

UNWANTED NEIGHBORS**SOCIAL ENVIRONMENTS, PERCEPTIONS OF RETURNEES, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RETURNS AND REINTEGRATION**

Recent analysis conducted by Social Inquiry and Cordaid in Iraq finds that, in the aftermath of conflict and displacement, certain neighborhood-level factors offer protective effects in relation to residents' individual psychosocial wellbeing.¹ Relatively positive levels of social cohesion, public participation, and institutional trust (i.e., the social environment) at the neighborhood-level act as buffers to protect individual psychosocial wellbeing from shocks in general, as well as moderating the effects of previous conflict exposure on mental health and psychosocial outcomes upon return. This brief builds on these findings and explores the linkages between social environment and the return and reintegration of residents.

Although Baiji, one of the largest cities in Salah al-Din Governorate, was retaken from ISIL in 2015, its displaced families did not begin to return home in earnest until 2017, as security forces prevented these movements, citing safety concerns and heavy damage to infrastructure. While location-specific data with regard to population figures is not available, at the district level over the course of the conflict approximately 142,758 residents were displaced, of whom 114,414 have returned, a return rate of 80%.² The estimated return rates for the Baiji urban center are lower, with most locations reporting the return of roughly half to less than half of their pre-conflict populations.³ According to Baiji residents and authorities, the population still displaced fall into three categories: 1) those, including business owners, who have decided to stay in their displacement locations due to employment and greater stability; 2) those who are not able to come back because their homes are completely destroyed and they have little means to rebuild; and 3) those blocked from return due to perceived ISIL affiliation. Quantifying how many displaced households fall in each category is not possible with the data available. Nevertheless, these displacement categories and their implications for reintegration—both for those already back and those who may come back—are found in most conflict-affected districts in Iraq.

While the return of the pre-conflict population by and large is seen as the priority for authorities to resolve displacement, residents themselves have more nuanced views in this regard. The views of these returned residents shape social environments relating to social cohesion and institutional trust in very localized ways. These social environments, in turn, influence perceptions of ISIL affiliation and collective blame. Understanding these dynamics is critical to better conceptualize what durable return after conflict means, and to develop reintegration strategies to help those who have just returned as well as those who have been back for longer. Such efforts will form the basis for reducing fragility and ensuring long-term peace—and this will be of particular importance going forward, as there is an expectation that more displaced people may return to the city in the immediate term. This is because the Federal Government of Iraq has closed the displacement camps within Salah al-Din Governorate where a proportion of Baiji residents, including those with perceived ISIL affiliation, have sheltered until now.

¹ Social Inquiry and Cordaid, *Streets Tell Stories: The Effects of Neighborhood Social Environment on Mental Health and Psychosocial Wellbeing in the Aftermath of Conflict* (The Hague: Cordaid, 2021).

² IOM, Integrated Locations Assessment dataset, Round V.

³ IOM, Returns Working Group, and Social Inquiry, Return Index dataset, Round 10.



The analysis presented here further underscores that durable return, reintegration, and peace are interlinked. Progress toward these goals cannot be assessed purely on an individual level; rather, it must be seen as a political process that individuals do their best to navigate. This process involves complex, often intertwined claims for redress of past wrongs—both those committed by authorities, and in some cases, by their own neighbors—as well as a desire for recognition as equal and legitimate members of the local and national socio-political community in which they live.⁴ In other words, going home entails not only the facilitation of return, but also continuous efforts to strengthen the social environments that all people live in together.

TECHNICAL FACTSHEET

- Original survey data collected from 765 residents across 30 neighborhoods in Baiji in November 2020.
- Survey data collection was preceded by 13 in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews with residents, community leaders, and local authorities in Baiji conducted in October 2020.
- Additional follow-up discussions with field teams and residents took place in December 2020.

HOW RETURNS SHAPE NEIGHBORHOOD SOCIAL ENVIRONMENTS

The overwhelming majority of Baiji respondents (97%) report having been displaced in 2014, with slightly over two-thirds returning to the city between 2018 and 2019. The return process itself requires security clearance from Baiji authorities. Local interlocutors indicate that community policing units, which were established via a dedicated division within the Ministry of Interior to serve as liaisons between security actors and community members, were partly created to help facilitate this process. They also note that at the onset of return to the city, community and tribal mechanisms were implemented to ease initial tensions between residents, as they came back to high levels of physical destruction and sought to cast blame on one another for what had happened. This tension had its basis in concerns that people, or in some cases whole families, with perceived ISIL affiliation had been granted security clearance and allowed to return when they should not have been. Local interlocutors further reported that the aforementioned mechanisms, combined with the passage of time, helped to improve community relations as people adjusted to their new conditions.

