IOM IRAQ

BARRIERS TO RETURN FOR ETHNO-RELIGIOUS MINORITIES IN IRAQ

Identity Politics and Political Patronage Among Yazidi and Christian Communities from Ninewa Governorate

by Saad Salloum, January 2020

USAID FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

ITALIAN AGENCY FOR DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

IOM UN MIGRATION

ABOUT IOM

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) is committed to the principle that humane and orderly migration benefits migrants and society. As an intergovernmental organization, IOM acts with its partners in the international community to: assist in meeting the operational challenges of migration; advance understanding of migration issues; encourage social and economic development through migration; and uphold the human dignity and well-being of migrants.

The opinions expressed in the report are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the International Organization for Migration (IOM). The information contained in this report is for general information purposes only. Names and boundaries do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

IOM Iraq endeavours to keep this information as accurate as possible but makes no claim – expressed or implied – on the completeness, accuracy and suitability of the information provided through this report.

ABOUT THE PROGRAMMES

This research project has been funded by USAID and the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation. The USAID-Funded, IOM Programme 'Supporting the Return of Displaced Population in the Ninewa Plains and West Ninewa' aligns with the Broad Agency Announcement (BBA) of USAID, centering around the research question *"How does integrated investment in community-led programming in areas where there have been low return rates, particularly among minorities, reduce barriers to return and increased the rate and sustainability of return?".* The BAA programme, implemented by IOM in partnership with Yazda and Samaritan's Purse, addresses this core question by 1) improving availability of and information on needs and services prioritized by the community to facilitate return and reintegration 2) enhancing economic opportunities and shelter solutions for returnees to become self-reliant and 3) strengthening social cohesion and psychosocial well-being for vulnerable community members. Under the first objective, various research projects have been implemented with IOM support with the aim of increasing understanding of obstacles to return and developing durable solutions to address protracted displacement. This report also received support from the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation under the project "Multi sectorial support for community stabilization in Hamdaniya district: reconstructing economic infrastructure and coexistence among minorities".

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Saad Salloum is Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Political Sciences at the University of Mustansariya in Baghdad and an expert on religious diversity in Iraq. He co-founded the Iraqi Council for Interfaith Dialogue in 2013, and the National Center for Countering Hate in 2018 and the Institute for Religious Diversity Studies in 2019. He is also the general coordinator of Masarat Foundation for Cultural and Media Development, a nonprofit that focuses on minorities, collective memory studies, and interfaith dialogue. His publications focus on Iraqi minorities and include "Minorities in Iraq" (2013), "Christians in Iraq" (2014), "Policies and Ethnic Groups in Iraq" (2014), "Unity in Diversity: Promoting Pluralism in Iraq" (2015), "Êzidîs in Iraq: Memory, Beliefs and Current Genocide" (2016), and "At Crossroads: Iraqi Minorities after ISIS" (2016) and The End of Diversity in Iraq (2019).

TABLE OF CONTENTS

"

Such a heated debate about authenticity in the discourse of Christian denominations in recent years has turned into competition that brings interpretations from history to justify political demands […] the divisions over identity remain inevitably […] related to the future of the Christian presence inside Iraq."

– Saad Salloum, January 2020
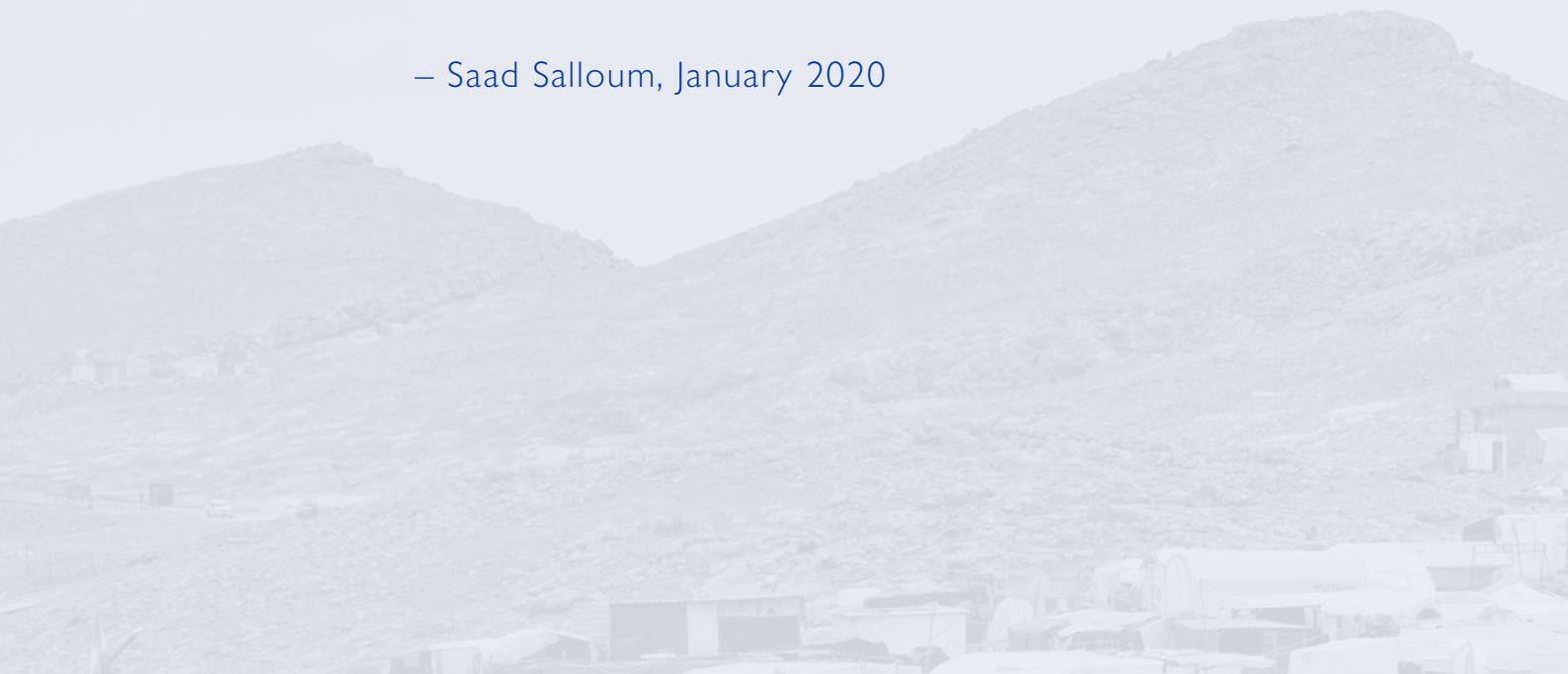
Map 1: Composition of Ethno-Religious Groups in Iraq

N

| 0 | 100 | 200 |

KILOMETERS

TURKEY

DAHUK

ERBIL

SULAYMANIYAH

NINEWA

SYRIA

KIRKUK

SALAH AL-DIN

IRAN

DIYALA

BAGHDAD

IRAQ

ANBAR

WASSIT

KERBALA   BABYLON

MISSAN

QADISSIYA

THI-QAR

NAJAF

BASRAH

SAUDI ARABIA

MUTHANNA

KUWAIT

LEGEND

	SHIA ARABS
	SUNNI ARABS
	KURDS
	CHRISTIANS/SHABAK
	YAZIDIS
	TURKMEN
	SPARSELY POPULATED
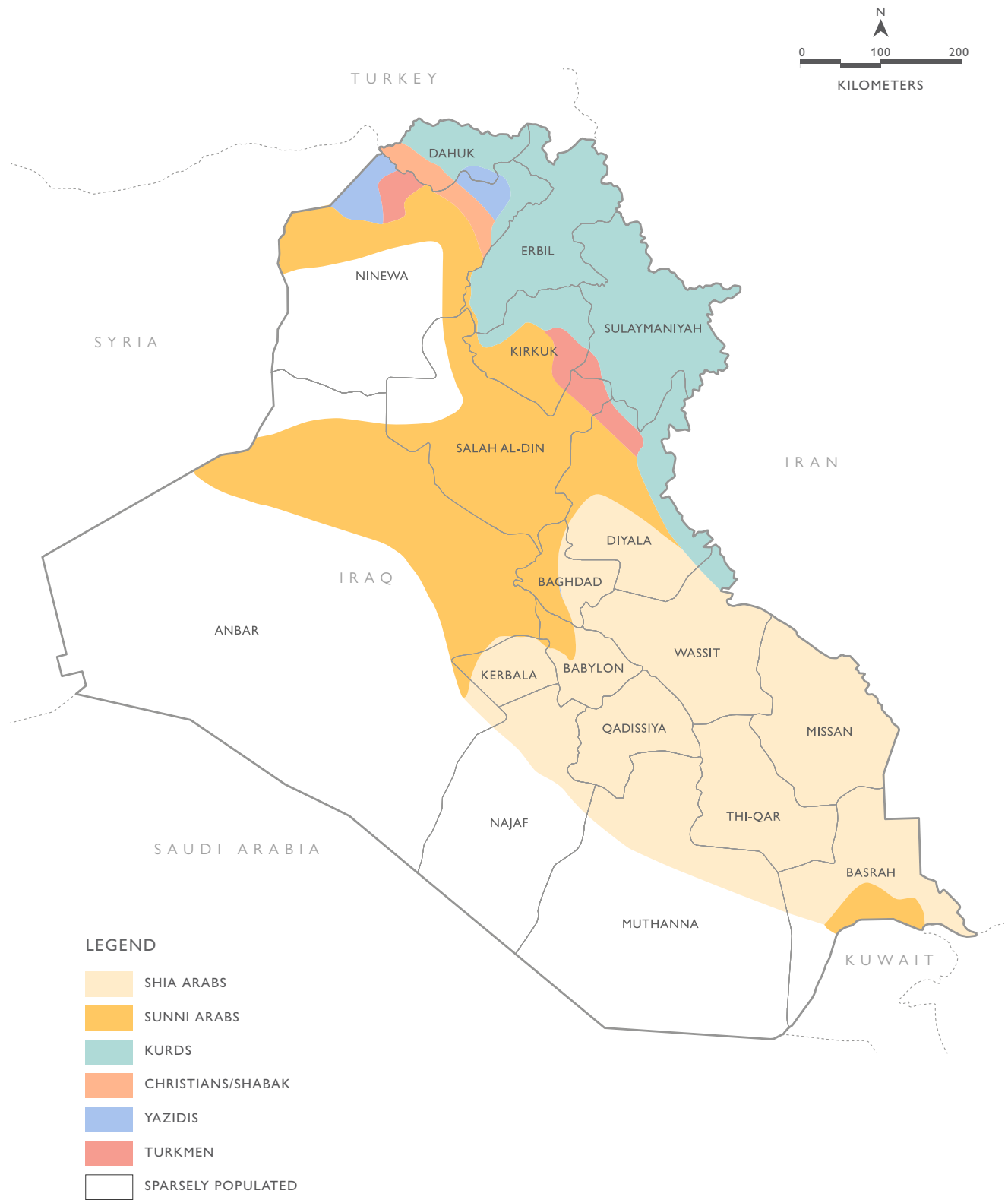
Shaded areas indicate where groups are mainly concentrated or constitute the majority population.
Sources: Daily Telegraph (UK). Base map: "Minority Crossroads: the future of ethno-religious minorities after ISIS, June 2017.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Years of instability and violence, which culminated with the assault of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) on Ninewa between 2014 and 2017, have left ethno-religious minorities in an unprecedented state of crisis, with many displaced from the Ninewa Plains and Sinjar. Since the retaking of most areas of Ninewa Governorate by Iraqi or Kurdish military forces, more than 1,7 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) have returned to their homes, but rates of return to Sinjar remain disproportionately low among Yazidis and Christians – many of whom express their intent to emigrate rather than to return to areas of origin.

Although migration is not new to ethno-religious minorities from Iraq, the current situation has reactivated discussions among and between these communities on their future and place in Iraq, including perspectives on how, and under which administration, areas of return should be managed. These discussions show fundamental divisions within ethno-religious minority communities, further compounded by the positions of political and religious leaders and identity politics.

This report aims to explore current positions among ethno-religious minorities to analyse how these positions influence decision-making on return and migration. Based on a number of qualitative interviews with community leaders in and outside Iraq, focus group discussions with various ethno-religious minorities in displacement contexts, and a variety of secondary data, this report provides an overview of the main divisions among ethno-religious communities.

The report finds that the way members of ethno-religious minorities identify themselves is what mostly influences these divisions. Definitions of identity have changed during displacement and are likely to continue shifting as the outcomes of the conflict unfold. This identity shift started taking shape with the US led invasion of Iraq in 2003, which resulted in the dominance of three major groups (Kurds, Shiites and Sunnis) over ethno-religious minorities. Years of violence and discrimination since 2003 and ISIL's territorial claim in 2014 led to the scattering of ethno-religious minorities across Iraq, subsequent protracted displacement and often migration abroad. ISIL's genocidal attack against the Yazidis in 2014 led community members to reconsider the basic components of their identity and to choose an identity that is less dependent on a geographic location or defined political narrative. While among Yazidis, identity politics are at

the core of inter-community divisions, the main split among Christians is between political and religious stakeholders. Christian communities (Chaldeans, Syriacs, Assyrians and Armenians) are fragmentated because of internal splits between the various Christian denominations and their multiple political parties.

Furthermore, discussions among ethno-religious communities often reveal a generational divide, with a disconnect between the established leadership –who are traditionally older– and younger generations, who are undergoing a process of identity change. This disconnect calls into question the representation of minorities by the current religious and political stakeholders. Internal identity divisions are further deepened by political competition at various levels which will ultimately define the fate of the areas of origin of Yazidis and Christians.

It is often reported that the main obstacles preventing the return of IDPs from ethno-religious minorities are a lack of infrastructure and services in areas of return, protection concerns and a general sense of instability. This report finds that at the heart of these obstacles is the political conflict about who ethno-religious minorities should be aligned with , which parties will dominate them and which ethno-religious identity trend will represent them. This conflict has created a context where the choice of return has become more complex and where the existential future of some minorities is at stake.

This report concludes that an administrative solution would enable minorities to manage their areas more independently and would provide elements for a sustainable return. Various scenarios for the administration of Sinjar and the Ninewa Plains are analysed and show how divisions on these administration scenarios reflect the dominant divisions on identities among ethno-religious minorities.

Another important factor this report addresses is the importance of trust building at various levels. A process of dialogue within ethno-religious minorities and other trust building exercises with other communities will contribute towards efforts to rebuild relations and establish stable social structures. Social structures within or between the minority groups should focus on challenging stereotypes and hate speech, ultimately providing an environment conducive to long-term normalization of the relationship between Christians and Shabaks in the Ninewa Plains and between Yazidis and Muslims in Sinjar, rather than quick-fixes with temporary results.

Trust building is considered one of the core challenges because ethno-religious communities have not only lost faith in their representatives, majority political blocks, the Kurdistan Regional Government or the Government of Iraq, but also in the international community. Discussions with ethno-religious minorities show that reconstruction and stabilization programming in Sinjar and the Ninewa Plains will not lead to the complete return of ethno-religious minorities unless there is a political settlement that includes consensus on genuine self-administration, provides guarantees of stability in these areas, and resolves the domination of ethno-religious minorities by majority parties. IDPs from ethno-religious minorities feel particularly frustrated because they don't have an independent representative – someone who is not subordinated to any of the majority blocks. The absence of meaningful political participation by ethno-religious minorities influences the future of their presence in their areas of origin as well as their decisions on return or emigration.

Mar Bahnam Church in Qaraqosh, Hamdaniyah. *Sarah Ali / IOM Iraq, 2019.*

ملخص تنفيذي

سنوات من عدم الاستقرار والعنف، بلغت ذروتها بإعتداءات الدولة الإسلامية في العراق والشام (داعش) على نينوى بين عامي ٢٠١٤ - ٢٠١٧، تركت الأقليات العرقية - الدينية في حالة أزمة لم يسبق لها مثيل، مع نزوح من سهل نينوى وسنجار. منذ استعادة القوات العسكرية العراقية والكردية لمعظم مناطق محافظة نينوى، عاد أكثر من ١,٧ مليون من النازحين داخلياً إلى ديارهم، لكن معدلات العودة إلى سنجار، ما تزال منخفضة، بشكل غير متناسب، بين الإيزيديين والمسيحيين - العديد منهم يعبرون عن نيتهم في الهجرة بدلاً من العودة إلى مناطقهم الأصلية.

