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Engaging the Post-ISIS Iraqi Religious Landscape for Peace and Reconciliation

By Ann Wainscott



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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report presents the findings of 175 interviews with Iraqis from the provinces of Baghdad, Basra, Diyala, Dohuk, Erbil, Karbala, Kirkuk, Najaf, and Sulimaniyah, and from Anbar and Nineveh Provinces. Part of a United States Institute of Peace initiative to map religious landscapes in conflict-affected states, the interviews evaluated who Iraqis perceive to be the most influential religious individuals, institutions, and ideas affecting reconciliation efforts in the country.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ann Wainscott is an assistant professor of political science at Miami University in Ohio. She specializes in contemporary forms of religious regulation in Muslim societies. From 2017 to 2018, she served as the American Academy of Religion–Luce Fellow in Religion and International Affairs at USIP. Her book *Bureaucratizing Islam: Morocco and the War on Terror* was published by Cambridge University Press in 2017.

Cover photo: Aerial view of Baghdad and the Tigris River. (Photo by Andersen Oystein/iStock)

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United States Institute of Peace

2301 Constitution Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20037

Phone: 202.457.1700

Fax: 202.429.6063

E-mail: usip_requests@usip.org

Web: www.usip.org

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Summary



Religious actors across traditions in Iraq continue to wield considerable influence and are perceived to have a role in moving the country toward peace. Involving them in reconciliation does not guarantee success, but excluding them seems certain to guarantee failure. Religious minorities are a critical piece of this puzzle. Addressing the challenges they face is essential to advancing multifaith peace efforts and reconciliation.

Research for this report—which included 175 semi-structured interviews conducted between late 2017 and late 2018 in the cities and surrounding areas of Baghdad, Basra, Diyala, Dohuk, Erbil, Karbala, Kirkuk, Mosul, Najaf, Sulaimaniyah, and in Anbar and Nineveh Provinces—suggests that Iraqis would accept or even actively desire the involvement of religious actors in several key areas related to peace: fighting extremism and sectarianism, correcting misconceptions about other religions, advancing social reconciliation at the local level, and representing the grievances of citizens to political authorities. Additionally, this research suggests that multiple conflicts with religious dimensions are manifesting within and among faith communities that religious actors might play a key role in mitigating.

Websites, blogs, and other media are primary sources for religious guidance. Relatedly, religious television channels, radio stations, and personalities wield considerable influence on attitudes and perceptions. At the same time, cross-sectarian membership is trending in multiple religious communities, such as the Kasnazani Sufi order and the Da'i al-Rabbani sect in Diyala, both of which contain Sunni and Shia members. Leaders of these movements may be well suited to lead reconciliation efforts across sectarian lines.

As peacebuilders and policymakers develop partnerships with Iraqi religious actors and institutions for peace, they need to remain sensitive to the complex nature of faith communities and actors, ensure inclusive engagement, and be alert to how their engagement can affect the perceived legitimacy of religious actors.



An Iraqi Shia woman is seen at the Imam Ali Mosque in Najaf, in central Iraq, during the holy month of Ramadan in May 2019. (Photo by Alaa Al-Marjani/Reuters)

Background

Religious actors can be critical partners in rebuilding a country after war because they wield influence and can shape the behavior of others in their communities, drawing on the power of religious language and practice to do so.

"I think the religious landscape is going through a phase of reorganization for every religion and every person. Everyone has started to think and work. In the post-ISIS era, people do not trust each other anymore—whether within one religion or among different religions."

—Fifty-three-year-old Christian male from the Nineveh Plains who works in Mosul

Shortly after thousands of Yazidi women were abducted by the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) in the summer of 2014, the leader of the Yazidi ("Ezidi") religion, Khurto Hajji Ismail, also known as Baba Sheikh, decided to make a change to the religion's tenets and rituals.¹ Historically, any Yazidi who had sex with a non-Yazidi was considered no longer a member of the community. In contradiction to tradition, and in consultation with the Yazidi Spiritual Council, Baba Sheikh declared that women who had been enslaved by ISIS would now be welcomed home as Yazidis. When older members of the community resisted the change, Baba Sheikh's support proved decisive. In the months that followed, religious leaders modified an existing baptism ritual for newborns, repurposing it for women returning from captivity. The baptism ritual allows its recipients to be "reborn" into the Yazidi faith. Some complete the ritual repeatedly as they seek healing from trauma.²

The actions of Baba Sheikh exemplify the unique contributions religious actors can make to postconflict peace and reconciliation. They can use existing structures and ritual practices within their faith tradition to help victims process trauma. They can use their leadership positions to encourage their community to support members most affected by violence. They can stand for unpopular positions or try to influence those in their communities who oppose reconciliation. They can model new behavior they hope to see from their community members. They can also have a multiplying effect, in that their support of reconciliation encourages others to participate. In short, religious actors can be critical partners in rebuilding a country after war because they wield influence and can shape the behavior of others in their communities, drawing on the power of religious language and practice to do so.

Given their unique role and resources, this report argues for engagement with Iraq's religious actors as part of broader peace and reconciliation efforts in that country. Although involving religious actors in reconciliation does not guarantee success, excluding them seems certain to guarantee failure.

The report analyzes the unique role that religious actors play in Iraq, as described in interviews with Iraqis. Religious actors include traditional clerics (those who are often meant by the phrase *religious leaders*) as well as individuals who may not have formal religious credentials, or traditional profiles, but who are nonetheless influential in shaping religious attitudes and behaviors, including women and youth. Defining individuals as religious actors is inherently subjective. The report tends to defer to those interviewed for this project in their categorization of an individual as a religious actor, but this is not a decisive judgment. For example, though Moqtada al-Sadr was mentioned frequently, most interviewees referred to him as a political actor rather than a religious one. This report deals head on with the fact that the status of some individuals as religious actors is a matter of contestation; it presents relevant information when possible.

Influence is the ability to shape the beliefs and behaviors of others. This report categorizes the nature of religious actors' influence in two ways: the basis of influence and the method of exerting influence. By basis of influence, we mean why a particular actor has become influential. Ammar al-Hakim, for example, largely inherited his religious influence, although his theological training and teaching and his social activities are also credentials. Alternatively, many religious actors derive their influence from formal clerical positions gained through institutional training and affiliation, especially Christian leaders, such as Bishop Basilio Salim Yaldo. Finally, the creation of bureaucratic positions of religious leadership in the Iraqi state has increased the number of women who exercise influence as religious actors. Nadia Maghamiss, for example, is a Sabeen-Mandaean who previously headed the government agency responsible for minority faiths, the Endowment of the Christian, Yazidi, and Sabeen-Mandaean Religions Diwan. Identifying the factors that shape why some individuals gain influence may help observers identify potential up-and-coming religious actors with social and political influence.

The report also identifies the institutions through which religious actors exercise influence. For example, Moqtada al-Sadr should be understood primarily as the leader of a strong populist movement, but he also exercises influence through his affiliation with Saraya al-Salam, a nonstate armed group. Ayatollah Hadi al-Modarresi maintains an extremely influential presence on social media. In some cases, a formal position of religious leadership in the state bureaucracy can be both the basis for and method of an individual's religious influence. By disaggregating the institutions over which religious actors exercise their influence, the report illuminates the various ways in which religious actors shape public discourse and therefore have real impact on the course of conflict and peace in the country.

Methods of influence vary by religious community. Christian actors and those from most minority faiths such as the Shabak, Yazidi, and Kaka'i tend to exert

It is precisely their ability to shape citizens' beliefs, encourage changes in behavior, mobilize resources, and draw on their rich religious traditions that distinguishes religious actors from other partners for peace, such as politicians, journalists, and business leaders.

more influence through their formal positions. Shia, meanwhile, are more likely to be active on social media or aligned with nonstate armed groups such as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and political parties. This distinction is breaking down, however, in that even Shabak and Christian groups have now formed nonstate armed protection groups in response to the existential level of violence in recent years, and as they become more active on social media.

A significant class of Shia religious actors are concentrated in the shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala and are not involved with either the PMF or political parties but are involved with the management of seminaries and other religious institutions. In addition to their numerical advantage, this access to organs of influence, combined with their largely independent financing, tends to translate to a much broader range of positions of influence for religious actors among the Shia. Overall, Sunni religious and political actors have been too divided across multiple political parties and religious organizations, and too dependent on state-sponsored positions of religious authority, to command significant influence, a crisis that weakened their response to the rise of ISIS and today challenges reconciliation efforts.

Interviews suggest that the most influential religious actor in Iraq—across a range of faiths—is Grand Ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistani. Although this likely does not come as a surprise to Iraq analysts, the research also indicates that Chaldean Patriarch Louis Raphaël I Sako has wider influence, including with Sunni and Shia Muslims, than is currently acknowledged in the literature, and is likely the most influential Christian in Iraq other than Pope Francis. Nevertheless, his reach pales in comparison with the enormous influence of Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani. Most other religious actors have much narrower influence than these two men.

This report analyzes the influence of religious actors—who has it, why they have it, and how they exercise it—to illuminate the crucial role that religious actors can play in supporting peace and reconciliation efforts. It is precisely their ability to shape citizens' beliefs, encourage changes in behavior, mobilize resources, and draw on their rich religious traditions that distinguishes religious actors from other partners for peace, such as politicians, journalists, and business leaders.

A STRAINED RELATIONSHIP

Iraqi political institutions have long exacerbated religious tensions in the country. The British established the modern state of Iraq in 1921 by unifying three Ottoman provinces (Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra). The state religion of the Ottoman Empire was Sunni Islam, which effectively resulted in the empowerment of the Sunni minority over the Shia majority in Iraq. As a result, the scholars of the Shia shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala were largely disengaged. In the words of scholar Charles Tripp, “The Shia generally ignored Ottoman institutions.”³

The Sunni also dominated the state that emerged from the Ottoman Empire, and especially the military, because most Shia lacked relevant experience to secure positions in the new administration. The first government that formed suggested some promise of interfaith involvement, however. Although dominated by the Sunni, it also contained Shia, Christian, and Jewish members.

Despite these positive signs, many minority populations were concerned for their safety. In the years prior to Iraq's admission to the League of Nations, a variety of minorities—including (Christian) Assyrians and Yazidis—petitioned for international protection rather than entrust their safety to the Iraqi state. Under pressure from the League, in 1932, the young Iraqi state promised “to guarantee the rights of foreigners and

minorities, as well as to allow freedom of conscience and religion.”⁴ More than eighty-five years later, Iraq still struggles to fulfill this promise, even under pressure from domestic and international actors.

The concerns of the minorities were well founded. The state did not prioritize their protection. In one particularly telling example, the Iraqi state took two days to respond to an assault on Iraqi Jews that led to the death of two hundred people and destroyed Jewish property in May 1941. In 1948, when the government was under pressure for its involvement in the disastrous Arab war in Palestine, the state increased its harassment of Jews: “Their movements were restricted, Jews were barred from certain government posts, courts martial were used extensively to imprison and intimidate Jews and a prominent member of the community was executed for allegedly assisting the new state of Israel.”⁵

But state-led persecution of religious minorities was not limited to the Jews. During the same period, the Iraqi state mandated conscription to the armed forces. The Yazidis were particularly strident in their refusal to be drafted, but their resistance was crushed by the imposition of martial law on Mount Sinjar and fighting between the Yazidis and government forces that killed hundreds of Yazidis.

Hostility was not limited to the minorities. The relationship between the Shia and the state in particular became increasingly antagonistic. In the 1950s, a trend toward Islamist political activism, including the growth of the Muslim Brotherhood (among the Sunni) and the founding of the Da’wa party (among the Shia), demonstrated the increasing resistance among the Iraqi population to the perceived secularism of the state, a conflict that would metastasize in coming decades.⁶

In 1969, before Saddam Hussein had secured the presidency, then President Hasan al-Bakr attempted to enlist the highest Shia religious leader of the day, Ayatollah Muhsin al-Hakim, to take Iraq’s side in

a conflict with Iran over the Shatt al-Arab, the waterway formed by the confluence of the Tigris and the Euphrates Rivers. Hakim’s refusal led to a series of state-led persecutions of Shia religious institutions, seminary students, and religious leaders. Sunni and Shia religious leaders together led protests against the state’s actions. The state responded by prohibiting Islamic religious instruction in Iraqi schools. Ayatollah Hakim responded with a legal ruling (fatwa) forbidding Shia participation in the Baath Party, which facilitated continued Sunni dominance over state institutions.

The 1970s were characterized by ongoing state persecution of both Sunni and Shia religious leaders, with persecution of the Shia intensifying after the Iranian Revolution in 1979. At the same time, the regime increasingly viewed religion as a resource to exploit. The Arab Socialist Baath Party that ruled Iraq from 1968 to 2003, largely under the leadership of Saddam Hussein, sought to co-opt religious leaders and institutions without empowering them. In doing so, the Baathists walked a fine line made possible by the authoritarian structures of the regime that discouraged dissent and encouraged compliance. The regime expected loyal religious elites to legitimize Baathist rule and the party’s appropriation of Islamic discourses without threatening the regime’s dominance.⁷

To facilitate this strategy, the state mercilessly persecuted religious actors they perceived to be independent from state influence. After the revolts of 1991 following the first Gulf War, the state directed its ire at Grand Ayatollah Abu al-Qasim al-Kho’i, the leading Shia reference of his time, and his sons. After al-Kho’i’s death, his student Grand Ayatollah ‘Ali al-Sistani became the leading reference among the Shia. He continued al-Kho’i’s practice of distancing himself from politics but intervening at key moments.

During the 1980s, Iraq fought a brutal war with Iran that resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths on both sides. In the later part of the war, Saddam Hussein targeted northern Iraq and the Kurds in particular because



Yazidi leader Khurto Hajji Ismail, also known as Baba Sheikh, speaks during an interview with Reuters at his residence in Shikhan, in the Kurdish region of northern Iraq, on December 7, 2016. (Photo by Ari Jalal/Reuters)

of their alignment with Iran. The al-Anfal campaign is estimated to have killed at least one hundred thousand citizens. As part of a forced Arabization campaign meant to change the demography of the region from largely Kurdish to Arab, anyone who did not identify as Arab in the 1987 census was targeted for forced relocation or execution. The results were devastating not only for Kurds but also for religious minorities who did not identify as Arab. Although Iraq's defeat in the Persian Gulf War (1990–91) led to autonomy for the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), the Baathists continued to target the city of Kirkuk in particular for forced Arabization up until the American invasion of Iraq in 2003.⁸

The US invasion had dramatic consequences for Iraq's religious landscape. The power-sharing agreement put in place reserved the most powerful positions for the Shia, including the prime minister, and the Interior

and Foreign Ministries. The Kurds control the presidency and the Finance Ministry, and the Sunni hold the speaker of Parliament and the Defense Ministry. The Iraqi Governing Council also split the Ministry of Endowments into three separate ministries: one for the Sunni, one for the Shia, and one for minorities.

In an effort to prevent the reemergence of the Baath Party as a major force in Iraqi politics, the Coalition Provisional Authority, which governed Iraq the year following the invasion, undertook a policy of de-Baathification. The policy removed former Baath Party members from all public-sector positions and prevented them from obtaining positions in the future. The policy was far-reaching and included largely apolitical positions such as doctors and teachers. The Sunni, who had long dominated both the military and the state, found themselves unemployed and often unable to find positions outside the bureaucracy.

The American invasion of Iraq also removed the authoritarian structures that contained religious forces. In the words of scholar Samuel Helfont, “Sunni and Shi’i extremists who had been suppressed and silenced were suddenly free to operate in the open. They thrived in an atmosphere where religion had been actively promoted and formed militant organizations that have torn the country apart.”⁹ They were also able to play on the decades of persecution they suffered at the hands of the state to gain support among the Iraqi population.

