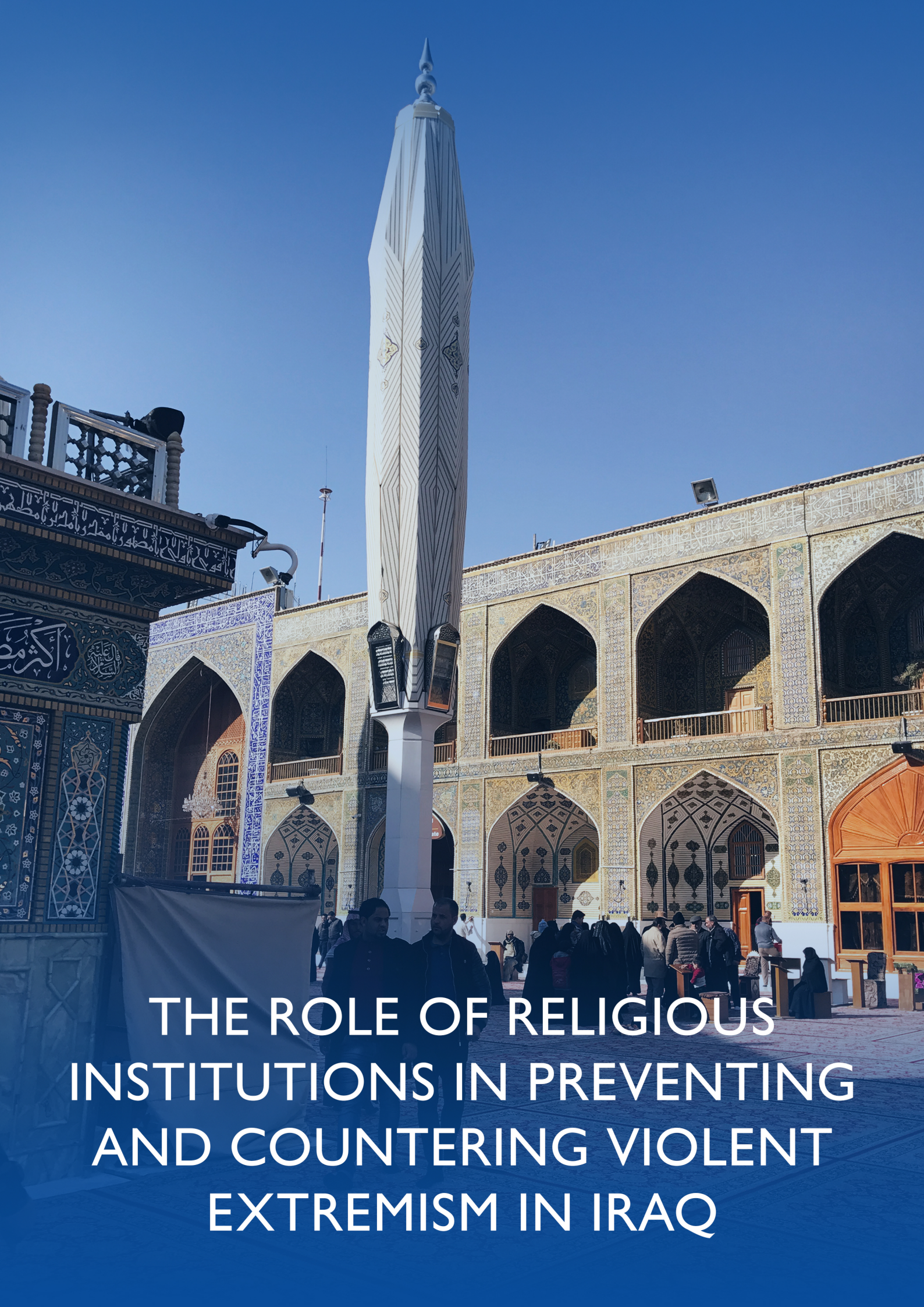

THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS IN PREVENTING AND COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN IRAQ

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SUMMARY

Religious institutions and clerics are an untapped resource in the work on preventing and countering violent extremism in Iraq (P/CVE). This report examines Iraq's diverse religious landscape and utilizes a multi-method toolkit, including interviews and an original survey, to examine the potential for clerics to engage in P/CVE. The report outlines areas for cooperation with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), other United Nations (UN) actors, and the broader international community, on one hand, and the Government of Iraq (GoI) on the other. It raises several key questions: what role can religious institutions play in P/CVE? What role have they already played? And what are the limitations they face, particularly from their adherents?

