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Finding One’s Place in Chaos

Returnees’ Reintegration Experiences in Northern Iraq

Katja Mielke \ BICC

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SUMMARY

Migration in northern Iraq is a product of global, postcolonial processes driven by highly unequal international relations of global capitalism and geopolitics. With a focus on 'reintegration' experiences of returnees to northern Iraq who have left abroad over the last four decades and returned since the 1990s, this *Working Paper* takes into view a myriad of people who had very different reasons for migrating—either for conflict/political and/or economic reason—and returning at some or several points in time. While their experiences after return with settling (back) in are highly individual, this *Paper* focuses on reintegration as a process from an emic perspective. It analyses the experiences of compelled and self-decided returnees in re-establishing themselves after return by looking at their return preparedness—understood as the willingness and readiness to return—at the individual and institutional level. Therefore, four reintegration dimensions (economic, social, psychological, political-structural) form the lens for the investigation. Studying (northern) Iraq, among other origin and return countries for migrants in Europe, is unique because financial remittances do not constitute a main motivation for emigration as, e.g., in West Africa or the Western Balkans. Instead, Iraqi Kurds seek a better life, and their migration entails the search for autonomy and often signifies a political act of emancipation from governance failure in the origin context.

Main findings

The main driver for emigration from northern Iraq is governance failure

Respectively, the adverse structural and cultural environment for return in Iraq and the KRG is not favourable and constitutes a major incentive for re- or onward migration of returnees from abroad.

Kurdish migrants' objective to obtain a foreign ('stable') passport and citizenship reflects many Iraqi citizens' perception of recurrent crises and future uncertainty

Despite seeking to escape crises and instability, Iraqi migrants' journey abroad and eventual return is not perceived in diachronic linearity where reintegration is sought with a stable vision and endpoint but is experienced as an expression of desire for a transnational way of belonging.

Reintegration assistance can only effectively enhance return preparedness once it is embedded in large-scale structural reforms of the Kurdish and Iraqi political economies

The effects of the adverse politico-cultural and economic reintegration context on returnees' reintegration in northern Iraq are not remedied by reintegration assistance measures that target individuals and institutions alone.

Individual reintegration trajectories are gendered and classed and depend on social networks the returnee can mobilise upon return

Employment and motility—the ability to be mobile and realise mobility aspirations—are the two crucial ingredients for leading a life in dignity after return. In most cases, social networks are maintained throughout migration and do not need to be re-established newly upon return.

Return migration to northern Iraq has no influence on social change in local society in the short- to medium term

Accumulated frustration connected to the rejection of social innovations bears the potential of radicalisation in the medium to long term. However, entrenched power structures in northern Iraq have not allowed discontent to surface openly; instead, it finds its expression through 'exit on foot', i.e., continuous (r)emigration (desires).

Acknowledgements

The research benefitted tremendously from the discussions with the BICC project team; therefore, I thank Zeynep Şahin Mencütek, Markus Rudolf, Clara Schmitz-Pranghe and Ruth Vollmer. Furthermore, joint field research with (the late) Elke Grawert in October 2019 set the framework for the subsequent remote research under Covid-19 restrictions in 2020 and 2021. Several young Iraqi scholars who collaborated with the author as field assistants made this possible: Ahmad Bilbas (2019–2020), Ahmed Abdou (2019–2022), Botan Mohammed (2019–2020) and Hussam Rekani (2021–2022). Without them, this empirical research could not have been conducted. Each interview and conversation intruded into interview partners' daily routines and possibly raised uncomfortable thoughts and reflections, for the tolerance and endurance of which I would like to wholeheartedly thank all returnees and experts both in Iraq and Germany. Gratitude also goes to the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) for generously funding this research between 2019 and 2022.

The study has been facilitated by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) as part of the research project "Trajectories of reintegration: The impacts of displacement and return on social change". All views expressed in the study are the sole responsibility of the author and should not be attributed to BMZ or any other institution or person.

Introduction

Migration in northern Iraq—encompassing emigration, return, re- and onward migration, and the establishment of transnational ethnoscapes (Appadurai, 1990)—is a product of global, postcolonial processes driven by highly unequal international relations of global capitalism and geopolitics. With a focus on reintegration experiences of returnees to northern Iraq who had left abroad over the last four decades and have returned since the 1990s, this *Paper* takes into view a myriad of people who had very different reasons for migrating—either for conflict/political and/or economic reasons—and returning at some or several points in time. Likewise, their experiences after return with settling (back) in are highly individual (Hammond, 2014).

Northern Iraq and its mainly Kurdish population share a history of displacement due to political tension and persecution under the regime of Saddam Hussein until 2003.[1] Since 1995, Iraqi migrants have been among the main groups to seek asylum in Europe (BAMF, 2022, p. 22, cf. Paasche, 2020). With the onslaught of ISIS at a time of economic downturn in 2014, millions fled from Ninewa, Kirkuk, Dohuk, etc. to places abroad. Currently, Iraqis represent the third-largest group of asylum seekers in the European Union and in Germany.[2] Only around one-third of all Iraqi applicants in Germany are granted protection (31.9 per cent in 2020; 36.5 per cent in 2021), as refugees (22.2/26.3 per cent), via subsidiary protection (4.4/4.1 per cent) or a deportation ban (5.9/5.7 per cent). In 2020 and 2021, rejections amounted to 38.2 per cent and 40.1 per cent respectively. The interview sample for this *Working Paper* included many returnees to Iraq who decided to leave Germany or other European states after their asylum application failed or when they felt their cases were being delayed and they could not endure the 'waiting' (Brun, 2015) in one of the camps.

Thirty years after the so-called asylum compromise that excluded the right to asylum from the German constitution, not only Germany but most European states pursue restrictive asylum policies for domestic political reasons (Biehler et al., 2022). So-called assisted returns—in several cases facilitated by the migration countries based on cooperation agreements and arrangements with the country of origin, in this case Iraq, and entailing readmission obligations—conceal the instrumental 'fortress Europe' policy based on asylum processes that keep out those who seek freedom and a better life and who could be accommodated via the creation of labour migration channels instead. They are offered so-called voluntary return (and reintegration) packages (Assisted Voluntary Return/and Reintegration, AVR/R) as an incentive to return under the control of the migration country ('assisted'). Policymakers subscribe to the sedentary vision that returns can be incentivised by small-scale funding and that this would ensure 'sustainable returns' (Council of the EU, 2021, p. 3), the unrealistic idea that people's movements stop after return, and that they stay and remain put in Iraq. Available empirical evidence confirmed in this *Paper* points in the opposite direction: Onward and re-migration—including motility, understood as the hypothetical ability to be mobile and realise mobility aspirations in the future (Kaufman et al., 2004)—form one of the main ingredients (the other being employment) to what people understand as leading a life in dignity.

In this *Paper*, the focus on reintegration as a process involving multiple dimensions (e.g., economic, social, psychological, but also political-cultural) seeks to illustrate the experiences people go through after returning to northern Iraq to re-establish themselves in their origin society.

1 \ For limitations of space, the history of migration in Iraq, e.g., the large-scale displacements caused by the 2006–2007 civil war in the central governorates and Baghdad, when millions fled to neighbouring countries (Jordan, Syria) cannot be discussed here (cf. Romano, 2005, 2007; Ferris, 2008; Sassoon, 2011); the same applies to internal displacement, e.g., during ISIS-rule, from Ninewa to Erbil and other places in northern Iraq (cf. Costantini & Palani, 2018).

2 \ Germany is the main destination for Iraqi asylum seekers in Europe, with 15.064 in 2021 (62 per cent male, 38 per cent female, 62.8 [71.1] per cent Kurdish, 27.5 [21.2] per cent Arab in 2020 [2021]), 9,846 in 2020, and 13,742 in 2019 after a peak of 96,116 asylum applications in 2016 (BAMF, 2022, p. 23).

Reintegration (Assistance) as an Analytical Concept, Policy Objective and Programme

Reintegration can be understood as a process, outcome and policy objective and, as such, could be aided through programmatic measures, i.e., assistance. The concept of reintegration is highly academic and largely unknown in Iraq. When asking for reintegration in interviews at the national Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA) in Baghdad, the only reference was to prisoners and mentally ill persons who would be supported with reintegration measures by the government after their release from confinement (ES19). Likewise, among returnees, the concept of reintegration was either not known at all or not meaningful as they do not usually conceive the period after return as a linear construct that ends at one point and is fully met. For this reason, this *Working Paper* employs 'reintegration' as an academic term and for lack of an alternative concept but does not subscribe to its instrumental understanding and usage of the term in the policy realm, including the notion of sustainable reintegration (cf. Marino & Lietaert, 2022).[3] The same applies to the common policy-distinction of forced vs. voluntary return/ees (cf. Erdal & Oeppen, 2022). This is not reflected in return migrants' perceptions and responses as they usually felt to have no choice but to return and referred to the process in many cases as 'deportation' although they were using the assisted voluntary return schemes. To capture this emic notion of force, this *Paper* distinguishes terminologically between compelled vs (self-)decided returnees, the latter referring to migrants who were able to decide themselves when and how to return.

Studying (northern) Iraq, among other origin and return countries for migrants in Europe, is unique in the sense as financial remittances do not play as significant a role as in West-Africa or the Western Balkans. Often it is not the urge to support a family back home but rather a migrant's main motivation to build a better life for oneself—whether as an entire family or an individual. The recent movements of people from northern Iraq, in particular, must be interpreted as them seeking autonomy and signify an act of emancipation (DeGenova et al., 2018, p. 241), if not an outright political act (Monsutti, 2018) of subversive protest against structural-political conditions in the origin context. For investigating reintegration after compelled or self-decided return, the notion of return preparedness (Cassarino, 2004) serves as a guiding concept in this *Paper.* It comprises the willingness and readiness of migrants to return, the latter referring to the eventual (non)mobilisation of resources such as assets or social networks to smoothen their post-arrival process for all reintegration dimensions (social, economic, psychological). Importantly, the concept of return preparedness goes beyond the individual level and also includes the political-structural dimension of the return context ('institutional return preparedness'), referring to both the local and national framework conditions.

Data Base and Methodology

The research project[4] was guided by a qualitative social science approach aimed at understanding 'reintegration' in its multi-dimensionality and from a process perspective (Lietaert & Kuschminder, 2021), based on the following research questions: 'How do social and biographical factors—in the interplay with what type and duration of assistance—influence the reintegration of returnees and ensure long-term ef-

3 \ The International Migration Organisation (IOM) views reintegration as a process which enables individuals to re-establish the economic, social and psychosocial relationships needed to maintain life, livelihood and dignity and inclusion in civic life. It is sustainable when 'returnees have reached levels of economic self-sufficiency, social stability within their communities, and psychosocial well-being that allow them to cope with (re)migration drivers. Having achieved sustainable reintegration, returnees are able to make further migration decisions a matter of choice, rather than necessity' (IOM, 2022).

4 \ This *Working Paper* is part of a four-year comparative research project at BICC called 'Trajectories of reintegration: the impacts of displacement, migration and return on social change', funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), 2019-22.

fects?', 'Which livelihood options do returnees apply, and how could these be supported in the long term?'.

The findings of this *Paper* build upon qualitative fieldwork in Baghdad and northern Iraq (Kirkuk Ninewa, Sulemaniya, Erbil and Dohuk governorates, cf. Map) between 2019 and 2022, mainly relying on interviews and, to a lesser extent, participant observation. The interview process initially foresaw a first interview with returnees who had been abroad for at least one year and a second and third follow-up interview after six and 12 months.[5] However, this plan had to be adjusted in many cases (e.g., also accepting returnees with shorter stays abroad) due to the Covid-19 pandemic and related access restrictions to potential interviewees from early 2020 onwards.[6] Despite having declared their readiness for follow-up interviews, some initial interviewees were not available later because of re-migration or other reasons.

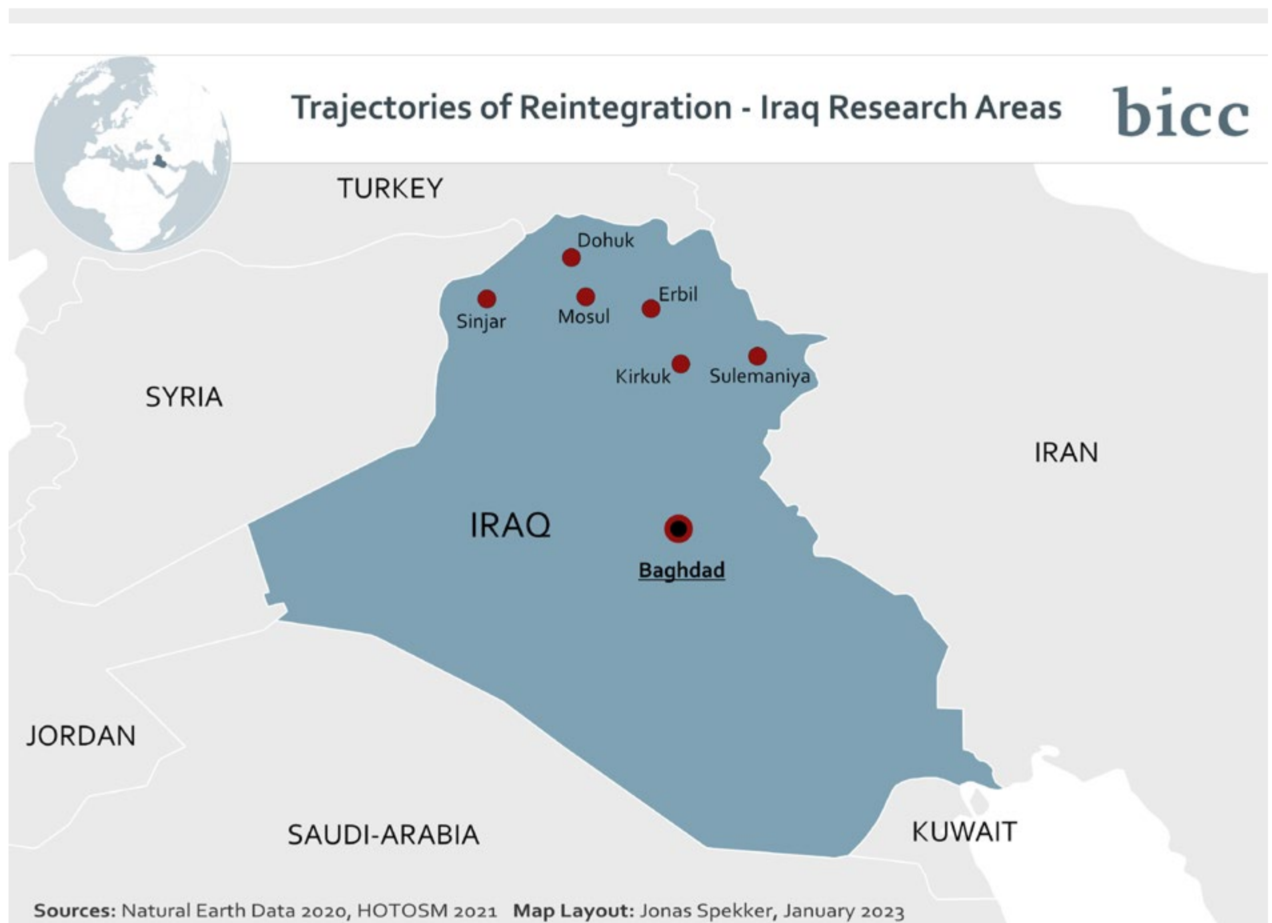
The interview sample consists of 173 interviews with Iraqi returnees from abroad (99 per cent identified as Kurdish respondents). For this *Working Paper*, the research team analysed 85 interviews with up to two follow-up interviews in depth. Forty-three interviewees had received some form of assistance (including AVRR cases), whereas the others were self-organised returnees (both compelled and self-decided). Furthermore, we conducted another 46 interviews with experts from government authorities, non-governmental service providers, international and local organisations and academics. All respondents have been granted anonymity, though their names are known to the researchers. In addition to using pseudonyms throughout the Paper to protect all respondents, as little information about time, place and characteristics as possible is mentioned. The interviews covered historical vs. recent return and reintegration experiences, returnees from the far (Europe, United States, Canada, Australia) and near abroad (Turkey, Iran, Jordan)[7], and assisted vs self-organised returnees who felt compelled to return or decided themselves how and when to return. Identifying/finding AVRR cases among returnees constituted a significant challenge for all interviewers. Where found, assisted returnees were particularly challenging to deal with because of common expectations from their side towards the researchers to receive some form of benefit in financial or other terms. We approached the sampling in different ways. On the one hand, we contacted NGOs providing reintegration assistance, including the GMAC; on the other hand, local research partners engaged in snowball sampling started off with the returnees' immediate family and friends. The interviewers found it difficult to talk about the political dimension of reintegration during times of political tension in Iraq, e.g., at the time preceding national elections in October 2021.

