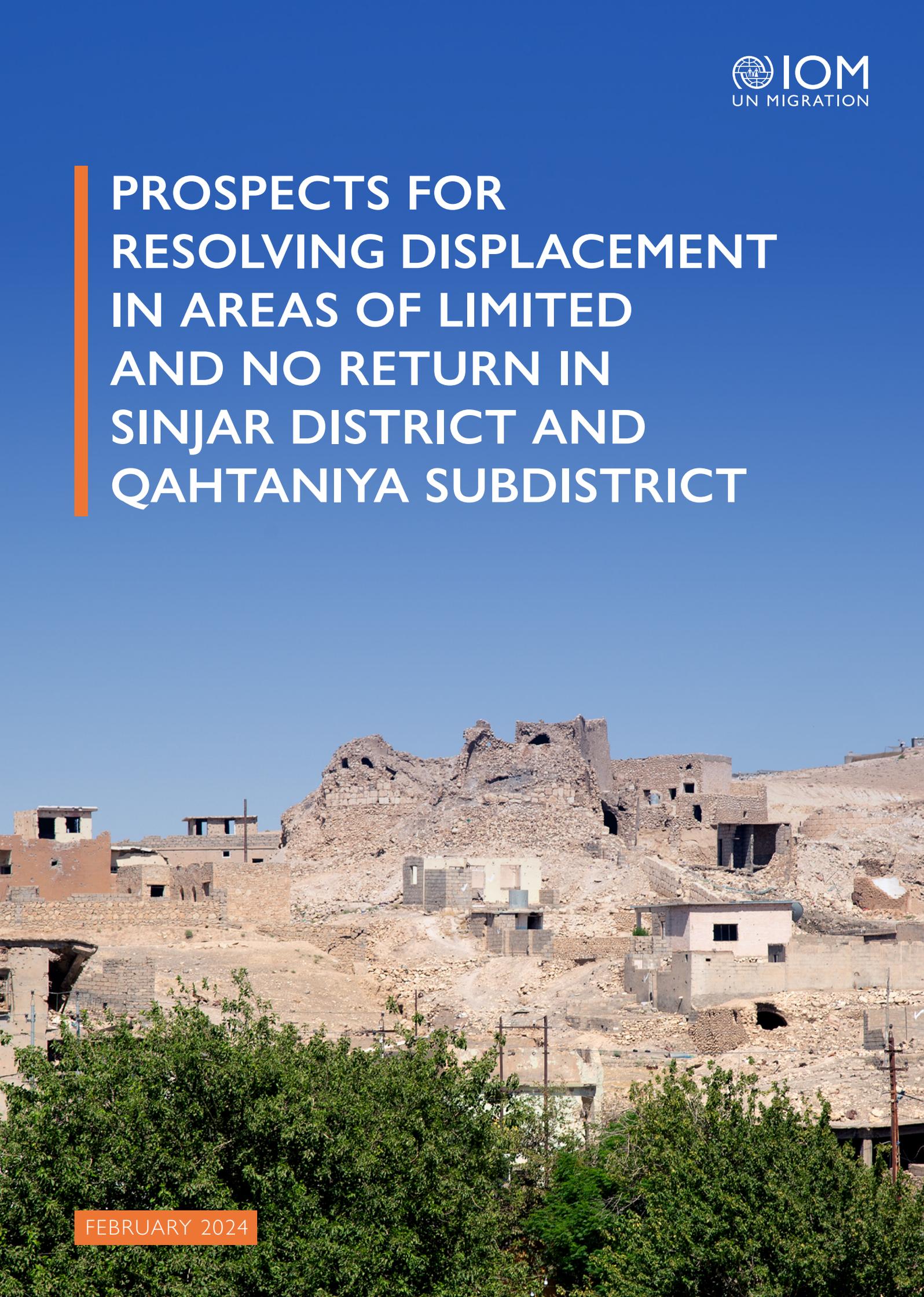




PROSPECTS FOR RESOLVING DISPLACEMENT IN AREAS OF LIMITED AND NO RETURN IN SINJAR DISTRICT AND QAHTANIYA SUBDISTRICT



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International Organization for Migration
Address: UNAMI Compound (Diwan 2), International Zone, Baghdad/Iraq
Email: iomiraq@iom.int
Website: <https://iraq.iom.int>

Cover photo: Yad Abdulqader

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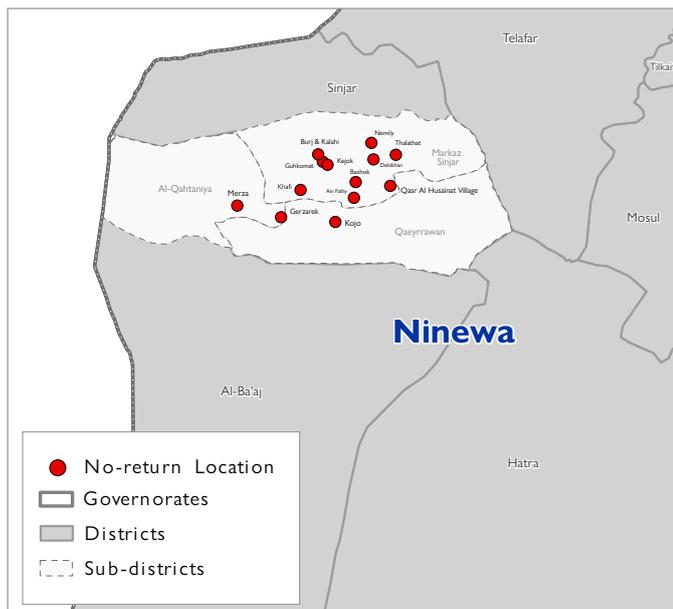
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This in-depth qualitative study of areas of limited and no returns in Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict seeks to uncover specific barriers to durably resolving the displacement of affected people and potential ways forward in unlocking those barriers. Doing so is a critical step in broadly implementing the Joint Government of Iraq, Kurdistan Regional Government and United Nations Roadmap for the Acceleration of the National Plan pursuant to the United Nations Secretary-General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement. The study also aims to improve the political dialogue in the country on how to provide a voluntary and informed choice of residence to people who are experiencing long-term displacement. Findings are drawn from separate focus group discussions with Yezidi, Kurdish and Sunni Arab internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict and key informant interviews with representatives from: the Ninewa Governor's Office, Sinjar authorities in Dohuk, Sinjar and Qahtaniya authorities within these areas, members of political parties in Sinjar, civil society leaders and activists, tribal leaders, national and international peacebuilding and human rights experts, United Nations personnel and donors.¹ Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict are considered together here, given their similar populations and recent conflict dynamics, connected histories and legacies of violence, as well as geographic proximity to one another and to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Syria and Türkiye.

Recent data indicate that 183,166 individuals from Sinjar district remain displaced at present.² This data does not exist for Qahtaniya subdistrict specifically, but in total 103,736 individuals remain displaced from Ba'aj district (inclusive of Qahtaniya).³ Available data indicate that some IDPs have returned to 150 locations across Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict. However, the majority (65%) of these locations have between half or less than half of their original populations back.⁴ In addition, reportedly 13 locations have not recorded returns since 2014; these locations are spread between Markaz Sinjar, Qayrawan and Qahtaniya subdistricts.⁵

Map 1. Location of no return in Sinjar district and Qahtaniyas subdistrict⁶



1 Due to the scope of the methodology, provincial-level actors were targeted for interviews. Stakeholders from the Kurdistan Regional Government and Federal Government of Iraq were not included in the sample; however, both actors will be key to engage for continued efforts to resolve solutions pathways for Sinjari returnees and IDPs.
 2 IOM DTM Iraq, Integrated Location Assessment VII.
 3 Ibid.
 4 IOM DTM Iraq, Return Index, Round 19.
 5 IOM DTM Iraq, Ninewa Household Survey Pilot, June 2023.
 6 Information is displayed to provide an approximation of geography; this map is not an official endorsement of borders or locations.

During discussions, IDPs reported concerns with insecurity, limited reconstruction of housing and infrastructure, limited public service provision and economic opportunity, contested local administration and governance, potential for tension and violence between groups, and the human, material and psychological remnants of war in areas of origin as combined obstacles to return. Key informants also noted the political interests that benefit from the continued displacement of Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict communities, including competition between various parties within and outside of the area. Furthermore, all study participants recognized that the geopolitical nature of the dynamics in these areas – related in part to the presence of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) – made durable and sustainable returns more difficult.

Thus, rather than seeing options for resolving their displacement in a manner that is voluntary and dignified, the displaced seem to have to decide between the least bad option. What is clear across Yezidi, Kurdish and Sunni Arab IDPs included in this analysis is their strong connection to Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict and a desire to eventually return. Participants also expressed concern about the nearly decade-long displacement creating deep fractures in their respective local identities, ways of life and practices of tradition, language and culture.

At the same time, study participants noted the numerous initiatives in place to help facilitate returns. These efforts included materially supporting families in their efforts to return and selected reconstruction efforts in areas of origin; localized reconciliation in northern Sinjar district; high-level political efforts including the Government of Iraq-Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)-brokered Sinjar Agreement to resolve administrative, security and reconstruction needs to enable people to come back; and more individualized efforts of different actors across local, provincial, national and international dialogues. However, for the most part, according to both IDPs and key informants, little has been implemented to push forward the far-reaching changes needed to make Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict more stable and conducive to sustainable and safe reintegration.

While progress in this regard is hindered in part by political gridlock and opposing views on the specifics of implementation, various local and provincial level key informants indicated certain key priorities that would help foster the return and reintegration of displaced populations to Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict: (1) compensation for death, injuries and damaged or destroyed housing, land, property and assets; (2) nomination of a representative, agreed upon and recognized local administration; and (3) reconstruction and development.

IDPs also saw these priorities as critical preconditions for return, and indeed analysis within this report highlights that IDP communities across locations and identity groups do have common demands. While they may not have the same views on exactly how these should be implemented or in which order, they do share a desire for safety, representative governance, reconstruction and development, compensation, justice, and reconciliation and dialogue between groups. Although IDPs stated similar broad preconditions overall, their specific details vary by group and, in some cases, contradict one another. The preconditions' order of importance also varies slightly depending on group but they are listed here based on overall frequency.

1. **Reconstruction including residential housing, public service provision and economic development.** This is a stated priority for all IDP groups included in this analysis, with little variation between them. Housing was the one area where some differences emerged. Yezidi IDPs indicated that, along with the broader need for housing reconstruction, there is the need to provide land and housing in areas of origin to younger generations of IDPs who displaced as children and now have families of their own. They also noted the need for public participation and consultation in wider reconstruction efforts. Sunni Arab IDPs raised concerns about the potential for housing, land and property occupation by armed actors and their supporters as an additional need that must be addressed.
2. **Ensuring safety and security, including by removing armed factions.** While all IDPs agreed that addressing insecurity in areas of origin is a prerequisite for return, they had differing views on what removing armed factions means in practice and who should provide security and law enforcement. Displaced Yezidis did not mention which specific armed factions needed to be removed, but almost unanimously indicated the need to establish a security force made up of the local population. In addition, a few Yezidi IDPs also called for the provision of international protection to Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict. Kurdish IDPs also tended to be more circumspect regarding which armed actors they thought needed to be removed, though some referred to the PKK. There was a general sense among this group of the need to reinstate the Peshmerga more fully into the area. Sunni Arab IDPs were the most explicit in stating that the removal of the PKK and affiliated groups was necessary for their ability to return. They, by and large, also stated a preference for the Iraqi Army and local police drawn from local communities as the primary sources for protection and law enforcement. Some also expressed the need for international monitors to be present to ensure protection as new security configurations are put in place.
3. **Provision of justice and compensation.** All the IDP groups included in this analysis had strong need and desire for their grievances and experiences to be acknowledged and redressed. What they seek varies to some degree, depending not only on the different types of violations experienced, but also on the level of attention and support given to some victim communities over others in their pursuit of justice. Yezidi IDPs had the clearest demands in this regard. They seek full compensation for losses experienced for those who qualify; demand criminal accountability for acts perpetrated by ISIL and for all those responsible for what happened in 2014; the exhumation of all remaining mass graves; the continued search for those still missing and their repatriation (dead or alive); the recognition of the Yezidi genocide; and the recognition and protection of Yezidi rights and culture. Kurdish and Sunni Arab IDPs indicated a demand for full compensation for those affected by conflict and the criminal accountability of ISIL perpetrators and responsible parties. They also indicated that there may be possibility for some to avail themselves of the General Amnesty Law should it be amended.
4. **A functioning and representative local administration.** The need for a single recognized, local government and appropriate representation within it is a key precondition for all Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict IDPs. Of note, many IDPs from Qahtaniya subdistrict wished to see their subdistrict of origin once again administratively connected to Sinjar district. This stance reflects the historical and cultural ties these areas have to one another. If they are linked back to Sinjar district, it would also enable Yezidis from Qahtaniya to have more voice in governance given that Sinjar has a more predominant Yezidi population than Ba'aj district. Representation of this nature is also particularly important to Sunni Arab IDPs as well and explains why they

explicitly stated seeking a representative local administration that sits under the auspices of the Government of Iraq.

