Turning back

Policy and data analysis of Iraqis moving back from Europe

Introduction

This briefing paper outlines the legal and policy frameworks governing the return of refugees and other migrants from Europe, with a particular focus on Iraqis. Analysing existing data on return migration from Europe, it identifies trends among Iraqis returning home, their reasons for return, and the conditions they face upon arriving in Iraq. Produced by the Mixed Migration Platform, this is the second in a series of studies examining specific issues pertinent to migration to, from and within the Middle East region.[1]

With over 1.5 million sea arrivals reported in Europe since 2014, much of the recent discourse on migration has focused on refugees and other migrants, particularly from the Middle East and Afghanistan, seeking safety and opportunity in Europe.[2] Iraqis accounted for 7% of all arrivals to Europe in 2015, and 8% in 2016.[3] At the same time, however, increasing numbers of newly arrived Iraqi refugees and asylum seekers[4] are turning back despite ongoing conflict and instability at home, as they are faced with challenging conditions in Europe and strengthened policy efforts aimed at facilitating or enforcing returns.[5] In 2014, Iraqis ranked 23rd among all nationalities returning from Europe, but had entered the top five in 2015.[6] In the first half of 2016 alone, IOM assisted over 7,000 Iraqis to return home from Europe, double the number it helped in all of 2015.[7] Findings from a purposive sample of Iraqis in Europe found one in five undecided about their intentions to remain; while not representative, this indicates many could decide to return home in the near future.[8]

Methodology and data limitations

The secondary data review carried out for this paper analysed academic, policy and humanitarian reports on return migration, as well as Eurostat and IOM data on the volume of returns from Europe and type of assistance returning migrants receive. Although comprehensive and publicly available data remains limited on Iraqis, even less is available on other nationalities returning from Europe, including Syrians and Afghans, influencing the focus of this case study to be solely on Iraqis.

Data on the volume of returns and the types of assistance returnees receive is available for some European countries, but not all.[9] Data from IOM's Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) scheme offers a useful proxy indicator on return movements from Europe, but only counts those assisted by IOM.[10] Little more than anecdotal evidence is available on others who return through their own means or with the help of smugglers, leaving major information gaps on the risks and challenges faced by migrants returning outside of official return schemes.[11] Displacement tracking in Iraq,[12] and assessments in communities of origin,[13] offer a better understanding of why displaced persons have returned home and the conditions they face upon return, but these studies do not often differentiate between Iraqis returning from Europe and returning internally displaced persons (IDPs).[14]

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[1] For more information, see www.mixedmigratinplatform.org.
[2] UNHCR (2016) Refugees/Migrant Response Mediterranean.
[3] UNHCR (2016) Refugees and Migrants Sea Arrivals in Europe: Monthly Update November 2016; UNHCR (2015) Over one million sea arrivals reach Europe in 2015, 30 December 2015.
[4] Recent reports indicate cases of previous waves of Iraqi migrants are also returning home, see for example Refugees Deeply (2016) Returnees Fight ISIS in Iraq, 7 June 2016. However, the scope of this paper is limited to Iraqis who have arrived and turned back since 2014.
[5] The Guardian (2016) EU signs deal to deport unlimited numbers of Afghan asylum seekers, 4 October 2016.
[6] Eurostat (2014/15) Third-country nationals who have left the territory by type of return and citizenship [migr_eirt_vol].
[7] IOM (2016) Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration: AVRR Bulletin 2016/1 (January-June); IOM (2015) Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration: 2015 Key Highlights.
[8] IOM (2016) Migration Flows from Iraq to Europe: Reasons behind Migration.

[9] Eurostat (2014/15) Third-country nationals who have left the territory by type of return and citizenship [migr_eirt_vol]; Eurostat (2014/15) Third-country nationals who have left the territory by type of assistance received and citizenship [migr_eirt_ass]. Data available for Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, Estonia, Ireland, Spain, France, Croatia, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia, Sweden, Liechtenstein, Norway.
[10] IOM (2016) Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration: AVRR Bulletin 2016/1 (January-June). For more information and analysis on the AVRR scheme, see CIRE (2004) Les enjeux de l'aide au retour volontaire.
[11] See for example: The New York Times (2016) Disappointed with Europe, Thousands of Iraqi Migrants Return Home, 4 February 2016.
[12] IOM (2017) Displacement Tracking Matrix (Iraq), 5 January 2017.
[13] IOM (2016) Migration Flows from Iraq to Europe: Reasons behind Migration.
[14] This paper draws a distinction between Iraqis returning from Europe, and returning IDPs, who have returned from displacement within the confines of Iraq's internationally recognised boundaries. Unless otherwise stated, use of the term returnees in this paper refers to Iraqis returning from Europe.