على الرغم من إن الهجرة ليست بالأمر الجديد بالنسبة للأقليات العرقية والدينية العراقية، الإ إن الوضع الحالي نشط النقاش داخل /وفي ما بين هذه المجتمعات بشأن مستقبلهم ومكانتهم في البلاد، بما في ذلك، وجهات النظر بشأن كيفية إدارة مناطق انتشارهم وتركزهم، وتحت أي إدارة ستُدار مناطق العودة. تُظهر هذه المناقشات انقسامات جوهرية داخل مجتمعات الأقليات العرقية والدينية، فضلا عن مواقف الزعماء السياسيين والدينيين والسياسات المتعلقة بالهوية.

يهدف هذا التقرير إلى استكشاف المواقف الراهنة للأقليات العرقية والدينية، وتحليل ديناميات وتأثير هذه المواقف على صنع القرار بشأن العودة والهجرة. وبناءً على عدد من المقابلات النوعية مع قادة المجتمع في العراق وخارجه، ومناقشات مجموعة التركيز مع مختلف الأقليات العرقية والدينية ،في حالات النزوح، والإستعانة بمجموعة متنوعة من البيانات الثانوية، تقدم هذه الدراسة لمحة عامة عن الانقسامات الرئيسة بين المجتمعات العرقية والدينية. توصل التقرير، الى إن الطريقة التي يعرّف بها أفراد الأقليات العرقية والدينية أنفسهم، هي التي تؤثر، في الغالب، على هذه الانقسامات. لقد تغيرت تعاريف الهوية أثناء النزوح، ومن المرجح أن تستمر في التغير، عندما تُكشف نتائج النزاع. لقد بدأت الهوية بالتشكل مع الغزو الذي قادته الولايات المتحدة للعراق في عام ٢٠٠٣، والذي أدى إلى هيمنة ثلاث جماعات رئيسة (الأكراد والشيعة والسنة) على الأقليات العرقية والدينية. أدت سنوات من العنف والتمييز منذ عام ٢٠٠٣، ,والتطورات المرتبطة بإجتياح دعش لمناطق الأقليات العرقية الدينية في جميع أنحاء العراق، إلى تشتت الأقليات العرقية الدينية في جميع أنحاء العراق، فضلا عن النزوح الذي طال أمده، والهجرة إلى الخارج في غالب الأحيان. أدى الهجوم الذي قام به داعش ضد الإيزيديين، والإبادة الجماعية التي أرتكبها، إلى قيام أفراد المجتمع، بإعادة النظر في المكونات الأساسية لهويتهم، واختيار هوية أقل اعتماداً على الموقع الجغرافي أو مسار سياسي محدد. وفي حين تُشكّل السياسات المرتبطة بالهوية في سياق المجتمع الإيزيدي، جوهر الانقسامات داخل تقسيمات المجتمع، فإن الانقسام الرئيسي بين المسيحيين يتمحور في أصحاب المصلحة السياسيين والدينيين. المجتمعات المسيحية (الكلدان والسريان والآشوريون والأرمن) مجزأة، بسبب الانقسامات الداخلية بين الطوائف المسيحية المختلفة وأحزابهم السياسية العديدة.

علاوة على ما تقدم، غالباً ما تكشف النقاشات بين المجتمعات العرقية والدينية عن فجوة بين الأجيال، مع وجود حالة انفصال بين القيادة القائمة —الذين هم أكبر سناً بشكل تقليدي— والأجيال الشابة، الذين يخضعون لعملية تغير الهوية. يدعو هذا الإنفصال إلى إثارة الشكيك في مدى تمثيل الأقليات من قبل أصحاب المصلحة الدينيين والسياسيين الحاليين. يتم تعميق انقسامات الهوية الداخلية عن طريق التنافس السياسي

على مختلف المستويات، ويرتهن مصير المناطق الأصلية للأيزيديين والمسيحيين، بجوهر هذه الإنقسامات.

غالبًا ما يُقال إن العقبات الرئيسة التي تحول دون عودة الأشخاص النازحين داخلياً من الأقليات العرقية – الدينية هي الافتقار إلى البنية التحتية والخدمات في مناطق العودة، والقلق بشأن الحماية والشعور العام بعدم الاستقرار. توصلت هذه الدراسة إلى أن أساس هذه العوائق هو الصراع السياسي يتمحور حول المسار السياسي الذي يجب أن تتطابق معه الأقليات العرقية والدينية، وأي الأحزاب ستؤثر عليها، وأي اتجاه للهوية العرقية والدينية سيمثلها. لقد خلق هذا الصراع سياقاً أصبح فيه خيار العودة أكثر تعقيدًا، حيث يكون المستقبل الوجودي لبعض الأقليات على المحك.

يذهب التقرير، إلى أن الحل الإداري سيمكن الأقليات من إدارة مناطقهم بشكل أكثر استقلالية. ويتم تحليل سيناريوهات مختلفة لإدارة سنجار وسهول نينوى، على نحو يوضح الكيفية التي تنعكس فيها، هذه الإنقسامات، على الهويات بين الأقليات العرقية الدينية.

هناك عامل مهم آخر يتناوله التقرير، يتمثل بأهمية بناء الثقة على مختلف المستويات. ستساهم عملية الحوار داخل الأقليات العرقية والدينية وغيرها من ممارسات بناء الثقة مع المجتمعات الأخرى، في الجهود المبذولة لإعادة بناء العلاقات وإنشاء هياكل اجتماعية مستقرة. يجب أن تركز الهياكل الاجتماعية داخل مجموعات الأقليات، أو فيما بينها، على مواجهة النماذج النمطية وخطابات الكراهية، الأمر الذي يوفر في النهاية، بيئة مواتية، لعملية تطبيع طويلة الأجل، للعلاقة بين المسيحيين والشبك في سهول نينوى وبين الإيزيديين والمسلمين في سنجار، بدلاً من عمليات إصلاحية سريعة ذات نتائج مؤقتة.

يُعد بناء الثقة أحد التحديات الأساسية، لأن المجتمعات العرقية والدينية، لم تفقد الثقة، في ممثليها، أو الكتل السياسية ذات الأغلبية، أو حكومة إقليم كردستان، أو حكومة العراق فحسب، بل، وأيضًا، بالمجتمع الدولي. تشير المناقشات مع الأقليات العرقية - الدينية إلى أن برامج إعادة الإعمار وتحقيق الاستقرار في سنجار وسهول نينوى، لن تؤدي إلى عودة الأقليات الإثنية-الدينية، ما لم تكن هناك تسوية سياسية، تتضمن توافقًا في الآراء بشأن الإدارة الذاتية الحقيقية، وتوفر ضمانات للاستقرار في هذه المناطق، وإيجاد حل، للهيمنة على الأقليات العرقية الدينية من قبل أحزاب تمثل الأغلبية. يشعر الأشخاص النازحون داخلياً من الأقليات العرقية الدينية بالإحباط بشكل خاص لأنهم ليس لديهم ممثل مستقل—أي، ممثل، لا يخضع لأي من كتل الأغلبية. يؤثر غياب المشاركة السياسية للأقليات العرقية والدينية على مستقبل وجودهم في مناطقهم الأصلية وكذلك على قراراتهم بشأن العودة أو الهجرة.

INTRODUCTION

In Iraq, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) targeted diversity in Ninewa Governorate and committed massacres and ethnic cleansing against members of minority groups. Thousands of Christians, Yazidis and other minorities such as Shabaks and Turkmen displaced to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and to central and southern Iraq.

Emigration is increasing and threatening the future of Christian and Yazidi presence in Iraq. The paper will not address the factors that lead to minority migration, those associated with instability and insecurity, or other factors related to hate speech and discrimination against religious minorities. Rather, this paper will focus on analysing the often-overlooked debates on return and migration within minority communities.

These factors are reflected in the internal divisions among minority members on issues related to the future and fate of minorities, such as "identity" and the fate of "disputed areas" in Sinjar and the Ninewa Plains. The paper analyses discussions on the internal divisions between the Christian clergy and politicians, as well as the divisions between clergy members from the 14 officially recognized Christian denominations. These struggles hinder the unity of Christians. This paper also deals with the divisions among Yazidi stakeholders that result from their political allegiances and their different narratives of the Yazidi identity.

WHY IS AN ANALYSIS OF THE DYNAMICS IMPORTANT?

The internal divisions of minorities leave representatives of the international community in doubt: who represents the community of the concerned minority independently? What are the demands of minorities outside the political influences of major groups? Such divisions often send conflicting messages to both the Government of Iraq (GoI) and the international community, obscuring what minority members want. While the debates among political and religious stakeholders usually prevent having a unified discourse on identity, migration, return and related issues, these debates also become a tool in the conflict between major groups in the minority areas. This is particularly relevant in the disputed areas between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the central government in Baghdad – specifically in the Ninewa Plains for the Christians and Sinjar for the Yazidis. These divisions impact identity choices for minority members, the main determinants of such identity (religious, ethnic, regional, etc.), individual decisions regarding emigration or return, and the political choices regarding the annexation of minority areas to one of the parties of the conflict. The two communities of the study (Christians and Yazidis) are deeply divided and the current conflict is preventing the return of emigrants and displaced people and negatively impacts their perception of their future presence in the country.

Displaced children on Mount Sinjar. *Raber Y. Aziz / IOM Iraq, June 2018.*

METHODOLOGY

In addition to reviewing discussions on websites and articles published on issues pertinent to the paper's subject, the researcher interviewed various representatives of the religious minorities of Christians, Yazidis and Mandaeans in Baghdad, Maysan, Erbil, Bartella, Dohuk, Bashiqa, as well as in Istanbul over the past two years.

For this particular study, two hearing sessions were organized in Erbil on 4 August 2019, and included 18 representatives of the religious minorities of Christians and Yazidis, one representative of the Mandaean minority, and three representatives of different political groups of Shabaks (the second largest minority in the Ninewa Plains after Christians. The session provided the possibility to compare the views by asking the same questions to each group of representatives of different minorities (Yazidis, Christians, Mandaeans), and assess the nature of the relationship between these minorities and the views on relations with each other, return, and emigration. A second session was held at the Center of Genocide Studies at the University of Dohuk on 7 August 2019 and included 18 Yazidi stakeholders. After this session, the researcher selected several persons from the two hearing sessions for a more extensive interview to develop appropriate approaches on sustainable returns, which could be presented as recommendations to provide a more sustainable return for internally displaced persons (IDPs) and migrants. The two sessions and the interviews with stakeholders aimed at identifying the differences regarding the dynamics of displacement and return among different stakeholders to better understand the obstacles to return. This process also allowed for analysis of the different identity trends within the minority communities. The sessions evaluated participants' perceptions on minority representation at the official, social and religious levels and stakeholders were asked about how they see the future of minorities. Finally, the sessions addressed the effectiveness of current reconstruction and stabilization programmes in minority areas that aim to encourage return.

THE SENSITIVITY AROUND NUMBERS OF MINORITIES IN IRAQ

During the debates, stakeholders representing religious minorities often tended to hide the real number of remaining minority members in the country. Many tended to exaggerate the number of remaining members of their group, confusing the researcher. This tendency is related to the intention of the minority stakeholders to prevent their community from being perceived as dwindling, which, they believe, would further drive emigration in search for an alternative homeland. This tendency is common among most religious minorities but is most prominent among Mandaeans.

Girls in traditional clothing at an arts exhibition in Hamdaniyah. *Raber Y. Aziz / IOM Iraq, April 2018.*

The Case Of The Mandaeans

Migration has had the greatest impact on the Mandean religious minority, 90% of which left Iraq between 2003 and 2010. This exodus included Mandaean clergy and discourages the remaining Mandaeans inside Iraq. Many Mandaeans say that if clerical leaders are looking for a future outside the country, why should Mandean youth still stay in Iraq?[1]

Debates over migration within the Mandaean minority are dominated by fear of extinction due to alarmingly low demographics. This has also affected the level of political participation of Mandaeans in Iraq.[2] As a result of this migration, divisions between the Mandaeans who remained in Iraq and the Mandaeans abroad has grown. The most active stakeholders are now outside Iraq. While Mandaeans abroad have strongly criticized Mandaeans in Iraq for not managing their demands and representation, these emigrants are criticized for bearing responsibility for the poor representation back home, because they emigrated and dispersed, becoming disconnected from the challenges of the Iraqi reality.[3]

Another reason for keeping numbers vague can be attributed to fear of political marginalization, because political demands are usually linked to demographic weight. Mandaeans hide the fact that nearly 3000 Mandaeans are left in Iraq, while the head of the Mandaean community indicates in his television interviews that the number of remaining Mandaeans exceeds 15,000. "If politicians don't pay attention to our demands and they know that we are only a few thousand, what would they do if they knew that the numbers are actually much lower?"[4] the leader said in an interview. Christians and Yazidis have similar concerns. Among Christians, there is particular fear of losing quota seats, as the number of quota seats they have obtained has reached the highest number among religious minorities (five seats for Christians versus one for Yazidis and one for Mandaeans).

In retrospect, Yazidis use the number of remaining Yazidis (which, in their view, exceeds the number of remaining Christians) to support their demands to be recognized as the second religious group after Muslims.[5] They demand to raise the Yazidi quota seats for similar reasons. The Yazidi representative in the Iraqi Parliament stated that it is inconceivable that "there is one seat for the Yazidis, whereas Christians have five seats although there are fewer Christians than Yazidis."[6] In Iraq, exaggeration is often used when it comes to demographic presence, to push a given minority to the status of a "majority group," comparable to the three majority groups of Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds. In the case of Turkmen, representatives of the Turkmen minority refuse to be described as a minority, and request to be regarded as the third ethnic component after Arabs and Kurds. As one Turkmen politician mentioned in an interview with the researcher, "we cannot be brought together with the rest of the minorities in one cooking pot!"[7] Demographic rhetoric is also used to support demands of the Shabak in the Ninewa Plains, who insist they represent a demographic majority compared to Christians, who have become a minority.[8] These claims affect their Christian neighbors, causing worries about demographic change of Christian areas. The most frequently mentioned term in discussions between Christians and the Shabaks is "demographic change," causing ongoing tensions between Shabaks and Christians.

---

1   Only four Mandaean clerics remained in Iraq because of the immigration trends. Other clerics have emigrated in succession to European countries or Australia, or they are in Turkey or Jordan temporarily waiting for their asylum. Mandaeans do not have accurate statistics for Mandaeans outside or inside Iraq, but there are more accurate figures for those who are in Kurdistan. According to the representative of the Mandaeans in the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, the number of Mandaeans in Erbil is 400 Mandaeans, while the number reaches 35-40 Mandaeans in Sulaymaniyah and 4 people in Dohuk.

2   Based on interviews with Khalid Roumi, a former MP for the Mandaean quota, and the official Mandaean representative at the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs in the Kurdistan Region, Erbil, 4-8-2019 Star Jabbar Hilu, head of the Mandaean ethno-religious group in Iraq and the world, Baghdad, July 25, 2019.

3   In response to these challenges, a document entitled "Mandaean document of hope" was issued Mandean diaspora; the document focuses on the need to convene the Mandaean Hope Conference to analyze the real dilemmas facing the ethno-religious group, and to develop a working strategy for the community for the next 30 years until 2050, with a focus on young people as young as 30 and striving to regulate the work of the clergy and their unity, prevent the overlap of the powers of religious leaders with civil leaders, and unify the work of Mandaean civil institutions, through forming a higher regulatory body which includes representatives from them in Iraq, Iran and in the diaspora while maintaining the specificities of each hand, and emphasizing that one party doesn't have the sole right of the power of decision. This conference took place on August 16-18 in the Netherlands.

4   Star Jabbar Hilu, head of the Mandaean ethno-religious group in Iraq and the world, Baghdad, July 25, 2019.

5   Khairi Buzani, Director of the Yazidi Department in the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs in the Kurdistan Region, Erbil, 5-8-2019.

