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Stigmatization Experienced by Families with Perceived ISIS Affiliation in Anbar Province

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SUMMARY

This discussion paper sheds light on a key challenge to the return and reintegration of families with perceived ISIS affiliation in Iraq: stigmatization. Stigma refers to the discriminatory actions and inimical attitudes and beliefs toward people with traits—real or perceived—that are negatively valued by a segment of society. In Iraq, the stigmatization of families with perceived Islamic State (ISIS) affiliation is a growing concern, one that not only impacts the daily lives of these families but also the ability to successfully return and reintegrate them back into their communities. USIP research and engagement on the issue shows that these families, which are comprised mainly of women and children, are shunned by the larger community in their areas of origin because they had a male relative who supported—and committed crimes for—ISIS, continued to live in areas taken over by the extremist group, or spent time in the al-Hol camp in Syria.

The discussion paper focuses on the ways in which stigma is manifesting among families with perceived affiliation in Anbar province, which is home to over half of the 30,000 Iraqis who have been residing in al-Hol, and its impact on return and reintegration dynamics in the province.

The paper's main findings include:

- Women with perceived affiliation in Anbar province face stigma through verbal harassment, security monitoring, rejection by relatives, property appropriation, legal and social barriers to civil documentation, and pressure for formal disavowal.
- These families respond to stigma by isolating themselves to avoid harassment and minimize tensions, and to protect relatives from negative interactions.
- Proactive measures by women include rejecting extremism publicly, such as formal disavowal and divorce from husbands, removing religious garb, and symbolically disavowing male relatives.
- Survivor families' attitudes toward return and reintegration vary: Some welcome returnees, others reject them due to security concerns, and some refuse their return out of anger and grief.

- Survivor families fear returning families could impact security. Supporters worry about social marginalization driving extremism, others fear attacks or exploitation, and opponents fear revenge violence.
- Survivor families feel the government and organizations are not addressing their concerns about compensation and decision-making in the reintegration process.

The paper's main actions for policy consideration include:

- Engage communities to ease concerns about return and reintegration and to reduce stigma. Ensure the general public and survivor families are aware of who is returning, their innocence, the role of security and governing officials, and the social and legal consequences of revenge violence.
- Clarify the illegality of formal disavowal processes. Monitor local adherence to the decree by Iraq's Prime Minister via National Security Advisory that directs government actors to prevent the practice of disavowal. Promote symbolic disavowals without legal consequences to replace formal ones.
- Balance the security concerns of survivor families and returnees. Modify monitoring practices to be less intrusive and follow transparent procedures. Raise awareness about the security vetting process to address returnees' concerns, while maintaining a sense of security for survivor families.
- Support dialogue and mediation to allay tensions, overcome stigmas, and promote sustainable reintegration. NGOs, international organizations, and local peace committees can facilitate dialogue, foster empathy, build a shared narrative, and promote mutual understanding between survivor families and returnees.
- Encourage interaction between survivor families and returnees through activities that foster cooperation and a common sense of purpose. Initiatives can include addressing community problems, beautification projects, joint holiday celebrations, and potential economic ventures.

- Help families with perceived affiliation access legal and economic aid, and ensure survivor families receive compensation. Direct government assistance is needed for both groups: Returnees need civil documentation and protection, while survivor families seek compensation to move forward.

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

Since the declared military defeat of the ISIS in 2017, over five million of the estimated six million people displaced by the violence have returned to their areas of origin.[1] This includes the majority of those who were living under ISIS's occupation and later displaced by military operations to drive out the extremist group. This is significant as these individuals were deemed to be, at best, ISIS sympathizers and, at worst, collaborators by many Iraqis for remaining under ISIS's control, signaling that collective blame of those who remained under ISIS has decreased over time. Despite this progress, a subset of this returning population still faces significant challenges returning and reintegrating back into their communities: families with perceived affiliation to ISIS members.

Defined here as households composed of first, second, and/or third-degree relatives of suspected ISIS members or supporters, families with perceived affiliation can be divided into two groups. The first group, numbering around 250,000 individuals, comprises mainly those who stayed in Iraq postdisplacement, living in internally displaced person (IDP) camps scattered around various provinces, and a smaller cohort displaced in Turkey.[2] The second group, totaling over 30,000 individuals, consists primarily of women and children who are Iraqi citizens and have spent time in the al-Hol camp in Syria. The return and reintegration of these families into their communities has been hampered by several obstacles. These include community opposition, including among tribal and security actors; security concerns related to revenge acts of violence; the loss of property and homes, which were either damaged due to war or appropriated by survivor families or security actors; the lack of proper civilian documentation; and exclusion from social and economic life. These challenges have been either perpetuated or exacerbated by the stigma attached to the families. Of note, the stigma attached to those who have spent time in al-Hol is particularly intense, with the mere mention of al-Hol conjuring up the belief among many that those housed there are, by default, ISIS sympathizers.

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[1] "Iraq," International Organization for Migration (IOM), Displacement Tracking Matrix, https://dtm.iom.int/iraq.

[2] Ouafae Sandi, *Affiliated with ISIS: Challenges for the Return and Reintegration of Women and Children* (United Nations Development Programme Iraq, 2022), www.undp.org/iraq/publications/affiliated-isis-challenges-return-and-reintegration-women-and-children.

To be sure, some progress on the issue has been made. Subnational entities—tribal leaders, governing actors, and local peace committees—have helped, in coordination with Iraq's federal government and international organizations, lay the foundation for return and reintegration through the brokering of local framework agreements that find consensus on how to support and facilitate the process, and through acting as liaisons and mediators between families with perceived affiliation and state institutions, and between the former and survivor families.[3] In tandem with these efforts, government institutions, especially Iraq's National Security Advisory (NSA) and Ministry of Migration and Displacement (MoMD), have played a role in identifying families eligible for return, ensuring that security clearances are issued, and that families with perceived affiliation have some assistance throughout the process—shelter, psychosocial, health, and return grant, to name a few—with the support of key international organizations, including the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and IOM.

