraq. Iraqis have been subjected to a succession of serious transgressions of their basic rights and the recovery process is long and difficult. In humble recognition of these struggles, IOM seeks to be a reliable source of the most important form of support: an indelible hope for a better future.

Thomas Lothar Weiss
Director Chief of Mission
IOM Iraq
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This study assessed the living conditions of a particular group of Iraqis: those who in the early years of this millennium had fled violence and persecution in Iraq to Syria and later, since 2011, returned to Iraq, seeking refuge from the civil conflict in Syria that erupted after the Arab Spring.

IOM conducted field research for this study in May and June 2014. A total of 1,309 returnee households were interviewed in three larger cluster regions of Central Iraq, Southern Iraq and the KRI. Besides this field survey, qualitative data was gathered in a small number of focus groups conducted in the three regions including Anbar Governorate.

The returnees, most of whom had arrived in the past one to two years, generally indicated that they had settled relatively well, considering the difficult conditions in Iraq.

Fifty-two per cent of the whole sample had been able to return to the home they had left behind when first fleeing Iraq. The remaining 48 per cent had to find other housing in the same region or elsewhere. According to key legal sources on displacement, this latter group can now be considered de jure internally displaced, but as long as many inadequacies in living conditions prevail for all the returnees, they all remain of concern to both national and international relief agencies.

Following the obstacles faced by many in reclaiming their original housing, about 75 per cent of the interviewees in the KRI originated from Baghdad. They typically rented housing, whereas in the Central region interviewees lived in their own flats and in the South and the governorate of Anbar they stayed with relatives or friends, the most unstable form of housing of the three.

Regarding employment, the percentage of returnee families with at least one family member working was quite high, varying from 91 per cent in the KRI and 87 per cent in Central Iraq to 72 per cent in the South; however, such high overall participation in the labour market tended to mask the underemployment prevalent in Iraq’s current turbulent economy. In addition, a large part of employed returnees suffered deskilling, frequently occupying jobs requiring lower qualifications than their actual skill set. Earnings were therefore insufficient to cover basic needs for the large majority: as many as 918 families out of 1,309, (70% of the entire sample), confirmed that their income did not meet their household needs.

In general, the returnees had high education levels: half had completed high school studies, and more than a third had studied at university level. These demographic indicators may have contributed to the high enrolment (84% for female and 83% for males) of returnee children in schools in Iraq. The chronic shortage of family income caused returnee children to drop out from school, particularly in the South. In Anbar Governorate, returnee children dropped out predominantly as a result of recurrent fighting and general lack of security for civilians.

Almost 80 per cent of heads of households felt closely integrated into their host community. While all those interviewed concurred in the KRI and 78 per cent in Central Iraq, a lower majority of 62 per cent felt integrated in the Southern Governorates. Given many such positive indications of the returnees’ life in large parts of Iraq, their intention to stay in their current region were understandable. After at least two forced displacements and one to two years spent in Iraq after their return, the majority wanted to stay; however, whereas those wanting to stay represented well over 90 per cent of respondents in KRI and Central Iraq, only 38 per cent wanted to stay in the South.

Overall, the least successful integration of returnees was in the South, linked presumably at least to their less independent housing in the region and more common economic hardship. These observations suggest returnees in the South need particular support in employment, housing and formal education, together with more research for better understanding of conditions in the South, a region which has been relatively stable during the ongoing conflict.

The field research gave such insight into the returnees’ situation in May and June 2014, but that data has been radically overtaken by the conflict and threat of violence spreading to most parts of Iraq since the early summer of 2014. The data collected for this study should thus be viewed as an assessment of that period that needs to be analysed against the turbulent events of 2014. The widespread conflict and displacement almost everywhere in Iraq has created immediate needs for security, political stabilization, and humanitarian relief for more than 2 million displaced in 2014. Therefore, while Iraq will eventually undergo massive reconstruction, including the normalization of oil production, agriculture, education, health care and other services, the ongoing violent conflict and unstable lives of millions of returnees, IDPs, refugees and other vulnerable populations, remain great concerns for the country’s future.
While Iraq continues to struggle in its response to the ongoing mass displacement that began in 2014, the returnees from Syria, some of whom are now internally displaced, remains a vulnerable population. The protracted and still potentially escalating situation in Syria makes the return there appear unlikely; therefore, efforts to re-integrate this population in Iraq or resettle them outside the country should be prioritized to address their specific needs. The strain created by the influx of returnees and IDPs on host communities, and the subsequent need for infrastructural adjustments, must also be considered. Additionally and in the longer term, the protracted crisis in both Syria and Iraq will very probably result in increased displacement across Iraq, further complicating efforts for recovery and reintegration for refugee returnees.**

The consequences of the multiple displacements of refugee returnees should be addressed in an integrated, holistic way, through a comprehensive set of immediate, mid- and long-term measures responding to the specific needs of all the individuals affected, ensuring at the same time the reinforcement and expansion of local capacities and infrastructure. The following recommendations have therefore been developed and configured within a framework of interlinked, mutually supportive individual and community initiatives focusing on all members of Iraqi society, not just a selected few. Based on the information, observations and findings generated by this assessment and in the preparation of the report, IOM Iraq has identified six areas toward which to target assistance.

1. **Timely, effective and targeted response to the immediate needs of the refugee returnees** should be a top priority of the international community. As many families fled Syria and returned to an uncertain Iraq, they arrived with few belongings and some have been unable to return to their original homes. Further, upon return, this population had limited access to basic essential domestic goods such as blankets, mattresses and cool boxes. The Mission recommends the distribution of non-food item kits, shelter support and other materials to improve the living conditions of the most vulnerable returnee families.

2. Second, as a protection measure for certain populations in Iraq during the present emergency, **resettlement** is an option for governments to provide for at-risk populations. In 2014 alone, tens of thousands of families have been persecuted by armed opposition groups for their ethnicity or religion; in particular, minorities such as Yazidis, Christians and Shia Turkmen have been targeted and remain in danger of intimidation and violence as the conflict continues. Though most returnees from Syria were Arab, many have still been persecuted based on political or tribal affiliations and could qualify for resettlement. After having been subjected to two or more displacements in recent years, resettlement should be considered as an option for this population. The Movement and Assisted Migration (MAM) Department of IOM Iraq, in coordination with IOM Jordan and UNHCR, is able to contribute pre- and post-movement assistance upon request from host governments. IOM advocates for the continuation of resettlement activities, when appropriate, for eligible Iraqi citizens in need of emergency movement assistance.

3. As previously mentioned, refugee returnees have experienced two or more displacements resulting from the onset of multiple violent conflicts. Therefore, **provision of psychosocial support** to those most in need can support these families as they continue the long recovery and reintegration process. Many of these families were forced to leave their homes twice with few belongings, and witnessed human rights atrocities in both Iraq and Syria that may have led to psychosocial problems. IOM has observed a general sense of distress, with refugee returnees losing hope of returning to their habitual residence and some lacking the viable options of integrating into communities in the KRI. Having lost houses, belongings and livelihoods in Syria and/or Iraq, and suffering from separation or loss of family members, some of whom remain trapped elsewhere

**The term “refugee returnee” is used throughout this report to specify the population that returned from abroad from the population that returned from internal displacement. See methodology page 20 for further information.
in Syria or Iraq, many refugee returnees exhibit signs associated with trauma. The provision of psychosocial programming should also be supported by the provision of information, counselling and referral services to ensure timely access to accurate information about registration procedures for returnees, rights, obligations and entitlements, access to basic services and work opportunities, as well as many other issues that could impede successful reintegration processes.

