

Religion and Migration in Iraq: Investigating the Reasons for Return of Internally Displaced Christians to Baghdeda

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Abstract

The emergence of the terrorist group, Daesh in 2014 and the international military campaign against it caused both a humanitarian crisis and mass displacement in Iraq. About 5.8 million people became internally displaced, and as of 2021, 1.2 million of them still remain in displacement. This article engages with the question of what motivates people to return from displacement to their area of origin. It investigates the role that religion played in the decision of internally displaced Christians to return to Baghdeda in the Ninewa Plain, Iraq's largest Christian town. Based on qualitative interviews, the article examines the factors influencing people's decisions to return. We find that religion contributes to an array of pull factors positively influencing the decision to return, within the nexus of other considerations such as security, reconstruction, and economic opportunities. Religion was found to contribute to the return decision through the respondents' Christian identity, the encouragement to return by religious leaders, and the reconstruction efforts led by the churches. However, while these factors contributed to motivating people to return, these alone are not sufficient to motivate Christians to stay in Baghdeda in the long-term if other important conditions like the security situation and economic opportunities are not in place.

Keywords: Iraq, internally displaced people, Christians, humanitarian aid, ethno-religious identity, conflict, Ninewa Plain

Introduction¹

Iraq has experienced multiple waves of mass displacements in recent years (Grisgraber 2017; Isser & Van der Auweraert 2009; Marfleet 2011; Riordan 2016). The most recent displacement was caused by the terrorist group Daesh². In June 2014, Daesh seized approximately one-third of Iraq and persecuted the minorities in occupied areas of the country (Kadhim 2019). The ensuing conflict between Daesh and the Iraqi government, backed by local militias as well as international forces between 2014 and 2017 caused a hu-

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² In this article the term ‘Daesh’, the Arabic acronym of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, is used. In this way, one prevents the association of Daesh with a state as well as connotations with its doings as being based on Islam, as outlined by Khan (2014).

manitarian crisis. In the course of combat, houses and infrastructure were destroyed and people fled their homes in search of security. Around 5.8 million people became internally displaced (ECHO 2019:1). By 2021 approximately 4.8 million internally displaced people (IDPs) returned after the cessation of the conflict while around 1.2 million still remain in displacement (cf. Displacement Tracking Matrix n.d.).

The Iraqi government aimed to close all IDP camps by the end of 2020 and thus facilitate the return of the IDPs to their areas of origin (IDMC 2020:33). According to Koser, the return of displaced populations in various different contexts showed that it ‘can be an important signifier of peace and the end of conflict, and can play an important part in validating the post-conflict political order’ (Koser 2015:3). The ability of the IDPs to return, symbolizes the capability of the Iraqi state to overcome the destruction caused by Daesh and ‘the restauration of ordinary life’ (Clausen 2019:30).

A significant number of IDPs returned home to their areas of origin. Following the retake of the areas, there were hardly any basic services such as water and electricity. Many hospitals and schools had been destroyed. The infrastructure was heavily damaged by Daesh, through combat operations or due to the coalition’s airstrikes. Aid commitments by the international community fell short of the reconstruction cost estimates by the Iraqi government of nearly USD 88 billion. Moreover, many of the promised funds were not distributed, as donors were concerned about government corruption and a lack of transparency and accountability (Kadhim 2019:65-66). The Iraqi government remained absent from the reconstruction phase and hardly distributed the promised compensation for damaged houses by Iraq’s Public Distribution System (Bryant 2019:vi).

The post-Daesh social and infrastructural rebuilding efforts were mostly undertaken by humanitarian stakeholders. One of the organizations providing humanitarian aid is the non-governmental organization (NGO) Malteser International (MI), the Humanitarian Relief Agency of the Sovereign Order of Malta. Launched in October 2018, MI’s Ninewa Return Program aimed at assisting IDPs returning to the Ninewa Plain in four focus areas: House reconstruction, economic livelihoods, education and social cohesion, and peacebuilding. The implementation of the projects on the ground took place through MI’s partners. The partners comprised churches and both international and local aid organizations. MI coordinated its activities with UN agencies, local ministries and authorities, faith leaders, and churches (MI

2023). The program was largely funded by the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development.

The point of departure of this article is the results of the Ninewa Return Program Survey, a quantitative study commissioned by MI aimed at evaluating the effects of the Ninewa Return Program by identifying the number of rehabilitated houses and returnees. By May 2020, 81% of the families had returned to their rehabilitated houses, while 19% did not return (Öhlmann 2021:8)³. When looking at the numbers based on the households' ethno-religious identification, one observes that of the 920 Christian households accounted for, 678 had returned while the remaining 242 did not return. Compared to other ethno-religious groups, the return rate of Christians (74%) is smaller than that of other groups like the Kaka'i, Shabak, and Sunni Arab (Öhlmann 2021:9)⁴. Moreover, the survey results indicate that the main reasons for return were 'identity with this community/area (geographically) [as well as] religious/cultural identity in this community/area' (Öhlmann 2021: 19). These reasons seem to be more important than the living situation in displacement or the security, shelter, and income opportunities in the area of origin. Based on the outlined survey results, this article aims to investigate the role that religion played in the decision of Christian IDPs to return to their areas of origin in the Ninewa Plain, specifically to Baghdeda, the largest Christian town in Iraq. To this end, it draws on the analysis of a series of qualitative interviews with Christians who have returned to Baghdeda after displacement.

Previous literature dealing with the reasons for IDP returns in the Iraqi context highlight a spectrum of reasons. A study by the International Organization for Migration (IOM 2019), highlights 'four major pull factors' reported by returnees: 'Missing home...return of other people...and family members...improved safety situation in the location of origin...and saving on

³ N = 1,985 families, of which 1,606 returned and 379 did not return.

⁴ In this article we follow the definition of an ethno-religious group by Taras and Ganguly as a group in which 'ethnic and religious identities are inseparable in the making of community' (Taras & Ganguly 2010:3). The terms 'ethno-religious group' and 'ethno-religious identity' are commonly used when referring to the context of Iraq in order to describe different groups of the population (e.g., IOM 2019:42). While acknowledging the debate in the literature around the concept of ethnic identity (cf. Taras & Ganguly 2010:3-6), we follow the specific categorizations used by Malteser International in their Ninewa Return Program.

living costs associated to returning to their habitual residence' (IOM 2019:6). Among the reasons to remain in displacement, the study highlights security concerns as the most important consideration, followed by access to public services. Related to questions of whether IDPs are satisfied in their situation after having returned, the study indicates a high degree of dissatisfaction, which seems to be mainly driven by security concerns, inadequate public services provision, and a lack of economic opportunities.

