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Is Military Liberation from Daesh Enough to Return? A Case Study of Christians' Non-Return to the Ninewa Plain in Iraq

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Abstract:

Daesh's brutal regime led to substantial displacement and disproportionately impacted Iraqi minorities. Since the liberation of Daesh-controlled areas in 2017, international organizations and the Iraqi government have massively supported the return of displaced persons. However, a survey showed a disproportionate non-return of Christian minorities. This paper investigates why a significant proportion of Christians are not returning to the Ninewa Plain. Through semi-structured interviews with relevant actors and displaced Christians, the paper argues that the reasons for non-return can be clustered into three interrelated factors: (1) the conditional and insufficient remedy for displaced Christians, (2) mistrust in the security and protection provided in the Ninewa Plain, and (3) migration and other economic (dis)incentives by state actors and family ties abroad. The analysis shows that perceived Christian identity plays an implicit role in decisions not to return to the Ninewa Plain, not least because of perceived threats from the Muslim majority in Iraq.

Is Military Liberation from Daesh Enough to Return?
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1   Introduction

Over the past decades, major and protracted conflicts in Iraq have resulted in continuous displacement and migration among the region's inhabitants. The establishment of the self-proclaimed "Islamic State of Iraq and Syria" (ISIS) in 2014—also known and used here as the Daesh conflict—affected millions of Iraqis.[1]

Daesh's brutal regime led to the displacement of substantial parts of the population and had a disproportionate impact on Iraq's minorities. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the number of Iraq's internally displaced persons (IDPs) was estimated to be 2,615,988 in 2017 (UNHCR 2018). Since the liberation of Daesh-controlled areas by Iraqi government forces and their allies in July 2017, international organizations and the Iraqi government have massively supported the return of displaced persons.

As part of the reconstruction effort, Malteser International (MI), the worldwide humanitarian relief agency of the Sovereign Order of Malta, launched the "Ninewa Return Program." The objective of this two-and-a-half-year program was to increase "the return and reintegration of the Ninewa Plain area refugee population into their former residential areas" (Malteser International 2020). The program had a budget of over €30 million and was largely funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development. The program's objectives aimed to ensure that Iraqi IDPs returned to their places of origin in the Ninewa Plain, where they could live in their own homes, reintegrate well, and experience social cohesion and mutual respect with other ethno-religious groups.

It also included the following sub-goals: "(1) war-damaged houses of displaced persons are repaired in such a way that they can return to their place of origin in dignity; (2) agricultural and non-agricultural means of production are restored and returnees have improved their knowledge, skills, and capital resources in the economic sector; (3) peace-building and social cohesion activities will be organized to promote interaction and dialogue between different ethno-religious groups; and (4) Schools are rehabilitated and expanded, and teachers are trained to ensure appropriate training in post-conflict contexts" (Malteser International 2020). Overall, 2,303 households in the districts of Hamdaniya, Tilkeif, and Sinjar were included in MI's reconstruction program, which was executed in close cooperation with local partners. The beneficiaries, including households from all religious groups in the respective areas, were selected based on a needs assessment.

To assess the impact of housing reconstruction done in the framework of the Ninewa Return Program, MI conducted a quantitative survey in their operation's Ninewa Plain areas. The survey showed that 81 percent of the households returned to their rebuilt homes (Öhlmann 2019). However, the data show that the rate of returning households is substantially lower in households belonging to a religious minority. Among the Christian and Kaka'i communities, for example, only 74 percent and 69 percent of respective households returned—despite the reconstruction of their houses (Öhlmann 2019). Against

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[1] While some argue that the Daesh conflict still exists through its ideology, for the purposes of this paper, the Daesh post-conflict period is designated as beginning at the point in which the Iraqi government officially declared complete control of formerly Daesh-occupied territory in 2017.

this backdrop, a central question arises: What are the factors precluding religious minority group members' return to their homes after liberation and reconstruction of their houses?

Focusing specifically on the case of Ninewa Plain Christians, this paper investigates the reasons why a significant proportion of their population is not returning to the Ninewa Plain. Building on the aforementioned MI survey, this paper offers a qualitative, in-depth analysis of the reasons given according to three interrelated factors: conditional and insufficient remedy for displaced Christians;[2] mistrust in the security and protection provided to residents in the Ninewa Plain; migration incentives and other economic (dis)incentives.

This paper furthermore tackles issues of displacement and non-return as part of a recent and ongoing phenomenon—acknowledging a gap in the literature on how the above factors have evolved in contemporary contexts, and addressing what currently constitutes mistrust, migration incentives, and economic (dis)incentives as presented by interviewees and situated in a research framework.

The Ninewa Plain historically has the largest population of Christians in Iraq. Christians used to make up around 40 percent of the population before Daesh, living in a so-called disputed area, an Iraqi territory that Kurdistan claims for its autonomous region (Neurink 2014). A 2016 report by the European Parliament of the European Union declared that Daesh's persecution of and atrocities against Christians throughout its rule in the Ninewa Plain are considered genocide (European Parliament 2019). Daesh also destroyed or damaged numerous Church buildings and forcibly transferred Christian children out of their family groups, which constitute associated markers of genocide according to the UN Convention. Through extensive interviews with Iraqi Christians, many international media outlets (including the BBC, Al Arabiya, and The Telegraph) report that "Christians in Iraq are close to extinction" (Gardner 2019).

In the broader demographic picture of Iraq, the number of Christian residents is significantly decreasing, though exact numbers are unclear. According to Iraqi academic and journalist Saad Salloum, Christians currently number a mere 250,000 to 300,000 (down from 1.4 million prior to 2003) due to their continuous emigration (Salloum 2020). In February of 2021, Louis Sako, Patriarch of Babylon of the Chaldeans, stated that the number of Christians is approximately half a million.[3] Such inconsistencies in reported numbers may be due to political interests (e.g., related to elections and seats in the parliament) and also a lack of accurate data. Yet contested statistics do not change the reality of this significant population decline and its impact on Christian communities in Iraq.

Understanding the level of stability of non-returning Christians in the area of displacement is crucial to the subject of this paper. In the Ninewa Plain, Christian non-returnees are mainly divided into three categories: displaced Christians still residing in camps in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) or Iraq undergoing voluntary return; displaced Christians residing in KRI and other areas of Iraq who have found a level of integration through jobs, schools, and medical care; and migrant Christians either residing in transit countries, waiting for asylum approval inside Iraq, or already settled as asylum seekers abroad. These categories are not mutually exclusive; someone identifying as a non-returnee might hold a job in KRI—or an IDP inside a camp may intend to migrate.

The methodology of this paper relies on a qualitative assessment of non-returnees' motivations for not returning. Based on the interviewees' views and experiences, the current challenges within the post-liberation Ninewa Plain region are identified.

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[2] "Remedy" here refers to material and non-material compensation of Christian losses during Daesh control, such as burned houses, looted businesses, and the stolen dignity and suffering that Christians endured (as explained by some of the non-returnees later in the paper).

[3] Iraqia TV is the official Iraqi TV Channel, and this interview was conducted with Sako on the occasion of Pope Francis' historic visit to Iraq.

The results indicate various interrelated reasons for Christians' decisions not to return to the Ninewa Plain. Expert interviewees from a variety of faiths and backgrounds noted that mistrust, a fear of the reoccurrence of Daesh in different forms, and political instability seem to be the primary catalysts behind Christians not returning to the Ninewa Plain. Most non-returnee Christians interviewed expressed that they no longer feel wanted in their area of origin, and that the remedy they have been offered is insufficient and/or sometimes conditionally imposed on them to return. Only a few interviewees indicated a lack of easy access to core services, such as medical care, as a main reason for not returning.

