Engaging Return Migrants in Information Campaigns in Iraq

Challenges, Reintegration, and Prospects

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Contents

List of Acronyms and abbreviations

AVRR	Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration
BMZ	German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development
CAIR	Capacity building for long-term reintegration of returnees to Afganistan and Iraq
DFR	Department of Foreign Relations
EJCC	Erbil Joint Crisis Coordination Centre
ETTC	European Technology and Training Centre
EU	European Union
EURCAP	Europen Readmission Capacity Building Facility
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH
GMAC	Iraq-German Centre for Jobs, Migration and Reintegration
ICMPD	International Centre for Migration Policy Development
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
IMM	Improving Migration Management
INIS	Iraqi National Intelligence Service
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
IOM-DTM	International Organisation for Migration - Displacement Tracking Matrix
JCC	Joint Crisis Coordination Centre
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
KRI	Kurdistan Region of Iraq
MGI	Migration Governance Indicator
MHPSS	Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
MIRAMI	Migration information and awareness raising on the risks of irregular migration in Iraq
MoFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Iraq
MoLSA	Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs
MoMD	Ministry of Migration and Displacement
MRC	Migrant Resource Centre
NRM	National Referral Mechanism
RPI	Reintegration Programme in Iraq
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
ZME	Centres for Migration and Development

Executive Summary

This report investigates the migration and reintegration experiences of Iraqi returnees, their influence on other people's decisions about migration, and their potential role in the implementation of migration information campaigns. It does so in the framework of the *Migration information and awareness raising on the risks of irregular migration in Iraq* (MIRAMI) project, which aims, among other things, at increasing awareness on safe and legal migration and reducing irregular migration from Iraq through changes in perceptions and behaviour of potential migrants as well as of the key influencers of their decisions.

Despite the relative stabilisation of the country after the defeat of ISIS in 2017, social and political insecurity, unemployment, lack of hope in the future, and individual longing for personal freedom continue to push young people to migrate out of Iraq, often through irregular means. For this reason, the past years have seen an increased interest in migration information campaigns to raise awareness on the risks of irregular migration and promote safe and regular migration channels. Recent campaigns have employed diaspora members and returnees as key figures to convey the desired message, driven by the idea that potential migrants tend to trust information coming from closer and more trusted sources, especially with past experiences of migration.

While recognising the methodological limitations of our research (limited sample, different spatial and temporal experiences, confined geographical scope, methodological biases), it is nonetheless possible to determine some common characteristics of the returnees' migration and post-return reintegration experiences and analyse them in light of existing literature to inform the development of migration information campaigns.

Migration and post-return reintegration experiences

- As many studies demonstrated, **the decision to migrate is influenced by a myriad of intertwining factors**. Our research confirms that security and economic issues continue to be the main drivers of migration, connected in particular to unemployment, financial difficulties, and lack of opportunities. An increasing number of displacements is also observed due to climate change. Especially among the youngest participants, however, personal development opportunities and the desire to mirror the success of previous migrants also operate as driving factors, thus revealing the importance of meso- and micro-level drivers of migration.

- **The role of social networks is paramount in shaping migration intentions and decisions**. The choice of destination was often influenced by existing social networks. All respondents shared that they had a close-enough personal network in Europe that could facilitate the migration process or directly encouraged them to pursue this step. This seems to confirm the cumulative causation theory of migration, according to which social networks would increase the likelihood of migration intentions and behaviour due to the combined effects of the expansion of migration chain links and the parallel reduction of migration risks and costs.

- In line with the general literature on the topic, several returnees have reported that **the information received regarding migration routes or financial costs was often inaccurate**. Although often initiating their journey in a regular way, many returnees had to resort to irregular migration paths in the attempt to enter their intended destinations, given the lack of regular migration channels and the absence of readily available information thereof. However, the use of smuggling networks, also favoured by a general perception of smuggling as a relatively quick and cheap solution to cross borders, turned out to be different than expected.

- Among returnees, there is a general acknowledgement of the risks associated with irregular migration, although **the physical and financial risks undertaken during the journey were often higher than what they had been told by smugglers or social contacts**. The awareness of risks, however, did not dissuade individuals from taking on such journeys, suggesting a deep-seated sense of either desperation or a strong desire for change that overrides the fear of potential dangers.
- A diverse range of personal motivations and socio-economic challenges led to return, thus underscoring the **complex and interconnected nature of motivations and challenges faced by individuals undergoing the migration process**. The profound impact of familial ties and individuals' desires for marital settlement emerged as key factors for return, sometimes coupled with a commitment to maintaining cultural identity. In other cases, economic difficulties, financial struggles, and the discrepancy between the idea of Europe and the harsh reality in the country of destination played a substantial role in the decision to return.
- Our research also shows that returnees have different reintegration experiences, reflecting the **complex interplay of economic opportunities, social networks, and personal resilience in shaping the reintegration process of returnees**. While some expressed a sense of fulfilment and contentment upon return, due to their successful reintegration into the local economy or the proximity to family and friends, others articulate feelings of psychosocial instability and financial distress, highlighting the challenges of restarting life from scratch, grappling with unemployment, and the burden of debts incurred during migration.

Despite the mixed experiences of returnees both during migration and upon return, it is possible to look at the main challenges of the reintegration process, highlight the best practices that are already in place, and advance recommendations for the efficient and sustainable engagement of returnees in the implementation of migration information campaigns. Based on our research, we outline below the main points to develop or work on:

- **Importance of efficient communication on institutional reintegration support**: Our research has highlighted that the reintegration mechanisms provided by governmental institutions and non-governmental organisations have limited reach and are not known among returnees. As a result, several testimonies revealed a sense of abandonment and frustration towards the government and international organisations and expressed their dissatisfaction for the absence of organised reintegration initiatives. For this reason, we highlight the need not only for stronger and more extensive economic and psychosocial support mechanisms, but also for a wider and more efficient communication of such programmes.
- **The role of social networks upon return**: There is a general agreement on the important role of social networks in migration decision-making processes; however, our research has also revealed their relevance in communities of return to improve the reintegration process. Strong social networks and access to resources within communities can provide support and protection to returnees, resulting in sustainable reintegration. We believe that a better reintegration of returnees can also facilitate their engagement in information campaigns.
- **The role of community leaders in the migration and reintegration process**: Community and religious leaders play a crucial role within their community by responding to the needs of both migrants and returnees. They can indeed provide information and support to potential migrants, as well as tangible and spiritual assistance to returnees, facilitating their access to essential services such as housing or health care and thus their overall reintegration in society.

In this respect, it can be beneficial to include community and religious leaders in the implementation of migration information campaigns.

- **The role of returnees in migration information campaigns**: Our research has revealed that, if they had to migrate again, returnees would do it in a regular way and would advise against the use of smuggling networks or irregular routes. Besides, it also emerged that, in some cases, returnees already act as informants to potential migrants in their networks, sharing information about their experiences. This highlights the potential willingness of returnees to engage in migration information campaigns, although our research cannot capture the extent of information they can provide, thus being limited to offering practical recommendations.

- **The importance of providing correct and reliable information**: Multiple studies as well as our research have demonstrated that migrants tend to gather information about migration from close networks, social media, and smugglers. The information provided, however, is often inaccurate, unreliable, or overly optimistic, thus leading to misconceptions and unrealistic expectations. This raises the need for the developers of information campaigns to provide accurate and trustworthy information, sharing positive as well as negative messages about migration. However, as highlighted by our research, it is also important to **accompany such campaigns with practical support and legal migration paths**, in order for campaign developers to really understand and address the needs of potential migrants on the ground, as well as for policymakers to provide valid alternatives to irregular migration.

- **Ethical considerations in the implementation of campaigns**: As emerged from the findings, there are several possibilities to design migration information campaigns for potential migrants and engage returnees in their implementation. However, ethical and methodological concerns might affect both the legitimacy and the implementation of such campaigns. For this reason, it is paramount to take into consideration the extent and the level of engagement of returnees as well as their relationship with the participants, in order to create sustainable and effective campaigns.

1   Introduction

In the past two decades, Iraq has experienced massive trends of migration, displacement, and return. The US-led invasion of the country in 2003 and even more so the sectarian violence in 2006-07 and the advance of ISIS in 2014 have led to the displacement of about six million people. Since the official conclusion of the conflict in December 2017, about 80% of the displaced families managed to return to their places of origin; however, more than one million individuals are still internally displaced and often unable to return due to persistent security issues, lack of socio-economic opportunities, or widespread residential destruction.[1]

While the great majority of displaced people during the conflict with ISIS had found temporary refuge in safer areas either within their own governorate or within the country, tens of thousands of Iraqis have migrated – often through irregular means – to Europe, in the attempt to escape violence and persecution and claim asylum. Since the end of the conflict, the country has experienced a period of relative stability and socio-economic development. However, international migration remains an appealing opportunity for thousands of young Iraqis, often lured by the prospect of wealth and success abroad. Emblematic, in this respect, is the migration of thousands of Iraqis towards eastern Europe in 2021, as a result of Belarus' decision to grant tourist visas to citizens of Iraq and other nationalities, which put pressure on European borders.[2]

Social and political insecurity, unemployment, lack of hope in the future, and individual longing for personal freedom continue to push young people to migrate out of Iraq, often through irregular means. For this reason, in the past years there has been an increased interest in migration information campaigns to raise awareness on the risks of irregular migration and promote safe and regular migration channels. In Iraq, in particular, the implementation of such campaigns has seen major improvements with the establishment in 2020 of the Migrant Resource Centre (MRC) under the aegis of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA), in the framework of the ICMPD-led IMM Project[3]. Since its foundation, the MRC – currently funded by Denmark – has conducted several campaigns to raise awareness on the risks of irregular migration, to support returnees in their reintegration process, and to counsel individuals on regular migration paths and on social and economic services within the country. Given the importance of its work and the high demand for its services, another MRC will open – with the financial support of the Norwegian Government – in the first half of 2024 in Erbil, to serve the needs of the KRI, an area that has seen massive outward migration over the past few years.

While the employment of migration information campaigns in Iraq is a relatively recent phenomenon, at the global level campaigns have been discussed, implemented, and analysed for more than twenty years. If prior campaigns were mostly designed to deter migrants from entering the territory of a certain state, often with scarce results, recent trends have explored how the role of messengers and the attention to the message can have a much more powerful impact on the target group and achieve

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[1] IOM Iraq-DTM, 'Iraq Master List Report 130. May-August 2023' (Baghdad: International Organization for Migration - Displacement Tracking Matrix, 2023), file:///C:/Users/mogianim/Downloads/202310182845215_DTM_130_Report_May_August_2023.pdf.

[2] Viola Pulkkinen, 'Notes from a Country of Origin: Iraq's Position in the EU-Belarus Border Crisis', *Institute for Security & Development Policy (ISDP)* (blog), 16 December 2021, https://www.isdp.eu/iraqs-position-in-the-eu-belarus-border-crisis/.

[3] Improving Migration Management in the Silk Routes, https://www.icmpd.org/our-work/projects/improving-migration-management-in-the-silk-routes-silk-routes-iii

desired outcomes.[4] Drawing from behavioural psychology and social network theory,[5] recent campaigns have employed diaspora members and returnees as key figures to convey the desired message, driven by the idea that potential migrants tend to trust information coming from closer and more trusted sources, especially those that have already experienced migration themselves. However, apart from a few studies,[6] literature on the engagement of returnees as messengers in the implementation of migration information campaigns or on the analysis of such campaigns' effectiveness remains limited.

In the context of heightened migration challenges in Iraq, this report seeks to investigate the migration and reintegration experiences of Iraqi returnees, their influence on other people's decisions about migration, and their potential role in the implementation of migration information campaigns. In doing so, it will contribute to the project *Migration information and awareness raising on the risks of irregular migration in Iraq* (MIRAMI), which aims, among other things, at increasing awareness on safe and legal migration and reducing irregular migration from the country through changes in perceptions and behaviour of potential migrants as well as of the key influencers of their decisions. Discussions on the role of returnees and other social networks is essential to better understand the information needs of potential migrants.

The report is structured as follows: Chapter 2 will give a summary of the patterns and trends of return migration to Iraq, including an examination of the general characteristics of returnees and an overview of the institutional, policy, and reintegration landscape in the country. After outlining the methodology adopted for this research (Chapter 3), Chapter 4 will delve into the experiences of returnees by highlighting the main drivers of migration, the challenges encountered during the journey, as well as their reasons for return through evidence from the field. Linking evidence from the field with theoretical elaborations, Chapter 5 will then discuss how to engage returnees in migration information campaigns effectively, by providing data from the field on the information gaps, the returnees' sources of information, and their social networks. Lastly, Chapter 6 will draw conclusions based on the key findings, reflecting on the returnee's overall experience, and offering practical recommendations for engaging returnees in migration information campaigns in an ethical and effective manner.

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[4] Jasper Tjaden and Felipe Alexander Dunsch, 'The Effect of Peer-to-Peer Risk Information on Potential Migrants – Evidence from a Randomized Controlled Trial in Senegal', *World Development* 145 (2021).

[5] Corrado Giulietti, Jackline Wahba, and Yves Zenou, 'Strong versus Weak Ties in Migration', *European Economic Review* 104 (May 2018): 111–37, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euroecorev.2018.02.006; Sonja Haug, 'Migration Networks and Migration Decision-Making', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 34, no. 4 (May 2008): 585–605, https://doi.org/10.1080/13691830801961605; Mathias Czaika, Jakub Bijak, and Toby Prike, 'Migration Decision-Making and Its Key Dimensions', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 697, no. 1 (September 2021): 15–31, https://doi.org/10.1177/00027162211052233.

[6] Dimeji R. Togunde and Sylvester O. Osagie, 'Icons of Progress: Returnees' Effects on Decisions by Nigerians to Migrate to the Us', *International Review of Modern Sociology* 35, no. 1 (2009): 115–35; Felipe Alexander Dunsch, Jasper Tjaden, and William Quiviger, 'Migrants as Messengers: The Impact of Peer-to-Peer Communication on Potential Migrants in Senegal', Impact Evaluation Report (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2019); Daniel Auer and Max Schaub, 'Returning from Greener Pastures? How Exposure to Returnees Affects Migration Plans', *World Development* 169 (September 2023): 106291, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2023.106291; Marie-Luce Bia-Zafinikamia, Jasper Dag Tjaden, and Horace Gninafon, 'The Impact of Mobile Cinema Events on Potential Migrants in Guinea Impact Evaluation Report' (Geneva: IOM, 2020).

2 Contextual Overview: Return and reintegration Patterns of Iraqi Migrants

2.1 Introduction

This section provides an analysis of the main patterns and trends in the return and reintegration process of Iraqi migrants. It will do so by, first, examining the dynamics of their return, with particular focus on the countries they return from, and second, by providing an overview of the policy and institutional frameworks in Iraq, including national policies, international collaborations, and governmental and non-governmental stakeholder initiatives.

2.2 Return Patterns and trends

With the official termination of the conflict against ISIS in December 2017, millions of displaced people returned to their places of origin. While the majority of returnees are internally displaced persons (IDPs) who sought refuge within their own governorate or elsewhere in Iraq, particularly in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), there is also a notable trend of Iraqi migrants returning from abroad. This includes those returning independently as well as through Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programs. According to the IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix (IOM-DTM), from May 2018 to April 2023, 48,536 Iraqis returned from overseas, resettling across numerous districts and locations within all 18 governorates, with significant concentrations in Thi-Qar (53%), Ninewa (36%) and Anbar (4%).[7] Iraq has consistently ranked among the top four countries of origin globally for the number of individuals utilising AVRR programs from 2015 to 2020. Despite fluctuating trends in these numbers, a peak was observed in 2016, with 12,776 AVRR applications processed. However, the number of returns has been declining in recent years.[8][9]

The decision of migrants to return to Iraq is influenced by various factors, including the restoration of personal and general security, the ability to reclaim property, the reestablishment of social networks, employment prospects, and access to basic services.[10] However, the reality of return can differ significantly from expectations. Local political dynamics and the often-inefficient reconstruction efforts in liberated areas can complicate return conditions, which vary widely and intertwine with ongoing displacement challenges.[11]

Returnees from abroad, just like IDPs, often face amplified reintegration obstacles. Qualitative research among individuals returning from Europe to Iraq between 2014 and 2017 revealed limited

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[7] IOM-DTM, 'Iraqi Returnees from Abroad - Dashboard' (Geneva: International Organization for Migration - Displacement Tracking Matrix, 2023).

[8] IOM, 'Return and Reintegration Key Highlights 2020. Annexes' (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2021); IOM, 'Return and Reintegration Key Highlights 2021' (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2022).

[9] Marco Mogiani, 'Displacement, Emigration, and Return: Understanding Migration Dynamics and Patterns within, to, and from Iraq. Background Report.' (Vienna: ICMPD, 2023).

[10] Géraldine Chatelard, 'Migration from Iraq between the Gulf and the Iraq Wars (1990-2003): Historical and Socio-Spatial Dimensions', Working Paper (Oxford: COMPAS - University of Oxford, 2009); Irene Costantini and Kamaran Palani, 'Displacement-Emigration-Return: Understanding Uncertainty in the Context of Iraq', Policy Report (Erbil: Middle East Research Institute, 2018).

