

“LIKE A FATHER WHO DOESN’T LOVE HIS CHILDREN”Social
Inquiry**INSTITUTIONAL TRUST, STATE NEGLECT, AND PROSPECTS FOR JUSTICE IN POST-CONFLICT IRAQ**

Recent analysis conducted by Social Inquiry and Cordaid in Iraq finds that, in the aftermath of conflict and displacement, certain neighborhood-level factors offer protective effects in relation to residents’ individual psychosocial wellbeing.¹ Relatively positive levels of social cohesion, public participation, and institutional trust (i.e., the social environment) at the neighborhood-level act as buffers to protect individual psychosocial wellbeing from shocks in general, as well as moderating the effects of previous conflict exposure on mental health and psychosocial outcomes upon return. This brief builds on these findings and explores the linkages between institutional trust, state neglect, and justice after conflict.

Baiji, one of the largest cities in the Salah al-Din Governorate, experienced mass population displacement, grave human rights violations, and particularly severe residential and civilian infrastructure destruction—second only to that inflicted upon Mosul—as a result of the ISIL conflict. Since the end of that conflict in Iraq in 2017, families have begun returning to the city to rebuild their lives and communities. Implicit in this return, as will be detailed below, is the expectation that the state would support them in these efforts, including repairing not only infrastructure but also the frayed social fabric of the city. Three years on, however, a sense of *recreancy* has set in—that is, a sense that institutions have failed to uphold the public’s trust that they will act and operate responsibly, if at all. Feelings of the state’s neglect and inability to act in the best interest of residents are widespread across the city. Deficits in trust among Baiji residents are particularly acute toward national and governorate level authorities, as their absence is reportedly more pronounced.

If left unaddressed, these deficits in trust may negatively impact the protective effects of neighborhood social environment on mental health and psychosocial wellbeing, as a prolonged feeling that institutions will not act and operate responsibly has spill-over effects that undermine the capacity for positive interaction and participation in society.² These negative impacts, in turn, have implications for accountability and redress processes in the aftermath of conflict, given that conflict-affected individuals with worse mental health outcomes are less inclined to support or to participate in non-punitive justice mechanisms.³ In other words, low levels of individual and collective institutional trust over time have the capacity to erode social cohesion and civic engagement, which in turn has negative implications for interest and participation in justice measures.

TECHNICAL FACTSHEET

- Original survey data collected from 765 residents across 30 neighborhoods in Baiji in November 2020.
- Survey data collection was preceded by 13 in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews with residents, community leaders, and local authorities in Baiji conducted in October 2020.
- Additional follow-up discussions with field teams and residents took place in December 2020.

¹ Social Inquiry and Cordaid, *Streets Tell Stories: The Effects of Neighborhood Social Environment on Mental Health and Psychosocial Wellbeing in the Aftermath of Conflict* (The Hague: Cordaid, 2021).

² Liesel Ashley Ritchie, “Individual Stress, Collective Trauma, and Social Capital in the Wake of the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill,” *Sociological Inquiry* 82, no. 2 (2012): 187-211.

³ Phuong Ngoc Pham, Patrick Vinck, and Harvey M. Weinstein, “Human Rights, Transitional Justice, Public Health and Social Reconstruction,” *Social Science & Medicine* 70 (2010): 98-105; and Phuong Pham, Harvey M. Weinstein, and Timothy Longman, “Trauma and PTSD Symptoms in Rwanda: Implications for Attitudes Toward Justice and Reconciliation,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 292, no. 5 (2004): 602-12.

