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## RETURN PROCESS: BA'AJ, NINEWA<sup>1</sup>

### ▪ General remarks

Ba'aj district is located around 150 km west of Mosul. Ba'aj has 38,112 returnees, the majority of whom reside in Markaz Ba'aj. Housing destruction, lack of basic services and livelihood opportunities and lack of security are the main obstacles to return. Furthermore, Ba'aj falls on the Iraqi-Syrian border, emphasizing the importance of security in the district. Ba'aj also faces a tense relationship with neighboring Sinjar district populations, who have accused several households (HHs) from Ba'aj of joining ISIL and participating in the attacks on Sinjar in August 2014. It is reported that several thousand IDPs from Ba'aj are still in displacement, with some displaced within Markaz Ba'aj, having come from various villages within the district.<sup>2</sup> However, many are in IDP camp and out of camp locations in other parts of Ninewa. This return process mapping attempts to provide a description of the processes that IDPs undergo to return to Ba'aj district.

### Before Return

#### ▪ Out-of-camp IDPs

Security clearance must be obtained by IDPs prior to any movement to the area of origin. First, a representative from the IDP HH is required to visit the Ba'aj Mayor's office, where the IDP is given a return form that must be filled and signed by three entities in the area of origin: a local mukhtar, the Intelligence Agency (IA) office in Ba'aj and the Mayor of Ba'aj himself.

The mukhtar, as per Iraqi government procedures, requires two witnesses to verify the information provided on the IDP before signing the form. After obtaining the mukhtar's signature, the IDP must visit the IA office, the security entity responsible for issuing security clearance for IDPs in the area. The IA has one office in Markaz Ba'aj, where the names of IDP HHs are crosschecked against a computer database. If the records are clean (i.e. there are no ISIL/ criminal suspects or other legal issues among the HH members), the IA approves and signs the form. Finally, the IDP returns to the Mayor's office to receive the final approval. Once the Mayor stamps the form, the IDP HH may return to their area of origin. NFIs, furniture, vehicles and other details of personal belongings are normally included in the return form to avoid any potential complications throughout the movement.

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<sup>1</sup> Information for this mapping has been obtained through key informant interviews with security actors, local authorities, aid agency partners, IDPs and returnees. Information is valid as of July 2020 and will be updated as needed.

<sup>2</sup> IOM Return Dynamics April 2020 reported that 7,008 IDPs were in Markaz Ba'aj.

- In-Camp IDPs

In-camp IDPs undergo the same process as out-of-camp IDPs but with an additional step: they must obtain a departure form from camp management, which also requires the stamp of the camp's security forces to be fully approved. Therefore, in-camp IDPs must obtain two approval letters to return: a security clearance form (return approval) obtained from the authorities of the area of origin (signed by mukhtar, IA and Mayor) and a departure form signed by camp management and security forces at the camp.

- The Intelligence Agency (IA) Office

Security screening takes place at the office of the Intelligence Agency (IA) in Markaz Baaj, where a security check on the HH's background is conducted for the purpose of identifying a criminal record or possible affiliation to extremist groups.

The most important document required during the security check is the national ID (or the Unified Card, which is a new document replacing the national ID). The IDs of all the HH members must be presented to be included in the process. If IDPs are returning from a formal camp, a resident card at the camp in question is also required to prove the current location of the IDP. If the IDP HH is not residing in a camp, they are required to provide a proof of address from the local mukhtar of the area of displacement. The entire process of obtaining security clearance can be completed within one working day, should the IDP manage to reach all three offices mentioned.

- What if the IDP faces a security issue?

Security clearance may not be granted for IDPs in the following cases:

- I. When one of the IDP HH members is suspected to have affiliation to extremist groups and the HH have not legally disowned him yet.
- II. When one of the IDP HH members has a name identical to that of an extremist group-affiliated person wanted by the security forces. This is a common case in the current Iraq context.
- III. When an IDP HH member faces other legal issues and wanted by the law for crimes such as robbery, fighting or illegal trade.

The first and third cases mainly result in arresting the wanted person, if that person is the one visiting the IA office to obtain the security clearance. If not, security forces may try to approach the person in question in the area of displacement to arrest them and refer them to a specialized court for prosecution. The second case would normally not lead to the arrest of an individual, as security forces may depend on other personal details to prove the identity of the wanted person. The ISF sometimes refer to tribal sheikhs to crosscheck background security information of individuals originating from the same areas.

