

IDPs in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI): Intractable Return and Absence of Social Integration Policy

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the protracted nature of displacement in the Iraqi context and places emphasis on the need for a social integration policy to bridge the deep cleavages of Iraqi society. Methodologically, the paper utilizes qualitative data by conducting focus-group discussions with IDPs and semi-structured individual interviews in KRI. In terms of return possibilities, while return in many ways is perceived to be not practical and to involve future risks, research findings show that a community-based distinction needs to be made between IDPs from minority backgrounds and IDPs who belong to demographic majorities in the homeland locations. A second distinction is a geographic and political one as findings indicate that IDPs who take refuge in KRI, though remain largely dissatisfied with displacement conditions, are willing to stay in KRI longer in the hope of further security and reconstruction process in the violence-affected areas. With respect to social integration policy, the paper outlines institutional, political and cultural explanations for a virtually absolute absence of social integration policy on national and regional levels. The paper suggests that the proposed social integration policy can capitalize practical implications of Social Contact Theory (SCT) in enhancing the integration of IDPs in the host communities.

INTRODUCTION

The return of internally displaced persons (IDPs)¹ to their areas of origin (AoO) often encounters complicated dynamics, particularly for IDPs who flee armed conflict and violence. Stefanovic and Loizides (2011) classify the determinants of intention to return into four factors: security, economic, education and social capital. Before offering a brief description for each, it is worth noting that these factors can exert contradictory effects of push-and-pull factors in displacement and in AoO; in other words, IDPs tend to make calculations for the above-mentioned factors both in the displacement settings and in the AoO. Any decision to return or stay is, eventually, the outcome of such comprehensive calculations.

The security thesis places emphasis on the stabilization of security conditions as a precondition of return. A report by the Return Working Group (Iraq) (RWG, 2018) states that while thinking of

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return, safety and security in the AoO has been one of the most discussed topics for IDPs with their family and relative stayers in AoO. Another report by IOM (February 2019) shows that “a better safety in the location of displacement” has been the main driver for (91%) of the IDPs interviewed to stay displaced. The same report reveals that improvement in security conditions was essential for roughly 60 per cent of IDPs who returned to AoO. The economic thesis, moreover, points to the indicators of economic prosperity, development and job opportunities to stress that the lack of economic opportunities in AoO, even in the context of improved security conditions, can prevent IDPs from return. Similar to concerns about safety and security, “livelihood opportunities and the status of housing” in AoO has been one of the central issues for IDPs thinking of return in Iraq (RWG, 2018). In the same vein, research in Bosnia-Herzegovina (Tuathail and O’Loughlin, 2009) demonstrates that some families ended up in displacement with better economic conditions and are reluctant to “gamble on return areas where important sources of local employment were in the hands of wartime profiteers and political figures”. Interestingly, Metivier, Stefanovic and Loizides (2018) refer to the second displacement of many returnees who faced ethnic discrimination in the local public institutions after return, which in consequence forced them to leave again, this time for economic reasons. Meanwhile, advocates of the education thesis posit that the restoration of education opportunities (e.g. reopening of schools and universities) and their accessibility in the host community, especially for families with school-age children, is essential for any possible return/ stay (Tuathail and O’Loughlin, 2009; IOM, 2019). Finally, the social capital thesis stresses on the significance of IDP networks and community associations in their impact on the intentions to return. In this regard, the community effort hypothesis suggests that victims of ethnic cleansing when are able to endure traditional ties with their fellows in AoO are more likely to consider joint return than those who managed to establish links with residents from the host communities (Stefanovic and Loizides, 2011). Research on ethnic economic migrants (Pierre, Martinovic and Vroome, 2015) points to similar outcomes: the research shows that migrants who achieved higher degrees of social and cultural integration (establishing contacts with local people and developing language proficiency) are more inclined to stay than to return. In the framework of social capital thesis, attention has also been paid to the contribution of IDP and refugee associations to advocate for pro-return policies and also to encourage collective return of displaced communities (Stefanovic and Loizides, 2011; Metivier, Stefanovic and Loizides, 2018). It is worth mentioning that the home thesis, with its focus on the IDP communities’ nostalgic aspirations to restore pre-displacement communal life and social cohesion after return, can best fit within the social capital thesis.

Nevertheless, research on return has elucidated a range of other nuances, which make return further complicated. To begin with, research on Iraq and elsewhere (Tuathail and O’Loughlin, 2009; Adelman and Barkan, 2011; PAX for Peace, 2015; Metivier, Stefanovic and Loizides, 2018; Ozaltin, Shakir and Loizides, 2019; IOM, 2019) has pointed to the gap of return between ethnic minority and ethnic majority groups with the former to have demonstrated feeble inclination to return. Moreover, research (Metivier, Stefanovic and Loizides, 2018) has also referred to generational differences in return intentions: IDPs who are born or grown up in the displaced setting and, in consequence, have less memory and attachment to the original home occasionally demonstrated less enthusiasm about return. Furthermore, research (Ozaltin, Shakir and Loizides, 2019; IOM, 2019) demonstrates that more educated IDPs not only are less inclined to return, but also are more enthusiastic to migrate to other countries. It is also suggested (Stefanovic and Loizides, 2011; Metivier, Stefanovic and Loizides, 2018; RWG, 2018; IOM February 2019) that return in many cases is a family and even a community decision. *Safety in Numbers* is an expression used to capture the preference of IDPs, especially from minority backgrounds, to return collectively as opposed to individual or family return, which may make them easy targets of future violence.

