

The Christians

Perceptions of Reconciliation and Conflict



About MERI

The Middle East Research Institute engages in policy issues contributing to the process of state building and democratisation in the Middle East. Through independent analysis and policy debates, our research aims to promote and develop good governance, human rights, rule of law and social and economic prosperity in the region. It was established in 2014 as an independent, not-for-profit organisation based in Erbil, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Middle East Research Institute

1186 Dream City

Erbil, Kurdistan Region of Iraq

T: +964 (0)662649690

E: info@meri-k.org

www.meri-k.org

NGO registration number. K843

© Middle East Research Institute, 2017

The opinions expressed in this publication are the responsibility of the author.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of MERI, the copyright holder. Please direct all enquiries to the publisher.

The Christians

Perceptions of Reconciliation and Conflict

MERI Policy Paper

Khogir Wirya
Linda Fawaz

September 2017

Contents

1. Executive Summary.....	4
2. Introduction.....	5
3. Findings.....	8
3.1 Bartalla and Qaraqosh.....	8
3.2 Sunni- Christian Relationship	9
3.3 Baghdad-Erbil Dispute	10
3.4 Christians in the KRI.....	10
3.5 Summary of the findings.....	11
4. The Way Forward.....	12
4.1 Rule of law.....	12
4.2 Security	13
4.3 Justice.....	15

About the Authors

Khogir Wirya is a researcher at MERI. He holds an MA from the University of Nottingham, UK and has been extensively involved in studying conflict resolution in Iraq in general and in the disputed territories in specific.

Linda Fawaz was a Research Intern at the Middle East Research Institute. She holds B.A. from the University of Southern California in international relations and global business.

Acknowledgments

Thanks are due to MERI research staff particularly Dave van Zoonen for providing general feedback and additional intellectual input. Also, thanks to Mohammed Abubaker for designing the report and to other MERI staff for their logistic and administrative support.

This study was commissioned by the United States Institute for Peace (USIP), coordinated and supported by Osama Gharizi (Regional Program Officer MENA), and Nahla Arif (Senior Field Officer).

Appreciation also goes out to the Alliance of Iraqi Minorities (AIM) for their engagement with and support to this research.

Photo obtained from (newscom)

1. Executive Summary

This report is about perceptions of reconciliation and conflict among the Christians in Iraq. Being a religious minority group in a country that has been fraught with conflicts and instability, this community, like other minorities in Iraq, endured suppression, displacement, and degradation. This, in addition to the weakening rule of law, has had an inverse impact on their communal relations, causing many to migrate. Furthermore, the Islamic State's (IS) invasion of large swathes of land in the Nineveh Plain, where large numbers of Christians live, was yet another severe blow inflicted upon this community.

The findings of this study reveal that the Christian community has had a conflictual relationship with the Shabaks, another minority group, in the Nineveh Plain well before IS's emergence in 2014. The interviewees claim that the Shabaks encroached on their lands in an attempt to undermine the Sunnis in Mosul, serve external agendas and change the demography of the area.

This report also shows that the Christians have disagreements with the Sunni Arabs, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), and the Central government of Iraq (CGI). In order to fend off the rising Shia dominance in the Nineveh Plain, Sunnis are partly blamed for increasing the level of violence in the area. Many Christians held grievances against KRG's policies in the Nineveh Plain before 2013. They argue that in its attempts to shield influence against Baghdad, the KRG caused friction and fragmentation among the Christians. As for the CGI, the interviewees expressed mistrust since it was unable to protect them from IS's onslaught.

In the eyes of Christians, the security situation after liberation does not portend well. The Shia Shabaks are thought to pose a security concern in the Nineveh Plain because of their involvement with Shia armed forces while there are Christian armed groups as well. Baghdad and Erbil have not engaged in debating future control of the security of the Nineveh Plains. Therefore, they see the potential for eruption of violence which may inflict great damage on reconciliation efforts.

In short, the dynamics in Nineveh Plain were not stable before June 2014. Inter and intra-communal relations were strained, the political landscape was divisive and the quality of services was poor. The KRG and Baghdad are usually blamed for the overall pre-crisis climate as they were competing for hegemony. The ramifications of that unhealthy competition were manifold. Polarisation, neglect, underdevelopment, and strained relationships are just some. IS's invasion strained the relations further and a return to the status quo ante means protracted conflicts and further instability. The bigger danger is that more and more Christians would leave the country should the situation remain unchanged.

2. Introduction

In Iraq, Christians are mostly Assyrian and Chaldean, along with a small number of Armenians.¹ Many are proud to trace their roots to the ancient Mesopotamians and the Assyrian Empire that was based in Ashur on the Tigris river, south of Nineveh. Therefore, they may strongly identify themselves by both religion and ethnicity. The Empire's main cities included Arbela (Erbil), Arrapha (Kirkuk), Kalhu (Nimrud), Nineveh (near Mosul), and Idiqlat (Tikrit).² Some of the Christians identify themselves as Catholic Assyrian, and others as Chaldean Catholic which indicates that there is no a unified historical narrative on the history of the ethnic groups that make up the Christian community in Iraq.