Key Messages & Policy Recommendations

Key Messages

I. There has been a major shift in the nationalities most commonly being assisted to return from Europe since 2015, with a 97% increase in Iraqis assisted by IOM to return home. However, not all areas of Iraq are safe or suitable for return. Moreover, Iraqis returning from Europe do not always arrive in their country or community of origin, with some becoming stranded in transit countries (such as Turkey) or arriving back to different communities within Iraq, enhancing their vulnerability.

II. Data on Iraqis and other nationalities returning from Europe is limited, particularly for those returning outside of formal voluntary assistance schemes. Eurostat data on returns is not available for all countries, limiting potential for analysis.

III. Although returns are often categorised as voluntary or involuntary, the reasons for the return of Iraqis from Europe are often complex and include individual, structural and policy-related factors.

IV. Returnees from Europe face similar challenges to returning IDPs in Iraq, including a need for protection services and basic needs provision, debt and exhausted resources, changed family and social circumstances, inadequate mental health services, and housing, land and property disputes. A lack of disaggregated data, however, limits our ability to pinpoint the needs specific to Iraqis returning from Europe.

Policy Recommendations

- European governments should ensure communities of origin in Iraq are suitable for safe, dignified and sustainable returns before incentivising voluntary returns.
- Adequate information about return options and conditions should be made available in all relevant languages, including Arabic, Sorani and Kurmanji Kurdish.
- In cases where conditions are proven to be suitable, comprehensive return and reintegration assistance packages should be made available to all Iraqis returning from Europe. Returns should be monitored to ensure returnees are able to reach their intended destination and re-integrate, and better efforts should be made to assess and the address the needs of those returning informally.

- Improve data collection and presentation on returns from Europe, including by ensuring all EU member states make available data on the number of return decisions and types of assistance provided.

- Governments and humanitarian actors should collect and publish better disaggregated data, to improve knowledge on and better address the needs of Iraqis returning from Europe, including by age, gender, time spent abroad, conditions in destination countries, and conditions in locations of return.
- Policies aimed at managing inward migration to Europe, including stricter border controls, tighter rules on family reunification, removal of housing support, and expanded immigration detention, should recognise and address the indirect effects these policies have on return migration decisions.

- Iraqi government and humanitarian actors should improve disaggregation of data on returnees to distinguish between Iraqis returning from Europe, and returning IDPs. Correspondingly, assistance should be tailored to ensure the specific needs of Iraqis returning from Europe are met.

Legal and policy framework for returns of refugees and other migrants from Europe

The return of refugees, asylum seekers and other migrants from Europe is governed by a range of international human rights and humanitarian principles and instruments. Central among these is the principle of *non-refoulement*, which is enshrined in the 1951 Refugee Convention.[15] It grants refugees and asylum seekers the right to protection from being forcibly returned to a country where they are liable to persecution. As such, for the return and reintegration of a refugee or asylum seeker to be considered a durable solution, its nature must be voluntary and conditions in the country of origin conducive to safe, dignified and sustainable return.[16]

In EU law, *Directive 2008/115/EC* lays down the common standards and procedures for returning irregular migrants whose asylum claims have been rejected.[17] It requires member states to uphold the principle of *non-refoulement* and ensure that return decisions give precedence to voluntary departures of third country nationals,[18] ahead of removal or other forced or coercive measures, although interpretation and application of the directive differs significantly among member states.[19]

