BUILDING BLOCKS OF THE RETURN INDEX IN IRAQ

APRIL 2020

DTM IOM DISPLACEMENT TRACKING MATRIX | RWG Iraq Returns Working Group | Social Inquiry

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SUMMARY

This report aims to provide general insights on how the Return Index was constructed in Iraq by delving into its most important building blocks, as well as discussing lessons learned during the design and implementation process. The report covers two aspects: (a) the indicator framework design with statistical modelling, and (b) the data analysis and dissemination. Both the building blocks and lessons learned can be used as blueprints to replicate the Return Index in other countries and displacement crises.

INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS THE RETURN INDEX?

The Return Index is a tool developed to measure and monitor the severity of conditions in locations with returnee populations in Iraq. As more people return to their places of origin than remain displaced after the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) conflict in Iraq, determining the severity of conditions in the locations to which returnees are returning, how severity changes over time, and finally, which locations have limited returns and why are all necessary steps to shape strategies for intervention and resource allocation.

The data for the Return Index is collected continuously through key informant interviews and reported every two months. Data collection is carried out at the location level, that is, villages in rural areas and neighbourhoods in urban settings, in around 1,800 locations across 38 districts in 8 governorates in Iraq. Data is collected through IOM's Rapid Assessment and Response Teams (RARTs), composed of over 100 staff members deployed across Iraq (20% of enumerators are female). IOM's RARTs collect data through structured interviews with key informants using a large, well-established network of over 9,500 key informants that includes community leaders, mukhtars, local authorities and security forces.

The advantage of this approach is its ability to systematically cover all known return locations in a short period of time and to monitor changes over time. The limitation of this approach is that it relies on one representative per location, mainly mukhtars and community or local council representatives, who report on the views of a potentially large and diverse population. Responses may be subject to individual key informant interpretation and may not consider all the nuances. In light of this limitation, questionnaires must aim as much as possible to capture observable indicators over individual perceptions.

The main assumption used to build the analytical model for the Return Index is that the severity of living conditions for returnees (i.e. the likelihood or sustainability of returns) can be evaluated according to whether all the pre-conflict population has returned or not. According to this assumption, locations where all residents have returned are likely to have good conditions for return. Locations where not all of the population have returned are likely to present issues with services, livelihoods, safety, or social cohesion. This measurement approach has limitations, given that the presence of full returns in a location may not be due to good conditions, but to forced or premature returns from places of displacement.

The Return Index is built using a list of indicators developed in consultation with relevant partners and stakeholders to reflect the displacement context in Iraq. To measure the severity of conditions in each location of return, the Return Index uses data on 16 indicators divided into two scales: Scale 1, on livelihoods and basic services, and Scale 2, centred around social cohesion and safety perceptions. A score is assigned to each indicator according to its impact in explaining the likelihood of return – the reason for giving a specific score instead of allocating the same value to all indicators is to reflect that not all indicators have the same impact on returns. A regression model is used to assess the impact of each of the indicators in facilitating or preventing returns, where the dependent variable is the return rate of the pre-conflict population and the independent variables are indicators that measure the severity of conditions. For example, the model tests how much more likely a location where agricultural activities are back to normal is to have returns, compared to a location where agriculture is still paralyzed.

Using the assigned scores for each indicator, the values of the two scales are calculated. To compute an overall severity index, the value of the two scales are combined as an average. The index ranges from 0 (all essential conditions for return are met) to 100 (no essential conditions for return are met). Higher scores denote more severe living conditions for returnees. The scores of the severity index are grouped into three categories: low, medium and high (which also includes very high).

Table 1. Example of basic composition to create the Return Index

INDICATOR FRAMEWORK	ASSIGNED SCORES
Indicator 1	10
Indicator 2	15
Indicator 3	15
Indicator 4	20
Indicator 5	40
Total score	100
Note: the higher the score, the more severe the conditions	

BUILDING BLOCKS IN INDICATOR FRAMEWORK DESIGN AND STATISTICAL MODELLING

#1. Formulating indicators on physical and social living conditions that resonate locally

The starting point to construct the Return Index is to have an in-depth understanding of which physical and social living conditions in places of origin influence displaced families to return, which requires strong contextual and conflict analyses. In addition, it is important to identify which indicators can measure these conditions. Both the total number of indicators used and the way they are formulated to obtain responses are determining factors when constructing an index that can be easily operationalized in the context assessed.