Other studies show similar results. The International Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) investigated the reasons of return for both IDPs and refugees (those who fled the country) and found that homesickness was a primary motivation for return, followed by other reasons such as difficult conditions in displacement and improved security conditions in the area of origin (IDMC 2018). Exploring the obstacles which IDPs living in camps in Anbar faced when returning, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Danish Refugee Council (DRC), and the International Rescue Committee (IRC) elicited an emotional obligation to return; a stabilized security situation; the necessity to secure personal housing, land, and property; and the presence of basic services as reasons for returning (NRC, DRC, & IRC 2018:19).

A study done by Davis, Benton, Al Dairani, Gallien, and Al-Shami (2018) indicates similar results regarding the importance of security, infrastructure and economic perspective, but does emphasize the importance of the emotional attachment to the area of origin as in the aforementioned studies. However, Davis, Benton, Al Dairani, Gallien, & Al-Shami (2018:11-12) highlight the need for adequate compensation. In that sense the study resonates with the argument of 'insufficient remedy' by Mahmood (2022:18) as a main reason not to return. Importantly, Davis *et al.* (2018:4) highlight the need to strengthen the agency of the returnees themselves and to see them as the key drivers of their return and reconstruction processes.

According to Khedir (2020:148), ethno-religious minorities in Iraq are uncertain about their future, which makes their decision to return more complicated than for majority group members. He also refers to a corpus of literature indicating that a return to an area where one's own ethnic group is, is regarded as safer by the majority, therefore being desirable. In this vein, the IOM results suggest 'that those who have faced discrimination before are now less inclined to return' (IOM 2019:6), which would apply to the Christian minority in focus of this article. Moreover, compared to other ethno-religious groups, the encouragement to return by religious leaders only

played an important role for the Christian IDPs (IOM 2019:22). Displaced minority populations such as Christians in Iraq are marked by the intersectionality of their minority situation and their displacement. They are IDPs, while also being a minority group both in the pre-displacement situation and potentially even more so in the post-displacement situation.

The literature reveals that the reasons for the return of Iraqi IDPs were multifaceted. There are reoccurring clusters around the aspects of emotional attachment to one's home, the security situation in the area of origin, infrastructure and livelihood opportunities in the area of origin, and the situation in displacement. One aspect, however, which has thus far received little attention in the literature is the role of Iraqi IDPs' ethno-religious identity in their decision to return. In the context of Iraq, as a society marked by high ethno-religious diversity, the question emerges to what extent people's religion and belonging to a specific community constitute a motivation to return. We posit that the role of religion and ethno-religious identity is an important factor to consider in the context of Iraq, which has been marked by sectarian tensions, attacks against minority populations, demographic change, and more recently, the closing up of communities due to mistrust toward people of other ethno-religious groups, and safety concerns. However, the link between ethno-religious identity and how it influences the decision of IDPs to return remains understudied. This article thus aims to provide an in-depth analysis of the role that religion and religious identity played in the Christian IDPs' decision to return to the city of Baghdad. It expands the existing literature by examining the role religion and religious belonging played in IDPs' decisions to return to their area of origin.

Our results reveal that religion contributed to the return decision through the respondents' Christian identity, the encouragement to return by religious leaders, and the reconstruction efforts led by the churches. The fact that Baghdad is still a majoritarian Christian town made the decision to return easier for many returnees. These factors influenced the decision to return within a nexus of several interrelated factors, such as political stability and security, reconstruction of housing and infrastructure, as well as economic opportunities. However, while Christian IDPs are worried about the extinction of their religion in Iraq, in light of the difficult living conditions, many intend to leave the country should the opportunity arise. We hence conclude that religion contributed to an array of pull factors positively influencing the decision to return. However, while these factors contributed to motivating

people to return, they alone are not sufficient to motivate Christians to stay in Baghdeda in the long-term. For the return to be sustainable other important conditions like an improved security situation and economic opportunities have to be in place.

Demographics of Iraq and Ethno-Religious Belonging

Iraq is characterized by a high degree of religious and cultural diversity (Lamani 2009:3; McGovern, Eason, & Carter 2009:2). Identity in Iraq is predominantly defined through family ties, clan affiliation, and religious and ethnic belonging (Picard 2012:332). Around 95% of Iraqis are Muslim (65% of them are Shi'a and 35% Sunni), while the remaining 5% belongs to other religious traditions (World Population Review 2023), whereas Christians constitute roughly 3% of the population (Marr & Al-Marashi 2018:14)⁵. Christianity has a long history in Iraq. It can be traced back to the 1st century in the area of today's Ninewa, a heritage that is still visible through the region's remaining churches, sanctums, and monasteries (Yacoub 2014:106-111). Hence, the Ninewa Plain is considered the cradle of Christianity in Iraq (Villeneuve 2018:6).

The majority of today's Iraqi Christians are Chaldean, Assyrian, or Syriac, and speak different dialectal variations of Aramaic (Müller 2009:77). Some Iraqi Christians do not identify as Arab but rather consider themselves a distinct ethnic group (IILHR, MRG, NPWJ, & UNPO 2016:10). According to estimations, about half of Iraqi Christians have left the country since 2003 (Hanish 2009:10), leaving the country with an estimated 200,000 to 500,000 Christians (Wirya & Fawaz 2017:5), mostly living in Mosul, the Ninewa Plain, Baghdad, Kirkuk, Basra, and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (IILHR *et al.* 2016:10).

The city of Baghdeda, the geographic focus of this article, lies in the Ninewa Plain, which is administered by the Iraqi central government. The town is also known as Qaraqosh or Al-Hamdaniya, although Baghdeda is the name commonly used by the inhabitants themselves (Sworesho 2021). Baghdeda was and still is the largest Christian city in Iraq, counting more than fifty thousand inhabitants before the emergence of Daesh (Grizwold 2015). The

⁵ The percentages cited are estimates, as the last Iraqi census was conducted in 1987.

majority of Baghdeda's inhabitants are Christians from different denominations, mostly Assyrian, Chaldean, and Syriac, in addition to Shabak and different Kurdish and Arab minorities (Gaston 2017:2).

