

# JISRA in Iraq

## Introduction

JISRA (Joint Initiative for Strategic Religious Action) is an international interfaith consortium consisting of Mensen met een Missie, Faith to Action Network, Tearfund (UK and Netherlands) and Search For Common Ground. The Arabic word “jibr” means bridge, symbolising what JISRA aims to do: build bridges between divided communities. The JISRA programme, which will run from 2021-2025, is being implemented in seven countries: Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iraq, Kenya, Mali, Nigeria and Uganda.

In Iraq, JISRA has two local partners: Peace and Freedom Organisation (PFO) and CAPNI for Humanitarian Aid. These partners are supported by JISRA’s three international consortium partners: Search For Common Ground, Mensen met een Missie, and Tearfund. Together these partners will address discrimination and extremism in religious communities, strengthen the bridge between religious communities, and engage international, national and local authorities on issues of freedom of religion and belief (FoRB). A recent baseline study commissioned by JISRA shows that FoRB remains a significant issue in the country due to unaddressed grievances, ongoing violence, and weak governance. Overall, this indicates that there is ample opportunity for JISRA to contribute to the FoRB agenda in a meaningful way.

## Context

In Iraq, decades of ethnically and religiously charged conflict has reaped widespread destruction and intensified societal divisions. Intermittent violence after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 descended into full-fledged conflict by 2014 when ISIS exploited the marginalisation of Sunni Arab communities to swell its ranks. This resulted in four years of distinctly sectarian conflict fuelled by national and foreign actors. Since October 2019 the country has seen clashes between security forces and protesters demanding more political independence and decrying government corruption, as well as its failure to deliver basic services. Throughout this time, unresolved tensions have persisted between the federal Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government, contributing to an unstable political system across the country.

The country's diverse demographics of Sunni Arabs and Kurds, Shia, Christians, and a multitude of minority groups continues to shape the politics of the Iraqi state-building project, most notably the competition between Shia and Sunni forces. Thus, mistrust continues to characterise politics and sectarian relations. Moreover, violent extremists have perpetrated human rights violations against a variety of faith groups yet these have remained largely unaddressed. For example, ISIS committed war crimes against Yazidis and Christians while security forces continue to arbitrarily detain, deny fair trials, and forcibly disappear Sunni Arabs because of suspicions of their affiliation to ISIS. As a result, FoRB is heavily compromised for most Iraqis.

The consortium has chosen three locations, Sinjar, Ninewa Plains, and Kirkuk in which JISRA activities will be implemented by PFO and CAPNI. All three locations are home to a plethora of ethnic and religious minority groups who have either had to flee in response to ISIS activity, face frequent conflict with other religious or ethnic groups, or have experienced oppression and marginalisation from authorities and security forces. Ninewa Plains has

historically been home to Christian, Yazidi and Kaka'i communities, though demographics have shifted since Saddam Hussein's efforts to "Arabize" the contested territories. Today, Shia and Sunni Shabak communities largely reside in small villages outside the urban centres with limited access to public services.

Meanwhile in Sinjar, Sunni Muslims returning since ISIS' departure have become more insular, while Shia residents feel more free to express their religion publicly with protection afforded by the Shia-affiliated militia Ha'ashd al-Shabi. A key source of tension in the district is unaddressed atrocities committed against Yazidis by ISIS as well as subsequent allegations of ISIS affiliation toward the Sunni community. Sinjar suffers from a general lack of governance and of economic opportunities since ISIS destroyed the agricultural sector. Many basic services are currently being provided by CSOs and NGOs.

The final location, Kirkuk, has a unique history of ethnic and religious diversity and tolerance, though Sunnis make up the majority of the population. The city has been controlled by the Ha'ashd al-Shabi since 2017 when they pushed out the Kurdistan Regional Government. However, the federal government has been relocating poverty and violence stricken communities to Kirkuk in what some describe as a demographic power play threatening the Shias. Nonetheless, levels of governance here are stronger than in Ninewa Plains and Sinjar.

## Findings

In order to get a clear idea of how FoRB is currently being enacted in Iraq within religious communities, between religious communities, and through policy and governance, JISRA commissioned Catalystas Consulting to conduct baseline study. The results, further detailed below, highlight the role of education in strengthening religious tolerance, the contested roles of religious doctrine and social customs, and the low levels of governance and implementation of FoRB.

