DANISH REFUGEE COUNCIL

Iraq

Experiences of Return and Reintegration

Voices of returnees from Denmark to Iraq

June, 2025 – Copenhagen, Denmark

DRC DANISH REFUGEE COUNCIL

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Contents

Series on experiences of return and reintegration

This is the first publication in a new series by DRC Asylum, focusing on return and reintegration. The series aims to shed light on what it means to return, not through statistics or policy analysis, but through the personal stories of people who have returned from Denmark to different countries. The publications are not evaluations of specific reintegration programs or academic studies. Instead, the goal is simply to share first-hand insights into the return and reitntegration process; insights that are personal, complex, and rarely heard in public debates. By presenting a diverse range of experiences, the series challenges simplified narratives of return as either success or failure and aims to broaden the discussion around return policies.

Summary (in Danish)

Denne rapport samler erfaringer fra 29 afviste asylansøgere, der er vendt tilbage til Irak fra Danmark. Formålet er at give et indblik i deres personlige oplevelser af tilbagevenden og reintegration og belyse processen gennem deres forskellige individuelle perspektiver.

Oplysningerne i rapporten stammer fra kvalitative interviews med 13 tilbagevendte personer gennemført under DRC's besøg i Irak i efteråret 2023 samt en telefonisk spørgeskemaundersøgelse med 21 tilbagevendte gennemført i perioden marts-maj 2024. Fem af deltagerne i telefonundersøgelsen deltog også i et kvalitativt interview, hvormed det samlede antal tilbagevendte, der bidrager til rapporten, er 29 personer, heraf 4 kvinder og 25 mænd.

Alle deltagere er voksne i alderen 20 til 69 år og vendt tilbage til Irak (både KRI og Syd-/Centralirak) fra Danmark i årene 2018 til 2023. Alle har fået støtte gennem et reintegrationsprogram faciliteret af ETTC (The European Technology and Training Centre) i Irak. De tilbagevendtes fravær fra Irak spænder fra én person, der har været væk i 5 måneder til nogle, der har været væk i mere end 20 år. Størstedelen har været væk fra Irak i 3 til 8 år, og de fleste af de tilbagevendte har således haft et meget langt ophold udenfor landet inden deres tilbagevenden.

Forberedelse og den første tid i Irak

De fleste tilbagevendte udtrykte tilfredshed med den information, rådgivning og forberedelsestid, de fik inden afrejsen fra Danmark. Dog kom det frem under interviewene, at mange ikke følte, at de var i stand til rigtigt at drage fuld nytte af den information og rådgivning, der var til rådighed. Især de personer, der var frihedsberøvet inden udrejsen, havde svært ved både at forberede sig mentalt og håndtere praktiske forhold – særligt at få adgang til at kontakte familie i Irak inden udrejsen. Frihedsberøvelsen og den mentale belastning gjorde det vanskeligt at fokusere på forberedelsen og skabte samtidig konkrete begrænsninger for den praktiske planlægning.

Flere tilbagevendte oplevede, at de reelt ikke havde et valg, men snarere blev presset til at udrejse. Det gjorde det vanskeligere at være – og føle sig – parat til udrejsen. Mange beskrev de første måneder i Irak som en *choktilstand,* hvor de følte sig fremmede og usikre med en følelse af at skulle starte et liv på ny. De, der oplevede en mindre svær overgang, havde ofte haft en oplevelse af, at de havde haft mere indflydelse på beslutningen om at vende tilbage. Mange af de tilbagevendte stod i det hele taget overfor særdeles komplekse reintegrationsudfordringer, hvilket gav sig til udtryk i deres beskrivelser af den første tid tilbage.

Der var generel tilfredshed med støtten fra reintegrationspartneren ETTC. De tilbagevendte oplevede at blive behandlet med respekt og beskrev organisationen som engageret i at hjælpe dem og imødekomme deres behov.

Økonomisk tryghed som den største bekymring

Den altdominerende bekymring for alle tilbagevendte var deres økonomiske tryghed. Mange havde svært ved at dække deres basale leveomkostninger og var afhængige af økonomisk støtte fra familie og netværk. Kun 12 ud af de 21 adspurgte i telefonundersøgelsen havde et arbejde, og langt størstedelen oplevede, at deres indkomst ikke var tilstrækkelig.

Omkring halvdelen af de tilbagevendte havde brugt deres reintegrationsmidler på at starte en virksomhed, primært indenfor enten transport, handel eller restaurationsbranchen. Dog var mere end halvdelen af disse virksomheder allerede lukket igen som følge af økonomiske udfordringer.

Der var en tydelig sammenhæng mellem økonomisk sikkerhed og mental trivsel, hvor de, der havde en mere stabil økonomi, generelt udtrykte, at de havde et bedre mentalt helbred. Mange udtrykte dog stadig stor usikkerhed om fremtiden.

Mange tilbagevendte var præget af *psykologisk demotivation* og en *grundlæggende følelse af usikkerhed for fremtiden*. Enkelte af de tilbagevendte havde på den ene side en tilstrækkelig indtægt til at dække deres leveomkostninger og klarede sig dermed økonomisk udmærket. På den anden side fyldte bekymringen for deres fremtidige økonomiske tryghed så meget, at de ikke trivedes mentalt. De udfordringer afspejlede sig i de tilbagevendtes ønsker og håb for fremtiden. De fleste havde ikke store drømme for fremtiden, men udtrykte blot et ønske om en stabil hverdag, økonomisk tryghed samt at kunne etablere og have vedvarende gode, stærke familiemæssige relationer.

Familie og netværk

Familie og netværk blev beskrevet af alle tilbagevendte som fuldstændig afgørende for at kunne klare sig i Irak – både som følelsesmæssig støtte men også som en adgang til ressourcer såsom bolig og arbejde. Flere havde fundet arbejde

og bolig udelukkende via deres familiemæssige netværk, og langt de fleste tilbagevendte var afhængige af familiens økonomiske hjælp.

De fleste tilbagevendte fremhævede familiemedlemmer (herunder udvidet familie) som deres primære støtte frem for netværk som venner og bekendte. Mange havde således ingen stærke støttenetværk uden for deres familie, hvilket viste sig at være sårbart, hvis familierelationerne ikke var stærke. Mens nogle tilbagevendte var glade for at være genforenet med deres familie i Irak og oplevede et trygt og godt familiesammenhold, oplevede andre afstand og udfordringer i familierelationerne. Nogle oplevede en følelse af distance til familien samt ensomhed og udfordringer med at finde sig til rette, særligt hvis de havde været væk fra Irak i flere år. Andre udtrykte også skam over deres situation, fx fordi de havde gældsat familien.

Flere af de tilbagevendte havde familie udenfor Iraks grænser og modtog støtte fra familien på afstand. Enkelte havde også nære familiemedlemmer i Danmark, og adskillelsen fra især børn i Danmark blev beskrevet som særdeles smertefuld.

Få af de tilbagevendte (domsudviste) havde tilbragt størstedelen af deres liv i Danmark og følte sig fremmede i Irak. De stod over for både sproglige og kulturelle barrierer og havde svært ved at navigere i en hverdag, der føltes meget anderledes. Før afrejsen til Irak havde de ikke fuldt ud forstået, hvor udfordrende deres nye situation ville blive.

Overordnet trivsel og tilhørsforhold

De tilbagevendte stod overfor en række udfordringer, der havde stor betydning for deres overordnede trivsel og reintegration. Økonomiske vanskeligheder var en af de største udfordringer. Mange beskrev, at de havde svært ved at finde arbejde, og at de kæmpede med høje leveomkostninger, mangel på jobmuligheder, begrænset adgang til basale fornødenheder og utilstrækkelige boligforhold. Derudover var adskillelsen fra familien (udenfor Irak) en stor følelsesmæssig belastning.

16 ud af de 21 adspurgte i telefonundersøgelsen oplevede, at reintegrationsstøtten fra ETTC havde forbedret deres psykosociale trivsel, mens 3 tilbagevendte ikke fandt den hjælpsom i forhold til deres mentale trivsel, da den ikke gjorde en forskel. 12 ud af 21 var utilfredse eller meget utilfredse med deres nuværende generelle situation, mens 9 var tilfredse eller meget tilfredse. Når det gjaldt fremtiden, forventede 8 stadig at være i Irak om tre år, 4 forventede at rejse fra landet, mens 9 var usikre. 5 følte sig velintegrerede, 10 følte sig delvist integrerede, og 6 slet ikke.

Mens nogle af de tilbagevendte således var optimistiske, følte langt de fleste en stor usikkerhed i forhold til fremtiden. Mange beskrev en uforudsigelig hverdag, hvor livet var "*50/50*" – nogle dage gode, andre dårlige. Selv blandt de personer, der klarede sig relativt godt, var der en grundlæggende følelse af ustabilitet og tvivl om, hvad fremtiden ville bringe, som forstærkede følelsen af mistrivsel og usikkerhed i hverdagen.

Background and purpose

"To start from zero" is how one returnee describes the experience of trying to settle in Iraq after many years away and following an asylum process in Denmark that ended in rejection. The feeling of starting over, of "*being shaken*" as expressed by another returnee, and going through a process marked by a sense of uprootedness and disorientation, recurs in the many personal stories, shared by returnees in Iraq to DRC[1]. Many struggle with the challenge of (re)building a life from an often insecure and difficult starting point.

This publication aims to bring forward and give voice to the personal experiences of returnees from Denmark to Iraq. It is not an evaluation or academic research. Rather, it presents insights that DRC has gathered from extensive experience and direct involvement with rejected asylum seekers and returnees. The purpose is to share valuable insights into the return and reintegration process through personal perspectives, details, and nuances from returnees. The aim is thus to highlight the complexity of return by sharing diverse experiences from returnees which neither paint a black-and-white picture nor offer simple solutions. These nuances are often overlooked in political discussions, which often have a narrow focus on increasing return rates and tend to present return stories as either cautionary tales or as idealized examples of successful reintegration. With this publication, DRC seeks to enrich the discussion on return and reintegration by bringing forward the personal and diverse experiences of individual returnees.

