

# PROSPECTS FOR RESOLVING DISPLACEMENT IN AREAS OF LIMITED AND NO RETURN IN BABYLON GOVERNORATE



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This in-depth qualitative study of areas of limited and no returns in Musayab district seeks to uncover specific barriers to the durable resolution of the displacement of affected people and potential ways forward in unlocking those barriers. Doing so is a critical step towards the implementation of the Joint Government of Iraq and United Nations Roadmap pursuant to the United Nations Secretary-General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement. This study also serves to improve the political dialogue in the country on how to provide a voluntary and informed choice of residence for people who are experiencing long-term displacement. Findings are drawn from focus group discussions with internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Jurf al-Sakhar and Al-Iskandaria and key informant interviews with local and provincial authorities, displaced tribal leaders and international experts.

Recent data indicate that 41,767 individuals from these two subdistricts remain displaced and have been since 2014.<sup>1</sup> As of August 2023, no returns have taken place in Jurf al-Sakhar and only two locations in Al-Iskandaria have registered partial returns. The primary barrier to return is attributed to the specific Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs) controlling each subdistrict – Kata'ib Hezbollah in Jurf al-Sakhar and Liwa Ali al-Akbar in Al-Iskandaria. Under the pretext of security and counterterrorism, PMUs prevent returns. IDPs, however, see these blockages as inhuman in nature and as a form of collective punishment against the displaced of Babylon in particular. There are also considerable economic, sociopolitical and regional benefits to these PMUs in keeping these populations from returning, particularly in Jurf al-Sakhar.

IDPs from Al-Iskandaria have had access to their areas of origin – or at least the subdistrict – while those from Jurf al-Sakhar have not been able to access neither their subdistrict nor land and property in nine years. Regardless, these displaced populations seem stuck between solutions as it is not possible to return nor fully integrate. The issues they face related to housing costs, irregular income, documentation issues and fears of being evicted from displacement locations make local integration difficult. Thus, the desire to return is strong among these populations, not only due to the material hardships of displacement, but also to their emotional and historical connections to land and rights as citizens. As such, while some indicate wishing to locally integrate, particularly if return seems unlikely, the issue of return is considered contentious, and most indicate wanting to return if it were possible.

These are hypothetical choices since no initiatives to resolve displacement from Al-Iskandaria and Jurf al-Sakhar have yielded any results yet. Key informants indicated that returns are most likely for Al-Iskandaria, particularly as a local process is ongoing for providing security clearance for families; however, Liwa Ali al-Akbar has not yet allowed their return. Necessary stakeholders for fully implementing this process, as per key informants, require the central government in coordination with the Popular Mobilization Commission (PMC). The United Nations and donor governments have a role to play in pressuring these actors to engage.

Given the character and structure of Kata'ib Hezbollah, within and outside of Iraq, many participants in this study point to the need to more fully and concertedly internationalize any future processes related to the return of the displaced to Jurf al-Sakhar. Doing so would include bringing together critical powerbrokers within and outside of Iraq that can have influence on this issue and on the force impeding returns. Key informants see the United Nations as having a critical role to play as a neutral third-party mediator, as a guarantor of IDP rights and protection, and as having influence on wider public discourse on this issue. For several key informants, however, Jurf al-Sakhar is seen as a redline for the PMC in that returns

can happen in Al-Iskandaria, but not here. This does not mean that any future efforts to facilitate returns should solely focus on Al-Iskandaria at the expense of Jurf al-Sakhar, but rather that recognition of the current impasses should inform any approach to resolve these issues, putting the rights, demands and protection of IDPs and recipient communities at their centre.

IDPs' preconditions for return include: (1) security configuration reform, safety and guarantees of protection, and in Jurf al-Sakhar in particular; the full withdrawal of the PMU from the area; (2) full compensation for losses, destruction of land and property, and assistance to help rebuild; (3) reconstruction and reconciliation support, the latter particularly in Jurf al-Sakhar; and (4) justice and accountability in relation to the fates of missing people and the release of prisoners who have not been charged (that is, of terrorism).

Preconditions for local integration for those IDPs willing to consider it (or even prefer it) include: (1) full compensation for losses, destruction of land, property, and assets in origin; (2) housing support; (3) economic integration; (4) expanded service provision and infrastructure in areas of displacement; and (5) justice and accountability around the fate of missing persons.

Several aspects need to be considered to begin addressing prospects for safe, voluntary and informed returns to these areas, while continuing to monitor the evolving regional conflict dynamics that are starting to impact Iraq.

The first aspect is the need to design approaches to the various PMU that consider them as more than simply Iranian proxies, more deeply understand their networks to each other and formal and informal institutions of the Iraqi State, and that create incremental opportunities for addressing structural challenges or deficiencies of the State. The challenges and opportunities uncovered through the Joint Government of Iraq and United Nations Roadmap process are a good starting point. A deeper mapping of relevant powerbrokers and backchannel actors across the landscape of formal and informal elements of the State will also likely be required for this as well.

The second aspect is the need to establish mechanisms through which the displaced can safely participate and voice their demands, perspectives and concerns. Doing so requires broadening the scope of who is informed about any such processes and who gets to safely participate and how, including women and young people. Space for recipient communities, both for those residing in areas of origin and areas of displacement, to express their views and concerns should be considered as well. This is also an opportunity to widen the public discourse on this issue and build a broader base of support within society for addressing the end of displacement in a rights-based and responsive way.

The third aspect is the need to set expectations among all stakeholders, including the displaced, about how many demands can be met in the immediate term – and how quickly. Any processes in this regard for Jurf al-Sakhar and Al-Iskandaria, even in the less challenging of the two locations, will take considerable time and will require significant confidence-building steps on all sides, with all options for resolving displacement being considered.

Finally, it will be critical to avoid pushing for solutions that are politically expedient in the short term but that do not durably resolve displacement or address grievances in the long term. The desire for immediate achievements is understandable, but all actors involved in any processes need to be committed over an extended time to ensure citizens' rights and their protection are upheld now and for future generations.

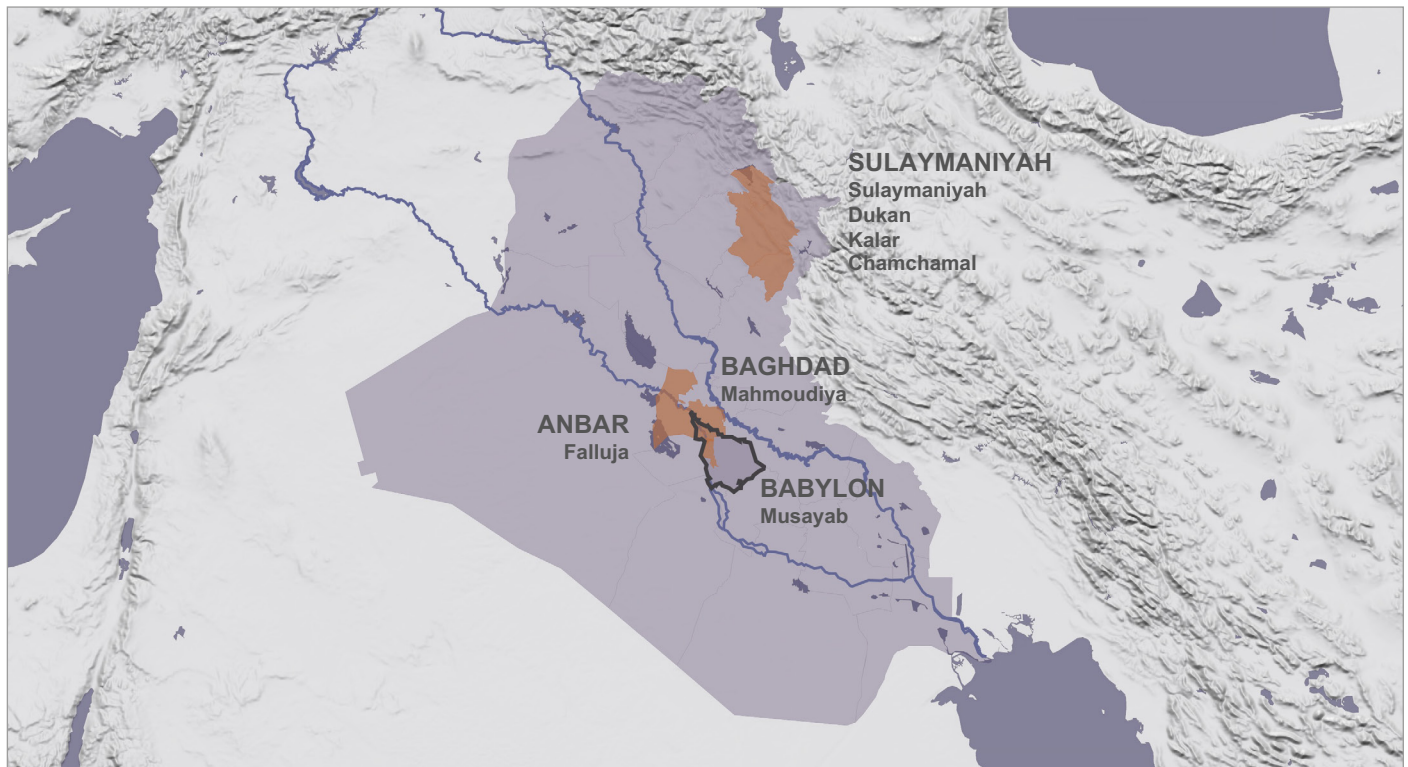
1 IOM DTM Iraq, Integrated Location Assessment VII (Erbil, IOM, 2022).

## INTRODUCTION

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) conflict in Iraq, which officially started in 2014, caused the forced internal displacement of approximately 6 million people from the northern and central parts of the country. In the almost six years since the end of the conflict in late 2017, around 4.8 million of these internally displaced persons (IDPs) have returned to their places of origin, with most of such movements taking place by 2018.<sup>2</sup> Despite this relatively impressive rate of return across the conflict-affected parts of the country, there remain areas where either very limited returns or none have taken place. Jurf al-Sakhar and Al-Iskandaria subdistricts within Musayab district in Babylon Governorate are

two such areas. In these locations, the return of IDPs remains impossible due to blockages imposed by security actors who now operate there. This condition of no return and its ripple effects have resulted in a nearly decade-long protracted displacement for those affected, limiting their potential options for resolving their displacement in a voluntary, safe and informed manner. The most recent displacement figures to date indicate that this population comprises 41,767 individuals spread primarily between Babylon, Anbar, Baghdad and Sulaymaniyah governorates, respectively (Map 1).<sup>3</sup>

Map 1. Primary districts of displacement for Jurf al-Sakhar and Al-Iskandaria IDPs



Further understanding the specific barriers to durably resolving the displacement of those from areas of limited and no return, and potential ways forward in unlocking them is a critical step towards implementing the Joint Government of Iraq and United Nations Roadmap pursuant to the United Nations Secretary-General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement.<sup>4</sup> Such knowledge also serves to improve the political dialogue in the country on how to provide a voluntary and informed choice of residence for people who are experiencing long-term displacement. This process is timely as government and international attention begins to encompass a wider focus beyond ISIL conflict-affected communities in the coming year.<sup>5</sup>

The following in-depth qualitative analysis of Jurf al-Sakhar and Al-Iskandaria contributes to this effort through first detailing the key factors preventing IDP returns to these areas and the implications should these factors persist; and second, through identifying any resolution pathways that may exist from a policy perspective. The overarching aim is to provide knowledge on how best to tackle rigid barriers to durable solutions for populations experiencing blocked or constrained return to their areas of origin as a basis for advocacy and programming. Findings will be presented following a brief overview of the context and a description of the study's methodology.