By focusing on IDPs displaced to Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), this research examines the potential return of IDPs to AoO. The paper suggests that in spite of retaking areas that had been controlled by Islamic State in Iraq and Levant (ISIL) and a significant plunge of sectarian violence

(not necessarily discrimination), return to AoO, for wide sections of IDPs, is not a near possibility. This is mainly applicable to IDPs who belong to minority groups in Nineveh and other governorates of Iraq. In this framework, a range of pull-and-push factors, both in the displacement and in the AoO, are studied.

As return becomes challenging, social integration of IDPs in the host communities comes to the fore. Prior to the way social integration of IDPs in KRI is examined, a brief conception of social integration is presented. Rutter (2015) offers a review of the multitude approaches through which social integration is defined: a *Right-based approach*, which defines social integration in terms of civil, political and social rights; *Outcome-based approach*, which places emphasis on a range of outcome and indicators such as employment rates, educational attainment and political participation to measure social integration; *Contact-based approach*, which stresses the significance of social contacts between refugees/displaced people with long-settled residents of the host communities; and finally, *Participation-based approach*, which insists on social inclusion and active participation in labour force, workplace, civil society, political participation and so forth. Ager and Strang (2004 cited in Rutter, 2015) try to provide an inclusive definition by suggesting that social integration is a combination of a set of *attributes/facilitators* (such as language proficiency, rights and responsibilities and social capital) and *outcomes/integration markers* (for instance educational attainment, and market-related and political indicators). Nonetheless, the social integration of IDPs is defined in a more specified way. The Framework for Durable Solutions for Internally Displaced Persons (cited in IOM, 2019) states “IDPs achieve local integration (or sustainable return or relocation) when they: (i) no longer have specific assistance and protection needs and vulnerabilities that are directly linked to their displacement and (ii) enjoy their human rights without discrimination on account of their displacement”.

This research is not an attempt to measure social integration of IDPs. Rather, it is an effort to present an argument about the lack of social integration policy in KRI and Iraq. The research goes further to advocate for the utilization of Social Contact Theory (SCT) in designing a policy for social integration. SCT has long suggested that cross-community interactions, under right conditions, can help to revise and deconstruct existing negative stereotypes and reduce levels of prejudice and discrimination (see, e.g., Allport, 1979; Bratt, 2002; Pettigrew, 2006; Pettigrew et al., 2011). Among the first advocates of SCT, Gordon Allport (1979, pp. 262-263) posits that frequent and meaningful contacts, as opposed to sporadic and casual contacts, between people of equal status can bring about positive changes in inter-community relations. Recent research (Jones and Rutland, 2018) has found that different forms of contact (direct, extended and imagined contact) reduced the prejudice of youth towards immigrants. Likewise, Tropp and Okamoto (2018) while defining social integration as a relational process suggest that frequency and the quality of contacts (friendliness versus discrimination) determine social integration of immigrants. In the same vein, Cheung and Phillimore (2014) suggest that length of residency and language competency broaden one’s social networks and facilitate integration of refugees in the labour market. Research has also examined barriers of social contact: Hebbani, Colic-Peisker and Mackinnon (2018) study the impact of cultural differences and language barriers for the social integration of refugees in Greater Brisbane. Similarly, Muller and Smets (2009) show how culturally unrealized expectations of Iraqi refugees in the Netherlands for close neighbourhood-based contacts disappointed Iraqi refugees and weakened their effort to establish contacts with native Dutch residents.

For Kurds and other Iraqi communities, displacement, along with its unwelcome consequences, offers unprecedented opportunities for interaction. The facts that the main cities of the KRI tended to be overwhelmingly ethnically homogeneous and the region remained outside the control of Iraqi government from 1991 onwards mean that chances for cross-communal interactions have been scarce. In the main urban centres, large-scale displacements have transformed some of the interaction spaces (especially residential neighbourhoods) and made them increasingly heterogeneous. Consequently, the new demographic realities, particularly in more urban settings, offer

opportunities for interventions that can create an environment to bridge communities that have been displaced.

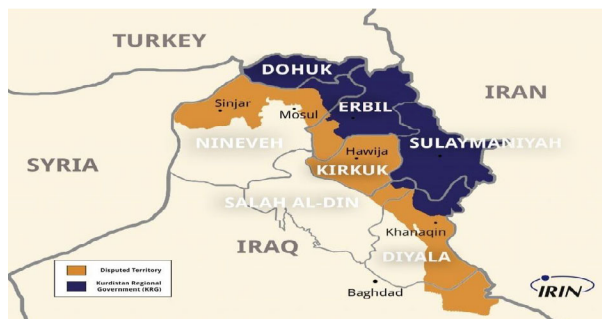
CONTEXT: KURDISTAN REGION OF IRAQ

KRI is located to the North and North East of Iraq. It consists of the four governorates of Erbil, Sulaimani, Dahuk and Halabja with an area of 40643 Km² (Kurdistan Region Government Website, 2018). Latest updates (Demographic Survey Kurdistan Region of Iraq, 2018, p. 14) estimate the population of the region to have reached 5,122,747 individuals in 2014. The overwhelming majority of the population are Kurds who have, alongside Arabs, Christians, Sabeen Mandaeans, Turkmens, Yazidis, Kakais and Jews, populated the area for a long history. Due to the demographic restructuring policies of successive Iraqi governments, inaccuracy of population censuses and general politicization of ethnicity, entirely reliable figures about the population size of each community are hard to find (see, e.g., Ismail, 2005; Anderson and Stansfield, 2009; Ismail, 2011; Bengio, 2014; Ozaltin, Shakir and Loizides, 2019).

