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The Reasons for Return of Internally Displaced Christians to Baghdeda

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Abstract:

Iraq has experienced multiple waves of mass displacement in recent history. In June 2014, Daesh seized approximately one-third of the Iraqi territory and targeted minorities in particular, which caused a mass displacement. The conflict between Daesh and the Iraqi government, backed by local militias as well as international forces, between the years 2014 and 2017 caused a humanitarian crisis. Around 5.8 million people became internally displaced. Approximately 4.8 million internally displaced persons returned after the cessation of the conflict while around 1.2 million remain in displacement.

This paper seeks to investigate the role religion played in the decision of Christian internally displaced persons to return to their area of origin of Baghdeda, the largest Christian town in Iraq, located in the Ninewa Plain. It examines whether and how different factors influenced the respondents' decisions to return. It finds that religion constitutes an important factor influencing the decision to return, within the nexus of other considerations such as economic opportunities, reconstruction, and security. Religion thereby plays a role because of the respondents' Christian identity, the encouragement to return by religious leaders, and the reconstruction efforts led by the churches.

The Reasons for Return of Internally Displaced Christians to Baghdeda

1   Introduction

Over the last decades, the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) worldwide has been increasing, reaching 50.8 million by the end of 2019. The vast majority of these IDPs (45.7 million) are displaced due to conflict and violence, a figure marking an "all-time high" according to the Global Report on International Displacement 2020.[1] IDPs are defined in the United Nations Guiding Principles on International Displacement as:

> *Persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflicts, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters and who have not crossed an internationally recognized border.[2]*

The numbers of IDPs are much higher than those of refugees,[3] yet IDPs tend to be less visible.[4]

There have been multiple mass displacements in the recent history of Iraq.[5] Displacement in Iraqi history has been driven by persecution and violence based on ethno-religious identity and political affiliation.[6] Daesh[7] caused the most recent displacement wave when they seized approximately one-third of the territory of Iraq in June 2014.[8] Daesh particularly targeted minorities[9] and seized areas inhabited by them. The conflict between Daesh and the Iraqi government, backed by local militias as well as international forces, between the years 2014 and 2017 caused a humanitarian crisis. In the course of combat, houses and infrastructure were destroyed and people fled their homes in search of security. Around 5.8 million

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[1] "Global Report on International Displacement 2020" (International Displacement Monitoring Centre and Norwegian Refugee Council, 2020).

[2] "Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement" (OCHA, 2001).

[3] "Refugee Data Finder: 80 Million Forcibly Displaced People Worldwide," UNHCR, https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/.

[4] "The Role of Local and Regional Governments in Protecting Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)" 37th session (Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, 2019).

[5] Daryl Grisgraber, "Too Much Too Soon: Displaced Iraqis and the Push to Return Home" (Refugees International, 2017).

[6] Nancy Riordan, "Internal Displacement in Iraq: Internally Displaced Persons and Disputed Territory," *New England Journal of Public Policy*, no. 2 (2016).

[7] In this paper the term Daesh, the Arabic acronym of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, is used. In this way, one prevents the association of Daesh with a state as well as connotations with its doings as being based on Islam, as outlined by Khan. (Zeba Khan, "Words Matter in 'ISIS' War, so Use 'Daesh'," The Boston Globe, https://www3.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2014/10/09/words-matter-isis-war-use-daesh/V85GYEuasEEJgrUun0dMUP/story.html?arc404=true, 9 October 2014.)

[8] Abbas Kadhim, "Rebuilding Iraq: Prospects and Challenges: Reconstruction in Iraq Cannot Be Achieved Without Universal Reconciliation, Economic and Education Reform, and Equitable Application of the Rule of Law" (2019), https://www.thecairoreview.com/essays/rebuilding-iraq-prospects-and-challenges/.

[9] In this paper Henrard's working definition of "minority" is adopted. A minority is "a population group with ethnic, religious and linguistic characteristics which differ from the rest of the population and is non-dominant, is numerically smaller than the rest of the population and has the wish to hold on to its separate identity." Kristin Henrard, "Devising the Adequate System of Minority Protection in the Area of Language Rights," in *Minority Languages in Europe – Frameworks, Status, Prospects*, 39.

people became internally displaced.[10] Approximately 4.8 million IDPs returned after the cessation of the conflict while around 1.2 million remain in displacement.[11]

The Iraqi government aimed to close all IDP camps by the end of 2020 and thus facilitate the return of the IDPs to their area of origin.[12] According to Koser, the return of displaced populations in various different contexts showed that it "can be an important signifier of peace and the end of conflict, and can play an important part in validating the post-conflict political order."[13] The ability of the IDPs to return symbolizes the capability of the Iraqi state to overcome the destruction caused by Daesh and "the restauration of ordinary life."[14] The return of most IDPs took place outside of organized return programs. It is only in June 2020 that the Iraqi government in cooperation with the International Organization for Migration organized facilitated voluntary returns for IDPs.[15]

A significant number of IDPs returned home to their area of origin. Following the retake of the areas, there were hardly any basic services such as water and electricity. Many hospitals and schools had been destroyed. The infrastructure had been heavily damaged by Daesh, through combat operations or due to the coalition's airstrikes. The Iraqi government estimated the reconstruction costs to be nearly 88 billion USD. In contrast, aid commitments made by the international community during the February 2018 rebuilding conference in Kuwait reached only 30 billion USD, constituting mainly investments, loans, and a few grants. Many of the promised funds were not distributed, as donors were concerned about government corruption and lack of transparency and accountability.[16] The Iraqi government remained absent from the reconstruction phase and hardly distributed the promised compensation for damaged houses by Iraq's Public Distribution System.[17]

The post-Daesh social and infrastructural rebuilding efforts were undertaken in large part by humanitarian stakeholders. One of the organizations providing humanitarian aid is the non-governmental organization Malteser International (MI), the Humanitarian Relief Agency of the Sovereign Order of Malta. Launched in October 2018, MI's Ninewa Return Program (NRP) was aimed at assisting IDPs returning to the Ninewa Plain in four focus areas: (1) house reconstruction, (2) livelihoods, (3) education, and (4) social cohesion and peacebuilding. The geographical focus was on two districts, Al-Hamdaniya and Tel Kaif,[18] as well as Sinjar at the end of the year 2020.[19] MI is known in the Ninewa Plain under the name "fursan Malta," the knights of Malta.[20] The implementation of the projects on the ground took place through MI's partners, which comprise churches and both international and local aid organizations. The program is largely funded by the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development. MI coordinated its activities with UN clusters of Shelter, Livelihood, and Education, local ministries and authorities, faith leaders, and

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[10] *ECHO* "European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations – Iraq," Fact Sheet (2019): 1.

[11] DTM "Iraq." https://dtm.iom.int/iraq (last accessed: March 17, 2021).

[12] International Displacement Monitoring Centre and Norwegian Refugee Council, "Global Report on International Displacement 2020," 33.

[13] Khalid Koser, "Religion and Displacement: Focusing on Solutions" (Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 2015), https://institute.global/policy/religion-and-displacement-focusing-solutions, 3.

[14] Maria-Louise Clausen, "Breaking the Cycle: Iraq Following the Military Defeat of the Islamic State" (DIIS (Danish Institute for International Studies), 2019), 30.

[15] IOM (International Organization for Migration), "Families Displaced by ISIL Conflict Safely Return Home Through Government of Iraq, IOM Project," news release, July 19, 2020.

[16] Kadhim (2019) 65–6.

[17] Bryant (2019) vi.

[18] Malteser International (2019) 1.

[19] Yvonne Dunton, Program Coordinator of the Ninewa Return Program (May 26, 2021).

[20] Ismael Al-Saffar, MI engineer in Erbil, October 2019.

churches.[21] The NRP, which ended in April 2021, constituted the program with the largest budget in the history of MI at a contract volume of 30 million EUR.[22]

The point of departure of this paper are the results of the Ninewa Return Program Survey, a quantitative study commissioned by MI, aimed at identifying the number of rehabilitated houses and the number of returnees. At the date of data collection, by May 2020, 81 percent of the families had returned to their rehabilitated houses and 19 percent had not returned.[23] When looking at the numbers based on the households' ethno-religious identification, one observes that of the 921 Christian households accounted for, 678 have returned and the remaining 242 had not returned. Compared to other ethno-religious groups, the return rate of Christians (at 74%) is smaller than that of other groups, namely Kaka'i, Shabak, and Sunni Arab.[24] Moreover, the survey results indicate that the main reasons for return are "identity with this community/area (geographically)" as well as "religious/cultural identity in this community/area." These reasons seem to be more important than the living situation in displacement or the security, shelter, and income opportunities in the area of origin.

