

“WHERE SHOULD WE GO?”

Durable Solutions for Remaining IDPs in Iraq



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About the Protection Consortium of Iraq

The Protection Consortium of Iraq supports **collective advocacy on protection issues and the sustainable recovery of internally displaced people across five governorates**. The consortium is led by the Norwegian Refugee Council in partnership with the Danish Refugee Council and the International Rescue Committee, in close collaboration with Justice Centre Iraq and REACH. Activities are conducted with support from the ministerial and judicial wings of the Government of Iraq, and in coordination with the United Nations alongside local and international agencies.

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A woman wearing a black niqab and a young girl are sitting on a patterned mat on the floor. The woman is looking towards the camera, and the girl is looking slightly to the side. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

Acronyms

DRC	Danish Refugee Council
ECHO	European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GBV	Gender Based Violence
GoI	Government of Iraq
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IRC	International Rescue Committee
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria Group
KRI	Kurdistan Region of Iraq
MoMD	Ministry of Migration and Displacement
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
PCI	Protection Consortium of Iraq
PDS	Public Distribution System
SSN	Social Safety Net
UN	United Nations

Recommendations

The recommendations below propose actions for stakeholders and duty-bearers working to meet the needs of IDPs in Iraq.

The Government of Iraq

- Scale up capacity and financial resourcing for key ministries and governorate-level directorates which address IDP services and subsidies, including return integration and relocation grants, housing compensation fund, and the [martyr's fund](#).
- Ensure centrality of protection and social cohesion concerns in development planning and activities and promote coordination between protection agencies such as the MOMD, Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and development/infrastructure agencies such as the Ministry of Planning and Ministry of Environment.
- Work towards official endorsement of the roadmap, complete with time-bound commitments and implementation plans. As part of the process, enhance engagement on solutions for politically blocked returns, social cohesion and restorative justice initiatives in conflict-impacted areas.
- Improve access for humanitarian and response actors through improved visa and access letter processes and de-linking of access from taxation and administrative concerns.

The United Nations

- Improve inclusion of humanitarian, development and peacebuilding actors in planning and engagement related to durable solutions and facilitate inclusion of impacted IDPs in discussions and planning. This is particularly important for response wide initiatives including the 2024 Humanitarian Transition Overview, Roadmap, and sectoral contingency planning.
- Promote accountability in engagement with Government of Iraq ministries and directorates, specifically related to Roadmap commitments, civil documentation, disbursement of return, integration and relocation grants, and humanitarian access.

Donors and embassies

- Communicate donor strategies to partners to enable better planning and consider directing flexible funding to partners and programming that looks at displacement-linked vulnerabilities for the remaining IDP caseload in Iraq.
- Ensure centrality of protection and social cohesion concerns in development funding, including targeting mechanisms that account for vulnerability and displacement status.
- Support capacity building activities within ministries and directorates, especially as it relates to civil affairs directorates.

'Nexus' actors (humanitarian, development and peacebuilding)

- Enhance inter-agency coordination to ensure alignment on key issues related to access, financing, and principled aid delivery.
- Support Government of Iraq actors with tailored capacity-building initiatives aimed at increasing data collection methodologies, personnel and systems strengthening for service delivery, and data security for protection case management

Introduction

At the height of the conflict with the so-called Islamic State group in Iraq, more than 6 million Iraqis had fled their homes — forced to live in camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs), in informal settlements, and other temporary settings. Now, more than six years since the end of active conflict, approximately 4.8 million Iraqis¹ have returned to their areas of origin.² While these returns can be seen as indicative of progress towards post-conflict recovery and resilience within communities, the act of return, in and of itself, cannot be considered a durable solution to displacement.³



Today, some Iraqis who have returned home are struggling to move forward with their lives because of a lack of support; and more than 1.1 million Iraqis are still internally displaced across north and central governorates.⁴ Over the past year, the pace of returns has plateaued, and in recent months, monitoring by the United Nations (UN) suggests many of those returning are being displaced again.⁵ **Data within this report indicates high rates of secondary displacement, and an increasing number of IDPs who have been displaced twice or more.**⁶

Camps set up in Federal Iraq during the conflict to house IDPs were closed between 2020 and 2021, and the Government of Iraq (GoI) announced in early 2024 the imminent closure

¹ <https://iraqdtm.iom.int/>

² In this context ‘area of origin’ includes an individual or household’s original home before conflict-induced displacement, or home area (neighbourhood, community) should the physical dwelling be destroyed. Resettlement in area of origin is referred to as the ‘return’ pathway or solution. For more see [Guidance note on safe, voluntary and dignified return in Iraq](#)

³ “A durable solution is achieved when internally displaced persons no longer have any specific assistance and protection needs that are linked to their displacement and can enjoy their human rights without discrimination on account of their displacement.” [Durable Solutions for IDPs. United Nations, August 2020.](#)

⁴ <https://iraqdtm.iom.int/>

⁵ DTM returns tracking between September and December of 2023 shows a slight increase in secondary displacement; and NRC’s climate and displacement report (2023) finds some returnees in Ninewa governorate have been forced to move due to climate change.