A return and rehabilitation process has also been established for the Iraqis in al-Hol. The process starts with Iraqi camp residents who desire to return home registering with the Iraqi government, which then triggers an initial security clearance process that, if successful, leads to families returning to the Jadaa Rehabilitation Center south of Mosul, also known as Jadaa-1. At Jadaa-1, which is run by MoMD with international donor and organization assistance, residents receive a degree of mental and psychosocial support, vocational training and, among other things, cash-for-work livelihood assistance, while further arrangements are made to facilitate their return home, including additional security vetting and the need to identify a sponsor who is willing to vouch for the women and children in question. The process to gain approval to leave Jadaa-1 for their areas of origin has also seen national and subnational authorities working closely together, making the process more attuned to the conflict sensitivity of local areas.[4]

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[3] For more on this, see: Mara Redlich Revkin, *Pathways to Reintegration:* "Iraq: Families Formerly Associated with ISIL" (United Nations Development Programme Iraq, 2021), www.undp.org/iraq/publications/pathways-reintegration-iraq-families-formerly-associated-isil; Jacqueline Parry and Olga Aymerich, "Local Peace Agreements and the Return of IDPs with Perceived ISIL Affiliation in Iraq" (policy research working paper 9916, World Bank Group, January 2022); "Local Peace Processes Toolkit," IOM, 2022, https://iraq.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl1316/files/documents/Local%20Peace%20Processes%20Toolkit%20%28final%20version%29.pdf.

[4] The process to leave Jadaa-1 involves the followings steps and actions. The first involves Jadaa-1 officials providing a list of names to intelligence agencies, who then conduct a security check of the individuals.

There has also been progress on return, both in terms of shifting attitudes and actual return outcomes. On the former, data from USIP's Conflict and Stabilization Monitoring Framework (CSMF) for Nineveh and Anbar shows some communities to be more likely to welcome families with perceived affiliation under certain conditions.[5] Two conditions stand out, both of which assume security clearance has been given. The first is that if survivor families agree to the return of families; the second is that if returnees abide by a tribal and/or community process or agreement that structures the conditions of return. Recent studies have also highlighted the shift toward more receptive attitudes, indicating a softening of views among communities in the immediate post-ISIS period.[6] Indeed, these studies suggest that most opposition today primarily targets those closely related to ISIS members who have committed egregious crimes, such as first and, to a lesser extent, second-degree family members, especially those who have spent time in al-Hol.[7] In terms of actual return outcomes, nearly 10,000 individuals from al-Hol have been repatriated to Iraq as of October 2024, according to data USIP obtained from the Iraqi government.[8]

Concurrent to this, the list of returnees is shared with district governing actors, namely the district commissioners (qa'em maqam), who consult with tribal leaders and village representatives (mukhtars) about the individuals in question to see if there is any information linking them to crimes committed by ISIS or objections from the community to the individuals returning home. In short, district commissioners attempt to validate the innocence of the returning families, while also engaging with the community in general, and survivor families specifically, on any concerns that they may have. Once cleared by security agencies and governing actors, the individuals residing in Jadaa-1 will need to obtain a sponsor for their return. In many cases, the sponsor is either a tribal leader or district governing actor. For more on security clearances impacting return efforts in general, see Sandi, *Affiliated with ISIS*.

[5] "Conflict and Stabilization Monitoring Framework," USIP, www.usip.org/programs/conflict-and-stabilization-monitoring-framework.

[6] For example, Revkin, *Pathways to Reintegration*; "Iraq: Treatment of Iraqis with Perceived Affiliation to ISIL," European Asylum Support Office (EASO), October 2020, https://euaa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/10_2020_EASO_COI_Report_Iraq_Treatment_Iraqis_affiliation_ISIL.pdf_0.pdf; Sandi, *Affiliated with ISIS*.

[7] Dr. Jacqueline Parry, Yousif Khalid Khoshnaw, Dr. Siobhan O'Neil, and Dr. Juan Armando Torres Munguía, "Coming Home: The Return and Reintegration of Families with Perceived ISIL Affiliation in Iraq," United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR), MEAC Findings Report 28, April 2023, https://unidir.org/publication/coming-home-the-return-and-reintegration-of-families-with-perceived-isil-affiliation-in-iraq-findings-report-28; Dr. Jacqueline Parry, Yousif Khalid Khoshnaw, Dr. Siobhan O'Neil, Dr. Juan Armando Torres Munguía, and Melisande Genat, "The Road Home from Al Hol Camp: Reflections on the Iraqi Experience," UNIDIR, MEAC Findings Report 24, December 2022, https://unidir.org/publication/the-road-home-from-al-hol-camp-reflections-on-the-iraqi-experience-findings-report-24; Revkin, *Pathways to Reintegration*; EASO, "Iraq: Treatment of Iraqis with Perceived Affiliation to ISIL"; Sandi, *Affiliated with ISIS*.

[8] Osama Gharizi, "Iraq's Lingering ISIS Challenge and the Role of Dialogue in Return and Reintegration," USIP, November 21, 2024, https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/11/iraqs-lingering-isis-challenge-and-role-dialogue-return-and-reintegration.

Yet, despite these advancements, families with perceived affiliation continue to face obstacles to return and reintegration. Blanket opposition to return in some areas remains high, as evidenced by further data from USIP's CSMF, which shows high opposition in Anbar, including Haqlaniya, a subdistrict of Haditha, where 71 percent outright rejected the return of families with perceived affiliation; the district of Ana, where 42 percent of respondents would not welcome returnees under any condition; and Ramadi district, where just over a third of respondents signaled their refusal to accept returnees no matter the circumstances.[9] Additionally, almost 20 percent of female-headed families with perceived afflation in Jadaa-1 reported opposition to their return from either a tribal leader, governing authority, neighbors, or relatives.[10]

The rehabilitation process has also faced criticism for not addressing the concerns of survivor families, as well as some government and security actors, who prefer that the process focus on tackling ideological reorientation—or families with perceived affiliation—and who desire activities to extend to the postreturn phase, particularly around livelihood assistance.[11] Expanding on this, one interviewee for this study, who was heavily involved in the return and reintegration process, noted that of the three phases in the process—al-Hol, Jadaa-1 rehabilitation, and reintegration—rehabilitation is the phase most in need of support, as there are few robust efforts on programming and assistance that can translate into tangible gains during the reintegration phase.[12]

The aforementioned challenges related to exclusion, loss of property, civilian documentation, and stigmatization also continue to hamper reintegration efforts. Recent studies have shed light on these and related issues, finding that single female-headed households are less likely to have strong family ties in their areas of origin, which has a knock-on effect of such households not being able to

[9] USIP, "Conflict and Stabilization Monitoring Framework," Round 1; in addition, results from USIP's CSMF in Nineveh for Round 7 show that nearly 50 percent of residents in Mosul district are against families with perceived affiliation returning to the district under any circumstance. In Sinjar, the site of ISIS's genocide against the Yazidi (Ezidi) community, opposition is even higher, with nearly 77 percent of residents, including 90 percent of Ezidis, declaring that under no condition should families with perceived affiliation be allowed to return to the district.

