Social Identity Theory and Internal Displacement: A Longitudinal Case Study of Iraqi Christians in Kurdistan

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Abstract

Unlike refugees who have crossed a border and are, therefore, protected under the 1951 Refugee Convention, internally displaced people do not have a dedicated international regime at the global level. The fact they remain within the geographical parameters of their country, alongside the international community's inaction for fear of violating national sovereignty, means that a lack of formal protection of, or accountability for, this group has been formulated. In the context of the unremitting crisis of internal displacement, this empirical longitudinal study of Christian Iraqi IDPs draws attention to the critically inadequate responses to the problem of chronic displacement. Specifically, this study extends social identity theory (SIT) to look at first-hand accounts of the displacement in order to frame the effects of liminality in hyphenated spaces on the construction of personal identity. This thesis makes the case for comprehensive monitoring and assessment mechanisms that prudently oversee viable and durable solutions to displacement in order to foster positive identities.

Keywords

Christianity; IDP; Iraq; persecution; protracted displacement; social identity theory; UNHCR

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Acronyms

GPID	Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement
HLP	High-Level Panel
IDMC	Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre
IDP	Internally Displaced Person/ People
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
KRG	Kurdish Regional Government
MoDM	Ministry of Displacement and Migration
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
OCHA	Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SIT	Social Identity Theory
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
WHO	World Health Organization

1. Introduction

Internal displacement is a human rights issue of major proportions. Causes of displacement can include natural factors, such as climate change, as well as human factors, including armed conflicts and the increasing gap amid the winners and losers of globalisation. Whatever its trigger, displacement must always be treated as a "phenomenon in need of remedy" (Hassine and Leckie, 2015: XVI). However, in the specific case when human conflict drives displacement, the response to this form of migration across the globe has been acutely inadequate. The rising figure of individuals caught in protracted and chronic patterns of displacement is currently the highest ever recorded, underscoring the omission of humanitarian exploitation and the requisite of resolute efforts by constitutional and practical stakeholders to address the shocking and growing numbers of IDPs.

While ubiquitous refugee literature comprises the dominant exodus narrative, this thesis looks to fill the lacunae in migration literature by conducting a nuanced first-hand study of the plight of Iraqi citizens within their own borders. In light of unprecedented forced migration endured by this community over the last few decades, with 2.5 million Iraqis (OCHAa, 2022; OCHAb, 2022) currently experiencing internal displacement, this study specifically investigates the complex dynamics of the unprecedented ethno-religious and humanitarian crises that have led to the predicament of Iraqi IDPs. By drawing on SIT to analyse 22 qualitative interviews with Christian Iraqi IDPs who have migrated to Iraqi Kurdistan, this longitudinal study (2019-2022) intends to answer the key research questions concerning the relationship between persecution and identity, how Iraqi IDPs can achieve a positive social identity, what legal actions can be taken to achieve justice and how this case study can inform the broader IDP situation. Answering these questions will help provide a lucid framework for understanding the current situation and will hopefully inform policy making and action to generate real-world impact.

2. Durable Solutions in Soft Law Frameworks

The 2030 UN Agenda for Sustainable Development, which looks to strengthen the shared pledge of universal peace and security, explicitly states that internal displacement is one of the central challenges to sustainable development in our 21st century context. With internal displacement constituting a threat to national harmony and security, protecting the IDP community should be an essential component of any comprehensive strategy to resolve conflict and create peace (Dirikgil, 2022). Thus, the case of IDPs calls for national and international dynamism, not simply due to human rights concerns, but also because of a collective investment in national and global stability.

2.1 Definitions and Legal Status

The UNHCR was established in 1950 with the directive to protect refugees, IDPs and stateless persons, supporting their willing repatriation and local integration in their country of origin, or refuge in another country. At 55 million globally (IDMC, 2021), IDPs constitute the greatest and most rapidly-rising category of *persons of concern* (see Table 1).

This contrasts with the world's 26.6 million refugees and 4.4 million asylum-seekers (UNHCR, 2022c). Given that they remain within the geographical parameters of their country's borders, IDPs are not eligible for security under the 1951 Refugee Geneva Convention, which details border crossing as "the determinant of a person's eligibility of international protection" (Lee, 1996: 38-39). Consequently, IDPs are not entitled to claim the same protections as those experienced by their compatriots. Having crossed a national border and therefore "becoming an international problem worthy of media attention" (de Alwis, 2021: 457), refugees have become more visible globally than IDPs. On the contrary, the displacement of IDPs takes place within national borders where there are fewer people witnessing the human rights abuse as media access, as well as humanitarian presence, is "at the discretion of the nation-state, which is frequently the perpetrator of the violence resulting in displacement" (de Alwis, 2021: 458). This invisibility creates a vicious cycle, resulting in a form of slow violence (de Alwis, 2021) known as protracted displacement, a label which very few seem to free themselves of once they receive it.

Terminology	Definition
IDP	"Persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border" (Deng, 1999:1).
Protracted IDP	An IDP who has been displaced for "5 years or more after their initial displacement, without immediate prospects for implementation of durable solutions" (UNCHR, 2009).
Refugees	"People who have fled war, violence, conflict or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country" (UNHCR, 2021).
Stateless persons	An individual who is not "considered as a national by any State under operation of its law" (UNHCR, 1954: 3).

Table 1. Classification of persons of concern

For many, displacement signifies a betrayal of the social contract between states and their citizens, a violation of the obligation of the state to protect its citizens. Former US Ambassador to the UN Richard Holbrooke (2000) encapsulated the reality of life as an IDP, wherein the "safety and the well-being of you and your family could turn on the geographic accident of whether you had crossed a border". Holbrooke critiqued what he considered as "sterile […] bureaucratic euphemisms and acronyms" ascribed to internally displaced communities that allow us to overlook these people and place innocent victims in a category that "differentiates them from refugees eligible for UNHCR help" (Holbrooke, 2000). The "anodyne lingo" (Weiss and

Korn, 2006: 2) that circulates the IDP narrative fails to illustrate the immeasurable human hardship endured by this community. IDPs have become disfranchised in bureaucratic liminal spaces without the same safeguards afforded to refugees. While mandates have since been extended to be more inclusive of returnees and other groups, those who fall under the umbrella of internal displacement still constitute the "lowest status of human existence under the UN Charter", deprived of "dignity, integrity and humanity" (Abdul-Nour, 2016: 140) and the basic right to life and liberty.

