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**PERSPECTIVES ON RETURNEES  
AND COEXISTENCE IN IRAQ'S  
NINEWA PROVINCE**

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# **PERSPECTIVES ON RETURNEES AND COEXISTENCE IN IRAQ'S NINEWA PROVINCE**

**International Republican Institute**  
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*Perspectives on Returnees and Coexistence in Iraq's Ninewa Province*

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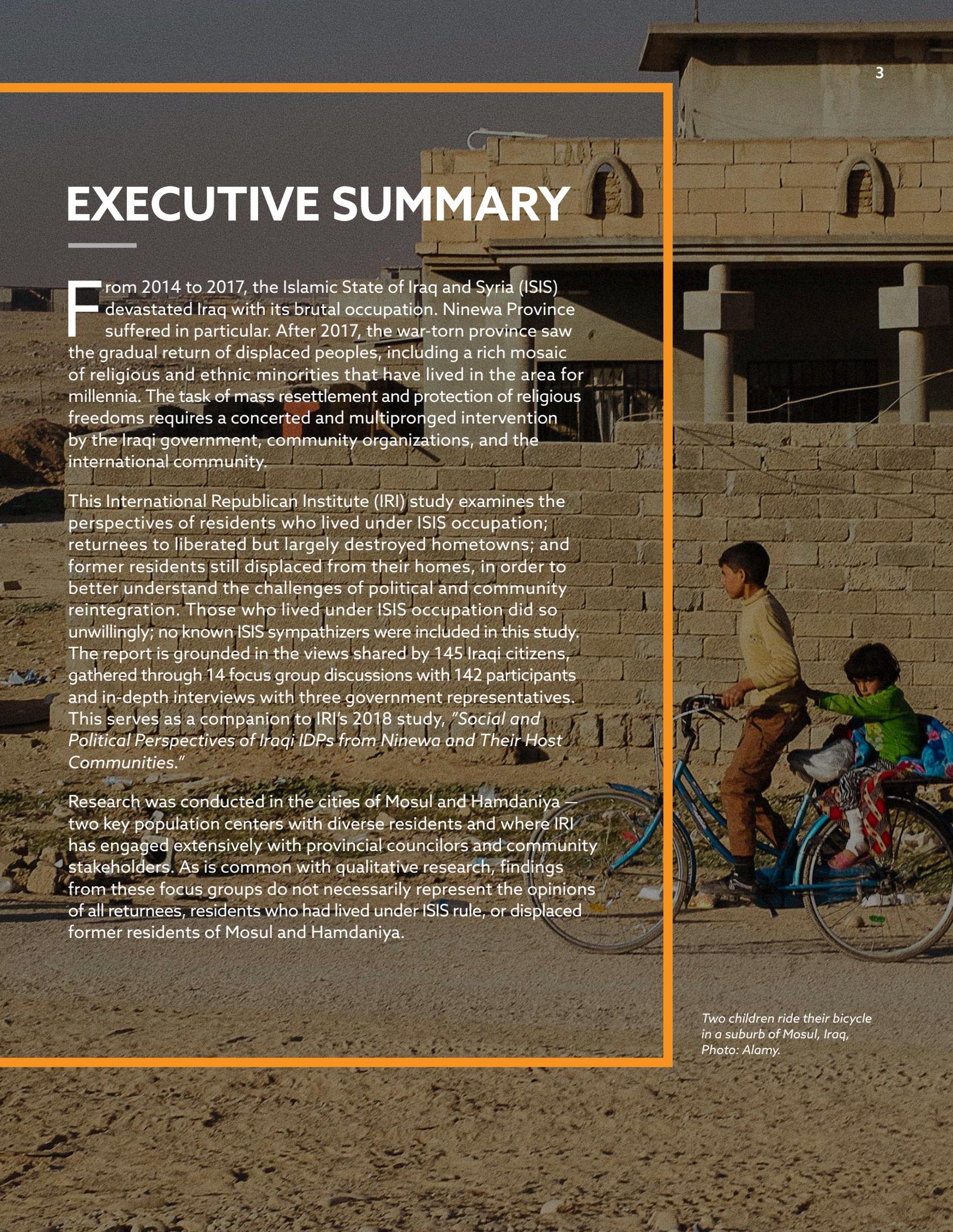
*Cover Image Description: An Iraqi man inspects the destruction in Mosul, Iraq in February 2018, Photo: Shutterstock.*

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From 2014 to 2017, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) devastated Iraq with its brutal occupation. Ninewa Province suffered in particular. After 2017, the war-torn province saw the gradual return of displaced peoples, including a rich mosaic of religious and ethnic minorities that have lived in the area for millennia. The task of mass resettlement and protection of religious freedoms requires a concerted and multipronged intervention by the Iraqi government, community organizations, and the international community.

This International Republican Institute (IRI) study examines the perspectives of residents who lived under ISIS occupation; returnees to liberated but largely destroyed hometowns; and former residents still displaced from their homes, in order to better understand the challenges of political and community reintegration. Those who lived under ISIS occupation did so unwillingly; no known ISIS sympathizers were included in this study. The report is grounded in the views shared by 145 Iraqi citizens, gathered through 14 focus group discussions with 142 participants and in-depth interviews with three government representatives. This serves as a companion to IRI's 2018 study, *"Social and Political Perspectives of Iraqi IDPs from Ninewa and Their Host Communities."*

Research was conducted in the cities of Mosul and Hamdaniya — two key population centers with diverse residents and where IRI has engaged extensively with provincial councilors and community stakeholders. As is common with qualitative research, findings from these focus groups do not necessarily represent the opinions of all returnees, residents who had lived under ISIS rule, or displaced former residents of Mosul and Hamdaniya.

A photograph of two children riding a blue bicycle on a dirt road. The boy is in the driver's seat, and the girl is sitting on the back seat. They are in front of a stone building with arched windows. The ground is dusty and there is some debris around.

*Two children ride their bicycle in a suburb of Mosul, Iraq. Photo: Alamy.*

## **Returnees**

- Finding 1** Returnee discussants' expectations for government support and services were high. Those who had lived as displaced persons in host communities – especially within Iraqi Kurdistan – expressed greater dissatisfaction and disappointment with the poor state of services than other groups.
- Finding 2** Female returnee discussants sought more personal freedom in their home communities. They reported frustration with men's restrictive attitudes towards them.
- Finding 3** Returnee discussants noted that community trust has been damaged by ISIS's occupation. They expressed fears of unknown new neighbors, perception of favoritism in aid distribution, and reported that some community leaders encourage insularity – undermining prospects for reconciliation between communities.
- Finding 4** Many returnee discussants believed that community reconciliation is possible but requires greater initiative from government and community leaders. Female discussants were more positive about reconciliation prospects.

## **Those Who Remained**

- Finding 5** Resident discussants were mostly satisfied with security in their communities but offered contradictory views about the resilience of ISIS.
- Finding 6** Hamdaniya resident discussants expressed fears of the district becoming a "disputed territory" contested by the central government, Kurdish authorities and local security forces.
- Finding 7** Hamdaniya resident discussants expressed sympathy for internally displaced persons (IDPs) and returnees. Mosul resident discussants, in contrast, viewed returnees with distrust.

- Finding 8** Mosul and Hamdaniya resident discussants, both male and female, observed an increased cultural liberalism among returnees, especially returnee women. Among Mosul resident discussants, men were severely critical of this change, while women had mixed views.
- Finding 9** Resident discussants expressed resentment toward all levels of the Iraqi government, especially with regard to service delivery; discussants complained that leaders do not listen to citizens and instead serve their own interests.
- Finding 10** Resident discussants from both areas expressed economic anxiety, especially relating to unemployment. Mosul resident discussants believed that returnees had destabilized the city economy, while Hamdaniya resident discussants were more positive.

