



POLICY BRIEF 1 / 2020

# Flight from Iraq and Syria

## The impact of religious and ethnic identity

### The study

These are the main findings from a qualitative pilot study conducted on 22 refugees from Iraq and Syria, now living in Norway. The findings were interpreted using a research-based contextual and comparative analysis and augmented by findings from studies of Iraqi and Syrian refugees and internally displaced persons in other countries. In-depth review of the findings, including excerpts from the interviews, methodological caveats and broader contextual analysis, are presented in separate country-based reports.

### Policy relevant main findings

The Iraqi interviewees were significantly more influenced by ethnic and religious identity factors as decisive considerations for flight, since it was on those grounds that they were targeted or experienced threats. The Syrian interviewees on the other hand, cited the ongoing war, the commission of crimes with impunity, and the policies of the government as primary reasons for flight.

The Syrian refugees that were interviewed saw no likelihood of stability and security as long as Assad remained in power. Return was not something they considered as long as the war continued.

### Main questions

- To what extent did your ethnic and/or religious identity figure among the reasons for your seeking refuge?
- How do such identity factors influence your considerations of return?
- What measures do you believe are necessary to ensure security for all and an inclusive society?

The Iraqi interviewees pointed out the following preconditions for future security:

- Legal recognition and equal rights in Iraqi law
- Physical protection against possible future atrocities
- Rehabilitation of minority core areas in Sinjar and the Nineveh Plains
- Legal settlement of genocide

# Iraq

Iraq is a democratic and federal republic with legislation influenced by Islamic law. The 2005 constitution, adopted after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, also recognises the multi-ethnic and multi-religious nature of Iraq. The highest political offices are reserved for Sunni and Shia Arabs and the Kurds.

The south is dominated by Shia Arabs. The north dominated by Sunni Muslim Kurds, while central Iraq outside of the capital Baghdad consists mainly of Sunni Arabs. Iraq is also home to a variety of ethno-religious components, including Assyrian and Chaldean Christians, the Shabak, the Yazidis, Kakais and Sabaeen Mandaeans, and other religious groups such as Zoroastrians and Bahai.

## Study

The study includes 10 interviews with Iraqi refugees; seven with Yazidis and three with Assyrian Christians. The Assyrians fled during the 1990s. Three of the Yazidis interviewed arrived after 2014. The Assyrians fled from Baghdad, but have family roots in the Nineveh plains. Some of the Yazidis fled from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and some from the Nineveh Plains and Sinjar.

Among the Yazidi interviewees, some identify as ethnically Kurdish, while others view being Yazidis as both an ethnic and religious identity. All of them referred to Yazidism as a basis for their religious identity. The Assyrian interviewees define themselves as Christian, but distinct from other Christian communities, such as the Chaldeans. They emphasized their ethnic and linguistic identity as distinct from the Arabs and the Kurds.

## Main findings

Focusing first on the similarities, both Assyrian and Yazidi interviewees expressed a general mistrust in Iraqi national and regional authorities, stemming from what they perceive to be the state's inability and/or unwillingness to protect them from attacks by jihadists. For the Assyrians, who fled during the 1990s, the jihadist attacks of 2010 that affected fellow believers then residing in Iraq contributed to the mistrust in future protection. For the Yazidis, it was the ISIS attack that began in August 2014 that was the main reference for this fear. Interviewees from both groups also explained their mistrust by what they perceive as a lack of constitutional recognition and political representation of their community in the new Iraq. The mistrust also was founded and bolstered by experiences of discrimination and negative attitudes towards their communities on the part of other inhabitants. This was also the case for those arriving in the 1990s.

When asked about their considerations of return, the lack of physical safety and security in the Nineveh Plains and Sinjar was a key factor for both the Assyrians and the Yazidis. Interviewees from both groups called for the international community to help ensure reconstruction, justice, and security in the region. In particular the Yazidi emphasized the concern for the close more than xxx xxx still internally displaced in refugee camps both in the safe zones of KR-I and in the disputed areas, e.g. of Sinjar and Nineveh Plains, five years after the start of the ISIS genocide.

Turning to the differences, the Assyrians interviewees suggested local self-governance with their own security system (with one interviewee raising the idea of an armed Christian defense) to protect against future terrorist attacks as a possible solution, if national and regional authorities as well as international actors failed to protect them. The Yazidi respondents did not suggest self-governance as an option.