Methodology

This study is based on 15 semi-structured narrative interviews conducted between December 2020 and February 2021. 10 interviewees were randomly selected from a list of 200 beneficiaries of MI's housing reconstruction aid in Baghdeda. In addition, five key informants were purposefully selected: Two MI staff members as well as local partners of MI, a Christian religious leader, an NGO employee, and a lawyer. All respondents except for one MI staff member were Christians and located in Baghdeda. Five of the interviewees were women, while 10 were men. As the COVID-19 pandemic did not allow in-person interviews, interviews were conducted telephonically or via videoconferencing (except in one case, where written answers were provided by the respondent). Full informed consent was verbally obtained from all interviewees. The interviews were conducted by the first author in Arabic and recorded with the consent of the interviewees (the English translations quoted in the sections below are translations by the first author). The study information stated that the participation in an interview would not influence the situation of the interviewee in terms of humanitarian aid. This aspect was emphasized at the beginning of each interview. To ensure a high degree of agency, the interviewees were asked whether they wanted to be mentioned by name (for instance, to have their voice heard) or to remain anonymous (e.g., for security reasons). Of the 15 respondents, 10 consented to be mentioned by name, while five preferred to remain anonymous. The latter are cited as 'interview partners' (IPs). All interviewees are cited in accordance with their respective preference.

Speaking the Lebanese dialect and sketching out her biography when introducing herself, it was clear to the interview partners that the first author acted as an 'outsider'. Yet, being of Lebanese descent but based in Germany seemed to put the interview partners at ease. They opened up, shared very personal details, and in a way felt responsible to explain context-specific aspects, sometimes even by making comparisons to the Lebanese context.

The interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed using the qualitative content analysis of Mayring (2010). The aim was to depict the multitude of views and experiences of interviewees. The category composition was done in an inductive manner. Codes were created throughout the coding process and were gathered in a list. The codes were categorized chronologically according to the three periods: 1) Before displacement; 2) during displacement; and 3) after displacement, which structured the analysis. This was done because each of these three periods constituted a substantially different situation for the interviewees, which needs to be taken into consideration when analyzing the data. The following section analyzes reasons of return in thematic subchapters. Subsequently, the situation upon return is outlined and the migration aspirations are discussed.

Analysis of the Reasons for Return to Baghdeda

The Displacement from Baghdeda and Situation in Displacement

All respondents were displaced from Baghdeda in August 2014, fleeing the town before it was seized by Daesh. They indicated that they were displaced to Ainkawa, the Christian district of Erbil in the Kurdistan Region. Diyaa Kaju explained that most of the families from Baghdeda moved there taking into account that it is a Christian area because ‘in such times people are forced to resort to sectarian and religious belonging and the national belonging falls’ (Interview Diyaa Kaju 2020). For Christian IDPs, being displaced in a majoritarian Christian area seemed to convey a feeling of security, although people still tend to feel like ‘strangers’ living outside their own area (Interview Atheer Marcus 2020)⁶.

The displacement period is in general described as ‘difficult and humiliating to a certain extent’ (Interview Andy 2021), and a ‘tragedy’ (Interview Ikhlas Mikho 2021)⁷. This is especially due to the shelter situation, high living expenses, not having a source of income, and difficulties of finding a job in Ainkawa, which were factors contributing to the IDPs’ decisions to

⁶ The Peshmerga is the army of Kurdistan Region of Iraq and with its 200,000 well-trained soldiers counts as the best in Iraq (cf. Höfchen n.d.).

⁷ She was widowed, a mother of five, and lost her job due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

return after their town was retaken from Daesh. ‘Many were living in rent in Erbil, like us, and this was one of the reasons for return’ (Interview Tharaa A. Simaan December 2020). IP10 for example did not want to return to Baghdad, but he returned with his children because they were living in a caravan camp that he describes as ‘unsuitable for living’ (Interview IP10 2020)⁸. He mentioned further reasons for his return, which are the absence of schools, financial support, and work in Erbil, as well as the aid focus on the provision of food supplies.

Only three respondents narrated that they had a job in displacement. The remaining interviewees did not have a source of income during displacement and faced difficulties due to the high cost of living in Erbil. IDPs received aid from the church, charitable organizations, and donors from outside of Iraq (Interview Father George 2020)⁹. There was aid in the form of shelter aid, food supplies, small sums of cash for groceries, blankets, mattresses, and other kinds of basic goods (Interview Najwa Abdallah 2020).

In summary, the respondents described the situation in displacement as difficult. It is clear that the insufficiencies of their situation in Ainkawa constituted an important push factor in their decision to return.

Encouragement by Religious Leaders

The church and clergy played an important role during displacement by providing aid and support to the Christian IDPs. They were considered a crucial and reliable source of information: ‘People were following the news through newspaper, TV, and so on, and especially through the church and they were planning their future based on that’ (Interview Father George 2020). Furthermore, the religious leaders were the first ones to return to the area (Interview IP12 2021).

Father George viewed the return as ‘a historical responsibility because we are the original inhabitants in this country and our numbers are shrinking. The Christians play a role in giving this country a testimony, not only religious or related to faith only but also a testimony in humanity and loyalty’ (Interview Father George 2020). He argued that the church worked on encouraging the people to return and stay by ‘morally guiding them to-

⁸ His wife died in displacement because of an illness.

⁹ Father George was a Syriac Catholic priest and the head of the local reconstruction committee in Baghdad.

ward the connection and loyalty to this land and continuing our message in this land and, practically, the church was oriented toward reconstructing' (Interview Father George 2020).

Seven of the returnees mentioned the encouragement they received by the church and clergy to return. However, most of them stressed that their decision to return was a personal one. This is illustrated by Tharaa Simaan's statement: 'We rely on the religious leaders, however, we do whatever we find good' (Interview Tharaa A. Simaan 2020). As many IDPs did not have any trust in the state or state institutions, it is only through their absolute confidence in the church that they had hopes for return (Interview Marwan Boutros 2020)¹⁰. Ahmed Rifat narrated that while IDPs might argue that their decision to return was a personal one, it was in reality influenced by the trust and respect they had for the clergy, whose views and demands they tend to take seriously. He believed that religious leaders played a partial role but not the most important role in the return (Interview Ahmed Rifat 2021)¹¹. In summary, it seems that the encouragement by the clergy and church did play a role in the decision to return. However, there were also other considerations that IDPs took into account when making the decision.