6   Saeb Khedr, representative of the Yazidi Quota in the Federal Parliament, Baghdad, July 30, 2019.

7   The term was used by a Turkmen activist, Zahid al-Bayati, in an interview with the researcher in Baghdad on July 30, 2019.

8   Interview with representatives of the Shabaks in Bartella on 3-8-2019.

I. DISCUSSION TRENDS AND THE NATURE OF DIVISIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE CHRISTIAN MINORITIES

Since 2003, Christians have faced the consequences of their diminishing demographic presence – due to their continuous emigration. Of the 1.4 million Christians in Iraq before 2003, only 250,000–300,000 remain.[9]

However, it is generally estimated that the actual number is much lower, approximately 120,000–150,000 Christians in Iraq and the KRI. The director of the Christian Department in the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs in the KRI confirmed in an exclusive interview a total of 140,000 Christians remain.[10]

Analysing the nature of debates within Christian communities on migration and displacement needs to consider the existence of 14 Christian denominations, more than 12 Christian parties and six armed factions. This multiplicity results in different opinions and perceptions, and makes a unified standpoint on issues related to emigration and return increasingly difficult. The most important issue among all Christian groups is the creation of a safe area for Christians in the Ninewa Plains, which is linked to facilitating the return of IDPs and Christian migrants. This idea links conditional return to the establishment of a safe area in the Ninewa Plains under international protection and is often mentioned in discussions among Christians at home (in Iraq and KRI) and dominates discussions among Christians abroad.

CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

Discussions about the Christian identity are a sensitive topic among Christians. The lack of agreement on a unified designation of Christians shows their failure to achieve a united position on such a core issue. Therefore, an analysis of the manifestations of these divisions is necessary to understand the fragmentation of Christian views on migration or on returning to specific areas such as the Ninewa Plains.

The Nature Of The Chaldean / Assyrian Divide

The national Christian confessional groups (Armenians, Chaldeans, Syriacs, Assyrians) and their denominations (Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant) have had an impact on the multiplicity of political parties and groups representing different Christian denominations. To overcome this obstacle, after 2003, the political representatives of the Assyrians succeeded in presenting a unified narrative of the Christian identity of the "Assyrian Chaldo-Syriac people." This relatively long name has attempted to overcome the divisive multiplicity, to present a single identity or body that is easily represented at the political level and can convey specific demands. This designation received general Christian acceptance during the early years of the USA-backed political process, but is no longer accepted by representatives of all Christian political groups. Particularly, those representing the Chaldeans and Syriacs[11] have been caught up in the struggle to "seize identities" for political purposes. In contrast to the "Arabization" of minorities by the Baathist regime before 2003, the term "Kurdization" of minorities emerged after 2003 to refer to policies of recruiting minorities and changing their identity in favor of achieving Kurdish goals. In the Christian context, the term "Assyrianazation" is used by Christians to express the dominant Assyrian move to use the identity of Christians of all sects in favor of the Assyrian national interests. Christian groups opposed to the Assyrianazation of Christians, also oppose the claims of representatives of some Assyrian political groups.[12] This opposition became more prominent when Assyrian parties achieved an important political presence and obtained seats in the parliament and ministerial positions. The lack of agreement on a unified designation for the national designations (Chaldean-Assyrian-Syriac-Armenian) led church leaders such as Cardinal Sacco to present the

9   Telephone interview with Father Amir Jiji Dominiki, advisor to the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in Vatican, July 29, 2019.

10 Interview with Khalid Al-Bir, Director of the Christian Department at the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs in the Kurdistan Region, Erbil, 5-8-2019.

11 Note that the name itself excludes Armenians, Arab Christians and Kurdish Christians.

12 Telephone interview with the members of the Chaldean Unified Forum, Michigan - Detroit, 30 July 2019.

"Christian component" as an extensive and alternative designation to include all Christian groups, individuals, parties and denominations.[13] This tendency has created an unavoidable clash between those who focus on the religious determinant of identity and those political stakeholders who focus on the national determinant.

The National Demands Of Armenians And Syriacs

In addition to the objections of the Chaldean political parties and entities to the dominance of the Assyrian political block after 2003, Armenians and Syriacs have also made separate demands. These two groups feel excluded and misrepresented since the writing of the Constitution, subsequent elections, and formation of successive governments after the USA invasion of Iraq. The Armenian Orthodox are an example of the overlap between the ethnic and religious sides. Although they are one of the officially recognized Christian denominations,[14] the Armenian Orthodox have not formed a political group that can express their independent identity. As a result of the poor representation of their demands by Christian political groups, Armenians tend to present themselves ethnically as representatives of Armenian nationalism, demanding a quota on a national basis. Armenians are demanding to raise their political representation to the level of ministers in the KRG, and to get a seat in the Federal Parliament.[15] The economic difficulties in Armenia and the significant economic interests of Armenians inside Iraq discourages emigration – compared to other Christian denominations.

Syriacs And The Demands For Recognition

Discussions regarding the Syriac demands are dominated by a sense of injustice, as they see their exclusion from the Iraqi Constitution of 2005 as a deliberate marginalization by Christians (Assyrians) in the Constitution Writing Committee. Inclusion is important to them because it relates to calls for self-administration, considering that the inhabitants of Bartella, Qaraqosh and other parts of the Ninewa Plains are predominantly Catholic and Orthodox Syriacs. In 2015, the heads of the Syriac denominations in Iraq called on the GoI to include the designation "Syriac" in the Iraqi Constitution under Article 125 along with the Chaldeans and Assyrians. The request was made in a letter signed by four Catholic and Orthodox Syriac bishops, representing the heads of the Syriac denominations in Iraq and the KRI.[16]

Chaldean Assyrian Objection

The Chaldean and Assyrian churches rejected this demand vehemently.[17] Such a heated debate about authenticity in the discourse of Christian denominations in recent years has turned into futile competition, using historical interpretations to justify political demands in today's political context. Thus, the divisions over identity remain inevitable in light of the different views of Armenian, Chaldean, Assyrian and Syriac stakeholders, on the future of the Christian presence inside Iraq.

THE MILITARIZATION OF THE CHRISTIAN GROUPS

The escalating levels of violence in the Ninewa Plains and areas surrounding Christian villages in Mosul by al-Qaeda first, and more recently by ISIL, have led to the establishment of new security actors to defend the Ninewa Plains. The most prominent example is when the KRG, in 2015, decided to establish a Christian militia in the Ninewa Plains, at the initiative of the former Minister of Finance in the KRG, Sarkis Aghajan. The forces consist of 3,000 Christian individuals whose salaries are paid by Aghajan.[18] The establishment of these forces broke the Christians' commitment to stay as far as possible from political conflicts and direct confrontations since the Assyrian massacre in 1933. The decision was, however, only the expression of the Christian's desire to build protection forces such as the police – not armed confrontational forces. The passive attitude of Christians throughout the history of their relationship with the modern Iraqi state (since its founding in 1921) changed after ISIL invaded Christian villages and lands in the Ninewa Plains in 2014. Christians began to establish armed forces, and

---

13 Interview with Patriarch Mar Rafael I Sacco, Bagdad, 29-7-2019.

14 A supplement of the Religious Welfare System (the officially recognized religious sects in Iraq, No. 32 of 1981).

15 Interview with Yervant Aminian, former representative of the Armenian Quota in the Kurdistan Regional Parliament, Erbil, 4-8-2019.

16 Text message from the heads of the Syriac ethno-religious group in Iraq, dated 21-10-2015.

17 The Syriacs are demanding the Iraqi government to include their name in the Constitution, available on the website of the Chaldean Patriarchate on the following link: http://saint-adday.com/?p=11786 . The Chaldeans and Assyrians strongly objected to the formula of the Syriac demands because of the provocative text in the letter of the Syriacs that "the name of the Chaldeans is irrelevant to the ancient Chaldeans, but in the middle of the fifteenth century, Pope Eugenius IV called a group of Nestorian Syriacs who followed the Church of Rome. The same case for the Assyrian brothers, as they are not related to the ancient ones, they were also named with this name in the late nineteenth century by a British missionary mission which found them in Oromia, Iran. Today, they are known as the Old Church of the East, or the Assyrian or Gathleic Church of the East and their language was and still is Syriac, it is neither Assyrian nor ancient Chaldean.

18 Saad Salloum, The prospects of pluralism and the future of citizenship in Iraq in light of the current transformations, a paper presented to the Carnegie Institute for Peace, Beirut, on 29-7-2015.

now have six paramilitary units or factions. Some of these factions belong to Christian parties, and some were established as armed organizations, then turned into political organizations to participate in the elections under the influence of one of the major political groups.[19]

In light of the decline of the Christians' trust in the Iraqi federal government and the KRG, they must consider independent choices without excluding cooperation with the authorities. Christians realize that majority groups (Arabs or Kurds) have goals that do not always match theirs. Kurdish politicians are aiming to include the Ninewa Plains lands in the KRI map, while the federal government considers these lands as areas administratively under the federal government, although practically subject to Kurdish authority.[20] Before ISIL entered the Ninewa Plains, the KRG controlled these areas. After the failure of the referendum in the KRI in 2017 and its retaking from ISIL, these areas came under the authority of the central government. This administrative confusion is affecting returns: how can Christian IDPs want to return permanently to areas from which they were displaced while they are a point of an ongoing conflict between Erbil and Baghdad?

This conflict partially explains the establishment of Christian armed factions. The formation of these forces opened the possibility of returning to hundreds of Assyrians from abroad, to fight with their fellow believers and participate in the retaking of the lands of Ninewa Plains. Christians in the diaspora were then more open to accept the idea of the creation of a Christian area in the Ninewa Plains.[21] The establishment of these groups, though, also attracted some adventurers who sought to have a political role by forming an armed faction within the Peshmerga forces or the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). As a result, debates in the Christian context were dominated by three scenarios, on which Christian political parties and groups remain deeply divided: 1) Forming armed groups under the control of the Peshmerga to liberate Christian areas and falling under the control of the KRG; 2) Forming armed groups under the control of the federal government (or the PMF) to achieve the same purpose and dealing with the choice of forming an autonomous governorate in the Ninewa Plains; 3) Forming armed groups with the push for the independence of their regions under international management or guarantees by

the international community for their independent status, in an attempt to get rid of the Arab-Kurdish conflict over these areas.

While Christians with their 14 sects, their 12 political parties and armed factions are divided between these three scenarios, each scenario is fraught with difficulties and challenges on the ground. Therefore, different approaches have emerged, reflecting a deep internal conflict between the political groups representing the different Christian denominations on the one hand, and the Christian religious leaders on the other.

THE IMPACT OF MILITARIZATION

The creation of armed militias is debated between clerics and politicians. Cardinal Louis Sacco insisted that the protection of Christians must come from the state and the creation of militias based on ethnic and religious grounds could destroy the country. The Christian religious leader fears that the spread of this phenomenon could deepen sectarianism and contribute to escalating the conflict, becoming a card in the hands of Islamic jihadist groups that want to revive the Crusades.[22]

On 18 July 2019, the US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control announced new sanctions against four Iraqi citizens under Executive Order 13818. The decision marks the first use of the Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act to target the perpetrators of grave human rights violations and corruption in Iraq and included Rayan Chaldean (Commander of the Christian Babylon Brigades) and Waad al-Qado (Commander of the Shabak 30th Brigade). Both are leaders of two influential armed factions in the Ninewa Plains, and they ignored the GoI's orders to withdraw from the Christian areas in the Ninewa Plains. According to some reports, their violations prevented the return of displaced people and hindered reconstruction activities.[23]

This was the first time that United States sanctions have targeted a Christian person. In a related context, the Chaldean Church reiterated its previous position of rejecting the creation of armed Christian factions. In a statement, Cardinal Sacco categorically rejected "The existence of any armed faction or movement bearing a special Christian character. On the contrary, we encourage the children of the Christian faith to enroll in official security services in the army and federal

---

19 1) The Babylon battalions, related to the Christian Movement in Iraq 2) the guards of the Popular Assembly, 3) the Assyrian Democratic Movement, 4) the Assyrian National Party, 5) the Ninewa Protection Units and 6) the Lions of Babylon.

20 For more on these difficulties, see: Saad Salloum, The Book of Christians in Iraq - a comprehensive history and current challenges, Masarat Foundation, Baghdad, 2014, MB. 397-404.

21 Call to Arms: Christians Joining Forces Against ISIL. Available at: http://www.aleteia.org/en/world/article/reverse-jihad-christians-joining-forces-against-ISIL-5899858875514880

22 Edwar Pentin, Patriarch Sako: Christian Militias Would Escalate Iraq crisis. Available at: http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/patriarch-sako-christian-militias-would-escalate-iraq-crISIL/#ixzz3gRZAHS5X

23 Michael Knights, Sanctions on Iraqi Political Figures: Shaping the Impact and Message, July 19, 2019. Available at: https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/sanctions-on-iraqi-political-figures-shaping-the-impact-and-message

police, and in the Peshmerga forces for those in the KRI." He pointed out that the church respects the personal decision of individuals to belong to the PMF or political action, but not the forming of a Christian faction because armed factions in the name of Christianity contradict the spirituality of the Christian religion, which calls for love, tolerance, forgiveness and peace.[24] The United States sanctions have revealed another dimension of the conflict over disputed minority areas, going beyond the Baghdad-Erbil conflict to become a manifestation and impact of the United States-Iran conflict.

Ongoing Debates On The Disputed Areas

Christian stakeholders do not have a clear roadmap regarding the future of their areas in the Ninewa Plains, which are under the influence of the Arab-Kurdish conflict, and have been used as an influential card in the quest for the independence of the Kurdistan region.

The idea of administrative independence for Christians is that they would be given the right to run their political, economic and educational affairs independently. This is the subject of the articles on the rights of minorities in the Iraqi Constitution. The Constitution states that "The federal system in the Republic of Iraq consists of a capital, regions, decentralized governorates and local administrations."[25],[26] In an article titled "Local administration", it is mentioned that this Constitution guarantees the administrative, political, cultural and educational rights of different nationalities such as Turkmen, Chaldeans, Assyrians and other components, and this shall be regulated by law.[27] But this approach clashes with the ambition of the KRG to include the Ninewa Plains as part of the KRI; the KRG would not object to an administratively independent area or even a Christian governorate, on the condition that it be put under the authority of the KRG and become part of its territory.