Throughout modern history, Christians have been geographically dispersed, with large numbers in cities across Iraq. In 1961 there were one million Christians in northern Iraq.³ However, by 1979, 50% of Christians were said to be living in Baghdad, making up 14% of the capital's population.⁴ Under the Arabisation policies of the Ba'ath regime, the community was required to identify as either Arab or Kurd in the 1977 census.⁵ Now, the largely reduced Christian population remains in Baghdad, Basra, Kirkuk, the Nineveh Plains, as well as the Erbil and Duhok governorates in the KRI. Prior to the emergence of the so called Islamic State (IS), Christians in the Nineveh Province formed a significant block in Hamdaniya district (the towns of Bartalla, Bakhdida [or Qaraqosh], and Karamleis), Tel Keif district (the towns of Al Qosh, Tel Esqof, and Batnaya), and in Mosul district (the villages Baqofa and Bashiqa).

In the Iraqi Constitution, Christians are mentioned twice. The first instance is in Article 2 which "guarantees" Islam as the majority identity of Iraqis, while asserting full religious rights for Christians at the same time. The second reference to Assyrians and Chaldeans is in Article 121, where political, cultural, and educational rights are mentioned with respect to local administrations. Article 2 of the Iraqi constitution establishes Islam as the state religion and one of the basic foundations of legislation. It further stipulates that no law shall contradict Islamic guidelines. Minorities have since argued that this article provides justification for discrimination against non-Muslims at all levels and sectors.⁵ In addition, there are other laws that have generated controversy and despondency among the minority groups. A case in point is the Iraqi Personal Status Law, which allows for one-way conversion only to Islam and considers the offspring of mixed parents (Muslim and none-Muslim) to be Muslim.

In 1998, at the Second Conference for the Assyrians Cultural Front in Beirut, a proposal was raised calling for the designation of an area for the Christians of North Iraq, to be under international protection.⁶ This was the first time such a plan was raised to the public, but it would not be the last.

1 Salloum, S. (2015). Human Rights Violations: Political Participation of Minorities in Iraq (No. 2). Masarat and Heartland Alliance International, retrieved from academia.edu.

2 Roux, G. Ancient Iraq. 3rd ed. England: Penguin Books, 1992.

3 "Eastern Christianity." The Cambridge History of Christianity, edited by Michael Angold, vol. 5, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 529.

4 "Iraq - Chaldeans." Minority Rights Group International. Last updated October 2014. Retrieved from: <http://minorityrights.org/minorities/chaldeans/>.

5 Lewis, Jonathan E. "Iraqi Assyrians: Barometer of Pluralism." Middle East Forum, vol. 10, no. 3, 2003, pp. 49-57.

6 United States Commission for International Religious Freedom. (2013). Annual Report 2013. Washington, D.C.

The violence at the peak of the war in 2007-2008 led to a renewed push for autonomy and self-rule, and since at least 2010, local Christian political parties began to speak of creating a Christian zone, or canton, in the Nineveh Plains.⁷ This demand is seen by many as a right enshrined in the constitution, as Article 121 entitles Christians to local administration of political, cultural, and educational rights. Since IS's invasion of Nineveh governorate in 2014, this idea has gained traction, with many wanting to see a Nineveh Plains Province. However, this idea does not have complete support by Christians in Iraq, as many fear it is too little, too late, or that it will bring more instability and insecurity due to the widening rifts among diverse communities in Nineveh Plain.⁸

Below is a map of the proposed Nineveh Plains Province, created by the Iraq Sustainable Democracy Project. The area is not homogenously Christian, but it contains most of the Christian districts as well as many other ethno-religious groups. It would not only remove that area from the administrative control of the Nineveh Province, but also geographically cut off the areaseast of the proposed Nineveh Plains.⁹ In 2014, most of the Nineveh Plain came under the control of IS, resulting in large scale damage and terror. While these areas have been liberated for some time now, the process of return has been sluggish.¹⁰