While the team commented on all 173 interviews, discussed and analysed them successively over the course of the research project, the quotes used in this *Working Paper* hail from 85 interviews coded with MAXQDA (a qualitative data analysis software) via inductive and deductive coding of categories arising from research questions plus open coding.

5 \ Follow-up interviews did not reveal major changes except in two dimensions given the time period the project covered with major events being the Covid-19 pandemic (2020-21) and the start of Russia's war in Ukraine in February 2022.

6 \ BICC researchers conducted fieldwork in Iraq in May 2019, September to October 2019, and April 2022. In the intermediate periods, Kurdish research partners—four students and lecturers at Sulemaniya, Erbil and Dohuk universities—conducted interviews, where possible, in person and during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic by phone or social media. They were trained by BICC staff in qualitative social science methods and interviewing as part of the capacity exchange approach of the research project. Weekly jour fixes with research partners were established in 2021 and provided a regular occasion to reflect on new interview data, for joint learning and support of further data collection. As part of the capacity exchange component, two researchers also visited BICC as short-term fellows in 2021.

7 \ Several interviewees had a migration history from Iran, where they left for as of the late 1970s and returned in the early 1990s or post-20033. Some of them later left for Europe and returned. For limitations of space, the experiences concerning reintegration processes after return from Iran are not discussed in this *Paper*.



Outline of the Working Paper

The Paper is structured along the main lines of inquiry that reflect four dimensions of reintegration, subdivided into two parts: In the first part, the structural political and cultural conditions of reintegration are examined based on an extended concept of institutional return preparedness. Accordingly, government policies, safety and security, the non-governmental assistance landscape and local society's readiness to embrace returnees are weighed and assessed together to establish the structural context for the focus on returnees' reintegration experiences in the second part. Its chapters investigate the agency of individual returnees, starting from livelihood-making and economic considerations, then focus on psychological aspects of settling (back) in before social reintegration and the link between return, reintegration and social change is discussed.

The concluding chapter summarises the findings of the individual chapters and puts them into a concluding conversation about reintegration trajectories.

Institutional Return Preparedness and Reintegration Assistance

The idea and policy objective to enhance the sustainability of return through reintegration assistance has motivated migration countries' governments to establish different reintegration assistance programmes and cooperations with local non-governmental partners and ministries of the Federal Government of Iraq (GoI) and Kurdistan's Regional Government (KRG). This chapter provides analytical insights into the political-structural reintegration dimension, asking to what extent policies and actual support of state and non-state institutions (including society at large) are conducive to return migrants' reintegration in northern Iraq. This so-called institutional return preparedness will be assessed in four dimensions, i.e., by looking at government policies of the GoI and KRG, the security/safety environment, reintegration programmes and measures by different non-governmental stakeholders and returnees' perception about such support, and how local society is ready to embrace returnees.

Governmental Policies

As an upper middle-income country, Iraq is highly oil-dependent (Sassoon, 2016, p. 23), and economic ups and downs depending on the oil price have been shown to influence migration dynamics over the last decades. Iraqis have sought to leave when their purchasing power decreases and employment is not available. Among the upper middle-income countries, Iraq has the highest poverty rate (CCA, 2022, p. 2). In the past, an end of crises, i.e., when the economic situation improved, also constituted incentives for the return of Iraqis from abroad. Iraq has no self-decreed migration strategy or law that would regulate return from abroad and reintegration. Since Iraqis left the country on a large scale for Europe, the European Union and several EU member states sought partnership and cooperation agreements with Iraq and closed return and readmission agreements as a precondition for national AVRR programmes (Biehler et al., 2021).[8] However, these are not implemented by government agencies but by non-governmental service providers.

The main governmental guideline for migration is the so-called National Migration Strategy document of 2020 (Technical Working Group, 2020). The document is not a policy in itself but, as a strategy, provides a framework for developing policies that 'facilitate, regulate and optimize migration' (TWG, 2020, p. 5). Return and reintegration is mentioned as an example of optimised migration and included as a strategic objective (no. 3). Thus, so far,

> *... there is no consistent and institutionalized framework for return migration from abroad. This makes it more difficult to safeguard the rights of Iraqis abroad and those who return, prepare for the reintegration of returnees in their home communities and promote national security through efficient identity management. As a result (...) reintegration efforts are less likely to be sustainable* (TWG, 2020, p. 5).

Moreover, the absence of referral mechanisms and partnerships with non-governmental or other actors in the country (e.g., civil society organisations and UN agencies) amplifies the impression of governance deficits. While the International Organization for Migration (IOM) is mainly working with the Ministry

8 \ The European Union and member states started so-called EU–Iraq Informal Migration Dialogue meetings after the military defeat of ISIS in 2017, and an EU–Iraq Partnership and Cooperation Agreement was signed in August 2018. According to this Agreement, Iraq is formally obliged to 'readmit own nationals who are illegally present on the territory of the other Party' but does not adhere to this obligation according to the EU Commission (2021). By July 2021, four EU member states, the United Kingdom and Norway had finalised bilateral readmission arrangements with Iraq ('which are also rarely respected or respected only for voluntary returns or for Iraqi nationals convicted for a criminal offence'). Against the background that 'some 12,000 of the 240,000 Iraqis currently living in Germany are failed asylum-seekers', Germany's Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) signed cooperation agreements with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the government of Iraq (GoI) in April 2018 to support returnees' reintegration (Deutsche Welle, 2018, Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2018). The 2018 memorandum of cooperation on the repatriation of Iraqi refugees who are no longer allowed to stay in Germany entails the readmission of 10,000 Iraqi refugees and ensures German support for their reintegration by providing jobs and training opportunities in Iraq.

of Migration and Displaced (MoMD) (cf. MoMD, 2020, IOM, 2020), the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) collaborates with the Ministries of Labour and Social Affairs (MoLSA) at national and regional (KRG) level (ES1, ES13-15, ES 19, ES31-32). A lack of coordination between different national ministries (e.g., Ministry of Planning, Ministry of Migration and Displaced, Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs) at federal, regional, and provincial levels and with non-governmental actors impedes consistent support for the reintegration of Iraqi returnees.[9] While the strategy is comprehensive and aligned with international processes, normative and legal frameworks, it awaits implementation. Activities in migration legislation and framework development have been driven by Iraq's European partners who seek to handle increasing numbers of Iraqi nationals on their territory who have no prospect of asylum or other legal options to stay. As one government official mentioned,

> *The government of Iraq has only become aware of migration and return issues and the need for managing these when the EU requested the cooperation of the GoI to stop the flow of Iraqis to Belarus in summer 2021* (ES19).

Economic policies have so far hardly acknowledged the need for private sector development in Iraq.[10] While the public sector is overstaffed and prestigious and has generated an overall high dependence of the population on government salaries, the private sector is underdeveloped and can neither absorb young people—57 per cent of Iraqis are younger than 25; 20 per cent of the population are aged 15 to 24[11] of whom only 26.5 per cent participate in the labour force, whereas 35.8 per cent in this youth group are unemployed (Carret et al., 2022, 3; ILO, 2022)—whose unemployment rate is far above the national average (16.5 per cent), nor returnees who are in need of income generation to provide for their families. The underlying problem is that acquired skills (if at all in the case of migrants/returnees) and private sector needs in most cases do not match (ES1). The pressure on the employment market is high as the young population seeks future perspectives; competition for public sector employment and related patronage frustrates returnees just as stayees. Dissatisfaction with the overall economic situation and pervasive corruption, not least manifest in gatekeeping for employment, had brought people to the streets in southern Iraq and Baghdad in 2019 from where the Tishreen movement arose. Significantly, no similar political mobilisation took place in northern Iraq—an indicator of the entrenched political power relations built on exclusive networks and patronage. The following quote illustrates the prevalent political culture in northern Iraq, which generates high levels of frustration and alienation from politics and results in non-participation and non-realisation of innovation potentials.

> *The government does not care about us; they are not loyal to their people. We cannot ask our rights here or they will do something against us that will make us regret forever* (TR0048).

When contrasting the structural-institutional barriers to reintegration with the expectations returnees have towards the government, an almost complete void in governmental return preparedness emerges.[12] Min-

9 \ The National Development Plan 2018-22 mentions returnees' social, political and economic integration needs related to poverty alleviation (Iraq Ministry of Planning, 2018, p. 26), in particular housing (IMoP, 2018, p. 31). While it is not making it explicit, the Plan's focus is on IDP returns and in line with the National Policy on Displacement (Iraq Ministry of Displacement and Migration, 2008). Referring to the above, non-coordination and lack of policies prevent targeted support provision based on different needs of, e.g., families vs. single male returnees. Moreover, assistance rights for victims of human trafficking are not granted in the absence of legal regulations, resulting, e.g., in the punishment of trafficked children instead of their support and rehabilitation. Cf. https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ILAB/child_labor_reports/tda2021/Iraq.pdf, p. 6.

10 \ The draft KRG Vision 2030—which is also not a policy document—includes ambitious goals for private sector development, cf. Kurdistan Regional Government, 2021, pp. 33–34.

11 \ https://www.statista.com/statistics/327299/age-structure-in-iraq/

12 \ In the non-economic sphere, the KRG's policy of establishing English-language schools for the children of returning families reflects an effort to incentivise and actually support return. Interviews in Baghdad and Mosul have shown that often, Arab families do not deem a return to Iraq feasible because they assessed the ability of their children to readjust to Arabic-language schools as very low and were articulating the demand to have English- or even German-language schools established in the main governorates (ES32).

istries (e.g., the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, MoLSA) and labour market institutions do not support returnees' livelihood-making in particular ways, e.g., through accessible loans, compensation schemes or other (ES13). Institutions do not address the existing gap in labour supply and demand which affects stayees/non-migrants the same way as returnees. Interviewees most consistently mentioned employment-related regulation needs: basic employment creation (inside the country or through legal labour migration pathways—'Help us emigrate!' [TR0080, TR0067], support for the unemployed and youth, financial support and loans for opening businesses, investments, or the regulation of the employment sector so that people would find jobs—which respondents commonly understood as citizenship 'rights'. Lawful behaviour (TR0042), rights, equality, fairness and the sanctioning of abuse and corruption were other wishes interviewed returnees mentioned, besides assigning the government responsibility for their children's future (TR00104). Thus, it might not be too far-fetched to consider the government as a hindrance to and outright spoiler of returnees' efforts to re-establish themselves through work/labour.

At the bottom line, these disconnects and institutional barriers to economic reintegration are a main motivation to leave Iraq and emigrate, particularly among the younger generation who cannot see economic (employment and livelihood) perspectives to be(come) independent and start a family. As one expert from the field of reintegration support stated, '... if people here had the chance, they would go (back) to Europe' (ES1). A returnee made the point that, albeit living in an autocratic and highly unequal society, political rights such as voting in elections, participating in a referendum and so on would be granted but only few economic rights that would match his potential (AA14).

Safety and Security

The safety and security context in northern Iraq is fragile. Even though ISIS was militarily defeated in 2017, the region struggles with the long-term repercussions of the violent conflict and international intervention. While remnant cells of ISIS are still able to carry out sparse attacks in areas peripheral to the governorates studied for this Paper, other security challenges have arisen since 2017. One is the unabated increasing influence of different ethno-religious militias, in particular of various armed groups belonging to the Iran-oriented Public Mobilisation Forces (PMF). After they had officially been incorporated into the formal governance structure in 2018, northern Iraqis find themselves in a situation where the state constitutes a major source of insecurity. The overall weak rule of law context where the justice system is neither independent nor effective, adds to the risk of being threatened or losing out in any conflict with somebody belonging to the government or some (para-state) governmental security organ. A higher authority to appeal to for justice does not exist, and therefore the life of vulnerable people without strong social network capital is highly insecure. The partial and autocratic institutions of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) likewise do not offer the sense of security and stability many respondents wish for. Asked whether feeling safe, one respondent replied:

> *To an extent, not very safe like in Europe. Here I will be safe as long I am not involved in politics. However, if I write a comment about a political party or about a person in government, I may lose my safety* (TR005).

Adding to this is the political conflict between Baghdad on Erbil over the budget, oil revenues and the so-called contested territories. This affects returnees in Sinjar (part of Ninewa) in particular, where access restrictions and non-development hamper their everyday lives. After public protests over the non-delivery of services and against pervasive corruption in Iraq that swept away the government under Adil Abdul-Mahdi, the caretaker government of interim prime minister Kathemi held national elections in October 2021, which were followed by a one-year-long political standoff among the political forces, including the Kurdish parties until a government was formed in October 2022. Elections in Iraqi Kurdistan (KRI)—regularly due in 2022—were also postponed until late 2023 because of the government crisis. All of this, plus added structural factors and perceived crises like inflation, price hikes and fuel

shortages as they occurred newly in 2022, contribute to a general feeling of uncertainty among northern Iraq residents. Furthermore, KRG and Sinjar residents' future confidence has been rudely shattered by the incursions of the Turkish military and, lately, renewed Iranian drone attacks (TR0027).

> *The area is more of a prison, PKK, Turkey and my government, as if we are under siege. We can't visit our villages. I expect there will be a great war between Turkey, PDK, and PKK, and the people will be victims. The living conditions of the people are the same. Turkish planes are hitting the outskirts of Sheladze* (TR002).

Several respondents spoke of their fear of renewed war and were very concerned for the future of their children. According to interviews, people do not believe that they can influence change through political participation because of entrenched power relations between parties and armed groups, international actors and transnational geopolitical dynamics. The lack of safety and security thus is another adverse factor affecting returnees' reintegration. The overall feeling of uncertainty and perception of a constantly looming crisis among Iraqi Kurds affects the desire to leave Iraq and build a life in safety, security and with a sense of certainty and (human) security elsewhere.

