

IDP Return and Social Cohesion: Evidence from Camp Closures in Iraq*

Benjamin C. Krick[†]

July 9, 2025

Abstract

After the resolution of a civil conflict, how does the return of the internally displaced population (IDPs) impact social cohesion? Little attention has been paid to the consequences of IDP return, despite extensive research on the causes and effects of displacement. I investigate this question in Iraq after the defeat of the Islamic State. Coercive and unexpected camp closures by the Iraqi federal government starting in July 2019 forced hundreds of thousands of internal migrants to return. The exogenous timing of the closure campaign provides a unique setting to estimate a plausibly causal effect of return. Leveraging village-level displacement data, community assessments, respondent-level surveys, and qualitative fieldwork, I find that the closure-induced returns frayed social cohesion. My theory provides a critical mechanism underpinning this relationship: return creates communal tensions by inducing feelings of fear and suspicion. These findings hold significant policy implications, as the approach of post-conflict governments to address internal migration profoundly influences the social legacy of civil conflicts.

*I thank Kyle Beardsley, Thomas Ginn, Jonathan Petkun, Mara Revkin, Shelley Liu, Samuel Whitt, Dave Siegel, Stephanie Schwartz, and Aidan Milliff for comments and suggestions. I am also grateful to participants at the 2025 International Studies Association Annual Conference, 2024 Carolina Conflict Consortium Annual Conference, Duke's Security Peace and Conflict Workshop, and the Fall 2024 Southern Workshop in Empirical Political Science.

[†]Ph.D. Candidate, Duke University Department of Political Science. Email: benjamin.krick@duke.edu.

“Internal displacement is the great tragedy of our time. The internally displaced people are among the most vulnerable of the human family.”

— Kofi Annan, Former UN Secretary General

1 Introduction

The scale of forced displacement is enormous, resulting in a humanitarian crisis that demands sustained attention. Recent events in Gaza, Lebanon, Sudan, Ukraine, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Myanmar underscore the human suffering caused by conflict-induced displacement. As of December 2024, the global population of forced migrants is 112 million. In 2024 alone, 20.1 million individuals were newly displaced by armed conflict and persecution (UNHCR, 2024). While many civilians are displaced across borders, far more are displaced internally. The global count of refugees and asylum seekers stands at 40 million, and the number of internally displaced migrants is 72 million (UNHCR, 2024). Despite constituting 64 percent of the world’s forcibly displaced population, humanitarian organizations and academic researchers have disproportionately focused on refugees and asylum seekers, leaving IDPs especially vulnerable and largely invisible.

In particular, we lack extensive evidence on IDP return dynamics.¹ This lack of knowledge is a critical gap, as rebuilding society is one of the fundamental challenges for post-conflict governments.² A successful transition from war to peace hinges on effective management of the IDP population. Protracted displacement is associated with continued fragility, social tensions, and instability. Facilitating a durable solution for internal migrants, either through return or integration elsewhere, is crucial for conducting elections, restoring security, and reviving economic activity. However, since responsibility for IDPs is largely relegated to national and local authorities, programmatic solutions and legal frameworks are often lacking. States have considerable flexibility in managing internal migration, which often leaves IDPs unsupported and entangled in post-conflict politics. While return is often considered the preferred durable solution and could be a major step toward reconstruction and reconciliation,

¹Of course, a small number of studies cover this topic, including Arias, Ibáñez and Querubin (2014); Camarena and Hägerdal (2020); Walk, Garimella and Christia (2023); Weber and Hartman (2022).

²Recent events in Syria underscore this point. Facilitating the return millions of displaced people is arguably the largest task ahead for the post-Assad regime (Marks and Rihawi, 2025).

if mismanaged, the return of IDPs can seriously hinder social stability and security.

What are the social consequences of IDP return? While recent research has examined the impacts of refugee repatriation (Blair, Krick and Wright, 2025; Ruiz and Vargas-Silva, 2022; Schwartz, 2019), to my knowledge, no study has quantified the consequence of IDP return. To address this question, I argue that the impact of IDP return depends on the community's response to returnees. Drawing on the “fear and suspicion” mechanism from research on social cohesion (Hager, Krakowski and Schaub, 2019; Krakowski, 2020) and reintegration (Kaplan and Nussio, 2018), I argue that return undermines social cohesion by triggering distrust. Internal migrants are often associated with combatants and perceived to have varying degrees of culpability for wartime violence. Upon return, receiving communities often suspect that migrants have collaborated with former enemies and pose future security risks. This dynamic is especially pronounced when migrants previously lived under the territorial control of an armed group, creating what Lichtenheld (2024) calls “guilt by location”, and when communities have experienced high levels of past victimization.

I offer a generalizable argument: IDP return reduces social cohesion by triggering fear and suspicion. I then develop this argument in the context of a conventional civil war, where I argue that *displacement timing* serves as a key heuristic for assigning “guilt by location.” In a stylized version of such a conflict, a rebel group seizes territory formerly under government control. In response, many civilians flee, unwilling to live under rebel rule, while others remain and — willingly or not — live under insurgent control, sometimes collaborating to varying degrees. During the counterinsurgency, escalating violence drives most civilians out, leaving primarily insurgents to face government forces. Once the state regains control, a decent subset of the original population quickly returns, and a fragile social equilibrium emerges. As additional displaced people return, communities are forced to decide how to reintegrate them.

For communities, reintegrating is a risky decision, especially in locations that experienced high levels of victimization during the conflict. Locals may view returnees with suspicion, fearing they were complicit in past atrocities or that their return could reignite violence. However, wartime loyalties are often opaque. In a world of shifting populations, it is difficult to determine who supported the state and who sided with the insurgents. One salient heuristic for judging wartime behavior (particularly whether individuals lived under rebel occupation) is the timing of displacement. In this context, I argue that the key cleavage shaping

fear and suspicion is between those who fled early and those who remained under insurgent control before eventually being displaced. The return of this latter group—stigmatized for having stayed—is perceived as threatening and undermines efforts to rebuild social cohesion by eroding trust and reconciliation.

I test this argument in the context of Iraq, after the defeat of the the Islamic State (IS). Between 2014 and 2017, IS, a violent extremist group, waged an insurgency against the Iraqi government. The conflict displaced six million Iraqis, making Iraq the world's third-largest producer of IDPs in this period. Within two years of the civil war's end, the government adopted an aggressive stance on displacement, declaring that all remaining IDPs must return home. To enforce this policy, it closed all official IDP camps, at times forcibly pushing migrants back to their pre-war communities. The sheer scale of conflict and displacement of the case warrants attention, but the coercive and abrupt closures provides a unique opportunity to tackle the inferential challenges of estimating the social consequences of return. Typically, the decision to return is endogenous to local conditions. However, in Iraq, the timing of camp closures was orthogonal to local improvements, so forced returns driven by the closures provide a way to overcome self-selection and more cleanly identify the effects of return.

This paper employs a rigorous mixed-methods approach, triangulating novel quantitative and qualitative data and leveraging plausibly exogenous variation to enable causal inference. I begin by compiling community-level data from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), a rich source that tracks both social cohesion and migration patterns across all conflict-affected communities in Iraq. Crucially, the data is longitudinal, allowing me to estimate the consequences of return in a difference-in-differences framework. I complement this with high-quality, representative survey data from Nineveh governorate, the area most affected by displacement and the camp closures. Finally, I conduct two rounds of intensive fieldwork in Iraq, which provide evidence supporting both the assumptions of my research design and the proposed causal mechanism underlying the quantitative results. Across all approaches, I find that IDP return negatively affected social cohesion. Consistent with my informational theory emphasizing fear and suspicion, the effect of return was driven by stigmatized returnees who had stayed and lived under IS control and was stronger in areas that had experienced higher levels of IS victimization.

This paper makes three contributions to the academic literature on conflict and forced

displacement. First, by focusing on social cohesion, this research responds to calls from both academics (Myers et al., 2024) and policymakers (World Bank, 2022) to strengthen the knowledge base on forced migration and social cohesion, given its vital role in maintaining stability. Until recently, research has largely overlooked how migrant flows affect social cohesion, concentrating instead on outcomes such as conflict incidents, voting patterns, and economic indicators.³ Further, by evaluating the effects of IDP return on social cohesion, I help unpack the broader relationship between conflict and social cohesion. A dynamic underdeveloped in the conflict literature is how the collective legacies of armed conflict depend on how civilians sort, move, and interact during and after the conflict (Gilligan, Pasquale and Samii, 2014; Langlotz et al., 2025; Marbach, 2024). Regardless of how violence shapes *individual* psyches, the legacy of conflict on *collective* social cohesion hinges on displacement patterns and migration management.

Second, this paper extends information-centric theories of civil conflict (e.g. Blair 2024; Kalyvas 2006; Lyall 2010; Sonin and Wright 2024; Uzonyi 2022) and displacement (e.g. Lichtenheld 2024; Steele 2018a; Weber 2025; Zhukov 2015), providing evidence that ambiguity about citizen loyalty – and, accordingly, who were perpetrators and victims – contributes to social conflict long after militancy ends. While Lichtenheld (2024) primarily focuses on how displacement patterns inform *combatants and governments* during wartime (Steele, 2018a; Lichtenheld, 2020), his concluding work highlights how these patterns may also shape *civilian* perceptions during and after conflict. I build on this insight and extend the argument by focusing on the timing of displacement, showing how displacement continues to influence civilian social relations in the post-conflict period.

Third, this research offers one of the first plausibly causal estimates of the effects of IDP return, doing so within a specific policy context: a government’s restrictive policy designed to swiftly end its responsibility for assisting internal migrants. By situating the analysis within this policy framework, the study contributes to a growing literature showing that the effects of migration are shaped by state policies, both in the developed (Helbling et al., 2017) and developing world (Blair, Grossman and Weinstein, 2022; Zhou, Grossman and Ge, 2023). It advances the emerging agenda calling for greater attention to internal migration policies and their consequences (Lichtenheld and Steele, 2024) and contributes to a growing body of scholarship on internal displacement (e.g. Balcells 2018; Hartman, Morse and Weber

³See Salehyan and Savun (2024) and Shaver et al. (2024) for recent literature reviews on the consequences of refugee flows.

2021; Lichtenheld and Schon 2021; Peisakhin, Stoop and Van der Windt 2024; Steele 2018*b*; Zhou and Lyall 2025). At a broader level, this research highlights migration management as an overlooked institution of governance—one that shapes the trajectory of any country grappling with social cleavages and the politics of belonging and exclusion.

2 Theory: Uncertainty After Conflict

This research focuses on the question of migrant return, but ultimately investigates a larger phenomenon: what is the social legacy of civil conflict? As Wood (2008) describes, civil war transforms “social processes... [the] social actors, structures, norms, and practices at the local level,” which often leave “profound social changes in their wake.” A key line of research in this area estimates the effects of wartime violence on social cohesion and examines how governments rebuild society after organized violence. Below, I define social cohesion and outline this work, emphasizing one pathway through which violence undermines inter-group relations: fear and suspicion. I then develop a theory of IDP return, arguing that return negatively affects social cohesion by activating this mechanism, introducing uncertainty about the extent to which citizens were complicit in wartime atrocities.

2.1 Conflict, Social Cohesion, and Reintegration

Social cohesion is defined as “a sense of shared purpose, trust, and willingness to cooperate among members of a given group, between members of different groups, and between people and the state” (Chatterjee, Gassier and Myint, 2023). This definition delineates two dimensions: vertical cohesion, the connection of citizens to government institutions, and horizontal cohesion, the bonds between members of society. I focus on the latter, examining how migrant return disrupts social dynamics in the receiving community. Horizontal cohesion is often operationalized through indicators such as willingness to cooperate for common goals, trust in neighbors, or reconciliation between aggrieved parties.

Restoring social cohesion is vital for achieving durable peace. In violence-affected contexts, war is often protracted and recurring, a cycle known as the “conflict trap” (Collier et al., 2003). Conflict has severe developmental consequences, eg. destruction of infrastructure, loss of employment opportunities, population displacement, and weakened institutions, which often contribute to further instability. Restoring social cohesion mitigates this “development in reverse,” making it a first order priority (Collier et al., 2003). Strong social

ties enable reconstruction, as reconciled and trusting communities can collaborate with the government to rebuild infrastructure, equitably provide public goods, attract investment, and manage aid. Cohesive communities are therefore more resilient to post-war challenges. For this reason, international development efforts in fragile, conflict-affected contexts often prioritize improving social cohesion. The 2018 UN-World Bank Pathways for Peace study emphasizes this, stating that “navigating change by fostering inclusiveness and thus social cohesion is the essence of prevention” (World Bank, 2018: p. 61).

Given the importance of social cohesion in post-conflict recovery, understanding how conflict affects social cohesion is crucial. The war-time exposure literature argues that during intense periods of political violence, identity solidifies along ethnic, religious, or political lines. While violence may foster cooperation *within* groups, by inducing “post-traumatic growth” (Bellows and Miguel, 2009; Blattman, 2009; Freitag, Kijewski and Oppold, 2019; Voors et al., 2012) or reinforcing the economic payoffs of cooperative behavior, there is limited evidence that violence bridges the social divide *between* groups (Bauer et al., 2016; Webster et al., 2020). The pro-social effect of exposure to violence is primarily limited to citizens that share the same identity (Fiedler, 2023). As groups become more internally cohesive through trauma induced bonding and collective coping (Gilligan, Pasquale and Samii, 2014), the divide between sects may grow (Rohner, Thoenig and Zilibotti, 2013). By entrenching cleavages, exposure to conflict can exacerbate inter-group tensions, creating distance between victimized groups and perpetrators of violence (Balcells, 2012; Grosjean, 2014; Lupu and Peisakhin, 2017).

Violence erodes social cohesion, particularly trust, by inducing fear and suspicion (Hager, Krakowski and Schaub, 2019). Conflict may unravel a country’s social fabric as victimization sows “seeds of distrust” (Rohner, Thoenig and Zilibotti, 2013). Victims of violence are fearful of reoccurrence, resentful against perpetrators, and suspicious of anyone that may have been complicit in violence. This post-traumatic distress accounts for decreased trust in violent exposed community (Cassar, Grosjean and Whitt, 2013; Ingelaere and Verpoorten, 2020; Kijewski and Freitag, 2018). In asymmetric wars, where civilian collaboration and denunciation are common, the suspicion mechanism is especially prominent – even among co-ethnics (Krakowski, 2020). Collectively, this literature suggests that conflict reshapes individuals’ social and psychological constitution, influencing how they respond to critical post-conflict challenges.

The reintegration of displaced community members is among the most consequential of such challenges civilians face. Communities must decide whether to accept returning individuals, navigating a delicate balance with long-term implications for social cohesion. On one hand, reintegration risks reigniting grievances and deepening social cleavages in the receiving community. On the other, isolating returnees may foster marginalization, increasing the risk of future militancy and extremism. Fear and suspicion of returnees may be particularly pronounced in communities with high levels of past violence, making reintegration more difficult. Exposure to victimization may increase the probability of reprisals (Podder, 2012), erode generalized trust (Cassar, Grosjean and Whitt, 2013), and reinforce perceptions of returnees as perpetrators (McMullin, 2013).

A robust body of literature examines disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR), a policy framework designed to reintegrate former combatants into civilian life (e.g. Humphreys and Weinstein (2007); Blattman (2009); Annan et al. (2011); Gilligan, Mvukiyehe and Samii (2013); Kaplan and Nussio (2018)). This approach assumes a clear distinction between civilians and combatants, yet such demarcations are often blurred, particularly in asymmetric conflicts within populated areas. Civilians engage with rebel groups to varying degrees, creating uncertainty around their involvement and perceived culpability (Kao and Revkin, 2023). The internally displaced embody this complexity, comprising individuals with diverse wartime experiences. Further complicating reintegration, former insurgents may embed themselves within IDP populations, fueling collective suspicion. While DDR focuses on combatants and repatriation addresses refugees – who are typically civilians largely distanced from wartime culpability – the return of IDPs pose unique challenges, as the inherent uncertainty of wartime loyalties can fuel fear and suspicion.

2.2 Theoretical Expectations

Building on these key insights from the literature on social cohesion, conflict, and reintegration, I detail my theory explaining the consequences of IDP return. This theory is community-centric, focusing on how receiving communities respond to the return of IDPs. I assume that the primary motivation of the receiving community (those who never left or who have already reintegrated) is to maximize personal security and local stability. Communities seek to move past the conflict, reconcile past grievances, and minimize the risk of future instability. The return of IDPs disrupts this social equilibrium, prompting the receiving population to evaluate whether the returnees pose a threat or bear responsibility for past

violence and extremism.

My theory proposes fear and suspicion as the key mechanism through which IDP return erodes social cohesion. IDP return disrupts community dynamics by reintroducing uncertainty about citizens' loyalties, fueling fear and suspicion.⁴ Because returning IDPs represent a mixed population with diverse wartime experiences, allegiances, and degrees of collaboration, their arrival often raises concerns that erode trust, reignite unresolved tensions, and heighten the need for reconciliation. Furthermore, migration-based cleavages can become entrenched over time. Protracted displacement reinforces identity differences between those who remained displaced and those who integrated into the local community (Schwartz, 2019). This hardens in-group and out-group boundaries, causing IDPs to be seen as "others" and potential threats. For these reasons, the overall consequences of IDP return are likely to be negative. I therefore propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1. *IDP return has a negative effect on social cohesion in the receiving community.*

Of course, significant variation in return dynamics exist, even within a particular context. If fear and suspicion – rooted in past victimization – is the primary causal pathway, I expect return to have heterogeneous effects based on the characteristics of both the migrants and the receiving community.

Regarding the characteristics of the migrants themselves, the consequences of return depend on whether IDPs are stigmatized – whether the community holds negative beliefs about them. Return barriers are either structural or social, as migrants weigh economic and emotional consequences when deciding whether to return (Camarena and Hägerdal, 2020). Those facing structural barriers, such as destroyed homes or lack of livelihood opportunities, delay return for practical reasons rather than concerns about physical security or social isolation. For these non-stigmatized returnees, the social consequences of return should be minimal, as their return is unlikely to disrupt communal dynamics or social cohesion. In contrast, the return of migrants facing social barriers may have negative social consequences, particularly if they are stigmatized due to perceived associations with groups that committed atrocities

⁴While other mechanisms—such as competition over jobs, anxiety of demographic change, and resentment over aid allocation—may also contribute, I argue that fear and suspicion is the key pathway driving negative effects, under specific scope conditions discussed below. I address these alternative explanations in Section 5.3.

during the conflict. These IDPs then may avoid returning out of fear of reprisal. This typically occurs when migrants share the identity of the perpetrating group. Communities might ascribe collective blame to those linked to the former enemy, viewing these migrants as perpetrators, leading to revenge motivated violence (Balcells, 2017).

The actual culpability of returnees is often opaque to the receiving community. Instead, communities rely on heuristics — cognitive shortcuts that assess threats based on visible characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, and age. One such heuristic is using displacement patterns as an indicator of responsibility, what Lichtenheld (2024) calls “guilt by location.” Wartime loyalty is often judged by whether individuals collaborated with or defected from the group controlling a given territory. Since territorial control and collaboration are self-enforcing (Kalyvas, 2006: p.112), fleeing an area controlled by a particular actor is frequently perceived as defection, while remaining is seen as support. This leads to an “increasing polarization of public loyalties...[as] the flight of those who feel threatened by that group leads to increasing homogeneity of the community as those allied to the group remain behind” (Wood, 2008: p.549). This logic helps explain the strategic displacement of populations (Lichtenheld, 2020) and violence against civilians (Steele, 2018*a*; Lichtenheld and Schon, 2021) during civil war, as both governments and rebels use displacement patterns to infer loyalty and collaboration (Balcells and Steele, 2016; Steele, 2018*b*). I extend this logic to the postwar period, where civilians similarly assess moving populations, determining whether returnees were complicit in wartime violence or pose a security threat.