Having a 'manageable' number of indicators to monitor is important, as adding too many indicators runs the risk of breaking the index composition into unmanageably small fractions, in addition to reducing the reliability of the estimates, making it difficult to understand the overall picture. In the case of Iraq, the Return Index contains 16 indicators divided into two scales to facilitate comprehension (see Table 2). The indicators must resonate with local circumstances and the displacement crisis, which makes the direct lifting of indicators from one context to another unfeasible without context-specific adjustments, additions or deletions. Qualitative research will likely be beneficial to identify and prioritize those key indicators that best explain in which conditions people return from displacement.[1]

Table 2. List of selected indicators on physical and social conditions

SCALE 1: LIVELIHOODS AND BASIC SERVICES	SCALE 2: SAFETY AND SOCIAL COHESION
Residential destruction	Community reconciliation
Employment access	Multiple security actors
Water sufficiency	Blocked returns
Recovery of agriculture	Checkpoints controlled by other security actors
Electricity sufficiency	Daily public life
Recovery of businesses	Illegal occupation of private residences
Access to basic services	Concerns about mine presence
Provision of government services	Sources of violence
SCALE 1 SCORE = 100	SCALE 2 SCORE = 100
SCORES OF THE OVERALL SEVERITY INDEX = AVERAGE OF SCALE 1 AND SCALE 2 SCORES	

Finally, some relevant concepts are difficult to transform into measurable indicators – for example, human rights violations or demographic changes, although important in the context of Iraq, are not easy to convert into questions to ask to key informants due to their sensitivity and complexity.

1 *Some examples that apply to Iraq include Social Inquiry & IOM CRP (2017), Reframing Social Fragility in Areas of Protracted Displacement and Emerging Return in Iraq; IOM DTM (2017), Obstacles to Return in Retaken Areas of Iraq; Social Inquiry, USIP & Sanad for Peacebuilding (2018), Conflict and Stabilization Monitoring Framework for Ninewa; Global Public Policy Institute (2018), Iraq after ISIL: Local and Sub-State Forces in Iraq; Norwegian Refugee Council (2018), The Long Road Home.*

Key consideration: Tailoring the indicators to the data collection method used

The formulation of indicators must also be tailored to the data collection method: either key informant interviews or household surveys. DTM data on returns in Iraq is available at the local level (i.e. the number of returning families in around 1,800 locations); in these cases, the data collection for the Return Index is most efficiently done through key informants in each location. The indicators must therefore conform to topics that a key informant (usually a local community leader) would be able to answer as objectively as possible "on behalf" of the whole community. Household interviews would be a feasible option if the analysis is conducted at a higher administrative level, such as a district or subdistrict – in that way, a sample that is representative enough could be collected among returnees.

#2. Determining the dependent variable for the model: how to measure the outcome of high severity conditions

In addition to a series of indicators (independent or explanatory variables), a statistical model requires a dependent variable: the outcome we expect to see, depending on the severity of local conditions. In this case, the outcome is the absence of returns in a location, such that the model evaluates the likelihood a population will return or not, given a set of conditions in place. In other words, the main assumption is that locations where all pre-conflict populations have returned are likely to present good physical and social conditions (low severity). On the contrary, locations that do not have all returns are likely to present lack of services, lack of or poor livelihoods, poor social cohesion or poor security (high severity).

Table 3 shows how this dependent variable is built. A binary variable for the model can be built using the response choices to the question below. The binary variable takes the value of 0 if the location has full or most returns and 1 if it has partial or minor returns. To reiterate, the model will explain why some locations have partial returns and what conditions determine this.

Table 3. Question used to formulate the dependent variable for the model

QUESTION	RESPONSE CHOICE	BINARY VARIABLE IN THE MODEL
Have most of the people displaced since 2014 returned to the location?	All have returned	0
	Most have returned	0
	Around half have returned	1
	Less than half have returned	1

Key consideration: Are alternative proxies available?

Using an indicator of partial returns as the outcome of severe physical and social living conditions for returnees is not without limitations. The presence of full returns in a location may not be due to good conditions on the ground, but to forced or premature returns from places of displacement.

There are other alternatives available to use as proxy indicators for the outcome, depending on the context. For instance, data on secondary displacement at the location level could be used – that is, locations from which returnees have displaced again for a second time. The rationale for this is that locations that are not experiencing secondary displacement are likely to have good conditions for return (i.e. low severity of conditions), where returnees are able to remain and seek durable solutions to their displacement. However, the measurement of secondary displacement is also subjected to limitations, not only due to the difficulty of identifying cases, but also due to an absence of a clear definition of what constitutes secondary forced displacement versus voluntary movement (e.g. non-forced migration to other places after having returned).