Non-governmental Programmes and Measures

European donors finance projects and measures of return and reintegration assistance to enhance local organisations' capacities to address returnees' different needs. These programmes are designed to compensate for what is perceived as low institutional return preparedness of central or Kurdish regional government institutions on the one hand and as an incentive for Iraqis in European countries to return if they have low prospects of being accepted for permanent legal stay (Council of the EU, 2021, p. 3). Regarding both expectations, the research found that the actual programmes and measures do not fulfil the objectives considering dominant adverse structural conditions. Interviews with representatives of different non-governmental stakeholders and service providers in return and reintegration assistance indicated that the spectrum of support measures is broad, and counselling is conducted to tailor reintegration measures to individual returnees' and families' needs. However, returnees assessed the effect as only temporary and largely insufficient, considering financial instalments for example as 'seed money' (TR0050, TR005). One interviewee—comparing formal assistance and family support—analysed in this regard, e.g., that '... the social and family support is continuous, but the organisation support is temporary' (TR005). Interviewed returnees wished for at least US $5,000 as a meaningful sum to start a business; the cash support should enable survival in dignity for at least one year. As one respondent reported, he perceived the offered cash support as a drop in the ocean:

> *I visited the office of [a service provider] in Dohuk that promised to buy me some home appliances. They told me to open a business, but I told them that it was not possible to open a business with US $2900 that they offered as support* (TR006).

Returnees' demands for financial support are high, especially if entire families return with little or no preparedness. They usually calculate the costs of emigration (paying the smuggler, travel to Europe) and losses against what they receive after return and mentioned that it would be helpful if they were at least compensated with half the amount that they expended for the journey abroad. In one example, a head of a family accounted how he would need and expect US $50,000 instead of the US $2,400 his family received as assistance upon return (TR0050).

For others, cash assistance upon return and an eventual second instalment was assessed as helpful to bridge the initial arrival period after return (TR0025, T9, TR0010, TR0041, TR0048, TR0058, TR00101)—whether to pay back some loan or debts, to co-finance a wedding or buy some home appliances. Three of 20 whom we interviewed received cash assistance and in-kind provision of tools and machines, e.g., for a mechanic or carpentry workshop or a small restaurant, which indeed helped the returnees to start working in the respective field (TR0102, TR0058, KS19).

BOX 1:
Reintegration Assistance Landscape for Returnees from Abroad in Northern Iraq

Reintegration programmes that aid compelled returnees from Europe after their return to northern Iraq include the EU-funded European Return and Reintegration Network (ERRIN)[1]—operational until June 2022 with more than 10,000 returnees assisted by one main service provider (European Technology and Training Center, ETTC) (Council of the EU, 2021, p. 16)—and its replacement, the Joint Reintegration Services (JRS) which started on 1 April 2022. These work with local partner organisations/service providers to aid returnees' reintegration by providing short- and long-term support measures for up to one year:

- *arrival assistance (airport pick-up, short-term accommodation);*
- *individual counselling after arrival;*
- *support in housing (e.g., basic equipment, rent subsidy);*
- *professional qualification measures, help in finding a job;*
- *support in setting up a business;*
- *counselling and support in social and medical matters as well as general legal advice.[2]*

The services can be complemented by additional national programmes and components. In the case of Germany[3], these are the StarthilfePlus/Supplementary Reintegration Support (since 2017)[4] providing one additional cash instalment after six to eight months and the BMZ Startfinder programme.[5] The latter runs two counselling centres (GMAC) in Iraq[6], administered by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH on behalf of BMZ in the framework of the 'Perspektive Heimat' initiative (Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2021). The German Centres for Jobs, Migration and Reintegration in Erbil and Baghdad counsel returnees from abroad as well as stayees and advise on a spectrum of reintegration assistance measures, including economic (livelihood-generation through job placement/start-up counselling, skill development), social (shelter, school enrolment, home appliances) and psychological assistance (psychosocial support and training). According to GIZ, more than 32,900 counselling measures and 21,800 individual consultations with returnees from abroad were conducted between July 2017 and March 2022, as result of which 2,600 persons were placed in a job, and 4,500 were supported with a start-up business.

1 \ Between 2017 and 27 August 2021, 2,908 persons returned with ERRIN from Germany to Iraq. Cf. Deutscher Bundestag, 2021, p. 16.

2 \ https://www.returningfromgermany.de/en/programmes/erin/
https://www.bamf.de/EN/Themen/Rueckkehr/ProgrammERRIN/programmerrin-node.html
https://www.returningfromgermany.de/en/programmes/jrs/

3 \ Germany's national return programme since 1979 is the Reintegration and Emigration Programme for Asylum-Seekers in Germany (REAG) and its supplement, the Government-Assisted Repatriation Programme (GARP, since 1989), which cover travel expenses and provide a transport allowance and start-up aid. It is funded by the federal government and the federal states in Germany. Between 2017 and July 2021, 7,529 Iraqi citizens returned via REAG-GARP. Cf. Deutscher Bundestag, 2021, p. 12.

4 \ The programme targets asylum seekers with little chance of being granted status in Germany and offers funding in exchange for voluntary return from Germany within a set period. Until July 2021, 6,483 returnees used StarthilfePlus. Cf. Deutscher Bundestag, 2021, p. 14.

5 \ Cf. https://www.returningfromgermany.de/en/programmes/bmz-startfinder; the Startfinder programme is part of the Programme Migration and Development (PME) that rests on the country of origin component with the counselling centres, a so-called civil society component that includes the GMACs' local NGO partners and service providers (GMAC, 2022), and a Germany-component where advice and counselling already starts before departure with the help of so-called reintegration scouts. This triple-component approaches constitutes the basis for GIZ's 'transnational case management' approach (Lietaert, 2022).

6 \ https://www.startfinder.de/en/advisory-centre/iraq

Moreover, 2,200 education and qualification measures and 1,800 psychosocial support measures were conducted.[7] According to government information, additional development cooperation programmes in the framework of 'Perspektive Heimat' brought more people into jobs[8], e.g., in projects of bilateral development cooperation aiding reconstruction, stabilisation and livelihood generation. However, it is not clear how many of those supported in total (as displayed in the following table) were returnees:

	2019	2020	2021
Job placement	13,513	8,820	3,692
Start-ups	3,329	2,740	6,455

IOM (2018) is implementing REAG-GARP and Starthilfe Plus and closely cooperates with GMAC by sending returnees to the centres for counselling and possible reintegration funding. Given the different conditions for and amounts of funding returnees qualify as eligible for, the responses about what amounts of how many instalments interviewees received differed[9] as well as their judgment of its usefulness. For instance, IOM financial assistance[10] seems to have made a difference as a top-up when returnees had assets of their own but otherwise was deemed too little. In northern Iraq, ETTC is the main provider of vocational and skills training, job placement support, grants for business start-ups within the REAG-GARP and Startfinder programmes. Several interviewees benefitted from ETTC-support for business license certification (e.g., of a shop), business training, cash support for opening a business and livelihood support in Sulemaniya, Erbil and Dohuk. Besides several other partners and service providers active in the region (GIAN Foundation, Hawar Help, Heartland Alliance, etc.), the Sulemaniya-based Summit Foundation for Refugee and Displaced Affairs stands out as one humanitarian organisation founded in 1994. It works transnationally, aiding Kurds to get out of prison/deportation arrest in Syria[11], returns dead bodies from abroad, verifies identities and also aids returnees arriving at the airport and with initial reintegration support—albeit with limited finances and thus trying to direct returnees, e.g., to the GMAC in Erbil for job placement counselling (interviews, Sulemaniya, 2019–2020).

7 \ Information provided by GIZ via email on 6 May 2022. According to a government document by the German parliament, the numbers looked significantly lower for the period 2017 until 31 July 2021: Accordingly, more than 15,400 measures benefited returnees from abroad, while 294 people could be placed in a job. Cf. Deutscher Bundestag, 2021, p. 2f. The extent to which the GMAC centres extended their scope of work and included the local population is expressed in the figures for 2021: Of all 38,471 measures conducted in Iraq, more than 12,000 measures (32 per cent) related to returnees from abroad (5,760 from Germany) and 25,380 or 66 per cent to the local population (GIZ email 6 May 2022).

8 \ Cf. Deutscher Bundestag, 2021, p. 4.

9 \ In interviews, respondents could not usually recall which organisation helped them, often they simply mentioned 'organisation', NGO, United Nations, or 'a German organisation'—lest they could recount the funding programme.

10 \ At least five respondents reported how they felt cheated by IOM because they did not receive what was promised; in most cases, the second instalment they were expecting was not paid (TR0094, TR0019, TR005, RI-7, RI-9).

11 \ According to interviews (ES6), Turkey deports Iraqis without papers to Syria.

According to reintegration infrastructure stakeholders, the gap between returnees' interests, abilities/skills and market demand is the biggest challenge for successful job placement and gradual reintegration. Assistance is desired chiefly for income generation, and returnees expect to be supported with immediate employment instead of training courses that returnee-interviewees perceive as time-consuming and not efficient. However, experts from service providers and reintegration counselling confirm the problem that the normal—usually short-term—training activities are not sufficient for employment in the private sector; instead, business planning, a matching of skills development with labour market demands and framework conditions, as well as structural reforms, including the opening up of official channels of migration and the training of government staff in the relevant ministries (MoLSA), are considered necessary. Even returnees articulated the expectation that the international organisations should force the KRG to help and support returnees (T7) as they have forced the GoI to help and support IDP returnees. In another variation, one returnee demanded that international engagement change the situation in Iraq and end corruption and favouritism (AA4).

In sum, the impact of non-governmental reintegration programmes and assistance measures seems to be rather short-lived and not in a position to enhance institutional return preparedness overall. As it is designed to complement and compensate for non-existent or even negative governmental return preparedness, the effect remains similar to a drop in the ocean with only very few success stories of sustainable businesses or employment creation.

Attitudes of the Local Population

How local society at the subnational and subregional level embraces returnees can significantly impact individuals' subjective feelings of reintegration. The research showed that among the four indicators of institutional return preparedness analysed in this section, the local population's attitudes are comparatively conducive to settling (back) in. In Kuschminder's typology of a structural and cultural environment for return (2017, pp. 43-45), local society would be rated as relating 'neutral' towards returnees' reintegration efforts, i.e., not having an overly positive or negative effect on returnees' ability to re-establish themselves. In fact, as the following paragraphs will show, attitudes towards returnees are ambivalent overall, with fairly high support of various kinds received from family members[13] and rather mixed and partly adverse interactions with society outside the intimate family realm.

This ambivalence is not least related to the broader political-economic context. Returnees are not perceived to be the most vulnerable members of society as Iraq had experienced massive displacement and (before as after) an economic downturn that caused a significant share of the population to experience downward social mobility and unknown poverty levels. Interviews have shown that people who went to Europe and returned are commonly expected to be better off, and instead of needing support, they are expected to be able to support those who did not migrate (AA4). 'All of my brothers and sisters thought that I had money in all of my bags and pockets, and they thought that I would somehow make all of them rich' (T2). Several respondents (e.g., RI-3) reported what expectations they had to manage in their extended family, e.g., that they were expecting gifts and money: Most of them were expecting expensive gifts. We had some gifts, but not expensive ones, to be honest.' Asked for examples of expensive gifts, she replied, 'phones, computers, other devices for instance' (RI-9).

Interviewees reported mixed responses about how they were received upon return. Their answers allow the conclusion that it also depended on how

13 \ Family support is discussed in detail as of p. 33-36. The analysis shows that family support outweighs any kind of formal reintegration assistance in the perception of returnees. Some interviewees even indicated to have received financial support from their families while abroad in what could be termed 'reverse remittances' to afford life and/or return (AA17). In one variation, a migrant had left savings with his family, and they would send him money whenever he needed it (TR001).

they framed their arrival and reasons for return in influencing people's attitudes towards them—e.g., whether they were met with respect, laughter or disrespect. The obvious need for framing also explains our impression from interviews that returnees mixed reasons, such as the lack of perspectives for getting a status/work permit abroad with the request of family member/s to return, which allowed them to argue 'I actually had no choice' and 'just did what was required from me by my family' (TR0029). This triggered very positive responses, e.g.,

> *'... people praise him for being "a good boy" as he came back to take care of his mother'* (RI-1); or *'As relatives, they respected me more than before because I returned because of my parents; and my friends treated me respectfully as before'* (TR0025).

In another variation, one respondent insisted on having returned to 'serve my homeland'—a reason that was likely well accepted at the 'right' point of time (temporal 'window of opportunity'), e.g., when somebody returned to join the Peshmerga fighters against ISIS or the 'Kurdish' cause after gaining autonomy from the central government post-2003 (cf. Baser & Toivanen, 2019).

That there is a temporal aspect to the level of acceptance after return is also evident from the following quote that illustrates how reception differed between the first-time and second-time return and the respective political-economic context at that time (e.g., while during the 2010s, returnees were respected for coming back home, more recently, there is more of a likelihood of them being ridiculed and despised):

> *After I returned, people made fun of me because I returned, and people didn't trust me like before; they didn't talk to me like before. I migrated for the second time as well. For the first time, they were happy to see me; in 2010, people respected those who returned from abroad* (TR0041).

Returnees encountered negative responses mostly from outside the immediate family with the already mentioned attitude prevailing that somebody who returns must have become rich and obtained citizenship. When these expectations were not met obviously (through gifts, stories, etc.), returnees encountered a mixture of blame, pity and ridicule, as the following quotes illustrate:

> *Each person treats me different; some people said, "it was better to be homeless there, rather than return", some others blamed me for spending all the money and having returned with empty hands* (TR00103).

> *People told me: "It was better for you to die than to return back". Still, some of my relatives tell me this when they see me* (TR00104).

From these quotes, it is not clear whether they were meant to be strong insults or self-pity because the stayees permanently live in that same return context ('hell'). 'Most people talked negatively to me; they didn't know why I returned. They told me, "you are stupid; you returned to hell again"' (TR0068). This quote indicates that usually, blame is general and abstract, its articulation not based on knowing the reasons for the individual decision to return:

> *Nobody welcomed us, we had nobody here, but still some people were asking us, "why did you return?" So we told them the story until they understood. And yes, because we have changed, people also are treating us differently.*

A most common reaction to returnees is to call them 'donkey', implying 'stupidity'. Variations of blame included the accusation of having spent money for nothing ('I/we told you so', TR0020, RI-12), to be a weakling ('You are not a man, otherwise you would have found a solution for making a good life abroad') or to have given up too soon ('Why did you return? It wasn't easy to reach Europe and live your life there', TR0065). One respondent stated to have been shocked after several people asked him: 'Why did you return? Everyone is leaving, and you returned' (TR0037).

That said, in another common variation of reception upon return, the curiosity of the stayees predominates ('After I returned, people tried to know how much money I made abroad and about my personal life', TR0042). They are approached for advice

and experiences because many Iraqis ponder about leaving abroad: 'I became more important to people; they asked about living and studying there' (TR0078). Remarkably, almost none of the responses towards people's return asked about or appreciated possible skills and education acquired abroad.

Unmarried women returnees, including those of the second generation who were born and/or raised abroad up to a certain age face negative responses and prejudices bordering stigma. They were suspected of having extramarital relations abroad and being raised against Kurdish traditions. Interviewees reported that being confronted with such suspicion and lack of respect all the time is a strong incentive to leave again as soon as possible: 'If I have the opportunity to go abroad, I will do it' (AA24).

> *When I came back, for me, everything was the same but from some people's perspective maybe not. For example, some people may think I am egotistic because I came from a developed country to a developing country, and there is a different culture between the two countries. They see me as a strange person in the community because they think I am influenced by Western culture or values and that my freedom is estranging Islamic beliefs, like a girlfriend relationship is allowed in Western countries, but it is not allowed in Islam community values* (second-generation returnee, AA15).

In a similar expression of scepticism and outright rejection, returnees experienced reactions when they attempted to introduce new ways of doing things. Responses ranged from outright rejection ('You are not in Europe! This is Kurdistan!'), laughter and being mocked, to acceptance and gratefulness, depending on the level of understanding of the person addressed and to what extent the innovation contrasted local customs. This led some interviewees to conclude that people in northern Iraq do not believe in change or might even be afraid of it. They said to be cautious in wanting to introduce new things not to give the impression that they would interfere with people's work and lifestyle, thus waiting until somebody would specifically ask:

> *Even if I know [the better way], I don't say anything because whatever I introduce they would say "you came from Europe you think you know better", and make fun of me* (TR0031).