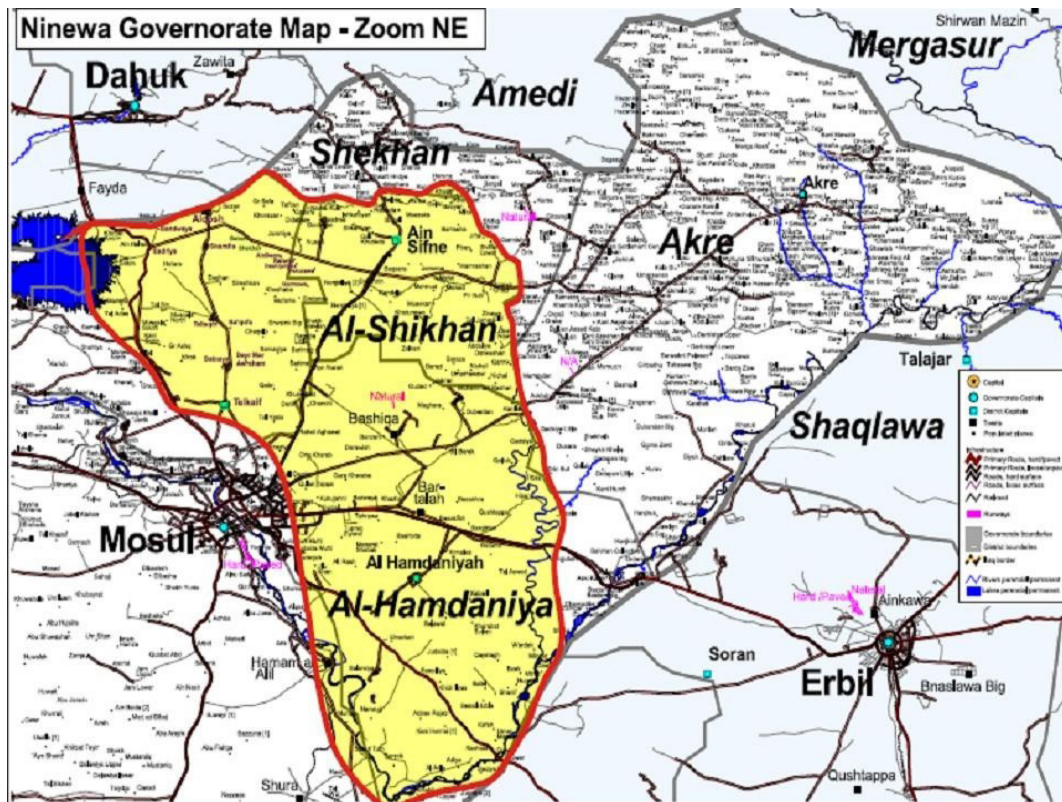


Figure 1: The proposed Nineveh Plains Province. Source: Iraq Sustainable Democracy Project

7 "Iraq – Assyrians." Minority Rights Group International. Last updated October 2014. Retrieved from: <http://minorityrights.org/minorities/assyrians-2/>.

8 Salloum, Sa'ad. A Guide to Minorities in Iraqi Memory, Identity and Challenges. Baghdad: Masarat, 2013.

9 Most of the land east of the proposed Nineveh Plains Province has affectively been under administrative control of the KRG already.

10 United States Comission for International Religious Freedom. (2015). Annual Report 2015. Washington, D.C.

Christians have long complained of neglect of their areas by both the CGI and the KRG. The regime change Baghdad in 2003 did not improve the situation in many minority areas, where there is still under-development, lack of investment, lack of sufficient government services and under-resourced state institutions.¹¹ Many reports have highlighted these concerns, which seem to be particularly acute in the disputed territories.¹²

The Christian communities played essential roles in building the modern state of Iraq after World War I, and their active participation continued throughout the Monarchy (1921-1958) and the Republic (1958-2003) era. In particular, they made significant contributions in the areas of arts, music, and literature. Christians made up a disproportionate ratio of the qualified professionals in Iraq in the 1980's, and continue to have a strong culture of education.¹³ However, discrimination, exclusion from leadership positions in governmental institutions and overall lack of security weakened their influence in society and caused members of the community to immigrate.¹⁴ Exacerbating this crisis, the continuing instability in Iraq has generated more conflicts among its varying ethnic and religious groups in a way that has proven difficult to reverse- the Christian community is no exemption.

This paper attempts to uncover the Christian community's conception of conflict and reconciliation. It focuses largely on the Nineveh Plain, and more specifically on Bartalla and Qaraqush. Although these two areas have been repeatedly addressed by most key informants and participants in focus groups, this does not mean that tensions do not exist in other areas where Christians share a public space with other groups. Rather, our findings suggest that similar ethno-religious tensions also exist in other areas, albeit in varying degrees of severity.