[11] Costantini and Palani, 'Displacement-Emigration-Return'.

access to livelihoods, job opportunities, safety, security, and social services. Notably, many returnees opted to return due to adverse social, administrative, and legal conditions in Europe, rather than an overall improvement in Iraq. Moreover, returnees often expressed feelings of despair or shame, particularly when family members did not understand their decision to return or when they returned without the means to support their families.[12] The results of a longitudinal study conducted by the IOM highlighted that insufficient income, unemployment, and to a lesser extent lack of hope for their future in Iraq constituted the main obstacles to reintegration, while age, lack of connections in the community, and lack of patronage (wasta) were the main barriers to employment.[13]

The sustainable reintegration of returnees is hindered by social, economic, and psychosocial difficulties.[14] Economic hardship, security concerns, and the inability to utilise the skills acquired abroad contribute to a sense of loss and despair among many. Consequently, while some returnees aspire to re-migrate, others express a willingness to remain in Iraq if conditions improve, particularly regarding security and access to employment and education.[15] In response to these challenges, the EU and IOM have undertaken longitudinal studies to assess the economic, social, and psychosocial aspects of reintegration for returnees in their countries of origin. The studies indicate that returnees to Iraq experienced a stronger deterioration in social and psychosocial dimensions than in the economic aspect. Although there is an overall decrease in reintegration scores, the specific patterns of economic reintegration, notably the gradual rise in employment over time, indicate a significant impact of economic factors on the process of reintegration.[16]

Although the situation has generally improved since the cessation of the conflict in 2017, the evolving dynamics in the Middle East may usher in heightened migration trends, particularly if conflicts intensify. Insights gathered from the interview with IOM highlighted that Iraq might become an important transit country along the migratory routes from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Syria, and other neighbouring countries to Europe. Analysis of Mediterranean flows reveal a significant increase of migratory movements from these countries, compounded by recent events between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Anticipated escalations in conflict as well as environmental crises in the region may increase migration movements from and through Iraq to Europe. Governmental efforts to improve socio-economic development and living conditions may therefore remain vain in this situation of uncertainty.

Moreover, the IOM highlighted that the regional stability of the country has been evident since 2017 following the cessation of the conflict. Iraq has progressively regained equilibrium in the region, leading to some movements, albeit not of substantial magnitude. However, the evolving dynamics in the Middle East may usher in heightened migration trends, particularly if conflicts intensify. A

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[12] REACH, 'Iraqi Migration to Europe in 2016: Profiles, Drivers and Return' (Geneva: REACH Initiative, June 2017).

[13] IOM, 'Returning from Abroad: Experiences, Needs and Vulnerabilities of Migrants Returning to Iraq. Findings from a Longitudinal Study' (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2023), https://iraq.un.org/sites/default/files/remote-resources/7de467360574d242a43fe2ccd02adbda.pdf.

[14] Constanza Vera Larrucea, Henrik Malm Lindberg, and André Asplund, 'Those Who Were Sent Back Return and Reintegration of Rejected Asylum Seekers to Afghanistan and Iraq,' *Delmi*, 2021, https://www.delmi.se/media/bikexkgo/delmi-report-on-return-and-reintegration.pdf.

[15] Constanza Vera Larrucea, Henrik Malm Lindberg, and André Asplund, 'Those Who Were Sent Back - Return and Reintegration of Rejected Asylum Seekers to Afghanistan and Iraq', 2021, https://www.delmi.se/media/bikexkgo/delmi-report-on-return-and-reintegration.pdf.

[16] EU and IOM, 'Longitudinal Evidence on Sustainable Reintegration Outcomes', Sustainable Reintegration Knowledge Bites Series (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2023).

worsening scenario involving multiple countries in the region could further propel people to migrate. The transit nature of Iraq assumes significance, especially in the context of monitoring developments concerning migration routes from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and other countries to Europe. Analysis of Mediterranean flows reveals a significant representation from these countries, compounded by recent events between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Anticipated escalations in conflict may drive increased Afghan migration through Iraq to Europe, contingent upon the stability and developmental strides within Iraq. The efficacy of governmental efforts to improve living conditions may influence migration patterns, although this remains uncertain, particularly in rural areas grappling with environmental crises. Factors such as food insecurity and a dearth of basic supplies contribute significantly to the displacement of individuals. Additionally, Syria, although not directly linked to Iraq, poses a risk, impacting movements not only within Iraq but also influencing migration from Syria to Iraq and onward to Europe.

2.3   Policy and Institutional framework on return and reintegration in Iraq

2.3.1   National Policies

The situation of return migrants in Iraq involves multiple complexities. The Iraq government is emphasising the return of IDPs and refugees, allocating significant funds for return support. A key initiative in 2008 included Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's Order 101, which offered a monthly compensation (300,000 Iraqi Dinars/month for six months, equivalent to about €210) for squatters to vacate unlawfully occupied houses in Baghdad and established return facilitation centres.[17] Late September that year, over 16,000 families had returned to Baghdad and nearly 12,000 in other parts of Iraq, with most returns (92%) from internal displacement.

In accordance with information provided by the IOM during our interview, it was conveyed that the Prime Minister has disclosed a new governmental initiative outlining the establishment of a reception committee at the airport, under the auspices of the MoMD, in conjunction with the Iraqi National Intelligence Service (INIS). This initiative entails the commencement of case reception procedures directly at the airport, wherein National Referral Mechanism caseworkers will undertake the reception of cases at the airport.

In the context of migration governance within Iraq, various governmental entities play pivotal roles in reintegration programmes. The Ministries of Migration and Displacement (MoMD), Labor and Social Affairs (MoLSA), Planning (MoP), Foreign Affairs (MoFA), and Interior (MoI), along with the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Centre and the Central Statistics Office, are instrumental in this domain. In collaboration with the IOM, the Iraqi government undertook the Migration Governance Indicator (MGI) assessment in 2020. This assessment examined 90 facets of the national capacity for managing migration, adhering to international reference standards across six thematic areas. It illuminated both strengths and areas necessitating enhancement in Iraq's migration management.[18]

[17] IOM, 'Government of Iraq Encourages Returns as Displacement Declines', International Organization for Migration, https://www.iom.int/news/government-iraq-encourages-returns-displacement-declines.
[18] ICMPD, 'Vision on Sustainable Reintegration of Returnees in Iraq - CAIR Report' (Vienna: International Centre for Migration Policy Development, 2022).

In response to these insights, a **Technical Working Group**[19] was established, comprising various ministries and officials from the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). This group's mandate was to devise a National Migration Strategy, supported by the IOM. While the MoMD internally approved this strategy, it awaits further ratification from the Prime Minister's Office. Legal frameworks also underpin these efforts. The MoMD Law No. 21 of 2009 specifies the categories of individuals eligible for services from the Ministry, encompassing returnees, rejected asylum seekers, refugees, asylum seekers abroad, and IDPs.[20] While Iraq has national-level inter-ministerial coordination mechanisms, they are primarily focused on refugees and IDPs. The Permanent Committee, inclusive of MoMD and MoFA, addresses all refugee-related issues, including asylum cases. The Higher Committee for the Relief and Support of the Displaced, chaired by MoMD and including MoI and the Ministry of Construction and Housing, extends support and aid to IDPs, encompassing resettlement efforts.[21]

The outcome of our interview with MoMD confirms this comprehensive and structured approach. This strategy, as described in the interview, is multifaceted, focusing on both diplomatic and organisational measures to effectively manage the complexities associated with returning nationals. Central to the Iraqi government's strategy is the establishment of robust diplomatic and organisational frameworks. This includes the deployment of permanent representatives in countries with significant Iraqi diaspora populations, such as Türkiye and Iran, with planned expansions into Syria. Such diplomatic outreach is essential for effectively addressing the issues faced by Iraqis abroad and is further augmented by a well-structured return mechanism.

This mechanism is inclusive, catering to various categories of Iraqis abroad, encompassing asylum-seekers, irregular residents, irregular migrants, and refugees, and is characterised by a uniform approach in treatment and service provision. Distinct pathways for return have been defined, namely, voluntary return and forced deportation. For those opting for voluntary return, the Iraqi government has set in motion special programs designed to streamline the return process.

For the voluntary return, we implement special programs, by which we organize the returnees'
papers if they have no passports and send them a temporary laissez-passer to be able to return to
Iraq. We do that in coordination with their host countries. Then we activate the reception system at
the airport and receive returnees at any of our branches spread out all over our Iraqi governorates.
(Organisation and International Cooperation Department, MoMD, Dec 2023)

These programs involve the arrangement of necessary legal documentation and the proactive coordination with host countries, ensuring a smooth transition for returnees. Upon their return, individuals are integrated into a system where they are eligible for registration at Ministry branches across various Iraqi governorates, including the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. This wide-reaching access to governmental services is a critical component of the reintegration process. Returnees are provided with comprehensive assistance, including legal documentation and financial support, exemplified by the grant of 1.5 million Iraqi dinars (equivalent to about €1,050) to each returnee.

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[19] Ministry of Migration and Displaced, '[IOM Translation of Official Report of the Ministry of Migration and Displaced] Ministry of Migration and Displaced First National Review of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration in Iraq,' 2020, https://migrationnetwork.un.org/sites/g/files/tmzbdl416/files/docs/gcm_voluntary_national_report-_iraq-_en.pdf.

[20] MoMD, Ministry of Migration and Displacement Law.

[21] ICMPD, 'Vision on Sustainable Reintegration of Returnees in Iraq - CAIR Report'.

Furthermore, as explained by the MoMD, the Department of Immigration Affairs has carried out a major **National Campaign** to reduce the risks of irregular migration, in coordination with the following entities: Ministry of Higher Education, Ministry of Planning, MoLSA, Baghdad Municipality, Civil Aviation Authority, all Municipal centres, Investment Department in the Baghdad Municipality, IOM and the Iraqi Media Network. These campaigns included displaying large advertising panels at the entrance of the Ministry, its branches, and all Universities in Baghdad. Moreover, awareness workshops were held by the IOM in Baghdad and Sulaymaniyah governorates, in conjunction with representatives from different ministries and international organisations. Short films related to the project were screened by students in some universities in Baghdad.

The Ministry of Planning in its National Development Plan 2018-2022 included returnees in its objective, by enabling and promoting the social, economic, and political integration of IDPs and returnees in liberated areas. This goal is to be realised through the implementation of specific measures, namely the initiation and implementation of labour-intensive programmes, designed to promptly generate employment for IDPs, returnees, and individuals affected by terrorism. Simultaneously, comprehensive rehabilitation and training programmes, complemented by the provision of small grants, are envisaged. The overarching objective is not only to address immediate economic concerns but also to foster the social integration of these vulnerable populations. The implementation of projects aimed at constructing low-cost housing, with a specific focus on economically disadvantaged returnees, is emphasised in the plan. Small grants allocated for restoration purposes further underlined the commitment to providing viable housing solutions, thereby contributing to the broader objective of societal reintegration in the liberated areas.[22]

2.3.2   International frameworks and cooperation

Addressing the myriad challenges faced by returnees, European and international institutions have shown growing interest in ensuring safe and sustainable returns. In 2021, the European Commission adopted its first **EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration**, aiming to promote voluntary return and reintegration within a common European framework. Meanwhile, several European states have adopted holistic approaches to support self-reliance, return, and reintegration in countries of origin, involving a wide range of actors in developing and implementing migration policies.[23]

The Iraqi government, too, has demonstrated a commitment to enhancing security, housing, employment, and educational services to facilitate sustainable returns. This includes collaborative efforts with European institutions and international agencies to develop durable reintegration solutions. For instance, the Danish Government-funded project CAIR,[24] implemented by ICMPD in collaboration with the relevant Iraqi Ministries, contributes to developing tailored approaches to address the varied needs and challenges of different categories of returnees. These efforts involve data collection and sharing on return and reintegration, multi-stakeholder engagement, institutional capacity building, and awareness raising on migration through the MRC activities.[25]

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[22] Ministry of Planning, 'National Development Plan 2018-2022' (Ministry of Planning, Republic of Iraq, 2018), https://andp.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/National%20Development%20Plan%202018-2022.pdf.
[23] European Commission, 'Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council. The EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration', Pub. L. No. COM(2021) 120 final (2021).
[24] See more info on the project: https://www.icmpd.org/our-work/projects/capacity-building-for-long-term-reintegration-of-returnees-to-afghanistan-and-iraq2
[25] ICMPD, 'Vision on Sustainable Reintegration of Returnees in Iraq - CAIR Report'.

Through strong collaboration with the Iraqi government, establishment of local networks in the field, and facilitation of local peace agreements, since 2017, UNDP has effectively equipped communities in Anbar, Ninewa, and Salah al-Din (governorates that have been liberated from ISIS) to welcome and accommodate returning individuals and families. To successfully facilitate the reintegration process, it was crucial to adopt an integrated approach that includes various strategies. These strategies included conducting communications campaigns to reduce stigma, provide Mental Health and Psychosocial Support, offering opportunities for livelihoods, and housing rehabilitation. While community acceptance is an important initial step, addressing these factors was essential to overcome potential obstacles in the reintegration process.[26]

Another initiative, particularly highlighted by the IOM during our interview, is the EURCAP Facility, aimed at strengthening partner countries' capacities to manage returns and cooperate on readmission with the EU as well as to prevent irregular migration. In the scope of Iraq, EURCAP was dedicated to enhancing the capacity of the Iraqi government, allowing them to effectively manage awareness campaigns in the future in cooperation with the IOM. After the conclusion of the project at the end of November 2023, the government took ownership of the initiative, conducting a total of 10 sessions on campaign implementation in both Erbil and Baghdad, and overseeing 40 to 45 cultural houses across all governorates for the dissemination of information about the risks associated with irregular migration. The JCC and the Ministry of Interior in Erbil also handled several sessions as part of their involvement in the initiative.

In 2021, the **EU's Draft Action Plan** focused on supporting Iraq in managing migration and tackling forced displacement, aiming for the safe voluntary return and reintegration of over one million internally displaced persons. The EU commended Iraq's temporary suspension of flights to Minsk, a move aimed at reducing irregular migration from Belarus towards the European Member States, and highlighted the need to prevent the emergence of alternative migration routes. The plan advanced for stronger cooperation to dismantle smuggling networks and enhance legal migration pathways, with an emphasis on using immigration liaison officers deployed in the region, and in parallel, information and awareness raising campaigns to be promoted on the risks of taking irregular migration pathways. Additionally, the EU also supported Iraq's migration efforts,[27] particularly the implementation of the **National Migration Strategy** and the adherence to the UN Global Compact for Migration. Regarding return and reintegration, the EU was committed to assisting Iraq with the readmission of Iraqi nationals in accordance with international law and as committed under the **EU-Iraq Partnership and Cooperation Agreement**. The EU also acknowledged the challenges faced by Iraq, specifically the lack of technical expertise and capacity in identity and data management, which are crucial for facilitating the return process.[28]

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[26] UNDP, 'Community Reintegration: The Key to Returning One Million Internally Displaced Iraqis', UNDP, 2023, https://www.undp.org/iraq/stories/community-reintegration-key-returning-one-million-internally-displaced-iraqis.

[27] Migration efforts in this context refers to addressing root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement, by supporting long-term reforms, rebuilding social cohesion between citizens and institutions (sustained governance), and building a solid social capital.

[28] Commission Services, 'Operationalization of the Pact – Action Plans for Strengthening Comprehensive Migration Partnerships with Priority Countries of Origin and Transit. Draft Action Plan: Iraq' (Council of the European Union, 20 September 2021), https://www.statewatch.org/media/2897/eu-council-migration-action-plan-iraq-11952-21.pdf..

To build on this, in 2023, the EU pushed for a '**non-binding instrument**' with Iraq in order to 'increase Iraq's cooperation on readmission'.[29] This non-binding agreement would come on top of the current EU-Iraq Partnership and Cooperation Agreement and the threat of visa sanctions against Iraq – both of which have been in the works since 2021, when it was determined that the country's cooperation on deportations was 'insufficient'.[30] However, according to goal 23 of the first National Review of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and regular Migration in Iraq, MoFA and MoMD seek to fulfil Iraq's obligations under the EU-Iraq Partnership Agreement. One area for boosting this cooperation is the process of opening offices within Iraqi embassies in countries hosting the largest number of Iraqis to enhance support for embassy staff in handling complex cases of return. Additionally, the abovementioned action plan facilitates the return of Iraqis, whose asylum applications have been rejected, and assists them in their integration and social reconciliation in their original governorates.[31]

It has been well noted that an effective and well-managed return policy is an essential part of a comprehensive migration policy. One of the main reasons of low return rates among irregular migrants is the difficulty in cooperating with migrants' countries of origin. In 2018, the strategy that the EU put in place for Iraq identified the establishment of a migration dialogue with Iraq, including procedures to facilitate the identification and return of returnees, as one of its strategic objectives; however, no tangible results have been achieved in terms of cooperation and enforced return.[32]

When it comes to return and readmission, more collaborations took place between the EU and the KRG (EJCC). A **National Referral Mechanism (NRM)** was put in place for referring returnees to the needed reintegration services after returning to Iraq. The referral system is free and confidential and can be accessed by anyone who has returned from abroad. This collaboration, funded by the EU and implemented by the Government of Iraq, including the KRG, with the support of the IOM, provides individual counselling, referrals to service providers, follows up on the reintegration process, and support reference letters. The reintegration assistance from the service providers include:

- ➢ Small business setup
- ➢ Job placement
- ➢ Vocational and educational training, including upskilling and retraining
- ➢ Housing assistance
- ➢ Education services
- ➢ Legal assistance
- ➢ Protection services
- ➢ Medical assistance
- ➢ Mental health and psychosocial support
- ➢ Cash assistance

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[29] General Secretariat of the Council, 'A Non-Binding Instrument on Return and Readmission between the EU and Iraq – Authorisation to Negotiate an NBI' (Council of the European Union, 4 October 2023), https://www.statewatch.org/media/4070/eu-council-non-binding-returns-agreement-iraq-paper-13551-23.pdf.

[30] Statewatch, 'EU Seeking Informal Agreement to Boost Deportations to Iraq', *Statewatch* (blog), 11 October 2023, https://www.statewatch.org/news/2023/october/eu-seeking-informal-agreement-to-boost-deportations-to-iraq/.

[31] Ministry of Migration and Displaced, 'First National Review of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration in Iraq'.

[32] European Court of Auditors, 'EU Readmission Cooperation with Third Countries: Relevant Actions Yielded Limited Results' (Luxembourg: European Court of Auditors, 2021), https://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/SR21_17/SR_Readmission-cooperation_EN.pdf.

