



A SNAPSHOT OF PVE IN IRAQ

MAPPING LOCALLY LED PVE ACTIVITIES
AND STAKEHOLDERS IN IRAQ



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The various conflicts Iraq has gone through have created fertile ground for the emergence of violent extremist groups. Addressing the drivers of violent extremism is essential for achieving long-term peace and security. **However, Iraq's prevention of violent extremism (PVE) shows critical deficiencies, such as the absence of a consolidated mapping of PVE initiatives and stakeholders.** To date, attempts to create a consolidated mapping of all stakeholders and their respective PVE initiatives has fallen short. Addressing this gap can significantly enhance the efficacy of future PVE strategies by pinpointing existing patterns, trends and voids in current programmes. This report aims to bridge this information deficit, offering a comprehensive overview of PVE projects and their stakeholders, while also evaluating the merits and limitations of specific PVE interventions such as public spaces, role models and communication campaigns.

First: To address these deficiencies, this report carried out a detailed analysis of 153 PVE projects in Iraq, executed by civil society organizations (CSOs) and government entities, to identify key trends and gaps within a year-long period. **Data indicate a significant emphasis on youth inclusion and social cohesion, representing 44 per cent of the total PVE focus, aligning with international consensus on their importance in PVE.** While the government's efforts towards coordinated PVE activity are commendable, there is a worrying lack of attention towards gender inclusion and economic well-being. These areas remain under-addressed. **The modality of PVE interventions leans heavily (60%) on workshops and training sessions, which, despite their value, have drawn criticism for their uniform approach.** Sports-based PVE interventions, though recognized for their effectiveness, account for just 5 per cent of initiatives.

Furthermore, a gap exists in locally led PVE research. Rigorous research studies are predominately commissioned by international donors and are largely implemented by international researchers who possess academic expertise, but might lack the nuanced contextual understanding integral to PVE research. Meanwhile, CSOs rarely conduct PVE studies, opting to rely on experience and observations to guide the implementation of PVE projects. These dynamics underscore a need for a collaborative approach, integrating the methodological rigor of international experts with the realities on the ground and the intimate knowledge held by local organizations, to foster research that is both comprehensive and contextually relevant.

Second: A stakeholder mapping exercise was conducted that involved selecting stakeholders, from CSOs to religious leaders, and assessing their influence on PVE based on

relevancy, effectiveness and impact. Key themes that emerged from the research included: **Tribes were identified as pivotal, for their deep community ties and dispute-resolution skills, but over-reliance on them might reinforce tribal hierarchies and risk political manipulations.** Political parties often exacerbate divisions, hindering PVE. Local CSOs, while vital, face challenges due to increased commercialization and potential political affiliations. Meanwhile, the research showed that volunteer groups, deeply rooted in localities, show promise in PVE, but require professional guidance.

Third: Public spaces – that is, areas designed for gatherings, cultural events and interactions that bind the fabric of society – have been observed as promising tools in promoting peace, unity and social cohesion. However, their effectiveness hinges on accessibility, especially for marginalized groups. However, challenges persist, with resource constraints, changing security dynamics and coordination issues among the top concerns. **Moreover, when shaping opinions and guiding behaviours, the deployment of role models is a promising approach.** Such role models can be found in every sector, from sports and education to business and media. Their ability to inspire and advocate for values such as tolerance, economic well-being and active community participation makes them invaluable in PVE efforts. **Lastly, the digital age has made communication campaigns essential in PVE, as they counter extremist narratives and reinforce messages on governance and youth inclusion. Yet, despite their potential, there is a shortage of systematic design and evaluation studies of such initiatives.**

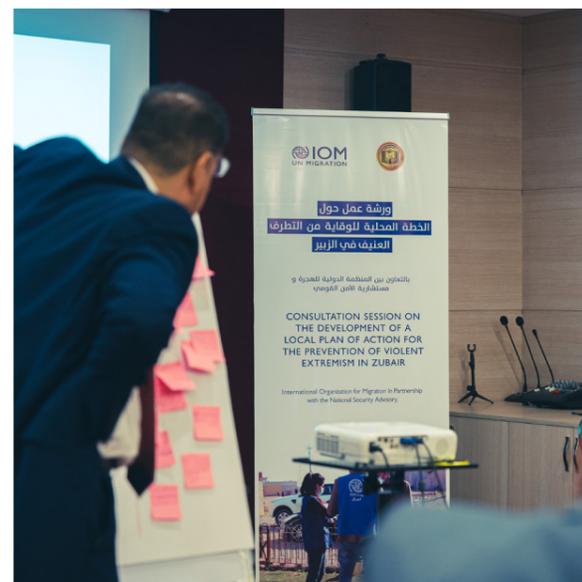


Photo 1: IOM Iraq 2022/ Sarah Al Jameel

RECOMMENDATIONS

Mapping of PVE Activities in Iraq

- **Diversify PVE Interventions:** The predominant reliance on workshops and training sessions, accounting for 60 per cent of the interventions, suggests a one-dimensional approach to PVE. While knowledge transfer and capacity building are essential, overemphasis might lead to a homogenized response to the multifaceted challenge of violent extremism. International non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and CSOs should consider introducing diversified intervention strategies. This may include community-based initiatives, public awareness campaigns and context-specific interventions addressing local needs and nuances. Collaborative community-based problem-solving and localized storytelling might be instrumental in addressing the root causes of extremism.
- **Leverage Sports-Based Activities and Enhance Local Research:** Sports-based activities have been underutilized, accounting for only 5 per cent of PVE interventions, despite their proven efficacy in the literature. Moreover, there is a marked deficit in locally led PVE research, with international organizations driving top-down research. PVE stakeholders should invest in and promote sports-based PVE programmes, recognizing their value in fostering community integration, resilience and youth engagement. Additionally, partnering with local universities, think tanks and grassroots organizations can promote a bottom-up research approach, ensuring that local perspectives and cultural nuances are adequately represented in PVE research.
- **Strengthen Multi-Actor Coordination in PVE Initiatives:** Coordination among INGOs, CSOs and government entities working on PVE is perceived as weak. As PVE challenges are multifaceted, a siloed approach may hinder the efficacy of interventions. It is critical for international NGOs, CSOs and government entities to foster an environment of increased collaboration and open dialogue. The recent formation of provincial- and district-level PVE committees presents a promising avenue. Leveraging and strengthening these structures can optimize resource allocation, minimize duplication of efforts and ensure a synchronized, strategic response to violent extremism.