⁶ “Displacement Survey”. Protection Consortium of Iraq, December 2023.

of all IDP camps in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).⁷ However, as the response in Iraq transitions from humanitarian to development focused approaches, the remaining caseload of IDPs continue to face specific challenges to finding a durable solution to displacement, including integrating into local economies, participating in formal education systems, claiming government subsidies or compensation, or, in some cases, moving freely from one location to another.⁸ Increasingly, it is evident that Iraqis in protracted displacement require sustainable choices beyond 'return to area of origin', and yet, alternate solutions (namely local integration and resettlement in third locations) presented under the [IASC Framework for Durable Solutions](#) have not received adequate attention or resourcing in Iraq.

This report follows on from analysis and recommendations raised in a joint 2022 '[Life in the Margins](#)' by DRC, IRC, NRC, Baghdad Women's Association, Justice Center, Heartland Alliance, and the Kurdistan Organisation for Human Rights Watch, which warned that nearly one million conflict-affected Iraqis were struggling to rebuild because of missing critical civil documentation which would allow them to exercise their rights and access social protection schemes. Almost two years since, significant progress has been achieved in linking Iraqis to civil documentation services, yet substantial barriers persist. Furthermore, much of the remaining caseload of IDPs in Iraq are considered "complex cases" and require multiple steps to obtain documentation. For individuals and families missing civil documentation this remains a major obstacle to achieving recovery and self-reliance.⁹

The purpose of this report is twofold: a) to analyse specific barriers to durable solutions for remaining IDPs in Iraq, specifically those in informal settlements; and b) to provide evidence that reinforces calls to strengthen resettlement and integration pathways as a precursor to closing the displacement file in Iraq. Recommendations presented seek to inform enhanced coordination and programmatic actions of international and local NGOs, Iraqi government actors, the UN and international stakeholders to better support the remaining caseload of IDPs at risk of being left behind.

⁷ [https://www.cabinet.iq/ar/category/aDOu\\$GSzDnEA- z/aDOu\\$GSzDnEA- z](https://www.cabinet.iq/ar/category/aDOu$GSzDnEA- z/aDOu$GSzDnEA- z)

⁸ [Protection Needs Overview: April-September 2023](#). IRC, December 2023

⁹ The term 'complex cases' is usually used to refer to legal barriers specific to IDPs perceived of affiliation to the 'Islamic State'. In such cases, barriers to reclamation of legal documents are usually higher, and engagement with courts takes more time.

Background

At the end of 2022, the UN country team in Iraq formalised its [Humanitarian Transition Overview](#) which served to guide response actors as the humanitarian context in Iraq moved towards a nexus approach, with a greater proportion of development objectives and increased ownership by government authorities. Despite best-faith attempts at coordination, the humanitarian transition led to rapid deactivation of clusters, contributed to an information and coordination vacuum between agencies. and coincided with a sharp decline in humanitarian funding While newly formed area-based coordination (ABCs) groups saw initial interest from sub-national authorities, lack of accountability and resources, combined with increased bureaucratic interference, meant that these groups soon became a challenge to the principled delivery of aid rather than an enabler of locally owned solutions.

Today, at least 1.1 million Iraqis are still internally displaced across north and central Iraq. Challenges related to data collection and poorly resourced tracking mechanisms mean that these numbers may well be higher.¹⁰ In 2021, the GoI completed the planned closure of all formal IDP camps within Federal Iraq which effectively presented IDPs with two fraught choices: returning to areas of origin (often under duress or with limited information about available services) or prolonged displacement in informal settlements characterised by a lack of shelter, facilities, services, and increased risk of gender-based violence (GBV).

Camps are not a solution to displacement, and while many in Iraq have returned and reintegrated into local systems, PCI members have repeatedly warned that the hasty closure of IDP camps does not appear to have promoted an end to displacement for all IDPs in Iraq

In fact, camp closures over the past several years have prompted new rounds of displacement and increased vulnerabilities.¹¹ Civil documentation, or lack thereof, has influenced much of this discrepancy; at last count, upwards of 430,000 displaced Iraqis are likely to be without key documents,¹² and like statistical estimates of IDPs, this number is projected to be much higher in

¹⁰ *Obtaining Representative Data on IDPs*. UNHCR, January 2017

<https://www.jips.org/uploads/2018/11/UNHCR-techseries-Obtaining-representative-data-on-IDP-2017.pdf>

¹¹ For more, see [The Humanitarian's coverage of camp closures in Iraq, informed by PCI analysis](#)

¹² [Missing Civil Documentation in Iraq](#). REACH, March 2023.

reality.¹³ Functionally, this has translated into displaced people living in limbo on the outskirts of cities, like al-Intesar neighbourhood in Mosul, often risking secondary displacement or excluded from key services and acceptance by communities following spontaneous return to villages like al-Qaim in Anbar.

In a [January 2024 statement](#), the GoI announced the planned closure of IDP camps in the KRI by the end of July. Given the unresolved challenges for IDPs to date, humanitarian and protection actors caution that these camp closures will exacerbate challenges for displaced groups such as access to services and the ability to exercise rights. It is unlikely that the closure of these camps will result in positive outcomes for impacted households and individuals. **Today, as humanitarian funding reduces, more efforts are urgently needed to strengthen pathways to enable solutions that respond to the lived realities of IDPs in Iraq.**

Durable Solutions to internal displacement

Durable solutions is broadly understood as the condition whereby displaced individuals and communities no longer have any specific assistance and protection needs that are linked to their displacement. There are usually three different pathways to durable solutions: sustainable re-integration at the place of origin (voluntary return); sustainable local integration in place of displacement (local integration); or sustainable integration in a third place (relocation).