About DRC Asylum (asyl.drc.ngo)

Since the early 1980s, DRC has been offering legal counselling to asylum seekers in Denmark at all stages of the asylum process, including support after a final rejection. Since 2004, return and reintegration projects have been an integral part of DRC's work in Denmark, and since 2014[2], DRC has with funding from the Danish authorities consistently provided impartial, non-directive return and reintegration counselling to a wide range of rejected asylum seekers in Denmark. DRC is also an active member of the European Reintegration Support Organizations (ERSO) network – a network of European NGOs with partnerships in over 30 countries worldwide through which reintegration counselling and support are made available. DRC has, in cooperation with local reintegration partners, made reintegration programs available since 2018 and been involved in more than 300 individual reintegration processes. Through counselling service in Denmark, close cooperation with local partners, virtual follow-up with returnees and in-country visits to both reintegration partners and returnees, DRC has gained significant experience in return and reintegration processes.

Position on return

First and foremost, DRC believes that access to a fair and efficient asylum procedure is a precondition for safe and dignified return. Applications for asylum must be processed in accordance with international refugee law and/or equivalent national legislation through transparent, effective, and fair procedures with safeguards and appeal options that protect the individual from arbitrary treatment and refoulement. DRC respects the right of states to return individuals without legal residence provided the decision to deny asylum or to withdraw refugee status has been made with due regard to national and international human rights standards.

As a humanitarian organisation, DRC advocates for the right of rejected asylum seekers to return in safety, dignity and with due respect for their fundamental rights. As such the use of force should be avoided. Every return process must be carried out in a humane and dignified manner, where people concerned are given a chance to prepare for and influence the return process. DRC's assistance to returnees serves solely a humanitarian purpose.

DRC's global policy on return is available here (drc.ngo). An extract is also provided at the end of this report.

1 Throughout the report, 'DRC' refers to DRC Asylum in Denmark, unless otherwise specified such as when referring to DRC Iraq.
2 For more information on DRC's approach to return and reintegration counselling, please refer to: "*DRC Return Counselling Methodology Brief. Return Counselling in a European Asylum Context. The Methodology employed by DRC when counselling rejected asylum seekers in Denmark about return*", August 2021. https://asyl.drc.ngo/media/jixhgocq/drc_return_couns_booklet.pdf.

Method, scope, & ethical considerations

The content presented in this publication compiles the experiences of a total of **29 returnees from Denmark to Iraq.** All returnees fall within the category of accepted return.[3]

The content is derived from two sources:

- *in-depth, individual, qualitative interviews* with 13 returnees conducted during DRC's visit to the reintegration partner organisation in Iraq, European Technology and Training Centre (ETTC),
- *individual phone survey responses* from 21 returnees. Five of whom also participated in a qualitative interview during the DRC visit to Iraq. Since there is thus an overlap of five individuals, the total number of returnees contributing to this report is 29.

The two sources differ significantly. The phone survey provides standardized responses, while the interviews offer deeper insights into experiences and emotions. In the following, content from the phone survey is highlighted in grey to help differentiate between the quantified survey results and the more nuanced perspectives from the interviews.

The questions in both methods focus primarily on the return and reintegration process and do not address security concerns or reasons for leaving Iraq.

Qualitative interviews

In late autumn of 2023, a DRC-delegation carried out a visit to Iraq in collaboration with ETTC. DRC has been collaborating with ETTC since 2017, initially through the European Return and Reintegration Network (ERRIN)[4] program and, between 2022 and 2023, through a direct cooperation agreement under the European Reintegration Support Organizations network (ERSO).

During the visit, the DRC-delegation interviewed 13 adult returnees (both to KRI and South/Central Iraq). All interviews were semi-structured and conducted in an informal atmosphere. In some cases, the returnees already knew the DRC staff member, as DRC provided individual counselling in Denmark before their departure. The interviews were held at ETTC's offices in Erbil, Duhok, and Sulaymaniyah, at the returnees' businesses, and, in one case, during a home visit. For security reasons, it was not possible for the DRC delegation to visit Baghdad as initially planned. Four interviews were therefore conducted online, with the returnee at ETTC's office in Baghdad and the DRC delegation at their office in Erbil.

ETTC was responsible for contacting the returnees and organizing the logistics of the interviews. ETTC reached out directly to a limited number of returnees, mainly based on logistical factors such as location, security, time constraints, and how long the returnees had been back in Iraq. DRC had requested to meet with a mix of returnees who had returned both recently and some time ago. Some returnees declined to participate, either because they did not want to spend time on the interview or preferred not to receive visitors. DRC's focus was on gathering firsthand information about the returnees' experiences throughout the entire return process from their stay in Denmark to the implementation of their reintegration plans in Iraq. The interview questions concentrated on assessing the sustainability of reintegration through three key dimensions: economic, social, and psychosocial embeddedness[5].

Individual phone surveys

A total of 21 individual returnees[6] participated in a phone survey. All respondents were adult returnees to Iraq (both KRI and South/Central Iraq) from Denmark who had either completed or were currently participating in a reintegration program facilitated by ETTC.

The interviews were conducted by staff from the regional DRC office in Erbil between March and May 2024. None of the participating returnees had met the interviewer before. Their answers are presented in the report through both text and graphs for easy overview.

3 For definition of accepted return see section "The analytical background. Key concepts".
4 ERRIN – European Return and Reintegration Network (https://www.icmpd.org/our-work/projects/european-return-and-reintegration-network-errin).
5 The approach – and interview framework applied – were developed with inspiration from Delmi's 2021 report "*Those who were sent back. Return and Reintegration of rejected asylum seekers to Afghanistan and Iraq".* Report. 2021:10. Delmi. https://www.delmi.se/media/bikexkgo/delmi-report-on-return-and-reintegration.pdf.
6 Five of the 21 respondents did also participate in a qualitative interview during DRC's visit to Iraq.

Initially, the pool of potential respondents included a total of 113 individuals[7], with only adults being offered participation. Unanswered calls were attempted three times before being marked as unreachable. Reasons for non-response included the respondents no longer being in the country (as informed by relatives), lack of response, out-of-service phone numbers, or incorrect contact information.

Despite these challenges, most respondents reacted positively to the outreach. However, some expressed regret about their return to Iraq, while others viewed it as a past event and did not want to participate in the survey.

The survey consisted of 34 questions with response options, organized into 7 sections. The survey was intended to assess the effectiveness of reintegration support at different stages (before departure and after return) as well as the respondents' satisfaction with these services. It also explored the sustainability of reintegration across the same three dimensions as the qualitative interview framework: economic, social, and psychosocial embeddedness. The survey tool was developed with inspiration from the IOM M&E Tools for return and reintegration programs[8].

About European Technology and Training Centre (ETTC) *(www.ettc-iraq.net)*

The European Technology and Training Centre (ETTC) offers support to returnees to Iraq from various countries. ETTC operates six offices across Iraq, with a main office and training center in Erbil, sub-offices in Sulaymaniyah, Duhok, Basra, Baghdad, and Kirkuk, along with a mobile team in southern Iraq. Founded in 2009 as part of a German NGO, ETTC is now an independent, non-profit organization registered in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). ETTC's services cover the full reintegration process, from airport pick-up to long-term support, including social integration, vocational training, employment services, and business development programs.

Anonymity and informed consent

All participants have been anonymized, with names changed to protect their identity. Each provided informed consent for the use of their experiences in this report.

Ethical considerations and limitations

DRC works based on the principle of "do no harm". Conducting the interviews, we aimed to ensure that topics and questions were formulated with respect and sensitivity towards the returnees' feelings and well-being. We recognize that participation could trigger unpleasant or traumatic experiences. To address this, we ensured that participation was voluntary and made it clear that there was no obligation to discuss specific topics. We also paid close attention to participants' reactions and adjusted our approach accordingly. Furthermore, if we identified any needs among returnees during the process, we made efforts to address them to the greatest extent possible or refer the individuals to appropriate support. However, it remained a challenge to fully meet all the needs revealed during the interviews.

No children were included in the study, and only a few women participated. This limits our findings and means their perspectives are not (well) represented.

All interviews, whether conducted in person or by phone, were carried out by DRC staff. Many of the qualitative interviews took place in the presence of ETTC staff and in a few of them ETTC assisted with interpretation. Furthermore, ETTC had supported contacting the returnees and organizing the logistics of the qualitative interviews. While this arrangement may offer some benefits, it can also pose challenges in ensuring the validity of the survey and in obtaining honest, unbiased responses.

The questions primarily focus on how the return and reintegration process is subjectively experienced by individual returnees, based on their self-evaluation and reflections on the reintegration process. However, sustainable reintegration involves more than just the returnee's personal experience and incorporating additional data and perspectives from other stakeholders would also be valuable, but this falls outside the scope of the report. This report provides only a snapshot — a limited selection of insights from a small number of returnees. To fully understand the return and reintegration process, it is of course crucial to consider and include the broader social, economic, and political contexts.

7 Returnees in the ERRIN program were included on the preliminary list only if they had received counseling from DRC in Denmark, as verified through DRC's case management system. The 113 individuals thus represent the total number of returnees from Denmark in the ETTC program who have received counselling from DRC prior to departure.
8 IOM M&E Tools for Return and Reintegration. Monitoring and Evaluation Tools for Return and Reintegration | Migrant Protection Platform (iom.int).

The analytical background. Key concepts

This is not an academic report nor an attempt to present a comprehensive analysis, but rather a focused exploration of the personal experiences and practical insights gathered from 29 returnees. However, a very brief look at some of the analytical concepts and the core framework of the interviews can support our goal of offering a nuanced understanding of their reintegration process.

To (re)turn: a simple process of "going home"

The "re-" in *re*turn, *re*turnee, and *re*integration emphasizes the idea of going back to a former place. But not all returnees are *going back* to a location where they have previously lived. Some are trying to integrate into - for them - new societies and return and reintegration is seldom a linear or straightforward process of simply going from "home" country to host country and then back "home". Nevertheless, for consistency with prevalent terminology, we use the terms return, returnee, and reintegration[9]. Likewise, the often-used term "country of origin" can often be misleading, as individuals may not always return to the country they originally come from. To address this, we use the term "country of return" while also acknowledging its inherent limitations.

Accepted return – a continuum between forced and voluntary

Return is often described as either voluntary or forced, but it is often in reality a grey area in between. For rejected asylum seekers, the decision to return is usually initiated by the authorities' return decision and the risk of forced deportation, thus the decision is seldom made voluntarily, but rather due to lack of alternative options. Being aware that rejected asylum seekers then rather accept than voluntarily consent to return, DRC in the European context operates with the term accepted return to describe individuals who agree to return (after a rejection to their asylum claim) but where a legal order and threat of possible sanctions may have influenced the decision.