2 IOM DTM Iraq, Returnee Master List Round 130; and Iraq Durable Solutions, Resolving Internal Displacement in Iraq: Inter-Agency Durable Solutions Strategic and Operational Framework (Baghdad, Iraq Durable Solutions, 2021).

3 IOM DTM Iraq, Integrated Location Assessment VII (Erbil, IOM, 2022).

4 See: United Nations, *The United Nations Secretary-General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement* (New York, United Nations, 2022).

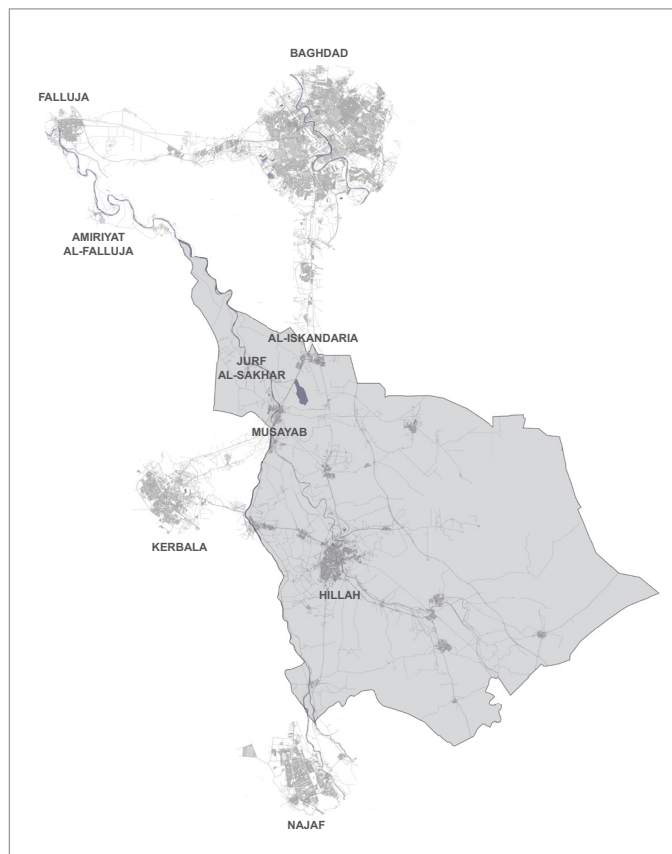
5 OCHA, *Humanitarian Transition Overview 2023* (Geneva and Baghdad, OCHA, 2023).

## CONTEXT OVERVIEW

Located along the Euphrates River, Musayab district, with its mixed Shia and Sunni Arab population, is home to some of the most lush and productive agricultural lands and lakes in the country. The area was also of strategic importance to the former Ba'athist regime and served as the site for a critical military industrial complex that included a munitions factory and depot and a series of underground military tunnels. Following the United States-led invasion of the country and the fall of the former regime, the area was the scene of some of the most intense insurgent and sectarian violence to take place in Iraq from 2003 to 2007.

In this context, ISIL fighters came into Sunni majority parts of Musayab district from neighbouring Anbar Governorate in the second half of 2014, though their control of the area was more tenuous than in other parts of the country they had taken. The group used this area and its existing military infrastructure as a base to launch attacks into the nearby Shia holy city of Kerbala in their attempt to capture further territory on their way toward Baghdad. Map 2 highlights the strategic positions of Jurf al-Sakhar and Al-Iskandaria within the axis between Anbar, Baghdad and Kerbala.

Map 2. Detail of Babylon Governorate and key surrounding areas



The Iraqi Security Forces, primarily a constellation of different Shia Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs), expelled ISIL from the district in October 2014, in what was known as Operation Ashura. One key motivation for this effort was to prevent large-scale militant attacks on pilgrims during the Shia holy month. These operations caused the displacement of primarily Sunni towns and villages, including Jurf al-Sakhar (renamed Jurf al-Nasr by the forces that retook the area) and its surroundings and parts of Al-Iskandaria. The operations also caused full-scale destruction of these specific areas from airstrikes, bombings and artillery fire. It should be noted that not all areas of either subdistrict experienced direct conflict and therefore not all population groups residing here displaced or were forced to flee. Human rights monitors also allege that PMU factions and other security forces engaged in the enforced disappearances of Sunni men and boys as they attempted to cross checkpoints to flee the fighting, including those leading out of Jurf al-Sakhar and Musayab.<sup>6</sup> It is believed that the PMU maintains an illegal detention facility in Jurf al-Sakhar to house some of these individuals and others deemed as threats to their power.<sup>7</sup>

Nearly all the Sunni Arab residents of these targeted areas in Musayab displaced in 2014, either into other mixed Shia-Sunni areas in the district or into Anbar, Baghdad and Sulaymaniyah governorates. Following the retaking of these areas from ISIL, the Babylon provincial council barred all Sunni displaced populations from coming back for at least eight months, to allow for security forces to clear explosives.<sup>8</sup> To date, almost none of these IDPs have been able to return to their home locations in either Jurf al-Sakhar or Al-Iskandaria subdistricts. As of August 2023, only two locations in Al-Iskandaria subdistrict had some return movements registered.<sup>9</sup> The PMU configurations controlling these areas, Kata'ib Hezbollah in Jurf al-Sakhar and Liwa Ali al-Akbar in Al-Iskandaria (Box 1), maintain that the blocked returns are due to security concerns – and indeed provincial and national political actors have deemed these areas and Jurf al-Sakhar in particular as an “incubator of terrorism” and “safe haven of Al-Qaeda and then ISIL.”<sup>10</sup> This stance is countered by a view that these blockages are linked to a wider demographic change strategy to consolidate political and economic power in the area.<sup>11</sup>

6 See, for example, Belkis Wille, “Life Without a Father is Meaningless”: Arbitrary Arrests and Enforced Disappearances in Iraq 2014–2017 (New York, Human Rights Watch, 2018) and Amnesty International, “Punished for Daesh’s Crimes”: Displaced Iraqis Abused by Militias and Government Forces (London, Amnesty International, 2016).

7 Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, Iraq Country Report for Human Rights Practices for 2019 (Washington, D.C., US Department of State, 2019).

8 David D. Kirkpatrick, Sunnis Fear Permanent Displacement from Iraqi Town, New York Times, 5 December 2014.

9 IOM DTM Iraq, Returnee Master List Round 130 (Erbil, IOM, 2023).

10 Sura Ali, Iraqi MP’s Comments on Forced Disappearance, Displacement of Sunnis Spark Controversy, Rudaw, 14 April 2021.

11 Ibid.

### Box 1. Overview of the respective PMU controlling Jurf al-Sakhar and Al-Iskandaria subdistricts

The PMU is a State-sponsored umbrella for various non-State armed groups who sought to defend the country from further ISIL expansion.<sup>12</sup> Many of these groups were already active in Iraq, especially in the Shia Arab-majority south, including those with ties to Iran; however, after 2014, sizeable Sunni forces and other minority group forces were also incorporated under this umbrella. While many of these PMU have come under the command of the Popular Mobilization Commission (PMC), which sits under the Prime Minister's Office, they retain a large degree of autonomy to pursue their own goals and interests across formal and informal network configurations.<sup>13</sup>

- Kata'ib Hezbollah (holding Jurf al-Sakhar) – Iran-backed group whose origins in Iraq date to the post-2003 era. It did not engage in Iraqi politics at that time, but rather resisted the United States occupation. As such, the United States has designated the group as a terrorist organization.<sup>14</sup> The group was led by Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, who was also the deputy head of the PMC, until his assassination in 2020. It is configured as a vanguard network, meaning it has strong leadership ties but weak connection between leadership and its base.<sup>15</sup> In practice, this has meant having elusive and relatively unknown leadership (including to its own fighters and government officials) that is nonetheless internally coherent and able to respond to shocks by rapidly mobilizing under different names and banners. It also has reach into Iraq's formal bureaucracy including provincial administrative structures as well as in non-governmental spaces and local businesses.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, this structure has prevented the group from establishing many political party offices, formally running for elections, or engaging in much activity in local communities.<sup>17</sup> The group's leadership ideologically aligns with Shia supremacy, recognizes deep ties and social relations with Iran, and has a preference for deference to Iran's Supreme Leader; however, they also emphasize that they do not take orders from outside powers but rather act in line with their own interpretation of Iraqi security priorities.<sup>18</sup> Since the ISIL conflict, the group is alleged to have committed serious human rights violations and abuses, run an illegal detention facility in Jurf al-Sakhar, and engaged in regional fighting and attacks in Syria,<sup>19</sup> among others. The group is also part of an umbrella entity, the Islamic

Resistance in Iraq, so named in October 2023 in response to regional conflict between Israel and Hamas.<sup>20</sup> The entity is comprised of other Iran-aligned PMU in the country and as an entity launched attacks against United States bases and targets in Iraq and Syria, though it is reported that only some of its members have directly engaged in such operations with the others rather cheering them on.<sup>21</sup>

- Liwa Ali al-Akbar (holding Al-Iskandaria) – One of the four so-called "shrine brigades" that are included within the overall PMU umbrella. This group is affiliated with the Imam Hussein Shrine in Kerbala Governorate and answers primarily to the spiritual leadership of Iraq's Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.<sup>22</sup> The leaders of these brigades in general are known to oppose Iran-backed leaders at the top of the PMC.<sup>23</sup> This group is not designated by any Western country as a terrorist organization.<sup>24</sup>

After unsuccessful initial attempts by national authorities and international stakeholders to facilitate the safe return of these IDPs, the situation was deemed intractable as of 2020.<sup>25</sup> The Sunni bloc in the Iraqi Parliament took up the issue again in 2022, raising the issue of the blocked returns from Babylon as a key priority and leverage point in the ensuing government formation process. The debate reemerged again in April 2023, when a Sunni politician made public statements regarding the return of IDPs to Babylon. In response, public protests took place in the governorate, with protesters rejecting any such possibility and residents claiming they did not want "terrorists" to come back.<sup>26</sup> The next month, social media and local news reporting highlighted the return of Federal Police battalions to Jurf al-Sakhar.<sup>27</sup> Their return was likely aimed at securing pilgrimage routes in the area rather than to facilitate returns given that after a news report in June 2023<sup>28</sup> and ensuing outcry, the government retracted its plan to build a new camp in western Anbar near an existing PMU base to house IDPs, including those from Jurf al-Sakhar.<sup>29</sup> Most recently, in July 2023, Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' Al-Sudani reportedly requested the rehabilitation and reopening of the Jurf al-Sakhar police station as a precursor to returns to the area,<sup>30</sup> though it is unclear what progress, if any, has been made in this regard. As such, most IDPs from Jurf al-Sakhar and Al-Iskandaria remain living among host communities or within informal settlements or camps in relatively close proximity to their homes with no alternatives as yet to permanently reach them should they wish to.

12 Erica Gaston and Andras Derzsi-Horvath, *After ISIL: Sub-State Actors, Local Forces, and the Micro-Politics of Control* (Berlin, Global Public Policy Institute, 2018).

13 Renad Mansour, *Networks of Power: The Popular Mobilization Forces and the State in Iraq* (London, Chatham House, 2021).

14 Jihad Intel, "Kataib Hezbollah," Middle East Forum.

15 Mansour, *Networks of Power*.

16 Mansour, *Networks of Power*; and Inna Rudolph, "Kataib Hezbollah (Iraq)," case study for *Guns and Governance: How Europe Should Talk with Non-State Armed Groups in the Middle East* (London, European Council on Foreign Relations, 2020).