[10] Parry et al., "The Road Home from Al Hol Camp."

[11] Parry et al., "The Road Home from Al Hol Camp"; Simona Foltyn, "'The People Don't Want Us': Inside a Camp for Iraqis Returned from Syrian Detention," *Guardian* (US edition), June 15, 2023, www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jun/15/inside-the-holding-camp-for-iraqis-returned-from-syrian-detention-al-hawl-jeddah1.

[12] In-Depth Interview (IDI), international organization, August 2023.

find a sponsor to enable their return home; that women with perceived affiliation are more likely than men to suffer from stigma upon their return home; that the lack of proper civilian documentation is a top concern of Jadaa-1 residents; that access to civilian documentation is a key determinant of whether rehabilitation and reintegration efforts are successful; and that a concerted national strategy to advance reintegration is needed, without which overall reintegration efforts risk being undermined.[13] These studies also highlight an overarching need for the Iraqi government and international partners to put more emphasis on reintegration and, specifically, the repairing of social bonds and cohesion.

This study seeks to expand on these recent findings by focusing on the ways in which stigma is manifesting among families with perceived affiliation in Anbar province and its impact on return and reintegration dynamics in the province. Specifically, it looks at the stigma experiences of women with perceived affiliation who have returned to their areas of origin and the challenges they faced reintegrating into their communities; the fears and concerns that women held in Jadaa-1 have regarding return and reintegration; the stances and positions of survivor families (i.e., those who have been directly victimized by ISIS) with regard to return and reintegration; and the potential opportunities and actions that can be utilized and undertaken to help mitigate stigma narratives and advance social cohesion.

As will be shown, the paper's findings confirm and complement other recent research, while also filling existing gaps related to the broader understanding of return and reintegration dynamics in Anbar. It begins by presenting the methodology and approach used in the study before delving into the main findings obtained from the interviews. The main findings section is divided into four parts. The first covers specific findings pertaining to the stigma experiences of families with perceived affiliation; the second covers the attitudes of survivor families and third-party actors toward return and reintegration dynamics; the third covers the conditions, challenges, and opportunities to mitigate stigma; and the fourth covers the role of certain actors in the process overall. The paper concludes with actions for policy consideration.

[13] Revkin, *Pathways to Reintegration*; USIP observations and findings from a joint USIP-American University in Dohuk session on return and reintegration during the Middle East Peace and Security Forum, November 2022.

METHODOLOGY

This paper draws on and utilizes the following data sources:

- A review of reports by specialized organizations and experts on the topic;
- USIP's engagement with Iraq government leaders and dialogue work facilitating return and reintegration in Anbar;
- USIP's Conflict and Stabilization Monitoring Framework for Nineveh and Anbar; and
- USIP's original research on stigmatization in collaboration with its Iraqi partner, Al-Tadhamun Iraqi League for Youth (TILY).

Regarding USIP's original research, USIP conducted 56 in-person, semistructured interviews with women from families with perceived affiliation who returned to Anbar province, women in Jadaa-1, adults from survivor families in Anbar, and third-party stakeholders, including authorities, tribal and civic leaders, and representatives from international organizations. All families interviewed were vetted and cleared by the government of Iraq.[14]

To ensure confidentiality, no personal identification data was collected, and interviews were conducted anonymously to encourage honesty. Interviews took place from April to August 2023, following conflict and gender sensitivity principles. Interviewees were identified through trusted third parties like community leaders, NGOs, and Jadaa-1 staff.

The paper also uses observational data from USIP's dialogue processes in Anbar, which since 2019 have focused on return and reintegration as well as tension mitigation. These efforts led to the 2021 Western Anbar Covenant signed by 28 tribal leaders, outlining a process for the safe return and reintegration of displaced Iraqis, and a commitment to stability and compensation for ISIS survivors.

A limitation to the study is the small interview sample size; as such, findings should not be interpreted as an exhaustive representation of families with perceived affiliation, or of survivor

[14] Interviewees from families with perceived affiliation (FPAs) who have returned to their areas of origin are referenced as FPA Anbar in this paper.

families, but rather as a snapshot of the dynamics in play. This said, the findings from the research sample are consistent with those from other studies referenced in this paper and those emerging from USIP's dialogue processes.

MAIN FINDINGS

Stigma Experiences of Families with Perceived Affiliation

Families with perceived affiliation who have returned to their areas of origin are experiencing stigma in several ways. These manifestations of stigma include everyday verbal harassment, where women and children are subjected to verbal abuse and bullying; security monitoring and harassment, which only fuels existing negative perceptions among the community of the returning families; rejection by relatives, where relatives of returning families have disowned them out of fear of being accused by the broader community of harboring sympathies toward ISIS; accusations of being ISIS sleeper cells; biases and marginalization among the government, nongovernment organizations, and businesses; and the confiscation of property and denial of compensation payments.

