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Stabilization & IDP Return in Nineveh A MERI Roundtable



The Government of Iraq (GoI), the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), and INGOs must engage in a concerted effort to prioritize investment in IDP camps. This was one of the critical conclusions proffered by participants at a roundtable discussion jointly convened by the Middle East Research Institute (MERI) and United States Institute of Peace (USIP). This event focused on key challenges and policy recommendations for the international community and KRG in securing stabilization and the return of internally displaced persons (IDPs) within Nineveh Province. Over 30 people were in attendance, including KRG ministers, members of parliament, representatives from intergovernmental and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), and staff from MERI and USIP. Research findings from a project funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and commissioned by USIP were disseminated to the stakeholders gathered.

Challenges and Recommendations for the KRG

At the outset of this roundtable, Kristin Perry, MERI Research Fellow, presented key challenges and recommendations for the KRG related to IDP stabilization and return. Among the critical challenges discussed is the rampant security fragmentation and community militarization within Nineveh Province, which stems from a lack of intergovernmental collaboration between Erbil and Baghdad, and is exacerbated by competition between the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in Sinjar district. The resultant splintering of the security landscape is a prevalent concern, as it provides opportunity for the proliferation of sub-state armed groups, the increasing influence and continued autonomy of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), and an intrusion of foreign interests which threatens the delicate balance of power in the region. An additional challenge is the lack of administrative clarity within the disputed territories arising from the failure to implement Article 140 of Iraq's Constitution, ineffective mechanisms guiding direct communication between Erbil and Baghdad, and unclear mandates and remits between institutions and organizations that



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obscure the ownership of interventions. Meanwhile, inadequate funding for reconstruction in areas of origin and capacity-building in host communities is perceived to solidify displacement by concentrating available resources in camp settings. This challenge has been exacerbated by shifting and shrinking international donorship, as well as the new influx of refugees from northern Syria. Without the financial assistance required to mitigate the resource burden of IDP absorption in the KRI, the KRG is reluctant to facilitate durable solutions for IDPs. All of these challenges, taken together, have fostered perceptions within the IDP community that the KRG has abandoned, politicized, or failed to collaborate on their concerns, consequently enervating the trust of these constituents in the KRG.

In light of these challenges, research indicates that the KRG has several opportunities to contribute meaningfully to IDP stabilization and return. For example, the KRG has an opportunity to address Kurdish in-fighting and foster greater intra-Kurdish solidarity, a strategy which could serve to mitigate security fragmentation by disincentivizing recruitment by intra-state armed groups in Sinjar. It could also improve its partnership with Baghdad by collaborating on the rapid enactment of the Joint Security Mechanism, investing in initiatives like the High Level Joint Committee, and pursuing administrative synergy in the disputed territories. Meanwhile, the KRG can build a compelling and consistent case for decentralization by addressing its own centralization issue and expressing solidarity with other stakeholder groups who desire decentralization at the local and communal levels. Opportunities were also identified for the KRG to exert its political leverage in pursuit of a cohesive federal policy for IDP return, as well as to bolster its reputation as a pro-democratic entity by increasing the remit of existing policies for inclusion and facilitating durable solutions for IDPs.



Challenges and Recommendations for the International Community

MERI Research Fellow Henriette Johansen then presented key challenges and recommendations for the international community related to IDP return and stabilization. While these objectives have garnered significant focus and investment from the



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international community, project aims are often frustrated by complexities arising from Nineveh's history of violence, foreign invasion, and war, as well as current security and geo-political dynamics. This has led some minority IDPs to question their territorial belonging and the state's ability to represent and protect their communities, enervating intent to return. At times, sentiments of historic marginalization across Nineveh's peripheries are also reinforced by INGO interventions that appear inequitable due to security and access constraints. Another challenge for the international community is the humanitarian relief-development nexus; the process of transition and dwindling donor interest carry attendant risks of destabilization and protection gaps. As one of the most vulnerable IDP populations, Single Female Headed Households find more security within camp settings and rarely enjoy livelihood opportunities in urban or peri-urban settings; the transition from relief to development, therefore, must consider protection gaps left by camp closures. In addition, addressing the displacement crisis requires international actors to navigate unclear structures and roles within the federal apparatus which enable abdication, delay, and corruption. Such structures have obscured the routes for effective dialogue, advocacy, and coordination, which can affect the sustainability of vital INGO interventions and impede their transformation into statutory change. Finally, peacebuilding efforts that tap into existing tribal and informal governance structures are controversial, as they can potentially foster discrimination, retribalization, or conflict by favoring some authorities over others. These risks could be mitigated by establishing a platform for donors, INGOs, and civil society organizations to host open discussions on the ethics of humanitarian intervention, to streamline and enhance socially cohesive programming.