17 Mansour, *Networks of Power*.

18 Inna Rudolph, "Kataib Hezbollah."

19 Jihad Intel, "Kataib Hezbollah."

20 Hamid Malik and Michael Knights, "Profile: The Islamic Resistance of Iraq," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 30 October 2023.

21 Brian Finucane et al., *Understanding Risks of U.S.-Iran Escalation amid the Gaza Conflict* (Brussels, International Crisis Group, 2023).

22 Jihad Intel, "Liwa Ali al-Akbar," Middle East Forum.; and Michael Knights and Hamid Malik, "How the United States Should View Iraq's Shrine Militias," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 5 February 2021.

23 Knights and Malik, *How the United States Should View Iraq's Shrine Militias*.

24 Jihad Intel, *Liwa Ali al-Akbar*.

25 IOM, *Returns Working Group and Social Inquiry, Cities as Home: Understanding Belonging and Acceptance Among IDPs and Host Communities in Iraq* (Baghdad, IOM, 2020).

26 Shafaq News, "Babylon Residents Protest Against 'Return of Terrorism' to Jurf al-Sakhar," *Shafaq News*, 7 April 2023.

27 Qurtas News, "The Commander of the Federal Police Forces Arrives in the Jurf al-Nasr Area," *Qurtas News*, 28 May 2023 [translated]. This information was also posted to social media, see [here](#) and [here](#).

28 Dana Taib Menmy, "Iraqi Government Plans to Forcibly Relocate IDPs in Western Anbar Desert: Afada Observatory," *New Arab*, 5 June 2023.

29 Internal discussion with United Nations personnel, June 2023.

30 Shorouk News, "Iraqi Official: al-Sudani is Preparing to Return the Displaced People of Jurf al-Sakhar; Political Consensus Disrupt the Return of Sinjar Displaced," *Shorouk News*, 29 July 2023 [translated].

## METHODOLOGY

This analysis focuses on: detailing how blockages to return are understood; what expected conditions prevail in areas of origin; realistic options for resolving displacement; efforts to address blockages to date; implications if the status quo persists; stakeholders that need to be involved going forward; preconditions for return and for local integration; demands and redlines; and potential pathways forward. Between August and September 2023, a combination of IOM field teams and Social Inquiry researchers conducted eight focus group discussions with displaced men and women from Jurf al-Sakhar and Al-Iskandaria in areas where they reside in highest concentration, and 13 key informant interviews with provincial, district or subdistrict level authorities and community leaders in those governorates where these IDPs are hosted as well as national and international level stakeholders and experts

### FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

To ensure that the analysis captured the diversity of views and experiences between Jurf al-Sakhar and Al-Iskandaria IDPs, between those residing in host communities and those in informal settlements or camps, and between men and women, data collection followed the below sampling frame. A total of 50 IDPs (24 men and 26 women) participated in focus group discussions, with individual participants' ages ranging from 20 to 67 years.

Table 1. Final focus group discussion sample

Population group	Governorate of displacement	Subdistrict of displacement	Residence type	Participant type
Jurf al-Sakhar IDPs (Sunni Arab)	Babylon	Markaz Al-Musayab	In host community	Men
	Babylon	Markaz Al-Musayab	In host community	Women
	Anbar	Al-Amiriya	Informal settlement/camp	Men
	Anbar	Al-Amiriya	Informal settlement/camp	Women
Al-Iskandaria IDPs (Sunni Arab)	Babylon	Al-Iskandaria	In host community	Men
	Babylon	Al-Iskandaria	In host community	Women
	Baghdad	Al-Latifiya	Informal settlement	Men
	Baghdad	Al-Latifiya	Informal settlement	Women

### KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

The key informant interviews provided further insights into blockages to return including from representatives of IDPs residing both within and outside of the areas sampled (Table 1), reflections on past and ongoing efforts to address these blockages, and the potential for future efforts in this regard. As such, they comprised the following provincial and local actors from Babylon, Anbar, Baghdad, Sulaymaniyah and Kerbala governorates:

- Ministry of Migration and Displacement provincial offices
- Former local council members
- Mayor's offices and other local officials
- Local authorities overseeing informal settlements
- High ranking tribal leaders

Efforts to gain more insight into central government and political responses to these blockages and potential ways forward, by speaking with personnel from the Prime Minister's Office and relevant security force personnel, proved unfruitful. While the research team contacted these different actors and the latter expressed interest in participating in this work, it was not possible to pin down interviews during the timeframe of this study. Therefore, to cover these dimensions as well as international responses, international experts and researchers were included as key informants.



## PERSPECTIVES ON DISPLACEMENT AND RETURN

The fates of Jurf al-Sakhar and Al-Iskandaria IDPs with respect to where and how they live are intimately embedded within a complex of interconnected sociopolitical and security dynamics. Both the displaced and key informants interviewed as part of this analysis are aware of these dynamics and are generally in alignment regarding their views of the current situation. As such, IDP and key informant data are presented together, with any divergences in opinion highlighted where relevant – whether between IDPs and key informants or among IDPs.

### ACCESS TO AREAS OF ORIGIN

One of the hallmarks of the displacement trajectories of the majority of both Jurf al-Sakhar and Al-Iskandaria IDPs is how close these populations are to their areas of origin. Many indicate that they can see the outlines of their hometowns and villages from their displacement locations. This proximity, however, does not necessarily translate into all IDPs being able to access these areas to check conditions therein, including that of their land and property. Rather, access depends on where IDPs are from and on which PMU force controls the area.

Many of the displaced men from Al-Iskandaria who participated in this analysis reported that they have had access to their home locations. Five men had gone back and forth to their homes around three years ago to complete procedures for a now discontinued return process. They were at that time able to take photos to assess the condition of their assets.<sup>31</sup> While it seems no longer possible to visit the sites of their own homes, all the men who participated in focus group discussions from Al-Iskandaria indicated that it is possible to visit other locations in the subdistrict, including the Abu Shamsi area, where their friends and relatives still reside. Thus, while the PMU in Al-Iskandaria will not allow IDPs to visit their homes anymore, regardless of whether they have security clearance or permission to do so, it is possible for these IDPs to attempt to see their homes using “tricks.”<sup>32</sup> Women from Al-Iskandaria for their part stated that they have not tried to return or visit since they know they are blocked from doing so by security forces.

No such workarounds reportedly exist for IDPs from Jurf al-Sakhar. These populations have not had access to their homes, land, or any part of the subdistrict since 2014. Displaced men and women alike indicated the impossibility of return because of the PMU force controlling the area. They noted that previous attempts had been met with threats and violence as would any new attempts to do so, and that even the former Prime Minister was turned back during past efforts to enter the area during his tenure. The undercurrent of fear relates not only to the potential of being killed, but to the possibility of being indefinitely detained as well.

*There were attempts by many [to return to Jurf al-Sakhar] but to no avail. And in some cases, live bullets were fired as a warning to people standing at the border waiting to be let in. They were told not to come back again or be killed if they did.*<sup>33</sup>

*If I pack my things and go to Jurf al-Sakhar now, it is considered suicide for me and my family, because it is certain that I will never see the light again.*<sup>34</sup>

*Whoever returns or demands to return is threatened or taken away (a matter I do not want to mention more).*<sup>35</sup>

*Our [home] areas are surrounded by a fence, and no one can enter because the PMU that controls the land does not allow it. One of the tribes that lives near these areas had livestock that crossed the fence and fell into the hands of the PMU. They did not return the livestock to their owners. So, if livestock was not returned to their owners, how can we return and secure ourselves?*<sup>36</sup>

However, this situation does not mean that these displaced populations have no knowledge of the general conditions in Jurf al-Sakhar overall or in their home locations. Some IDPs and their displaced community leaders indicated gaining information from either their host communities, should they reside in displacement close to their areas of origin, from actors connected to security forces, or from contact with their Shia neighbours and friends in Jurf al-Sakhar who never left. These Shia residents reportedly live in the Hamiyah and Bahban areas at the southern edges of the subdistrict.<sup>37</sup>

### EXPECTED CONDITIONS IN AREAS OF ORIGIN

Despite being isolated from their home communities, IDPs have detailed views of what they would expect to find should they return under present conditions. These relate to well-being and services (including livelihoods), governance, representation and responsive institutions, safety and security, and community relations.

### WELL-BEING AND SERVICES

IDPs and key informants alike indicated that widespread destruction of housing, civilian infrastructure and agricultural land are the current physical landscape of blocked areas of origin in Jurf al-Sakhar and Al-Iskandaria. This is attributed primarily to the intensity of fighting during the ISIL conflict as well as, in some instances, to the retaliatory attacks against housing or property belonging to alleged ISIL members or supporters. The issue of land or property occupation is also raised in Jurf al-Sakhar as PMU members and their families have reportedly taken up residence in some areas, as explained by several participants:

*A friend . . . who was not displaced [told me] that the other areas in Jurf al-Sakhar are ghost towns in which there is no life except one or two random areas in which the militia families themselves live.*<sup>38</sup>

*The force holding Jurf al-Sakhar brought their families from the provinces of the south and have settled in the area. They have started farming and making money from this agriculture as well as fish farming. They are currently raising fish and selling it in the market.*<sup>39</sup>

In the same vein, there is consensus that public service provision is currently non-existent in the specific locations where no returns have taken place in both Jurf al-Sakhar and Al-Iskandaria. Several IDPs and key informants did note,

31 Focus group discussion, Male IDPs from Al-Iskandaria, Babylon, September 2023; and Focus group discussion, Male IDPs from Al-Iskandaria, Baghdad, September 2023.

32 Focus group discussion participant, Male IDPs from Al-Iskandaria, Baghdad, September 2023.

33 Focus group discussion participant, Male IDPs from Jurf al-Sakhar, Babylon, September 2023.

34 Focus group discussion participant, Male IDPs from Jurf al-Sakhar, Anbar, September 2023.

35 Key informant, tribal leader, Sulaymaniyah, September 2023.

36 Focus group discussion participant, Female IDPs from Jurf al-Sakhar, Anbar, September 2023.

37 Key informant, tribal leader, Sulaymaniyah, September 2023 and Key informant, tribal leader, Baghdad, September 2023.

38 Key informant, tribal leader, Sulaymaniyah, September 2023.

39 Focus group discussion participant, Male IDPs from Jurf al-Sakhar, Babylon, September 2023.

however, that because Al-Iskandaria Centre itself was never taken by ISIL, this urban area did not face any kind of destruction and continues to have functioning public services. Furthermore, Babylon authorities in coordination with the PMU controlling Al-Iskandaria have reportedly taken the initiative to rehabilitate or restore service provision, including schools, and to revive commercial centres in the surrounding rural areas affected by conflict – not for the purpose of returning the displaced, but to support the communities that still live there and never left.<sup>40</sup>

Less seems to be known about reconstruction and service restoration in Jurf al-Sakhar, other than new and improved roads have been laid through the area connecting Baghdad and Kerbala to better accommodate the normal passage cars and religious pilgrims.<sup>41</sup> Those who mention this reconstruction also note the seeming contradiction of these areas being deemed too unstable and physically unfit for the return of displaced populations, but safe enough for large volumes of traffic and people that come through with religious pilgrimages.

Despite these material challenges, there seems to be consensus that if families that are still displaced were enabled to return, economic recovery in these areas would occur relatively rapidly given that this population comprises individuals who have “professions and crafts.”<sup>42</sup> Indeed, Jurf al-Sakhar and Al-Iskandaria are some of the most productive and lucrative agricultural areas in the country, requiring populations with skills across a variety of sectors.

