Reframing Social Fragility In Areas Of Protracted Displacement And Emerging Return In Iraq

A GUIDE FOR PROGRAMMING

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Cover Image: Kirkuk, Iraq, June 2016, Fragments in Kirkuk Citadel.  
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research provides an evidence-based understanding of social fragility at the micro-level within areas of protracted displacement and emerging return in Iraq, as pertains to social relationships, specifically examining people’s perceptions about the elements that divide or bring them together within their communities and the historical factors that have created or worsened these dynamics. Data generated regarding these dynamics and the tools developed to capture them are used to propose a reframing of the design and implementation of programming oriented around social cohesion to support broader scale stabilization, development, and peacebuilding efforts.

The need for this more in-depth and nuanced insight comes from a recognition that the nature of Iraq’s current conflict, coupled with the political and economic crises facing the country and longstanding historical grievances based on tribal, ethnic, religious and political identities, has the potential to further exacerbate existing social divisions and incite new ones, perpetuating localized fragility which in turn weakens social cohesion. The rational for evaluating fragility, then, is to determine how prepared particular communities are to withstand shocks, such as the arrival of a newly displaced population or the return of those previously displaced, that may disrupt existing, localized socio-economic fabrics, especially if accompanied by ethnic and/or religious diversity that may bring historical grievances to the fore. The result of fragility is not violence per se, but rather a setting in which violence is more likely if no intervention is put forward aimed at (re)constituting not just services and material support but relationships within and between groups, and groups and the state as well. While Iraq overall can be and is designated as a fragile country, it is still possible to identify pockets of extreme fragility as well as those of relative stability in the country. Understanding what drives this extreme fragility (and likewise stability) and where geographically these pockets exist, helps in laying the basis for more targeted, effective social cohesion-oriented programming to prevent communities on the brink from spiraling out of control and to continue to build bridges within communities that are more stable.

In developing this approach, Social Inquiry together with the International Organization for Migration’s (IOM) Community Revitalization Program (CRP), first explored the following indicators and determinants of local fragility, including demographic history and diversity, governance and security, past development neglect, lack of livelihoods, human rights violations, and community mobilization. From this, we further empirically assessed these through implementing a qualitative assessment to capture community-level perceptions of social
dynamics and these dynamics in historical context, adapted for host community members, non-camp internally displaced persons (IDPs), returning IDPs, and stayee populations, as appropriate. We carried out a total of 123 semi-structured interviews in specific neighborhoods in the following governorates:

- Sulaimaniya Governorate, a context of protracted displacement with a relatively homogeneous host community (in terms of ethno-religious groups), accommodating displaced persons from different groups.
- Kirkuk Governorate, a context of protracted displacement and stabilization with a heterogeneous host community accommodating a heterogeneous displaced population, in addition to being a pre-conflict disputed territory between different ethno-religious groups.
- Nineveh Governorate, a context of emerging return and stabilization with the presence of different ethno-religious groups either as stayees, IDPs, or returning IDPs and fluctuating population movement as more areas become safe to return to and military operations to retake Mosul, its largest city, are underway.

**Summary Findings**

Analyzing this qualitative data, carried out over June and July 2016, highlighted the following major themes that resonated across the three governorates of interest in relation to social cohesion and fragility:

- One consistent theme that emerged with respect to areas containing high numbers of IDPs particularly in Sulaimaniya and Kirkuk governorates is that they are calm, quiet, safe, and secure. Residents, host and IDP, also noted these areas’ relatively decent public services and infrastructure. Comparatively good living conditions notwithstanding, host community members across Sulaimaniya and Kirkuk subdistricts noted the economic strain of having such a high influx of IDPs in their neighborhoods coupled with the general fiscal crisis in Iraq and Kurdistan, particularly in relation to rent costs and employment. This is in contrast to the rural areas of Nineveh Governorate targeted for the assessment, where the brunt of violent conflict and insecurity has depleted already underdeveloped areas. Both returning IDPs and IDPs there reported drastic improvements in security which has encouraged them to remain in spite of poor services and lack of employment. That being said, interviewees reported interactions at surface level between different population groups as generally positive.

- Probing responses of interviewees living in contexts of protracted displacement and emerging return however revealed that host and returning communities have rather mixed
feelings toward those displaced into or out of their communities and relations are superficial at best. Sunni Arab IDPs, for instance, are seen and see themselves as guests perhaps explaining the support they receive from their hosts, but also suggesting their perceived impermanence as members of their new communities. Host community members also indicated their desire for IDPs to eventually return to their places of origin. This, coupled with language barriers in more predominantly Kurdish speaking host communities, contributed to their hesitation in engaging in greater cross-group interaction and community problem solving.

- A rural-urban divide was also identified in the urban areas of Sulaimaniya and, especially, in Kirkuk, as many of the IDPs interviewed come from rural areas in Anbar, Nineveh, and Kirkuk governorates. The more communal traditions of IDPs from these areas did not find very good fit in the cities due to the fact that the urban host community in general does not rely on tribal identification and codes of conduct as much as rural IDPs do. As a consequence, IDPs tended to find community with each other and in so doing, in some cases, further entrenched ethnic enclaves in already segregated neighborhoods. Thus, IDP and host community groups seem to be living in parallel, a situation that may not be sustainable as this displacement continues to protract. The town of Altun Kupri, outside of Kirkuk city, provides a counterpoint to this trend in that IDPs there reported more ease in integration. Owing to the town’s long history of establishment and its existing integrated nature, where Sunni Turkmen and Sunni Kurds live more or less side-by-side, host residents already have a touchstone for peaceful coexistence that has lasted over multiple upheavals and were perceived as being more open to newcomers who are different from them.

- Conflict and displacement are not the only factors at play in contributing to the feelings of isolation reported, even among more tribal communities in this sample. Many interviewees noted that society and way of life are changing in general and have been for a long time toward a more atomized society even within tightly knit groups. This atomization of family relations may help to break insularity and even spur more individual and critical thinking, particularly given greater access to outside societies through technology. It also has the capacity to further subdivide groups and entrench even more difference. Both sides of this can be seen in Iraq.

- A further entrenchment of difference can also be seen clearly in individuals’ responses related to their histories and legacies of abuse and victimization. Nearly all Kurds interviewed indicated that they themselves or their families had experienced force displacement (and return) at least once before and this shared narrative links individual
members of local host and IDP communities to the broader Kurdish community in the country. As such, they unanimously and proudly call themselves Kurds when asked, often before other identifiers. This nationalism takes particular relevance now given the Kurdistan Regional Government’s narrative around state-building and independence. More tightly held group identities related to past victimization as well as emerging demands toward nationalism and/or autonomy was also seen among the Turkmen, Yazidis, and Christians interviewed too, though they represent smaller numbers within our data.

• The Sunni Arabs interviewed, in particular IDPs and returning IDPs, on the other hand, struggled with how to define their identities. Many called themselves “strangers” in their new communities and in Iraq more generally. Constrained freedom of movement is one factor contributing to this seeming otherness as a number of IDPs reported having difficulty leaving their current communities to reach other parts of Iraq and Kurdistan. The feeling of being monitored in displacement and return, coupled with historic and recent anti-Sunni violence in their places of origin, give some interviewees the sense that they are considered “worthless.” It also perhaps points to a lack of acknowledgement of the particular difficulties the group overall has faced, as victims of violence and conflict as well.

• Not only identifying as victims but having that victimization acknowledged seems to be critically important for all population groups in our sample—Arabs, Kurds, Yazidis, Christians, and Turkmen alike. Some groups, like the Kurds and Yazidis were able to lay claim to this victimhood more directly in interviews. Many Kurds interviewed compared the current waves of displacement to their own taking place in the 1980s and 1990s, pointing out they suffered significantly more, without much in the way of humanitarian assistance. Sunni Arabs were more circumspect in regard to the abuses they suffered, perhaps owing to the alienation of being perceived to be connected to the previous regime and its Arab nationalism, Al-Qaeda, and now ISIS by virtue of ethno-religious affiliation. That being said, they do not make much mention of what other groups have gone through as a result of these entities. This omission of recognition on all sides is simply not possible in areas of return however, given the much closer proximity of the conflict and the fact that some members of the Sunni Arab population there were deeply involved in violence and abuse, while others were themselves victims of it. Making the distinction between victims and perpetrators (and the fact that some perpetrators themselves are also victims and vice versa) will be necessary particularly as more areas open up for return. The focus on one’s own group’s suffering is understandable and recognition is critical, but the consistent comparing of one suffering over another, stemming from perceptions of inequity and invisibility, only serves to obscure the commonalities inherent in various groups’ narratives.
Finding points of connection in these narratives could further serve to open deeper and more meaningful interaction, if they were to take place.

- Regarding the complexity of returns, the majority of host community members view IDP presence in their neighborhoods as temporary and wish for their return to their places of origin, for both altruistic reasons and because they do not wish them to become a more permanent part of their neighborhoods. IDP feelings on return are less straightforward with many longing to go back, but under the condition of guaranteed security including the removal of Shia militias from their areas of origin—this is a claim made by both Sunni Arab and Kurd IDPs whose areas are controlled by militias. Other IDPs however do seek to remain where they are now and integrate into their current neighborhoods.

- Further complicating decisions on returning or not is the fact that while it will be necessary to recognize that those who stayed under ISIS control were not all supporters and that some were victims, it is impossible to deny the experiences of those particularly targeted by ISIS and their feelings now. Within our sample, there was a lot of uncertainty as to what would happen in Nineveh, but also clear statements of wanting separation or at least not wanting to deal with those still displaced coming back yet, with the assumption that most fled with ISIS. What is interesting and troubling to note is the further encroaching sectarianism, between Sunni Kurds and Shia Arabs and Sunni and Shia Turkmen, which was not particularly prominent prior to this crisis.

- Finally, one area where there was consensus across all groups related to when they were most comfortable and happy in Iraq. Despite the violent repression, persecution, and development neglect of the previous regime, pre-2003 Iraq was the period recalled with if not fondness per se, then at least some nostalgia. It seems perhaps what is most missed is a sense of prosperity and material comfort, some form of national unity, protection, and predictability, even with respect to violence and bad policy. All respondents blame the government (both in Iraq and Kurdistan) for the economic crisis, corruption, lack of aid and violent sectarianism. At the same time, the majority of people felt that only God and, short of that, the government could change things for the better. That people want to end current state of affairs for the better, but feel that change cannot come from them, indicates a loss or lack of agency and absence of hope in society.

**Social Cohesion Programming and Recommendations**

The following are key considerations to take into account when designing either stand-alone social cohesion programming or mainstreaming social cohesion into other work including
livelihoods and infrastructure revitalization in particularly fragile areas of protracted displacement and emerging return. The central component of these interventions, and one of the most effective ways to reduce prejudice and break down divisions between groups in a neighborhood, is to foster meaningful and sustained interpersonal contact:

- **Taking sides and perceived fairness of intervention.** Understanding the perception of programming by all the communities in a target area is critical, especially in areas of return. It must be taken into account that not all displaced families can or want to return, even if areas are cleared of armed opposition and, as we are seeing here, the rationale for this is not purely economic, but relates to historical grievances, identity, politics, and security. In addition, it is difficult to conduct social cohesion-framed work predicated on interpersonal contact when one group is ostensibly banned from coming back. Furthermore, if particularly victimized groups are not ready to live together again, it should not be the place of impartial organizations to force such reintegration especially right now. Programming in this regard needs to take a different tact, focused on understanding needs related to victimization and justice on all sides, preventing revenge, and working toward building understanding of other groups. Any planned intervention must also be accepting of the fact that returning to the status quo ante may be impossible in practical terms and not a solution in rights-based terms.

