

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

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Abstract

After armed conflict, how does the return of displaced populations affect social cohesion? What are the consequences of reintegrating civilians associated with former combatants? Existing work studies individual preferences for who should reintegrate and individual outcomes for those who return. Less is known about how reintegration reshapes the overall cohesion of the community. 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 protracted displacement profoundly influences the social legacy of civil conflicts.

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1 Introduction

Facilitating the return of displaced populations is a central challenge in the aftermath of armed conflict. For the 112 million people currently displaced, barriers to return include insecurity, limited economic opportunities, destroyed infrastructure, and simmering communal conflict (UNHCR, 2024). The inter-group hostility that fueled violence often persists long after the fighting ends. In post-conflict contexts such as Iraq, Syria, Colombia, Bosnia, Nigeria, the Philippines, Ukraine, Rwanda, South Africa, and Afghanistan, this animus has stigmatized the displaced and undermined peacebuilding. Existing research explores this question, examining individual preferences toward reintegrating stigmatized civilians (Blair et al., 2021; Kao and Revkin, 2023; Revkin and Kao, 2024) and the reintegration outcomes of returnees themselves (Annan et al., 2011; Gilligan, Mvukiyehe and Samii, 2013; Kaplan and Nussio, 2018). Less work assesses the broader consequences of reintegration on community level social cohesion.

The aggregate consequences of reintegration pose a puzzling and thorny question. The diverse wartime experiences of migrants complicate reintegration efforts. Return populations often include rebel fighters, civilians who supported rebels in nonviolent roles, passive collaborators, and individuals entirely innocent. Identifying innocent civilians from former perpetrators of violence is difficult, often leading communities to indiscriminately perceive migrants who share ethnic or political ties with the losing group as enemy collaborators. On one hand, reintegration may reduce this prejudice by reducing uncertainty through inter-group contact (De Coninck, Rodríguez-de Dios and d’Haenens, 2021; Ghosn, Braithwaite and Chu, 2019; Knappert et al., 2021; Mousa, 2020). Positive contact could dispel rumors of collaboration for innocent migrants and enable citizens to more accurately assess the volition of so-called “collaborators.” On the other hand, return may risk reigniting inter-group animosity (Ruiz and Vargas-Silva, 2022; Schwartz, 2019), negative contact with returnees associated with the perpetrating group — even if they were not culpable in violence — may reawaken community tensions.

In this paper, I examine whether the return of internally displaced people has a nega-

tive or positive effect on long-term reconciliation.¹ Drawing on a key mechanism from the social cohesion (Hager, Krakowski and Schaub, 2019; Krakowski, 2020) and reintegration literature (Kaplan and Nussio, 2018), I argue that return has a negative effect on horizontal social cohesion because it activates “fear and suspicion.” Absent targeted interventions, the reintegration of a stigmatized population often produces negative social contact with deleterious consequences. I test this argument in Iraq, a context where protracted displacement and stigmatization of the displaced were major issues. Even two years after the defeat of the Islamic State (IS), in 2019 Iraq still hosted the world’s third-largest population of IDPs. In response, the Iraqi government adopted an aggressive stance toward displacement, declaring that all remaining IDPs must return home. To enforce this policy, it closed all official IDP camps between 2019 and 2021, at times forcibly returning migrants to their pre-war communities.

This paper employs a rigorous mixed-methods approach to evaluate the consequences of this camp closure policy. To do so, I triangulate novel qualitative and quantitative data and leverage plausibly exogenous variation in camp closures. This project utilizes two rounds of intensive fieldwork in Iraq, which probed the underlying assumptions of my planned quantitative, research design and the causal mechanism behind my theory. This qualitative data provides texture to my argument throughout the paper. I then test the theory quantitatively 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 the governorate of Nineveh, the area most affected by displacement and the camp closures.

Across research designs, I leverage multiple sources of variation to test my theory. To identify the average treatment effect of return, I exploit the plausibly exogenous timing of camp closures, which forced IDP’s to return home. I then examine three sources of heterogeneity to test the observable implications of my mechanism. First, I disaggregate the treatment by ethnicity, distinguishing between migrants who were Sunni (co-ethnics with IS) and those who were not. Second, I leverage variation in the timing of returnees’ origi-

¹I focus on the IDP population for two reasons. First, they constitute 64 percent of the world’s forcibly displaced population yet remained disproportionately understudied. Second, IDPs are more likely to face stigmatization issues than refugees because of their vulnerability and geographic proximity to the conflict.

nal displacement, allowing me to separately identify the effects of returnees who previously lived under IS' occupation from those who did not. Third, I explore heterogeneity based on community-level victimization, drawing on spatial conflict data. Consistent with my informational theory emphasizing fear and suspicion, the negative effect of return on reconciliatory attitudes is driven by stigmatized, Sunni returnees who had temporarily stayed and lived under IS control and is stronger in areas that experienced higher levels of IS victimization.

This paper makes several contributions. 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. 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.

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. More specifically, I provide evidence that migrants are often judged by their displacement decisions (i.e. “guilt by location”) not only by combatants and governments (Steele, 2018a; Lichtenheld, 2020), but also by their fellow citizens.

This paper also contributes to the empirical literature on reintegration. Past research primarily examines the micro-foundations of reintegration with conjoint experiments: evaluating preferences for *hypothetical* profiles of returnees (Dill et al., 2025; Revkin and Kao, 2024; Kao and Revkin, 2023; Gelot and Khadka, 2025). This study provides an estimate of the *realized* consequences of return in a natural context, providing the first plausibly causal estimate of the effects of IDP return.

Finally, the study contributes to a growing literature showing that the effects of migration are shaped by international norms and 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 2021; Lichtenheld and Schon 2021; Peisakhin, Stoop and Van der Windt 2024; Steele 2018b; Zhou and Lyall 2025). In a post-liberal international order legal norms of migrant protection are eroding (Davutoglu, 2025), posing particular risks for IDPs whose protections are the least developed.

2 Conflict, Social Cohesion, and Reintegration

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. 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 horizontal cohesion, often operationalized through indicators such as willingness to cooperate for common goals, trust in neighbors, or reconciliation between aggrieved parties.²

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.

²I use the terms reconciliation and social cohesion interchangeably. Reconciliation, as defined by Kao, Fabbe and Petersen (2023: citing Enright (2014)), is “the formation of pro-social attitudes and behavior of former enemies toward one another within the same social space.” This can be understood as a form of horizontal social cohesion: relations between groups divided along the “master cleavage” of the conflict (Wood, 2008).

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. Seminal work in the field (Bellows and Miguel, 2009; Blattman, 2009; Freitag, Kijewski and Oppold, 2019; Voors et al., 2012) found exposure to violence to have a positive effect on prosocial behavior by inducing “post-traumatic growth.”³ This trauma-induced bonding and collective coping (Gilligan, Pasquale and Samii, 2014) often solidifies identity along ethnic, religious, or political lines. As groups become more internally cohesive, the divide between sects may grow (Rohner, Thoenig and Zilibotti, 2013). Therefore, while violence may foster cooperation *within* groups, there is limited evidence that violence bridges the social divide *between* groups (Bauer et al., 2016; Webster et al., 2020). 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 can also erode social cohesion, both between and within groups, 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) and there is generalized evidence that “wartime violence consistently heightens hostility toward former adversaries” (Barceló, 2025). Victims of violence are fearful of recurrence, resentful of perpetrators, and suspicious of anyone who 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, when civilian collaboration is common and “violence emerges from an in-group or from an unknown perpetrator”, the suspicion mechanism is especially prominent (Krakowski, 2020; Berman, Clarke and Majed, 2024). Collectively, this literature suggests that conflict reshapes individuals’ social and psychological constitution, influencing how they respond to critical post-conflict challenges.

