

# The Sabean-Mandaeans

## Perceptions of Reconciliation and Conflict



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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.

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# **The Sabean-Mandaeans**

## **Perceptions of Reconciliation and Conflict**

**MERI Policy Paper**

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# Contents

1. Abstract .....	4
2. The Sabeian-Mandaean Community and ‘Reconciliation’ .....	5
3. Challenges Faced by the Sabeian-Mandaean Community .....	6
4. In Baghdad and the South of Iraq.....	6
5. In the Kurdistan Region and Kirkuk .....	10
6. Preventing Extinction .....	11
7. The Way Forward .....	13
8. Recommendations .....	14
References .....	15

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Photo obtained from [geopolis.francetvinfo.fr](http://geopolis.francetvinfo.fr) (by Michael Kooren)

## 1. Abstract

The Sabean-Mandaean community in Iraq is threatened with extinction. As a result of unabated kidnappings, robberies and killings, much of the community has been displaced from Baghdad and areas in the south of Iraq to the Kurdistan Region and Kirkuk. Considering the particular vulnerability of the community, and the continued security threats present in their areas of origin, community members are currently not considering going back. After the defeat of the Islamic State, the Iraqi government should seize the window of opportunity to promote coexistence, religious pluralism and citizenship. In the short term, however, the Kurdistan Regional Government can play an important role in supporting the continued survival of the Sabean-Mandaean community by adopting a long-term vision towards their settlement in the region and facilitate their integration in Kurdistan society. The international community who are concerned with religious pluralism in Iraq should seek to support the KRG in its approach and improve the community's connectedness with its diaspora by reducing restrictions on visiting visas for countries hosting a large number of Sabean-Mandaeans.

## 2. The Sabean-Mandaean Community and 'Reconciliation'

The Sabean-Mandaean community identifies itself as a linguistic and religious minority indigenous to Iraq (Mandaean Union, 2016). Mandeans are believed to be part of the group of Sabean religions mentioned in the Qur'an as believers that are not to face persecution, along with Christians and Majus. Although there exists a fair degree of theological ambiguity as to whether the Sabbeans referred to in the Qur'an are the same as the modern-day Sabean-Mandaean community in Iraq, it is clear that their belief in a single god pre-dates the rise of Islam. At times, however, the community has been accused of pagan beliefs – such as worshipping the stars – due to misinterpretations of their complex beliefs (Drower, 1937). The religion recognises some of the prophetic figures of the Abrahamic religions such as John, who is especially venerated as the baptiser, but views others as false prophets (Lupieri, 2002). Baptism in flowing water features as an important ritual in the Sabean-Mandaean faith. The community has therefore historically lived in close vicinity of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

The number of Sabean-Mandaeans living in Iraq has decreased dramatically over the last decades. The community suffered greatly under Saddam Hussein regime's efforts to drain the southern marshes, forcing Sabean-Mandaeans to abandon their way of life and prompting many to find ways of leaving the country (Minority Rights Group International, 2014). International sanctions meant that this trend continued in the 1990s. After 2003, the growing instability combined with the lifting of restrictions on leaving the country accelerated this process of emigration. It is estimated their numbers have dramatically decreased from around 50,000 to 70,000 prior to 2003, to a mere 3,500 to 5,000 in 2012 (Institute for International Law and Human Rights, 2013). Sources from the community itself put the estimated number currently at 6,000 community members in Iraq (Mandaean Union, 2016). Many Sabean-Mandaeans fear their community has scattered and diffused to the extent that it will not be able to preserve its culture and traditions for much longer (Salloum, 2013).

Since 2003, periodic reports published on violence against Sabean-Mandaeans show it to be an unabated trend (Mandaean Union, 2016). The U.S. Department of State reports that the Sabean-Mandaean community faces discrimination and intimidation tactics designed to pressure community members into leaving their areas of residence in Iraq (US DoS, 2014). Kidnappings and robberies are the most common crimes against the community. Iraq's current climate of impunity renders Sabean-Mandaeans particularly vulnerable due to their strictly pacifist faith and lack of social tribal structures, militia-affiliations and geographic concentration of the community (Mandaean Union, 2011). The government's inability to investigate crimes and prosecute defendants is an important reason for the increase and persistence of violent attacks against minorities (Amnesty International, 2014).