The idea of returning to the 'fatherland' came up multiple times during the interviews. Father George mentioned the connection to the land as the reason for return: 'The motivation for return was this land which we inherited from our forebears; it is our obligation to be faithful to it and to rebuild it despite of all the challenges, difficulties, and messages of demoralization' (Interview Father George 2020). Safaa Bahnam mentioned the return 'to our area, the area of our fathers and forebears' (Interview Safaa Bahnam 2020). IP3 also referred to the church's encouragement to return and not to abandon 'our lands', although he expressed that, 'I am not convinced with the idea of the land and the land of our forebears because what's the point in returning to our land and the land of our forebears if I am not comfortable?' (Interview IP3 2021). According to Ahmed Rifat, this feeling of belonging to the fatherland expressed by Christians from Baghdeda is also known to Iraqis from other ethno-religious groups and areas of the country. He explained that it is not easy for Christians to leave Baghdeda because of 'the[ir] sense of nation-

¹⁰ Marwan Boutros was a lawyer and rights activist, involved in the establishment of the local resource center in Baghdeda.

¹¹ Ahmed Rifat was the monitoring and evaluation coordinator at MI.

al, ethnic, religious belonging and belonging to their area and the area of their forebears' (Interview Ahmed Rifat 2021). Furthermore, some respondents referred to themselves as the 'the original inhabitants of the area' to emphasize their rootedness in and connection to Baghdeda (Interview IP12 2021).

Apart from referring to the idea of the fatherland or being the original inhabitants, the interviewees expressed their connectedness to Baghdeda by referring to it as the place where they grew up and where their friends and family are: '[Baghdeda] is my area and my place of birth, in it are my family and relatives' (Interview Ikhlas Mikho 2021). Some expressed not imagining living somewhere else once Baghdeda was retaken from Daesh, like IP12, who explained that 'it is impossible to live in another area when our area has been liberated' (Interview IP12 2021). Moreover, Baghdeda is home to specific traditions, as Marwan Boutros pointed out: 'Religion is present in us in any place on earth, but there are aspects of tradition and custom, relationships and social fabric which you don't find anywhere else' (Interview Marwan Boutros 2020).

Father George explained that 'the church is considered the prime and last sanctuary, like the mother. The mother does not leave her children...and as an institution there is a role for the archbishop, bishops, priests, and nuns' (Interview Father George 2020). He elaborated by stating that the mother takes care of her children in different ways so that they remain in this land. He regarded the church at the forefront defending the rights of the people and pushing the government to work toward the persistence of the people.

Concerning the return of IDPs, the church immediately advocated for the return of all the people (Interview Father George 2020). IP12 was convinced that without the church, 'we would not have returned' (Interview IP12 2021). He added that 'the faith in Baghdeda is strong and the people love the church' (Interview IP12 2021). However, this positive picture of the church or clergy did not resonate with all the respondents. IP10 criticized the intermingling of politics and religion where decision-making is influenced, for example, by the archbishop – a cleric viewed as if he is a government minister (meaning that everything has to go through him) (Interview IP10 2020).

The respondents' views about the representative role of the clergy were divided. Najwa Abdallah narrated that 'the church and religious leaders...made our voices heard to foreign countries' (Interview Najwa Abdallah 2020), whereas Ikhlas Mikho stated that 'the religious leaders do not help anyone...because the religious leaders and the government do not look at the

citizens and their needs' (Interview Ikhlas Mikho 2021). The feeling of not being seen, heard, or represented by the clergy was mentioned by two other respondents. IP10's statements were in line with those of Ikhlas Mikho, by stating that the religious leaders 'were our role models and strengths' (Interview IP10 2020) which, however, changed after the displacement. Moreover, Ikhlas Mikho and IP10 expressed being disappointed by the church and religious leaders. Diyaa Kaju opposed the idea of being represented by the church or archbishop, and explained that 'the sectarianists want us Christians to be caught in this narrow framework because our numbers are small...they limit us to the representation by the archbishop or priest. I don't want to be represented by a priest or archbishop, not because of hate but I don't want to be limited to the sectarian framework because it's a trap that will end the Christians completely. The clergy love this trap, and in my personal opinion, the clergy should refuse and refrain from politics because politics corrupts the clergy' (Interview Diyaa Kaju 2020).

Support from and trust in their religious community, institution, and clergy encouraged Christian IDPs to return to Baghdeda. The religious leaders and clergy encouraged the Christian IDPs to return at different occasions. Interviewees furthermore referred to the notion of the fatherland, with the Christians being the original inhabitants of the country, and the historical responsibility associated with that. Some of the interviewees, however, criticized the church and clergy citing disappointment, potential corruption, and the commingling of the religious and political spheres.

Reconstruction Aid as Motivation to Return

Due to the large scale of destruction, the need for aid, especially for housing reconstruction, was high. After the Ninewa Plain was retaken from Daesh, each church established a local reconstruction committee headed by a church leader to initiate and lead the reconstruction phase and to collect funds for that purpose. The local reconstruction committees formed part of MI's partners in the housing reconstruction. They documented damages and set up a database comprising the collected information.

Even before MI partnered with local reconstruction committees, the committees were already involved in house reconstructions. They did the assessments and identified the needs and the number of people who wanted to return in their aspiration to obtain funding. Working with local reconstruction committees provided MI with a network, which allowed them an immediate

implementation (Monzer 2020:35). Christian IDPs were informed about the formation of the committees and the reconstruction aid it would provide upon return. Tharaa Simaan remembered that, after the church established their local reconstruction committees, many people were encouraged to return. The committees opened an office and many people registered. Plans were made and the funding started to arrive from NGOs, which became one of the biggest motivations for return. She added that some IDPs believed that with the start of housing reconstruction they might find employment in Baghdeda (Interview Tharaa A. Simaan 2020).