KRI enjoyed a de facto autonomous situation since 1991, and, since 2005, it is recognized by Iraqi constitution as a self-governing region within the boundaries of Iraqi federal state (Iraqi Constitution 2005, Article 117-first, available at: https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iraq_2005.pdf?lang=en). As a result of disagreements between KRI and Iraqi government, the Iraqi permanent constitution of 2005 failed to define the geographic boundaries of KRI. The “Internally Disputed Territories” (see Map KRI and IDTs in Iraq) thus defined by Iraqi Constitution include fifteen districts in the governorates of Nineveh, Kirkuk, Saladin, Erbil, and Diyala and it is a swathe of land that begins from Sinjar to the Northwest of Iraq and extends to Khanaqin and Mandali in the Northeast (Riordan, 2016, p. 2).

Since the 2003 war, KRI, unlike other parts of Iraq, has proven to be significantly safer area and managed to achieve high records of economic development². Economically, in spite of widespread corruption and public grievances over inequalities (see Watts, 2016), the region witnessed an unprecedented investment boom. The KRG’s Board of Investment Factsheet points to an investment of USD 22bn from 2006 to mid-2012. By 2012, foreign direct investment made up 15 per cent of the total investment (KRG Board of Investment, 2012). The rapid rise of investment rates in the region can be explained, on the one hand, by the political and security stability of the region

Map: KRI and IDTs in Iraq.



Source: [glohttps://www.google.com](https://www.google.com)

and, on the other hand, by the controversial Law of Investment (Law for Investment in Kurdistan Region No.4, 2006, available at: <http://www.kurdistan-parliament.org/Default.aspx?page=byyear&c=LDD-Yasa&id=2006>).

DISPLACEMENT IN IRAQ (2003-2019): AN OVERVIEW

Massive population displacements, systematic or as a consequence of civic unrest, have been a common collective experience in the last fifty years of Iraqi history. A well-documented policy of demographic engineering, with the aim of changing the demographic composition of ethnically diverse and economically strategic areas, has been implemented in many parts of the country (see, e.g., Ismail, 2005; Ismail, 2011; Anderson and Stansfield, 2009; Bengio, 2014; PAX for Peace, 2015, Ozaltin, Shakir and Loizides, 2019). The second part of displacement, which is the subject of this paper, in contrast to the systematic demographic change, is, for the most part, a consequence of the collapse of state control and widespread sectarian violence and organized crime, which swept the country in the aftermath of the 2003 war.

Although by 2006 an estimated 250,000 Iraqis had already been displaced, there is an agreement that the attack on Al-Askari Shrine, one of the holiest Shi'a shrines in Samarra in February 2006, constituted the spark for sectarian violence in Iraq. Between 2006 and 2008 apart from 1.8 million Iraqis who took refuge in neighbouring countries, 1.6 million Iraqi were displaced internally (International Organization of Migration (IOM) 2014, p. 15 also see Marfleet, 2011, p. 280).

A relatively stable era 2008-2012 was followed by a gradual deterioration of situations in predominantly Sunni Arab governorates (Anbar, Nineveh, Diyala and Saladin). The Iraqi government's violent reaction to sit-in demands in those governorates triggered another wave of displacement, though not of a large scale. IOM (2014, p. 16) reports that 9,991 persons were displaced in 2013. The invasion of predominantly Sunni Arab governorates in 2014 by ISIL marks the beginning of massive waves of displacement. In the span of four months (June to September 2014), 1,901,370 (IOM, 2015) persons were displaced, of which number 836,670 IDPs were from Mosul alone (IOM, 2014). In spite of the return of substantial segments of IDPs in 2017-2018, the latest available figure of 2018 estimates the number of Iraqi IDPs to reach 1.8 million persons (DTM 2018 cited in Ozaltin, Shakir and Loizides, 2019).

Due to their stable security conditions, relative economic prosperity and geographic adjacency to predominantly Sunni Arab governorates, the four governorates of KRI provided safe havens for large number of IDPs. KRI hosted 810,000 Iraqi IDPs who fled sectarian violence between 2003 and 2010, and it received another 1.8 million IDPS in the aftermath of the ISIL attack (Ministry of Interior – KRG, 2017). Although after retaking Nineveh and other majority Sunni Arab governorates from ISIL, considerable sections of IDPs began moving to their AoO, figures of Joint Crisis Coordination Centre, KRG (JCCC), point to the existence of 763,277 registered IDPs in KRI in June 2019.

To conclude this section, reference to two facts is essential: first, a peculiar feature of displacement in Iraq is that it has not been confined to one specific area. In fact, as Marfleet (2011, p. 280) observes, each governorate (excluding governorates of KRI) of Iraq has produced and received IDPs. The overarching displacement trend has been one of movement of IDPs to communities whose religious and ethnic identity is consistent with that of the majority of the population in host communities (Ibid, p. 280). In this sense, the internal displacement in Iraq strengthened further the physical and social segregation of society along ethnic and religious lines. Internal displacement also influenced the composition of neighbourhoods in multi-ethnic and religious urban settings. In this regard, while in Baghdad, historically most of the neighbourhoods were ethnically mixed and, according to Ala Hussain Al-Qazzaz (cited in Damluji, 2010, p. 76), religion and sect never had an impact on one's place of residence, in post-2006, sectarian violence and organized crime enforced

a clear-cut geographical segregation along ethnic lines: interestingly by early 2007, an estimate of 5.25 of Baghdad's total population of the then 7 million resided in homogeneous neighbourhoods (Damluji, 2010, p. 78). A similar trend was the case in many other historically mixed cities of Iraq: in Kirkuk, for example, Kurds mostly moved to the northern neighbourhoods and Arabs to the southern neighbourhoods of the city, and in Mosul, Sunni Arabs remained on the western side of Tigris and Kurds and other minorities concentrated on the eastern side (Rydgren and Sofi, 2011; PAX for Peace, 2015). Adelman and Barkan (2011) conclude:

Iraqi society has been fractured along ethnic and religious lines, but these divisions now define not only the predominant political structure, but also the geographical division of the population into virtually exclusive zones of Shi'a, Sunni, and Kurds, with an almost total ethnic cleansing of other minorities.