4. Another crucial aspect of the reintegration process is the enhancement of livelihoods and reintegration. The Mission recommends job placement across a full spectrum of education, employment generation and support for micro businesses. As a vital condition to promoting durable reintegration, appropriate strategies must promote expansion of local economies to satisfy the basic economic requirements of the refugee returnees. This population is one of the best targets for livelihood enhancement projects because it is more likely to intend to integrate into the communities to which it has returned or the new communities in which it has settled. As a result, the Mission advocates for the continuation of livelihood support programmes to facilitate reintegration through employment generation, job matching and support for the creation of small and micro-businesses through vocational training, business development programmes, in-kind grants, and on the job training courses, among other projects. It is essential for social cohesion in Iraq that both returnees and host community members are targeted for these programmes, as past research has indicated that host communities can also be highly vulnerable to unemployment. Supporting only IDPs can cause tension between different groups within the community. The Mission has over a decade of experience delivering diverse livelihoods programming to vulnerable returnees, refugees, IDPs and host communities across Iraq, which enables it to contribute to enhancing reintegration of returnee families.

5. The data on which this report is based indicates that 48 per cent of the returnees did not return to their place of origin and identifies lack of access to land and property as one of the main reasons for continuous internal displacement. In order to support the return and reintegration in their areas of origin or integration in the places of current residence, the Mission recommends provision of technical and capacity building support to the relevant national actors to design and implement land/property restitution and/or compensation mechanisms. Restitution mechanisms will facilitate access to land and property rights for the displaced population that intends to return to the community of origin while a compensation mechanism will enable the displaced population, which for various reasons cannot return to the community of origin to gain appropriate financial compensation that will in turn help them integrate into their current location. The Mission will have to collect further details at the household level to achieve an appropriate policy platform and advise the various stakeholders accordingly.

6. Lastly, data and information management research, amid the continued IDP crisis currently ravaging Iraq, are essential to track those who have returned due to the conflict in Syria to the ever-complex situation in Iraq, to ensure that they are entitled to the appropriate assistance. Further research will support the response to many questions raised that currently remain unanswered concerning durable integration for returnees and those now part of the IDP caseload, currently standing at nearly 2 million individuals.

The aforementioned recommendations to mitigate the ongoing plight of returnee families from Syria against the backdrop of the current humanitarian context are made more complex as the crisis has escalated. The Mission will therefore implement a comprehensive package of mutually supportive measures to provide assistance to meet the specific needs of returnee families from Syria as well as the newly displaced, formulated and strengthened over the last 11 years since its establishment in January 2003.
In the last decades, conflicts in the Middle East have continued to generate new layers of international refugees and internally displaced persons. This study focuses on one group that has suffered multiple displacements: Iraqi citizens who first fled to Syria from instability in their own country and then, due to civil war in Syria since 2011, have been forced to return to Iraq.

2014 has been a particularly turbulent year in the Middle East, besides the new outbreak of conflict in Gaza in the summer of 2014 and the fourth year of the Syrian conflict, which have had serious effects on every neighbouring county. The Syrian conflict has partly merged with the crisis in Iraq, particularly through the expansion of the armed extremist groups. In the summer of 2014 this group gained control of large areas in the northern parts of Iraq and Syria, moving freely across the border between the two countries.

The spreading conflict has caused displacement in the region to rise to an unprecedented level. Estimates indicate that the Syrian conflict has generated around three million refugees and over eight million IDPs. Within these displaced are nationals from neighbouring countries, settled in Syria before the conflict began in the spring of 2011.

This study is part of a larger programmatic activity: in 2013, IOM conducted no less than 5 thematic studies among IDPs in Iraq. Carried out under the Community Revitalization Programme II (CRP II), in more peaceful conditions and therefore with a strong development orientation, the studies assessed the barriers to socio-economic integration of IDPs, integration problems for IDP youth in secondary education, the lives of displaced women, the success of IDPs’ micro-enterprises and the impact of the Syria crisis causing movement of refugees and returnees to Iraq.¹

Following the thematic assessment of displacement in Iraq from 2013 to 2014 and a subsequent IOM assess-

¹ All previous IOM thematic reports are available at http://iomiraq.net/allreports?qt-view__all_reports__page=1#qt-view__all_reports__page
INTRODUCTION

ment of 2013,² this study focuses on Iraqi returnees from Syria, a unique migratory group that has experienced many displacements.

The multi-stage displacement also created the issue of the returnees’ legal status and consequently the question of which national or international agencies should be responsible for their protection and welfare. At the end of Chapter 1, which describes the historical background to the recent displacement waves in Iraq, the status of the returnees from Syria is discussed. The legal sources consulted for this study confirm that the Iraqi returnees should upon their return to Iraq be formally considered as internally displaced - especially those who could not return to their place of origin, but also those who could as they share much of the distress of the rest of the returnees - and thus under the responsibility of the Iraqi Government and benefiting from the protection and assistance to IDPs under the Iraqi system, supported by the international community.

As stated by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) key international guidelines developed for IDPs, protection of the Iraqi returnees from Syria should ultimately aim at achieving durable solutions to their displacement related problems and needs. Given the complex regional conflict raging in Iraq and Syria, this specific goal is not attainable in the short term; however, components of a durable solutions framework, including security, access to utilities (such as water, food, housing, healthcare and education), also form a relevant thematic scheme when analysing the current difficult conditions of the displaced assessed in this study. Consequently, with the durable solutions framework as the reference, the key research objectives were to:

- map the displacement patterns of the Iraqi returnees from Syria
- understand the returnees’ basic socioeconomic condition and needs
- identify the returnees’ short- and long-term intentions

Chapter 2 explains the methodology of this study, while Chapter 3 recounts the complex displacement history of the returnees, and Chapter 4 analyses their socio-economic situation and future intentions, at the time of the field research in the late spring of 2014.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Syria was traditionally considered a haven for displaced people in the Middle East, known for keeping its borders open for Arabs, accepting large numbers of Palestinian refugees and several waves of Lebanese asylum seekers. Over the years, Iraqis became one of the largest migrant groups in Syria.

Iraqis have emigrated to Syria for numerous reasons: better access to work or public services; safety from conflicts. In recent decades, before the current hostilities that started in late 2013, Iraqi citizens’ flight to Syria seemed to have taken place in three major waves.