2.2 Evolution of UNHCR Support Models

Obstacles for the international community to support IDPs stems largely from the issue of national sovereignty. Whilst sovereignty *should* equate to responsibility (Weiss and Korn, 2006: XIII), this is not always the case and many states are either reluctant or unable to protect their citizens. Although the international community often plays a prosocial "subsidiary role in supporting or complementing governmental protection" (Ferreira et al., 2020: 3), the UNHCR's hesitancy to interfere with the autonomy of nation states is problematic for groups such as IDPs who desperately require comprehensive support mechanisms, rather than merely a subsidiary body. Figure 1 elucidates the evolution of the UNHCR systems in relation to IDPs, such as the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (GPID) which are the UN's non-legally binding principles on the right of IDPs. Unfortunately, all of the systems in Figure 1 have so far failed to materialise into anything robust that IDPs can rely on.

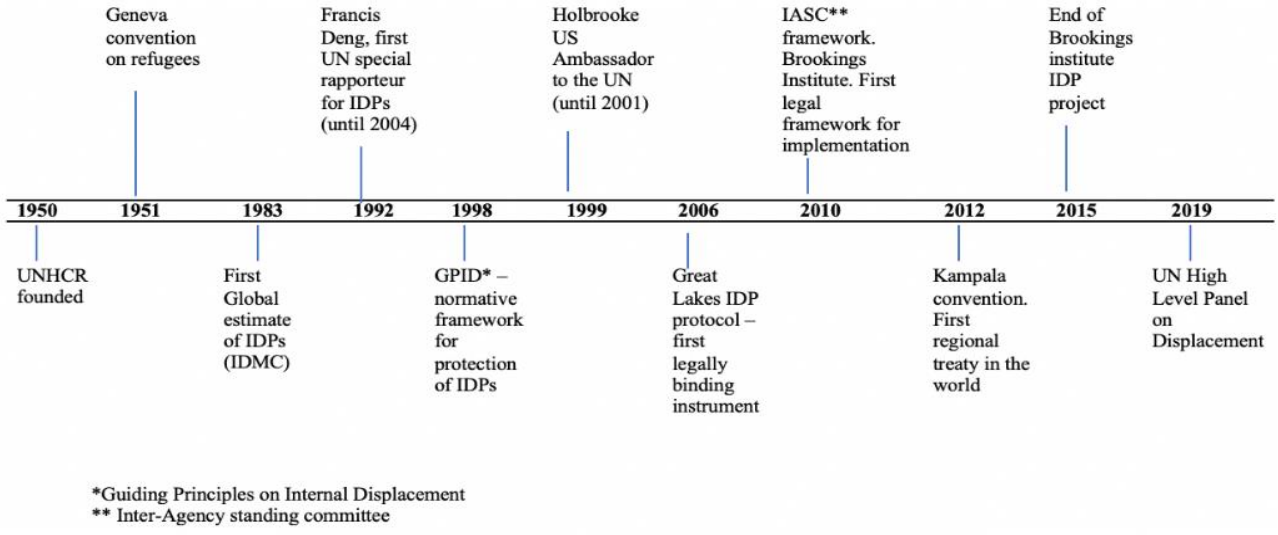

Figure 1. Successive milestones in UNHCR's work on IDPs

The disconnect between the humanitarian narrative and enforceable action is particularly discernible on two fronts. Firstly, although the UNHCR and international community frequently emphasise the gravity of the situation and highlight the importance of nation state responsibility, providing a durable solution to protracted displacement is still largely dealt with as a de facto task of international actors who have so far provided little besides lip service. While liable coordination architecture for humanitarian response currently exists, there is no such

accountability for materialising coordinated solutions (United Nations Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement, 2021: 28). Secondly, in spite of the recognition of the power of collaborative action across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, minimal tangible change has transpired. As it stands, the UNHCR's humanitarian programme is simply "not tailored to address the [long term] needs, priorities and rights of IDPs" (Mooney, 2005: 18). Current approaches are not equipped to deal with the gravity of the situation and building momentum for change must come from a change to the status quo.

3. Historical Overview

Once a region of relatively passive "peaceful co-existence" (سالمي ته ژوند) that embraced religious heterogeneity, the Middle East has, over the last two centuries, been troubled by colonialist and zealotic impositions. More recently, the rise of extremist groups in Iraq such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), has been "predicated largely on the idea of restoring sublime Muslim unity fractured by nefarious western intervention" (Atwan, 2015). Following caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's ultimatum to meet ISIS's requirements or "leave the borders of the Islamic Caliphate" (Reuters, 2014) by 19th July 2014, millions of Iraqi Christians had no choice but to flee their homeland. Abduction, persecution, rape, enslavement, and, for countless of these Christian subjects, execution, are rampant under ISIS's rule. In 2016, John Kerry, then US Secretary of State, officially acknowledged the ethnic cleansing of Christians in the Middle East as a crime against humanity (Fishel, 2016). In spite of recognition of ISIS's cultural cleansing campaign, there has been an inadequate level of co-operation between global institutions to manumit the Iraqi Christian community. Although Iraqi forces were able to reclaim Mosul in 2017, the city and its citizens are still suffering from the collateral damage of destruction to both its infrastructure and buildings, and from citizens' own fears that extremist sleeper cells and/or unexploded ordnance remain. Safe return is, therefore, not a guarantee.

While many Iraqis have had no choice but to migrate to safer yet still politically disputed regions of Iraq, their basic rights have not migrated with them. This community has found itself in legal limbo within their indigenous borders, facing "existential threats to their cultural survival" (Mako, 2012: 190). Many have moved north to cities in Kurdistan, such as Erbil, under the KRG. Functioning as a self-governing polity within the borders of the Iraqi federal state, Kurdistan has remained largely unaffected by the turmoil occurring in other regions of Iraq making it a "safe haven" (Khedir, 2021: 149) for a large proportion of IDPs. Despite relative safety, there are still notable barriers to successful assimilation in these areas due to symbolic boundaries and the ethno-nationalistic approach of KRG that render Iraqi Christian IDPs quasi-citizens and outsiders to the indigenous community. A referendum for Kurdish independence, in which Arabs were not legally permitted to participate due to their outsider status, was held on September 25th 2018. 92% of Kurds supported secession (Chulov, 2017). Independence was ultimately not granted as the referendum was deemed unconstitutional. However, if the Kurds do eventually achieve independence, the Christian IDPs could suffer acutely as a result of exclusionary ethno-national tendencies of the KRG.

In 2003, the Iraqi Ministry of Displacement and Migration (MoDM) was established to alleviate the dire effects that accompany the nature of being an IDP or returnee. The Ministry was

originally introduced as a lifeline for displaced persons, with the 2008 National Policy for Displacement (Iraqi National Authorities, 2008) providing a blueprint for policy action in the context of migration. However, when the 2014 crisis erupted in Iraq, the Ministry was unqualified to deal with the surge in displacement, with the 2008 National Policy for Displacement proving "insufficient as a credible roadmap for addressing the new displacement tidal wave" (Costantini and Palani: 38). The MoDM has since focused its energy on in-camp Muslim refugees, as they constitute a larger majority, leaving little room for minority Christian IDPs. For a community "close to extinction" (Gardner, 2019), Christian Iraqi IDPs are in a wholly unsustainable situation. This protracted internal displacement posits an exigent case of genocide (USAID, 2021), and demands recognition of such from the national and international community.