Among the most consequential of such challenges is the reintegration of the displaced. A

³This positive effect only occurs when certain scope conditions are met: when violence is identity-based, perpetrated by a clear out-group, and when civilians and combatants are sharply differentiated (Barceló, 2025; Berman, Clarke and Majed, 2024)

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. While DDR focuses on combatants and repatriation addresses refugees—who are typically civilians largely distanced from wartime culpability—the return of IDPs poses unique challenges. Because IDPs often reside in zones near belligerent activity, their wartime loyalties are uncertain, fueling fear and suspicion upon their return.⁴

3 Theory: Uncertainty After Conflict

The central logic of my theory rests on this mechanism of fear and suspicion. My primary expectation is that *the return of IDPs will negatively affect social cohesion, and that the degree of stigmatization facing returnees will mediate this relationship*. When returnees are not stigmatized, their return should have little or no effect on cohesion. When they are stigmatized, return is likely to erode cohesion through heightened fear and suspicion. To develop this argument, I first define stigmatization and then trace the causal sequence linking conflict experiences, stigma formation, and postwar reintegration dynamics.

Stigmatization occurs when individuals possess “an attribute that is deeply discrediting”, generating animosity between those who hold that attribute and those who do not (Goffman, 2009; Macdonald and Kerali, 2020). Communities are “deeply engaged stake-holders who have important things to lose, to gain, and to preserve.” (Kleinman, 1999: p.352) When someone poses a threat to these important interests, a community may develop a social norm sanctioning those who exhibit characteristics associated with the perceived threat.⁵ In

⁴The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (2025) details the unique protection concerns for internal migrants: IDP’s “are generally subject to heightened vulnerability in a number of areas... More often than refugees, the internally displaced tend to remain close to or become trapped in zones of conflict, caught in the cross-fire and at risk of being used as pawns, targets or human shields by the belligerents... Unlike refugees, these internally displaced persons do not have a special status in international law... [the government carries] primary responsibility for their assistance and protection.”

⁵While I primarily theorize at the individual level, the stigmatization of certain returnees often arises from community-level norms and perceptions, reflecting broader group or tribal dynamics.

wartime contexts, this takes the form of conflict-based stigmatization—a process through which individuals or groups are marked, blamed, or marginalized because of their real or perceived association with violence or a particular armed actor.

This stigma shapes civilian dynamics throughout each stage of the conflict. First, a community endures the conflict itself. During war, noncombatants learn about the central cleavage shaping the conflict and may experience direct physical or emotional harm, or witness harm to members of their community. Second, once the fighting ends—through either negotiated stalemate or military victory—the cleavage hardens between those seen as perpetrators and those seen as victims. Outcomes often reflect “victor’s justice,” as the defeated are labeled perpetrators and bear collective blame. Finally, as displaced populations begin to return—whether voluntarily or through government pressure—the receiving community encounters these returnees through the lens of wartime experiences and the stigmas that have formed. It is this interaction, the contact between returnees and the communities they rejoin, that lies at the heart of my theory.⁶

There are several possible outcomes of this contact. In some cases, the returnees are not associated with violence and communities accurately perceive this. When uncertainty about guilt is low and returnees are not viewed as culpable, contact should have little or no effect on cohesion. However, when uncertainty about guilt is high, contact can unfold along two divergent paths. Under optimal conditions—equal status among groups, intergroup cooperation, common goals, and an institutionally supportive context—contact can reduce prejudice and discrimination (Allport, 1954). Yet in most return and reintegration contexts, such conditions are rarely met.⁷

Instead, I argue that postwar contact typically occurs under less-than-optimal conditions and therefore backfires. Interactions between returnees and receiving communities often

⁶My theory has two main actors: migrant returnees and the receiving community. Migrant returnees are refugees or IDPs who experienced protracted displacement—defined by UNHCR as displacement lasting more than five years—but are now returning. The receiving community consists of those who remained settled in their communities, either never leaving or returning immediately after the war. In many protracted conflict contexts (e.g., Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Gaza, Colombia), populations are highly mobile, with frequent displacement and return. As a result, nearly all individuals in certain communities are displaced at some point, making classification by migration status not meaningful. The actors in my theory emerge only after this dynamic settles, forming two groups in post-conflict equilibrium.

⁷The quality of return depends on two dimensions: coercion—the extent to which migrants return and reintegrate voluntarily—and coordination—the extent to which government, local, and humanitarian actors align and support reintegration. Positive social contact is only possible when coercion is low and coordination is high, a condition rarely met in post-conflict settings.

occur under high levels of ambiguity. This negative contact reinforces rather than reduces bias. Contact with groups perceived as complicit in past violence (i.e. stigmatized) heightens fear and suspicion, deepens animosity, and erodes social cohesion. Even when communities have begun to reconcile with their wartime experiences, the reintroduction of stigmatized returnees is a setback—reopening old wounds, reactivating divisions, and undermining forgiveness and social repair.

3.1 Observable Implications

In a direct test of this theory, stigmatization would be measured using detailed information on returnees.⁸ This is not only infeasible but also unrealistic, as receiving communities rely on heuristics to judge the culpability of returnees. Instead, I propose several observable implications measurable at the meso-level (village or neighborhood) and broadly generalizable. In contexts with conflict based stigmatization, my core expectation will generalize. However, observable implications of the argument may depend on context-specific factors responsible for stigmatization, which is a function of the experiences of the community and the characteristics of the returnees (Macdonald and Kerali, 2020).⁹

Which migrants are likely to be stigmatized? Returnees are stigmatized when they possess “attributes that [are] deeply discrediting” (Goffman, 2009). Such attributes, which imply involvement in violence, may be either ascriptive or behavioral. First, the “guilt” of returnees may be inferred from ascriptive, demographic traits. Innocent civilians can become politicized in the haze of war simply because they share an identity with the former enemy.¹⁰ Communities may ascribe collective blame to these migrants, viewing them as perpetrators or collaborators. In contrast, returnees not associated with the group are less likely to be treated with fear or suspicion upon return. Therefore, *the return of IDPs who share an identity with the perpetrating group will have a larger negative effect on social cohesion in receiving communities to those that do not.*

⁸Survey research employing conjoint experiments reveals which attributes drive stigmatization (e.g., Kao and Revkin 2023; Dill et al. 2025), and these estimates could be used to code detailed biographies of returnees.

⁹I develop the observable implications in the context of conventional civil conflict.

¹⁰The relevant ascriptive characteristic varies across contexts and may be tied to ethnic, tribal, or political identities. For example, this could include Ukrainian returnees of Russian descent to the Donbas (Ash, 2025; Dill et al., 2025), Hutu returnees after the Rwandan genocide (Fujii, 2009; Lischer, 2011), Sunni returnees in Iraq and Syria after ISIS (Lichtenheld, 2024; Revkin and Kao, 2024), Croat and Serb returnees in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Lippman, 2019), or Tamil returnees in Sri Lanka.

