



Executive Summary

Over 300,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) have returned to their areas in Kirkuk province since its liberation, half of whom are from southwest Kirkuk. The relatively high rate of return has brought hope back to southwest Kirkuk, although challenges to return and recovery remain. Several factors contributed to encouraging residents to return to their homes, including a more reassuring security environment, a partial restoration of basic services, and an improved relationship between local authorities and the federal government.

However, security and social cohesion challenges continue to hinder stability in southwest Kirkuk. One of the primary challenges facing the area is a lack of long-term programs designed to deal with societal divisions created by over a decade and a half of conflict. Short-term achievements are often not followed by long-term strategies from the Government of Iraq (GoI) to build on these successes and put in place policies to mitigate future conflicts.

Community-led conflict resolution efforts are often ad-hoc with no clear long-term strategy. Several interviews with local government officials and tribal and civil society leaders suggest that people are expecting the federal government to intervene with solutions and programs. The GoI does not appear to be planning or carrying out such programs.

Further, divisions among and within communities remain strong and deeply embedded. The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant's (Daesh) continued presence, lack of basic services, intra-tribal competition, lack of government intervention to deal with returning Daesh-affiliated families and individuals, and exclusion of women from public life pose a challenge to the rehabilitation of southwest Kirkuk.

Background

Southwest Kirkuk suffered years of conflict that damaged its social fabric and left its infrastructure in near-complete destruction. Residents in southwest Kirkuk (Riyadh, Rashad, Hawija, Zab, Abasi) are largely Sunni Arab tribes, with the Ubaid and Jbur tribes being the largest. Violent armed groups thrived in the area throughout the past 16 years. An early national resistance movement following the 2003 U.S.-led invasion and the subsequent emergence of radical violent groups turned these areas into one of Daesh's most prominent strongholds. Political and ethnic divisions in Kirkuk province fed into radical groups' narratives and enabled them to recruit hundreds of residents. The conflict not only caused large-scale destruction of private and public property, but

also displaced thousands of residents, pitted Sunni Arabs against Turkmen, Christian and Kurdish communities, and created deep divisions among Sunni Arabs themselves.

Daesh occupied southwest Kirkuk for over three years from June 2014 to October 2017, making it the last area in Iraq to be liberated from Daesh.¹ Daesh's emergence in southwest Kirkuk was welcomed by many who initially saw it as a legitimate rebellion against the Shi'ite-dominated government. Residents' early support for Daesh did not last for long. Daesh soon lost support in the area due to its violent treatment of residents, especially tribal and community leaders who refused to pledge allegiance to the violent extremist group.² The later displacement of nearly half a million residents further increased resentment against Daesh among residents of southwest Kirkuk.



Figure 1 : Iraq Map

Nonetheless, Daesh's durable legacy in the area continues to divide Kirkuki society. Residents, even those who have no connection with Daesh and have fled from its rule, are often accused of being Daesh sympathizers and discriminated against by

¹ "[Prime Minister] Abadi announces the liberation of Hawija," al-Hura Iraq 5 October 2017 - <https://arbne.ws/32BQqsz>;

"Following Mosul, Daesh controls Hawija and other sub-districts," Annhar, 10 June 2014 - <http://bit.ly/2Y8utSQ>

² "Hawija revolts against Daesh," Niqash, 18 September 2014 - <http://bit.ly/2LZyDpo>

other communities. Those who joined Daesh are now rejected by their own communities, leading to revenge campaigns that are sowing divisions and further eroding the area's social fabric.

For more than a decade and a half of conflict, these tribes in southwest Kirkuk have had different loyalties, including to the Kurds, the Iraqi government, Sunni political parties, al-Qa'ida and Daesh, and national insurgencies. These different loyalties undermined social cohesion, creating competing factions in the process.