5. **Reconciliation and dialogue between groups.** On this last point, there seems to be full consensus and no caveats or particularities among IDP groups included in this analysis. All expressed deep concern over the potential for tensions between communities should they return and wished to have processes in place to address these concerns. This stance is in stark contrast to some key informants responsible for the area who indicated that community relations are not an issue.

The IDPs included in this research did not refer to what they thought would make local integration – for example in Dohuk – more feasible. The emphasis of their discussions focused on being able to return eventually. However, they did indicate that receiving compensation for deaths, injuries and damage or destruction of housing, property and assets would be a significant factor in helping them take a more proactive decision as to how they would like to resolve their displacement.

There seems to be room to push forward on pressing issues that create obstacles for resolving displacement in Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict, considering that at least, broad agreement exists on what the issues are. The 2023 provincial elections, coupled with the potential signing of the Joint Government of Iraq and United Nations Roadmap for the Acceleration of the National Plan, have the capacity to change whether and how addressing returns to these areas happen. However, the following considerations should be taken into account:

- **The need for deeper and more inclusive engagement of all stakeholders.** These stakeholders include not only Government of Iraq and KRG authorities, but also those acting within Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict and local powerbrokers therein. Such engagement may additionally require some buy-in from regional actors. Most critical is the need to have more direct and representative involvement of the wider civil society and IDP and returnee population groups of Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict. The United Nations is seen as best placed to convene this broader engagement and in conducting private and public advocacy to make it happen. Thus, the significant effort, knowledge of context and expertise it took to bring the Government of Iraq and KRG counterparts together to discuss this issue should be brought to bear in widening the circle of engagement while centering the needs and demands of all Sinjaris.
- **The need for flexibility.** For some actors, the Sinjar Agreement is the policy framework used to deal with the underlying issues impeding returns, but others indicated that the agreement is unworkable considering how little has been done so far and how much political opposition it faces locally. It may be possible to revive the agreement by including more stakeholders, renegotiating its terms, reviewing it to include more details and provisions, and securing implementation guarantors. Alternatively, the agreement may need to be set aside to make way for a new and actionable tool, depending on local and regional dynamics. Based on the analysis here and wider overall reporting, IDPs are not necessarily committed to the Sinjar Agreement. What they seek is a coordinated and cohesive response to their needs and implementation that produces positive changes. This aim should be the focus of any future processes, regardless of the framework used.
- **The need for finding commonalities and exploring more localized, less political possibilities.** IDP communities across locations and identity groups do have common demands. While they may not all have the same views on exactly how these should be implemented or in which order, they do share a desire for safety, representative governance, reconstruction and development, compensation, justice, and reconciliation and dialogue between

groups. Building a base for common advocacy and demands would perhaps help in adding further public pressure for action and may generate greater solidarity and recognition between groups. The issue of compensation, for instance, could be a starting point, building toward more politically sensitive areas like governance and security. These processes cannot be rushed and do not fit in short programme cycles. Rather, they need the long-term commitment of all stakeholders and multiyear support not only to generate impact, but also to prevent further harm.

- **The need to consider in-depth investment and support on the ground.** Sinjar's ongoing instability, the uncertain and unresolved status of its local government and the confluence of security forces and armed groups operating there create a difficult environment for actors working to improve living conditions and foster sustainable reintegration. It may take significant time for stability to improve; in the meantime, more localized efforts need significant and sustained support to take effect in a manner that is cohesive, coordinated and impactful at a wider level. As such, the need for more immediate efforts may serve as an opportunity for international donors to explore the ways in which they can invest in Sinjaris themselves, to start building connections to advocate together for social and political change on their own terms. The strategies employed by the international community

to help Yezidis in organizing and advocating for justice demands may be well worth considering. Such strategies may include funding streams related to wider democracy promotion and public participation, good governance, human rights, justice and accountability, and sustainable peace and security.

- **The need for space for more comprehensive transitional justice.** The issues impeding returns, sustainable reintegration or any durable resolution of displacement for the communities of Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict are deep-rooted and stem from a legacy of conflict and grievances. Therefore, it may be worth considering the ways in which a deeper look at these issues and their root causes may also contribute to finding solutions to displacement, specifically solutions that recognize the rights and dignity of all victims as citizens rather than the rights of some over others. The demands Yezidis have for justice cannot be sought alone. Addressing their demands will require the support and collaboration of the wider communities where Yezidis are from and a recognition of the severity of what happened. At the same time, the justice demands of other communities should not continue to be deprioritized but rather recognized, with remedies sought for these as well. While the current priorities of the Government of Iraq aim to move away from conflict toward more prosperity and quality of life for Iraqis, looking back may be the only way to move forward.

INTRODUCTION

The conflict with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Iraq, officially begun in 2014, caused the forcible internal displacement of approximately 6 million people from the northern and central parts of the country. In the six years since the end of the conflict in late 2017, around 4.8 million of these internally displaced persons (IDPs) have returned to their places of origin, with the bulk of such movements taking place by 2018.⁷ Despite this relatively high rate of return across the conflict-affected parts of the country, areas remain where either very limited returns or none have taken place. Sinjar district (comprised of Markaz Sinjar, Al-Shamal, and Qayrawan subdistricts) and Qahtaniya subdistrict in Ninewa Governorate are two such areas. These areas are considered together in this analysis, given their similar populations and recent conflict dynamics, connected histories and legacies of violence, and geographic proximity to one another and to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Syria and Türkiye (Map 2).

IDP returns have occurred to some degree across Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict, however, these movements remain constrained due to a host of interrelated factors.⁸ These factors include concerns over safety and security, the need for reconstruction including improved public service provision and

availability of economic opportunities, widespread residential destruction, the need for accountability, redress and compensation, and the need for community reconciliation. For some of these displaced populations, blockages to return are imposed by security actors now operating therein or by tribal or community leaders, and in other cases, these blockages are self-imposed for fear of what security actors or community members would do should they come back.

The pervasive condition of limited to no return and its associated effects have resulted in a nearly decade-long protraction of displacement for a significant proportion of affected communities. This situation limits displaced people's options for viably resolving their displacement in a voluntary, safe and informed manner. The most recent displacement figures indicate that approximately 183,166 individuals from Sinjar district remain displaced.⁹ These data are not known for Qahtaniya subdistrict, but in total 103,736 individuals from Ba'aj district remain displaced.¹⁰ The displaced populations from Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict are primarily Yezidis, Sunni Arabs, Sunni and Shia Kurds and are displaced predominantly across Dohuk and Ninewa governorates, in camp and non-camp settings (Map 2).¹¹

7 IOM DTM Iraq, Returnee Master List Round 130; and Iraq Durable Solutions, *Resolving Internal Displacement in Iraq: Inter-Agency Durable Solutions Strategic and Operational Framework* (Baghdad, Iraq Durable Solutions, 2021).

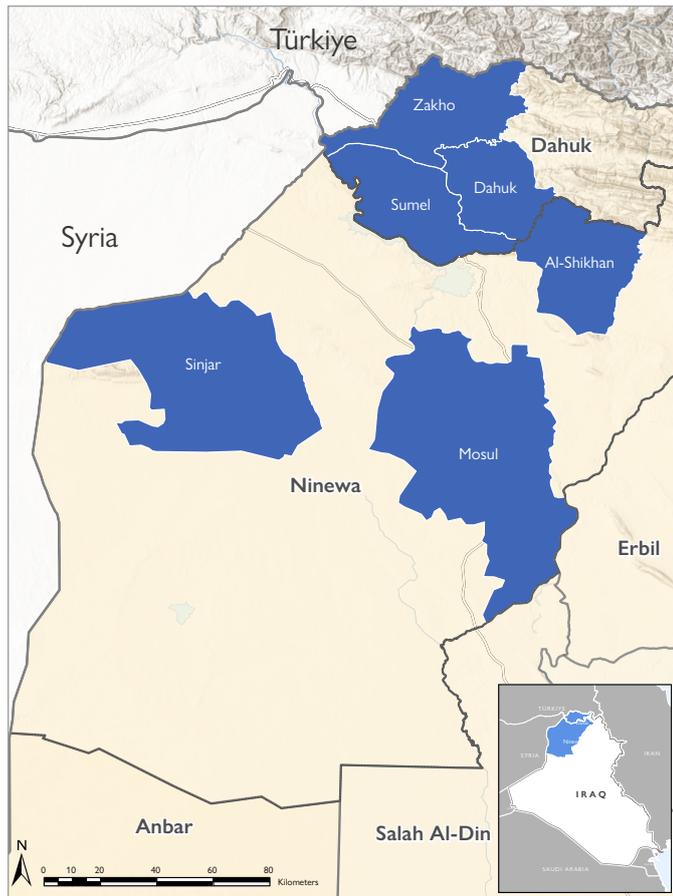
8 Additionally, some IDPs have returned to the district but not yet to their areas of origin, currently residing in other locations within Sinjar. See, for example, IOM DTM Iraq, *Emergency Tracking Arrivals in Sinjar and Al-Ba'aj Districts 1 April–1 November 2023*.

9 IOM DTM Iraq, *Integrated Location Assessment VII*.

10 Ibid.

11 This is a non-exhaustive list of affected population groups.

Map 2. Primary districts of displacement for Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict IDPs



Further understanding the specific barriers to durably resolving the displacement of people from areas of limited and no return and potential ways forward in unlocking these barriers is critical. This analysis aims to support the implementation of the upcoming Joint Government of Iraq, Kurdistan Regional Government and United Nations Roadmap for the Acceleration of the National Plan, pursuant to the United Nations Secretary-General’s Action Agenda on Internal Displacement.¹² This research also seeks to improve the political dialogue in the country on how to provide a voluntary and informed choice to people who are experiencing long-term displacement. Doing so is important as government and international attention begins to encompass a wider focus beyond ISIL conflict-affected communities in 2024 and beyond.¹³

This in-depth qualitative analysis of Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict contributes to this effort by detailing the key factors preventing IDP returns to these areas and the implications should these factors persist, and by identifying any resolution pathways that may exist from a policy perspective. The overarching aim of this work is to provide knowledge of how best to tackle barriers to durable solutions for populations experiencing blocked or constrained return to their areas of origin as a basis for advocacy and operations. Findings will be presented following a detailed overview of the context to date and a description of study’s methodology.

CONTEXT OVERVIEW

Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict occupy one of the remotest corners of Iraq. Despite its physical distance from centres of power in the country, this ethno-religiously diverse area has always been of strategic importance to successive iterations of competing leadership in Iraq. The area has also increasingly become the site of wider regional and geopolitical competition in the aftermath of the ISIL conflict, in part due to its geographic position. The effects of this legacy are felt by resident communities and displaced populations alike. To further ground findings of the subsequent analysis, this section will detail pre- and post-2003 dynamics; the ISIL

conflict, its aftermath and geopolitical implications; resulting displacement and return patterns; and the current state of well-being and services, governance and institutions, physical safety and security, and links to geopolitical competition, relationship between groups, and justice and accountability.

For reference and as an indication of the complexity of the current dynamics in Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict, Figure 1 provides an overview of the key stakeholders with interest in the area, some of whom will be described in more detail below.

12 See The United Nations Secretary-General’s Action Agenda on Internal Displacement Follow-Up to the Report of the UN Secretary-General’s High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement (New York, United Nations, 2022).

13 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Humanitarian Transition Overview 2023* (Geneva and Baghdad, OCHA, 2023).

Figure 1. General mapping of current key stakeholders

International	Government
• United Nations	Government of Iraq
• United States of America	• Prime Minister's Office
• Donor countries	• Popular Mobilization Commission
• Global Coalition	• Office of National Security Advisor
• Türkiye	• National Security Service
• Iran	• Ministry of Defense
	• Ministry of Interior
Society	• Office of Tribal Affairs
• IDPs	• Joint Operations Command
• Tribal leaders and community leaders (displaced and those who have returned)	• Ministry of Migration and Displacement
• Community members (in areas of displacement and/or origin)	• Marjiya (Supreme Shia Authority)
• Civil society and activists	• Sunni Endowment
	• Governor and provincial authorities
Security Forces	• Subdistrict mayors and district administration (in displacement in Dohuk, KDP aligned)
• Iraqi Army	• Political blocs and representatives in Parliament
• National security and intelligence agencies	Kurdistan Regional Government
• Local Police	• Prime Minister's Office
• Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) battalions	• Ministry of Interior
• Yezidi-comprised Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS)	• Governor and provincial authorities
• Peshmerga forces and aligned actors	"Self-Administration"
• Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)/People's Protection Units (YPG)	• "Acting" authorities within areas of origin, including the Sinjar Coordination of National Components and Forces

PRE- AND POST-2003 DYNAMICS

Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict, comprised of primarily of Yezidi and Muslim communities (mainly Sunni Kurds and Arabs), was the site of significant structural and physical violence and development neglect both pre- and post-2003. Under the Ba'ath regime, in the 1970s and 1980s, these areas were subject to Arabization campaigns. Yezidi populations were moved out of their villages into government-owned collective towns and restricted from owning property. Kurdish families were forced out of Sinjar district altogether. These campaigns enabled the resettlement of Sunni Arab populations and the reallocation of Yezidi and Kurdish property to them, creating land ownership disputes.¹⁴

During this time, in a further effort to tip the demographic balance in favour of Sunni Arabs, the primarily Yezidi subdistrict of Qahtaniya was administratively detached from Sinjar district and replaced with the mostly Sunni Arab-inhabited Qayrawan subdistrict.¹⁵ Qahtaniya subdistrict was added to Sunni Arab-majority Ba'aj district instead. The overall aim of these policies was to push back against Kurdish self-determination efforts following the 1970 Autonomous Agreement

in which the Ba'ath regime agreed to the autonomy of Kurdish-majority areas in northern Iraq; partially because of these actions, the agreement was never honoured.¹⁶

Since the fall of the Ba'ath regime in 2003, Sinjar district is considered part of the internally disputed territories between the Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) whose final governance status is pending determination of Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution. While officially under the Government of Iraq administration, for much of the post-2003 period Sinjar district was under the de facto control of the KRG and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) until the arrival of ISIL in 2014. Qahtaniya subdistrict, now part of Ba'aj district, falls more squarely under the authority of the Government of Iraq.