THREE IRAQI DISPLACEMENT WAVES

The first wave of refugees was generated by the Ba’athist rule during the 1970s and continued to the early 1990s. In the 1970s and 1980s, Iraq was under Ba’ath party rule, led by Saddam Hussein, who officially became President in 1979. The oppression and marginalisation of minorities, the Iraq-Iran War (1980-1988) and the al-Anfal Campaign (1987-1989) against Kurds in the North of Iraq all contributed to the displacement, which included large numbers of Iraqis fleeing into Syria. During this first period, many who fled Iraq were Sunni Muslims who opposed the Ba’athist Party, or Shia Muslims targeted by the Sunni-led Ba’ath Party, or yet belonged to minority groups who likewise feared persecution from the Party. The eight-year long Iran-Iraq war led to displacement of mainly Iraqi Kurds fleeing to neighbouring countries. It is estimated by Human Rights Watch that during the al-Anfal campaign led by the Iraqi army during 1986 to 1989, 50,000 to 100,000 Kurds were killed using chemical weapons, aerial attacks and other forms of offensive, driving Kurds to flee Iraq.4

The 1991 Gulf War created an estimated 2 to 3 million refugees from Iraq. An estimated 100,000 Iraqis escaped the fighting to Jordan, Syria and other neighbouring countries.5 In the aftermath of the 1991 War, Syria shut its borders to Iraq, though they were re-opened during 2001 to 2002.

The second major wave of refugees and internally displaced followed fighting triggered by the military intervention led by the United States of America in 2003 and fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime, which marked the beginning of prolonged instability. The international community expected up to 1 million Iraqis to leave after the start of the invasion; however, 2 years after the start of the intervention only an estimated 190,000 people were displaced.6

A Brookings report of 2007 stated that Iraqis leaving at that time was due to the warfare led by the Multi-National Force and its Iraqi government allies, or to sectarian violence following the hostility that the Saddam Hussein regime had created between Sunni and Shi’a.

The event that generated the third large-scale wave of displacements was the February 2006 bombing of the Al-Askari Mosque in Samarra, one of the holiest Shia shrines in Iraq. This triggered widespread sectarian violence.

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6. IDMC (2010) IRAQ Little new displacement but around 2.8 million Iraqis remain internally displaced, 4 March
SYRIAN RESPONSES

Syria received a large influx of Iraqi refugees with each of the three waves described above. The majority were Sunni Muslims, but also Shias, Christians, Sabean Mandaeans and long-term Palestinian residents in Iraq. Many Iraqi refugees fled after suffering traumatic experiences and systematic persecution in Iraq.

UNHCR (2008) reported that from February 2006 to October 2007, Syria received between 30,000 and 60,000 refugees each month, an estimated total of between 390,000 and 1,140,000. At the beginning of 2007 UNHCR estimated that the number of Iraqi refugees in Syria exceeded 1.2 million, significant numbers in a country with a population of 18 million. The number of Iraqis entering Syria declined sharply, however, following imposition of visa regulations in October 2007.

According to a UNHCR report from 2007, at that time Syria hosted more Iraqi refugees than any other country in the world. The influx of such a large number had a negative impact on Syria’s economy, education and health care services. Local media and citizens blamed the Iraqi refugees for rising housing and commodity prices, increased traffic and shortages in utilities and services. Some analysts claimed that the information created a false perception of a far larger number of Iraqi refugees in Syria than the reality.

Syrians also often believed that the Iraqi refugees were wealthy. This was only true of a small minority, mostly those who left Iraq after the 2003 intervention. Among those refugees were some of Iraq’s highly educated nationals and experts: by some estimates, 20 per cent of Iraq’s physicians and 35 per cent of its professors had left the country. Many came to Syria with their savings and contributed to the economy. An IMF report in 2007 stated that the influx of Iraqi refugees had improved Syria’s economic recovery.

The influx of Iraqi refugees following the Samarra Bombing in 2006 was said to be less educated and arrived with fewer savings. Their money often ran out before they were able to generate new income, as most entered on tourist visas without permission to work. Many Iraqi families remained in Syria longer than initially planned, leading to depletion of their resources. Some reports claim that at that time Iraqi refugees had resorted to child labour or prostitution as coping mechanisms.

The Syrian Government accorded these Iraqi refugees free emergency and primary health care. Education was also free for Iraqi refugee children, although in 2007 just 30,000 Iraqi children were reportedly enrolled in school. Many Syrians were proud of their Government for fulfilling its declarations of Arab unity (qawmiyya) and many Iraqis still recognize that within the Middle East, Syria was where they received the best treatment following their displacement.

Large scale displacement into Syria continued through 2007, until the Syrian Government introduced a visa requirement for Iraqis in October 2007. This obligation reduced the number of Iraqis entering Syria up until the 2011 crisis that continues to date and caused many Iraqis to overstay their visas and remain in Syria illegally, from a fear of being unable to renew expired visas and having to return to Iraq, adding to their difficulties.

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10. Ibid.
11. IOM (2013) Iraq Activities April 2013
Syria, despite continuing to host large numbers of forced migrants, does not belong among the ratified States Parties of the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention, nor its concomitant 1967 Protocol. Iraqis were, therefore, not recognized as refugees by the Syrian authorities; however since April 2007 UNHCR has recognized and registered all Iraqis from the central and southern areas of Iraq as prima facie refugees. Although registration facilitated the Iraqi refugees’ access to assistance, international protection status could not guarantee the Iraqi refugees protection against refoulement, which both the Convention and Protocol prohibit.

**RETURN OF IRAQIS BEFORE SPRING 2011**

The majority of Iraqi refugees in Syria rented their accommodation and relied on savings. They were not housed in camps and many did not register with UNHCR, as they did not need immediate assistance. After living in Syria for a couple of years, however, without legal employment or free access to more than basic health services, their savings diminished and their situation became more precarious. As options diminished, in some cases return became an option not previously considered.

Towards the end of 2007, the Iraqi Government urged Iraqi citizens in neighbouring countries to return to Iraq, reporting stabilized security, the provision of a USD700 to USD800 cash incentive and free bus or plane transport. At the time it was reported that Iraqi families’ motivations to consider returning home were more connected to diminishing savings and resources, expired visas or visa restrictions and difficult living conditions in Syria than incentives to entice them to return to Iraq. Return was however against the United Nations’ advice at the time, due to continued insecurity in Iraq.

As from 2008, Amnesty International reported cases of forced returns occurring in breach of international law, especially for individuals registered with UNHCR as refugees. In this period, UNHCR Syria stated that Iraqis at greatest risk of such deportation were those who had been arrested; lacked or had destroyed documents; had entered Syria illegally; or had committed criminal acts within Syria.

In addition, Iraqi Palestinians who had entered Syria with forged documents were often deported and then housed in the Al-Waleed Camp on the Syrian/Iraqi border, where conditions were reported to be harsh. The camp has since been closed. Despite periods of relative stability in Iraq during the last decade, many who had sought refuge in Syria before the spring of 2011 were reported to be still too afraid to return.

**CRISIS IN SYRIA AND IRAQ SINCE 2011**

The current Syrian crisis broke out in March 2011: a peaceful protest against the Government led within months to full, armed conflict between various factions and government forces. Now, in late 2014, in its fourth year of fighting, the conflict has become part of complex regional warfare covering large parts of Syria and Iraq and characterized by divisions between secular and Islamist fighters as well as among ethnic groups.

Many Iraqis fled and returned to Iraq at the start of the 2011 Syrian crisis. Prior to this, few Iraqis in Syria had been willing to return: from January to October 2010, UNHCR supported just 163 persons returning to Iraq from Syria. As the security situation within Iraq remained complex and unpredictable, the Iraqis in Syria often saw little or no possibility of returning to their country of origin.