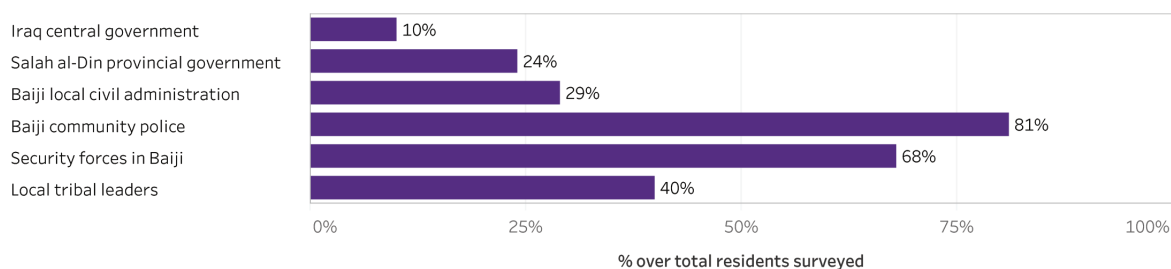


In seeking to address this phenomenon and avoid its potential negative ramifications, it is necessary to understand its dynamics in greater depth. The following analysis of Baiji residents' perceptions as they return to their city after conflict provides a window into these dynamics, demonstrating the connections between low institutional trust, state neglect, and dim prospects for justice. However, the analysis also highlights that these dynamics are not immutable, and offers a way forward in starting to overcome them by providing guidance for more in-depth political analysis and targeted interventions.

MISTRUST DIRECTED AT THE STATE

In order to ascertain an overall level of institutional trust per neighborhood sampled in the city, respondents were asked to rate how confident they are in various institutional actors working for the best interests of all Baiji residents. These actors included the central, provincial, and local governments; the community police, which are attached to a dedicated division within the Ministry of Interior and comprised of locally constituted units that serve as liaisons between residents and security forces and law enforcement; the security forces themselves, which include Iraqi Security Forces, Counter-Terrorism Service, Federal Police, both local and external (predominantly from Iraq's southern governorates) Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs), and local police; and finally, local tribal leaders (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Percentage of respondents who are confident institutional actors are working for the best interests of all Baiji residents



It is predominantly the community police, followed by security forces, whom survey respondents most feel work for the best interests of all. These two actors are the only ones that have the reported trust of more than half of respondents in Baiji. The community police, comprised of members who are from the city of Baiji, play a role in raising residents' concerns and seeking to foster dialogue and trust between the community and security and law enforcement actors. This seems to go a long way to engendering confidence and trust with the general population. The picture is a bit more complicated regarding the constellation of security forces in Baiji. Given the multiplicity of security actors present at the time of data collection, community leaders and residents alike made reference to growing concerns over this militarization and the *"hegemony of external PMUs,"* as one resident put it. Some positive responses may, in fact, be attributed to concerns over publicly critiquing these forces. At the same time, the fact that security actors are increasingly locally constituted, the growing stability of the overall security situation in the city, and an easing of movement restrictions have all reportedly also helped in generating greater trust in security actors overall, in spite of the above-noted concerns.

By contrast, trust is particularly low with respect to administrative actors, as the percentage of respondents expressing trust in central, provincial, or local governments does not exceed 30%. Confidence in the central government is lowest by far. This situation implies that trust seems to

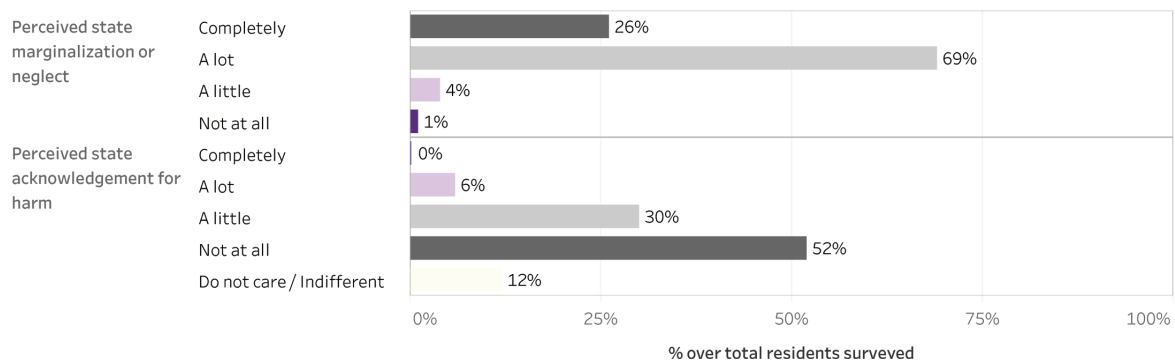
decrease the farther the actor is from the city, with the local administration of Baiji garnering greater—albeit still relatively low—levels of confidence from residents as compared to the provincial and central governments.