This referral mechanism was adopted by MoMD in Federal Iraq through a joint effort consisting of representatives from MoMD, MoFA, and MoLSA to support returnees. The entities assist returnees with filling out the necessary forms, completing their documents, and providing them with contact information in the framework of the NRM. According to the MoMD, in 2024, the Ministry is expected to adopt a complete digitised system. The NRM system will also be handled electronically, and individuals will no longer have to come to the Ministry in person. More information was provided on the NRM through our interview with IOM, which stated that this mechanism was approved by His Excellency the Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' Al Sudani in 2023 and, although it was set up by the EU, it is now a fully functioning government body operated by the MoMD.

The NRM has already been approved by the His Excellency the Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' Al Sudani, and the NRM is the reintegration body for all the upcoming return and when it was set to launch a year ago in December is only now seeing the light formally, around 4 months ago where the prime minister announced this in an official letter. The NRM now is a government body, it is the government's own tools, it is not something that is run by IOM or any other organisation. The human resource is the MoMD's employees, the electricity, internet, computers, building, everything for the NRM is provided by the MoMD. (IOM interview, 2024)

In addition to the engagement between MoMD and MoLSA on migration matters, the German government-funded **Programme for Human Security and Stabilisation (PHSS)** is a key initiative aiming at assisting the unemployed and under-employed individuals, including returnees, and vulnerable communities, with the objective of fostering economic growth, creating employment opportunities, and providing essential services to returnees.

Complementing these efforts, ICMPD has played a crucial role by establishing and operationalising the Migration Resource Centre (MRC) in Baghdad in 2020, in collaboration with MoLSA. Integrated as a dedicated unit within MoLSA's organigram, the MRC aspires to become a functional department with a specific focus on reintegration. Through outreach, awareness raising, and counselling activities, the MRC serves potential, intending, and returning migrants. This includes valuable efforts such as awareness campaigns, info-SMS, and events that contribute to informed decision-making regarding migration matters, rules, and procedures. Notably, the MRC also works closely with returnees to Iraq to provide them with information, guidance, and referrals to necessary services, along with tailored trainings to build their knowledge and skills.[33] The MRC-Erbil, scheduled to open this year, will contribute to providing assistance to the intending, outgoing, and returning migrants in KRI. A specific focus will be on building migration knowledge and awareness, programmes for training and developing skills of the returnees, as well as capacity building for the KRG.

A representative from the Department of Foreign Relations within the KRG provided valuable insights into their responsibilities and collaborative efforts in addressing migration-related matters. The official outlined the department's role in coordinating with diplomatic missions, international organisations, and Kurdish authorities, specifically focusing on issues related to returnees and migration. While expressing a willingness to raise awareness about legal migration as a means to mitigate irregular migration, the representative acknowledged practical constraints within their government department's capacity to implement such initiatives, suggesting a collaborative approach with

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[33] ICMPD, 'Migrant Resource Centre Inaugurated in Baghdad by the Iraqi Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and ICMPD - ICMPD,' www.icmpd.org, 2020, https://www.icmpd.org/news/import-news-september/migrant-resource-centre-inaugurated-in-baghdad-by-the-iraqi-ministry-of-labour-and-social-affairs-and-icmpd.

international organisations to address these issues. The government recognised the complexities of migration trends and outlined the cooperative efforts with IOM on awareness campaign to educate students about the risks associated with irregular migration. The discussion also touched upon challenges faced by returnees during the reintegration process. The absence of an MRC was highlighted, with ongoing efforts, in collaboration with JCC and ICMPD, to address this gap, as mentioned above. The need for more active support and development in the context of NRM project was emphasised, revealing existing gaps in its implementation.

2.3.3   Initiatives by non-governmental and intergovernmental stakeholders

There are multiple non-governmental and intergovernmental stakeholders operating in Iraq. Many of these stakeholders view Iraqi civil society as a viable actor that is able to contribute to the country's sustainable recovery and long-term stability.[34] During the fieldwork, we engaged with some of these non-governmental stakeholders, especially with key entities that work on the issues of migration, return, and reintegration, such as the IOM and European Technology and Training Centre (ETTC) in Baghdad, Rwanga Foundation, and GMAC-GIZ in the KRI. These institutions provided an overview of the ground-level support for migrants and highlighted their role in aiding both migrants and returnees.

GMAC-GIZ, for instance, implements a global programme entitled **Centres for Migration and Development (ZME)**, commissioned by the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) to support persons throughout the entire migration cycle. This programme emerged with a primary focus on providing individuals with advisory services tailored to facilitate the reintegration of returnees. The emphasis was on a socio-economic reintegration process, encompassing various personalised support measures predominantly directed towards economic reintegration, such as job placements, location-based training, and assistance in establishing and developing businesses. The scope of support extended beyond economic aspects to include social reintegration measures, MHPSS, and legal assistance. This comprehensive approach positioned the programme as an integral part of the broader migration and reintegration support ecosystem. Over time, there has been a discernible shift in the thematic focus, transitioning from a strong focus on reintegration support to a more holistic perspective on migration.

In alignment with this evolved perspective, the programme now extends its support to individuals interested in migration, aspiring to go to Germany or other European countries. The outreach extends to civil society actors, where efforts are directed at enhancing their capacities to provide assistance to migrants and returnees. Despite not being directly involved in the physical act of returning individuals, they offer referral services for returnees, while already being in touch with their team working in the host country.

More examples of non-governmental and intergovernmental stakeholder involvement are the **collaboration between the Iraqi Red Crescent Society and the Swedish Red Cross**, which recently (2023) concluded a return and reintegration workshop in Baghdad. The purpose of this workshop was to train staff and volunteers in providing aid and support to rejected asylum seekers returning to Iraq. 32 people took part, including coordinators from the psychological support, family reunification, and disaster department across eight governorates. The rejected asylum seekers were assisted during the

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[34] NCCI, 'Iraq's Civil Society in Perspective' (Erbil: NGO Coordination Committee for Iraq, 2011), file:///C:/Users/mogianim/Downloads/Full_Report.pdf.

pre-departure phase to Iraq and through the ETTC programme for reintegration services,[35] which provided them with financial grants and psychological support.[36]

Organisations like the IOM and UNDP cooperated not only with the central government of Iraq but also with KRG. As mentioned in the interview with the General Director of the JCC, they have collaborations with various partners, such as the IOM and UNDP, actively engaging in collective efforts spanning diverse areas. UNDP specifically facilitated the inclusion of international advisors in shaping and expanding the institutions mandate, structural framework, regulatory guidelines, and capacity-building initiatives. Substantial contributions also emerged from the UNHCR, as well as the governments of the United States, Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, and Austria. These collaborative initiatives are strategically aligned to extend access with the broader international community.

Within the interview conducted with ETTC, the representatives highlighted the scope of their work in Iraq and KRI, offering a training and job placement programme called **Reintegration Programme in Iraq (RPI).** Returnees from selected European countries are supported at the ETTC facilities in career and social reintegration aspects. Interested individuals receive customised consulting and information both in the host country and upon return. The ETTC also mentioned another programme encompassing all EU Member States in collaboration with Frontex, providing financial assistance for voluntary returnees. The distinction is crucial between voluntary and non-voluntary return, as the latter category does not receive this topped-up assistance. Returnees register themselves in an electronic system adopted by all Frontex partners. This registration enables the organisation to maintain contact with the returnees and assess their eligibility for inclusion in the programme.

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[35] ETTC, 'ERRIN Reintegration Programme for Returning Migrants', 2022, https://www.ettc-iraq.net/ERRINdoc/Leaflet%20KRG%20(EN).pdf.

[36] Iraqi Red Crescent Society, ' لمساعدة المهاجرين العائدين على الاندماج بالمجتمع الهلال الأحمر ينظم ورشة العودة الطوعية وإعادة الدمج', https://shorturl.at/dszZ1, 2023.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research design and data collection

The methodology adopted in this report aims at providing a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and perspectives of Iraqi returnees, with a particular focus on their migration decision-making processes and potential roles as influencers in the context of migration. It entails a comprehensive approach, integrating both primary and secondary data sources to gather a spectrum of insights. Desk research was undertaken to establish a conceptual framework for understanding the role of returnees in shaping the decision-making of potential migrants. A thorough analysis of existing data, literature, and outcomes of past campaigns was crucial for understanding the context of Iraqi returnees and the historical and sociopolitical factors influencing their decisions. This comprehensive review laid the groundwork for the subsequent sections.

The fieldwork was carried out by an externally contracted company, Social Inquiry, which methodically explored various dimensions of the returnees' experiences and journeys by conducting semi-structured interviews. The cornerstone of the primary data collection was nine *in-depth interviews* conducted with Iraqi returnees, supplemented by expert interviews with stakeholders in Iraq working on return migration and reintegration. These interviews were designed to elicit detailed narratives of the returnees' migration experiences, by capturing their personal stories, challenges, and aspirations, thus providing a deeper, more nuanced understanding of their reintegration experiences.

Additionally, and to build on this foundation, the study also draws upon four *focus group discussions* with returnees in Baghdad and Erbil (with 9 to 11 participants in each group). These discussions allowed for the exploration of communal perspectives and the dynamics of shared experiences among returnees. The focus groups with returnees probed deeply into their lived experiences and the complex nature of their journeys. These discussions covered a spectrum of topics, from the motivations and challenges of migration to the nuances of the reintegration process upon return to Iraq. Participants were invited to share their personal narratives, providing insights into the obstacles they faced during migration, their reasons for returning, and the support they received in reintegration, as well as the existing support mechanisms. The focus groups also explored the participants' roles as influencers within their communities and their potential to contribute to more informed migration decisions in the future. The focus groups served as a platform for dialogue and exchange, enabling participants to express their views and reflect on the experiences of their peers.

Fieldwork was also conducted with five governmental stakeholders in both Baghdad and Erbil. In Baghdad, interviews were carried out with the two main migration stakeholders in the Iraqi government, i.e., MoMD and MoLSA. These discussions delved into the institutional mandates and the initiatives targeting Iraqi migrants, returnees, and IDPs. The strategic goals, intended outcomes, and demographic focus of these initiatives, gathering insights into the geographical regions of activity and the collaborative frameworks in place were explored. Additional governmental stakeholder interviews in Erbil were conducted with the General Director of the Joint Crisis Coordination Centre (JCC), the Manager at the Erbil Joint Crisis Coordination Centre (EJCC), and the Director of International Organisations at the Department of Foreign Relations (DFR). These interactions were pivotal in understanding the governmental framework and policies pertaining to migration, displacement, and return in the KRI. The engagement with non-governmental stakeholders included key entities such as IOM and the ETTC in Baghdad, as well as the Rwanga Foundation, Blumont, and GMAC-GIZ in the KRI. These institutions provided an overview of the ground-level support provided to migrants and the role

these organisations play in aiding migrants and returnees and offered insights into the migratory trends and challenges faced by returnees.

3.2 Profile of returnees

3.2.1 Geographical scope

This study draws upon data collected from the governorates of Erbil, Dohuk, Sulaymaniyah, and Baghdad. The abovementioned nine qualitative interviews were conducted with returnees in the KRI, which represents the main region of origin of potential migrants headed towards Europe, while the two focus group discussions took place in Baghdad and Erbil. The profile of the returnees consisted of individuals who left Iraq in a regular way either to Türkiye or Iran and then proceeded irregularly to Europe, with the exception of two cases that purchased fake travel documents and visas. All respondents returned voluntarily from Europe, except for three cases one from Germany, UK, and Sweden that were deported back.[37]

3.2.2 Age, gender, marital status, education, and employment

All respondents were in their twenties when they migrated, although the starting point of the migration journey varies from 2001 up to August 2023. While some of them were single at the time of migration, others were already married, some of whom left the country with their spouses. The gender dimension was relatively variegated, as some of the women interviewed accompanied their husbands. Regarding their education, unlike findings from the CAIR-I project conducted by ICMPD, nearly all respondents had obtained a university degree prior to migrating, except for two individuals who possessed a high school diploma. This preference for those with higher education levels is consistent with the observation that the majority of Iraqi migrants, as a whole, tend to possess a relatively high level of education.[38] The majority of respondents were unemployed at the time of their migration, either due to completing their university studies or being jobless, apart from two respondents who were engaged in low-skilled labour. Furthermore, among the respondents three individuals were internally displaced as a result of the ISIS conflict before migrating abroad.

3.2.3 Country of destination

Five out of the nine respondents had chosen the UK as a preferred country of destination, while three chose Germany and one Austria. Between 2000 and 2003, the UK was the leading destination country among asylum seekers in Europe, many of whom came from Iraq and Somalia.[39] More recently, studies

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[37] Please see Annex 1 for the tables of the interviewee's profiles.

[38] IOM Iraq-DTM, 'Migrants Profile - September 2020-February 2021' (Baghdad: International Organization for Migration - Displacement Tracking Matrix, 2021), https://iraqdtm.iom.int/files/BorderMonitoring/2023152838335_cross_border_monitoring_Sep2020_Feb2021.pdf.

[39] Philip Connor, 'Number of Refugees to Europe Surges to Record 1.3 Million in 2015', Global Attitudes Project (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2016), https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2016/08/02/2-asylum-seeker-destinations-germany-again-europes-leading-destination/.

showcased that Germany, Sweden, and the UK have been the main destination countries of asylum seekers from war-torn countries, especially in the period between 2015 and 2016.[40]

Our relatives live in Germany and the UK, so I was in between both countries when thinking where to migrate to. But in order to get a better future, I thought London would be better. My uncles live there. (02-Erbil, Male, 34 years old)

Among all respondent, it was observed that the highest number of returnees originated from Germany. Additionally, there were some from Sweden and the UK, with two individuals from Austria and one from Lithuania. Notably, one person was deported halfway through their journey from Latvia.

But I couldn't reach the UK because they stopped us on the borders when we arrived in Latvia. The police sent us directly to Turkey. (02-ERB, Male, 34 years old)

Building on this, the IOM during their interview highlighted that the return trend in Iraq has remained relatively stable over the past years. According to the IOM, the primary country of return continues to be Germany, and distinct trends have been observed based on different migration waves. Primarily, returnees are observed to return towards the KRI, although migrants are returning across the entire country. The gender dimension still predominantly involves males, although a notable number of households, including children are returning.

So this is in a nutshell when it comes to migrants, the gender dimension of the migration, it is still pretty prevalent towards male, although we have seen quite a high number of households returning, including children. And this, I think, reflects also the data of other service providers that could be ETTC or GIZ. So these are the main trends and clearly each migration experience is unique and that's why we implement an individualized protection case management for those who are returning, including the provision of reintegrational system. (IOM interview, 2024)

3.3 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were integral to the research process. Participants were ensured confidentiality and anonymity, and their consent was obtained after they were fully informed about the study's objectives and scope. Special attention was given to creating a respectful and empathetic environment during the interviews and the focus group discussions, acknowledging the sensitive nature of the subjects being explored. Moreover, the external company selected for conducting the fieldwork was identified after a comprehensive evaluation process, ensuring its proficiency and extensive experience in operating in Iraq, particularly in dealing with vulnerable groups. Their expertise was essential in facilitating a thorough approach to the research, ensuring that the methods employed were both culturally sensitive and methodologically sound. The company's credibility and trust, gained from their extensive work in Iraq, were key reasons for their selection.

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[40] Regina Konle-Seidl, 'Integration of Refugees in Austria, Germany and Sweden: Comparative Analysis' (Bruxelles: European Parliament, 2018), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/614200/IPOL_STU(2018)614200_EN.pdf.

3.4 Limitation and challenges of the study

In conducting research for the purpose of this report, it is essential to recognise the inherent limitations that arise from the study's design and execution. Geographically, the research centred mostly on the KRI's governorates of Erbil, Dohuk, and Suleimani, with a FGD conducted in Baghdad. This geographic concentration, while justified by the prevalence of migration and return in these areas, limits the generalisability of the findings to other parts of Iraq, where socio-economic conditions, security situations, and cultural contexts may differ significantly. Furthermore, the sample is composed only of returnees, providing no empirical evidence on those who did not leave or had the intention to do so (potential migrants). This is a substantial limitation, especially given the differing range of exposure among participants, including some who returned within days.

The sample size presents another limitation, as a total of nine interviews across the three districts, does not offer a representative sample and restricts the study from making broad generalisations. Additionally, the reliance on existing networks and contacts for engaging returnees might have led to selection bias, potentially overlooking the perspectives of those outside these networks.

The qualitative nature of the research, primarily through interviews, introduces its own set of challenges. While interviews offer in-depth insights, they are inherently subjective. The researchers' perspectives, experiences, and biases could have influenced how responses were understood and reported. The translation and transcription might have resulted in a loss of subtle nuances. Additionally, the interviewers' influence and the respondents' desire to present themselves in a certain light could have affected the authenticity of the responses. Another significant limitation is the lack of a solid database to accurately determine the number of returnees in a given area and compare to the number of migrants.

Lastly, the temporal and contextual limitations of the study must be acknowledged. Conducted within a specific time frame, the findings represent a snapshot of the situation during this period. The dynamic nature of migration, influenced by changing policies, socio-economic conditions, and international events, means that the findings might have a limited shelf-life. The broader political and security context of Iraq and the KRI, in particular, could have influenced the participants' responses based on when they left the country and their time of return.

4 Returnee Influence: Shaping Migration Choices

4.1 Introduction

Drawing on literature review as well as on field data, this chapter looks at the role of returnees in influencing the migration decision-making processes of potential migrants. The chapter starts by providing a conceptual exploration of the ways in which returnees potentially impact the decision-making processes of potential migrants. Drawing on literature on migration and social network theory, we navigate the theoretical underpinnings and examine the different aspects that might influence the decision on migration. Turning our focus to the Iraqi context, the following sub-section explores the grounded experiences of returnees. By analysing the role of returnees in migration decision-making processes, we aim to contribute to the design and implementation of effective migration information campaigns that align with the complex dynamics of the Iraqi context. The theoretical discussion and the observations from the field provide not only a solid basis for the analysis of the role of returnees in migration information campaigns – which will be explored more in depth in the following chapter – but also an important source for policymakers, practitioners, and institutions involved in shaping such campaigns.

