

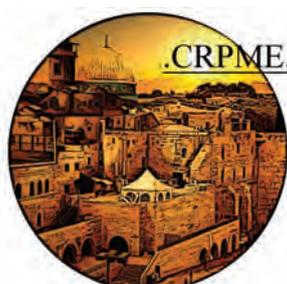


UNTYING THE KNOTS Of RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY IN IRAQI KURDISTAN:

Deploying Pluralism against Barbarism

REPORT 2016 – II – SPECIAL REPORT

CENTRE FOR RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN THE MIDDLE EAST- CRPME



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Executive Summary

- Beside the threat of ISIS, Iraqi Kurdistan is facing deep political and economic crisis that have negative implications on religious pluralism, particularly, in the face of uncertainty after the liberation of Mosul and the broader region of Nineveh.
- The work of KRG and, more specifically, the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, in conjunction with various initiatives from representatives of different communities in the Ministry are noteworthy. Law 5 of 2015 for the ‘Protection of the Components [Minorities] of Kurdistan’ is one of the fruits of their efforts. This promising, albeit limited, work shows the intention of KRG to create an environment of religious tolerance, which (will) distinguish it from the rest of Iraq and the wider region. This view, however, is not always shared by the politico-religious leadership and the members of the communities, who often portray these changes as merely cosmetic.
- The religious and ethnic communities are alarmingly fragmented and are mired by inner-communal disagreements. The divide is not only across religious/doctrinal lines, but also political ones. A basic factor is the polarization driven by the conflict between KRG and the central government of Iraq.
- The research team noted the phenomenon of militarization of the communities, as a result of the aforementioned polarization. With the exception of Zoroastrians and Jews, all the other communities have established military units or militias to fight against ISIS, either on KRG’s side or the central government’s side. Given that these militias do not intend to disband after the ousting of ISIS, they will play an important role in the Erbil-Baghdad rivalry. Meanwhile, the Yazidi, Shabak and Turkmen communities are highly likely to be driven into conflict.
- In the case of the Christian community, the religious leadership opposes militarization, as it deems that the protection of Christians is the mandate of the official state authorities. In addition, the religious leadership has been accused of having a ‘passive’ stance, an accusation, which together with its opposition to the arming of Christians, has engendered a rift between the political and the religious leadership.
- Particularly vulnerable are the over 2 million refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Iraqi Kurdistan, whose population is estimated to be 5 million. The refugees and IDPs seem to be affected by the aid budget reductions, but they are also at risk of drawing the hostility of the host community, who might consider them passive recipients of governmental assistance.

- The return of IDPs is a thorny issue, not only because of the possible revenge attacks, but also due to the total destruction of some regions. The lack of resources and, in some cases, the lack of willingness to reconstruct the regions renders the return of IDPs a point of contention. In this context, the emigration flows are expected to increase significantly, particularly among the Christian and the Yazidi communities.
- The cooperation between the communities is rudimentary. The initiatives for dialogue are limited both between the communities and within each community, either because dialogue comes second in the urgency of fighting ISIS or because similar initiatives have failed in the past. In general, the communities seem to promote their interests separately from each other and, at times, at expense of each other, particularly when it comes to the issue of the autonomous zone in the Nineveh region.
- Cooperation and dialogue is of significant importance in the context of discussions for the creation of an autonomous zone in the Nineveh region, an idea that is very popular among the Christian, Yazidi, Shabak and Turkmen communities. Nevertheless, while the majority supports the idea, they seem to lack a clear and common plan vis-a-vis the status of the autonomous zone, whether it will be under the administrative control of KRG or the central government, the role of the international community and the specific arrangements for the coexistence between the different communities.
- While the idea of creating an autonomous zone for the religious minorities has an overall positive reception, the scenario of a Sunni autonomous zone is treated with skepticism. Except from some Sunnis, the only other external supporter of this scenario is Turkey. In any case, the odds for such a scenario to materialize are poor, given the suspicion towards the Sunni community.
- The notion of distrust and fear of the ‘other’ is rampant, especially against Arab Sunni Muslims and Sunni Muslims in general. Although there is a distinction – at least on a rhetorical level – between the Arab Sunni Muslims who fled and those who stayed and allied themselves with the ‘Islamic State’, the majority does not want to continue living next to Arab Sunni Muslims. Given the lack of a central command over the various armed groups, and the fact that there is no plan to bring those responsible to justice, revenge attacks will probably be inevitable. These acts of revenge may even occur against members of the same community, especially in the case of Turkmen.

Scope and Methodology

The field research was conducted before the start of the operation for the liberation of Mosul. During the field research, CRPME research team had broad discussions and conducted 45 official interviews, with the political, the religious and the military leadership of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and the respective communities, academia, media and civil society organizations. Moreover, 6 further interviews were conducted via skype or telephone, with persons who were residing outside of Iraqi Kurdistan (e.g. Baghdad). The research team visited Erbil, Dohuk, Alqosh, Lalesh and an IDP camp, Dawdia, in the Amedi region.

The aim of the research is to provide a better understanding of the dynamics of religious pluralism and coexistence in Iraq and, particularly, in Iraqi Kurdistan. The research team examined the notion of peaceful coexistence and pluralism, focusing on of the Christian, Yazidi, Shabak, Yarsan (Kakai), Zoroastrian, Turkmen, and Jewish communities. With the impact of ISIS threat as a starting point, the research delves into the questions of forgiveness and trust and the lasting impact of the intercommunal grievances currently and in the post-ISIS era. Additionally, the research studies these questions along the axes of the growing number of militias, fueling the increasing ‘decentralization’ of the monopoly of violence, and the ubiquitous rivalry between Erbil and Baghdad, which brings the aforementioned communities in the eye of the ‘disputed areas’ storm. By the same token, the research poses the question of whether the ‘disputed geography’ contests pluralism in Nineveh by default and what are the realistic options that might halt and reverse the dwindling pluralism.

Interviewees

The conducted interviews covered a wide range of experts from the political, religious and military leadership of Iraqi Kurdistan, civil society, as well as members of the religious communities and academics. On a governmental level, the research team met with the spokesman of KRG, Safeen Dizayee. In addition, they visited the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs and met with the Ministry's spokesman, Mariwan Naqshbandy, and with the representatives from the Jewish (Sherzad Omer Mamsani), the Christian (Omed Mansory, replacing Albert Khalid, who was outside Kurdistan), Baha'i (Sarmad Moqbel Keykhosro), Zoroastrian (Awat Tayib) and Mandaean (Khalid A. Roomi) communities. During the visit in Dohuk, the research team visited the Board of Relief and Humanitarian Affairs (BRHA), the governmental service responsible for the humanitarian aid for refugees and IDPs, where they had the opportunity to interview the head of BRHA, Ismail Mohamed Ahmed, the program manager, Laylan Mohammed Saleh, and the public relations manager, Salam Taher. Additionally, the research team visited Dawdia camp; a camp where IDPs from different communities live together. Upon their visit to the Dawdia camp, the research team had the opportunity to gain a direct insight into the experience of coexistence and the initiatives of social cohesion by interviewing some representatives of the communities, such as Khalef Rasho Yunis (Yazidi) and Samir Pauls Mansour (Christian), but also IDP families from different communities.

In an effort to talk with as many people as possible from all the religious components, the research team conducted interviews with influential members of the communities and community-focused and local NGOs that advocate for the rights of the communities and promote coexistence. For the issues that concern the Yazidi community, the research team visited the Holy town of the Yazidis, Lalesh, where they discussed with the religious leader of the Yazidi community, Baba Sheikh, and the official spokesperson of the Yazidis, Hadi Baba Sheikh. Moreover, the research team visited the offices of Yazda organization, where they discussed with the Manager of Operations, Jameel Chomer, and the deputy-director of the office in Iraq, Daria Wadsworth, about the situation of the Yazidis. A similar meeting took place in the offices of the organization Azidi Solidarity and Fraternity League (ASFL), where interviews were conducted with the director of the organization, Dloufan Hason Samou, the coordinator of culture programs and information, Uday Hassan Khadr, and the coordinator of financial affairs, Saffa Salou Abdal. Meanwhile, a separate interview was conducted with the manager of the youth program, Azad Darwish Hassan, and researchers of the organization, who focus on collecting the accounts of Yazidi survivors. The research team also met with two significant members of the Yazidi community, Ido Baba Sheikh, a former MP in the Iraqi Parliament, and the author Shamadeen Barani.

In regards to the Christian community, the research team conducted a large number of interviews, in an effort to understand and trace the multitude of voices within the community. The research team met with the main Christian parties in the region. More specifically, they visited the offices of the Assyrian Patriotic Party in Dohuk, where the research team met with Emmanuel Khoshaba Yohanna, General Secretary of the party and Commander-in-Chief of Dwekh Nawsha militia. Similar visits took place in the offices of the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM) in Erbil, where they met with the member of the central committee of the party, Idris Mirza, and discussed with Zaia Rasho Yawoo. The team also met with the President of the Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council, Shams Al-Deen Gewargis and with General Amer Chamun, the Commander of the Protection Forces of Nineveh Plains (NPGF), which is part of the aforementioned party. During their visit in Alqosh, the research team visited the training camp of the Nineveh Protection Units (NPU), which operates under the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM), and interviewed General Behnam Abbush, Commander of the NPU, and Athra Kado, manager of public relations of NPU. In addition, during the visit to the Christian town Alqosh, the research team discussed extensively with the manager of public relations of the Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council, Ghazwan Elias; with the head of the Kurdistan Democratic Party in Alqosh, Najeeb Khabaz; with the head of the Chaldean Democratic Party in Alqosh, Atheer Giliana, and members of the Communist Party of Iraq. Moreover, the research team visited the Monastery Rabban Hormizd and the Monastery Notre Dame des Semences, where they discussed with Father Gabriel Waheed Gorges Tooma, head of the monastery; Father Salar Kajo, legal counsel of the Bishopric of the Chaldean Catholic Church and Father Aram Romel, manager of the New Hope Trauma Center of Iraq. On a religious leadership level, the team met with the Armenian Archbishop Avag Asatourian, who is also the General Secretary of the Council of Leaders of Christian Churches in Iraq.