This paper is one of a series of reports produced as part of a study entitled *Perceptions of Reconciliation and Conflict among Minority Groups in Northern Iraq*. The study was commissioned by the United States Institute for Peace (USIP) and covers five ethno-religious communities in Northern Iraq: Yazidi, Christian, Turkmen, Shabak and Sabeen-Mandaeans. The study took place from May 2016 until January 2017. This paper focuses on the Christian community and constitutes an amended version of a report previously submitted to USIP. The findings in this report are based on qualitative data collected through 22 semi-structured key informant interviews and two focus group discussions. Participants in the study included male and female community leaders, activists, intellectuals, and spiritual and political representatives

11 United States Commission for International Religious Freedom. (2013). Annual Report 2013. Washington, D.C.

12 Ibid.

13 Salloum, Sa'ad. *A Guide to Minorities in Iraqi Memory, Identity and Challenges*. Baghdad: Masarat, 2013.

14 Ibid.

3. Findings

3.1 Bartalla and Qaraqosh

Bartalla was formed during the 1970's as a sub-district of Al-Hamdaniya District, which was established in 1970. Qaraquh is another name used synonymously to denote Al-Hamdaniya city.¹⁵ Focus group discussions (FGDs) and a score of interviews revealed that Bartalla and Qaraqosh are considered to be the two places most affected by ethno-religious tensions. In both Bartalla and Qaraqosh city the findings suggest that the conflict is perceived to be largely between Christians and the Shia segment of the Shabaks.¹⁶

Various underlying causes for the tensions between these two have been identified; the first relates to identity. Christians claim that Bartalla and Qaraqosh had carried a Christian identity up until recent history, but the former lost its ethno-religious character after the wholesale settlement of the Shabaks; while the second still maintains a substantial Christian majority. With regards to Bartalla, the general feeling among Christians interviewed was that it was inhabited by a community that was exclusively Christian until recently. Highlighting this trait, a Christian civil activist noted:

“Bartalla was a pure Christian area. There were no other ethnicities living there, but after a period of time, the government tried to change the demography of the area by introducing new people to that area. They were not even Christian. Now the number of Shabaks is higher than Christians.”

Stressing the Christian identity of Bartalla, another local Christian public servant nostalgically noted:

“Bartalla has always been a Christian town. Its history goes back to around 3000 years ago. It was demolished three times. When it was rebuilt the last time, its entire population was Christian. Up until 1972 there were only 2 Shabak families in Bartalla.”

Emboldened by the ascendancy to power of Shia parties in Baghdad after the Ba'ath regime was toppled in 2003. Shabaks in Northern Iraq, specifically the Shia Shabaks (Christians claim), embarked on an extensive land-encroachment process with financial backing from Iran. Many Christians believe that the ultimate aim was to increase Shia presence, seize power in local government institutions, and change the demography of the area. Achieving this would give the Shia's the tools to; undermine the Sunnis in the Nineveh Governorate, embolden a strip of land branded as “Shia Crescent,”¹⁷ or at the very least serve Iran's vested interests. And so, the Shabaks started a large-scale movement to Bartalla, where demand to purchase land increased significantly. The increased appetite for buying property in Bartalla caused galloping inflation, tempting Christians to sell their properties, causing a rift within the Christian community itself. Segments of the community fiercely opposed selling the area while others could not refuse the financial enticement. Christians consider such practices, coupled with the increased insecurity, to have stripped Bartalla of its Christian identity, and rebranded it as “Capital of the Shabaks.”¹⁸

“By default, religious extremism affects trust and confidence, and that in itself generates a strange relationship among the communities. Speaking of Bartalla in general, the Shias started to put pressure on the rest of the minorities, specifically Christians. For example, the Christians in Bartalla had their own small shops, and the Shias would come and give them options to sell their shops. They would offer huge amounts of money and we didn't know the source of the money.”

15 UNAMI. (2007). Internal disputed boundaries, Unpublished report.

16 In the rest of the report the word 'Shabaks' is used to denote only the Shia segment of the community.

17 The term “Shia Crescent” is typically used to refer to the alliance between majority Shia Iran and Iraq, and Syria. In this context, it is meant to refer to the area where Shia are present in the Nineveh Plain that makes a crescent around Mosul.

18 Christians mentioned that the nickname was coined by a provocative Shabak representative and member of the Dawa Party, to indicate that the area is under the control of Shabaks.

A handful of the respondents mentioned another reason behind the Shabaks moving in to Bartalla: the quality of services and infrastructure in the villages they inhabited. According to interviewees, Shabaks were originally from the villages that surround Bartalla. These villages were usually less developed in terms of infrastructure lacking schools, hospitals, and services. With town centers having better infrastructure and services, they became destinations for the neighboring Shabaks.

However, some Christians challenge this reason and argue that the intensity and organisation of the migration- in addition to the increased availability of funds to purchase lands in Christian areas, cast a shadow of doubt on the motives behind the process. They believe that the implicit aim was to change the demography of the area and empower the Shia's.

“After 2003, it was realized that the trend of moving towards Christian area was systematic. The reason is that during Saddam's regime the movement was not big in scale. But after 2003, Shia Shabaks would give huge amounts of money to buy Christian lands.”

- An academic from Qaraqosh

Like Bartalla, Qaraqosh seems to have been fraught with similar complexities, though not reaching the same intensity of identity dispute since the area still has a majority Christian community. This predominance is believed to have been maintained largely by the religious leadership and the Kurdish security forces (the Asayesh).

