Violent Extremism in Mosul & the Kurdistan Region:

Context, Drivers, and Public Perception

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MERI
**Middle East
Research Institute**

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Authors' Biographies

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Kamaran Palani is a Research Fellow at the Middle East Research Institute. Palani holds a PhD from Leiden University (Faculty of Governance and Global Affairs in 2021). Prior to his PhD, Kamaran acquired extensive experience by working with various local and international NGOs, academic and research centres, including Salahaddin University-Erbil, Spark, UNAMI, UNDP, PAX, World Bank, and Iraq Studies in Beirut. Kamaran's research interests include the study of de facto statehood in the international system, Iraqi politics, regional Kurdish politics, internal displacement, and violent extremism in Iraq and the Middle East. Palani has published his work in international peer-reviewed journals, such as: Third World Quarterly, Ethnopolitics, British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies and International Migration. He is the author of Kurdistan's De Facto Statehood: A New Explanatory Framework (Routledge, 2022).

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Contents

ABSTRACT

The Nineveh Province and Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) are co-located in northern Iraq. They are comparable in terms of ethno-religious and sectarian diversity, history, and political economy. However, since 2003, these two regions and their communities have produced two different environments. Nineveh became extremely vulnerable to violent extremism (VE), while the KRI demonstrated persistent resilience.

In this paper, a comparative analysis was carried out to examine public perception of the presence, root causes and drivers of VE, and their perception of the impact of on-going governmental and non-governmental initiatives for the prevention of VE (PVE). The issue occurrence and non-occurrence of VE in two comparable environments, are characterised in a local socio-economic, security and political context.

Combined with a comprehensive literature review, the data here shows that: VE should be contextualised within the broader security, governance, and identity crises, both locally in the governorate and nationally in Iraq as a whole. Thus, drivers enabling VE are different depending on the context, as well as the dynamic of other variables through time, which consequently need regular re-evaluation. Such, an understanding is critical for analysing the conditions that could facilitate the rise of extremist groups and VE, and for designing PVE policies.

Building resilience against radicalisation and transitioning to PVE is a long-term process that requires systematic and comprehensive investment in building intra- and inter-community trust, and trust between people and the authorities. Taken together, the Nineveh and KRI experience since 2003, highlights the need to focus on key policy priorities, including: countering pull factors, enhancing rule-of-law and good governance; reforming the security sector and state-monopoly of violence; economic reform and empowerment of the youth; and promoting religious moderation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Despite the considerable inroads that have been made on the root causes and drivers of violent extremism (VE), this complex phenomenon continues to attract much debate in both policy and academic circles. The emergence of Islamic State (IS) in Iraq in 2014 and Al-Qaida before that, made the country a centre of focus as a breeding ground for VE. However, VE has evolved in Iraq over the decades, after the country witnessed external and internal wars, international blockades, regime changes, armed non-state actors' proliferation, rampant corruption, and institutional disintegration, among others. These rendered the state increasingly fragile and social cohesion among its diverse communities increasingly difficult since insufficient attention was paid to remedy historical and generational grievances within the communities. Nevertheless, none of these major events can explain the significant local (provincial) variations in VE inside Iraq or help design effective policies for the prevention of violent extremism (PVE).

Iraq is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country with considerable variations in the local communities' socio-economic evolutions and public perception of extremism, which have impacted the occurrence and non-occurrence of VE in the various provinces. Hence, contextualising VE and designing bespoke preventative policies in such a country requires a much deeper understanding of the local variations, including the public perception of their environment and local drivers of VE.

In this paper, a comparative analysis is carried out to understand why VE emerged in Nineveh Province (Mosul as its capital) after 2003, whilst prevented in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) in the same period. And to examine public perceptions and awareness of both VE and the measures put in place by various local, national, and international actors for the PVE.

Nineveh Province and the KRI are co-located in northern Iraq and share around 200 km of borders. They are comparable in terms of population size, history, geography, political economy, and ethno-religious and sectarian diversity. However, since 2003, these two regions and their communities have produced two different environments. Nineveh became extremely vulnerable to VE while the KRI demonstrated persistent resilience. While the underlying conditions for extremism exist in Kurdistan,[1] and a proportion of the population has experienced the negative effects of the KRI's poor governance and corruption, nevertheless, the pull many young Kurds had towards radicalisation, and religiously framed extremism remains weak.

The central argument of this paper is that one cannot understand the occurrence and non-occurrence of VE without understanding the various contextual aspects of the society, including political transitions, socio-economic conditions, sects, religious practices and interpretations, state-society relations, political process, and security structure. Through detailed evidence-based analysis, we contrast Nineveh Province and the KRI, and argue that VE in Iraq should be viewed within the overall structure of governance and identity. The paper thus contributes both to the literature on PVE, and to local policy making in Iraq.

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1   Palani, K. (2021). Youth Radicalization in Kurdistan: The Government Response. In Fazil and Baser (Eds.), Youth Identity, Politics and Change in Contemporary Kurdistan. Chapter 10. Transnational Press London

2. METHODOLOGY & STUDY PARTICIPANTS

In this study, a mixed-methods approach was employed, including:

• A detailed literature review and analysis of the historical evolution of religious indoctrination and the role of the state in tolerating, promoting, or tackling extremism.

• Utilising our past and current research as well as empirical data

• A field survey in both Nineveh and the KRI with standardised questionnaires.

For the field survey, a total of 287 individuals were interviewed, including 121 in Nineveh and 166 in the KRI during the period July to August 2021. The survey was conducted with two population groups:

Group-1: Individuals in enabling environments, including those who have not engaged in, and those who have witnessed, VE;

Group-2: Those who were previously active in organised activities within the definition of VE, but who are now no longer active.

Measures were taken to ensure gender representation. In Nineveh, men constituted 66% (80 participants), while women formed 34% (41 participants) of the sample. In the KRI, men constituted 77% (127 participants), while women formed 23% (39 participants). Table 1 presents the sample description of the two groups we interviewed for this survey in both regions.

Table 1: Sample description (total of respondents = 287)

Participants	Demography	Numbers (%)
Gender	Female	73 (25.5%)
	Male	214 (74.5%)
Age (years)	18-25	46 (16%)
	25-39	135 (47%)
	40-60	99 (34.5%)
	60 +	5 (1.75%)
Location	Mosul city	121 (42%)
	Erbil	82 (28.5%)
	Sulaymaniyah	41 (14%)
	Halabja	41 (14%)

2A. Sampling

To provide an unbiased sample, the MERI research team, which consisted of three research fellows and six enumerators, searched for, and identified, several study subjects (cases for interview or survey) both in the KRI and Nineveh Province (Mosul City). Potential participants were then contacted to request consent for an interview. A face-to-face mode of interview was pursued, which proved essential for building trust between the researchers and participants. The PREVEX project developed a questionnaire on preventing VE,[2] which was adapted to fit the local context of the investigation. This was translated into Kurdish and Arabic. To ensure the reliability of the data and to avoid misinformation, the researchers underwent a training session where the purpose of the study and the target sample population was clearly defined.

For study Group 1, the enumerators targeted public places to identify potential participants. Three enumerators teamed up at a time, ensuring fair representation. For study Group 2, the team could not seek non-random sampling, largely due to security reasons. Instead, the team relied on a 'respondent-driven snowballing' where in some cases enumerators were introduced to study participants. Additionally, attempts were made to identify study subjects affiliated to different organisations, or residing in different geographic locations, which also helped to reduce bias.

The sampling process, particularly for Group 2, proved less difficult in the KRI compared to Mosul. The KRI (Government and public) does not treat repented violent extremists as terrorists, and most of these organisations' leaders and members are integrated into the legitimate political process, as explained below. In places like Halabja town several hundreds of individuals previously affiliated with Kurdish extremist groups, lived and later re-integrated into the society. In contrast, in Nineveh Province, extremist organisations and their affiliates are still considered as terrorists by authorities and the wider public. As a result, the enumerators relied heavily on local research networks to identify potential interviewees and survey respondents, hence, fewer respondents (compared to the KRI).

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2 Erik Skare et al., (2021). Preventing violent extremism, the Middle East: Working Paper on 'enabling environments', drivers and occurrence/non-occurrence of violent extremism in the region. Available at: https://www.prevex-balkan-mena.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/D7.2_final.pdf

3. ENABLING DRIVERS OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN NINEVEH

Nineveh Province is often described as the "little Iraq", with a diverse population composed of many of the ethno-religious communities found across the whole country. Ethnically, there are Arabs, Kurds, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Armenians, and Turkomans. Religiously, Sunnis, Shiites, Christians, Yezidis, Kaka'is and Sabean-Mandeans live in Nineveh. Sunni Arabs constitute the overall majority of the governorate, followed by Kurds.

Some Kurdish-majority areas of Nineveh Province, such as Sinjar, Nineveh Plains, Sheikhan and Makhmour, are among disputed territories between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the Federal Government of Iraq (FGoI). Administration and security of these areas are divided between KRG forces and Baghdad. In these territories, the management and security situation is fragile due to the administrative vacuum and confusion over the dual presence of the two governments: the FGoI and KRG. Despite these political and security issues, the Province of Nineveh, with Mosul as its capital, has historically been a place of cohesion of the multiple religions and communities, before being declared the capital of the so-called IS in 2014.