The research team, also, had the opportunity to meet with members of the Yarsan (Kakai), Shabak and Turkmen communities. More specifically, the research team interviewed (Pir) Liza Falakadin Kakei, leader of the Yarsan (Kakai) community and member of the National Affairs Office of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, and her advisor (General) Luqman Rashid Kakei. From the Shabak community, the research team met with Husein Z. Ali Al-Shabake, head of the Justice Organization for Minorities Rights (JOMR), and conducted a skype interview with Dr. Hunain Mahmood Al-Qaddo, who is a member of the Iraqi Parliament and Director of the Iraqi Minorities Council. The research team discussed with the activist Himan Mahmood, and conducted a skype interview with Dr. Ali Akram Al Bayati, director of the Turkmen Rescue Foundation, on the issue of Turkmens. A similar skype interview was conducted with the vice-president of the European Jewish Congress and member of the Executive Board of Deputies of

British Jews, Edwin Shuker, who is of Iraqi descent and actively promotes the preservation of the connection of the Iraqi Jewish diaspora with Iraq.

Aiming to gain a more well-rounded perspective of religious pluralism in the region and to include the non-dominant voices, the research team conducted interviews with figures from the broader political arena, academics and journalists. In this framework, the research team interviewed Nori Brimo, member of the Central Committee of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Syria; Dara Khailany, the economic advisor of the regional government and member of the second biggest party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Furthermore, the team had an extensive interview about the trends within the Islamic schools of thought in Iraqi Kurdistan with Abdul Rahman Saddeeq, who is a former Minister of Environment of Iraq and former high-ranking figure in the main Islamic party of Kurdistan, the Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU). Saddeeq is head of the NGO PRD (Project for Reform and Development), while he also presents the TV show *Be Kurdi* (In Kurdish), often promoting interreligious dialogue and touching upon issues of religious coexistence. During the visit in Erbil, the research team visited the offices of one of the largest media outlet in Kurdistan, Rudaw, and interviewed the editor-in-chief of Rudaw English, Ayub Nuri. Similarly, an interview was conducted with the editor-in-chief of the Assyrian International News Agency (AINA), Peter BetBasoo.

The research team also pursued further contacts with experts in local organizations, research centers and academics, who possess erudite and/or empirical knowledge on issues of religious pluralism. CRPME team interviewed Peshkawt Adham, director of Al-Mesalla Human Resources Development Center - an NGO that focuses on refugees and IDPs and, particularly, on youth and women; Abdul Salam Madeni, president of the Rwanga Foundation – an organization that focuses on education; Kheidher Domle (via skype), who is a renowned expert on the role of media and minority issues in Iraq and, particularly, in Kurdistan, and is a member of Reconstruction of Peace and Conflict Resolution Centre in the University of Dohuk. Moreover, the research team met in Erbil with Dave van Zoonen, Research Fellow at the Middle East Research Institute (MERI), to discuss the issue of minorities and pluralism. From the academic community, the team conducted interviews with Professor Muslih Mirani of the American University of Dohuk and Professor Rashid Miran of the Salahaddin University, but also with Professor Saad Salloum, via Skype, of the Mustansiriya University in Baghdad. Salloum, who is also the coordinator of the MASARAT Centre and founder of the Iraqi Council for Interfaith Dialogue, is considered a leading expert on religious and ethnic minorities in Iraq.

Religious pluralism in Iraqi Kurdistan

An evaluation of the status of religious pluralism in Iraqi Kurdistan can be comprehensive only if one takes into account that, beside the threat of ISIS, KRG is experiencing a political and financial crisis. President Barzani's term should have ended in August 19, 2015. The refusal of the Kurdish President Mahmood Barzani to step down until, as he said, Kurdistan achieves independence, has aggravated the political situation in the region.¹ In an effort to prevent the Kurdish Parliament from declaring Presidential elections, the Kurdish Parliament was prevented from convening since October 2015. The political crisis comes amidst a deep financial crisis. According to the government officials, the budget cuts from the central government and the drop of oil prices, as well as the uncertainty created by the presence of ISIS to foreign investors, has contributed gravely to the financial crisis. Nevertheless, unofficial sources claim that Iraqi Kurdistan has enough resources to recover from this crisis, if it were not for the corruption and clientalism that shrouds the tribal Kurdish politics, society and, by extension, the economy of Iraqi Kurdistan. From the beginning of 2016, there are delays in the salaries of public servants, including the soldiers of Peshmerga, who usually have priority. Along with the social turmoil caused by the delay of the salaries and the reduction of wages, the limited financial resources of KRG are endangering the social peace in Iraqi Kurdistan; mainly because it allows the prevalence of perceptions that view other communities as disproportionately favored.

Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), who according to the spokesman of KRG, Safeen Dizayee, number around 1.8 million, that is 30% increase of the Iraqi Kurdistan's total population, face the highest risk. The refugees and IDPs seem to be affected by the aid budget reduction, but they are also at risk of being considered as passive recipients of governmental assistance. The perception that 'the living conditions of the IDPs/refugees, are better than the living conditions of the host community, not to mention that they are free of charge', as the project manager of BRHA, Laylan Mohammed Saleh pointed out, might become an issue of contention as the cost of relief mounts. According to Dizayee, the annual cost of relief response is 1.4 billion dollars, bringing the government and the host community on the verge of exhaustion. Dizayee admits that given the economic crisis and the expected increase of demand in relief provisions in the wake of the liberation of Mosul, 'KRG will be able to provide more'. He further adds that although the international community has helped, 'what has been provided is not to the same magnitude or scale of the crisis'.

BRHA officials, who are operating in Dohuk province, paint a similarly daunting picture. According to the head of BRHA, Ismail Mohamed Ahmed,

¹ Rudaw, 'Barzani: I will not stand in next presidential elections', 14/7/2016, <http://rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/140720162>

Dohuk alone hosts 700,000 people, which constitutes more than 60% of the population. Only 190,000 people live in the 22 camps (18 for IDPs and 4 for refugees) that exist in Dohuk.² The rest of IDP/refugee population has found shelter outside the camps, increasing, thus, the pressure on the host community. Ismail Mohamed Ahmed pointed out that while ‘in the beginning, the host community in Dohuk opened their hearts even before opening their doors to the IDPs and the refugees [...] one of the greatest challenges was the services. For example, from the beginning of the crisis until up to August 2016, 1,850,000 IDPs/refugees visited the hospitals of Dohuk. [Similar challenges exist with] water and electricity’. According to Dizayee, there is a 60% increase in electricity demand. The schooling system is also facing challenges, as there are around 60,000 IDP/refugee students. Ismail Mohamed Ahmed stated that more than 680 schools were opened for the IDPs and refugees in Dohuk. However, according to Abdul Salam Madeni, president of the Rwanga Foundation, given that the Ministry of Education admits that there is a shortage of 3000 school for the local community, the shortage is much bigger for the IDP/refugee population.

The problems will be greater in the aftermath of the liberation of Mosul. From the point of view of Husein Z. Ali Al-Shabake, who is an IDP himself, 70-75% of the problems in Nineveh could be solved if, first, the *orderly* return of IDPs could be ensured; second, a generous compensation could be given to the IDPs and, third, the people who joined ISIS be brought to justice. The government will have to face the costs of reconstructing the homes of IDPs in order for them to return, while dealing with the tensions that are highly likely to emerge between the communities. However, there are no clear plans nor the financial resources for the reconstruction of the region and the support for IDPs. In any case, the return of IDPs to their homes is a much more complex issue. It should be taken into consideration that the radical change in the lives of IDPs cannot simply go back to ‘normal’. As Dara Khailany, the economic advisor of KRG and member of the second biggest party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), highlighted, ‘those who were employed in agriculture, now are dependent on a monthly government-provided income and they become consumers instead of producers. Also the longer it takes to go back, it will be harder for their sons and daughters to accommodate to their lives in their original villages’.

Bringing those responsible to justice is a common plea across all the communities, as it is the ultimate prerequisite for both inter-communal and intra-communal reconciliation. Jameel Chomer, Manager of Operations of Yazda in Iraq, summarizes the urgency and necessity of accountability saying that ‘if those Sunni tribes around Sinjar, whose members participated in enslaving the women, killing those people, looting the area, participated in bringing those people to justice, then

² Another 5 camps have been built on the borders of Dohuk province to host the IDPs from the operation of Mosul.

we can talk about a kind of reconciliation. If this doesn't happen, it is very hard to talk about coexistence'. However, as Jameel Chomer complains, the Sunni parties refuse to assume responsibility, claiming that the suffering has befallen upon all Iraqis and not specific communities, and fail to advocate the punishment of Sunnis who collaborated with ISIS. The Sunni tribal leaders, who have members that participated in ISIS atrocities, are equally hesitant to provide lists of their members and generally refrain from openly condemning ISIS. On this note, official spokesperson of the Yazidis, Hadi Baba Sheikh identified specific tribes that fall into this category, 'not one [member of] Khatuni [tribe] is innocent. And [Al-Bu] Mitaywit neither, and 90% of Al-Ubaid. The other tribes have people among them that have helped the Yazidis'.³ Whereas, the leaders of Sunni tribes, such as the Shammar and the Jarba tribes, whose members did not collaborate with ISIS, are more keen on condemning it. For example, the Jarba tribe held a press conference where they apologized and stated that they have no relationship with ISIS and what they did to the Yazidis. Dave van Zoonen, Research Fellow at MERI, posits that the tribes and security components in Iraq, have lists of names of the people who joined ISIS; nevertheless, the idea of merging them was never implemented. Tribal leaders' unwillingness to contribute to bringing justice to the victims and the lack of cooperation between different security components, might render the collective punishment of the Sunni (either Arab or not Arab) population is highly probable, if not inevitable, in the near future.

There already is a strong anti-Sunni discourse among the non-Sunni communities in Iraqi Kurdistan. Although, a distinction is made between the Sunni Muslims who fled and those who stayed and allied themselves – directly or indirectly – with ISIS, in general, there is the perception that ISIS expresses the true Sunni Islam. During the team's visit to the MERI Center, CRPME was informed of cases of Sunnis who helped others escape and were subsequently killed by ISIS for that; yet, Dave van Zoonen added that these stories are not highlighted enough to reduce distrust in intra and inter-community relations. Some would make a distinction between Sunni and Shia Islam, not only because ISIS emerged from the Sunni milieu but also because Shia religious leaders have spoken in favor of the victims. A case in point is Ayatollah Sistani's announcement in the wake of ISIS atrocities in which he called for solidarity towards the Yazidis, Shabak and Christians in Nineveh, who are 'our brothers and sisters'. In any case, most claimed that dialogue and coexistence is impossible unless Islam and, particularly, Sunni Islam, reforms its doctrine.