## GOVERNANCE, REPRESENTATION AND RESPONSIVE INSTITUTIONS

Differences again emerge between Jurf al-Sakhar and Al-Iskandaria subdistricts in terms of local civilian governance. Those displaced from Al-Iskandaria anticipate a functioning local administration given that the subdistrict’s capital was not directly impacted by the conflict, and population blockages only affect specific areas within the subdistrict. The subdistrict has, for example, a mayor appointed by provincial authorities. However, there seems to be a general deficiency in staffing of public offices and institutions given the continued displacement of portions of the wider population.<sup>43</sup> To address this gap, local authorities and security forces controlling Al-Iskandaria reportedly informed public sector employees who were still displaced and were involved in direct human services (particularly teachers) to return to their homes and resume their posts.<sup>44</sup> Nonetheless, this does not mean that Al-Iskandaria IDPs would expect or currently perceive any kind of political representation in governance in their locations of origin. Rather, the fact that they cannot come back underscores this lack of representation, as an informant observes: “We do not have real political representation in those areas that would seek or demand our rights. This is one of the reasons that makes our position weak, and our demands do not receive much seriousness and attention among the public.”<sup>45</sup> This seems to be the case at both the local and national levels, where government agencies reportedly did not agree to allocate voting

centres in areas of displacement for these populations to participate more easily in past electoral processes to contribute to selecting Babylon representation in the Iraqi Parliament.<sup>46</sup>

For those from Jurf al-Sakhar, the situation seems clear in that the displaced do not feel they have representation nor do they believe civilian government institutions are present, due to the widespread destruction of the area and the fact that the subdistrict is inaccessible to displaced populations and any local or national officials.<sup>47</sup> Key informants also noted that the current mayor of the subdistrict was appointed by the PMU controlling the subdistrict and aligned with its leadership.<sup>48</sup> Another key informant stated that Prime al-Sudani has requested the rehabilitation and reopening of the local police station in Jurf al-Sakhar in anticipation of creating a safe environment for returns.<sup>49</sup> While these statements have been reported upon, no one else in the study mentioned this rehabilitation nor is there clear indication it is taking place as yet.

## SAFETY AND SECURITY

Many IDPs refused to engage directly on the topic of expected safety and security conditions should they return. Rather, they expressed their views on the current security configurations in their areas of origin when asked about this topic more indirectly via obstacles to return, preconditions for resolving their displacement, and necessary stakeholders to any future processes in this regard.

Those who did respond indicated that they would not feel secure in their home areas should the current PMUs holding the land remain in place:

*There is little safety if all the forces currently present outside of the law and holding the land do not leave . . . They are originally outlaws and do not care about anyone and do not respect anyone and are not afraid of anyone at all, so physical and psychological security is missing even if we return.<sup>50</sup>*

Furthermore, feelings of safety in general would take time to come back, considering that “every family has a painful memory there, and many of their loved ones lost their lives there”<sup>51</sup> and that “[w]e lost people even on our way when we fled our homes, [PMU] took them to unknown destinations and we do not know anything about them.”<sup>52</sup> These concerns are in particular, those of the displaced from Jurf al-Sakhar.

## RELATIONS BETWEEN COMMUNITIES

Social cohesion issues and/or intra or intercommunal violence are not anticipated should returns take place in Al-Iskandaria, according to both IDPs and key informants. They indicated that this is so because those still displaced from Al-Iskandaria and current residents have very close familial ties, are from the same clans, and in some instances have seen each other since initial displacement.

40 Key informant, local authority, Baghdad, September 2023.

41 Focus group discussion, Female IDPs from Jurf al-Sakhar, Anbar, September 2023; and key informant, local authority, Baghdad, September 2023.

42 Focus group discussion participant, Male IDPs from Jurf al-Sakhar, Anbar, September 2023; Focus group discussion participant, Male IDPs from Al-Iskandaria, Baghdad, September 2023; and key informant, local authority, Anbar, September 2023.

43 Key informant, local authority, Babylon, September 2023.

44 Key informant, local authority, Baghdad, September 2023; and Focus group discussion, Male IDPs from Al-Iskandaria, Babylon, September 2023.

45 Focus group discussion participant, Male IDPs from Al-Iskandaria, Baghdad, September 2023.

46 Key informant, local authority, Baghdad, September 2023.

47 Key informant, former local authority, Babylon, September 2023; Key informant, tribal leader, Sulaymaniyah, September 2023; Key informant, tribal leader, Baghdad, September 2023; and Focus group discussion, Male IDPs from Jurf al-Sakhar, Babylon, September 2023.

48 Key informant, tribal leader, Sulaymaniyah, September 2023; and Key informant, tribal leader, Baghdad, September 2023.

49 Key informant interview, local authority, Kerbala, September 2023.

50 Focus group discussion participant, Male IDPs from Jurf al-Sakhar, Babylon, September 2023.

51 Key informant, tribal leader, Anbar, September 2023.

52 Focus group discussion participant, Female IDPs from Jurf al-Sakhar, Anbar, September 2023.

Overall, this is not the picture IDPs from Jurf al-Sakhar or key informants envision for expected community relations in their areas of origin. Some expressed uncertainty over what social dynamics would be like, while others foresee significant tensions, if not direct violence or attacks, should they come back in the absence of rule of law and reconciliation processes. Women explicitly expressed concern over this aspect: “If everyone returns, expectations will be bad, there will be conflicts there. It will be a struggle to take revenge [against each other] unless the government guarantees community reconciliation before returning.”<sup>53</sup> IDPs from Jurf al-Sakhar noted that potential for intra and intercommunal violence stems from several related factors, including the desire for revenge against those who destroyed their homes, tribal disputes that remain unresolved including those linked to ISIL conflict dynamics, and sectarian divisions created by the PMU currently controlling the subdistrict and blocking returns.<sup>54</sup> These concerns may have longer-standing bases than the ISIL conflict alone, given the area’s pre- and post-2003 legacies as well.<sup>55</sup>

## RATIONALE FOR BLOCKED RETURNS

All IDPs and most key informants recognized that the primary barrier to return in both Jurf al-Sakhar and Al-Iskandaria are the current PMU configurations (considered “outlaw militias”<sup>56</sup> by the displaced) that continue to hold these lands. Kata’ib Hezbollah control the former and Liwa Ali al-Akbar the latter. Others go further, in directly or indirectly stating that these PMU are not acting alone, but in line with highly influential political actors both within and outside of the country.<sup>57</sup>

Many IDPs, for their part, see these blockages as identarian in nature and as a form of collective punishment against the displaced of Babylon in particular, rather than based on ongoing insecurity or instability in the surrounding areas. They feel this way considering that other populations still reside in these areas and most displaced Sunni populations from elsewhere in the country have been allowed to return to their homes, as stated by several participants:

*We do not deny that there were security exposures and breaches in Jurf al-Sakhar, but many of us were not a party to this conflict . . . and yet today we are being punished for crimes we did not commit.*<sup>58</sup>

*They don’t want us to come back, and they don’t want our problems to end. We have been displaced for almost 10 years. If they wanted us to go back, they would, but they don’t. Everyone started to return, displaced from Ninewa, Salah al-Din, Kirkuk, and Anbar, but Jurf al-Sakhar did not return.*<sup>59</sup>

*The security forces present do not allow displaced families to return to their original homes in Al-Iskandaria subdistrict. Knowing that many families still live in areas that did not experience attacks or displacement, we are a group of Sunni tribes who have been forced to leave our areas of origin after the events of 2014.*<sup>60</sup>

These current blockages to return then may be seen as the “most demonstrative and clear-cut example”<sup>61</sup> of collective punishment and wider institutional response to Sunnis in the aftermath of the ISIL conflict. They also have an internal economic and sociopolitical as well as regional benefit to those obstructing returns, particularly to the force holding Jurf al-Sakhar.<sup>62</sup> Key informants noted the considerable wealth to be generated from Jurf al-Sakhar’s agricultural lands and waters alone, making them strategic assets that would allow the force there to maintain their own interests and aims.<sup>63</sup> Finally, this force may have “other purposes”<sup>64</sup> for holding the land as well, which no participant would specify in detail, but may pertain military infrastructure.<sup>65</sup> Allowing for the return of populations to Jurf al-Sakhar would seem to “make no sense”<sup>66</sup> in such a context where the reasons to keep people – and indeed formal government oversight – away abound.

## OPTIONS FOR RESOLVING DISPLACEMENT

For most IDPs from these areas, resolving their displacement means returning to their homes. Even those who deem local integration a possibility would consider return if a pathway to do so was available. Others noted that while their preferred solution may be to return, some of their children do not want to go back to rural areas – having grown up in urban environments or because they are too afraid of the security forces to want to go back. Some parents thus reported they would not know what to do should the option to return become available to them. Some take a hardline position, stating that return is the only solution and that they would accept nothing less even if other options and support were made available to them, while others would settle for a deal.

These debates, which took place during all the focus group discussions, are hypothetical as no such conditions seem to exist yet. Rather, IDPs are “currently between two options”<sup>67</sup> where many keep hoping for return, making it difficult to fully commit to local integration as a solution. Compounding this uncertainty are the administrative choices and documentation obstacles these populations face in displacement; these may decrease their claims on their lands in areas of origin and make local integration (or even resettlement) less viable than it potentially could be, as will be described. This status quo thus creates the conditions for “bureaucratic non-existence”<sup>68</sup> for these IDPs within a heavily bureaucratic State.

53 Focus group discussion participant, Female IDPs from Jurf al-Sakhar, Babylon, September 2023.

54 Focus group discussion, Female IDPs from Jurf al-Sakhar, Anbar, September 2023; Focus group discussion, Male IDPs from Jurf al-Sakhar, Babylon, September 2023; and Focus group discussion, Female IDPs from Jurf al-Sakhar, Babylon, September 2023.

55 Key informant interview, international expert, Online, September 2023.

56 Focus group discussion participant, Male IDPs from Jurf al-Sakhar, Babylon, September 2023.

57 Key informant interview, local authority, Baghdad, September 2023; Key informant interview, tribal leader, Sulaymaniyah, September 2023; Key informant interview, tribal leader, Baghdad, September 2023; and Key informant interview, tribal leader, Anbar, September 2023.

58 Focus group discussion participant, Male IDPs from Jurf al-Sakhar, Anbar, September 2023.

59 Focus group discussion participant, Female IDPs from Jurf al-Sakhar, Babylon, September 2023.

60 Focus group discussion participant, Male IDPs from Al-Iskandaria, Baghdad, September 2023.

61 Key informant interview, international expert, Online, September 2023.

62 Inna Rudolf, *Tracing the Role of the Violent Entrepreneurs in the Iraqi Post-Conflict Economy* (Washington, D.C., Newlines Institute, 2023).

63 Key informant interview, international expert, Online, September 2023; Key informant interview, local authority, Baghdad, September 2023; and Key informant interview, tribal leader, Sulaymaniyah, September 2023.

64 Key informant interview, tribal leader, Sulaymaniyah, September 2023.

65 Alissa J. Rubin, “Why Fears of a Broader Middle East Conflict are Growing in Iraq,” *New York Times*, December 9, 2023; and Michael Knights, “Kata’ib Hezbollah’s Role in the August 15 al-Tanf Attack,” *The Washington Institute of Near East Policy*, 25 August 2022.

