

PROSPECTS FOR RESOLVING DISPLACEMENT IN AREAS OF LIMITED AND NO RETURN IN TUZ KHURMATU DISTRICT



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This in-depth qualitative study of areas of limited and no returns in Tuz Khurmatu district seeks to uncover specific barriers to durably resolving the displacement of affected people and potential ways forward in unlocking those barriers. Doing so is a critical step in implementing the Joint Government of Iraq, Kurdistan Regional Government and United Nations Roadmap for the Acceleration of the National Plan, pursuant to the United Nations Secretary-General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement.¹ The study also aims to contribute to improving the political dialogue in the country on how to provide a voluntary and informed choice of residence to people who are experiencing long-term displacement. Findings are drawn from separate focus group discussions with Kurdish, Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Tuz Khurmatu district and key informant interviews with representatives from the Salah al-Din provincial administration, provincial council members for the district, district-level authorities, security personnel, local civil society, tribal leaders, a Kurdistan Regional Government official working on the disputed territories, a national/local expert and United Nations personnel.

Recent data indicate that 33,856 individuals from Tuz Khurmatu district remain displaced and that the district has a 65 per cent return rate, the lowest in the governorate overall.² Available data also indicate that some IDPs have returned to 45 locations across Tuz Khurmatu; however, of these, 19 have less than half their pre-conflict populations back.³ In addition, 18 locations reportedly have no returns recorded; these locations are spread between Al-Amerli, Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, and Suleiman Beg subdistricts.⁴

During focus group discussions, IDPs reported concerns and barriers to return related to security, protection and documentation; housing, land, property and compensation; social relations and rights violations; governance and representation; and service provision and economic prospects. Their lives in displacement, specifically for Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen IDPs and especially women, were marked by considerable hardship, including having to pay rent and facing threats of eviction and housing removal; lack of compensation, social welfare benefits and civil documentation; difficulty finding work; and social isolation, discrimination and feeling pressured to leave.

Tuz Khurmatu district IDPs across groups felt that a durable and meaningful resolution to displacement would mean experiencing full and equal citizenship – an experience they currently do not feel they have. Regarding where they wish to reside, all Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen men in the sample seek to return. Some Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen women also seek the same, while others recognized that local integration in their area of displacement is the better option for them considering their current situation as female heads of households. Kurdish IDPs also had mixed opinions in this regard. Some seek to locally integrate in their displacement locations given the political fallout of the Kurdish Referendum, but others wished to return because they miss home and are concerned about demographic change in urban Markaz Tuz Khurmatu.

Study participants noted very recent efforts that have begun at the behest of the former acting governor of Salah al-Din and taken up by the newly appointed governor to facilitate the return of Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen IDPs residing in Markaz

Tuz Khurmatu. Such efforts have included meetings with several district, provincial and national leaders across the wide landscape of relevant State institutions as well as coordination between United Nations agencies, international non-governmental organizations and district level authorities for service provision, reconstruction and aid; advocacy by different actors to expedite compensation approvals and payments; and development of mechanisms to better address tribal and/or ethno-religious issues. During fieldwork, other efforts came to light as well. In May 2024, the Salah al-Din Joint Coordination Forum was launched with the new governor and senior United Nations leadership to improve coordination between the local government and development partners. Furthermore, a member of a provincial committee established by the Prime Minister to resolve displacement in Salah al-Din by June 2025, with priority focus on Tuz Khurmatu district, indicated that a new round of meetings would take place with national level actors, tribal leaders and other influential community leaders in this regard as well. Finally, also in May 2024, the Kurdistan Regional Government Council of Ministers established a Ministerial Committee to review the draft roadmap set forth by the General Board of the Kurdistan Areas Outside the Region to address administrative, security and military issues in the disputed territories (which include Tuz Khurmatu district), with a focus on agricultural land and displacement of Kurds, and develop an implementation plan based on Article 140 of the Constitution of Iraq. The General Board of the Kurdistan Areas Outside the Region was also tasked with engaging more quickly and intensely on Article 140 issues, particularly around political and social concerns that the different ethno-religious groups residing in these areas have, addressing each disputed territory separately given their particularities.

Some key informants seemed optimistic that the resolution of displacement, especially through the facilitation of returns, is very likely now for Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen IDPs. There may also be space to start incorporating displaced Kurds into these discussions – if re-engagement on Article 140 proceeds. However, support seems limited for local integration in areas of displacement, though key informants indicated that people could stay if they so wished. IDPs expressed less enthusiasm for the prospects of these efforts, as little has changed in terms of their own circumstances.

The fact that obstacles to resolving displacement in Tuz Khurmatu district have persisted for nearly a decade is seen by some as intended. These obstacles follow a similar pattern to that found in other areas of limited and no return, including Musayab and Sinjar districts. This intentionality seems in line with the more consolidated political strategy of the Shia Coordination Framework to gain votes, seats and influence in the governance of northern and central Iraq. This strategy presents several deeply entrenched dynamics that may limit the impact and effectiveness of any efforts to facilitate returns or enable local integration in areas of displacement, unless accompanied by a deeper understanding of spoilers and bottlenecks across the various ongoing and emerging processes, the limitations of existing legislation and legal system to address key obstacles related to Daesh perpetration and past and present land occupation, and the need for addressing the resolution of displacement at all levels of society.

Given these dynamics, there is not one singular obstacle, which if addressed, would fully enable the displaced to either safely and sustainably return to their locations of

1 As part of the United Nations Secretary-General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement, Iraq was selected as a pilot country for the development of a compact, or agreement, between governments, the United Nations and partners to accelerate durable solutions for people in displacement aimed at giving equity to the options of return, integration or relocation based on the preferences of affected populations. In March 2023, a Roadmap for the Acceleration of the National Plan was proposed that recommended nine specific areas of engagement with the Government of Iraq and Kurdistan Regional Government to accelerate the resolution of displacement for people displaced by the Daesh conflict. The areas of engagement propose concrete asks to the Government of Iraq and Kurdistan Regional Government to provide individual and communities rights and entitlements under Iraq law, including improving political dialogue around these issues as well. As of this writing, official endorsement of the Roadmap for the Acceleration of the National Plan by the Government of Iraq and Kurdistan Regional Government is forthcoming. See, United Nations, *The United Nations Secretary-General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement Follow-Up to the Report of the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement* (New York, United Nations, 2022), and Action Agenda on Internal Displacement (New York, Office of the Special Adviser on Solutions to Internal Displacement).

2 International Organization for Migration (IOM) Displacement Data Matrix (DTM), *Progress Toward Durable Solutions in Iraq: Salah al-Din* (Baghdad, IOM, 2023).

3 IOM DTM, *Return Index, Round 20*.

4 IOM DTM, No Return, Round 129 (internal document).

origin in Tuz Khurmatu district or to locally integrate into their locations of displacement. Instead, IDPs have been living precariously between two possible solutions – and their preconditions and priorities for resolving their displacement are connected to the obstacles they face.

Preconditions and priorities for return include:

- Unimpeded procedures for issuance of national ID cards and security clearances for all family members;
- Security configuration reform, safety and guarantees of protection;
- Expedited compensation payments that appropriately reflect the damage and destruction of property and assets IDPs had prior to displacement;
- Reconstruction, service provision, and livelihoods support, including reclamation of agricultural land;
- Reconciliation and reintegration support;
- Knowledge of the fate of those missing or arrested.

Preconditions and priorities for local integration in areas of displacement include:

- Unimpeded procedures for issuance of national ID cards and security clearances for all family members;
- Expedited compensation payments that appropriately reflect the damage and destruction of property and assets IDPs had prior to displacement;
- Knowledge of the fate of those missing or arrested;
- Access to social welfare benefits and housing support;
- Economic and social integration.

The above IDP preconditions and priorities fall within a wider governance landscape, where addressing complex concerns seem unlikely despite earlier government commitments to do so, and where there is political gain for some in keeping the displaced in precarity. Thus, rather than providing granular recommendations for each precondition and priority, for which numerous detailed issue-specific analyses already exist, the aim here is determining how to strengthen and potentially connect ongoing and nascent initiatives so they yield tangible and lasting positive outcomes for all people from Tuz Khurmatu district.

This proposal includes approaches to the more political aspects of negotiating the resolution of displacement, public participation and discourse, and interventions on the ground. These approaches could be taken up by local, national and international actors engaging in Tuz Khurmatu district, including through the Government of Iraq, Kurdistan Region Government and the United Nations Roadmap for the Acceleration of the National Plan.

- Conduct a deeper mapping and analysis of relevant powerbrokers and backchannel actors across the landscape of formal and informal structures in Iraq to better identify the specific stakeholders needed for resolving displacement in Tuz Khurmatu district, particularly as there may be growing momentum to explore related Article 140 issues as well. This mapping should engage with the actual landscape of power and influence in the district (and beyond). As such, it will be critical to map and identify impediments and bottlenecks through determining the positions and influence of senior civil servants as well as actors within or connected to the Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs) operating in the district, among others. The aim should be to detail leverage points among these actors, including why they are putting up obstacles to resolving displacement, to be able to better ensure more transparent implementation, enforcement and oversight of ongoing or new agreements or plans.

- Ensure that engagement and investment regarding impediments to local integration in areas of displacement are prioritized in addition to efforts aimed at addressing impediments to return. The aim in any efforts at durably resolving displacement is to ensure citizens feel equality in the fulfillment of their rights – wherever they reside. If an individual or household chooses to remain in their locations of displacement, it does not mean that they do not still have rights claims and needs. Rather, a holistic view and approach must be taken in this regard, allowing the displaced access to all options available.
- Reduce the lack of representation IDPs feel, while also mitigating concerns that different communities and their representatives have had in participating with each other, particularly on sensitive issues. This may be done by separately bringing each IDP group, their respective community leaders/representatives, and their respective political representatives together to develop a proactive strategy for engaging on their preconditions and priorities for resolving displacement. Such strategies should identify different groups' redlines and concessions and provide openings for counterparts to engage with to reach new ways to durably resolve issues and address concerns of displaced and recipient communities alike.
- Link the rights-based demands and concerns of the IDPs from Tuz Khurmatu district to wider constituencies who have similar demands. Slowly connecting various constituencies to each other or within wider platforms advocating for these rights may be possible. Such issues include compensation; housing, land and property issues; and the fate of the missing. These linkages may also contribute to expanding the discourse on transitional justice in the country to widen the time periods, types of violations and victims and perpetrators it encompasses.
- Ensure more inclusive engagement with displaced communities. This should involve creating a safe space for the meaningful participation of all IDP constituencies, including women and youth, in any political or public processes and programming, where their views are appropriately represented, and where they are kept informed of what is happening. The same holds true for recipient communities as well.
- Identify key activists, journalists, lawyers, intellectuals, organizations and wider civic platforms that would be interested in taking up issues pertaining to resolving displacement in Tuz Khurmatu district – or more broadly to address rights-based concerns.
- Continue reconstruction, rehabilitation and livelihoods projects in locations of existing and emerging return in Tuz Khurmatu district, as having a presence can contribute to motivating efforts on solutions.
- Address issues facing IDPs and recipient communities in areas of displacement, especially in Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, given that any ongoing or emerging process to resolve displacement will take considerable time to have effect, that some IDPs are seeking to locally integrate, and that life in displacement has proved to be difficult in general. In particular, the displaced residing in Markaz Tuz Khurmatu raised concerns over eviction risks, lack of jobs and social exclusion and discrimination (by community members and local institutions), among others.
- Initiate robust social cohesion and peacebuilding efforts between ethno-religious communities in and from Tuz Khurmatu district. Many IDPs expressed concerns over community relations should they return, and IDPs within Markaz Tuz Khurmatu experience significant exclusion from other residents of the city.
- Conduct concerted advocacy toward government and legislative bodies to ensure more expedited compensation payments, release and use of reconstruction funds, and sustained attention on the district.

INTRODUCTION

The Daesh conflict in Iraq caused the forcible internal displacement of approximately 6 million people from the northern and central parts of the country. In the almost seven years since the end of the conflict in late 2017, around 4.8 million of these internally displaced persons (IDPs) have returned to their places of origin,⁵ with the bulk of such movements taking place by 2018.⁶ Despite this relatively high rate of return across the conflict-affected parts of the country, areas remain where either very limited returns or none have taken place. Tuz Khurmatu district (comprised of Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg subdistricts) in Salah al-Din Governorate is one such area.⁷

While IDP returns have occurred to some degree across Tuz Khurmatu district, its return rate of 65 per cent is the lowest of all districts in the governorate to date.⁸ Return movements remain constrained due to a host of interrelated factors including concerns over safety and security, the need for reconstruction including improving public service provision and availability of economic opportunities, widespread residential destruction and pervasive land occupation, the need for compensation and redress, and the need for wider community reconciliation, among others. For some of these displaced populations, blockages to return are

imposed by security actors operating there, local authorities, or tribal or community leaders. In other cases, these blockages are self-imposed by the displaced themselves for fear of what would happen to them should they come back given concerns over general security of their locations of origin, poor living conditions overall, and/or how security actors or community members would react.

This pervasive condition of limited to no return (and its knock-on effects) has resulted in a nearly decade-long protraction of displacement for a significant proportion of affected communities. This situation limits displaced people's options for viably resolving their displacement in a voluntary, safe, and informed manner. The most recent displacement figures indicate that approximately 33,856 individuals from Tuz Khurmatu district remain displaced.⁹ The displaced populations from this district are primarily Sunni Arabs and Sunni Kurds, with a smaller proportion of Sunni Turkmen.¹⁰ Based on the data available, the largest shares of Tuz Khurmatu IDPs are displaced in Salah al-Din within the district in Markaz Tuz Khurmatu (15,474 individuals) and in Kirkuk within Markaz Kirkuk (12,508 individuals) – in both instances residing among the host community.¹¹ This is followed by smaller proportions residing in Sulaymaniyah in Markaz Kalar and Markaz Sulaymaniyah (Map 1).

Map 1. Primary subdistricts of displacement for Tuz Khurmatu IDPs



Further understanding the specific barriers to durably resolving the displacement of people from areas of limited and no return, and potential ways forward in unlocking

these barriers, is a critical step. This analysis broadly supports the implementation of the upcoming Joint Government of Iraq, Kurdistan Regional Government and United

5 IOM DTM Iraq, *Returnee Master List Round 131*.

6 Iraq Durable Solutions, *Resolving Internal Displacement in Iraq: Inter-Agency Durable Solutions Strategic and Operational Framework* (Baghdad, Iraq Durable Solutions, 2021).

7 Al-Amerli and Suleiman Beg are considered part of Tuz Khurmatu district in this report for practical purposes and because the Ministry of Planning has not officially recognized either as separate districts to date.

8 IOM DTM, *Progress Toward Durable Solutions in Iraq: Salah al-Din* (Baghdad, IOM, 2023).

9 Ibid.

10 IOM DTM, *Protracted Displacement in Iraq: District of Displacement Profiles* (Baghdad, IOM, 2022).

11 IOM DTM, *Integrated Locations Assessment VII* (dashboard).

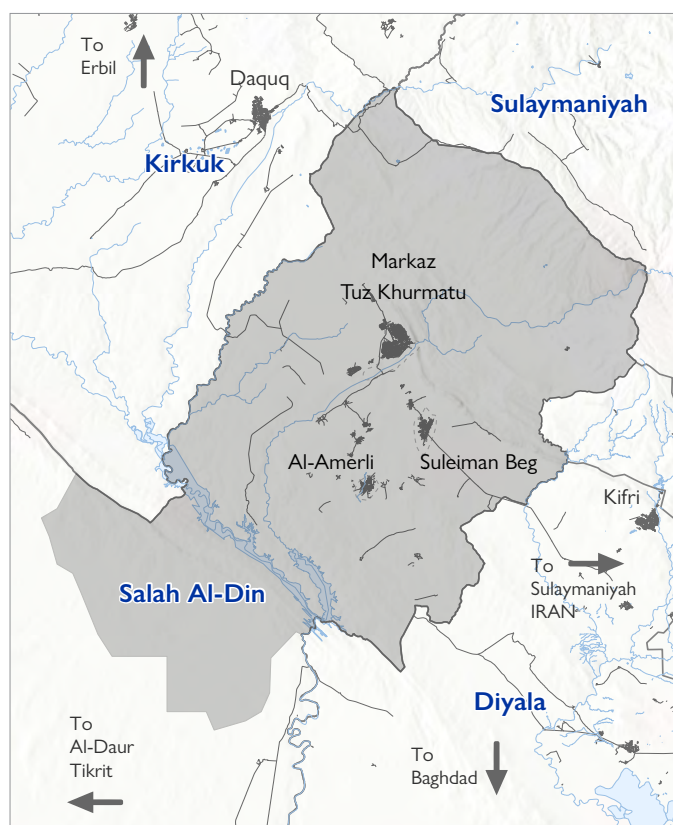
Nations Roadmap for the Acceleration of the National Plan, pursuant to the United Nations Secretary-General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement.¹² This research also aims to improve the political dialogue in the country on how to provide a voluntary and informed choice to people who are experiencing long-term displacement. This endeavour is timely, as government and international attention begins to have a wider focus, beyond Daesh conflict-affected communities.¹³

The following in-depth qualitative analysis of Tuz Khurmatu district contributes to

CONTEXT OVERVIEW

Tuz Khurmatu district, home to Shia and Sunni Turkmen, Sunni Kurd and Sunni Arab communities, is strategically located on the Kirkuk-Baghdad highway in central Iraq (Map 2). Markaz Tuz Khurmatu is Turkmen in origin. Its urban centre is comprised of Turkmen and Kurdish populations and Sunni Arab, Sunni Turkmen and Kurdish villages surround it. The town centre of Al-Amerli is a Shia Turkmen enclave surrounded primarily by Sunni Arab villages and Suleiman Beg is mainly Sunni Arab in composition.

