MIRAMI
RAISING AWARENESS
### on irregular migration in Iraq

Displacement, emigration, and return.
Understanding migration dynamics and patterns within, to, and from Iraq

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Background Report – August 2023

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Contents

Executive Summary

This background report serves as a foundation within the framework of the *Migration Information and Awareness Raising on the Risks of Irregular Migration in Iraq* (MIRAMI) Project. Building upon existing experiences and collaborations, such as the Migrant Resource Centre (MRC) established in Baghdad, the MIRAMI Project aims at increasing awareness of safe and legal migration, reducing irregular migration, and improving reintegration support for returnees through the development of targeted migration information campaigns. The project targets various groups, including potential migrants, returnees, families, female migrants, and influencers like community leaders and media representatives. In doing so, MIRAMI contributes to the Iraqi government's vision of sustainable reintegration for returnees, aligning with national strategies for migration management.

By focusing on three main research aspects, i.e., the analysis of migration trends and patterns in Iraq, the literature review of previous campaigns, and the examination of the role of returnees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in migration decision-making, this report aims at shaping the direction of the project and laying the groundwork for the subsequent development of targeted migration information campaigns. This executive summary highlights the key role of the background report and its contributions to the project.

Migration Dynamics and Drivers in Iraq

Since the defeat of ISIS in December 2017, Iraq has experienced relative stability, economic improvements in certain regions, and the return of displaced individuals to their homes. However, challenges such as unemployment, political uncertainty, and a desire for freedom continue to drive young people out of the country. The lack of legal migration pathways has led to irregular migration, resulting in challenges both within the country and at its borders. Thousands of Iraqis attempted to enter Europe illegally in 2021, highlighting the need for comprehensive strategies to address outward migration. The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), a relatively stable area, has also seen emigration due to economic and political instability. The country's demographic trends, with a significant increase in the working-age population and high youth unemployment, exacerbate migration pressures. However, limited research has focused on Iraqi emigration trends.

The report identifies key drivers of migration, including security concerns, economic hardships, and personal aspirations. While potential migrants often desire to reach Western Europe and North America, IDPs typically wish to return home or integrate into their host regions. However, security concerns, economic problems, and limited access to housing and social services often prevent the return of IDPs or complicates the situation of the returnees, pushing some of them to migrate again. Many potential migrants lack access to reliable migration-related information, relying on word-of-mouth and social networks. Irregular migration can exhaust resources, extend journey times, and risk lives due to insufficient information. This underscores the importance of providing accurate and beneficial migration information to potential migrants.

Migration Information Campaigns

Migration information campaigns play a crucial role in influencing individuals' migration decisions by providing them with accurate, relevant, and reliable information. These campaigns aim to address the gaps in knowledge that potential migrants often face, helping them make more informed choices about their migration journey. Building upon previous research conducted by ICMPD in the framework of the PARIM project, the background report delves into the significance of such campaigns, their strategies, and their impact, offering valuable insights for the MIRAMI Project.

Conveying a clear and credible message is crucial for every campaign. Migration campaigns strive to strike a balance between emotional appeal and informative content. By emphasising both the dangers and potential legal pathways of migration, campaigns aim to capture the attention of potential migrants and guide their decision-making process. Campaigns leverage a mix of traditional and digital communication channels and employ a variety of mediums to engage potential migrants to reach their target audience effectively. The choice of messengers is also crucial; the report underlines that using returnees as messengers can enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of campaign messages.

Despite their significance, assessing the effectiveness of migration information campaigns can be complex due to the multifaceted nature of migration decisions. While some campaigns report success in decreasing migration numbers, the report acknowledges that establishing a direct link between campaigns and behavioural changes

is challenging. Critics argue that campaigns can serve symbolic purposes for governments; yet, studies also highlight the positive impact that campaigns can have on raising awareness about migration risks and legal pathways.

The Role of Returnees and IDPs

Using returnees as messengers in migration information campaigns might enhance trust and credibility. The background report examines the pivotal role that returnees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) can play as messengers in migration information campaigns. These individuals possess first-hand experience with migration journeys, making them credible sources of information. Their stories can provide potential migrants with insights into the challenges, risks, and opportunities associated with migration, fostering more informed decision-making.

Returnees' credibility lies in their shared background and experiences with potential migrants. When returnees share their stories, they can provide context, emotional resonance, and a sense of relatability that official institutions or abstract information might lack. By sharing both the difficulties and the successes of their journeys, returnees can help potential migrants make well-rounded judgments on irregular migration.

However, involving returnees in campaigns requires careful selection and preparation. Returnees must be respected within their communities, and their migration experiences should not be perceived as failures. Cultural and religious factors should also be considered, as well as the potential stigmatisation some returnees might face. The report emphasises the need to assess each returnee's influence, knowledge, communication skills, and motivation before incorporating them into campaigns.

Recommendations

The report also advances some recommendations for designing and implementing effective migration information campaigns in Iraq:

- **Clear Objectives**: Set clear and measurable objectives in collaboration with stakeholders to define campaign success.

- **Target Group Definition**: Identify and engage the target group effectively, recognising the evolving nature of potential irregular migrants.

- **Relevant and Credible Messaging**: Develop messages that are understandable, relevant, and credible, while also incorporating emotional elements.

- **Holistic Approaches**: Address root causes of migration through development initiatives, legal migration channels, and cooperation with local governments.

Conclusion

Iraq's migration challenges persist despite relative stability since the defeat of ISIS. Unemployment, political uncertainty, and a desire for better opportunities drive people to seek irregular migration routes. To counter these challenges, effective migration information campaigns that address the root causes of migration are crucial. By understanding migration dynamics, leveraging the experiences of returnees, and focusing on clear objectives and credible messaging, the MIRAMI Project aims to contribute to safer and more informed migration decisions for Iraqis.

1 Introduction

Since the defeat of ISIS in December 2017, Iraq has entered a period of relative stability, with moderate economic improvements (especially in the northern regions), the return of millions of displaced people to their areas of origin, and the stabilisation of migratory pressures within and from the country after the high outward migration of Iraqi citizens to Europe during the previous years. However, the situation is far from ideal: unemployment, social and political uncertainties, and personal desire for freedom continues to push young people out of the country mostly in an irregular way, as legal migration pathways are scarce and unknown. These factors constituted crucial drivers for outward migration in 2021, when thousands of people were lured to travel to Belarus on a tourist visa to then enter the EU illegally. According to the European Border Agency FRONTEX, in that year about 8,700 Iraqi migrants were apprehended at the external borders of Europe, more than half of whom at the Eastern European border.[1] Besides, 2021 saw also a sudden increase of asylum applications lodged by Iraqi nationals in Poland, Latvia, and Lithuania, as well as consistently high numbers of asylum claims in Germany, Greece, Austria, and Belgium.[2]

Although with much lower numbers than those fleeing the 2014 conflict against ISIS, the outward migration of many Iraqi citizens – particularly from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), a relatively stable and secure region within the country – reflects the continued difficult economic and political situation in the country, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. A closer look reveals how the recent economic and political instability in the region, with rampant unemployment, corruption, massive cuts in state salaries, and the impact of internal and cross-border displacement,[3] constitutes important migration drivers even for the KRI. After the burst of the Arab Spring and the general situation of instability in those countries that host thousands of Iraqi refugees in the past, Western Europe has become one of the most common destinations for Iraqi nationals during the 2015 migration crisis and remained such throughout the second half of the decade, together with the neighbouring countries of Türkiye and Jordan.[4]

While protracted conflict and lack of economic opportunities in Iraq engendered large numbers of emigrants, with more than two million Iraqis living abroad in 2020[5] and an estimated negative net migration rate of -0.83 migrants per 1,000 people in 2022,[6] the migratory situation in the country is exacerbated by the demographic developments of the past two decades, which have seen a staggering increase in the working age population. The stable population growth rate of over 2% per year has resulted in an increase of the country's population by approximately one million persons each year for the past two decades, bringing the current total population of Iraq at 45.5 million people, nearly a double increase compared to 2000.[7] The demographic and socio-economic features of the Iraqi population, characterised by a median age of 20 years old and a staggering 36% in youth unemployment rate,[8] make outward migration a craved perspective. However, probably given the relatively low number of Iraqi emigrants in comparison not only with other migrant groups (e.g., Syrians and Afghans) but also with the number of IDPs within the country, there seems to be little research on the main trends, patterns, and drivers of outward emigration – a topic that this report, and the MIRAMI Project more generally, would like to contribute to.

The lack of economic opportunities, which pushes many people out of their regions, is often mixed with a lack of access to migration related information, which complicates migration journeys. Information about migration is often obtained through word of mouth or social networks and is therefore highly based on the personal experiences and feelings of those who 'made it'. The lack of reliable information on migration might prompt people to embark on a migration journey that quickly exhausts migrants' economic resources, extends migration

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[1] FRONTEX, "Risk Analysis for 2022/2023" (Warsaw: FRONTEX, 2022).
[2] https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/download/?url=COX78m; EUAA, "Latest Asylum Trends - Annual Overview 2022," *European Union Agency for Asylum* (blog), February 22, 2023, https://euaa.europa.eu/latest-asylum-trends-annual-overview-2022.
[3] The Kurdistan Region of Iraq is the major host of internally displaced people (IDPs) from other governorates and refugees from other countries.
[4] Irene Costantini and Kamaran Palani, "Displacement-Emigration-Return: Understanding Uncertainty in the Context of Iraq," Policy Report (Erbil: Middle East Research Institute, 2018).
[5] United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, "International Migrant Stock 2020," 2020.
[6] MPI, "Iraq: Country Resources," *Migration Policy Institute* (blog), 2023, https://www.migrationpolicy.org/country-resource/iraq.
[7] Macrotrends, "Iraq Population 1950-2023," 2023, https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/IRQ/iraq/population.
[8] CSO, KRSO and ILO, "Iraq Labour Force Survey 2021" (Baghdad and Erbil: Central Statistical Organization (CSO), Kurdistan Region Statistics Office (KRSO) and International Labour Organization (ILO), 2022).

times indefinitely, and in some cases jeopardises migrants' lives. This might explain why people often report high levels of disappointment when embarking on a migration journey that is more complicated than expected.

Within this context, the Project *Migration information and awareness raising on the risks of irregular migration in Iraq* (MIRAMI) aims to provide reliable and beneficial information to potential migrants through the creation and implementation of targeted migration information campaigns that contribute to:

- Increased safe and legal migration from Iraq;

- Reduced irregular migration from Iraq to the EU and other countries;

- Improved access to reintegration information and services for returnees.

The overall objective of this project is to contribute to the change of perceptions and behaviour of potential and intending migrants from Iraq considering migrating through irregular pathways to Europe and of key influencers of their decisions (families, friends, community leaders, returnees, private sector, media, and teachers).

For this reason, the project encompasses a broad range of target groups, including primarily potential irregular migrants, aspiring or returned migrants, families of aspiring migrants, female migrants, and, more generally, all those people whose perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours are associated with enabling irregular migration directly or indirectly. The primary target group will be approached directly through awareness raising campaigns, community education and outreach activities, and other modes of direct engagement allowing for immediate transfer of information and knowledge to the audiences. The project will also address formal and informal social networks and social groups whose members' knowledge, attitudes, and practices may influence the primary audience's behaviour, which will be approached through mass media campaigns (SMS, print media, electronic, social media, etc.). Finally, MIRAMI will indirectly benefit local government representatives, law enforcement officials, and media representatives, whose actions reflect the broader social, cultural, and policy factors that create an enabling environment for positive change.

To implement the project in an efficient way, ICMPD can build concretely upon the research and practical experiences gained through several projects on awareness raising implemented in Iraq as well as through continuous cooperation with the Iraqi government since 2017, in particular:

- *Improving Migration Management in the Silk Routes Countries* (IMM, 2017-2022), which aimed at raising awareness of migration through the creation of a Migrant Resource Centre (MRC) in Baghdad, which was effectively established and operationalised by ICMPD in 2020 together with the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MOLSA). Since 2022, the MRC has established close cooperation with the MOLSA in the KRI, with the aim of strengthening capacity building and awareness raising programmes in major irregular migration prone provinces. The main aim of the Centre is to raise awareness of the dangers and consequences of irregular migration, inform about existing legal pathways for Iraqi migrants, counsel returning migrants on reintegration measures available through MOLSA and other programmes, and provide guidance and counselling for incoming foreign labour migrants in Iraq.

- *Awareness raising on migration in Iraq and Pakistan* (MARIP I, 2019), which provided training to 13 journalists in Iraq with the aim of improving migration reporting for accurate and in-depth stories as well as, more generally, ensuring a correct understanding of the complex issues related to migration and disseminating accurate information towards the promotion of safe and orderly migration to and from Iraq.

- *Information activities and capacity building on asylum, legal and irregular migration in Afghanistan, Iraq and the Western Balkans* (IKAM, 2021-2022), which aimed at strengthening local stakeholders' capacity building and counselling activities through mass media, community outreach, and engagement of potential migrants and their key influencers.

- *Capacity building for long-term reintegration of returnees to Iraq* (CAIR, 2021-2023), which aimed at creating the conditions for the sustainable reintegration of Iraqi returnees through the institution of a Reintegration Information Desk within the MRC and the provision of practical and timely information on active reintegration programmes and services.

By creating a specific information dissemination and awareness raising campaign for Iraqi returnees, MIRAMI will contribute not only to the expansion of MRC's existing work, but also to the reinforcement of the reintegration framework for returnees outlined by the Government of Iraq. In 2019, Iraq's Ministry of Migration and Displacement (MoMD) carried out a comprehensive national profile with the aim of addressing the main

changes in migration patterns and challenges to migration management. The review found indeed significant changes in migration and displacement patterns within the country since 2003, such as (1) a larger numbers of Iraqi migrants abroad; (2) new countries of destination for Iraqi migrants; (3) the continued presence of migrant workers within Iraq; and (4) new challenges and opportunities related to changes and evolutions in the security, economic, and environmental situation.[9] The aforementioned trends have taken place within a national context of significant internal displacement (due to the conflict with the ISIL) and demographic changes, which have contributed to a larger working age population. Based on the review and considering the recent demographic changes that doubled the working age population in the country over the span of two decades, the government of Iraq identified the reintegration of returnees – both IDPs and from abroad – as a key policy concern, reflected in Goal 21 of the Global Compact on Migration, which is highlighted in the Iraqi National Review.

The current project will complement the <u>Vision on Sustainable Reintegration of Returnees in Iraq</u> and its complementary Action Plan, developed through a whole-of-government approach in Iraq with technical and expert support of ICMPD in the framework of the CAIR Project.[10] MIRAMI will build particularly on the first priority of the Vision, which aims to increase capacity and awareness of return and reintegration at the national, local, and community levels. Moreover, the Project will also contribute to the third strategic objective of the Ministry of Migration and Displacement-led National Strategy for Migration Management in Iraq, i.e., fully integrate return, readmission, and reintegration, by understanding the behaviour of returnee migrants and identifying reintegration opportunities for them. In this way, MIRAMI seeks to strengthen migration management for the socio-economic benefit of Iraq while upholding the human rights of migrants within and outside the country.

Within this framework, the current background report aims at laying the groundwork for the subsequent development of the project, from the qualitative and quantitative research in the field to the design and implementation of tailored and efficient migration information campaigns. It will do so by:

- Analysing existing primary and secondary data on migration dynamics from and within Iraq, identifying the potential target group, its specific profile (age, gender, education, skills qualifications), and its geographic origins;

- Reviewing previous information campaigns and communication activities in the country, their methodology, their features including key messages and channels, and their effectiveness and efficiency;

- Investigating the experiences and role of returnees and IDPs, including as relevant to the migration decision-making process of potential Iraqi migrants. In so doing, the report will inform the roll-out, implementation, and management of the project and campaign activities.

The report is structured in two main sections. After providing a brief explanation of the main concepts and categories used throughout the report (Chapter 2), Chapter 3 will delve into the migration context in Iraq by (1) providing a brief reconstruction of the country's tormented contemporary history; (2) analysing the main migration dynamics within the country, with particular attention to the interrelation between internal displacement, return, and emigration over the last decade; and (3) understanding the main macro- and micro-level drivers of (irregular) migration Iraq that need to be taken into consideration in the elaboration and development of migration information campaigns. Chapter 4 will look more specifically at migration information campaigns, reviewing the main concepts and assumptions behind their implementation, the role of key actors in their implementation (in particular, that of returnees), as well as their effectiveness and shortcomings. A specific section will also be dedicated to the analysis of some migration information campaigns implemented in Iraq.

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[9] MoMD, "First National Review of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration in Iraq" (Ministry of Migration and Displacement, September 2020).

[10] ICMPD, "Vision on Sustainable Reintegration of Returnees in Iraq - CAIR Report" (Vienna: International Centre for Migration Policy Development, 2022).

2 Key terms and definitions

2.1 Introduction

Drawing from the current state-of-the-art in migration research, this chapter will present the main concepts and categories related to migration that not only will guide us throughout the report but also are necessary for the elaboration and implementation of migration information campaigns. Before looking at the official definition of key migration terms, it is important to bear in mind that concepts cannot always capture the multiplicity of social reality nor the variety of personal experiences. In other words, what can be enclosed within a particular definition can never be fixed and predetermined; rather, it is often evanescent and always changing according to specific social and personal circumstances. For this reason, the first part of this section will provide a brief but critical analysis of the term 'migrant' vis-à-vis the official definition provided by international organisations. For the same reason, before looking at the main migration terms and their use within the specificity of this project, it should be considered that the key terms presented here can and should be further refined as the project progresses, if the structural and personal circumstances change.

While categorisations are conceptually challenging and empirically problematic for the consequences they might have on the everyday lives of people, they remain nevertheless important foundations for the elaboration and implementation of policies and projects. In the case of MIRAMI, definitions constitute an important aspect of the project, as they allow the identification of the target group as well as their participation in targeted activities in the framework of migration information campaigns. For this reason, the last section of this chapter will look, more practically, at the work of MRC Iraq and at the characteristics of its variegated clientele throughout the first three years of operations. Looking at the empirical work of the MRC allows not only to enrich theoretical categorisations but also to provide a more precise outline of the main target group of the project, i.e. potential (irregular) migrants.

2.2 Definitions of 'migrant' and related challenges

Who is a migrant? This question has accompanied the work of international organisations and state authorities as well as of many migration scholars throughout the last decades. Far from wanting to solve this conceptual quandary, the following section aims at providing a brief overview of the main terms that will be used throughout the report, mostly drawing from the official definition of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and other relevant authorities and institutions at the international level, discussing the main challenges and contradictions in categorising people on the move.

Quite interestingly, the Glossary on Migration published by the IOM states that 'At the international level, no universally accepted definition for "migrant" exists.'[11] Despite, or perhaps precisely because of this, the same glossary provides a whole plethora of different terms to define people on the move. Employing rather neutral terms, the IOM defines 'migrant' as 'an umbrella term, not defined under international law, reflecting the common lay understanding of a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons. The term includes a number of well-defined legal categories of people, such as migrant workers; persons whose particular types of movements are legally defined, such as smuggled migrants; as well as those whose status or means of movement are not specifically defined under international law, such as international students.'

Whatever the reasons for migration, the extent of the spatio-temporal coordinates of the journey, and the legal conditions under which migration occurs, what is associated with the term 'migrant' is the idea of movement from one place to another. However, when we start looking at those reasons, coordinates, and conditions behind migration movements, new definitions necessarily emerge. It is often the relationship between movement and nation states' borders that changes migration patterns and terms. For the purpose of this report, this section will look at only some of the official definitions of 'migrant' that take into account (the interrelation between) the reasons, the spatial coordinates, and the legal conditions of migration.

The movement of a person within their own country has different legal and socio-political implications than the movement of the same person across an international border. According to the specific reason behind migration, people that move within their own country's border are generally categorised as 'internal migrants' or 'internally

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[11] IOM, "Glossary on Migration," International Migration Law (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2019).

displaced persons (IDPs)'. The latter is particularly important in the analysis of Iraqi migration dynamics and patterns, as we will see in the following chapter. The IOM defines IDPs as 'Persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border.'[12] Noteworthy is the fact that, while displaced people crossing international borders are recognised and protected at the international level according to the UNHCR Geneva Convention, those who remain within their borders are not legally entitled to specific forms of protection.

If migrants cross international borders, however, a whole variety of terms can apply to them according to the legal and socio-economic conditions of the crossing. In the case of MIRAMI, an interesting category of people is that of irregular migrants. The IOM defines an 'irregular migrant' as a 'person who moves or has moved across an international border and is not authorized to enter or to stay in a State pursuant to the law of that State and to international agreements to which that State is a party.'[13] Unlike the general definition of 'migrant', this definition specifically highlights the role of nation states' policies in defining who can (or cannot) enter or stay in the territory of that state as well as in establishing the conditions for border crossing. Far from being a fixed label, the condition of migrant irregularity is therefore the product of the law itself, and thus constantly changing according to the state's economic needs and political climate.[14]

The relative note to the IOM definition specifies that 'even when in an irregular situation, migrants are still entitled to the respect, protection and fulfilment of their human rights.' Besides, the IOM continues, 'refugees are to be granted access to international protection and protected against being penalized for unauthorized entry or stay if they have travelled from a place where they were at risk.'[15] The definition of 'irregular migrant' intertwines therefore with that of 'refugee', defined, according to the UNHCR Refugee Convention, as a 'person who, owing to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.'[16]

Despite the apparently clear and well-defined explanations, the interrelation between 'irregular migrant' and 'refugee' contains conceptual and practical challenges. First, the boundaries between the two definitions are often blurred, raising difficulties in distinguishing them.[17] As De Genova, Garelli, and Tazzioli put it, 'every act of migration, to some extent—and in a world wracked by wars, civil wars, and other more diffuse forms of societal violence, as well as the structural violence of deprivation and marginalization, perhaps more and more—may be apprehensible as a quest for refuge, and migrants come increasingly to resemble "refugees," while, similarly, refugees never cease to have aspirations and projects for recomposing their lives and thus never cease to resemble "migrants."'[18] Second, the strengthening of border measures, the curtailment of regular migratory paths, and the criminalisation of migration movements have made the crossing increasingly difficult for migrants, compelling them to disguise themselves as asylum seekers while limiting their possibility to claim asylum.[19] Judith Kohlenberger terms this process 'the asylum paradox', that is, the impossibility for asylum seekers to access the European territory in a regular way, prompting them to enter it unlawfully in order to exercise their right to protection and claim asylum.[20]

A particular category of migrant is that of returnee, as the same definition can apply to returning migrants whether they cross an internationals border or not. The IOM defines 'return' as 'the act or process of going back or being taken back to the point of departure. This could be within the territorial boundaries of a country, as in

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[12] IOM.

[13] IOM.

[14] Nicholas De Genova, "The Legal Production of Mexican/Migrant 'Illegality,'" *Latino Studies* 2, no. 2 (July 2004): 160–85.

[15] IOM, "Glossary on Migration."

[16] UNHCR, "Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees" (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2010).

[17] Rebecca Hamlin, *Crossing: How We Label and React to People on the Move* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021).

[18] Nicholas De Genova, Glenda Garelli, and Martina Tazzioli, eds., "Autonomy of Asylum? The Autonomy of Migration Undoing the Refugee Crisis Script," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 117, no. 2 (April 1, 2018): 242.

[19] Serhat Karakayali and Enrica Rigo, "Mapping the European Space of Circulation," in *The Deportation Regime: Sovereignty, Space, and the Freedom of Movement*, ed. Nicholas De Genova and Nathalie Peutz (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 123–44.

[20] Judith Kohlenberger, *Das Fluchtparadox: Über Unseren Widersprüchlichen Umgang Mit Vertreibung Und Vertriebenen* (Wien: Kremayr & Scheriau, 2022).

the case of returning internally displaced persons (IDPs) and demobilized combatants; or between a country of destination or transit and a country of origin, as in the case of migrant workers, refugees or asylum seekers.' Whatever the reasons and the starting points of return are, this definition implies a tight emotional connection between the migrant and the country or area of origin, which supposedly facilitates their reintegration into the society. However, as this report will show in the next chapter, the socio-economic conditions of return and reintegration are not as straightforward as imagined, affecting the everyday life of returnees and, in some cases, turning return into remigration.

2.3 Potential (irregular) migrants

2.3.1 Conceptual definitions

Potential (irregular) migrants are crucial target groups of migration information campaigns; however, defining them constitutes a challenging and contested issue. At both the national and international levels, there is no clear definition of who a potential irregular migrant is and, among the myriad definitions in the IOM glossary, that of 'potential (irregular) migrant' does not even appear. The lack of a clear definition of what constitutes the main target group of MIRAMI might complicate not only the field research (and the sampling strategy for the implementation of the survey) but also the elaboration and delivery of targeted migration information campaigns. The previous work conducted by ICMPD and the migration literature on migration intentions and aspirations can help us solve this puzzle.

When looking at 'potential migrants', it is important to distinguish those who have a mere wish or desire to emigrate – who are termed 'aspiring migrants' and often constitute the majority of potential migrants – from those who have concrete migration intentions and have started to make plans and prepare for leaving, which are defined as 'intending migrants'.[21] Just to put things into perspective: The recent World Bank's World Development Report states that, as of 2022, about 184 million people, corresponding to 2.5% of the world's population, could be considered international migrants as they lived outside their country of nationality.[22] On the other hand, according to survey by the Gallup World Poll, more than 750 million people, or almost 10% of the world's population, expressed their desire to migrate, while only a small fraction of them actually have the chances and intentions to realise their plans.[23]

Just like any other definition, the conceptual distinction between 'aspiring migrants' and 'intending migrants' is often blurred and erratic, since even migration plans and intentions might take time and resources to be translated into practice and carries along methodological and empirical consequences. Several migration scholars have attempted to measure and analyse aspirations and intentions, trying to understand in particular when these turn effectively into migration, as well as to assess the drivers of migration that prompt people to (wish to) migrate. The study of migration intentions and aspirations allows not only capturing the factors driving migration movements and their impact on migration decisions, but also potentially analysing personal behaviours and actions beyond actual migration, thus contributing to a better understanding of the migration-development nexus.[24]

Although a complete literature review of (the interrelations between) migration aspirations and intentions goes beyond the scope of this report,[25] a brief examination of the 'nature of the mindset' as well as of the drivers of migration would allow not only a better understanding of their complexity and interrelations but also, and most

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[21] Katharina Hahn-Schaur, *Awareness Raising and Information Campaigns on the Risks of Irregular Migration from Pakistan: Background Report* (Vienna: ICMPD, 2021).