Based on the outlined survey results, this paper seeks to investigate the role religion played in the decision of Christian IDPs to return to their area of origin in the Ninewa Plain, specifically to Baghdeda, the largest Christian town in Iraq. Previous literature dealing with the reasons for IDP return in the Iraqi context highlight a wide spectrum of reasons. The reasons given by IDPs thinking about returning to their area of origin, or by people who already returned, revolve around the attachment to home, security issues, restoring of basic services, and financial considerations. This paper expands the existing literature by examining the role religion and religious belonging played in IDPs' decisions to return to their area of origin, which has previously received little attention. This paper argues that the role of ethno-religious identity is an important factor to consider in the context of Iraq, which has been marked by sectarian tensions, attacks against minority populations, demographic change, and, more recently, the closing up of communities due to mistrust toward people of other ethno-religious groups and safety concerns. The analysis presented in this paper shows that: (1) Support from and trust in their religious community, institution, and clergy encouraged Christian IDPs to return to Baghdeda; (2) the fact that Baghdeda is still a majoritarian Christian town made the decision to return easier; and (3) Christian IDPs are worried about the extinction of their religion in Iraq, but nonetheless in light of the difficult living conditions many intend to leave the country should the opportunity arise. Overall, these religious factors seem to play an important role. However, they influence the decision to return in conjunction with several other factors, such as economic opportunities, reconstruction of housing and infrastructure as well as political stability and security. The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 provides information about Iraqi society, which is characterized by a unique social mosaic composed of various ethno-religious groups. The literature review in Section 3 presents an overview of the relevant literature and reports on prominent reasons for the return of IDPs in the Iraqi context. Section 4 outlines the methodology of this research. The reasons for the return of Christian IDPs to Baghdeda are analyzed and discussed in Sections 5 and 6, respectively. Finally, the last section summarizes the results and highlights recommended measures to be taken in order to support the returnees who wish to remain in Baghdeda.

2   Brief Overview: Demographics of Iraq and Ethno-religious Belonging[25]

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[21] Malteser International – Ninewa Return Program in Iraq (2018) under "Our Measures for Creating Future Prospects."

[22] Stefan Pleisnitzer, MI headquarters in Cologne, October 2019.

[23] Philipp Öhlmann, "Ninewa Return Programme Survey: Analysis Report" (commissioned by Malteser International, 2021), 8. The total percentage number is constituted by 1,985 families, from which 1,606 returned and 379 did not.

[24] Ibid. 9.

[25] Some parts of this section have been adapted from my master's thesis, "The Humanitarian Mandate versus Minority Protection. A Reconcilable Dilemma? The Example of Malteser International's Ninewa Return Programme," August 2020.

Iraq is characterized by "a delicate and beautiful cultural, religious and social mosaic"[26] that is formed by the existence of various religions and ethnicities in the country.[27] Identity in Iraq is predominantly defined through primordial categories—family ties, clan affiliation, religious and ethnic belonging.[28] Based on estimations, around 95 percent of Iraqis are Muslim; among them, 65 percent are Shi'a and 35 percent Sunni Muslims. The remaining five percent belong to other religions,[29] whereby Christians constitute roughly three percent of the population.[30] Christians have a long history in Iraq. Iraqi Christians are the oldest Christian communities in the Orient.[31] Christianity in Iraq can be traced back to the first century in the area of today's Ninewa, as is illustrated through the region's remaining churches, sanctums, and monasteries, such as Mar Mattai.[32]

Christianity in the Middle East can be classified into five branches: the Church of the East, Oriental Orthodox Churches, Eastern Orthodox Churches, Roman Catholic and Eastern Rite Catholic Churches, and Protestant Churches.[33] In the year 2000, 34 Christian denominations were counted in Iraq.[34] The majority of Iraqi Christians are Chaldean, Assyrian, or Syriac, and speak different dialectal variations of Aramaic. Some Iraqi Christians do not identify as Arab but rather consider themselves a distinct ethnic group.[35] According to estimations, 50 percent of Iraqi Christians have left the country since 2003.[36] Today it is estimated that a remaining 200,000 to 500,000 Christians reside in Iraq,[37] mostly living in Mosul, the Ninewa Plain, Baghdad, Kirkuk, Basra, and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).[38] Louis Raphaël I Sako, the Patriarch of the Chaldean Church of Babylon, and others view the soul of Christians from the Orient as inextricably bound to its soil. Leaving their place of origin in the Orient would mean that they become deracinated, disoriented, and deprived of their identity.[39]

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[26] Mokhtar Lamani, "Minorities in Iraq. The Other Victims" (CIGI Special Report, The Centre for International Governance Innovation, 2009): 3.

[27] "Iraq's New Reality: The Impact of Conflict on Minorities, Refugees, and the Internally Displaced" (Stimson Centre and The Centre for International Governance Innovation, 2009): 2.

[28] Elizabeth Picard, "Conclusion: Nation-Building and Minority Rights in the Middle East," in *Religious Minorities in the Middle East: Domination, Self-Empowerment, Accommodation*, ed. Anh N. Longva and Anne S. Roald (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2012): 332.

[29] World Population Review (2020).

[30] Phebe Marr and Ibrahim Al-Marashi, *The Modern History of Iraq* (New York: Routledge, 2018): 14. The percentages cited in this paper represent merely estimations, as the last official Iraqi census was conducted in 1987.

[31] Wolfgang G. Lerch, "Zeugen Uralter Kulturen, Christen Im Irak Und in Syrien," Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, https://www.bpb.de/apuz/31143/zeugen-uralter-kulturen-christen-im-irak-und-in-syrien. The term "Orient" in this paper is adapted from the original sources and is used to indicate a geographical area.

[32] Joseph Yacoub, "Ninive endeuillée. Un des berceaux de la Chrétienté," *Revue d'éthique et de la théologie morale*, no. 282 (2014/5): 106–11.

[33] Paul S. Rowe, "Introduction: Reclaiming 'Minorities' in the Middle East," in *Routledge Handbook of Minorities in the Middle East*, ed. Paul S. Rowe (New York: Routledge, 2019), 9–11.

[34] Hannelore Müller, *Religionen in Nahen Osten. Band 1: Irak, Jordanien, Syrien, Libanon* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2009), 77.

[35] "No Way Home: Iraq's Minorities on the Verge of Disappearance" (Institute for International Law and Human Rights, Minority Rights Group International, No Peace Without Justice and Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation, 2016): 10.

[36] Shak Hanish, "Christians, Yazidis, and Mandaeans in Iraq – a Survival Issue," *Digest of the Middle East Studies* 18 (2009): 10.

[37] Khogir Wirya and Linda Fawaz, "The Christians – Perceptions of Reconciliation and Conflict" (Middle East Research Institute, 2017): 5.

[38] "Crossroads: The Future of Iraq's Minorities After ISIS" (Institute for International Law and Human Right, Minority Rights Group International, No Peace Without Justice and Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation, 2017): 9.

[39] David Villeneuve, "Chrétiens d'Orient: Perspectives vues de l'Orient," *Laval théologique et philosophique* 72, no. 3 (2016): 516.

The Ninewa Plain, which is located in the north and east of Mosul, is considered the cradle of Christianity in Iraq.[40] Some parts of the Ninewa Plain are disputed territories, claimed by both the KRI and the Government of Iraq.[41] Baghdeda lies in the Ninewa Plain in the district of Al-Hamdaniya and is administered by the Government of Iraq.[42] Baghdeda is also known under the names Qaraqosh and Al-Hamdaniya. According to Sworesho, Baghdeda is the name commonly used by the inhabitants themselves, while the latter two are "name[s] that foreigners have historically given the city."[43] Baghdeda was and still is the largest Christian city in Iraq, counting more than fifty thousand inhabitants before the emergence of Daesh.[44] The majority of Baghdeda's inhabitants are Christians from different denominations, mostly Assyrian, Chaldean, and Syriac, in addition to Shabak and different Kurdish and Arab minorities.[45]

3   Literature Review: Current Studies on Return Decisions of IDPs in Iraq

Studies by NGOs and institutions focussing on displacement issues deal with some of the factors influencing IDPs' decisions to return or remain in displacement in the Iraqi context (e.g., safety and security; housing, land, and property; assistance and compensation; living conditions and livelihoods). Furthermore, the literature deals with social cohesion and peacebuilding, analyzing the social relationships between different ethno-religious groups in post-Daesh Iraq, and how these can be re-established and fostered. However, the link between ethno-religious identity and how it influences the decision of IDPs to return remains widely unstudied.

According to an International Organization for Migration study from 2019, the factors influencing Christian IDPs' decisions to return to their area of origin include: missing home (91%), "people I know returned" (71%), improvement of the safety in the area of origin (56%), joining family members who have returned (47%), community and/or religious leaders encouraged return (47%), lower living costs in area of origin (40%), public services improved in the area of origin (26%), and the possibility to work or create economic opportunities in the area of origin (17%).[46] Compared to other ethno-religious groups, the encouragement of return by religious leaders only played an important role for the Christian IDPs.[47] The study also looks into the different factors in the area of displacement that played a role in IDPs' decisions to return to their area of origin. In the case of Christian IDPs, the four most mentioned factors are: the host community speaks a language different from their own (26%), no financial means to stay in displacement (19%), efforts made by authorities to encourage return (19%), and lack of work opportunities (13%).[48] In addition to this,

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[40] David Villeneuve, "Enquêter auprès des Chrétiens d'Irak: Considérations méthodologiques sur un terrain en 'millieu difficile'," *Carnets de géographes*, no. 11 (2018): 6, DOI 10.4000/cdg.1638.