In this context, the Sunni Kurdish community is putting every effort to differentiate and distance itself from ISIS and by extension the Arab Sunni community. Although Kurds do not deny that there are some members of the

³ Another tribe that is known to have many ISIS members is the Gargari tribe.

community that joined ISIS, they postulate that in general radical Islam is foreign to the Kurdish society. There is no doubt that Salafi ideas have reached Iraqi Kurdistan. Kheider Domle, minorities expert and Yazidi activist, points out that there are some channels that openly promote hate speech against non-Sunni Muslims. He particularly, mentions the Salafi TV show of Dr. Abdul Latif. Abdul Rahman Saddeeq, head of PRD, explains that this ‘Shadow Islam’ expressed by the Salafis, which promotes the idea that everyone that does not follow their school of thought are *Kafir*, will generate division within the society, especially, in the future it will affect the peacefulness of society. Nevertheless, as Safeen Dizayee claims, ‘throughout the Middle East and throughout the world there is an increase of radicalism and Kurdistan is not immune to that. However, radicalism doesn’t have roots like what you might see in Afghanistan or Pakistan. There may be some sympathy towards radicalism, however, we’ve been able to pinpoint them and make sure that they don’t have a negative impact on the community’. In the same vein, Abdul Rahman Saddeeq suggests that the Kurdish Islam is a Sufi Islam, as Kurds ‘believe in an internal [introvert] way; they believe in righteousness (Al-Haq), goodness and beauty; not in an extrovert way; women are not forced to wear Hijab and you can see this in our Ministry, unlike Baghdad’.

KRG is actively promoting the image of an open and pluralistic society. Posing as the sole protector of religious communities in Iraq, KRG is strengthening further the long-term process of de-arabization in the context of the rivalry with the central government. Undoubtedly, there have been some positive initiatives; the most important being Law 5 of 2015 for the ‘Protection of the Components [Minorities] of Kurdistan’, which recognizes Turkmen, Chaldeans-Syriacs-Assyrians and Armenians as ethnic components and Christians, Yazidis, Mandaeans, Kakais, Shabaks, Failis, Zoroastrians and others as religious components, who enjoy protection and equal rights in Iraqi Kurdistan. Notably, Law 5 provides the ability to legally claim the confiscated property in the context of religious persecution. The spokesman of the Ministry of Endowments, Mariwan Naqshbandy, who is a Sufi Muslim, mentioned that this Law triggered reactions from some Muslim clergy in Iraqi Kurdistan, as it allowed the Christians and Jews that left the country to claim their properties. In response to these reactions, the Ministry issued a Fatwa that justified Law 5 based on Sharia Law.

Most importantly, Law 5 consolidates the institutional representation of all the religions in the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs. This suggests that KRG, despite the intense reactions for the inclusion of the Baha’i, Zoroastrian and Jewish representatives, is fully committed to create a friendly environment for all religions. In the framework of creating an environment of religious tolerance, imams who promoted hate speech in their sermons have been dismissed from their positions. In addition, Mariwan Naqshbandy stated that his office has drafted a law proposal on two important issues: the removal of the word *endowments* from the

ministry's title (in 2007 it was renamed to Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs from Ministry from Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs) and the safeguarding of the freedom of religion, given that converting from Islam to another religion is considered a crime. The proposal will be submitted once the Parliament re-convenes.

Another issue that the Ministry considers vital for ensuring freedom of religion is the religion tag on the identity cards. Freedom of religion implies the right and protection not only of those who consciously wish to change their religion and are in danger of being considered apostates (Muslims who wish to follow another faith), but also those who were forced to convert to Islam or converted out of fear and wish to return to their previous faith, as well as those who follow one religion, but in their identity cards are referred to as Muslims. This mainly applies to Baha'is (95% of whom are registered as Muslims), Zoroastrians and Yarsan (Kakais). The removal of the religion tag from the ID is in the future plans of the Ministry. Mariwan Naqshbandy, noted that this measure would reduce tensions within the society; however, he added that it is too soon to proceed with such a proposal, given that the majority of the parties in the Parliament would not support it.

The notion of *bad timing* has been brought up on numerous occasions. Safeen Dizayee posited that 'you can't bring radical reforms in a short period of time when the society is not ready. You have to educate the society'. Abdul Rahman Saddeeq puts forward a similar argument in regards to the prospect of the separation of religion and the state, saying 'I cannot say that now is the right time or not to decide; even politicians will not impose their will in expense of votes, so they need the society to be ready'. By the same token, Peshkawt Adham, Executive Director of Al-Mesalla, claims that only 20% of the society would support such a notion, and while the leaders of KDP and PUK, want a secular state, they do not promote such an agenda because they are afraid of losing support.

Despite the slow progress, the representatives of the communities in the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs spoke highly of KRG's efforts and, particularly, of the Ministry's. They noted that the status of pluralism has improved, even their relations with the Muslim religious leadership. They highlighted the numerous symbolic initiatives, such common prayers, the participation in the UN National Day of Tolerance and the attendance of the representatives in celebrations and events of each community. The representatives underlined that Iraqi Kurdistan, as opposed to the rest of Iraq and the rest of the region, has always been friendlier to religious minorities, even before Law 5. To some extent, this cannot be denied given that a large portion of the minorities population have migrated to Iraqi Kurdistan from the rest of Iraq.

Conversely, members of the religious communities, outside the Ministry, repeatedly expressed their suspicions towards these initiatives, as they have not

brought substantial changes on the ground, especially with regards to the discrimination they face from Muslims. According to Saad Salloum, coordinator of the MASARAT Centre, the situation of the minorities has not improved. Other liberal initiatives as well, such as prohibiting polygamy and combating violence against women, are perceived with wariness, because they are linked and associated with President Mahmood Barzani personally. This personality-centered political system explains the slow-paced changes on a societal level, but what is raising even more concerns, among the members of the religious communities, is the uncertain future of the freedom of religion and pluralism in a post-Barzani era.

On civil society level, there have been some noteworthy initiatives from local NGOs and experts. These efforts are mainly directed towards changing the perception of the youth. As Abdel Rahman Madeni puts it ‘the ideas we plant in their minds will affect their perception and the type of future tomorrow’. These initiatives aim to bring down and vitiate the stereotypes on each community by bringing together and creating a space for dialogue between the communities. Furthermore, according to Peshkawt Adham, Al-Mesalla is encouraging youths from different communities to conduct research on issues of pluralism and diversity. The civil society initiatives include youth from the Sunni milieu as well. Other initiatives put forth by Kheider Domle, aim at educating civil servants and journalists on the issue of minorities.

Despite these positive initiatives, uncertainty remains dominant and affects the way people perceive their future in the country, especially the religious and ethnic minorities. Many political and religious leaders discussed the mass ‘exodus’ of members of their communities and numerous people expressed their desire to leave the country. The Yazidi and Christian communities seem to be more affected by this trend. Even the other communities that showed ‘more willingness’ to stay in Iraq, the reason is either because they have nowhere to go or they believe that they are not welcome in the West, like Yazidis and Christians are. The migration trend is also determined by the place of origin. The ‘willingness’ is stronger among the IDPs that are from areas that ISIS completely destroyed, e.g. Sinjar, and/or other areas with mixed populations that a portion of the Sunni Muslim inhabitants participated in the atrocities of ISIS.

In this context, another phenomenon with extremely dire consequences on religious pluralism is emerging. Many missionary (mainly Evangelical) groups have mushroomed, taking advantage of the insecurity and the desperation of the people. The aggressive proselytization targets the vulnerable people, mainly IDPs regardless of their religion. In exchange, these missionary teams offer basic goods or –concealed- assistance to leave the country. Although Abdul Rahman Saddeeq claims that their efforts are largely unsuccessful, the Armenian Archbishop Avag Asatourian, who is also the general secretary of the Council of Christian Church

Leaders, appears more concerned claiming that these groups that first appeared after 2003, have managed to ‘create pockets of new Christians in Erbil and even in Karbala’, targeting mainly Christians but also Muslims. Interestingly, it has been confirmed unofficially by many sources, that these missionary groups are operating with Barzani’s and KRG’s consent. If one takes into account that, as Father Salar Kajo, legal counsel of the Bishopric of the Chaldean Catholic Church, says, the native churches do not have the liberty to evangelize, this policy of double-standards, if actually is true, is posed to create further distrust among minorities.

An additional feature that bears wider and long-term repercussions is the phenomenon of militarization of the society and the socio-political discourse. Undoubtedly, militarization stems from the war against ISIS, since of a large portion of the population has joined Peshmerga either as volunteers or part-time fighters. By extension, the glorification of the Peshmerga and the military power in general encompasses the society as a whole. This trend equally affects almost all other ethnic religious communities. As a result, many have joined Peshmerga or have formed militias or units operating either under Peshmerga or under the central government. At the same time, a securitized discourse has become prevalent among sections of the society and the political (yet not always the religious) leadership that views military power as fundamental for the security of the religious and ethnic communities. On the other hand, scholars have expressed their reservations regarding the possible long-term consequences of militarization. Saad Salloum, has posited that although the minorities have the right to fight for their lands, ‘militarization may lead to a future civil war’, especially in the context of the Erbil-Baghdad polarization, in the post-Mosul liberation era.

Some claim that security and trust can only be restored with an autonomous zone in the Nineveh Plains, where religious and ethnic minorities will enjoy a certain level of self-administration. However, the fact that the territory of the proposed governorate lays on the disputed territories, brings these minorities in the epicenter of the Erbil-Baghdad rivalry. At the same time, the minorities seem to lack a common vision regarding the status of the autonomous zone; from whether there will be an autonomous zone that will include Sinjar, Tel Afar and the remaining Nineveh Plains, or three separate governorates to whether it will be under the control of either KRG or the central government. In this context, each community appears entrenched within the confines of its religious and/or ethnic character, which is occasionally dissected along political or denominational lines drawn by both the aforementioned militarization and the Erbil-Baghdad rivalry. Consequently, this entrenchment daunts the development of dialogue and cooperation within and between different communities, rendering the cause of the non-dominant communities weaker and more vulnerable. This provides a further indication that a separate Nineveh Plains province is not a magical remedy for all the problems, unless there is a thorough and open discussion between the

communities of the region about their aspirations, fears and doubts. The research team was told that a neutral environment and the mediation of external parties or governments, that are not directly involved in the unfolding conflicts, could offer a space for dialogue. However, they did not seem inclined to include the Sunni Muslims, unless there is a reform in the Sunni doctrine. In turn, this perception indicates that the broad-spectrum mistrust and fear, which is further empowered by the emergence of ISIS, will require long and persistent efforts to undo.