Second, migrants are also judged by their behavior during the conflict. Receiving communities are unlikely to forgive those who collaborated with the enemy, creating challenges upon return. While existing research shows that desires for revenge are greater when collaboration was severe and voluntary (Kao and Revkin, 2023), individuals rarely observe others' acts of collaboration directly. Instead, they rely on visible heuristics that signal guilt. One such cue is displacement patterns, or what Lichtenheld (2024) calls "guilt by location." Wartime loyalty is often inferred from whether individuals collaborated with or defected from the group controlling a territory. Because territorial control and collaboration are self-reinforcing (Kalyvas, 2006: p.112), fleeing an area is often perceived as defection, while remaining is seen as support. Both governments, rebels, and communities use displacement patterns to infer loyalty, collaboration, and complicity in wartime violence (Balcells and Steele, 2016; Steele, 2018b; Lichtenheld, 2024). Migrants who lived under the control or occupation of an armed group are stigmatized and less likely to be accepted after conflict.¹¹ Therefore, *the return of IDPs who lived under territorial control (occupation) of the losing group will have a larger negative effect on social cohesion in receiving communities to those that did not.*

Who is likely to stigmatize migrants? A community's history of violence partly determines its social identity. In communities with little or no experience of violence residents feel less threat and identify less as victims of the conflict. Without this victim identity, the propensity to stigmatize those associated with violence should be lower. By contrast, fear and suspicion of returnees may be particularly pronounced in communities with high levels of past violence, making reintegration more difficult. Insecurity in a community increases distrust between cleavages (Kijewski and Freitag, 2018), undermines prospects for successful reintegration (Kaplan and Nussio, 2018), raises the likelihood of reprisals (Podder, 2012), and reinforces perceptions of returnees as perpetrators (McMullin, 2013).¹² Therefore, *the return of IDPs to communities with higher levels of past civilian victimization will have a larger negative effect on social cohesion compared to those with lower levels of victimization.*

¹¹See Lichtenheld (2024: Ch. 8) and Dill et al. (2025) for micro-foundational evidence from Iraq and Ukraine.

¹²This dynamic can occur across receiving communities regardless of their identity. Communities that were victimized by their fellow co-ethnics may become suspicious of members of their own group, while minority communities may instead develop suspicion toward the out group as a whole.

4 Context

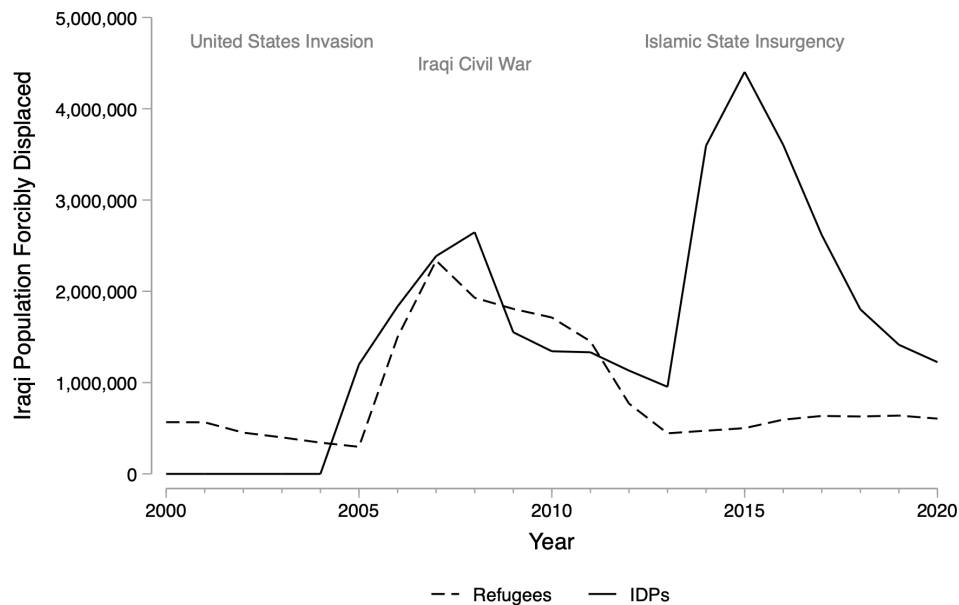
4.1 Conflict and Displacement in Iraq

I test my theory in the context of Iraq, a critical case for studying displacement. Since the Iran–Iraq War in 1980, Iraq has consistently been one of the world’s major producers of refugees and IDPs. Figure 1 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 3). IDPs 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.

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).

Figure 1: 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.

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.

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. 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.

4.2 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 area of origin (CCCM, 2021).¹³

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). The Center for Civilians in Conflict concluded the closures violated standard of voluntary, safe and dignified return outlined by the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (OCHA, 1998: p. 14). Migrants themselves were apprehensive about returning, worried that their communities were unwilling to assimilate them. 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

¹³This is likely a conservative estimate, as the survey asked whether respondents returned to their former neighborhood or village, excluding those who may have returned to the general area, such as the subdistrict.

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). I explore this observation quantitatively in Table A-4 by comparing the characteristics of camps in each closure wave. The demographics of a given camp do not meaningfully predict the timing of its closure. This provides further evidence that the timing of individual camp closures was orthogonal to trends in local conditions.¹⁴

5 Unpacking the Theory Qualitatively

Before testing my theory quantitatively, I present qualitative evidence illustrating the origins of communal tensions, the attitudinal and behavioral consequences of reintegration, and variation in the stigmatization of migrant populations.¹⁵ To do so, I interviewed returnees and receiving communities in three communities in the Nineveh Governorate, each affected by violence and the closure-induced returns but varying in social dynamics and demographics. Al-Qayara is a rural Sunni Arab community that saw a high number of IS recruits. Markaz Telafar is a diverse urban center inhabited by Turkmen, Arab, and Kurdish residents. Qayrawan is a semi-urban, mixed town in Sinjar, home to a large Yazidi population that was targeted in the genocide by IS.¹⁶

The Origins of Fear and Mistrust Discussions with the community members began with an exploration of the dynamics before 2014 and how they defined reconciliation within their community. Despite the overall instability in Iraq during the 2000s, respondents recounted that prior to the arrival of IS, neighbors generally treated one another with respect and that *"the words of the sheikh and the elders were heard and obeyed by all members of*

¹⁴Local reporting and original interviews suggest that the general adoption of Resolution 16 may have been motivated by broader concerns—such as a desire to signal Iraq's stability, anticipation of UN aid draw-down in 2022 (OCHA, 2023; Travers, 2023), and the October 2021 parliamentary election (Alloush 2022; Focus Group 6). However, the staggered timing of individual closures throughout 2019, 2020, and 2021 did not directly coincide with the effects of these future policies.

¹⁵I conducted two rounds of fieldwork. 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. This is presented throughout the paper. The second round, conducted in June 2024, used a "most different systems design" to probe the causal mechanism of the theory. This suggestive and illustrative evidence is presented here. Across both rounds, I conducted 41 semi-structured interviews and 11 focus groups, involving 81 participants. Interviews were approved by X University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) on July 22, 2023 (Protocol Number 1506016040).

¹⁶Section A.4 provides demographic information on the interviewees, their communities, and selection of data collection locations.

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 felt 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).

The Consequences of Stigmatized Returns There was widespread fear among community members that returnees posed a security risk, potentially facilitating 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). Community members accused returnees of providing tips to IS cells in the desert and occasionally made threats toward returnees, sometimes following through by burning their tents or throwing stun grenades.

One community member described the specific attitudinal and behavioral shifts following the return of IDPs: “*People in this community used to visit each other late at night.... After they (IDPs) 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).

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 a family who ruined your life... the brother of the one who killed your brother, or the son of the one who killed your son?*” (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).

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).

