The Hammurabi Human Rights Organization Discusses Return Migration Policies in Iraq and Ideas for Realistic Alternatives

As part of the activities of the EU-funded GAPs research project, on December 04, 2025, the Hammurabi Human Rights Organization (HHRO) held a roundtable meeting at the Yarmouk International Hotel in Baghdad, with the active participation of stakeholders in the field of return migration. The meeting aimed to present the findings and conclusions of the reports prepared by the Organization within the project, as well as to discuss Iraq's policies in the context of return migration and viable humanitarian alternatives for the return of Iraqi migrants from EU countries to their homeland.

Twenty-three people participated in the meeting, representing a number of governmental and non-governmental institutions, including: the Council of Ministers' General Secretariat, the Non-Governmental Organizations Department, the Migration and Displacement Ministry, the Labor and Social Affairs Ministry, the Justice Ministry, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), the European Training and Technology Centre (ETTC), and the Tawasul and Nesmet Ataa organizations. Two returnees also participated in the workshop to share their experiences of returning, adding a realistic and human dimension to the discussion. The meeting began with a welcoming address by the HHRO's Vice President, Dr. Mohammed Al-Maeeni, who expressed his gratitude to the participants for their commitment and emphasized the importance of collaborative efforts to address return migration issues. He also provided an overview of the GAPs project, its objectives, and its international partners.

The session was moderated by the HHRO's research team leader, Mr. William Warda, who presented the team's achievements since the project's inception in 2023, highlighting key findings and recommendations regarding return migration. A presentation was also given on the migration and return policy framework in Iraq, as well as its development phases.

Participants then heard firsthand accounts from returnees who discussed the challenges hindering their reintegration into society after returning. This was followed by a discussion that included valuable contributions from representatives of participating organizations regarding practical obstacles and humanitarian alternatives for return migration in Iraq.

The presentation included two main sections: first, the HHRO's achievements and key activities; and second, a discussion of Iraq's policies regarding return migration and alternative approaches. These are detailed below:

Outputs and findings of research on return migration in the Iraqi context, conducted by the HHRO within the European-funded GAPs research project.

Overview of Iraq's policies regarding return migration – discussion of the best alternatives.

(Roundtable discussion)

Baghdad, 4 December 2025

Introduction

The HHRO presents this progress report to stakeholders, reflecting the dedicated efforts of its research team over the past two years in studying return migration in Iraq, in accordance with international human rights standards. This report is part of the EU-funded GAPs research project, which aims to gain a deeper understanding of return policies and migration patterns globally.

The project combines its decentralized approach with three innovative concepts: focusing on the structure of return migration, enabling GAPs to analyze gaps in return migration governance; analyzing its diplomacy to understand how relations between EU member states and non-EU countries influence cooperation on return processes; and examining pathways that utilize social, spatial, and temporal means and tools to understand migrant movement and motivations.

Project Partners:

Uppsala University, Sweden.	Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies, Germany.	Radboud University Foundation, Netherlands.	Özyeğin University, Turkey.	Hammurabi Human Rights Organization, Iraq.	Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, Sweden.
Hashemite University, Jordan.	National Centre for Social Research, Greece.	International Migration Association, Morocco.	Toronto Metropolitan University, Canada.	University of Nigeria, Nigeria.	Bilim Organization for Social Research and Studies, Afghanistan.
University of Warsaw, Poland.	Migration Issue, Germany.	University of Sousse, Tunisia.	Science-Policy Interface Agency, Germany.	University of Glasgow, Scotland.	

First Axis: Key Achievements and Activities

First: Research and Reports

The research team prepared nine comprehensive reports and studies covering various aspects of the return migration phenomenon in Iraq:

1. The Basic Concepts of Return Migration Report (WP1) – Addressing definitions and theoretical parameters.
2. The Infrastructure of Return Migration Report (WP3) – Examining key actors, resources, and technologies that constitute the infrastructure for return.
3. The National Report on Iraq (WP4) – Providing a comprehensive overview of return policies in the regional context (South-South migration) and addressing the return of Syrian refugees to Syria, including opportunities and challenges.
4. The National Report on Iraq (WP8) – Examining the experiences of Iraqi returnees from Europe and their integration opportunities.
5. The National Report on Iraq (WP9) – Exploring human rights trade-offs in the context of return migration.
6. A Study on the Impact of Climate Change on Return Migration – Linking the climate crisis and migration, and exploring potential solutions.
7. A Guide to Best Practices in Return Migration – Documenting successful Iraqi experiences regarding return migration.
8. National Return Policy – Providing recommendations on policies to be followed.
9. Ethical Applications – Documenting the ethical standards adopted by the HHRO for fieldwork, and obtaining approval from the Catholic University in Erbil.