It may also be argued that the tension between Christians and Shabaks could have a religious grounding. A number of the participants mentioned incompatibility between Christianity and Islam. They argued that Christians objected to Muslims moving into their areas not only after 2003, but even during the ancien régime. Due to differences in belief and religious practices between the two, communal disagreements are inevitable. Nevertheless, on the other end of the spectrum lie those that attribute the religious dissonance to misinterpretation of Islam and not the religion itself. Their observation is that certain principles of Islam are misinterpreted and preached incorrectly by some religious leaders. Therefore, religious diversity and tolerance should be made a priority in these areas.

3.2 Sunni- Christian Relationship

It was a general belief among the Christians that the increased presence of the Shabaks across the Nineveh Plain prompted the Sunnis in Mosul to react and initiate a rivalry in the area. However, the Sunni population could not catch up with Shia levels due to their small numbers and the increased support Shias received. Christians felt helpless and without support, as their representation in the local government was not strong enough to influence a decision in the face of the Shia, Sunni and Kurdish parties within the government configuration. Therefore, an outlook arose within the Christian community that the sectarian rivalry is responsible for the encroachment process post 2003 across the Nineveh Plain in general and also in Bartalla specifically.

The relationship between Christians and Sunni Arabs appears to be imbued with mistrust- there are numerous causes. One is related to the rivalry between the Sunnis and Shias, which had damaging repercussions to the Christians across Iraq, but specifically in Nineveh Province. The level of sectarian conflict between the two main Islamic denominations rose considerably in the years following 2003, causing security vacuums and arousing communal grievances only to the detriment of the minorities. This atmosphere allowed for extremist groups to emerge- and thrive. Vulnerable and defenseless, Christians and further minority groups fell prey to extremism. They have suffered from relentless attacks, most severely in Baghdad¹⁹ and Mosul²⁰.

IS's swift military advances in 2014, its occupation of large swathes of land in the Nineveh Plains, the destruction, and soaring number of casualties associated with the invasion²¹ added another level of complexity to Christian-Sunni relations. IS is a Sunni extremist group, and those who remained under IS's rule in Nineveh Plain are thought to be largely Sunnis, hence the growing perception that those who remained were in fact linked to IS. This may have severely damaged Christian-Sunni relations to the extent that some of the participants expressed despondency about the low potential to rebuild societal bonds.

3.3 Baghdad-Erbil Dispute

Another branch of Christian dissatisfaction is in relation to KRG's policies in the Nineveh Plains in general. Particular participants believed that the major Kurdish political parties politicized and divided the Christian community after 2003. They pressured existing Christian political parties to fall under their control, created new Kurdish-affiliated political parties, and alienated those who rejected Kurdish policies in the region. Moreover, the fact that the Peshmerga forces and the Kurdish Asayesh forces controlled security in Nineveh Plain while its administration was managed by the central government of Iraq (CGI) also contributed to deepening divisions as both actors pursued conflicting agendas regarding the future of the area. Each tried to co-opt and tie the minorities to its side, resulting in increased polarisation and fragmentation.

3.4 Christians in the KRI

Christians living in KRI, under the KRG, fared better than those in the disputed territories. The Baghdad-Erbil rivalry did not affect them. They were better protected by legal provisions and enjoyed equal business and employment opportunities. However, they had their grievances too.

Based on the interviews, land ownership, underdevelopment and unimplemented statutes in certain places are the main issues facing the Christians in the KRI. Firstly, respondents mentioned that certain Christian villages in Duhok were severely damaged by the Iraqi Government in the 1960's and 70's, on the grounds that their inhabitants were part of the Kurdish dissidence. These lands – a Christian Parliamentarian put the number at 53 villages – were later encroached upon and settled by Kurds and have not been returned to their original owners despite repeated formal appeals and court rulings.

Christian representatives have claimed that large swathes of land in Erbil that are owned by Christians have been appropriated by the KRG and used for various purposes, including private investment. Despite numerous promises and even official court and KRG rulings, they claim no restitution has been granted. The unresolved land disputes in the KRI have incited grievances against the authorities to the extent that Christians have referred to this issue as 'Kurdification'.

The second issue relates to laws and the lack of will to implement them. A significant number of Christians find the law that dictates the passing of faith from parents to their children objectionable. This is so because in the event of an interfaith marriage, any offspring would be counted as Muslim by default.²² In addition, Christians have expressed not only frustration but also privation of hope for the governments' will to apply

19 Chulov, Martin. "Baghdad church siege survivors speak of taunts, killings and explosions." *The Guardian*. 2010 November 1. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/nov/01/baghdad-church-siege-survivors-speak>.

20 "Christian areas targeted in deadly Baghdad attacks." *BBC News*. 2010 November 10. Retrieved from: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-11724378>.