Embeddedness across three key areas

The interview framework in both the in-person interviews and the phone survey follows similar structures and evolves around the concept of (mixed) embeddedness rather than reintegration – with inspiration from previous research/reports[10]. Reintegration assumes that the individual was previously integrated and now needs to rediscover or reestablish that condition. An embeddedness-approach acknowledges that the process might not be one of *re*integration with an *end* goal but rather a continuous process of embedding into an ever-changing, dynamic context. Returnees often have changed identities and positions, and the country they return to presents a new reality with social relations, political structures, and economic conditions having shifted.

The interview framework examines embeddedness across three interrelated key areas: economic, social, and psychosocial. *Economic embeddedness* includes factors like income, opportunities for self-sufficiency, and housing conditions. *Social embeddedness* covers social networks, relationships, the re-establishment of previous connections, and participation in hobbies and recreational activities. *Psychosocial embeddedness* refers to the returnees' sense of belonging, autonomy, agency, and overall well-being. Sustainable reintegration requires a level of embeddedness across all three dimensions and all three are thus important to include in the analysis. While they are closely linked to each other, may overlap, and can strengthen each other, it is also possible to be well embedded into one, e.g. being economically secure but struggling in other areas.

Addressing the complexities of return and sustainable reintegration

This report does not aim to evaluate or measure the success of a specific reintegration program. Its purpose is to bring forward and give voice to the personal experiences of returnees from Denmark to Iraq, highlighting the nuances and complexities involved in a reintegration process. Sustainable reintegration extends beyond merely achieving economic self-sufficiency or avoiding re-migration, and it is well-established that returnees' experiences before and during migration affect the reintegration

9 This is similar to DRC's use of "return counselling" for our DRC counselling service. While the term implies a focus on return, our counselling services are broader, open-ended, and not limited to return-related issues. For more information on DRC's approach to return and reintegration counselling, please refer to: *"DRC Return Counselling Methodology Brief. Return Counselling in a European Asylum Context. The Methodology employed by DRC when counselling rejected asylum seekers in Denmark about return*", August 2021. https://asyl.drc.ngo/media/jixhgocq/drc_return_couns_booklet.pdf.

10 See for instance: Ruben et al. (2009) "*What Determines the Embeddedness of Forced-Return Migrants? Rethinking the Role of Pre- and Post-Return Assistance"* in IMR Volume 43 Number 4 (Winter 2009): 908– (https://asyl.drc.ngo/media/x2nbthph/evaluation-of-the-kosovo-programme.pdf) & in *"Those who were sent back. Return and Reintegration of rejected asylum seekers to Afghanistan and Iraq".* Report. 2021:10,p. 21-23 Delmi. https://www.delmi.se/media/bikexkgo/delmi-report-on-return-and-reintegration.pdf.

process and the ways in which a returnee is able to reintegrate economically, socially and psychosocially, after the return[11]. Reintegration should be understood as a complex process influenced by both individual, social, and contextual factors throughout the entire migration cycle. Thus, it is important to note that the available reintegration program, though valuable, cannot guarantee long-term sustainability. Rather, these programs represent an initial small step in the reintegration journey, addressing some challenges but not fully ensuring comprehensive reintegration.

Support system in Denmark

Reintegration support is an offer from the Danish authorities to rejected asylum seekers who cooperate with the authorities on their return. This means that it is only persons who fall within the category of voluntary/accepted return, that may be eligible for the support. The Danish Return Agency assesses whether an individual is cooperating in relation to their return journey. The agency is also responsible for determining whether an applicant meets the conditions for reintegration support. Eligibility criteria include, among other things, not having an active application for a residence permit pending with the Danish authorities and not being a national of a visa-free country.

The support is offered in-kind, up to DKK 20,000 per person (app. up to 2,700 EUR), and is managed by local reintegration partners in the country of return. “In-kind” support means that it is provided through services and assistance, rather than as cash. The support is tailored to the individual’s needs and can be used for a range of purposes, including temporary accommodation, employment assistance, income-generating activities, business development, healthcare, and housing improvements. The local reintegration partner oversees the returnee’s progress for up to 12 months following their departure from Denmark.

11 cf. Black et al. 2004; van Houte & Davids 2008; Ruben et al. 2009; Paasche 2016; Koser & Kuschminder 2015; Kuschminder 2017; Strand et al 2016; IOM 2015; OECD 2020 in *”Those who were sent back. Return and Reintegration of rejected asylum seekers to Afghanistan and Iraq”.* Report. 2021:10,p. 9. Delmi. & *“Long-term Sustainability of Return of Rejected Asylum Seekers to Kosovo. Evaluation of the Kosovo Return Programme implemented by Danish Refugee Council 2006-2009”.* April 2011, p. 5. DRC.

Experiences of return and reintegration

Profile of returnees

This report draws on experiences from 29 individual returnees from Denmark to Iraq, all of whom were rejected asylum seekers. The returnees, all adults, returned to both KRI and South/Central Iraq and have either completed or are currently participating in a reintegration program, facilitated by ETTC. Their return timelines varied, with some returning as early as 2018 and others as recently as 2023.

In-depth interviews were conducted with 13 returnees between the ages of 29 and 69 (2 women and 11 men), in various situations, including men with families, single women, and single men, three of whom had expulsion orders due to criminal convictions. Their time away from Iraq varied, ranging from one having been away for only 5 months, three for more than 20 years, and the majority having been absent for 3 to 8 years.

The phone survey included 21 returnees (3 women and 18 men) who left Denmark between the ages of 20 and 69. Their time away from Iraq also differed, with 10 persons absent for over 1 year, 8 for over 5 years, and 3 for more than 10 years. Five of the respondents in the phone survey also participated in a qualitative interview during the DRC visit to Iraq. Since there is thus an overlap of five individuals, the total number of individual returnees contributing to this report is 29 – 4 women and 25 men.

In the sections below, we do not specify whether a returnee is from KRI or South/Central Iraq, even though these are very different return contexts, as the limited number of returnees makes such distinctions less meaningful and may compromise the returnees' anonymity.

Context

This report is not intended to cover the general situation in Iraq or offer information on the specific Iraqi context. It is solely intended to offer insights into the personal experiences of returnees. However, the return stories must, of course, be understood against the background of Iraq's fragile security situation and ongoing political and sectarian instability. Despite increased stability in 2024, the country continues to be affected by ongoing conflicts[12]. Furthermore, Iraq's population is rapidly growing, expected to reach 74,5 million by 2050[13], from a population of app. 45 million in 2023[14]. The economy, heavily dependent on oil, makes Iraq vulnerable to oil price fluctuations. Corruption, income inequality, gender discrimination, high unemployment, and poverty remain, among other things, major challenges, fueling protests and migration, particularly among youth[15].

In 2024, a total of 16,004 (first-time) applications for asylum were submitted in the EU from individuals from Iraq[16]. 44 % of all the applications from Iraq in 2024 were lodged in Germany[17]. In 2023, a total of 23,010 (first-time) asylum applications were submitted in the EU by individuals from Iraq, almost the same as in 2022, when there were 23,210 applications from persons from Iraq[18]. UNHCR has identified a non-exhaustive list of several risk profiles from Iraq that may require international protection, depending on individual circumstances, including, among others, women and children, members of religious and minority ethnic groups, individuals perceived as contravening strict Islamic rules, individuals involved in political or militant opposition.[19]

In Denmark, the number of asylum applications is very low compared to many other European countries. In 2024, 50 applications for asylum from persons from Iraq were registered (out of a total of 2.333 applications), in 2023, 60 applications from persons from Iraq were submitted, and 103 in 2022[20].

12 EUAA, May 2024 *"Iraq – Security situation. Country of Origin Information Report"* & EUAA. May 2024. *"Iraq. Country Focus. Country of Origin Information Report "* (https://coi.euaa.europa.eu/administration/easo/PLib/2024_05_EUAA_COI_Report_Iraq_Security_Situation.pdf) (https://coi.euaa.europa.eu/administration/easo/PLib/2024_05_EUAA_COI_Report_Iraq_Country_Focus.pdf).
13 UN Iraq, Iraq Common Country Analysis 2023, January 2024, cited in EUAA May 2024 *"Iraq. Country Focus. Country of Origin Information Report"*.
14 The World Bank's Open Data portal, population total Iraq. https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?end=2023&locations=IQ&start=1960. Accessed at 23.04.2025.
15 Human Rights Watch, January 16 2025 *"World Report 2025 – Iraq"* & EUAA May 2024 *"Iraq. Country Focus. Country of Origin Information Report "* (https://coi.euaa.europa.eu/administration/easo/PLib/2024_05_EUAA_COI_Report_Iraq_Country_Focus.pdf).
16 Eurostat. Asylum applications - annual statistics (https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Asylum_applications_-_annual_statistics) (Data extracted on 20 March 2025).
17 EUAA. Latest Asylum Trends. Annual Analysis (https://euaa.europa.eu/latest-asylum-trends-annual-analysis).
18 Eurostat. Asylum applications - annual statistics (https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Asylum_applications_-_annual_statistics) (Data extracted on 20 March 2025).
19 UNHCR, January 2024 *"International protection considerations with regard to people fleeing the republic of Iraq"*.
20 Udlændingestyrelsen. *"Tal og Fakta på udlændingeområdet, 2023"* (https://us.dk/media/ychlmhvv/tal-og-fakta-26062024-a.pdf).

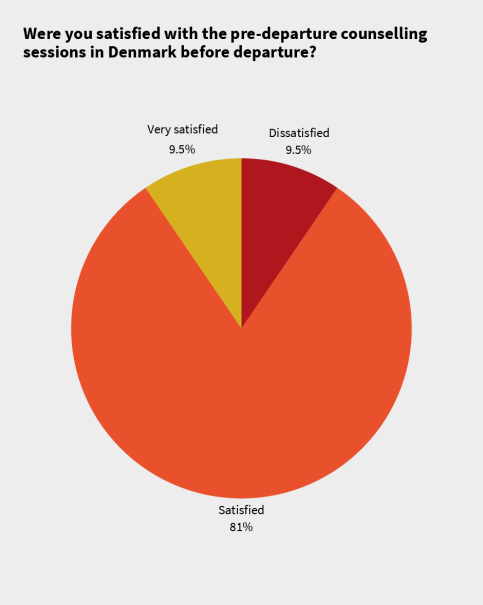
In 2023, 26 rejected asylum seekers from Iraq had an order to leave Denmark, compared to 39 persons in 2022, making up 7% of all rejected asylum seekers in Denmark in this category[21].