[22] World Bank, ed., *World Development Report 2023: Migrants, Refugees, and Societies* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2023).

[23] Mathias Czaika and Constantin Reinprecht, "Migration Drivers: Why Do People Migrate?," in *Introduction to Migration Studies*, ed. Peter Scholten, IMISCOE Research Series (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 49–82, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92377-8_3.

[24] Jørgen Carling, "Measuring Migration Aspirations and Related Concepts," MIGNEX Background Paper (Oslo: Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), 2019), www.mignex.org/d023.

[25] For reference, see Silva Migali and M Scipioni, "A Global Analysis of Intentions to Migrate," *JCR Technical Report*, 2018, 60; Carling, "Measuring Migration Aspirations and Related Concepts"; Maryam Aslany et al., "Systematic Review of Determinants of Migration Aspirations," *QuantMig Project Deliverable D2.2.* (Southampton: University of Southampton, 2021); Jørgen Carling and Mathilde Bålsrud Mjelva, "Survey Instruments and Survey Data on Migration Aspirations," *QuantMig Project Deliverable D2.1*, no. 870299 (2021), https://www.prio.org/utility/DownloadFile.ashx?id=2295&type=publicationfile; Hahn-Schaur, *Awareness Raising and Information Campaigns on the Risks of Irregular Migration from Pakistan: Background Report*; Raffaella Pagogna and Patrick Sakdapolrak, "Disciplining Migration Aspirations through Migration-information Campaigns: A Systematic Review of the Literature," *Geography Compass* 15, no. 7 (July 2021); Eda Kiriscioglu and Aysen Ustubici, "'At Least, at the Border, I Am Killing Myself by My Own Will': Migration Aspirations and Risk Perceptions among Syrian and Afghan Communities," *Journal of Immigrant and Refugee Studies*, 2023, https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2023.2198485.

importantly, a clearer picture of the target group for the implementation of the research project and the relative information campaign. In the words of Carling and Mjelva, the nature of the mindset is defined as 'a person's thoughts and feelings about the prospect of migration' and includes eight categories, namely: consideration, preference, willingness, necessity, planning, intention, expectation, and likelihood.[26] These categories, initially developed by Carling and defined in Figure 1,[27] describe the process of the formation of the decision to migrate, by carefully detailing its development from the initial consideration and evaluation of migration to the will and belief that migration will take place. Besides, they constitute an invaluable help for researchers in formulating specific research questions when implementing surveys or interviewing key informants. The nature of the mindset, however, should be analysed together with its timeframe and spatiality to understand the temporal development of the migration idea as well as the spatial aspects of the potential migration project.[28]

Figure 1: Definition of the eight categories of the nature of the mindset. Dashed lines indicate closely related mindset. Source: Carling and Mjelva, 2021.

Nature of the mindset	Definition (with the action defined as 'migration')
Consideration	The act of reflecting on the feasibility or desirability of migration
Preference	The evaluative conclusion that migrating would be preferable to staying
Willingness	The preparedness to migrate despite assumed disadvantage or hardship
Necessity	The assessment that migration is the only option
Planning	The preparation of a course of action towards migration
Intention	The will or commitment to pursue a course of action towards migration
Expectation	The belief that migration will most probably take place
Likelihood	The assessment of the probability that migration will take place

Personal aspirations and capabilities alone do not affect migration decisions, but often intertwine with a variety of migration drivers at both meso- and macro-level, which should be likewise analysed in their complexity and interrelatedness. In their analysis of 463 studies on migration drivers, Czaika & Reinprecht identify 24 migration driving factors categorised into nine driver dimensions (economic, demographic, environmental, developmental, politico-institutional, security-related, socio-cultural, and supranational) and analyse their interplay as well as their interrelations within micro-, meso-, and macro-level dimensions of migration.[29] Since about 90% of the world's population never migrate, it is also important to consider the potential presence of specific 'drivers of immobility', which prevent or discourage people from leaving their country.[30]

Taking into consideration the nature of the mindset and the drivers of migration is of paramount relevance for the project's overarching goal of devising and implementing effective migration information campaigns tailored to the needs of potential irregular migrants. By delineating the nuanced journey from aspirations to concrete intentions, the project can gain insight into the critical junctures where information campaigns can effectively intervene. Delving into the intricate interplay of factors that drive migration decisions can equip the campaign with a comprehensive understanding of potential migrants' motivations, enabling the creation of targeted content that addresses specific drivers and resonates with the intended audience. Moreover, recognising the potential presence of 'drivers of immobility' offers a holistic perspective, helping the project craft messages that alleviate concerns and uncertainties holding individuals back from pursuing migration. In essence, the integration of the nature of the mindset and the drivers of migration can enrich the project's strategic approach, allowing it to accurately identify, engage, and support potential irregular migrants through informative campaigns that acknowledge their aspirations, intentions, and desires.

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[26] Carling and Mjelva, "Survey Instruments and Survey Data on Migration Aspirations."
[27] Carling, "Measuring Migration Aspirations and Related Concepts."
[28] Carling; Carling and Mjelva, "Survey Instruments and Survey Data on Migration Aspirations."
[29] Czaika and Reinprecht, "Migration Drivers."
[30] Kerilyn Schewel, "Understanding Immobility: Moving Beyond the Mobility Bias in Migration Studies," *International Migration Review* 54, no. 2 (June 2020): 328–55.

2.3.2   Empirical characteristics

The characteristics of potential migrants can be analysed from different perspectives: theoretically, through the analysis of those studies on the categorisation of migration or on the aspiration and intentions of those migrants who have made the journey (which will be examined more in depth in section 3.5.1), or empirically, through the examination of the data from those agencies that actually work with this target group, such as the MRC. Concerning the studies, noteworthy is the research conducted by IOM Iraq at the end of 2015 among 474 Iraqi migrants who reached Europe over the course of the previous year. Although not generalisable, the study provided an interesting cross section of the main characteristics of the potential Iraqi migrant: male (93% of respondents), young (between 20 and 30 years in almost three quarters of the cases), single, and without any dependants (in about two thirds of cases).[31] Another study conducted by REACH among 413 Iraqis on the Aegean islands in 2017 similarly confirmed that migrants were mostly male (83%) and predominantly young (39% were aged 17 to 25 and 35% were 26 to 35 years old). However, the study also reported that 45% of respondents had travelled to Greece with members of their family, thus signalling that women had also migrated from the country but remained underrepresented in the survey.[32]

From an empirical point of view, while the pool of potential migrants can be quite vast and larger than that of actual migrants, the work of the MRC can help narrow it down. Since its establishment in late 2020, MRC Iraq has provided counselling to hundreds of Iraqi citizens, organised events and informative sessions, and implemented information campaigns among the population to raise awareness of the risks or irregular migration. Whether driven by a mere sense of curiosity or seriously preparing for leaving the country, thousands of potential ('aspiring' and 'intending') migrants in Iraq have participated in such events or been reached by the campaigns. The work of the MRC has been therefore important not only to share correct and reliable information on migration journeys and options but also to understand and assess the characteristics and level of preparedness of potential migrants themselves.

In a recent study, the Iraqi Foundation for Development Research (IRFAD) analysed the work of MRC Iraq and provided a glimpse of its clientele, drafting an outline of the characteristics of the potential migrants. The study draws from a survey conducted among 262 Iraqi citizens that either attended group events organised by the MRC (182 people) or sought counselling via its hotline or its WhatsApp and walk-in services (80 people). Overall, the study seems to confirm the results of previously mentioned studies conducted among Iraqi migrants in Europe. The great majority of respondents are indeed **male, single, and young, with a relatively good educational background**. Although indicating the general professional characteristics of the respondents, however, the study does not mention their specific economic conditions and backgrounds. More specifically, about 59% of respondents were male, while 55% were between 18 and 25 years of age and another 20% between 26 and 35 years of age. In terms of marital status, almost 65% of respondents were single and only about 30% declared to be married or in a relationship. As for their education level, more than 40% of respondents reported having some college education, with another 32% having obtained a bachelor's degree, while around 9% of the sample have either completed primary school or secondary school education. Regarding their employment profile, the sample was variegated: Most respondents were composed of either students (34.7%) or unemployed people (35.5%, two thirds of which looking for work), but another 19% of respondents were employed in a salaried job and about 8% were self-employed.

The IRFAD study also investigated the MRC clients' migration history, their close connections abroad, and their intentions to migrate (which will be further detailed in the following chapter). The study discovered that **more than three quarters of respondents had not lived in a country other than their own for more than three months** while almost 56% had family members or close friends currently living abroad. This, IRFAD believes, 'suggests that most of the sample was made up of potential first-time migrants.'[33] In fact, almost one quarter of respondents expressed their intention to migrate abroad in the following two years and already started to take preliminary steps to prepare for their emigration, such as talking to family and friends or searching for information. When looking at migration intentions, the study clearly showed different patterns according to the age, gender, and origin of respondents. With regards to age, younger respondents (below 36 years) were indeed more likely to express a desire to migrate than older ones; similarly, a higher proportion of female respondents

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[31] IOM Iraq, "Migration Flows from Iraq to Europe - February 2016" (Baghdad: International Organization for Migration - Iraq Mission, 2016).
[32] REACH, "Iraqi Migration to Europe in 2016: Profiles, Drivers and Return" (Geneva: REACH Initiative, June 2017).
[33] IRFAD, "A Descriptive Study of the Influence of Information Campaigns and Counselling on the Knowledge, Attitudes and Intentions (KAIs) of Potential Migrants in Iraq" (Baghdad: IRFAD Foundation for Development Research, July 2022), 14.

indicated no desire to migrate at all (33%) compared to male respondents (24%). With regards to their origin, **respondents from the KRI were more likely to express a desire to migrate (80%)** compared to respondents from the central or southern regions of the country (46%).[34]

The data from the MRC counselling service itself for the period 2021-2023 showed similar (and sometimes stronger) trends in terms of age and gender of potential irregular migrants, but stark differences in relation to their origin, probably due to the fact that the MRC is located in Baghdad. According to the MRC, almost 90% of the 5445 clients consulted through its walk-in, phone, and social network services in 2022 were male; a trend that continued in the first seven month of 2023 despite its reduced overall numbers, with almost 80% of the 779 clients consulted being male. Six out of ten people counselled during this period were between 23 and 34 years of age, 22% between 35 and 45, and 15% between 18 and 22. Regarding their origin, 49% of the clients were from the Baghdad governorate, 13% from the Erbil governorate, and 9% each from the Basra and Sulaymaniyah governorates. The MRC reported that **the main drivers of irregular migration were unemployment, lack of jobs, and the desire to lead a better and more economically stable life in the countries of destination**. However, the MRC did not have clear disaggregated data about the educational and economic backgrounds of their clients, also because many migrants are often reluctant to share information about their personal life.

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[34] IRFAD, "A Descriptive Study."

3 Migration dynamics from and within Iraq

3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the main characteristics, trends, and patterns of migration within, from, and to Iraq, with the aim of offering a clear understanding of the principal migration dynamics and factors influencing mobility from and within the country and laying the foundations for the design and implementation of quantitative and qualitative research in the field. After briefly outlining the main migration dynamics in the contemporary history of the country, the chapter delves into the analysis of the interrelation between internal displacement, return, and outward migration. It examines the complexities of internal displacement, covering its main trends, destinations, and reasons (not) to return (Section 3.3). Following this, the chapter explores the significant trends and drivers of return migration, categorising them into domestic and international return (Section 3.4). Lastly, the chapter addresses outward emigration, discussing its main trends and drivers (Section 3.5).

Before delving into the analysis of migration dynamics within, from, and to Iraq, three caveats are necessary. First, as shown in the previous chapter, the conceptual boundaries between forced or voluntary as well as between regular and irregular migration are often blurred and constantly changing, thus complicating the analysis of the conditions of displacement or irregularity. Second, and consequently, although examined separately for the sake of clarity, internal displacement, return, and international emigration are often interrelated: as the report will show, internal displacement might turn into return or international displacement, return into remigration, and international emigration into return. Third, while there is plenty of research on IDPs and returnees, the study of the main trends, patterns, and drivers of international migration from Iraq seems to be quite scarce, probably due to the relatively low number of Iraqis abroad in comparison with the high numbers of, on the one hand, Syrian and Afghan towards Europe and, on the other, Iraqi IDPs within the country. In this respect, the current report, and the MIRAMI Project more generally, aim to contribute to this research gap.

3.2 Main migration trends in Iraq

Migration and displacement have been a constant characteristic in the contemporary history of Iraq.[35] Unlike other oil exporting countries in the region, which have generally experienced a steady increase in incoming labour migration since the 1960s, Iraq initially saw fluctuating migratory trends, mostly due to political instabilities. The 1968 military coup through which the nationalist Socialist Arab Ba'ath party took the reins of power and the rise to power of Saddam Hussein in 1979, who exacerbated the authoritarian nature of the regime, led to the persecution and displacement of Kurds in the North and Shiites all over the country.[36] Until 1973, Iraq was one of the only two Arab countries, together with Oman, that was exporting labour as well as oil.[37] With the staggering increase in oil prices, Iraq started to attract migrant labour force from neighbouring countries, in particular Egypt, Sudan, and Turkey, which partly offset the emigration of Iraqi citizens abroad.[38] The transition to an industrial economy led to the depopulation of the countryside and the parallel urbanisation of major centres. The rapid urban growth caused not only the dearth of social services, which could not keep up with high internal migration movements, but also the neglect of the agricultural sector to the advantage of a temporary and often illusory oil-led economic development.[39] The Iraq-Iran war between 1980 and 1988 and the implementation of development programs further increased the demand for labour migration in Iraq, which reached two million people by the end of the decade.[40]

[35] Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Géraldine Chatelard, "The Politics of Population Movements in Contemporary Iraq: A Research Agenda," in *Writing the Modern History of Iraq: Histographical and Political Challenges*, ed. Jordi Tejel et al. (London: World Scientific Publishers - Imperial College Press, 2012), 359–78.

[36] Constanza Vera-Larrucea, Henrik Malm Lindberg, and André Asplund, "Those Who Were Sent Back. Return and Reintegration of Rejected Asylum Seekers to Afghanistan and Iraq," DELMI Report (Stockholm: Delegationen för migrationsstudier, 2021).

[37] Tayseer Abdel Jaber, "Inter-Arab Labor Movements: Problems and Prospects," in *Economic Development of the Arab Countries*, ed. Saíd El-Naggar (USA: International Monetary Fund, 1993), 145–72, https://www.elibrary.imf.org/view/book/9781557753328/C05.xml; Alain Roussillon, "Manpower Migrations and Arab Unity: The Challenges of the Iraqi Model," *Tiers Monde* 26, no. 103 (1985): 637–64.

[38] Jaber, "Inter-Arab Labor Movements"; Martin Baldwin-Edwards, "Migration in the Middle East and Mediterranean" (Geneva: Global Commission on International Migration, 2005).

[39] Fred Halliday, "Labor Migration in the Arab World," *Middle East Report* 123 (1984).

[40] Jaber, "Inter-Arab Labor Movements."

3.2.1 From a labour-destination to a refugee-source country

With the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent outburst of the Gulf War in 1990-91, many migrant workers in Iraq and in other Arab countries returned to their countries of origin, while many Iraqis were displaced as a result of internal and international conflicts, the social and economic consequences of the embargo, or political persecutions.[41] Since the Gulf War, Iraq has turned from a country of (temporary and oil-dependent) immigration to a country of emigration.[42] While before the invasion about one million Iraqis were living abroad, throughout the 1990s another 1.5 million Iraqis fled either to neighbouring countries, such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Turkey, or to the countries of the Global North, in particular the UK, Scandinavian countries, the USA, and Australia, leading to the formation of exile communities.[43] If the previous diaspora could integrate in the countries of destination under a variety of legal status due to their relatively privileged social position, since the 1990s the number of asylum claims submitted by Iraqi nationals mostly in the USA and in Europe increased dramatically, making Iraq one of the main countries of origin of refugees in the world.[44]

In addition to international conflicts, the 'Arabisation' campaigns under the guidance of the Ba'ath party through the elimination of political oppositions and the military attacks against ethnic and religious minorities led to the displacement and emigration of hundreds of thousands of people.[45] In fact, competing ethnic and sectarian nationalisms have been present since the creation of Iraq by the British in 1921, but the rise to power of the Ba'ath party exacerbated the domination over and the forceful removal of ethnic and religious minorities.[46] Since the late 1960s, in the attempt to consolidate its power, the Ba'athist regime has targeted in particular Kurdish and Shiite minorities: According to estimates, between the late 1980s and the early 1990s around two million Iraqi Shiites and Kurds have been forcibly displaced and found refuge in other parts of the country as well as in Iran, Jordan, or Turkey.[47]

In some cases, the severe restrictions imposed on the international mobility of displaced people since the Iraq-Iran war compelled many of them to remain within the country.[48] The restrictions on the international mobility were a two-fold process. On the one hand, after the end of the Cold War and the gradual advance of neoliberal globalisation, the countries of the Global North started to regulate their borders accordingly, lifting the restrictions to the mobility of capital, goods, high-skilled workers, and services, while introducing limits to the mobility of certain categories of people.[49] Besides, with the burst of the Gulf War, many embassies in the country either closed down or reduced their operations. On the other hand, the Iraqi regime itself introduced policies and measures to prevent people, in particular from the middle class, to leave its territory.[50] The costly economic and financial guarantees required to leave the country, the introduction of the death penalty for returning asylum seekers, and the embargo imposed on the country after the invasion of Kuwait, which de facto made it impossible to leave Iraq by sea or air, severely limited the possibility to escape in a regular manner or to return to it after the end of the hostilities.[51]

After the defeat of Iraq in the Gulf War, spontaneous uprisings began in different parts of the country in the attempt to overturn the Ba'ath regime.[52] In the predominantly Shiite southern region, the main protagonists of the revolts were local resistance groups that, exasperated with the policing regime and the repercussions of the conflicts, started to attack institutional offices and police stations. In the north, Kurdish groups took over towns and villages, which they held for few weeks.[53] However, the regime was able to neutralise both protests, in some

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[41] Migration Data Portal, "Migration Data in Western Asia," *Migration Data Portal* (blog), May 31, 2023, https://www.migrationdataportal.org/regional-data-overview/migration-data-western-asia.

[42] Ibrahim Sirkeci, "War in Iraq: Environment of Insecurity and International Migration," *International Migration* 43, no. 4 (October 2005): 197–214, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2435.2005.00338.x.

[43] Géraldine Chatelard, "Migration from Iraq between the Gulf and the Iraq Wars (1990-2003): Historical and Socio-Spatial Dimensions," Working Paper (Oxford: COMPAS - University of Oxford, 2009); Chatelard, "The Politics of Population Movements in Contemporary Iraq."

[44] Sirkeci, "War in Iraq"; Chatelard, "Migration from Iraq."

[45] John Fawcett and Victor Tanner, "The Internally Displaced People of Iraq" (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 2002); Chatelard, "Migration from Iraq."

[46] Oula Kadhum, "Nation-Destroying, Emigration and Iraqi Nationhood after the 2003 Intervention," *International Affairs* 99, no. 2 (March 6, 2023): 587–604, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiac322.

[47] Sirkeci, "War in Iraq"; Chatelard, "Migration from Iraq"; Kadhum, "Nation-Destroying, Emigration and Iraqi Nationhood after the 2003 Intervention."

[48] Alan Dowty, "The Assault on Freedom of Emigration," *World Affairs* 151, no. 2 (1988): 85–92; Chatelard, "The Politics of Population Movements in Contemporary Iraq."

[49] Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

[50] Chatelard, "Migration from Iraq."

[51] Ibid.

[52] Eric Hooglund, "The Other Face of War," *Middle East Report* 171 (1991); Fawcett and Tanner, "The Internally Displaced People of Iraq."

[53] Hooglund, "The Other Face of War."

cases resorting to brutal means. The repression of the regime caused several thousand deaths and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people. In the north, the situation became particularly cruel, with more than 2.3 million people forced to flee towards Iran, Turkey, or Syria.[54] While Iran set up refugee camps to assist the displaced population, Turkey closed the access to its territory and denied access to potential asylum seekers, forcing them to stay in makeshift camps across the mountainous borderland.[55] In addition to the social, economic, and environmental devastations of the conflict, noteworthy is also the deliberate restriction of the access to vital resources and rights (such as land, water, food, as well as social services and citizenship), which constitutes another aspect of the 'population engineering' in the attempt to control and govern political, ethnic, and religious minorities.[56]

Although lasting only a few months, the Gulf War left enormous social, political, and economic repercussions. With the embargo imposed by the United Nations, the Iraqi government was forbidden from trading crude oil export, which constituted over 90% of its exports, and created a system of food rationing to confront the impoverishment of the population.[57] Politically, the country, already divided along ethnic and religious fault lines, saw the establishment in 1992 of the northern governorates of Dohuk, Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and (partly) Kirkuk under the control of the Kurdistan Regional Government (or KRG).[58] Although enjoying relative autonomy from the central government, the KRG, itself politically divided into two different factions, had to deal with the relative underdevelopment of the region, the lack of labour opportunities, and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people within the region.[59] The southern regions of Iraq, again under the control of the central government after the failed uprising attempts, experienced other internal conflicts against Iraqi Shiites – disguised under the pretext of draining the marshes to reclaim agricultural land – which nevertheless led to the death and displacement of some 100,000 to 200,000 people.[60] In the central and southern regions, the 'Arabisation' campaigns against Kurds, Turkmen, and Assyrians continued, leading to the displacement or dispossession of probably other 100,000 to 200,000 people.[61]

3.2.2   From the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq to the advance of ISIS

Prior to the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, about 300,000 people, most of whom Iraqi Shiites, were displaced in the central and southern regions of the country, while about 600,000 people were internally displaced in the northern regions.[62] In addition to this, it is estimated that neighbouring countries hosted more than 500,000 Iraqis, while European countries – in particular Germany, Sweden, and the UK – had experienced a staggering increase in asylum claims from Iraqi nationals over the previous decade.[63] Unlike many predictions, the US-led invasion of Iraq did not initially cause massive displacement of the population, but only of the wealthy class connected with the Ba'ath regime.[64] As the Saddam Hussein regime toppled, some displaced people also started to return to Iraq, although a series of problems related to political and security issues prevented or blocked the return of many.[65] However, the sectarian violence in the following years, in particular the 2006 bombing of the al-Askari Mosque by Sunni insurgents, provoked thousands of deaths and massive displacement of population.[66]

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[54] Hooglund; Sirkeci, "War in Iraq."
[55] Fawcett and Tanner, "The Internally Displaced People of Iraq."
[56] Chatelard, "The Politics of Population Movements in Contemporary Iraq."
[57] Fawcett and Tanner, "The Internally Displaced People of Iraq."
[58] Ibid.
[59] Fawcett and Tanner, "The Internally Displaced People of Iraq"; Chatelard, "Migration from Iraq"; Tamás Dudlák, "A Small Country for More Men? Iraqi Kurdistan and Recent Inflows of Migration," *Corvinus Journal of International Affairs* 2, no. 4 (2017): 35–53, https://doi.org/10.14267/cojourn.2017v2n4a5.
[60] Fawcett and Tanner, "The Internally Displaced People of Iraq."
[61] Fawcett and Tanner; AIJ-FIDH, "Iraq: Continuous and Silent Ethnic Cleansing. Displaced Persons in Iraqi Kurdistan and Iraqi Refugees in Iran" (Paris: Alliance International pour la Justice -International Federation for Human Rights, 2003), https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/iq350a.pdf.
[62] Chatelard, "Migration from Iraq"; Cameron Thibos, "35 Years of Forced Displacement in Iraq: Contextualising the ISIS Threat, Unpacking the Movements" (Florence: Migration Policy Centre, 2014).
[63] Sirkeci, "War in Iraq"; Thibos, "35 Years of Forced Displacement in Iraq."
[64] Ashraf al-Khalidi, Sophia Hoffmann, and Victor Tanner, "Iraqi Refugees in the Syrian Arab Republic: A Field-Based Snapshot" (Washington, D.C: The Brookings Institution - University of Bern, 2007).
[65] Thibos, "35 Years of Forced Displacement in Iraq"; David Romano, "Whose House Is This Anyway? IDP and Refugee Return in Post-Saddam Iraq," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 18, no. 4 (December 1, 2005): 430–53, https://doi.org/10.1093/refuge/fei039.
[66] al-Khalidi, Hoffmann, and Tanner, "Iraqi Refugees in the Syrian Arab Republic."