Self-reliance can be seen as a step toward this process and describes the social and economic ability of an individual, a household, or a displaced community to meet essential needs. The IASC framework outlines four dimensions—or safeties—integral to facilitating these solutions: physical safety (security and freedom from discrimination based on displacement status); material safety (access to services); legal safety (access to judicial remedy and legal status); and social safety or cohesion (participation in social affairs, governance and decision-making processes). Importantly, durable solutions is not just an absolute goal, but a fluid, context specific process that progressively identifies and ameliorates displacement-specific vulnerabilities.

¹³ [Life in the Margins. Danish Refugee Council, International Rescue Committee, and Norwegian Refugee Council, September 2022](#)

The National Plan for IDPs and the Roadmap for Solutions

The Government of Iraq has made efforts at addressing the root causes of protracted displacement and identifying pathways towards durable solutions. The November 2020 [‘National Plan for Getting the IDPs Back to their Liberated Areas’](#) outlined ambitious interventions aimed at supporting IDPs but ultimately suffered from insufficient data and resourcing, political blockages, and lack of clear implementation strategies. In practise, the Government’s response has prioritised return as the primary solution to displacement.

Throughout 2023, the UN made progress in engagement with the GoI and Kurdistan Regional Government on solutions pathways for the remaining humanitarian caseload through the [Office of the Special Adviser on Solutions to Internal Displacement, Robert Piper](#). The “Roadmap for Solutions”, as it has been described, sought to review progress achieved in the implementation of the National Plan for IDPs, reach consensus on renewed benchmarks for an action plan, and establish financial commitments from the GoI to implement solutions. Over the past year, discussions with the GoI have ebbed and flowed, with tacit agreement reached in October 2023 to move toward a multi-ministerial approach to address the remaining displacement file. While any agreement, however limited, could be seen as a step in the right direction, the Roadmap, as it is designed, faces challenges in ameliorating the full extent of barriers experienced by IDPs in Iraq.

Since the start of discussions, civil society actors, including international agencies have underscored the importance of expanding solutions beyond return to areas of origin and have referenced the inhospitable conditions for return in conflict-affected areas. Operational experience and [multi-sectoral analysis](#) consistently shows conditions are not conducive in areas of prospective return, including gaps in basic service availability, provision and delivery. Previous [joint reports by DRC, IRC and NRC](#) have identified extraneous barriers faced by IDPs to access already limited services like education and healthcare. Despite engagement of NGOs with the UN country team, the draft agreement with the government does not adequately highlight the importance of strengthening all pathways to durable solutions to displacement.

Alongside the detrimental impact upon displaced communities themselves, the omission of resettlement and integration pathways raises two broad issues: a) risk of a lack of UN and sectoral accountability to affected communities; and b) possible culpability of humanitarian actors in laying the groundwork for failed returns and secondary displacement in the future. Initial indications are not promising.

Additionally, the imminent closure of formal IDP camps in the Kurdistan Region stands to impact 650,000 IDPs, upwards of 250,000 of whom are Yazidis.¹⁴ Up to 95% of IDPs in camps in the KRI do not intend to return to their areas of origin in the next 12 months, primarily because of tenuous safety and a lack of civil documentation, housing and economic opportunities.¹⁵ Concerningly, 4% of those who returned to areas of origin from camps in the KRI over the past year were forced to move again due to these same barriers, falling back into vulnerability and requiring renewed support from agencies and international donors.¹⁶ In UN-led conversations around closure of camps, NGOs have been largely excluded. Meanwhile, durable solutions pathways for remaining IDPs in Federal Iraq remain obscure and unattainable in the near term.

Methodology

This report relies on three streams of primary evidence: a) a survey of 938 respondents currently in informal settlements across 5 governorates (Anbar, Diyala, Kirkuk, Ninewa, and Salah al-Din); b) qualitative data from legal assistance, protection and livelihoods programming under the Protection Consortium alongside focus group discussions in Ninewa and Kirkuk; and c) insights from engagement with UN country leadership, humanitarian and development donors, and ministerial counterparts as part of the Roadmap discussions. Supplementary desk research surveyed relevant publications and data sets on displacement trends in Iraq, the Durable Solutions Framework, and protection monitoring by response partners.

¹⁴ Iraq, UN cooperating to shut down IDP camps in Kurdistan Region, Rudaw (2023)

¹⁵ [Cross Cutting Needs Assessment. REACH, January 2024](#)

¹⁶ Ibid



NRC legal assistance staff speak to community representatives in al-Qaim, Anbar

Between November and December 2023, DRC, IRC, NRC and Justice Centre Iraq surveyed 938 respondents in informal settlements in Anbar, Diyala, Kirkuk, Ninewa and Salah al-Din. 52% of respondents were women and over 15% reported disabilities. All survey participants were above the age 18. Quantitative survey data was contextualised through analysis of programme insights, and through focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted in Mosul and Sinjar in February 2024. Data was also drawn from consortium led FGDs in Ninewa and Kirkuk in June 2023, which specifically examined women's experiences of protracted displacement and their movement intentions. PCI actors faced access restrictions when attempting to reach IDP communities throughout 2023 and early 2024, which limited supplemental qualitative data collection activities.