Economic Reintegration: Focus on Livelihood Strategies

Contrary to the previous chapter, where I showed how reintegration in northern Iraq is hugely determined by the (structural) political-economic set-up, including questions related to governance (economic policies, market and employment structures, public vs. private sector dynamics) and demographic characteristics, this chapter depicts the livelihood strategies returnees apply and how they conceive their impact on social mobility. Thus, the focus here is on returnees' agency.

Without exception, interviewees emphasised throughout the research that employment constitutes **the** central factor in generating a livelihood while re-establishing themselves economically and financially. Therefore, this chapter takes a closer look at access factors for employment and livelihood-making. The first part will discuss assets, assistance and patronage as the main three access factors for employment. The second section reflects on the empirical evolution of two main categories of returnees—discussed in terms of the class positionality of middle- and lower-class-returnees—whose distinct access options to livelihood resources determine the individual economic reintegration trajectory after return. The last part provides insights into how respondents experienced and perceived the economic crises encountered during the research period, i.e., the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020/21 and the Ukraine war in 2022.

Assets, Assistance and Patronage as Access Factors for Livelihood-making

Livelihood[14]-generation through employment or the set-up of own businesses depends on the existence or availability of different assets. In the context of reintegration, the most relevant assets are skills (theoretical and practical) and material assets, such as savings and property. Their (non)existence and (non)availability and the existence or absence of migration-related debts essentially structure the livelihood options of returnees.

The research found that while the skills of returnees are important, respondents' source of income after return was, in most cases, not linked to their migration, i.e., to training, employment or occupation abroad. Sampled respondents did not acquire useful skills abroad; most mentioned they had obtained basic language skills which, however, they rated as insufficient for studying or for using them to their advantage after return, e.g. for successfully gaining employment in a migration country-related company (e.g., GIZ or German private company) in Iraq. In few cases where migrants had acquired professional skills, these related to practical crafts (barber, blacksmith, electrical engineer) and constituted a solid basis for setting up their own business. Wherever possible, returnees tried to regain a previous job if they had one and had already worked in before migration, most eagerly in the public sector. Successful re-employments reported by interviewees included Peshmerga soldiers, a prison warden, teachers and university lecturers. An important precondition for regaining ordinary public sector jobs (excluding, e.g., Peshmerga) was that people had taken official leave from their position. Selected responses also pointed to the significance of good relations with the superior/former boss. In cases where, e.g., teachers had not taken leave, they were denied re-employment. This scenario has hit single female teachers hard. Because they rely on themselves only and have no other breadwinner, they are highly disadvantaged when trying to find alternative employment due to gender discrimination practices built on prejudice. Whereas a government job secures them a relatively regular income and independence from potentially exploitative relations with the wider family or friends, lack of access to public employment leaves females highly vulnerable (King & Lulle, 2022).

(Mostly decided) returnees who obtained work experience abroad and started their own entrepreneurial activities after return mentioned soft skills related to work ethics that they benefit from. This

14 \ Building on notions of entitlement and access to resources, a livelihood approach takes up the perspective of people's agency and identifies the livelihood options people use to make their living in each context and period, and how they maintain the basis of making a living for the future. Cf. Grawert, 1998.

included self-discipline, treating each other with respect, 'to kick out useless people', commitment to appointment times, 'not giving much about people's talk', and 'taking on responsibilities'.

Related to the sample of interviewees, which included mainly recent migrant-returnees who were young males that had not even established themselves prior to migration in their own socio-economic environment in northern Iraq, most did not have any assets that they could have potentially recovered and used after their return. In cases where they had material assets like a car, they had sold it before departure as one of several sources to finance the travel to Europe. Interestingly, a common line of argument in the interviews was that interviewees missed such assets after return, i.e., respondents talked with regret about what they had sold and 'lost' due to the 'unsuccessful' migration and portrayed these losses as assets they were entitled to (demand back) or expressed the wish of compensation. In various cases where families fled abroad due to conflict, e.g., from Ninewa during the onslaught of the so-called Islamic State between 2014 and 2017, asset restitution was complicated because of property destruction (houses, land), outstanding compensation payments for these and the unlawful occupation of land and houses (e.g., Arab IDP-families or militias). In historical cases of migration and return, obstacles to regaining property related to the political situation (Turkey–PKK conflict) in the border areas of northern Iraq. Several villages were vacated during the forced displacement of the original inhabitants, who were not allowed to return to their places but resettled further away from the original areas (and the border).

Similarly to the availability of property, the sampled (mostly compelled) most interviewees did not have enough savings that they could use after return. For decided returnees, savings marked a cornerstone of their 'reintegration' plan (even if they did not label it like this), and this is indicative of their individual return preparedness. Depending on the amount, savings are either used to set up a business or enable a comfortable living immediately after arrival, in which time they can explore and secure income options based on skills and experiences they obtained abroad. In one rare case, an interviewee reported about anmounts of money he had sent home while staying abroad:

> *'I did not have anything when I left Iraq. I sent a lot of money, but my brothers wasted the money I transferred to them. So, I had nothing after I returned'* (TR004).

Formal 'reintegration assistance' provided by non-governmental organisations/service providers aims first and foremost to support returnees in accessing livelihood opportunities. Assistance either aims to enhance their assets through skills-building or cash-support for investing in start-up businesses to generate (self-)employment. Alternatively, access to employment is facilitated directly through job-placement schemes or other start-up facilitation measures (registration of business licenses, etc.). While reintegration assistance (AVRR mechanisms) is most active in the economic sphere—acknowledging that returnees need economic perspectives to realise life aspirations—interviewees overall assessed that such assistance did not have a significant impact on their livelihood. It is described as minimal in most cases (between US $300 and US $1,000) and did not yield longer-term effects. They evaluated financial support for opening or sustaining a business after several months as not sufficient (e.g., TR0039, TR0050, TR0061, TR0068, TR0080). Where return programmes offered cash support, different respondents stated that they used it to repay the debts they had accumulated for leaving Iraq (e.g., TR0028, TR0029) or used it as a contribution to preparing their wedding (TR0090). These respondents, and others who just appreciated the cash funding for being able to buy some appliances or equipment for the house without having to borrow money from anybody, labelled the assistance as 'good enough' or 'not enough for a serious project but better than nothing' (TR0061). Whereas this statement referred to the cash handouts, training and skills-building were not necessarily considered more sustainable for two reasons. First, because society does not value innovative approaches and new ideas. As one respondent stated, 'For a normal citizen, even if you have learnt some-

thing, it will be hard to use it here. They don't accept new ideas easily' (TR005).

Second, because the overall dominating perception is that jobs are not acquired based on merit but on relationships (*wasta*), through different kinds of patronage. Interview responses indicated that just like skills or assistance, patronage constitutes an access factor for employment in the public and the private/non-governmental sector. Possibly because government employment is considered highly prestigious—because of the job security with permanent contracts, relatively stable salaries and related social status and benefits[15]—it has always been difficult to access, and government position holders tend to use their positions to secure public employment for family members and friends, etc. first. Respondents mentioned the need for *wasta* or talked of 'sectarianism' (meaning both gatekeeping in this context and the need to belong to a certain party network) as common obstacles to getting a job 'other than taxi driving', e.g., also in NGOs, oil companies, or the 'coalition forces' supply machinery (AA20). Hardly any respondent in the interview sample could give detailed information on how to obtain a business license or the legal and factual conditions for doing business. The overall impression from the interviews is that gatekeeping and the circumvention of official legal procedures through personal network relations dominate; in the word of one interviewee, 'doing nepotism and follow legal procedures' (TR002). Importantly, the above elaborated context of a weak private sector also implies that returnees are more likely to find employment in the informal economy where formal contracts are rare and job security does not exist.

15 \ Other benefits include the prospect to be given a piece of land for a house, e.g., in the case of university lecturers.

Economic Reintegration Trajectories of Middle Class vs. Lower-Class Returnees

While the discussion in this chapter has so far focused on purely economic access factors that underlie returnees' livelihood options, it must be considered that social relations and networks (going beyond functional patron–client relations) also constitute livelihood resources or provide access to livelihood generation (access through loyalty). This is what Bourdieu (1998 [1994]) would call 'social capital'. While the role of social networks and family support for social reintegration is discussed in detail later, this section captures returnees' disposition with social capital and networks as one dimension of social class (Weber, 2005 [1922]). Class-belonging[16] reflects the disposition with material and immaterial endowments that leads to economic stratification. The interview material allows distinguishing between two 'ideal' types of effectively tangible class categories. For analysing economic reintegration trajectories, these shall be called 'lower class' and middle class[17], whereas both are subjected to structural conditions and policy changes. These power relations account for inequality in ownership and access to resources, such as influential positions and sustained employment (Offe & Wiesenthal, 1980).

The following paragraphs illustrate how the two class positionalities (lower vs middle class) (Anghel, 2019) entail different access options to livelihood resources that determine individual economic

16 \ Class belonging is not causally linked with private property ownership (instead it may comprise access to [employment] markets, housing, income, assets, social services, support, aid, etc.), nor does it necessarily constitute a collective identity upon which members of the respective class start to act to represent and defend their joint interests mobilising against another class.

17 \ The author is aware that how returnees are positioned in class terms, is highly complex, especially if there is no self-ascription clarifying the belonging to a certain 'class', and where subjective interpretations of economic and social relations exist. The analytical value of introducing the class as category/prism in this section lies in the fact that social class constitutes an important marker of positionality and thus informs individuals' agency as a determining factor for the extent to which livelihood plus its quality can be secured.

reintegration trajectories after return. Self-organised or decided return is mostly a privilege of the middle-class and not lower-class returnees. If refugees or migrants have a choice, they will first try to earn enough to provide the conditions for a successful return—successful here in the sense of living a life after return that complies with their ideas of dignity, aspiration and satisfaction. In the reintegration process, middle-class returnees benefit from assets that include professional and family networks, skills that open up job opportunities after return, savings, a foreign passport and related motility. They require *wasta* to access public sector employment; not necessarily to establish their own private business. While they achieve their economic 'settlement'/integration quicker than lower-class returnees, they struggle with unreliable procedures in the Iraqi bureaucracy and corruption (Paasche, 2016). Especially young returnees (women more than men) face limitations due to the social control by their families as they grapple with a perceived loss of freedom after returning from any very open European society to a comparatively inward-looking and 'closed' community in northern Iraq. However, due to their social status and background (citizenship, education, etc.), they can cope with these challenges because they are more inclined towards multiple movements; transnational, split families may enable them to feel at home in any new place.

In comparison, after return, lower-class migrants face difficulties returning to their previous status. It is likely that they will experience downward social mobility and risk to settle in overall precarious conditions if they are unable to find employment. They will have to compete with labour migrants for low-paid jobs. Public sector jobs are perceived as a distant dream because they are not accessible to persons without wasta, money and language skills. Often, their family cannot support them, and their personal networks are low in resources. They regret having sold everything when they left Iraq as they lost the basis for establishing themselves again after return (FGD 2019). This leads to a higher risk of stigmatisation and mental problems. Especially female returnees who come back without their husband reported that they experience stigmatisation, exclusion and even removal from their mother-in-law's house. Diseases, caring for their children and starting a family keep lower-class male returnees in precarious jobs, uncertainty and frustration. For the latter scenarios, respondents explained that reintegration assistance is insufficient to re-establish themselves sustainably, as their situation is precarious, and they have no means to add to the assistance from their own resources or assets. Any existing strong patron–client relations based on kin and other personal network or social ties could mitigate social inequalities and access barriers upon return because they resemble some sort of social capital. However, such cases were rare to non-existent; moreover, involving a highly unequal position, such relations imply dependency that could turn into exploitation.

The Perception of Economic Crisis and its Impact on Social Mobility/ Livelihood-making

While we found economic reintegration to be most challenging for lower-class returnees (especially females) without employment and more difficult for those working in the private sector than those with public sector jobs, the looming threat of a regularly occurring crisis and its actual occurrence impacts lower- and middle-income returnees alike—albeit to differing degrees because they possess different coping capacities (asset base, networks, etc.). During field research and data collection, two main crisis scenarios impacted respondents' subjective feeling of reintegration or economic well-being. First, the Covid-19 pandemic paralysed economic transactions and the bazaar in 2019 and 2020 parallel to a decline of oil prices in 2020/21. Then, the start of Russia's war against Ukraine caused major international economic upheavals from April 2022 onwards that were felt strongly by people in northern Iraq.

The sampled respondents saw the pandemic as less an existential threat than the unfolding economic crisis in 2022. Although several interviewees and their families had been infected with the Covid-

virus and some even reported on relatives having died, the fact that Covid was affecting all strata of the society to the same extent without distinction, the will to endure a crisis that had been unprecedented and had to be endured was more pronounced. According to respondents, those who wanted to be vaccinated could receive vaccinations relatively easily and free of charge in public hospitals.

Especially people employed in the private and informal sector or those who had their own businesses often suffered economic losses because of lockdown restrictions and highly reduced purchasing in all types of shops and markets. Gyms and the gastro sector, where many returnees find informal employment in the larger cities, were hit hardest by access restrictions. Covid-19 restrictions hampered the establishment of start-up businesses throughout 2020 (TR080). Nevertheless, the overwhelming majority of respondents indicated that they had not been too much affected or not at all by the impact of Covid-19 on their livelihood-making. It seems that they were positioning and qualifying their losses and experienced limitations in the overall framework of losses experienced at the international and national level.

In contrast, the tremors of the Ukraine war were felt differently by lower-class versus middle-class respondents. Although Iraq has the fifth-largest proven reserves of oil worldwide and is not dependent on Russian resources in any sense, the outbreak of the war caused prices for petrol (which is not refined in the country but needs to be imported) to rise on the one hand and a large-scale scarcity of fuel on the other hand. Almost immediately, kilometre-long queues of waiting cars formed in the vicinity of gas stations throughout northern Iraq.[18] Subsequently, returnees who worked as taxi drivers were affected disproportionately and hampered in generating their livelihood.

18 \ This also had to do with the difference in subsidising practices between the central government and the KRG. Whereas the former heavily subsidised petrol, the tight financial situation of the KRG at the time—not least due to conflicts with the central government over oil contracts, pipelines, etc.—did not allow it to subsidise it to the same extent. This led to fuel-station tourism from drivers in Dohuk, for example to Mosul.

Similarly, market stall and shop owners explained their tense economic situation due to the rising prices and declining purchasing power of clients:

> *As a market owner, I will tell you it's now worse than before, and it's always going to be worse and worse. Everything is becoming more expensive, the taxes, the water and electricity bills. People can't buy goods like before, everything is more expensive now, and this affects me directly. I can hardly pay my debt, especially after this war between Russia and Ukraine. Let me tell you, for example, this week, the price of one box of chicken has increased by 18,000 IQD (US $12.25). [...] The economic situation is very bad; people can't buy things from my market, and I'm also struggling with the taxes, debts, and bills, and also the goods and food are now more expensive. I have no other source of income but this market. For example, now I need to fix my big freezer here in the market but I can't, I have just ignored it. I'm trying to manage this market and all its requirements by borrowing money from people I know* (TR0048).

Tellingly, while this market owner was interviewed, someone came to him and asked him for the money that he had loaned him. The market owner asked for forgiveness and requested the lender to wait until the next day. Respondents commonly cited that they were coping by borrowing money for their household and business. At the household level, the effects of rising prices and inflation were tangible. In the word of one respondent, who was asked for his current source of income and coping strategy:

> *I have my salary from the university. (...) It is not sufficient at all; everything has become private, schools and hospitals, for example. To make ends meet, I sometimes borrow until the end of the month when I receive my salary and then pay back and borrow more; the same cycle continues* (AA4).

