

'I AM DETERMINED TO REALIZE MY DREAM'

Understanding decision making during
displacement and return in Iraq

BECCA SMITH, MICHAEL BOYCE AND
ZINAH MOHAMMED

It is often said that displaced people face 'no choice' or 'impossible choices' in the aftermath of conflict or disaster. But in fact, displaced people make decisions in the same way as anyone else: by balancing interests, by taking advice and by using their own ethical compass.

This research report explores the decision making processes of displaced people and returnees in Salah al-Din governorate, Iraq. It finds that against a backdrop of strong family and community support, displaced people and returnees – including women – have surprising levels of agency and self-direction. The report concludes with guidance for Iraqi authorities and humanitarian/development actors to recognize the power of displaced women, and support all displaced people whether they wish to return to their homes or not.

This research report was written to share research results, to contribute to public debate and to invite feedback on development and humanitarian policy and practice. It does not necessarily reflect the policy positions of the organizations jointly publishing it. The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the individual organizations.



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Research reports

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It is often said that displaced people face ‘no choice’ or ‘impossible choices’ in the aftermath of conflict or disaster. But in fact, displaced people make decisions in the same way as anyone else: by balancing interests, by taking advice and by using their own ethical compass. In order to understand these decision making processes, Oxfam undertook a study using the SenseMaker methodology in Salah al-Din governorate, Iraq, during February and March 2018. Salah al-Din governorate was heavily affected by the conflict between Iraqi authorities and ISIS, with more than 450,000 of its residents displaced into other governorates, and with Salah al-Din itself hosting 330,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) at the height of the humanitarian crisis.

With the prolonged control of ISIS in many towns and villages, the need for food, water and medicine increased, and at great risk, many families tried to escape. As needs intensified, local civil society organizations stepped in to provide basic services. The ability of international aid agencies to provide food, water, medicine and/or protection services was severely limited¹ and they were not present in many areas. Reports indicate that in places where food and other supplies were available they remained unbranded, with ISIS often taking credit for providing food to the people. As the head of a local non-government organization (NGO) based in the city of Tikrit said:

‘We have volunteers working in areas that are under Daaesh [the Arabic name for ISIS] control and Daaesh doesn’t bother them because they are doing humanitarian work and helping people ... There is not a problem for us to work, the only problem is the labelling of the organizations that send us the aid supplies. We have to have it without labelling for Daaesh to accept it. If they saw these labels, they wouldn’t let it in and they give our volunteers trouble and they forbid the distribution of those items to the people.’²

After most ISIS-held territories were retaken, returns began to occur, and access into the territories improved, making possible the increased presence of national and international organizations. Although many people have returned home, many others remain displaced due to extensive damage in their home areas, the lack of access to basic services, or because they have been prevented from returning by formal or customary authorities. In order to capture their experiences, a team from the Sahara Economic Development Organization, trained and supported by Oxfam, surveyed 531 IDPs and returnees across Tikrit and Baiji districts.

The survey results showed that many individuals in Salah al-Din have experienced a displacement odyssey – fleeing to multiple locations during the conflict, and often losing their own sense of identity and belonging along the way. Though many had some access to assistance and social services, their main sources of support were their own families and the communities who hosted them. And while most maintain a strong desire to return home (or to remain at home, if they have returned), a significant minority see their futures elsewhere in Iraq, if not abroad. This is due to the lack of basic services and job opportunities, difficult economic circumstances, a deficit in government trust, sectarian differences and a loss of property and even community – leading to a low sense of belonging.

Looking back on key decisions the respondents made, and how they made them, a number of interesting observations emerged:

- Most respondents (approximately two-thirds) said their decisions were mainly influenced by a sense of belonging to their family, rather than belonging to other groups of individuals (10%) or to a specific place (10%). Such responses are noteworthy given that Iraqi society is typically viewed – from the outside, at least – as largely divided by regional, ethnic or religious affiliation. Indeed, only 1% of respondents cited religious or community leaders as among their greatest sources of influence.

- Almost half of the respondents were motivated by what they themselves wanted to do, rather than by what they felt was expected of them (30%) or what they were told to do (15%). This trend held true for (and indeed, was particularly strong among) female and male youth, who are often perceived to have limited agency in Iraqi society.
- Family members were by far the greatest sources of influence on respondents' decision making. Conversely, less than 10% of respondents stated that their decisions were influenced by workers from NGOs.
- And among those who were influenced by NGO workers, this influence was seen as slightly negative (especially by female respondents). This should serve as a reality check for Oxfam and other organizations responding in conflict, displacement and disasters from natural hazards, and it should be reflected in the way humanitarian organizations communicate with supporters, donors, policy makers and displaced people themselves.

This report concludes with guidance for Iraqi authorities and humanitarian/development actors as to how they might use these findings – particularly for women's empowerment programming, alternatives to returns, psychosocial interventions, and accountability/feedback mechanisms for people who have been displaced from their homes. A summary of observations from the study, and guidance for stakeholders includes the following:

1. The agency and drive of women, and especially young women, in Iraqi society deserves increased attention, as it is presently underappreciated.
2. Noting that a forward-leaning approach should be applied to women's empowerment, we urge humanitarian and development actors (including Oxfam) to ensure that funding mechanisms and programming solutions are responsive to women's aspirations – even (and perhaps especially) when those aspirations challenge oppressive gender norms.
3. We reaffirm the calls to the Government of Iraq and representatives at governorate levels to implement a system that enables the safe, voluntary and informed return of internally displaced Iraqi citizens. This system should be respected by all actors including humanitarian and development organizations, members of the private sector and community, religious and tribal leaders.
4. While calling for voluntary, safe and informed returns, it is appreciated not all displaced persons would like to and/or are able to go back to their homes. We therefore urge the Iraqi government to operationalize displacement policies that will provide settlement alternatives, such as local integration or national resettlement. The availability and implementation of these durable solutions will ensure that the rights of displaced persons are guaranteed, and will be key in advancing social cohesion.
5. Alongside providing alternative solutions to settlement, creating jobs and providing income-generating opportunities, particularly for young people, must be prioritized by the Government of Iraq, and supported by the international community.
6. The importance of psychosocial support repeatedly came up during the study as respondents narrated their experiences. These stories highlight the need for Iraqi authorities to make larger investments in the country's mental health system so that psychosocial support is more accessible and affordable for conflict-affected populations. In addition, donor, humanitarian and development agencies should also heighten their funding and programming interventions so as to improve access to psychosocial treatment and support for those who need it.