Each year some 400,000–500,000 foreign nationals are ordered to leave after having entered the EU irregularly.[20] Despite this, only 39% of deportation orders are enforced, leaving many in Europe unregistered and at risk of deportation.[21] One priority of the 2015 European Agenda on Migration is to improve this enforcement rate.[22] An example of this policy in action is the March 2016 EU-Turkey Statement, which requires the return of all irregular migrants arriving after 18 March by boat on Greek Islands from Turkey to be returned to Turkey if they do not lodge or revoke an asylum claim, or if their asylum claims, processed in Greece, are unfounded or inadmissible.[23] As of end December 2016, 800 people had been returned under the agreement since 4 April 2016, including at least 17 Iraqis.[24]

Assisted returns

In many cases, asylum seekers whose claims have failed do agree to return before a final deportation order is enforced, and are considered to have returned voluntarily, despite being faced with limited choices.[25] In such cases, governments and international organisations, especially IOM through its AVRR scheme, support returning migrants with return and reintegration assistance.[26] Most EU member states offer some form of voluntary return assistance scheme, although these schemes vary in terms of the level of the support provided, and the safeguards in place to ensure the voluntariness and sustainability of return.[27] Most commonly, EU states offer to pay transportation costs for asylum seekers and migrants who agree to return voluntarily, through schemes such as the German Reintegration and Emigration Programme (REAG/GARP), implemented by IOM.[28] More comprehensive schemes exist, but eligibility is limited. The European Reintegration Network (ERIN), for example, is a joint return and reintegration programme involving seven participating EU member states and is available to returnees from 11 countries of origin, including Iraq. ERIN offers returnees an arrivals service, access to medical and charitable institutions, vocational skill-building schemes and support in setting up a business.[29]

Although voluntary return schemes are premised on the agreement of the individual returning home, studies have questioned the voluntary nature of returning migrants' decisions to return. Returning migrants often make the decision to return without adequate time or resources to seek advice and information on conditions at home. When considered against the prospect of social isolation, unemployment, uncertain legal status, and potential compulsory deportation without any assistance, the alternatives to return may be considered limited.[30] At the same time, studies acknowledge that most migrants exercise some degree of agency over their return, although they are hesitant to identify a clear-cut boundary between voluntary and involuntary return migration, instead viewing voluntariness on a spectrum.[31] Correspondingly, although the discourse on return migration commonly distinguishes between voluntary and involuntary returns, the voluntariness of return migrants' decisions to go home should not be overstated.

Growing numbers of Iraqi returnees from Europe

Despite a lack of comprehensive quantitative data, there are clear indications that the number of migrants returning from Europe to the Middle East, in both a voluntarily and enforced manner, has grown in recent years. From 2014 to 2015, total recorded returns from the European countries for which data is available to the Middle East more than doubled, from over

[15] UNHCR (1951) The 1951 Refugee Convention.
[16] UNHCR, Solutions: Family Reunification; Local Reintegration; Resettlement; Voluntary Repatriation.
[17] EC (2008) Directive 2008/115/EC "Common standards and procedures for returning illegal immigrants".
[18] REDIAL (2016) European Synthesis Report on the Termination of Illegal Stay.
[19] REDIAL (2016) Return Directive Dialogue.
[20] EC (2016) Return and readmission.
[21] EC (2015) European Agenda on Migration.
[22] Ibid.
[23] European Council (2016) EU-Turkey Statement, 18 March 2016.
[24] European Commission (2016) Fourth Report on the Progress made in the implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement, 8 December 2016; IOM (2016) Mixed Migration Flows in the Mediterranean and Beyond: Compilation of Available Data and Information.

[25] IOM (2004) Return Migration.
[26] IOM (2016) Assisted Voluntary Returns and Repatriation.
[27] Webber, Frances (2011) "How voluntary are voluntary returns?" in Race and Class, vol 52(4) 98-107.
[28] German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (2016) REAG/GARP Support Programme, 13 December 2016.
[29] German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (2016) The ERIN Reintegration Programme, 28 December 2016. Partner states: Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Finland, France, the United Kingdom and Norway. Eligible countries/regions of origin: Afghanistan, India, Iran, Iraq/Iraqi Kurdistan Region, Morocco, Nigeria, Pakistan, Russian Federation (Chechnia), Somaliland, Sri Lanka, Ukraine.
[30] Webber, Frances (2011) "How voluntary are returns?" in Race and Class, vol 52(4) 98-107.
[31] Van Houte, Marieke and Tine Davids (2014) "Moving Back or Moving Forward? Return Migration, Development and Peace-Building" in New Diversities, vol 16(2).

