

MIGRATION FROM IRAQ TO EUROPEAN UNION COUNTRIES

A SURVEY OF RETURNEES FROM THE BELARUSIAN MIGRATION CRISIS

April 2022



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ACRONYMS

AVRR Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration

CD Community Discussion

EU European Union

GoI Government of Iraq

IOM International Organization for Migration

RART Rapid Assessment and Response Team

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- To better understand the experiences, motivation and needs of Iraqis who returned from Belarus and neighbouring countries during the Belarusian migration crisis in 2021/22, IOM Iraq utilised its network of Rapid Assessment and Response Teams (RARTs) to conduct a survey of returnees.
- Using a chain referral sampling methodology, 234 respondents were surveyed in February 2022, the majority of whom were aged 18-34 (77%), male (82%) and unmarried (60%). Due to the non-probabilistic sample design, findings presented here cannot be generalised to a broader population.
- IOM also conducted community discussions (CDs) in Dahuk and Sulaymaniyah governorates to complement the survey. 116 individuals (63 men and 53 women) participated, including returnees from Belarus and bordering EU countries, as well as community members who had remained in Iraq but came from communities impacted by the Belarus migration crisis.
- Over half of the male survey respondents were unemployed and seeking work (54%), with a similar proportion holding primary education as their highest level of attainment (48%). Female respondents comprised 18 per cent of those interviewed, the majority of whom were aged 18-34 (61%) and married (68%). Most female respondents stated their employment as domestic work in their own homes (56%).
- Most respondents travelled to seek employment in their intended destination (82%). Around half of respondents stated they were seeking asylum (51%). Those reportedly seeking asylum were more likely to reside in Baghdad governorate (81%) than in Erbil (56%), Dahuk (36%) or Sulaymaniyah (6%).
- Over half of all respondents received help to migrate (64%). Of these, most received assistance from family or friends (58%), with 41 per cent reporting using a people smuggler and 38 per cent reporting travel facilitated through a travel agent.
- Most respondents intended their final destination to be one of the countries of the EU (66%), predominantly Germany (35%) and Lithuania (21%). The United Kingdom was another prevalent intended destination (24%).
- Most respondents transited through one or more countries on route to their destination (89%). Of these, around half transited through Belarus itself, flying there directly from Iraq (53%), before attempting to move to neighbouring countries of the EU. Smaller proportions travelled through Turkey (17%), the United Arab Emirates (10%) or Lebanon (3%) before travelling to Belarus, Poland and/or Lithuania.
- Half of all respondents returned to Iraq from Belarus itself (50%), with a further 41 per cent returning from Lithuania. Others returned from Latvia (6%), Poland (2%) and Turkey (1%). Overall, 76 per cent of respondents received assistance to return.
- Asked what assistance they required upon return, most respondents cited access to employment (80%) and access to credit (58%). Assistance needs differed according to the governorate of residence of respondents with, for example, shelter (43%) and childcare (38%) the most prevalent needs identified by respondents from Sulaymaniyah governorate, 30 per cent of whom were female.
- Nearly all respondents identified the need for better employment and livelihood opportunities in the area in which they currently reside (97%). Over half also noted the need for reduced public corruption (59%), improved access to basic services (58%) and access to credit (53%).
- Asked if they would attempt to emigrate again, only 29 per cent of respondents said that they would. Those respondents that habitually reside in Dahuk governorate were the most likely to attempt to emigrate again with 50 per cent intent on emigration or undecided.
- Despite the many difficulties experienced by respondents during their attempted emigration and upon return, underlying economic and socio-political pressures will likely continue to drive emigration, particularly among un- and underemployed men seeking employment opportunities abroad.
- Reintegration assistance that addresses the primary needs of returnees, including socio-economic, social, and psycho-social needs, is critical to ensuring sustainable reintegration for those who have returned to Iraq from Belarus and EU countries.
- The report concludes that the expansion of monitoring and data collection exercises at points of departure from Iraq is essential to anticipate volumes of emigration that may lead to crises, and to better management of orderly migration, more targeted information campaigns and more effective reintegration programming.

CONTEXT

During the recent migration crisis in Belarus, thousands of Iraqis experienced harassment, exposure and violence. Many returned, via IOM facilitated movements through the Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programme and via movements organised and supported by the Government of Iraq from Belarus and neighbouring countries of the European Union (EU). Potential emigrants from Iraq began to travel to Belarus, Lithuania, Latvia and Poland in large numbers in the second half of 2021. In the context of negotiations between the Government of Belarus and the EU, the Government of Belarus' relaxation of visa policies and a travel information campaign in Iraq, there was a significant increase in the number of potential emigrants from Iraq travelling to Belarus. Many of those potential emigrants travelled with the intention of onward travel to enter the European Union or the United Kingdom.

With the suspension of flights from Baghdad to Belarus in August 2021, potential emigrants from Iraq began to use alternative routes to reach Belarus and neighbouring EU countries, including from airports in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah. The increase of Iraqi emigrants entering Belarus resulted in a crisis when Belarusian security forces began to move migrants to the country's borders with Poland, Lithuania and Latvia. This was accompanied by reports of violence and abuse against Iraqi migrants at the border, many of whom were reportedly unable to move into Europe or back into Belarus. As a result, the Government of Iraq (GoI), facilitated the return of approximately 3,800 Iraqi migrants. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM), with the support of the European Union, have continued to facilitate the voluntary return of Iraqi migrants from Belarus and EU countries.

METHODOLOGY

To better understand the experiences, motivation and needs of those who returned from the crisis in Belarus, IOM Iraq conducted a survey with 234 returnees in February 2022. Returnees were identified and contacted by IOM Iraq's national network of Rapid Assessment and Response Teams (RARTs) using a chain referral sampling methodology. Returnees were also contacted if they had registered with an IOM office for assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) assistance. Returnees were interviewed in person or via telephone and were asked if they consented to be contacted for future surveys to participate in longitudinal studies.

In addition, IOM Iraq conducted 12 community discussions (CDs) with community members in both urban and camp settings in Dahuk and Sulaymaniyah governorates, with a total of 116 participants. Participants included individuals who had themselves returned from irregular migration attempts, as well as community members who had not left Iraq but were impacted by the Belarus crisis.

As respondents to the survey and CD participants were part of a non-probabilistic sample, findings detailed in this report cannot be generalised to a broader population. However, given the paucity of available data on this subset of potential emigrants, this report aims to inform further research and targeted programming aimed at supporting orderly and humane migration from Iraq and sustainable reintegration of those that return.