Lastly, DRC, IRC, and NRC are all participants in the UN-led Roadmap discussions, and co-chair most remaining coordination bodies.¹⁷ Insights from engagement in these spaces,

¹⁷ These bodies include: Humanitarian Country Team (HCT), Durable Solutions Technical Forum (DSTF), Durable Solutions Technical Working Group (DSTWG), Humanitarian Access Working Group (HAWG), Joint Coordination Fora (JCF), Protection Platform (PP) and Area Based Coordination bodies (ABC)

along with bilateral discussions with donors, have been used to triangulate findings and draft specific recommendations.

Protracted Displacement: IDP Experiences and Challenges

As noted above, the number of Iraqi IDPs has not appreciably decreased since the closure of IDP camps in Federal Iraq.¹⁸ There are several contributing factors to the prevalence of protracted displacement, as well as persistent challenges that have effectively combined to bar IDPs from returning to their areas of origin, or sustainably integrating into their areas of displacement, or relocating to tertiary locations. The below sections highlight what these barriers are and how they are increasingly interlinked, and outline experiences of displaced groups by reviewing data around movement intentions and barriers to the achievement of durable solutions.

Access to Services and Rights

Access to services such as health care, education, and government social safety net schemes remain inadequate and inequitable for remaining IDPs.¹⁹ Lack of livelihoods and functional markets further impede households' abilities to generate income and meet basic needs such as shelter and nutrition, and act as a barrier to decisions around return to area of origin. **40% of PCI survey respondents indicated 'lack of services and infrastructure' as a primary motivation for not returning to their area of origin; and almost 60% of respondents who had been displaced more than once indicated 'lack of services' as their reason for secondary (or subsequent) displacement.**²⁰

Displacement status serves as a vulnerability multiplier, further reducing the ability of individuals to access services and exercise their rights. Services and government subsidies are allocated through governorate-level offices, and individuals must seek services in their governorate of origin. Access to public services, such as healthcare, education, infrastructure and others is crucial for IDPs as it directly impacts their ability to rebuild their lives and reintegrate into society, thus fostering stability. Without essential services, PCI analysis indicates individuals are hesitant to return to an environment where their basic needs cannot be met.

¹⁸ <https://iraqdtm.iom.int/>

¹⁹ [Protection Needs Overview: April-September 2023. IRC, December 2023](#)

²⁰ "Displacement Survey". Protection Consortium of Iraq, December 2023.

Access to services is also a significant issue for people living in displacement as IDPs do not necessarily have the same rights in their area of displacement as the host community. Insufficient A services and resources has also been found to raise tensions between communities who must share already limited resources. As a displaced female head of household in Kirkuk governorate shared, “because we are not from the area, we are always wary of getting into trouble”.²¹

Iraq possesses the foundation of a decent social security system, including basic income support, Social Safety Net, (SSN), and a monthly food ration Public Distribution Service (PDS). **However, access to these systems remains ad-hoc and exclusionary.** ²² Many IDPs simply do not know of its existence or the requirements to apply. Additionally, a combination of civil documentation, and other state issued documents are required to access public rights-based services in Iraq. Requirements vary from governorate to governorate further confusing the system. **Despite high need, survey respondents, the PCI found that 65% of respondents were not registered for SSN or PDS. Out of those registered, only 67% reported that they regularly received the benefit.** ²³ Indeed,

“The welfare and compensation programme does not include all citizens, as there are many conditions to be eligible.”

IRC Focus group discussion
participant in Kirkuk governorate
shared. June 2023

persistent bureaucratic hurdles, under-resourced systems, and varying processes from one governorate to another all contribute to a cumbersome and often immovable aid distribution system that results in many eligible applicants going without assistance.

Informal Settlements: Vulnerability and Movement

Intentions

Informal sites materialised as a by-product of the closure of IDP camps in Federal Iraq in early 2021 and can be characterised as locations not integrated within the surrounding communities and excluded from public services.²⁴ Estimates of numbers of IDPs in informal sites in Iraq is outdated and inaccurate—the last survey conducted by IOM’s DTM places the number of IDPs in [informal sites across Federal Iraq and the KRI at 79,470](#), and was conducted in 2022. Since then, clusters have been deactivated, services to remaining formal

²¹ *ibid*

²² At the beginning of 2024, the GoI re-opened SSN registration for select cases including women and children, with no further information about wider access to registration. Furthermore, the PDS registration system has remained unavailable for more than 12 months for new registrations due to digitization processes and irregular updates from GoI officials about timeline for completion of system digitization.

²³ *ibid*

²⁴ [Technical Guidance on Informal Site Definitions. UNHCR, September 2020](#)

camps have suffered because of reduced humanitarian funding, and anecdotal evidence of secondary displacement has risen. **Given the significant decrease in sector coordination, coupled with insufficient data from key government ministries, PCI actors and peer agencies believe there are far more IDPs in informal sites than currently cited in reports and planning documents.** Access restrictions on NGOs seeking to enter informal sites to conduct quantitative surveys has further impeded the collection of accurate and up-to-date data.