Map 2. Detail of Tuz Khurmatu district and surroundings



this effort by first, detailing the key factors preventing IDP returns to these areas and the implications should these factors persist and, second, identifying resolution pathways that may exist from a policy perspective. The overarching aim of this work is to provide knowledge of how best to tackle sclerotic barriers to durable solutions for populations experiencing blocked or constrained return to their areas of origin as a basis for advocacy and operations. Findings will be presented following an overview of the context to date and a description of study's methodology.

PRE- AND POST-2003

Originally part of Kirkuk Governorate, Tuz Khurmatu district was administratively attached to Salah al-Din Governorate in 1976 under the Ba'ath regime, to push back against Kurdish self-determination efforts. The area was also subjected to demographic change efforts via Arabization campaigns, where authorities gave plots of land in the district to Arab tribes from other parts of Salah al-Din. The regime targeted the district's Kurdish and Turkmen population during the 1988 Anfal campaign¹⁴ and targeted Kurds again in reprisal for the 1991 Kurdish uprising in northern Iraq.¹⁵

Since the fall of the Ba'ath regime in 2003, Tuz Khurmatu district is considered part of the internally disputed territories between the Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government, whose final governance status is pending determination of Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution. From then on, the district has experienced some of the highest levels of violence and political instability as compared to other disputed territories in the country.¹⁶ Tensions started to rise in 2003 due to the political dominance of the Kurds, who through the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) held the office of mayor and other key administrative posts in the district, sought to align Markaz Tuz Khurmatu with Markaz Kirkuk over Markaz Tikrit,¹⁷ and maintained security control via the Peshmerga.¹⁸ By 2009, Baghdad-based Shia political parties in the central government began directing Tuz Khurmatu district posts and services to the Shia Turkmen community to start taking power away from the Kurds.¹⁹ The security control of the district was also split at this time between the Peshmerga and Government of Iraq security forces, namely the Iraqi Army and Federal Police, the latter of which was comprised primarily of Shia Turkmen as a stated protective measure due to attacks by radical Sunni Arab elements against the district's Shia population.²⁰ These radical elements emerged in part out of increasing marginalization and repression of Sunni Arab populations, both country-wide and in the district itself. Worsening relations and standoffs between Peshmerga and Government of Iraq forces coincided with a sharp deterioration in security of the district between 2013 and 2014, with explosions reported almost daily during this period.²¹

12 As part of the United Nations Secretary-General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement, Iraq was selected as a pilot country for the development of a compact, or agreement, between governments, the United Nations and partners to accelerate durable solutions for people in displacement aimed at giving equity to the options of return, integration or relocation based on the preferences of affected populations. In March 2023, a Roadmap for the Acceleration of the National Plan was proposed that recommended nine specific areas of engagement with the Government of Iraq and Kurdistan Regional Government to accelerate the resolution of displacement for people displaced by the Daesh conflict. The areas of engagement propose concrete asks to the Government of Iraq and Kurdistan Regional Government to provide individual and communities rights and entitlements under Iraq law, including improving political dialogue around these issues as well. As of this writing, official endorsement of the Roadmap for the Acceleration of the National Plan by the Government of Iraq and Kurdistan Regional Government is forthcoming. See, United Nations, *The United Nations Secretary-General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement Follow-Up to the Report of the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement* (New York, United Nations, 2022), and Action Agenda on Internal Displacement (New York, Office of the Special Adviser on Solutions to Internal Displacement).

13 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Humanitarian Transition Overview 2023* (Geneva and Baghdad, OCHA, 2023).

14 Mac Skelton and Zmkan Ali Saleem, *Iraq's Disputed Internal Boundaries After ISIS: Heterogeneous Actors Vying for Influence* (London, London School of Economics Middle East Centre, 2019).

15 András Derzsi-Horváth, *Iraq after ISIL: Tuz* (Berlin, GPPI, 2017).

16 United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), "Summary Report Reinforcing Peace and Stability in Iraq's Disputed Territories: A Case Study of Kirkuk, Tuz Khurmatu, and Northern Diyala" (Baghdad, UNAMI, 2018).

17 Skelton and Saleem, *Iraq's Disputed Internal Boundaries After ISIS*.

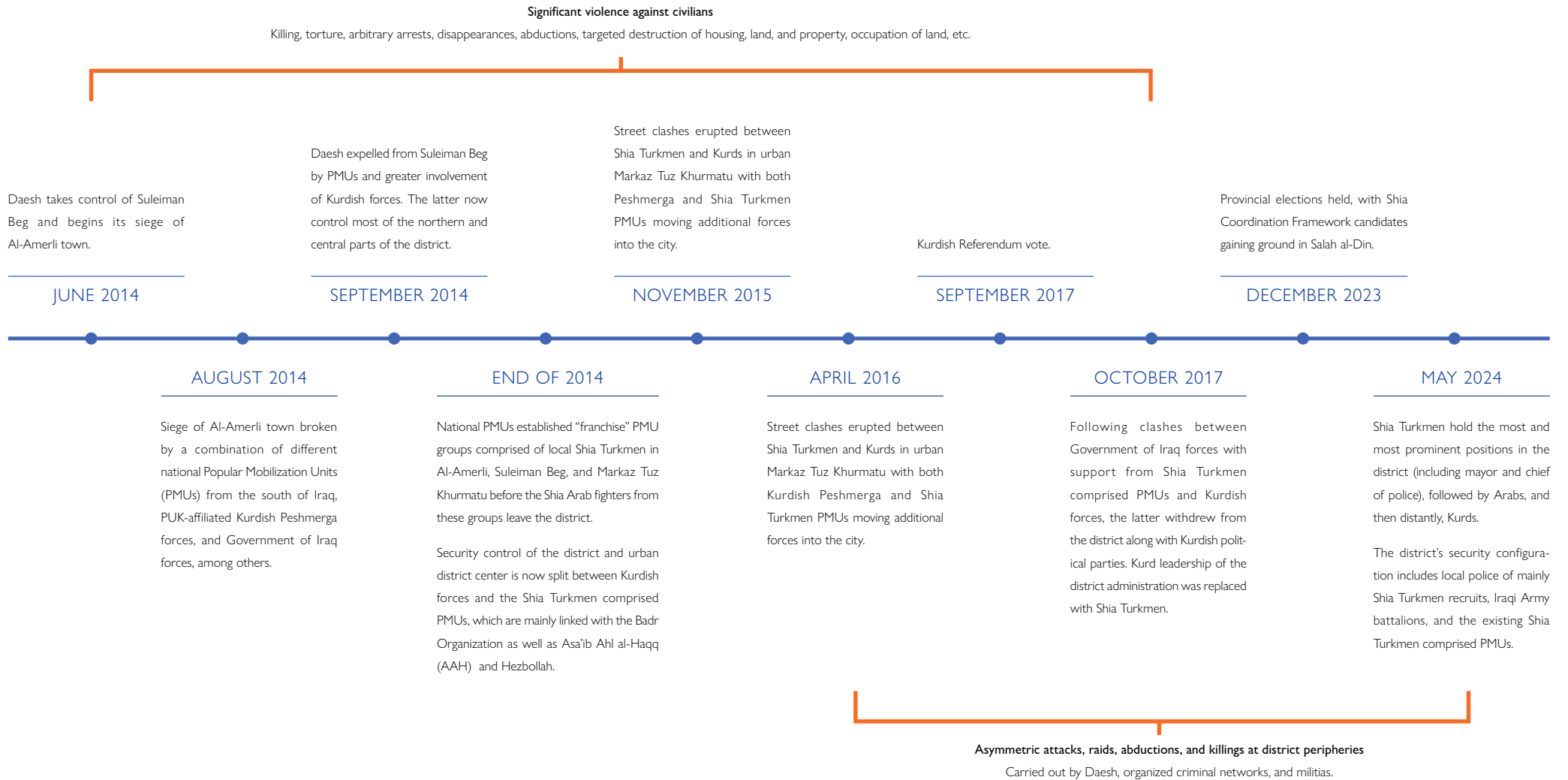
18 International Crisis Group (ICG), *Reviving UN Mediation on Iraq's Disputed Internal Borders*, Middle East Report 194 (Brussels, ICG, 2018).

19 UNAMI, "Summary Report."

20 Skelton and Saleem, *Iraq's Disputed Internal Boundaries After ISIS*.

21 UNAMI, "Summary Report."

Figure 1. Timeline of the Daesh conflict and aftermath in Tuz Khurmatu district



DAESH CONFLICT TO PRESENT (2014–2024)

While various security and political configurations came together in Tuz Khurmatu district to fight Daesh in 2014, this unity did not last long. The violent competition and contestation of the previous years resumed shortly after Daesh's ouster from the district amid pervasive violence and violations against civilian populations. Figure 1 provides a timeline of the key events and dynamics of the past ten years that are described in more detail in the subsequent sections.

SECURITY CONFIGURATIONS AND ADMINISTRATION

In June 2014, Daesh took control of Suleiman Beg having faced little armed resistance as the Iraqi Army virtually disappeared from the area.²² From there, the armed group launched a siege on the neighbouring Shia Turkmen enclave of Al-Amerli. Various national Popular Mobilization Unit (PMU) contingents, including the Badr Organization, Hezbollah Battalions, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), Peace Brigades and Imam Ali Brigades took the lead in defending Al-Amerli, with assistance from PUK-affiliated Kurdish forces, Government of Iraq forces, Global Coalition air support and Iranian military advisors on the ground.²³ This military arrangement was made possible through an agreement between the Kurdistan Regional Government and Government of Iraq, which allowed for the free passage of PMU fighters from the south of Iraq into Tuz Khurmatu district via Kurdish-controlled areas in the north, on the condition that all southern Shia Arab PMU forces would leave the district following Daesh's expulsion from it.²⁴

These assembled PMUs and other forces broke the 80-day siege on the town in August 2014 and retook Suleiman Beg with relatively greater involvement of Kurdish forces in September 2014.²⁵ In the initial months after Daesh's defeat in the district, Kurdish forces had strengthened their control over its northern and central parts. This consolidation, however, was short-lived: with Iran brokering a deal between Kurdish and PMU sides, Badr Organization and AAH brigades were allowed to move into Shia Turkmen neighbourhoods of Markaz Tuz Khurmatu. These brigades began recruiting and arming members of the Shia Turkmen community to form local "franchise" PMU groups that could contest Kurdish dominance and leave a national PMU foothold in the district.²⁶ The same happened in Al-Amerli and Suleiman Beg. With these developments, the district was split and controlled by two competing security actors. Kurdish forces controlled the northern Kurdish-majority areas and the rest of the district, including Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, fell under the authority of the Shia Turkmen PMUs.²⁷ The physical manifestation of these divisions could be seen in the walls and barricades that were erected to separate neighbourhoods and

areas of control by identity group.²⁸ However, this did not prevent both sides from clashing over control of the district centre. The security configuration of the district centre changed again on 16 October 2017, in the aftermath of the Kurdish Referendum, when Kurdish security forces and political parties withdrew from the district, leaving Kurds with little influence over political and security arrangements.²⁹ The Kurdish mayor, director of electricity and head of the municipality were all fired and replaced with Shia Turkmen appointees loyal to Badr Organization and AAH blocs.³⁰

The current district administration, decided upon in May 2024, similarly gives Turkmen the most positions (including the same mayor as appointed in 2017 and head of the police), followed by Arabs and then Kurds.³¹ The December 2023 provincial elections also saw Shia Coordination Framework candidates (running as the National Framework) gain ground within the Salah al-Din Provincial Council and use their leverage to eventually recall the initially appointed governor,³² though they were unable to gain more influential posts within the governorate level administration, despite strong contestation of current appointments.³³ The district's security configuration currently includes local police, predominantly made up of local Shia Turkmen recruits, Iraqi Army battalions and various PMU brigades also mainly comprised of local Shia Turkmen recruits and affiliated with the Badr Organization, AAH and Hezbollah.

DESTRUCTION, VIOLENCE, ONGOING ATTACKS AND LACK OF ACCOUNTABILITY

The aftermath of the Daesh conflict in Tuz Khurmatu district left behind significant physical destruction, attributed both to Daesh attacks and the military operations to expel the group. However, Human Rights Watch, in documenting widespread property destruction in Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen villages within PMU-controlled areas of the district, found that the pattern of destruction was methodical, driven by revenge and intended to alter demographic composition rather than because of fighting Daesh alone.³⁴ Similar patterns emerged within Arab villages that were under Kurdish force control after the expulsion of Daesh.³⁵

Even as Daesh was expelled from the district, extreme violence and human rights violations proliferated. Sunni Arabs and Sunni Turkmen were subject to killings, arbitrary arrests, abduction, torture and extortion by the PMUs controlling these areas.³⁶ Local Arab leaders claimed that since January 2015, PMUs and other security forces had detained some 700 Arabs, usually on suspicion of being affiliated with or supporting Daesh, and their whereabouts remain unknown.³⁷ In November 2015 and again in April 2016, street clashes erupted between Shia Turkmen and Kurds, with both Peshmerga and Shia Turkmen PMUs moving additional forces into

22 Derzsi-Horváth, *Iraq after ISIL: Tuz*.

23 UNAMI, "Summary Report."

24 Derzsi-Horváth, *Iraq after ISIL: Tuz*.

25 Ibid.

26 UNAMI, "Summary Report."

27 Ibid.

28 Nabih Bulos, "Tuz Khurmatu is Iraq's City of Walls. Is it a Sign of the Country's Future?" *Los Angeles Times*, 11 March 2018.

29 UNAMI, "Summary Report."

30 Skelton and Saleem, *Iraq's Disputed Internal Boundaries After ISIS*.

31 Kirkuk Now, "Government Positions of Tuz Khormatu District Shared," *Kirkuk Now*, 21 May 2024.

32 Omar Al-Nidawi, "Avoiding Iranian-Backed Iraqi Militias' Political Takeover in the Shadow of a U.S. Withdrawal" *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 3 April 2024.

33 Shafaq News, "National Framework Condemns Sectarian Proposals in Saladin Government Formation" *Shafaq News*, 4 February 2024.

34 Human Rights Watch, "After Liberation Came Destruction: Iraqi Militias and the Aftermath of Amerli" *Human Rights Watch*, 18 March 2015.

35 Derzsi-Horváth, *Iraq after ISIL: Tuz*.

36 Human Rights Watch, "Iraq: Ethnic Fighting Endangers Civilians" *Human Rights Watch*, 13 January 2016.

37 ICG, *Reviving UN Mediation on Iraq's Disputed Internal Borders*.

the city.³⁸ The clashes of November 2015 brought with them abductions and mass arrests of both population groups.³⁹ The fierce clashes between Government of Iraq security forces with support from Shia Turkmen PMU brigades, and Kurdish forces in October 2017 in urban Markaz Tuz Khurmatu following the Kurdish Referendum included indiscriminate attacks on civilians, destruction and looting of homes and shops, and arson targeted at Kurdish areas.⁴⁰ In the midst of this violence, Daesh and other shadowy groups linked to organized crime networks and militias also began carrying out asymmetric attacks, raids and abductions at the peripheries of Tuz Khurmatu district.⁴¹ There are also growing suspicions of illicit drugs being produced in secret laboratories around Markaz Tuz Khurmatu for trafficking elsewhere into the country including Kirkuk and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.⁴²

To date, victims of these violations have had few avenues for justice and accountability. The main recourse that affected individuals have for redress is Law No. 20 of 2009 (amended in 2015) on Compensation of Victims of War Operations, Military Mistakes, and Terrorist Operations. However, this is a cumbersome and backlogged compensation process, and payments in general in the country remain few and far between.⁴³

DISPLACEMENT AND RETURN MOVEMENTS (2014–2024)

The confluence of varied but interconnected conflict and political dynamics that occurred in rapid succession in Tuz Khurmatu district between 2014 and 2017 caused the internal displacement of different segments of the population at different times that protracts to date (Box 1).