Role Models, Public Spaces and Media Campaigns

- **Utilize Role Models:** Role models from different sectors such as education, sports and entrepreneurship have shown potential in influencing and motivating youth to embrace

positive values and aspirations. Leveraging these individuals makes PVE programming more holistic and versatile. However, it is critical to employ a proper monitoring mechanism to track the effectiveness of the programming.

- **Bridge Narratives with Actionable Opportunities:** Research indicates that alternative narratives that promote positive values such as tolerance, freedom and democracy are more effective than direct counter-narratives. However, it is essential to bridge the gap between these positive messages and actionable opportunities in the real world. Thus, when crafting communication campaigns, organizations should not just focus on promoting positive values but also provide avenues or platforms where these values can be realized. For instance, if a campaign promotes social cohesion, it can be coupled with community-building events or platforms for dialogue between different community groups. This approach ensures that the audience sees tangible actions aligned with the promoted messages, reinforcing their credibility and impact.

PVE Stakeholder Evaluation

- **Enhance CSOs' Effectiveness and Neutrality:** CSOs have been recognized for their high relevance in the PVE space, with their roots deeply embedded within communities. However, concerns about poor localization of programmes, commercialization of their models and potential association with political parties threaten their effectiveness and perceived neutrality. There is a need to focus on localizing efforts, maintaining authenticity and ensuring the CSOs' core mission is not derailed by external influences.
- **Utilize Private Communication Platforms:** The efficacy of private communication platforms such as closed WhatsApp groups has been underscored by their ability to facilitate candid discussions and problem-solving. Given the restrictions and potential repercussions of public expression, particularly on platforms like Facebook, there is a pressing need for secure communication avenues where individuals feel safe sharing their perspectives.
- **Guard PVE from Political Interferences:** Political parties were seen as having a negative impact on PVE, often exacerbating violent extremism due to their sectarian narratives and fierce political competitions. The association of PVE initiatives with these parties can significantly undermine their credibility, effectiveness and reach.

INTRODUCTION: CONTEXTUAL OVERVIEW

Iraq has faced years of challenges, including political shifts and community tensions, which have contributed to extremist sentiments. Furthermore, Iraq has been one of the main targets of countering terrorism and countering violent extremism (CVE) measures since 2001. However, most of these measures have been implemented predominantly through the lens of counterterrorism strategies. This narrow focus has often overshadowed the underlying sociopolitical dynamics and unique cultural contexts of the region.

Moreover, the PVE landscape in Iraq is marked by a discernible gap due to the limited efforts to map all organizations actively engaged in PVE efforts and the lack of an exhaustive record of the programmes they implement. This absence of consolidated information inevitably leads to a limited understanding of the real impact of these diverse programmes. Furthermore, there is a notable lack of programme effectiveness evaluation, which can likely be attributed to resources constraints and shortage in standardized assessment metrics.

However, since 2015 more emphasis was placed on understanding violent extremism (VE), realizing that PVE should focus on the societal factors and drivers that lead individuals and small groups to embrace or otherwise support militant ideologies.

This effort was driven by the United Nations' Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, presented by the then-United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon in December 2015. The plan marked the first time a comprehensive approach towards PVE was outlined at a global level, emphasizing a balance between security-focused counter-terrorism measures and preventive measures that addressed the underlying drivers of violent extremism.

The plan has generated a trend for countries experiencing violent extremism to adopt and implement PVE Strategies and National Action Plans. Despite this momentum, PVE is still an emerging initiative and further efforts are needed to define the terms, challenges and opportunities of these strategies to contribute to sustainable peace and development.

Such foundation is important for international donors and the Government of Iraq, as they seek to identify and scale up effective PVE programmes. A detailed overview is likely to offer insights into the patterns, trends and gaps that exist in current PVE programming. These insights, in turn, could inform the design and implementation of future initiatives. Therefore, it is crucial to address these gaps by carrying out comprehensive PVE programming mapping and key stakeholder analysis. Such efforts would pave the way for a better understanding of the overall impact of PVE programming in Iraq.

In addition to mapping PVE projects and evaluating key stakeholders, this paper will provide a comprehensive analysis of specific PVE interventions such as the use of public spaces, role models and communication campaigns. The mapping of PVE landscape in Iraq over the last year, primarily implemented by local CSOs and governmental bodies, revealed a significant emphasis on capacity-building as the principal modality of PVE intervention. The analysis of approximately 153 projects and initiatives revealed that a staggering 66 per cent were directed towards enhancing the abilities of CSO (affiliates, government personnel and influential community figures). Conversely, other forms of interventions, notably public spaces, communication campaigns and role models, constituted a minor portion of the overall programming. Most strikingly, the deployment of role models in PVE interventions appeared absent, pointing to an underutilized if not completely overlooked approach in efforts to prevent violent extremism. The analysis will detail the benefits and shortcoming of implementing these activities in Iraq.



Photo 2: IOM Iraq 2022/ Sarah Al Jameel

METHODOLOGY

This research project incorporated a mixed-method approach, both qualitative and quantitative, beginning with a thorough review of existing literature and reports associated with PVE programmes in Iraq and its neighbouring regions.

A detailed open-source analysis of PVE activities in Iraq was performed. The collection method consisted of visiting the social media platforms of CSOs and government entities who advertised a specific PVE activity and recording the information published in their post. The collected data consisted of the name of the CSOs implementing PVE activities from July 2022 to July 2023, donor organizations, the PVE activity implemented, the type of intervention employed and the VE factor its seeking to address. The analysis included data from 77 CSOs – funded by international organizations such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Gesellschaft für International Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) – and 24 government departments including the National Committee on the Implementation of the Strategy to Combat Violent Extremism and various ministry-level

and governorate-level PVE subcommittees. Collected data were then subject to a detailed qualitative analysis to identify trends, themes and gaps.

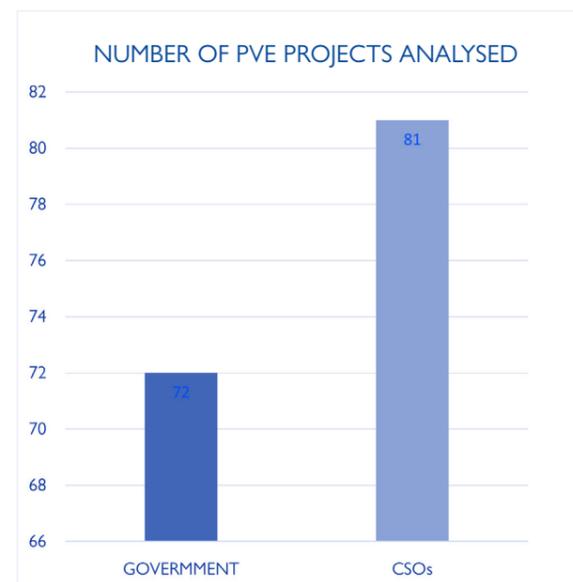
Moreover, a detailed literature review was carried out to evaluate best practices in implementing PVE interventions utilizing public spaces, role models and communications campaigns. The focus was to prioritize papers that conducted case studies in environments such as Iraq's, to ensure the relevance and applicability of the findings to the Iraqi context.

