SETTLEMENT OF IDP FAMILIES IN DOHUK GOVERNORATE

MARCH 2025

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Location: Dohuk Governorate

Date: 11th March 2025

INTRODUCTION

Since the onset of the ISIL crisis in 2014, Dohuk Governorate has hosted one of the largest internally displaced populations in Iraq. Between 2014 and 2025, approximately 500,430 individuals (99,291 families) entered Dohuk in search of safety and stability. As of late 2025, the Directorate of Migration and Crisis Response (DMCR) reports that 279,679 IDPs – (56,971 families) remain in the governorate, many of whom are residing in private housing across urban and peri-urban areas such as Dohuk city, Khanke, and Zakho.

Currently, Dohuk Governorate accommodates 13 camps, yet recent return trends indicate a slow but ongoing shift. Between 2024 and 2025, 27,734 individuals – (5,516 families) returned to their areas of origin from these camps, along with an additional 3,198 individuals – (656 families) who returned from out-of-camp locations. However, the Ministry of Migration and Displacement (MoMD) data shows that a portion of these families, around 400, were formally registered as returnees but have remained in Dohuk rather than physically returning, reflecting a divergence between administrative return and actual relocation.

This report examines the situation of these families, particularly those who completed formal return procedures but continue to reside in Dohuk. Through interviews and field assessments, it explores their motivations, legal and procedural pathways, legal and procedural pathways, and the extent to which their current situation reflects a temporary arrangement or a shift toward permanent urban integration.

METHODOLOGY

This report is based on a series of semi-structured interviews across multiple locations in Dohuk Governorate. The objective was to better understand the experiences of IDPs who have formally completed return procedures through the Ministry of Migration and Displacement (MoMD) and the Dohuk Department of Migration and Crisis Response (DMCR), but who ultimately chose to remain in Dohuk rather than physically return to their areas of origin.

A total of 27 individuals were interviewed, comprising:

- 16 internally displaced persons (IDPs), including 1 Muslim family and 15 Yazidi individuals/families
- 6 local authorities, including representatives from DMCR, MoMD, Assayish, and two Mukhtars
- 5 host community members

Locations included Dohuk city, Khanke, and Zakho, selected due to their high concentration of settled IDPs from Sinjar and the diversity in living arrangements (formal housing, rented accommodation, and informal shelters). These areas also reflect both urban and peri-urban settlement dynamics across the governorate.

Displacement History & Ethno-religious Composition:

All IDP participants had been displaced since 2014, primarily from Sinjar District. Most were Yazidis, except one Kurdish Sunni Muslim family. Religious identity, particularly among Yazidi families, was noted as a contributing factor to their reluctance to return to their areas of origin, especially due to unresolved security and social tensions. Some had lived in camps (e.g., Khanke), while others spent years in out-of-camp private accommodations. Most of them had formally obtained return documentation between 2023 and 2025, yet chose to settle in Dohuk for safety, service access, and economic reasons.

BACKGROUND

According to data from the Department of Migration and Crisis Response (DMCR) and the Ministry of Migration and Displacement (MoMD), a total of 500,430 individuals has entered Dohuk Governorate since the start of the crisis. Most of these internally displaced people (IDPs) are from Sinjar and other districts in Ninewa.

As of the end of 2024, DMCR reported that 281,105 IDPs are residing in Dohuk governorate.

Population movement trends in 2024 reflect the complexity of displacement and return dynamics:

- 794 households returned to Dohuk (reverse returnees), having previously attempted return to areas of origin but subsequently relocated back to Dohuk.
- 903 households were newly registered into camps, having moved from out-of-camp locations, indicating ongoing displacement vulnerabilities.
- Population movement trends since 2020:
- Since 2020, a total of 15,269 households have returned from camps to their areas of origin.
- An additional 5,000 households returned from out-of-camp urban or rural settings to their areas of origin.

Despite the existence of formal return programs, displacement dynamics in Dohuk remain complex. According to DMCR and DTM data from 2024, approximately 30,000 individuals (around 6,000 households) left IDP camps in Dohuk Governorate. Of these, 84% were recorded as returning to their areas of origin, while 16% became secondary displaced, meaning they left the camps but did not return home. Within this 16%, 103 households were identified as locally integrating in out-of-camp areas within Dohuk; this figure comes specifically from IOM DTM 2024 monitoring data.