Stigmatization: Ethnicity, Occupation, and Victimization This stigma often arose from the ethnicity of IDPs and their original displacement patterns. 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. It was extremely rare for civilians to avoid displacement altogether. Variation in displacement timing created two groups of people: what Revkin (2021) calls “stayers” and “leavers.”¹⁷ 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). Even when civilians stayed for non-ideological reasons, fellow Iraqis often equated their decision to remain as tacit acceptance of IS’ legitimacy.

Respondents in Al-Qayara and Sinjar identified this dynamic. A respondent in Sinjar noted that “*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 (but subsequently displaced) 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). Another

¹⁷The receiving community is almost exclusively made up of leavers, those who left early and returned immediately following the conflict, while the returnees are a mixed group of stayers and leavers.

community member expressed that 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 (Interviews #39, 40, 41). “Guilt by location” particularly stigmatized Sunni Muslims.

IDP return, however, was not universally harmful across all communities. Responses varied depending on the ethnicity of returnees and 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 and where a larger proportion of returnees were non-Sunni, 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 of Arab IDPs. 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 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.

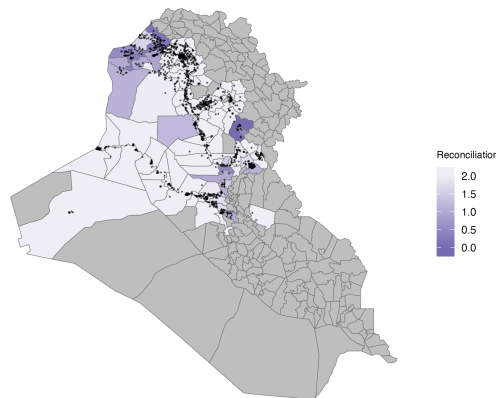
6 Research Design

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 quantitative analysis.

6.1 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.¹⁸ Figure 2 visualizes the communities included in the panel and Table A-2 presents descriptive statistics.

Figure 2: 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.

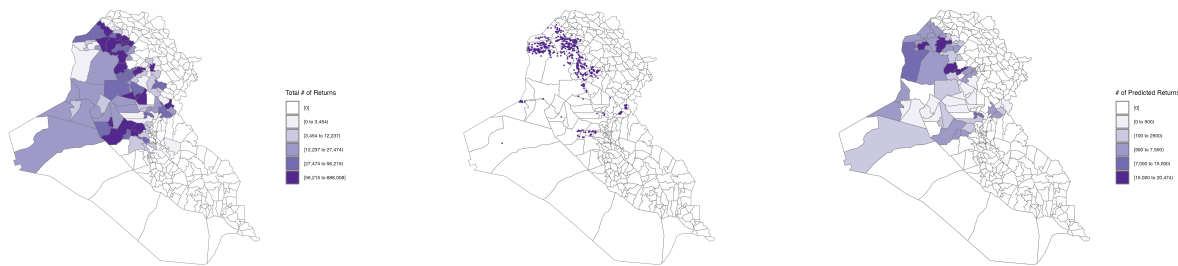
Measuring Social Cohesion To measure social cohesion, I use the Return Index, an elite survey assessing the severity of structural, security, and social conditions in return areas. IOM draws on its large network of “community leaders”, including village elders (referred to as “mukhtars” in Arabic), representatives of specific communities, and local informal authorities who act as registrars for their communities.¹⁹ The questionnaire was designed 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 survey question for

¹⁸IOM 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.

¹⁹While 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 this limitation, I supplement this analysis with a separate respondent-level analysis using representative data.

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.” The outcome is reverse coded (“yes, not taking place” = 0, “yes, taking place” = 1, and “no” = 2), with higher values indicating that conflict grievances have been reconciled in the community.²⁰ Reconciliation is therefore my primary outcome of interest²¹ and the remaining variables are used as covariates.²² Figure 2 visualizes the geographic distribution of this reconciliation measure.

Figure 3: 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 3 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

²⁰This measure captures whether a respondent believes that “reconciliation is necessary” for their community to function properly. Respondents understood that indicating reconciliation is needed reflected that conflict-related grievances were unresolved (i.e., low levels of social cohesion). Respondents identified grievances as stemming from “crimes committed by ISIS,” “crimes committed during and after the conflict,” “unrestricted population returns,” “destruction of property,” “targeting or discrimination,” “social, cultural, or political exclusion,” and “tribal disputes.”

²¹Barceló (2025) organizes social cohesion outcomes into four domains, and reconciliation clearly falls under “attitudinal hardening toward wartime enemies,” which in the Iraqi case refers to attitudes toward IS.

²²Section A.1 provides additional details on the Return Index, including the wording and coding of all survey questions.

“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 another shelter type.”²³ 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.²⁴

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.²⁵

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.²⁶ 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

²³Apart 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.

²⁴The 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).

²⁵Ideally, I would have a continuous measure of this endogenous variable, tracking each camp resident’s movement after closure. Such a variable is unavailable. The binary measure serves the same purpose but is less precise.

²⁶Section A.2 provides additional details about the CCCM data.

camp's closure.

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.²⁷

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.

²⁷My 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.

Since the assignment of cross-sectional exposure is not random, my estimation strategy 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 ;²⁸
- $\text{Predicted Returns}_{st}$ 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;²⁹
- 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

²⁸The 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.

²⁹Controls 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.

A-11 by instrumenting the indicator for whether a community received any closure-induced 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.

6.2 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.³⁰

The approach with this data is straightforward. This cross-sectional data was collected in November and December of 2021 after the camp closure campaign.³¹ 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;³²
- α_s are subdistrict fixed effects;
- X_i is a matrix of respondent level demographic controls.

³⁰Section A.3 provides additional details about the sampling strategy and survey instruments.

³¹The 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.

³²This 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.

- N_j is a matrix of pre-treatment location-level characteristics from the Return Index;³³
- 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.

One key advantage of the respondent level approach is its ability to isolate the direct effect of contact. Return could affect social cohesion either through a compositional shift (as the population changes due to the arrival of new returnees, who may have lower levels of social cohesion) or through contact (as returnees influences social cohesion via interactions with the receiving community). I theorize and seek to estimate the latter. Unfortunately, the community level analysis aggregates both pathways. However, in the respondent-level analysis, returnees are excluded from the analysis, ensuring that the estimated effects reflect contact rather than a compositional shift.

6.3 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

³³Controls 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.

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.

7 Results

7.1 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 examine the effects of the predicted returns measure on community-level perceptions of reconciliation. 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.

Consistent with expectations, coefficients are negative, statistically significant, and stable across specifications. Returns impaired the reconciliation process, negatively affecting the resolution of wartime grievances between ethnic and tribal groups. The continuous treatment variables and the likert outcome measure are both z-standardized. Therefore, a one-standard-deviation increase in returns lowers the level of reconciliation in the community by 0.031 standard deviations.³⁴

While these effects may appear modest, they remain consequential. For the hundreds

³⁴A one-standard-deviation increase in return (an influx of 102 returnees, per 10,000 residents, to a sub-district) lowers the probability of community reconciliation by 1.3–1.6 percentage points, when the dependent variable is collapsed into a binary (1 = no, reconciliation is not needed).

of communities affected by the camp closure, even a small subset regressing from a state of reconciliation to renewed grievances could have substantial consequences for thousands of residents (as detailed in Section A.4). Additionally, this reconciliation measure may be inherently difficult to move. Because this measure was collected from community elites, temporal variation is limited: a change in the measure from one round to the next requires a visible and documented shift in community conditions. This limitation should not apply to the perception-based measures from the household surveys, to which I now turn.