Map 2: Iraq – Ninewa Plains IDP Crisis (6 June – 7 August)
Successive Phases of Crisis and Displacement of Christian Minorities in the Ninewa Plains
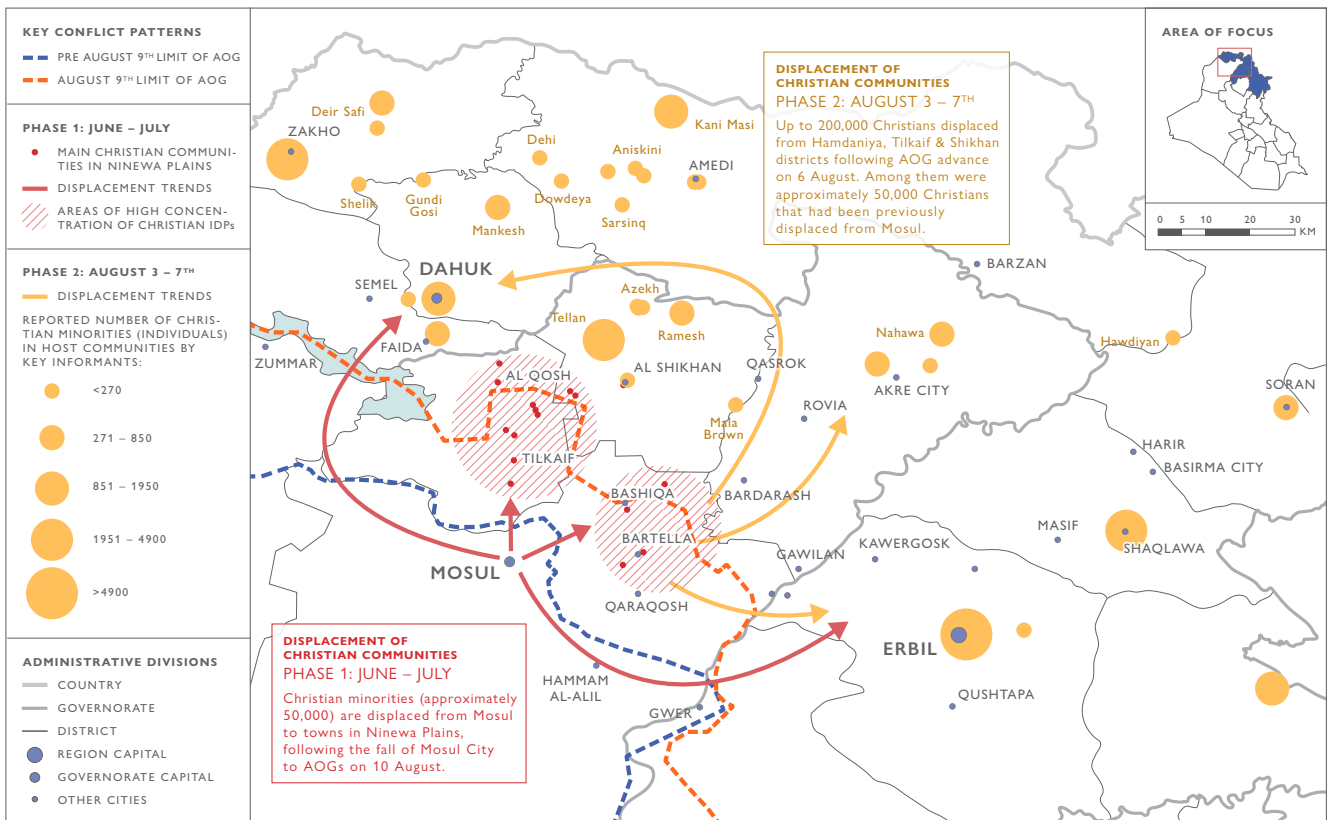
Base map by REACH. Data, designations and boundaries contained on this map are not warranted to be error-free and do not imply acceptance by the REACH partners, associates or donors mentioned on this map. Populated places: US NIMA. Administrative boundaries: GADM/OCHA/HIC 2011. IDP Numbers: REACH Field Team, OCHA, IOM. Minority Areas: nealrauhauser.wordpress.com. Projection: GCS WGS 1984. Contact: iraq@reach-initiative.org. File: IRQ_REF_KRI_NinewaPlains.

24 The Chaldean Church rejects the formation of an armed Christian faction, the Chaldean Patriarchate Website https://saint-adday.com/?p=33613

25 Article 116 of the Iraqi Constitution of 2005.

26 Articles 117 to 124 of the Iraqi Constitution of 2005.

27 Article 125 of the Iraqi Constitution of 2005.

II. DISCUSSION TRENDS AND THE NATURE OF DIVISIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE YAZIDI MINORITY

Yazidi migration is more complicated to analyse than Christian or Mandaean migration because of the genocidal attacks perpetrated against Yazidis by ISIL. The 2014 attacks on Yazidis in Sinjar were followed by internal displacement, with many Yazidis living for years in camps in the KRI.

Yazidis are currently struggling to plan their future: returning to Sinjar, settling permanently in areas of displacement, or migrating permanently outside Iraq. The latest figures according to the statistics of the Office of Kidnapped and Rescued Persons[28] show that there were about 550,000 Yazidis in Iraq in 2014. ISIL's invasion of Sinjar resulted in 1,293 casualties, orphaned 2,745 children and saw 6,417 people (3,547 women and 2,869 men)[29] kidnapped. Another 360,000 Yazidis became displaced.[30] While other minorities also suffered at the hands of ISIL, Yazidis as a group were the worst affected by the ISIL conflict. Discussions related to return or settlement choices for Yazidi IDPs are influenced by various factors, such as the situation on the ground in Sinjar, the political conflict in Sinjar and the changes in the way Yazidis identify themselves in terms of ethnicity and religion.

THE SITUATION ON THE GROUND IN SINJAR

Sinjar can be divided into two parts. There is a difference in the level of security in northern Sinjar (Al-Shimal), and southern Sinjar (Qahtaniyah). Sinuni, in Al-Shimal sub-district, was retaken in 2015 and there has been a gradual return of IDPs, supported by the Yazidi community and international and local organizations. However, the retaking of Qahtaniyah was delayed until the end of 2017 and there are greater challenges in the return of IDPs because of the history conflict with ISIL, the level of destruction and the proximity to local populations whom Yazidis regard as "ISIL collaborators."[31] While displaced Yazidis are very hesitant to return to their land, many Muslim Arabs from Sinjar have returned. Therefore, many Yazidis feel they are victims of a plan to divide Sinjar between Yazidis in the north of the district and Arabs in the south.[32] Meanwhile, Sinjar town is still destroyed and lacks the necessary infrastructure to provide for the most basic needs of returnees. The poor health and education services discourage return. The area is still contaminated with explosives, mines and remnants of combat operations, and the homes of many of those who left have been booby-trapped. This situation requires a major campaign to remove these debris and explosive remanence, and many returnees have already been killed by unexploded ordnances.

The security situation is unstable, as returnees have to deal with several security bodies that are politically linked to parties. There is no single official political body that can be dealt with, and in light of the multiplicity of actors in Sinjar, if returnees are under attack and need help from the authorities, they do not know who to turn to. The security breaches and military skirmishes between the conflicting parties in Sinjar that occasionally take place reflect this volatile situation. In addition, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) has been bombarded by Turkey, and bombardment has prompted fear among the civilian population. Return is also related to justice issues, especially as some of the perpetrators –or those involved with them or their collaborators– of crimes against the Yazidis are still present in these areas and have not faced investigation or prosecution. Yazidis point out that ISIL collaborators move freely in south Sinjar and adjacent areas, such as Baaj. In this context, legal action against perpetrators would encourage the return of IDPs. For those who were victims of ISIL's genocidal attack, Sinjar has become a crime scene rather than a place to where they can go back, and memory will remain fraught with this association between crime and place.

---

28 Established in October 2014 under the KRG leadership.

29 Interview with Hussein al-Qaedi, the director of the Rescue Office of the Kidnapped Yazidis in the governorate of Dohuk on 7-8-2019.

30 See https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=20395&LangID=E

31 Interview with Husam Abdullah, the director of the Yazidi Organization for Documentation, Erbil, 4-8-2019.

32 Interview with Talal Haskani, an activist from Sinjar, Dohuk, 6-8-2019.

CHANGES IN YAZIDI IDENTITIES

Discussions about changes in Yazidi IDP identity and their choices during displacement illustrate the factors that discourage return. There is a desire not to return because the situation of IDPs has improved during displacement in many respects. Such a reality is rarely highlighted in public discussions with non-Yazidis or in the media because of the pressures to conform to the prevailing picture of the tragedy of Yazidis, revolving around extermination and displacement. The situation of many young people of Sinjar has improved after displacement, as they completed their studies in Dohuk, and many secured jobs that provide them with a steady income.[33] Furthermore, immigration for Yazidis has become easier than before and Yazidi emigrants regularly send money to their families, which has improved the economic situation of many Yazidi families in Iraq. This financial factor is pushing emigrants to stay abroad, and for those in displacement, not to return.[34] Yazidis' skills have clearly developed in their new environments, as they have acquired new experiences in the labor market and have developed their capabilities to suit the requirements of this market. Many of them are now working with international or local organizations dealing with the situation of Yazidis and other related issues, and others have the possibility of working in administrative jobs in the government and security and engaging in the service and tourism sectors, among others.

In this context, Yazidi women focus on the improvement of personal freedoms in displacement, as their freedom in the displacement area is perceived to be greater than that in the conservative environment of Sinjar. Displacement locations offer new opportunities for women in terms of work and social mixing space and personal choices. Women can now compete with men in the labor market in sectors such as government jobs and local and international organizations, which has expanded their choices. One Yazidi woman said: "We only knew domestic work and serving men", while another one said: "I can wear jeans and make-up, something I didn't know at all in Sinjar."[35] These new freedoms influence many Yazidi girls. Some Yazidi women say that they now compete with Yazidi men in the labor market because they lost their main male breadwinner, which forced many of them to work and socialize, and this in turn raised their self-confidence. Yazidi women have now developed ways of dealing with other religious groups, after fear and hesitation used to control these relationships.[36]

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF DISPLACEMENT

Like in many war economies, a new class of stakeholders has emerged, linked to the conflict and the resulting massive displacement. Displacement has provided opportunities for local economies, in what we might call "the political economy of displacement."Local businessmen are able to generate quick profits as a result of displacement through rents, good, cheap labour and services to or from IDPs.

In this context, the "displacement economy" contributed to the relative recovery in the KRI through the provision of supplies and food for IDPs, especially as this assistance is purchased from the local market in Dohuk. For instance, the regular money transfers released by the Iraqi Ministry of Migration and Displacement supported the local banking sector and local residents benefited from employment opportunities in humanitarian assistance.[37] Based on the above, the political economy of displacement is a factor that discourages returns. Eventual return threatens contractors as well as Yazidi politicians, traders and other stakeholders with interests related to IDPs.

Electoral votes are another opportunity created by displacement. The number of displaced people from Sinjar, over 300,000, is relevant for the electoral process and a large number of electoral votes could resolve the election battle for the ruling Kurdish party. Yazidi activists in Erbil, Dohuk and Bashiqa testified that IDPs were under pressure to vote for a specific list and that humanitarian aid is used to influence votes during elections. In the words of a Yazidi activist, "it is easy to get what you want from the displaced people with a bottle of water."[38] IDPs provide cheap labor, and add vitality to the tourism sector; they are also described as having a good level of confidence and performance, which is appreciated by employers. Economic stakeholders now depend on "displacement economy" which also, for instance, provided hard currency during the five-year political / economic crisis between the central government and the KRG.

33 Interview with Maisar al-Adani, the rescue center of the kidnapped Yazidis, Dohuk, 7-8-2019.

34 Interview with Farouk Sheikh Elias, Bazra, on 7-8-2019.

35 Focus Group Discussion with Yazidi Youth in Dohuk, 7-08-2019.

36 Interview with Hadiya Hussein, a member of the Higher Committee of the Lalish Cultural Center in Dohuk, 7-8-2019.

37 Interview with Uday Cruz, a Yazidi activist, Dohuk, 6-8-2019.

38 Interview with Yazidi activist Ghanem Elias, from the Olive Branch Organization, Erbil, on 4-8-2019.

DISCUSSION ON YAZIDI IDENTITIES

The power struggle between the major groups (Kurds, Shiites, Sunnis) pushed Yazidis to further fragmentation and disagreement over their identity, influenced by the conflict over the disputed territories between the central government and the KRG, similar to the conflict experienced by Christians in the Ninewa Plains. This has resulted in shifting identities among Yazidi communities, summarized below.

Sinjar City. *Vanessa Okoth-Obbo / IOM Iraq, 2019.*

Yazidis are Kurds

The official Kurdish standpoint is to describe Yazidis as authentic Kurds. In one of the meetings of former KRG President, Massoud Barzani, with important figures in Sheikhan district, Barzani confirmed that no one can impose any identity on the Yazidis, stressing that they are "authentic Kurds."[39] Because the ruling party in Erbil exerts influence on the spiritual council in Sheikhan, the latter adopted this stance as well. The proponents of this position justify this by stating that Yazidis are part of the Kurdish geography, that the language spoken by the Yazidis (the most important determinant of identity) is Kurdish (especially the language of religious texts and prayers), and that the Yazidi religion is the religion of the original Kurds before the majority of them converted to Islam.[40] One of the positive results of this position is the reduction of hatred and tensions between Muslims and Yazidis in the KRI, as it has contributed to creating a unified national base, although the political consequences of this narrative provokes an intense internal Yazidi controversy. The debate is mainly related to the lack of independence of Yazidi representatives in Kurdish parties, such as in the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), and the limited representation of Yazidi interests in general under the umbrella of Kurdish parties. Similarly, Yazidis in KRG institutions are always seen as representatives of Kurdish parties. Their claims that the KRG should control Yazidi-majority areas officially under authority of the GoI (such as Sinjar and Baashiqa, but also Sheikhan, which is controlled by Peshmerga) are seen as part of the official KRG standpoint. As for the issues of emigration and the return of IDPs, the views of the Yazidis in KRG leadership positions are in line with the official KRG position that KRG control is a prerequisite for return of Yazidis to their areas.

Yazidis are Part of the Identity of the Arab Majority

The Ba'ath regime tried to Arabize Yazidis by imposing an Arab identity, which resulted in a split between a group in favor of that Arabization, represented by the prince Bayzidi al-Emawi (who was officially appointed as a prince of the religious group in 1980) and another group, against the Arab identity, represented by the previous prince, Tahsin Bek.[41] Part of the current Yazidi establishment is still loyal to the Arab identity, while representatives of the factions loyal to the Kurdish have developed a narrative to counter this.

---

39 The President of the Kurdistan Region: We will not accept anyone to impose any identity on the Yazidis because they are genuine Kurds, the official website of the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq at the link: http://www.krg.org/a/print.aspx?l=14&smap=010000&a=27533

40 Interview with Karim Suleiman, a senior advisor to the Higher Council of the Yazidis, on various dates from 2018 to 2019.

41 Details of the division are available in Saad Salloum's book, the Yazidis in Iraq, Memory, Beliefs, Collective Identity, 2016.

The pro-Arab identity prince promotes the Arabism of the Yazidis (Anwar Muawiya) and stands against attempts to "Kurdicize" Yazidis.[42] In his view, imposing a Kurdish identity is an attempt by Kurdish political parties to strip Yazidis of their Iraqi identity: "The fact that some Yazidis speak Kurdish does not mean that they belong to the ethnic nationality of the Kurds. Not all Arabic speakers are ethnically Arabs."[43]

The pro-Arab prince reiterated this stance after Sinjar's occupation by ISIL fighters in 2014, blaming "the Kurdistan Democratic Party" and its leadership for abandoning the protection of Yazidis when the Peshmerga withdrew from Sinjar.[44] These positions were reiterated in other occasions, with accusations that the Kurdish authorities tried to Kurdicize Yazidis.[45]