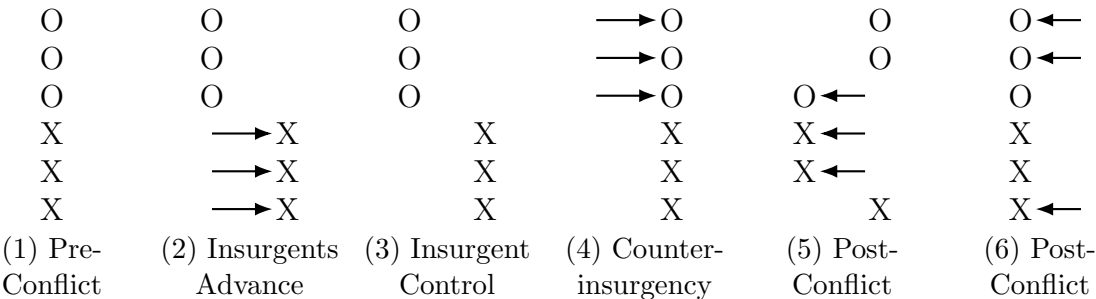
Importantly, this heuristic is imprecise. While “guilt by location” can sometimes help identify former combatants, it often fails to capture nuance and fails to distinguish the extent and volition of individuals’ collaboration with armed groups (Kao and Revkin, 2023). Often armed actors will restrict civilian’s ability to flee in order to establish sovereign control of a territory (Jentsch and Steele, 2023). As a result, displacement patterns can stigmatize entirely innocent civilians who were merely trapped in contested areas. Regardless, since civilians who lived under a group’s territorial control are perceived as complicit in violent extremism, I propose the following sub-hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1a. *IDP return has a larger negative effect on social cohesion when returnees previously lived under the territorial control of a belligerent actor.*

It should be noted, that the heuristic which civilians use to identify if migrants previously lived under the territorial control a belligerent actor is relativity context specific.

For example, communities may look to place of origin, social ties to armed actors, roles or behaviors during occupation, use of language or dress associated with the group, economic status during occupation, absence of victimization, and information from rumors or official records to infer whether civilians lived under a group’s territorial control.

Figure 1: Stylized Sequence of Displacement and Return During Conventional Civil Conflict



The mechanics of the argument that I put further is developed with a specific context in mind, a conventional civil conflict, in which *displacement timing* is the key indicator whether returnees previously lived under the territorial control. Figure 1 presents a stylized version of this context. In the pre-conflict period (1), the community lives together in relative cohesion. When insurgents advance on the area (2), only a subset of the population flees (represented by Xs and referred to as “Pre-Occupation Migrants”) while the remaining members (represented by Os and referred to as “Post-Occupation Migrants.”) stay and live under insurgent territorial control. During this period (3), civilians who remain may collaborate with the insurgents to varying degrees, whether by joining the insurgency, providing information, or complying with governance structures (e.g., paying taxes, using services like hospitals). In period (4), as the counterinsurgency campaign begins, most civilians either flee the intense fighting or are forcibly relocated by the government. By this point, the community has been largely depleted—its members either killed, displaced, or expelled. In the post-conflict periods (5), the government reestablishes control, and individuals begin to return. My argument is that the distinction in displacement timing, captured by the Xs and Os, remains salient: those who fled before insurgent rule (Xs) are viewed differently from those who lived under it (Os). Communities, comprised of individuals who have already returned, are often suspicious of those who remained during insurgent control, creating social cohesion problems in period (6).

The impact of return also depends on the characteristics of the receiving community,

particularly the security environment. A receiving community's history of victimization mediates whether return will have a negative effect. High levels of past terror reduces a community's social capacity to absorb returnees, making them less likely to take risks and engage in the challenging process of reintegration — regardless of who the returnees are. Communities with a history of intra-community conflict are less resilient to risk-taking, as they are acutely aware of the dangers of violent extremism (Aymerich, 2020). This is consistent with the previously outlined research on war-related distress, which suggests that exposure to violence increases distrust (Kijewski and Freitag, 2018), and with Kaplan and Nussio (2018)'s theory which posits that an insecure environment reduces the prospects of successful reintegration. Therefore, I offer a final sub-hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1b. *IDP return has a larger negative effect on social cohesion in communities with higher levels of past civilian victimization.*

2.3 Scope Conditions and Generalizability

My theory best explains return dynamics when a number of scope conditions are met. Stigmatization of returnees is more likely when a belligerent actor is a violent extremist, occupies discrete territory with sovereign control, establishes wartime governance over a civilian population, and forcibly sorts the population. Clear frontlines mark those who lived under the group's control from those who did not. Civilians under such control are often seen as complying with the dominant party's rule, passively signaling allegiance to both combatants and other civilians. When the insurgents are violent extremists (Walter, 2017), this association is especially problematic. Yet while the act of living under the group's authority is visible, the extent to which civilians were willingly collaborating remains unclear (Kao and Revkin, 2023). This ambiguity fuels post-conflict fear and suspicion. Rebel governance intensifies this uncertainty, as civilians may be forced to pay taxes or work for the insurgents out of economic necessity, especially when insurgents co-opt state institutions (Arjona, Kasfir and Mampilly, 2015). Further, when combatants implement population sorting to distinguish loyal from disloyal factions, "guilt by location" becomes likely (Lichtenheld, 2020). Such assortative policies politicize migration decisions, reinforcing the perception that living under a warring party's territorial control equates to allegiance. Under these conditions, social barriers to return become a significant possibility.

IDP return after a civil conflict is the setting most suited for my theory. Relevant examples include the wars in Gaza, where displaced populations are likely to return to

areas historically governed by Hamas, and Syria, where migrants are returning to regions previously loyal to Assad. My theory primarily applies to IDPs, because IDPs stay near conflict zones and are thus more exposed to insurgent networks and the politics of control and collaboration. While my focus is on internal migrants after sub-state conflict, my theory may still have explanatory power for refugee repatriation or interstate conflicts. For instance, fear and mistrust shaped refugee returns to Rwanda after the 1994 Genocide, as community members associated returnees with the violence of the Hutu government (Fujii, 2009; Lischer, 2011). Dynamics consistent with my framework also appear in Ukraine, where civilians who temporarily remained in the Russian occupied Donbas regime and subsequently fled are often judged as Russian collaborators (Dettmer, 2023).

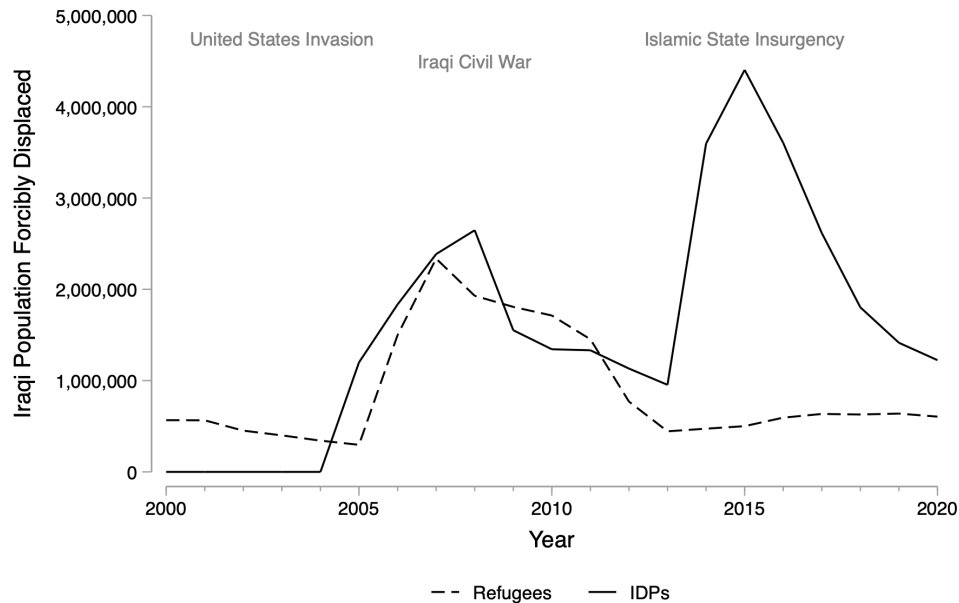
3 Context

3.1 Conflict and Displacement in Iraq

I test my theory in the context of Iraq, a critical case for studying internal displacement that aligns closely with my scope conditions. Since the Iran–Iraq War in 1980, Iraq has consistently been one of the world’s major producers of refugees and IDPs. Figure 2 plots the Iraqi population living in displacement over time, highlighting the country’s two most recent waves of displacement. The first wave was triggered by the United States’ invasion in 2003 and the ensuing sectarian violence, while the second—the focus of this study—resulted from the IS insurgency, which began with the group’s occupation of northwest Iraq in 2014 and ended with its territorial defeat in 2017. Notably, the majority of Iraq’s displaced population has historically chosen to remain within the country’s borders rather than seek refuge abroad.

During the IS insurgency, around six million Iraqis, roughly 15% of the country’s population, were internally displaced (IOM, 2020). Iraq became the world’s third-largest producer of IDPs (behind only Syria and Colombia), accounting for approximately 10% of the global IDP population (UNHCR, 2015). In contrast to previous conflicts, displacement was geographically concentrated (Figure 4). IDP’s largely originated from the northwestern region of Iraq, including Ninevah, Anbar, and Salah Al-Din governorates, which were under the control of IS. The vast majority of residents in these areas were displaced during the course of the war.

Figure 2: Forced Displacement in Iraq



Note: The source of the data is UNHCR Refugee Data Finder. Data collection on internal displacement did not begin until 2004.

The insurgency responsible for this mass displacement was characterized by well-defined frontlines, rebel governance, and harsh rule. IS, the successor to Al-Qaeda in Iraq, initiated the substate conflict in 2014 by launching a conventional military offensive. They quickly established territorial control across Iraq and Syria, infamously capturing Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, and declaring it the capital of their self-proclaimed caliphate. At the apex of their power in 2015, IS controlled an area roughly the size of Great Britain with clear territorial boundaries (Johnston et al., 2019). Functioning as a quasi-state, it assumed various government roles, including tax collection, court administration, policing, and healthcare delivery (Revkin, 2018; Robinson et al., 2017). While these institutions provided public goods, they also served as instruments of the group's violent extremism, used to enforce an authoritarian interpretation of Sharia law and brutally punish noncompliance (Revkin and Ahram, 2020).

IS's sovereign control of territory was short-lived as the Iraqi government, supported by a multinational coalition, fought back against the insurgency. The ensuing conflict was both symmetric and asymmetric (Berman, Felter and Shapiro, 2015). Initially, combatants

engaged in conventional battles using tanks and small arms along clear frontlines, but the war soon shifted to an irregular phase once the multi-national coalition entered the conflict and increased the military technology of the state. The coalition relied on widespread airstrikes, while IS embedded itself within the civilian population, employing asymmetric tactics such as hit-and-run attacks, suicide bombings, human shields, drones, and vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices.

An additional feature of the conflict was how variation in displacement timing often served as a heuristic to identify individuals who had lived under IS control. Many civilians fled in response to IS violence during its offensive in 2014, while others chose to remain and live under IS rule, fleeing only during Iraq's military campaign to reclaim control in 2016 (Revkin, 2021). It was extremely rare for civilians to avoid displacement altogether. This effectively created two groups: "Pre-Occupation Migrants" and "Post-Occupation Migrants."

This distinction, between fleeing IS versus fleeing the counterinsurgency, was visible to combatants, the government, and other civilians both during and after the conflict, creating a perceived "guilt by location" (Lichtenheld, 2024) which was marked by displacement timing. Even when civilians stayed for non-ideological reasons, fellow Iraqis often equated their decision to remain as tacit acceptance of IS' legitimacy.⁵ As one community member expressed during a focus group, those "who welcomed IS and remained free under IS occupation of the region without being held accountable by IS and without being forced into mass displacement are still hated by the societal and tribal components who rejected IS and stood against IS" (Focus Group # 5). This resentment between those who accepted and those who resisted IS rule hindered the reintegration of migrants following the group's defeat. Therefore, I argue that IDP return has a larger negative effect on social cohesion when "Post-Occupation Migrants" return, and that the return of "Pre-Occupation Migrants" should be negligible.

In July 2017, the coalition declared territorial victory over IS in Iraq, restoring security conditions that enabled nearly four million internal migrants to rapidly return home.

⁵Civilian agency over migration decisions was often constrained under IS rule, as the group strategically displaced populations, purging undesirable factions and restricting the outmigration of potential supporters. One IDP interviewed for this study recounted, "It was very difficult for us to leave [Mosul] ... IS controlled Mosul from all sides of the city and were stopping people at their checkpoints. We could not flee or they would kill us. Even smuggling was not safe..." (Interview #25). Another interviewee described forced relocation, stating, "IS moved us during the war [as] the army was liberating areas from IS... block[ing us] from leaving" (Interview #26).

However, despite improvements in economic and security conditions, social barriers to return persisted, and the pace of return slowed. By 2019, approximately 1.7 million Iraqis remained internally displaced, with 443,000 living in 68 official IDP camps. Alarming, only 5% of camp residents expressed intentions to return within the next 12 months (CCCM, 2019). In response to this protracted displacement crisis, and despite the widespread lack of return intentions, the Iraqi government proposed a direct solution: closing the remaining camps in federal Iraq to compel displaced populations to return. This research empirically evaluates the consequences of this policy.

3.2 Camp Closure Campaign

The camp closure campaign began in July 2019 with the adoption of Resolution 16 by Iraq's National Security Council, which mandated the closure of all IDP camps and the return of encamped IDPs. In a rapid and disorganized fashion, Iraqi authorities closed formal settlements and forcibly relocated thousands of migrants to their pre-conflict areas of origin. Table A-3 provides a timeline of the closures which occurred in two distinct phases. Closures first intensified during the latter half of 2019 but were unexpectedly paused due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In October 2020, the Minister of Migration and Displacement announced the resumption of closures. During this second phase, the government of Iraq decommissioned the majority of remaining camps in federal Iraq. The effort was ultimately effective in facilitating mass return: in a camp closure follow-up survey, 56% of migrants who were forced to leave reported returning to their pre-conflict areas of origin (CCCM, 2021).

Seeking an immediate rather than a durable solution to displacement, the Iraqi government tragically implemented the policy without adequate planning or coordination with humanitarian actors. Journalists and iNGOs raised alarms about the policy, citing the government's inadequate plans, dire conditions in areas of return, and social barriers to reintegration (HRW, 2021; Al-Khateeb, 2021; Foltyn, 2020). Migrants themselves were apprehensive about returning, worried that their communities were unwilling to assimilate them. Garcia (2021), on behalf of the Center for Civilians in Conflict, argued that the actions of Iraqi authorities clearly violated the 1998 UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, which states that authorities have the responsibility to "allow internally displaced persons to return voluntarily, in safety and with dignity, to their homes or places of habitual residence, or to resettle voluntarily in another part of the country" (OCHA, 1998: p. 14). Regardless of legality, because of the "rushed closure of camps and the pressure on IDPs to return to their

areas of origin” returns carried the “potential to exacerbate existing tensions” in receiving communities (Garcia, 2021: p. 2).

Given that improvements in communal dynamics did not motivate the government’s decision to close camps, the closure campaign provides a unique context to estimate the consequences of return. As one iNGO employee succinctly explained during fieldwork, “I would say [camp closures] were random, the focus of government was to close [the camps]...It was a random selection with no readiness of IDPs to go to their area of origin; abrupt and very random” (Interview #22). While the timing of individual camp closures was orthogonal to trends in local conditions, this does not mean the broader policy decision lacked logic.

The Iraqi government did not provide an official rationale for the camp closure campaign, but local reporting and original interviews suggest several plausible explanations for the adoption of Resolution 16. First, the government of Iraq may have sought to hastily transition to a post-conflict state, one perceived as stable enough to foster strong international relationships, trade, foreign direct investments, and tourism. Closing the camps removed the most visible vestige of the IS conflict, signaling Iraq’s transition from conflict to stability. Second, the decision may have been an anticipatory response to a drawdown of international funding. In 2022, the United Nations would transition Iraq from emergency to development aid, affecting the Iraqi government’s ability to manage displacement (OCHA, 2023; Travers, 2023). The government may have opted to close the camps preemptively, before the burden of camp management fell almost entirely on domestic resources. Finally, electoral motivations might have driven the closures. By pushing displaced families, which in federal Iraq were primarily Sunni Arabs, to their areas of origin before the October 2021 parliamentary election, the closures may have aimed to tilt election results in favor of Arabs vis-a-vis minority groups (Alloush 2022; Focus Group #6).

4 Research Design

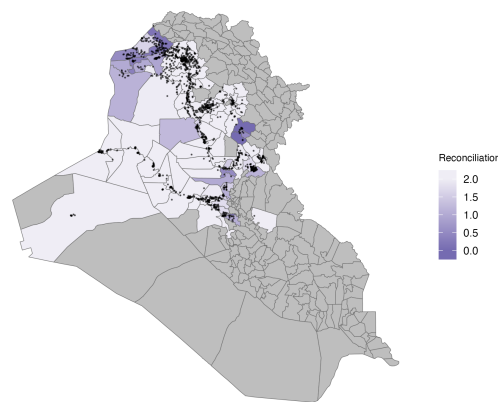
Estimating the effect of IDP return presents a significant inferential challenge: migrants have agency over when to return, rendering return endogenous to social cohesion. Communities experiencing higher return numbers are likely more secure, further along in reconstruction, and exhibit higher levels of social cohesion, as returnees self-select based on local conditions. The context of the camp closures and ensuing forced returns provides leverage to overcome this hurdle. To do so, I employ a multi-method design (Seawright, 2016), combining two

complementary empirical strategies with qualitative data from original fieldwork. Below, I outline the data and estimation strategies for each analysis.

4.1 Community Level

I compile a quarterly panel dataset spanning from 2019 to 2021, leveraging data from IOM. The unit of analysis is the fourth administrative division, corresponding to villages in rural areas and neighborhoods in urban centers. This panel includes only locations directly affected by the IS insurgency.⁶ Figure 3 visualizes the communities included in the panel and Table A-2 presents descriptive statistics.

Figure 3: Social Cohesion Prior to the Camp Closures



Note: Subdistricts are shaded with the mean reconciliation variable from the Return Index (February 2019). Subdistricts shown in grey are out of sample. Black dots indicate the locations of communities where data was collected.

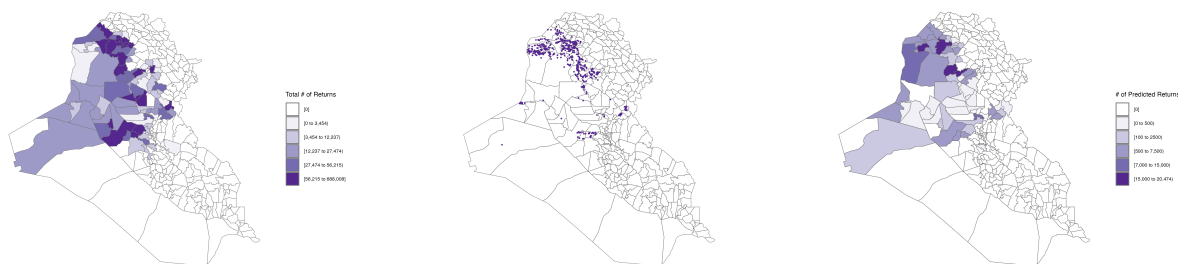
Measuring Social Cohesion To measure social cohesion, I use the Return Index, an elite survey assessing the severity of structural, security, and social conditions in return areas. IOM draws on its large network of “community leaders”, including village elders (referred to as “mukhtars” in Arabic), representatives of specific communities, and local informal authorities who act as registrars for their communities.⁷ The questionnaire was designed

⁶IOM collects data on 3,000 locations across 105 districts in 18 governorates. Since the sample focuses on communities impacted by displacement, there is minimal variation in the extensive margin of violence and out-migration. All included communities experienced IS activity and/or the counterinsurgency campaign, leading to widespread displacement at some point during the conflict.