- **Language barriers, non-verbal communication, and sharing narratives.** One of the biggest obstacles for interaction within the communities we examined, especially in Kurdish majority areas, is the lack of formal opportunities to learn the host community language. Providing this is one step toward trust-building and good faith between the IDPs and host communities, especially as it helps the former to impart to the host community that they are trying to become a part of the local society and incorporate into customs, not override them, particularly in areas where demographic change brings fear. This may help in beginning to build trust enough to open spaces for dialogue and sharing of experiences. Such a process seems critical, in that individuals interviewed did not feel like their personal or group suffering was acknowledged or that they shared a common narrative with others. At the same time, because words often fail to convey all the nuance and complexity of emotion, such expressions need not however be solely verbal. Arts-based forms of storytelling, including participatory theatre, are potentially useful means for addressing the need for self-articulated, personal, and shared narratives, opening space for people to collectively share their stories and create meaning about what happened in the community, together.
• **Agency and mobilization.** Fostering collective agency may help to counter the generalized sense of despair and hopelessness about a very uncertain future that many interviewees in this study expressed. While people may not know how to bring peace to the whole of Iraq, they may certainly have ideas on how to improve relationships in their neighborhoods and this is a place to start. Furthermore, it is critical to positive social cohesion that people work together to find this collective agency, to understand their common interests and combined skills to solve the issues they face. Interventions then must be goal-oriented, serve a purpose that is agreed upon by the community, and carried out together by members of the different groups in the community. This fosters both community engagement and individual sense of accomplishment. Such thinking and design should be incorporated into livelihoods and infrastructure programming.

• **Focus on youth while paying heed to inter-generational dynamics.** Our findings indicate that while youth are more likely to be welcoming of change in their communities, they are also more inclined to hold very hardline, divisive views against the “others” when opportunities for their own lives seem limited. Thus, it is critical that youth are involved in goal-oriented interventions and that they can take on leadership roles, from livelihoods work to conflict mediation to education to civic activism. This kind of engagement though can cause major shifts in inter-generational dynamics, particularly in tribal and hierarchical societies. While these shifts are already occurring in Iraq, they are not necessarily all welcome. It is therefore critical to ensure that while empowering youth, programming does not stoke greater inter-generational conflict.

• **Integrated spaces.** Encouraging integrated use of public space through programming can further help in breaking up enclaves and allowing individuals and groups to feel more comfortable throughout their neighborhoods, fostering more connection and interaction. This is important particularly as host communities seem to favor secluding IDPs into separate camps to prevent any interaction. Another key consideration to make in the reconstruction of areas destroyed by conflict is that the physical design of a neighborhood itself and the rebuilding of public facilities can contribute to its susceptibility to peacebuilding efforts. Understanding which infrastructure (or lack of it) is the source of tension and facilitating programming on that rather than necessarily first focusing on that which is most badly damaged would also serve to foster dialogue and build relations between groups.

• **Staff training on social cohesion approaches and reducing burnout.** Staff efforts to engage in difficult conversations and deal with uncomfortable truths revealed in communities can
be both physically and emotionally challenging. This is particularly true for staff who come from these communities and have their own narratives and experiences of such issues. Conflict- and cultural-sensitivity is imperative. Safe space must be given for staff to reflect together on their own biases and perceptions.

- **Cohesion takes time and connects across all levels of society.** Work related to human psychology and behavior change is not fast. It takes time and needs it as the basis for changing perceptions and actions is repeated, consistent and sustained meaningful interaction with members of different groups. It also requires longer-term engagement so structures developed during project implementation are able to exist and keep functioning after the end-date of the initial work. Criteria should be in place to allow for some projects to continue in areas where there is most need and where improvements are taking place, to build on and deepen the work to eventually stand on its own. Furthermore, for any grassroots and localized changes to sustain, local and national authorities must also play a part in developing strategies that address the needs and concerns of all victims on the ground. Social cohesion focused programming can help pave the way for greater and inclusive interaction between citizens and the state.
1. INTRODUCTION

Iraq is once again at the precipice of widespread social upheaval and restructuring. This is not an exaggeration when considering: 1) the over 3.1 million people internally displaced across the country over the last two years as a result of ISIS and the military operations to remove their hold on land; 2) the panoply of military forces and armed groups involved in these operations – each with their own political and related ethno-religious agendas; and 3) the growing disputes over already contested territories in the country as a result of this fighting, new waves of human rights violations, and mass movement of people. And this is to say nothing of growing public discontent toward the government in general in relation to corruption and a faltering political and economic landscape. The nature of this conflict then coupled with the political and economic crises facing the country and longstanding historical grievances based on tribal, ethnic, religious, and political identities, has the potential to further exacerbate existing social tensions/divisions and incite new ones, perpetuating localized fragility which in turn weakens social cohesion.

It is this confluence of livelihoods concerns, historical neglect, demographic shifts, and community factors that determine the level of fragility and, in turn, social cohesion of Iraq in general and its individual communities specifically. In other words, they help predict how prepared communities are to withstand shocks such as the arrival of a newly displaced population or the return of those previously displaced that may disrupt existing, localized socio-economic fabrics, especially if accompanied by ethnic and/or religious diversity that may bring historical grievances to the fore. The result is not violence per se, but a setting in which violence is more likely if no intervention is put forward aimed at (re)constituting not just services and material support but relationships within and between groups, and groups and the state as well.

Thus, while anecdotal evidence of rising existent and new tensions is becoming increasingly apparent in areas of protracted displacement as well as in areas of emerging return, more clear, rigorous understanding of these dynamics at the micro-level, particularly as pertains to social relationships, is necessary to better shape policies and programming in these contexts. What is lacking relates specifically to people’s perceptions about the elements that divide or bring them together and the historical factors that have created or worsened relationships.

Understanding these dynamics and the tools to capture them are critical in effectively designing and carrying out interventions aimed at laying the basis for broader scale
stabilization, development, and peacebuilding efforts. This is at the heart of the International Organization for Migration’s (IOM) Community Revitalization Program (CRP). As the program moves into its sixth iteration in Iraq, which will include more social cohesion components in it, IOM sought to gain greater insight into how best to approach and target programming in this regard to continue its efforts in preventing at-risk communities from falling into cycles of seemingly intractable violence and armed conflict. As such, Social Inquiry carried out a desk review to develop a more nuanced framework for exploring social cohesion at the neighborhood level and, from this, designed a qualitative assessment to capture community-level perceptions of this cohesion. For this, we identified those factors which drive fragility in this conflict-prone context and built a set of questions focused on perceptions, interactions and history, adapted to whether targeting host community members, non-camp internally displaced persons (IDPs), returning IDPs, and stayee populations. We then carried out a total of 123 semi-structured interviews in specific neighborhoods in Sulaimaniya, Kirkuk, and Nineveh governorates based on these population groups, taking into account gender and ethno-religious diversity as well.

What we found is that a number of factors are at play when understanding fragility and cohesion in terms of relationships within and between groups and between groups and the state. These include demographic history and diversity, governance and security, past development neglect, lack of livelihoods, human rights violations, and community mobilization. In asking questions related to these six vectors, we discovered a number of common themes across communities and population groups in Iraq. Population groups, despite living in close proximity in cities, towns, and villages tend to lead parallel lives with little meaningful interaction. This disconnect is part of a larger trend toward loosening relationships given increasing movement toward urbanization. But history and identity also play a significant role: legacies of unacknowledged and unredressed human rights violations have left behind a perception of identity based on victimization and comparison of suffering, with Sunni Arabs in a precarious position with regard to how they describe themselves and their current plight. This in turn adds to the complexity of any returns process and heightens the despair nearly all interview subjects felt about an uncertain and unpredictable future.

Taking these dynamics into account, those endeavoring social cohesion related programming in areas of protracted displacement and emerging return should keep in mind the perceived fairness of their interventions, the importance of allowing people to share narratives, the need

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1 This is the first of two reports carried out under the auspices of the CRP. This one focuses on micro-level fragility and social cohesion to aid in program development. The second focuses on these issues at the macro-level providing policy insight toward rights-based and justice sensitive stabilization in areas retaken from ISIS.
to build agency and mobilize people around goal-oriented actions, the continued focus on youth paying heed to inter-generational dynamics, the creation of integrated public spaces for interaction, the necessity for ongoing staff training and reflection, and the fact that social cohesion takes time. Furthermore, it is imperative that for any grassroots and localized changes to prevail, local and national authorities must also play a part in developing strategies that address the needs and concerns of all victims on the ground.

We will explore the theoretical underpinnings of establishing a more “social” and micro-level approach to fragility and cohesion, findings from our fieldwork, and considerations for best practices in greater detail in the sections below.
2. REFRAMING COMMUNITY REVITALIZATION

2.1. Putting the “social” back into social fragility and cohesion

While there is no set definition of “fragility” in the context of nation-states, in World Bank parlance, it refers to “periods when states or institutions lack the capacity, accountability, or legitimacy to mediate relations between citizen groups and between citizens and the state, making them vulnerable to violence” (World Bank 2011, xvi). What is striking about this description, as opposed to others which focus on, among others, service provision, legitimacy, or accountability to the international community, is its rightful identification of the state in mediating relationships, not just between itself and society, but between groups in society as well.

This subtle shift from defining fragility only in terms of state institutions and instead to relationships as well, points to a growing understanding that “a state’s fragility is also a function of the strength of civil society and the extensiveness of social capital” (OECD, 2011, 14). In other words, the state is not the only actor and may not even be the most powerful actor in staunching fragility (Marc et al., 2013). Furthermore, shifting focus from solely the functioning of state institutions to the range of social relationships existent in society highlights the evolving, not always linear nature of fragility and tensions in a given context (Marc et al., 2013). These dynamics, which influence and are influenced by state functioning writ-large, are not exclusively pegged to them and as such can change the level of fragility, up or down, at the community-level. This helps explain so-called pockets of fragility in contexts where state institutions are relatively strong and pockets of stability in areas where state institutions are weak (Dubois, Huyghebaert, & Brouillet, 2010; Carpenter, 2015).

Given the current, ongoing conflict and violence in Iraq, the ensuing forced migration and its struggling economy and weak institutions, the country is fragile across any description of the term and was listed as such in OECD’s 2015 States of Fragility List. But, what does this mean in practice for everyday citizens, navigating their communities amidst such upheaval? Answering this means unpacking the numerous and intersecting relationships that bind members of one group to each other, groups to one another, and groups to the state –and the factors that may pull them apart. Roughly speaking this means exploring social cohesion as a central component in not only understanding but reducing fragility as well.

Here we take social cohesion to mean a confluence of social inclusion, social capital, and social mobility (OECD, 2011). This framing of social cohesion recognizes that it involves, on the one
hand, social connectedness in different life domains, such as political, socio-economic and socio-cultural spheres. And on the other, covers subjective representations (perception) as well as behavioral outcomes (involvement) (UNDP-UNHCR Joint Secretariat, 2015). Furthermore, it implies a convergence across groups in a society, offering a “measure of predictability to interactions across people and groups, which in turn provides incentives for collection action” (Marc et al., 2013, 15), even if it cannot guarantee that all groups agree on all issues. In this sense, the cohesion we seek enables peaceful contestation, voice, respect for cultural difference, and broadly speaking builds the freedom of both individuals and groups (Norton & de Haan, 2013).

