

## Why Iraq needs interfaith harmony now more than ever

7/02/2023

On the 19th of January, the Iraqi national team won the 2023 Gulf Cup that took place in the Iraqi southern city, Basra. Many participants from 'The Joint Initiative for Strategic Religious Action' (JISRA), organized a trip from the districts of Nineveh Plain and Kirkuk province, to Basra. Despite the participants identifying with different religious and ethnic groups, the underlying motivation was the same: they all wanted to travel South to support their national team.

While this trip may sound small and arguably even a given for nationals of Iraq, its significance ought not to be overlooked as inter-faith activities and support have not always been guaranteed. Ruling Iraq along sectarian divides dates back pre Saddam Hussein's time, and stems from the continuous efforts of trying to 'nationalize' one unified Iraq (including language, culture, and religion)- something that has led to great marginalization and tension between the different factions. By trying to hold on to what the different factions considered theirs, the default practice of excluding the other, and in some extreme cases 'banning' was developed. Such practices ensure that one's own sect remains a majority and the standard practice, while the others can be dismissed as 'an exception to the rule'. Against this backdrop, the social relations between the different religious groups across Iraq have been greatly damaged, something that has been compounded by conflict that has swept the country in the past 20 years. As such, in its post-conflict state, FoRB and interreligious harmony matter more than ever in Iraq.

The Joint Initiative for Strategic Religious Action (JISRA) seeks to address the sectarian divides in Iraq through an effort to achieve greater interfaith harmony. The five-year consortium seeks to advance harmonious coexistence and freedom of all, JISRA works with diverse religious communities across Iraq, helping them discover shared values and interests. JISRA's activities are implemented along three different pathways: intra-religious, inter-religious, and extra-religious pathways. All of these activities take place in parallel, to ensure that reflections and lessons learned from engaging with other religious groups, can be brought up in reflections with one's own community to further debunk misunderstandings, representations, and rumors. This further contributes to the strengthening of the social fabric.

For instance, during one of the inter-religious activities, the idea to organize a joint trip to Basra to show support for the Iraqi national team during the Gulf Cup was raised by the participants themselves. When asked about the role that JISRA in coming up with the initiative and how they approached people in the South from different cultures, and religions, they stated:

*"The JISRA project, in general, has changed some of our core concepts, especially surrounding issues of peace and social cohesion, through participation and integration with communities of different cultures.... Going to Basra was something that previously I would have never*

*considered as I would have been worried about targeted attacks. However, none of this happened, and instead, I met people from the Shiite communities that I normally do not engage with and learned from them” (Male participant from Bashiqa, 26 years old)*

*“I wanted to visit Basra as I had never been before and was interested in learning more about other cultures, an interest gained during the JISRA sessions... in Basra, I met black Iraqis and Muslims from the Shiite sect and Baha’is as well. We discussed how the politics in their province affected them differently, and we told them how we are affected by the politics of our provinces differently. We realised how much we shared in terms of experiences” (Male from Hamdaniya, 37 years old)*

We are bringing this example up now as a part of [World Interfaith Harmony Week](#), to show that it is possible to create one national identity which considers and applies to all faith groups in Iraq. Since its adoption by the UN General Assembly in 2010, [World Interfaith Harmony Week](#) is celebrated every year between 1 and 7 February. All over the world, religious actors and other goodwill groups come together to show the power of their activities, and the value of interreligious exchange to society.

The JISRA partners - Search for Common Ground (Search), Peace & Freedom Organisation (PFO), Mensen met een Missie, CAPNI for Humanitarian Aid in Iraq and Tearfund - call on citizens and communities across Iraq to join us in the celebration of interfaith harmony and act together to create the spaces where all faith groups feel safe and can enjoy something as simple as football games under the same flag.

While today marks the end of the interfaith harmony week, JISRA will continue to push for inter-faith harmony across Iraq through our activities, as well as national advocacy efforts. If you would like to find out more, see details below.

**Search for Common Ground:**

**Facebook:** [@sfcg.iraq](#)

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**Peace and Freedom Organization:**

**Facebook:** [Peace and freedom organization-PFO](#)

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