



# **Social and Political Perspectives of Iraqi IDPs from Ninewa and their Host Communities**

**A Focus Group and Key Informant Interview Study in Iraq  
April-May 2018**

*Social and Political Perspectives of Iraqi IDPs from Ninewa and their Host Communities*

Brian Zupruk, Ashleigh Whelan & Emily Brouch

Copyright © 2018 International Republican Institute. All rights reserved.

Permission Statement: No part of this work may be reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without the written permission of the International Republican Institute.

Requests for permission should include the following information:

- The title of the document for which permission to copy material is desired.
- A description of the material for which permission to copy is desired.
- The purpose for which the copied material will be used and the manner in which it will be used.
- Your name, title, company or organization name, telephone number, fax number, e-mail address and mailing address.

Please send all requests for permission to:

Attn: Department of External Affairs

International Republican Institute

1225 Eye Street NW, Suite 800

Washington, DC 20005

[info@iri.org](mailto:info@iri.org)

*Disclaimer: This publication was made possible through the support provided by the National Endowment for Democracy. The opinions expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of National Endowment for Democracy.*

---

## Table of Contents

<b>IRI in Iraq</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Methodology</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Findings and Analysis</b>	<b>6</b>
I. Life in Erbil: IDPs and the Host Community	6
II. Life in Mosul: Views of Both Migrant and Non-Migrant Moslawis <sup>1</sup>	14
III. Religious Coexistence	19
IV. Views on ISIS: IDPs, Host Community, and Mosul Residents	22
<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>24</b>

---

<sup>1</sup> People who self-identify as being from Mosul

## IRI in Iraq



A nonprofit, nonpartisan organization founded in 1983, the International Republican Institute (IRI) advances freedom and democracy worldwide by developing political parties, civic institutions, open elections, democratic governance and the rule of law. IRI has operated in Iraq since 2003, fostering responsive civic and government institutions and working to ensure the inclusion of youth, women and a broad range of minority groups in Iraqi political life. IRI's programming in Iraq has been wide-ranging, including quantitative and qualitative research, technical assistance to political parties, civil society organizations, think tanks and the Council of Representatives. IRI currently works with provincial councils throughout Iraq to facilitate greater communication with citizens about their roles and responsibilities under Iraq's constitution.

### Executive Summary

At the request of the International Republican Institute (IRI), the Al Mustakilla Research Group (IIACSS) conducted a qualitative focus group study and key informant interviews on a range of topics related to governance, security and political inclusion. Discussants and interviewees were drawn predominantly from Ninewa Province and comprised Iraqi internally displaced persons (IDPs) who fled their homes because of Da'esh and/or the Coalition operations to defeat the terrorist organization, people that returned from being displaced, and individuals that stayed in Mosul during the Da'esh occupation.

Special attention was paid to including young Iraqis under age 30 – who now make up the vast majority of Iraqis but remain politically disengaged – and to Iraqi Christians, widely considered to be among Iraq’s most vulnerable and marginalized communities. Consistent with the nature of qualitative research, study findings are not necessarily representative of Iraqi IDPs in Ninewa or their host community members, or individuals who stayed in Mosul during the Da’esh occupation.

Ultimately, IRI seeks to contribute to the understanding of how to address long-term needs of IDPs in Iraq and identify areas where IRI could lend its expertise to support IDP voices, minority rights, youth inclusion and overall political engagement. IRI further validated select findings through a series of post-parliamentary election discussions with civil society and political party representatives. Through these, IRI was able to delve deeper into the preparations, or lack thereof, for electoral participation among minority communities. Its work is focused on improving the responsiveness of Iraqi government to the needs of some of its most vulnerable citizens as part of the broader effort to stabilize Iraq and guide the country on a path to a self-sufficient, inclusive and democratic future.

Internal displacement as the result of violent religious and ethnic persecution continues to be one of the single largest issues facing the Iraqi state. Per the International Organization for Migration, as of May 31, 2018 Iraq still has approximately 2 million IDPs, with 58 percent displaced from Ninewa alone. The sheer magnitude of the displacement crisis strains government and international donor resources, but one cannot allow the scale of the problem to overshadow both the immediate and long-term impact of the crisis on communities throughout the country. The crisis has persisted for more than a year after the liberation of Mosul from Da’esh; IRI now seeks to better understand how various communities through Ninewa and Iraqi Kurdistan are coping, and how they perceive their government’s performance in managing the response and addressing the underlying issues.

### ***Summarized Key Findings***

#### *I. Life in Erbil: IDPs and the Host Community*

- Across IDP groups, discussants said they felt integrated and welcomed by the host community. By contrast, host community discussants said their relationship with IDPs is tense; IDPs have a negative impact on the community and they hope they will leave.
- Across IDP groups, most said the national government does not listen to their concerns and they want more involvement in decision-making, and many intended to vote in the May parliamentary elections. In contrast, most among the host community believed the government already listens to IDPs’ concerns and many resented their political influence.
- Across IDP groups, most discussants did not plan to return to their homes, though many said they would like to return if the government could provide safety in their former neighborhoods. Many others said they would like to leave Iraq given the dire situation.

#### *II. Life in Mosul: Returned and Nonmigrant Residents*

- Most discussants were happy to be in Mosul, often citing the culture, diversity and sense of belonging in the city. However, many said they would like to leave Mosul permanently at some point.
- Most discussants said the national government does not listen to their concerns and they want more involvement in decision-making, and many intended to vote in the May parliamentary elections.
- Discussants desired increased government assistance to address numerous problems that remain from ISIS rule.

### III. Religious Coexistence

- Christian IDPs living in Erbil reported no challenges to exercising their faith, but the financial and material support they receive from NGOs and churches is now declining.
- Among the Mosul discussants, most said interreligious reconciliation is possible and important in the city after ISIS; hope for reconciliation was strongest among the Moslawi study participants.

### IV. Views on ISIS: IDPs, Host Community and Mosul Residents

- Among discussants from the Mosul and IDP groups, most said that ISIS retains a support base in Iraq but disagreed on the level of support. IDPs believed ISIS has more support than did Mosul residents.
- Across all groups — Mosul residents, IDPs and host community — most said they could never reconcile with former or current ISIS supporters.

#### **A Note: Naming Terror**


Throughout this report, the reader will see the terrorist group that calls itself the “Islamic State” variously referred to as both “ISIS” and as “Da’esh.” This is intentional. IRI generally adheres to the United States Government’s preferred nomenclature of ISIS for the Islamic State group, but many Iraqis use the Arabic acronym, which is transliterated as Da’esh. Da’esh is considered derogatory and/or mocking and is purposefully used by Arabic speakers to delegitimize ISIS. Where Da’esh is used by participants in our study, many of whom were direct victims of terrorist violence, no substitution has been made.

#### **Analytical Highlights**

- Study participants’ perception of government corruption and a limited ability to influence local decision-making hinders the construction of a durable, stable political climate. Building and repairing confidence in the political system requires a significant change in both the actions and the communications of government officials. Misconceptions about which “side” has a greater voice engender resentment, which when met by silence from official bodies, simmers into distrust and hinders cohesion. IDP and returnee discussants highlighted their belief that the priorities of other groups – including host communities and the Shi’a majority – were addressed more seriously than their own, while host community discussants believed the exact inverse.
- The dissatisfaction with the quality of governance and the lack of inclusion that discussants perceive among government agencies and officials has led to nostalgia for Saddam Hussein’s government. This is particularly dangerous if youth begin to agree with this notion, as they have not lived through that period themselves. Nostalgia for an idealized version of history could result in political and electoral preferences that set Iraq’s democracy back or deepen political fragmentation. In a worst-case scenario, this could lead to a preference for authoritarian governments that could easily slide into extremism.
- Issues of identity – specifically the overlapping ethnic, religious, tribal, local and national dimensions – strongly affected discussants. Those displaced by ISIS felt their existence and affiliations were threatened, and some felt that the nascent post-2003 concept of Iraqi nationalism was under threat. Discussants from host communities noted fears of their culture being denigrated or undermined by migration from Ninewa. These shared fears of loss of identity present an opportunity for

communities to build stronger inter-ethnoreligious relations based on common experiences between and within groups in order to stabilize and rebuild communities across Northern Iraq.