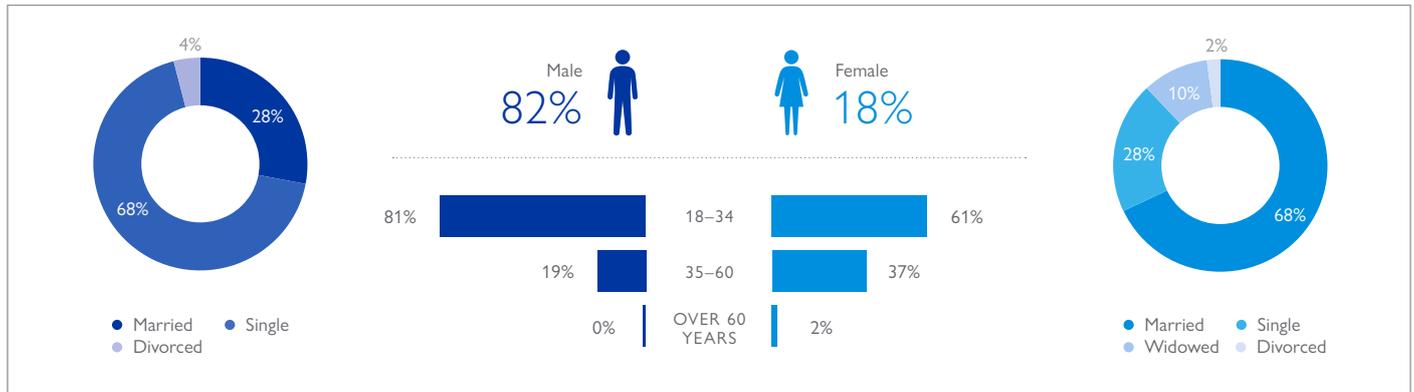
This report follows prior protection monitoring conducted by IOM Iraq in November 2021, which focused on the Yezidi camp population in Dahuk governorate. The survey and CDs detailed in this report adopted a broader lens, across different communities engaging in irregular migration.

SURVEY RESPONDENT PROFILE

Of the 234 survey respondents, the majority were aged 18-34 (77%), male (82%) and unmarried (60%). Female respondents comprised 18 per cent of those interviewed, the majority of whom were aged

18-34 (61%) and married (68%). Minors were not interviewed during the survey, however in community discussions participants specifically highlighted that unaccompanied minors undertook the journey.

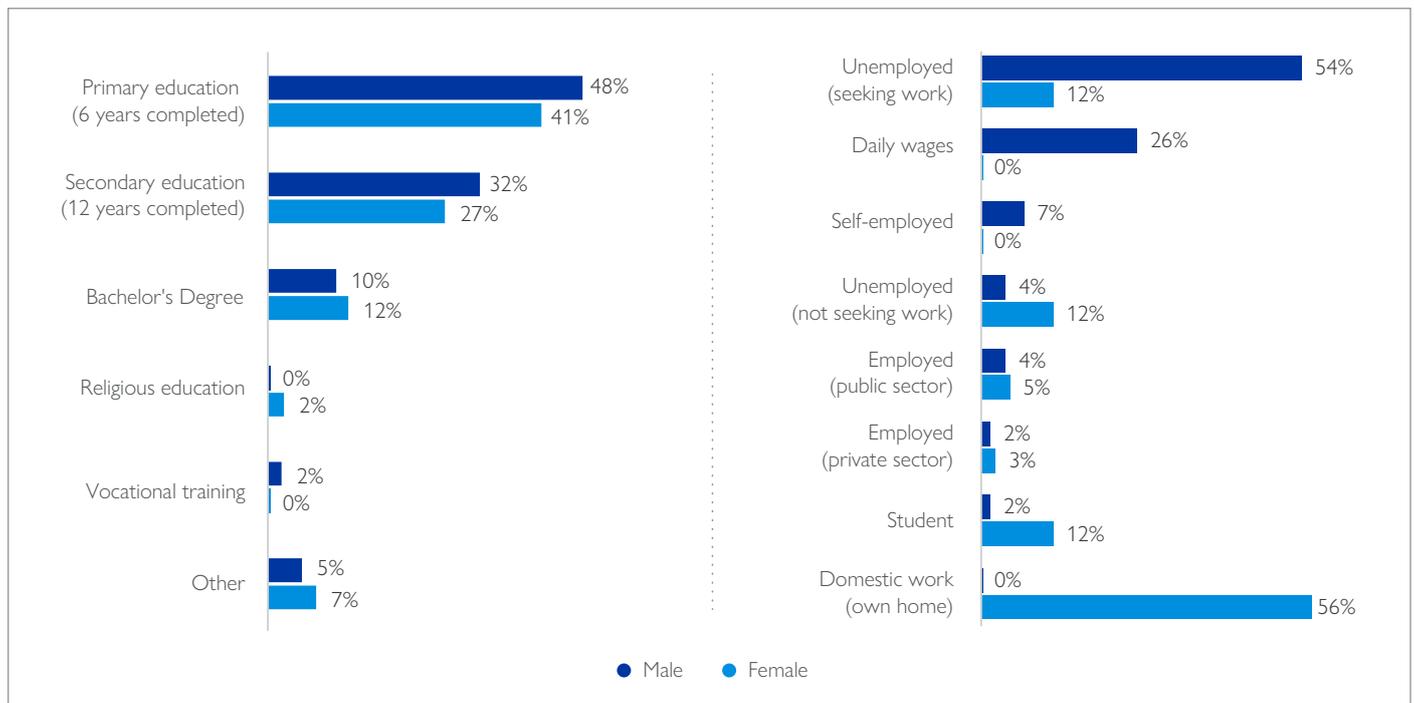
Figure 1: Percentage of survey respondents by age, gender and marital status



Over half of the male survey respondents were unemployed and seeking work (54%), a further quarter were engaged in daily wage labour (26%). Their technical or vocational skills were also limited; around half of all male respondents held primary education as their highest level of attainment (48%). Most female respondents were engaged in domestic work in their own home (56%), while 12 per

cent were students (compared with only 2% of males). Around a third of female respondents were aged 35-60 (37%), and a similar proportion were single or widowed (30%). Of the female respondents, 41 per cent had completed primary education and 27 per cent had completed secondary education. Overall, only 12 per cent of all respondents had completed a bachelor's degree or vocational training.