Finally, 15 in-depth interviews were conducted between March 2023 and June 2023 with a diverse group of stakeholders active in PVE projects. The interviewees included activists, academics, representatives of civil society and researchers. With representation from varied regions such as Tel Afar, Mosul, Hawijah, Fallujah and Zubair, a broad range of perspectives was ensured. Each interview, conducted over the phone for the interviewees' convenience and comfort, lasted about an hour. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, all interviewees were guaranteed anonymity.



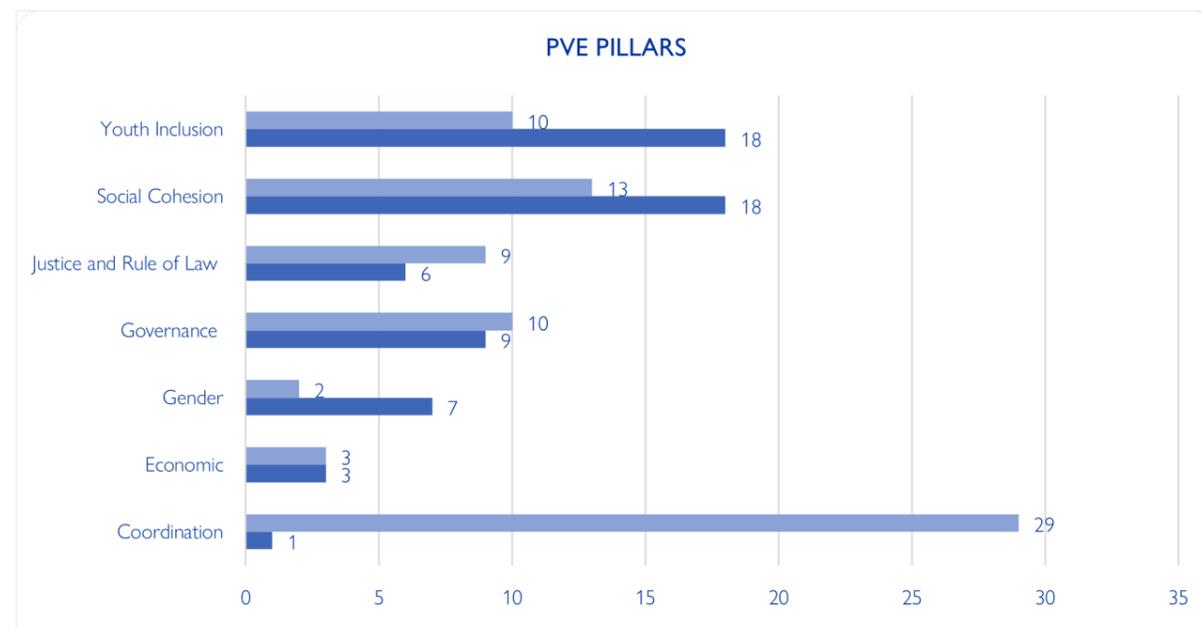
Photo 3: IOM Iraq 2022/ Sarah Al Jameel

MAPPING PVE ACTIVITIES



A close analysis of 153 PVE projects implemented by CSOs and government entities in Iraq, such as the various ministry-level and governorate-level PVE subcommittees, was conducted to understand trends and gaps in the PVE landscape. A dataset was constructed to catalogue these projects. This dataset encompassed key information such as the location and date of each initiative, the implementing organization, the donor and the specific PVE pillar being addressed. The PVE pillars were adopted from IOM's key drivers of VE in Iraq, which include governance and capacity building, economic well-being, social cohesion, justice and rule of law, youth inclusion, gender and coordination. Meanwhile, the PVE intervention types are defined here as the deployed exercises designed to address the identified factors leading to VE, such as workshops, community engagement and media campaigns. The collection timeline was from July 2022 to July 2023. A collection period of one year was selected to ensure the inclusion of a comprehensive quantity and type of PVE activities.

KEY FINDINGS



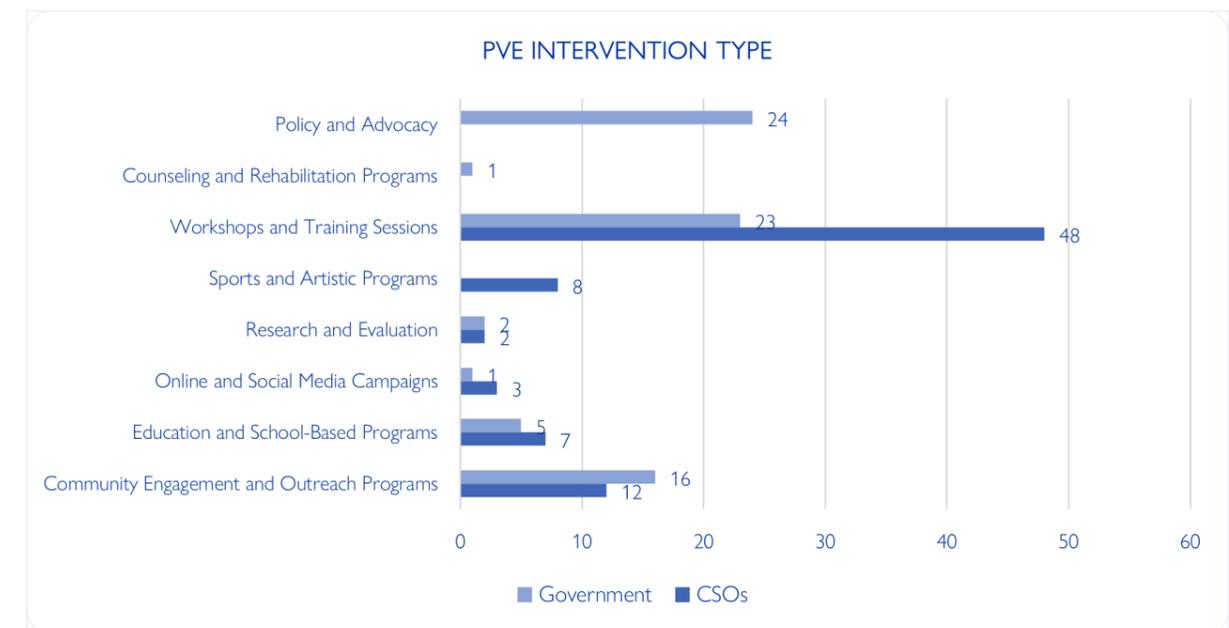
The data revealed that CSO and government projects were significantly committed towards Youth Inclusion and Social Cohesion, with 44 per cent of the focus. This pattern offers a promising perspective, as nurturing social cohesion and fostering youth inclusion are identified as key factors in the effective prevention of violent extremism. There is considerable research illustrating the effectiveness of increasing youth inclusion in PVE. This trend also applies to social cohesion, as the type of extremism in Iraq occurs among different communities living in close to each other. Thus, international development organizations have dedicated considerable attention to increasing social cohesion across Iraq.