These findings seem to indicate that people put trust into institutions that they perceive as representing them more directly, and whose presence they not only can see but feel contributing positively to their lives in some way. This may also help to explain the lower levels of trust also directed at informal or customary actors. While tribal leaders are local and embedded within Baiji society, they are seen as more interested in “*politics and power*,” as one resident noted, than in supporting the communities they represent.

PERVASIVE FEELINGS OF NEGLECT

Springing up resoundingly from both qualitative and quantitative data is how neglected and unacknowledged by relevant authorities residents in Baiji feel, in terms of what they have experienced and continue to experience. This is seen clearly in Figure 2, which shows that 95% of residents surveyed share a strong sense of marginalization upon return, and 52% do not feel that the authorities in Baghdad have acknowledged at all their recent experiences of violence and suffering. Qualitative interviews revealed that beyond deploying security forces to combat ISIL, people feel the state has done little else for them.

Figure 2. Respondents’ levels of perceived stated marginalization or neglect and acknowledgement



These sentiments go beyond the residents’ own conflict exposure and encompass the overall experience of destruction the city went through. Significant anger is directed at the state, in particular the central and provincial governments, with recognition that the local administration only has so much power to affect change in terms of reconstruction of housing and infrastructure, service provision, and financial support. Local authorities, community leaders, and residents interviewed all noted that Baiji was deemed a city in distress and eligible for support from the government’s Reconstruction Fund. However, this has yet to materialize. Further to this, residents and community leaders alike indicated that compensation from the state was required to help families and to acknowledge the physical and human losses they have suffered; so far, this too is in short supply. Residents instead noted that the state provided security forces to retake the city from ISIL, but has been absent since then in both actual and symbolic terms.

Neglected and unacknowledged

"Baiji is now safe to the extent that it allows you to resume your life, and [ISIL] is now a thing of the past, but people are still waiting on the government to help because they feel neglected truly." (Local authority member)

"[Baiji is] neglected by the provincial government, as if it is not from the governorate's cities. It has been isolated from any concern if not for international organizations that have contributed to the restoration of many structures in it." (Community leader)

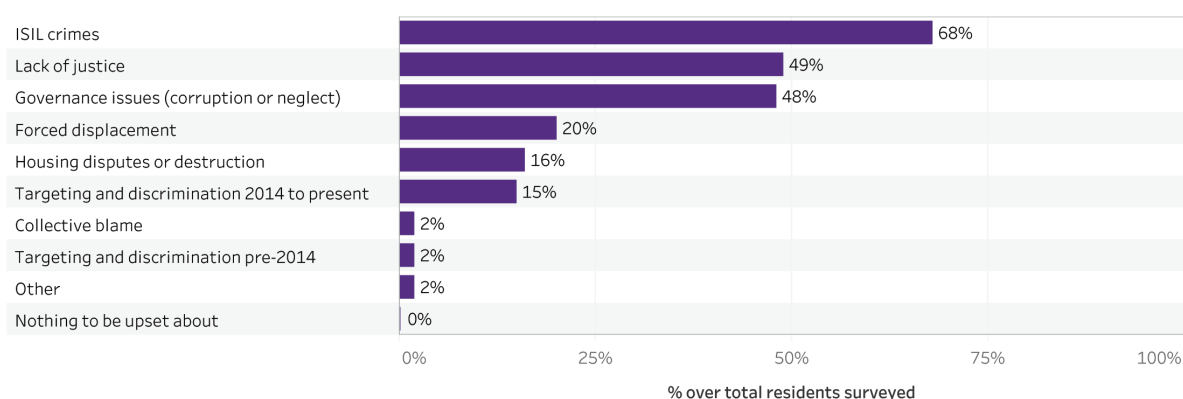
"The state only provided security forces for the liberation process. After that, what was offered to us is not worth mentioning." (Resident)