According to estimates, in 2007 more than two million Iraqis were internally displaced and other two millions were living as refuges in neighbouring countries, particularly in Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon.[67]

The fall of the Saddam Hussein regime and the following establishment of a new political system that allocated seats according to ethnic and sectarian quotas empowered the Shiite and Kurd communities, which had always been relegated to the margins of the political community, if not openly discriminated and persecuted. However, the fragile democracy that replaced the authoritarian regime de facto promoted not only the de-Ba'athification of the country, with the removal of Sunni officials from state institutions and the dismissal of Sunni teachers and soldiers, but also the marginalisation or expulsion of non-Muslim minorities, in particular Christians, Sabaean-Mandeans, and Yazidis, thus reviving sectarian and ethno-religious tensions as well as tribalism and patriarchal forms of authority.[68] While ethnic and religious minorities comprised about 10% of the whole Iraqi population in 2003, their number decreased to about 3% of Iraq's 31 million people by 2010.[69] At the end of the 2000s, Iraqis were the world's second largest refugee group after Afghans,[70] while Iraqi IDPs, which amounted to a staggering 2.7 million people, constituted the third largest IDP population in the world.[71] The great majority of the 1.8 million Iraqi refugees were hosted in the neighbouring countries of Syria and Jordan.[72] In the same period, Syria was the third largest refugee hosting country in the world after Pakistan and Iran, hosting more than one million refugees, the overwhelming majority of whom from Iraq.[73] However, most displacements registered in and from Iraq at the end of the decade took place in 2006, with the bombing of the al-Askari Mosque and the beginning of ethno-religious conflicts, peaked in 2007-8, and have dwindled since then. The number of Iraqi refugees in Syria, although still significantly high, decreased towards the end of the 2000s, because of return to the country of origin or migration to other destinations, such as Europe.[74] The relative improvement in the security conditions and in the socio-economic situation in certain regions of the country, in particular the KRI, prompted thousands of Iraqis to return home (see Figure 2). However, the humanitarian difficulties related to the return, the sporadic sectarian violence, and political instability still represented important issues that prevented or complicated the conditions to return to Iraq.[75]

Figure 2: Number of returnees to Iraq, 2003-2010. Source: Elaboration from UNHCR 2010.

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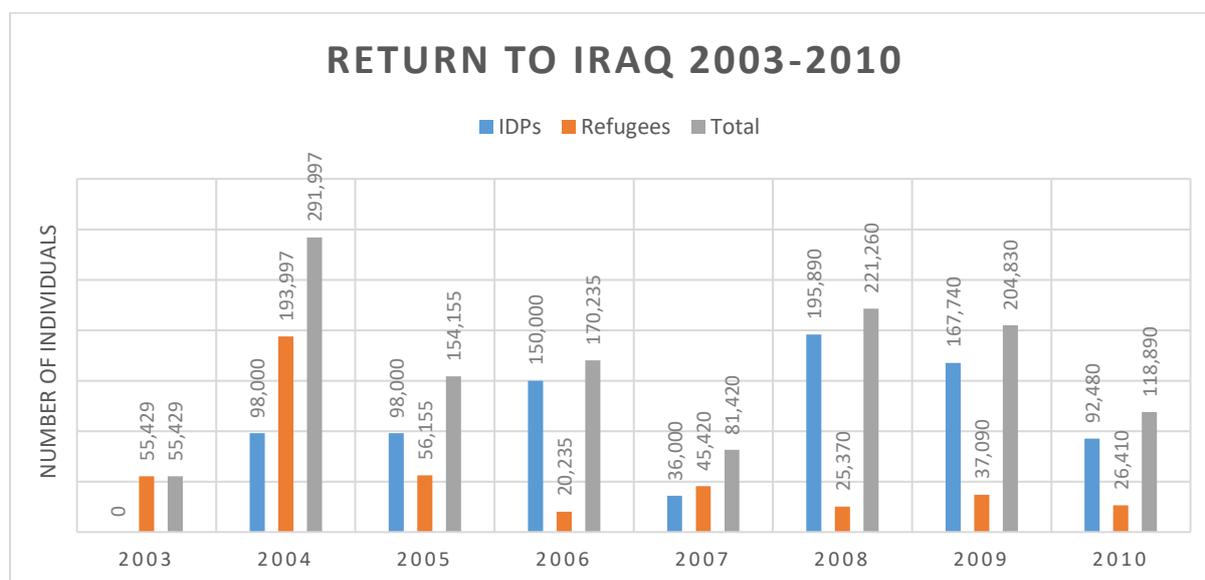
[67] UNHCR, "2007 Global Trends: Refugees, Asylum-Seekers, Returnees, Internally Displaced and Stateless Persons" (Geneva: UNHCR, 2008); Thibos, "35 Years of Forced Displacement in Iraq"; Hélène Thiollet, "Managing Migrant Labour in the Gulf. Transnational Dynamics of Migration Politics since the 1930s," Working Paper (Oxford: International Migration Institute, 2016).

[68] al-Khalidi, Hoffmann, and Tanner, "Iraqi Refugees in the Syrian Arab Republic"; Vera-Larrucea, Malm Lindberg, and Asplund, "Those Who Were Sent Back"; Kadhum, "Nation-Destroying, Emigration and Iraqi Nationhood after the 2003 Intervention."

[69] Elizabeth Ferris and Abbie Taylor, "The Past and Future of Iraq's Minorities," *The Washington Post*, September 8, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/09/08/the-past-and-future-of-iraqs-minorities/; Kadhum, "Nation-Destroying, Emigration and Iraqi Nationhood after the 2003 Intervention."

[70] UNHCR, "UNHCR Global Trends 2010: 60 Years and Still Counting" (Geneva: UNHCR, 2010).

[71] IOM, "World Migration Report 2010" (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2010).

[72] Marie McAuliffe and Martin Ruhs, *World Migration Report 2018* (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2017).

[73] UNHCR, "UNHCR Global Trends 2010: 60 Years and Still Counting."

[74] UNHCR; UNHCR, "UNHCR Iraq Operation - Monthly Statistical Update on Return - December 2010" (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2010), https://www.refworld.org/country,,,COUNTRYREP,IRQ,,4d401451c,0.html.

[75] Amnesty International, *Amnesty International Report 2008: The State of the World's Human Rights* (London: Amnesty International, 2008).

The same trends of return can be seen in the first years of the 2010s. Starting from 2010 and for the following three years, the number of IDPs in the country decreased significantly, dwindling by 25% (see Figure 3). Similarly, the number of refugees from Iraq dropped by about 9% from the 400,000 in 2013 to 370,000 one year later, making Iraqis the ninth-largest refugee group in 2014.[76] Besides, the Arab Spring in 2011 prompted many Iraqis in Syria to return to their country or to move to other destinations.[77] In addition to this, Iraq itself became a host country for some Syrian refugees: before 2014, about 217,000 Syrian refugees were registered in Iraq, the vast majority of whom were ethnically Kurdish and hosted in the KRI.[78] However, the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/ISIS) in 2014 generated another violent stage of internal and international displacement, which led to one of the largest humanitarian crises in the nation's history and to the temporarily halt of the government efforts to promote returns to Iraq through specific policies and programmes. As Costantini noted,[79] since the advancement of ISIS, three main (and often interrelated) migration patterns can be noticed: displacement, emigration, and return. These patterns will be explained in detail below.

Figure 3: Number of IDPs in Iraq. Source: Elaboration from the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC).
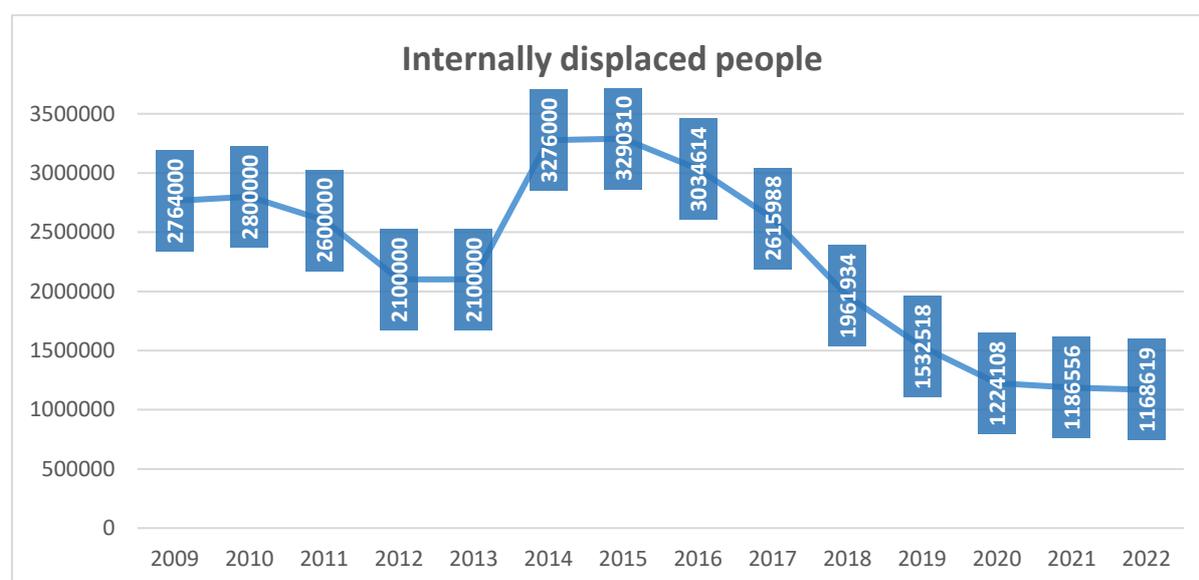
3.3 Internal displacement

3.3.1   Main trends and destinations

Although being concentrated in few areas of the country, the conflict between ISIL and the Iraqi government represented the main driver of displacement in recent times, with repercussions that are visible until the present day. During its first stages, between the end of 2014 and May 2015, the conflict saw ISIL conquering large territorial areas in both Syria and Iraq, particularly in the north-western regions, before the Iraqi government started to slowly take back control of those regions until the official end of the conflict and the proclamation of victory in December 2017.

In the first few months of territorial advancement, ISIL conquered large sections of the Anbar, Ninewa, and Salah al-Din governorates, including the cities of Falluja, Mosul, and Sinjar. The first months of conflicts generated from 1.2[80] to 2.6[81] million newly displaced people, increasing throughout the rest of the year and the beginning of the following one.[82] According to the IOM Iraqi Mission,[83] specific events during the first months of the conflict

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[76] UNHCR, "UNHCR Global Trends Forced Displacement in 2014: World at War" (Geneva: UNHCR, 2014).

[77] Philippe Fargues, "International Migration and the Nation State in Arab Countries," *Middle East Law and Governance* 5, no. 1–2 (2013): 5–35, https://doi.org/10.1163/18763375-00501001.

[78] Thibos, "35 Years of Forced Displacement in Iraq."

[79] Irene Costantini, "Iraq after the Islamic State: Displacement, Migration and Return," *LSE Blog* (blog), February 17, 2018, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/02/17/iraq-after-the-islamic-state-displacement-migration-and-return/#search.

[80] McAuliffe and Ruhs, *World Migration Report 2018*.

[81] UNHCR, "UNHCR Global Trends Forced Displacement in 2014: World at War."

[82] The number of IDPs varies significantly according to the different sources, due to the problematic issue of the registration of people, especially in times of conflict. IOM Iraq, for example, talks about "nearly six million Iraqis displaced due to conflict since January 2014" (IOM Iraq); however, no source or methodology is mentioned to justify this figure.

[83] IOM Iraq, "Protracted Displacement in Iraq: Revisiting Categories of Return Barriers" (Baghdad: International Organization for Migration - Iraq Mission, 2021).

triggered different stages of displacement. Between December 2013 and May 2014, the conflict, concentrated in the Ramadi and Fallujah Districts in the Anbar Governorate, prompted almost 480,000 people to flee their homes. Fighting in Mosul between June and July 2014 led to massive displacements, especially from Ninewa and Diyala governorates, with many displaced people seeking safety within the same governorates. In August 2014, the ISIL threats in the Ninewa Governorate, especially in the Sinjar District, forced about 740,000 people to flee to other provinces. Between September 2014 and March 2015, continued security threats posed by ISIL generated another round of displacement, before the 'Fall of Ramadi' to ISIL in May 2015 that led to the displacement of other tens of thousands of people, mostly within Anbar and towards Baghdad.

The displacement caused by the conflict against ISIL can be categorised into intra-governorate, when it takes place within the same governorate, or inter-governorate, when displaced people take refuge to different governorates. The patterns of intra-governorate and inter-governorate displacement can vary significantly according to the situation within the governorate, the magnitude of the conflict, and the intentions of IDPs. In the early stages of the conflict, the capture of Falluja and Ramadi by ISIS displaced hundreds of thousands of people from the governorate of Anbar, more than 60% of whom remained in their province. The Anbar campaign led by the Iraqi forces the following year generated another and more intense series of displacements, the great majority of whom found refuge to other governorates (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Number and destination of IDPs from Anbar governorate, Apr. 2014-Aug. 2020. Source: IOM Iraq.
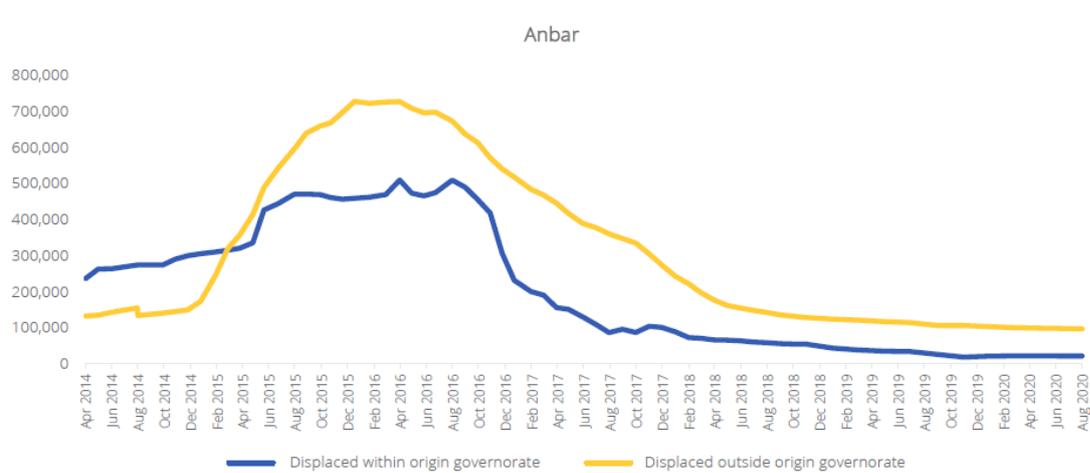
The governorates of Ninewa and Salah al-Din, the most affected ones by the conflict together with that of Anbar, show instead opposite patterns. At the beginning of the conflict, about 90% of displaced people from the two governorates fled to the governorate of Kerbala as well as to those of Dohuk and Erbil in the KRI, adding to the 250,000 Syrian refugees already present (see Figure 5).[84] The evolution and escalation of the conflict generated other IDPs, who nevertheless remained mostly within their governorate. Throughout the whole duration of the conflict, IDPs from Diyala and Kirkuk remained mostly within their own governorate. It is interesting to notice, however, that few thousands displaced people also went to other countries, either to neighbouring countries such as Jordan, Türkiye, and even Syria, itself a country at war,[85] or towards Europe.

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[84] Dudlák, "A Small Country for More Men?"; McAuliffe and Ruhs, *World Migration Report 2018*; Costantini and Palani, "Displacement-Emigration-Return."
[85] Thibos, "35 Years of Forced Displacement in Iraq."

Figure 5: Number and destination of IDPs from Ninewa and Salah al-Din governorates, Apr. 2014-Aug. 2020. Source: IOM Iraq.

Ninewa

Salah al-Din
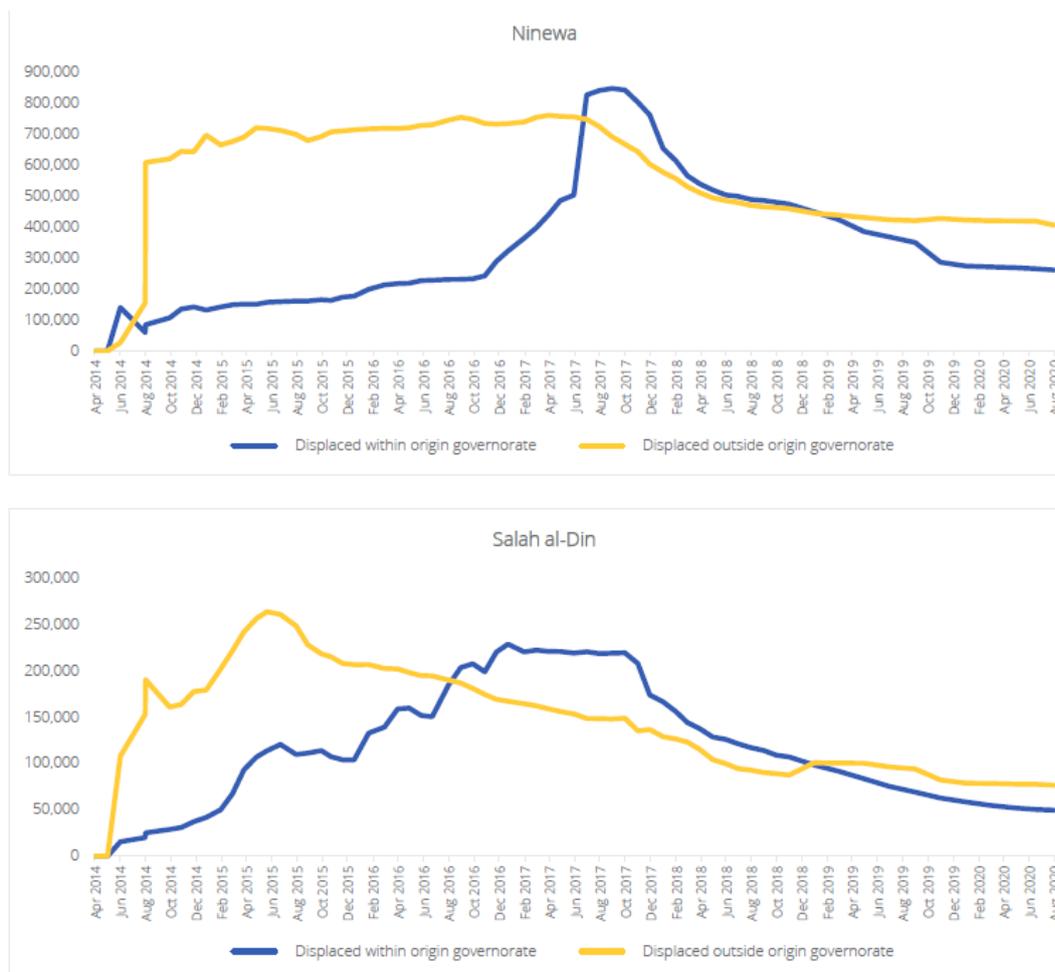
Since the Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al Abadi announced the victory over ISIS in December 2017, the country has experienced a period of relative stability and hundreds of thousands of IDPs have gradually returned to their area of origin. However, according to the Displacement Tracking Matrix of the International Organization for Migration (IOM-DTM),[86] as of April 2023 almost 1.2 million people were still displaced within the country, a figure that has slightly decreased over the previous three years. While the great majority of IDPs (about 680,000 people, or 57% of the whole internally displaced population in Iraq) originate from the governorate of Ninewa alone, other governorates of origin of IDPs are Salah al-Din and Anbar (both with about 130,000 people), as well as Kirkuk and Diyala (with about 70,000 people each). The main governorates of destination, hosting about 82% of all IDPs, are the three governorates of the KRI (Erbil, Dohuk, and Sulaymaniyah, with the first two accounting for more than 500,000 people) and the neighbouring governorates of Ninewa and Kirkuk.

The Iraqi government, supported by the United Nations agencies – notably the IOM and the UNHCR – and other international partners, has dedicated large amounts of resources to facilitate the return of individuals and families and the reconstruction of conflict-impacted areas. In 2019, the Iraqi government initiated a plan to close IDP camps and facilitate the return of persons to their areas of origin, while the UN and some NGOs participated in the process through the Iraq Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM) Cluster strategy, to ensure that minimum standards were being met. Despite the efforts, some Iraqi IDPs are either unwilling or unable to return to their communities of origin – a situation that will be explored in the next section.

If internal and international conflicts have generally constituted the main drivers of displacement, in recent years climate and environmental degradation have also been reported as a threat for the everyday life of people as well as for local and national authorities. While some of these threats such as droughts and floods affect people directly, leading to their immediate displacement, others like pollution or infrastructural development impact on the human well-being and health conditions in the long run, generating slower but continuous and growing

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[86] IOM Iraq-DTM, "Iraq Master List Report 129. January-April 2023" (Baghdad: International Organization for Migration - Displacement Tracking Matrix, 2023), https://iraqdtm.iom.int/images/MasterList/20236153417216_DTM_129_Report_January_April_2023.pdf.

processes of displacement. Although droughts and water scarcity have been persistent issues in Iraq for decades, the increase in the occurrence of extreme temperatures in the past years have exacerbated them, leading to increasing loss of livelihoods, food insecurity, and health risks. On the other hand, rainfall events have generally decreased over the years but also become more intense, also due to the reduced capacity of the soil to absorb precipitations as a result of common farming practices.[87]

Climate and environmental degradation do not affect the whole country homogeneously. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre - Norwegian Refugee Council (IDMC-NRC), as of the end of 2022 Iraq reported 69,000 IDPs due to environmental disasters, with 51,000 new displacements recorded only in the last year, which represented around a sixth of all disaster displacements across the MENA region as a whole.[88] However, the majority of climate-induced IDPs are concentrated in the southern and central regions, where climate and environmental degradation have had a greater impact. Over the past decade, the southern governorates of Basra, Maysan, and Thi-Qar have experienced the highest number of internal displacement due mainly to water scarcity, pollution, and soil salinity. The degradation and pollution of land have particularly affected the 8% of population fully reliant on agriculture, livestock, and fishing, prompting many of them to migrate elsewhere. Even the central governorates of Kerbala, Qadisiya, Muthanna, Najaf, and Wasit have reported many displacements due to water scarcity or pollution, pushing many people out of the countryside and towards urban areas. Climate-induced displacements are supposedly occurring also in the governorates Anbar, Ninewa, Kirkuk, Salah al-Din, and Diyala, although the lack of systematic tracking mechanisms might affect the provision of information.[89]According to data collected by the IOM-DTM among 3,358 families between 1 and 15 March 2022, the main governorate of origin of climate-induced IDPs is Thi-Qar (with 1,542 families displaced, mostly from the al-Shatra district), followed by Maysan (733, particularly in the al-Maimouna district), Qadisiya (326, the majority of whom in the Afaq district) and Basrah (246). Almost two thirds of climate-induced IDPs tend to remain within their own governorate or even their district of origin, moving primarily toward urban locations. In fact, the governorate of Thi-Qar also hosts the largest number of climate-induced displaced families (1,110), followed by Maysan (733) and Kerbala governorates (353). The Thi-Qar Governorate's district of al-Shatra, one of the main districts of origin of IDPs, also hosts the largest numbers of displaced families (990), signalling a high number of intra-district displacements. Many families from the al-Shatra district, however, are also present in the Kerbala Governorate, where they constitute 84% of the 337 families displaced there. In the Maysan Governorate, most displaced families (471) are located in the Amara district, with over a quarter of them displaced from within the district.[90]

3.3.2 Reasons (not) to return

The Displacement Tracking Matrix shows that IDPs generally tend to remain within their own governorate. In the governorates of Ninewa, Salah al-Din, Anbar, and Kirkuk, for example, the majority (and, in some cases, the almost totality) of IDPs are from the same governorate. The reasons for this might be multiple: the presence of social networks and connections in the area, the belief that the situation of displacement will be temporary, or the lack of economic or social resources to move further to other destinations. However, many have also found refuge in neighbouring or other governorates: IDPs from Ninewa are present in significant numbers in the governorates of Dohuk (where they represent the almost totality of IDPs hosted here) and Erbil; similarly, both the governorates of Erbil and Sulaymaniyah host tens of thousands of IDPs from Anbar and Salah al-Din (see Figure 6).

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[87] IOM Iraq, "Migration, Environment, and Climate Change in Iraq" (Baghdad: International Organization for Migration - Iraq Mission, 2022).
[88] IDMC-NRC, "Internal Displacement and Food Security" (Geneva: Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre - Norwegian Refugee Council, 2023).
[89] IOM Iraq, "Migration, Environment, and Climate Change in Iraq."
[90] IOM Iraq-DTM, "Climate-Induced Displacement – Central and Southern Iraq" (Baghdad: International Organization for Migration - Displacement Tracking Matrix, 2022).