The latest REACH [multi-sectoral assessment on informal sites](#)²⁵ highlights significant primary needs such as dignified shelter, healthcare, livelihood opportunities and food security. In addition, surveyed families in informal sites reported being in debt, and at risk of eviction and harm due to legal status, a lack of housing, land and property rights and social stigma. Surveys conducted by the Consortium for this report suggests women in informal sites face additional protection risks, including exploitation, abuse, and sexual harassment. People living in informal sites are also at continued risk of eviction, as they are unable to realise any housing, land or property rights and remain at the whim of the owners of the land, namely private landlords or the Government. Risk of eviction is a major cause of anxiety and stress for these communities. Despite these abhorrent conditions, **85% of respondents have no intention to move from their area of displacement in the next 12 months. Only 6% of respondents are looking to move within the next three months; 5% over the next six months; and 4% over the next year.**

It is increasingly clear that IDPs are being forced to stay in informal sites because alternate solutions are not available or realistic. Reasons for staying in informal sites can be assessed across three broad themes: a) lack of civil documentation; b) lack of equitable access to adequate compensation and social safety nets; and c) lack of services in areas of return.

²⁵ REACH is a PCI coordinating partner and receives funding from ECHO

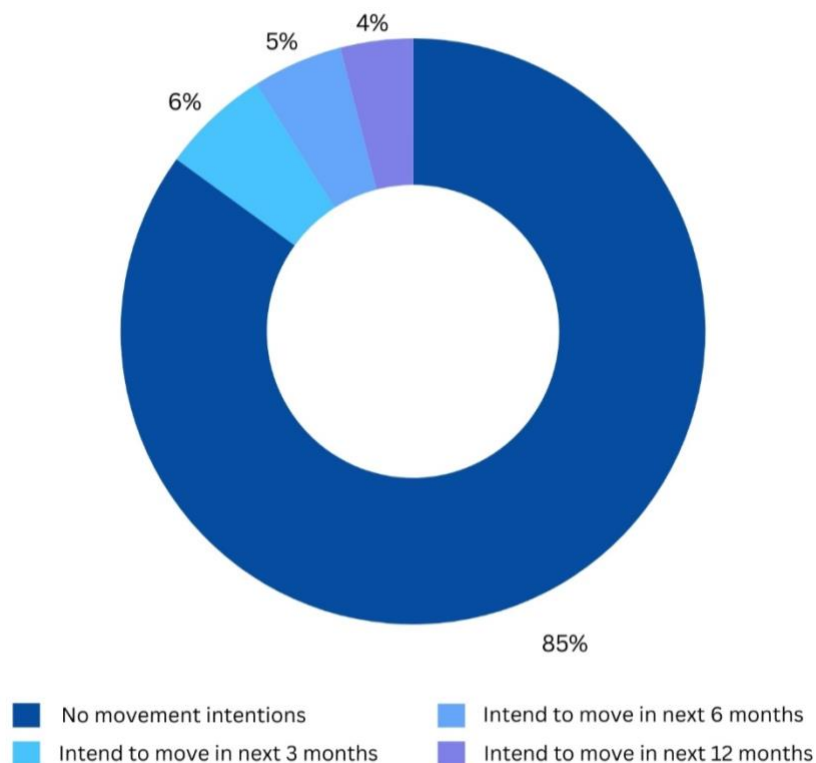


Figure: Movement intentions in informal settlements over the next 12 months. Source: PCI

For respondents intending to move over the next 12 months, **return to area of origin is not always the preferred movement location**. In fact, evidence suggests households in informal settlements who decide to leave are often displaced from one location to the next. While most internally displaced families hope to one day return home, two discrete realities mediate near term choice: conditions in prospective areas of return, and conditions in areas of current displacement. In many cases, degradation of safety and access to services coupled with the untenability of near term return mean families are often forced to move again. **65% of respondents reported being displaced at least once in the past three years, and 35% have been displaced twice or more.**

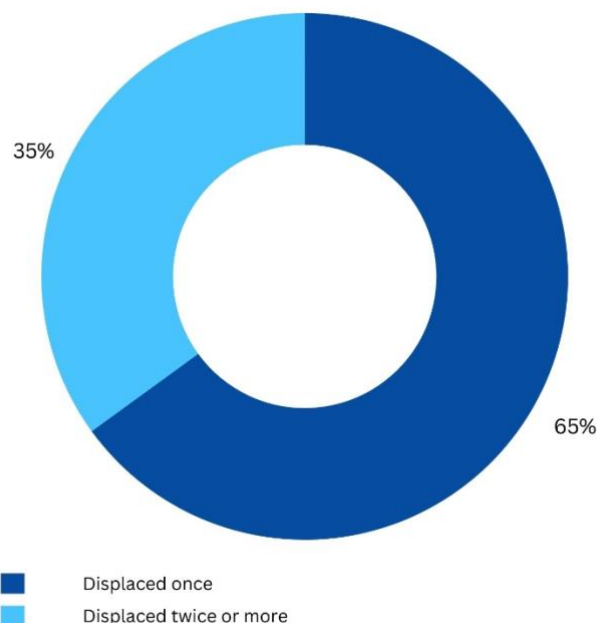


Figure: How many times have you been displaced in the past 3 years? Source: PCI

Civil Documentation

Civil documentation remains a key barrier to legal protection for IDPs in Iraq, prohibiting people from exercising their rights, accessing public services, and often excluding them from recovery and reconstruction efforts. A [June 2023 survey](#) of informal sites estimated around 14% of IDPs lacked civil documentation; and November 2023 surveys—conducted in areas where Consortium partners are operational and have longstanding relationships with communities—places this number closer to 38%.²⁶ Moreover, **one in three survey respondents said that a lack of documents was the primary barrier to returning home.**²⁷