Box 1. IDP groups and displacement waves included in this analysis

Sunni Arabs and Sunni Turkmen displaced due to the Daesh conflict starting in 2014:

This group encompasses people primarily from Al-Amerli and Suleiman Beg subdistricts and rural parts of Markaz Tuz Khurmatu who fled during the Daesh conflict and military operations to retake these areas. They displaced mainly into urban Markaz Tuz Khurmatu.

Kurds displaced due to the change in district security and political configuration in October 2017:

This group encompasses people primarily from urban Markaz Tuz Khurmatu who fled amid targeting and violence as Government of Iraq and Kurdish forces clashed, and the latter eventually withdrew from the district centre. They displaced mainly into urban Markaz Kirkuk.

The Daesh conflict in Tuz Khurmatu district resulted in the internal displacement of mainly Shia and Sunni Turkmen and Sunni Arab populations from Al-Amerli, Suleiman Beg and the surroundings of Markaz Tuz Khurmatu in 2014. While displacement took place relatively quickly, return has been painfully slow for most of this population, with the exception of displaced Shia Turkmen. The PMUs operating in their areas reportedly granted Shia Turkmen protective policies that facilitated their return relatively early on,⁴⁴ while blocking Sunni populations from doing the same.⁴⁵ In the immediate aftermath of the large-scale displacement of Kurds from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu after the violence of October 2017, several Government of Iraq and Kurdistan Regional Government actors worked to facilitate their return as quickly as possible through a deal with Shia Turkmen PMU groups. This initiative led to the return of some displaced Kurds over the remainder of 2017; however, no other substantial return movements of Kurds have taken place to date.

Based on the most recent reporting, 18 rural locations across the Tuz Khurmatu district (10 locations in Al-Amerli subdistrict, 6 in Markaz Tuz Khurmatu subdistrict and 2 in Suleiman Beg subdistrict) have witnessed no returns to date due to blocks by security actors; while 12 rural locations all in Al-Amerli subdistrict that had previously witnessed no returns due to security-related blockages have now registered some families back.⁴⁶ Among the 45 locations of return in the district, 27 report having displaced families still blocked from returning and of these, 19 have under half their pre-conflict populations back.⁴⁷

38 Skelton and Saleem, *Iraq's Disputed Internal Boundaries After ISIS*.

39 Human Rights Watch, "Iraq: Ethnic Fighting Endangers Civilians."

40 Amnesty International, "Iraq: Fresh Evidence that Tens of Thousands Forced to Flee Tuz Khurmatu Amid Indiscriminate Attacks, Looting and Arson" *Amnesty International*, 24 October 2017.

41 ICG, *Reviving UN Mediation on Iraq's Disputed Internal Borders*; Tom Westcott, "No Surrender: 'White Flag' Group Rises as New Threat in Northern Iraq" *Middle East Eye*, 1 February 2018; and Araz Mohammed et al., "Kidnappers Feed off IS Insurgency in Iraq's Disputed Territories" *Iraq Oil Report*, 2 March 2020.

42 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Drug Trafficking Dynamics Across Iraq and the Middle East: Trends and Responses Executive Summary* (Cairo, UNODC, 2024).

43 Caroline Baudot, *We Hope, But We Are Hopeless: Civilians' Perceptions of The Compensation Process in Iraq* (Baghdad, CIVIC, 2018); and Khaled Zaza et al., *Mosul After the Battle: Reparations for Civilian Harm and the Future of Ninewa* (London, Ceasefire Center for Civilian Rights / Minority Rights Group International, 2020).

44 UNAMI, "Summary Report."

45 Horváth, *Iraq after ISIL: Tuz*.

46 IOM DTM, *No Return*, Round 129.

47 IOM DTM, *Return Index*, Round 20.

METHODOLOGY

This research focuses on detailing how obstacles to return and reintegration are understood; how people are living in locations of displacement; options for resolving displacement; implications if the status quo persists; efforts to address obstacles to date and the stakeholders needed to resolve displacement; the preconditions IDPs have for return and for location integration in their areas of displacement; the underlying political economy that would hinder the resolution of displacement; and some potential pathways forward. A combination of IOM and Social Inquiry field teams and researchers conducted six focus group discussions with displaced men and women from Tuz Khurmatu district in areas where these communities reside in highest concentration. Focus group discussions were complemented by 17 key informant interviews with provincial and district level authorities, tribal leaders, local civil society, United Nations personnel, and a Kurdistan Regional Government official. Data collection took place between April and May 2024.

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

To ensure the analysis captured the diversity of views and experiences between IDPs from Tuz Khurmatu district displaced within and outside of it, between ethno-religious identities, and between men and women, data collection followed the below sampling frame. A total of 57 IDPs (27 men and 30 women) participated in focus group discussions, with individual participants' ages ranging between 25 and 72 years. The original sampling strategy included conducting separate focus group discussions with Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen IDPs. This strategy was adjusted in the field as Sunni Turkmen IDPs did not attend separately scheduled sessions and preferred to participate alongside their Sunni Arab counterparts, though in smaller number. Given the ongoing political, social and security dynamics in Tuz Khurmatu district

and the sensitivities around prospects for return, not all IDPs who participated in the focus group discussions felt comfortable in answering all question, but instead voiced agreement or dissent with the overall discussion. Finally, displaced Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen male participants disclosed their specific locations of origin, but the remaining participants did not feel comfortable in doing so. These locations are referenced where relevant in the subsequent analysis.

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

The key informant interviews provided further insights into obstacles to return, underlying political dynamics, reflections on past and ongoing efforts to resolve displacement, and pathways forward. The interviews comprised the following actors: members of the provincial administration (Ministry of Migration and Displacement and Commission of Human Rights), members of the provincial council, members of the local administration (Mayor's Office and Migration and Displacement Office), religious leader affiliated with the local Sunni Endowment, security officer, tribal leaders, local civil society, national/local expert, United Nations personnel working closely on the displacement portfolio in Tuz Khurmatu district and those engaged in the Joint Government of Iraq, Kurdistan Regional Government and United Nations Roadmap for the Acceleration of the National Plan, and Kurdistan Regional Government official tasked with addressing disputed territories. In addition to the provincial administration and council, the most relevant Government of Iraq officials to this case are Members of Parliament for Tuz Khurmatu district; however, field teams were unable to interview these actors. Key informant interviews are further supplemented by a review of internal workshop and meeting reports pertaining to addressing displacement in the district.

Table 1. Final focus group discussion sample

Population group	Governorate of displacement	Subdistrict of displacement	Participant type	Residence type
Kurdish IDPs (from urban Markaz Tuz Khurmatu)	Kirkuk	Markaz Kirkuk	Men	In host community
			Women	
Sunni Arab + Sunni Turkmen IDPs (from rural Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg)	Salah al-Din	Markaz Tuz Khurmatu	Men	
			Women	
			Men	
			Women	

PERSPECTIVES ON DISPLACEMENT AND RETURN

Interconnected economic, social, political and security dynamics complicate the sustainable resolution of displacement for IDPs from Tuz Khurmatu district. Both IDPs and key informants spoken to as part of this analysis were keenly aware of these complexities. Furthermore, this analysis reveals that while individual identities in terms of ethno-religious group, gender and place of origin shape how obstacles to return are perceived and the extent to which they impact people, there is consensus on what these obstacles are. The same holds true for obstacles to local integration in areas of displacement as well, which seem to particularly impact displaced Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen women. Taken together, these factors indicate that IDPs are not closer to return nor to locally integrating as a resolution to their displacement, but

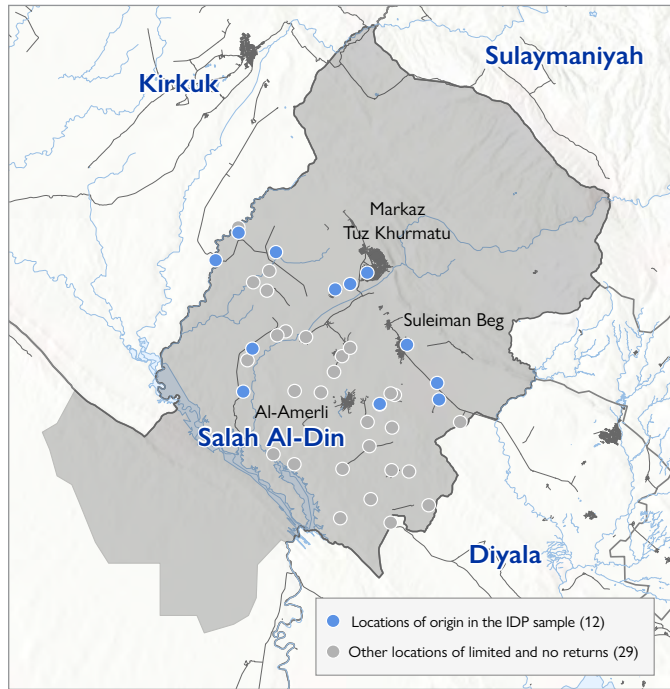
rather face limits to their rights as citizens in the current environment. This situation could have more severe consequences should it continue.

ACCESS TO LOCATIONS OF ORIGIN AND PREVIOUS RETURN ATTEMPTS

One of the hallmarks of the displacement trajectories of the majority of Tuz Khurmatu IDPs is how close these populations are to their locations of origin (Map 3). Many are within the district and others are not that far away in neighbouring Kirkuk Governorate. This proximity, however, does not necessarily

translate into all IDPs being able to access these locations to visit or to try to live there again. Rather, access depends on where IDPs are from, their willingness to attempt returning, and security actors and conditions therein.

Map 3. IDP locations of origin and other recorded locations of limited and no return in Tuz Khurmatu district⁴⁸



Kurdish IDPs, both men and women, currently residing in Markaz Kirkuk, by and large, have not been back to their neighbourhoods in Markaz Tuz Khurmatu since displacement. This is not due to any form of officially restricted access to the urban area of the subdistrict, but rather to IDPs' own misgivings over the safety and viability of living there again in the current circumstances. One IDP who has gone back and forth between Markaz Kirkuk and Markaz Tuz Khurmatu noted that the latter is not how it used to be, *"There is still a Turkmen-Kurdish conflict there. They hate each other."*⁴⁹

For Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen IDPs residing in urban parts of Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, their ability to access and in some cases attempt to live in their villages and towns of origin on the outskirts of Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli or Suleiman Beg subdistricts varies by location and by gender. Among the displaced men in this subset, some from Bir Ahmed Mahmoud village in Al-Amerli reported that they had tried to return three years ago along with a few other families; however, pervasive security incidents forced them to all displace again at the behest of security forces before being able to fully settle back: *"Security problems in the area made [security forces] notify us to leave once more."*⁵⁰ Men from Zanjaly and Albo Shakar villages, also in Al-Amerli, indicated that they faced restricted access to these locations by security forces given the presence of military barracks

in them and their proximity to the town center; access to some of their agricultural lands was also limited because of security issues as well.⁵¹ Furthermore, on visiting the parts of Zanjaly village that were accessible to him, one IDP remarked that *"the presence of multiple security forces inside the village itself hindered return. We cannot live near military barracks."*⁵² A recognition of social problems, tensions and fear of arbitrary arrests after visiting Dabag village in Markaz Tuz Khurmatu prevented the men in this subset from this location from moving back.⁵³ Finally, while some displaced men could access and visit Al-Salam, Halewa Al-Kaber and Yangija villages in Markaz Tuz Khurmatu and Sarat and Hafrya villages and neighbourhoods in Suleiman Beg, they all indicated that the varying levels of service provision, limited job opportunities, and, critically, their own lack of financial support and resources have kept them from returning.⁵⁴ Some men also reported not being able to access their locations of origin at all due to difficulties in obtaining security clearance documentation.

Unlike their male counterparts, none of the displaced Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen women, most of whom in this analysis are the sole heads of their households, have sought to access their locations of origin since displacement. Rather, they noted that no security permits are available for them to return to their locations of origin, that some villages are prohibited from accessing due to the absence of security forces, and others still are subject to *"continuous terrorist attacks"*⁵⁵ and other security incidents.⁵⁶ The fear of security threats in locations of origin is pervasive among these displaced women, and with good reason given their direct and indirect experiences of loss and violence since the onset of the Daesh conflict to date, including in their relatives' attempts to return.

*A group of farmers went to inspect the situation in [location of origin in Al-Amerli] to reclaim and prepare the land for farming, but three of them, including my brother, were kidnapped by unknown parties. And the locals were blackmailed for a ransom of 30,000 [United States dollars (USD)] in exchange for their release. We have not attempted to reach [our location of origin] since the farmers were kidnapped.*⁵⁷

Despite the difference in access to locations of origin across the displaced communities included in this analysis, all participants seem to have a clear sense of both the obstacles that limit their return movements and the conditions they would find should they return.

OBSTACLES TO RETURN AND EXPECTED CONDITIONS IN LOCATIONS OF ORIGIN

Both the displaced and key informants recognized that a confluence of factors make returning and staying a considerably difficult prospect. The different displaced groups in this analysis perceived this complexity through the lens of their own concerns – which are multiple and interconnected – making it hard for them to uniformly prioritize one obstacle over another. Each of these obstacles and expected conditions in locations of origin are detailed below, with differences between displaced communities highlighted as relevant. They

48 The IDP locations of origin presented in the map represent those which focus group participants disclosed being from. Other locations of limited and no return refer to those locations that either report less than half their pre-conflict populations back or that are recorded as having no returns registered. Data sources: IOM DTM, Return Index Round 20 and IOM DTM, No Return Round 129.

49 Focus group discussion participant, Kurdish Male IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Kirkuk, April 2024.

50 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Male IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu and Al-Amerli, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

51 Focus group discussion, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Male IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu and Al-Amerli, Salah al-Din, April 2024; and Focus group discussion, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Male IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

52 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Male IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu and Al-Amerli, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

53 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Male IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu and Al-Amerli, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

54 Focus group discussion, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Male IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu and Al-Amerli, Salah al-Din, April 2024; and Focus group discussion, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Male IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

55 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Female IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

56 Focus group discussion, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Female IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024; and Focus group discussion, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Female IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

57 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Female IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

are organized thematically, starting with issues pertaining to security, protection and documentation; housing, land, property and compensation; social relations and rights violations; governance and representation; and service provision and economic prospects.

Current security configurations, the multiplicity of forces and their knock-on effects (such as fears for personal safety, lack of equal treatment, harassment and arrest, and impeded access to national ID and security clearance procedures creating de facto blocks on return). This aspect is an extensive concern among all displaced groups in this analysis, though they described their concerns and obstacles in different ways. These obstacles include fears for their safety and equal protection, harassment, arrest and blocked returns through impeded documentation and security clearance procedures. Before delving into the specificities of these obstacles and whether and how they impact different IDP communities, detailing the current security configuration in the district is important.

After the defeat of Daesh, over several stages, the security portfolio in Tuz Khurmatu district was handed over to Ministry of Interior forces, comprised mainly of the local police. However, several security actors continue operating in various parts of the district, as follows:⁵⁸

- The local police, headed by and comprised primarily of Shia Turkmen, are formally in charge of the entire district's security portfolio. They are present inside the district centre (urban Markaz Tuz Khurmatu) and in some subdistricts.
- The East Salah al-Din Operations Command, comprising mainly Iraqi Army battalions, extends its presence from southeast Kirkuk Governorate, through Tuz Khurmatu district encompassing the eastern outskirts of Markaz Tuz Khurmatu and Suleiman Beg, into northern Diyala Governorate, following the road to Baghdad.
- Various PMU brigades, mainly of the Badr Organization as well as (to a much lesser extent) AAH and Hezbollah and again comprised primarily of local Shia Turkmen, are present in Al-Amerli, Suleiman Beg, and some other Sunni Arab villages. In addition, these factions have presence inside urban Markaz Tuz Khurmatu and control part of the road leading to Kurdistan Regional Government-administered areas outside of the district to the east. They also maintain checkpoints on the roads leading to Al-Amerli, Suleiman Beg, the Sadiq Airbase, and Hamreen Mountains in the northwestern parts of the district. Two Sunni Arab PMU brigades from Kirkuk Governorate are also deployed between the district and Hamreen Mountains, near the Sadiq Airbase. Finally, the AAH faction's presence is primarily connected to its economic offices and related activities in the district.

As such, while on paper the local police are responsible for and have formal control of the district's security portfolio, in practice, significant informal influence is exerted through the presence of so many other security actors across the district, particularly as the PMU groups (and, in some cases, their economic offices) are connected to powerful national political actors (including some parties

within the Shia Coordination Framework). This significant informal influence, coupled with the fact that both the local police and PMU brigades are made up of predominantly Shia Turkmen recruits in an ethno-religiously diverse and contested district, heightens concerns over the capacity of these groups to act in an unbiased and impartial manner in carrying out law enforcement and security provision including in the pursuit of resolving displacement: *"Safety and security are felt only by some of the communities, those who have power and are led by some politicians. Other communities do not feel the same level of safety and security and that is one of the reasons they can't return."*⁵⁹

Kurdish IDPs from urban Markaz Tuz Khurmatu were the most direct in explicating this feeling. They noted that it would be impossible for them to live in safety with Shia Turkmen-comprised forces, especially PMUs, providing security to the city. This perception is due to the legacy of tensions and violence between Kurds and Shia Turkmen in the district overall and in the wake of the circumstances of Kurds' displacement in October 2017, rather than any specific physical blockages to their return.