Data was gathered through surveys and focus group discussions, as well as interviews with religious actors, community members, and duty bearers (i.e. religious, tribal, political or security members). There were a total of 504 respondents hailing from the three project locations: Kirkuk, Ninewa Plains, and Sinjar. The demographics of the respondents were as follows: 70% male and 30% female; 79% youth (age 18-35) and 21% older than 35; and 35% Yazidis, 31% Sunni Muslims, 15% Shia Muslims, 7% Catholic Christians, 2% Kaka'is.

### Within Religious Communities

#### 1. Tolerance towards different beliefs

The study revealed a general environment of tension, with tolerance towards minorities and the religious "other" often being shaky. According to participants, distrust between Shia and Sunni communities is prevalent. For example, within the Sunni community in Sinjar, allegations of ISIS affiliation is a particularly sensitive issue. As noted by one participant, some Sunni Muslims feel unsafe displaying their religious traditions publicly.

*"Arab Sunnis are not allowed to practise specific celebrations openly in Bashiqa and are arrested for promenading their religious belief on specific holy days by what is noted to be the Ha'ashd al-Shabi forces in the region if they do."* — Sunni Shabak woman, 50, civil society organisation (CSO) volunteer

However, tolerance of other religious beliefs differs from location to location. A notable example of Muslim communities reporting a general ease regarding co-existence with other religions came from Kirkuk. Nonetheless,

religious minorities such as Christians and Yazidis often feel targeted and discriminated against. For example, Christian and Yazidi students from Mosul and Sinjar attending Mosul University noted that they do not stay in official on-campus housing due to fears of being targeted for violence or being picked on for their religious identity.

Across religions, participants noted a lack of acceptance from their religious communities when it comes to marrying outside their denomination. In addition, the study revealed limited acceptance of atheism or irreligious belief. However, in Iraq, religion is strongly interwoven with ethnic affiliation and identity rather than being purely a matter of belief. As such, atheism is interpreted as denial of ethnic identity, making any discussion of atheism difficult.

*“In Sunni and Shia communities, if someone declares they are, for example, an Atheist, they have to fear for their life. This isn’t just happening there, it’s present across Iraq for the Muslim groups. Look at the Tishreen demonstrations in Baghdad — look what happened to them.”*

Finally, on attitudes of tolerance within religious communities, the study found that differences were not always correlated to religious belief, but often to level of education, which is also closely tied to the rural-urban divide. Thus, a higher level of education and residing in an urban area were stronger predictors of respect for FoRB and other tenets of basic human rights.

## **2. Challenging harmful norms and practices**

Many participants in the study claimed that their religious community did not harbour any harmful practices despite the reality of practices like child marriage, honour killings, inability to marry outside of faith, and child recruitment to local militias. Some ascribed harmful norms and practices to social customs, culture, or political barriers, rather than religion directly.

However, efforts by religious actors have been highly successful in reducing the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) within a single generation in most places in Ninewa Plains. Child marriage, on the other hand, continues to be a challenge and concern. Religious actors advocating reform are often concentrated in urban centres, while religious actors in rural areas seem to be doing less, or nothing, to challenge the practice of child marriage — a result more closely linked to education levels than religion.

A key issue within Muslim and Yazidi communities was Sunni the representation and empowerment of women. For example, in Sinjar Muslim women were not allowed by male elders to participate in the study and the religious leadership did not report supporting women’s participation in society. Meanwhile, in the Yazidi community, a prominent issue was the return of Yazidi women who have been freed from ISIS captivity and forced marriages. While there has been a public motion to accept these Yazidi returnees, many continue to face challenges in their communities. In the Yazidi community, marriage or any form of sexual relations with people outside the religion is not accepted. According to the participant, the faith still casts out those who marry outside of the religion (even forced marriages). Furthermore, it often leads to honour killings and reprisals, spurring cycles of violence.

Christian communities reported having good interfaith relations, not practicing child marriage or FGM, and viewing men and women as equals. However, Christian youths challenged older participants’ perception of gender equality in the community, saying that women’s empowerment initiatives often fail to achieve meaningful change. One participant said, *“No one in this city listens to the needs of women.”* She stated she has no hope in the effectiveness of awareness seminars, protests, and meetings: *“We are sure that 100 protests and seminars will be useless...these requests have been in vain.”*

## **3. FoRB, gender, and inclusivity**

The patriarchal nature of hierarchy within all religious orders means that women's issues are often addressed in small and women-only spaces. While 100% of religious actors across religions agreed that in their communities, "Women are encouraged to express their opinions regarding issues in my community," many did not organise events to support women's rights. This indicates an opportunity or opening to encourage religious actors to organise such events.

