



Inter-religious dialogues:

A space for community-led discussions on religion and acceptance

Background

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 significant 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

JISRA Project Summary

The Joint Initiative for Strategic Religious Action (JISRA) aims to address and transform these dynamics in Iraq at an intra-, inter-, and extra-religious level to promote Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB) through direct and local partner implementation. This project is a Dutch-funded 5-year-long project, which operates in 7 countries, of which Iraq is one. In Iraq, the three target locations are Kirkuk, Ninevah Plain, and Sheikhan. These areas are home to multiple different religions, which have been shaded by conflict which has exacerbated the already existing tensions between the different religious affiliations.

Activity Details

Sheikhan is home to two main religious affiliations, Yazidis and Muslims, in addition to a few Christian families. There is also a large Internally Displaced People (IDP) community consisting of Yazidi families that are from Sinjar and are living in three camps that exist within the Sheikhan district. In January 2023, **Search for Common Ground Iraq** (Search Iraq) and **Peace and Freedom Organization** (PFO), carried out 'inter-religious' dialogues in Sheikhan between the Muslim and Yazidi components. The set of dialogues creates a safe space for open and constructive conversations and reflection that can foster tolerance and understanding and challenge misconceptions.

Imam Khatib, a 47-year-old Imam from Sheikhan, participated in the dialogue sessions and expressed that the fact that he and his colleagues had been given a 'space' to meet and discuss inter-religious issues was something he was particularly grateful for. He emphasized that due to historical contingencies, there are limited opportunities for interaction and dialogue across religious affiliations, despite living in the same community.

As such, the space which this activity is creating, is in of itself a promotion of FoRB. When asked about why he joined JISRA, Khatbib answered:

“As a religious leader in Sheikhan, my role in the community is well respected. I want to have a positive impact and promote FORB and solve inter-religious tensions that have existed for years”.

The JISRA project leverages the role of a variety of actors, including religious leaders, young women and men from different religious and socio-economic backgrounds, and civil society to identify, reflect, and build upon specific entry points for religious engagement and promote an inclusive, tolerant, and flourishing society in Iraq. Khatib expressed that the inclusion of different actors, youth, teachers, academics, etc, and not only religious leaders is something that he notes is crucial for a long-term impact.

“Previous projects that I have participated in that focus on FoRB, only invite religious leaders. These have never yielded a long-term impact, something that I believe that JISRA can do if the space for collaboration and discussion continues to be provided.”

Inter-religious dialogues are preceded by trust-building activities and result in joint small project ideas that promote reconciliation and mutual understanding among religious groups. Our approach to inter-religious dialogue relies on flexibility and creativity and accommodates the preferences of stakeholders.

“Each [religious group in Sheikhan] has different perspectives, and ways of living, religious beliefs, yet we are meant to live together. Therefore it is very important to have these types of dialogues to create bridges and learn more about each other. Naturally, in Sheikhan, we do not have these platforms where the various religious community members can meet and discuss community issues, Community members are often pegged against each other when discussing these matters in isolation”

In March 2023, these inter-religious dialogue sessions will continue with the hope to build on the recent space developed for dialogue among various religious actors.

