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MEAC Iraq Case Study Report

# Managing Exits from Conflict in Iraq: A Case Study of Basra and Tal Afar

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MANAGING EXITS  
FROM ARMED CONFLICT

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## KEY FINDINGS

- **Basra and Tal Afar have markedly different demographics and histories, and their experience during the recent conflict also differed significantly.** Tal Afar was occupied for two years by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and experienced fierce fighting during the military campaign, whereas Basra did not experience occupation or large-scale displacement but did see high rates of mobilization into the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). Both locations face obstacles to 'exiting conflict' and providing a viable reintegration pathway for ex-combatants (in the case of Basra) and persons with perceived ISIL affiliation (in the case of Tal Afar). Some of these obstacles relate to the conflict, while others pre-date and continue beyond the war.
- **Although Basra was not attacked or occupied by ISIL, well-being indicators revealed multiple vulnerabilities.** Many people still struggle to meet their family's basic needs and have poor psychosocial health. In addition, many people fear generalized violence or tribal violence (not directed towards them personally) and want a stronger State security presence. While Basra is often marginalized in humanitarian and stabilization interventions due to its distance from the recent conflict, the study suggests that other forms of violence unrelated to war (such as tribal disputes) are highly destabilizing and that locations such as Basra deserve attention and investment if communities are to transition to a more peaceful state.
- **The impact of the conflict in Tal Afar is seen clearly in indicators on socioeconomic well-being, mental health, and social cohesion.** Most respondents in Tal Afar did not have access to supportive social networks to provide guidance or economic support, and most people said their financial situation had significantly worsened since the war. Mental health indicators also showed very high rates of vulnerability and distress. An important finding is that social relations were weak in Tal Afar even prior to the recent war, suggesting that addressing this issue is complex and requires substantial investment and attention.
- **Trust in the government was low before the war and remained low after the war.**<sup>1</sup> Highest rates of trust (in both locations) were held towards tribal authorities, followed by local security forces, local authorities and (lowest of all) the courts and judiciary. At the same time, people preferred to have State-based security forces (such as the police and military) although they relied on both State institutions (such as local police) and non-State mechanisms (such as tribal authorities) to resolve disputes or seek justice, suggesting a gap between community preferences and what the State is able to deliver. Participation in civil activities and political participation was extremely low and sensitive to talk about, even more so in Tal Afar than in Basra.
- **The war created fractures in social relations in Tal Afar that extend far beyond those who are perceived to have supported ISIL.** Although only 10 per cent of respondents lived under ISIL occupation, nearly half of all respondents reported that family and community members express critical or negative perceptions of them because they do not agree with their decisions or actions during the war, and three-quarters of respondents felt that people who had a similar experience during the war understand them better. This suggests that wartime experiences are

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<sup>1</sup> In both Basra and Tal Afar, in both the pre-war and post-war periods, one-third of respondents felt that the government 'never' applied the law equally and fairly to all people.

a key component of identity and social trust for many Tal Afar residents and may undermine social cohesion in the long term if not addressed. Even in Basra, despite its distance from the war, one-third of respondents felt that people who had a similar experience during the war understood them better, indicating that conflict experiences remain an important influence over identity and social trust in Basra also.

- **Experiences of social exclusion were widespread in Tal Afar.** 30 per cent of respondents felt excluded from social events over the past 12 months, and one-quarter felt excluded from family activities. Importantly, people described their social marginalization and exclusion in ways that do not meet the typical targeting categories of international organizations. When asked why they were excluded, people were much more likely to reference their income and education levels rather than wartime experience (such as living under ISIL occupation). This presents a challenge for effective needs assessments that touch on such sensitive and complex causal phenomenon and suggests that agencies should seek community input to ensure their targeting criteria reflect the way people themselves describe their vulnerability.
- **Community acceptance of ex-combatants and insecurity undermine the reintegration of ex-combatants.** In Basra, 2 of 12 ex-combatants stated that they had been treated poorly in public settings due to their status as ex-combatants, and one ex-combatant stated that his family and friends have mixed (i.e., both positive and negative) perceptions of his involvement in the PMF. While the study did not interrogate why these (partially) negative perceptions exist, other research suggests it may be due to the dominance of the PMF in economic and political life in Basra and the perception that PMF members unfairly benefit from current or former membership. Ongoing insecurity also undermines the reintegration of ex-combatants, given that 25 per cent of respondents in Tal Afar and 15 per cent in Basra believe that civilians need weapons to protect themselves.
- **Environmental changes (such as drought) appear to be a potential driver of recruitment into armed groups in Tal Afar.** In Tal Afar, 29 per cent of respondents reported knowing someone who joined an armed group due to the repercussions of climate shifts (such as loss of agricultural livelihoods due to drought).
- **Disability rates were higher among ex-combatants compared with the civilian population,<sup>2</sup> however, most ex-combatants said that their disability did not stem from the war.** This was a surprising finding since ex-combatant disabilities are more often linked to war injuries, particularly for those who spent time in combat. The reason why ex-combatants reported that their disability was not associated with the war deserves further investigation.
- **In Tal Afar, the reintegration of families with perceived ISIL affiliation is a significant challenge to post-war community recovery and cohesion.** Men were more likely to raise concerns related to the physical security of the community (indicating that the return of these families would lead to revenge attacks and introduce security risks), whereas women appeared to be concerned about broader social or ideological issues rather than specifically physical security (worrying that these families would continue to support ISIL or remain connected to extremist groups). Most respondents believed that accusations against families for ISIL affiliation were true, suggesting that accusations “stick” and it is difficult to dislodge the associated stigma.

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<sup>2</sup> Disability was reported among roughly 20 per cent of the civilian respondents versus 40 per cent of ex-combatants.

However, respondents did distinguish individual profiles of people accused of ISIL affiliation (with slightly more leniency reported towards female-headed households, for example).

- **Most people prefer a government-led process for facilitating the return of families with perceived ISIL affiliation.** The Iraqi Government relies on a range of mechanisms to facilitate the return of families with perceived ISIL affiliation, including a government-led security screening process; disavowal of accused family members; and sponsorship by a reputable community member. Respondents indicated the highest levels of trust towards the government-led security screening process, with much lower rates of trust towards the disavowment process (known as *tabriyya*) and the sponsorship system. Only 25 per cent of respondents expected that families with perceived ISIL affiliation should disavow relatives before returning.
- **Humanitarian assistance was often associated with markers of corruption in Tal Afar.** It is vital to note that this is not specific to IOM, and it is unclear whether respondents were referring to international or national organizations and actors (or both). Nonetheless, 38 per cent of respondents in Tal Afar said that a connection was required to receive assistance (versus 13 per cent in Basra) and another 13 per cent said it was necessary to pay to receive humanitarian support (versus zero in Basra).

# Background

## About MEAC

How and why do individuals exit armed groups, and how do they do so sustainably, without falling back into conflict cycles? These questions are at the core of UNU-CPR's Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) initiative. MEAC is a multi-year, multi-partner collaboration that aims to develop a unified, rigorous approach to examining how and why individuals exit armed conflict and evaluating the efficacy of interventions meant to support their transition to civilian life. MEAC seeks to inform evidence-based programme design and implementation in real time to improve efficacy. At the strategic level, the cross-programme, cross-agency lessons that will emerge from the growing MEAC evidence base will support more effective conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts.

## About this Series

The MEAC findings report series seeks to put evidence about conflict transitions and related programming into the hands of policymakers and practitioners in real time. The reports present short overviews of findings (or emerging findings) across a wide range of thematic areas and include analyses on their political or practical implications for the UN and its partners.

## About this Report

IOM Iraq is delivering programming across Iraq aimed at reducing local sources of violence and supporting economic recovery. These programmes target communities that experienced a high rate of mobilization during the war with ISIL and/or are recovering from the after-effects of occupation by ISIL and the subsequent military campaign to dislodge the group. This report is based on data collected from February 2022 to March 2022 from a total of 807 respondents across the provinces of Basra and Tal Afar, chosen as sites for the MEAC pilot in Iraq due to their high rates of mobilization and differing experiences during the war with ISIL. The report presents data about community experiences pre-, during, and post-war, and examines what community experiences, perceptions, and preferences mean for reintegration prospects in Basra and Tal Afar. This data may be useful to UN and NGO partners working in the region to bolster their early recovery programming, as well as efforts to support the communities who receive a high number of ex-combatants or persons perceived to be associated with armed groups. The report ends with an examination of key policy and programmatic implications of these findings.

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Exiting Armed Groups in Iraq

The MEAC initiative aims to understand how individuals reintegrate to ‘civilian’ or ‘community’ life after a period of conflict. It focuses on people who are oriented towards conflict in their actions, associations, identity, or the way they are identified by others. This includes people who were combatants; those who joined armed groups in non-combatant roles; those accused of joining (willingly or by force) an armed group; and those whose transition or reintegration is affected by their *perceived* connection to an armed group (even if distant, or ideological rather than material). While wartime experiences and transition pathways vary considerably, the common factor among such diverse groups is the heightened challenge individuals face when transitioning from war to peace as a result of their identity or the way they are identified by others.

In Iraq, the insurgency led by the ISIL from 2014 until 2017 led many people to be involved or associated with conflict (and conflict actors) in one way or another. From those associated with ISIL – or perceived as having an association with the group – to those who joined security forces that fought against ISIL, many people need specific types of support in order to fully and sustainably reintegrate after the war ends. Recognizing that different groups of people require support is not intended to imply that their experiences during or after war are the same – rather, this report suggests that understanding the big picture is vital to effectively supporting Iraq’s transition out of conflict and this requires taking into account the full range of reintegration challenges. This report covers the experience of three different groups, described briefly below.

### Popular Mobilization Forces

ISIL’s rapid advance across Iraq in late 2013 and early 2014 overwhelmed the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). In June 2014, as ISIL reached the height of its territorial gains in Iraq, the country’s most influential Shiite cleric, Grand-Ayatollah Al-Sistani, issued a *fatwa* calling upon all able-bodied Iraqi males to take up arms in order to defend Iraqi territory from the group.<sup>3</sup> Tens of thousands of men responded, the majority of whom originated from Shia areas of south-central Iraq that were not attacked or occupied by ISIL, although at the time many feared that either their own or other nearby communities might suffer that fate given the speed of ISIL’s insurgency. However, while the PMF is most known for the Shia forces that form its leadership and the majority of recruits, it also includes more than 50 groups that span the full spectrum of Iraq’s ethnic, political, and religious diversity. Most of those who mobilized joined non-State armed groups that were already in existence but were not formally recognized by the government. In 2016, the Prime Minister issued an Executive Order recognizing these groups under the collective umbrella of the PMF.<sup>4</sup> Shortly thereafter, the PMF were incorporated as part of the ISF through Law No. 40 of 2016. Yet, an important distinction remains: while on paper the PMF is subordinate to the Iraqi Government chain of command, in reality, all attempts by successive Prime Ministers to bring the PMF under the operational control of

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<sup>3</sup> See the content of the [fatwa](#). "What was stated in the Friday sermon of the representative of the supreme religious authority in Holy Karbala," Al-Sistani, 13 June 2014.

<sup>4</sup> This recognition came via Office of the Prime Minister of Iraq, Executive Order No. 91, 24 February 2016.



the ISF or Iraqi Government have failed, and groups retain their own command structures and identity.<sup>5</sup>

During the war with ISIL, many PMF combatants were deployed outside their own governorate as part of the government-led military campaign to retake territory from ISIL, and were tasked to fight, protect infrastructure or religious sites, or provide other military functions. Following the territorial defeat of ISIL in late 2017 – significant credit for which went to the PMF<sup>6</sup> – thousands of PMF combatants demobilized and returned home, although no formal Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) process took place, and little (if any) reintegration support was provided. A key issue with PMF mobilization is that it attracted a lot of unemployed youth, offering them a salaried position along with the legitimacy of saving Iraq. While this was not the only profile to mobilize (and people with ongoing employment also joined the PMF), those who had existing jobs did not typically need the same degree (or type) of reintegration assistance when they demobilized because most were able to return to their old jobs. The situation for unemployed youth created more significant challenges, including the risk that those who could not find civilian employment would remain attached to their group and this would encourage the continued prominence of armed groups in communities long after the war ended; or that combatants would demobilize, but their difficult living circumstances would push them towards criminal behaviour or sources of income.

### Families with Perceived ISIL affiliation

Another very different but equally important population whose identity is connected to the war is comprised of those who are perceived as associated with ISIL.<sup>7</sup> When ISIL attacked and occupied the Sunni-majority western and northern governorates of Iraq (including Anbar, Kirkuk, Ninewa, and Salah al-Din), some residents fled immediately while others remained throughout the occupation. Those who stayed did so for diverse reasons: economic, social, familial, ideological, as well as because of security concerns and a lack of information or misinformation about their options. Particularly in the early days, a perception that the quality of governance under ISIL would improve relative to the Iraqi State led many to stay.<sup>8</sup> Residents who remained in ISIL-held territory were typically displaced when the military launched a campaign to retake each location.<sup>9</sup> As a result, the timing and circumstances of displacement have divided many communities between those who remained under ISIL occupation and those who fled the group's arrival. As a first point of concern, this study examines the highly varied wartime experiences of these two populations and how these experiences may have affected community cohesion and contributed to intracommunity divisions.

A second point of concern for this study is a subset of people who lived under ISIL occupation and who today are perceived by their communities as (former or current) ISIL affiliates. Communities (and individuals) differ in their perception of what 'level' or 'type' of collaboration warrants this accusation. In most communities, those who held certain roles under ISIL (such as senior leadership)

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<sup>5</sup> Crispin Smith, Hamdi Malik, and Michael Knights, "[Team of Legal Gladiators? Iraqi Militias' Tortured Relationship with Law](#)," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 12 April 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Erwin van Veen, Nick Grinstead, and Floor El-Kamouni-Janssen, [House Divided: Political Relations and Coalition-building between Iraq's Shi'a](#) (Clingendael: Netherlands Institute of International Relations, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Due to ethical concerns that it may put people at risk of potential prosecution under the 2005 Terrorism Act, the study did not try to identify or engage with persons who were actually involved with ISIL (whether of their own volition or not). Rather, it focuses on persons who are perceived by their community as affiliated, whether or not that perception is accurate.

<sup>8</sup> Mara Revkin, "[Competitive Governance and Displacement Decisions Under Rebel Rule: Evidence from the Islamic State in Iraq](#)," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* vol 65, No. 1 (September, 2021).

<sup>9</sup> For detailed information on displacement patterns during the war with ISIL in Iraq, see IOM Iraq, [Iraq Displacement Crisis 2014-2017](#) (Baghdad: IOM, 2018).

or committed serious crimes on behalf of the group are characterized as associated with the group.<sup>10</sup> Often, however, such accusations of affiliation go beyond the individual and attach to first- or second-degree relatives, or even reach up to fourth-degree relatives in some communities.<sup>11</sup> Families with perceived affiliation to ISIL (even when due to a relatively distant familial connection) can find the return to their communities blocked by security actors,<sup>12</sup> experience community rejection and stigmatization,<sup>13</sup> and are at high risk of revenge attacks and violence.<sup>14</sup> Female returnees who face this accusation are also at a higher risk of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), particularly female-headed houses and those in rural areas.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, it is common for people to fear that the return of families they believe supported or continue to support ISIL will destabilize their communities and create new risks for security and social relations. In this context, the buy-in of community members has been vital to avoid revenge attacks or the start of new conflict when families with perceived ISIL affiliation return.<sup>16</sup> In light of this, the study seeks to understand perceptions towards these families, factors affecting reintegration, and reintegration experiences to date.

## Community Members

UN reintegration and early recovery programming recognizes that conflict exit is not only an individual matter but also a community one. Ex-combatants and those perceived as having had an affiliation with an armed group do not reintegrate in a vacuum. Community acceptance is essential for an individual's full and sustained return to civilian life. Moreover, the communities to which ex-combatants return are often fragile and underdeveloped and people there are likely to resent reintegration programming that benefit only parts of the community while ignoring others. Therefore, it is essential to contextualize an individual's reintegration progress against the history, orientation, and norms of their community. As such, most transition programmes aim not only to transform and reintegrate ex-combatants, but to develop and reconstruct the entire society through efforts aimed at political, economic, and social development.<sup>17</sup> On this basis, the MEAC project collects information on community experiences, beliefs, and perceptions in so far as they relate to the transition out of conflict.

## 1.2 Research Questions and Policy Objectives

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<sup>10</sup> For example, in the governorate of Anbar, some communities consider as ISIL affiliates those who cohabited with the group, whereas other communities have a more nuanced understanding of affiliation and consider as affiliated families those with one first-degree relative allegedly was a full-fledged member of the group, meaning the person was an ISIL combatant or was appointed by ISIL to a core civil servant post such as mukhtar. Certain actions are also considered as 'red lines' for returning to the community, which tends to apply to those families whose first-degree relatives killed other community members or burn their properties as part of ISIL. For more information see, IOM Iraq, [Managing Return in Anbar: Community Responses to the Return of IDPs with Perceived Affiliation](#) (Baghdad: IOM, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> IOM Iraq, [Tribal Justice Mechanisms and Durable Solutions for Families with a Perceived Affiliation to ISIS](#) (Baghdad: IOM, 2020).

<sup>12</sup> Blocked returns are commonly enforced by security actors on the ground, usually on the grounds of the IDPs families not possessing the required documentation (usually a security clearance) to leave the area if displacement or re-enter the area of origin. See, IOM Iraq, [Protracted displacement in Iraq: Revisiting categories of return barriers](#) (Baghdad: IOM, 2021).

<sup>13</sup> IOM Iraq (2020), and IOM Iraq (2018).

<sup>14</sup> See, Human Rights Watch, [Iraq: Looting, Destruction by Forces Fighting ISIS](#), 16 February 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Oxfam, [Community perceptions of Sexual and Gender Based Violence](#), 29 July 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Olga Aymerich, [Community Resilience and the Return of Iraqi IDPs with Perceived Affiliation to the Islamic State](#), *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, vol 39, no. 4 (January, 2021).

<sup>17</sup> Kees Kingma, [Demobilization, reintegration and peacebuilding in Africa](#), *International Peacekeeping* vol 9, no. 2 (September, 2002); Alpaslan Özerdem and Tim Jacoby, [Post-war recovery: Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration](#) (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2009).

This report is the first in a series that will interrogate the process of 'conflict exit' in the context of Iraq. In this first report and pilot study, the focus is on community perceptions towards the reintegration of the two target groups (namely, PMF ex-combatants and families with perceived ISIL affiliation) in Basra and Tal Afar.

This report aims to answer two research questions:

- What do community wartime experiences and related perceptions and preferences mean for reintegration prospects in Basra and Tal Afar?
- Are current conditions present in the community favourable for reintegration, and more broadly for community reconciliation and peacebuilding?

The primary policy objective of this report is to identify programmatic areas where IOM, its partners, and other early recovery actors can better design, implement, and/or support community-based reintegration programming.

## 2. Methodology

This report is based on data collected from February 2022 to March 2022 from a total of 807 respondents in Basra and Tal Afar. Data was collected by a team of Iraqi enumerators who live in the relevant governorates. In both locations, male enumerators interviewed male respondents and female enumerators interviewed female respondents.

Due to complex challenges related to access and research permission, the sample size in Basra is significantly smaller compared with Tal Afar. In total, 86 surveys (11 per cent) were conducted in Basra, while 721 (89 per cent) were conducted in Tal Afar. In both locations, a selection of participants in IOM programmes were interviewed by phone. In Tal Afar, an additional randomized sample was collected from community members by way of a household survey. The figure below provides the breakdown for each location.