In light of the recent consolidation and closure of IDP camps, the protection of overwhelming female and highly vulnerable populations is a key challenge for the international community. A call was made for realistic donor investments that focus on addressing the needs and securing the safety of these populations rather than insisting on 'return' as the primary or exclusive indicator of success. As INGOs face shrinking donor interests and shortened donor cycles, development interventions also need to diversify investments through private and public sector partnerships. In addition, INGO



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projects could be enhanced by building the capacity of local personnel and securing a statutory structure for the continuation of vital service delivery upon INGO exit. This would involve ground-up advocacy and campaigning efforts to cover institutional gaps, such as much needed shelters for women and children, and mental health services. Finally, INGOs can optimize the sustainability, efficacy, and communal ownership of their engagements by securing gender-balanced and diverse participation.

Participant Discussion Points

Following these presentations, roundtable participants engaged in lively discussion and debate concerning the research findings and recommendations. Existing challenges related to the various locations of displacement were validated and expanded, and the need for an approach that balances the maintenance of IDP camps, reconstruction in areas of origin, and capacity-building in host communities was heavily emphasized. Salient differentials between IDPs were highlighted, challenging the treatment of “return” as an equal objective for all communities; participants observed that, while many minorities, women, and youth express reluctance to return due to the better protections and opportunities available in displacement, many Sunni IDPs reportedly wish to return but are being actively prevented from doing so. Encouraging the permanent absorption of IDPs in the KRI, while a preference of some religious minority components, was rejected by other participants as “emptying” Nineveh Province of minority communities and facilitating demographic change.

Security emerged as a primary concern among the stakeholders gathered, triggering heated contention about how to resolve existing security issues. Some expressed the need for the GoI to prioritize a resolution of the quasi-autonomous PMF. Several minority participants expressed their preference that security arrangements be handled by representative minority militias. However, this suggestion was stridently resisted by both minority leaders and members of the international community, who argued that allowing independent militias actually increases the vulnerability of minority groups. Instead, some participants suggested greater investment in the local police as a means of increasing the security capacity of legitimate, representative forces.





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An additional disagreement emerged over the idea of an autonomous, independent district for minority groups. This was proffered as an administrative solution by local participants, but was opposed by members of the international community who argued that our collective focus should remain on “realistic” solutions.

A central emphasis from participants was the need for the GoI to increase its dedication to the Nineveh file, specifically in relation to the maintenance of IDP camps, the formalization of the PMF, and the institutionalization of vital service provision.

This roundtable was held on October 20th, 2019.

List of Participants:

- Aydin Maruf Selim, Minister of State, KRG
- Safeen Muhsin Dizayee, Minister, Head of Department of Foreign Relations, KRG
- Ano Jawhar, Minister of Transportation & Communications, KRG
- Jabar Yawar, Secretary General of the Ministry of Peshmerga, KRG
- Klara Odisho Yaqub, Member of Parliament, KRG
- Farid Eliya, Member of Parliament, KRG
- Gulistan Said Muhammed, Member of Parliament, KRG
- Steven Fagin, U.S. Consul General
- Martin Lafon, French Expertise
- Paula Garcia, Center for Civilians in Conflict
- Cara Bragg, CRS
- Stella Martani, Heartland Alliance
- Suzan Younan, Heartland Alliance
- Hoger Chato, AIM
- Tanya Gilly-Khailany, SEED Foundation
- Erin Neale, IOM
- Noor Qais, Sanad for Peacebuilding
- Savannah Thomas-Arrigo, USAID
- Elie Abouaoun, Director of Middle East and North Africa Programs, USIP
- Violeta Chocarro Garcia, Iraq Program Manager, USIP
- Joshua Levkowitz, Program Specialist, USIP
- Shivan Fazil, Program Specialist, USIP
- Yousif Kalain, Program Assistant, USIP
- Salah Abdulrahman, Project Assistant, USIP
- Dlauer Ala'Aldeen, President of MERI (*Chair of the session*)
- Henriette Johansen, Research Fellow, MERI
- Kristin Perry, Research Fellow, MERI
- Kamaran Palani, Research Fellow, MERI
- Fuad Smail, Director of HR, MERI
- Mohammed Othman, IT Manager, MERI