Table 1: Return Negatively Affects Community Level Social Cohesion

	Reconciliation			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Predicted Returns	-0.027** (0.011)	-0.031** (0.013)	-0.031** (0.014)	-0.032** (0.013)
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.

Table 2 presents the effects of closure-induced returns on five indicators capturing different dimensions of social cohesion (Equation 3). 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 (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.

Respondent-level analyses confirm the community-level results and also identify which dimensions of social cohesion are most affected by return. Column 1 analyzes inter-group reconciliation, mirroring the analysis in Table 1, but relying on responses from a representative sample of community members. 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.³⁵ Return also increased respondents' feelings of mistrust (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. These effects are comparable in magnitude to other meaningful covariates, including a respondent's unemployment status and community security levels.

Importantly, return does not appear to affect all dimensions of social cohesion. The estimated effects of return on 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 4 reveal negative effects on trust and feelings of judgment. Yet across all specifications, return has no statistically significant effect on intra-group reconciliation. Although the coefficients are in the expected direction, standard errors remain large.

Robustness & Threats to Inference

The main threat to inference is the potential endogeneity of return and local conditions. The identification assumption is that absent camp closures, reconciliation in affected and unaffected communities would have followed the same trajectory. This counterfactual is impossible to observe, but graphical evidence in Figure A-4 shows that treated and untreated communities followed parallel trends in the six periods (18 months) prior to treatment. This

³⁵Substantively, 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).

Table 2: 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.

increases the credibility of the assumption. To further bolster confidence, I show that results also 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-10), using generalized synthetic control (Figure A-5), implementing a two-stage least squares (2SLS) IV estimator (Table A-11), dichotomizing the continuous treatment (Figure A-7), and applying alternative difference-in-differences estimators for staggered adoption (Figure A-7). Finally, my primary control variables are only available beginning in 2019. To ensure that heterogeneity in historical trajectories does not bias the results, I also control for exposure to conflict before 2019 in Table A-12. 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-14 shows that omitted variable bias would need to be substantial to nullify the results.

7.2 Causal Mechanism

The above analysis establishes a negative relationship between IDP return and reconciliation. Further evidence is needed to probe whether the proposed fear and suspicion mechanism underlies this relationship. To do so, I examine three sources of heterogeneity: place-based stigmatization, the ethnic identity of returnees, and communities' historical exposure to conflict.

First, recent research finds that migrants who lived under enemy occupation are more likely be stigmatized (Lichtenheld, 2024). Therefore, the return of migrants who lived under IS rule (before subsequently being displaced) is likely a major source of reduced social cohesion. To test this, I disaggregate the predicted returns variable, using returnees date of initial displacement from the camp profiling data. I categorize returnees into two groups: those who fled before IS established territorial sovereignty (“leavers”) and those who lived under IS control and fled later in the conflict (“stayers”).³⁶ This creates two separate treatment variables: predicted returns of “leavers” and predicted returns of “stayers.”

Table 3 displays these results. As a benchmark, panel A reproduces my fully specified model from Table 1, where the predicted returns variable is not disaggregated. Panel B estimates the effect of “Stayers” returning, while panel C examines the effect of “Leavers” returning. Remarkably, the baseline estimate (panel A) remains nearly unchanged when the treatment is redefined to include only “Stayers” (panel B). Notably, there is no significant effect for the “Leavers” 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

³⁶Following Revkin (2018), I use March 1, 2015, the date when IS imposed its de facto travel ban, as the cutoff.

consists of migrants who did not live under IS control.³⁷ Consistent with my proposed mechanism, the negative effect of returns is driven entirely by the return of “stayers”, those who lived under IS territorial control.

Table 3: Original Displacement Timing Conditions Community Level Social Cohesion

	Reconciliation
	(1)
<i>Panel A: All Migrants</i>	
Predicted Returns	-0.032** (0.013)
<i>Panel B: Post-Occupation Migrants</i>	
Predicted Returns	-0.029** (0.013)
<i>Panel C: Pre-Occupation Migrants</i>	
Predicted Returns	-0.007 (0.018)
Observations	15300
Clusters	92
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.

I now turn to the respondent-level analysis, again disaggregating the treatment variable. Table 4 presents the results. Panel A reproduces the results from Table 2. 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

³⁷Figure A-2 visualizes the distribution of the original displacement timing for migrants in the Camp Profiling Assessment.

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 migrants stigmatized by occupation. 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.

Table 4: 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: Stayers</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: Leavers</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.

Second, I examine the ethno-religious identity of returnees. The effects of return should emerge primarily through negative contact with returnees who share the broader identity of the perpetrator. Because IS was a Sunni Islamist organization, conflict-based stigma should predominantly affect Sunni returnees. Table 5 supports this expectation with the respondent-level design.³⁸ Panel A reproduces the baseline results from Table 2. Panel B

³⁸The respondent-level data include each individual's ethnic identity. Because treatment is coded directly

restricts treatment to villages that received any Sunni returnees, while Panel C restricts treatment to those that received only non-Sunni returnees. The results show that the effects of return are driven by Sunnis, the sect associated with IS. In contrast, the return of non-Sunni groups, who were often victims of IS, has little to no effect on reconciliation between groups or feelings of mistrust. In contrast, respondents in communities that received non-Sunni returnees reported feeling *less* judged by others in their communities.

Table 5: 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.

Finally, I examine whether community exposure to violence mediates the effect of return. This last test of the mechanism expects prior violence within a community to condition the effect of return. In Table 6 I examine the heterogeneous effects of returns by exposure to victimization. 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 from the survey, I can disaggregate it by identity.

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

	Reconciliation
	(1)
Predicted Returns	-0.035*** (0.013)
Predicted Returns X IS Victimization	-0.054** (0.025)
Observations	15300
Clusters	92
PARAMETERS	
Village 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. 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.

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 0.054.⁴⁰ 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 psycho-

³⁹Consistent 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.

⁴⁰The victimization variable is z-standardized.

logical and social barriers to reconciliation. Returnees may be associated with past memories 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.

7.3 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, I find little evidence that communities viewed returnees as a threat to the local economy or job market. In the community-level analysis, I examine this directly in the Table A-15, finding that returns did not affect unemployment in the community. Additionally, results from Table 3 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 (Bourhrous, Khafagi and Tartir, 2024). In Table A-16, I examine whether returns triggered demographic anxiety. While camp-closure returns are positively associated with increased discomfort about the current population composition, 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

trigger communal tensions and conflict — particularly when governments prioritize assistance to returnees while neglecting host communities, leading to resentment (Schwartz, 2019). In Iraq, 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. 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 the host community families who lost their men”* (Interview #29). Because returnees are suspected of affiliation with IS, communities believe that the government is compensating perpetrators while ignoring victims. Future research should further examine the links between return, aid allocation, and harm compensation.

8 Discussion and Conclusion

One of the fundamental challenges for post-conflicts government is the reintegration of the displaced. What are the consequences of migrant return on community dynamics? This article advances an informational theory of IDP return. I argue that return has a negative effect on social cohesion, mediated by the level migrants are stigmatized. Fear and suspicion is presented as the key mechanism driving the effect of return. Returnees introduces uncertainty into the post-conflict environment, particularly in communities that experienced high levels of victimization. Locals may suspect returnees of complicity in past violence and fear renewed instability. Because wartime loyalties are often opaque, communities rely on heuristics. Migrants who shared an identity with, or lived under the territorial control of, the former enemy are often presumed to be collaborators. Their return is viewed as a threat, eroding interpersonal trust and impairing reconciliation.