The study notes that in Yazidi communities, that family-power relations are likely to change due the nature of the ISIS occupation and the mass genocide of men and boys, resulting in a skewed population of survivors and an increase in female-headed households. This has the potential to cause shifts in power dynamics within the Yazidi community and has become a focus of Yazidi religious actors who are increasing the frequency of gender-focused sermons and events.

## **Between Religious Communities**

### **1. Collaboration across religious divides**

Christian communities reported the most inter-faith activities organised by religious leaders, followed by Yazidi religious leaders, while Sunni and Shia religious leaders organised the least. Once again, the results of the study pointed to a rural-urban divide, with the majority of interfaith activities taking place in urban centres.

Many of the issues concerning relations between religious communities pertain to the atrocities committed by ISIS, in particular against Yazidis. There is a strong negative perception towards Sunnis amongst the Yazidi community, with participants citing a lack of effort by Sunni religious actors to address the wrongdoings committed during the ISIS occupation or the heretical status applied to Yazidis. Indeed, there have been several missed opportunities for Sunni religious leaders to denounce atrocities towards Yazidis.

Meanwhile, religious actors from Sunni communities who participated in the study were often quick to note their desire for co-existence and harmony whilst highlighting their community's ostracization and unfettered blame for all the atrocities committed by ISIS. Moreover, they feared calling out ISIS-collaborators within their communities due to the presence of ISIS sleeper cells. Thus, participation in interfaith events may be a means to rebuild the reputation of Sunni communities.

There are already examples of impactful interfaith exchanges and community building in Iraq. However, on a grand scale barriers to interfaith collaboration remain, and also partly stem from competition for resources and power. For example, the main barrier to public education being truly intermixed is that the demographic divide is maintained, often by force, as a means of ensuring representation at the national level, superseding local co-existence.

### **2. The role of religious actors**

Survey and interview answers of religious actors showed that more than half agree with the right of other faith communities to practice their religion freely and more than half said they had organised interfaith events. However, these numbers differed per location and religious group. In Sinjar and Ninewa Plains for example, the majority of Muslim religious actors noted a lack of belief in the right to religious expression for those outside their own religion.

Among those religious leaders who are open-minded, there is indeed a higher level of effort toward hosting interfaith events and actions. However, there is a sharp drop-off in religious actors' roles in solving interfaith challenges. This gap of tackling inter-faith challenges indicates an overall trend across all project locations that

political parties (which sometimes overlap with religious leadership and tribal leadership) are increasingly the primary avenue of power and conflict mitigation and mediation.

When it comes to tackling issue of extremism, some religious actors are taking steps in the right direction, yet their efforts were often noted as ineffective due to the changing nature of extremism and its increasing presence on online platforms. According to several interviewees from NGO and academic backgrounds, current social structures are inadequate in dealing with the problem.

*“There’s some extremism in Bashiqa — and religious leaders and political leaders are working to try and reduce it and remove hatred but their ways are old and not fit for the world we live in which focuses on technology.”* — Yazidi woman, 37, NGO worker, Bashiqa

## **FoRB Governance and Policy**

### **1. FoRB laws and policies**

The constitution of Iraq establishes Islam as the official state religion and states that no law may be enacted that contradicts the provisions of Islam. At the same time the constitution and national laws do ensure freedom of religious belief and practice. There is explicit mention of Muslims, Christians, Yazidis, and Mandaeans, but no mention followers of other religions, nor atheists. At the same time, the absence of Yazidism and other religions beside Islam in Iraq’s Personal Status Code provides legal loopholes in the judicial system that enables discrimination against religious minorities.

It is important to note that in many cases, disputes are settled using customary law rather than going through a formal judicial process. This avenue for dispute settlement reinforces tribal and religious structure, often to the detriment of women and youth. Use of customary or tribal law has increased in some areas due to overall lower levels of governance as a direct result of the fight to liberate the regions from ISIS. This has given rise to new militias, often affiliated with a religious denomination. Thus, FoRB is enacted by tribal or customary law only insofar as the local militia allows it.

### **2. Implementation of FoRB**

Iraqi laws do ensure freedom of religious belief in theory, however, the application of law is only as strong as its implementers. There have been widespread cases of violence against different religious denominations perpetrated by the Government of Iraq, for example targeting and displacing Sunnis and verbally harassing Christians and Yazidis. The central government has not addressed these abuses.