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Traumatic experiences in Iraq also deterred returns: “I will never return to Iraq where they killed my husband and took our house away. What can I tell my children? That their father was killed because he was a Sunni.” Nevertheless, the devolution of the Syrian crisis into a civil war and regional conflict, along with Iraqis’ dwindling savings and changes in visa requirements, compelled many to return. Since the start of the Syrian crisis in March 2011, influxes of Iraqi returnees back into Iraq has thus been significant. In June 2013, UNHCR reported that 50,000 Iraqis had returned to Iraq since June 2012. In March 2013, the UNHCR reported that at least 76,000 Iraqi nationals had returned to Iraq since the beginning of the Syrian conflict, but that 70,000 “refugees from Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia” were still living in Syria at that time. At the end of 2013, the United Nations reported that the number of returnees intending to integrate in Iraq had reduced since the start of the year.

The political and security situation in Iraq has become increasingly unstable during 2014, due to increasing violence following the expanded military capabilities and armed group offensives. The returnees who fled Syria before the escalation of conflict in Iraq in 2014 were severely affected by the current conflict like other displaced populations in Iraq.

The new upsurge in violence and subsequent fighting has caused a massive emergency of internal displacement. Approximately 2 million people in Iraq had been internally displaced by December 2014 from the beginning of the year. In the autumn of 2014, fighting intensified, notably in Anbar Province where in October, armed groups gained control of the strategically important towns of Heet and al Furat, close to large military bases and only 30 kilometres from Ramadi, the Anbar capital.

The current crisis is considered the worst violence since 2006 to 2008, when the Samara Mosque bombing triggered an estimated 1.6 million displaced persons within Iraq.

Returnees have undergone multiple displacements: formerly refugees in Syria, now back in Iraq, only just over half of our survey sample could return to their former homes, while others had to go elsewhere. Overall, the returnees were suffering along with the internally displaced and the rest of the population in the current difficult situation in Iraq. As the returnees’ multi-stage history of displacements and varying situations had created uncertainty and ambiguity regarding their status - and some had not even registered, due to political concerns - the next section briefly examines the status issue.

**RETURNEES: THE QUESTION OF THEIR STATUS AND RESPONSIBILITY TO PROTECT THEM**

Syria is not a ratified member of the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol, thus Iraqis were not considered as refugees by the Syrian authorities. Nonetheless, if a person flees physical harm or persecution across an international border, the international community considers him or her a refugee.

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24. IDMC’s contribution of legal expertise for this section is gratefully acknowledged.
When asked how they perceived their status in Syria, only 33 per cent of Iraqi returnees interviewed claimed to be refugees, although a large majority had fled there due to violence or persecution. Thirty-five per cent claimed to be guests of the state, a perception perhaps encouraged by the above mentioned welcoming Pan-Arab border Syrian policy before visa amendments in late 2007.

Most Iraqis who had left their country to seek refuge in Syria met refugee criteria and thus became de facto international refugees. Later, UNHCR recognized their status officially; however, their return to Iraq and community of origin raised the issue of their status: were they still refugees, refugee returnees or IDPs? Their ambiguous status consequently raised the question of which entity would be responsible for their protection and assistance. This section reviews legal opinion on those issues.

Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement\(^\text{25}\) states that IDPs are “persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border”.

As for refugees, they do cross an international border and seek refuge in a third country. The difference between IDP and refugee status affects their entitlement to protection. While living in their own country, IDPs remain under the protection of their national authorities, but refugees submit themselves to the protection of the authorities in the receiving country.

Contrary to being a refugee, becoming displaced within one’s own country does not confer a similar special legal status under international law. A person in a vulnerable situation in his or her own country is entitled to all relevant guaranties of human rights and humanitarian law applicable to any citizens of that country. This does not exclude establishing administrative measures such as national registration to identify the displaced and respond better to their specific needs; however, lack of such registration does not deprive IDPs of their rights.

According to the Annotations of the Guiding Principles by Professor Walter Kälin, Representative of the United Nations Secretary General on IDPs, the IDP definition provided in the Guiding Principles should be interpreted broadly to include people who “first go abroad and then return (voluntarily or involuntarily) but cannot go back to their place of origin/habitual residences” for reasons indicated in the IDP definition (armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters)\(^\text{26}\).

In the specific case of those Iraqi returnees from Syria unable to return to their places of origin or habitual residence due to ongoing conflict, generalized violence or human rights violations, they can be now considered IDPs. It is thus primarily the Iraqi Government’s responsibility to offer protection and assistance to its returned citizens who may still suffer from consequences of their displacement on returning to their country of origin. If need be, the international community supports national governments in their reintegration programmes through activities and projects on social cohesion, reconstruction, housing, education, etc. to ensure that former refugees are supported in their effort to achieve durable solutions\(^\text{27}\). Such responsibility should cover all former refugees, now returnees, whether still internally displaced or able to resume their former homes. The State, supported by the international community, has the responsibility of ensuring that the whole returnee population can lead stable and secure lives, that is, obtain durable solutions. Until such time they remain of concern to those responsible to protect and assist\(^\text{28}\).


\(^{26}\) Ibid.

\(^{27}\) UNHCR voluntary repatriation Handbook, 1996.

CHAPTER TWO

METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the methodology applied to the study. The main source of information was a field survey conducted by IOM’s nationwide RART network among IDP households in three regional clusters in Iraq: South; Centre; and North (the Kurdish Region). The field survey produced data for quantitative analysis, which was complemented with a limited number of focus group discussions also conducted by RARTs for qualitative analysis.

29. Central-northern Iraq is included in this cluster for the purposes of this report
KEY CONCEPTS

This report uses the following key return migration concepts:

**Refugee** – A person, who “owing to well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinions, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country” (Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, Art. 1A(2), 1951 as modified by the 1967 Protocol).

**Returnee** – broadly covers the movement and return process. “This return process could take place within territorial boundaries of a country, for example returning Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) or from a host country to the country of origin, as in the case of refugees.”

**Voluntary Return** - “a type of return based on the voluntary decision of an individual. A voluntary decision is defined by the absence of any physical, psychological, or material coercion and is based on adequate, available, accurate, and objective information.”

**Forced Return** - where “an element of coercion exists, including threats to life and livelihood, whether arising from natural or man-made causes (e.g. movements of refugees and internally displaced persons as well as people displaced by natural or environmental disasters, chemical or nuclear disasters, famine, or development projects).”

Protection of Iraqi returnees from Syria aims at ultimately achieving a sustainable and durable solution for their circumstances. In the current volatile situation in the whole Middle East, when the displaced population’s immediate humanitarian needs are priority, the durable solutions remain distant goals, and as an internationally agreed reference framework for creating short- and longer-term relief and support to those in need.