Moving toward this elastic and more fluid ideal is fraught with difficulty, to say the least. Evidence suggests that perceived injustice between groups, for example, weakens social cohesion from the outset and influences beliefs around equity and fairness and what constitutes them (World Vision International, 2015). Historical events that have caused trauma in particular seem to have an important effect on perceptions of injustice and can harden distinctions between groups, furthering division (Marc et al, 2013). Related to this, already rigid relationships (and social identities) may hinder the capacity of societies to maintain social cohesion under conditions of rapid change (such as displacement and return), challenging gender roles, relationships between generations, and the basis of social membership (Norton & de Haan, 2013).

Thus, positing fragility and social cohesion in these all too human terms, and in a context as complex as Iraq, demands a much more nuanced set of policy and practice measures that go beyond reconstituting services and material support and instead seek to repair the social fabric in which groups are embedded. This work requires an understanding not just of the “what” but the “why” of social interaction and perception in the midst of such turmoil.
2.2. The case for micro-level criteria for macro-level policy

Given the above framing, we are operating under the hypothesis that, at the neighborhood level, social dynamics in terms of divisions and connections among and between groups are influenced by identity and historical factors, and that these factors must be taken into account in greater detail, layered on top of more proximate causes of tensions, related to access to services, security and livelihoods (World Vision International, 2015). The evidence-base for these proximate and underlying factors as relates to Iraq is as follows:

• Demographic history and diversity

Several major waves of displacement have taken place in Iraq in its modern history, forcing neighborhoods and communities to reconfigure themselves on an ongoing basis and, as such, need to be taken into account when examining social connections in communities. These waves are not only due to voluntary migration (usually from poor rural areas to the urban centers), but also as a result of major waves of state-sponsored (pre-2003) and conflict-related (2006-2007) forced displacement. Before this newest wave of population movement began in 2014, it was estimated that there were already 2.8 million Iraqis already internally displaced, of which 1.5 million were displaced between 2006 and 2007 (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2011). The cities of Baghdad, Mosul, and Ba’quba absorbed the greatest number of IDPs prior to the most recent crisis. In 5 of the 10 districts in Baghdad Governorate, for instance, between 20% and 30% of heads of households were born in a different governorate or country than where they currently lived as a result of displacement (Iraq Household Socio-Economic Survey, 2012). In some subdistricts such as Al-Wihda, south-east of the capital, this number goes up to 44%. On the other end of the spectrum, all but one district in Sulaimaniya Governorate had immigration rates below 5%, which points to a very long-standing, unchanged society.

The social impacts of this level of displacement overall plays itself out in a number of ways. Historical experience in the country shows that host communities formed by a diverse mix of ethno-religious and tribal groups which were forcibly put together, exhibit low social cohesion at the micro-level. Anderson & Stansfield (2009), for instance, in researching the ethno-politics of Kirkuk Governorate (home to Sunni Kurds, Sunni and Shia Arabs, Sunni and Shia Turkmen, Christians, and other minorities) over the previous half of the century, found that this diversity linked as it was to heavy demographic engineering by the state, is at the core of the disputes and violence in cities and towns located there. Furthermore, communities or neighborhoods
with a long history of heavy displacement tend to show a frayed social fabric as inter-personal links remain weak and surrounded by tensions (Marc et al., 2013; Carpenter, 2015; Desmond, 2016). Those communities with a history of homogeneity and stable population movements, on the other hand, tend to have strong cohesion, making it difficult for the newly displaced to integrate (Norton & de Haan, 2013).

**Governance and security**

Social fabric is strongly influenced by people’s feeling of living in a secure and equitable environment that allows them to carry out daily activities as well as fulfill individual and/or collective aspirations (World Bank, 2011). Corruption, bad governance and insecurity undermine this trust and the shared values that make a society work (USIP, 2010). Public dissatisfaction with corrupt leaders and with power structures perceived to be illegitimate, for instance, served as catalysts for change across the Middle East (Hiltermann, 2016; Transparency International, 2016). In Iraq in particular, by 2011, the average overall public confidence ranking of governorate and national authorities stood at 62%, but varied greatly at the local level (Iraq Knowledge Network Survey, 2011). The population in several of the Sunni Arab majority districts on the western side of the country, including Rutba, Ramadi, Heet, Fallujah, Ana, Samarra, Daur, Tikrit, Balad, and Baiji, ranked their confidence in national and governorate authorities significantly below 50% and it is these areas that saw a raise in armed opposition groups to the government from this period to present, including ISIS. Discredit of local leaders was—and still is—also pervasive in some districts in Shia-majority governorates as well, especially within Baghdad Governorate in the areas of Tarmiya, Sadr City 2, Kadimiya, Adamiya, and Sunni-majority Abu Ghraib. Related to this erosion of public trust and confidence in authorities, is the weakening security situation in specific areas of the country since regime change in 2003. The areas with lowest confidence in authorities also had 50% of their populations dissatisfied with levels of local security (Iraq Household Socio-Economic Survey, 2012). These areas included the districts of Hawija (Kirkuk Governorate); Fallujah and Rutba (Anbar Governorate); Adhamia and Abu Ghraib (Baghdad Governorate); and Tooz Khormatu, Samarra, and Shirqat (Salahaddin Governorate), nearly all of which were eventually taken by ISIS or experienced violence related to this group. For the remainder of Iraqi districts, dissatisfaction in local level of security did not surpass 10% (Iraq Household Socio-Economic Survey, 2012).

**Past development neglect**

Historical development neglect in terms of economic and public services infrastructure as compared to other communities, also contributes to driving tensions in a community facing social change, particularly when this neglect was part of a purposeful marginalization policy
by the state. Social exclusion in these instances then is intimately linked to fragility in the form of structural discrimination and systemic restriction of basic services and goods to specific groups (Overseas Development Institute, 2012). Many areas in Iraq fall into this category having been neglected often for political and identity-based motives, which in turn engenders a sense of alienation with respect to being part of the wider society in the country. For instance, the Kurdistan Region, Nineveh Governorate and most of the southern governorates lag behind the rest of the country in terms of the educational endowment of working age adults as a result of decades-long state policies significantly restricting their endowment of educational services (World Bank, 2014).

- **Lack of livelihoods**

Communities under economic stress, where a significant segment of its members are deprived of access to livelihoods or adequate levels of well-being, are more prone to show tensions and divisions, especially with the arrival of new populations seeking shelter or economic opportunities (OECD, 2011). In addition, evidence for Iraq shows a high correlation between the arrival of IDPs, loss of livelihoods, and an increase of negative inter-community perceptions (UNDP, 2015a). A particular segment of the population vulnerable to these dynamics is youth, who may feel driven to join violent protest movements or militias, or even emigrate, upon living amidst a fragile environment (Fantappie, 2016). The average unemployment and underemployment rate among male youth between the ages of 16 to 29 in Iraq was 26% in 2012 with significant variation across governorates (Iraq Household Socio-Economic Survey, 2012). While Sulaimaniya had the lowest rate, with 7%, all southern governorates presented a rate between 40% and 50%. In Baghdad city, as well, rates were largely above the country average.

- **Human rights violations**

The link between fragility and human rights violations appear when state institutions lack the political will and/or capacity to safeguard the security and rights of their populations and in many cases institute policies geared toward curtailing both, either across the population or toward specific groups. These violations are strongly associated with, and in some cases generated by, entrenched insecurity and the persistence of poverty and exclusion in a territory (Thomas & Ron, 2007). Iraq certainly fits this profile with a legacy of gross human rights violations that span population groups and were perpetrated not only by the previous regime but subsequent governments and non-state armed groups as well. These abuses perpetrated by one group against another, be it the state toward specific communities or between ethno-religious groups or some combination thereof, are at the core of historical grievances in the country and underpin many of the other factors presented here. Such grievances affect large swaths of the population and play a significant role in the construction of communal identities.
which are passed down through generations, particularly as they have been often unacknowledged and remain unredressed (International Center for Transitional Justice & Human Rights Center at University of California, Berkeley, 2004). This legacy hinders the capacity of different communities to co-exist, share narratives, resources, and public space in the country in spite of its diversity.

- **Community mobilization**

Positive civic engagement, mobilization or activism within a community is frequently correlated with a higher capacity to face social change peacefully (Marc et al., 2013). Undertaking such actions in a non-violent manner are shaped simultaneously by trust between community members, across groups, between groups and the state as well as the agency people feel to affect change in their communities. Erosion of this trust stemming from a legacy of mass, violent repression of civil rights coupled with social dynamics described above are drivers of low agency and poorly coordinated social action in a number of contexts (de Greiff, 2009). These factors also help to explain why approximately 49% of the Iraqi population has reported that they would never participate in a public political discussion, attend a demonstration, or contact a politician (Iraq Knowledge Network Survey, 2011). Some areas, including several districts in Nineveh, Kirkuk, and Salahaddin governorates, had even higher rates of civic non-participation.

Understanding in greater detail the interplay of these vectors at the community level lays the basis for more effective stand-alone and cross-cutting social cohesion-oriented programming in fragile communities –ones where violence may or may not have erupted, but divisions and hostilities remain high due in part to perceived unfairness or inequity in treatment of one group over another.

What these social relationships are (and are perceived to be) and how they operate at the micro-level can help in understanding: 1) which specific geographical areas or communities in a given context are at risk for increased tensions and/or violence, 2) what actions would be necessary to prevent any spiral into conflict in these areas, and 3) how society operates overall through a more nuanced lens, establishing the foundations for broader level policy interventions that aid in the peaceful navigation of social change. By seeking to understand in more detail and develop tools to capture the more socially-oriented aspects of cohesion (i.e., social capital) at the neighborhood level, examining current and past experiences while also exploring future aspirations, we can then use micro-level data to inform longer-term and more macro-level strategies for stabilization and conflict transformation. This effort positions social cohesion-
focused programming as a crucial prevention and/or adaptation mechanism, ensuring that neighborhoods do not deteriorate physically, economically, socially, and/or psychologically due to displacement, return, and internecine rivalries. And that instead, programming can seek to ease horizontal tensions between groups at the community-level, making them more able to collectively work toward addressing vertical tensions at a more macro-level.
3. FIELDWORK

3.1. Methodology

To further empirically assess the framework developed above, we carried out qualitative fieldwork in 9 neighborhoods in total in Sulaimaniya, Kirkuk, and Nineveh governorates, in conjunction with IOM’s enumeration teams and the Rapid Assessment Response Team (RART) over the course of June and July 2016. These governorates represent three different typologies of social dynamics within the current conflict in Iraq, in particular:

- Sulaimaniya is a context of protracted displacement with a relatively homogenous host community (in terms of ethno-religious groups), accommodating displaced persons from different groups.
- Kirkuk is a context of protracted displacement and stabilization with a heterogeneous host community accommodating a heterogeneous displaced population, in addition to being a pre-conflict disputed territory between different ethno-religious groups.
- Nineveh is a context of emerging stabilization with the presence of different ethno-religious groups either as stayees, IDPs, or returning IDPs and fluctuating population movement as more areas become safe to return to and military operations to retake Mosul, its largest city, are underway.