[41] Crispin M. Smith and Vartan Shadarevian, "Wilting in the Kurdish Sun: The Hopes and Fears of Religious Minorities in Northern Iraq" (USCIRF, 2017): 3.

[42] Nineb Lamassu, "Connectors and Dividers Report" (Un ponte per, 2020), Introduction III.

[43] Evon Sworesho, "Baghdeda, Qaraqosh, Al-Hamdaniya: Three Names for One Assyrian City" (2021), https://providencemag.com/2021/03/baghdeda-qaraqosh-al-hamdaniya-three-names-one-assyrian-city/.

[44] Eliza Grizwold, "Is This the End of Christianity in the Middle East?," *The New York Times Magazine*, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/26/magazine/is-this-the-end-of-christianity-in-the-middle-east.html.

[45] Erica Gaston, "Iraq After ISIL, Hamdaniya District" (GPPi (Global Public Policy Institute), 2017), 2.

[46] Based on a sample of 703 returnees. The indicated percentages represent the very strong and strong answers combined. "Understanding Ethno-Religious Groups in Iraq: Displacement and Return" (IOM (International Organization for Migration), 2019), 20.

[47] Ibid. 22. The role of the encouragement of community and/or religious leaders for the decision of IDPs to return based on their ethno-religious belonging is as follows: Christians: 47%, Shabak Shia: 15%, Turkmen Shia: 26%, and Ezidis 4%.

[48] IOM (International Organization for Migration), "Understanding Ethno-religious Groups in Iraq: Displacement and Return" 22–23. The four most mentioned factors irrespective of the ethno-religious belonging are: no financial means to stay in displacement, difficulties to adapt to the new environment, lack of work opportunities, and efforts made by authorities to encourage returns.

factors that increased the likelihood of Christian IDPs returning are property ownership, the level of identification with their ethno-religious group, and the influence of other people's actions.[49]

A case study conducted by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre and the Norwegian Refugee Council in 2018 thematized the motivational factors for return. This study does not look at reasons of return for IDPs as a distinct group, however, since it also includes refugees. Their findings indicate that, while usually a main reason given for return is the desire for increased security, homesickness is a primary motivation. The second most important reason for return concerns the presence of difficult conditions in the area of displacement. The third reason given by the IDPs and refugees is the improved security situation, which was however mentioned by only one-fifth of the IDPs. The fourth most common reason for return is to regain a livelihood.[50]

A joint study between the Danish Refugee Council, the International Rescue Committee, and the Norwegian Refugee Council examined the obstacles IDPs living in camps in Anbar face when it comes to return. The reasons given by IDPs for their planned return were: the emotional obligation to return; the stable security situation in the area of origin; the necessity to secure personal housing, land, and property; and the presence of basic services.[51] According to Khedir, ethno-religious minorities in Iraq are uncertain about their future, which makes their decision to return more complicated than for majority group members. He also refers to a corpus of literature indicating that a return to an area where one's own ethnic group is the majority is regarded as safer, and thus desirable.[52]

The literature review shows that the reasons for return of Iraqi IDPs are multifaceted. There are reoccurring clusters around the aspects of homesickness, the security situation in the area of origin, as well as livelihood opportunities. Furthermore, the encouragement by community and religious leaders, the emotional obligation to return, and the return of other people have been factors influencing return decisions for Iraqi IDPs. This leads to the assumption that the role of ethno-religious belonging or the belonging to a specific geographical area play an important role in the return decision. This paper thus aims to provide an in-depth analysis of the role religion and religious identity play in the return decision of Christian IDPs to the city of Baghdeda.

4   Methodology

This study is based on 15 semi-structured narrative interviews conducted between October 2020 and February 2021 in Arabic, and recorded with the consent of the interviewee. Interviews were conducted by the author via different phone and telecommunication applications, as the Covid-19 pandemic did not allow in-person interviews. The interviewees were randomly selected from a list of around 200 previous MI beneficiaries of the housing reconstruction aid in Baghdeda. Prospective interviewees were sent an introductory message in which the researcher introduced herself and the research briefly, followed by the detailed study information, and asking them whether they would like to take part by participating in an interview in which they would share their personal experiences and views.

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[49] Ibid. 37.

[50] "Nowhere to Return to: Iraqis' Search for Durable Solutions Continues" (International Displacement Monitoring Centre and Norwegian Refugee Council, 2018), 22–3.

[51] "The Long Road Home: Achieving Durable Solutions to Displacement in Iraq: Lessons from Returns in Anbar" (Norwegian Refugee Council, Danish Refugee Council and International Rescue Committee, 2018), 19.

[52] Hewa H. Khedir, "IDPs in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI): Intractable Return and Absence of Social Integration Policy," 2020, 8.

Through this procedure, the author was able to make contact with ten study participants who agreed to semi-structured interviews. Another participant the author reached out to sent written answers because he explained that he could not conduct an interview via the phone or messaging applications for personal reasons. Three further interviews were conducted with staff members or local partners of MI, namely Tharaa A. Simaan, Ahmed Rifat, and Father George. One additional interview contact was provided by the colleague of the author Serri (Sura) Mahmood who provided the contact of a former colleague, Najwa Abdallah.

The interviewees, hence, included a religious leader, a lawyer (and activist), two local MI employees (one of whom is from Baghdeda), an NGO employee, and ten MI beneficiaries. All 14 interviewees from Baghdeda (five women and nine men) are Christians from different denominations. The study information stated that the participation in an interview would not influence or ameliorate the situation of the interviewee in terms of humanitarian aid. This aspect was pointed out at the beginning of each interview. Of the 15 respondents, ten consented to be mentioned by name in the paper (some only by referring to their first name), while five preferred to remain anonymous. As such, they are mentioned anonymously in the following as Interview Partners (IP). Some information about the respondents is mentioned in a footnote at the first reference of their name or pseudonym.

Speaking the Lebanese dialect and sketching out my biography when introducing myself, it became clear to my interview partners that I am an "outsider." Yet being of Lebanese descent and based in Germany seemed to have reassured my interview partners; they opened up to me, shared very personal details, and in a way felt responsible to explain context-specific aspects, sometimes even by making comparisons to the Lebanese context. My knowledge of Iraq stemmed from my preparations and fieldwork done in Iraqi Kurdistan in October 2020. This experience allowed me to expand my knowledge about the area and gain firsthand insight into the field of humanitarian aid.

The interviews were transcribed and then coded using the software program MAXQDA in order to structure and reduce the data set. The category composition was done in both an inductive and deductive manner. A list of codes was compiled before starting the coding process and then complemented by new codes created throughout the coding process. This resulted in 1,056 codes, noting that one code can be assigned to multiple categories. The qualitative analysis was done using content analysis.[53] For this it was necessary to conduct a detailed analysis of specific codes relevant to answering the research question. The aim was to depict the multitude of views and experiences of interviewees, as well as to quantify some of the findings.

5   Analysis of the Reasons for Return to Baghdeda

In this section of the paper, the displacement from Baghdeda is outlined followed by an analysis of the reasons given by the interviewees for their return to their area of origins. The interviews were coded guided by Mayring's summarizing content analysis. The codes were sorted chronologically in order to map the time before, during, and after displacement, as the factors motivating the return of the Christian IDPs are individual and to some extent also situational.

The analysis of the reasons is clustered around the subchapters. Moreover, the situation upon return is outlined and the immigration aspirations are discussed.

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[53] Philipp Mayring, *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse: Grundlagen und Techniken*, 11th updated and revised edition (Weinheim: Beltz Verlag, 2010).

5.1 The Displacement from Baghdeda

The inhabitants of Baghdeda endured displacement two times due to Daesh.[54] According to Father George, the first displacement lasted three days to one week and was caused by Daesh seizing Mosul and the fear of the approximate war.[55] Atheer Marcus recalled that the second displacement came rather unexpectedly, after Masoud Barzani, the President of Iraqi Kurdistan at that time, had promised Patriarch Sako of Babylon that the Peshmerga would protect the city.[56] Instead, the Peshmerga withdrew when the shelling started, which left the inhabitants of Baghdeda with no other choice than to flee. The fate of many of the people who did not leave the city that day remains unclear.[57] The events which took place on August 6, 2014, marked the beginning of the second displacement[58] and ended after the town was recovered from Daesh in October 2016.[59] The unexpectedness of the second displacement and the assumption that it would be like the first displacement (i.e., only persisting a few days) led the inhabitants of Baghdeda to leave everything behind when fleeing.[60]

All respondents indicated that they were displaced to Ainkawa, the Christian district of Erbil, KRI. Four of the interview respondents moved from Ainkawa to other cities in KRI at different moments in displacement and for various reasons, including high living expenses or finding a job outside of Erbil. Diyaa Kaju explained that most of the families from Baghdeda moved to Ainkawa taking into account that it is a Christian area, because "in such times people are forced to resort to sectarian and religious belonging and the national belonging falls."[61] For Christian IDPs, for example, being displaced in a majoritarian Christian area seems to convey a feeling of security, although people still tend to feel like "strangers" living outside their own area, as Atheer Marcus explained.[62]

After the retake of Baghdeda from Daesh, a number of IDPs decided to return. The return however did not happen promptly; some of the reasons for that were the destruction of the infrastructure, the area being unfit for living, fear of the existence of explosive remnants in the houses, and the lack of hospitals and schools.[63] In the following, the reasons for return will be presented and discussed.