21 A detailed account of the casualties and the impact of IS on the minorities is available at: http://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/MRG_CFRRep_Iraq_July16.pdf

22 It should be noted that the objection is about Article 26 of the Unified National Card Law passed by the Iraqi parliament in 2016. Although it was issued by the Iraqi parliament, the law may be applicable in the KRI as well.

laws that advance equality. An example is Law No. 5 issued in 2015 by the Kurdistan Parliament and signed by the president of the KRI to address appropriated Christian land. However, it is yet to be enforced. Additionally, the interview subjects view the KRI’s draft constitution to be biased towards Islam. On this point, Christians and other minorities are not granted their due rights as the Constitution is based on Islamic sources. Thus, calls for a secular system were repeatedly voiced in the interviews.

3.5 Summary of the findings

Given the staggering number and scale of disputes and disagreements, it should be no surprise to hear differing views about the administrative future of the Nineveh Plain within the Christian community. Opinions range from wanting a standalone Nineveh Plain region, or a governorate tied to Baghdad or Erbil, to introducing new ethnic-based administrative units within the current arrangement.

The following table explains the tensions impacting the Christian and other communities:

Tensions	Perceived Reasons
Christian – Shabak	Shabaks have encroached on areas inhabited mainly by Christians causing communal tension and conflicts.
Christian – Sunni	Sunnis joined or supported IS and are thus complicit in the large-scale violence.
Christian – KRG	Weak trust towards the KRG because of its policies in Nineveh Plain, and it s failure defend the area from IS onslaught. Grievances against the draft constitution and certain other laws
Christian – CGI	Weak trust towards the Baghdad after the collapse of the Iraqi army in the face of IS in Nineveh. Irasq failed to reach an agreement with KRG about the future if disputed territories
Christian – Muslims/Islam	The Iraqi authorities’ a ambivalence about extremists preaching religious violence or misinterpretations of Islam that led to discriminations and growing violence.
Christian – Christian	Some argue that the Nineveh Plain should be administered by the KRG, others want it to be tied to Baghdad, while others want semi-autonomy.

4. The Way Forward

This section will focus on areas that can be seen as entry points to militate against potential conflicts, and possibly pave the way for peaceful coexistence and reconciliation. Such areas include rule of law, security and justice. They are addressed in detail below.

4.1 Rule of law

Quite often, Christians have considered weakness in the rule of law in Iraq to be the main cause of their beleaguered relations with other communities. According to the respondents, weak rule of law has caused their community to endure unfair treatment, underrepresentation, insecurity, displacement and perceptions of inferiority. To solve such problems or at least decrease their severity, they believe that enforcing the rule of law and prosecuting transgressors, namely IS affiliates, is imperative. However, the data reveals that rule of law also carries another meaning to Christians. To some, it means rectifying unjust practices committed in the past. Though despondent about the potential to establish the rule of law, those in this camp argue that without redressing past injustices, via relocation of the Shabaks to the areas from which they originated, there is little hope to step forward. To others, ridding governmental institutions of the influence of religion and religious institutions constitutes holding up the rule of law. Still others see the introduction of new ethnic-based administrative units in the Nineveh Plain to be one way of enforcing the rule of law.

Wimmer (2003) notes that the influence of ethnicity and religion may well be strengthened at the early stages of democratisation.²³ This proposition seems to be in line with what Christians recall about the dynamics after 2003. They recount that their relations started to crumble after the previous regime was toppled. They also argue that public institutions lost their credibility mainly because religious clerics and the political parties, which were established along ethnic channels, started to shield authority in governmental institutions, resulting in practices that propagated clientelism and patronage. This is allegedly true so much so in Mosul City that one of the political parties has achieved a near monopoly on public departments. In addition, some of the participants heavily criticised the American administration, holding it accountable for the mayhem that bedeviled Iraq and its institutions after 2003 because it was in charge of governing the country, but allowed for its disintegration.

Similar to Mosul, most of the discussants mentioned that after 2003 the Shia political parties increased their presence and exerted significant influence over the governmental institutions in certain areas in Nineveh Plain. As a result, ethnic tensions heightened between the two groups, reaching intense proportions as the Christian community suffered further marginalization, insecurity and reduced employment opportunities. With the backing of Baghdad, the Shabaks increased their grip on power at local level, taking the largest share of employment opportunities whilst security deteriorated.

The Christian community appears to generally agree that the way forward in addressing the issue of rule of law, is to ward off the influence of the religious institutions and the political parties over governmental institutions. This whilst minimising the presence of the latter in Nineveh Plain. However, given the current dynamic in Iraq, reducing leverage on governmental institutions may not be easily achieved- at least in the short run. A tailor-made mechanism of accountability and measuring performance could go a long way towards providing a solution in this regard.