For some of the interviewees, the provision of help was a crucial factor in their decision to return. This was true in the case of IP3, who remarked, ‘The aid by the church arrived...and this is why I returned and rebuilt my family’s house’ (Interview IP3 2021). Najwa Abdallah affirmed that any person who saw an opportunity to rebuild their house mostly returned instead of leaving it destroyed (Interview Najwa Abdallah 2020). However, the aid volume was less than what the returnees expected. IP10 believed that if IDPs had known about the small financial aid they would receive for the home reconstruction, they would not have returned (Interview IP10 2020). Diyaa Kaju described the financial aid as being appropriate in the beginning but decreasing with time due to shrinking funds. For instance, he only received half of the sum he spent on his house from the local reconstruction committee, nevertheless considering it ‘better than nothing’ (Interview Diyaa Kaju 2020). Three interviewees indicated that the financial aid for reconstruction they received was insufficient and they had to borrow money to cover the costs of the house rehabilitation. For example, IP6 narrated that the sums provided ‘were very low’ (Interview IP6 2021), as the amount she received covered less than half of the cost.

Two interviewees alluded to the (in)voluntariness of the return. Andy indicated that the return was not completely voluntary, stating that ‘everyone knows that the displacement was involuntary but [what] most of them don’t know is that the return was also involuntary’ (Interview Andy 2021). He explained that in the camps and Christian neighborhoods for IDPs, the water and electricity provisions stopped and the schools, health facilities, and prayer houses were closed to force them to return. This differed from what Safaa Bahnam related: ‘The church did not force anyone to return but the faith-based organizations provided help for the reconstruction of houses to anyone who wanted to return’ (Interview Safaa Bahnam 2020). Other respondents’

expressions raised the question whether returnees were fully convinced by the return, since it seems like some only returned to escape a difficult situation in displacement. In this vein, Najwa Abdallah stated that some of the people whose houses were burned, returned on the basis that NGOs would help them with housing rehabilitation because they were financially exhausted from paying rent in Erbil (Interview Najwa Abdallah 2020). Safaa Bahnam argued that some people who were struggling financially due to a lack of work returned, and their houses were rehabilitated in an acceptable manner (Interview Safaa Bahnam 2020).

From the interview responses it materializes that the provision of aid for housing reconstruction was a motivating factor for return. However, one respondent interpreted the announcement of certain aid types as having lured the people into returning. Andy explained that certain stakeholders promised monthly allowances for the first 100 to 300 families returning, but this did not materialize (Interview Andy 2021). This feeling of having been lured into something might also have come up because, as IP10 claims, after three years there were still many people who had not received payments from the local reconstruction committee (Interview IP10 2020).

Some respondents felt that there was inequality or favoritism when it came to the provision of help through the church, local reconstruction committees, or NGOs. IP10 lamented that inequality was a big problem that frustrated many: 'For example, my house was burned [and] they gave me 50, and someone else did not deserve 50 but they gave him 70 or 80; there is no equality and the dysfunction lies in the employees in Baghdeda' (Interview IP10 2020). Ahmed Rifat narrated that he received isolated complaints about nepotism and corruption in local reconstruction committees and spoke about that to the committee heads. He assumes that they were not successful at explaining the beneficiary selection criteria correctly, which made the people feel that there was no equality in the provision of help (Interview Ahmed Rifat 2021).

According to Father George, at the time of data collection, around 55% of the town was rebuilt, thanks to the aid from foreign countries. In his perspective, even if there are still traces of the destruction and burning, the rebuilding has not only improved the appearance of the city, but also made a huge difference in the people's wellbeing. Moreover, he emphasized that all of Baghdeda's components – state, religion, and citizens – played a significant role in the reconstruction. Father George described the reconstruction of

Baghdeda as an example to all the surrounding cities, as it is the first city to be reconstructed in such a way and with such speed. It symbolized both the return and belief in the return (Interview Father George 2020). A survey of the Ninewa Reconstruction Committee, the umbrella organization of all local reconstruction committees, indicates that by January 12, 2021, 43.7% of Baghdeda's inhabitants had already returned (Ninewa Reconstruction Committee 2023).

Although the IDPs decided to return, they were concerned about various issues in their areas of origin. During the interviews they voiced their worries about how life would be possible due to the scale of destruction and not knowing whether jobs, schools, hospitals, and basic services would be available. Moreover, the security situation in Baghdeda was one of the most important factors IDPs considered when thinking about a return, especially as they 'were afraid that anything would lead to displacement again because people cannot stand to go through the same situation one more time' (Interview Najwa Abdallah 2020). The provision of aid in the housing sector alone was not enough, 'as work is needed or you cannot live' (Interview IP10 2020).

Religious Symbols and Practices

The churches in Baghdeda were burned down (Interview Father George 2020) and church towers destroyed (Interview Ikhlas Mikho 2021). Father George recalls that 'especially the young people would search for the bell and ring it as if it was a sign of their return' (Interview Father George 2020). He added that he visited the Al-Tahira Church during his first visit to the town, describing the sight of the demolished church as saddening and appearing to be an act of revenge as well as a message that the Christians should not remain on this land. He further explained that the church is an important symbol for 'Oriental Christians [as] we can pray anywhere but it is an important geographical symbol especially if in it is a fingerprint of our fathers and grandfathers. For that reason, we are attached to it so much' (Interview Father George 2020). Notwithstanding the symbolism of the church, the archbishop decided that the houses of the returnees would be rebuilt first and the churches last, as he considered suitable shelter as more important for human beings and, besides, prayer can be done under any circumstance and in any place. This is why the reconstruction of the churches only started at a later stage. The church of Sarah and Behnam for example was completely burned. After

a cleaning campaign, the black scorch marks were still there but it was suitable for festivities and gatherings. The state of the church remained this way until the start of its rehabilitation one and a half years later.

The sight of the defiled religious symbols and buildings was mentioned by some of the interviewees. Ikhlas Mikho, for example, recounted with sadness finding the picture of Christ that was usually hanging in front of her house, perforated by gunshots (Interview Ikhlas Mikho 2021). Religious symbols and practices are of importance to the inhabitants of Baghdeda. This is why, when funds started to arrive, religious symbols that *touched people's souls* were rebuilt. Moreover, shortly after the retake of the Daesh-occupied territories, the church started to hold services. Some people would come from their place of displacement only to join the service and then return. This, Marwan Boutros stated, helped to break the cycle of fear of coming to the area (Interview Marwan Boutros 2020). Four respondents indicated that the resumption of daily religious services was an important factor for their return. Moreover, Marwan Boutros described the presence of the church and mass as giving a 'motivation for life' (Interview Marwan Boutros 2020). The importance of the presence of religious symbols and practices in Baghdeda can be linked to what Diyaa Kaju related about the significance of religion for Middle Eastern communities. He explained that religion does not have an importance to him anymore, but 'religion is very important to our communities in the region. Religion is a part of culture and civilization which we hold on to, and we the Assyrians are majoritarian Christian...in Iraq...So, religion is part of the existence of the human being, and this can be a direct or indirect reason for the return' (Interview Diyaa Kaju 2020).