31. Ibid.

*Throughout the report, Iraqis who have returned from Syria are referred to as “refugee returnees” in order to distinguish this population from Iraqis who have returned to their original locations after being displaced internally.*
DURABLE SOLUTIONS

Traditionally UNHCR advocates three durable solutions: repatriation, resettlement and local integration. In addition to this, the IASC has developed a framework of eight aspects referring to the rights of the displaced and the concrete steps for fulfilling their basic needs. This framework was developed with the input of donors, international agencies, governments, non-governmental organisations, IDP organizations and civil society and it reflects a human-rights based approach with benchmarks to assess whether a durable solution has been achieved:

- Access to Documentation
- Safety and Security
- Adequate Standard of Living
- Restoration of Housing, Land and Property
- Family Reunification
- Access to Livelihoods
- Participation in Public Affairs
- Access to Effective Remedies and Justice

IOM used several of these criteria to analyse the circumstances of the Iraqi returnees from Syria and to assess to what extent a durable solution could be achieved within the current volatile situation in Iraq. The key elements for the structure of the analysis are shown below.

IOM’S DISPLACEMENT TRACKING INFRASTRUCTURE

Data collection for this thematic report was accomplished by IOM’s RART network across Iraq, with 60 staff members deployed in all 18 Governorates. The RARTs are trained and equipped to carry out rapid individual assessments, community assessments, and information collection and analysis to produce preliminary recommendations for Community Assistance Projects (CAPs).

RARTs are also trained to assess and respond rapidly to the emergency and humanitarian needs of the most vulnerable populations regardless of their status as refugee returnees, IDPs, IDP returnees or host community members. Since 2003, IOM has assessed and monitored the movements, needs, living conditions and intentions of populations throughout Iraq. These assessments provide valuable qualitative and quantitative data and information for public distribution to government officials, humanitarian actors including agencies in the United Nations Country Team in Iraq and partner NGOs, think tanks, media outlets, academic institutions and other key stakeholders.

IOM’s RART personnel regularly contribute data to the Humanitarian Country Team, to allow the United Nations Country Team in Iraq to coordinate and deliver humanitarian assistance more effectively.

GEOGRAPHIC COVERAGE

Assessments of returnee households were carried out in three cluster regions that covered 16 of Iraq’s 18 Governorates, excluding Muthanna and Anbar. Muthanna did not have a sufficiently large refugee returnee population to be included in the sample. Anbar was considered unsafe for household assessments due to poor security. Accordingly, the RART started conducting focus group discussions in Anbar, but had completed only a few by June 2014, when the general deterioration in security in Iraq halted field research.

PROFILE OF THE TARGET POPULATION

Iraqi Governorates were clustered into the three main regions as follows:

Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI): This northern region consists of Erbil, Dahuk and Sulaymaniah Governorates. The KRI is an ethnically Kurdish and Sunni region with a semi-autonomous government. The KRI enjoys not only comparatively more job

opportunities and better infrastructure, but also of stable security, which has made the region an attractive destination for many IDP groups.

Centre: The region covers the Anbar, Baghdad, Diyala, Ninawa, Kirkuk, Salah Al Din, Babylon, Kerbala, Qadisiyah and Wassit Governorates, the central region of Iraq has nearly equal sized populations of Arab Sunni and Arab Shia, with some governorates holding solidly Sunni or Shia populations, along with those that are mixed and that have various small religious and ethnic minority groups. This region has proven vulnerable to armed conflicts and has experienced numerous displacement waves over the past decade.

South: Basra, Missan, Muthanna, Najaf and Thi-Qar Governorates, which are more secure than the central region and enjoy relative ethnic and religious homogeneity, the majority being Arab Shia.

As population density varies greatly within a region, stratified sampling of locations aimed to ensure that estimates can be made with equal accuracy in different parts of the region, and that comparisons of regions can be made with equal statistical power.

### DATA COLLECTION METHODS

1. Quantitative data collection

Returnee household surveys used questionnaires to collect quantitative data targeting a sample of Iraq returnee households, to capture their displacement process, intentions, socio-economic status, security and protection needs.

Before identifying the representative sample of locations and households, IOM Iraq RARTs developed displacement data baselines through IOM’s displacement monitoring mechanism. They collected information on refugee returnee populations and their locations from various sources, namely the Iraqi Ministry of Migration and Displacement (MOMD) registration records, local councils within the Governorates, community leaders, villages and neighbourhood mukhtars, NGOs and other civil society actors. This baseline data was collected in January and February 2014, forming the basis for the random sampling of 1,309 IDP households. All groups of participants were selected to include those from multiple districts, rural and urban areas.

### Methods of Data Collection by Regional Cluster

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>REGIONAL BREAKDOWN</th>
<th>DATA COLLECTION METHODS USED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Central Iraq</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Babylon, Baghdad, Diyala, Kirkuk, Ninawa, Kerbala, Qadisiyah, Wassit</td>
<td>720 Household Questionnaire Interviews, 2 Focus Group Discussions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern Iraq</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thi-Qar, Missan, Basra, Najaf</td>
<td>196 Household Questionnaire Interviews, 2 Focus Group Discussions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dahuk, Erbil, Sulaymaniyyah</td>
<td>392 Household Questionnaire Interviews, 2 Focus Group Discussions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anbar Governorate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 Focus Group Discussions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
where applicable; female-headed households and various ethnic and religious groups.

Stratified random sampling of strata corresponding to the three main geographic clusters of the KRI, Central and South was used to determine a representative sample of the returnee population. With 95 per cent confidence rate and 5 per cent margin of error, the sample is statistically significant to represent refugee returnees in Iraq and within the three identified main regions.

2. Qualitative Data Collection
Focus Group Discussions and Key Informant Interviews

RARTs arranged focus group discussions among returnees in several locations, selecting the participants by maximum variation sampling, a purposive sampling technique for qualitative studies. The method selects study units representing a wide range of variation in dimensions of interest. In this case, respondents were selected based on region and gender, as both of these indicators have been known to significantly impact the overall situation for IDPs due to regional variation in security, ethnosectarian makeup and economic situation.

Security conditions in Anbar Governorate prevented systematic collection of household assessments, unlike the other Iraqi Governorates, therefore data collection in Anbar was restricted to focus group discussions. Only three such discussions could be held before weakened security halted this work throughout Iraq. Only nine focus group discussions were carried out in total, in Anbar, Basra, Erbil and Kerbala Governorates.

Although the background information and earlier developments in Iraqi displacements to Syria remain, the rapidly changing situation and spread of the conflict after June 2014 put the field research results into a radically new context. They offer a view of the living conditions and intentions of the Iraqi returnees at the very moment before the steep escalation of violence in June 2014 and there is now therefore need to analyze and interpret the data against a much more turbulent background.
This chapter reviews the field research findings, focusing on the dynamics of the many displacements of the Iraqi refugees/returnees from Syria, as conveyed by the field survey and focus group discussions. The demographic characteristics of the sample population interviewed in the survey appear below, for a clearer view of the data on the returnees’ displacement and living conditions.
The field survey for this study was carried out in April and May 2014. As shown in the Methods of data collection by regional cluster Table on page 22 the geographical distribution of the 1,309 interviewed households is proportional to the size of the identified returnee population in different parts of Iraq. Thus, 720 (55%) households were interviewed in Central Iraq, 392 (30%) in the Kurdish Region of Iraq and 196 (15%) in the Southern Governorates.