On the latter two issues, some interviewees mention that their property—homes and/or land—has been confiscated or appropriated by survivor families or security actors. They lament having no real recourse to get their property back, feeling that their stigma puts them at a disadvantage in the eyes of society and the law.[15] One governing actor confirms this and notes that, in his district, "many families of martyrs have seized the homes and lands of stigmatized families as a form of revenge for the actions committed by ISIS members. This has resulted in conflicts and disputes between the two parties."[16] At the same time, these women and children are seen as ineligible for compensation under Law 20, which specifies that citizens who have suffered damages or losses because of military operations, terrorist acts, or other circumstances of armed conflict and insecurity are able to receive

[15] USIP's dialogue process in Anbar also highlights this challenge, with returning family dialogue participants noting the occupation of houses being a challenge faced upon return.
[16] IDI, governing actor, April 2023.

compensation. Yet the law is not seen to apply to these women and children, given their perceived affiliation with ISIS.

Women also report other legal barriers related to receiving key civil documentation, as well as pressure to disavow and divorce their husbands. These manifestations of stigma are explored in more detail in subsequent sections of this paper. Moreover, it is important to note that the instances of stigma mentioned above vary, and interviewees do not report having the same experiences. A minority of interviewees even state that they have experienced little to no harassment since returning to their areas of origin and that the broader community is mostly sympathetic to their situation. Indeed, factors such as tribal affiliation, actions of the husband/male relative associated with ISIS, and composition of the host community all seem to play a role in the extent to which stigma is experienced by returnees. Of note, women with perceived affiliation residing in Jadaa-1 say they fear these manifestations of stigma upon their return.

Families with perceived affiliation have reacted to stigma in two main ways: isolation and proactive actions. On the former, women have chosen to isolate themselves—and to a lesser extent, their children—from the broader community and, at times, immediate family members. The rationale behind this is threefold. First, less interaction simply means less opportunities for harassment to occur. Second, some women interviewees note that only going out of the house when necessary helps to not provoke survivor families and other members of the community who see them in a negative light. Third, remaining disconnected from the community lessens the risk that their relatives will face negative interactions from the broader community. One interviewee sums up the penchant to pursue isolation as a response strategy to stigmatization by stating: "We [the family] distance ourselves and isolate from the general community as much as possible so as to avoid issues or problems for us and the community."[17]

Yet, this isolation, while aimed at alleviating tensions and conflict, has negative ramifications on the families' emotional and physical health, and prevents social ties from being formed and strengthened, something that is needed if reintegration is to truly occur. Indeed, a recent study found

[17] IDI, FPA Anbar, April 2023.

that the strength of one's social network within their areas of origin is a prime determinant of how well those individuals with perceived ISIS affiliation reintegrate back into their communities.[18] Isolation prevents such networks from being activated and strengthened, stymieing reintegration efforts overall.[19]

The second main response has been for families to engage in a series of proactive measures aimed at dispelling doubts among the community and affirming their rejection of extremism and commitment to peace. This includes actions such as formal disavowal and divorce from husbands, the removal of religious garb, especially the niqab, and the symbolic disavowal of male relatives to survivor families or in front of the larger community. Regarding formal disavowal and divorce, it should be emphasized that the action is seen by some women with affiliation as a prerequisite to return and a fundamental step to gaining the trust of survivor communities and key stakeholders, including security actors, even if some women do not actually want to engage in the practice, given that it is perceived to infringe on their rights and/or brings them additional challenges related to personal status.

Such proactive actions were also mentioned by survivor families as key steps toward absolving returnees of their stigma (see the section below).

Attitudes on Return, Reintegration, and Stigma

Survivor families express mixed feelings toward the return of families with perceived ISIS affiliation. Regarding their feelings toward families with perceived affiliation, survivor families can be placed into one of three categories. The first contains those who mainly view the wives and children of ISIS members and supporters as victims. Those in this category highlight the need to differentiate between the actions and motives of husbands and those of their wives and children, with some interviewees from this category stating that women have often opposed their husbands

[18] Parry et al., "Coming Home."
[19] For more on the importance of social network strength and reintegration outcomes, see Parry et al., "Coming Home"; Lisa Schirch, Chris Bosley, and Michael Niconchuck, *RISE Action Guide: Rehabilitation and (Re)integration Through Individual, Social, and Structural Engagement* (Washington, DC: USIP, 2023).

joining the extremist group but were powerless to stop them for doing so.[20] Per one interviewee: "We must accept that the return of women and children is an honorable duty, because these women are not guilty of their husbands' actions." Those in this category are generally accepting and welcoming of the return and reintegration of families with perceived affiliation, provided that these families demonstrate in some fashion their rejection of ISIS and extremist ideology.

The second category involves those who reject the return of the families with perceived affiliation, with this rejection predicated on the fear that instability, in some fashion, would follow. To be sure, those in this category are not categorically against the return of the women and children associated with ISIS members, but rather, fear their return would usher in a period of instability in their areas, and as such, do not want these families to return under the present conditions.[21] These fears seem to confirm findings from another study in Anbar, which shows that communities residing in rural and more geographically vulnerable areas fear that those returning families with perceived affiliation would only strengthen efforts by remnant ISIS cells that are active in the area, indicating that their concerns are less about the families themselves and more about the security gaps in the overall environment.[22]

The third category are those who refuse to accept the return of families with perceived affiliation under any circumstance. Here, there is categorical opposition to the prospect of return and reintegration. In the view of these survivor families, too much pain has been caused by ISIS to warrant forgiveness. Illustrating this are the words of one interviewee, who stated: "How can I accept the return of a family whose son killed my brothers in the cruelest manner, throwing them into a well in the desert without mercy? How can I forgive the family whose son showed no mercy to my brothers, leaving their children fatherless and displacing my family in the desert, seizing all our belongings, and causing havoc in our lives?"[23] Those in this grouping also fear the returning families may still harbor extremist views or links to ISIS members.

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[20] IDI, survivor family (multiple), April/May 2023.
[21] See USIP's CSMF for Nineveh, Round 7 results, which explores this in more detail.
[22] "Managing Return in Anbar: Community Responses to the Return of IDPs with Perceived Affiliation," IOM Iraq, 2020, https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/managing-return-anbar-community-responses-return-idps-perceived-affiliation.
[23] IDI, survivor family, April 2023.