Second: Ethical Applications and Approvals

The research team successfully:

- Developed and adopted comprehensive ethical applications for the project in accordance with international research ethics standards.
- Obtained official approval from the Catholic University in Erbil for the ethical applications, ensuring the research methodology's integrity, respect for participants' rights, and incorporating the NGO Directorate's feedback on the questionnaire.

Third: Interviews and Field Studies

The research team conducted:

- 250 in-depth interviews with Iraqis returning from Europe, gathering their real-life experiences and the challenges they faced. The shortest interview lasted 25 minutes, and the longest lasted two hours.
- Seven specialized interviews were conducted with key stakeholders from the governmental, international, and civil society sectors to understand the political and institutional environment for return. Each interview lasted between half an hour and one and a half hours.
- Data was collected using a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative research.

Fourth: Media and Awareness Activities

The HHRO:

- Published seven blog posts on the official GAPs research project website, highlighting key issues and recommendations in the context of return migration.

- Published three articles in local newspapers addressing specific issues related to return migration and the human rights of returnees.
- Raised public and official awareness about the importance of the return migration issue and its impact on the economy and society.

Fifth: Dialogue with Stakeholders

The HHRO organized:

- A roundtable meeting in April 2024 with the participation of more than 20 stakeholders from:
  - Central and local government ministries and institutions.
  - International organizations (IOM, ICMPD, ETTC).
  - Experts and academics.

The meeting focused on the main theme of "Return Migration in all its Iraqi Dimensions," providing an opportunity to exchange experiences and perspectives on how to improve the legal and institutional framework for return.

Sixth: Supporting the Livelihoods of Returnees (Economic and Social Support)

- The HHRO established small projects for three returnees, and is in the process of allocating small projects for eight others.
- Providing assistance to dozens of returnees with medicine and healthcare after they sought assistance from the HHRO.
- Providing food aid and winter clothing to returnees and their families.

Key Findings and Recommendations from the Reports

Main Findings

1. Infrastructure Gaps

- **Weak Infrastructure:** Despite the establishment of the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) in 2023, a relatively new mechanism that the HHRO has considered a success story and clear evidence of the development of Iraq's policies in the context of return migration, the return infrastructure still suffers from numerous weaknesses, particularly in governorates far from Baghdad.
- **Insufficient Reception Centers:** Services are concentrated solely at Baghdad International Airport, with no reception centers in other regions and governorates.
- **Inadequate Funding:** There is a lack of financial allocations from the government budget for return, reintegration, and consolidation programs.

2. Human Rights and Dignity Issues

- **Negative Rights Trade-offs:** There are instances where some returnees' human rights have been compromised within the framework of agreements between states, contradicting international human rights obligations.

- **Lack of Respect for the Non-Refoulement Principle:** Some cases of forced returns occur without sufficient guarantees for the returnees' safety.
- **Insufficient Legal Protection:** There is an absence of effective mechanisms to protect returnees from violations.

3. Economic and Social Challenges

- **Limited Job Opportunities:** The lack of real job opportunities for returnees limits their ability to integrate economically.
- **Weak Rehabilitation Programs:** A shortage of vocational training programs and psychosocial support for returnees.
- **Housing Problems:** The lack of suitable housing for returnees at affordable prices, or the absence of temporary housing until their situation stabilizes.
- **Administrative and Bureaucratic Issues:** The complexity of government procedures and delays in services frustrate returnees.

4. Weak International Coordination and Communication

- **Weak International Coordination:** The lack of effective coordination between host countries in Europe and Iraqi authorities before and during return.
- **Lack of Transparency:** The failure to publish bilateral agreements publicly or involve stakeholders in their drafting.
- **Insufficient Information:** Returnees lack sufficient information about available services.

5. Climate and Environmental Issues

- **Impact on Migration:** Climate change significantly contributes to population displacement in areas such as the marshes and desert regions.
- **Lack of clear policies:** The absence of clear policies for dealing with climate-affected migrants.

Key Recommendations

1. Improving Policies and Legal Framework

- **Review Bilateral Agreements:** Ensure that human rights are not sacrificed for diplomatic or developmental gains.
- **Enact Protective Legislation:** Enact strong laws to protect returnees' rights and guarantee their dignified treatment.
- **Adhere to International Standards:** Respect the non-refoulement principle and international human rights standards.