Lack of civil documentation also precipitates protection risks. Without access to legal identity and civil documentation, IDPs are not able to move through checkpoints, seek remedy through courts, or access basic services like healthcare. Civil documentation is often a requirement to access housing, land and property rights, including reclaiming occupied property, protecting tenancy rights and therefore providing a safeguard against arbitrary evictions. In effect, this means IDPs without documents are more vulnerable to be victims of

²⁶ Different methodologies and survey locations account for variations in populations reporting missing civil documentation. See also: [IRC Protection Needs Overview Monitoring and Trends \(April-2023-September-2023\)](#)

²⁷ "Displacement Survey". Protection Consortium of Iraq, December 2023.

abuse, exploitation and harm—including, but not limited to, eviction from informal sites, arbitrary detention, and/or financial exploitation by landlords and community leaders. PCI monitoring routinely finds evictions and social tensions are tied to the lack of documents—including civil documentation, formalised tenure documents and property deeds—of IDPs. Civil documentation is also a pre-requisite to register and access Iraq’s SSN as well as social protection schemes.

Lack of documentation is also a significant barrier to return as multiple levels of approvals must be undertaken to facilitate a return to an area of origin.²⁸ On paper, Iraq's legal framework guarantees access to civil documentation for all Iraqi citizens, but in practice, extra-legal barriers are often imposed on IDPs, especially those perceived to be affiliated to ISIS. This includes, but is not limited to, DNA tests, security clearances, and providing proof of missing fathers; often alongside other extrajudicial practices like tabriya and ikhbar.²⁹ Navigating these barriers is time consuming and expensive, and functionally excludes IDPs from courts. This, in turn, complicates inclusion in return and integration grants, and access to Iraq’s social safety net.³⁰

Linking IDPs to social services

As part of post-conflict recovery, PCI actors have engaged in critical civil documentation assistance across five governorates over several years.³¹ Promisingly, civil documentation needs have decreased year on year, and more conflict-impacted individuals have received their housing cards, birth certificates, nationality certificates, and unified ID cards. The PCI works to link IDPs to civil documentation support through awareness sessions, legal counselling, and pro-bono legal assistance. However, needs remain, and civil documentation is not a guarantee of durable solutions and access to rights.

The Public Distribution System (PDS) supports Iraqi households to meet their basic needs and is instrumental in promoting recovery and resilience. Households with limited income can apply to receive the benefit, and the distribution size is based on the number of people in the family. PDS registration is dependent upon civil documentation, knowledge of application procedures, and legal representation to navigate the application process. At

²⁸ This includes, but is not limited to, approvals from the MoMD, National Security Forces and local Popular Mobilization Forces

²⁹ Tabriya (disavowal) and Ikhbar (reporting) are mechanisms whereby individuals, often women, with family ties to individuals with perceived affiliation to ISIS are required disavow or report on their relatives. These processes are extra-judicial and can cause significant harm and lead to community stigma. For more information: <https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/life-margins-re-examining-needs-paperless-people-post-conflict-iraq>

³⁰ <https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/life-margins-re-examining-needs-paperless-people-post-conflict-iraq>

³¹ [Life in the Margins. Danish Refugee Council, International Rescue Committee, and Norwegian Refugee Council, September 2022](#)

present, the PDS benefit is exclusively issued in Baghdad, and it can take up to one year from application to receive the PDS card. In many cases, applicants are improperly registered or not registered at all. This bureaucratic shortcoming forces households to re-apply, and for many IDP families, these requirements serve as barriers to accessing PDS support.

Additional challenges impact the ability of IDPs to register for the PDS benefit. Periodically, the PDS system closes for new cases, updating family sizes, or updating marriage records due to already high case numbers for administration. Further, each district follows their own registration procedures which causes confusion at the applicant level as well as for response actors. These temporary pauses and regional variances highlight the importance of a well-resourced system to accept, review, and register cases on a regular and timely basis with a unified approach across the country. Further, households can face rejection or indeterminate wait times in their application cases. **PCI data indicates 65% of surveyed IDPs in informal settlements have not yet registered for the PDS benefit.**³²

According to an IRC legal advisor working in Anbar, *"Security checks can stop the PDS registration process, especially if a family member has perceived affiliation to terrorist groups. If the family member has lost their civil documentation or is waiting for new documents, this also delays the process. Available guidance from the directorate is not always clear, and often delays our own interventions."*



IRC Lawyer interviewing a displaced woman and her family about their missing documentation.

³² "Displacement Survey". Protection Consortium of Iraq, December 2023.