With the demise of the Islamic State, Iraq enters a new period; a rare window of opportunity where it must seek to break with its violent past and engineer a brighter future for its people. Building a better future requires communities that were previously pitted against each other to come to terms with what has happened and repair severed social bonds. This process of reconciliation can take on a myriad of forms. Its main elements – non-violent coexistence, truth, justice, acknowledgement, apology, forgiveness, equality, and trust – and the exact configuration in which they must be prioritised differ from country to country, and from community to community. The elements of reconciliation – let alone the concept itself – are therefore heavily subject to local context and community views. What does justice mean to different victims? And what does peaceful coexistence and equality look like in different contexts? What reconciliation is, in other words, depends on who you are and where you are looking at it from. Thus, the central logic driving this

research is the recognition that preconceived one-size-fits-all notions of reconciliation cannot simply be imposed on target communities.

This report is one of a series produced as part of a study on Perceptions on 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-Mandaeen. The study took place from May 2016 until January 2017. This report is an amended version of a report previously submitted to USIP, its focus is on the Sabeen-Mandaeen community. The findings in this report are based on qualitative data collected through 24 semi-structured key informant interviews and 2 focus groups.

### **3. Challenges Faced by the Sabeen-Mandaeen Community**

As nearly all Sabeen-Mandaeans living in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) have been displaced from elsewhere in Iraq, participants in the study were asked about their experience prior to displacement and about their current situation in the KRI. Although the situations are markedly different, the community faces a number of challenges in both locations and participants expressed deep concerns regarding the continued survival of their community in Iraq and elsewhere.

### **4. In Baghdad and the South of Iraq**

As the security situation worsened after 2003, many Sabeen-Mandaeans moved abroad or moved north into the KRI or Kirkuk. Most participants originally came from Baghdad or regions further south such as Missan and Basra. Many kept in close contact with family still there. Interviewees stated that the main push factors for their displacement were issues related to security and social justice.

Interviewees described a climate of complete impunity. Kidnappings, robberies and killings were the order of the day and the police force was unable to investigate or arrest suspects. Many shared personal accounts of how the growing insecurity in Iraq had affected themselves or their immediate family. In Iraq, Sabeen-Mandaeans are perceived as a wealthy community, mainly due to the fact that many traditionally work as goldsmiths and gold traders. When rule of law disintegrated, the community quickly became a prime target for kidnappings and robberies by criminal gangs and competing militias. The disproportionately high number of kidnappings and robberies against the community has been widely reported on by the Institute for International Law and Human Rights (2013: p. 111-119) and the United Nations (UNHCR, 2012: p. 29), as well as the Sabeen-Mandaeen community itself.<sup>1</sup> These crimes, in combination with religiously motivated attacks and intimidation tactics were frequently mentioned as the main reasons for Sabeen-Mandaeans leaving their area of origin.

I left Baghdad because I used to own a goldsmith shop, and one day I caught a robber. The police came and told me; "Listen, you have a shop here. And his associates are still around. If you do not release him, they might come later and hurt you."

So the police told me it is better for me let him go, because if he gets out otherwise through corruption or a bribe, or his fellow-gang members decide they want to take revenge, the police would be unable to stop them.

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<sup>1</sup> The Mandaean Associations Union publishes detailed annual reports on crimes and atrocities committed against members of their community. These reports can be found at: [www.mandaeenunion.com](http://www.mandaeenunion.com).



That is when I thought I should leave and go to Erbil.

▮ **Former Goldsmith, Baghdad.**

We had a lot of kidnappings because of the money. We don't know exactly who is behind it, but my brother was kidnapped in 2008. We had to pay a lot of money to get him back.

▮ **Student, Baghdad.**

The view that acts of violence against members of the Sabean-Mandaean community were religiously motivated proved contentious. While some participants see the frequent attacks as a clear sign of intolerance towards them, a symptom of the widely-held view that members of their community somehow do not belong or are unwanted in their areas of origin, others see the attacks mainly as a result of general lawlessness and the weak position their community holds 'in the middle' of a much larger Sunni/Shia conflict.