While Yezidi and Sunni Arab populations in Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict have historically maintained socioeconomic and cultural ties given their proximity, these areas were not spared from the sectarian violence that spread through Iraq post-2003. During this time, leaflets and speeches at local mosques in Mosul called Yezidis infidels and outlaws because of the heterodox

14 Saman Dawod, "Will New Land-Ownership Rights be Game-Changer for Iraq's Yezidis?" *Amwaj News*, 7 March 2023; Salam Al-Sinjary, *Sinjar the City and Mountains: Historical and Sociological study between 1900-1980 AD*, Baghdad, Salam Al-Sinjary, 2021, (pp. 141, 149).

15 Osama Gharizi, "Struggle for Sinjar: Iraq's Views on Security in the Disputed District," *United States Institute of Peace*, 5 April 2021.

16 Ibid.

nature of their religious beliefs, with the presence of radical militant groups like Al-Qaeda further inflaming tensions between mainly Arab Muslim and Yezidi communities.¹⁷ When news spread in 2007 about a Yezidi girl who was stoned by her family for wanting to convert to Islam and marry a Muslim, violence erupted and the number of deadly attacks against Yezidis increased rapidly.¹⁸ The most egregious of these attacks against Yezidis – and indeed the deadliest of the entire Iraq war – was the coordinated truck-bombings of Qahtaniya and Jazeera villages in August 2007, leaving nearly 800 people dead and thousands injured.¹⁹ Al-Qaeda was suspected to be behind this attack, though no group claimed responsibility for it.

The high death toll was partially attributed to the architecture of the villages: most of the structures in the area were stone and mud huts that simply collapsed in the blasts.²⁰ This architectural characteristic is indicative of the historic marginalization and development neglect Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict have faced. Data from 2012 indicate that these areas have some of the highest rates of insecurity, poverty and perceived corruption in institutions compared to the rest of Iraq.²¹ These findings underscore the fact that the fragility of these areas predated ISIL and that the conflict only exacerbated it.

ISIL CONFLICT, INITIAL AFTERMATH AND GEOPOLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

ISIL captured Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict in the wake of the preemptive withdrawal of Peshmerga forces and Government of Iraq forces from these areas, in the second half of 2014.²² The armed group carried out grave, large-scale human rights violations primarily against the Yezidi population. These violations, including extrajudicial killings, kidnapping, trafficking, sexual violence, the desecration of Yezidi and Shia holy sites and widespread destruction were most prominently experienced by communities within Markaz Sinjar, Qayrawan and Qahtaniya subdistricts. ISIL also targeted those Sunni populations attempting to flee. Security forces, including the Peshmerga and Global Coalition forces, as well as externally supported armed groups (the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and People's Protection Units (YPG)) and local cells of the newly created, Yezidi-comprised Sinjar Resistance Units (YBŞ), which were aligned with the PKK and YPG, retook Markaz Sinjar and Al-Shamal subdistricts in mid-2015; Qayrawan and Qahtaniya subdistricts were retaken in mid-2017 by the Iraqi Army and Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs) along with the YBŞ.

All these forces remained on the ground, not without tensions and clashes,²³ until October 2017. During that time, in response to the Kurdish independence referendum held one month earlier, Iraqi Army divisions and PMUs advanced across disputed territories including Sinjar district. As a result, Kurdish security forces in Sinjar district moved north toward KRG territory leaving much of the area to the Iraqi Army and PMUs including up to the Syrian border. These forces did not challenge the YBŞ's control of territory in the district, and the latter retained control of 15 km of that border.²⁴

The confluence of these various security forces and armed groups in Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict by the end of the ISIL conflict are reflective of the existing Government of Iraq-KRG competition over the area. They have also drawn the area into the wider regional dynamics and competition facing Iraq. The presence of the PKK is of major concern for Türkiye, who has designated the armed group a terrorist organization (as have the United States, United Kingdom and European Union, among others). In this regard, Türkiye is allied with the KDP, a historical political rival of the PKK.²⁵ Türkiye also has longer-term goals in the area including a direct border crossing with Federal Iraq and a rail connection to Mosul, both of which would cross through territory that connects Iran to its partner organizations in Iraq and Syria.²⁶ The presence of Iran-aligned, Shia-led PMUs and affiliated groups is part of this Shia corridor connecting Iran to Syria. The PMUs facilitate this connection to Iran's interests including Iran's involvement in the Syrian conflict, by maintaining a mutually beneficial relationship with the PKK and with the YBŞ. The cross-border nature of this relationship, especially with the PKK, enables all these parties to share in the spoils of increased smuggling between Iraq and Syria.

DISPLACEMENT AND RETURN PATTERNS

Two distinct displacement patterns emerged among the two largest ethno-religious groups in Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict at the onset of the ISIL conflict. With the arrival of ISIL, the overwhelming majority of Yezidis (and a small subset of Sunni Arabs) displaced between June and August 2014 into the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Then, between September 2014 and mid-2015, the bulk of the Sunni Arab population displaced into Mosul or Syria as military operations commenced to push ISIL out. Return patterns are differentiated not only by identity group but by location as well. Yezidis began returning to Al-Shamal in mid-2015, while returns to Markaz Sinjar did not begin in earnest until the following year and returns to Qayrawan and Qahtaniya did not pick up until after 2017.

New dynamics in 2020 and 2021 further spurred additional Yezidi returns. Concerns over COVID-19 transmission in camps and economic strain in displacement due to lockdowns were factors, as was the need of families that had one family member working in Sinjar to be able to stay together during lockdown (as movement restricted between governorates). These factors combined with deteriorating displacement camp conditions in Dohuk Governorate to prompt returns. The Government of Iraq's October 2020 announcement that it would close all IDP camps in its territories by the end of that year further precipitated the return of Sunni Arab families to Sinjar district, specifically to Al-Shamal and Qayrawan subdistricts, as the camps where they had been residing began to close.

Despite these returns, most Yezidi and Sunni Arab populations are still displaced. This trend reversed course for Yezidis in mid-2023, when hundreds of displaced families returned mainly to Sinjar district; these movements were driven by the impact of hate speech targeting the Yezidi community – that was the

17 Sebastian Maisel, "Sectarian-Based Violence: The Case of the Yezidis in Iraq and Syria," *Middle East Institute*, 23 July 2014.

18 Ibid.

19 Andrew Wander, "How Suicide Bombings Shattered Iraq," *Al Jazeera*, 24 October 2010.

20 Damien Cave and James Glanz, "Toll in Iraq Bombings is Raised to More than 500," *New York Times*, 22 August 2007.

21 Iraq Household Socio-Economic Survey, Database by Organization for Statistics and Information Technology, Ministry of Planning, Government of Iraq, Kurdistan Regional Statistics Office, Ministry of Planning, Government of Iraq in conjunction with World Bank (2012); and Iraq Knowledge Network Survey, Database by Central Statistical Office, Government of Iraq (2011).

22 *Middle East Eye*, "Barzani Slams Peshmerga Leaders Over Sinjar Withdrawal," *Middle East Eye*, 12 February 2015; and International Crisis Group (ICG), *Winning the Post-ISIL Battle in Iraq for Sinjar*, Middle East Report No. 183 (Brussels, ICG, 2018).

23 See, for example, Rikar Hussein and Sirwan Kajjo, "Battle Among Kurds in Sinjar Could Hinder Fight Against Islamic State," *Voice of America*, 3 March 2017.

24 ICG, *Winning the Post-ISIL Battle*.

25 ICG, *Iraq: Stabilising the Contested District of Sinjar*, Middle East Report No. 235 (Brussels, ICG, 2022).

26 SardarmAziz, Erwin van Veen, and Engin Yüksel, *Turkish Interventions in its Near Abroad: The Case of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq* (The Hague, Clingendael Institute, 2022).

consequence of incidents that took place during a visit by a small number of Sunni Arab families in April 2023²⁷ – as well as the challenges associated with protracted displacement and a desire to reunite with relatives and friends.²⁸ At the same time, since 2022, there have been significant upticks in the cross-border movement of Yezidi men and women into Türkiye via the Ibrahim Al-Khaleel border point in Dohuk.²⁹ These cohorts come from either displacement sites within Dohuk Governorate or from their areas of origin, specifically Sinjar district. In general, those considering emigrating do so seeking better economic and safety conditions.³⁰ Substandard conditions in displacement, the continuing insecurity and political instability in areas of origin and a fear of forced recruitment into armed groups in areas of origin further contribute to this outward movement.³¹ For Sunni Arab populations, recent household survey data indicate a confluence of material and security factors as their primary obstacles to return.³²

For both groups, data show a 41 per cent rate of return for Sinjar district overall, while these data are unavailable for Qahtaniya subdistrict on its own. Return movements have occurred in 150 locations across Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict. The majority (65%) of these locations have between half or less than half of their original populations back.³³ In addition, there are reportedly 13 locations with no returns recorded since 2014, spread across Markaz Sinjar, Qayrawan, and Qahtaniya subdistricts.³⁴ Markaz Sinjar and Al-Shamal feature moderate rates of return (even if many locations are still sparsely populated), while Qayrawan and Qahtaniya have particularly low rates of return.

WELL-BEING AND SERVICES

Since the official end of the conflict, Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict overall have had some of the most severe living conditions compared to other conflict-affected areas, particularly in relation to residential destruction, access to employment, recovery of agriculture and/or businesses, incorporation of public sector employees and public water provision.³⁵ The situations in Qayrawan and Qahtaniya subdistricts, where fewer displaced households have returned, are especially dire across these dimensions, with access to primary health care also reportedly limited.

The 2020 Sinjar Agreement (described below) included a commitment of 18 million United States dollars (USD) to the Sinjar Reconstruction Fund; however, these funds have remained unspent due to political gridlock.³⁶ The recently approved federal budget for Iraq also includes a specific USD 38 million allocation for the reconstruction of areas in Sinjar and the Ninewa Plains destroyed during the ISIL conflict and has an additional USD 381 million reconstruction fund for the poorest governorates aimed at improving public services.³⁷ In the wake of

this budget announcement in the second half of 2023, Yezidi groups appealed to the Government of Iraq for more specific funding to rebuild Sinjar district, stating that the amount allocated did not match existing needs.³⁸

GOVERNANCE AND INSTITUTIONS

As Sinjar district was retaken from ISIL between 2015 and 2017, the KDP resumed its de facto control of the area. This situation changed in October 2017 with the shift in security configuration in the district in response to the Kurdish independence referendum. Specifically, when Kurdish forces moved back into KRG territory, so did the local administration operating in Sinjar district. Since then, the district's governance has comprised many formal and informal arrangements involving the following actors:

- Local officials linked to the KDP acting from outside the district, mainly in Dohuk Governorate;
- The PMU based within the district (including Iran-aligned brigades) comprising members of the local population as well as those coming from southern Iraq;
- The political arm, the so-called "Self-Administration," of the YBŞ also based in the district and inclusive of members of the Sinjar Coordination of National Components and Forces which is comprised of all the political parties across ethno-religious lines in the district except the KDP.

The PMU, in an effort to consolidate its hold on Sinjar district, has backed the YBŞ and its Self-Administration, which seeks to carry out some bureaucratic functions in the area. Specifically, the PMU appointed district and subdistrict mayors loyal to or members of the Self-Administration via its overall national leadership in the Popular Mobilization Commission (PMC).³⁹ The Government of Iraq, however, never recognized these appointees and the PMC never followed up to demand a formal replacement of the KDP administration operating in Dohuk.⁴⁰ As such, the Government of Iraq and Ninewa provincial authorities formally recognize the KDP administration alone. What this means in practice is that Sinjar district residents and IDPs must navigate parallel governance structures and institutions operating within and outside of the district, regardless of their support for one side or the other (or neither).

This dynamic continues in the wake of the October 2020 Sinjar Agreement brokered by the Baghdad and Erbil governments, in coordination with the United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI), to resolve issues of governance, security provision and returns, among others in the district (Box 1).