The resumption of the daily religious services encouraged IDPs to come from their areas of displacement to partake. It contributed to breaking the cycle of fear and witnessed the reconstruction progress in Baghdeda. Religious rituals and practices encouraged IDPs to come to Baghdeda and had, in some cases, a positive effect on their decision to return. The reconstruction of churches and Christian religious symbols had a positive impact on the psychological wellbeing of the community.

Returning to a Christian Majoritarian Town

An important aspect in the return to Baghdeda is the fact that it was, and still is, a majoritarian Christian town. As Najwa Abdallah expressed, 'All Christians love their area because it comprises a Christian majority' (Interview

Najwa Abdallah 2020). Moreover, living in a Christian area conveys a feeling of security. IP12 argues that ‘we as Christians, we cannot live in [just] any place’ and it is impossible to live in a religiously mixed area. He spoke about Christians in Iraq being confined to specific areas to live in (Interview IP12 2021). Ikhlas Mikho, who is from Baghdeda, but lived in Baghdad for many years until the explosion of the Al-Najat Church in 2011, was the only one who stated that it is not important to her to live in a Christian area (Interview Ikhlas Mikho 2021). However, Andy drew another picture of the coexistence of people from different ethno-religious belongings in Iraq: ‘Pretending to live peacefully and accepting the other is nothing other than a media picture...and does not represent the reality’ (Interview Andy 2021).

Another factor encouraging the respondents to return was that Baghdeda did not experience demographic change. In the specific case of Baghdeda, it has been a majoritarian Christian town and remained so even after the last displacement. Other towns in the proximity of Baghdeda, like Bartella and Tel Keif, did experience demographic changes. Despite having formerly been majoritarian Christian, today Christian inhabitants constitute minorities in these towns. Najwa Abdallah explains, ‘If demographic change had happened, we would not have returned; demographic change means that I return to live with people who are strangers’ (Interview Najwa Abdallah 2020). Four of the respondents spoke about being worried or afraid that Baghdeda would be affected by demographic change. Father George describes demographic change as a ‘threat’ and ‘ongoing battle’ (Interview Father George 2020).

Some of the respondents explained that demographic change manifests itself for example in the appearance of the towns or the prevailing dress code. Safaa Bahnam considers the presence of ‘Islamic symbols’ in former Christian majoritarian towns as provocation. He explains that Karamless ‘is a Christian area in which the flag of Hussein has been put up on the opposite side of the monastery, and this is a form of provocation and there are underlying intentions behind such actions’ (Interview Safaa Bahnam 2020). Tharaa Simaan’s decision to return to Baghdeda was led by the idea to do her share against demographic change, stating, ‘We prefer that Baghdeda keeps its religious identity and I don’t want to see more mosques than churches in it in 100 years. I don’t want to see what happened in Telkeif happening in [Baghdeda]’ (Interview Tharaa A. Simaan 2020).

The interviewees described their relationships with people from other ethno-religious backgrounds differently. Two interviewees did not have any contact with non-Christians in Baghdeda, while others claimed that their contact was limited to greetings or describe their contact as ‘careful’. Still others argued that their contacts did not change after Daesh, and one even emphasized that the Shabak in Baghdeda are well integrated and even speak their language. One interview partner stated that his Muslim neighbors are nice with him, but through the interaction of his and their children, he discovered that they had a ‘Daesh mindset’. Many spoke about their relationships with non-Christians being afflicted with fear, mistrust, and suspicion. Diyaa Kaju narrates that he has non-Christian friends in Mosul and describes his relationship with them on an individual level as good. He explains: ‘The problem lies in the sectarian political leaders that are fabricating problems because their seats and posts depend on the presence of problems between the religions and sects’ (Interview Diyaa Kaju 2020). He further describes them as war dealers and corrupt, who ‘do not merit to be political leaders and there is no exception. All of them fabricate problems, stir up sedition and conflicts, and rule by fear’ (Interview Diyaa Kaju 2020).

The Situation upon Return and Future Perspectives

The situation upon return was described in a negative way: ‘I saw a catastrophe when I returned’ (Interview Safaa Bahnam 2020), ‘Baghdeda was a disaster area’ (Interview IP6 2021), ‘the situation was not good in the beginning’ (Interview Ikhlas Mikho 2021), ‘our return was a tragedy...we were expecting a better and more beautiful situation’ (Interview IP10 2020), and ‘life was very difficult’ (Interview IP12 2021). These statements related in particular to the massive scale of destruction of houses, churches, and infrastructure, as described by Ikhlas Mikho: ‘It is very difficult when you enter your area, which was beautiful and blossoming, and you see it in a frightening situation where all the houses and churches are burned’ (Interview Ikhlas Mikho 2021). Moreover, for around six months after the retake of the Daesh-occupied territories, basic services like water and electricity were absent or limited and the security situation tense because ‘combat operations were still ongoing when the first families returned’ (Interview Andy 2021).

Though all respondents agree on the gradual improvement of the general situation in Baghdeda after its retake from Daesh, they describe the scale of improvement in different ways. This gradual amelioration of the situ-

ation motivated some of the IDPs to return. According to Najwa Abdallah, ‘when we saw the reconstruction, the reopening of the hospital, the return of the governmental employees, and the cleaning of the schools we were encouraged to return’ (Interview Najwa Abdallah 2020).

The security situation was perceived differently among the respondents. Tharaa Simaan recounts that ‘directly after liberation the area was given to the Hashd-al-Shaabi¹², but the forces present in [Baghdeda] are the Christian military forces NPU and we trust them 100 percent’ (Interview Tharaa A. Simaan 2020). Some indicated that they had enough security at that stage, and that there was no fear, while others spoke about a relative feeling of security, and a few called the security situation ‘still tense’. The interviewees expressed that the future security situation was yet unknown and that there was a possibility of security breaches. They had a fear that what happened previously might happen again, especially as some believed that the Daesh ideology was still spreading and had not disappeared. In light of this, Safaa Bahnam expressed his fear that in 10 to 15 years ‘someone will come and say to the Christians or Ezidis like they said to the Jews when they left Iraq, “Today it’s the people of Saturday and tomorrow it’s the people of Sunday”’ (Interview Safaa Bahnam 2020).