To substantiate the latter view, they point out that when competition even between Shia militias intensified – e.g. between Sadrists and Badr – kidnappings and robberies would increase. This is, in their view, not the result of religiously motivated targeting, but of general armed struggle between different actors who seek to finance it at the expense of innocent civilians.

Participants who see the attacks as religiously motivated would point to attacks on religious ceremonies, and intimidation tactics used – often in the form of threat letters – to show Sabean-Mandaeans that they do not belong in a certain area and should leave. Participants explained that the lack of police investigations renders it impossible to know with certainty what the motivation is behind many of the attacks. The Mandaean Associations Union maintains an extensive catalogue of such crimes and publishes numerous reports which include evidence of kidnappings, intimidation, rape and assassination.<sup>2</sup>

In my view, most incidents against us are related to property or money, and some inter-personal disputes. A person wants to have our property or money and he finds a way of getting it; usually through kidnapping or robbery.

▮ **Goldsmith, Basra**

Both Shia and Sunni actors, whenever they need money they think first about kidnapping a Sabean. In Baghdad, before 2003, 90% of goldsmiths was Sabean. Now it is only 1 or 2%.

We are not able to determine what drives the assassinations and kidnappings. We are not sure whether they were done because we follow a different religion or purely out of financial reasoning. There have not been any investigations into these incidents. Many of us, in the end, thought that instead of our money ending up in the hands of terrorists, we better migrate and leave the country.

▮ **Political leader, Baghdad**

The impunity with which crimes are committed clearly engenders a general sense of despondency about the future. Sabean-Mandaeans originally from Baghdad and areas in the Southern parts of Iraq did not expect the situation to improve in the near future, and none claimed to seriously consider going back at this point. Interviewees explained that national security forces such as the police and army are not able to stand up to the many powerful and competing armed militias now active in Iraq's capital and other areas of the country.

The police is afraid of the militias on the streets. And also of their leaders who hold positions of great power. When we tried to move back to Baghdad in 2010, we saw the community was militarised, there were lots of

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.mandaeanunion.com/mhrg>

militias. The city and its people had changed.

▸ **Health worker, Baghdad**

As long as Sunni and Shia are fighting we cannot go back. There are so many militias now... They are more powerful than the police. They can do whatever they want in the streets and no one can touch them. I have seen this with my own eyes.

▸ **Civil engineer, Baghdad**

As the government lost the capacity to provide security, interviewees explained they had to ensure their safety through other means. In areas such as Missan, Basra and Baghdad, interviewees stated that they felt forced to pay money to tribesman and militias in order to obtain some level of protection for themselves and their family. Participants explained that, in the south especially, it is vital to be recognised and accepted as part of a tribe or community. This recognition and acceptance, however, is subject to assimilation and payment according to interviewees. They relayed accounts of how tribesman and militia leaders approach Sabean-Mandaeans living in their area and demand financial support for settling tribal conflicts, religious ceremonies and events.

During Muharram for example, a holy month in Islam which Shias observe as the month in which Hussein Ibn Ali was martyred, multiple interviewees explained that Sabean-Mandaeans are expected to financially support parades and other public events. Financial support is not enough however, and numerous participants claimed Sabeans-Mandaeans living in the south also feel pressured into actively partaking in rituals of self-harm; e.g. floggings with a Zanjeer, lacerations and other ways in which some male Shias express their mourning over Hussein's martyrdom. If Sabean-Mandaeans do not actively partake, interviewees claimed, they risk disenfranchisement from the local community. Considering the current climate of lawlessness and the government's inability to provide security, this can have dramatic consequences for their safety in the south.

The Sabean-Mandaean faith, which is strictly pacifist and prohibits the carrying of arms even in self-defence, leaves community members with only two means of protection: payment or escape. Interviewees explained that not everyone has the option to escape, for varying reasons such as an illness in the family, children who have yet to finish their studies, or because they lack the financial means to start a new life elsewhere. Some interviewees were adamant that the only Sabean-Mandaeans left in Baghdad and the southern governorates are those for whom escape is not an option.

Did you know the Sabeans now share the lamentation of the Shias? In the south, they hit themselves just to avoid any threats coming from the Shias. If you do not take part in these ceremonies, you would be an anomaly. Something weird within the community and they would hurt you, kidnap members of your family, or they would threaten you.