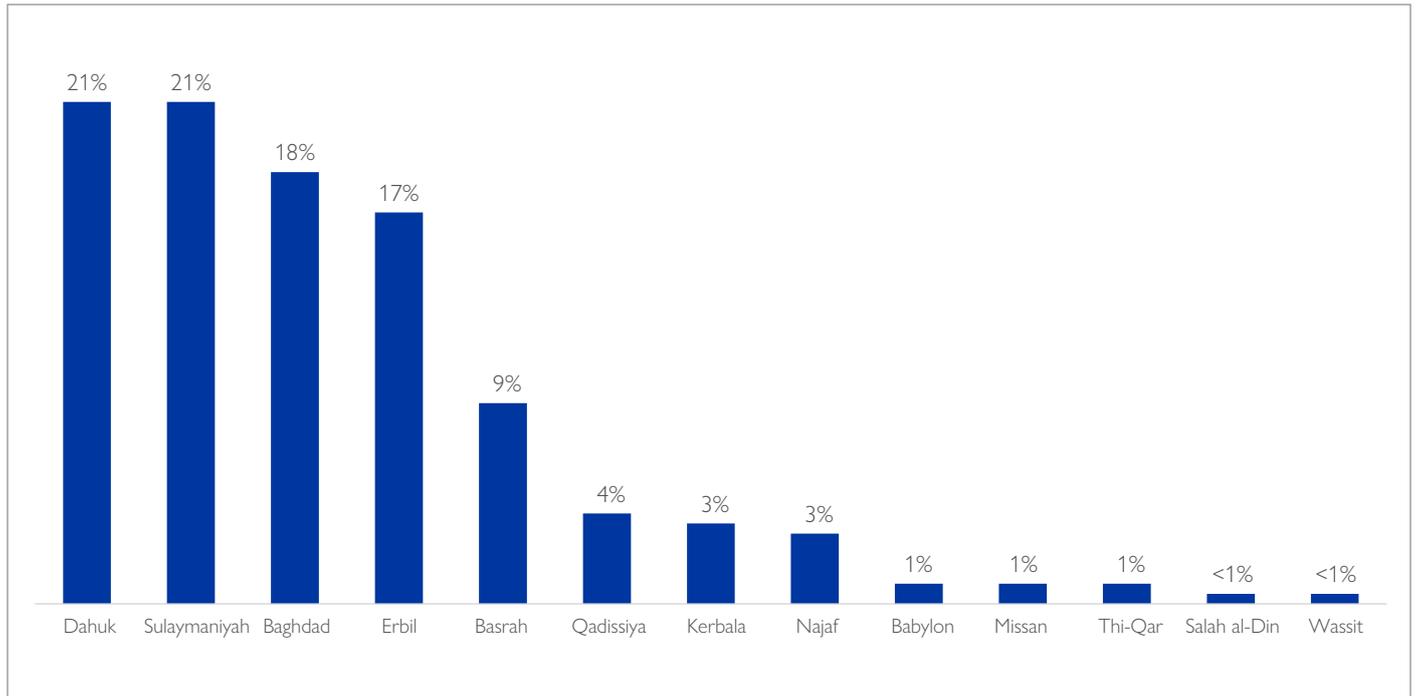
Figure 2: Percentage of respondents by highest level of education attainment and employment status



Twenty-one per cent of all respondents reside in both Dahuk and Sulaymaniyah governorates, with a slightly smaller proportion residing in Erbil (17%). Eighteen per cent of respondents reside in Baghdad and

a further nine per cent in Basrah. Those from the remaining governorates, primarily in central and southern Iraq, comprised a smaller proportion of the respondents.

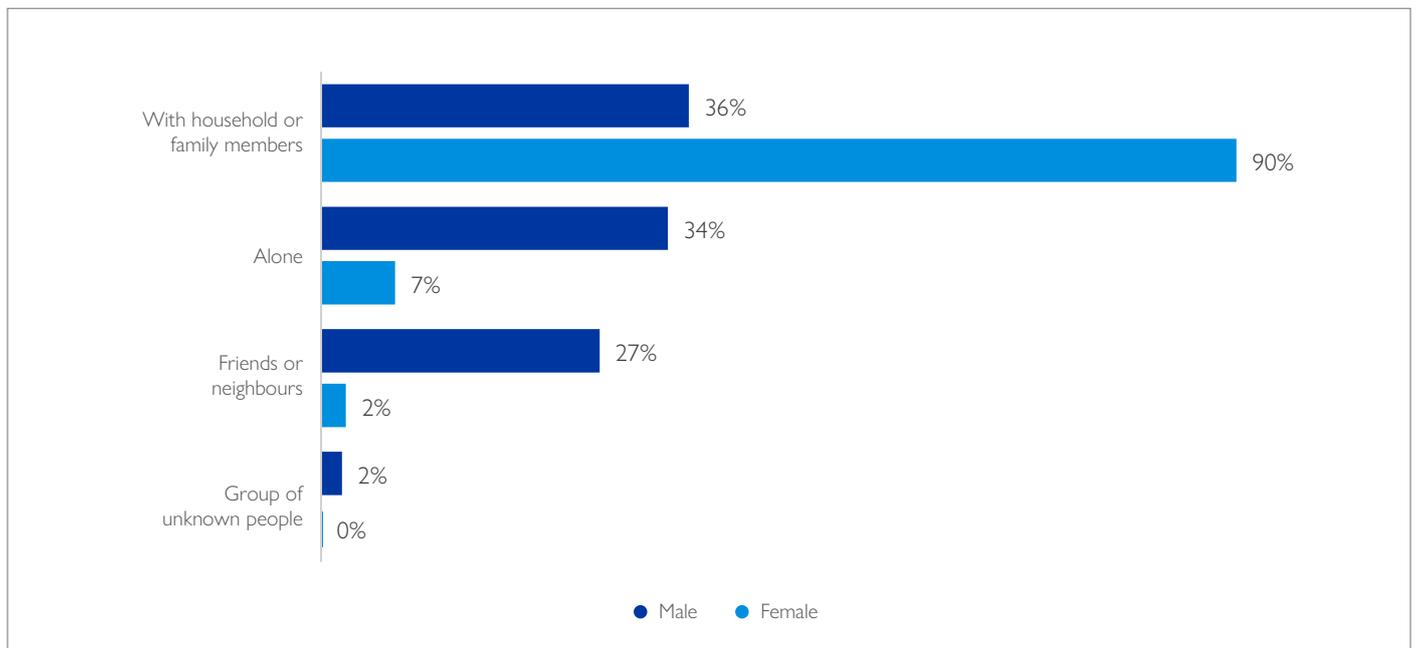
Figure 3: Percentage of survey respondents by governorate of residence



For most survey respondents, this was their first attempt at emigrating from Iraq (75%). Around a quarter of male respondents had migrated before (27%) and 12 per cent of female respondents had attempted to migrate before. Around a third of men travelled with their family

(36%) or alone (34%), with a further quarter travelling with friends or neighbours (27%). Most women travelled with members of their household or family (90%). Very few respondents had been internally displaced prior to attempting to emigrate (5% overall).

