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Iraq: Not a Homecoming

In December 2018, I witnessed the violent closure of Kilo 18, a camp in Anbar given that designation because it was 18 kilometers from the town of Ramadi in central Iraq. The scene was awful: families screaming at soldiers, demanding an explanation for their expulsion; others quietly huddled together, their flip-flopped feet caked in cold mud, by their now-empty tents.

These were families who wanted to return home but were not being allowed to by the army and their local communities because they were perceived to have links to ISIS. Most often it was because a father, brother, or son was alleged to have taken up arms with the group. Now they were being told they had to leave the makeshift tents that had been home for the last few years and move to yet another camp. Any hopes of a true homecoming—back to the towns, villages, cities where they made their lives before Iraq tumbled into chaos in 2014—seemed more remote than ever. For many, going “home” is complicated, fraught, even dangerous. For others, it is impossible.

Displacement from the Battles Against ISIS

At the peak of the fighting between Iraqi forces and ISIS in 2017, at least 5.8 million people (<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/thelongroadhomefinal28022018.pdf>) had been forced to flee their homes. Dozens of camps sprang up across Iraq to house the displaced, and as fighting subsided some families started to go back home. But many remain displaced—an estimated 1.8 million (<https://www.unocha.org/iraq>) —450,000 of them across 109 camps and another 1.2 million in private or informal housing arrangements.

The remaining displaced are uniquely vulnerable to abuse. Some are being forced (<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/thelongroadhomefinal28022018.pdf>) to return home to unsafe conditions, where they risk landmines, revenge attacks from neighbors, or forced recruitment into local armed groups. Some are being prevented from returning home and are effectively detained in camps.

The shuttering of Kilo 18 was part of a larger effort in Iraq to deal with the massive displacement caused by the conflict. In the runup to Iraq’s parliamentary elections in May 2018, the prime minister at the time, Haidar al-Abadi started, calling on the displaced families to go home. Since early 2018, the authorities have more aggressively pushed for returns of most displaced people. They have started closing the camps. Families who can’t return home are being moved to the remaining camps. This massive social reengineering project to rebuild a shattered nation will come with costs.

Forced Returns

Some families who have been forced to return home find that all that’s left are ruins.

In early December 2018, I visited the village of Tal Abu Jarad, one area of Salah al-Din that had been firmly in the hands of ISIS for several years. The devastation shocked me. Many families had fled the area in 2016, as ISIS battled Iraqi forces. Now 60 families had returned to rubble because local leaders

ordered authorities in the areas where the families had been living to evict them to force them back. Humanitarian organizations I spoke to suspect this is because a local leader wanted to attract aid to the area and can only do that if there is a population that has returned.

Once the families came home, the armed group controlling the area told them that a male relative had to join a local neighborhood watch to conduct daily patrols to protect the area against ISIS. “They said everyone needs to defend their home, but without pay,” an elderly woman told me as her son was out on patrol. We are not opposed to neighborhood watches, but they need to be voluntary and the men being given arms need to be properly trained and put into a command control structure with clear legal guidelines. A young boy pointed into the bushes and told me ISIS was still lurking there and active at night.

In nearby Hawija, ISIS fighters have been executing villagers who are seen to be helping the authorities. One thing I am certain of is that, when I visited the families of Tal Abu Jarad, they were not safe.

Imprisoned in Camps

Since 2016 I have spent long stretches in camps across Iraq. During that time, I have noticed a dramatic shift in the feelings of the people in the camps. Where they were once happy to be back under Iraqi government control and receiving services, three years on, with no sign that they will be allowed to return home, these families now seethe with anger and resentment toward the authorities. Instead of developing a clear plan to reintegrate families into Iraqi society, the authorities have done little, abdicating control to armed groups, community leaders, and mob mentality. Government officials have told me it is politically “too hard” to do the right thing and facilitate their return home.

Areas of No Return

In the spring of 2019, humanitarian workers in Iraq identified 242 distinct areas in Iraq where not a single family has been able to return even though the fighting ended, in some cases as long as five years ago. In some areas this is because ISIS left landmines and other forms of explosives, booby-trapping homes that have yet to be cleared.