4,500 in 2014 to almost 10,000 in 2015, with sharp rises in returns recorded from Belgium and Hungary in particular.[32]

Volume of Returns from Europe to Middle East (2014 v 2015) [33]
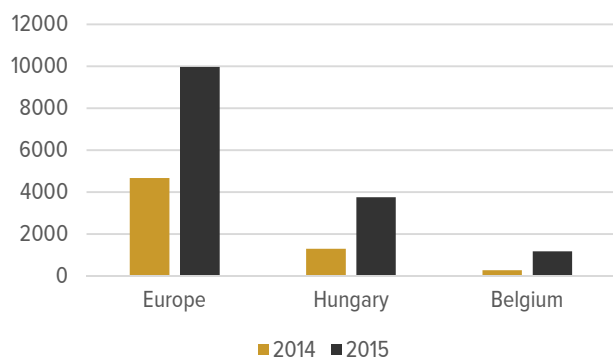
Of those returning from Europe to the Middle East, the number of Iraqis returning has undergone a major shift since 2014. In 2014, Iraqis accounted for 1.2% of total returns from Europe, ranking 23rd among all returning nationalities in the European countries for which data is available.[34] However, by 2015, Iraqis accounted for 4% of all returns and had entered the top five nationalities returning, behind Ukraine, Morocco, Albania and Syria.

Returns from Europe by citizenship (2015)[35]

| Country of Citizenship	Total Returns (2015)	% of European Total Returns (2015)
Ukraine	13,475	15%
Morocco	9,575	11%
Albania	8,055	9%
Syria	4,665	5%
Iraq	*3,490*	*4%*

Increased return assistance

The increase in the number of Iraqis returning home is correlated with an increasing number being assisted to return. Return assistance to Iraqis increased significantly in 2015 compared to the previous year, according to data available for some European countries. In 2015, 77% of Iraqi returnees were reported as being assisted to return, compared to only 34% in 2014.[36]

This trend corresponds with the expansion of IOM's AVRR scheme in Europe. IOM assisted 44,000 people return from Europe in 2014, and 70,000 in 2015. Based on mid-year

trends, over 100,000 were expected to be assisted to return in 2016.

Assisted returns to the Middle East account for a growing proportion of all IOM assisted returns from Europe. In the first half of 2016, 18.2% of IOM assisted returnees originated from the MENA region, compared to around 7% in both 2014 and 2015, which correlates with the sharp increase of refugees and other migrants arriving in Europe from the Middle East, particularly from Syria and Iraq.[37] While Albanians remain the largest beneficiary group of IOM's AVRR schemes in Europe, Iraqis and Afghans have replaced Kosovars and Serbs in the top three nationalities. For the first six months of 2016, the number of Iraqis assisted by IOM to return home was 7,087— almost double the total number assisted in 2015 (3,607).[38]

IOM Assisted Voluntary Return and Repatriation (2015 v 2016)[39]
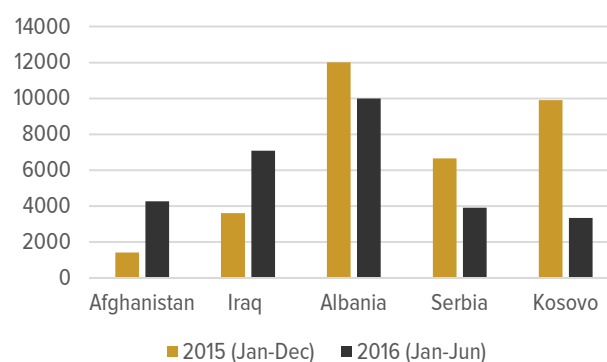
Despite growing numbers of Iraqi returnees, the proportion returning voluntarily from Europe remained static between 2014 and 2015 (63%) among the countries for which data is available, although there were notable differences between countries. In 2015, no returns of Iraqis from Hungary were reported to be voluntary, compared to 77% from Sweden.[40]