## ***The Displaced***

- Finding 11** Yazidi IDP discussants emphasized three main preconditions for return: security guaranteed by the international community, infrastructure development, and government-run targeted service delivery.
- Finding 12** Yazidi IDP discussants faced a dual crisis of community and national identity. Many accused their Arab neighbors of betrayal amid ISIS occupation and blamed the government for their systemic marginalization. The loss of Iraqi identity was a commonly shared sentiment among Yazidi IDP discussants.
- Finding 13** IDP discussants said that basic services in camps are lacking and psychosocial support for survivors is inadequate. They reported that programs implemented in camps do not always meet the needs of the community, and there is little accountability in the allocation of financial resources.
- Finding 14** IDP discussants held a negative view of the government. They cited poor service delivery within IDP camps and accused the government of neglect and corruption.

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# OVERVIEW

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Since 2017, the International Republican Institute (IRI) has provided technical assistance to Iraqi political leaders, civil society organizations and citizens in order to help them address the challenges of post-Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) reconstruction and reconciliation. The long-term success of reconstruction depends, in large part, on Iraqi leaders having a genuine understanding of citizen needs and strategies with which to address these needs.

IRI contracted IIACSS, an Iraqi research firm, to facilitate citizen focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews (IDIs) in January 2019 in Mosul, Hamdaniya District, and Dohuk province to inform a citizen-centered approach to governance in Ninewa province. These 14 FGDs and three IDIs included a diverse array of perspectives on reconstruction in Ninewa:

- Shabak, Shia and Christian returnees to Hamdaniya who are rebuilding their lives after ISIS;
- Residents of Mosul who lived under ISIS's brutal occupation and now want to move forward; and
- Yazidis displaced from their homes to camps in Dohuk, unable or unwilling to return to their original homes post-ISIS.

This analysis was produced using three main sources of information:

- IRI's 2018 *"Social and Political Perspectives of Iraqi IDPs from Ninewa and Their Host Communities"* study informed the structure of the research agenda and the selection of target demographics.<sup>1</sup>
- Prior to hosting the FGDs, IRI conducted a stakeholder mapping exercise with provincial councilors, civil society activists and religious leaders in Ninewa. The goal of this exercise was to understand which actors in Iraq's complex landscape are well positioned to facilitate the peaceful reintegration of returning internally displaced persons (IDPs) into their communities of origin, and to define more precisely the challenges they face in doing so.
- The report is based on 14 FGDs with a diverse pool of 142 Iraqi citizens and IDIs with three government representatives from each of the three locations: Mosul, Hamdaniya and Dohuk. IIACSS selected focus group discussants using a pre-screening tool designed by IRI based first on their status as returnees, IDPs, or never-displaced residents, as well as their ethnic and religious affiliation. FGDs were segregated by gender. As common with qualitative research, findings from these focus groups do not necessarily represent the opinions of all returnees, residents who had lived under ISIS rule, or still displaced former residents of Mosul and Hamdaniya.

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<sup>1</sup> Zupruk, Brian, Ashleigh Whelan, and Emily Brouch. *Social and Political Perspectives of Iraqi IDPs from Ninewa and Their Host Communities*. International Republican Institute, Apr.-May 2018, [www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2018-09-05\\_iraq\\_fgd\\_report.pdf](http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2018-09-05_iraq_fgd_report.pdf).

# CONTEXT

Iraq's Ninewa province — historically a hub of trade, intellectualism and diversity — has become a flashpoint of sectarian violence and instability. Following the U.S.-led coalition invasion of Iraq in 2003, Mosul's various religious and ethnic sects set out on drastically diverging paths. The declining political influence of the city's majority Sunni Arab population (a strong base of support for Baathism and Saddam Hussein) was linked to the parallel rise in extremism. In contrast, Iraqi Kurds living in Ninewa benefited from the ascendant wealth and security of Kurdish parties based in the adjacent Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR).

The minority Shabak, Yazidi and Christian communities — which were well-integrated into the politics and economy of Ninewa prior to 2003 — splintered into factions, aligned with larger blocs and became the targets of sectarian violence. Tensions in the province reached a crescendo in 2014 when ISIS, pursuing a violently puritanical vision of Islam, swept eastward from Syria. As the organization gained control of northern Iraq in 2014, more than one million of Ninewa's residents fled to other provinces, including Erbil and Dohuk. The displaced included 800,000 members of the Turkmen, Yazidi, Christian and Shabak communities.<sup>2</sup>

From 2014 to 2017, ISIS occupied Mosul, pillaged Hamdaniya, and subjected its populations to murder, enslavement and displacement. In 2017, the Iraqi Government retook control of Ninewa from the so-called Islamic State. As the U.S.-led coalition and Iraqi forces advanced, roads, bridges, schools and homes were destroyed by fighting and new waves of displacement followed. More than two years later, much of urban Mosul, devastated by the eponymous battle to retake the city, has not been rebuilt and is only partially repopulated. To the southeast of the urban center, many of Hamdaniya's churches, factories, schools and homes still lay in ruins.

■ In 2017, the Iraqi Government retook control of Ninewa from the so-called Islamic State. As the U.S.-led coalition and Iraqi forces advanced, roads, bridges, schools and homes were destroyed by fighting and new waves of displacement followed.

<sup>2</sup> *Understanding Ethno-religious Groups in Iraq: Displacement and Return*. International Organization for Migration, 2009, [iraq.iom.int/publications/understanding-ethno-religious-groups-iraq-displacement-and-return-report](http://iraq.iom.int/publications/understanding-ethno-religious-groups-iraq-displacement-and-return-report).

ISIS's devastating conquest and destructive retreat triggered several distinct waves of displacement. In 2014, more than 2.1 million Ninewa residents — and nearly all Christians and Yazidis — were displaced to other provinces or fled abroad in response to ISIS's targeting of minorities.<sup>3</sup> Several years later, nearly 1.6 million people returned to a province that lay in ruins.<sup>4</sup> International organizations provided short-term emergency assistance after 2017, but the Iraqi government has been slow to invest in reconstruction, which has also been hampered by the lack of political prioritization; poor coordination between ministries, local government, civil society, religious leaders and international agencies; corruption; and cumbersome project management. The destruction of property and infrastructure and the dearth of public services has further disincentivized return.

Although the immediate threat of ISIS has been removed, displacement remains a driver of instability in the region. The voluntary return of IDPs to their communities of origin is key to achieving sustainable peace during the reconstruction period. Yet not all returns are voluntary. Coerced and forced returns at the behest of political or militia leaders, as well as the imprisonment of alleged sympathizers or relatives of alleged ISIS members, are in direct violation of international human rights standards and risk further alienating vulnerable populations.

As returns accelerated in 2018 and 2019, a serious divergence of opinion between those who left and returned ("returnees"), those who remained during the period of ISIS occupation ("residents"), and those who fled ("internally displaced persons") became apparent. This divergence is rooted in different community experiences under ISIS but also from a complicated post-ISIS landscape. Although common ground remains between these groups on issues like public services and an attachment to their communities, divisions over issues such as post-ISIS justice and the role of women risk fraying the social fabric and risk reigniting conflict.

■ The voluntary return of IDPs to their communities of origin is key to achieving sustainable peace during the reconstruction period.

<sup>3</sup> International Organization for Migration. "IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix Round 110, July 2019." *ReliefWeb*, [reliefweb.int/report/iraq/iraq-displacement-tracking-matrix-dtm-round-110-july-2019](https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/iraq-displacement-tracking-matrix-dtm-round-110-july-2019).

<sup>4</sup> International Organization for Migration. "IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix Round 110, July 2019."

## This report is segmented by demographic (returnees, residents, IDPs) and frames needs in Mosul and Hamdaniya around four themes:

### Security and Stability

Security in Ninewa has improved dramatically, although pockets of instability remain and the enduring presence of Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs), a state-sponsored umbrella organization composed of militias, in the area intimidate residents and returnees alike and prevent or discourage IDPs from returning. The aftershocks of displacement are both causes and byproducts of instability.

The process of reintegrating IDPs has been fraught. Kurds and other ethnic and religious groups are suspicious of Sunni Arab communities that remained in ISIS-occupied areas (“residents”), while divisions within and between minority groups and Sunni Arabs threaten to renew conflict.<sup>5</sup> Due to the prevalence of grievances, like economic instability and poor infrastructure, that existed before ISIS, there remains a risk for residual support in Ninewa’s rural areas. This has raised fears that ISIS could reemerge out of the ashes of these destroyed communities where there is still some support for the Islamic State.