- Outreach to minority groups requires nuance and consistent attention. Discussants from different minority groups described dissimilar outlooks on political inclusion, and navigating this space requires a thoughtful approach and careful messaging. Whereas Sunni Muslim discussants expressed more optimism about engagement with government officials and bodies, Christian discussants were more skeptical that their voices and participation would be sufficient to draw attention and action for community needs.



“Voting is a kind of confrontation...if I don’t vote, other people will vote. But if I vote and other people like me vote, then we will choose the best candidate. If not in this election, we will vote in the next election, and in the next election, and we will keep voting until Iraq is good.”

(IDP in Host Community - Male)

## Methodology

At the request of the International Republican Institute, the Al Mustakilla Research Group (IIACSS) conducted a qualitative focus group study and key informant interviews on a range of topics related to governance, security and political inclusion. Discussants and interviewees were drawn predominantly from Ninewa Province and comprised Iraqi IDPs who fled their homes because of Da'esh and/or the Coalition operations to defeat the terrorist organization, people who returned from being displaced, and individuals that stayed in Mosul during the Da'esh occupation. Special attention was paid to including young Iraqis under the age of 30 – who now make up the vast majority in the country but remain politically disengaged – and Iraqi Christians, widely considered to be among Iraq's most vulnerable and marginalized people. Ultimately, IRI seeks to contribute to the understanding of how to address the long-term needs of IDPs in Iraq and identify areas where IRI could lend its expertise to support IDP voices, minority rights, youth inclusion and overall political engagement.

The study included 12 focus groups with 118 discussants as well as 20 key informant interviews. There were no major recruitment problems for the studies among any of the target groups, though additional time was required to identify sufficient numbers of participants within Mosul given the logistical and security challenges that still plague the city. Recruiters, using the screening questionnaire administered in public areas such as markets as well as the snowball method, found 12 potential discussants for focus group discussions (FGD) for each group. The focus groups were accompanied by 20 in-depth interviews with government officials, civil society members, religious leaders and journalists. Discussions took place either in Erbil or Mosul (see Table 1 below for location). The duration of each session was approximately 120 minutes. This report presents the results of FGDs conducted from April 18 to 25, 2018 as well as key informant interviews conducted during May. Consistent with the nature of qualitative research, study findings are not necessarily representative of Iraqi IDPs in Ninewa or their host community members, or individuals who stayed in Mosul during the Da'esh occupation.

IRI sought to supplement existing research on Iraqi IDPs and returnees by focusing on their social and political perspectives, as IRI views this as a key component to long-term reconciliation and resettlement goals. As such, the main objectives for this study included understanding:

- IDPs and IDP-related community leaders' expectations of political inclusion or exclusion in the months following the expulsion of Da'esh, including:
  - The current personal and institutional networks of IDPs as related to political, integration or resettlement issues.
- IDPs' preferences for their future – whether they would rather return, integrate into host communities or migrate elsewhere – and the factors that would facilitate these choices.
- Government and traditional governance structures' perspectives on how to ensure political inclusion as well as IDPs' needs related to basic necessities, reconciliation and political voice.



**Table 1**

	Demographics	Location	Age	Ethno-Religious Identity
1	Youth returnees, male	Mosul	Under 25	Arab Sunni
2	Youth returnees, female	Mosul	Under 25	Arab Sunni
3	Youth who did not leave Mosul during Da'esh rule, male	Mosul	Under 25	Arab Sunni
4	Youth who did not leave Mosul during Da'esh rule, female	Mosul	Under 25	Arab Sunni
5	IDPs in camps and host communities, male	Erbil Province	Over 18	Arab Sunni
6	IDPs in camps and host communities, female	Erbil Province	Over 18	Multi-Ethnic
7	Host community members, male	Erbil Province	Over 18	Kurdish Sunni
8	Host community members, female	Erbil Province	Over 18	Kurdish Sunni
9	Christian IDPs, male	Erbil Province	Over 18	Christian
10	Christian IDPs, female	Erbil Province	Over 18	Christian
11	IDPs who live outside the camps, male	Erbil Province	Over 18	Arab Sunni
12	IDPs who live outside the camps, female	Erbil Province	Over 18	Arab Sunni

## Findings and Analysis

### I. Life in Erbil: IDPs and the Host Community

#### Finding 1: Across IDP groups, safety was the primary reason discussants liked living in Erbil.

Across Iraq, host communities – not camps - have borne the brunt of the displacement crisis. The International Organization for Migration estimates that as of June 2018, 220,000 people remain displaced in Erbil Province, of whom approximately 84,000 came from Ninewa. Just 9 percent of IDPs were in camps, while 90 percent were living in private settings.<sup>2</sup> For most IDP participants in IRI's study – including those in camps, those in private homes and Christian IDPs – safety is the primary benefit of living in Erbil. Many expressed feeling far more secure in Kurdistan than in their home provinces. A female Christian IDP said, "For me as a displaced person, I mostly like the safety, stability and the peace here." Christian discussants in particular felt targeted not just by Muslims, but by other minorities as well, including the increasingly militarized Yazidi community. Many living in the camps are unsure what kind of life would even await them in the outside world:

- *"We came here for safety and life is good. We will stay here and not return to our areas because they are not safe. A while ago, my cousin returned and passed through Sinjar and got shot by Yazidi militants. I have a dead brother who was killed by ISIS. My father died here in the camp and I have a brother who died a few days ago in an incident. Thus, I am forced to stay here for safety."*<sup>3</sup>

(Camp, Erbil – Male)

#### Finding 2: Across IDP groups, discussants said they felt integrated and welcomed by the host community.

<sup>2</sup> "Displacement Tracking Matrix: Round 98." *DTM-IOM-Iraq Mission*, June 30, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Quotes have been minimally treated to aid clarity. Errors that do not affect understanding (e.g. syntax, grammar, or word choice mistakes) were not corrected in order to keep the original expression as intact as possible.

IDP discussants described warm relations with their host communities in Erbil. Erbil, and notably its Christian quarter, Ainkawa, has absorbed vast numbers of IDPs. The presence of IDPs throughout Erbil is beginning to feel much more permanent as the IDPs perceive Kurdistan as not just safe but welcoming. One female Christian IDP stated, "No one has ever asked us 'what are you doing here?' They are all good to us, and we consider the people of Kurdistan our family. It is safer than Mosul. It is true that we had good neighbors in Mosul, but we didn't feel safe." Another said, "When we go to the market, the people of Erbil treat us very respectfully, and they respect us as Christians. When we go through the checkpoints, the security forces treat us very good." A male Christian IDP said, "I am integrated in the community here. I have friends that I go out with to play football and we go to the café together. I feel more comfortable here than before."