Figure 4: Percentage of respondents by travelling companions



EMIGRATION: DRIVERS, ASSISTANCE AND JOURNEY

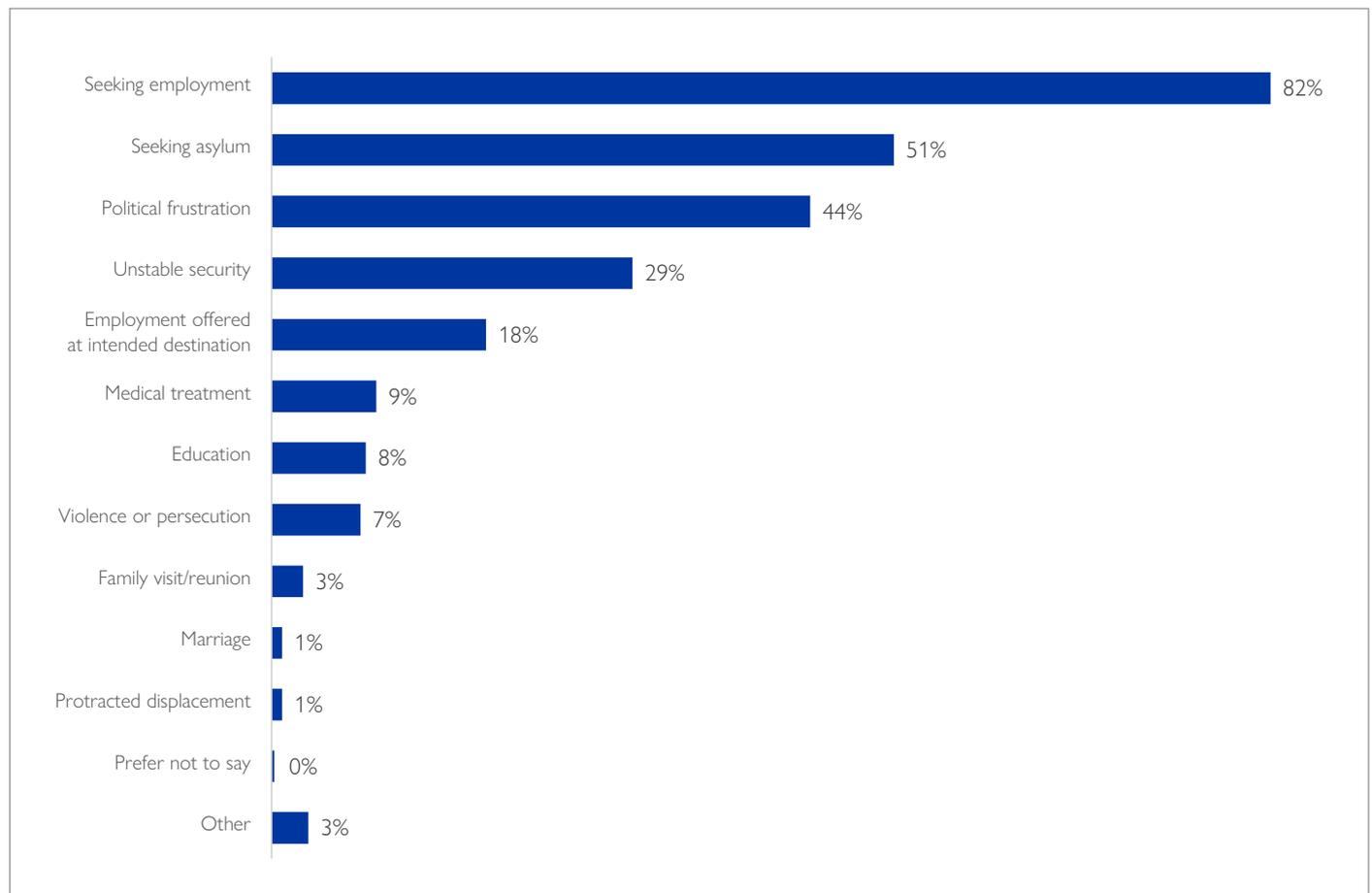
DRIVERS

Asked why they attempted to emigrate, most respondents were seeking employment in their intended destination (82%). In community discussions, participants said that even those with recognised qualifications find it difficult to find job opportunities and dignified work in Iraq. Around half of survey respondents also stated they were seeking asylum (51%). The proportion of respondents that provided this reason was notably higher among those who habitually reside in Baghdad governorate (81%) than in Erbil (56%), Dahuk (36%) or Sulaymaniyah (6%).

Frustration or lack of hope in the political situation was more frequently reported among those from governorates outside the

Kurdistan Region of Iraq (Basrah 65%, Baghdad 60%), than among those in Dahuk, Sulaymaniyah and Erbil (Dahuk and Sulaymaniyah both 34%, Erbil 31%). Male respondents were also more likely to cite this reason than female respondents (48% compared with 27%). In CDs, Yezidi participants specifically noted the ongoing barriers to return to their areas of origin in Sinjar district, Ninewa governorate. They described ongoing insecurity in Sinjar as well as the lack of services and absence of adequate shelter. The complex drivers of migration were summarised by one community discussion participant in Dahuk who said “I can give you hundreds of reasons to go, but there aren't any reasons to stay.”

Figure 5: Percentage of respondents by reason for travel



JOURNEY

Over half of all respondents received some form of help to migrate (64%). Of these, most received assistance from family or friends (58%), with 41 per cent also reporting using a people smuggler and 38 per cent reporting travel being facilitated by a travel agent.¹

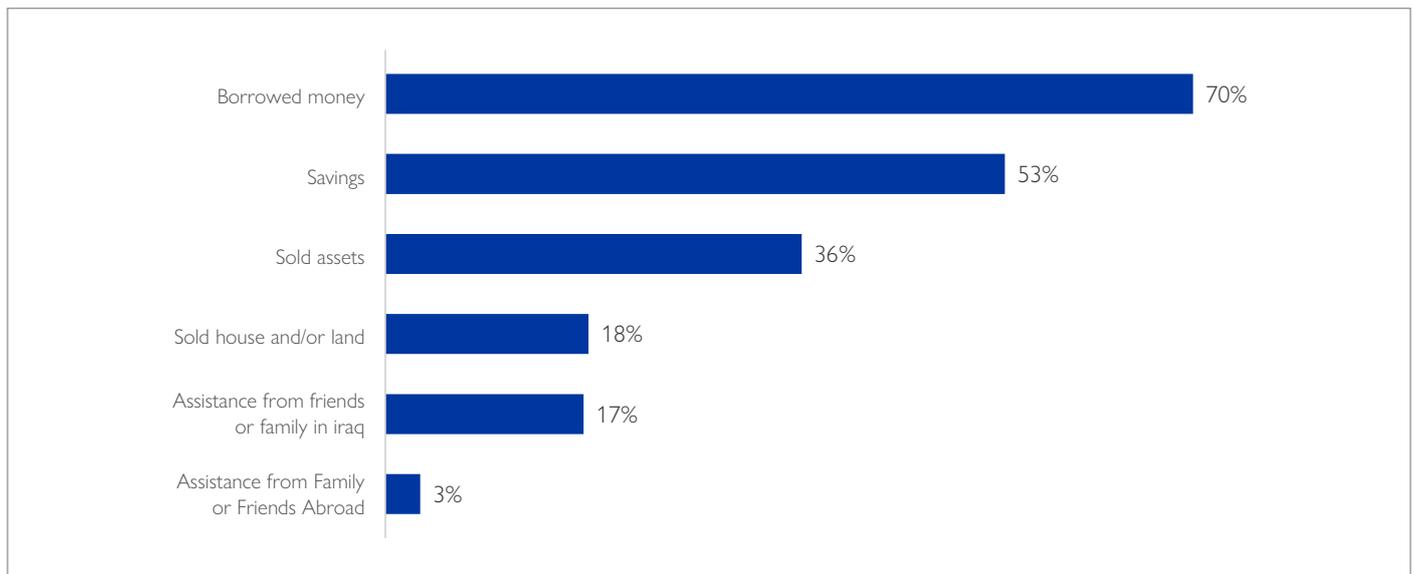
While samples from each governorate vary in size, governorates with notable proportions receiving assistance from a smuggler include Dahuk (49%, 20 respondents), Sulaymaniyah (44%, 17) and Erbil (39%, 11). Only seven per cent of respondents from Baghdad governorate reported assistance from a smuggler (3 respondents). Of those that received assistance from smugglers and travel agents, most found information about their services through word of mouth (68%) with only a third using social media to gather information (29%).