Informal returns

In addition to those formally returning to Iraq through AVRR schemes, a growing number of Iraqis are reported to be returning home informally, using their own means and resources, and at times with the assistance of smugglers.[41] Travel agents and airport staff regularly report selling return airfares to Iraqis, some of whom have sold assets or exhausted savings to afford the journey back to Iraq.[42] Yet, it is not reported whether these returnees reach their intended destination, or remain stranded in other areas of Iraq. Others, who cannot afford the airfare home, are reportedly attempting to head back to Turkey by crossing the Evros river, but little is

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[32] Eurostat (2014/15) Third-country nationals who have left the territory by type of return and citizenship [migr_eirt_vol]; Eurostat (2014/15) Third-country nationals who have left the territory by type of assistance received and citizenship [migr_eirt_ass]. Middle East is defined as Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey and oPt/Israel, see Mixed Migration Platform: Overview.
[33] Eurostat (2014/15) Third-country nationals who have left the territory by type of return and citizenship [migr_eirt_vol]; Eurostat (2014/15) Third-country nationals who have left the territory by type of assistance received and citizenship [migr_eirt_ass]. Middle East is defined as Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey and oPt/Israel, see Mixed Migration Platform: Overview.
[34] Eurostat (2014/15) Third-country nationals who have left the territory by type of return and citizenship [migr_eirt_vol].
[35] Ibid.

[36] Eurostat (2014/15) Third-country nationals who have left the territory by type of assistance received and citizenship [migr_eirt_ass].
[37] IOM (2015) Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration: 2015 Key Highlights.
[38] IOM (2016) "Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration: AVRR Bulletin 2016/1 (January-June); IOM (2015) Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration: 2015 Key Highlights.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Eurostat (2014/15) Third-country nationals who have left the territory by type of return and citizenship [migr_eirt_vol].
[41] The New York Times (2016) Disappointed With Europe, Thousands of Iraqi Migrants Return Home, 4 February 2016.
[42] DW (2016) Next stop Erbil: Iraqi refugees line up to return home, 22 January 2016.

known about whether they succeed in continuing onwards to Iraq, or the vulnerabilities they face on the journey.[43]

Reasons for return

Analysis of returns to Iraq by UNHCR and IOM as well as evidence from media reports indicate a range of reasons for return.[44] These include the cost of living in Europe without employment, difficult conditions in reception centres, delays in asylum procedures and obtaining a secure legal status, poor access to services, lack of family reunification assistance and options, difficulty of integration, discrimination and fear of attacks in the country of asylum, and family reasons or changed circumstances at home.[45]

While multiple reasons for return have been identified, it is clear that return decisions are often as complex as the decisions to migrate in the first place. There is a growing body of evidence to support the assumption that migrants weigh up a range of factors at home against those in their host countries to decide whether or not to return. Those factors can be categorised into three groups: individual, structural, and policy-related.[46]

Reasons for return[47]

Individual factors		Structural factors		Policy-related factors	
Age, gender, time abroad	Family/ social circumstances	Destination country conditions	Origin country conditions	Directly targeting return migration	Indirectly affecting decisions to return

Individual factors

Individual factors influencing return migration decisions include both the personal attributes of the migrant and social relations specific to them.[48] Personal attributes may include age, gender, and the time spent abroad, although there is, so far, limited analysis of these individual determinants in the case of Iraqis returning from Europe. By contrast, family and social circumstances, such as the desire to reunite with family members or a change in one's family situation at home, have been shown to play an important role for Iraqis deciding to return home.[49] Focus group discussions from a study conducted by IOM with Iraqi returnees indicated that family circumstances were strong influencers of return, including the need to care for sick family members back home, which in some cases compelled even those who had been granted asylum in Europe to return home.[50] UNHCR and REACH studies have similarly found rejoining families at home as being among the main reasons for return: according

to a March 2016 REACH assessment of communities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KR-I) where Iraqis had returned from Europe, around 25% cited rejoining their families at home as their main reason for returning.[51]

Structural factors

Structural factors, both in the country of origin and in the destination country, also have an important influence on return migration decisions. Structural factors in the destination country include legal status and the ability to work, the security situation and level of discrimination, living conditions and access to services and support.[52] According to IOM, a lack of employment opportunities and unclear legal status are among the main sources of dissatisfaction for Iraqis in Europe.[53] Moreover, conditions in the country of destination set against unrealistic prior expectations have also proven to be major factors in return decisions among Iraqis. REACH assessment data in KR-I indicated that over half the surveyed returnees had returned because they found life was not as expected in Europe.[54]