▸ **Former Mandaean Council member, Baghdad**

You must have seen a convoy of Sabean-Mandaeans hitting themselves with the Shias during Muharram. This is only because they are afraid of the Shia community... In the south, tribalism rules over rule of law. If a Sabean feels vulnerable, he tried to align himself with a tribe; through giving money and participating in their religious ceremonies. That is one way of protecting themselves from other tribes and extremist groups.

▸ **Mandaean council member, Kirkuk**

Sabean-Mandaeans in the south have been subjected to mounting pressure to change their lifestyle in order to conform better to Islamic principles. Participants complained that their wives and daughters were unable to go out in public without wearing a veil, and that their alcohol shops were closed down at an increasing rate. Several interviewees shared personal stories of discrimination and xenophobia against them. In fact, a

significant number – 28 percent – of participants expressly used the term ‘second-class citizen’ to describe their perceived status in Iraq’s society. They feel inhibited in celebrating holidays and frequently opt not to for fear of affronting their surrounding community.

In Missan, we used to be called outcasts (Negiz). When we go to a funeral, and we drink tea, they would not even wash the dishes later but break them. This is the level of racism against us. In addition to that, the issue of wearing the veil was imposed on us.

▮ **Goldsmith, Missan**

Politically, the amendment of Iraq’s National Identity Card Law, in particular Article 26, in October 2015 appears to be a significant grievance among Sabean-Mandaeans. They see it as a structural injustice towards the minority communities in Iraq. The article stipulates that A) only a non-Muslim can change his religion, and B) children of whom one of the parents converts to Islam are automatically registered as Muslims. As Muslims cannot convert their religion, Sabeans see this as an infringement on the personal rights of the child and feel that it imposes a religion on members of their community. The law prohibiting alcohol is mentioned as a similar example of infringement on personal rights by the government. Although the law is not enforced in many places, the symbolism it projects is divisive and exclusionary they argued. For the sake of children’s rights and equality before the law, interviewees told researchers the latest amendment from October 2015 should be repealed and the law should return to its previous stipulations. Alternatively, there is no necessity to mention an individual’s religion on an identity card at all. Numerous participants also mentioned the passing of a recent law banning alcohol as the latest indication of the growing ‘theocratisation’ of the Iraq’s political arena and called for the law to be repealed as it sends a negative signal and inhibits the process of coexistence and reconciliation after the Islamic State.

We live in a situation which is quite similar to Velayat Faqih as it is in Iran. The minorities cannot live in a situation where the entire community is being Islamised. Article 26 of the National Identity Card Law, and the prohibition of alcohol are symptoms of that. We think it is an infringement of personal rights.

▮ **Erbil Mandaean Council Member, from Baghdad**

The government system should be based on citizenship rather than sectarianism. The laws now being passed are based on sectarian and religious preferences.

▮ **Community representative, Baghdad**

## 5. In the Kurdistan Region and Kirkuk

In the north, the situation is quite different. As most participants had previously lived in the south or Baghdad and later moved to the Kurdistan Region, they were able to make a comparison of their experience of living in both places. When asked about the security situation in the KRI, none of the interviewees expressed serious concerns about religiously motivated attacks. They predominantly regard the disintegration of rule of law in the rest of Iraq as the main reason for attacks on their community, and, as they perceive the KRG to maintain a firm grip on society, they do not feel under immediate threat from being targeted by religious extremist groups. They did however voice a number of other challenges.

Two-thirds of participants agreed that the language barrier between the Arabic speaking Sabeian-Mandaean community and the Kurdish speaking majority has a negative impact on community relations. They argued that it inhibits social ties across communities and is “bad for business” as it affects prospects of economic transactions in the small and wholesale private sector. A few participants also shared experiences of racism and discrimination against them on account of speaking Arabic. Being perceived as Arabs from the south sometimes results in discrimination and verbal abuse.

As displaced people with a limited social network, the community is especially struggling with the dearth of economic opportunities and lack of access to employment in the public sector. Before Baghdad suspended budget allocations to the KRG, its budget was largely determined by its proportion of Iraq’s population. This was determined at 17%. However, since IDPs are not part of this 17%, their salaries are not covered and thus they are generally barred from employment unless Baghdad pays their salaries. The process of secondment is also possible but fraud with difficulty and subject to political connectedness and mostly avoided.<sup>3</sup> This situation has remained unchanged even after Baghdad’s cutting of the budget.