In community discussions, word of mouth and social media were identified by participants as the two primary sources of information

on irregular migration routes, smugglers and travel agents. Participants described receiving information from community members including family who had successfully migrated. Smugglers are also reportedly using social media platforms to share information on irregular migration routes to Europe and promote their services. Social media platforms specified by CD participants as sources of information included TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, and Viber.

Around 70 per cent of survey respondents borrowed money to fund their attempted migration, although they did so almost exclusively from family and friends (93% of all those that borrowed money). Half of respondents drew upon savings to pay for the journey (53%) and/or sold assets such as their house, land, cars or furniture.

Figure 6: Percentage of respondents by how their journey was funded



INFORMATION ON RISKS

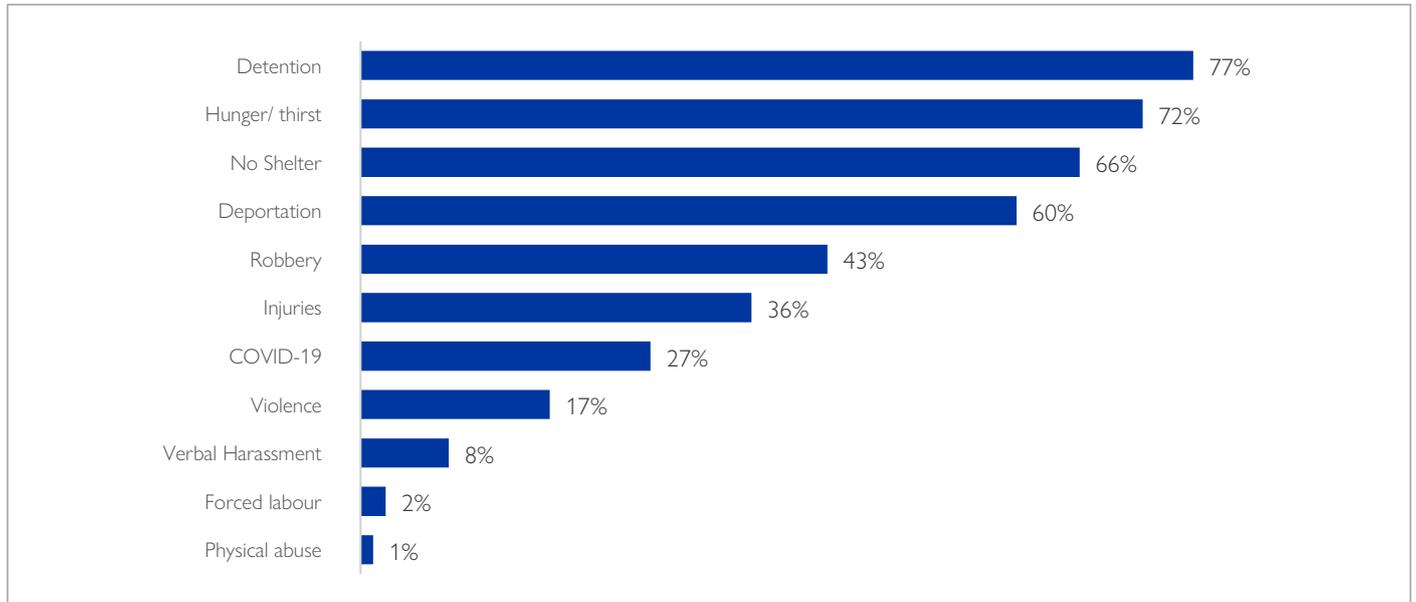
Awareness of the risks associated with irregular migration was mixed among respondents, with only 37 per cent reporting that they were aware of the risks of the journey before they left home. Among those aware of risks, deportation, hunger/thirst, and lack of shelter were the most commonly cited.

In community discussions, participants reported having a relatively high knowledge of the risks associated with irregular migration. This awareness of risks increased, as community members attempted the

Belarus migration route and the specific risks and incidents, including violence, exploitation, abuse and deliberate deprivation of food and water, were shared back to communities. Participants said that this information was shared through social media and directly by community members who had attempted the journey. Despite this awareness of the risks associated with the migration route, participants were clear that this did not act as a deterrent for many: “The recent events did not change our minds,” said one female CD participant in Sulaymaniyah.

¹ Respondents could select more than one source of help to facilitate travel.

Figure 7: Percentage of survey respondents by known risks, for those aware of risks