We sought to carry out semi-structured interviews with individuals representing host community members, IDPs, and returning IDPs, as appropriate, in three targeted neighborhoods/areas in each governorate under consideration, taking into account ethno-religious diversity within each. We sought to carry out 7 individual interviews for each population group in Sulaimaniya and Kirkuk and four individual interviews each in Nineveh given time and accessibility constraints, where possible. Interviewees were selected based on occupation segments (Table 1), making sure where possible that socio-economic status, education level, gender, and age were representative across entire set of interviews conducted for each population group over the three neighborhoods in each governorate.

\[\text{2 These constraints included limits on hours to approach Muslim interview subjects due to Ramadan, enumerator and RART staff scheduling as multiple research projects were taking place in close succession, and whether members of the relevant population and identity groups were still in communities and felt comfortable speaking on these issues.}\]
Table 1. Segments of society covered in the household interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OCCUPATION SEGMENT</th>
<th>SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS</th>
<th>EDUCATION LEVELS</th>
<th>AGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Small Business owner</td>
<td>High-income level</td>
<td>University graduate</td>
<td>Below age of 35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government employee*</td>
<td>Medium-income level</td>
<td>Basic education</td>
<td>Above age of 35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student*</td>
<td>Low-income level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed (and looking for job actively)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wage / Farmer laborer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retired / Elderly*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housewife (head of HH / non-head)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* For at least two of these three segments, female respondents were sought.

Target locations for the fieldwork were selected by combining data on social and economic indicators at subdistrict level, available in the Iraq Household Socio-Economic Survey of 2012, with data on the number of IDPs hosted at neighborhood level, as provided in IOM’s Displacement Tracking Matrix. Final selection was further refined with inputs from enumerators and RART staff regarding updated information on ethno-religious diversity in chosen areas, accessibility, and feasibility of reaching these areas given the limited time-frame available for data collection (Table 2).

Table 2. Distribution of interviews in targeted groups and communities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GOVERNORATE</th>
<th>NUMBER OF GROUPS</th>
<th>NUMBER OF INTERVIEWS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sulaimaniya</td>
<td>Said Sadiq: 7 interviews to host community (Sunni Kurds) and 7 interviews to IDPs (Sunni Arabs). Dukan: 7 interviews to host community (Sunni Kurds) and 7 interviews to IDPs (Sunni Arabs). Sulaimaniya City: 7 interviews to host community (Sunni Kurds) and 7 interviews to IDPs (Sunni Arabs).</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kirkuk</td>
<td>Panja Ali: 7 interviews to host community (Sunni Kurds) and 14 interviews to IDPs (7 Sunni Arabs and 7 Sunni Kurds). Hay Al-Jamiaa: 8 interviews to host community (Sunni Arabs) and 6 interviews to IDPs (Sunni Arabs). Altun Kupri: 6 interviews to host community (3 Sunni Turkmen and 3 Sunni Kurds) and 8 interviews to IDPs (Sunni Arabs).</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Nineveh Areas have returning IDPs, IDPs, and stayees of different ethno-religious groups. Some areas will be homogenous and others will consist of mixed groups.

Ayadiyah: 6 interviews to returning IDPs (Sunni Kurds), 2 interviews to stayees (Sunni Arabs), and 4 interviews to IDPs (Sunni Arabs).

Wana: 12 interviews to returning IDPs (4 Sunni Arabs, 4 Sunni Kurds, and 4 Shia Turkmen).

Al-Qosh and Bozan: 8 interviews to IDPs only (4 Christians and 4 Yezidi).

The interview guide contained between 10 and 15 open-ended questions and follow-up prompts, depending on population group and consisted of the following sections based on updated framing of fragility and cohesion:

- **Localized social dynamics**: The questions in this portion of the interview focused on obtaining information related to the description of the neighborhood where individuals are in, any changes noted in the neighborhood before, during, and after 2014, and neighborhood interactions. IDPs were also asked to compare and contrast their current location to their place of origin and returning IDPs to note any changes before, during, and after displacement and return. Our primary focus was on the social and relationship aspects of living conditions on their own and how they related to perceptions of neighborhood security, service provision, and infrastructure. We also sought to capture what people considered positive aspects of their neighborhood (and pre-displacement neighborhood).

- **Social dynamics in historical context**: The questions in this portion of the interview focused on obtaining information related to individuals’ migration/conflict history, views on identity within their broader group history, divisions and connections within their group and between their group and others, and finally aspirations for the future. The aim here was to have interviewees discuss how their personal and group histories (and identities) shape their perspectives on the situation now, to gain insight as to whether these deeper experiences influence feelings about current changes in their neighborhoods. Related to this, we sought to understand how past and current circumstances shape individuals’ future aspirations as well as aspirations of the group they belong to, identity-wise. This included asking if and how such aspirations changed from 2003 to now. Finally, interviewees were asked to explain how they identify themselves (without direction) to further learn how people see themselves in their neighborhood and wider society.

These questions were developed after review of similar assessments of social dynamics in displacement, including the qualitative interview guide developed for IOM’s longitudinal study on displacement (in process). Given the sensitive nature of the topics on which we sought to
collect data and the tensions/divisions existing within the general geographical areas of data collection, we took care to develop the questions in a conflict- and culturally-sensitive manner. The interview guide was translated from English into Kurdish and Arabic, and cross-checked with enumerators and RART staff for clarity of translation and meaning.

The interviews themselves were conducted between June and July 2016. Because this fell during Ramadan, interviews with Muslim households took place in morning hours only. Interviews were held after written informed consent was established. Two-person enumeration teams carried out the interviews across the three governorates, with one person conducting the interview and the other taking detailed notes (for security reasons, no interviews were audio-recorded). The interviews were held in Kurdish or Arabic, as needed, and we received final transcripts from enumerators in English, Kurdish, and Arabic –whichever language they felt most comfortable typing up their notes. Transcripts were then translated into English by the Social Inquiry team with assistance from IOM.

We received transcripts on a rolling basis by design, to begin to review findings and emerging themes and ensure quality control. In line with this, we also accompanied enumeration teams in Sulaimaniya and Kirkuk, participating in some data collection as well. We were unable to accompany enumeration teams in Nineveh due to heightened security and stricter controls on access authorization into the area. We however provided feedback to enumerators by e-mail and phone as needed.

To prevent bias and ensure consistency in definitions of themes and terms, data was analyzed and coded by the three researchers making up the Social Inquiry team. In identifying themes, we sought to compare responses of interview subjects within each governorate, looking for commonalities and differences between population groups with respect to their displacement status, ethno-religious background, age, gender, and occupation. We then compared findings across governorates for any emerging cross-cutting themes.
3.2. Summary Findings

Below is a detailed analysis of the major themes that resonated across the three governorates of interest, highlighting both commonalities and divergences between locations and multiple identity groups, all in relation to social cohesion in such contexts. These findings lay the basis for programmatic guidelines and consideration, applicable across governorates and population groups, which are developed in the next section.

- **Contextual factors matter**

Before delving into our fieldwork data in more detail, it is important to note the general ethno-religious diversity of host community, IDPs, returning IDPs, and stayees in each of the areas targeted across Sulaimaniya, Kirkuk, and Nineveh governorates. In Sulaimaniya, the host communities in Said Sadiq (Berkew and Sheikhan neighborhoods), Dukan (Qamchoxa, Topzawa, Sarcham, and Sara Mountain neighborhoods), and Sulaimaniya City (Chwarbax neighborhood) are all Sunni Kurd and the internally displaced populations all Sunni Arab from Nineveh, Al-Anbar, Babylon, Salahaddin, and Diyala governorates.

The areas focused on in Kirkuk City and surroundings present more diversity in terms of both host and displaced populations and are different from one another: Altun Kupri has a host community comprised predominantly of Sunni Turkmen and Sunni Kurds, with a small minority of Sunni Arabs, while the IDPs who have settled here are mostly Sunni Arabs from Nineveh, Al-Anbar, Babylon, Salahaddin, and Diyala governorates; the host community in Hay Al-Jamiaa, on the other hand, is Sunni Arab and the displaced are also Sunni Arab from both within and outside of Kirkuk Governorate; and Panja Ali has a predominantly Sunni Kurd host community with both Sunni Arab and Sunni Kurd IDPs. The Arab IDPs here come from outside of Kirkuk Governorate while some Kurd IDPs come from within Kirkuk Governorate and Salahaddin Governorate as well.

The areas targeted in Nineveh have not only ethno-religious diversity, but also displacement diversity with a combination of host community (stayees), returning IDPs, and IDPs. Unlike in Sulaiminya and Kirkuk governorates, here the focus of data collection was in rural areas. In Wana subdistrict, mixed Sunni Kurd and Sunni Arab villages contain both Sunni Kurd and Arab returning IDPs. Babnet village within the Wana subdistrict was a formerly mixed village containing Shia Turkmen and Sunni Arabs, but now only Shia Turkmen returning IDPs remain.

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3 Detailed governorate case studies available by request from authors.
Within Ayyadhiya subdistrict, the predominantly Sunni Kurd village of Tal Marak currently contains Sunni Kurd returning IDPs, while Abu Wani village contains Sunni Arab host community and Sunni Arab IDPs who fled fighting in their original villages. The town of Al-Qosh meanwhile contains both Christian host and IDP communities, and Bozan village is now made up of Yezidi host and IDP communities.

In terms of socioeconomic levels, target neighborhoods (or villages) in Sulaimaniya are generally middle-income, in Kirkuk middle-to-low income, and in Nineveh low income. Furthermore, the target neighborhoods in Sulaimaniya and Kirkuk are in urban centers (Chwarbax, Hay Al-Jamiaa, and Panja Ali) and periphery towns (Dukan, Said Sadiq, and Altun Kupri). All villages targeted in Nineveh are in rural areas.

With regard to the current conflict, Sulaimaniya has had no ISIS presence and no open fighting within its borders. There is a strong ISIS presence in the south of Kirkuk, with the road leading into Kirkuk City closed for security purposes, essentially dividing the governorate north and south. Military operations to extricate ISIS from these areas were not in place at the time of data collection. Finally, Nineveh was almost completely overrun by ISIS in 2014. Large swathes of its land have seen open conflict as ISIS has been pushed out, but Mosul, Iraq’s second largest city, was still under its control. Military and ensuing humanitarian response planning for retaking the city and surrounding areas were underway at the time of data collection.

Despite these differences, one consistent theme emerged with respect to areas containing high numbers of IDPs particularly in Sulaimaniya and Kirkuk: that they are calm, quiet, safe, and secure. As a 46-year-old male government employee from Fallujah (Al-Anbar) noted, “Since our arrival here [Said Sadiq], we can sleep comfortably without worrying about getting killed in a blink of an eye.” Residents, host and IDP, also noted these areas’ relatively decent public services and infrastructure. These features, coupled with the presence of relatives in the area who arrived in the last decade, comparative ease of entry/obtaining residence status, and/or cheap rents led many IDPs into these areas. Returning IDPs into Nineveh also reported that the areas they fled to, both north into the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and further south into Iraq were considerable developed (and more so than their places of origin).