4. Social Identity Theory

With daily threats to displaced Iraqi Christians as a result of historical and political contexts of the Middle East, the social identities of this community are in grave danger. In *Les identités meurtrières,* Maalouf (2011) asserts that identity is not given, but rather built up and transforms throughout a person's life. Self-identity is, therefore, an evolutionary process, moulded through environmental and social factors. SIT reflects this notion as it is an "interactionist social psychological theory of the role of self-conception" (Hogg, 2016: 3) that helps explain inter-group behaviours and partisan social identity. Membership of distinct groups helps people define who they are, how they are able to relate to others, and how they can generate positive identities. This links to the concept of felt identity (Kaufman and Feldman, 2004: 468), the subjective sense of one's own self as a result of their social experiences, as well as territorialisation of identity, where an individual's spatial continuity (Milligan, 2003: 382) and attachment to their roots forms a great deal of their identity.

In order to frame the intricacies of SIT, Tajfel and Turner (1979) broke this understanding down into three stages: social categorisation, social identification, and social comparison. Social categorisation follows the idea that we compartmentalise objects in order to better understand and identify them. In a similar vein, we categorise individuals in order to better understand society. Such categories include sex, race, and age, as well as social status, occupation and sexual orientation. By apportioning individuals based on this social information, we are able to understand specific characteristics about them and, in turn, decide where we think they fit in to society. Similarly, we understand ourselves better by knowing which categories we fit into.

The second stage, social identification, is the idea that we inherit the identity of the group to which we belong, or believe we belong. Within these groups are particular values and attributes, divided into ascriptive and affective features. Ascriptive features are determinants of an individual's social status based on cultural considerations, including birth right, race, language, religion, sexual orientation, norms, values, and customs (Fukuyama, 2018; Mangum and Block, 2018). Affective features include intellectual and emotional identification in the form of, for example, political affiliation.

The final stage, social comparison, concerns the tendency to compare ourselves to other groups once we have categorised ourselves as part of a particular collective. Ideally, one wants to be part of what they deem to be the favourable group. Social comparison helps explain clashes in the form of prejudice and discrimination. Once a group establishes themselves in opposition to another group, or sees the other group's social identity as a threat to their own, hostilities can arise. Thus, individuals compartmentalise theirs and other salient groups into *us*, the in-group, versus *them*, the out-group.

For the purpose of this study, SIT is understood within the context of cultural affinity for the marginal out-group, Iraqi Christian IDPs, as exhibited in Figure 2. Much like Gürsoy's (2021: iv) publication exploring the relationship between SIT and IDPs, this study focuses on the "influential components of the identity formation process" of the lived experiences of this particular Middle Eastern community. With respect to Iraqi Christian IDPs, it is critical to appreciate that the injustices that have manifested as a result of cultural and religious identity factors have accumulated in a "crisis of national identity" (Korn, 2001: 7) where IDPs are wedged between the culture they left behind and the culture they have entered into (Anthias, 2009). As de Awlis (2021: 462) explains, this "out-of-placeness" and liminality often results in perceptions of IDPs as "polluting and disruptive" by their host communities.

The in-group in this case study are the Islamic Kurds who constitute the majority, with the Christian Iraqis forming the minority out-group. Ascriptive determinants in this setting differentiate displaced Iraqi Christians from their hosts in the north, Kurdish citizens. While resettlement is a perilous process that impacts all migrants, those who come from cultures different to that of their host communities often face additional barriers to assimilation. As Cadena-Camargo (2021: 893) explains, positive resettlement requires both "IDPs acceptance by the host community and IDPs feeling that they belong to the host community". This process is not unidirectional and acceptance must be reciprocal for progressive migration steps. However, SIT suggests that there is a "favourability gap between the well-liked in-group and a disliked out-group" (Mangum and Block, 2018: 3). Countless ascriptive obstacles to successful assimilation, primarily as a result of the cultural, ethnic and religious differences, language barriers (Iraqis speaking Arabic and Kurds speaking Kurdish), and anxieties regarding potential Kurdish independence and what this would mean in terms of further displacement, mean that the out-group community of Iraqi IDPs are experiencing constant and unrelenting threats to their identity as the disliked out-group. This frames feelings of instability among the minority Christian Iraqi IDPs, who are deracinated from the securities of the place they normally identify as home.