The remainder of this paper is structured according to the following: section 2 provides an overview of relevant concepts and literature; section 3 explains the methodology used; section 4 describes the data and resulting analysis exploring the reasons behind Christians' non-return to the Ninewa Plain; section 5 outlines the paper's discussion of these results; and section 6 offers concluding remarks and policy recommendations.

2   Relevant Concepts and Literature

A 2019 study by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) found that the primary reason IDPs, including Christians, do not return to the Ninewa Plain is that they experience better safety in the location of their displacement. In a breakdown by group, the study showed that Christians are also afraid of not being welcomed back to their areas of origin post-displacement (IOM 2019). The IOM study raises questions such as: Who has the legitimacy to welcome those Christians, and under which jurisdiction? What does safety actually mean in such a context, where the majority of Iraq's areas experience frequent safety breaches? Such questions seek to underscore the longstanding unequal distributions of power and resources in the Ninewa Plain that contribute to unequal protections for ethnoreligious minority groups in the region.

Exploring overarching conceptualizations of power and protection in the literature helps paint a clearer picture of the local context in and around the Ninewa Plain. Yip (2018) writes that the sociological examination of power concerns itself with discovering and describing relative strengths—equal or unequal; stable, or subject to periodic change. At the intersection of power and religion, Wibisono, Louis, and Jetten (2019) argue that the perceived incompatibility of national and religious identities may lead to state repression of religious congregations, schools, or doctrines, and even state violence against members of religious groups. Similarly, Werbner (2009) refers to religious identity as a powerful force perceived to challenge, contest, and preserve distinctions and unities. One may draw parallels from such frameworks to the contexts influencing power—and thus, sources of protection—for Christians in Iraq. Research on the psychology of religion suggests that existential well-being depends inter alia on the religious symmetry between the individual and the country; what matters is whether the individual's religion is the dominant one in the host country or not, rather than religious salience or participation (Lun Bond 2013). According to social identity theory, individuals determine whether they belong to a social group or not by defining the boundaries of that group, and "perceived similarity" and "frequency of interaction" are factors that form a group (Mehmet 2019). On this note, the concept of "others," or in this context Christians and Muslims "othering" each other, is crucial to this subject. Staszak (2009) explains that "Otherness" is due less to the difference of the Other than to the point of view and the discourse of the person who perceives the Other as such. Opposing Us, the Self, and Them, the Other, is to choose a criterion that allows humanity to be divided into two groups: one that embodies the norm and whose identity is valued and another that is defined by its faults, devalued, and susceptible to discrimination (Staszak 2009).

In this vein, Salloum (2020) argues that mixed and conflicting alliances of different Christian groups in Iraq contribute to a lack of unified political representation that would help them unite in solving core issues challenging their communities. There are currently fourteen Christian denominations, over twelve Christian political parties in Baghdad and KRI, and six armed factions (Salloum 2020). These denominations are affiliated with different international "patron" powers (or at least portray an image of such affiliation), making Christians' political dynamics and inter-faith relationships complicated. For example, there is the Assyrian Democratic Movement, a political party which is alleged to be pro-Iranian and originating in Iran although its founders claim it was established in 1979 in Iraq (Alsindi 2018). And there is the creation of a unified political representation of "Assyrian Chaldo-Syriac people," which was USA-backed in 2003 (Salloum 2020).

In addition, Christians are caught up between the KRI and the Baghdad governments' disputes and tension between their security forces. Iraqi forces could not protect them from the Daesh invasion. Christians in Ninewa Plain areas, such as Alqosh, Bartella, Bashiqa, Batnaya, Baquba, Qaraqosh, Karamles, Tel Uskuf, and other Christian localities, believe they were betrayed by the Kurdish forces (Peshmerga) twice in 2014; first in June, when Daesh captured Mosul (the center of the Ninewa province), and then in August upon Daesh's capture of the Christian settlements in the Ninewa Plain (Oehring 2017).

According to Wibisono, Louis, and Jetten (2019), while national identity can establish inclusiveness, perceived identity incompatibility between religious and national identities can lead to political action to establish religious-political governance and to seize power from more secular governments. In Iraq, Islam is the religion of major political parties and officials in power. Islam acknowledges Christianity as a religion and Jesus as the Prophet in this religion. Therefore, it is understandable why political parties would support Christian groups to some extent, portraying a "tolerant" Muslim image, respecting their own religion—Islam—by respecting Christianity in turn, and leveraging this image for their politicized Islamic agenda. Furthermore, Skelton and Bahnam (2019) note that aligning with the Christian community can be good political optics.

An additional aspect that differentiates Christianity from other minority religions in Iraq is that Christianity is a missionary religion constituting the largest minority group. Accordingly, its numbers and Christianity's missionary tradition may be perceived as posing a threat to Iraq's Islamic-driven political agenda in the long run. Adding to this complexity is the issue of disputed territories between the KRI and the Baghdad Government, in which a majority of Christians live. The term "Kurdization" of minorities emerged after 2003 to refer to policies of recruiting minorities and changing their identity in favor of achieving Kurdish goals (Salloum 2020). Moreover, the KRI publicly supports militias, and its response to complaints about supporting militias claims a responsibility to secure areas regained from Daesh (Minorities Rights Group International 2017). This indicates that political disputes feed the fear of Christians to return to such areas. Another political challenge is the role of the Christian diaspora. A 2009 report on minorities in Iraq by the Centre for International Governance Innovation discusses a robust external component to these contexts, which derives from the Christian diaspora abroad who raise awareness of Christians' circumstances in Iraq and influence politics on the ground (Lamani 2009). An example of this is a Ninewa Plain-focused proposal by Christian diaspora advocacy groups (supported by foreign contingents) to create a separate, autonomous region in Iraq administered by and catering to ethnoreligious minorities (Lamani 2009). Such external factors represent a challenge to both majority Muslim governments of Kurdistan and Baghdad, making Christians the center of political attention in post-Daesh armed conflict discourse.

Church leaders and a Christian welfare system in the Ninewa Plain are crucial elements in this context. The welfare system exists under the Ninewa Reconstruction Committee (NRC), which works "to enable

Iraqi Christians who wish to return home to villages in the Ninewa Plain" (NRC, n.d.). The NRC is composed of different Local Reconstruction Committees (LRCs) of Churches in the Ninewa Plain that joined forces with the committee (Hein 2020). According to NRC, the local Church leaders' voices and roles in the Ninewa Plain are more substantial than in other Iraqi regions. Indeed, the Patriarch of the Chaldean Catholics, the Syriac Catholic Archbishop, and the Syriac Orthodox Metropolitan are followed attentively by their faithful and civil authorities (NRC, n.d.). In order to return, the majority of displaced Christians rely on this welfare system for remedy and assistance. At the same time, providing such remedy is an opportunity for those leaders to gain power, mobilize funds, and access more resources. It is therefore crucial to monitor how the process of remedy is governed and whether it has an effect on Christians' decisions to return.

A concept closely related to key questions around remedy is that of dignity. Dignity—and its absence—become central to understanding Daesh's control, the process of displacement, and the nature of relief provided for return. As a concept, dignity is generally associated with individual autonomy, along with the capacity (and freedom) to self-determine and take control of one's destiny and lifestyle (Jones and Dupre 2012). Human dignity is, however, not just about reason and rational decision-making, it is also, as discussed in this paper, about feelings, emotions, and vulnerability. According to Mairis (1994), "dignity exists when an individual is capable of exerting control over his or her behaviour, surroundings and the way in which he or she is treated by others." In the analysis section, the concept of dignity appeared to be relevant and crucial to the decisions not to return. As will become apparent, Christians have experienced a loss of dignity throughout the Daesh invasion as well as the post-liberation process.