Another (middle-class) interviewee also complained about rising living expenses, especially after the Ukraine crisis started. He shared how he decided with his family to leave their house and move to an apartment that the family had rented out before to rent out the house instead and benefit from its twice as high rent compared to that of the apartment (AA15).

Psychological Reintegration: Returnees' Inner Conflicts about Belonging

The notions of home and feeling settled (again) after return are contested. The research found that returnees distinguish various facets of feeling, and being, settled. Whereas they spoke with confidence about an emotional versus social versus economic side, much of what was mentioned to impede an overall or 'complete' feeling of belonging and having settled (back) in, or of what would facilitate this feeling, related to political framework conditions. This chapter elaborates on how, eventually, future uncertainty and temporal instability bear the risk of amplifying positionalities of in-betweenness or social alienation. It demonstrates how various facets of feeling settled evoke ambivalent belonging, contributing to a common desire among returnees to remigrate. The discussion about post-return mobility aspirations, re-migration and onward migration naturally leads to questioning the category of 'returnee' in the last section

Various Facets of Feeling Settled

In this subsection, the different aspects of '(not) feeling settled' will be unpacked for two groups: second-generation returnees (cf. Kılınç, 2022) and children versus all other non-decided (i.e., compelled) returnees who have a comparatively low level of return-preparedness (see Introduction).

Second-generation Returnees and Children

Second-generation returnees who were either born abroad or spent their formative years outside of Iraq reported that they experienced the differences and discrepancies of 'two lives' and the necessity to negotiate an individual sense of belonging here and there. They[19] spoke about being torn apart between the obligation and commitments to relatives, their job environment or simply their lifestyle in the place of origin and between the lifestyle, opportunities, and memories from abroad. Some of the interviewees have dual citizenship and could move but are unable to leave Iraq because of their spouses' legal status who have Iraqi passports. In an exemplary case, a Kurdish lady who was born abroad and is married to a Kurdish person who holds an Iraqi passport reported several failed attempts to organise their legal emigration. She stated, 'I miss everything in Austria, yet I can't leave my husband and daughter'. Others feel obliged towards their parents and believe that they have to stay to assist them.

Second-generation minors have no choice but to follow their parents' decision to leave Europe and return. A regularly cited motivation of families to return was that Kurdish parents believe the lifestyle abroad might cause their adolescent children to deviate from religious norms, Kurdish tradition and tribal codes, given stories of other Kurdish families abroad who lost their children to alcoholism, prostitution, drug addiction or simply living with someone outside of wedlock. In many such cases, the adolescents blame their parents for returning to their places of origin and demand their parents to relocate them to the EU countries where they were socialised (TR0043, TR0027, TR0031, TR0037) and feel safer (TR0080) because in Iraq, the 'home-culture' (AA2), schooling system (AA14) and social etiquette is alien for them to some extent. Even small children suffer emotionally, manifest in homesickness for the place of migration. According to one father: 'My children always ask me to show them their videos from Kindergarten because they miss their days back in Germany' (TR00104).

In these cases, liminality—defined broadly as the 'experience of finding oneself at a boundary or in an in-between position' (...) 'is about how human beings, in their various social and cultural contexts, deal with change' (Thomassen, 2015, p. 40)—is not only experienced by the children but also by the parent generation. They are struggling with unhappy children and local traditions, such as the impossibility of taking daughters to the public swimming pool, as this is 'considered abnormal in Dohuk' (AA14). One father reported how he and his wife found themselves in a conflict with their children about return,

19 \ For ethical reasons, children were not interviewed but parents' views about their children's reintegration challenges were considered.

explaining how the children identify more with Germany, the place of their upbringing before return:

> *My kids feel more loyal to Germany than to here and do not feel free here, e.g., they cannot ride a bicycle in the street because such behaviour is considered shameful in society. [...] They prefer to speak more German at home than Kurdish. The positive thing here is that the Kurdistan Regional Government provided foreign schooling in English for returning Kurdish students free of charge. This was the only opportunity for my daughters to speak German with their returning classmates and the teachers. If someone speaks badly about Germany, my daughters get upset because they consider this a personal insult; and if someone asks them what their identity is, their first answer is 'German', then 'Kurdish'* (AA14).

Given that in comparison with the parent generation, the minors have not taken the relocation decision themselves, emplacement—defined by Vigh & Bjarnesen (2016, p. 10) as striving to positively locate oneself in a set of relations—is more negatively affected in the younger generation, especially among those who were born abroad, than among the returnees who had already lived in Iraq.

Compelled Returnees

Interviews reveal that a share of respondents who returned from abroad face emotional/mental hardship after return, even if their stay abroad has been short (Vathi 2022). Subsequently, compelled returnees, especially if their return took place before they had achieved any of the goals they had set for migration, often find themselves in a state of in-betweenness or increasing alienation after return.

In the case of alienation, returnees are unwilling and unable to embed themselves in Kurdish/Iraqi society. They feel alienated to the degree that their perception of continued uncertainty and crisis prevents them from re-establishing their lives in the former environment or some other place in the country. These returnees suffer from the feeling of failure and unfulfilled dreams. They find their origin society unwelcoming and hostile, but they are also unwilling to reconcile with their surroundings. Members of this group of returnees were usually rejected in the migration countries, refused asylum, forcibly deported, or felt homesick and later—when already returned—regretted their decision. Other members of the origin society blame them for being weak and having given in to the challenges they faced abroad; most insultingly, they are blamed for returning. When the returnee's family is supportive, returnees usually find it easier to cope with the situation, but when the family is derogatory to them, they start to develop a sense of self-reproach that immobilises them mentally and physically causing a vicious circle from the society that does not accept them, the unfulfilled dreams, and the aspiration to re-migrate. They devaluate the past (upbringing and socialisation in Iraq), reject the presence (political and institutional setup in northern Iraq) and tend to completely withdraw from societal and political engagement. A related temporal disjuncture deprives them of a timeframe or known future to work towards in their accustomed living environment (of choice) from which they returned. Subsequently, they find solace in alienation and tend to be unable to plan, progress or invest in themselves.

This group of returnees usually does not have the option to newly emigrate/remigrate because of the previous unsuccessful journey, lack of financial sources and legal problems in Europe. They have not obtained foreign passports and thus have no access to legal pathways to Europe. However, they usually say 'we will return to Europe no matter how long it may take'. During data collection, the large-scale out-migration of many Kurdish families to Belarus in 2021 further fuelled compelled returnees' desire to remigrate. This aspiration fulfils the emotional need to cling to unachieved dreams or prove the society wrong for the categorisations and blame they received upon return, or to newly escape the society that they had once already escaped from in the past. In the meantime, they have resorted to a sort of inner exile: Their sense of belonging to a country that is Iraq or a region that is Kurdistan seems to be evaporating, their agency impeded, and their subjectivity seems to be dominated by a sense of destruction and suffering.

In contrast, the ambivalent state of in-betweenness among compelled second-generation returnees carries a more productive potential of becoming (Griffiths et al., 2013) which can be realised either at the place of return—where future-making depends on the successful navigation of recurring crises—or the previous or a potential new place of (e)migration. The 'in-betweeners' are torn between leaving again and staying to settle (back) in, while experiencing daunting challenges in the reintegration process. While feeling settled is highly subjective and differs from person to person, responses of interviewees in this group allow the distinction of emotional, economic-financial and social facets of 'feeling settled'.

Respondents often connected feeling settled emotionally to intimate family matters and events, such as getting married, the birth of children, or their children's school enrolment. For example, to the question, 'What was most important for you upon return?' most interviewees replied: 'seeing my family/parents/siblings/wife/relatives (some never seen before) again'. Many stated that they felt emotionally settled immediately upon return when 'the stress was over', they saw their native area again ('being in Kurdistan again'), achieved 'peace of mind' or another personal comfort—in the words of a female returnee:

> *'… when I reached home, had a meal with my family and slept for a very long time so that i could take a really good rest' (RI-2). For others, settling in emotionally was not an automatism and had not yet been achieved: One respondent stated in a follow-up interview six months later when comparing the time of the first interview, that he was doing better than before but still did not feel settled—or 'never': 'I am always thinking of returning [re-migrating]'. […] 'Since I arrived, I have never thought that I am settled. I always think I will go back to Europe'* (TR004).

Respondents described feeling economically and financially settled as very challenging, yet 'trying to find an income/a job' or 'starting my business' ranked second after family matters when answering the question of what has been most important upon return. It is also seen as a prerequisite to feeling emotionally stable:

> *I don't feel settled emotionally. What will make me feel settled when you don't feel comfortable, when you are psychologically tired, when you are jobless, when you have nothing here?* (TR0068).

In the respondents' perceptions, only few settled in economic terms ('when I opened my shop again' or 'I reached my business goals') while the majority had 'not yet', because they wanted to pursue further goals, repay loans and—most importantly—be able to provide for their families. This was especially relevant and challenging for newlywed males who had just started a family. Given these challenges, several young returnees mentioned being torn between 'settling', i.e., getting married, and trying to go abroad again to pursue an education (MA, PhD). Many returnees did not feel economically settled throughout data collection (initial and follow-up interview period). They rather talked about it as an aspiration scenario, expecting it to take time and eventually depend on structural factors such as the uncertainty and volatility of markets and the 'thriving of the bazaar'. In this context, it is informative to contrast the above perceptions of compelled returnees with a decided returnee who told the research team: 'I felt settled economically before I came to Kurdistan; that is why I came [back]' (TR0042), thus suggesting how a high level of return preparedness—being economically secure, e.g., through having obtained skills or ventured into business or just working hard—matters.

Interviewees linked the feeling of being socially settled with family networks ('immediately upon return to my family', TR00103, TR00104, TR0031), the larger social environment ('when I knew I am inside my own society and nobody would no longer be saying "he has black hair"', TR0032) and language use:

> *Right upon return, I felt that I had arrived. Feeling arrived is special because wherever you go, they understand and communicate in the same language as you do; everything feels familiar and is better than being somewhere outside your culture or home. Those who have not seen exile don't know this feeling* (T9).

Asked what people perceived as helpful in the process of settling in, answers comprised 'a hospitable society', 'acceptance of multi-cultural background', 'family', 'marriage', 'socialising', 'starting college', 'work', and 'humanitarian NGOs/support'. 'Religion and traditions' were mentioned as conducive and adverse factors for psychological reintegration; especially female respondents mentioned grappling with the close-mindedness of local society regarding women's positions and rights. Quite a few respondents asked how they were supposed to feel settled in the volatile political and regional context they are situated in. The following quote gives a sense of the diffuse notions of insecurity and uncertainty many respondents shared:

> *When I graduated, and I found a job, I felt settled. During this time, when I was working, I had the chance to travel, but I didn't leave; I preferred to stay as I felt I was socially and economically settled. Then, you realise that there will never be peace in Iraq: If Iraq is stable for 10 years, there will be 20 years of conflicts. The last thing to do is to travel. Since the 1970s, my father said, we have been saying the situation will get better and the country will be stable. However, nothing is getting better, but it is getting worse. I think people are saying that it will be better just to fool themselves and continue to live. Some of my relatives who were well off and had everything sold everything and travelled abroad as they believed there was no future here. Moreover, we are trapped by enemies, Turkish, Persian and Arabs. They try to make our lives even worse* (TR005).

Responses to the question of how settling in could be facilitated, pointed out political conditions and expectations towards the government: Besides creating employment and the providing accommodation/shelter/housing (TR0037), the settling of the political situation in the country (possibly referring either to the political conflicts in Kurdistan and Ninewa or between Erbil and Baghdad), and security/establishing a feeling of safety were mentioned. The following statements offer some concrete examples that carry a notion of politicisation:

> *In my view, feeling settled sets in when you know your children will have a good future with enough income and will live with your family* (TR0031);
>
> *having safety and human rights, having a government which does its job right and provides for people according to their needs* (TR0037);
>
> *giving returnees the personal freedom they want, would be a huge step towards feeling settled* (RI-7).

These statements reflect two levels of settlement 'ingredients' that form the precondition for identification with a certain social community. While material provisions and security are deemed important, respondents' answers illustrate their awareness that necessary political context conditions ('respect and rights') need to be created to facilitate reintegration, even if the prospect for their development are dim, as the following quote illustrates:

> *I cannot ask for my rights; I will be taken to prison. It is tough for those who have lived abroad for some time as they see injustices, corruption, violations of their rights and can do nothing about it. For other people, as they live with it, it is normal as they have not seen the alternatives* (AA4).

In case of an imbalance or dissonance between expectations and meeting these requirements, the feeling of belonging remains fragmented and ambivalent at best, often incentivising re-migration desires.

Ambivalent Belonging and the Desire for Re-migration

The interview analysis clearly shows that returnees are in deep inner conflict about their own belonging.[20] This again has a social but more profoundly—according to the responses sampled—a political dimension and links to questions of rights and citizenship. Strikingly, many respondents reported having formal citizenship rights in Iraq but not enjoying full rights if they compare it with their situation in the respective country of migration, e.g., Switzerland, the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden or Norway. The perception that they had actually enjoyed 'full' or 'more' citizenship rights 'and human rights' in the country of migration compared to Iraq, even though they had not obtained permanent residence status, was widespread (TR00104). Interviewees mentioned '... in Germany, no one will take my rights' (TR0102), and responses mixed economic rights with citizenship rights, stating they were able to get a 'monthly salary', healthcare, childcare, job assistance and shelter in the country of migration and that they experienced how their 'family was treated with respect' (TR0025). In contrast, in Iraq, they felt deprived of rights which they said 'are taken away by a corrupt government' (TR00101), deprived of justice ('somebody can take your money'), described their 'ambitions killed and energy drowned out' (TR00103), and themselves as victims to inequity due to 'sectarianism' and 'gate-keeping', which refers to the existence of patronage networks needed to find a job, for example (AA13).

To provide a sense of this ambivalence of belonging, a few quotes are listed in the following:

> *No, I do not belong here because I feel this is not a place people like me should be living. Here is chaos, and I don't like living like this* (TR0071).
>
> *I consider myself Kurdish, but in Sweden, I enjoy more rights as a human* (TR0031).
>
> *I feel like I don't belong here, but I am part of the European community* (TR0039, TR0068).
>
> *No, I don't feel I belong here. I belong to any place that would offer me a respectful life and give me my rights and secure my children's future. No matter if it is Africa, Europe or elsewhere* (TR0048).
>
> *I cannot feel social belonging to a place or society where I cannot have any rights or respect* (TR0080).
>
> *I feel I am a part of their [Germany] community. For example, when they moved me from a camp to another camp, one of my friends wanted to move with me. When one of the police came to me and asked about our problem, I told him our story, and the police officer told me, "You are in Germany now, you are one of us, and no one can force you"* (TR0065) .

20 \ Belonging marks the emotion-laden process of situating oneself as an individual or group (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2012, p. 12); it encompasses practices of locality-generation, which produce 'a structure of feeling ... (by) particular forms of intentional activity and yielding particular sorts of material effects' (Appadurai, 1996, p. 182). According to Anthias (2006, p. 21), it is 'through practices and experiences of social inclusion that a sense of a stake and acceptance in a society is created and maintained'. The different degrees of emplacement and belonging can also be described as multidimensional embeddedness (cf. Houte et al., 2014). If the creation of belonging is understood as a laborious act that, besides emplacement practices, also always encompasses boundary-making practices, it is obvious that the outcome is uncertain and dependent on multiple factors, not least structural (context) conditions.