KEY FINDINGS:

1. Religious leaders have a versatile definition of extremism that goes beyond religious and ideological motivations.
2. Religious leaders recognize the economic drivers of extremism and are concerned about poverty and unemployment.
3. Religious leaders are concerned about tribal violence.
4. A class of public-facing clerics has emerged, one that is willing to engage with the international community and civil society more directly.
5. Tensions persist in the religious peacebuilding space, where certain grievances and issues remain unaddressed and unresolved.
6. There is an international dimension to religious peacebuilding in Iraq.
7. Clerics perceive a decreasing religiosity and decreasing public trust in religious figures and institutions, backed by public opinion data, including IOM's recent survey.
8. Clerics want to focus on youth and PVE, rather than on CVE which they view as outside their purview.
9. Clerics are unaware of the central government's efforts in the PVE space.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. International Organizations (IOs) interested in the P/CVE space should collaborate with the GoI on curricular reforms at the national level and should bring religious leaders into this discussion.
2. IOs should work with clerics and religious institutions on PVE, but not CVE, given clerical interests.
3. IOs should identify and work with social media clerics who have stronger youth outreach.
4. IOs should avoid working with politicized clerics.
5. IOs and the GoI should take advantage of historic moments to galvanize momentum for P/CVE work.
6. IOs should be more intentional about workshops to avoid event fatigue among clerical and civil society participants.
7. IOs and civil society should focus and tailor approaches to the audience.
8. IOs and the GoI need to distinguish between religious monitoring and censorship, and be careful in navigating this space.
9. IOs and the GoI should consider the need for a truth and reconciliation commission.

1. INTRODUCTION

Iraq has been the site of violent extremism throughout its modern history. In some instances, the violence experienced in Iraq has had clear religious motivations, or has been targeted towards a particular religious or ethno-religious group, as happened with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Religion has also been an important source of violence de-escalation in the country, whether through the coordination of IOs and agencies devoted to peacebuilding or through the independent actions of religious elite within the country, such as when Grand Ayatollah Muhsin Al-Hakim, the head of the Shia religious establishment from 1946 to 1970, forbade the killing of Kurds in the 1960s, at a time when the Iraqi state was fighting Kurdish forces.[1] As such, there is a basis for engaging with religious institutions and religious leaders in P/CVE. However, given the multiplicity of mechanisms that connect "religion" to "violent extremism" as either a multiplying force or as a dampening effect, the approach to this question in any policy-oriented capacity must be measured, sensitive and grounded in research. This report aims to provide this research to center and ground the P/CVE work of both Iraqi governmental institutions and international agencies.[2]

The report employs a mixed methodology to frame the history and background of religious institutions and arrive at a series of findings with built-in recommendations. First, it provides a brief mapping of religious institutions in the country – their structure, their relationship with the state, and their geographic base. The report employs a previously developed theory of religious institutions, which describes them by how hierarchical and how institutionalized they are.[3] Second, it constructs a story of the role of religious institutions in peacebuilding through an assessment of primary clerical sources and secondary scholarship. Third, it relies on in-depth semi-structured interviews with Iraqi clerics to describe how religious leaders define violent extremism (VE) and P/CVE as well as their own role in it. Finally, the report raises the essential question of whether religious institutions can play a role in P/CVE or if the nature of religious authority has changed in the country, relying on a representative survey conducted by IOM in Mosul, Tel Afar, Basra, Hawija and Fallujah districts. Because this survey is not a nation-wide survey, its findings are additionally bolstered by evidence from existing national-level public opinion polling.