### Social Cohesion

Discussants stressed a desire to reclaim a pluralistic, tolerant community — yet social cohesion in Ninewa remains badly damaged. Christians, Sunni, Shia, Shabak and Turkmen Iraqis lived as neighbors and coworkers for decades before ISIS sought to systematically purge and oppress minority groups. Their reign of terror created distrust between these traumatized communities.

### Government Performance

Returnee, IDP and resident needs include basic service delivery and reconstruction, political and social reconciliation, and the reintegration of both returnees and those who were trapped by ISIS into a cohesive, functioning community. As Iraq seeks to create a post-ISIS national identity and to incorporate IDPs, returnees and residents into Iraq’s democratic process, local and national governments and community leaders must understand their perspectives and needs.

### Identity

As Iraq seeks to rebuild a national identity post-ISIS, it is essential that local and national governments and political actors — in conjunction with local community leaders — understand that physical reconstruction alone will not guarantee community protection against extremism and a tendency towards reconciliation. Iraq must take steps to renew intercommunity cohesion, be open to honest discussion of what transpired, and work to restore the trust and confidence of its citizens in the political process from the bottom up.

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**Returnees:** Those who left and returned, both voluntary and by force.

**Residents:** Those who remained during the period of ISIS occupation.

**IDPs:** Internally displaced persons who fled to outside provinces such as Dohuk and Erbil, including Shabak, Yazidi and Christian minorities.

<sup>5</sup> Rohwerder, Brigitte. *Conflict Dynamics and Potential for Peacebuilding in Iraq*. GSRDC. Assets Publishing Service (Government of the United Kingdom), 19 Aug. 2015, [assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08967e5274a27b200007d/HDQ1263.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08967e5274a27b200007d/HDQ1263.pdf).

## Figure 1: Map of Iraq's Ninewa Province



## Background on Selected Geographic Areas

**01 Mosul** was the country's second-largest city and northern Iraq's main political, commercial, and educational hub for most of the country's modern history. It is the capital of Ninewa province (Iraq's second-largest province by population and third-largest by land). Prior to the rise of ISIS, the municipality recorded nearly 1.4 million residents.<sup>6</sup> Without a recent census, exact numbers are unknown, but an estimated 80 percent Sunni Arab and 20 percent Kurd, Yazidi, Christian (Assyrian, Chaldean, and Armenian), Shabak, and Turkmen make up the city's population.<sup>7</sup>

After ISIS occupied Mosul in 2014, an estimated 500,000 residents fled, primarily to the adjacent IKR provinces of Dohuk and Erbil. Religious minorities emigrated at particularly high rates. ISIS occupation devastated Mosul's infrastructure, economy and social fabric.<sup>8</sup> The limited reconstruction that has taken place since Mosul's liberation in July 2017 is insufficient. The west side of Mosul remains in ruins. Although government funding and international assistance has been allocated to reconstruction projects, implementation is slow and inefficient, and quality of life — education, job market, and more — remains low. Nearly 300,000 of Mosul's residents remain displaced as of July 2019. Additionally, almost one million have returned.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *City Profile of Mosul, Iraq: Multi-sector Analysis of a City under Siege*. UN Habitat, Oct. 2016, [unhabitat.org/city-profile-of-mosul-iraq-a-city-under-siege/](https://unhabitat.org/city-profile-of-mosul-iraq-a-city-under-siege/).

<sup>7</sup> *City Profile of Mosul, Iraq*.

<sup>8</sup> *City Profile of Mosul, Iraq*.

<sup>9</sup> International Organization for Migration. "IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix Round 110, July 2019."

**02 Hamdaniya District** east and southeast of Mosul on the Ninewa Plains between Mosul and Erbil, is the ancient home to many of Ninewa's minority communities: Christians, Yazidis and Shabak Iraqis (a distinct ethnic group that is primarily Shia). The district hosts Iraq's largest Christian center (Alqosh) and a significant Yazidi town (Bashiqa). Prior to ISIS's occupation, Hamdaniya — one of six districts in Ninewa province — had a population of 226,367. (The population increased from 2008 to 2016 due to Christians resettling in the area.)<sup>10</sup>

ISIS's invasion in 2014 pushed an estimated 125,000 people of all sects to flee the district. Minority groups, including the Christian, Shabak and Yazidi communities, were disproportionately displaced.<sup>11</sup> Most of those left behind were executed or enslaved.<sup>12</sup> According to the International Organization for Migration's (IOM) Displacement Tracking Matrix, Hamdaniya was home to approximately 160,000 returnees as of July 2019.<sup>13</sup>

**03 Dohuk Province** directly above Ninewa, is Iraq's northernmost province and is part of the Kurdistan Region. As of 2018, the province hosted about 500,000 Iraqi IDPs (a population that peaked at nearly 750,000).<sup>14</sup> International organizations constructed these camp sites as temporary shelters to relieve the displacement crisis of 2014; as a result, many lack sufficient infrastructure and amenities for long-term habitation. Displaced Yazidis have generally been reluctant to move back to their home communities, even after the ISIS's defeat, and therefore the camps remain open and operating.

<sup>9</sup> International Organization for Migration. "IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix Round 110, July 2019."

<sup>10</sup> Gaston, Erica. "Iraq after ISIL: Qaraqosh, Hamdaniya District." *GGPI (Global Public Policy Institute)*, 5 Aug. 2017, [gppi.net/2017/08/05/iraq-after-isil-qaraqosh-hamdaniya-district](http://gppi.net/2017/08/05/iraq-after-isil-qaraqosh-hamdaniya-district).

<sup>11</sup> Barker, Jeremy P. "A Flicker of Hope? Implications of the Genocide Designation for Religious Minorities in Iraq." *Religious Freedom Institute*, 30 July 2016, [www.religiousfreedominstitute.org/cornerstone/2016/7/30/a-flicker-of-hope-implications-of-the-genocide-designation-for-religious-minorities-in-iraq](http://www.religiousfreedominstitute.org/cornerstone/2016/7/30/a-flicker-of-hope-implications-of-the-genocide-designation-for-religious-minorities-in-iraq).

<sup>12</sup> Barker. "A Flicker of Hope? Implications of the Genocide Designation for Religious Minorities in Iraq."

<sup>13</sup> International Organization for Migration. "IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix Round 110, July 2019."

<sup>14</sup> "Kurdistan Region Still Hosts About 1.5 Million IDPs and Refugees." Kurdistan Regional Government, 14 Feb. 2019, [previous.cabinet.gov.krd/a/d.aspx?s=010000&l=12&a=57579](http://previous.cabinet.gov.krd/a/d.aspx?s=010000&l=12&a=57579).

# FINDINGS: RETURNEES

*Focus groups discussions with formerly displaced Iraqis from the Shabak and Christian communities who have now returned to their homes either in Hamdaniya District or Mosul city. Each of the four focus groups were separated by gender and by religious affiliation.<sup>15</sup>*

## Finding 1

**Returnee discussants' expectations for government support and services were high. Those who had lived as displaced persons in host communities — especially within Iraqi Kurdistan — expressed greater dissatisfaction and disappointment with the poor state of services than other groups.**

- The lack of services and slow pace of reconstruction were noted as hindering the progress of returns and contributing to the overarching frustration of returnees with government performance, creating further distrust. Most returnee discussants reported that faith-based organizations were the main supporters of reconstruction, especially for Christians.
- Despite the universal desire to return, many residents noted that life is far worse than before their displacement. Participants pointed to the hollowed-out financial sector and absent public services as the main shortcomings of post-ISIS Mosul and Hamdaniya.

**“Our presence will force the government to rebuild our area.”**

**— Shabak female returnee to Hamdaniya**

**We returned because of our love for our area. Mosul will remain our city and we will always love it no matter what happened. We have no place other than our house and our city.**

— Christian female returnee to Mosul

**[The government] only comes to us during the elections. We will not see them again when the elections are finished.**

— Christian female returnee to Mosul

<sup>15</sup> Quotes in this report were minimally treated as necessary to improve clarity. The original was preserved to the largest extent possible, including errors in syntax and word choice.