Another positive development is the noticeable efforts made by government entities to better coordinate PVE activities and policies. This drive towards greater collaboration is demonstrated through internal meetings taking place at multiple levels, from governorates to ministries and national platforms, with these assemblies occurring every month. This regular communication fosters a synchronized approach to PVE, enhancing the effectiveness and consistency of strategies across various levels of governance.

Among the areas of concern is the insufficient emphasis placed on gender inclusion and economic well-being within

PVE projects. Both of these critical areas were the least addressed by CSOs and government-led activities, indicating a significant gap. It is possible that gender inclusion is not seen as a standalone effort by international donors, but as an integral part of all PVE programmes. PVE projects, regardless of their theme, must include a gender component. This factor could explain the lack of specific gender-promoting activities conducted by CSOs and government entities. Furthermore, recent administrative decisions by the Government of Iraq may also play a role in this observed deficit. The move to restrict the use of the term gender can send mixed signals, potentially discouraging organizations from designing or implementing explicit gender-related projects.

However, some concerted efforts exist, most notably the Socio-economic and Community Resilience for the Prevention of Violent Extremism (SERVE) programme, implemented jointly by UNDP and World Vision. The SERVE programme notably prioritizes the facilitation of livelihood opportunities, thereby supporting community reintegration efforts in the provinces of Anbar, Salah al-Din and Ninewa. Despite this, a broader and more strategic commitment to addressing gender inclusion and economic wellness in PVE work is clearly needed.



and local festivals, in bringing communities together and establishing a sense of commonality.⁷

One notable example of **how public spaces can be utilized for social cohesion** is the establishment of family outing areas outside city centres in Iraq. These areas serve as gathering spaces for individuals and families from various cultural, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds, fostering an environment that promotes unity and inclusivity. These family outing areas encourage people to engage in activities and conversations that transcend their differences.

To increase effectiveness of these initiatives, **it is critical for public spaces to be accessible to all**, particularly marginalized groups such as women, youth and persons with disabilities, and provide the necessary infrastructure and services to ensure their safety and security. Ensuring proper and well-planned public infrastructure and environment has a direct impact on the well-being of the citizens and their perception of the environment in which they live and work.⁸

This is especially true in Iraq, as the current trend of migratory movements from rural areas to city centres have increased the population in cities, which have in turn built up the amount of urban waste, decreased the public and green areas, increased informal settlements and increased the number of vehicles and the level of pollution.⁹ This trend highlights the increasing need for the deployment of public spaces to bring community members together.¹⁰

Numerous inclusive business incubation spaces have emerged in Iraq, demonstrating a positive trend in supporting entrepreneurship. In the past two years, Baghdad has experienced a significant increase in incubation spaces, including Computing, Makers of Baghdad, The Station and KAPITA Business Hub. This trend is expected to expand to other major provinces soon. Currently, Mosul hosts such spaces, Mosul Lab, The Station and Qaf Lab, while Basra hosts one.¹¹ These programmes provide valuable capacity-building and funding opportunities for early-stage startups and entrepreneurs, fostering innovation and economic growth.

Public spaces can further contribute to improving rule of law as they can provide legal information and support services to vulnerable groups such as women and children, who may be at risk of exploitation and abuse. In addition, public spaces can be used to promote community policing and conflict resolution initiatives. By providing safe spaces for dialogue and mediation, governance structures can empower communities to resolve disputes and prevent violence. Public spaces can also serve as venues for training and capacity-building activities, such as conflict resolution workshops and community policing training, which can promote trust and collaboration between law enforcement agencies and local communities.

Moreover, public spaces play a vital role in youth empowerment and gender inclusion as they can be utilized as safe spaces. The concept of “safe spaces” is incredibly important to the process of youth empowerment and development in all stages of young people’s lives.¹² The United Nations advocates for the creation of safe spaces for youth by promoting access to safe public spaces. Ensuring the availability of safe learning and recreational spaces for children and youth reduces susceptibility to social pressures such as substance abuse and engaging in crime. Across Iraq, there are youth centres that serve as recreational places for youth to play sports, receive training and conduct workshops. These centres are either privately owned or government funded.

However, there are **critical challenges to the deployment of public spaces** in PVE, especially in Iraq. Resource constraints present a major challenge, as implementing PVE initiatives in public spaces often requires substantial financial, human and logistical resources. Local authorities and community organizations may face budgetary constraints, limiting their ability to carry out these programmes effectively. Additionally, a lack of skilled personnel and inadequate infrastructure can hinder the success of PVE initiatives. Furthermore, effective PVE initiatives in public spaces often require close coordination and collaboration between various stakeholders, including local authorities, community organizations and security agencies. Thus, changing security dynamics and ever-changing security requirements pose a challenge for implementation of PVE activities in public spaces.

7 Action Against Hunger, Conflict Sensitivity Assessment in Ninewa, 2023.

8 UNDP, “Rehabilitated public spaces can be powerful generators of social inclusiveness and greener recovery in war-affected Iraqi cities,” 2021.

9 USAID, “Guide to Preventing Violent Extremism, Reflections and Recommendations on addressing the root causes of violent extremism and radicalization,” 2019.

10 Ibid.

11 Iraqi Innovators, Qaf Lab: The Iraqi Incubator Doing Things Differently For Startups, 2022.

12 UNODC, Preventing Violent Extremism Through Sport: Technical Guide, 2020.

ROLE MODELS

Individual role models can have an effective impact in PVE programming through various means. Role models, who can be influential figures from different sectors such as sports, education, media and business can help promote positive values, tolerance and social responsibility. Their involvement in PVE initiatives can fit well within PVE programming, through inspiring change and positive behaviour. This can be done by inspiring individuals, particularly youth, to embrace positive values, engage in constructive activities and reject extremist ideologies. For example, role models encourage citizens to actively participate in political processes and community initiatives.¹³

Role models can contribute to economic well-being. By harnessing the influence and expertise of prominent figures across various sectors, PVE initiatives can foster economic development, job creation and an enhanced quality of life for the Iraqi population. Some notable examples include encouraging entrepreneurship and innovation, promoting skill development and education, and advocating for inclusive economic policies. Owners of thriving local Iraqi startups, such as Talabat (a food delivery service), Baly (ridesharing) and Miswag (online shopping), can serve as inspirational role models for the youth. Their success stories motivate and guide young individuals to pursue their entrepreneurial ambitions, driving economic growth and prosperity.