Critics argue that Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, who served from 2006 to 2014, pursued policies that encouraged the growth of sectarianism in the country. He was accused of only weakly regulating Shia militias while disbanding the Sunni Sahwa movement, and targeting Sunni politicians for arrest and other forms of harassment. When protests in Sunni areas broke out in 2013 calling for an end to their political disenfranchisement, critics allege that al-Maliki brutally suppressed them. In response, many Sunni elites began calling for an autonomous region for the Sunni.¹⁰ Combined with intra-Sunni conflict and grievances caused by de-Baathification, the disenfranchisement of the Sunni population encouraged recruitment to or acquiescence to ISIS. Under Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, who succeeded al-Maliki in 2014 and served until late 2018, the country’s Sunni population was initially optimistic. But many citizens were disappointed by what they saw as movement toward Iran, rather than away from it. A Sunni member of Parliament summarized his feelings in 2017: “We are now a displaced people, a completely marginalized people—and it’s getting worse by the day. . . . We have a corrupt government controlled by a foreign power, at the expense of Sunnis.”¹¹ The statement reflects the widespread disillusionment among the Sunni under al-Abadi’s leadership.

The contemporary Iraqi state continues to embrace policies that, intentionally or otherwise, strengthen the salience of religious identity in political life and encourage sectarian tensions. Islam is constitutionally the official

religion of the state, Muslims are not legally permitted to convert to other religions, and Jews still cannot hold official office or serve in the military. The national identity card policy, which lists the religion of citizens on their identifying documents, limits them to choosing between Muslim, Christian, or Sabeian-Mandaean faiths and discriminates against religious minorities. The requirement that children born of one Muslim parent list their identity as Muslim, regardless of whether they were born as a result of rape, further enflames tensions.¹² That the most recent national ID card law was passed with this provision in 2015, in the midst of the ISIS enslavement of Yazidis and other minorities, contributes to the image of the Iraqi state as hostile to minorities.¹³ Further, Iraqi law does not protect the freedom of religion of atheists and many smaller religious minorities.

Peacebuilders and policymakers should keep this strained history in mind as they attempt to engage the religious sector. Religious actors have good reasons to be wary of cooperation with state-sponsored institutions, both foreign and domestic. At the same time, the need for cooperation with religious actors to advance peace and reconciliation has never been greater.

THE RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE

Iraq’s minority population has declined by an estimated 2 percent over the last hundred years. Prior to World War I, Iraq’s religious communities were estimated to be 50 percent Shia, 20 percent Kurdish, 20 percent Sunni, and 8 percent minority—which included Christian, Yazidi, Sabeian-Mandaean, and Turkmen.¹⁴ Current figures estimate the population as 55 percent Shia, 40 percent Sunni (15 percent Kurdish, 24 percent Arab, and 1 percent Turkmen), and 5 percent minority groups.¹⁵

In 2019, the Christian population is estimated at less than a quarter million, the vast majority of whom live in the Nineveh Plains and the KRI. Before the US invasion, the Christian population was estimated to be at least eight hundred thousand. The Christian population is extremely diverse, composed of a variety of denominations

including Chaldean Catholics, Assyrians, Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Armenian Catholic, Armenian Apostolic, Anglican, and Protestant. The Evangelical population is estimated to be quite small—three thousand people. The size of other minority groups include the Yazidi population, estimated at six hundred thousand to three-quarters of a million; the Sabean-Mandaean population, estimated at ten thousand; the Baha'i at two thousand and the Kaka'i (Yarsani) at least 120,000. The Jewish community is estimated at 430 families in the KRI and nine adults in Baghdad.¹⁶

The Sunni and the Iraqi minorities are more likely to have been displaced by recent fighting. The International Organization for Migration estimated Iraq's population of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in 2018 at two and a half million, nearly three-quarters Sunni Arab (67 percent Arab and 6 percent Kurdish), 14 percent Shia (Turkmen, Arab, or Shabak), 8 percent Yazidi, 3 percent Christian, and the remaining smaller minorities.¹⁷

For overlapping historical, geographic, social, and theological reasons, the Sunni and the Shia of Iraq construct religious authority differently. The dominance of the Sunni in state institutions meant that it was less urgent for them to build nonstate institutions to defend and represent their interests. Their nonstate institutions are consequently weaker, and positions associated with them are less prestigious. The Sunni also tend to align themselves with a tribe or a political party rather than a specific cleric. The Shia, meanwhile, preserved hierarchical religious authority as a counterpoint to state authority and built strong institutions, including a number of significant seminaries.

Religious authority in Sunni Islam is broad, spread across multiple institutions and individuals. Worldwide, most Sunni follow one of four legal schools. Although the majority of the Sunni in Iraq subscribe to the Hanafi legal school, the presence of competing legal traditions contributes to the diffuse nature of religious authority, given that individuals have a broader choice of religious

influences. Members of different schools regard different texts and scholars as authoritative, creating a number of intellectual lineages. Further, no centralized body unites these schools, nor are there any centers for Islamic learning for the Sunni in Iraq that might mitigate these factors.

Religious authority among the Shia is far more hierarchical. Various factors shape religious authority, but an individual's level of religious learning is the primary factor for the Shia. Specific titles indicate the level of religious learning and make it easier for everyday citizens to gauge the status of particular clerics and choose a religious reference. Among the Shia, the most educated are known as grand ayatollahs. Lower-ranking clerics include the ayatollah and then hujjat al-Islam (which can be roughly translated as "religious authorities"). Since the mid-nineteenth century, it has also been common to select the most learned among the grand ayatollahs, known as the *marja'* or religious reference (pl. *maraji'*). The *maraji'*, other scholars of the Shia seminaries, their students, and the broader religious community associated with them are known collectively as the *hawza 'ilmiyya*.¹⁸ These titles are elaborated on later in this report.

Further, all living Shia are expected to pick a religious reference or *marja'* to whom they will refer as their highest religious authority. The Shia are therefore encouraged to have a formal relationship with a cleric but have a narrower choice than the Sunni do. The result is a more structured religious landscape.

METHODS

This report does not presume to provide authoritative conclusions on the nature of the Iraqi religious landscape. Rather, it is an effort to contribute to filling an existing knowledge gap with the long-term goal of inspiring and supporting subsequent research. It seeks to illuminate and analyze aspects of the religious landscape in Iraq, particularly influential religious actors, to help policymakers and practitioners better understand how to navigate and engage within the religious landscape in efforts to advance peace in Iraq.



Research Locations in Iraq

Adapted from artwork by Rainer Lesniewski/Shutterstock

research—though the findings of this report could certainly provide the foundation for a meaningful survey.²⁰

Interviews were conducted with academics, NGO leaders, activists, teachers, business leaders, and others considered key informants for their ability to speak to the influence of religious actors in their community. Some of the interviews were with grassroots-level religious actors such as professors at seminaries. The great majority, however, were with individuals who would have no conflict of interest in identifying influential religious actors. As a safety precaution, interview subjects were selected from the researchers' social networks.

Drawing from the methodology developed by the United States Institute of Peace to map the religious landscape in conflict-affected states, the report is derived from a rigorous combination of field research, expert consultations, and a review of the secondary literature.¹⁹ Desk research was ongoing from June 2017 until publication, and includes analyses of existing reports and media coverage in Arabic and English as well as consultations with experts, policymakers, and peacebuilding organizations. The field research component was completed in partnership with Sanad for Peacebuilding, an Iraqi nongovernmental organization. Sanad hired fourteen local researchers who, after training, completed 175 semi-structured interviews conducted between late 2017 and late 2018 in the cities and surrounding areas of Baghdad, Basra, Diyala, Dohuk, Erbil, Karbala, Kirkuk, Mosul, Najaf, and Sulaimaniyah, and in Anbar and Nineveh Provinces. These locations were selected for their potential for future reconciliation projects and because they provided a good geographic distribution, facilitated representation of minority religious communities, and were deemed safe for conducting interviews. Semi-structured interviews were employed because the current low level of knowledge about the Iraqi religious landscape does not permit the development of more sophisticated techniques, such as survey

Interviewees were not random sampled, so it is not possible to extrapolate larger trends from the data. Given that the data is based on interviews, the report captures the perception of interviewed Iraqis about the religious landscape. Although perception is an imperfect measure of influence, it does allow for an understanding of who is being discussed broadly. Preliminary analysis of social media data often confirmed the importance of particular religious actors, even if it is not possible to rank or state the exact nature of an individual's level of influence.

Questions were intended to identify influential religious actors in specific communities: Who do you look to for guidance on religious matters? Has a religious actor ever convinced you to change your mind on an issue? If so, who? What religious actors outside of your faith do you most respect? Are there any young people with religious influence? Which women have religious influence? Are there any religious TV stations that are popular? If so, which ones? Who are popular commentators on those channels? What accounts of religious individuals are the most influential on social media?

This report does not enumerate all religious actors uncovered in the research. To protect their privacy and

security and not draw attention to relatively unknown religious actors, we attempted to include only those individuals known at the regional or national level. Individuals who were identified in only one city were usually not included. This choice has had some unfortunate consequences. Religious actors who are women, for example, tend to be influential only at the local level. As a result, although the research uncovered a number of influential religious women, only those known at the regional or national level have been named here. Religious women are more likely to hold formal positions (such as acting as principals of schools) and are much less likely to be active on social media. The *role of mullaya* (female mullah), a position of influence held by women, was mentioned frequently in interviews. The mullaya host mourning rituals among the Shia.

Word-for-word quotes are sometimes included to illustrate key points. Readers will notice that interviewees frequently use the title *sayyed*, an honorific that conveys respect for Shia religious actors who are descendants of the Prophet Muhammad through his grandsons Hassan and Hussein.

WHY RELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT?

The report prioritizes analysis of the religious sector not because it is the most influential force in Iraqi politics, but because religious actors are valuable partners for peace and reconciliation efforts. To quote one interviewee, Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani's "speeches are effective in stopping bloodshed and promoting peace." This statement highlights the unique role that religious actors are poised to play in reconciliation processes. As noted earlier, they can use their influence to shape citizens' behavior and therefore transform postconflict situations.

Second, reconciliation efforts that do not engage the most influential actors in society, whether religious or not, are at risk of being foiled. Religious actors can exacerbate existing conflicts or contribute to their resolution.²¹ In light of this, states and nonstate actors have been increasing their engagement with Iraqi religious

actors. Even Saudi Arabia reached out to both Shia and Christian religious leaders as part of its effort to rebrand itself a moderate regime.²²

In consultations, many US policymakers have expressed frustration at the difficulty of engaging with religious actors in Iraq, who are understandably wary of being viewed as too close to a foreign government. In identifying religious actors of influence, this report provides some insights policymakers have not been able to gain because of this distance, and offers guidance about how to navigate these sensitivities in engaging with Iraqi religious leaders.

Third, even influence that appears to be purely religious can quickly translate into political influence. Ja'afar al-Sadr is a case in point. Although a relatively unknown figure, he was quickly in the running for prime minister in 2010 despite a lack of political experience. His genealogical descent from Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Baqir al-Sadr, a Shia cleric executed by Saddam Hussein's regime in 1980, was enough to help him garner the second most votes from the State of Law Coalition in the parliamentary elections.²³

Finally, religious engagement is important because influence is at the heart of policy implementation. As researcher Khogir Wirya explains, "In Iraq . . . a lot of laws and procedures and decisions are made, but influence and implementation on the ground is what is lacking."²⁴ Given the centrality of influence to implementation, this report analyzes the various forms that religious actors' influence takes, with an eye toward encouraging peacebuilders and policymakers to partner with religious actors who could wield their influence on behalf of the implementation of peace and reconciliation efforts.²⁵ That said, the report does not take a position on whether specific actors should or should not be engaged in these efforts.

The involvement of Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani's office in a 2014 dialogue process sponsored by USIP, Sanad for Peacebuilding, and the Network of Iraqi Facilitators

highlights the role religious actors can play in policy implementation. Of concern were the possibility of revenge killings against Sunni tribes by Shia tribes after ISIS massacred 1,700 Shia cadets at Camp Speicher. Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani's office played a role in the analysis phase of the investigation and again during the subsequent negotiations. By sending a representative of his office to attend the negotiations, al-Sistani invoked his presence in the effort and essentially pressured the Shia participants in the negotiation to fully participate and to accept the final agreement, which has held to this day.

Although engaging religious actors is important, they are not the only actors who must be engaged. In the words of Elie Abouaoun, "Transformation [in Iraq] would entail enlisting opinion makers, including religious leaders, journalists, educators, and international donors, to help move society toward new beliefs that promote political diversity, peaceful transfers of power, and respect for human rights."²⁶

Even as this report encourages targeted engagement with religious actors, the interviews suggest that Iraqis want less involvement of religious actors in politics, not more. Multiple interviewees clarified that though they favor the involvement of religious actors in reconciliation, they see their role as limited to what they call social reconciliation. They explicitly expressed concern about religious leaders' involvement in political reconciliation or party politics generally.

Respondents expressed interest in a few matters regarding the involvement of religious actors, however. The first is related to the role religious actors can play in representing the grievances and demands of their communities. Several respondents expressed regret that religious actors did not step more fully into this role, especially because it relates to calling for more reliable social and public services from the Iraqi government.

Second, many respondents wanted to see religious leaders involved in the fight against sectarianism and

religious extremism. Although some might assume that religious extremism is understood to be a Sunni problem, as exemplified in the ideology of ISIS, the interviews suggest that many Iraqis view other forms of extremism as problematic, including forms of Shia extremism described in the "Religious Trends" section of this report.

It is possible to recognize Iraqis' concerns about involving religious actors in party politics even while calling for their inclusion in efforts to advance peace, particularly at the local level. In fact, more involvement of religious actors at the local level to mediate disputes, represent citizen grievances, and contribute to religious literacy might have the outcome of drawing these actors away from party politics.

IMPACT OF ISIS ON RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

The so-called Islamic State captured nearly a third of Iraq's territory during the summer of 2014. After more than three years of fighting, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi declared victory over the group on December 9, 2017, just as researchers for this report were completing their first round of fieldwork.²⁷ Although the title of this report references post-ISIS Iraq, the ideology of ISIS and small sleeper cells continue to exist. The title is meant to suggest that Iraq is entering a new phase as the state shifts resources away from fighting toward rebuilding the country.

Intra-Sunni competition and conflict contributed to the rise of ISIS and weakened the ability of Sunni elites to respond to the crisis brought on by the group. After the Baath Party was disbanded, several groups sought to take the mantle as the leader of the Sunni, among them political parties such as the Iraqi Islamic Party and political-religious organizations such as the General Conference of Iraqi Sunnis and the Association of Muslim Scholars.²⁸ Infighting among these groups, as well as vacillation between participation and boycotting Iraqi politics, left the Sunni vulnerable to a group that offered to represent their interests and address their grievances. In one infamous example, Sunni tribal elites threw chairs and punches at one another at a conference meant to solve the problem of how to counter ISIS.²⁹

ISIS's brutal style of rule, its targeting of religious minorities and the culture of accusation among the country's Sunni population that resulted as some members joined the group are all well documented. But many other subtle impacts of the ISIS caliphate and its demise are less well-known, particularly those that affected religious communities beyond the Sunni. The story discussed earlier of how Baba Sheikh repurposed religious rituals among the Yazidi is but one example.