Many participants across religious groups agreed with the statement *“There are no international laws and regulations that protect freedom of expression, and my community decision-makers do not actively promote co-existence and tolerance and therefore I do not feel free to express my religious preference freely.”* These findings demonstrate a need of greater awareness of legal protections among community members as well as better adherence to national laws among judicial authorities and security forces.

### **3. Influence of religious leaders and community members**

Nearly half of respondents noted that decision makers are not responsive to the input of religious community leadership, indicating a general lack of responsiveness from political parties and the state. Among the different religions surveyed, not a single one had a more than 30% positive response rate, illustrating that the power holders are now political parties and security actors and that their interests often play a greater role in decision-making than advocacy from religious leaders.

When asked about whether different actors are responsive to the needs of community members, respondents also rated all actors rather poorly. NGOs and CSOs scored best (33%), followed by security actors (30%), religious actors (25%), and lastly government actors. This indicates that the role of NGOs and CSOs is significant and necessary within the Iraqi context, and that the overall level of governance has weakened to the point that that civil society and security actors have come to fill the spaces where the government is effectively absent.

## Women and Youth

### 1. Women and FoRB

Women in Kirkuk, more than any other location where research was carried out, take up regular roles in political, communal, and familial decision-making. As Kirkuk is a major city there are also higher levels of women present in decision-making roles in Kirkuk, followed by larger towns in Ninewa Plains, then in villages around Ninewa Plains, and finally Sinjar. Here too there is a direct correlation to urbanisation and level of education.

Across the country, women do have access to bureaucratic and administrative roles in the government, however, even in the more “liberal” cities, there is a lack of female representation in key decision-making positions. As noted by a participant, the issue is not only with lack of equal representation at the ethnic or tribal level but at the decision-making level in all aspects of life:

*“There is no equality between men and women. For example, in Tel Kief, there are many (government) departments. There is no woman director or even director of a department.”*

There have however been positive changes since the last election, which saw the implementation of a quota of 25% (83 seats) for women in parliament. Because of the gender quota, all JISRA project areas now have female representatives in official capacities. Furthermore, this has the potential to drive changes at the upper levels of government in the future.

### 2. Youth and FoRB

Young people are still largely underrepresented in key decision-making positions and experience loss of power due to the pervasive level of youth unemployment throughout Iraq, which leaves them more vulnerable to the whims of parental decision-making and removes their autonomy and ability to exert themselves as leaders. Still, there is a growing positive trend for youth thanks to efforts by CSOs and NGOs to support youth in organising themselves and receiving meaningful training over the last 7 years. As demonstrated by responses by community members to the statement *“In my community, youth are able to meaningfully influence decision-making,”* there was an overall positive response rate of nearly 70%. This indicates a growing understanding of the importance of youth in the public sphere, especially when it comes to entrepreneurship and transformation and adaptation of community businesses, many of which were forced to take a sudden digital-leap due to the onset of Covid-19 restrictions on in-person contact, ushering in a greater need for e-spaces where youth dominate influential social media.

## Plan of Action

### Within Religious Communities

JISRA aims to build inclusive, open, and constructive religious communities. Activities in the programme in Iraq include:

1. Intra-religious dialogues

- JISRA will convene and facilitate intrareligious dialogues within targeted locations.
- 2. Training in strategic communication
  - JISRA will organise and conduct training in strategic communication for religious, tribal, and civic actors, including women and youth, to equip them with the tools to effectively outreach to their religious communities, supporters, and followers.
- 3. Media training
  - The consortium will organise training in media for social change for youth stakeholders to increase their skills in communication for tolerance and inclusion.
- 4. Inclusion campaigns
  - Youth will be supported to develop video spots, memes, and other digital storytelling, these will be disseminated throughout influential channels.

## **Between Religious Communities**

Next, JISRA aims to promote meaningful collaboration across religious divides. As such, activities will focus on:

1. Conflict transformation training
  - Trainings for religious, tribal, and civic actors (including women and youth groups), to deliver tools and skills for dialogue sessions to alter inter-religious conflicts.
2. Inter-religious dialogues
  - The consortium will convene inter-religious dialogues after the necessary capacity building and trust-building with local stakeholders. These dialogue sessions will provide the necessary avenue to discuss the current grievances and build a stronger relationship and work towards building a stronger bond together.
3. Youth-led inter-religious action social media campaigns
  - Taking the skill-building training received earlier, youth will launch social media campaigns and the goal of these campaigns will be to highlight the impact of jointly-led inter-religious campaigns and collaboration.

Finally, a focus on women and youth empowerment will be an interwoven component in all JISRA activities.