⁷While the temporal and geographic coverage of the Return Index is extensive – a condition necessary for my primary identification strategy – it admittedly only includes a subset of the population: elites. To address

to elicit objective, observable responses from these elites to evaluate community dynamics. Indicators measure the availability of livelihood opportunities, access to basic services, and perceptions of safety and social cohesion. The primary instrument for measuring social cohesion asks whether “this community needs reconciliation with other ethno-religious/tribal communities in the sub-district to achieve peaceful coexistence and prevent further violence.” Reconciliation is therefore my primary outcome of interest for the community level analysis and the remaining variables are used as covariates.⁸ Figure 3 visualizes the geographic distribution of this reconciliation measure.

Figure 4: IDP Returns in Iraq



Note: The left panel depicts the return stock, shading subdistricts by the total number of returnees from the Return Index in February 2019. The middle panel presents the endogenous explanatory variable, marking with purple dots locations that reported camp closure-induced returns. The right panel shows my treatment variable, shading subdistricts by the predicted number of returns based on camp residents’ location of origin.

Measuring IDP Return Rich displacement data in Iraq provides granular estimates of return, enabling the construction of three key variables: the stock of returnees, whether a community was affected by camp closures, and a predicted return measure. Figure 4 visualizes the geographic distribution of these variables.

I begin with IOM “stock” data, which records the total number of migrants who have returned to a given location (village or neighborhood). This data, generated through the same process as the return index, offers a cross-sectional snapshot of returnees, defined as “those displaced since January 2014 who have returned to their location of origin [village or neighborhood], irrespective of whether they have returned to their former residence or

this limitation, I supplement this analysis with a separate respondent-level analysis using representative data.

⁸Section A.1 provides additional details on the Return Index, including the wording and coding of all survey instruments.

another shelter type.”⁹ This stock data is used throughout the paper to quantify displacement trends, explore correlates of return numbers, and serve as a control in the analysis. Unfortunately it does not capture the number of new arrivals within discrete time periods and therefore cannot be used to estimate the effects of return.¹⁰

IOM data does, however, provide a measure of whether a given community was affected by the camp closures. This endogenous variable indicates whether any returnees in the community were forced to return due to the camp closure policy. This binary variable takes a value of one at the first instance when a community receives any camp closure-induced returns.¹¹

Finally, I construct a measure of predicted returns, the treatment variable for my empirical strategy. To do so, I use the Camp Profiling Assessment which provides the pre-conflict location of origin for IDP’s residing in formal camps. The Camp Profiling Assessment is administrative data collected by Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM), a joint humanitarian coordination mechanism of UNHCR and IOM. CCCM maintains a formal registry of camp residents and conducts biannual representative surveys to assess the demographics and needs of IDPs residing in all formal camps in Iraq. This data records a detailed history of migration for a given respondent, including their sub-district of origin prior to the conflict.¹² Using the earliest available survey that includes the location of origin variable at the sub-district level, I calculate the number of returnees a given sub-district would be exposed to if all camp residents were to return to their place of origin upon the camp’s closure.

⁹Apart from random measurement error, systematic inaccuracies in the data seem unlikely. Several observations bolster confidence in the quality of the data. First, IOM contacts local authorities for return numbers, often relying on the same individuals who maintain the Ministry of Migration’s official list of returnees used for IDP registration and assistance. Second, during fieldwork, I consulted multiple independent sources, including local researchers, NGOs, and academics, who had verified the data’s accuracy through field visits and cross-referenced observations. Finally, IOM Iraq pioneered its migration tracking tool in December 2013, a model now adopted by the UN in other country offices, including those in Sudan, Afghanistan, and Ukraine.

¹⁰The optimal measure of return migration would be administrative “flow” data, tracking internal migrants’ movements into and out of subdistricts. Such data is unavailable in Iraq. While I could estimate return flows by first-differencing the return stock, I avoid this approach due to issues outlined in Shaver et al. (2024).

¹¹Ideally, I would have a continuous measure of this endogenous variable, tracking each camp resident’s movement after closure. The binary measure serves the same purpose but is less precise.

¹²Section A.2 provides additional details about the CCCM data.

Empirical Strategy My identification strategy exploits the random timing of camp closures within a generalized difference-in-differences framework. My design resembles Sviatschi (2022) who studies the consequences of deportations, leveraging the timing of a deportation campaign and geographic variation in deportees’ birth municipalities. In my set-up, I leverage the timing of the camp closure campaign and geographic variation in IDP’s pre-conflict location of origin.¹³

A community’s cross-sectional exposure is determined by the number of its members residing in formal camps across Iraq before the closures. The treatment is then incrementally turned on as camps precipitously close across Iraq increasing its intensity. Bureaucratic delays and pandemic-related disruptions make the idiosyncratic timing of individual camp closures plausibly exogenous. I construct this staggered and continuous variable with the following equation:

$$\text{Predicted Returns}_{st} = \sum_k \text{IDPs in Camp}_{ks} \times \text{Camp Closed}_{kt} \quad (1)$$

where

- IDPs in Camp_{ks} is the number of IDPs in camp k who are originally from subdistrict s , provided by the Camp Profiling Assessment;
- Camp Closed_{kt} is a binary indicator whether camp k closed in survey round t .

Variation in my treatment variable, predicted returns, is driven by original displacement patterns into specific camps, the number of individuals who returned home long before the closures, and the timing of individual camp closures. Importantly, each camp housed a diverse population of migrants from various locations across Iraq. The exogenous timing of individual camp closures then led residents to return to multiple different locations, alleviating any concern that the closure timing of an individual camp was correlated with local conditions in areas of origin.

Since the assignment of cross-sectional exposure is not random, my estimation strategy

¹³My approach is similar to a shift-share design. As summarized by Borusyak, Hull and Jaravel (2024), shift-share designs can rely either on the exogeneity of the temporal shock (shift) or the cross-sectional exposure (share) for identification. My design relies on the exogeneity of the shift not the share.

accounts for this by comparing social cohesion in treated units (communities with a high number of individuals living in camps) before and after the camp closures while differencing out the trajectory in untreated units (communities with little or no members living in camps). This design accounts for differential factors influencing return by imputing the counterfactual trajectory from untreated units, mitigating endogeneity. The difference-in-differences approach is estimated using the following reduced-form equation:

$$Y_{jst} = \alpha_s + \lambda_t + \delta \text{Predicted Returns}_{st} + (N_j \times \lambda_t) + \epsilon \quad (2)$$

where

- Y_{jst} captures social cohesion in location j in subdistrict s for a given survey round t ;¹⁴
- $\text{Predicted Returns}_{st}$ captures the predicted number of returnees to sub-district s in round t which is normalized by the sub-district population and z-standardized;
- α_s are subdistrict (unit) and λ_t are round (time) fixed effects;
- N_j is a matrix of pre-treatment (time invariant) location-level characteristics interacted with round fixed effects;¹⁵
- ϵ are robust, sub-district-clustered standard errors.

This design estimates the intent-to-treat (ITT) effect, lending a credible estimate of the social consequences of the camp closures. I adopt this approach for two reasons. First, a high-quality measure of the ideal, endogenous variables (administrative, flow data on actual returns) is unavailable. Second, the ITT has the advantage of accounting for non-compliance. Even in the context of the camp closures where many migrants were physically forced home, individuals facing insurmountable barriers to return may have opted for secondary displacement instead of returning. As a result, some sub-districts may not fully comply with their treatment assignment. By using predicted rather than actual returns, this approach provides a more conservative estimate mitigating the bias from this selection out of treatment. As a complimentary strategy, I also estimate the local average treatment effect (LATE) in Table A-9 by instrumenting the indicator for whether a community received any closure-induced

¹⁴The panel includes Rounds 3 through 12 of the Return Index covering the period from February 2019 to December 2021. The reconciliation survey question was not asked in Rounds 1 and 2.

¹⁵Controls are: returns (stock), return rate, rurality, employment, access to civil documentation, access to electricity, access to water, housing destruction, access to schools, access to health care, number of security actors, militia presence, movement restrictions, and unexplored ordinances.

returns with the predicted returns variable.

The difference-in-differences design relies on the standard parallel trends assumption: social cohesion in communities with a high number of individuals living in camps would have followed the same trajectory as communities with little or no members still living in camps if not for the camp closures. While I cannot directly test this assumption (as the counterfactual scenario is unobservable), I assess the presence of parallel pre-trends using an event-study model. Figure A-4 shows that trends were parallel in the pre-period, providing support for the assumption.

Qualitative evidence provides additional support for my identification strategy, specifically that there was no anticipation. Fieldwork revealed that receiving communities did not anticipate the timing of closure induced returnees. For their to be temporal spillover locations would have to anticipate the treatment timing *and* adjust their outcomes accordingly. This assumption of no anticipation is reasonable, as even migrants themselves were not preparing for the camp closures. As one migrant explained, “A week or more before the decision to officially [close the camp], we heard that the camp would be closed. We thought it was a common rumor... and we did not believe it, until we received the official notification a few days before returning” (Interview #27). A humanitarian worker similarly noted that even organizations responsible for facilitating returns were not informed of closure dates (Interview #24). The Iraqi government, aware that closures could attract criticism from media and organizations such as the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) for violating voluntary return standards, had incentives to withhold closure dates for individual camps.

4.2 Respondent Level

As an additional testing strategy, I use a high-quality, representative survey to measure social cohesion at the individual level. This survey, the Conflict and Stabilization Monitoring Framework (CSMF), collected data from Nineveh, the governorate most affected by displacement, which accounts for approximately 39% of all returns and 71% of returns resulting from the camp closure policy (IOM, 2021). The survey was specifically designed to track the post-conflict trajectory of social cohesion in communities that experienced IS occupation, exhibited ethnic and religious diversity, and faced complex migration and return dynamics. It is representative of the ethno-religious groups (i.e., Arabs, Kurds, Yazidis, Turkmen, and

Christians) and gender distribution within each sub-district’s population, based on a three-step weighting methodology. Social cohesion is measured using five outcomes: inter-group reconciliation, intra-group reconciliation, trust in neighbors, feelings of mistrust, and feelings of judgment. Each outcome is originally coded on a 4-point Likert scale, but all variables are z-standardized to facilitate interpretation.¹⁶

The approach with this data is straightforward. This cross-sectional data was collected in November and December of 2021 after the camp closure campaign.¹⁷ Therefore, high-quality measures of social cohesion are regressed on the endogenous variable, effectively comparing respondent’s perceived social cohesion in locations that experienced camp closure returns to those that did not. This is estimated with the following ordinary least squares equation:

$$Y_{ji} = \alpha_s + \delta \text{Returns}_j + X_i + (N_j \times \lambda_t) + \epsilon \quad (3)$$

where

- Y_{ji} captures various outcomes which quantify respondent i ’s perceptions of social cohesion in location j ;
- Returns_j is the binary, endogenous variable indicating whether location j received any camp closure induced returns;¹⁸
- α_s are subdistrict fixed effects;
- X_i is a matrix of respondent level demographic controls.
- N_j is a matrix of pre-treatment location-level characteristics from the Return Index;¹⁹

¹⁶Section A.3 provides additional details about the sampling strategy and survey instruments.

¹⁷The lack of granularity in the predicted returns variable and limited geographic coverage in the CMSF data prevent using the same approach for both the community-level and respondent-level analyses. The predicted returns variable can only be defined at the subdistrict level, and the CMSF survey covers only 9 subdistricts. Additionally, rounds of the CMSF data collected prior to the camp closure cannot be used for a simple pre-post design (2x2 difference-in-differences) due to differences in the sampling frame and the lack of standardized survey instruments across rounds.

¹⁸This variable is coded directly from the survey. Because the survey is representative, the sampling strategy should capture all members of the community. A location is coded as treated if any community member reported having last lived in a camp and returned in 2019 or later, suggesting their return was plausibly induced by the camp closure policy. These “returnees” are then removed from the sample to ensure that I am estimating their direct effect on the receiving community, not the effect of the demographic shift their arrival introduces.

¹⁹Controls are: returns (stock), return rate, rurality, employment, access to civil documentation, access to electricity, access to water, housing destruction, access to schools, access to health care, number of security

- ϵ are robust, location-clustered standard errors.

This strategy relies on the strong assumption of conditional unconfoundedness; after controlling for a rich, matrix of individual and community-level covariates I assume omitted variable bias is negligible. To formally probe this assumption, I implement a number of sensitivity analyses alongside my results.

4.3 Qualitative Data

I also collected qualitative data, which helped shape my theory and supplement the quantitative evidence. The first round, conducted in August 2023, was exploratory and inductive, aimed at generating testable hypotheses, illuminating potential causal mechanisms, and assessing the credibility of the design’s identifying assumptions. During this fieldwork across northern Iraq, in the governorates of Nineveh, Dohuk, Erbil, Kirkuk, and Sulaimaniyah, I interviewed three target populations: IDPs in remaining camps in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), practitioners involved in migration management and data collection, and members of receiving communities.

Location (Subdistrict, District)	Ethnicity	Urbanization	Returns (Closures)	Social Cohesion	Safety Concerns	Economic Recovery	Return Rate	IS Victimization	Controlled by IS
Al-Qayara, Mosul	Sunni Arab	Rural Villages	Yes	Low	Low	Complete	All	Medium	Yes
Markaz Telafar, Telafar	Mixed: Turkmen, Arab, Kurdish	Towns & Urban Center	Yes	Medium	Low	Partial	Most	Medium	Yes
Qayrawan, Sinjar	Mixed: Yazidi, Arab, Kurdish	Rural Villages & Towns	Yes	High	Medium	Low	Few	High	Yes

Table 1: Community Characteristics in Selected Subdistricts

The second round, conducted in June 2024, focused on probing the causal mechanism of the theory. This qualitative approach was not designed to independently test the theory but to offer suggestive evidence for the proposed causal process and mechanism. Based on indicators from the Return Index, I selected three sub-districts across distinct districts in Nineveh Governorate, all affected by closure-induced returns but differing in levels of social cohesion. This design enables a comparison between two ‘positive’ cases, where returns seemingly harmed social cohesion to varying degrees, and one ‘negative’ case, where they appeared not to. These communities were also selected to capture demographic variation, enabling exploration of how community dynamics shape the consequences of return. Table 1 provides details on these cases. After selecting the cases, I conducted qualitative data actors, militia presence, movement restrictions, and unexplored ordinances.

collection (semi-structured interviews and focus groups) through a local firm. The field team, native to the districts where they collected data, leveraged their community connections to recruit participants who were either recent returnees or integrated members of the community.

Across both rounds, I conducted 41 semi-structured interviews and 11 focus groups, involving 81 participants. Participants included local government employees, teachers, farmers, NGO workers, lawyers, shop keeper, homemakers, and retirees, with significant age and gender representation.²⁰

Ethical Considerations This research was guided by the principle of “do no harm” (Wood, 2006), drawing on the APSA Ethics Guide and Cronin-Furman and Lake (2018) “Questions for Consideration by Scholars Embarking on Field Research.” The quantitative portion analyzed existing survey data from USIP and IOM; I have no formal relationship with either organization, avoiding concerns of “dual-hatting” (Parkinson, 2025). I did, however, have multiple in-person meetings with the organizations in order to understand the data generating processes. The data contained no identifying or sensitive information, and any respondent-level datasets were shared under an “Analysis of Existing Data” agreement between the organizations and the author’s university IRB.

Qualitative data was collected not only because quantitative approaches have limits in examining complex phenomena like return dynamics, but also because the individuals we study deserve the opportunity to share their own perspectives. This, however, requires additional ethical care. For the fieldwork, I worked with—and fairly compensated—a local translator whose full-time role is assisting researchers and journalists. Their intimate knowledge of the local context informed which topics and participants were appropriate, and I maintained conservative safety and ethical standards, always deferring to their recommendations. Informed consent was obtained at the start of each interview, with participants clearly told that the study was voluntary, uncompensated, and unaffiliated with the government or NGOs. Interviews took the form of “life narratives,” giving participants control over which periods or topics they wished to discuss, recognizing the potential sensitivities linked to conflict and displacement. Section A.4 provides a thorough consideration of research ethics.

²⁰Section A.4 provides additional details about the qualitative data including and the demographics of interviewees. Interviews were approved by Duke University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) on July 22, 2023 (Protocol Number 1506016040).

5 Results

5.1 Main Results

What was the effect of camp closure induced returns on the receiving community? Table 1 presents the community-level analysis. Following Equation (2), I regress the survey instrument measuring community reconciliation on the predicted return measure. Column 1 displays the baseline specification, a TWFE model with no control variables. Subsequent columns iteratively add pre-period covariates interacted with round fixed effects. Column 2 controls for community demographics, including the number of IDPs who returned before the closures. Since return dynamics are shaped by local conditions, controlling for pre-treatment returns accounts for any unmeasured factors influencing migrant returns. Columns 3–4 explicitly controls for such factors. Column 3 adds controls for economic development and the availability of goods and services, and column 4 introduces a matrix of structural security controls, including the presence of non-state security actors.

The coefficients are negative, statistically significant, and stable across specifications. A one standard deviation increase in the predicted returns measure lowers the probability of community reconciliation by 1.3–1.6 percentage points. Since the dependent variable is a binary,²¹ this means that an influx of 102 returnees, per 10,000 residents, to a sub-district is associated with a 1.3–1.6 percentage point higher probability of a community reporting a lack of reconciliation.²² Returns impaired the process of reconciliation, negatively effecting social cohesion.

I now turn to the respondent-level analysis, estimating Equation (3). Table 3 presents the effects of closure-induced returns on five indicators capturing different dimensions of social cohesion. All outcomes are coded such that higher values indicate greater social cohesion and are standardized to have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1. All specifications include both respondent-level demographic controls and community-level controls from the DTM Return Index. This accounts not only for individual characteristics that may shape attitudes toward conflict and return (age, gender, income, education, occupation, ethno-religious identity, and head of household status), but also for community-level factors

²¹For interpretability, in this main analysis I collapse the dependent variable into a binary indicator (1 = no, reconciliation is not needed).

²²Before standardization, the predicted returns variable (normalized by population) has a standard deviation of 0.0102.

Table 2: Return Negatively Affects Community Level Social Cohesion

	Reconciliation			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Predicted Returns	-0.013** (0.005)	-0.014** (0.006)	-0.016** (0.007)	-0.016** (0.006)
Observations	15300	15300	15300	15300
Clusters	92	92	92	92
PARAMETERS				
Subdistrict FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Round FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Migration Controls		Yes	Yes	Yes
Development Controls			Yes	Yes
Security Controls				Yes

Note: * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$. Robust standard errors clustered by subdistrict are in parentheses. Reconciliation is a binary dependent variable. Predicted returns is the continuous, staggered treatment variable based on camp residents' location of origin prior to camp closures. Migration controls are the prior number of returns (stock) and the return rate. Development controls are rurality, employment, access to civil documentation, access to electricity, access to water, housing destruction, access to schools, and access to health care. Security control are the number of security actors, militia presence, movement restrictions, and unexplored ordinances. All controls are measured in the pre-treatment period and are interacted with round-specific fixed effects.

(security and development indicators) that could induce endogeneity in return patterns. The models additionally control the number of people who returned to the community prior to camp closures, helping to absorb unmeasured factors driving return dynamics. Geographic fixed effects at the subdistrict level are also included to account for unobserved heterogeneity, effectively comparing respondents within the same subdistrict.

Column 1 analyzes inter-group reconciliation, mirroring the community-level analysis in Table 2, but relying on responses from a representative sample of community members. The results are consistent. Respondents were asked how necessary reconciliation was between their social component and others in the community. The estimated effect of closure-induced returns is -0.224 , indicating that exposure to closure-induced returns is associated with a 0.224 standard deviation decrease in reconciliation. Substantively, this corresponds to a 6.6 percentage point increase in the probability that a respondent reports reconciliation as necessary (collapsing the 4-point scale into a binary where “very necessary” or “somewhat necessary” = 1). Return also had a negative effect on perceptions of being mistrusted by

others (column 4). Closure-induced returns increased this sense of mistrust by 0.318 standard deviations, raising the likelihood that respondents felt others distrusted members of their social component.