Past conflicts and current concerns associated with extremism in Nineveh are many and have had sectarian, religious and political aspects, and importantly, have been affected by regional interference. Most of these conflicts predate the 2014 IS occupation of Nineveh. Nineveh encompasses the largest area of Iraq occupied by IS, for the longest period and with Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq, being the Caliphate's. Despite its territorial defeat in summer 2017, IS activities have continued in the governorate, indicating that the factors that led to the initial rise of IS cannot be addressed through military means alone. The complex interplay of political and security factors left in IS's wake have contributed to deepening rivalries between different parties over control and domination. [3]

3A. Ninevah Before 2003: The Fatih Campaign

The "Faith Campaign" (al-Hamlah al-Imaniyyah), launched by the Saddam Hussein regime in 1994, marked the beginning of a new era in the relationship between religion and the Iraqi state. Through this campaign, Saddam Hussein's instrumental use of religion served the purpose of maintaining his control over the Iraqi society which was growing restive by the limits imposed by the international sanctions on Iraq. Among the impacts of the campaign were the closure of nightclubs and a ban on the sale of alcohol. It reached its climax with the application of certain provisions of Sharia Law, including forms of corporal punishment. A new penalty code was issued and implemented, that included the amputation of hands for robbery, beheading women by sword for engaging in prostitution, and throwing men from the roof of a building for practicing homosexuality.[4]

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3   USIP [United States Institute for Peace]. (2020). "Conflict and Stabilization Monitoring Framework Project" (United States Institute for Peace). Available at https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/USIP-Conflict-and-Stabilization-Monitoring-Framework-Project.pdf

4   Abdul-Jabar, F. (2017). The Caliphate State: Advancing Towards the Past. ISIL and the Local Community in Iraq (Beirut and Doha: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies); p. 117.

The Faith Campaign provided a social platform for covert Islamists. The Ba'ath regime also enabled the rise of religious figures and groups which began to consolidate their presence in Sunni-majority areas, including Mosul. [5] As a result, Islamists were allowed to go to mosques, teach Islamic classes, preach religious conservatism and to create charity organisations to provide aid during the economic sanctions to people in underfunded facilities and students from poor background. These significantly impacted the society, allowing several new Mosques and religious centres to be established, and for religious teaching to increase in schools. Wearing Hijab became more common for women during this period. All these activities happened when the country was under deep economic sanctions. [6]

Furthermore, the Campaign in the Sunni-majority regions encouraged a new path in religious practices and interpretations. Some clerics who achieved prominence and influence through their lectures were adherents of either the ultra-conservative Salafist ideology, the Sufi Naqshbandi order, or the Muslim Brotherhood political movement, generating a confusing and sometimes conflicting doctrinal landscape as each espoused different messaging thought. [7] The state also began to officially impose the Islamisation of society at certain levels, despite the ruling Ba'ath Party's historic association with secular Arab nationalism and socialism. The impact of the Faith Campaign lasted beyond Saddam's fall in 2003. The Islamic scholars and institutions empowered by the campaign played a key role in calling for the Sunnis in Nineveh and other parts of Iraq to boycott and delegitimise the new political process after 2003. [8]

3B. Nineveh After 2003: Rejecting The New Political Order

The regime-change in Iraq in 2003 was a decisive moment to understand the process of occurrence and non-occurrence of VE in Nineveh and the KRI. In June 2003, the US-run administration in Iraq, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), dissolved the Ba'ath Party, dismissing its members from government positions. The CPA Order No. 1 excluded the top four levels (ranks) of the Ba'ath Party membership from state employment. [9] The CPA's Order No. 2 disbanded Iraq's military and other security forces, resulting in large-scale unemployment.

A significant portion of the former Iraqi army's hierarchy were occupied by people from Mosul, which was thus particularly affected by the de-Baathification measures, which led to expulsion of thousands of Ba'th affiliates, including skilled professionals such as doctors and university professors. This created an administrative gap, deteriorating services and worsening security in Mosul. During the Ba'ath era, membership in the Ba'ath party was a key requirement for employment in the government sector. In Nineveh, like the rest of Iraq, the disbanding of the former security and military forces paralysed the government, [10] leading to waves of Sunni protests which, in turn, pushed the main Sunni political parties to boycott the 2005 Iraqi

5   Baram, A. (2005). "Who are the insurgents? Sunni Arab rebels in Iraq" (United States Institute for Peace). Available at: https://www.usip.org/publications/2005/05/who-are-insurgents-sunni-arab-rebels-iraq, p. 10.

6   Program on Extremism (2021, September 1). Mosul and the Islamic State. Available at: https://extremism.gwu.edu/mosul-and-the-islamic-state

7   Abdul-Jabar, "The Caliphate State", p. 119.

8   See: Program on Extremism (2021, September 1). Mosul and the Islamic State. Available at: https://extremism.gwu.edu/mosul-and-the-islamic-state

9   Dobbins, J., et al., (2008) "After the war: Nation-building from FDR to George W. Bush," Santa Monica, CA: RAND, pp. 104-127.

10   Rathmell, A. (2005) 'Planning Post-conflict Reconstruction in Iraq: What Can We Learn?', International Affairs, 81(5), 1013-1038, p. 1025,

elections. The elections, unsurprisingly, failed to facilitate national reconciliation.

The fall of the former regime in 2003 brought about anti-government sectarian violence throughout the country, including Nineveh governorate and the city of Mosul. Sectarian killings and kidnappings increased, as did insurgency, terrorism, and militiary violence. Extremist groups, including Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi's Tawhid and Jihad, and al-Qa'ida, began targeting Sunnis who cooperated with the new authorities or the "occupying" forces.

The successive Governments of former Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki (2006-2010 and 2010-2014) adopted particularly harsh measures in the city of Mosul, and his two mandates were characterised by a rise in sectarian tone. The security forces brought into the governorate of Nineveh, mostly from southern Iraq, did not coordinate well with the existing local security authorities and were met with scepticism by the people they were supposed to serve. The harsh new counter-terrorism laws, excessively targeting the Sunni Arab population, also fuelled anger and frustration. The population's mistrust towards the post-2003 political leadership in Baghdad, largely dominated by the Shi'as, contributed to formation of negative perceptions towards political authorities, divisions between communities on the ground, and citizens' disengagement with the entire political process. Moreover, strong ties also existed between many former officers of the Saddam Hussein's regime, as well as clans and tribal sheikhs in their home areas, providing extremist groups with a vital support network from the local community allowing extremists to freely recruit members into their ranks. All these factors, together with the high level of corruption among the army ranks, have been identified as the major causes of the collapse of the Iraqi security forces when IS took over Mosul. [11]

At the heart of the post-2003 tensions in Nineveh was the Sunni Arabs' opposition to the presence of US forces in Iraq and their marginalisation in the structure of the new political system in the country. Districts like Tal Afar became centres for Sunni opposition to the new authorities. [12] As a result, Nineveh became a base for the Sunni insurgency which would engulf the country for years to come. The violence committed over the course of years impacted relations between Shias and Sunnis, as well as intercommunal relations with other ethno-religious groups. [13]

Within this context, several religiously inspired organisations and political movements emerged, some adopting violent extremist ideas, with a clear impact on the social and political environment in Nineveh and Iraq in general. The trajectory of these movements varied depending on the interaction of socio-political factors, highlighting that the prevention of VE requires a comprehensive and long-term approach. Among the violent extremist groups that operated in Nineveh are the Jihad and Tawhid Group, al-Qa'ida Group of Jihad in the Land of the Two Rivers, the Mujahideen Shura Council, the Naqshbandi Order, and IS.

Iraqi Government's Heavy-Handed Approach As A Push Factor

In 2008-2009 the situation improved in the city of Mosul. Its economy began to revive, and the terrorist activities were decreased in the city centre. Importantly, the local civil society also started to emerge. However,

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11   Un Ponte Per [UPP]. (2021). Preventing Violent Extremism in Nineveh. Un Ponte Per: Erbil, p. 16.

12   D. Van Zoonen & Wirya, K. (2017b). "Turkmen in Tal Afar: Perceptions of Reconciliation and Conflict" (Middle East Research Institute). Available at: http://www.meri-k.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Turkmen-in-Tal-Afar-Report.pdf

13   See, for example D. Van Zoonen & Wirya, K. (2017a). "The Yazidis: Perceptions of Reconciliation and Conflict" (Middle East Research Institute). Available at: http://www.meri-k.org/publication/the-yazidisperceptions-of-reconciliation-and-conflict/; D. Van Zoonen & Wirya, K. (2017b). "Turkmen in Tal Afar: Perceptions of Reconciliation and Conflict" (Middle East Research Institute). Available at: http://www.meri-k.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Turkmen-in-Tal-Afar-Report.pdf.

when the US completely withdrew from Iraq in 2011, they left a huge security vacuum. Additionally, the increased sectarian politics in Baghdad was a key barrier to development in Mosul and other Sunni-majority areas. The Islamists and extremists exploited the new sentiments emerged among Sunnis in Iraq, including in Mosul, against the Maliki government in Baghdad, and people's uncertainty and mistrust with the US. In this context, jihadists began to present themselves as the main protector of the people, in the face of an increased sectarian government in Baghdad and unreliable American forces.

4. FACTORS FAVOURING VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN THE KURDISTAN REGION

4A. The Kurdistan Region Before 2003

The KRI is an autonomous region that emerged in northern Iraq after the Kurdish uprising against the Iraqi Ba'ath regime in 1991, resulting in the institution of a No-Fly Zone over the region. When the UN enacted Security Council Resolution 688, and the US, UK and France began enforcing a No-Fly Zone north of the 36th parallel in April 1991, Baghdad later withdrew its administration from three Kurdish-majority provinces, including Erbil, Sulaimanyah and Duhok. The Kurdish political opposition parties filled the gap, took over the governance and held a general election in May 1992, followed by the formation of the first elected government. However, the new social and political structures of Kurdistan were not ready for competitive politics. In 1994, violence between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) erupted, due to many factors, specifically conflict over revenues, ultimately leading to the split of the KRI administration. In 1998, the US brokered the Washington Agreement to end the internal war, which accepted the split of the two separate administrations in Erbil and Sulaimaniyah.