Christians

The Christian community in Iraq, comprising of 14 denominations, has been decimated, since 2003. Even before ISIS stormed the Nineveh Plains, out of the 1.4 million Christians in 2003, two-thirds had already left the country. Since 2014, approximately 200,000 Christians have been displaced from Mosul and other urban centers of the broader Nineveh region that came under ISIS control. Currently, the Christian population has dropped to just 275,000 and is expected to further decrease in the future.

The Christian community in Iraqi Kurdistan is marred by deep intercommunal disagreements and appears highly divided. The first dividing line rests on the self-identification of part of the community as Assyrians, putting forward the idea that all Christians in Iraq are ethnic Assyrian. The leading proponents of this view are the Assyrian Patriotic Party and the Assyrian Democratic Movement. In contrast, many Christians, mainly Chaldeans, put forward their religious identity and accuse the former of attempting to impose on them an ethnic identity that they do not espouse. The main political force behind this belief is the Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council. The second intra-Christian division derives from the polarization between KRG and the central government of Iraq, bringing the Assyrian Democratic Movement on the side of Baghdad and the Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council on the side of Erbil.

In fact, all the religious communities in Iraq are put in a position where they have to pick a side, an imposed *decision* with significant political, economic and military ramifications. For example, some Christian parties feel that the parties that align themselves with KRG have a special treatment. To some extent, the Kurdish government seems to actively try to influence some of the Christian parties by offering financial aid and support for the militias that operate under them. Although there is no proof for such practice, the parties that lean towards KRG appear to have more resources.

Even though, overall the Christian militias enjoy more autonomy and, thus, have a more favorable position compared to other community-orientated militias, their *choice* between Erbil and Baghdad has implications on the size and nature of the military force, its logistical sufficiency, as well as its freedom of movement. For example, the commander of NPU (affiliated with the Assyrian Democratic Movement), General Behnam Abbush, has described the difficulties he faced in order to cover the logistical needs of his soldiers and the 'political pressures' that were exerted so that the NPU forces would not exceed 300 men. On the contrary, NPGF (affiliated with the Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council) does not seem to face such restrictions and its soldiers seem to be better compensated. NPGF is not involved in active combat and, as their Commander, General Amer Chamun,

admitted, its mandate is limited to the protection of the churches and the force generally assumes a defensive operational posture.

These divides within the Christian community, which are partly fueled by the antagonism between KRG and the central government, will have significant implications in the aftermath of Mosul's liberation. It is worth noting that all the Christians excluded the possibility of involvement in military operations beyond their territories. However, the fact that some Christian areas are part of the so-called 'disputed territories' will undoubtedly amplify the pressures from the central government and KRG. Although everyone without exception rejected the possibility of clashes between Christian forces, in the context of a proxy war between Erbil and Baghdad, a further widening of the gap within the community cannot be ruled out.

The majority of the Christian political forces that favored the creation of militias were against the possibility of disbanding the militias in a post-ISIS era, aspiring to transform them into a permanent police or military force, operating under one of the two centers of power. The presence of such force is seen as a safeguard for the future and a prerequisite for the return of stability and security in the region. As General Secretary of APP and Commander-in-Chief of Dwekh Nawsha, Emmanuel Khoshaba Yohanna, put it: 'without an organized force we don't have any right in this new Iraq, this the new reality'. The spokesman of KRG, Safeen Dizayee, seemed positive towards the idea claiming that 'security of the local population has to be provided by the local people themselves, [who will be] recruit[ed] in the police force, military units or security apparatus so that they would be able to provide security for their population'. However, it was not clear to what extent the Kurdish authorities, or the authorities of the central government respectively, will wish to control these forces and how they will react if these forces choose to cooperate with the opposite side or claim their independence. These fears were echoed in the statement of the manager of public relations of NPU, Athra Kado, who expressed his fear that NPU will be presented with the ultimatum to 'either work with KRG 100% or be crushed'.

The idea of a separate Christian security force is directly linked to the debate around the creation of an autonomous Christian zone in the Nineveh Plains. Although, the idea finds most Christian parties in agreement, they seem to lack a common vision regarding the form and the particular status of the zone. The Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council envisions an autonomous zone within KRG. The representative of the Chaldean Democratic Party in Alqosh, reiterated this view by saying 'we want a governorate, but with KRG because all persecutions [against Christians] have come from the central government'. Yet, he also added that in any case international protection is welcome. In the same vein, the Assyrian Patriotic Party showed a clear preference towards international protection,

demonstrating, however, the lack of trust for both Erbil and Baghdad. In the words of Emmanuel Khoshaba Yohanna, ‘some of them [Christians] say Baghdad is more useful for us, others say KRG is more useful. We as APP, we say why we have to choose our master, why we can’t be the master of ourselves’. International protection is not rejected, as a transitional phase, by the Assyrian Democratic Movement, which is one of the few Christian political parties, that is rather hesitant towards the idea of an autonomous zone, as it considers the Christian areas an inseparable part of Iraq. However, members of the Assyrian Democratic Movement expressed their readiness to accept such an outcome in the event that it is supported by the majority of Christians in the referendum that is supposed to take place to decide the future of the disputed areas.

International protection features high in the discourse of the religious figures as well, who tend to link it with the ongoing exodus of Christians from the country. Father Gabriel Waheed Gorges Tooma, head of the Chaldean Catholic monastery of Hormisdas, sees international protection as a guarantee for the future because ‘today we have ISIS, yesterday was Baath, tomorrow will be others’ and believes that ‘if international protection is offered, many people will come back’. The Armenian Archbishop, Avag Asatourian, offers a more pessimistic reading of the future of Christianity in the region, expressing his fear that the international protection is ‘a little too late’ to save the Christian presence in Iraq.

The religious leadership mirrors the disagreements and lack of common vision that is evident among the political forces. As Father Gabriel Tooma pointedly remarks: ‘there are no two Churches in all Iraq that are in agreement... There are no two priests that are in agreement’. Moreover, the stance of the religious leadership on some issues, such as the militarization of Christians, often diverges significantly from that of the political parties. This has allowed accusations that the religious leadership has adopted a rather passive stance, while the community endures devastating blows. The Editor-in-Chief of AINA, Peter BetBasoo, summarizes this point claiming that ‘the religious leaders have been mostly irresponsible, a detriment to the progress of securing the Assyrian rights in Iraq’.

For instance, the religious leadership generally opposes the militarization of the Christian community. The main argument is that the protection of Christians is and should be the responsibility of the central government or KRG, while self-protection units can only put Christians in more danger and drag the community into the conflicts of others. As Father Gabriel Tooma, puts it: ‘the units we have as Christians are not enough. You cannot compare these units with the forces of Peshmerga or the soldiers of the Central government. Our weapons are old; we don’t have the advantages like Kurdistan or Iraq; and if we attain the [military] power, we will enter in the conflict between Arabs, and Kurds and the cost will be high’. These views are echoed in the comments of the Armenian Archbishop, who

remarks that: ‘the central government should be strong and weapons have to be in the hands of the government... People should not take up arms because they will lose... Bearing arms can offer momentary advantage (protect a village) but it is not a viable long-term option because such a force would need arms, money, training and some other government will provide that but it will make them dependent on it’.

By the same token, the religious leadership expresses reservations or even rejects the prospect of an autonomous zone, opting instead for a unified and strong Iraqi state. Father Gabriel Tooma disregards the whole discussion as ‘only talk’ and asks rhetorically: ‘Did we make Baghdad a secure place, so that we make a region for Christians? Did we secure KRG from Turkey and Iran, so that we make a region for Christians? Did we make Syria safe? Or Christians in Iran, and other countries... These are all dreams that will take time to materialize, and surely it won’t be easy, since there are many that stand in the way’. The Armenian Archbishop, Avag Asatourian, puts forward a more concrete concern saying that such a zone might easily ‘become a buffer zone for the Arab-Kurdish conflict’. Father Salar Kajo adds an additional layer to the debate by saying that: ‘If we are all Iraqis, article 125 [that allows the creation of separate provinces] is not needed. But if they view us on a different level than other Iraqis then we need this Article’.

The perception that Christians are treated as second-class citizens is a common theme among Christians. As Father Salar Kajo sustains the main problem is that the status of Christians and of other religious minorities, in Iraqi Kurdistan and in Iraq, in general, often depends on the person who is in charge and not the rights and freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution; a reality that generates insecurity and fear that the situation could change at any minute. Father Gabriel Tooma brings this point into the current situation of Christians in KRG, noting that ‘it is Barzani that loves Christians, but tomorrow if he is not in power... if the family of Barzani leaves, and an Islamic party takes over we won’t be welcome in Kurdistan either’. Father Aram Romel, manager of the New Hope Trauma Center of Iraq in Alqosh, expresses similar concerns positing that Christians ‘are now only protected by the government, but not from the people of KRG... The people are very conservative’. The worries of the Christian community are far from unfounded. The Article 1 of the Constitution, which states that Sharia is the main source of legislation, as well as other articles of the Constitution, such as article 26 that stipulates that children being born from at least one Muslim parent are automatically Muslims, foster the impression that Muslims enjoy more rights than the other communities and that, to some degree, treat them and the need for interfaith dialogue with disdain.

In this context, the efforts of the Christian religious leadership to open an interreligious dialogue are rarely met by the other side; and few Muslim religious

figures that do respond to these overtures, according to Father Salar Kajo, are weak and seem to be excluded from the Iraqi political scene. The same view is expressed by the Armenian Archbishop, Avag Asatourian, who is also the General Secretary of the Council of Leaders of Christian Churches in Iraq, whose purpose among others is to open a dialogue with Muslims, in his remark that there are ‘no actions besides words... We are invited to conferences, [they are] thinking that by inviting us and being there and by saying that the Christians are the original inhabitants of Iraq... by doing this they think they have done their duty towards Christians’.