**Finding 3: Host community discussants described tense relations with IDPs; believe IDPs have a negative impact on the community and hope they will leave.**

There was a stark contrast between the viewpoints of the host community and those of the IDPs. While several discussants described positive or neutral relationships with IDPs, many said they have little interaction with IDPs and do not trust them. Most host community discussants said IDPs have a mixed or negative effect on their community, often citing detrimental economic and social impacts. Several women complained that Arab women were more appealing to Kurdish men because they did not take a dowry, which reduced marriage prospects for Kurdish women. Several discussants said Sunni IDPs, including those from Fallujah and Anbar provinces, are easier to interact with than IDPs from Ninewa province or Shi'a IDPs. Community members attempted to explain these concerns:

- *"Our young generation has lost some parts of our culture because of looking at them [Arab IDPs]. For example, lots of Kurds are now going out wearing shorts, which was a shame before. Looking around Qalat [Erbil's citadel], you see many people smoking shisha, which was not like that before. You see how they invaded our culture."*  
(Host Community, Erbil – Male)
- *"We have a long history with Arabs that are now IDPs. They have attacked and hurt us, as Kurds, throughout their history. We have learned to avoid from them. The fact that they were bad to us, and they are still the same, made us not interact with them."*  
(Host Community, Erbil – Male)
- *"I think our interaction is tenser. We do not like each other actually. We first respected them a lot. Later they disrespected us, and we regret that we helped them. We had an Arab neighbor who we helped a lot, but after a while they started disturbing us...they did not care even after we told them that their behaviors are disturbing."*  
(Host Community, Erbil – Female)

The long-term presence of IDPs vexed host community discussants, and many sought for the displaced to return home expeditiously.

- *"They do not love this land. That is why they should go back. For example, when we go to a picnic, we all clean the place after us, but they do not. They say they are IDPs and it is our job to clean the place for them. They should be returned back."*  
(Host Community, Erbil – Female)

- *"We cannot have them around forever. We do not have such a strong economy. How do you personally feel if you have your loved ones, like your parents, living in your house for more than a year or two? You will definitely reach a point where you want them to have their own income source and life."*

*(Host Community, Erbil – Female)*

Host community discussants cited a smaller number of positive effects of IDPs, including that they were educated, had medical skills, infused money into the local economy and allowed Kurds to learn Arabic. As one host community woman noted, "There were many doctors among IDPs that were very professional and smart. They were useful because they were ready to work as volunteers in our hospitals." Another woman urged greater sympathy for IDPs saying, "I think we should think more open mind about this. We were in the same situation as them a few times and we were always respected. We were displaced to Iran, Turkey, and internally between Sulaymaniyah and Erbil. We should know how it feels to be displaced. They are the same as us. They have positive and negatives sides, as we had when we were displaced." Somewhat predictably, cultural shifts were welcomed when host community discussants believed that the changes were valuable to them or their community but negatively when they did not approve of the IDPs actions or of their communities' imitation.

*"I know an IDP doctor who is the only doctor with that specialty in Kurdistan. He trained many others in his field here. People like him should be encouraged to stay here. Otherwise, those in the camps are a pressure on us; they are eating our part, using our services."*

*(Host Community, Erbil – Male)*

#### **Finding 4: Across IDP groups, most discussants said the national government does not listen to their concerns and they want more involvement in decision-making; many intended to vote in the May 2018 parliamentary elections.**

To various degrees, IDP discussants said the national government is unresponsive to their needs and concerns. Most said that this lack of responsiveness was a major problem that negatively affected their lives. When asked how to improve the situation, most discussants said Iraq needed new leaders and IDPs needed a greater voice in decision-making. In contrast to the national government, several IDP discussants said the Kurdish government and local organizations listen to them:

- *"No politician has ever visited us and asked about our needs, and they never hear us. They only do imaginary projects at the time of elections – like giving loans and providing job opportunities – and they are all lies."*  
*(IDP in Host Community, Erbil – Male)*
- *"The local government is better than ISIS, but they won't respond to our demands."*  
*(IDP in Host Community, Erbil – Male)*

The view that significant government change was needed to make a meaningful difference in service provision and reconstruction was nearly universal amongst discussants. Despite pessimism about the likelihood of political change and the quality of elections, many IDP discussants intended to vote in the May parliamentary elections. Three different female IDPs in camps in Erbil recommended changing "all of the politicians," "our entire government" and "Nouri al-Maliki." Similarly, a male IDP living in a host

community argued, “We have to choose new faces in the next government because the same faces have ruled us for 13 years, and they did not do anything for us.”

Several IDPs appeared to long for the “stability” of Saddam Hussein’s era, preferring the memory of an era with greater stability to the current dynamic but dysfunctional political system. A female IDP in a camp in Erbil said, “Only Saddam Hussein’s policy can control Iraq.” Another female camp-based IDP agreed, “We wish that someone like Saddam Hussein would rule. It would be safe and everything would be great.” Despite the nostalgia for perceived stability, most discussants reported wanting to be more politically active, through participation in elections as well as post-election. A male IDP living in a host community contended, “We must be involved. Because if we don’t get involved...all the Sunni community will be destroyed as before. If Kurdistan did not exist, we would all be dead now.” In contrast, Christian IDP discussants were divided about greater political participation, with several saying Iraq has an Islamic government in which they cannot participate.

- “We are not living in a secular and civil country. The Iraqi Constitution gives us just a formal position in the state, and we can get involved in the government, but the Iraqi Constitution says that the Islamic religion is the basis of law in Iraq, and this thing is against our Christian lives.”  
(Christian IDP – Male)
- “[Iraqi law] does not allow anyone other than Muslims to be in any ruling position. We can't even be a principal in a school where the majority of the students are Muslim.”  
(Christian IDP – Male)

*“I have a Muslim friend, and at the time of Da’esh, he got his son out of Mosul to Finland. I was in contact with his son on the phone, and he used to tell me that he reached Finland and he crossed five countries until he reached Finland and no one asked him if he is Muslim or Christian. So, the people who live outside of Iraq are living on the basis of this thing, that we are all humans. But in Iraq, we are Arabs, and Kurds, and Christians, and Shia, and Sunni, and so many other names.”*

*(Christian IDP – Male)*

However, there was significant disillusionment among some of the IDPs about politics and elections. “They will not change,” said a host community-based female IDP in reference to Iraqi politicians. A community leader in Erbil said foreign influence was corrupting government officials. “Iranian intervention in Iraq’s affairs has pushed patriots and real politicians away from the government,” he argued. “They are no longer able to do their duty to benefit the people. They will fight any figure who is trying to lead Iraq correctly.”

During key informant interviews, most leaders and activists criticized both the central and local government, while central and local government officials agreed that the government is unresponsive to IDPs. However, one community leader in Erbil praised the local government: “[The local government does] listen to us. Our voices are heard by them because they are in a direct contact with us. IDPs are trying to deliver their voices to the central government through the local government...but we don’t get anything back from the central government.” In one interview a Mosul municipal official said, “The local government has the same situation as the central government. Both governments were out of war just recently. They drained all their resources, and the available resources are not enough for the destruction that happened. No country in the world can have a war like this and provide the services again in a short period of time.”

This reality, juxtaposed with the perspective from discussants that greater responsiveness was needed, points to an immediate need to improve government communications to ensure that Iraqis know their government hears them, even if they cannot respond immediately.

**Finding 5: Host community discussants believed the government already listens to IDP concerns, and many resented the political influence of IDPs.**

In contrast to the interviews and IDP discussants' self-assessments, most host community members believed the government listens to the needs of IDPs. A host community woman said, "Looking at the quality of the services they are provided with, then yes, they are definitely listened to." Another argued, "Some of them are complaining a lot that they are not listened to. They say neither the Iraqi government nor the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) is listening to them. They are blaming them for not providing them with enough services. But I think that is just their complaining nature." A host community man said, "I do not know why it is important to listen to them. They have a better life than we do, and they have the same services as us. We do not have to listen to them."