#3. Developing a valid survey tool from the indicators list for key informants

The indicators selected in Building Block #1 need to then be formulated into a survey format as questions to be answered by key informants. In order to fit into a statistical model, the indicators must measure different levels of severity in an incremental way. In practical terms, this means that the questions for each indicator must first define a minimum level (baseline) representing those conditions that may be necessary to ensure a place can adequately sustain returning populations.[2]

2 *Some limitations apply: these minimum-level living conditions, while essential, may not be "optimal," especially in situations where physical and/or social conditions might have been be relatively poor pre-conflict and might have induced displacement even in the absence of conflict. For example, full access to healthcare may have been non-existent before the conflict anyway or, if access is currently available, access may be sub-optimal due to poor quality of the healthcare provided in the first place.*

For example, an indicator about the availability of healthcare should have the baseline condition that "all returnees have access to healthcare." This baseline is then followed by different levels of severity (e.g. half of returnees have access, no returnees have access etc.). Two examples of these levels are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Example of questions formulated for healthcare access and residential destruction to fit in the model

EXAMPLE 1: HEALTHCARE ACCESS	RESPONSE CHOICE
Can residents from this location access primary health centres in the location or nearby?	Most or all can access primary healthcare (baseline)
	Only some can access primary healthcare while others cannot
	None can access primary healthcare (worst condition)
EXAMPLE 2: RESIDENTIAL DESTRUCTION	**RESPONSE CHOICE**
Are the houses in the location destroyed / heavily damaged?	None of the houses are destroyed (baseline)
	Less than half of the houses are destroyed
	About half of the houses are destroyed
	More than half of the houses are destroyed (worst condition)

By adding these different categories for each indicator, the statistical model can then compare the likelihood of full returns in a location with non-optimal conditions compared to a location with the baseline minimum conditions in place.

#4. Implementing a robust data collection process

The reliability of the data is strongly influenced by the data collection process. An important aspect of the data collection process that may affect data quality is the frequency and method of fieldwork surveying. When conditions on the ground and return movements are dynamic and changing relatively quickly, a monthly data collection would be the most effective process – this data collection was conducted during the early stages of the Return Index process in Iraq. As the displacement situation in Iraq evolved into a more protracted one and return rates slowed down following two years since the formal end of the conflict, the frequency of data collection for the Return Index became bimonthly.

In addition, data collection through site visits has proven to be the most effective method, as opposed to alternatives such as phone interviews with key informants. Visits allow for a qualitative confirmation of informant responses – however, this method is subject to logistical and security-related constraints when mobilizing enumerators to the areas. It is important also to bear in mind that security constraints may cause key informants to self-censor when responding to certain questions, making in-person interviews more reliable than phone interviews in the context of Iraq.

Key consideration: Establishing early quality control mechanisms for responses is essential

Quality control for the responses obtained from key informants plays a very important role in ensuring that the analysis reflects the real situation on the ground (or at least as much as possible). Variation in the responses linked to the indicators between rounds must be due to conditions on the ground changing, as opposed to receiving a different "opinion" from the key informant. In an assessment of this type, it should be expected that the responses provided to the questions are quite constant across rounds of data collection, unless the situation on the ground is extremely dynamic. Having too much variation that is difficult to justify may raise concerns about the reliability of the data.

For this reason, field visits can be an essential part of quality control, as the enumerators can double check and verify any variation in the indicators from the previous round (some indicators may not be directly verifiable, such as insecurity perceptions). In addition, the survey questionnaire can include a qualitative question asking the key informant to justify the new answer provided in those cases in which a different response has been provided as compared to the previous round. There should be a way to cross-check responses across rounds during interviews for this purpose.

#5. Fitting the statistical model with the data collected

The statistical model is based on a logistical multivariate regression. This type of regression is used to explain the likelihood of an outcome (in this case, the absence of full returns in a location) given the independent or explanatory variables used (in this case, all the indicators collected). The model therefore combines all the data collected as follows.

- **Dependent variable (the outcome we want to explain):** The level of returns as presented in Building Block #2 constitutes the outcome to be explained by the presence of severe conditions in locations. For the model used in Iraq, this variable contains the locations that experienced only partial returns of their pre-conflict population (16% of the total locations, such that 84% of locations have full returns). The model, in practical terms, responds to the following questions: are there physical and social conditions on the ground that explain why a location is more likely to have partial returns as opposed to full returns? Are some conditions more likely to be found in the 16 per cent of locations with partial returns than in the 84 per cent with full returns?
- **Independent variables (the indicators that explain the likelihood of full or partial returns):** The indicators formulated in Building Block #3 are measured as binary or categorical variables.[3] As explained above, this measurement approach means that there is a base category against which relatively worse conditions are tested (e.g. "most or all can access primary healthcare" versus "none can access primary healthcare"). The indicators are expected to be statistically significant in the model: that is, locations in which one or more of these conditions are not met are expected to be less likely to have full returns.
- **Control variables (the indicators that capture other contextual elements):** The statistical model can include contextual indicators not used for the index composition, referred to as control variables. These are used to capture other factors that may affect returns but are not indicative of severity levels. For example, the control variable used in the case of Iraq is the categorization of the locations as either urban or rural. Other control variables could be, for example, time that has passed since conflict ceased in the location or whether the location also hosts displaced people.