In addition to internal divisions, Sunni Arabs in southwest Kirkuk have a tense relationship with their neighboring communities. There are strong political and social divisions between Sunni Arabs and the Kurds, while tensions with other minorities, including Christians and Shi'ite Turkmen, remain high. The Kurdish takeover of Kirkuk city in 2014 and the later clashes with Daesh had a negative impact on these relationships. Kurds were accused of demolishing entire Sunni Arab villages, discriminating against local residents, and forcing many of them out of disputed areas; Turkmen communities continue to reject the return of hundreds of residents in the Daquq district, accusing them of having joined Daesh when it stormed Kirkuk in 2014. This is especially true in Tuz Khurmato district, where some Turkmen militias do not allow neighboring Sunni communities to return to their homes.³

Drivers of Return

During the past 19 months, improvements in security and basic services, as well as in the relationship between local authorities in southwest Kirkuk and the federal government led to the return of thousands of IDPs to Kirkuk, most of whom were from the province's southwest.⁴ Although over 100,000 IDPs have yet to return to Kirkuk, over 300,000 have returned to their homes across the province, including 150,000 IDPs in the Hawija district.⁵ At the same time, interviewees reported a slow and poor performance by the Gol in restoring basic services, especially in rural areas. Work by semi-government bodies, however, was reported to be effective in restoring limited yet important basic services in the area.

Improved Basic Services

During the past 20 months, several projects were implemented to restore water and improve electricity in southwest Kirkuk. The limited restoration of basic services encouraged thousands of IDPs to return to their homes. The Reconstruction Fund of Areas Affected by Terrorism (RFAAT) was reported to be the primary actor working on restoring basic services in southwest Kirkuk. RFAAT restored drinking and irrigation water, electricity towers and stations, reopened roads, and rehabilitated government buildings. A RFAAT advisor said in an interview with TSN that their projects in southwest Kirkuk

³ Two interviewees indicated that some Sunni communities near Tuz Khurmato in Salah al-Din remain displaced due to Turkmen's opposition. Turkmen accused them of having worked with Daesh to attack their areas in 2014.

⁴ Over 100,00 IDPs remain displaced in Kirkuk. "Displacement Tracking Matrix DMT," IOM Iraq Mission, June 2019 - <http://bit.ly/2LT04Q8>

⁵ Displacement Tracking Matrix, IOM Iraq Mission, April 2019 - <http://bit.ly/2XX1uBI>

focus only on emergency projects designed to provide “good enough” basic services to the area. Nonetheless, the restoration of these services helped many residents return to their areas, especially in city centers such as Hawija city.

RFAAT’s work, however, lacks the strategic approach needed to resolve the area’s needs for the long term. “All of our projects are based on emergency needs. Our projects are not long-term strategic projects,” a RFAAT advisor told TSN.⁶

The RFAAT advisor and a local government official reported that the GoI has been slow to respond to the area’s needs. The RFAAT advisor explained that all projects are planned in coordination with the Kirkuk provincial government and the GoI. The advisor added that slow bureaucracy and corruption are likely to be behind the GoI’s slow response.



Figure 2 : Map showing IDPs return in southwest Kirkuk
(Source: IOM Iraq Mission)

A Kirkuk Provincial Council (PC) member agreed that the government is slow to respond and is not allocating enough resources to southwest Kirkuk. He also blamed the GoI slow response on corruption and misallocation of resources. “Decisions are made in Baghdad not here [in Kirkuk],” explained the PC member.⁷ “Corruption is everywhere, and we only hear of money being spent but don’t see the results on the ground.”⁸ The PC member admitted however that these projects helped thousands of people return to their homes, but added that “closer coordination between the provincial government and Baghdad is needed.”

The Hawija District Council President said in an interview that the government allocated seven billion Iraqi Dinar (5.9 million USD) to his district.⁹ He added that several strategic projects are planned, including water stations and the first higher education institution in the area. “With more spending, we will see more people return to their homes,” the president stated.

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Reformed Security Forces

Security forces, namely the Federal Police, have revised their approach to dealing with local residents during the past year, thus improving levels of trust and their credibility in the eyes of the population. A Federal Police officer who works in Hawija explained that

⁶ TSN source interview, 10 July 2019

⁷ TSN source interview, 14 July 2019

⁸ TSN source interview 14 July 2019

⁹ TSN source interview, 15 July 2019

they have instated new policies to improve their relationship with local communities. One of these policies aims to increase contact with community leaders. “My commander sees more community leaders than his own soldiers,” reported the captain.¹⁰ He added that, unlike before, all complaints against abuse of power or excessive use of force against civilians are investigated.¹¹ He cited several cases where Federal Police officers were jailed or demoted because of complaints by locals. In addition, the Federal Police set up outposts in villages and towns to protect civilians from Daesh’s raids, a strategy that mirrors the Coalition Forces’ strategy in 2006.