Although several host community discussants supported the IDP's political rights, many resented their influence in the region. A host community woman explained, "I think they should not be allowed to have any effect on the political decisions in this region. That will change the demography of our place. It will change so that Kurdish people might start to vote for Arabs, and they will ultimately take over Kurdistan." A host community man said, "I think they should not be allowed to have any influence on the political decisions in our region, they are temporary here and they are not allowed to decide for us."

**Finding 6: Across IDP groups, most discussants complained of poor living conditions.**

IDP discussants noted numerous negative aspects of their daily lives and government services. These included the provision of health services, educational opportunities, food assistance and physical reconstruction, but they also focused on the systematic challenges that underscore their exclusion from public life.

*"If you don't give bribes, you will not get what you want."*

*(IDP in Host Community – Female)*

**Official Documents are Difficult to Get.** Obtaining official documents is difficult for IDPs. Discussants reported challenges obtaining election cards, passports and residence permits; the high cost of replacing paperwork destroyed under ISIS; and the prevalence of bribes and corruption. A Christian female IDP stated, "Now they are updating the information of the election card. I updated my information because I am from Qaraqosh. But my husband is from Mosul, so he couldn't update it because he will have to go to Mosul." A female IDP in a camp in Erbil said, "My sons died in the events and I did one of their family's papers, so they would get their father's salary. When ISIS came and all of the documents got ruined, I was told that I must do the papers all over again, but I have no money to do them now."

**Reliable Official Information Sources are Deficient; Government Coordination is Lacking.** When asked where they get information on important issues facing the IDP community, most discussants said the government provides little information to them. A Christian female IDP explained, "We don't receive all of the information. We just receive 20 percent of the information, or 10 percent of the information."

Across IDP groups, discussants said they mostly receive information on government decisions regarding IDPs or their former homes from each other, relatives or the internet.

In interviews, many community leaders and activists expressed a desire for the local and national governments to work together to solve the problems faced by IDPs. A community leader in Erbil explained, “The central government won’t be able to know about our issues and concerns without the local government; the local government should deliver our voices and concerns to the central government.” A religious leader said both the local and national governments should “bear the responsibility of Iraq.” Yet interviewees largely agreed that NGOs – not the government – were providing the most assistance to IDPs. A youth activist in Erbil had a poor view of government responsiveness, saying, “If it wasn’t for the international organizations, then the IDPs’ problems wouldn’t be solved.” Discussants’ views on government engagement were equally poor (see Finding 3), underscoring the desire for more coordination between and attention from government actors by IDPs, returnees and host community members alike.

**Rare Job Opportunities Increase IDPs Reliance on Subsidies.** IDP discussants said job opportunities are virtually nonexistent. Many IDPs said NGOs provide job training, but that this is often not enough. A Christian female IDP said, “The government could provide us with a small business or the government could give us money to start our own project.” IDPs receive subsidies from the national government, but many complained that this is insufficient. A camp-bound man said, “My family has six members, so I get 160,000 IQD [approximately US\$135]. Won’t we need a doctor and clothes? What will this money do? My cigarettes alone cost 30,000 IQD [~\$25] a month and when I take my children to the clinic, I have to pay a lot for the taxi. Won’t my children want clothes and meat? Some of my children are in school, so won’t I give them pocket money?”

*“These NGOs made projects and businesses in the compounds for displaced people. But only the women worked in these businesses, so there was no true source of money. Only the women learned how to sew, to be a hairdresser or to learn how to make handmade crafts. It was not that good.”*

*(Christian IDP – Female)*

**Leaders Identify Needs but Have Few Solutions.** During interviews, government officials, tribal leaders and local community leaders acknowledged the suffering of IDPs and outline community needs but offered few solutions. Even discussants from government bodies identified a need for greater government intervention. A government official in Mosul said, “The IDPs need a place to stay...They need livelihoods, which means the government should activate the social care, orphan care, and women and widows support systems. The war resulted in many orphans and widows, so the government should support them and provide a place for them to live instead of leaving them in camps.” A community leader in Erbil said, “One of the most important needs is to provide a stable security situation. The basic services are also completely destroyed, like water, electricity, health and education.” An official at the Ministry of Migration said, “[IDPs] need financial help, job opportunities and safety.” A tribal leader in Mosul said, “IDPs in the camps are far from their homes and are foreigners out there. They are living in a place that is not inhabitable for any human being in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Everyone agrees on that because people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century need air-conditioning, electricity, streets, hospitals and all that.”

**Finding 7: Many host community discussants believed IDPs experience mostly good living conditions and resented the strain IDPs place on existing resources.**

FGD discussants from host communities had a very different view of IDPs' lives than IDPs themselves. While they agreed that healthcare and infrastructure for IDPs was poor, they generally said that education, food, information, employment and recreational activities were all available for IDPs, and were often better than what hosts had. Women among the host communities appeared particularly critical of perceived disparities in the education provided to IDP children and those from Erbil:

- *"They put [displaced children] in the best Kurdish schools and had a special time to be taught in Arabic. That shortened the teaching time for the original students of those schools, which is bad."*  
(Host Community – Female)
- *"I think [IDPs] were provided with a very good educational service. That was even a load on our students and education system. The Kurdistan Regional Government had to provide them with materials. In addition, their students were helped a lot. Some of them started studying in the middle of the year and they were still accepted, without taking any examinations in the first half of the year. They were treated the same as our students who started at the beginning of the year and sat together in the same class. Everything was made easy for the IDPs."*  
(Host Community – Female)

Erbil's permanent residents – most of whom have been heavily affected by the Kurdistan region's economic malaise – saw the financial and material support for IDPs as unfair, especially given their own suffering. With the local economy having stalled since the beginning of the ISIS crisis, there was concern that employment opportunities in Kurdistan were being affected by the IDPs: "Since [IDPs] are working for cheap, they have many more job opportunities than us" (Host Community – Woman). Others claimed that food assistance was flowing to IDPs while permanent residents struggled to put food on the table: "IDPs were much better off than us. They all had their smart card that they used to take food and salary every month. We do not even have that. We may get some food like oil once every three months, but they get everything every month" (Host Community – Man).

**Finding 8: Across IDP groups, most discussants did not plan to return to their homes, though many said they would like to return if the government could provide safety in their former neighborhoods. Many others said they would like to leave Iraq altogether because the situation remains dire.**

Most IDP discussants said they do not intend to return to their former homes in Mosul, generally citing lack of security or lost property. Fears of poor security, access to basic necessities and the lingering presence of ISIS cells undergirded most responses. These fears appear well-founded given the statements of the groups currently residing in Mosul. Some discussants said that they had already built new lives which they were reluctant to leave behind:

- *"I have been living here for few years now and my area is destroyed. I saw atrocities in it. Now, I have friends here and they are good people. I would prefer dying here and not returning."*  
(Camp, Erbil – Male)
- *"I have no house in Mosul or anywhere, so I prefer that my daughter and I stay here."*  
(Camp, Erbil – Female)
- *"There is no stability in Mosul, no electricity, no water, no food supplies and no jobs. We are comfortable in Erbil."*



(Camp, Erbil – Male)

- *"We would count on the tribes and not the government [for security], because the government would let an ISIS member out of prison for \$20,000."*

(IDP in Host Community – Male)

While some IDP discussants said they would prefer to stay in Iraq, many said they would like to leave Iraq if given the opportunity. A male IDP based in a host community said, "Most of the Iraqis, including me, want to move to another country because there is no future in Iraq. There is no future for us or our children in Iraq. In the past, al Qaeda came to our areas and ISIS came after that. Now the White Flags group will come to our areas.<sup>4</sup> Iraq has no future. But we don't have the chance to travel to another country. If you tell me that you will get me and my family out from Iraq, I will come with you now." This view was particularly prevalent among Christian IDPs (see **Further Analysis** on Page 14 for more detail).