Employing a mixed-methods approach, I test this argument in Iraq. Using a difference-in-differences design, I show that IDP return induced by camp closures had a negative effect on reconciliatory attitudes toward perpetrators. Qualitative and supplementary quantitative evidence suggest these attitudes translated into meaningful prejudicial behavior and reprisals. However, the effects of return were primarily limited to reconciliation, the fact of social cohesion most directly tied to stigmatized returnees. These results are driven by Sunni returnees who previously lived under IS territorial control and is more pronounced in areas with higher levels of IS victimization. These findings are corroborated with household survey

data and original qualitative interviews, offering insights into how fear and suspicion emerges from negative contact during attempted reintegration.

I evaluate the consequences of return under specific circumstances. In Iraq, return was driven by a coerced and uncoordinated camp closure campaign. The government forced returns and failed to coordinate with local or international actors. These conditions prevented stigmas from being reduced prior to reintegration, resulting in negative contact between the returnees and the receiving community. My theory suggests that if stigmatization had been reduced before return, the effect on social cohesion would have been neutral or positive. Future research should examine the consequences of return under different conditions and assess how interventions—such as appeals by trusted authorities (Blair et al., 2021), local peace agreements (Parry and Aymerich, 2022), or inclusive livelihood programs (Caffisch et al., 2025)—can reduce fear and suspicion and create more durable conditions for return. In particular, the influence of group/tribal dynamics and informal governance on individuals' reactions to returnees should be further explored.

The case of Iraq has clear policy implications for the management of the internally displaced. International law and norms correctly guarantee a right to return. However, an over-emphasis on return as the “preferred solution” can create perverse incentives for host governments. Post-conflict governments may privilege the end goal of “ending” displacement over the process required to ensure that return is voluntary, safe, and dignified. This is especially true regarding the return of IDPs, where the concept of “return” is underdeveloped. While refugee return entails repatriation, IDP return presumably demands going “home.” However, there is no consensus on the geographic level (i.e. pre-conflict residency, neighborhood, town, district, or governorate) that meets the definition of return. Return to the pre-conflict place of origin, “domicile return” (Bradley, 2018), is not a “natural or logical outcome in most post-conflict situations.” (Orlans, 2022). More importantly, the majority of the world’s internal migrants do not wish to return to their pre-conflict communities (IOM, 2024). Return frameworks and aid structures should center IDP preferences, offering migrants a menu of reintegration options. As this research demonstrates, forcing return may undermine post-conflict stability. This has implications for international law and should shape how governments and INGOs design interventions, craft policies, and collect data.

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

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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.

This survey captures the dynamics of a diverse array of communities in Western and Northern Iraq, spanning both rural and urban areas affected by the Islamic State conflict. Because the conflict did not directly affect the Shia south or the Kurdistan Region, the sample largely consists of Sunni-majority communities in Anbar, Baghdad and Salah al-Din (including key cities such as Tikrit, Ramadi, and Fallujah) and the ethnically diverse communities in Ninewa and Kirkuk (including key cities such as Mosul, Kirkuk, and Telafar).

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-5 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 (Stayers)	15300	483.681	1040.756	0.000	3827.588
Predicted Returns (Leavers)	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	Surdeh	274	92	Aug-19
3	Anbar	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)

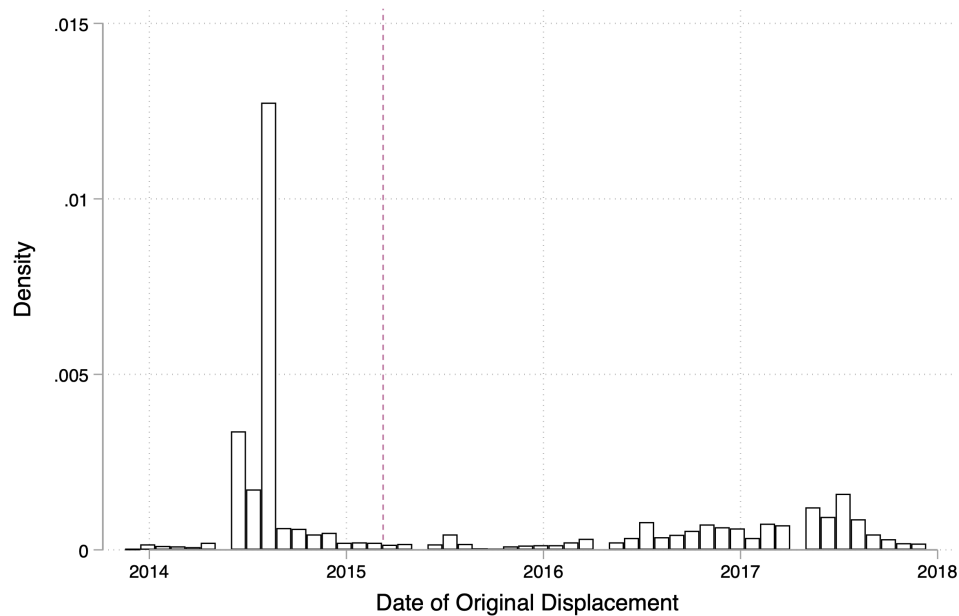
Assessed District

As shown in the right panel of Figure 3, 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.

Finally, inference could be threatened if the timing of individual camp closures were influenced by local conditions in residents' areas of origin. To assess this, I compare camps closed in the first phase with those closed in the second phase. Table A-4 regresses whether the camp was closed in the later, second phase on survey measures on demographics, needs, and perceptions of camp residents. Overall, camp composition does not predict closure timing, and there are few meaningful differences between migrants in early- and late-closed camps.

Table A-4: Balance in Closure Phases

	Closed Late
	(1)
Female	-0.015 (0.030)
Age of Resident	0.002 (0.001)
# HH Members	0.000 (0.011)
First Place of Displacement? No	0.254*** (0.079)
First Time in Camp? No	0.086 (0.082)
Property in Origin Damaged	-0.002 (0.066)
Compensation for Harm	0.179 (0.162)
Receives Aid	-0.107 (0.090)
Family Separated	-0.018 (0.079)
Lacks Identification	0.231* (0.123)
Observations	1537
Clusters	24

Note: * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$. Robust standard errors clustered by the camp are in parentheses. Closed Late is a binary indicating that the camp closed in the second phase (2020 and onward).

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.

A United States Institute of Peace (2020) report provides a summary of the three districts included in the sample:

