



## AREA OF NO RETURN

---

For Makhmur, Aien Ayub, Karabasha  
Sabir, and Qalata Soran Saeed  
**COMMUNITY DIALOGUE**

December 2024

**Date:** 21 January 2025

**Location:** Makhmur Mayor's Office

## METHODOLOGY

The community dialogue in Makhmur District was conducted using a participatory approach to gather insights from key stakeholders, including government officials, community representatives, and local Mukhtars. The methodology included:

1. **Stakeholder Identification:** Key participants were identified based on their roles in local governance, security, and community representation.
2. **Structured Dialogue:** The session followed a semi-structured format with guided questions to facilitate focused discussions on obstacles to return, ongoing challenges, and potential solutions.
3. **Analysis and Reporting:** Findings were analyzed to identify recurring themes, challenges, and actionable recommendations, which are presented in the subsequent sections of this report.
4. **Comparative Case Study:** Elyawa village was included as a reference point to highlight factors enabling successful return. Unlike other villages, Elyawa had a shorter displacement period (displaced in 2016, returned within months) and a larger population (90 families), qualifying for government-supported infrastructure. This stability provided lessons applicable to villagers still facing security and infrastructure challenges.

Participants	
Name	Position
Government	
Rizgar Mohammed	Makhmur Mayor
Himdad Azad	Makhmur Directorate of Services
Walid Abd Hamadi	Administration manager
Marwan Ahmed	DG of Agriculture
Haji Salam	Director of Endowments Department
Ahmed Sabir	Chief of Police
Mukhtars	
Hirish Abdullah	Qalata Soran Mukhtar
Kaiwan Sabah	Karabasha Sabir Mukhtar
Community	
Faris Ali	Aien Ayub Community Rep
Hirsh Majeed	Aien Ayub Community Rep

Participants	
Name	Position
Amir Hussam	Qalata Soran Community Rep
Sardar Zirar Amin	Qalata Soran Community Rep
Sabah Muhyaldin	Karabasha Community Rep
Sarbast Sa'ad	Karabasha Community Rep
UN Agency/NGOs (list each by name)	
Karam Eskandar	RWG
Hannan Abdul	RWG
Alan Al-jaf	RWG



Figure 1: community dialogue participants

## BACKGROUND

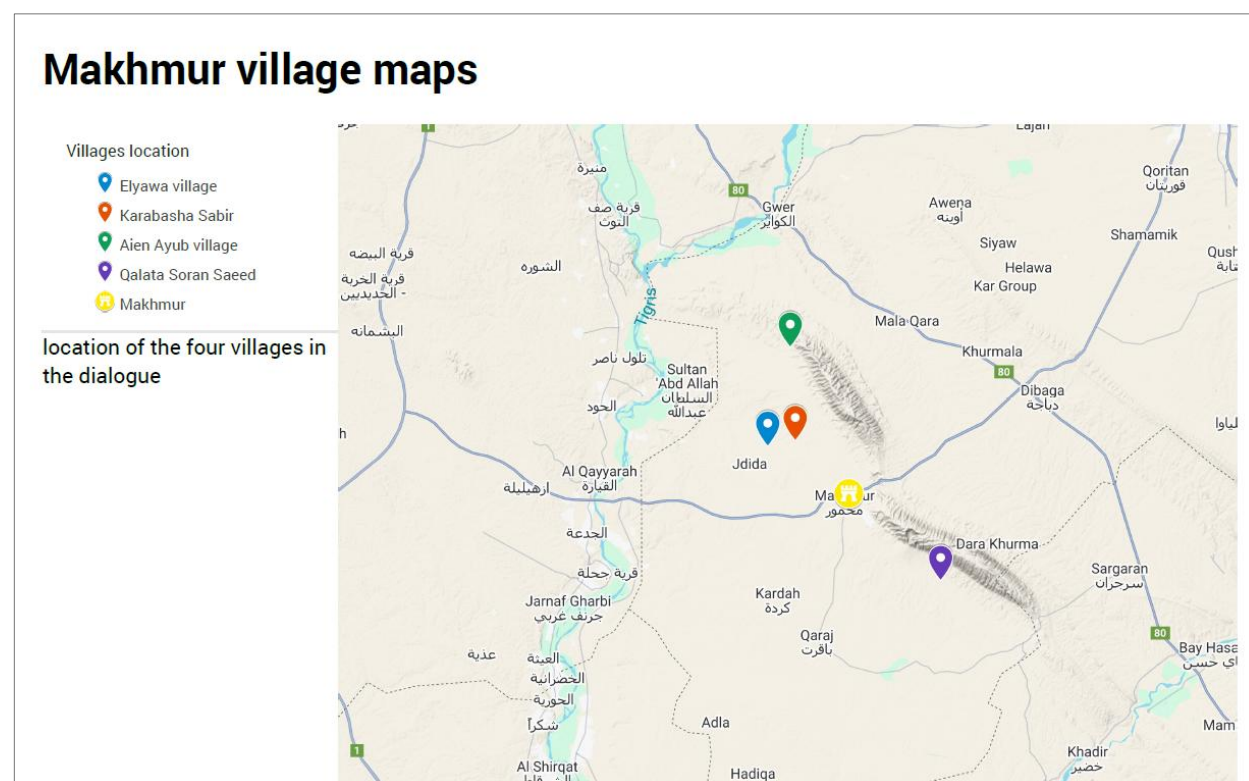
Makhmur District, located in a disputed area between the Federal Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), continues to face significant challenges related to displacement, insecurity, and infrastructure deficits. Out of its numerous rural communities, 34 villages remain classified as areas of no return due to persistent security concerns, unresolved land disputes, and inadequate access to essential services.