Comparatively good living conditions notwithstanding, host community members across Sulaimaniya and Kirkuk subdistricts noted the economic strain of having such a high influx of IDPs in their neighborhoods coupled with general fiscal crisis in Iraq and Kurdistan, “Of course [IDP] presence led to an increase in rents. I’m renting a house and the owner increased the rent because of the IDPs, market prices have risen as well, unemployment and population are
also higher. This has affected my life negatively and I have to work extra hours” (Sunni Turkman host community member in Altun Kupri, Kirkuk, taxi driver, male, 30 years old). This strain is not completely lost on IDPs either, “Individuals, especially the ones with limited income, have been negatively affected by the IDPs because the Arabs do the same work as the Kurds but for a lower price” (Sunni Arab IDP from Fallujah, Al-Anbar living in Chwarbax, Sulaimaniya, government employee/lecturer, male, 61 years old). That being said, host community business owners in both governorates indicated that the IDP presence, at least initially, was positive as they added cash into the local economy and comprised a low-cost pool of labor. In Nineveh, bearing the brunt of violent conflict has depleted already underdeveloped areas and both returning IDPs and IDPs report very poor services and infrastructure with little to no employment opportunities. Security however is perceived to have drastically improved, enabling those who have returned to do so.

Even with these difficulties, at first pass, the majority of people interviewed report positive interactions with one another both past and present, for example, “The interaction with both IDPs and host community makes me feel comfortable physically and psychologically because of the good treatment we get here” (Sunni Arab IDP from Baiji, Salahaddin living in Altun Kupri, Kirkuk, student, male, 24 years old). A closer reading of these neighborhoods however reveals a more complex and complicated landscape both in terms of physical space for interaction (or not) and of thought and feeling in response not only to the uncertainties of conflict and crisis but modernity as well, where histories of victimization linked with traditions of honor and hospitality mix over each other.

- **Living alone together**

Probing responses of interviewees living in contexts of protracted displacement and emerging return we find, unsurprisingly, that host and returning communities have rather mixed feelings toward those displaced into or out of their communities. These feelings range from acceptance to ambivalence to abject rejection of those, predominantly Sunni Arabs, deemed as “other”:

I have very good relations with the IDPs and I try to help them as much as I can and this very normal. It has not affected my perception toward my community and my neighborhood. (Sunni Kurd host community member from Altun Kupri, Kirkuk, farmer, male, 42 years old)

I have a neutral stance toward [IDPs], meaning that they neither have positive effects nor do they have negative effects. (Sunni Kurd host community member from Qamchoxa, Sulaimaniya, farmer, male, 50 years old)
My interaction and communication with people in the neighborhood was good in the past and even now, but only with those Arabs who came back with us. (Sunni Kurd returning IDP from Wana, Nineveh, shop worker, male, 29 years old)

I can’t say they have a positive impact on the city. I don’t trust them and I don’t feel secure because of their presence because they are not trustworthy and the neighborhood is not secure because of them. They need to be taken back to their places of origin. (Sunni Kurd host community member from Panja Ali, Kirkuk, unemployed, male, 55 years old)

I hate Arabs and Iranians, when I see them I want to expel them . . . Many times when I like to go out, I change my mind because of the Arabs. (Sunni Kurd host community member from Berkew, Sulaimaniya, student, male, 21 years old)

The most fair and suitable solution for us is that each side of us [Shia Turkmen returning IDPs and still displaced Sunni Arabs from same area] lives away from the other. (Shia Turkman returning IDP to Babnet village, Nineveh, farmer, male, 52 years old)

Much of this vitriol directed at Sunni Arabs comes from current and deeper historical grievances, which will be discussed in more detail (particularly as relates to areas of return), but needless to say it hampers interactions, even helpful ones, keeping them superficial and transactional at best. The Sunni Arab IDPs are seen and see themselves as guests perhaps explaining the support they receive from their hosts, but also suggesting their perceived impermanence as members of their new communities. It is one of the reasons the Sunni Arab IDPs also express hesitation in engaging in greater cross-group interaction and community problem solving, “The bad history we have been through has forced us to be isolated into order to avoid problems” (Sunni IDP from Fallujah, Al-Anbar living in Sara Mountain, Sulaimaniya, retired non-commissioned officer in the Iraqi Army, male, 62 years old). Compounding this in areas of protracted displacement is the language barrier faced by Arab IDPs coming into Sulaimaniya where the entire host community population speaks Kurdish and, by and large, does not speak Arabic. IDPs also reported facing this issue, though to a lesser extent, in Altun Kupri in Kirkuk, whose dominant neighborhood languages are Turkmani and Kurdish.

One area of seemingly greater, more meaningful connection is the emergence of intermarriage between groups mentioned by new and old residents in the Berkew neighborhood of Said Sadiq in Sulaimaniya. The trend points to the host community adopting an IDP practice to the chagrin of others: polygamy is not a common Kurdish practice and “some married Kurdish men are getting married to Arab IDP women and this has led to many social problems within Kurdish families” (Sunni Kurd host community member from Berkew, Sulaimaniya, government
employee and business owner, male, 30 years old). This adaption and intermarriage in general is important to note given how central marriage is to both cultures. Furthermore, though no one stated outright that intermarriage was a major societal problem, one host community interviewee noted that if “Arab girls get married to our boys, the Kurdish girls will stay single . . . our Kurdish girls should be considered a priority” (Sunni Kurd host community member from Berkew, Sulaimaniya, government employee, male, 52 years old). The circumstances of these marriages should be examined in more detail first from a protection standpoint and then as a potential point of further tension as well as a local coping strategy for tribally affiliated groups to integrate, as IDP and host communities are in Sulaimaniya.

A much less fraught and more hopeful example of greater meaningful cross-group integration comes from Altun Kupri in Kirkuk. Owing to the town’s long history of establishment and its existing integrated nature, where Sunni Turkmen and Sunni Kurds live more or less side-by-side, host residents already have a touchstone for peaceful coexistence that has lasted over multiple upheavals. This connects them closely to their town identity and not just to their identity group’s suffering overall:

This history has not played a role in shaping my perceptions personally because here we have not been subjected to anything. We have been coexisting together with other communities for many years . . . (Sunni Turkman host community member from Altun Kupri, student, male, 22 years old)

In terms of identity, I am a human being before anything else then I’m a Kurd from Altun Kupri. (Sunni Kurd host community member from Altun Kupri, farmer, male, 42 years old)

I identify myself as a citizen from Altun Kurpi, a housewife and unmarried. (Sunni Turkman host community member, housewife, female, 42 years old)

This gives the host community members the tools to foster acceptance of newcomers a bit easier, recognizing that it takes time and requires effort from both sides, “My communication and interaction with the new arrivals to the neighborhood is good, but there is caution in dealing with them because we don’t know them well and we need time to get to know them” (Sunni Kurd host community member from Altun Kurpri, government employee, male, 36 years old). Such openness and peaceful diversity came as a welcome surprise to IDPs coming into the area, “I have heard that there are conflicts between the different ethnicities and sects who have certain identities, but when I became displaced to this area, my perceptions changed. I realized that they treat us with respect and appreciation and I realized that all I heard was made up . . .” (Sunni Arab IDP from Baiji, Salahaddin living in Altun Kupri, student, male, 24 years old).
These positive interactions seem to give some hope that different groups can live together, and in some instances have spurred IDPs in the area to more proactively seek engagement with the host community, for example by learning and practicing the native languages of the town with residents.

It seems then that the age of a neighborhood and the social configurations of different groups including how they occupy physical space together plays a significant role in determining perceptions of inclusion. Rural versus urban divides should also not be underestimated in affecting interactions, regardless of ethno-religious homogeneity or not. The more communal traditions of the Sunni Arab IDPs from within and outside of Kirkuk Governorate did not find very good fit in the city because the host community in general in the urban area is not tribal in orientation. This has proved a sticking-point for Arab IDPs to better integrate and interact even with the Sunni Arab host community in Hay Al-Jamiaa, “We cannot integrate or interact a lot with the society in Kirkuk because they don’t like to socialize and they don’t gather as we used to do in our place of origin” (Sunni Arab IDP from Fallujah, Al-Anbar living in Hay Al-Jamiaa, Kirkuk, housewife, female, 40 years old).

What has happened instead within Hay Al-Jamiaa and Panja Ali in Kirkuk and across areas in Sulaimaniya, is that Sunni Arab IDPs have found community with each other. This can be seen as an important coping strategy but also serves to further create enclaves in already segregated neighborhoods, which may cause greater tensions down the line, if displacement continues to protract or if new conflict erupts.

- **A loosening of the ties that bind in an urbanizing world**

We cannot however blame conflict and displacement alone for feelings of isolation emerging in the country and among even the more tribal communities in Sulaimaniya and Kirkuk. Society and way of life are changing in general and have been for a long time:

The social relations have weakened a bit lately compared to the past when relations were stronger, but with time, people got busier with their lives. (Sunni Kurd host community member from Altun Kupri, Kirkuk, farmer, male, 42 years old)

I am busy with my job and don’t have interactions with my neighbors . . . people here are not social and they stay away from each other because they are all busy working and earning money . . . I see changes in the attitude of people here. They begin to stay isolated. The European culture has impacted us. Families who have lived in Europe for many years and come back have gained a culture of being isolated and they try to apply...
The changes I have noticed through the last years are that during the last decade, technology was not as widespread as now and people used to spend much more time with each other than now. (Sunni Kurd host community member from Dukan, Sulaimaniya, recent graduate, male, 26 years old)

Our customs and traditions are still the same as before because we preserved them. Now because our life has changed, and it’s different from village life, our kids have changed for the worse and it’s hard to control them. Before when kids used to work, they would give their earnings to their father. But now, they don’t appreciate their father and don’t give him their earnings. They do what they want and don’t respect elders at home, which is a bad thing. (Sunni Arab IDP from Daquq, Kirkuk living in Hay Al-Jamiaa, Kirkuk, unemployed, male, 59 years old)

The feelings and interactions (or lack thereof) above then stem not only from the reopening of old wounds and creation of new ones from the current conflict, its ensuing displacement, and economic downturn, but from a general, progressively growing trend toward a more atomized society even within tightly knit groups. All these factors keep communities in flux and further influence group and individual identities and how people see themselves (or do not) in the broader scheme of society and in relation to its members. This atomization of family relations may help to break insularity and even spur more individual and critical thinking, particularly given greater access to outside societies through technology. It also has the capacity to further subdivide groups and entrench even more difference. Both sides of this can be seen in Iraq. The importance will be in loosening ties not to cut them off entirely but to allow them to bridge between different groups, creating a more inclusive web of thought and belonging.

• **Legacies of victimization and the Sunni identity problem**
This further entrenchment of difference can be seen clearly in individuals’ responses related to their histories and legacies of abuse. Nearly all Kurds interviewed indicated that they themselves or their families had experienced force displacement (and return) at least once before, moving toward, if not into, Iran during the Anfal campaign against the Kurds by the previous regime in the late 1980s and early 1990s, some yet again during the Kurdish civil war in the mid-1990s, and others due to Arabization campaigns in Kirkuk and Nineveh. They recounted harrowing stories of their long and perilous journeys to safety. Their displacements were usually short-lived and families returned to rebuild. One Kurd interviewee from Kirkuk
noted that his property had been given to others and he had to work for these new owners to get his land back.

These shared narratives link individual members of local host and IDP communities to the broader Kurdish community in the country. As such, they unanimously and proudly call themselves Kurds when asked, often before other identifiers. To put it another way, the “Kurdish history of grievances has left a nationalistic impact on our perceptions in life. Therefore, nationalism comes first when expressing our sense of identity to others” (Sunni Kurd host community member from Qamchoxa, Sulaimaniya, female, 18 years old). This nationalism takes particular relevance now given the Kurdistan Regional Government’s narrative around state-building and independence. More tightly held group identities related to past victimization as well as emerging demands toward nationalism and/or autonomy was also seen among the Turkmen, Yezidis, and Christians interviewed too, though they represent smaller numbers within our data.