## *II. Life in Mosul: Views of Both Migrant and Nonmigrant Moslawis*

**Finding 9: Among Mosul focus groups, most discussants were happy to be in Mosul, often citing the culture, diversity and sense of belonging in the city. However, many said they would like to leave Mosul permanently at some point.**

Most study participants living in Mosul have a personal dedication to the culture and history of the area. One returned Moslawi woman said, "Mosul is our home. It is the city that we were born in. We will always love it." Another returned Moslawi woman explained, "We faced so much trouble during the time of displacement, but living in Mosul is very good. All the people care about each other. All the people of Mosul help each other, despite all of the things that we faced." A youth activist from Mosul interviewed noted that despite the challenges of having returned to Mosul, he thought that others should also return, noting, "There is a great change. The people's manners changed very much in the cities that ISIS controlled. The way Iraqis look at those cities also changed after the liberation for the better, not like before the liberation [when] they used to look at Mosul and other occupied cities in a bad way, considering them ISIS cities."

A man who had returned to Mosul contended, "Mosul is special in Iraq. Mosul is known more than any other place in Iraq for its peaceful coexistence. You will find the Arabs, the Kurds, the Shabak, the Yazidi, the Sunni, the Shi'a and the Christians all live in Mosul... [Mosul is] our historical heritage. It makes us very excited to stay in it and to defend it." A Moslawi woman who had not left the city during the ISIS occupation struck a similar tone: "What connects me to Mosul is not only my house. Mosul is our city and it is a mini Iraq because of the diversity in it. Even if there are things in it that are bad for us and hinder our future, we must hope to make our city like we want it." However, a returned Moslawi woman noted continued tension in the city. "There is some tension between the two sides of the city," she explained. "Some people living in the left side of the city think that the people living in the right side of the city are with ISIS."

Despite widespread pride in the city, several Mosul FGD discussants hoped to leave at some point. Several returned Moslawi women said life is hard, with little money and few opportunities. Another returned woman said youth are dropping out of school because there is no future in the city. A Moslawi

---

<sup>4</sup> The White Flags is an extremist group reportedly consisting of an alliance of former ISIS, Ansar al-Islam and Kurdish mafia members. While little information has emerged, the group fights against the Iraqi and Kurdish regional government alike.



man who stayed in the city during the ISIS occupation said he would go “anywhere other than Iraq as long as I feel like a human who has rights and respect, which we lack here.” Another man, who had also not left Mosul during the ISIS occupation explained, “I hope to go to a European country – England or any country that respects human rights and provides a job.”

**Finding 10: Most discussants in the Mosul groups said the national government does not listen to their concerns and they want more involvement in decision-making; many intended to vote in the May 2018 parliamentary elections.**

Most Mosul discussants said the national government provides little support and rarely, if ever, consults them on their perspectives, often saying that NGOs are more helpful. A Moslawi woman said, “The government just gives promises and doesn’t do anything” (Returned Resident). A Moslawi man claimed, “The government is not doing anything for us” (Returned Resident). Several Mosul women described elected officials as “ignorant” and “corrupt” (Returned Residents). Another Moslawi woman said, “No politician has ever asked us what we want and need” (Non-Migrant Moslawi). Moslawis said that the government’s lack of responsiveness has negative implications for national pride and security. Another Moslawi man argued, “If the government doesn’t support the youth, this might inspire them to do things that harm society, like join ISIS” (Non-Migrant Moslawi – Male).

*A Moslawi man contended that government unresponsiveness “makes terrorist organizations” and another declared that lack of government engagement, “makes us dislike our country. We don’t feel like we belong to our country.”*

*(Both Non-Migrant Moslawi – Males)*

Many Mosul discussants wanted a greater role in decision-making. A young man from Mosul said, “It is my future and the future of the generations to come. If I make a good decision now, it will result in a better future for me and my children and even my grandchildren maybe. I might be able to produce a better society” (Non-Migrant Moslawi). Another young man from Mosul said, “Most of the youth of Mosul...want to change the old politicians with new politicians who are supported by the youth. I think that this is the last chance for Mosul to change the faces of the politicians, so we have to change them” (Returned Moslawi). However, many Mosul residents were pessimistic about the prospects for political change. A Moslawi woman claimed, “The politicians are all the same, nothing will change” (Returned Moslawi). Another Moslawi woman suggested, “I think that the whole state should go on a huge protest against the government. This will make the government to listen to us” (Returned Moslawi). A Moslawi said, “There should be international pressure on the government. We will not affect the government if we go on protests, but the international pressure will affect the government” (Returned Moslawi).

Despite their disillusionment, many Mosul discussants still intended to vote in the May 2018 parliamentary elections:

- *“We want to change the politician’s parties that have ruled Iraq since 2003. They did not provide anything for Iraq or the Iraqi people. They are just thieves, so we want new faces to rule Iraq that will serve the Iraqi people.”*  
*(Returned Resident – Male)*
- *“The simplest method [for change] is coming in the next months. The politicians who will represent us in the parliament will be chosen, and this is the best way to affect the government.”*  
*(Returned Resident – Male)*

These feelings were not universal. Others expressed skepticism about the utility of elections:

- *"Voting in elections doesn't help in decision making because we can't find a person to trust, who will do something for us. I will not participate in the victory of a corrupt person or person who I know nothing about."*

(Non-Migrant Moslawi – Female)

- *"The elections are fixed, even if you vote."*

(Non-Migrant Moslawi – Male)

#### **Further Analysis: Is Isolation Helping or Harming Iraq's Minorities?**

The 2018 parliamentary elections saw the first signs of post-sectarianism, with minority candidates joining lists headed by other confessional groups. To some analysts, this is a positive sign, a marker that Iraq may not follow the Lebanese model of a strict confessional system that has resulted in political stalemate numerous times. Yet for some within Iraq's minority communities, this means a loss of voice. Many minority political parties competed solely for the quota seats, and always against other parties claiming to represent the same community. This internal fragmentation meant that minority parties competed for the lowest number of seats they could possibly achieve instead of supporting consensus candidates and competing for a greater number of seats.

Further, Ninewa's ethnoreligious minorities are in clear need of greater education on Iraqi election law and electoral dynamics. IRI found that these communities lacked a thorough comprehension of Iraq's democratic processes and were thus at a distinct political disadvantage. Effective representation at the provincial and national levels for these communities will need to come from within. They must examine how internal fragmentation and the prima facie conclusion that they need to cloister themselves from the Muslim majority may actually be contributing to their marginalization. This is not to blame the victims for the atrocities committed against them, but a reminder that their strongest advocates must come from within their communities.