In general, the statistical modelling follows a two-step approach. In the first step, the regression analysis includes all indicators. Those indicators that are found to be statistically insignificant in this first step (i.e. they do not contribute to an explanation for the lack of returns) are excluded from the models in the second step, which involves running the regression models without them. To find the model that fits the best, as a rule, several models are tested iteratively, grouping the response choices of indicators differently. In the case of Iraq, two separate regression models were tested: eight indicators related to livelihoods and essential services were tested in one regression model (Scale 1), and eight indicators related to social cohesion and safety perceptions were tested in another regression model (Scale 2).

The final regression results obtained in Iraq are shown in Table 5 and Table 6, separated between the two scales. The coefficients are given an odds ratio. This ratio is interpreted as the additional likelihood of having partial returns as opposed to full returns if the non-optimal condition is met in the location. For example, a location with destroyed houses is almost 15 times less likely to have full returns compared to a location with no house destruction, irrespective of any other condition in place. The indicators below would be interpreted using this approach.

Table 5. Regression results for Scale 1 indicators: livelihoods and essential services

INDICATOR	ODDS RATIO	BASELINE CONDITION	NON-OPTIMAL CONDITION TESTED
Residential destruction	14.75	No house destruction	Existence of destroyed houses with no reconstruction
Employment access	9.91	At least half of residents can find employment	Less than half or no residents can find employment
Water sufficiency	2.49	At least half of residents have enough water	Less than half or no residents have enough water
Recovery of agriculture	2.03	All or most agriculture taking place	Only some or no agriculture taking place
Electricity sufficiency	1.82	At least half of residents have enough electricity	Less than half or no residents have enough electricity
Recovery of businesses	1.64	All or most businesses restarted	Some or no business has restarted
Reincorporation of civil servants	1.47	Most civil servants are reincorporated	Some or no civil servants are reincorporated

3 *Binary variables refer to those that only have two values, representing two opposite conditions (for example, access to healthcare versus no access). Categorical variables are composed of three or more categories, for example representing different extents of residential destruction: 'less than half of the houses are destroyed'; 'about half of the houses are destroyed'; or 'more than half of the houses are destroyed'.*

INDICATOR	ODDS RATIO	BASELINE CONDITION	NON-OPTIMAL CONDITION TESTED
Access to primary essential services	1.47	No access issues neither to primary school nor primary healthcare	Some access issues to primary school or primary healthcare
Rural location	0.16	(Control variable)	

Table 6. Regression results for Scale 2 indicators: social cohesion and safety perceptions

INDICATOR	ODDS RATIO	BASELINE CONDITION	NON-OPTIMAL CONDITION TESTED
Community reconciliation	2.95	Reconciliation is not needed or is not happening	Reconciliation is needed but not happening
Multiplicity of armed actors	2.37	Three or fewer armed actors in location	Four or more armed actors in location
Checkpoints controlled by other security actors	1.98	No non-state armed groups are present	Non-state armed groups are present
Existence of blocked returns	1.97	No family is blocked from returning to location	Some families are not allowed to return to location
Day-to-day public tensions	1.80	Daily life in streets is restored	Streets are sparsely populated and low willingness to leave the house
Illegal occupation of private residences	1.64	No occupation cases in location	Some cases of occupation in location
Concerns about mines	1.53	No concerns among residents	Residents are concerned about the presence of mines
Concerns about sources of violence	1.45	No concerns among residents	Residents are concerned about at least one source of violence

Key consideration: What can be done with indicators that are not statistically significant in the model?

Some indicators identified in Building Block #1 may end up not being significant, and therefore are dropped out of the model. However, these indicators still provide information about living conditions and challenges for returnees – they may not explain likelihood of return, but they can be good indicators for program design and planning purposes.

For example, in Iraq, the indicator measuring whether markets were supplying the necessary products for inhabitants was not found to be significant. Reporting data for this indicator, however, can still be relevant for partners working in food security — locations with non-functional markets should still be a concern for national authorities and the humanitarian community.

#6. Moving from statistical coefficients to scores for the Index

The results from the statistical model are used to calculate a score of two scales. The odds ratio gives a measurement of which indicators matter the most in explaining returns, so that it is possible to rank them by different levels of impact. It is reasonable to assume that if a location with house destruction is 15 times less likely to have returns, while a location with no electricity is only twice less likely, then an indicator about house destruction should have higher score as its impact is larger.

Based on this principle, we assign scores to each indicator proportionally to its respective odds ratio over a base of 100 points. Indicators with a higher odds ratio receive a greater weight in the score (Table 7). In this sense, a location with a score of 100 would be one with no indicator at its "baseline" level, that is, a location with house destruction, no employment, no services, no social cohesion and no security. The index therefore ranges from 0 (all essential conditions to return are met) to 100 (no essential conditions to return are met).

In the case of Iraq, this index was calculated separately for the two indicator scales: (1) livelihoods and essential services, and (2) social cohesion and safety perceptions. The overall Severity Index score was then generated by averaging the scores obtained for each scale. Separating the calculations for each scale allows for monitoring the situation separately for the physical conditions on one side and social conditions on the other.