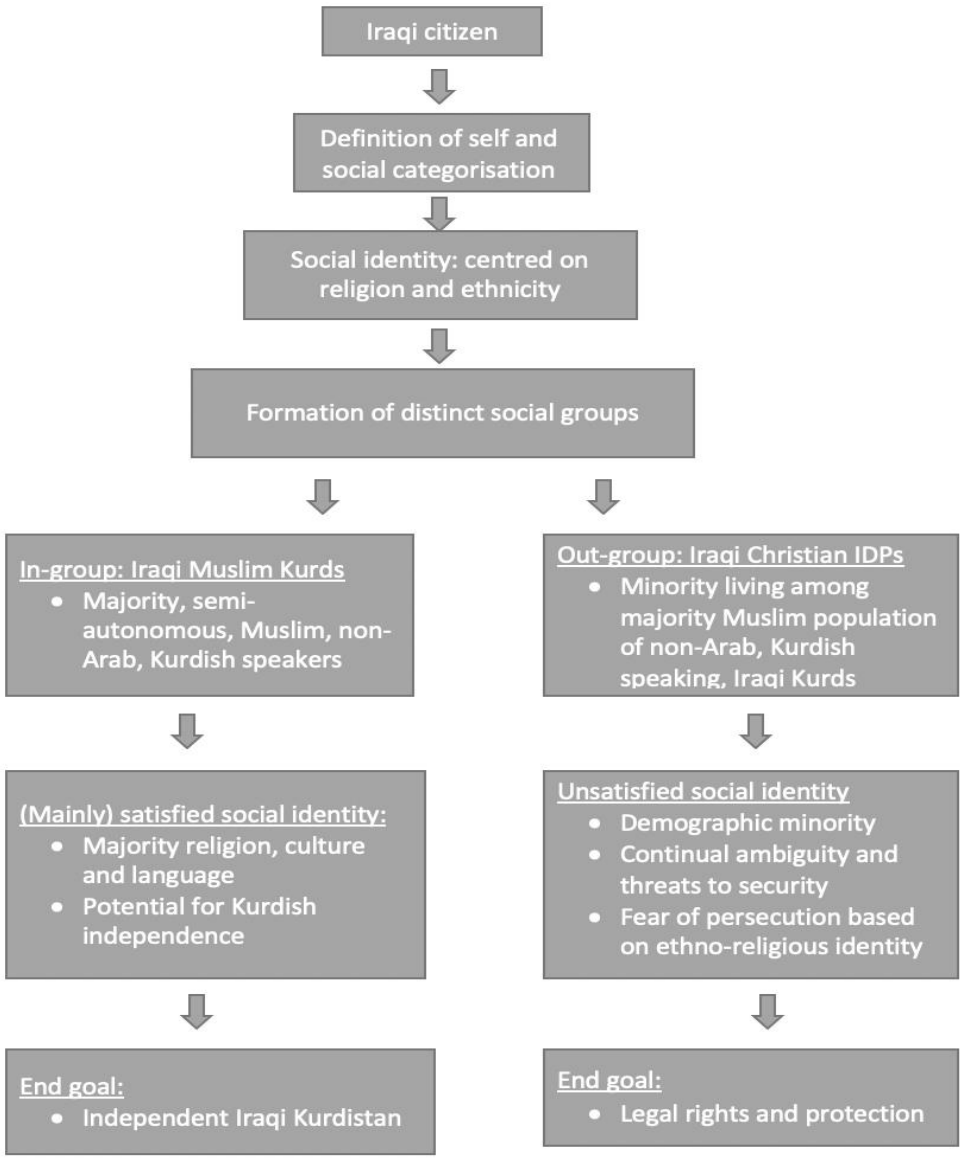

Figure 2. Social identity theory: Iraqi Christian IDPs

5. Results and Discussion

Data generated in the longitudinal study of 22 Iraqi Christian IDPs (see the anonymised participant list in Table 2) living in Erbil under the KRG over the course of two years is analysed in the following section. The purpose of the data collection is to address this study's objectives, which concern the nature of displacement as well as solutions to, and justice for, displacement. It also functions to address all four research questions: the effect of persecution on this community (research question one); how to reinforce a positive social identity (research question two); what legal actions can be taken to achieve justice for the crimes committed against Iraqi IDPs

(research question three); and how this particular case can help us understand and theorise issues of displacement (research question four). The data generated helps to fill the gaps in existing literature and understanding in order to enlighten current policy from the first-hand perspectives of those who suffer from perpetual internal displacement. Key themes, including self-identity, insecurity and intergenerational differences, reflect the scope of precarity that comes with living as the minority out-group with limited agency. With sentiments ranging from indignant to indifferent, the power of comparative longitudinal data is evident in its insights into the personal perceptions of respondents and the changes in their outlooks over time.

Respondent number	Gender	Age	Occupation
1	Male	22	Medical student
2	Female	22	Medical student
3	Female	25	Medical doctor
4	Female	29	Pharmacist
5	Male	30	Master's student
6	Male	35	Agricultural engineer
7	Male	36	Accountant
8	Male	38	Chemist
9	Female	41	IT specialist
10	Female	46	Architect
11	Female	50	Chemistry university lecturer
12	Male	50	Chemist working for an NGO
13	Male	50	Computer programmer
14	Female	50	Dentist
15	Male	57	Architect
16	Male	60	Radiologist consultant
17	Female	63	Mechanical engineer lecturer
18	Male	63	Civil engineer
19	Male	63	Aircraft engineer
20	Male	64	Microbiologist
21	Male	67	Priest
22	Female	76	Chemistry lecturer

Table 2. Anonymised participant list

5.1 Intergenerational Comparisons

A key discovery across the two studies was the significant intergenerational discrepancy. Among the 17 participants aged between 35 and 76, who were born before 1990 and had reached their teenage years or adulthood before the 2003 Iraq war and the rise of ISIS, a more robust sense of self was apparent. As Respondent 13 explains in the 2022 interviews:

> "I feel nostalgic about our life before becoming displaced. Holding on to these fond memories helps me maintain a positive personal identity as indigenous individuals within an increasingly diminishing demography."

Nostalgia - "positive tones of evocation of a lived past" (Davis, 1979: 18) - serves as a powerful tool in helping maintain or regain identities within communities. These feelings were predominantly exclusive to the older generation, who had deep-rooted positive associations with their ethno-religious identity. Out of the 14 participants from the older generation, 11 referenced nostalgia. 13 out of 14 of them expressed that their ascriptive features, being Christian and Iraqi, helped them feel like they were "part of something bigger*"* (Respondent 10 in response to question two, 2019 interview in appendix 3). It appears to be this camaraderie with the community of Iraqi Christians that has helped keep their identities rooted. Respondent 18 embodies these feelings:

> "Christianity provides a sort of private sanctuary, allowing me to find meaning in the day to day that is important in fostering a positive identity."

Clearly, this unanimity with their identity means that, regardless of threats to it, many older respondents saw it as a lifeline and thus a positive thing, regardless of the fact they are part of the minority out-group. This response embodies the SIT notion that being part of a wider social community or group has the ability to instil meaning and foster positive partisan positivity (Hogg, 2016: 3). Interestingly, for some of the other older respondents, these feelings seemed to have changed as they changed location. Respondent 19 sheds light on this, explaining that while "ethnic and religious discrepancies didn't used to be an issue" they now serve as "strong barriers to creating a positive existence in Kurdistan" where the majority in-group is less tolerant of them. For this participant, and several others of this generation, this strong connection to their identity meant that threats to it took a real toll on their selfhood. However, all in all, ethno-religious affiliation was something the older generation deemed as important to their identities and something they were proud of.

On the contrary, the younger generation, whose memories of growing up were dominated by the successive conflicts in Iraq in the 1990s, appear to have less of a connection to both their religion and ethnicity. With few memories of peaceful co-existence, this group seem to view these

ascriptive characteristics as a "precursor to persecution" (Respondent 2, 2022 interviews) and a burden to achieving a positive social identity. Respondent 11 defends these generational differences, explaining:

> "I am 50, so I have had the opportunity to be many other things before becoming an IDP. I was able to really establish my identity over the years, so it has not been very harmful to me. However, for my children, I can see that being an IDP has been very damaging as it has consumed so much of their life."

Respondent 11's daughter, Respondent 2, reflected her mother's sentiments in her 2019 interview, stating:

> "I feel like I am just existing, not living. I am studying to be a lawyer so that I can try to create a positive future for myself, and hopefully help those in a similar situation to me. But it is not a straight path. I feel like I am constantly struggling for the right to basic education, basic representation and basic human rights protections."