Return and Reintegration Grants

Since July 2019, the MoMD has implemented a return grant programme, disbursing 1.5 million IQD to registered returnee households with two or more family members and 750,000 IQD³³ to single-member families.³⁴ This one-time grant has been communicated by authorities as a safety net for returning families. Effectiveness, however, has been hindered by infrequent and low disbursement rates. A further concern is the relatively low monetary value of the grant, especially for people whose houses are damaged or destroyed. According to sectoral data, as of December 2024, only 160,315 families have received the grant out of 588,674 families who have returned and registered their return with MoMD.³⁵

Whilst return grants do offer a degree of support, frequent delays in the distribution of funds reduce efficacy. The PCI is aware of countless cases where households have returned to areas of origin and are awaiting payments for six months or more. Furthermore, for some IDPs, return is not contingent on finances alone, but on vulnerabilities stemming from social cohesion and political barriers.



Ahmed, 7, lives with his mother and grandparents. Born during war, Ahmed does not have a birth certificate, and has never been to school. Photo: NRC

³³ At the time of writing, 750,000 IQD is approximately \$500 USD.

³⁴ For more information see <https://www.simaetbatha.com/en-us/articles/4404241691543>

³⁵ For more information see <https://iraqdurablesolutions.net/Home/RWG>

For IDPs unable or unwilling to return to their area of origin, there is an alternative grant available. The integration grant is designed to support people to locally integrate into their area of displacement.³⁶ Similar to return grants, they are also one-off payments, limited to 500,000 IQD (approximately 380 USD) for households with two or more family members and 250,000 IQD (approximately 190 USD) for individuals³⁷ In addition to the significant monetary discrepancy between return and integration grants, the dispersal of integration grants also remains significantly limited. Since **2019 there has only been one round of integration grants distributed to 1,128 families.** Many IDPs who may be eligible for these schemes are simply unaware of their existence. **47% of survey respondents did not know the registration processes for the integration grant, and 45% did not know how to register for return grants.** Nearly 10% of survey respondents who had registered for the integration grant had been rejected, and over 7% of those who had registered for the return grant had been rejected.³⁸

Thus far, there is no relocation grant scheme available for IDPs in Federal Iraq. The approach to these grants both in terms of the monetary value assigned and the rate of distribution, emphasises the clear preference for encouraging return over other pathways.

The announcement of camp closures in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq came alongside the most comprehensive plan for a camp closure to date. This plan outlined the availability of grants for IDPs in KRI camps at an equitable value of 4 million IQD (approximately 3,040 USD) for all three pathways: return, integration and relocation. This more equitable approach would be of huge benefit to all IDPs in Iraq regardless of assigned status or location.

Conditions in Areas of Origin

Even if access to essential services and government subsidies are streamlined, there will be a segment of IDPs who cannot return to areas of origin. This is largely due to two factors: a) blocked returns; and b) lack of conditions conducive to safe, voluntary and sustainable returns.

³⁶ *ibid*

³⁷ At the time of writing, 500,000 IQD is approximate \$333 USD.

³⁸ “Displacement Survey”. Protection Consortium of Iraq, December 2023.

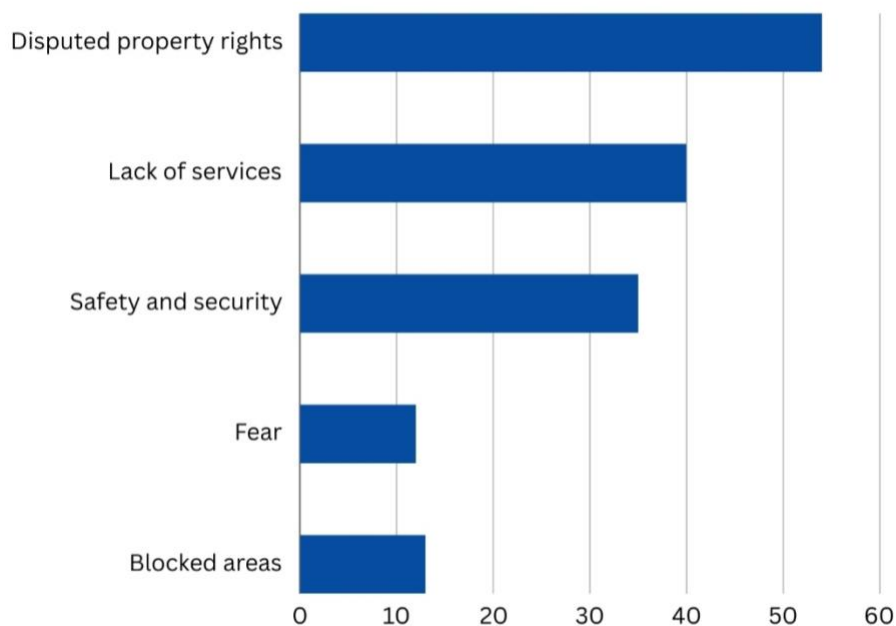


Figure: PCI survey question ‘what is stopping you from returning home?’ Source: PCI

As of November 2023, [IOM estimates](#) there are still 292 locations of no return in Iraq, largely because returns are being blocked by sub-national authorities and/or armed actors in control of territories. Without political intervention to resolve core security issues, return to these locations would put IDPs—especially IDPs perceived of affiliation to ISIS— at risk of harm, and [may constitute refoulement](#).³⁹

Protection concerns are not constrained to areas of return. **PCI data indicates 25%, or 1 in 4 IDPs in informal sites consider GBV as a priority concern in areas of displacement.**

In some areas, complete lack of returns can be attributed to damaged, destroyed or disputed property. The National Plan for IDPs outlines the importance of property compensation to support individuals and families to return. However, despite clear legal frameworks established by the

“The decision has been taken not to return, because we will be subjected to killing and revenge if we return. Protection cannot be guaranteed for us.”