But in 94 of the areas, the de facto ban (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/06/24/iraq-displaced-families-blocked-returning>) on returns (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/04/26/iraq-local-forces-banish-isis-suspects-families>) is a form of punishment against those the security forces perceive as having been sympathetic to ISIS, or as having a relative who was sympathetic to the group. An Interior Ministry official estimated the number of people from families with perceived ISIS affiliation who could not return home because of objections by federal or local authorities or communities at 250,000. And this number is about to get bigger: humanitarian organizations working in camps in Syria have identified at least 30,000 Iraqis whom the Iraqi government is in the process of repatriating (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/05/07/iraq-confining-families-alleged-isis-ties-unlawful>) from Syria.

The government has yet to tell aid agencies how it will treat these families when they cross the border. But some authorities have suggested that they view these families as the most ISIS-sympathetic and are pushing for them to be screened at the border and then sent into de facto detention in segregated camps.

Prevented Return

At Kilo 18 in December 2018, A soldier told me that only three families were allowed to go home—they had fulfilled the requirements of finding a community leader and 10 witnesses to testify they never had sympathy for ISIS. The rest were being moved on to other camps.

One elderly woman who wanted to go home was from an area in Anbar governorate where the majority tribe was claiming that members of her tribe had joined ISIS and demanded huge payments to allow families to return. “I don’t have \$40,000 to go home,” she said. Dozens of families in Anbar told similar stories: only if they were rich enough to pay the stronger tribe could they go home. A few wealthy families from Kilo 18 were going home; the poorest remained.

The remaining families were transferred to two other camps in Anbar, and with the departures a greater mix of the camp population was made up of families with alleged ties to ISIS. The families said that security forces began to treat residents more like prisoners than displaced people, in some camps depriving them of cell phones, visitors (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/03/05/iraq-displacement-detention-suspected-isis-families>) , or the right to come or go freely (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/10/21/iraq/krg-displaced-people-cant-move-freely>) , or in some cases at all, from the camp. What were once displacement camps, built by the United Nations, have become open air prisons.

Detentions in Camps

In early December 2018, after hours of negotiations, a group of Shia armed fighters belonging to the Hashad al-Shaabi or Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) finally let me into an infamous camp called Ishaqi, in Salah al-Din governorate. Infamous because there is no international or local organization present to manage the camp. The fighters are the camp’s “management.” Most organizations that have tried to enter have been turned back by the fighters who run the camp as a prison. Of the more than 400 residents, I saw only about 30 men, all older than 60.

At one point I was able to slip away from the fighter assigned to monitor my interviews. The moment he was out of earshot, women stopped talking about the horrific camp conditions—lack of fuel, and the chronic diseases—and instead started rapidly firing names at me, dozens and dozens of names of men. They said that a month after security forces had brought them to the camp, there was a nearby bombing.

Afterward, the PMF fighters promptly rounded up all 52 men in the camp between the ages of 17 and 57 and took them away, along with a few younger boys. They have not heard from them since, a pattern (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/09/27/iraq-secret-detention-no-recourse>) I have repeatedly documented following arrests in camps. For 30 minutes, all I did was write down names, including of boys as young as 10. Before I left, I tore the filled pages out of my notebook and hid them in my pocket so that the guards would not find them if I was searched.

In November 2018 I met “Rawan,” a warm and friendly 35-year-old woman, at a camp 60 kilometers south of Mosul, the one-time stronghold of ISIS in Iraq. She welcomed me into her tent, clean and empty in the middle, piled high with mattresses and pillows along the sides. There were no personal possessions—her family was forced to leave behind everything they owned when they fled their home, just two kilometers from the camp where she now lives, after a bombing that destroyed the house in 2016.

As we sat on the cold hard floor, Rawan fought back tears describing the day last August when police arrived at the tent and arrested her 14-year-old son, “Ziad.” She said, “They only took him because of what his dad did, not because of anything he did.” Retributive arrests and guilt by association have become all too common (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/02/03/victimized-first-isis-then-liberators>) in Iraq.