**“ We need to increase cultural awareness, starting from educational institutions and with women who are restricted from leaving their homes [by their families] and not let our children be affected by ISIS. We must remove the blinders on peoples’ eyes and reverse the brainwashing that occurred by raising cultural and social awareness.”**

**– A returnee man, Filingue**



*Iraqi artists paint pro-peace graffiti in Mosul, Iraq, Photo: Shutterstock.*

## Analysis

Despite the destruction of many returnee discussants' homes, places of worship and shared resources, returnees expressed a strong desire to return to their communities. Although many of those displaced to host communities in Iraqi Kurdistan expressed overall satisfaction with the services they obtained there, they noted they felt like outsiders, often because of the language barrier.

Others pointed to high housing costs in their host communities. Some expected continued financial support from the government as a result of what they had received while displaced — though that assistance had been predominantly provided by charities or nongovernmental organizations. Discussants who returned said they no longer felt like they knew their neighbors, with some alluding to the presence of the PMUs as strangers in their communities.

## Finding 2

### **Female returnee discussants sought more personal freedom in their home communities. They reported frustration with men's restrictive attitudes towards them and frequent harassment of women in public.**

- Women returnee discussants of both Christian and Shabak communities expressed greater expectations for personal freedom in their home communities following their displacement to less conservative areas. For example, some explained that they had evolved in their thinking and now wore less conservative clothing than before their displacement. Some female discussants complained about men's harassment on the street, which they said they did not encounter prior to the ISIS occupation. Discussants noted that there are limited opportunities for social engagement and do not feel safe in public. They think that they have greater physical security, but it is not sufficient to carry out their lives in a more liberal manner. Male returnee discussants did not bring up these topics in relation to women, however, male resident discussants highlighted concerns about increased cultural liberalism amongst returnees (see Finding 8).
- Female discussants diverged in their opinions over whether women should be treated equally to men in the job market. Some women said that since men are traditionally responsible for providing for their families they should be given priority when job opportunities are available. However, other women noted that men are more likely to spend money on themselves, whereas women are more likely to spend the money on their families. The latter also argued that because there are now many female-headed households, women deserve at least equal opportunity if not preferential treatment in hiring.

## Analysis

The focus group discussions underline how attitudinal changes on women's rights among some returnees conflict with the outlook of some residents who remained under ISIS occupation. While social conflict over issues of women's rights is not unique to Ninewa province or Iraq in general, the added dimension of trauma heightens the risk of social disintegration, as do fissures created by suspicions of others from outside one's religious community. High levels of competition for employment, especially with many women entering the workforce, will likely negatively affect social cohesion within the province, unless overall employment prospects improve.

**We have so many divorced women and so many widows ... and they all have no jobs.**

— Shabak female returnee to Mosul

## Finding 3

**Returnee discussants noted that community trust has been damaged by ISIS's occupation. They expressed fear of unknown new neighbors, perception of favoritism in aid distribution, and reported that some community leaders encourage insularity — undermining prospects for reconciliation between communities.**

- Some discussants said they no longer know their neighbors' religious or political affiliations, creating a fear of the "unknown other." Discussants told stories about the pre-ISIS days, when they felt more secure in their towns with neighbors they'd known for generations, highlighting shared meals and holiday celebrations — and many noted that these bonds remained during displacement, despite families being separated by long distances.
- There is a perception among some Shabak and Christian discussants that their communities do not mix and that there is discrimination and distrust between Muslims and Christians in

**“Our neighbors are Muslims, but it looks like we all live together in one house. They visited us when we were displaced and offered for us to stay with them in Najaf and Karbala [where they fled] when we did not have a home.”**

— Christian female returnee to Mosul

general. However, some discussants (typically women) also pointed to the depth and continuity of inter-religious friendships despite displacement and instability.

- Discussants mentioned that they felt financial support by religious organizations was conditional on ensuring that property stayed within the community. Christian discussants more frequently noted that their religious

networks — both within Iraq as well as abroad — provided financial assistance for rebuilding and encouraged them to return to their communities. While this reduced their need to rely on government assistance to rebuild homes, discussants expressed frustration with the slow pace of government action to rebuild shared infrastructure.

## Analysis

Given the ongoing competition for control within the Ninewa Plains between various PMUs and the Iraqi government, discussants may have been expressing uncertainty and fear regarding the presence of the PMUs operating in the area. While the predominantly Assyrian Christian Ninewa Plain Protection Unit controls security within Hamdaniya District, other PMU forces operate within the province and in Mosul city itself. The ongoing struggle for control of the land and reconstruction funds places the average resident amid conflict between predominantly Shia PMU units, and between the political parties and religious leaders affiliated with the Iraqi and Kurdish Regional Governments.

**The future of minorities is unknown. We don't know what will happen to us a few years from now and we don't know what our fate will be when something happens to Mosul again.**

— Shabak female returnee to Mosul

**There is no coexistence. When Muslims see a Christian, they stay away from him — and the Christians stay away from the Muslims when they see them.**

— Christian man returnee to Mosul

## Finding 4

**Many returnees believed that community reconciliation is possible but requires greater community and government-led initiatives. Women were more positive about reconciliation prospects.**

*Differentiating between reconciliation among religious/ethnic groups and reconciliation among returnees and ISIS sympathizers is important. Most discussants wanted to see reconciliation among religious and ethnic groups but few sought reconciliation with their persecutors. Perspectives on reconciliation with ISIS sympathizers ranged from openness under certain conditions — such as mandatory participation in rehabilitation programs or the presence of unaffiliated security services — to the total rejection of reconciliation.*

**“When ISIS first came, the Sunnis of Mosul thought that they would not be harmed — that they were only there for the Shia — but then ISIS targeted them too.”**

**— Shabak female returnee to Hamdaniya**

- Some discussants, particularly from the Shabak community, believed that some Sunni residents remained in their communities because they did not expect to be targeted by ISIS because of their sectarian identity. Without excusing acts of violence by ISIS, some discussants said that some people joined ISIS because they needed a job or as a result of dissatisfaction with the government.
- While many discussants did not believe that ISIS members were still living in their communities, others highlighted the risk of sleeper cells and feared the long-term effects of the occupation on the children who lived through it. Some male Christian discussants expressed concerns that those who lived under occupation (willingly or unwillingly) have become desensitized to violence, putting them at odds with the returnees' expectations for community norms.
- Openness to interethnic and interreligious reconciliation was prevalent across genders and religious affiliations. However, at the same time discussants desired justice and investigations into those who were affiliated with ISIS and sympathized with the group's cause and message.

## Analysis

Views on community reconciliation need to be analyzed through the perspective of multi-layered traumas experienced by returnees. While community relations may have been strained pre-ISIS, there was no impending threat of violence. However, now returnees think this is a possibility. One discussant summarized the point well, “If we don’t reconcile with them, they will turn against us – and they will use violence.” Thus, even if community members distrust some of their neighbors, they may seek a cold reconciliation to prevent a return to extreme violence. This desire for a return to normalcy despite fears demonstrates that community mistrust can be overcome, especially if proper resources are allocated to rehabilitating those who lived under ISIS control.