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[54] Father George: Syriac Catholic priest and head of LRC in Baghdeda.

[55] Father George. He explains that the reasons for their fear is that it was the first time they experienced an immediate war, whereas the Iran and the Gulf Wars were far away.

[56] Atheer Marcus: female, born in the 1980s, married and has two children, is currently not working. The Peshmerga is the Kurdish army of KRI and counts with its 200,000 well-trained soldiers as the best in Iraq. The Peshmerga received military support and arms supply from the US and Iran in their fight against Daesh. (Carolyn Höfchen, "Wer sind die Peshmerga," Arte, https://info.arte.tv/de/wer-sind-die-peschmerga).

[57] Interview partner 12: male, born in the 1960s, unemployed at the date of the interview, his sons have jobs.

[58] Atheer Marcus

[59] Gaston, "Iraq after ISIL, Hamdaniya District," 6.

[60] Najwa Abdallah: female, has a university degree, works for a local NGO, married and has a child.

[61] Diyaa Kaju: male, born in the 1970s, engineer, teaches at the university.

[62] Atheer Marcus

[63] Najwa Abdallah

5.2 The Situation in Displacement

The displacement period is in general described as "difficult and humiliating to a certain extent,"[64] "with the displacement the suffering started,"[65] and a "tragedy."[66] This is especially due to the shelter situation, the high living expenses, not having a source of income, and the difficulties of finding a job in Ainkawa. The time spent in displacement varied; the respondents indicated a time period of three to five years.

Due to the sudden influx of IDPs arriving in Ainkawa, some of the new arrivals had to live and sleep on the pavement or in churches, public gardens, festival halls, and buildings under construction.[67] After about one year, NGOs, churches, and private donors financed the establishment of camps made out of tents or caravans.[68] Families renting accommodation received financial support from the church as a contribution to the rental costs.[69] Nevertheless, in order to reduce the cost of rent it was common for several families to share one apartment so as to be able to afford housing.[70]

Three respondents said that they had a job in displacement. The remaining interviewees did not have a source of income during displacement and faced difficulties due to the high cost of living in Erbil. IDPs received aid from the church, charitable organizations, and donors from outside of Iraq.[71] Besides the aforementioned shelter aid, there was also aid in the form of food supplies, small sums of cash for groceries, blankets, mattresses, and other kinds of basic goods.[72] It is striking that most respondents mentioned the church as a provider of aid during displacement, though they seem to be unaware of the involvement of NGOs being the back donors of a portion of the aid provided by the church. Five of the respondents indicated that the help was also coming from NGOs, with one stating that "NGOs provided aid, but I don't know whether these NGOs belonged to the church or not,"[73] but another respondent indicated that the NGOs did not provide any help during displacement.[74] Only one respondent referred to the government in this matter, saying that it did not provide any help[75] and emphasizing that, without the church, the people would not have been able to live in displacement.[76]

The housing situation and the high living expenses in Ainkawa were factors that contributed to IDPs' decisions to return after their town was retaken from Daesh. "Many were living in rent in Erbil, like us, and this was one of the reasons for return,"[77] Tharaa A. Simaan explained. IP10 for example did not want to return to Baghdeda, but he returned with his children because they were living in a caravan camp that he describes as "unsuitable for living."[78] He mentioned further reasons for his return, which are the absence of schools, financial support, and work in Erbil, as well as the aid focus on the provision of food supplies.[79] IP6 said that the schools in Baghdeda started opening after three years of displacement and in

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[64] Andy: male, student.
[65] Marwan Boutros: male, lawyer and rights activist, was involved in the establishment of the LRC in Baghdeda, married, father, insists on remaining in Baghdeda.
[66] Ikhlas Mikho
[67] Andy
[68] Diyaa Kaju and Najwa Abdallah
[69] Interview partner 10: male, father of two teenagers, his wife died in displacement because of an illness.
[70] Najwa Abdallah
[71] Father George
[72] Najwa Abdallah
[73] Interview partner 10
[74] Atheer Marcus
[75] Interview partner 12
[76] Ibid.
[77] Tharaa A. Simaan
[78] Interview partner 10
[79] Ibid.

order for her two children to continue schooling, they were "forced to return." She explained that her children did not have the opportunity to complete their schooling in Erbil. However, her children were determined to finish school, and that was only possible in Baghdeda according to IP6.[80]

5.3 Encouragement by Religious Leaders

The church and clergy played an important role during displacement by providing aid and support to the Christian IDPs. They were considered as a crucial and reliable source of information for the IDPs, as the following quotation illustrates: "[…] people were following the news through newspaper, TV, and so on and especially through the church and they were planning their future based on that."[81] Furthermore, the religious leaders were the first ones to return to the area.[82]

Father George explained that return is "[…] a historical responsibility because we are the original inhabitants in this country and our numbers are shrinking. The Christians play a role in giving this country a testimony, not only religious or related to faith only but also a testimony in humanity and loyalty […]"[83] The Christian IDPs were encouraged to return at different occasions, for instance during the preaching and counselling.[84] Father George argued that the church worked on encouraging the people to return and stay by "morally guiding them toward the connection and loyalty to this land and continuing our message in this land and, practically, the church was oriented toward reconstructing."[85] The involvement of the church in the reconstruction work and how it influenced IDPs' return decisions will be explained in the next section.

Seven of the returnees mentioned the encouragement they received by the church and clergy to return. However most of them stressed that their decision to return was a personal one, which is exemplified by Tharaa A. Simaan's statement: "We rely on the religious leaders, however we do whatever we find good."[86] As many IDPs did not have any trust in the state or state institutions, it is only through their absolute confidence in the church that they had hopes for return.[87] Ahmed Rifat explained that IDPs might say that their decision to return is a personal one. He argues that, in reality, it was influenced by the trust and respect they have toward the clergy, whose views and demands they tend to hear. He believed that religious leaders played a partial role but not the most important role in the return.[88] This suggests that the encouragement by the clergy and church played a role in the IDPs' decisions to return, however there were also other considerations that they took into account when making the decision.

The idea of returning to the "fatherland" came up multiple times during the interviews. Father George named the connection to the land as the reason for return. As he put it, "the motivation for return was this land which we inherited from our forebears; it is our obligation to be faithful to it and to rebuild it despite of all the challenges, difficulties, and messages of demoralization."[89] Safaa Bahnam, for instance, mentioned the return "to our area, the area of our fathers and forebears."[90] IP3 also referred to the

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[80] Interview partner 6: female, 45 years old, widow, mother of two, relies on the financial support of her father.
[81] Father George
[82] Interview partner 12
[83] Father George
[84] Ibid.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Tharaa A. Simaan: female, has a university degree, monitoring and evaluation officer at MI.
[87] Marwan Boutros
[88] Ahmed Rifat: male, not from Baghdeda, Monitoring and Evaluation Coordinator at MI.
[89] Father George
[90] Safaa Bahnam: male, born in the 1960s, married, father of four, employed outside of Baghdeda.

church's encouragement to return and not to abandon "our lands," although he expressed that "I am not convinced with the idea of the land and the land of our forebears because what's the point in returning to our land and the land of our forebears if I am not comfortable?"[91] According to Ahmed Rifat, this feeling of belonging to the fatherland expressed by Christians from Baghdeda is also known to Iraqis from other ethno-religious groups and areas of the country. He explained that it is not easy for Christians to leave Baghdeda because of "the[ir] sense of national, ethnic, religious belonging and belonging to their area and the area of their forebears."[92] Furthermore, some respondents referred to themselves as the "the original inhabitants of the area"[93] to emphasize their rootedness in and connection to Baghdeda.