Other religions also saw fundamental changes as a result of the ISIS presence. The Kaka'i, a small minority faith mostly confined to northern Iraq, saw a division deepen between those who see the Kaka'i as an independent religion and those who claim that it is a sect of Islam. "I believe this division was caused by the Kaka'i's fear of being attacked by the Islamic State militants or by Islamic puritanical militants," explained Ako Shawais, a representative of the Kaka'i community on the Halabja Provincial Council.³⁰ The disagreement has had political implications for the community, which went unrepresented in Kurdistan's Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, as the two sides competed for the slot. The situation is complicated by government policy. Like the Baha'i, the Kaka'i faith is not registered as an official religion in Iraq. Therefore, Kaka'i people are identified only as "Muslim" on their identity cards. The Islamization of some Kaka'i has also led to changes in religious rituals. Kaka'i living near territory that ISIS controlled adopted a series of Islamic practices, such as reciting Islamic prayers or having the Quran recited during funeral rites.³¹

For Christians and Yazidis, the impact of ISIS has been existential. Questions about whether the actions of ISIS, the military campaign to dislodge them, and continued discrimination and persecution threaten the continuity of these communities in Iraq are serious concerns. These issues have been analyzed in a number of venues, but other important effects of the impact of ISIS on the Christian community have yet to be systematically examined. These effects include an increased ecumenicalism among church leadership. Christian leaders of

different denominations now frequently worship in one another's churches and attend one another's events. In one example, the Syriac Catholic and Syriac Orthodox clergy participated in the first Catholic mass in Mosul in more than three years to express solidarity and celebrate the reinstatement of mass in the area.³² But the long-term stability of this increased ecumenicalism is threatened by disagreements over the degree and nature of political engagement of the Christian community.

Christian respondents complained of increasing divisions among them and their leaders. One young woman (age twenty-five) originally from Mosul but now managing aid programs in the Nineveh Plains said, "For Christians, the sectarian conflicts [have] increased, as everyone you meet asks you if you are a Chaldean or Assyrian, Armenian or Syrian. This matter was not commonly [asked about] previously."

Among Muslims, the presence of ISIS has caused tremendous soul-searching among both the Sunni and Shia populations. As one interviewee explained,

As for the religious side, it has undergone a "coup" and a lot of societal concepts about religion have changed. The emergence of ISIS, Wahhabi extremism, and the Apostasy Fatwas have had a big influence as well. Now everyone is wondering, "Is this truly our religion?" There's some skepticism, there's a search for true Islam, and lots of religious extremists have turned into secularists, especially those residing outside Iraq—and I consider this a change toward good.

For example, we have in Iraq, as well as in Iran, young Hawza [Shia seminary] students, who write in a modern way and look for true religion, changing even doctrines, refusing obsolete teachings.

The increased secularism and other changes to Iraqi religious identity are discussed later in this report.

The presence of ISIS has also encouraged changes to religious rituals and education. For the Shia, the Arba'een pilgrimage, which commemorates the

martyrdom of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson Hussein, has taken on political connotations since 2014. The size of the pilgrimage has grown steadily since it was reinstated in 2003, and in 2014 was estimated to include more than twenty million people. "The ritual is no longer a purely cultural ceremony but has become something of a political protest. It's a show of force against those hostile to the rise of the Shiites [a euphemism for ISIS] in the region."³³ Although the suggestion that Arba'een was ever purely a religious ceremony is inaccurate, the increased politicization of the event speaks to the impact that ISIS's presence has had on Shia political activism.³⁴

One Shia explained how religious schoolbooks are being revised as a result of increased concerns of extremism:

There are old Sunni and Shia writings that still convey hatred and haven't been revised yet. Many Shia men from Najaf called for the revision of these books that convey hatred and resentment, and especially after ISIS[s] entrance, this event changed a lot of ideas and opinions among the Shia. Thus they started calling for the removal of Hadith and matters concerned with the captivity of women and slaves because they saw how it was undertaken [by ISIS] . . . and feared it might come back. And this can be considered the only good thing to come from the entrance of ISIS: it moved the minds and ideas of the religious figures.

Among the Sunni, which saw many community members recruited into ISIS, or accused of being members of ISIS, the impact is impossible to detail. Concerns about retaliation against alleged ISIS members and their families are serious. One interviewee from Anbar explained that some members of his community "are not willing to see the brother of the criminal [ISIS member] or his relatives within his own territory."

Not only are some ISIS families unwelcome in their own communities, many are now also forced to live in camps, unable to move about freely or make a living.

Among the Sunni, the presence of ISIS is also altering

the roles that religious leaders are expected to take. Another interviewee from Anbar pointed to the increased role for religious leaders in community disputes as a result of ISIS. Religious leaders, he explained, are the best positioned to intervene in conflicts where one neighbor accuses another of having been a member of ISIS. Another interviewee pointed out that religious leaders are the ideal people to try to prevent the rise of what is called ISIS 2.0 ideology.

To further complicate matters, post-ISIS reconstruction has created new grievances among Iraq's religious communities. Some Shia, particularly those in the country's south, worry that funds pledged to Iraq's reconstruction and oil revenues will go exclusively to areas devastated by ISIS, in the country's north and west, and not to areas that are oil rich and provided many of the (largely Shia) soldiers whose lives were lost in the fight. The grievance is heightened by the fact that some see Sunni tribes as responsible for the rise of ISIS. Salman Abd al-Wedad's comments exemplify this attitude: "Sunni areas, where the people brought in, accepted and supported Daesh [ISIS], are now compensated for destruction while we did not get the rights for our martyrs. In the end, they get our oil money and we remain deprived."³⁵

In sum, the presence of ISIS has affected the religious landscape in fundamental ways. Religious leaders have modified their rituals, beliefs, and texts in response to the terrorist group. Alignments among religious communities have changed, some groups cooperating more earnestly and other relationships permanently affected. Finally, the roles that religious leaders are being asked to play have also changed, particularly among the Sunni.

PERSPECTIVES ON RECONCILIATION

According to conflict resolution scholar Herbert Kelman, reconciliation is the third phase in peacebuilding. The first phase is *conflict settlement*, or ending the violence. The second is *conflict resolution*, when the initial steps are taken toward building trust among the parties to the



Louis Raphaël I Sako, head of Iraq's Chaldean Catholic Church, is pictured at the June 28, 2018 ceremony during which Pope Francis named him a cardinal of the Catholic Church. (Photo by Tony Gentile/Reuters)

conflict. The third is *reconciliation*.³⁶ Understandings of this phase vary. On the one hand, proponents of what has been termed the *liberal peace* see reconciliation as focused on the needs of individuals for access to institutions and judicial processes of accountability.

Others see reconciliation as more rooted in communities. Reconciliation, in the words of scholar Daniel Philpott, “encompasses some of the core commitments of the liberal tradition like human rights, [but] its central idea, restoration of right relationship, is far more holistic, both in its recognition of the harms that human rights violations and war crimes inflict but also in the set of restorative practices it proposes.”³⁷ According to Philpott, the central concept of reconciliation is justice, broadly conceived. Religious actors are central to this process because, as Philpott elaborates, “such a concept of justice has been advocated disproportionately,

though not exclusively, by the religious.”

In Islamic tradition, reconciliation, or *sulh*, “offers a resilient, generative, and flexible model of peacemaking,” according to scholar Rasha Diab. *Sulh* can be initiated through either an apology or a stated commitment to peace. The process requires the presence of witnesses to facilitate accountability to the peace process.

Diab argues that *sulh* is similar to other kinds of peacebuilding because “all critique injustice and violence and advocate for conflict resolution and peace.”³⁸ *Sulh* is the approach to conflict resolution that was embraced by the Prophet Muhammad, and the Quran makes reference to the process repeatedly.³⁹ The Prophet and his companions preferred *sulh* to formal legal adjudication, which they argued can lead to the wrong party being sanctioned.⁴⁰

Reconciliation is also a central concept in Christian theology, although it did not reach its current status in Christian doctrine until fairly recently. The concept was transformed from a theological to an activist one through the work of South African religious leaders such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who used the concept to oppose the apartheid regime. John De Gruchy, a South African theologian, has applied reconciliation to violent conflicts, arguing for a reconciliation theology, stressing that “reconciliation is about the restoration of justice.”⁴¹

In the interviews, three trends emerged on reconciliation. First, Iraqi citizens differentiate between political (national) reconciliation and social (local) reconciliation. Second, they support the involvement of religious actors in social reconciliation but not in national politics. Finally, they support the involvement of religious minorities in social reconciliation.

Political versus Social Reconciliation

Many of those interviewed differentiated between what they called social and political reconciliation. Most argued that religious actors ought to be involved in the former, but not the latter. A Sunni interviewee from Baghdad explained:

National reconciliation is a big lie promoted politically for other projects and objectives. First, we need a comprehensive social reconciliation and a restoration of the value system and the religious establishment. Then we move on to political reconciliation. The clerics have no role [in the political reconciliation] because it is a political project and their effect is limited to calm and not to raise problematic issues—which is their responsibility, to manage the religious value system in Iraqi society.

Involvement of Religious Actors in Social Reconciliation

A Shia from Basra also remarked on differentiating between political and social reconciliation: “I do not want clerics to intervene in political conflicts. . . . I want the intervention of clerics in social conflicts to prevent the spilling of blood and to repair relationships among groups. . . . The clergy should embrace their role in reconciliation in Iraq.”

A Shia man from Najaf, who wants religious actors to participate in reconciliation, clarified that that did not extend to other political matters: “The clerics should not interfere in ‘narrow interpartisan’ conflicts. There is no room for their interference, and they may lose. So they shouldn’t busy themselves with these kind of conflicts, but rather their intervention should fall in issues of interest to society.”

A Yazidi man from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq explained why he favored the involvement of religious actors: “Each religious group has many political orientations, so politicians cannot represent them. . . . It is better to use . . . religious actors, who are accepted by people of different political persuasions.”

Involving Actors of Religious Minorities

Agreement was unanimous about the need to involve the leaders of religious minorities in social reconciliation. A Sunni man from Kirkuk thought that religious leaders from larger faith communities had a special role to play in facilitating the involvement of religious minorities.

Religious Trends

Those seeking to engage with Iraq's religious sector may benefit from understanding several trends among religious communities that emerged in the fieldwork.

GUIDANCE FROM ONLINE SOURCES

Interviewees consistently said that they seek out religious guidance online. In some cases, they clarified that they prefer to go to online sources than to religious leaders in person. For example, in response to the question, "To whom do you go for religious guidance?" a thirty-three-year-old Turkmen Shia woman from Mosul said, "I thank Allah that I haven't needed anything for these matters, and if I do need someone I will not head to religious men. I might go to trusted websites which provide good answers." Of course, the woman's comments refer not only to the popularity of online sources of religious guidance but also to the gendered dynamics that shape these decisions. Women in particular seem prone to seeking guidance from blogs or other websites so that they do not have to ask their questions directly to the predominantly male clerical establishment.

Influential Media: Television and Radio

Religious media are sect based. No channels offer or include a wide variety of viewpoints. On the subject of religious television stations, a Sunni Arab man from Mosul remarked,

I think the Sunnis are influenced by their channels, and the same thing goes for the Shia. However, the most important thing is that there are no channels with moderate speech inclusive of all thoughts of every direction that encourages the positive impact of religion and highlights its importance in the life of the Iraqi people.

One idea Iraqi policymakers might embrace is the idea of a state-sponsored religious television station

focused on religious literacy that seeks to inform the population about basic belief systems of all faiths present in Iraq in a nondevotional way.

A number of influential media outlets were uncovered during the research:

- Among Shia: Al-Anwar, Al-Forat (Ammar al-Hakim's network), Karbala TV, Al-Aqila TV, Al-Hujja, Al-Ebaa TV, Al-Ghadeer (Badr).
- Among Sunni: Quran channel (apparently quite popular among women), Al-Majd TV (Salafi), Huda TV, Al-Resala TV (Saudi), Iqraa TV (Saudi), Al-Shariqa (UAE) TV.
- "People in general watch Saudi religious channels," one Sunni remarked.
- Popular channels in Sulaimaniyah included: Payam (Bayan) and Almozhgary TV (which belongs to the Salafi movement in the KRI).
- In both Sulaimaniyah and Nineveh, religious radio stations are also significant. In Sulaimaniyah, Radio Sunna (which belongs to the Islamic Kurdish Party) was identified as influential. In Nineveh, several radio stations were identified: Alghad, FM1 Quran, and Shabak Radio.
- Christians share a similar set of television stations, including Al-Hayat TV, Al-Karma TV, Nour Sat (Télé Lumière), and Sat-7. One interviewee estimated that "about ten stations" in all appeal to the Christian community in Nineveh; these are only the most influential.

THE HUSSEINIYA

The increasing importance of the Husseinia in the daily life of the Shia came up frequently in interviews. The Husseinia is named for al-Hussein ibn Ali ibn Abi Talib (d. 680), grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, who was martyred at the Battle of Karbala for his refusal to embrace the rule of Umayyad Caliph Yazid. The Husseinia is a space used to host commemorations of the birth

and martyrdom of Imam Hussein and other imams. Shia attend many religious lectures, rituals, and social events at the Husseiniya. The space may also be used for prayer, funerals, and religious education. It differs from a mosque in that it tends not to host Friday prayers and rarely has a minaret or dome. It is in fact more of a large conference hall that can be used for multiple purposes.

Shia tend to attend the Husseiniya more often than the Sunni attend the mosque because of the number of devotional rituals they host, such as on the birthday of Imam Hussein and on the memorial of his death. Sunni faithful, by contrast, tend to attend the mosque for more select purposes (formal prayers and the teaching of the Quran). Although in theory both Sunni and Shia could attend a mosque together (in practice they do not), the Sunni would not attend a Husseiniya. Although the Sunni recognize the importance of Hussein, they do not consider him a focus of their devotional practices.

The centrality of the Husseiniya to daily life among the Shia represents a shift. Under Saddam Hussein, Shia devotional practices were illegal or strongly discouraged. These practices include the Arba'een pilgrimage, the Ashura pilgrimage, and attendance at the Husseiniya. Following the American invasion, these religious centers and rituals flourished as part of a broader Shia revival in the country. Interviewees frequently mentioned these institutions. As one said of the Shia, "Those who attend these platforms are people of strong faith."

An individual who preaches in the Husseiniya is known as a *khatib*. The most frequently mentioned khatib was the young cleric Ali al-Talqani. Although he is not the most influential of these types of preachers, his influence is growing rapidly (see the case study on page 38). The position of religious leadership for women, the mullaya position (described in a later section) is also associated with Husseiniya mosques. Multiple Shia television channels broadcast programming from the Husseiniya, multiplying the influence of these institutions and those who preach in them.

INTRA-SHIA CONFLICT

Another trend that surfaced during the research is a long-standing intra-Shia conflict that remains potent. In the interviews, some Shia—especially those from Najaf—heavily criticized followers of Ayatollah Mohammad al-Husayni al-Shirazi (d. 2001), sometimes referred to as the Shiraziyyin. While the Shiraziyyin are a minority among the wider Iraqi Shia community, the intensity of ideological conflict between them and mainstream Shia, and its transnational implications, merits attention. Al-Shirazi—a descendant of Mirza Mahdi al-Hussaini al-Shirazi (b. 1814), the leading religious scholar of his era from the city of Karbala—was an outspoken critic of the Baathists who left the country in 1971 following the discovery of an assassination plot against him. His exile contributed to the spread of the Shiraziyyin, especially in the Gulf region. The conflict manifests as a rivalry between the scholars and their followers of the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala. As a result, another name for the Shiraziyyin is "the Karbala group" (*jama'at Karbala*).⁴² The main living Shirazi scholar, however, is Ayatollah Sadeq Shirazi, who is headquartered in Qom, Iran.