The report is divided into four sections. Section one is a background section that describes the report methodology, defines key terms and describes the existing literature on the relationship between P/CVE and religion. Section two provides a background on Iraqi religious institutions and their history with P/CVE and sectors tangential to it. Section three synthesizes data to presents findings on several themes that have emerged during the research. Section four presents a series of policy recommendations directed at the GoI and IOs operating in the country, including IOM.

Among the themes presented as findings and/or policy recommendations in sections three and four is the almost universal recognition by Iraqi clerics that there are non-religious sources of violent extremism in the country, including tribal VE, which has emerged as a worrisome trend. Although most clerics spoke of tribal violence in the context of southern and central Iraq, it bears to keep in mind that tribal violence plagues many areas in northern Iraq, including in parts of Ninewa Governorate and, of course, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). Clerics, particularly those who enjoy close community ties, are well positioned to diagnose new VE threats in society and can be considered a resource in P/CVE, even when the VE is not religiously motivated or religiously rooted.

Although nearly all clerics do not associate violent extremism with religion, there is tension between clerics of minority faith groups (e.g. various denominations of Christians) and Muslim clerics on whether the language of "forgiveness" or the language of "reconciliation" is better suited to the Iraqi case. Although clerics recognize that VE is not always the domain of religion, when it is associated with religion, the association is commonly made with Sunni Islam. The language surrounding P/CVE (and peacebuilding in general) has been developed by IOs operating in Iraq, so the responsibility to assess its suitability and public acceptance in the Iraqi context is a potential area of cooperation for committees in the Iraqi Government and IO partners. The language of peacebuilding that is employed by IOs has permeated the clerical class, particularly public-facing clerics, but has little depth. What has happened in Iraq, particularly among Muslim clerics, is the development of a cadre of IO-friendly clerics who serve as a bridge between

1 For more on the history of Shia peacebuilding in Iraq, see: Alshamary, Marsin R. "Religious Peacebuilding in Iraq: Prospects and Challenges from the Hawza", *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, *15*(4), 2021.

2 This research primarily is directed at supporting the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Committee for the Prevention of Violent Extremism at the Office of the National Security Advisory (ONSA).

3 The theory was developed in: (M. Alshamary, 2020)

religious institutions and IOs –but those clerics operate at the periphery of some of their religious communities, with limited impact. Their existence is akin to the NGO-ization of civil society in Iraq.[4]

Like many of the other pervasive challenges facing Iraq (e.g. corruption, environmental degradation, etc…), violent extremism is in plain sight, but is left unaddressed because of the disarray caused by the existence of multiple institutions, committees and task forces that have overlapping and superfluous mandates. This includes multiple religious institutions – bridging state and non-state – as well as multiple security[5] and government institutions. Further complicating this work is the fact that there is a clear power dynamic in the reconciliation and peacebuilding sector, where representatives of minority groups are obliged to perform a certain obsequiousness to ensure access to basic resources and privileges. The superficiality of the relationship of minority group representatives to higher ranking government officials, coupled with the "committee syndrome" in Iraq risks fanning resentment. The organizations tasked with P/CVE may themselves promote some of the factors leading to VE through their implicit marginalization of others.

Although some of the religious leaders operating in the space of P/CVE are outliers in their communities, they all contend with decreasing trust in religious authority among Iraq's youth population.[6] According to interviewed clerics, the problem is most pronounced among Muslim clerics of Shia and Sunni sects. Muslim and non-Muslim clerics alike blame decreasing trust in Muslim clerics on the politicization of religion. It is not clear (yet, but will be parsed out in the full report) if clerics believe other religions are not as politicized or if, due to their minority status, they have intentionally avoided politics to direct their energy elsewhere.

Key historic events galvanize clerics to work in the peacebuilding space and present opportunities for launching programmes. For example, Pope Francis' March 2021 visit to Iraq has had a positive impact on the appetite of clerics for peacebuilding and interfaith engagement, suggesting that transnational religious communities can have an impact on national-level developments. The nature of religious dialogue, religious cooperation on P/CVE and peacebuilding has also transformed and magnified after the 2014 ISIL invasion. Religious institutions, even in an environment of decreased public trust, are still important partners in P/CVE, and their ability to diagnose societal problems is an asset.