Apart from referring to the idea of the fatherland or being the original inhabitants, the interviewees expressed their connectedness to Baghdeda by referring to it as the place where they grew up and where their friends and family are, as shown in the following quote: "Qaraqosh is my area and my place of birth, in it are my family and relatives."[94] Furthermore, some expressed not imagining living somewhere else once Baghdeda was retaken from Daesh, like IP12, who explained that, "It is impossible to live in another area when our area has been liberated."[95] Moreover, Baghdeda is home to specific traditions, as Marwan Boutros pointed out: "Religion is present in us in any place on earth, but there are aspects of tradition and custom, relationships and social fabric which you don't find anywhere else."[96]

Father George explained that "the church is considered the prime and last sanctuary, like the mother. The mother does not leave her children […] and as an institution there is a role for the archbishop, bishops, priests, and nuns."[97] He went further to say that the mother took care of her children in different ways so that they remain in this land. He saw the church at the forefront defending the rights of the people and pushing the government to work toward the persistence of the people.[98]

Concerning the return of IDPs, the church had from the beginning a role in advocating for the return of all the people that continues to this day.[99] IP12 was convinced that without the role of the church "we would not have returned."[100] He added that, "The faith in Baghdeda is strong and the people love the church."[101] However, this positive picture of the church or clergy did not resonate with all the respondents. IP10 criticized the intermingling of politics and religion where decision-making is influenced, for example, by the archbishop—a cleric viewed as if he is a minister (meaning that everything has to go through him).[102] As IP10 explained, "The archbishop, who is responsible for the area from a religious way, did not allow NGOs to work except through the church."[103] He recounted that an NGO wanted to build a health center in Baghdeda, however the archbishop did not agree and did not allow the NGO to work because it did not

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91 Interview partner 3: male, born in the 1970s, employed.
92 Ahmed Rifat
93 Interview partner 12
94 Ikhlas Mikho: female, born in the 1960s, widowed, mother of five, lost her job due to the Covid pandemic.
95 Interview partner 12
96 Marwan Boutros
97 Father George
98 Ibid.
99 Ibid.
100 Interview partner 12
101 Ibid.
102 Interview partner 10
103 ibid. However, Yvonne Dunton explained in a written statement of 26 May 2021 that Malteser International conducted activities in the area through partner NGOs which did not involve the church.

come through the church. According to him, many NGOs left after the refusal of the archbishop,[104] whose only interest according to Adan is "unfortunately, money."[105]

The respondents' views about the representative role of the clergy were divided. Najwa Abdallah expressed that "the church and religious leaders […] made our voices heard to foreign countries,"[106] whereas Ikhlas Mikho said that "the religious leaders do not help anyone […] because the religious leaders and the government do not look at the citizens and their needs."[107] The feeling of not being seen, heard, or represented by the clergy was mentioned by two other respondents. IP10's statements went in the same direction as Ikhlas Mikhos', by stating that the religious leaders "were our role models and strengths,"[108] which however changed after the displacement. Moreover, Ikhlas Mikhos and IP10 expressed being disappointed by the church and religious leaders. Diyaa Kaju opposed the idea of being represented by the church or archbishop, and explains that

> *The sectarianists want us Christians to be caught in this narrow framework because our numbers are small […] they limit us to the representation by the archbishop or priest. I don't want to be represented by a priest or archbishop, not because of hate but I don't want to be limited to the sectarian framework because it's a trap that will end the Christians completely. The clergy love this trap, and in my personal opinion the clergy should refuse and refrain from politics because politics corrupts the clergy.[109]*

5.4 Reconstruction Aid as Motivation to Return

Due to the large scale of destruction, the need for aid, especially for housing reconstruction, was high. Many returnees were dependent on the aid provided by multiple stakeholders. The aid that was arriving to Baghdeda and its inhabitants had to go through the church institutions. The church established, for example, the Local Reconstruction Committees (LRCs) to initiate and lead the reconstruction phase and to collect funds for that purpose. The LRCs were one of MI's partners in the housing reconstruction. After the Ninewa Plain was retaken from Daesh, each church initiated its own LRC headed by a priest. The LRCs documented the house damages and set up a database comprising the collected information.

Before MI partnered with LRCs, the latter were already involved in house reconstructions. The LRCs did the assessments and identified the needs and the number of people who wanted to return. LRCs did all this aspiring to obtain funding. Working with LRCs provided MI with a network which allowed them an immediate implementation[110] Christian IDPs were informed about the formation of the LRCs and the reconstruction aid it would provide upon return. Tharaa A. Simaan remembered that, after the church established the LRC, many people were encouraged to return; the LRC opened an office and many registered. Plans were made, the funding started to arrive from NGOs, and that was one of the biggest motivations for return.[111] She added that some IDPs believed that with the start of housing reconstruction they might find employment in Baghdeda.[112]

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[104] Ibid.
[105] Ibid.
[106] Najwa Abdallah
[107] Ikhlas Mikho
[108] Interview partner 10
[109] Diyaa Kaju
[110] Nora Monzer, "The Humanitarian Mandate versus Minority Protection. A Reconcilable Dilemma? The Example of Malteser International's Ninewa Return Programme" (master's thesis, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, August 3, 2020), 35.
[111] Tharaa A. Simaan
[112] Ibid.

For some of the interviewees, the provision of help was a crucial factor in their decision to return. This was true in the case of IP3, who remarked, "The aid by the church arrived [...] and this is why I returned and rebuilt my family's house."[113] Najwa Abdallah affirmed that any person who sees an opportunity to rebuild his/her house most often returns instead of leaving it destroyed.[114] However, the aid volume was less than what the returnees expected. IP10 believes that if IDPs had known about the small financial aid they would receive for the home reconstruction, they would not have returned.[115] Diyaa Kaju described the financial aid as being appropriate in the beginning but decreasing with time due to shrinking funds. For instance, he received from the LRC half of the sum he spent on his house, which he considered "better than nothing."[116] Three interviewees indicated that the financial aid for reconstruction they received was insufficient and they had to borrow money in order to cover the costs of the house rehabilitation. For example IP6 said that sums provided by NGOs "were very low."[117] She received 8,000 USD to rebuild her burned house. However, that sum was not sufficient, and she had to borrow 13 million IQD (roughly 8,900 USD) in order to rebuild her house.[118] In addition to that, four interviewees noted that once the house was rehabilitated, the next obstacle was the question of how to get furniture, as no aid was provided in that matter.

Two interviewees alluded to the voluntariness of the return. Andy indicated that the return was not completely voluntary, stating, "Everyone knows that the displacement was involuntary but [what] most of them don't know is that the return was also involuntary."[119] He explained that in the camps and Christian neighborhoods for IDPs, the water and electricity provisions stopped and the schools, health facilities, and prayer houses were closed to force them to return.[120] This differed with what Safaa Bahnam related: "The church did not force anyone to return but the faith-based organizations provided help for the reconstruction of houses to anyone who wanted to return."[121] Other respondents' expressions raised the question whether returnees were fully convinced by the return, since it seems like some only returned to escape a difficult situation in displacement. This is drawn from expressions in line with the following two statements. Najwa Abdallah said that some of the people whose houses were burned returned on the basis that NGOs would help them with housing rehabilitation because they were financially exhausted from paying rent in Erbil.[122] Safaa Bahnam argued that some people who were struggling financially due to lack of work returned, and their houses were rehabilitated in an acceptable manner.[123]

From the interview responses it materializes that the provision of aid for housing reconstruction was a motivational factor for return. However, one respondent interpreted the announcement of certain aid types as having lured the people into returning. Andy explained that certain stakeholders promised monthly allowances for the first 100 to 300 families returning, but this did not happen.[124] This feeling of having been lured into something might also have come up because, as IP10 claims, after three years there were still many people who had not received payments from the LRC.[125]

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[113] Interview partner 3
[114] Najwa Abdallah
[115] Interview partner 10
[116] Diyaa Kaju
[117] Interview partner 6
[118] Ibid. Interview partner 6 pleads NGOs to help those who borrowed money to rebuild their houses to repay their debts.
[119] Andy
[120] Ibid.
[121] Safaa Bahnam
[122] Najwa Abdallah
[123] Safaa Bahnam
[124] Andy
[125] Interview partner 10

Some respondents felt that there was inequality or favoritism when it came to the provision of help through the church, LRCs, or NGOs. IP10 lamented that inequality is a big problem that frustrates many:[126] "For example, my house was burned [and] they gave me 50, and someone else did not deserve 50 but they gave him 70 or 80; there is no equality and the dysfunction lies in the employees in Baghdeda."[127] Ahmed Rifat said that he received isolated complaints about nepotism and corruption in LRCs and spoke about that with the LRC heads. He assumes that they were not successful at explaining the beneficiary selection criteria correctly, which makes people feel that there is no equality in the provision of help.[128]

According to Father George, at the time of data collection, around 55% of the town had been rebuilt, thanks to the aid from foreign countries. Even if there are still traces of the destruction and burning, the rebuilding has not only improved the appearance of the city, but also made a huge difference in people's well-being.[129] Moreover, he emphasized that all of Baghdeda's components— state, religion, and citizens—had a big role in the reconstruction. The reconstruction of Baghdeda is an example to all the surrounding cities, as it is the first city to be reconstructed in such a way and speed; it symbolizes both the return and belief in the return.[130] A survey of the Ninewa Reconstruction Committee, the umbrella organization of all LRCs, shows that 43.7% of Baghdeda's inhabitants returned.[131] Due to the coronavirus pandemic, the reconstruction efforts were however stagnating. Father George indicated that the church is helping within its capabilities. Moreover, he hoped that donors will give hope to the people by providing shelter for them, especially for those who want to return or to new families and young people.[132]