Separately, MoMD administrative data indicates that between 2023 and 2025, approximately 400 IDP families completed formal return procedures, meaning they officially de-registered as displaced but nonetheless remained physically in Dohuk city instead of moving back to their areas of origin. This observation is based on MoMD's cross-checking of de-registration lists with household residency patterns, often tracked through local government channels and service access records.

This trend is further reinforced by the notable number of reverse returns (families who attempted return but then moved back to Dohuk) recorded during this period, highlighting persistent barriers to return in some areas, particularly due to limited access to basic services and unresolved security concerns.

This group is distinct from those enrolled in DMCR's reverse return program, which targets families who returned and were displaced again. In contrast, the families highlighted in this report never physically returned but obtained return letters primarily to access benefits such as the return grant or regularize documentation while continuing to reside in Dohuk.

This divergence between administrative return and physical settlement has exposed important gaps in policy classification, assistance eligibility, and durable solution pathways. According to key informants from MoMD, the option of formal settlement within Dohuk was never officially available, as such cases would not be approved by DMCR. This report seeks to unpack these complexities through the experiences and perspectives of affected families and relevant stakeholders.

Figures: IDP families who settled

FINDINGS FROM MEETINGS WITH IDP FAMILIES AND STAKEHOLDERS

During the engagement sessions with IDP families and key stakeholders, several key themes emerged regarding their settlement process in the Dohuk Governorate:

1. Overview of Meetings Conducted

The data was collected through direct engagement with 27 individuals, including:

	List of Key Informants and FGD Participants						
		IDP Key Informants			Local Authority	Host Community	Comment
Location	#	Male	Female	Area of Origin			
Dohuk	2	1	1		2	2	DMCR Tam
Dohuk	1	1			1	1	Head of MoMD Dohuk
Khanke	8	5	3	Shimal Sub-district	1		
Dohuk city	7	5	2	Tal Qasab	2	2	
Chamishko camp	4	2	2	Dogre			
Zakho city	5	3	2	Sinjar / Tel azir		1	
Total							

2. Shelter Types Observed:

AMONG THE INTERVIEWED IDPS:

- Families in Dohuk city were primarily renting accommodation.
- Families in Khanke were residing in informal sites.
- Families interviewed in Zakho were living in owned homes and often managing small businesses.

Families interviewed shared a variety of reasons behind their decision to settle in Dohuk, reflecting a broad range of displacement trajectories and current living conditions. Some applied for return documentation primarily to access return grants, but never physically returned to their areas of origin. Others prioritized proximity to employment opportunities, higher education, and access to essential services for their children. A few families had the financial means to remain outside the camps throughout displacement.

The sample included families from different sub-districts in Sinjar, both camp-based and out-of-camp IDPs, and a small number of individuals who have changed their place of residency, secured housing or land, or started informal businesses in Dohuk. While most participants were Yazidi, the sample also included one Muslim family and a range of socio-economic backgrounds.

Several common factors emerged among Yazidi families explaining why return remains unfeasible at present:

- Security concerns – Continued instability in Sinjar, including the presence of armed actors, was cited as a major deterrent.
- Damaged or destroyed homes – Most families do not have a habitable shelter to return to.
- Lack of basic services – Inadequate education, health, and infrastructure in their places of origin remain unresolved.

While some families expressed openness to permanent settlement if conditions do not improve, the majority emphasized that their current stay in Dohuk is temporary. Many of these families come from agricultural backgrounds, and while they feel at home in Dohuk, they do not own land there. The inability to farm remains a key factor keeping the thought of return alive in their minds. They expressed that once it is safe and viable, they would return without hesitation.

However, during discussions, two female-headed households expressed a strong preference to remain in Dohuk permanently, citing a preference for city life over the hardships of rural living. They emphasized that Dohuk provides them with better access to education, employment, and services that are unavailable in their villages. These women highlighted how urban settlement offered greater opportunities for their children and personal empowerment, making return an unattractive option for them.