The Sunni Arabs interviewed, in particular IDPs and returning IDPs, on the other hand, struggled with how to define their identities. Many called themselves “strangers” in their new communities and in Iraq more generally:

I feel no belonging to this country because I have seen that our rights have been violated and we have been insulted, so why should I be loyal to this country? (Sunni Arab IDP from Baiji, Salahhadin living in in Altun Kupri, Kirkuk, student, male, 24 years old)

Now, I don’t feel I am the son of this country anymore. I feel like an absolute stranger! And I would say this is the feeling of all the people in Fallujah, and especially the Sunni population in Iraq . . . the Sunni population is regarded as terrorist nowadays. (Sunni Arab IDP from Fallujah, Al-Anbar living in Berkew, Sulaimaniya, government employee, male, 42 years old)

This sentiment has played itself out again more recently at least in terms of freedom of movement as a number of IDPs reported having difficulty leaving their current communities to reach other parts of Iraq and Kurdistan. The feeling of being monitored in displacement and return, coupled with historic and recent anti-Sunni violence in their places of origin, makes Sunni lives “too cheap and worthless in this country” (Sunni Arab IDP from Nineveh living in Chwarbax, Sulaimaniya, wage worker, male, 30 years old). It also perhaps points to a lack of acknowledgement of the particular difficulties the group overall has faced, as victims of violence and conflict as well.
Indeed, not only identifying as victims but having that victimization acknowledged seems critically important to all people in Iraq. While some groups were able to lay claim to this mantle directly in interviews:

We are victims. They took our kids and women and they killed many civilian Yezidi men. We will never forget about the right of our girls who have been kidnapped and the brutal methods used against them. (Yezidi IDP from Tal Qasab, Nineveh living in Bozan village, Nineveh, barber, male, 32 years old)

The Kurds have been through such tough times that no other people have been through before. (Sunni Kurd host community member from Berkew, Sulaimaniya, farmer, male, 55 years old)

That history is painful and we will never forget it because they killed us and threatened us because of our identity. (Shia Turkman returnee to Babnet village, Nineveh, farmer, male, 52 years old)

Sunni Arabs were more circumspect, “we have been displaced, suffered, and been psychologically hurt” (Sunni Arab IDP from Mosul, Nineveh living in Altun Kupri, Kirkuk, daily wage worker, male, 55 years old). Only one respondent among all the Sunni Arab IDPs interviewed across locations directly and without prevarication noted that with regard to the “recent events by ISIS . . . the greatest number of victims were the Sunni Arabs” (Sunni Arab IDP from Mosul, Nineveh living in Panja Ali, Kirkuk, student, male, 24 years old). Thus, perhaps owing to the alienation of being perceived to be connected to the previous regime and its Arab nationalism, Al-Qaeda, and now ISIS by virtue of ethno-religious affiliation and the seeming comparisons of suffering made within society, many tend to refer to themselves as Iraqis first, equivocating on other identifiers:

All I can say is that I’m an Iraqi and was born as a Muslim and Sunni, which apparently is a crime in my country. (Sunni Arab IDP from Shahraban, Diyala living in Chwarbax, Sulaimaniya, housewife, female, 22 years old)

I personally wish my identity was Muslim Sunni Arab from France or America. (Sunni Arab IDP from Baiji, Salahaddin living in Altun Kupri, Kirkuk, student, male, 24 years old)

I can identify myself and my family as a simple Iraqi family, we belong to the Obeid tribe and we are Sunnis, but I don’t really like to mention that I’m Sunni because we have suffered a lot from the abuse of the Shia militias. (Sunni Arab IDP from Hibhib-Al-Hadid, Diyala living in Chwarbax, Sulaimaniya, retired, male, 66 years old)
Today the only thing that matters is asking what ethnicity and religion you belong to, that’s why I only find myself as an Arab and Muslim. (Sunni Arab IDP from Abu Looni village, Nineveh living in Abu Wani village, Nineveh, housewife, female, 50 years old)

If you ask me about my identity, I would say that I’m an Iraqi Muslim from the nation of Mohammed. (Sunni Arab IDP from Fallujah, Al-Anbar living in Sheikhan, Sulaimaniya, housewife, female, 64 years old)

Their histories of forced migration are mixed, with some experiencing displacement for the first time now due to threats from ISIS and/or the Shia militias fighting them and others experiencing displacement for the second or third time, having fled their areas of origin during the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and/or during the Shia-Sunni fighting in 2006 and 2007, with these latter instances relatively short-lived as compared to now. While some Sunni Arabs have been able to return to their places of origin recently, many are still unable or unwilling to return. Regardless, narratives recounted here also detail arduous and dangerous journeys to safety, after attacks and threats of violence based on identity.

The predominantly Kurd host communities we studied do acknowledge the plight of the IDPs, “We feel sorry for them, for what happened to them. We know how it feels to be displaced from your town and your city . . . It is difficult to leave your home and your city” (Sunni Kurd host community member from Chwrbax, Sulaimaniya, housewife, female, 56 years old), yet there is still an undercurrent of animosity to their presence based on the host communities’ history of abuse and flight at the hands of a Sunni Arab regime:

I can’t trust the Arabs, they are not reliable and we have had bad experiences with them. They have hurt us before but now we help them despite the fact that we hate them because they need our help and we think that if we help them, they will help our children in the future. (Sunni Kurd host community member from Panja Ali, Kirkuk, business owner, male, 35 years old)

By their own admission, host community members in Sulaimaniya, for example, compare their previous displacement to that of the Syrian refugees and residents of Sinjar because all of them had to flee en masse and under very bad conditions. These are similar conditions to those Sunni Arab IDPs faced as well, but the host community seems to have less empathy for them than Syrian refugees and displaced Sinjar residents, who are by and large ethnically Kurdish.

As it stands, from the interviews, some host community members do not feel Sunni Arab IDPs are struggling very much and actually consider that perhaps they are thriving in displacement because IDPs “get assistance from every corner of the world” (Sunni Kurd host community
member from Chwarbax, Sulaimaniya, small business owner/carpenter, male, 47 years old) and still receive Iraqi government salaries, while the host community bears the brunt of the current economic crisis. The fact that they also recounted not receiving any aid during their own displacements further highlights the underlying sentiment that they always end up worse off and still survive. Conversely, it should be noted that in Kirkuk, most host community members feel the IDPs needed more aid, in part to help them go home.

The Sunni Arab IDPs for their part, in interviews, while understanding the difficulty they have posed on local economies, make no direct reference to any past, targeted campaign against other groups in Iraq by the previous regime or armed groups or the displacement that resulted from it (e.g., mass killing, destruction of villages inhabited by Kurds or Christians, forced resettlement, and repression against the southern governorates, among others). Such seeming disregard may stem in part from a focus on their current circumstances as well as from a distancing from perpetrators of abuses who share the same ethno-religious identity. This omission of recognition is simply not possible in areas of return however, given the much closer proximity of the conflict and the fact that some members of the Sunni Arab population there were deeply involved in violence and abuse, while others were themselves victims of it:

I used to deal with everybody. For work, I would go to Sinjar and interact with everyone, but now, things are not the same. Those hurt by ISIS see us Arabs as ISIS supporters, but we were also affected by ISIS and were displaced . . . this negative view makes me feel sad because I’m being punished or pained by guilt I never committed. I don’t deny that a lot of people from neighboring villages supported ISIS and I wish that everyone one of those people is punished, but let innocents live with freedom. (Sunni Arab returning IDP to Wana, Nineveh, farmer and school janitor, male, 40 years old)

Making the distinction between victims and perpetrators (and the fact that some perpetrators themselves are also victims and vice versa) will be necessary particularly as more areas open up for return. The Sunni Arab returning IDPs in Nineveh understand this, because they have no choice if they wish to stay but this distinction needs be taken into by all other groups in these areas as well if peaceful, inclusive resolutions to displacement and return are to take place –in whichever forms they take.

The focus on one’s own group’s suffering is understandable, but the consistent comparing of one suffering over another, stemming from perceptions of inequity and invisibility, only serves to obscure the commonalities inherent in various groups’ narratives. Recognition of each group’s suffering is imperative, but at the same time, finding points of connection in these narratives could further serve to open deeper and more meaningful interaction, if they were to
take place. This is critical because as noted, and at present, groups seem to be living in parallel, which may not be sustainable as this displacement protracts. This parallel existence among returning IDPs and those still displaced will also limit ways of appropriately deciding if, when, how, and where returns occur, taking into account all victims’ needs.

• **The complexity of return**

At the same time, while it will be necessary to recognize that those who stayed under ISIS control were not all supporters and that some were “prisoners . . . insulted and tortured” (Sunni Arab returning IDP to Wana, Nineveh, farmer, male, 48 years old), it is impossible to deny the experiences of those particularly targeted by ISIS and their feelings now. Within our sample, there was a lot of uncertainty as to what would happen, but also clear statements of wanting separation or at least not wanting to deal with those still displaced coming back yet, with the assumption that most fled with ISIS:

The question is how good is the security situation going to be? And how will the different communities think about each other? (Yezidi IDP from Sinjar, Nineveh in Bozan village, Nineveh, math teacher, male, 60 years old)

We live in our area and they live in theirs because there is no solution for the problems that occurred here. (Shia Turkman returning IDP to Babnet village, Nineveh, farmer, male, 52 years old)

There are those who supported ISIS and killed innocent people and they have no choice but to face justice, and be tried for their crimes. I’m not ready to deal with these people and they should not come back to our society anymore. (Sunni Kurd returning IDP to Wana, Nineveh, government employee, male, 44 years old)

But for those who betrayed us, if they come back, our feelings will change into hatred and we’re going to deal with them very carefully. (Sunni Kurd returning IDP to Wana, Nineveh, government employee, male, 35 years old)

Many people felt that regardless of the situation, it would be necessary for all tribes to engage in some kind of reconciliation process to ensure peace going forward and resolve existing disputes.

With respect to IDPs in general, the majority of host community members view IDP presence in their neighborhoods as temporary and wish for their return to their places of origin, for both altruistic reasons and because they do not wish them to become a more permanent part of their neighborhoods, as noted previously. IDP feelings on return are less straightforward with many
longing to go back, but under the condition of guaranteed security including the removal of Shia militias from their areas of origin.

This holds true not only for Sunni Arab IDPs but Sunni Kurd IDPs as well who have been pushed out of their areas in Salahaddin by these militias, “I think the situation is very bad as things got out of control of the government and now decisions are made by the armed militias who are playing with our lives and future” (Sunni Kurd IDP from Tooz Khormatu, Salahaddin living in Panja Ali, Kirkuk, government employee, male, 21 years old). Concern was also raised by a Sunni Turkman host community member in Altun Kupri who noted that Shia Turkmen pushed out their Sunni Turkmen counterparts in Nineveh (in response to actual and perceived ISIS affiliation). Any changes to who is securing, and for that matter governing, these areas are a politically fraught undertaking and one that is unlikely to occur or be settled very quickly. What is interesting and troubling to note is the further encroaching sectarianism, between Sunni Kurds and Shia Arabs and Sunni and Shia Turkmen, which was not particularly prominent prior to this crisis.