3   Methodology

Following Bryman's (2012) social research methods, this paper's methodology utilizes semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, interviews with relevant stakeholders were conducted virtually via Skype, WhatsApp, and Zoom calls. As such, it should be noted that the interview sample was affected to some degree by socioeconomic status and reliable internet access, especially among non-returnees. One interview was conducted in person with Ms. Ivan Jabro, Minister of Migration and Displaced in Iraq.

Interviews are divided into two categories: those conducted with stakeholders knowledgeable about issues of non-return in the region, such as public officials and activists, and those conducted with Christian non-returnees themselves. In total, 21 interviews were conducted, including two follow-up interviews. Nine non-returnees were interviewed, of whom five were part of the MI project—with the rest not formally associated with MI[4] (but likewise displaced from the Ninewa Plain). For safety reasons, all non-returnees' identities are anonymized as Case 1 to Case 9. Sociodemographic background information on these individuals is provided in the analysis segment. This information is given based on how those non-returnees prefer to be introduced and might not therefore be standardized.

During the selection of the interviewees, it was crucial to include both non-returnees who were part of MI's Ninewa Return Program and those who were not, in order to mitigate biases among the non-returnee pool of responses. This is due to the sensitive nature of a non-returnee justifying his/her non-return after having potentially made an agreement with MI for Ninewa Plain support (e.g., rebuilding their house). All non-returnee respondents were displaced from different areas of the Ninewa Plain—

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[4] The four non-returnees were accessed through extensive networking and word of mouth. The criteria were that the non-returnees are Christians with no political affiliation, displaced from the Ninewa Plain at the time of Daesh conflict, hold a bachelor level of education and above, and/or have years of experience in relevant Christian topics in Iraq. Especial thanks to Baghdad Women Association and Sami Habib.

such as Bartella, Tilkeif, and Qaraqosh—and are currently residing either in Iraq or abroad. The public officials and activists interviewed for this paper are listed below (names are mentioned with their consent):

- Ms. Ivan Jabro, Iraq's Minister of Migration and Displaced.

- Mr. Diya Butros Saliwa, Chairman of Kurdistan Independent Human Rights Commission.

- Judge Mushraq Naji, Member of the High Commission for Human Rights in Iraq and former Member of Parliament 2010–2014.

- Dr. Saad Salloum, Expert in religious and ethnic diversity affairs in Iraq; Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Political Sciences at Al-Mustansiriya University.

- Mr. Sami Habib, Legal Specialist; co-founder of the NGOs Ninewa Center for Minority Rights (NCMR) and Alliance of Iraqi Minorities Network (AIM).

- Ms. Ban Najib Mikha, Vice President of the NGO Women Minorities Forum.

- Mr. Jamil al Jamil, media specialist at Un Ponte Per (UPP) in Iraq; civil society activist and journalist.

- Ms. Liza Hido, President of the NGO Baghdad Women Association (BWA).

- Mr. Edd Yousif, Chairman of the Alliance of Iraqi Minorities Network; Executive Director of the Ninewa Center for Human Rights.

- Mr. Ahmad Rifat, Practitioner at Malteser International (MI).[5]

All interviews except for one (see footnote 5) were conducted in Arabic by the author of this paper. Different interview guides were designed for the two categories of interviewee groups (see Annex). The first set addressed officials and activists; the second set addressed Christian non-returnees across diverse locations and circumstances.[6] In addition to the structured sets of questions, any follow-up questions that appeared relevant to the conversation were posed. There was no time limit for the interviews, giving the interviewees the freedom to elaborate on the topics of their own interest and experience.

In order to avoid reestablishing trauma among non-returnees, the author was careful in asking questions specific to the displacement process. At the same time, the interview format allowed a space of storytelling for those who needed to convey their struggle (and sometimes those stories appeared to be relevant to reasons for not returning). Throughout the interview process, the author experienced sensitivity and fear among non-returnee respondents regarding her identity and affiliation. The author's name and accent indicate being an Iraqi citizen, a fact that contributed to questions from respondents on her views as a member of a majority group. The author assured all interviewees of the confidential handling of their personal information as well as the neutrality and independence of the research project paper and the author's views.

While conducting the interviews, the author noted down reoccurring reasons, causes, and themes discussed, which were then mapped into a memo. Later, the interviews were transcribed, and transcriptions subsequently transferred into MAXQDA for analysis. The paper's analysis used a grounded theory guided approach where reoccurring issues were identified that influenced non-returnees directly or indirectly, and those issues were later grouped into main categories and further clustered into themes.

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[5] The interview was conducted by my colleague in this project, Ms. Nora Monzer.
[6] The questions and the interviewees' backgrounds can be found in the Annex.

While there are, undoubtedly, nuanced similarities, differences, and interconnections among those codes and themes, the author carefully separated them for the purposes of analysis while noting down common issues that link them, keeping what would be relevant to this paper's core questions and excluding themes that were out of the scope of the paper.

After the final round of coding, the information was transferred into an Excel spreadsheet to begin content analysis. Themes and word frequency and recurrence were evaluated in relation to the research questions. This information was also compared with the notes taken while conducting the interviews, as well as triangulated with the existing literature.

4 Analysis: Reasons for Non-Return of Christians to the Ninewa Plain

After interview transcription and processing, recurring themes were identified and clustered into aspects in which various subjects appeared significant to non-return. For example, "weak governance and the process of remedy" comprised the role of religious leaders in return and the insufficient remedy provided to non-returnees by the Churches and/or the Iraqi central government. "Political influence" included militarized areas, disputed territories, political instability, multiple security forces, and Christians' political division. There were also the adverse effects of migration, foreign state influence, social changes and family ties, and lack of economic opportunities.

The final round of clustering and coding demonstrated the following overlapping themes as directly contributing to Christians' decisions to not return to the Ninewa Plain:

1.   Lack of trust in security and protection (mentioned 53 times, 19 interviewees).[7]

2.   Political instability and governments' (KRI and the Iraqi central) influence and intervention (mentioned 52 times, 18 interviewees).

3.   Militarized area (mentioned 15 times, 10 interviewees).

4.   Process of remedy, governance, and religious actors' roles (mentioned 48 times, 17 interviewees).

5.   Migration incentives and demographic/social changes (mentioned 49 times, 18 interviewees).

6.   Economic challenges, job seekers/holders elsewhere (mentioned 28 times, 14 interviewees).

7.   Other: children's education (mentioned 3 times, 3 interviewees); medical reasons (mentioned 2 times, 2 interviewees); psychological reasons (mentioned 1 time, one interviewee).

In sum, all interviewees identified mistrust in the security of the area and their protection, a fear of the reoccurrence of Daesh in different forms, and political instability as the greatest threats to Christian communities' return to the Ninewa Plain. The first targeted group of experts stated the historical discrimination against Christians, lack of trust in the protection and governance of militarized areas in the Ninewa Plain, general poor governance, emigration incentives to leave Iraq, and a lack of jobs as factors influencing the non-return of Christians. The majority of non-returnees expressed the feeling that they were no longer wanted in their area of origin and that the remedy was insufficient for the return. A handful of interviewees named insufficient access to core services, including medical care and education, as the main reason for not returning. According to the above, the three interrelated factors on which this paper's exploration of non-return are based become clear: A) conditional and insufficient remedy for displaced Christians (4); B) mistrust in the security and protection provided in the Ninewa

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[7] As shown in the Annex, there was a question about trust, therefore it was possible to quantify the trust component.