*Figure 1: Sample size*

	Basra	Tal Afar
IOM referrals (by phone)	86	165
Community sample (in person)	0	556
<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>721</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>807</b>	

Almost all respondents (99 per cent) were adults, with 7 respondents aged between 15 and 17 (all boys located in Tal Afar). Overall, 40 per cent of respondents were female, with 34 per cent female respondents in Tal Afar and 51 per cent female respondents in Basra. This variation is due to the unwillingness of some female community members in Tal Afar to participate in the survey, often due to their perception that it was not appropriate for women to engage in topics deemed political or sensitive. In Tal Afar, where residents come from diverse sectarian backgrounds, the survey – and IOM programming – targeted diverse neighbourhoods, which resulted in 60 per cent Shia respondents and 40 per cent Sunni respondents (all of whom were Turkmen, in line with the majority demographic in Tal Afar).

The survey sought to understand wartime experiences; community perceptions of PMF ex-combatants (where possible, given the sensitivity inherent in asking directly about this topic) as well as families with perceived ISIL affiliation; trust in government institutions; perceptions on the reintegration process; as well as holistic well-being indicators covering economic well-being, social well-being, psychological well-being, political and civic engagement, and rule of law. The survey also collected information on disability utilizing the Washington Group questions.<sup>18</sup> While a comprehensive analysis of each data point is not possible in this report, it includes key points throughout the report.

A brief note on language: The report refers to Basra (which is a province) and Tal Afar (which is a district of Nineveh province). Although data collection took place in only two districts of Basra (of seven districts), the report refers to Basra given that the province is relatively homogenous in terms

<sup>18</sup> See the [Washington Group on Disability Statistics](#).

of ethno-sectarian background and there is little difference between districts in terms of recent history and conflict experience. The province of Nineveh where Tal Afar is located, by contrast, is Iraq's most diverse province ethnically and religiously, and the recent history and wartime experience varies considerably between (and even within) districts. As such, it would be misleading to refer to Nineveh province when the data collection took place only in Tal Afar city.

## Limitations

Interviewing PMF ex-combatants about their wartime and demobilization experiences is difficult given the sensitivity of the topic, particularly when utilizing a survey format where there is limited time to establish trust. In addition, the political environment in Basra necessitated a complex process to obtain access and permission to undertake surveys. Overall, 14 per cent of respondents in Basra (12 persons) and 1 per cent of respondents in Tal Afar (seven persons) reported that they had joined an armed group; however, it was not possible to interview the Basra respondents about their wartime or combatant-related experiences. In addition, five of the seven ex-combatants in Tal Afar did not respond to the request to answer questions specific to their wartime experiences, leaving a total sample size of only two ex-combatants. The limited sample of ex-combatants prompted a shift in focus in the study, to examine community experiences, perceptions, and preferences and what these mean for reintegration prospects of PMF ex-combatants, rather than the views or experiences of ex-combatants themselves. This experience also generated recommendations on future research design and approaches, included in the final section of this report.

A second limitation relates to the challenges of effectively isolating the impact of community-based programming. The community-based targeting of the studied programmes did not allow for easy verification and referral of ex-combatants among programme beneficiaries, and this limitation – in addition to the limitation associated with the lack of permissions mentioned earlier – meant that this study could not identify a sufficient sample of ex-combatants that would enable the authors to draw direct conclusions about their reintegration progress. That said, the community data – particularly in Tal Afar – is quite rich and allows for a close examination of community receptivity to the reintegration of both PMF ex-combatants and families with perceived ISIL affiliation.

A third limitation relates to persons perceived as affiliated to ISIL. In Tal Afar, 10 per cent of respondents reported that they lived in ISIL territory during occupation. Given the sensitivity in asking someone if they are or were perceived as affiliated to ISIL, the study utilized proxy indicators to identify people within this group who appear to have had proximity to ISIL and are likely treated by their community as if they are affiliated with it. Given it is a small sample size, the findings should be taken cautiously and cannot be generalized. Instead, similar to the above, the findings focus on community perceptions and societal conditions that affect reintegration prospects for this group also.

Finally, a fourth limitation is the small sample size in Basra. Originally, the survey planned to sample equal numbers of participants in both Basra and Tal Afar. However, it was not possible to complete a randomized community survey without obtaining permission from the PMF Commission, which as mentioned earlier was not forthcoming. As a result, the Basra sample includes 86 respondents who were referred by IOM (as former participants in IOM's community-based programming) and contacted by phone. Given the relatively small sample size, the Basra results should be read with caution, particularly when the number of respondents or the statistical shift is small.

### 3. Wartime Experiences

One premise of this study is that war and wartime experiences have wide-reaching impact on the well-being of individuals and communities, and that different wartime experiences shape the way that individuals and communities transition out of conflict and, relatedly, how they think about their identity or are identified by others. This transition from war to peace is also shaped by a myriad of factors that pre-date or coexist alongside the conflict, such as well-being and resilience prior to the conflict start, existing divisions within a society, prior trust in government institutions, or the existence of social support networks. The study also aims to map these existing factors and examine how conflict impacts them – and, in turn, how changes to these broader factors might contribute to conditions that support or undermine the reintegration prospects of ex-combatants and families with perceived ISIL affiliation. To start with, this section provides an overview of conflict experiences in Basra and Tal Afar during the war with ISIL.

Basra and Tal Afar had vastly different wartime experiences. Basra was not attacked or occupied by ISIL and did not receive a large number of internally displaced persons (IDPs), but had one of the highest governorate-level rates of mobilization into the PMF and saw many recruits deploy to other governorates including in combat roles, while Tal Afar was occupied by ISIL for two years, saw heavy fighting during the military operation to retake the city, and also experienced mobilization into the PMF. These different experiences provide an interesting counterpoint to look at the impact of different wartime experiences on individuals and communities; however, it is important to note that the study is not designed as a comparative case study. Basra and Tal Afar differ considerably on many other fronts, not only wartime experiences – such as ethno-sectarian makeup, community cohesion, history of intercommunal violence, relationship with the central government, and presence of armed groups, just to name a few. This means that the 2014-2017 war with ISIL is not an isolated variable affecting otherwise similar communities. Nonetheless, comparing well-being indicators across the two locations highlights some instances when the impact of conflict appears particularly stark on those who were more exposed to violence, and the study draws attention to these examples as a way of understanding the impact of conflict on a community's well-being. Just as important, it also draws attention to areas where well-being indicators have not changed considerably due to wartime experiences, suggesting that continuing forms of violence can be equally as destabilizing for communities, and that communities affected by structural violence (such as tribal disputes or absence of rule of law) require equal levels of attention as those affected by conflict.

### 3.1 Basra

Basra is a province located at Iraq's southern tip and renowned for its rich oil reserves and port access. The population is predominantly Shia Arab (and all respondents to the survey were Shia Arab). Even prior to the war with ISIL, armed groups have played a prominent role in Basra's political, social, and economic life, enabled by the security vacuum that emerged in Basra following the 2003 US-led military intervention and which allowed non-State armed groups to set up alternative security systems linked to a system of political patronage.<sup>19</sup> Today, a combination of armed groups (many associated with the PMF), tribes, and smuggling cartels are said to influence every aspect of commercial life in Basra. As is the case across Iraq, different PMF units operate in fierce competition and jockey for control over Iraq's three most valuable assets: oil, control over security forces, and access to public services and resources.<sup>20</sup> Basra's wealth (linked to oil and border points, which offer vital opportunities for revenue raising) made Basra a key hub for the PMF, and the province also provided some of the highest numbers of recruits during the war against ISIL, including among youth.<sup>21</sup>

The high rate of mobilization in Basra is reflected in the survey data: 14 per cent of male respondents (12 persons) had joined an armed group during the war on ISIL, and 23 per cent of female respondents reported that their husband or father had joined an armed group during the war. In all but one case (who listed the group as 'other'), the armed group was the PMF. Of the 12 respondents who had joined an armed group, only one was still active (and the remainder had demobilized). Although the rate of mobilization was fairly high, it is worth noting that of those interviewed there were no instances of spouses being killed during the war (despite 2 per cent of Basra respondents reporting to be widow(er)s).

In addition to trying to understand fatality rates among those who mobilized, the survey sought to measure other physical and psychological wounds of war contextualized against the well-being for the local population. To this end, the survey collected information on the prevalence of disability, utilizing the Washing Group questions, as well as questions on psychosocial functioning (discussed in the next section). Disability rates in Basra were lower than Tal Afar, and it was uncommon for respondents to link their disability to the war: only 6 per cent of all reported instances of disability were stated to result from the recent conflict and another 6 per cent of reported instances of disability 'maybe or in part' started as a result of the war. This group included 4 ex-combatants out of a total of 12 ex-combatants in the study sample, indicating a relatively high prevalence of disability, particularly when compared with the civilian sample where 14 of civilians out of 74 (19 per cent) reported some type of disability (note that the overall rate of disability was slightly higher than the number of persons, given that some respondents reported multiple disabilities). Of the ex-combatants, one reported difficulty with walking, one difficulty with walking and self-care, and two with difficulty seeing; however, three of the four stated that these problems did not start as the result of the war, and one refused to answer this question. Given the small sample size, this should not be read as indicative of the rate of disability among ex-combatants; moreover, there may be stigma attached with admitting an injury resulted from the war, which may be influenced these answers. Of the 13 civilian respondents, only one reported that the difficulty started as the result of the conflict,

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<sup>19</sup> James K. Wither, "[Basra's not Belfast: the British Army, 'Small Wars' and Iraq](#)" *Small Wars & Insurgencies* vol. 20, no. 3-4 (December, 2009).

<sup>20</sup> Mac Skelton and Zmkan Ali Saleem, [Iraq's Political Marketplace at the Subnational Level: The Struggle for Power in Three Provinces](#) (London: Conflict Research Programme, 2020).

<sup>21</sup> Jessa Rose Dury-Agri, Omer Kassim, and Patrick Martin, [Iraqi Security Forces and Popular Mobilization Forces: Orders of Battle](#) (Washington DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2017).

one said it might have started as a result of the war, one did not know, and ten said it did not start as the result of the conflict.

*Figure 2: Washington Group questions, Basra (n=86)*

Question	No	Some	A lot	Cannot do
Do you have difficulty seeing, even with glasses?	88%	8%	2%	0%
Do you have difficulty hearing, even with a hearing aid?	99%	0%	0%	0%
Do you have difficulty walking or climbing stairs?	91%	7%	1%	0%
Do you have difficulty taking care of yourself?	94%	5%	0%	0%
Do you have difficulty remembering or concentrating?	95%	3%	0%	0%
Using your usual (customary) language, do you have difficulty communicating?	97%	2%	0%	0%

The data suggests that the direct impact of the war had limited reach in Basra; however, high rates of mobilization in support of the military campaign, together with the broader economic and social effects of the war, are likely to have had an impact. The subsequent sections aim to understand the extent to which well-being was affected in Basra even in the absence of direct war-time violence.



### 3.2 Tal Afar

Located in north-western Ninewa, Tal Afar is one of the largest districts of the province. Prior to the war with ISIL, it consisted mainly of Sunni and Shia Turkmen and a minority of Sunni and Shia Arabs and Kurds. All respondents to the survey were Turkmen, with a mix of Sunni (40 per cent) and Shia (60 per cent) respondents. Tal Afar was attacked and occupied by ISIL for approximately two years and experienced fierce fighting during the military operation to retake the city, as one of the last areas to be retaken from ISIL control. In the town of Tal Afar (where this survey took place), the main security forces engaged in the military campaign were PMF units originating from southern Iraq, and the PMF has remained the most prominent actors in the area since then. Of the survey sample, 1 per cent (seven persons) had joined an armed group, of which six joined the PMF and one reported the group as 'other'.

Most respondents from Tal Afar experienced serious harm during the period of ISIL occupation and the military campaign to retake the district, and experiences were relatively similar between men and women. Almost all (95 per cent) of Tal Afar respondents were displaced at some point during the war, and 10 per cent lived under ISIL occupation. 8 per cent of children attended school under ISIL occupation. Of those surveyed, 3 per cent of respondents reported to be widow(er)s and, of these, 61 per cent reported that their spouse died during the recent war. Additionally, 5 per cent of respondents (49 persons) reported that a child living with them was the child of someone killed during the war (almost all relatives).

During the war, roughly two-thirds (68 per cent) of respondents felt like they were 'sometimes' or 'most times' in danger of being hurt or killed, for which most (98 per cent) blamed ISIL. Many people experienced severe harm to a close relative during the war, including having a close relative killed (34 per cent)<sup>22</sup> or abducted by an armed group (11 per cent).<sup>23</sup> In addition, 91 per cent of respondents reported that their property or belongings were destroyed or taken away.<sup>24</sup> As noted in the footnotes, these harms were generally attributed to ISIL (around 90 per cent) as well as coalition airstrikes (roughly 14 per cent) or coalition actors associated with the government of Iraq. There were no reports of sexual violence or forced marriage, which likely indicate the sensitivity of the topic and lack of willingness to report such crimes, rather than an absence of such violence, given that sexual violence particularly against Shia Turkmen in Tal Afar is documented elsewhere (and highly stigmatized).<sup>25</sup>

Disability rates were high in Tal Afar, and respondents often linked their disability to the recent conflict: 24 per cent of disabilities were reported to have started as a result of the recent conflict and 23 per cent of reported disabilities 'maybe or in part' started as a result of the recent conflict. Three of the seven ex-combatants in Tal Afar reported to have a disability, including one who had difficulty seeing, walking, and remembering and noted that these difficulties started as the result of the war; in addition to two who said the difficulty did not start as the result of the war, but reported difficulty seeing and remembering. These injuries may indeed pre-date the war, but (as with Basra), it may be that these difficulties started after the war ended and the ex-combatants therefore do not draw an explicit connection to the war; or they may be unwilling to link a problem with cognitive function (difficulty remembering or concentrating) to wartime experience since it implies mental trauma associated with the war.

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<sup>22</sup> 90 per cent by ISIL, 14 per cent by coalition strikes, 3 per cent by Iraqi army or Peshmerga, and 3 per cent by other actors.

<sup>23</sup> 90 per cent attributed to ISIL, 14 per cent coalition airstrikes, 4 per cent Iraqi army or Peshmerga, 1 per cent the PMF, and 5 per cent to other actors

<sup>24</sup> 92 per cent by ISIL, 12 per cent by coalition airstrikes, 6 per cent by the PMF.

<sup>25</sup> Guley Bor, [Response to and reparations for conflict-related sexual violence in Iraq: The case of Shi'a Turkmen survivors in Tal Afar](#) (London: LSE Middle East Centre Report, 2019).

*Figure 3: Washington Group questions, Tal Afar (n=721)*

Question	No	Some	A lot	Cannot do
Do you have difficulty seeing, even with glasses?	77%	18%	4%	0%
Do you have difficulty hearing, even with a hearing aid?	87%	11%	2%	0%
Do you have difficulty walking or climbing stairs?	81%	13%	6%	0%
Do you have difficulty taking care of yourself?	84%	11%	4%	0%
Do you have difficulty remembering or concentrating?	81%	16 %	3%	0%
Using your usual (customary) language, do you have difficulty communicating?	87%	10%	2%	0%

The survey data suggests that the impact of the war on Tal Afar was significant, with virtually all of the population exposed to violence to some extent and often in multiple forms (e.g., displacement, death, or injury of a relative, conflict-related violence). While the majority of violence was attributed to ISIL, the responsibility of diverse actors (such as the ISF or PMF) raises more complex concerns about post-war social cohesion and reconciliation, discussed later in the report.

## 4. Socioeconomic Well-being

The study sought to understand how key indicators of human well-being changed before and after the war as well as conflict experiences – this includes economic well-being, social well-being, psychological well-being, political and civic engagement, and perceptions of rule of law. It should be noted that many of these questions were originally designed to try to understand the factors that might influence armed group involvement. By asking questions about well-being and experiences right before the conflict came to a location/armed group involvement, the research team had hoped to isolate certain differences in the non-affiliated and armed group affiliated populations. The small number of confirmed ex-combatants and restrictions on asking about armed group involvement in Basra made it impossible to use these questions in this manner, but it does help identify how the war impacted well-being.

### 4.1 Basra

The impact of the war on economic well-being in Basra appears mixed; many respondents reported an improved financial situation post-war, but despite some gains, they remain unable to provide for their family's basic needs today. Prior to the start of the war, roughly half of Basra respondents could cover their expenses without difficulty. Financial status after the war was mixed: 39 per cent of respondents in Basra reported that their financial situation had improved compared to pre-2014; however, roughly 70 per cent of respondents stated that they faced difficulty in meeting their needs.

Social support structures in Basra appeared somewhat stronger after the war or at least, based on a limited number of indicators, social support did not appear to deteriorate as a result of the conflict. The study asked a series of questions about social support networks and across indicators respondents showed improved connectivity and support post-war. Prior to 2014, 42 per cent of respondents in Basra did not know anyone they could ask to lend money if they faced an emergency, but this figure dropped to only 12 per cent in the post-war period, which might mean that because people are finally better off, they are more able to help their neighbours. Before the war, 23 per cent of respondents did not know anyone they could turn to for guidance or help to make plans for the future, but this reduced to just 7 per cent in the post-war period, indicating that most people have someone to turn to for support (usually a family member or good friend). In the post-war period, most women appeared to have access to a supportive network, with 64 per cent of women in Basra reporting that there were older women they could approach for advice and mediation on family issues.

This positive turn regarding social relations may be due to several factors. The supportive relationship between economic and social well-being may have enabled families who experienced an improvement in financial status to offer material assistance to those who needed it within their social network, or the poor perception of institutions of governance (discussed in the next section, and tangential to the war) may have encouraged residents to rely on each other. In addition, the war on ISIL may have created a collective sense of community and common sense of identity among residents in Basra, particularly when compared to Tal Afar where the 'enemy' was present in the community and residents were perceived to hold vastly different positions in relation to that enemy (including mobilizing to fight ISIL, tolerating the group, or joining the group).

The study also examined physical and psychological well-being and tried to understand how the conflict had impacted respondents' psychosocial health. Mental health indicators in Basra raised a number of concerns for well-being. Across almost every indicator, roughly a third of the population admitted difficulty functioning, frequent anxiety, or markers of avoidance. Of particular concern, 23 per cent of respondents 'never' feel hopeful about the future.

*Figure 4: Mental health indicators, Basra (n=86)*

Question	Most times	Sometimes	Never
In the last month, was there a time when it was difficult for you to concentrate on work or studies?	1%	29%	67%
In the last month, have you felt like you did not have the energy to attend a social event, like a wedding or a party?	0%	29%	70%
In your life now, how often do you feel a lot of anxiety?	1%	34%	60%
In your life now, how often do thoughts about the bad things that happened to you keep bothering you?	1%	29%	59%
In your life now, how often do you stay away from things that remind you of the bad things that happened?	7%	26%	56%
In your life now, how often do you feel hopeful about the future?	17%	58%	23%

Overall, the data on socioeconomic well-being suggests that even though Basra was not attacked or occupied by ISIL, many people still struggle to meet their family's basic needs, face challenges with their psychosocial well-being, and need support for specific populations such as persons with a disability. At the same time, social relations in Basra appear to be a strength, and community members appear willing and able to support each other financially when needed, and most have access to supportive social networks.

## 4.2 Tal Afar

As expected, given the impact of the war and the fight to regain the district, residents in Tal Afar demonstrated a decline or stagnation across virtually all well-being indicators in the post-war period. Prior to the start of the war, roughly half of all respondents could cover their expenses without difficulty. This declined significantly after the war, with roughly 70 per cent of respondents reporting difficulty in meeting their needs, and almost half reporting that their economic situation was 'significantly worse' today than before 2014.