In this period, the ruling Kurdish parties also faced a new rival: the Kurdish Islamists, some of whose leaders were inspired by the Jihad in Afghanistan. The KDP and PUK engaged in clashes with Kurdish Islamist parties in 1993 and again in the early 2000s. The Islamic Movement of Kurdistan (IMK) which was established in 1987, was a major political and armed organisation. It began to reject the KDP-PUK rule of Kurdistan after the Uprising. [14] Later, several factions broke away from the IMK in the 1990s, forming new political parties. The main ones included:

- The Islamic Union of Kurdistan (IUK) in 1994,

- The Kurdistan Islamic Group (KIG) in 1999.

The fragmentation did not stop there. The IMK's internal divisions gave rise to new and more radical organisations such as:

- The Islamic Jihad Group, under the leadership of Mulla Ameen Pirdawd Khoshnaw.

- Jund al-Islam led by Abu Abdullah al-Shafi'i, and

- al-Islah ('Reformist Group'), led by Mullah Krekar.

Jund al-Islam and al-Islah merged in December 2001, creating a new Jihadist and extremist organisation of Ansar al-Islam, with Krekar as their collective leader. [15] Ansar al-Islam became one of the most radical Islamist groups operating in Kurdistan. It totally rejected traditional practices and Kurdish understandings of Islam, and later created a jihadi proto-state in remote villages around Halabja on the Iranian border in

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14 Gade, Tine, and Kamaran Palani. (2022). "The hybridisation of religion and nationalism in Iraqi Kurdistan: the case of Kurdish Islam." Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal, 1-21, p. 6.

15 Gade, Tine, and Kamaran Palani. (2022). "The hybridisation of religion and nationalism in Iraqi Kurdistan: the case of Kurdish Islam." Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal, 1-21, p. 6.

2001-2003, where it established a Shariʻa court and attacked Sufi shrines. Moreover, it attracted foreign fighters fleeing Afghanistan. Ansar al-Islam was the first target of US attacks after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, when many of its surviving members fled to Arab areas of Iraq, like Mosul, or migrated onward and re-settled in the diaspora.

At this decisive moment, there was an enabling environment to violence and extremism in Kurdistan, but, as shall be explained below, a combination of contextual and structural factors and developments at different levels prevented VE from consolidating in the years after 2003.

4B. The Kurdistan Region From 2003 To Date

Unlike the neighbouring region Nineveh, the KRI witnessed a completely different security, economic and political transformation after 2003. The Kurds welcomed the regime change in Baghdad and cooperated with the US and the new Iraqi authorities. In this period, the KRI witnessed unprecedented degree of stability, when compared to the rest of Iraq. Above all, it has become the most resilient part of Iraq to VE. The US-led 2003 invasion of Iraq gave the Kurds an opportunity to unify their administration. Unlike Sunni Arabs, the Kurds played a kingmaker role in Baghdad, and occupied the posts of President, Minister of Foreign Affairs, and other key positions. They also played a major role in bringing the constitution to fruition in 2005. [16] Whilst the majority of the Sunni Arabs, including those in Nineveh, voted against the constitution, the majority of the Kurds voted in favour, demonstrating two different political environments and perceptions towards the new political order in Iraq.

Internally, Kurdistan became more stable, particularly because of the 'Unification Accord', a power-sharing agreement, between the KDP and PUK that came into effect in 2006 when a coalition government of unity replaced the previous two administrations [17] Unification progressed a great deal during this period, and the Kurds were able to speak with one voice to Baghdad. These developments strengthened social contract between the people and authorities and provided sense of representation and inclusion among the Kurds in the early years of the post-2003 Iraq.

Economically, the new political agreement between Baghdad and Erbil allocates 17% of the national budget to the KRI, based on an estimation of the population. From 2005 to 2013, the KRG budget increased from c. $2.5 billion to $13 billion. [18] With oil prices at their peak between 2012 and 2013, Erbil experienced an unprecedented economic boom, with annual growth rates amounting to 12%. [19] In this period, unemployment in Kurdistan, including among the youth, reached the lowest level in Iraq and lower than many societies in the Middle East. Migration of young Kurds from this period to Europe also decreased to the lowest level compared to the years before 2003. New schools and universities were built in Kurdistan, and the private sector began to grow unlike the rest of Iraq.

16   The new constitution in Iraq recognises the Kurdistan Region as the only federal region within Iraq's borders replete with protected privileges, including control over security forces, economy and body of law independent from that of the government of Iraq, as per Section 5, Article 117.

17   See: Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). (2006, January 23). Kurdistan regional government unification agreement. http://previous.cabinet.gov.krd/a/d.aspx?s=010000&l=12&a=8891

18   Natali, D. (2015). The Kurdish quasi-state: Leveraging political Limbo. The Washington Quarterly, 38(2), 145–164. https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2015.1064715 p. 147.

19   Determined to Grow: Economy. (2013, October 1). Invest in group. https://investingroup.org/%20review/236/determined-to-grow-economy-kurdistan/

Regarding governance and political participation, in the first decade after 2003 the prospect of democracy was high in Kurdistan compared to other phases. Between 2003 and 2015, many considered the KRI's democratisation attempts as a good example of democracy in Iraq, in terms of relatively fair elections, rights for religious and ethnic minorities, women rights, and emerging active opposition in parliament. [20]

Above all, in this period, the Kurdish Islamist parties, which previously engaged in violent confrontations with the Kurdish ruling parties, integrated into the new political process after 2003. The Islamic political parties disarmed their members and actively engaged in the process. After the regime change in Iraq in 2003, Kurdish Islamists accepted the new political process and the first elections under the US-led occupation. The KRI's three main Islamist parties (the KIU, KIG and IMI) all entered the Parliament. This was a significant shift, especially for the latter two organisations, which were created from the outset as armed movements and jihad was officially part of their political manifesto. [21] In addition to the lack of popular support and public appeal to armed struggle, fearing targeted US bombings against them, the Islamist parties laid down their weapons. Moreover, the Kurds saw the new status of Kurdistan as a Federal Region within Iraq as an opportunity. The Kurdish Islamist parties' acceptance of the political process under US occupation shows that they put their Kurdish cause before their Islamic anti-imperialism.

4C. The Kurdish Issue is an 'Ethnic One'

There is a consensus that the people's adherence to Kurdayati (Kurdishness, serving the Kurdish cause) is the most powerful explanatory factor to why VE was contained in Kurdistan after 2003. Kurdayati is an element that has constrained religiously motivated extremism and violence in the KRI for years. Kurdish issue in Iraq has been traditionally an issue around ethnic identity and differences. For the past seven decades, the main political movements in Kurdistan have not been religious. The Kurdish ethnic cause has been a barrier to religiously-motivated or framed extremism.

The dramatic rise of IS in Syria and Iraq in 2014 attracted many young people in the region and across the world, including some young Kurds. There are no fully reliable statistics for the number of Kurdish youths who joined IS. However, statements and interviews with KRG officials indicate that around 530 young Iraqi Kurds joined the group, the majority (300 to 330) were killed in Syria and Iraq from 2014 to 2017, and around 150 of them returned and surrendered to the KRI authorities. [22] Regarding the returnees and their motivations, a dominant explanation among the security officials and researchers is that the factor of 'ethnic' identity of the Kurds within IS was fundamental to the decision to return. A senior internal security agent, who interviewed the Kurdish returnees, told us that once IS started attacking the Kurds in Syria and Iraq, many young Kurds did not want to involve in fighting the Kurds, and "raping and enslaving Kurdish women".

'Ethnic' identity was viewed as an important explanatory factor for PVE in Kurdistan in a recent study conducted by the Peace and Freedom Organisation. [23] Many analysts also view the factor of ethnic identity

20   Kamaran Palani, et al. (2021) Strategies to Gain International Recognition: Iraqi Kurdistan's September 2017 Referendum for Independence, Ethnopolitics, 20:4, 406-427, p. 411.

21   Gade and Palani, "The hybridisation of religion and nationalism in Iraqi Kurdistan," p. 7.

22   Hiwa S. (2019, May 23). 150 Kurdish ISIS militants who surrendered to Kurdistan Region authorities are in prison: Official. Kurdistan24. https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/fe5cb55d-9871-4692-ae29-67f2e4d5be7c

23   Yousif, S. & Muhammad, A. (2020). "Violent Extremism: Factors and Approaches to Prevention in the Kurdistan

as a key barrier to the growth of Islamist parties generally in Kurdistan. In an interview with Rudaw, Meleagrou-Hitchens, the Head of Research at the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, also shared the same belief that the significance of the ethnic Kurdish cause for the young Kurds is a major reason preventing young Kurds from adopting extremist religious ideology. [24] In relation to this, another common perception was that the IS leaders did not trust the Kurdish jihadists and viewed them with "doubts". [25] However, there is no comprehensive and academic study to provide evidence to confirm and explain the impact of "ethnic identity" in the Kurdish returnees' decision to leave the self-proclaimed Caliphate. Most of these statements come from the KRG and anonymous security officials.

In 2014, the KRI suddenly had a new, extremely aggressive neighbour, IS, with across hundreds of kilometres of shared borders which also constituted a domestic security threat. However, the number of Kurds who joined IS remained relatively low despite the proximity of, and the relative ease of access to, the Caliphate, particularly in the early months of the group's emergence in Iraq. Nevertheless, the emergence of IS was a challenge, not only for the KRI authorities, but also for the established Kurdish Islamist parties on how they may respond to this new reality. They came under pressure from the anti-IS social and formal media. The Islamists, including the three main Islamist parties in Kurdistan, denounced IS and supported the Peshmerga's fight against the group.