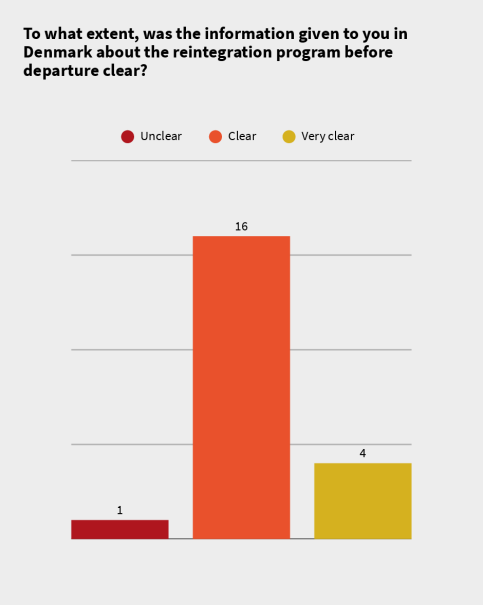
Within this context, the following sections unfold the individual return and reintegration experiences.

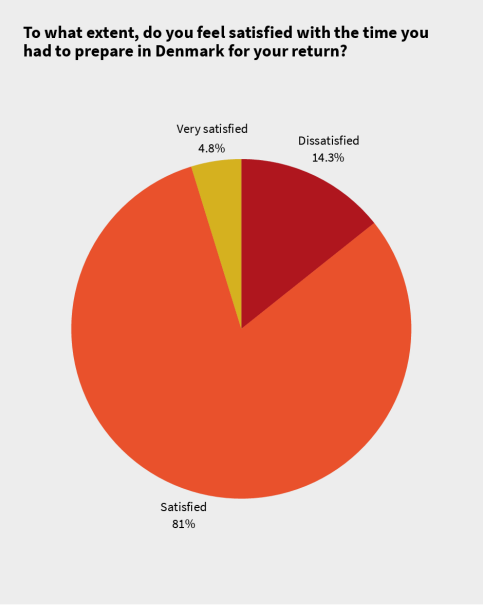
Prepared to return – practical and psychological barriers

This section explores returnees' experiences with pre-departure support, focusing on the information, counselling, and preparation provided before leaving Denmark.

Among the 21 phone survey respondents, 19 expressed satisfaction with the pre-departure counselling they received in Denmark, and 20 found the information about the reintegration program to be clear. Additionally, 17 were satisfied with the time they had to prepare before leaving. Overall, the majority indicated satisfaction with the time, information, and counselling provided before departure.







However, the qualitative interviews revealed a more nuanced picture. While most interviewees also reported being satisfied with the pre-departure information and counselling, many felt they lacked the circumstances and agency to fully benefit from this support. Several were detained prior to departure, significantly limiting their ability to prepare, contact family, or make

21 Udlændingestyrelsen. *"Tal og Fakta på udlændingeområdet, 2023"* (https://us.dk/media/ychlmhvv/tal-og-fakta-26062024-a.pdf).

necessary arrangements. The experience of detention had a profound impact on their mental state, leaving them feeling overwhelmed, anxious, and unable to focus on planning for their return. This affected their capacity to engage with the information and resources provided, as their priority was often coping with the immediate stress and uncertainty of their situation. One returnee said, *"I had enough time to prepare, but I didn't have the energy for it."* Another stated, *"I had the time to prepare, but I couldn't. It wasn't my choice to return."*

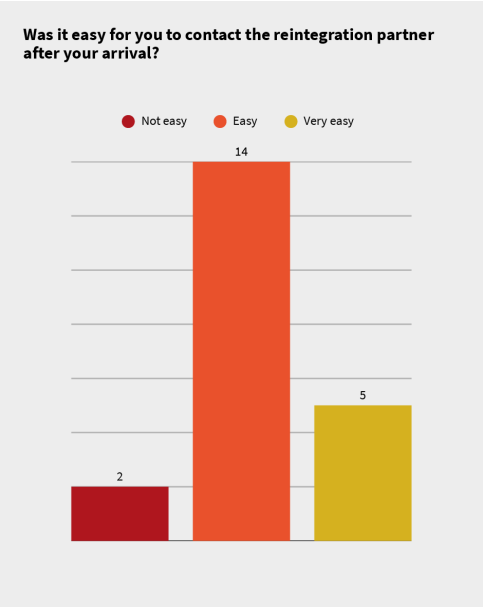
The sense of lacking a voluntary choice was a common thread throughout all the narratives. *"They don't care about reintegration. They just want to send you back,"* one returnee observed referring to the general decision-makers in Denmark. Other returnees expressed similar feelings, stating: *"I chose to go back because I knew that in the end I would have to"*, and *"The Danish State wants me to return, and if I don't, they will push me".* Another expressed feeling like *"just a number,"* stating that the entire asylum process and return procedure felt impersonal and bureaucratic, as if he was merely a case to be managed rather than an individual with needs and experiences. This sense of being treated as a case rather than a person left him feeling dehumanized and disconnected from genuine support.

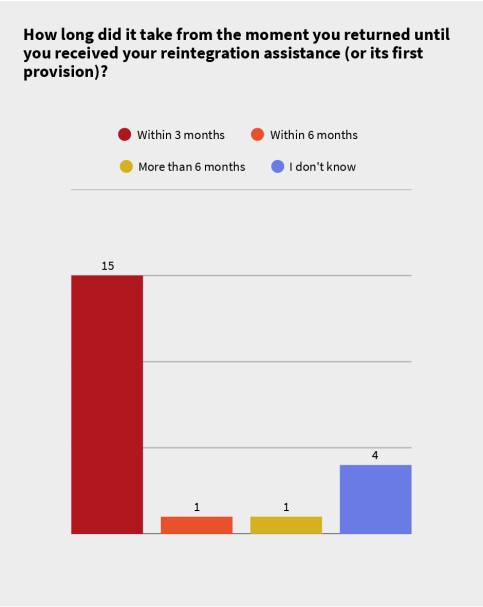
While many returnees overall expressed satisfaction with the pre-departure counselling and information, the interviews highlighted that true preparedness involves more than sufficient pre-departure counselling. For many, barriers such as detention, lack of agency, free choice, and emotional distress challenged their ability to effectively prepare and *feel* prepared for return. Preparedness is not just about getting sufficient time and correct information but also about being in a situation where one can fully engage with the process, take in the information and mobilize the needed resources to benefit from available support. The feelings and pre-departure experiences conveyed by the returnees also had a significant influence on the initial period after returning.

Just arrived. Now what?

The initial period after arriving in Iraq is descried by most of the returnees as a difficult time where you need to adapt to a new environment and adjust to life in Iraq. Establishing contact with a reintegration partner early on after arrival, building trust, and starting dialogue about meaningful reintegration activities can be critical for ensuring a good start. Generally, a reintegration plan must be developed and approved within the first three months after arrival. The plan outlines how the reintegration budget should be spent. Some returnees need time to settle, explore their options, and decide in collaboration with the reintegration partner how to allocate the reintegration budget effectively and meaningfully.

Over 71% of the phone survey respondents activated their reintegration support within the first three months after arrival and more than 90% of respondents reported finding it easy to contact ETTC after their arrival in Iraq[22] which suggests a satisfactory level of accessibility from the reintegration partner.





22 Airport pick-up at arrival was at that time not a standard part of the program for many returnees, making it even more important to ensure accurate contact details between returnee and the reintegration partner.

Feeling shocked upon arrival

During the interviews, many returnees described the initial period after returning to Iraq as an extremely challenging time and feeling a sense of shock. One returnee said, *"I was in shock during the first three months back."* This term—*shock*—frequently recurred in interviews with the returnees. One explained, "*When you come back as a returnee from Europe, you experience shock. It doesn't matter whether you've been away for a month or a year; you will feel the difference when you come back. That difference is also in people's mindset. You feel like a stranger."* Others mentioned feelings of depression and disorientation *"being shaken",* having forgotten what life was like in Iraq. This adjustment period often left them feeling overwhelmed and isolated. One returnee reflected, *"I forgot about life in Kurdistan. I didn't adapt well during the months. I just slept all the time". "*Another returnee said *"the first period back in Iraq was very difficult, I didn't connect with anyone. I spent most of my time at home. Communication here is different, you interact differently with people.* Yet another returnee, who had only been back in Iraq for 20 days, described feeling unsettled: *"I don't feel grounded yet; I'm a little in shock. Everything is new, and I need to work hard to adapt. You have to start from zero."*

The experiences shared by the returnees here reflect that reintegration is not simply a matter of going back to a familiar place to *re*-integrate into a familiar context. Both the individual returnee and the context they return to have changed creating a new reality. This is reflected in the narratives as a sense of *"feeling like a stranger,"* even when the time away from Iraq has not been very long.

The returnees' experiences during the initial period after returning, including feelings of shock, may also reflect and be closely tied to their level of preparedness to return as described in the previous section. Many returnees felt pressured to return, many had been detained prior to departure and did not feel engaged or prepared to return either mentally or practically. For most, the decision to return was not voluntary but rather *accepted* due to a lack of other choices. The process of reintegration thus begins long before actual arrival in Iraq and a good basis for starting a reintegration process is feeling prepared and motivated. It may reduce the feeling of shock upon arrival or of "*being shaken",* as expressed by a returnee.

In contrast to the majority, a few returnees did not express feelings of frustration or state of shock upon arrival. Instead, they expressed a level of satisfaction with their decision to return. None of those had been detained prior to departure and generally reported being more involved in the decision-making process to return. They explained that the choice didn't feel entirely voluntary — describing it as a matter of detention or return. However, they emphasized being actively engaged in the process, ultimately accepting the decision. Once the choice was made, they expressed a desire for the return to happen quickly and felt relatively prepared for it. One returnee shared, *"I don't regret traveling to Denmark, and I don't regret returning to Iraq*." He explained that he and his children upon return were happy to be back and reunite with family, though his wife felt differently and would have preferred staying in Denmark.