The Shiraziyyin are a trend among Shia Muslims who tend to be critical of traditional Iraqi Shia religious institutions, especially the seminaries of Najaf and the Najafi references, or *maraji'*, the highest religious leaders.⁴³ In interviews with *Al-Monitor*, one Shirazi supporter explained that "youth are attracted to the Shirazis because they stand up to the clerical establishment."⁴⁴ Theologically, the Shiraziyyin tend to be more conservative, embracing such controversial practices as *tatbir*, a self-flagellation practice mourning the martyrdom of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson Hussein. Some Shiraziyyin also take positions that stoke conflict with the Sunni, such as blaming them for the killing of the Prophet's daughter Fatima. One extreme example is Yasir al-Habib, who also directly attacked the Prophet's wife Aisha, calling her a prostitute, among other insults. Some Shiraziyyin distance themselves from such attacks, suggesting that London-based members of the movement do not represent the Qom-based clerics.



Iranian President Hassan Rouhani (second from left) meets with Iraq's most senior Shia cleric, Grand Ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistani (left), accompanied by Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif (second from right) in Najaf on March 13, 2019. (Photo by Office of Grand Ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistani via AP)

Among the Shiraziyyin are several significant religious leaders. Mohammad al-Shirazi had six sons, all of whom became religious scholars. They include Muhammad Reza (1959–2008), Morteza (b. 1964), Ja'afar, Mehdi Ali, and Muhammad Hussein. Mohammad's brother Sadiq Hussaini al-Shirazi (b. 1942) and his sons are also considered central players. Mohammad al-Shirazi's nephews, Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi al-Modarresi and Ayatollah Hadi al-Modarresi, are two of the most influential family members. Finally, some members of the Qazwini family are intermarried with the Shirazi family and also members of this trend.

Conflict between the followers of Shirazi and the seminaries of Najaf can be traced back more than fifty years. It is rooted in the rivalry between the clerics of Najaf and Karbala. In general, the clerics of Najaf reject the idea of *wilayat-al-faqih*, guardianship by religious clerics, that

is the foundation for the Iranian Revolution. Mohammad al-Shirazi, by contrast, embraced a similar concept, *hukumat al-fuquha*, or government of the clerics.

This rivalry was furthered by Mohammad al-Shirazi's lack of respect for many unwritten rules of Iraqi religious elites. For example, Shirazi announced his status as a *marja'* decades before it would be acceptable to do so in Najaf. To some, he was a reformer. To others, he was a disrespectful and undereducated usurper. In the 1960s, Grand Ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistani's teacher, Grand Ayatollah Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei, a religious scholar in Najaf, even threatened to revoke Shirazi's credentials as a religious scholar over the conflict. The interviews suggest that this conflict remains potent today.

One Najafi religious elite epitomizes the hostility between the two groups:

I can say and I am not afraid that the maraji' Shirazi was the last straw to destroy and abuse religion and humanity. They try to practice rituals that have no correct source of being in books. . . . Their mind is literally ignorant and obscurantist.

So we could say that al-Shirazi maraji' has harmed Islam many times because they work smartly and use the emotional drive to fuel their corruptive needs. They also have access to many televised channels like Al-Anwar News and Al-Zahraa and Al-Mahdi and Ya Hussein, etc. Some of them air in English and other languages to destroy a wider range of minds. They also have many negative encounters with intellectual people who were against it. So if you're not a supporter, you are not allowed on these channels no matter who you are.

The one who is mostly seen on these channels is Mujtaba al-Shirazi and Ahmed al-Shirazi and if al-Sayyed al-Sadr the first or the second were here, they wouldn't allow such things to occur. But I must say that our current situation can't handle inner self conflict because what's there outside is already enough. Some people were the result of this negative maraji' like Yasir al-Habib and Hassan Allah Yari. Those people took use of religion for their own personal gain and planted corrupted and damaged images about Islam to the world. You cannot trust people who invite others to be selfless and grateful while they live in luxury and don't actually know how it feels for real. Those people shouldn't represent us and we must fight against them.

The researcher for Najaf noted the intensity with which this individual criticized the Shirazi:

When he talked about the Shirazi maraji', he spoke with anger and his voice got louder and his hand movements were going up and down and he hit his desk with his hand and he apologized several times. When he mentioned the name (Yasir al-Habib) he seemed almost disgusted and very hurt and he shook his head especially when he said it is a relapse of values. Then he was quiet for a while and took out a cigarette and said, "This will pull out deep pain in me."

Other religious leaders from the Shirazi school who were mentioned include Abdul-Hameed al-Mohajer, Mohammed al-Ghali, Hasan Allah Yari, and Yasir al-Habib. They were mentioned as having a negative influence on peace, usually by interviewees in Najaf. Outside

Najaf, they were not mentioned as particularly influential (and so are not dealt with in detail in this report). For example, some were described as "maraji' whose main existence is dependent on the destabilization of the community, so they try to play tricks on people to stay in power."

The Shiraziyyin are extremely effective on social media, which makes it difficult to measure their level of influence since, in the words of Laurence Louër, "they compensate [for their smaller following than Najafi clerics] by an all-out media campaign that gives them [the appearance of] a disproportionate weight as compared to their real audience."⁴⁵ The Shirazyyin's social media prowess builds on their mastery of more traditional forms of media such as television. Al-Anwar TV, first conceived by Mohammed al-Shirazi before his death, was the first television station associated with a marja'.

A number of Shiraziyyin are extremely influential on social media. After Basim al-Karbalai, a popular Shia eulogy reciter, Ayatollah Hadi al-Modarresi is the second most influential Iraqi religious actor on Twitter, having well over five hundred thousand followers. A YouTube channel that collected videos of the Shiraziyyin was one of the most influential of any religious channel in Iraq and had more than 154,000 subscribers and nearly fifty-five million views before the account was deleted in early 2019. The second most popular YouTube channel, Karbala TV, is also aligned with the group. Likewise, the third most popular, Ahlulbayt TV, which has 103,000 subscribers and eighteen million views (as of early 2019), is the sect's English-language outreach station, headquartered in London.

The Shiraziyyin likely perform well on social media for two reasons. First, more strident language is an effective tool for increasing the number of social media followers, and the Shiraziyyin are known for the use of such language.⁴⁶ Second, the seminaries of Najaf, as the most influential religious institutions in Iraq, are not under the same need to compete for influence on social media as the Shiraziyyin. Although religious leaders from Najaf

True atheists in Iraq are rare; they were more popular in the 1960s and 1970s. When someone does publicly share such beliefs, they tend to be ostracized. Although Iraq’s constitution technically enshrines freedom of conscience, individual atheists do not feel safe sharing their beliefs.

have not abdicated the space entirely, those who follow the Najafi maraji’ do not make the same level of effort to distribute their sayings or writings on social media. Although an analysis of social media might overstate the level of influence of the Shiraziyyin, the findings of this report—that Iraqis increasingly go to online sources for religious guidance—suggest that groups that are the most organized online will grow in influence.

At the same time, multiple interviewees described watching television stations associated with the Shiraziyyin but still referring to Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani or other maraji’ for religious guidance, suggesting that many Iraqis do not feel this is a conflict in which they have to pick a side.

FAITH, SECULARISM, AND ATHEISM

Another religious trend mentioned in interviews was the increasing number of Iraqis who question their religion, claim no religious identification, or define themselves as secular.⁴⁷ Most who mentioned this blame the actions of ISIS for causing people to question their faith. One Catholic man from Baghdad explained,

I’ve seen that 7 percent of Iraqis have turned to atheism according to a report . . . as they are now questioning the values of religion. Especially after ISIL [ISIS] and the ideologies that they have spread, people began to question how possible it was for the religion to promote killing and stealing, etc.”

The report he cites could not be located. Yet many interviewees suggested that atheism, secularism, or a crisis of faith was taking place. Nonbelief is controversial in Iraq because many Iraqis understand Islam to have an inherently political nature.⁴⁸

A Muslim woman from Baghdad suggested that the increase is largely among the youth: “A large number

of young people are turning to atheism, changing their religion, or denying their community to others as a reaction to what is happening in their surroundings.”

True atheists in Iraq are rare; they were more popular in the 1960s and 1970s. When someone does publicly share such beliefs, they tend to be ostracized. Although Iraq’s constitution technically enshrines freedom of conscience, individual atheists do not feel safe sharing their beliefs with others and may face threats to their security if they do. In January 2018, the *Atlantic* reported on the case of Lubna Ahmed Yaseen, a young Iraqi woman who is openly atheist. She had to leave Iraq because of the volume of death threats she faced.⁴⁹ Her case points to the presence of social discrimination and persecution against atheists even in the presence of legal protections.

None of the interviewees explicitly identified themselves as atheists. One in Kirkuk listed atheism as a “school of thought” present in his city. A man from Anbar Province remarked similarly. An Iraqi Atheists Facebook page is active. Others embrace the term *secularism* to identify themselves as nonfaith practitioners or as agnostics. One woman in Baghdad identified herself as a secular Muslim. A Muslim man from Kirkuk explained, “People often follow secularism rather than religion generally.” Others see no contradiction to embracing both religion and secularism. As an individual from Kirkuk said, “I’m a Muslim who believes in Islam as a religion and in God and the Prophet Mohammad. I believe that Islam is a religion of peace. I also personally believe in secularism.”

Nevertheless, interviews suggest that atheism is increasing across Iraq and in Nineveh in particular. A forty-six-year-old Kurdish Yazidi from Dohuk explained, “Atheism and aversion to religion has reached its highest level among all religious groups in Iraq. I know that they have begun to organize themselves into groups

to meet and discuss a lot of things in different areas inside of Nineveh Province.” A thirty-three-year-old Turkmen Shia woman agreed that “atheism began to spread in Mosul.” She also suggested that thousands of atheists live in Mosul but do not openly identify as such given the impact of ISIS on the city. A Christian man who works in Mosul agreed: “There are also atheist ideas, which started to spread as a reaction to ISIS.” Although no one who openly identified as an atheist was interviewed, one twenty-seven-year-old Sunni Arab interviewee said (while laughing), “I personally stepped away from religion.” Later in the interview, he said, “I do not have a religious identity.” These expressions may indicate euphemisms currently in circulation that atheists, secularists, and agnostics use. Unexpectedly, his tone suggests that he does not feel fear expressing his beliefs. This young man seems to be an exception in the frankness with which he discusses his nonbelief; the more common approach was to claim to know others who are becoming atheist.

Atheism also appears to be spreading among the Christian population. A fifty-eight-year-old Chaldean woman from Nineveh described how many Christians, men in particular, are leaving the faith (“getting far from God”). They are asking, she explained, how God could allow such tragedy to befall them. Another Christian woman from the Nineveh Plains argued that the decreasing attendance in church on Sundays supports the claim that people are leaving the faith.

Opinions were split about the desirability of this development. Some self-described secular interviewees were encouraged by society’s decreasing religiosity. Others expressed concern about the long-term impact of such a development given that other groups in society have become more religious. A fifty-one-year-old Shia Shabak man said, “There is an emergence of atheists and nonreligious groups whom I think pose a great danger to the communities in Mosul, which are known to be conservative.” The researcher commented, “He said this sentence with a hesitation, as if he did not want to say it.”

Many who advocate secularism do not accept atheism. One fifty-three-year-old Christian man from Mosul argued that though he rejects atheism, he strongly advocates secularism (understood here to mean the legal and bureaucratic separation of state and religious authority) as “the only solution” to Iraq’s problems.

Atheism is not just spreading organically in the area. As indicated and as reported by multiple interviewees, atheists are using social media (Facebook in particular) to pursue potential converts to urge them to leave their religion. Atheists are also actively trying to convert people through personal relationships. One Sunni admitted that his brother had been pressuring him to convert to atheism and criticizing him for participating in Islamic prayers and fasting.

Many mentioned a backlash against atheists, but were not willing to provide any details about it. A thirty-eight-year-old Sunni man from Mosul remarked, “I hear about a lot of atheists, but society is fighting them hard because they defame the name of Allah, and this in Mosul is a red-line for the majority.” His words capture the stigma faced by those who chose nonbelief in the region and suggest the need for more protections for nonbelievers.

RELUCTANT SHIISM

Another trend can be referred to as reluctant Shiism. This group combines cultural affiliation with Shiism paired with intense criticism for the sect and a longing for a more open and sometimes more liberal society. This trend emerged strongly in the interviews in Najaf. A thirty-one-year-old woman from Najaf explained, “I’m a Shia Muslim . . . but not in the current perspective of Shiism. The radicalism and extremism have opened my mind and made me feel like I don’t belong to this society but to a society that’s more flexible and moderate.”

Another Shia from Najaf said that he does not practice his religion “in depth.” He described his resistance to religion as partially related to the increasing religiosity of his home city:

"In Iraq, because of the heavy Shia wave here, we have this oppressed sense of freedom because anyone who dares to disagree or criticize a certain topic ends up being fought and accused of being a secular, as if secularism was a crime," said a Shia man from Najaf.

The religious scene has changed in Najaf in the past few years. For example, many people are now reluctant because there isn't any diversity . . . as it is a very closed city, so we see that in the mosques, streets, automobiles all are following the same direction, in addition to hanging posters and pictures of religious figures everywhere, which makes the people here feel oppressed in a way. I think that it's important to have a diverse community with many different layers to it, and maybe they need to hear songs or music, which isn't allowed. Even commercials are now considered to offend the holiness of the city. I can see that in other religious countries that are considered Islamic with Shia majority, such as Lebanon and Iran, there is much more freedom and less pressure on the community. In Iraq, because of the heavy Shia wave here, we have this oppressed sense of freedom because anyone who dares to disagree or criticize a certain topic ends up being fought and accused of being a secular, as if secularism was a crime. I feel the same pressures as well. There is no diversity in our local media stations. All we see are religious talks and shows and sometimes news.

Another Shia concurred: "There's no diversity in Najaf, only Shia radicalism. It's mainly conveyed by the religious parties and I don't think it's anywhere near the real Shia ideology." This reluctance seems to stem from the same disillusionment that is inspiring increased atheism. The researcher in Najaf described another man who "somewhere along the fifth question [which asked if there is trust between religious leaders and their communities], he started to get upset and sad and he said with a sad tone, 'Why are we Muslims?'"

GROWTH OF SMALLER SECTS

A number of small Shia sects can be found in Diyala Province, among them the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist, the Alaliyaheen, the Shaykhi group, and al-Dai'i al-Rabbani. The rise of the al-Dai'i al-Rabbani reflects a broader national trend of increased membership in religious organizations that include both Sunni and Shia

members. The trend reflects the desire of many Iraqis for sects to be less consequential in the religious life of the country. The growth of the Kasnazani Sufi order, described later, also reflects this dynamic.

The Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist is a movement that, as the name indicates, has a strong Iranian influence. Some even suggest that the recent growth of the movement suggests Iranian patronage. The group is concentrated in majority Shia areas of Diyala, but is also popular in Nineveh. The Alaliyaheen are a Shia trend concentrated in the Khanaqeen district of Diyala among the Kurds. They are accused of exaggerating the sanctification of Imam Ali and are therefore not accepted by most Shia and Sunni. The group is headquartered in southern Turkey in the region of Diyarbakir.

The Shaykhi group is a movement among Twelver Shia with a specific methodology exemplified in their slogan, "We say what Mohammad said, and we follow the religion of Mohammed's family." The movement is approximately 250 years old. The founder was Sheikh Ahmed ibn Zayn al-Abidin al-Ahsa'i, from the al-Ahsa region of Saudi Arabia. The high religious authority for the group is currently located in Iran, in the city of Kerman. His name is Agha Zayn al-Abidin bin Abdulridha al-Ibrahimi. The high religious authority in Iraq is named al-Mitwali Abdulla Ali Zain al-Abbideen al-Mosawi. He is the link between the community in Iraq and Iran, and reports to the group's leader in Iran. In Diyala, the group is concentrated in the Muqdadiya district and the al-Khalis district. One member of the group put their membership at around fifteen thousand in Diyala. (This figure could not be confirmed.) The group has at least one member in the Provincial Council.