**We must reconcile with them, because we can’t deal with them with violence.**

– Shabak female returnee to Hamdaniya

**We should close this chapter and open a new page. We must deal with each other because this is not just “our” area or “their” area – this area is for all of us and there must be unity and coexistence between the components that live here.**

– Christian man returnee to Mosul



*Al-Salam hospital in Mosul, Iraq is viewed from a car, Photo: iStock*

# FINDINGS: THOSE WHO REMAINED

*Focus group discussion sessions with residents — in this study, all Sunni Arab Iraqis who lived under ISIS occupation — were separated by area of residence, either Hamdaniya or Mosul, as well as by gender. All resident discussants lived in the area prior to ISIS rule, during the invasion in 2014, throughout the three-year occupation, and during the liberation and reconstruction process.*

## Finding 5

### **Resident discussants were mostly satisfied with security in their communities but offered conflicting views about ISIS's resilience.**

- Most Hamdaniya and Mosul resident discussants felt safe because local security was managed by the joint Iraqi Security Forces and CJTF-OIR. Discussants in both locations perceived that violent crime (murder, kidnapping) and terrorism were rare at the time of the focus group. However, they noted that property crimes — illegal manipulation of deeds, squatting and looting — occurred regularly. Depending on their location, resident discussants credited improved security to different actors. In Mosul city, discussants credited the central government most often; for example, a male resident living in Mosul specifically cited the Ministries of Interior and Defense. In Hamdaniya, resident discussants attributed improved security to local (implying Kurdish, Christian and Shabak) forces and never mentioned Iraqi state forces. In both locations, discussants were unsure which entities are officially responsible for providing security in their area.
- Resident discussants in both areas had complex and conflicting views on the roots and resilience of ISIS. Some discussants believed that ISIS followers in their area were attracted to the group's extremist worldview; others felt that this was because of religious sectarian pressures (with Sunni populations feeling threatened by pre-2014 Shia military presence); and others felt that people were drawn to ISIS because of economic need and unemployment.
- Some Hamdaniya resident discussants believed that ISIS was eradicated, while others thought that it was resilient and would reemerge. A discussant in Hamdaniya, for example, said that when ISIS arrived, "all the people celebrated." Another resident believed that the community "had been fooled" and ISIS only had support "in the beginning." A third discussant noted that many residents of Hamdaniya "believed the ideology of ISIS" but few actively joined the group. Some discussants thought ISIS would eventually return and compared it to "a time bomb" of sectarian tension that may explode in the future.
- Mosul resident discussants argued that support for ISIS had mostly evaporated by 2019 — maintaining that most ISIS supporters were dead or in camps, though some supporters had gone underground. Several asserted that ISIS only appeared to be popular early on because "people were forced" to follow the group and because Shia-dominated central government security forces were deeply unpopular and "abusive." According

to one discussant, “In the beginning ISIS was good, but after a while they showed their true colors” and fell out of favor in Mosul. Discussants asserted that by 2019 ISIS supporters had largely been “killed or left the city” and that “ISIS has no one left” and that “ISIS had committed crimes, and we will never forget them.” In contrast, some Mosul discussants said that ISIS supporters still existed among displaced Sunnis living in camps, young people who lost family members during the campaign to retake Mosul, and ideologically committed supporters who went underground after 2017. Some discussants highlighted the way in which ISIS built community support between 2013 and 2014, asserting that the group may attempt to repeat this in the near future.

**“ I think reconciliation is hard because these people’s minds are with ISIS ...”**

**— Male, Hamdaniya resident**

## **Analysis**

The potential for a resurgent ISIS is a core political and social challenge for Iraq. Analysts cite evidence that ISIS is adapting to the new security landscape and consolidating pockets of support. According to the 2018 Inspector General’s report from the U.S. Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve, ISIS’s strategy is to capitalize on citizen resentment over poor governance, especially in isolated and rural areas.

IRI’s focus group discussions in Mosul and Hamdaniya corroborate concerns over a potential ISIS resurgence. Discussants argued that while ISIS supporters may not be publicly visible, they had gone underground and could be reactivated. This possibility clearly inspired fear among several discussants who were hesitant to speak about the terrorist group at all. Additionally, distrust of the Iraqi government, tribal rivalries and sectarian tensions may all nourish ISIS sympathies. Young men with few job prospects, living in ruined cities, policed by outsider groups, and lacking political pathways to improve their communities are potential ISIS recruits. As discussants regularly noted, unaddressed grievances are interconnected with extremism as an outlet for frustrations.

## Finding 6

**Hamdaniya resident discussants expressed fears of the district becoming a long-term “disputed territory,” contested by the central government, Kurdish authorities and local security forces.<sup>16</sup>**

**“ We have these concerns other than ISIS’s return to the area; we are concerned about who will control us and what is going to happen.”**

**— Shabak female,  
Hamdaniya resident**

- Several Hamdaniya resident discussants highlighted the political contest between the Iraqi government, the Kurdish government and PMUs to control the area post-ISIS, whereas discussants in Mosul never questioned the rule of the central government in their area. A Shabak resident discussant explained that the competition for control is between the “central government,” “Kurdistan,” “international forces” and “area people.” Another discussant characterized the dispute as lack of clarity about “which entity will provide security.”

- A female Arab discussant focused on the conflict between the “central government and Kurdistan.” She cited the example of Kurdish checkpoints moving closer to Hamdaniya and the central government then moving their checkpoints closer to Erbil. This discussant identified strongly with Ninewa provincial government and Iraq’s central government, saying that she was “an Arab” and therefore did not want to be governed by Kurdish authorities who she deemed “racist.”
- The competition for power within Hamdaniya bred anxiety within all communities. A Shabak resident discussant considered the security situation to be “good” but feared “changes for the worse” with “different” (non-Shabak) forces taking control of the area. Another discussant stressed that disputed areas tended to be “neglected.”



*An Iraqi flag and Christian cross stand at an entrance to the predominately Christian town of Qaraqosh, Iraq, Photo: iStock.*

<sup>16</sup> Operation Inherent Resolve and Other Overseas Contingency Operations Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, 5 Feb. 2019, [media.defense.gov/2019/Feb/05/2002086500/-1/-1/1/FY2019-IG-IRREPORT.PDF](https://media.defense.gov/2019/Feb/05/2002086500/-1/-1/1/FY2019-IG-IRREPORT.PDF).

## Analysis

The competition to control Hamdaniya and adjacent areas is arguably the district's defining political challenge. If political control remains disputed, governance (including public services, security and regulation) will suffer in the long run, as it has in Kirkuk, Diyala and other disputed territories.

Prior to the arrival of ISIS, the district was under the full administrative control of the central government, but under the political influence of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). The KDP secured several seats on the now-dissolved Ninewa Provincial Council, in part by recruiting Yazidi candidates to run on its list. After 2003, the KDP formally declared parts of the Ninewa Plains, including Hamdaniya District, a "disputed territory," opening the door for a legal dispute in an attempt to formalize its influence in the area.

After ISIS's defeat, the mostly depopulated area was contested by central government-controlled forces, KDP peshmerga, and newly arrived local forces like the 30th Brigade (a Shabak Popular Mobilization Unit (PMU) and the 50th Brigade (a notionally Christian PMF)). These PMUs – which formed following Grand Ayatollah Sistani's fatwa (decree) to mobilize popular forces to fight ISIS. PMUs are composed of primarily Iraqi regular forces from predominantly Shia provinces in the south, which are therefore viewed as foreigners by residents and returnees in Ninewa.

While many remain grateful for the role these forces played in defeating ISIS, many also feel they've overstayed their welcome and wish to see less partisan security forces – particularly the Iraqi army – return to provide security. The district's future political status depends on the central government's ability to consolidate power and dislodge PMU forces. This ongoing effort will define Iraq's future as a coherent, unified state.

## Finding 7

### **Hamdaniya resident discussants expressed sympathy for IDPs and returnees. Mosul resident discussants, in contrast, viewed returnees with distrust.**

- Hamdaniya resident discussants, both male and female, were eager to achieve peaceful coexistence of IDPs and returnees, and expressed sympathy for displaced members of the community – especially Christian families. Some went as far as claiming that "ISIS is forgotten" in the area, and that the inhabitants would not allow the recent past to shape community relations.
- Other discussants downplayed the plight of the displaced, and instead focused on the deprivation and suffering of residents under ISIS.



*An Iraqi woman walks with her child past a destroyed house in Mosul, Iraq, Photo: Shutterstock.*

- Several male discussants from Mosul did not see sectarianism as a problem, instead, they cited a corrosion of overall community trust unrelated to the return of minorities to the area, tracing new distrust to a lack of information about returnees. Discussants explained that, prior to ISIS, Mosul was close-knit and neighbors knew each other closely, but that the effects of the occupation had brought pervasive suspicion to the city.
- One discussant relayed a story of his relative helping a displaced family only to be accused of assisting former ISIS members. In his telling, his relative took pity on a returnee family and allowed them to live in an unfinished house on his property. The discussant's relative was eventually called to the police station and accused of harboring former ISIS members. The family, according to police, had been involved with ISIS and were wanted. The discussant underscored how difficult this made it to trust other members of the community.
- Sunni Arab resident discussants' perspectives on Shabak returnees and residents were more varied than on Christian returnees. Members of the Shabak community were perceived to have been less persecuted than others. Discussants mentioned Shabak families moving into depopulated cities following the recapture of the area by the Iraqi government where they would squat in the unoccupied homes of displaced Christians, sometimes bringing their livestock with them into the cities, before being evicted or forced to pay rent by owners.