Social relations in Tal Afar were poor even before the war on ISIL started and little appeared to change after the war. Before 2014, half (49 per cent) of all respondents in Tal Afar did not know anyone they could ask to lend money if they faced an emergency, and this decreased slightly in the post-war period (to 42 per cent), meaning that slightly more people had someone they could ask for money in an emergency. Given that the financial situation of most respondents did not improve, this finding may point to solidarity in the post-return environment among certain communities and willingness to support each other when they could afford it. Pre-2014, almost half (42 per cent) of all respondents did not have anyone they could turn to for guidance or help to make plans for the future, and this increased slightly to 46 per cent in the post-war period indicating that support networks may have been affected somewhat as a result of the war. Women in Tal Afar appeared to have weaker social support networks compared to women in Basra, with only 41 per cent of women in Tal Afar reporting that there were older women who are respected within the community they could approach for advice and mediation on family issues (compared to 64 per cent in Basra).<sup>26</sup> These changes were minimal and reiterate the comparative weak social support networks available to most residents in Tal Afar.

Finally, mental health indicators in Tal Afar were very poor, indicating the impact of the conflict on people's psychosocial well-being. This is one area where conflict experiences appear to have had a severe impact, evidenced by the stark difference between Basra and Tal Afar. Over half of the respondents in Tal Afar indicated that they found it difficult to concentrate, they lacked the energy to socialize, and they felt a lot of anxiety. Most dramatically, over 80 per cent of respondents stated that they are bothered by thoughts about the bad things that happened to them, and another 80 per cent reported that they stay away from things that remind them of the bad things that happened to them. This suggests that the experience of conflict, occupation, displacement, and violence have had significant, widespread, and long-lasting impact on people's psychosocial functioning in Tal Afar.

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<sup>26</sup> The purpose of this question was to capture a comparable figure to tribal leaders from the perspective of female community members, since tribal leaders are often not accessible to women. The question asked: "Are there older women in your neighborhood that you can approach more easily and who are respected enough by the community that for some family-related issues you think that they can offer useful advice, and mediation?"

Figure 5: Mental health indicators, Tal Afar (n=721)

Question	Most times	Sometimes	Never
In the last month, was there a time when it was difficult for you to concentrate on work or studies?	18%	47%	33%
In the last month, have you felt like you did not have the energy to attend a social event, like a wedding or a party?	12%	44%	42%
In your life now, how often do you feel a lot of anxiety?	29%	42%	27%
In your life now, how often do thoughts about the bad things that happened to you keep bothering you?	41%	41%	17%
In your life now, how often do you stay away from things that remind you of the bad things that happened?	46%	36%	17%
In your life now, how often do you feel hopeful about the future?	34%	44%	20%

Overall, the data on socioeconomic well-being suggests that the war had a severe impact on Tal Afar, particularly in relation to financial security and mental health. Most people do not have access to supportive social networks, and this appears an issue that requires substantial investment and attention given that the same issue pre-dated the war. It appears that for many people in Tal Afar, it would not make sense to talk about 'returning' to a positive pre-war state of relations; rather, it is likely that community divisions and isolation are long-standing and have deep roots that may have been exacerbated by the recent conflict.

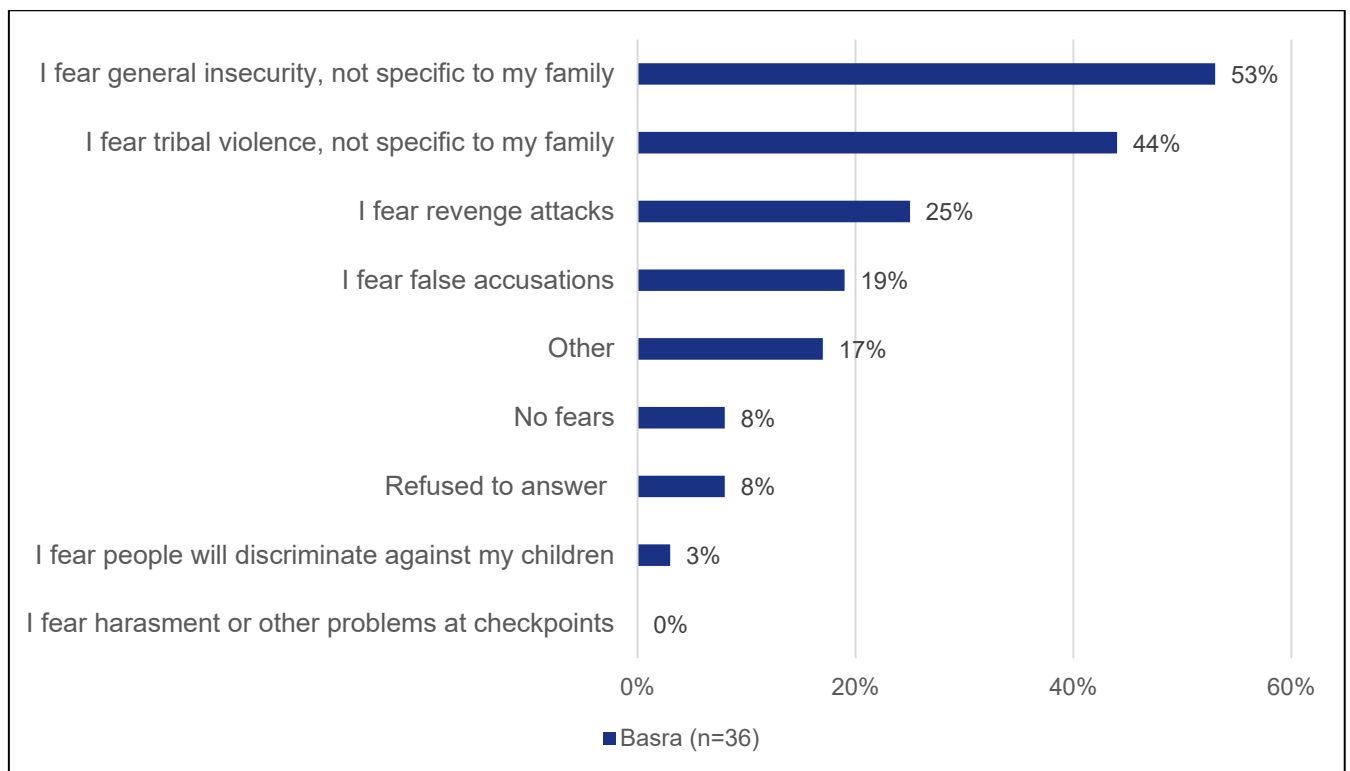
# 5. Security & State-citizen Relations

## 5.1 Basra

### Security in Basra

While most Basra respondents felt safe in their area, 8 per cent noted that they ‘did not really’ consider all members of their family safe in their neighbourhoods. Unsafe locations included Hower in Basra city centre (5 respondents) and Al Tanawumah in Shat al Arab (2 respondents). Generalized violence and tribal violence were the two top concerns, neither of which were targeted towards specific individuals. In addition, 9 respondents feared revenge attacks – which, in the context of Basra, most likely refers to retaliatory tribal violence. In response to these fears, half of the respondents limited their movements as much as possible, and 37 per cent did not socialize outside the house. Half of all respondents (51 per cent) were ‘somewhat’ or ‘very’ concerned about violence against women, in particular domestic violence, crime, honour killings, and violence in schools or universities. Drug usage was also high in Basra, with 16 per cent of respondents reporting that ‘many’ people use drugs in their neighbourhood, and 23 per cent reporting ‘a few’. Almost all reports of drug usage came from respondents who live in the Hower neighbourhood of Basra city centre. The most common drugs reported were crystal meth, Tramadol (prescription opium), and hashish.

Figure 6: What type of fears do you have?



### State-citizen Relations in Basra

The survey asked a series of questions to understand how citizens perceive and relate to government institutions and how this may have been affected by the war. In Basra, trust in the government appeared to have changed little as a result of the war, with respondents consistently displaying low levels of trust. As shown in Figure 7, in both the pre-war and post-war period, one-third of respondents felt that the government ‘never’ applied the law equally and fairly to all people. Trust in different institutions varied slightly in the post-war period. As seen in Figure 8 below, only 28 per cent of respondents felt that their family is ‘always’ treated fairly by the courts and judiciary, with higher fairness attributed to local authorities (36 per cent), local security forces (41 per cent), and tribal authorities (53 per cent).

Figure 7: Comparison of trust that the government applies the law equally and fairly for all people in Basra.

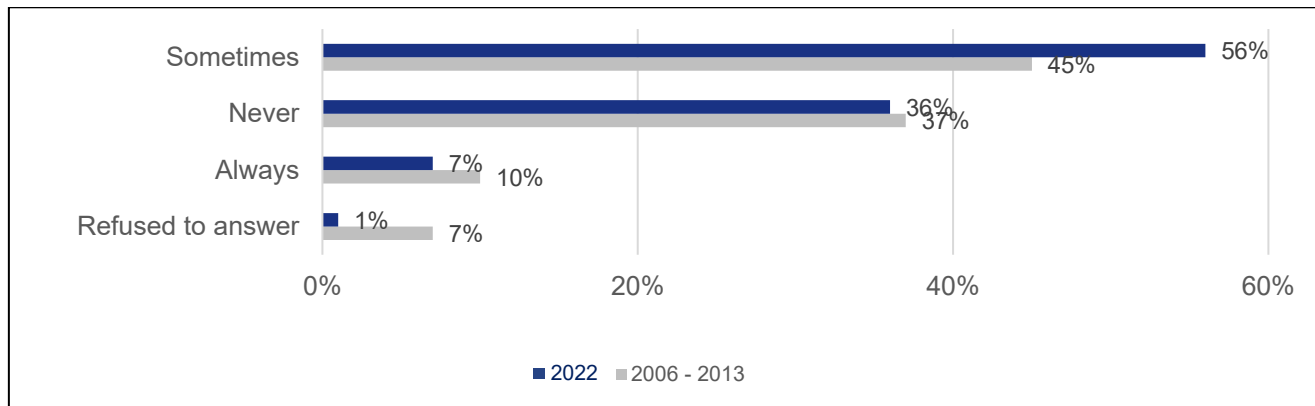
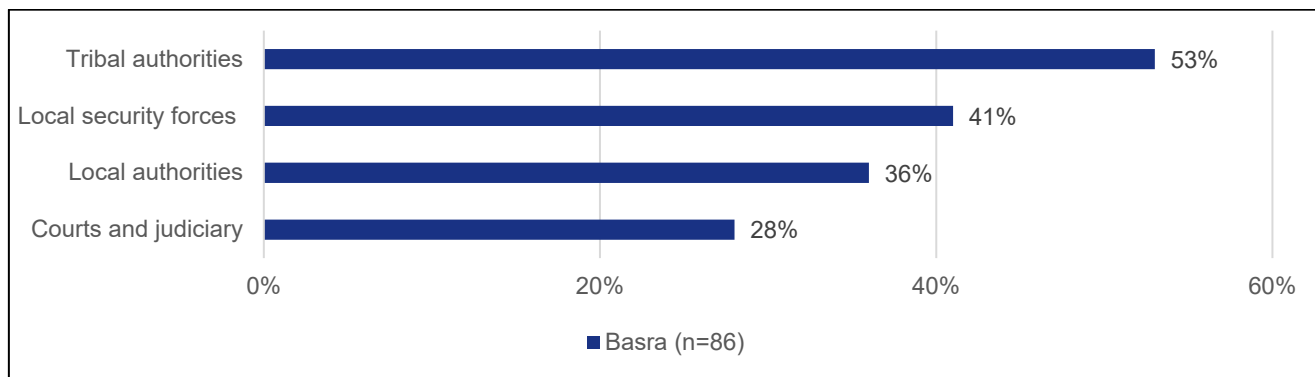


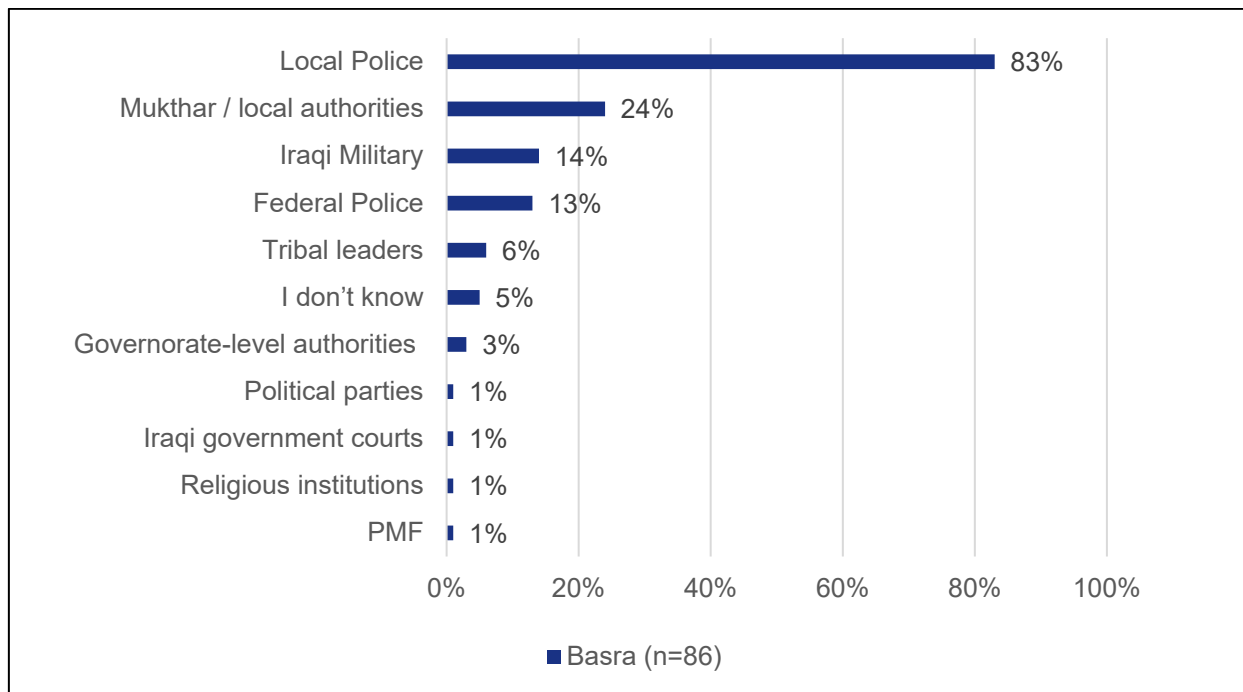
Figure 8: Perception of fairness of institutions in Basra.



The study demonstrated a strong preference for State-based security actors. The local police were perceived by most respondents (83 per cent) as having a positive influence on security in their area. Local authorities (24 per cent), the Iraqi military (14 per cent), and federal police (13 per cent) also received affirmation as positive actors. Tribal leaders, by contrast, were identified as having a positive impact on security by only 6 per cent of respondents.



Figure 9: Which actors present in your area primarily have a positive impact on your security?



Yet, while there was a preference for State-based security actors, respondents also turned to non-State mechanisms – such as tribal leaders and family members – in order to resolve disputes or protect their household from crime, indicating a potential gap between their expectations of the State and what the State is able to deliver.

Figure 10: If you were to have a dispute with another person in your area because they damaged your car or property, who would your household go to in order to get justice?

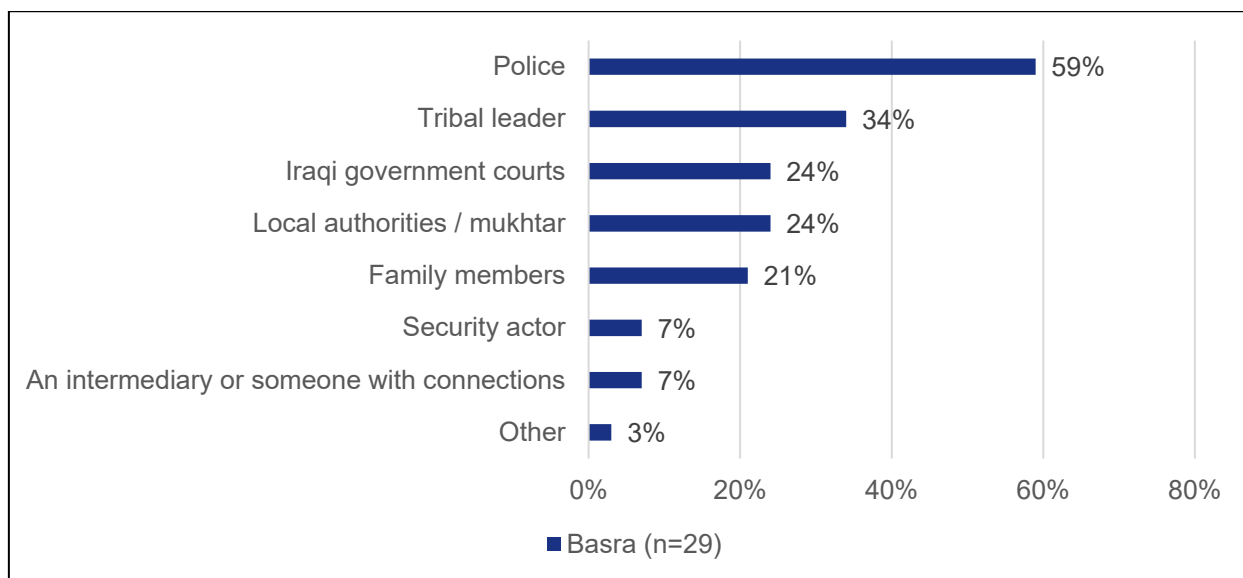
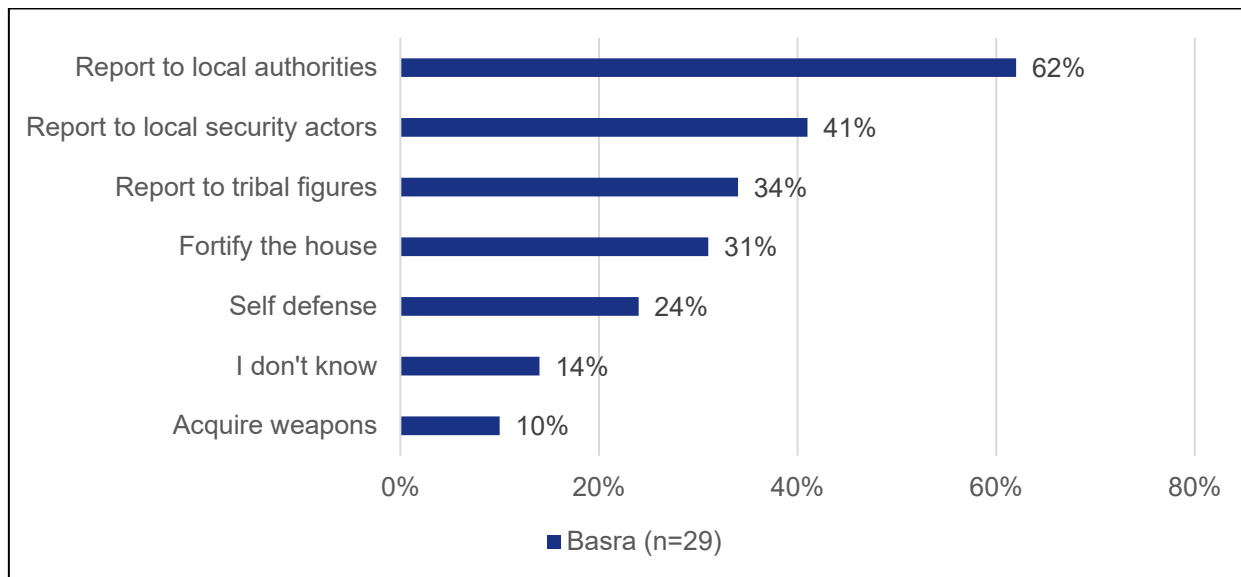


Figure 11. How do you expect to protect your household from crime?