Second, a significant fact about displacement in Iraq is the disproportionate representation of ethnic and religious minorities (ERMs) in the overall displaced population (The Centre of International Governance Innovation, 2009, p.3). Although ERMs make up roughly 5 per cent of the country's population, 20 per cent of the overall Iraqi IDPs are from ERM backgrounds. Intimidation and actual violence against members of ERMs has been a country-wide phenomenon. According to the Minority Rights Group International Report, 90 per cent of Chaldo-Assyrians, 76 per cent of Yazidis, 75 per cent of Shabaks and 85 per cent of Turkmen have received threats motivated by ethnic or religious animosity, including pressure to assimilate to dominant local religious norms and/or to give pledges of support for different militia groups (cited in Marfleet, 2011 also PAX for Peace, 2015). The report by the Centre for International Governance Innovation points to the displacement of 80 per cent of Mandaeans and 60 per cent of Christians. Of 1,200 Christian families in Basra in 2003, only a few managed to stay. Nearly 75 per cent of Christians have fled Baghdad, many taking refuge in northern governorates. A report shows that only 10 per cent of Christians who used to reside in Iraq in 1991 remained in the country. The same reports states that half of Iraqi asylum seekers in Europe are Iraqi Christians (Adelman, 2015, p.174). This has led some to suggest that Iraq is moving towards a minority-free nation. It is worth noting that 60 per cent of IDPs in KRI are from ERM backgrounds (JCCC, 2019).

METHODOLOGY

This research makes use of qualitative data gathered by the author in 2015, 2017 and 2018 as part of separate research projects on a) the return of IDPs to Nineveh (for which the author worked as research consultant to PAX for Peace); b) political participation of ERMs in Nineveh after ISIL; and c) Kurdish inhabitants' attitude in Erbil towards Iraqi Arab IDPs in KRI. The data collection in March 2015 included focus-group discussions with IDPs from minority backgrounds in IDP camps in the governorates of Erbil and Dahuk in KRI and representatives of those communities in the Iraqi Parliament and Provincial Council of Nineveh. Overall, alongside 18 interviews with key informants, more than 300 persons participated in the focus-group discussions that were carried out in IDP camps. The 2017 data collection on political participation of ERMs was confined to political party leaders and members of Iraqi Parliament representing minorities in Nineveh. In this project, ten people were interviewed. The third project on the attitude of Kurdish inhabitants in Erbil city towards Iraqi Arab IDPs was a survey in which 224 persons participated. In addition, the paper uses a number of pilot interviews, which were carried out in the second half of 2018 with midlevel policy implementers in the Ministry of Interior, KRG. The research also utilized secondary data analysis by examining figures and recent reports published on displacement in Iraq.

Yet, future research projects need to overcome some of the limitations of this paper by including a thorough examination of other examples of displacement and social integration policies in different contexts. Adding a comparative aspect to the research in this area is likely to be helpful in designing social integration policies in KRI. Moreover, future research is encouraged to reach out to IDPs in non-camp settings as it allows examining indicators of social integration in a context where displacement took long enough for the IDPs and host communities to interact and to establish durable social contacts.

Finally, it is worth noting that data collection, especially with the first wave of focus-group discussions, encountered significant difficulties. First, IDPs interviewed, mostly from Nineveh, spoke variations of informal Arabic language and other IDPs from ERM backgrounds sometimes spoke completely different languages. Although the author received essential support from a local research assistant, minor communication issues were not entirely overcome. Second, and more importantly, it was the fact that IDPs in the camp setting, by the time of the data collection for this project, had already been overwhelmed by other research projects and need assessment missions conducted by governmental and non-governmental agencies. The impacts of this were twofold: on the one hand, some IDP had become tired, and hostile to, researchers approaching them having almost the same set of questions to ask; and on the other hand, the humanitarian needs of IDPs were so overriding to discourage them to talk about seemingly less pressing cultural or political issues. As interviewees placed (understandably) central emphasis on basic needs of shelter, water and food, frequent diversions of the communication would occur during the course of interviews. In many instances, interviewees would expect/ hope to receive immediate assistance and would hope this project to be instrumental in receiving swift humanitarian services.

RETURN: THE POSSIBILITY AND COMMUNITY VARIATIONS

For many IDPs, especially for IDPs from ERM backgrounds, return is not the most desired option (PAX for Peace, 2015; MERI, 2017a; IOM, 2019). Research shows (MERI, 2017a) that displacement for a considerable numbers of IDPs is a pre-step for a cross-border migration. About 45 per cent of IDP household surveyed in Middle East Research Institute (MERI)'s report (Ibid) have wished or even developed concrete plans to leave the country altogether. IOM (Feb. 2019) report indicates that 39 per cent of Christian IDPs and 25 per cent of Yazidi IDPs plan to migrate abroad. Nevertheless, sizeable numbers of IDPs are willing/ hopping/ planning to return to their original homelands inside Iraq. According to UNHCR (cited in Minority Rights Group International, 2016, p. 30), 42 per cent of Iraqi IDPs in southern and central parts of Iraq intend to return and 35 per cent are waiting to make a decision on the matter. The figures drop for IDPs in the northern governorates of KRI as only 22 per cent of IDPs reported the intention to return to their original locations. Motivations for return, that is pushing factors in the host community, (PAX for Peace, 2015; Minority Rights Group International, 2016; MERI, 2017a) revolve around, but are not limited to, poor living conditions in the camp and other displacement settings³, lack of services and job opportunities, discrimination, inability to cope with host communities due to language or cultural barriers, security restrictions on the movement of IDPs, emotional attachment to the homeland and family reunification. In spite of return, returnees have not always found post-return environment satisfying: In fact, IOM (February 2019) survey on returnees demonstrates that 87 per cent of returnees surveyed are not satisfied: three areas of concern are services, security and economic opportunities.