INTENDED DESTINATION

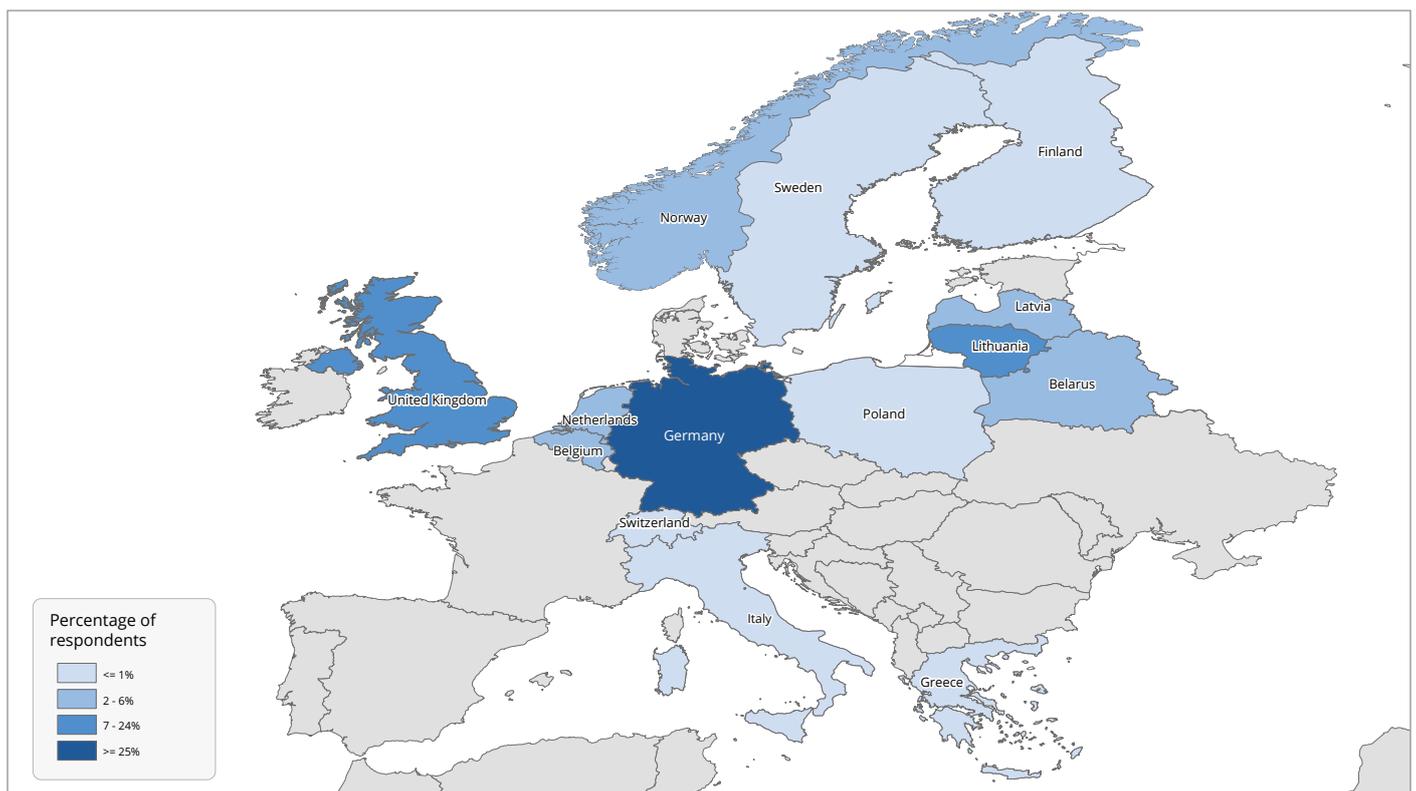
Most respondents intended their final destination to be one of the countries of the EU (66%), predominantly Germany (35%) and Lithuania (21%). The United Kingdom was another prevalent intended destination (24%).²

Respondents from each governorate tended to have a predominant intended destination. Germany was the most prevalent intended destination among respondents who habitually reside in Dahuk (52%) and Erbil (44%) governorates. Most respondents from Baghdad governorate

intended to reach Lithuania (65%). Those who reside in Sulaymaniyah mostly intended to reach the United Kingdom (56%).

Half of the respondents did not have family or friends in their intended destination (52%). A slightly smaller proportion had close family or relatives in their intended destination (41%), although this proportion was notably higher for returnees that habitually reside in Dahuk (84%).

Map 1: Percentage of respondents by intended destination

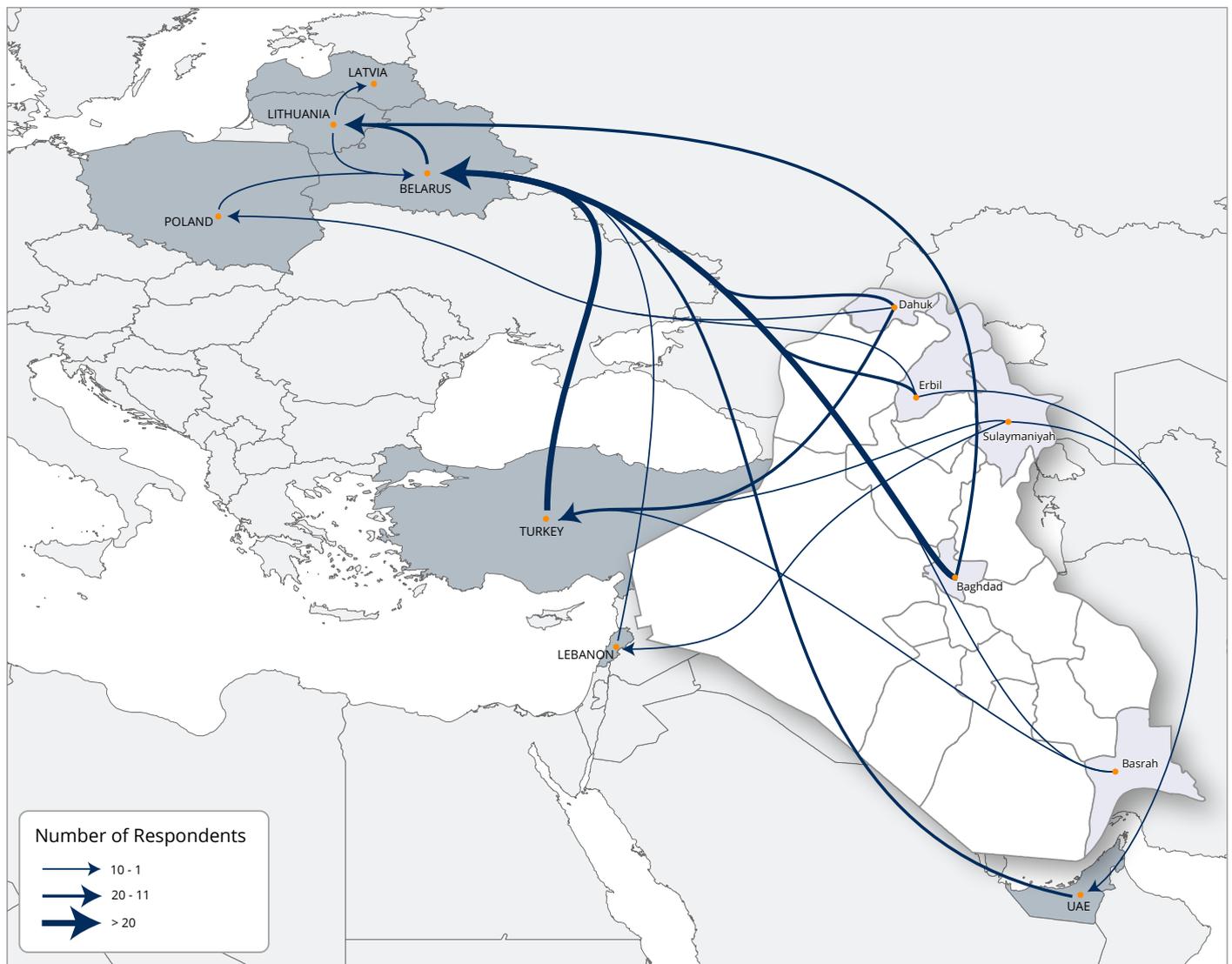


² The proportion of respondents that stated Lithuania as their intended destination may be larger than expected due to the large proportion of respondents that returned from Lithuania (41%).