Nearly all the 1,309 families interviewed were of Arab ethnicity (96%). The survey also included families from the Kurdish, Turkmen, Assyrian and Chaldean minorities. The participants’ overall religious affiliation is 58 per cent Sunni Muslims and 40 per cent Shia Muslims. The Assyrian and Chaldean families accounted for the 1 per cent Christian families interviewed.

The largest proportion of the head of household sample comprised married men between the ages of 26 and 60. Practically all interviewed individuals identified themselves as heads of their household, of whom 94 per cent were between the ages of 26 and 60. Five per cent of the interviewed were older than 61 and 1 per cent of the participants were between 15 and 24 years old. Of those interviewed 74 per cent were married, 13 per cent widowed, 7 per cent single and 5 per cent divorced.

The sample of 1,309 surveyed families whose head of household was interviewed represented a total of 5,928 individuals of whom 3,009 were male and 2,919 female. Thirty-nine per cent of the total sample population were between 26 and 60 years of age, 23 per cent between 15 and 25, 23 per cent were between 6 and 14 and 10 per cent were between 1 and 5 years old. Only 4 per cent were over the age of 60 and just 2 per cent were infants under the age of 1 year. The gender ratio for this population is 49:51 female to male.

35. A head of household constitutes a person is who is acknowledged as such by the other household members.
The questionnaire asked the interviewed heads of returnee households to state any vulnerability in their family. As many as 695 of the 1,309 families interviewed (53%) reported vulnerable family members, with a total of 848 individuals suffering from a specific vulnerability. Seventy-two of the families (6%) had members with physical disabilities, 15 families (about 1%) had members with mental disabilities, 449 (over 34% of all families surveyed) included members with chronic illnesses, 6 had lost a family member, 76 families included pregnant females. Additionally, there were 32 single heads of households, 146 (11.2%) female heads of households and 3 minor heads of households.

DISPLACEMENTS

Fleeing Iraq

The majority of the Iraqi families who sought refuge in Syria did so to flee the violence and persecution after the 2006 Samara bombing. In the sample, 28 per cent of the Iraqi returnees interviewed had fled soon after the 2006 events, a further 27 per cent fled to Syria in 2007. Besides the peak years of 2006 and 2007, an additional 28 per cent of the Iraqi refugees interviewed fled to Syria during the period between 2008 and 2011; 12 per cent had fled from earlier conflicts between 1979 and 2005.

An overwhelming majority of the families surveyed had settled in urban areas of Syria: 78 per cent in Damascus or its surroundings, 11 per cent in Aleppo and 5 per cent in Al-Hasakah.

Displacement to Syria was the very first displacement for the most of those interviewed: only 19 households claimed to have been IDPs before their passage to Syria. The majority of respondents gave generalized violence as their main reason for fleeing Iraq, complemented by factors such as political persecution, ethnic or religious persecution and direct threats. Common secondary reasons were lack of public services, employment and income.

Although violence was the main reason for leaving, in the majority of the cases the decision to flee was not taken abruptly. Almost two thirds of the interviewed returnees reported that a combination of factors produced their decision to leave over a period of time, while 39 per cent said that a specific event had triggered their displacement.

In the sample, 69 per cent of the returnee household heads gave better security as a main reason for choosing to flee to Syria; 31 per cent stated the freedom to practice cultural and religious traditions, 21 per cent also referring to the presence of a similar ethnosectarian group as a pull factor. When asked to provide additional influencing factors, those interviewed mentioned better access to employment, public services and presence of family and friends. Interestingly, 64 per cent of those displaced to Syria stated that once arrived, their expectations regarding Syria proved correct.
Fleeing Back to Iraq

The Syria crisis began in March 2011. By July, large numbers of Syrians had taken up arms in the escalating conflict. Iraqis in Syria started to flee back to Iraq, despite growing uncertainty of security in their country of origin. A large number of the interviewees had already returned to Iraq in 2011, but the majority returned in 2012 as the situation in Syria continued to deteriorate. In 2013 the numbers of Iraqis returning from Syria declined sharply: just 8 per cent of the surveyed population had returned in 2013.

The conflict in Syria or, as cited in the questionnaire, generalized violence and armed conflict became the main reason for this movement back to Iraq. Some returnees also gave lack of public services and employment in Syria. Sixty-nine per cent stated that they had no choice but to flee from Syria and return to Iraq, with just over half claiming that their displacement was the result of a specific event.

Thirty-two per cent of all sample households originated from Baghdad, 12 per cent from Ninawa, 12 per cent from Basra, 9 per cent from Najaf and 8 per cent from Thi-Qar. 52 per cent of the interviewed returnees could return to their former residences in Iraq, while almost half had to find homes elsewhere, even in other regions.

After return and resettlement in Iraq, the proportions of returnees per governorate altered: Baghdad still headed the list with 19 per cent of the households interviewed, followed by Basra (11%), Ninawa (11%), Erbil (9%), Najaf (9%) and Thi-Qar (8%), with several other governorates hosting smaller percentages. Approximately 75 per cent of the returnees who settled in the Kurdish Region of Iraq (in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah Governorates) originated from Baghdad.

Living conditions in Iraq worsened for all returnees and their problems spread to the majority of the Iraqi population in the escalated crisis of 2014.

In late spring of 2014, when the survey was conducted, a majority of the returnees interviewed were concerned about security in their current location, but as high as 86 per cent of the heads of households interviewed felt their current locations in Iraq were safer than their previous areas of displacement in Syria; however, there were particular areas where safety was a concern to most of the returnees. Just before the escalation of fighting in June 2014, the overwhelming majority of those interviewed in Salah-Din and Kirkuk Governorates and about one third of those interviewed in Ninawa and Thi-Qar already felt their current locations were not safer than their area of displacement in Syria.

Independent of whether or not they had returned to their place of origin, 96 per cent of interviewees perceived themselves as returnees, almost all confirming that they had registered with the MOMD. Despite such a large registration, there was still mention of specific barriers to doing so. Lack of documentation was most commonly cited, also a perceived lack of any benefit from registering, or fear of local authorities. While almost all interviewees did not believe their status as returnees would as such give rise to security concerns in Iraq, 10 per cent believed the contrary, due to their political affiliations prior to leaving Iraq.
### Returned to original house

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Governorate of Residence before Fleeing to Syria</th>
<th>% of Iraqi Returnees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baghdad</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basrah</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diyala</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kerbala</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missan</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Najaf</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ninewa</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qadissiya</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salah al-Din</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thi-Qar</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wassit</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Returned to original house*
Iraqi returnees from Syria following the 2011 Syria crisis

Chapter three

Did not Return to original houses

Babylon ____ 1%
Baghdad ____ 3%
Basrah ____ 15%
BAGHDAD _______ 1%
DIYALA _______ 1%
BASRAH _________ 14%

Diyala ____ 2%
Erbil ____ 11%
BAGHDAD _______ 1%
KIRKUK _________ 7%

Kerbala ____ 8%
Baghdad ____ 11%
KERBALA _________ 5%
KIRKUK _________ 7%

Ninewa ____ 9%
BAGHDAD _______ 1%
NINEWA _________ 1%

OTHER ____ 1%

Missan ____ 2%
Najaf ____ 11%
Qadissiya ____ 3%
Salah al-Din ____ 1%

Sulaymaniyah ____ 11%
BAGHDAD _______ 9%
DIYALA _______ 1%
OTHER _________ 1%

Wassit ____ 13%

Kirkuk ____ 7%
BAGHDAD _______ 1%
Erbil ____ 1%
Diyala ____ 1%
OTHER ____ 1%

Sulaymaniyah ____ 11%
BAGHDAD _______ 9%
DIYALA _______ 1%
OTHER _________ 1%

48% Did not Return to property of origin
CHAPTER FOUR

LIVELIHOODS

This chapter focuses on elements of the returnees’ living conditions in Iraq, as expressed at the time of the survey: housing, employment, school education, current principal needs, general integration in the community and and whether they intend to stay in the current community.