27 Likely due to the modality of the visit, with visiting families accompanied by security forces and with limited coordination with local communities. The visiting families were met with protests from the Yezidi community residing in the area, which was then followed by innumerable instances of violent speech against Yazidis particularly across Ninewa and Dohuk. See, Kirkuk Now, "No One Entered Rahman Mosque, Nothing Burnt Down," Kirkuk Now, 29 April 2023.

28 IOM DTM Iraq, Emergency Tracking Arrivals in Sinjar and Al-Ba'aj Districts 1 April–1 November 2023.

29 IOM Iraq, "Yezidi Migration from Iraq to Türkiye: Trends, Drivers, and Vulnerabilities" (Baghdad, IOM, forthcoming).

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 IOM DTM Iraq, No Returns, Round 129.

33 IOM DTM Iraq, Return Index, Round 19.

34 IOM DTM Iraq, Ninewa Household Survey Pilot, June 2023.

35 IOM DTM Iraq, Return Index, Round 19.

36 Human Rights Watch, "Iraq: Political Infighting Blocking Reconstruction of Sinjar," *Human Rights Watch*, 6 June 2023.

37 Hamzeh Hadad, "Analysis: Iraq's New Budget May Hamper More than it Helps," *Al-Jazeera*, 26 June 2023.

38 Free Yezidi Foundation et al., "Demand for \$1.5 billion Sinjar Reconstruction Fund by 3 August 2024," Public statement, 27 July 2023; and Amberin Zaman, "Iraq's Yezidis Appeal to Baghdad for Funds to Rebuild their Native Sinjar," *Al-Monitor*, 27 July 2023.

39 ICG, Iraq: Stabilising the Contested District of Sinjar.

40 Ibid.

Box 1. Brief overview of the Sinjar Agreement

Signed into effect on 1 October 2020 by the KRG Minister of Interior and the Government of Iraq Vice-President of the National Security Service, the Agreement for Restoring Stability and Normalizing Conditions in the Sinjar District (the Sinjar Agreement) encompasses three pillars pertaining to administration, security and reconstruction. A Joint Field Committee was established to follow up on the provisions stipulated for the administrative and security pillars.

The **administrative pillar** includes first selecting a new independent, professional and acceptable district mayor in line with constitutional and legal mechanisms and second considering nominees for other administrative positions based on professionalism, integrity and the district's social structure.

The **security pillar** stipulates that the district will be secured exclusively by the local police and national security and intelligence services, with all other armed formations to be moved out of the district. This pillar states that security will be further strengthened with the recruitment of 2,500 members to internal security forces in Sinjar, ensuring the equitable participation of Sinjar residents currently living in IDP camps. Finally, it agrees on terminating the PKK's presence in the district and surrounding areas, such that the organization and its affiliates shall have no role in Sinjar.

The **reconstruction pillar** provides for the establishment of a separate Joint Committee to rebuild the district in coordination with the provincial administration of Ninewa Governorate. The Committee's level and description of tasks shall be identified by the Federal Prime Minister and KRG Prime Minister.

While the Sinjar Agreement was initially seen as a positive outcome by the United States, European countries, Türkiye and some segments of the Yezidi population, including politically non-aligned activists and groups, this support wore off as gaps in the agreement and its negotiation came to light,⁴¹ including the lack of:

- A specified role for international actors as guarantors of the agreement;
- Clear timelines and guaranteed funding for implementation;
- Engagement with Iran, who could have exerted influence on actors on the ground to respect the terms of the agreement;
- Engagement with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), who could serve as an intermediary between the PKK and YBŞ and Government of Iraq and KRG counterparts;
- Engagement with the powerbrokers on the ground in Sinjar district including the specific PMU brigades therein, the YBŞ and the Self-Administration;
- Engagement with civil society and affected communities.⁴²

The overall lack of inclusivity in negotiating parties allowed for the agreement to indirectly insinuate the disbandment of the YBŞ with no alternatives given for its members, and to make no mention of the role of the Self-Administration, tacitly prohibiting it. Therefore, the Self-Administration in Sinjar district has outright rejected the agreement on the grounds that they and the wider population of

Sinjaris were not involved in such decision-making. A recent survey of Sinjar district residents revealed that across these communities, approximately 80 per cent did not know about the agreement at all, 16 per cent had heard of it but did not know its details and only 3 per cent knew about the agreement and its provisions.⁴³ Residents of Qayrawan subdistrict seemed to have the most awareness of the Sinjar Agreement though not its details (24%). Among the sample of Sinjar IDPs in Dohuk assessed in this regard, one third had heard of the agreement and another 9 per cent knew its details.⁴⁴ Thus, IDPs seemed to have a greater awareness of it than returnees. This gap in knowledge may be reflective of the respective the administrations under which IDPs and returnees live.

Three years from its signing, very little of the agreement has been implemented. Sinjar district still does not have an appointed mayor and continues to have parallel governance structures. Reconstruction remains stalled and security provisions minimally implemented. Among the security provisions that have taken place is the training of the first cohort of Local Police recruits who are now awaiting vehicles and logistical support to take up their positions in Qahtaniya subdistrict. A second cohort is slated to being training in late December 2023.

To spur more action in this regard, the Special Representative to the Secretary-General for Iraq/Head of UNAMI and United States officials, among others, have reiterated calls for the full implementation of the Sinjar Agreement this year.⁴⁵ The Government of Iraq also recently confirmed its commitment to working with the KRG on its implementation.⁴⁶ In addition, the Government of Iraq met with a delegation of the Sinjar Coordination of National Components and Forces who discussed the need to ensure better service provision to Sinjar district and put in place a strong local administration to help resolve the continued displacement of its residents.⁴⁷ The results of the December 2023 provincial elections produced a split result between the main parties, which may influence the momentum toward implementation of the Agreement, with the potential to catalyse or stall the process again.⁴⁸

PHYSICAL SAFETY AND SECURITY AND THE LINKS TO ONGOING GEOPOLITICAL COMPETITION

The multiplicity of actors who fought to retake Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict from ISIL yielded not only a multiplicity of governance structures as described above, but a proliferation of official security actors and other armed groups currently on the ground, including:

- National security and intelligence agencies with offices in the district;
- Iraqi Army divisions;
- Iraqi Border Police at the Syrian border;
- Local Police;
- Peshmerga aligned forces;
- PMU brigades;
- YBŞ battalions;
- PKK and YPG.

41 Ibid.

42 Lizzie Porter, "Despite Government Promises, Lives in Sinjar Remain on Hold," *New Humanitarian*, 30 March 2021; and ICG, *Iraq: Stabilising the Contested District of Sinjar*.

43 *United States Institute of Peace, Conflict and Stabilization Monitoring Framework, Wave 7.*

44 Ibid.

45 See, for example, United Nations, "Briefing Security Council, Special Representative Urges Iraq's Parties Prioritize National Interest Over Partisan Concerns," SC/15285, 18 May 2023; UNAMI, "Remarks by the SRSF for Iraq and Head of the United Nations Assistance Mission to Iraq (UNAMI), Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert, at the ninth Annual Commemoration of Victims of the Genocide Against the Yezidis and other Iraqi Components," UNAMI, 3 August 2023; and Wladimir Van Wilgenburg, "Sinjar Agreement Must be Implemented by Baghdad and Erbil: U.S. Official," *Kurdistan24*, 30 August 2023.

46 *Shafaq News*, "Baghdad Confirms Commitment to Implementing the Sinjar Agreement," *Shafaq News*, 10 October 2023.

47 Laith Hussein, "Issue of the Displaced Must be Terminated, Political Parties and Forces," *Kirkuk Now*, 11 November 2023.

48 Sajad Jiyad, *Iraq's Provincial Elections: Electoral Dynamics and Political Implications* (Sulaymaniyah, IRIS, 2023).

An important alliance to reiterate is between the PMU and the YBŞ. The PMU's 80th Brigade operates in the area and includes some senior YBŞ fighters among its ranks. The PMU views the YBŞ like any other forces formed by Iraqi ethno-religious minority groups to defend their communities against ISIL. As such, because the YBŞ only comprises Iraqi Yezidis, the PMU considers the group has a future within the Iraqi State, regardless of its being modelled on the PKK. The PMU also maintains several other local, competing Yezidi, Shia Arab and Sunni Arab brigades. The YBŞ for its part maintains its own cadres of fighters and groups in addition to those within the PMU's 80th Brigade. This alliance between the PMU and the YBŞ thus connects the PMU with the PKK, and supports the PMU's efforts to maintain a Shia corridor connecting Iran to Syria.

It is noteworthy that unlike its view of the YBŞ, the PMU sees the PKK as a "foreign guest" in Iraq.⁴⁹ The relatively neutral position of the PMU toward the PKK is not shared by other stakeholders with interest in the area, including the Government of Iraq, KDP and Türkiye. While there is some recognition that making direct comparisons between the PKK and YBŞ is not possible, that distinction is not always made on the ground by Türkiye; similarly, the Government of Iraq forces may not always make that distinction as they seek to mitigate anti-PKK incursions by Türkiye.⁵⁰

Thus, the multiplicity of security actors and the potential for clashes between them are one of the primary concerns residents across Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict have in terms of their safety.⁵¹ These concerns are well founded as these various groups do clash with each other⁵² and such escalations are exacerbated by Turkish airstrikes against PKK positions in Ninewa and Dohuk, among other areas.⁵³ Recent analysis indicates that Turkish attacks have intensified over time, with the most airstrikes occurring in 2022 since such operations began in 2016. These strikes have led to civilian deaths, the destruction of civilian infrastructure and further displacement.⁵⁴ The attacks and their effects have generated significant hostility against Türkiye among local populations, as has the targeting of senior YBŞ commanders, including those within the PMU's 80th Brigade, who are seen as national heroes for fighting ISIL.

The wider competition between Türkiye and Iran in Iraq continue to play a role in Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict. At the same time, Türkiye's actions appear to show an intention to not provoke Iran. Türkiye has not targeted other PMU brigades in the area. Furthermore, Türkiye has not condemned or retaliated against attacks on Turkish units in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and disputed territories allegedly perpetrated by Iran-aligned so-called "resistance" factions linked to the PMU (of which the YBŞ is reportedly not a member).⁵⁵ Overall, these resistance factions within the PMU tend to view Türkiye's presence in Iraq as an occupation in the same way they see the United States' presence, and have used the unrest in Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict to increasingly attack Turkish bases and critical Iraqi energy infrastructure that benefit Türkiye.⁵⁶

49 ICG, Iraq: Stabilising the Contested District of Sinjar.

50 Ibid.

51 IOM DTM Iraq, Return Index, Round 19; and USIP, CSMF, Wave 7.

52 See, for example, *Al Jazeera*, "Rival Kurdish Groups Clash in Iraq's Sinjar Region," *Al Jazeera*, 3 March 2017; and *Al Jazeera*, "Estimated 3,000 People Flee Armed Clashes in Northern Iraq," *Al Jazeera*, 2 May 2022.

53 See, for example, Dana Taib Menmy, "Yezidis in Sinjar Fear Instability as Türkiye Pounds Iraqi Kurdistan Region," *New Arab*, 20 April 2022.

54 Amina Ismail and Lena Masri, "As Türkiye Intensifies War on Kurdish Militants in Iraq, Civilians Suffer," *Reuters*, 10 October 2023.

55 ICG, Iraq: Stabilising the Contested District of Sinjar.

56 Ibid.

57 Paula Garcia, *Caught in the Middle: The Impact of Security and Political Fragmentation on Civilian Protection in Sinjar* (Washington, DC., CIVIC, 2020); and *Human Rights Watch*, "Yezidi Fighters Allegedly Execute Civilians," *Human Rights Watch*, 27 December 2017.

58 Paula Garcia, *Caught in the Middle*; and Belkis Wille, "Iraq: Not a Homecoming," *Human Rights Watch*, 14 June 2019.

59 Coalition for Just Reparations, "Coalition for Just Reparations Condemns Hate Speech and Accusations Against Yezidi," Public statement, 11 May 2023; and Kirkuk Now, "No One Entered Rahman Mosque," 29 April 2023.

60 Jane Arraf, "Years After a Massacre, Yazidis Bury Their Loved Ones," *New York Times*, 7 February 2021.

61 Ceasefire, "The Yezidi Survivors' Law: A Step Towards Reparations for the ISIS Conflict" (London, Ceasefire, 2021).

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GROUPS

The ties Yezidi and Sunni Arab populations in Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict had historically maintained are now cut off as a result of the mass violence and violations during the ISIL conflict. Since the end of this conflict, community-level interaction between groups is limited to non-existent. Sunni Arab populations have effectively been prevented from returning to much of Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict because of the various security configurations in place as well as IDPs' fears of what may happen to them if they go back. These concerns stem from previous retaliatory actions taken against this population during and after military operations by various armed actors and community members.⁵⁷ A shift in security actors in 2018 including more presence of the Iraqi Army, and IDP camp closures in 2020 onward enabled some Sunni Arab families to return – mainly to some areas of Qayrawan and Al-Shamal. However, their movements are limited to Arab-controlled towns and surrounding areas, regardless of how far away these towns are from their homes and whether the families have any connection to these areas. These restrictions are in place because these populations have received direct threats from security actors and Yezidi community members, which has prevented them from accessing nearby Yezidi towns to which they had previous connection, including as public and private sector employees.⁵⁸ The recent wave of hate speech against Yezidi communities in response to erroneous rumors that they had desecrated a mosque in Markaz Sinjar during protests against the visit to prepare the return by some Sunni families to the district⁵⁹ highlights the risks Yezidis still face and the fractured relations between groups.

