OBJECTIVE: Given the sudden large-scale population returns from displacement since October 2017 in Northern Ninewa, UNHCR, Danish Refugee Council, and Social Inquiry conducted a study to understand the impact this change had on the social dynamics of those communities affected, in order to help shape immediate and longer-term strategies for assistance, protection, development, and reconciliation in these areas.

The disputed, ethno-religiously diverse areas of Northern Ninewa experienced steady, though relatively flat rates of return of previously displaced populations (hereby referred to as “old returnees”), after being retaken from ISIL in 2015 through early 2017, respectively. This flat rate was in part the result of a significant portion of the population being blocked or unable to return. The flow of returning families, particularly Sunni Arabs (referred to as “new returnees”), spiked dramatically in October 2017, coinciding with the change in security configuration in these areas from Kurdish Peshmerga Forces to Iraqi Security Forces (see Figure 1).

The following summarises the findings from the report, Population Return Trends, Protection, and Social Dynamics in Northern Ninewa, released by UNHCR in March 2018.

Figure 1. Map of security changes in Northern Ninewa in October 2017

Source: Umap Openstreetmap with data from Live Universal Awareness Map for Iraq

TECHNICAL FACTSHEET

Data in this summary comes from the following sources:

- 39 in-depth qualitative interviews with key informants, community members and representatives carried out between December 2017 and January 2018 to gain insight into (i) local social dynamics; (ii) local conflict and peace mechanisms; and (iii) addressing social divisions and tensions.
- Interviews conducted with 18 old returnees (returned between 2015 and early 2017), 17 new returnees (returned after October 2017), and 4 key informants.
- Target locations included Zummar sub-district (with additional key informant interviews with newly displaced populations in Dohuk Governorate), Wana sub-district, Bashiqa Centre, and Rabbia sub-district.
- UNHCR international protection monitoring reports from August 2017 to February 2018.

¹ IOM-DTM Returns Dashboard – Ninewa, see: http://iraqdtm.iom.int.
ZUMMAR SUB-DISTRICT

Zummar is a historically mixed area comprised mainly of Sunni Arabs and Sunni Kurds. The main town, Zummar Centre, contains both these groups within its neighbourhoods. Most of the villages within the sub-district are homogeneous in their compositions and interspersed among each other, across the territory. The population nearly doubled after new returns took place in October 2017, mostly from designated Mosul IDP camps (including those within Erbil and Dohuk Governorates).²

Protection concerns raised during interviews and in internal monitoring included reported raids on homes and individuals by unknown actors at the onset of the security change-over; severe restrictions of movement, particularly into the Kurdistan Region given road and checkpoint closures; returns to destroyed villages around the sub-district; change from the 2015 Kurdistan Region-aligned local administration; lack of services and livelihoods opportunities as well as limited assistance; and physical risk toward former members of Kurdish security forces.

In this climate, both old and new returnees agreed that formal dialogue and reconciliation is needed between the communities in Zummar. Kurdish respondents also felt that reconciliation between Erbil and Baghdad is also necessary in relation to administration and security provision in the area. The issues raised for resolution included ISIL perpetrators being brought to formal justice, compensation for destruction, and arbitration of competing housing, land, and property claims. Opportunities for such dialogue seemed possible at the time of fieldwork as both old and new returnees acknowledged and expressed regret over certain actions committed by their respective groups, as well as further indicating that both sides needed to compromise.

WANA SUB-DISTRICT

Like Zummar Centre, Wana Centre is also relatively evenly mixed between Sunni Arabs and Sunni Kurds. Beyond the centre however, the sub-district is populated by Sunni Arab villages with only a small number of Sunni Kurdish villages and one mixed Shia Turkmen-Sunni Arab village in the north.

The biggest protection concern at the time of fieldwork was the return of families to destroyed villages, with no large-scale reconstruction efforts underway, limited assistance provided, and lack of service provision. Before October 2017, returns had only taken place in five villages in the sub-district, including the centre. The rest of the villages were largely destroyed, empty, or still under ISIL control until Mosul was retaken in 2017.

The most prevalent grievance noted between old and new returnees alike in Wana sub-district related to collective blame. Old returnees felt blamed for widespread destruction and the blocking of returns and feared revenge against them. New returnees also felt blamed, for alleged ISIL affiliation and perpetration. This led to different views reported between old and new returnees as to what constituted culpability in relation to real or perceived ISIL affiliation.

Despite these protection-related concerns, neither old nor new returnees expressed strong need for reconciliation or dialogue in the sub-district and did not acknowledge any perceived “wrongdoing” by

²Mosul Camp Exit Questionnaire Analysis, 30 October and 30 November 2017, CCCM Cluster.
their respective groups. Rather, both groups reported wanting justice: old returnees in relation to ISIL perpetration and new returnees in relation to destruction, not only in terms of compensation, but in that those responsible for it should be held to account as well.

BASHIQA CENTRE

The town of Bashiqa Centre is a historically mixed area comprising predominantly Yezidis and Christians, with a Shabak population, and a small number of Sunni Arabs. The population as a whole started returning to the town in February 2017, although population levels are still below pre-2014 estimates.