Fear of instability is rife among survivor families, **though the reason for this varies, depending on their perception toward families with perceived affiliation.** Those who welcome the return of the wives and children of men associated with ISIS are concerned less with instability caused by these families and more over what might transpire if these families are rejected and marginalized from the community: Women and children need to be reintegrated and supported to live normal lives in order to stave off the potential for more extremist views and actions in the future. In other words, there is an understanding that a lack of proper reintegration may ultimately produce a new radicalized generation.

Other adults from survivor families oppose return on the grounds that it would lead to instability, either in the form of revenge acts of violence perpetrated by survivor families or others in the community, or in attacks by ISIS remnants, who would exploit the vulnerability of returning families to help plan or coordinate future attacks. Indeed, the fear among these survivor families is not that the families themselves would instigate attacks, but rather that the security and social environments are not yet conducive to guaranteeing safety and security.

Those who categorically reject the return of families with affiliation do so, in part, on the grounds that they fear returning families maintain extremist views and will, at some point, pursue vendettas in order to avenge their husbands and fathers. While interviewees generally acknowledged that returning families have been cleared by government and security actors to return, this has not allayed their fears or changed their view of these families as potential perpetrators of extremist violence.[24]

Survivor families believe there is too much attention on the families with perceived affiliation and little focus on addressing their own rights and concerns. A common refrain heard from survivor families is that more attention needs to be put on addressing their concerns and needs in the return and reintegration process. Two specific issues stand out from the interviews. First, their demand for compensation is not being responded to. Here, survivor families state that the government compensation process is too slow and, in their view, mired in corruption. They specifically note that

[24] Interviewees with adults from families with perceived affiliation who have returned to their areas of origin reported being blamed and accused by survivor families and others of coordinating and/or aiding attacks done by ISIS remnants in some areas following their return. IDI, FPA Anbar (multiple), April/May 2023.

their applications to receive compensation are not being processed in a timely manner and that only families with political connections are receiving payments from the government compensation mechanism, with some stating that undeserving families—that is, those who do not meet the criteria for filing claims—are among those getting payments.

Tribal and government actors have also pointed out the need to focus more on survivor family needs. One tribal leader notes that international and government actors have provided a lot of assistance to families with perceived affiliation, but that "we have not seen this support extended to the victims' families, something that has caused societal resentment. This party [survivor families] feel marginalized [. . .] and they have not received compensation for their losses, both family and property." A government actor interviewed echoes this sentiment and takes it a step further by pointing out that the faults in the compensation legislation (Law 20)—namely, that it has reduced the entitlement amount by half—has contributed to survivor families holding on to their opposition to the return of those with perceived affiliation.[25] In addition to this, another government actor notes that local government authorities are essentially helpless when it comes to the compensation file due to the fact that the three subcommittees in the province dealing with compensation claims are tied to the judiciary and the Martyrs Foundation, making it difficult for local authorities to monitor and follow up on this in an effective manner

USIP's dialogue process in Anbar confirms and adds to the views on compensation, with gaps in the legal framework undermining the capacity to process the large number of applications (30,000 claims were reported to be worked on by the Anbar compensation committee), lack of sufficient budget allocations from the federal government, and disconnect between the central and provincial compensation committees all cited as the main impediments to processing claims in a timely manner in the province.[26] Additionally, the delay in processing claims is also partially attributed to the delay in liberating areas from ISIS, which subsequently led to a delay among residents from these areas in submitting compensation claims. Because applications are processed in chronological order—earliest to latest—this has meant that applications from western Anbar have yet to be reviewed in full.

[25] IDI, district governing actor (multiple), April 2023.
[26] Western Anbar dialogue session with tribal leaders and national and subnational government representatives, including the Anbar Compensation Committee Directorate, March 6, 2023.

Another subnational actor privy to the workings of the compensation process puts the blame on the Central Compensation Committee, which, in his view, often overrides the decisions reached by the subnational committee, further adding to delays.

The second grievance survivor families raise relates to their exclusion from the decision-making process governing return and reintegration. Specifically, some interviewees claim that tribal and government leaders do not consult them in the return and reintegration process, or that they act without taking into consideration their opposition to those families affiliated with ISIS. Some note, however, that they do not view this as a deliberate act or slight per se, but rather one taken due to high-level government political pressure to proceed with the return and reintegration process.

Some tribal leaders push back against the notion that they are excluding survivor families, with one noting: "We [tribal leaders] have not made any decisions on our own; rather, we have engaged in collective consultation and involved them [survivor families] in the process."[27] Indeed, he believes that "one of the most effective measures that refute the stigma associated with families with perceived affiliation is to actively involve victims' families in the process, as they have a strong and official influence."

USIP's dialogue process in Anbar shows that there is a degree of truth to both these views. Some tribal leaders are indeed more inclusive in their engagement than others, with committees formed to help streamline and consolidate tribal community engagement efforts. At the same time, however, some of these engagements lack proper follow-up and information-sharing mechanisms, meaning those involved are not always privy to what occurs after the initial engagement. This, in turn, fuels a feeling of neglect among survivor families.

Return, Reintegration, and Stigma Reduction: Conditions, Challenges, and Opportunities

Forced disavowal of family members is seen as a central precept for the return and reintegration of families perceived to have affiliation with ISIS. Survivor families and those from families

[27] IDI, tribal leader, April 2023.

with perceived affiliation point, directly or indirectly, to *tabriya* (Arabic for disavowal)—or the process of disavowing a family member accused of being part of ISIS—as a key step that must be done if the return and reintegration process is to commence. The disavowal process in Iraq can either be a tribal one that carries little legal ramification (also referred to as denouncement), or one done through the formal legal system.[28] In the context of return and reintegration, all interviewees refer to tabriya by its formal definition, eschewing the tribal practice that, while having social implications, does not carry any legal consequences.

For survivor families, formally disavowing male relatives accused of being part of ISIS brings a degree of comfort and demonstrates that the families with affiliation are keen on renouncing extremism. It is also often seen as a first step toward sustained reintegration. Hence, though a separate study found overall community trust in the disavowal process to be low and not necessarily something that communities expected to occur as a condition for return, interviews with survivor families indicate that, for this specific group, the step is of critical importance to return and reintegration efforts.[29]

For families with perceived affiliation, however, formal disavowal, which also includes divorcing accused husbands, is seen as a necessary action to not only return home but also to obtain critical civil documentation. Indeed, there is an understanding among these families that, despite nothing in the legal framework making such an act mandatory, bringing a lawsuit against their male relative is an action required by security, community, and government leaders. As such, pursuing formal proceedings allows families with perceived ISIS affiliation to receive security clearances to go home, in addition to the necessary court and security documents needed to submit applications for key civilian documentation, such as government identification cards and property claims, among other things.