Photo 1: ABDULATEEF Rafal/IOM Iraq

4 For more on the NGO-ization of civil society in Iraq, see: Ali, Z. (2018). Women's political activism in Iraq: Caught between NGOization and the struggle for a civil state. International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies, 12(1), 35–51.

5 For more on multiple security actors, see: Felbab-Brown, V. (2019). *Pitfalls of the paramilitary paradigm: The Iraqi state, geopolitics, and Al-Hashd al-Shaabi.*

6 Public opinion data from the Arab Barometer supports this claim.

2. TOOLS AND DEFINITIONS

2.1 DEFINING KEY TERMS

This report examines the role of religious institutions and clerics in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). As such, several terms need to be defined:

I define religious institutions as organizations dedicated to the practice, representation and preservation of a particular religion through the provision of moral guidance and social services to constituents. Religious institutions can take on various organizational forms and have different ideologies that guide their relationship with the private and public spheres (especially the government). Religious institutions represent faith groups and are led by clerics,[7] defined as individuals whose "primary occupation is to provide spiritual counsel, religious services, and/or religious knowledge to a community where a majority of adherents and clerics recognize him/her as having the authority to do so."[8]

I adopt Powers' (2010) definition of religious peacebuilding broadly as "…the beliefs, norms and rituals that pertain to peacebuilding, as well as a range of actors, from religious institutions, faith-based private voluntary organizations that are not formally part of a religious institution, and individuals and groups for whom religion is a significant motivation for their peacebuilding."[9]

I adopt the IOM definition of violent extremism (VE) as "a phenomenon aimed at advancing an exclusivist ideological agenda by advocating, committing or supporting acts of violence, typically based on racial, religious or ethnic supremacy or opposition to democratic principles. It is not specific to any religion, ethnicity, ideology or group."[10] Implicit to this definition is the belief that religion is relevant to VE in so far as it is able to provide an ideological agenda.

Terrorism is a subset of violent extremism and is a more controversial and contested term. It is an act of political violence, usually against civilians, that is meant to inspire terror in those who observe it. Some scholars find that the definition of terrorism is too narrow, as there is an entire enabling network around a single attack and that the justification of violence depends on whether one believes that the world is at peace or at war.[11]

Extremism is not, in of itself, a positive or negative phenomena. It simply means that when an individual has extremist views – whether in religion, politics or any other domain – that they are to the far right or the far left of other individuals in their cohort. Of course, extremism is then subjective as one society's average position can be another society's extreme position. In the context of religious extremism, the economist Laurence Iancconne puts it most elegantly, "To account for the suicidal zealot we must also understand the self-sacrificing saint. Not because the two share any sort of moral equivalence, but the internal logic and social foundations of religious extremism are much the same, whether the extremists' goals are good, bad, or deadly."[12]

Religious extremism should not be confused with fundamentalism, which is often applied to members of a religious group who have identified a utopic golden age in the history of their religion and are trying to live by its standards and rules. The most well-known fundamentalists are Christian Fundamentalists (where the term originates) and Salafi Muslims (where the word "salaf" translates into predecessors). Neither religious extremists nor fundamentalists are necessarily violent.

I also adopt the IOM definition for preventing violent extremism as "non-coercive measures to address the drivers of violent extremism, create resilience among potentially vulnerable populations and prevent recruitment or mobilization to extremist violence. PVE programming typically focuses on structural drivers of violent extremism. It aims to identify the type or characteristics of people who are at risk of influence, exploitation or recruitment by extremist groups in such a context, but does not target individuals on a personal basis. PVE programming does not include efforts to confront, discredit or undermine the ideas or methods

7 Muslim clerics prefer to be called "religious scholars" rather than clerics or religious men, but the term "clerics" will be used in this report to refer to all religious leaders for the sake of comparability.