#### **Finding 11: Among Mosul focus groups, discussants desired increased government assistance to address the numerous problems that remain from ISIS rule.**

Mosul was shattered during the battle to reclaim the city, and the western half of the city in particular was almost completely destroyed. Buildings remain laced with traps laid by retreating ISIS forces, and the ruins are littered with bodies and unexploded ordnance. Despite this devastation, Mosul remains home to hundreds of thousands of people. Many had no choice but to stay – trapped by ISIS or by the fighting – and many of those who fled are now returning and seeking to recover some sense of normalcy. Moslawis face the almost unimaginable task of rebuilding their city, and a broad consensus on the most critical issues they are facing began to emerge from FGD participants:

**Official Documents are Difficult to Obtain.** Participants had numerous complaints regarding accessing official documents, including delays, long lines, unreasonable distances to travel and corruption. The inability to acquire critical documentation ranging from land deeds to birth and death certificates to personal and voter identification cards is hindering IDPs and returnees from rebuilding their lives.

The vicious depravity of ISIS affected nearly every person in Mosul. Their proclivity toward collective punishment and summary executions and the reliance on mass graves, has compounded difficulties for citizens seeking closure. A Moslawi man explained:

- *"There are problems with the issuing of death certificates for the people who were killed by ISIS. For example, when someone goes to get a death certificate for a member of his family, the doctors ask him about the body of the dead person. But there is no body because it is under the ruins or they don't know where the body is, so how they could issue a death certificate? There are so many people who are suffering from this issue now."*

(Returned Moslawi – Male)

**Job Opportunities are Fleeting.** Unemployment is rampant in Mosul, and the expectation among discussants was that the Iraqi government needs to intervene to reverse the situation. Widespread corruption and nepotism have further depressed an already crippled job market. A lack of economic opportunity is preventing many from moving home, and is catalyzing further migration. One Moslawi woman said jobs were not available "in the government, only in [NGOs and international organizations]. And you can't get a job in any organization unless you have favoritism."

- *"[The Government] should provide more support to the private sector to provide job opportunities because a lot of youth are ready to do anything to put money in their pockets."*

(Non-Migrant Moslawi – Male)

During interviews, government, tribal and community leaders recognized the significant problems facing Mosul residents. A government official said residents will need "many things" to have a "good life," but "most importantly, water must be available in addition to electricity, healthcare and cleanliness." A community leader claimed returnees and residents need "schools, government departments, services and roads." Similarly, an official from the Ministry of Migration said residents require "house renovations, job opportunities and financial help."

*"A while ago, there were rumors that the government had opened 15,000 new jobs for the people of Mosul. All the people went to apply, but after a while, we heard that it was just an election advertisement."*

(Returned Moslawi – Female)

**Schools Need Repairs; Students Need Psychosocial Support.** Mosul's education system, which was coopted by ISIS during the occupation, has both literally and figuratively collapsed. Discussants reported that schools remain in disrepair and that few good teachers remain, and many described how three years of ISIS occupation had corrupted the system. The youngest students faced severe psychological trauma and indoctrination under ISIS that now requires specialized attention. One returned Moslawi man said, "The young children in elementary schools need awareness campaigns to change their thinking."

*"There are children who are still singing the songs of ISIS, and ISIS ideology is still with them. ISIS used to teach them 'one bullet plus one bullet equals two bullets' and so on, so these things need to be changed in their thinking."*

(Returned Moslawi – Male)

**Looking to Traditional Leaders for Assistance.** In the absence of good governance, Iraqis are turning to traditional leaders for help. Tribal dynamics continue to play a significant role in the lives of Iraqis, particularly in more rural areas where the governments' ability to provide support is limited. One tribal leader from Mosul explained, "Thousands of houses are destroyed in the old city, so rebuilding it is very important. It is one of the key actions for the return of displaced people." The tribal leader in Mosul also

explained how tribal leaders could help communities. While acknowledging the declining influence of tribes in socially integrated urban centers, he argued that tribes remain important in villages. “For example, in Ramadi [Anbar province], there are tribes like Albo Nimr that didn’t let ISIS enter their village. The tribes have great role in elections and all political things; they have an effect. If a car accident or murder happens, it will be solved through tribes. The country has a role in bringing justice, but so does the tribe.”

**Finding 12: Discussants who lived in Mosul during the ISIS occupation described lives marked by fear, murder and uncertainty. However, most said the city is now safe.**

The men and woman who survived the ISIS occupation of Mosul described horrific conditions and widespread suffering. While daily life continued for those who stayed in the city, it was a far from normal. Paradoxically, there is a sense of optimism and motivation that seems to have arisen from the severe trauma that they share:

- *“No one was excluded from ISIS’s cruelty. All ages were punished harshly.”*  
(Non-Migrant Moslawi – Male)
- *“Life under ISIS is a prison. We had no rights and some personal practices that had nothing to do with religion were imposed on us. There were no schools and no work. We are Iraqis, but the word Iraq was erased from our dictionary.”*  
(Non-migrant Moslawi – Female)
- *“The difference between the two times is like dark and light. At the time of ISIS, we were in darkness and we had no rights. We lived in danger and fear.”*  
(Non-migrant Moslawi – Female)
- *“We all lost something or someone. They used to kill people for the simplest things and in an ugly way. ISIS made a yard where they would kill people in front of others and children. Everything can be fixed, but these ugly and horrific memories are hard to erase from our minds.”*  
(Non-migrant Moslawi – Female)
- *“[Da’esh] ruined our future and as youth we need that bright future... I lost three years of my education. We had to leave school and work because in that time there was no salaries. That’s how our future was ruined, but now it is better and we hope to find jobs after we finish our education.”*  
(Non-Migrant Moslawi – Male)

### III. Religious Coexistence

**Finding 13: Most Mosul focus group discussants said that interreligious reconciliation is possible and important in the city after ISIS.**

There is ample evidence that the three-year ISIS occupation of Ninewa resulted in at least short-term fatigue with sectarian politics, especially among the Sunni population. The population is weary of violence, and many Moslawi discussants said reconciliation between Christians and Muslims is necessary for the future peace and prosperity of the region:

- *“The people of other religions who were affected by ISIS mostly should be treated well. I think that a festival should be made – call it the peace festival – to bring all the religions in one place.”*

(Returned Moslawi – Female)

- *"There are so many ways [to reconcile]. One of them is that the Muslims should go and clean a church. It would be all over the media, and when the Christians see this, they will return to their area."*

(Returned Moslawi – Female)

- *"I went to a church in one of the towns. There was a ceremony there. We went to deliver a message that the Muslims are not like ISIS, Islam is peace and love, and there is no difference between the Christians and the Muslims."*

(Returned Moslawi – Male)

However, one discussant from Mosul questioned why Christian suffering should be prioritized. This reflects the Sunni community's feelings of continued neglect by the Government of Iraq (GOI) and a fear among many that GOI and international aid will continue to bypass them.

- *"All the people in Mosul from different religions and sects are treated with injustice. There is no one sect or religion that is treated with more injustice than the other."*

(Returned Moslawi – Man)

#### **Finding 14: Christian IDPs living in Erbil reported no challenges to exercising their faith; receive significant but declining support from NGOs and churches.**

When asked if they could exercise their faith openly, Christian IDP discussants reported no problems and many said they are freer now than in Mosul. A female Christian IDP said, "In Mosul, we were in a strict environment. We wore hijab. We were forced to wear things that we didn't want, so that we could exercise our faith." Another woman added, "We even were afraid in our churches because we were afraid that someone will bomb us." However, in Erbil Christian organizations helped them. A Christian woman said, "When we first were displaced, the churches welcomed us and they provided everything for us." Another Christian woman explained, "We trust the churches and the organizations to provide the things that we need." Christian IDPs also appreciated the protection from the security forces in Kurdistan. "I like how the security forces protect us during our holy days, and they provide safety to us," said a Christian female IDP. A Christian male IDP said, "The Christians walk proudly here. The Kurdistan government knows that we will not make any problems." Another man said, "We as Christians are always welcomed. We see a difference when we go through the check points and the security forces trust us."