Kurdistan has also witnessed the rise of a quietist Salafist movement led by Dr. Abdullatif Salafi, who also rejected IS. [26] Such groups believe that they had a significant role in preventing radicalisation and extremism among the Kurdish youth during the rise and rule of IS (2014-2017). For example, on several occasions, Abdullatif Salafi mentioned that a commander of hundreds of Peshmerga fighters asked him if their fight against IS was "right" and could be considered as "defending the nation". Salafi gave his unreserved support for the military operations against IS. Ultimately, the Kurdish Islamist parties have no doubt played a positive role in preventing young Kurds from joining IS and other extremist groups which adopt radical views towards non-Muslim groups (e.g., Yazidis).

4D. The Dominant Practice of Islam in The KRI

In recent literature and discussions on extremism in Kurdistan, the concept of "Kurdish Islam" has emerged, propagated by Kurdish intellectuals including Tahsin Hama Gharib and Abdulrahman Sadiq. This notion gained more focus and support from the KRG during the fight against IS. Kurdish Islamic scholars see a "nationalisation" of Islam as an integral part of the national identity of Kurdistan and the soul of the Kurdish statehood project. [27] Kurdish Islam is seen as the antidote to militant extremism. To prevent extremism and promote coexistence between the various religious and ethnic components of the KRI,

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Region-Iraq". Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343893188_Violent_Extremism_Factors_and_Approaches_to_Prevention_in_the_Kurdistan_Region-Iraq , p. 11.

24   600 ganji kurd chunata naw daesh (600 Kurds joined ISIS). (2016, March 18). Rudaw. https://www.rudaw.net/sorani/kurdistan/180320169

25   Bas News. (2016, Apr 8). http://www.basnews.com/so/babat/269165

26   Kurdistan24's interview with Dr. Abdullatif Salafi. (2019, June 3). Available at: https://www.kurdistan24.net/so/program/9f3b3152-3d35-4941-857d-4993c2dc9e05

27   Gade and Palani, "The hybridisation of religion and nationalism in Iraqi Kurdistan," p. 12.

Kurdish authorities have used such narrative and practice of religion. [28]

Kurdish Islam is a response to a popular belief that Arabs, Turks and Persians have used Islam against the Kurdish cause. Kurdish parties wish to overcome that, by creating religious boundaries to others. Having largely been a political concept, the term of Kurdish Islam moved into the academic debate after 2003 by Kurdish scholars and intellectuals. According to these intellectuals, Kurdish Islam is as an integral part of consolidating the national identity of Kurdistan. They argue that Kurdish Islam should be the soul and spirit of the Kurdish statehood project, combining religion and Kurdish aspiration for independence. This combination is termed "Kurdish Islam". Since the regime in the region used religion against Kurdish independence movements, [29] practices of Islam should now be conducted in a way that serves the Kurdish struggle for independence. Moreover, they also view that the Kurds do not need to import others' (specifically the Arabs') understanding of Islam, as historically the Kurds have had their own Islamic thought, madrasas and practices, which in their opinion has emphasised peaceful coexistence.

4E. Polarisation is on The Rize

Whilst Kurdish nationalism and moderate practice of Islam played a defensive wall against religiously framed violent extremism in the KRI after 2003, these factors are facing significant challenges. Kurdistan has become increasingly polarized in recent years, with rising youth dissatisfaction and disillusionment with the authorities. Some factors to explain the tremendous pressures youth are facing include the post-2014 financial crisis, a lack of effective anti-corruption government reforms, insufficient policies to empower youth, and widening political divisions. It is not the historical struggle for independence from the Iraqi state that defines the priorities and dreams of the people of Kurdistan today but, rather, youth dissatisfaction and disappointment toward the Kurdish authorities. A new identity is thus emerging among young Kurds within which the political class is viewed as "the other". [30] This anti-authority sentiment translates into different manifestations of resistance against, and disengagement with, political processes, ranging from emigration to Europe, protest movements, and potential youth radicalisation.

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28   See: Skare, E. et al. (2021). Preventing violent extremism, the Middle East, pp. 13-14.

29   Anaid, A. (2017). Learning from history Kurdish nationalism and state-building efforts. In A. Danilovich (Ed.), Iraqi Kurdistan in Middle Eastern politics (pp. 11–35). Routledge, p. 21.

30 Palani, "Youth Radicalization in Kurdistan," p. 223.

5. SURVEY RESULTS ON:
PUBLIC AWARENESS AND PERCEPTION OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND PREVENTION OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM

5A. Public Awareness & Perception Of VE

Applying a detailed and standardised questionnaire, it was observed that most of the population in both Nineveh and the KRI admit that their communities are confronted with VE. However, there was a clear difference between the two populations where 93% of Nineveh respondents believed their community is confronted with extremism, compared to 73% in the KRI (Fig. 1A and 1B). In Kurdistan, the number of those who denied that their community is confronted with extremism was 22%, significantly higher than Nineveh.

When asked about the type of extremism they are aware of, 53% of the respondents in Nineveh mentioned religious extremism as the main form of VE, while 34% also referred to ethnic extremism (Fig. 2A). In contrast, the majority of the KRI respondents believed that the prevailing extremism is religious (48%), followed by ethno-nationalism (33%) (Fig. 2B).

While asked if the prevailing extremism they identified is promoting violence, the overwhelming majority (94%) of Nineveh respondents said yes, compared to 62% in the KRI (Fig. 3A and B).

Figure 1: Response to the question: Is your community confronted with extremism?
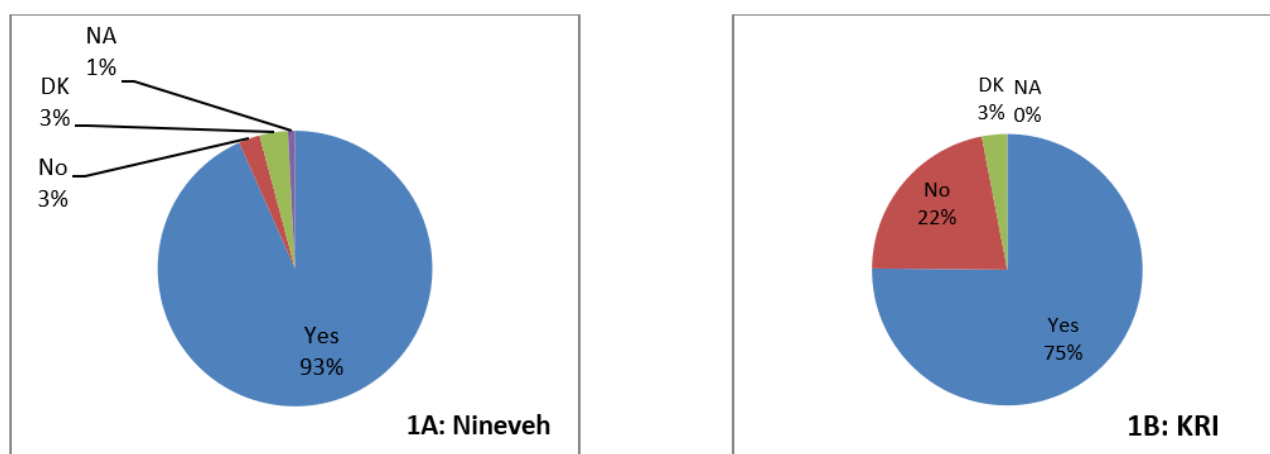
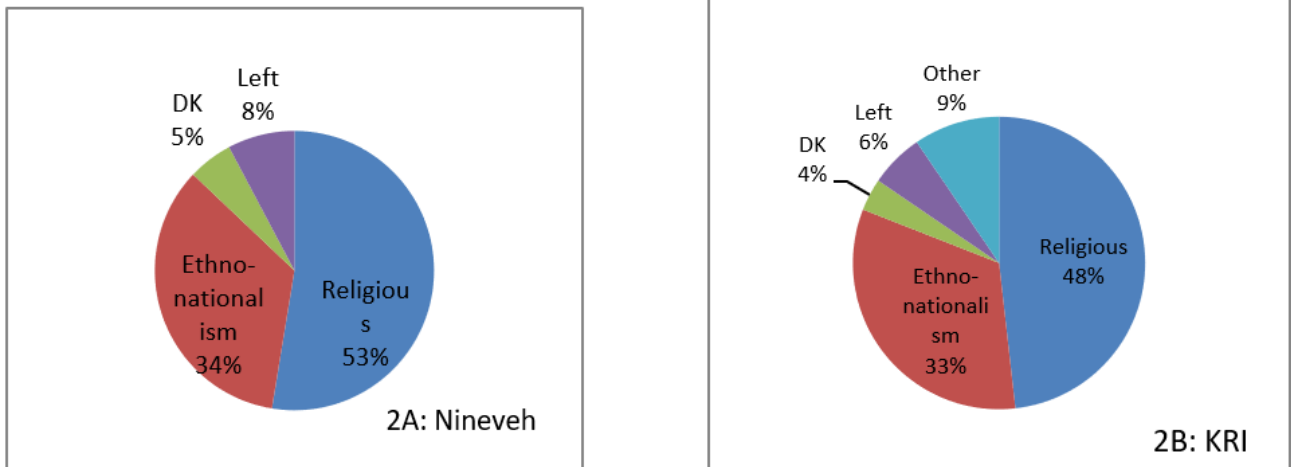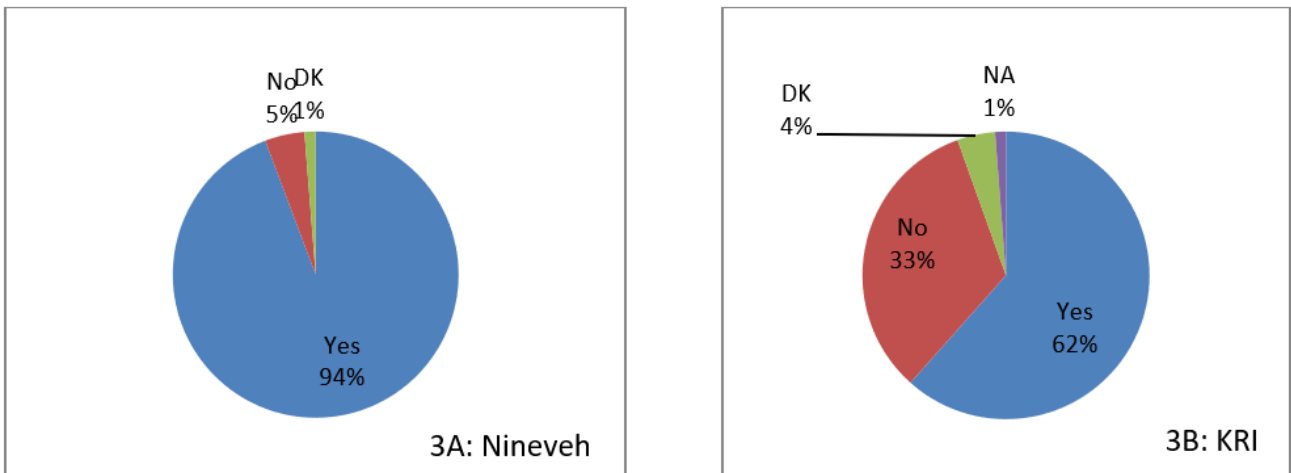*Figure 2: Response to the question: What type of extremism is present in your community?*