Table 7. Score composition for scales 1 and 2

SCALE 1: LIVELIHOODS AND ESSENTIAL SERVICES	
IF LOCATION PRESENTS…:	SCORE RECEIVED
Large extent of destroyed houses with no reconstruction	41
Less than half or no residents can find employment	28
Less than half or no residents have enough water	7
Only some or no agriculture is taking place	6
Less than half or no residents have enough electricity	5
Some or no businesses have restarted	5
Some or no civil servants are reincorporated	4
Some access issues to primary school or primary healthcare	4
TOTAL	100
SCALE 2: SOCIAL COHESION AND SECURITY PERCEPTIONS	
IF LOCATION PRESENTS…:	SCORE RECEIVED
Reconciliation is needed but not happening	19
Four or more armed actors in the location	15
Presence of non-state armed groups	13
Some families are banned from returning to the location	13
Streets are sparsely populated and low willingness to leave the house	11
Some cases of illegal house occupation in location	10
Residents are concerned about the presence of mines	10
Residents are concerned about at least one source of violence	9
TOTAL	100

BUILDING BLOCKS FOR DATA ANALYSIS AND DISSEMINATION

#7. Establishing different categories of severity to facilitate the analysis of scores

Using an absolute score per location for programme design and prioritization can be complex without further analysis of the data; this is particularly true in contexts where organizations or clusters do not have the data management or analysis capacity necessary to operationalize complex datasets. One first step that can be taken to help rapidly assess what the data indicates about the severity of conditions is to organize locations into different categories, such as locations with very high, high, medium, or low severity conditions based on their overall scores.

There are several ways to rank locations into severity categories, including by categorizing the top 50 highest scoring locations (or top 10% locations) as very high severity or by distinguishing locations based on how far their score is from the standard deviation of the data. Another less arbitrary system to draw the line between high severity locations and the other locations is to identify those locations which deviate significantly from the general trend — in Figure 1 below, the location scores seem to be significantly higher in the first 52 locations. These scores would constitute the very high severity category, comprising locations with scores between 53 and 100 (the maximum score). The remaining locations are divided into three other categories (high, medium, and low) using proportional intervals. This division can be conducted separately for each scale. The cut-off points ultimately applied in Iraq are listed in Table 8.

Figure 1. Ranking of locations from highest to lowest severity based on the Return Index score

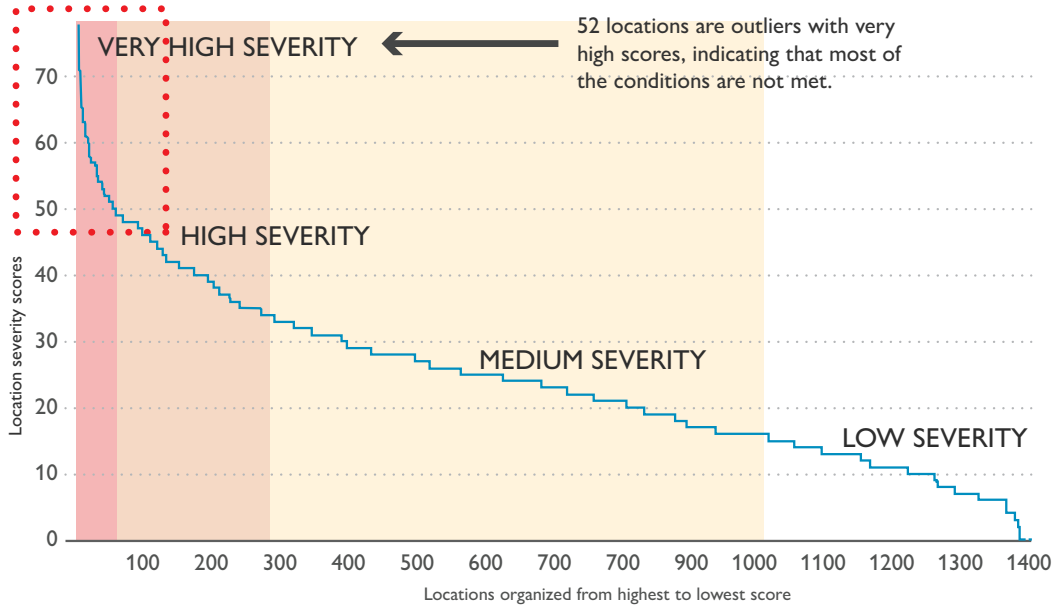


Table 8. Cut-off points used in Iraq to divide the location score into severity categories