JUSTICE AND RECONCILIATION

While progress toward addressing service and reconstruction needs and governance and security questions is stagnant, authorities seem to be taking seriously Yezidi communities' need for acknowledgement and redress in the wake of the ISIL conflict. Early 2021 saw the first return and reburial of remains exhumed from mass graves in Sinjar district, following their documentation and identification in Baghdad.⁶⁰ In October 2023, in further recognition of the genocide perpetrated against the Yezidis during the ISIL conflict, the Yezidi Genocide Memorial was inaugurated.

However, the Government of Iraq's passage of the Yezidi Female Survivor's Law No. 8 of 2021 is the most notable effort in this regard, as it provides a reparations framework for Yezidi, Christian, Turkmen and Shabak survivors of ISIL crimes that would entail regular financial payment as well as access to education, psychosocial care and housing and land.⁶¹ The Directorate-General of Survivors Affairs, established under this legislation, opened its application process for reparations in September 2021 and distributed debit cards for accessing these

funds to a first group of applicants in March 2023.⁶² However, the Government of Iraq later changed application procedures to include the requirement that applicants file a judicial complaint to be eligible for reparations, creating an unnecessary and potentially harmful burden on survivors.⁶³ Other means for redress via Law 20 for compensation for deaths, injuries and damage affecting work, study and property due to military operations, military mistakes and terrorist acts also continues to be difficult to navigate and extremely backlogged.⁶⁴

Yezidi communities have also seen gains regarding criminal accountability for perpetrators of the genocide committed against them in European domestic courts via evidentiary documentation collected locally including via the United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/IS (UNITAD). However, Yazidi communities still feel the Government of Iraq and KRG are lacking in their prosecutorial capacities.⁶⁵ This perception is further underscored by the Government of Iraq request and subsequent United Nations Security Council vote to terminate UNITAD's mandate in September 2024, without an Iraqi legislative framework in place to deal with international crimes.⁶⁶ At present, authorities use counterterrorism laws and courts in seeking domestic accountability for ISIL perpetration, which among other issues, does not allow for witness and survivor testimony.

Lastly, in a separate initiative aimed at addressing historic discrimination faced by Iraq's ethno-religious minority population, the Government of Iraq issued a decree granting ownership of land and housing to Yezidi tenants of 11 residential collective townships in Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict that had experienced Arabization in the 1970s.⁶⁷

Sunni Muslim communities for their part also seek accountability and redress for violations they experienced at the hands of ISIL and by various security actors, armed groups and aggrieved communities linked to collective blame levied against them for the actions of ISIL. These abuses encompass targeting by the State and various security actors, including via counterterrorism laws as well as intercommunal violence and physical and administrative discrimination against

them.⁶⁸ There has so far been limited effort and scope to address any of these grievances and concerns, beyond the complex and backlogged compensation process under Law 20.

The General Amnesty Law No. 27 of 2016 sought to rectify and redress some of the considerable shortfalls of the Government of Iraq and KRG counterterrorism laws in general, under which predominantly Sunni Arab adults and children have been sentenced, by granting amnesty to those convicted of ISIL (or other terrorist group) association who could demonstrate they joined against their will and did not commit serious crimes while a member.⁶⁹ The law also allows for judicial review of criminal charges where individuals were convicted based on confessions extracted under duress. The law, however, was amended in 2017 to exclude crimes committed after 10 June 2014, seemingly ensuring that potential pardons would not be extended to those convicted in relation to ISIL.⁷⁰ This law may change again should Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani seek further amendment, as he has signaled previously.⁷¹ Doing so may allow victims of unfair trials and detention related to ISIL association to seek some measure of compensation.

Broadly, the justice landscape regarding the ISIL conflict is significantly focused on Yezidi populations given the scale of genocidal perpetration committed against them. At the same time, future processes of justice and reconciliation should be more holistic, comprehensive and inclusive of more victim and survivor communities.⁷² A critical step in this regard has included extensive mediation efforts led by national peacebuilders between Yezidi and Sunni tribes in northern Sinjar district to improve community relations and develop actionable plans for criminal accountability for violations perpetrated by both sides during and after the ISIL conflict. One public outcome of this effort was the release of a statement by Sunni tribal leadership in the district condemning and repudiating the acts of genocide and violence perpetrated against Yezidis during the conflict and pledging that such acts would not have space to occur again.⁷³

62 IOM, "On 2nd Anniversary of YSL: Yezidi Survivors See First Benefits of Landmark Reparations Law," Press Release, 2 March 2023.

63 Human Rights Watch, "Iraq: Flawed Implementation of Yezidi Compensation Law," *Human Rights Watch*, 14 April 2023.

64 Khaled Zaza et al., *Mosul After the Battle: Reparations for Civilian Harm and the Future of Ninewa* (London, Ceasefire Center for Civilian Rights / Minority Rights Group International, 2020).

65 Alannah Travers, "As UNITAD Winds Down, a Proposed Amnesty Law in Iraq Prompts Hopes – and Fear," *Coalition for Justice Reparations*, 5 November 2023.

66 Ibid.

67 Dawod, "Will New Land-Ownership Rights be Game-Changer for Iraq's Yezidis?"

68 UNAMI, *Human Rights in the Administration of Justice in Iraq: Trials under the Anti-Terrorism Laws and Implications for Justice, Accountability and Social Cohesion in the Aftermath of ISIL* (Baghdad, UNAMI, 2020); Garcia, *Caught in the Middle*; and Wille, *Not a Homecoming*.

69 Mara Redlich Revkin, "After the Islamic State: Balancing Accountability and Reconciliation in Iraq (Iraq Case Study)," in: *The Limits of Punishment: Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism* (Tokyo, Barcelona: United Nations University / Institute for Integrated Transitions, 2018).

70 Mara Revkin, "Report of the UN Global Framework Joint Scoping Exercise for Iraq" (Baghdad, UNAMI, 2022).

71 Travers, "As UNITAD Winds Down;" and Sarhang Hamasaeed, "Iraq's al-Sudani Government, One Year Later," *United States Institute of Peace*, 2 November 2023.

72 Travers, "As UNITAD Winds Down."

73 Peace Paradigms Organization and IOM, "Joint Statement of the Representatives of Religious Islamic Institutions in Iraq to Support Peaceful Coexistence between the Iraqi Components," Public statement, 28 June 2022.

METHODOLOGY

This research focuses on detailing how obstacles to return and reintegration are understood, efforts to address obstacles to date, points of consensus and contention among stakeholders, demands of different affected groups, implications if the status quo persists and potential pathways forward. A combination of IOM and Social Inquiry field teams and researchers conducted 16 focus group discussions with displaced men and women from Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict in areas where these groups reside in highest concentration. Focus group discussions were complemented by 16 key informant interviews with provincial, district or subdistrict level authorities, tribal and community leaders, United Nations personnel, donors and national and international experts. Data collection took place between September and November 2023.

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

To ensure the analysis captured the diversity of views and experiences between IDPs in Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict, between ethno-religious identities, between people residing in host communities and informal settlements or camps, and between men and women, data collection followed the below sampling frame. A total of 93 IDPs (47 men and 46 women) participated in focus group discussions, with individual participants' ages ranging between 20 and 63 years. It should be noted that it was difficult to identify IDPs from Qayrawan subdistrict wishing to participate in focus group discussions and as such, they were not included in this sample.

Table 1. Final focus group discussion sample

Population group	Governorate of displacement	Subdistrict of origin	Residence type	Participant type
Yezidis	Dohuk	Markaz Sinjar + Al-Shamal	Camp	Men
	Dohuk	Markaz Sinjar + Al-Shamal	Camp	Women
	Dohuk	Qahtaniya	Camp	Men
	Dohuk	Qahtaniya	Camp	Women
	Dohuk	Qahtaniya	Informal settlement	Men
	Dohuk	Qahtaniya	Informal settlement	Women
	Ninewa	Qahtaniya	In host community	Men
	Ninewa	Qahtaniya	In host community	Women
	Ninewa	Qahtaniya	In host community	Men
	Ninewa	Qahtaniya	In host community	Women
Kurds	Dohuk	Markaz Sinjar + Al-Shamal	Camp	Men
	Dohuk	Markaz Sinjar + Al-Shamal	Camp	Women
Sunni Arabs	Ninewa	Markaz Sinjar + Al-Shamal	In host community	Men
	Ninewa	Markaz Sinjar + Al-Shamal	In host community	Women
	Ninewa	Markaz Sinjar + Al-Shamal	In host community	Men
	Ninewa	Markaz Sinjar + Al-Shamal	In host community	Women

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

The key informant interviews were focused at a localized and governorate level and included representatives from the Ninewa Governor's Office, Sinjar district authorities in Dohuk, Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict authorities within these areas, members of political parties in Sinjar district, civil society leaders

and activists, and tribal leaders.⁷⁴ National and international peacebuilding and human rights experts, United Nations personnel and international donors were also included as key informants.

⁷⁴ Due to the scope of the methodology, provincial-level actors were targeted for interviews. Stakeholders from the Kurdistan Regional Government and Federal Government of Iraq were not included in the sample; however, both actors will be key to engage for continued efforts to resolve solutions pathways for Sinjari returnees and IDPs.

PERSPECTIVES ON DISPLACEMENT AND RETURN

Interconnected economic, social, political and security dynamics complicate the sustainable resolution of displacement for IDPs from Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict. Both displaced people and key informants spoken to as part of this analysis were keenly aware of this limitation. Furthermore, this analysis reveals that while individual identities shape how obstacles – particularly to return – are perceived, there is consensus on what they are.

ACCESS TO AREAS OF ORIGIN AND PREVIOUS RETURN ATTEMPTS

Yezidi and Kurdish IDPs in Dohuk did not make specific reference to any past return attempts or visits to their places of origin in Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict during focus group discussions. However, key informants indicated that anecdotally, some IDPs, mainly Yezidis, go back and forth between their locations of displacement and locations of origin.⁷⁵ The reported reasons for this movement include IDPs starting to rebuild their homes over time and spending time with family and friends who have returned. In some instances, families time this movement to coincide with their children's summer holidays from school. According to key informants, a characteristic of this movement is that IDPs carry it out without officially registering a request to return to their areas of origin with camp and/or Dohuk authorities.⁷⁶ They do so to maintain their IDP status in Dohuk and, where relevant, keep their plots in camps. Such strategies allow IDPs to return home for a time, while still maintaining their displaced status and access to better provisioned public services, including schools, in areas of displacement – in addition to maintain access to an area that is safe and stable.

Some Yezidi IDPs from Qahtaniya subdistrict living in Sinjar district also reported attempting to return,⁷⁷ including those who had gone back to their areas of origin to live but had to leave due to the severe lack of basic services there including water and electricity provision. As well, some stated they made numerous plans to try to return but did not have the resources and support to carry out these plans effectively and sustainably.

Sunni Arab IDPs in Mosul for the most part indicated that they had not been back to their areas of origin since being displaced – this was particularly the case for women. Three men had gone back to Sinjar district for short visits, including to obtain official documents and citizenship certificates for family members and children born in displacement.⁷⁸ After hearing the security situation had improved and the Iraqi Army had more control over the district, another three men reported they secured official security approvals for their families to return, as recently as the second quarter of 2023. However, these returns were very short-lived as these IDPs reportedly did not feel safe, were accused of being terrorists, and were threatened and assaulted by armed groups within the district.⁷⁹

OBSTACLES TO RETURN AND EXPECTED CONDITIONS IN AREAS OF ORIGIN

The displaced and key informants alike recognized that no formal or official blockages to return exist (aside from those linked to ISIL perpetration), but that a confluence of factors make returning and staying a considerably difficult prospect. Both Yezidi and Sunni Arab IDPs pointed out that there are too many competing political parties, security actors and interests in their areas of origin to make material and social well-being likely.

The multiplicity of political parties leads to instability and hampers return efforts, making the political situation complicated and unfavourable for reconstruction⁸⁰

The multiplicity of authorities in Sinjar, of administration, of security centres and of decision-makers is among the most prominent causes of chaos within the district and the most important obstacle facing the displaced.⁸¹

However, different groups perceived this overall complexity through the lens of their own concerns – which are multiple and interconnected – making it hard for groups to prioritize one obstacle over another.

Displaced Yezidis

For Yezidi IDPs in both Dohuk and Ninewa, from across Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict, some of the primary obstacles for their return included the unstable security situation, including Turkish airstrikes; the continued presence of explosive remnants of war in their areas of origin; limited infrastructure and public service provision including health care and education; limited financial opportunities; and lack of housing due to destruction (from conflict and from the environmental degradation of mud structures that have not been tended to for nearly a decade now). Regarding housing in particular, people who displaced as minors and who are now adults with their own families do not have land or homes to go back to in their areas of origin.⁸² Existing international support to housing repair or reconstruction only covers IDPs who had some form of registered housing prior to displacement, excluding younger generations who grew up in displacement.⁸³ As such, it is relatively easier for younger generations to access shelter (even if it is in poor condition) and services in their locations of displacement than in Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict.