Table 3: Return Negatively Affects Respondent Level Social Cohesion

	Reconciliation (between)	Reconciliation (within)	Trust (in others)	Mistrusted Less (by others)	Judged Less (by others)
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Closure-Induced Returns	-0.224** (0.089)	-0.101 (0.127)	0.000 (0.071)	-0.296** (0.126)	-0.003 (0.164)
Observations	1354	1362	1371	1291	1362
Clusters	72	72	72	72	72
PARAMETERS					
Subdistrict FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Demographic Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Migration Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Development Index	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Security Index	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Note: * p <.10, ** p <.05, *** p <.01. Robust standard errors, clustered by village, are in parentheses. Outcome variables, originally measured on four-point Likert scales, are z-standardized. Demographic controls include respondents' gender, age, education, head of household status, occupation, income, and ethnicity. Migration controls include prior returns (stock) and the village return rate. The development index is the first principal component of rurality, employment, civil documentation access, electricity access, water access, housing destruction, school access, and health care access. The security index is the first principal component of security actors, militia presence, movement restrictions, and unexplored ordinances. All controls are measured pre-treatment. Estimates are weighted by sampling weights.

Return, however, does not appear to affect all dimensions of social cohesion. The estimated effects of return on intra-group reconciliation (column 2), trust in others (column 3), and feelings of judgment by others (column 5) are close to zero and not statistically significant. That being said, additional analyses disaggregating return by displacement timing in Table 5 reveal negative effects on trust and feelings of judgment. Yet across all specifications, return has no discernible effect on intra-group reconciliation. This is consistent with theoretical expectations. While return may generate fear and suspicion between groups, it is less likely to do so within groups. The social cohesion literature suggests that shared experiences of violence can actually strengthen intra-group bonds (Bauer et al., 2016; Fiedler, 2023), making it unlikely that return would erode cohesion among individuals who share a common identity.

Robustness & Threats to Inference

The main threat to inference is the potential endogeneity of return and local conditions. If treated and untreated communities followed parallel trends prior to treatment, then the community-level estimation strategy addresses this concern. Although graphical evidence supports this assumption (Table A-4), it may remain strong to assume that, absent camp closures, affected and unaffected communities would have followed similar trajectories. To bolster credibility, I also show that results hold under a conditional parallel trends assumption. Estimates remain robust even after controlling for pre-closure return levels and structural covariates capturing return pull factors. These controls likely absorb much of the unobserved confounding, as the same factors influencing early returns likely shaped return during the camp closure period.

I also employ additional estimation strategies to ensure that my results are robust and not driven by potential violations of this assumption or by the specifics of my primary estimation strategy, two-way fixed effects (TWFE). These include matching treated and control communities on observables before applying TWFE (Table A-8), using generalized synthetic control (Figure A-5), implementing a two-stage least squares (2SLS) IV estimator (Table A-9), dichotomizing the continuous treatment (Figure A-7), and applying alternative difference-in-differences estimators for staggered adoption (Figure A-7). Core results are robust to all alternative specifications.

The respondent-level analysis faces the same inferential challenge but relies on the strong assumption of conditional independence: after controlling for observed confounders, return is assumed to affect outcomes only through its treatment effect. Several pieces of evidence support this. First, results are robust when controlling for prior return levels, which likely capture much unmeasured confounding. Second, any remaining bias likely attenuates estimates toward zero, as return is more likely in socially cohesive communities—biasing negative effects upward. The reported estimates are therefore conservative. Finally, sensitivity analysis in Table A-10 shows that omitted variable bias would need to be substantial to nullify the results. Overall, findings are reasonably robust to concerns about omitted variable bias.

5.2 Causal Mechanism

The analysis above has established a negative relationship between IDP return and reconciliation. However, further evidence is needed to probe whether fear and suspicion is the mechanism underlying this relationship. The following section presents qualitative evidence from semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with both members of receiving communities affected by closure-induced return and migrants who were forced to return as a result of the closures.²³

Qualitative Evidence

Discussions with the community members began with an exploration of the dynamics before 2014 and how they defined reconciliation within their community. Across interviews, respondents recounted that before the arrival of IS, neighbors treated each other with “love and affection,” and “the words of the sheikh and the elders were heard and obeyed by all members of the tribe” (Interview #30). The rise of IS and “the acts of sabotage carried out by Daesh” were described as the force that “negatively affected people’s thoughts and psychology” and tore “the fabric of the village” (Interviews #29, 31). Interviewees recounted how, upon the arrival of IS, some of their neighbors and extended family members joined the group. Trust within the community was completely eroded, with many feeling they “couldn’t trust people, even those closest to them, fearing they might be a source of Daesh” (Interview #31).

IS victimization provided the backdrop against which individuals defined social cohesion and reconciliation. One interviewee succinctly stated, “conflicts with Daesh are the first and the last reason that delays the reconciliation process” (Interview #30). Reconciliation, according to another, is achieved by “the return of life to how it was before the Daesh conflict... and trying to live in peace, security, and love, while erasing Daesh’s ideas from memory” (Interview #31). When discussing reconciliation, individuals referred to two groups, “community members and the returning families”, and identified this cleavage as the source of communal mistrust and tensions (Interview #29).

Two prominent themes emerged from the interviews. First, there was widespread fear among community members that returnees posed a security risk, potentially facilitating

²³Excerpts of significant quotes from these interviews can be found in Section A.5

the return of IS. One interviewee noted that community “tensions are mostly due to fear of the return of Daesh” and emphasized that “the community needs to feel safe above all else, especially after the return of Daesh families” (Interview #29). There was anxiety that returnees might be collaborating with IS sleeper cells to enable IS’s return (Focus Group #1 and Interview #28, 29). Community members explicitly feared that returnees could still be in contact with IS, providing them with coordinates and information about the village and security forces (Focus Group #1). Returnees were aware of these suspicions, frequently facing accusations from the receiving community of providing tips to IS cells in the desert (Focus Group #2, 3). In some cases, community members made threats toward returnees, sometimes following through by burning their tents or throwing stun grenades.

One community member described a distinct shift in community dynamics following the return of IDPs:

“Before their return, people in the community used to visit each other until late night.... After they returned people started to not going out during the night, fearing for their security, or some people were worried that they would be accused of burning tents of returnees. Parents also started to prevent their children from playing with the children of returnees, fearing social changes” (Focus Group #1).

Second, members of receiving communities were suspicious that returnees had been complicit in past violence against them, reactivating memories of their own victimization. Some saw returnees as “the reason for our displacement, the killing of our men, and the destruction of our homes and farms” (Focus Group #1). One focus group participant expressed the disdain and hatred he felt upon seeing returnees he believed were responsible for the violence: “How do you face the brother of the one who killed your brother, or the son of the one who killed your son? And you see a family who displaced your family and ruined your life” (Focus Group #1). Returnees themselves felt this stigmatization, expressing that the community did not trust them, felt they adopted extremist ideas, and considered them guilty for conflict-related violence (Focus Group #2). These beliefs precluded the community from integrating returnees into society.

In some cases, guilt was attributed to returnees who were family members of former IS fighters. In other cases, returnees were unfairly stigmatized without any connection to the armed group. Community members expressed that reconciliation has not been achieved

because “the returning families are still viewed as Daesh families and as murderers and criminals...even if they are not guilty” (Interview #31). The village saw “all people affiliated with Daesh as enemies, even those who have not been involved with Daesh” (Interview #29).

This stigma often arose from original displacement patterns. One respondent explained, “when Daesh entered the region, some people stayed in their homes while others joined Daesh. This is why there are tensions between people...” (Interview #32). Those who lived under IS control are assumed to have been complicit with extremism. One community member believed this population was satisfied with IS’ control. “They just watched and did not lift a finger to stop it” (Focus Group #1). This is the “guilt by location” dynamic (expressed clearly in Interviews #39, 40, 41), which particularly stigmatizes Sunni Muslims who lived under IS control despite witnessing the group’s atrocious actions.

IDP return, however, was not universally harmful across all communities. Responses varied depending on the location of data collection. In some communities, return did not disrupt social dynamics, even amid camp closures. One respondent from Telafar, a more urban area that experienced relatively less victimization, remarked, “we hope that all families will return to their homes because it will lead to stability in all aspects, if appropriate services are provided to all citizens” (Focus Group #6). This dynamic differed sharply in Sinjar, where respondents described heightened tension and fear following returns. Sinjar, known for the extreme levels of violence perpetrated against the Yazidi minority, remained deeply scarred by its past. In Al-Qayara, a Sunni Arab community, the dynamics were distinct again. While not marked by the same kind of sectarian trauma, fear and suspicion were widespread there due to the continued presence of IS cells in nearby mountains. Overall, the impact of returnees depended largely on whether the community received IS stigmatized individuals and the extent of their prior victimization by IS. I now examine these sources of heterogeneity quantitatively.

Quantitative Evidence

I begin by examining Hypothesis 1a, which posits that individuals who lived under IS territorial control are stigmatized, and that their return triggers fear and suspicion, driving the negative effects of return. Table 4 confirms this expectation. Using the camp profiling data, I disaggregate the predicted returns variable using on a survey question asking individuals about the date of their initial displacement. I categorize individuals into two groups: those

who fled before IS established territorial sovereignty (“Pre-Occupation Migrants”) and those who lived under IS control and fled later in the conflict (“Post-Occupation Migrants”).²⁴ This creates two separate treatment variables: predicted returns of “Pre-Occupation Migrants” and predicted returns of “Post-Occupation Migrants.”

Consistent with my proposed mechanism, the negative effect of returns is driven entirely by the return of “Post-Occupation Migrants”, those who lived under IS territorial control. Table 4 displays these results. As a benchmark, panel A reproduces my fully specified model from Table 2, where the predicted returns variable is not disaggregated. Panel B estimates the effect of “Post-Occupation Migrants” returning, while panel C examines the effect of “Pre-Occupation Migrants” returning. Notably, there is no significant effect for the “Pre-Occupation Migrants” treatment variable. The coefficient is near zero and precisely estimated. This lack of effect is not due to insufficient statistical power, as 59% of the sample consists of migrants who did not live under IS control.²⁵ The return of these individuals is not associated with decreased reconciliation. Remarkably, the baseline estimate (panel A) remains nearly unchanged when the treatment is redefined to include only “Post-Occupation Migrants” (panel B). Thus, the negative effect of returns on social cohesion operates exclusively through the return of those who lived under IS territorial control.

I now turn to the respondent-level analysis, again disaggregating the treatment variable. Table 5 presents the results. Panel A reproduces the results from Table 3. Based again on migrants’ initial displacement dates, panel B restricts the treatment to returnees who presumably lived under IS territorial control, while panel C focuses on returnees who never lived under IS control. Overall, the results are consistent with the community-level analysis. The consequences of return appear to be driven by the return of stigmatized migrants. In panel B, the magnitude of the treatment effect increases across most outcomes, and the standard errors shrink, yielding statistically significant effects on intra-group reconciliation, trust in others, perceived mistrust by others, and judgment by others.

Until now, this article has intentionally bracketed off a discussion of ethno-religious identity for the sake of parsimony. While sect is important, in many contexts (but not all) displacement timing largely subsumes group identity. In a conflict involving a violent ex-

²⁴Following Revkin (2018), I use March 1, 2015, the date when IS imposed its de facto travel ban, as the cutoff. Revkin (2018) refers to these respective groups as “leavers” and “stayers”.

²⁵Figure A-2 visualizes the distribution of the original displacement timing for migrants in the Camp Profiling Assessment.

Table 4: Original Displacement Timing Conditions Community Level Social Cohesion

	Reconciliation
	(1)
<i>Panel A: All Migrants</i>	
Predicted Returns	-0.016** (0.006)
<i>Panel B: Post-Occupation Migrants</i>	
Predicted Returns	-0.015** (0.006)
<i>Panel C: Pre-Occupation Migrants</i>	
Predicted Returns	0.001 (0.009)
Observations	15300
Units	1530
PARAMETERS	
Subdistrict FE	Yes
Round FE	Yes
Migration Controls	Yes
Development Controls	Yes
Security Controls	Yes

Note: * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$. Robust standard errors clustered by subdistrict are in parentheses. Reconciliation is a binary dependent variable. Predicted returns is the continuous, staggered treatment variable based on camp residents' location of origin prior to camp closures. Demographic controls are the prior number of returns (stock) and the return rate. Migration controls are rurality, employment, access to civil documentation, access to electricity, access to water, housing destruction, access to schools, and access to health care. Security control are the number of security actors, militia presence, movement restrictions, and unexplored ordinances. All controls are measured in the pre-treatment period and are interacted with round-specific fixed effects.

tremist group, civilians must generally belong to the actor's in-group in order to live under their territorial control. As a result, displacement timing is only meaningful for individuals in the perpetrator's in-group, and the negative effects of return only emerges from returnees who share the perpetrator's broader identity. In other words, identity is a necessary but not sufficient cue for communities to identify perpetrators; location-based heuristics help sharpen these perceptions.

In the Iraqi conflict, the primary source of division was religious rather than ethnic, separating Sunni Muslims from non-Sunni groups such as Shia Muslims and Christians.²⁶

²⁶IS was primarily a Sunni Arab group, but it also recruited other Sunnis, including foreign fighters as

Table 5: Original Displacement Timing Conditions Respondent Level Social Cohesion

	Reconciliation (between)	Reconciliation (within)	Trust (in others)	Mistrusted Less (by others)	Judged Less (by others)
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
<i>Panel A: All Migrants</i>					
Closure-Induced Returns	-0.224** (0.089)	-0.101 (0.127)	0.000 (0.071)	-0.296** (0.126)	-0.003 (0.164)
<i>Panel B: Post-Occupation Migrants</i>					
Closure-Induced Returns	-0.412*** (0.151)	0.035 (0.276)	-0.336* (0.191)	-0.862** (0.403)	-0.750** (0.322)
<i>Panel C: Pre-Occupation Migrants</i>					
Closure-Induced Returns	-0.192* (0.100)	-0.106 (0.141)	-0.019 (0.091)	-0.330** (0.152)	0.019 (0.193)
Observations	1354	1362	1371	1291	1362
Clusters	72	72	72	72	72
PARAMETERS					
Subdistrict FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Demographic Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Migration Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Development Index	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Security Index	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Note: * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$. Robust standard errors, clustered by village, are in parentheses. Outcome variables, originally measured on four-point Likert scales, are z-standardized. Demographic controls include respondents' gender, age, education, head of household status, occupation, income, and ethnicity. Migration controls include prior returns (stock) and the village return rate. The development index is the first principal component of rurality, employment, civil documentation access, electricity access, water access, housing destruction, school access, and health care access. The security index is the first principal component of security actors, militia presence, movement restrictions, and unexplored ordinances. All controls are measured pre-treatment. Estimates are weighted by sampling weights.

Persecuted minorities such as Christians or Yazidis were unlikely to remain under IS' control, and therefore were less likely to be stigmatized or induce fear and suspicion upon return.

Respondent level data confirms this dynamic. While not all returnees in the survey are Sunni, all returnees who presumably lived under IS' control are Sunni. Table A-11 examines the role of identity by estimating the effect of closure-induced return of Sunni (i.e. Arab, Kurd, and Turkmen) vs. non-Sunni (i.e. Yazidi, Christian, Shabak, and Shia) migrants. As expected, negative effects are driven exclusively by returning Sunnis, while returns of non-Sunnis have null or even positive effects on social cohesion. This is also corroborated by the qualitative data.

well as Kurdish and Turkmen Iraqis.

I finally turn to Hypothesis 1b, the last test of the mechanism. Hypothesis 1b posits that prior violence within a community conditions the effect of return. In Table 6 I examine the heterogeneous effects of returns by exposure to violence. I interact the predicted returns variable with the number of IS-perpetrated civilian fatalities in a sub-district, as recorded by the Uppsala Conflict Data Georeferenced Event Dataset (UCDP-GED).²⁷ The victimization variable is normalized by the sub-district population and z-standardized.

	Reconciliation
	(1)
Predicted Returns	-0.021*** (0.004)
Predicted Returns X IS Victimization	-0.014*** (0.005)
Observations	15300
Unites	1530
PARAMETERS	
Village FE	Yes
Round FE	Yes
Migration Controls	Yes
Development Controls	Yes
Security Controls	Yes

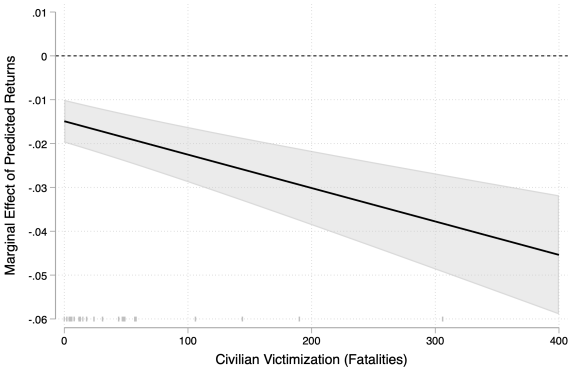


Figure 5: The Marginal Effect of Return

Table 6: The Effect of Return is Conditioned by Past Violence

The interaction term in Table 6 is negative and statistically significant, indicating that the consequences of return are more pronounced in communities with higher levels of past civilian victimization. A one-standard deviation increase in fatalities within a sub-district amplifies the negative effect of return by 0.014. To provide a more substantive interpretation, Figure 5 displays the marginal effect of return on social cohesion across varying levels of victimization. As the level of past violence increases, the marginal effect of return becomes more negative.

This finding lends further support to the fear and suspicion mechanism. Personal or communal experiences of victimization may heighten fears of future violence, raising psychological and social barriers to reconciliation. Returnees may be associated with past memories

²⁷Consistent with Weber (2025), I use UCDP-GED because it covers the full temporal scope of the conflict. An alternative source, the Armed Conflict Location Event Data (ACLED), did not begin collecting data until 2016 and therefore misses much of the early violence, including the infamous massacre of Yazidis in Sinjar in August 2014.

of violence, and their return may trigger concerns about renewed insecurity. These results offer suggestive evidence for this pathway. However, given the limitations of conflict event data in Iraq, particularly under-reporting, these results should be interpreted with caution. Future research should develop more direct tests of how exposure to past violence moderates reintegration.

5.3 Alternative Explanations

Three alternative mechanisms could explain the negative effect of IDP return on social cohesion. First, a large body of research argues that economic concerns drive negative attitudes toward migrants (e.g. Adida, Lo and Platas 2019; Bansak, Hainmueller and Hangartner 2016; Dancygier and Donnelly 2013; Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014). However, in the Iraqi context, there is little evidence that communities viewed returnees as a threat to the local economy or job market. Results from Table 4 suggest that the negative effect on social cohesion is driven solely by stigmatized returnees, “leavers”. If economic concerns were the primary cause of declining social cohesion, I would not expect this heterogeneity, as both groups plausibly pose a similar economic threat. Further, in both the qualitative fieldwork and responses to open-ended survey questions about return-related concerns, economic consequences were never mentioned.

Second, it is possible that community dynamics were disrupted because return migration was perceived as a threat to the demographic balance. Return remains a sensitive issue in Iraq, given IS’ efforts to cleanse minority populations from their homelands and the ongoing demographic tensions fueled by overlapping land claims among Sunni Arabs and minority groups. In Table A-12, I examine whether returns triggered demographic anxiety. Camp-closure returns are positively associated with increased discomfort about the current population composition. Although this concern did not emerge in qualitative interviews, demographic anxiety is a real and salient dynamic in Iraq. Importantly, this mechanism is not mutually exclusive with fear and suspicion. Return may heighten discomfort with the local demographic balance precisely because respondents fear and distrust members of other sects.