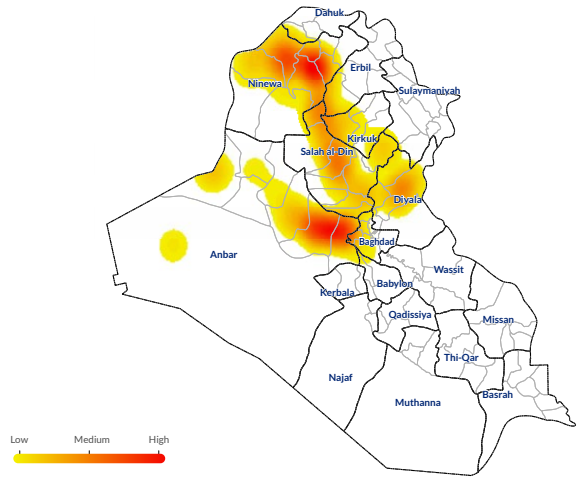
SEVERITY CATEGORIES	SCORE INTERVALS OF OVERALL SEVERITY INDEX	SCORE INTERVALS OF SCALE 1	SCORE INTERVALS OF SCALE 2
Very high	53–100	63–100	53–100
High	35–52	41–62	35–52
Medium	18–34	21–40	18–34
Low	0–17	0–20	0–17

Key consideration: Playing with data visualization

Innovative ways to visualize the data and disseminate these findings are available: for example, using graphs, diagrams or, as in the image on the right, heatmaps. Mapping where the locations with high severity are concentrated also helps in interpreting, planning and prioritizing interventions.

This map plots each of the nearly 1,800 locations assessed as part of the Return Index. The map shows conditions of severity based on population size and severity score of each assessed location. The darker colours indicate a larger concentration of families living in severe conditions of return, while the brighter colours indicate lower severity conditions or areas with low levels of returns.

Map1. Returnee population density by overall severity score



#8. Identifying geographical hotspots of severity

"Severity hotspots" can be generated by identifying geographical clusters that concentrate several locations with high severity that are in proximity of each other. Subdistricts are classified as hotspots if they score highly in terms of severity on at least one of the two scales (either livelihoods and basic services, or safety and social cohesion) or if they score medium in terms of severity but also host relatively large numbers of returnees. Iraq's Return Index identified 32 hotspots across six governorates. An example of hotspots is given in Figure 2 in the case of Anbar Governorate, showing the five subdistricts that need particular attention given the average severity of each of their individual locations.[4] While identifying and locating the most severe individual locations can

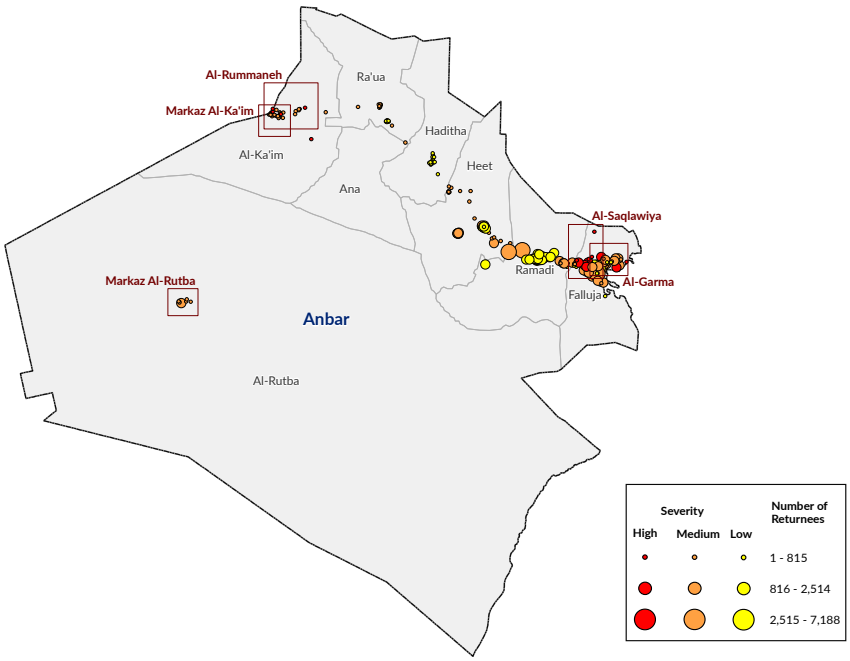
4 *The average score is weighted by each location's returnee population size.*

be of interest for monitoring purposes, the most impactful way to operationalize the results of the Return Index is to carry out analysis at a more aggregate level. Humanitarian and development interventions are usually designed to cover specific districts or subdistricts; therefore, prioritizing hotspots over individual locations is more efficient. Ultimately, the hotspots are likely to include most if not all of the most severe locations. Out of the 50 locations with the highest score, 48 are included in these hotspots. The round-to-round reporting of the Return Index aims to provide a more detailed analysis of these hotspots, contextualizing which indicators make them high severity.