The role of family, teachers and peers as role models and mentors was a significant theme in the reviewed literature regarding youth empowerment. These figures can step in and help before young people get too caught up in extremist ideas.¹⁴ Friends play a big part in effectively stopping violent radicalization from happening. Literature indicates the role of friends is more powerful than that of family members and teachers. Friends are best positioned to notice early signs of individuals considering acts of violent extremism.¹⁵ However, despite being best-positioned to notice early-signs of radicalization, friends often do not disclose these signs or intervene due to fear of damaging the relationship.

13 OECD, “Youth Engagement and Empowerment: In Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia,” 2018.

14 Adrian Cherney, Kathleen De Rooy, Ryan Williams, “An Evidence Review of Strategies Targeting Youth Who Have Radicalised to Violent Extremism,” 2022.

15 Michael J. Williams, John G. Horgan, William P. Evan “The critical role of friends in networks for countering violent extremism: toward a theory of vicarious help-seeking,” 2015.

16 M. Moyano, R. M. Lobato “Preventing violent extremism in youth through sports: An intervention from the 3N model,” Psychology of Sport & Exercise Journal, 2022.

17 Johns, Amelia & Grossman, Michele & McDonald, Kevin. “More Than a Game”: The Impact of Sport-Based Youth Mentoring Schemes on Developing Resilience toward Violent Extremism, 2014.

18 UNODC, “Preventing Violent Extremism Through Sport: A Practical Guide,” 2020.

19 Michael Jones, “Through the Looking Glass: Assessing the Evidence Base for P/CVE Communications,” RUSI Occasional Papers, 2020.

20 UNESCO, “Preventing Violent Extremism through Education,” 2017.

21 Michael Jones, “Through the Looking Glass: Assessing the Evidence Base for P/CVE Communications,” RUSI Occasional Papers, 2020.

Moreover, literature also highlights the role of the sports coach as a role model/mentor, playing a key role in nurturing values of respect, fairness and sportsmanship. Overall, research has backed the concept of utilizing sports in the promotion of peace and bringing different groups together on a framework of positive values such as partnership, respect and tolerance. An evaluation of a major United Nations PVE sports-focused youth mentoring programme “More than a Game” found that the programme improved participants’ social networks while increasing their confidence, self-esteem, sense of belonging and self-control.¹⁶

It is recommended that sports-based PVE interventions are accompanied by ‘off-field’ mentoring activities to encourage positive effects of engaging in dialogue instead of violence.¹⁷ Signifying the role of the sports and sports coaches, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) published a practical guide titled “Preventing Violent Extremism Through Sport” that promotes the use of sports as an effective prevention tool that seeks to disrupt the radicalization and recruitment processes.¹⁸

It is important to note that the literature appears to be divided on the use of imams as role models/mentors. Some literature argues that the use of imams to mentor youth relies on the assumption that youth have a narrow and inaccurate view of Islam. An inspection of online literature shows that there is limited evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of the use of imams in PVE interventions.¹⁹ In Iraq, the history of religious institutions and figures’ involvement in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) programmes has been assessed to have a negative impact.

Moreover, the literature seems split on former extremists’ use in PVE activities. Some literature suggests that the use of former extremist is more effective with primary interventions rather than deradicalization of extremists.²⁰ Moreover, former extremists, alongside the victims of terrorism, are seen to be authentic messengers that can de-glamourize violent groups and offer a more engaging set of emotive stories to cultivating trust and credibility.²¹

Meanwhile, other literature suggests that former extremists are not perceived as credible.²² This criticism revolves around perceived motives and incentives of former extremists who engage in PVE programmes. Another criticism of utilizing former extremist individuals is centred on their skillset, arguing that former extremists often lack the specialist psychosocial or psychological skills to sustain or leverage outreach with vulnerable individuals.²³

The **use of tribal sheikhs as role models for gender-promotion should be considered** especially in gender promotion activities, as women in Iraq identified tribal structures as restrictive and unsafe, preferring to rely on government and security institutions.²⁴ Tribal sheikhs hold significant influence within their communities and possess the potential to drive change, including promoting gender equality.

However, it is crucial to recognize the historical and cultural contexts in which tribal structures have operated. To address these concerns, any efforts to involve tribal sheikhs in gender-promotion initiatives should be accompanied by comprehensive strategies that aim to transform the underlying norms and values that perpetuate gender inequality. Doing so could include engaging in dialogue with tribal leaders to raise awareness about the negative impact of restrictive practices on women and emphasizing the benefits of gender equality for the entire community.

Furthermore, strategic engagement with tribal figures in PVE activities is crucial to avoid inadvertently enhancing their power as non-State entities. **This interaction should be finely balanced to harness their influence without compromising State authority.**²⁵ A good instance of this approach was exhibited by the Young Messenger Organization, a Mosul-based CSO. This organization involved tribal sheikhs in their women's empowerment workshops, inviting them to present certificates to the women upon completion of the training. By having the sheikhs appear only at the conclusion of the workshop, the organization subtly highlighted tribal endorsement for the initiative and the women involved, without over-amplifying their authority.

CHALLENGES OF UTILIZING ROLE MODELS IN PVE

Utilizing role models in PVE programming presents certain challenges that must be acknowledged and addressed for optimal effectiveness. The main challenge revolves around the quality of the relationship between the role model/mentor and the mentee or beneficiary. The literature suggests mentoring is about building relationships and trust and demonstrating empathy while providing guidance and support.²⁶ The assumption of some programmes is that the stronger the relationship is with a mentor, the better the chance mentees have of making a change in their life and moving away from radicalization.

Moreover, role models' engagement in PVE programming could expose them to the possibility of retaliation or other adverse consequences, which could in turn impact the trust and relationship-building that is so central to the mentor-mentee dynamic. Therefore, implementing a robust monitoring system is critical to identify and mitigate these risks, ensuring the safety of role models and maintaining the integrity and effectiveness of the programme.