8 This definition was developed in Alshamary, M. (2020). Prophets and priests : religious leaders and protest in Iraq [Ph.D.]. Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

9 Powers, Gerard F., "Religion and Peacebuilding." In Strategies of Peace: Transforming Conflict in a Violent World, edited by Gerard F. Powers, and Daniel Philpott, 317–354 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

10 IOM Iraq, February 2021, *Strategy to Prevent Violent Extremism Amongst Conflict-Affected Populations in Iraq,* page 4.

11 Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

12 Iannacconne, Laurence (2012) "Extremism and the Economics of Religion" *The Economic Record,* 112.

of the extremist groups themselves."[13] Thus, PVE is not a directly confrontational programme, but one that addresses structural causes that could contribute to VE. Religion can enter PVE work in a myriad of ways, but PVE work does not promote the creation of religious materials that are used to directly and purposefully counter ideas of extremist groups. Rather, it is more of an approach of communal capacity building and inoculation against ideological threats.

Conversely, religion can be employed more directly in countering violent extremism work, which is defined by IOM as "programmes that employ a broad range of non-coercive measures to address the drivers of violent extremism. CVE programmes include activities that target individuals who are personally identified as potentially 'at risk' of being engaged in violent extremist groups, to the extent that it is feasible in each location. It also includes activities to confront, discredit or undermine the ideas or methods of the extremist groups themselves."[14]

This report examines the potential of religious institutions to engage in both PVE and CVE, though it favors the former given that it is better aligned with the tools of religious institutions.

Photo 2: © Ali Al-Baroodi

2.2 LITERATURE

Academic research focusing strictly on P/CVE is scarce, but there are adjacent research areas that can and have informed the P/CVE space, including research focusing on ethnic violence, radicalization and terrorism studies, and contentious politics more broadly. Although the practitioner discourse on P/CVE work is extensive and global, the academic and practitioner research on the role of religious institutions is much less common. This is interesting because religion frequently emerges in the discourse on P/CVE, mainly as a potential ideological driver and sometimes as an antidote as well. The discussions of religion are understandably sensitive as overclaiming causality verges on the essentialist. There are also a few adjacent research topics and areas of policy interest that have already set the scene for those interested in religion in P/CVE, including religion and peacebuilding. All are established branches of research with insights valuable to the P/CVE space.

In this section, I draw on this extensive if disjointed set of literatures to answer several questions pertaining to religious institutions and P/CVE. First, I ask, what are the motivators of violent extremism? I draw from multiple literatures including, for example, the civil war literature that provides us with answers as to what causes an individual to join a civil war and what makes an entire community susceptible to violence. Although violent extremism is not the same as civil war, there may be shared motivators that the civil war literature raises that are useful for analysts of VE to be aware of. The question of what drives an individual to commit an act of terrorism is similar to my question: what drives violent extremism? Then, shifting gears to religion, what role does religion play in conflict and violence broadly, both in escalation and de-escalation, at the individual and at the communal level? Finally, what is religious extremism and under what conditions does it become violent extremism?

Previous studies conducted by IOM researchers have divided factors leading to VE into three categories: structural motivators, individual incentives and enabling factors.[15] The academic research on violence has focused on examining and testing the background and proximate causes that operate at the community level and at the individual level. Among the structural causes identified by the literature are economic marginalization, political marginalization, state

13 IOM Strategy document, p. 4.

14 IOM strategy document, p. 4.

15 IOM understands the drivers of violent extremism through the analytical framework and methodology described by James Khalil and Martine Zeuthen in the RUSI report "Countering Violent Extremism and Risk Reduction: A Guide to Programme Design and Evaluation, adapted slightly to the Iraq context. For more information, see: James Khalil and Martine Zeuthen, 'Countering Violent Extremism and Risk Reduction: A Guide to Programme Design and Evaluation', RUSI Whitehall Report 2-16

weakness and corruption. The individual factors that are considered include age, education level, employment status, religiosity, social networks and exposure to violence.

Economic drivers of violent extremism – both at the individual and the communal level – are strongly documented in the literature and in adjacent fields. In the civil war literature, for example, "greed"-based arguments – based in economic marginalization – find more evidence than grievance-based arguments. Moreover, the ethno-religious fractionalization arguments – which posit that more divided societies are more susceptible to internal violence – finds little evidence in the literature. Poverty, then, is a driving motivator in both research on VE specifically and in adjacent fields. However, the course to VE is rarely a uni-causal journey, and involves the convergence of a variety of key variables.