Although the IDPs decided to return, they were concerned about different issues in their area of origin. During the interviews they voiced their worries about how a life would be possible due to the scale of destruction and not knowing whether jobs, schools, hospitals, and basic services will be available. Moreover, the security situation in Baghdeda was one of the most important factors IDPs considered when thinking about a return, especially as "[they] were afraid that anything would lead to displacement again because people cannot stand to go through the same situation one more time."[133] The provision of aid in the housing sector alone is not enough, "as work is needed or you cannot live."[134]

5.5 Religious Rituals, Practices, and Symbols

The churches in Baghdeda were burned[135] and church towers destroyed.[136] Father George retells that "especially the young people would search for the bell and ring it as if it was a sign of their return."[137] He added that he visited the Al-Tahira Church during his first visit to the town, describing the sight of the demolished church as saddening and it appearing to be an act of revenge as well as a message that the

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[126] Ibid.
[127] Ibid.
[128] Ahmed Rifat
[129] Father George
[130] Ibid.
[131] The data updated on January 12, 2021, indicates that 43.7% of Baghdeda's inhabitants, namely 24,300 people, returned. "Qaraqosh/Bakhdida – Restauration Process and Returnees," Ninewa Reconstruction Committee, https://www.nrciraq.org /reconstruction-process/karakosh-bakhdida-restoration-process-and-returnees/.
[132] Father George
[133] Najwa Abdallah
[134] Interview partner 10
[135] Father George
[136] Ikhlas Mikho
[137] Father George

Christians should not remain on this land.[138] He further explained that the church is an important symbol for "Oriental Christians" as "we can pray anywhere but it is an important geographical symbol especially if in it is a fingerprint of our fathers and grandfathers. For that reason we are attached to it so much."[139] This is reflective of what he said to the Al-Tahira Church: "Like our forebears insisted to build you, today your children will insist to give you a new beauty."[140] Notwithstanding the symbolism of the church, the archbishop decided that the houses of the returnees would be rebuilt first and the churches last, as he considers suitable shelter as important for human beings and, besides, the prayer can be done in any circumstances and place.[141] This is why the reconstruction of the churches started only at a later stage. The Church of Sarah and Behnam for example was completely burned. After a cleaning campaign, the black scorch marks were still there but it was suitable for festivities and gatherings. Father George recounted that people would not look at the scorch marks and destruction when they were praying. The state of the church remained this way until the start of its rehabilitation one and a half years later.[142] One of the interviewees said that she believed that the churches should not have been rebuilt, instead "they should be left the way they are as documentation for the international community."[143]

The sight of the defiled religious symbols and buildings was mentioned by some of the interviewees. Ikhlas Mikho, for example, recounted with sadness finding the picture of Christ that was usually hanging in front of her house, perforated by gun shots upon her return.[144] Religious symbols and practices are of importance to the inhabitants of Baghdeda. This is why, when funds started to arrive, religious symbols that "touch people's souls"[145] were rebuilt. Moreover, shortly after the retake of the Daesh-occupied territories, the church started the mass and people would come from their place of displacement only to join the service and then return. This action, Marwan Boutros said, helped to break the cycle of fear of coming to the area.[146] Four respondents indicated that the resumption of daily religious services encouraged or was an important factor for the return. Moreover, Marwan Boutros described the presence of the church and mass as giving a "motivation for life."[147] The importance of the presence of religious symbols and practices in Baghdeda can be linked to what Diyaa Kaju said about the significance of religion for Middle Eastern communities. He explained that religion does not have an importance to him anymore, but:

> *Religion is very important to our communities in the region. Religion is a part of culture and civilization which we hold on to, and we the Assyrians are majoritarian Christian […] in Iraq […]. So religion is part of the existence of the human being, and this can be a direct or indirect reason for the return.[148]*

5.6 Returning to a Christian Majoritarian Town

An important precondition of the return of four respondents to Baghdeda is the fact that it was, and still is, a majoritarian Christian town. As Najwa Abdallah expressed, "All Christians love their area because it

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[138] Ibid.
[139] Ibid.
[140] Ibid.
[141] Father George
[142] Ibid.
[143] Interview partner 6
[144] Ikhlas Mikho
[145] Marwan Boutros
[146] Marwan Boutros
[147] Marwan Boutros
[148] Diyaa Kaju

comprises a Christian majority."[149] Moreover, living in a Christian area conveys a feeling of security. IP12 argued that, "We as Christians, we cannot live in [just] any place"[150] and it is impossible to live in a religiously mixed area.[151] He spoke about Christians in Iraq being confined to specific areas to live in.[152] Ikhlas Mikho was the only one who said that it is not of importance to her to live in a Christian area.[153] However, Andy drew another picture of the coexistence of people from different ethno-religious belongings in Iraq. He said that "pretending to live peacefully and accepting the other is nothing other than a media picture […] and does not represent the reality."[154]

Another factor encouraging the respondents to return is that Baghdeda did not experience demographic change. In the specific case of Baghdeda, it has been a majoritarian Christian town and remains so even after the last displacement. Other towns in the proximity of Baghdeda, like Bartella and Tel Keif, did experience demographic change. Despite having formerly been majoritarian Christian, today Christian inhabitants constitute minorities in these towns. Najwa Abdallah explained, "If demographic change had happened, we would not have returned,"[155] adding that, "demographic change means that I return to live with people who are strangers."[156] Four of the respondents spoke about being worried or afraid that Baghdeda will be affected by demographic change. Father George described demographic change as "a threat"[157] and "ongoing battle."[158]

Some of the respondents explained that demographic change manifests itself for example in the appearance of the towns or the prevailing dress code. Safaa Bahnam considers the presence of "Islamic symbols" in former Christian majoritarian towns as provocation. He explains that Karamless "is a Christian area in which the flag of Hussein has been put up on the opposite side of the monastery, and this is a form of provocation and there are underlying intentions behind such actions."[159] In the case of Tharaa A. Simaan, her decision to return was led by the idea to do her share against demographic change. She indicated that her decision to return to Baghdeda was influenced by demographic change by stating, "We prefer that Baghdeda keeps its religious identity and I don't want to see more mosques than churches in it in 100 years. I don't want to see what happened in Telkeif happening in Qaraqosh [Baghdeda]."[160]

The interviewees described their relationships with people from other ethno-religious backgrounds differently. Two interviewees do not have any contact to non-Christians in Baghdeda, others say their contact is limited to greetings or describe their contact as "careful." Still others say that their contacts did not change after Daesh, and one even emphasized that the Shabak in Baghdeda are well integrated and even speak their language. Though one interview partner said his Muslim neighbors are nice with him, through the interaction of his and their children, he discovered that they had a "Daesh mindset." Many spoke about their relationships with non-Christians being afflicted with fear, mistrust, and suspicion. Diyaa Kaju said that he has non-Christian friends in Mosul and described his relationship with them on an individual level as good. He explains that, "The problem lies in the sectarian political leaders that are

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149 Najwa Abdallah
150 Interview partner 12
151 Ibid.
152 Ibid.
153 Ikhlas Mikho. Ikhlas Mikho is from Baghdeda but lived for many years in Baghdad until the explosion of the Al-Najat Church in 2011.
154 Andy
155 Najwa Abdallah
156 Najwa Abdallah
157 Father George
158 Ibid.
159 Diyaa Kaju
160 Tharaa A. Simaan

fabricating problems because their seats and posts depend on the presence of problems between the religions and sects." He further described them as war dealers and corrupt, who "do not merit to be political leaders and there is no exception. All of them fabricate problems, stir up sedition and conflicts, and rule by fear."[161]

5.7 The Situation upon Return and Today

The situation upon return was described in a negative way: "I saw a catastrophe when I returned,"[162] "Baghdeda was a disaster area,"[163] "the situation was not good in the beginning,"[164] "our return was a tragedy,"[165] "life was very difficult,"[166] or "we were expecting a better and more beautiful situation."[167] These arguments related in particular to the massive scale of destruction of houses, churches, and infrastructure, which Ikhlas Mikho described as such: "It is very difficult when you enter your area, which was beautiful and blossoming, and you see it in a frightening situation where all the houses and churches are burned."[168] Moreover, for around six months after the retake of the Daesh-occupied territories, basic services like water and electricity were absent or limited and the security situation tense, because "combat operations were still ongoing when the first families returned."[169] Yet other respondents recalled not facing greater difficulties when returning. This could be due to the different dates of return, which stretch from directly after the retake of Daesh-occupied territories to three years after the beginning of the displacement until the date of the interviews.