To understand motivations for reluctance to return, one has to take into account that IDPs do not constitute a homogeneous category. In fact, a distinction has to be made between IDPs on two important grounds, IDPs from minority backgrounds vs. IDPs from majority backgrounds, and a

second distinction between locations of displacement (central and south locations vs. northern locations).

Consistent with other literature (Tuathail and O'Loughlin, 2009; Adelman and Barkan, 2011; Metivier, Stefanovic and Loizides, 2018; Ozaltin, Shakir and Loizides, 2019) that asserts that return to a location where one's ethnic community constitutes the demographic majority is perceived to be safer and therefore more desired, MERI's (2017a, p. 30) data show that return has been a more attractive option for Shi'a Arabs, Sunni Arabs, Kurds and Turkmens than to ethnic and religious minorities such as Christians, Sunni Shabaks, Yazidis or Kakais. This finding has been confirmed by IOM's survey (February 2019), which demonstrates that nearly all Shi'a Shabaks and Shi'a Turkmen (belonging to majority Shi'a communities) are planning to stay in their areas of return. Correspondently, IOM's survey (Ibid) shows that although ERMs make up 22 per cent of Iraqi IDPs, they barely constitute 2.7 per cent of returnees.

The decision to return for minorities is much more complicated than it is for members of majority groups: the wide-scale violence against ERMs amid a situation of lawlessness in many parts of Iraq after the 2003 war has made minorities deeply uncertain about their future in Iraq. Our focus-group discussions with IDPs from minority backgrounds revealed numerous examples of violence and discriminatory practices against minorities. As large sections of IDPs from ERM backgrounds headed abroad, Minority Rights Groups International (2016) correctly concluded that Iraqi "minorities are on the verge of disappearance". IDPs from minority backgrounds, across interviewees, were deeply sceptical not only about the capacity of Iraqi government but also about its intention and honesty to protect them upon any future return. A participant in a focus-group discussion said:

Iraqi government used whatever force it had and used coalition forces with all of its advanced combat machinery to protect Shi'a population of Amirli⁴...but what did they do to protect Yazidis? We have been under siege of Da'esh for six months in Sinjar Mountains...they never came to help.

Recognizing the possibilities of future violence against minorities after any possible return, there is a strong call by ethnic and religious minorities, grassroots and elite alike that any return has to be guaranteed by international protection. Yazidi and Christian participants would regularly repeat that "*we only return when there is international protection*" and that "*we will not return with this government...[and] that this government sells us at the cost of one dinar*". The calls, in some instances, go further to include new institutional arrangements that can protect minorities and guarantee their autonomy in areas where they constitute a demographic majority. This applies mainly to Nineveh plain, which is a home for Christian, Yazidi, Turkmen, Shabaks and Kakais. In this framework, proposals such as the creation of an autonomous region in Nineveh Plain, after the KRI model, or at least creation of a new governorate in the area have been on the table (PAX for Peace, 2015; Khedir, 2017a; MERI, 2017b). Even in certain instances, some IDPs advocated integration of their areas into KRI. Hence, when it comes to minorities, return becomes a political issue and exceeds the conventional focus on physical reconstruction and individual concerns associated with availability of basic services or job opportunities.

Another distinction for IDP communities is the difference in the locations of displacement: in this regard, IDPs who took refuge in KRI are less likely to take immediate decisions about return. In spite of the entry restrictions and restrictions over movement that had been introduced by KRG (now relaxed) and even some forms of social, cultural and economic discriminations towards IDPs particularly IDPs from Arab backgrounds (Interview with IDPs from Arab backgrounds in KRI), largely due to the absence of any security risks, IDPs interviewed are happy to stay longer in KRI and wait to take a more informed decision about staying, returning or migrating to other countries. Participants in focus-group discussions very frequently emphasized that they, at least, feel safe in KRI. Other interviewees in a different research project had said, "*Here [in Kurdistan] we feel like*

we live in another country". Furthermore, some IDPs interviewed stated that "*here in Kurdistan we are treated equally... nobody tells you are Turkmen, Shabak, or Christian*". Apparently, for many IDPs, choosing to stay in KR reflects mainly the ability of the KRG to maintain stability. Therefore, in return for safety, they are willing to compromise on the basic needs of food, clean water, shelter, education and job opportunities. It should also be noted that even before 2014, events that triggered massive displacement from Nineveh, KRI, especially the two adjacent governorates of Erbil and Dahuk, were significant providers of economic opportunities for residents of Nineveh plain.

As security, economic and reconstruction of the violence-affected areas did not improve, there has been a new sporadic movement of re-displacement for IDPs who had returned to their original locations in the areas retaken from ISIL in 2017. Hoshang Mohammed, KRG's JCCC director, stated that 11,000 persons were re-displaced from Mosul in the first eight months of 2018 (Rudaw Media Network 2018, available at <http://www.rudaw.net/sorani/kurdistan/130820188>). The instability of newly retaken areas, fears associated with retaliations and discriminations and stability and economic opportunities in KRI have been among the most important explanatory factors for the new re-displacements. Overall, for substantial portions of IDP communities, return is not an immediate option, re-displacement, despite the fact that ISIL has been almost completely driven out of Iraqi territories, for a variety of reasons, remains a possibility. This protracted nature of displacement brings to the fore the necessity of a social integration policy.