Fear and distrust is not only evident in the relations of Christians with the dominant communities but also with the other ethno-religious minorities of the region. It is noteworthy that during the research team’s discussions with Christians, the latter often avoided mentioning the other religious communities of the Nineveh in the discussion on the planned new province. When the team brought up the issue, they avouched that the other communities are certainly welcome to join them, yet the clear implication was that Christians should have the primacy and that there should be a certain distinction between what communities should be included. For instance, the Yazidis are viewed much more positively than other communities, particularly the Shabak.

The rivalry between Christians and Shabak, according to Peshkawt Adham, is based on the former’s belief that there is a mass influx of Shabak in Christian areas, which is financially supported by Shia religious figures, the Shia government in Baghdad and Iran. The Shabak migration in these areas, which is often presented as ‘land grabs’ by the Christians, is mainly in the form of sales of property that belonged to Christians that left the country, and by extension, it is directly linked to the mass exodus of the Christian population from the country. In this context, in conjunction with the much higher birth rate of Shabak, the latter are facing a demographic threat, which alters the character of the Christian areas. Indeed, traditionally Christian towns, such as Bartalla and Qaraqosh tend to become majority Shabak. The situation is further complicated by the allegations that there are cases of seized Christian properties, whose owners ‘temporarily’ left the area or the country, in which KRG appears to be involved. According to Peter BetBasoo, who has documented extensively this type of ‘land grabs’, these seizures, in areas such as Seh Nala, are made possible by the intentional absence of property rights in KRG. According to Peshkawt Adham, in either case this phenomenon is exacerbated by the unclear ownership status, as in many cases it is determined by documents dating back to the Ottoman period which are held in Turkey and are easily contestable.

Overall, during the interviews and the lengthy discussion with members of the Christian community, one could discern a prevailing feeling of lost hope for a better future. With the exception of the Assyrian Democratic Movement and,

particularly NPU, who were firm in their determination to remain in Iraq and fight for the preservation of Christian homes, not because they are 'certain that they will win but because there is no other option', as Athra Kado said, most Christians expressed - directly or indirectly - their willingness to flee. The political and religious leadership is alarmed by this trend but at the same time acknowledges its inability to halt it. As the Armenian Archbishop says 'the official stance of the Church is for the people not to leave Iraq, but it is not working'. In face of the dwindling numbers, several commentators expressed their fear and in 15-20 years there will be no Christians left and Christianity in Iraq will be a distant memory that will fade over time. The real danger, according to Father Gabriel Tooma, is that if Iraqi Christians stay abroad, they will lose their identity and their connection to their land, because Christianity in Iraq is a 'tree of 2000 years, which grew in this land. There are forces in Iraq that want to chop down the tree; if so, it will die and if you uproot it and take it to Australia, it will also die, because it is a different soil'.

Yazidis

The Yazidi community is estimated to be 500,000-600,000 people, mainly located in the rural areas of Sinjar. During the ISIS occupation of Sinjar in August 2014, more than 3,000 Yazidis were murdered and around 5,000 were kidnapped, among them many women and children, while 90% of the population has been displaced. Until today, it is estimated that 2400-3000 women are still in ISIS's captivity.

The Yazidi community has, undoubtedly, suffered heavily in the hands of ISIS. According to Yazda, there are 100 kill-sites and 35 mass graves in north Sinjar mountains so far, while another 7-10 mass graves are believed to be in the south, which at the time of the interview were under ISIS control. According to Jameel Chomer, Manager of Operations of Yazda, 'there is no work done in the mass graves [such as] excavations [and] DNA tests, and there is no real protection around the sites, just some wire around them'. This is partly because of the shortage of funds, as a result of the financial crisis, but also because of the presence of different military forces in the liberated areas of Sinjar.⁴

There are mainly, two ways in which the Yazidis are trying to deal with the violence and suffering that they have endured. One is the mass exodus out of Iraq. Yazda estimates that around 100,000 Yazidis have left the country since 2014, that is almost 20% of the community. The Yazidi diaspora is mainly located in Germany and the US, with 100,000 and 2000 Yazidis, respectively, while there is also an old community of 40,000 Yazidis in Armenia. According to Yazidi representatives, should the exodus of Yazidis continue at this rate, the diaspora will soon exceed the number of the Yazidis in Iraq. For some Yazidis, emigration is out of question. Hadi Baba Sheikh, laments the exodus of Yazidis abroad, saying that 'even if I was forced to become Muslim, Christian, Jew or whatever, let me be killed, but let my blood [shed] in my country'. His main fear is that with time, the Yazidi community abroad will disappear and dissolve within the host societies and 'if no Yazidi remains in Iraq, the Yazidi religion will disappear'. According to Yazda, the Yazidis in the diaspora try to address these issues in various ways. For example, some families choose to leave some members behind in order to preserve the link with the Yazidi lands in Iraq, while there are also discussions about building a temple in Germany, where most Yazidis outside Iraq live. Another important issue is marriage, since Yazidis are not allowed to marry outside the community, a tradition that most Yazidis, even the non-religious ones, want to uphold. Thus, many Yazidis come back to Iraq to find a spouse and then return back to their new homes.

According to Jameel Chomer, for those leaving the country, having a separate province might be the only way for them to return and stay in Iraq, because it will make them feel safer and they won't have to depend anymore on others for

⁴ For the analysis on the different military forces in Sinjar see below.

military protection. Again, there is no clear idea or consensus in the Yazidi community on the specific arrangements that will govern this new province. Interestingly, Yazidis are also not fully persuaded that a Christian-ruled province would be an optimal solution. As Hadi Baba Sheikh, points out: '[Christians] are not violent, nor are a threat to the Yazidi people... We might be better under Christian rule but we do not know for sure. There is doubt'. Hadi Baba Sheikh's doubts are a further indication that a separate Nineveh Plains province is not a remedy for all the problems, unless there is a thorough and open discussion between the communities of the region about their aspirations, fears and doubts.

The second way, with which the community attempts to deal with the horrors it has endured, is more optimistic towards the future of the community, since it rests on the conscious decision of the community's leadership to open to the outside world. This decision is twofold. On the one hand, it involves the active effort to make the Yazidi voice heard in the international fora and to sensitize the public opinion on the Yazidi cause. The main pillar of this endeavor is the initiatives for the recognition of the Yazidi massacre as genocide. On the other hand, the Yazidi community is attempting to engage in an interfaith dialogue with other communities, so as to confute various misconceptions about their beliefs.

Underneath these trends and initiatives, disappointment and distrust remains high in the Yazidi community. Apart from very few Yazidis, who are affiliated with KDP, the majority of Yazidis accuse Peshmerga for abandoning them during ISIS attack on Sinjar. Almost every Yazidi that the research team met, said that Peshmerga had reassured the inhabitants of Sinjar that they were in no danger and advised them not to leave their homes; only to abandon them helpless when ISIS entered their villages. Nevertheless, the atrocities of ISIS against the Yazidis, merely reinforced a pre-existing feeling of distrust produced by an established pattern of discrimination against the Yazidi community. More specifically, discrimination practices and often racist attitudes, even the very perception of Yazidis as devil worshipers – an idea often associated with ISIS – were already common. Uday Hassan Khadr, coordinator of Culture and Media of ASFL, vividly describes this reality, saying that the Muslims, especially the Wahhabi, 'consider us people of *Dhimah*, which means that we cannot take part in the decision-making process, that the others are better than us and we are like slaves within the Islamic society. Even when we extend our hand to greet Muslims, they do not reciprocate because we are considered filthy'.

Equally indicative are the words of a Yazidi, who stated that he is confident that should ISIS come to Dohuk in this very moment, three quarters of the population would stay aloof or actively participate in the killing of Yazidis.⁵ One of the recurring complaints of the Yazidi community was that, apart from a few

⁵ As conveyed to CRPME by the deputy-director of Yazda, Daria Wadsworth.

exceptions, there were no signs of sympathy or explicit condemnation of the acts of ISIS against the Yazidis. The distrust and disappointment of Yazidis from Sinjar is more pronounced than that of Yazidis from other areas (e.g. Bashika), given that the former had a much harsher experience, while the Yazidis from Bashika were able to flee to secure areas. This geographic differentiation affects the possibility of IDPs returning to their homes. On the one hand, many people both from within and outside the Yazidi community, such as the former Yazidi MP, Ido Baba Sheikh, acknowledge that even before ISIS, Sinjar was largely marginalized, as the state channeled limited funds for education and health. Hence, return might not be a desirable option in terms of livelihood sustainment, especially in light of the destruction brought to the already meagre infrastructure. On the other hand, for the Yazidis of Sinjar, who saw their family and relatives being murdered, their wives and daughters raped and kidnapped by their very neighbors, their return is by no means an easy decision. Moreover, as Laylan Mohammed Saleh, sustained, the ‘Yazidis from Sinjar are different [from other Yazidis]; they are very conservative because they are part of the disputed areas, so they are poor’. This inevitably increases the prospect of revenge attacks against their previous neighbors, who participated in the mass rapes and killings of the Yazidis. As Peshkawt Adham, Executive Director of Al-Mesalla, pointedly remarked on the prevalence of the idea of honor, ‘if ISIS took and killed only men and didn’t touch the women, the Yazidi would have a very different vision’ of the future.

The issue of Yazidi women remains central to the community. According to Jameel Chomer, Manager of Operations of Yazda, at the early stages of the ISIS attack in Sinjar, they passed down information to the central government, KRG and the coalition forces on the exact location and strength of the ISIS forces in areas where Yazidis were held. However, their agonizing requests for airstrikes and military operations to liberate the captured Yazidis were not heard. Hence, the opportunity to save many of those captured was lost and as months passed it became practically impossible because, in spring 2015, ISIS separated Yazidi men from women and children and most probably executed the former and dispersed across different locations the latter. Given this reality, the only option left to rescue the abducted women is through payment of large sums to smugglers operating in the area. The money is usually provided either by foreign philanthropists or the relatives of the Yazidi women and members of the community. According to Jameel Chomer, for a short period, KRG reimbursed the people who payed the smugglers to save their relatives via the Yazidi Affairs office, which is connected to the KRG Prime Minister’s office, but according to Uday Hassan Khadr, coordinator of Culture and Media ASFL, this assistance was not offered by KRG as a government, instead, ‘it was the Barzani family that offered the money’. At the same time, he added, ‘the Iraqi government has not given a penny for the [Yazidi] women’. However, according to Jameel Chomer, Yazda has put pressure on Baghdad to

allocate funds for survivors, a request that was finally approved by the Social Affairs and Jobs Ministry, who agreed to provide a monthly allowance of 150.000 Iraqi dinars (120 euros) to the women survivors. Although it is a complicated and lengthy process, until October 2016, 703 such allowances were issued and another 200 applications are still pending.