23 Wimmer, A. (2003). Democracy and ethno-religious conflict in Iraq. *Survival*,45 (4), 111-134., p.13

The fact that both Christians and Shabaks fell prey to the vicious attacks of IS in 2014 brings them under the same umbrella of being victims. This point should be capitalised upon to initiate a dialogue between the two communities regarding future peaceful coexistence, respect and mutual tolerance. In doing so, it could be of benefit to call on religious leaders of both communities, although caution should be taken. Divisions of Christians consider the religious leadership to be politicized, and have thus preferred to exclude them from future efforts of reconciliation. This perception also applies to politicians who are deemed part of the problem. Therefore, in identifying the most trustful and unbiased leadership, it is of paramount importance to consider the community's views if they are to be included in future reconciliatory endeavors. For reconciliation to succeed, some believe it should be a bottom up process, where the grassroots are the most active and politicians are kept aside.

Changing current boundaries by introducing new administrative units along ethnic lines appears to be favored by the Christian community as a means to address the weak rule of law. The assumption is that such a move will decrease the number of conflicting actors, as well as their clout on public institutions, leading to decreased disagreements. However, the exact configurations of such an arrangement have not been well explored by the groups involved. Furthermore, disagreements from the neighboring Yazidi and Turkmen villages may arise, as it is likely that their areas would be affected.

For Christians, rule of law is perceived to be essential in preventing conflict and further exacerbation of societal relations in Nineveh Plain. In their eyes, governmental institutions, such as the police and the courts, need to be empowered to enforce the rule of law. This reinforcement should guarantee objectivity, efficiency, fairness in the treatment of the population and most importantly detaching religion and the political parties' grip over local governmental institutions. Unless religion and state are separated, and a secular constitution is adopted, they claim that the current fragmentation and marginalization would continue. This view is perhaps based on the power of the political parties over the entire system of governance in Iraq; a clout that has been divisive, according to the argument. Decreased influence of political parties is deemed particularly necessary in the post-liberation climate, since problems of vengeance and ownership, among others, will loom large. The issue of who will actually take the responsibility of empowering local institutions and governing the area does not appear to be a major bone of contention among the Christians, (although the majority has favoured Baghdad given that ideally, institutions will eventually rise up to the task of maintaining stability).

4.2 Security

The vast majority of participants hold the view that the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the dynamics that followed have had adverse effects on the Christian community in Iraq. Not only did their communal ties deteriorate, they also suffered from new internal cleavages. The war incited animosity and retributive actions against Christians, as they were either associated with the "Christian West" which waged the war,²⁴ or because they were branded as "American Agents."²⁵ As a result, violence against Christians rose considerably in the years after 2003, taking the form of killings, recurrent attacks, abductions, torture, and forced displacement, leaving them extremely vulnerable.²⁶ Many Christians blame the American administration and its policies for the persecution they have been facing since 2003. From their perspective, miscalculated decisions such as dismantling the army and dismissing of a large number of bureaucrats, and the lack of proper planning undermined public institutions, heightened sectarian conflict and instigated widespread instability in Iraq.

24 Ara Bedlian, The chapter on Christians entitled Christians in Iraq: Decreased number and Immigration Challenges, page 62.

25 Youash, M. (2008). Iraq's Minority Crisis and US National Security: Protecting Minority Rights in Iraq. *Am. U. Int'l L. Rev.*, 24, 341. (P.347)

26 Human Rights Watch. (2009). *On Vulnerable Ground: Violence Against Minority Communities in Nineveh Province's Disputed Territories*. NYC, NY: HRW.

Such decisions provided the opportunity for certain sectarian political parties to take the reigns of power and carry out divisive policies, resulting in years of insecurity and tension. Most affected were the ethnically diverse governorates, home to many minorities. Extremist groups capitalised on these tensions and managed to infiltrate various governmental institutions.

Prior to the emergence of IS in 2014, security in Nineveh Plain was largely in the hands of the Peshmerga and the Asayesh forces, while lying under the CGI administratively. This created a situation that proved harmful to Christians. Baghdad and Erbil pursued contradicting agendas about the future of the region, with each wanting full control. Christians argue that this rivalry negatively affected stability of the area. Both parties worked to gain the backing of local communities, causing rifts between and within the various ethno-religious groups. As a result, security among other aspects, depreciated before 2014.

Besides the negative impact of the dispute between the CGI and KRG, Christians have also reportedly suffered from the Shia-Sunni sectarian conflict which followed the marginalisation of Sunnis after the 2003 regime change. Security in Nineveh Province sharply declined with terror attacks, organised crime and increasingly pervasive resistance to the US occupation. Kept away from power, Sunnis found themselves more and more isolated.²⁷ Taking advantage of this divisive climate, extremist groups like al-Qaeda managed to penetrate a disgruntled part of society and unleash relentless attacks on religious minorities in Mosul—specifically the Christians and Shabaks who fled to the nearby Nineveh Plain. According to Christians, an increased population of Shia Shabaks in some areas in Nineveh Plain brought Shia political offices to the areas too. These offices became targets of terrorist attacks at later stages.