To ensure role models are forming a high-quality relationship with their mentees, an approach known as Positive Youth Development (PYD) can be employed.²⁷ PYD aims to develop assets in five key domains, competence (social, academic and cognitive skills); confidence (positive self-worth and self-efficacy); connection (positive bonds with people and institutions); character (sense of morality and integrity); and care and compassion (sense of sympathy and empathy). When these develop, they are expected to contribute to the emergence of contributions that include actions to benefit the community or civil society. This framework can be utilized to ensure role models and mentoring programmes are achieving their intended outcomes.

COMMUNICATION CAMPAIGNS

A review of 139 English-language studies that focused on P/CVE communications that included peer-reviewed publications, independent evaluations and programme documents **revealed significant shortfalls in the evidence base of communication programmes.**²⁸ There appears to be a consensus in the literature on the lack of empirical data demonstrating the effectiveness of P/CVE strategic communications. P/CVE communications are argued to be grounded in a set of implicit and explicit assumptions rather than a fully articulated theory.

However, there are some indications of how P/CVE communications can be effective. **Media literacy and critical thinking have been described as useful for enhancing self-regulation and individual resilience.**²⁹ Providing people with the skills they need to safely navigate social media can mitigate wider anti-social behaviours, with some studies referencing possible diminishing rates of aggression and violent content consumption. Critical thinking and media literacy courses can potentially have positive effects; however, it is unclear to what extent they directly address the problem of radicalization.

Moreover, **there is broad agreement that using alternative narratives, rather than counter-narratives, is more effective in PVE communications.** Consequently, research suggests focusing on positive messages that promote social values, tolerance, freedom and democracy to counter extremist narratives.³⁰ However, it is essential to complement alternative narratives with additional initiatives that provide practical ways to achieve the positive lifestyles and approaches they promote, while maintaining realistic aspirations. Failing to do so may weaken the credibility of the content or create a gap between the proposed positive alternatives and the actual support provided, leading to disappointment among the target audience.

Improving the capacity of local organizations proved to be an effective measure for increasing the quality, scale and reach of media campaigns. For instance, a detailed evaluation of Youth Innovation Labs – a youth-focused capacity-building initiative – suggested it achieved its primary objectives of increasing the reach and production value of third-party content.³¹ Media training programmes in Morocco led by Search for Common Ground enumerates similar accomplishments, helping to amplify locally produced alternative narratives that far surpassed their anticipated benchmarks for consumer interaction.



Photo 4: IOM Iraq 2022/ Sarah Al Jameel

22 Daniel Koehler, Gordon Clubb, Jocelyn J. Bélanger, Michael H. Becker & Michael J. Williams, "Don't Kill the Messenger: Perceived Credibility of Far-Right Former Extremists and Police Officers in P/CVE Communication," 2023.

23 Michael, Jones, "Through the Looking Glass: Assessing the Evidence Base for P/CVE Communications," RUSI, 2020.

24 Action Against Hunger, "Conflict Sensitivity Assessment in Ninewa," 2023.

25 XCEPT Cross Border Conflict, "Controversies and Challenges of Peacebuilding in Nineveh: Revisiting Post-IS Reconciliation in Iraq," January 2023.

26 Christensen, Tina Wilchen. Lessons Learned from P/CVE Youth Mentorship. Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), 2019.

27 David L. DuBois & Fasika Alem, "Mentoring and Domestic Radicalization," University of Illinois at Chicago, 2017.

28 Michael, Jones, "Through the Looking Glass: Assessing the Evidence Base for P/CVE Communications," RUSI, 2020.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Michael, Jones, "Through the Looking Glass: Assessing the Evidence Base for P/CVE Communications," RUSI, 2020.

STAKEHOLDER MAPPING

A stakeholder mapping exercise was carried out to create a clear map of the Iraqi stakeholders involved in preventing violent extremism. The analysis was conducted to identify the influence level of stakeholder groups based on a questionnaire form tool that assesses the influence of each stakeholder. The process of the stakeholder mapping is explained below.

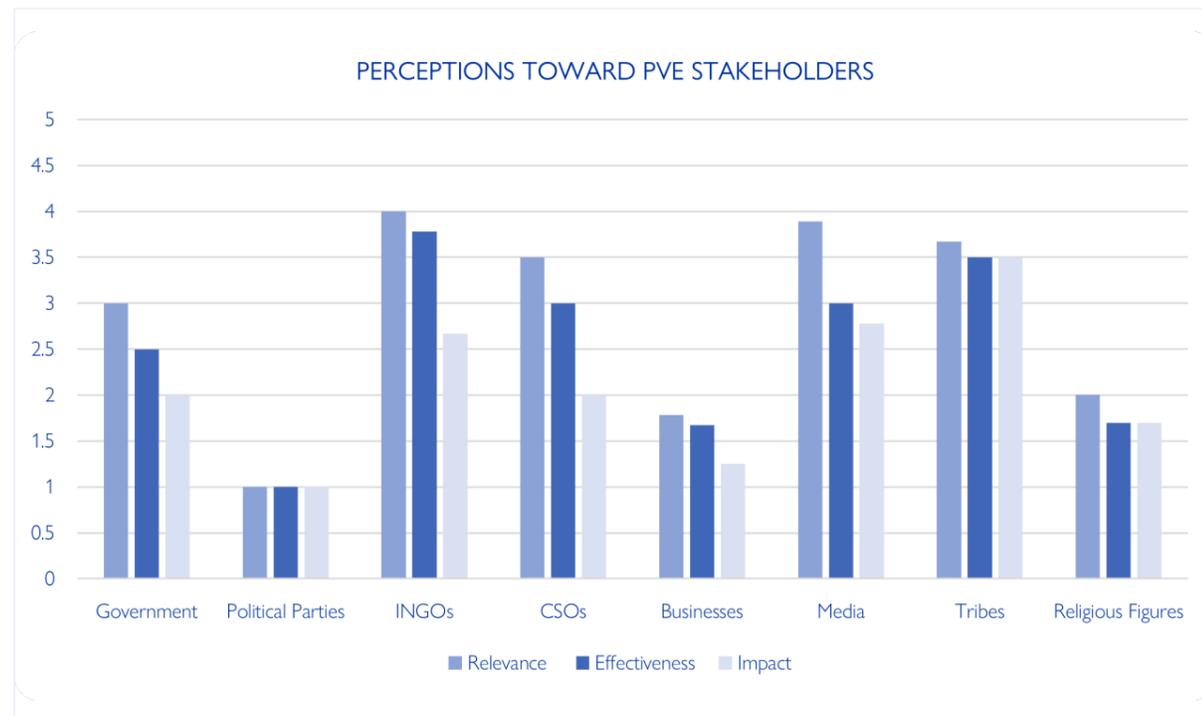
Stakeholder selection: Stakeholders who have a direct or indirect influence on PVE initiatives in Iraq were selected, including non-governmental organizations, media outlets, religious leaders and civil society groups.