In addition, when conditions in the destination country are deemed inadequate, returnees are more likely to emphasise these structural conditions over individual factors in their reasons for return. IOM focus group discussions with Iraqi returnees found that those returning from Hungary and Belgium cited poor treatment (including physical abuse) and poor accommodation as their main reasons for deciding to return, ahead of individual factors. By contrast, individual factors were more commonly cited by those returning from Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands, where they otherwise reported having proper accommodation and good treatment.[55]

In the country of origin, structural factors may include economic conditions and job prospects, the security situation and conflict status, or the political situation and legal status of a potential returnee.[56] With ongoing conflict, poor employment prospects, and a turbulent political situation, structural conditions in Iraq are rarely conducive to returns, and are seldom cited among the reasons Iraqis decide to return from Europe.[57] This is also clear from the data available on returning IDPs in Iraq, who face ongoing conflict, insecurity, residential and local infrastructure damage in their communities of origin.[58]

Policy-related factors

Policy-related factors can incentivise or deter decisions to migrate, as well as decisions to remain or return. As such, migration policies may directly or indirectly impact migrants'

[43] Associated Press (2016) *Syrian teenager shot trying to return from Greece to Turkey*, 24 June 2016.
[44] UNHCR (2016) *UNHCR Position on Returns to Iraq*; The New York Times (2016) *Disappointed With Europe, Thousands of Iraqi Migrants Return Home*, 4 February 2016.
[45] IOM (2016) *Migration Flows from Iraq to Europe: Reasons behind Migration*.
[46] UNU-MERIT (2015) *Comparative Research on the Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration of Migrants*.
[47] Model adapted from Black et al (2004) *Understanding Voluntary Return*, Home Office Report 50/04, London.
[48] UNU-MERIT (2015) *Comparative Research on the Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration of Migrants*.
[49] IOM (2016) *Assessing the risks of migration along the Central and Eastern Mediterranean Routes: Iraq and Nigeria as Case Study Countries*.

[50] IOM (2016) *Migration Flows from Iraq to Europe: Reasons Behind Migration*.
[51] REACH (2016) *Situation Overview: European Migration Crisis*, March 2016; UNHCR (2016) *UNHCR Position on Returns to Iraq*.
[52] UNU-MERIT (2015) *Comparative Research on the Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration of Migrants*.
[53] IOM (2016) *Migration Flows from Iraq to Europe: Reasons Behind Migration*.
[54] REACH (2016) *Situation Overview: European Migration Crisis*, March 2016.
[55] IOM (2016) *Migration Flows from Iraq to Europe: Reasons Behind Migration*.
[56] UNU-MERIT (2015) *Comparative Research on the Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration of Migrants*.
[57] UNHCR (2016) *UNHCR Position on Returns to Iraq*.
[58] IOM (2016) *Returnee Location Assessment Report*.

decisions to return.[59] European governments have introduced a range of policy measures directly aimed at encouraging and facilitating returns, including readmission agreements with origin and third countries, including Turkey and Afghanistan.[60] While a readmission agreement with Iraq is not yet in place, European governments have expanded voluntary return and reintegration assistance packages, such as ERIN, to directly encourage asylum seekers and migrants to return home before they are forcibly deported (see section above, Legal and policy framework). The Iraqi government has also adopted policies to facilitate returns, providing single-use passports for Iraqis who need documentation to return home, having lost theirs en route to Europe.[61]

Alongside policies directly aimed at increasing returns are policies which aim at stemming the inward flow of migrants to Europe, but which also indirectly impact decisions to remain or return. For example, stricter border controls, tighter rules on family reunification, removal of housing support, and expanded immigration detention policies ostensibly aim to reduce or manage inward migration. However, they simultaneously reduce the attractiveness of Europe to Iraqis and other migrant groups already there, adding to the incentives to return home. In Sweden, for example, policies in 2016 aimed at reducing inward migration coincided with a growth in asylum seekers withdrawing their claims and seeking to return home. As of August, 1,366 Iraqis in Sweden had withdrawn their asylum applications in 2016, compared to 1,243 new asylum claims for the year.[62]

Conditions upon return to Iraq

Although voluntary returns require that the country of origin offers the prospect of safe, dignified and sustainable return, it is doubtful that most Iraqi returnees have access to these conditions upon return. Findings on return conditions in Iraq are primarily drawn from samples of returning IDPs, or samples that do not distinguish between Iraqis returning from Europe and returning IDPs.[63] While it is likely that the two groups face similar challenges, more clearly disaggregated data is needed to identify concerns specific to Iraqis returning from Europe.