Across Yezidi IDP populations included in this analysis, poverty and the lack of financial resources to return represent a considerable and pervasive obstacle. The return grants initiated by the Ministry of Migration and Displacement to address these financial issues and help facilitate returns to Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict for those who wish to do so reportedly have unclear application procedures and uncertain disbursement timelines.⁸⁴ Officially seeking to return also requires approval and authorization from Dohuk-based authorities in the form of a departure letter. Acquiring this letter had previously taken IDPs

75 Key informant interview, international expert, online, September 2023; and Key informant interview, local authority in Sinjar district, October 2023.

76 Key informant interview, international expert, Online, September 2023; and Key informant interview, local authority in Sinjar district, October 2023.

77 Focus group discussion, Yezidi Male IDPs from Qahtaniya in Markaz Sinjar, October 2023; and Focus group discussion, Yezidi Male IDPs from Qahtaniya in Al-Shamal, October 2023.

78 Focus group discussion 1, Sunni Arab Male IDPs from Sinjar + Al-Shamal in Mosul, November 2023; and Focus group discussion 2 2, Sunni Arab Male IDPs from Sinjar + Al-Shamal in Mosul, November 2023.

79 Focus group discussion 2, Sunni Arab Male IDPs from Sinjar + Al-Shamal in Mosul, November 2023.

80 Focus group discussion, Yezidi Male IDPs from Sinjar + Al-Shamal in Dohuk (camp), November 2023.

81 Focus group discussion 2, Sunni Arab Male IDPs from Sinjar + Al-Shamal in Mosul, November 2023.

82 Focus group discussion, Yezidi Female IDPs from Qahtaniya in Dohuk (camp), November 2023.

83 Key informant interview, United Nations personnel, online, September 2023.

84 Focus group discussion, Yezidi Female IDPs from Qahtaniya in Dohuk (informal settlement), November 2023; and Key informant interview, United Nations personnel, online, September 2023.

considerable time after they submitted the required paperwork. Yezidi IDPs noted that despite IOM's efforts to streamline the process – and indeed IOM has recently worked in coordination with Dohuk-based authorities in this regard⁸⁵ – the process remains “unacceptably slow. These delays cause additional suffering to IDPs and hinders the restoration of their normal lives [in their areas of origin].”⁸⁶

Yezidi IDPs also raised concerns about tensions between different communities – particularly between Yezidi and Sunni Arab communities – should more people come back. Concerns about internal divisions within the Yezidi community were also mentioned, but to a lesser extent. These internal divisions stem from the different interconnected sociopolitical and security alignments that have emerged within the Yezidi community in the aftermath of the conflict and prolonged displacement. These divisions are partly linked to the diversity of actors and interests intersecting in Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict. The lack of political and social consensus among Yezidis feels new to most in the community and is a worrying development for some.⁸⁷

Finally, of particular note for Yezidis displaced from Qahtaniya subdistrict (but mentioned by others as well) is the considerable number of mass graves that have yet to be exhumed in areas of origin: “I imagine that when I return I will see destroyed houses and mass graves everywhere and every house that has lost family and loved ones.”⁸⁸ Authorities indicated that approximately 58 mass graves associated with ISIL perpetration remain within Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict.⁸⁹ These sites pose significant psychological harm to potential returnees if graves are not exhumed and the deceased identified and returned to their families for dignified burial.⁹⁰

Displaced Kurds

Kurdish IDPs in Dohuk highlighted similar concerns in terms of lack of services and infrastructure in areas of origin, lack of housing due to destruction and limited economic opportunities. Limited resources in displacement, including delayed salary payments issued by the Government of Iraq for displaced public sector employees from the district also make it difficult to make plans to return. These IDPs also highlighted fears regarding insecurity due to “armed factions” and “neighbouring Arabs.”⁹¹ This sentiment likely refers to interconnected dynamics: the presence of a multiplicity of security forces and armed groups on the ground, including the PKK; broader Government of Iraq-KRG competition over the disputed territories; and the conduct of Kurdish forces against Arab villages and populations in the operations to retake Sinjar district from ISIL.

Displaced Sunni Arabs

Displaced Sunni Arab participants tended to highlight that their returns are constrained by parties and armed groups with foreign support, “including the PKK and its armed forces.”⁹² The various PMU brigades operating in Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict may also be of concern to displaced Sunni Arabs considering that the latter tend to view the PMUs as having foreign support or linkages. According to Sunni Arab IDPs, such actors hinder returns under the

pretext that displaced Sunni Arabs are terrorists and thus refuse to recognize their official security clearance documents.⁹³ Furthermore, these armed groups reportedly support the denunciation Arab returns.⁹⁴ Sunni Arab IDPs and their tribal representatives also reported that armed groups have occupied Arab IDPs' homes, properties and shops in Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict.⁹⁵ These factors tended to predominate discussions on obstacles to return; however, participants also noted that the lack of clarity on who is governing the area, lack of infrastructure and poor service provision, residential destruction, societal tensions between groups, limited economic opportunities and limited resources to support returns are obstacles as well.

(GEO)POLITICAL IMPERATIVES THAT BENEFIT FROM LIMITED RETURNS

A final obstacle to return not mentioned directly by IDPs but that came up among key informants relates to a political dimension, with competing narratives as to what is happening and why. Perhaps one conclusion is that while no specific party or entity prevents returns directly – and indeed resolving displacement for populations from Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict is often a stated priority of these entities – each has interests and ambitions that might benefit from the continued displacement of communities from these areas.⁹⁶ The following points emerge from the views expressed across interviews:

- The KDP has significant political and economic power in Ninewa Governorate overall and in the disputed territories therein (including Sinjar district) with the continued presence of IDPs in Dohuk Governorate. This is further bolstered by the retention of the formally recognized Sinjar local administration in Dohuk as well.
- The Sinjar district-based political parties (under the umbrella of the Sinjar Coordination of National Components and Forces) comprising the Self-Administration are also able to maintain and consolidate power in the absence of more returns. There is a realistic chance that as more IDPs come back from displacement in Dohuk and other parts of Ninewa, these parties' power and influence will dilute. This may in part contribute to their rejection of the Sinjar Agreement, as it did not include them in its considerations, and if more people come back through the agreement's implementation, these parties might lose some of their footing as powerbrokers in the district.
- Those actors operating at the Syrian border, including Iran-aligned PMUs, have an incentive to keep areas empty and destabilized to continue their illicit activities and operations including smuggling, with relatively little interference. Fewer people in these areas also makes it easier to maintain a Shia corridor connecting Iran to Syria through the territory of Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict.
- Finally, Türkiye benefits from continued instability that prevents returns, as it contributes to ensuring the area does not come under the control of perceived PKK-linked parties – which in turn may have implications for Kurdish separatism in Türkiye.

85 Key informant interview, UN personnel, Online, September 2023.

86 Focus group discussion, Yezidi Female IDPs from Qahtaniya in Dohuk (informal settlement), November 2023.

87 Saad Salloum, Return to Sinjar: Challenges, Opportunities, and Dimensions of Conflict (IOM, Baghdad, 2020).

88 Focus group discussion, Yezidi Female IDPs from Qahtaniya in Al-Shamal, October 2023.

89 Key informant interview, Ninewa provincial authority, Mosul, November 2023.

90 Focus group discussion, Yezidi Male IDPs from Qahtaniya in Markaz Sinjar, October 2023.

91 Focus group discussion, Kurd Male IDPs from Sinjar + Al-Shamal in Dohuk (camp), November 2023; and Focus group discussion, Kurd Male IDPs from Sinjar + Al-Shamal in Dohuk (camp), November 2023.

92 Key informant interview, tribal leader from Qahtaniya, November 2023.

93 Focus group discussion 2, Sunni Arab Male IDPs from Sinjar + Al-Shamal in Mosul, November 2023.

94 Key informant interview, tribal leader from Qahtaniya, November 2023; and Key informant interview, tribal leader from Al-Shamal, November 2023.

95 Focus group discussion 1, Sunni Arab Male IDPs from Sinjar + Al-Shamal in Mosul, November 2023; and Key informant interview, tribal leader from Qahtaniya, November 2023.

96 Key informant interview, Ninewa provincial authority, Mosul, November 2023.

Taken together, these dynamics leave the displaced and returnees alike subject to the discretion of political actors on the ground with no meaningful way to have their voices and decision-making respected.⁹⁷ An additional difficulty in ensuring IDPs and returnees have a voice in the decision-making process comes from the fact that communities have been dispersed geographically for nearly a decade. Sinjaris would have more ability to push for changes on their own terms if everyone was able to come back. It may be precisely this possibility for collective civic deliberation and decision-making that the current, competing powers fear the most, lest they themselves lose out.

OPTIONS FOR RESOLVING DISPLACEMENT

Being caught up in these dynamics, which they recognize as both local, regional, national and geopolitical, the displaced populations included in this analysis seem somewhat split on what their preferred means of resolving their displacement would be. Some very much want to return should conditions permit, some seem resigned to try to locally integrate because they have given up on waiting for conditions to improve in their areas of origin, others are locally integrating somewhat more willingly although they also face obstacles, and others, given the hardships of their current living conditions, particularly in camps, see no options

other than to move to other encampments or try to emigrate.

Thus, rather than exploring options for resolving their displacement in a manner that is voluntary and dignified, the displaced seem to have to decide between the least bad option. With limited support to overcome the challenges they face, for most people the least bad option is not a choice at all.

Where there is consensus across IDP groups is the desire for home and a deep connection to being from Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict. As such, IDPs also all lamented that this nearly decade-long displacement has the capacity to create deep fractures in their respective local identities, ways of life and practices of tradition, language and culture.

Displacement has impacted the cultural identity of society, and it creates the possibility of losing our heritage and traditions.⁹⁸

I believe that the failure to resolve displacement will lead to the loss of cultural and social ties, threatening the extinction of local heritage, language and traditions.⁹⁹

One effect [of protracted displacement] is the loss of our identity, the identity of our origins, our documents, the property rights of our lands, and the loss of our beliefs, customs and traditions that were made hundreds of years ago.¹⁰⁰

PERSPECTIVES ON PAST AND ONGOING PROCESSES FOR RETURN

All study participants were aware of past and ongoing processes to support returns in various capacities, including through governmental and United Nations Agencies' efforts on facilitating return movements and reconstruction, localized reconciliation efforts and high-level policy to resolve outstanding issues in areas of origin overall (indeed, across the IDP groups included in this analysis many seemed to be aware of the Sinjar Agreement). There seems to be consensus that these efforts tend to be heavily bureaucratic and slow, not inclusive enough of all displaced communities, not given enough long-term resources and support to succeed, and subject to high levels of political infighting and inaction. As such, not much has changed on the ground. People are still in need of "a qualifying environment to return to,"¹⁰¹ which leaves particularly aggrieved communities in a considerable level of precarity, fearing for the loss of their identities and place in society should the status quo remain unchanged.

IOM activities as an important effort and acknowledged that collaboration with authorities works well in this regard. However, Sunni Arab IDPs perceived that in comparison to other groups, they remain underserved and have to navigate most of the processes for return on their own and at their own expense.

The local and central government, the United Nations, civil society organizations and the Ministry of Migration and Displacement do not pay attention to us as displaced people from the Arab component. They only support the return of displaced persons from the other components living in camps, providing them with livelihoods and reconstructing their affected areas. We are in oblivion. There is no one to call us and demand our rights like the rest of the other components. The return of some [Arab] families was voluntary, at their own risk, and at their own expense to go back and to repair their homes, without the assistance of the government.¹⁰²

A consensus among all IDPs was that full compensation for deaths, injuries, lost assets and damaged or destroyed homes and property would go a long way to help facilitate returns, but that the governmental process is extremely difficult and cumbersome and little to no funds have been received by anyone. Key informants also noted that Yezidis may qualify for reparations under the Yezidi Survivors' Law and/or compensation under Law 20; however, many seemed to be unclear as to which mechanism they qualify for and were daunted by application processes.¹⁰³ Finally, Yezidi IDPs from Qahtaniya subdistrict in particular indicated that the Government of Iraq must "speed up"¹⁰⁴ the process through which it seeks to grant land and housing ownership back to Yezidi tenants of residential townships. Receiving formal ownership rights, as part of a Government of Iraq

INITIATIVES THAT HAVE TAKEN PLACE TO DATE

Return support and reconstruction

Nearly all IDPs indicated knowing some aspect about IOM efforts to help support returns to Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict in terms of facilitation of return documentation, particularly from Dohuk, go and see visits, and transportation and aid support in areas of origin. While some IDPs living in Dohuk were appreciative of this support, they maintained that the processes remain exceedingly slow and delayed due to government bureaucracy. Key informants also recognized

97 Key informant interview, national expert, online, September 2023.

98 Focus group discussion, Yezidi Male IDPs from Qahtaniya in Dohuk (informal settlement), November 2023.

99 Focus group discussion, Kurdish Male IDPs from Markaz Sinjar + Al Shamal in Dohuk (camp), November 2023.

100 Focus group discussion, Sunni Arab Male IDPs from Markaz Sinjar + Al Shamal in Mosul, November 2023.

101 Key informant interview, national expert, online, September 2023.

102 Focus group discussion 2, Sunni Arab Male IDPs from Markaz Sinjar + Al Shamal in Mosul, November 2023.

103 Key informant interview, United Nations personnel, online, September 2023; and Key informant interview, international expert, September 2023.