This response was powerful in highlighting the desperation this community feels as a result of their social experiences that form their felt identities. For the younger generation, it became apparent that adversity was all they seemed to know, with all of the 8 participants expressing feelings of despair at their current situation. Threats to their identity are considered the norm, and fostering a positive identity whilst in their current protracted displacement situation, living as the unfavourable minority out-group, feels like an impossible task. Resentment and cynicism towards the challenges of achieving positive distinctiveness and a positive conception of the self seemed to manifest in the outlooks of this persecuted group, something that was still evident two years later in the second set of interviews. When asked question 3 (refer to appendix 1 and 2), regarding displacement and identity, in 2022, Respondent 2 stated:

> "I still feel very claustrophobic and disheartened. I should be a qualified lawyer by now but I am not because of tireless obstacles in the way."

As this displacement is predominantly a result of ethnic and/or religious persecution, the younger generation generally felt that gaining a positive identity was not possible whilst living as a demographically-challenged minority out-group in an environment that does not wholly understand, accept, nor support them. With their ethno-religious IDP identities riddled with continual negative associations as a result of the favourability gap between the "well-liked in-group and a disliked out-group" (Mangum and Block, 2018: 3), many of those born during or after the 1990s opt to distance themselves to their original ethno-religious identities in the pursuit of a more peaceful life.

5.2 Displacement and Negative Identity

Anxiety relating to the perilous position of being both a religious minority and an IDP was clear across the cohort, in both the 2019 and 2022 study. In the first set of interviews, 20 out of the 22 respondents referred to the term *ethno-religious cleansing.* In the second set of interviews, all 22 participants used the term, or a rendition of these terms. The general consensus was that Christians had become scapegoats for the turmoil experienced in Iraq, with Respondent 4 in the 2022 interviews contending that:

> "If the state and international community upheld their stewardship duties to protect their citizens we would not have been forced from our homes and cleansed of forms of identity that are essential to us – our ethnicity and our religion."

Clearly, the liminality endured by the protracted internally displaced subjects has had a destabilising consequence, disenfranchising personal identity in a society where IDPs still continue to live as the minority out-group. Respondent 7's response reiterated these feelings, explaining that:

> "While I am many other things; a son, a husband, a father, an accountant, all other people seem to see me as is an IDP. So long as I am an IDP, I feel like I cannot embrace the beauty of being anything else."

This response emphasises the negatives of out-group homogeneity explored in SIT, whereby IDPs as the "other" (Said, 1979) are viewed as a collective based solely off their identity as displaced people, ignoring their individual distinctiveness. The parallels across different groups of IDPs highlights the negative associations of the internal displacement label across the global community of IDPs, something that stands as a clear barrier to embracing any other part of one's social identity. Such sentiments were also reflected in the initial response of Respondent 12 in 2022, who stated:

> "Being an IDP and having a negative identity are homogenous. The transition period remains stagnant, as though we are in a vehicle stuck in mud with no one able, or willing, to tow us out."

This liminal impasse in which IDPs are stuck augments the disquiet nature of being an out-group minority living in the in-group majority host region. These sentiments are consistent with the destabilising impact of shifting identities (Caldas-Coulthard and Iedema, 2016), where people

"treat you differently" and you "feel differently about yourself" in turn (Respondent 5, 2022 interview).

Many respondents also seemed to acknowledge, and appreciate, Kurdish refuge as a vital lifeline. In the 2022 interviews, Respondent 3 hailed the "safety net and protection that the KRG has provided", explaining that "without this salvation, who knows where I would be now". This was a stark change from Respondent 3's response in 2019, where she critiques the KRG from preventing her from pursuing her "dream of becoming a doctor", due to restrictions on IDPs enrolling in Kurdish universities. While this barrier still exists, now that Respondent 3 is a qualified doctor she is able to appreciate the stability that having a base in Kurdistan has given her. With this said, Kurdish independence was flagged up as a central concern, with independence potentially equating to further displacement, and further threats to the positive identity of the respondents. As Respondent 5 explained: "if Kurdistan was to gain independence, the progress we have made towards constructing a positive future for ourselves will be stymied. We will be back to square one". With their current, and only, lifeline potentially subject to being removed at any moment, this community is forced to live in constant fear of being uprooted and having to start rebuilding their lives all over again. Until they are granted citizenship under the KRG or manage to resettle somewhere where they are recognised and, importantly, protected in the law, they cannot fully foster positive identities.

5.3 Protection and Justice

A recurring theme in discussions on protection across both sets of interviews was the pressing issue of legal recognition and protection. Anger towards those who should be helping safeguard their identities was widespread, with high level of disappointment expressed at the sheer neglect on the part of their government and the international community. In the 2019 interviews, Respondent 10 contended that "the baton of responsibility keeps being passed on, with no one stepping up to protect us". This reply embodies the anger at the absence of any real concern for what happens to their community, who are currently "sitting ducks" (Respondent 20, 2019 interviews) to any impositions or forms of persecution. This community cannot possibly achieve an optimal equilibrium in their current set up, as their need to be assimilated, to be connected to love ones, or to be autonomous is not nurtured or protected.

Responses concerning what these provisions would look like were largely two-fold. On a national level, inclusive citizenship and state protection was noted as essential for this community to protect their status as ethno-religious IDPs. At an international level, the second proposals argued for robust constitutional frameworks and legal recognition. In response to question 4 (refer to appendix 1 and 2) in the initial interviews, Respondent 11 stated "We are quite literally nobodies in the eyes of the law. Until that changes, we stay nobodies". This issue was still pertinent in the second set of interviews, with Respondent 11 maintaining recognition in

the law as the "first stepping stone to alleviating our plight". As a protracted IDP themselves, having lived in Kurdistan for eight years, Respondent 6 also shed some insights into the general feelings of displaced persons:

> "International protection must have several dimensions including provisions to prevent displacement, as well as durable legal assistance for the IDP community."

This response was one of many that articulated concerns about perennial threats to personal identity and livelihoods if legal action to prevent and protect internal displacement were not adopted soon. Respondent 9 embodied these feelings in the 2022 interviews, stressing the need for "sustained support informed by the actual needs of IDPs". An absence of this, she explained, would see "continued threats to our Iraqi and Christian identity". These fears dominated the rhetoric concerning the future of the IDP community. Anxieties regarding what would happen to this community if their status faced further threats were very apparent. Respondent 1 also reflected these broader feelings in her response to question five (refer to appendix 1 and 2), stating:

> "National and supranational frameworks need to activate their agency and provide something durable we as IDPs can invest our hope in to."

In her earlier 2019 interviews, Respondent 1 had emphasised that this support did not mean "superficial lip service" but instead "legally binding frameworks that those with the power to help us can be held accountable to if they fail to support us". This emphasis is significant as it demonstrates the frustrations of previous weak policy objectives that failed to provide any substantial support. In a similar vein, in the 2022 interviews, Respondent 18 suggested that the international community should "emulate the response to refugees" in order to place the community of Iraqi Christian IDPs "on track to fostering positive identities". What was apparent among all respondents was that these identities could not be wholly positive without being buoyed by legal recognition and robust policy implementation that they could rely on.