4.2 Conceptualising the role of returnees as influencers in migration decision-making of potential migrants

Several studies have shown how the decision to migrate is influenced by a myriad of factors. Drawing from neoclassical economics, early migration theories often emphasise the role of economic factors in driving migration movements. When looking at the micro-level, for example, these theories examine the individual's need to maximise their own interests, while at the macro-level they consider the role of wage differentials or labour market imbalances between different countries.[41] The push-pull theory takes into consideration a combination of drivers – from socio-economic opportunities to political problems and environmental issues – both in the country of origin and in the country of destination, which either prompt people to leave their country and reach other ones.[42] As also emerged from the research findings as well as from the Needs Assessment conducted by the MRC in 2021, economic and financial reasons constitute indeed important determinants that influence the decision to migrate.[43]

These theories, however, have been often criticised not only for not taking in due consideration the personal aspirations, needs, and capabilities of potential migrants[44] and their 'psychological, cognitive, emotional, and behavioural factors, as well as individuals' personal and normative belief and value

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[41] For an overview, see Jessica Hagen-Zanker, 'Why Do People Migrate? A Review of the Theoretical Literature' (Maastricht: Maastricht University, January 2008).

[42] Richard Black et al., 'The Effect of Environmental Change on Human Migration', *Global Environmental Change* 21 (December 2011): 3–11, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2011.10.001.

[43] IRFAD, 'Needs Assessment Study on Migration Information in Iraq' (Baghdad: IRFAD Foundation for Development Research, 2021).

[44] See Jørgen Carling, 'Measuring Migration Aspirations and Related Concepts', MIGNEX Background Paper (Oslo: Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), 2019), www.mignex.org/d023.

systems',[45] but also for overlooking the importance of social networks in which potential migrants are embedded. By considering the migration project not merely an individual plan to maximise one's own benefits but a household decision, the New Economics of Labour Migration starts to investigate the role of 'other people'[46] in migration decisions. It is with the emergence of **social network theory** and in particular with the 'transnational turn' in migration studies that migration theories started to look at the importance of social networks in migration.[47]

While sociological approaches look at how **social networks would increase the likelihood of migration** intentions and behaviour due to the combined effects of the expansion of migration chain links and the parallel reduction of migration risks and costs,[48] transnational approaches examine the role of social networks more in depth, investigating their role in changing migration intentions and behaviours.[49] Haug, for example, finds that social networks can represent both push and pull factors according to their specific location: While social capital in the place of destination increases migration intentions and, in turn, the possibility of migration itself, since potential migrants get more acquainted with the socio-economic situation in the country of origin, the presence of strong ties in the place of origin – and therefore the existence of powerful links with relatives and the community – might reduce the tendency to migrate.[50]

As also discussed in previous ICMPD research,[51] **social networks play a pivotal role in turning potential migrants' aspirations into migration decisions**. Whether they are relatives, close friends, or simply acquaintances, and whether they are located in the same country or in countries of transit or destination, social networks can provide potential migrants with relevant information about the bureaucratic procedures, the journey, the situation in the country of destination, as well as with financial support.[52] While Garip and Asad find that potential migrants tend to rely on strong ties (family and close friends) especially in high-risk situations,[53] Giulietti et al.[54] show that even weak ties (neighbours and acquaintances) can share relevant information on the migration process, often

[45] Jessica Hagen-Zanker and Gemma Hennessey, 'What Do We Know about the Subjective and Intangible Factors That Shape Migration Decision-Making? A Review of the Literature from Low and Middle Income Countries' (Oslo: PRIO, 2021).

[46] Gil S. Epstein and Ira N. Gang, 'The Influence of Others on Migration Plans' (Bonn: Institute for the Study of Labor, 2004).

[47] Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Blanc-Szanton, 'Transnationalism: A New Analytic Framework for Understanding Migration', *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 645, no. 1 (July 1992): 1–24, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-6632.1992.tb33484.x.

[48] Douglas S. Massey, 'Social Structure, Household Strategies, and the Cumulative Causation of Migration', *Population Index* 56, no. 1 (1990): 3, https://doi.org/10.2307/3644186.

[49] Charles Tilly, 'Trust Networks in Transnational Migration', *Sociological Forum* 22, no. 1 (March 2007): 3–24, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1573-7861.2006.00002.x.

[50] Haug, 'Migration Networks and Migration Decision-Making'.

[51] Katharina Hahn-Schaur, 'Awareness Raising and Information Campaigns on the Risks of Irregular Migration from Pakistan: Background Report' (Vienna: ICMPD, 2021); Ayesha Qaisrani and Jelena Jokic, 'Engaging Diasporas in Information Campaigns on Migration' (Vienna: ICMPD, 2021).

[52] Sarah Dolfin and Garance Genicot, 'What Do Networks Do? The Role of Networks on Migration and "Coyote" Use', *Review of Development Economics* 14, no. 2 (May 2010): 343–59, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9361.2010.00557.x.

[53] Filiz Garip and Asad L. Asad, 'Migrant Networks', in *Emerging Trends in the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, ed. Robert A Scott and Stephan M Kosslyn (New York: Wiley, 2015), 1–13, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118900772.etrds0220.

[54] Giulietti, Wahba, and Zenou, 'Strong versus Weak Ties in Migration'.

complementing the information provided by strong ties. According to Lee and Lee, in certain urban areas the role of local social networks can be more important than the socio-economic status of potential migrants when intending to migrate.[55]

The **rise of information and communication technology** has increased the amount of information available and improved its availability and circulation. Besides, it constitutes a powerful way to maintain social connections with relatives and friends abroad, as well as to create new contacts. Dekker and Engbersen argue that social media do not just constitute a new means of communication in migration networks, but they also transform the nature of these networks by maintaining strong ties, reinforcing weak ties, and providing a rich source of insider knowledge, thereby facilitating migration movements.[56] Bakewell and Jolivet highlight the importance not only of personal network feedback, defined as the direct and personal communication between potential migrants and their contacts with migration experience, but also of narrowcast feedback, i.e., the impersonal information provided by direct contacts through online platforms, as well as of broadcast feedback, that is, the general information provided through mass media and available for the general public.[57]

Previous ICMPD research[58] has shown how potential migrants tend to trust the information provided by family and friends, while communication from governmental or institutional sources is usually perceived as biased and unreliable. However, the first kind of information is often far from being objective and trustworthy, not only because the legal and socio-economic conditions in the countries of transit and destination might change, thus affecting the migration experience of future migrants, but also because the information itself might be biased, highlighting particularly positive, or in some cases, particularly negative experiences.[59] Certainly, information – especially online – is highly variegated and can encourage[60] or simply support[61] migration plans and strategies. Social media posts on success stories and high-quality lifestyle – whether they represent or exaggerate reality – tend to have a positive effect on migration decisions.[62] Countering cumulative causation assumptions that social networks and information provision support migration, Dekker et al. find that information can discourage migration plans and intentions.[63] Fiedler, on the other hand, shows how migrants who are

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[55] YeonKyeong Lee and Seung Jong Lee, 'Analysis of the Influence of Social Relations on Migration Intention: Focusing on Local Social Capital and Subjective Socioeconomic Status', *International Journal of Community Well-Being* 2, no. 3–4 (December 2019): 193–211.

[56] Rianne Dekker and Godfried Engbersen, 'How Social Media Transform Migrant Networks and Facilitate Migration', *Global Networks* 14, no. 4 (October 2014): 401–18.

[57] Oliver Bakewell and Dominique Jolivet, 'Broadcasting Migration Outcomes', in *Beyond Networks: Feedback in International Migration*, ed. Oliver Bakewell et al. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 183–204.

[58] Hahn-Schaur, 'Awareness Raising and Information Campaigns on the Risks of Irregular Migration from Pakistan: Background Report'; IRFAD, 'Needs Assessment Study on Migration Information in Iraq'; see also Ida M. S. Vammen et al., 'Does Information Save Migrants' Lives? Knowledge and Needs of West African Migrants En Route to Europe', DIIS Report (Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, 2021).

[59] REACH, 'Iraqi Migration to Europe in 2016: Profiles, Drivers and Return'.

[60] Bertil Vilhelmson and Eva Thulin, 'Does the Internet Encourage People to Move? Investigating Swedish Young Adults' Internal Migration Experiences and Plans', *Geoforum* 47 (June 2013): 209–16.

[61] Eva Thulin and Bertil Vilhelmson, 'Virtual Practices and Migration Plans: A Qualitative Study of Urban Young Adults', *Population, Space and Place* 20, no. 5 (July 2014): 389–401.

[62] Bakewell and Jolivet, 'Broadcasting Migration Outcomes'.

[63] Rianne Dekker, Godfried Engbersen, and Faber, 'Online Feedback in Migration Networks', in *Beyond Networks: Feedback in International Migration*, ed. Oliver Bakewell et al. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 69–89.

exposed to negative sources of information disproving their own beliefs tend to reduce cognitive dissonance by questioning the credibility of those sources.[64]

Social networks and information are important aspects in the formation of migration intentions and plans. The role of returnees as source of information among potential migrants has emerged in recent studies on their knowledge, attitudes, and intentions.[65] The literature on social networks, however, has generally focused on the relevance of either strong or weak ties, overlooking the role of specific agents, i.e., returnees, in influencing migration intentions and behaviours. By the same token, the literature on return migration has focused, among other things, on the role of returnees in the political, social, and economic development of their countries of origin,[66] without exploring the micro-level impact of return on the migration intentions of potential migrants.

Recent research, which will be examined more in depth in chapter 5, has explored the impact of migration information and awareness raising campaigns involving return migrants on the decision-making process of potential migrants. **However, only few studies have investigated the role of returnees on migration intentions and behaviours**. Among these, Togunde and Osagie examine the role of Nigerian returnees in influencing young adults' intentions to migrate to the USA. The study shows how 'fascination with style of dressing, fluency of spoken English language, polished behaviour and decent display of mannerisms are associated with increased likelihood of wanting to visit the United States', while, on the other hand, negative perceptions regarding the social, cultural, or economic characteristics in the country of destination significantly reduces the desire to migrate there.[67] The study, however, also demonstrates that the image that returnees convey of the country of destination is highly subjective and dependent on their own personal experience: For some returnees, the USA is a country with a stable and flourishing economy and rich of socio-economic opportunities, while others see them as land rampant with crime where it is difficult to become successful.

Not only are there few studies available on this specific topic, but the results are also contradictory. Two empirical studies on the role of migrant networks in labour migration in China, for example, found opposite results. One study found that higher rates of return migration may discourage first-time migration from communities of origin,[68] while the other concluded that the number of returnees in a community may actually encourage migration by reducing migration costs, although the results were insignificant for the sample.[69] The latter, however, also found that, while current migrants can provide reliable and updated information on the labour situation at destination, thus representing an

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[64] Anke Fiedler, 'From Being Aware to Going There: On the Awareness and Decision-Making of (Prospective) Migrants', *Mass Communication and Society* 23, no. 3 (2020): 356–77, https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2019.1666992.

[65] Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat, 'Blinded by Hope: Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices of Ethiopian Migrants' (Nairobi: Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat, 2014); IRFAD, 'A Descriptive Study of the Influence of Information Campaigns and Counselling on the Knowledge, Attitudes and Intentions (KAIs) of Potential Migrants in Iraq' (Baghdad: IRFAD Foundation for Development Research, July 2022).

[66] Savina Ammassari, 'From Nation-building to Entrepreneurship: The Impact of Élite Return Migrants in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana', *Population, Space and Place* 10, no. 2 (March 2004): 133–54; Franzisca Zanker and Judith Altrogge, 'The Political Influence of Return: From Diaspora to Libyan Transit Returnees', *International Migration* 57, no. 4 (August 2019): 167–80, https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12578.

[67] Togunde and Osagie, 'ICONS OF PROGRESS'.

[68] Giulietti, Wahba, and Zenou, 'Strong versus Weak Ties in Migration'.

[69] Yaohui Zhao, 'The Role of Migrant Networks in Labor Migration: The Case of China', *Contemporary Economic Policy* 21, no. 4 (October 2003): 500–511.

important pull factor for village labourers in places of origin, returnees do not have such promotion effect, as they are not perceived as being up to date with socio-economic conditions.

Using geospatial analysis, census data, and in-person interviews with potential migrants in the Senegambia region, Auer and Schaub show how even the presence of returnees within a specific community might reduce the migration intentions of potential migrants, as the latter become more aware of the risks associated to migration and of the stigma attached to failed migration plans.[70] This result, however, is observed only among returnees from Europe, whereas returnees from other African countries do not alter migration plans. According to the authors, the presence of returnees from Europe might make potential migrants more aware of the risks of irregular migration, as well as more inclined to perceive the migration process as a failure, thus turning returnees into negative role models.

Although theoretically conceived as weak social ties, **returnees can significantly affect – positively and negatively – migration intentions and behaviours among potential migrants**. By virtue of their firsthand experiences, returnees carry a unique perspective on migration, becoming living testimonials of both the challenges and opportunities associated with migration. Their impressions and stories can significantly influence their community members' perceptions of migration, confirming or discarding the expectations that potential migrants might have regarding the everyday life in their desired countries of destination. Still, despite the growing interest in and research on return migration, little attention is dedicated to this specific topic. Drawing from field data, the following section looks at the potential role of returnees in influencing migration intentions.

4.3 Role of returnees in migration decision-making in Iraq: Insights from the field

4.3.1 Introduction

As we have seen, the role of returnees as messengers or influencers and how they can affect decision-making of potential migrants in Iraq is a topic that has not received much attention in the literature. Drawing from empirical findings, the following sections will highlight the main drivers of migration, the challenges the returnees have endured during their migratory journey, and their main reasons for return. Within the realm of reintegration, we will explore the post-migration realities, including the emotional impact of migration, their integration experience, the support they received from their families and institutions, and how they are perceived by the community. Before examining the role of returnees in migration decision-making and their potential participation in migration information campaigns, it is important to shed light on the drivers of return, in order to have a better understanding of the returnees' experiences.

4.3.2 Main Drivers of Migration

During the fieldwork, both government officials and returnees emphasised **security** and **economic** factors as the main drivers for Iraqi migration, although an increasing number of displacements is observed due to **climate change**. Respondents further explained that joblessness, the necessity to increase household income, and the aspiration for a brighter future are the main migration drivers. Additionally, the desire to mirror the success of previous migrants also operated as a driving factor. These responses correspond to what is commonly recognised as drivers of migration in general, and

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[70] Auer and Schaub, 'Returning from Greener Pastures?'.

particularly in Iraq. A study conducted by IOM in Iraq in 2016 revealed that the main reasons for migrating are (general and personal) security, lack of equality and social justice, and political and economic stability.[71] This aspect was also confirmed during our recent interview with IOM, where they emphasised that individuals are compelled to migrate due to a combination of factors such as economic, security, and environmental issues.

So you have a lot of elements that contribute to this choice, but definitely at the end of the day, the majority of the migrants moving around and not only in this part of the world, but everywhere, it's about economic safety, right? I mean, everybody wants to have an income and has a roof over his head and have a job, you know, good education for the kids, good services, you know, to make a decent living. (IOM interview, 2024)

Economic drivers were repeatedly identified among respondents as the primary factors in the decision-making processes, with two predominant interpretations.[72] The first is the necessity for subsistence, evident in the experiences of several respondents who faced unemployment or financial difficulties as the main providers for their households. Specifically, four respondents highlighted their struggles to earn a living in the KRI. The second involves aspirations exceeding the local opportunities available in one's home community. For these individuals, staying in their home country did not necessarily imply a negative future; rather, they believed that living abroad would offer superior opportunities for personal growth. This was particularly relevant for some who saw migration as a way to provide better futures for their children.

The biggest reason that pushed me to leave the country was to be able to find a better job and gain good money. (03-SUL, Male, 43 years old)

Personal development opportunities also emerged as a significant factor, especially among the youngest participants who were completing their university education. They aspired to progress further, either in their professional careers or by pursuing higher education. This was exemplified in cases where the decision to migrate was also influenced by the desire to create better opportunities for their children. A notable trend is observed in the migration of five respondents who relocated shortly after their university graduation, a phenomenon that reflects a broader issue, where educational attainment does not necessarily lead to improved prospects. Both economic drivers often intersect, as indicated by one of the respondents:

I needed to increase my income to provide for my family, and I came to the realisation that there are limited prospects for a prosperous future here... My family urged me to leave because they understood that I couldn't earn a sufficient income in this location. (03-DOH, Male, 40 years old).

However, a notable divergence in responses was observed among community and religious leaders, particularly in terms of perceived primary drivers of migration. While some community leaders articulated the desperation of people who immigrated, others have also pointed out that many who

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[71] IOM Iraq-DTM, 'Migration Flows From Iraq to Europe: Reasons Behind Migration' (Baghdad: International Organization for Migration - Iraq Mission, 2016).