The returnees generally expressed a strong feeling of inclusion in their communities. They also felt that they stood on equal footing with the host communities, with the whole population having to face the difficult conditions in Iraq. Thus the majority wanted to continue living in their current area, except for the Southern region where the returnees’ sense of inclusion was lowest. Although about 80 per cent of the returnees had some form of employment, many were underemployed with insufficient earnings for basic needs.

When the data collection for this study was conducted in April and May 2014, 52 per cent of those surveyed had been able to return to their original homes. The remaining 48 per cent returned elsewhere within the same governorate or outside it. While this almost equal division concerned most of the governorates covered, none of the families that had fled the Kurdish Region managed to return to their original homes.
As stated above, 32 per cent of the interviewees had originated from Baghdad. While more than half could return to their homes, the remainder had to find other solutions: 13 per cent remained within the Baghdad Governorate and a further 11 per cent stayed in the Central region. 76 per cent of those unable to regain their former homes in Baghdad resettled in the KRI, mainly in Erbil and Sulaymaniya Governorates.

Those who could not return to their former homes gave a variety of reasons, such as having sold the accommodation, destruction of the property or occupation by squatters. Most of the families who had lost their residence had no access to restitution or legal support for loss of property, one of the eight elements in the durable solutions framework. The returnees' habitation status thus varied by region. While most of the returnees to the KRI originated from Baghdad Governorate, almost all had rented their accommodation; in Central Iraq most had owned their own flats. In the Southern Region the majority of the returnees had settled with family or friends.

The focus groups gave additional information of variation in housing, which strengthened the picture given by IOM’s parallel research study on the newest waves of internal displacement in Iraq in 2013 and 2014. Both that study and this report indicated the hardship that high housing costs caused for IDP families. While just over half of the returnees from Syria could return to their original homes, often owned by their family, the remainder had to compete with other displaced persons in the tightening market where rents were rising and the IDP returnees struggled to pay their rents.

As regular employment for IDPs and Iraqis as a whole was scarce, income was low. High housing costs absorbed the greater part of households' income, often leaving insufficient funds for other necessities such as food, health care or children’s schooling. In particular, in households headed by female returnees the unemployment and high housing costs regularly seemed to cause the children to drop out of school, as confirmed by the female focus group discussions in Basra.

Comparing their housing with that of their Iraqi host communities, 87 per cent of returnees felt on equal footing. The majority of the respondents considered the quality of their housing better or equal to that in Syria, the remainder only slightly worse than that in Syria.

Earning a living in Syria constituted a fundamental problem for Iraqi refugees: their basic entry passport stamp precluded legal employment. This caused great financial problems to the refugee families. Some Iraqi refugees worked illegally for very low wages. Families struggling with the high cost of housing were reduced to sharing flats or even rooms. Fifty-six per cent of the interviewees reported lacking stable employment while in Syria; for many of the remaining 44 per cent, the situation was not necessarily much better: many had only been able to work part-time in Syria, very often in low-skilled occupations. Only 174 of the respondents (30% of those who had had some form of employment) had found skilled employment in Syria.

Employment for the target group appeared better after returning to Iraq; in 83 per cent of the households at least one member was contributing financially.

In the KRI, contrary to the situation of other IDPs in the region overall, the employment rate of the returnee families from Syria was as high as 91 per cent; of the 192 families surveyed, at least one member was contributing financially to the household income at the time of the survey. In the Southern Region, the proportion was 72 per cent and in Central Iraq 87 per cent; however, very often earnings were insufficient to cover even the basic needs of the returnee families.

918 families out of 1,309, or 70 per cent of the whole sample confirmed that their income did not
cover their household expenditure needs. A female focus group participant in Kerbala confirmed: “Most heads of household work on daily wages, which is not enough even for one day.” This appeared to concern the whole population of Iraq. Almost 90 per cent of the returnees interviewed confirmed that they felt fully (58%) or at least fairly (30%) equal in terms of wages received and only 7 per cent felt discrimination.

Despite the fairly high percentages of families surveyed having at least one person in employment, the returnees still suffered from underemployment and believed that the generally unstable situation in Iraq contributed strongly to the restricted labour market and lack of jobs. Many also commented on their lack of requisite skills, or to a mismatch between needed and available skills. This view was supported by the fact that despite the generally high levels of education among the returnees and their high level of participation in the labour markets, only 16 per cent were in skilled occupations.

Employment difficulties, prevailing cultural norms and deskilling also affected returnee women: according to an Erbil focus group, women found obstacles to working outside their homes and graduates’ diplomas and work experience was not recognized. These results suggest that when the situation in Iraq allows reconstruction, there is a need for comprehensive labour market measures to optimize the population’s skills, particularly among returnees and IDPs, and to provide training to improve availability of the required skills.

Already in the late spring of 2014, the work situation in Anbar Province appeared more difficult than in the three Cluster Regions covered by the survey. Conditions in Anbar has been seriously perturbed by fighting since January 2014 and new, heavy fighting was reported during the autumn of 2014. The information obtained by the few Anbar focus groups suggested that most of the returnees were unemployed and in “dire need of financial aid or job opportunities” because in Anbar it is “hard to find a job even for a host community member”. Also in Basra, the focus groups confirmed the returnees’ lower employment rate. Female participants in particular stressed the hardship suffered due to unemployment and lack of income, resulting, among other things, in their children dropping out of school to look for work to contribute to their families’ survival.

**EDUCATION**

Overall, however, school enrolment among returnee children was relatively high. The survey indicated that the education level of the whole Iraqi diaspora in Syria was generally high: in 35 per cent of the families covered by the survey, at least one family member had either completed or partially completed university studies and 52 per cent had at least completed high school studies. This background may have contributed to the high degree of school enrolment of returnee children, both in Iraq and before that in Syria.

Education in Syria was free for Iraqi refugee children, who attended school to a large extent. Only 20 per cent of the school-age children of the interviewees had remained outside school education while in Syria. Among the reasons given for non-attendance were lack of documentation, lack of funds, distance from home and poor security. When interviewed in Iraq an even higher proportion of returnee families’ children were enrolled: a total of 1,091 male and 1,029 female school-age children attended school, indicating non-attendance of 17 per cent of school-age boys and 16 per cent school-age girls. As in Syria, high costs, lack of documentation, poor security and remote location of the schools were given as the most important reasons for non-attendance. Economic reasons for teenage youths dropping out of education were particularly noted in the Southern Iraq female focus group. Lack of work and underemployment among adults had forced the school-age youths to work to contribute to their families’ financial survival. Such high enrolment led to over 80 per cent of the returnees considering they had parity with the host population in access to education.