Map 3: Iraq – Sinjar IDP Crisis (3 August – 14 August) — Succesive Phases of Crisis and Displacement Trends
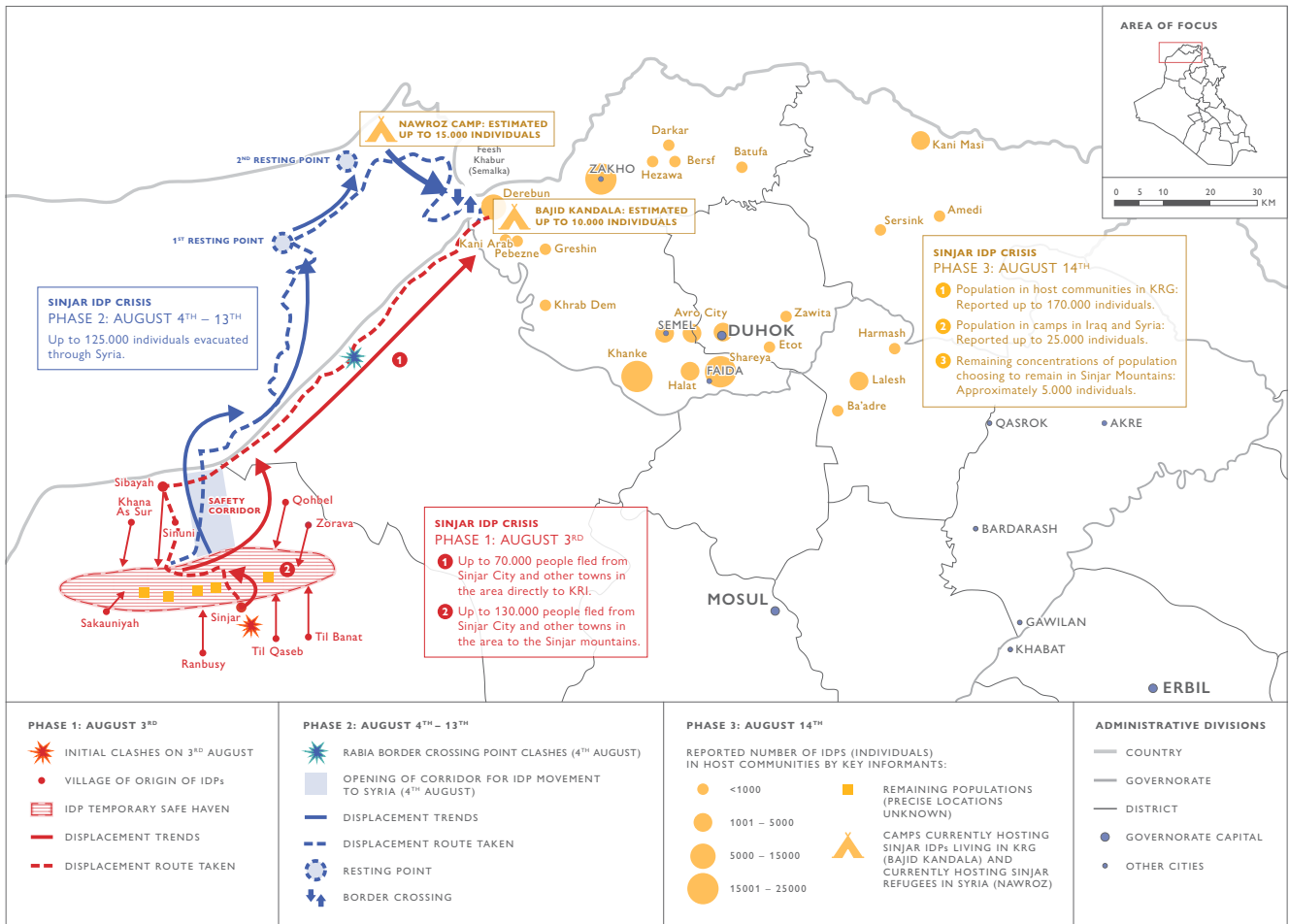
Base map by REACH. Data, designations and boundaries contained on this map are not warranted to be error-free and do not imply acceptance by the REACH partners, associates or donors mentioned on this map. Data Sources: IDP Displacement Route: REACH Field Teams. IDP Numbers: REACH Field Teams, OCHA, IOM. Coordinate System: WGS 1984 UTM Zone 38N. Projection: Transverse Mercator. File: IRQ_Duhok_IDPind_KI_June2014withdots. Contact: reach.mapping@impact-initiatives.org

---

42 Prince of the Yazidi ethno-religious group resolves its national affiliation: An interview conducted by Intisar Al-Alusi with Prince Anwar Muawiya published on the following link: http://www.al-Yazidi.net/Arabic.htm

43 Muawiya Al-Emawi, the identity of the Yazidi ethno-religious group: between history and politics: It has ancient Iraqi roots. Its name is Umayyad and it has nothing to do with the Kurds. An article published on the following link: http://www.furkono.com/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=12280

44 The prince of the Yazidi ethno-religious group: Yazidis are not Kurds and we will demand an international investigation into the crime of ethnic cleansing against the Yazidis by the ISIL and the betrayal of the Peshmerga. Available on the following link: http://www.al-moharer.net/mohhtm/anwar_mouawiyah12-11-14_307.htm

45 Ibid.

Pushing Towards Religious Uniqueness

The politicization of the Yazidi identity led to the adoption of a compromise narrative that affirms the Yazidi unique identity within a Kurdish context. The term "Yazidi uniqueness" seeks to give the Yazidis a minimum of identity independence without provoking the ire of the Kurdish national current in both Yazidi and non-Yazidi parties.[46] This was the position of the previous Yazidi prince,[47] who stressed that Yazidis are Kurds, but that they are unique and have rights, that this uniqueness must be respected, and that these rights must be guaranteed so that Yazidis are not considered Kurds.[48] However, the prince modified this narrative after the ISIL attack on Sinjar, noting that Yazidis should maintain their religion and nationality, and describing Kurds as friends.[49] This statement reflects the extent to which the Yazidis have lost faith in Muslims (whether Arabs or Kurds) and the weakness of the "middle-ground" narrative. A new narrative emphasizing the independence of Yazidis for the first time in their contemporary history following the ISIL attack is becoming increasingly influential among young stakeholders.[50] It is worth mentioning that the new prince is pro-Kurdish, leading to a deep disagreement over his appointment because many Yazidis believe that he will not make decisions independently of the influence of Kurdish parties.

Yazidi is a Separate Nationality

After the genocide, displacement and mass exodus, a new narrative calling for a separate identity for the Yazidis has been growing. This identity emphasizes how Yazidis differ from Muslim Kurds and gives importance to national identity over religious affiliation. However, we note that this narrative dates back to before the ISIL led genocide in 2014. The consequences of this narrative led to the call for independent political representation of the Yazidis and recognition that they are a fourth nationality, alongside Arabs, Kurds and Turkmen. The researcher has noticed that many Yazidi activists have moved from the first (Kurdish) narrative to the new (Yazidi national) narrative after the genocide, even though they might not state that publicly – this shift is having a significant influence on large sections of the Yazidi community.

A NEW PLAYER AND A DIFFERENT NARRATIVE IN SINJAR

In 2014, a new player entered the Yazidi scene: the PKK. The party gained influence after successfully intervening to rescue the besieged Yazidis on Mount Sinjar during the first weeks of the ISIL attack on Sinjar in 2014. Their presence increased with the establishment of the Resistance Units in Sinjar (YBŞ, based on its Kurdish name). The YBŞ are aligned to the PKK and composed of Yazidis from Turkey, Syria and Europe. The PKK went a step further by establishing an administrative unit called "Self-Administration of Sinjar" at the end of 2014. At the same time, the PKK established the Yazidi Council of Sinjar, which included 27 members representing the displaced Yazidis in camps in Syria, Turkey and in Sinjar. The PKK's strategy was to call for the revival of a religion that disappeared 15 centuries ago from the region (Zoroastrianism), including both Kurds and Yazidis, and to present it as an umbrella to unite fighters around one axis of Kurdish affiliation. The strategy seeks to bypass the almost inevitable relationship between Kurds and Islam and creates a long-term and deep-rooted link between the Kurds and the space in which they live.[51]

Although this narrative gained momentum because of the PKK's role in rescuing Yazidis in 2014, particularly when Yazidis felt betrayed by the Peshmerga forces, it also led to further politicization and fragmentation of the Yazidi identity. Many young Yazidis in Dohuk said that they had been investigated by KRG security forces for visiting areas under the influence of the PKK in Sinjar or for visiting its fighters[52] and there have been reports of pressure (in the form of orders)[53] to local organizations not to deal with areas controlled by the PKK, depriving residents of those areas of essential services. However, the PKK's influence seems unavoidable in the villages they control in Sinjar or its northern parts (Tel Azir, Khana Sor and areas of the mountain). Their presence also impacts traditions, with Yazidi women fighting alongside male fighters from different religious backgrounds – and sometimes marrying them.[54] Because of these mixed marriages, Yazidis lose members, because the Yazidi religion is a closed,

---

46 Wissam Johar, the Yazidi Nationality is a legitimate right, Electronic Bulletin of Modern Dialogue No: 1798 dated 17-1-2007.

47 Prince Tahseen Beg was born in 1933 in Ba'adre, in Sheikhan district (under Mosul at that time). He was nominated to take over as Prince from his father Saeed Ali Beg in 1944 and remained in his position until his death on 28 January 2019.

48 Saad Salloum, Minorities in Iraq: Memory, Identity, Challenges, Masarat Foundation for Cultural and Media Development, Baghdad, 2013.

49 The meeting is available at the following link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oc6Hpjv8t30

50 Interviews with young Yazidi activists in Dohu.

51 A Telephone contact with Yazidi fighters of PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) and interviews with Yazidi sympathizers of the mentioned party.

52 A hearing session at the Center of the Genocide Studies at the University of Dohuk with Yazidi activists 7-8-2019.

53 Communicated during private individuals in Dohuk in August 2019.

54 Interviews with female PKK fighters, August 2019.

non-missionary religion. According to Yazidi beliefs, the person who marries outside of the religion, doesn't only move from one religion to another, but he/she moves out from the society itself. Similarly, male Yazidis are required to marry female Yazidis of the same class within the Yazidi society.

The Attitude of Yazidi Youth Towards the Different Identities

Young people who were interviewed for this study have two different opinions: one that sees Yazidism as an independent nationality (those who wish to maintain the religious uniqueness and believe religion is a part of their identity), and one that is more secular and alienated from religious identity, seeking to develop a completely non-religious identity without specifying the content of this new identity. The latter focuses on individual choice, with a reformist tendency, such as the abolition of the strict class system within the Yazidi community, which forbids marriage between classes, for example, while celebrating ritual and cultural manifestations of the religion such as its festivals, symbols and temples. However, members of the new generation have "greater awareness of the differentiation between political loyalty and the basics of religious belief, and they cannot sacrifice the second in favor of the first or put the second at the service of the first as the previous generation did," said a young counselor in the Yazidi Spiritual Council.[55]

The Yazidi community was divided between choosing a Kurdish Yazidi identity and an independent Yazidi identity, but ISIL's genocidal attacks in 2014 alienated them from the Kurdish identity even though they were displaced to the KRI. The impact of the 2014 attacks were crucial in focusing on Yazidi uniqueness – which also came as the result of the Yazidis' isolation and their feeling of being different from other communities. In this context, the Kurdish determinant of the identity remains a dilemma for Yazidis. Kurds remain religiously different from Yazidis and Yazidi youth fear the growth of political Islam in the KRI. The discriminatory perception of Kurds towards Yazidis is considered similar to prevailing prejudices of Muslim Arabs to Yazidis, and therefore discrimination remains an anxiety factor for Yazidis, particularly in Dohuk.

In the face of the manipulation of the Yazidis' emotions by political actors in the KRI, part of Yazidi youth chose to engage in modernizing Yazidi society and disseminating reformist ideas. Most of this new generation's ideas are focused on reducing the great importance of the identity, whether the national or religious one, in a world where the individual has fundamental rights, whether Yazidis are Kurdish or not, and whether there

is a Yazidi nationality or not. This new generation wants to have a state based on citizenship and acceptance of diversity. The young representatives of this school of thought focus on freeing Yazidis from having conflicting identities, and on the modernization of the Yazidi religion. They demand the integration of Yazidis into the West as an alternative to the dilemma of establishing a multi-nationality model that addresses diversity in Iraq. They also call for the abolition of the class system within Yazidi society, to reduce the dominance of the traditional leadership of the prince, the Spiritual Council and the chiefs of clans in Sheikhan, Sinjar, Bashiqa and other regions. They promote the influence of educated and young Yazidis to contribute to a reformist movement that preserves Yazidis from the dangers of extinction or melting in the cultures of the majority and protects them from archaic traditions and the influence of major parties in Erbil or Baghdad.

Many factors have contributed to this school of thought, including the shock of the genocide and the emergence of Yazidi figures at an international level, figures who do not belong to the higher classes within the community, such as Nadia Murad. Furthermore, active figures in many European countries, the establishment of outspoken Yazidi institutions and a global presence such as Yazda, an international Yazidi nongovernmental organization, and vocal news agencies such as Yazidi 24 contributed to the emergence of this current. These developments created a competition with the traditional institutions such as the prince's establishment and the Spiritual Council, which appeared to be backward, passive in representing the Yazidis' issues, and giving in to political pressures.

BETWEEN SHEIKHAN AND SINJAR: DIVISIONS BASED ON GEOGRAPHIC AREAS

The geographical division between Sinjar (the area where the genocide took place, and where Yazidis have the highest demographic concentration) and Sheikhan (the headquarters of the main temple of the Yazidis, the Spiritual Council and the Official Emirate) further fragmented the Yazidi identity and moved the internal Yazidi conflict to new dimensions based on geographic areas. This division increased when Sinjar leaders stated that they would only support the new prince (Emir Hazem) of Sheikhan if several conditions were met, including giving them a more active role in determining various Yazidi affairs, forming a Higher Yazidi Council with 70% representation from Sinjar, and expanding the Higher Spiritual Council with Yazidis from Sinjar.[56]

---

55 Interview with Faris Kuti, an advisor to the Spiritual Council of the Yazidis, Erbil on 3-8-2019.

56 Saad Salloum, Yazidis divided over selection of a new leader, al-Monitor, February 17, 2019. Available at: https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/02/iraq-minorities-yazidis.html

The failure to respond to these demands seems to have led to a geographic division between the Sheikhan actors, who are at the forefront of the political and religious representation of the Yazidis, and the Sinjar actors, who demand better representation because they have a larger demographic presence and were the main victims of the 2014 ISIL attacks.

Divisions began as soon as the new Yazidi prince was inducted on Saturday 27 July 2019 in the Lalish Temple in Sheikhan. In a remarkable development, prince Nayef Bin Dawood appointed himself a prince of Sinjar with the approval and congratulation of clerics, important people in clans in a religious shrine in Sinjar.[57] The inauguration happened with the tacit approval of Kurdish parties, including the PKK, as well as from Baghdad.[58] For the first time in the history of the Yazidis, they have two emirates: the first in Sheikhan and the second in Sinjar.[59] This new division will cast a shadow over the return of IDPs and their status in Sinjar. Will the returnees follow the prince of Sheikhan or the prince of Sinjar?

Three Princes (Emirs) and Three Choices

In a new development, a third prince, Omaya Muawiya appointed himself as prince in Germany on 9 August 2019. The new prince said: "I bear the historical responsibility for the establishment of the Yazidi emirate in the diaspora, based in the Federal Republic of Germany, and the management of the affairs of the Yazidi community, working on reuniting them, relieving their pains and sorrows and standing beside them in difficult circumstances." The new prince justified this action in that he is seeking to unite Yazidis after the 2014 genocide. This rivalry for the Yazidi leadership adds a new type of division that threatens the future of the Yazidi minority and the ability of its leaders to achieve unity. The announcement of the new prince in Germany threatens the further disintegration of relations between the Yazidis inside and outside Iraq – noting that the third prince lives in the European country with the largest concentration of the Yazidis outside Iraq (approximately 140,000 Yazidis, according to Yazidi activists).

These developments, which reflect a competition between three princes (emirs) on the leadership of Yazidis, angered Yazidi society, and caused tension in the Yazidi camps in Dohuk. Social media was filled with announcements of the inauguration of new princes (emirs) from different classes of the Yazidis. The presence of three competing princes (emirs) means three choices in loyalty and identity: a prince for the displaced people, a prince for the returnees and a third for the diaspora. The triad of princes imposes a new situation that includes one of three choices for IDPs: remaining in KRI, returning to Sinjar, or emigrating to Germany. The division of the Yazidis between the three princes (emirs) reflects well the division of Yazidis.

The Role of Women in Discussions About the Future of Yazidis

Many Yazidi female activists objected to the male dominated discussions over the future of the Yazidis. The absence of women's voices reveals the positioning of women in Yazidi traditions and reflects their marginal representation in decision-making. In the words of a Yazidi female activist from Sinjar, "Yazidi women paid the highest price of the genocide, yet women are still a neglected figure in the political and social balances."[60]

In the opinion of Yazidi female activists, women proved resistance and courage during the genocide. In the IDP camps, they have assumed the burden of supporting their families, particularly with the death of many male Yazidi breadwinners.

Yazidi women often celebrate the young Yazidi woman, Nadia Murad, who won the Nobel Prize for peace, making her an icon of courage that inspires battered women around the world. In this context, princess Oroba Ismail[61] expressed her readiness to lead the Yazidi community and her desire to be "nominated for the leadership of the Yazidi emirate, if there ever were legal nominations with a fair competition."[62] Encouraging the promotion of the role of women within Yazidi society should become a priority for international stakeholders, particularly in light of the importance and role of women in maintaining the cohesion of Yazidi families and Yazidi society in general.