104 Focus group discussion, Yezidi Male IDPs from Qahtaniya in Markaz Sinjar, November 2023.

effort to redress the harms of past Arabization policies against Iraq's ethno-religious minority communities, was seen by some Yezidi IDPs as another means of helping them resolve their displacement.

While large-scale reconstruction efforts remain stalled, study participants did note that the international community has played a role in supporting efforts to rehabilitate, repair and build infrastructure. Such support included a UNDP initiative to reconstruct and rehabilitate damaged and destroyed housing complexes in the area, which reportedly contributed to the return of some families.¹⁰⁵ However, deeper engagement in the Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict by international donors is not as robust as it could be due to instability and the occupation of repaired civilian infrastructure by armed groups.¹⁰⁶

Localized reconciliation

Several key informants and some Sunni Arab IDPs within this analysis also participated in or knew about a localized reconciliation effort initiated between Yezidi and Sunni Arab tribes for northern Sinjar district. This effort sought to bring Yezidi and Arab leadership together on key points, which included supporting attempts to locate missing Yezidi women survivors in Iraq and Syria; joint advocacy for reconstruction and compensation in Sinjar district; support to bringing ISIL perpetrators to justice; negotiation on issues within Al-Shamal where returning Muslim communities experienced violations by Yezidi security counterparts; and agreement to change religious narratives with statements of support from large and influential Muslim institutions across the country. This effort resulted in an agreed upon framework for action along these key points and an accompanying public statement by Muslim tribal leaders repudiating the acts of genocide and violence perpetrated against Yezidis during the conflict and pledging for this never to happen again.

Reaching consensus for this joint Yezidi-Arab action framework took considerable time and resources to achieve; however, its implementation was limited in part by the lack of support for follow-up monitoring and momentum. As such, tangible impacts from this localized reconciliation effort and its ensuing action framework were hard to detect. These efforts could be revived with significant, longer-term donor commitment. Such donor investments cannot be bound to short project cycles nor ignore local sensitivities and demands. The stakeholders engaged in bridging divides between deeply aggrieved communities take significant risks in doing so and need to know that their efforts will be supported over the time it takes to heal these wounds and create change within their communities. These efforts also highlight that it is possible to spark progress at a localized level by engaging on issues that are important to the wider community but have a less political bent.

Broader engagement on resolving Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict displacement

The Sinjar Agreement is the primary, high-level framework that the Government of Iraq and KRG have to address issues pertaining to Sinjar district and the agreement is seen as such by donors as well. Without its implementation, it would be difficult for many donor governments to commit to increased direct involvement and support. This hesitancy connects to concern that once support to a project or programme is completed, there is no clear actor or authority

to take over and administer it to ensure, for example, that public goods and infrastructure are sustained for use by citizens and not diverted for other purposes.¹⁰⁷ The alleged YBŞ occupation of the Zarifa Oso School in Sinjar district, built with Japanese funds in 2022 to serve 1,000 students, underscores this concern.¹⁰⁸ It is reported that at least three schools in Sinjar district have been coopted and occupied for use by security forces and armed actors.¹⁰⁹ Furthermore, the multiplicity of security actors and armed groups operating in Sinjar district also limit donor governments' direct involvement in working with Government of Iraq and KRG authorities in implementing the agreement; rather, these actors lend their support by backing UNAMI, particularly in its recent efforts to bring renewed momentum to the process.

This is not to say, however, that displaced communities and their representatives, local authorities and others have not been active in seeking solutions for Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict before or after the signing of the Sinjar Agreement – regardless of whether they wish to see it implemented or reject it entirely. Several key informants reported having engaged in local, provincial, national and even international discussions on key issues facing these areas, their residents and those still displaced. These actors did not necessarily have the same view about how to tackle the challenges, but they did raise many of the same broad topics as priorities: compensation; establishing an agreed upon, representative local administration; and reconstruction, among others. While most IDPs in this sample have not directly engaged with or participated in any initiatives at such a high level, they have sought to raise their concerns locally and on social media.

Despite these efforts, however, most participants in this study agreed that relatively limited changes have occurred on the ground in this regard, particularly since the signing of the Sinjar Agreement. By and large, consensus exists that the Government of Iraq and KRG are the authorities who have the capacity and legitimacy to act but that they have not done so. Some key informants attribute this stagnation to the fact that while both sides raise implementing the agreement as a priority, neither wants to take responsibility given how complicated it is; whomever would act first could then be perceived as the duty bearer for its implementation.¹¹⁰

IMPLICATIONS OF CONTINUING THE STATUS QUO

If Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict remain in persistent uncertainty, it will imply that the State is neglecting its duty to protect a region and diverse population that it failed to shield from some of the gravest harms perpetrated during the ISIL conflict. The uncertainty and precarity this situation creates for all displaced communities and their subsequent generations is an additional harm they must carry and deal with, primarily on their own. Their voices and views are lost amid internal and external political maneuvering.

One consequence of this uncertainty is seen in IDPs' fear that continued dislocation from their homelands and fragmentation of their communities across geography will lead to a loss of their identities and cultures as Sinjaris. This concern, in turn, prompts fears of IDPs losing their place in society in part through the demographic change of Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict,

¹⁰⁵ Key informant interview, civil servant and political party official, Sinuni, November 2023.

¹⁰⁶ Key informant interview, international donor, online, November 2023.

¹⁰⁷ Key informant interview, international donor, online, November 2023.

¹⁰⁸ This occupation of an internationally-funded rehabilitation project – while deeply troubling – may have been an isolated case. For information on the incident see, for example, *Kurdistan24*, "Over 1,000 Students Denied Access to a Sinjar School by PKK, Says Japanese Envoy," *Kurdistan24*, 19 October 2023.

¹⁰⁹ *Human Rights Watch*, "Iraq: Political Infighting Blocking Reconstruction of Sinjar."

¹¹⁰ Key informant interview, international donor, online, November 2023; and Key informant interview, international expert, Online, September 2023.

at the expense of their respective communities. The status quo thus creates “temporary citizens with no electoral or political impact, no right to participate in [Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict] administration.”¹¹¹ Such a condition also raises concerns among the displaced for increasing tensions between groups and the prospects for future sectarian conflicts, given the legacy of their areas of origin and the current actors on the ground. There is also a fear that continued instability and unsustainable living conditions may prompt the displaced to

emigrate. The recent uptick of Yezidi men and women crossing from Dohuk into Türkiye in higher proportion to other groups is evidence that such movement is already occurring.¹¹² Finally, leaving the current status quo unchecked gives room for various actors to continue to use Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict as routes for their own cross-border operations in conflict and illicit commerce, making it even harder to dislodge such groups given their material incentives to remain.

PERSPECTIVES ON FUTURE RETURN PROCESSES AND PRECONDITIONS FOR RESOLUTION OF DISPLACEMENT

As indicated above, there seems to be general agreement among key informants within the various local administrations and at the provincial level on the conditions needed to foster more returns to Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict.¹¹³ These include providing compensation to the displaced for any deaths, injuries or losses of housing, property and assets; instituting a representative, agreed upon and recognized local administration; and reconstructing and developing these areas. The specifics of these conditions, particularly in terms of who would comprise the local administration and how to maintain the stability and security of these areas is where the disagreements lie. IDPs also see these priorities as critical preconditions for return but have other demands as well, particularly in relation to justice and redress and reconciliation between groups. Again, the specific details of what these preconditions should be depends on IDP identity and in some cases political alignment or lack thereof. These needs often touched upon and transcended politics, rather connecting to whom the displaced communities feel will protect and vindicate their rights.

POINTS OF DISAGREEMENT AND RED LINES

Priorities related to administration, security and reconstruction all fall within the remit of the Sinjar Agreement – which the Self-Administration rejects outright, having not been included in its negotiation in the first place. At the same time, the need for a local administration is a critical necessity for all stakeholders engaged in Sinjar district and an issue that is a priority to be resolved, as reflected by study participants.

Under the terms of the Sinjar Agreement, appointing a mayor is the first step in this process. Along these terms, the KDP submitted proposed candidates to the Government of Iraq for review across institutions, including the PMC.¹¹⁴ Prominent Yezidis instead called for the local community to select a non-partisan mayor,¹¹⁵ which is how some current Self-Administration acting authorities have been chosen. These competing positions have put the Government of Iraq in a bind, not wanting to anger local Sinjari communities while also not wishing to alienate the KDP, which is a powerful actor in parliament and holds the most seats in that body for Sinjar district.¹¹⁶ As such, to date, no new mayor has been officially appointed or selected.

Some of the arguments of the Self-Administration (and wider coalition of political parties representing the district) against this process is that they do not believe that the KRG nor the KDP have a legitimate role to play in Sinjar district, and that the original Kurdish population of the area is too small for it to be part of Kurdish territory.¹¹⁷ This pushback perhaps highlights not only wider tensions between Arab and Kurdish leadership, but also a Yezidi assertion as a distinct ethno-religious identity in the country, rather than a broadly Kurdish one. This stance may also be, as some within the group intimated in interviews, a response to the fact that this area was under KDP control when ISIL was able to perpetrate genocide against the Yezidis. While both governments are seen to be at fault for letting this happen, it was the Peshmerga forces who left Sinjar district unprotected in the summer of 2014.¹¹⁸

Another and perhaps even greater point of contention between these actors relates to security and the stipulation under the Sinjar Agreement that the PKK and its affiliates have no role in Sinjar district. There seems to be general agreement that the presence of the PKK is a concern. The PKK is seen by most as a foreign actor that is limiting returns because their presence incites Turkish airstrikes; as well, Yezidi and Kurdish populations are concerned about the group’s forced recruitment and indoctrination of children and young people,¹¹⁹ and the group’s presence is seen as an intimidating factor to Arab populations who want to return.

The main issue rather relates to who is considered a PKK affiliate. For all intents and purposes, for the KDP, for at least some institutions of the Government of Iraq and Türkiye, and for displaced Kurds and Sunni Arabs and the latter’s tribal leaders, the YBŞ is a PKK affiliate. For the Self-Administration, the PMU and wider PMC, and at least some Yezidis communities, the armed group is seen as a locally established force protecting Sinjar district and its communities, and as such, should be somehow incorporated into the formal security portfolio for Sinjar district.

The impasses reached in terms of both local governance and security have so far prevented the large-scale reconstruction efforts all stakeholders want to see in the district. Federal budget allocations for this purpose have yet to be spent as the Joint Committee that is to be tasked with deciding what these funds should

111 Key informant interview, tribal leader in Sinuni, November 2023.

112 IOM Iraq, “Yezidi Migration from Iraq to Türkiye.” Forthcoming.

113 Key informant interview, Ninewa provincial authority, Mosul, November 2023; Key informant interview, Sinjar district local authority in Dohuk, November 2023; and Key informant interview, local authority in Sinjar district, November 2023.

114 ICG, Iraq: Stabilising the Contested District of Sinjar.

115 Shamiran Mako, “Negotiating Peace in Iraq’s Disputed Territories: Modifying the Sinjar Agreement,” *Lawfare*, 17 January 2021.

116 ICG, Iraq: Stabilising the Contested District of Sinjar.

117 Key informant interview, local authority in Qahtaniya subdistrict, November 2023; Key informant interview, local authority in Sinjar district, November 2023; Key informant interview, political party member in Sinjar district, November 2023; and Key informant interview, political party leader in Sinjar district, November 2023.

118 Key informant interview, local authority in Sinjar district, November 2023.

119 Key informant interview, Sinjar district local authority in Dohuk, November 2023.

be spent on and where, per the Sinjar Agreement, has not been established.¹²⁰ The continuing uncertainty of governance, presence of certain armed groups on the ground, and general instability also prevent international donors from investing more directly and deeply in reconstruction.

IDP PRECONDITIONS FOR RETURN

Just as multiple interconnected factors prevent the displaced from Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict from returning, so too would multiple interconnected preconditions be necessary for these populations to come back. These preconditions fall around the same topics across groups, though their details vary by group and, in some cases, contradict one another. Their order of importance also varies slightly depending on the group but are listed below based on overall frequency.

1. Reconstruction including residential housing, public service provision and economic development. This is a stated priority for all IDP groups included in this analysis, with little variation between them. Housing was the one area where some differences emerged.

Yezidi IDPs indicated that, along with the broader need for housing reconstruction, there is the need to provide land and housing in areas of origin to younger generations of IDPs who displaced as children and now have families of their own. These populations are not eligible for existing housing support within current landscape of aid provision. Yezidi IDPs also noted the need for public participation and consultation in wider reconstruction efforts.