**“ Now we ask about anyone that comes to our city from another area, and it is not like how it was before when we used to not ask about anyone.”**

**— Male, Mosul resident**

## Finding 8

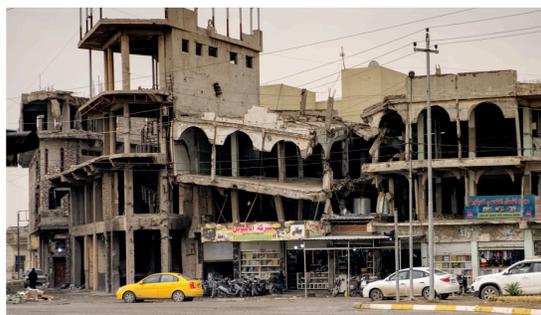
### Mosul and Hamdaniya resident discussants, both male and female, observed an increased cultural liberalism among returnees, especially returnee women. Among Mosul resident discussants, men were severely critical of this change, while women had mixed views.

- Discussants from both Mosul and Hamdaniya observed increased cultural tolerance among returnees who had lived in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region and elsewhere, but interpretations of this trend varied depending on the discussants' location and demographic.
  - Female discussants in Hamdaniya (and several in Mosul) asserted that returnees had become "more cultured" while living in Erbil. Some discussants expressed envy that the displaced had benefited from displacement to the Iraqi Kurdistan Region. There they enjoyed better business, educational and job opportunities, higher incomes and a better quality of family life. Female discussants regularly contrasted their extremely "limited" lifestyle in Ninewa under ISIS with the freer lifestyle outside of Ninewa.
- The returnees developed and improved at the time of ISIS because they left the city, but our time was frozen and we didn't do anything to develop and improve.**

— Female, Mosul resident
- Among Mosul resident discussants, women who had lived under ISIS had more mixed opinions about the effects of returnees on the community's traditionally conservative lifestyle. While some discussants saw returnees as more liberal and cultured after their return, a slight majority believed that returnees were responsible for making Mosul a more immoral environment. One discussant cited the "extremely liberal" attire and behavior of women at the local university as an example of a new level of social denigration. Their male counterparts consistently attributed the perceived degeneration of moral standards to returnees. Female discussants regularly contrasted their extremely "limited" lifestyle in Ninewa under ISIS with the freer lifestyle outside of Ninewa.
  - Two explanations of the city's perceived moral decline emerged. Commonly, male resident discussants claimed that returnees had been corrupted while displaced. Less commonly, they believed that returnees' socially liberal behaviors were always present in Mosul but went underground during the ISIS years, only to reemerge after ISIS withdrew.
  - Mosul resident discussants identified several specific behaviors perceived to be more common after ISIS as a result of returnees:
    - **Dress:** Some were critical of returnees' style of clothing, claiming the style was more revealing than was previously acceptable.
    - **Prostitution:** Many male discussants in this group raised concerns about the liberal attitudes of returnee women and specifically prostitution. For example, a resident cited the opening of new cafes with "working girls"— places that had purportedly not existed before.
    - **Alcohol:** Several discussants complained that returnees had opened liquor stores. Other claimed that returnees were openly drinking and getting drunk in the streets.
    - **Homosexuality:** Some discussants claimed that returnees increased the prevalence of homosexuality in Mosul, particularly among young, idle men.

The returnees affected the community in a negative way, because the ideology they brought with them [was] not suitable with our community.

— Male, Mosul resident



Destroyed house in Mosul, Iraq in January 2020,  
Photo: Enno Lenze.

## Finding 9

**Residents expressed resentment toward all levels of Iraqi government, especially with regard to service delivery provision; discussants complained that leaders don't listen to citizens and instead serve their own interests.**

- Discussants were deeply critical of government performance at all levels, and do not think that the national government is addressing their individual and community needs.
- Discussants primarily evaluated government performance in relation to their experiences with service delivery, including access to healthcare (noting a lack of hospitals); quality of primary and higher education (noting a drop in quality of education during and after ISIS); and the strength of job market (noting a lack of jobs).
- Despite devastation from years of war and occupation, discussants did not stress government-led reconstruction as a clear priority. One discussant said that Mosul needs “more than just a bridge” and argued that government-led reconstruction was getting in the way of citizen-led reconstruction efforts.
- Most discussants wanted better roads and bridges. One discussant noted that one of Mosul's three main bridges has been left destroyed for years. Several discussants supported road construction but criticized the construction of new sidewalks, trees and medians as opportunities for overspending and corruption. Several discussants (particularly in Hamdaniya) emphasized the need to rebuild private homes destroyed by ISIS, claiming the government had not provided adequate compensation.
- Most Mosul and Hamdaniya resident discussants expressed a desire to be more involved in decision-making in their communities. Hamdaniya resident discussants believed that they were in a good position to make decisions for their communities but said that they did not have the opportunity to do this.

**If we participate in the decision-making process, we will make an impact in the community, because we want to change our reality. ... Each one of us wants to be a part of the decision-making processes but we are not getting this chance.**

— Male, Mosul resident

- Residents noted that politicians appeared concerned about citizen needs during campaign seasons but then disappear after elections. Discussants in both locations noted promises to provide jobs, build

infrastructure, and combat corruption during campaigns — and then little or no follow-through in the years after elections. This trend of overpromising added to the broader perception that politicians in Iraq are self-serving and a pervasive cynicism about the performance of Iraqi democracy.

**Our issue is not with the governor or with the government; our issue is that the whole political system is wrong in the country. The rail tracks have issues, so if you change the train driver you will not fix the issue, but if you change the rail tracks then everything will be better.**

— Male, Mosul resident

**“ We want the government to provide us with more services than the services six months ago [late 2018] — but there is little improvement.”**

— Male, Hamdaniya resident

## Finding 10

**Resident discussants of both areas emphasized economic anxiety, especially about unemployment. Mosul resident discussants believed that returnees had destabilized the city economy, while Hamdaniya resident discussants were more positive.**

- Mosul residents stressed that negative influence of returnees on the local economy. For example, discussants claimed that returnees influenced local prices by increasing demand, created job competition, and raised the unemployment rate. In Hamdaniya, discussants viewed the improved security situation and the return of Christian communities as positive for the local economy.
- Unemployment and job creation were the most cited public policy concerns. Discussants noted a disconnect between education levels and job

opportunities. A resident in Mosul, for example, noted that his household has six college graduates and yet all were unemployed. This anxiety was also common in Hamandiyah, where discussants cited years of education in technical industries followed by a lack of job opportunities after graduation — delaying marriage and other life milestones.

**If the situation remains like this without jobs or employment, the situation will be worse than before [ISIS]. There are so many graduates without jobs.**

— Male, Hamdaniya resident

# FINDINGS: THE DISPLACED

Focus groups discussions with displaced Iraqis featured Yazidi men and women, predominantly displaced from Sinjar, living in camps in Dohuk. Two separate focus group discussions, separated by gender, took place outside of the camp settings to encourage openness.

## Finding 11

**Yazidi IDP discussants emphasized three main preconditions for return: security guaranteed by the international community, infrastructure development, and government-run targeted service delivery.**

- Nearly all Yazidi IDP discussants said that guarantees for their protection by the UN and other international bodies is a critical condition

for their return. They believed that if there was enough understanding internationally about the historical persecution and depth of betrayal during the ISIS invasion, the international community would be willing to protect them more effectively.