The Yazidis expressed a deeper mistrust than the Assyrians in the authorities and the majority population. This was largely based on their experiences of the 2014 genocide, the circumstances surrounding it; together with the failure of the central and regional government protect them from

***In August 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS) seized the districts of Sinjar, Tel Afar and the Ninewa Plains, leading to a mass exodus of Yazidis, Christians and other religious communities from these areas. By March 2015, 500,000 Yazidis, predominantly from Sinjar District, had been displaced, with the majority fleeing to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KR-I) and particularly Dohuk Governorate.***

the ISIS attack. Yazidis also referenced earlier terrorist attacks, notably the Al-Qaeda suicide bombings of Yazidi villages in Sinjar in August 2007. Several referred to decades-old marginalization and othering of the Yazidis, even by Iraqi minority groups, based on misconceptions about their religion. Yazidis arriving before 2014 defined themselves as “Yazidi-Kurds” or as “Yazidi and Kurd”, while those arriving after 2014 referred to Kurds as a separate ethnic group. The Yazidis who arrived after 2014 and some of those also expressed fears of the Muslim community, in particular Sunni Arabs from whom successive Iraq-based jihadists groups have recruited. They feared that Yazidis would never be fully accepted, and consequently would never be safe in Iraq.

The Assyrian interviewees were concerned about support for cultural and linguistic rights, and for legal recognition and political representation as a distinct ethnic group. The Yazidis were more concerned about their poor socio-economic conditions and the threat of a revival of ISIS due to impunity. They explained their fear with their profound marginalization and the fact that their heartland lies in a disputed area, two factors which have deprived them of economic and educational opportunities and increased their sense of isolation and insecurity.

One Yazidi interviewee highlighted the need for a revision of domestic law, which obliges all children with Muslim fathers to be registered as Muslims (not only children with Yazidi mothers). This has distressing consequences for Yazidi women who bore children as a result of rape by ISIS fighters, and for the parts of the community which continues to struggle with accepting these children who are Muslims under Iraqi law.

Both Assyrians and Yazidis referred to constitutional recognition of their group as an important symbolic gesture that may prevent new cycles of persecution and discrimination. The Assyrians called for recognition of their long history as an ethnic group predating the Arabs and the Kurds. The Yazidis sought legal recognition and representation mainly as a religious group, though some also defined themselves as a distinct ethnic group, separate from the Kurds.

## Syria

Syria defines itself as an Arab Republic with a centralised state. Since the 1963 coup, it has been ruled by the Baath Party, and led by the Assad family since 1971. An uprising in 2011 was brutally crushed by the government, plunging Syria into a ferocious civil war. The ongoing conflict has caused the deaths of an estimated one million people, and the displacement of more than 11 million (half the population).

Around 85 per cent of the population is Arab, with a Kurdish community in the north. The government and general power-elite are dominated by Alawites, a Shia-sect constituting about 12 % of the population. About 70 per cent of the population identify as Sunni Muslims. Religious minorities with a long tradition in the country include such as the Druze, Twelver-Shia and Yazidis, and Christian groups, including Assyrians, Chaldeans, Syriac Orthodox, and the Armenians.

## Study

Twelve refugees from Syria, all with a minimum of three years living in Norway, were interviewed. All of them had arrived after 2011, most of them after 2013 when the uprising had developed into a full-fledged civil war. Four of them were Sunni Arab, four Sunni Kurds, one Christian Assyrian, one Christian Armenian, and one Arab Alawite. They originate from different regions of Syria and have different socio-economic backgrounds. There were three women among the twelve interviewees.

## Main Findings

The interviewees shared the view that Syrian nationality was the overarching identity for the various groups in the period prior to the uprising in 2011. They all identified themselves as affiliated with specific religious and/or ethnic groups. However, religious and ethnic divisions were central neither to the informants’ stories about their lives before 2011, nor to the motivation and aims of the uprising.

As the interviewees' accounts extended into the years of war and escape, 'divisions' increasingly became a central theme. References to ethnic and religious divides were more frequent. First and foremost interviewees attributed this to the Assad government's exploitation of such divisions as part of its war tactics. This may also be understood in light of their affiliation with the opposition to the regime.

The deep and persistent line of conflict was perceived by the interviewees to be first between the government and a relatively unified people prior to the uprising, and then between the government and a ever-growing number of armed actors, many of them anti-Assad, present in Syria after 2011.

Virtually all the interviewees believed that the Syrian people had been betrayed by the world community. They considered the interventions in the war by the superpowers (USA, Russia) and neighboring states (e.g. Turkey) to be a contributing factor in keeping the war going. ISIS figured as a much less important factor for the ongoing war, though this view may be influenced by where they came from and when they fled Syria.

During the civil unrest and conflict, social media served as an essential information channel; now they are used primarily to maintain contact with family members in Syria and other countries.

The informants had little or no faith in a stable or secure life for inhabitants in Syria. Several underlined that they considered this highly unlikely as long as Assad remained in power.

## Comparative analysis

A feature among all Iraqi and Syrian refugees interviewed is the pivotal role that the general conditions of war and violent conflict played in their motivation for fleeing. Lack of trust in the ability and/or willingness of the government to provide security for citizens in general - and in the case of Iraq, in particular to ensure protection against extremist groups - is a main reason for their fear of return or for their concern for family members or others who are still living in the homeland.