One of the most serious shortcomings is the psychological support for women and children, who were in captivity, which is basically non-existent. According to Daria Wadsworth, in fact there are no special arrangements for survivors living in the camps. According to the researchers from ASFL, who work with survivors, there are cases of children, who spent months under ISIS and were effectively brainwashed, and upon their return demonstrate anti-social and, occasionally, dangerous behavior, who receive no psychological support whatsoever. This lack of psychological support can be partially explained by the fact that the issue of mental health is a taboo in the society and there are only 28 psychologists in Iraqi Kurdistan (only 9 in Dohuk), which makes the introduction of relevant programs from foreign NGOs necessary.

In addition, there is a small number (45-60) of children who were born as a result of the rape of Yazidi women. According to Kheider Domle, 'there have been cases where women tried to perform an abortion [as] there are conservatives within the community who would not accept these children'. Nevertheless, Yazda is aware of only one case, and the father of the child was willing to accept the child. In any case, the number of rape-children is relatively low because in 2015 ISIS started to issue contraceptives to Yazidi captives. According to Kheider Domle, the number is not expected to increase significantly after the liberation of the Yazidi territories because ISIS has adopted a policy of removing all the children they have from Yazidi women from their mothers. These children, together with other children who were captured during the ISIS attack in Sinjar,⁶ are often placed in training camps in areas such as Tel Afar and Hel Hadra, where they are indoctrinated and receive military training. Kheider Domle assumes that these children might be employed in the fighting in Mosul or will be sent over to Syria, as will the women who are still in ISIS hands. According to Yazidi representatives, these women and children are both accepted by the community, and efforts are made so as to avoid any kind of stigmatization. By the same token, the spiritual leader of the Yazidis, Baba Sheikh, has issued an announcement calling on the community to accept the Yazidi women, victims of ISIS and also rejected the idea that those who were forced to convert to Islam under the threat of violence can no longer be considered Yazidis.

⁶ According to Kheider Domle, children over the age of 14 were treated as adults and were executed along with other Yazidi men.

The Yazidi community is also deeply affected by the rivalry between KRG and the central government. KRG is trying by all means to portray Yazidis as Kurds. According to Jameel Chomer, KRG ‘wants to coopt the Yazidi cause as a Kurdish one, especially now that it gets more international attention... and because they [understand that they] have some culpability’. It is particularly interesting that at first KRG referred to the Yazidi genocide as a Kurdish genocide and started to call it ‘Sinjar (yet not Yazidi) genocide’ only after the case was submitted to ICC. The perception that Yazidis are Kurds is quite widespread among Yazidis, even those who distrust KRG and the Muslim Kurds in general. However, part of the community identifies itself as non-Kurds, with distinct ethnic and religious traits. Hadi Baba Sheikh expressed this view, saying that ‘the Yazidi should separate from the Kurds in terms of ethnicity; we have our specificity’. The perception that Yazidis are not Kurds was actively promoted in the 1990s by the Saddam regime, and still is by some Iraqi political parties and some third countries even today, according to Kheider Domle. After the Sinjar massacre, as grievances against KRG grew stronger, this perception has gained more supporters. This divergence is reflected, though not fully comports with, the rivalry between Erbil and Baghdad. The political head of the Yazidi community, (Prince) Tahseen Saeed Bek, is closer to KRG, while the spiritual leader of the community, Baba Sheikh, appears to lean more towards the central government.

Yazidis are particularly affected by the militarization trend that sways Iraq’s ethno-religious communities. In this case, however, the division is not simply between forces who operate under Peshmerga and forces who cooperate with the central government. The situation is much more complex, as different parties have established their presence in Sinjar and are vying for its control. On the one hand, there are the Yazidi fighters, led by Qasim Shesho, who operate under Peshmerga and largely comport with KRG claims to the region. Many Yazidis, who disliked the idea of cooperating with Peshmerga, mainly due to its failure to protect the Yazidis during the ISIS attack, opted for the Sinjar Defense Units militias (HPŞ) (later renamed to Êzîdxan Protection Force), which is led by Haydar Shesho. HPŞ claimed to be an independent force, yet it seems to have good relations with the second largest Kurdish party, PUK. Hadi Baba Sheikh expressed his support for the militia, stating: ‘I [encourage] people to go with Êzîdxan and defend themselves and not go with the Kurdish parties’. The reluctance of the ruling KDP party to allow independent -or outside its control- Yazidi militias, as demonstrated in the April 2015 arrest of Haydar Shesho, in conjunction with the general disappointment with Peshmerga, has led some Yazidis to turn to other forces present in the area, namely YPG and PKK. These forces took advantage of the power vacuum and the frustration of the Yazidi population, while conducting operations for the rescue of trapped Yazidis and the liberation of territories in west Sinjar, that has earned them much sympathy and some territorial control. YPG/PKK influence is mainly fueled

through the Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS) militia, which is believed to have its roots in Yazidi military units that were formed prior to the 2014 ISIS offence. Since mid-2015, YBS has been incorporated in the Hashd al-Shaabi (PMU) militia umbrella organization affiliated with the central government, which since then pays the salaries of the YBS fighters.

With Peshmerga, YPG/PKK and central government and their affiliated Yazidi forces in Sinjar, all claiming control in the region and fighting to achieve it, there is another obstacle, as the representative of Yazidis in Dawdia camp said, for Yazidi IDPs to return to their homes. In the post-Mosul liberation era, this conflict will probably intensify, dragging Yazidi militias and fighters deeply into it. A proxy war, involving Yazidis fighting against each other, will have devastating consequences for the Yazidi community, which given its traditional stance of non-involvement in local and regional conflicts, lacks the experience of managing such tensions within the community.

Turkmen

Estimations on the size of the Turkmen community vary significantly. Sources from within the community estimate that Turkmen are approximately 2.5–3 million people, while international sources bring their number to around 600,000. Around 60% of the population is Sunni, while the rest are Shia and a small number are Christians. They are mainly located in Northern Iraq, particularly in Kirkuk and Tal Afar. Even though the Turkmen constitute the third largest ethnicity in Iraq and the second largest in Kurdistan, they do not have the equivalent political representation and influence, nor do they enjoy the same attention from the international community as other communities. At first glance, the Turkmen issue in Iraq is an ethnic one. However, the emergence of sectarian rifts in Iraq and the rise of ISIS have brought to the fore the religious differences in the community, elevating the Sunni and Shia distinction to the level of a major divide within the community.

According to Dr. Ali Akram Al Bayati, director of the Turkmen Rescue Foundation, 1,200 Turkmen – mostly Shia – have been abducted by ISIS, 600 of which women and 130 children. Many of those abducted were killed in the following months. Tal Afar alone is home to 15,000 Sunni Turkmen who live under ISIS. Although many Sunni Turkmen abandoned their areas in the wake of ISIS advance, the fact that a part of the population participated in the massacres of Shia Turkmen and of other communities, such as the Yazidis, has created an unbridgeable gap within the Turkmen community. The Turkmen, with whom the research team spoke with, stated that the identities of the people who collaborated with ISIS are known within the community. Yet, part of the Turkmen Sunni leadership refuse to hand lists of names of their people who have joined ISIS, increasing the risk of revenge attacks or collective punishment within the community or from communities who have suffered from ISIS. This has allowed the emergence of cases of racism against the community. According to Turkmen activist Himan Mahmood, there are incidents where displaced Turkmen children from Tal Afar face racism or are prevented from attending school because they are considered *'terrorists'*.

To further complicate the situation, the issue of Turkmen women under ISIS, that is barely known outside the Turkmen community, creates much controversy within the community. There are recorded cases of Turkmen women, mainly Shia, who were raped, murdered and even burned alive by ISIS, and their bodies were left hanging naked in public places. One of the most known cases is that of Iman Mohammed Yunus, former MP with the Iraq Turkmen Front. There are also cases of Sunni Turkmen women, who were forced into temporary marriages (*mut'a*) with ISIS fighters for the sake of 'sexual jihad' (*Jihad ul Nikaah*). According to Himan Mahmood, several of these women have attempted or committed suicide

to spare themselves from the suffering. The fact that the families of the women, who manage to contact them, usually encourage the women to stay and to not attempt to escape, contributes to some extent to these acts of despair. The very few (8) women who managed to escape, due to the Turkmen community's conservatism, ultimately, *'left the prison of ISIS and ended up in their families' prison*, as they *'brought shame'* to their families, according to Himan Mahmood. The families of the Turkmen survivors 'lock the girls' in the houses and refuse to allow any contact with the outside world, which makes it extremely hard and in some cases impossible for people such as Himan Mahmood, Dr. Ali Akram al Bayati and others to visit the Turkmen survivors.

Controversially, the Turkmen leadership refuses to recognize the situation of the Turkmen women, either because of the conservative norms or because of political reasons. Himan Mahmood, herself a Sunni Turkmen, posited that the Sunni Turkmen leadership is afraid of losing their influence by raising the controversial issue of Turkmen women or take a stance against ISIS. Similarly, the Shia leadership, although it easily condemns ISIS, the issue of Turkmen women remains taboo because of the same conservative norms. A case in point is a press conference, which was organized to take place in February 2015 in the Kurdish Parliament, about the case of Turkmen women, with Dr. Ali Akram al Bayati as keynote speaker. Turkmen MPs chose to not attend. This reluctance extends to both KRG and the central government. As Himan Mahmood and Dr. Ali Akram al Bayati noted, despite their repeated attempts and meetings with governmental officials of both governments, they failed to secure a commitment on their part to address this issue. The excuse that was often presented was that this is an intra-communal matter of the Turkmen; therefore, it should be addressed by the Turkmen leadership. Himan Mahmood's failed attempt to convince the Shia representative in the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs to issue a fatwa calling the community to accept and assist the Turkmen female survivors is indicative of the general silence on the matter. The research team posed the question in the meeting it had with the Ministry of Endowments, only to receive the same answer that it is an internal problem of the Turkmen community. Given that the Turkmen leadership refuses to take a stance, while Erbil and Baghdad deny any responsibility in dealing with the issue, the efforts were successfully routed towards the international community to raise awareness. Indeed, the Turkmen women in ISIS captivity is an issue that has been mentioned by both John Kerry, US Secretary of State Department, and Zainab Hawa Bangura, Special Representative of the UN on Sexual Violence in Armed Conflicts.