*I took a decision since the referendum and what happened with the Turkmen and Arabs there, I realized that I should sell my house and buy one in Kirkuk because I lost hope since the moment I saw the Hashd al-Shaabi [local Shia Turkmen PMUs] controlling us.*⁶⁰

*I won't feel safe and secure if the Hashd al-Shaabi [local Shia Turkmen PMU] is still controlling us. No one can return if they don't feel they can sleep safely in their houses and feel as protected as the other components.*⁶¹

Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen IDPs, on the other hand, indicated that the many different security forces controlling or operating in and around their locations of origin across Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli and Suleiman Beg pose considerable psychological and physical barriers to return. Regarding psychological barriers, the presence and composition of these forces as well as their reported harassment, investigation and arbitrary arrest of those who have already managed to go back generates considerable fear and anxiety among the IDP participants in this study, who have considered or attempted returning.

*The presence of multiple security forces with different denominations, some based on sectarian grounds, negatively affects us, generating fear among the displaced and hindering our return to the village.*⁶²

*The lack of security stability threatens living in areas where displaced people have returned. Some families returned a while ago, but due to harassment and movement restrictions imposed by the controlling forces in the area, they moved back to [displacement location].*⁶³

*The different security forces' unprofessional handling of the information they receive from secret informants and their arbitrary arrests of villagers have instilled fear and anxiety in us, causing us to hesitate to return to the village.*⁶⁴

*Security problems are fabricated to prevent us from returning as security forces conduct raids on homes or interrogate returnees to the village under false pretenses.*⁶⁵

58 Key informant interview, national/local expert, Erbil (online), May 2024. This information was gathered and confirmed by various local sources in the district and surrounding areas.

59 Key informant interview, provincial council member, Salah al-Din, May 2024.

60 Focus group discussion participant, Kurdish Male IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Kirkuk, April 2024.

61 Focus group discussion participant, Kurdish Female IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Kirkuk, April 2024.

62 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Male IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

63 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Male IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

64 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Male IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

65 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Male IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

In terms of physical barriers, many IDPs reported not being able to go back permanently because they have not been able to obtain the appropriate documentation and clearances to do so. In particular, the “multiplicity of security entities and the different requests from each entity”⁶⁶ has created confusion and additional administrative burdens for IDPs in seeking to obtain the appropriate clearances and documentation to return. In some cases, for example, this reportedly resulted in displaced families receiving promises from the area’s operations commander to facilitate their return procedures, only to be met with delays and hurdles as the “multiplicity of active entities”⁶⁷ and authorities intervened. In other words, IDPs are subject to de facto blockages to return due to such politically linked interference – from security actors as well as politically aligned civil servants. Key informants also recognized that this landscape of varied armed actors and their connections to power prevent Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen IDPs from returning to their villages of origin.

*Non-State forces holding the land prevent people from returning to their places of origin as they are militarily dominant and armed. There are also villages on the outskirts of Al-Amerli where the displaced are currently prohibited from returning by influential individuals there.*⁶⁸

*The armed groups and influential entities that hold power prevent returns by restricting movement and not allowing people to come back.*⁶⁹

*Politicians are kind of against the return of families and they have made up issues (security and tribal) to prevent returns in order to serve their own interests and gain more influence.*⁷⁰

The confluence of actors has also reportedly allowed for gaps in the verification process of security information they receive, impacting the issuance of relevant civil documentation for return (if not resulting in outright arrests): “A case occurred when applying for the unified national ID card in Al-Amerli, where the security official responsible tore up and rejected our request, citing the affiliation of one of our relatives to terrorist groups.”⁷¹ These gaps have implications for local integration in locations of displacement as well, which will be described in subsequent sections.

Finally, despite the presence of so many forces on the ground and a reportedly steady reduction in security incidents across Tuz Khurmatu district,⁷² security breaches including sporadic Daesh attacks, clashes and explosions still occur.⁷³ The only locations of origin where IDPs reported a relatively stable security situation were Al-Salam, Halewa Al-Kaber, and Yangjia villages in Markaz Tuz Khurmatu. The fact that security incidents are still perceived as too frequent by many Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen IDPs, particularly women, is yet another obstacle to return, as it is a risk they are unwilling to take: “It is impossible for us to consider returning as long as the security situation remains unstable because we will not risk the lives of our children for the sake of returning.”⁷⁴

Pervasive house destruction and lack of compensation. Tuz Khurmatu district experienced high levels of residential destruction during and after the Daesh conflict. For displaced Kurds, this destruction is primarily within urban neighbourhoods of Markaz Tuz Khurmatu and stemmed from violence in October 2017 as Shia Turkmen comprised PMUs swept into the town center. Residential destruction for Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen IDPs is concentrated in the villages on the rural outskirts of Markaz Tuz Khurmatu and Al-Amerli and towns and villages of Suleiman Beg, and is attributed to military operations as well as retaliatory acts from the constellation of security forces fighting Daesh in these areas in 2014, including the Peshmerga and various PMU brigades. Regardless of when, how and by whom, housing loss due to destruction is reported by nearly all IDPs in this analysis and is cited as another critical factor in preventing their return.

*Most of our houses are destroyed, where do you expect us to live?*⁷⁵

*Those who managed to reach the villages told us that our homes have been completely destroyed, as if they never existed in the first place.*⁷⁶

Such destruction persists because very few displaced families from Tuz Khurmatu district have the financial resources to rebuild on their own nor have they received compensation via Law 20 on Compensation of Victims of War Operations, Military Mistakes, and Terrorist Operations to do so, including those who submitted applications years ago. One displaced woman noted that she had heard of other displaced families in Diyala and Kirkuk receiving compensation payment in full, but that “it seems displaced people from Salah al-Din province have been discriminated against and their issue has been neglected. We don’t know the reason for this unfair discrimination.”⁷⁷ There is a well-documented backlog with respect to compensation application and payment overall in the country; however, key informants interviewed for this analysis also acknowledged that specific provincial level bureaucracy for compensation in Salah al-Din is particularly onerous and exceedingly slow, compounding the existing backlog.⁷⁸ This slowness in response has also reportedly cost IDPs as they pay additional fees to try and speed the process along: “The compensation file has been delayed for many years, forcing the displaced to pay hefty amounts to expedite procedures.”⁷⁹ Compensation issues also impact IDPs’ ability to locally integrate into their displacement locations, as will be discussed in subsequent sections.

Expropriation of agricultural lands. Many Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen IDPs also face the prospect of no longer having access and rights to their agricultural lands, which are government owned via the Ministry of Agriculture and for which farmers have renewable contracts for their use. Lack of access and rights to these lands would severely limit IDPs’ prospects for viable livelihoods should they return to their locations of origin. This is a particularly sensitive topic and as such, the displaced tended to refer to it obliquely.

66 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Male IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

67 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Male IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

68 Key informant interview, member of the provincial administration, Salah al-Din, May 2024.

69 Key informant interview, civil activist, Salah al-Din, May 2024.

70 Key informant interview, provincial council member, Salah al-Din, May 2024.

71 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Male IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

72 Key informant interview, security officer, Salah al-Din, May 2024; and Key informant interview, member of the provincial administration, Salah al-Din, May 2024.

73 Key informant interview, member of the provincial administration, Salah al-Din, May 2024; Key informant interview, member of the provincial administration, Salah al-Din, May 2024; and Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Male IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

74 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Female IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

75 Focus group discussion participant, Kurdish Female IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Kirkuk, April 2024.

76 Focus group discussion, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Female IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

77 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Female IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

78 Key informant interview, United Nations personnel, Erbil (online), May 2024; Key informant interview, United Nations personnel, Baghdad (online), May 2024; and Key informant interview, Kurdistan Regional Government official, Erbil, May 2024.

79 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Male IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

*Some individuals are attempting to purchase large tracts of agricultural land.*⁸⁰

*There is a person known to us all, whose name or organization we will not say, who has exploited the security situation and conditions of war to forge government agricultural land contracts and transfer them entirely to his name, preventing farmers from cultivating these lands.*⁸¹

*Thousands of dunums of land have been leased to farmers since the 1970s, but after 2014, tribes claimed ownership of these lands, alleging that the previous regime took them from them and leased them to others.*⁸²

Some key informants were similarly circumspect in describing the situation as well.

*There are some sectarian and partisan parties involved or who have an interest in preventing the return of the displaced to their villages by exploiting abandoned agricultural lands for their benefit.*⁸³

*The problem is that there are large areas controlled in some villages that were seized from their owners and have not been returned until this day.*⁸⁴

*The actors benefitting from the current situation of no returns are those who have occupied lands of the displaced people. They have imposed themselves because they have power.*⁸⁵

Those key informants willing or able to speak more openly on this issue indicated that threats to IDPs' agricultural land rights come from two sources that relate to the interlinked ethno-religious, political and tribal dimensions described above. First, a Kurdish businessman with political ties apportioned 1,500 plots of State-owned land across the northern parts of Tuz Khurmatu district to himself via the Ministry of Agriculture as IDPs' contracts expired in 2019 and they were unable to easily renew them from displacement.⁸⁶ Second, local Shia Turkmen PMUs and in some cases their economic offices, political parties and the Shia Endowment now control agricultural lands through their power and influence, primarily across the southern parts, among others, of the district.⁸⁷

The sensitivity of this issue stems not only from the powerful actors involved in this land expropriation, but from the legacy of demographic engineering in the district through the forced dispossession of certain communities from their lands to make way for others. An indicative example of this is the stance of one provincial-level official that all IDPs from the recent crises in the district should be allowed to return, except for those from a specific tribe given the tensions that would arise because the tribe has been on Kurdish farmland since the Ba'ath regime's Arabization effort.⁸⁸ Thus, what is happening now has a historical precedent that continues: *"There are issues around housing, land, and property in the district that go back to the era of the former regime. These issues have not only not*

been resolved, but they have also been increasing because of the events of 2014 and then Shia domination since 2017."⁸⁹ Addressing this critical obstacle facing current IDPs is more complex when placed in the context of over four decades of unjust formal and informal land policies and the ensuing legitimate, competing claims to land each community in and from the district hold.

Residential occupation by security forces. Across Al-Amerli and Suleiman Beg, based on Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen IDP responses, another obstacle to return is the presence of military barracks and security headquarters within their villages of origin, which seems to occur in part because these villages are at the perimeter of the wider towns and urban centres these forces are supposed to secure.⁹⁰ Civilian housing is often used for barracks or headquarters and this presence hinders freedom of movement in and out of these locations.

*The presence of [security forces] in our village, which use a citizen's house as their headquarters, restrict[s] our movement in and out of the village and only allow[s] movement at specific locations and times.*⁹¹

*The presence of military barracks inside the village and even inside the houses themselves prevent us from returning to the village.*⁹²

Indeed, Tuz Khurmatu district has had some of the highest rates of occupied residential buildings and property since reporting on conditions in areas of return began.⁹³

Disappearances, deaths and fraying social relations. Tuz Khurmatu district has a long history of internecine violence, tensions and disputes, none of which have seen a lasting remedy nor resolution. Current dynamics, which emerged from this legacy, are reportedly exacerbated by political competition and rhetoric. They impact displaced communities' views on return and how they would be received by those already living in their locations of origin if they did go back.

For Kurdish IDPs, the current urban landscape is a visual harbinger of the social divisions they would encounter should they return: *"We used to live in mixed neighbourhoods with Arabs and Turkmen, but now each street in Tuz Khurmatu has one specific component living separately from others, which reminds us that the situation isn't the same and will never be reconciled."*⁹⁴ For some, the thought of living together again with Shia Turkmen residents is extremely difficult to consider given what happened in the city that caused them to displace including violations against their own families, *"I saw my relatives get killed by [local Shia Turkmen PMU] hands . . . every street in Tuz Khurmatu now reminds me of betrayal, blood and losing my people."*⁹⁵ Others still hold out the hope that the government will invest in more support toward reconciliation between Kurds and Turkmen to allow for returns.⁹⁶

80 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Male IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

81 Focus group discussion, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Female IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

82 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Male IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

83 Key informant interview, tribal leader, Salah al-Din, May 2024.

84 Key informant interview, member of the provincial administration, Salah al-Din, May 2024.

85 Key informant interview, provincial council member, May 2024.

86 Key informant interview, member of the provincial administration, Salah al-Din, May 2024; Key informant interview, United Nations personnel, Baghdad (online), May 2024.

87 Key informant interview, United Nations personnel, Baghdad (online), May 2024; Key informant interview, Kurdistan Regional Government official, Erbil, May 2024; and Key informant interview, provincial council member, Salah al-Din, May 2024.

88 Key informant interview, provincial council member, Salah al-Din, May 2024.

89 Key informant interview, Kurdistan Regional Government official, Erbil, May 2024.

90 Key informant interview, national/local expert, Erbil (online), May 2024.

91 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Male IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

92 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Male IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

93 IOM, Regional Working Group and Social Inquiry, "The Physical and Social Dimensions of Housing in Conflict-Affected Areas," *Return Index Thematic Series Briefing 1* (Baghdad, IOM, 2019).

94 Focus group discussion participant, Kurdish Male IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Kirkuk, April 2024.

95 Focus group discussion participant, Kurdish Male IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Kirkuk, April 2024.

96 Focus group discussion participant, Kurdish Male IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Kirkuk, April 2024.

Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen IDPs have also experienced their share of violence and loss. While not disclosed in detail within focus group discussions, some of the men who participated sought assistance for uncovering the fate of their missing relatives, who had been arrested between 2014 and 2016, and who have not been heard from since.⁹⁷ Similarly, nearly all the Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen women who had participated in this study are widows whose husbands were either killed or abducted during this period and never heard from again: *"We fled from our homes out of fear of occupation and shelling and we did not take anything with us except our identification papers and our souls . . . My husband left one night eight years ago and was kidnapped by an unknown party, and we have not heard anything about him since then."*⁹⁸

Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen IDPs' lack of information on missing family members leaves them open for accusations of Daesh affiliation, including by the non-displaced in their locations of origin, which negatively impacts their prospects for return (or other resolution of displacement) and reinforces an existing sense of collective blame.⁹⁹ This is a concern men in particular raised, based on the experiences of others who had returned to areas where tribal and ethno-religious tensions were high: *"The existence of tribal tensions in the area make families afraid of the secret informant who spies on villagers, accusing them of belonging to terrorist groups. Thus, villagers fear returning and being accused by secret informants and being subjected to arrest and imprisonment based on false accusations."*¹⁰⁰ For displaced Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen women in particular, the lack of certainty over the whereabouts of their husbands may also impact their ability to make claims over agricultural lands in their locations of origin given that the documentation for these may be under their husbands' names and require legal processes to prove inheritance.¹⁰¹

While many IDPs in this analysis were concerned with social relations between groups in their locations of origin as described above as well as over *"unresolved land disputes"*¹⁰² and *"personal animosities and hostilities,"*¹⁰³ and some Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen IDPs expressed a sense of isolation and loss of social ties since displacement,¹⁰⁴ not all felt the same. A smaller number of IDPs and some key informants as well anticipated that relations would be fine, except for isolated incidents between tribes or ethno-religious groups stemming from the Daesh conflict, since most locations where the displaced are from tend to be homogenous (though they neighbour areas with different tribal or ethno-religious groups residing in them). However, this perception belies wider concerns raised in other fora by provincial authorities of the need for more dedicated reconciliation, peacebuilding and social cohesion initiatives for the district to help in resolving displacement.¹⁰⁵

The view that social dynamics and community relations are stable was also refuted directly by provincial authorities representing the district, where they pointed to ongoing political competition, tied as it is to ethno-religious identity and a legacy of division, as a key factor in exacerbating tensions.

*Interactions and relations between different communities can't be described as good. This is the result of competition between political actors and the ideologies they impose on people.*¹⁰⁶

*The main trait in the district is the lack of acceptance of each other. This has been the case even before 2014, but after 2014 it worsened a lot.*¹⁰⁷

The *"misuse of social media platforms"*¹⁰⁸ and heightened rhetoric during elections, including the December 2023 provincial elections, where *"sometimes tribal, ethnic or even sectarian tendencies appear"*¹⁰⁹ were cited as further evidence of this.

Limited representation and voice amid continuing political competition.

The IDPs who participated in this study all expressed deep concern over their representation in governance and the limited space that exists for them to voice their needs to authorities that would respond to them should they return, further underscoring the political nature of their continued displacement, strain on intergroup relations and feelings of unequal citizenship.