Nidhal, from Musahak village in Salah al-Din governorate, was forced to leave her home in October 2015 to escape life under ISIS. Over the span of two years Nidhal and her family moved six times, living in Salah al-Din, Kirkuk and Anbar governorates. They returned home in October 2017. Nidhal is photographed with blankets she received from communities that welcomed and hosted her while she was displaced. Photo credit: Charlotte Sawyer/Oxfam.

1 UNDERSTANDING CHOICES DURING DISPLACEMENT AND RETURN

In the midst of conflict or a disaster from natural hazards, it is often said that the people affected face ‘no choice’ or ‘impossible choices’ when trying to survive. Fleeing one’s home, moving to a camp, selling one’s belongings or taking on debt: these are all decisions that displaced people make every day. It is tempting to see such decisions as both necessary and automatic. However, displaced people still have agency. Like anyone else, they make decisions by consulting others, by weighing their options and by deciding what is morally acceptable.

The aim of this publication is to inform Oxfam’s work on displacement. By analysing the responses of 531 interviews with displaced and returned Iraqi women and men, the study seeks to understand:

- Which factors influence how people who have been displaced by conflict make decisions, and the extent to which decision making processes vary for different demographic groups;
- Whether, by capturing the experiences of large numbers of displaced people, we can challenge assumptions and stereotypes about the displacement experience;
- Whether national programmatic and policy responses should change to account for the decision making practices of displaced people and returnees.

2 DISPLACEMENT AND RETURN IN IRAQ AND SALAH AL-DIN GOVERNORATE

Iraq has suffered from repeated bouts of conflict and displacement, the most recent due to the dramatic rise of the militant group ISIS. ISIS was an outgrowth of older Iraqi jihadist organizations, including Al Qaeda in Iraq.³ Its militants' extreme brutality – along with widespread popular disillusion with Iraq's sectarian and corrupt government – proved a lethal combination. Beginning in early 2014, ISIS's zone of control expanded rapidly to encompass slightly over one-third of Iraqi territory, with local security forces and civilian authorities either forced out or eliminated. ISIS imposed a severe form of Islamic law on the areas it conquered, and its fighters exacted violence against religious/ethnic minorities and any others who opposed them, forcing many civilians to flee their homes.

By the end of 2017, a military campaign by Iraqi and international forces had routed ISIS from all but a few holdouts. However, by that time, the conflict had caused widespread casualties and destruction, particularly due to the use of explosive weapons (improvised explosive devices, aerial bombardments and mortars) in residential areas by actors on both sides. At the height of the conflict more than 3.4 million people had been displaced. A large-scale international humanitarian effort, alongside work to restore services in retaken areas, provided many civilians with basic assistance and the chance to return home quickly. But as of April 2018, more than 2 million Iraqis remained displaced for reasons including insecurity, poor living conditions or because they were barred from returning by security forces or local authorities.

Salah al-Din governorate was one of the first regions of Iraq affected by the conflict with ISIS. Large-scale displacement from the area began in mid-2014, when ISIS forces invaded the city of Tikrit and surrounding areas (see Figure 1). By the height of the conflict in early 2017, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) reported that approximately 469,000 Salah al-Din residents had been displaced across Iraq.⁴ Salah al-Din itself hosted more than 330,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs), mostly from Salah al-Din, Kirkuk and Ninewa governorates.⁵ Displacement continued in the area, even beyond the officially declared end of the conflict in December 2017, with IDPs continuing to arrive from Hawija district, one of ISIS's final strongholds.

Figure 1: Map of Iraq showing the districts of Tikrit and Baiji within Salah al-Din governorate



Source: Wikimedia/TUBS. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saladin_Governorate#/media/File:Salah_ad-Din_in_Iraq.svg

By the time of this survey, the tide had turned: as of March 2018, IOM reported that just over 200,000 people were still displaced within Salah al-Din, while 511,000 residents of Salah al-Din had returned home from other parts of the country.⁶

3 METHODOLOGY

The SenseMaker research method prioritizes the voice of the storyteller, who starts the data collection process by sharing a story and then answers a pre-determined set of analytical questions called a ‘signification framework’ to interpret his or her own story.⁷ The resulting data is then aggregated to generate recognizable patterns, trends and outliers using SenseMaker analytical software. For this research, each respondent began the interview process by sharing a story about a decision they had made during the previous six months. This decision could have been whether to flee or return, or about any other matter of consequence to their lives (see Box 1).

Box 1: Prompt question for respondents

'I would like you to think of the past six months specifically. Most people make big and small decisions every day. Please tell me about one such decision or choice, an important one that you made recently. It should be something that helps other people understand what it is like to be displaced and/or just returning. Your story will stay completely anonymous. We want to hear about your life and experience in your own words, but you don't have to include your name or the name of people that played a role in your story. Please think about:

'What choice or decision did you make?'

'Why did you make that choice or decision?'

'Who was involved?'

'What happened in your life as a result?'