*Figure 3: Response to the question: Is the prevailing extremism you mentioned, promoting violence?*

5B. Perception of Drivers of VE

The issue of VE in Nineveh should consider a combination of causes and drivers, forming the ground for the rise of extremism. The data show that among the factors which led people to support extremist actions and extremist groups in Nineveh, 23% of respondents mentioned poverty, followed by lack of education (22%), militarisation and the spread of armed groups (20%) and unemployment (17%) (Fig. 4A). Only 10% of the respondents mentioned religion as a factor driving people to support extremist groups in the governorate and 8% believed that the state is provoking them.

In the KRI, 33% mentioned lack of education, followed by unemployment (30%). Like the Nineveh respondents, only 9% mentioned religion as a factor contributing to VE.

Figure 4: Response to the question: Why do people support such groups and actions?

4A: Nineveh

4B: KRI
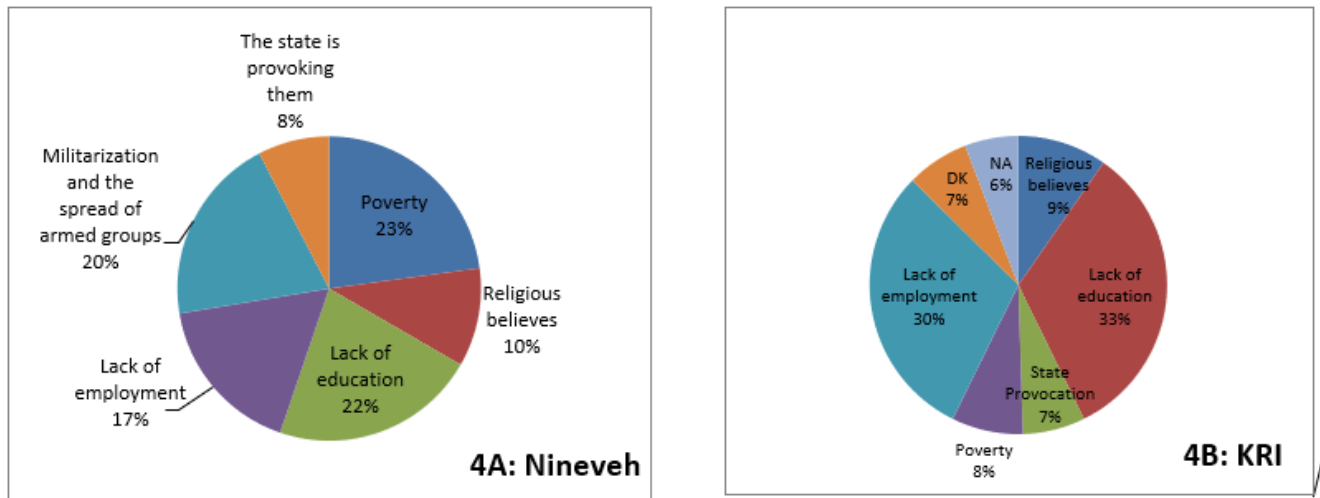
5C. Public Awareness of The Prevention Efforts to Combat VE

The data collected for this research indicates that only 30% of the Nineveh respondents were aware of field efforts by the FGoI or other existing programs aiming at PVE, whereas the majority (59%) were unaware (Fig. 5A). The same was true in the KRI where 65% of survey respondents replied negatively, while 22% were aware (Fig. 5B).

When asked how they might describe the impact and contribution of the efforts to peace and social cohesion, only 40% of the respondents believed these were sufficient or generous, while the majority (57%) thought they were not (Fig. 6A). In contrast, 88% of the KRI respondents were positive about the scale or magnitude of this contribution to peace and social cohesion (Fig. 6B). Of these, 35% thought it was generous and 53% thought it was sufficient.

When asked whether part of the PVE efforts should consist of negotiating with extremist groups, opinions were divided. Almost half (48%) of the respondents in Nineveh believed that negotiating with extremist groups will work. Of these, 26% believed such negotiations will lead to no effect, and 22% thought it is determinantal and will worsen VE because it "will give them legitimacy" (Fig. 7A). In the KRI, however, respondents were more positive about negotiating with extremists, 56% thought negotiations will work, 28% thought it will not work and only 11% said it will make it (Fig. 7B).

Figure 5A: Response to the question: Are you aware of programs in your community dedicated to prevent violent extremism?

5A: Nineveh

5B: KRI

Figure 6: Response to the question: Based on your personal experience how do you describe the magnitude of this contribution to peace and social cohesion?

*Figure 7: Response to the question: What do you think of negotiating with extremist groups?*
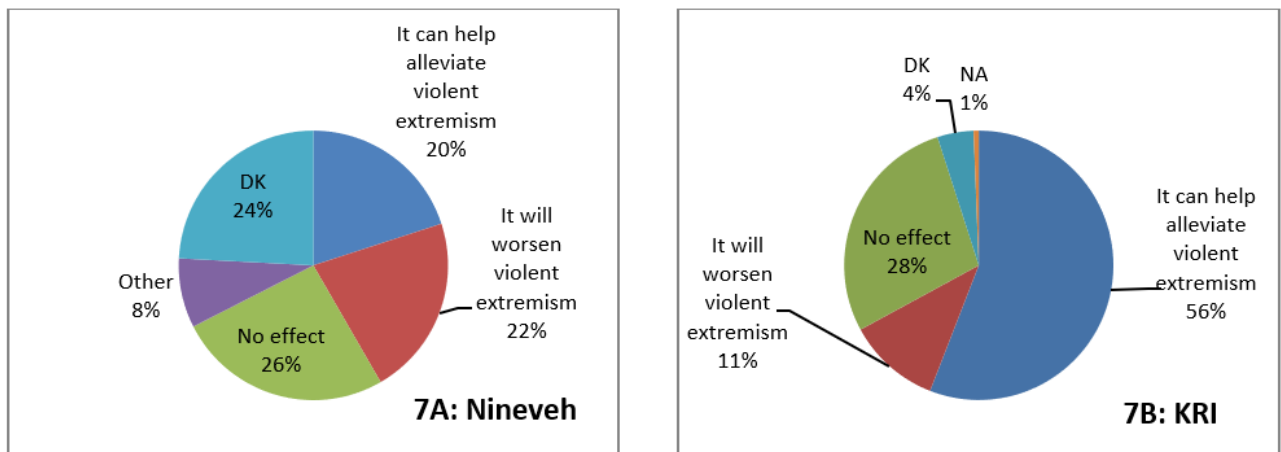
5D. Awareness of International Assistance for the PVE

Asked about the awareness of local and international governmental and non-governmental involvement in the PVE, 48% of Nineveh respondents were able to name specific actors, including of non-governmental organisations (NGOs, mostly international), 40% mentioned the specific international governments or governmental agencies by name, and only 12% mentioned their national or local government organisations (Fig. 8A). Among the International NGOs mentioned by survey respondents were: Un Ponte Per, PAX Peace Organisation, Malteser International, German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ), and the United States Institute of Peace (USIP). The countries or government agencies that were mentioned the most were European Union (EU) (29%), the USA (7%), Germany (2%) and the United Nations (2%).

In the case of the KRI, 43% of the surveyed respondents mentioned the KRG, 25% mentioned NGOs and 32% mentioned international governments or agencies (Fig. 8B). The EU, UN, US and Germany were mentioned by 14%, 11%, 6% and 1% of the respondents, respectively.

Figure 8: Response to the question: Are one of the organisations or countries involved in PVE present in your community?