This sentiment cross-cut groups:

*The government [in Tuz Khurmatu district] still supports the Arabs and Turkmen. Besides, the mayor is originally Turkmen and gives more support to his component [ethno-religious group] in jobs, governance, resolving issues, solving crimes, within the courts . . . no one will support the Kurds.*¹¹⁰

*If you feel yourself neglected and no one cares about what you really feel and need, then we can't say we are safe.*¹¹¹

*There is no political representation for us to convey our concerns and needs to the relevant authorities and this negatively affects returns.*¹¹²

*There is no real representation for us in governmental institutions such as provincial councils or the Iraqi Parliament.*¹¹³

*We don't believe anyone will lend us a helping hand to revive our destroyed areas.*¹¹⁴

Even in areas like Yangija village in Markaz Tuz Khurmatu where, by all accounts, efforts to rebuild and facilitate returns continues to date, displaced residents from there noted that *"a particular entity monopolizes decision-making and does not involve returnees and displaced people in decisions concerning the area."*¹¹⁵ Key informants corroborated this state of affairs overall for Tuz Khurmatu district, where there is

97 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Male IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

98 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Female IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

99 Key informant interview, local district authority, Salah al-Din, May 2024.

100 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Male IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

101 Imrul Islam, "Navigating Humanitarian Principles in the Nexus: Reflections from Iraq" Humanitarian Practice Network, 30 May 2023.

102 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Male IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

103 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Female IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

104 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Female IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

105 Regional Working Group and Iraq Durable Solutions, "Thematic Durable Solutions Meeting Report: Tuz Khurmatu Return Challenges" (Baghdad, IOM, 2023); IOM and Public Aid Organization (PAO), "Workshop for Local Authorities in Tuz Khurmatu" (Erbil, PAO, 2023); and IOM and PAO, "Workshop for Local Community Leaders" (Erbil, PAO, 2023).

106 Key informant interview, provincial council member, Salah al-Din, May 2024.

107 Key informant interview, provincial council member, Salah al-Din, May 2024.

108 Key informant interview, member of the provincial administration, Salah al-Din, May 2024.

109 Key informant interview, member of the provincial administration, Salah al-Din, May 2024.

110 Focus group discussion participant, Kurdish Male IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Kirkuk, April 2024.

111 Focus group discussion participant, Kurdish Female IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Kirkuk, April 2024.

112 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Male IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

113 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Male IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

114 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Female IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

115 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Male IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

some ethno-religious representation within government departments “*but not at the level of decision-makers . . . each of these departments is linked to a higher authority and cannot deviate from the established or adopted context.*”¹¹⁶ In other words, local decision-making seems heavily influenced, if not wholly driven, by specific political and economic interests of nationally powerful political parties to which civil servants are affiliated. At the district level, Shia Turkmen hold the most and most senior posts (including the mayor and chief of police), followed by Sunni Arabs, and lastly by a wide margin, Kurds within municipal and public service posts.¹¹⁷

These factors, when taken together, may account in part for why the displaced feel unrepresented: some of their most critical concerns at the local level are overseen by actors who are often perceived to be acting in line with political and sectarian interests rather than seeking to serve all constituents.¹¹⁸ One local official stated this feeling more directly: “*There is no actual governance and institutions are weak because of ethnic and sectarian tensions. There is also a lack of balanced representation in the district administration.*”¹¹⁹

Some of these sentiments may have been exacerbated by the recent statements of an influential Badr-linked Member of Parliament from Tuz Khurmatu district with respect to the ethno-religious apportionment of senior posts in the governorate administration in the wake of the December 2023 provincial elections.¹²⁰ Specifically, he expressed deep upset at the members of the provincial council for not appointing Shia representatives to influential positions at the governorate level, and demanded they start the process again.¹²¹ This came after months of forceful statements from the National Framework bloc of the provincial council (representing the Shia Coordination Framework) over what they deemed sectarian proposals in the selection of non-Shia individuals for influential positions that they felt did not adequately reflect the share of seats they won on the council.¹²² While these efforts did not fully yield their intended results regarding all provincial-level appointments,¹²³ they did lead to the recall of the initially appointed governor. Combined, this rhetoric and political maneuvering may have further shaped perceptions on the changing and consolidated landscape of influence in the district and governorate as Shia Coordination Framework parties gain ground amid an ever more fragmented Sunni Arab bloc and reduced Kurdish presence.¹²⁴

Notably, this competition for power and influence has been at play in the district since 2003 and stems from the design of Iraq’s governance system, where State departments in the central government as well as at the provincial level are divided among ruling political parties and staffed by loyal senior bureaucrats.¹²⁵ This design enables real political power to lie with political parties including through their loyalists and affiliated armed groups and puts State resources under

their control. These dynamics have accounted for widespread violence, instability and poor service provision in the district in the lead up to the conflict with Daesh in 2014.¹²⁶ Many of the main actors involved now in the district are the same as before, though in different configurations, with different consolidations of power and with changed levels of influence and leverage from local to national levels.

Piecemeal improvements to service provision and concerns over livelihood prospects. IDP perceptions on the expected level of service provision available in locations of origin vary by group and specific location, depending on individual levels of destruction, historic neglect and prioritization for reconstruction which, as noted above, is sometimes captured by political interests; however, nearly all displaced participants expressed worry over the prospects of viable livelihoods should they return at present, in part due to political interference in the local economy and access to agricultural land.

Displaced Kurds from the urban centre of Markaz Tuz Khurmatu indicated that they have heard water and electricity provision have improved, roads are paved and the markets are functioning, but this does them no good if they do not have homes to live in nor feel safe to be back.¹²⁷ Of greater concern, particularly for men, was the ability to participate in the local economy. One IDP noted that now, “*there is no dealing in the bazaar with Turkmen and this will negatively impact the financial status of the city because Kurds and Turkmen used to buy and sell together as one.*”¹²⁸ Others indicated that should they go back, they would likely not be able to access their rights in jobs (within the public or private sector), money and business.¹²⁹ This perception comes from the reportedly uneven allocation of public sector jobs across ethno-religious lines with more openings available to Shia Turkmen than to others and to the harassment and threats directed toward any successful Kurdish or Arab entrepreneurs in the district.¹³⁰ This overall situation may relate to the control of “*certain political parties and groups*”¹³¹ over the district’s economy.

Displaced Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen women overall described the anticipated level of service provision in their locations of origin to be limited to non-existent, based on the information they have. One woman displaced from a village in Suleiman Beg noted the wider legacy of development neglect that affected some of these areas prior to conflict as well: “*There are no services, but I would like to clarify that we lacked clean drinking water even before the Daesh invasion and displacement. We suffered from the water’s bitter taste and a shortage of electricity and now, after the village was completely destroyed, services have totally disappeared.*”¹³²

Displaced Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen men, by virtue of the fact that some have visited their locations of origin, described a more nuanced picture of service provision

116 Key informant interview, member of the provincial administration, Salah al-Din, May 2024.

117 Kirkuk Now, “Government Positions of Tuz Khormatu District Shared.”

118 Skelton and Saleem, Iraq’s Disputed Internal Boundaries After ISIS.

119 Key informant interview, provincial council member, Salah al-Din, May 2024.

120 Key informant interview, member of the provincial administration, Salah al-Din, May 2024.

121 See, for example, this [statement](#).

122 Shafaq News, “National Framework Condemns Sectarian Proposals in Saladin Government Formation.”

123 Kirkuk Now, “Government Positions of Tuz Khormatu District Shared.”

124 Key informant interview, United Nations personnel, Baghdad (online), May 2024.

125 Toby Dodge and Renad Mansour, *Politically Sanctioned Corruption and Barriers to Reform in Iraq* (London, Chatham House, 2021).

126 Derzsi-Horváth, Iraq after ISIL: Tuz; United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq, “Summary Report;” International Crisis Group, Reviving UN Mediation on Iraq’s Disputed Internal Borders; and Skelton and Saleem, Iraq’s Disputed Internal Boundaries After ISIS.

127 Focus group discussion participant, Kurdish Male IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Kirkuk, April 2024; and focus group discussion participant, Kurdish Female IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Kirkuk, April 2024.

128 Focus group discussion participant, Kurdish Male IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Kirkuk, April 2024.

129 Focus group discussion participant, Kurdish Male IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Kirkuk, April 2024.

130 Key informant interview, United Nations personnel, Baghdad (online), May 2024.

131 Key informant interview, Kurdistan Regional Government official, Erbil, May 2024.

132 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Female IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

and restoration,¹³³ one that reflects the slow and piecemeal process of reconstruction after conflict. Some locations (Albo Shakar village in Al-Amerli, Sarat village and Hafrya village in Suleiman Beg, and Dabag village in Markaz Tuz Khurmatu) reportedly have no services, jobs nor housing. Others (Bir Ahmed Mahmoud and Zanjaly villages in Al-Amerli), have some electricity provision but reportedly lack drinking water, health care, schools and sanitation services and have substantial house destruction, but some agricultural activity has restarted. Others (Al-Salam and Halewa Al-Kaber villages in Markaz Tuz Khurmatu) have reportedly relatively decent service provision and roads but lack schools, have some agricultural activities taking place, and have limited house reconstruction by returnees with independent means to rebuild. Finally, Yangija village in Markaz Tuz Khurmatu is reportedly the site of some of the largest improvements as water and electricity provision are relatively good, health care and education exist, and housing reconstruction has begun with the support of international organizations. These descriptions broadly match those reported by key informants in reference to some of the same villages.

Additional concern was expressed by both displaced Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen men and women regarding their ability to resume their agricultural livelihoods should they return. This concern is related first to the financial burden of replacing lost assets and restarting livelihoods without any assistance: *“It takes a lot of time, money and support to thrive again . . . I used to own eight cows and worked in dairy and local cheese production, which was very profitable. Today, I own nothing, and I am one of hundreds who have lost everything they own”*¹³⁴ and second to the potential inability to access their lands upon return and engage in the agricultural activities that served as their primary source of income: *“Displaced people cannot cultivate their plots of land in their [villages of origin] due to property disputes, intertribal tensions and constraints imposed by security forces, and consequently have lost their only source of income.”*¹³⁵

LIFE IN DISPLACEMENT

Just as the prospects for return are complex and multifaceted, so too are those for local integration in locations of displacement – though for some groups more than others. All Kurdish IDPs included in this analysis but one now pay rent for housing and some reported that this is a new financial burden for their households.¹³⁶ Among the men, all have jobs in displacement, including daily labour, business owner, highly skilled worker in the private sector and public employee. Most of the women reported working in the home but one was a public employee in displacement. They did not disclose any other challenges they may face in their daily lives in displacement in Markaz Kirkuk.

Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen IDPs currently residing in urban parts of Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, on the other hand, reported considerable hardship in displacement across nearly every dimension of life. Both men and women in this study were affected, but women disproportionately so given their status as widows and sole heads of household due to the deaths or abductions of their husbands during and after the Daesh conflict.

Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen IDPs' obstacles in displacement are detailed as follows:

Renting and threats of eviction and housing removal. Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen displaced women described paying rent to live in unfinished structures and informal settlements, among others.¹³⁷ While the conditions are poor, with limited services and unpaved roads, they reportedly do not have the means to pay for anything better. More worrying still is the threat of eviction they face if increasingly higher rent costs are not met: *“We are threatened with eviction by the landlord. Every time, he demands an increase in rent or he will evict us.”*¹³⁸ Others still pointed to fears of homelessness over reported threats to demolish informal settlements and irregular housing:

*Our biggest fear right now is homelessness. Currently, I live with my children in an illegal house, and we are threatened with eviction and removal of housing.*¹³⁹

*We are renting illegal houses because we were forced to rent them due to their lower cost. The houses we live in are also threatened with removal. We don't know where we can find other houses with suitable rent to our current situation.*¹⁴⁰

Lack of compensation, social welfare and civil documentation. These financial burdens would be significantly reduced if Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen IDPs had access to compensation and other types of safety nets. As described earlier, IDPs have reportedly not yet received compensation for their losses and in some cases have spent additional money to try to expedite their applications. Furthermore, displaced women noted that their efforts to register for and benefit from social welfare grants have also gone unanswered; all women focus group participants reported having never received any kind of financial assistance since being displaced.¹⁴¹ Lastly, and perhaps a limiting factor in accessing other support, is the difficulty some have reported in obtaining new civil documentation, including unified national IDs and gaining security clearances. Some displaced Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen women indicated that they had to replace lost documentation, while some men explicitly stated that they have been unable to complete the procedures for obtaining new IDs. As one displaced man explained:

*The loss of family members through assassinations and arrests based on religion or nationality, which occurred after 2014, negatively affects the remaining family and tribe members. These individuals face many difficulties and complications when trying to obtain official documents from government offices or security forces, leading to many of them being unable to obtain unified IDs for their children as well.*¹⁴²

These processes become even more complex when women cannot provide death certificates for their missing or abducted husbands.¹⁴³ Because security clearance procedures related to Daesh affiliation are tied to receipt of civil documentation, which in turn enables access to services, not having civil documentation restricts IDPs' freedom of movement in and out of displacement locations and their ability to access employment and public services and benefits, among others.¹⁴⁴

Difficulty in finding work. Finding viable job opportunities in displacement is a priority for displaced Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen men and women; however, women were more explicit than men in the challenges they face in this regard,

133 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Male IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

134 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Female IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

135 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Male IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

136 Focus group discussion, Kurdish Male IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Kirkuk, April 2024; and Focus group discussion, Kurdish Female IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Kirkuk, April 2024.

137 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Female IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

138 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Female IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

139 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Female IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

140 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Female IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

141 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Female IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

142 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Male IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

143 Danish Refugee Council (DRC) et al., *Life in the Margins: Re-examining the Needs of Paperless People in Post-Conflict Iraq* (Baghdad, DRC, 2022).

144 Ibid.

particularly as heads of their households. They noted “clear discrimination”¹⁴⁵ between displaced people and the host community in Markaz Tuz Khurmatu in this regard, specifically, that “suitable and sufficient job opportunities are not available for [the displaced], especially for women.”¹⁴⁶ One of the major issues with finding work in the urban centre is that most of the displaced women participants had worked in the dairy industry in their locations of origin “but we lost the livestock we had and can no longer afford to buy other livestock.”¹⁴⁷ In short, IDPs’ agricultural skills do not translate well into an urban job market without significant other resources at their disposal. It is even harder for widows to find appropriate work, especially considering “society’s negative view of a woman living alone without a man.”¹⁴⁸ While it seems that displaced men and women can scrape by under these difficult circumstances to at least cover rent, none disclosed what they did to earn an income.

Social isolation and feeling pressured to leave. The conditions described above make feeling welcome in displacement considerably challenging. Displaced Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen women were particularly explicit in this regard:

*We are not well off in the displacement areas due to poverty, lack of resources and a sense of alienation.*¹⁴⁹

*Despite being from nearby villages and all from the same province, we do not feel any integration at all.*¹⁵⁰

*We face discrimination in various forms, in obtaining financial compensation, in how schools treat our children, and also in our housing.*¹⁵¹

*We don’t feel comfortable in the current area, and we fear being expelled and forced to return at any time.*¹⁵²

This latter point is especially concerning and sometimes reportedly comes to the women indirectly, including via messages conveyed to displaced children by school administrators: “One day my daughter came home crying, saying that the school administration notified all displaced students to return home and inform their families that they must return to their areas of origin and that the school will expel them soon.”¹⁵³ Worryingly, children are reportedly being treated differently at school, especially by administrators. Other women also reported that their children faced difficulties in school among peers due to cultural differences and their lack of integration into the wider displacement area. Some key informants confirmed these overall sentiments, explaining that often, “the displaced are treated like second-class citizens, not entitled to reside in certain areas or ostracized therein.”¹⁵⁴ This treatment is in part attributed to the worry over the change in

demography of urban Markaz Tuz Khurmatu with the protracted stay of Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen IDPs.¹⁵⁵

OPTIONS FOR RESOLVING DISPLACEMENT

When asked what a durable and meaningful resolution to displacement would be for them, IDP participants in this analysis focused on experiencing full and equal citizenship, something they feel they currently do not have:

*Equality in accessing all rights.*¹⁵⁶

*Equality and justice among members of the community, which are almost non-existent, need to be ensured.*¹⁵⁷

*Feel[ing] like an Iraqi citizen with the same rights and duties as other citizens regardless of ethnicity, religion or tribe.*¹⁵⁸

*Having a house to live in and a good neighbour to talk to and then a police force to protect you without saying you are a Kurd; this is a bright future for us.*¹⁵⁹

While the need for equal citizenship was pervasive across this sample, locations where IDPs wished to seek the resolution of their displacement varied by group, and to some extent gender. Nearly all displaced Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen men indicated preferring to return to their places of origin. Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen women IDPs were a bit more split on this prospect. Many women wished to return “so that we can escape the humiliation of living in illegal houses,”¹⁶⁰ especially since they “long very much for our lands and our areas and for what we were before displacement.”¹⁶¹ Others, however, recognized that even if they preferred to return, their current circumstances as de facto widows make integrating into their displacement locations a more feasible prospect: “I prefer living in my [location of origin], but after losing my husband and not knowing if he’s alive or dead, and raising five children alone, even if the conditions in my village improve, I won’t be able to return after establishing a life here in Markaz Tuz Khurmatu without my husband.”¹⁶² Finally, displaced Kurds in this analysis seemed certain they have no choice but to locally integrate in displacement. For some this is a relatively straightforward prospect: “I feel more stable living in Markaz Kirkuk and close to my job here”¹⁶³ and “wherever there is money and a job, I consider it my home.”¹⁶⁴ Others, though, reportedly would like to return to the homes they had built (that are now destroyed) not only to avoid the hardship of rent, but because regardless of an individual’s financial situation, “being far from your place of origin

145 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Female IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

146 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Female IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

147 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Female IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

148 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Female IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

149 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Female IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

150 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Female IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

151 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Female IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

152 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Female IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

153 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Female IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

154 Key informant interview, security force officer, Salah al-Din, May 2024; and Key informant interview, tribal leader, Salah al-Din, May 2024.