The district's proximity to Security Exclusion Zones has contributed to ongoing risks, with ISIL elements still active in remote areas, occasionally infiltrating villages for supplies. Limited resources and complex jurisdictional dynamics between Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and Peshmerga have further complicated return efforts.

Makhmur's unique administrative status also impacts on the provision of services and development initiatives. While it falls administratively under the Federal Government of Iraq, the district has long received support from the KRG due to its geographical location and the presence of Kurdish-majority communities. The KRG has historically invested in infrastructure projects. With the 2025 KRG budget expected to allocate resources for smaller villages, there is potential for targeted assistance to address some of the infrastructure gaps hindering returns in these no-return areas.

This community dialogue focused specifically on three villages (Aien Ayub, Karabasha Sabir, and Qalata Soran Saeed) to identify key obstacles to return and discuss potential solutions. Elyawa village was also included as a positive example to illustrate how security and infrastructure investments can facilitate return.

Previous meetings with Mukhtars and local authorities highlighted critical challenges, including restrictions on movement and insufficient infrastructure. Building on these discussions, this meeting aimed to facilitate actionable solutions to support the sustainable return of displaced families and for the community and local authorities to be on the same page regarding priorities and concerns.



## KEY DISCUSSIONS:

### Aien Ayub (Hawar Gel) Village

Aien Ayub village remains under significant security restrictions, with movement limited by an unofficial curfew imposed by some security officers rather than an official directive. The curfew, enforced from 5:00 PM to 5:00 AM, was initially implemented due to reported ISIL movements in the surrounding Security Exclusion Zones. However, no recent incidents have been reported in the village itself.

### Displacement Status:

- Pre-2014 Population: 65 families.
- **Current Situation:** 17 families currently engage in farming activities during the day, while only three families partially stay overnight despite the curfew. The remaining 45 families are displaced and have settled primarily in Makhmur town and Erbil city.

### Return Intentions:

- 20 displaced families have expressed a clear willingness to return if security measures are eased and essential services are restored.
- The primary obstacle identified by the community is the curfew, which prevents overnight stays, disrupts agricultural activities, and hampers the restoration of livelihoods.

### Community Perspective:

The residents emphasized that freedom of movement is their top priority, as the curfew limits their ability to manage agricultural work, care for livestock, and monitor their properties. They also requested better coordination between ISF and Peshmerga to address security concerns.