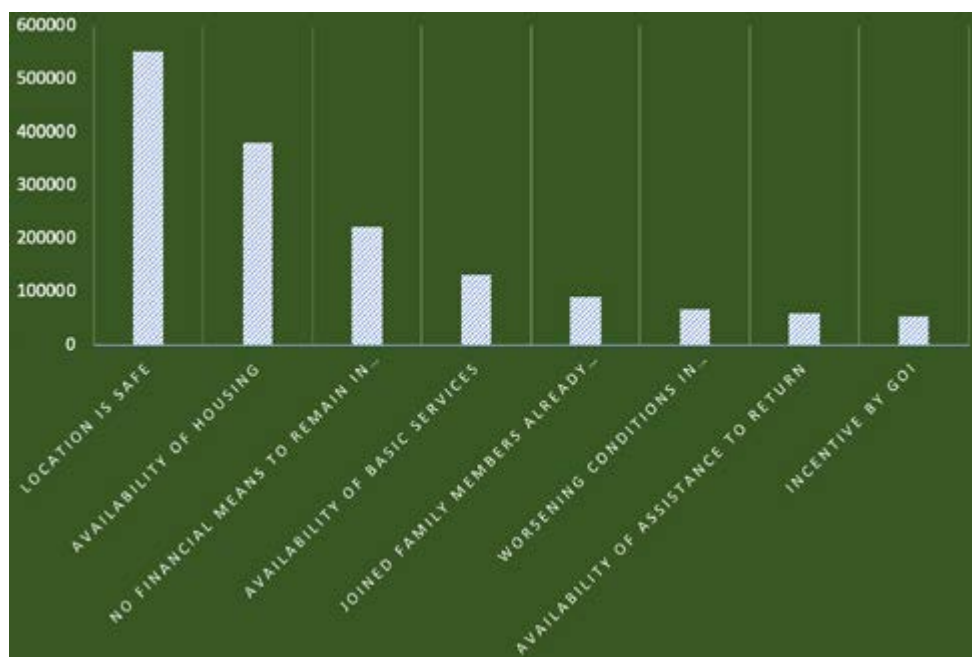


Figure 3 : Reasons for IDPs' returns (Source: IOM Iraq Mission)

Two community leaders and two government officials confirmed that the relationship between local communities and the Federal Police has improved during the past year. “The Federal Police, especially the commanders, coordinate and cooperate closely with local tribes and communities to provide security in southwest Kirkuk,” said the PC member. “There were some complaints at the beginning with the Federal Police, but they have improved,” added a tribal leader from the area. The Hawija District President said that he works in close coordination with the Federal Police, and only minor complaints were reported during the past year. “We feel that they (Federal Police) are here for us,

¹⁰ TSN source interview, 18 June 2019

¹¹ Displacement Tracking Matrix, IOM Iraq Mission, April 2019 - <http://bit.ly/2XX1uBl>

to protect and serve," the president said. "They coordinate their work closely with us and their treatment of locals is excellent."

"Early mistreatment by the Federal Police against some communities following Daesh attacks was vindictive and harmed their relationship with locals," the journalist explained. He added that these practices declined significantly in the past year.

Three sources who were interviewed for this report said that the Federal Police is on its way out and will be replaced with Iraqi Army units.¹²

"Although we are happy with [the Federal Police], we would rather have the Iraqi Army," said the PC member. "[The Iraqi Army] is a professional force that is trained to manage security in rural areas like southwest Kirkuk."

"Even those who were not with Daesh wanted us to leave." Federal Police Officer

Improved Relationships with Baghdad

Broadly speaking, Sunni Arabs' relationship with Baghdad improved significantly during Prime Minister's Haider al-Abadi's term. Good practices by the security forces, Daesh's brutal treatment of residents, and discrimination by the Kurds against Sunni Arabs all contributed to improving the relationship between Baghdad and Sunni Arabs in the area.

Prior to Daesh's occupation, the relationship between the Gol and residents was extremely tense. Government use of violence against protesters in Hawija in 2013 led many to embrace Daesh's takeover of their areas.¹³ Gol's use of violence and feelings of marginalization led many to accept Daesh's – or any Sunni rebel group – over the Gol's rule. "People did not want us here before," said the Federal Police Captain. "Even those who were not with Daesh wanted us to leave."

Although Daesh received substantial support in southwest Kirkuk when it took over Hawija in 2014, its mistreatment of locals soon altered this support. "People were tricked by Daesh," said a tribal leader and a former member of parliament (MP) in an interview with TSN. "They saw what Daesh has to offer and that made them rethink their relationship with Baghdad," he explained. He added that a good sign of the improving relationship is the rate at which residents are taking up arms against Daesh in the area. "People have tasted the bitterness of living under Daesh's rule, and they are going die before letting Daesh back to their areas," the Hawija journalist added.