Several Christian IDPs said support from churches and other organizations is declining, and that the aid was disproportionately going to people displaced from the Ninewa Plains. This aid ranged from direct food and medical aid to subsidies for rent in and around Erbil:

- *"The church used to give us aid every month, until September of 2017, and then they stopped giving us aid. They used to give us good aid like good rice and good detergents."*

(Christian IDP – Female)

- *"We – the displaced people from Mosul – don't get anything here. We are treated with injustice. The Iraqi government doesn't ask about us. The churches and the organizations pay attention to the people in Ninewa Plains, so we are neglected now."*

(Christian IDP – Female)

- *"There is no organization that has helped us since September of 2017; only the Akdad organization, which gave us 20,000 dinars [approximately \$17] each month."*

(Christian IDP – Female)

**Finding 15: Across IDP groups, many discussants said that although their lives are better now than under ISIS, life in Mosul was difficult even before ISIS took over the city.**

Persecution of minority communities in and around Mosul is a long-term crisis that began well before ISIS took over the region in 2014. Discussants highlighted the situation they faced as ISIS grew in the period before they took over. Christian IDPs in particular sought to draw attention to the suffering they faced in Mosul and elsewhere before ISIS's rise. One female Christian IDP explained, "Before Da'esh came to Mosul, we suffered from killing... and threats to Christians. We were living in horror. When Da'esh came, the situation became much worse for us, so we moved to Kurdistan." Another Christian woman described multiple displacements: "This is our second displacement. We got displaced to Bashiqa or Bartella, and then we were displaced [to Erbil]."

One discussant described religiously motivated attacks on his family prior to the Da'esh occupation:

- *"Before Da'esh... [Christians] were threatened and we were afraid all the time. I was threatened by terrorists. They ambushed me when I was getting out from my house with my children and they wanted to kill me or to kidnap one of my children, but I escaped them and they were shooting at me, and they were six men in two cars. So we were not settled before Da'esh, but we were lightly settled when we left Mosul to the Ninewa Plains, and this settlement did not last long because Da'esh came."*

(IDP in Host Community – Male)

Many Sunni IDPs also said that life was difficult before ISIS arrived, and described issues similar to their Christian compatriots in that they feared terrorist violence, suffered poor treatment and persecution by the government, and harbored feelings of neglect after their displacement:

- *"Before ISIS, we were settled in our houses and there was work, but we didn't have peace of mind and we were nervous. There was no good government that could control the people. There is favoritism in the police and army and there is no system."*

(IDP in Host Community – Female)

- *"Before ISIS invaded Mosul, we used to suffer from the government. They used to take strict precautions because of terrorism and we used to be affected by that. They used to close some streets that people used to go to their work."*

(Camp, Erbil – Male)

*"I just wonder why the government doesn't care about us Sunnis? If they cared about us, we would return to our homes and leave the camps. We are living safely here but we are not comfortable and nothing is good."*

(Camp, Erbil – Female)

While both Christians and non-Christians experienced difficulties in Mosul, IRI noted a distinction in the kinds of instability they faced both during and after the ISIS occupation. While Christians consistently reported facing direct threats to their personal safety, non-Christians' dissatisfaction with their situation

seems to have derived from the unresponsiveness and corruption of the political system. That said, there is considerable overlap in the issues that they face now, a finding that contrasts strongly with each group's perceptions of how others have fared. This indicates that building stronger inter-ethnoreligious relations based on common experiences between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims and Christian, Yazidi, and other ethnic groups should be a priority for those seeking to stabilize and rebuild communities across Northern Iraq.

#### **Further Analysis: The Plight of Iraqi Christians**

Iraqi Christians are facing an existential crisis that extends far beyond the country's current conflict. In analyzing the responses of all FGD groups, the experience of Iraqi Christian IDPs with displacement and camp life does not appear to differ radically from that of their non-Christian counterparts. Daily challenges appear to differ little between Christians and Muslims in the region. The only notable distinction identified explicitly by participants – that Christian churches and charities are providing Christian IDPs with services – seems to be more a function of the available resources possessed by these institutions rather than any sort of systemic bias or government preference.

Despite the similarities in their daily lives, it is critically important to recognize that Iraqi Christians have legitimate fears regarding their future as Iraqis that must be viewed separately from their needs as IDPs. Christian life in Iraq was being threatened – often violently – long before ISIS surged into Ninewa. This history of persecution was evident in numerous Christian discussants' descriptions of ambushes, killings and repeated displacements prior to the 2014 ISIS takeover.<sup>5</sup> While the shared communal trauma of the current crisis has resulted in an uptick in inclusive rhetoric, there remain substantial hurdles within Iraq's political and social systems to true integration of Iraqi Christians. Christian discussants painted a portrait of a nationwide political framework that has little to no room for their voice either individually or collectively. The religious background of elected officials thus far has played a substantial role in feeding this sense of alienation.

With confessional/sectarian lists as the status quo, the monopoly of religious clerics and ethno-religious divisions across Iraqi politics has left a marked impact on Iraqi Christians' investment in and perception of their own political power.<sup>6</sup> One female IDP predicted vote rigging (though these allegations persist post-election, they are unproven): "If we voted or not, the result is already decided" (IDP in Host Community), while another Christian woman said, "Only God can change the situation in Iraq because we are weak." Several discussants said they lacked voting cards to participate – a common complaint among IDP populations that were underserved by the Iraqi High Election Commission in the pre-election period.

This sense of disenfranchisement is further compounded by a persistent sense of instability and fear. While many discussants cited a desire to leave Iraq if possible, the sentiment was particularly strong among Christian IDPs. A Christian female IDP argued, "I want to live outside of Iraq because I want to live safely. Because even if we settle now, after a period of time, another side or group will come and harm us. We demand to get us – the Christians of Mosul – out of Iraq if they don't want to keep us in Kurdistan." Another Christian female IDP agreed, "There is someone trying to change the demography of Iraq, to erase the Christians from the map of Iraq. We have felt this since 2003." For many Iraqi Christians, the systemic persecution that has defined their experience since the 2003 invasion has persisted despite their relatively warm welcome as IDPs in Kurdistan. As one Christian man related, "I wish that we could stay

---

<sup>5</sup> Middle East Research Institute. *The Christians: Perceptions of Reconciliations and Conflict*. 2017

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.



here forever, but Iraq is not stable. For this reason, we want to live outside of Iraq, because the Christians don't like to live without law."

For Christians to feel included in their country's political processes, they must be further integrated in the candidate pools and decision-making bodies of their communities; likewise, political power-holders and citizens must be invested in inclusion.

#### IV. Views on ISIS: IDPs, Host Community and Mosul Residents

##### **Finding 16: Most discussants believe they can never reconcile with ISIS supporters.**

Across all focus groups, most said they could never again interact with – let alone reconcile with – ISIS supporters. The Sunni extremism coopted by ISIS has deep roots in Ninewa, and manifested violently on multiple occasions prior to ISIS' formation. There are deep fears that a next generation of Sunni jihadists may emerge if decisive action is not taken. There was a near-ubiquitous sense of loss, anger and trepidation:

- *"How can we reconcile with someone who supports Da'esh? We paid blood for this. About 2,000 Peshmerga were killed fighting Da'esh, which means 2,000 Kurdish families are ruined because of them. There is no way to live with someone who thinks Da'esh was right."*

(Host Community – Male)

*"We in the Sunni areas have lived through three or four stages of extremist groups. The same people who were with ISIS were in [Jamaat al-Tawhid and Jihad]. We reconciled with them before, but then al Qaeda came. We reconciled with them again. How could I reconcile with them if they join each extremist group that comes? If they have made only one mistake, then we would reconcile with them."*

(IDP in Host Community – Male)

##### **Context: Families of ISIS Members**

Government-run camps for those accused of supporting ISIS and their families hold hundreds of families throughout several provinces in Iraq. Stigmatized and harshly judged by administrative judges and the population at large, these families are in a precarious situation – most cannot prove their innocence, even if they have disavowed their brother, husband or son, and the government has not yet been able to process each of their cases. International human rights groups warn of abuses and against the use of collective punishment, but it is not clear that families will be able to re-enter Iraqi society, even if cleared of wrongdoing by the state.