Plain (1, 2, and 3), and C) migration and other economic (dis)incentives by state actors and family ties abroad (5 and 6).

In terms of emigration incentives, interviewees largely expressed the view that emigration offered not only a safe place to start over, but also provided access to family ties that most Christians felt they lost after displacement. Regarding point 7 above, "Other," the reasons given did not produce a pattern across interviews and were thus coded as individual factors. For instance, though a "psychological reason" appeared only once in one interview, this paper does not infer that other interviewees and non-returnees do not struggle with psychological trauma and its impact on decisions not to return. Rather, the paper deals only with sufficient data collected across a small sample, and the author was careful in asking questions that would not inadvertently unearth trauma. As such, this may have reduced the likelihood that psychological reasons would be raised.

It should also be noted that, even if the above themes reflect clear patterns in reasons given for not returning, the highest number of occurrences does not necessarily imply priority of one over the other. For example, political discourse appeared in all discussions, but the non-returnees' statements regarding mistrust, insufficient remedy, and migration incentives appeared more directly and in more explicit patterns (cf. below).

According to more granular detail, it was those non-returnees who were part of the MI project that indicated the most fear about the impact of various agendas of different actors in power. The four non-returnees interviewed from outside the MI project more often spoke of a lack of trust in government, security and the insufficient remedy, and the fear of the reemergence of Daesh in different forms. The interviewees who cited medical reasons for not returning said that they could better access health services in KRI. Changes in social ties and a lack of jobs also emerged as a theme of note. In fact, fifteen interviewees noted the lack of job opportunities and COVID-19's economic impact in the Ninewa Plain as influencing the trend of non-return.

The next sections will break down the above cluster of themes in order to give a more comprehensive overview on Christians' motivation not to return to the Ninewa Plain. The structure of the next sections is as follows: A) the conditional and insufficient remedy for displaced Christians, explained in sections 4.1 on stolen dignity and section 4.2 on the role of religion and religious leaders; B) mistrust in security and protection provided in the Ninewa Plain, explained in section 4.3 on the political influence on non-return, and C) migration and other economic (dis)incentives by state actors and family ties abroad, explained in section 4.4 on emigration incentives and demographic change.

4.1 Stolen Dignity and the Process of Remedy

The majority of the non-returnees expressed fear of the unknown. The "unknown," in the context of the interviews, generally meant "unknown people" living in the vicinity that may constitute a threat and is relevant to the established concept of "othering" as explained by Staszak (2008). Interviewees also indicated "unknown circumstances," such as events and security breaches (like the Daesh experience) that might occur at any time to cause displacement again. "The unknown" comprises politics, alliances, and economic opportunities. The unknown is formed by instability and changes in the Ninewa Plain since the Daesh conflict. Some also indicated that "mental" liberation from Daesh is yet to come. For Christians, there is no such thing as a Daesh-liberated area. Daesh can come back under different forms or labels. "It is possible to say that the Ninewa Plain is liberated only militarily from Daesh, but Daesh ideology is still there," said Diya Sliwa, Chairman of the Kurdistan Independent Human Rights Commission.

At Baghdad Women Association's support centers in the Ninewa Plain, for example, workers experienced constant changes and mistrust—whether merely commuting to work or dealing with cases in courts. "Daesh ideology exists; our female lawyers in the center were afraid to go to the court in Qaraqosh because 'different people' operate there," said Liza Hido, Baghdad Women Association President. Christian communities live in a culture where every person and every family know their neighbors. According to Hido, this culture is essential to maintain the inner peace in those communities, to "feel safe." This culture is no longer the same in the post-Daesh period. Having strangers (people outside Christian communities who moved here and there during the conflict and also those affected by the demographic change) among them causes fear and hesitance within the Christian communities to go back to something different.

Other threatening issues of Daesh remain unresolved. According to Ban Mikha, "There is Al-Tasfirat prison in Tilkaif city where Daesh terrorists are put (within Ninewa Plain)." Edd Yousif said, "There is a terrorism court in Tilkaif, and there is also the prison of terrorism, where juveniles and Daesh families are imprisoned." Interviewees noted that having Daesh family members living in camps nearby—some interviewees describe these camps as similar to detention centers—constitutes a threat. It is, of course, discrimination against those families in presuming they categorically represent terrorism, but survival is the primary concern for Christians navigating real and perceived threats that may be caused by Daesh affiliates (i.e., family members and so-called "sleeper cells").

For some Christians, living among Muslims becomes too difficult to imagine; they still see them as the groups that oppressed them and stole their dignity. According to Sami Habib:

> *Muslims were the reason for the displacement in Mosul to the Ninewa Plain. Even before Daesh, some mosques, not all of them, used to say: "Muslims, do not buy Christian homes; one day you will take them for free." What happened to us in the Ninewa Plain made us cautious or apprehensive.*

These quotes paint a clear picture: even though the situation has changed, it will not bring back the dignity of those who didn't return. "They could not bring us back our stolen dignity" (Case 7[8]). Also, this change is not enough, according to Case 3[9]:

> *Now there are no fanatics like before when clerics used to call in at mosques and rally against other religions. There are also initiatives and campaigns by young people under the auspices of clerics and Sheikhs to clean churches and prepare them for the return and celebration of Christmas. We value those actions, but we cannot trust them. There is a strong obsession to think about living Muslims who undermined the Christian communities' existence.*

Christians lost trust in a state that should have protected them; they also lost trust in their neighbors and their surroundings, whether it is any functioning business or social ties. Being familiar with "the surroundings" is crucial for Christians to function daily. Ban Mikha said, "The Church and schools are operating; I asked the priest why they do not return. He said, 'Frankly, the area is safe, but the issue is fear.'" The constant fear of the unknown and of sudden, life-altering events has made those Christians feel like they are in a standby situation, a transit area, not home. Ban Mikha continued, "We are working

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[8] Father of two, displaced from Mosul before Daesh to the Ninewa Plain, then displaced from the Ninewa Plain during Daesh invasion, currently in Erbil.
[9] Father of three, has 30 years' experience in education at the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, displaced from Bartella, currently in Erbil.

to bring back the Christians, but all of them do not accept [return] because there are Muslims now living in the areas, and they do not feel safe and trusting."

Given the statements of the non-returnees, the combined images of Islam, Muslims, and Daesh seem to be hard to separate for Christians. It is a two-faced coin: one represents Daesh, the other is the general experience with Muslims, whether socially or politically. This lack of a shared understanding of religions, combined with Iraq's governing practices, escalated the mistrust among multi-religious groups in the Ninewa Plain. When Daesh invaded, "Muslim" neighbors joined Daesh. "Christians are aware that neighbors and people a few meters away consider them infidels," said Sami Habib. This goes with the concept of othering as described above. According to Case 4,[10] the fear of Muslims in general is constant:

> *On my first day at the university after the liberation, I met two Muslim girls at the university. One of them welcomed me back to the city and the other girl told me that she wishes that Daesh would return.*

Faced with lingering experiences of the social upheaval resulting from Daesh, the majority of non-returnees expressed a lack of trust in the Iraqi and Kurdish governments to provide protection. Generally speaking, the current ruling governments in Baghdad and Kurdistan do not constitute a source of trust in security and protection. "There have been no positive developments that indicate the Baghdad government's eligibility as an asset to the country," said Sami Habib. According to Case 3, "The Iraqi government failed to build the state of Iraq, to build the strategies of public sectors and accommodate youth and professionals, to develop the economy, but rather deliberately demolished and stole the Iraqi economy." Even before Daesh, Case 3 added, "We remained in lamentable suffering from threats, kidnappings (my son was kidnapped twice). I complained to the police complaints department; they said, 'We are busy, you should fight them.'"