SOCIAL INTEGRATION: THE ABSENCE OF A POLICY

MERI's report (2017a) suggests that displacement in Iraq should be perceived as a chronic issue, not a temporal or a humanitarian matter. This understanding is relevant given that the Iraqi context is marked by the fragility of political process and the ineffectiveness of state apparatuses in maintaining peace and stability. The possibilities remain for further displacements and re-displacements after return. One of the implications for the protracted nature of displacement is that social integration policies need to be developed at national and regional levels.

In addition, even though it is not plausible to straightforwardly portray Iraqi society as a totally sectarian society, one cannot deny the fact that the manifestations of violent sectarianism grew rapidly and that many forms of violence, including forced displacement, are practised to serve sectarian agendas (see, e.g., Inglehart, Moaddel and Tessler, 2006; Damluji, 2010; Rydgren and Sofi, 2011; Haddad, 2011; Adelman and Barkan, 2011; Khedir, 2013). Research has shown that Iraqi society has moved towards social and physical segregations and that level of inter-community trust and tolerance has declined significantly. Social integration policies, therefore, should now be at the heart of any debate about the future of the country. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqi IDPs, many from Arab and ERM backgrounds, have settled in KRI and lack the tools and support to integrate in the Kurdish communities. Consequently, IDPs remained physically and socially isolated, in the case of IDPs in the refugee camps, and socially isolated in the case of IDPs who live in Kurdish urban neighbourhoods. In this context, IDPs pointed out that not speaking Kurdish language constitutes a real barrier for them to interact with Kurds (MERI 2017a). In another survey, Khedir (2017b) found that for the host community too, language proved to be a momentous barrier and that Kurds who speak Arabic were more likely to engage in social contact with Iraqi Arab IDPs.

Yet, it is safe to argue that social integration of IDPs is by no means a government policy/ priority. This applies to Iraqi national and Kurdistan governments. *Institutionally*, on the national level, the government of Iraq's Ministry of Migration and Displaced (MMD) has not been tasked with any forms of social integration-related mandates (see Law of Ministry of Migration and Displaced numbered 21 for the year, 2009). The law that specifically identifies multitude categories of

displaced Iraqis refers very vaguely to providing “necessary services” to them. In few instances, the law merely mentions “immediate and urgent needs” without tackling the long-term needs of IDPs. In Kurdistan Region, the JCCC, formed by KRG, resembles the Iraqi MMD in the sense that its scope of activities is confined to engage in coordination with local, national and international actors in providing humanitarian needs for the IDPs in the region. In consequence, interviewees from ministerial level in KRG recognized the complexity of displacement issue and called for a more organized, coordinated (engagement with the UN and Iraqi government) and inclusive approach to the issue: an Interviewee stated:

The government [KRG] on its own cannot deal with IDPs. . .like Baghdad, it should have had a ministry for displacement. . .displacement is a complicated issue and has many cultural, economic and demographic aspects.

Another interviewee (shared by other interviewees) pointed to the necessity of a broader approach to IDPs. He stated:

The Government need not to look at IDPs through security lenses. . .it is time for the attention to be paid to educational, economic and cultural needs of displaced individuals.

A more significant impediment, however, is the *political sensitivities* that surround displacement. In KRI, reflecting a history of state-sponsored demographic changes, there are common fears that displacement of massive numbers of Iraqi Arab IDPs may result in another wave of demographic change in the future (Interview with key informants). Thus, both at the elite and grassroots levels, there is a conviction that the displacement of Arab IDPs must not be allowed to prolong. Furthermore, what reinforces pro-return of IDPs is security concerns resulted from potential involvement of some IDPs or their families and relatives in extremist groups: an interviewee said:

A substantial section of Sunni Arab IDPs have already taken part in terrorist activities of Da’esh or they say they are accused by Shi’a Arabs as collaborators of Da’esh. . .Shi’as do that to drive us out from our homes.

Nevertheless, none of interviewees from KRG ministry of Interior called for forced return of IDPs, even with IDPs who constitute stronger potential security threat. An Interviewee said “*IDPs who do not pose a security concern should be allowed to stay, and others must be encouraged to return*”. Interviewees suggested that KRG and Iraqi government must do their best to return IDPs as fast as possible. This tendency has not been challenged by the recognition that displacement has had some positive impacts on the economy of Kurdish society and it has enhanced community relations (Interviews with Key informants and Khedir, 2017b). Apparently, long-term political concerns related to demographic changes and, to lesser extent, economic concerns associated with the burden created by displacement on KRG and the market have detrimentally shaped mass attitudes towards displacement. Therefore, in the host environment, a pro-return preference seems to be ominously pervasive.

For different reasons, other Iraqi communities have taken similar positions: Sunni Arab elites, whose areas have been the major producers of IDPs in the aftermath of ISIL’s capture of Mosul and other predominantly Arab Sunni governorates, are worried that displacement of hundreds of thousands of Sunni Arabs will negatively harm their election constituencies. Sunni Arab elites have feared that the displacement of massive number of their supporters to KRI and other Iraqi cities would lead to a decline in the true presence of Sunni Arab voice in the Iraqi Parliament. Although not stated publicly, there are also common reservations that the longer Arab IDPs stay in KRI; Kurdish authorities will have a stronger chance to patronize them. It is argued that in displacement settings, either as a result of fear or as a consequence of providing privileges (stick and carrot), IDPs