8A: Nineveh

8B: KRI
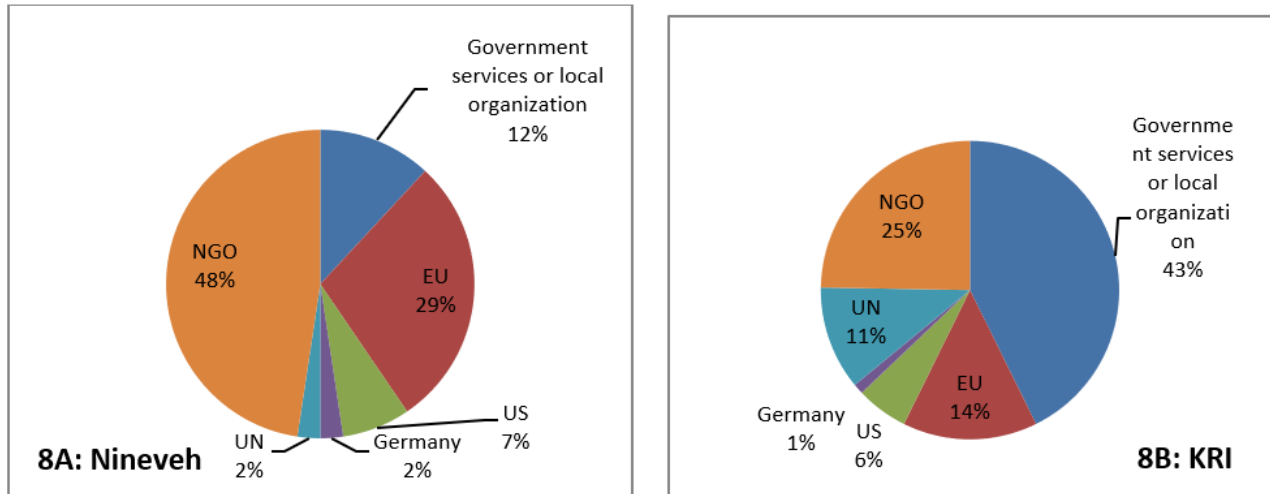
5E. Perception of the Effectiveness and Quality of Delivery

In Nineveh, people's perception of the quality and effectiveness of the social cohesion programs, varied considerably. The vast majority (77%) acknowledged that the local and international organisations working on the PVE in the Province contributed to peace and community cohesion, and helped in maintaining peace and social cohesion (Fig. 9A). Only, 18% of participants believed otherwise. However, Nineveh respondents were highly divided in terms of their assessment of the appropriateness and the focus of the social cohesion programs. Of those interviewed, 58% believed that the contribution and programs in their governorate offered the right type of assistance (32%) or 'well targeted to right beneficiaries' (16%). The rest believed that the programmes and contributions are either wrong type of assistance (26%) or 'wrongly targeted - to wrong beneficiaries' (26%) (Fig. 10A).

Figure 9: Response to the question: Do you think that organisations working PVE in your community help to maintain peace and social cohesion?
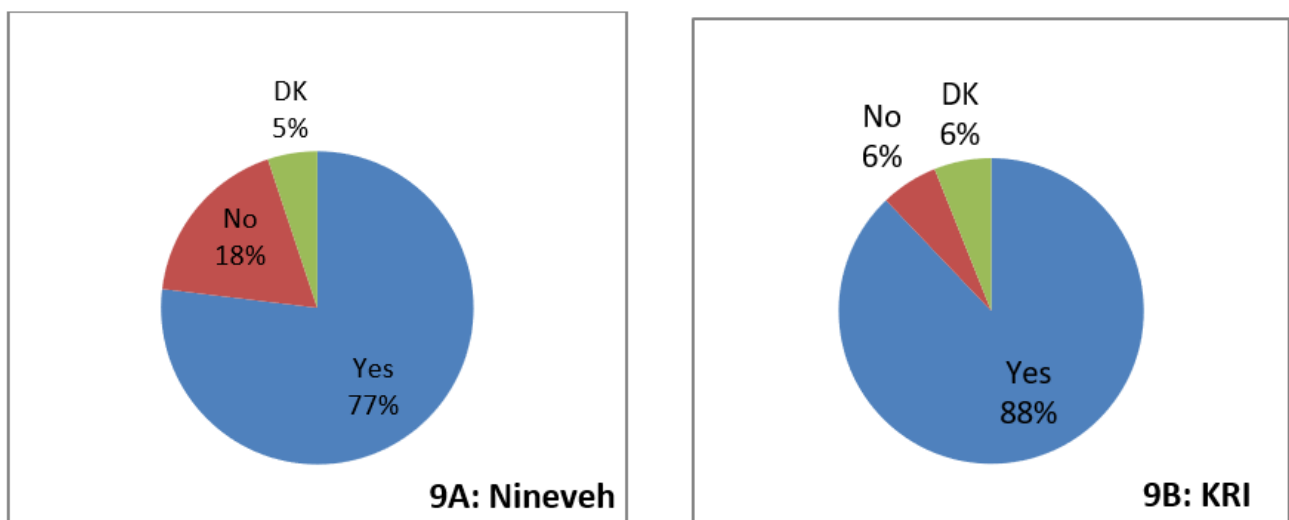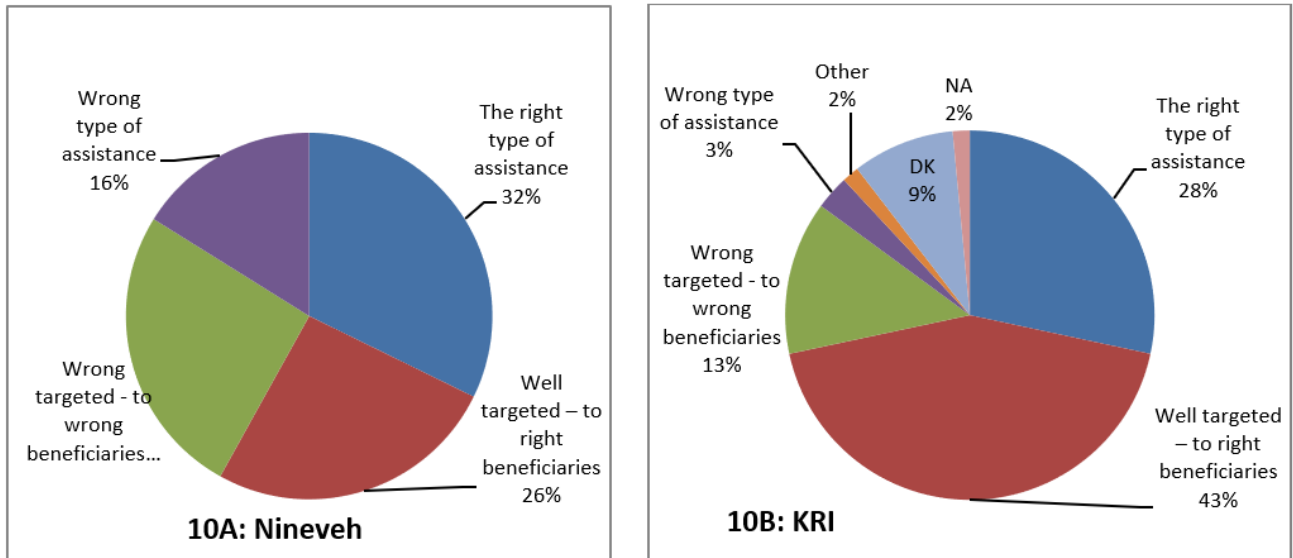