On the individual level, Horgan (2008) reviews the literature to provide a list of risk factors that make an individual predisposed to terrorism including: emotional vulnerability, dissatisfaction with their current activity, identification with victims, the belief that engaging in violence against the state and its symbols is not immoral, a sense of reward and social ties to those experiencing similar issues.[16] Previous research conducted by IOM has identified key drivers and factors that contribute to the risk of VE including civil status; education of children; socio-economic profile; civil documentation; accommodation, property rights, and compensation; displacement history;[17] life under ISIL; social relations; and return intentions.[18]

In all of these motivators, where is the role of religion? In the Iraqi academic discourse on VE, much space is devoted to religion, including the need to focus on "moderate religious rhetoric". In this academic space, religious extremism is often simplistically treated as synonymous to Salafism.[19] In addition, the Iraqi academic space recognizes economic motivators as a key driver of VE. Similar to Iraqi academic discourse, the National Strategy for PVE identifies several drivers of VE including: the oppressive methods of the former regime, long wars, failure of the social contract, loss of a middle class, security vacuum and the spread of Takfiri thought.

Peter Mandaville and Melissa Nozell argue that religion manifests in ways other than ideology in the P/CVE space. They outline four including: religion as a source of collective identity and solidarity, religion as a narrative that helps organize and give meaning, religion as "moral warrant", and religion a way to imbue a higher moral purpose.

Research on suicide terrorism, a subset of VE, presents a strong positive correlation between religion and suicide bombing, through various mechanisms.[20] For some it is about religion and national identity; Pape argues that religion is relevant to suicide bombing when there is a religious difference between an occupier and the occupied.[21] Others adopt an economics of religion argument, where extremist groups want to weed out half-hearted supporters. Other scholars point to the theology of a particular group, as Moghadam does with Salafism.[22] Interestingly, the research also finds that groups in more impoverished settings are more likely to resort to suicide violence, but the individual characteristics of the suicide terrorist themselves are of a higher socioeconomic status.[23]

At an individual level, there is research showing a relationship between socioeconomic opportunities and VE. For example, Nielsen (2019) argues that the trained Sunni clerics who are most likely to be radicalized and to become jihadists are those who fail to find employment as teachers or as Imams in mosques. Their exposure to religious ideas is not different from their colleagues who found employment, but their socio-economic circumstances led to different outcomes.

As final questions concerning countering VE, does the research provide any insights on *where* in the radicalization process should the countering occur? What programmes are most effective? And – with regards to religious institutions – given limited resources, are they better employed in prevention or in countering, and if the latter, where in the countering process are they best suited? The interviewees in this project have a particular viewpoint –

16 Horgan (2008), "From Profiles to Pathways and Roots to Routes: Perspectives from Psychology on Radicalization into Terrorism" 84-85.

17 Displacment on its own is not a driver of violent extremism, but it often creates challenges, like unemployment and discrimination, that can lead to violent extremism.

18 IOM, "Drivers of Violent Extremism in Urban Areas of Iraq".

19 Suhad Ismail Khalil and Ali Faris Hameed, مواجهة التطرف: المداخل، الاستراتيجيات، بيئة العمليات, (Baghdad, Iraq: Nahrain University Press, 2019).

20 Horowitz, Michael C. 2015 "The Rise and Spread of Suicide Bombing." *The Annual Review of Political Science* 18:69-84.

21 Pape RA. 2003. "The strategic logic of suicide terrorism". *American Political Science Review* 97:343–61.

22 Moghadam A. 2009. Motives for martyrdom: al-Qaida, Salafi Jihad, and the spread of suicide attacks. *International Security* 33:46–78.