It is worth noting that the Ninewa Plain constitutes the most diverse area of minorities amongst all Iraqi regions. According to Salloum, historically, it represents a place of origin for Christians, Shabaks, and Yezidis, acting as a safe zone or buffer from discriminatory practices of majority groups, including those of the government. For minority group members, including the non-returnees interviewed here, the army did not initially fight for them. Daesh was only a threat when it got closer to the capital, and more importantly, the south and other areas constituting a symbol for Shia Muslims. According to Case 1,[11] "When Daesh invaded, evidence suggested that the Iraqi army and Peshmerga withdrew from the Ninewa Plain."

The current remedy process is mainly provided by other actors such as NGOs and Churches, yet it is insufficient and based on conditions such as a set, minimum timeframe to return in order to receive support. This in some ways "forces" the return as the affected persons have no alternative options but to comply with those conditions. This conditional remedy consequently made leaving the Ninewa Plain a reoccurring issue. For example, Case 7 explained:

> *I found my house burned and [my belongings] stolen, my shops destroyed by missiles. International organizations and the Church began to provide reconstruction compensation, but I only received less than*

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[10] Female student at the Law Faculty, Mosul University, and human rights activist, displaced from Mosul, currently in Erbil. She commutes to Mosul University from Erbil daily.
[11] Displaced from Bartella, was residing in Erbil, and currently in Jordan to emigrate to Australia.

half the amount. Even if those displaced return, it's somehow enforced, and after reconstruction of the houses, we cannot rent it out for up to three years.

According to Case 3,

The international community helped rebuild some destroyed homes and supported in rebuilding some shops, but the rest is left to us to figure out. I had owned 14 different shops and a commercial building, none of which I was compensated for or have anymore.

This reconstruction gap is too big to ignore, said Diya Sliwa, Sami Habib, and Case 8.[12] "Some houses are still burned to this day, and many buildings (including commercial) are still destroyed" (Case 8). Therefore, returning seems temporary—or unsustainable—until the conditions of remedy are met. A related issue is that within the remedy process to facilitate return, the Iraqi government did not provide sufficient funds to non-returnees. Moreover, the plans for reconstruction and rehabilitation are weak and ineffective. Case 6, for instance, was not compensated at all, and others were not fully compensated. As Jamil Al-Jamil stated, "There was a plan to influence the return where the Baghdad government promised to pay compensation of 5 million Iraqi dinars; and even when those Christians decided to return, those who returned have not received it to this day." Sami Habib added:

The government has so far been reluctant to provide full compensation for the damages; the pay return amounts to [1.5 million Iraqi dinars]. More than half of the displaced people have not been given full compensation for damages. For example, the losses are estimated at 10 million Iraqi dinars, and, in the decision, they write 5 million; fifty percent of the value, to make up for the others.

The majority of interviewees expressed concern for those they know who returned and seemed to have no other choice. Case 1 said:

There is a segment of people who have returned for economic reasons, for example, having a shop (to rent out) or agriculture (to cultivate their land) or a specific business or restaurant. Many of them are operating their business in the Ninewa Plain in order to afford a house in KRI, just in case something else happened.

Yet there may also be hardships in the location of displacement that make returning the best available option. According to the Minister of Migration, Ivan Jabro, "We think humanly about those displaced, especially when we see an increase in suicides in the camps due to the low standards of living in them." This vicious cycle of mistrust, both of the parties providing protection and of the actors tasked with providing sufficient remedy, had an accumulative influence on Christians' decision whether or not to return.

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[12] Father of three, displaced from Karamlis, currently in Erbil.

4.2 The Role of Religion and Religious Leaders

The majority of respondents were divided in their views about religious actors' influence on the people not returning. According to some respondents, there are those religious actors who demand international protection and guarantees in order to return to the Ninewa Plain, as well as those who encouraged the return as a matter of duty. Duty, in this sense, may be characterized by the overall purpose of bringing back Christians to their homes in order to reactivate Christian cultural identity and practice in the Ninewa Plain. It may also be understood as a matter of necessity for religious actors who require returned communities to populate church services and activities to ensure the viability of their congregations. Bringing Christians back to the area is crucial for the priests' functions and careers. As Diya Sliwa put it, "Priests defiantly wish to return to their area of work, rebuild, and start their spiritual work." For Case 7, Christians no longer trust the priests: "Most of the clergy left a day before us when Daesh was approaching. Now they call us to return, while they secured their families elsewhere abroad." Other non-returnees said that religious actors had a neutral position when it came to returning or not returning. "Those who were convinced with what the priest said went back, while those who did not return were affected by the second opinion, which is not to return without guarantees" (Case 1).

Some interviewees note that religious leaders choose their words carefully when encouraging people to return because they cannot claim or guarantee protection for their Christian congregants. "The Church is not a military institution to defend anyone, but rather it has a humanitarian and guiding role to serve the returnees," Case 9[13] said. Case 7 added, "They have no role in protecting the Christians." While according to Case 2, "The priest did not force or impose any opinion on us, to say, 'Come back, and we will protect you.'"

Given the circumstances Christians endured throughout the Daesh-caused displacement, guarantees of protection from a trusted source are crucial for a decision to return. Despite this ambivalence surrounding religious actors—whether in cooperation with International Organizations or not—they have been and continue to be primary actors in the process of Christian returns. "The Church [re]built the burned houses, and they tried to make those homes suitable for living," noted Diya Sliwa. In the case of one interviewee, "The Church supported us with food aid every month for a period of three years" (Case 9).

Contrasting such praise were expressions of frustration among some interviewees with how the Churches handled the situation and had become politicized. "Their role is negative, and they failed; sects within Christians do not consider the opinion of a cleric of another sect" (Case 3). "One of the Orthodox Archbishops said there is no safety, and we cannot live with the Arabs. This Archbishop's political stance was not the same before Daesh; he is now affiliated with Kurdish forces and the current Kurdish parties," said Jamil Al-Jamil. Such observations mark a shift.

During the past decade, Christian Church leaders usually abstained from supporting any particular political party. According to some non-returnee interviews, Christians largely assume that Church leaders' essential role is supposed to be spiritual. Therefore, the idea of leaders seeking protection by getting involved in politics is confusing and causes suspicion among some Christian groups. At the same time, political participation may be beneficial for the larger group for the purpose of protection. Regardless of where religious leaders are positioned in the spectrum of political participation, it seems to affect levels of community trust and cohesion: "Priests intervened in politics, and made an oath to

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[13] Human rights and civil society activist, currently in Erbil.

support the Baghdad government, others supported the KRI" (Case 2).[14] "Currently, the rule of the Christian community is under sectarian rule in the full sense of the word; we are confused" (Case 3).

There is also the issue of Church governance in handling operations for return. Four out of nine non-returnees indicated that there was corruption within the Church system. It is crucial to note that Daesh caused a shock to institutional infrastructure in the Ninewa Plain, which had already been weak. The Church, as well as those who are in charge of remedy processes there, are ill-prepared for such high demand. As a consequence, complaints about corruption and the aforementioned political agendas occurred in several of the respondents' remarks.