### Karabasha Sabir Village

Karabasha Sabir village continues to face significant challenges, particularly regarding infrastructure and access to essential services. Pre-conflict, the village had a small artesian well system and a primary school that served children up to 6th grade. However, the village has never had a formal water pipeline, relying entirely on groundwater sources.

### Displacement Status:

- Pre-2014 Population: 30 families.
- **Current Situation:** The village remains largely uninhabited, with no families currently residing there. Of the original residents, 20 families are displaced and have settled in Erbil, while another 10 families are living in Makhmur town. The village lacks basic services and security, contributing to the absence of residents.

### Return Intentions:

- The 10 families in Makhmur have emphasized that returning to Karabasha Sabir depends on improvements in infrastructure and security.

### Infrastructure and Services:

- **Water:** The village relies on artesian wells that were damaged during the ISIL conflict. The main water tank remains non-functional, and no water pipeline has ever been installed.
- **Roads:** The unpaved road to the village is in poor condition, particularly affecting access during the rainy season.
- **Electricity:** The village is connected to the main grid but experiences intermittent outages, which are needed for watering the plants for families who do farming during the day.

### Community Perspective:

The residents identified access to water as the most critical need, emphasizing the necessity of repairing the artesian wells and installing a reliable pipeline. They also stressed the importance of road improvements to facilitate movement and access to services. Additionally, they requested security measures to allow for overnight stays.

### Qalata Soran Saeed Village

Qalata Soran Saeed village has long faced complex land ownership challenges rooted in historical allocations and subsequent disputes. In 1987, Sheikh Soran Saeed, the original landowner, verbally allocated 30 dunums of land to

approximately 40 families who had been displaced from other villages within Makhmur District due to the conflict of the Baath Regime and agricultural restructuring policies of the time. These families settled on the land, building homes and establishing small-scale farming operations. However, there was no formal lease agreement or legal documentation, as the arrangement was made verbally.

In 2014, amid the rise of ISIL and subsequent security concerns, these families were once again displaced from Qalata Soran Saeed. Upon their return in recent years, they found their access to the land challenged. The heirs of Sheikh Soran Saeed, who had initially honored the 1987 verbal agreement, later retracted their decision, disputing the families' right to build on the land. This reversal has left families in a precarious situation, facing potential eviction without legal recognition of their decades-long residence and agricultural activities.

### Displacement Status:

- **Pre-1987 Population:** Approximately 40 families.
- **Pre-2014 Population:** 30 families.
- **Current Situation:** 30 of these families are displaced and now live in Makhmur town and Erbil city. Only five families remain on the disputed land, despite the ongoing legal uncertainties.

### Origins of the Community:

- The majority of these families originally came from nearby villages, including Qaraj and Elyawa, which were affected by conflict and forced relocation policies during the late 1980s. The Sheikh's decision to allocate the land was an informal, community-driven effort to support displaced households.

### Return Intentions:

- Most of the displaced families have expressed a willingness to return if legal ownership is secured and basic infrastructure, particularly water and road access, is established.
- Community representatives requested a formal land allocation from the government to ensure tenure security and prevent further disputes.

### Community Perspective:

The community representatives emphasized the importance of formalizing land ownership to ensure long-term stability. They also requested government support in establishing a reliable water supply and upgrading existing infrastructure. Access to the 30 dunums initially allocated by Sheikh Soran is seen as critical to restoring agricultural livelihoods and facilitating permanent return.

The Makhmur Municipality confirmed that the original allocation of land was informal and lacked legal documentation. However, they expressed a willingness to allocate 15–20 dunums of government land near the main road, contingent upon a site assessment to determine suitability for agricultural and residential purposes. The Agriculture Department committed to forming a committee to oversee the assessment and issue recommendations. The community welcomed this decision with great enthusiasm, seeing it as a long-awaited opportunity to finally secure their own land and restore their lives after years of uncertainty.