Initial tensions at the first returns

“After the events of 2014, there were tensions, and the atmosphere was charged because people know that some of those who have engaged in the conflict are from this or that family or tribe. Therefore, we worked from the start for unity and invited the clan elders, intellectuals, and the rest of society, and even the security authorities such as the local police. We raised issues that needed settling and resolution.” (Local authority member)

“During the return and the view of destroyed neighborhoods, there was blame on some people and families that they were the cause of what happened. But people soon understood that what happened was greater than it being about an individual will or just the act of armed groups, and that they should unite in the face of coming days.” (Community leader)

⁴ Megan Bradley, “Durable Solutions and the Right of Returns for IDPs: Evolving Interpretations,” *International Journal of Refugee Law*, 30 no. 2 (2018): 218-242.

Despite these reported improvements, 17% of Baiji residents recently surveyed still feel that some people in their neighborhoods should not have been allowed to return. Another 49% of respondents, when asked what issues angered them most, reported being most upset about the lack of justice after conflict. Residents indicate that this encompasses the absence of accountability for the loss of homes and family members due to ISIL perpetration, as well as concerns over seeing people who are allegedly responsible for these violations back in the city.

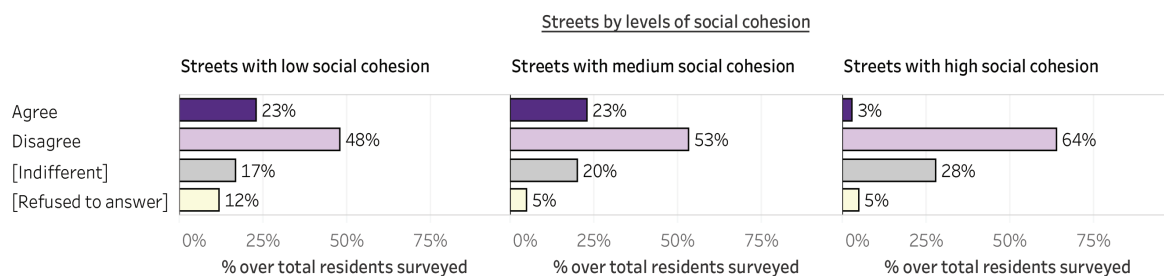
Precedent for concerns

“There are many families who are prevented from returning to the district because of ISIL affiliation . . . These families cause concern to local inhabitants as they do not trust them due to precedents where some families returned and the security forces discovered that they were sleeper cells for ISIL after several violations occurred. Some returnee families were providing support and facilitation to some ISIL elements into the city.” (Local authority member)

These individual views of one’s neighbors have a notable impact at the collective level in relation to neighborhood-levels of social cohesion and institutional trust in particular. Specifically, as Figure 1 highlights, there is a relatively higher percentage of respondents (23%) on streets with either low or moderate levels of social cohesion, respectively, who believe that some of the people currently residing there with them should not have been allowed to return. This is compared to streets with high social cohesion, where the percentage of residents (3%) believing this is very small. This rate of mistrust on streets with low social cohesion is almost 8 times higher than that of streets with high social cohesion. Indeed, collective suspicion of one another seems highly correlated with a reduction in the willingness of neighbors to help each other, in their feelings of being close-knit and sharing values, and in their overall ability to get along with one another.

Figure 1. Returns and neighborhood social cohesion

Agree or disagree: “Some returnees in my neighborhood should not have been allowed to come back”