> *Many people were affected by the clerics and did not accept the return because of them. They corrupted the region and did not help us with dignity, but rather with shame. The simplest example: they distributed garbage containers. They did not find me at home. They said we will not give it to you until you return.* (Case 3)

Another interviewee expressed the belief that it was "okay" if Christians received less than the full designated assistance. "Something is better than nothing. Corruption is present and rampant everywhere, but despite this, little arrives" (Case 9). "The priest deals with organizations, and in my opinion, the clerics should stay away from matters like relief and remain a better civilian," said Case 6.[15] According to Case 7, "Corruption of the church system has an adverse effect on return due to the loss of Christians' only source of confidence." As has been demonstrated, the change in actors' dynamics and shift in Church leaders' roles has confused Christian civilians and shaken their trust in the priests they once followed for spiritual reasons only. It is clear that church leaders represent a unique leadership position in Ninewa Plain governance; their views, operations, and actions matter to and influence decisions of return.

Finally, within this religious discourse, one can examine notions of Christian identity and its relationship to decisions to return. The majority of non-returnees expressed that, regardless of the remedy process, Church leaders' calls, and what the Ninewa Plain symbolically represents for Christian communities, their Christian identity did not influence their decision not to return. The decision of returning or not was not interlinked with Christian identity as such. All non-returnees remarked in some way that the practice of their religion, such as going to church and having Christian social ties, and the feeling of "their Christianity" was not substantively affected by where they resided. Some expressed that being outside of the Ninewa Plain in a safer place like Kurdistan allowed them to stay much later during the Mass, adding that, "During the mass, we do not think about whether the church will be attacked or not" (Case 4). In the Ninewa Plain, even before Daesh, symbolic Christian expressions (like wearing a cross) could cause Christians hardship. Living outside the Ninewa Plain, Case 3 revealed: "I am currently hanging a cross in my car. I boast about the cross as a belief and love." Some non-returnees also expressed that they had become stronger believers in defiance against what Daesh had imposed on them. "I am honored to be persecuted for Christ's sake," said Case 4. In conclusion, Christian identity and practice played an implicit role in the respondents' answers even though they stated it had no explicit influence on their decision not to return.

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[14] Father of four and retired, essentially displaced from Mosul to the Ninewa Plain, then displaced from the Ninewa Plain during Daesh, currently in Erbil.
[15] Father of four and taking care of five sisters as well, displaced from Qaraqosh, currently in Erbil.

4.3 The Political Influence on Non-Return

There are two main political aspects to consider in the Ninewa Plain. First, the security forces and their affiliation to major political actors, and second, the disputes between the governments of Kurdistan and Baghdad on territories and governance in the Ninewa Plain. Those aspects mutually overlap, and both contribute to Christians not returning. "The political conflict exists, the country is divided into sectarian groups, there is no stability, and there are groups that are politically supported and control entire regions" (Case 9). According to the majority of non-returnees, neither the federal nor Kurdistan governments forced anyone to return, but nor did they provide the proper environment (security, jobs, sufficient remedy) for returning to the Ninewa Plain.

The emergence of new powers in this context constitutes an ethnic, political, and regional threat to displaced Christians. "We are concerned that our territories are considered belonging to the KRI and/or the federal governments, but those territories are ours," said Ban Mikha. Christians also fear armed clashes because the Ninewa Plain is a border area between the KRI and Ninewa, between the Peshmerga and the Hashd.[16] In sum, Christians feel that they do not have complete control over their areas. Moreover, the general discourse on the disputed territories in the Ninewa Plain focuses on both the Baghdad and KRI governments' political agendas.

The issue does not stop around the borders of those disputed territories but instead continues to internal governance and how Christians, mainly civilians, are caught up amid these processes. There are divisions in providing security, governance, education, and jobs by the two governments within the same area, which in turn cause instability and confusion, and create false hope for those who want to be governed by one government. Historically and under the current situation, the Kurdistan government offered better safety and protection for Christians within the disputed territories and within the Kurdistan region. And evidently, according to Saliwa, minorities laws in Kurdistan favor and protect Christians more than the laws established by the central government in Baghdad. According to Case 7, "If the disputed areas were under the control of the KRI, most of those who migrated would return, because security and control would be re-established better than [under the] Baghdad government." And when it comes to trusts, "The Baghdad government is now an Iranian government, and most of the Shiites present in the Ninewa Plain now in Bartella have great influence and they have heavy weapons and tanks; when I imagine such scenes, I hesitate to return" (Case 7).

A majority of the non-returnees interviewed described overall better treatment in the KRI than from the Baghdad government, but still rely more on the federal government for jobs. Ban Mikha explained that Christians have no choice but to go to schools belonging to the federal government, because the likelihood of getting a job in the federal public sector is greater than to be given one by the KRI. The KRI is taking advantage of non-return to prove that Christians fear what is happening on the ground, while portraying a polished, positive image of the KRI protecting Christians and fulfilling the rights of minorities in the region for the diaspora and international community. There is also the idea that "some Islamic politicians adhere to the ideas and beliefs of some mullahs who say Christians are related to Europe and America" (Sami Habib). The KRI's dream of becoming an independent state informs its expansionist objectives to include nearby territories that would augment the number of minorities in its autonomous region and help gain more votes toward independence. This means that the Baghdad government loses territorial ground, while the KRI perhaps gains more value and legitimacy as a government. Such thinking puts the federal government in a critical position.

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[16] Also known as the Popular Mobilization Forces.

Another challenge for Christian civilians to consider in their decisions to return is the division among Christian political parties. As Habib (2018) explains, Iraqi Christians in political parties are as divided as others, and those parties are affiliated with the two Iraq governments. But unlike other divided political parties within Islam as the majority religious group, the Christian minority cannot afford to be divided politically—especially when the Iraqi parliament only offers Christians five seats out of 329. "There were attempts to unify the parties, but they failed because the decisions are in the hands of the largest parties," said Jamil Al-Jamil. Although the existence of Christian political parties may portray a value for both governments' agendas in the Ninewa Plain, their influence is not an extension of the Christian people in the region. According to Salloum, Christian politicians' views must be unified to influence the overall political agenda and consequently provide sufficient remedy, protection, and the rebuilding of trust.

4.4 Emigration Incentives and Demographic Change

The Daesh conflict reignited unresolved issues among ethnoreligious groups. Land and property in the Ninewa Plain constitute crucial elements influencing the decision not to return. After the Daesh conflict, there was a trend of Christians selling their houses, which was not the case before Daesh. "Why are Christians allowed to sell their homes and leave the space for the others? In Alqosh [where Christians used to concentrate], they have not given up their beliefs and their land" (Case 7). Selling land, displacement, and emigration, whether strategically planned or not, have influenced the density of the Christian population in the Ninewa Plain. "The Ninewa Plain is no longer demographically Christian-dominated as they become a minority in it," said Saad Salloum.

Although some of the non-returnees have deep roots in the Ninewa Plain, the majority of the interviewees previously came from different areas in Iraq with majority Muslim populations (such as Mosul, Basra, and Baghdad). Those non-returnees eventually settled in the Ninewa Plain in the hopes of it being their final destination. Those groups' move to the Ninewa Plain did not come from nothing; it was a safe, preferred choice since the Ninewa Plain is considered an area with a high concentration of Christians. This meant that trust was a valuable component in their initial decision to go to the Ninewa Plain on the basis of shared religion. This is no longer the case, Ban Mikha said: "Hamdaniya region is not only not dominated by Christians anymore, but Muslim Shabaks are also becoming the majority in Bartella, and Yazidis, Shabaks, Kaka'i, and others around the Ninewa Plain."