### Civic and Political Engagement in Basra

Civic and political engagement in Basra was not uncommon but very sensitive and people appeared reluctant to talk about it. It was even sensitive for respondents to admit participating in (seemingly) non-political civic activities, such as volunteer community events. Almost half (43 per cent) of all respondents refused to answer whether they had engaged in civic activities in the post-war period; of those who acknowledged they had participated, the most common forms were community initiatives (10 per cent), volunteer organizations (8 per cent), sports clubs (8 per cent), and unions or professional associations (5 per cent). Political activities were significantly more sensitive, with 78 per cent of participants refusing to answer whether they had participated in any political activities. This is indicative of the tense political space in Basra in recent years caused by the targeting of civil society activists who participated in demonstrations. Of those who did acknowledge participation in political activities, the most common activities were protests (12 per cent, addressing government corruption, lack of basic services, and unemployment), and strikes (9 per cent). Participation in protests was higher in the pre-war period, with 18 per cent of respondents stating that they had participated in demonstrations, mainly against government corruption and lack of basic services.

Basra respondents did not have the same civil documentation challenges that have plagued communities that were once occupied by ISIL. Only 1 respondent in Basra reported that someone in their family was missing documentation (in this case a child, who was missing a civil ID since the Directorate was too far for the family to access).

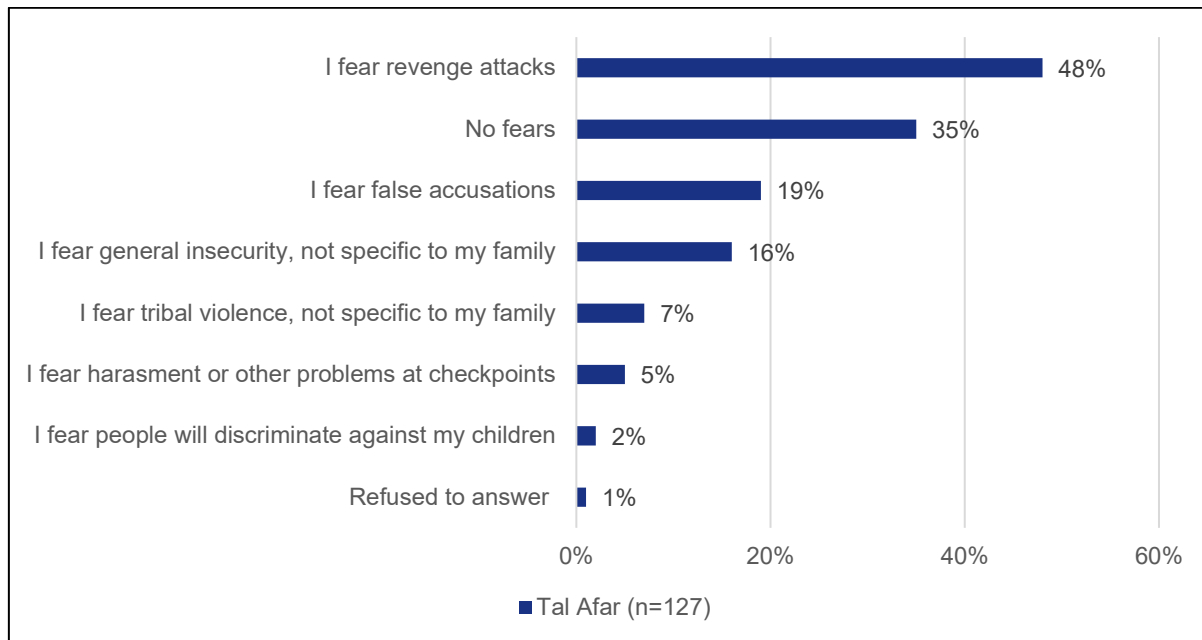
One final indicator that offers a potential snapshot of perceived government support for each location is the availability of public employment. In Iraq, public service jobs are one of the few ways that citizens can access reliable income and employment benefits (such as a pension), and as such they are highly coveted. In recent years, access to government employment has been a key issue raised by protestors demonstrating against unemployment and government corruption. In Basra, the availability of public service employment appeared relatively high, with 47 per cent of respondents relying upon a government salary (although noting that the sample size was relatively small, and this is not necessarily representative of Basra as a whole).

## 5.2 Tal Afar

### Security in Tal Afar

Only 3 per cent of respondents in Tal Afar reported that they ‘did not really’ consider all members of their family safe in their neighbourhood, a surprising finding given that Tal Afar is considered one of Iraq’s more volatile areas. However, given that Tal Afar has experienced extreme insecurity over the past ten years – including occupation by ISIL and a brutal military campaign – it is likely that respondents thus consider that Tal Afar is now comparatively safe. Unsafe locations included: Kifah (6 respondents), Al Wahda (2 respondents), Al Salem (2 respondents), Al Saad (3 respondents), Al Rabie (2 respondents), Al Noor (2 respondents), Al Muthana (2 respondents), Tal Afar centre (2 respondents), and Al Eruba (1 respondent). These unsafe locations covered a range of Sunni, Shia, and mixed neighbourhoods.<sup>27</sup> Almost half (48 per cent) of respondents who felt unsafe feared revenge attacks, and another 19 per cent feared false accusations, whereas generalized violence or tribal violence were relatively low concerns. In response to these fears, half of the respondents do not socialize outside the house and 45 per cent limit their movements as much as possible. Almost half of all respondents (46 per cent) were ‘somewhat’ or ‘very’ concerned about violence against women, in particular honour killings, domestic violence, crime, and forced restrictive views. Drug usage was lower in Tal Afar, with only 3 per cent of respondents reporting that ‘many’ people use drugs in their neighbourhood, and 7 per cent reporting ‘a few’. In Tal Afar, neighbourhoods where many people use drugs include Al Khatraa (3), Al Mualeimeen (2), Al Muthana (3), Kifah (4), and Tal Afar centre (3). The most common drugs were Tramadol (prescription opium), hashish, and crystal meth.

Figure 12: What type of fears do you have?

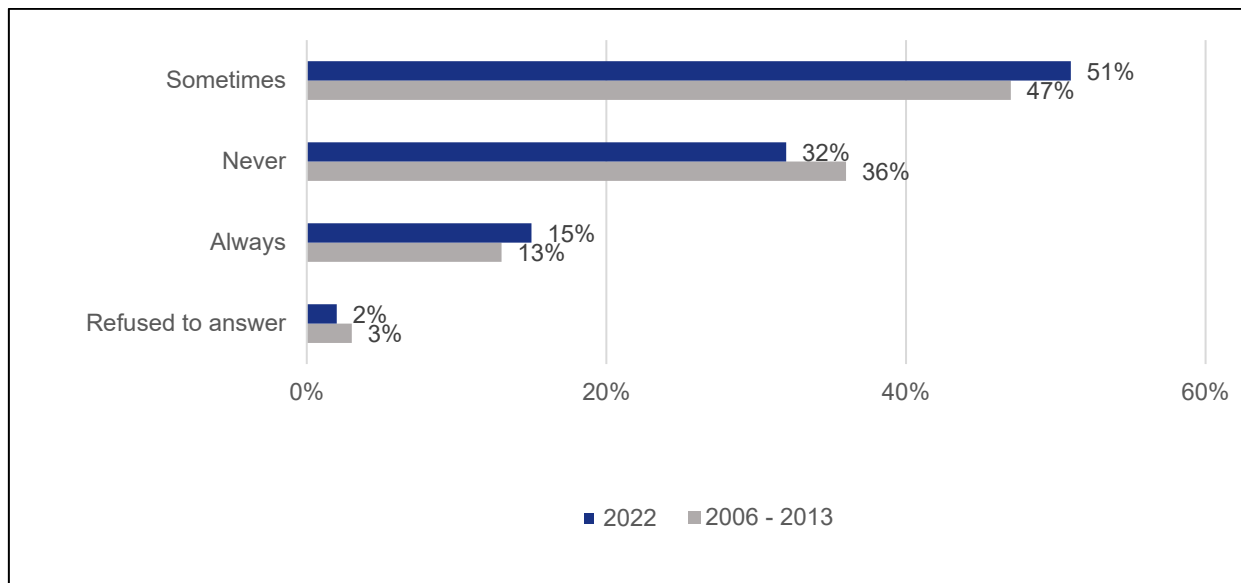


<sup>27</sup> Shia neighbourhoods include Kifah, Al Saad, Al Rabie, Al Wahda; Sunni neighbourhoods include Salem and Al Noor; and mixed Sunni and Shia neighbourhoods include Muthana and Al Eruba.

### State-citizen Relations in Tal Afar

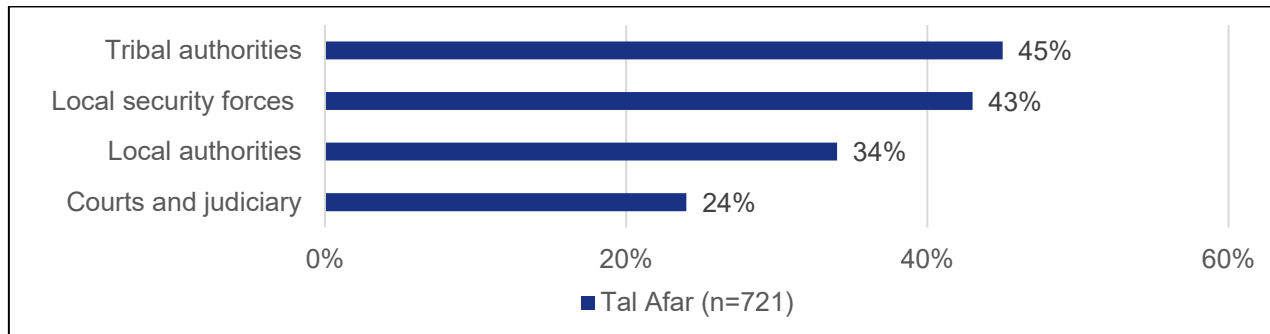
As with Basra, in Tal Afar trust in the government appeared to have changed little before and after the war. In both the pre-war and post-war period, one-third of respondents felt that the government 'never' applied the law equally and fairly to all people. Trust in different institutions varied slightly in the post-war period and showed slightly lower rates than Basra. In Tal Afar, only 24 per cent of respondents felt that their family is 'always' treated fairly by the courts and judiciary, with higher fairness attributed to local authorities (34 per cent), local security forces (43 per cent), and tribal authorities (45 per cent). The similarity in data to Basra is striking and reiterates that many structural issues are not specific to the war but reflect a wider lack of trust in institutions in Iraq. However, the specific reasons for this lack of trust in Tal Afar and Basra are likely unique, with Tal Afar facing significant sectarian violence in the years following the 2003 military campaign that have remained key drivers of conflict and are historically tied to the government favouring certain ethno-sectarian communities over others. While a full history is not possible, it is worth noting that under Saddam Hussein's rule, Sunni Turkmen residents were privileged over their Shia compatriots and given access to government and security posts; after 2003, when Shia forces (in particular the Badr Organization that is now part of the PMF and remains dominant in Tal Afar) took control of local government authorities in Tal Afar, there were reports of harsh sectarian policies, harassment, and attacks against the Sunni population, which contributed to the emergence of strong Al-Qaida factions among the Sunni Turkmen in Tal Afar.<sup>28</sup> As such, grievances against Iraqi institutions (including security forces, local authorities, and courts) are complex and long-standing, and many of these dynamics are exacerbated by the recent conflict and treatment of returning IDPs.

Figure 13: Trust that the government applies the law equally and fairly for all people in Tal Afar



<sup>28</sup> Frauke Mass and Erica Gaston, "[Iraq After ISIL: Tal Afar City](#)", GPPI, 21 August 2017.

Figure 14: Perceptions of fairness of institutions in Tal Afar.



As with Basra, there was a strong preference for State-based security actors, and the actors identified as having primarily a positive impact on security included the local police (71 per cent), local authorities (36 per cent), and the Iraqi military (8 per cent). There was a much lower reliance on tribal leaders and family members as a means of protecting the household from crime or seeking justice.

Figure 15: Which of the actors that are present in your area primarily have a positive impact on your security?

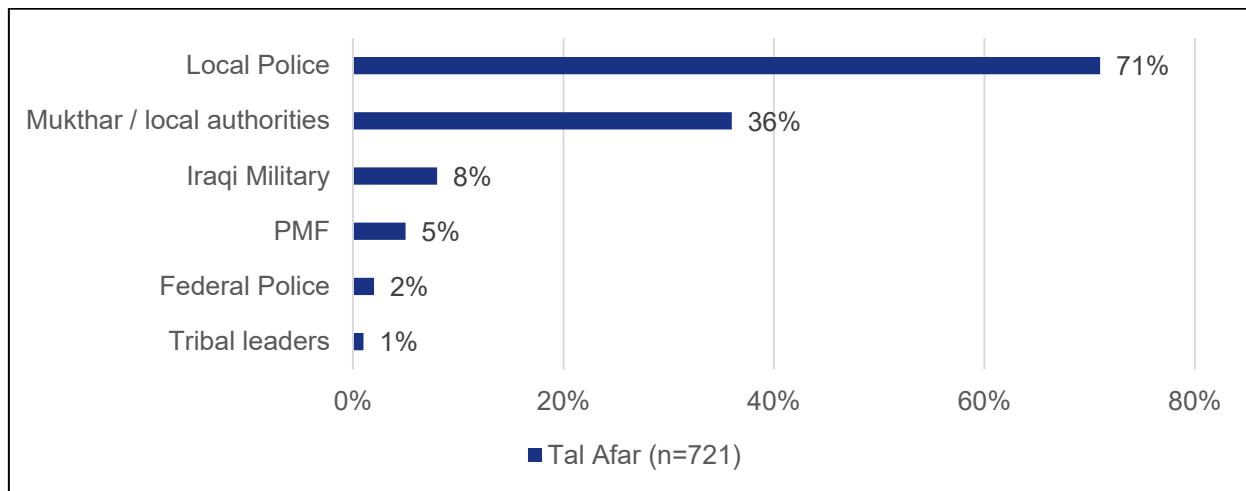


Figure 16: If you were to have a dispute with another person in your area because they damaged your car or property, who would your household go to in order to get justice?

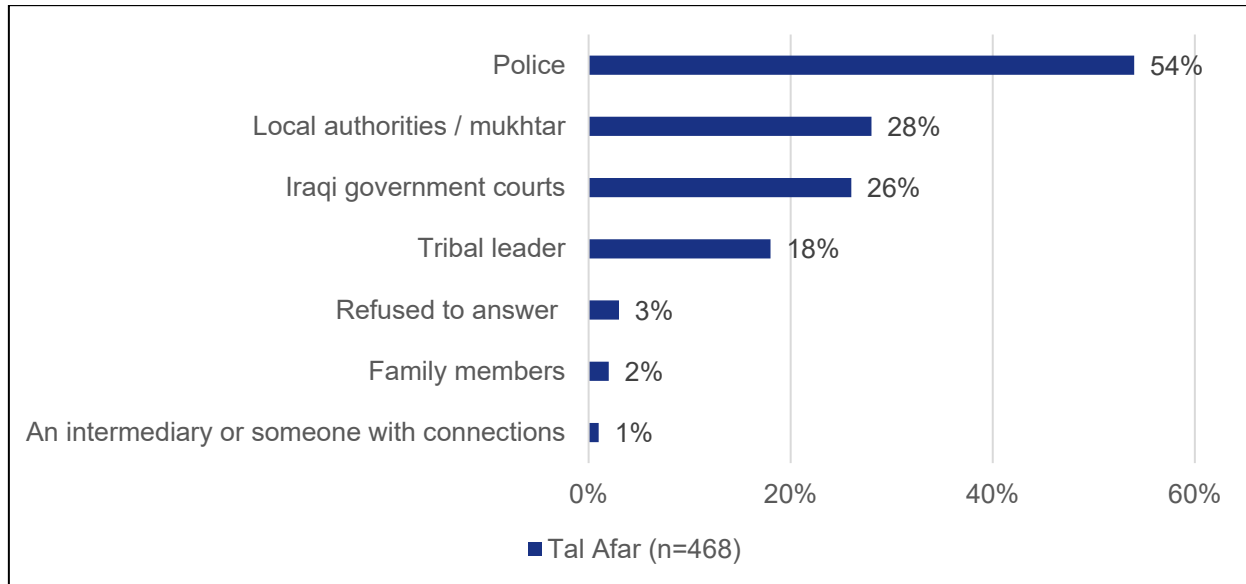
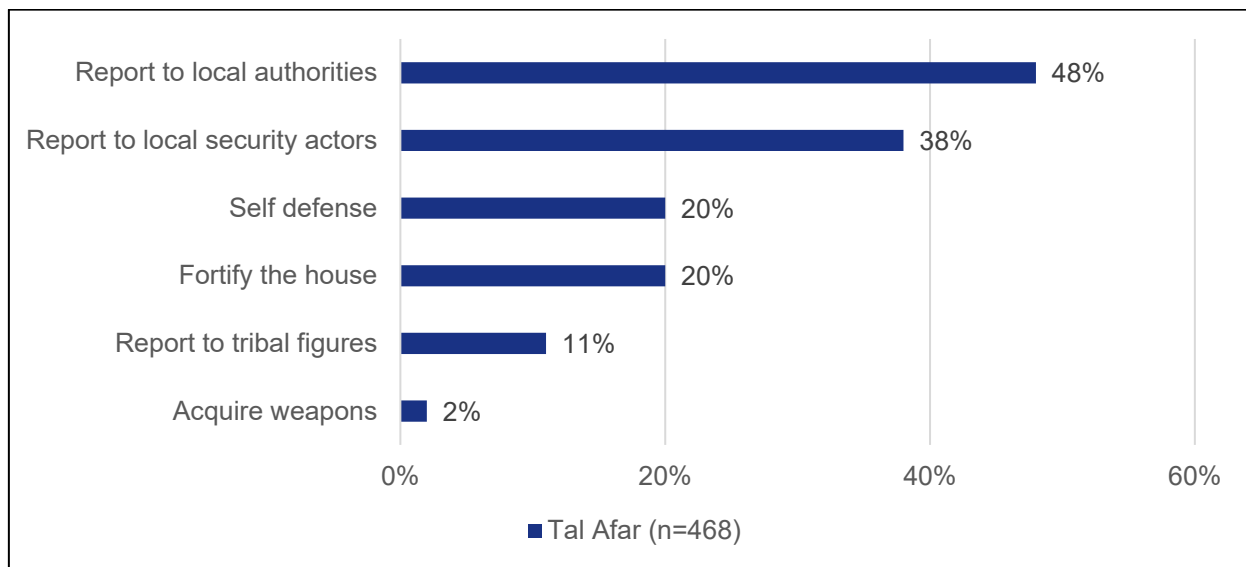


Figure 17: How do you expect to protect your household from crime?