The Iraqi interviewees were significantly more influenced by ethnic and religious identity factors as decisive considerations for flight. This is unsurprising, given that it was largely, if not entirely, on those grounds that they were targeted or experienced threats. The Syrian interviewees on the other hand, cited the ongoing war, the commission of crimes with impunity, and the policies of the government as primary reasons for flight.

The sectarian dimension was also slightly different with respect to the interviewees' considerations for return. While identity figured as an important explanation for (lack of) trust in existing institutions for the Iraqi interviewees, the Syrians emphasised their mistrust in the politics of the Assad government as a major reason for the lack of confidence that return would be safe.

Information via social media and mobile phones allows the interviewees to follow the development in Syria and Iraq and to keep in touch with family still there. For the Iraqi refugees also contact with their respective religious communities also plays an important role in maintaining ties with their country and receiving information about the developments.

## Contextual analysis

By Cecilie Hellestveit and Sareta Ashraph

While both the Iraqi and the Syrian refugees expressed distrust in the ability and/or willingness of their governments to assure their safety, the roots of these profound misgivings are found in the distinct recent histories of each country.

Ethnic and religious minorities in Iraq have come under sustained attacked since the rise of violent radical groups, following the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq. Following the 2003 de-Baathification process and the disbanding of the army, former members of the Iraqi armed forces and ousted Baathists found a common enemy with Islamists and foreign jihadi fighters. By 2004, a violent insurgency had begun. This would lead to the rise of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and of the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI).

Both AQI and ISI targeted non-Sunni religious communities, including the Assyrians Christians and the Yazidis. In May 2011, ISI, led by Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, morphed into ISIS. After the June 2014 declaration of its "caliphate", ISIS launched extensive and systematic campaigns of violence against ethno-religious minority groups, most infamously on the Yazidis.

The distrust in the state has deep roots: since 2004, the Iraqi state has proved unable to keep Iraq's minority communities safe, with incidents such as the 2007 Sinjar bombings and the 2010 Baghdad church bombing embedded in the collective memory of Iraq's Yazidis and Assyrian Christians, respectively.

The fragility of the Iraqi state was brought sharply into focus by the total collapse of the Iraqi army in Mosul in June 2014. As the Iraqi army fled, ISIS seized their weapons and quickly advanced to within 60 kilometers of Baghdad.

For the Yazidis, their mistrust is directed both at the central government and at the Kurdish Regional Government. The retreat by the Peshmerga, the Iraqi Kurdish forces, from Sinjar in the ISIS August 2014 attack, and the failure of the Peshmerga to inform or evacuate the Yazidis while they secured new strategic Kurdish territory further south, caused a deep fracture between parts of the Yazidi community and the Kurdish government. It is likely why some Yazidis now disavow Kurdish protection and has returned to asserting Yazidi ethnicity.

The Syrian government has always posed a threat to those who oppose it. In the decades prior to 2011, there were multiple reports of human rights abuses perpetrated by the government on its opponents and critics. Since 2011, countless reports has documented government forces and pro-government actors attacking Syrian civilians. Some of the crimes recorded include killings, torture, sexual violence, attacks on hospitals and schools, indiscriminate attacks, starvation, and the use of chemical weapons. There are strong indications that some refugees who chosed, or have reportedly been forced, to return to Syria have been detained, and in some cases, have disappeared.

The active threat posed by the Syrian state to those who have sought refuge, who could be perceived as being insufficiently loyal to the Assad government, should be taken very seriously.

Equally serious consideration should be given to the belief among Iraqi Assyrians and Yazidis that Iraq is incapable of protecting them from attack, whether from ISIS or its future incarnations, or by others, including other armed groups and civilians.

The unravelling of Iraq after the US invasion in 2003, and the ravaging civil war in Syria from 2012 has affected religious and ethno-religious components in both Syria and Iraq deeply. The dominance of intercommunal power-play and sectarian violence has become engrained in the Iraqi political system in a much deeper way than in Syria. By contrast, Syria is still a society where power-elites are dominated by minorities, and where the authorities maintain a strong interest in portraying itself as non-sectarian and protector of minorities.

This divergence in recent history is reflected in the different visions for the future expressed by the Syrian and Iraqi interviewees. While the Syrians, to a larger extent, highlight political explanations, the Iraqis view their ethnic and religious affiliation both as the origins of their targeting as well as a major threat to their safe and secure return to their homeland. It should nevertheless be underlined that there is considerable doubt concerning the ability and/or will by the central governments in both countries to prioritize protection to minority identity groups under existing circumstances.

## Iraq and Syria Policy Brief

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## Research project “Flight from Iraq and Syria”

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This research compiles as a part of a project on Inclusive Citizenship and Human Rights ([www.inclusive-citizenship.no](http://www.inclusive-citizenship.no)) at HL-senteret.

The project received financial support from **The Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs**



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