Saad Salloum argued that, "The demographic change was not intentionally made. Displaced Shabaks fled from Mosul to the Ninewa Plain during the past ten years, and Christians fled from central and southern Iraq to the Ninewa Plain, and demographic pressure occurred." However, other facts indicate that this demographic change is indeed intentional. "In Bartella, Shabaks wrote 'Bartella the Capital of the Shabaks' on school walls," Sami Habib noted. This supports Wibisono, Louis, and Jetten's (2019) earlier argument that the perceived incompatibility of religious identities leads to repression among religious congregations, schools, or doctrines, and even state violence against members of religious groups. The intentional demographic pressure causes hesitation among displaced Christians to return. It is more threatening for Christians when they look back at areas where it used to be with majority Christians having a new religious or ethnic identity that is not Christians because they do not feel safe. This religious identity change applies to some Ninewa Plain areas. Some indicators shown this change as a threat to the Christians through building new non-Christian worship in areas where it used to have Christian majority. For example,, Ban Mikha expressed concern "about a piece of land in Alqosh where a Sunni syndicate is planning to build a mosque. There are no Muslims there; why are they planning this?" A mosque indicates a plan for Muslim habitation, and potentially a threat to Christians of a renewed displacement cycle cause by Muslims.

"Shabaks have taken control of Bartella; this is a factor that is encouraging the Christians to migrate. And, in Tilkeif, 'strangers' displaced by Daesh became a majority, [which] is also an unhelpful factor for them to return," said Edd Yousif. Although Shabaks may not represent a direct threat to Christians, as they have their brigade within the Iraqi forces, the Ninewa Plain's demographic change also indicates a change in the power balance. For example, when the Shabaks have an armed faction near a Christian area, according to three non-returnees, it certainly provokes some concern among Christians as to whether a conflict or competition may take place. In other words, those areas no longer represent a Christian demographic weight.

Instead, the region has turned into a network of a Muslim majority. Such demographic shifts were also outlined in the aforementioned IOM (2019) study, which identified them as a reason behind Christians' reports of not feeling welcome in the Ninewa Plain anymore. According to Saad Salloum, "To Shabaks, the Ninewa Plain is historical land from which the Shabaks originated, and they have up to fifty-seven villages symbolically called 'Shabakistan,' while Christians were [there] centuries earlier than the Shabaks."

Thus, in addition to the central governments' conflict and the region's strife, "There is an internal struggle between the minorities themselves; between Christians and Shabaks over the regions, especially Bartella. Each minority claims to have historical rights to it," Saad Salloum said. As such, the Ninewa Plain has become an area of conflicting narratives about historical authenticity and ownership of land. It is therefore misleading to think that Christian displacement in the Ninewa Plain is caused solely by Daesh. Daesh conflict, like any other conflict, offers opportunities for strategic actors to intervene. To conclude, when Christian communities balance between the historical, symbolic, and spiritual value of the Ninewa Plain, its lost and conflicted territories, and between personal choices of family stability and protection, the safest immediate option often is emigration.

Emigration is not a new topic for any place affected by conflict, economic scarcity, or climate change. Nevertheless, what makes emigration uniquely different for displaced Iraqi Christians is that emigration is an ongoing project regardless of the situation in Iraq. These Christians are more susceptible to migration than others. Especially the Ninewa Plain's continuous evolution into a foreign space within Iraq for displaced minorities.

Emigration was presented as an ongoing trend within interviews. Case 2 called it the "clinical death of Christian communities in Iraq," contributing to an awareness that security concerns are not the only reasons behind non-return. "If emigration is temporary until security is restored, then so be it, but Christians sell their property showing unwillingness to return" (Mushraq Naji). Non-returnees are often convinced to follow their diasporic community and family members who already settled abroad. "For years there is no stability and staying here does not guarantee any future for anyone," Case 9 said. "Emigration is an existing project, but deciding when to migrate depends on the circumstances," Case 1 added. "The duty calls upon us to acknowledge that emigration is a serious issue," said Sami Habib. Many factors influence the migration of Christians. One of them is the loss of family ties in the homeland and among those displaced. "It becomes apparent that all Christians want to emigrate because their relatives are abroad," said Migration Minister Ivan Jabro.

Case 6 said:

> *Most people I know in Qaraqosh are now abroad, I have no one left there, I feel anxious, upset, and oppressed. Even people there talk about emigration only, we get more tired, and we decide not to return or even visit the region.*

According to Case 5,[17] "I wish I could return, but I do not have anyone in the village. All of my relatives have migrated." Although challenging, migration has become the future and only hope for those groups. Further illustrating this, Case 6 added, "I have relatives in America and Australia, friends in Germany and France. I want to guarantee the future of my children, because Iraq has not stabilized, and we are afraid that it will deteriorate."

It can also be argued that the emigration trend is a state of normalcy, and the diaspora is one of the incentives that created it. Unlike stereotypical ideas of emigration, where individuals arrive in a new place and must make new friends, emigration for Iraqi Christians has the added nuance of instant communities—relatives waiting for them, an image of a whole concept of another home abroad. This image is created not only through existing family ties and extended relatives, but also by nation states abroad. States' incentives and biases toward Christian immigrants have played a crucial factor in emigration. "The doors of emigration from other countries are distinctively opened to Christians," said Judge Mushraq Naji. "Some European countries, including Germany and France, and some Churches facilitated Christian emigration," said Liza Hido. "Had it not been for the other states' facilities for emigration, many Christians would not have left the country this way," observed Case 4.

As noted previously, another challenge facing Christians in deciding whether to return is the lack of job opportunities. A dearth of jobs in Iraq is exacerbated by the ongoing economic situation caused by war as well as the current impact of COVID-19. "Even in the Ninewa Plain, Christian families are willing to migrate due to the coronavirus and miserable economic conditions," said Jamil Al-Jamil. According to one interviewee:

> I am 100 percent for emigration, as there is no longer any livelihood for us here and the future of our children. We have seen nothing but wars, sieges, and displacement; we seek to find a life and a future for our children. (Case 8)

Case 4 explained,

> In Erbil, there are very few job opportunities, but of course it is better than Mosul. My college colleagues come every week to Erbil to work, whereas if he does the same job in Mosul, he will take half of Erbil's salary. In Erbil, [it is] financially better.

As elucidated by these remarks, it is not only the war-torn condition of Iraqi buildings impacting return, but also a general lack of development and work field diversity: "Whoever works now in Erbil will lose his job in the event of his return. For example, a hotel employee in the Ninewa Plain—there is no hotel or factory worker, the Ninewa Plain does not contain a factory," stated Case 1.

Even among those trying to organize grassroots community rehabilitation, challenges remain:

> I spoke with the priest. I told him that we are about 400 people from Karamles living in Ankawa; if we launch any project from the available aid, we will be able to return and work in our region, but he was not convinced. They did not provide job opportunities; for only a few, for acquaintances. (Case 8)

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[17] Single female, displaced from Karamlis, currently in Erbil. She cares for her sick senior parents.

5 Discussion

Multiple factors, such as the shift in religious leaders' roles and changing dynamics in the Ninewa Plain as well as territorial disputes and political instability, led Christians to create and pursue a new home outside of the Ninewa Plain. Foreign states' incentives and biases toward Christian groups have been crucial in building a new home and increasing emigration. Emigration for Iraqi Christians has the added nuance of instant communities—relatives waiting for them, an image of a whole concept of another home abroad.