9A: Nineveh

9B: KRI

Figure 10: Which of the following descriptions fits better with this contribution? (Nineveh) [31]
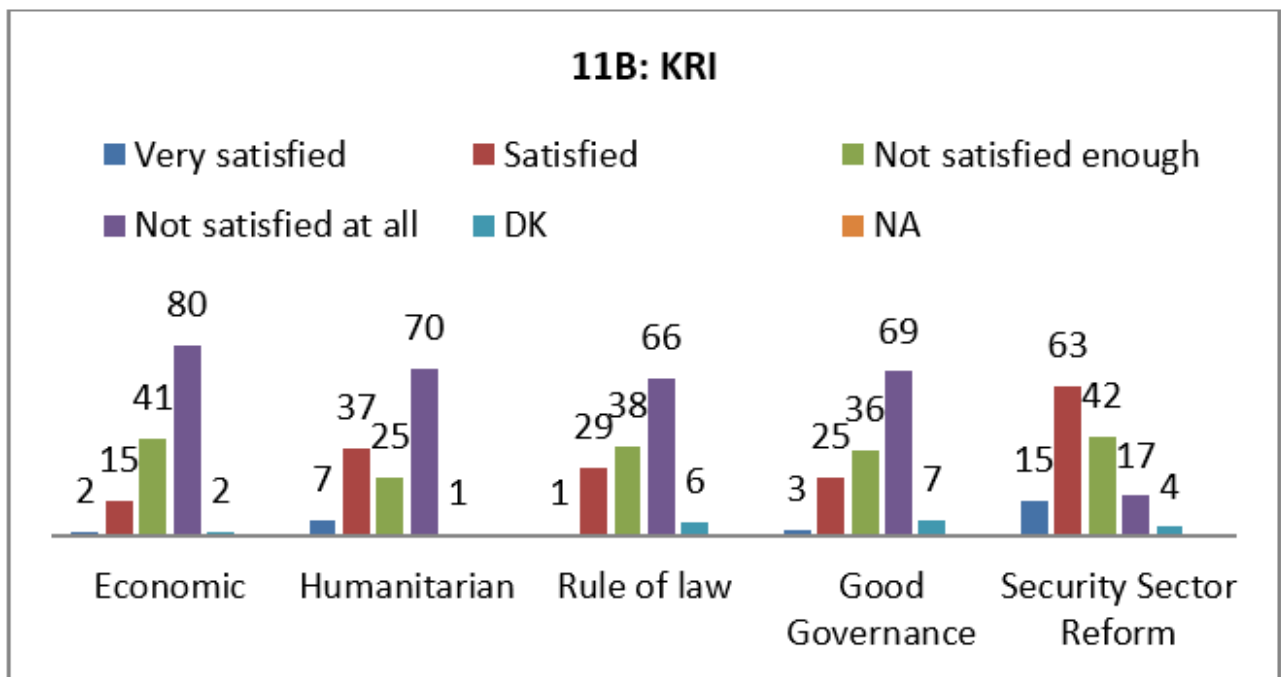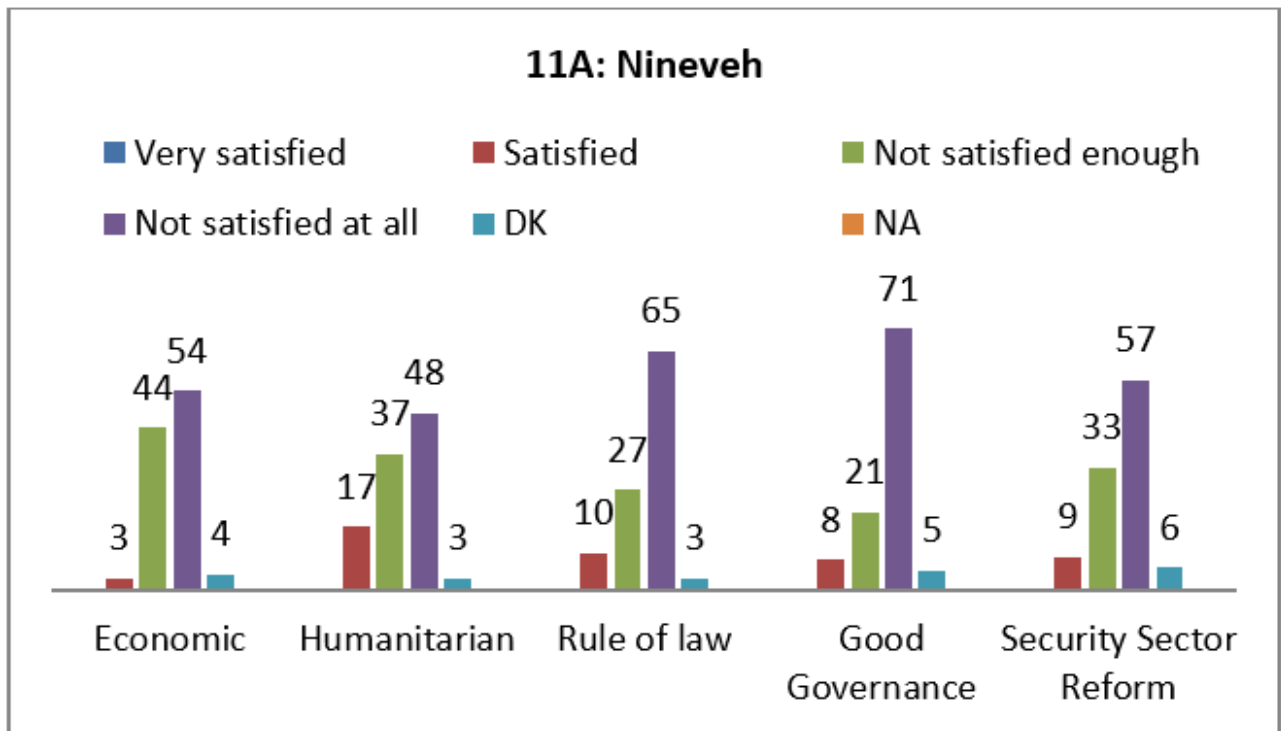

10A: Nineveh

10B: KRI

In contrast, in the KRI, 88% of the respondents believe that the local and international organisations working on the PVE were successful in maintaining peace and social cohesion, and only 6% thought otherwise (Fig. 9B). Also, the collective PVE efforts are perceived favourably by the majority (71%) of the KRI interviewees (Fig. 10B). Of these, 43% thought the contribution and programs were of the right type and well-targeted, and 28% believed the support was the right type of assistance. Only 13% believed that the contribution was 'wrongly targeted to wrong beneficiaries', and fewer still (3%) considered the contribution to be a 'wrong type of assistance' (Fig. 10B).

5F. Satisfaction Levels

In terms of levels of satisfaction with the governmental and international aid, the data reveals high levels of dissatisfaction in Nineveh in the fields of economy, humanitarian support, rule-of-law, good governance, and security sector reform (Fig. 11A). Of the 105 respondents in Nineveh, none were 'very satisfied' with progress in any of these sectors. Average satisfactions were reported by a small minority of respondents in these five sectors. The vast majority were either not satisfied enough or not satisfied at all (Fig. 11A). In contrast, in the KRI, there was a relatively higher number of respondents who were satisfied or very satisfied in all five sectors. That said, the overall pattern of dissatisfaction was similar to Nineveh, i.e. the majority were either not satisfied enough or not satisfied at all, except in the area of security reform where the majority were satisfied or very satisfied with governmental and international efforts (Fig. 11B).

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31   The respondents were given one choice in this question.

Figure 11: Response to the question: Are you satisfied with governmental and international aid toward your community?

11A: Nineveh

Legend: Very satisfied, Satisfied, Not satisfied enough, Not satisfied at all, DK, NA

Categories: Economic, Humanitarian, Rule of law, Good Governance, Security Sector Reform

11B: KRI

Legend: Very satisfied, Satisfied, Not satisfied enough, Not satisfied at all, DK, NA

Categories: Economic, Humanitarian, Rule of law, Good Governance, Security Sector Reform

6. CONTEXT & IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS: REMAINING DRIVERS OF VE AND POLICY CHALLENGES

Iraq continues to suffer from fragility, instability, and conflict, which has in the past enabled the occurrence of VE across the nation. However, as this study further demonstrates, there are stark local variations at local provincial levels and Nineveh, in particular, deserves greater focus for it suffers from geopolitical conflicts, and tensions between urban and rural areas. Also, since 2017, the stigma of IS which continues to haunt significant sections of the population. In addition, the governorate still suffers from intercommunal as well as international (Iran and Turkey) competition for hegemony. The liberation of Nineveh from IS in 2017 did not offer a solution to these and other long-standing conflicts. Rather, the forces which have dominated post-IS Nineveh have played a prominent role in exacerbating conflicts, constraining attempts at building resilience against VE.

6A. Marginalisation and Mistrust

The data further underlines that the religiously, ethnically, and linguistically diverse population of Nineveh continues to be threatened by a perceived marginalisation and discrimination based on sect and ethnicity. The greater empowerment of certain groups, which since 2017 has dominated the local administration and/or are supported by armed militias, creates inequality as certain groups monopolise resources and power. For instance, Nineveh's Shabaks are highly armed, backed by the Popular Mobilisation Unites, and the Christians have received generous international economic grants compared to other local communities. In contrast, the Sunni Arab majority has been once again marginalised and suffers from the stigma of association with IS. It is of no surprise that trust in the state institutions among the Sunni Arabs remains at its lowest, let alone in their ability to achieve peace and stability via negotiating with extremist groups.

The same type of mistrust between Nineveh's communities, along with exclusion and discrimination, have restricted certain communities' full access to public services or employment opportunities, and impeded the area's redevelopment since 2017. Significantly, two studies conducted by the Un Ponte Per and Mercy Corps, have shown that the majority of respondents rejected the idea of the return of the families with members previously affiliated with IS to their places of origin.[32]

6B. Corruption and Bad Governance

Where government mismanagement is mixed with violations of human rights, freedom, and the rule of law, the environment would be ripe for the growth of extremism. Government administration in Nineveh was, and still is, based on sectarian power-sharing, and is characterised by discrimination on the basis of religion or ethnicity. The lack of a truly democratic space may become a factor that drives further VE. [33] Moreover, widespread and increasing corruption remains to be the main outcome of institutional weakness and poor

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32 Mercy Corps. (2015). "Investing in Iraq's Peace: How Good Governance Can Diminish Support for Violent Extremism". Available at: https://www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/iraq-peace-governance-extremism p. 3; UPP, "Preventing Violent Extremism in Nineveh", p. 23.

33 UPP, "Preventing Violent Extremism in Nineveh", p. 28.

governance over the years, and it is itself a driver for further rivalry and conflict in the governorate. [34] As in other parts of Iraq, and as expressed in several studies, Nineveh's population express low confidence in the role of their political representatives, while the majority of them also recognise that the continuation of the status quo may lead to new conflicts and tensions in the governorate, among many other undesirable outcomes.

6C. Education

Limited access to education in the post-2017 phase is another key area of concern for the future. [35] The defeat of IS was not accompanied by measures aimed at returning children in schools. This is particularly evident in the camps where IS members' families have been held since the military defeat of the organisation, where many children and adolescents, males, and females, do not have access to education. This is since most do not possess identity documents, without which they face restrictions on movement and cannot enrol in schools. [36] Combined with the lack of appropriate programmes aimed at reintegrating these students into the public schooling system, they are completely excluded from education. Lack of appropriate education, and the social opportunity to engage with children from other communities in school, make youth vulnerable to recruiters for VE.