A similar problem relates to the difficulties in transferring students from elsewhere in Iraq to the KRI. Students are often not able to switch universities without suffering delays. Additionally, students who attended high school in Iraq rather than the KRI do not automatically have access to Kurdish universities due to differences in curricula and the language barrier. Participants suspect the difficulties are mainly due to the KRG’s reluctance to cover the costs of education for people originally from outside the region – i.e. not part of the 17%.

Some participants also expressed frustration with visa/residency requirements. According to them, it has become increasingly difficult to obtain a residency permit, and when successful, it is only valid for short periods – sometimes as short as a month. Special permits are also required for buying property or starting a business. The arduous and time-consuming exercise of renewing permits every month is a heavy burden for people trying to build up a life after displacement.

Despite feeling generally safe in both the KRI and Kirkuk, participants did express concern that in these areas too, religious extremism may rise. Most Sabeian-Mandaeans felt there are no guarantees regarding the security situation in the future. When asked about the source of this feeling, several interviewees shared personal stories they felt were indicative of the fragility of social cohesion and religious acceptance in the KRI. One example was when the religious centre in Erbil wanted to adorn its roof with the principal symbol of the Sabeian-Mandaean faith – a cross covered by a white robe – they reportedly needed to bring four different cranemen as the first three declined the job upon realising it concerned a non-Islamic religious symbol. Interviewees jovially told the authors they only succeeded the fourth time by tricking the man,

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<sup>3</sup> This can happen, for example, in the case of teachers in public schools.

covering the whole object in a dark blanket and pretending it was something else.

We have started to develop a sense of fear in the community. That is because of the general rise of extremist ideology, but we do feel free here compared to Baghdad.

▫ **Local council leader, Erbil**

People usually come here [KRI] to stay for a while and leave. It is difficult for people to build up a life from the very beginning here. If they have to do it, they immediately decide to do it abroad because of assurance. Nobody here can guarantee what happens next. At the moment it is stable, but we don't know for how long.

▫ **Goldsmith, Missan**

## 6. Preventing Extinction

The ongoing emigration of Sabean-Mandaeans is clearly of major concern to the community to the point that it is seen as a serious threat to the survival of the community in Iraq and elsewhere. As the community becomes more scattered across the globe, emigrating to places in Europe, North America or Australia and New Zealand, it becomes increasingly difficult to preserve and pass on traditions, beliefs and language to future generations. It also becomes more difficult for young Sabeans to find a potential life partner practicing the same faith as most countries hosting Sabean-Mandaeans are home to only a small number. Moreover, the size of popular countries like the US, Canada and Australia is not conducive to keeping the community closely connected. In many places, including Iraq and the Kurdistan Region, there are no qualified priests to perform religious rituals such as baptisms. They often have to be flown in especially for the ceremony.<sup>4</sup>

Motivations for migration among the Sabean community are complex; ranging from push-factors such as insecurity, high living costs, a dearth of economic opportunities, a lack of integration into Kurdish society, and general feeling of pessimism regarding the direction of the country, to pull-factors such as the presence of family or social networks in other countries, the promise of education and better opportunities for future generations, as well as the perceived guarantee for long-term stability and protection from persecution. The authors spoke to several interviewees with concrete plans for leaving Iraq in the near future. For some, one or more of the above push factors was most pertinent, while others were drawn mainly by one or more of the pull factors present in the country of destination. It was clear however that most interviewees shared deep concerns about the continued survival of the Sabean-Mandaeans as their community becomes increasingly dispersed globally.

We worry that in two or three years the community here will have vanished, because the trend among the youth is to move abroad, to live abroad. And when they go abroad they lose their identity, the Sabean identity, because they get integrated in the communities there.