Though all respondents agreed on the gradual improvement of the general situation in Baghdeda after its retake from Daesh, they described the scale of improvement in different ways. Marwan Boutros describes the situation today compared to the beginning of the return as a "real miracle,"[170] while Atheer Marcus said that the situation "did not improve 100 percent."[171] IP10 affirmed that conditions have improved, but says that the situation is becoming increasingly problematic,[172] whereas IP12 even described the situation as disastrous.[173] IP10 explained that the only tangible improvements are in the housing reconstruction sector.[174] This gradual amelioration of the situation motivated some of the IDPs to return. According to Najwa Abdallah, "when we saw the reconstruction, the reopening of the hospital, the return of the governmental employees, and the cleaning of the schools we were encouraged to return."[175]

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[161] Diyaa Kaju
[162] Safaa Bahnam
[163] Interview partner 6
[164] Ikhlas Mikho
[165] Interview partner 10
[166] Interview partner 12
[167] Interview partner 10
[168] Ikhlas Mikho
[169] Andy
[170] Marwan Boutros
[171] Atheer Marcus
[172] Interview partner 10
[173] Interview partner 12
[174] Interview partner 10
[175] Najwa Abdallah

Tharaa A. Simaan recounts that "directly after liberation the area was given to the Hashd-al-Shaabi[176] but the forces present in Qaraqosh are the Christian military forces NPU and we trust them 100 percent."[177] The security situation was perceived differently among the respondents. Some indicated that there is security today and there is no fear, others spoke about a relative feeling of security, and a few called the security situation "still tense." The interviewees expressed that the future security situation is unknown and there is a possibility of security breaches. There is a fear that what happened previously might happen again, especially as some believed that the Daesh ideology was still spreading and had not disappeared. In light of this, Safaa Bahnam expressed his fear that in 10 to 50 years "someone will come and say to the Christians or Ezidis like they said to the Jews when they left Iraq: 'today it's the people of Saturday and tomorrow it's the people of Sunday.'"[178]

The difficulties respondents are facing are mainly of financial nature or job-related. The economic situation was described as difficult and as not having returned to how it was before displacement. There are no or only limited job opportunities, especially for the youth. This situation has only been aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic. IP3 described the economic situation as hard and says that he cannot guarantee his children's future.[179] "Subsistence is difficult" as there are no job opportunities, projects, or investments. In order to secure a job, people have to resort to nepotism and corruption.[180] Unemployment among the youth was especially thematized. As Safaa Bahnam said, "Young people do not have an income, although they had an income, money, and a car before Daesh."[181] He added that the young people do not have the means to get married, and argued that the elimination of unemployment "will make us stick more to our land."[182]

The aid received after return, besides the reconstruction aid, was considered less than was provided during displacement. There is no help from the church, but NGOs are occasionally providing aid in the form of food parcels or distributions of diapers for infants; aid in the form of cash payments is not provided. Moreover, none of the interviewees received from the Ministry of Displacement and Migration compensation for their possessions that were stolen or destroyed by Daesh.

5.8 Thinking of Leaving the Country?

Father George stated, that based on surveys, that around 45 percent of the original inhabitants of Baghdeda moved to another country.[183] When asking the respondents whether they were thinking of migrating abroad, seven of them affirmed and two indicated not wanting to leave the country for now. The reasons given by the seven interview partners for wanting to leave were: the existing inequality, to guarantee a better future for their children, not seeing any future in Iraq, demographic change, the financial situation, and health condition. They said they had not been able to leave because of their financial situation and were waiting for a chance to migrate or waiting for the end of the Covid-19 pandemic before embarking on the migration or asylum journey. IP12 said that the clergy encouraged the

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[176] The Hashd-al-Shaabi, also known as "Popular Mobilization Units," is constituted by around 50, mostly Shia paramilitary groups and has links to Iran. The Hashd was established in 2014 and was involved in fighting Daesh and recruiting several thousand volunteers to that aim (Mansour, 2019). Today, the Hashd is integrated into the Iraqi security apparatus and has control over parts of the territories retaken from Daesh (Bryant (2019) p. 7).
[177] Tharaa A. Simaan
[178] Safaa Bahnam
[179] Interview partner 3
[180] Ikhlas Mikho
[181] Safaa Bahnam
[182] Ibid.
[183] Father George

Christians to "remain and not to emigrate."[184] He concurrently lamented that "[…] there is no solution for us in this country, we are oppressed and we cannot live without laws that protect us. Without law there is no security and no one to protect us."[185]

5.9 Preserving the Christian Presence in Iraq

Almost all interviewees stated that the future of Christians in Iraq was uncertain or indicated that there was no future for Christians in Iraq. Father George said that people question whether there is a future in this reality, however no one could answer this question, not the church, the government, or the world.[186] However, some of the interviewees expressed being aware of the importance of remaining in Christian areas of Iraq, Baghdeda for example, as it is "considered the area with [the] most Christians, and if we leave there won't be a majoritarian Christian area and we will be spread over different areas and countries."[187] Immigration was described as a threat to the existence of Christians in Iraq. As Diyaa Kaju said:

We, the Ashuri[188] Christians, are the original inhabitants of Iraq. Our immigration in this way means our total extinction because the immigrants who left into different countries are no longer who they were before. Once they lose their land, they will lose their language, traditions, and customs one generation after the other. And this is what leads to the extinction of whole old communities. And this is the reason for our devotion for remaining.[189]

He considered the emigration of Iraqi Christians as a "genocide."[190] Safaa Bahnam said that delegations composed of NGOs and especially clergy would visit to affirm the importance of the presence of the Christians in the Middle East. He argued that they should provide aid and job opportunities for the youth in order to preserve the permanence of the Christians in the area.[191]

6 Discussion

Support from and trust in their religious community, institution, and clergy encouraged Christian IDPs to return to Baghdeda. As highlighted in the analysis, the religious leaders and clergy encouraged the Christian IDPs to return at different occasions. They resorted to the idea of the fatherland, the Christians being the original inhabitants of the country, and the historical responsibility associated with that. In Iraq, according to Hanoosh, Chaldeans in comparison with the Muslim Arab majorities "might think of themselves as more historically rooted, ancient and indigenous to the land that constitutes Iraq today."[192] For some of the respondents, the idea of the fatherland and being the original inhabitants were motivational factors for return, wanting to return, rebuild, and live in Baghdeda. While the returnees expressed the encouragement they received by the church, they simultaneously stressed that their

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[184] Interview partner 12
[185] Ibid.
[186] Father George
[187] Najwa Abdallah
[188] Ashuri is the Arabic term for Assyrian. (Yasmeen Hanoosh, "Minority Identities Before and After Iraq: The Making of Modern Assyrian and Chaldean Appellations," *The Arab Studies Journal* 24, no. 2 (2016): 28.)
[189] Diyaa Kaju
[190] Ibid.
[191] Safaa Bahnam
[192] Yasmeen Hanoosh, *The Chaldeans: Politics and Identity in Iraq and the American Diaspora* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2019).

decision to return was a personal one. Moreover, their rootedness in Baghdeda was expressed through references to the town as their place of birth and upbringing, and their connectedness to friends and family there. With the retake of Baghdeda from Daesh, some respondents indicated not imagining remaining in displacement or not returning to their area of origin. This is due to their strong connectedness to Baghdeda and its people, but also the difficult situation of displacement seems to have contributed to this urge to return.

As mentioned above, Father George described the relationship between the church and parish as a mother that cares for her children. It becomes apparent that the role of the church and clergy is not limited to the spiritual or religious sphere, but rather allows them to function as spokespeople for their parish in humanitarian, social, and political terms. Moreover, it constitutes an important source of aid and information. This prominent role might be more understandable when taking into consideration the importance of cultural and religious institutions within Iraqi society. As Faily points out, the "core political authority and legitimacy [of the state] is based on an ethno-sectarian foundation. […] The state is the weakest institutional component within Iraqi society, suffering in comparison with religious and cultural institutions."[193] Faily describes religious leadership as "influential in all of Iraq's sects."[194] This role of the church and clergy is not without controversy, as some of the interviewed persons argued that it limits the kind of representation available to them, conflates political and religious spheres, and leads to further inequality and corruption. In addition to that, not all respondents feel that the church or religious leaders advocate and work in the best interests of the parish. Nonetheless, the church and clergy are more trusted by Christian IDPs than are governmental institutions, which manifests itself in the role of the church as outlined in this paper. This trust seemed to have encouraged Christian IDPs to follow the calls of the clergy and return. However, such trust in the church and clergy is declining, especially after return, as some respondents feel that their interests are not represented and lament corruption.

The encouragement by religious leaders alone would not have effectuated the return of Christian IDPs to Baghdeda. Rather, this encouragement coupled with reconstruction aid led by the church influenced the IDPs' return decisions positively. The church stopped the financial support for the rent in displacement and focussed aid on the reconstruction efforts in Baghdeda, on which many returnees were dependent. The establishment of the LRCs and announcement of the aid it would provide in housing reconstruction constituted an important reason for the return of IDPs. Hein (2020) analyzed the role that LRCs played in rebuilding Ninewa Plain communities and showed that the work of the LRCs is not limited to physical reconstruction. She concludes that LRCs in many instances fostered intra-communal and inter-communal dialogue and exchanges needed for social cohesion, as well as diminished the feelings of abandonment among Christian communities while boosting a sense of safety.[195] Some of the returnees in this paper viewed the aid volume as less than what they expected, which led some to borrow money in order to accomplish their housing reconstruction—posing an additional financial burden. The perceived low sums of aid made some people feel lured into returning. Moreover, they lamented inequality or favoritism when it comes to the provision of help through the church or NGOs.