Figure 6: Distribution of Iraqi IDPs according to the governorate of displacement and governorate of origin, April 2023. Source: Elaboration from IOM-DTM 2023.
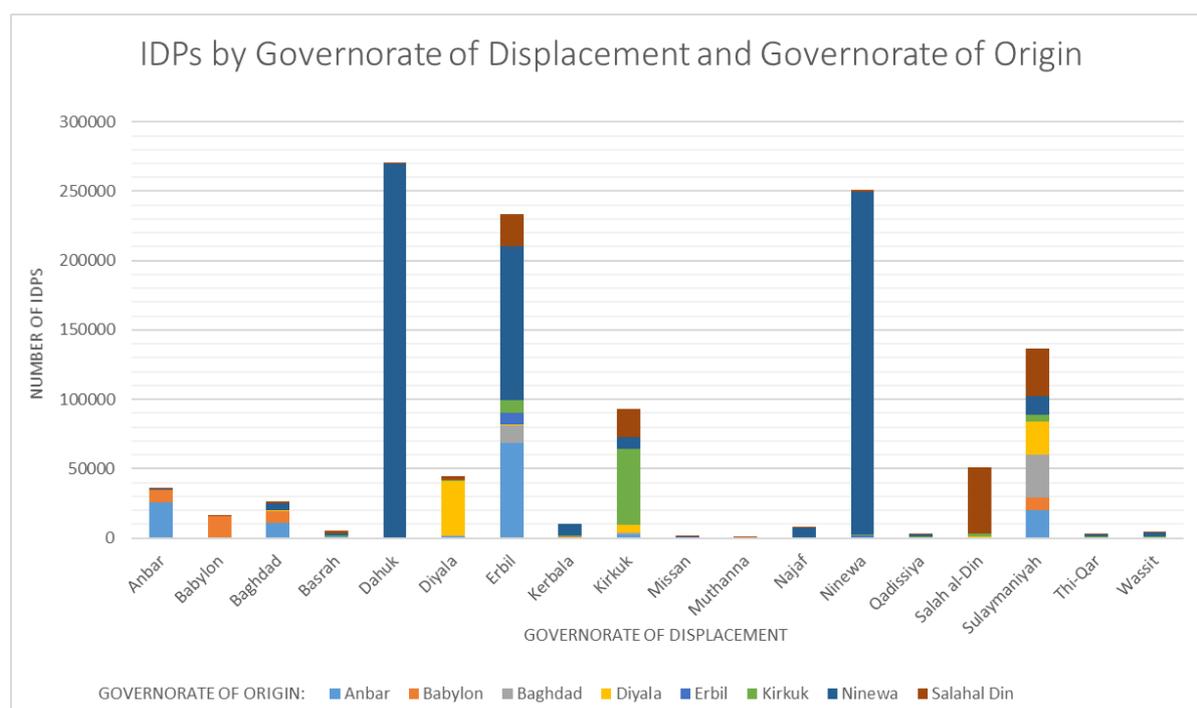
The analysis of the situation of displacement at the district level shows interesting patterns, which confirm the importance of social networks in the intentions of the displaced population. According to a survey conducted by the IOM-DTM among 300,000 displaced households at the end of 2018, 92% of the total IDPs originate from only 23 districts, with the great majority of them coming from the two districts of Mosul and Sinjar (in the Ninewa governorate), one quarter from the six districts of Al-Ba'aj, Al-Hawiga, Baiji, Falluja, Ramadi, and Telafar, and another quarter from the remaining 15 districts. The survey also shows that social networks and ethno-religious affiliations are important factors that contribute to what the IOM called the process of 'clustering in displacement'. It is indeed reported that similar groups of IDPs fled together and lived in displacement in the same area, such as IDPs from Sinjar living in the Dohuk governorate; IDPs from Telafar grouped in displacement in the Dohuk governorate as well as in Kerbala and Najaf due to ethno-religious affiliation with the host community; IDPs from Falluja, Ramadi, and Tikrit mainly living in the two districts of Erbil and Sulaymaniyah; and IDPs from Anbar mainly settled in Falluja.[91]

Far from being temporary, however, the situation of displacement can last several years, leading to what the UNHCR calls 'protracted displacement'.[92] According to the UN-OCHA humanitarian bulletin, as of 2020 about 79% of IDPs in Iraq had already lived in a situation of displacement since at least 2016, with the great majority (58%, or about 680,000 people) displaced during the early months of the conflict against ISIS. Looking at the rate of return – that is, the proportion of IDPs who became displaced because of the conflict against ISIL and have returned to their area of origin – the IOM calculated that, as of early 2023, still 19% of families remained in a condition of displacement at the national level. At the level of governorates, Baghdad, Ninewa, and Diyala showed the lowest rates of return, with 33%, 25%, and 23% of families, respectively, still displaced within the country.[93]

The rate of return allows us not only to analyse the severity of the conditions in the areas of origin and, in turn, the intentions of IDPs, but also to elaborate and assess the potential solutions to the challenges that IDPs face in displacement. The conflict against ISIS represented indeed a hard blow not only for the local population but also for the local economy and the society in general. The ISIS advancement was accompanied by the devastation of housing and public infrastructure, as well as by the destruction or occupation of commercial activities and centres such as local markets, industries, and farms. As a result, local and national supply chains were often

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[91] IOM Iraq, "Reasons to Remain: An In-Depth Analysis of the Main Districts of Origin" (Baghdad: International Organization for Migration - Iraq Mission, 2019).
[92] UNHCR, "UNHCR Global Trends Forced Displacement in 2018" (Geneva: UNHCR, 2018).
[93] IOM Iraq-DTM, "Iraq Master List Report 129. January-April 2023."

disrupted, and many families saw their livelihoods compromised or destroyed.[94] Even with the defeat of ISIS and the gradual stabilisation of the country, weak infrastructures, poor livelihoods, and lack of basic services often prevented the return of IDPs in their area of origin, constituting important reasons for protracted displacement.[95]

A longitudinal five-round study conducted by IOM Iraq and Georgetown University between 2016 and 2020 among about 2,000 non-camp Iraqi IDP households displaced between January 2014 and December 2015 by ISIL showed how access to livelihoods became the main factor for many IDPs considering returning to their places of origin, surpassing issues of personal or societal security, which scored at consistent high levels during the first three rounds of survey (see figure 7). Although those who were employed in the public sector often managed to maintain their job in displacement and many others retained their business or found an occupation in the informal labour market, data seemed to suggest that 'IDPs neither have the economic safety nets for return without obvious employment opportunities nor do they want to return without access to livelihoods.'[96] Security and housing conditions, however, continued to remain other important factors preventing the return of IDPs in their areas of origin and compelling them to develop or adjust their strategies to access 'durable solutions' to their displacement. While some IDPs eventually integrate in the areas of destination as their sense of security and feelings of acceptance in the host community increase over time,[97] and others return to their areas of origin despite the lack of social and economic conditions that facilitate their re-integration,[98] the study suggests that there still remains lot to do in terms of infrastructural development and socio-economic reconstruction.

Figure 7: First most important need for IDPS to return to their respective areas of origin. Source: IOM Iraq and Georgetown University 2020.

According to another study by IOM Iraq, the damage or destruction of the house represents another significant barrier that prevents IDPs from returning to their area of origin. At the country level, 71% of displaced families reported housing damages or destruction, with particular incidence among IDPs from the districts of Dakuk (Kirkuk governorate), Ramadi and Falluja (Anbar governorate), and Al-Hamdaniya (Ninewa Governorate). Families from the districts of Mosul, Telafar, Tilkaif, Sinjar, and Al-Hamdaniya in the Ninewa Governorate also reported severe damages to their houses. The destruction of local economies and employment opportunities during ISIS occupation of north-western Iraq has also represented a significant deterrent to returning home, affecting 62% of IDP families – especially those working in the agricultural, services, and industrial sectors. The lack of job opportunities affected in particular the Ninewa governorate's districts of Telafar and Al-Ba'aj as well as the Baiji district in Salah al-Din. At the national level, 41% of IDP families also reported lack of basic services in their areas of origin, especially in the district of Kirkuk and in the Ninewa Governorate's districts of Sinjar and Al-Ba'aj.[99]

[94] IOM Iraq, "Obstacles to Returnee Reintegration in Iraq: Livelihoods and Economic Security" (Baghdad: International Organization for Migration - Iraq Mission, 2022).
[95] IRFAD, "Needs Assessment Study on Migration Information in Iraq" (Baghdad: IRFAD Foundation for Development Research, 2021).
[96] IOM Iraq and Georgetown University, "Access to Durable Solutions among IDPs in Iraq. Livelihoods and Economic Security in Displacement" (Baghdad: International Organization for Migration - Iraq Mission, 2020), 6.
[97] Lorenza Rossi et al., "Iraqi's Access to Durable Solutions: Results of Two Rounds of a Longitudinal Study," *International Migration* 57, no. 2 (April 2019): 48–64.
[98] IOM Iraq, "Obstacles to Returnee Reintegration in Iraq."
[99] IOM Iraq, "Protracted Displacement in Iraq."

The extent of the residential destruction, the chronic lack of basic services, and the threats to personal safety and security create proper 'locations of no return', that is, areas that, despite having recorded displacement during the conflict against ISIS, have not recorded any returns or have seen other stages of re-displacement. According to the IOM-DTM, as of March 2022 more than 10% of the 2,803 locations of displacement could be considered locations of no return. Almost half of such locations (134) are concentrated in the Ninewa governorate (in particular in the districts of Hatra and Al-Ba'aj), and another 52 in the Diyala governorate, most of which in the district of Khanaqin. In some cases, returns are de facto blocked due to security concerns or ethno-religious tensions. In sixty locations, all previous residents are prevented from returning home, 15 of which in the Salah al-Din governorate's district of Tuz Khurmatu, 13 in the Babylon governorate's district of Al-Musayab, and ten in the Ninewa governorate's district of Mosul. In 49 locations in the Diyala governorate (in particular in the districts of Khanaqin and Al-Muqdadiya), tribal or ethnoreligious groups are prevented from returning.[100]

The situation, however, remains difficult even in the governorates of destination. According to the IDMC-NRC,[101] unemployment rates among Iraqi IDPs are at least 10% higher than among residents, compelling people to adopt negative coping strategies (such as selling assets, turning to crime activities, or taking their children out of school) to face their increasing livelihood insecurity. This can be also the reason why 'around one third of families living in camps have no livelihood-generating income and lack the money to pay for the trip back home.'[102] Besides, the fifth round of the Protection Monitoring System, a survey conducted by the National Protection Cluster of Iraq among 2,389 key informants (almost half of whom IDPs and returnees), shows several issues in their communities. About 45% of the interviewees reported issues in accessing their houses; 40% faced issues to obtain or renew their civil documentation; and 34% assessed the protection situation of women and children as negative.

The condition of displacement and the situation in the area of origin have also significant implications for the future intentions of IDPs to remain in displacement, return to their home, or move to other destinations. In general, almost two thirds of out-of-camp IDPs (who themselves constitute 80% of overall IDPs) preferred to remain in displacement in the short/medium term, while only around 10% of IDPs expressed their intention to return.[103] The intention to stay in displacement or return home varies significantly according to the obstacles that IDPs might face or simply fear in their area of origin. The great majority of out-of-camp displaced families from the governorates of Diyala and Baghdad, for example, seemed more prone to remain in displacement, while many from the governorates of Salah al-Din and Ninewa (in particular from the respective districts of Baiji and Telafar) expressed either their intention to return or their indecision about the future. In-camp displaced families seemed slightly more prone to return home (in particular those from the districts of Kirkuk, Al-Hamdaniya in the governorate of Ninewa, and Balad and Tikrit in the governorate of Salah al-Din), but most of them still preferred to remain in displacement in the short term.

In the long run, however, the intentions of IDPs seem to change drastically. Another survey conducted by IOM Iraq at the end of 2020 showed how, at the country level, the majority of IDPs (60%) were more likely to intend to return home after the following six months, although their intentions vary across the governorates of displacement. About nine out of ten IDPs from Sulaymaniyah, Diyala, and Salah al-Din, for example, expressed their intention to return to their place of origin eventually. On the other hand, only around half of the displaced people in Babylon and Kerbala as well as a third in Baghdad and Kirkuk preferred to integrate in their current location. Indecision about future intentions remained an important aspect among 67% of IDPs in Anbar, 49% in Dohuk, and 27% in Ninewa. About 3% of total respondents (with a particularly high incidence among respondents in Ninewa, at 14%), expressed instead their intention to move to a third location within the country or abroad.[104] These findings mirror those of another survey conducted by REACH among 5,731 displaced households between December 2017 and January 2018, which showed how only 3% of respondents who did not plan to return to their area of origin actually wished to migrate to other destinations.[105]

[100] IOM-DTM, "No Way Home. An Assessment of Barriers to Sustainable Return and Reintegration in Locations of No Return" (Geneva: International Organization for Migration - Displacement Tracking Matrix, 2022).

[101] IDMC-NRC, "Internal Displacement and Food Security."

[102] IOM Iraq, "Reasons to Remain."

[103] IOM Iraq.

[104] IOM Iraq, "Protracted Displacement in Iraq."

[105] REACH, "Intentions Survey. Round II - National IDP Camps. December 2017-January 2018" (Geneva: REACH Initiative, 2018).

As of the end of 2022, Iraq remained the third country in the MENA region with the highest overall number of IDPs and with the highest number of new displacements, in both cases after Syria and Yemen,[106] although with much lower numbers than in previous years. Localised conflicts and pockets of violence have triggered about 32,000 new displacements in 2022, and the presence of armed groups, combined with the difficult social and economic situation in certain areas, have hampered the conditions for a sustainable return.[107] In addition to this, 51,000 new displacements have been registered in the same year due to natural disasters, in particular droughts.[108] Although the situation in some parts of the country remains difficult, Iraq has seen a significant decrease in the number of IDPs since the defeat of ISIS as well as a general improvement of the humanitarian and economic situation over the last few years due to increasing oil revenues.[109] However, the political and socio-economic conditions that often constitute a driver for displacement and outward migration should be addressed more forcefully.

Although much lower in quantitative terms, internal migratory movements driven by social and economic issues are also present. The lack of economic opportunities, particularly in the southern provinces, has prompted thousands of people to move to the cities of Kerbala, Najaf, and Baghdad.[110] While unemployment remains the most important driver of migration, especially among the lower sectors of society, the increasing price of land and rent has also constituted an important factor that affected families' ability to sustain their livelihoods, pushing many of them out of their place.[111] As the recovery of the country has slowly begun, it remains to be seen whether the Iraqi government will carry on along the path of economic development and social reconstruction, in order to ensure better living standards to the population.[112]

3.4 Main trends and drivers of return migration

3.4.1 Domestic return

Starting from 2015 and increasingly in the following years, the military offensive of the Iraqi government liberated some areas and main cities from the grasp of ISIS, allowing the slow return of people to their place of origin. Although violence and conflicts continued until July 2017, when the Iraqi forces took back control of Mosul, since the end of 2016 the number of IDPs has remained relatively stable at about three million people, before starting to decline slowly and reaching about 1.1 million people at the beginning of 2023. Conversely, the number of returnees has steadily increased, surpassing those of IDPs at the end of 2017 and constantly remaining over four million people since mid-2019 (see Figure 8).[113]

Figure 8: Number of Iraqi IDPs and returnees, April 2014 - April 2023. Source: IOM-DTM 2023.

According to the IOM-DTM,[114] significant return movements had already been documented in 2015, when almost 470,000 people returned to their place of origin following the recapture of Tikrit in Salah al-Din (where 55% of the whole returnee population returned to) and of other important areas in Ninewa and Diyala. In 2016, with the retaking of important cities in Anbar, the number of new returnees almost doubled, with other 900,000 people able to return home. Anbar saw the highest number of returns, with more than half a million people, but

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[106] IDMC-NRC, "Internal Displacement and Food Security."
[107] Costantini and Palani, "Displacement-Emigration-Return"; IDMC-NRC, "Internal Displacement and Food Security."
[108] IDMC-NRC, "Internal Displacement and Food Security."
[109] NPC, "Transition 2022" (National Protection Cluster of Iraq, 2022).
[110] IRFAD, "Needs Assessment Study on Migration Information in Iraq."
[111] IRFAD.
[112] Costantini and Palani, "Displacement-Emigration-Return."
[113] IOM Iraq-DTM, "Iraq Master List Report 129. January-April 2023."
[114] IOM Iraq, "Iraq Displacement Crisis 2014-2017" (Baghdad: International Organization for Migration - Iraq Mission, 2018).

a significant number of returnees were registered also in the governorates of Salah al-Din, Diyala, and Ninewa. Similar patterns emerged in 2017, with a staggering increase in the number of new returnees in comparison to the previous year, almost 1,850,000 people, and the overall number of returns topping 3.2 million individuals. The governorate of Ninewa received 30% of the whole returnee population thanks to the retaking of Mosul, but significant numbers of returns could be seen also in the governorates of Anbar (38%) and Salah al-Din (14%). The same year also saw an increase in the ratio of extra-governorate returns (57% of all returns, in contrast to 40% in 2016), 'reflecting how even IDPs who have resettled far from home (and who have been in displacement for several years) are consistently returning home.'[115]

In 2018, almost one million IDPs returned to their localities of origin, making Iraq the first country in the world in terms of number of returns.[116] However, although the rate of returns has remained positive since 2018, the absolute number of returnees has progressively declined year after year. After the spike from 2016 to 2018, over the following year just more than 430,000 people were registered as returnees, about 230,000 in 2020, 120,000 in 2021, and finally only about 37,000 in 2022, when the number of total returns reached the peak of five million individuals. In 2019, Anbar was the governorate that registered one of the most significant successes in returns, with more than 160,000 returnees and 91% of all IDPs from that region returned.[117] In the following two years, the governorate of Ninewa received the highest number of returnees (about 160,000 people in total), followed by those of Anbar (about 89,000 people) and Salah al-Din (about 62,000 people).[118] Despite hosting the largest number of returnees (almost two million people), the governorate of Ninewa registered a low proportion of returnees in relation to its displaced population, with 26% of its population (about 665,000 people) still in a condition of displacement, either internally or in other governorates.[119] The return patterns since 2015 have shown a great majority of intra-governorate returns in Diyala, Kirkuk, and, to a lesser extent, Ninewa, as well as mixed patterns of intra- and extra-governorate returns in Anbar and Salah al-Din (see Figure 9).

Figure 9: Distribution of Iraqi returnees according to the governorate of return and last governorate of displacement, April 2023. Source: Elaboration from IOM-DTM 2023.
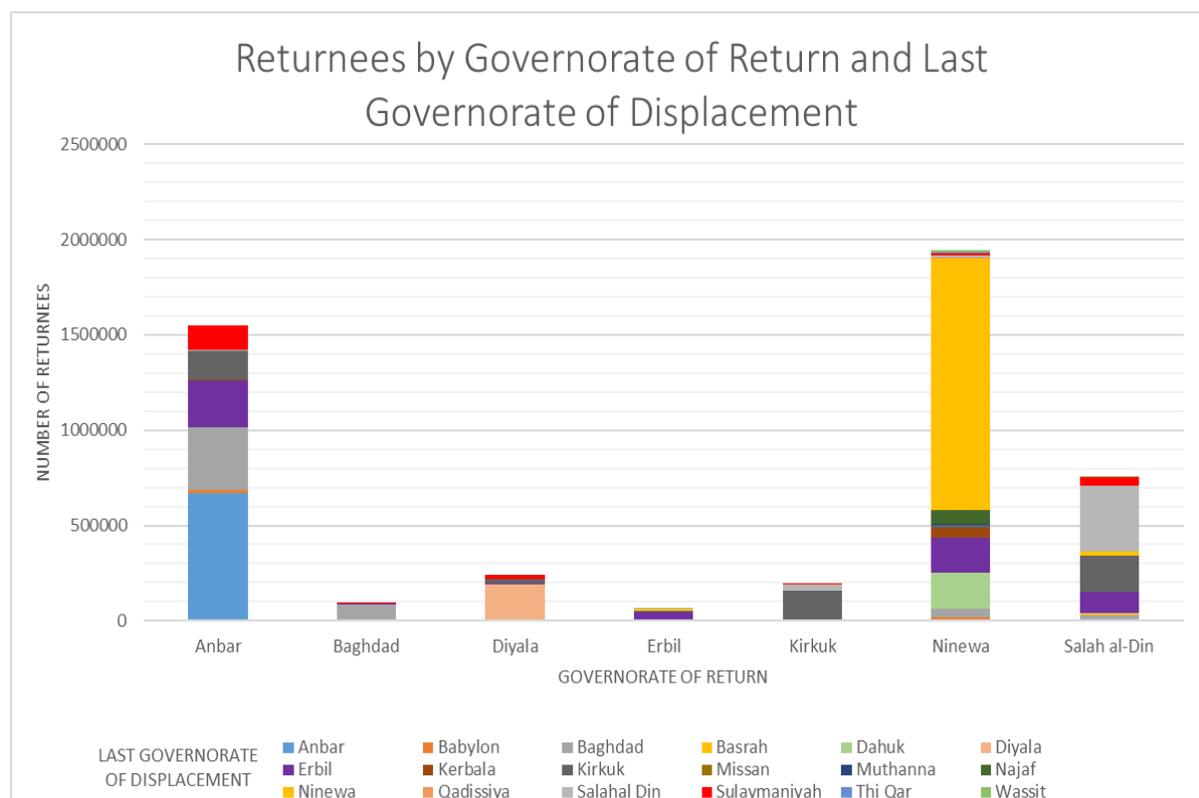
As of May 2023, the districts that hosted the higher number of returnees were Mosul in the Ninewa governorate, with more than one million returnees, and Ramadi and Falluja in the Anbar governorate, with about 600,000 returnees each. The number of returnees in these three districts alone corresponded to about 46% of the total

[115] IOM Iraq, 35.
[116] UNHCR, "UNHCR Global Trends Forced Displacement in 2018."
[117] IOM Iraq-DTM, "Iraq Master List Report 129. January-April 2023."
[118] IOM Iraq-DTM; IOM Iraq-DTM.
[119] IOM Iraq, "Returns in Iraq: 2021 Overview" (Baghdad: International Organization for Migration - Iraq Mission, 2022).

returnee population. Other important districts of return were those of Telafar and Al-Hamdaniya in the Ninewa governorate (with 364,000 and 174,000 returnees, respectively), Tikrit in the Salah al-Din governorate (with almost 190,000 returnees), as well as the Anbar governorate's district of Heet and the Kirkuk's district of Al-Hawiga, with about 180,000 returnees each.[120]

3.4.1.1   Drivers to return and obstacles to reintegration

According to the IOM, safety and security represent both the most important driver for return and the most pressing problem once moved to the place of origin.[121] For the great majority of returnees, safety and security in the area of origin and the availability of housing constituted the main reasons that prompted them to return home (91% and 82%, respectively).[122] At the national level, 'Locations classified as low severity have more often witnessed the return of all of the displaced population while locations classified as high severity more often witnessed the return of less than half its displaced population.'[123] The access to services such as health and education is the third most important driver of return, at least for 28% of returnees. Only a small proportion of all returnees decided to come back to join family members who have returned (8%) or for the availability of jobs in their area of origin (5%). However, at the governorate level the situation is more variegated, with access to economic opportunities considered as an important driver for return among 24% and 25% of returnees in Salah al-Din and Erbil, respectively, and almost no one in Dohuk, Diyala, and Ninewa.[124]

As IOM Iraq noted, however, 'while the movement home is a first step toward reintegration, it is not necessarily an indication of longer-term sustainability per se'.[125] Threats to personal security, lack of access to socio-economic opportunities, and the unavailability of courts of law represent the most important obstacles to the sustainable reintegration of returnees. Despite the end of hostilities, risks of violence – which broadly include continuing attacks from ISIS as well as social conflicts, ethno-religious or tribal tensions, and revenge cases – constitute an issue for about half of the returnees. Adding to this, 17% of returnees nationally do not feel comfortable when accessing police or formal law enforcement, and about 7% of them either lack confidence in the security forces or do not feel protected by the state from external threats.[126] At the district level, the situation varies significantly, with risks of violence affecting the almost totality of returnees in the districts of Heet and Al-Qa'im (Anbar governorate), Al-Shirqat and Baiji (Salah al-Din governorate), and Sinjar (Ninewa governorate), but almost no one in the districts of Al-Hamdaniya and Tilkaif (Ninewa governorate) and Kirkuk in the governorate with the same name.[127]

Regarding the source of violence, continuing attacks from ISIS represent an obstacle to reintegration for almost half of the returnees, especially in the districts of Al-Shirqat and Baiji (Salah al-Din governorate) and Al-Qa'im (Anbar governorate). Clashes between security forces, revenge acts, and ethno-religious tensions affect from 5% to 6% of returnees, in particular in the districts of Sinjar and Telafar (Ninewa governorate), Baiji and Balad (Salah al-Din governorate), and Al-Khalis (Diyala governorate). It is interesting to notice, however, that in the district of Telafar reconciliation efforts have been put in place to restore or maintain co-existence between the different ethno-religious groups and to facilitate the return of those IDPs who are prevented from returning due to security concerns at the local level.[128]

Social and economic challenges constitute other important obstacles to the sustainable reintegration of returnees in their areas of origin. Overall, about 65% of returnee households live in low employment areas, especially in the Ninewa governorate's districts of Telafar, Sinjar, and Al-Ba'aj, which sustained widespread destruction during the ISIL crisis and where the almost totality of returnees now face problems in finding employment.[129] Sustainable access to livelihoods and employment represents one of the main needs for 79% of all returnees, particularly in the governorates of Ninewa, Anbar, and Salah al-Din.[130] Even when respondents claimed to have a source of income, this was insufficient or unstable in 53% of the cases, with a particularly high

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[120] IOM Iraq-DTM, "Iraq Master List Report 129. January-April 2023."
[121] IOM Iraq, "Home Again? Categorising Obstacles to Returnee Reintegration in Iraq" (Baghdad: International Organization for Migration - Iraq Mission, 2021); IOM Iraq, "Obstacles to Returnee Reintegration in Iraq."
[122] IOM Iraq, "Obstacles to Returnee Reintegration in Iraq."
[123] IOM Iraq, "Returns in Iraq: 2021 Overview," 4.
[124] IOM Iraq, "Obstacles to Returnee Reintegration in Iraq."
[125] IOM Iraq, "Home Again?," 5.
[126] IOM, "Reimagining Reintegration. An Analysis of Sustainable Returns after Conflict" (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2023).
[127] IOM Iraq, "Home Again?"
[128] IOM Iraq.
[129] IOM Iraq, "Obstacles to Returnee Reintegration in Iraq."
[130] IOM Iraq.

incidence in the districts of Al-Shirqat (Salah al-Din governorate) and Khanaqin (Diyala Governorate), where 67% of returnees lamented this problem.[131] The presence of ISIS resulted in the destruction of the economic and agricultural sectors, which represented another problem to reintegration for 43% and 22% of returnees, respectively. The presence of inoperative businesses was particularly present in the Salah al-Din governorate's districts of Al-Shirqat and Baiji, and in the Ninewa governorate's district of Sinjar. The latter also suffered from the presence of inoperative agriculture in 81% of the cases, together with the Anbar governorate's districts of Al-Qa'im and Heet, in 32% and 29% of the cases, respectively.[132]

Besides personal or familiar issues, many returnees face obstacles in accessing public services related to welfare provisions or legal support. At the national level, 62% of returnee households face issues with receiving healthcare, particularly due to the financial costs relating to access it (in 47% of the cases). The situation is especially difficult in the Diyala Governorate's district of Khanaqin, where 92% of returnees lamented problems in receiving healthcare, as well as in the Salah al-Din governorate's district of Baiji (78%) and in the Anbar governorate's districts of Heet, Falluja, and Ramadi, with more than 70% of cases reported. Similarly, 64% of returnee households experience issues with receiving education, especially in the Ninewa governorate's districts of Sinjar and Mosul (in 89% and 82% of the cases, respectively), in the Salah al-Din governorate's district of Baiji (79%), and in the Diyala Governorate's district of Khanaqin (69%). In addition to this, 64 and 31% of returnees have indicated that the state does not have adequate capacities to provide healthcare and education, respectively.[133]

With regards to the legal system, not only do many returnees face difficulties in accessing proper jurisdictional procedures for obtaining personal documents, housing compensations, or dispute solutions, but they also express little trust in the judicial system, which is often perceived as highly corrupted (according to 87% of returnees) and ineffective (in 45% of the cases). Issues with personal documentation affect only a minority of people, particularly in the district of Sinjar (Ninewa governorate) and Kirkuk, frequently with close relatives (allegedly) associated with ISIS. Yet, the consequences of being undocumented and the bureaucratic challenges in solving the problem made this issue particularly pressing. Compensation for residential destruction or the death of a family member during the ISIS conflict constitutes a much wider issues, which still affects 42% of the returnees. The situation is particularly critical in the districts of Khanaqin (Diyala governorate), Sinjar (Ninewa governorate), and Baiji (Salah al-Din governorate), where 70%, 67%, and 59% of returnees, respectively, indicate that the legal system is ineffective. Even more returnees do not feel adequately represented in local reconciliation efforts, particularly in Khanaqin (89% of cases), Sinjar (88%), and in the Salah al-Din governorate's districts of Tikrit, Balad, and Baiji (all of them with more than 80% of cases reported).[134]

3.4.1.2 Re-displacement patterns and intentions

Despite the general improvement of conditions in many parts of the country, the obstacles in the reintegration process that returnees face may lead them to (intend to) re-displace. The process of re-displacement can have multiple causes. One of the most important is the decision to return home to areas where conditions are not sustainable following the receipt of incomplete or flawed information about the situation in the area of origin (which might lead to the misguided expectation about the assistance that returnees would receive upon return). The failed integration of returnees in the community of origin and the outburst of further violence and conflicts might constitute other reasons for the voluntary or forced process of re-displacement.