The difficulties that respondents were facing were mainly of a financial nature or employment related. The economic situation was described as difficult and as not having returned to how it was before displacement, aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic. IP3 described the economic situation as ‘hard’ and stated that he could not guarantee his children’s future: ‘Subsistence is difficult’, as there are no job opportunities, projects, or investments. According to him, in order to secure a job, people have to resort to nepotism and corruption in order to secure employment (Interview IP3 2021). Unemployment among the youth was especially thematized, as Safaa Bahnam narrated, ‘Young people do not have an income, although they had an income, money, and a car before Daesh’ (Interview Safaa Bahnam 2020). He

¹² The Hashd-al-Shaabi, also known as ‘popular mobilization units’, is constituted by around 50, mostly Shia paramilitary groups and has links to Iran. The Hashd was established in 2014 and was involved in fighting Daesh and recruiting several thousand volunteers to that aim (Mansour 2019). Today, the Hashd is integrated into the Iraqi security apparatus and has control over parts of the territories retaken from Daesh (Bryant 2019:7).

added that young people do not have the means to get married and argued that the elimination of unemployment ‘will make us stick more to our land’ (Interview Safaa Bahnam 2020).

Almost all interviewees stated that the future of Christians in Iraq was either uncertain or that there was no future for Christians in Iraq. Some of the interviewees expressed being aware of the importance of remaining in Christian areas of Iraq, Baghdada for example, as it is ‘considered the area with [the] most Christians, and if we leave, there won’t be a majoritarian Christian area and we will be spread over different areas and countries’ (Interview Najwa Abdallah 2020). Emigration was described as a threat to the existence of Christians in Iraq, as Diyaa Kaju narrated: ‘We, the Ashuri¹³ Christians, are the original inhabitants of Iraq. Our emigration...means our total extinction because the migrants who left for different countries are no longer who they were before. Once they lose their land, they will lose their language, traditions, and customs one generation after the other. And this is what leads to the extinction of whole old communities. And this is the reason for our devotion for remaining’ (Interview Diyaa Kaju 2020).

When asking the respondents whether they were thinking of migrating abroad, seven of them affirmed and two indicated not wanting to leave the country for now. The reasons given by the seven interview partners for wanting to leave were the existing inequality; to guarantee a better future for their children; not seeing any future in Iraq; fear of demographic change; the financial situation; and health conditions. They averred that they had not been able to leave because of their financial situation and were waiting for a chance to migrate or waiting for the end of the pandemic before embarking on the migration or asylum journey. IP12 conversed that the clergy encouraged the Christians to ‘remain and not to emigrate’ (Interview IP12 2021). He concurrently lamented that ‘there is no solution for us in this country, we are oppressed, and we cannot live without laws that protect us’ (Interview IP12 2021).

Discussion

Support from and trust in their religious community, institution, and clergy encouraged Christian IDPs to return to Baghdada. As highlighted in the anal-

¹³ Ashuri is the Arabic term for Assyrian (Hanoosh 2016:28).

ysis, the religious leaders and clergy encouraged the Christian IDPs to return on different occasions. They resorted to the idea of the fatherland, the Christians being the original inhabitants of the country, and the historical responsibility associated with that. In Iraq, according to Hanoosh, Chaldeans in comparison with the Muslim Arab majorities ‘might think of themselves as more historically rooted, ancient and indigenous to the land that constitutes Iraq today’ (Hanoosh 2019:2). For some of the respondents, the idea of the fatherland and being the original inhabitants were motivational factors for return, wanting to return to, rebuild, and live in Baghdeda. While the returnees expressed the encouragement by the church, they simultaneously stressed that their decision to return was a personal one. Moreover, their rootedness in Baghdeda was expressed through references to the town as their place of birth and upbringing, and their connectedness to friends and family there. With the retake of Baghdeda from Daesh, some respondents indicated that they could not imagine remaining in displacement or not returning to their area of origin, thereby illustrating their strong connectedness to Baghdeda and its people, but also the difficult situation of displacement. Both seem to have contributed to their urge to return.

The role of the church and clergy was not limited to the spiritual or religious sphere. They functioned as spokespeople for their parishes in humanitarian, social, and political terms. Moreover, the church constituted an important source of aid and information. This prominent role might be more understandable when taking into consideration the importance of cultural and religious institutions within the Iraqi society. As Faily points out, the ‘core political authority and legitimacy [of the state] is based on an ethno-sectarian foundation...The state is the weakest institutional component within Iraqi society, suffering in comparison with religious and cultural institutions’ (Faily 2016:13). Faily describes religious leadership as ‘influential in all of Iraq’s sects’ (Faily 2016:13). Although important, at times the political role of the church and clergy is not without controversy. Some of the interviewed people argued that it limits the kind of representation available to them, conflates political and religious spheres, and leads to further inequality and corruption. Moreover, not all respondents felt that the church or religious leaders advocate and work in the best interests of the parish. Nonetheless, it became clear that the church and clergy are more trusted by Christian IDPs than governmental institutions. This trust seems to have contributed to encouraging Christian IDPs to follow the calls of the clergy and return. However, the re-

sponses indicate that trust in the church and clergy was declining after return, as some respondents lamented corruption and felt that their interests were not represented.

The encouragement by religious leaders alone would not have effectuated the return of Christian IDPs to Baghdad. Rather, this encouragement coupled with reconstruction aid led by the church influenced the IDPs' return decisions positively. The church stopped the financial support for the rent in displacement, on which many returnees were dependent and focused aid on the reconstruction efforts in Baghdad. The establishment of the local reconstruction committees and announcement of the aid it would provide in housing reconstruction constituted an important reason for the return of IDPs. Hein (2020) analyzed the role that the committees played in rebuilding Ninewa Plain communities and showed that their work is not limited to physical reconstruction. She concludes that in many instances, local reconstruction committees fostered intra-communal and inter-communal dialogue and exchanges needed for social cohesion, and diminished the feelings of abandonment among Christian communities while boosting a sense of safety (Hein 2020:57-60). Some of the returnees viewed the amount of aid received as less than expected, leading some to borrow money for their housing reconstruction with a resulting additional financial burden. The perceived low sums of aid made some people feel lured into returning. Moreover, they lamented inequality or favoritism when it comes to the provision of help by the church or NGOs.