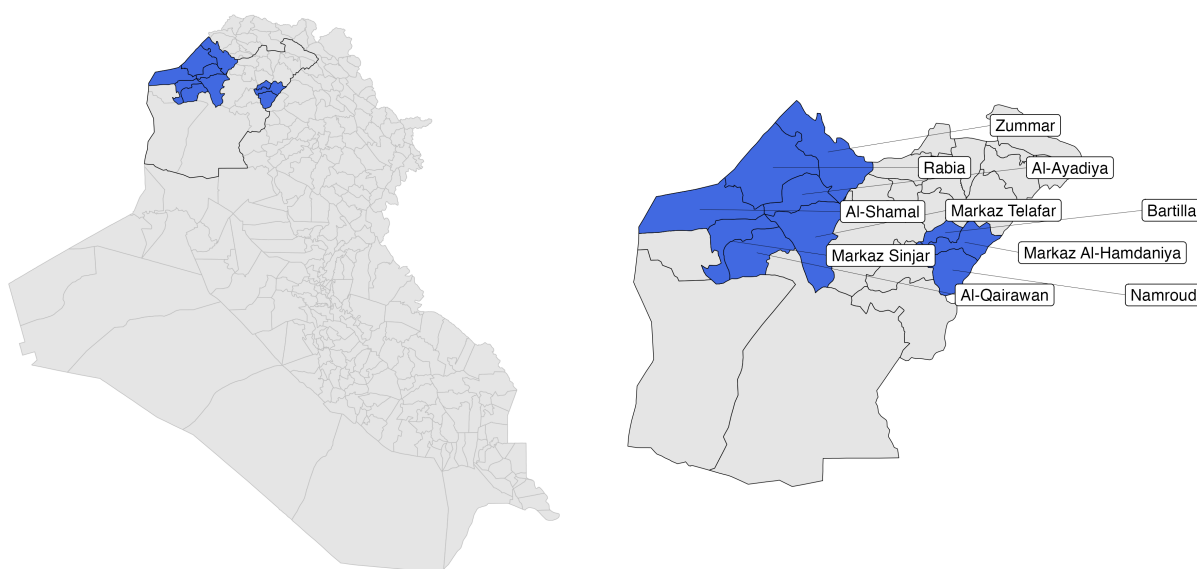
“Hamdaniya: Located about 20 miles east of Mosul, Hamdaniya is one of 14 districts contested by the Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). It is home to Christian and Shabak communities and to smaller populations of Yazidis, Kaka’is, Arabs, Kurds, and Turkmen. Both the Christian and Shabak communities have historically been targeted by terrorist groups, with towns such as Qaraqosh—a historical stronghold of the area’s Christians—suffering greatly. In ISIS’s wake, tensions between Christians and Shia Shabaks have increased over land, political representation, security, and cultural identity.

Sinjar: Located in western Nineveh and populated by Yazidis, Sunni and Shia Arabs, and Kurds, Sinjar district—which includes the Yazidi town of Sinuni—is also disputed between the KRG and the Government of Iraq. The district’s populations have suffered greatly in the aftermath of ISIS’s genocidal campaign against the Yazidis. ISIS crimes—including mass execution, enslavement, and forced displacement of thousands—have severely strained the relationship between Sunni Arabs and Yazidis, who feel the need for accountability and compensation.

Tal Afar: Tal Afar is located in northwestern Nineveh, between Sinjar and Mosul, and is home to a sizeable population of ethnic Turkmen, mostly located

in the two major population centers: Tal Afar Center and Ayadhiya subdistrict. Approximately 60-70 percent of Turkmen in Tal Afar district are Sunni and the remainder are Shia. The towns of Rabia and Zummar have sizeable Sunni Arab and Kurdish populations. While Tal Afar’s entire Shia Turkmen population was displaced in the wake of ISIS, most have returned, due in part to the strong presence of Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in the area. A large portion of the district’s Sunni community remains displaced, fearing that upon return they will be targeted for revenge violence by local Shia or PMF-affiliated armed groups due to their perceived affiliation with ISIS.”

Figure A-3: Surveyed Subdistricts in Nineveh



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.

Surveys were administered face-to-face by local enumerators who shared the ethno-religious identity of respondents. The sampling strategy employed stratified random sampling 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-5 display the survey instruments and outcome space for the variables analyzed from the survey, and Table A-6 presents descriptive statistics for this respondent level dataset.

Table A-5: 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-6: 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 (Leavers)	1413	0.422	0.494	0.000	1.000
Closure-Induced Returns (Stayers)	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

Round One 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.

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-7 provides demographic details for the first round of interviews.

Table A-7: 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

Round Two 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 Return Index indicators, I selected three sub-districts across distinct districts in Nineveh Governorate, each affected by closure-induced returns but varying in social cohesion and demographics. This "most-different" design 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-8 provides details on these cases.

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 A-8: Community Characteristics in Selected Subdistricts

After selecting the cases, I conducted qualitative data collection (semi-structured interviews and focus groups) through a local firm. 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. The field team leveraged their community connections to recruit participants who were either recent returnees or integrated members of the community.

Table A-9 provides demographic details of the second round of interviews. 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.

Table A-9: 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

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 reflection, 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)

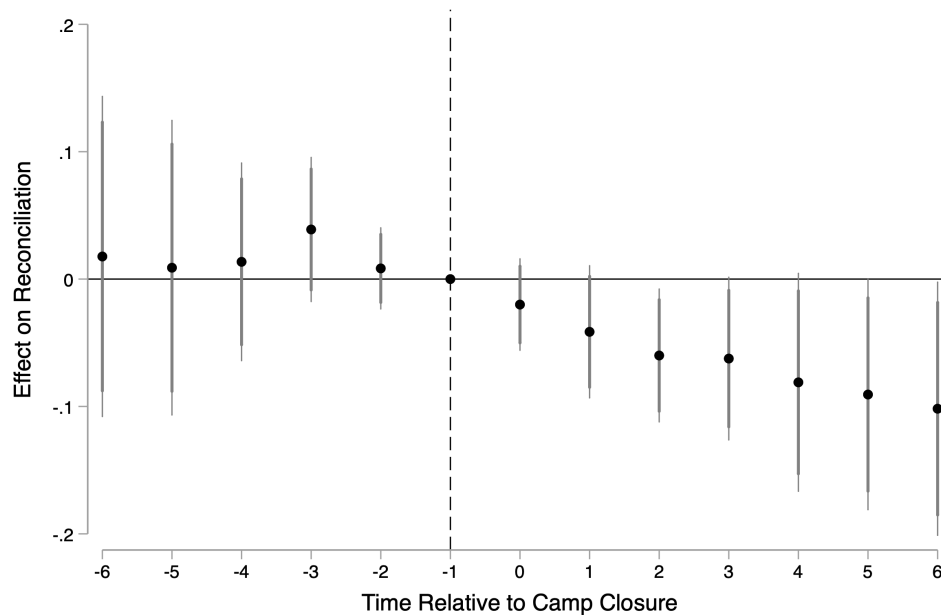
International organizations must have a major role to help by conducting awareness programs and conveying the idea of the importance of reconciliation and the importance of living in peace and stability in one region. Because what we see from the government's curriculum (schools) is not focused on these 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-10, 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-10: Matched-TWFE

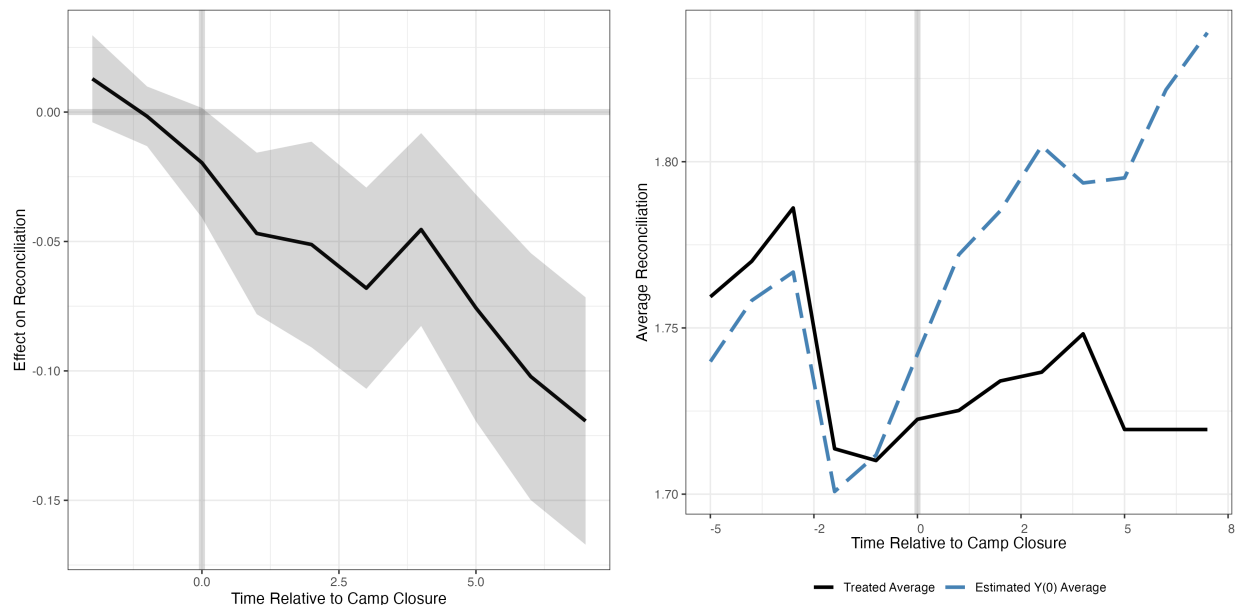
	<u>Reconciliation</u>
	(1)
Predicted Returns (Binary)	-0.081** (0.036)
Observations	13240
Clusters	90
PARAMETERS	
Subdistrict FE	Yes
Round FE	Yes
Migration Controls	Yes
Development Controls	Yes
Security Controls	Yes