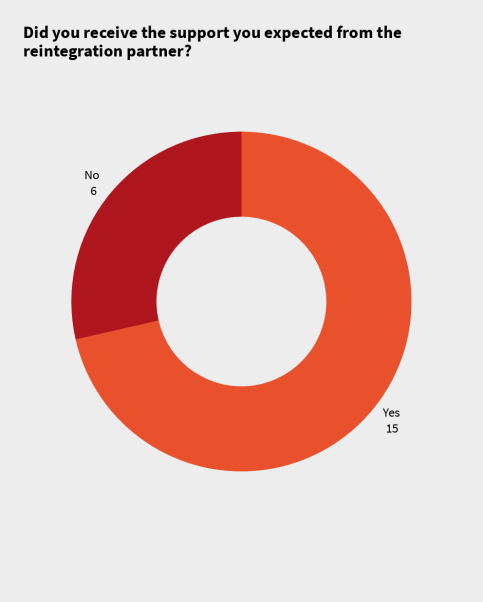
Overall, there was a difference in experiences between those who actively accepted to return and those who felt more pressured. Those who made more of an active choice reported less frustration and a stronger sense of resources during their initial period back.

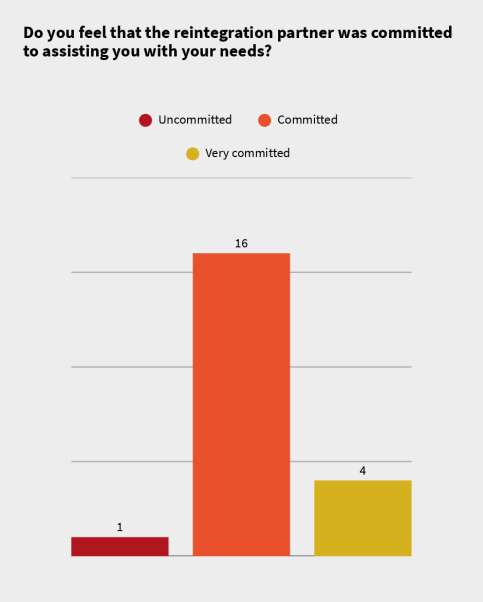
The statements also emphasize the importance of high-quality pre-departure counselling[23], including clear expectation management, as well as reliable, high-quality reintegration support with dedicated staff. These elements are crucial for providing returnees with a solid foundation upon arrival and ensuring their expectations align with the reality they face. For example, one returnee expressed disappointment, having mistakenly believed that the reintegration partner would provide accommodation upon arrival, which led to a difficult start.

Timely and reliable support systems play a crucial role in building trust and easing the transition. Good practices include online meetings with the reintegration partner prior to departure, an allocated dedicated contact person both in Denmark and Iraq, access to airport pick-up by the reintegration partner, close and consistent contact, and empathetic engagement during the process of returning and during the initial period after return.

23 Not all returnees interviewed were offered an online meeting with ETTC at the time of their return. While this is now a standard part of the return process, it was not consistently implemented in earlier years. Some of the returnees left as early as 2018, when pre-departure meetings were not systematically integrated. It is possible that such meetings could have helped reduce the sense of shock upon return.

Out of the 21 respondents to the phone survey, 14 stated that the reintegration assistance was provided in a timely manner, 1 disagreed, and 6 felt it was only partially timely. Regarding expectations, 15 participants felt they received the support they expected from the reintegration partner, while 6 did not. 19 (of the 21) respondents reported feeling treated with respect, and 20 believed that the partner organization was committed to helping them address their needs. Overall, 11 participants were satisfied with the reintegration support, and 12 (of the 21 participants) would recommend the program to others in similar situations.





Amina: Challenging transitions

DRC met with Amina[24] at an ETTC office, where she was accompanied by her mother, who also listened in on the conversation at Amina's request. At the time of the interview, Amina had been back in Iraq for approximately two years. Prior to her return, she had spent six years in Denmark. She never obtained a residence permit in Denmark.

When she first arrived back in Iraq after many years abroad, she described feeling in shock, feeling depressed, and sleeping a lot. She shared that after so many years away, she had forgotten what life in Iraq was like. Amina explained that it took her about three months to adjust after her return and during this adjustment process, she mostly kept to herself and was very tired. She said that she feels better now and is also happier in Iraq compared to her time in Denmark, largely because she has her family around her. However, she also misses aspects of her life in Denmark. There, she could go for walks, ride a bike, and do other things that are not possible for her in Iraq, but she also felt very alone and isolated in Denmark. Amina mentions that it took her three years to adapt to life in Denmark, thus highlighting the challenges of transitioning both from Iraq to Denmark and back again.

Since her return, Amina has lived with her parents, who support her. Her family is doing okay financially, but they are concerned about the general unstable situation in Iraq, and their income is not what it once was. Amina is currently unemployed. After her return, she spent her reintegration support on job placement, which entailed a form of internship to gain work experience. Her dream is to open her own business working as a designer and tailor as she has a passion for design.

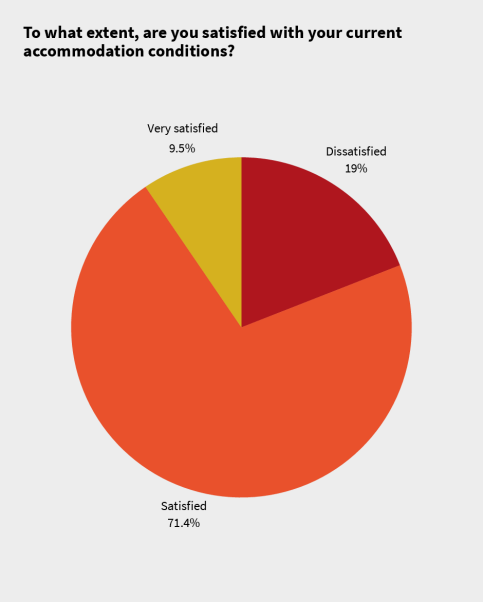
Economic security as an overwhelming concern

The primary and overwhelming concern shared by nearly all returnees is, without question, their economic situation. *"In Iraq, only your pocket helps you"* one of the returnees stated during an interview, highlighting the critical role financial resources play in securing a life in Iraq.

24 To protect anonymity, all names in the case-descriptions have been changed and replaced with alternative ones.

Accommodation, work, and financial dependency

Of the 21 phone survey respondents, 2 respondents owned their own homes, while the rest lived in rental housing or with family and/or friends. 15 were satisfied with their accommodation and housing situation while 6 were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied, commenting that access to adequate rental housing is limited and rent is high.

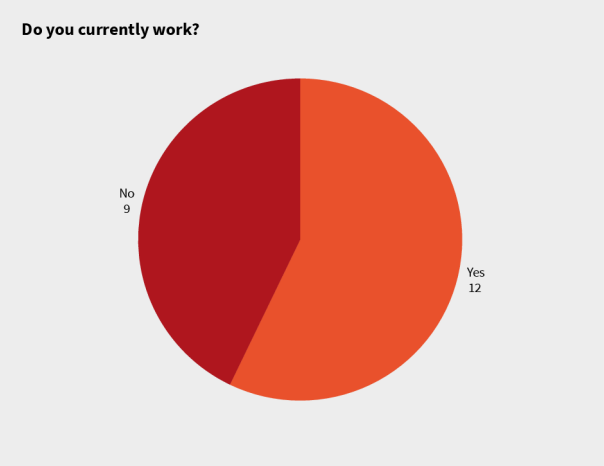


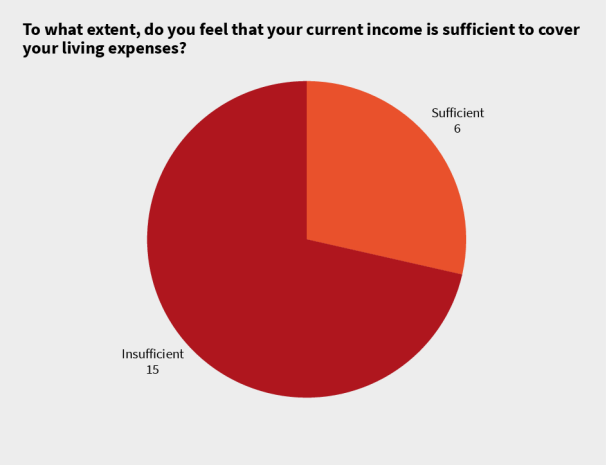
A similar picture was revealed in the in-depth interviews, where most returnees reported living with family, many not only as a necessity but also as a choice. Only a few returnees lived alone in rented accommodation, and many expressed concerns about the cost of rent.

The few returnees who mentioned living alone were all male. One of them explained that he initially stayed with family upon his return but quickly sought his own rented accommodation, as he wanted to live independently and did not feel so comfortable with his family. He had started a profitable business with his reintegration funds allowing him to cover his own rent. He had left Iraq at a young age, just 19, and had been in Europe for around 8 years. During his time in Europe, he had limited contact with his family, and he mentioned that returning to Iraq was a significant change for him. Mentally, he was still struggling and finding it difficult to adjust even though he had been back in Iraq for a year.

Another returnee, an elderly woman, shared that she lives with her adult son and daughter-in-law but feels like a burden because she is unable to assist with household tasks due to her health. Additionally, she stated that she cannot afford the necessary healthcare to meet her needs.

Out of 21 phone survey respondents, 9 were not in employment, while 12 reported having work (either as employees or self-employed in formal and informal sectors). Over 71% of the respondents stated that their income is insufficient to cover their living expenses.





Generally, several of the returnees rely on financial support from their family to get by. This assistance is crucial for them, as they struggle to meet their basic needs, such as accommodation, without family support.

Starting a business

Approximately half of the returnees (15 out of 29 respondents, including phone and in-person interviewees) had used or planned to use[25] all or part of their reintegration budget to start a business.

All 15 returnees who chose to establish a business with reintegration funds are male, and their businesses cover the sectors:

- Transportation: 4 returnees (e.g., taxi services)
- Restaurant business: 3 returnees (e.g., café)
- Trade: 8 returnees (e.g., minimarkets, clothing stores)

However, more than half of these businesses (8 out of 15) are closed again. One returnee reported that he had to close his business, a café, due to high competition in the area, with three other cafés nearby. His income was too low, and expenses too high, which left him unable to cover the rent for the location. He fell four months behind on payments and thus decided to close the café, sell the inventory, and use the profit to pay off the remaining rent debts. He is now struggling to get by.