[72] Refugee Migrants UN, 'Addressing Drivers of Migration, Including Adverse Effects of Climate Change, Natural Disasters and Human-Made Crises, through Protection and Assistance, Sustainable Development, Poverty Eradication, Conflict Prevention and Resolution' (United Nations, 2017), https://refugeesmigrants.un.org/sites/default/files/issue_brief_ts2_final.pdf.

choose to migrate are not financially disadvantaged but rather have the means to invest substantial amount of money in their migration journey. As one community leader stated:

The individuals undertaking these journeys are not impoverished; they invest substantial amounts of money in migration. (Community Leader – Erbil – FGD)

The respondents' answers provide a window into the multifaceted nature of their decision-making process and preparations for migration. All nine individuals cited a combination of economic instability, safety concerns, and family pressures as their primary reasons for leaving Iraq, consistent with de Haas'[73] understanding of migration as a response to structural conditions. The choice of destination was often influenced by existing social networks, aligning with Massey's[74] sociological approach to social networks. In some cases, however, pull factors – in particular the perception of Europe as an idealised place - can also represent important drivers of migration.[75] As one respondent indicated:

After my graduation, I had a friend of mine who made it to the UK illegally before me and got a job there. He knew a man from Erbil that was a smuggler and who supported my friend to leave. So, my friend encouraged me to choose the UK and try illegally to migrate through the smuggler. I was optimistic that I could aim for a better job and life. My friend's case was the best example for it. (02-SUL, Male, 45 years old)

The abovementioned study by IOM also reflected that the choice of selecting Europe as the destination was influenced by several factors. Firstly, there were no other feasible options within the region, making Europe the only viable choice. Additionally, the route to Europe was seen as relatively open, signifying lower risks and associated costs for migrants. Another significant consideration was the perception of European countries have a welcoming approach to immigration, reflected in their implemented reception systems and policies.[76]

Furthermore, building on what has been mentioned regarding social networks; family, friends and community networks underlie much of the recent migration to other countries. All respondents shared that they had a close-enough personal network in Europe that could facilitate the migration process or directly encouraged them to pursue this step. This aligns with the IOM study, where their respondent's choice of destination was based on presence of contacts, either close friends or relatives or acquaintances, in the country of destination, but also on the availability of information about assistance, especially focusing on the ease and speed of acquiring a residency permit and facilitating family reunification.[77]

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[73] Hein De Haas, 'A Theory of Migration: The Aspirations-Capabilities Framework', *Comparative Migration Studies* 9, no. 1 (December 2021): 8, https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-020-00210-4.

[74] Douglas S. Massey et al., 'Theories of International Migration: A Review and Appraisal', *Population and Development Review* 19, no. 3 (September 1993): 431, https://doi.org/10.2307/2938462.

[75] European Parliament, 'Exploring Migration Causes: Why People Migrate', *News - European Parliament* (blog), 1 July 2020, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/world/20200624STO81906/exploring-migration-causes-why-people-migrate.

[76] IOM Iraq-DTM, 'Migration Flows From Iraq To Europe'.

[77] Ibid.

4.3.3   Challenges during the journey

Based on the collective findings from the interviews conducted with returnees, FGDs, and conversations with stakeholders, a consistent pattern emerged. It appears that Iraqis, as reported across various interviews, predominantly initiate their journey by legally leaving Iraq. Upon reaching destinations such as Türkiye or Iran, a significant number of individuals then proceed to Belarus, while others opt for routes leading to Greece. Below is a table visualising some of the different and complex journeys that were mentioned in the interviews.

Destination	Transit Points
Austria	Türkiye, Greece, Romania
Bosnia (Intended for Sweden)	Greece, Serbia, Bosnia
Germany	Russia, Belarus, Poland
Germany	Türkiye, Greece
Germany	Türkiye, Bulgaria, Greece
Germany	Iran, Türkiye, Greece, Italy
Sweden	Türkiye, Greece, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Austria, Germany
Sweden	Türkiye, Belarus, Latvia
Sweden	Türkiye
UK	France (legally), then irregularly to UK
UK	Iran, Türkiye, Greece

As already mentioned in the methodology section, the journey to Europe and the UK involved opting for irregular migration paths without considering any alternatives. The factors driving irregular migration are similar to those influencing regular migration and are mostly influenced by socio-economic variables. The channels available to potential migrants are primarily determined by the policies of destination countries. Furthermore, the rise of cross-regional smuggling and trafficking networks became significant as individuals sought alternative and often high-risk routes to reach their intended destinations.[78] In this context, the option of irregular migration as a first choice could be interpreted for two reasons. First, potential migrants perceive the process of smuggling to be relatively quicker and easier than alternative methods, as mentioned by one respondent:

Even my father told me to wait until he can send me there in a legal way. But I was young and in a rush and couldn't wait. So I just contacted the smuggler… everybody in Kurdistan knows some names of smugglers who used to send people illegally for years, so this part was easy. (02-ERB, Male, 34 years old)

Second, the absence of readily available information on alternative migration options is another factor pushing towards irregular migration. Notably, in all interviews but one, individuals known to respondents who had successfully migrated to Europe also migrated through irregular means, thereby reinforcing a pattern of 'path dependency.'[79] As one respondent said:

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[78] IOM, 'World Migration Report 2011: Communicating Effectively about Migration' (Geneva: IOM, 2011), https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/wmr2011_english.pdf.

[79] Paul Pierson, 'Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics', *American Political Science Review* 94, no. 2 (June 2000): 251–67, https://doi.org/10.2307/2586011.

My friend already made it to Germany before me, which encouraged me to work day and night to save enough money to pay a smuggler. (03-DOH, Male, 40 years old).

The narratives gained from the interviews and FGDs shed light on the myriad challenges faced by individuals taking these journeys. Respondents consistently articulated the presence of risks throughout their migration experiences. While many faced financial burdens (some had to pay up to $40,000, others had to sell assets) and legal obstacles, others encountered physical dangers and navigated dangerous routes. The situations described by the respondents paint a vivid picture of the hard nature of these journeys. One prominent theme that emerges is the severe physical and emotional hardships endured by migrants. Some examples stated by respondents included walking through jungles without water or food, avoiding police violence, or navigating through border controls:

We left around midnight, by car, passing through the forest and valleys, and it took us about 5 hours to reach the borders. We had to walk from midnight to the morning across forests and valleys, I hurt my leg during the travel. Another person who was with us had his leg injured too. I was in pain, and we were in the forest. I ended up surrendering at the borders between Lithuania and Poland. They treated us very harshly. I wasn't beaten personally, but others were. I felt that I needed to get myself together. (Returnee – Baghdad – FGD)

The majority of respondents spent thousands of dollars, often financed through personal savings or family support, only to face the terror of almost drowning when their boat ran out of fuel or hiding under car seats to cross a border.

I was on the verge of breaking down. There were children with us. The journey was dangerous and scary. The situation was quite dangerous. We had to wait for long hours before being finally rescued by the Greek Navy. (Returnee – Baghdad - FGD)

An overarching theme that resonated across the responses was the **engagement with smugglers to facilitate the irregular crossings**. Respondents described the necessity of relying on them to navigate the routes. This engagement with smugglers, while indicative of the challenges faced, also underscored the lengths to which individuals were compelled to go to achieve their migration objectives. While smuggling has become a profitable business, with smugglers acting as facilitators that offer a broad range of services to desperate and vulnerable migrants at extremely high prices,[80] nine of our respondents that used smugglers to travel into Europe reported that most of the time **the information they received was inaccurate**.

I can say that the information I received about the whole trip, travelling across all these countries illegally, were very inaccurate. The smuggler didn't mention that we were going to walk across Belarus, in the middle of forests and hills, through highly risky roads, with no water and no food. Neither about the risk of being sent back to Türkiye if things go wrong. (02-ERB, Male, 34 years old)

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[80] European Commission, 'Migrant Smuggling,' home-affairs.ec.europa.eu, accessed January 9, 2024, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/irregular-migration-and-return/migrant-smuggling_en#:~:text=Smugglers%20use%20land%2C%20sea%20and; International Monetary Fund, 'Eurostat: Smuggling of Migrants', *International Monetary Fund* (blog), 2022, https://www.imf.org/en/Data/Statistics/informal-economy-data/Reports/Eurostat-Smuggling-of-Migrants.

The needs assessment study also highlighted that some of the returnees received inaccurate information by their contacts in the countries they migrated to, these contacts consisted of friends and family members.[81] In our study, the respondent who had a similar experience, received this inaccurate information from his local contacts in Iraq, even though according to him these people who provided him with the information used to make deals with smugglers. He stated:

I was trying to get more information from people in Erbil who used to make these deals with smugglers. And this helped me a lot, such as advising me on how to save my money at one of the banks that are available in Turkey until I reach safety. But unfortunately the information was inaccurate because I made it successfully to Austria but I had to face a lot of issues and was forced to do things during my journey that no one mentioned beforehand taking the step of migration. (03-ERB, Male, 39 years old)

Hunger and thirst, lack of shelter, and detention seemed to be common experiences among respondents, aligning with conducted studies.[82] Furthermore, migration durations varied among participants, ranging from a swift-5-day journey to a more extended 1.5-month trek through Türkiye and Greece. When the respondents were asked about what they would do differently in retrospective, there are three respondents who explained that irregular migration was an act of irresponsibility given the physical risks it entailed and, instead, they should have tried to migrate through legal ways by all means even if it would have taken more time. For example, one respondent stated that:

When I talk to myself, I keep saying that if I had to do it again, I would probably try to stay in Dohuk while applying legally for migration, with no rush and no risks (02-DOH, Female, 49 years old).

While respondents expressed willingness to undergo the same process, **they explicitly advised avoiding smuggling and recommending the use of regular routes**. However, there is a lack of thoughtful consideration on how practical or feasible that option might be, and the extent of information they can provide, all they can offer is a practical recommendation.

Furthermore, there is a general acknowledgement, among returnees and their communities, of the well-known risks associated with irregular migration. This awareness, however, does not universally dissuade individuals from taking on such journeys, suggesting a deep-seated sense of either desperation or a strong desire for change that overrides the fear of potential dangers.

4.3.4   Reasons for return

All respondents returned to Iraq voluntarily, except one that was deported from the country of destination and another one along the journey. They exhibited a diverse range of motivations and challenges associated with the migration process and reasons leading to their return. A recurrent theme is the profound impact of familial ties, with participants expressing both the emotional suffering caused by separation from family and a strong emphasis on the core values of being with one's family. The journey itself serves as a pivotal point of realisation, where encounters and exposure

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[81] IRFAD, 'Needs Assessment Study on Migration Information in Iraq'.

[82] IOM -DTM, 'Iraqi Returnees from Europe: A Snapshot Report on Iraqi Nationals upon Return in Iraq' (Geneva: International Organization for Migration - Displacement Tracking Matrix, 2018), https://dtm.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl1461/files/reports/DP.1635%20-%20Iraq_Returnees_Snapshot-Report%20-%20V5.pdf.

to risks contribute to a heightened awareness of family values. Instances of failed family reunification underscore the prioritisation of family bonds over prolonged separation. One respondent stated:

I was planning to settle with my family in Austria. I waited for 5 years to invite my family to come and live with me. But I failed with the process. We had been waiting for official papers, but we got no response after many years waiting. So, I had made it safely to Austria and I had a good job there at one of the restaurants, I got some money, but being unable to reunite with my family made me return to Iraq and live with my wife and kids in Erbil again. I had no choice but to return, because I was listening my kids crying every time I called them on the phone. (03-ERB, Male, 39 years old)

Individuals' desires for marital settlement and the influence of maternal figures emerged as a factor for return. Loneliness and a longing for traditional marriage are coupled with a commitment to maintaining cultural identity. As one respondent stated:

After 5 years working there, having a good job and renting a house, I started thinking of marriage. This made me travel back to the Kurdistan Region to find a suitable partner. I found a wife that convinced me to stay beside her. My mother also convinced me. By the time I returned, I was happy because I started working in Sulaymaniyah and had a good salary. So, I could settle back with my wife. (01-SUL, Male, 43 years old)

Economic considerations also play a substantial role, with instances of unemployment in Germany leading to financial struggles. However, the desire for family reunification, combined with completing education, highlights a multifaceted approach to decision-making processes. Financial considerations continue to be influential, as participants navigate the challenges of managing financial issues, with some expressing the possibility of a future return to the UK. Success in country of destination is perceived as an avenue for entrepreneurial aspirations, revealing a complex interplay between personal, familial, and economic factors shaping migration experiences. Overall, these responses underscore the complex and interconnected nature of motivations and challenges faced by individuals undergoing the migration process.

The discrepancy between the idea of Europe and the harsh reality in the country of destination is another factor that pushes migrants to return. The disappointment and frustration expressed by many were due to the immigration policies, their asylum-seeking applications, as well as the living conditions, where many were dependent on the reception system in place in their countries of destination.[83] The idea of Europe and the European dream is what reportedly drove most people to migrate there in the first place; however, this perspective markedly shifts in the context of return. Many returnees during the focus group discussions echoed the following sentiment:

In my case, the problem was with the misleading information. They described heaven on earth for me and when I got there I was hit hard by the reality. (Returnee – Baghdad – FGD)

This common misconception among many Iraqis about life in Europe was also emphasised with the stakeholders we conducted interviews with. There is a belief that Europe is a utopian paradise where one can easily find wealth, housing, and security without much effort. However, the reality is quite different. Iraqis are often surprised by the strict laws in Europe. As ETTC explained, in Iraq there is a

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[83] IOM Iraq-DTM, 'Migration Flows From Iraq To Europe'.

reliance on familial support, with even those not working guaranteed a roof and a meal. This contrasts with the reality in Europe, leading to shock upon arrival to Europe.

Most Iraqis here imagine that Europe is heaven on earth. They think that once they arrive, they will find some money, a house, security, and that they will have a good time. But most of them were surprised by the laws implemented in Europe, which are very strict. (ETTC Interview, 2023)

Furthermore, the majority of respondents indicated that their return to Iraq is permanent. When the respondents were asked if they would consider re-migrating, all but one woman – who nevertheless had spent two decades in Europe and had no personal networks in Iraq – said they are highly unlikely to re-migrate.

4.4 Reintegration and post-migration realities

4.4.1 Introduction

In this section we delve into the intricate dimensions of reintegration, shedding light on the multifaceted aspects that shape the post-migration landscapes for returnees. Drawing insights directly from the rich tapestry of interviews and discussions conducted, we explore the emotional impact of migration the dynamics of family and community support, providing insights into the social fabric that returnees must navigate. Lastly, we explore the post-return realisations that unfold as individuals reconcile with the familiar yet evolved landscapes.

4.4.2 Exploring the themes of reintegration

From the moment of leaving one's country to the experiences lived during the journey, the reception in the host country, the process of adaptation and integration, and the return and reintegration to the country of origin, migration transforms migrants' feelings, thoughts, memories, and relationships. Whether positive or negative, conscious or unconscious, gradual or disruptive, this transformation affects migrants' worldview, culture, behaviour. Acknowledging these factors during assistance delivery may help returnees' reintegration.[84] As part of our research, we inquired about the returnees' emotional state and overall well-being upon their return. Several individuals expressed a sense of fulfilment and contentment post-return. These sentiments are primarily linked to their successful reintegration into the local economy, as evidenced by securing employment or establishing small businesses. The proximity to family and friends further enhanced their sense of well-being, underscoring the importance of social support networks in the reintegration process.

I feel I did the right decision to return. I was able to find a job later here, I am still working now, and I have money and I live with my family, surrounded by friends. (01-ERB, Male, 37 years old)

I feel good because I have a small business now and God saved me from a death in the last moment. It was a negative experience that I will never forget. I am grateful of still being alive among my family and friends. (02-ERB, Male, 34 years old)

Conversely, other returnees articulate feelings of instability, hopelessness, and financial distress. Their responses highlight the challenges of restarting life from scratch, grappling with unemployment, and the burden of debts incurred during migration. This dichotomy in experiences reflects the complex

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[84] Biella-Battista et al., 'Reintegration Handbook: Practical Guidance on the Design, Implementation and Monitoring of Reintegration Assistance'.

interplay of economic opportunities, social networks, and personal resilience in shaping the reintegration process of returnees.

How can it be better? Almost everyone is wanted[85], indebted. We had to borrow money to travel. We have the right to a decent life and salary. I had to borrow money to leave the country and now that I returned, I am still trying to pay my debts, while my salary is barely enough to make ends meet. We're living in a rental; we don't own anything in Iraq. I would personally seize any opportunity to leave again. (Returnee - Baghdad – FGD)

Statements by community leaders revealed a deep understanding of the psychological impact of migration and the challenges of reintegration, as well as the roles and responsibilities of various stakeholders in addressing these issues. The role of community leaders is crucial, as they advise returnees to reframe their experiences, encouraging them to view their journey as an unfortunate trip rather than a life-defining failure. This prevents further psychological harm and fosters a sense of acceptance and resilience.

Some suffer from psychological disorders due to taking a perilous route in pursuit of what they believed would be a paradise, only to find themselves in difficult circumstances without adequate support. People in the community may not always embrace them well.

In such cases, I've encountered individuals and advised them to accept the reality. I've said, "Consider it as a trip that didn't go as planned, and don't let it further harm yourself." These are the pieces of advice we offer to those facing challenges.

It's heartbreaking to witness cases where individuals have left their mothers and fathers, facing the shock of unexpected circumstances. (Community Leaders - Erbil – FGD)

The comparison of these experiences suggests that while the majority of returnees find a renewed sense of purpose and stability, others continue to struggle with the repercussions of their migration journey. This disparity underscores the need for comprehensive reintegration programmes that address not only economic but also psychosocial aspects, ensuring a more holistic approach to improving the well-being of returnees. As highlighted by the IOM, 'Sustainable reintegration is achieved when returnees have reached levels of economic self-sufficiency, social stability, and psychosocial well-being that make their further migration decisions a matter of choice, rather than a necessity.'[86]

The reintegration experience of returnees can be significantly shaped by the diverse reasons motivating them to return, the social changes in the society of origin, and the support they are provided with.[87] The process of readaptation and readjustment into society takes time, often depending on the duration of the migration experiences.[88] The reintegration experiences of returnees to Iraq, as reflected in their personal accounts, can shed further light on this process. The experiences of returnees range from relatively smooth transitions to profound struggles, highlighting the critical

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[85] Here he meant wanted by the Iraqi authorities.
[86] Biella-Battista et al., 'Reintegration Handbook: Practical Guidance on the Design, Implementation and Monitoring of Reintegration Assistance'.
[87] *Ibid*.
[88] Jean-Pierre Cassarino, 'Theorising Return Migration: The Conceptual Approach to Return Migrants Revisited', *International Journal on Multicultural Societies* 6, no. 2 (2004): 253–79.

role of familial support, employment opportunities, and institutional assistance in shaping reintegration outcomes.

Several returnees reported positive reintegration experiences, often due to strong family support, the ability to secure employment, and a deep-seated sense of belonging to their native communities. The emotional relief of reuniting with family and the security of having a job are repeatedly emphasised as pivotal factors in facilitating a sense of normality and stability.