---

57 The inauguration of prince Nayef bin Dawood bin Suleiman as an official emir of Sinjar. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QEZuyaqFuNk

58 Interview with Khairi Bouzani, the director of the Endowments Section of the Yazidis.

59 Interview with Talal Haskani, activist from Sinjar, Dohuk, 6-8-2019.

60 Basma Hajji Khader, a social researcher and activist from Sinjar, Duhok, on 7-8-2019.

61 Oroba Ismail is the eldest daughter of Prine Bayazid Ismail and the wife of Omyya Muawiya, who declared himself Prince of the Yazidis in the diaspora. They represent the Arab identity and currently reside in Germany. For more information, see Saad Salloum, Minorities Women in Iraq, Masarat, Baghdad, 2015.

62 Saad Salloum, Yazidis divided over selection of a new leader, al-Monitor, February 17, 2019. Available at: https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/02/iraq-minorities-yazidis.html

III. APPROACHES TO ADDRESS THE BARRIERS TO RETURN

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS ON OBSTACLES TO RETURN

This study finds that the dynamics of divisions within religious minority communities creates disputes about migration and return. In the case of the Christians, the main split is between the political and religious stakeholders, while among Yazidis identity politics are at the core of divisions.

Discussions often reflect the disconnect of the traditional leadership from the hopes of young generations, who are undergoing a process of identity change. This disconnect puts in question the representation of minorities by the current religious and political stakeholders. Internal identity divisions are further fragmented by politics as well as geography, with the disputed status of the areas of origin of Yazidis and Christians at the core of disputes. The definition of identity has changed since the United States invasion in 2003, which resulted in the dominance of the three major groups (Kurds, Shiites and Sunnis) over minorities.[63] The ISIL attacks of 2014 introduced a new phase that led to the scattering of minority members, away from their areas of origin. The genocide on Yazidis led community members to reconsider the basic determinants of their identity and to choose an identity that is less dependent on a geographically defined political sphere. Moreover, the definition of identity has also changed during displacement, and it will continue to shift according to the outcomes of the conflict.

Main obstacles preventing the return of IDPs are loss of confidence in a stable future, lack of infrastructure and services in areas of return, lack of protection, and instability. But at the heart of these obstacles is the political conflict about who the minorities will be aligned with, which parties will influence them, and the divisions of the minority's representatives. This political conflict has created a reality in which the choice of return has become more complex and the future of the minorities' existence is in limbo. An end to this conflict with one of the administrative solutions would enable minorities to manage their areas more independently and would provide elements for a sustainable return. Another important factor is the loss of trust – horizontal and vertical – among minorities: loss of horizontal trust in the relationship with other majority groups (as between Muslims and Yazidis in Sinjar) or between the minorities themselves (as between Shabaks and Christians in the Ninewa Plains), and loss of vertical trust between minority members and authorities at different levels (locally towards the government of Ninewa Governorate, regionally towards the KRG or centrally towards the GoI). Rebuilding this trust is one of the challenges that stakeholders in the international community, the GoI and the United Nations should address. This task is difficult as minority members have lost trust in the effectiveness and role of the international community. Reconstruction and stabilization programmes in the minority areas will not, by themselves, encourage returns unless a political solution that ensures the stability of these areas and mitigates political interference is found.

How do we encourage IDPs and emigrants from the religious minorities to return to the areas from which they were displaced in the Ninewa Plains and Sinjar?

Painting, Hamdaniyah High School. *Raber Y. Aziz / IOM Iraq, 2019.*

---

63 The dimensions of this domination are illustrated by a division of power presidencies that are not supported by the constitution: a Kurdish president, a Shiite prime minister, and a Sunni parliament head.

This report suggests that an effective strategy for the return of IDPs should be based on the following roadmaps:

1. Different scenarios on *the management of the disputed areas of the minorities* in the Ninewa Plains and Sinjar, through a compromise between ethno-religious groups and their political elites. Such administrative management should enable mitigating the conflict between the Kurdish and Arab political currents and minorities. Resolving the issue of the disputed areas would also contribute to rebuilding confidence at the horizontal level, that is, among the minorities that have lost confidence in each other, and at the vertical level, between the minorities and different levels of government.

2. *Dialogue within minority communities and trust building with other communities,* in the framework of the Constitution, respect of the will of the majority of the minorities' members, and conditional on the creation of greater cohesion within Yazidis and reinforcing the capacity and stability of its social structure through ongoing internal dialogue. The same applies to Christian communities (Chaldeans, Syriacs, Assyrians and Armenians), who tend to be fragmentated because of internal splits between the various Christian denominations and their multiple political currents. Internal dialogue should be accompanied by a focus on rebuilding trust with other ethno-religious groups by changing stereotypes about religious minorities and tackling hate speech, in other words, providing the requirements for the normalization of the relationship between Christians and Shabaks in the Ninewa Plains, and between Yazidis and Muslims in Sinjar in the long run, not just proposing temporary fixes.

3. *Curbing the influence of political blocks*. The dominance of the majority political blocks prevents minorities from being politically influential and hampers their ability to represent their interests. Moreover, this context makes political minority elites subordinate to the interests and directives of major groups. Minorities, and minority IDPs in particular, are negatively influenced by the absence of an independent representation, and this lack of political participation influences the future of their presence in their areas of origin as well as their decisions on return or emigration.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SELF-ADMINISTRATION AND THE DIFFERENT SCENARIOS

Self-administration is an incentive that encourages IDPs to return, because in such case they would have a say in the administration of their areas in a way that prioritizes their needs. Moreover, self-administration would also potentially encourage those who emigrated to consider returning or investing in their area, thanks to the psychological attraction of investment linked to identity. In the long run, the safe return of minorities to their original areas is perceived to have a positive impact on the demographic weight of Christians in the Ninewa Plains and Yazidis in Sinjar. In interviews by the researcher with IDPs in Dohuk, Erbil and Baghdad, optimistic and positive perceptions of the return of Christians and Yazidis in case of a self-administration prevailed.[64] Moreover, interviews by the researcher with Christian emigrants abroad reveal a motivation to return if a safe zone providing economic incentives[65] and opportunities were established.

In terms of security, the self-administration of the minorities in the Ninewa Plains and Sinjar is a way to protect Christians and Yazidis from the dangers of a return of an ethnic conflict and would contribute to sustainable stability, as former State Minister for Provincial Affairs Turhan Al-Mufti stated.[66]

Self-administration could also trigger local investment and would contribute to the prosperity and development of the region without the need for additional funds from the GoI or international donors.

The creation of a safe zone for Christians and Yazidis would encourage wealthy economic elites in the diaspora to return and invest in Iraq.

Different scenarios for the administration of the minorities' regions in the Ninewa Plains and Sinjar exist, reflecting the position of the 2005 Iraqi Constitution and the visions of the major political currents of the largest groups (Arabs and Kurds) and the representatives of religious minorities (Christians and Yazidis). Below is an overview of the various scenarios with an assessment of each in terms of feasibility, and of whether they would constitute an incentive that would encourage the return of IDPs and migrants and ensure sustainable stability.

---

64 Personal interview conducted by the researcher with displaced Iraqi Christians on different dates in the governorates of Erbil-Ainkawa, and Dohuk Governorate in the KRI during the following months: April, May, June, 2019.

65 Interviews conducted by the researcher with Iraqi Christian refugees in Beirut-Lebanon on June 25, 2019, and Istanbul-Turkey on July 15, 2019. Correspondence with refugees in Amman-Jordan on various dates 2019.

66 Dr. Turhan Al-Mufti, former Minister of State for Provincial Affairs and Head of the Provincial Affairs Secretariat of the Higher Commission for the Coordination of Governorates in the Republic of Iraq, an interview conducted by the researcher, Baghdad, on 13-9-2019.

SCENARIO 1:
A Sub-Administrative Unit Below the Governorate Level (Administrative Decentralization)

The 2005 Iraqi Constitution embraced this scenario, which grants Christians in the Ninewa Plains and Yazidis in Sinjar a form of "administrative autonomy within the federal state, and under the umbrella of Ninewa Governorate." This approach would give Christians and Yazidis the right to independently administer their political, economic and educational affairs, in accordance with the Iraqi Constitution. This definition of "autonomy" is envisaged within the federal system as an alternative to any proposal to divide Iraq on ethnic and sectarian bases. This approach does not question the distribution of Constitutional powers in Iraq between the regions and the centre, but provides a form of autonomy at below the governorate and regional levels.[67] Clearly, the implementation of this approach is consistent with the pursuit of the GoI in preserving the federal system to protect the country's unity. The approach, if it is also applied to Sinjar, is consistent with the conception of the GoI of the autonomy of the minorities in accordance with Article 125 of the Constitution. It is also consistent with the approach of the former GoI government, headed by Haider al-Abadi, on the best way to govern in the post-ISIL period, which is based on strengthening decentralization. In practice however, this approach is affected by the influence of political parties, and local residents of the two regions (Ninewa Plains and Sinjar) are often not consulted. For example, the appointment of a representative of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, Muhma Khalil parallel to Fahd Omar, representing the PMF, although not recognized by the federal government, proved to be an obstacle for the return of IDPs. As for the situation in the Ninewa Plains, a Shabak-Christian consensus is required for its administration, and the government's decisio[68] to create towns where Shabaks are separated from Christians seems to be a reversal of the previous government's approach. In practice, this system may lead to the separation of minorities and create new instability factors.

SCENARIO 2:
A New Governorate within the Federal State of Iraq

The governorates law No. 21 of 2008[69] approved and regulated the establishment of districts and towns, but did not address the establishment of new governorates.[70] The only way to create a governorate is for the council of ministers to write a draft law and to submit it to the Parliament for discussion and approval. This is what happened in 2014 with the approval of the Iraqi Council of Ministers, in principle, to turn some districts into governorates, including the Ninewa Plains, and a committee headed by the Minister of State for Governorate Affairs was assigned to establish the necessary state capacities, showing the government's efforts, at the time, to adopt the project.[71] However, the proposal was faced with strong opposition from the major Sunni Arab blocks in Ninewa Governorate and their allies in parliament, which considered the creation of a Christian governorate a threat to their areas of influence. Other representatives of Ninewa Governorate in the Federal Parliament also rejected attempts to establish a Christian governorate and demanded a resolution to preserve the borders of the governorate with all its administrative divisions from 2003.[72]

This scenario is clearly important for the creation of a special governorate for the minorities, Sinjar for the Yazidis, the Ninewa Plains for Christians, Shabaks and other minorities, and Telafar for Turkmens. Within this scenario, each governorate would have an independent budget from the federal government and financial resources could be rationally allocated to develop infrastructures and services. This scenario would also contemplate easing security control in the area through armed units of the minorities, which could be transferred to the police or local security forces. In terms of investment, the creation of independent governorates would encourage the financial elites of the various actors both outside and in Iraq to direct capital to invest in the newly independent governorates in a way that promotes local economy and provides new job opportunities that provide an economic incentive for the return of emigrants and IDPs. In such a way, ethnic tension is turned into a lucrative competition for the development of these new governorates.

---

67 Saad Salloum, Creative Diversity - A Roadmap for Promoting Pluralism in Iraq, Baghdad, ICRI Publications, 2013.

68 Letter of the Iraqi Ministry of Planning addressed to the Secretariat of the Council of Ministers under the title The development of districts and districts and municipal sections in the area of Ninewa Plain number 14-6-6238 on 13-3-2019.

69 Also referred to as Provincial Powers Act.

70 Provincial Governance Law No. 12 of 2008, Iraqi Waqaee, Issue No. 4070, dated 31 March 2008.

71 The Council of Ministers held its third regular meeting in Baghdad (Tuesday, 21 January 2014) chaired by the Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki and the Council approved, in principle, the transform of the districts of Tuz, Fallujah and Ninewa Plains to a governorate, provided that it is submitted to the Council of Ministers after completing the necessary requirements. It also agreed to form a committee headed by the competent Minister of State and the membership of representatives of the ministries of justice, municipalities and the general secretariat of the Council of Ministers to develop procedures for transforming a district into a Governorate. See The Republic of Iraq, Secretariat of the Council of Ministers, is available at the following link: http://cabinet.iq/ArticleShow.aspx? Id = 4226 & lang

72 Fadhil al-Nashmi, Ninewa after ISIS … One region or a group of governorates? An-Nahar Newspaper, Baghdad, September 25, 2016. Available at: https://www.annahar.com/article/474425-نينوى-بعد-داعش-اقليم-واحد-ام-مجموعة-محافظات

SCENARIO 3: Areas with Special Status within KRI

This approach embodies the ambition of the KRG to include the Ninewa Plains and Sinjar in its region. The minorities within these areas would be granted an independent status, provided that they are under the influence of the KRG and part of its territory. A constitutional approach for resolving the conflict over the disputed areas is included in Article 58 of the State Transitional Administration Law 2004, and then in the permanent Iraqi Constitution of 2005 in Article 140.[73] The conflict over these areas and the military maneuvers between the GoI and the KRG show the ongoing political conflict in the governorates of Kirkuk, Salah al-Din and Diyala.[74] The implementation of this scenario is difficult, and may create deep splits within the same minorities leading to clashes within and among Christian, Shabak and Yazidi communities. There are supporters of and opponents to this scenario within each of these minorities, reflecting the division of the minorities' actors between loyalty to Baghdad or Erbil.

SCENARIO 4: Ninewa Region with Three Governorates

In contrast to the Kurdish scenario of considering minority areas as disputed areas that must be a part of the KRI, a scenario presented by Sunni Arab political currents in the Ninewa Provincial Council and the Federal Parliament aims to keep minority areas within the borders of the Ninewa Provincial Administrative Council by turning the governorate into a region. This trend can also be explained as a response to scenarios of turning minority areas into governorates or making them independent under international protection, which threatens, according to proponents of this scenario, the unity of Ninewa Governorate. The scenario also reflects the fears of Sunni Arabs in Ninewa Governorate from a coalition of Kurds, Shiites, and minority representatives to contain them. In the face of different approaches consisting of establishing governorates for the minorities, or administrations that are independent from the centre of the governorate, the Ninewa Provincial Council, which is dominated by Sunni Arab political currents, presented an alternative plan to transform Ninewa Governorate into "a Region" just as the Kurdish Region in Iraq, which also consists of three governorates.

The provincial council's decision included transforming the governorate into a region consisting of three governorates: western Ninewa (including Telafar district), eastern Ninewa (including the three Ninewa Plains districts) and southern Ninewa, (including Mosul and Sinjar). The provincial council has sent the required documents of the project to the federal parliament.[75] According to this plan, Ninewa Region would consist of six to eight governorates and each security force in each region would cooperate with the others to fight terrorism and ensure security.[76]

The difficulty in implementing this plan is the need for a consensus between representatives of Sunni Arab political currents and representatives of the minorities. The Law on Executive Procedures for the Formation of Regions No. (13) of 2008[77] states that a region consists of one governorate or more.[78] The region is established through a referendum, and a request is submitted by one third of the members of each of the provincial councils in the governorates that intend to form a region.[79] The scenario has political grounds, as the idea of a Ninewa region dominated by Sunni Arab elites remains a threatening alternative raised by Arab political elites in Mosul against any alternative scenario for the establishment of independent governorates for the minorities, or that of incorporating the areas into the KRI.

---

73 Article 140 includes a roadmap in which the first stage is "normalization" (the return of Kurds and other residents who were displaced because of Arabization), the second stage is a survey to determine the demographic component of the population of the disputed areas and the third and final stage involves holding a referendum to determine the final status of the disputed areas, and to decide whether it will be directly under the authority of Baghdad or Erbil or it will become a governorate in a way or it will have an autonomy without a direct authority of one party.

74 For more about the difficulties of the hot spots in the disputed areas see: Iraq and Kurds: Trouble on the Line of Touch, International Crisis Group, Middle East Report No. 88, dated 8 July 2009.

75 Roland Begamov, What happens after the decision to create new Iraqi governorates?, Voice of Russia today (Sputnik) January 31, 2014. Available at: https://arabic.sputniknews.com/arabic.ruvr.ru/2014_01_31/128119497

76 Al-Nujaifi: Ninewa region will be established of 8 decentralized governorates, site Khulassa news, on 4 - 8 - 2016.
Available at: http://www.alkulasa.net/artical/2979

77 Law of the executive procedures for the formation of the regions No. (13) for the year 2008, the Iraqi waqaee, No. 4060 on 11-2-2008.