23 Berman E. 2009. Radical, Religious, and Violent: The New Economics of Terrorism. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press; Berman E, Laitin DD. 2008. Religion, terrorism and public goods: testing the club model. J. Public Econ, 92:1942–67; Gambetta D, Hertog S. 2009. Why are there so many engineers among Islamic radicals? Eur. J. Sociol. 50:201–30. ; Iannaccone LR. 2006. The market for martyrs. Interdiscip. J. Res. Religion 2:1–28; Iannaccone LR, Berman E. 2006. Religious extremism: the good, the bad, and the deadly. Public Choice 128:109–29.

most Iraqi clerics believe that radicalized individuals are a lost cause, but in fact, some research shows that there are gaps in the radicalization process that can be used to deradicalize individuals. For example, John Horgan (2008 cites research from Northern Ireland showing that the gap between what people are recruited to do and what they end up doing is an unutilized weakness in the radicalization process. Oftentimes, what individuals are radicalized around ends up being very distant from the day-to-day activities that they are expected to do, which may be distant from the lofty goal that they were recruited for. Horgan's advice is to seize on this through counterpropaganda media messages that clarify the gritty realities of terrorism, saying that it can be "beneficial to encourage those who have disengaged from terrorist activity to become more vocal in dispelling the attractions and lures of involvement in movements."[24]

2.3 METHODOLOGY

In order to assess how religious leaders view violent extremism in Iraq and how religious institutions may play a role in P/CVE, I conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with clerics from Iraq's many faith groups. The interviews were mainly conducted in-person in Baghdad, Najaf, Erbil and Ninewa, but some interviews were held virtually or on the phone, as well. Although the interviewees represented various faith groups and geographic locations, the interview guide was designed to be a general one that allowed for comparison between the groups. In addition, although Arabic is not the primary language of all religious leaders in Iraq, the guide was designed in Arabic (rather than in English) to be more culturally accessible and to minimize the jargon that comes with the English that international organizations use. The interview guide – translated into English – is attached to the appendix in its most general form. There were slight modifications for different religious groups.

Interviews were either recorded on a device or through notes taken by the researcher, depending on the interviewee's preference. All notes were then digitized and coded by theme. The general themes that emerged across all interviewees are described in the findings section. Themes that are unique to faith groups or geographic locations are also described in the findings section. In addition to the interviews, the research was informed by participant observation of interfaith and religious peacebuilding conferences organized by various international organizations and local civil society groups, where clerics were present and interacting with one another on the topics of peacebuilding, reconciliation and stabilization in Iraq. Finally, the report makes use of primary materials including publications (books, pamphlets, magazines, etc…), lectures and videos devoted to the topic of peacebuilding, produced by both Iraqi clerics and academics. This methodology is designed to answer questions about the role of religious institutions in peacebuilding and P/CVE and the perspectives of clerics in how it is defined and accomplished. The research also raises the question of how influential religious institutions in society are. To answer this question, I rely on interviews, public opinion data and a survey that was conducted by IOM in Tel Afar, Mosul, Hawija, Fallujah and Basra from November 2022 to January 2023. These sites were intentionally selected to capture a range of religious identities and include communities that are diverse and ones that are relatively homogenous.

In total, slightly over 2000 individuals were surveyed, a quarter of whom were women.[25] The age distributions of respondents naturally skewed towards youth, given the makeup of Iraq's overall population. What makes this sample unique and may raise issues of bias is the fact that nearly a quarter of the respondents were unemployed and looking for a job. Although Iraq has a high unemployment rate overall, the rate in the sample is above the national average.

The survey instrument, attached in the appendix, focuses on perceptions of citizens towards various religious leaders and religious institutions and their role in peacebuilding broadly and in P/CVE. The survey was kept intentionally short, with only 13 questions and taking only 15-20 minutes, as to encourage participation, reduce attrition and not generate respondent burnout in communities that are constantly surveyed by international organizations. The survey questions and their degree of sensitivity were assessed in consultation with the team of enumerators, who are local to and familiar with the survey sites.

In both the survey and the interviews, a missing component is Kurdish Iraqis, who are predominantly Sunni Muslim. Although there were interviews conducted in Erbil, they were mainly with Christians residing in Ainkawa. It bears to keep this exclusion in mind when reading this report, as there are concerns about the growing influence of extremist religious leaders in Kurdish areas. This is a space for future, complementary research.