Third, it is possible that IDP return aggravated resentment over aid allocation. Host communities may perceive themselves as economically vulnerable and more deserving of aid than refugees (Breslawski, 2024). When aid is used to facilitate repatriation, return can trig-

ger communal tensions and conflict — particularly when governments prioritize assistance to returnees while neglecting host communities, leading to resentment (Schwartz, 2019). In the case of IDP return, this dynamic is present, but I argue that resentment is largely driven by fear and suspicion. My qualitative evidence from Iraq extends the existing literature, highlighting how compensation was often directed toward displaced families in camps without first addressing the losses suffered by host communities. This was seen as compensating perpetrators before victims. As one key informant explained: “It is illogical [for this community] to accept accused Daesh families and treat them well... [as] they have not been compensated for what they lost, and they feel unfair. Therefore, I see the return of these families as a great injustice to them and to the host community families who lost their men” (Interview #29). Because returnees are suspected of affiliation with IS, communities believe that the government is rewarding perpetrators while ignoring victims. Future research should further examine the links between return, aid allocation, and harm compensation.

6 Discussion and Conclusion

In this article, I advanced an informational theory of IDP return. I argued that the return of IDPs to their area of origin undermines social cohesion by introducing additional uncertainty into the post-conflict environment. For communities, reintegrating returnees is a risky decision, especially in locations that experienced high levels of victimization during the conflict. Locals may suspect returnees of being complicit in atrocities and fear that their return could facilitate renewed violence. However, wartime loyalties are often opaque. In a world of shifting populations, it is not always clear who supported the state and who sided with the insurgents. As a result, locals rely on heuristics. One key heuristic is displacement timing: individuals who lived under the control of an armed group are assumed to be more complicit in their terror. The return of this population is thus judged as threatening and sets back the process of restoring social cohesion, eroding interpersonal trust and reconciliation. Thus, I argued that fear and suspicion is the key mechanism driving the negative effect of IDP return on social cohesion.

Employing a mixed-methods approach, I tested this argument in Iraq. Using a difference-in-differences design, I showed that the government’s camp closure campaign negatively affected reconciliation. This effect was driven by returnees who previously lived under IS territorial control and was more pronounced in areas with higher levels of IS victimization. These findings are validated with additional survey evidence and multiple rounds of quali-

tative data collection, offering detailed insights into how fear and suspicion emerge during attempted reintegration.

I find evidence that IDP return negatively affects social cohesion; however, this does not mean return is universally harmful across all contexts. My argument is that when fear and suspicion of returnees are present, return will have negative effects — a dynamic most likely to arise in civil conflicts involving violent extremist groups, territorial control, and population sorting. In settings where such fear is and suspicion absent, return could have null or even positive effects, for example by signaling safety or facilitating aid. While I offer initial scope conditions, the next step is to theorize and test under which circumstances IDP return produces negative, null, or positive outcomes.

While this research contributes to the growing literature on social cohesion, return, and informational theories of conflict and forced displacement, it also carries clear policy implications for post-conflict migration management. Governments and humanitarian actors often prioritize return as the preferred “durable solution” for IDPs. This article joins Bradley (2018) and Orlans (2022) in challenging that notion. While the emphasis on return reflects the global framework for refugee repatriation, it sets a much higher bar: refugee return involves only repatriation, whereas IDP return demands going “home.” Return to the pre-conflict place of origin, “domicile return” (Bradley, 2018), is not a “natural or logical outcome in most post-conflict situations, nor does it have to mark a moment in time where mobility ends” (Orlans, 2022). Moreover, the majority of the world’s internal migrants do not wish to return to their pre-conflict communities (IOM, 2024). Encouraging involuntary return risks undermining, rather than supporting, post-conflict stability. Integration should be considered an equally viable — if not preferred — durable solution for IDPs. This has implications for international law and should shape how governments and INGOs design interventions, craft policies, and collect data.

References

- Abadie, Alberto. 2005. "Semiparametric difference-in-differences estimators." *The review of economic studies* 72(1):1–19.
- Adida, Claire L, Adeline Lo and Melina R Platas. 2019. "Americans preferred Syrian refugees who are female, English-speaking, and Christian on the eve of Donald Trump's election." *PloS one* 14(10):e0222504.
- Al-Khateeb, Firas. 2021. *Returning Iraqis face dire conditions following camp closures*. UN-HCR.
- Alloush, Basma. 2022. "Living in the shadows: Iraq's remaining displaced families." *War on the Rocks*.
- American Political Science Association. 2020. "Principles and guidance for human subjects research." *APSA*. April 20.
- Annan, Jeannie, Christopher Blattman, Dyan Mazurana and Khristopher Carlson. 2011. "Civil war, reintegration, and gender in Northern Uganda." *Journal of conflict resolution* 55(6):877–908.
- Arias, María Alejandra, Ana María Ibáñez and Pablo Querubin. 2014. "The desire to return during civil war: Evidence for internally displaced populations in Colombia." *Peace Economics, Peace Science and Public Policy* 20(1):209–233.
- Arjona, Ana, Nelson Kasfir and Zachariah Mampilly. 2015. *Rebel governance in civil war*. Cambridge University Press.
- Aymerich, Olga. 2020. "Community resilience and the return of Iraqi IDPs with perceived affiliation to the Islamic State." *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 39(4):552–563.
- Baker, Andrew C, David F Larcker and Charles CY Wang. 2022. "How much should we trust staggered difference-in-differences estimates?" *Journal of Financial Economics* 144(2):370–395.
- Balcells, Laia. 2012. "The consequences of victimization on political identities: Evidence from Spain." *Politics & Society* 40(3):311–347.
- Balcells, Laia. 2017. *Rivalry and revenge*. Cambridge University Press.

- Balcells, Laia. 2018. “Dynamics of internal resettlement during civil war: Evidence from Catalonia (1936–39).” *Journal of Peace Research* 55(2):236–251.
- Balcells, Laia and Abbey Steele. 2016. “Warfare, political identities, and displacement in Spain and Colombia.” *Political Geography* 51:15–29.
- Bansak, Kirk, Jens Hainmueller and Dominik Hangartner. 2016. “How economic, humanitarian, and religious concerns shape European attitudes toward asylum seekers.” *Science* 354(6309):217–222.
- Bauer, Michal, Christopher Blattman, Julie Chytilová, Joseph Henrich, Edward Miguel and Tamar Mitts. 2016. “Can war foster cooperation?” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 30(3):249–274.
- Bellows, John and Edward Miguel. 2009. “War and local collective action in Sierra Leone.” *Journal of public Economics* 93(11-12):1144–1157.
- Berman, Eli, Joseph H. Felter and Jacob H. Shapiro. 2015. “The Super Smart Way to Dismantle ISIS.” *The National Interest* .
- Blair, Christopher W. 2024. “Border fortification and legibility: Evidence from Afghanistan.” *American Journal of Political Science* .
- Blair, Christopher W., Benjamin C. Krick and Austin L. Wright. 2025. “Refugee Repatriation and Conflict: Evidence from the Maximum Pressure Sanction.” *Empirical Studies of Conflict Project Working Paper* (39).
- Blair, Christopher W, Guy Grossman and Jeremy M Weinstein. 2022. “Forced displacement and asylum policy in the developing world.” *International Organization* 76(2):337–378.
- Blattman, Christopher. 2009. “From violence to voting: War and political participation in Uganda.” *American political Science review* 103(2):231–247.
- Borusyak, Kirill, Peter Hull and Xavier Jaravel. 2024. A practical guide to shift-share instruments. Technical report National Bureau of Economic Research.
- Bradley, Megan. 2018. “Durable Solutions and the Right of Return for IDPs: Evolving Interpretations.” *International Journal of Refugee Law* 30(2):218–242.
URL: <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijrl/eev021>

- Breslawski, Jori. 2024. “Who Deserves Aid? Perceptions of Fairness in Contexts of Forced Displacement.” *World Development* 183:106710.
- Callaway, Brantly, Andrew Goodman-Bacon and Pedro HC Sant’Anna. 2024. Event Studies with a Continuous Treatment. In *AEA Papers and Proceedings*. Vol. 114 pp. 601–605.
- Callaway, Brantly and Pedro HC Sant’Anna. 2021. “Difference-in-differences with multiple time periods.” *Journal of econometrics* 225(2):200–230.
- Camarena, Kara Ross and Nils Hägerdal. 2020. “When do displaced persons return? Postwar migration among Christians in Mount Lebanon.” *American Journal of Political Science* 64(2):223–239.
- Cassar, Alessandra, Pauline Grosjean and Sam Whitt. 2013. “Legacies of violence: trust and market development.” *Journal of Economic Growth* 18:285–318.
- CCCM. 2019. *IDP Camp Directory: Comparative Dashboard and Camp Profiles Round XI*. REACH.
- CCCM. 2021. “Camp Departure Follow-up Survey: Sudden Camp Closure.” <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/90052>.
- Cengiz, Doruk, Arindrajit Dube, Attila Lindner and Ben Zipperer. 2019. “The effect of minimum wages on low-wage jobs.” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 134(3):1405–1454.
- Chatterjee, Shreya, Marine Gassier and Nikolas Myint. 2023. “Leveraging Social Cohesion for Development Outcomes.” *World Bank Policy Research Working Paper* .
- Chiu, Albert, XINGCHEN LAN, ZIYI LIU and YIQING XU. 2025. “Causal Panel Analysis under Parallel Trends: Lessons from a Large Reanalysis Study.” *American Political Science Review* pp. 1–22.
- Cinelli, Carlos and Chad Hazlett. 2020. “Making sense of sensitivity: Extending omitted variable bias.” *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society Series B: Statistical Methodology* 82(1):39–67.
- Collier, Paul, V. L. Elliott, Håvard Hegre, Anke Hoeffler, Marta Reynal-Querol and Nicholas Sambanis. 2003. *Breaking the Conflict Trap: Civil War and Development Policy*. The World Bank Group.

- Cronin-Furman, Kate and Milli Lake. 2018. "Ethics abroad: Fieldwork in fragile and violent contexts." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 51(3):607–614.
- Dancygier, Rafaela M and Michael J Donnelly. 2013. "Sectoral economies, economic contexts, and attitudes toward immigration." *The journal of politics* 75(1):17–35.
- De Chaisemartin, Clément and Xavier d'Haultfoeuille. 2020. "Two-way fixed effects estimators with heterogeneous treatment effects." *American economic review* 110(9):2964–2996.
- Dettmer, Jamie. 2023. "In Ukraine, collaboration cases aren't always clear-cut." *Politico* .
URL: <https://www.politico.eu/article/in-ukraine-collaboration-cases-arent-always-clear-cut/>
- Dunning, Thad. 2012. *Natural experiments in the social sciences: A design-based approach*. Cambridge University Press.
- Fiedler, Charlotte. 2023. "What Do We Know about How Armed Conflict Affects Social Cohesion? A Review of the Empirical Literature." *International Studies Review* 25(3).
- Foltyn, Simona. 2020. "Iraq's decision to shut down IDP camps too hasty, NGOs say." *Al Jazeera* .
- Freitag, Markus, Sara Kijewski and Malvin Oppold. 2019. "War experiences, economic grievances, and political participation in postwar societies: An empirical analysis of Kosovo." *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 36(4):405–424.
- Fujii, Lee Ann. 2009. *Killing Neighbors: Webs of Violence in Rwanda*. Cornell University Press.
- Garcia, Paula. 2021. *Ignoring Iraq's Most Vulnerable: The Plight of Displaced Persons*. Center for Civilians In Conflict.
- Gilligan, Michael J, Benjamin J Pasquale and Cyrus Samii. 2014. "Civil war and social cohesion: Lab-in-the-field evidence from Nepal." *American Journal of Political Science* 58(3):604–619.
- Gilligan, Michael J, Eric N Mvukiyehe and Cyrus Samii. 2013. "Reintegrating rebels into civilian life: Quasi-experimental evidence from Burundi." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 57(4):598–626.

- Grosjean, Pauline. 2014. "Conflict and social and political preferences: Evidence from World War II and civil conflict in 35 European countries." *Comparative Economic Studies* 56:424–451.
- Hager, Anselm, Krzysztof Krakowski and Max Schaub. 2019. "Ethnic riots and prosocial behavior: Evidence from Kyrgyzstan." *American Political Science Review* 113(4):1029–1044.
- Hainmueller, Jens and Daniel J Hopkins. 2014. "Public attitudes toward immigration." *Annual review of political science* 17(1):225–249.
- Hartman, Alexandra C, Benjamin S Morse and Sigrid Weber. 2021. "Violence, displacement, and support for internally displaced persons: Evidence from Syria." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 65(10):1791–1819.
- Helbling, Marc, Liv Bjerre, Friederike Römer and Malisa Zobel. 2017. "Measuring immigration policies: The IMPIC database." *European Political Science* 16:79–98.
- HRW. 2021. *Iraq: Inadequate Plans for Camp Closures Vulnerable People Stripped of Services During Pandemic*. Human Rights Watch.
- Humphreys, Macartan and Jeremy M Weinstein. 2007. "Demobilization and reintegration." *Journal of conflict resolution* 51(4):531–567.
- Ingelaere, Bert and Marijke Verpoorten. 2020. "Trust in the aftermath of genocide: insights from Rwandan life histories." *Journal of Peace Research* 57(4):521–535.
- IOM. 2020. *An Overview of Displacement in Iraq*. International Organization for Migration.
- IOM. 2021. "Return Dynamics in Ninewa Governorate." *Return Index Governorate Profiling*.
URL: https://iraqdtm.iom.int/images/ReturnIndex/2021613925714_iom_dtm_ReturnDynamics_in_Ninewa_M
- IOM. 2024. *Progress 2024: Periodic Global Report on the State of Solutions to Internal Displacement*. International Organization for Migration.
- Jentzsch, Corinna and Abbey Steele. 2023. "Social control in civil wars." *Civil Wars* 25(2-3):452–471.

- Johnston, Patrick B, Mona Alami, Colin P Clarke and Howard J Shatz. 2019. *Return and Expand?: The Finances and Prospects of the Islamic State After the Caliphate*. RAND Corporation Santa Monica.
- Kalyvas, Stathis N. 2006. *The logic of violence in civil war*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kao, Kristen and Mara R Revkin. 2023. “Retribution or reconciliation? Post-conflict attitudes toward enemy collaborators.” *American Journal of Political Science* 67(2):358–373.
- Kaplan, Oliver and Enzo Nussio. 2018. “Community counts: The social reintegration of ex-combatants in Colombia.” *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 35(2):132–153.
- Kijewski, Sara and Markus Freitag. 2018. “Civil war and the formation of social trust in Kosovo: Posttraumatic growth or war-related distress?” *Journal of conflict resolution* 62(4):717–742.
- Krakowski, Krzysztof. 2020. “Pulled together or torn asunder? Community cohesion after symmetric and asymmetric civil war.” *Journal of conflict resolution* 64(7-8):1470–1498.
- Langlotz, Sarah, Paul Michel, Philip Verwimp, Patricia Justino and Tilman Brück. 2025. “Cohesion Among Whom? Stayees, Displaced, and Returnees in Conflict Contexts.” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 69(1):3–16.
- Lichtenheld, Adam. 2024. *Guilt by Location: Forced Displacement and Population Sorting in Civil Wars*. Cambridge University Press.
- Lichtenheld, Adam and Abbey Steele. 2024. “State Policies on Internal Displacement (SPID): Introducing a Global Dataset.” *Working paper, University of Amsterdam*.
- Lichtenheld, Adam G. 2020. “Explaining population displacement strategies in civil wars: a cross-national analysis.” *International Organization* 74(2):253–294.
- Lichtenheld, Adam G and Justin Schon. 2021. “The consequences of internal displacement on civil war violence: evidence from Syria.” *Political Geography* 86:102346.
- Lischer, Sarah Kenyon. 2011. “Civil war, genocide and political order in Rwanda: security implications of refugee return.” *Conflict, Security & Development* 11(3):261–284.
- Lupu, Noam and Leonid Peisakhin. 2017. “The legacy of political violence across generations.” *American Journal of Political Science* 61(4):836–851.

- Lyall, Jason. 2010. “Are Coethnics More Effective Counterinsurgents? Evidence from the Second Chechen War.” *American Political Science Review* 104(1):1–20.
- Marbach, Moritz. 2024. “Causal effects, migration, and legacy studies.” *American Journal of Political Science* 68(4):1447–1459.
- Marks, Jess and Hazem Rihawi. 2025. “Syria’s Biggest Problem: How to Resettle Millions of Refugees and Displaced People.” *Foreign Affairs* .
- McMullin, Jareme R. 2013. “Integration or separation? The stigmatisation of ex-combatants after war.” *Review of international studies* 39(2):385–414.
- Myers, Emily, Audrey Sacks, Juan F Tellez and Erik Wibbels. 2024. “Forced displacement, social cohesion, and the state: Evidence from eight new studies.” *World Development* 173:106416.
- OCHA. 1998. *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*. UN.
- OCHA. 2023. *Iraq Humanitarian Transition Overview*. UN.
- Orlans, Kristof. 2022. “Challenging Return as a Preferred Solution to Internal Displacement.” *IOM Blog*, International Organization for Migration. Accessed: 2025-06-02.
URL: <https://weblog.iom.int/challenging-return-preferred-solution-internal-displacement>
- Parkinson, Sarah E. 2025. “Indiana Jones & the Institutional Review Board: Disciplinary Incentives, Researcher Archetypes & the Pathologies of Knowledge Production.” *Dædalus* 154(2):93–113.
- Peisakhin, Leonid, Nik Stoop and Peter Van der Windt. 2024. “Who hosts? The correlates of hosting the internally displaced.” *American Political Science Review* pp. 1–16.
- Podder, Sukanya. 2012. “From recruitment to reintegration: communities and ex-combatants in post-conflict Liberia.” *International Peacekeeping* 19(2):186–202.
- Revkin, Mara R. 2018. “When terrorists govern: Protecting civilians in conflicts with state-building armed groups.” *Harvard National Security Journal* 9:100.
- Revkin, Mara Redlich. 2021. “Competitive governance and displacement decisions under rebel rule: Evidence from the Islamic State in Iraq.” *Journal of conflict resolution* 65(1):46–80.

- Revkin, Mara Redlich and Ariel I Ahram. 2020. “Perspectives on the rebel social contract: Exit, voice, and loyalty in the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.” *World Development* 132:104981.
- Robinson, Eric, Daniel Egel, Patrick B Johnston, Sean Mann, Alexander D Rothenberg and David Stebbins. 2017. “When the Islamic State Comes to Town: The Economic Impact of Islamic State Governance in Iraq and Syria.” *RAND Corporation* .
- Rohner, Dominic, Mathias Thoenig and Fabrizio Zilibotti. 2013. “Seeds of distrust: Conflict in Uganda.” *Journal of Economic Growth* 18:217–252.
- Ruiz, Isabel and Carlos Vargas-Silva. 2022. “Refugee Return and Social Cohesion.” *Oxford Review of Economic Policy* 38(3):678–698.
- Salehyan, Idean and Burcu Savun. 2024. “Strategic Humanitarianism: Host States and Refugee Policy.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 27(Volume 27, 2024):107–125.
- Schwartz, Stephanie. 2019. “Home, again: refugee return and post-conflict violence in Burundi.” *International Security* 44(2):110–145.
- Seawright, Jason. 2016. *Multi-method social science: Combining qualitative and quantitative tools*. Cambridge University Press.
- Shaver, Andrew, Benjamin Krick, Judy Blancaflor, Xavier Liu, Ghassan Samara, Sarah Yein Ku, Shengkuo Hu, Joshua Angelo, Martha Carreon, Trishia Lim et al. 2024. “The Causes and Consequences of Refugee Flows: A Contemporary Reanalysis.” *American Political Science Review* pp. 1–9.
- Sonin, Konstantin and Austin L Wright. 2024. “Rebel capacity, intelligence gathering, and combat tactics.” *American Journal of Political Science* 68(2):459–477.
- Steele, Abbey. 2018a. *Democracy and displacement in Colombia’s civil war*. Cornell University Press.
- Steele, Abbey. 2018b. “IDP resettlement and collective targeting during civil wars: Evidence from Colombia.” *Journal of Peace Research* 55(6):810–824.
- Sun, Liyang and Sarah Abraham. 2021. “Estimating dynamic treatment effects in event studies with heterogeneous treatment effects.” *Journal of econometrics* 225(2):175–199.