The Kurdish takeover of Kirkuk city and alleged discrimination against Arabs that followed left its mark on communities' preferences for Baghdad's or Sulaymaniya's rule. Several reports indicated that during fights against Daesh, Kurdish paramilitary forces demolished hundreds of homes in Kirkuk and Nineveh and later prevented residents from returning to their homes.¹⁴ Even in Kirkuk city, Sunni Arabs reported that they were accused by

¹² TSN source interview, 3, 14, July, 26 June 2019

¹³ "Security forces storm Hawija protests with force," al-Jazeera TV, 3 May 2013 - <http://bit.ly/2NZbOF1>

¹⁴ "Banished and Dispossessed: Forced Displacement and Deliberate Destruction in Northern Iraq," Amnesty International, 19 January 2016 - <http://bit.ly/2XHAiad>

the Kurds of affiliation with Daesh. Kurdish forces often imposed restrictions on Sunni Arabs' movements, even within the latter's areas.¹⁵

Following the federal government's takeover of Kirkuk city in 2017, most Sunni Arabs were relieved. "Things are better now," said a Sunni Arab engineer from Kirkuk. "We can now move around without harassment," he added. The activist from Hawija said that the majority of tribal leaders in Hawija refuse to go to Erbil to attend meetings and trainings. "They want Baghdad now because they feel that's where they belong."

Challenges to Social Cohesion

The southwest Kirkuk communities are one of the country's most vulnerable to Daesh's narrative and recruitment. Years of isolation, violence, Daesh recruitment efforts, and government neglect transformed the rural society into a radical stronghold.

During and before Daesh occupation of southwest Kirkuk, hundreds of residents joined the terrorist group, many of whom committed crimes against their own communities. "Southwest Kirkuk's society has been feeding terrorism in Iraq," said the RFAAT advisor. The former MP explained that Daesh's success in the area was due to several factors. "Many who have joined Daesh did not know any better. They were children or people in need for money. Some joined to get a car or a gun, others truly believed in what they were doing." He added that Daesh had a lot of support among residents before it occupied the area, believing that they were a "tribal resistance, not a terrorist organization."

Daesh and other insurgents' presence and operations in the area created deep societal divisions, leaving tribes, sub-tribes, and families at war with each other. To this day, many of the areas' residents who are accused of affiliating with Daesh are unable to return to their homes due to the communities' rejection. In many cases, even if a Daesh family acquires the needed paperwork and security clearance from the Gol, communities prevent their return.

In addition to communities' rejection, there are nearly no efforts by civil society, international organizations, or the Gol to address the issue of Daesh families. This has led to ad-hoc efforts that are unorganized and unregulated to deal with this segment of the society. Claims of tribal leaders allowing well-known Daesh operatives to return to the area angered and terrified Daesh victims, according to two community leaders. Interviewees suggested that such practices are weakening trust in the tribal and security actors involved in the process.

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Although security has improved, southwest Kirkuk continues to face security threats from Daesh. Daesh primarily attacks civilians cooperating with the Gol and conducts hit-and-run attacks against the Iraqi security forces. The Federal Police and local Tribal

¹⁵ Ibid

Mobilization Units (TMUs) have failed in completely extricating Daesh from the area. By using farmlands and desert areas as a deep strategic hideout to plan and conduct their attacks, Daesh has been able to maintain presence and relevance in southwest Kirkuk.

Daesh Presence Impairs Reconciliation

Daesh's presence in the area is hindering reconciliation efforts. "As long as Daesh is able to operate in our areas and maintain their network of sleeper cells and informants, Daesh victims are not willing to forgive," said one community leader from Hawija. "We can't heal as long as the wound is bleeding," he added.

Although most remain in IDP camps, families who are allegedly affiliated with Daesh and manage to return could negatively impact the social cohesion of the area. All individuals interviewed for this report said that without government intervention to reintegrate Daesh families, there is a fear that this return will increase security violations.

Indeed, some believe that Daesh is only able to operate because some of these families could return. "Daesh families are giving extra strength to Daesh," explained the activist from Hawija. "They provide Daesh with information and sometimes host them and feed them," he stated. The PC member, who is originally from Hawija, advocated to keep these families in camps, at least until their communities are ready to accept them back. "This is not the right time for these people to return," said the PC member. "They will once again be an incubator for Daesh," he added.