Other IDPs however do seek to remain where they are now and integrate into their current neighborhoods. This highlights the need then for better and more nuanced interaction between the two groups for longer-term stability as the solution to this displacement crisis seems less and less likely to entail whole-scale return in the current context.

• Longing for the past while despairing over an uncertain future

One area where there was consensus across all groups related to when they were most comfortable and happy in Iraq. Despite the violent repression, persecution, and development neglect of the previous regime, pre-2003 Iraq was the period recalled with if not fondness per se, then at least some nostalgia. It seems perhaps what is most missed is a sense of prosperity and material comfort, some form of national unity, protection, and predictability, even with respect to violence and bad policy:

In Saddam’s time the economy was good and the people were doing better. After the fall of Saddam, the Kurds did much better, but still, Saddam’s time was the best in terms of living standards and the economic situation. (Sunni Kurd host community member from Berkew, Sulaimaniya, farmer, male, 55 years old)

I used to feel safe and secure during the Saddam era and this is true . . . At the time the country had a strategy. If you were not against Saddam, no one dares to come close to you. Now the country is governed by many officials and this causes corruption and
pushes the country backward. (Sunni Kurd host community member from Panja Ali, business owner, male, 35 years old)

We used to feel safe before 2003 and life was simple and easy with no problems or political parties or any militias. We were able to visit any province we liked to without fearing anything because there was only one authority ruling Iraq and there was no sectarianism or any differences between Sunnis and Shia or any other sects. (Sunni Arab IDP from Hibhib-Al-Hadid, Diyala living in Chwarbax, Sulaimaniya, retired, male, 66 years old)

We were feeling safe and comfortable physically and psychologically until the end of 2003. After that things changed and everything went out of control; violence, sectarianism, and killing for identity took over. (Sunni Arab IDP from Jurf Al-Sakhr, Babylon living in Topzawa, Sulaimaniya, farmer, male, 51 years old)

Before 2003, no one dared to threaten or kill Christians. (Christian IDP from Mosul, Nineveh living in Al-Qosh, Nineveh, student, female, 14 years old)

Before 2003, we used to feel safe but had no freedom, now we have freedom but our future is unknown. (Sunni Kurd host community member, Altun Kupri, Kirkuk, farmer, male, 42 years old)

All respondents, while acknowledging the U.S. and other regional actors’ (i.e., Iran’s) interference in the country as contributing to the uncertainty, unabashedly place the blame for the current state of affairs, from economic crisis and corruption to lack of aid and violent sectarianism squarely on the shoulders of the ruling authorities and political parties, who they see as having no stake in the country and seeking only their own personal gain:

We need to have a national government instead of the sectarian one we have now, which kills innocent people without any trials and no one asks why! (Sunni Arab IDP from Ramadi, Al-Anbar living in Chwarbax, Sulaimaniya, government employee, male, 40 years old)

I think Iraqi politicians are not serving the country. They are just filling their pockets with money. (Sunni Arab IDP from Mosul, Nineveh living in Chwarbax, Sulaimaniya, seamstress, female, 40 years old)

The government can do a lot and it can provide everything for the people, how long we need to remain the richest country but poorest people, this is not fair . . . The only power we have is when we vote during the elections, but we are not willing to vote anymore because we don’t trust the candidates. (Sunni Turkman host community member from Altun Kupri, Kirkuk, housewife, female, 42 years old)
We are led by a bunch of thieves. (Sunni Arab IDP from Fallujah, Al-Anbar living in Sheikhan, Sulaimaniya, shop owner, male, 38 years old)

The government has never done anything to protect our areas and if it were not for the pressure on them, they would never try to liberate the western parts of Iraq because it is a government of criminals like Al-Maliki, Abadi, and the Sunni leaders. This government doesn’t like its own people; they kill them and drink their blood. We lost our areas and it is impossible to control these areas again. ISIS beheads all who are loyal to the government and the people with masks destroy our houses and kill us. It is *haram* to call this a government. (Sunni Arab IDP from Shaqlawiya, Al-Anbar living in Berkew, Sulaimaniya, farmer, male, 42 years old)

Our feelings changed also because we realized that the government is not serious about supporting the citizens, instead it fights the citizens and discriminates between different groups; add to that the high level of corruption in the country. (Sunni Arab host community member from Hay Al-Jamiaa, student, male, 33 years old)

Our political leaders are not loyal to this country and its citizens . . . I have no faith in the political leaders and parties; they are useless, hopeless, and helpless. (Sunni Kurd host community member from Berkew, Sulaimaniya, housewife, female, 63 years old)

Only God can solve everything, because now all the politicians and political parties are only thinking about themselves and their interests. (Sunni Kurd host community member from Chwarbax, Sulaimaniya, shop owner, male, 61 years old)

On this last point, the majority of people interviewed, across groups, felt that only God and, short of that, the government could change things for the better in the country. The individuals interviewed say they want to live in peace without discrimination and hatred, but see no way to do so without a new kind of leadership. Interestingly, the ongoing ethnic divisions and sectarianism seem bewildering to many interviewees across groups, who see it as a new phenomenon that came with the 2003 invasion of the country, rather than something that is both latent within it and honed by previous policies and personalities before this time.

That people want to end it and get out from under it, but feel that change cannot come from them indicates a loss or lack of agency and absence of hope in country and society, “I can’t think about the future for my family because we are living in a country with no future and no plans . . . I see no future for this country anymore” (Sunni Arab IDP from Nineveh living in Chwarbax, Sulaimaniya, wage worker, male, 30 years old). One respondent countered such helplessness by noting that “My life has gotten much worse and I can’t say it is only because of the government. I am certain the people and the community should be blamed too; they don’t stand up and demand their rights!” (Sunni Kurd host community member from Panja Ali,
unemployed, male, 55 years old). But even this call to action was tempered with fatalism, “We live an unsafe and unstable life and I got used to this way of living.”

This very bleak and even grim perception of the present and future, predicated on unpredictability and a lack of agency, does not bode well for broader efforts to change society for the better. But in seeking to not let any crisis go to waste, it may also be an opportunity, neighborhood by neighborhood, to loosen existing bonds and create new ones, based on a shared understanding and recognition of others, of intersecting, similar, and divergent narratives, and of the need, regardless of the solution, to work together to get to peace.
4. SOCIAL COHESION PROGRAMMING AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the above, it would be a misnomer to say that there is no social cohesion in Iraq. In some ways, as our fieldwork suggests, there is too much in that within identity groups there is a rigid sense of history with little room or willingness for counter-narrative coupled with strong tribal/clan structures. This type of solidarity has the capacity to breed a “crude” form of cohesion that may coexist with norms and values which are hierarchical, exclusionary, and even xenophobic, biasing themselves toward the established social and political order and to cultural and social homogeneity (Norton & de Haan, 2013). We see this across Iraq and it appears within the data collected for this assessment. At the same time, as is noted in our fieldwork and elsewhere there is a change in social order taking place within communities that the multiple crises the country is facing, if not started, then exacerbated (Fantapple, 2016).

These changes may on one hand, break apart large swathes of long-held uniformity, only to create even smaller pockets of solidarity with hostile goals, enhanced group identity and cohesiveness, and the emergence of militant subgroups and leaders, further fragmenting and disseminating conflict (Pruitt & Kim, 2004). The rising sectarianism between Shia and Sunni Turkmen and Sunni Kurds and Shia Arabs is one example of this starting to happen. On the other hand, such changes may create openings for developing a more elastic within-group dynamic that enables outside groups to bridge into it, allowing for both more individual and group rights. The purpose then of interventions aimed at establishing this type of cohesion is to reverse the dehumanization and deindividualization that wear down inhibition against aggression (Carpenter, 2012). The central component to this latter process, and one of the most effective ways to reduce prejudice between groups, is interpersonal contact (Allport, 1954). This is obvious on the face of it, but requires a nuanced understanding of the histories and identities existent in a given community and the ways in which this shapes perceptions of fairness, justice, and “the other,” to design interventions that address these issues without exacerbating them (World Vision International, 2013).

What this entails is creating conditions for effective contact, facilitating said contact, and delineating the change in behavior the program is seeking to achieve (UNDP, 2015b). This is true for stand-alone social cohesion programming or mainstreaming social cohesion into other work including livelihoods and infrastructure revitalization. And indeed, a social cohesion lens and approach should be part of any program’s fundamental strategy to design and implementation, regardless of the thematic cluster to which it belongs (Cantle, 2007). Table 3 (adapted from UNDP, 2015b) highlights the necessary precepts to achieve this, across fields.
Table 3. Precepts for interpersonal contact

Conditions for Effective Contact:

• Members of the groups interacting have equal status.
• Interactions between groups is goal-oriented, specifically that groups share same goal and achieve them together.
• Achieving goals is without competition among group members.
• Inter-group contact is more positive and accepted when there is buy-in from the social networks of the participants.

Facilitating Factors:

• Help individuals from groups see each other as individuals with common characteristics, without a “two group” identity.
• Help individuals from different groups for a “new” group within its own identity.
• This new group and its individual members share new perspective into larger group.
• These new perspectives are more likely to succeed in reducing prejudice if society (e.g., elders, parents, teachers, etc.) reinforce them.

Awareness, Education, and Behavior Change:

• Learn about each other’s group.
• Learn and practice new positive behaviors repeatedly.
• Have positive emotional experience during contact (including empathy, humor, and affirmation) to create ties between people.
• Generate re-thinking about one’s own group (as not the only way).
• Function and think as a unique and special group.

In order to be most effective in beginning to breakdown divisions and tensions and bring different groups together within a neighborhood, it is critical that all conditions, facilitating factors, and clear, planned changes are included within the design and implementation of any programming in the community. The work must also move beyond surface awareness raising of other groups and toward deeper behavioral change toward them. It is this change in thinking and action that will sustain cohesion in the long-term.

This again requires understanding the status quo in a neighborhood. As our fieldwork suggests, most interactions between groups, particularly newly arrived and longer-term residents, is transactional at best and often that way by choice. Creating space for more meaningful and proactive interaction that goes beyond simply bringing groups to the same location may require time for trust-building first. It is critical to allow for this within any intervention planned, as contact between groups that creates anxiety for those who take part is not likely to bring about cohesion. Programming then in any form needs to be multi-faceted, taking on cross-cutting, multi-pronged approaches to allow for meaningful interaction within and between groups—and
this takes creativity, critical thinking, and community buy-in to achieve. It looks different depending on the specificities of each neighborhood.

The following are key considerations to take into account when designing such work, either as stand-alone or cross-cutting programming:

• **Taking sides and perceived fairness of interventions**

Understanding the perception of interventions and programming by all communities residing in target areas is critical. In Sulaimaniya for instance, we found that host community members indeed knew IDPs needed assistance, but felt it was unfair not only because they felt ignored in dealing with their own economic struggles but that they never received any benefits during their displacement, decades before. Unpacking these views and feelings ahead of designing programming is important to ensure buy-in from all community sectors.