- Sviatschi, Maria Micaela. 2022. "Spreading gangs: Exporting US criminal capital to El Salvador." *American Economic Review* 112(6):1985–2024.
- Travers, Alannah. 2023. "Taking stock of the UN's shift away from emergency aid in Iraq." *The New Humanitarian* .
- UNHCR. 2015. *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2015*. United Nations.
- UNHCR. 2024. *Mid-Year Trends: 2024*. United Nations.
- Uzonyi, Gary. 2022. "An informational theory of genocide and politicide during civil war." *Comparative Political Studies* 55(6):933–962.
- Voors, Maarten J, Eleonora E M Nillesen, Philip Verwimp, Erwin H Bulte, Robert Lensink and Daan P Van Soest. 2012. "Violent conflict and behavior: a field experiment in Burundi." *American Economic Review* 102(2):941–964.
- Walk, Erin, Kiran Garimella and Fotini Christia. 2023. "Displacement and return in the internet Era: Social media for monitoring migration decisions in Northern Syria." *World Development* 168:106268.
- Walter, Barbara F. 2017. "The extremist's advantage in civil wars." *International security* 42(2):7–39.
- Weber, Sigrid. 2025. "Controlling a moving world: Territorial control, displacement and the spread of civilian targeting in Iraq." *Journal of Peace Research* 62(2):211–229.
- Weber, Sigrid and Alexandra Hartman. 2022. "Property rights and post-conflict recovery: Theory and evidence from IDP return movements in Iraq." *University College London* .
- Webster, Kaitlyn, Priscilla Torres, Chong Chen and Kyle Beardsley. 2020. "Ethnic and gender hierarchies in the crucible of war." *International Studies Quarterly* 64(3):710–722.
- Wood, Elisabeth Jean. 2006. "The ethical challenges of field research in conflict zones." *Qualitative sociology* 29:373–386.
- Wood, Elisabeth Jean. 2008. "The social processes of civil war: The wartime transformation of social networks." *Annu. Rev. Polit. Sci.* 11(1):539–561.
- World Bank. 2018. *Pathways for peace: Inclusive approaches to preventing violent conflict*. The World Bank.

- World Bank. 2022. *Social Cohesion and Forced Displacement: A Synthesis of New Research*.
World Bank. License: CC BY 3.0 IGO.
URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/38431>
- Xu, Yiqing. 2017. “Generalized synthetic control method: Causal inference with interactive fixed effects models.” *Political Analysis* 25(1):57–76.
- Zhou, Yang-Yang, Guy Grossman and Shuning Ge. 2023. “Inclusive refugee-hosting can improve local development and prevent public backlash.” *World Development* 166:106203.
- Zhou, Yang-Yang and Jason Lyall. 2025. “Prolonged contact does not reshape locals’ attitudes toward migrants in wartime settings.” *American Journal of Political Science* 69(1):210–222.
- Zhukov, Yuri M. 2015. “Population resettlement in war: Theory and evidence from Soviet archives.” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59(7):1155–1185.

Supplementary Materials for IDP Return and Social Cohesion: Evidence from Camp Closures in Iraq

Benjamin C. Krick

July 9, 2025

Table of Contents

A	Appendix	SI-1
A.1	Return Index	SI-1
A.2	Camp Profiling Assessment	SI-4
A.3	CSMF Data	SI-7
A.4	Qualitative Data Collection	SI-10
A.5	Excerpts of Qualitative Data	SI-16
A.6	Parallel Trends	SI-22
A.7	Matching and Generalize Synthetic Control	SI-23
A.8	Difference-in-Differences Estimators	SI-25
A.9	Instrumental Variable Estimates	SI-27
A.10	Sensitivity Analysis	SI-28
A.11	Heterogeneity by Ethnicity	SI-29
A.12	Demographic Anxiety	SI-30

A Appendix

A.1 Return Index

The Return Index is an elite survey conducted by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). IOM developed a network of key informants, and IOM local staff administer the Return Index survey quarterly — either face-to-face or over the phone. While the geographic coverage is extensive, encompassing a majority of villages and neighborhoods in subdistricts affected by conflict and displacement, the survey is not representative of the general population.

The elites surveyed are generally mukhtars, informal local leaders who head villages or neighborhoods. Consequently, the survey primarily reflects the perspectives of older males. Aware of this limitation in the data generation process, IOM designed the survey to elicit objective and observable indicators which capture community dynamics (e.g., whether people go out at night, the presence of militants), which are less likely to be biased by the identity of the elite respondent. Table [A-4](#) details the wording of the survey instruments.

Given this limitation, this research takes a multi-method approach, supplementing the elite survey with a respondent-level survey and qualitative data, which are more representative in terms of gender, social status, and age. The community-level results should be interpreted with this potential bias in mind. Table [A-2](#) displays descriptive statistics for the community-level panel, which relies on the Return Index.

Table A-1: Coding Variables from the Return Index

Variable	Question	Coding
Reconciliation	Does this community need reconciliation with other ethno-religious/tribal communities in the sub-district to achieve a peaceful co-existence and prevent further violence?	Yes; not taking place =0, Yes; taking place =1, No =2
Returns (Stock)	What is the number of returnee families in this location?	# of returnees Yes =1, No =0
Camp Returns	Have any of the families been forced to return... [due to] formal camp closed?	All =1, Most =2, Around half =3, Less than half =4
Return Rate	Have most people displaced since 2014 returned to the location?	Most or all =1, Around half =2, Less than half =3, None = 4
Employment	Can residents in this location find employment?	No =1, Yes =0
Access to Civil Documentation	Can residents access an office for civil matters, such as personal documents?	Most or all =1, Only some =2, None =3
Access to Electricity	Do residents have enough electricity for their needs?	Most or all =1, Only some =2, None =3
Access to Water	Do residents have enough water for their drinking and domestic needs?	None =1, Less than half=2, About half =3, More than half = 4
Housing Destruction	Are the houses in the location destroyed/ heavily damaged?	Many =1, Few =2, None = 3
Housing Reconstruction	Have any of the destroyed houses been reconstructed or rehabilitated?	Most or all = 1, Some = 2, None = 3
Access to Schools	Can children from this location access/attend primary schooling, in the location or nearby?	Most or all = 1, Some = 2, None = 3
Access to Health Care	Can residents from this location access primary health centres, in the location or nearby?	Most or all = 1, Some = 2, None = 3
Number of Security Actors	How many different security groups/actors are present in this location? (e.g. Iraqi army, federal police, local police, Hashd al-Shaabi, other)	# of groups/actors
Militia Presence	Apart from the Iraqi army, the local police and the federal police, is there any other armed group in control of the checkpoints around this location?	No =1, Yes =0
Movement Restrictions	Are restrictions of movement affecting the daily life of current residents?	No restrictions= 1, Yes, no impact =2, Yes, some impact =3, Yes, big impact =4
Unexplored Ordinances	How concerned are residents about explosive devices, such as mines, UXOs and IEDs?	Not concerned = 1, Somewhat concerned = 2, Very concerned = 3

Table A-2: Community Level Descriptive Statistics

	Observations	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
OUTCOME VARIABLE					
Reconciliation	15300	1.762	0.598	0.000	2.000
EXPLANATORY VARIABLES					
Predicted Returns	15300	553.904	1086.925	0.000	4094.356
Predicted Returns (Normalized by Pop)	15300	0.004	0.010	0.000	0.089
Predicted Returns (Stayer)	15300	483.681	1040.756	0.000	3827.588
Predicted Returns (Leaver)	15300	70.223	130.779	0.000	1625.625
Camp Returns	15300	0.048	0.214	0.000	1.000
CONTROL VARIABLES					
Return Rate	15300	1.907	0.723	0.000	3.000
Returnee Stock (Families)	15300	450.259	706.146	1.000	7188.000
Employment	15300	1.193	0.645	0.000	2.000
Access to Civil Documentation	15300	0.009	0.095	0.000	1.000
Access to Electricity	15300	1.527	0.826	0.000	2.000
Access to Water	15300	1.560	0.793	0.000	2.000
Housing Destruction	15300	1.185	0.477	0.000	2.000
Housing Reconstruction	15300	1.075	0.748	0.000	2.000
Access to School	15300	1.763	0.599	0.000	2.000
Access to Healthcare	15300	1.488	0.850	0.000	2.000
Rural	15300	0.364	0.481	0.000	1.000
Number of Security Actors	15300	0.154	0.361	0.000	1.000
Militia Presence	15300	0.588	0.492	0.000	1.000
Movement Restrictions	15300	0.219	0.507	0.000	2.000
Unexploded Ordinances	15300	0.062	0.273	0.000	2.000
IS Victimization	15300	254.275	712.807	0.000	2450.000

A.2 Camp Profiling Assessment

To construct the predicted returns measure, I use data from the Camp Profiling Assessments. The Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM) Cluster collects administrative data on all formal camps in Iraq. Table A-3 presents the populations and closure dates of camp clusters in federal Iraq. Figure A-1 plots the locations of these camps.

Table A-3: Profiling Federal Iraq's Formal IDP Camps

Number	District	Subdistrict	Camp Name	Pre-Closures Individuals	Pre-Closures Households	Closure Month-Year
1	Anbar	Ramadi	Habbaniya Tourist City*	2578	672	Jul-19
2	Sulaymaniyah	Dokan	Surdes	274	92	Aug-19
3		Falluja	Amriyat Fallujah Camp*	11661	360	Sep-19
4	Ninewa	Mosul	Haj Ali	13224	2722	Sep-19
5	Ninewa	Hamdaniya	Nimrud	2507	697	Sep-19
6	Salah al-Din	Tikrit	Al Alam	1651	389	Sep-19
7	Ninewa	Hamdaniya	As Salamyiah 1	7352	NA	Oct-19
8	Ninewa	Mosul	Hamam Al Alil 1	15516	3819	Oct-19
9	Ninewa	Mosul	Qayyarah Airstrip*	32675	7231	Oct-19
10	Ninewa	Mosul	Qayyarah-Jad'ah (1-6)*	NA	13675	Oct-19
11	Salah al-Din	Shirqat	Al Basteen	1464	295	Oct-19
12	Kirkuk	Kirkuk	Laylan 2	2727	365	Dec-19
13	Baghdad	Abu Ghraib	Al Ahel	857	147	Oct-20
14	Diyala	Ba'quba	Muskar Saad Camp	635	145	Oct-20
15	Kerbala	Hindiya	Al-Kawthar Camp	758	124	Oct-20
16	Diyala	Khanaqin	Al-Wand 1	2806	678	Nov-20
17	Diyala	Khanaqin	Al-Wand 2	966	235	Nov-20
18	Baghdad	Resafa	Zayona	398	97	Nov-20
19	Kirkuk	Kirkuk	Laylan 1	6104	110	Nov-20
20	Kirkuk	Daquq	Yahyawa	2647	500	Nov-20
21	Ninewa	Mosul	Hamam Al Alil 2	20976	4363	Nov-20
22	Salah al-Din	Tikrit	Al Karama	1611	456	Dec-20
23	Ninewa	Hamdaniya	As Salamyiah 2	18579	NA	Jan-21
Total				205703	37940	

Note: * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$ The source of all data is CCCM Profiling Assessments. (2) A * denotes a composite camp, consisting of several distinct sub-camps. Composite camps underwent phased closures, where authorities reclassified, consolidated, and closed sub-camps before eventually shutting down the entire camp. The closure date reflects the start of this process. (3) Camps located in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq are excluded from this table. These 26 camps under jurisdiction of the Kurdistan Regional Government were not closed during the federal Iraq closure campaign in 2019 and 2020. (4) This table includes all formal camps in Iraq that housed more than 100 migrants. Data for the 21 smaller camps with fewer than 100 migrants is unavailable, as these camps were not tracked by CCCM.

CCCM also conducts annual surveys to assess demographic characteristics, migrant needs, and gaps in service provision. These surveys include a question about pre-displacement location: “Which sub-district in Iraq were you living in before your displacement?” I use Round XI data, collected in February 2019 prior to the camp closure campaign, which is the earliest available round that includes sub-district-of-origin information. Household data collection occurred between January 30 and February 27, 2019. In total, 4,248 households, comprising 21,135 individuals, were surveyed across 49 camps.

The survey was administered face-to-face by enumerators. Data were collected at the household level, using stratified random sampling within each camp. Sample sizes were

▲ Assessed Camp (Name + Number of Samples)

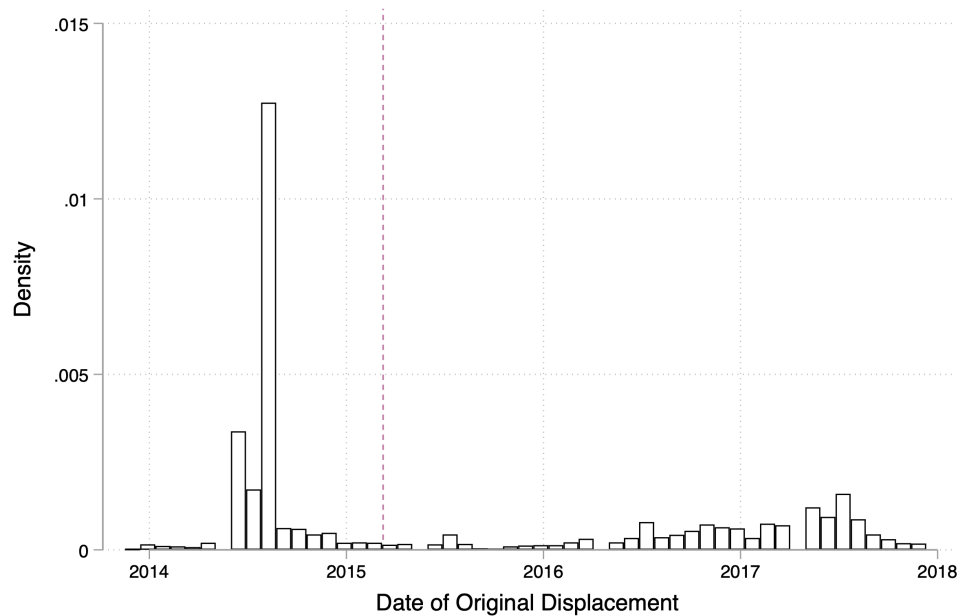
■ Assessed District

As shown in the right panel of Figure 4, the survey captures the distribution of residents by sub-district of origin. It also includes information on the timing of initial displacement, asking: “When were you initially displaced from your sub-district?” Given that IS established territorial control of its self-declared caliphate by March 2015, this displacement timing can be used as a proxy for whether individuals lived under IS rule.

SI-5

following IS's offensive into Iraq. However, 41% of surveyed individuals were not displaced until after March 2015, i.e. "Post-Occupation Migrants". Many of these later displacements coincided with the peak intensity of the Iraqi government's and coalition forces' counterinsurgency campaign during the second half of 2016 and first half of 2017.

Figure A-2: Distribution of Camp Residents' Original Date of Displacement



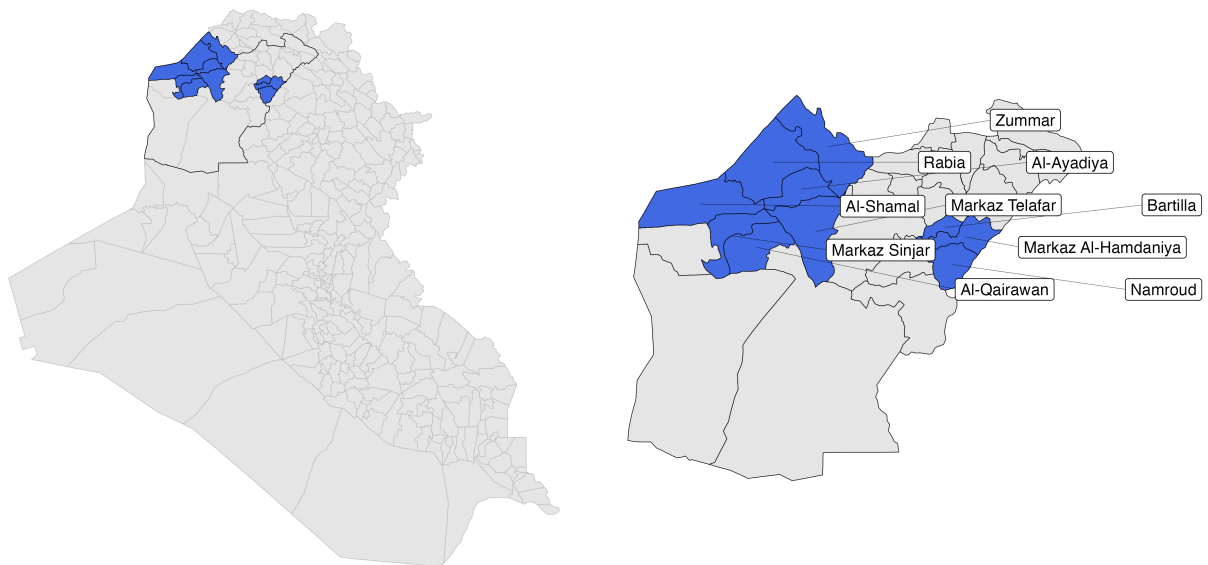
Note: The histogram shows the distribution of migrants by the date of their initial displacement. The dashed vertical line marks March 1, 2015, which serves as the cutoff between those who lived under IS territorial control and those who did not.

A.3 CSMF Data

The Conflict and Stabilization Monitoring Framework is a representative, household survey collected in the governorate of Nineveh to provide insights into post-conflict dynamics in a critical region. The framework includes survey questions about governance, reconciliation/social cohesion, well-being, rule of law, and safety/security. The United State of Peace (USIP) commissioned Social Inquiry, a non-profit research organization, to implement the survey.

I analyze Wave 6 of the CSMF, collected in November and December 2021. A total of 2,002 households were surveyed across 72 communities in 10 subdistricts within three districts: Sinjar, Tal Afar, and Hamdaniya. Figure A-3 displays the subdistricts included in the sample. While descriptive statistics at the subdistrict level are publicly available, raw respondent-level data with location identifiers are not, due to the small size of many sampled villages and associated protection concerns. Through a data-sharing agreement with the author's university IRB, Social Inquiry, and USIP, I obtained access to the raw data with location information.

Figure A-3: Surveyed Subdistricts in Nineveh



Surveys were administered face-to-face by local enumerators who shared the ethno-religious identity of respondents. The sampling strategy employed stratified random sam-

pling by subdistrict and ethno-religious group, making results representative of the population sizes within each group and subdistrict. The primary sampling unit was the village, as subdistricts are largely rural. Sampling weights are included to ensure representativeness at the subdistrict level. The survey also included IDPs who were still displaced but were originally from the subdistrict; these respondents were removed from the analysis. The sample was approximately 67% male and 33% female. Sampling weights were applied to adjust for gender imbalance. More information on survey methodology is available on the [USIP website](#).

Table A-4 display the survey instruments and outcome space for the variables analyzed from the survey, and Table A-5 presents descriptive statistics for this respondent level dataset.