When it came to discussions regarding justice for the crimes against humanity inflicted on this community, the general consensus was that holding ISIS accountable for the persecution committed was essential. In the 2019 interviews, Respondent 16 affirmed: "what they have done is inexcusable. There is no room for the same to happen again". Two years later, Respondent 21 echoed these sentiments:

> "If you do not make it excruciatingly clear that what ISIS has committed is a crime against humanity, you are effectively consenting to further crimes taking place - the international community bears that blood on their hands."

Feelings towards this punishment for the crimes committed were very strong, with no room for negotiation regarding whether retribution from the crimes executed by ISIS were necessary. The interviews make clear that healing not only requires protectionist measures going forward, but it also requires looking back and gaining justice for the persecution that has taken place. Even in the place of international protection and support, it is not possible for this community to foster a wholly positive identity without retribution of ISIS first.

5.4 Summary of Findings

Nearly a decade has elapsed since the exodus of Christians from Mosul by ISIS in 2014. Yet, this community continues to live as foreigners in its own country. With unrelenting vicissitudes to the circumstance and identity of these communities, the interviews have provided meaningful first-hand observations to the lived experiences and feelings of this vulnerable group through a SIT lens. Framing these findings within the model of SIT, as seen in Figure 4, highlights that the toll that being an ethno-religious IDP out-group minority has taken on achieving a positive social identity is cosmic. In-group-out-group hierarchies as a result of ascriptive determinants, as well as subsequent favourability gaps between the two groups, have intensified the plight of the already struggling community of Iraqi Christian IDPs, leading to a "crisis of identity" (Korn, 2001: 7).

A thematic breakdown of findings helps elucidate the destabilising effects of these dynamics on individual identity. Intergenerational themes of social identity for the older generation included features such as faith and preservation of identity as a result of nostalgia and territorialisation of identity, while key themes for the younger generation included adversity, resentment, and claustrophobia as a product of their felt identity as Iraqi Christian IDPs. Both generations shared mutual frustrations towards their limited agency as a demographic minority out-group and the disorientation of being an IDP. Mutual themes across all ages, genders, and both interview sets, was anger towards the challenges that come with being a demographic minority, the liminal disorientation of being an IDP, the negatives of out-group homogeneity and the absence of robust protection. This research illustrates barriers to a positive self-identity as being 'Iraqi' and being 'Christian', as well as being 'internally displaced' - all of which are minority out-group statuses in Erbil. Key sentiments relating to displacement and identity included: anxiety, insecurity, disenfranchisement of personal identity, the homogeneity of internal displacement and negative identity, as well the destabilising effect of shifting identities. Other key terms that were frequently referenced included ethno-religious cleansing, and endangerment.

The data confirms that reinforcing positive social identities among Iraqi Christian IDPs is not possible without more robust national and international protection, a common view among the interviewees. This includes proactive steps related to prevention, as well as monitoring and

assessment mechanisms that facilitate successful and sustainable reintegration into society. For this to be effective, and for Iraqi IDPs' social identities to be positively reinforced, these steps must be informed by IDPs from the outset. This rapport between IDPs and the national and international community is essential in ensuring that the plight of the minority out-group is being adequately addressed. Instilling confidence through the form of a robust safety net for this community would help Iraqi Christian IDPs work towards achieving optimal distinctiveness, embracing their individuality without fear of discrimination and, similarly, embrace membership to their community without worrying about in-group-out-group favourability gaps.