It didn't take me a long time to feel like home again because I was happy to return. Falling in love and marry the woman I loved made it easy for me. She encouraged me to find a good job and rent a house here and then settle together. And I strongly think that the biggest part that can help a person to reintegrate is finding a job. With a salary, you can pay the bills and support yourself and your family for the future. (01-SUL, Male, 43 years old)

It was easy for me to reintegrate because I was already willing to return, and I wanted to see my family and friends. I got what I wanted to get: a passport and a university certificate that helped me a lot in finding a job as pharmacist here. I have my job, my family. I feel it wasn't a big challenge to be back here and live among my people. (01-DOH, Male, 30 years old)

However, alongside these stories of successful reintegration are narratives of hardship and ongoing challenges. Some returnees described prolonged periods of adjustment, marked by psychological distress stemming from past migration experiences and the difficulty of re-establishing a livelihood. The lack of knowledge about the formal reintegration support from governmental and non-governmental organisations is a recurrent theme, underscoring a significant gap in the provision of information about the necessary services. This absence of support is particularly acute for individuals who have returned without financial resources or stable employment prospects. No financial or institutional assistance was provided for their return, and they were not aware of any. Instead, most of the reintegration support stemmed from their own social networks.

It took a full year for me to feel like I'm back to my family. They helped me a lot. I was glad because I made it safely, and I can be with my family again after this horrible experience. After that, I started to consider doing it legally. It was very difficult for me. It took me a lot of time, more than a year, to forget the negative experience. I couldn't shake that thinking that I was going to die in any moment. (02-ERB, Male, 34 years old)

I don't remember if there was an organisation or any governmental office that could follow up on my case of even supporting me in my new life here. I did not get anything anyway. My friends found me a job as a driver, which I can say was the key solution for my reintegration. Now I have money again, I can support my family, and I feel safe in Erbil. I even start to feel that what happened was for the best. (03-ERB, Male, 39 years old)

Some testimonies revealed a sense of abandonment and frustration towards the Iraqi government and international organisations. They express dissatisfaction with the absence of information regarding the organised reintegration initiatives, highlighting the need for essential support in areas like employment opportunities, financial support for business ventures, and psychological counselling.

I really need support but no one is helping here. I applied for benefits to support me opening a small business here, but I have been waiting with no response. My family tries helping me from time to

time, but still I need to get to a point where I can work for myself. I need to have my own money. This is a big issue for me. (03-SUL, Male, 43 years old)

Despite the negative experiences of some respondents, the IOM pointed out that there has been a stable support for returnees over the past years, often in coordination with the services provided under the NRM. This is crucial because migrants may have varying entitlements through different programs supported by the states they are returning from. Reintegration significantly depends on factors such as the migrants' migration experience, the time spent outside their home country, potential protection concerns, and the skills acquired during their stay in a transit or host country.

Family support

The role of family support in the reintegration of returnees across different regions of Iraq is a critical factor that significantly influences their experiences. Several returnees consistently emphasised the crucial role their families played in their reintegration process. This support ranged from emotional encouragement, helping them to perceive their experiences as valuable life lessons, to tangible assistance such as financial aid and help in establishing small businesses. Parents and relatives were instrumental in helping returnees start over, as seen in the case of a returnee whose father helped him open a barbershop. In some cases, returnees also highlighted the vital support received from their extended families. This support was not just emotional or psychosocial but also financial, aiding them in purchasing assets and contributing to their reintegration in the community. Such support was integral to their ability to rebuild their lives and form new familial units.

My family was happy because I returned safely. When I was telling them the stories of what I really faced there, they were sad and happy at the same time because I returned. My father helped me in opening a barbershop. So now I have a small business. But I feel like there could have been some projects to support work and provide jobs for the returnees, help them do small businesses to achieve better social integration. (02-ERB, Male, 34 years old)

However, some responses also revealed an underlying desire for independence and self-sufficiency among the returnees. While family support is cherished and acknowledged, there is a recurring theme of wanting to earn their own income and not solely rely on family assistance. This sentiment is particularly evident in the context of broader economic challenges in the KRI, where government instability and fiscal issues have exacerbated the difficulties of finding employment.

I can say that all the people around me helped a lot. My wife was telling me good stories of our kids that happened while I was away and about their future in Erbil. My friends found me a job. So all these things helped me somehow to feel like I can live in Erbil again. (03-ERB, Male, 39 years old)

My family used to support me and were the ones who pushed me to return. It was a right decision. The only support after return that I received from them was mentally, by being a supportive family. (01-DOH, Male, 30 years old)

Community perception

Empowering returnees to share their experiences within their communities of origin and establishing social connections can bolster their resilience and enhance the sustainability of their reintegration

process.[89] The community perception of returning migrants in various regions of Iraq reflects a generally welcoming and supportive attitude, albeit with some nuances. In some cases, returnees report a warm reception from both friends and family, emphasising the relief and happiness of their communities upon their safe return.

Everybody welcomed me. Friends, family, everyone was happy because I made it safely back. (02-ERB, Male, 34 years old)

The community's pride in the achievements of returnees, such as completing studies abroad or acquiring new skills, is particularly highlighted. This suggests that the community values the accomplishments and experiences gained abroad, which might positively influence the reintegration process.

Very well, everybody was welcoming and happy that I finished my studies there, that I got a passport and I returned. (01-DOH, Male, 30 years old)

However, other respondents present a different picture. While the general community response is positive, there are indications of challenges faced by children who have spent significant time abroad. The difficulty these children face in adapting to the local language and culture points to a more complex integration process for younger returnees. This aspect highlights the **need for more comprehensive community support mechanisms**, especially for those who have lived abroad for extended periods during their formative years. Overall, the community perception of returnees across Iraq is largely positive, characterised by a welcoming attitude.

Good for us, but our children are finding it more difficult; they don't speak Arabic. (Returnee – Baghdad – FGD)

My son Mustapha lived for 8 years in Sweden. He went to Swedish schools and lived in the Swedish community. When he came back here, he found that things were very different. (Returnee – Baghdad – FGD)

The situation in communities of return greatly influences the reintegration process. Strong social networks and access to resources within communities can provide support and protection to returnees, resulting in sustainable reintegration.[90] Both community leaders and religious leaders play a crucial role in responses to migrants and returnees. They provide tangible and spiritual assistance, facilitating access to essential services such as health care and the reintegration in society.[91]

The focus group discussion conducted with community and religious leaders in Baghdad showcased that these leaders play a crucial role in addressing the immediate needs and challenges faced by returnees, including issues related to housing, legal documentation, and overall reintegration into the community. Community and religious leaders actively engage with migrants and returnees, often providing direct assistance and support. They also work closely with local governments to facilitate

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[89] Biella-Battista et al., 'Reintegration Handbook: Practical Guidance on the Design, Implementation and Monitoring of Reintegration Assistance'.

[90] Biella-Battista et al., 'Reintegration Handbook: Practical Guidance on the Design, Implementation and Monitoring of Reintegration Assistance'.

[91] Religions for Peace, 'Guide to Action on Mobilizing Faith Communities to Welcome Migrants and Refugees' (New York: Religions for Peace, 2018), https://www.rfp.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/RfP-Refugees-and-Migrants-Resource-Guide.pdf.

reintegration of returnees. These leaders, akin to mayors in their localities, assist and advocate for these individuals. One of the most pressing issues mentioned is the severe housing crisis. Many displaced persons struggle to find accommodation, with some unable to furnish their homes or even lacking basic necessities such as a bed.

Regarding the returnees, the majority of those don't have a place to stay in, and those who managed to find a house have barely managed to furnish it; some don't even have a bed to sleep in. The displaced suffer from a housing problem more than anything else. We have displaced from Jurf. It is very hard for them to survive. (Community Leaders – Baghdad – FGD)

The leaders also discussed migration, noting that financial constraints prevent many from migrating despite the desire to do so. They advise against irregular migration due to its dangers and uncertainties, emphasising the need for legal and safe migration channels.

The only way out is through smuggling, irregular routes, which are risky. People don't have the opportunity to legally migrate. (Community Leaders – Baghdad – FGD)

Post-return realisations

As individuals reintegrate into their former environments, a process of reflection often ensues. Post-return realisations among returnees in Iraq reveal a profound shift in perspective, predominantly characterised by an appreciation of family and a re-assessment of the decision to migrate. Many returnees expressed a newfound realisation of the importance of being close to family, often citing this as the most significant lesson learnt from their migration experience. This sentiment is particularly strong among respondents from the KRI, where the joy and relief of re-uniting with their families overshadow any challenges faced upon return.

Furthermore, the reflection on their migration journey also brings to light the hardships and risks associated with irregular migration. Several returnees expressed a clear preference for staying home or pursuing migration through legal channels if given the opportunity to take this decision again. The experiences they had during the journey have left a lasting impact, leading to the re-evaluation of the risks involved and a stronger inclination towards safety and legality.

It had taught me a lesson. I was grateful in the end to be able to return. This made me realise that being with your family is the most important thing in life. (01-ERB, Male, 37 years old)

If I had to go back in time, I would choose the same country because of my family relations there, but I would have opted for a different way to reach the UK. I would have stayed for a while in Dohuk and wait, and apply legally and leave. (02-DOH, Male, 40 years old)

Only one returnee from Dohuk felt that the risks he took were justified by his ultimate achievements.

I would choose to make exactly the same step I did. It was very successful in the end. I feel that if you have a clear goal, you need to take the risk anyway. (03-DOH, Male, 40 years old)

5 Information Impact: Returnees as Messengers

5.1 Introduction

As emerged from the previous chapter, the accuracy and reliability of information is paramount to ensure that the migration journey proceeds positively. In virtue of their firsthand experience of migration, returnees may play a crucial role as messengers in information campaigns. By engaging returnees as messengers, information campaigns can effectively reach and connect with the target audience, ensuring credibility and trust. Returnees can indeed share their personal experiences, provide practical advice, and offer insights into the challenges and opportunities of migration. Their stories can serve as powerful narratives that resonate with the potential migrants and returnees, helping to address their concerns, raise awareness about available resources and support mechanisms, and promote positive reintegration outcomes.

This chapter will delve more in depth into the potential involvement of returnees in the implementation of migration information campaigns. It will do so by, first, examining previous information and awareness raising campaigns that have involved returnees, analysing their rationales and impact. Drawing from fieldwork insights, second, it will explore the information needs highlighted by the returnees, with particular attention to the information gaps and misconceptions that they experienced during their migration plans and journeys, as well as to the most potentially effective channels that, to the best of their knowledge, would reach potential migrants. Finally, the chapter will conclude by discussing some ethical and methodological consideration when engaging with returnees in the implementation of migration information campaigns.

5.2 Global overview

As seen in the previous sections, many studies have shown that potential migrants often tend to rely on family and friends for the provision of information regarding the migration journey or the situation in the country of destination, even though the information provided tends to be inaccurate or unreliable.[92] On the other hand, the actors implementing the campaigns – whether they be national governments, international organisations, NGOs or civil society organisations – have employed a whole variety of techniques to share more accurate information on the risks of irregular migration. The use of different messengers constitutes one such expedient.

Since official institutions and government representatives are generally not perceived as objective sources of information and therefore are reportedly not trusted by potential migrants,[93] some campaigns have employed local celebrities to deliver their message and increase their impact. The most famous campaign in this respect was launched in 2007 by the Spanish government in collaboration with the IOM and depicted the Senegalese singer Youssou N'Dour imploring young

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[92] Jessica Hagen-Zanker and Richard Mallett, 'Journeys to Europe: The Role of Policy in Migrant Decision-Making' (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2016); Hahn-Schaur, 'Awareness Raising and Information Campaigns on the Risks of Irregular Migration from Pakistan: Background Report'.

[93] Jasper Tjaden, Sandra Morgenstern, and Frank Laczko, 'Evaluating the Impact of Information Campaigns in the Field of Migration: A Systematic Review of the Evidence, and Practical Guidance' (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2018).

migrants – described as the 'future of Africa' – not to leave their country at all.[94] The employment of celebrities might have positive repercussions, especially when attempting to reach broader audiences – in fact the campaign was designed as a television spot and broadcasted at the national level. Despite the sensitive and thoughtful message, however, the emotional distance between the messenger and the target group raises doubts on the effective impact of the campaign.

The employment of celebrities might also run the risk of negatively affecting the design of information campaigns, as it conveys the idea that the messenger has somehow 'made it' (either in their own country or abroad), while convincing others not to try at all. This is also an issue for those campaigns that, for example, use diaspora members abroad to deliver messages to potential migrants in their countries of destination. The employment of members of the diaspora – especially when sharing the same ethnic, linguistic, and cultural background – might seem logical to increase the trustworthiness of the messenger and reapproach the emotional distance with the target group. However, not only is it often difficult to find diaspora members willing to discourage potential migrants, but, even when this happens, **the messenger might not be perceived as credible or reliable**, especially if not personally known to potential migrants, thus having a counterproductive effect on the objective of the campaign.[95] Even if the conditions of the journey or the situation in the intended country of destination actually deteriorate, diaspora members might still be considered a successful example of migration, and 'if the medium is the message, then this message is: migrate'.[96]

For this reason, some campaigns have resorted to the **employment of local organisations and community leaders** to deliver more credible information on migration paths and risks. The partnership with local organisations and community leaders has proved to be more effective, as it removed the physical and sometimes socio-cultural distance between diaspora members and potential migrants in the country of origin. Not only are local organisations and community leaders more familiar with the local context in which migration takes place as well as socially and culturally closer to potential migrants, but they also have the necessary knowledge of and presence within the local community, which allows them to leverage their social links to understand the needs of people and help them make more informed decisions.[97]

A similar strategy is employed in the **employment of returnees as messengers** in migration information campaigns. Drawing on McCroskey and Teven's study on goodwill, previous ICMPD research has shown how the use of returnees as messengers can increase the credibility of the message and subsequently the potential impact of migration information campaigns.[98] It can do so by **leveraging the expertise of the messenger, their trustworthiness and motivation, as well as their**

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[94] Kira Kosnick, 'Mediating Migration: New Roles for (Mass) Media', *InMedia* 5 (17 September 2014), http://journals.openedition.org/inmedia/761; Julia Van Dessel and Antoine Pécoud, 'A NGO's Dilemma: Rescuing Migrants at Sea or Keeping Them in Their Place?', *Border Criminologies* (blog), 27 April 2020, https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2020/04/ngos-dilemma; Juliette Howard, 'Beyond the Humanitarian Rhetoric of Migrant Information Campaigns', *E-International Relations*, 2021, https://www.e-ir.info/2021/06/14/beyond-the-humanitarian-rhetoric-of-migrant-information-campaigns/.

[95] Qaisrani and Jokic, 'Engaging Diasporas in Information Campaigns on Migration'.

[96] Seefar, '3E Impact. Ethical, Engaged & Effective. Running Communications on Irregular Migration from Kos to Kandahar'.

[97] Seefar and ECORYS, 'Study on Best Practices in Irregular Migration Awareness Campaigns,' 2021.

[98] Ayesha Qaisrani, Katharina Hahn-Schaur, and Maegan Hendow, 'Irregular Migration Dynamics from Pakistan and the Role of Information Campaigns: PARIM Final Report' (Vienna: International Centre for Migration Policy Development, 2021).

goodwill in sharing accurate information. In other words, returnees can be seen as trusted sources of information as they can provide first-hand knowledge and experience on (irregular) migration and establish a closer emotional connection with potential migrants, provided that they are willing to share such information with goodwill.

In recent years, many campaigns have employed returnees as messengers in the belief that returnees could share first-hand experiences of their migration journeys with their peers, providing a reliable and trustworthy source of information.[99] These campaigns represent a relatively novel approach, as they do not rely on top-down information provided by national governments, international organisations, or local NGOs, but on trained returnees who voluntarily provide information to their peers or participate in lively discussions with them.[100]

The IOM has been particularly active in implementing this approach, conducting peer-to-peer awareness raising campaigns called 'Migrants as Messengers' (MaM). As seen before, in Senegal and in Guinea, the campaign generally envisages the screening of a movie with video testimonies from migrants and returnees, sometimes preceded by theatrical or artistic performances and always followed by interactive question and answer sessions with returnees. Only in Guinea, the CinemArena campaign, consisting in the screening of a documentary related to the risks of irregular migration (called Migrant, Retour de l'Enfer – Migrants, return from hell) with testimonies from migrants and returnees, reached about 16,000 people during its implementation in 32 towns and villages between January and February 2019.[101]

While recent studies have examined the effectiveness of these campaigns through quantitative means and randomised controlled trials, thus providing more reliable results, the empirical evidence of the impact of such campaigns on potential migrants' aspirations and intentions to migrate remains nevertheless scarce. Besides, these studies provide evidence to support the assumption that increasing risk awareness might have a relevant impact on potential migrants' decision-making process; yet, establishing the link between higher risk perception and reduced irregular migration flows is still a difficult task.[102]

Dunsch, Tjaden, and Quiviger have followed the implementation of the MaM campaign in eight neighbourhoods of Dakar. Their study surveyed 924 potential migrants over the course of five months, collecting information about their previous knowledge of migration, their reaction to the movie, and its impact after some time. The analysis of the campaign's impact has demonstrated that potential migrants who participated in the treatment group (n=472) were **19% more well-informed about the risks and opportunities associated with migration, 25% more aware of the multiple risks associated with irregular migration, and 20% less likely to migrate irregularly within the next two years compared to the control group (n=452)**. The study also reported small but positive effects on potential migrants' social perception of returnees in their communities. However, limited effects were registered regarding the factual knowledge on the legal context, the length and costs of the journey, the perception of the chances to successfully arrive to Europe and to remain there in case of arrival as

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[99] Tjaden, 'Assessing the Impact of Awareness-Raising Campaigns on Potential Migrants – What We Have Learned so Far'.

[100] Dunsch, Tjaden, and Quiviger, 'Migrants as Messengers'.

[101] Bia-Zafinikamia, Tjaden, and Gninafon, 'The Impact of Mobile Cinema Events on Potential Migrants in Guinea Impact Evaluation Report'.