A displaced woman living in Kirkuk speaking about the fear that many IDPs share when faced with the prospect of return to areas in control of armed groups.

³⁹ Non-refoulement is increasingly understood to refer to returns or transfers of persons between authorities rather than between countries – and can thereby be applicable to transfers that occur between authorities within a single state. See: https://www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/reports/non-refoulement-in-the-context-of-internal-displacement/nrc-non-refoulement_idps-screen.pdf

government, the UN estimates that only 1% of claimants have received property compensation.⁴⁰ Further, there are prohibitively high barriers to accessing the compensation scheme for people from areas covered under [Constitution Article 140](#), which seeks solutions to the issue of disputed territories between the Federal and Kurdistan governments.

Oula's story: The long road to recovery for remaining IDPs in Iraq

Oula*, is a single mother of eight who was displaced from Sinjar in 2014. Her 8-year-old daughter, Zaina was killed during the fighting.

"We escaped from Sinjar with only our lives and sought safety in Erbil. My husband was missing, and I was alone with my children. We stayed at a camp first and then with extended family—farming to make ends meet. A few years later, we moved to Hamam al-Alil camp, where I hoped to find my husband, but to no avail. After the camp closed, we settled in Mosul and have been living in this small room ever since."

Oula is one of many internally displaced Iraqis living in informal settlements. In West Mosul, informal sites are 'home' to approximately 10,000 families. Conditions in these areas are dire, with limited services due to the lack of property deeds, resulting in the absence of centralised electricity and water supply. Families resort to drawing electricity and water through "illegal lines," which are periodically cut by authorities. Eviction notices are routinely issued to families. "My son and I collect garbage to make a living. Sometimes, when we walk down the streets, insults are hurled at me. I am used to it, but I worry for my children. I have daughters who are scared to even go out and play." Oula's story is not an anomaly.

In Mosul where communities are working through the scars of past, broad accusations often lead to violation of rights. "My 8-year-old son was stopped at a check point," according to Naseema, Oula's neighbour. "Because his uncle was part of the 'Islamic State', they arrested my son and destroyed his ID card. We have been going back and forth for over one year.

⁴⁰ Private document shared by UN with partners.

They issued paper saying that my son is innocent, but we still do not have ID card. No one wants us here, but we have no home to return to. Where will we go?"



Conclusion

Continued protracted displacement and the absence of a concrete plan to restore areas of origin has resulted in a dire situation for many IDPs in Iraq, with increasing numbers finding themselves further from a solution to their displacement than ever before. As Iraq transitions into its development phase, the failure to adequately address residual humanitarian needs and implement durable solutions only compounds the challenges faced by these communities. The reluctance or inability of many IDPs to return home is rooted in various factors, including fears of instability, politically blocked areas, and the lack of rehabilitation and access to essential services essential for dignified living. Regrettably, for many who do decide to return, these apprehensions often materialise.

In the transition from humanitarian to development response, and from humanitarian coordination and oversight to government leadership, challenges have emerged that pose a threat to the achievement of durable solutions for displaced Iraqis. Despite concerted efforts by the United Nations to implement a new coordination architecture in alignment with local governments, tangible progress remains minimal.

Consistent funding and support allowed before the transition allowed humanitarian agencies to reach millions of Iraqis during and following the end of large-scale conflict, and in many ways, the response can be seen as proof of what coordinated humanitarian action can achieve. In other ways, however, lingering vulnerabilities of 1.1 million IDPs should not be considered as a mere footnote by donors, the United Nations, and national and international agencies. To do so would be a departure from humanitarian principles, a quiet acceptance of exclusion on the basis of displacement status, and—in the longer term—culpability in onward and secondary displacement.

The recently published [Independent Review of the Humanitarian Response to Internal Displacement](#) is clear that the humanitarian system as it is set up today is not necessarily equipped to deal with internal displacement. In Iraq, the various

system-wide shifts that have occurred have not necessarily accounted for perspectives and choices of displaced people themselves. Without improvements in coordination, resourcing, and programming, Iraqis IDPs may well continue to experience protracted displacement with no durable solutions or hope in sight. However, there is still an opportunity to realign and reinforce sectoral strategies. Renewed investments and leadership can bring about improved access to services and rights for displaced Iraqis, IDP-returnees, and host communities.

The need to build trust and cooperation is ever more vital as the Government of Iraq continues to take up the mantle of coordination, leveraging the expertise of the UN and civil society, including IDPs themselves, as needed. Not only is this in the best interest of displacement effected communities, but it also aligns with international obligations such as those outlines in the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework.