Her husband joined ISIS along with his brothers, and he was killed in an airstrike in 2017. She said the security forces took her son, along with her 70-year-old mother-in-law, and said they didn’t believe her husband was dead. Rawan thinks the arrests were meant to pressure her husband to turn himself in. “When they arrested my son, they told me it was because they had reports that under ISIS he was wearing the ISIS-preferred dress. Well of course he was, that was what he saw the men around him wearing!”

She spends her days in the camp, caught in limbo, unable to move on with her life. She can't renew her identity card, (the original was lost in the rubble of her home) nor can she enroll her other children in the local public school in the camp because her husband joined ISIS. She has been branded with the label of “Awa'il Dawaish” or “ISIS families,” a blanket punitive term applied to anyone with alleged links to ISIS fighters. It is a label that shunts thousands of people, largely women and children, to the margins of Iraqi society, deprived of services, deprived of the ability to move freely, deprived of a future. It is a label that amounts to collective punishment.

Branded an Enemy: Guilt by Association

Thousands of women and children across Iraq have been labelled Awa'il Dawaish since fighting began in 2014. They are pariahs in Iraq—I'll never forget hearing a soldier at an arrival center near a camp hiss at a woman barely strong enough to stand: “Why did you let your son join ISIS? Once he did, why did you let him sleep at home every night? Why didn't you poison him with his dinner?” This treatment may have not only material but psychological impact as well. Recent findings indicate that internally displaced people who feel they are being negatively judged are more prone to depression than others.

ISIS targeted Sunni—mostly Arab—families for recruitment using a mix of ideology, incentives, and threats and exploiting the resentment caused by their marginalization by Iraqi governments since 2003. Iraqis have a legitimate desire to want authorities to hold to account those who encouraged and supported ISIS and are implicated in horrific atrocities including war crimes. However, with ISIS routed from most of its territory, authorities are also focusing on the women and kids of those perceived to have joined ISIS and preventing (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/02/04/families-isis-relatives-forced-camps>) these women and children from returning home and reintegrating (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/03/05/iraq-displacement-detention-suspected-isis-families>) into society. In some cases these women are falling prey to sexual exploitation (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/04/iraq-women-children-with-perceived-ties-to-is-denied-aid-sexually-exploited-trapped-in-camps/>) . This poses a serious threat to Iraq's future, creating a disenfranchised population that will be vulnerable to recruitment by the next wave of extremists. In other words, Iraq's tragic history may repeat itself.

Denial of Security Clearance

One of the most nefarious tools of collective punishment against families with perceived ISIS affiliation is what Iraqis call “security clearance.” Iraqis need security clearance to replace any missing civil documentation. Many families who lived under ISIS rule between 2014 and 2017 are missing (<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-mosul-children-iraq-legal-system-stateless-school-aid-fighter-fathers-crime-a7742751.html>) one or more civil documents. ISIS authorities regularly confiscated official documentation and issued their own, which the Iraqi authorities do not recognize (<https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/born-under-isis-children-struggling-iraq>) . In addition, state security forces confiscated (<https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/iraq-situation-unhcr-flash-update-8-june-2017>) some families' documents as they fled fighting or when they arrived (https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Returnees%20Profile_Ninewa_Jan2018.pdf) at camps for displaced people.

To obtain security clearance, families need to approach the designated intelligence force in their area, which differs among the governorates, to submit their names and request clearance. Officers will run their names through a database of people flagged as “wanted” for their suspected links to ISIS. If their relative is on one of those lists, officers will deny them clearance (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/02/25/iraq-families-alleged-isis-members-denied-ids>) , tear up the application, and destroy even their expired documents – in some cases even arrest them.