The al-Dai'i al-Rabbani is a recently formed Shia movement that has come to public attention because it

established a political party under the same name and participated in the 2014 and 2018 parliamentary elections. According to one leader of the movement, the party was formed to help spread the group's ideology. Its office is located in the center of Baqubah in the al-Khalis district. Its views are not supported by the Shia High Religious Establishment and therefore questioned by many mainstream Shia. The newness of the group contributes to suspicion about it. In the words of one interviewee, "In general, the community does not support the emergence of new religious movements as that leads to division within it." The group's founder, Fadhil Abdulhussein al-Marsoomi, argues that no sect can claim to be the only true religion. A number of Sunni have joined the movement. The group's motto is "Toward one life, with one Islam and one religion, under the light of the Hanafi, Ibrahim, Mohammadi, and today's Rabani family."

RESURGENT SUFISM

Under ISIS, Sufism was suppressed, particularly in the city of Mosul. ISIS executed Sufis who refused to abandon their practices, confiscated the buildings (*takyas*) where they practice their rituals, burned their texts, and destroyed sacred burial sites. As a result, the majority of adherents of Sufism left the city. Before ISIS, Mosul was home to as many as one hundred Sufi *takyas*. Few remain today. Since the city was reclaimed, people have begun speaking more freely about Sufism, leading to what some consider to be a resurgence of the movement, especially the Kasnazani Sufi order, founded by Muhammad 'Abd al-Kareem al-Kasnazani and currently led by his son Nehro Kasnazani.

Beyond the increase in membership in these groups, efforts have been undertaken to rebuild or replace *takyas*. The Ali Kasnazani Takya in Mosul, for example, was recently built and is actively hosting rituals for the Kasnazani order.⁵⁰ One Sunni Arab man from Mosul remarked, "Sufi activity started to increase [in Mosul], especially the Kasnazani Straight Path, a religious group lead by Sheikh Nehro. The group also appears to be growing in Baghdad."⁵¹ The Path's numbers began

to grow in Kurdistan. Sheikh Nehro is a Kurdish figure from Sulaimaniyah." Another interviewee mentioned that the apolitical nature of the Kasnazani group has contributed to its popularity in the area. He said it "spread rapidly" after the military defeat of ISIS. He also mentioned the Naqshbandiyah as important in the area. One Shia Shabak man from Mosul commented that though trust had been lost between the Sunni clerical establishment and its members, "society is restoring the trust in Sufism and its orientations." The trend of resurgent Sufism was also reported in Sulaimaniyah, where the same orders are prevalent.

Members of minority religious communities are keen to see Sufism spread, as they consider this orientation more likely to assure their safety and noninterference in their affairs. This belief may be the result of a widespread (but inaccurate) view that Sufis never embrace violence. One sixty-one-year-old Kaka'i man said, for example,

Let me make one thing clear, the only solution for Iraqi people is to be Sufis. Sufism is the best solution because Sufi people do not interfere in anything and they do not make enemies with other components. Thus, I see the idea of becoming a Sufi is the best to solve all religion problems in Iraq in general and in Mosul in particular.

This statement highlights how some view the spread of Sufism as a kind of cure-all for society's problems. Policymakers and peacebuilders should be aware that each Sufi order has its own beliefs related to violence, peace, and reconciliation, and each needs to be investigated prior to partnership.

THE ROLE OF WOMEN

Nearly all respondents remarked on the absence or near absence of prominent female religious actors in Iraq. One forty-eight-year-old Sunni respondent from Mosul even suggested that many of the country's current problems cannot be separated from the absence of women in the religious field. "To be honest," he said, "if we had moderate female [religious] figures, our



Iraqi Yazidis light candles and paraffin torches during a ceremony to celebrate the Yazidi New Year, on April 16, 2019, at Lalish temple in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. (Photo by Ari Jalal/Reuters)

situation would be much better. However, there are no female figures who work in this field, which is under the men's control." The comment speaks to the real need for more female religious actors to engage directly in solving the country's problems, though it overstates the dominance that men have over the religious sector. A number of female religious actors can be found in all religious communities, but their influence is often limited in scope to other women and to smaller communities than that of their male counterparts.

Among the religious minorities, women play a variety of roles. Asmar Asmail is a *sheikha* in the Yazidi religion, which means that she is a member of the Sheikh caste and leads religious rituals. Among the Yazidi are tens of sheikha. Amal Askar is well-known for her contributions to translating the Mandi, the holy text of the Sabean-Mandaean community.

In the Christian community, no local female religious leaders were named.⁵² Interviewees did mention the influence of Sister Katia, a Lebanese Christian television host on the Al-Hayat channel and "Nancy," an evangelical television host, likely referring to Nancy Stafford of Sat-7 Network. Among male religious actors, Father Aram Rameel Hamel was named as influential among Christian women in the Nineveh Plains.

Among the Shia, many interviewees mentioned the increasing importance of women who hold the mullaya role, explained by one respondent as "women who recite the Quran and religious advice at funerals and other mourning rituals." These women perform at women-only rituals, both in Iraq and among Iraqi diaspora communities elsewhere. The interviewee continued, "I don't support this phenomenon because it marks a dangerous turning point in society in every way toward

religion.” In other words, he fears the growing influence of these women is evidence of increased religiosity. His resistance to the mullaya position seemed more related to his desire to see Iraqis become less attached to their religious identities than to hostility with women religious leaders in general.

Other interviewees mentioned that the influence of the mullaya increased with the arrival of ISIS, likely because of the dramatic increase in the number of funerals or bereavement rituals where the mullaya perform. Significantly, the mullaya are not just performing memorized songs, but instead synthesizing an in-depth understanding of people’s individual experiences with important events from Islamic history while offering advice to specific women. The mullaya role is significant not only for how it elevates women to positions of religious influence but also for how it provides women with a person with whom they can consult about religious matters who is also a woman. In the words of scholar Tayba Hassan al-Khalifa Sharif, “The mullaya retells, reconstructs, and relives history as sacred narrative. . . . By providing a performance so intense that it unlocks repressed emotions, she allows the women to reconnect with the deepest levels of their consciousness.”⁵³

Other women who have come to prominence tend to have formal roles. Sameera al-Zubaidi is a religious figure popular in the Sadrist trend of the Shia, particularly in Diyala Province. She is well-known as a member of the Provincial Council, a position that she has held since 2014. As is true for many male figures, her formal position reinforces her role as a religious leader. She gives sermons at a local Husseiniya to other women and was named as influential due to her vocal support of women’s issues. In other words, her influence stems not only from her identity as a woman but also from her willingness to represent women’s issues in both religious and political circles.

CONFLICT OVER FOOD

Many minority interviewees reported that potential Muslim customers refused to buy food prepared by them, even if the meat was halal. This issue was brought up across the north, including in interviews in Nineveh, Sulimaniyah, Dohuk, and Erbil. Both Sunni and Shia across the north refuse to eat or purchase food prepared by Yazidi, Kaka’i, and Yarsani (Ahl e haq) minorities, which is having a negative effect on their businesses. One interviewee even implied that these dynamics also affect relations among Islamic communities. He explained, “The Sufi Muslims do not pray behind the Salafis, nor eat each other’s food, nor do they mingle with the Christians.”

Food conflict both reflects the lack of trust between religious communities and encourages further communal conflict. It is therefore an area that should be prioritized by those who work for peace and reconciliation in the country. In the short term, local nonprofit groups might seek to build cooperation between food service providers of different religious backgrounds. These initiatives could build on solutions already embraced by local providers. A Shabak reported that one innovative Yazidi butcher in Nineveh has addressed this issue by hiring a Muslim butcher to slaughter some of his meat so that he could sell to the Muslim population. This model has some promise. Nevertheless, we recommend more comprehensive solutions, including formal certification of halal foods and religious peacebuilding projects that involve local religious leaders to foster dialogue to fully understand the extent of this issue and to educate their communities and build trust.

Influence of Religious Actors

Interviewees cited various reasons for the influence of religious leaders—their role in shaping religious discourse, the intimacy of religion to people’s daily lives, the perception that religious leaders can be effective problem solvers, and the relationships that many religious leaders have with other influential individuals. Some Iraqis believe that a religious leaders’ word must be respected regardless of whether one agrees, suggesting how consequential the opinion of religious leaders can be. Further, interviewees believe that religious leaders’ influence increases around elections, protest movements, and other times of uncertainty. We now analyze two aspects of influence: the basis for an individual’s influence and the ways they exercise it. Understanding how religious actors’ influence is derived, and what can diminish it, is critical for policymakers and practitioners to understand if they are to identify and partner effectively with religious actors in Iraq for peacebuilding. A third aspect of influence that could be explored in further research is the population over which a religious actor exercises influence.

Christian leaders in particular are viewed as especially influential and our research suggests many Iraqis have deep respect for them. Regardless of the religious background of the respondent, the most likely answer to the question “Which religious leader outside of your own faith do you respect the most?” was either to name a specific Christian leader or to say Christian leaders in general.

BASIS OF INFLUENCE

Why are particular religious actors seen as influential? How did interviewees explain why certain religious actors are more respected than others? In responding to these questions, the report focuses on the most common answers, including inherited religious leadership (usually from a father or grandfather), persecution at the

hands of either the Baath Party or ISIS, regional support (usually Iran, but sometimes Saudi Arabia), religious credentials, religious methodology, sponsorship of social activities such as clinics or orphanages, and finally constrained criticism of current political affairs (see table 1).

The most influential individuals combine a variety of these categories. An interviewee in Baghdad explained:

I find Hussein al-Sadr influential because he is from a long-standing religious family and a martyr family because his uncle was executed by Saddam Hussein and his cousin also. He was one of those detained by the former regime and that was one side [of his influence]. The other side [comes from] good projects for orphans and the elderly as well as a solid scientific university. And he’s known for loving the country and his door was open for all people and that made him effective.

The final explanations in this statement, which could be categorized as perceived patriotism and sincerity, are not analyzed here but are worth bearing in mind when evaluating the sources of an individual’s religious influence. Two other factors that came up in relatively few cases but are nonetheless noteworthy are the importance of leading pilgrimages and offering Islamic healing rituals. Mahmud al-Araji, for example, is a local religious leader and Shia cleric in Sinjar, Nineveh. His organization of large and successful pilgrimages to Karbala was cited by one Yazidi interviewee from the area as evidence of his influence: “I think he is supported because it is impossible to do and plan for as many activities [as he does] without widespread support.” The second is Islamic healing, or *rouqia*. Mustafa and Mohammad al-Khashali, young Sunni Sufi clerics in Baquba, were cited as influential because of their ability to practice Islamic healing rituals. Although these rituals are intended to address illnesses, religious

Table 1. Basis of Influence of Iraqi Shia Leaders

| Basis | Name |
|---|--|
| Inherited religious leadership | Moqtada al-Sadr, Ali al-Sadr, Ahmad al-Sadr |
| Persecution or victimization (of self or family) | Ayatollah Hussein Ismail al-Sadr, Moqtada al-Sadr, Ammar al-Hakim |
| Regional support (usually Iran) or resistance to foreign interference | Qais al-Khazali, Moqtada al-Sadr |
| Religious credentials through education (such as a PhD in religion or theology, authority to issue fatwa) | Grand Ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistani, Grand Ayatollah Bashir Hussein al-Najafi, Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sistani, Ayatollah Hussein Ismail al-Sadr |
| Known for a specific religious methodology | Grand Ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistani, Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Yaqoobi |
| Sponsorship of social activities | Grand Ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistani, Ammar al-Hakim, Ayatollah Hadi al-Modarresi, Ayatollah Hussein Ismail al-Sadr, Moqtada al-Sadr, Qazwini family, Seyyed Jawad al-Khoei |
| Constrained criticism of current affairs | Grand Ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistani, Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Saeed al-Hakim |

actors might consider how they could be also used to support peace and reconciliation efforts, such as healing trauma.

Religious leaders who comment too regularly on current political events lose influence and credibility as religious actors. Those who comment more selectively on political matters are viewed as having more authority, the assumption being that they are more focused on spiritual concerns. Iraqi and foreign policymakers should bear this dynamic in mind when they ask religious leaders to make public statements.

Inherited Leadership

Religious actors with inherited religious leadership are born into well-known, highly respected families. This

surfaced as one of the most important factors explaining influence, though it primarily applies to male religious actors from the Shia tradition (as well as Yazidi). One interviewee referred to this as “the father effect” when discussing Moqtada al-Sadr.

Inherited religious leadership does not necessarily fall (or fall exclusively) to a religious leader’s relatives. Take the case of Mohammad Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr, the father of Moqtada al-Sadr. Many attribute the son’s current influence to the affection many had for his father rather than for his level of learning. Most Shia clerics study for twenty-one years in three seven-year cycles, but Moqtada studied only for a few years, from 2007 to 2011, in self-imposed exile in Qom, Iran, under Kazem al-Haeri (b. 1938).⁵⁴ Sadr’s modest level of learning contributes to

the perception that his influence is inherited rather than earned.

But Sadr's relatively low level of Islamic learning also allows for his father's more accomplished students to claim inherited religious leadership. Some claim that Grand Ayatollah Mohammad al-Yaqoobi is in fact Sadeq al-Sadr's true heir, not Moqtada. Inherited religious leadership is then not automatically conferred. It emerges instead through competition between a leader's followers and children in the decades after his death.

In Shiism a factor that contributes to inherited religious leadership, but is not sufficient as a basis for influence, is descent from a leading figure from the history of the religion.⁵⁵ Ali al-Talqani, for example, claims to be descended from Ali ibn Abi Talib, the first imam according to Shia belief, and also therefore descended directly from the Prophet Muhammad through his daughter Fatima. This was not mentioned often in interviews, but it is important to the way many religious leaders present themselves online. Talqani, for example, gives his entire lineage back to Ali on his Facebook page. Because so many religious leaders in Iraq claim descent from the Prophet, we reserve the category of inherited religious leadership for those whose immediate relatives (fathers, grandfathers, uncles) were religious leaders.

It is also important to differentiate inherited religious leadership with succession. As mentioned, Grand Ayatollah Mohammad al-Yaqoobi is seen as the successor to his teacher to whom he is not related. This is slightly different from the inherited leadership that refers to familial relations because, as the case of Moqtada al-Sadr demonstrates, being related to a significant religious leader seems to lower the bar of how educated one has to be to gain influence as a religious leader (though Moqtada is increasingly seen as a political figure in the contemporary period). In the case of a student emerging as a successor to his teacher, the student is likely to be one of the most educated of the teacher's students, and therefore it would be more

appropriate to classify him in the category "Religious credentials earned through education."

Persecution or Victimization

Multiple interviewees cited a religious actor's persecution, or a family's persecution, usually at the hands of the Baath Party, or victimization, usually at the hands of ISIS, as a basis for influence. Persecution is seen to demonstrate a religious actor's commitment to their faith. It is both a cause and an indication of influence. As one religious actor explained, "The more influential the cleric, the more savage the [Baathist] response."⁵⁶ Persecution likely suggests that an individual was already influential, but it may also lend influence or credibility to that individual or his or her relatives in the future. Victimization sometimes creates unlikely religious leaders who speak on behalf of the community to draw attention to tragedies they have witnessed.

Multiple members of Ammar al-Hakim's family were killed by the Baath Party. He still invokes their deaths in public speeches. In one interview, a Shia woman made reference to the Hakim family's experience of persecution to explain why she respects Ammar as both a political and a religious leader. She said the family's experience of persecution led her to trust them, partly because she had also been imprisoned by the Baath Party for her own religious activism. In such cases, interviewees did not distinguish between a figure's religious or political influence.