It is also critical when entering into areas that are now receiving returns. Not all the displaced families can return, even if areas are cleared of armed opposition and, as we are seeing here, the rationale for this is not purely economic, but relates to historical grievances, identity, politics, and security. Furthermore, it is difficult to conduct social cohesion-framed work predicated on interpersonal contact when one group is ostensibly banned from coming back. This is the case in the Babnet village in Ninveh which was previous a mixed Shia Turkmen/Sunni Arab community. Only the Shia Turkmen have been able to return and some explicitly state that they refuse to live with Sunni Arabs anymore, given their victimization in this recent conflict and long history of marginalization and persecution in this area. Sunni Kurd returnees in the area also indicate that while they still have relationships with the Sunni Arabs who fled and returned with them, they are unwilling and unable to deal at this point with those who betrayed them. That being said, many people interviewed in Nineveh felt that tribal leaders needed to be involved in some kind of reconciliation process to ensure peace and security for all.

The concern in so-called “disputed” areas then is imposing an outside solution to settling issues between those returned, those returning, and those still displaced, where protection aims for the different groups may be at odds. If particularly victimized groups are not ready to live together again, it should not be the place of impartial organizations to force such reintegration especially right now. This is not to say the work cannot happen, but needs to take a different tact, focused on understanding needs related to victimization and justice on all sides, preventing revenge, and working toward building understanding of other groups. Entering into an area where these
dynamics are at play requires very careful analysis and programming designed with very specific aims and objectives. This should be carried out in consultation with actors deeply involved in the interplay of transitional justice, mediation, reconciliation, politics, and security in these locations. Any planned intervention must also be accepting of the fact that returning to the *status quo ante* is impossible now in practical terms and not a solution in rights-based terms either as the context was likely unjust previously, contributing to forced displacement in the first place and the demands for protection and separation engendered now (Bradley, 2012).

• **Language, non-verbal communication, and sharing narratives**

One of the biggest obstacles for interaction within the communities we examined, particularly those whose host community members and IDPs are of different ethnicities, is language barrier. While it will be necessary to carry out interventions using all local languages to ensure participation, one step toward trust-building and good faith between host community and IDPs is for the newly arrived to learn the host community language. Providing opportunities for this is important, particularly in areas where the historical fear is not only demographic shifts, but a complete takeover of the new culture over the existing one. Practically speaking it will allow for IDPs to be able to better engage with their new environs, improving access to services and jobs, but on a deeper level, it would help impart to the host community that they are trying to become a part of the local society and incorporate into customs, not override them (Cantel, 2007). This holds particularly true in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, where predominantly Arab IDPs are entering into predominantly Kurdish host communities, whose historical, identity-based persecution by the previous regime included targeted attacks and human rights violations in their areas.

This building of common language between groups also helps in giving greater tools for being able to share experiences and narratives of conflict and displacement. This seems critical, particularly based on our fieldwork, in that individuals did not seem to feel like their personal or group suffering was acknowledged or that they shared a common narrative with others. It is not for nothing that despite the heat during the fieldwork period and the fact that it was Ramadan, Muslim respondents across population groups took the time to speak with us at length even though there was no material incentive to do so.

Such expressions can serve as an important step toward not only individual healing but in restoring collective memory and repairing the social fabric in which individuals are embedded (Stepakoff, 2008). This is another component of building greater trust and connection and may be particularly necessary for Sunni Arab IDPs and returning IDPs who seem at a loss for how
to describe themselves and their connection to a very changing society. Because words often fail to convey all the nuance and complexity of emotion, such expressions need not however be solely verbal. Arts-based forms of storytelling, including participatory theatre, are potentially useful means for addressing the need for self-articulated, personal, and shared narratives, opening space for people to collectively share their stories and create meaning about what happened in the community (Siddiqui & Joffre-Eichhorn, 2014). Thus, non-verbal, physical, and performative acts within such processes may allow people to feel without being retraumatized and gain deeper insight into said narrative, allowing others who have perhaps different experiences to see the issue from another perspective in a manner that is not antagonistic but instead allows for problem solving together – or to find commonalities with their own experiences (Siddiqui et al., 2016). This is again important for those with reopened and new psychic wounds from this current conflict, whose victimization runs deep and should not be discounted. It also allows space for all groups to understand the complexities of conflict identities and that victimized groups may also be perpetrators of abuse (and vice versa). This recognition of one’s own group’s wrongdoing (not only Sunni Arabs), is particularly sensitive to broach for all involved, but necessary for building trust (Carpenter, 2012).

It cannot be emphasized enough however that while arts-based approaches complement and enhance mental health and psychosocial care, they cannot and should not substitute for them.

- **Agency and mobilization**

What was also notable across communities and geographic locations from our data was a sense of despair and hopelessness about a very uncertain future. It seems for most people, only God and government can resolve the crises facing Iraq. The people themselves at the local level cannot make society-wide change. And perhaps this is true: one neighborhood on its own cannot change the country, but it can potentially change for the better the lives of all the people who live there. As such, it is critical to social cohesion that people work together to find their collective agency, to understand their common interests and combined skills to solve the issues they face. Interventions then must be goal-oriented, serve a purpose that is agreed upon by the community, and carried out together by members of the different groups in the community. This means framing civic engagement and shared rights in more concrete terms that build a sense of commonality around real life issues the community as a whole faces and designing programming to help build community capacity to contribute to the well-being and problem solving of these issues in a tangible way (Cantle, 2007).
While conducting a theatre workshop with victims of conflict in Afghanistan from different areas, for instance, facilitators noted that participants could not answer questions related to bringing peace to society as a whole, but they could and did have many solutions to more specific problems that faced their communities, including girls’ education and radicalization (Siddiqui & Joffre-Eichhorn, 2014). This served as a basis then for victims forming cross-identity mobilization groups, using theatre to build greater support in their communities and advocate to local authorities for their needs with proposed, practical solutions to address them. Similarly, in Lebanon, host community and Syrian refugee youth, in identifying rising tensions within and between groups, were trained on how to mediate conflict and then developed proposals for peacebuilding activities to implement in their respective communities, together (Search for Common Ground, 2014).

What is important here is not only that different groups worked together to begin to solve community needs, but that individuals themselves also found purpose and empowerment, allowing them to feel good about themselves as agents of positive change. The purpose is to restore dignity not just materially but psychologically. Livelihoods and employment allow for both as well given that in addition to income, they provide people with another identity-marker that is not ethno-religious and a new set of conditions in which to positively and more deeply engage with other community members, including those who share their job identity (provided working conditions are not exploitative). Thus, this same kind of goal-oriented design can and must be incorporated into livelihoods and infrastructure projects as well to ensure their sustainability and the sustainability of cohesion long after the project is through.

• **Focus on youth while paying heed to inter-generational dynamics**

Youth are a critical target for social cohesion programming, particularly in Iraq where they make up a significant proportion of the population. This lopsided distribution in fragile states has the capacity to push societies back into violence if youth are not engaged and felt to be a recognized and active part of society (Fantappie, 2016). Our findings here indicate that while youth are more likely to be welcoming of change in their communities, they are also more inclined to hold very hardline, divisive views against the “others” when opportunities for their own lives seem limited or curtailed due to circumstances beyond their control. Thus, it is critical that youth are involved in such goal-oriented interventions and that they can take on leadership roles, from livelihoods work to conflict mediation to education to civic activism.

This kind of engagement though can cause major shifts in inter-generational dynamics, particularly in tribal and hierarchical communities like those found in Iraq (Fantappie, 2016).
While our data indicates that shifts are already occurring not only from conflict, economic crisis, and displacement, but from technology and more access to outside communities as well, these changes are not necessarily all welcome. It is therefore critical to ensure that while empowering youth, programming does not stoke greater inter-generational conflict. Existing social structures must be involved within youth oriented interventions to bridge not just identity but age divides.

**Integrated spaces**

In addition to integrating groups interpersonally, it is also important to think about physical spaces where interaction can occur. A look at neighborhoods in Baghdad during the sectarian violence of 2006 raises interesting questions regarding physical space. Namely, that areas with more integrated physical structures, meaning both that neighbors of different identity groups lived side by side and that public buildings were for all groups and this access was made explicit, seemed to be more resistant to armed groups and violent sectarianism than those areas that contained identity-based enclaves (Carpenter, 2012). Encouraging integrated use of public space through programming can further help in breaking up enclaves and allowing individuals and groups to feel more comfortable throughout their neighborhoods, fostering more connection, “After all, there isn’t a park or anything that allow us to meet, we simply eat, sleep, and do nothing; we are almost dead people” (Sunni Kurd host community member from Panja Ali, unemployed, male, 55 years old). This is important particularly as host communities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq seem to favor secluding IDPs into separate camps to prevent any interaction, as was found in our data and other more detailed reports on urban displacement (UNHCR, 2016). This is also a key consideration to make in the reconstruction of areas destroyed by conflict –that the physical design of a neighborhood itself and the rebuilding of public facilities can contribute to its susceptibility to peacebuilding efforts. Understanding which infrastructure (or lack of it) is the source of tension and facilitating programming on that basis rather than necessarily first focusing on that which is most badly damaged would also serve to foster dialogue and build relations between groups. Beyond this, it may be important to coordinate with others on the restoration in some capacity of sites of historical or cultural significance, which often serve as a point of pride for residents of all stripes in a neighborhood.

**Staff training on social cohesion approaches and reducing burnout**

Staff involved in implementing such projects must be given time and space for more in-depth training on social cohesion and right-based approaches to programming as well as conflict
mediation and peacebuilding skills. Taking a socially dynamic approach to any work requires the ability to engage in difficult conversations and deal with uncomfortable truths revealed in communities. Conflict- and cultural-sensitivity is imperative.

Furthermore, because this work is nothing if not both physically and emotionally difficult, safe space must be given for staff to reflect together on their own biases and perceptions and the challenges they face in working in such divided places, particularly if they are from the communities in which they are working. Left unchecked, these stressors and the experience of direct or vicarious trauma can lead to professional burnout, which entails, among others, emotional exhaustion or depletion of emotional resources; depersonalization manifested in detachment from the job and the people being served; and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment (Maslach et al., 2001). This is problematic for staff because they are the mediators of any intervention underway and they do impart values, model behavior, and play a role in socialization, whether they believe so or not.

- **Cohesion takes time and connects across all levels of society**

This kind of work, framed as it is toward human psychology and behavior change, is not fast. It takes time and needs it. The basis for changing perceptions and actions is repeated, consistent and sustained meaningful interaction with members of the different groups (UNDP, 2015b). Building capacity and a sense of agency also requires longer-term engagement so structures developed during project implementation are able to exist and keep functioning after the end-date of the initial work. One way to grapple with these concerns is to try to remain in target communities for some time. In order to maintain coverage and appropriate distribution of programming across Iraq, selecting new locations is important, but criteria should be in place to allow for some projects to continue in areas where there is most need and where improvements are taking place, to build on and deepen the work to eventually stand on its own.

Critical to this as well is the buy-in and interaction of relevant authorities into processes for change. As nearly all interviewees noted, the government has a role to play in connecting localized pockets of change to one another, through more formal processes and governance that is accountable, transparent, and equitable to all members of society. It is imperative that for any grassroots and localized changes to sustain, local and national authorities must also play a part in developing strategies that address the needs and concerns of all victims on the ground and social cohesion focused programming can help pave the way for greater and inclusive interaction between citizens and the state.
The most important factor to keep in mind and one that is the undercurrent of all these considerations is that social cohesion and relationship building are not byproducts of programming, but must be placed at the center of any work in order to help societies move toward lasting, sustainable, and just peace.
5. REFERENCES


UNHCR (2016). Displacement as Challenge and Opportunity: Urban Profile of Refugees, Internally Displaced Persons, and Host Community in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Erbil: UNHCR.