155 Key informant interview, tribal leader, Salah al-Din, May 2024; Key informant interview, tribal leader, Salah al-Din, May 2024; Key informant interview, tribal leader, Salah al-Din, May 2024; and Key informant interview, security force officer, Salah al-Din, May 2024.

156 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Female IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

157 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Male IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

158 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Male IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

159 Focus group discussion, Kurdish Female IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Kirkuk, April 2024.

160 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Female IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

161 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Female IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

162 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Female IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

163 Focus group discussion, Kurdish Male IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Kirkuk, April 2024.

164 Focus group discussion, Kurdish Male IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Kirkuk, April 2024.

*makes you always feel like a stranger and homeless*¹⁶⁵ and their continued absence would eventually allow for the *“Kurdish identity of the city to vanish.”*¹⁶⁶

Regardless of IDPs’ preferences, they still face significant challenges in being able to either return or locally integrate – and as such, seem to be between two options, unable to fully attain their sense of equality and citizenship in either.

IMPLICATIONS OF MAINTAINING THE STATUS QUO FOR THE DISPLACED

One of the most obvious implications of the continuation of this status quo is the prolonged precarity, denial of rights and, in some cases, collective punishment of IDPs from Tuz Khurmatu district, many of whom are particularly vulnerable because of their conflict experiences and loss. This vulnerable group includes not only widows, but also children born into and growing up amid these dynamics. Not addressing their needs, grievances and rights claims would further underscore

to the displaced that the desire for political hegemony over rivals is more important for authorities than serving all citizens equally. Most already seem to feel this way and expressed deep concern over the prospects of several interrelated circumstances including demographic change, loss of lands, loss of customs and traditions as subsequent generations grow up in host communities, erosion of social and family networks as previously intact communities remain fragmented in displacement and growing psychological distress, hatred and animosity that may develop as grievances and rights remain unaddressed and neglected. These circumstances may also foreclose any possibility to resolve the district’s disputed status in a way that is equitable and fair. Taken altogether, this could perpetuate continued cycles of hardship, instability and indignity in a part of Iraq that has witnessed so much violence and unredressed grievances. Key informants seem acutely aware of this situation and more than one raised the concern that should they not succeed in supporting communities to return, they will contribute to entrenching a second-class citizenship for generations to come.

PERSPECTIVES ON PROCESSES TO RESOLVE DISPLACEMENT

Most study participants acknowledged the recent momentum in addressing the displacement issue in Tuz Khurmatu district, particularly with respect to Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen communities. The focus is placed on the return of individuals and families with no Daesh links but not on reducing impediments facing those who seek to locally integrate in displacement locations. Male Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen IDPs all reported having engaged over time in various meetings and discussions with local and provincial authorities, security actors, tribal leaders, Members of Parliament, the United Nations, and international and local civil society organizations. Key informants across this analysis also reported participating in such convenings over time and engaging in follow-up efforts to support reconstruction and service provision, expedite compensation payments, and bridge divides between groups, especially in recent years corresponding to the current Iraqi administration’s priorities. IDPs and key informants, however, had differing views on the effects these efforts have had so far – perhaps unsurprisingly authorities had a more positive outlook than did the displaced, considering that their own situations remain largely unchanged. Displaced Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen women did not seem to have much information on any such initiatives and reported no level of participation in them, while displaced Kurds had no knowledge of efforts to facilitate return for their community since 2017. This lack of knowledge and participation highlights inclusion gaps within processes to date; however, ongoing initiatives and emerging efforts that have come to light during fieldwork may offer windows to broaden out the scope of displaced communities included and rights to be vindicated, upheld and redressed.

RETURN INITIATIVES THAT HAVE TAKEN PLACE TO DATE

Concern over the return of the displaced from Tuz Khurmatu district began almost as soon as the Daesh conflict ended in the district. Shia Turkmen IDPs were granted protective policies by the national PMUs operating in their areas

in the immediate aftermath of Daesh’s expulsion that facilitated their return relatively early on.¹⁶⁷ Displaced Sunni populations, however, were blocked from doing the same.¹⁶⁸ Throughout 2015, Sunni Arab IDPs from Suleiman Beg were unable to return over fears they would be punished due to a widespread, largely unsubstantiated perception that they had collaborated with or supported Daesh.¹⁶⁹ While various negotiations took place between 2016 and 2018 with relevant authorities to facilitate and approve the return of Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen families into their locations of origin within the now Shia Turkmen PMU-controlled areas, return movements remained stalled. This blockage was due to ongoing fears of reprisals, Shia Turkmen demands for payment for alleged Sunni Arab participation in Daesh and the illegal occupation of Sunni Arab lands by Shia Turkmen fighters.¹⁷⁰ Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen returns have gradually increased since 2018 and some key informants noted slow progress in this regard, especially for parts of Suleiman Beg and Al-Amerli to date.¹⁷¹

Return of displaced Kurdish populations in the aftermath of the October 2017 violence was also a priority and several Government of Iraq and Kurdistan Regional Government actors worked quickly to negotiate a settlement with Shia Turkmen PMUs for the deployment of Government of Iraq Emergency Response Division forces to the district.¹⁷² These forces, with orders from the country’s senior leadership, were tasked with providing protection for those Kurds who returned to the district centre,¹⁷³ as well as addressing wider security threats to the district as a whole.¹⁷⁴ They stayed until 2018, when they were redeployed to southern Iraq in response to civil unrest there. Although no further clashes or violence between groups occurred since, no other substantial return movements of Kurds have taken place to date. In this time, Kurdistan Regional Government authorities have reportedly engaged in regular advocacy and communication with Baghdad-level authorities to prioritize and expedite compensation for all displaced communities in the district, improve the security situation in the district, and try to implement Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution regarding the disputed territories (which

165 Focus group discussion, Kurdish Male IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Kirkuk, April 2024.

166 Focus group discussion, Kurdish Female IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Kirkuk, April 2024.

167 UNAMI, “Summary Report.”

168 Horváth, Iraq after ISIL: Tuz.

169 UNAMI, “Summary Report.”

170 Ibid.

171 Key informant interview, member of the provincial administration, Salah al-Din, May 2024; and Key informant interview, provincial council member, Salah al-Din, May 2024.

172 UNAMI, “Summary Report.”

173 Ibid.

174 Key informant interview, national/local expert, Erbil (online), May 2024.

include Tuz Khurmatu district) in addition to conducting regular visits to the area to meet with different communities to hear their grievances and concerns.¹⁷⁵

More recently, the approved executive and legislative agenda for Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' Al-Sudani's administration, agreed upon in 2022 to unblock the stalled government formation process, includes priorities that have direct relevance to the district, and to the obstacles raised earlier: resolving displacement, addressing its disputed status and amending legislation related to terrorism, among others.

Key points include:¹⁷⁶

- A commitment to facilitate the return of all IDPs to their places of origin within the first six months following the formation of the government, entailing:
 - Speeding up the process of the reconstruction of conflict-affected areas by supporting the Reconstruction Fund, removing any obstacles facing reconstruction, and activating relations with international actors in this regard.
 - Solving security issues in locations of origin through the redeployment of military and security forces (Army, Federal Police and PMUs) to the outside of cities and where they should remain in their bases and barracks, handing over the security portfolio inside the city to the local police, and carrying out their duties pertaining to preserving the sovereignty of the country, fighting terrorism and supporting the local police based on instructions from the Chief of the Operations Command.
 - Cancelling security permissions for citizens in conflict-affected areas, thus enabling them to move around their areas. (Note: this is not the same as a security clearance, which remains a necessary procedure.)
- The allocation of budget for compensating all citizens affected by terrorist attacks and military operations under Law 20.
- A commitment to work with relevant actors to discover the fate of the missing and consider them as victims of terrorism after being security cleared.
- The allocation of budget for Article 140 efforts, including the process of compensation, after reconvening the Higher Committee for Article 140 within one month of the formation of the government.
- Completion of amendments to the General Amnesty Law No. 27 of 2016 (amended in 2017) as well as the Federal Anti-Terrorism Law No. 13 of 2005, the latter per the 2017 Decree No. 84 of the Council of Ministers. These efforts should include amendments related to the definition of membership or association with a terrorist group and inclusion criteria for amnesty.

These priorities may have helped give further impetus to the previous acting governor of Salal al-Din to kick-start efforts to address obstacles to return in Tuz Khurmatu district in 2023.¹⁷⁷ The newly appointed governor has resumed initiatives

in this regard, visiting the district in his first months in office this year.¹⁷⁸ In the last year, key informants at the provincial level noted engaging with the Director of Tribal Affairs at the Ministry of Interior; the Director of Human Rights at the Ministry of Interior; the Ministry of Migration and Displacement in Baghdad, the Member of Parliament for Tuz Khurmatu district who is a representative of the Badr bloc and member of the Parliamentary Security and Defense Committee, a member of the Board of Commissioners, the Mayor of Tuz Khurmatu district, and former provincial council members. This engagement seems to have helped in paving the way for more direct implementation on the ground to support returns in coordination with the United Nations and international and local civil society organizations.¹⁷⁹

The following are specific initiatives described by key informants that are primarily related to facilitating the return of displaced Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen communities:

Service provision, reconstruction and aid. A priority for the local government in Tuz Khurmatu district is expanding and improving service provision including in areas of limited and no return. As such, local authorities had reportedly activated several projects in the latter half of 2023 in specific villages to help foster returns, with Yangjja village being a particular test case.¹⁸⁰ As part of this effort, the previous acting governor tasked the Directorate of Engineers to assess housing and infrastructure damage and destruction so the local government could allocate appropriate funds.¹⁸¹ International non-governmental organizations and United Nations agencies have also begun engaging in infrastructure projects in coordination with district authorities; of note, the International Organization for Migration is working on housing projects, as has the United Nations Development Programme.¹⁸² Part of this effort entailed strengthening non-governmental organizations and United Nations coordination with district authorities to identify needs and to ensure their access. Both have reportedly improved significantly over time, including access into Shia Turkmen PMU-controlled areas.¹⁸³ The Directorate of Migration and Displacement in the governorate also distributed durable goods and food supplies to those who chose to return through the process it facilitated; these returnees have begun investing in their properties *"as a form of stability."*¹⁸⁴

Amid this progress, however, some actors reportedly faced obstacles and opposition that limited or slowed their work. The team of engineers sent to assess damage and destruction in Tuz Khurmatu district faced issues as individuals from the district administration sought to stop them from reaching all affected areas under the pretext of safety concerns over mines and unexploded ordinance,¹⁸⁵ while civil activists seeking to assist the displaced indicated that *"there were armed groups that opposed and attempted to hinder our efforts."*¹⁸⁶ These incidents seem to underscore concern over both corruption and political interference or bias in local reconstruction efforts in the current environment.¹⁸⁷

Compensation. The payment of compensation for damaged and destroyed housing and property and lost assets is a critical priority for IDPs and all stakeholders involved in seeking to resolve displacement in Tuz Khurmatu district. Pressure

175 Key informant interview, Kurdistan Regional Government official, Erbil, May 2024; and Key informant interview, national/local expert, Erbil (online), May 2024.

176 Bas News, "Bas News Publishes the text of the Ministerial Curriculum of the government of Prime Minister-elect Mohammed Shia' Al-Sudani Submitted to the Iraqi Parliament" [translated] Bas News, 27 October 2022.

177 Key informant interview, United Nations personnel, Baghdad (online), May 2024.

178 Key informant interview, United Nations personnel, Baghdad (online), May 2024.

179 See, RWG and Iraq Durable Solutions, "Thematic Durable Solutions Meeting Report."

180 Key informant interview, United Nations personnel, Erbil (online), May 2024.

181 Key informant interview, United Nations personnel, Baghdad (online), May 2024.

182 Key informant interview, United Nations personnel, Erbil (online), May 2024; and key informant interview, provincial council member, Salah al-Din, May 2024.

183 Key informant interview, United Nations personnel, Erbil (online), May 2024.

184 Key informant interview, member of the provincial administration, Salah al-Din, May 2024.

185 Key informant interview, United Nations personnel, Baghdad (online), May 2024.

186 Key informant interview, civil activist, Salah al-Din, May 2024.

187 Key informant interview, national/local expert, Erbil (online), May 2024.

to speed up this process for Salah al-Din Governorate has come from several quarters.¹⁸⁸ There is reportedly some movement in this regard within the central government, but it has not yet been felt among the displaced of Tuz Khurmatu district given the scale of pending claims and needs in Salah al-Din as a whole.¹⁸⁹

Addressing tribal and/or ethno-religious issues. The Sunni Endowment has also engaged to support returns in certain instances; leaders of associated mosques formed a Sunni Endowment delegation and have met with district and provincial officials.¹⁹⁰ Tribal leaders who participated in this study also indicated having formed delegations to meet with district and provincial officials in this regard.¹⁹¹ Furthermore, national non-governmental organizations in partnership with United Nations agencies have begun working with local authorities and community leaders in Tuz Khurmatu district to establish more inclusive mechanisms and dialogues between different communities and between communities and local authorities and security forces to foster more sustainable reintegration on return.¹⁹²

Some of the IDP participants in this study who had knowledge of these efforts recognized that these are a start to addressing obstacles to return, but not at the level of action required to fully resolve them. Some key informants also echoed this sentiment. However, others noted that while these efforts have started with limited scope, they can grow: *“As efforts began on a small and limited scale and started to expand and bear fruit stage by stage, it is certainly possible to expand these efforts further, but we need greater seriousness.”*¹⁹³

EMERGING INITIATIVES AND CRITICAL STAKEHOLDERS FOR RETURN

The possibilities for *“greater seriousness”* in addressing obstacles to return may increase with several emerging initiatives that seem to build on efforts that have already taken place. On 22 May 2024, the United Nations senior leadership in the country in collaboration with the new governor of Salah al-Din, launched the Salah al-Din Joint Coordination Forum to improve coordination between local government and development partners.¹⁹⁴ This collaboration has the potential to reinforce the existing local coordination between authorities and international actors.

Furthermore, one provincial level key informant indicated being a member of a committee recently established by the Prime Minister, tasked with resolving displacement in the governorate by June of 2025.¹⁹⁵ The committee's work will focus on Tuz Khurmatu and Shirqat districts first, followed by other areas in Salah al-Din. This effort will reportedly begin with a new series of meetings, first with the Member of Parliament for Tuz Khurmatu district, who is a representative of the Badr bloc and member of the Parliamentary Security and Defense Committee, and then with tribal leaders, influential members of society and politicians representing the communities in Tuz Khurmatu district – it will now also include engagement with the newly appointed provincial council members for the district as well.

Finally, on 29 May 2024, the General Board of the Kurdistan Areas Outside the Region presented findings of its report on conditions in the disputed territories (which include Tuz Khurmatu district) and a proposed roadmap for addressing critical administrative, security and military issues via Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution to the Kurdistan Regional Government Council of Ministers.¹⁹⁶ Of particular concern was the confiscation of agricultural lands and displacement of Kurdish residents due to Arabization campaigns of the previous regime as well as to more recent dynamics. In response, the Kurdistan Regional Government Council of Ministers reaffirmed its commitment to the disputed territories by resolving issues using the existing constitutional framework. The same Council of Ministers also established a ministerial committee to review the draft roadmap set forth by the General Board of the Kurdistan Areas Outside the Region and develop an implementation plan, particularly regarding agricultural land issues.¹⁹⁷ Furthermore, the Kurdistan Regional Government Council of Ministers reportedly called on the General Board of the Kurdistan Areas Outside the Region to engage more quickly and intensely on Article 140 issues including in Tuz Khurmatu district, particularly around political and social concerns that the different ethno-religious groups residing in the district have.¹⁹⁸ One key informant with knowledge of these developments indicated that the General Board of the Kurdistan Areas Outside the Region is open to cooperating with any interested organizations, agencies and actors in such efforts and to solving Article 140 issues within each disputed territory separately, given their particularities.¹⁹⁹

A potentially promising factor regarding the first two of these emerging initiatives is that they include some of the key higher-level actors that study participants overall felt were needed for any plans to have weight and a hope of actual implementation and enforcement: the Prime Minister's Office, high-level political leadership of the main PMUs on the ground, and the international community including United Nations. The international community is seen as critical for aid and reconstruction support overall, with others also pointing to its role in ensuring authorities act on their commitments.