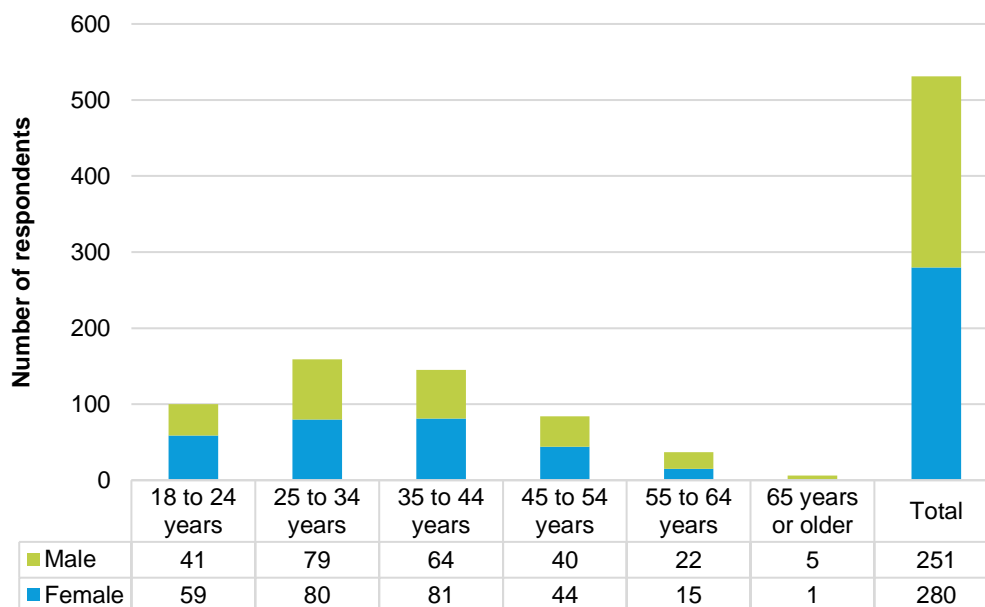
The diverse lived experiences of women and men were then further unpacked by asking them about a range of issues, including their access to social support and other resources, their sense of belonging and identity, and their degree of hope for the future.

The survey questions and signification framework were designed collaboratively between Oxfam and its local partner, the Sahara Economic Development Organization (SEDO). This process ensured that all questions were relevant and tailored specifically to the context of Iraq.

Data was collected in February and March 2018 across four sites in Salah al-Din governorate, across the two districts of Tikrit and Baiji, using enumerators from SEDO specifically trained to collect stories using SenseMaker.⁸ One site in each district was predominantly populated by IDPs, the other by returnees. These locations were chosen on account of the large movements of displaced people seen there during the conflict with ISIS, and based on the ability of enumerators to interview residents safely. SEDO's role in data collection proved critical, as its trusted local contacts were essential for gaining access and the trust of interviewees.

The study sought to capture the experiences of Iraqis of different ages and genders, and especially to highlight the voices of women and young people, who are often assumed to have less agency and power than men and older people in Iraqi society. Iraq has not had a national census since 1997, so the research team had no official demographic data to use as a guide. Teams were requested to obtain a sample comprising approximately equal gender balance and 40% of individuals between the ages of 18 and 35, targets which were achieved (see Figure 2). Teams were also requested to interview roughly equal numbers of self-identified displaced and returnee individuals.

Figure 2: Respondents by age and gender



Respondents participated voluntarily and did not receive any compensation. Each respondent was asked to give informed consent before their interview, having been told that the information they shared would be used in publications and advocacy, but that they would remain anonymous as their names would not be collected.

Due to its methodology and scope, this study does not claim to be representative of the situation of all forcibly displaced Iraqis. The choice of methodology reflects Oxfam's desire to deepen its understanding of decision making among people affected by violence and displacement, rather than 'assessing' or measuring the characteristics of displaced people using indicators commonly found in household surveys. Further, the study covers but one of many Iraqi governorates affected by displacement. Finally, because the signification framework was designed to be used in other contexts for previous/future case studies, the underlying questions had to retain a general nature that would apply to a wide range of settings and enable a degree of comparability across multiple data sets.

4 WHO WERE THE DECISION MAKERS? WHAT WAS THEIR DISPLACEMENT EXPERIENCE?

To capture the most relevant snapshot of people currently on the move, the study surveyed both displaced (56%) and returnee (44%) populations living across four locations in Tikrit (57%) and Baiji (43%) districts.

The majority of respondents (57%) reported leaving their homes between two and five years prior to the survey date, concurrent with the period of ISIS's arrival, occupation and expulsion from Salah al-Din. Smaller numbers of respondents were displaced for between one and two years (28%) or between six months and one year (9%) prior to the survey. When asked with whom they travelled during their displacement, only 2% said they travelled mostly alone,

whereas 82% travelled with their family or other relatives. Just over half reported travelling with non-family members whom they had met during displacement.

More than 68% of respondents had been displaced more than once during the conflict, with 41% having fled three or more times. The stories of those displaced multiple times reflect a complicated – and, in some instances, ongoing – odyssey. In some cases, people were forced to flee multiple times, facing insecurity at many steps along the way. Others returned to their homes, only to find them destroyed by aerial bombardment or booby traps, occupied by others, inaccessible because of property rights issues, or unliveable because of a lack of basic services like water or electricity.

Box 2: In search of safety

'Like all the citizens of the city where I was displaced, I wanted safety for myself, my family and my children. We never imagined that we would go through such bad days. We got hungry, cold and lost our sense of self-worth sometimes. It felt like we were moving from one country to the other while we were only moving from one city to the other. We returned eventually, as we had wished. But when we returned, nothing was the same and we started to see more strangers than the original people of our city. I decided to sell my house because I have daughters and felt more comfortable moving to another neighbourhood nearby.'

Male, aged 45–54

A substantial majority of respondents (89%) cited the presence of armed groups as their reason for fleeing. Though many of these respondents were likely fleeing from ISIS activities, it is clear that others were fleeing clashes between ISIS, the Iraqi military and forces allied with the Iraqi military (including pro-government militias and Peshmerga forces deployed by the Kurdistan Regional Government). Most respondents (64%) also reported fleeing in anticipation of violence. Approximately 10% of individuals also cited expulsion/eviction or a lack of safe food and water as a key factor.

When asked about their legal status, the vast majority of respondents (90%) said they were Iraqi citizens with documentation, and an additional 2% were citizens without documentation. A further 6% identified as temporary residents with permits, and 2% identified as permanent residents. No further data was collected on the nationality of non-Iraqi respondents. As Salah al-Din is not known to have a significant foreign/refugee population, it is likely that the respondents who identified as temporary/permanent residents were actually Iraqi citizens. They may instead have been referring to the fact that they previously lived in another governorate and had not acquired a residency card for Salah al-Din.