This category is meaningful beyond Iraq. Iran's current Supreme Leader, Ali al-Khamenei, references his multiple arrests and exile under Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi's regime on his own homepage, as a way of establishing his credibility as a religious leader.⁵⁷

Alliances

In an apparent contradiction, both access to an external patron and refusal to be controlled by an external patron can garner a religious actor influence. Yet these two characteristics appeal to different populations. The two examples cited most often are Qais al-Khazali, for his perceived close relationship with Iran, and Moqtada

al-Sadr, who publicly cultivates the image of answering to no external influence, a stark change from his association with Iran after his self-imposed exile there ending in 2011.

Education

As the case of Moqtada al-Sadr makes clear, inherited religious leadership is often fragile among the Shia in the absence of individual religious credentials. Like persecution, educational credentials are indicators of the seriousness with which one approaches religious commitments. Typically, the better educated the leader, the more influential they become. Among other religious groups, religious learning is revered but does not necessarily translate directly into influence. Among the Sunni and minority faiths, formal positions of religious leadership seem to be more consequential.

Methodology

Religious methodology is also a concept that applies primarily to the Shia. It refers to the way in which an Islamic scholar uses available evidence to come to a conclusion on a complicated legal matter. When scholars differ on methodology, they may come to different conclusions in legal rulings. In several of the interviews, respondents referred to a particular scholar's methodology as a reason for their influence. Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani explains his methodology on his website as one of seeking the universal meaning from holy texts such as the Quran rather than a literal reading.

Sponsorship

Many religious actors provide social services as a way of caring for, communicating concern about, and strengthening their relationship with those who are in need. Religious actors usually fund social services through donations. Christian religious leaders in Iraq emphasize that they distribute social services regardless of the sect of the recipients.⁵⁸ This makes sense given their status as a religious minority and the vast diversity of religious beliefs in the regions where Christians are located. Shia religious leaders, by contrast, tend to distribute social services just to members of their own faith.

Shia religious leaders tend to favor meeting the needs of students in seminaries as their primary social service, though they are also engaged in a wide variety of medical and other forms of outreach. According to his website, Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani supports nearly fifty thousand students, the majority of whom are studying in Qom. In addition to housing seminary students, al-Sistani also sponsors several clinics, including the Jawad al-Aimma Specialist Eye Hospital, and two clinics for low-income people: the Imam Sadiq Charitable Clinic and the Imam Hasan Mojtaba clinic. Sistani also maintains al-Ayn Social Care Foundation for the care of orphans and internally displaced persons. By the end of 2015, the foundation had cared for more than thirty thousand orphans at a cost of approximately \$80 million.

Shia religious leaders command such significant resources that they frequently cooperate with the state or step in to cover the needs of populations not met by the state. The displacement of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis due to the advance of ISIS is a case in point. For example, an IDP camp near Karbala was at first financed through the combined resources of the state and the shrines of Karbala. By 2016, however, a fall in oil prices combined with the state's decision to direct all available funds to the fight against ISIS left the province's IDPs in need of more sponsorship. The shrines now manage the needs of the IDPs through donations from the wealthy, pilgrims, and investments.⁵⁹ An investigation by the *Atlantic* suggests that, in a concrete sense, the shrines have begun to assume the functions of the state.

In Baghdad, Hussein Ismail al-Sadr was named as a particularly influential religious leader given his founding of the Humanitarian Dialogue Foundation, which combines development with reconciliation projects. One Shia woman from Baghdad commented that Hussein al-Sadr's social activities had contributed to a decrease in violence.

Constrained Commentary on Politics

Multiple interviews alluded to religious actors' judicious involvement in political affairs as key to their influence.

Many interviewees saw Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani as the most effective religious leader in this regard. Although Sistani himself is not considered a politicized figure, his decisions have significant political consequences. In 2014, Sistani released a statement encouraging Iraqi politicians not to cling to their positions of power. The statement was widely interpreted as calling for then Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to step down.⁶⁰ It took less than a month from Sistani's first statement for Maliki to step aside, allowing Haider al-Abadi to form a government, a day before the grand ayatollah was expected to strengthen his criticism of Maliki in another Friday sermon.⁶¹

Respondents from across Iraq and across religions commented on how Sistani's infrequent interventions in politics have increased their respect for him. They give several reasons for this: he rarely gets involved, when he does it is for an issue of critical importance, his silence on an issue can function as a kind of critique, he appears to be working toward the good of society rather than for personal gain, and his absence from the public sphere produces a kind of enigma. One Shia man from Najaf explained,

When you look at Sayyed Sistani with his continuous guidance regarding voting for the constitution as a democratic practice, you still see that he keeps his distance from politics and only steps in when it's a major necessity. Contrast that to all the other religious men who interfere in politics to make personal gains.

A religious leader from Najaf remarked similarly: "He is a man which in his silence, there's a philosophy. Whose silence is almost like a scream against many voices that are empty."

Or, as one Shia Muslim who self-identified as liberal explained,

In Iraq we have a psychological phenomenon: those who distance themselves and don't have much of a presence or public appearances tend to be very influential. For example, if al-Sayyed al-Sistani appeared daily on the screen and in

public events, he'd be less influential. Mystery produces a halo—that's why he's not regarded as an ordinary person.

Although Sistani is viewed as being not especially involved in politics, political figures from both inside and outside Iraq seek consultations with him. Sistani rarely allows anyone to be photographed with him, but even obtaining a meeting with the grand ayatollah is a mark of influence. Sistani chooses carefully with whom he will meet, and US and European officials have been frustrated by his unwillingness to meet them. In 2014, he met with then UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to discuss the crisis caused by the rapid advance of ISIS. Most senior Iraqi officials such as prime ministers have met the cleric on at least one occasion.

Although Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani was not criticized in any of the interviews for his involvement in political affairs, other religious actors were. For example, a woman from Najaf commented, "The most prominent leaders [in Najaf] are the religious maraji', namely, al-Sayyed al-Sistani and to a lesser degree al-Sheikh Ishaq al-Fayyad and then Mohammed Saied al-Hakeem, but his influence is undermined by his involvement in politics." Similarly, a Friday preacher was criticized for the same reason. In the words of one interviewee, Ja'afar al-Ibrahimi

used the Hussainiya platform as a tool to criticize the political process and the government, and that is not accepted because the whole point of the platform is to spread guidance on social and religious issues. Yes, there can be some criticism involved, but it should be constructive not destructive and not as detailed and elaborate as he was doing.

More simply, those who try to shape politics from the pulpit are seen as becoming too involved in earthly matters.

At the same time, coordination seems evident among the highest levels of Shia religious authority in order to strengthen the effect of Sistani's interventions in politics. Other leading clerics who exercise tremendous restraint in commenting on political affairs appear to be intentionally magnifying Sistani's words with their own silence.

Table 2. Methods of Influence of Select Iraqi Religious Leaders

| | Shia | Sunni | Christian | Other |
|--|---|---|---|---|
| Political party leader | Moqtada al-Sadr, Ammar al-Hakim, Sheikh Jalal al-Din al-Saghir, Salah Abdul Razzaq, Ayad Jamal Aldin/al-Din, Ayatollah Hadi al-Modarresi | Osama Tawfiq al-Tikriti, Khaled Yassin al-Obaidi, Salim al-Jabouri | Yonadam Kanna (Assyrian), Joseph Sliwa, Emanuel Khoshaba Youkhana (Assyrian) | Vian Dakhil (Yazidi), Sheikh Shamo (Yazidi – KRG), Ako Shawais (Kaka'i), Raad Jabar al-Khamis (Sabean-Mandaean), Ameena Saeed Hasan (former MP, Yazidi) |
| Nonstate armed group affiliation | Moqtada al-Sadr, Ammar al-Hakim, Sheikh Jalal al-Din al-Saghir, Qais al-Khazali | Nishwan al-Jabouri, Maghdad al-Sabawi | Yonadam Kanna (Assyrian) | Haydar Shesho (Yazidi), Mazlum Shengal (Yazidi), Berivan Arin (Yazidi), Abu Ja'afar al Shabaki (Shabak) |
| Formal position, religious leadership or cleric | Living maraji: Grand Ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistani, Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi al-Modarresi, Bashir al-Najafi, Mohammad Saeed al-Hakim, Mohammad Ishaq al-Fayyad, Sadr al-Din al-Qubbanji | Abdul Malik al-Saadi | Avag Asadourian (Armenian Christian), Louis Raphaël I Sako (Chaldean Catholic Patriarch of Baghdad), Primate His Grace Bishop Vahan Hovhannessian, Archbishop Paulos Faraj Rahho (Chaldean), Archbishop Bashar Warda (Chaldean, Erbil), Bishop Rabban al-Qas (Chaldean), Nicodeums Sharif (Syriac Orthodox, Mosul), Archbishop Apris Jounsen, Archbishop Timotheos Mousa of the Archdiocese of Mor Mattai Monastery (Syriac Orthodox), Archbishop Thomas Mirkis (Chaldean), Archbishop Nicodemus Daoud Sharaf | Baba Sheikh Khurto Hajji Ismail (Yazidi), Prince Tahseen Said (Yazidi), Sheikh Khartu Hajji Ismael (Yazidi), Satar Jabar Helo (Sabean-Mandaean), Edwin Shuker (Jewish, located outside Iraq), Mazen Nayef (Sabean-Mandaean) |
| Television and radio station | Ayatollah Hadi al-Modarresi (Ahulbayt TV), Ammar al-Hakim (Al-Forat), Nouri al-Maliki (Afaq TV), Mujtaba Hussein Shirazi (Imam Hussein Media), Kamal al-Haydari (al-Kawthar), Hassan Allah Yari (Ahl-e-Bait TV), Ali al-Talqani, Rashid al-Husseini (Al-Anwar), Mohammed Yaqoobi (Hadith al-Ruh television program), Ja'afar al-Ibrahimi (Al-Anwar), Yasir al-Habib (Fadak) | Akram al-Alwani (Baghdad TV), Khalid al-Mulla (Afaq) | Yonadam Kanna (Assyrian), Ashur TV) | |
| Social media | Ayatollah Hadi al-Modarresi, Ali al-Talqani, Kamal al-Haydari | Grand Mufti Mahdi al-Sumaidaie | | |
| Government or religious agency association | Alaa Abd al-Sahib al-Musawi | Grand Mufti Mahdi al-Sumaidaie, Rafie Al-Rifai, Abdul Latif al-Hemyem, Muthanna Harith al-Dhari, Abdullah Jalal | | Nadia F. Maghamiss (Sabean-Mandaean), Toma Zaki Zahroon (Sabean-Mandaean) |
| Moderate speech | Grand Ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistani | Abdul Malik al-Saadi, Dr. Akram Obaid al-Alwani | | |
| Social movement leader | Moqtada al-Sadr | Abdul Malik al-Saadi | | |

Or, as one Shia interviewee put it, they are “silent out of respect for Sistani’s silence.” It is unclear whether leading clerics will speak out more following his death. Even as recently as 2010, the four religious references in Najaf were described as “quite activist,” indicating how recently this dynamic of extreme restraint has developed.⁶² It is possible that Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani is given more leeway to comment on and shape politics than other religious leaders. Regardless of the special status afforded to him, it is safe to conclude that Iraqis prefer their religious leaders to be highly selective in their commentary on political affairs.

METHODS OF INFLUENCE

Here the report details the instruments through which religious actors exercise influence, including political parties, nonstate armed groups, formal positions of religious leadership, television or radio stations, social media, association with a government agency, and the use of moderate speech (see table 2).

Association with a Political Party

Although many religious leaders derive influence from their distance from politics, some choose the opposite course, and use a political party as a vehicle of influence. Political parties help religious actors mobilize followers and resources. The most frequently mentioned religious actor with political party ties is Ammar al-Hakim, the former leader of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and the current leader of the Hikma movement.

Political parties that lead or are significant players in coalition governments can shore up support through the distribution of patronage. In one telling example, a member of the ISCI, Ali Khudair al-Abodi, was made director general of the country’s newest state-sponsored oil company, the Dhi Qar Oil Company, despite what some have called a lack of management experience. Al-Abodi’s appointment speaks not only to the resources that political parties gain access to through electoral success, but also to the influence that party leaders have over other senior party members, whose

livelihoods depend on the party’s success.

But religious actors need to be aware that citizens have different expectations for political parties with whom they share sectarian affiliations. In discussing the need to rebuild his city after ISIS was defeated, one Iraqi remarked, “These politicians are Sunni—they are supposed to help us. . . . They’re useless.”⁶³ Perceived inaction by fellow members of one’s religious sect may result in a particularly virulent rejection of their authority.

For minority religions, affiliation with a political party may give specific individuals a platform from which to defend the interests of the community. The case of Vian Dakhil is one example. Dakhil became the face of the Yazidi community through her powerful testimony following the ISIS invasion of Yazidi territory in 2014. As only one of two Yazidi members of Iraq’s parliament, she is frequently called upon in both national and international forums to represent her community.

Similarly, Yonadam Kanna, the secretary general of the Assyrian Democratic Movement, is also a member of parliament representing a religious minority, Assyrian Christians. While Dakhil is one of only a few leaders of the Yazidi community, Kanna faces the opposite problem; he spends much of his time trying to differentiate the Iraqi Christian community from other well-meaning Christian groups that complicate security and opportunities for Iraqi Christians. In a 2015 interview, he discussed how American Christian groups had called for an autonomous province for Christians in Iraq, against the wishes of some Iraqi Christians.⁶⁴

One challenge for religious actors associated with political parties is that some Iraqis hold the parties with religious identities responsible for increasing disaffection with religion in Iraq. As one interviewee from Basra explained, “The situation [of religion in Iraq] is weak because politicians who are affiliated with political Islam do not offer a management approach that meets the needs of the citizen, causing dissatisfaction with political Islam.”

Association with a Nonstate Armed Group

Most armed groups in Iraq exist under the umbrella of the Popular Mobilization Forces, which, though largely Shia, also include groups from Sunni, Christian, and Yazidi communities. The Shia PMF factions can be divided by their loyalties to three leaders: Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Grand Ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistani, and Moqtada al-Sadr. Ammar al-Hakim's armed groups, including Saraya al-Jihad, Saraya al-'Aqida, and Saraya al-'Ashura, are loyal to Sistani.⁶⁵ Because many of Iraq's militias are loyal to either Sistani or Khamenei, both of whom are advanced in age (eighty-nine and eighty, respectively), how their deaths will affect the behavior of these groups is a concern for citizens, policymakers, and peacemakers. Of particular concern in Iraq is the possibility that upon the death of Sistani a militia may try to install an ayatollah with whom they have a strong relationship as his successor. Further research is necessary to understand the alignments between current militias and leading religious figures.

Religious leaders affiliated with armed groups are influential because of the consequential actions they can order. In one particularly telling interview, a commander explained, "If our religious authorities order us to kidnap or kill, we execute the orders. We are Islamists and we obey our religious authorities. We do what is ordered by our religious authorities, not by any state."⁶⁶ Other leaders have made similar statements. Akram al-Kaabi, the leader of the Harakat al-Nujaba armed group, has said publicly that he would overthrow the Iraqi government if ordered to do so by Grand Ayatollah Khamenei: "PMF cannot stage a coup unless a religious authority makes a decision to change the rule in Iraq. If a religious authority decides, we rely on Allah and go ahead. It would be normal for us to implement."⁶⁷

Before ISIS, no Christian armed groups were established in Iraq. But, following reports of human rights abuses by Shia armed groups, several Christian groups formed, including the Dwekh Nawsha and the Christian Iraqi Babylon Brigades. Albert Kisso leads the Dwekh Nawsha, and Ryan al-Kildani is commander of the Iraqi Babylon

Brigades.⁶⁸ These individuals are not seen as religious leaders. Sunni, Yazidi, Shabak, and Turkmen communities also have raised armed groups since the advent of ISIS.⁶⁹

Formal Religious Leadership

Formal positions of religious leadership grant religious actors access to multiple resources that facilitate influence, among them physical infrastructure, social networks, and religious authority. Formal positions are the primary way Christian religious leaders exercise influence but are also important for Shia, Yazidi, and Sabean-Mandaean religious communities. Among the Shia, the only time formal positions were mentioned in interviews were in discussions of the maraji' or the Shia endowment. Some interviewees mentioned Sunni and Shia religious endowments, but rarely identified the leaders of these groups by name.