"The government acknowledged our suffering only in words. It did not provide us with anything since liberation." (Resident)

GRIEVANCES, PROSPECTS FOR JUSTICE, AND GROWING APATHY

The absence of both appropriate state responsiveness and visible change on the ground underscores the three main grievances Baiji respondents indicate being the most upset about (Figure 3): ISIL crimes (indicated by 68% of survey respondents); lack of justice (49%); and governance issues such as corruption and neglect (48%).

Figure 3. Issues respondents are most upset about



Note: Multiple responses allowed

Follow-up discussions revealed that grievances over ISIL crimes relate not only to perpetration of violations by the armed group, but also to the fact that the group's arrival and actions resulted in the full weight of Iraqi and Coalition security apparatus being brought to bear on the city, leading to its near-complete destruction. Many residents report that the external PMU were the source of most of the destruction and looting of public infrastructure.⁴ This destruction is seen as a part of the crimes of the conflict, of which residents are collective victims.

Grievances over lack of justice encompass multiple dimensions as well. One relates to the absence of accountability for the loss of homes and family members due to ISIL's actions. This grievance is exacerbated further by concerns over seeing people back in the city who are allegedly in some way responsible for these violations. Many residents view it as unjust that these individuals were not either prevented from returning or arrested on arrival and, as such,

⁴This has also been reported elsewhere, see, for example, András Derzsi-Horváth, Mario Schulz, and Hana Nasser, *Iraq After ISIL: Baiji* (Berlin: Global Public Policy Institute, 2017).

roughly 17% of Baiji respondents feel that some of the people in their neighborhoods should not have been allowed back. Perhaps linked to this, another dimension of injustice relates to perceptions of nepotism and inequality based on tribal affiliation, regarding access to public sector employment or clearance for returns. These issues remain unaddressed for most people and further contribute to anger over governance issues. Indeed, the majority of Baiji respondents (77%) view corruption as a very or somewhat serious problem in the city at present. This corruption reportedly has also seeped into processes for compensation and financial support on return, further slowing down already nascent processes.

Apathy in word and deed

"People don't care anymore . . . people are tired and disappointed that things don't work. They apply for compensation or return grants and get nothing. I applied for a return grant and [authorities] lost my papers many times until I realized I needed to pay bribes in order to receive the funds I was owed. So, people give up." (Resident)

"I don't plan to vote again since the process is corrupt and the winners are pre-determined . . . women and youth don't care about reconciliation because they feel it has nothing to do with them and it won't change anything about their situation." (Resident)

All of this has the combined effect of making residents particularly pessimistic about the prospects for positive change going forward. An overwhelming majority of Baiji respondents (87%) hold negative views about the possibilities for accountability and redress for violations that occurred during and after the ISIL conflict. Furthermore, while residents noted the importance of compensation to help families and to repair victims of property destruction or human loss, a large proportion (83%) doubt the ability of authorities to effectively do so. A similar trend is found with regard to elections, as most respondents (81%) do not feel that the electoral process translates people's expectations into positive change.

Given these sentiments, the not-insignificant level of disinterest in these and related issues altogether is unsurprising, though no less concerning. In particular, 10% of Baiji respondents report not caring about justice and redress processes and corruption; another 12% report the same in relation to acknowledgement and elections; and, most worrying, 39% have no interest in reconciliation one way or another. Such feelings persist despite these issues being directly related to the grievances most people hold overall, either as potential drivers of said grievances or as mechanisms to address them.