[102] See Jasper Tjaden, 'Risky Journeys – Risk and Decision-making among Potential Irregular Migrants in Senegal and Guinea', *International Migration* 61, no. 2 (April 2023): 212–25, https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.13003.

well as of the potential earnings at destination.[103] This, however, is not surprising especially considering that the campaign itself did not aim at increasing potential migrants' factual knowledge on such aspects of migration.[104]

The campaign implemented in Guinea was evaluated through a similar approach. Even in this case, the treatment group, consisting of 1,494 potential migrants between the ages of 15 and 39, was interviewed before and three months after the screening, while the control group, consisting of 1,040 individuals with the same profile, underwent the same interviewing procedure but on a different movie unrelated to migration. The study estimated that the CinemArena – as the campaign in Guinea was called – **increased the awareness of the dangers of irregular migration by 10%, increased the percentage of people with knowledge of financial costs related to irregular migration by 23%, reduced the intentions to irregularly migrate to Europe by 10%, and increased positive perceptions of future economic opportunities in their own country by 19%**.[105]

Given the success of the Phase 1 of the campaign in terms of reach and impact, the IOM has expanded its implementation in other four West African countries, namely The Gambia, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Côte d'Ivoire, as well as in Bangladesh and Panama. The activities implemented in these countries within the framework of the MaM campaign are variegated, spanning from concerts to sport tournaments, school advocacy, theatre plays, radio programs, film screenings, video production, and social media engagement. According to the IOM website,[106] in West Africa the campaigns have reached more than one million people online and 200,000 people on the ground.

In the second phase of the MaM campaign, an impact evaluation has been carried out in the Gambia, Guinea, Nigeria, and Senegal.[107] The study surveyed 13,968 individuals between 17 and 30 years old in 333 areas across the four countries, assessing their knowledge, attitudes, intentions, and perceptions regarding migration issues. The results showed significant differences (and even some peculiarities) from country to country. In Guinea, MaM activities generally increased the knowledge and perceptions related to the risks of irregular migration, reducing the intention to migrate irregularly by 64%. Similarly, in Senegal the intervention significantly increased the knowledge and perceptions related to the risks of irregular migration as well as those associated with the socio-economic possibilities in the country; however, the intention to migrate irregularly decreased only slightly. The intervention in the Gambia seemed effective in improving perceptions of risks associated with irregular migration; however, it also had reversed effects noted on knowledge related to opportunities in the country. Interestingly, the intentions to migrate irregularly among the surveyed population increased by 11%. The impact assessment in Nigeria, instead, failed due to the very low attendance to the campaign.

Despite the increasing use of migration campaigns, only few of them have been evaluated through randomised controlled trials, with some people (constituting the treatment group) watching a short

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[103] Dunsch, Tjaden, and Quiviger, 'Migrants as Messengers'.

[104] Ida Marie Savio Vammen, '"When Migrants Become Messengers": Affective Borderwork and Aspiration Management in Senegal', *Geopolitics* 27, no. 5 (20 October 2022): 1410–29, https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2021.1913408.

[105] Bia-Zafinikamia, Tjaden, and Gninafon, 'The Impact of Mobile Cinema Events on Potential Migrants in Guinea Impact Evaluation Report'; see also Tjaden and Gninafon, 'Raising Awareness About the Risk of Irregular Migration'.

[106] https://www.migrantsasmessengers.org/.

[107] Oumarou Hebie, Mawugnon F.E. Sessou, and Jasper Tjaden, 'Irregular Migration from West Africa: Robust Evaluation of Peer-to-Peer Awareness-Raising Activities in Four Countries' (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2023).

documentary on migration issues and participating in the following debate with returnees, while others from the control group watching instead a 'placebo' film screening not related to migration and not followed by any discussion. The lack of rigorous assessment makes it difficult to establish the connection between the intervention and the result, thus compromising the outcomes of these campaigns. Belgium, for instance, claimed that the two migration information campaigns targeting potential migrants and returnees in Armenia and Georgia, implemented in 2013-2014 and 2016 respectively, reduced the number of potential irregular migrants from both countries; however, neither of the campaigns have been evaluated.[108] When a clear and rigorous evaluation process is missing, it is difficult to correctly pinpoint the factor that makes potential migrants choose not to leave their country (or to do so in a regular way) and, therefore, to understand the aspect of the campaign that 'worked'.[109] Besides, as Jinkang et al. notice, the message itself can be received differently by different people, and 'the intermediation of the actors – including journalists – in charge of disseminating campaigns' messages and materials can transform or even subvert these messages'.[110]

Besides, although they do not usually have a wide reach, information and awareness raising campaigns employing returnees might have a **much more powerful impact** than conventional television or social media campaigns. The direct connection between returnees and the audience can indeed add 'an element of direct social exchange which has the potential to create more resilient trust and credibility'.[111] In this respect, a **combination of facts and emotions** has often been employed in the design of the campaign message. Communicating facts is certainly important, especially considering that potential migrants often rely on unreliable or deceptive sources that provide misleading information to lure them or to save their own face (as in the case of returnees and diaspora members).[112] Facts alone, however, 'do not change hearts and minds'.[113] Despite providing concrete information on migration, MaM campaigns have limited effects on factual knowledge such as the costs and duration of the journey or the legal procedures to arrive in the countries of destination. In some cases, facts can also be counterproductive. Shrestha, for example, has noticed that potential irregular migrants sometimes overestimate their mortality risks during the journey and therefore, when presented with correct information, might be more encouraged to leave their country.[114] Social and behavioural psychology tell us that messages get through if they have an emotional component, if they are personal – in other words, if they manage to establish a close connection between the messenger and the target group.

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[108] Audun Beyer, Jan-Paul Brekke, and Kjersti Thorbjørnsrud, 'Communicating Borders. Informing Migrants and Potential Asylum Seekers through Social Media' (Oslo: Institutt for samfunnsforskning, 2017).

[109] Tjaden, Morgenstern, and Laczko, 'Evaluating the Impact of Information Campaigns in the Field of Migration'.

[110] Alagie Jinkang, Valentina Cappi, and Pierluigi Musarò, '"Back Way" Migration to Europe: The Role of Journalists in Disseminating Information Campaigns in The Gambia', *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 38, no. 6 (2 November 2023): 901–18, https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2022.2156375.

[111] Tjaden and Dunsch, 'The Effect of Peer-to-Peer Risk Information on Potential Migrants'.

[112] Qaisrani, Hahn-Schaur, and Hendow, 'Irregular Migration Dynamics from Pakistan and the Role of Information Campaigns: PARIM Final Report'.

[113] Tjaden, 'Assessing the Impact of Awareness-Raising Campaigns on Potential Migrants – What We Have Learned so Far'.

[114] Maheshwor Shrestha, 'Get Rich or Die Tryin': Perceived Earnings, Perceived Mortality Rates, and Migration Decisions of Potential Work Migrants from Nepal', *The World Bank Economic Review* 34, no. 1 (2020): 1–27, https://doi.org/10.1093/wber/lhz023, see also Tijan L Bah and Catia Batista, 'Understanding Willingness to Migrate Illegally : Evidence from a Lab in the Field Experiment', NOVAFRICA Working Paper Series (Carcavelos: NOVAFRICA, 2019), www.novafrica.org.

A study conducted by Seefar and Ecorys has shown how the employment of returnees and diaspora as messengers can provide a **stronger sense of familiarity among the audience**, increasing the emotional connection between the latter and the messengers.[115] The inclusion of personal stories and experiences into the discussion, the study highlights, makes returnees and diaspora members more knowledgeable and reliable than any other actor in the field, potentially influencing migration relevant decisions and aspirations. According to the study, however, the employment of returnees can backfire if the latter are perceived as having failed at their migration intention or even stigmatised after their return, or even if the campaign itself advocates for not migrating at all, without considering other possibilities. The study shows that the effectiveness of the employment of returnees and diaspora members in migration information and awareness raising campaigns is not straightforward, but rather dependent on the motivation of the messengers, their community influence, the relevance of their experiences, and their communication skills.[116] Still, well-designed information campaigns with clear objectives, impactful messages, and trustworthy messengers, can increase awareness of the risks of irregular migration among potential migrants and reduce their intention to migrate irregularly.[117]

5.3   Insights from the field: information needs highlighted by returnees

5.3.1   Introduction

In this section, we utilise the sample to identify the primary information gaps, as emphasised by returnees, community and religious leaders, as well as stakeholders. Their interviews allow the understanding of how the information that returnees had prior to the trip differed from what they experienced on the road and when they arrived. Based on the identification of these information gaps, further specific recommendations for MIRAMI are provided for designing the migration information campaigns in the most effective way that would help frame campaign messages, identify the most effective channels of communication, as well as engage returnees as messengers.

5.3.2   Information gaps, misconceptions, and migration experiences

Multiple studies have consistently demonstrated that a significant number of migrants start their journeys with limited or strongly biased information.[118] When potential migrants perceive that they lack adequate information, regardless of its actual accuracy, they may be more inclined and more likely to receive, trust, or use new information provided by information campaigns.[119] IOM Iraq's DTM revealed that migrants' lack of sufficient information on migration to Europe led to substantial misconceptions about the living conditions in the destination country. This shows how important decision-making processes are, especially with regards to the migrants' reasons/drivers for migrating and their choice of the preferred country of destination.[120]

During our fieldwork, questions on their awareness of the risks of migration were addressed, as well the potential influence of returnees on others considering migration. Initially, the majority of respondents acknowledged their limited knowledge about the specifics of migration routes, but they believed to have more awareness of the associated risks and dangers. This dual awareness highlights a complex understanding where **the lack of detailed route information coexists with a general**

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[115] Seefar and ECORYS, 'Study on Best Practices in Irregular Migration Awareness Campaigns,' 2021.
[116] Seefar and ECORYS.
[117] Tjaden and Dunsch, 'The Effect of Peer-To-Peer Risk Information on Potential Migrants,' 2021.
[118] IRFAD, 'Needs Assessment Study on Migration Information in Iraq'.
[119] Dunsch, Tjaden, and Quiviger, 'Migrants as Messengers'.
[120] IOM Iraq-DTM, 'Migration Flows From Iraq To Europe'.

understanding of the risky nature of the journey. As mentioned earlier, the knowledge of risks associated with irregular migration does not change the behaviour or intentions of individuals from taking on such journeys.

Q. Were you aware of all the route options outside the country?

No, not at all. We were aware of the risks and difficulties, we heard about that, and we knew that some people had lost their lives on the route.

The problem was with the wrong information that was provided to me. Those who told me about Sweden, did not give me accurate information. They painted a rosy picture of the country. When I got there, I found that the reality was different than what they had described. The problem was with the misleading information that I was given (Returnee - Baghdad – FGD)

This issue highlighted a lack of information about migration destinations, with returnees recounting that they **received overly optimistic or inaccurate portrayals of life in destination countries**, which, in turn, led to a **stark contrast between expectations and reality upon arrival**. This discrepancy underscores the impact of misleading information on the decision-making process of migrants.

5.3.3   Information Channels and their impact

The interviews also shed light on the dynamics of information exchange and decision-making regarding migration. A striking theme was the reliance on **personal networks** and the **internet** for information about migration, which also often leads to misconceptions and unrealistic expectations. A 2018 study conducted by IOM-DTM among Iraqi returnees highlighted that diaspora and networks abroad are known to have an influence on migrants' decision-making process. When asked if they had family and friends in Europe before they left, 55% of the respondents stated that they had family in at least one European country, and 58% reported to have friends somewhere in Europe.[121] This very much aligns with our results, where all nine respondents reported having family members or friends in the destination countries who assisted and encouraged the respondents to take this journey.

Links abroad

In examining the interviews, a recurring theme emerges regarding the influential role of connections and links abroad in shaping the decisions and experiences of migrants. Whether seeking financial, moral, or informational support, individuals consistently turn to their **network of friends and family** who have already taken on this migration journey previously.

In general, we asked those who had already travelled, friends, for support… Financial support.
(Returnee – Baghdad – FGD)

Several other respondents share instances of relying on information from **close connections**. Notably, one individual credits the accuracy of information provided by his brother for a successful and legal migration to France.

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[121] IOM -DTM, 'Iraqi Returnees from Europe: A Snapshot Report on Iraqi Nationals upon Return in Iraq' (Geneva: International Organization for Migration - Displacement Tracking Matrix, 2018), https://dtm.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl1461/files/reports/DP.1635%20-%20Iraq_Returnees_Snapshot-Report%20-%20V5.pdf.

I got enough information about my migration from my brother who made the same steps and made it to the UK. He was very supportive in sharing very accurate information. So, I managed to arrive to France completely legally. (01-SUL, Male, 43 years old)

Family bonds emerged also as powerful motivators, with uncles, sisters, and other relatives living abroad acting as influential figures encouraging and inspiring migration decisions. This support significantly impacts the perceptions and aspirations of potential migrants.

My uncle encouraged me when he was living there in Germany. I got encouraged by my uncle to come and start a new life there. (03-SUL, Male, 43 years old)

My sister was living in the UK with her family since the 1980s. I didn't really have any friends or family or people to interact with in Dohuk. My sister encouraged me to come and join her. (02-DOH-Female, 49 years old)

In essence, links abroad encapsulate the web of connections, both familial and social, that guide and influence migrants along their journey. These links serve as agents for support, information, and inspiration, collectively contributing to the diverse and interconnected tapestry of migration experiences.

The engagement with social networks abroad is key. The influence of family and friends abroad in disseminating information to prospective migrants is generally assumed to be strong, as they can provide information on migration routes and risks, as well as on the situation in the country of destination.[122]

I chose to go to Germany because I have relatives and friends living there for a while. (01-ERB, Male, 37 years old)

Role of Returnees in shaping migration decisions

During the FGD, the discussion shifted toward the perceived role of returnees as influencers in the context of migration decisions. While some respondents indicated their willingness to give advice to potential migrants, this depends on the individual situation of each potential migrant. Moreover, some individuals reported being approached by friends and family members for insights into their migration experiences. Their response typically involves sharing truthful accounts of their journey, emphasising the personal nature of the decision to migrate. This approach indicates a sense of responsibility to provide honest reflections, while recognising the pressures and circumstances that each potential migrant may face. The returnees articulate the importance of individual agency[123] in their choices, indicating that migration is a decision deeply rooted in personal desires and situations, rather than being influenced by external opinions or narratives.[124] According to a respondent:

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[122] Ruta Nimkar and Bram Frouws, 'Split Loyalties: Mixed Migration and the Diaspora Connection', RMMS Discussion Paper (Copenhagen: Danish Refugee Council, 2018), https://mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/023_split-loyalties.pdf.

[123] Czaika, Bijak, and Prike, 'Migration Decision-Making and Its Key Dimensions'.

[124] Paolo Boccagni, 'Aspirations and the Subjective Future of Migration: Comparing Views and Desires of the "Time Ahead" through the Narratives of Immigrant Domestic Workers', *Comparative Migration Studies* 5, no. 1 (December 2017): 4, https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-016-0047-6.

When they ask me, I always tell them the truth. I do not give them any advice. This decision depends on every person and the pressure they are subject to. (Returnee - Baghdad – FGD)

In the interview conducted with ETTC, it was revealed that **returnees play a significant role as influencers or messengers**. They are often approached by friends and family who inquire about their experiences and seek advice about migration. The responses of the returnees, along with the experiences they share, may contribute to shaping the perceptions and decisions of the potential migrants. This role of returnees as informal advisors and sources of firsthand information highlights the importance of their experiences in influencing migration decisions.

The family, the parents who pressure their sons to leave again. They don't force them, but they exert some pressure, as we heard from some cases. With other cases, returnees made the choice themselves as they prefer not to stay here. (ETTC interview, 2023)

Returnees find themselves in a unique position, often approached by friends and relatives considering migration, particularly through irregular means. Their personal migration stories, marked by challenges and risks, serve as powerful testimonials that have a considerable impact on other people's decisions. These stories often lead to a re-evaluation of migration plans, showcasing the profound influence of first-hand experiences in shaping attitudes and choices about migration. As emerged from some of the respondents' testimonials:

Friends and relatives are actually contacting me and asking if it is a wise step to leave illegally. And they were asking me about the smuggler contact details. But I told them my story, which made a lot of them to rethink and never try to leave. (01-ERB, Male, 37 years old)

In my experience, I can say that some of my friends wanted to do it illegally after me. But then when they heard of my story, some regain the senses and didn't leave. But some others took the risk anyway. (02-ERB, Male, 34 years old)

Addressing information gaps in reintegration

The stories from returnees emphasise a significant gap in formal reintegration support, coupled with the influential role of personal experiences and social networks in the migration decision-making process. Many returnees expressed a distinct **lack of awareness regarding available reintegration services or information**, highlighting a notable deficiency in structured guidance and assistance for those readjusting to life post-migration.

There were no reintegration information sources that I found when I came back. And I don't know what support or services would help with reintegration. (01-ERB, Male, 37 years old)

In this respect, family and social networks offer emotional backing and practical assistance, filling the void left by institutional support systems. They become the de facto source of information and guidance, demonstrating the critical role of personal connections in the reintegration journey. In essence, these accounts reveal that social networks often replace the formal provision of reintegration support. The complexity of migration decision-making is laid bare, shaped by a blend of individual aspirations, risk awareness, and the influence of personal experiences.

It was a decision that we took individually. I don't think that anyone can make us take such a decision. We wouldn't have gone if we didn't want to. (Returnee – Baghdad – FGD)

Despite the information discrepancies consistently mentioned by returnees, the IOM clarified in an interview that they are actively addressing this issue. They highlighted on-going coordination with mission counterparts in host or transit countries, emphasising a comprehensive approach covering the entire continuum of the process from pre-departure to return. Integration assistance, the operational footprint of IOM, and close relationships with consular authorities, Iraqi embassies, and government counterparts in various host countries enable the sharing of information and the promotion of awareness regarding services. This collaborative effort is particularly critical given the variations in asylum systems in the main countries from which migrants are returning. The IOM emphasised that this information is made available well in advance for those interested, and upon arrival individuals receive information through the NRM system and from border officials regarding potential assistance options. The responsibility for deciding whether to opt for AVRR or alternative solutions, or to accept assistance upon arrival, ultimately lies with the individual. The organisation stressed the importance of ongoing reminders about these mechanisms.