### **Civic and Political Engagement in Tal Afar**

Civic and political engagement in Tal Afar was extremely limited. Only 2 per cent of respondents participated in demonstrations during the pre-war era. The topic proved extremely sensitive in the post-war period (even more so than Basra), with 90 per cent refusing to answer whether they had participated in any political activities. Of those who did acknowledge participation, the most common activities were volunteering for a political party or candidate (4 per cent or three people). Participation in (seemingly) non-political civic activities, such as volunteer community events, also appeared highly sensitive (again, even more so than Basra), with nearly two-thirds of respondents (64 per cent) refusing to answer whether they had engaged in civic activities. Of those who had participated, the most common activities were community initiatives (8 per cent), volunteer organizations (9 per cent), and sports clubs (6 per cent). While participation in sports clubs appears unlikely to be a sensitive issue, it is likely that given the extent of destruction in Tal Afar and the slow pace of reconstruction, access to sports clubs is simply not available for most people.

In Tal Afar, 4 per cent of respondents (29 persons) stated that someone in the family was missing documentation, primarily because they could not afford the cost of the documentation or the cost of a lawyer to support the process. This covered a variety of documents: national ID, civil status ID, birth certificate, marriage certificate, and Public Distribution System card, and affected the head of household and children. However, one-third of respondents did not give a reason for the missing documentation, suggesting that it may be linked to administrative barriers that affect families with perceived ISIL affiliation (such as the inability to obtain a security clearance).

Finally, access to public service employment was significantly lower in Tal Afar than in Basra, an important indicator since it offers one of the few ways to achieve a reliable income and social security benefits in Iraq. Only 34 per cent of respondents in Tal Afar reported that they relied on a government salary, compared to 47 per cent in Basra. This may create or exacerbate a perception that the government is less supportive of Tal Afar residents than other citizens and contribute to the fractured State-citizen relations. This perception is often associated with sectarian overtures, as noted above, given that successive governments have utilized access to government positions as a means of supporting certain segments of the population.

## 6. Social Cohesion & Reconciliation

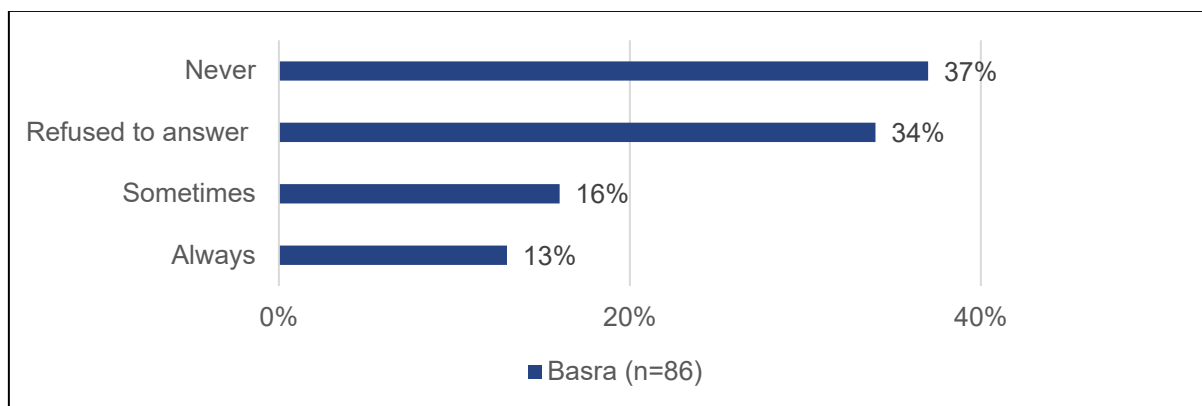
The study revealed some important insights for social cohesion and reconciliation efforts in Tal Afar and Basra generally, beyond the specific reintegration challenges faced by ex-combatants and families with perceived ISIL affiliation. The report will address these general insights first, since they help to contextualize the challenges faced by specific groups.

### 6.1 Basra

The war does not appear to have created significant divisions in Basra. When asked if people in the community express critical or negative perceptions of them because they do not agree with their wartime experience, only 3 per cent said ‘sometimes,’ and 7 per cent said their family members expressed critical views towards them.<sup>29</sup> However, almost one-quarter of respondents refused to answer this question. The limited experience of critique or negative perceptions is likely because fewer people in Basra were directly involved in the war, and virtually all of those who were involved mobilized as part of the government-led military campaign to retake territory from ISIL, which had widespread community support. Moreover, most combatants deployed outside their own governorate and for the most part avoided the direct scrutiny of their community.

This is not to say, however, that the war did not impact social relationships in Basra. As shown in Figure 18, 29 per cent of respondents in Basra felt that people who had a similar experience during the war understand them better, indicating that conflict experiences remain an important influence over identity and social trust.

*Figure 18. Do you feel that people who had a similar experience during the war understand you better?*



<sup>29</sup> The survey did not ask the basis for the negative views.



On the other hand, as seen in Figure 19, there were indicators that social exclusion also appeared to be an issue for some people: in Basra, 14 per cent of respondents felt that they were excluded from social gatherings or activities over the past 12 months (this dropped to just 6 per cent for family activities). The top reasons for the exclusion were marital status, which speaks to the high value placed upon marriage and family structure in Basra society, and (separately) ‘perceptions related to the war,’ which in the context of Basra, given that all respondents were Shia, is likely related to affiliation (or lack of affiliation) to the PMF rather than perceived affiliation to ISIL.

Figure 19. In the past 12 months, have you felt excluded from social gatherings or activities (e.g., weddings, funerals, religious gatherings, parties)

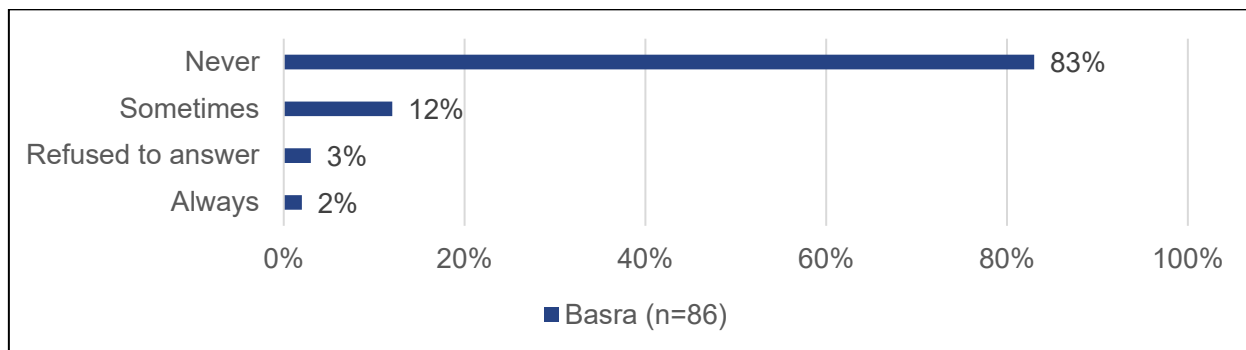
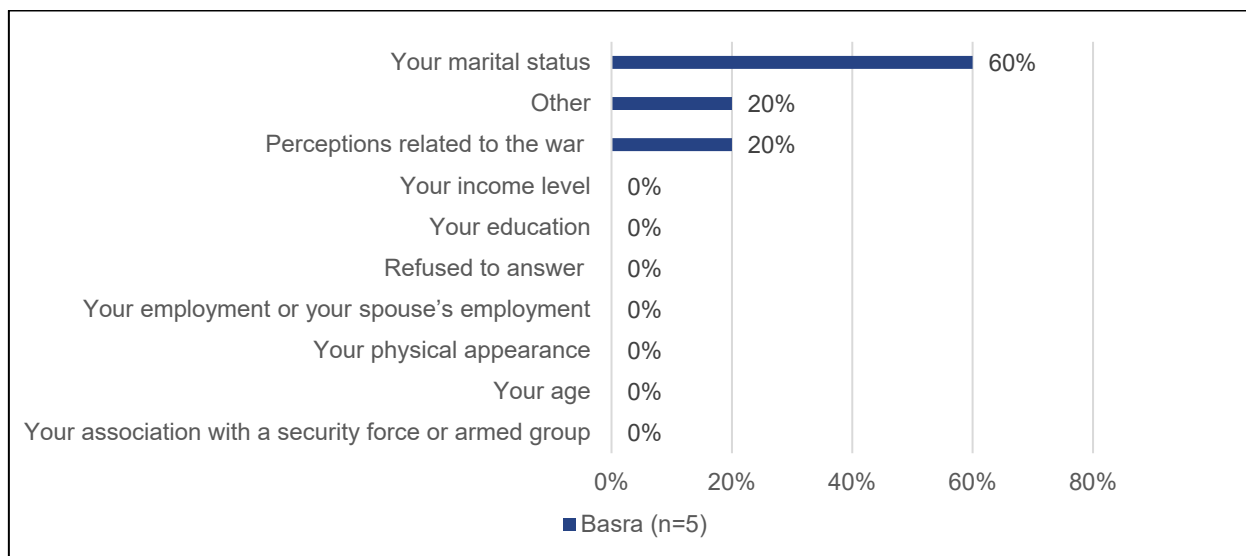


Figure 20. Why do you think people excluded you?

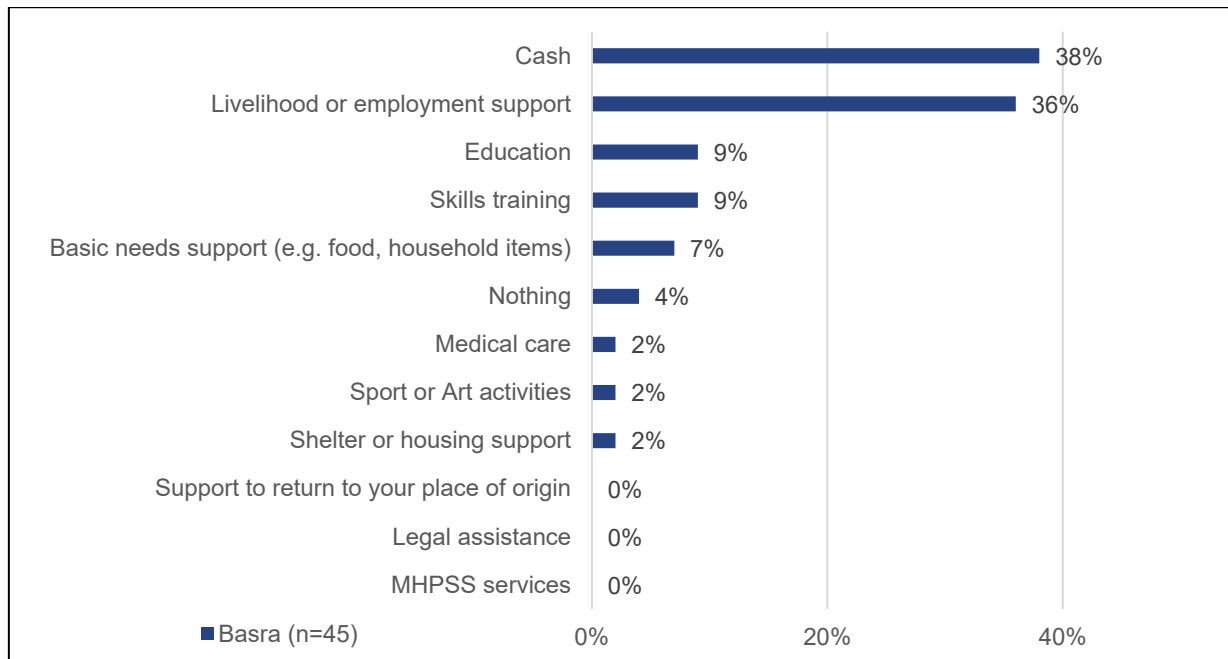


In addition to exclusions, a small percentage of the sample reported that they were ‘sometimes’ treated poorly in a market in the past month (8 per cent) or that ‘sometimes’ people acted like they did not trust them (9 per cent). The top reasons for this poor treatment were again marital status and

association with a security force or armed group.<sup>30</sup> The implications for ex-combatants will be further discussed in the next section. On the extreme end, a similar percentage of respondents reported being threatened. It is interesting to note people reported being threatened at a higher rate in Basra compared to Tal Afar (7 per cent compared to 4 per cent).

The study also considered how much support communities are receiving in the post-war period and what this potentially means for their transition out of conflict. Almost half (45 per cent) of all respondents in Basra had not received any assistance from international organizations or NGOs in the past 12 months. Of those who had, the most common forms of assistance were cash, mental health, and psycho-social support (MHPSS), and skills training. Asked which activities had the most positive impact on their life, respondents in Basra most frequently cited cash and livelihood and employment support.

*Figure 21: Of the support you've received, what had the most positive impact on your life today?*



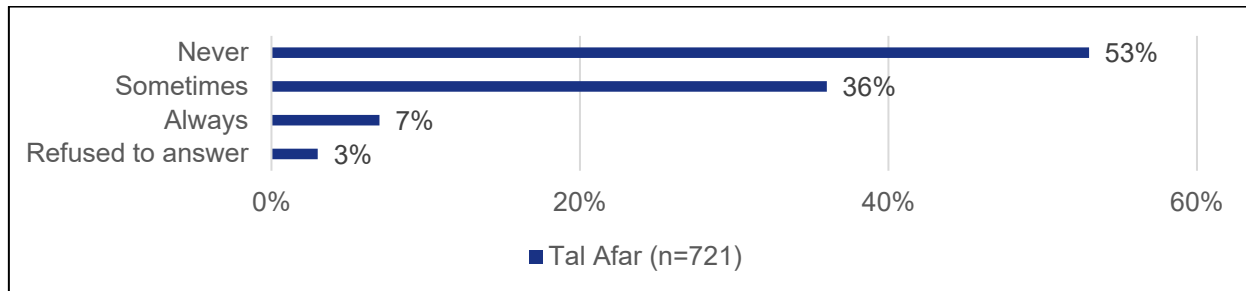
Respondents in Basra did not generally associate access to assistance with corrupt practices. Asked why they did not receive any support, a minority stated that they need a connection (13 per cent) however none reported needing to pay for assistance. Over half were not aware why they did not receive any support, suggesting that perhaps eligibility criteria or programme timeframes were not clear.

<sup>30</sup> An additional 64 per cent listed 'other' as the reason. In this survey, this question was not followed up on due to constraints on survey length; however, clarification will be sought in future data collection.

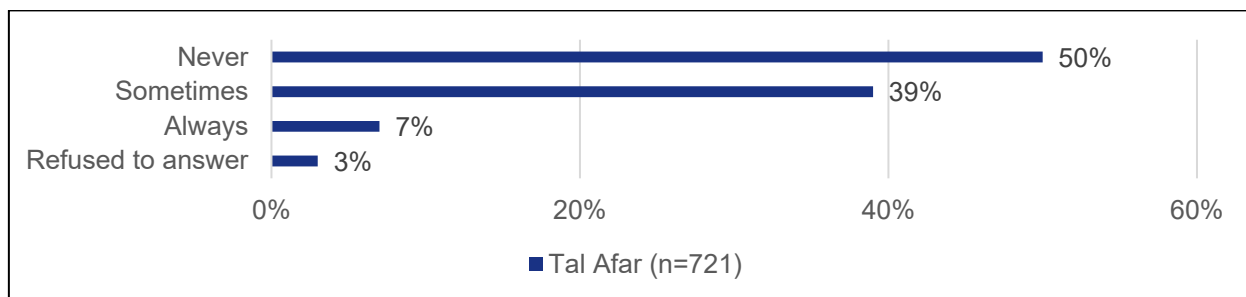
## 6.2 Tal Afar

A key finding in Tal Afar is that social fracture and perceived marginalization extend across the society, indicating that addressing social cohesion and reconciliation are important issues not only for families with perceived ISIL affiliation, but the Tal Afar community more broadly. Although only 10 per cent of respondents lived under ISIL occupation, 43 per cent of respondents reported that family members express critical or negative perceptions of them because they do not agree with their wartime experiences (that is, the way they behaved or acted during the war or the choices they made), and 46 per cent said that other people in their area (e.g. neighbours, community members) were critical of them because they do not agree with their wartime experiences (see Figures 22 and 23).

*Figure 22: Do family members express critical or negative perceptions of you because they don't agree with the experience you had during the war?*

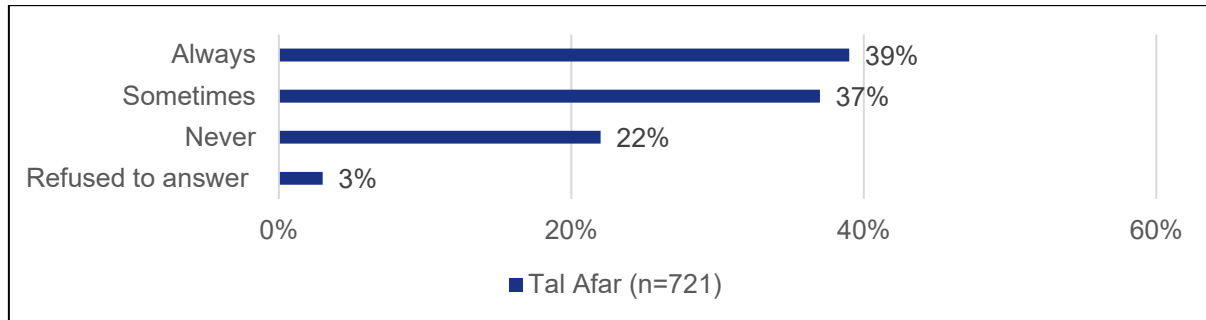


*Figure 23: Do other people in your area express critical or negative perceptions of you because they don't agree with the experience you had during the war?*



Moreover, 76 per cent of respondents felt that people who had a similar experience during the war understand them better. This suggests that wartime experiences are a key component of identity and social trust for many Tal Afar residents and may contribute to social divisions at a very broad level, not only for those who lived under ISIL occupation.

Figure 24: Do you feel that people who had a similar experience during the war understand you better?



Experiences of social exclusion were also fairly widespread in Tal Afar, with 30 per cent of respondents feeling excluded from social events over the past 12 months, and 23 per cent feeling excluded from family activities.