Protection and basic needs

Political barriers, discrimination and the threat of ongoing sectarian violence pose major protection risks to both returning IDPs and those returning from Europe.[64] The prevalence of security incidents, presence of explosive remnants of war and/or improvised explosive devices, arbitrary arrests and restrictions on movement, and inter-communal tensions, are extremely high in some areas of return in Iraq.[65]

Returning IDPs also cite basic needs, such as water, sanitation and hygiene (WaSH), food security and livelihoods, and health among their top requirements in return locations.[66] Damage and destruction is widespread in communities of origin: 13% of returning IDPs have been unable to return to their habitual residence since 2014, largely due to conflict-related damage.[67] It is likely that Iraqis returning from Europe, particularly those with limited means, face similar challenges.

Debt and exhausted resources

Iraqis returning from Europe often face high levels of debt incurred due to the cost of their outbound migration journey. Some have used up savings or sold all their assets to make the journey, or to pay for their return, including selling their properties at home and other valuables.[68] This leaves them with few resources to rebuild their lives once home.[69] In addition, recent reports indicate that migrants returning from Europe face debt-related protection risks upon return, as they remain vulnerable to smugglers to whom they continue to be indebted for the cost of their outward journeys.[70]

Changed family and social circumstances

Like returning IDPs, Iraqis returning from Europe may also face changed family and social circumstances upon return.[71] Family members may have become sick or injured at home, remain in the country of destination or transit, or have died or become missing along the route.[72]

Lessons from Afghanistan indicate that those returning from abroad may face heightened vulnerabilities upon return, due to weak cultural or social ties in their location of return.[73] Demographics in Iraq have shifted dramatically since 2014, with almost 3 million people still internally displaced as of January 2017.[74] In this context, Iraqis returning from Europe face significantly altered communities, and could face major social adjustment challenges.

Inadequate mental health services

Returning from displacement can be associated with shame, stress and depression, raising mental health and psychosocial concerns.[75] Yet, in Iraq, psychiatric and

[59] UNU-MERIT (2015) Comparative Research on the Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration of Migrants.
[60] See for example European Council (2016) Return and readmission; Mehdi Rais (2016) "European Union Readmission Agreements" in Forced Migration Review, online; The EU-Afghanistan Joint Way Forward on Migration Issues, 2 October 2016; The Guardian (2016) EU signs deal to deport unlimited numbers of Afghan asylum seekers, 4 October 2016.
[61] DW (2016) Next stop Erbil: Iraqi refugees line up to return home, 22 January 2016.
[62] Independent (2016) Sweden sees record numbers of asylum seekers withdraw applications and leave, 26 August 2016.
[63] IOM (2016) Returnee Location Assessment Report.
[64] See for example IRIN (2016) Beyond Mosul: Iraq's displacement and sectarian timebombs, 22 November 2016.
[65] See for example, Iraq Protection Cluster (2016) Diyala Returnee Profile, 22 July 2016.
[66] IOM (2016) Returnee Location Assessment Report.
[67] Ibid.

[68] REACH (2016) Migration to Europe through the Western Balkans, May 2016.
[69] DW (2016) Next stop Erbil: Iraqi refugees line up to return home, 22 January 2016.
[70] Ardittis and Laczko (2016) "Introduction: Understanding and Measuring Safe Migration" in Migration Policy Practice, Vol. VI, Number 4, October-December 2016.
[71] IOM (2016) Migration Flows from Iraq to Europe: Reasons Behind Migration; IOM (2016) Assessing the risks of migration along the Central and Eastern Mediterranean Routes: Iraq and Nigeria as Case Study Countries.
[72] See, for example, IOM (2016) Migration Flows from Iraq to Europe: Reasons Behind Migration; IOM (2017) Missing Migrants Mediterranean Update, 20 January 2017.
[73] The Guardian (2016) EU signs deal to deport unlimited numbers of Afghan asylum seekers, 4 October 2016; Schuster and Majidi (2013) "What happens post-deportation? The experience of deported Afghans" in Migration Studies, 23 June 2013.
[74] IOM (2017) Displacement Tracking Matrix, Iraq, 5 January 2017.
[75] IRIN (2017) Iraq's growing mental health problem, 16 January 2017.