However, opening legal proceedings against accused family members is riddled with challenges and risks. Many women and their advocates complain that the divorce and disavowal process

[28] Formal tabriya is technically called *ikhbar*, but in the post-ISIS period, communities and stakeholders have often conflated the terms. Given that all interviewees did not use the term ikhbar, but rather tabriya in the formal definition, tabriya is used here. For more on the practice, see Melisande Genat, *Tribal Justice Mechanisms and Durable Solutions for Families with a Perceived Affiliation to ISIS* (Baghdad: IOM Iraq, 2022).
[29] Parry et al., "Coming Home."

is costly and that they do not have the funds needed to hire a lawyer and cover all the legal fees associated with the process, which has also been described as lengthy and drawn out. Others have also highlighted the fact that the process is riddled with corruption, with government actors seeking illicit payments to provide needed paperwork and documentation. Another barrier relates to marriage and death certificates, which must be submitted to the courts during the process. Simply put, some women do not have the required documents, either because they have been lost, were never produced in the first place, or because they were married during the time of ISIS's occupation, thus rendering any documents produced in this period as invalid in the eyes of Iraqi courts. Women facing such a scenario complain that they have run up against a bureaucratic wall in which little leeway or alternatives are provided that would allow them to overcome this barrier and access other pressing documentation.

In addition to these challenges, a larger one casts its shadow over the whole process: Some interviewees note that there is either direct and indirect pressure from the government, security actors, and/or community members to disavow family members, as this is, as previously mentioned, a step often seen as a prerequisite for return and successful reintegration. This is reportedly the case even in situations where the male relative in question has been proven to be innocent and not a supporter of ISIS.[30] As such, the whole process is seen as infringing on the rights and will of innocent women to manage their personal affairs. This practice also raises concern about a looming issue over the medium and long term: how to deal with the disavowed male relatives who may one day be released after serving their prison sentences, or who are deemed innocent by the courts. The very act isolates these men further from their family and society, something that may only act to harden the stigma placed on them and push them toward more extremist narratives in the future.

Related to the disavowal and divorce process, legal barriers are reported in the process to receive key civilian documentation. Even those who have successfully gone through the divorce and disavowal process state that this is not a guarantee to receiving key civilian documentation needed to restart their lives. Indeed, women of families with perceived affiliation report legal

[30] IDI, FPA Anbar, April 2023.

barriers to receiving key civil documentation. Many cite the main barrier to be the cost associated with the process of obtaining documents, including legal fees of lawyers, as well as bribes demanded by government employees and/or village leaders (mukhtars).[31] In short, disavowal and divorce may help get the required permissions to go back home, but it is not a panacea for the many obstacles associated with obtaining civilian documentation.

Survivor families state that they would accept the return and reintegration of families with perceived affiliation under certain conditions, some of which could also help allay the stigma associated with these families. The different groups of survivor families—those who are generally supportive of return and reintegration, those who oppose return due to security concerns, and those who categorically refuse return under any conditions—do mention conditions under which they would support the return and reintegration of families with perceived affiliation. This is true even among the category who categorically state their blanket opposition to the scenario of welcoming back affiliated families. When probed on this, some from this group see the return of affiliated families to be contingent on survivor family needs being met first (i.e., compensation, criminal accountability demands, and inclusion in the return process) and for the returning families to demonstrate through actions their rejection of ISIS and extremist ideology in general.

On the latter, several actions were mentioned, some of which overlap with the views of families with perceived affiliation, including the previously discussed issue of formal disavowal, which in the eyes of survivor families signals that these women are committed to rejecting extremist ideology and those who perpetrate it; the removal of religious attire, particularly the niqab, another act that indicates women are no longer wedded to the religious conservativism associated with ISIS; the presentation of security clearances and disavowal documents to the larger public, to make it known that the families are no longer associated with ISIS members and innocent of the actions of male relatives; and public declarations by these families, which should carry legal ramification, that they will not communicate with anyone from ISIS, and immediately report to security actors any instances in which ISIS members contact them. The need for some elements of a restorative justice

[31] IDI, FPA Anbar (multiple), April 2023.

process emerged from the interviews as well, with one interviewee noting the need to have a symbolic disavowal in which stigmatized women publicly denounce ISIS and their male relatives associated with the group in front of tribal leaders, government actors, and survivor families.[32] These actions, should they occur, are believed to go a long way in removing the stigma attached to these families with perceived affiliation.

Additionally, survivor families state several other things that can be done to help generate support for return and reintegration. For one, not only is the approval and support of tribal and security actors a must, but these actors also need to be involved in the postreturn process of monitoring the actions of these families to guarantee that they are not engaging in criminal activities. For survivor families, the monitoring acts as a follow-up mechanism that can verify if these families are exhibiting proper behavior, which would then, in their view, allay their fears and lead to a reduction of stigma. Interviewees from survivor families also want women and children to go through a reeducation process to ensure that they are fully rid of any radical views and beliefs. Some, particularly those most ardently opposed to the return and reintegration process, also desire these families to be relocated to the periphery of urban areas, something they feel would help minimize any tensions, as these families would be out of sight and out of mind.