Determining level of influence on PVE initiatives in Iraq: The level of influence was determined based on the relevancy, effectiveness and impact of each stakeholder on PVE. The output is obtained through 15 in-depth interviews that were conducted between March 2023 and June 2023 with a diverse group of individuals active in PVE projects.

The interviewees included activists, academics, representatives of civil society and researchers. With representation from varied regions such as Tel Afar, Mosul, Hawijah, Fallujah, and Zubair, a broad range of perspectives was ensured.

- **Relevancy:** Considers the mandate, expertise and capacity to address the specific factors contributing to violent extremism in the target context.
- **Effectiveness:** Respondents were asked to assess factors such as the stakeholder's organizational capacity, leadership, technical expertise and partnerships with other actors.
- **Impact:** Involves determining the outcomes and long-term effects of PVE interventions and the ability to create sustainable change in the target communities.

KEY FINDINGS



Tribal Effectiveness in PVE: Tribes in Iraq play a crucial role in preventing violent extremism due to their deep-rooted connections within local communities.³² Interviewees identified tribes as effective stakeholders in PVE, primarily due to their ability to resolve disputes and facilitate the return of displaced persons to their communities.³³ This capability was largely shown in recent operations to return families from camps to host communities in Nineveh. Stakeholders interviewed cited tribes' ability to leverage their influence and traditional dispute resolution mechanisms to help mitigate the factors that fuel violent extremism.

However, relying solely on tribes for PVE activities can lead to several challenges. It is important to note that reliance on tribes can unintentionally reinforce the power dynamics and tribal hierarchies within communities, potentially excluding marginalized groups or individuals who do not hold significant influence within the tribe. Moreover, in certain parts of Iraq, such as the south, tribes are often associated with violence and extortion; therefore, careful consideration and vetting must be conducted prior to working with any tribe. Moreover, as tribes operate with their own traditional systems and norms, there may be a lack of oversight and accountability for their PVE activities. Moreover, tribes are susceptible to political manipulation or cooptation, which could compromise the neutrality and effectiveness of PVE efforts. This could lead to the promotion of specific political agendas or the marginalization of certain groups, undermining the goal of PVE.

Negative Impact of Political Parties on PVE. Among the various stakeholders, political parties were consistently ranked the lowest in terms of relevance, effectiveness and impact on PVE. Respondents overwhelmingly expressed the sentiment that political parties regularly contribute to the rise of violent extremism rather than mitigating it.³⁴ By promoting sectarian narratives and engaging in fierce political competition, political parties in Iraq were seen to exacerbate social divisions and foster an environment that is conducive to the spread of extremism.

In areas such as Zubair and Fallujah, the dominance and competition of political parties are seen as significant contributing factors to the growth of VE.³⁵ The respondents from these areas reported that their freedom of expression, particularly on online platforms, is severely restricted due to the fear of retaliation from political parties. This atmosphere of fear and suppression further hampers efforts to address the root causes of violent extremism and inhibits open discussions and collaborative solutions.

Moreover, the relevance, effectiveness and impact of PVE programmes or stakeholders can be significantly undermined if there is a perceived association with political parties. This perception can lead to a lack of trust and credibility among the target audience, potentially limiting the reach and success of PVE initiatives.

Challenges Faced by Local Civil Society Organizations in PVE: Local CSOs were perceived to be highly relevant for implementing PVE work; however, several limitations regarding effectiveness and impact of CSOs were cited by respondents. Interviewees cited issues such as poor localization of CSOs programmes, poor capacity and commercialization of their business model.³⁶ Several stakeholders criticized poor localization in CSO programme implementation, stating that staff who implement projects are often not from the areas that project is targeting. This was specifically cited in Tel Afar, south of Mosul, and Zubair where respondents stated that CSO project staff are often from Mosul City or areas outside of Zubair.³⁷

Respondents highlighted that CSOs are increasingly adopting a more commercialized approach, functioning like private entities with a primary focus on securing funding.³⁸ This shift in priorities detracts from their intended impact and is undermining the core mission of these organizations such as promoting social change and addressing the needs of local communities.³⁹ This commercialization leaves CSOs vulnerable to politicization, as some political parties were reported to coopt CSOs as political campaigning platforms. Donors can adopt measures to mitigate this trend. Multi-

32 Key Informant Interview, April 2023.

33 It should be noted that most interviews were conducted in areas where tribal influence is substantial, such as rural regions of Nineveh, Hawijah, Fallujah and Zubair. In these areas, tribes have played a more prominent role in PVE efforts, including reconciliation, peace agreements and support for returnees. Furthermore, tribes have sought to assert their anti-ISIL stance by actively participating in PVE initiatives, as some tribe members had previously joined the extremist organization. This context may have influenced the interviewees' perspectives on the effectiveness of tribal involvement in PVE efforts.

34 Key Informant Interviews, April 2023.

35 Key Informant Interviews in Zubair and Fallujah, April 2023.

36 Key Informant Interviews, April 2023.

37 Ibid.

38 Key Informant Interviews, April 2023.

39 Ibid.

year projects should be prioritized, especially in PVE programming, as the scale of the problem requires a long-term and sustainable solution.

The association with political parties is highly damaging to CSO's credibility, as the overwhelming perception of all respondents is that political parties contribute to VE. Commercialization of operations and association with political parties damages the CSO's neutrality and effectiveness in addressing the issues they were initially established to tackle, such as PVE.

Furthermore, **respondents expressed concerns over the redundancy of CSO PVE projects, citing their predominant focus on raising awareness.** A common sentiment shared by these respondents was the need to shift away from awareness-centred programming and focus more on the implementation of practical, tangible projects.⁴⁰ These respondents emphasized that while raising awareness is an important aspect of PVE efforts, it may not be sufficient to create lasting change on its own. They argued that CSOs should prioritize initiatives that have a direct, positive impact on the communities they serve, addressing the root causes of violent extremism and fostering long-term resilience.

For example, a UNDP deliberative democracy programme in Zubair was praised by respondents for its unique approach and impact.⁴¹ This initiative, according to a respondent in Zubair, enabled direct engagement between young people and decision makers, fostering a platform for genuine dialogue and collaboration.⁴² This programme stands out from previous efforts, which often relied on representatives to convey the perspectives of youth to policymakers. By eliminating the need for intermediaries, the UNDP programme was described as ensuring young people's voices were accurately and authentically represented in the decision-making process.