## Elyawa Village

Elyawa village was included in the community dialogue as a comparative case study to understand the factors contributing to its stability and successful return, in contrast to the ongoing challenges faced by the other villages. Unlike other villages that experienced prolonged displacement and infrastructure destruction, Elyawa presents a case of resilience and continuity, offering insights into how security, minimal conflict impact, and sustained community presence can facilitate a smooth return process.

### Displacement Status:

- **Displacement Period:** Families were displaced only during the 2016 military operations to retake areas from ISIL but returned within a few months.
- **Conflict Impact:** Elyawa differs from other villages in that it was not significantly affected by ISIL's occupation. As an Arab Sunni-majority village, the community remained in place during ISIL's control, which prevented targeted destruction or looting. Families only left temporarily during the military operations to avoid being caught in clashes between ISIL fighters and Iraqi Security Forces (ISF).
- **Current Situation:** All 90 families have since returned and are permanently settled in the village. The lack of extensive damage to infrastructure allowed for a swift return and resumption of normal life, making Elyawa a useful reference point for understanding the role of stability and minimal conflict impact in return dynamics.

### KEY FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO STABILITY:

1. **Limited Displacement Duration:** The families of Elyawa village were displaced for a couple of months in 2016 during military operations to retake the area from ISIL. However, this displacement period was not long enough to force families to resettle permanently elsewhere, allowing them to return and resume their agricultural activities relatively quickly. Unlike other villages that faced prolonged displacement due to extensive infrastructure damage or ongoing security threats, Elyawa's infrastructure remained intact, and security conditions stabilized soon after the military operations concluded. This enabled a smooth return process with minimal disruption to social and economic structures.
2. **Displacement Location, Lack of Alternatives, and Village Geography:** During their temporary displacement, most Elyawa families sought refuge in nearby areas within Makhmur District or stayed with relatives, rather than relocating to urban centers like Erbil. Unlike other villages where displaced families found sustainable alternatives in cities with better services and job opportunities, Elyawa families did not establish long-term alternatives and remained committed to returning as soon as conditions allowed. Additionally, Elyawa's location is farther from the mountainous areas compared to other villages, making it less exposed to security threats that could prolong displacement. Their familiarity with the land, strong social cohesion, and lack of viable long-term settlement options elsewhere made their return both necessary and immediate.
3. **Population Size and Government Support:** Elyawa's population exceeded the minimum thresholds required for government services, which ensured continued access to essential infrastructure maintenance, such as school upkeep and road repairs. This government support contributed to a faster recovery process compared to smaller villages, where limited population size often resulted in fewer public services and delayed reconstruction efforts.

### Infrastructure and Services:

- **Water:** The village benefits from a new water treatment plant, constructed with a 2.7 billion IQD investment, which also serves seven neighboring villages.
- **Electricity:** Reliable access to the power grid with minimal disruptions reported.
- **Roads:** Well-maintained roads ensure consistent access to nearby towns and agricultural markets.
- **Education:** The village primary school remained intact during the conflict and resumed operations shortly after the return of families.

---

## Key Inputs from Local Authorities

### 1. Population Intentions:

- Some families have integrated into their displacement communities and no longer wish to return. Others still want to return, but security concerns remain a major factor. If security is no longer the main obstacle, more families might feel encouraged to go back.

### 2. Regulatory Constraints:

- According to 2021 government regulations, services such as roads and schools require a minimum population threshold:
  - **Roads:** Minimum of 100 families.
  - **Schools:** Minimum of 50 students.
- **Public Health Centers (PHCs):** There is no specific regulation for PHC construction in individual villages. However, in practice, the government does not build PHCs for single villages unless they are significantly far from the nearest city. In such cases, a PHC is established to serve multiple villages.
- **Water Access:** Many villages traditionally relied on wells for water supply even before displacement. However, due to the proximity of Karabasha Sabir to the Elyawa Water Treatment Plant (WTP), the government has proposed linking the village to the WTP via a pipeline, ensuring a more reliable water source.
- **The KRG's 2025 budget** follows a lump sum model, allowing municipalities greater flexibility in spending based on identified local needs. This means that smaller villages could receive support for essential services even if they do not meet standard government thresholds, depending on the municipality's priorities.
- **Reconsideration of Government Criteria:** Given that many families have been displaced multiple times, villages should be included in service projects even if they do not strictly meet the population thresholds. Local authorities should actively advocate for regulatory adjustments, highlighting the unique circumstances of returnee communities and the need for more flexible criteria to ensure essential services reach all affected villages.