More than 81% of respondents reported experiencing property loss or damage during the conflict, with the vast majority of these incidents occurring after fleeing their homes. Family separation and cases of physical harm were also reported by around 30% of respondents. A notable 76% of respondents said that they experienced a 'loss of sense of self or belonging' during their displacement and return process (see Table 1). This high response rate was similar across age groups, but women were somewhat more likely to have experienced this than men (81% versus 70%). Displaced respondents were also more likely to experience this than returnees (78% versus 73%) and, not surprisingly, displaced respondents reported much higher rates of alienation 'where they are now' (18% versus 3% of returnees). When considered alongside respondents' answers about psychological well-being, this suggests that many displaced people are both keenly aware of their own mental health issues and are in need of greater psychosocial support.

**Table 1: ‘What have you experienced and when? (Loss of sense of self/belonging)’
(Multiple responses allowed)**

Response	Displaced people	Returnees	Men	Women
<i>Before leaving home</i>	27%	27%	33%	21%
<i>Between leaving and where you are now</i>	56%	59%	52%	62%
<i>Where you are now</i>	18%	3%	14%	10%
<i>Never</i>	22%	26%	26%	19%

ASSISTANCE OF FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

The survey data indicates that respondents benefited greatly from the assistance of their families and communities. They indicated that ‘welcoming attitudes’ were the most abundant asset they had during their displacement and return (75%), followed by ‘encouragement to participate in the local community’ (69%). Research has shown that in a humanitarian crisis, it is communities themselves who respond first, and the survey data suggests that a similar dynamic is at play in Salah al-Din.⁹ When asked about access to basic assistance and social services, responses were still positive on average (education: 60%; basic assistance: 54%; health care: 43%), but were notably more mixed. Respondents were most negative when asked about their access to economic opportunities, with one-third having access. These results were largely the same for women and men, though on average, women reported slightly greater difficulties being welcomed and encouraged by their community, while men reported slightly greater challenges accessing economic opportunities and health care.

Box 3: Living with psychological trauma

‘When I was displaced I hated myself and my neighbourhood because of the mental trauma I faced in that time. Some days I cried and asked God what our children had done to deserve this. But when I returned, things started to get better: even though we are suffering economically, I can ask for help from friends and family.’

Male, aged 35–44

Surprisingly, levels of access were not substantially different for IDPs compared with returnees: indeed, their access to economic opportunities and community participation was essentially the same. IDP respondents reported greater difficulties accessing welcoming attitudes, basic assistance, health care and education than returnees, but the differences were relatively minor.

5 FINDINGS

5.1 WHAT ARE PEOPLE MAKING DECISIONS ABOUT?

Respondents were asked to think about the decision they described at the beginning of the survey, and then to choose which of a list of issues were most closely linked to this decision (see Table 2). The most common themes cited were basic needs, including housing/shelter, money and education. ‘Family’ was also a theme for more than half of respondents. Due to under-reporting of gender-based violence in Iraq, as a result of stigma, the number of stories linked to sexual assault and trafficking of people should not be seen as indicative of the true prevalence of such forms of abuse.¹⁰ While a number of themes were consistently strong for women and men, there was notable variation with respect to education, on which women – and especially young women – placed significantly more emphasis than men.

Table 2: ‘Your story is mainly about...?’ (Up to three responses allowed)

Story theme	Number of respondents	% of all respondents	% of female respondents	% of male respondents
<i>Housing or shelter</i>	331	62%	65%	59%
<i>Money</i>	297	56%	57%	55%
<i>Family</i>	274	52%	50%	53%
<i>Education</i>	201	38%	45%	30%
<i>Health</i>	125	24%	24%	24%
<i>Personal property</i>	70	13%	11%	15%
<i>Transport</i>	60	11%	9%	14%
<i>Other</i>	38	7%	5%	10%
<i>Harassment or discrimination</i>	34	6%	5%	8%
<i>Physical harm</i>	26	5%	5%	5%
<i>Trafficking of people</i>	17	3%	4%	2%
<i>Documentation</i>	16	3%	3%	4%
<i>Environmental problems</i>	16	3%	4%	2%
<i>Sexual assault</i>	2	1%	1%	0%

5.2 WHICH FACTORS DID PEOPLE CONSIDER WHEN MAKING DECISIONS?

The survey asked a number of triad questions¹¹ about why and how respondents made their decisions, and about who had the most control over these decisions.

When asked whether their decisions were influenced by a sense of belonging with their family, with a larger group of individuals or to a specific location, more than 60% of respondents identified their family as most important. A further 14% identified equally with all three choices, while only about 10% felt the greatest connection to either a place or a group. This general trend was evident regardless of displacement status, age or marital status – but there was variation between women and men (see Figure 3). Women were significantly more likely to feel the strongest bond with family (65%) than men (51%), while men were more likely to identify equally with each of the three choices (18% versus 10%). Anecdotal evidence certainly points to the importance of family links in Iraqi society, with such links often extending across many generations. However, the rather low levels of motivation based on other group identities (e.g. tribal, ethnic, religious) is noteworthy, particularly since the discourse around Iraqi politics and society (both domestically and internationally) is often anchored by these identities.

Figure 3: How feelings of belonging influenced men’s and women’s decisions

‘My choice or decision was influenced by feeling that I belong with/to...’



Nearly two-thirds of respondents reported that their decision was chiefly motivated by a desire for ‘change’ (as defined by the respondents), with about one-third being motivated mostly by a desire to meet their basic needs. This was consistent between women and men. Neither younger nor older respondents were substantially motivated by a desire for things to stay the same (5% of each age group), though younger respondents were somewhat more inclined to be seeking change than to meet their basic needs. Displaced individuals reported being slightly more motivated than returnees by a desire to meet their daily needs, which might be expected given their ongoing vulnerability.

When asked what mattered more in their decision – safety and security, status and belonging, or prosperity – more than 60% of respondents reported that survival and safety mattered most, with 20% and 12% chiefly motivated by status/belonging or prosperity, respectively. The percentage of displaced respondents who reported prioritizing survival and safety (70%) was higher than that of returnees (60%).