66 Key informant interview, tribal leader, Sulaymaniyah, September 2023.

67 Key informant interview, local authority, Anbar, September 2023.

68 Key informant interview, international expert, Online, September 2023.

This means living with profound uncertainty and little agency to direct one's own course in life: "We do not know our current fate. We are living in an unknown spiral. The end of our lives is now in the hands of parties that fear nothing. The future of our families and children is unknown. We feel lost and no one hears us or cares about our words."<sup>69</sup>

The displaced feel a range of emotions about this status quo and the potential to positively change it, from "hopeless"<sup>70</sup> to "not optimistic"<sup>71</sup> to "optimistic, but not to the level of enthusiasm, because many families have become desperate and frustrated, and it is difficult to convince them of any future initiatives that urge their return."<sup>72</sup> The following sections detail the desire to return and experiences in displacement that may limit possibilities for other solutions as well.

## DESIRE FOR RETURN

Many IDPs who participated in this analysis noted that they own relatively large plots of agricultural land and orchards (between 60 and 80 dunums) as well as fish farms and large homes in their areas of origin. Even those who did not make specific references to the size of their lands or who reported being low-income indicated that they own their houses in their locations of origin. The generalized home ownership is an important economic aspect in the will to return: if they returned, these IDPs would save on rent and would resume more lucrative agricultural livelihoods than those available in displacement.

The desire for return, however, runs significantly deeper than the material hardships of displacement. IDPs from both Jurf al-Sakhar and Al-Iskandaria detailed their emotional connections to their lands and old ways of life, their feelings of psychological dislocation being so close to home but not being able to go back, and the need to pass down their lands to future generations.

*How to prosper in life if we cannot look at our homes that are only 2 km away from here? How to be prosperous if we are not allowed to approach the land of our parents and grandparents? How to be prosperous if we are threatened with death if we approach our land? . . . Talking about it prolongs the pain and heartbreak . . . I am over 60 years old, and I hope when I die to be buried in my land, from which I was forcibly displaced.<sup>73</sup>*

*Our comfort, well-being and the stability of our psychological situation depends on our return to our areas of origin and the start of our lives there again. We are used to living on large lands, eating fresh fruits and residing in houses that carry the memories of our ancestors, so only that can revive us again.<sup>74</sup>*

*Even our children who were not born in Jurf al-Sakhar are eager to return. As it is said, 'Your land is your pride.' Even if we eat the soil of our land, it is better than the humiliation of displacement.<sup>75</sup>*

*Everyone feels harm and discrimination and society deals with us as strangers not citizens and our rights are taken away. We feel pain when it wanders into our thoughts that we have no homes or areas for us, and our orchards are no longer ours.<sup>76</sup>*

Clearly, the displaced demand "our land and our rights."<sup>77</sup> This conforms with recent legal and academic literature on the understanding of IDPs' right of return not only as a geographical destination, but a sociopolitical and emotional process toward not only reclaiming land, but equal citizenship rights as well.<sup>78</sup>

## EXPERIENCES IN DISPLACEMENT

At the heart of the reported difficulties the displaced face lie two intertwined issues: high rents and unsteady income. These populations had previously lived in homes they did not have to pay rent for and had a steady income from agriculture. They now must pay for rents and basic needs for large (and growing) families on irregular daily wage earnings, because their skillsets are not well-suited for the more urban economies of the locations where they reside. One IDP from Jurf al-Sakhar noted the "social and class disintegration"<sup>79</sup> among the displaced, as those with financial means can buy or rent proper housing and those who have less must set up tents or build irregular housing on land they do not own, in some cases paying rent to use it. The IDPs that comprise this analysis tend to fall into the latter category, whether they are living within the host community in Babylon Governorate or in informal settlements and camps in Anbar and Baghdad – and all struggle with adequately accommodating themselves and their families.

Those displaced in Baghdad, for example, reported strict regulations on displaced populations regarding construction or renovation of housing on irregular or informal sites.<sup>80</sup> Further compounding this housing crisis is the expansion of their own families – nearly a decade has passed since they arrived in these areas. In some instances, young people have had to put marriage plans on hold because their parents cannot afford to move to bigger residences to house growing extended families all together.<sup>81</sup> In other instances, marriage enables families to separate into their own households. However, adults who were displaced from Al-Iskandaria or Jurf al-Sakhar as minors do not have housing cards of their own to be able to buy, build or rent property officially. This documentation must come from authorities in their areas of origin – who refuse to register them – and authorities in displacement will not make concessions for them either.<sup>82</sup> This situation furthers younger generations' housing precarity in displacement but also raises questions as to their ties to land in their place of origin. Similar issues may arise regarding the renewal of documentation or registration of new births in displacement, shifting residency or further creating precarity between areas origin and displacement.<sup>83</sup>

69 Focus group discussion participant, Male IDPs from Al-Iskandaria, Baghdad, September 2023.

70 Focus group discussion participant, Female IDPs from Al-Iskandaria, Babylon, September 2023.

71 Focus group discussion participant, Male IDPs from Jurf al-Sakhar, Babylon, September 2023.

72 Key informant interview, tribal leader, Sulaymaniyah, September 2023.

73 Focus group discussion participant, Male IDPs from Jurf al-Sakhar, Babylon, September 2023.

74 Focus group discussion participant, Male IDPs from Al-Iskandaria, Baghdad, September 2023.

75 Focus group discussion participant, Male IDPs from Jurf al-Sakhar, Anbar, September 2023.

76 Focus group discussion participant, Female IDPs from Jurf al-Sakhar, Anbar, September 2023.

77 Focus group discussion participant, Female IDPs from Jurf al-Sakhar, Anbar, September 2023.

78 Megan Bradley, "Durable Solutions and the Right of Return for IDPs: Evolving Interpretations," *International Journal of Refugee Law*, 30 no. 2 (2018): 218–42.

79 Focus group discussion participant, Male IDPs from Jurf al-Sakhar, Anbar, September 2023.

80 Focus group discussion participant, Male IDPs from Al-Iskandaria, Baghdad, September 2023.

81 Focus group discussion participant, Male IDPs from Al-Iskandaria, Baghdad, September 2023.

82 Key informant interview, local authority, Baghdad, September 2023.

83 Key informant interview, international expert, Online, September 2023.

In this analysis, however, those displaced in Anbar and Baghdad noted that their existing documentation is recognized, and that dealing with government offices for their needs is relatively easy.<sup>84</sup> This includes enrolling their children in schools and accessing health care. One of the key barriers raised relates to the transportation costs to send children to school once enrolled.

The situation seems more difficult with respect to government support or assistance for those displaced within Babylon. IDP women reported experiencing discrimination in receiving health care or accessing social welfare based on their ethno-religious identities and their locations of origin.<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, only one of the six women from Jurf al-Sakhar who participated in this analysis in Babylon had an IDP card. As one displaced woman noted, “we feel a lot of harm when we go to any government department and they throw away our papers and neglect them.”<sup>86</sup> This same trend seemed to emerge in job seeking as well, particularly impacting those displaced from Jurf al-Sakhar. These men noted that members of their host community are occasionally threatened by the PMU who control Jurf al-Sakhar for working with or hiring IDPs from there.<sup>87</sup>

One strategy for dealing with these obstacles seems to be intermarriage with the host community in Babylon, as one participant notes:

*I married a girl from this area and with the help of her family, I was able to find a house and also got a job. I will be clear with you; I am Sunni and married a Shia because I know that this matter will have a positive psychological and social impact on my future situation. The current situation requires a lot of concessions in order to move the wheel of life.*<sup>88</sup>

## PERSPECTIVES ON PAST AND ONGOING PROCESSES FOR RETURN

Considering past and ongoing processes to facilitate return for Al-Iskandaria and Jurf al-Sakhar separately is necessary, as they have involved different approaches and stakeholders and, while in general no returns have taken place to date, the two locations have different prospects for the potential for returns in the future. The implications for maintaining the current status quo, however, cut across areas of origin and affect not only IDPs but also the wider society.

### EFFORTS TO DATE TO FACILITATE RETURNS TO AL-ISKANDARIA

Some displaced men from Al-Iskandaria reported having participated in numerous conferences and meetings with a range of national, provincial and local actors over time. These actors have included Members of Parliament from Babylon, now former Parliament Speaker Mohammed al-Halbousi, the Governor of Babylon,

To some, this solution is dismaying because it is an indication that people are willing to settle in displacement, while for others, it points to the sectarian framing of their plight. This workaround is also a cause for concern given the reportedly numerous intermarriages that have resulted in early divorces, further creating tensions between displaced and host community families.<sup>89</sup>

The biggest fear amongst all IDPs included in this analysis, regardless of their experiences in displacement, is that they may be evicted from their current homes or areas of displacement given the strain that their growing presence is having on living conditions for IDPs and host community alike. Participants explicitly and emphatically stated that no one within the host community or their respective local administrations have made such calls, but the fear persists nonetheless and relates to the structural environment of these displacement locations. These areas had taken in large numbers of IDP families nearly 10 years ago – that have only grown larger along with the host community population, while service provision capacity and infrastructure reportedly remain unchanged since 2014. The worry is that should they be evicted, IDPs would have nowhere they can safely go. Despite these displaced populations having been security-cleared numerous times,<sup>90</sup> the stigma of remaining blocked from return and being from Jurf al-Sakhar and Al-Iskandaria makes these families fearful of moving around the country or finding work and housing elsewhere.<sup>91</sup> As one IDP explained, “We are under the hammer of accusation in the event of any problem or security breach and the reason is because we are not a native resident [of the area] as well as the burden we place on the [displacement site].”<sup>92</sup> Under the current circumstances, people are concerned that this feeling might follow them should they move elsewhere.

Chairman of the Babylon Provincial Council, Director of the Babylon Police, Mayor of Al-Iskandaria, representatives of the Liwa Ali al-Akbar PMU, tribal leaders and other notable community members.<sup>93</sup> Part of these past processes had also included the displaced undergoing security clearances and visiting their home to assess damages. For one such IDP, participation in an initial conference in this regard left him “at first with a good feeling . . . but then it became clear to us that the issue was not that easy, and it is not possible to obtain approvals to return at this time.”<sup>94</sup> Displaced women reported not having participated in any such efforts and have varying degrees of knowledge of them.

What is clear to all the displaced, is that except for some public sector employees who were recalled to Al-Iskandaria and a small number of families who procured other informal means to return,<sup>95</sup> none of the displaced have so far been allowed to come back. Displaced men and women from Al-Iskandaria both noted that their continued displacement and possibility for return has become part of

84 Focus group discussion, Female IDPs from Al-Iskandaria, Baghdad, September 2023; and Focus group discussion, Male IDPs from Jurf al-Sakhar, Anbar, September 2023.

85 Focus group discussion, Female IDPs from Jurf al-Sakhar, Babylon, September 2023; and Focus group discussion, Female IDPs from Al-Iskandaria, Babylon, September 2023.

86 Focus group discussion participant, Female IDPs from Al-Iskandaria, Babylon, September 2023.

87 Focus group discussion participant, Male IDPs from Jurf al-Sakhar, Babylon, September 2023.

88 Focus group discussion participant, Male IDPs from Jurf al-Sakhar, Babylon, September 2023.

89 Focus group discussion participant, Male IDPs from Jurf al-Sakhar, Babylon, September 2023.

90 Key informant interview, local authority, Baghdad, September 2023; Key informant interview, local authority, Anbar, September 2023; Key informant interview, local authority, Babylon, September 2023; and Key informant interview, tribal leader, Anbar, September 2023.

91 Key informant interview, tribal leader, Anbar, September 2023.

92 Focus group discussion participant, Male IDPs from Al-Iskandaria, Baghdad, September 2023.

93 Focus group discussion, Male IDPs from Al-Iskandaria, Babylon, September 2023; and Focus group discussion, Male IDPs from Al-Iskandaria, Baghdad, September 2023.