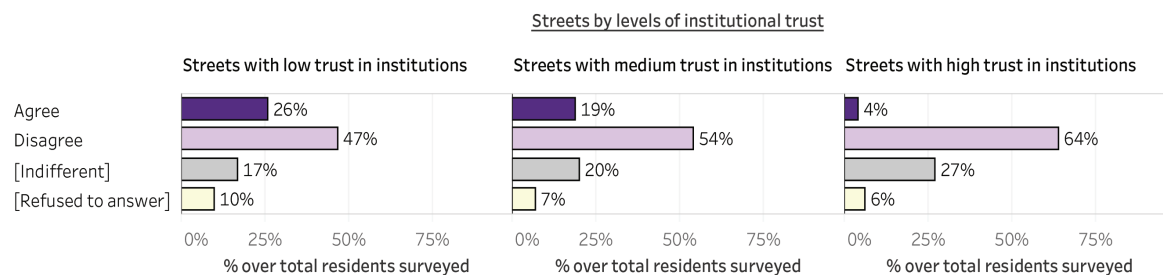


A similar trend emerges when exploring the relationship between the mistrust of one’s neighbors and a neighborhood’s collective level of institutional trust. There tends to be low confidence in institutions on streets where many residents believe that some returns there should not have been allowed. Based on Figure 2, people living on streets with low institutional trust are 6 times more likely to feel this way than their counterparts living on streets with high institutional trust. This is perhaps not surprising, since the ability to return and stay is itself predicated on being granted approval to do so through institutional processes. Believing that some neighbors should not have been granted this approval thus calls into question the confidence one may have in the transparency, trustworthiness, and effectiveness of institutions to serve the best interests of all residents.



Figure 2. Returns and neighborhood trust in institutions

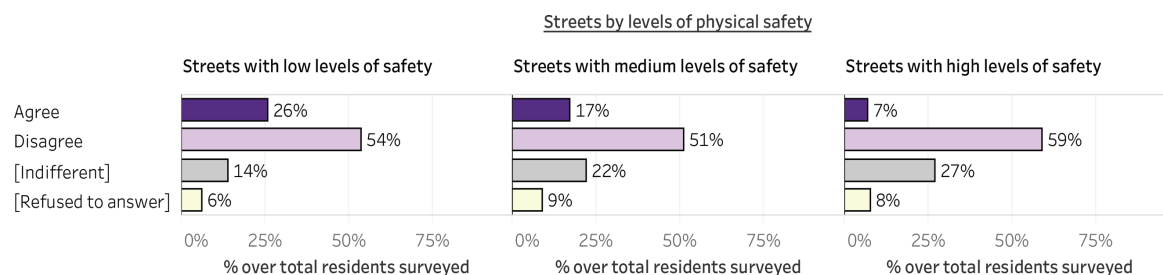
Agree or disagree: "Some returnees in my neighborhood should not have been allowed to come back"



Finally, neighborhood physical safety is also impacted by views about returnees in the same manner (Figure 3). People living on streets with low physical safety are almost 4 times more likely to oppose the return of some of their neighbors than their counterparts living on streets with high levels of physical safety. This tends to line up with concerns residents have of the recurrence of ISIL attacks or similar events in the city based on the current security landscape.

Figure 3. Returns and neighborhood physical safety

Agree or disagree: "Some returnees in my neighborhood should not have been allowed to come back"



All in all, then, the return of people who residents view as having a link to ISIL seems to generate adverse feelings among individual neighbors in those areas where they are perceived to have returned. These adverse feelings negatively impact collective cohesion, institutional trust, and safety in those specific parts of the city. Such views also seem to influence how residents perceive collective blame and ISIL affiliation.

ISIL AFFILIATION AND VIEWS ON FUTURE RETURNS

Baiji respondents, by and large (81%), do not think having a family member who is associated with ISIL should implicate the whole family. In other words, the overwhelming majority of residents seem opposed to collective blame of whole families due to the actions of individual members. There is, however, a correlation observed between perceptions of returnees and collective blame, in that those who feel some of their neighbors should not been allowed to return also tend to extrapolate ISIL affiliation toward the whole family.

Of particular note is that the level of respondents' conflict exposure does *not* have any bearing on their views regarding families with members linked to ISIL; residents who experienced higher levels of violence or conflict-related events do not necessarily have more negative views of such families than those with lower conflict exposure. This seems to indicate that views of

what constitutes ISIL-affiliation are particularly localized, attached to neighborhood networks and the relationships therein as they evolve before, during, and after conflict.

While residents tend to have more nuanced stances in relation to what constitutes ISIL-affiliation or blame in relation to whole families, over half (55%) also report that if ISIL-suspected individuals returned there would be retaliation against them (Figure 4), while additional 35% refused to answer the question. This consensus exists regardless of the neighborhood in which the respondents live with regard to levels of cohesion, institutional trust, and safety. Thus, while accommodations may be made by some residents for family members, the same does not seem to be true of those believed to be ISIL-linked individuals.