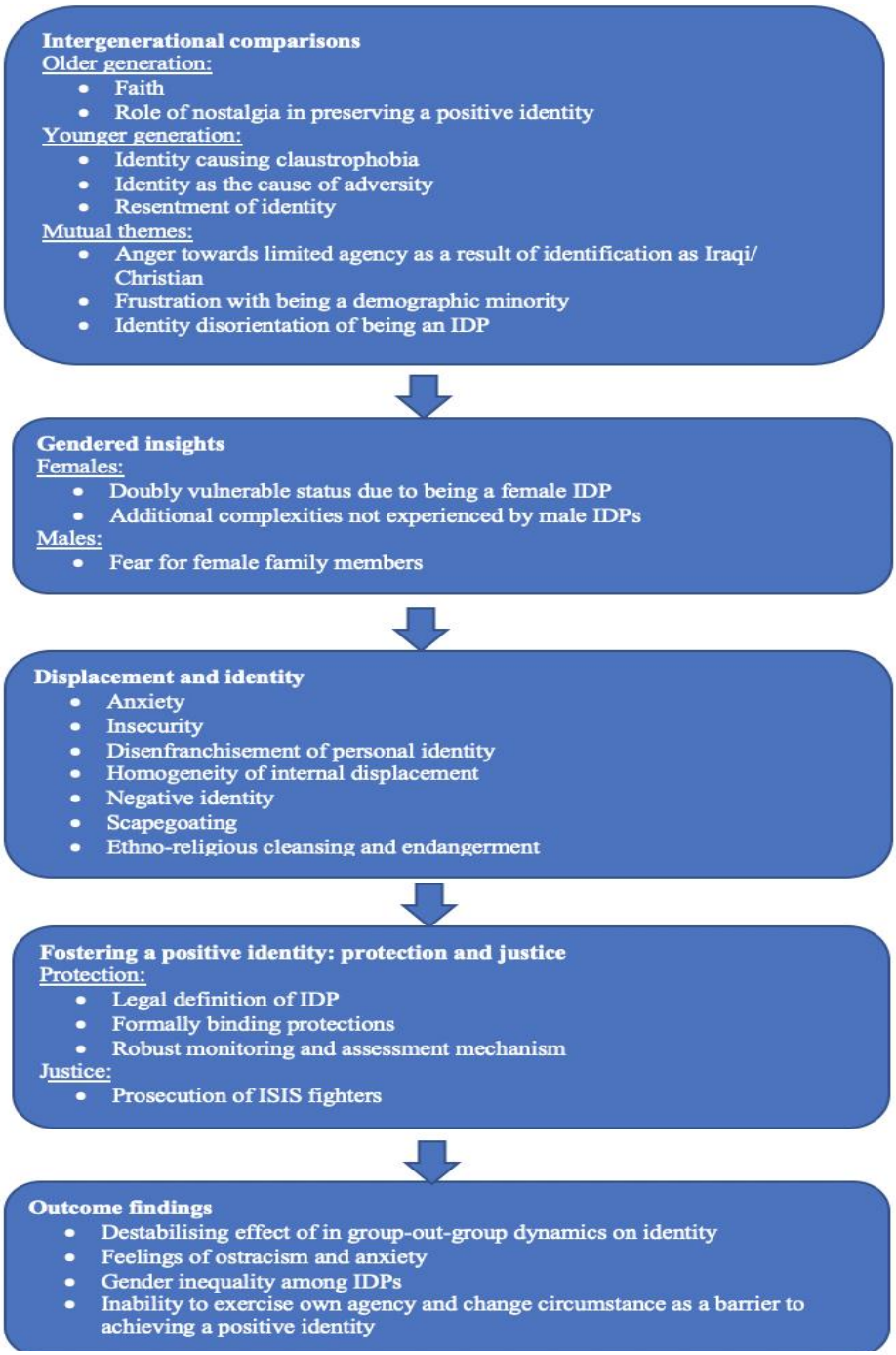

Figure 3. Annotated SIT model of the findings

Moreover, the respondents emphasised the importance of more comprehensive legal frameworks in achieving recognition, protection and, subsequently, a positive sense of self. There was also unanimity concerning justice in the form of the official prosecution of ISIS, with crucial emphasis on the weight that the international community would bear if they did not act soon to protect vulnerable communities. Lastly, with respect to question four (refer to appendix 1 and 2) regarding the importance of this case study in theorising issues of displacement, the data yielded is invaluable in filling in the gaps of current practical and academic understandings surrounding the relationship between internal displacement and identity.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the liminality between the out-group Iraqi Christian IDPs and the in-group Muslim Kurds has had a destabilising effect. Feelings of ostracism and anxiety are heightened due to a lack of robust constitutional protection, which was owed to both national and international failures. The inability to exercise their own agency and change their negative circumstances means achieving optimal distinctiveness and, ultimately, a positive identity, is seemingly impossible without comprehensive attention and responses from the national and international community to the plight of this community.

6. Recommendations

The current status quo for IDPs in Iraq, and globally, cannot be maintained. Theorising internal displacement within state sovereignty exemplifies Holbrooke's (2000) notion that sovereignty does not licence irresponsibility. While normative frameworks help elucidate the plight of IDPs more broadly, hollow international policy instruments offered by organisations such as the UNHCR means that the number of IDPs continues to rise globally, with their plight intensifying daily. Figure 4 presents the opposing forces to achieving a positive identity in the context of Iraqi Christian IDPs, by employing Lewin's (1964) force field analysis model. The forces working in favour of a positive social identity for IDPs include solidarity of ethno-religious identity, a key defining characteristic of this community, as well as the work of UNHCR, including the intentions of the High-Level Panel (HLP) on Internal Displacement, current Kurdish tolerance and the guiding principles on internal displacement. On the other hand, the opposing forces include their status as a minority out-group in Kurdistan, the sectarian government in charge of Iraq, Kurdish instability and threats of independence, as well as the lack of legally-binding protection. At any moment, any of the forces resisting change, such as Kurdish instability, could overpower the forces for positive change, and the situation for Iraqi IDPs could spiral into further despair. On the contrary, if the forces for change manage to overpower the forces resisting change, the Iraqi IDP community could see positive vicissitudes to their current plight.

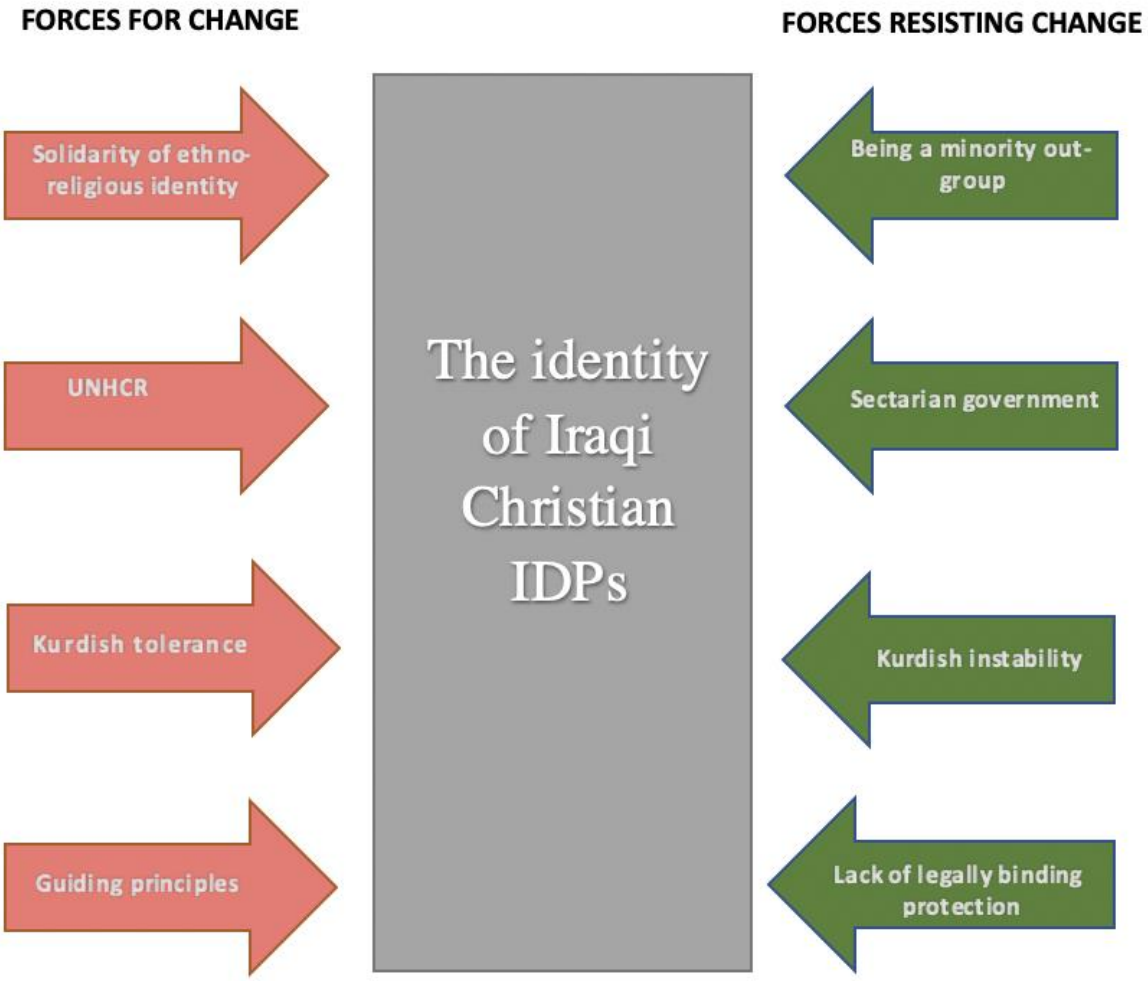

Figure 4. Force field analysis (after Lewin, 1964)

In line with insights from the data produced from the qualitative interviews, recommendations for driving these changes and creating viable lifelines for these communities are presented in the following section.