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In addition, residents with affiliation to Daesh often face discrimination and isolation from their communities, even among children. Children with connection to Daesh are often harassed by their peers who call them names, like 'Dwaish' or Daesh members. "These are going to affect many generations to come," said a community leader from Hawija in an interview.¹⁶ "Acts like this will enable Daesh and other groups to reemerge in our society," he added. A women and human rights activist from Kirkuk added that the "society is not accepting Daesh members' wives and their children." "Their own tribes, families and the larger society are unwilling to accept them back. Women were participants of the violations and violence that was committed against civilians [in Hawija]," she explained. She added that their return is not the only problem, and noted other challenges, especially when dealing with the legal status of their children, most of whom have no legal documents.

"Daesh families are left alone. No one talks to them or wants to be associated with them," said the head of the Hawija District. "They have chosen their path, and we chose ours."

The lack of transparency and objectivity in resettling former Daesh members and their families is also a concern and could be a contributing factor to the area's instability. According to two interviews, some tribal leaders mediated on behalf of Daesh members to return to their homes. Some of these were known criminals to the community. This

¹⁶ TSN source interview, 3 July 2019

has decreased trust in reconciliation efforts due to ongoing fears that Daesh may return to the area. According to one tribal leader “some shaikhs are paid to do the bidding of these individuals, and others just want to cover for their tribesmen’s crimes.”¹⁷

The rate of Daesh families returning to southwest Kirkuk is extremely low due to community rejection and government lack of planning to deal with this issue. “The primary actor rejecting the returning individuals are the local communities. “There is a fear that Daesh victims will harm returning Daesh families,” said the PC member. “Even if the government allows them to return, tribes of Daesh victims will refuse to let them back.” The Hawija District Council President added that the number of returnees with connection to Daesh is next to zero.¹⁸

All interviewees, however, agreed that the issue must be dealt with and that the Iraqi government should spearhead any and all efforts. “The government must have a strategy to deal with this issue,” said the tribal leader. “No effort will succeed and have a long-term effect without the government having a central role in reconciliation,” added the activist. The Iraqi government does not appear to have a plan, at least at this time, to deal with Daesh families. “It is not a priority,” explained the tribal leader and former MP. “Our area will not be stable or safe if we don’t resolve the [Daesh families] issue,” said the Hawija District President. “We have worked on it for a while now and failed to achieve any meaningful results,” he added. “But will tackle it again and again until it is resolved.”

Exclusion of Women

All interviewees agreed that women’s role in public life in southwest Kirkuk is non-existent and that women are largely excluded, especially in conservative areas, like Multaqa, Rashad, and Riyadh. Even in areas where they have more freedom and access to education – mostly in Jburi tribe’s areas – women have little to no role in public life. The exclusion is largely due to tribal traditions and conservative societies. Men are the center and could be said to be the only decision-makers, including in government. “Men have their channels of communications, inclusion structures, and norms that support their domination over public life and decision-making,” the Hawija activist said in an interview.¹⁹ A senior advisor to the World Bank who has worked on the issue said that getting women to participate in workshops and trainings is extremely difficult: “Penetrating into the women’s section of society was one of the most difficult challenges we faced working in Hawija”.²⁰ “We failed to bring enough women to most of our workshops and trainings,” the advisor stated, adding that “even principals of girls-only schools are

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¹⁷ TSN source interview, 9 July 2019

¹⁸ TSN source interview, 15 July 2019

¹⁹ TSN source interview, 3 July 2019

²⁰ TSN source interview, 10 July 2019

men." "The only female teacher that was able to attend one of our trainings was the wife of one of the principals", the advisor added."

The local activist, who worked with tribes and government officials to facilitate reconciliation in the area, agreed with the RFAAT advisor. "Women's public participation in a men-dominated society like ours has been challenging. It is not only men who refuse women's participation, but also most women here are not interested in participating," the activist said.²¹ He added that even in more open communities in southwest Kirkuk, women are not interested in voluntary work. In al-Zab, for example, women requested to be paid to participate in peace committees and were unwilling to "work for free."

One of the primary reasons for women's little to no participation in public life is tribalism and conservative communities, according to interviewees. "There is no space in [liberated rural Kirkuk] for women to participate and be active and effective," said a CEO of a women's rights organization in Kirkuk.²² She added that there are plenty of opportunities for women to participate in public life, but none are given."