According to a research conducted by the IOM between March 2018 and December 2019, more than 6,000 families (or 37,000 individuals) have re-displaced, 60% of whom towards out-of-camp locations.[135] The average rate of re-displacement at the country level is about 2.6%, which means that almost three out of 100 displaced households that had returned to their area of origin have left again.[136] Among the re-displaced households, 4,251 (69% of them) were from the Ninewa governorate, while almost 800 (13%) from Anbar and more than 500 (8%) from Salah al-Din. Among the 292 locations of re-displacement, 166 (56% of them) were located in the Ninewa governorate, 69 (23%) in Anbar, and the remaining in Kirkuk, Salah al-Din, Baghdad, and Erbil.[137] In

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[131] IOM Iraq, "Home Again?"
[132] IOM Iraq.
[133] IOM, "Reimagining Reintegration. An Analysis of Sustainable Returns after Conflict."
[134] IOM.
[135] IOM Iraq, "Re-Displaced. An Exploration of Displacement after Attempted Return in Iraq" (Baghdad: International Organization for Migration - Iraq Mission, 2020).
[136] IOM Iraq, "Home Again?"
[137] IOM Iraq, "Re-Displaced."

relation to the whole population of returnees, the most affected districts were those of Sinjar and Telafar (Ninewa governorate), Khanaqin and Al-Muqdadiya (Diyala governorate), and Balad and Tooz Khormatu (Salah al-Din governorate).[138]

Regarding the specific causes of re-displacement, the residential destruction is the only factor with a high impact on the decision to leave again. According to the IOM, although 'Nearly all of the locations reporting re-displacement share notable levels of house destruction due to the conflict',[139] many returning families lack adequate and appropriate information about the conditions of their houses before returning. Other important factors that have a fair impact on re-displacement are the voluntariness of return (i.e., whether returnees go back voluntarily or not), the (insufficient) presence of security actors, and the everyday tensions in the community life. The lack of economic opportunities represents only a weak (but statistically significant) driver of re-displacement.

Even when re-displacement has not occurred in practice, some returnees might express their intentions to move somewhere else. According to another IOM study carried out in 2021, while the great majority of returnees indicated their intentions to remain in their place of return during the following 12 months, about 1.6% of them did not know what to do and almost 1% of them expressed their intention to move to other places within the country's borders. When looking at the district level, however, the number of returnees with intentions of re-displacement tends to be higher in those districts with low numbers of overall returnees or with the highest re-displacement rates. The highest re-displacement intentions are reported in the Diyala governorate's districts of Al-Muqdadiya (24.2%) and Khanaqin (10.8%), the Ninewa governorate's districts of Tilkaif (15.5%) and Sinjar (11.8%), and the Anbar governorate's district of Al-Qa'im (11.8%).[140]

3.4.2 International return

While the great majority of returnees consist of IDPs that have found refuge within their own governorate or within the country (in particular in the KRI) following the advance of ISIS, some trends show also a return movement of Iraqi migrants abroad, either independently or through assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVVR) programmes. According to the IOM-DTM, from May 2018 to April 2023 48,536 Iraqi returned to their country from abroad, settling in 74 Districts and 726 locations across all governorates, with particular incidence in those of Thi-Qar (53%), Ninewa (36%), and Anbar (4%).[141] When looking at the data on AVRR programmes from 2013 to 2021, Iraq has always been among the top four countries of origin worldwide in terms of number of assisted persons from 2015 to 2020; yet, this number has experienced fluctuating trends. In 2014, the first year of the conflict against ISIS, only 1,280 people availed themselves of the AVRR programmes, the lowest number registered throughout the nine-year period. However, the number of returnees saw a peak in 2016, with 12,776 AVVR applications processed, and consistently high numbers until 2019, with almost 4,000 AVRR returns, before declining in the following two years.[142]

The return of millions of IDPs and Iraqi migrants is often seen not only as the natural consequence of the general improvement of the political and socio-economic conditions in the place of origin, but also as the end of the condition of displacement, and therefore prioritised as a durable solution by international organisations. However, as Costantini and Palani argue,[143] 'it is problematic to determine precisely when a displacement crisis ends.' Just as the re-integration process of IDPs is complex and laden with obstacles, so is that of returnees from abroad. In both cases, re-integration is a multi-dimensional process that involves economic, social, and psychosocial embeddedness in the place of origin, which, especially in cases of return after several years abroad, cannot always be defined as 'home'.[144]

On the one hand, the decision to return does not simply depend on the mere end of hostilities, but on a whole variety of individual and socio-economic factors that span from the restoration of personal and general security, the possibility of regaining one's own house, re-stablishing social networks, finding a job, and obtaining access

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[138] IOM Iraq, "Home Again?"
[139] IOM Iraq, "Re-Displaced," 8.
[140] IOM Iraq, "Home Again?"
[141] IOM-DTM, "Iraqi Returnees from Abroad - Dashboard" (Geneva: International Organization for Migration - Displacement Tracking Matrix, 2023).
[142] IOM, "Return and Reintegration Key Highlights 2020. Annexes" (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2021); IOM, "Return and Reintegration Key Highlights 2021" (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2022).
[143] Costantini and Palani, "Displacement-Emigration-Return," 8.
[144] Vera-Larrucea, Malm Lindberg, and Asplund, "Those Who Were Sent Back."

to basic and social services.[145] In this context, the unstable political dynamics and the time-consuming and often mismanaged process of reconstruction in liberated areas represent important issues that prevent or complicate the conditions for return. The return process itself assumes therefore different and often uncertain characteristics according to the local contexts, intertwining with further processes of displacement.[146]

On the other hand, when the process of return occurs, the conditions are not always as imagined. The same obstacles to reintegration that IDPs face upon return can be also experienced, often in an amplified manner, by returnees from abroad.[147] According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre,[148] as of 2022 'more than 592,000 returnees were living in conditions of poverty and vulnerability, exposed to protection risks including exploitation and abuse, gender-based violence and human trafficking.' A qualitative study conducted among 65 individuals who returned from Europe to Iraq between 2014 and 2017 showed that several returnees experienced limited access to livelihoods and difficulties in finding a job (especially in the KRI), lack of safety and security as well as difficulties in accessing social services (in particular in Baghdad), or lack of psycho-social support.[149] In this last case, however, it is important to notice not only the limitations of the study, which cannot be generalised, but also the fact that many returnees from Europe decided to go back to their country due to the social and legal difficulties encountered in Europe, rather than because of a general improvement of the situation in their place of origin.[150]

Another study that followed the migration patterns of a group of migrants from Afghanistan and Iraq to Sweden and back to their countries of origin similarly showed that return has often occurred due to the rejection of their asylum claims – and in some cases through forced removal from the country. Although Iraqi returnees were generally more prone to return voluntarily and with their families than Afghans were, and although the level of 'embeddedness' among Iraqi returnees was generally higher than that of Afghans, the conditions of return were not exempt from difficulties. The great majority of the 40 Iraqi returnees interviewed were met by family and friends at the airport and welcomed in their places of origin – a clear sign not only of the social support that many returnees could count on but also of the lesser level of social stigmatisation associated with migration.

However, some did express feelings of despair, especially when relatives did not understand the reasons for their return, and even shame for having failed their migration journey or for having returned home empty-handed, unable to support their families. Although many returnees shared a strong sense of belonging to the Iraqi society, some felt uncomfortable, insecure, and vulnerable due to the potential threats to collective and personal safety, and therefore hid their presence in the country or reduced social contacts to a minimum. From an economic point of view, many returnees believed that life upon return was sometimes worse than that before the departure, as it was particularly difficult to find stable and financially secure employment due either to security issues or to unavailability of jobs. Some also highlighted that the skills acquired in Sweden were not useful in the country of origin, thus leading to a sense of despair and a feeling of having lost their most important and productive years of their lives. Many respondents, therefore, borrowed money from family or friends or used their reintegration grant to make ends meet, in particular to buy medication, rent, and groceries.

Given the social, economic, or psychosocial difficulties that returnees often experienced upon their return, the study concluded, the conditions for a sustainable reintegration were generally missing. While only few returnees achieved a 'successful embeddedness' in the country of origin – that is, when all social, economic, or psychosocial dimensions of reintegration were met – the majority experienced poor or very poor levels of embeddedness, which compromised the process of their reintegration within society and, in some cases, prompted their re-emigration. The study showed how, due to the difficult conditions in the area of origin, half of the returnees interviewed intended or even planned to migrate again to Europe, often in a legal way, and some started to collect the necessary resources to move abroad. However, it is also interesting to notice that, among those who expressed their intention to leave again, some would remain in Iraq if the social and economic conditions improved, in particular in relation to security and access to employment and education.[151]

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[145] Chatelard, "Migration from Iraq"; Costantini and Palani, "Displacement-Emigration-Return."

[146] Costantini and Palani, "Displacement-Emigration-Return."

[147] ICMPD, "Vision on Sustainable Reintegration of Returnees in Iraq - CAIR Report."

[148] IDMC-NRC, "Internal Displacement and Food Security," 38.

[149] REACH, "Iraqi Migration to Europe in 2016: Profiles, Drivers and Return."

[150] IOM Iraq, "Migration Flows from Iraq to Europe: Reasons Behind Migration" (Baghdad: International Organization for Migration - Iraq Mission, 2016); REACH, "Iraqi Migration to Europe in 2016: Profiles, Drivers and Return."

[151] Vera-Larrucea, Malm Lindberg, and Asplund, "Those Who Were Sent Back."

More recently, the EU and the IOM presented the results of a longitudinal study conducted in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iraq, and Pakistan, showing the economic, social, and psychosocial aspects of reintegration of returnees in their respective country of origin. The survey, based on three rounds of data collection between August 2020 and July 2022, showed that, apart from those returning to Bangladesh, the returnees to all other countries experienced a deterioration of the reintegration scores throughout the three rounds, mainly in the economic dimension (which tends to drive the other scores). Returnees in Iraq, however, experienced a stronger deterioration in the social and psychosocial dimensions rather than in the economic dimension, which decreased slightly during this period. The reduction in the economic dimension scores is also reflected in the lack of advancement in several individual economic indicators, such as satisfaction with current economic conditions, food security, and borrowing money. Although experiencing a general decline of the composite reintegration score, Iraqi respondents were slightly more likely to be in employment by the third round of the survey, thus suggesting mixed economic reintegration patterns. As a result, the study suggests that, among other things, efforts should concentrate on improving the economic aspects of reintegration also through development cooperation programmes, not only because this dimension lags behind others but also because it can revitalise the social and psychosocial conditions for reintegration.[152]

On the one hand, in the past years there has been a growing interest among European and international institutions in addressing questions of how, when, and under what conditions migrants, including rejected asylum seekers, could return safely to their home countries and rebuild their lives within the communities of return. In April 2021, the European Commission adopted the first EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration, promoting voluntary return and reintegration as part of the common European system for returns.[153] Besides, several European states – inter alia, Germany, Denmark, and Switzerland – have moved towards adopting a whole-of-government approach to return, promoting self-support, return, and reintegration in the countries of origin, fostering interdepartmental coordination in most return and reintegration policies, and involving increasingly diverse actors in the elaboration and development of migration policies.

On the other hand, the Iraqi government has also demonstrated great interest in improving the conditions of security in the country as well as the access to adequate housing, employment, and education services necessary to guarantee a sustainable return. Besides, it has proactively cooperated with European institutions and international agencies for the elaboration and implementation of durable solutions for the reintegration of returnees. Following a whole-of-government approach, relevant Iraqi Ministries have been therefore involved to assess the main challenges that returnees – in particular the most vulnerable ones, such as women and children – might face upon return, discuss the vision for a sustainable reintegration of returnees, and elaborate specific measures to promote and implement it.

In the framework of the Danish Government-funded project CAIR, aiming precisely at facilitating the creation of conditions for sustainable reintegration of Iraqi returnees from Europe, ICMPD developed a series of measures in collaboration with relevant Iraqi Ministries to foster the sustainable reintegration of returnees in the country, i.e., the creation and implementation of tailored approaches to respond to the specific needs and challenges of different categories of returnees, the sharing of data on return and reintegration between Ministries, and the mapping of and engagement with relevant Iraqi stakeholder, development actors, and the private sector in general for the development and implementation of reintegration programmes. The collaborative work has resulted in the formulation of a Vision on Sustainable Reintegration of Returnees in Iraq, which supports the Iraqi Government in its response to the identified limitations in the knowledge, skills, and capacities on return and reintegration by expanding reintegration service provisions for the returnees through a whole of government/whole of society approach, strengthening referral mechanisms and increasing information outreach on reintegration. However, further and stronger collaboration is needed to increase capacity and awareness of return and reintegration at the national, local, and community levels, develop a flexible and tailored system of reintegration services to returnees, and increase the cooperation within and between the Iraqi Ministries in order to improve coordination, communication, and dialogue on reintegration efforts in Iraq.[154]

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[152] EU and IOM, "Longitudinal Evidence on Sustainable Reintegration Outcomes," Sustainable Reintegration Knowledge Bites Series (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2023).
[153] European Commission, "Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council. The EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration," Pub. L. No. COM(2021) 120 final (2021).
[154] ICMPD, "Vision on Sustainable Reintegration of Returnees in Iraq - CAIR Report."

3.5 Emigration

Internal and international conflicts as well as lack of socio-economic opportunities have led to significant migration movements out of the country for at least forty years. More recently, increased international mobility occurred after the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq and the following widespread sectarian violence, and even more so with the outburst of the conflict with ISIS in 2014. As the UNDESA statistics show, the number of Iraqi migrants worldwide almost tripled during the 2000s, raising from 828,000 at the beginning of the decade to 1,340,000 five years later and more than 2.5 million people in 2010. After a period of decline at the beginning of the 2010s, the number of Iraqi emigrants raised again, reaching again two million people in 2020, about a quarter of whom were refugees and asylum seekers (see Figure 10).[155]

Regarding the main destinations of migrants, while neighbouring countries (in particular, Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon) and Northern Africa represented the most preferred migratory options until the early 2010s, these destination countries declined sharply in the following years. Given the relative situation of instability in the whole region after the Arab Spring, especially in countries that traditionally received many Iraqi refugees such as Syria, Europe became the main destination of Iraqi migrants in the second half of the decade. If Iraqi migrants in Europe represented 12% of the whole Iraqi population abroad in 2010, ten years later this rate doubled.[156]

Regarding destination choices within Europe, the link to social networks is well established in migration research. Some European countries have been the preferred destination for Iraqi migrants for decades. Sweden, for example, has represented one of the main countries of destination for the Iraqi diaspora, hosting the third largest group of Iraqi migrants in Europe after Germany and the United Kingdom, with Iraqis constituting the second largest group of foreign-born citizens in the country after Syrians in 2022.[157] More than 30,000 migrants, followed by a little over 20,000 relatives, found refuge in Sweden between 1980 and 1999, escaping wars and political persecutions in their country. Over the following twenty years, another 130,000 Iraqis were granted residence permits in Sweden, especially after the 2006/07 ethnic tensions and the start of the US withdrawal. According to the DELMI report, the arrival of many Iraqis in Sweden was related not only to the already numerous presence of Iraqi nationals in the country, but also to the relatively favourable recognition rates in Sweden at the time, which considered Iraqis as a persecuted group and granted asylum in about 90% of the cases.[158]

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[155] IOM, "World Migration Report 2022" (Geneva: IOM, 2022).

[156] Costantini and Palani, "Displacement-Emigration-Return"; F. Scapolo et al., *Atlas of Migration 2022* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2023).

[157] Statista, "Foreign-Born Population in Sweden in 2022, by Country of Birth," 2023, https://www.statista.com/statistics/1041828/sweden-foreign-born-population-origin/.

[158] Vera-Larrucea, Malm Lindberg, and Asplund, "Those Who Were Sent Back."

Figure 10: Emigration of Iraqi nationals and main destinations, 1990-2020. Source: elaboration from UNDESA.
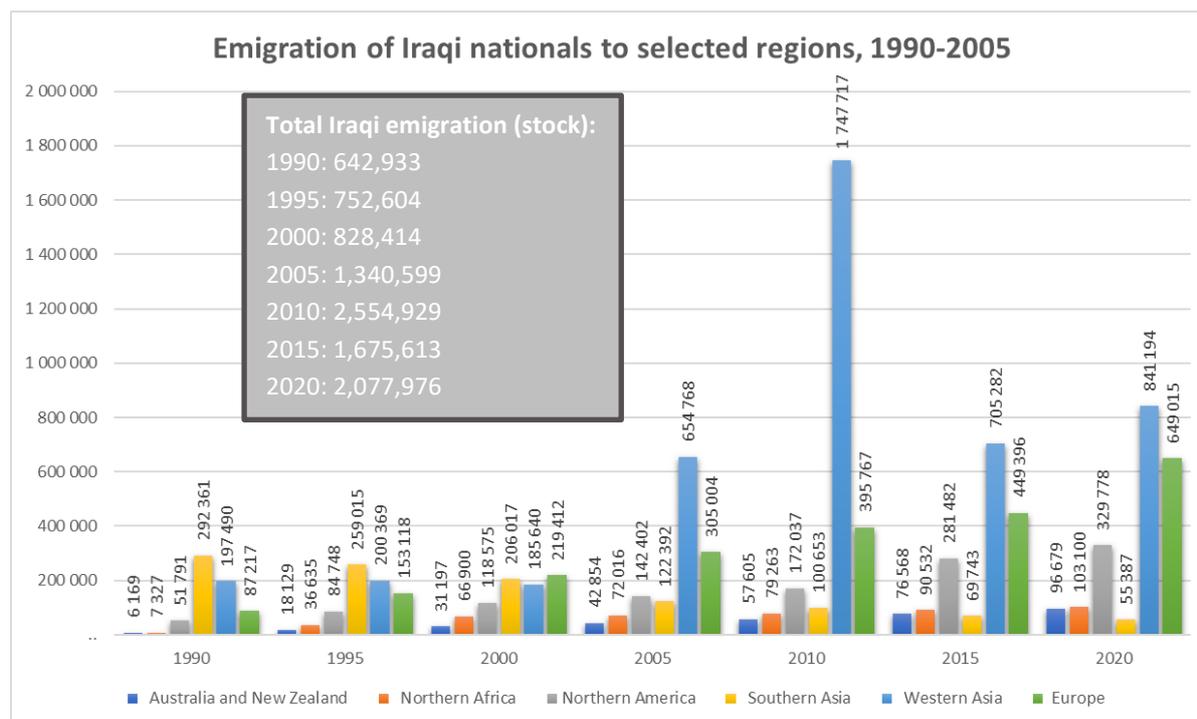
With the 2015 migration crisis, tens of thousands of Iraqis migrated to and claimed asylum in Europe to escape political persecution and violence in their country as well as in the neighbouring region. In 2015 only, about 90,000 Iraqis entered Europe through the Eastern Mediterranean route, which was perceived as the only feasible option.[159] After Afghan and Syrian nationals, who constituted the overwhelming majority of migrants entering Europe, Iraqis were the third largest group, amounting to 7% of all migrants.[160] According to the European Union Agency for Asylum, about 120,000 Iraqis lodged their asylum claims in one of the European member states in both 2015 and 2016, receiving more than 60% of positive decisions, in the form of either refugee status or other subsidiary protections (see Figure 11). In 2016, more than half of the total asylum applications submitted by Iraqi nationals were lodged in Germany (about 68,000), but a significant number of applications were registered also in Finland (16,000), Sweden (10,000), and Belgium (6,000). However, the recognition rate varies significantly from country to country, between 100% of positive responses in Spain and Poland (although with 80 and 20 claims submitted, respectively) and about 13% in Hungary and the UK.[161]

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[159] REACH, "Iraqi Migration to Europe in 2016: Profiles, Drivers and Return."
[160] Costantini and Palani, "Displacement-Emigration-Return."
[161] AIDA, "Refugee Rights Subsiding? Europe's Two-Tier Protection Regime and Its Effect on the Rights of Beneficiaries" (Brussels: Asylum Information Database, 2017).

Figure 11: Number of asylum applications lodged and first instance decisions received by Iraqi asylum seekers in the EU, 2014-2022. Source: European Union Agency for Asylum.[162]
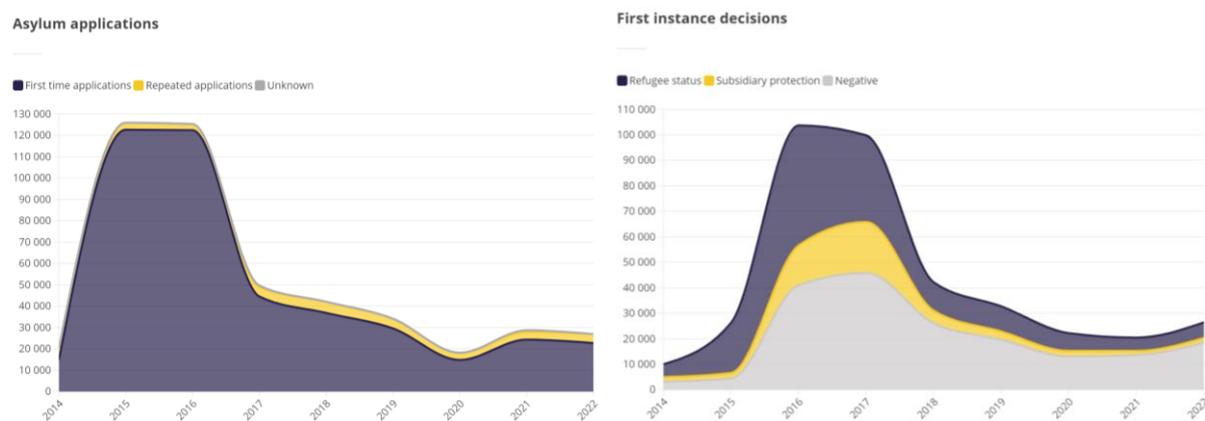
Since the relative stabilisation of the country after the defeat of ISIS in 2017, the number of Iraqi migrants to Europe has decreased, within a general decrease of migratory movements to Europe following the implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement, while that of returnees has increased. However, migration from Iraq has never stopped completely and, in some cases, has shifted towards other routes. While the Eastern Mediterranean route towards Greece has continued to be the most viable option for many Iraqi migrants, in 2018 some of them were registered in the Central Mediterranean route and in the Balkan route.[163] If Iraqi migrants in Europe represented 12% of the whole Iraqi population abroad in 2010, ten years later this rate doubled.[164]

In 2021, however, migration from Iraq to Europe took the route of Belarus. In 2021, Belarus allowed migrants from Iraq as well as Syria, Iran, Yemen, Afghanistan, Cuba, and other states to travel to the country on a tourist visa. This move, aimed at putting pressure on European borders through the exploitation of migrants, lured thousands of Iraqi migrants – in particular from the KRI's districts of Erbil, Shiladze, and Sulaymaniyah[165] – to travel to Belarus and then head towards the border with Poland in the attempt to cross it irregularly. According to the European Border Agency FRONTEX, while the number of Iraqi migrants apprehended at the external borders of Europe declined significantly from 2018 to 2020, reaching a minimum of about 2,000 people, the figure rose again to about 8,700 in 2021, more than half of whom at the Eastern European border.[166] Among the overall detections of irregular border crossings at the Eastern border, Iraqis represented by far the main nationality, accounting for almost 60% of the apprehensions.