will not have full freedom to elect their “authentic” representatives. Having many IDPs in KRI and that they cast their vote in the region has been suggested to enable Kurdish authorities to influence the displaced persons’ vote. In the period leading up to the May 2018 parliamentary elections, Sunni Arab elites were among the loudest advocates for the postponement of elections. They demanded for elections to take place following the return of IDPs. Additionally, minority groups’ elites, on their part, have persistently raised concerns about the ultimate existence of minorities in the country resulting from massive outward migrations. Hence, it is not only the Kurds (the host community and elites) who have taken pro-return attitudes, but rather it is a preference shared by other communities and political elites, albeit for different reasons. Associated with that, there is a belief that displacement is method to gain political ends: an interviewee while advocated for return of IDPs considered displacement as a political method by Shi’a elites to purge Sunni Arabs and to create a strong Shi’astan (land of Shi’a) in Iraq, a move according to him, must be resisted by returning the Sunni Arabs back to their areas of origin. He said:

nothing is left to be called Iraq. . . we have a Shi’astan and Kurdistan Region. . . the staying of IDPs in Kurdistan not only does not relax the financial burden of KRG, it facilitates the plan of creation of a tyrannical Shi’a state which will be a threat to Kurdistan region and other components in the country.

In spite of the relevance of political and security-related concerns, the absence of a social integration policy has other roots: there is an obvious lack of a policy concept and tradition of social integration in Iraq. What makes this line of argument robust is that in the last three decades, there have been other communities who were in need of social integration services but never received them in any significant way. Kurdish refugees who returned from Western countries or those who returned from neighbouring countries (mainly Iran) are a case in point. Interestingly, some policies of KRG in relation to Kurdish returnees from the Western countries have discouraged their social integration. For instance, the first school to instruct children of returnee families was set up by Kurdistan Save the Children in October 2004 (Romano, n.d). The method and curriculum of education, however, was a Western one. Since then, “international schools” have proliferated in KRI. The language of instruction in these schools range from English, to French, to Dutch and so on. The curricula and pedagogy also follow the Western models. Research (Salih, Rahman, and Othman, 2017) found that these schools are not protecting the Kurdish language, as the mother language, and that subjects that can introduce students to the culture and history of Kurdistan are downplayed. In other words, education that has long been thought as one of the main tools of social integrations serves to further social de-integration and social marginalization.

Therefore, social integration of IDPs remains problematic as it is influenced by historical hostilities, lack of institutional framework and overall absence of social integration as a policy concept and tradition.

CONCLUSIONS: TOWARDS POLICY INTERVENTIONS

Displacement of IDPs in KR is very likely to be a prolonged issue. Substantial numbers of IDPs, especially from ERM backgrounds, tend to stay permanently or transitionally. The vast majority of IDPs have settled in Kurdish neighbourhoods in the main cities of the region lacking necessary tools and support to integrate in Kurdish society. One implication for such a reality is that there is a need to develop social integration policies that go beyond the immediate and humanitarian needs of IDPs to facilitate their social integration in Kurdish society. To this end, and by drawing on SCT, social integration policies should assist and support hosting Kurdish communities and displaced communities in establishing meaningful relationships and contacts.

In spite of the fact that IDPs, whether in camp settings or in urban neighbourhoods, have not had significant contacts with Kurdish communities, research (Khedir, 2017b and also Key informant interview) indicates that the social contact in Erbil, though remained to be infrequent, has been helpful in the formation of a more positive image of Iraqi Arabs. Many research participants reported that they had previously thought of Arabs as tribal, aggressive, enemies of Kurds and so on, but that increased contact had changed their attitudes. A substantial number of respondents in the same survey had mentioned that if they were able to speak Arabic language, they would have had closer social relationships with Iraqi Arabs. While one cannot deny the impact of historical injustices on inter-community relations in Iraq, it is important to note that availability of organizational support and well-designed policy interventions can steer communities towards more peaceful relations.

It is also worth noting that although a pro-return preference tends to be prevailing, the interviewees from KRG's Ministry of Interior not only acknowledged a range of desired economic and cultural outcomes of displacement (such as bringing in money into KRI especially by IDPs from middle and upper classes and developing more understanding between communities), but also advocated for taking displacement as an opportunity to build cross-community ties and peace-building initiatives.

This paper places emphasis on *language support* and *diversification and heterogenization of interaction spaces* as two main elements of social integration policy. For Iraqi IDPs to be able to establish a normal life, they first and foremost need to be provided with Kurdish language training opportunities. To the best of author's knowledge, apart from mandatory language trainings for Arab surgeons who work in Kurdish cities⁵, there have been no such similar interventions. Kurdish residents often blame Arab IDPs who, after years of residence in KRI, still do not speak Kurdish language. In fact, some Kurds tend to interpret it as an indicator of hostility and Arabs' overall sense of superiority and their belief that speaking Kurdish language is not a necessity. This is to suggest that language, as is typically the case, transcends the day-to-day functions of communication and carries many sensitive political connotations. In fact, access to language trainings is a challenge for many, regardless of their nationality. Even people from Western countries, who for whatsoever reason reside in Kurdistan, find it extremely difficult, if not totally impossible, to find suitable Kurdish language courses. Perhaps Kurdish academic institutions and private sector can reach out to their Western counterparts benefiting from their experience in designing tailor-made courses for the Iraqi and Kurdish contexts.