- Many discussants noted that the central government had a responsibility to treat the Yazidi community as an inseparable component of Iraq and back up its rhetorical support for the community with actions that facilitate their safe return to their homes. Some discussants felt that the Christian minority has received more support. Others called on the Iraqi Parliament to recognize that the Yazidi community faced a genocide and to hold a session dedicated to rebuilding trust.<sup>17</sup>
- Some discussants said they would only be interested in political participation and voting if they felt that candidates/parties would positively contribute to the security environment and service provision for the Yazidi community. Discussants attributed

**“The government did not protect our area well so that we could live safely, so we blame the government first and we blame [our Arab blood brothers] next.”**

— Female, Yazidi IDP

<sup>17</sup> As of the time of writing, no action has been taken by the Council of Representatives to recognize the Yazidi community specifically. The Kurdistan Regional Parliament has officially proclaimed August 3 (the anniversary of the ISIS invasion) as a day of remembrance in honor of those killed by ISIS. The Council of Representatives is considering a law proposed by the President's Office to guarantee the rights of Yazidi women who survived the genocide, but it has not yet been brought to the floor for consideration.

their waning faith in the central government and KRG to the many broken promises to address their concerns. Some discussants specifically noted that the support they were receiving in the camps was solely the result of international humanitarian organizations and not the Iraqi or Kurdish governments.

- For Yazidi IDP discussants, the ISIS occupation was one of many historical instances of violent oppression. Their use of a term loosely

translated as “blood brother” when describing their Arab neighbors who had betrayed them underscores how deeply they felt the betrayal. Although the word “genocide” was not explicitly used by discussion moderators, it was consistently used by IDP discussants to describe what happened to their community, and some discussants repeatedly said that ISIS had inflicted the “seventy-fifth” genocide against the Yazidi community in its history.

## Analysis

Given the history of violence toward their community, Yazidi IDP discussants are worried for their safety and trust neither the central government in Baghdad nor the Kurdistan Regional Government to protect them. While many Yazidi IDP respondents held ISIS responsible for their displacement, blame was just as frequently attributed to the failure of the Iraqi security forces and Kurdish peshmerga. Others accused government security forces of abandoning them during the ISIS invasion of Sinjar.

Discussants shared harrowing accounts of how neighbors betrayed each other — shattering bonds that they believed would have protected them. When moderators asked discussants what they hoped for their futures, all Yazidi IDP respondents agreed they would emigrate if possible — not because they want to leave Iraq, but because they did not feel secure in their home communities.

Discussants highlighted concerns including the presence of landmines and other unexploded ordnances, villages in dire need of infrastructural development and lack of employment opportunities as motivating their desire to emigrate. However, it was also clear that many would prefer to return to their homes or remain in host communities if the government were to implement reconstruction projects and targeted service delivery.

**Without the international protection there is no security for the Yazidis in Iraq ... the government is not capable of providing security for us.**

— Male, Yazidi IDP

## Finding 12

**Yazidi IDP discussants faced a dual crisis of community and national identity. Many accused Arab neighbors of betrayal amid ISIS occupation and blamed the government for systemic marginalization. The loss of Iraqi identity was a commonly shared sentiment among Yazidi IDP discussants.**

- All Yazidi IDP discussants shared the belief that some of their Arab neighbors betrayed the Yazidi community. Some said that their neighbors went as far as to call ISIS members to report where to find Yazidi families, especially those with young women in the household. Some shared stories of being attacked by ISIS sympathizers as they were fleeing to Mount Sinjar and others said that their homes and belongings had been taken over by those they had previously called “blood brothers.”
- Discussants recounted how they were made to wait before being allowed entry into the Kurdistan Region and others reported that they believed government officials delayed warning the communities in and around Sinjar because they feared a mass exodus to the Kurdistan Region. Their inability to flee to safety and the bureaucratic delays they had faced further affected their perception of persecution. When discussing the prospect of returning to their homes, some male discussants felt strongly that the tribes in neighboring Baaj District had betrayed them and would attack them if they returned to Sinjar.
- The perceived lack of recognition of their struggles by the Iraqi government has compounded the trauma experienced by the Yazidis. Discussants expressed frustration that the Council of Representatives has not referred to the ISIS campaign against the Yazidis as a genocide. A few discussants

**“The government does not recognize us as Iraqis. Why am I counted as an Iraqi citizen, but I am neglected by the government?”**

**— Male, Yazidi IDP**

also claimed that their votes in the 2018 parliamentary elections had been cancelled, believing this to be another example in a long line of political exclusion.<sup>18</sup>

- Both male and female Yazidi IDP discussants expressed a perception of political exclusion in Iraq, based explicitly on ethnoreligious lines, and noted that Yazidis’ shared collective experience of persecution underscores why their fear of strangers is a necessary

<sup>18</sup> Ballots from nearly 625 polling stations within IDP camps were declared invalid following demonstrable fraud through ballot stuffing, multiple voting and a lack of adequate identification, accounting for more than 50 percent of the total polling stations cancelled nationwide and overseas due to fraud.



protection mechanism. Discussants said that extreme fear of persecution by ISIS combined with the feelings of hopelessness caused by long-term displacement led to an increase in suicide within the camps. Particularly among female discussants, the lack of psychological care to manage the stress, especially for rape and sexual slavery survivors, undermined community cohesion.

**We used to live in the same area with Arabs, and the Arabs opened the borders of our areas to ISIS. ... The Arabs used to tell us that they are our brothers ... and [we] discovered the opposite when ISIS came.**

— Male, Yazidi IDP

**The government did nothing for us. ... Our identity was taken away from us, and we haven't seen any reaction to prove that we are part of this country. We haven't felt that we are from the Iraqi people; we always feel like a minority and we are always trapped in the corner.**

**TOP:** Yazidi woman sits with her three children inside a tent in an IDP camp in Duhok, Iraq, Photo: iStock.

**MIDDLE:** Children walking to a tent in an IDP camp near Mosul, Iraq, Photo: iStock.

**BOTTOM:** Yazidi family shows photos of their deceased relatives in an IDP camp in Duhok, Iraq, Photo: Alamy.

## Analysis

A profound sense of betrayal among Yazidi IDP discussants was evident – betrayal by the government, armed forces, communities and even neighbors – in short, betrayal by the entire system itself. Many Yazidi IDP discussants no longer identify with Arabs as members of the same community, and now feel a need to isolate themselves from Arab neighbors whom they do not think can be trusted. They also pointed out that Yazidis' sense of community identity within Iraq has been damaged.

Compounding this sense of loss is the entrenched belief among Yazidi IDP discussants that the government does not view them as Iraqi citizens. Yazidi IDP discussants, expelled from their ancestral lands by ISIS, feel forgotten by their government. They noted that they see government officials only when it is time for elections and that officials do not follow through on promises for financial assistance or infrastructure redevelopment. Some discussants expressed feeling like political pawns for which neither the federal government nor the Kurdistan Regional Government will take responsibility. This sense of disenfranchisement is worsened by the fact that Yazidi IDPs routinely lack forms of identification, which effectively strips them of many of their rights as Iraqi citizens, including the right to vote and access government services.

## Finding 13

**IDP discussants said that basic services in camps are lacking and psychosocial support for survivors is inadequate. They reported that programs implemented in camps do not always meet the needs of the community, and there is little accountability for the proper allocation of financial resources.**

- IDP discussants consistently mentioned the deterioration of service delivery over the past five years. They explained that during the initial stages of displacement, international organizations provided 24-hour electricity, food, water and health supplies, but that today their access to electricity and water was unreliable. Inadequate electrical systems provide electricity for only a few hours per day and poor maintenance causes electrical fires. IDPs also cited a lack of access to safe drinking water as contributing to the spread of illnesses within the camps, particularly among children.
- Many IDP discussants noted the need for additional health centers, medicine and doctors

inside the camps. Women frequently noted that there was insufficient psychosocial care for ISIS survivors — undermining their ability to reintegrate into the community.

- Both male and female IDP discussants highlighted the need for greater services for pregnant women, noting the dearth of doctors onsite to provide prenatal care and limited transport available to hospitals.
- Female IDP discussants expressed concern at the absence of educational and recreational opportunities for children in the camps, citing the shortage of teachers onsite and the inadequate skill sets of the few volunteer teachers. (For children who attended ISIS-occupied schools just a few years ago, deprogramming and proper schooling are especially critical.) Some discussants specifically linked recreational programs to the psychosocial well-being of children, noting that they need outlets for their energy and to help them heal from the traumas of occupation and displacement.