Sunni Arab IDPs raised concerns about the potential for housing, land and property occupation by armed actors and their supporters as an additional need that must be addressed in this regard.

2. Ensuring safety and security, including by removing armed factions. While all IDPs agreed that addressing insecurity in their area of origin is a prerequisite for return, they had differing views on what removing armed factions means in practice and who should provide security and law enforcement.

Displaced Yezidis did not mention which specific armed factions needed to be removed. Rather, they almost unanimously indicated the need for establishing a security force made up of the local population (which is a stipulation of the Sinjar Agreement as well). In addition, a few Yezidi IDPs also called for the provision of international protection to Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict.

Kurdish IDPs also tended to be more circumspect regarding which armed factors they thought needed to be removed, though some referred to the PKK. There was a general sense among this group of the need to reinstate the Peshmerga more fully into areas of origin.

Sunni Arab IDPs were the most explicit in stating that the removal of the PKK and affiliated groups was necessary for their being able to return. They, by and large, also stated a preference for the Iraqi Army and local police (representatively comprised of local community members also included in the Sinjar Agreement) as the primary sources for protection and law enforcement. Some had also expressed the need for international monitors to be present to ensure protection as new security configurations are put in place.

3. Provision of justice and compensation. All the IDP groups included in this analysis had a strong need and desire for their grievances and experiences

to be acknowledged and redressed. Once again, what they seek varies to some degree, depending not only on the different types of violations experienced, but also on the level of attention and support paid to some victim communities over others in their pursuit for justice.

Yezidi IDPs had the clearest demands in this regard. They seek full compensation for losses experienced for those who qualify. Few IDPs made distinctions between the different schemes available to them (reparations and compensation), which may underscore the continuing confusion over whether individuals qualify for one, the other or both. Furthermore, they demand criminal accountability for ISIL perpetration and all those responsible for what happened in 2014; the exhumation of all remaining mass graves; the continued search for those still missing and their repatriation (dead or alive); the recognition of the Yezidi genocide; and the recognition and protection of Yezidi rights and culture.

Kurdish and Sunni Arab IDPs for their part indicated a demand for full compensation for those affected by conflict and the criminal accountability of ISIL perpetrators and responsible parties. Sunni Arab IDPs also indicated that there may be possibility for some to avail themselves of the General Amnesty Law should it be amended. These IDPs also noted the discrepancy between how their experiences and losses during conflict and prolonged displacement are considered by authorities and the international community compared to those of other communities from Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict.

This perception is a particularly sensitive topic because there is considerable international focus on Yezidi justice and redress needs, and this is reflected in the ways in which they tend to articulate their demands. Such focus is necessary given that the scale of what happened to this community warrants reparations and justice and international attention has helped them organize and advocate for themselves. At the same time, this attention has led to a “*hierarchization*”¹²¹ of victims. As such, other communities from Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict are “*also correct in pointing out that their concerns are less focused on to their detriment and it is sometimes perceived as the international community not wanting to support Muslims if they don't have to.*”¹²²

4. A functioning and representative local administration. The need for a single recognized, local government and appropriate representation within it is a key precondition for all Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict IDPs. This need was indicated as a requirement so that the people of Sinjar are “*properly represented in decisions and negotiations about their region.*”¹²³

Many IDPs from Qahtaniya subdistrict wished to see their subdistrict of origin once again administratively connected to Sinjar district, reflecting the historical and cultural ties these areas have to one another. Doing so would enable Yezidis from Qahtaniya to have more of a voice in governance if the area was linked again with Sinjar district given that the latter has a more predominant Yezidi population than Ba'aj district.

Representation of this nature is also particularly important to Sunni Arab IDPs as well and explains why they explicitly stated seeking a representative local administration that sits under the auspices of the Government of Iraq rather than of the KRG. Sunni Arab IDPs indeed seem most concerned about their political voice in the area given that so few of their community members have been able to return and that they do not have particularly strong representation among the KDP or Self-Administration currently vying for power.

120 HRW, “Iraq: Political Infighting Blocking Reconstruction of Sinjar.”

121 Key informant interview, international expert, online, September 2023.

122 Key informant interview, international expert, online, September 2023.

123 Focus group discussion, Yezidi Male IDPs from Qahtaniya in Markaz Sinjar, November 2023.

5. **Reconciliation and dialogue between groups.** On this last point, there seemed to be full consensus and no caveats or particularities among IDP groups included in this analysis. All expressed deep concern over the potential for tensions between communities should they return and wished to have processes in place to address these concerns. This concern is in stark contrast to some key informants of both administrations responsible for the area who indicated that community relations are not an issue.

IDP PRECONDITIONS FOR LOCAL INTEGRATION

The displaced people included in this research did not refer to what would make local integration more feasible for them. The emphasis of their discussions focused on being able to eventually return. Those who indicated attempting to locally integrate, specifically within host communities in Mosul, reported issues related to high rents, movement restrictions linked to their identities, the difficulty of obtaining official documents including by having parallel administrations attached to their areas of origin, and integrating with the local communities around them.¹²⁴ Addressing the outstanding issues related to Sinjar district governance would help in easing some of this administrative burden.

For IDPs across groups and across displacement locations, receiving compensation for deaths, injuries and damage or destruction of housing, property and assets, would be a significant factor in helping them take a more proactive decision as to how they would like to resolve their displacement.¹²⁵

POTENTIAL PATHWAYS FORWARD

Despite considerable discussion on the importance of resolving displacement from Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict, it remains unclear whether and how all stakeholders involved will address this issue in 2024. The prospect for signing and implementing the Joint Government of Iraq, Kurdistan Regional Government and United Nations Roadmap for the Acceleration of the National Plan, anticipated to launch in 2024, would help in providing space to further discuss this issue.

The recent outcome of the December 2023 provincial elections will have an impact on whether and how the issue of resolving displacement for Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict is acted upon. Of the 29 seats on the Ninewa Provincial Council, Ninewa for Its People, led by a Sunni Arab politician, won the most with five, followed by the KDP with four. As such, the council is split and as of this writing in late 2023, it remains to be seen how this dynamic will influence the selection of governor and deputy governor.¹²⁶ The outcome of that decision will in turn impact the appointment of a mayor for Sinjar district, which will be a key component of addressing unresolved issues in the area.

DEEPER AND MORE INCLUSIVE ENGAGEMENT OF ALL STAKEHOLDERS

The current impasses in durably resolving displacement for Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict and responses from study participants highlight the need for significantly more inclusive engagement of all stakeholders currently involved in and

PUTTING THESE PIECES TOGETHER

Given these dynamics, any new or renewed efforts to address returns will likely need to take a broader view of the stakeholders involved, their diverging views, competing efforts and areas of consensus to move forward in relation to compensation, governance, security and reconstruction. Some IDPs and key informants also highlighted the need for more inclusive processes that reflect all the communities from the district and subdistrict, with IDPs across groups noting that greater involvement of the United Nations and international community is needed to ensure monitoring of any action that is decided upon.

More critical still, key informants pointed out that having some consensus on priorities by local communities, as fractured as they may seem, would go a considerable way to leverage pressure on authorities to act, including from the United Nations and international donor community.¹²⁶ The fact that IDPs from Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict have broadly similar demands for the protection and vindication of their rights may serve as a useful starting point to building community-level joint advocacy. This more representative and collective positioning would be something the United Nations and international community could draw on for leverage, and to add weight to their advocacy and pressure capacity on authorities. IDPs' willingness to engage in any such efforts to resolve their displacement and by extension contribute to creating a Sinjari society where all can thrive seems high, provided these initiatives are convened with a commitment to act.

influencing dynamics in these areas. Stakeholders include not only Government of Iraq and KRG authorities, but also those acting within Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict and local powerbrokers therein. Such engagement may additionally require some buy-in from regional actors as well. Most critical, however, is the need to have more direct and representative involvement of the wider civil society and IDP and returnee groups of Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict. Based on this analysis, the United Nations is seen as best placed to convene this broader engagement and in conducting private and public advocacy to make it happen. Thus, the significant effort, knowledge of context and expertise it took to bring the Government of Iraq and KRG counterparts together on Sinjar district should be brought to bear in widening this circle of engagement while centering the needs and demands of all Sinjaris.

FLEXIBILITY IN APPROACH

While for some actors, the Sinjar Agreement is the policy framework through which to deal with the underlying issues impeding returns, others indicated that the agreement is unworkable – considering how little has been done so far and how much political opposition it faces within the district.¹²⁷ Others still noted that addressing Sinjar district in a vacuum without also tackling the disputed territories more broadly is a half measure only.¹²⁸ It may be possible to revive the agreement by including more stakeholders to it, renegotiating its terms, bolstering it to include more details and provisions, and securing guarantors of

¹²⁴ Focus group discussion 1, Sunni Arab Male IDPs from Sinjar + Al-Shamal in Mosul, November 2023.

¹²⁵ Key informant interview, United Nations personnel, September 2023; Key informant interview, international expert, September 2023; and Key informant interview, national expert, September 2023.

¹²⁶ Key informant interview, national expert, September 2023; and Key informant interview, international donor, November 2023.

¹²⁷ Key informant interview, national expert, online, September 2023; Key informant interview, local authority in Qahtaniya subdistrict, November 2023; Key informant interview, local authority in Sinjar district, November 2023; Key informant interview, political party member in Sinjar district, November 2023; and Key informant interview, political party leader in Sinjar district, November 2023.

¹²⁸ Key informant interview, Sinjar district local authority in Dohuk, November 2023.

its implementation. On this latter point, IDPs specify the need for international monitoring and backing. Alternatively, the agreement may need to be set aside to make way for a new and actionable alternative, depending on the local dynamics and in the wider region. Based on this the analysis and wider overall reporting, IDPs are not necessarily committed to the Sinjar Agreement. What they seek is a coordinated and cohesive response to their needs and implementation that leads to positive changes on the ground. These elements should be the focus of any future processes, regardless of the framework used.

FINDING COMMONALITIES AND EXPLORING MORE LOCALIZED, LESS POLITICAL POSSIBILITIES

This analysis highlights that IDP communities across locations and identity groups do have common demands. While they may not have the same views on exactly how these should be implemented or in which order, they do share a desire for safety, representative governance, reconstruction and development, compensation, justice, and reconciliation and dialogue between groups. Building a base for common advocacy and demands would perhaps help in adding further public pressure for action and may generate greater solidarity and recognition between groups. Compensation, for instance, could prompt changes in law based on public demand, avoiding more politically sensitive areas like governance and security.

The example of localized reconciliation for northern Sinjar district and the topics that parties agreed upon provide an example of what may be possible. Reviving that effort and the action framework that was agreed on with sustained resources and support could serve as a point of departure in determining how best to leverage cross-community engagement for long-term social and political change, while addressing the more immediate needs of IDPs and returnees alike. Doing so may also enable buy-in of other communities and their leadership across the rest of Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict to engage in such processes over time.

The most critical point to underscore in this regard is that any efforts at building cross-group advocacy and action among those from Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict will take significant time and effort and require deep knowledge of the local context given the depth of grievances and trauma that remain between and among groups. These processes cannot be rushed and do not fit in short programme cycles. Rather, they necessitate the long-term commitment of all stakeholders and multiyear support not only to generate impact, but also to prevent further harm.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR IN-DEPTH INVESTMENT AND SUPPORT ON THE GROUND

The current conditions in Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict limit the breadth and depth of investment international donors are willing to commit to the area. This limitation relates not only to the location's ongoing instability, but also to the uncertain and unresolved status of its local government and the confluence of security forces and armed groups operating there. It may take significant time for conditions to improve such that this stance will change. In the meantime, more localized efforts need significant and sustained support to take effect in a manner that is cohesive, coordinated and impactful at a wider level. Such localized efforts may serve as an opportunity for international donors to explore the ways in which they can invest – particularly in Sinjaris themselves, to start building connections to advocate together for social and political change on their own terms. The strategies and funding employed by the international community to help Yezidis in organizing and advocating for justice demands may be well worth considering. Such strategies may include funding streams related to wider democracy promotion and public participation, good governance, human rights, justice and accountability, and sustainable peace and security.

SPACE FOR MORE COMPREHENSIVE TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE

The issues impeding returns or any durable resolution of displacement for the communities of Sinjar district and Qahtaniya subdistrict have deep roots and stem from a legacy of conflict and grievances. Therefore, it may be worth considering the ways in which a deeper look at these issues and their root causes may contribute to finding solutions to displacement, specifically, solutions that recognize the rights and dignity of all victims as citizens rather than the rights of some over others. The demands Yezidis have for justice cannot be sought alone. Addressing their demands will require the support of and collaboration with the wider communities where they are from and a recognition from them of the severity of what happened. At the same time, the justice demands of other communities should not continue to be deprioritized, but rather recognized, with remedies sought for these as well. While the current priorities of the Government of Iraq aim to move on from conflict toward more prosperity and quality of life for Iraqis, looking back may be the only way to move forward.

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IOM IRAQ

UNAMI Compound (Diwan 2),
International Zone,
Baghdad, Iraq

 iraq.iom.int

 iomiraq@iom.int

    @IOMIraq



Kingdom of the Netherlands

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