Awareness raising is also mentioned by survivor families, families with perceived affiliation, and third-party actors as a key action that can help overcome stigma in the immediate and long term. In addition to the abovementioned actions, survivor families emphasize the role awareness raising can play in changing opposing attitudes and negative perceptions toward women and children with perceived affiliation. Specifically, they note that the general public needs to be exposed to information and narratives from tribal, security, and government leaders that emphasize the innocence of the returning families, promote reconciliation and unity, and prohibit verbal and physical harassment of innocent women and children. Some survivor family interviewees went a step further and noted the need to shed light on the plight that women and children have faced, including living under ISIS, displacement, and the troubling and noxious conditions in the

[32] IDI, survivor family, April 2023.

al-Hol camp. In fact, understanding these difficulties helped shift stances of opposition to ones in support of return and reintegration among survivor families, as admitted by two survivor family interviewees.[33]

Key to awareness raising seems to be a realization of how women and children are essentially helpless in relation to the actions taken by the men, something that seemingly evokes a feeling of empathy. As one survivor family interviewee explains, educating people needs to include leaders explaining to the public that women and children "are not all members of ISIS and they are often helpless and have no control over their situation. For example, in Anbar society, the wife usually does not have the decision-making power in the relationship and has to follow her husband [. . .] and we need to work on awareness raising and integration through education and guidance [on this] from religious leaders and tribal elders."[34]

Adults from families with perceived affiliation, as well as tribal and district governing authorities, concur with survivor families that there needs to be more effort around raising the awareness—of the broader community in general and victims' families specifically—of the innocence of these women and children and the fact that they were also victimized by ISIS. Complementing awareness raising, some tribal and district governing authorities also mention the need to spur interaction and cooperation between survivor families and those with perceived affiliation, though this may be a challenge in the immediate term given the strong reluctance of survivor families to do so, even among those who are generally supportive of the return of innocent women and children. Yet where both awareness raising and positive interactions have been possible, progress has been made in repairing the relationship between the groups. For example, one governing actor interviewee highlights a case in his district, where "two women, one a stigmatized woman, the other a victim of ISIS, had their relationship transformed from one of fighting and insulting to one of friendship and working together for a better life, now believing they are victims equally," after efforts were made that challenged misinformation and prodded the two women to find common ground.[35]

[33] IDI, survivor family, April 2023.
[34] IDI, survivor family, April 2023.
[35] IDI, governing actor, April 2023.

In addition to awareness raising and proactive measures, families with perceived affiliation have identified several other actions they believe would help offset the stigma associated with them and advance reintegration. One of the most critical mentioned by interviewees is amending security monitoring practices. Following their return, they note that security actors have engaged or continue to engage in follow-up monitoring and surveillance efforts, ostensibly to ensure that they are not causing trouble or communicating with extremist elements. This has entailed the visiting of homes at random times, in addition to calling the women in for questioning at the premises of the security actors. Women with perceived affiliation advocate for the limitation or elimination of these actions, as they view them as only helping perpetuate the perception that they are engaging in illicit and extremist activities, thereby making it harder to shed the stigma of being affiliated with ISIS.

Financial and civil documentation assistance from the government is another area of concern for families with perceived affiliation**.** They highlight the high costs associated with legal actions such as divorce and disavowal, which have prevented many women from pursuing these processes. Therefore, many are wanting these costs to be covered by the government so they can obtain the legal paperwork needed to obtain other vital civil documentation. At the same time, women who cannot present valid marriage, birth, or death certificates find themselves running up against a bureaucratic wall in which little leeway or alternatives are provided that would allow them to access other pressing documentation. They seek more flexibility and alternatives to overcome these barriers and obtain the essential documentation that is required by the government.

The lack of economic opportunities is also a pressing issue raised by interviewees, with many feeling that the stigma associated with them is a key factor in their inability to find a source of livelihood. Indeed, this sentiment is shared by women with perceived association participating in USIP's dialogue process in Anbar, as they note that businesses are reluctant to hire them.

Role of Other Actors

Given the tribal nature of society in Anbar, tribal leaders, backed by district governing actors and security actors, are identified by all interviewee groups as key actors who should continue to play a key role in the return and reintegration process, including with regard to stigma-reducing

actions. Tribal leaders already play a prominent role in the return and reintegration process. Their efforts involve coordinating with government actors and agencies and security actors on the return process, engaging in prereturn actions aimed at creating a more stable and suitable environment for the return and reintegration process to commence, and dealing with specific tensions between returning families and community members, including survivor families. Some also wear the dual hat of being a tribal leader as well as a district commissioner (*qa'em maqam*) and are part of committees—local peace committees, community dialogue committees, and others—comprised of community, tribal, governing, and security actors working on brokering community agreements that would, among other things, give the green light for the return and reintegration process to advance. Given these roles and the tribal nature of society in Anbar, tribal leaders are considered to be a key social protection actor within communities. Per multiple interviewees, if the tribal leaders announce to tribal members that these women and children are innocent, then this carries weight in society and helps allay the stigma associated with them.

However, tribal competition and conflict can also prove to be a challenge to the return and reintegration process, something highlighted by USIP's dialogue work in Anbar. Here, tribal rivalries and disputes stemming from the pre- and post-ISIS period can manifest in terms of collective accusations against a tribe of being an ISIS sympathizer, or a negative view toward individuals of a rival tribe irrespective of their guilt or innocence.

Security actors are already playing a key role in the return and reintegration process. Interviewees note the active role of security actors in the security screening process and the role they play in monitoring and surveillance. Yet interviewees also note actions by security actors that have undermined the process and have instead led to a deepening of stigmatization. For example, one survivor family interviewee mentions that a prominent security actor in her district has publicly rejected the return of families with perceived affiliation on the grounds that these families may cause further instability upon return. Such a stance merely works to buttress the ossified positions of those survivor families who categorically reject the return of families with perceived affiliation.[36]

[36] A district governing actor highlighted the negative role some security actors have played, having stated that security actors in his district have "engaged in various actions with the aim of reinforcing the stigma attached

While these views appear in the minority, they do highlight the pivotal role security actors have in advancing the return and reintegration process. Indeed, women residing in Jadaa-1 desire security actors to accompany them on their journey home, as this would both deter attacks against them and signal to the community that they have been brought back by security actors who have cleared them of any guilt. In addition, many want the security actors to, along with tribal leaders, work on educating the broader community about their innocence and, crucially, for them to make it known that any harm done to the families would come with punitive ramifications. In short, they want security actors to help protect them from any animosity and enmity faced upon their return.

ACTIONS FOR POLICY CONSIDERATION

The following actions for policy consideration were formulated through a synthesis and analysis of interviewee feedback, through outcomes from USIP's dialogue process in Anbar, and with a conflict-sensitive lens to preclude actions that might exacerbate tensions and conflict.