Figure 25: In the past 12 months, have you felt excluded from social gatherings or activities (e.g., weddings, funerals, religious gatherings, parties)

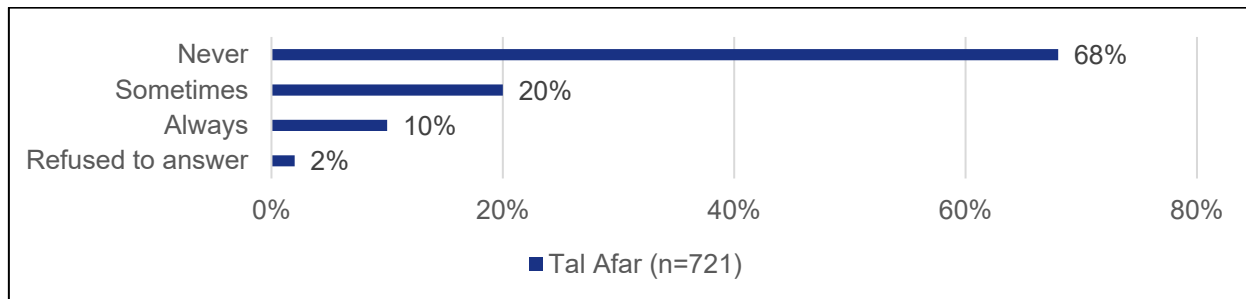
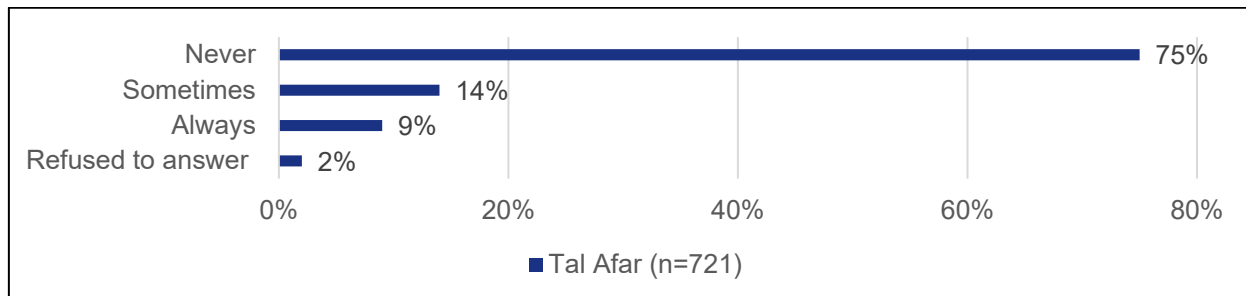


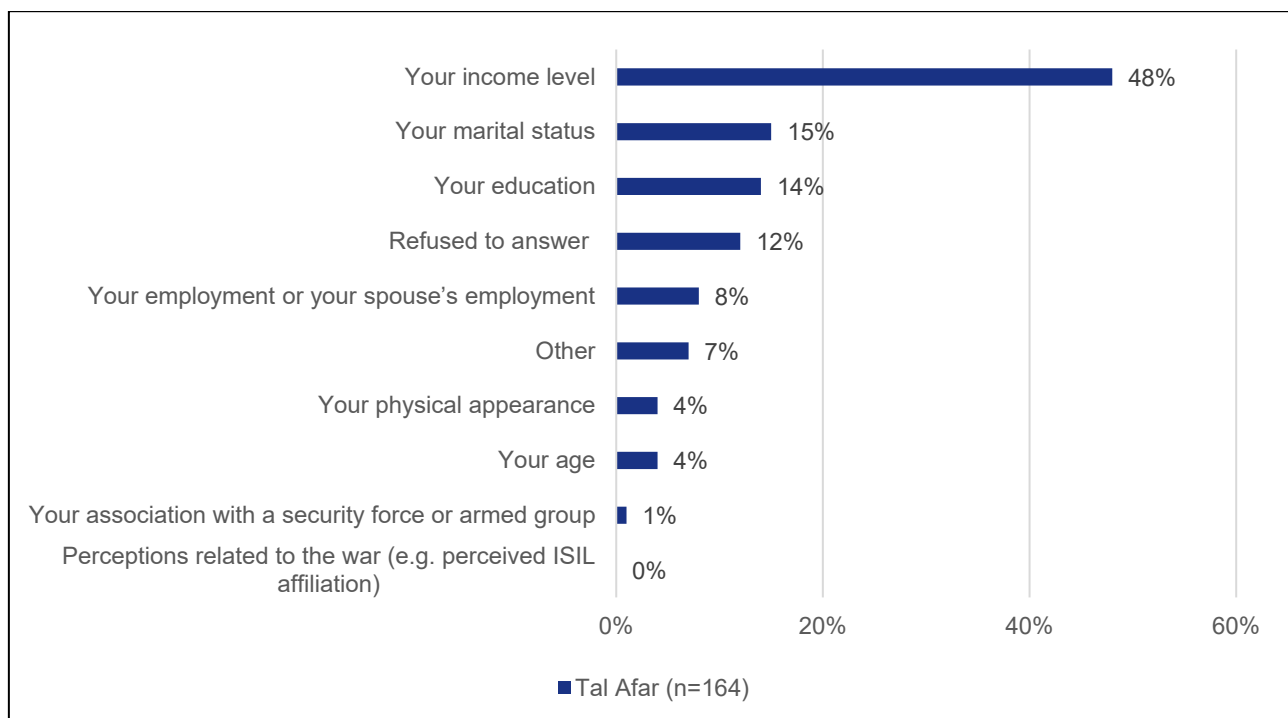
Figure 26: In the past 12 months, have you felt excluded from family activities?



When asked why they think people excluded them, the vast majority did not identify reasons linked directly to the conflict, but rather pointed to income level (48 per cent), marital status (15 per cent), education level (14 per cent), and type of employment (8 per cent), as seen in Figure 27. Notably, only 1 per cent pointed to their membership in an armed group as a source of exclusion.

Many of these socioeconomic indicators may be related to wartime experiences. For example, income level may have decreased for families whose main breadwinner joined the PMF and deployed, given that those who had pre-existing jobs or businesses often experienced a reduction in salary and those salaries were often paid infrequently or only in part. In addition, families with perceived ISIL affiliation are likely to have lower income due to time in displacement and discrimination in the job market, but they may prefer to identify their socioeconomic status as the source of discrimination rather than their perceived ISIL affiliation, given the stigma involved. A key point for programming is to recognize that people may describe their social marginalization and exclusion in ways that do not meet the targeting categories of international organizations – that is, by referring to their income status rather than their status as an ex-combatant or a family with perceived ISIL affiliation. This can be a challenge for effective needs assessments that touch on such sensitive and complex causal phenomenon and may require a new approach to vulnerability assessments.

Figure 27: Why do you think people excluded you?

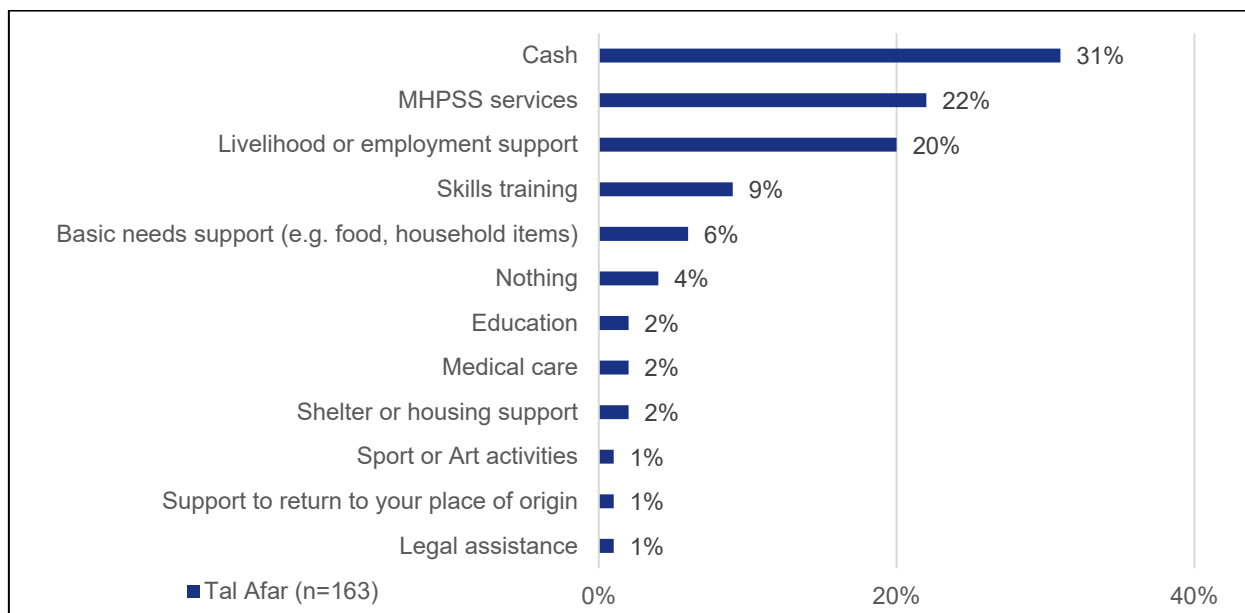


Reports of poor treatment were similar to Basra and included poor treatment in a market (16 per cent), people acting like they do not trust them (14 per cent) and being threatened (5 per cent). When asked why they believed they were treated poorly, the top reasons provided were income level (34 per cent), physical appearance (15 per cent), and marital status (12 per cent), suggesting there are wider biases in society linked to socioeconomic status. These biases likely pre-dated the war but may have been made prominent or exacerbated by the recent conflict, as income levels for certain populations dropped and may be seen as indicators of wartime affiliations or involvement (such as those who lost access to their income during occupation or displacement, or social stigma towards

widowed women, particularly if their husband was accused of having some degree of affiliation to ISIL). Only 1 per cent of respondents reported that they were treated poorly because of their involvement in an armed group. It is noteworthy that 33 per cent of respondents who reported poor treatment refused to give an answer as to why. This might be because these respondents do not have a clear idea why they are mistreated or it could signify discomfort in sharing that information with an enumerator, particularly if doing so might hint at involvement with – or perceived involvement with an – armed group.

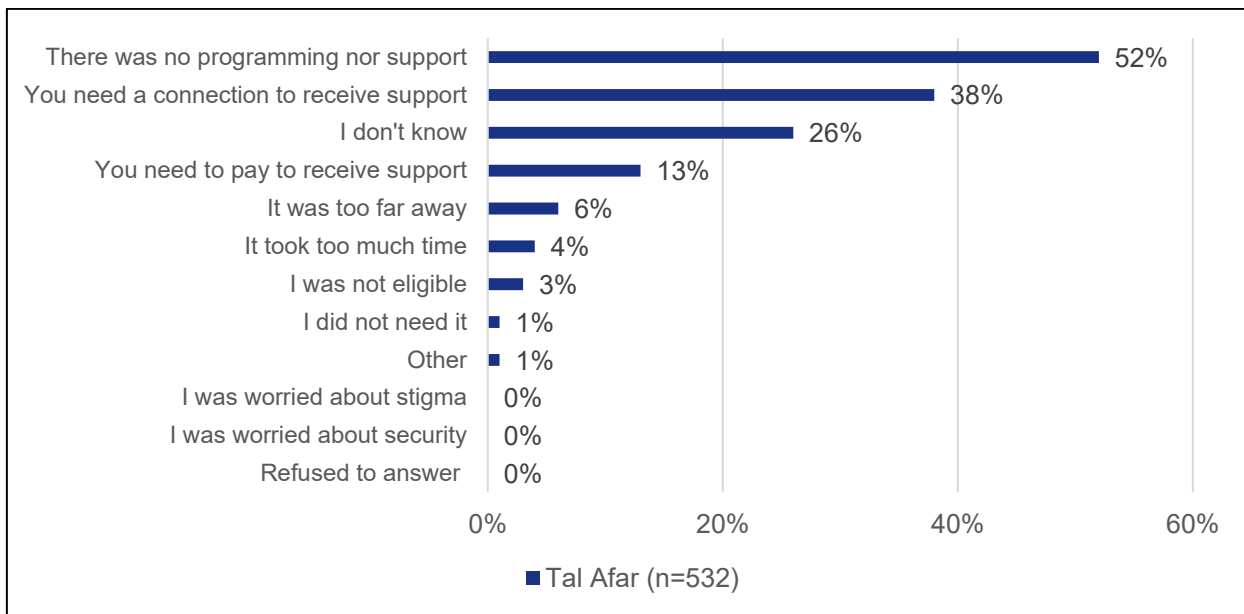
International assistance in Tal Afar was less common compared to Basra. 74 per cent of respondents in Tal Afar had not received any assistance from international organizations or NGOs in the past 12 months. Of those who had received assistance, the most common types included cash, MHPSS, and skills training. Asked which activities had the most positive impact on their life, respondents in Tal Afar reported cash, MHPSS, and livelihood or employment support.

*Figure 28: Of the support you've received, what had the most positive impact on your life today?*



A notable finding is that international assistance was often associated with markers of corruption by Tal Afar respondents compared to those in Basra. Asked why they did not receive any support from international organizations or NGOs, 38 per cent of respondents in Tal Afar said, 'you need a connection' (versus 13 per cent in Basra) and another 13 per cent said, 'you need to pay to receive support' (versus zero in Basra). This perception of corruption could potentially exacerbate social divisions and inequalities if assistance is perceived as benefiting those with connections (whether personal, political, or otherwise) or money. On the upside, concerns about stigma or insecurity were not reported as barriers to accessing international assistance. It is worth reiterating that 'assistance' providers captures a very wide range of actors and supports, and it is uncertain if the sentiments around assistance are universal and apply equally to international and national actors. Nonetheless, they are important to note and address given the far-reaching implications for programme engagement and effectiveness.

Figure 29. Why do you think you did not receive any support?



# 7. Reintegration of Ex-combatants

## 7.1 Basra

Several factors emerged in the data as potentially undermining the reintegration of ex-combatants in Basra: community acceptance of ex-combatants, ongoing insecurity, and environmental degradation threatening livelihoods.

Community acceptance of ex-combatants appears to be an issue in Basra. While the sample is very small, two of 12 ex-combatants interviewed in Basra reported that they were treated poorly in the past month due to their association with an armed group, both of which were former members of the PMF, although the precise faction is unknown. While the study did not investigate the reasons driving the poor treatment, it likely speaks to the dominance of the PMF in socioeconomic life in Basra today, which is often resented by community members who are not associated with the PMF, and their impact on the militarization of civilian spaces, as detailed in a separate study.<sup>31</sup>

Second, a number of respondents were concerned about security in Basra (although fewer compared with Tal Afar). Concern about tribal violence was high, with 63 per cent of Basra residents concerned about the risk of tribal violence (compared to 50 per cent of residents in Tal Afar). Of those surveyed, 15 per cent agreed that civilians need weapons to provide their own security in their neighbourhood, a finding that points to the fact that although Basra does not face an active threat from ISIL, the prevalence of tribal violence and crime is high. There was relatively high interest in having the State increase its presence, with over half of all respondents (56 per cent) agreeing that their area needs greater police or army presence to provide security. While the interest in State provision of security is positive for the rule of law, if the government fails to provide the increased security that residents believe they need, it may reinforce their perspective that civilians need weapons to provide their own security. This may encourage continued, increased, or repeat mobilization into the PMF.

Finally, it is worth noting that despite the prevalence of environmental issues in Basra, including drought, salinity, and flooding, respondents did not believe that climate-related difficulties drove recruitment into the PMF or other armed groups, with only 3 per cent of respondents stating that they knew or heard of someone who joined an armed group due to climate shifts. This aligns with other research conducted in Basra, which suggests that people forcibly displaced by environmental factors (including climate change) are not employed at a higher rate in the PMF as compared to the host population,<sup>32</sup> suggesting that targeting the economically vulnerable is not a recruitment tactic utilized by the PMF.

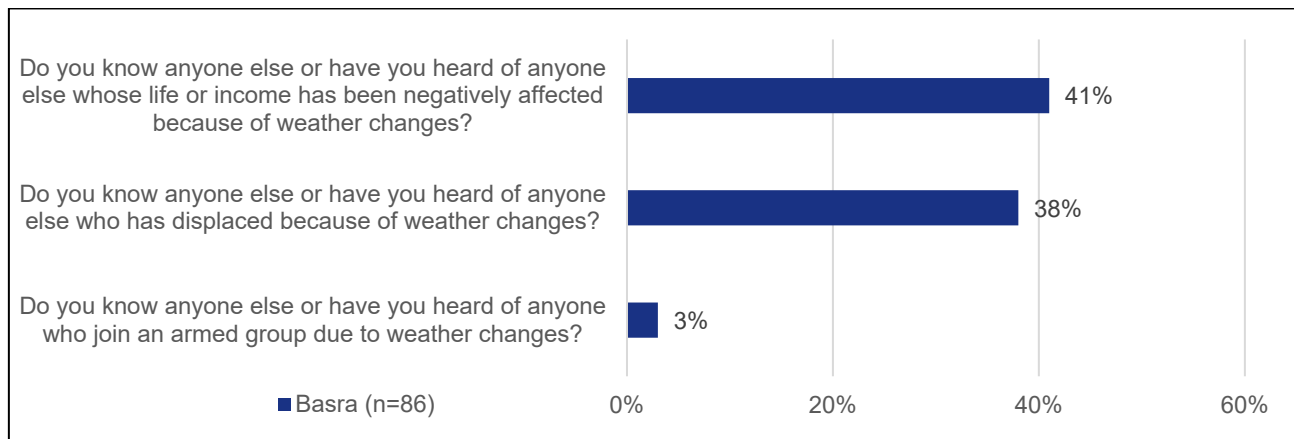
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<sup>31</sup> Jacqueline Parry and Olga Aymerich, "[Reintegration of ex-combatants in a militarized society](#)," *Peacebuilding* (2022).

<sup>32</sup> Social Inquiry and IOM Iraq, [Migration into a fragile setting: Responding to climate-induced informal urbanization and inequality in Basra, Iraq](#) (Erbil: Social Inquiry and IOM Iraq, 2022).



Figure 30. Impact of climate change on armed group membership: per cent who reported “yes”



## 7.2 Tal Afar

Several factors emerged in the data as potentially undermining the reintegration of ex-combatants in Tal Afar: ongoing insecurity, the mixed relationship the PMF enjoys with the local population, and climate and environmental factors.

First, ongoing security remained a concern for many respondents. One-quarter of respondents agreed that civilians need weapons to provide their own security in their neighbourhood, significantly higher than in Basra. There was a concurrent interest in having the State increase the prevalence of national security actors, with 50 per cent of respondents agreeing that their area needs greater police or army presence to provide security. Like in Basra, the interest in State provision of security is positive for the rule of law, but if the government fails to provide the increased security that residents believe they need, it may reinforce their perspective that civilians need weapons to provide their own security. This may encourage continued, increased, or repeat mobilization into the PMF or other armed groups. The PMF also benefits if the State remains weak as it enables its factions to remain the strongest security actor in Tal Afar, one repercussion of which is that the PMF remains an appealing source of employment and status within the community.

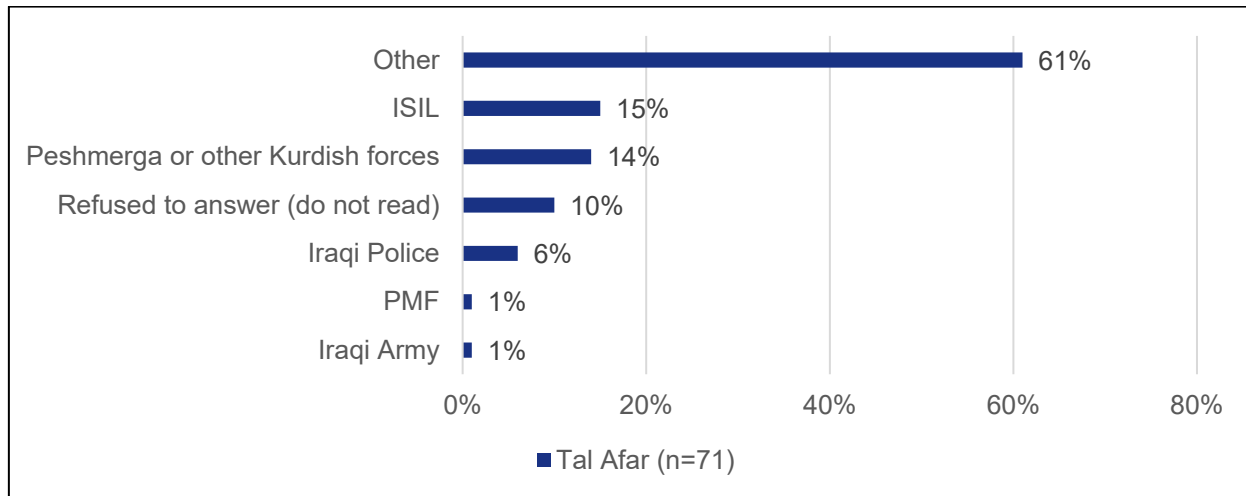
Second, there were consistent indications that the PMF remains a strong security actor in Tal Afar and that they have a mixed relationship with civilian residents. A small number of respondents attributed harm during or after the war to the PMF, including abductions (1 per cent attributed to the PMF) and property destruction or theft (6 per cent attributed to the PMF). However, what is striking is the high rate of respondents who refused to identify a perpetrator. 14 per cent of men and 4 per cent of women said that they faced harassment or assault while displaced, but the majority (61 per cent) were not willing to identify a perpetrator and listed ‘other’ as the responsible actor, as the figure below indicates. While it is impossible to say for certain, given the past reports of harassment by the PMF and associated actors against IDPs (particularly Sunni IDPs who lived under ISIL occupation),<sup>33</sup> at least part of this response likely refers to the PMF.<sup>34</sup> If the community continues to have a mixed

<sup>33</sup> See, Erica Gaston and Mario Domisse, “[At the Tip of the Spear: Armed Groups’ Impact on Displacement and Return in Post-ISIL Iraq](#),” *GPPI*, 18 February 2019.