Despite the overall acceptance that language competency is essential for any future social integration of migrants, refugees and IDPs, there are policy issues that remain contentious. Bian (2017) summarizes the central debate in looking at language as a human right and language as a human capital issue. By focusing on the first, Bian suggests European Union policies have promoted the significance of multilingualism and the preservation of community and minority languages. Nevertheless, human mobility, access to job opportunities and inclusion of migrants require efficiency in the formal language of the receiving countries, language as a human capital. Keeping the balance between the two issues remains vital in the Kurdish context too. While KRG's policies need to approve and promote language differences as an individual and group human right and that it is constitutionally endorsed anyways, it needs to develop policies that ensure that non-Kurdish speakers will have access to language training opportunities. Moreover, the design and delivery of language courses are also of pivotal significance: Caglitutuncigil (2018) warns that language classes can have adverse effects as they may deepen gender and class-based inequalities. Thus, the author calls for a more attention to the organizational features of those courses. In this respect, it has to be made certain that language trainings will not cause gender lag (as it is more likely that men due to their family status of being breadwinner in the Iraqi context) by admitting predominantly men in these courses. In addition, language trainings should be extensive enough to enable trainees to work in various employment settings, not only low paid jobs, as Caglitutuncigil (ibid) contends.

Moreover, language courses can be instrumental if they include the spoken language to allow IDPs interact with ordinary Kurds in neighbourhoods and other residential settings.

What is more, diversification and heterogenization of interaction spaces, again systematically and under right conditions, should be an element of the proposed social integration policy. Iraqi IDPs in KRI are isolated either physically and socially in camp settings or socially in urban neighbourhoods. Rydgren, Sofi and Hallsten (2013, pp. 1679-1680) examined the impact of heterogeneous settings (workplace, residential neighbourhoods, political parties and civil society) in Kirkuk and concluded that heterogeneity of social settings increases the possibility of cross-community interaction, which eventually produce inter-community trust and tolerance. With respect to IDPs in urban settings in KRI, one can observe that heterogeneity has not penetrated most of the possible interaction spaces. Apart from residential neighbourhoods, schools, workplaces (especially governmental offices) and civil society tend to be much less heterogeneous. Schools that can gather large number of students are more homogeneous than other interaction spaces. IDP children who headed to the KRI before 2014 study the KRG's school curricula in the Arabic language, and children who took refuge in KRI after this date attend schools that are administratively run by Iraqi government (105 schools in Erbil alone), and they follow the Iraqi government school curricula in the Arabic language (Interview with Mahmoud Hamza, Senior Education Facilitator, UNICEF). The Kurdish language is not taught in any of those schools. The outcome is the isolation of IDP children socially and stifling the development of their language skills and cultural competencies. This has been the case for most Syrian refugee children in the last few years as they have continuously had their education in the Arabic language. Though one can understand that such a situation has arisen because of the massive nature of displacement and the limited admission capacity of Kurdish schools, the outcome remains the same: that children from IDP and host communities lack the social space to interact and to establish constructive relationships. Social integration policy has to develop strategies to explore the ways through which multitude social spaces can be properly heterogenized. In this regard, a special focus has to be placed on educational institutions. It is important to take maximum advantage of the fact that of 763,277 IDPs in KRI, 549,675 persons (72%) reside in non-camp settings (JCCC, 2019). This means that the vast majority of IDPs share the physical sphere with Kurds, the language proficiency training along with systematic increase in the interaction spaces can offer greater chances for social integration of IDPs in KRI.

Finally, two issues are of fundamental importance: first, reluctance to return, for whatever reason, cannot be sufficient to justify the need for social integration policies. However, for reasons stated previously, stakeholders in the Iraqi government and the KRG are not in favour of looking at the displacement as a long-standing and protracted concern. They intend the displacement period to be short, and believe that social integration policies may prolong it. The author suggests that policy-oriented research must begin by challenging this understanding. Second, social integration is broader than the framework established in this article, social integration policies have to take into account a complex range of political, legal, economic, cultural and attitudinal aspects and there are many stakeholders who need to agree both in the design and in the implementation phases of these policies. Nevertheless, the policy framework put forward in this article, invites policymakers to consider the widely applied SCT as one of the routes of social integration. Barriers to integration are many and diverse; however, for the SCT, language barriers and lack of social interaction spaces constitute two major impediments.

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NOTES

1. The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement define IDPs as “persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border” (United Nations, 1998 cited in IOM Iraq, Feb. 2019)
2. Geographic distribution of violence in Iraq shows that Baghdad, Baqubah, Mosul, Samarra and Kirkuk have been the most violent places in Iraq. RAND (cited in Hall and Stahl 2008) estimates the number of Iraqi violence-related fatalities, excluding fatalities resulting from major military operations, between May 2003 and mid-January 2007 at 52,000 with 73 deaths per day in 2006. A larger household survey, for virtually the same period, produced an estimate of 151,000 deaths (Green and Ward 2009, p. 610).
3. In a focus-group discussion, a group of Christian female IDPs told the author that the whole family of 5, 7, 9 and even 17 members live in one room, whereas previously, they owned houses in their AoO built on 200- and 300-m² areas of land. It should be noted that Christian IDPs enjoyed relatively better services in displacement compared with other IDPS for whom the situation, especially in the camp settings, was much tougher.
4. Amirli is a town in Saladin governorate with a population of 42,000, mainly from Shi’s Turkmen ethnic backgrounds.
5. This language training programme is a mandatory programme for Iraq Arab surgeons who work in KR. It is a three-month length course with the aim of enabling surgeons to communicate with patients. So far, 400 surgeons have been covered by the course. In spite of its success as claimed by Mohammad Taha Hawez, management director of Kurdistan Surgeons’ Syndicate (Phone Interview, 20 November, 2019) and the demand of Arab surgeon for further training, it can be criticized on two grounds: first, the training is technical in the sense that the scope of it is limited to training surgeons to communicate with patients about their physical problems only, and as such, no space is devoted to the use of language in everyday life. Thus, the utility of these trainings is likely to stay in a narrow professional circle; and second, this training targets general surgeons and dentists are not included in the programme.

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