Christian denominations tend to use similar titles to indicate hierarchy. The highest Christian authorities are archbishops and patriarchs. Patriarchs are high-ranking bishops who head independent churches. Louis I Raphaël Sako, for example, is the Chaldean Catholic Patriarch of Baghdad. Bishops are the heads of dioceses, and archbishops are heads of important dioceses (usually ones that include urban areas).

In Twelver Shia Islam, the main branch of Shia Islam practiced in Iraq, titles imply formal positions of religious leadership. In theory, this hierarchy is related to the degree of learning of the individual and the quality of his scholarship. That is, a scholar would progress through the various titles as they gained greater and greater respect among their colleagues. In practice, however, political considerations have and do shape the titles scholars claim and grant one another. Scholars specialize in particular areas and may have the right to *ijtihad* (the right to reinterpret Islamic law for lesser clerics and ordinary citizens) in one area but not in another.

Grand ayatollah is the highest title. A grand ayatollah is a marja'—a religious reference or a source to emulate.



Iraqi Shia leader Moqtada al-Sadr (right) meets with the former president of Iraqi Kurdistan, Masoud Barzani, in Najaf, on November 23, 2018. (Photo by Alaa al-Marjani/Reuters)

Individuals of this rank have the right to exercise *ijtihad*. In Shiism, such clerics are necessary because Islamic law must address continuously evolving subjects on which past scholars might not have ruled. Shia are expected to pick one living grand ayatollah to whom they can refer to interpret Islamic law for contemporary circumstances (a relationship known as *emulation*). Grand ayatollahs provide guidance through *fatawa* (plural of fatwa), which comprise the believer's question and the scholar's answer.

Below grand ayatollahs are ayatollahs, who also have the right to *ijtihad*. On achieving such a rank, the scholar begins to teach in a seminary and amass students. Below ayatollahs are *hujjat al-Islam*. In Iraq, all three of these titles are held exclusively by men, though in Iran some women have been granted the status of *mujtahida* with the right to interpret Islamic law.

Television and Radio

The media is an incredibly important platform for religious groups, and particularly for minority religious trends seeking to spread their ideas. One Iraqi reporter, Majed Shukr, told *Al-Monitor* in 2015, "Media outlets play a major role in religious mobilization and pushing people to religiosity. . . . Most Iraqi channels and local stations broadcast religious programs around the clock, while love songs are no longer played."⁷⁰ Radio stations are also important. In Baghdad, one Shia explained, "Al-Ahad radio station is generally more influential than the TV stations," probably referring to the omnipresence of radio in taxi cabs, barber shops, and other establishments that may not have a television.

Questions about the role of media elicited strong responses: interviewees tended to view certain channels as productive and others as counterproductive to peace and

Table 3. Influence of Prominent Religious Leaders on Facebook

| Name | Facebook Page | Likes | Followers | Year Joined |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------|-----------|-------------|
| Basim Karbalai | www.facebook.com/BasimKarbalaei | 2,941,641 | 2,917,782 | 2008 |
| Kamal al-Haydari | www.facebook.com/alhaydari | 1,734,877 | 1,719,931 | 2012 |
| Ali al-Talqani | www.facebook.com/talqani | 1,552,546 | 1,786,619 | 2016 |
| Moqtada al-Sadr | www.facebook.com/www.jawabna | 1,026,432 | 1,034,628 | 2015 |
| Grand Mufti Rafie Al-Rifai | www.facebook.com/muftialiraq | 812,121 | 830,799 | 2012 |
| Ja'afar al-Ibrahimi | www.facebook.com/ashaq.albrahimi | 557,167 | 678,569 | 2014 |
| Habib al-Kathmi | www.facebook.com/JwahrH | 337,204 | 343,110 | 2014 |
| Khalid al-Mulla | www.facebook.com/D.Khalid.Almulla | 252,459 | 252,319 | 2010 |
| Mahmoud Hassani Sorkhi/Sarkhi | www.facebook.com/alsrkhy.alhasany | 202,145 | 216,177 | 2011 |
| Sheikh Abd al-Rada Ma'ash | www.facebook.com/maash14 | 137,124 | 141,131 | 2010 |

Note: As of October 4, 2019.

reconciliation. One Shia man from Najaf, for example, explained that “Al-Forat news has always showed the positive side [of Islam], and Al-Anwar News is the opposite, as it shows the corrupted and incorrect image of Islam.” This answer is not surprising. As detailed earlier, Al-Anwar News is associated with the Shiraziyyin, a religious trend that tends to be the object of much criticism in Najaf. Another person from Najaf expressed similar criticism:

As for media, there are certain stations that specialize in showing cases of killing and war and they don't have a single show that calls for peace, morals, literature. It's the same with the hosts, every channel we see belongs to a certain school of thought and there's a specific maraji' that supports it like Al-Ahad, Al-Nujaba'a, Al-Anwar, etc.

As mentioned earlier, television stations magnify the impact of the Husseiniya by broadcasting sermons and other events live from the mosque. Karbala TV, for example, is always live broadcasting from the shrine to Imam Hussein. In Kirkuk, individuals seemed to be more influenced by channels from abroad—such as Al-Noor, from Turkey, or Al-Quran, from Saudi Arabia—than by Iraqi channels. (See table 2 for the media affiliation of various religious actors.)

Social Media and Web Presence

Social media has become an important platform for religious actors since 2010. Religious actors in Iraq use Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, Instagram, YouTube, and other platforms to deliver content to followers, demonstrate their influence, and shape public discourse. The most popular social media accounts tend to be managed not by the religious actor himself but by a media office tasked with the responsibility.

Although social media does not provide a perfect measure of a religious actor's influence, it does allow for some measures that, when taken in a broader context, help in evaluating the level of an individual's influence.⁷¹ The most influential religious actor on either Facebook or Twitter is the Shia eulogy singer Basim Karbalai. He has nearly three million followers on Facebook and nearly nine hundred thousand on Twitter (the discrepancy points to the popularity of Facebook in Iraq relative to Twitter). The influence of Karbalai's social media accounts says more about the rising importance of the Husseiniya and the style of preaching embraced there than it does about al-Karbalai as a religious figure. He was not mentioned in any of the interviews and is therefore not profiled in the report.

Table 4. Twitter Influence of Prominent Religious Leaders

| Name | Handle | Followers | Tweets | Klout Score | Year Joined |
|----------------------------------|------------------|-----------|--------|-------------|-------------|
| Basim al-Karbalai | @BasimKarbalaei | 697,000 | 1,424 | 59 | 2013 |
| Ayatollah Hadi al-Modarresi | @HadiAlModarresi | 938,000 | 6,841 | 62 | 2010 |
| Ahmad al-Sadr | @Ahmadalsadr | 441,000 | 644 | 55 | 2013 |
| Ammar al-Hakim | @Ammar_Alhakeem | 397,000 | 4,686 | 56 | 2012 |
| Ja'afar al-Ibrahimi | @JAlibrahimi | 382,000 | 977 | 56 | 2011 |
| Taha al-Dulaimi | @tahadulaimi | 238,000 | 13,400 | 63 | 2012 |
| Moqtada al-Sadr | @mu_alsadr | 190,000 | 83 | 65 | 2015 |
| Ayad Jamal al-Din | @Ayadjamaladdin | 118,000 | 31,100 | | 2014 |
| Kamal al-Haydari | @alhaydari | 51,900 | 2,885 | 49 | 2012 |
| Qais al-Khazali | @Qais_alkhazali | 106,000 | 950 | 61 | 2013 |
| Ali al-Sadr | @Ali_alsadr1993 | 36,100 | 25 | 51 | 2016 |
| Sayed Mahdi al-Modarresi | @SayedModarresi | 26,900 | 7,853 | 59 | 2009 |
| Sheikh Abd al-Rada Ma'ash | @A_m3ash | 378,000 | 5,882 | 52 | 2010 |
| Yassir al-Habib | @Sheikh_alHabib | 14,300 | 40,300 | 52 | 2013 |
| Mustafa al-Najafi | @MustafaNajafi | 14,400 | 14,600 | 54 | 2010 |
| Mahmoud Hassani Sorkhi/Sarkhi | @alsrkhyalhasany | 11,100 | 20,100 | 57 | 2015 |
| Hossein Qazwini | @Shqazwini | 9,128 | 924 | 55 | 2013 |
| Office of Jalal al-Din al-Saghir | @alsagheeroffice | 4,873 | 2,679 | 48 | 2011 |

Note: Data as of May 23, 2018. Klout scores were retired in May 2018, as initial research for this report was being completed. Klout scores measure the activity of users and provide an alternative measure to followers. Suppose a follower does not often retweet those followed, but frequently retweets what they write. Klout would measure that as high influence. However, if a follower retweets everyone all of the time, retweets of content would be measured less. Nevertheless, Klout scores can be manipulated and are therefore a helpful but imperfect metric in evaluating influence online. Mahmoud Hassani Sorkhi/Sarkhi's previous account was @AnsIraq, which he created in 2011.

Other than Karbalai, the most influential religious leader on Facebook is Kamal al-Haydari, who has nearly two million followers (see table 3). Interviewees identified tens of individuals' social media accounts as an effective religious outreach method. Despite an increase in followers during the parliamentary elections of 2018, Moqtada al-Sadr's social media presence has been surpassed by Ali al-Talqani, Talqani was one of the individuals whose use of social media was most frequently mentioned as a positive influence.

An interesting measure for influence on Twitter was the Klout score, a measure that is no longer available. A

Klout score evaluated influence not by the number of one's followers alone, but also by taking into account how active those followers were in responding to tweets. The higher the Klout score, the more influential the religious actor (see table 4). In mid-2018, when judged by Klout scores, the most influential Twitter account of a religious actor in Iraq was Moqtada al-Sadr's, followed by that of a prominent Sunni Taha al-Dulaimi. The third most influential religious actor was Hadi al-Modarresi, a leader of the Shiraziyyin trend identified earlier in this report.

As discussed, a reliance on social media as an indicator of influence may overstate the importance of particular actors or trends because certain groups have targeted social media and others have not. Influence on social media is only one of multiple indicators that should be consulted when evaluating an individual's level of influence. Nevertheless, in a situation of massive displacement, which Iraq is currently experiencing, influence in media and particularly on social media may suggest whether an individual might be expected to gain influence. In other words, groups with a serious social media presence are likely to be increasingly influential over time.

The interviews and desk research uncovered few women active as religious leaders on social media, although Iraqi women in other sectors have embraced these technologies.⁷² Outside Iraq, many women in the region have found social media an important way to bypass male gatekeepers in the world of communication. Mona Eltahawy, an Egyptian author, explained,

When I look across the Muslim world and the various Muslim communities around the world, this is the most exciting time to be a Muslim woman for many reasons, but primarily because of social media, which has given a platform and a voice to women we would have never heard from before.⁷³

The one exception to this trend in Iraq is Lubna Ahmed Yaseen, the Iraqi atheist mentioned earlier who now lives in California. She explicitly describes herself as “atheist” and “anti religions (Islam)” in her Twitter profile. She was not identified in any interviews for this study but is an up-and-coming leader of the Iraqi atheist community.

Virtually all religious actors in Iraq maintain a serious web presence, including the four leading religious references of Najaf. Table 5 identifies the websites of the four leading religious scholars in Najaf and the number of languages into which their websites are translated. This becomes yet another measure of Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani's impressive reach.

ALI AL-TALQANI

Research for this report uncovered an interesting puzzle. An enormous number of respondents characterized an up-and-coming religious leader, Ali al-Talqani, as the most influential religious leader in their communities and on social media or as an influential religious leader with cross-sectarian appeal. Although Shia, he was popular and well-known among both Sunni and Shia, as well as many of the religious minorities interviewed.

He was mentioned specifically by a thirty-six-year-old secular Sunni Arab from Diyala; a seventy-year-old Sunni also from Diyala named him as a man who has influence on the Shia “and maybe Sunni too” through his videos on YouTube. “His speeches,” he explained, “gained the support of both sides for their moderateness.” Talqani was also named in interviews in Kirkuk, Karbala, Najaf, and Baghdad. Additional support from his growing influence is evident in the dramatic increase in the number of followers of his social media accounts and views of his videos on YouTube during the period of research. One Yazidi interviewee from Baghdad commented how Talqani's influence made him feel “reassured” because of his positive humanistic values. Talqani was also identified by a Christian from Baghdad as

one of the most influential young religious leaders.

The words "moderate" and "humanist" were frequently used to describe him: "He is one of the young clerics whose religious awareness-raising lectures have gone viral on YouTube as a result of his influential style and civilized and moderate thoughts. . . and it's worth mentioning that youngsters from both denominations (Sunni and Shia) follow him."

It was therefore surprising, after analyzing only a few short clips of his speaking, to realize that Talqani displayed both relatively mainstream beliefs that are not only *not* moderate but also might be considered what some call Shia extremism, as well as other views that could be described as misogynistic. For example, interviewees in the shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala, which are overwhelmingly Shia, complained that the space has become too sanctified, that too little space is available for young people to be free. Although some citizens view prohibitions on music as religiosity ran amok, Talqani refers to music and singing as *haram* (forbidden by religion). If he is emblematic of trends criticized by some as Shia extremism, why is he simultaneously viewed as a moderate?

To make matters even more complex, Talqani's views of women

are not consistently moderate. In one clip, he vilifies women for relatively minor issues, such as watching foreign soap operas, even as the country is faced with a crisis of domestic violence. He also seems to suggest that men are superior to women. In more recent clips, Talqani calls for a modern Muslim woman who works outside of the home but still abides by Muslim traditions in dress and social values.

One explanation for his being considered moderate is his choice of words, such as humanist or moderate, to describe himself. His presentation shapes the perception of his viewers. He frequently uses the word humanistic when making the argument that religion is fully compatible with modern life. Such an explanation, however, does not give enough credit to his viewers. In fact, a number of interviews suggested that the presence of ISIS has sharpened their eye in noticing language that they view as extremist.

Another explanation is that his calls for increased compassion, empathy, and tolerance among groups endears him to the Iraqi population, especially minorities, who might be willing to overlook immoderate statements on other issues as long as his overall message favors coexistence. A third explanation is that there is something more in his style rather than

his substance that encourages this perception.

Perhaps the most compelling explanation is the idea that what is moderate is relative in every society. Those describing Talqani as moderate believe him to be so. Given the wide range of views expressed in the country, he is in fact more moderate than others. He is by no means moderate by the standards of the international community, however. The case of Talqani highlights how it cannot be assumed what is meant by the use of familiar terms such as "moderate." Instead, it must be asked what it means to be moderate in contemporary Iraq.

The confusing reputation of Ali al-Talqani highlights the difficulty of selecting partners for peace and reconciliation efforts. Individuals who hold views that might support peace and reconciliation efforts in one area might simultaneously hold views that are not constructive in another. Religious actors are complex and not easily categorized, especially by terms such as extremist or moderate. Views differ about whether to engage religious actors with problematic viewpoints. It is important that policymakers and peacebuilders alike find ways to collaborate that do not condone views religious actors may hold that run counter to human rights.