Along the same lines, the number of asylum applications lodged in Poland by Iraqi migrants surged from the few dozen presented each year until 2020 to the 1,436 in 2021 alone. The same trend can be seen in Latvia and Lithuania, although with lower numbers.[167] In general, over the summer of 2021, European countries have seen a slight increase in the number of asylum applications lodged by Iraqi nationals, before declining again in 2022. Between August 2020 and September 2021, Iraqi asylum seekers remained consistently in the top ten group of applicants in the EU, particularly in Germany (which accounts for more than half of all Iraqi applications), Greece, Austria, and Belgium. In 2022, however, they were the only group that lodged slightly fewer asylum applications in comparison to the previous year.[168] Following the Belarusian crisis, the Iraqi Government organised the return of approximately 4,000 Iraqis from Belarus and its neighbouring EU countries (mainly Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland), with the practical and financial support from the EU- and IOM-facilitated AVVR programme as well as the MRC.

[162] EUAA, "Asylum Report 2023" (Valletta: European Union Agency for Asylum, 2023).

[163] UNHCR, "Desperate Journeys. Refugees and Migrants Arriving in Europe and at Europe's Borders. January – December 2018" (Geneva: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2019).

[164] Scapolo et al., *Atlas of Migration 2022*.

[165] Viola Pulkkinen, "Notes from a Country of Origin: Iraq's Position in the EU-Belarus Border Crisis," *Institute for Security & Development Policy (ISDP)* (blog), December 16, 2021, https://www.isdp.eu/iraqs-position-in-the-eu-belarus-border-crisis/.

[166] FRONTEX, "Risk Analysis for 2022/2023."

[167] https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/download/?url=COX78m

[168] EUAA, "Latest Asylum Trends - Annual Overview 2022."

3.5.1 Main trends and drivers of emigration

While migration to Europe has been met with increasing securitisation of borders and restriction of regular migration channels, this did not deter migrants to (attempt to) enter the European space, even if they did so in an irregular way.[169] While the attention of international organisations and national institutions has been mostly directed towards the characteristics, trends, and challenges of internal displacement, some research has also delved into the outward irregular migration of Iraqi migrants, in order to understand their patterns and drivers.

One such example is the DFID-funded project *Understanding complex migration flows from Iraq to Europe through movement tracking and awareness campaigns*, implemented by the IOM-DTM. The project consisted in a quantitative survey conducted between November and December 2015 among 474 Iraqi migrants who left Iraq in the previous year to reach Europe and a qualitative study conducted during March and April 2016 among 86 respondents in the form of focus group discussions. Most respondents were originally from the governorates of Ninewa (10%), Baghdad, and Anbar (about 9% each); yet, a much lower number of respondents resided in Ninewa and Anbar at the time of emigration, as the two governorates were the most affected by the ISIS advancement (see Figure 12). Interestingly, the survey also showed that more than 40% of respondents declared to have a degree, although almost half of the respondents were unemployed before leaving the country.[170]

Figure 12: Respondents by governorate of origin and governorate of residence at the time of departure. Source: IOM Iraq 2016.
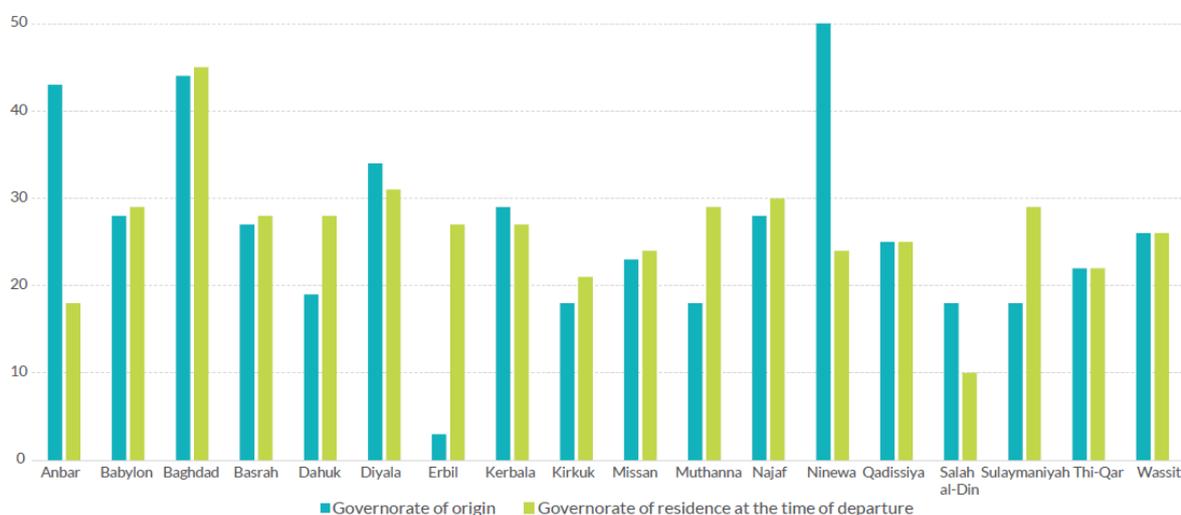
Another quantitative study conducted among 413 Iraqi migrants on the Aegean islands in 2017 confirmed that the majority of Iraqis who had migrated to Europe the previous year came from the conflict-affected governorates of Baghdad (30%) and Ninewa (20%, more than half of whom from the district of Sinjar), while 13% came from Sulaymaniyah.[171] However, the same study reported, Iraqi migrants might have different perceptions and experiences of the conflict: While respondents from Ninewa were directly affected by the conflict, others from the KRI or Baghdad reported a growing fear that the conflict could have negatively affected their livelihoods and security. In many cases, the decision to migrate is neither new nor immediate. According to the REACH report, more than 30% of the Iraqis that reached the Aegean islands in 2016 had already been internally displaced before migrating to Europe across the Turkish border, either to the KRI or to Baghdad.[172] Besides, as Costantini and Palani note, emigration often remains a personal desire that does not turn into a proper plan, mostly due to lack of economic means.[173] Similarly, most Iraqis who migrated to Greece in 2016 reported that up to two and a half years had been necessary before leaving the country in order to collect the necessary contacts, information, and resources.[174]

The study also investigated the educational and professional backgrounds of the Iraqi migrants that reached the Greek islands. Unlike the previously mentioned study by IOM Iraq, the REACH survey showed strong discrepancies in relation to both the educational and professional achievements of Iraqi migrants. At the time

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[169] REACH, "Iraqi Migration to Europe in 2016: Profiles, Drivers and Return."
[170] IOM Iraq, "Migration Flows from Iraq to Europe - February 2016."
[171] REACH, "Iraqi Migration to Europe in 2016: Profiles, Drivers and Return."
[172] REACH; see also Costantini and Palani, "Displacement-Emigration-Return."
[173] Costantini and Palani, "Displacement-Emigration-Return."
[174] REACH, "Iraqi Migration to Europe in 2016: Profiles, Drivers and Return."

of departure, only 16% of respondents declared to have completed university, while another 14% had a high school diploma; yet, more than one third of respondents (34%) had obtained only a primary school education. According to REACH, the 'relatively high frequency of reporting of lower levels of education may be related to the increased affordability of migration from Iraq to Europe over time, whereby poorer families, with lower education levels, could only afford migration to Europe when it became more common and, thereby, less expensive.'[175] The analysis of the professional background of Iraqi migrants, however, showed better results in comparison with the IOM Iraq study. Among the respondents of the REACH survey, only 10% declared to be unemployed at the time of migration, while 20% were owner of small businesses, about 15% each were practitioners of trade or employed in low skilled service industry, and 9% each were either public officials or skilled service workers.[176]

According to the 2022 World Migration Report of the IOM,[177] the main reasons reported for travelling irregularly to Europe are conflict and persecution. In the case of Iraq, however, multiple reasons seem to intertwine. The IOM Iraq survey showed that the primary reason for migration was lack of hope in the future, common among 80% of respondents, followed by general security concerns in 10% of the cases. When asked to provide a second reason for migration, more than one third of respondents did not express any option, while about 25% indicated either general security concerns or unemployment, and another 10% targeted violence. According to IOM Iraq, the combination of different responses denotes 'the high level of volatility, the sense of uncertainty and the precariousness of the situation in Iraq.'[178] The qualitative study accompanying the survey showed how both general and personal security concerns were particularly prominent in Baghdad; with some cases also reported in the KRI due to the geographical proximity of some ISIL posts. Respondents in the KRI, however, were mainly concerned about the political instability of the region and the unpredictability of the security situation. Economic drivers of migration, such as unemployment and lack of job opportunities, were reported across all locations, with particular incidence among respondents from the KRI. Just like in the survey, when asked about their main reason to leave the country, many respondents indicated the lack of hope in the future and expressed their desire to achieve a better one in Europe.[179]

When delving into the drivers of migration, the REACH survey shows a grimmer picture. For 37% of respondents, conflict constituted the main reason for migration, followed by ethnic, political, or religious persecution (22%) and other issues so complicated that migrants could not break them down into specific categories (17%). Even when looking at secondary and tertiary reasons for migration, general conflict and individual persecutions represented the most common responses. Interestingly, lack of access to education and employed were mentioned only among 2% and 1% of respondents, respectively. When looking at the specific governorates, conflict and persecution were the most reported drivers of migration in Baghdad and Ninewa, while in Sulaymaniyah health issues were reported as the second most important reasons for migration by one in four (24%) respondents, after the fear of conflict in neighbouring regions (26%).[180]

A survey conducted by the IOM-DTM among 2,100 Iraqi migrants in Europe and returnees showed that about three out of four respondents had faced challenges at personal, household, or community level before migrating. Security threat was the most reported challenge at all levels (in particular at the personal level, with 62% of cases), generally followed by economic issues, such as unemployment (7%), insufficient income within the household (22%), or lack of jobs and livelihoods at the community level (28%). When looking at the primary reason for migration, almost two thirds of respondents reported either conflict at the country level (34%) or insecurity at the personal or family level (30%); the same issues were also reported, in a reversed way, as secondary reasons of migration (14% and 22%, respectively). Economic problems at the personal or societal level were reported as the primary reason for migration by 20% of respondents, and as the secondary reason by 12%. The survey, however, did not provide any breakdown on the governorates of origin or last displacement of the migrants and returnees interviewed.[181]

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[175] REACH, 11.
[176] REACH, "Iraqi Migration to Europe in 2016: Profiles, Drivers and Return."
[177] IOM, "World Migration Report 2022."
[178] IOM Iraq, "Migration Flows from Iraq to Europe - February 2016," 8.
[179] IOM Iraq, "Migration Flows from Iraq to Europe."
[180] REACH, "Iraqi Migration to Europe in 2016: Profiles, Drivers and Return."
[181] IOM-DTM, "Comprehensive Migration Flows Survey (CMFS) - Migration Drivers and Reasons for Migration to Europe," DTM REMAP Project (Geneva: International Organization for Migration - Displacement Tracking Matrix, 2017).

While the main migration drivers remain the presence of pockets of violence and the lack of socio-economic opportunities, some factors constitute important triggers that turn migration wishes into plans. According to the REACH survey, positive images of migration via traditional and social media constituted the main trigger of migration for 38% of respondents, followed by negative changes in the personal situation (24%) and positive perceptions of the situation of asylum, reception, and integration in Europe (22%). During focus group discussions conducted in Greece, however, experienced security incidents and acute security threats were often reported among respondents, prompting their immediate decision to leave.[182] According to the IOM-DTM survey, security incidents constituted the main trigger of migration for 58% of respondents, followed by family pressures to migrate (27%) and lack of employment (15%). However, the same study reported that more than three out of four respondents would have not stayed in the country even if they had been offered an employment or educational opportunity.[183]

Despite the relative political stability after the conflict against ISIS, the social and economic situation in Iraq presents uncertainties and fluctuations. As of 2020, more than 2.3 million Iraqi nationals were living abroad, almost 15% of whom (about 340,000 people) as refugees or with some forms of subsidiary protection.[184] Structural drivers and individual longing for more personal freedom continue to push young people to migrate from Iraq, often irregularly. The KRI, generally considered a relatively stable and secure region, has been – and remains to this day – one of the main regions of origin of Iraqi migrants. Rampant unemployment (especially in the public sector), high levels of corruption, and massive cuts in state salaries constitute important migration drivers, both for locals and for the hundreds of thousands of IDPs that had found refuge in the region over the previous years.

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[182] REACH, "Iraqi Migration to Europe in 2016: Profiles, Drivers and Return."

[183] IOM-DTM, "Comprehensive Migration Flows Survey (CMFS) - Migration Drivers and Reasons for Migration to Europe."

[184] Scapolo et al., *Atlas of Migration 2022*.

4 Information campaigns addressing irregular migration

4.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the examination of migration information campaigns addressing irregular migration both in Iraq and in other countries. Drawing from the most recent literature on the topic and building upon previous research conducted by ICMPD in the framework of similar projects,[185] the first part provides a critical review of migration information campaigns, examining with particular attention their objectives, methodology, implementation, and impact (Section 4.2). The chapter then delves into the analysis of the implementation of migration information campaigns in Iraq (Sections 4.3 and 4.4), looking first at the knowledge, attitudes, and intentions among (potential) migrants in the country and then providing insights into how these campaigns are executed. Additionally, it discusses the role of messengers, including returnees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), in migration campaigns (Section 4.5).

By analysing these aspects, the chapter aims at expanding and enriching the ICMPD theoretical and empirical work on migration information campaigns, thus shedding light on the effectiveness and implications of information campaigns in addressing irregular migration in Iraq, and setting the stage for the design and implementation of effective and reliable campaigns.

4.2 Migration Information Campaigns

Since their institution in the early 1990s, information and awareness-raising campaigns have been increasingly employed as an alternative tool of migration management. A wide variety of individuals and institutions (ranging from international organisations, civil society organisations, European institutions, nation states, as well as private stakeholders, migrant returnees, and local celebrities)[186] have been involved in the design or implementation of such campaigns in the countries of origin and transit of migrants, allocating a growing number of resources and funds. According to the European Migration Network, from the 'long summer of migration' and up until 2019, the European Union and its member states have implemented 129 information and awareness-raising campaigns, devoting over 23 million euros to their development and implementation.[187]

But what are migration information campaigns and why has there been such a surge in their implementation over the past years? At its most basic level, migration information campaigns are targeted informative campaigns that aim at providing a specific group of people (usually aspiring or intending irregular migrants) with better and more precise information on the dangers of irregular migration patterns, on the real political and socio-economic situation in the intended country of destination, and/or on the possibility of legal migration channels. Given such purposes – 'who can argue against "objective information provision"?', asks Caitlin Optekamp[188] – several international and civil society organisations have participated in their ideation and implementation to promote and spread awareness of migration movements and integration patterns.

Despite their straightforward general objective of information and awareness raising, migration information campaigns can differ significantly in their specific objectives, the target groups, the message they convey, the medium and the messengers they employ, and their effectiveness.[189] Besides, some scholars have criticised migration information campaigns either for their wrong underlying assumptions or for their hidden objectives. While some have noticed how such campaigns often rely on the idea that migrants lack proper information on

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[185] Hahn-Schaur, *Awareness Raising and Information Campaigns on the Risks of Irregular Migration from Pakistan: Background Report*.

[186] Omar N. Cham and Florian Trauner, "Migration Information Campaigns: How to Analyse Their Impact?," *International Migration*, April 13, 2023, 1–11.

[187] EMN, "Migration and Communication: Information and Awareness-Raising Campaigns in Countries of Origin and Transit," in *Austrian National EMN Conference* (Vienna, 2019).

[188] Caitlin Optekamp, "Migration Information Campaigns. A Qualitative Study on the Role That Migration Information Campaigns Play in the Migrant Decision-Making Process through the Lens of Practitioners in the Field of Migration" (Utrecht, Universiteit Utrecht, 2016), 24.

[189] Djamila Schans and Caitlin Optekamp, "Raising Awareness, Changing Behavior? Combatting Irregular Migration through Information Campaigns," Cahier (Amsterdam: Ministerie von Veiligheid en Justitie, 2016), https://www.eerstekamer.nl/overig/20170328/raising_awareness_changing; Jasper Tjaden, Sandra Morgenstern, and Frank Laczko, "Evaluating the Impact of Information Campaigns in the Field of Migration: A Systematic Review of the Evidence, and Practical Guidance," Central Mediterranean Route Thematic Report Series (Geneva, International Organization for Migration, 2018); Pagogna and Sakdapolrak, "Disciplining Migration Aspirations through Migration-information Campaigns."

migration patterns and channels,[190] others have pointed out how these campaigns are part and parcel of the multifarious apparatus of migration management that tends to prevent migration movements through simultaneous forms of care and control.[191]

In the next sections, the different topics and issues related to migration information campaigns will be discussed more in depth, building upon previous work conducted by ICMPD on the topic as well as on more recent literature. In the framework of the PARIM I project, ICMPD assessed the characteristics, role, and effectiveness of migration information campaigns, providing a comprehensive literature review on the topic.[192] Reconnecting with and expanding on such work, the next section explores the main characteristics and assess the effectiveness of migration information campaigns, before looking more in depth at the implementation of information campaigns in Iraq and at the role of migrants as messengers in the elaboration of such campaigns.

4.2.1   Main characteristics of migration information campaigns

According to their specific objectives, target groups, messages, and messengers, migration information campaigns can vary significantly. In their analysis of 33 campaigns targeting irregular migrants, Schans and Optekamp have shown that most campaigns tend either to raise awareness of the dangers of irregular migration or to provide information about the social and economic conditions in the country of destination, presented in a negative connotation.[193] The message conveyed, however, can range from positively informing migrants and local communities about the legal paths to enter Europe or the risks posed by smugglers and traffickers to communicating the possibility of death, exploitation, or physical and sexual abuse along the way. In other words, while some campaigns aim at sensitising migrants and local communities in their countries of origin or protecting them along the journey, others aim at provoking an emotional and behavioural change among potential migrants through a negative framing of migration to deter or discourage them from embarking on the journey in the first place.[194]

The choice of message, therefore, becomes crucial to achieve the specific objective of the campaign. Migration information campaigns usually adopt dissuasive or deterrent messages, although the boundary between the two is sometimes blurred.[195] Some campaigns also adopt a persuasive message, encouraging migrants to pursue a positive action: This is the case of specific campaigns, often implemented directly in countries of destination, which promote the assisted voluntary returns of migrants to their countries of origin, through either communicative persuasion or economic incentives.[196] Some campaigns also involve the use of threat to create a 'hostile environment' against irregular migrants, as was the case of the 'go home vans' circulating in the UK.[197]

Campaigns implemented in the countries of origin and transit tend to employ a wide array of messages, according to the objectives that they pursue. Some humanitarian campaigns aiming at protecting migrants along their journey or decreasing their vulnerability generally provide information on the risks that migrants might face as well as on safer routes and legal procedures that they might take. This kind of campaigns often sees the involvement of humanitarian organisations and NGOs in their creation and implementation.[198] Most campaigns,

[190] Céline Nieuwenhuys and Antoine Pecoud, "Human Trafficking, Information Campaigns, and Strategies of Migration Control," *American Behavioral Scientist* 50, no. 12 (2007): 1674–95; Maybritt Jill Alpes and Ninna Nyberg Sørensen, "Migration Risk Campaigns Are Based on Wrong Assumptions," DIIS Policy Brief (Copenhagen: Dansk Institut for Internationale Studier, 2015); Schans and Optekamp, "Raising Awareness, Changing Behavior?"

[191] Jørgen Carling and María Hernández-Carretero, "Protecting Europe and Protecting Migrants? Strategies for Managing Unauthorised Migration from Africa," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 13, no. 1 (2011): 42–58; Charles Heller, "Perception Management. Deterring Potential Migrants through Information Campaigns," *Global Media and Communication* 10, no. 3 (2014): 303–18; Ceri Oeppen, "'Leaving Afghanistan! Are You Sure?' European Efforts to Deter Potential Migrants through Information Campaigns," *Human Geography* 9, no. 2 (2016): 57–68.

[192] Hahn-Schaur, *Awareness Raising and Information Campaigns on the Risks of Irregular Migration from Pakistan: Background Report*.

[193] Schans and Optekamp, "Raising Awareness, Changing Behavior?"

[194] Jan Paul Brekke and Kjersti Thorbjørnsrud, "Communicating Borders. Governments Deterring Asylum Seekers through Social Media Campaigns," *Migration Studies* 8, no. 1 (2018): 43–65; Jan-Paul Brekke and Audun Beyer, "'Everyone Wants to Leave'. Transit Migration from Khartoum-The Role of Information and Social Media Campaigns" (Oslo: Institutt for samfunnsforskning, 2019), www.samfunnsforskning.no; Florian Trauner, Omar N. Cham, and Rosangela Caleprico, "EU-Funded Information Campaigns Targeting Potential Migrants: State of the Art," BRIDGES Working Paper, 2022.

[195] Carling and Hernández-Carretero, "Protecting Europe and Protecting Migrants?"

[196] Laura Cleton and Reinhard Schweitzer, "'Our Aim Is to Assist Migrants in Making a Well-Informed Decision': How Return Counsellors in Austria and the Netherlands Manage the Aspirations of Unwanted Non-Citizens," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 47, no. 17 (December 13, 2021): 3846–63; Cécile Balty et al., "The 'Don't Come/Go Back Home' Continuum: The Use of Storytelling in Migration Information Campaigns," *Revista Da Abralin* 20, no. 3 (December 6, 2021): 93–112.

[197] Maya Goodfellow, *Hostile Environment: How Immigrants Became Scapegoats* (London: Verso, 2020).

[198] Ida M. S. Vammen et al., "Does Information Save Migrants' Lives? Knowledge and Needs of West African Migrants En Route to Europe," DIIS Report (Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, 2021).

however, employ a dissuasive or deterrent message – although often striking a balance between practices of care and control[199] – aiming at discouraging potential migrants from leaving by informing them about the risks of irregular migration or the tough living conditions in the countries of destination.[200] Some scholars have highlighted how certain countries have employed particularly strict messages – often accompanied by harsh policies – to deter migrants from reaching their territory.[201] By looking at information campaigns as forms of public diplomacy, Hartig has noted the irony of countries advancing a powerful and positive image of themselves to attract tourists and investments at the international level, while simultaneously depicting themselves in a negative way to deter unwanted migration movements.[202]

Regarding the medium and messengers employed, migration information campaigns have generally been implemented through a wide variety of ways, often according to the different target groups they aim to reach. Since their inception, campaigns have employed traditional forms of communication, such as TV advertisements, billboards, radio broadcasts, flyers, and leaflets, which could reach a wide and diversified audience.[203] Some campaigns have also adopted more participatory approaches, such as community discussion, workshops, and theatre plays, in the attempt to focus on and engage with local communities through 'vehicles of popular culture'.[204] With the recent technological advancement, campaigns have increasingly used digital means of communication, from posts in social networks to YouTube videos and text messages.[205] The use of digital platforms has allowed campaign organisers and stakeholder to decrease their costs, reach their intended (and often young) audience in a more precise way, and communicate directly with it.[206]

4.2.2   Criticisms against migration information campaigns

As mentioned before, despite their increasing use by states, international institutions, and humanitarian organisations over the past years, migration information campaigns have been subject to criticism regarding their underlying assumptions, their purported effectiveness, and their hidden agenda. With regard to the underlying assumptions of migration information campaigns, as Tjaden, Morgenstern, and Laczko superbly summarised it, 'First, it is assumed that potential migrants lack information; second, that available information (i.e. prior to an information campaign) is inaccurate; third, that new information (i.e. from the campaign) is trusted and believed; fourth, that the new information will affect knowledge, perceptions and/or attitudes; fifth, that a change in knowledge, perceptions and/or attitudes will translate into a change in behaviour.'[207] From a sociological perspective, it is also assumed that migration decisions are individual decisions that do not take into consideration structural drivers of migration nor family and communal ties.[208]

All these points can be further investigated by looking more in depth into the literature to evaluate the role of migration information campaigns. The assumption that migrants have little or wrong information on migration may be the reason why so many information campaigns have been launched since 2015.[209] Yet, empirical research has often criticised and counteracted this assumption. Drawing upon survey's insights from one of Nigeria's main hubs of irregular migration, Beber and Scacco have ascertained that, contrary to the expectations, potential migrants are relatively well informed about, and sometimes even underestimate, the socio-economic

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[199] Oeppen, "'Leaving Afghanistan! Are You Sure?'"; Pierluigi Musarò, "*Aware Migrants*: The Role of Information Campaigns in the Management of Migration," *European Journal of Communication* 34, no. 6 (December 2019): 629–40.

[200] Carling and Hernández-Carretero, "Protecting Europe and Protecting Migrants?"

[201] Caroline Fleay et al., "Missing the Boat: Australia and Asylum Seeker Deterrence Messaging," *International Migration* 54, no. 4 (August 2016): 60–73; Brekke and Thorbjørnsrud, "Communicating Borders"; Sarah C. Bishop, "An International Analysis of Governmental Media Campaigns to Deter Asylum Seekers," *International Journal of Communication* 14 (2020): 1092–1114.

[202] Falk Hartig, "Deterrence by Public Diplomacy: The Negative Dimension of International Political Communication," *Journal of Communication Management* 21, no. 4 (November 6, 2017): 342–54.

[203] Heller, "Perception Management. Deterring Potential Migrants through Information Campaigns"; Evie Browne, "Impact of Communication Campaigns to Deter Irregular Migration (GSDRC Helpdesk Research Report 1248)" (Birmingham, GSDRC, University of Birmingham, 2015); Sjoerd van Bemmel, "The Perception of Risk among Unauthorized Migrants in Ghana," *Journal of Risk Research* 23, no. 1 (January 2019): 47–61.