<sup>34</sup> Notably, for questions on other types of victimization not typically associated with the PMF – property destruction and killing (of close relatives in this case) – there were much lower rates of describing perpetrators as “other” (5 and 3 per cent, respectively), which again hints that the local populations are concerned about the repercussions of leveling accusations against the PMF even in a confidential interview.

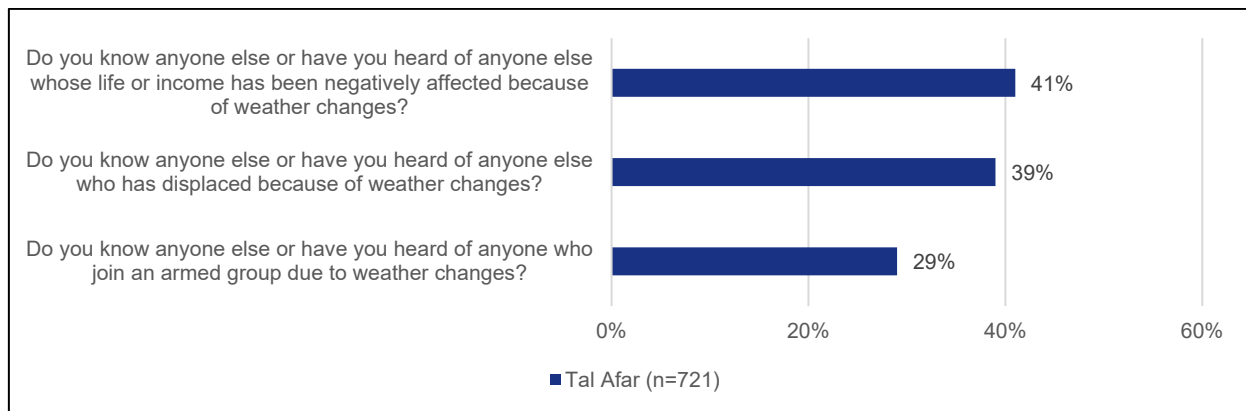
relationship with the PMF, it may undermine the degree of acceptance community members feel towards combatants who demobilize and try to reintegrate.

Figure 31: If you faced harassment or assault while displaced, who was responsible?



Third, environmental and climate change appear as significant risk factors for re-recruitment into armed groups in Tal Afar, given that 29 per cent of respondents knew or heard of someone who had joined an armed group due to climate shifts. The study did not ask respondents to specify which armed group, so this may relate to ISIL, the PMF, or other armed actors. Prior to the 2014 war, ISIL targeted a number of Sunni areas of Iraq affected by drought, exploiting grievances related to water scarcity and loss of agricultural livelihoods as a recruitment tool; it also spread rumours that water and agricultural policies were intentionally designed to harm Sunni farmers. Around Tikrit in Salah al-Din for example, ISIL appears to have attracted much more support from water-deprived communities than from their better-resourced peers.<sup>35</sup>

Figure 32: Impact of climate change on armed group membership: per cent who reported “yes”



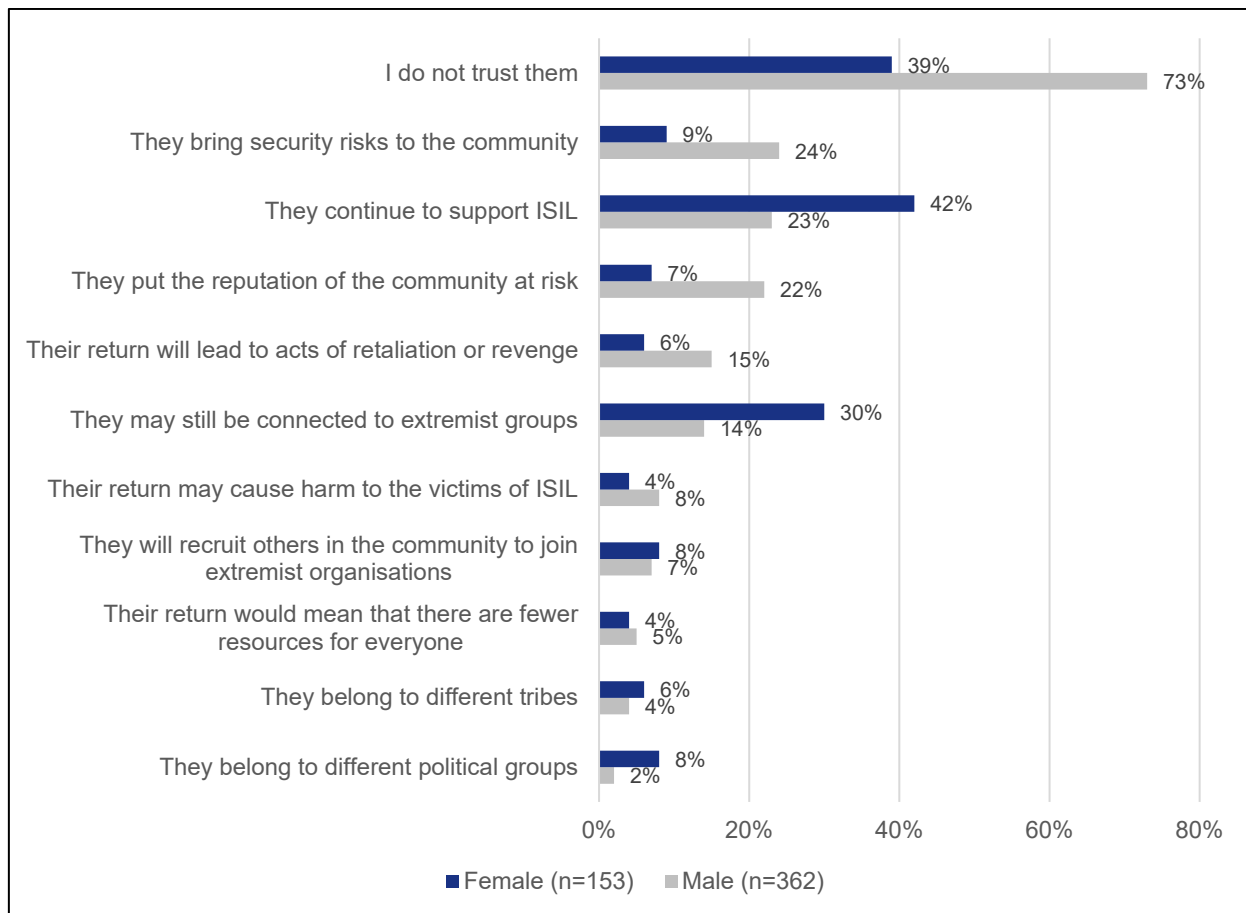
<sup>35</sup> Peter Schwarzstein, “Climate change and water woes drove ISIS recruiting in Iraq,” *National Geographic*, 14 November 2017.

# 8. Families with Perceived ISIL Affiliation

## 8.1 Tal Afar

In Tal Afar, the reintegration of families with perceived ISIL affiliation appeared (unsurprisingly) as the biggest challenge to post-war community recovery and cohesion. The majority of respondents (78 per cent of men and 64 per cent of women) were concerned about the return of people who are accused of having family ties to ISIL. Interestingly, men and women expressed different reasons as to why they were concerned about the return of these families.

*Figure 33: What concerns do you have about people who are accused of having ties to ISIL returning to your area? (Tal Afar)*



Men were more likely to raise concerns related to the physical security of the community, whereas women were more likely to be concerned about ideological risks. This may reflect the fact that women generally take on responsibility for matters related to the well-being of their family and children (such as childcare, education, and the family's psychosocial well-being) which puts these issues at the forefront of their minds, whereas men are typically responsible for external matters such as security and public engagement in the community. Men and women both raised concern that they do not trust families accused of having ties with ISIL (although men were almost twice as likely to raise this concern). Men, however, were more likely to feel that these families bring security risks to the community, put the reputation of the community at risk, and may trigger revenge attacks. Women, on the other hand, were more likely to report concerns that these families continue to support ISIL and may still be connected to extremist groups.

Via a separate question, both men and women indicated their fear that the return of families with perceived ISIL affiliation would trigger acts of revenge (30 per cent 'very concerned' and 27 per cent 'somewhat concerned' about acts of revenge related to the war on ISIL, with little difference between men and women).<sup>36</sup> Concern about tribal violence was also relatively high, with 50 per cent of Tal Afar respondents concerned about the risk of tribal violence. It is unclear whether this is solely linked to division related to the war (including perceived ISIL affiliation), but at the very least it is likely a contributing factor.

It appears that most people are not supportive of the return of families with perceived ISIL affiliation nor of any support provided to them. Almost all Tal Afar respondents (93 per cent) reported that their community was not supportive of assistance provided to families with perceived ISIL affiliation.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, 89 per cent of men and 80 per cent of women in Tal Afar reported that they would not feel comfortable if their children went to the same school as the children from 'ISIL families'. In addition, people appeared to hold firm views about the truth of accusations, with only 5 per cent of female respondents and 1 per cent of male respondents in Tal Afar believing that some families were falsely accused of ISIL affiliation. This suggests that accusations "stick" and it may be very hard to chip away at the stigma associated with this perception – a potential challenge for reintegration and community reconciliation efforts. Moreover, it draws into question whether acceptance campaigns that aim to present the returning accused families as 'humanitarian' cases will work, since residents are unlikely to shift their beliefs about the original accusations. Rather, it may make more sense to focus on improving acceptance of individual guilt (so that accusations do not attach to family members), generating more complex perceptions of who the families are and what they experienced under ISIL (to demonstrate that even those accused of associating with ISIL may have faced pressure or atrocities), or demonstrating that people have changed over the course of time.

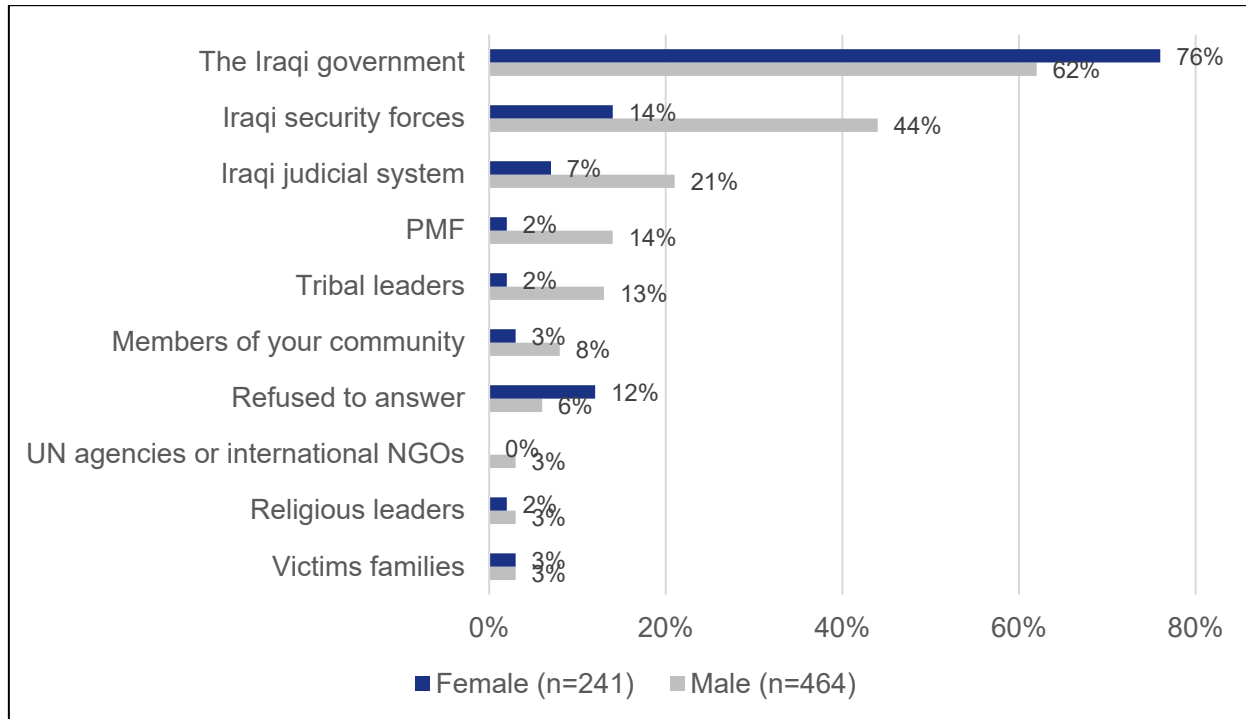
While there was a general lack of support for the reintegration of ISIL families into their communities, if returns must happen, there was a clear preference for the Iraqi Government to lead any process related to them. The majority of both men and women agreed that the Iraqi Government should be responsible for deciding if people with family ties to ISIL should be allowed to return, although men were more likely to identify specific components of the government as responsible – namely, the security forces and judicial system.

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<sup>36</sup> Compared with 20 per cent of Basra residents who were 'somewhat concerned'.

<sup>37</sup> Compared with 96 per cent of respondents in Basra who said that the community was not supportive of assistance provided to families with perceived ISIL affiliation.

Figure 34: Who do you think should be responsible for deciding if people who have family ties to ISIL should be allowed to return? (Tal Afar)



Community trust in the mechanisms to facilitate returns was mixed in Tal Afar. The strongest sense of trust was towards the government-led security screening process that is followed by the governorate. As seen in Figure 35, two-thirds of men and one-third of women trusted the process to some degree, while one-third did not trust the security screening process (noting that one-third of female respondents responded 'I don't know' to this question). Lower rates of trust existed towards the disavowment process (known as *tabriyya*) whereby someone will formally 'disavow' their accused relative, with only one-third of men and women trusting the process (to varying degrees, see Figure 36 below). Men were slightly more likely to trust the sponsorship process (whereby a known community figure 'sponsors' or formally vouches for a family and facilitates their return as part of the government-led security screening and return process).

Figure 35: Do you trust the security screening process that is followed by the governorate to determine whether a person is dangerous or not, and whether the person can return? (Tal Afar)

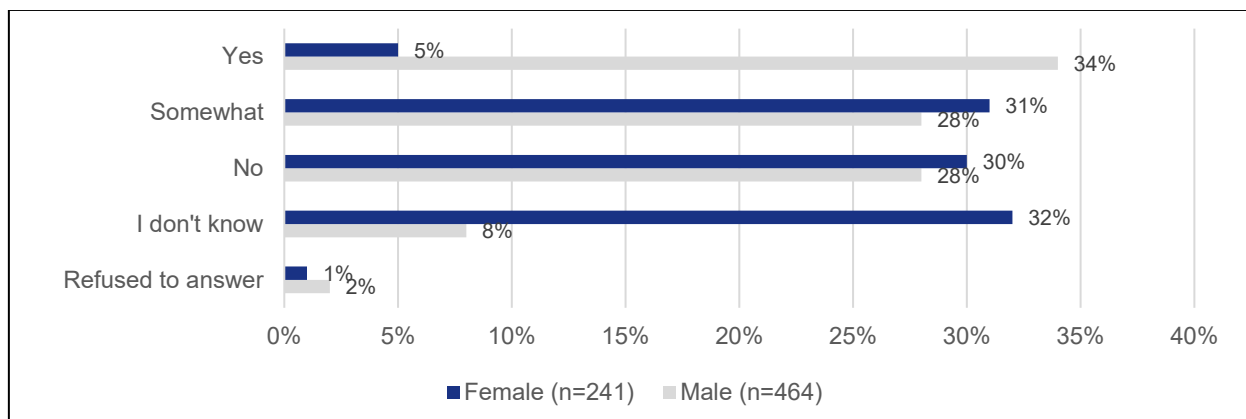


Figure 36: Do you trust the tabriyya procedure, by which they pledge to sever all bonds with their ISIL relatives? (Tal Afar)

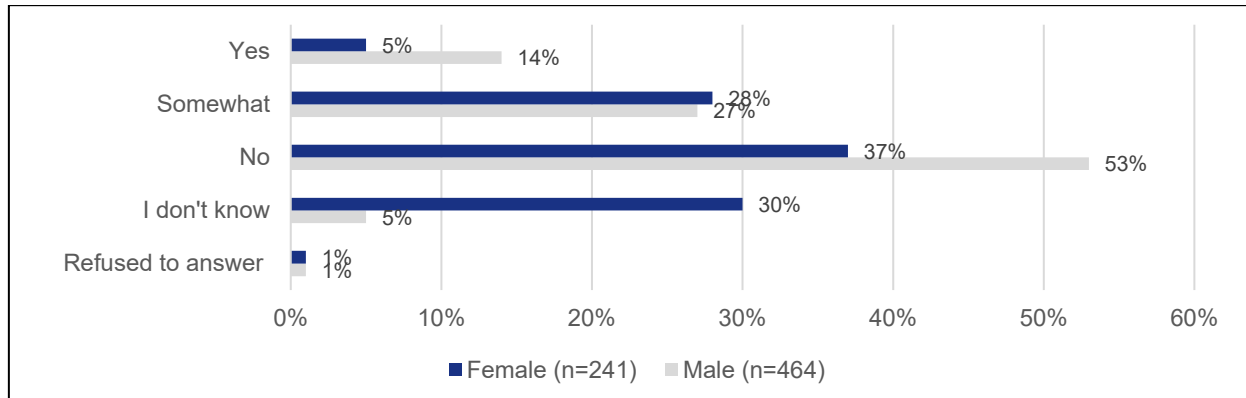
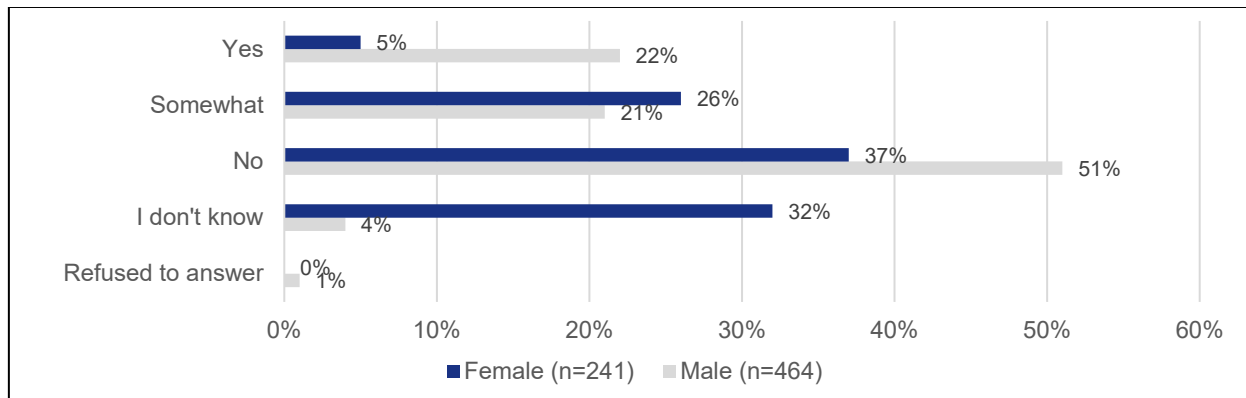


Figure 37: Do you trust the sponsorship process to ensure community safety? (Tal Afar)



Men and women held similar views about the conditions that people with family ties to ISIL should fulfil before being allowed to return. The top responses included: serving long prison sentences, disavowing any of their family members, seeking psychological counselling, and completing an education course. Notably, one-quarter of respondents (both male and female) refused to answer this question. Views were mixed on whether the same conditions should apply to men and women, indicating potential flexibility on this issue, likely suggesting preferences vary by the specific profile of the individual or family. This offers a potential opportunity for community engagement campaigns and suggests that they may gain more traction if they focus on very specific profiles – of women, children, female-headed households etc., as well as the diversity between them – rather than on collective family units.