Among the businesses that remain open, 3 returnees report that they are struggling to make it work. Others have only recently opened their business and are hopeful but yet to see if the business will be successful. A few returnees report making a decent and sufficient income, few even managing to save money, but most returnees state that their business generate an insufficient income.

Although the quantitative findings in this report are limited and only a small number of women (4 women in total) participated in sharing their experiences, it is worth noticing that none of the female returnees have invested in starting a business. During the many years of experience in this field, DRC Asylum has not encountered any examples of female returnees opening their own business in Iraq[26] even though it may have been a wish for some. During an interview one female returnee expressed her passion for sewing and design and mentioned she has a dream of opening a clothes shop, but she had not spent any of her funds on supporting this dream. She was living with her parents, financially supported by them, and without a job.

A link between economic security and mental well-being

It is too simple to draw a straight line between economic security and mental well-being. Some returnees did manage well economically but still struggled with their mental well-being. It is clear, however, that many returnees expressed a very strong link between economic security and their well-being. Being able to pay rent, have an adequate income, and being self-sufficient was the most prominent concern across all data. Generally, the returnees who managed okay economically also appeared to have better mental health.

A common thread among all narratives was a *fundamental sense of insecurity about the future*. On one hand a few returnees had sufficient income to cover their living expenses and were thus currently doing okay financially. On the other hand, their concern for their *future* economic security as well as their ability to establish and maintain good, strong family relationships was so overwhelming that they were not thriving mentally.

One returnee described feeling like a failure. He had built up large debts from money spent on his journey to Europe. Feeling ashamed, he decided to sell the taxi he had purchased with reintegration funds to pay off his debts although the taxi was providing an adequate income. He now has a job, but his income is so low that he cannot cover basic living expenses and express a deep concern for his future.

25 A few of the returnees interviewed in Iraq had not yet implemented their reintegration activities as they had only recently arrived.
26 DRC has since 2014 offered return counselling to returnees to Iraq and since 2018 reintegration programs have been made available to returnees to Iraq. DRC has knowledge of only one female who invested her funds in a business start-up. She initially wanted to open a business selling food but ended up invested her funds in her husband's business, selling men's clothes.

The absence of big dreams for the future.

Many returnees expressed modest hopes for the future focusing primarily on basic needs and security. *"All I hope for is to have a job and take care of my children,"* one returnee shared, while another said, *"I just want a normal life."* A third expressed, *"I dream of economic security. That's all."* Their wishes revolve around the essentials—family, stability, security – and are not dreams of big success or adventure, but the fundamental hope for peace of mind and the ability to provide financially for yourself and your family.

These wishes reflect the challenging living conditions many of the returnees' face where the struggle for basic stability leaves little room for bigger dreams. When the basics are not in place or feel uncertain, it may be difficult to put anything else into words.

Network and family – the importance of "knowing people"

Family as a gateway

The importance of social networks and family is reflected in all the returnees' narratives. It stands out as a main support for their general well-being but also as a steppingstone and gateway to services and resources, such as accommodation and employment. Many of the returnees live with family and depend on financial support from them. One returnee mentioned that he only secured a job thanks to his uncle. Another returnee said, *"If you don't have family here, don't return. You can't manage without it. "*

Most of the returnees highlight family members (including extended family) as their primary provider of support rather than network such as friends and acquaintances. Many of the returnees lack strong support networks outside their family. One female returnee shared she has a close relationship with her parents, but she doesn't have any friends beyond her family, only one friend whom she mostly communicates with through phone or social media. Other returnees shared similar experiences, mentioning that they had no friends outside their family and had not built a new support network or formed new friendships after returning

Others described having a close and supportive relationship with their family and some also express happiness with being reunited with family after returning to Iraq, and that their families accepted them upon return. One returnee shared, *"I prefer here more than Denmark. Here I am not alone."* He returned to Iraq in early 2020, got married after his return, and recently became a father. Another returnee, who lives in Iraq with his wife, children, and parents, also emphasized the importance of being close to family. Through his job, he was offered the opportunity to migrate legally to the U.S. but declined, choosing instead to stay in Iraq. He felt economically stable and preferred to remain where he had built a good life close to family. Another returnee used part of his reintegration funds to renovate a family house where his parents also live. He said that after the renovation, his parents supported him in finding a wife. Now, he is settled, living in a section of the family house with his wife and children.

It is evident that family and network play a crucial role in the reintegration process for the returnees, offering both emotional and practical support.

Out of the 21 phone survey respondents, 2 respondents stated that they had no network (family or friends) in Iraq, while 19 indicated they did have a network. Of these 19, 16 felt they could rely on their network for support.

Ali: Feeling at home with strong family ties and hopeful for the future in Iraq

DRC met Ali approximately four years after his return to Iraq. In 2019, he left Denmark with his wife and their two young children, both born in Europe. Ali was given the choice between accepting to return or being detained and he does recall that the waiting period in Denmark before departure was challenging. Once he and his wife decided to return, it took some months for the process to be completed. Upon arrival, they were welcomed by Ali' father and initially lived with him. His family was happy to have them back, and Ali himself felt content, though he noted that his wife struggled more with the transition.

Ali and his family invested their reintegration funds in purchasing a car, allowing him to start working as a taxi driver. Some of the funds were also used for home improvements. Over time, Ali sold his taxi, has bought a new car, and now has a stable job as a driver for an organization. His financial situation has improved, and he is now able to save money. Through his work, Ali was offered the opportunity to migrate legally but declined. He feels settled, values being close to his family, and is satisfied with his life in Iraq and hopeful for his future.

Support from a distance and separation

One returnee explained how his family supported him from a distance while he was in Denmark. He has a strong bond to his family, whom he feels has always supported and taken care of him. During his time in Denmark, he maintained close contact with them, and before his return, he said that they did everything they could to prepare him for the return. However, he explained that it was difficult to maintain close contact with his family during his time of detention in Denmark. He had been detained for 8 months prior to his departure.

A few of the returnees also mentioned receiving both emotional and financial support from family from a distance after their return to Iraq as they had family members who remained in Denmark. Some were thus separated from family members living in Denmark due to their return. A male returnee with children in Denmark described the separation from his children as an unbearable pain. He expressed feeling deeply depressed, with his only wish being to reunite with his two children. The separation had left him feeling isolated and without a sense of purpose. He struggled across multiple aspects of his life—socially, mentally, and financially, finding it difficult to move forward in the absence of his children.

Another returnee shared that he recently ended his relationship with his girlfriend in Denmark. He explained that she had been a great support to him, but he felt that she needed to move on with her life. He believed he could no longer hold on to her, as she couldn't move to Iraq or even visit, given that he had nothing to offer her. When return involves separation from close family, the reintegration process becomes even more difficult, making it harder to establish new social connections and feel settled.

Nothing like Denmark

Three of the 13 returnees interviewed in Iraq had received expulsion orders due to criminal convictions and thus lost their residence permit in Denmark. Two of them had spent most of their lives in Denmark, having arrived as children, and still having close family in Denmark. They faced some similar challenges as the other returnees but also much deeper and more complex ones. Leaving Denmark meant uprooting an entire life and trying to establish a life in a country that was largely unknown to them.

One returnee who had lived in Denmark for more than 20 years and grew up in the country[27] said *"You need to know everything here [in Iraq]. You need the right network. It's not like standing in line at Borgerservice [citizen service center in Denmark]. You learn to do things in a different way here."* This statement underlines the importance of network in Iraq and how it can function as an access to support. The returnee elaborates that he had little contact with his extended family in Iraq when he lived in Denmark. He lived in Denmark with his parents and siblings. Upon his expulsion to Iraq, he realized the necessity of maintaining good relationships with them. He now faces the challenge of navigating a system that is different from what he was used to in Denmark and where family and network are crucial, and he expressed concern that his Iraqi family may view him as insincere due to his lack of interest in them during his time in Denmark.

27 This person received an expulsion order from Denmark due to criminal convictions. Having moved to Denmark at the age of 7, he had lived legally in Denmark for more than 20 years.

Two experiences with differences and similarities: Expelled from Denmark and starting a life in a new country

DRC met with Khalid and Mustafa separately. They do not know each other. Despite their different circumstances, their experiences of adjusting to life in Iraq has some similarities. Both Khalid and Mustafa lived in Denmark for most of their lives, having arrived at a young age. They had to leave Denmark due to expulsion orders following criminal convictions. At the time of the interviews, Mustafa had been in Iraq for about ten months, while Khalid had only been there for a few months. They both mentioned that they struggle with adjusting to their new reality and expressed concern about economic uncertainty and language barriers. Neither of them speaks the language (Arabic/Kurdish) fluently and Khalid mentioned that he feels embarrassed trying to express himself to others.

Khalid has used his reintegration support to cover rent and household supplies. He has an uncle in Iraq who supports him—he rents a house from his uncle, and the uncle also helped Khalid find a job. Khalid's father, who still lives in Denmark, travelled with him for the initial period in Iraq. Initially, Khalid felt relief at being out of prison and free. However, as time passes, he said the reality of his situation is slowly sinking in. He reflected that in prison he had the opportunity to work, earn money, and maintain a certain level of predictability. In some ways, life there was easier, he said, as he knew he would get food and receive his wages. Before travelling to Iraq, he did not fully grasp the challenges of the situation he would be in now. He mentioned that he does not disclose his legal situation in Denmark to others in Iraq as he is afraid of stigmatization.

Looking ahead, Khalid hopes for a simple future – he dreams of having a wife and children and economic stability. He is grateful for the support he has received in Iraq but said that it is not sustainable. During the interviews with DRC, Khalid seems to be shifting between feeling resigned, hopeful, relieved, and sad – a mix of many emotions. This may also reflect the fact that his situation is still new, as he has only been in Iraq for a few months.

During the interview with Mustafa, he expressed a strong sense of belonging to Denmark and said that he does not feel at home in Iraq. He misses Denmark and would return if he had the opportunity. His reintegration experience has been marked by disappointment. He initially expected temporary accommodation upon arrival but found himself having to secure accommodation on his own. Like Khalid, he has spent his reintegration support on rent. He struggles to find employment. He managed to work for a few months but is currently unemployed again. He expressed deep concern about the overall situation in Iraq, particularly regarding the economy and security.

Mustafa's feelings about his return process are shaped by a sense of injustice and detachment from the legal proceedings that led to his expulsion. He does not feel he was given a real chance. Mustafa depends on support from his family in Denmark but has also made a few friends in Iraq who help him socially by e.g. practicing the language.