▫ **Local council member, Erbil**

Given the severity of their concerns, participants took the time to discuss their communities' needs and possible solutions at length. Recommendations ranged from diminishing the role of religion in politics and governance to raising awareness on the Sabean-Mandaean identity and the importance of tolerance. There was some divergence regarding whether the first steps of addressing the issues should be focused on bottom-up processes such as changing attitudes and increasing tolerance at the community level, or whether top-down measures such as strengthening the rule of law and diminishing sectarian policies should be

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<sup>4</sup> Interviewees in Erbil and Baghdad explained that the priest qualified to perform baptisms and other important religious ceremonies is often flown in from Australia. It is very difficult to become a priest in the Sabean faith. It involves being born within the priest-caste and not marrying outside of it, never cutting one's hair and beard, and flawless recitation of ancient religious texts and hymns. The coronation ceremony is described at length by the renowned anthropologist Lady E.S. Drower in her book *The Coronation of the Great Sislam* (1962).

prioritised. Most interviewees felt improving the rule of law would have the quickest positive effect in the short term, while others felt that only by combatting the rising tide of intolerance at a community level a real solution can be found. In case of the latter, nearly all interviewees felt the focus should be on the youth.

To that extent, the most commonly mentioned measure (61% of interviewees) was reforming the way religion was taught in Iraq's public schools. At the moment, interviewees explained, non-Muslim children are being instructed to leave the room during religious classes as they mostly focus on the teachings of Islam and do not spend much time on other religions. This, according to the interviewees, has an alienating effect on non-Muslims and widens the gap between communities. Instead, religious classes should be restructured so as to provide equal attention to all religions present in Iraq, and teachers should be trained to advocate the importance of religious tolerance. Some interviewees also argued in favour of abolishing religious classes in public schools all together.

We have a Ministry of Education and Scientific Research but the problem is students are taught science without education. Nothing about morality or citizenship. This is not taught at schools, only science.

– **Teacher, Kirkuk**

In general, however, the community appears pessimistic about the prospect of altering societal attitudes towards religious tolerance and plurality, and Baghdad's capacity to provide security in the near future. Consequently, displaced Sabean-Mandaeans are not planning to return to their areas of origin anytime soon. In the more immediate term therefore, improving the situation in the KRI becomes more important; keeping in mind that stemming the flow of emigration may prove critical in preserving this ancient community. Participants made a number of suggestions aimed at on the one hand improving their community's integration into the society in Kurdistan and, on the other, maintaining a critical level of connectedness for the endangered community.

To improve integration into Kurdish society, a number of participants floated the idea of mandatory language courses provided by the KRG. International organisations could be approached to provide financial and executive support if needed. In conjunction, the media could increase coverage and inform the public more on the Sabean-Mandaean identity. It seems interviewees feel the main objective here is to distinguish their community from displaced Arab populations living in the KRI. If the local Kurdish community has a better understanding of their identity, they reason, discrimination resulting from the misapprehension that they're Arab would decrease. Finally, Sabean-Mandaeans would like to be able to apply for longer-term residency permits. They explained the current permits given by the Kurdish Asayish<sup>5</sup> – if at all – are reportedly only valid for one month. Renewing the permit every month is a time-consuming task which displaced people with financial worries cannot afford to engage in.

To improve and maintain community connections, interviewees expressed the need to lower the barriers currently preventing Sabean-Mandaeans from moving to the KRI. Interviewees who have moved to the KRI or Kirkuk from the south frequently voiced concerns about their fellow Sabean-Mandaeans still resident in other areas of Iraq. No Sabean-Mandaean who has the ability and financial means to move remains in the south out of their own free will, according to interviewees. They explained however, that what frequently stops Sabeans from moving north is the lack of economic opportunities, high living costs, the inability of civil servants to be able to transfer their contracts to the KRG, and the difficulties surrounding the transferral of children or students who are in the middle of their education. If Sabeans had access to

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<sup>5</sup> The KRG's primary intelligence agency in Iraq.

public employment, they argue, they would be better able to cover the higher living costs and commit to sending their children to private schools. Of course, increasing access to public education in the KRI by reducing barriers for the transferral of students is also seen as important. Interviewees were convinced that if Sabeans were able to work in the public sector and their children could go to a public school here, almost all Sabean-Mandaeans would surely move to the relative safety of the Kurdistan Region.