2. Strengthening Infrastructure

- **Expand Service Network:** Establish reception and registration centers in major governorates and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

- **Improve Services:** Provide high-quality health, education, and social services to returnees.
- **Increase Budget Allocations:** Increase government budget allocations for return and reintegration programs.

3. Comprehensive Integration Programs

- **Vocational Training Programs:** Develop advanced vocational training programs to help returnees integrate into the labor market.
- **Psychosocial Support:** Provide psychosocial support programs for returnees suffering from the effects of trauma.
- **Economic Support:** Provide loans and facilities to help returnees start small businesses.

4. Improving Coordination and Communication

- **Transparent Agreements:** Publicize and document bilateral agreements to ensure accountability and transparency.
- **Effective International Coordination:** Develop clear protocols for coordination between Iraqi authorities and host countries.
- **Stakeholder Engagement:** Involve national and international civil society organizations and returnee representatives in the policymaking process.

5. Strengthening Human Rights and Dignity

- **Effective Complaints Mechanisms:** Establish independent mechanisms for receiving complaints and investigating human rights violations.
- **Independent Monitoring:** Empower civil society organizations to monitor return programs and submit periodic reports.
- **Legal Protection:** Ensure effective legal protection for returnees against any violations.

Second Axis: Iraq's Policies on Return Migration and a Discussion of Alternatives

• Historical Background and General Context

Since its founding in 1921, Iraq has witnessed continuous waves of migration due to political, security, and economic instability. These waves have led to profound demographic and social changes, with the number of Iraqis living abroad reaching approximately five million in 2003.

• Policy Shift After 2003

Following the fall of the dictatorial regime, Iraq adopted a new policy focused on preserving its human resources and encouraging return. The Migration and Displacement Ministry was established in 2004, and Law No. 21 of 2009 was enacted, regulating migration affairs through a national committee and an emergency operations room. Iraq also issued decrees

encouraging its skilled citizens to return and joined international agreements to combat illegal migration.

• Current Phase (2017 onward)

After the decline of ISIS in 2017, policies have clearly evolved. Iraq joined the Global Compact for Migration in 2018 and launched its National Migration Management Strategy in 2020. Since Mohammed Shia Al-Sudani took office at the end of 2022, return and displacement issues have become government priorities, with the establishment of the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) in 2023 to coordinate returns and provide integrated services.

Institutional Mechanisms and Partnerships

Iraq established a ministerial coordination committee for receiving migrants, led by the Migration and Displacement Ministry, with the participation of several ministries, international organizations (IOM, UNHCR, GIZ, ICMPD), and the civil society sector. Iraq signed bilateral agreements with European countries (Sweden, Germany, and the United Kingdom) to regulate voluntary, forced, and assisted returns.

Legislative and Constitutional Achievements

Iraq accepted dual citizenship to encourage returns and ratified eight of the nine international human rights treaties. It enacted laws to protect refugees and those dismissed for political reasons. It launched its first National Action Plan for Safe and Orderly Migration in August 2015.

Challenges and Gaps

Despite progress, policies face several obstacles: weak coordination among stakeholders, insufficient budget allocations, heavy reliance on international organizations, slow administrative implementation, and restrictions on granting loans and integration programs (training, psychosocial support, and housing). Bilateral agreements also raise concerns about the non-refoulement principle being compromised for the sake of diplomatic interests.

Return Alternatives that Preserve Returnees' Dignity in Accordance with Human Rights

Alternative 1: Improving Economic and Security Conditions (Country of Origin)

Content: This alternative relies on improving conditions in Iraq to make return an attractive option:

- **Economic diversification:** Reducing total dependence on oil and investing in other sectors.
- **Job creation:** Creating real jobs with fair wages in the public and private sectors.
- **Security stability:** Ensuring lasting peace and preventing a return to armed conflict.
- **Public services:** Providing quality healthcare, education, and housing.

Benefits:

- Preserving the dignity of returnees and ensures their choice is free and voluntary.
- Encouraging natural and sustainable reverse migration.
- Reducing pressure on European host countries.
- Benefitting the Iraqi economy by bringing back expertise and skills.

Challenges:

- Requires substantial investments and financial resources.
- Takes a long time to show results.
- Requires political stability and security.

Alternative 2: Other Return Options Programs (Host Countries)

Content: Instead of forcing potential returnees to return, alternative options can be provided:

- **Legal Residency:** Allowing permanent or temporary legal residency in host countries with full protection.
- **Migration to Third Countries:** Facilitating migration to other countries instead of forcibly returning them.
- **Temporary Work Programs:** Allowing temporary work with the possibility of voluntary return later.