Against this background, it is no surprise that a significant number of respondents—asked where or what 'home' is for them—replied that the country of migration feels more like it due to the rights and services received there. However, there was a wide spectrum of answers to this question that did not refer to either origin or migration country (or naming both) but other/smaller social units (citing a city, 'my work office', the mosque, the family house, 'wherever my family is', 'the place of my mother') or denied the existence of a home altogether ('home is not anywhere', a 'graveyard' [TR002]). The difficulty of settling in again and struggling to find one's place and identity was captured by one respondent who stated, "Germany was never a home, and after return, my place of origin was not a home either' (RI-7).[21] Several respondents (TR0028, TR0036, TR0067, TR0019, TR0031, TR0070) replied to the question 'where home is' with 'in-between' (Iraq and the migration country), thus confirming the above categorisation of 'in-betweeners' among compelled returnees.

These ambivalent emic notions of citizenship and belonging are fuelled by political frustration, the alienation of returnees from politics and the feeling of having no significant voice in society. One respondent described 'having to accept the government system again' as the most difficult thing in re-establishing themselves after return (AA4). Others mentioned that even belonging to the right political party does not necessarily guarantee upward social mobility and advantages:

> *It depends on which level you are. If someone is at a high level with a political party, they will get everything, a job, money and a share of the corruption, while others don't get anything, even if they belong to some political party* (TR0048).

Political participation was thus not viewed as worthwhile, even by highly educated, self-decided returnees:

> *It is not important for me to engage politically and participate in Iraq because it will not change anything in the community. I do not want to comment further on this* (AA18).

> *I have no hope because the same people have been ruling for the last 30 years* (TR0048).

Interviewees offered several explanations why their voice in society did not seem to matter, saying it was not effective, they were still too young, nobody would be listening, they would not be reaching the top (where change could be initiated), they did not belong to the party, nobody would care about their opinion, or they would not feel safe to raise their voice. At a less aggregate level, i.e., within the family or the immediate environment (teaching students), returnees did not perceive the situation as that desolate. One returnee shared his experience of higher respect after return and linked it to acquired skills abroad:

> *I feel I have my voice somehow after I returned because people respect me more and listen to me because of my experience. I think people respect me because they see that I was not a bad example like many other returnees who returned without learning anything from their journey. They also respect me because they see me as a good son who returned for his mother* (TR0102).

21 \ The arguments in this chapter are illustrated with selective quotes to illustrate the overall empirical impression of returnees' inner conflict and ambivalence in (social) belonging. However, this should not evoke the impression that they viewed migration countries and their stay experiences there uncritically. On the contrary, racism (in Germany, Sweden and Switzerland) was mentioned by some respondents as adverse experience that made them feel discriminated against or as unequal/second order/migration-background citizens despite having the German passport and citizenship, for example.

Belonging is also 'classed', i.e., a differentiated perception of social belonging is common among returnees with different educational and socio-economic dispositions, as captured in this statement: 'I feel I belong in this community, but in the lowest class of the community' (TR0037). Furthermore, those who belong to groups with no support network and are categorised as socially different, e.g., single female returnees who live separate from their families, feel less belonging to the return community because they have a smaller chance of finding employment (due to the limited options for single females), run the risk of sexual abuse and may encounter poverty and social isolation.

Mobility Aspirations After Return

What has been said above about the challenges to settling (back) in from a psychological point of view and the subsequently elaborated findings about inner conflicts of belonging underpin respondents' partly powerful motivations to leave Iraq again, either to the country and place of migration or any substitute European country. Additionally, the adverse international political context, economic ups and downs, a perception of fragility due to regularly occurring crises (Syrian refugees, COVID-pandemic, ISIS, geopolitical conditions related to Iran and Saudi Arabia/United States, Ukraine war and subsequent inflation and price hikes, etc.) cause great uncertainty about the future among returnees and stayees. Interviews showed that emigration and remigration are often chosen as pathways out of the cycle of crises, as the next catastrophic event is expected to strike soon. The desire to 'become stable' and achieve planning security is connected to the aspired possession of EU-, Turkish or other Western passports and citizenship. Foreign passport holders re-establish themselves comparatively easily in Iraq because besides benefitting from their experience and skills from a long-term stay abroad in the professional sphere, the foreign nationality allows them to leave anytime they feel overwhelmed or forced to migrate because of newly developed adverse context conditions and crises. Interviewees expressed intense psychological relief about the option to escape—theoretically at any time—and mentioned using the opportunity whenever they feel a need for it. In many cases, they take time out from Iraq at least once a year, visit relatives and friends in the country of second nationality and take advantage of different services, e.g., most prominently healthcare services to get medical checkups, etc.

It is against this background that compelled and decided returnees, who did not obtain a permanent status (citizenship or other) because of unsuccessful asylum procedures or for other reasons, perceive their stay abroad as a failure in hindsight. Even though their economic and legal status as 'voluntary returnees' or deportees often deprives them of the option of regular visits to the migration country or other destinations abroad, they aspire to continued/further mobility. This aspiration comprises a wide spectrum—from the intention to re-migrate for good to sporadic visits for touristic purposes and to keep up personal relations established during the time spent abroad or onward migration to another country. Whether or not and when this aspiration is being realised is a matter of resources, i.e., assets and networks. Thus, it is also classed and comes close to what Paasche (2020) conceptualises as 'emulation'.[22] Interviews strongly suggest that for a share of the respondents, the theoretical possibility of moving and being mobile is a crucial dimension of dignity. Moreover, such mobility aspirations do not contradict the outlook or perspective of (continued) reintegration; on the contrary, their realisation is integral to settlement and can contribute to fostering reintegration, as the insights from dual passport holders indicate. These findings are in line with other studies (e.g., Gemi & Triandafyllidou, 2021) that describe post-re-

22 \ The idea of emulation originates in the sociological studies of elites as drivers and loci of social change. Paasche (2020) argues that Iraqi contemporary asylum migrants are less able to benefit form elite asylum pioneers practically (in terms of chain migration and transnational network effects), but the latter are still being emulated, which finds expression in the desire to migrate, even if they might not have the resources or face other disabling factors. Emulative migration as 'observationally learned' migration explaining the desire but not the ability to migrate (p. 204) can thus be understood as one dimension of motility and relevant for re-migration intentions as well.

turn mobility as one necessary indicator of long-term 'sustainable' reintegration.[23] Thus, motility, as the potential capacity to move and the ability to be mobile (cf. Kaufmann, Bergman & Joye, 2004), becomes an important psychological building block for reintegration. It is a crucial factor of dignity and enhances the self-respect of returnees, independent of whether they belong to the socio-economically most vulnerable or rather affluent strata of the origin society.

An Emic View of the Notions of Return/ee and Reintegration

The complexity of return and reintegration processes and inherently related conflicts as elaborated in the previous two sections, made us inquire about the category of returnee: What is the self-designation of 'returnees' and what meaning do they attach to the term itself? The interview responses have shown that the people who themselves returned from abroad perceive the notion of returnee as ambivalent. They consider return neither permanent nor bound to lead to settlement at the place of previous living or any alternative place in the country of origin and asked which thoughts, ideas and meanings interviewees associated with the term returnee, many spoke about mixed feelings on a spectrum between regret, shame, anxiety, acceptance, positive experience and happiness about having returned.

Most prominently, respondents mentioned regret about having returned (AA14, TR0027, TR0028, TR0036, TR0037, TR0038, 048, 041, 061, 065, 068, 070, 072, 077). In a variation, people felt regret for the entire period of being away, including going abroad, spending time in the migration country and then returning, adding in some cases something along the line of 'I wish I didn't leave. I wouldn't have lost my job and my money' (TR00103); 'Had I known I would have to return I would not have emigrated' (TR00104) or 'I lost my business, my popularity, my name during those three years. I just started from zero again' (TR0024). Other responses included expressions of feelings related to the idea of regretting return, e.g., unfortunate, lost (for example two years of studies, TR0020), disappointed, desperation, unhappiness, sadness, fool [TR005], naïve, broken inside and failing.

Shame was the second-most mentioned association returnees connected with the notion of returnee based on their own experience. For example, in cases where a family had sold things to enable a son's migration to Europe, the returned felt ashamed as he was not even able to compensate his family's expenses: 'I gained nothing but misfortune because of that" (T9). In other cases, shame caused the returnees to hide that they had been abroad and 'failed' (in their own self-perception). A taxi driver in Dohuk narrated how he kept a distance from people and avoided friendships out of shame and embarrassment that despite having British citizenship, he is making a living by driving his taxi in Dohuk and is currently 'going crazy' like everybody else because of the fuel shortage. He stated that he has only one very good friend to whom he confided his background and that his relatives are afraid that he will ask them for help. Over the course of the conversation, it became clear that he opted for a life as a taxi driver in Dohuk because he could not use his British citizenship and take his children there—he had actually obtained a British passport under a false name and Syrian nationality (AA20). Other interviewees linked shame with words like 'broken', 'lost', 'loser' and 'depression'. Few felt the need to stress that they did not return self-decided but did not have a choice and were forced to return, which made them anxious.

A third group shared the perception that their migration and return experience was something they accepted as just a period of life abroad and life situation, speaking of it as 'a trip, but an expensive one' (TR0032), 'it was an attempt for me' (TR0078) or just calling it 'migration' (TR0041). A fourth group viewed migration and return as a good experience ('eye-opening', 'tolerance-teaching', 'as single women winning a challenge by going abroad and coming back') and appreciated the exposure to a different so-

23 \ Cf. also Iaria (2014) for Iraq in the context of pre-2014 Iraqi displacement to neighbouring countries (Jordan and Syria).

ciety. In contrast, they often associated the migration countries with the words 'system' or 'structure' and Iraq with 'chaos'. Thus, it becomes clear how various connotations are linked to the category of returnee in the minds of those who are designated as returnees by others because they have crossed the physical distance between migration and origin country. However, not every interviewee would self-designate as returnee; some rejected the term as non-adequate either because of its broadly negative connotation (signalling inferiority, TR0029, TR0032) or lack of meaning: 'I don't feel like I am a returnee. I feel like I belong here, I am from here, and this is my motherland, and these are my people' (TR0042). Importantly, there is no equivalent term in Kurdish dialects for the word returnee in the migration context. If contextualised to mean return(ing) from migration—a term that is viewed positively because 'generally, leaving the country is seen as an answer to the crisis' (HZ_140123)—it has a negative connotation.

The impression that reintegration as a category and multifaceted process does not resonate in returnees' perceptions about the process they are going through after return corresponds to our findings about the notion of return. They prefer to see their lives in a continuum they are living through with constantly arising new challenges. This might form a small part of a possible explanation for the fact that, except for two or three of the many respondents, not one mentioned the relevance of psychosocial reintegration support by local NGOs or other moral and emotional, i.e., psychological support providers beyond their own family, friends or the immediate community. Those few who had come across the term reintegration understood it rather as a status description of a personal feeling, in some cases adding right away, 'I do not feel reintegrated' (RI-1, RI-3). Reintegration appears to be more of an academic term adopted by aid and development practitioners but not used in ordinary people's everyday conversations in northern Iraq (as in Germany). Therefore, interviewees circumscribed 'reintegration' as a 'reconnection to the community/the past after coming back from abroad' rather than the process in the narrow sense.

Social Reintegration: Family Comfort vs. Reactionary Society

The research team found that social networks and family support have an overriding impact on individuals' reintegration processes. This chapter first discusses to what extent returnees have preserved social networks during their stay abroad and/or were able to establish new networks after return and how these social relations influence how they re-establish themselves. Then, the empirical insights are reflected against the question of post-return transnationalism, revealing that the sampled Iraqi returnees mostly obtained very limited transnational capital but expressed a desire for transnational belonging. The third section elaborates on the empirical (Iraq-specific) relationship between return migration, reintegration and social change (King, 2022).

The Significance of Social Relations and Networks Upon and After Return

With one exception[24], all respondents interviewed for this research indicated that they returned to the place of origin, i.e., the place they had lived before migration. The most common reason for this choice was the presence of family and friends at that place; this way, returnees could rely on family support and a pre-existing social network. The interview material clearly showed that decided and compelled returnees considered family support as key to reintegration. Depending on the socio-economic status ('class') of the family, we detected two types of support groups: For one, affluent families with income and networks, for the other, families without considerable assets or income. In the latter case, returnees often felt more dependent on their parents and feared being a burden. They suffered mentally for not being able to give back the modest support they had received. Young men in particular who had migrated between 2014 and 2016 and had been just in the last year of school or had only graduated from school at the time and who failed to stay in Europe often expressed they were feeling ill at ease living at the expense of their families despite their own progressing age and their inability to find employment.

As explored in the previous chapter on the psychological dimension of reintegration, college and marriage constituted 'best practices' facilitated by families of young male returnees to enable their sons finding their place and re-establish socially. This was independent of the economic status of the family. Asked for the type of networks and social relations returnees had after return, the own family network ranked first, followed by social acquaintances acquired via the job, business relations or other economic activities. Several respondents mentioned religious networks, e.g., from the mosque, adding that Islam and religious values constituted a stable anchor for them in changing economic circumstances and politics. The longer people had been away from Iraq, the more difficult it was to reconnect with old friends. In the words of one returnee (TR0077), the reason was the change of his own mindset and that it would no longer fit the mindset and attitudes of his former friends.

A few interviewees indicated that they had abstained from entering new relationships and networks for various reasons not connected with their migration as such but rather for reasons of time, all being busy and having their own lives with families started and social family obligations demanding priority attention. Reviving political networks featured prominently among older returnees who had migrated from Iraq, e.g., in the 1990s or at least before the 2010s. Often, they described themselves as Peshmerga and returned with expectations towards the KDP, such as to be given a government job. This expectation was met in some cases but not in all. Those returnees who had been either able to get their government job back or find employment in the government after return—again through influential family networks or political patronage—were lucky. As indicated in

24 \ In this case (RI-15), the orphan-returnee had lost his two younger brothers who drowned in the Aegean Sea when on board of a boat between Turkey and Greece. He decided not to return to his small hometown in Sulemaniya governorate but chose Erbil as a new place upon return to avoid an abusive uncle and old memories at the place where he and his brothers had grown up together.

the section on assets, assistance and patronage, the permanence and related security of a government job in Iraq (besides the social prestige because of just that) provides a sense of stability and confidence. This likely motivated one respondent to answer the question on social networks stating, 'Because I have a government job, I am financially secure; I do not need political and religious networks, they are not of primary necessity' (AA1).

A female returnee whose husband was re-employed in a non-governmental organisation in Kirkuk explained how they had been in close touch with their family and former colleagues during migration and how these relations intensified once they had decided to return. This way, they were able to request the family in Kirkuk to arrange and buy a house for them before arrival. Her husband had also negotiated with his former boss about his return to the organisation and was promised a job immediately after return, even if was not the same as before. In contrast to their case, the respondent talked about a female friend of hers who had 'changed' when she was in Europe.

> *She cut all the connections with her home country, and whenever someone called her, she would reply arrogantly. After some time, when she and her family were deported to Iraq, there was no one to help them in anything. People looked at them with disgust. But we never behaved like her* (RI-9).

Since the 2010s, social relations have been maintained by mobile phone and/or the Internet (WhatsApp, Vyber, etc.) most of the time. For those migrants who obtained permanent residence abroad, annual visits to attend festivals or festivities (weddings, funerals) or during children's summer holidays constitute a cornerstone for keeping up their social networks and relationships that benefit them after return.