Rejection and retaliation

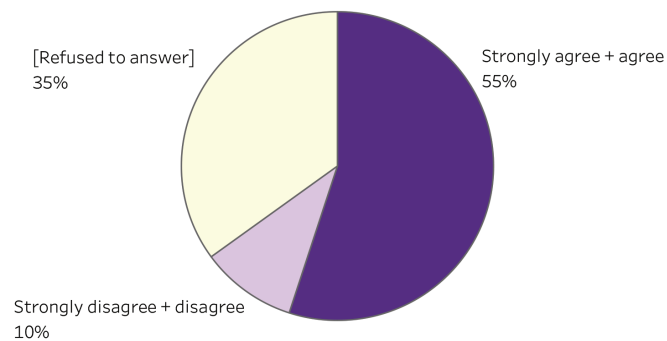
“It already happened that people in Baiji did not accept the families that had some affiliation with ISIL and there were some clashes between them because of the destruction that befell the city.” (Local authority member)

“Some families are prevented from returning due to one of their family members being with ISIL. Those pose a danger to city residents due to fear of reprisals or harboring and providing support to terrorists.” (Community leader)

“There is a complete rejection of anything related to ISIL. There is even a rejection towards some of their family members because some of these families are still communicating with ISIL. This is something the streets felt because there were some security breaches that killed people of the city, something that security investigations confirmed is due to the involvement of some of the returning families.” (Resident)

Figure 4. Returns and revenge

Agree or disagree: “In the event of the return of ISIL-affiliated families, residents of Baiji City would retaliate against them”



Taken together, these dynamics raise protection, accountability, and redress issues for all people of Baiji: for those residents who have already returned, as well as for those still displaced who want to return, irrespective of how ISIL affiliation is interpreted. Given this, it is perhaps unsurprising that half of Baiji respondents feel reconciliation is necessary in the city. This is seen as needed predominantly between people who lost family members to ISIL perpetration⁵ and ISIL-affiliated families, but also between residents and authorities, among residents, and among tribes—highlighting the reality that fault lines within the community run deeper than those created by the ISIL conflict. Of note is that an additional 39%, disproportionately women and young people, report not caring about whether or not reconciliation is needed, as they feel such processes make no difference to their lives.

⁵ ISIL particularly targeted local members of the Iraqi Security Forces in the city as they overran it and during its retaking.



IMPLICATIONS FOR RETURN REINTEGRATION

The findings presented here show that suspicion over who was or was not allowed to return is correlated with lower neighborhood cohesion, institutional trust, and safety—and furthermore, does seem to influence how residents perceive ISIL affiliation and blame. In addition, the risk for some type of retaliation against new returnees with perceived ISIL affiliation is relatively high. While there is some desire for reconciliation measures, and while authorities and community leaders have indicated that some reconciliation processes had taken place at the onset of returns, there remain grievances and concerns over who has returned and may return. This presents rights and protection concerns for all involved, including both existing returnees and those who want to return (especially those coming from camps that have closed), who together may have interlinked protection, rights, and redress claims, even if in some cases they may be competing. This is observed in the data collected for Baiji, but these are dynamics present in many conflict-affected districts of Iraq.

What these findings underscore is that the process of return goes beyond the mere ability to come back and the administrative processes that precede it—which themselves do not seem to be transparent or effective to a subset of residents. Rather, return involves the ability of people to be able to re-establish social ties, claim citizenship rights, and obtain redress for what happened to them during and after the conflict. These issues are critical for all people as, at present, 82% of respondents feel marginalized or neglected and another 95% feel unacknowledged by the state for what they have gone through both during and after conflict. These feelings of marginalization may further exacerbate underlying existing tensions regarding concerns over who is back and who could come back in the near future, making reintegration on return that much more complex. These views, as seen above, seem to be an underlying factor in limiting social cohesion and institutional trust at the neighborhood level.

Thus, grappling with the opacity of the returns process and the misconceptions surrounding it, as well as seeking to repair ties between neighbors even at a basic level, would be avenues of intervention to begin to improve cohesion and institutional trust. Such interventions would require greater engagement and responsiveness of authorities to communities' concerns regarding the rights of all, along with making remedies for violations more accessible. These efforts do not end once people return, but continue long after, as an ongoing process to reduce fragility, increase rights, and ensure greater prospects for durable and just peace.

ABOUT SOCIAL INQUIRY

Social Inquiry is an Iraq-based not-for-profit research institution focused on influencing policy and praxis that establishes civic trust and repairs social fabric within and between fragile communities, and communities and the state.

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