Both Khalid and Mustafa expressed that they are experiencing difficulties adjusting to life in Iraq, particularly due to economic insecurity and language challenges. They both rely on family support, but Khalid has a stronger network in Iraq, including an uncle who has helped him settle. While Khalid expresses that he is happy for the reintegration support though it is not sufficient, Mustafa is feeling let down by unmet expectations. Their outlooks also differ; Khalid has some hope for building a future in Iraq, while Mustafa remains emotionally attached to Denmark and struggles to see a path forward in Iraq.

When family relations are difficult

A previous section describes a young male returnee who after 8 years in Europe was struggling to adjust to life in Iraq and had chosen to live independently as he was not that comfortable living in a joint household with his parents. In addition, he also shared that he felt distanced from his family, and that many things had changed since he left Iraq when he was 19 years old. He now feels quite alone and different. Several other returnees also reported difficulties in their family relationships.

One elderly woman, also mentioned in a previous section, felt like a burden to her family because she was unable to contribute around the house. Another returnee expressed being close only to his cousin, as the rest of his family put pressure on him, making him feel like a failure for putting his family in debt. He said that he actually shares his family's view of him and expressed shame over having brought dishonor to them by returning and burdening them financially. One returnee mentioned that he had a good relationship with his mother, but his relations with the rest of the family were tense. He reflected on his hopes for

more friends and a stronger network over time. He planned to open a clothing shop with his reintegration funds, hoping that this would help him build a stronger network, meet new people, and establish better social relations through his business. Another returnee who had returned to Iraq recently said, *"I need my own place to live, and I need to know people".* The importance of *"knowing people"* and the impact of strong and good family relationships on the returnees' sense of belonging is evident throughout all the return stories.

Omar: Leaving Iraq at a young age, spending many years away, building a sustainable business but not feeling settled

Omar was 19 years old when he left Iraq. After spending eight years in Denmark, he returned to Iraq in 2022. If he had a choice, he said, he would have preferred to still be in Denmark. During the interview with DRC, he recommended DRC to prepare others for reality of return as the experience can be a shock.

At the time of the interview, Omar had been back in Iraq for approximately one year and he didn't feel at home or settled. The hardest part for Omar was the fragile security situation and he also said, that adjusting to life in Iraq is not easy, and everything feels different—both the country and himself as he has changed. When he first returned, he lived with his parents but only for a short while as he didn't feel comfortable there. Now, he has his own rented apartment and, financially, Omar is managing okay. He has invested his reintegration funds in opening a minimarket, which is doing well, and he hopes to expand his business. His income covers his living expenses. Emotionally things are, however, more difficult as he is not happy and not feeling settled. Speaking with DRC and sharing his story did also bring up many emotions.

A sense of otherness

The experience in Europe and with return left some of the returnees feeling alone and different from their family, as previously mentioned. For the two returnees who had spent most of their lives in Denmark[28] the feeling of being different was particularly evident. Language also posed a challenge and one shared that he feels embarrassed about his Kurdish, as he did not speak it fluently. Another returnee expressed a sense of shame about his return, saying that he avoids sharing the truth about his situation, *"I just pretend to be rich and that it was my choice to come here"*. He felt uncomfortable with the circumstances of his return, and he did not want to be perceived as someone who had been forced back, highlighting the stigma that can be associated with return.

During the interviews, several returnees expressed a desire to connect with other returnees who had faced or were facing similar challenges as peer networks could potentially provide some emotional and perhaps practical support and reduce the feeling of being different. One mentioned that he in fact was in contact with other returnees soon after his arrival in Iraq and that they assisted him in getting in touch with ETTC. A few returnees were, however, also in doubt whether peer support and contact would be something that they would actually access if offered. One returnee also expressed a wish to have had more contact after return with his counsellor from DRC. He had been living in Denmark for many years and expressed that he missed Denmark and did not feel at home in Iraq. Therefore, it would have been nice to be more in contact with his counsellor from Denmark.

Overall well-being and feeling of belonging

When asked about the impact of reintegration support on the returnees' well-being, 16 out of 21 respondents in the phone survey said that the support from ETTC had improved their psychosocial well-being. In contrast, 3 respondents found it unhelpful, adding comments like, *"I didn't feel it changed anything."*

When asked about satisfaction with their overall situation, 12 out of 21 respondents reported feeling dissatisfied or very dissatisfied, while 9 were satisfied or very satisfied. Some of the comments included were:

- *"I have two children who are sick."*
- *"It is difficult to integrate after more than 10 years in Europe."*
- *"There is limited access to water and electricity."*
- *"My children live in Denmark."*
- *"My family does not live in Iraq."*

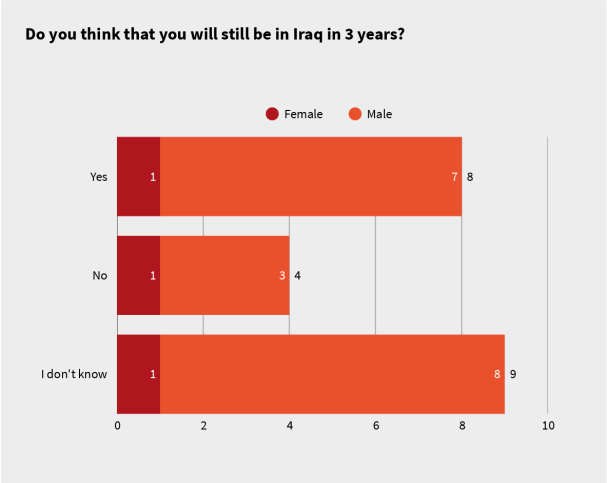
28 The returnees with expulsion orders resulting in the loss of their Danish residence permits.

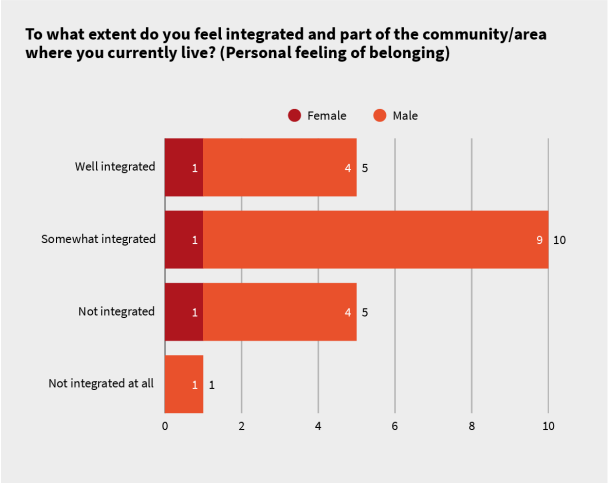
- *"I am sick and cannot afford proper treatment."*
- *"My shop has closed, and I have no job."*
- *"It's difficult to find work and housing, and there's a lack of opportunities."*
- *"I struggle to cope with high prices and my small income."*

The comments highlight the variety of challenges returnees can face that significantly affect their well-being and reintegration. These include economic struggles, such as difficulty finding work and dealing with high prices. In addition, limited access to basic services like water and electricity, along with challenges in securing adequate housing further added to the feeling of not being satisfied with their overall situation. Health issues, both personal and related to family members including children, were also a concern., with some returnees unable to afford necessary treatment. Separation from family, especially children, also adds a severe emotional burden.

Respondents were asked about their expectations for the future, specifically whether they expected to still be in Iraq in three years. Of the 21 respondents, 8 answered yes, expecting to still be in Iraq in three years, 4 answered no, and 9 were uncertain. Comments included, *"Life is hard here", "I have no job, and my family is not here", "It is unsafe and difficult to live here*".

Out of the 21 phone survey respondents, 5 felt well-integrated in Iraq, 10 felt somewhat integrated, while 6 did not feel integrated (5 feeling not integrated and 1 not integrated at all).





The survey did not provide further details on why some respondents did or did not expect to be in Iraq in three years or why they felt well or poorly integrated. However, the challenges mentioned offered an explanation. The interviews, on the other hand, provided a bit more insights into the returnees' perspectives on their future and overall well-being.

Living with unpredictability and uncertainty: "In Iraq it is 50/50"

Some returnees were positive and hopeful. One described being in a state of shock upon his return but he was now happy and content in Iraq. A few were particularly optimistic about the future. A returnee with a family, a stable job, and a decent income said, *"If it continues like this, the future looks very bright."* Another returnee, who had successfully established a business, also expressed high confidence in his future in Iraq. A common factor among those with a positive outlook was their relatively strong economic and social situation.

Most returnees were, however, hesitant to express any high hopes for their future. Their focus was on basic needs and security both in terms of economic stability and the security situation in general in Iraq. One simply said, *"I have no plans for the future"* elaborating that his life and existence was characterised by a high degree of uncertainty which meant he couldn't plan for the future. A few expressed hopes of returning to Denmark or Europe. Two returnees, independently of each other, described the situation and future as *"50/50."* As one of them put it: *"In Iraq, it is 50/50. Some days are good, other days are bad. You have a good day, you have a bad day."* This reflects a sense of unpredictability and a fundamental uncertainty about what the future holds. Even those who are managing relatively well still expressed this underlying uncertainty and that no matter their individual circumstances, they remained aware that their situation could change at any time.

Final thoughts

Among the returnees there was, overall, a feeling of gratitude for the support they have received in Iraq from ETTC. At the same time, however, there was also a sense that the reintegration package given from Denmark was not driven by a genuine desire for successful reintegration for the individual. Most stated that the reintegration funds were not sufficient to meet their needs, and many expressed a feeling of not having a choice and being pushed to return.

Generally, the returnees faced a range of challenges that had a profound impact on their well-being and reintegration process. The overwhelming concern from all returnees was their economic security. Many struggled to cover their basic living expenses and relied on financial support from family and social networks. Family and social networks were crucial for returnees' adjustment in Iraq, providing both emotional support and access to resources like housing and employment. Many found work and housing through their family, and the majority relied on family for financial assistance. There was a clear link between economic security and mental well-being. Returnees who managed to achieve a more stable economic situation generally reported better mental health. Despite this, many still expressed uncertainty and anxiety about their future, as they lacked confidence in the long-term sustainability of their economic situation. Psychological demotivation and a fundamental sense of insecurity about the future were prevalent among the returnees.