**INCLUSION & EQUALITY**

While sharing the employment problems common to the whole population, returnees (some of whom
had returned already in 2011), generally reported good conditions in areas such as housing or education and seemed relatively well settled and received by their hosting communities, which reflected positive community relations, at least in the KRI and Central Iraq, although somewhat less in the South.

Regarding returnees’ inclusion in the Iraqi community, almost 80 per cent of the heads of household commented very positively: nearly all in the Kurdish Region, 78 per cent in Central Iraq and 62 per cent in the Southern Governorates. In the South, the share of those feeling excluded rose to 13 per cent of those surveyed.

Converging with the generally high feeling of inclusion, the returnees generally felt highly equal in areas such as health care, access to utilities and even to the judicial system. Concerning the latter, the only pocket of discontent was in Central Iraq, where 10 per cent of respondents felt discrimination in access to justice.

Despite the high proportion of families who had access to employment through at least one person, income and livelihood were still a high priority issue, followed by housing and food. Sixty-nine per cent of all families interviewed stated employment as an immediate need. Almost as many, 63 per cent, mentioned shelter and housing, 39 per cent mentioned non-food items (distributed to supplement heating and accommodation) and 23 per cent mentioned food. Similar proportions were indicated as long term needs, together with further aspects such as education, physical protection, health, freedom to practice religion or culture, as well as elements needed to conduct life on a more permanent basis.

The bad employment situation and deteriorating security in Anbar placed the returnees, the displaced and the host community in particular distress. The following summary by a returnee focus group facilitator captures many aspects of life in Anbar:

“The main factors that worry the returnees from Syria after their forced displacement from Syria are the deterioration of the current security situation in the governorate, fear for the fall of the area to gunmen, the outbreak of military operations inside the location as well as the current lack of services such as electricity, health, communications, education, municipality, an almost complete siege of the area, blocking of roads and the high prices or lack of fuel, gas, food, and NFI in general. All these factors worry the returnees from Syria and make them live in a state of instability and fear of the future.”

This statement appeared accurate in the early autumn of 2014, when large parts of Anbar, which has a number of strategically important land routes and is relatively close to Baghdad, was again the focus of heavy fighting.
INTENTIONS

The survey asked returnee households about their original intentions of moving from Syria back to Iraq, and while in Iraq, their thoughts of eventually moving again. Although most of the returnees, having already moved many times, would prefer to stay, the continuing uncertain situation encouraged many to think of resettling abroad. The survey asked returnee households about their original intentions of moving from Syria back to Iraq, and while in Iraq, their thoughts of eventually moving again. Migration research has found that expressed intentions of voluntary migration are usually much higher than the actual movements. Forced displacement of course often takes place contrary to original intentions. Thirty-nine per cent of the returnees interviewed for this study confirmed that before the conflict in Syria broke out in 2011 they had intended to remain in
Syria. Only one in five respondents had intended to return to Iraq and almost as many had entertained plans to emigrate to a third country such as the USA, the UK or Australia.

Once returned to Iraq, 76 per cent of the interviewees stated their intention to stay, even in their current location, whether or not it was their earlier region and accommodation of origin. Many of the interviewees, however, stated that poor security and poor employment opportunities might make this difficult.

There were, however, quite significant differences between the cluster regions: while in Central Iraq 93 per cent and in the Kurdish Region almost 94 per cent of those interviewed wanted to stay in their current locations (this was also confirmed by the focus groups in Anbar), the proportion of those willing to stay was only 37.5 per cent in the Southern Governorates, where almost a third of the respondents wanted to move either abroad or elsewhere in Iraq and another third had no clear intention.
Displacement of Iraqis to Syria in the past decades and their forced return to Iraq following the Syrian uprising in 2011 form a unique chapter in the history of displacement in Iraq and the whole Middle East. This study first examined the several waves of mass displacement in Iraq in recent decades and the flight of Iraqi refugees to Syria in particular. Neither that historical review, nor the field research aim to draw any detailed political portrayal of the Iraqi returnees from Syria; the main goal was to gain insight into their current situation, in order to present recommendations for action responding to their needs as IDPs.
The field research gave such insight into the returnees’ situation in May and June 2014, but that data has been radically overtaken by the conflict and threat of violence spreading to most parts of Iraq since the early summer of 2014. The data collected for this study should thus be viewed as a snapshot of the situation at the time of the survey that needs to be analysed against the turbulent events of 2014.

At the time of the field research an overwhelming majority of the returnees in the Kurdish Region and in Central Iraq were relatively satisfied with their situation, considering the circumstances in the country. Having an overall high level of education and most having settled in their region in the past 1 to 2 years, the returnees were commonly employed (which however did not give sufficient income to cover all expenses) and over 80 per cent of their children were at school. After many forced displacements, they wanted to stay in their current region.

Although the returnees gave many, relatively positive indications of their living conditions, about half indicated particular family vulnerabilities aggravating their hardship, such as chronic illnesses, physical or mental disabilities, loss of family members, or being single or female heads of households.

It is reasonable to expect that the living conditions of those already in distress at the time of the field research – and of many whose life was relatively settled - will have worsened, especially in Central and Northern Iraq where the violence spread over the summer, and in Anbar, where the conflict has continued since early 2014, and intensified in the autumn of 2014.

The situation in the Kurdish region has dramatically changed. The mass displacement from Ninawa Governorate in the late summer of 2014 and the conflict has put the region, its whole population and the international community under intense pressure, both in terms of security and the comprehensive, largest scale humanitarian needs. Food, water, shelter, sanitation and basic health care have taken precedence in the national and international relief efforts, and are also the chief concerns of returnees and others who had been displaced earlier into the region.

Such continued distress concerns the Anbar Governorate in particular. The returnees, other displaced persons and the rest of the population have been trapped between conflict zones, suffering from disturbed livelihoods, cut communications, lacking food, medical and other services, and forced into rough, crowded housing.

At the time of the survey, the returnees to the Southern Governorates were the least satisfied out of the regions covered. Whereas the returnees in Central Iraq and KRI regions generally wanted to stay, that sentiment was far less common in Southern Iraq, where the feeling of inclusion was also the lowest and problems of housing, unemployment and dropping out of school education were clearly higher than in the two other regions, but probably yet surpassed by the hardship in Anbar, which continued as one of the locations of the conflict.

The study confirms that, despite the returnees’ relatively successful integration, generally high level of education and ability to find some form of employment, their experiences and that of other displaced persons varied in different areas of Iraq: for example, in schooling for their children, almost always underemployed and lacking income, facing economic problems (Southern Iraq), administrative and language barriers (for displaced generally in the Kurdish Region) and their crowded housing with relatives or friends (Southern Iraq). More focused and deeper analytical research is required to be able to address the whole range of underlying and more acute issues especially in Southern Iraq, to adapt the assistance and stabilization projects more closely to the needs of communities at all levels in Iraq, thus contributing to the country’s massive tasks of economic and physical reconstruction.
IRAQI RETURNEES FROM SYRIA

FOLLOWING THE 2011 SYRIA CRISIS

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