[204] Kira Kosnick, "Mediating Migration: New Roles for (Mass) Media," *InMedia* 5 (September 17, 2014), http://journals.openedition.org/inmedia/761.

[205] Brekke and Thorbjørnsrud, "Communicating Borders"; Brekke and Beyer, "Everyone Wants to Leave"; Musarò, "*Aware Migrants*."

[206] Brekke and Thorbjørnsrud, "Communicating Borders"; Cham and Trauner, "Migration Information Campaigns."

[207] Tjaden, Morgenstern, and Laczko, "Evaluating the Impact of Information Campaigns in the Field of Migration: A Systematic Review of the Evidence, and Practical Guidance."

[208] Schans and Optekamp, "Raising Awareness, Changing Behavior?"

[209] Verena K. Brändle, "Claiming Authority Over 'Truths' and 'Facts': Information Risk Campaigns to Prevent Irregular Migration," in *Europe in the Age of Post-Truth Politics: Populism, Disinformation and the Public Sphere*, ed. Maximilian Conrad et al. (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023), 151–76.

situation in Europe, thus suggesting that 'information campaigns that attempt to lower expectations about the economic benefits of life in Europe risk becoming *mis*information campaigns.'[210]

On the other hand, the participants they interviewed demonstrated scarce knowledge of the logistics related to the migration journey, showing an underestimation of the risks and a parallel overestimation of their own abilities in reaching the destination country via irregular means. This research outcome might suggest the need to develop better and more informed campaigns on the risks of irregular migration and the potential regular migration paths. However, other studies have noticed how 'poor information – whether transmitted through word of mouth, social norms, or smugglers – is unlikely to be the sole factor behind risky decisions.'[211] In some cases, the decision to migrate and the choice of the country of destination depend less on rational and informed calculations than on the difficult situation in the country of origin[212] and on the reputation of their destination countries to protect basic human rights.[213] Other studies have also shown that, far from being as ignorant as they are often depicted, migrants take their decisions within a particularly vulnerable socio-economic context, assessing the information at their disposal very carefully.[214]

Trust and impact of information campaigns among migrants are other issues that have been highlighted in the literature. Not only do migrants tend to rely on multiple sources to get their information about the migration journey or their intended country of destination, but they can also be sceptical about information provided 'by actors with vested interests' that depict destination countries in a negative way (despite being much better off than their own) and promote relatively tight migration and border policies.[215] In this respect, migration information campaigns might overlook the fact that migrants have a wide range of information to choose from – from official channels such as TV programs, radio broadcasts, and the Internet, to friends and relatives, social networks, and local communities – and assess, interpret, or even re-appropriate such information according to their needs and aspirations.[216] Therefore, the campaign often represents only one among many sources of information, which neither can be perceived as 'objective', especially if the 'migratory disposition' of migrants is stronger than the campaign's message,[217] nor can it be trusted, in particular if migrants perceive that the real intention of the campaign is to prevent them from migrating.[218]

One of the most debated and thorny issues about migration information campaigns concerns their effectiveness. First, there is neither a clear definition nor an appropriate measurement of the 'success' of these campaigns. While some actors tend to present even a modest decrease in migratory trends as a successful outcome of the implementation of information campaigns (often to please their donors), the reality is much different. Establishing a clear correlation (let alone a causation) between migration information campaigns and the reduction in migratory movements is nearly impossible, precisely because migration decisions depend on a multiplicity of interrelated social and individual factors.[219] For this reason, some have argued that such campaigns have a symbolic dimension, allowing governments to claim that they are 'doing something' against irregular migration.[220]

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[210] Bernd Beber and Alexandra Scacco, "The Myth of the Misinformed Migrant? Survey Insights from Nigeria's Irregular Migration Epicenter," Ruhr Economic Papers (Essen: RWI - Leibniz-Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung, 2019), 16.

[211] Jacob Townsend and Christel Oomen, "Before the Boat: Understanding the Migrant Journey" (Brussels: Migration Policy Institute Europe, 2015), 1.

[212] Fleay et al., "Missing the Boat"; Christopher Changwe Nshimbi, "Rational Actors, Passive and Helpless Victims, Neither, Both: EU Borders and the Drive to Migrate in the Horn of Africa," *Social Inclusion* 9, no. 1 (March 25, 2021): 257–67; Vammen et al., "Does Information Save Migrants' Lives?"

[213] Cathryn Costello and Esra Kaytaz, "Building Empirical Research into Alternatives to Detention: Perceptions of Asylum-Seekers and Refugees in Toronto and Geneva," Legal and Protection Policy Research Series (Geneva: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2013), http://www.refworld.org/docid/51a6fec84.html.

[214] van Bemmel, "The Perception of Risk among Unauthorized Migrants in Ghana."

[215] Alpes and Sørensen, "Migration Risk Campaigns Are Based on Wrong Assumptions"; Vammen et al., "Does Information Save Migrants' Lives?"

[216] Fleay et al., "Missing the Boat"; Anne-Line Rodriguez, "European Attempts to Govern African Youths by Raising Awareness of the Risks of Migration: Ethnography of an Encounter," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 45, no. 5 (April 4, 2019): 735–51; Nshimbi, "Rational Actors, Passive and Helpless Victims, Neither, Both."

[217] Nieuwenhuys and Pecoud, "Human Trafficking, Information Campaigns, and Strategies of Migration Control"; Brändle, "Claiming Authority Over 'Truths' and 'Facts.'"

[218] Carling and Hernández-Carretero, "Protecting Europe and Protecting Migrants?"; Alpes and Sørensen, "Migration Risk Campaigns Are Based on Wrong Assumptions."

[219] Browne, "Impact of Communication Campaigns to Deter Irregular Migration (GSDRC Helpdesk Research Report 1248)"; Trauner, Cham, and Caleprico, "EU-Funded Information Campaigns Targeting Potential Migrants: State of the Art."

[220] Oeppen, "'Leaving Afghanistan! Are You Sure?'"; Rodriguez, "European Attempts to Govern African Youths by Raising Awareness of the Risks of Migration."

Even when looking, more modestly, at the potential impact of migration information campaigns on migrants' aspirations and behaviours, it is difficult to identify a clear connection between the two. In their analysis of 17 peer-reviewed journal articles on migration information campaigns, Pagogna and Sakdapolrak have noticed how none of them can assert with certainty that such campaigns have had a positive impact on migrants' behaviours.[221] After all, even when the information from the campaign is trusted and accepted, increased awareness does not necessarily translate into behavioural change.[222] When campaigns claim to be successful in positively shaping migrants' knowledge and awareness, as 89% of the 65 campaigns reviewed by Tjaden, Morgenstern, and Laczko do, the quality of the evaluation process has been put into question.[223]

4.2.3   Guidelines for developing information campaigns

The creation and implementation of a migration information campaign should take into consideration several aspects related not only to the general design of the campaign itself but also to the structural conditions in the country of origin and the political objectives of the countries of destination. First, campaigns should have a clear and achievable objective, which can be measured and assessed in a scientifically rigorous way. The lack of a clear objective might lead to confusion in the implementation of the campaign and to lack of scientific accuracy in its evaluation.[224] To avoid this, it is important that donors, policymakers, implementing agencies, and researchers establish the core conditions of the campaigns and agree on a mutual definition of 'success': While even a 10-20% change in potential migrants' behaviour might be a significant result for social scientists, it might be irrelevant for policymakers.[225]

Another important aspect is the definition, identification, and engagement of the target group. The definition of 'potential irregular migrants', as we have seen in chapter 2, is necessarily blurred and open to interpretation. Not only can there be no register of such category of people, but also any tentative definition might change according to individual experiences and socio-political contexts.[226] Even when the target group is defined and selected, it is important to consider the broader social context in which the group operates. The involvement of the community might help develop the campaign in two ways: it allows, first, the identification of patterns among people who want to migrate and those who do not,[227] and, second, the involvement of people that might have an important role in the decision-making process.[228] Far from being a mere receiver of the message, the target group should also have an active role in the campaign. Its participation should be envisaged from the beginning, with a survey to understand the people's knowledge, assessment, and intentions of migration, to the end, with a follow-up on the effectiveness of the campaign after its implementation.[229]

The third aspect is the elaboration of the campaign message. The rule of thumb for messages to be effective is to be understandable, relevant, credible, and actionable.[230] Yet, this might not be enough. The message should be consistent with the objective of the campaign and respond to the specific needs of the target groups. Research has shown that migrants tend to disregard, if not completely overturn the message, even if presented in a positive way or with humanitarian purposes, if they perceive that it comes from an institution that pursues a hostile aim against them.[231] Similarly, campaigns should not simply claim to deliver objective and unique factual knowledge about migration. On the one hand, the knowledge provided by close networks of relatives and friends is generally more trusted than official channels, which represent only one among the different sources of information that migrants employ.[232] On the other hand, objective facts by themselves do not change perceptions or behaviours if they are not accompanied by emotional or subjective messages.[233]

[221] Pagogna and Sakdapolrak, "Disciplining Migration Aspirations through Migration-information Campaigns."

[222] Schans and Optekamp, "Raising Awareness, Changing Behavior?"

[223] Tjaden, Morgenstern, and Laczko, "Evaluating the Impact of Information Campaigns in the Field of Migration: A Systematic Review of the Evidence, and Practical Guidance."

[224] Jasper Tjaden, "Assessing the Impact of Awareness-Raising Campaigns on Potential Migrants – What We Have Learned so Far," in *Migration in West and North Africa and across the Mediterranean*, ed. Philippe Fargues and Marzia Rango (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2020), 426–34.

[225] Tjaden; Jasper Tjaden and Horace Gninafon, "Raising Awareness About the Risk of Irregular Migration: Quasi-Experimental Evidence from Guinea," *Population and Development Review* 48, no. 3 (2022): 745–66.

[226] Schans and Optekamp, "Raising Awareness, Changing Behavior?"

[227] Townsend and Oomen, "Before the Boat: Understanding the Migrant Journey."

[228] Browne, "Impact of Communication Campaigns to Deter Irregular Migration (GSDRC Helpdesk Research Report 1248)."

[229] Beber and Scacco, "The Myth of the Misinformed Migrant?"

[230] Schans and Optekamp, "Raising Awareness, Changing Behavior?"; Beber and Scacco, "The Myth of the Misinformed Migrant?"

[231] van Bemmel, "The Perception of Risk among Unauthorized Migrants in Ghana"; Vammen et al., "Does Information Save Migrants' Lives?"

[232] Schans and Optekamp, "Raising Awareness, Changing Behavior?"

[233] Jasper Tjaden and Felipe Alexander Dunsch, "The Effect of Peer-to-Peer Risk Information on Potential Migrants – Evidence from a Randomized Controlled Trial in Senegal," *World Development* 145 (2021).

While deterrent messages like the Australian *No way* campaign might have a counterproductive effect, information about the dangers and risks of irregular migration might also not work, if the social and economic conditions in the country of origin threaten the livelihoods of people. As Alpes and Sørensen argue, potential migrants also need concrete 'information about opportunities for regular work abroad, information about scholarship programs, and information on how to attain temporary or permanent visas and work permits.'[234] However, it is also crucial that these opportunities are made available in the countries of destination. For this reason, regular migratory channels for work, study, and humanitarian purposes should be implemented and promoted, in order to prevent migrants' deaths and exploitation by smuggling and trafficking networks in the first place.[235] Most importantly, for a campaign to be effective, what is needed is to combat the root causes of migration through the implementation of cooperation and development projects against poverty, socio-economic inequalities, conflict, unemployment, and bad governance.[236] Creating better social and economic conditions in the countries of origin is 'no small task',[237] but it is nonetheless fundamental to promote sustainable and durable solutions.

4.3 Knowledge, attitudes, and intentions among (potential) migrants in Iraq

4.3.1 Migration knowledge

Over the past years, a few studies have dealt with the assessment of the knowledge, attitudes, and intentions about migration among (potential) migrants in Iraq, although the topic remains generally underexplored. In relation to migrants' prior knowledge of migration risks and paths, studies have often confirmed the fact that migrants use multiple sources of information before taking the decision to migrate, mostly from family and friends. A survey conducted by the IOM among 473 migrants in 2016 showed that word of mouth (in particular, social activities and social networks abroad) represented the preferred means of information for 40% of the respondents, followed by social media (23%) and the internet (22%). Only a small minority of migrants relied on official information channels provided by the government or by international organisations and institutions (1% each).[238]

However, some studies have also pointed out that, although migrants feel satisfied with the information they receive, their specific knowledge on migration risks and paths is often inaccurate or biased.[239] The same IOM survey indicated that while the majority of respondents were generally satisfied with the information received about life in the country of destination, they were mostly dissatisfied with the information received on legal documents, transportation, costs, and routes.[240] A qualitative study conducted by REACH among 50 Iraqi returnees in Baghdad and the KRI in July 2017 showed how only 20% of them actually knew about legal migration paths to Europe, although they did not try to access it mostly due to the high costs related to the visa application or to the long waiting periods. Similarly, two thirds of them were aware only of asylum to remain in Europe legally, but they had scarce or inexistent knowledge on alternative protection mechanisms such as the subsidiary protection. Looking at the disaggregated data, respondents from the KRI tended to be better informed about legal migration pathways (such as temporary residency, long-term residency, and student visas) than those from the greater Baghdad region, probably because Kurdish applicants were less likely to be granted asylum given the relative political and economic stability in the region.[241]

Another qualitative study conducted among 35 potential migrants in seven different regions by IRFAD has shown that many potential migrants lacked the necessary information on (regular) migration channels, migration journeys and risks, and the situation in the country of destination, as they often relied on word-of-mouth information provided by family and friends.[242] While eight potential migrants consulted the Internet and official websites to get information on migration, and other 13 relied on information from the government, official

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[234] Alpes and Sørensen, "Migration Risk Campaigns Are Based on Wrong Assumptions."
[235] Heller, "Perception Management. Deterring Potential Migrants through Information Campaigns."
[236] Carling and Hernández-Carretero, "Protecting Europe and Protecting Migrants?"
[237] Schans and Optekamp, "Raising Awareness, Changing Behavior?"
[238] IOM Iraq, "Migration Flows from Iraq to Europe - February 2016."
[239] REACH, "Iraqi Migration to Europe in 2016: Profiles, Drivers and Return."
[240] IOM Iraq, "Migration Flows from Iraq to Europe - February 2016."
[241] REACH, "Knowing How to Go. Iraqi Asylum Seekers and Legal Pathways to Get to and Stay in Europe" (Geneva: REACH Initiative, November 2017).
[242] IRFAD, "Needs Assessment Study on Migration Information in Iraq."

organisations, and Iraqi embassies abroad, many distrusted the government, which they considered biased and incapable of providing them with reliable information and general support to respond to their needs. In fact, the remaining 14 respondents tended to rely on information provided by relatives or friends, which, although deemed sufficient for the travel, might have been inaccurate or unreliable.

Contrary to general understanding, 24 out of 35 potential migrants did have general information about the risks related to irregular migration as well as on legal migratory paths, often from close contacts in the country of destination, and would know who to contact in case of danger during their travel. However, 25 of them also reported that they needed more information on the legal and socio-economic situation in the potential country of destination, in particular related to the asylum process, their legal rights as refugees or migrants, and social services such as housing and employment. The study has revealed how even those migrants that had already made migration plans and prepared for the journey tended not only to underestimate the risks of the journey, especially when conducted in an irregular way, but also to lack the necessary financial resources for it. For these reasons, in the context of the MIRAMI Project, the work of the MRC constitutes an important asset to reach both 'aspiring' and 'intending' migrants through its counselling services and the implementation of targeted migration information campaigns. Given the limited scope of the study, however, the findings cannot claim to represent the entire Iraqi population.

Following the Belarusian migration crisis, Seefar launched a rapid research study among more than 600 Kurdish potential migrants, transit migrants, and returnees to collect information on their knowledge and perceptions of migration patterns, with the aim of protecting them from the dangers of irregular migration to Europe.[243] The mixed-method study has shown that many migrants decided to take the migration route to Belarus because it was initially perceived as easier, safer, and cheaper than other routes. Although the respondents did not know much about Belarus, the initial information about the openness of this route, which was then amplified by social media and circulated through social networks, lured many migrants to apply for a visa. However, it soon became clear that the information circulating about that route was exaggerated or misleading. The study has shown that 61% of migrants believed that Europe was granting asylum to Kurdish migrants in Belarus, while 32% of them were convinced that migrants could cross from Belarus to Poland legally. For this reason, the organisation suggested, there is a need for providing more balanced information and supporting migrants in their decisions.

4.3.2 Migration intentions

Most potential migrants seek to migrate abroad rather than to a different Iraqi province, as they do not see any economic opportunities in the country. Interestingly, however, a study conducted by REACH among IDPs has shown that this category of people has very different migration intentions. When the conditions to return in the governorate of origin are prohibitive, most of them expressed the intention to stay and integrate in their current area of displacement, while only 3% of them stated their wish to migrate abroad.[244] This suggests that, although living in an area with high emigration patterns such as the KRI, IDPs do not necessarily want to move further.

With regard to potential migrants, research has shown that they generally prefer to migrate to western countries such as Western Europe and North America, in addition to neighbouring countries such as Türkiye and Jordan. Another survey conducted among Iraqi migrants in the Aegean islands by the same organisation has unveiled that the most reported intended countries of destination were Germany (37%), the Netherlands (11%), and the United Kingdom (11%). The choice of the country was driven not simply by the level of services and opportunities provided but also, in a quarter of the cases, by the presence of family members there and the possibility of reunification. It is also noteworthy that 18% of respondents just wanted to reach 'any safe country' and were determined to do that by any means necessary. According to the study, 75% of respondents left Iraq after the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement, knowing of its existence and, therefore, of the possibility of becoming stranded in Greece.[245]

The same patterns have been confirmed by more recent studies conducted among different categories of migrants. According to a descriptive study on the knowledge, attitudes, and intentions of potential migrants in Iraq, although only 27% of the 262 respondents involved had made plans or were preparing to migrate, the majority (14%) indicated Europe as their preferred destination, followed by 11% who specifically indicated Germany. However, about 9% of the respondents also expressed their intention to move to the United States,

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[243] Seefar, "To Belarus and Beyond" (Seefar, 2022).
[244] REACH, "Intentions Survey."
[245] REACH, "Iraqi Migration to Europe in 2016: Profiles, Drivers and Return."

Türkiye, or Canada.[246] Similar results emerged from the IOM-DTM study on returnees from Belarus, where two thirds of the respondents expressed their general intention to migrate in one European country. Among those who mentioned a specific country of destination, 35% indicated Germany, 24% the UK, and 21% Lithuania (probably due to the large proportion of respondents returned from there). Interestingly, the study has noted how respondents from the same governorate tended to have a predominant intended destination, although half of them did not have family or relatives in those countries.[247]

Migration intentions and plans, however, can also change along the journey, due to changing personal and structural factors. A survey conducted by the IOM among 473 migrants residing in Europe has shown that 30% of them have never reached their intended country of destination but decided to settle in other countries due to the impossibility of reaching them or to changing circumstances.[248] Families seem particularly prone to develop and revise their migration plans according to different factors and aspirations. Looking at the experience of 90 Syrian, Afghan, and Iraqi families across five countries, another study conducted by REACH has shown that some families have never intended to travel in the first place but were forced to do so due to worsening socio-economic conditions. When deciding to leave, most of the families interviewed planned for a long-term separation, while a minority envisaged a temporary separation, hoping to be reunited as soon as possible upon arrival in their intended destination, either through irregular or regular channels (such as family reunification and resettlement).[249]

4.4 The implementation of migration information campaigns in Iraq

Since the improvement of the security condition in the country following the progressive defeat of ISIS, a few migration information campaigns have been implemented in Iraq to prevent migrants from leaving their country and reaching other destinations. Already in the winter of 2015, at the height of the 'migration crisis', the Belgian government sent out a message to Iraqi migrants to deter them from applying for asylum in Belgium, as they would have had no prospect of receiving it.[250] The campaign, transmitted via Facebook in English and Arabic, was presented as a success by the then State Secretary for Asylum and Migration Theo Francken, claiming that it reduced the number of asylum applications by Iraqi citizens by 85% in three months.[251] In the same period, the Finnish government launched a similar campaign via Facebook to deter Iraqi migrants to go to Finland, as the risk of rejection of their asylum claims and subsequent repatriation to their country would have been high. The campaign, which in the words of the then leader of the Finns Party parliamentary group, Sampo Terho, aimed at curbing the uncontrolled influx of migrants, received 80,000 view on the social network.[252] However, despite the praises of their promoters, it is difficult to establish the concrete impact of social media campaigns on reducing migration movements and to assess their effectiveness, which.[253] This is probably the reason why the evaluation of such campaigns often remains private.

In spring 2016, another campaign with the aim of deterring Iraqi migrants was commissioned and launched by the Australian immigration department.[254] The campaign consisted in the production and distribution of a 90-minute fictional film, *The Journey*, which, although targeting mainly Afghan migrants, was broadcasted also in Iran, Iraq, and Pakistan. The film was harshly criticised for its high costs (topping six million Australian dollars) as well as for spending almost one third of that to pay a company run by an Afghan entrepreneur, Saad Mohseni, who himself fled to Australia when he was young. Other critics questioned the necessity of the movie altogether, especially considering that Australia had been implementing one of the harshest migration policies against

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[246] IRFAD, "A Descriptive Study."

[247] IOM Iraq-DTM, "Migration from Iraq to European Union Countries: A Survey of Returnees from the Belarusian Migration Crisis" (Geneva: International Organization for Migration - Displacement Tracking Matrix, 2022).

[248] IOM Iraq, "Migration Flows from Iraq to Europe - February 2016."

[249] REACH, "Separated Families: Who Stays, Who Goes and Why? Decision-Making and Its Consequences for Families Separated by Mixed Migration" (Geneva: REACH Initiative, April 2017).

[250] Schans and Optekamp, "Raising Awareness, Changing Behavior?"

[251] "Irakezen Onder Indruk van Facebook-Campagne Francken," *De Standaard*, September 29, 2015, https://www.hln.be/vluchtelingencrisis/irakezen-onder-indruk-van-facebook-campagne-francken~a4e7ddf4/; "Implosie van Asielaanvragen Irakezen," *De Standaard*, January 5, 2016, https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20160105_02050466.

[252] "Foreign Ministry Launches 'Don't Come' Facebook Campaign in Iraq and Turkey," *Yle* (blog), October 23, 2015, https://yle.fi/a/3-8404359; Schans and Optekamp, "Raising Awareness, Changing Behavior?"

[253] Esther Haarman, Jasper Tjaden, and Gustavo López, "Assessing the Effectiveness of Online Facebook Campaigns Targeting Potential Irregular Migrants: A Pilot Study in Three West African Countries" (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2020).

[254] Schans and Optekamp, "Raising Awareness, Changing Behavior?"

asylum seekers, forcing them to face difficulties and deaths while in transit towards or trying to access the Australian territory.[255]

Whether through social networks or via more traditional channels, the deterrent campaigns described above have many aspects in common. First, they are promoted by governmental institutions with the specific aim of preventing migrants from reaching their territory and potentially asking for asylum; second, they are one-off campaigns that do not entail needs assessments nor follow-ups; third, they are often accompanied by stricter policy measures that allow to achieve the objectives of the campaign. In the following years, however, other actors such as international organisations and private companies have taken part in the creation and implementation of migration campaigns with the aim of informing migrants of the risks about migration or possible legal migration paths, rather than deterring them from moving in the first place.

Between May 2019 and April 2021, Seefar conducted the *Migration Communication Campaign (Phase 2)* in Nigeria and the KRI. The campaign, financed by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was evaluated by the Center for Evaluation and Development, which provided information on its rationale, implementation, and impact. Regarding the KRI, the campaign targeted 14 potential migrants between 16 and 34 years old, mostly from Erbil and Sulaymaniyah, and their relative communities as secondary audience. Although most respondents addressed the lack of economic opportunities, security risks, and the difficulty in obtaining legal documents as the primary reasons to migrate irregularly, some also mentioned their LGBTIQ+ identity as a potential reason for persecution and escape.

Drawing from extensive primary research conducted by Seefar since 2009 on the beneficiaries' personal needs for information and opportunities, the campaign included messages on the physical and emotional risks of migrating irregularly as well as information on alternative paths to irregular migration. Messages were communicated through a range of channels including word-of-mouth counsellors, face-to-face and remote consultations, community events, media engagement, online and social media outreach, and educational outputs. According to the evaluators, the use of both positive and negative messages, the involvement of well-trained local counsellors, and the provision of information tailored to the needs of beneficiaries constituted important factors for the success of the campaign in sharing knowledge and increasing awareness about migration. However, while many respondents reported having reflected upon their life plans after participating in the campaign, in the KRI a minority of them were still willing to migrate irregularly.[256]

Another Seefar campaign ran from May to December 2021 as part of *The Migrant Project*.[257] The campaign, which targeted educated single male potential migrants in urban areas as well as those with families in peri-urban and rural areas, aimed at providing them with relevant information on both the risks of irregular migration and safer legal migratory alternatives through face-to-face counselling and online outreach. According to the organisation,[258] the campaign proved to be successful in increasing potential migrants' awareness of migration and reconsidering their behaviour, making about a third of them change their minds about migrating irregularly. However, no methodological explanation about the implementation and evaluation of the campaign has been provided.