The social status of those forced to live or work in ISIS-controlled areas remains a point of great contention. While a few discussants advocated for reconciliation and the reintegration of former ISIS supporters, most advocated for isolation, resocialization programs, imprisonment, or execution:

- *"I think that all the people who cooperated with ISIS, the men, the young men, the youth, the children and the women, should all be separated out of the state into camps. The men should be executed. The women who fought with ISIS should be executed too. The remaining children or the families of ISIS members – because there were women who were forced to marry ISIS men – should be separated outside of the state and given rehabilitation courses, and starve them as they starved us."*

(Returned Moslawi – Woman)



A minority of discussants expressed sympathy for the families of ISIS supporters, and worried that mass ostracism could endanger reconciliation and catalyze another wave of Sunni extremism:

- *"There is a friend of mine who is with me in the university. At the time of ISIS, his uncles joined, but he and his family rejected ISIS...At the time of the liberation, ISIS retreated to the right side of the city, and he and his family were forced by his uncles...to go with ISIS to the right side of the city. After the liberation, he returned to the university, but he has been forsaken by all of the students."*  
(Returned Moslawi – Man)
  
- *"The majority of the families didn't join ISIS but their relatives did. They are all forsaken, and all the people left them. I am against this thing because we don't have to make them feel that they are forsaken... The government should make awareness programs for these people to merge them with the society again, to prevent them from being extremists."*  
(Returned Moslawi – Man)

**Finding 17: Most discussants in Mosul and IDP groups said that ISIS retains support in Iraq but disagreed on the intensity. IDPs believed ISIS has more support than Mosul residents do.**

While there was a consensus that ISIS retains some support (the root causes of which were outside the scope of this study), discussants from the Mosul and IDP groups were split on the depth of pro-ISIS sentiment. Women among the Christian IDPs gave the highest estimates, believing between 60-90 percent of Mosul residents still support ISIS. Discussants noted that ISIS is already seeking to consolidate and rebrand their efforts, with some elements now calling themselves members of the "White Banners" or "White Flags:"

- *"[ISIS] have sleeper cells that are widespread. They changed the thinking of the people and played with their minds. They made them forget about everything and just believe in the Da'esh ideology."*  
(Christian IDP – Female)
  
- *"When ISIS got in, they took the kids and taught them. So the kids who are in Mosul are broken and brainwashed, not like our kids. We left and came to camps and our kids still have humanity. But the kids who stayed in Mosul and saw all the beheading and throwing people from buildings will be affected. It will be planted in their minds."*  
(Camp, Erbil – Male)
  
- *"If someone was brainwashed during the time of ISIS, then he would still be brainwashed now."*  
(Non-Migrant Moslawi – Male)

Moslawis confirmed that ISIS maintains support in their city, but were far more conservative in their estimates. When asked if they knew ISIS supporters, "yes, but very few" was a common response across Mosul groups. ISIS has been militarily defeated, but their message still resonates with some Sunnis who are frustrated with the status quo. Several returnees noted that some Moslawis believe that ISIS was better than the current government because of the endemic corruption and poor state of city services. These are the same complaints that arose repeatedly in the decade preceding ISIS' rise.

“When the Soviet Union fell, communism failed. But there is still a Communist Party.”

(Host Community – Man)

Youth activists from Mosul and Erbil warned that persistent youth suffering could reenergize ISIS. Iraqi youth continue to grapple with unemployment, poverty, poor education and healthcare, and limited opportunities to influence government decisions or participate in community affairs. They warned that extremists would exploit these issues to recruit from a vulnerable youth population. “This is what Da’esh did before invading the city,” said one youth activist from Erbil. “They used youth frustration about the government, security departments, society and unemployment. Da’esh uses the suffering of others to their benefit.” This was further substantiated by another youth activist in Erbil: “Young men need money to get married. People need source of income, so of course they will go with them... [Terrorists] target weak people.”

Moslawi activists were more skeptical of ISIS’s allure to youth who have seen the damage wrought by the war and emphasized sentiments about a youth-driven future for the city. However, when pressed, they also began to sound alarm bells about corruption, the lack of responsive governance and the lack of economic opportunity.

There is potential in this moment to reshape the government and economy in Ninewa, but the margin for error on the part of the Iraqi government in Mosul is small and narrowing. Because of failures to communicate actionable strategies to rebuild Mosul and regain the trust of the people, the window has been left open for citizen anger to be coopted by extremists once again.

## Recommendations

With the data from this study in hand and in consultation the international donor community, local stakeholders and IRI project beneficiaries, IRI has developed the following recommendations for improving the political inclusion of IDPs in Ninewa Province.

### *Relationship Management between IDPs and Host Communities*

- Create routine facilitated community dialogue sessions, potentially with initial sessions held with IDP and host communities independently to establish core consensus messages.
- Establish systematic community-government working groups to ensure nuanced attention to the evolution of IDP needs.
- Organize and institutionalize participatory prioritization and decision-making mechanisms.
- Support community events, including those specifically organized for women, centered on nonpolitical issues to facilitate engagement between IDPs and host communities in lower-pressure environments.

### *Trust-Building between Government and Citizens*

- Employ a range of direct channels to allow citizens to voice their concerns to government officials.
- Support greater government transparency, especially regarding budget allocations and service provision. To that end, make information about service delivery and government assistance more accessible.
- Government agencies and official bodies need greater coordination to address the multitude of citizen needs and must broaden and modernize communication methods.

- Counteract nostalgia for authoritarian governance by engaging in local-level listening tours by provincial and national authorities.
- Combat corruption and waste through national and provincial monitoring efforts jointly implemented with citizens' groups and civil society.
- Create and reinvigorate national anti-corruption campaigns, including initiatives like one-stop shops, reporting hotlines and measures to expose "ghost" workers and teachers.<sup>7</sup>
- Expand civic education, especially for people under the age of 25, in geographically distant areas or in marginalized communities.

#### *Religious Coexistence*

- Engage religious minorities through political dialogues; ensure minority representation is mainstreamed and habitual rather than a segregated activity.
- Hold community events such as peace fairs, cultural exchanges, and other positive, energetic events to showcase and celebrate differences while highlighting similarities and re-establishing local and national pride.
- Support "open house" days for religious institutions to encourage other sects to learn more about their services, festivals, and rituals.
- Create targeted messaging campaigns to positively influence perceptions of the rebuilding process and project inclusivity and tolerance as a source of community ownership. Work with interreligious cadres of young leaders who can directly support their communities while advocating for political solutions.

---

<sup>7</sup> "Ghost" workers either exist only on paper or do not regularly report for duty and are an extremely costly phenomenon. Ghost workers are major drain on government budgets, a sign of pervasive corruption, and further erode public trust and confidence in their government.



IRI.org



@IRIGlobal



(202) 572-1531