The majority of respondents transited through one or more countries on route to their destination (89%). Of these, around half transited through Belarus itself, flying there directly from Iraq (53%), before attempting to enter neighbouring countries. Smaller proportions travelled through Turkey (17%), the United Arab Emirates (10%) or Lebanon (3%) before travelling to Belarus, Poland and Lithuania. These routes reflect the gradual reduction of air travel routes available to potential Iraqi emigrants, with the suspension of flights from Baghdad to Minsk in August 2021, and then the ban on Iraqis boarding flights to Belarus from Turkey in November 2021.

Notably, 8 per cent of those who transited through other countries during their attempted migration to EU countries engaged in several cycles of transit into and out of countries of the EU, most commonly moving between Belarus, Poland, Turkey and Lithuania. This pattern appears to demonstrate how potential emigrants engaged in multiple attempts to enter EU countries via different entry points, with transit stays in non-EU countries before ultimately returning to Iraq.

Map 2: Primary transit routes

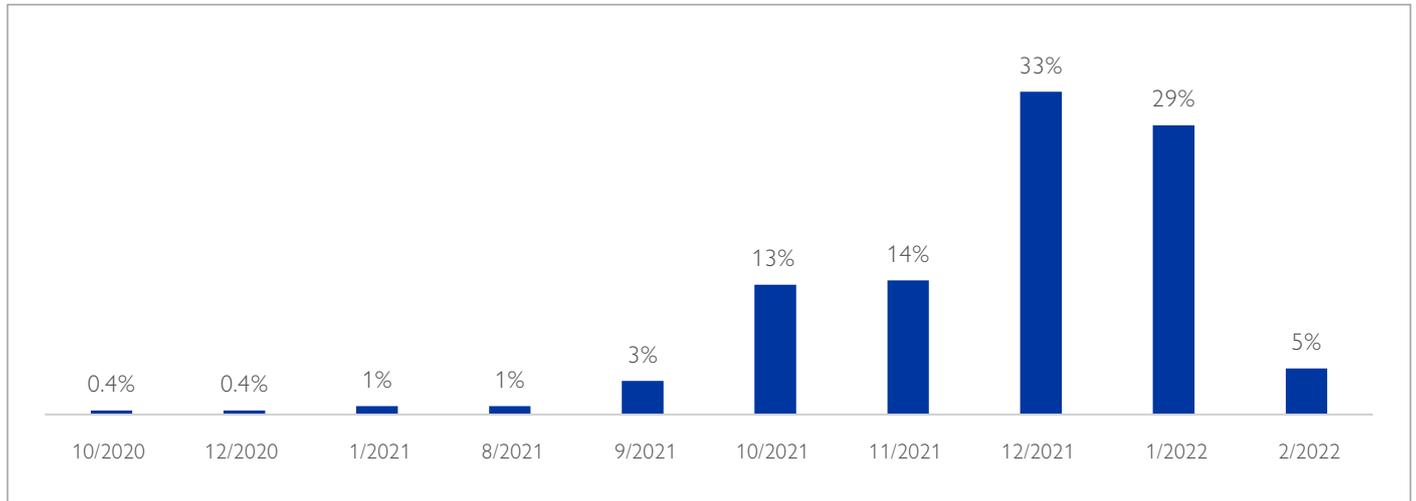


RETURN AND REINTEGRATION

Almost two thirds of all survey respondents returned to Iraq in December 2021 and January 2022 (62%). Half of all respondents returned from Belarus itself (50%), with a further 41 per cent

returning from Lithuania. Others returned from Latvia (6%), Poland (2%) and Turkey (1%).

Figure 8: Percentage of respondents by date of return

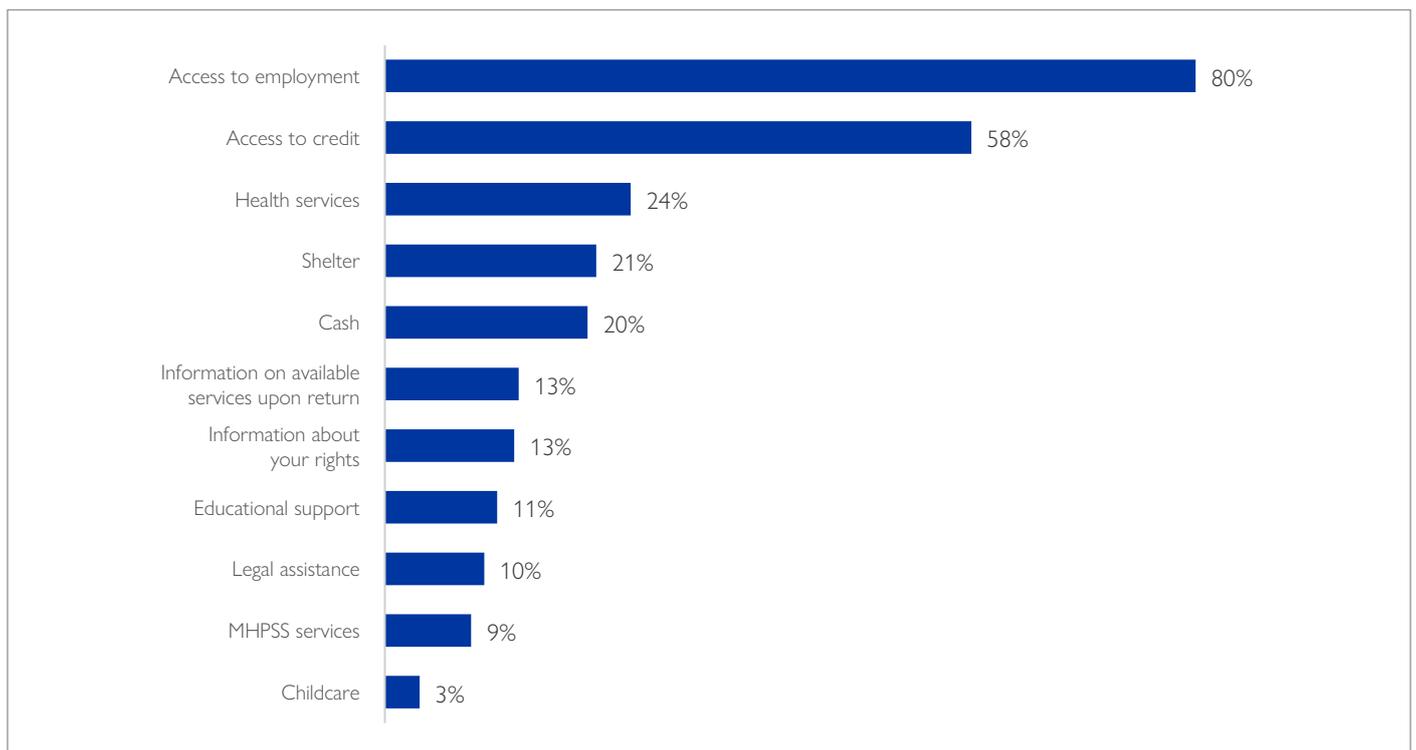


REINTEGRATION NEEDS

Asked what assistance they have needed upon their return to Iraq, most respondents cited access to employment (80%) and access to credit (58%). CD participants observed that many returnees had spent the entirety of their savings and incurred debt in order to attempt migration, placing them in a precarious economic condition

on their return. In addition, MHPSS services were identified as a need, particularly for those suffering the effects of trauma incurred during the migration journey. In addition to suffering abuse and exploitation on the journey, some participants described feelings of shame associated with a failed emigration attempt.