With regard to ICMPD's work in Iraq, since the establishment of the MRC Baghdad in 2020 under the aegis of the MOLSA in the framework of the ICMPD-led IMM Project, a number of information campaigns have been elaborated and implemented to raise awareness of irregular migration, trafficking, and smuggling, support returnees in their reintegration process, and counsel individuals on regular migration paths as well as on social and economic services within the country. While the MRC spread awareness of irregular and regular migration through its information campaigns, it also helped create awareness about the MRC itself and its services, so that potential migrants in need of more extensive and personalised support could reach it. In 2022, MRC Iraq conducted more than 300 outreach events and activities, hundreds of social media activities, and eight SMS campaigns, reaching more than six million Iraqis, and providing them with accurate information on the dangers of irregular migration, the pathways to legal migration, and the socio-economic situation of migrants in Europe.

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[255] Jonathan Pearlman, "Australia Spends Millions on Film 'Persuading Migrants to Stay Away,'" *The Telegraph*, April 4, 2016, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/04/04/australia-spends-millions-on-film-persuading-migrants-to-stay-aw/?utm_medium=email&utm_source=flipboard.

[256] Frederic Kamta, Ravi Baghel, and Johanna Kern, "Evaluation of Awareness Raising Campaigns for (Potential) Migrants" (Mannheim: Center for Evaluation and Development, 2023).

[257] Seefar, "Behaviour Change Campaign Helps Kurdish Potential Migrants to Make Safer Migration Choices," *Seefar* (blog), 2022, https://seefar.org/news/projects/behaviour-change-campaign-helps-kurdish-potential-migrants-to-make-safer-migration-choices/.

[258] Seefar.

Similar trends can be seen in the first seven months of 2023, when the MRC conducted 149 outreach sessions and 132 social media activities, reaching more than four million people. As potential migrants found out about the MRC services through such campaigns, they contacted the MRC to receive specific information and/or personal counselling: In 2022, the MRC counselled 5,447 potential migrants via its walk-in services, its hotline, and its WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger accounts. The discontinuance of the SMS campaigns and the reduction of social media activities in 2023 has led to a relative decrease in the campaign outreach as well as in the number of people counselled, but the engagement of people through outreach sessions and social media has remained high (see Table 1).

Table 1: Overview of some of the migration information campaigns implemented by MRC Iraq. Source: Elaboration from MRC Iraq. + Data available only for the activities implemented in person; * Until July.

	2021+	2022	2023*
Total number of outreach sessions	NA	304	149
Total number of people reached via outreach sessions	1,842	5,894	2,747
Total number of social media posts	NA	545	132
Total number of people reached via social media	NA	5,535,848	4,549,689
Total number of other campaigns (radio, SMS)	NA	13	1
Total number of other campaigns (posters/stickers)	NA	3,360	1,082
Total number of people reached via other campaigns	NA	1,009,029	91,000
Total number of people counselled	2,944	5,447	878

The work of the MRC has been also valuable in the elaboration and implementation of specific strategies and campaigns following the 2021-2022 Belarusian crisis. Shortage of information on the migration process along this route has placed Iraqis who departed with valid visas into irregular situations in the onward journey from Belarus towards the EU countries. Their attempts to cross the borders without valid documentation led to their irregular stay or crossings into the EU territory, protracted confinement, loss of material assets en route or at destination, and even their detention and deportation. The crisis required therefore coordinated responses involving a whole-of-government approach as well as support of international community. In this respect, the MRC cooperated closely with the EU Delegation to Iraq, the Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs (DG Home), and the Directorate-General for International Partnerships (INTPA) as well as with the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and the Ministry of Youth in the KRI to address the needs of potential migrants, build further trust with the communities of origin, and coordinate the awareness raising response in areas with high risks of irregular migration.

Since August 2021, the MRC has conducted a series of campaigns with the aim of providing correct information on the migration route to Europe and raising awareness of the risks of irregular migration. In four months, the MRC carried out 69 awareness raising sessions focusing on irregular migration along the route to Belarus, which saw the participation of several people. Since most potential migrants came from the KRI, the MRC cooperated with the Kurdish organisation CDO to implement specific awareness raising campaigns in the region and developed an SMS campaign in Arabic and Kurdish to raise awareness of the risks of irregular migration that reached one million people. Besides, live sessions, documentaries, and testimonials have been published on the Facebook page of MRC Iraq, reaching and engaging primarily with the youth (Table 2).

Table 2: Overview of some of the migration information campaigns implemented by MRC Iraq.

Campaign	Location	Timeframe	Implemented with	Language
SMS Campaign	KRI; Baghdad; Ninewa; Basrah	Oct 2021-Jan 2022	Asiacell; Zain; Korek telecom	Arabic + Kurdish
SMS Campaign	KRI; Baghdad; Ninewa; Basrah	Aug 2022-Oct 2022	Asiacell; Zain	Arabic + Kurdish

TV campaign	Iraq base	Feb 2022	5 channels publishing 15 seconds video daily	Arabic (4 channels) & Kurdish
Social media campaign	Iraq base with focus on Kurdistan	Sep-Nov 2021	TCM	Arabic + Kurdish
Social media campaign	Iraq base	March-Sep 2022	Focus media	Arabic + Kurdish
Social media campaign	Iraq base	Dec 2022-May 2023	One frame	Arabic
Local NGOs	KRI; Salah al-Din; Diyala; Basrah	Feb-May 2022	CDO + Tajdeed	Awareness in Arabic and Kurdish
Local NGOs	KRI	Aug 2022-April 2023	CDO	Counselling & Awareness in Kurdish

How have the campaigns of MRC Iraq been evaluated? In the framework of the EU- and Austrian government-funded IKAM project on information and capacity building on asylum, legal, and irregular migration in Afghanistan, Iraq and the Western Balkans, IRFAD evaluated the work of MRC Iraq, particularly around three key areas: potential migrants' information needs, reach, and channels; the influence of the MRC on their knowledge and attitudes; and its influence on their intentions and plans to emigrate.[259] The study has shown a significant impact of the MRC in raising potential migrants' awareness of the risks of irregular migration as well as in shaping their information on legal migration paths. In particular, migrants that attended an MRC event reported an increased awareness of the general risks related to irregular migration (+102%), an increased knowledge on the lack of basic services for irregular migrants in Europe (+34%), and a decrease in the willingness to accept an employment offer tied to a visit visa (-62%). Yet, the study also showed how the MRC did not have a significant impact on the migration intentions of potential migrants. Although there was a slight decrease in the proportion of respondents that wished to move 'a little bit' and 'a fair amount', the data showed no differences among those that wished to migrate 'a lot'. Like most evaluations, the scope of the study remains limited, since the sample is based on campaign participants rather than the whole population of Iraqi potential migrants and did not include the construction of a control group.[260]

A more comprehensive study on the work of the six ICMPD MRCs (in Iraq as well as in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan) was carried out few months later.[261] The study used a quasi-experimental design where users were randomly placed into either the control group or the treatment group before taking part in one of the MRC activities, provided with the exact same survey, but measured in two different moments, i.e., before and after their participation in the MRC activities, respectively, in order to avoid potential memory biases and attritions. In the case of MRC Iraq, the study reported a staggering increase in potential migrants' awareness of safer and legal migration options (+125%) as well as of the government entities that they can call for assistance while abroad (+153%), and a decrease in their intention to migrate irregularly (-72%). Interestingly, the study also reported a slight increase in the probability to migrate. Overall, these findings provide an exceptional glimpse on migrants' decision to migrate, increasing our understanding of what kind of interventions are effective and why. Besides, they suggest that new and personalised information from reliable sources can have dramatic effects on individuals' level of awareness of issues and migration decision-making.

4.5 The role of messengers (returnees and IDPs)

The trustworthiness of the information channels and messages that migrants rely on is another important matter of theoretical debate and empirical implementation. As mentioned previously, migrants often rely on information from family, friends, and even smugglers, which they consider accurate and well founded (although

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[259] IRFAD, "A Descriptive Study."
[260] IRFAD.
[261] James Dennison, "Impact Assessment of the Budapest Process's Migrant Resource Centres" (Vienna: International Centre for Migration Policy Development, 2022).

research shows this is often not the case). On the other hand, communication from official or institutional sources is often perceived as biased and unreliable.[262] To overcome this issue, over the past years migration information campaigns have seen the involvement of a wide array of actors, from national governments and international organisations to NGOs, civil society organisations, local institutions, and celebrities, in order to spread their message more efficiently and increase migrants' trust in it. Whether the fame of the messenger and the emotional feature of the message translate into more trustworthiness and increased effectiveness of the campaign, however, is matter of debate. The current section provides a brief overview of the main rationale and shortcomings behind the role of returnees in the implementation of migration information campaigns.

As mentioned before, research has shown that the information provided by family and friends is far from being objective and reliable, for a whole variety of reasons. First, information on migration is often based on personal experiences and word of mouth and thus necessarily subjective and subject to different interpretations. Second, the legal and socio-economic situation in the country of destination might change, thus making the journey or the reception conditions more difficult. Third, the information provided by smugglers can be even more biased, as it is moved by economic interests. Although migrants might carefully choose the smugglers and place great trust in them, they often do so under difficult and fast-paced conditions, which do not allow them to verify the information they receive.[263] Finally, the personal information that some migrants might share about the everyday life in the country of destination might also be ridden with inaccuracies and lies to 'put on a brave face',[264] thus exaggerating or even fabricating positive aspects while concealing problems and difficulties.

The latter is indeed the plot of a campaign produced by the Swiss government with the aim of showing the difficulties of undocumented migrants in the country of destination. The campaign depicts a fictional Cameroonian migrant calling his father back home and telling him about his successful life in the country as well as his good results in his studies. As the call ends, however, the video focuses on the reality of the migrant in the country of destination, begging for money and fleeing the police, while his father sits comfortably in his chair, reassured by his son's words.[265] As Howard argues, the campaign employs a sensational narrative that 'frames home as safe and comfortable, while undocumented migration is represented as dangerous and destined for failure', without being accompanied by positive or informational messages.[266]

On the other hand, the information provided by official institutions is rarely perceived as objective and, therefore, it is often not trusted or believed.[267] For these reasons, several campaigns have resorted to the employment of local authorities and celebrities to increase the credibility of the message. One of the most famous campaigns in this respect is the television ad launched in 2007 by the Spanish government in collaboration with the IOM and broadcasted in Senegal.[268] The short video, which depicts a desperate mother mourning the death of her son, ends with the famous Senegalese singer Youssou N'Dour telling young migrants not to leave their country in vain, as they are the 'future of Africa'.[269] Despite the employment of celebrities, assessing the credibility of such campaigns and their impact on migration intentions remains a challenging issue, as they are dependent on a whole variety of factors.

In order to strengthen the credibility of the message and the impact of the campaign, new strategies have been implemented. In recent years, campaigns have employed returned migrants to communicate information about legal migration paths or raise awareness of the difficulties of migration. In these peer-to-peer campaigns, returnees share their experiences of their journey through emotional videos.[270] This strategy, employed in the

[262] Vammen et al., "Does Information Save Migrants' Lives?"

[263] Jessica Hagen-Zanker and Richard Mallett, "Journeys to Europe: The Role of Policy in Migrant Decision-Making" (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2016); Hahn-Schaur, *Awareness Raising and Information Campaigns on the Risks of Irregular Migration from Pakistan: Background Report*.

[264] Jessica Hagen-Zanker et al., "Migration from the Margins: Mobility, Vulnerability and Inevitability in Mid-Western Nepal and North-Western Pakistan" (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2014), 32.

[265] Schans and Optekamp, "Raising Awareness, Changing Behavior?"

[266] Juliette Howard, "Beyond the Humanitarian Rhetoric of Migrant Information Campaigns," *E-International Relations*, 2021, https://www.e-ir.info/2021/06/14/beyond-the-humanitarian-rhetoric-of-migrant-information-campaigns/.

[267] Tjaden, Morgenstern, and Laczko, "Evaluating the Impact of Information Campaigns in the Field of Migration: A Systematic Review of the Evidence, and Practical Guidance."

[268] Kosnick, "Mediating Migration"; Julia Van Dessel and Antoine Pécoud, "A NGO's Dilemma: Rescuing Migrants at Sea or Keeping Them in Their Place?," *Border Criminologies* (blog), April 27, 2020, https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2020/04/ngos-dilemma; Howard, "Beyond the Humanitarian Rhetoric of Migrant Information Campaigns."

[269] Spanish campaign broadcasted in Senegal - YouTube.

[270] Trauner, Cham, and Caleprico, "EU-Funded Information Campaigns Targeting Potential Migrants: State of the Art"; Cham and Trauner, "Migration Information Campaigns."

Migrants as Messengers (MaM) campaigns, is based upon the idea that 'returnees are a trusted source of information for potential migrants, and that their emotional message has a large impact on risk perception and reducing intention to migrate irregularly.'[271]

A study conducted by Dunsch, Tjaden, and Quiviger to evaluate a peer-to-peer awareness raising campaign in Senegal has recently shown that this kind of campaigns can indeed have an impact on migrants' perceptions, information levels, knowledge, and intentions to migrate to Europe. The study, which employed randomised controlled trial, surveyed approximately 1,000 potential migrants from eight different neighbourhoods of Dakar, who were invited to attend either a MaM film event followed by interactive question and answer sessions with returnees (treatment group) or a film screening with no informational content on migration (control group). The results of the study show that potential migrants who participated in the treatment group reported to be 25% more aware of the risks associated with irregular migration, 19% more informed about the risks and opportunities of migration, and 20% less likely to express the intention to migrate irregularly than the control group. However, the MaM campaign had limited effects on migrants' knowledge of the legal context of migration, their familiarity with the socio-economic conditions in the country of destination, their perception of the journey, and the chances to arrive in Europe successfully.[272]

It must be noted, however, that not all returnees can be suitable for sharing messages about migration, nor can they be necessarily perceived as credible messengers. In some cases, returnees who have returned to their country prematurely or without having accumulated wealth might be perceived as having failed at migration and stigmatised in their communities of origin.[273] This aspect should be taken into consideration in the case of Iraq. A needs assessment study conducted by IRFAD among 35 returnees has shown that many of them faced legal and socio-economic problems in the country of destination as well as personal difficulties in adapting to different customs and traditions or in being away from home – all conditions that pushed them to return to Iraq.[274] The conditions of return might also affect the credibility of the messenger. A similar project on information campaigns conducted in Pakistan by ICMPD has shown that returnees who returned voluntary may be more trustworthy than forced returnees, who are often perceived as a source of shame in society and not reliable about their negative experience abroad.[275] Besides, returnees might also face challenges when re-integrating in the community of origin. Social, economic, and psychological problems might affect the process of re-integration and the everyday life of the returnees, increasing the perceived sense of failure of their migration experience.[276]

Another aspect to take into consideration when engaging with returnees in the implementation of migration information campaigns is the ethnic and religious divisions of the country, especially within a highly diversified country as Iraq. Although this generally relates more to the engagement of diaspora members, it is nevertheless important that returnees share the same ethnic and religious characteristics with the community.[277] Finally, it is important to remember that having a migratory experience does not necessarily turn returnees into messengers. First, not every returnee wants to be involved in information campaigns; second, if they wish to do so, they should have the necessary motivation, influence, knowledge of migration, and communicational abilities to share relevant stories with their community.[278] A study conducted among 50 Iraqi returnees has shown that, despite the general assumption that returnees gain new knowledge on migration paths to share within the community upon their return, this does not appear to happen. Only one of them reported to have gained new knowledge of legal migration pathways and other protection services upon return to Iraq.[279]

In conclusion, research has demonstrated that returnees might play an important role in the implementation of migration information campaigns within their own community, as they are often considered a better source of credibility and trustworthiness than external agencies or national institutions. However, returnees differ

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[271] Felipe Alexander Dunsch, Jasper Tjaden, and William Quiviger, "Migrants as Messengers: The Impact of Peer-to-Peer Communication on Potential Migrants in Senegal," Impact Evaluation Report (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2019).

[272] Dunsch, Tjaden, and Quiviger.

[273] Seefar and ECORYS, "Study on Best Practices in Irregular Migration Awareness-Raising Campaigns" (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2021).

[274] IRFAD, "Needs Assessment Study on Migration Information in Iraq."

[275] Ayesha Qaisrani, Katharina Hahn-Schaur, and Maegan Hendow, "Irregular Migration Dynamics from Pakistan and the Role of Information Campaigns: PARIM Final Report" (Vienna: International Centre for Migration Policy Development, 2021).

[276] IRFAD, "Needs Assessment Study on Migration Information in Iraq"; Seefar and ECORYS, "Study on Best Practices in Irregular Migration Awareness-Raising Campaigns."

[277] Seefar, "3E Impact. Ethical, Engaged & Effective. Running Communications on Irregular Migration from Kos to Kandahar" (SEEFAR, 2018).

[278] Seefar and ECORYS, "Study on Best Practices in Irregular Migration Awareness-Raising Campaigns."

[279] REACH, "Knowing How to Go. Iraqi Asylum Seekers and Legal Pathways to Get to and Stay in Europe."

strongly in their lived experience and knowledge of migration, potential influence within their community, and communication skills, therefore their participation in the campaign should be assessed thoroughly. Although there are some studies on the experience of returnees in Iraq,[280] information campaigns in Iraq do not seem to have engaged with returnees so far, a gap that the MIRAMI Project is ideally placed to address.

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[280] IRFAD, "Needs Assessment Study on Migration Information in Iraq"; ICMPD, "Vision on Sustainable Reintegration of Returnees in Iraq - CAIR Report."

5 Conclusion and further steps

Since the then Prime Minister of Iraq Haider al Abadi announced the victory over ISIS in Iraq on 9 December 2017, the country has entered a period of relative stability. Social insecurity, localised conflicts, political and economic instabilities, and lack of job opportunities, however, still represent important challenges for the reconstruction of the country after the conflict and constitute the main drivers for migration within and outside Iraq. Those who embark on a journey abroad tend to do so with little and often unreliable information at their disposal, obtained through word of mouth and social networks, and in an irregular way, ignoring the potential legal alternatives and overlooking the personal risks and financial costs of migration.

The current Background Report aims at setting the stage for the elaboration and development of targeted migration information campaigns in Iraq in the framework of the MIRAMI Project. It does so by focusing on three main research aspects:

- The understanding and analysis of existing primary and secondary data on migration dynamics from and within Iraq, including the identification of potential target groups;

- The in-depth review of previous migration information campaigns and activities in Iraq as well as in other countries, with particular focus on their methodology, key messages and channels, and effectiveness;

- The investigation of the experiences and potential role of returnees and IDPs in the migration decision-making process of potential Iraqi migrants.

Migration patterns from and within Iraq

As documented in the report, migration and displacement have been constant aspects of Iraqi contemporary history. Since the outburst of the conflict against ISIS in 2014, internal displacement and outward migration have staggeringly increased. The end of hostilities favoured the return of many nationally and some internationally displaced people. At present, more than one million people remain displaced within the country (many of whom have abandoned the idea of returning to their areas of origin and integrated in the region of displacement), while many attempt to migrate abroad each year, often in an irregular way.[281] The report has highlighted some main trends and patterns of migration within and from the country:

- **Drivers of migration**: Security issues at both societal and individual levels continue to remain the main drivers of migration, prompting many Iraqis to abandon their country, or to wish to do so. Economic reasons at the personal or household levels (unemployment, loss of livelihoods, and lack of hope in the future) are secondary drivers of migration, although very prominent in the KRI.

- **Migration intentions**: Potential migrants generally prefer to migrate to western countries such as Western Europe and North America, in addition to neighbouring countries such as Türkiye and Jordan. On the contrary, IDPs tend either to desire to return to their areas of origin or, if the conditions do not allow, to remain in the region of displacement and integrate there.

- **Areas of origin of international migrants**: Most migrants intercepted in Europe come from the KRI and Baghdad as well as from some of the governorates most affected by the advancement of ISIS, such as Anbar, Diyala, Ninewa, and Salah al-Din. However, it is important to notice that some of those coming from the KRI do not actually originate from there but had been previously displaced to the region during the conflict against ISIS.

Migration information campaigns

Since their institution in the 1990s, migration information and awareness-raising campaigns have been increasingly employed by a whole variety of institutions (international organisations, European institutions, nation states, and NGOs) and for a multiplicity of reasons (from increasing knowledge about the risks of irregular migration to providing information about legal migratory routes and deterring migrants from accessing a particular territory). Several actors (from private stakeholders to migrant returnees and local celebrities) have been involved in the design or implementation of such campaigns in the countries of origin and transit of migrants.

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[281] IOM Iraq, "Re-Displaced"; IOM-DTM, "No Way Home," 2022; IOM Iraq-DTM, "Iraq Master List Report 129. January-April 2023."

Drawing from the work already carried out in the framework of similar projects[282] as well as from the analysis of other review works, the current Background Report provides an extensive review of migration information campaigns, with particular focus on their methodology, key messages and channels, and effectiveness. The main outcomes of this review are highlighted here:

- **Message:** The conveyed message varies from informing of legal ways to enter Europe to highlighting dangers like death and abuse during the journey. Some campaigns sensitise migrants and protect them, while others aim to discourage migration by causing an emotional and behavioural change among potential migrants through the emphasis on its negative aspects.

- **Medium and messengers**: Migration information campaigns have employed various methods and approaches to reach their targeted audience, from traditional (TV ads, billboards, radio broadcasts, flyers, and leaflets) to participatory (community discussions, workshops, and theatre plays) and digital forms of communication (social media posts, YouTube videos, and text messages). This shift has reduced costs, allowed precise targeting of younger audiences, and facilitated direct communication between organisers and stakeholders.

- **Effectiveness of the campaigns:** The effectiveness of migration information campaigns is a contentious issue. Defining and measuring their success is challenging due to the complex nature of migration decisions, which depend on multiple factors. Some campaigns claim even a small decrease in migration as a success, but critics argue that they serve a symbolic purpose for governments. Studies show that establishing a clear link between campaigns and behavioural changes among migrants is difficult, and the quality of evaluation processes has been questioned.

Since the improvement of the general security conditions in the country, migration information campaigns have been employed also in Iraq to prevent migrants from leaving their homes or share information about legal alternatives and risks related to irregular migration. The first campaigns often contain a deterrent message that aim at dissuading potential migrants from embarking on a migration journey towards Europe. These campaigns, often accompanied by stricter policy measures, are often financed and implemented by governmental institutions in western countries, with the aim of preventing migrants from reaching their territories and applying for asylum.

However, in recent years, international organisations and private companies have also participated in creating informative campaigns to educate migrants about migration risks and legal paths. These campaigns have conveyed both positive and negative messages, employed well-trained local counsellors, and contributed to raising awareness and knowledge about migration. Overall, migration information campaigns vary in their approaches and outcomes, with their effectiveness remaining a topic of debate.

In recent years, the MRC in Iraq has conducted several information campaigns, including SMS, outreach events, and social media activities, reaching around 4.5 million people. These campaigns provided accurate information on the dangers of irregular migration and legal migration pathways, aiming to raise awareness among potential migrants. Overall, the MRC campaigns have been effective in increasing awareness of risks related to irregular migration and knowledge on safer and legal migration options among potential migrants; yet, their impact on migration intentions remains nuanced and complex.

The role of returnees and IDPs in the migration decision-making process

To increase the trustworthiness of the message and the effectiveness of the campaign, migration information campaigns have increasingly relied on local celebrities and employed emotional messages. Information provided by family and friends is considered trustworthy by those interested in migration but is often unreliable and incorrect, while that provided by international organisations and national authorities is considered biased and therefore mistrusted. However, research has shown that the fame of the messenger and the emotional feature of the message do not necessarily increase the trustworthiness and effectiveness of the campaign. For this reasons, new strategies, such as the *Migrants as Messengers* approach, have been implemented to increase the credibility of the message and the impact of the campaign. The main characteristics of this strategy are summarised below:

- **Trustworthiness of information channels:** While family, friends, and smugglers are often unreliable when sharing information on migration journeys and risks, returnees can provide trusted information, provided that (1) they are known and credible within their community, (2) their migration journey is

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[282] Hahn-Schaur, *Awareness Raising and Information Campaigns on the Risks of Irregular Migration from Pakistan: Background Report*.

not perceived as a failure, and (3) their emotional message can have a large impact on risk perception and awareness.

- **Effectiveness of peer-to-peer campaigns:** Using returned migrants as messengers can impact migrants' awareness of migration risks and intentions to migrate irregularly. However, it may have limited effects on legal context knowledge and perception of the journey.

- **Challenges in engaging returnees:** Not all returnees are suitable messengers, as some may face stigmatization or difficulties in re-integration. Ethnic and religious divisions should also be considered when engaging returnees, and their motivation, influence, knowledge, and communication skills need to be assessed before participation.

Taking into consideration the complex migration patterns within and from Iraq as well as the results of the review on migration information campaigns, the report concludes by sharing some potential next steps that might contribute to designing and implementing more successful campaigns in the country.

- **Clear and achievable objective:** Setting a clear and measurable objective, together with a prior mutual agreement on the definition of 'success' among donors, policymakers, implementing agencies, and researchers, is essential for the successful impact of the campaign.

- **Explicit definition and involvement of the target group:** Although the definition of 'potential irregular migrants' is blurred, the campaign should nevertheless aim at identifying as precisely as possible the category of people that could correspond to it. The identification and engagement of the target group should consider the dynamic and evolving nature of potential irregular migrants, and the involvement of the community can help understand patterns and decision-making processes.

- **Relevant and credible message:** The campaign message should be understandable, relevant, credible, and actionable, aligned with the campaign's objective and responsive to the target group's specific needs. Emotional and subjective elements are essential, as mere objective facts may not lead to behavioural change.

Whereas deterrent messages often fail to stop migration movements, even information campaigns highlighting the risks of irregular migration might have limited effects when people face dire conditions at home. Providing information about regular work opportunities, scholarships, and visas is essential, but it is equally crucial to establish legal migration channels and address root causes like poverty, inequality, conflict, and unemployment through development projects and continuous cooperation with local governments.

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