78 Article 1 of the law.

79 Article 2 of the law.

SCENARIO 5:
A Governorate Within Al Rafidein Region for Minorities

This scenario is considered a practical development of the idea of establishing a safe zone for minorities under international sponsorship. However, this scenario is bolder than others. In this context, representatives of the Assyrian Christians, Turkmens and Yazidis in Baghdad announced, on Sunday 5 March 2017, a tripartite coalition called the National Coalition for Al Rafidein Region in Iraq,[80] of joining the Assyrian Christians, Turkmen, and Yazidi minorities in a project proposing a self-administration linked to the federal government. The suggestion for a special region for the minorities was announced by three institutions: the Al Rafidein Organization, which represents the Assyrians, the Independent Supreme Yazidi Council, which represents the Yazidis, and the Turkmen Rescue Foundation representing the Turkmens. This scenario comprises three adjacent areas: Ninewa Plains, Telafar and Sinjar.[81] The proponents of the project see that establishing a region for the minorities in the Ninewa Region, which would include three governorates, is the way to strengthen the ethno-religious communities of this region because they would collaborate with each other at the security, political, social and economic levels."[82] Two of the project's founders are now described as representatives of the minorities they represent. The first weakness of this scenario is its aim to establish governorates by announcing the region before succeeding in creating the governorates. Second, the project did not include the minorities living in the Ninewa Plains, such as Shabaks or Kakais. To counter these arguments, proponents of this scenario are seeking international support to internal obstacles. They state that although other minorities are not mentioned in the project, it is open to the rest of the minorities to join.[83] A systematic weakness in the project is the fact that it is elitist and isolated from the minorities themselves; there were no consultations within the Yazidi, Turkmen or Christian communities.

SCENARIO 6:
A Safe Zone Under International Protection

The Yazidi and Christian internal debates on establishing a safe zone for minorities, under international protection need to be understood in light of the complexity or unfeasibility of the previous scenarios. Christian and Yazidi representatives often talk about the need to establish a safe zone but without clarifying how this scenario would be in line with the Iraqi Constitution, or how it would be administered. Furthermore, they tend to exclude their neighbors or partners from the rest of the minorities. According to the proponents of this scenario, an international protection scenario would pull the Ninewa Plains and Sinjar out of the Arab-Kurdish conflict and would ensure a safe and fast return of IDPs. Among Christian communities, many political parties and currents and Christian personalities inside and outside Iraq called for this approach.[84] After the genocide in Sinjar, Yazidis supported this scenario as well, as they were frustrated with the failure and weakness of the GoI and KRG in protecting them. Moreover, the lack of sufficient internal political will to implement any of the other approaches and the lack of alternative solutions that satisfy Christians or Yazidis have further contributed to attention for international support. This scenario is linked to one of the previous scenarios, but requires direct international engagement to create a Christian governorate in the Ninewa Plains or a Yazidi governorate in Sinjar, to establish an autonomous region below the governorate level with international protection through air cover, as was the case in the safe zone in KRI in accordance with Security Council resolution 688 of 1991,[85] and to give the area special status with monitoring and management supervision by the international community.

A United States Congressional recognition in March 2016 of the genocide against "Christians, Yazidis and other minorities in Iraq", encouraged the supporters of this scenario and gave them the illusion of unconditional support from the United States. The stakeholders found their historic opportunity in the safe zone scenario in United States Congressional Resolution 152 of 9 September 2016, which supported the idea of creating a Christian governorate in the Ninewa

---

80 Official website of the project: https://alrafideincoalition.wordpress.com

81 The statement is available in English on the official website of the project at the following link: https://alrafideincoalition.wordpress.com/2017/03/07/national-coalition-for-al-rafidein-region

82 Ali Akram al-Bayati, President of the Turkmen Rescue Foundation, an interview conducted by the researcher, Baghdad, on 13/6/2019 and 'Dawood William Lazar', president of the organization of Al Rafidein.

83 Prince Nayef Dawood, Chairman of the Independent Yazidi Supreme Council, a telephone call by the researcher on 12 - 6 - 2019.

84 For example, the call of the Secretary-General to the Bet Nahrein Democratic Party, Romeo Hakkari, for the establishment of a safe zone by the international community on http: //www.betnahrain.org. See also A Christian political group calling for the establishment of a safe zone in Ninewa Plain under international protection, Alsumaria News website, available at the following link: http://www.alsumaria.tv/news/106842

85 See https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/688(1991)

Plains.[86] The resolution used the description "indigenous peoples" to describe the minorities in the Ninewa Plains, meaning they had the right to self-determination.

It is noteworthy that the United States resolution focuses only on the Ninewa Plains, and suggests that it is a special approach of Christians although it does mention Yazidis, whose presence is marginal in the Ninewa Plains compared to Sinjar. The approach also excludes Shabaks, which leaves a dangerous and deceptive impression of singling out Christians at the expense of other minorities, provoking tensions with other minorities.

Analysis on the Various Scenarios: The Right for Self-Determination versus Territorial Integrity

Legally, it has been pointed that "the question whether minorities have the right to self-determination, is an ongoing legal debate and some consider self- determination and the rights of the minorities are two sides of the same coin."[87] Here, the description as indigenous peoples, which was used by the United States resolution, is to avoid the jurisprudential debate in international law on the right of a minority to self-determination. On the other hand, the term "indigenous peoples" is not applied to minorities in Iraq,[88] noting that the description itself is not exempt from a similar jurisprudential debate in international law on the legality of the rights of indigenous peoples to self-determination.[89] Therefore, the resolution relies on the national legal framework and the resolutions of the GoI to justify it. The resolution also tries to rid the Ninewa Plains of Article 140 of the Constitution that qualifies it as "disputed." The concept of the right to self-determination as presented in international law contains an inconsistency between the right to secession and the principle of Territorial Integrity of the State. The United States Congress resolution avoided this inconsistency by supporting the Council of Ministers resolution and Article 125 of the Constitution, in support of the territorial integrity of Iraq. Thus, this approach focused on the right of the Christian minority to self-determine its regions with greater administrative autonomy in managing the affairs of their regions, and to decide the best way for this administration while contributing to strengthening the presence of Christians, encouraging returns, mitigating the

political conflicts between the main parties, and ending discrimination and exclusion in the management of these areas – but under the umbrella of the Federal government. Despite the optimism of the proponents of this last scenario when the resolution was first issued, there is no clear vision about how to implement the resolution, and how the executive institutions are involved in its implementation. Of course, this cannot be achieved without unifying the visions of Christians and achieving a Christian-Shabak consensus, and what is more important is acceptance by the Kurdish or Arab parties, which seems to be a complex task amid the internal Arab-Kurdish conflicts, the Christian dispersion and the Christian-Shabak conflict.

DIALOGUE WITHIN MINORITY COMMUNITIES AND TRUST BUILDING WITH OTHER COMMUNITIES

The Case of the Shabak-Christian Conflict

After the retaking of the Ninewa Plains from ISIL, the conflict took an internal dimension among the minorities of the area, through increasing sensitivities between Christians and Shabaks. The displaced people returned with competing narratives and mutual accusations that fueled hate speeches between the two sides as a result of the political complexities. Recent years have witnessed calls from minorities' leaders to establish an autonomous region (Scenario I) or a governorate for the minorities (Scenario II), but the controversy over the autonomy of the Ninewa Plains has not resulted in agreement among its communities on the nature and scope of this administration (even within the minorities themselves). Currently, approaches seem to be moving towards a scenario of separation between Shabaks and Christians as a quick solution and to avoid clashes between the two sides.

Shabaks have an existential connection to their fertile lands in the Ninewa Plains. Shabaks are a Muslim minority with a complex identity; the majority of them today (almost 70%) are Imamate Shiites, and the rest is Sunni. However, despite their sectarian divisions, they share a unique ideological heritage and rituals of "Gratitude and Sufism" that distinguishes their cultural and religious identity. Shabaks speak a language that is different from Arabic and Kurdish and have a long history of coexistence with other religious minorities such as Christians, Yazidis and Kakais in the Ninewa Plains. The

---

86 Expressing the sense of Congress that the United States and the international community should support the Republic of Iraq and its people to recognize a governorate in Ninewa Plain region, consistent with lawful expressions of self-determination by its indigenous peoples, H.CON.RES.152. SEPTEMBER 9, 2016. Available at: https://www.congress.gov/114/bills/hconres152/BILLS-114hconres152ih.pdf

87 Riad Shafiq Shea, Minority Rights in the Light of International Law, Beirut, Dar Al Nahar, 2010, p. 336.

88 Saad Salloum, Unity in Diversity, Pluralism and the Promotion of Citizenship Fostering Cultural Diversity in Iraq, Baghdad, Masarat Foundation for Cultural and Media Development, 2015), p. 26.

89 JOSHUA CASTELLINO and JÉRÉMIE GILBERT, SELF-DETERMINATION, INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND MINORITIES, Macquarie Law Journal, The Macquarie Law School at Macquarie University, Vol 3, (2003), p. 155-178.

geographical belonging of the Shabak is spread in villages scattered between the left bank of the Tigris River to the Khazir River in the east and al-Nuran Mountain in the north to Nimrud town in the south; some live in the districts of Bartella, Qaraqosh, Nimrud and Bashiqa, while some live in several districts of Mosul.[90] The Shabak-Christian conflict in the Ninewa Plains threatens to eradicate a legacy of coexistence. The danger is that the conflict would increase if one of the minorities becomes a majority while the others become marginalized, starting a conflict for influence and territory that threatens to further fragment the region.[91] Relations between representatives of Shabaks and Christians in the Ninewa Plains should be normalized[92] in a manner it ensures a safe environment that encourages IDPs and emigrants to return. After the retaking of the Ninewa Plains and the return of displaced Christians and Shabaks, self-confidence among the Shabak minority increased, thanks to the presence of a military force supported by the federal government (Brigade 30) that contributed to the retaking of the area, changing the balance of power in the Ninewa Plains in favor of Shabaks, to the expense of Christians, who felt a sense of injustice and marginalization under a Shabak security dominance. The federal government in Baghdad has allowed the Shabak to control security and military affairs in the Ninewa Plains through Brigade 30 after the failure of the referendum on the independence in the KRI, and after the federal government took control of the disputed areas on 16 October 2017. The withdrawal of Peshmerga forces from these areas allowed the PMF, led by Brigade 30, to enjoy unprecedented influence. The position of power broker in the Ninewa Plains was achieved for the first time in the modern history of Shabaks: they went on to self-protect by militarizing the minority and arming it to achieve a relative independence from the Peshmerga forces and the federal government forces.

The shift in the power balance in favor of Shabaks makes Christians feel that Shabaks, thanks to their military and economic power, will support an ongoing displacement from villages to towns and districts, specifically to Al-Hamdaniya and Bartella, which have a Christian identity. Christians debate their fears that displacement (described as "settlement" by some Christians)[93] will erase the Christian identity of these areas.[94] They also fear the provision of PMF fighters with housing units and parts of historical Christian lands, under the pretext that the PMF contributed to the fight against ISIL. According to Christians, such actions would lead to a new demographic change[95]. The Shabak meanwhile, state that the poor provision of health, education and infrastructure in their villages pushes them to move towards the centres of the towns that have services and government interest, and that there is no systematic policy for a demographic change by Shabaks and that these are just exaggerations from some Christian political actors.[96]

On 18 July 2019, the United States Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control announced new sanctions against Iraqi citizens, including Waad al-Qadu, leader of the Shabaks Brigade 30. In response to this, the Iraqi prime minister soon decided to withdraw the Shabak brigade from all inspection areas in the Ninewa Plains and to replace them by Iraqi army forces. However, Shabaks demonstrated by cutting off the Mosul-Erbil road in protest against this decision,[97] causing the PM to reverse his decision and agree that checkpoints would be manned jointly by Brigade 30 and the Iraqi security forces. This crisis shows that the conflict in the Ninewa Plains over the future of the PMF in this region (in particular Brigade 30, which includes mostly fighters from the Shabak minority) reflects not only a conflict over how security is managed in the disputed areas, but also a deeper conflict over its future. Will these areas be part of the KRI or will they remain under the administration of the

---

90 Saad Salloum, Shabak: The Lost Sect between Ethnic Intolerance and Cultural Genocide, Episode 5, Al-Mada Newspaper, Baghdad, Al-Mada Institution for Media, Culture and Arts, No. 3369 dated 26 May 2015.

91 Saad Salloum, Minorities in Iraq, Memory, Identity, Challenges, Baghdad, Masarat Foundation for Cultural and Media Development, 2013, pp. 332-333.

92 Typical Christian Perspectives in the following news: Christian politician accuses Shabak of changing demography of Christianity in Ninewa, Alsumaria News, available at http://www.alsumaria.tv/news/58626. In contrast, Shabak's point of view in the following news: Shabak politician accuses Christians of raising the issue of the exposure of areas in Ninewa Plain of change to establish a governorate for them, Alsumaria News. Available at: http://www.alsumaria.tv/news/58625

93 The term itself refers to some form of conquest or colonialism. Its use by some Christian elites during interviews for free, it seems to reflect already profound fears.

94 Interviews with different Christian figures.

95 A recent controversy was around the construction of "Sultan City" in Bartella, which some Christian clergy demanded to stop as condition for their participation in a reconciliation conference with former MP Al Abadi on 14 March 2018. For more, see What happens in Bartella and Ninewa plain? Available at: https://www.ishtartv.com/viewarticle,86514.html

96 Interviews with Shabak figures.

97 Ahmed al-Dabbagh, sit-ins and demonstrations. The full story of what happened in Ninewa plain. Available at: https://www.noonpost.com/content/28918

federal government in Baghdad? Furthermore, the accusations against Brigade 30 relates not only to human rights violations in the Ninewa Plains, but also to the fact that the Brigade received rockets from Iran, and covered for the presence of Iranian Revolutionary Guard headquarters in the Ninewa Plains, turning the region into an area for the international conflict between Iran and the United States, putting the Shabak minority on the Iranian side, and Christians on the American's. This is a dangerous theory that puts the minorities of the Ninewa Plains in the middle of a giant chessboard, and makes dialogue about the future of the Ninewa Plains subject to regional consensus and issues.

Rebuilding Trust Between Christians and Shabaks

This report finds that the normalization of the relationship between Shabaks and Christians in the Ninewa Plains should start with a Christian-Shabak dialogue about the basics of the Ninewa Plains management. Meanwhile, dialogue should also focus on rebuilding their trust with the central authority in Baghdad, by providing a kind of administrative autonomy for both of Shabaks and Christians in the Ninewa Plains through an independent administrative status for the Ninewa Plains, whether by transforming it into a governorate or giving it an independent administrative status below the governorate level in accordance with Article 125 of the Constitution. Furthermore, the danger of the hate speeches exchanged between Shabak and Christian members and mutual accusations of demographic change or the use of international or regional powers to impose a fait accompli calls for organized action to restore confidence through continuous dialogue. According to monitoring conducted by the study team of the National Center of Addressing Hate Speech in Baghdad,[98] the number of hate messages exchanged between Shabaks and Christians reached 1263 hate messages in December 2018.

Monitoring of social media hate speeches between ethno-religious minorities in Ninewa Plains

35%	38%	27%
FROM **CHRISTIANS** AGAINST **SHABAK**	FROM **SHABAK** AGAINST **YOUTH ACTIVISTS**	FROM **SHABAK** AGAINST **SHABAK**

Source: The Deep state, Analysis of deep hatred in Iraq, Saad Salloum, The National Center of Addressing Hate Speech in Iraq, Baghdad, 2019, p.72.

These figures show that a Christian-Shabak dialogue to rebuild trust should be preceded by internal debates, within the Christian and Shabak communities. Part of Christians and Shabaks are against any process of dialogue or building bridges between the two communities, which is extremely dangerous and encourages more radical solutions.

The mere initiative to ease the tension could be a temporary cooling off factor, but to provide sustainability in the normalization of the relationship between the two communities, it is important that dialogue take place with the involvement of the United Nations and representatives of the governorate and federal governments, and reach to a Joint Declaration of Principles. This declaration should include the most important issues, such as a joint management of the Ninewa Plains areas, the future of the minorities' armed forces in these areas (in terms of organizing the relationship between these armed units and the federal government forces, and defining their roles in terms of security), guarantees for freedom of religion, belief and rituals, transforming some villages into administrative towns and some towns into districts (to ease the Christians' sensitivity about the issue of demographic change), and balancing financial allocations of public services between rural and urban areas.