When asked a further question about what mattered in their decision – reducing risk, taking advantage of an opportunity or keeping things the same – respondents were almost equally split between reducing risk and maximizing opportunity. Less than 10% said they were mainly aiming to keep things the same. These responses did not vary significantly between men and women. However, returnees were slightly more likely to report being motivated by opportunity than their displaced counterparts.

5.3 WHO INFLUENCED PEOPLE'S DECISIONS? HOW MUCH AGENCY DID THEY HAVE?

Iraq is widely perceived as a patriarchal society, in which women and young people have limited agency. However, in reviewing the data from this survey, one can see a more complex picture.

Respondents were asked who most strongly influenced their decisions, and whether that influence was positive or negative. Family members were the most commonly cited sources of influence over individuals' decisions – and the most positive influences of all. More than 60% of respondents were influenced by their spouse or other relatives, with 50% being influenced by their children. Less common positive influences included friends (31%), police and military forces (17%), and local residents (16%). The only source of influence seen as a strong negative was informal armed groups (14% and very negative).

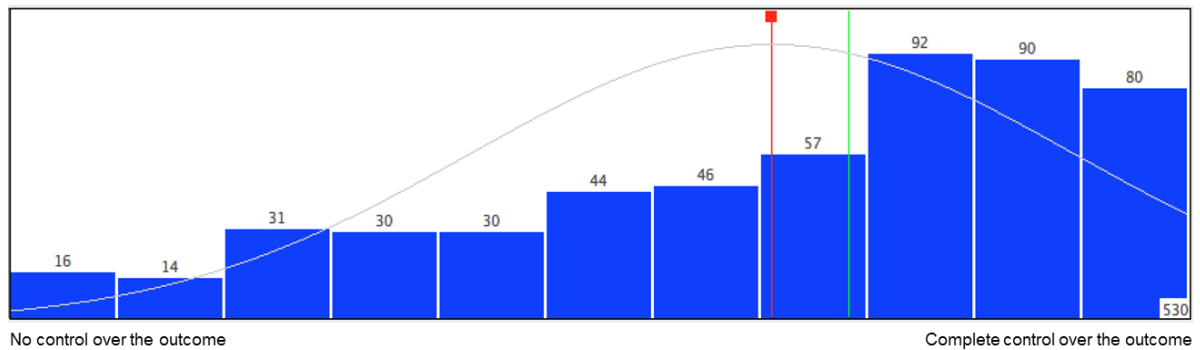
Perhaps just as interesting as the sources of greatest influence are the sources of limited or no influence. These point to a different displacement experience from that which the media, humanitarians and policy makers might imagine. For example, given Iraq's history of sectarian conflict, one might imagine survey participants to be heavily influenced by religious or community leaders, but in fact, only 1% of respondents said that these individuals were involved in their stories.

Also noteworthy is how little influence service providers and duty-bearers had over people's decisions: less than 10% of respondents cited NGO workers (6%; slightly negative), legal support providers (5%; slightly positive), and local government officials (3%; slightly positive) as influencing their decision. Of the 20 respondents who cited NGO workers, the vast majority were female (79%), and these 16 female respondents had significantly more negative views than their four male counterparts. The stories of respondents who cited NGOs as having influenced their decision were reviewed for any allegations of abuse, but none were identified. One respondent who specifically mentioned NGOs in her story stated only that 'NGOs do not help us'. Even so, and despite the increasing investment in and attention to safeguarding issues within Oxfam and the broader humanitarian community, this result should be a reminder of the need for careful review of NGOs' feedback and complaints mechanisms.

When asked whether their decisions reflected what they wanted, what they were told to do or what they felt they should do, roughly half of respondents indicated that they were chiefly driven by 'what they wanted', with roughly a third being driven by 'what they should do'. Less than 15% primarily felt compelled to do 'what they were asked to do by someone else'. Interestingly, these results were almost identical when comparing male and female respondents. Further, youth respondents (aged 18–34) – and young women in particular – reported slightly higher degrees of self-motivation than older adults (more than 58% 'what they wanted'). Similar results emerged when respondents were asked to describe (by choosing a point along a spectrum, also known as a slider¹²) whether they felt they had more or less control over the outcomes of their decision (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Respondents' level of control over the outcomes of their decisions (n = 530)

Thinking about my choice/decision, I had...



Box 4: Making choices – absolute autonomy

‘Upon returning home I decided to split from my husband because of our different ways of thinking and different principles. I made this decision with the support of a psychologist and my life completely transformed. I am back to life again.’

Female, aged 18–24

Though these respondents said that they were motivated by ‘what they wanted’ or that they ‘had control’ of the outcomes of their decisions, this autonomy is not necessarily absolute. For example, a large proportion of young female respondents who indicated high levels of control over their decisions also noted the importance of support from their parents.