3. Perspectives from Mukhtars

Meetings with the Mukhtars of each location provided further context regarding how IDP families are integrating into the host communities. According to the Mukhtars:

- Some families, particularly those in Zakho, have purchased homes and established small businesses.
- Others are renting or living in informal shelters constructed on unused land, especially in peri-urban areas.
- The host community has generally responded positively, with no reports of tension or discrimination. Instead, there is a visible sense of solidarity and cooperation in daily interactions and support with accessing services.

4. Host Community Perspectives

To ensure a balanced understanding, interviews were also conducted with host community members living in neighborhoods where IDPs have settled, including Khanke, Dohuk city, and Zakho. These respondents included individuals who had IDP families as direct neighbors, providing insight into day-to-day coexistence.

Key points raised:

- Most host community members welcomed the presence of IDPs and emphasized their contributions to the local economy, particularly in construction, services, and small retail.
- IDPs from Sinjar were described as respectful and cooperative, though respondents acknowledged that limited social mixing persists, especially with Yazidi families, due to cultural and religious differences.
- Despite these social distinctions, there were no reported incidents of conflict, and mutual respect has been maintained across all locations.

5. Security and Legal Considerations

A meeting with the Assayish (local security) focal point provided clarity on the legal and residency procedures applicable to displaced families residing in Dohuk Governorate.

For Yazidi families, no special residency permit is required. They are treated as KRI residents and may live, move, or settle freely within the region. However, to formalize their presence in any location, registration with the local Assayish office is required, which is a standard administrative process for all residents, not specific to IDPs.

The registration process typically requires the following:

- National ID
- Iraqi family residency card
- Application form (completed at the Assayish office, including details such as the family's area of origin, political party affiliation, and names of relatives)
- Two photographs of the head of the household

This registration ensures the family is officially recognized by local authorities, enabling access to services and confirming their lawful presence in the area.

Importantly, the Assayish emphasized that there have been no security incidents or community complaints linked to the IDP population, and all procedures are applied uniformly to both IDPs and host community members.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR POLICY AND PROGRAMMATIC RESPONSE

Based on discussions with IDP families, Mukhtars, and other stakeholders, the following key areas require attention:

- **Clarification of the Settlement Process and Legal Definition of Families:** There is a need for clearer guidance on how families who settle in urban areas are classified within official frameworks. Many families still express a desire to return to their areas of origin if conditions improve. Therefore, settlement should not be seen as a permanent status but rather as an option available to families alongside return. Clear definitions will help ensure that policies reflect their realities.
- **Urban Settlement as an Option, not a Default:** Families settling in Dohuk should not automatically be considered as permanently settled. Instead, policies should allow flexibility for families to either integrate fully or return if conditions permit. For many families, settlement is the only option.
- **Process Transparency:** MoMD, DMCR, and local authorities should work together to simplify and clarify the steps families must take to obtain legal recognition of their status in urban areas. This includes procedures for obtaining residency documentation and access to services.
- **Flexible Support Mechanisms:** Assistance programs should not solely focus on return but should also consider the needs of families who choose to settle in urban areas, ensuring that they receive adequate housing, employment opportunities, and access to services.

CONCLUSION

While many IDP families have taken tangible steps toward settlement in Dohuk Governorate, such as renting homes, enrolling children in schools, and engaging in local labor markets, their intention to return remains deeply rooted, particularly among male heads of households. For most, Dohuk represents a place of safety and opportunity, but not a replacement for their original villages, to which they remain tied by land ownership, agriculture-based livelihoods, and community networks.

This raises an important policy dilemma: If families continue to express a desire to return and view their current settlement as temporary, can we consider them integrated? Are they 'settled' if their physical location has changed but their intention has not? **And from a programmatic and governmental standpoint:** Is settlement defined by physical presence? By documentation? Or by intent?

Clarifying these definitions is essential not only for service provision and case classification but also for guiding Iraq's broader durable solutions agenda. Without clear parameters, we risk misrepresenting the status of thousands of families and overlooking the nuanced realities shaping their choices.

Moving forward, these conceptual and operational questions must be addressed both internally within the humanitarian sector and externally with government counterparts to ensure that interventions are grounded in the lived experiences of displaced communities.

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