Moreover, Christians' lack of trust in the (Muslim) religious majority influences the decision not to return. Daesh and the ruling government share the same religious identity: Islam. As demonstrated in the paper's analysis, this commonality in religion may indicate a constant perceived threat to displaced Christians considering return. While a sharp distinction has to be made between Islamic extremism and Islam as a religion of the majority, it is difficult to make this distinction from the perspective of religious minorities persecuted under Daesh rule in the name of Islam. Being able to refer to the perpetrators (Daesh) as well as to the rest of the majority population as Muslims might be perceived as threatening by Christians. Though Daesh used the Quran with a specific, fundamentalist interpretation, the Quran is the religious text from which the current Iraqi constitution (Article 2) and state organs derive their legislation. As such, there is no guarantee for Christians that the Iraqi government would not also come up with a new interpretation of the Quran less tolerable to religious minorities at a future time.

Under the above circumstances (minorities not sharing a religious understanding while populating a condensed geographical space), the concept of othering seems more relevant and significant to understanding members of ethnoreligious minority groups in the Ninewa Plain. Some of the non-returnees and experts interviewed stated that the factors affecting non-return were changes in the surroundings, power relations, and social aspects such as demographic change. Take, for example, the Baghdad government's plan to build a mosque in a purely Christian area, as indicated by Ban Mikha. Muslims populating a strictly Christian site constitutes potential physical threats to those Christians' safety and is closely interrelated with ideological threats to religious and social identity.

6 Conclusion and Recommendations

In review, this paper has offered a qualitative, in-depth analysis of the reasons given by displaced Christians for not returning to the Ninewa Plain after the end of the Daesh conflict. It found three interrelated facets: A) the conditional and insufficient remedy for displaced Christians; B) mistrust in the security and protection provided in the Ninewa Plain; and C) migration and other economic (dis)incentives by state actors and family ties abroad. The paper did not directly tackle psychological aspects that influence Christians' non-return to the Ninewa Plain (although related concepts of psychosocial identity were addressed). It also did not tackle the legal context, which includes laws discriminating against Christians, or the lack of a legal framework that may hinder the process of remedy for non-returnees. These are rich areas for future research.

In Iraq, there is no existing tradition of education across religions. For example, Iraqi schoolchildren are not taught about other religions than Islam. Similarly, we do not see a Christian attending Islamic classes in public schools, where Islam is also taught. One of the few, if not the only place teaching about other religions in Iraq is the Masarat Institution, established in 2005. Yet this is a small NGO that cannot cover the cross-religious information gap at the national level. Islam is not understood or explained to other minorities in the Iraqi context. Therefore, systematic interreligious education is needed.

Moreover, there must be a unified power and security control in the Ninawa Plain. This is crucial to resolving the issue of disputed territories and political disputes. Such unified power and security control can be fostered through unifying Christian politicians' agendas to influence political change in the direction of repealing discriminatory laws and establishing such laws that support minorities, diversity, and inclusion.

The two governments, the Iraqi central government and the KRI government, should work with local actors and NGOs on establishing a plan of action to reconstruct and rehabilitate the Ninewa Plain. The plan could address issues such as creating job opportunities for Christians, providing sufficient and unconditional remedy for displaced Christians, conducting awareness-raising campaigns on social cohesion and diversity, and finally to build trust among Christians and other religious groups in Iraq.

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Annex

Interview Guides

Questions addressed to the expert interviewees:

1. Please give a brief about yourself, professional background?

2. How do you see Christians' presence in Iraq?

3. How do you see the Christians in the Iraqi constitution and on the ground?

4. Where do the reasons for Christian non-return in the post-Daesh conflict lie (do you think)? What is your take on the situation of Christians not returning?

5. How would you rank which minorities are most targeted? Why? (include the Arabic word, if in Arabic means more broadly or specifically than in English)

6. Do you think Christians have influence/power (in Arabic) in the politics between political officials in KRI and Baghdad powers?

7. Is there power in influencing the Christians' non-return? By whom? Why?

8. Further comments or additions?

Questions addressed to non-returning Christians:

1. Briefly, introduce yourself, would you please explain your current family situation?

2. How would you describe your current situation? (FU-Are you planning to return? Another plan? Further?)

3. What are you most worried about (for not returning)?

4. What was the role of your religious community and leaders?

5. What is the role of your religion as your faith?

6. How do you describe your identity?

7. Does this identity change based on which area you live in Iraq? If so, why and how?

8. What does your identity practice entail?

9. Do you see an impact on entitlements in the post-Daesh conflict/ your home? (Related to Q8).

10. Where do you see yourself as a Christian in Iraq?

11. How do you feel about going back to NP? Why? (Depends on answers)

12. Do you trust the ruling governments? Which government? Why?

13. How do you perceive your experience during Daesh displacement compared to previous and the current ruling government?

    - What change of situation would you need that would allow for your return to your home in NP? (ask it in general, don't ask if it's out of context if they are well settled)

14. What are your plans for the future?

15. Further comments?

Interviewees

(1) Expert interviewees

- Sami Habib, 63 years, holds diploma in administration, Administrative and Legal Specialist, founder member of Nineveh Center for Minority Rights – NCMR (NGO) and Alliance of Iraqi Minorities Network – AIM (NGO), has more than 40 years' experience serving government institutes, former member of Al-Hamdaniya Municipal council, and former HR manager of Al-Hamdaniya University.

- Ban Najib Mikha, Civil Engineer at Duhok Polytechnic University and Vice President of Women Minorities Forum (NGO) 2020.

- Diya Butros Saliwa, 65 years, holds BSc in Physics, Baghdad University 1980, Chairman of Independent Human Rights Commission in Kurdistan Region since 2013, founder of Chaldean National Congress (political party) 2000, member of Chaldean Cultural Society.

- Jamil al Jamil, media specialist at UPP in Iraq, civil society activist, poet, and journalist.

- Liza Nissan, President of Baghdad Women Association, has 25 years' experience at the Ministry of Finance.

- Edd Yousif, Chairman of the Alliance of Iraqi Minorities Network and Executive Director of the Nineveh Center for Human Rights.

- Judge Mushraq Naji, holds MA in National Security Planning, Member of the High Commission for Human Rights in Iraq and former Member of Parliament 2010–2014.

- Saad Salloum, expert in religious and ethnic diversity affairs in Iraq, Assistant Professor at the College of Political Sciences at Al-Mustansiriya University and General Coordinator of Masarat for Cultural and Media Development (MCMD).

- Ivan Faeq Jabro, Minister of Migration and Displaced.

(2) Non-returning Christians

- Non returnee (1), displaced from Bartella, was residing in Erbil, and currently in Jordan to emigrate to Australia.

- Non returnee (2), father of four and retired, essentially displaced from Mosul to the Ninewa Plain, then displaced from the Ninewa Plain during Daesh, currently in Erbil.

- Non returnee (3), father of three, has 30 years' experience in education at the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, displaced from Bartella, currently in Erbil.

- Non returnee (4), female student at the Law Faculty, Mosul University and human rights activist, displaced from Mosul, currently in Erbil. She commutes to Mosul University from Erbil daily.

- Non returnee (5), single female, displaced from Karamlis, currently in Erbil. She cares for her sick senior parents.

- Non returnee (6), father of four and taking care of five sisters as well, displaced from Qaraqosh, currently in Erbil.

- Non returnee (7), father of two, displaced from Mosul before Daesh to the Ninewa Plain, then displaced from the Ninewa Plain during Daesh invasion, currently in Erbil.

- Non returnee (8), father of three, displaced from Karamlis, currently in Erbil.
- Non returnee (9), human rights and civil society activist, currently in Erbil.