psychosocial support services are extremely weak. Mental health professionals are in short supply, and are faced with overwhelming demand as civilians emerge from trauma and conflict. According to official figures, there are only 80 clinical psychologists in Iraq.[76] Returnees from Europe compete with returning IDPs and host communities for access to these limited mental health services.

Housing, land and property disputes

Housing, land and property issues also pose barriers to returnees seeking restitution of their claims to property, particularly in areas of Iraq where the controlling authority has changed hands, often multiple times. As was the case during previous displacement waves in Iraq, the likelihood of property disputes causing social tensions between returnees and local property claimants remains high.[77]

Conclusion

The number of Iraqis returning from Europe has more than doubled since 2014. The interaction of individual, structural and policy-related factors has led many to decide to return, where they face protection and humanitarian needs similar to returning IDPs, as well as exhausted resources, changed family and social circumstances, inadequate mental health services, and housing, land and property disputes.

The growing trend of Iraqis returning from Europe has important implications for policy makers and humanitarian responders. As the scale of returns increases, so too does the imperative of ensuring that each return aligns with the fundamental principle of *non-refoulement*, and that beyond repatriation, durable returns also ensure the adequate reintegration of Iraqi returnees. However, the lack of comprehensive and disaggregated data specific to Iraqis and other nationalities returning from Europe limits the ability of humanitarian and government actors to tailor return schemes to meet the humanitarian and protection needs specific to each group. Correspondingly, the following information gaps are highlighted as areas for further research.

Suggested areas for future research

- Collection and analysis of disaggregated data to specify the communities, sub-districts and governorates Iraqis and other nationalities returning from Europe arrive in, and how individual and socio-economic differences between returnees influence their ability to successfully re-integrate in these areas.

- Analysis of the safety of return migration, including that which occurs through informal channels and smuggling networks, with a focus on the risks returning migrants face in transit and upon return.[78]

- Arrival back in the country of origin is not always the end of the migration experience, and those who have embarked on an international journey but have returned home after failing to reach their intended destination or being forced back, may seek to migrate again.[79] While previous studies have explored the re-migration of Iraqis, further research is needed to assess the contemporary return migration of Iraqis and other nationalities from Europe in the context of circular migration.[80] In addition, more research is needed to understand if and whether voluntarily returning migrants are limited in their ability to seek asylum at a later stage.

- Many European countries consider assisted voluntary return migration as part of their migration and development agendas. More research is needed into the specific development benefits recently returned Iraqis bring, or could bring home.[81]

- The number of Afghans returning from Europe has undergone an even greater shift than that of Iraqis since 2014. More research is needed into the case of Afghans returning from Europe, particularly in light of the recent EU-Afghanistan readmission agreement, and the fact that many Afghan returnees may be particularly vulnerable, having grown up in displacement in Iran and Pakistan, and never actually lived in Afghanistan.[82]

[76] ibid.
[77] IOM (2016) Housing, Land and Property (HLP) Issues facing Returnees in Retaken Areas of Iraq.
[78] See for example proposed research by IOM GMDAC (2016).
[79] UNU-MERIT (2015) Comparative Research on the Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration of Migrants.
[80] Iaria, Vanessa (2011) "Attempting Return: Iraqis' re-migration from Iraq," in Refuge, vol 28(1).

[81] ECDPM and ICMPD (2013) Migration and Development Policies and Practices: A mapping study of eleven European countries and the European Commission.
[82] The EU-Afghanistan Joint Way Forward on Migration Issues, 2 October 2016; The Guardian (2016) EU signs deal to deport unlimited numbers of Afghan asylum seekers, 4 October 2016; Schuster and Majidi (2013) "What happens post-deportation? The experience of deported Afghans" in Migration Studies, 23 June 2013.