94 Focus group discussion participant, Male IDPs from Al-Iskandaria, Baghdad, September 2023.

95 Focus group discussion participant, Male IDPs from Al-Iskandaria, Babylon, September 2023.

“electoral propaganda,”<sup>96</sup> where politicians visit them and pay attention to their plight to secure votes ahead of elections and nothing more.

Key informants involved in seeking to facilitate returns in Al-Iskandaria describe more recent processes. In particular, via an initiative by the mayor of Al-Iskandaria, who has good relations with Liwa Ali al-Akbar leadership in the area and convinced the armed group to support the return of particularly vulnerable families, security clearance processes have been completed for more than 600 families residing in Al-Iskandaria who wish to return to their areas of origin in the subdistrict.<sup>97</sup> Similarly, local authorities from Al-Latafiya subdistrict in Baghdad received a request from local authorities in Al-Iskandaria to provide them with a registry of all those displaced from there and who would be eligible for return. The process entailed coordination with the Baghdad Operations Command to issue security cards for those cleared of ISIL affiliation and who are not wanted by security forces, and sharing this registry back with authorities in Al-Iskandaria.<sup>98</sup> Despite these initiatives, returns have yet to commence, likely due to obstacles by the PMU controlling the area and political interference at the Babylon provincial level.<sup>99</sup>

## EFFORTS TO DATE TO FACILITATE RETURNS TO JURF AL-SAKHAR

IDPs and key informants alike reported that numerous meetings, conferences and seminars have taken place since the official end of the ISIL conflict in 2017 to seek to resolve the displacement of people from Jurf al-Sakhar. These events have taken place in Babylon, Baghdad and Anbar, some organized through national or provincial channels and others through individual initiatives. They have included the participation of some of the IDP men and displaced tribal leaders included in this sample, as well as other senior tribal leaders and notable members of Jurf al-Sakhar. While some displaced women reported knowing about such events, none have been invited to nor have participated in any. These sessions have included the former Prime Minister’s Office, representatives of the PMC, the Ministry of Migration and Displacement, the Ministry of Human Rights, high-level politicians (including now former Parliament Speaker Mohammed al-Halbousi and rival Sunni political leader Sheikh Khamis al-Khanjar), Sunni and Shia tribal leadership of Jurf al-Sakhar, and the Governor of Babylon and other provincial leaders. One IDP mentioned that the United Nations had convened a conference to resolve this issue, but the IDP did not specify which agency or other actors participated in the event. In addition, senior Sunni tribal leadership of Jurf al-Sakhar had visited senior officials in Iran to seek some resolution of this issue, given the perceived “cross-border”<sup>100</sup> nature of Kata’ib Hezbollah’s political and financial support and decision-making.

None of these disparate efforts have produced results, however, primarily due to the “intransigence”<sup>101</sup> of Kata’ib Hezbollah in Jurf al-Sakhar. Rather, it is reported that those seeking to raise the issue are often deemed terrorists and subject to deep security scrutiny, regardless of their standing in society.<sup>102</sup> As with Al-Iskandaria, prospects for the return of the displaced to Jurf al-Sakhar have become “subject to political and electoral bidding to the point that we have lost confidence in many of

the personalities and government agencies that sponsor these efforts.”<sup>103</sup>

In this context, combined with the nature and connections of Kata’ib Hezbollah within and outside of Iraq, many participants in this study pointed to the need to more fully and concertedly internationalize any future processes related to the return of the displaced to Jurf al-Sakhar. This process includes bringing together critical powerbrokers within and outside of Iraq that have influence on this issue and on the force impeding returns, with the United Nations in particular seen as having a critical role to play as a neutral third-party mediator, guarantor of IDP rights and protection, and shaper of wider public discourse on this issue.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR MAINTAINING THE STATUS QUO

The most obvious implication of the continuation of this status quo is the prolonged precarity, denial of rights and collective punishment of IDPs from Jurf al-Sakhar and Al-Iskandaria – conditions in which over 40,000 individuals endure these challenges, alongside the children born into and growing up amid these dynamics.

Beyond the moral and ethical dimensions of this situation, maintaining this status quo sets a negative precedent in terms of State control of armed actors, governance and the potential for further forced demographic change. Allowing these blockages to continue – either because the State cannot compel PMU factions to stop these practices or because it chooses not to, thus tacitly endorsing them – gives the PMU and other actors a blank check to deploy similar tactics against other communities elsewhere in strategic parts of the country under the pretext of security and counterterrorism. A clear example occurred in early 2023 when different PMU faction leaders, including from Kata’ib Hezbollah, publicly described strategies for dealing with the Sunni enclave of Tarmiyah subdistrict in northern Baghdad in the wake of an ISIL attack in the area. These potential strategies included replicating the Jurf al-Sakhar approach or applying a softer version by coopting Sunni politicians and local volunteers into such efforts to take over the area.<sup>104</sup> It is worth noting that Tarmiyah also has important Ba’ath’-era properties and infrastructure as well as rich farmlands near strategic trucking and pilgrim routes connecting Baghdad and Samarra.

Furthermore, there is concern amongst both the displaced and key informants that this continued precarity, erosion of rights and dignity, and prevention of the right to return with no solution of any kind will lead to insecurity and violence. In particular, concerns exist that displaced families may eventually unite and confront the forces holding these lands directly, knowing that the consequences of such actions will be dire but doing so because no other options are left.<sup>105</sup> Another source of worry is that younger generations who have grown up in displacement will eventually take up the cause of the right of their return, which may again involve directly confronting those who have taken these lands.<sup>106</sup> Even if no such collective action materializes, concern exists about the more

96 Focus group discussion participant, Male IDPs from Al-Iskandaria, Baghdad, September 2023.

97 Key informant interview, local authority, Babylon, September 2023.

98 Key informant interview, local authority, Baghdad, September 2023.

99 Key informant interview, local authority, Baghdad, September 2023.

100 Key informant interview, tribal leader, Baghdad, September 2023.

101 Key informant interview, tribal leader, Sulaymaniyah, September 2023; and Key informant interview, tribal leader, Baghdad, September 2023.

102 Key informant interview, tribal leader, Baghdad, September 2023.

103 Key informant interview, tribal leader, Anbar, September 2023.

104 Key informant interview, international expert, Online, September 2023; and Amir al-Kaabi, Michael Knights, and Hamdi Malik, “The Jurf al-Sakhar Model: Militias Debate How to Carve Out a New Enclave North of Baghdad,” The Washington Institute of Near East Policy, 20 February 2023.

105 Key informant interview, tribal leader, Sulaymaniyah, September 2023; Key informant interview, tribal leader, Baghdad, September 2023; and Focus group discussion participant, Female IDPs from Jurf al-Sakhar, Anbar, September 2023.

106 Key informant interview, tribal leader, Sulaymaniyah, September 2023.

individualized impacts of such disenfranchisement and land separation including upticks in criminal activity, recruitment into armed groups and even suicide.<sup>107</sup> Others still worry that families and in particular young people will give up on ever being able to return and seek to move farther away to areas they deem safer, with less discrimination and with more opportunities, including the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.<sup>108</sup>

Finally, this persistent situation, with no recourse for either a rights-based return or local integration process, raises concerns over the continued strain on host communities and institutional and infrastructural breakdown in areas of displacement if no action is taken to address the needs of a rapidly expanding

population. In this regard, the fear among the displaced is that they may eventually be forced out of the host communities and/or informal settlements and camps where they currently reside, with nowhere else to go. Key informants are concerned that this will increase rural migration into urban centres and reduce agricultural production in some of the most critical sites for the sector in the country.

Therefore, leaving conditions unchanged will have significant implications in the near- and long-term, across many dimensions. The current context also calls into question prospects for equality of citizenship, good governance and the end of displacement in the country.

## PERSPECTIVES ON FUTURE RETURN PROCESSES AND PRECONDITIONS FOR RESOLUTION OF DISPLACEMENT

To analyse perceptions of future return processes for the displaced from Al-Iskandaria and Jurf al-Sakhar, considering perspectives on the two subdistricts separately is necessary, because each is held by a different PMU faction that has different structures and connections with national and regional actors. What may work to facilitate returns or a resolution for displaced families from Al-Iskandaria, held by Liwa Ali al-Akbar, will likely not be applicable for those displaced from

Jurf al-Sakhar, held by Kata'ib Hezbollah.<sup>109</sup> Figure 1 offers an overview of key stakeholders that may factor into such processes. However, IDPs' preconditions for return and local integration are relatively similar across locations and both subdistricts will be considered together in this regard and in exploring redlines for negotiations.

Figure 1. General mapping of key stakeholders

<b>Government of Iraq</b>	<b>International</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prime Minister's Office</li> <li>• Popular Mobilization Commission</li> <li>• Office of National Security Advisor*</li> <li>• National Security Service*</li> <li>• Ministry of Defense*</li> <li>• Ministry of Interior*</li> <li>• Office of Tribal Affairs*</li> <li>• Joint Operations Command*</li> <li>• Ministry of Migration and Displacement*</li> <li>• Marjiya (Supreme Shia Authority)*</li> <li>• Sunni Endowment*</li> <li>• Governor and provincial authorities</li> <li>• Subdistrict mayors</li> <li>• Political blocs and representatives in Parliament</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• United Nations</li> <li>• United States</li> <li>• International Coalition of the Cross</li> <li>• Donor countries</li> <li>• Global Coalition*</li> <li>• Iran</li> </ul>
	<b>Society</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• IDPs</li> <li>• Displaced tribal leaders and notable figures</li> <li>• Residents of subdistricts and surroundings*</li> <li>• Civil society (including Iraqi human rights organizations)</li> </ul>
	<b>Security Forces</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kata'ib Hezbollah (Jurf al-Sakhar)</li> <li>• Islamic Resistance in Iraq*</li> <li>• Liwa Ali al-Akbar (Al-Iskandaria)</li> </ul>

\* Not mentioned in the analysis of findings below, but stakeholders that need to be considered as well.

107 Key informant interview, tribal leader, Baghdad, September 2023.

108 Focus group discussion, Male IDPs from Jurf al-Sakhar, Babylon, September 2023; Focus group discussion, Female IDPs from Jurf al-Sakhar, Anbar, September 2023.

109 Key informant interview, international expert, Online, September 2023.

## NECESSARY STAKEHOLDERS FOR AL-ISKANDARIA RETURNS

For IDPs from Al-Iskandaria, the possibility of return is “in the hands of God and the government.”<sup>110</sup> Key informants working on returns for this subdistrict seemed to note the same, in that higher-level national pressure and agreement would significantly contribute to moving forward the existing processes they have started: “If an agreement is reached between the central government and the PMC [Popular Mobilization Commission], then the return of the displaced to Al-Iskandaria will be implemented.”<sup>111</sup> Having this high-level agreement may further incentivize those impeding returns, from Liwa Ali al-Akbar to provincial-level politicians, to conform with the agreement. However, the central government reportedly has not made real attempts to bring back the displaced.

While noting that the international community has not shown much engagement regarding the displaced from Babylon in general, some key informants do see a role for the United Nations and donors to play in Al-Iskandaria. First, they could pressure the central government, including the PMC, to engage more in resolving displacement and enabling returns. Second, they could influence public opinion on this issue.<sup>112</sup> Public and private advocacy on the part of the international community would need to be driven by the viewpoints, if not outright participation, of the displaced to ensure their rights and protection needs are met as citizens of Iraq. However, while some IDPs are willing to voice their grievances, others, particularly men and women from Al-Iskandaria displaced in Baghdad, express concerns over doing so because they may be targeted for speaking out – this has happened to others, including Tishreen movement protesters:

*“We cannot speak or demand our rights to the concerned authorities because we are afraid of being targeted.”<sup>113</sup>*

*“We are afraid of facing the responsible authorities for security reasons. Whenever I try to think about addressing our problem and putting it to decision-makers, I remember what happened to the demonstrators in the public squares when they demanded their rights. They were assassinated, arrested and experienced violence because they demanded what they wanted.”<sup>114</sup>*

Such concerns would need to be taken into account to ensure appropriate, inclusive and safe participation of IDPs in any future processes.