Box 5: Making choices – supported autonomy

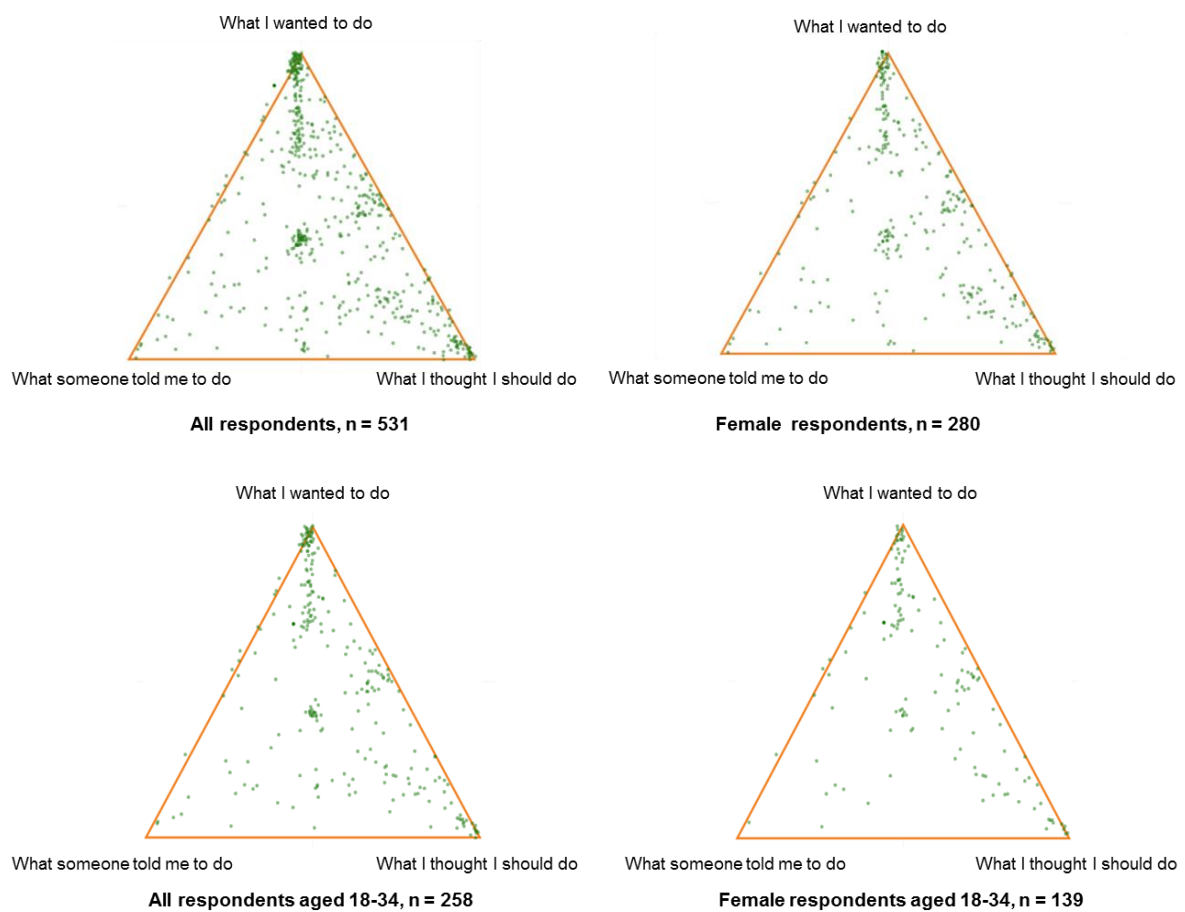
‘I fled from Baiji to Hawija to Kirkuk, and then on to Tikrit. I was a high school student during this time, and my decision was to continue my education because I had missed two previous chances to enrol in university. Thank God, I made it to university. I was really motivated to do this and make a change in my life, and I was supported in this by my father and also my mother. Before, I was so scared of losing my future, but now that has changed and we gained a chance to get our lives back.’

Female, aged 18–24



Hadla left her home in Musahak village on 17 October 2015, fleeing to Shirqat district in Salah al-Din. After a year she moved to Tikrit, and was forced to move three more times, living between Tikrit and Alam districts. Hadla finally returned home on 21 October 2017. Photo credit: Charlotte Sawyer/Oxfam.

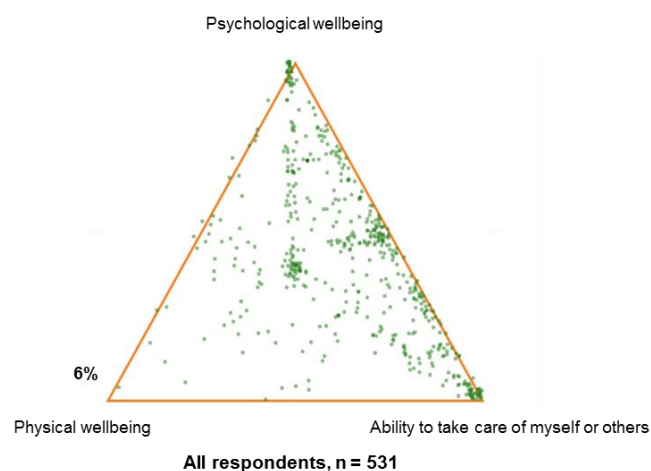
Figure 5: ‘The choice or decision that I made was...’



5.4 WHAT WERE THE OUTCOMES OF THESE DECISIONS?

When asked about the greatest effect of their decision on their personal life, 75% of respondents were almost equally split across three responses: the effect on their ability to provide for themselves/their families; the effect on their mental health; and an effect on both equally. A small minority (6%) said the greatest effect had been on their physical health (Figure 6).

Figure 6: 'Thinking about my choice/decision, I have experienced changes in my...'



Box 6: Outcomes of making choices

'I was escorted from my home area to Hawija, where we were besieged by ISIS. We tried to escape more than once. Finally, we were allowed to leave, but ISIS took all of our documents. Then, after walking for 13 hours, we were able to cross into Tikrit with the help of the army. We were so close to death on the way. I had a baby that I left on the road and sacrificed for the sake of the rest of my children. He was ill and I did not have medicine or water to give him, so we had to leave him there. This gave me intense pain and I cry for this loss. After we arrived in Tikrit, we went to Hamra where our relatives were, but we still suffered there. The decision I made recently was to return to rebuild my home, which was destroyed and stolen. I also decided to build a small grave for my son who we left on the way, so I can visit him whenever I miss him.'

Male, aged 35–44

Respondents were also asked to describe how they felt about their decision. Despite the difficult stories they shared – with many involving the loss of loved ones, as well as homes and property – most respondents said that in the end, they felt positive (53%) or strongly positive (14%), with only 8% feeling negative and 3% strongly negative. More than two-thirds of respondents (women and men, of almost all age groups) had positive or strongly positive feelings.¹³ Perhaps most surprisingly, the degree of positive feeling did not vary according to whether the respondents remained displaced or had returned home.