The previous paragraphs show that reintegration is always situated, i.e., taking place based on social relations either at the family, work, business or political network level. It may take place in family homes/at family events (e.g. visiting the in-laws on Friday evenings), schools, colleges and universities, or workplaces, plus—albeit to a lesser extent and selectively—in cafés where people meet old or new friends and socialise (see below on the social circle that evolved among returnees from Norway or Switzerland at certain locations).

Expressing a Transnational Way of Belonging

Returnees' maintaining of social relations and networks with people in the country of migration after return has emerged as a new field of study over the last years (Kuschminder. 2017, p. 32). It derived guided by the possibility that such networks and relations—designated as post-return transnationalism—could be helpful in the reintegration process while impacting origin/home- and migration communities abroad at the same time (Kuschminder, 2017, p. 29).

The interviews conducted for this research have shown that such interactions are rare among returnees in Iraq. The prevalence and intensity of exchange are limited and decreasing over time, except for few cases. In the relatively rare cases where returnees maintain strong links with the migration country, these are mostly with other migrants, often from the same country or ethnic background (e.g., Kurds in Germany), and they vanish once the friends have returned. However, as indicated in several interviews, these relationships and regular exchanges about updates and their friends' current situation can also become an incentive to remigrate (TR0039, TR0068, TR0080).

This said, Iraqis derive no significant transnational capital from their migration and return experience compared to migrants from the Western Balkans, for instance, where proximity to Western European countries and markets and favourable access rules for labour migrants are a given. Even second-generation returnees do not possess this transnational capital because they often reject staying in Iraq and feel uncomfortable living 'in-between' instead of using the advantages of having been socialised in a transnational setting.

Nevertheless, even though interviewees in most cases do not bring with them sustained cross-border connections after return, they often 'express themselves in a transnational way of belonging' (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004) as the findings in the previous chapter suggest. With reference to the citizenship question and the rights and governance dimension, respondents highlighted a transnational element of who they are when speaking about being in limbo and situating themselves 'in between'. In some cases, returnees reported to interact only with each other or friends and acquaintances with similar experiences, thus indicating the development of a transnational identity as returnee/s from a specific European country like Norway (TR005) or Switzerland. Such circles also provide a space to escape from everyday chores and to keep up morale because the longer people have been in OECD countries and the more successful they were there (and decided themselves how and when to return), the more they grapple with a loss of freedom and related challenges after their return.

Social (Non)Change

Whether and how return migration and the follow-up processes (i.e. reintegration) can induce some degree of social change and have an economic, political, social and/or cultural impact on the return community is a highly policy-relevant question. While it is not possible to measure the impact, the interviews suggest that returnees' agency to bring about social change is very limited in northern Iraq. Changes and actual experiences of change are greatest at the personal level, often not yielding an impact beyond the immediate core family. The following examples of how respondents describe their personal changes leave open the possibility that social change might incrementally set in over the long term if the returnees can pass on their changes in personality and political and civic outlook to their children and future generations. However, the adverse social and political environment dims such an outlook for long-term positive change.

Three themes emerged in respondents' answers on personal changes they experienced during migration. First, they described a changed attitude towards work and a more goal-oriented living. For example, they would state that they now knew how to work hard to achieve something in life, have a focus: 'I learnt that working is not a shame. I developed personally, and I know how to make my relationships stronger with people around me' (TR0032). The second topic that emerged is the effect of migrants' exposure to different legal systems and the rule of law in the migration country. They generally appreciated the legal system and its in-built equities, saying, e.g., that they were 'treated like a human', 'having rights', 'being seen by people and authorities'. Even rejected asylum seekers who had a hard time living in camp conditions in Germany as they did not obtain a work permit for several years, for instance, also expressed such opinions. Achieved legal awareness, which after return informs their expectations towards the Iraqi and KRG governments, is one issue returnees mentioned. Third, the interaction with migration countries' justice systems resulted in the common view that the respondents' experience abroad had made them more tolerant towards differences, whether they be religious, ethnic or other. Typical statements included, 'My attitude changed' (TR0027), 'I now accept different beliefs and respect every human' (TR0042), 'I became aware of rights and dignity. This made me respect everyone' (TR0065), 'I now consider all people equal and I respect the law' (TR0028). However, interviews also showed that such personal change was not unproblematic or necessarily welcomed, even in the immediate social environment of the respondents, as the following two quotes indicate:

> *I became more open-minded; I gave more freedom to my children and did not care about people's talk. This made my relationship with my family better, but sometimes some relatives stayed away from me.* (TR0067).
>
> *My mentality and humanity changed. I learned to obey the law and became a clean person. But it did not make my relations better, it made it worse.* (TR0039).

The previous elaborations (see pp. 16-18 and pp. 24-25) on the home community's reactions to returnees introducing new insights from their migration experience abroad and their relations' blatant disregard is another case in point to conclude that changes are most often rejected. The chance of returnees to introduce innovation and ideas in a way that does not put off members of the local society is slim in general. While the immediate family might be more open and tolerant to accept new behaviour and ideas as well as returnees' attempts to present them in a locally acceptable manner (vernacularisation, cf. Kuschminder, 2017, p. 39), this decreases the further returnees are positioned toward the addressees. Thus, colleagues at work, the broader social community and society in KRI and Iraq broadly reject and silence attempts of vernacularisation (Levitt & Merry, 2009). In exceptional cases, well-prepared (in the sense of return preparedness), self-decided returnees who have developed successful entrepreneurial careers abroad, can start businesses where they, as founders, determine the rules of the game and use acquired/new business models or methods in their own company. They constitute islands in the sea of conventional business practitioners in an environment where the private sector is largely underdeveloped and not attractive for employees, thus bearing a limited capacity to influence larger parts of the population. The following quote offers a glimpse into the prejudices and cultural conservatism that constitute insurmountable challenges for many returnees:

> *Kurdish society has not accepted the contribution of experiences people bring with them from their lives abroad. We cannot expect that it will promote development in the community because the Kurdish community believes that returnees are influenced by non-Islamic customs and traditions and try to apply Western values in a Kurdish Muslim community. For example, some returnees support relations between girls and boys without marriage, and while this is rejected in Islamic traditions, Western society finds this a kind of personal freedom* (AA1).

The common rejection of change, the lack of open-mindedness and the adverse social and political environment met with, in particular, compelled returnees' lack of self-confidence (many of whom also have psychosocial problems) which explains that their frustration rather leads to quiet withdrawal and further desperation about their perceived incompatibility with the return society than radicalisation, protest, and political mobilisation. Instead, the ridiculing and rejection of social innovation and feeling of incompatibility increase returnees' desire to leave again and re-migrate.

Summary of Findings

The previous chapters analysed the reintegration experiences of Iraqi returnees from abroad, followed by the presentation of qualitative findings along the analytical trope displayed in Figure 1. The concept of return preparedness and its distinction of individual vs. institutional return preparedness served as a useful starting point for disentangling structure-agency dimensions of reintegration and aligning the two types of return preparedness with the different dimensions of reintegration, i.e., the political-structural reintegration dimension as a reflection of institutional return preparedness and the economic, social and psychosocial reintegration dimensions reflecting manifestations of individual return preparedness.

As for the political-structural dimension, i.e. the overall institutional return preparedness, we introduced four indicators and separately assessed them as either conducive (positive—though none of the indicators showed this result), adverse (negative) or with no tangible effect (neutral). As Figure 2 summarises, the structural and cultural environment for return in Iraq (and the KRG) is not favourable and is, therefore, a major driver of returnees' re-migration and onward migration as well as for continued emigration considerations of Iraqis who did not migrate previously. While government policies have largely ignored the need to support reintegration needs of returnees from Europe, labour market institutions are incapable of remedying the gap in labour supply and demand, which equally affects stayees/non-migrants and returnees. Both groups—especially among the young generation—share the lack of economic (employment and livelihood) perspectives to be(come) independent and start a family. The prevalent political culture impedes local society's acceptance of innovation brought in from the outside and generates high levels of frustration and political alienation among returnees. The perceived uncertainty about future security and safety amplifies many respondents' dissatisfaction with life in northern Iraq.

Figure 1:
Analytical Trope followed in this Paper

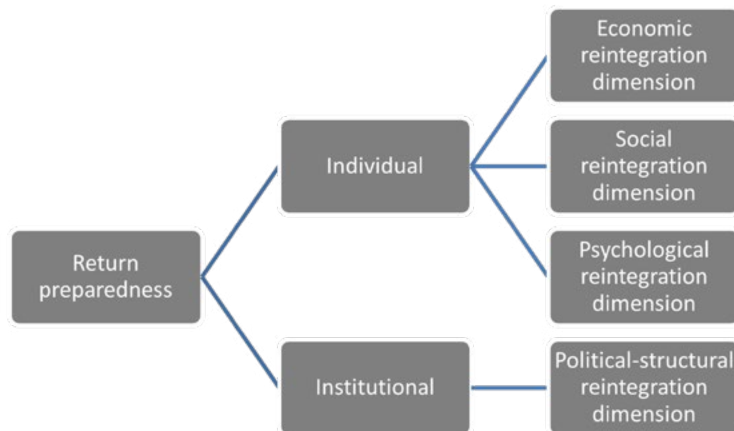
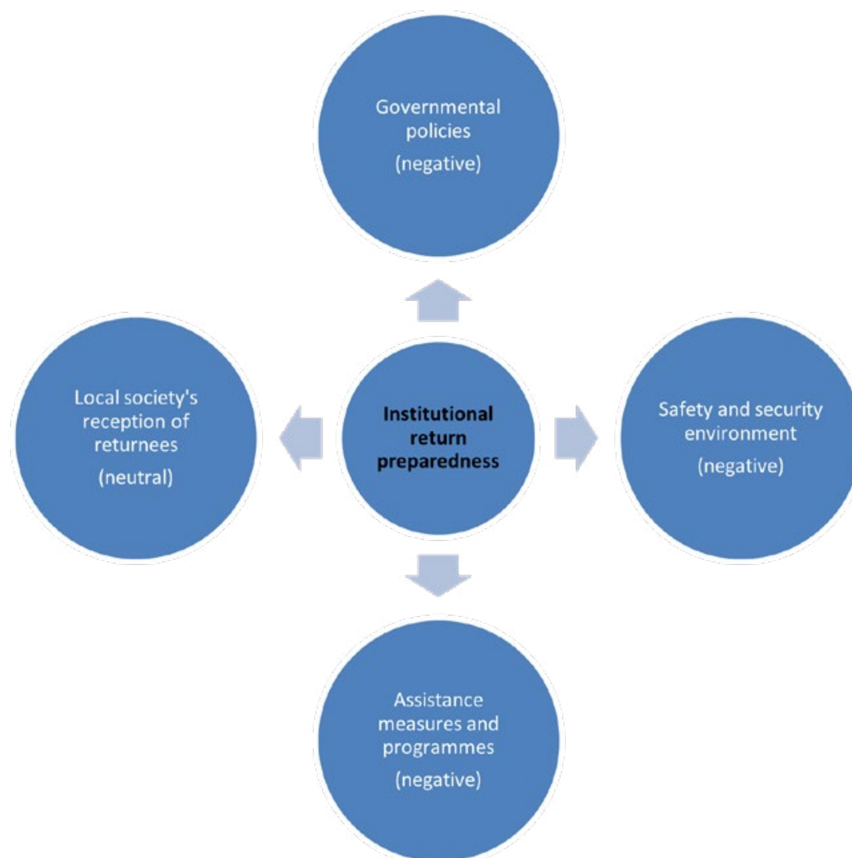


Figure 2:

Institutional Return Preparedness: Indicators and Findings



Given the structural-political context, reintegration assistance non-governmental service providers offer via international donor funding seems like a futile struggle in an adverse context, underlining the need for structural reform efforts. While families are the main source of moral and financial support when returnees try to re-establish themselves, the wider local society's reception of returnees is more ambivalent and can take the form of psychological pressure due to generally heavy reproaches towards returnees, prejudices and non-tolerance of innovations in returnees' behaviour, business and everyday practices.

Turning to the reintegration dimensions that relate to individual return preparedness, this *Paper's* section on economic reintegration highlighted how individual trajectories of economic reintegration depend on the socio-economic status of returnees, their migration background (second-generation returnees, status, and length of time abroad), assets and access to networking capital (of political and professional networks) upon return. Moreover, economic reintegration experiences and crisis perceptions are gendered and classed (King & Lulle, 2022). Self-organised or decided returnees with a middle-class status feature a higher level of individual return preparedness and frequently succeed in livelihood generation after return. Most respondents suggest that employment/earning a decent salary is a precondition for a

life in dignity and is perceived as a precondition for (successful re-) settlement and being part of Kurdish society (again). Economic reintegration assistance is perceived as insufficient to have a long-term effect on returnees' livelihoods and existential needs satisfaction as it facilitates mid- to long-term employment only in exceptional cases. The desire to re-migrate or onward migration are based upon limited economic perspectives, the experience of patronage-driven employment structures and the perception of constantly being subjected to crises, all of which evoke large-scale scepticism, uncertainty and the feeling that social mobility can hardly be achieved in Iraq.

The analysis of the psychological reintegration dimension found that second-generation and compelled returnees from abroad often face emotional and mental hardship after return, feel trapped in a feeling of in-betweenness and are torn in their belonging between migration and origin context. Despite the perception of failure due to non-acceptance abroad and resulting alienation after return, many compelled returnees aspire to continued mobility, just like self-decided returnees who did not obtain a permanent status (citizenship or other) with the option of regular visits abroad. This aspiration comprises a wide spectrum from the intention to re-migrate for good to sporadic visits for touristic purposes and to keep up personal relations established in the migration country. Whether or not and when they can realise this aspiration is a matter of resources, i.e., assets and networks. Motility evolves as a second crucial characteristic (after employment) for leading a dignified life after returning from abroad and should be considered in policymaking.

The experience of rights, receiving respect and humane treatment caused many respondents to state that they identify more with the community of migration—even if they have been rejected—than with Iraq or KRG. The stay abroad had raised their awareness of political rights and resulted in frustration and feelings of fatalism towards political participation and eventual change in the origin context. Return and the challenges to re-establish in the country of origin are not perceived as deterministic or the final stage of a (linear imagined) migration project that leads to permanent settlement at 'the place of origin'. For many, it is a phase in a more encompassing trajectory (of migration, life course for some or stage of life) and the consequence of a chance taken to lead a more dignified life.

As concerns the social dimension of reintegration, the empirical findings point out that social relations and networks are the main source of long-term assistance for returnees and enable emotional, social, and economic settlement after return. In most cases, social networks are maintained throughout migration and do not need to be re-established upon return. Iraqis derive no significant transnational capital from their migration and return experience. Actively keeping up social relations with the migration country is not common. In rather rare cases where returnees maintain strong links with the migration country, these are mostly with other migrants, often from the same country or ethnic background. Even second-generation returnees do not possess this transnational capital because they often reject staying in Iraq and feel psychologically uncomfortable living 'in-between' instead of using their socialisation in both contexts. Kurdish migrants' objective to obtain a foreign ('stable') passport and citizenship reflects many Iraqi citizens' perception of recurrent crises and future uncertainty. Despite seeking to escape crises and instability, Iraqi migrants' do not perceive their journey abroad and eventual return in diachronic linearity where reintegration is sought with a stable vision and endpoint but rather experience it as an expression of desire for a transnational way of belonging.