Moreover, **a noteworthy trend highlighted by respondents was the success of initiatives carried out by volunteer groups.**⁴³ Volunteer groups were seen as effective due to several key factors. First, volunteer group members typically originate from the local area, providing them with an intimate understanding of the community's unique challenges and cultural nuances. Second, volunteers are often directly impacted by the issues they are addressing,

which fosters a powerful sense of personal investment and motivation to drive positive change. Moreover, volunteers are not perceived to be motivated by financial incentives.

However, it is crucial to recognize the risks associated with relying on volunteer work in specialized fields. The lack of adequately trained staff could potentially lead to misguided interventions, even with the best intentions. Hence, while volunteer groups can be an asset in PVE efforts, it is essential to consider capacity-building measures or appropriate oversight to ensure the quality and safety of their interventions.

Central Government Ineffectiveness in PVE. The effectiveness of the Government of Iraq in PVE was seen by the interviewed stakeholders as poor but were praised in specific PVE interventions such as supporting returnees. Respondents perceived the central government to employ a largely security-based approach to tackling VE, with the majority of activities falling under CVE and not PVE.⁴⁴ Moreover, government PVE efforts were seen as primarily focused on capacity-building of government staff rather than addressing the root causes of violent extremism. Moreover, the regular change in government officials due to elections, dismissals and resignations was identified as a major contributing factor to the ineffectiveness of government-led PVE efforts.⁴⁵

Nevertheless, community policing was identified as a promising and effective government tool in addressing PVE-related challenges. According to respondents, community police officers often possess a deep understanding of the local context, allowing them to address domestic disputes and other issues without having to resort to tribal intervention or escalate matters to higher security authorities.

A notable example from Zubair illustrated the adaptability and cultural sensitivity of the community police.⁴⁶ In this instance, officers opted to wear traditional clothing and engage in a sit-down discussion with the conflicting parties to resolve the dispute. This approach demonstrated their awareness of the parties' concerns about being perceived as relying on security forces to solve their problems. By embracing local customs and traditions, community police officers were able to build trust, effectively mediate the situation and foster a positive relationship between law enforcement and the community.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Key Informant Interview in Zubair, April 2023.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Key Informant Interviews in Fallujah and Zubair, 2023.

⁴⁴ Key Informant Interviews, April 2023.

⁴⁵ Key Informant Interviews, April 2023.

⁴⁶ Key Informant Interviews in Zubair, April 2023.

Nonetheless, community policing in Iraq would benefit from capacity-building initiatives and an increased number of female officers. Additionally, respondents pointed out that community police often have limited authority, which can lead to challenges in resolving disputes effectively, particularly domestic conflicts.

Limited Capacity of Media and Influencers in Addressing PVE: A recurring theme among respondents was the inadequate capacity and fragmentation of media organizations and individuals, which hampers their ability to effectively contribute to PVE efforts. Participants emphasized a distinction between official media from established organizations and individual efforts, expressing a preference for the latter due to its more organic nature. Moreover, a major trend highlighted by several respondents was the increasing restrictions on public expression on social media platforms, especially on Facebook. Respondents in several areas cited fear of freely expressing their opinions as they worried about threats to their safety, especially from political parties and government officials.⁴⁷

Nevertheless, **respondents believed that media initiatives have the greatest impact when combined with on-the-ground activities,** resulting in a more comprehensive

approach to PVE. A particularly noteworthy example is the Hawijah Youth Gathering, which skillfully utilizes social media platforms to organize and promote their volunteer efforts aimed at supporting underprivileged families and securing funds through crowdfunding campaigns.⁴⁸ This approach ensures a broader reach and engagement, rallying the community around a shared cause and fostering a sense of unity.

Another distinguished initiative is a closed WhatsApp group in Zubair that connects local activists and government officials to address pressing infrastructure and service-related issues.⁴⁹ By providing a private forum for discussion and coordination, the group facilitates efficient communication and problem-solving between stakeholders, allowing them to collaboratively tackle community challenges.

These initiatives' success can be attributed to the private nature of the discussions and coordination efforts. This confidentiality creates an environment enabling participants to candidly share their concerns, ideas and solutions without fear of public scrutiny. By fostering close-knit, secure networks, these communication strategies empower community members to take an active role in addressing local issues and contribute to broader PVE efforts.



Photo 5: IOM Iraq 2022/ Sarah Al Jameel

⁴⁷ Key Informant Interviews, April 2023.

⁴⁸ Hawijah Youth Gathering, www.facebook.com/groups/255007365693298.

⁴⁹ Key Informant Interviews in Zubair, April 2023.

CONCLUSION

The landscape of PVE in Iraq presents both challenges and opportunities. This extensive analysis has underscored the significance of diversifying interventions, prioritizing local research and emphasizing the roles of various actors in shaping public spaces. The persistent reliance on workshops and training sessions, while valuable, needs to be complemented with innovative strategies that encompass the multifaceted nature of violent extremism. The introduction of sports-based activities and leveraging role models from diverse sectors highlight just a few of the promising avenues that could enhance the efficacy of PVE interventions. Furthermore, understanding the dynamics of different actors in the creation

and rejuvenation of public spaces –whether government-led, civil society-driven or supported by INGOs – plays a crucial role in their success and sustainability.

Moving forward, it is paramount that Iraq’s PVE strategy remains adaptable, incorporating new insights and tailoring interventions based on the evolving needs and nuances of its diverse communities. Emphasizing locally led research and bottom-up approaches will ensure that interventions are grounded in the realities of the communities they serve. By doing so, Iraq can foster a more inclusive, resilient and cohesive society, better equipped to counter and prevent violent extremism.



Photo 6: IOM Iraq 2022/ Anjam Rasool

METHODOLOGY APPENDIX

EVALUATING STAKEHOLDERS

STAKEHOLDERS	EVALUATION CRITERIA <i>(On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being low and 5 being high)</i>		
	RELEVANCE	EFFECTIVENESS	IMPACT
Central Government			
Local Governments			
Political Parties			
International Non-Governmental Organizations			
Civil Society Organizations			
Private Businesses			
Media Organizations/Influencers			
Tribes			
Religious Figures			

Questions

1. Relevance: How well do the PVE programmes of each stakeholder align with the needs and priorities of the target population and the national PVE strategy?
2. Effectiveness: To what extent have the PVE programmes of each stakeholder achieved their intended objectives and outcomes?
3. Impact: What are the long-term effects of each stakeholder’s PVE programmes on reducing violent extremism in Iraq, both directly and indirectly?

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