There is no space in [liberated rural Kirkuk] for women to participate and be active and effective."
CEO of a women rights organization

Women were also reported to have fewer opportunities to access higher education in rural areas in southwest Kirkuk, especially in more conservative communities. In some rural communities, such as al-Zab and Hawija for example, more women were able to finish their education following their displacement. The case was not true in some areas like Rashad and Riyadh, where most girls are not allowed to pursue higher education.²³

Furthermore, women's participation in local governments is nonexistent. The Hawija District President explained that the lack of women's participation is explained by the absence of an electoral act since 2005. The President, however, failed to explain how the absence of elections led to the exclusion of women. "It is complicated. Elections are complex, involving engaging in politics and securing votes" he responded. "We hope that we will see more inclusion of women in future elections." The Hawija District Council has no women members.

The Limitations of Tribal Mediation

Tribes remain an important power broker but cannot operate outside state authority. Tribal mediation is especially effective when supported by local and national governments. Without government involvement and support, tribal mediation is limited to only minor conflicts. Cases of death are sometimes resolved through tribes, but now, especially with

²¹ TSN source interview, 3 July 2019

²² TSN source interview, 10 July 2019

²³ TSN source interviews between 2 and 3 July 2019

cases related to Daesh, tribes do not have the authority to resolve such disputes without government support.

Tribal councils have intervened and resolved numerous conflicts among residents in the area. The councils intervened in both minor and major issues, such as disputes over irrigation water among farmers, working with government institutions to deliver basic services, and mediating the return of displaced families. The rate of success differed depending on the type of conflict. Tribal efforts to allow Daesh-affiliated families to return to the area, for example, almost always failed, according to interviewees. "The issue is complex, and many actors are involved, [including] politicians who do not want reconciliation to succeed," the Hawija District Council President said.

Although cases involving Daesh members and their families are often left to the government to deal with, two sources reported that some tribal leaders intervened to reconcile known Daesh members with their communities. However, tribes usually try not to deal with Daesh cases out of fear of tribal retribution. "When the case involves a Daesh member, he is on his own," said the tribal leader from Hawija. "Most tribal leaders are unwilling to risk their reputation and standing to defend Daesh members," he further explained. "Nonetheless, for the right price, some would do."

"When the case involves a Daesh member, he is on his own." Tribal Leader

By not defending or vouching for Daesh members, tribes placed accountability on individuals, not the tribe. "We hold individuals responsible [for their crimes], not their tribes or families," the Hawija tribal leader stated. This approach was adopted in several areas, including Anbar and Salah al-Din provinces, where tribes denounced and disowned tribesmen who have joined Daesh.²⁴

Conclusion and Recommendations

Southwest Kirkuk is in a better position than it was a year ago: Services are returning, albeit not delivered by the central government; reconciliation efforts achieved some success; the relationship between residents in southwest Kirkuk and the Gol has improved; and most residents reject Daesh's ideology and presence.

The Gol and its partners are not capitalizing on the limited progress achieved so far, which is likely to be reversed without policies designed to address key societal challenges. Actors seeking to stabilize southwest Kirkuk must put in place plans that not only address the immediate needs, but also deal with long term societal challenges that, if left unaddressed, might be conducive to extremist ideology and violence.

One pressing issue is the return and reintegration of families and individuals with alleged or proven affiliation with Daesh. The Gol and its partners should seek to develop and implement a strategy to deal with reintegrating such returnees. These programs should not only target the returnees, but also the wider society to prepare it to include these individuals. Short of that, a return of these individuals is likely to create further tension

²⁴ Several tribes in the neighboring Salah al-Din province disowned tribesmen who committed crimes with Daesh. See "Albu Ajeel [disowns] tribe members for participating in the Spiker massacre," Basra News, 13 January 2015 - <http://bit.ly/2LnIVRM>

and potentially violence between Daesh victims and those accused of association with Daesh, allowing the terrorist group a reentry to southwest Kirkuk.

The GoI should also enact laws and regulations to govern the return and reintegration of citizens with affiliation to Daesh to avoid ad-hoc, unregulated return that might lead to communal tensions and violence.

Women's participation in public life should be a paramount objective. The GoI and its allies should work with tribal and community leaders to ensure this inclusion without upsetting tribal and religious traditions.



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