Table 5. Websites of the Four Religious References of Najaf

| Name | Website | Languages |
|--|------------------|--|
| Grand Ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistani | www.sistani.org | French, Turkish, Azerbaijani, English, Urdu, Farsi, and Arabic |
| Grand Ayatollah Ishaq al-Fayyad | www.alfayadh.org | English, Arabic, Farsi |
| Grand Ayatollah Bashir Hussein al-Najafi | www.alnajafy.com | English, Urdu, Arabic |
| Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Saeed al-Hakim | www.alhakeem.com | English, Urdu, Farsi, Arabic |

Association with a Government Agency

The Iraqi government maintains a number of formal positions of religious leadership, including multiple endowments, which manage the country's religious institutions. The country's Shia and Sunni endowments manage their respective mosques and grant credentials to those who preach there. The endowments also manage other religious properties—shrines, tombs, and colleges, as well as Islamic charities and annual pilgrimages.

Positions of religious influence associated with government agencies have been particularly important for the country's Sunni population. Because the population has lacked centralized leadership, formal religious positions with government agencies have allowed specific Sunni leaders to come to national prominence. Among them are the Grand Mufti Mahdi al-Sumaidaie, the head of the body's official fatwa body (*dar al-ifta*),⁷⁴ and Dr. Abdul Latif al-Hemyem, the chair of the Sunni Endowment Diwan of Iraq.

Moderate Speech

Since 2001, increased concern over the presence of jihadists in Muslim societies has created an opening for religious leaders who present themselves as moderates. This translates into a vehicle for influence given that religious leaders are invited to special symposia or other events that provide a broader platform, and may even translate into actual material resources. Many interviewees mentioned the ideological moderation of some religious leaders as a reason for their influence.

A Muslim (no sect identified) from Kirkuk voiced a popular view: "Depending on the issue at hand, we find that the public is drawn to the religious influence at times and completely indifferent to it at other times. For now, the moderate speech is most effective—especially considering the fact that terrorism has negatively affected the image of Islam."

A Shia man from Najaf commented, "I very much respect the moderate religious figures of other sects and I feel connected to them as a human being. For example, Christians are very open and peaceful people and I don't have a problem with them. I have many friends from other sects and religions."

Although being cynical about the category of moderate Islam is easy, the category is meaningful among Iraqis. Multiple interviewees who self-identified as not practicing Shia, moderate Shia, liberal Shia, or intellectuals without religion referred to Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani's moderation as the reason they refer to him on spiritual matters. In the words of a woman from Najaf,

I'm a liberal, leaning toward individualism and freedom of choice. . . . I'm a pious Muslim but I tend to give people their freedom. There's no coercion in anything and I don't call apostasy upon any religion. I find a lot of things and notions in the Shia doctrine to be exaggerated and untrue and I don't take part in a lot of them. This position has come to me through education and I don't tend to stereotype people, and in my religious matters which are mere acts of worship, I resort to [al-Sayyed al-Sistani].

Conclusions and Recommendations



The aftermath of ISIS has shifted the religious landscape of Iraq in fundamental ways. Religious leaders have modified their religions' rituals, beliefs, and texts in response. Alignments among religious communities and institutions have changed, with some groups cooperating more earnestly while others' relationships likely have been permanently affected.

The post-ISIS context has also created new opportunities and needs for Iraqi religious actors to advance peace and reconciliation efforts, drawing on their sources and mechanisms of influence as documented. For example, among the Sunni community in particular, many respondents argued that religious actors are the best positioned to intervene in conflicts where one neighbor accuses another of having been a member of ISIS. Further, respondents from all religious communities suggested that religious actors are the ideal people to try to prevent the rise of ISIS 2.0 ideology and to address other forms of extremism.

Post-ISIS reconstruction has also created new tensions within and among Iraq's religious communities that must be addressed in efforts to advance peace. The influx of aid has led to infighting among Christian and other minority communities. Shia communities, particularly those in the south, fear that Sunni communities will receive more reconstruction aid and leave their communities less developed. They also fear that the sacrifices of the many Shia soldiers killed in the fighting against the Islamic State will go unrecognized. Religious actors could play a role in mitigating these and other conflicts that have a religious dimension or that cross religious identity lines.

These new opportunities come with important caveats. Religious actors' real and potential efforts to mitigate conflict and advance reconciliation within and among diverse religious groups, and to support peace more broadly, and national and international policymakers and peace practitioners' partnerships with them in these efforts, need to proceed with care. Efforts should be sensitive to community wariness about religious actors' entanglement with party politics, and the ways in which religious actors' influence is bolstered or constrained by their relationships with foreign groups, their online presence, and their responsiveness to community needs.

More broadly and centrally, policymakers and practitioners need to ensure that who they partner with in the religious landscape, and how they do so, reflects the goal they seek: an inclusive, participatory Iraqi state and society in which diverse communities coexist peacefully.

ENGAGING ACTORS

Three trends about Iraqi perceptions on reconciliation emerged from the interviews. First, Iraqi citizens differentiate between political or national reconciliation and social or local reconciliation processes. Second, Iraqis desire the involvement of religious leaders in social (local) reconciliation but not in political (national) reconciliation (or in national politics generally). Finally, they desire the central involvement of religious minorities in social reconciliation efforts.

Iraqi religious leaders are already engaging in efforts to promote reconciliation within their communities, and sometimes across community lines, drawing on religious

Many Iraqis view past reconciliation processes as vehicles for corruption. The need is therefore acute to create institutional mechanisms to protect national-level reconciliation efforts from facilitating personal gain for those involved.

ideas, practices, and rituals to do so. Much of this work to date has been ad hoc and personality driven, though it shows great potential. However, some religious actors are understandably wary of engaging in formal reconciliation efforts. Many Iraqis view past reconciliation processes as vehicles for corruption. The need is therefore acute to create institutional mechanisms to protect national-level reconciliation efforts from facilitating personal gain for those involved. At the national level, religious actors may be able to serve as guarantors of more formal reconciliation processes to ensure that they are held accountable to a set of principles on transparency and community accountability, as long as they do not become so entangled with political processes that their image is tarnished. At the local level, where politicians would be seen with suspicion, religious actors who are widely respected and highly influential often have the credibility to host or help facilitate reconciliation processes.

Partnerships with religious actors on reconciliation efforts should take the following issues into account.

First, policymakers and practitioners need to be sensitive to the complexities within and among religious communities, and in how religious actors and institutions intersect with political actors, institutions, and issues that affect broader conflict in Iraq, as explored in this report.

International engagement with religious actors in Iraq affects their influence and how their communities perceive them. Iraqi religious actors' alliances with foreign actors—including diplomats, peace practitioners, and global religious leaders—can lead to stronger, credible voices and effective violence mitigation and reconciliation efforts if handled appropriately. Care needs to be taken to recognize which foreign alliances are helpful, and in what situations, to ensure that engagement does not undermine their credibility. For example,

Saudi support for Christian leaders' reconciliation efforts was helpful, but Iran's support to Shia leadership in reconciliation efforts in Basra was seen as politically motivated. In particular, religious leaders who are seen as aligned with the United States or the West are easily written off and their influence severely undermined.

It is vital to make the extra effort to identify and support women and youth religious actors who are playing critical roles in their communities in support of peace, in recognition of the influence of these actors in shaping community attitudes and behaviors, and to ensure that religious engagement does not reinforce male dominance. Similarly, it is critical that religious actor engagement prioritizes the involvement of minority faith leaders in recognition of their heightened vulnerabilities and particular priorities, and to ensure religious engagement does not reinforce Muslim dominance.

Iraqi communities are ambivalent about religious actors' involvement in peace efforts. Before expanding or strengthening religious actors' involvement in peace work, it would be wise to help facilitate dialogues between religious actors and their local communities to explore that ambivalence and ensure that religious actors understand their communities' hopes and fears, and vice versa. It is imperative that religious actors not be pushed to issue frequent public statements on national political affairs because this can undermine their influence and credibility with community members who prefer that their religious leaders remain more focused on issues of spiritual and local community concern.

Separately, initiatives to advance reconciliation in partnership with religious actors could include collaboration and media outreach. More particularly, programs could center on collaboration with religious actors who are already—or who wish to be more involved



Ammar al-Hakim, head of the Hikma movement, speaks during a Christmas mass at the St. George Chaldean Catholic Church in Baghdad on December 25, 2018. (Photo by Thayer Al-Sudani/Reuters)

in—responding to the needs of their conflict-affected communities. Such efforts can be undertaken within faith communities, as well as in collaborative efforts, where appropriate, that can simultaneously deepen multifaith understanding and relationships. Partnership to support this work could entail capacity building; help designing, organizing and implementing projects; or exchange visits to other postconflict contexts in which religious actors played a meaningful role in reconciliation efforts.

This could include any number of projects. For example, efforts could be bolstered to provide trauma-healing support, using both traditional forms of therapeutic care and religious rituals and healing practices that facilitate healing, following the example of Baba Sheikh from the Yazidi community. Rouquia or Islamic healing practices, for example, might be repurposed to help deal with

individual trauma and broken communities.

Support could be offered to religious actors' ability to understand and effectively advocate for their community needs (including those from their own faith communities and others with whom they live) with local authorities. Facilitation efforts might include the return of displaced communities, creating a welcoming and safe environment, helping those communities to rebuild, providing short-term relief and support in the restoration of their sources of livelihood, and helping mitigate conflicts that arise between returning communities and those who remained.

Initiatives to help mitigate local conflicts within and between communities offer potential. These conflicts include those over food politics throughout the north, the growing number of individuals who identify as atheist or who are critical of mainstream faith beliefs and

practices, tensions associated with the delivery of aid (especially in post-ISIS territories), and between followers of the Shiraziyyin and the Najafi maraji', as well as those others identified throughout this report. Further, as Christian communities return to areas that were formerly under ISIS control, peacebuilders should seize the moment of ecumenical activities between those communities in order to mitigate infighting among Christian groups.

Other programs might involve promoting an environment of peaceful coexistence, mutual trust, and respect. Successful efforts would include sustained and regular intra- and interfaith dialogue and relationship building that address sensitive concerns or predominant assumptions that breed mistrust; multifaith collaboration to address shared concerns at the local level and to advocate for nondiscrimination based on religious identity and practice at the national level; and the individual promotion of ideas and practices to promote understanding about Iraq's religious diversity.

Last, collaboration could also bear fruit with religious authorities who use innovative methods for developing rulings (fatwa) to investigate and produce legal guidance related to reconciliation, coexistence, and peace.

Separately, media platforms could be created to facilitate multifaith engagement, greater understanding of Iraq's diverse religious communities, and support for religious freedom for those of all beliefs and none. A television program is needed that provides a platform for multifaith engagement and understanding. Social media will also be a critical platform for this work.

Special outreach and reintegration programming needs to be developed in areas liberated from ISIS. The reintegration of minority communities as well as family members of ISIS members who were not a part of ISIS but have been excommunicated by association is especially important. For both, trust needs to be

rebuilt with their communities so they can return to their communities and livelihoods.

In identifying religious actors with whom to partner on reconciliation efforts, policymakers and practitioners should take into account that religious actors, like their communities, are complex. Those who are moderate in some respects may undermine human rights in other arenas. Faith leaders from all faiths should be engaged meaningfully and from the start. Religious actors who are effective at communicating to, and partnering with, their communities in ways that build ownership in peace and reconciliation processes early on will be key partners.

Religious actors with a strong online media presence—or willingness to build it—can be especially influential partners for certain projects, especially those aiming to strengthen attitudes of respect for diversity and religious narratives in support of peace. Conversely, those who are perceived as displaying wealth or acting without humility are less likely to have trust with, and influence on, their communities.

Reconciliation efforts will benefit from engaging women religious leaders who have local influence, especially through family lineage and training. Women who hold the mullaya role among the Shia, for example, could be particularly strong partners in addressing the needs of women in peace and reconciliation work. Catholic nuns could as well, and potentially women from families with important religious lineages. Social media is an untapped resource for women religious peacebuilders to gain influence through a following, not to mention bypassing traditional patriarchal institutions and systems.

Policymakers and practitioners also need to recognize that Shia religious leaders sometimes set the tone for the behavior of other religious communities. Targeted interventions with leaders of the Shia may therefore have broader effects. Thinking beyond the borders of Iraq is essential in considering religious engagement

for peace, as is recognizing the influence and popularity within Iraq of international religious figures among all religious communities, even while taking into account the ways in which these foreign figures can affect the legitimacy of local faith actors.

ENGAGING INSTITUTIONS

Government institutions such as the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the Dar al-Ifta Council, or the Sunni and Shia endowments are potential partners for reconciliation, building social cohesion, tolerance, and respect across religious communities. Religious colleges and seminaries can also be ideal vehicles for messaging to their students but also institutions that are able to convey comprehensive peace and conflict resolution education where formal religious actors can be trained.

Outside formal institutions of religious learning, reconciliation efforts might take advantage of the increasing importance of the Husseiniya among the Shia. Targeted efforts that address a growing population of individuals termed reluctant Shia in this report—and who are therefore unlikely to be affected by collaboration with the Husseiniyas—will also be required.

Increasing multireligious literacy across the country should be a priority. Religious television and radio channels have a large following and provide a platform for religious actors to influence populations' behavior and practice. They also offer programming that doubles as effective entry points for messaging about reconciliation and peacebuilding and are spaces where religious actors successfully exercise their influence.

Further ways to engage religious institutions include engaging with sharia colleges, seminaries, and other religious educational institutions to help them establish classes on dialogue, conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and trauma healing. Public schools might also

integrate peacebuilding into the curriculum. Working with seminaries and schools is another possibility, especially those that are revisiting their books and curriculum, in particular to remove religious justifications of violence toward other religious communities and to include religious texts about tolerance and respect across religious communities. Ways to engage with the Husseiniya could be explored for teaching about peace education, building capacity for conflict resolution, developing space for intrafaith dialogue, and building intercommunal tolerance and respect, including among women and youth.

Opportunities could be explored to engage with new intersectarian religious movements, such as the al-Dai'i al-Rabbani from Diyala and the Kaznazani Sufi brotherhood. Such efforts could present a further opportunity to partner with groups already dealing with intrafaith tensions. Another possibility, when sermons are unified by the governmental bodies such as the Ministry of Religious Affairs or the Sunni or Shia endowments, would be to work with these institutions to encourage messages of peace, tolerance, respect, and reconciliation, in ways that will not constrain freedoms of expression or religion. Partnering with major religious networks can be constructive, especially those engaged in social services, to also integrate programming on tolerance, respect, social cohesion, and reconciliation. Opportunities to work with them on building trust between religious communities post-ISIS may also be possible.

A final option would be to create an institutionalized mechanism that allows and enables Iraqi citizens to have a say in who represents them in national- and local-level reconciliation dialogues. Such representatives include not only religious actors but also tribal leaders and representatives of civil society, economic society, and political society.

Notes

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Religious actors across traditions in Iraq continue to wield considerable influence and are perceived to have a role in moving the country toward peace. Involving them in reconciliation does not of course guarantee success, but excluding them seems certain to guarantee failure. Religious minorities are a critical piece of this puzzle, and addressing the challenges they face is essential to advancing multifaith peace efforts and reconciliation. Drawing from established methodology to map the religious landscape in conflict-affected states and a rigorous combination of field research, expert consultations, and a review of secondary literature, this report analyzes the influence of religious actors in Iraq—who has it, why they have it, and how they exercise it—to illuminate the crucial role they can play.

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