In the interviews with members of the Turkmen community, the issue of international protection appeared central to the Turkmen. Himan Mahmood said that the international protection was of vital importance, not only for the protection of women and the prevention of revenge attacks after the liberation of the region,

but also as a means of pressure to bring the Shia and the Sunni leadership on the same table. Furthermore, Dr. Ali Akram al Bayati linked the international protection with the planned autonomous zone in the region. More specifically, he proposed the creation of a 'safe/secure zone', similar to the one established in Kurdistan in 1991, which would offer a conducive environment for the different communities to discuss the future of the region. Although he mentioned that the region will be open to all communities, he particularly pointed out the Christian and Yazidi communities as the most suitable partners for such an endeavor.

Interestingly, Dr. Al Bayati is against the presence of foreign troops, emphasizing that, on the one hand, there were already too many western advisors and, on the other, the local forces (Christians, Yazidis and Turkmen) were able to provide security to the region. He further highlighted that the western military aid should be confined to training and provision of weapons, which should be, in any case, channeled through the central government, not KRG. Regarding the involvement of regional powers, although Dr. Al Bayati was relatively more positive towards Iran's involvement since 'Tehran contributed to the liberation of many areas', he was critical, nevertheless, of the involvement of regional powers, claiming that the desire of neighboring countries intention to promote their interests in the region has led Iraq into chaos. Interestingly, both Al Bayati and Himan Mahmood are negative towards the involvement of Turkey, disregarding thus the concept of Turkey's role as a protector of the Turkmen. In fact, both accused Turkey that it has been manipulating the community for its own interests and that, especially since 2007-2008, Turkey has reached an agreement with KRG that is to the detriment of the community.

Shabak

The Shabak community numbers around 300,000 people, of whom 70 – 75% self-identify as Shia (although they differ in some aspects from Twelver Shias) and the rest as Sunnis. They are mainly a rural population, located in the areas around Mosul; therefore, the Shabak have been directly affected by ISIS offensive. It is estimated that around 1,500 Shabaks have been killed and 206 are held captive by ISIS. Further, a small part of Sunni Shabaks seem to have joined ISIS. Their identity is known to the Shabak community, that has provided a list of names to the authorities.

A large part of Shabaks are IDPs in Iraqi Kurdistan and south Iraq. In general, Shabaks have not left the country in large numbers, like Christians and Yazidis. According to Husein Z. Ali Al-Shabake, only 100-200 Shabak families have left Iraq. The number is small partly due to the fact that many Shabaks are convinced that they are not welcome in the West (at least not to the extent that Christians and Yazidis are). A poll has shown that 95% of the Shabaks do not intend to migrate. Other than not having ‘someone to greet them’ abroad, the Shabaks stated as additional reasons their reluctance to adopt a Western lifestyle, as it does not comport with the –conservative- customs and traditions of the community, especially in relation to women, and their lack of knowledge of the language of the receiving country.

The Shabak community did not elude polarization. This polarization is not always defined by the religious identity (Sunn-Shia), instead the polarization is generated by the KRG-central government rivalry that often transcends the religious identity. Sunni Shabak almost exclusively tend to support KRG. However, among the Shia Shabaks, although most lean towards the central government, there are quite a few that support KRG. As a result, there seems to be a half-half division within the Shabak community. For instance, the research team interviewed two influential figures of the Shia Shabak community; Dr. Hunain Mahmood Al-Qaddo and Husein Z. Ali al-Shabake. The former expressed a deeply anti-Kurdish view, accusing the KRG of adopting an agenda of kurdification of the Shabak people. By contrast, Husein Z. Ali al-Shabake recognized that part of the Shabaks aligns with the central government, but claimed that coexistence with the Arabs would be difficult and, if anything, KRG is closer to the Shabak community because of its geographical proximity. Apart from the personal convictions of individual Shabaks, a possible explanation for KRG’s success in winning the loyalty of Shabaks might be the fact that most Shabaks have relocated after 2014 to Kurdish areas, bringing up to 80% of Shabak, according to Al-Qaddo, under the direct influence of KRG. Their status as IDPs and the exposure towards implicit or explicit pressures from the ruling authorities this entails has probably pushed some Shabaks to adopt a particular stance as a means for survival. According to Al-Qaddo, ‘they are often

forced to go on demonstrations supporting KRG and are threatened that if they don't, they will get kicked out of Kurdistan'. The fear of persecution is further fueled by past experiences, such as the targeting of anti-KRG Shabaks during the 2009 provincial elections, and the general feeling of being more vulnerable as they are less in the public eye compared to other communities.

The trend towards militarization is apparent in the case of Shabaks as well. The aforementioned polarization has also led to the formation of military units and militias, some fighting on KRG side and some as part of pro-Baghdad Shia militias (Popular Mobilization Units – PMU). Given that the pro-Baghdad Shabak forces are operating as an autonomous militia (Quwat Sahl Nīnawā), under PMU, instead of being part of the regular Iraqi army, intensifies the fear of implication in revenge attacks and clashes with members of the community aligning with the KRG, particularly since Quwat Sahl Nīnawā has a firm anti-Kurdish stance.

The possibility of inter-communal conflict within the Shabak community is directly related to the debate regarding the nature of an autonomous zone in the Nineveh region. In this regard, Al-Shabake suggested that there are three possible scenarios; the first, and least possible scenario, is a Sunni autonomous zone that would not fall under neither the KRG or the central government. Turkey appears to be the main supporter of this scenario. Shabaks deprecate such a scenario, given that already many Shabaks have been killed in areas where the Turkish army is stationed. It is worth noting that KRG did not attempt to prevent the attacks, while Baghdad simply condemned them. The second scenario is the creation of an autonomous zone that would fall under the central government, a possibility which, according to Al-Shabake, would intensify the rivalry between Erbil and Baghdad. He also emphasized that it would not be a viable solution from an economic perspective. The third scenario of an autonomous zone operating under KRG's administration is 'the best choice', according to Al-Shabake, given the geographical factor and the Shabaks 'common experience' of oppression with the Kurds and other communities in the Nineveh Plains under the previous regime in the 1980s and 1990s.

Notwithstanding, the shared experience of oppression and the current threat do not guarantee coexistence among these communities. A case in point is the aforementioned rivalry between Christians and Shabaks, which in the past had occasionally taken the form of violent confrontations. Members of the Shabak community acknowledged the socio-economic consequences of the mass influx of Shabaks in the Christian areas. However, they rejected the accusation of *land grabs*, arguing that the Shabaks legally purchased the properties. There have been some efforts in the past to find a solution between the Christians and Shabaks; some of them with the intervention of foreign mediators such as USIP and local initiatives such as the Network of Iraqi Facilitators (NIF). In 2011, the Shabaks and Christians

agreed to sign an unofficial 'Pact of Goodwill', which would promote coexistence, respect for the religious public spaces and participation in the religious celebrations of the other community. According to Al-Shabake, the document was never signed because of the Christian religious leadership's disapproval of the document. Al-Shabake highlighted that the Church was always an obstacle in his efforts to reconcile the two communities, while the general tendency of the Christian community to 'regard itself as being better than other communities', further hampered negotiations. Despite these obstacles, the Shabaks and Christians had reached an understanding and a viable plan. Al-Shabake proposed moving services infrastructure, such as schools and hospitals, to the outskirts of the Christian towns 'in order to minimize the competition'. Unfortunately, this plan was suspended with the emergence of ISIS. Since 2014, there has not been an effort to open dialogue between the two communities, an issue that will reemerge significantly in the post-Mosul era.

Yarsan (Kakai)

Due to the long-term secrecy and mystery surrounding the Yarsan (Kakai) community, there is a lack of reliable data for the size of their population. It is estimated that there are approximately 200,000 to 250,000 Yarsan, mainly concentrated in Halabja, which is the epicenter of Yarsan religion in Iraq and home to most Yarsans, Mosul, Kirkuk and Diyala province. Unlike the other communities, the Erbil-Baghdad rivalry has not shrouded the Yarsan community, given that they largely identify as Kurds. In fact, the Yarsan representative expressed his disappointment at the fact that the West often portrays them as a distinct ethnic group, citing as an example a report issued by the European Parliament in 2015.⁷

Instead, the main division within the Yarsan community is between the 'conservative' camp and the 'reformist' camp. The conservative camp, which is mostly formed by people of the older generation, supports the preservation of secrecy to avoid persecution and maintain their independence, while the reformists -mainly younger Yarsan- claim that the community is ready 'to open' to the world, as the Yazidis and Zoroastrians have, because it is unnecessary to remain in the shadow and hide their beliefs in a flourishing and pluralistic society. Al-Mesalla has conducted a poll, in which 80% 'admitted' that they were Yarsan and of the remaining 20% most were afraid to answer and only a small portion said that they were Muslims. The results of the poll show that 'reformist' ideas seem to gain ground, yet not necessary political influence, while at the same time the fear of persecution is still high among Yarsan.

The division between reformists and conservatives has also implications in the issue of building places of worship. The 'conservatives' want to continue concealing their places of worship as mosques and maintain the practice of *tzam khana* (place of gathering); a type of temples located within houses, whose construction began in the 1960s after a number of attacks on Yarsan temples. The 'reformists', on the other hand, believe that the community should have overt and recognizable temples. The fears of the conservative camp are not totally unfounded, since there have been at least 8 attacks on Yarsan temples in the past few years and a temple called Baua Mahmi, which was concealed as a Shia mosque, was totally destroyed in Hannaqin region by ISIS. Likewise, according to Luqman Kakei, in 2012 in Kirkuk, someone compiled a list of Yarsans, dubbing them as Kufars, and bill-posted it around the city.