**“Life in the camps is very difficult. There are no services in the camps — the electricity is not enough, the water is not enough, and the security is not good.”**

**— Female, Yazidi IDP**

**There are women who have survived ISIS and they are not receiving any psychological, financial or moral support. Their lives are ended.**

**— Female, Yazidi IDP**

## Analysis

Corruption was frequently cited as affecting service delivery inside the IDP camps, with IDP discussants pointing to government mismanagement of humanitarian assistance and a lack of transparency in the process of obtaining official documents. IDP discussants commonly attributed government neglect to purposeful government exploitation, fueled by corruption. When one of the discussants accused the government of withholding much of the assistance being provided to camps by international organizations, no one attempted to counter this argument.

Discussants were unable to identify ways of redressing these grievances, and cited protests as the only way to get the government’s attention. The poor provision of services, the distrust of the government bodies meant to provide those services, and a lack of effective advocates are likely to exacerbate feelings of exclusion and alienation.

## Finding 14

### **IDP discussants held a negative view of government. They cited poor service delivery within IDP camps and accused the government of neglect and rampant corruption.**

- IDP discussants expressed a strong negative perception of government, primarily associated with the government's inability to effectively administer services — both within camps and in host communities. They reported that the government's failure to properly represent, protect and include Yazidis in Iraqi politics has worsened relations between the community and their government representatives. Perspectives about the prevalence of government corruption were reflected in the belief that voting would not change anything in the country. Some discussants believed that their votes in the 2018 parliamentary elections were purposefully discounted. When asked whether they would vote in upcoming elections, many discussants expressed disillusionment with the political process and indicated they were not convinced that electoral participation would result in any positive change.
- Yazidi IDPs commonly expressed disdain at the central government's failure to include their community's perspective in political decision-making and to properly administer services, particularly post-ISIS liberation. IDP discussants frequently described government officials as self-interested, corrupt and lacking accountability. Within the broader historical context of Yazidi political disenfranchisement, such sentiments signify a worsening sociopolitical schism between Yazidi IDPs and Iraqi political officials.
- Yazidi IDP discussants' perceptions of political exclusion were compounded by frustration with widespread political corruption. One IDP respondent shared her experience of candidates visiting her community solely during election time and distributing bribes such as phone cards and gifts for children in exchange for votes. When asked to share the first word that comes to mind when thinking about government officials, a majority of female IDP discussants said "corruption."

**“We want to [be involved in decision-making] because it is our right.”**

— Male, Yazidi IDP

**There is no difference in voting or not voting, because before each election they declare who the winner is, so I would vote for nothing.**

— Female, Yazidi IDP

## Analysis

Insufficient service delivery and political exclusion in Yazidi communities predates the ISIS occupation. As a historically marginalized and oppressed ethnoreligious population, Yazidis are in acute need of enhanced political inclusion, representation and provision of services. Unfortunately, these needs have remained largely unmet by the government. Yazidi IDP discussants commonly attributed their lack of parliamentary representation – currently there is just one Yazidi member of the Iraqi Parliament within the 329-person body – to voter marginalization, specifically highlighting May 2018 parliamentary elections and the exclusion of ballots cast in many IDP camps.

Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that they do not have a say in political decision-making and expressed feelings of disillusionment and marginalization. This has contributed to growing resentment toward government officials within Yazidi IDP communities, a situation that has only worsened as service delivery needs remain unmet and corruption remains unaddressed.

# CONCLUSION

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ISIS's invasion and occupation of Ninewa fundamentally altered the social fabric of the communities in the province. Recovery and reconciliation will require dedicated efforts by national and local governments, civil society and the international community to support individuals, families and communities.

Although the security situation is improving, key governance issues remain unresolved. With the long-term presence, and perhaps permanence, of PMUs within Ninewa, concerns of the ethnicity/religious affiliation of those providing security is directly connected to the perception of safety and community trust that can encourage people to stay or return home. Iraqis living in Ninewa feel competition between the government bodies and security forces keenly and experience the negative effects of duplicative checkpoints, conflicting administrative procedures and gaps in service delivery that result. Without normalization of armed forces and the resolution of administrative boundaries, it will be extremely difficult to rebuild the community trust necessary for permanent returns. Without a resolution to these long-term issues in a way that meets the needs of traumatized families, it is likely that secondary displacement will occur as families will seek alternative places to live.

They also expressed skepticism that participating in elections would affect the results or improve governance. Despite the acute dissatisfaction with government performance, discussants still expressed a strong desire to participate more in governance and decision-making. This may be a function of wanting to regain control over their future after many years of being subjected to ISIS rule and/or displacement — or a lack of confidence in the current governance system. In either case, it represents an opportunity to support community-led and government-led consultation, engagement and advocacy efforts that rebuild relationships and establish pathways of communication that could result in improved service delivery. These efforts need to be supported by greater capacity building for government officials. IRI's experience with local government officials throughout Iraq has demonstrated that even where there is willingness to engage; the habits, methodologies and tools of a productive, consultative democratic system still need further development. Government leaders need to be better prepared to deal with the issues their constituents are facing and demonstrate their commitment to public service rather than superficially making public appearances with affected communities as political opportunities. Most critically, government leaders, especially those in Baghdad, need to create and implement a policy of reeducation and reintegration for those who will return from so-called ISIS camps at home and abroad lest they inadvertently facilitate the next generation of ISIS.

The desire to move forward from the horror and stagnation of ISIS is strong throughout all groups engaged in IRI's research. Many have an ever-present fear that ISIS can return, in part because the military operations are not yet completed.<sup>19</sup> Fear of unknown strangers now living in Mosul and Hamdaniya alongside those that lived under the occupation and those that returned as well as the broken trust between Yazidis and their neighbors also contributed to a sense that could reemerge. Despite the pervasive fears, there is willingness, albeit sometimes tepid, to reconcile at the community level. The wistfulness for the past goes beyond rose-colored glasses as discussants were realistic that Ninewa was not a paradise pre-ISIS, but the desire to return to stronger social community ties was evident. This rebuilding may be possible, especially given the clear indication of the durability of individual neighbor relationships that pre-dated ISIS, lasted through displacement/occupation and were renewed upon returning home. Community-led approaches to dialogue, sharing civic and religious festivals and participatory processes may assist the Christian, Shabak and Sunni communities. However, the Yazidi community's feelings of betrayal by its neighbors will take significantly more time to repair, if ever. For the Yazidi community, international guarantees and engagement appear to be prerequisites for progress. The rebuilding of trust will be a lengthy and often hyper-local process that requires government leadership and strong support from religious and nongovernmental leaders alike.

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<sup>19</sup> At the time of writing, the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) were currently engaged in the fifth phase of the "Will of Victory" operations dedicated to the eradicating the remaining ISIS cells throughout the liberated areas of Ninewa, Anbar, Salahadin and Diyala provinces.

# APPENDIX: METHODOLOGY

IRI contracted IIACSS to facilitate a series of FGDs and IDIs on the social dynamics of displacement in post-ISIS Iraq in January 2019 with individuals from Mosul city and Hamdaniya District and individuals who had been displaced from these locations who are living in IDP camps in Dohuk. The research agenda was built upon two IRI-led qualitative studies: The first was *"Social and Political Perspectives of Iraqi IDPs from Ninewa and Their Host Communities,"* conducted in April-May 2018. The second was a stakeholder and issue mapping exercise conducted immediately prior to this study. Both were integral sources that informed the selection of target demographics, the development of interview and focus group protocols, and the determination of regional areas of focus.

This report is based on 14 FGDs, which reached 142 Iraqi citizens. The discussions targeted a diverse pool of discussants, and also draws upon IDIs with three government representatives. FGD participants were selected using a pre-screening tool designed by IRI, based first on their status as either a returnee, IDP or never-displaced resident as well as their ethnic and religious affiliation. FGDs were organized as follows, with separate discussions for men and women within each group:

FGD Location	Group
Hamdaniya District	Shabak returnees
	Christian returnees
	Residents from the community of origin
Mosul city	Shabak returnees
	Christian returnees
	Residents from the community of origin
Dohuk	Yazidi IDPs displaced from Ninewa province; predominantly Sinjar

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