As such, relative optimism seems to exist among some key informants that sustainably resolving displacement in Tuz Khurmatu district is possible now given that even influential actors increasingly believe that there is no benefit in maintaining the status quo, especially when compared to previous attempts at facilitating returns in 2015 and 2016:

*I can consider that we have exceeded a success rate of 80 per cent as all parties are ready to resolve this crisis. When all parties witness the process of drafting a charter or rather an agreement on return, this in itself ensures sustainable return. It has become a consensus among the majority of parties that there is no benefit in the continuation of displacement. I believe I am more optimistic if we compare the situation to 2015 and 2016. Every party I meet with tells me they are very optimistic, and the days will prove that.*²⁰⁰

I can say we are now halfway there and have made considerable progress because we have seen tangible results . . . We have not succeeded in convincing all these families

188 Key informant interview, United Nations personnel, Erbil (online), May 2024; and Key informant interview, Kurdistan Regional Government official, Erbil, May 2024.

189 Key informant interview, United Nations personnel, Erbil (online), May 2024.

190 Key informant interview, local religious leader, Salah al-Din, May 2024.

191 Key informant interview, tribal leader, Salah al-Din, May 2024; Key informant interview, tribal leader, Salah al-Din, May 2024; and Key informant interview, tribal leader, Salah al-Din, May 2024.

192 IOM and PAO, “Workshop for Local Authorities in Tuz Khormatu;” and IOM and PAO, “Workshop for Local Community Leaders.”

193 Key informant interview, member of the provincial administration, Salah al-Din, May 2024.

194 See X post by UNAMI.

195 Key informant interview, member of the provincial administration, Salah al-Din, May 2024.

196 Kurdistan Regional Government, “KRG Council Calls for End to Violations in Kurdistan Areas Outside the Region” KRG, 1 June 2024; Draw Media, “KRG Council of Ministers Discuss Situation of Kurdish Territories Outside Kurdistan Region Control” Draw Media, 30 May 2024; and Kurdistan24, “KRG Council of Ministers Discuss Situation of Kurdish Territories Outside Kurdistan Region Control” Kurdistan24, 29 May 2024.

197 Ibid.

198 Key informant interview, Kurdistan Regional Government official, Erbil, May 2024; and Key informant interview, national/local expert, Erbil (online), May 2024.

199 Key informant interview, Kurdistan Regional Government official, Erbil, May 2024; and Key informant interview, national/local expert, Erbil (online), May 2024.

200 Key informant interview, member of the provincial administration, Salah al-Din, May 2024.

to return because it requires broader efforts . . . I don't think there is deliberate action by the government to maintain the status quo, not even at the level of the PMU leadership. [Badr bloc representative in Parliament for Tuz Khurmatu district] is a very responsive person, especially as he is a member of the Parliamentary Security and Defense Committee and is trying to reconcile viewpoints. He wants to end this file.²⁰¹

The third emerging initiative of the Kurdistan Regional Government seeks to grapple with some of the most critical underlying causes of violence and tension in Tuz Khurmatu district that pre-date the Daesh conflict, which have been exacerbated by the conflict and political developments since, and that continue to hinder the sustainable resolution of displacement for all communities. This initiative may potentially offer another lever of pressure and oversight to ensure that efforts to address longstanding grievances are taken up by relevant high-level actors as a priority and that there is space for more localized intervention at the

district-level while also offering a pathway to incorporate resolving displacement of Kurds into ongoing efforts directed toward Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen IDPs in a more holistic way: "It's not only about returns; we need to find solutions for the underlying causes of the problems in these areas."²⁰²

Finally, study participants also pointed to the need to involve the Popular Mobilization Commission and "land holding authorities"²⁰³ as additional actors with leverage to enforce current or emerging plans for the resolution of displacement in the district. Kurdish participants noted that the Peshmerga would also be critical to include, particularly in addressing security issues.

Figure 2 illustrates an overview of key stakeholders that already factor into these ongoing and emerging initiatives or may eventually do so over time.

Figure 2. General mapping of key stakeholders

International	Government
United Nations	Government of Iraq
International non-governmental organizations	Prime Minister's Office
Donor countries	Popular Mobilization Commission
Iran	Office of National Security Advisor
	National Security Service
	Higher Committee for Article 140
	Ministry of Defense
	Ministry of Interior
	Office of Tribal Affairs
	Office of Human Rights
	Marja'iya (Supreme Shia Authority)
	Sunni Endowment
	Joint Operations Command
	Ministry of Migration and Displacement
	Governor and provincial administration
	Provincial Council
	District mayor
	Political blocs in Parliament
	Kurdistan Regional Government
	Prime Minister's Office
	Council of Ministers
	General Board of Kurdistan Areas Outside of the Kurdistan Region

201 Key informant interview, member of the provincial administration, Salah al-Din, May 2024.

202 Key informant interview, Kurdistan Regional Government official, Erbil, May 2024.

203 Key informant interview, member of the provincial administration, Salah al-Din, May 2024.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR LOCAL INTEGRATION

Supporting the local integration of IDPs seems a more feasible prospect for some international actors with respect to addressing displacement from areas of limited and no return.²⁰⁴ Such support does not, however, seem to be the priority for many other key informants working on resolving displacement in Tuz Khurmatu district. Rather, while some key informants noted that Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen IDPs are discriminated against in displacement within the district and that supporting them in finding better housing and jobs would help in this regard,²⁰⁵ there is a more prevailing sense among authorities that IDPs who wish

to remain in urban displacement locations do so because of their “*adaptation to the new situation and finding more suitable livelihoods in displacement areas*”²⁰⁶ without necessarily recognizing the struggles they still face. Thus, return is the priority of authorities in this analysis rather than improving conditions for the displaced where they currently reside, even if they acknowledge that IDPs have the right to remain in their displacement locations should they choose to do so. Return is furthermore seen as a way to address the seemingly unwanted demographic shift that has occurred in urban Markaz Tuz Khurmatu with the presence of Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen IDPs.

UNLOCKING PATHWAYS TO RESOLVING DISPLACEMENT

The recent progress on facilitating returns and the emerging initiatives dedicated to addressing displacement in Tuz Khurmatu district (and its disputed status) may be critical fora to engage with. However, to be more effective, any deeper efforts to do so need to take a clear view of the spoilers and political dynamics that benefit from the continued marginalization of specific populations through their prolonged displacement. They also need to prioritize addressing the interconnected preconditions IDPs have for both return and local integration in areas of displacement – preconditions that also align with the commitments within the Government of Iraq’s executive and legislative agenda.

The following sections detail the wider political economy of continued displacement in the district; potential mitigation of spoilers, possible openings for engagement and structural barriers that continue to hinder IDPs and authorities’ efforts to resolve displacement; IDPs’ preconditions and priorities for return and local integration; and approaches to bolster and potentially connect ongoing and emerging initiatives to address immediate and longer-term needs.

RATIONALE FOR UNRESOLVED DISPLACEMENT

Some consider the persistence of obstacles to resolving displacement in Tuz Khurmatu district for nearly a decade now as occurring by design. For instance, the holding of agricultural land by primarily Iran-aligned PMUs, their engagement in licit and illicit economies therein, and their preventing the return of certain ethno-religious populations under the guise of security or through threats, harassment and difficult administrative procedures, follows a similar tactic to that employed in other strategic areas of limited and no return including Musayab and Sinjar districts.²⁰⁷ Indeed, several key informants within Tuz Khurmatu district noted that “*sectarian and partisan entities*”²⁰⁸ prevent Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen returns in the interest of “*powerful States*”²⁰⁹ in Iraq. It is perhaps

no coincidence that Tuz Khurmatu district is on the road that connects Iran to Syria, via the Sinjar district border crossing.²¹⁰

Furthermore, the limited return of Kurds to and the restriction of Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen rights and places of residence in Tuz Khurmatu district may be seen as beneficial to the overall and now consolidated political strategy of the Shia Coordination Framework – which has connections both with the PMUs and various economic offices on the ground in the district and with powerful actors in the central government – to gain votes, seats and influence across northern and central Iraq.²¹¹ Their ascendance into provincial and local government in non-Shia majority north and central parts of the country has occurred in part by coopting other communities and parties²¹² and by reconfiguring the share of different communities in more mixed areas in favour of Shia populations therein.²¹³ Such reconfiguration is easier to do in areas that have experienced significant displacement of their populations due to the Daesh conflict and subsequent upheavals. Displaced people seem quite aware of this positioning and planning, and it raises questions around how possible returns may ever be for some communities: “*I feel this plan is already designed by the central government to let the [PMU] control us and give authority to the [Shia] Turkmen. It is impossible to undo what they planned for ages.*”²¹⁴

Even those actors who expressed great optimism now for resolving displacement in the district conceded that this positive outlook has not stopped some actors from impeding efforts with relative impunity, even as consensus grows that this is a priority issue: “*It doesn’t prevent some individuals within these [armed and/or political] groups from benefitting from this conflict and trying to exacerbate problems . . . There are parties benefiting from the situation because there is a spirit of revenge and control. We do not want to mention their names, and I think it is known at the national level.*”²¹⁵ This is precisely the experience IDP participants have recounted in many of the obstacles they face in seeking to return or locally

204 Key informant interview, United Nations personnel, Baghdad (online), May 2024.

205 Key informant interview, security force officer, Salah al-Din, May 2024; Key informant interview, tribal leader, Salah al-Din, May 2024; and Key informant interview, religious leader, Salah al-Din, May 2024.

206 Key informant interview, member of the provincial administration, Salah al-Din, May 2024.

207 Key informant interview, United Nations personnel, Baghdad (online), May 2024. See, IOM and Social Inquiry, *Prospects for Resolving Displacement in Areas of Limited and No Return in Babylon Governorate* (Baghdad, IOM, 2024), available on request; and IOM and Social Inquiry, *Prospects for Resolving Displacement in Areas of Limited and No Return in Sinjar District and Qahaniya Subdistrict* (Baghdad, IOM, 2024).

208 Key informant interview, tribal leader, Salah al-Din, May 2024.

209 Key informant interview, civil activist, Salah al-Din, May 2024.

210 Key informant interview, United Nations personnel, Baghdad (online), May 2024.

211 Al-Nidawi, “Avoiding Iranian-Backed Iraqi Militias’ Political Takeover;” Shima Ali, “Between Power Sharing and Power Consolidation: The Impact of Iraq’s Provincial Election Results” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 7 March 2024; and Sajad Jiyad, *Iraq’s Provincial Elections: Electoral Dynamics and Political Implications* (Sulaymaniyah, IRIS, 2023).

212 Ibid.; Gregory J. Kruczek and Shivan Fazil, “How Iraq’s Minorities Became Political Pawns for both Kurds and Arabs” *Amwaj Media*, 5 July 2024; and Kamaran Palani, “Iran-backed PMFs are Destabilising Iraq’s Disputed Regions” *Al-Jazeera*, 8 May 2021.

213 Key informant interview, United Nations personnel, Baghdad (online), May 2024.

214 Focus group discussion, Kurdish Male IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Kirkuk, April 2024.

215 Key informant interview, member of the provincial administration, Salah al-Din, May 2024.

integrate. This situation raises concerns that the efforts put forward will not reach the “*magnitude of the disaster*.”²¹⁶ Furthermore, key informants recognized that the risk of derailment is always present, given the political competition for power in the district and governorate – for example in the distribution of key posts in local and provincial governance and administration, which reverberates up to the national level and involves the same actors who are deemed necessary for resolving displacement. Thus, the key to resolving displacement in a safe and sustainable way in Tuz Khurmatu district requires that “*civil rights should be promoted, and the role of armed groups, political parties, and politicians should be undermined*.”²¹⁷

POTENTIAL MITIGATION OF SPOILERS, OPENINGS FOR ENGAGEMENT, AND CONTINUED STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

Nearly all study participants felt that mitigation against such interference and potential political derailment entailed pressure and involvement from the central government, including the Prime Minister, first and foremost.

*The government should issue clear and decisive decrees regarding returns in order to prevent any interventions from other actors who have interests in keeping the situation as it is. We have previously had attempts to facilitate returns and solve related issues, but unfortunately those attempts did not result in what we were aiming for as there was no true response from the government . . . local efforts seem to be useless. The Prime Minister should intervene. The federal government, Ministry of Defense, and Ministry of Interior have the required influence to solve issues.*²¹⁸

This pressure and involvement, however, may not be forthcoming, as the current Iraqi administration’s approach to resolving displacement nearly two years into being in government is reportedly focused on development and reconstruction, in line with its wider national priorities,²¹⁹ rather than security, social cohesion or obstacles that would require significant political consensus building to address.²²⁰ As such, the Prime Minister has delegated efforts towards resolving displacement to lower levels.²²¹ Namely, provincial and local authorities and security forces therein, including PMUs, are responsible for figuring out what to do and how to enforce whatever actions they agree to take – something most key informants acknowledged that they have not been able to fully do in the decade since the start of the Daesh conflict in the district.

A considerably smaller number of study participants indicated that the international community could also contribute to ensuring processes for the resolution of displacement in Tuz Khurmatu district stay on track. The Government of Iraq, Kurdistan Regional Government and United Nations Roadmap for the Acceleration of the National Plan may be one mechanism to do so, should it receive final endorsement and signature from relevant authorities, because it has the potential to engage seniormost authorities in the country and hold them

to account for their commitments in this regard. However, the United Nations’ role as a source of pressure and leverage is relatively more uncertain now as the political mission’s mandate ends in December 2025.

At the same time, a top-down approach alone might not necessarily sideline those who seek to hamper these efforts, considering the heterarchical nature of power in Iraq in general and the diffuse network of formal and informal actors with different spheres of influence, priorities and interests that have impacted the resolution of displacement to date.²²² As such, while it is important to secure buy-in of district, provincial and national leaders across the wide landscape of institutions needed to address obstacles to return as those involved in ongoing and emerging efforts are seeking to do, it will be equally critical to map and identify the positions and influence of the senior civil servants who run those institutions to better identify where bottlenecks to any enforcement or implementation of policies, rulings, procedures and/or programming occur and why.²²³ The same holds true for the armed actors on the ground as well.²²⁴

The Kurdistan Regional Government’s potential re-engagement on the disputed territories via Article 140, particularly around agricultural land and Kurdish displacement from the previous regime’s Arabization policies to date, may serve as another avenue to address some of the root causes of the current protracted displacement in Tuz Khurmatu district. This is particularly relevant since addressing issues related to the disputed territories had previously been a stated priority of the current Iraqi administration as well.²²⁵ Any progress in this regard, however, may be further subject to the ongoing gridlock between the Kurdistan Regional Government and Government of Iraq and in-fighting between Kurdish political parties.²²⁶ This may pose issues in properly initiating efforts at the national level, but also seems to pervade district level and community efforts as well since past visits initiated by the Kurdistan Regional Government to Tuz Khurmatu district, via the General Board of Kurdistan Areas Outside the Kurdistan Region, to bring representatives from different communities together to listen to each other’s concerns faced difficulties, as “*some representatives refuse to sit and discuss with others, this even happens within the same community if they are from different political parties*.”²²⁷ Renewed engagement must be handled with care given these divides and ongoing political volatility of the district. This holds especially true regarding agricultural land as a priority issue. Consideration must be made for both the historic and ongoing grievances and rights violations of all parties involved, because some of the agricultural land that has been under dispute in the district since the Ba’ath regime also encompasses that which has been expropriated from the displaced now.

Finally, key informants raised the prospect of the legal system and courts to more decisively address the main blockage to returns facing primarily Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen IDPs: Daesh perpetration. According to some local and provincial authorities and tribal leaders, those who fought with Daesh during the conflict or committed violations against civilians are the only ones (along with their families)

216 Key informant interview, member of the local administration, Salah al-Din, May 2024.

217 Key informant interview, provincial council member, Salah al-Din, May 2024.

218 Key informant interview, provincial council member, Salah al-Din, May 2024.

219 See, United Nations Security Council, “Letter dated 8 May 2024 from the Chargé d’affaires a.i. of the Permanent Mission of Iraq to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General,” (S/2024/378).

220 Key informant interview, United Nations personnel, Baghdad (online), Salah al-Din, May 2024.

221 Key informant interview, national/local expert, Erbil (online), May 2024.

222 Nadia Siddiqui and Roger Guiu, “HDP Nexus Outcomes and the Integration of Peace Elements: The Case of Iraq after the ISIL Conflict” *The International Spectator*, 59(3):118–137.

223 Dodge and Mansour, Politically Sanctioned Corruption.

224 Inna Rudolf, *Tracing the Role of Violent Entrepreneurs in the Iraqi Post-Conflict Economy* (Washington, D.C., New Lines Institute, 2023); Renad Mansour, *Networks of Power: The Popular Mobilization Forces and the State in Iraq* (London, Chatham House, 2021).