5.5 PERSPECTIVES ON THE FUTURE

Overall, respondents indicated a clear desire to return to their home areas of Iraq (if still displaced), or to remain at home (if they had already returned). This was the preferred outcome for 63% of displaced people and 72% of returnees. However, significant numbers of respondents wanted a different outcome: 21% of displaced respondents wished to remain where they were, while 15% of displaced people and 23% of returnees wanted to move to another location that was not their home area. These findings are an important reminder that return will not – and must not – be the only durable solution available to displaced Iraqis, and that Iraqi authorities must allow for and support the possibility of local integration.

Echoing their answers to similar questions (e.g. whether they had positive or negative feelings about their stories), respondents declared that they were hopeful about their futures. This level of hopefulness was nearly uniform, among women and men and across age groups, with displaced respondents and returnees expressing similar levels of hope.

Respondents cited a wide range of factors that could have improved the outcome of their decisions – access to basic assistance and improved security/treatment by authorities were among the most cited (Table 3). The rank order of these needs varied little between women and men or across age groups; however, compared with men, women respondents were more likely to cite access to technology, knowledge about rights/entitlements and opportunities to permanently resettle or go abroad. Compared with returnees, displaced respondents were more likely to cite access to goods, confidence/guarantees of security and better laws and policies.

Table 3: ‘What could have led to a better outcome of your decision?’ (Up to three responses allowed)

Response	Number of respondents	% of all respondents	% of female respondents	% of male respondents
<i>Access to goods</i>	317	60%	61%	59%
<i>Confidence/ guarantees of security</i>	261	49%	53%	45%
<i>Work opportunities</i>	258	49%	44%	54%
<i>Better health support</i>	202	38%	36%	40%
<i>Better treatment by authorities</i>	141	27%	27%	26%
<i>Better laws or policies</i>	105	20%	18%	22%
<i>Permanent resettlement</i>	82	15%	19%	12%
<i>Knowledge about rights/entitlements</i>	40	8%	10%	5%
<i>Ability to go abroad</i>	35	7%	8%	6%
<i>Better connection with/attitudes of local residents</i>	32	6%	5%	7%
<i>Access to technology</i>	13	2%	3%	2%

6 CONCLUSIONS

A number of important themes emerge from this study, signalling how Oxfam and other organizations could consider reorienting their programming and policy approaches to improve support to displaced populations.

6.1 THE UNDER-APPRECIATED POWER OF WOMEN

The agency and drive of women, and especially young women, in Iraqi society should be further acknowledged. Given the patriarchal structure of Iraqi society, women in the survey sample showed a surprisingly strong will to make decisions based on their own interests, a desire to travel and live outside of their home areas, the desire to access information about their rights, and to access technology to improve their lives. These tendencies were especially strong among young women – sometimes more so than among young men. Women’s autonomy may not be absolute, but at the very least, the data from this study argues for a forward-leaning approach to women’s empowerment that is not overly deferential to real or perceived conservative gender norms. While it may be useful to achieve a level of buy-in for women’s empowerment activities from among women’s families and communities,¹⁴ this should not be the main factor in determining project design. It is much more important that humanitarian and development actors (including Oxfam) are responsive to women’s aspirations – even (and perhaps especially) when those aspirations challenge oppressive gender norms.

6.2 THE NEED FOR ALTERNATIVES TO RETURN

The majority of displaced survey respondents expressed a desire to return to their homes, while most returnees wanted to remain in their homes. This indicates, as other studies have done, that enabling safe, voluntary and informed returns of internally displaced Iraqi citizens must be a high priority, both for the Iraqi government and humanitarian/development organizations. Initiatives by the government and UN agencies to assist returnees are therefore important, even if implementation has fallen short or been marred by abuses, especially against the most vulnerable would-be returnees, such as those with family ties to ISIS. However, a significant minority of respondents in this survey did not want to return to (or remain in) their home areas, and these families are not receiving the same level of support – materially, legally or politically – as returnees. These findings are echoed in recent research conducted among displaced people in other Iraqi governorates.¹⁵

Neither the Iraqi government nor UN agencies have clear policies on local integration or other solutions for displaced people who cannot or do not want to return home, and this is a gap that needs to be urgently addressed. Such policies will be necessary to ensure that displaced people can fully enjoy their right to settle and to access social services outside of their home governorates.

Alongside providing alternative solutions to settlement, creating jobs and providing income-generating opportunities, particularly for young people, must be prioritized by the Government of Iraq, and supported by the international community. Further, initiating social cohesion programmes that can unite communities and grow a national sense of belonging is essential.

6.3 THE CENTRALITY OF PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT

The very large numbers of respondents who noted the loss of their sense of self/belonging as a result of displacement is a reminder that psychosocial care is both crucial and under-resourced. The trauma and alienation that displaced people and returnees face can be significant, as their stories in this study reflect. But one should also consider other dimensions of mental health in displacement, such as: the overall cognitive/emotional toll of socio-economic suffering; the added stress of repeatedly having to make major decisions amidst this suffering; and the fact that the quality of one's decision making can be reduced by the cognitive toll of suffering.¹⁶ All of this argues in favour of vital investment in psychosocial care, both in a crisis, as a means of coping in the short term, and after the crisis has subsided, as a means to recover and build resilience.

Humanitarian/development agencies should respond by providing the funds and programming necessary to meet the psychosocial needs of displaced people, and Oxfam should support specialized psychosocial actors or service providers in their appeals for such funds. More than that, as Iraq moves out of the emergency phase, Iraqi authorities will need to take this forward by investing more in the country's mental health system and making it more accessible and affordable for conflict-affected populations.

6.4 THE LIMITS OF NGO ACTION AND THE POWER OF DISPLACED PEOPLE

Iraqis and the communities who host them should not be underestimated by the rest of the world. Respondents indicated that they had strong support from (and were strongly motivated by) their families and local residents. This support may be bolstered by the assistance that humanitarian/development agencies provide, but was clearly not replaced by it. Just as important, respondents indicated that their decisions were guided largely by what they wanted – not what they were told to do, or what they felt was expected of them (by NGOs or anyone else). This should serve as a reality check for Oxfam and other organizations responding in conflict, displacement and disasters from natural hazards, and it should be reflected in the way humanitarian organizations communicate with supporters, donors, policy makers and displaced people themselves. Humanitarians should be able to improve the lives of displaced people, but they are not the lead players in those people's stories. To present humanitarian organizations as anything otherwise risks misrepresenting the true picture – and, potentially, creating mistrust between aid workers and the people they are trying to help.