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

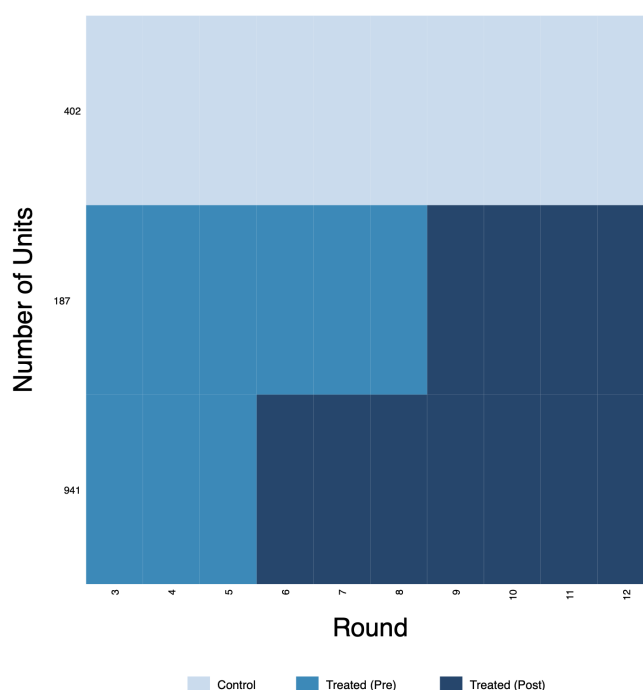


A.8 Difference-in-Differences Estimators

Recent econometric literature on difference-in-differences highlights concerns with TWFE estimators under staggered treatment adoption.⁴¹ 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

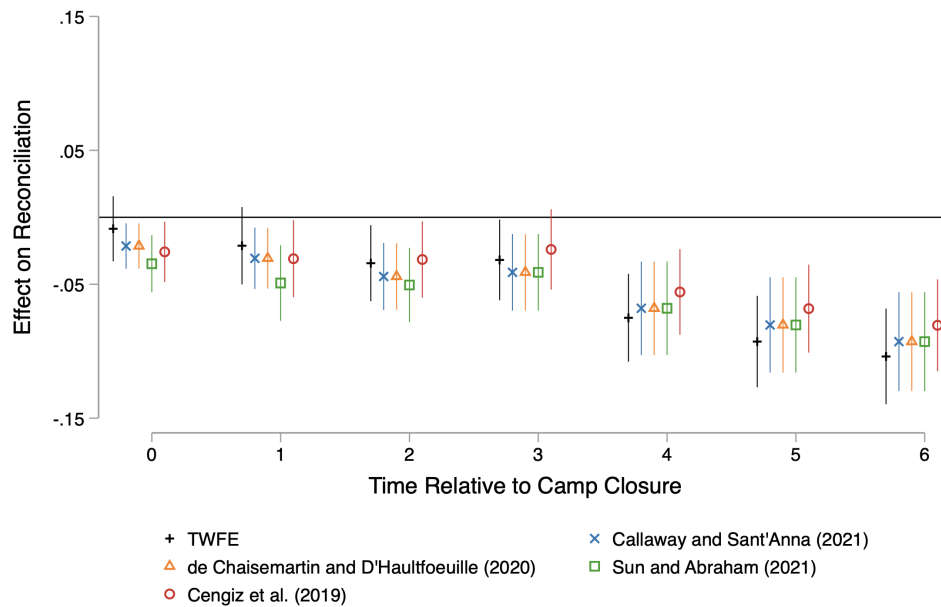


Nonetheless, I take further steps to ensure robustness by employing estimators that are designed to address treatment effect heterogeneity in the presence of staggered adoption. Since no such estimators currently exist for staggered and continuous treatments, I collapse the treatment variable into a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

⁴¹See 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-11 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-11: 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 Historical Controls

In the community-level analysis, the DTM panel begins in 2019. Although trends are parallel in the 18 months prior to treatment and robust to a range of controls, this does not capture longer-term historical trajectories. To address this, I additionally control for four measures of historical conflict exposure at the subdistrict level: estimates of civilian casualties during the Iraq Civil War (2004–2010) from both Iraq Body Count and the Worldwide Incidents Tracking System, and civilian casualties during the IS conflict (2014–2018) from both UCDP and ACLED. Results are robust to the inclusion of these control variables.

Table A-12: Community Results with Historical Controls

	Reconciliation			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Predicted Returns	-0.032** (0.014)	-0.028** (0.012)	-0.031** (0.013)	-0.031** (0.013)
Observations	15300	14991	15300	15300
Clusters	92	88	92	92
PARAMETERS				
Subdistrict FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Round FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Migration Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Development Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Security Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
IBC	Yes			
WITS		Yes		
GED			Yes	
ACLED				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.

A.11 Placebo Outcomes

One way to probe the identification assumption is to examine the effect of treatment on outcomes that should not plausibly be affected. In Table A-13, I assess whether return has any impact on non-social, local conditions. Returnees have no statistically significant effect on the functioning of businesses, the availability of electricity, water, or healthcare, or on concerns about unexploded ordnance.

Table A-13: Returns Does not Affect Unrelated Outcomes

	Business	Electricity	Water	Healthcare	UXOs
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Predicted Returns	-0.000 (0.018)	0.032 (0.032)	0.017 (0.022)	-0.018 (0.015)	-0.003 (0.005)
Observations	15300	15300	15300	15300	15300
Clusters	92	92	92	92	92
PARAMETERS					
Subdistrict FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Round FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Migration Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Note: * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$. Robust standard errors clustered by subdistrict are in parentheses. Outcomes are operation of businesses, access to electricity, access to water, access to healthcare, and concerns about unexplored ordinances. 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. All controls are measured in the pre-treatment period and are interacted with round-specific fixed effects.

A.12 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-14: 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-14, 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.13 Alternative Explanations

In Table A-15, I examine whether return affected the availability of employment within a community. Returns do not appear to have a statistically significant effect, bolstering confidence that the observed effects of return are driven by stigmatization rather than competition over jobs.

Table A-15: Returns Did Not Have an Effect on Availability of Employment

	<u>Availability of Employment</u>
	(1)
Predicted Returns	0.001 (0.016)
Observations	15300
Clusters	92
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. Unemployment 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.

In Table A-16, I examine an additional 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-16: 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.