In addition to the housing reconstruction, the burned and destroyed religious symbols and churches in Baghdeda were reconstructed. This seemed to have had a positive impact on the psychological well-being of the community due to the symbols' relevance for Christians. Moreover, the resumption of daily services encouraged the IDPs to come from their areas of displacement to partake in mass and thus allow them to

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[193] Lukman Faily, "Social Harmony: An Iraqi Perspective" (LSE Middle East Centre Report, 2016), 13.
[194] Ibid.
[195] Mona Hein, "The Role of Religious Actors in Rebuilding Communities in the Nineveh Plains in Post-ISIS Iraq" (master's thesis, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, September 2020), 57–60.

overcome fears and witness the reconstruction. These religious rituals and practices encouraged IDPs to come to Baghdeda and had, in some cases, a positive effect on the decision to return. Furthermore, the archbishop's prioritization is not to be taken for granted because it has been shown elsewhere that, in the aftermath of a disaster or war, communities might choose to rebuild their churches and temples before rebuilding hospitals.[196]

Although the encouragement by religious leaders and reconstruction aid were motivational factors in IDPs' decisions to return, one should not underestimate the relevance of the situation in displacement. As indicated above, all respondents fled to the Christian district of Ainkawa in Erbil. This coincides with Higel's observation that people who have to flee their area of origin mostly choose an area of displacement in which they share linguistic, religious, and ethnic characteristics with the host community.[197] The situation in displacement was full of hardships, most notably concerning the shelter situation, high living expenses, lack of job opportunities, and lack of income. The IDPs received aid from the church and NGOs, which provided shelter aid, food supplies, small sums of cash for groceries, and other basic goods. The difficult situation in displacement was one of the reasons for the return to Baghdeda once it was retaken from Daesh and after reconstruction aid from the LRCs was available.

The fact that Baghdeda is still a majoritarian Christian town made the decision to return easier. Over the last 15 years, formerly heterogeneous communities in Iraq changed; they "bec[ame] more isolationist and homogenous as trust deficits among groups in society gr[e]w."[198] Mousa defines social trust as "an equilibrium in which everyday interactions between two groups are not conditioned on identity"[199] and gives an example from the post-Daesh context, which is the mistrust Christians have toward their Muslim neighbours.[200] Moreover, the work of Costantini and Palani shows that IDPs from different ethno-religious groups consider a prospective future coexistence as doubtful.[201] In contrast to other former Christian towns and villages in the Ninewa Plain, Baghdeda did not experience demographic change. According to Khedir, the return of IDPs depends on "the specific location of the return and the history of such locations, especially with regard to the level of demographic change policies."[202] There are few relationships between Christians and non-Christians in Baghdeda, and those that do exist often tend to be tinged by mistrust and fear.[203]

The general situation in Baghdeda after its retake from Daesh improved gradually. However the situation today is still not ideal and perceived as difficult. Nevertheless, the improvements in housing reconstruction and basic services influenced IDPs' decisions to return. Today's security situation in Baghdeda was perceived differently by the respondents, however they agreed that the future security situation is unpredictable. The biggest difficulties they face today are the weak economic situation and limited job opportunities, which became worse with the start of the coronavirus pandemic. Many returnees have difficulties finding work and sustaining themselves and their families.

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[196] Deepa Narayan, Raj Patel, and Kai Schafft, "Voices of the Poor: Can Anyone Hear Us?" (World Bank Group, 2000).

[197] Lahib Higel, "Iraq's Displacement Crisis: Security and Protection" (Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights and Minority Rights Group International, 2016,).

[198] Hafsa Halawa, "The Forgotten Iraq" (Middle East Institute, 2020), 7.

[199] Salma Mousa, "Overcoming the Trust Deficit: An Experiment on Intergroup Contact and Soccer in Post-ISIS Iraq" (2018), 3.

[200] Mousa, "Overcoming the Trust Deficit: An Experiment on Intergroup Contact and Soccer in Post-ISIS Iraq" 1.

[201] Irene Costantini and Kamaran Palani, "Displacement-Emigration-Return: Understanding Uncertainty in the Context of Iraq" (Middle East Research Institute, 2018).

[202] Hewa H. Khedir, "After ISIS: Perspectives of Displaced Communities from Ninewa on Return to Iraq's Disputed Territory" (Pax for Peace, 2015), 70.

[203] These findings do not overlap with the results of the final evaluation of the Ninewa Return Program of Malteser International on social cohesion activities in Hamdaniya and Telkeif, which indicate that "70–80% had a very positive attitude toward other ethnic groups, had contacts and saw positive change over the past two years" (Yvonne Dunton, May 26, 2021).

A portion of the returnees indicated to be thinking about emigrating if an opportunity presented itself. At the same time, there seems to be an awareness among the interviewees about the importance of preserving a Christian presence in Iraq. Mousa's study refuted the assumption that Christians are ethno-centric and that those who stayed in Iraq post-2003 are "committed to preserve a Christian presence in Iraq."[204] Her findings show that 70 percent of her Christian respondents, constituted by young men, would leave the country if they had the opportunity.[205] The results of this paper correspond with Mousa's finding. The idea of the fatherland and the loyalty to it are not enough to make people bear the difficult situation in which they find themselves after returning to Baghdeda. The current situation the returnees find themselves in makes it difficult for them to remain in Baghdeda for preventing the extinction of Christians in Iraq in the near future.

Two limitations of this study need to be highlighted. First, due to the limited number of interviews, the findings of this paper cannot be considered statistically representative of all Christians in Baghdeda. Moreover, as a result of differing reconstruction progresses, provisions of aid, and scales of demographic change, it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine the role of ethno-religious belonging/religion for Iraqi IDPs' return decisions in contexts other than Baghdeda. Second, due to the Covid-19 pandemic no in-person interviews were possible. However, due to the interviewer's mother tongue speaking ability of Arabic, while at the same time being enough of an outsider (of Lebanese descent and working at a German academic institution) to be considered impartial to Iraq's conflicts, it can be assumed that the results have a high degree of reliability. Despite these limitations, the paper provides important insights into the motivations leading Christians to return to their area of origin in post-Daesh Iraq. It thereby constitutes a basis for future studies about the role of religion in IDPs' decisions to return to their area of origin in the Iraqi context and beyond.

7 Conclusion

This paper aimed at investigating the role religion played in the decision of Christian IDPs to return to Baghdeda, their area of origin. The findings show that religion did play a role in the decisions of Christian IDPs to return to their area of origin in Baghdeda. It should be emphasized that the findings reflect an interrelatedness of multiple factors influencing Christian IDPs' decisions to return. The support from and trust in their religious community, institution, and clergy encouraged Christian IDPs to return to Baghdeda. This encouragement was multifaceted, ranging from the church and clergy's referring to the idea of the fatherland and their connectedness to it, as well as their being the original inhabitants. Moreover, the churches established LRCs to lead housing reconstruction aid, which, for some, was a crucial factor in their decision to return. In addition to that, the resumption of church services allowed IDPs to travel to Baghdeda to partake in them and thus overcome their fears while witnessing the situation gradually improve. All of these aforementioned aspects were the main reasons given by interviewees for their return, and/or positively impacted their decisions to return.

The fact that Baghdeda is still a majoritarian Christian town made the decision to return easier. The division along ethno-religious lines that has deepened in the last 15 years throughout the country and an increasing fear and mistrust toward the "other" post Daesh-related events, make people feel more secure living among their own ethno-religious groups. This is one of the reasons for IDPs deciding to return to Baghdeda, in addition to the town's status as not having endured demographic change. There is relatively

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[204] Mousa, "Overcoming the Trust Deficit: An Experiment on Intergroup Contact and Soccer in Post-ISIS Iraq".
[205] Ibid.

little contact with the non-Christian minority in Baghdeda, and if they interact the relationship is burdened by fear and mistrust.

There is a clear awareness regarding the decreasing numbers of Christians, the imminent threat of their extinction, and the need to prevent that from happening. That said, the data indicate that this is not a primary reason for the Christian IDPs to return. Furthermore, their difficult situation in Baghdeda today leads them to think of emigrating in the hope of a more comfortable life and better future for their children.

Based on the analysis in this paper, the following policy recommendations can be highlighted. In order to contribute to a sustainable return, the Iraqi government, NGOs, and international stakeholders should create job opportunities in the area of return, as well as improve the security situation around Baghdeda and Iraq in general. Moreover, social cohesion should be fostered to tackle the mistrust and fear among different ethno-religious groups. A wider participation and inclusion of the Christian population and other minority groups in the social and political sphere is crucial for them to make their demands heard and be able to shape their futures. Furthermore, the returnees are in need of further aid, as most of them have not been able to restore their lives after having been uprooted by the emergence of Daesh. It is thus essential that the end of the humanitarian aid phase is followed by development aid in order to further improve the situation in Baghdeda and create a future prospective.

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