## NECESSARY STAKEHOLDERS FOR JURF AL-SAKHAR RETURNS

IDPs and key informants alike recognize that senior central government officials, political party representatives, Babylon provincial authorities (including the mayor of Jurf al-Sakhar) and religious authorities need to be engaged in any future efforts around returns to Jurf al-Sakhar. At the same time, they also make clear that many of these actors do not have the power or authority to influence the actions and decision-making of Kata’ib Hezbollah. As a displaced man notes, “with our respect to [these] actors, they cannot

do anything because they are not allowed to enter the area, so how will they solve the problem?”<sup>115</sup>

Indeed, the only internal body that most participants in this analysis deem to have any influence over and reach into the force holding Jurf al-Sakhar is the PMC. As such, most IDPs and key informants see the leadership of the PMC as integral to any future prospects for return – and that through them, it may be possible for representatives of Kata’ib Hezbollah to engage in negotiations, which is unsettling to some, considering how fearful they are of the armed group, the level of impediments the group has posed to any sort of agreement to date, and how the prospect of negotiating with them serves to further legitimate the group. For many others, however, no progress will be made without some level of participation on their part.

This dilemma is also the reason many consider high-level diplomatic engagement with Iran on this matter as essential as well. Iran is seen as the actor with the most significant and direct influence over the group. No participant made specific reference as to who should be included in any future efforts in this regard, other than they should be sufficiently high ranking (such as an ambassador), though some indirect references were made to the inclusion of representatives of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, “a party whose name I reserve to mention but who is directly responsible for this militia.”<sup>116</sup>

Displaced tribal leaders also indicate the United States has also a role to play in Jurf al-Sakhar returns. Tribal leaders interviewed here seemed to express surprise that the United States has acted as a “spectator”<sup>117</sup> to initiatives and impasses on returns in Jurf al-Sakhar for the last nine years and have wondered how “America occupied an entire country and cannot liberate an area of 40 km?”<sup>118</sup> Nonetheless, at the time of data collection, these key informants still saw the United States as an important actor, particularly as it has the political, economic and security leverage to bring various actors to the table.

While noting the limited role the United Nations has played so far at the political level in addressing returns to Jurf al-Sakhar – for example, asking why this issue has not been raised directly at the Security Council – many IDPs and key informants feel that it is an essential actor in any future processes. The United Nations is seen to have the capacity and skill to act as a neutral third-party mediator and to help facilitate public and private advocacy as well as diplomatic backchannels to various other stakeholders listed in this analysis. Furthermore, of all the stakeholders mentioned so far, the United Nations is the least problematic for nearly all of the displaced to engage with directly. The displaced do not trust the authorities, their own political representatives, and other external parties they recognize as necessary for the sustainable resolution of their displacement. They are also fearful of Kata’ib Hezbollah. Thus, the displaced and their community-level representatives seek guarantees of protection and safety should they more publicly engage in such efforts; they also solicit a means to communicate with relevant United Nations actors in this regard. Many seem ready to engage such efforts in given the gravity of the cause, if their safety is ensured (considering the other actors who they feel need to also participate): “Optimism is required, but caution is a duty. We are

<sup>110</sup> Focus group discussion participant, Female IDPs from Al-Iskandaria, Baghdad, September 2023.

<sup>111</sup> Key informant interview, local authority, Babylon, September 2023.

<sup>112</sup> Key informant interview, local authority, Babylon, September 2023; and Key informant interview, local authority, Baghdad, September 2023.

<sup>113</sup> Focus group discussion participant, Female IDPs from Al-Iskandaria, Baghdad, September 2023.

<sup>114</sup> Focus group discussion participant, Male IDPs from Al-Iskandaria, Baghdad, September 2023.

<sup>115</sup> Focus group discussion participant, Male IDPs from Jurf al-Sakhar, Babylon, September 2023.

<sup>116</sup> Key informant interview, tribal leader, Sulaymaniyah, September 2023. It is widely believed among analysts that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps was directly involved in Kata’ib Hezbollah’s formation, see, Mapping Militant Organizations, “Kata’ib Hezbollah.”

<sup>117</sup> Key informant interview, tribal leader, Sulaymaniyah, September 2023.

<sup>118</sup> Key informant interview, tribal leader, Baghdad, September 2023.



dealing with murderers who do not care about the law or tribal customs or even religion. But we must be optimistic and set one path before us, which is to return to our land, rebuild it and protect it as well.”<sup>119</sup>

The displaced and their community-level representatives also tend to view the United Nations as the actor who would be most likely to give greater legitimacy to their demands and help shape wider public discourse on and interaction with the issue. They hope to engage a broader segment of Iraqi society including intellectuals, journalists, academics and writers on this cause, even at a limited scale, with the recognition that public pressure on decision-makers and politicians is the only way to ensure issues remain at the fore and are eventually resolved.<sup>120</sup>

## IDP PRECONDITIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE RETURN

The major precondition for return from the perspective of local authorities is for IDPs to obtain security clearances. This is the case across areas of return in Iraq but does not seem to apply in Jurf al-Sakhar and Al-Iskandaria. Many IDPs from these subdistricts have repeatedly submitted to security checks and received clearances that have reportedly gone unrecognized by the PMU controlling each area. Given this protracted displacement despite having participated in the steps needed for return, some key informants indicate that should the displaced from Jurf al-Sakhar and Al-Iskandaria be allowed to return, they would do so relatively quickly, even if it means living in tents on their land.

While several IDPs and displaced community leaders do report this willingness as well, most have considerably more nuanced views of what would be needed for them to be able to return safely and sustainably. Their preconditions, based on frequency of reporting, are as follows:

- **Security configuration reform, safety and guarantees of protection:** the first condition to enable return, particularly for IDPs from Jurf al-Sakhar, is the wholesale removal of the PMU currently controlling the area, to be replaced with the Iraqi Army and local police. There seems to be genuine fear that with the PMU still present, returning populations would be subjected to continuous monitoring and surveillance, arbitrary arrest and violence.<sup>121</sup> As such, the displaced from Jurf al-Sakhar also seek specific guarantees from the international community and/or central government of protection upon return and that any pledges in this regard are “attended by active parties with political and moral weight internationally and internally.”<sup>122</sup> IDPs from Al-Iskandaria also indicated that they wish for more traditional Army and local police forces securing their areas, including increased checkpoints leading into and out of their areas to protect them from external threats. They do not make as explicit demands for the full removal of the PMU force controlling their areas, but some have raised concerns pertaining to the potential for arrests and security harassment by this actor. These issues, however, seem somewhat less pervasive in Al-Iskandaria than in Jurf al-Sakhar, given the different PMUs holding each subdistrict.
- **Full compensation:** IDPs from both subdistricts demand compensation for their losses, destruction of land and property, and assistance to help rebuild.

This would entail allowing these IDPs access to their homes and properties in their place of origin to be able to apply for compensation. This study reveals that some IDPs from Al-Iskandaria have been able to access their homes but none from Jurf al-Sakhar at time of writing. Women also report wanting compensation for children who “started their lives displaced in a camp and who are not to blame for what happened.”<sup>123</sup>

- **Reconstruction and reconciliation support:** the displaced seek reconstruction of civilian infrastructure, as has happened in other ISIL-conflict affected parts of the country related to water, sanitation and electricity, and a restoration of civil institutions including police stations, documentation offices, courts and other government services including schools and health care. Those displaced from Jurf al-Sakhar also require government-led community reconciliation processes in tandem with these efforts.
- **Justice and accountability:** the displaced from both subdistricts want to know the real reason for their prolonged displacement as well as the fates of the missing from these areas and demand the release of those prisoners held to date though no terrorism charges have been brought against them.<sup>124</sup> Many of those who remain indefinitely detained are believed to be in Jurf al-Sakhar.

The aim of these preconditions seems to be to counter the “humiliating way”<sup>125</sup> in which residents of these locations fled, with a “dignified return,”<sup>126</sup> one that not only recognizes the right to return to their lands, but also the right to live in safety, freedom and dignity as citizens. They also include acknowledgement of their losses and some level of accountability and redress for them as well.

## IDP PRECONDITIONS FOR LOCAL INTEGRATION

Local integration is a contentious topic among the displaced from Jurf al-Sakhar and Al-Iskandaria. Those willing to consider this option (or even prefer it) also have preconditions to make this option viable and sustainable, particularly in light of their displacement experiences to date:

- **Full compensation:** including full compensation for the losses they experienced in their places of origin for land, property and assets. This would require access to land and property in place of origin to be able to file such claims.
- **Housing support:** IDPs demand support for housing they can afford. The displaced raise several points in this regard, including being granted permissions (and relevant documentation) to buy land or build homes in displacement or other areas including for new families; turning their informal settlements into more formalized areas; having the government build housing complexes for the displaced to live in; or being allowed to sell their land and properties in areas of origin and use those funds to build housing in displacement areas.
- **Economic integration:** the displaced seek support in obtaining steadier incomes as they had before displacement or being granted permission to seek employment in other areas.

119 Focus group discussion participant, Male IDPs from Jurf al-Sakhar, Babylon, September 2023.

120 Key informant interview, tribal leader, Sulaymaniyah, September 2023.

121 Key informant interview, tribal leader, Anbar, September 2023; Focus group discussion participant, Female IDPs from Jurf al-Sakhar, Anbar, September 2023; and Focus group discussion participants, Male IDPs from Jurf al-Sakhar, Babylon, September 2023.

122 Focus group discussion participant, Male IDPs from Jurf al-Sakhar, Babylon, September 2023.

123 Focus group discussion participant, Female IDPs from Jurf al-Sakhar, Anbar, September 2023.

124 Focus group discussion, Male IDPs from Al-Iskandaria, Baghdad, September 2023; Focus group discussion, Male IDPs from Jurf al-Sakhar, Babylon, September 2023; and Focus group discussion, Female IDPs from Al-Iskandaria, Babylon, September 2023.

125 Focus group discussion participant, Female IDPs from Jurf al-Sakhar, Babylon, September 2023.

126 Focus group discussion participant, Female IDPs from Jurf al-Sakhar, Anbar, September 2023.

- **Expanded service provision and infrastructure:** this precondition is linked to the demands for housing and economic integration and includes calls for addressing the service provision and infrastructure shortfalls in areas of displacement to better serve all residents.
- **Justice and accountability:** the displaced also demand the truth about the fate of the missing due to conflict and displacement.

*I do not want to return as much as to get information about my missing husband . . . I do not want housing or land, I just want to know the fate of my missing husband, is he dead or alive? He has been missing since 2016. We call on the concerned authorities to find our men who went missing, even if they are deceased. I was prevented from obtaining his death certificate unless I mention that he was a terrorist, but he was not. So, I decided to leave these procedures until obtaining confirmed and correct information from government agencies.<sup>127</sup>*

These preconditions and demands mirror those needed for sustainable return, in that IDPs seek not only material compensation, but a recognition of their rights as citizens regardless of where they are from or where they currently live and their need for dignity in local integration.