225 Dana Taib Menmy, “Iraqi PM Makes First Visit to Kurdistan Region to Ease Freight Baghdad-Erbil Tensions” *The New Arab*, 14 March 2023.

226 Fawzi al-Zubaidi, “Obstacles and Options in Baghdad-Erbil Negotiations” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 25 March 2024.

227 Key informant interview, Kurdistan Regional Government official, Erbil, May 2024.

who cannot return. In practice, this is not the case, as under the guise of security and perceived Daesh affiliation, many others are de facto blocked from return through impeded civil documentation and security clearance procedures. These procedures are very complex, particularly for those with missing family members and no knowledge of their whereabouts.

As such, the use of the judiciary in these matters “*against perpetrators directly proven with all evidence*,”²²⁸ is seen as another way to speed up the return of others not implicated in such crimes and reduce collective blame against whole population groups. This view, however, overlooks the flaws in existing counterterrorism laws and criminal proceedings where arrest, coercive interrogation, lengthy detention and trials are possible based on limited to no evidence and minimal to no due process on the grounds of a vaguely defined affiliation or association with a terrorist group alone rather than specific acts.²²⁹ These proceedings, as they have taken place to date, have yet to provide the accountability victims’ families seek,²³⁰ nor have they seemed to reduce collective blame IDP families face with respect to the forces that stop returns on the basis of alleged Daesh affiliation. Amendments to the Federal Anti-Terrorism Law and particularly the General Amnesty Law to address these deficiencies, a key commitment to bringing Sunni parties on board in forming the current government, seem to have stalled for now due to political in-fighting within the Iraqi Parliament, both between Sunni leadership and the Shia Coordination Framework bloc and among rival Sunni blocs.²³¹ This situation further underscores the need for incorporating international crimes into the domestic legal framework, establishing an accountability mechanism in line with international standards to bring those responsible for international crimes to justice, and to bring justice to those falsely accused, tortured and imprisoned.²³²

Notably, even if individuals manage to receive security clearance, are exonerated from false accusations or have served prison sentences for association and been granted release papers, these may still not be recognized or enforced by actors that seek to prevent returns regardless.²³³ Furthermore, potentially biased and cumbersome processes also exist within the civil proceedings that some key informants feel would more clearly resolve issues related to the expropriation of IDPs’ agricultural land. Past judicial rulings regarding disputed agricultural lands have also not been honored by provincial and local authorities, with little higher-level oversight of their enforcement.²³⁴ This lack of enforcement leads to IDPs and authorities alike to develop workarounds that offer some temporary relief but have the longer-term effect of exacerbating underlying governance deficits and compounding the scale of grievance.

PRECONDITIONS AND PRIORITIES FOR RETURN AND LOCAL INTEGRATION

There is generally never one singular obstacle, which if addressed, would fully enable the displaced to either safely and sustainably return or locally integrate – especially in contexts where said displacement has protracted for nearly a decade in very complex and entrenched social, economic, political and security dynamics. As such, Tuz Khurmatu IDPs’ preconditions and priorities tackle all the interconnected obstacles they have faced living precariously between two possible solutions.

PRECONDITIONS AND PRIORITIES FOR RETURN

A significant overlap exists in the preconditions and priorities for return across Kurdish, Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen IDPs in this sample; however, not all are relevant for each group. The following list of preconditions and priorities is organized by theme, with distinctions made, where relevant, to which groups they apply and in what ways:

Unimpeded procedures for issuance of national ID cards and security clearances for all family members. The lack of civil documentation hinders any prospects for return, freedom of movement, access to services and, in some cases, employment. Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen IDPs have reported significant difficulties in obtaining new documentation for themselves and their children, particularly because various security entities and influential actors have interfered with the process. Returns are not possible without this documentation and related security clearance nor is local integration in displacement locations fully possible either. Those most impacted tend to be displaced individuals who may be perceived to have some kind of Daesh affiliation – seemingly regardless of the quality of evidence for these views.

Security configuration reform, safety and guarantees of protection. This is a precondition that spans all IDP groups in this analysis. In general, security configuration reform for Kurds from urban Markaz Tuz Khurmatu would entail including Peshmerga and other Kurdish police forces as part of a joint command for the city. Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen IDPs for their part require “*neutral, professional joint forces*”²³⁵ that would be at the borders of the return areas rather than within villages where they currently are, restricting movement and access. Some also indicated incorporating returnee populations to these joint forces. Of note is also the requirement of safety guarantees, not only from harassment by security forces, but of outside attacks on these areas by Daesh remnants and other criminal networks.

Expedited compensation payments that appropriately reflect the damage and destruction of property and assets IDPs had prior to displacement. This is a priority for all IDPs across groups. Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen IDPs also specify that compensation must cover losses even in areas where their land and assets have been expropriated since their displacement. For some, this compensation would be used to return and rebuild their homes, but for others, it may allow for the resources necessary to determine what to do next, including supporting local integration.

Reconstruction, service provision, and livelihoods support, including reclamation of agricultural land. Reconstruction and service provision are of particular importance to Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen IDPs, considering many of their villages had been severely, if not completely, destroyed and some had faced developmental neglect prior to the Daesh conflict as well. Similarly, these populations want assurances that they will be able to access and farm the agricultural land they had contracts for prior to displacement. Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen women IDPs noted the need for livelihood projects and start-up support in their locations of origin given the scale of destruction and loss. For displaced Kurds, their focus on livelihoods tended to be around being able to access more jobs in the public and private sector and to share the marketplace with Shia Turkmen.

228 Key informant interview, member of the provincial administration, Salah al-Din, May 2024.

229 UNAMI, *Human Rights in the Administration of Justice in Iraq: Trials under the Anti-Terrorism Laws and Implications for Justice, Accountability and Social Cohesion in the Aftermath of ISIL* (Baghdad, UNAMI, 2020).

230 Ibid.

231 Mohanad Faris, “How Halbousi’s Ouster is Shaping Sunni Politics in Iraq” Amwaj Media, 25 April 2024.

232 Alannah Travers, “As UNITAD Winds-Down, A Proposed Amnesty Law in Iraq Prompts Hopes – And Fear” Coalition 4 Just Reparations, 5 November 2023.

233 IOM and Social Inquiry, *Areas of Limited and No Return in Babylon Governorate; IOM and Social Inquiry, Areas of Limited and No Return in Sinjar District and Qahataniya Subdistrict; and UNODC, “Iraq Case Study,” in Targeted by Terrorists: Child Recruitment, Exploitation and Reintegration in Indonesia, Iraq and Nigeria* (Vienna, UNODC, 2024).

234 See, for example, Goran Baban, “Kirkuk Agriculture Department Ignores Decree by Ministry of Justice” Kirkuk Now, 28 September 2020.

235 Focus group discussion participant, Sunni Arab and Turkmen Male IDPs from Markaz Tuz Khurmatu, Al-Amerli, and Suleiman Beg, Salah al-Din, April 2024.

Reconciliation and reintegration support. All IDP groups indicated some level of fear over intercommunity tensions should they return. Displaced Kurds seek reconciliation support with Shia Turkmen residents of Markaz Tuz Khurmatu. Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen IDPs seek similar efforts to ensure that all groups are treated equally and that returnees are once again considered part of the community and not harmed. These efforts will need to be focused on addressing concerns not only of potential returnees, but of their recipient communities as well.

Knowledge of the fate of those missing or arrested. This was a request raised by some Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen male IDPs about relatives that had been arrested but never heard from again during and after the Daesh conflict. This request may also be pertinent to displaced Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen women whose husbands are missing as well. This is a critical step for accountability, may help bring closure, and may ease some of the precarity and risk people in this context with missing relatives have in terms of documentation (regarding civil ID and land and property contracts) and security accusations.

PRECONDITIONS AND PRIORITIES FOR LOCAL INTEGRATION

Some IDPs within this analysis have indicated that their preference would be to stay in displacement rather than return given their life circumstances now. While they did not specify preconditions and priorities to help support their local integration, identifying areas where support may be needed is possible, based on their descriptions of life in displacement. These preconditions and priorities apply primarily to displaced Sunni Arabs and Sunni Turkmen, especially women, but some may also be relevant to some displaced Kurds.

Unimpeded procedures for issuance of national ID cards and security clearances for all family members. This precondition seems to apply mainly for Sunni Arab and Turkmen IDPs, since they fled from areas where Daesh had control for a time and therefore face issues in obtaining new civil documentation and security clearances.

Expedited compensation payments that appropriately reflect the damage and destruction of property and assets IDPs had prior to displacement. Compensation is a priority for all IDP groups seeking to locally integrate, whether in Markaz Tuz Khurmatu or in Markaz Kirkuk.

Knowledge of the fate of those missing or arrested. This again seems to primarily be a precondition indicated by Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen IDPs.

Access to social welfare benefits and housing support. Vulnerable IDPs in this analysis across groups indicated difficulty in paying rent in their locations of displacement, though the issue seems more predominant among those residing in Markaz Tuz Khurmatu than Markaz Kirkuk. Displaced Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen women also reported greater concern over risks of eviction and residential removal because of the types of housing they have access to, namely informal settlements and irregular housing within the city. This subgroup has also not been able to access social welfare benefits as their applications go unanswered. Access to benefits and safe, adequate and affordable housing is critical for the local integration of IDPs. As such, efforts toward providing housing support in the form of rent assistance, rent control or the formalization of settlements or irregular housing among others, are needed, as are processes for unbiased and expedited processing of social welfare applications.

Economic and social integration. The displaced, especially Sunni Arab and Sunni Turkmen widows, seek assistance in finding appropriate livelihoods and steadier incomes, as they had before displacement. Achieving this may require job skills support, to better adapt to an urban economy in displacement. Sunni Arab and

Sunni Turkmen IDPs described feelings of deep social exclusion and isolation among the host community as well – coming from both residents and local authorities, which was corroborated by some key informants. Thus, intervention and policies are needed to promote social cohesion, inclusion and protection both between IDPs and host communities in Markaz Tuz Khurmatu and between IDPs and wider institutions and authorities in the city.

APPROACHES FOR RESOLVING DISPLACEMENT

The above IDP preconditions and priorities encompass relatively straightforward reconstruction needs to more complex and structural legal, political, social and security concerns. They come up against a wider governance landscape where unpacking these concerns seems unlikely despite earlier stated government commitments to the contrary and ongoing and emerging efforts to resolve displacement, and where there is political gain in some quarters for keeping the displaced in a precarious situation. Thus, rather than providing granular recommendations for the individual preconditions and priorities, of which numerous detailed issue-specific analyses already exist, the aim here is how to strengthen and potentially connect ongoing and nascent initiatives so they yield tangible and lasting positive outcomes for all people from Tuz Khurmatu district. This includes approaches to the more political aspects of negotiating the resolution of displacement, public participation and discourse, and interventions on the ground. These could be taken up by local, national and international actors engaging in Tuz Khurmatu district, including through the Government of Iraq, Kurdistan Regional Government and United Nations Roadmap for the Acceleration of the National Plan.

NEGOTIATING THE RESOLUTION OF DISPLACEMENT

Provincial and district level efforts to resolve displacement have already begun anew for Tuz Khurmatu district. These seek coordination and negotiation with and buy-in of district, provincial and national leaders across the wide landscape of institutions in Iraq as well as with the international community. There are also renewed efforts to address Article 140 concerns, starting with agricultural land issues and displacement of Kurds, by the Kurdistan Regional Government and its General Board of Kurdistan Areas Outside the Region. The latter expressed openness to cooperating with any interested organizations, agencies and actors in such efforts and to solving Article 140 issues by individual disputed territory, with the aim of understanding the political and social concerns of each ethno-religious community therein.

These various initiatives are all happening on separate tracks and time frames in the district, but it may be possible and eventually necessary to interlink them to negotiate and address not only immediate preconditions and priorities of all IDP groups but also the underlying unaddressed administrative and security issues that continue to protract displacement and hinder implementation of even relatively straightforward projects, plans and procedures. The following are approaches that could help ensure these various processes continue to move forward in a meaningful way and are framed around the priorities and demands of affected communities:

- Conduct a deeper mapping and analysis of relevant powerbrokers and backchannel actors across the landscape of formal and informal structures in Iraq to better identify the stakeholders necessary for resolving displacement in Tuz Khurmatu district, particularly as there may be growing momentum on exploring related Article 140 issues. This mapping should engage with the actual landscape of power and influence in the district (and beyond) rather than what is officially mandated alone. As such, it will be critical to map and identify spoilers and bottlenecks through delineating the positions and influence of senior civil servants as well as actors within or connected to the PMUs operating in the

district, among others. The aim should be to detail leverage points among these actors, including why they are putting up obstacles to resolving displacement, to be able to better ensure more transparent implementation, enforcement and oversight of ongoing or new agreements or plans.

- Ensure engagement and investment is not only on obstacles to return but also on impediments to local integration. The aim of any efforts in durably resolving displacement is to ensure citizens feel “*under the law, with no distinction between components*”²³⁶ – wherever they reside. It should not be assumed that if an individual or household chooses to remain in their locations of displacement, that they do not have rights claims and needs. Rather, a holistic view and approach must be taken in this regard, with all options open.
- Reduce the lack of voice and representation IDPs feel while also mitigating concerns that different communities and their representatives have had in participating with each other in the past, particularly on sensitive issues. This may be done by separately bringing each IDP group, their respective community leaders/representatives, and their respective political representatives together to develop a coherent and proactive strategy for engaging on their preconditions and priorities for resolving displacement. Such strategies should identify the redlines and concessions of different groups and provide openings for counterparts to engage with. Doing so may provide new ways to durably resolve issues and address concerns of displaced and recipient communities alike.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION AND DISCOURSE

Compared to other areas of limited and no return, Tuz Khurmatu district has received significantly less national and international attention, especially since 2017. This is evidenced by the relatively limited existing analysis on and reporting from the district and by study participants' own feelings that the district tends to be overlooked in general in relation to the challenges it faces.

The fact that publicly raising concerns has not happened in a significant way in recent years may relate to the constrained environment that exists in the district for this type of activity. This gap is certainly reflected in the hesitancy that some IDP groups had in participating in this analysis and in the indirect way all IDPs and some key informants spoke about the actors obstructing returns and local integration. This is a concern for several reasons, not least of which is that public pressure and civil mobilization can be powerful tools in raising issues and keeping them at the forefront of decision-makers' priorities and public discourse in Iraq. The following approaches seek to raise issues around resolving displacement and other rights-based concerns more broadly to help provide further cover to IDPs from Tuz Khurmatu so they can engage in any processes that concern them and build greater public consensus and pressure on these issues:

- Link the rights-based demands and concerns of the IDPs from Tuz Khurmatu district to wider constituencies who have similar demands. Slowly connecting various constituencies to each other or within wider platforms advocating for

these rights may be possible. Such issues include compensation; housing, land and property issues; and the fate of the missing. This may also contribute to expanding the discourse on transitional justice in the country to widen the time periods, types of violations and victims and perpetrators it encompasses.

- Ensure more inclusive engagement with displaced communities. This approach should involve creating a safe space for the meaningful participation of all IDP constituencies, including women and youth, in any political or public processes and programming, where their views are appropriately represented, and they are kept informed of what is happening. The same holds true for recipient communities.
- Identify key activists, journalists, lawyers, intellectuals, organizations and wider civic platforms that could or would be interested in taking up issues pertaining to resolving displacement in Tuz Khurmatu district, or more broadly to address rights-based concerns.

INTERVENTIONS ON THE GROUND

The following approaches relate to addressing more immediate and medium-term needs of displaced and recipient communities as more politically oriented negotiations and processes for resolving displacement and addressing underlying issues take shape. These interventions may also help leverage more concerted efforts for these negotiations and processes:

- Continue reconstruction, rehabilitation and livelihoods projects in locations of existing and emerging return in Tuz Khurmatu district, as having a presence can help in motivating efforts on solutions.
- Address issues facing IDPs and recipient communities in areas of displacement, especially in Markaz Tuz Khurmatu. The need for this is critical because any ongoing or emerging process to resolve obstacles to return will take considerable time to have effect, there are IDPs who are seeking to locally integrate in their areas of displacement, and life in displacement has proved to be difficult for IDPs in general. The displaced residing in Markaz Tuz Khurmatu particularly raised concerns over eviction risks, lack of jobs and social exclusion and discrimination (by community members and local institutions), among others.
- Initiate robust social cohesion and peacebuilding efforts between ethno-religious communities in and from Tuz Khurmatu district. Many IDPs expressed concerns over community relations should they return, and IDPs within Markaz Tuz Khurmatu experience significant exclusion from other residents of the city.
- Conduct concerted advocacy toward government bodies to ensure more expedited compensation payments and release and use of reconstruction funds.

236 Key informant interview, member of the provincial administration, Salah al-Din, May 2024.

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