Based on estimates by aid groups, in early 2019 at least 156,000 displaced people are missing at least some of their essential civil documentation. Without security clearance and documents an Iraqi is not allowed to freely move within the country. Without documents they are not allowed to pass through a

checkpoint, of which there are thousands along every main road and throughout all towns and villages and at the entrances and exits to camps. This means if they are currently living in a camp, they are effectively prisoner there until they are able to obtain clearance.

In addition, people missing documentation cannot get a job or health care or apply for welfare benefits in Iraq. They cannot get birth certificates for newborn children or children born when they lived under ISIS control. Children denied birth certificates may not be allowed to enroll in school and are at risk of statelessness. Women unable to obtain death certificates for their spouses are unable to inherit property or remarry for several years. The absence of documents—or of the clearance to replace lost ones—effectively turns these people into disenfranchised non-citizens.

Security forces have admitted to me that limiting freedom of movement is the very reason they deny these families security clearance. “It is easier to watch them if they cannot move,” one told me with a grin. Without a security clearance, relatives of ISIS suspects are effectively blocked from returning home. Moving around in Iraq without a valid ID card is not only extremely dangerous but it puts the person at risk of arrest (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/03/06/iraq-isis-child-suspects-arbitrarily-arrested-tortured>) , and as a result, torture (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/04/18/iraq-torture-persists-mosul-jail>) . Most perversely, Iraqis need security clearance to enter a government building, including a courthouse if you wanted to seek judicial remedy for, as an example, being rejected for security clearance.

Many lawyers who sought to help these families get security clearance have been threatened (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/09/12/iraq-officials-threatening-arresting-lawyers>) , beaten and arrested (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/02/25/iraq-officials-arrest-abuse-harass-aid-workers>) . Not surprisingly, none I met since 2017 are willing to risk helping a family once they find out a relative is an ISIS suspect.

Overcoming Restrictions on Movement and Returns

In some areas a practical solution has emerged for obtaining security clearance so relatives of ISIS suspects can return home. In the fall of 2016, Anbar community leaders got the judiciary to agree that if a wife, father, sister, or other relative of an ISIS member who is missing— perhaps dead (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/07/19/iraq-execution-site-near-mosuls-old-city>) , perhaps disappeared (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/09/27/iraq-secret-detention-no-recourse>) —makes a criminal complaint against that relative over his ISIS membership in front of a judge, the judge will issue a document that green-lights their security clearance. The practice is called *tabriya*.

When I first heard about the practice, I assumed that few families would ever consider doing this—Iraqis deeply value family loyalty. I asked “Jamila,” a woman living with her daughters in an Anbar camp, waiting to go home, who had done *tabriya*, about this. “What would you have us do? We cannot stay like this forever, we need to go home,” she told me. While this practice is clearly inappropriate— no one should have to open a criminal complaint against their husband to secure basic rights—many families see no other avenue for returning home.

Even when families get security clearances, though, there’s no guarantee that they can return home, or remain there.

In December 2018, I was walking through an almost totally abandoned market in the town of Qaim, along the Syrian border, which was retaken from ISIS in late 2017. I came across “Hind,” who was reluctant to speak until we were able to find a relatively private place to talk. “I was able to get my security clearance and come home 20 days ago,” she said quietly. “But in the middle of the night 10 days ago, PMF intelligence showed up at my house and confiscated it. They said I have to go and do *tabriya* if I want to get it back.” She was one of four women I met that day whose security clearance had been confiscated by the PMF. They all were living in fear that the next time the PMF came to their house they would be arrested, perhaps even raped.

Other areas are taking other approaches to keep tabs on ISIS families. In late January 2019, authorities governing the town of Karma (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/06/09/iraq-fallujah-abuses-test-control>

militias), northeast of Fallujah in Anbar governorate, issued special pink identity cards to at least 200 families with relatives suspected of ISIS affiliation, a local lawyer and a humanitarian worker told me. They said the families were allowed to return home and can use the documents to travel through checkpoints but will be permanently marked by the pink cards.