The reconstruction of Christian religious symbols and churches in Baghdad seems to have had a positive impact on the psychological wellbeing of the community. Moreover, the resumption of daily services encouraged IDPs to come from their areas of displacement to partake. It thereby contributed to overcoming fears and allowed them to witness the reconstruction. Religious rituals and practices encouraged IDPs to come to Baghdad and had, in some cases, a positive effect on their decision to return.

Although the encouragement by religious leaders and reconstruction aid formed motivational factors in the IDPs' decisions to return, one should not underestimate the relevance of the situation in displacement. All respondents fled to the Christian district of Ainkawa in Erbil. This coincides with Higel's observation that people fleeing their area of origin mostly choose an area of displacement in which they share linguistic, religious, and ethnic characteristics with the host community (Higel 2016:16). The situation in

displacement was full of hardships concerning the shelter situation, high living costs, and economic insecurity. These difficulties constituted an important push factor in their decision to return.

The fact that Baghdeda was still a majoritarian Christian town made the decision to return easier. In contrast to other former Christian towns and villages in the Ninewa Plain, Baghdeda did not experience demographic change. Over the last 15 years, formerly heterogeneous communities in Iraq changed; they became ‘more isolationist and homogenous as trust deficits among groups in society gr[e]w’ (Halawa 2020:7). Mousa (2018:3) defines social trust as ‘an equilibrium in which everyday interactions between two groups are not conditioned on identity’ and gives an example from the post-Daesh context, which is the mistrust Christians had toward their Muslim neighbors (Mousa 2018:1). Moreover, Costantini and Palani (2018) indicate that IDPs from different ethno-religious groups considered a prospective future coexistence as doubtful. According to Khedir, the return of IDPs depends on ‘the specific location of the return and the history of such locations, especially with regard to the level of demographic change policies’ (Khedir 2015:70). From the interview responses it materialized that there are only a few relationships between Christians and non-Christians in Baghdeda, and those that do exist often tend to be tinged by mistrust and fear.

There seems to be an awareness among the interviewees about the importance of preserving a Christian presence in Iraq. At the same time, some of the returnees indicated to be thinking about emigrating if an opportunity presented itself because of existing inequalities, fear of demographic change, the economic situation, missing perspectives in Iraq, and to guarantee a better future for their children. Mousa’s study refutes the assumption that Christians are ethnocentric and that those who stayed in Iraq post-2003 are ‘committed to preserve a Christian presence in Iraq’ (Mousa 2018). Her findings reveal that 70% of her Christian respondents, constituted by young men, would leave the country if they had the opportunity (Mousa 2018). The results of the present study correspond with Mousa’s findings. The idea of the fatherland and the loyalty to it are not enough to make people bear the difficult situation in which they find themselves after returning to Baghdeda.

Limitations and Benefits of this Study

Two limitations of this study need to be highlighted. First, due to the limited number of interviews, our findings cannot be considered statistically representative of all Christians in Baghdad. Moreover, as a result of differing reconstruction progressions, provisions of aid, and scales of demographic change, it is beyond the scope of this study to examine the role of ethno-religious belonging/religion for Iraqi IDPs' return decisions in contexts other than Baghdad. Second, due to the COVID-19 pandemic no in-person interviews were possible. However, due to the interviewer being a mother tongue Arabic speaker, while at the same time being enough of an outsider (of Lebanese descent and working at a German academic institution) to be considered impartial to Iraq's conflicts, it can be assumed that the results have a high degree of reliability. Despite these limitations, the article provides important insights into the motivations leading Christians to return to their area of origin in post-Daesh Iraq. It thereby constitutes a basis for future studies about the role of religion in the IDPs' decisions to return to their area of origin in the Iraqi context and beyond.

Conclusions

Overall, our results show that religious identity constitutes an important factor among Christian IDPs' multifaceted considerations in their decision to return. Relating our findings back to the debate on push and pull factors as well as durable return, the following picture emerges: First, the deplorable situation in displacement constituted an important push factor for Christian IDPs. Second, it clearly emerges that religion played a vital role in the decision to return. Encouragement by religious leaders, respondents' religious identity, connectedness to the 'fatherland', the 2000-year Christian tradition in Baghdad and the resumption of religious services, linked with active relief work by religious institutions through the local reconstruction committees were important pull factors contributing to the respondents' decision to move back to their area of origin. Another important factor is the perceived safety in a Christian majority town. Divisions along ethno-religious lines have deepened during the last 15 years throughout Iraq. An increasing fear and mistrust toward the 'other' make people feel more secure living among their own ethno-religious groups. It should be emphasized that the results reflect

an interrelatedness of multiple factors influencing Christian IDPs' decisions to return. However, 'return does not always constitute a durable solution' (IDMC 2018:6). Our interviews clearly revealed that while religion may produce an array of factors that support the decision to return, it does not alone provide sufficient reason to remain in Baghdeda. While religion constitutes one of several pull factors, it does not seem to be strong enough to constitute a *stick* factor causing Christians to remain in their home area in the long term.

This indicates that in order to achieve a sustainable return, religious identity is not sufficient. Other factors like security and economic opportunities have to be provided and might outweigh the aspect of religious identity. In fact, the continuously difficult situation in Baghdeda leads many to think of emigrating in the hope of a more secure life and a better future for their children. This resonates with the results of an IOM study that found 'regarding satisfaction with return, a vast majority (87%) of returnees are not satisfied. The top three areas where returnees demand improvements are public service provision, security and economic opportunities' (IOM 2019:6).

Based on the analysis in this article, the following policy recommendations can be highlighted. In order to contribute to a sustainable return, the Iraqi government, NGOs, and international stakeholders should prioritize creating economic opportunities, as well as improve the security situation. Moreover, social cohesion should be fostered to tackle the mistrust and fear among different ethno-religious groups. A wider participation and inclusion of the Christian population and other minority groups in the social and political spheres are crucial for them to make their demands heard and be able to shape their futures. Furthermore, the returnees are in need of further aid, as most of them have not been able to restore their lives after having been uprooted by the emergence of Daesh. It is thus essential that the end of the humanitarian aid phase is followed by economic development in order to further improve the situation in Baghdeda and create a future perspective.

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