Recommendation 1: a clearer and more comprehensive internationally legally-binding definition of IDP

The current ambiguity around what constitutes internal displacement and the lack of any real binding definition of IDPs is a "grave lacuna in international law" (Nyanduga, 2004: 58). There was a common view among interviewees that we need a more encompassing international instrument and thus change must begin with the recognition of the basic importance of right to legal identity for all in order for these communities to be adequately recognised before

international law (Tull, 2019). Not only would this oblige states to "respond to IDPs as citizens" (Almanza and Phillips-Barrasso, 2021), it would also impose global accountability for the fate of this vulnerable group in order to enable positive and meaningful identities to be constructed. Recognising that IDPs can already be citizens of the state they are in would grant them with the security needed to foster a stronger sense of belonging.

Recommendation 2: integrate GPID into international law

With no state or international body currently wholly accountable for the fate of the IDP community, the future of Iraqi IDPs is in the hands of the federal government of Iraq. While the government of Iraq technically recognizes the protection of IDPs within its mandates, by the nature of it being a sectarian body the provisions in place by the Iraqi government are "fraught with difficulties and discrimination" (Chatelard, 2012: 12). These obstacles often deny basic protections, further depriving IDPs of the ability to improve their situation. By the very nature of the GPID being a *guiding* set of principles, it steers "towards flexibility, rather than legal precision" (Vincent, 2000: 30). Formally establishing the GPID as a legally-binding international decree would give the international community more clout, allowing it to provide refuge and rehabilitation for these vulnerable members of society, as well as holding states accountable for failure to adhere to the law. It would also help the UNHCR mandate migrate beyond current stalemates, providing a robust legal framework that the international community is accountable to, granting a robust safety net for IDPs.

Recommendation 3: comprehensive monitoring and assessment mechanisms

Geographic return is "not synonymous with full restitution of rights or instantaneous to the pre-displacement of status quo" (Davis et al., 2018). Even after returning to their places of origin, IDP communities are exposed to challenges that cannot be imminently eradicated. Therefore, resolving displacement is an abiding procedure that should see a gradual reduction in the need for external security and support.

With no assistance for their trauma, a key theme in the interviews was sustainable support mechanisms. Monitoring and assessment systems must have long-term visions, with viable solutions that advance security, compensation for damage to/loss of property and be able to create an environment that IDPs are able to flourish in under healthy socio-economic settings. Within the international assessment monitoring and mechanisms should be a platform for IDPs to participate in the decision-making process (Dirikgil, 2022). When these communities are involved in modalities, they are able to work proactively towards rebuilding positive identities.

Recommendation 4: bringing ISIS to account

Establishing recommendations to place the persecuted Christian Iraqi IDP community on a path towards positive identities is a very necessary challenge. However, it is also essential that justice is achieved through the prosecution of the predominant persecutor – ISIS. Until recently, ISIS fighters have only been prosecuted for terrorism-related offences. November 30th 2021 saw a landmark change to this, wherein former ISIS member, Taha al-Jumailly, was given a life sentence for genocide and war crimes, at a court in Frankfurt, Germany (Morris, 2021; Ochab, 2021). This was the first genocide conviction of an ISIS fighter. While neither the perpetrator nor his victims were German, the German courts had jurisdiction over the crimes of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity under the principle of universal jurisdiction. This case served as a watershed moment in the retribution of ISIS fighters and helped set the precedent for the importance of a tribunal for such offences. If the Christian and broader community of victims is able to achieve any justice, as well have future atrocities prevented, the prosecution of ISIS fighters for these crimes must become customary.

7. Conclusions

With perennial geopolitical conflicts fought within the battle lines of Iraq, Christian communities inside its borders have found themselves in a catch-22 situation. Unlike their refugee compatriots who have been able to gain international recognition as a result of border crossing, this community of Iraqi IDPs, as well as the broader international IDP community, remains invisible. An absence of international attention, partnered with obstacles such as national sovereignty, has meant that this community remains perpetually neglected, with no viable lifelines currently presented to alleviate their struggles. This paper has employed SIT to encompass dimensions based on internal displacement and ethno-religious discrimination in light of the specific case of Iraq. Through qualitative interviews and a comprehensive analysis of the problem of displacement, including the role of the international community and the legacy of conflict in Iraq, this paper identifies systematic failures of international bodies and the Iraqi government as a key barrier to progress. As a product of this struggle, it is clear that the oppression endured by this community has had predominantly negative implications, creating difficult hurdles to achieving optimal distinctiveness. Despite many respondents trying to maintain a positive sense of self, the data highlights the bleak reality of the relationship between discrimination and the inherent struggles that come as a result of the internal displacement label.

With the number of IDPs rising continually, this paper offers feasible solutions to reinforce standards and legal obligations that support the plight, and protection, of IDPs, with personal insights from the vulnerable community itself on how to foster positive social identities. Fortifying the sustained presence of these communities around the world requires a more

inclusive vision which endorses rich diversity and the right to identity. More specifically, these recommendations look to migrate beyond the stalemate of discussions pertaining to national sovereignty and the agency of international bodies which have, to date, impeded progress in reducing the number of individuals who fall under this category. This includes legal recognition and associated protections, as well as comprehensive assessment and monitoring mechanisms that would be indispensable in improving the agency of this out-group minority community in Kurdistan, as well as the broader internally displaced community. Addressing each specific echelon of internal displacement is not only essential in protecting the fundamental human rights of this community, but also in advancing regional and global stability in line with the 2030 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Given that the Iraqi Christian IDP community constitutes less than 1 million, affording them legally-binding human rights under the GPID in international law on the basis of ethno-religious discrimination would grant early success for the UN's so far stagnant High-Level Panel on displacement. This case could pave the way for future advances for the internally displaced community, demonstrating that ending the plight of the internally displaced community is both possible and feasible.

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Appendix 1. Interview questions (English version)

Question number	Interview questions
1	How old are you?
2	What role does your religious and ethnic identity play in your life?
3	What effect do you feel living as an IDP has had on your identity?
4	Do you feel like your identity, as both an Iraqi Christian and as an IDP, is protected?
5	Going forward, how can the community of Iraqi Christian IDPs achieve a positive social identity?

Appendix 2. Interview questions (Arabic version)

الرقم السؤال	المقابلة سؤال
١	عمرك كم
٢	حياتك؟ في والعرقية الدينية هويتك تلعبه الذي الدور هو ما
٣	التأثير الذي تشعر به على هويتك عند العيش بصفتك نازحًا داخلياً؟ هو ما
٤	محمية؟ هويتك بأن ، داخلي كنازح وعراقي كمسيحي ، تشعر هل
٥	للمضي قدمًا ، كيف يمكن لمجتمع النازحين الداخليين من المسيحيين العراقيين تحقيق هوية اجتماعية ايجابية