## OVERALL DEMANDS AND REDLINES FOR RETURN

IDP demands for return include:

- **(Re)institution of traditional security forces** (that is, Army and local police) in their areas of origin and in the case of Jurf al-Sakhar, the wholesale removal of Kata'ib Hezbollah from the subdistrict;
- **International and national guarantees** of their protection to participate

in any future negotiations as well as regarding their return should they be allowed to do so;

- **Full compensation** for their losses and economic recovery;
- **Reconstruction of their areas** of origin and in the case of Jurf al-Sakhar, special attention paid to reconciliation efforts;
- **Knowledge of the whereabouts** of those missing or detained during conflict and displacement.

While the displaced may shift their positions on some of these demands, it seems that the absolute redlines, as revealed in this analysis, pertain to lasting changes in the security configuration in their areas of origin, guarantees of protection and safety, and compensation.

These redlines run seemingly counter to those of both Kata'ib Hezbollah in Jurf al-Sakhar and Liwa Ali al-Akbar in Al-Iskandaria, which are to prevent Sunni Arab populations from these areas from coming back under the pretext of security, and to maintain control of this strategic territory. Key informants in this analysis add more nuance to this line of reasoning. They point out that for PMC overall, the redline is Jurf al-Sakhar. Numerous key informants note that it would be possible to negotiate returns to Al-Iskandaria in some manner, but not to Jurf al-Sakhar.<sup>128</sup> Even if returns to the latter were negotiated, it is highly unlikely that the process would result in Kata'ib Hezbollah leaving the area given how strategic it is for their interests.<sup>129</sup> However, this does not mean that any future efforts to facilitate returns should solely focus on Al-Iskandaria at the expense of Jurf al-Sakhar, but that the current impasses should be recognized, informing any approach to resolve these issues, putting the rights demands and protection of IDPs and recipient communities at their centre.

## POTENTIAL PATHWAYS FORWARD

Resolving internal displacement, and in particular facilitating returns, is a key priority on the current administration in Iraq, as indicated in the recent flurry of activity of the Joint Government of Iraq and United Nations Roadmap. However, promises to address concerns about PMU presence in Sunni-majority areas have gone unanswered.<sup>130</sup> The latest federal budget and statements around it indicate the administration's desire to expand PMU personnel and further entrench these groups across the country.<sup>131</sup> Coupled with Prime Minister al-Sudani's focus on eliminating corruption in the economic sector, this stance may also be a strategy to control the illicit behaviour of these groups.<sup>132</sup> In any event, recent proposals to address displacement from Jurf al-Sakhar in particular have either been retracted (building a camp in western Anbar for these IDPs) or have not yet come to fruition (rehabilitating and reopening the local police station). It is thus not entirely clear how willing senior officials are to engage in the blocked returns of Jurf al-Sakhar and Al-Iskandaria subdistricts given who remains displaced, why, and by whom.

Recent regional conflict dynamics between Israel and Hamas seem to further complicate matters in this regard. That external conflict has once again rapidly escalated tensions between the United States and Iran via specific PMU factions in Iraq operating under the umbrella of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, with the Iraqi administration having to balance between these actors for its own national stability.<sup>133</sup> This is an evolving flashpoint which will likely influence the opportunities for addressing these blocked returns and their prioritization among stated key stakeholders. Continuous monitoring of these dynamics is warranted, particularly as efforts to implement the Joint Government of Iraq and United Nations Roadmap continue.

Several aspects need to be considered to set a path to begin addressing prospects for safe, voluntary and informed returns to these areas. These include approaches for negotiating the resolution of displacement; IDP participation and wider public discourse; and expectation setting and mitigating political expediency.

<sup>127</sup> Focus group discussion participant, Female IDPs from Al-Iskandaria, Babylon, September 2023.

<sup>128</sup> Key informant interview, former local authority, Babylon, September 2023; Key informant interview, local authority, Babylon, September 2023; and Key informant interview, international expert, Online, September 2023.

<sup>129</sup> Key informant interview, international expert, Online, September 2023.

<sup>130</sup> Hussain Abdul-Hussain, "Al-Sudani's Unfulfilled Promises a Worry for Iraqis," Arab News, 16 November 2022. It should be noted that Jurf al-Sakhar was excluded from this proposal.

<sup>131</sup> Jared Szuba, "US, Iraq Defense Chiefs Discuss post-Islamic State Strategy", Al-Monitor, 10 August 2023; Kamaran Palani and Khogir W. Mohammed, "Windfall Oil Revenue is Buying Illusory Stability in Iraq," Al-Jazeera, 8 July 2023; and Amwaj Media, "Granted Expanded Funding and Personnel, Iraq's PMU Highlights Drone Arsenal," Amwaj Media, 20 June 2023.

<sup>132</sup> Rudolf, Tracing the Role of the Violent Entrepreneurs.

<sup>133</sup> International Crisis Group, "Flashpoint: Iraq," International Crisis Group, 26 October 2023; and Suadad al-Salhy, "No Consensus Yet Among Iraqi Armed Groups on Joining Israel-Hamas War," Al-Monitor, 25 October 2023.

## APPROACHES FOR NEGOTIATING THE RESOLUTION OF DISPLACEMENT

Because PMU factions are the primary actors preventing returns to Al-Iskandaria and Jurf al-Sakhar, any future negotiation on returns and resolving displacement in general will require engagement with, among others, the PMC, and pressure on specific PMU factions. Past attempts by external policymakers and the central government to bring various PMU groups into line and within a more centralized command structure, including seeking to co-opt and fragment groups, building alternatives to these groups, economic sanctions and military attacks, have not succeeded because they have not properly taken into account the nature of the PMU nor the nature of the Iraqi State.<sup>134</sup> As such, approaches to these groups in reform processes, including those that have strong ties to Iran, need to (1) consider them as more than simply Iranian proxies, (2) more deeply understand their networks to each other and formal and informal institutions and apparatus of the Iraqi State, and (3) create incremental opportunities for addressing structural challenges or deficiencies of the State.<sup>135</sup> The challenges and opportunities uncovered through the Joint Government of Iraq and United Nations Roadmap process may be a place to start in this regard.

Regarding the areas of limited and no return considered here, the most straightforward in terms of approach seems to be in Al-Iskandaria. Key informants deem this the most likely to be resolved and a recent localized effort has begun, though Liwa Ali al-Akbar still has not allowed security-cleared individuals to return. This armed group is not currently involved in wider destabilizing activities in the country and has considerably more internalized networks in Iraq. As such, return processes will reportedly need the buy-in and involvement of national authorities, including the PMC, to be fully implemented. This is an area where the United Nations and donor government leverage with the central government is seen as most useful.

The case of Jurf al-Sakhar is considerably more complex and political, making it harder to navigate. The situation is particularly delicate in the current geopolitical context as Kata'ib Hezbollah, currently preventing returns, may also be linked to recent potentially destabilizing activities in the country via its affiliation with the Islamic Resistance in Iraq. The group does have strong ties to Iran, but also has some connections within the PMC and within the political sphere in Iraq, including loose affiliation with the Coordination Framework and Nouri al-Maliki.<sup>136</sup> These actors have not shown much willingness to engage on the issue of returns to Jurf al-Sakhar to date. Higher-level political representation of the displaced communities themselves have not offered much in the way of proactive engagement on this topic either, beyond issuing of political statements. Bringing these and other actors, including potentially the United States, together on this issue will likely require significant effort, including a deeper mapping and analysis of relevant powerbrokers and backchannel actors across the landscape of formal and informal components of the State in this regard. Based on the findings above, displaced communities see the United Nations, as a neutral third party, as the best placed to take on the decidedly more political role in convening and mediating between these actors. The existing United Nations efforts around the Joint Government of Iraq and United Nations Roadmap corroborates this view and the need for political solutions in the case of particularly intractable displacement resolution to date. European and other donor governments may also play a role, since they are also perceived as being relatively neutral parties,<sup>137</sup> but this may need to be reevaluated in light of recent ongoing regional conflict dynamics.

## LOCAL INTEGRATION

While not discussed in detail by participants in this study, the inclusion of local integration within negotiations for resolving displacement in general would require

the same actors and approaches described above. This is because the actors blocking returns are also hindering local integration by limiting the ability of the displaced to seek compensation or obtain necessary documentation to live as residents more fully in displacement locations. Furthermore, negotiations would also eventually need to include provincial and local level authorities and security actors in the primary areas of displacement, including Babylon, Anbar, Baghdad and Sulaymaniyah, and by extension Federal Government and Kurdistan Regional Government involvement as well. The United Nations seems best placed to mediate between these actors as a neutral third party. Deeper analysis of powerbrokers and backchannel actors related to areas of displacement would also be warranted.

The aim of including local integration as an alternative would be to ensure that any approaches for negotiating resolution of displacement for Al-Iskandaria and for Jurf al-Sakhar allow for all options to be considered since the beginning.

## PUBLIC PARTICIPATION AND DISCOURSE

More robust and concerted engagement on return issues in both Al-Iskandaria and Jurf al-Sakhar will require mechanisms by which the displaced can also safely participate and voice their demands, perspectives and concerns. Ensuring this participation also includes widening who is informed about any such processes and who gets to safely participate and how. Previous efforts at seeking to discuss resolution of displacement in these areas tended to include only older men. Renewed efforts must include the voices of women and young people and space for recipient communities – either those residing in areas of origin or areas of displacement – to express their views and concerns as well. Doing so is also an opportunity to widen the public discourse on this issue and build a broader base of support within society for addressing the end of displacement in a rights-based and responsive way. In the event processes stall or cannot start quickly, raising these issues in public and private advocacy would contribute to keeping them on the agenda.

## EXPECTATION SETTING AND MITIGATING POLITICAL EXPEDIENCY

Another consideration for any potential pathways relates to expectation setting among all stakeholders, including the displaced. Any processes in this regard for Jurf al-Sakhar and Al-Iskandaria, even the “easier” of the two, will take considerable time and will require significant confidence-building steps on all sides, with all options for resolving displacement considered. The resolution of displacement, both in normative and concrete terms and based on IDPs’ stated preconditions for return and for local integration, is beyond geography alone. Solutions encompass a host of rights claims and, in some cases, administrative, governance and security reforms; because of this, and of the actors involved, any new initiatives will likely face setbacks. Working with stakeholders will be important to pursue feasible preconditions to provide rights, dignity and justice to displaced families, even if processes initially stall, recognizing that these may shift and change over time. Doing so would mitigate the impact of remaining stuck between solutions on the path toward return or local integration. Finally, it will be critical to resist pushing for solutions that are politically expedient in the short-term but that do not durably resolve displacement or address grievances in the long term. The desire for quick wins is understandable, especially under these circumstances, but all actors involved in any processes need to be in it for the long haul, to ensure citizens’ rights and protection are upheld now and for future generations.

<sup>134</sup> Mansour, *Networks of Power*.

<sup>135</sup> Mansour, *Networks of Power*; Rudolf, “Kataib Hezbollah (Iraq)”; and Erica Gaston and Douglas Ollivant, *U.S.-Iran Proxy Competition in Iraq* (Washington, D.C., New America, 2020).

<sup>136</sup> Rudolf, *Tracing the Role of the Violent Entrepreneurs*; and Mansour, *Networks of Power*.

<sup>137</sup> Julien Barnes-Dacey, Ellie Geranmayeh, Hugh Lovatt, “Rethinking Governance: The Case for European Engagement with Non-State Armed Groups,” case study for *Guns and Governance: How Europe Should Talk with Non-State Armed Groups in the Middle East* (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2020).

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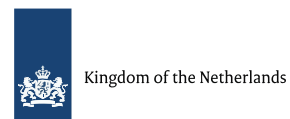
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