Key consideration: The option of adding returnee population size into the equation

It is important to strike a balance between severity score and returnee population size. In other words, is a subdistrict with 10,000 returnees living in locations with medium severity conditions as critical and in need of prioritization as another subdistrict with 2,000 returnees living in high severity conditions? The answer is not straightforward and is often authority, agency, and organization specific. The Return Index provides information related to severity and number of returns, but leaves these ethical considerations to stakeholders using the data.

Figure 2. Severity hotspots identified in Anbar Governorate (in red boxes)



Key consideration: Monitoring locations with no returns is also an important part of response design

Until now, all the data collection and analysis described in this report are based on locations where at least one family has returned. In post-conflict settings, it is common to also find locations that remain uninhabited, that is, with no returning population due to different reasons (abandonment, destruction, insecurity, government blockage, etc.). These locations should also be identified and monitored as part of the humanitarian response design – their populations, as with all those displaced, will remain in displacement until root causes in their places of origin are addressed.

A specific challenge for these locations, however, is the greater difficulty to map and assess them. Often, they are hard to locate because they are inaccessible and may not have been properly mapped by authorities before the conflict. Furthermore, their being uninhabited means that identifying a key informant or finding out where their populations currently are is challenging. Frequently, however, these locations with no return are also within severity hotspots; this has been the case in Iraq for many such locations.

#9. Giving stakeholders the ability to explore data by location and indicator

Beyond analysing severity clusters, the Return Index also provides rich information for each individual indicator. For example, it allows stakeholders involved in housing and shelter policy and intervention to identify relatively quickly where the most severe conditions in terms of residential destruction can be found in conflict-affected areas. It is important to complement reporting with a dataset that provides this information for each indicator and for each location assessed. A snapshot of the accompanying

dataset for Iraq is shown in Figure 3. This dataset is shared as a regular public stand-alone output.

What this dataset does is to categorize each indicator as between low, medium and high severity in a color-coded system, based on the specific responses provided to the survey. This categorization allows for further thematic comparison between locations or districts, so that stakeholders can tailor analysis in greater detail. The dataset is also accompanied by a codebook, which allows users to understand how the severity category was assigned.

Figure 3. Example of color-coded tabulation of indicators per location and using the codebook

DISTRICT	LOCATION	FAMILIES	RECOVERY OF AGRICULTURE	RECOVERY OF SMALL BUSINESSES	EMPLOYMENT ACCESS	ELECTRICITY SUFFICIENCY
Zakho	Zakho	130	Low	Low	Low	Low
Makhmour	Gwer	1824	Not applicable	Medium	Medium	High
Makhmour	Shahidan	430	Not applicable	Low	Low	Low
Makhmour	Farmanbaran	240	Not applicable	Not applicable	Low	Low
Makhmour	Abu Sheta	828	Not applicable	Medium	Medium	Low
Makhmour	Kapran	442	High	Not applicable	Medium	Low
Makhmour	Kabarok	160	Not applicable	Medium	Medium	High
Makhmour	Ein Muzan	82	Low	Not applicable	Medium	Medium