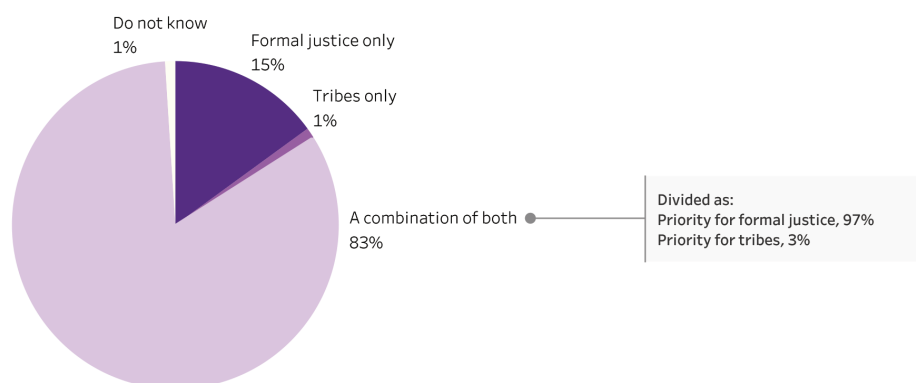
The lack of interest or concern in such issues seems to highlight a growing sense of apathy among residents in any mechanism or process working correctly, if at all, based on the negative experiences they have already had in trying to navigate those mechanisms and processes which currently exist—or the *"false promises"* they are offered, as one resident put it. Based on empirical literature and residents' own assessment, the trajectory for their participation, particularly in public affairs, is beginning to drop because they are tired of trying to access support and getting nowhere, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of despair and disengagement.

A WAY FORWARD?

The dynamics connecting low institutional trust to increasing apathy toward change processes seem to be playing out in real time in Baiji. If this trend continues, it may serve to degrade social cohesion and civic engagement, thus potentially lowering psychosocial wellbeing over time. This in turn could further limit the interest in and possibilities for non-punitive justice measures and reconciliation down the line, particularly as more displaced families return—including families with perceived ISIL affiliation still displaced in camps that were set to close by the end of 2020. It is important to address these issues related to institutional trust, not because Baiji is at risk of immediate open violence per se, but because if trust deficits are allowed to perpetuate and participation and cohesion are allowed to erode, fragility and instability will increase, leaving the community overall weaker in the face of any future shocks which themselves could be conflict-generative.

While this presents as a relatively dire scenario, there do seem to be openings for creating positive change. Despite perceiving institutions to be weak, residents of Baiji still feel the state is and should be primarily responsible for the reconstruction of neighborhoods, as well as for ensuring that accountability and redress processes take place—even if they attribute any progress on either issue to the international community. There is recognition that *“international organizations cannot carry out the mission of a state,”* as a community leader noted. Furthermore, residents also seem to prioritize formal state actors over customary actors in dealing with issues related to the ISIL conflict, perhaps an indication that they feel formal actors enable more inclusive, fair, and actionable proceedings (Figure 4). In addition, institutional trust, however low, is strongest with those actors geographically closest to residents who are in turn farther from larger centers of political power. These views, coupled with deeper analysis of the levers of power and ways to engage them, provide guidance as to where to begin in seeking to better link state institutions at all levels to the citizens they are meant to serve.

Figure 4. Respondents’ perception of the best way in which to deal with issues related to the ISIL conflict



⁵ See, for example, Mac Skelton and Zmkan Ali Saleem, *Displacement and Iraq’s Political Marketplace: Addressing Political Barriers to IDP Returns* (Sulaimaniya: IRIS, 2021).



While the concerns that residents raise are large and relate to broader issues of politics and governance overall, taking even small steps toward increasing state response matters. Recent findings indicate that small, incremental changes to particularly low feelings of institutional trust at the neighborhood level have significant impacts on improving psychosocial wellbeing. These changes include greater state presence, action, and oversight of reconstruction efforts, and more efficient and transparent processes for accessing compensation and return support. Efforts in this direction can help in laying the basis for more participatory and inclusive governance and justice processes. The residents of Baiji have kept their end of the bargain in working to rebuild their lives and communities in the aftermath of conflict; it is time for institutions to do the same.

ABOUT SOCIAL INQUIRY

Social Inquiry is an Iraq-based not-for-profit research institution focused on influencing policy and praxis that establishes civic trust and repairs social fabric within and between fragile communities, and communities and the state.

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