Table A-4: Coding Variables from CSMF

Variable	Question	Coding
Reconciliation (Between)	How necessary is reconciliation between your component and other components now in [subdistrict]?	Very necessary =1, Somewhat necessary =2, Not very necessary = 3, Not necessary at all = 4
Reconciliation (Within)	How necessary is reconciliation within your component in [subdistrict]?	Very necessary =1, Somewhat necessary =2, Not very necessary = 3, Not necessary at all = 4
Judged Less (by others)	Do you feel you are being judged or labelled negatively because of the actions of others who have the same identity as you?	Completely =1, A lot =2, A little = 3, Not at all = 4
Mistrusted Less (by others)	How much mistrust do you think others have of your component in [subdistrict]?	Completely =1, A lot =2, A little = 3, Not at all = 4
Trust (of others)	How much do you trust people from other components in [subdistrict]?	Not at all =1, A little =2, A lot =3, Completely = 4

Table A-5: Respondent Level Descriptive Statistics

	Observations	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
OUTCOME VARIABLE					
Reconciliation (between)	1357	2.182	0.883	1.000	4.000
Reconciliation (within)	1365	2.258	0.897	1.000	4.000
Trust	1373	2.417	0.845	1.000	4.000
Mistrusted Less	1294	2.968	0.755	1.000	4.000
Judged Less	1365	2.988	0.843	1.000	4.000
EXPLANATORY VARIABLES					
Closure-Induced Returns	1413	0.568	0.496	0.000	1.000
Closure-Induced Returns (Leaver)	1413	0.422	0.494	0.000	1.000
Closure-Induced Returns (Stayer)	1413	0.200	0.400	0.000	1.000
CONTROL VARIABLES					
Gender	1413	1.338	0.473	1.000	2.000
Age	1413	2.891	1.178	1.000	6.000
Education	1413	3.125	1.383	1.000	5.000
Household Head	1412	1.479	0.500	1.000	2.000
Occupation	1411	5.709	3.594	1.000	13.000
Income	1413	3.427	0.938	1.000	5.000
Ethnicity	1413	7.893	11.636	1.000	60.000
Return Rate	1413	1.452	0.787	0.000	3.000
Returnee Stock (Families)	1413	1285.744	1496.077	22.000	4653.000
Development Index	1413	-0.492	1.775	-6.563	2.282
Security Index	1413	-0.082	0.955	-0.534	4.650

A.4 Qualitative Data Collection

The qualitative data and fieldwork were just of one of three research designs for this project. Further the qualitative data collection served a number of purposes.

The initial phase of fieldwork was exploratory, aimed at informing both theory and research design. Conversations with both returnees and migrants aided in inductive theory building. I conducted this fieldwork myself, with the assistance of a local translator fluent in both Arabic and Kurdish. Interviews were semi-structured and took the form of life narratives, allowing participants to recount their personal histories. This approach was well-suited to this exploratory phase of research and gave respondents greater agency over what they chose to share or withhold. I also conducted interviews with research firms and NGOs that collected the observational data, as well as with individuals involved in camp management — many of whom were required to respond to and adapt to the camp closure policies. Since my core research design leverages natural variation, this qualitative fieldwork helped assess the plausibility of the identification assumptions. Robust “natural experiments” benefit from such multi-method approach (Dunning, 2012). Table [A-6](#) provides demographic details for the first round of interviews.

Table A-6: Demographics: Interviews in Summer 2023

Interview	Date	Location	Type	Gender	Age
1	August 2023	Dahok (Informal Camp)	IDP	Male	30
2	August 2023	Dahok (Informal Camp)	IDP	Female	53
3	August 2023	Dahok (Informal Camp)	IDP	Male	35
4	August 2023	Erbil	IDP	Male	NA
5	August 2023	Erbil	IDP	Female	60
6	August 2023	Erbil	IDP	Male	34
7	August 2023	Hassan Sham (Formal Camp)	Camp Management	Male	NA
8	August 2023	Hassan Sham (Formal Camp)	IDP	Male	32
9	August 2023	Hassan Sham (Formal Camp)	IDP	Male	50
10	August 2023	Hassan Sham (Formal Camp)	IDP (camp mukhtar)	Male	NA
11	August 2023	Harshm (Formal Camp)	Camp Management	Female	30
12	August 2023	Harshm (Formal Camp)	Local NGO Employee	Male	NA
13	August 2023	Harshm (Formal Camp)	IDP (camp mukhtar)	Male	55
14	August 2023	Harshm (Formal Camp)	IDP	Male	52
15	August 2023	Harshm (Formal Camp)	IDP	Male	NA
16	August 2023	Mosul	Receiving Community	Male	NA
17	August 2023	Mosul	Returnee	Male	NA
18	August 2023	Mosul	Receiving Community	Male	60
19	August 2023	Mosul	Receiving Community	Female	NA
20	August 2023	Mosul	Returnee	Female	NA
21	August 2023	Mosul	IDP	Male	NA
22	August 2023	Erbil	iNGO	Female	NA
23	August 2023	Erbil	iNGO	Male	NA
24	August 2023	Erbil	iNGO	Male	NA
25	August 2023	Mosul	Returnee	Male	NA
26	August 2023	Mosul	Returnee	Male	NA

The second round of fieldwork was designed to probe the causal mechanisms underlying my theory. I selected three communities known to be affected by camp closures but that varied in terms of social cohesion, conflict history, and demographic composition. Table A-7 provides demographic details of the second round of interviews. Unlike the first round, I did not conduct this fieldwork myself. Instead, I hired a small, trusted local research firm that employed enumerators native to each subdistrict. Given the relative fragility and insecurity in these areas, it was more appropriate for local researchers—rather than an external presence like myself—to conduct interviews in these potentially sensitive communities. Data collection included a mix of focus groups and key informant interviews. The sample aimed to ensure gender representation and included both members of receiving communities and migrants; however, interviews were conducted separately, as mixing these groups could have been considered inappropriate or risked inducing tensions. Interviews followed a semi-structured script focused on current social and migration dynamics, but enumerators were explicitly instructed to allow participants to guide the conversation. Any questions that enumerators believed could be perceived as sensitive were removed.

Ethical Considerations Rigorous research is ethical research. Conducting research in fragile and conflict-affected environments demands heightened attention to ethical considerations, particularly around the safety, consent, and well-being of participants, enumerators, and interlocutors. All components of this study, including the analysis of pre-existing quantitative data, received approval from the author’s university Institutional Review Board (IRB). This approval ensured that the research met baseline standards, including confidentiality protections and compliance with applicable laws and regulations. However, IRB approval is only a starting point; researchers working in conflict settings must take additional steps to ensure their work is ethically sound.

The American Political Science Association (2020) and Cronin-Furman and Lake (2018) offer valuable frameworks for navigating the ethical challenges that arise throughout the research process. American Political Science Association (2020) outlines core ethical principles that researchers should uphold, including attention to power dynamics, consent, deception, harm and trauma, confidentiality, impact, and compliance with laws and regulations. Cronin-Furman and Lake (2018) complement this by offering a set of questions researchers should ask themselves before entering the field, during data collection, and after returning. These are not intended as perfunctory checklists. Rather, ethical fieldwork requires ongoing reflec-

Table A-7: Demographics: Interviews and Focus Groups in Summer 2024

Interview	Date	Location	Type		Gender	Job
27	June 2024	Al-Qayara	Returnee		Female	Citizen
28	June 2024	Al-Qayara	Receiving Community		Male	Teacher
29	June 2024	Al-Qayara	Receiving Community		Male	NGO
30	June 2024	Al-Qayara	Returnee		Male	Citizen
31	June 2024	Al-Qayara	Receiving Community		Female	Citizen
32	June 2024	Telafer	Returnee		Male	Citizen
33	June 2024	Telafer	Receiving Community		Male	Citizen
34	June 2024	Telafer	Receiving Community		Male	Citizen
35	June 2024	Telafer	Receiving Community		Male	Lawyer
36	June 2024	Telafer	Receiving Community		Female	Government
37	June 2024	Sinjar	Returnee		Female	Citizen
38	June 2024	Sinjar	Receiving Community		Male	Retired
39	June 2024	Sinjar	Receiving Community		Male	Agriculture
40	June 2024	Sinjar	Receiving Community		Male	Citizen
41	June 2024	Sinjar	Receiving Community		Male	Teacher
Focus Group	Date	Location	Type	#	Gender	Age Range
1	June 2024	Al-Qayara	Receiving Community	12	Male	26-49
2	June 2024	Al-Qayara	Returnees	11	Male	19-53
3	June 2024	Al-Qayara	Returnees	9	Female	19-50
4	June 2024	Telafer	Receiving Community	7	Male	34-60
5	June 2024	Telafer	Returnees	7	Male	39-56
6	June 2024	Telafer	Returnees	5	Female	32-72
7	June 2024	Sinjar	Receiving Community	5	Male	NA
8	June 2024	Sinjar	Receiving Community	6	Male	NA
9	June 2024	Sinjar	Returnees	4	Male	NA
10	June 2024	Sinjar	Returnees	7	Male/ Female	NA
11	June 2024	Sinjar	Returnees	6	Male	NA

tion, responsiveness, and adaptation to conditions on the ground. Accordingly, I reflect on how my own research sought to dynamically engage with and uphold these ethical standards.

Before conducting fieldwork in Iraq, I made every effort to prepare thoroughly and familiarize myself with the local context. This included reviewing relevant academic literature, policy reports, and news coverage to understand the political, social, and security dynamics. I also consulted with both local and international researchers and journalists who had conducted fieldwork on similar topics in the region. Their insights were instrumental in shaping my understanding of the risks, norms, and ethical standards appropriate for the setting.

Prior to departing, I developed a confidentiality and data protection protocol to ensure that interview data would be anonymized and untraceable. To reduce any risk of physical harm, I created a detailed safety plan in consultation with local contacts, designed to protect both my own security and to avoid interviewing individuals in areas with elevated risk. This planning helped ensure that research activities did not create new vulnerabilities for either participants or my translator. While Kurdish and Iraqi authorities could, in theory, engage in surveillance, limited state capacity made digital or physical repression unlikely. Although the risk of device confiscation was low, all data were encrypted and securely stored. To further reduce confidentiality risks, interviews were transcribed in real time, and no audio recordings were made.

A key component of ethical fieldwork was hiring a trusted and experienced translator. I worked with a recommended local professional who had previously assisted other researchers and journalists. This translator, referred to locally as a “fixer”, was fairly compensated at a rate competitive even by international standards. Beyond translation, they provided critical logistical support: identifying participants, managing transportation, and helping navigate the field environment. Their local knowledge also helped ensure that interview topics and settings did not expose participants to emotional or physical harm.

The main ethical challenges in the field were securing informed consent and minimizing the risk of retraumatization. Informed consent was always obtained before interviews began, and participants were clearly told that I was an independent researcher unaffiliated with any NGO or government body. Still, this distinction was sometimes difficult to convey given my identity as a foreign, white researcher. I remained alert to signs of misunderstanding. If, during the interview, it became clear that a participant believed I was affiliated with an aid organization or expected direct benefits from the interview, the conversation was brought to a close.

Minimizing physical and emotional harm and avoiding retraumatization were constant concerns. I am confident that participants were never placed in physical danger. Interviews were conducted in safe, familiar environments where being interviewed was not socially taboo or suspicious. Although displacement and return can be sensitive topics, they are widely discussed in Iraq, and engaging in such conversations posed minimal physical risk to participants. Nonetheless, the emotional toll of recounting experiences of displacement and violence was a risk. To mitigate this, interviews were designed to allow participants agency

over the conversation. Rather than probing for details, I invited participants to share life stories in their own terms. We discussed life events of the past several years which often included their experience with displacement and conflict, but at times touched on unrelated topics of daily life, historical memory, or opinions on politics and culture. Furthermore, I clearly communicated to participants that they were free to skip any question or end the interview at any time. If a participant ever showed signs of emotional distress, I promptly concluded the interview.

I was transparent with respondents that there were no direct benefits by participating in the research. Nonetheless, the project addresses policy issues with real implications for the lives of Iraqis. This project was motivated by initial reporting that suggested camp closures were negatively impacting both displaced populations and receiving communities. From a normative and policy perspective, it was essential to evaluate the consequences of these closures. While this could have been done using quantitative data alone, I chose to incorporate qualitative data to gain a deeper understanding of the local context. Citizens affected by such migration policies should have the opportunity to share their experiences and to be meaningfully included in research on the politics of return.

A.5 Excerpts of Qualitative Data

The following sections present excerpts of qualitative data, organized around key themes: general experiences with the camp closures; respondents' expressions of fear regarding a possible resurgence of IS; their suspicion toward returnees; the behavioral implications of this fear and suspicion, including revenge attacks; and finally, the solutions respondents proposed to rebuild their communities and effectively reintegrate returnees.

Context of Camp Closures

We did not know about it until we heard from the mayor and the sheikh of the village that the police station was informed them about the return of the families of Daesh to their homes. The camps will be closed, and all families will be returned to their areas and those who resist it will be punished. (Focus Group #1)

No, it wasn't a good idea, especially since it was a sudden decision and without warning. No reconciliation between the community and those families achieved. And the affected people were not compensated for their men, their homes, and their farms, so it was a bad idea. (Focus Group #1)

We learned about it a few days before we were forced to return, and we thought it was a common rumor, but we were officially informed by the Iraqi Ministry of Immigration. A week or less or a little more before the decision to officially displace us from the camp. Yes, we were afraid, but we did not imagine at that time that the closure would take place because we knew about the resistance to our return and we know that we are not welcomed in our areas, but we did not have another place to take refuge but the camps. We always heard that the camp would be closed and because they were just news and we did not believe it, until we received the official notification a few days before returning. (Focus Group #2)

The process of closing the camps was initially an ill-considered decision, but it was a political decision par excellence, because there were parliamentary elections

in Iraq and because of this there was insistence by some political parties to return the displaced to their areas for political interests. (Focus Group #6)

Fear: IS Resurgence

Society still treats families accused for having ties with Daesh as collaborators with Daesh, who have been in contact with them, the community believes that the returnee families are looking to take advantage of a moment when the community is weak, so they [the returnee families] can make Daesh to return. Especially, because these villages are bordered by desert areas where there may be Daesh groups. (Focus Group #2)

We are a tribal society, and there are some tensions and fears from Daesh due to our geographical location, as we are bordered to the west which is a desert. And, there is a fear from the presence of Daesh groups there. There is also the fear of Daesh families that they may still have contact with their Daesh relatives (in the desert). Also, their families (returnees of families accused of having ties with Daesh) face constant discrimination and bullying, and they (returnees) face constant stigma. (Interview #28)

Yes, fears still exist in community, because the villages are close to vast desert areas in which they believe there are Daesh groups there, and they are also not far from the mountains. They also believe that families (returnees) may be communicating with their Daesh members in the desert and may give them some news, locations and coordinates These fears still exist, as some incidents occurred, such as the exposure of security forces and their movements in some neighboring areas to security incident, such as (Interview #28)

There is a fear from Daesh families (accused of having members tied with Daesh) and their children and that the Daesh organization would be re-established again in the future. So, the government must strive to integrate these returnees into the community. . . Yes, fears still exist, but now the people have confidence in the security forces, especially since the forces controlling the area are mostly from the

area. The fear is of armed conflict that may cause of killing the security forces who are from the community. (Interview #31)

Yes, fears still exist, for many reasons, including: Our regions have very vast marginal lands that are semi-desert, so fear exists. Lack of trust about some of the returnee families, especially those whose relatives or fathers were leaders in Daesh. Social media and encouragement for their return, especially the Tiktok programs that allows their appearance. Social pressure on returnee families may cause them to reorganize themselves and many other factors. (Interview #32)

Suspicion: Guilt by Location & Stigmatization

Yes, there are some tensions that remain at the present time, the reason is when Daesh entered the region, there were a portion of the people who stayed in their homes and while some others joined Daesh. This is why there are some tensions between the people or between the tribes in the region. (Interview #33)

The entry and control of Daesh into our region was welcomed by some components of society in our region without mentioning the naming of society on a sectarian basis. It was completely rejected by some other components. We were forced to flee during Daesh's control of our region. Meanwhile, some members of Sunni neighbors did not flee and were able to stay with Daesh without any fear or harm to them. At the time, we lost all our possessions and were exposed to the risk of death when Daesh entered our region and fled the region towards the mountain and displaced to the Kurdistan Region. (Interview #38)

Yes, in fact, tensions remain in the community as a result of the conflict with Daesh because the Sunni Arabs, who welcomed Daesh and remained free under Daesh occupation of the region without being held accountable by Daesh and without being forced into mass displacement, are still hated by the societal and tribal components who rejected Daesh and stood against Daesh and made sacrifices in blood, lives and property as a result of Daesh occupation to the region. Daesh committed genocide against the Yazidis, knowing that the sons of the Sunni Arab

component, as well as a small number of Sunni Muslim Kurds, were not displaced because of Daesh occupation of the Sinjar region. Rather, they were displaced because of the military operations carried out by the international coalition forces and the Iraqi security forces with the Peshmerga forces to liberate our regions. (Focus Group #5)

Revenge Attacks

We used to find some written threats on small papers near our homes, and there were fake pages on Facebook that threatened and terrified us asking to leave the area. Also, our children in schools are treated with discrimination and heard a lot of harmful words from their peers. No one dealt with them with fair or helped them. Our children even feel that they are a stigma of the community. No one likes to play with them, and no one befriends them. Likewise, we live in a complete isolation. No one visits us or approaches us. (Focus Group #3)

Some tents were burned, and various threats were made through calls, Facebook or other social media accounts, through anonymous accounts. Inequality and public discrimination were following us to everywhere we went. We suffered from hunger for many days, no one helped us, and the community did not extend a helping hand. The government left us without any financial support, and the organizations no longer support us after we returned. (Focus Group #3)

Yes, they did, since their return, fears of disturbances and accidents have emerged. During the start of their return, we were afraid of reckless movements of some young people against them and the acts of sabotage. Indeed, there was burning of tents and other acts. (Focus Group #1)

Fear of some reckless young people committing acts against returning families. Which would destabilize the security of the village or acts of sabotage against these families. And, this actually has happened several times, including burning tents, threats and throwing sound bombs at their homes. (Focus Group #1)

Yes, censors about the security situation, especially in the beginning. Many incidents occurred upon their return, including burning tents and threatening families. And, scaring them with some remote gunshots and sound bombs. The security forces also pursued some of those who did acts. (Focus Group #1)

Solutions: Education and Compensation

As for how it was affected; there was no compensation for those affected by Daesh acts, as well as the lack of a source of livelihoods for returnees. Also, there were no sessions or awareness and guidance courses about acceptance and living in peace and security with people who are not guilt of his parents or brothers acts. All this did not happen, so how can a return take place without real reconciliation. (Focus Group #1)

The families affected by Daesh do not accept reconciliation and consider it unfair because they lost a lot because of Daesh, it is illogical [for them] to accept accused Daesh families and treat them well... they have not been compensated for what they lost, and they feel unfair. Therefore, I see the return of these families is a great injustice to them and to the host community families who lost their men.” (Interview #29)

Yes, there are a lot of things to deal with internal displacement... Including changing school curricula and replacing it with a curricula that urge love, happiness, living, staying away from killing and revenge, urging to stay away from bad habits and sectarian matters, and not talking about sect and groups, and this will reduce the internal disputes. (Focus Group #1)

The solution is through government support for those affected by Daesh and compensating them with finance for their men, homes, and farms. Because many of the village members are unemployed and do not have job or work, they believe that the government is not supportive to them. Likewise, the government and organizations must hold awareness seminars for the community and for the returnees and educate them that we and our children are not to be blamed for what happened to them. (Interview #28)

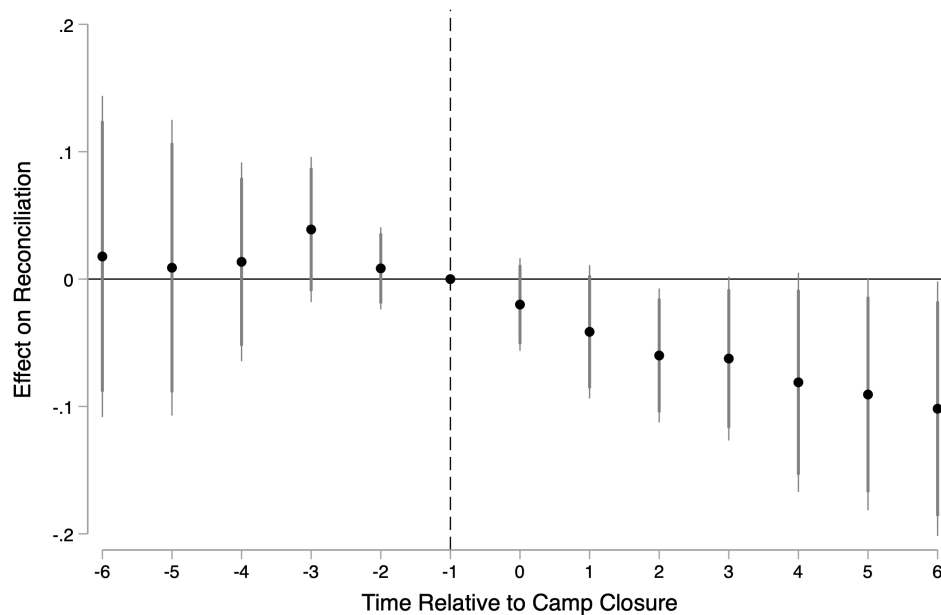
International organizations must have a major role to help by conducting awareness programs and conveying the idea of the importance of reconciliation and the importance of living in peace and stability in one region. Because what we see from the government's curriculum (schools) is not focused on these important topics, nor does the government create any committees to educate people (public). Supporting agriculture and keeping people busy with work. Because this will give young people interests that it may make them forget these tensions. (Interview #30)

The community needs proper awareness in order to differentiate between an Daesh fighters and the peaceful families accused of having members of their families ties with Daesh, and this depends on what the governmental and organizations provide in terms of real awareness and not just meetings. It is necessary to start giving sessions by organizations to educate young people and the elderly. The school has a role also through teaching children. (Interview #29)

A.6 Parallel Trends

My identification strategy for the community level analysis relies on the parallel trends assumption, which I assess by estimating an event study. Given my staggered and continuous treatment, I follow Callaway, Goodman-Bacon and Sant’Anna (2024) and collapse the treatment variable into a binary indicator. In Figure A-4, I define a unit as treated if its returnee exposure exceeds the 10th percentile among units with positive exposure. The pre-treatment coefficients are small, close to zero, and statistically insignificant, bolstering support that units were trending in parallel period to treatment.