Engage communities in ways that help assuage concerns about return and reintegration and allay views that perpetuate stigma. These activities generally fall into one of two types. The first is public awareness raising about families with perceived affiliation, especially on matters concerning their innocence; what the postreturn process will look like, especially with regard to security provision; and the need to avoid engaging in revenge acts of violence. Here, security officials should also provide more information about the security vetting process, especially in relation to those returning from al-Hol, so that communities understand that those who have returned pose little risk—if they were a security threat, the process would have caught them at the onset.[37] In short, ensuring the awareness of the public in general, and survivor families in particular—of who is returning and how, details about their innocence, the role and actions taken by security and governing officials in the return and the postreturn phase, and the social and legal consequences that would

to these families. They do so for personal interests, including financial gain and exerting authority over the society they are responsible for." IDI, district governing actor, April 2023.

[37] For more on this, see Parry et al., "The Road Home from Al Hol Camp."

come with any acts of revenge violence—could, based on findings from this study, help allay concerns and begin to shift attitudes and behaviors toward returning women and children.

The second relates more specifically to survivor families: Findings show that they want to be included in the process in some manner so that they feel their concerns are considered by governing and security officials. This could range from simple awareness raising sessions, engagement by certain committees that have been established, or direct mediation between survivor families and those with perceived affiliation conducted by trusted third parties.

Clarify the illegality of the formal disavowal process. This process has been considered controversial, yet it is seen as a means of addressing the concerns of both security entities and specific community members regarding the return and reintegration process. However, given its illegality and the negative consequences involved, the NSA has taken steps in the context of the USIP project in Anbar to prevent the practice, securing a decree from Iraq's prime minister in August 2023 that states the practice is not required for families with perceived affiliation to return home. Monitoring efforts should be applied to ensure the decree is being followed at the local level, and to understand why and how violations occurred. At the same time, efforts should be made to raise the public's awareness over the fact that the practice is not obligatory and the adverse effects it has on returning families. Encouraging actions that replace demands for formal disavowals with symbolic disavowal gestures, carrying no legal consequences, should also be promoted.

Strike a balance between survivor family desires and those of families with perceived affiliation around security concerns. Survivor families and those with perceived affiliation appear to have clashing needs and concerns related to security. Specifically, the monitoring and surveillance role played by security actors helps minimize concerns among survivor families—and the community at large—over whether families are engaged in illegal activity. At the same time, however, these actions add a degree of insecurity among returnees, who feel that such actions only work to deepen their stigma. One possible way forward is to help amend monitoring and surveillance practices so that they are less intrusive and in accordance with transparent procedures. Combined with awareness raising, particularly on the security vetting process, this could help offset the concerns women with perceived affiliation have, while at the same time continuing to give a sense of security to

survivor families. Establishing a follow-up committee or using existing peace infrastructures (e.g., community dialogue committees, peace committees, NGOs) to act as a community-based follow-up mechanism could also help allay concerns about the risks posed in the return and reintegration process.

Support dialogue and mediation efforts to allay tensions, overcome stigmas, and promote sustainable reintegration. Tensions exist between survivor families and families with perceived affiliation over the crimes committed by ISIS members and, among other things, property and land disputes (i.e., cases where survivor families have taken over the houses of families with perceived affiliation). Dialogue and mediation undertaken by trusted third parties (NGOs, international organizations, local peace committees, etc.) are highlighted as activities that can help resolve these issues, as they can promote empathy, a shared narrative of past events, and an understanding of each other's struggles and challenges, as well as debunk existing stigmas, prejudices, and stereotypes, thereby paving the way for the advancement of reintegration and social cohesion postreturn. As part of these efforts, symbolic actions, such as a public disavowal of extremist groups and ideologies, could be pursued, as this is something that could lead to the dropping of opposition to returns and the stigma attached to returning families. Similarly, there is a need to engage in direct mediation between survivor families most opposed to returns and families with perceived affiliation—doing so could help quell opposition to the process, prevent revenge acts of violence, and increase the sense that survivor concerns are being paid attention to before the onset of returns occurring. At the same time, efforts should also be made to allay tribal tensions and conflict in the province, which can act as a barrier to the return and reintegration process, and perpetuate stigmatization.

Encourage interaction between survivor families and families with perceived affiliation, where safely possible. In addition to dialogue and awareness raising activities, activities should be supported that foster cooperation and a common sense of purpose between survivor families and families with perceived affiliation. This can include initiatives that tackle specific problems identified by both groups in their community, community beautification projects (e.g., street or garden cleanup efforts), joint holiday celebrations (e.g., an iftar during Ramadan organized and attended by the groups), potential economic ventures, and sport and art activities. Such actions can help both

groups work toward a common objective, helping to develop trust between them and promoting a feeling of shared purpose and experience. In short, activities that help increase the social bonds between the groups should be pursued where safely possible.

Help families with perceived affiliation access legal and economic aid, and help survivor families receive compensation. Both survivor families and families with perceived affiliation need direct government assistance, with the former seeking compensation as a necessary step on the path toward welcoming back returning families and turning the page on the past, and the latter requiring help obtaining key civil documentation. On the former, establishing a monitoring mechanism to prevent corruption in the compensation process, addressing the lack of sufficient budget allocations to process the large number of claims, and bridging the disconnect between central and provincial compensation committees can help address the grievances of survivor families. On the latter, improving the capacity and resources among administrative units responsible for issuing civil documentation, and reforming the legal framework to make it less bureaucratic and more accessible for citizens, were highlighted as key areas of support from interviewees. Helping advocate for compensation to apply to families with perceived affiliation deemed innocent by security actors should also be pursued. Moreover, interviewees stress the need for continued psychosocial support for returning women and children, as well as economic opportunities for both groups, which if achieved can help advance reintegration. The establishment of a case management system, wherein social workers engage with community leaders and government actors to assess the needs of survivor and returnee families, and provide them support, may also provide a boon to reintegration efforts, as it will show that the concerns of survivor families and returnees are not being forgotten by authorities.