These intra-communal disagreements have also delayed the appointment of the Yarsan (Kakai) representative in the Ministry of Endowment and Religious

⁷ Pichon, Eric, 'Minorities in Iraq Pushed to the brink of existence', *Briefing*, European Parliament Research Service, February 2015, [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2015/548988/EPRS_BRI\(2015\)548988_REV1_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2015/548988/EPRS_BRI(2015)548988_REV1_EN.pdf)

Affairs; hitherto the position remains vacant, while all the other communities have already a representative. The delay and the intra-communal tensions in general are to a large extent fueled by the efforts of the central government and external powers, namely Iran, to manipulate the community according to their interests. Iran's main concern, according to the representatives of the community, is that if they get their rights the much bigger Yarsan community in Iran (over 3 million) will make demands as well. In Iraq, after 2003, Saddam's policy of persecution, which rested on the fact they were Kurds, was replaced by a policy of Shi'ification, based on the fact that Yarsan for centuries used Shia religious references to conceal their identity and beliefs in order to escape persecution. According to Luqman Kakei, 'there is direct and indirect pressure on the community. Direct in the sense than when [they] try to secure their rights in the Iraqi parliament nobody listens to them. Indirect in the sense that they offer (economic and other) support to the radical groups within Yarsans. That's why the latter, although not a majority have more influence'.

A special reference should be made to the issue of gender within the Yarsan community. The Yarsan community is the only community that women are in position of power and influence and enjoy the respect of their male peers. Remarkably, the leader of the Yarsan community, (Pir) Liza Falakadin Kakei, gave the impression that women being in high-rank positions within the community is a norm. According to (Pir) Liza Kakei, 'women always had a strong position within the community; there are 15 women that have important positions within the community as scholars and religious figures'. This seems extraordinary, given that the Kurdish community in Iraqi Kurdistan is rather conservative, especially on the issue of women.

The lack of cooperation between communities and the establishment of dialogue was central in the discourse of the Yarsan representatives. Both (Pir) Liza Kakei and (General) Luqman Rashid Kakei expressed their disappointment in the current lack of cooperation between the religious minorities in Iraqi Kurdistan. (Pir) Liza expressed her lament for the fact that while in the past Yarsans, through her father, Falakadin Kakei, who was an MP and an influential figure in KRG, actively promoted the rights of all the communities, today the other communities fail to do so. This disappointment is mainly directed to the Christian and the Yazidi communities, who as she said, tend to promote exclusively their own interests. Luqman Kakei summarized this point stating that 'one of our weak points is when someone is closer to his rights, he forgets others... They (Christians and Yazidis) talk about Christian and Yazidis... [but] what about us?' adding in the end 'one community cannot improve its standing without other minorities improving theirs'. The grievances expressed by the Yarsan representatives corroborate the general impression that CRPME gained, that is that, partly due to the extraordinary hostile milieu they are currently in, each religious/ethnic community in Iraqi Kurdistan has

retreated and entrenched itself within the confines of its own community, focusing solely on their own survival, which often happens at the expense of others.

Jews

The once vibrant Jewish community has almost disappeared in Iraq. Approximately, 135,000 Jews lived in Iraq prior to 1948. Today, after extensive persecution and migration, which mostly took place in the 1950s and 1970s,⁸ only 5 Jews are left in Baghdad, hiding their religious identity and living in fear, and approximately 400 families in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Nevertheless, the perception regarding Jews is changing in Iraq. In October 2, 2016, Edwin Shuker a prominent Jewish activist born in Baghdad, who works to preserve the link between Iraq and the Iraqi Jewish diaspora, posted a video in Arabic on his Facebook page discussing the fate of Iraqi Jews. His video received huge popularity in social media with 1 million of views and only 6-7 negative comments out of a total of over 3500 comments. Furthermore, according to Shuker, Muqtada al-Sadr contacted him after the video, welcoming him to Iraq. In CRPME's interview with Shuker, he added that 'the reception of the Iraqi Muslim community of the issue of Jews of Iraq is overwhelmingly positive', possibly due to a sense of 'nostalgia and a belief that if Jews never left, this mess would not have happened and if Jews will come back they would bring this kind of civility that was the hallmark of Iraq'.

Even though, in Iraq the fate of the Jews in the future is unknown, according to Shuker, 'it is a very dynamic time'. For the past 30 years, nothing happened in regards to the Jewish cause in Iraq, now 'we get daily articles; Muslim books coming out [mentioning the Jewish community] and even studies in Baghdad university about the Jewish community'. Moreover, according to Shuker, there was a petition handed to the Iraqi government to allow Jews to have a quota in the Parliament. Nevertheless, the Jews are not recognized in the Iraqi Constitution, making the acceptance of the petition less probable. In Iraqi Kurdistan things are moving faster. The Jewish community officially has a representative in the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs in KRG. According to the Jewish representative, Sherzad Mamsani, a handful of Jewish Iraqi Kurds are coming forth and reveal their Jewish roots, since his appointment. Though, he added that 'there are many Jews that are still hiding their identity' for fear of persecution. The representative pointed out that there are three sub-communities within the Jewish community, 'the Jews, who due to fear and persecution, converted [...]; the ones that left to Israel and didn't like the situation there and returned; the people that never changed their religion and practiced their religion secretly'. Despite the small size of the community and the challenges it faces, Mamsani is working to raise the issue of the Jewish cause in Iraqi Kurdistan. He says that 'the Kurdish community is more friendly to Jews', presenting an opportunity for him to put forth the Jewish

⁸ Iraq initially tried to prevent Jews from emigrating in 1948, only to pass a law in 1950 allowing them to leave but stripping them of citizenship if they did.

cause. One of the most symbolic steps was the submission of a formal request to open a synagogue in Erbil, which still remains pending. In fact, there are 54 synagogues in Baghdad alone, and 9 in Iraqi Kurdistan, none of which are operating. Even the 800-year-old synagogue and temple of prophet Nahum, is on the verge of irreparable damage. According to Shuker, there have been limited efforts to restore synagogues, especially in this time of war and financial crisis.

On November 30, which is the 71st commemoration of the expulsion of Jews from the Middle East, other refer to it as the ‘forgotten Holocaust’, a ceremony took place in Erbil. All the religious representatives attended the ceremony, further attesting the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs’ dedication to promoting pluralism in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Zoroastrians

The case of Zoroastrians is of particular interest, as it is considered one of the communities that is thriving in Kurdistan. Even though there are no reliable data, the community claims that there are 100,000 Zoroastrians and they are growing in number. According to Peshkawt Adham, their number is significantly lower (3000-4000). KRG's Law 5, which recognized the Zoroastrians as a religious component of Iraqi Kurdistan, contributed to the 'revival' of the community in the region. Given the fact the Zoroastrians were systematically persecuted in Iraq, Law 5 is of great importance and is undoubtedly a great achievement. During the interview with the Zoroastrian representatives, it was implied that there were pressures exerted on KRG by external powers, but also by extremist Muslims within Iraqi Kurdistan, so as not to recognize Zoroastrians. In general, there is a perception that Zoroastrianism is promoted by the KRG and Kurdish nationalists as a 'national religion', as part of their wider effort of detaching Iraqi Kurdistan from the rest of Iraq and the Arabs.

According to Kheider Domle, Zoroastrianism appears to attract mainly young Kurds, who convert from Islam. However, the Zoroastrian representative of the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs, Awat Tayib, dubbed the increase of Zoroastrians as 'return' to their true religion. She also stated that it is not linked to the emergence of ISIS and the disappointment in Islam, but is a result of the increasing freedom people enjoy to practice openly their true faith. Furthermore, Awat Tayib, who is also a Zoroastrian priestess, underlined the need for preservation and restoration of the 12 Zoroastrian temples in the region that date back thousands of years. Acknowledging the dire financial situation of KRG, Awat Tayib stated that their efforts to gather funds have been directed to foreign institutions and organizations.

According to Peshkawt Adham, Zoroastrianism is also affected by intra-communal tensions. In particular, there appears to be a rift between 'reformists' and 'conservatives, which however rests on rather philosophical questions; namely the question whether Zarathustra was a prophet or a philosopher, with conservatives ascribing to the former notion and reformists to the latter. The younger generation seems to lean towards the reformist side; a possible indication that new converts seek less rigid and less doctrinal religions. In any case, this rift assumes political connotations, since, according to Peshkawt Adham, some Zoroastrians do not recognize the -reformist- Zoroastrian representative in the Kurdish Parliament, while others do not recognize the -conservative- representative in the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs.

Recommendations

The main issues that need to be addressed are restoring trust between all the components of the Iraqi society, preventing revenge attacks and addressing and solving possible sources of tensions between the communities in the future. In this precarious time of war, dialogue and justice are the main safeguards of pluralism in Iraqi Kurdistan. In order for the minorities to avoid any further polarization, they have to unify their efforts and establish a common voice.

On the one hand, there are issues that taint the relations between the minorities, such as the tensions between the Christians and the Shabaks, that should be addressed. Likewise, the distrust of these minorities towards Islam, and particularly, towards the Sunni components, either Turkmen, Shabak, Kurd or Arab, should be equally addressed. On the other hand, the government should further its efforts to reform legal and political system and institutionalize pluralism in order to establish trust and predictability in the policies of protection of minorities, beyond the good-will of individual leaders.

Dialogue is central for vitiating stereotypes between the various religious and ethnic components. On a second level, dialogue will generate cooperation in contentious issues, such as the issue of 'land grabs' between Christians and Shabaks, by creating a safe environment where grievances from both side can be expressed and tensions defused via practical and viable solutions. In turn, this safe environment may generate a shared basis for dialogue, from which a common vision in regards to an autonomous zone/s and other possible solutions may rise. Unifying the voices of the religious and ethnic minorities would release them from the entrenchment that renders them vulnerable. Dialogue, to some extent, is futile if it does not include the Sunnis. Sunni Islam has been at the center of grievances for the past few years, and its image has to be restored. Given that they are perceived as the source of the problem that hinders pluralism, the Sunni milieu should be part of the solution and cannot be excluded from the process of dialogue and cooperation. In this process, the Sunni tribes should have a *seat at the table* to ensure long-term peace and stability.

Justice is a common plea across all the communities, as it is the ultimate prerequisite for both inter-communal and intra-communal reconciliation. Bringing those who participated in the atrocities of ISIS to justice, to some extent, would ease the pain of the victims. In order to restore the trust between the components,

the Sunni tribes should cooperate in handing lists of names of their people, who have joined ISIS, to avoid collective punishment and to wipe the slate clean and gain the trust of the minorities. The example of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa, with the necessary adjustments that reflect the specificities of Iraq, might be valuable. Furthermore, the allocation of funds for reconstructing the towns and villages of IDPs is necessary for the return of IDPs and the long-term social peace that has been threatened by the pressure that the presence of IDPs and the financial crisis exerts on the host society. In a post-Mosul liberation era, all these steps are crucial not only to wipe out pre-existing stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes, but also to ensure that the next *ISIS* does not find fertile ground in the region.



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