Most returnees expressed satisfaction with the information, counselling, and preparation time they received before departing from Denmark. However, some felt unable to fully benefit from the available information and counselling. This was particularly true for those who had been detained before departure, as they struggled both to prepare mentally and to handle practical matters—especially gaining access to contact their families in Iraq before leaving.

The diverse and varied experiences of returnees highlight that return and reintegration is far from a straightforward journey from one place to another. It is not simply a matter of leaving a place that does not feel like home and returning to a familiar one. Likewise, the decision to return—or to come to terms with an imposed return—is rarely made as a direct consequence of a legal ruling but is rather often a challenging and complex process. The terms often used in this field—such as 'voluntary return', 'sustainable reintegration', or even 'returnee'—tend to oversimplify these complex realities. They do not always reflect the lived experiences of those returning, and they risk masking the uncertainty and ambivalence many feel. Furthermore, reintegration support is often framed as a "motivational tool" used by states to ensure compliance with return decisions. This inevitably places the support within a political agenda, where the *primary* aim may not be to support people in rebuilding their lives, but rather to increase return rates. Returnees' own experiences and descriptions of the process must thus be understood within this context. Their stories are shaped not only by the personal challenges of return but also by the structural conditions and political intentions surrounding the process and support they receive.

To promote sustainable reintegration, and to truly commit to achieving long-term sustainability, this complexity must be factored into policymaking. Rather than focusing disproportionately on the simple act of return and return statistics, the multifaceted experiences from returnees demonstrate that we should deepen our understanding of the various stages of the migration cycle, and the various factors that shape reintegration outcomes.

Recommendations

Based on DRC's experience and direct involvement with rejected asylum seekers and returnees and based on the experiences of returnees shared in this report, DRC proposes the following recommendations. First, specific recommendations are provided to improve the reintegration process. Following that, more overall recommendations are outlined to ensure the safe and dignified return of rejected asylum seekers.

Recommendations to improve the reintegration process

Returnees from both the phone survey and interviews were given the opportunity to offer their own recommendations, which are also included here together with recommendations proposed by DRC. The recommendations are organized according to the sections of the report.

Pre departure and arrival

- Ensure access to dignified and adequate living conditions in Denmark to safeguard mental and physical health.
- Avoid the use of sanctions and detention to "motivate" return. It undermines human dignity, is ineffective as a motivational tool, and may complicate the reintegration process.
- Ensure access to impartial, high-quality counselling; both legal and return counselling.
- Implement a person-centered approach by assigning a dedicated counsellor in both Denmark and the country of return to ensure close, consistent support and empathetic engagement throughout the return process and during the initial reintegration period after arrival.
- Ensure that returnees have access to online meetings with the reintegration partner before departure.
- Support returnees in maintaining communication with family and network in the country of return before departure.
- Due to their limited ability to prepare both practically and mentally while detained, ensure targeted pre-departure support and counselling for detained returnees. This should include access to communication with family and network in country of return, as well as access to online counseling with the reintegration partner before departure.
- For individuals with family and social network in Denmark, including those departing directly from detention or prison, provide an opportunity for them to meet and say goodbye at departure/e.g. at the airport.
- Guarantee airport pickup at arrival when needed, without deductions from the reintegration budget.

Economic security as an overwhelming concern

- Ensure that financial reintegration support is sufficient to support sustainable reintegration, taking into account individual needs, local economic conditions, and the varying costs of rebuilding livelihoods.
- If reintegration funds are invested in starting a business, ensure business ideas are carefully assessed to ensure they are realistic, profitable, and sustainable in the long run.
- Increase access to job opportunities by improving job placement programs, training, and skill development that match local job markets.

Network and family

- Facilitate family mediation in cases of conflict, misunderstanding, or when communication issues between the returnee and their family hinder reintegration, in order to strengthen family support.
- Promote meaningful peer-to-peer support and activities, e.g. enabling returnees to serve as mentors for newcomers or returnees with limited social networks. This, however, should be implemented with careful considerations of the many ethical dilemmas and challenges of peer support.
- Guarantee access to schooling for returnee children in the country of return before departure.

Overall wellbeing and feeling of belonging

- Strengthen psychosocial support components in reintegration programs.
- Ensure access to psychosocial counselling both prior to departure and after return.
- Psychosocial support should be available to returnees without any deductions from the reintegration budget after return. Psychosocial challenges are often stigmatized, which can make returnees hesitant to seek support.

- Ensure the opportunity for contact and dialogue with the return counsellor in Denmark after return. For some individuals, receiving a follow-up call to check in on their well-being can provide reassurance and a sense of support during the transition.

Overall recommendations for ensuring safe and dignified return of rejected asylum seekers

FAIR AND EFFICIENT ASYLUM PROCEDURE. Access to a fair and efficient asylum procedure is a precondition for safe and dignified return. Applications for asylum must be processed in accordance with international refugee law and/or equivalent national legislation through transparent, effective, and fair procedures with safeguards and appeal options that protect the individual from arbitrary treatment and refoulement**.**

NO DETENTION AND DIGNIFIED STANDARDS OF LIVING. The use of sanctions and detention to "motivate" return must be avoided, to the greatest extend possible as it undermines human dignity and is ineffective as a motivational tool.
Instead, rejected asylum seekers should be offered **dignified and adequate living conditions** to safeguard their mental and physical health. Additionally, they should receive adequate support to **enhance empowerment and maintain their skills** and sense of agency.

IMPARTIAL COUNSELLING. If rejected asylum seekers wish to explore pathways for legal stay, they should have access to **independent legal counselling**. Similarly, **access to return counselling** should be ensured.

Return counselling is not just information-giving and guidance about the actual return procedure; it should create a confidential space for rejected asylum seekers where worries, questions, and strategies can be shared and discussed freely. It is best done in a **safe atmosphere by nongovernmental counsellors** with excellent, empathetic communication skills. The goal of return counselling should be to **empower individuals and support informed decision-making** about their future.

ACCEPTED RETURN. Forced return undermines human dignity and should be avoided. Prevalence should be given to voluntary/accepted return.

Efforts should focus on creating the widest possible opportunities for voluntary or accepted return, where rejected asylum seekers are **given the time and conditions necessary to meaningfully prepare**, build trust, and influence their return process. Many may have held onto the hope of building a new life for a long time, making it a complex process to adjust and make informed decisions about their future. Threats of forced return and sanctions rarely provide clarity or lead to sustainable solutions. Instead, it often makes it harder to prepare meaningfully for the future. A dignified return process is more likely to improve the chances for sustainable reintegration.

MEANINGFUL REINTEGRATION SUPPORT. Access to meaningful and sufficient support to ensure sustainable reintegration should be a part of the return process. As a reintegration process begins prior to departure, it is important to have **access to pre-departure counselling, receive guidance on reintegration activities, and have opportunities for skill development.**

Reintegration programs should be developed in consultation with all relevant stakeholders before implementation and the support should be tailored to individual needs of the returnees and the local conditions.

Extract of DRC's global policy on return

DRC engages in return processes globally, including in the Danish context.

The following eight positions outline the overall framework for DRC's engagement in return processes globally – applicable in all return situations including asylum seekers, refugees and IDPs:

#1: All forcibly displaced persons have a right to be protected against refoulement, to receive protection and assistance in accordance with international human rights law and should not be forced or pressured through i.e. untenable conditions in the host country to return to the area of origin under unsafe circumstances and conditions non-conducive for reintegration.

#2: DRC respects the right of States to return individuals without legal residence provided the decision to deny asylum or to withdraw refugee status has been made with due regard to national and international human rights standards. However, DRC finds that refugees should not be subject to constant or regular reviews of their refugee status. The right to family unity should be respected and minors should never be returned in contravention of the best interest of the child, and the possibility to grant a humanitarian residence permit or similar to vulnerable groups for health related or other humanitarian reasons should be promoted.

#3: Inclusion and dignity of all concerned individuals must be upheld in the return process. Every return process must be carried out in a humane and dignified manner, where people concerned are given a chance to prepare and influence the return process.

#4: The right to return "all the way home" must be guaranteed. The return of all concerned individuals must be based on their right to return "all the way home" if they so wish. If the returnee wishes to be housed and reintegrated in other areas of the country of origin, this must be respected and supported on equal terms as the right to return home.

#5: Forced return, even if legally sanctioned, should be avoided as it often comes with measures that undermine human dignity, incl. detention and the use of force.

#6: Return must not be viewed as the mere physical movement of people back to their area of origin but should always be accompanied by post-return monitoring and meaningful reintegration support.

#7: Refugees and IDPs must be supported in building capacities and develop skills while in exile to enable dignified life and improve the chances for sustainable return.

#8: Return should not be seen or promoted in isolation. In a protracted crisis, all three durable solutions should be pursued simultaneously and a host-government's potential preference for return should never dilute DRC's programming and advocacy to promote local solutions and resettlement.

For further elaboration of the positions, and the specificities of return of rejected asylum seekers see the full DRC Return policy. https://pro.drc.ngo/media/bvyhj4ml/drc-return-policy_external_oct-2018_update-jan2019.pdf

Se also, DRC's Policy Brief on best practices for return counselling https://pro.drc.ngo/media/ngxjccln/drc-policy-brief-return-counselling-february-2019.pdf

Thank you

Firstly, and most importantly, to the **returnees** who generously and courageously shared their personal stories and experiences, providing invaluable insights into their journeys and challenges.

To ETTC for their comprehensive support, including granting access to their facilities and providing hospitality that went above and beyond our expectations during the DRC-delegations' visit. Their collaboration was crucial in ensuring interviews were set up and meaningful data collected. Thank you also for valuable comments on the report.

Our DRC colleagues in Iraq, particularly the DRC Monitoring team in Erbil, for their outstanding expertise and technical support. Their assistance in developing the survey tool and rolling it out among returnees in Iraq was invaluable.

About DRC

The DRC Danish Refugee Council assists refugees and internally displaced persons across the globe: we provide emergency aid, fight for their rights, and strengthen their opportunity for a brighter future. Our vision is a dignified life for all those who are displaced. DRC was founded in Denmark in 1956 and has since grown to become a leading international humanitarian organization. We work in conflict-affected areas, along the migration routes, and in the countries where refugees settle. In cooperation with local communities, we strive for responsible and sustainable solutions. We work toward successful integration and – whenever possible – for the fulfillment of the wish to return home. The DRC Asylum Division in Denmark has for decades been providing counselling to asylum seekers in all stages of the Danish asylum procedure, including in the return procedure.

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