Figure 38: Which of the following conditions, if any, do you believe that people with family ties to ISIL should fulfil before being allowed to return? (Tal Afar)

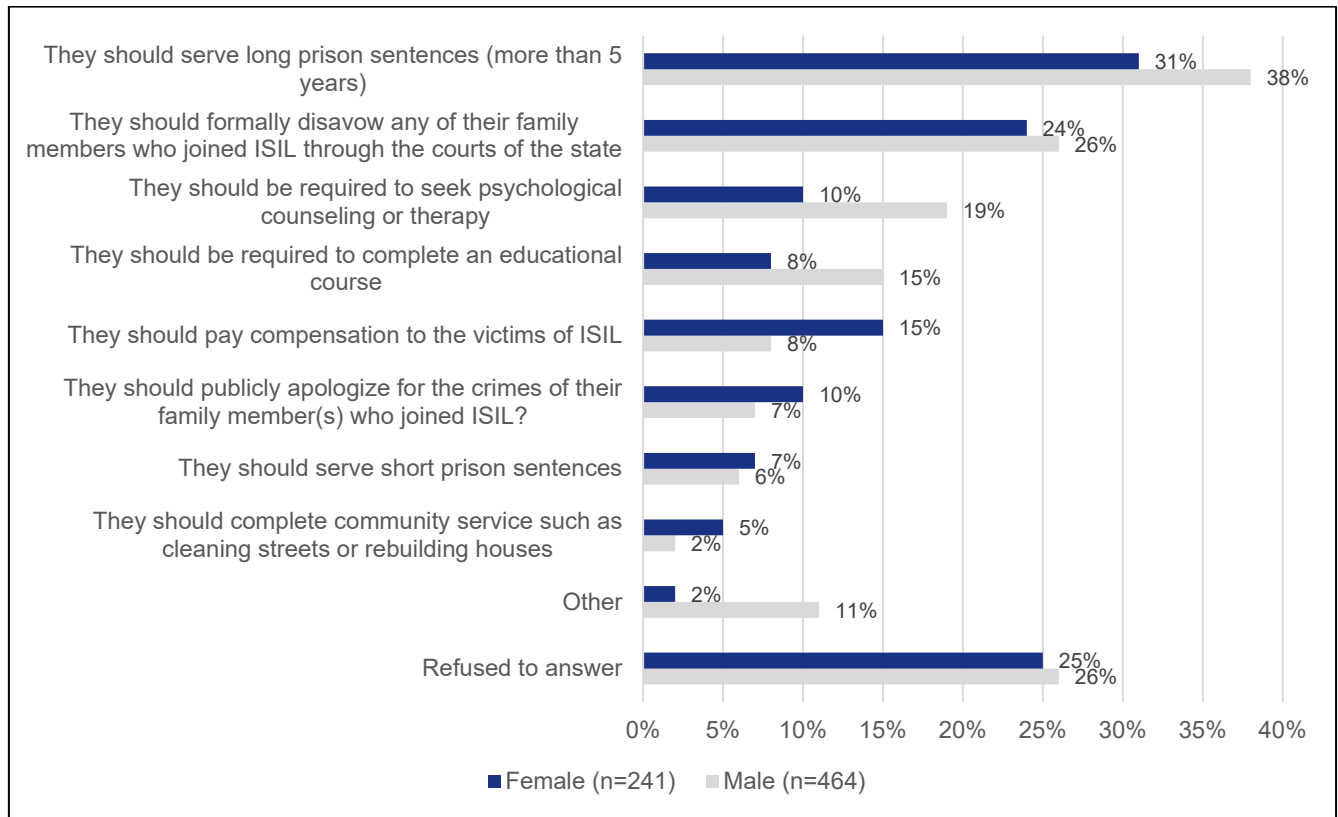
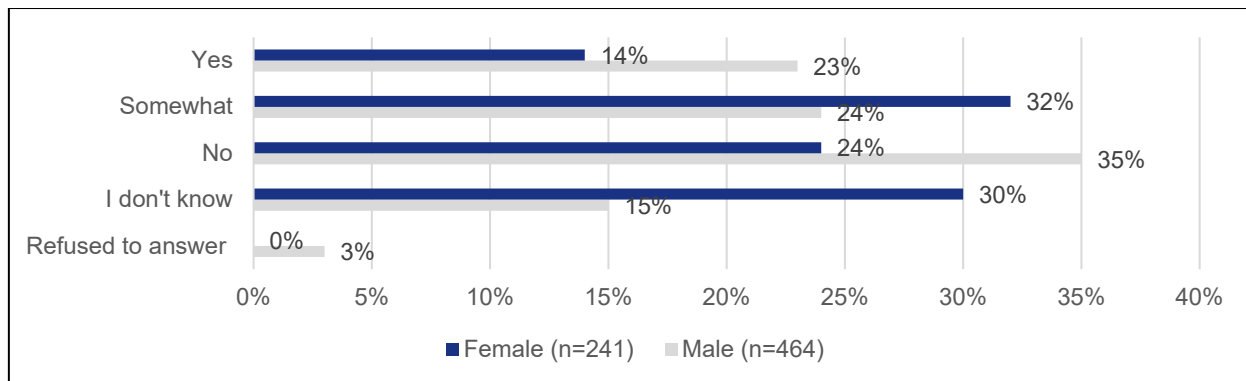


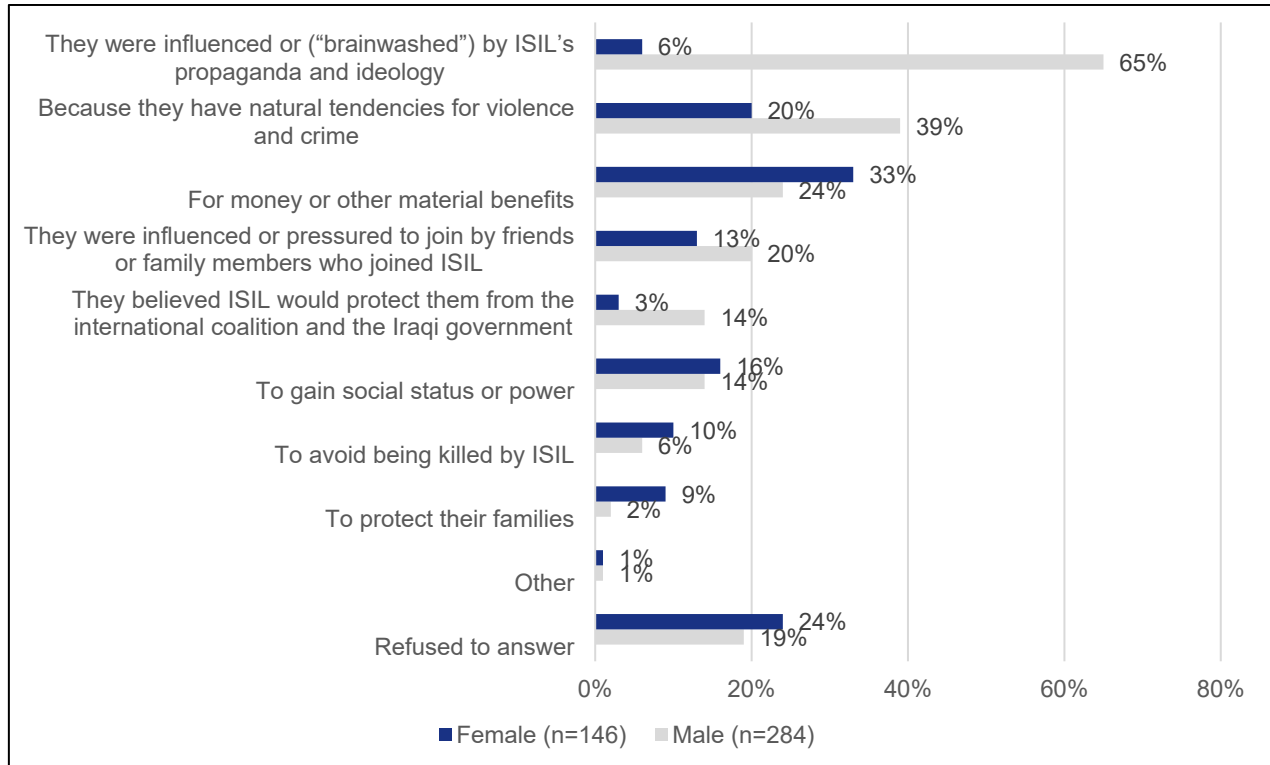
Figure 39: Do you think different conditions should apply to men and women? (Tal Afar)



The survey suggests that association with ISIL was substantial and well known in Tal Afar. Respondents suggested that up to 15 per cent of residents became fighters for ISIL, and up to 15 per cent of residents pledged allegiance to ISIL and worked for them in a civilian capacity. Male and

female respondents held markedly different views on why people chose to do this: men were more likely to state it was because they were ‘brainwashed’ or have natural tendencies for violence, whereas women were more likely to point to material benefits. This may reflect that women are more likely to have been exposed to female recruits and men to male recruits (who may, in turn, have been driven by different factors, although this is not an issue the study considered directly), or it may reflect the fact that (as evidenced by earlier questions) men tend to focus on components of community security, whereas women are usually more conscious of family-level dynamics that may include the need to provide financially for their family (linked to the appeal of material benefits).

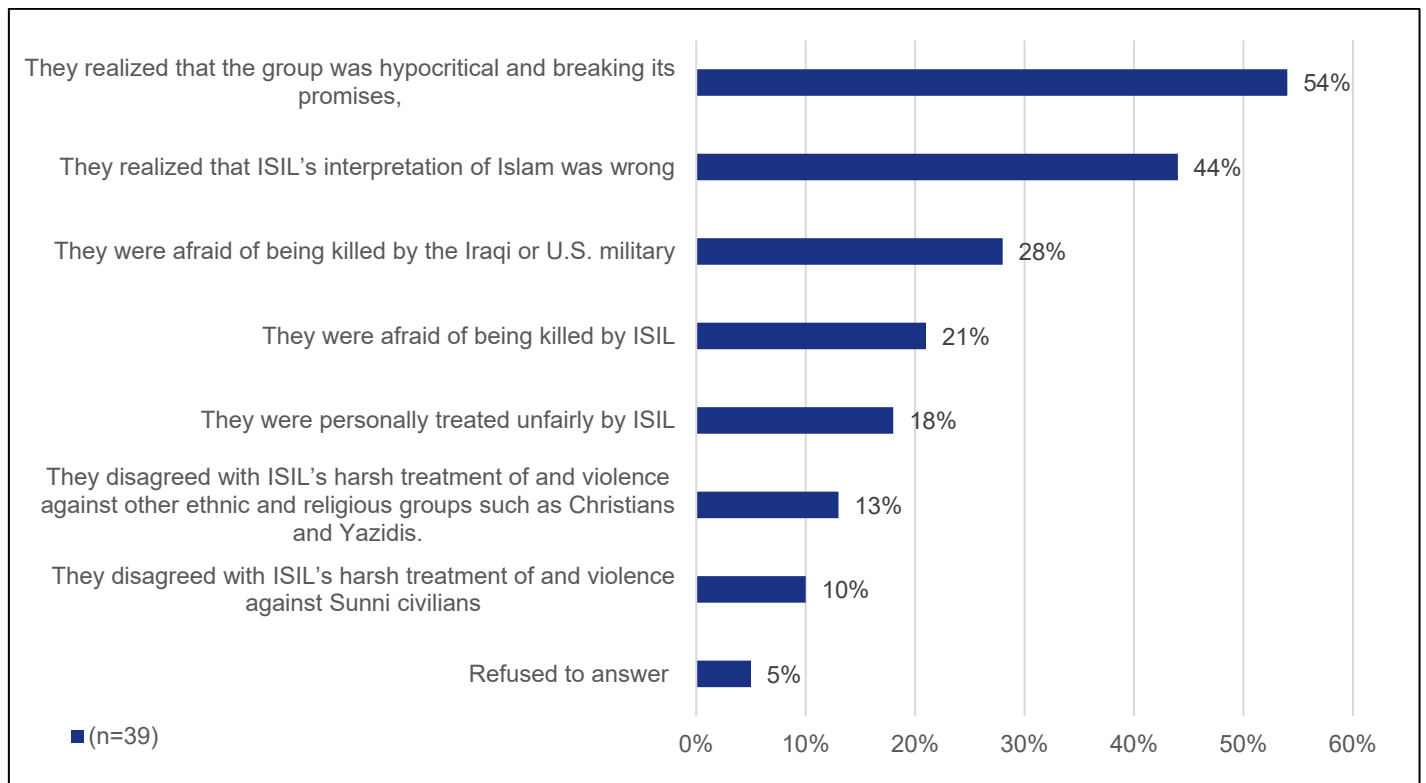
Figure 40: Why do you think these people became fighters for ISIL? (Tal Afar)



In addition, 7 per cent of male respondents and 3 per cent of female respondents in Tal Afar stated that they knew people who pledged allegiance to ISIL and then changed their minds and decided to leave the group. They identified a range of reasons for this decision to leave.



Figure 41: Why do you think these people left ISIL? (Tal Afar)



## 9. Programming Implications

The findings from this study offer insights relevant to humanitarian and stabilization programming, discussed in turn below.

### Community-based reintegration programming for ex-combatants

- **The wider role of the PMF (as a dominant security, political, and economic actor with mixed community relations) undermines community acceptance of ex-combatants and jeopardizes the conditions for formal DDR to take place.** Support to ex-combatants will likely be insufficient to improve reintegration prospects, since the wider behaviour of the group continues to undermine community acceptance. Improving reintegration prospects requires wider political engagement to address community relations with the PMF beyond reintegration assistance.
- **Additional research should be carried out to understand the extent and cause of discrimination faced by some ex-combatants.** This would help to tailor reintegration programming to the specific barriers ex-combatants face, and better address community concerns about the presence of ex-combatants.
- **A community-based approach can make it difficult to evaluate the impact of programming at the individual level and requires a strong evaluation framework.** While a community-based approach may be necessary to avoid stigmatizing participants or undermining community acceptance of the assistance, the number of ex-combatants or their precise involvement in the programme may be unclear. This approach would therefore benefit from a stronger framework to evaluate the impact of the programme specifically on individual ex-combatants; this could be reflected in the monitoring and evaluation framework, beneficiary registration, or beneficiary engagement throughout the project cycle.

### Reintegration of families with perceived ISIL affiliation

- **Efforts to improve community acceptance should focus on raising awareness of the government-led process, the diversity of family profiles, and the different concerns of male and female community members.** To date, many of the efforts to encourage community acceptance of the return of families with perceived ISIL affiliation have focused on portraying these families as victims of ISIL with humanitarian needs. The study raised doubts about the effectiveness of this approach (since most people hold firm views about their affiliation) and revealed alternative approaches that may be more effective:
  - a) **Increase awareness and understanding of the government-led process** that includes security screening and (for some cases) a period of time in a transit camp (namely, the Jeddah-1 camp). Community trust is highest towards the government-led process and appears to offer the strongest opportunity to encourage community acceptance of returns.
  - b) **Utilize public awareness and engagement campaigns to highlight the complex experiences that many families with perceived ISIL affiliation had.** Community members appear to distinguish cases based on their individual experience, and while

this would need to be done in a way that does not violate privacy or share identifiable information publicly, it appears that encouraging a more nuanced understanding of the background of these families would strengthen community acceptance.

- c) **Develop separate public awareness and engagement campaigns for men and women in the community.** Men and women hold different concerns towards these families (with men more concerned about physical security and women focused on broader social and ideological issues) and different views on why people joined ISIL. If a campaign is not tailored to these specific concerns, it is unlikely to effectively address the different types of resistance men and women feel towards the families' return.
  - d) **Consider engaging the government on the regular enforcement of disavowment as a condition to return,** given the fact that it often involves significant rights deprivation. Community trust in the disavowment process was relatively low and only a minority (25 per cent) expected returnees to disavow relatives. This suggests that this process is not community driven and would usually not result in community rejection if it were removed as a requirement for return.
- **Reconsider how vulnerability targeting criteria are set.** Most respondents were unwilling to acknowledge personal markers of ISIL affiliation (such as the need to obtain a sponsor or disavow a relative), which points to the sensitivity of this question and its stigmatizing nature. Instead, it was more common for people to identify broader socioeconomic indicators, such as employment status or income, as the reasons why they were excluded or discriminated against. Assessments to understand vulnerability or marginalization should utilize multi-layered indicators to capture this accurately.
  - **Address social discrimination and exclusion beyond just families with perceived ISIL affiliation.** Social marginalization appears to extend well beyond just those with perceived ISIL affiliation and should be addressed on a wider basis in social cohesion or protection programming.

## MHPSS

- **Expand or strengthen MHPSS services in Tal Afar, given the acute need.** In addition, people in Tal Afar chose to access MHPSS services when available and appeared to value these services, which offers a positive environment to increase and strengthen the service provision of MHPSS.
- **Investigate how MHPSS might become more acceptable in Basra.** In Basra, MHPSS services appeared less accessible and less valued, although it is unclear from the study why this is the case. This would benefit from additional research including in the way MHPSS is delivered and accessed in Basra.
- **Consider how to address the issue of social exclusion and marginalization in MHPSS programming.** While many families with perceived ISIL affiliation are marginalized, it is clear that social stigma and marginalization extend to broader social factors such as the type of job you have, what you look like, and whether you are married or not. These factors are important to consider in psychosocial support programming, as they lead to social exclusion and may affect mental health.

## Programming to prevent recruitment into armed groups

- **Monitor loss of livelihoods due to environmental and climate change as a potential source of grievance that armed groups may exploit.** There are numerous actions that could assist those whose livelihoods are impacted by climate shifts, including providing job retraining and teaching climate resistant farming techniques, which could be undertaken as part of environmental management, economic development, or even “preventing violent extremism” interventions.
- **Utilize community insights on the reasons why people left ISIL to design prevention programming.** Community respondents suggested that ISIL affiliates left the group due to a perception of the group as hypocritical and a belief that ISIL’s interpretation of Islam was incorrect, which may offer entry points for community prevention programming.

## Humanitarian or stabilization assistance

- **Strengthen prevention and mitigation programmes linked to abuse of humanitarian aid.** In Tal Afar, the perception of corruption within humanitarian or stabilization assistance was quite high – this does not imply that this perception attaches to IOM in any way, and it is unclear if it refers to both international and national assistance. However, given the potentially high reputational risk to IOM it would be important to proactively address this general perception, by increasing communication around eligibility criteria, ensuring accountability mechanisms are in place, and monitoring perceptions towards assistance provided by IOM and its partners.

**MANAGING EXITS  
FROM ARMED CONFLICT**



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