Finally, the Sabean-Mandaean community hopes that the international community and possibly advocacy/lobby groups can do something to ease the process of getting tourist visas for countries with a high concentration of Sabean-Mandaeans. Nearly every family has relatives and friends in Canada, Australia, the United States or European countries. Although it is difficult for Iraqi citizens to get permission to visit other countries, interviewees explained that easing this process would make it easier for their children to find someone to get married to, or alternatively for parents to arrange marriages, thus helping to preserve the Sabean identity at home and abroad.

## **7. The Way Forward**

The Sabean-Mandaean community appears united in their views and express a highly coherent outlook on challenges and potential solutions. Arguably as a result of their lack of political engagement with Iraq's legislative and executive branches, the community does not seem to be as divided, or indeed polarised, as other minority communities in Northern Iraq. In terms of reconciliation, none of the interviewees or participants in focus groups made any far-reaching or extraordinary demands; they do not seem to prioritise punishment or vengeance of any sort, nor do they demand their own territory or security force. They ask only for the right to exist, for stability to emerge and a chance to return home and be accepted as part of Iraq's society.

The ongoing emigration of Sabeans from Iraq does appear to be approaching a critical tipping point. Their numbers have declined to the extent that the remnants of the community no longer feel able to maintain or pass on their ancient beliefs, rituals and language. There is a fear that the community is unlikely to survive for longer than two or three more generations.

At present, the best way of preserving the identity and culture of this community is by facilitating the long-term settlement of Sabean-Mandaeans in the KRI. For this to be feasible, however, the KRG needs to adopt a long-term vision and provide additional support for accommodating the community that is already largely in their midst. If the KRG designates the Sabean-Mandaean community as a particularly vulnerable group on account of their lack of a protective tribal structure, geographic concentration and pacifist beliefs, this could form a justification for attributing the Sabean-Mandaeans a special status distinct from other Iraqi IDPs currently in the KRI. This special status should then be accompanied by mechanisms facilitating the long-term integration of Sabean-Mandaeans in the Kurdish society.

In addition, the diplomatic community in Baghdad and Erbil could be made more aware of the importance and indeed urgency of providing Sabean-Mandaeans with visiting visas for countries hosting significant numbers of Iraqi Sabean-Mandaeans. Easing the process of getting visiting visas would allow families as well as the community at large to stay more connected, preserving beliefs and rituals fundamental to their identity. It may also enable the few remaining Sabean priests to travel more easily to important pockets of communities scattered in different countries.

## 8. Recommendations

### To the Government of Iraq:

- Political leaders need to publicly acknowledge and advocate for the importance of pluralism and religious diversity through passing and enacting laws that promote such concepts.
- Political leaders need to publicly defend basic human rights such as freedom of thought and religion, and refrain from drafting and enacting discriminatory laws.
- Amend or repeal Article 26 of National Identity Card Law, or otherwise abolish the practice of stating religion on identity cards.
- Amend or repeal the law banning alcohol in Iraq.
- Reform the security sector of Iraq by demobilising militias and/or integrating them in the national security forces.
- Consider ways of reforming the education curricula as to promote tolerance and religious pluralism.
- Encourage positive media coverage on minority identities, customs and beliefs in a way that celebrates diversity and promotes tolerance.

### To the Kurdistan Regional Government:

- Commit to preserving the Sabean-Mandaean identity and community in the region.
- Consider legal possibilities of assigning a special status to displaced Sabean-Mandaeans and adopt a long-term strategy for preserving the community in the region.
- Seek to provide language courses – potentially mandatory – to displaced persons.
- Provide long-term residency permits that are valid for one or multiple years allowing Sabean-Mandaeans to access public positions and education, buy property, houses and start businesses with greater ease.
- Encourage positive media coverage on minority identities, customs and beliefs in a way that celebrates diversity and promotes tolerance.

### To the International Community:

- Support the KRG in ways to facilitate the long-term settlement of Sabean-Mandaeans in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.
- Support efforts to provide language courses for Sabean-Mandaeans in Kurdish majority areas.
- Seek to find ways of easing visa requirements and reduce restrictions on Sabean-Mandaeans from Iraq wishing to visit family and community members abroad.
- Support inter-community dialogue sessions, and ensure youth participation in conferences and events that focus on religious tolerance.
- Support and urge the KRG and the Iraqi Government to pass and implement laws that promote inclusiveness, religious diversity and pluralism.



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