### 3. Security Updates:

- Makhmur's 60-kilometer Security Exclusion Zone, located within the Makhmur mountains, remains a hotspot for ISIL activity, with small groups infiltrating villages in search of food, heightening security concerns. Almost the entire mountain area is under ISIL control.
- **Proximity to Affected Villages:**
- Aien Ayub and Qalata Soran Saeed are approximately 1 kilometer from the mountain, placing them in close proximity to ISIL activity. This poses a direct security threat to returnees, as armed groups have been known to move through the area.

- Karabasha Sabir is located 6 kilometers away from the mountain, providing a relative buffer, but residents still report concerns about sporadic security threats from ISIL members moving through rural areas.
- Historical Clashes & Security Measures: The area has witnessed historical clashes between ISF and Peshmerga, with 18 casualties in 2017 and 7 in 2024. However, coordination between the two forces has improved, with plans to form a joint brigade to secure disputed areas and enhance overall stability.
- Impact on Returns:
- Security forces have expressed concerns that some families may be trading foodstuffs with ISIL elements, complicating return efforts and raising questions about security risks associated with repopulating these villages.
- The situation in Makhmur requires a context-specific approach, balancing security risks with the necessity of enabling displaced families to return and rebuild their lives.

The presence of French forces at the Coalition base in Makhmur has stabilized the situation. Their active patrols and intelligence sharing have effectively deterred ISIL activities, contributing to a calmer security environment.

- The mayor expressed concerns over ISF policies blocking family returns for two reasons: reducing their responsibilities in securing these areas and allegations of corruption. He highlighted that some military personnel have been accused of restricting access to land under the pretext of security concerns, while in reality, these lands are reportedly being used for unauthorized agricultural activities or leased to third parties for personal gain. This misuse of authority has further complicated the return process and fueled community mistrust toward security forces.

#### 4. Infrastructure:

- While water and electricity are not major issues, minor support will be provided to address artesian well maintenance and water connectivity.

---

## Action Points and follow-up

### 1. Security and Movement:

- The mayor will raise a formal letter to the Ninewa Operations Command requesting the removal of the 5 PM curfew and easing movement restrictions in all villages.
- A thematic security meeting will be organized with the ISF, Peshmerga, and local authorities to address persistent security concerns, improve coordination, and establish clear guidelines to support safe returns.

### 2. Water Supply:

- The mayor will request the Erbil Governorate to clean artesian wells in Aien Ayub and Karabasha Sabir, as they were originally dug by the Erbil municipality.
- The government will proceed with linking Karabasha Sabir to the new Elyawa Water Treatment Plant (WTP) while it is still under implementation.

**3. Land Allocation:** The Municipality and Agriculture Department will allocate 15-20 dunums of government land for Qalata Soran Saeed families, with a committee to assess the suitability of the proposed site near the main road.

**4. Community Engagement & Next Steps:**

- The RWG team will follow up with Ninewa Operations Command on curfew and military issues, as a second layer of support for the mayor's coordination efforts.
- A community meeting will be organized to discuss return intentions, key challenges, and necessary support for sustainable reintegration.

---

This meeting underscored the critical need for collaboration between local authorities, security forces, and community members to overcome barriers and facilitate the sustainable return of displaced families. The proactive measures outlined by the mayor and commitments from all stakeholders signal a positive step toward achieving durable solutions.



# COMMUNITY DIALOGUE REPORT: AREA OF NO RETURN

---

For Makhmur, Aien Ayub, Karabasha  
Sabir, and Qalata Soran Saeed

December 2024