In the Sinsil area of Diyala governorate, PMF groups in control told local families eager to return in mid-2018 that the most able male in their family needs to join a local armed unit, generally without pay, to conduct neighborhood patrols and nighttime policing. “Suha,” told me her husband was a teacher but that for the first 10 months after their return he was forced to carry out all-night patrols, preventing him from working. Because some families don’t have a living adult male member, “Muhammad,” a 23-year-old member of his local ‘neighborhood watch’ said there were at least 10 members under 18, the youngest 16.

Iraq used to have a large number of child soldiers but has made real strides over the past decade to reduce their ranks. The forced recruitment by local armed groups threatens that progress.

Rehabilitation

While families with perceived ISIS affiliation face all sorts of abuse, their situation might get much worse in the coming years. Authorities in Baghdad told me in early 2019 that they are considering a proposal (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/05/07/iraq-confining-families-alleged-isis-ties-unlawful>) to construct large-scale semi-permanent detention sites that they are calling “residential compounds.” They said they would construct these compounds, or “cities in the desert” to house families with perceived affiliation to target them with deradicalization programming. They said these “compounds” would have full services, and that with limited exceptions, the “residents” inside would not be allowed to leave while they live there, without specifying how long families would be held there. One official said that humanitarian organizations should not be present in the sites and that the government is not interested in their criticisms.

This chilling plan is not new.

It was the summer of 2016, and an Anbar local leader was speaking to a room of UN officials about the dangers posed by so-called ISIS families.

“They might hold dangerous ideologies and we need to cleanse their minds,” he said, “We need to rehabilitate them.” Getting families to complete a rehabilitation program would signal to local communities that they should let these families come home, he argued.

The government tried to establish such a rehabilitation camp (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/07/13/iraq-alleged-isis-families-sent-rehabilitation-camp>) in 2017 but abandoned the effort. Holding families against their will and forcing them to undergo any kind of program constitutes arbitrary detention. It’s not a new idea. Saudi Arabia (<https://www.hrw.org/report/2009/03/28/no-direction-home/returns-guantanamo-yemen>), Nigeria (<https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/09/05/achieving-peace-in-northeast-nigeria-reintegration-challenge-pub-77177>) and Somalia (https://rusi.org/sites/default/files/20190104_whr_4-18_deradicalisation_and_disengagement_in_somalia_web.pdf) have set up ideological rehabilitation courses for Al Qaeda, Boko Haram, and al-Shabab affiliates. But these programs were for fighters in these groups, not their families, and even in those countries, they risked amounting to arbitrary detention. Even if someone is related to an ISIS member, that relationship should not be used as a pretext to unjustly penalize them.

Segregation and Fear in Sinjar

Late in 2018 I visited four Arab villages in Sinjar where families had returned willingly in June 2018. From 2014 to 2017, these families had remained and lived under ISIS. At the same time their Yazidi neighbors suffered from sexual slavery and killings (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/04/14/iraq-isis-escapees-describe-systematic-rape>) by ISIS. After the area was retaken from ISIS, the Arabs fled and the

Yezidis began to return. Some of the Yezidis formed armed groups under the patronage of the local PMF, which have been implicated (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/12/27/iraq-yezidi-fighters-allegedly-execute-civilians>) in killings of Sunni Arabs. As of early 2019, about 80,000 Yezidis had returned (<https://www.nrc.no/news/2018/november/sinjar-three-years-on-yazidis-have-nowhere-to-return/>) to their original homeland in Sinjar, while another roughly 300,000 were still living in camps in northern Iraq, waiting to go home.

In mid-2018 the government said that some of the Arabs could go home. A total of about 550 families had returned to the four villages when I visited in November. After spending time in these communities, one thing became clear to me: without real accountability for crimes committed during the conflict, some residents would take matters into their own hands.

“Alyas,” a Yezidi man who had rebuilt his home in late 2018, called on these returning families to identify the people responsible for the most serious ISIS crimes to ease tensions around their return. His concern was that if this did not happen, the Arab returnees might be at risk of retributive attacks. At the same time, the Arab communities raised allegations that when they fled the area, armed forces had carried out mass destruction of their homes after looting their properties and stole their farming equipment and harvests. A community leader told me that without compensation for these losses, his community’s grievance would also fester.