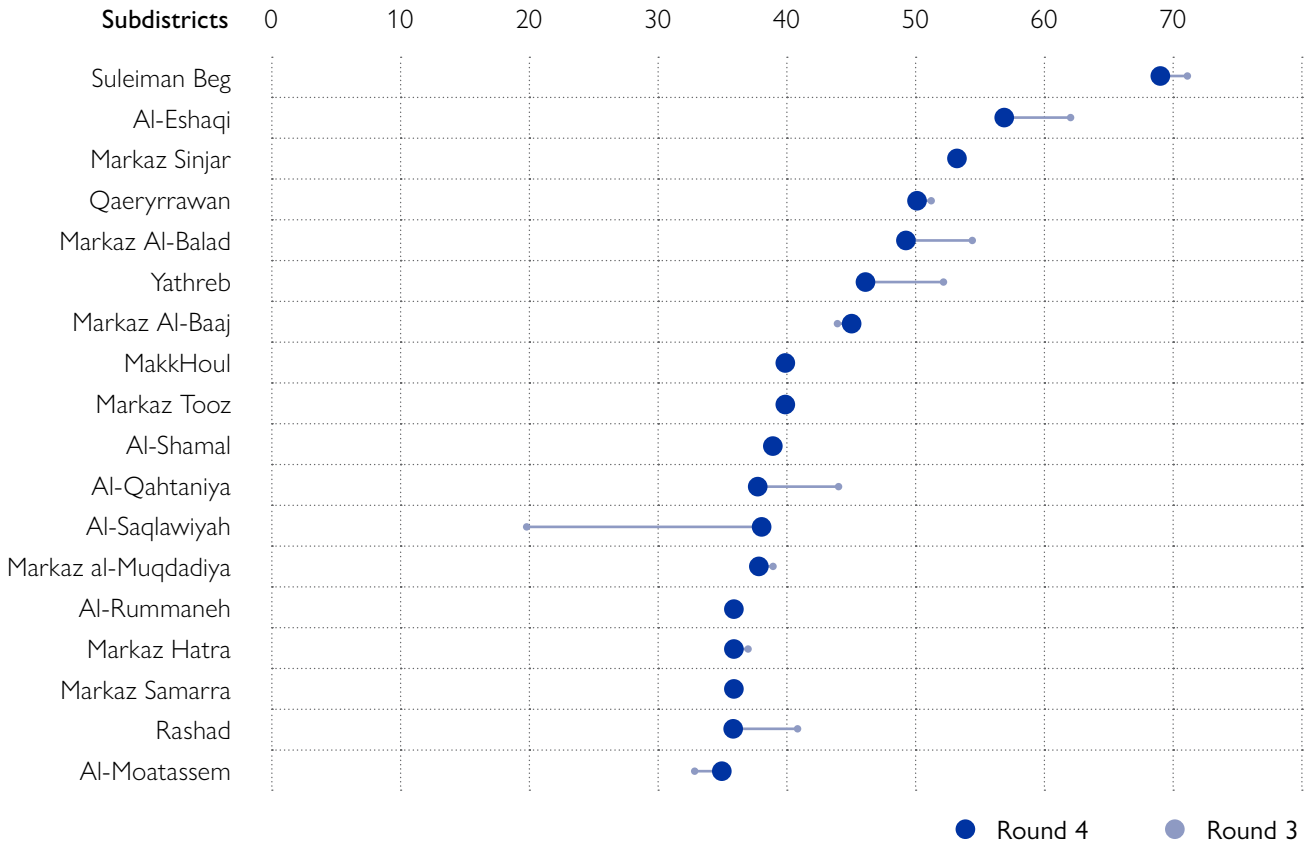
SCALE 1: LIVELIHOODS AND BASIC SERVICES	CATEGORY OF SEVERITY
Recovery of agriculture	
1 = Most or all agricultural and/or livestock activities are taking place as before	Low
2 = Some of the agricultural and/or livestock activities are taking place as before	Medium
3 = None of the agricultural and/or livestock activities are taking place as before	High
0 = Location does not have agricultural land	Not applicable
Recovery of businesses	
1 = Most or all businesses are open	Low
2 = Some businesses are open	Medium
3 = None of the business are open	High
4 = Not applicable, there is no business in location	Not applicable
Employment access	
1 = Most or all reisdents can find employment	Low
2 = Around half the reisdents can find employment	Low
3 = Less than half the reisdents can find employment	Medium
4 = None of the reisdents can find employment	High
Access to markets for basic items and food	
1 = It is easy to access basic items and food	Low
2 = It is difficult to access basic items and food	Medium
3 = it is not possible to access basic items and food	High
Provision of government services	
4 = Most or all government services are being provided	Low
5 = Some of the services are being provided, but not all	Medium
6 = None of the government services are provided	High
7 = Not applicable, there are no government services in location	Not applicable

#10. Using a temporal comparison round after round to identify trends

One of the key features of the Return Index is that it should allow for a temporal comparison of scores in addition to a geographical comparison. A temporal comparison means that the Index allows for comparing scores between rounds of data collection to see where conditions have improved or deteriorated. Such information can lay the basis for further investigation into changes in context, including those related to policy and programme implementation (or gaps).

To conduct this temporal analysis, a combined dataset is needed that consists of a time-series with locations and their respective scores round-by-round. The regular reporting of the Return Index in Iraq relies heavily on identifying which specific indicators are changing over time, driving severity up or down within the hotspots. A potential way to visualize such changes from round to round at the subdistrict level is shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Comparing the average severity score in selected subdistricts between Rounds 3 and 4



Key consideration: Revising indicators based on context over time can ensure their relevance

A new version of the Return Index was developed six months after the design and launch of the first version in Iraq. The new model included: 1) a revised list of indicators developed in consultation with relevant partners and stakeholders, and 2) an updated scoring breakdown per indicator, with the aim of better reflecting the changing displacement context.

For the first step, some indicators were rephrased and others were included anew, in order to match the changing conditions and drivers on the ground — for example, the first version of the Index did not include any indicator measuring whether a location had not allowed the pre-conflict population to return (blockages). There was emerging evidence that these blockages were becoming a larger issue, and the indicator was found to be statistically significant in the model. In addition, other pre-existing indicators changed their score and the model was re-run. One example of such a change related to the indicator for reconciliation, which significantly increased its score in the second version compared to the first, becoming the most relevant indicator within the index on social cohesion and safety perceptions. Such changes highlight the fact that as certain physical and social conditions are met in places of return, others not addressed immediately or that are more intractable come to the fore in relation to the likelihood of return.

BUILDING BLOCKS OF THE RETURN INDEX IN IRAQ

APRIL 2020

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IOM Iraq thanks the U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM) and USAID for its continued support.

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