Key protection concerns raised during interviews and in internal monitoring included significant reconstruction needs, mine clearance, and restoration of basic services and livelihoods, particularly as the town had many agricultural processing plants employing the local population that as of December 2017 were not functioning.

In terms of grievances, Shabak returnees expressed anger and frustration, particularly toward humanitarian actors, for perceived inequity in aid provision, indicating that Yezidi and Christian residents are prioritised over them. At the same time, Yezidi returnees in particular also voiced fear that another surge of sectarianism could occur, and felt exposed by living next to Muslim communities.

Despite this, returnees overall indicated that while there were “sensitivities” between groups at the time, no formal reconciliation process was necessary to repair social bonds. Instead, what was needed was time, the restoration of normal life in terms of services and jobs, and recognition of shared suffering. Women respondents in particular reported that if any process for dialogue and reconciliation were to take place, it should be secular in nature and not involve religious practices. Finally, while both Yezidi and Christian returnees indicated feeling very connected to their town, many reported wanting to leave Iraq for Europe, as many of their friends and relatives have done since 2014.

RABBIA SUB-DISTRICT

Most of Rabbia sub-district is populated by Sunni Arabs from the Shammar tribe, the same tribe that can be found on the other side of the border in Syria and further south in Iraq. Other tribes, such as the Johesh, are scattered in the southern part of the sub-district and at the border with Sinjar district, in close proximity to Yezidi villages on the other side. In addition, the north of Rabbia, which remains under control of the Kurdistan Regional Government, is populated by Kurdish villages. Since the initial wave of returns to Rabbia in late 2015 and early 2016, the sub-district did not experience further significant population changes during the fieldwork period.

Protection concerns highlighted in internal monitoring report and observations in fieldwork include restoration of services and basic needs in remote areas; challenging interactions with security forces currently in the area; prevention of the return of families not originally from Rabbia sub-district (i.e., pre-2014 displaced populations living in the area, mainly Sunni Arabs and Sunni Turkmen from elsewhere in Ninewa); and destruction of irregular settlements.

Despite these issues, the main focus of interviews in Rabbia sub-district as directed by the Shammar respondents focused on reconciliation needs between neighbouring communities, particularly Yezidis and the Sunni Arab tribes blocked from returning to their homes in Sinjar and Ayadiya (most of whom are hosted in Rabbia). They feel able to mediate and seek to carry this out with governmental support, particularly with regard to financial compensation to cover losses and grievances on all sides. The Shammar members interviewed highlighted two obstacles to initiating any such process: (i) their inability to find a Yezidi counterpart for discussion, citing a perceived lack of willingness among this group and strong internal divisions among them; and (ii) groups of Yezidi forces becoming more militant and violent against Sunni Arabs in general at the time.
CONSIDERATIONS

The dynamics captured in Northern Ninewa between December 2017 and February 2018 indicate that a protection-focused approach is needed predicated on three critical pillars related to returns, favourable environment conditions, and peaceful coexistence.

STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

Pillar I: Return as a sustainable durable solution
- Ensure voluntariness, safety, and dignity;
- Support efforts toward inclusive, participatory and informed choice for comprehensive and sustainable durable solutions.

Pillar II: Favourable environment conditions for a sustainable durable solution
- Improve physical security, freedom of movement, and humanitarian access;
- Prevent and respond to sexual and gender-based violence (including men, women, boys, and girls), protect children from violence, exploitation, and abuse, including children coming out of armed groups;
- Ensure access to targeted mental and psychosocial support to persons as needed;
- Prioritise the resolution of housing, land, and property claims.

Pillar III: Peaceful coexistence and restorative justice in transitional contexts, including peacebuilding, security, reconciliation, justice, and the rule of law
- Tackle issues of exclusion, marginalisation, and inequity as root causes fuelling conflict and violence and which create protection risks, hampering durable solutions to displacement;
- Consider gender equality, inclusion, accountability, and reconciliation as central to restoring rights and reducing violations.

In practice, immediate-term aims include:

- Ensuring equitable and transparent aid provision, avoiding identity-based targeting in such diverse areas, and adhering to “do no harm” principles.
- Prioritising cross-sector approaches to social cohesion and peacebuilding programming, in order to lay the basis for repairing the social fabric between ethno-religious groups, frayed at present by pre-conflict grievances and actions taken during and after the ISIL conflict.
- Providing housing assistance and restoring service provision so as not to leave communities unsupported in physical reconstruction, which can further help in mitigating grievances and tensions.
- Monitoring collective blame trends and any targeting of groups for punitive action based on identity given that cycles of blame, detention, and release, if not worse violations, will further perpetuate tensions between groups.

Longer-term aims should focus on the following:

- Shifting humanitarian assistance to longer-term development and early recovery efforts.
- Promoting mechanisms to sustainably address housing, land, and property claims.
- Satisfying communities’ need for justice and compromise through credible accountability and reconciliation processes that serve all victims and communities.

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