Returnees' agency to bring about social change in their country of origin is severely limited. Chances and actual experiences of change are greatest at the personal level, followed by the immediate social environment (family), and least at an aggregate societal level. Return migration to northern Iraq has no influence on social change in local society in the short- to medium term. Accumulated frustration connected to the rejection of social innovations bears the potential of radicalisation in the medium- to long term. However, entrenched power structures in northern Iraq have not allowed discontent to surface

openly; instead, it finds its expression through 'exit on foot', i.e., continuous (r)emigration (desires). It can be concluded that the main driver for emigration from northern Iraq is governance failure. Reintegration assistance can only effectively enhance return preparedness once it is embedded in large-scale structural reforms of the Kurdish and Iraqi political economies. The effects of the adverse politico-cultural and economic reintegration context on returnees' reintegration in northern Iraq will not be remedied by reintegration assistance measures that target individuals and institutions alone. Individual reintegration trajectories are gendered and classed and depend on social networks the returnee can mobilise upon return. Employment and motility—the ability to be mobile and realise mobility aspirations—are the two crucial ingredients for leading a life in dignity after return.

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Annex: List of Interviews

a) Database returnees from abroad

85 selected interviews & 2 FGDs with returnees to northern Iraq from abroad, conducted 2019-22

Pseudonym	Date of interview	Gender	Age	Family status	Socio-economic background	Return from	Assisted yes/no	Duration of stay abroad	Year left Iraq	Motive for departure ('own words')
AA1	31.10.19 16.7.20 20.6.21	male	>40	married	professional	NL	no	28 years	1983	parents were pol refugees, to Iran via Turkey, then moved to NL
AA2	10.11.19 20.5.21	male	55	married	company owner	USA	no	12 years	1996	worked with US NGOs etc, 'fear of revenge'
AA3	16.11.19 26.6.21	male	>30	single	prev KRG, now NGO	CH	yes	1 year, 1 month	2016	ISIS, economy
AA4	18.11.19 18.7.20 20.6.21	male	>40	married	academic	UK	yes	5 years	2000	economic
AA5	20.11.19 7.2.21 5.7.21	male	>40	single	Peshmerga	D	yes	5 years	2001	economic
AA6	27.11.19 25.7.20 6.5.21	male	26-39	single	academic	Iran	yes	17 years	1988	Anfal, to Iran via Turkey
AA13	4.5.20 26.5.21	male	37	single	Professional	Jordan-Syria	no	4 years	2005	insecurity, economy
AA14	20.6.20 17.5.22	male	44	married	ass by brother	D	no	16 years	1996	medical treatment
AA15	16.9.21 4.5.22	male	22	single	dep on mother	Finland	no	4 years	2000	political, though father stayed behind
AA17	19.9.21 19.2.22	male	40	married	shop owner	Sweden	yes (f)	2 years	2007	study intention
AA18	15.9.21 26.4.22	male	60	married	academic	D	no	24 years	1989	political
AA20	30.9.21 5.9.22	male	36	married	taxi driver	UK	no	18 years	2002	looking for different lifestyle
AA24	2.3.21 3.3.22	female	23	single	dep on parents	D		11 years	born abroad	parents left 1993, family returned 2010
T2	9.12.19	male	>50	married	unemployed	Iran, D via Turkey	yes	18 years	1991	political refuge
T7	6.2.& 21.2.20	male	35-45	married	driver, technician	Denmark, D	yes	11 years	2001	insecurity
T9	23.2.21	male	35-40	married	labourer	UK	yes	7 years	2003	economic, seek work opportunities
T10	17.3.21	male	42	married	worker	UK	yes	2012	2000	econ, aim to earn money in Europe
EK-0	30.5.19	male	37	married	restaurant-owner	D	yes	2 years	2015	economic crisis, debts
EK-1	6.10.19	male	26-39	married	employed	D	no	2 years	2011	studying/ language course in Germany
EK-2	7.10.19	husband and wife	26-39	married	part-time employed	D	yes	1 year	2015	low salaries, went with extended family

a) Database returnees from abroad: - continued

85 selected interviews & 2 FGDs with returnees to northern Iraq from abroad, conducted 2019-22

Pseudonym	Date of interview	Gender	Age	Family status	Socio-economic background	Return from	Assisted yes/no	Duration of stay abroad	Year left Iraq	Motive for departure ('own words')
EK-3/FGD4	3.10.19	males	18-39	single/ married	mixed	DK, D	yes	3 months to 2 years	2015	economic crisis
EK-4	5.10.19	female	39	married	unemployed	D	yes	3 years	2015	insecurity, threat perception
EK-5	7.10.19	male	26-39	married	shop-owner	D	yes	3 years	2015	medical treatment, relationship
EK-6/FGD5	8.10.19	females	18-40	single/ married	employed	D	no	12-21 years	1995-98	political refuge/ born in Germany (D)
EK-7	2.10.19	female	26	single	high-skilled	UK	no	>10 years	2000/2009	economic
EK-8	2.10.19	male	26-39	single	employed	D	no	17 years	1998	father sought political refuge in D
EK-9	18.10.19	male	26-39	married	occasional jobs	Norway	yes	4 years	2008	n.a.
EK-10	19.10.19	male	26-39	single	employed	NL	yes	2 years	2009	living in Christian majority context
RI-1	13.10.19	male	26-39	single	jobless	D	yes	3 years	2014	econ crisis, no earning, ISIS
RI-2	20.10.19	female	26-39	divorced	BA graduate without job	D	yes	3 years	2014	jobless, ISIS
RI-3	27.11.19	male	26-39	single	high school graduate, unemployed	UK	yes	5 yerars	2012	jobless, leaving with friends
RI-8	29.12.19	female	>40	divorced	teacher (diploma)	D, Italy	yes	5 years	2014	'more liberty and personal freedom'
RI-9	25.1.20	female	26-39	married	accountant, housewife	D	yes	6 years	2011	'find another life' as relatives in Europe had done before
RI-12	13.1.20	male	>40	married	employed, shop owner	D	yes	2 years	2015	economic crisis
RI-15	23.10.19	male	26-39	single	tailor	Turkey	yes	1 year	2016	econ situation, 'make a better living'
TR001	20.3.21 25.7.22	male	33	married	police, shop owner	Bulgaria	yes	6 months	2016	insecurity, instability
TR002	24.3.21 8.4.22	male	36	married	Peshmerga-barber-cafe owner	CH	yes	7 years	2006	adventurism, imitating friends
TR004	25.4.21	male	40	married	Peshmerga	CH	yes	11 years	2001	n.a.
TR005	17.6.21 2.8.22	male	30	married	student-NGO	Norway	yes	4 years	2008	seeking good life
TR006	16.6.21	male	30	single	high school	Sweden	yes	7 years	2014	joining siblings living in Sweden
TR0010	13.8.21 29.7.22	male	40	married	gastro-body-building-studio	CH	no	12 years	1999	seeking better life, support family
TR0019	2.9.21	male	30	married	college graduate, barber, painter	CH	yes	3 years	2014	seeking to be an artist
TR0020	2.9.21 23.3.22	male	21	single	dep on parents	D	no	2 years	2014	ISIS threat
TR0022	18.9.21 17.3.22	male	26	single	student TUR	Iran	no	12 years	< 1995	parents were political refugees, born in Iran, returned 2008
TR0023	18.9.21 17.3.22	male	26	single	dep on family, unemployed	Iran	no	16 years	1986	parents were political refugees, born in Iran

a) Database returnees from abroad: - continued

85 selected interviews & 2 FGDs with returnees to northern Iraq from abroad, conducted 2019-22

Pseudonym	Date of interview	Gender	Age	Family status	Socio-economic background	Return from	Assisted yes/no	Duration of stay abroad	Year left Iraq	Motive for departure ('own words')
TR0024	20.9.21 21.3.22	male	31	single	barber, artist	Sweden	no	3 years	2014	overall depressing situation
TR0025	11.9.21 27.3.22	male	31	married	employed psychotherapist	D	no	2 years	2015	better life, bad political links
TR0027	14.9.21 19.3.22	male	35	married	retired Peshmerga	Sweden	no	1 year	2018	new life, good future
TR0028	17.9.21 23.3.22	male	32	single	employed med shop	CH	no	1 year	2015	jobless, no hope
TR0029	14.9.21 20.3.22	male	30	single	taxi driver	D	no	2 years	2014	better life, see world
TR0030	5.10.21 21.3.22	male	30	married	jobless	Israel	no	8 years	2017	Israel residency for fiance
TR0031	25.9.21 29.3.22	female	35	married	not working	Sweden	no (d)	11 years	2009	marriage to husband in Sweden
TR0032	22.9.21 22.3.22	male	29	single	coffee-shop, photo studio	Sweden	no (d)	2 years	2016	love in Sweden
TR0035	16.9.22 12.4.23	female	23	single	job-seeking	NL	no	1 year	2009	father in NL called family
TR0036	27.9.21 8.4.22	male	22	single	student-gold shop uncle	D	no	2 years	2014	seeking good future away from family
TR0037	22.9.21 17.4.22	male	46	married	electr-labourer (disabled)	Greece	yes	2 years	2016	ISIS threat
TR0038	20.9.21 19.4.22	male	44	married	barber shop owner	CH-UK	no	8 years	2002	Economic situation, insecurity
TR0039	20.9.21 19.4.22	male	33	married	Peshm+shop owner-jobless	CH	no	2 years	2014	political issue: party threat
TR0041	21.9.22 20.4.22	male	36	married	alumin worker	Greece	no	5 years/ 6 months	2005/2018	economic situation
TR0042	21.9.22 20.4.22	male	36	married	teacher	UK	no	7 years	2006	friends left, economic situation, see Europe
TR0043	2.8.21	male	43	married	worker	D	yes	5 years	2015	better life
TR0048	10.6.21 19.3.22	male	42	married	employed-shop owner	D	yes	9 years	2001	economic situation
TR0050	6.10.21 8.4.22	male	49	married	high-school stud	D	yes	1 year	2017	no jobs, rumours about D
TR0058	9.10.21 18.5.22	male	31	single	market owner	D	yes	6 years	2015	ISIS-war, many crises
TR0061	11.10.21 27.3.22	male	46	married	store owner	UK	no	4 years	2001	financial, sending $ home
TR0064	13.10.21 22.4.22	male	33	married	jobless graduate	CH	no (d)	1 year	2015	'to find a future in my life'
TR0065	14.10.21 22.4.22	male	33	single	worker sewer shop	D	no	1 year	2015	economic situation
TR0067	1.10.21 8.4.22	male	56	married	tailor	NL	no	12 years	2001	economic situation, better life
TR0068	2.10.21 18.4.22	male	31	married	student-jobless	CH	no	1 year	2015	economic situation, no job

a) Database returnees from abroad: - continued

85 selected interviews & 2 FGDs with returnees to northern Iraq from abroad, conducted 2019-22

Pseudonym	Date of interview	Gender	Age	Family status	Socio-economic background	Return from	Assisted yes/no	Duration of stay abroad	Year left Iraq	Motive for departure ('own words')
TR0070	28.9.21 14.5.22	male	31	married	student - police	Greece	no	5 years	2007	good future, uncle called
TR0071	25.9.21 19.5.22	male	32	single	student – employed in gaming store	Norway	no	7 years	2006	seeking better life
TR0072	25.9.21 19.5.22	male	40	married	store-driver	Greece	no	8 years	2004	living a good life
TR0077	6.10.21 16.4.22	male	32	single	student-electr engr	Belgium	no	4 years	2007	'tired of social problems'
TR0078	8.10.21 8.4.22	male	22	single	student-trader	Turkey	no	2 years	2018	movement with family
TR0079	8.10.21 26.3.22	male	46	married	tailor-jobless	CH	no	9 years	2001	good life
TR0080	7.9.21 30.3.22	female	37	married	mother	D	yes	2 years	2017	ISIS-damaged house
TR0084	4.9.21	female	60	married	university teacher	Iran	yes	26 years	1975	political refuge
TR0086	6.9.21	male	63	married	Peshmerga	Turkey	yes	23 years	1975	political refuge
TR0090	3.10.21	male	36	married	worker-jobless	CH	no	3 years	2008	get surgery not available in Kurdistan
TR0099	18.5.22	female	18	single	student	Slovakia	yes	3 years	2014/2018	ISIS, 2014-17 in Erbil
TR00101	28.7.22	male	27	married	shop/market owner	Sweden	yes (d)	5 years	2014	Economic, seeking better life
TR0102	15.6.22	male	18-25	single	self-employed	Slovakia	yes	7 years	2014	ISI, 2014-17 in Erbil
TR00103	28.7.22	male	42	divorced	prev. Police, now NGO driver	Greece	yes	1 year	2018	escape after divorce
TR00104	6.8.22	male	33	married	Peshmerga	D	yes	3 years	2016	economic, better life for kids
TR00106	1.6.22	male	28	married	worker	Greece	yes	2 years	2019	no hope for decent life
TR0107	27.7.22	male	26	single	high school graduate	Turkey-France	yes	3 years	2016	to 'build a future'
TRA0094	5.1.22	male	26-39	married	n.a.	Turkey-D	yes	2 years	2015	ISIS

b) Database expert and stakeholder interviews in Iraq

Pseudonym	Place and date of interview	Institutional affiliation
ES1	26. 5. / 9. 10. 2019, Erbil	IGO
ES2	27. 5. 2019, Erbil	Service provider
ES3	28. 5. 2019, Dohuk	Local government representative
ES4	29. 5. 2019, Dohuk	IGO
ES5	29. 5. 2019, Dohuk	scholar, consultant
ES6	30. 5. / 3. 10. 2019, Sulemaniya	NGO
ES7	30. 5. 2019, Sulemaniya	scholar
ES8	31. 5. 2019, Sulemaniya	scholar
ES9	30. 9. 2019, Erbil	educational institute
ES10	1. 10. 2019, Erbil	IGO
ES11	6. 10. 2019, Sulemaniya	Service provider
ES12	9. 10. 2019, Erbil	State officer
ES13	21. 10. 2019, Erbil	State officer
ES14	21. 10. 2019, Erbil	State officer
ES15	21. 10. 2019, Erbil	State officer
ES16	30. 10. 2019, Erbil	NGO
ES17	2. 4. 2022, Baghdad	NGO
ES18	2. 4. 2022, Baghdad	Journalist
ES19	3. 4. 2022, Baghdad	State officer
ES20	3. 4. 2022, Baghdad	IGO
ES21	3. 4. 2022, Baghdad	INGO
ES22	4. 4. 2022, Baghdad	State officer
ES23	5. 4. 2022, Ramadi	Scholar, former IDP
ES24	5. 4. 2022, Ramadi	NGO
ES25	7. 4. 2022, Dohuk	State officer
ES26	7. / 8. 4. 2022, Dohuk	Government agency
ES27	7. 4. 2022, Dohuk	Local government representative
ES28	10. 4. 2022, Dohuk	Scholar, returnee
ES29	10. 4. 2022, Dohuk	Service provider
ES30	10. 4. 2022, skype	INGO
ES31	11. 4. 2022, Mosul	State officer
ES32	11. 4. 2022, Mosul	State officer
ES33	11. 4. 2022, Mosul	Government agency
ES34	12. 4. 2022, Sinjar	Local government representative
ES35	12. 4. 2022, Sinjar	NGO
ES36	12. 4. 2022, Sinjar	Non-governmental stakeholder
ES37	14. 4. 2022, Dohuk	NGO
ES38	16. 4. 2022, Erbil	NGO
ES39	18. 4. 2022, Qaraqosh	CSO
ES40	18. 4. 2022, Qaraqosh	NGO
ES41	18. 4. 2022, Erbil	Informed analyst
ES42	19. 4. 2022, Erbil	IGO
ES43	19. 4. 2022, Erbil	NGO
ES44	20. 4. 2022, Erbil	Service provider
ES45	21. 4. 2022, WhatsApp	Scholar, NGO
ES46	12. 5. 2022, Teams	IGO

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