Figure A-4: Event Study Estimates



Note: The plot displays the coefficients and confidence interval estimates from the event study. Coefficients are marked with black dots, and 90% and 95% confidence intervals are represented by thin and thick gray lines, respectively. The dashed vertical line indicates the period directly prior to treatment. This reference period is excluded to prevent perfect multicollinearity. Reconciliation is the dependent variable, measured on a three-point Likert scale. Predicted returns is the binary, staggered treatment variable based on camp residents’ location of origin prior to camp closures. The full matrix of control variables is included.

A.7 Matching and Generalize Synthetic Control

Even with the presence of parallel pre-trends, it is not possible to conclude with certainty that the parallel trends assumption holds, as it relies on a counterfactual — how units would have trended had the camps not been closed. In addition to controlling for pre-treatment covariates in all main specifications, I also implement two strategies that incorporate covariates so identification relies less heavily on the strong assumption parallel trends. Both methods require the treatment to be binary.

First, in Table A-8, I employ a matching estimator prior to estimating the TWFE model (Abadie, 2005). Specifically, I match based on Mahalanobis distance using the full matrix of pre-treatment controls. This approach improves covariate balance between treated and control units, helping to mitigate time-varying confounding. Results are robust to this approach; the predicted returns variable is negative and statistically significant.

Table A-8: Matched-TWFE

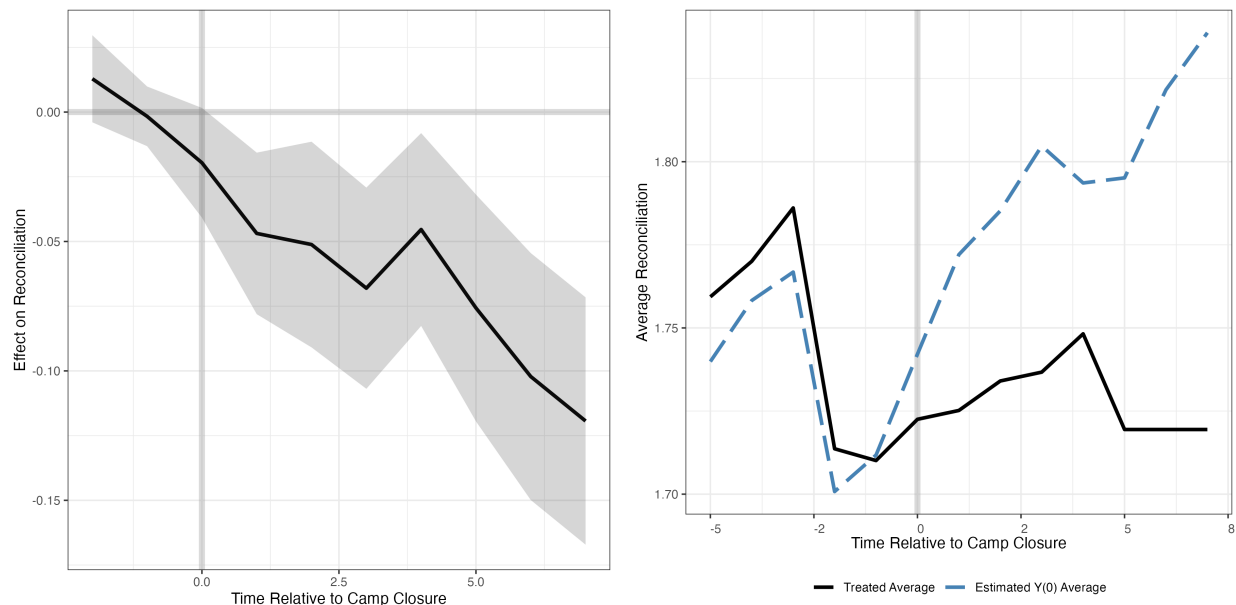
	<u>Reconciliation</u>
	(1)
Predicted Returns (Binary)	-0.081** (0.036)
Observations	13240
Clusters	90
PARAMETERS	
Subdistrict FE	Yes
Round FE	Yes
Migration Controls	Yes
Development Controls	Yes
Security Controls	Yes

Note: * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$. Robust standard errors clustered by subdistrict are in parentheses. Reconciliation is measured on a three-point Likert scale. Predicted returns is the binary, staggered treatment variable based on camp residents' location of origin prior to camp closures. Migration controls are the prior number of returns (stock) and the return rate. Development controls are rurality, employment, access to civil documentation, access to electricity, access to water, housing destruction, access to schools, and access to health care. Security control are the number of security actors, militia presence, movement restrictions, and unexplored ordinances. All controls are measured in the pre-treatment period and are interacted with round-specific fixed effects.

Second, I employ the generalized synthetic control method (Xu, 2017), which relaxes the parallel trends assumption by imputing the counterfactual trajectory of treated units using time-varying covariates. Crucially, the method can accommodate staggered treatment tim-

ing without introducing bias. The left panel of Figure A-5 presents the results in a standard event-study format, and right panel displays the observed and imputed counterfactual outcomes (i.e., the untreated average of treated units in the treatment period). The results are consistent with previous estimates: closure-induced returns have a negative effect on social cohesion. However, these results should be interpreted with some caution, as the majority of units are treated in Round 6 (see Figure A-6). Given that the panel begins in Round 3, most treated units have only three pre-treatment periods (Rounds 3, 4, and 5). The generalized synthetic control method can yield biased estimates when there are limited pre-treatment periods available.

Figure A-5: Xu (2017) Generalized Synthetic Control Method

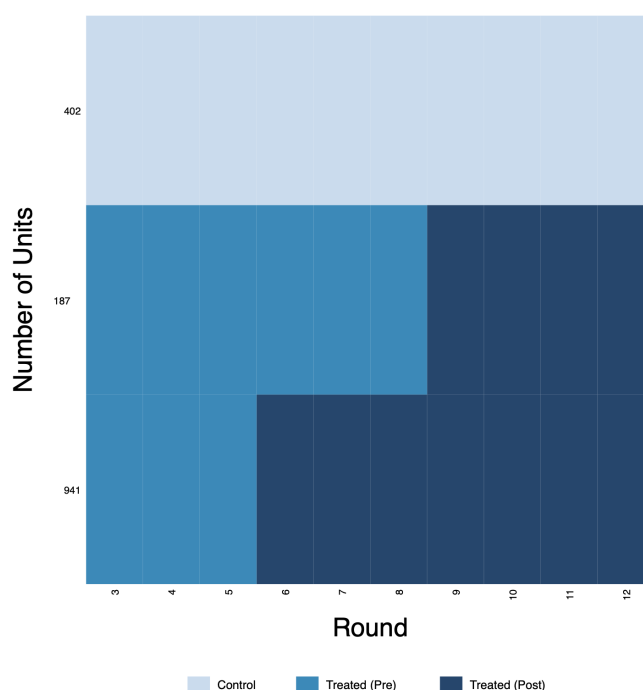


A.8 Difference-in-Differences Estimators

Recent econometric literature on difference-in-differences highlights concerns with TWFE estimators under staggered treatment adoption.²⁸ The primary issue is the presence of “forbidden comparisons.” TWFE may compare not-yet-treated units to already-treated units, leading to so-called “negative weighting” and bias estimates. This problem is especially likely when never-treated units are not available in a given period.

This concern can be partially alleviated by examining the distribution of treatment timing. Figure A-6 shows that a substantial number of never-treated units are present in every period, which reduces the risk of this bias.

Figure A-6: Treatment Status by Round

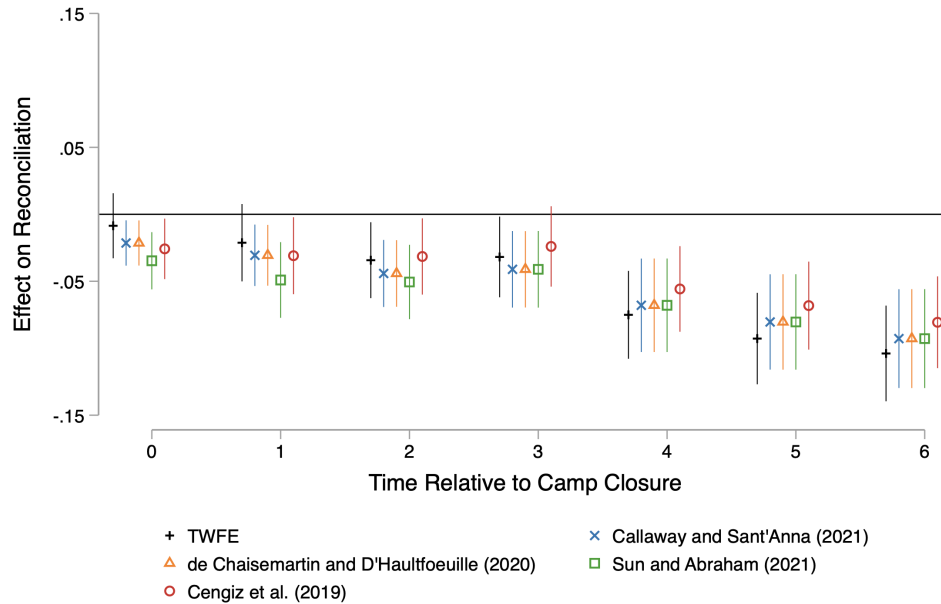


Nonetheless, I take further steps to ensure robustness by employing estimators that are designed to address treatment effect heterogeneity in the presence of staggered adoption. Since no such estimators currently exist for staggered and continuous treatments, I collapse the treatment variable into a binary indicator. Figure A-7 results from five different estima-

²⁸See Baker, Larcker and Wang (2022) and Chiu et al. (2025) for recent reviews.

tors (TWFE with a binary treatment, Callaway and Sant’Anna (2021), De Chaisemartin and d’Haultfoeuille (2020), Cengiz et al. (2019), and Sun and Abraham (2021)) in an event study plot. The consistency of results across estimators — all of which yield an average treatment effect (ATT) of approximately 0.5 in the post-treatment period — increases confidence that the community-level findings are not driven by potential bias from the TWFE estimator.

Figure A-7: Heterogeneous Robust Estimators for Staggered Treatments



Note: The plot displays post-treatment coefficients and 95% confidence intervals from the event study, estimated using five different methods. Coefficients are indicated by symbols corresponding to each estimator, while confidence intervals are shown as colored lines. Reconciliation is the dependent variable, measured on a three-point Likert scale. Predicted returns is the binary, staggered treatment variable based on camp residents’ location of origin prior to camp closures. Control variables are not included.

A.9 Instrumental Variable Estimates

As an alternative to the primary reduced specification, I estimate my main analysis using 2SLS. Specifically, I instrument a binary indicator for whether a location received forced returns from the camp closure with the predicted returns measure. This endogenous variable is more granular than the predicted returns measure, capturing return dynamics at the village level. Table A-9 columns 1 and 2 report the first-stage relationship, showing that the predicted returns measure is strongly associated with the endogenous variable, confirming its relevance. Columns 4 and 6 present the 2SLS results, indicating that returns had a negative and statistically significant effect on reconciliation, reinforcing my main findings.

Table A-9: Instrumental Variable Estimates of Return on Community Social Cohesion

	Closure-Induced Returns		Reconciliation			
	(1) 1st Stage OLS	(2) 1st Stage OLS	(3) OLS	(4) 2SLS	(5) OLS	(6) 2SLS
Predicted Returns	0.042*** (0.008)	0.037*** (0.007)				
Closure-Induced Returns			-0.020** (0.010)	-0.385*** (0.077)	-0.019 (0.012)	-0.528*** (0.123)
Observations	15300	15300	15300	15300	15300	15300
Clusters	1530	1530	1530	1530	1530	1530
Kleibergen-Paap F Statistic				26.749		28.158
Cragg-Donald F Statistic				333.969		192.132
PARAMETERS						
Village FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Round FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Migration Controls		Yes			Yes	Yes
Development Controls		Yes			Yes	Yes
Security Controls		Yes			Yes	Yes

Note: * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$. Robust standard errors clustered by village are in parentheses. Predicted returns is the continuous, staggered treatment variable based on camp residents' location of origin prior to camp closures. Closure-induced returns is the binary endogenous variable indicating whether a location received forced returns from camp closures. Demographic controls are the prior number of returns (stock) and the return rate. Migration controls are rurality, employment, access to civil documentation, access to electricity, access to water, housing destruction, access to schools, and access to health care. Security control are the number of security actors, militia presence, movement restrictions, and unexplored ordinances. All controls are measured in the pre-treatment period and are interacted with round-specific fixed effects.

A.10 Sensitivity Analysis

To assess the sensitivity of the respondent-level results to unobserved confounding, I ask the following question: How strong would an unobserved confounder need to be to reduce the coefficient on Closure-Induced Returns to zero? I implement the approach developed by Cinelli and Hazlett (2020), which benchmarks the potential strength of unobserved confounding using the observed covariates.

Table A-10: Cinelli and Hazlett (2020) Sensitivity Analysis

Specification	Occupation	Ethnicity
Table 3 (1)	13.4	0.8
Table 3 (4)	15.0	0.7
Table 5 (1)	17.5	0.7
Table 5 (3)	6.5	0.2
Table 5 (4)	22.3	0.8
Table 5 (5)	23.2	0.6

In Table A-10, I use two observed covariates as benchmarks: fixed effects for income and for ethno-religious group. Across all specifications, an unobserved confounder would need to be between 6.5 and 23.2 times stronger than income to fully attenuate the effect of Closure-Induced Returns. Income is a meaningful benchmark, given income drives individual attitudes toward migrants and acceptance of violence and extremism. In contrast, a confounder only 0.2 to 0.8 times as strong as the ethno-religious fixed effects would be sufficient to eliminate the estimated effects. While this might seem concerning, the ethno-religious variable—capturing eight distinct groups—a substantial share of variation in social cohesion outcomes. It is therefore highly unlikely that an unobserved confounder could explain even a fraction of the residual variance captured by this variable in both the treatment and the outcome. These findings suggest the estimates are reasonably robust to omitted variable bias.

A.11 Heterogeneity by Ethnicity

In Table A-11, I explore the role of migrant’s ethnic-religious identity in shaping the consequences of return. The respondent-level survey includes each individual’s ethnic identity, and because the treatment is coded directly from this survey, I can disaggregate the treatment by the ethnicity of returnees. Panel A reproduces results from Table 3. Panel B recodes treatment to include only villages that received any Sunni returnees (Sunni Arabs, Kurds, and Turkmen). Panel C, by contrast, includes only villages that received non-Sunni returnees (Yazidis, Christians, Shabak, and Shia Arabs and Kurds). The results indicate that the effects of return are driven by the return of Sunnis — members of the sect associated with IS. In contrast, the return of non-Sunni groups — who were often victims of IS — had little to no effect on reconciliation or trust. However, on the dimension of judgment, respondents in communities that received non-Sunni returnees reported feeling *less* judged by others in their communities.

Table A-11: Ethnicity of Returnees Conditions Respondent Level Social Cohesion

	Reconciliation (between)	Reconciliation (within)	Trust (in others)	Mistrusted Less (by others)	Judged Less (by others)
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
<i>Panel A: All Ethnicities</i>					
Closure-Induced Returns (All)	-0.224** (0.089)	-0.101 (0.127)	0.000 (0.071)	-0.296** (0.126)	-0.003 (0.164)
<i>Panel B: Sunni</i>					
Closure-Induced Returns (Sunni)	-0.237* (0.123)	-0.263 (0.197)	0.108 (0.107)	-0.544*** (0.194)	-0.361 (0.249)
<i>Panel C: Non-Sunni</i>					
Closure-Induced Returns (Non-Sunni)	-0.185* (0.105)	0.071 (0.127)	-0.110 (0.068)	-0.018 (0.101)	0.370*** (0.090)
Observations	1354	1362	1371	1291	1362
Clusters	72	72	72	72	72
PARAMETERS					
Subdistrict FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Demographic Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Migration Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Development Index	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Security Index	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Note: * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$. Robust standard errors, clustered by village, are in parentheses. Demographic controls include respondents’ gender, age, education, head of household status, occupation, income, and ethnicity. Migration controls include prior returns (stock) and the village return rate. The development index is the first principal component of rurality, employment, civil documentation access, electricity access, water access, housing destruction, school access, and health care access. The security index is the first principal component of security actors, militia presence, movement restrictions, and unexplored ordinances. All controls are measured pre-treatment. Estimates are weighted by sampling weights.

A.12 Demographic Anxiety

In Table A-12, I examine an alternative explanation: that returns negatively affected social cohesion by inducing demographic anxiety. To assess this, I use a respondent-level survey question that asks respondents how comfortable they are with the current population composition in their community (1 = Very comfortable; 4 = Not at all comfortable). Closure-induced returns are associated with a statistically significant increase in population discomfort. On average, communities that experienced such returns reported a 0.226-point higher mean level of discomfort with the local population composition.

Table A-12: Return Induces Discomfort with the Population Composition

	Population Discomfort
	(1)
Closure-Induced Returns	0.226*** (0.065)
Observations	1396
Clusters	72
PARAMETERS	
Subdistrict FE	Yes
Demographic Controls	Yes
Migration Controls	Yes
Development Index	Yes
Security Index	Yes

Note: * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$. Robust standard errors, clustered by village, are in parentheses. Demographic controls include respondents' gender, age, education, head of household status, occupation, income, and ethnicity. Migration controls include prior returns (stock) and the village return rate. The development index is the first principal component of rurality, employment, civil documentation access, electricity access, water access, housing destruction, school access, and health care access. The security index is the first principal component of security actors, militia presence, movement restrictions, and unexplored ordinances. All controls are measured pre-treatment. Estimates are weighted by sampling weights.