Moreover, observations from the IOM highlighted that migrants may not approach consular services in the countries of destination, relying instead on diaspora associations or their network – whose information provision may however not be reliable. In this respect, the IOM emphasised the importance of building trust both in countries of destination and when individuals are returning, as well as the importance of transparency of procedures and services, so that assistance can be provided to the beneficiaries without discrimination, with integrity and honesty.

5.4 Lessons learnt: Uptake of advice

The uptake of advice from Iraqi returnees and community leaders regarding migration presents a spectrum of perspectives, reflecting diverse experiences and outcomes. A common theme is **caution against irregular migration** due to its inherent risks and uncertainties. Returnees often highlight the deceitful promises of smugglers and emphasise the importance of being well-informed about the challenges and realities of migration. They stress the need for clear understanding and preparation before making such a life-altering decision. One returnee strongly advises against irregular migration, citing the risks involved and the potential for misleading promises by smugglers. Others vary in their advice, with some suggesting a focus on self-improvement within their own country, while others acknowledge the appeal of potential success abroad but warn of the gamble involved. The emphasis is on the unpredictability of migration and the need for caution.

My advice to others would be 'don't do it'. It is risky, and the smuggler can promise you a lot of fake stuff just to get more money. Having more information can at least make us aware of what we will face and what are the possible solutions. It is important to see the situation clearly beforehand and then decide, but I did not have this. (01-ERB, Male, 37 years old)

It is a difficult experience and a risky one. I don't recommend anybody going through it. (03-ERB, Male, 39 years old)

Other perspectives are somewhat more balanced, with some **advocating for legal migration paths** while understanding the reasons that might compel someone to choose irregular methods. The advice reflects a recognition of the complex circumstances that lead to migration decisions. In general, many respondents recognise the individual nature of each person's situation, suggesting that the decision to migrate depends on personal circumstances, including desperation and perceived opportunities. The advice from Iraqi returnees and community leaders leans towards discouraging dangerous journeys, emphasising the importance of informed decision-making, legal pathways, and exploring

local opportunities. This advice reflects a nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding migration and the desire to prevent others from facing similar risks and challenges.

The advice I am trying to give is that people should try to do it but legally. I don't blame people if they do it illegally… we all pass through difficult times and things indeed force us to leave in the end. Again, everyone has a different story and circumstances, so I'm not judging people doing it one way or the other. (01-DOH, Male, 30 years old)

Some of the community leaders highlighted the **ineffectiveness of awareness-raising campaigns without accompanying practical support**. They call for field visits and direct engagement with the community to better understand and address their needs. The importance of practical support over mere information dissemination is a recurring theme in their discussion.

We do not need awareness-raising anymore and mere words, these people need actual assistance.

Field visits should be organised to map the needs of these people. You can know what their needs are if you ask them about it. (Community Leaders – Baghdad – FGD)

A significant aspect of their approach involves fostering a sense of national loyalty and debunking the myths about life in Europe. They emphasise the importance of gradual reintegration into society, highlighting the need for a step-by-step approach to help returnees readjust in their home country. Moreover, their role as scholars (as one leader referred to the group) also extends to **educating the wider community through teaching and public discourse**. They bear the responsibility of clarifying misconceptions about irregular migration and reintegration. They also advise on the involvement of mass media and civil society organisations, to recognise and utilise the skills acquired by returnees in Europe, providing them with job opportunities that can facilitate their smoother reintegration into the community.

We need to raise their awareness about the love of their nation, advising them to foster loyalty towards the country. Moreover, we must clarify that the paradise they have been shown about the EU is not accurate; they are myths. The process of reintegrating them into society needs to occur step by step. (Community Leaders – Erbil – FGD)

5.5   Summary and ethical considerations for engaging returnees

As emerged from the findings, there are several approaches to design migration information campaigns for potential migrants and engage returnees in their implementation. However, there are some other ethical considerations that might affect both the legitimacy and the implementation of migration information campaigns. While general ethical considerations regarding the design and implementation of migration information campaigns have been discussed in the previous ICMPD research,[125] here we will focus on more specific reflections concerning the participation of returnees in such campaigns.

The first issue is precisely related to the **possibility of engaging with returnees**. Optimity Advisors and Seefar, for example, have noted the difficulties not only in identifying returnees in certain contexts,

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[125] Katharina Hahn-Schaur, 'Awareness Raising and Information Campaigns on the Risks of Irregular Migration from Pakistan: Background Report' (Vienna: ICMPD, 2021).

but also in persuading them to engage with the campaign.[126] Considering the often-traumatic experiences that returnees might have faced during their journey, their unease in sharing their story and their feelings in public is obvious. In this respect, the MRC might play an important role in sensibly identifying those returnees that could potentially contribute to the implementation of information campaigns, as they often are the first point of contact for returnees returning to Iraq.

Even when returnees accept to participate in the campaign, **their engagement should be carefully assessed and reflected in view of their experiences and modalities of return**. Although our research respondents do not seem to have faced stigma and discrimination upon return to their communities, the process of reintegration of returnees should be accounted for when contemplating their engagement in migration information campaigns.[127] Even when returnees have returned voluntarily and with enough financial resources, they might still face social or psychological challenges in reintegrating in their communities, especially after many years abroad. The mere fact of being a returnee, therefore, is not sufficient to engage with the campaign, since the particularly negative experience of migration or return might affect themselves, their credibility of the messenger and exacerbate their reintegration in the local community.

Similarly, it is important to **consider the level of engagement of returnees**. Participants in campaigns are generally volunteers who receive a dedicated training and contribute to the public discussion by providing their story and answering questions from the audience. While the voluntary aspect of their work should reflect their genuine engagement in the campaign and their selfless relationship with their community, some authors have criticised the class and racial divide between returnees and others involved, such as the representatives of international organisations.[128] While the former are often asked to dedicate great amount of time for their participation in the campaigns without financial incentives, the latter enjoy instead generous compensation for their work abroad. We believe, therefore, that the design and implementation of the campaign should reflect on the fair contribution for those involved in the campaign.

Another aspect to consider is the **relationship between returnees and participants**. In highly diversified countries such as Iraq, it is imperative that returnees and others involved share the same ethnic and religious backgrounds for the campaign to be effective and sustainable.[129] Besides, while campaigns generally tend to engage with more educated and relatively better off messengers, some have instead highlighted the importance for returnees and others involved to share the same socio-economic background, in order not to create further gaps with the audience.[130] Having the same ethnic, religious, and socio-economic background would allow to achieve a three-fold purpose: first, to better respond to the needs of a specific community through targeted information; second, to establish a stronger connection between the messenger and the target group; third, to implement the campaign in a smoother and more efficient way.

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[126] Optimity Advisors and Seefar, 'How West African Migrants Engage with Migration Information En-Route to Europe' (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2017).

[127] Seefar and ECORYS, 'Study on Best Practices in Irregular Migration Awareness Campaigns'.

[128] Anissa Maâ, Julia Van Dessel, and Ida Marie Savio Vammen, 'Can Migrants Do the (Border)Work? Conflicting Dynamics and Effects of "Peer-to-Peer" Intermediation in North and West Africa', *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 38, no. 6 (2 November 2023): 995–1013, https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2022.2108111.

[129] Seefar, '3E Impact. Ethical, Engaged & Effective. Running Communications on Irregular Migration from Kos to Kandahar'.

[130] Seefar and ECORYS, 'Study on Best Practices in Irregular Migration Awareness Campaigns'.

Finally, a brief consideration on the **message of the campaign**. Whether having a deterrent, persuasive, or emotional character, such campaigns have been criticised by scholars from different background, who contested their subtle role in governing migration, in particular by reproducing real or imaginary boundaries in the mind of participants. [131] While the specific character of the message has been briefly examined before, it is important to mention that messages should have the best interest of the target group at their heart. In this respect, although sharing the negative experiences of returnees might have an important impact among the target group, campaigns should also spread positive stories as well as correct and reliable information on migration journeys, the rights of migrants in the countries of transit and destination, and legal alternatives to irregular migration.

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[131] Alagie Jinkang, Valentina Cappi, and Pierluigi Musarò, '"Back Way" Migration to Europe: The Role of Journalists in Disseminating Information Campaigns in The Gambia', *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 38, no. 6 (2 November 2023): 901–18, https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2022.2156375; Pécoud, 'Migration Control as Communication?'; Vammen, '"When Migrants Become Messengers"'; Jill Williams and Kate Coddington, 'Deterring Transnational Migration: Public Information Campaigns, Affective Governmentality, and the Family', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 25, no. 2 (15 March 2023): 201–22, https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2022.2134046.

6   Conclusions: reflecting on returnees' overall experience

Drawing from theoretical analysis and empirical findings, this report offers valuable insight that can inform the design of an effective migration information campaign targeted at potential irregular migrants from Iraq. It does so by looking at the unique experiences of returnees, capturing not only their own migration journeys, needs for information, and aspirations, but also their potential role as influencers in the implementation of such campaigns. In this respect, the report has, first, theoretically elaborated on the process of decision-making on migration among potential migrants, showing how this might be shaped, among other things, by narratives, perceptions, messages, and influences of returnees in their communities. Then, drawing on interviews and FGDs with returnees, the report has examined their experiences to identify knowledge gaps, information needs, and effective ways to potentially engage them in the implementation of information campaign.

As emerged from the literature and confirmed from the findings, social networks have a powerful role on the decision-making process on migration of potential migrants. The information that social networks provide is generally believed to be accurate and reliable. Family members and friends abroad, in particular, seem to be relevant and trustworthy sources of information, as they can provide information not only on migration routes and risks but also on the situation in the country of destination. However, studies have shown how such information is often unreliable, due to misinformation or misconception on migration issues, the necessity for diaspora and returnees to save their face and present a more positive scenario, or the changing (often worsening) legal, social, and political framework in the country of destination.

The interviews with returnees confirmed this assumption, as many of them declared that most of the **information they received before migrating turned out to be inaccurate**. In some cases, the ideal image of Europe that they had before migrating not only clashed with the difficult reality once they arrived in the country of destination, but also constituted a reason for their return. The personal experience of migrants – often more negative than initially envisaged or expected - may then affect their own interpretation of migration, prompting them to reflect on whether the whole migration journey was successful as well as on what they could have done differently to improve it. While some respondents highlighted that the option of irregular migration was the first choice, either because it was perceived comparatively quicker and easier or because information on alternative migration options was not readily available, they also pointed out that **irregular migration was an act of irresponsibility**, fraught with physical risks, and that they should have tried to migrate through legal ways even if it would have taken more time.

In virtue of their first-hand experience of migration, returnees can therefore constitute important influencers in the process of decision making on migration. In particular, this is what we draw from our findings:

➢   With regard to the information possessed before the migration journey, returnees seemed to have **more knowledge of the risks and dangers associated with the migration journey, than of the migration routes**. Although an increased awareness of the risks of irregular migration does not necessarily dissuade individuals from taking on such journeys, it nevertheless highlights a complex understanding and varied perception of the migration process among potential migrants, indicating the need to provide more reliable and accurate information on migration.

➤ **Returnees are often approached by friends and family who inquire about their experiences and seek advice about migration, particularly through irregular means**. Returnees are often willing to share truthful accounts of their journey, providing honest reflections while recognising the pressures and circumstances that each potential migrant may face. Their personal migration stories might have a considerable impact on other people's decisions, shaping the perceptions and decisions of the potential migrants and, in some cases, leading to a re-evaluation of irregular migration plans.

➤ The **post-return reflection on their migration journey also brings to light the hardships and risks associated with irregular migration**. The experiences they had during their own irregular journey have left a lasting impact, leading to the re-evaluation of the risks involved and a stronger inclination towards safety and legality. For this reason, when asked what they would do differently, or what they would recommend to potential migrants, several returnees expressed a clear preference for contributing to the social and economic development of their country or pursuing migration through legal channels.

➤ A common theme is **caution against irregular migration due to its inherent risks and uncertainties**. Returnees often highlight the deceitful promises of smugglers and emphasise the importance of being well-informed about the challenges and realities of irregular migration. Some acknowledged the appeal of potential success abroad but warn against the gamble involved, where outcomes can range from achieving wealth to returning home with nothing. They stress the need for clear understanding and preparation before making such a life-altering decision.

When analysing the role of returnees and their impact on decision making processes, it is important to have a closer look at their ecosystem (i.e., their close social networks, their communities of origin, as well as the general service providers), understand its dynamics, and its (positive or negative) impact on the returnee's everyday life.[132] For this reason, drawing from our finding, we can advance the following for the implementation of migration information campaigns:

➤ **The role of returnees in influencing migration decision-making can be effective, especially if they are part of the broad social network of potential migrants**. Returnees seem to act already as messengers, as they are often asked by their family and friends to share their personal experiences on migration. However, in order to be effective, campaign should aim to **engage returnees within the same communities that comprise the target audience**.

➤ By actively **engaging returnees in information campaigns** with their firsthand and authentic perspective on migration, the impact of such campaigns can be enhanced. Returnees can indeed play a pivotal role in raising awareness about the risks associated with irregular migration, as the stories that they share are credible and relatable for prospective migrants.

➤ With regard to the campaign message, **it is recommended that the focus is on specific information**, such as alternative legal migration pathways, that potential migrants do not seem to possess or, if they do, have scarce and blurred knowledge about. As emerged from the findings, returnees and, in general, those who prepare themselves for migration, seem to

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[132] Biella-Battista et al., 'Reintegration Handbook: Practical Guidance on the Design, Implementation and Monitoring of Reintegration Assistance'.

have quite a good awareness of the risks of irregular migration. Therefore, a campaign focused solely on such topic risks being ineffective.

➤ In the pursuit of effective migration information dissemination, a strategic recommendation involves the **active engagement of community and religious leaders in information campaigns**. The pivotal role assumed by these leaders transcends their influential voices within the community, extending to the resonance and impact that their messages carry. Leveraging the trusted positions these leaders hold, both as opinion-makers and moral authorities, ensures that accurate migration information reaches a broader audience.

➤ Information campaigns should also specifically address the reintegration mechanisms as one of the stakeholders highlighted.

While we see much potential in the involvement of returnees in the implementation of migration information campaigns, we have nevertheless also noticed a discrepancy between the reintegration measures provided by governmental institutions and the actual support – or information thereof – received by returnees. Some returnees described prolonged periods of adjustment upon their return, marked by psychological distress stemming from past migration experiences and the difficulty of reintegrating in their community and establishing a livelihood. This is particularly evident among those individuals who have returned without financial resources or stable employment prospects. For this reason, we believe that it is also paramount to **increase reintegration services and programs both in qualitative and quantitative terms, improve the dialogue between governmental entities and returnees regarding available and potential reintegration services, and enhance the information channels to facilitate a more widespread communication on the available reintegration services and programmes**.

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8 Annex 1 – List of all returnees and stakeholders interviewed

Code	Age when migrated	Gender	Year of migration	Year of return	Time abroad	Final (or intended) destination	Return type	Origin in Iraq	Time since return
01-ERB	29	Male	2015	2015	1 month	Germany	Abandoned on way	IDP	9 years
02-ERB	26	Male	2016	2016	3 months	UK	Deported from Latvia	Local resident	8 years
03-ERB	30	Male	2014	2019	5 years	Austria	Voluntary (no support)	IDP	5 years
01-SUL	26	Male	2005	2011	5 years	UK	Voluntary (no support)	Local resident	13 years
02-SUL	24	Male	2002	2016	14 years	UK	Voluntary (no support)	Local resident	8 years
03-SUL	24	Male	2004	2015	11 years	Germany	Voluntary (no support)	Local resident	9 years
01-DOH	24	Male	2017	2021	5 years	UK	Voluntary (no support)	IDP	3 years
02-DOH	27	Female	2001	2021	20 years	UK	Voluntary (no support)	Local resident	3 years
03-DOH	22	Male	2005	2018	13 years	Germany	Voluntary (no support)	Local resident	6 years

Governmental Stakeholders	
Stakeholder	**Location**
MoMD	Baghdad
MoLSA	Baghdad
JCC	Erbil
EJCC	Erbil
DFR	Erbil

Non-governmental and intergovernmental stakeholders	
Stakeholder	**Location**
ETTC	Baghdad
Rwanga Foundation	Erbil
Blumont	Erbil
GMAZ-GIZ	Erbil
IOM	Baghdad

Focus Group Discussions

Baghdad

	Gender	Final (or intended) destination	Return type	Year of migration	Year of return	Time abroad
1	Female	Austria	NA	NA	2023	NA
2	Male	Germany	NA	2021	2023	2 years
3	Male	Germany	Deported	October 2022	2023	10 months
4	Female	Lithuania	NA	2017	2022	2 years
5	Male	Sweden	Deported	2015	2023	8 years
6	Male	Sweden	NA	2014	2023	9 years
7	Male	Sweden	NA	2015	2022	7 years
8	Female	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
9	Male	Germany	NA	2022	2023	1 years

Erbil

	Gender	Relation	Final (or intended) destination	Year of migration	Year of return	Time abroad
1	Female	Wife & Husband	Germany	NA	NA	NA
2	Male			2021	2023	2 years
3	Female	Wife & Husband	Germany	2016	2018	2 years
4	Male			1) 2000 2) 2016	1) 2012 2) 2018	1) 12 years 2) 2 years
5	Male		Sweden	2015	2018	3 years
6	Female	Wife & Husband	Sweden	2015	2023	8 years
7	Male			2015	2022	7 years
8	Female	Wife & Husband	Sweden	She migrated with her family when she was 8 years old	2021	NA
9	Male				2021	NA
10	Male		Intended: UK. France (2 months); Germany (6 months)	2017	2018	1 year

11	Male		Germany	NA	2018	