It is a common perception among the Christians interviewed that many Sunni Arabs and Sunni Turkmens in Nineveh Plain joined or supported IS's expansion. Fair prosecution of perpetrators is therefore a demand of a preponderance of the respondents. This being said, to avoid the danger of painting all Sunni Arabs and Turkmens with the same brush of guilt, establishing truth commissions could go a long way in determining what happened in the area, and to set the record straight as to who were the real perpetrators, bystanders and who was forced to commit crime.

The Christian community is concerned about the proliferation of armed groups both within their community and within the communities of their perceived rivals in Nineveh Plain. Currently, multiple Christian armed groups exist in Nineveh Plain, and each pursues a different political agenda. Furthermore, the Shabaks have also established their own forces in this territory. Given their strained relations, and rivalry for power and domination, their relations may suffer even more.

Governance in Nineveh Plain can be entwined with difficulty due to the reasons mentioned above, and whoever governs the area after liberation, be it the KRG, CGI or both, should take very seriously the responsibility of providing security and safety for the citizens. Attaining legitimacy, and more importantly the trust of the people, is a vital yet difficult task to achieve in the future. Therefore, it is of great importance that Baghdad and Erbil reach an agreement on how to handle the security of the disputed Nineveh Plain, and how to engage local communities. Engaging local stakeholders from now on to discuss future dynamics could help build confidence in the authorities and facilitate future cooperation on the ground.

27 O'Driscoll, Dylan. "US Policy in Iraq: Searching for the Reverse Gear?" *Middle East Policy* 23.1 (2016): 34-41.p. 35.

4.3 Justice

Justice has various conceptions, including retributive, restorative, compensatory, historical and rectifying (truth commissions).²⁸ Retributive justice focusses on the idea that reconciliation would not be fulfilled without employing punitive measures. Restorative justice attempts to restore relations between the victim and the offender by bringing together the victims and relevant communities to discuss facts and identify the causes of wrongdoings. This type of justice aims to elevate the status of the victims through participation and increased involvement and input in post-traumatic climates. Historical justice seeks to provide accounts of past misconduct to establish truth about the past as a means to hold perpetrators accountable. Compensatory justice, on the other hand, generally focuses on reinstating the status quo prior to the conflict. This would include restitution of property and also the regaining of liberty, citizenship and legal rights.²⁹ Other academics incorporate additional concepts in evaluations of justice, such as economic, social, and symbolic considerations.³⁰

In this study, the participants have underlined the importance of establishing justice, but depending on the context, their conceptions of justice differed. This difference in views is understandable because the meaning of justice is often context-bound. To some, mainly those from Nineveh Plain, justice carries retributive, compensatory and historical dimensions, while to others, mainly those from the KRI, ideas focus on social justice. Social justice entails recognition, respect and equal treatment in a society.

Christians in Qaraqush and Bartalla, as discussed earlier, have grievances against the Shabak community that revolve around land encroachment, aggrandisement, and social and religious incompatibility. Therefore, to establish justice, Christians demand that these grievances be addressed. Both Christian and Shabak representatives have already considered ways to tackle some of their grievances, such as introducing new administrative units. When this suggestion was submitted to the CGI as a way to ameliorate tensions between Shabaks and Christians in Nineveh, the government rejected it. Christians suspect the reasons for this rejection are political party rivalries and the Shia-Sunni sectarian conflict.

Establishing an independent judicial institution, to try IS perpetrators and those who commit acts of revenge, is a crucial part of the justice process. However, there are several interpretations among the Christian community as to who should administer the judicial process. One segment of the interviewees favored CGI courts, others showed preference to the KRG while others demanded international supervision. Yet another camp stressed impartiality and representation, regardless of the entity. Baghdad, Erbil and related international bodies in coordination with local stakeholders should give post-conflict litigation serious consideration and reach an agreeable formulation. Failing to do so is likely to renew grievances and sink the judicial process as well as future reconciliatory efforts.

28 Bloomfield, David, Terri Barnes, and Lucien Huyse, eds. *Reconciliation after violent conflict: A handbook*. International Idea, 2003.p. 97.

29 Ibid p. 97-145

30 Lambourne, W. (2204). *Post-Conflict Peacebuilding: Meeting Human Needs for Justice and Reconciliation*. Issue 4, p 7.

The Middle East Research Institute

Unless otherwise stated, the views expressed in this document do not necessarily reflect the views of The Middle East Research Institute. The Institute should be adequately credited should any of the text be used.

Middle East Research Institute
Erbil - Kurdistan Region - Iraq
info@meri-k.org | +964(0)662649690

www.meri-k.org | facebook.com/meri.info | twitter.com/meri_info



Middle East Research Institute

Erbil - Kurdistan Region - Iraq

info@meri-k.org | +964(0)662649690

facebook.com/meri.info | twitter.com/meri_info

WWW.MERI-K.ORG