The GoI has presented a scenario to address Shabak-Christian sensitivities by creating administrative units for the Shabak and isolating these units from Christians. The GoI's plan to form administrative units in the Ninewa Plains is based on the creation of two new administrative units in that area, one east of Mosul, called Kalak town, and the other north of the city, called Bazwaia district, provided that they are administratively affiliated to the centre of Mosul directly.[99] The resolution to create administrative units in the Ninewa Plains, as mentioned above, has led to relative satisfaction among Christians, but has been opposed by part of the Shabak. This refusal reflects the conflict over the powers between the provincial councils and the federal government, and shows that no resolutions will be issued without considering the interests of political blocks and factions. The Christian reactions were positive towards the resolution: "the issue of the creation of the administrative units in the plain was presented in a meeting and we welcomed it, because those administrative units are on the ground, and this step helps the sons of our people to have their own lands." The same voices noted that rejecting the federal government's resolution is considered a sign to "adopting political agendas aim at emptying the Ninewa Plains from its

---

98 See https://arabic.rt.com/middle_east/1045192-التوتر-يتصاعد-بين-الأقليات-في-سهل-نينوى-rtباحث-عراقي-ل

99 See the letter of the Iraqi Ministry of Planning addressing the Secretariat of the Council of Ministers under the title (the creation of districts and towns and municipal sections) in Ninewa Plain, number 14 - 6 - 6238 on 13 - 3 - 2019.

native population."[100] Obviously, the issuance of this resolution and the subsequent reactions show that the GoI should discuss the various scenarios by opening a dialogue between Shabaks and Christians and between the Ninewa's residents and the Provincial Council in on the other side. The resolution's weakness is that it will turn the Ninewa Plains into isolated islands divided by ethno-religious communities.

CURBING THE INFLUENCE OF THE MAJOR POLITICAL MOVEMENTS

Dominance of Political Parties in Sinjar

Sinjar has an important strategic location, 50 km from the triangle of the Turkish-Syrian-Iraqi border, making its situation more complicated and more political than the Ninewa Plains because of the regional power conflict for influence in a strategic region through their proxies. As outlined earlier in this report, the 2014 ISIL invasion of Sinjar introduced new actors to the political and military arena in the Yazidi-majority region, while reducing influence of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (PDK). Therefore, the PDK often calls to remove PKK elements from Sinjar, showing the wider conflict between Kurdish parties over the political and military influence in both north Syria and Sinjar in Iraq. Turkey considers the PKK's presence in Sinjar a threat to its national security, and fears this presence will create a new geography that will enable the party to be more powerful on the ground, better support its bases and consolidate its influence on the triangle of the Turkish-Syrian-Iraqi border. Turkey fears of the establishment of a route linking the Qandil Mountains, the main fortress of the PKK, to Sinjar Mountain, linking the two to the Syrian Democratic Forces on the second bank of the Syrian border, which would form a support belt for both, creating a corridor to transport fighters, arms and logistic support against Turkish interests.[101] In the face of this conflict, which has a regional dimension as well, Turkey refuses to turn Sinjar into a base for the PKK – which it classifies as a terrorist party – as Iran seeks to extend its influence through allies to control the region bordering Syria. The tensions between the PKK and PDK over influence and control over Sinjar have not subsided. Each holds the other responsible for IDPs not returning: the PKK accuses PDK of exploiting IDPs in a political game against the federal government and of adopting arbitrary measures that impede the return of displaced Yazidis to Sinjar.

The YBŞ has become an official force subject to the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Commission after the withdrawal of PKK members from Sinjar. The members of the units are Yazidi Iraqi residents from the area and their sacrifices in the fight against ISIL strengthens their popular acceptance. The YBŞ denies any organizational relationship with PKK.

Hamdaniyah. *Auday Alwee / IOM Iraq, 2019.*

---

100 Interviews with different Christian figures.

101 Mujahid al-Taie, PKK's employment in Sinjar and the will to fight around Mosul, Noon Post. Available at: http://www.noonpost.com/content/27819

The retaking of the Ninewa Plains and Sinjar from ISIL, in which units from the local minorities participated, changed the balance of power and the reinforced the idea of self-protection by armed units representing the minorities: a military force of Shabak has emerged through the influence of Brigade 30 in the Ninewa Plains, while the emergence of the PKK Yazidi military force in Sinjar, which has become active on the ground, is a political concern for Kurdish rival Kurdish parties, even more now that the new players have created a political wing that participated in the recent parliamentary elections, namely the Yazidi Freedom and Democracy Party.

The Yazidi Political Alliance

The Yazidi Freedom and Democracy Party joined the Yazidi Alliance, which also includes the Yazidi Democratic Party (close to the Kurdistan Democratic Party) as well as two Yazidi national parties: the Yazidi Progress Party and the Yazidi Movement for Reform. Despite the importance of this alliance, the ideological differences between these parties, especially on the issue of Yazidi identity, will always remain a factor of division and hinder the formulation of any joint strategy for the administration of Sinjar. Therefore, the alliance is probably for temporary electoral interests. If this alliance is to develop as a steady coalition to increase the Yazidi's influence in their disputed areas, it should mitigate the influence of the rival Kurdish parties (in particular PDK and PKK) and focus on the establishment of a joint administration in Sinjar in accordance with the provisions of the Federal Constitution, which guarantees the independence of Yazidis outside the Arab-Kurdish, Turkish-Iranian or Kurdish-Kurdish conflict. PDK, whose influence in Sinjar is weakening, is likely to lose its impact on the overall provincial council elections in Ninewa. However, the Yazidi representation in the next Ninewa Council is in danger, especially with the adoption of a change in the electoral system which, in short, means that large blocks will get most of the seats and small blocks will find it difficult to obtain the minimum votes required for one seat (approximately 40,000 votes). As a consequence of this electoral system, three larger political blocks would dominate the Ninewa Provincial Council and the smaller political blocks would not find alternatives but to be under the umbrella of one of these large blocks. Currently, the number of Yazidi

representatives in Ninewa Council is seven, but this will be challenging to maintain in the planned elections. Therefore, the Yazidi Alliance will need to select an independent candidate and seek a coalition with one of the three major blocks – one that fits with the aspirations and the demands of Yazidis and respects the alliance's declaration.

In addition to the PKK-KDP struggle and the Yazidi political alliance, a third dynamic dominates the political landscape in Sinjar, namely Prince Nayef bin Dawood declaring himself a prince in Sinjar and being blessed by clerics, clans' elders and figures in a religious shrine in Sinjar.[102] Sinjar is a playing field for Yazidi politics more than anywhere else in Iraq. The new emir did not conceal his ambition to play a role in the future of Yazidis. On 5 March 2017, he and his allies, Christian and Turkmen, announced the idea of a minority-specific region, Al-Rafidein Region. It is not clear if the new step to inaugurate Nayef bin Dawood as Emir of Sinjar is a practical implementation of Al-Rafidein Region project (see scenario 5), or whether it is a response to current challenges in light of the emergence of new actors, especially since the idea of a region for the minorities was mentioned in the context of achieving an independent status of Sinjar, away from the Arab-Kurdish conflict over this important strategic region. However, these new dynamics suggest greater independence from the KRG position. Yazidi political positioning is represented by Yazidi parties opposed to the ruling party in Erbil and to the PKK with implicit approval from Baghdad.

Sinjar, which witnesses increasing attention as the provincial elections approach, makes the sustainable return of Yazidi IDPs who have settled in the KRI dependent on the outcome of this political conflict. In this regard, Human Rights Watch criticized forced deportation by the KRG of Yazidi families due to the involvement of their relatives in Iraqi government forces or the PMF, stating that this amounts to collective punishment.[103] The Iraqi New World Newspaper documented that 200 families from Dohuk were expelled because their children are enrolled with the PMF[104] and Yazidi witnesses pointed out that the security forces Asayish threatened to assassinate their children.[105] Furthermore, some observers say that those who want to return to Sinjar will not be allowed to enter the KRI again.[106] Therefore, the return of IDPs remains primarily contingent upon resolving

---

102 Inauguration of Prince Nayef bin Dawood bin Suleiman as an Emir of Sinjar. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QEZuyaqFuNk

103 Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Yazidi Fighters' Families Expelled. Available at: https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/07/09/kurdistan-region-iraq-yezidi-fighters-families-expelled

104 (New World) is the only direction to publish the names of Yazidi families expelled from Kurdistan Region because their members were loyal to the Public Mobilization Units. Available at: 2-43329-aalem.com/news/43329-

105 (New World) documents Yazidi testimonies on the expulsion of 200 families from Dohuk because of their children belonging to the Popular Mobilization. Available at: https://al-aalem.com/news/43322-حو-إيزيدين-شهادات-توثق-الجديد-العالم

106 Skype interviews with Yazidi activist, Saman Daoud, 14-9-2019.

political disputes between influential parties in Sinjar and reaching a political agreement that facilitates the return of IDPs, which seems unlikely at the moment in light of the competitive coalitions between these parties, in anticipation of the provincial council elections.

The Importance of Meaningful Political Participation of Minorities

The analysis of the situation of religious minorities in the Ninewa Plains and Sinjar shows that improving the political participation of minorities would indicate the rebuilding of trust between the minorities and the state. Discrimination, symbolic violence, cultural exclusion, incomplete and ineffective political representation and the dominance of majority political parties on minorities are as bad as outright violence, and equally responsible for the minorities' emigration and the frustration and distrust of the displaced – as a result of the lack of independent representation or, worse, their exploitation for electoral purposes. For example, one observer noted that the policy of some Christian parties is linked to the "Kurdish strategy based on supporting a special area project for Christians in the Ninewa Plains and facilitating the referendum later to join the KRG in exchange for autonomy for their areas."[107] This position shows that the major political blocks are imposing their will on their minority coalition partners, resulting in the disconnection of minority political representatives from their grassroots bases. As a consequence, these representatives are not able to act as real and effective spokespersons because of personal interests and coalition pressures, with major political currents imposing their views on the minorities' representatives. Ultimately, if representatives of Christians and Yazidis do not have the power to make substantive and influential decisions on issues of importance to their communities, such as managing Sinjar and the Ninewa Plains independently, their participation is in essence ineffective.[108] Within this context, Patriarch Louis Sacco's call for a unified political reference for Christians and naming it the "Christian component" as a suitable alternative to fragmentation in the national nomenclature may be important in this context.

This report finds that strengthening political participation of minorities at the national level can be achieved by increasing the degree of their contribution to decision-making at the federal level. Minority politicians state that this can be done by increasing the number of quota seats, as demanded by Christians (from 5 to 15 seats) and Yazidis (from 1 to 5). However, this approach will not be effective in practice, as it makes no difference to increase the number of seats

because the voting weight is still minor compared to the major blocks. Proposals to provide minorities with a veto on specific issues, such as the right to identity, freedom of religion and belief, and the management of minority areas, might be more effective.

SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS BY THE AUTHOR

In light of seeking to restore the confidence of minority religious communities in taking participating in their own affairs, the creation of a safe zone for Christians in the Ninewa Plains and for Yazidis in Sinjar can be part of policies to rebuild trust between minorities and the state. This solution would be a factor encouraging the displaced to return and for their equitable participation in the development of their societies freely and with dignity. In this context, it is important to prevent the over-simplification of the conflict as a merely religious one, or part of the country's religious fragmentation project. On the same note, any impression that it constitutes preferential treatment for Christians or Yazidis from others should be avoided. Instead, it is vital to involve Christians, Shabaks, Yazidis and other minorities in any peace negotiations on the future of the disputed areas.

The author of this report has identified the following specific recommendations:

- Ensure that the special administrative status of the minorities is part of the plan to return minority IDPs to their areas retaken from ISIL in the Ninewa and Sinjar Plains, while providing adequate resources to rehabilitate basic infrastructure and service provision. Individuals who wish to return to their homes will not return unless there is an attractive environment that provides a convenient alternative to integration in the area of displacement or migration.

- Build the capacity of the GoI in the field of protection of minorities, provided that this does not include merely the establishment of formal institutions, but also creates an appropriate environment that fosters a culture of confronting violence.

- Build and strengthen national capacity to assess risks, identify weaknesses in the government's capacity to respond to them, mobilize early response to prevent violence against minorities and strengthen the state's response through regular assessments of risk factors, conflict indicators and indicators of violence. Information should be provided to policy makers who are able to take effective and timely action.

---

107   Yahya al-Kubaisi, for post-state maps, Arab Jerusalem, September 22, 2016.

108   Saad Salloum, Political Participation of Minorities in Iraq, Baghdad, Masarat Foundation for Cultural and Media Development, 2017, p. 1.

- Monitor and confront hate speech against religious minorities through a firm and effective government policy. The enactment of legislation criminalizing hate speech is an appropriate entry point in this context. The National Center for Combating Hate Speeches, which includes more than one monitor, is an early warning network that spreads across Iraq, publishes periodic reports that monitor and analyse hate speech against the minorities, and proposes appropriate policies for the federal government to combat all forms of hate speech.

- Design appropriate curricula for a pluralistic society to confront stereotypes and correct misconceptions or distortions that create a culture that justifies oppression and discrimination against minorities, and makes violence against them possible. The best approach is to design curricula based on learning from diversity (dialogue and daily mixing between students from diverse religious backgrounds) and learning about diversity (through curricula that focus on diversity as a source of wealth and not a threat). The Diversity Institute was launched in July 2019 with the aim of introducing religious scholars and students of Islamic sciences to religious diversity within the framework of the slogan "unity in diversity".[109]

- Despite the challenge posed by the formation of different armed factions for Christians, Shabaks and Yazidis, they represent an opportunity to form protection units for safe minority areas in the future, especially after gaining field experience in the fight against ISIL. But turning these into a local police force or security units to maintain stability within the safe zone is subject to unification, overcoming differences and political rivalries, linking them vertically to the state and integrating them within the Iraqi army, while granting independence within the protection of the safe area, and protecting the armed factions from politicization as much as possible.

- Resolve the outstanding differences between Shabak and Christian representatives about the boundaries of the mixed areas of the Ninewa Plains, the accusations of mutual demographic change and the way the safe zone is managed,. Unless difficulties are resolved and views on common challenges and interests are resolved, it will be difficult to implement the Safe Zone project without the most important sectors. Interested minorities are Shabaks or Christians or other minorities such as Yazidis, Turkmen and Kakais.

- Restrict the dominance of major political currents over the opinions and work of representatives of Christians, Shabaks and Yazidis, with regard to the safe zone of the minorities and other issues of concern to the minorities. Alternatively, achieve a balance in the coalition between the political currents of Christians and Yazidis and the currents of major blocks in a manner that does not harm the interests of Christians, Shabaks and Yazidis.

- Unify the visions of the Christian political currents, or at least form an umbrella organization with the aim of achieving the interests of its voters, in particular with regard to the safe zone in the Ninewa Plains and the nature of its establishment, management, and independence. This suggestion is considered the best way to confront the power of majority blocks as it would allow forming a stronger negotiating block driven by a shared vision and interests.

- Promote the minorities' political participation through improved representation in the parliament and government. To make minority political participation more effective, we propose to grant them veto power on specific issues (identity, freedom of belief, future of their regions and the way they are administered). We believe that this may strike a balance and enhance participation in, and contribution to, national policy-making and access to (and use of) public services. This should address the current isolation (in terms of psychosocial wellbeing, political participations and social inclusion) of Christians, Shabaks and Yazidis and integrate them into the national framework, which would ultimately encourage sustainable return.

"

The majority's political blocks are imposing
their will on their minority coalition partners,
which results in the disconnection of the
minorities' political representatives from their
grassroots bases. As a consequence, they are
not able to act as effective spokespersons
because of personal interests and coalition
pressures. Ultimately, if representatives
of Christians and Yazidis do not have the
power to make substantive and influential
decisions on issues of importance to their
communities, such as managing the Sinjar
and Ninewa Plains independently, their
participation is in essence ineffective."

– Saad Salloum, January 2020