- Additional Points

Two points should be noted concerning Ba'aj security clearance. First, HHs with individuals perceived affiliated with ISIL or have other security issues normally try to avoid the security clearance process, hence opting to stay in displacement until their issues are resolved. Secondly, HHs with two different intentions (where some members want to return and others do not) face further social and psychological complications, especially in cases where a spouse refuses to join the returning HH. Such decisions could lead to divorce, separation of parents and children and tensions between the two HHs (the HH of the husband and that of the wife).

## The Return Process

- Information on Areas of Origin

IDPs rely on their normal networks for information regarding conditions in areas of origin, family members or neighbours who have returned earlier or other community members. After obtaining their security clearance, IDPs reserve the right to return to different areas of Ba'aj district. IDPs may obtain more information on their AoOs by requesting the information from the office of the Ba'aj Mayor or the offices of the sub districts' mayors. In general, IDPs are reportedly interested in knowing more about livelihood opportunities, basic services and the general security situation in their AoOs. IDPs may also receive more information from mukhtars, tribal sheikhs and community representatives, in cases where they can be reached.

- Transportation

IDPs may return to Ba'aj using their own means of transportation, if available. In the case of a collective return of a large number of HHs, MOMD may assist with transportation. An example of this case happened on 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2020 when MOMD provided transportation for over 70 HHs returning to various villages of Ba'aj.

- Checkpoints

IDPs must cross several checkpoints to reach Ba'aj, where security checks are conducted via a computer database. Checkpoints include Bawabat Al Sham (West Mosul), Tel Afar (three checkpoints) and Ba'aj entrance checkpoint. There may be additional checkpoints depending on where IDPs intend to return and whether they pass through Sinjar or not. Therefore, it may take several hours before IDPs arrive at their destination.

Several different factions of security forces man the checkpoints leading to Ba'aj; however, they all follow similar procedures when crosschecking IDP information. At the checkpoints, IDPs are normally requested to present personal IDs, security clearance documents obtained from the area of origin, a letter from the mukhtar of the area of displacement and a camp departure letter (in case they had been staying in camps).

- Single Females and Female-Headed Households (FHHs)

Single females and female headed households (FHHs) may also register for return and transportation but are required to prove that their husbands and male family members never joined ISIL. In cases where the males had previously joined ISIL, the applicant must provide a legal letter from an Iraqi court proving that they have disowned or divorced their ISIL affiliated family members. Failure to provide this letter means the person in question will not be permitted to return.

## After Return

- Registration with the Local Government

Upon return, IDPs must register as returnees at the Ba'aj Mayor's office and local police station. The Mayor's office provides a return card to document the return, after which the returnees visit the police station and present both the return card and the return form that was previously filled by the Mayor's office, IA office and mukhtar. The Ba'aj local police will also register the return and the exact location of return.

- Closure of Displacement File

To close their displacement file and open a return file, returnees in Ba'aj must visit the MOMD office in Mosul, which is the office that directly manages returns in Ba'aj. Follow up with MOMD is not mandatory but necessary for returnees to access benefits such as the MOMD return grant and assistance packages. MOMD requires all the return documents (signed return forms, camp departure letters etc.) provided by local authorities in Ba'aj and camp management to register the HH in question on the MOMD database.

- Return Conditions

According to the Return Index, the majority of returnees to Ba'aj are living in locations of high severity.<sup>3</sup> The main drivers of severity in the sub-districts of Markaz Ba'aj and Al-Qahtaniya are lack of safety and security (concerns over renewed ISIL attacks and ethno-religious tensions and multiple security actors), social cohesion issues, blocked returns and lack of basic services, especially insufficient access to water. Key informants report that many IDPs are unable to return to their areas of origin due to secondary occupation of their homes by armed actors. The lack of livelihoods is also a significant driver of severity for Al-Qahtaniya, with farming activities being affected most. Key informants have also reported lack of legal documents and detention concerns as obstacles for many IDPs wishing to return to their areas of origin in Ba'aj.

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<sup>3</sup> IOM DTM Return Index Dashboard, Round 9, May-June 2020.