Benefits:

- Respects individual choice and personal freedom.
- Reduces diplomatic friction between countries.
- Provides better legal protection for individuals.
- Allows for gradual and natural integration.

Alternative 3: Well-Considered and Planned Return Programs (Between the Host Country and Country of Origin)

Content: Designing comprehensive return programs that take into account individuals' real needs:

1. **Accurate Assessment:**
   - Assessing the security situation in different governorates.
   - Identifying available services in each region.
   - Understanding individuals' specific needs (health, education, social).

2. **Advance Planning:**
   - Preparing individuals psychologically prior to returning.
   - Arranging accommodation and employment in advance.
   - Organizing a safe and dignified reception.

3. **Ongoing Support:**
    - Regular follow-up after returning.
    - Providing comprehensive services.
    - Rapid response to emergencies.

Fourth Alternative: Genuine Bilateral Agreements

Content: Building agreements between Iraq and European countries based on respect for human rights:

- **Shifting Obligations:** Sharing responsibilities and burdens between the host country and country of origin.
- **Technical Assistance:** Supporting host countries in improving infrastructure.
- **Financial Assistance:** European countries bearing a portion of reintegration costs.
- **Exchange of Expertise:** Sharing best practices and training staff from both sides (country of origin and host country).

Benefits:

- Balancing responsibilities between countries.
- Tangibly improving returnees' conditions.
- Reducing negative impacts on host communities.
- Building genuine trust between countries.

Fifth Alternative: Investing in Local Development

Content: Linking return programs to long-term development programs:

- **Establishing free economic zones:** Providing investment and employment opportunities.
- **Supporting small businesses:** Providing loans and training for returnees.
- **Developing infrastructure:** Providing health, education, and housing services.
- **Reconstruction with Returnee Participation:** Making returnees partners in rebuilding their homeland.

Benefits:

- Transforming returnees into real economic resources.
- Increasing economic productivity.
- Restoring trust and a sense of belonging.
- Creating an incentive for others to return.

Following deliberations and discussions, the session concluded with the following recommendations:

1. At the National Level

- Reviewing existing laws to ensure their compliance with international human rights standards.
- Developing national policies that combine voluntary and planned return.
- Expanding the National Referral Mechanism to include all governorates and regions.
- Allocating sufficient financial resources from the government budget for return programs and compensation for those affected.
- Improving public services, particularly health, education, and housing, by providing affordable housing and distributing land to returnees.
- Ensuring security and stability by resolving conflicts and disputes.
- Establishing accountability mechanisms to guarantee respect for returnees' rights.
- Creating a fund to finance income-generating projects.
- Increasing attention to psychosocial support and establishing specialized centers for this purpose.

2. At the International Level

- Signing public agreements based on mutual respect for human rights and enhancing coordination with the international community.
- Exchanging technical and financial assistance to improve infrastructure. Coordination between Iraq and the European Union is essential to coordinating roles and opportunities for reintegration.
- **Respecting the non-refoulement principle:** Preventing the deportation of individuals to places where they may face danger.
- **Ongoing dialogue:** Between countries on migration and return issues, including encouraging the return of skilled workers and working to provide incentives for this.
- **Joint monitoring:** To ensure respect for agreements.

3. At the Civil Society Level:

- **Defending returnees' rights:** Through awareness-raising and monitoring.
- **Providing complementary services:** Psychological, social, and economic support, as well as small projects (livelihoods).
- **Documenting violations:** And submitting reports to the relevant authorities.
- **Working on prevention:** By raising community awareness of irregular migration dangers.

Conclusion

- The studies and research conducted by the HHRO reflect the complex reality of return migration in Iraq.
- The Iraqi Government is demonstrating an increasing commitment to addressing this issue through the establishment of a National Referral Mechanism and its accession to international conventions.

- Significant gaps remain, however, between theory and practice.
- Research has shown that the optimal approach to return migration must be comprehensive, balanced, and combine respect for human rights and dignity with national stability and development.
- A return policy cannot succeed if it is based on coercion or the sacrifice of fundamental individual rights.
- Responsibility should be shared by all parties:
  - The Iraqi Government must provide a safe and stable environment and genuine services;
  - European countries must provide technical and financial support and respect human rights standards; and international and national organizations must play the role of mediator, monitor, and supporter.

The HHRO's Appeal

We call on all stakeholders to listen to the voices of returnees and to benefit from the lessons learned from these studies to build genuine and humane return migration policies that respect human dignity and basic rights, and contribute to building a strong and stable Iraq.

William Warda
Main Investigator of HHRO Research Team