Figure 9: Percentage of respondents by assistance needed upon return



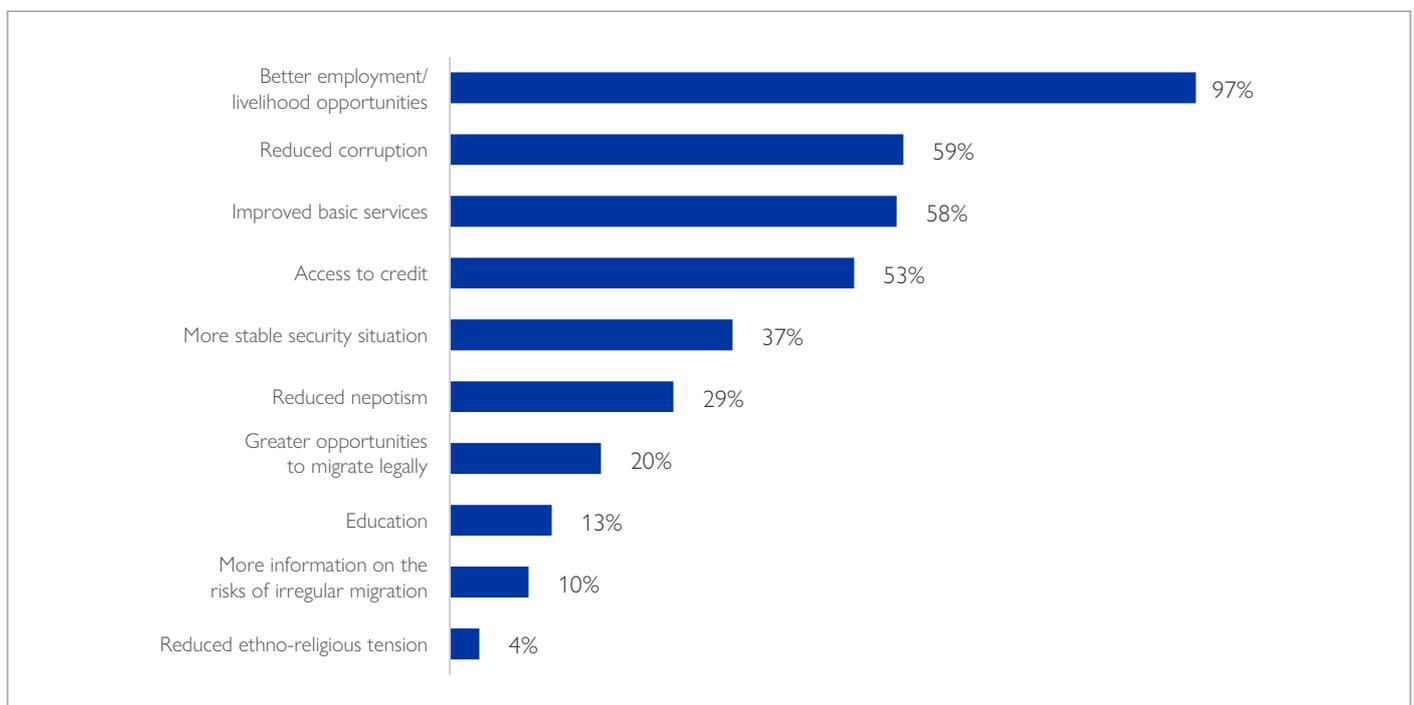
Among the four governorates with high numbers of respondents there were some notable distinctions in the assistance required. Respondents that habitually reside in Baghdad cited the need for legal assistance (52%) and more information about their rights (50%), as well as MHPSS services (40%).

Respondents that habitually reside in Sulaymaniyah identified assistance for shelter (43%), childcare (38%) and access to credit (28%). It is notable that respondents from Sulaymaniyah were 30 per cent female, which may explain the specific assistance required.

Respondents from Erbil highlighted a diverse range of assistance needed, with access to credit (21%) and improved access to services (19%) among the most prevalent. In Dahuk, two thirds of respondents cited 'other' needs and specified direct cash assistance.

Asked what improvements were needed in their area of origin, nearly all respondents identified the need for better employment and livelihood opportunities in the area in which they currently reside (97%). Over half also noted the need for reduced corruption (59%), improved access to basic services (58%) and access to credit (53%). The need for a more stable security situation was also commonly cited (37%).

There was little notable variation between governorates regarding needed improvements; however, respondents who habitually reside in Baghdad governorate were more likely to identify the desired improvement of reduced corruption (79%), nepotism (47%) and more information on the risks of irregular migration (33%) than in other governorates



FUTURE MIGRATION INTENTIONS

Asked if they would attempt to emigrate again, only 29 per cent of respondents said that they would. Male respondents were moderately more likely to emigrate again than female respondents (31% compared with 24%). Those respondents who habitually reside in Dahuk governorate were the most likely to attempt to emigrate again with 50 per cent intent on making another attempt or undecided. Of those who intended to attempt to emigrate again, over half intend to reach Germany (58%) and a further 30 per cent intend to reach the United Kingdom.

In community discussions, participants who expressed an intention to attempt emigration again said that they were waiting until the spring before attempting to migrate through irregular pathways. This was linked to a suggestion that the poor conditions experienced by Iraqis attempting emigration could be mitigated by delaying departure until the end of winter.

CONCLUSION

Given the many difficulties experienced by respondents in their attempted emigration and return, it is perhaps unsurprising that less than a third would attempt to emigrate again. However, the underlying economic and socio-political pressures – identified through respondents' assessments of the improvements needed in their area of residence – will likely continue to drive emigration, particularly among young, un- and under-employed men seeking employment opportunities abroad.

Reintegration assistance that addresses the primary needs of returnees, including socioeconomic, social, and psycho-social needs, is critical to ensuring sustainable reintegration for those who have returned to Iraq from Belarus and EU countries.

Data collected from returnees participating in this survey is regularly gathered by IOM Iraq from travellers, emigrants and potential emigrants entering or exiting Iraq via five primary border points with Turkey, the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Syrian Arab Republic.³ However, as demonstrated by the rapidity and scale of the crisis at the Belarusian border, more expansive monitoring and data collection at points of departure from Iraq, including airports, is essential to anticipating volumes of emigration that may lead to crises, and to better migration management, more targeted information campaigns and effective reintegration programming.

³ Reports, dashboards and datasets from this monitoring can be found at <https://iraqdtm.iom.int/Remap>.

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