Most families we spoke to said tensions between Arabs and Yezidis remain high and the only protection they have is a small group of Iraqi army soldiers deployed to protect the villagers from any attacks. “Ammar,” from one village where only a quarter of the residents have been willing to risk return, told me that in October 2018 a large group of Yezidi PMF members showed up and stole the village’s whole flock of sheep at gunpoint. The army had to intervene and bring the sheep back. Families in the next village told me that three days before my visit, the same PMF forces had come back with bulldozers, saying they were going to set up a checkpoint to monitor the families. The army had almost come to blows with them before they backed down.

The army has told Ammar that if any of the villagers dare enter any of the towns in Sinjar—towns where Arabs used to hold jobs including in local government—they will be killed. Ammar and the rest of the community are forced to drive 40 kilometers to the nearest town controlled by the Arab population for everything from basic shopping to urgent medical care.

Where is the Iraqi government? Ali and Alyas wanted to know. Without a concerted effort to provide accountability for the ISIS crimes, including those against Yezidis, to address grievances and build trust, this small corner of Iraq may be doomed to an endless spiral of violence.

Abandoned in the Cold

On a cold, rainy day in early December 2018, I visited a cluster of tents not being provided with any governmental or nongovernmental services next to an abandoned train station in Salah al-Din, 70 kilometers north of Baghdad. “Ibrahim,” who emerged as a spokesman for the group living there, said that before coming to the site 74 families from the same village only three kilometers away, had been living in a camp in Baghdad since they fled their homes in 2014. In Baghdad, each family had a container-like home, food, health care, and a school nearby. In February 2018, Iraqi forces forcibly evicted them from that camp, saying they had to return home. All of them received security clearance. But, instead of allowing them to go back into their village, Iraqi army soldiers stopped them short because the PMF in control of their area, had decided no one was allowed to return, saying that the local people had been sympathetic to ISIS. That’s how these families ended up being marooned in the makeshift camp at the train station.

“Reem,” was living in a camp in Baghdad where she had access to specialist medical facilities to take care of her two children with disabilities. In February 2018, Iraqi forces forcibly evicted them from that camp, but other soldiers blocked her from returning home. Now she is stuck living without access to a hospital or other services, in a tent next to an abandoned train station three kilometers from her village.

“Reem,” is taking care of her two children alone at the abandoned station. Both children have disabilities and her 4-year-old needs surgery. She told me that at least in Baghdad, the child had been seen by a specialist at the children’s hospital. She cried quietly as she told me she had no idea what she was going to do—she could not afford to leave her 9-year-old alone to take her youngest to Baghdad for the surgery. “Why did they force us to come here against our will?”

Where from here?

Why does the plight of these families preoccupy me? It offends me at a moral level, but I also have a deeper fear: that by marginalizing these families, punishing them for the real or perceived acts of family members, and by depriving them of the opportunity to reintegrate into their communities, the country is pushing them back into the arms of recruiters like those who preyed on young Sunni Arab men and boys to join the ranks of ISIS.

Rawan, whose son was detained because her husband fought with ISIS, can see this in her own children, who are ostracized and prevented even from attending school. “This generation will grow up to become barbaric... the government needs to put them back in school and issue them their identity papers so this generation can forget about ISIS.”

No one believes that healing the many wounds of this traumatized country will be easy. But the task for the government—with the support of the international community—is clear. People like Rawan need to have their documents and civil rights restored. Kids should be allowed back into schools. Systems need to be created to give victims of the most horrific crimes a sense that justice has been done and allow all Iraqi society to build enough trust to live peacefully, side by side, once again.

If returning home is impossible, as it may be for some, dooming families to a life in limbo in a makeshift camp, or a private or informal housing arrangement is not a solution. Everyone deserves a home. If they can’t go home, the government needs to give them a start elsewhere in Iraq, and not in an unlivable location separate from the rest of society. This is how the healing can begin.

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