

No War Yet No Peace: Why a Million Iraqis Remain Exiled in Their Own Country

BIC STORIES FROM THE FIELD, SERIES – COMMENTARY

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Five years after the end of the war against the Islamic State group, more than a million people remain displaced across Iraq. Tribal feuds, destruction of infrastructures and private homes, and a lack of services and livelihood opportunities are some of the main factors impeding the safe and voluntary return of these civilians to their area of origin.

Iraq has a long history of internal displacement provoked by decades of conflict, including the recent war against the Islamic State group (ISIS). Returns have occurred en masse since the self-styled “Caliphate” was officially defeated in December 2017, with close to 5 million people going back home. However, despite the brutal fighting having come to an end, more than a million Iraqis remain exiled inside their own country.¹

During a recent trip to Iraq, the Brussels International Center (BIC) visited several communities of IDPs (internally displaced persons) settled in the city of Mosul to highlight some of the main return barriers they face.

“There are no good schools back home and few job opportunities,” Bassem Ali Hussein, a 42-year-old father of seven, told the BIC.

¹ Iraq country profile, Internal displacement monitoring center - <https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/iraq>

The family left the town of Al-Qairawan, near Sinjar (North-West), when ISIS swept over the area in the summer of 2014. They now live with other displaced families in the informal site of Wadi Agab, named after a nearby cemetery, where they built mud houses on municipal land.

Ali Hussein said that five of his children go every day to a school located just a ten minutes' walk away. He emphasised that while he would eventually like to return home, life in a major city offered his family more opportunities for the time being, such as access to a proper education and more work opportunities.

"Here, even if I only make 5000 dinars a day or less (around 3 euros), that's something," he said, adding that he would often find work on construction sites across the city.

Another factor contributing to their decision to remain displaced was access to healthcare. "My wife is sick and often needs to go to the hospital. If we return to our village [where health services are insufficient], the cost of traveling weekly to Mosul for treatment would be too high," he said.

Other households originating from the same area told the BIC that before the war they had been relying on agriculture as their main source of income but that recent droughts had severely compromised their ability to make a living out of farming, adding yet another barrier to their return home.

The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) warned in a recent report that farming communities in Iraq have seen their wheat, vegetable, and fruit harvests decline for the second year in a row because of severe drought conditions. "Should the current drought conditions continue to damage crops and harvests," NRC stated, then many of these households "will be forced from their lands to urban areas in search of alternative sources of income."²

Damages to their homes have sustained during their years-long absence - namely because of a lack of maintenance or destruction caused by the fighting - was also cited by several interviewees as a factor hindering their return.

Last year, the European Union allocated 24 million euros for humanitarian programmes in Iraq, giving special attention to people who were left in dire conditions after Iraqi authorities suddenly closed most of the country's camps in 2020 and 2021.

² Iraq: Drought crisis destroys income and crops countrywide, Oct. 2022. Norwegian Refugee Council <https://www.nrc.no/news/2022/october/iraq-drought-crisis-destroys-income-and-crops-country-wide/>

“European humanitarian aid has been focused – and still is – on the victims of the conflict against the Islamic State. Our response shifted a bit over the years to offer more programmes dedicated to the protection of vulnerable communities,” Christopher Reltien, the Head of the EU Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid (ECHO) mission in Iraq, told the BIC during a recent interview in Baghdad.

“Our main objective is allowing the return and reintegration of all displaced populations, including citizens somehow affiliated with ISIS, which is a sensitive issue,” he added.

Many families with ties to the terrorist organisation are now barred from returning home because of the prospect of retaliatory killings, known as “blood revenge” or *tha'r* in Arabic.

Nearly sixty households, many of which are affiliated with ISIS, found refuge in Mosul’s Al-Intisar neighbourhood where they converted abandoned shops in shelters.

“Some people in the village have relatives who have been killed by ISIS so if we return, because my husband was with ISIS, they could take revenge on us,” 42-year-old Fatima told the BIC.

Her husband, who had decided to join ISIS when the group seized Mosul, was a combatant and died fighting in the old city where the jihadists made their last stand in the summer of 2017.

As the new head of the household, Fatima opted to move with her six children to this informal site located within a major city where tribal connexions are weaker, and the risk of blood revenge is thus lower.

Families affiliated with ISIS told the BIC that the host community did not initially offer them a warm welcome but that their relations had improved over the years.

“At the beginning, it was tense with the neighbours, and it can still be sensitive sometimes. There was recently a food distribution at the mosque and some men told me to leave saying I did not deserve help,” said Sara, whose husband was also a member of ISIS and is now presumed dead. “At the beginning, other children would beat up my son saying he was a *daeshi*,” she said using a derogatory Arabic term designating members of the terrorist group.

“However, things got better,” said Fatima. “Residents of the neighbourhood got to live next to us and understood that we are not here to harm anyone. Some even said they regretted behaving like they did. Now, some help us by giving us food.”

Many of these women have had to take over the role of breadwinner following the death of their spouse while trying to reduce the costs of living as much as possible. The shops they are squatting, known as Souk Almaash, belong to the municipality and come at no cost and access to electricity is provided by connecting illegally to the public grid. Support from NGOs and relatives has also proven vital.

A survey conducted by the French NGO Acted showed that 100% of the 55 households living in Souk Almaash were planning to remain on site given the current circumstances. However, about half of them expressed their will to eventually return to their area of origin.

“When it comes to families affiliated with ISIS, the prospect of their return to their area of origin is complex. There are different scenarios with different outcomes. There have been cases of false or exaggerated accusations levelled against them. But there have also been cases of reconciliation where some of these families were allowed back home if the husband had not participated in atrocities and had only, for example, an administrative position with ISIS,” said Mélisande Genat, a PhD student in History at Stanford University whose current research focuses on state law and tribal justice in Iraq.

“Yet, in some instances, families were pressured to sell their land, making the prospect of their return impossible,” she told the BIC.

There is no easy answer to Iraq’s protracted displacement crisis. While most families say they would ideally like to return home, there often exist many barriers preventing them to do so. A shortage of economic opportunities is frequently accompanied by a lack of services, proper schooling, and a decent housing. Sometimes, political instability or interpersonal conflicts add yet another layer of complexity to the issue.

“We want to go back home so we can have a real life,” said Bassem Ali Hussein from the Wadi Agab site. “Because here is just a temporary life.”

About the BIC

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