NOTES

- 1 IRIN/HPG. (2014). *Aid and the Islamic State*. IRIN/HPG Crisis Brief, December 2014. <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/9390.pdf>, p.1.
- 2 Ibid, p.4.
- 3 For more information on the emergence and rise of ISIS, see: International Crisis Group (August 14, 2013) *Make or Break: Iraq's Sunnis and the State*. Brussels: International Crisis Group. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/make-or-break-iraq-s-sunnis-and-state>; International Crisis Group (June 20, 2014) *Iraq's Jihadi Jack-in-the-Box*. Brussels: International Crisis Group. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/iraq-s-jihadi-jack-in-the-box>; and L. Khatib (June 29, 2015) *The Islamic State's Strategy: Lasting and Expanding*. Beirut: Carnegie Middle East Center. <http://www.css.ethz.ch/en/services/digital-library/publications/publication.html/193891>
- 4 IOM Iraq. (March 2017). *Displacement Tracking Matrix. Integrated Location Assessment: Part II – Governorate Profiles*, p. 49. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/DTM%20Integrated%20Location%20Assessment_Part%20II_Governorate%20Profiles_March%202017_0.pdf
- 5 International Organization for Migration (IOM) website. Iraq Mission Displacement Tracking Matrix. Retrieved April 5, 2018, from <http://iraqdtm.iom.int/IDPsML.aspx>
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 For more information about the SenseMaker research method, see: F. Mager, B. Smith and I. Guijt (2018). *How Decent is Decent Work? Using SenseMaker to Understand Workers' Experiences*. Oxford: Oxfam. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/how-decent-is-decent-work-using-sensemaker-to-understand-workers-experiences-620476>
- 8 A mixed-gender team of local data collectors was trained for a week on the novel question types used in SenseMaker, and on the tablets that Oxfam uses to collect data. The signification framework's original English text was translated into modern standard Arabic, and then adjusted to suit the local Arabic dialect based on feedback from the data collectors. After training, the research tool was pre-tested and adapted where the questions proved ambiguous. Data was collected for a total of 17 days.
- 9 It is worth noting that this generosity is often greatest in the emergency phase and decreases as displacement becomes protracted and/or a pattern of dependency is established. For further discussion of this dynamic, see: R.C. Vidal López, C.I. Atehortúa Arredondo and J. Salcedo (2011). *The Effects of Internal Displacement on Host Communities: A Case Study of Suba and Ciudad Bolívar Localities in Bogotá, Colombia*. Bogotá: Brookings Institution-London School of Economics Project on Internal Displacement. <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Host-Communities-Colombia-English.pdf>; and A. Mathieu (2017). *'We're Here for an Indefinite Period': Prospects for Local Integration of Internally Displaced People in North Kivu, DRC*. Oxford: Oxfam. Retrieved July 10, 2018, from <https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/were-here-indefinite-period>
- 10 For more information about the typology of gender-based violence among Iraq's displaced people, and the challenges to reporting, see: United Nations Population Fund (2016). *The GBV Assessment in Conflict Affected Governorates in Iraq*. Erbil: United Nations Population Fund. <http://iraq.unfpa.org/en/publications/gbv-assessment-conflict-affected-governorates-iraq>; F. Vigaud-Walsh (2017). *Guilt by Association: Iraqi Women Detained and Subject to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse*. Washington DC: Refugees International. <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports/2017/10/iraq>; and Amnesty International (2018). *The Condemned: Women and Children Isolated, Trapped and Exploited in Iraq*. London: Amnesty International. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2018/04/the-condemned-women-and-children-isolated-trapped-and-exploited-in-iraq/>
- 11 A triad is a type of follow-up question in which respondents signify the relative importance of three predefined elements in their experience by indicating where, in a triangle, their experience lies in relation to the three elements. The purpose of this is to understand the relative importance of three concepts or elements, and how strongly each is present in a specific story.
- 12 A slider is a type of follow-up question (also called a dyad) in which respondents are asked to signify what happened in the experience they shared, by indicating where that experience sits along the spectrum between two extremes.
- 13 Only 33.3% of respondents above age 65 expressed positive or strongly positive feelings. However, the survey sample only contained six respondents in this age group, limiting the power of the resulting statistics.

- 14 For more information, see: L. Dietrich and S.E. Carter (2017). *Gender and Conflict Analysis in ISIS Affected Communities of Iraq*. Oxford: Oxfam. Retrieved July 10, 2018, from <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/gender-and-conflict-analysis-in-isis-affected-communities-of-iraq-620272>
- 15 See, for example: A. Saieh, D. Brown, and P. McCluskey (2018). *The Long Road Home: Achieving Durable Solutions to Displacement in Iraq: Lessons from Returns in Anbar*. Norwegian Refugee Council, Danish Refugee Council and International Rescue Committee. Retrieved July 10, 2018, from <https://www.rescue.org/report/long-road-home-achieving-durable-solutions-displacement-iraq>
- 16 This connection has been elucidated by research in behavioural economics, for example: A. Mani et al. (2013). *Poverty Impedes Cognitive Function*. *Science*, 341, 976–80. <http://science.sciencemag.org/content/341/6149/976>

SEDO

Sahara Economic Development Organization (SEDO) is an Iraqi non-profit humanitarian NGO founded in July 2007 in Tikrit city by a number of civil activists and academics to assist vulnerable groups to overcome the economic, social and political instabilities in Iraq. SEDO's mission is 'A sustainable and just world for everybody' and its vision is 'A world in which every person attains the right to survival and development with dignity'. SEDO has assisted more than (890,000) people in Iraq in the first 10 years after its foundation in the areas of livelihoods, WASH, food security, protection and social cohesion.

OXFAM

Oxfam is an international confederation of 19 organizations networked together in more than 90 countries, as part of a global movement for change, to build a future free from the injustice of poverty. Please write to any of the agencies for further information, or visit www.oxfam.org

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