6D. Socio-Economic Factors

Poverty and underdevelopment are major push factors of VE, but VE in turn causes large human, economic and material losses that negatively affect resilience and development opportunities. Unemployment, currently, represents the top concern in Nineveh.[37] Nineveh has experienced a drastic reduction in domestic and foreign investment in the local economy; a sharp decline in the gains of the workforce in the governorate; internal displacement from rural areas to major cities in search of safety, leading to the decline of agricultural production and traditional products; and overall insecurity. As a result, Nineveh has experienced high rates of unemployment and poverty. The economic consequences of IS exacerbated a situation that was already dire, also due to high levels of corruption channelled through a patronage system organised around key political parties.

Nineveh's economic recovery and reconstruction continues to be severely obstructed by the remnants of conflicts and displacement. [38] Local actors in Nineveh point to the need for livelihood initiatives to revive the economy and secure the creation of job opportunities, arguing that these efforts are essential not only to incentivise refugees' and migrants' return, but also to guarantee long-term stability.

While the existing data shows there is an improvement in services, such as provision of water and electricity,

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34   UPP, "Preventing Violent Extremism in Nineveh", p. 28.

35   See UPP, 2021, p. 24-25.

36   United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq. (2020). "The Right to Education in Iraq". Available at: https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/IQ/2020-02IraqRightEducationreport.pdf , p. 11.

37   Ken, A. (2021, June 22). "Unemployment Replaces ISIS as Top Security Concern for Minorities in Iraq". Available at: https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/06/unemployment-replaces-isis-top-security-concern-minorities-iraq

38   Johansen, H., Palani, K. & Ala'Aldeen, D. (2020). "Ninewa Plains and Western Ninewa: Sustainable Returns and Stabilization Efforts. Current Initiatives and Trends" (Middle East Research Institute). Available at: http://www.meri-k.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Initiatives-Mapping-Report-Full-Report.pdf p. 38.

there is still much infrastructure damage, especially in the old city of Mosul (also known as the "right side" or West Mosul). The health sector is perhaps the worst affected in light of the infrastructure damage, with key hospitals still in ruins or out of service.

The existing research also identifies some key social and family factors as on-going concerns for being drivers of VE. This included the social disintegration during and after the IS period and the long-term psychological impact of the IS rule, family fragmentation, poor education, lack of leadership, and absence of positive role-models for teenagers. These are in addition to the continued presence of social and clan customs and traditions, the emergence of the relatively new phenomenon of social discrimination of people in Western Mosul towards people from East Mosul and people from other "classes."

6E. Militarisation of the Society

The militarisation of society is another barrier to stabilisation and peacebuilding in Nineveh, leading citizens to believe that security can only be provided by armed groups, which, in turn, represent a major challenge to the achievement of social cohesion in the governorate. [39] Perceptions towards armed militias affiliated with ethno-religious minorities are highly polarised. Existing studies on Nineveh show that the militarisation of society is considered as the second factor that promotes VE. In Nineveh, this militarisation occurred in parallel to the fight against IS, with the emergence of various factions which were later consolidated after the liberation of Nineveh. [40] They include:

- The 30th Brigade, the most prominent group, affiliated to and mainly composed of the Shabaks. The Brigade is located in the regions of Bartella, Bashiqa and Hamdaniya, in addition to the villages located along the Mosul-Erbil road.

- The Babylonian Brigades, headed by a Christian with a Christian minority and an Arab (Sunni or Shia) majority membership, most of whom originate from outside Nineveh. This Brigade is spread across the areas of Tal Keif, Batnaya and Talsquf, in addition to Christian villages along the Mosul-Dohuk road.

- The Nineveh Plain Protection Units, consisting of Christian fighters is deployed in the Hamdaniya district.

- The Sinjar Protection Units consist of Yazidi fighters on Mount Sinjar and other dispersed Yazidi factions.

- A Shia Turkmen-majority armed group operating in the areas of al-Ayadiyah, Rashidiya and Shreikhan.

- The Tribal Mobilisation Forces composed of Sunni Arabs, spread across Tal Afar and Sinjar.

Although perceived differently by different communities and individuals in Nineveh, the emergence of these armed actors resulted in the militarisation of ethno-religious minorities, a widening gap between and within communities, and the weakening of state authority and control in the province.

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39   Ibid., p. 38.

40   For an overview of the existing exrmed groups in Nineveh, see Palani, K., Ala'Aldeen, D., & Cersosimo, S. (2018). "Turkey and the European Union: Conflicting Policies and Opportunities for Cooperation Over Iraq, Syria and the Kurdish Political Actors" (Erbil: Middle East Research Institute). Available at: http://www.meri-k.org/publication/turkey-and-the-european-union-conflicting-policies-and-opportunities-for-cooperation/ pp. 15-16.

6F. Prison Conditions

There is a widespread fear that the harsh treatment people receive in government prisons could once again play a role in the radicalisation and recruitment of large numbers of detainees into violent extremist groups. This view extends also to those camps where IS families are hosted, which are largely perceived as a fertile ground for extremism in the future. In Nineveh, there are three prison centres in the areas of Qayyarah and Hammam al-Alil with at least 1,269 detainees, including boys as young as 13, some of whom are living in terrible conditions and with limited medical care. [41] Prior to the rise of IS in 2014, detainees sought to join violent extremist groups inside prisons because these groups were seen as having the power to release some detainees through paying corrupt prison employees, security officers and judges. According to Omer Mohammed, the founder of Mosul Eye, "Islamic State's chain of intelligence was built over many years in Mosul on two main elements: 1) the security forces' corruption, and 2) locals' fear of being killed as a result of that corruption, that a jailed terrorist could bribe his way to freedom and once out exercise retribution on his accusers". [42]

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[41] Human Rights Watch (2019, July 4). "Iraq: Thousands Detained, Including Children, in Degrading Conditions". Available at: https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/04/iraq-thousands-detained-including-children-degrading-conditions

[42] Mohammed, O. (2020, Sep 29). "Exposing Terror, Building Resilience: Harnessing Citizen Journalists and Social Media to Confront Terrorism". Available at: https://gnet-research.org/2020/09/29/exposing-terror-building-resilience-harnessing-citizen-journalists-and-social-media-to-confront-terrorism/

7. CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The discussions and findings of this paper have shown that enabling drivers for VE are different depending on the context as well as the dynamic of other variables through time, which therefore need regular re-evaluation.

In Nineveh, VE should be contextualised within the broader security, governance, and identity crises, both locally in the governorate and nationally in Iraq as a whole. In other words, VE over the past decade was the consequence of significant changes in the political, social, and economic composition of Nineveh governorate and Iraq more broadly. Such an understanding is critical for analysing the conditions that could facilitate the rise of extremist groups and VE, and for designing PVE policies. Building resilience in Nineveh against radicalisation and transition to PVE is a long-term process that requires systematic and comprehensive investment in building intra- and inter-community trust, and trust between people and the authorities. Maintaining a narrow focus on terrorism is unlikely to secure sustainable solutions to the current crises, as this ignores key socio-political and historical developments that gave rise to the current environment for social and political grievances.

Examining the KRI experience since 2003, highlights five possible observations which ought to be considered as policy priorities and elements for resilience in the prevention of radicalisation in the region.

a. Countering pull factors

The absence of pull factors, such as the appeal of a particular charismatic Kurdish leader or group, or an ideology that can both reach deep into Kurdish society to promote extremist behaviour.

b. Effective security

The continuing efficiency of the government's hard security measures in monitoring and countering terrorism, and the high level of cooperation between the government security forces and the wider population.

c. Kurdish ethnic cause

Kurds' historical attachment to their ethnic cause, which has been a bulwark against religious extremism, while promoting or justifying ethnic-based violence.

d. Moderate local Islam

Kurds' historic relationship with Islam, largely dependent on spiritual experience and Sufism, making Kurdish areas more inclined to pluralism and tolerance.

e. Economic empowerment of the youth

After 2003, economic conditions improved in the KRI considerably as they won their share of the national budget following 2003. This contributed to reducing unemployment rates to unprecedented lows, reducing emigration levels within the youth, and improving education infrastructure in the region. However, since 2014, the KRG has become overwhelmed by financial problems, internal political rivalry, preventing youth radicalisation and PVE. Consequently, key initiatives such as educational and religious reforms did not receive the warranted prioritisation. Though people's adherence to Kurdayati (Kurdishness) and the

dominant spiritual rather than politicised practices of religion among the Kurds create a degree of resilience against religious extremism. However, recent developments indicate a diminishing sense of Kurdayati among the youth. Therefore, without comprehensive assessments and discussions regarding the PVE among Kurdistan's youth, the factors fuelling violence and extremism may increase in the future.

Despite the diminishing sense of Kurdayati and further fragmentation of Kurdish nationalism after the inconsequential 2017 referendum for independence, there are still no identifiable group, charismatic Kurdish leader or ideology that can reach deep into Kurdish society to promote extremist narrative. Migration as a form of resistance has become the main outcome of deterioration of socio-economic conditions as well as people's dissatisfaction with authorities in the KRI.

f. It is more about governance than religious identity

While there is a general tendency in the Middle East to associate violent extremism with religion, the empirical findings of this paper support the existing knowledge of drivers of violent extremism that socio-economic and governance-related concerns are the primary reason for VE's surge. Findings of cross-sectional and cross-regional studies conducted within the PREVEX project highlight those economic conditions and, more specifically, harsh unemployment (especially among youth) are the fundamental reason for VE. [43] While the data highlights poor governance and socio-economic conditions, the focus of the governments in the region is still on religious reform or regulating the religious sphere as the main concern for VE, hence, largely ignoring the social, economic, and political causes of radicalisation.

43　Gilad Ben-Nun and Ulf Engel. (2022). Working Paper on a comparison of 'enabling environments', drivers, and occurrence/non- occurrence of violent extremism in the Balkans and the MENA region. Available at: https://www.prevex-balkan-mena.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/D8.2-1.pdf

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