24 Horgan (2008), 91-92.

25 36 respondents were interviewed at a youth conference in Erbil, but they constitute less than 2% of the sample and have been excluded in analysis that is disaggregated at the local level.

3. THE IRAQI CONTEXT

The Iraqi context is one in which VE was driven by religious ideology and was targeting specific religious groups. This shapes the role of religious institutions in P/CVE work and makes navigating the space more difficult and sensitive for all those involved, including international organizations dedicated to peacebuilding. In Iraq, we must ask the tough questions: How do we deal with religious institutions who were victims of VE How do we incorporate religious institutions who share the same religion as extremists? How do we acknowledge that this is an unequal space, without casting blame? Can this work be done without a truth and reconciliation component?

The dominant research on religious peacebuilding in Iraq takes the ISIL War as a starting off point. Other analysis considers the civil war of the mid-2000s as a starting off point, but few point to the history of ethnic-based and religious-based VE that haunted the country prior to 2003 and that shaped subsequent cycles of violence and extremism. The right balance needs to be struck when situating VE in the Iraqi context. On one hand, international organizations – including IOM – understandably maintain a focus on social cohesion and the issue of reintegration of ISIL-affiliated and ISIL-adjacent families.[26] On the other hand, the GoI tends to emphasize the role of the Ba'athist dictatorship in creating the structural causes for violent extremism in the country. The National PVE Strategy, published by the national security advisory's PVE committee, explains that one of the causes of VE in Iraq is "the oppressive policies of the former regime and its state terrorism that it practiced, the continuing wars, have [sic] caused social and psychological repercussions, creating the base for a culture of hate, violence, revenge…"[27] When seeking to collaborate with religious institutions, it is important to understand and acknowledge the complexity of Iraqi history and the many factors that have contributed to the current VE landscape. The story of VE in Iraq is undoubtedly multicausal, with clear historical antecedents.

There are various forms of religious institutions in Iraq including those that are associated with the state and those that are independent. The GoI through the Prime Minister's Office, supports three endowments: the Shia Endowment Office, the Sunni Endowment Office and the Christians, Yezidi and Sabaean-Mandaean Religions Endowment Office. Among other things, these offices are tasked with overseeing and managing religious property, including places of worship, seminaries and universities. The three endowment offices were established after 2003. Prior to this, there was a unified Ministry of Endowments, run by a government that favored heavy surveillance.[28]

Despite these clean divisions among the endowments, Iraq's religious landscape is complex. The most familiar complexity is that between Shia and Sunni Muslims, although Sufism is growing in Mosul, Baghdad and the Kurdistan Region.[29] Outside of the endowments, Shia religious authority is centralized in the Marjayya, a hierarchical institution of clerics led by Grand Ayatollah Ali Al Sistani and a constellation of other elite clerics. The Marjayya oversees the education of clerics in the religious seminaries (the Hawzas), accepts and distributes religious taxes and serves as the spiritual guide to millions of Shia Muslims in Iraq, who are geographically concentrated in south and south-central Iraq (with some enclaves in the north). Although the majority of Shia in Iraq are Arabs, there are also Turkmen Shia, Shabak Shia, and Kurdish Shia (known as Feyli Kurds).

Sunni Muslims lack the clear religious hierarchy of the Shia, as there is no institution equivalent to the Marjayya. In the past, this has made it difficult to organize dialogue with Sunni Muslim leadership in Iraq, given how difficult it has been to identify a central leadership that could serve as a clear spiritual guide. The Sunni religious establishment has traditionally benefited from being a state religion historically. Its adherents (though excluding the Kurdistan Region of Iraq) are predominantly Arabs living in central Iraq and Baghdad (with some enclaves in the south) as well as some Turkmen. Under the Ba'athist dictatorship, the government attempted to co-opt mainstream Sunni religious leaders and monitor those perceived as too extremist. Many Sunni clerics were salaried civil servants, and the association with the state was difficult to untangle. This changed after 2003, when Shia Muslims dominated the new Iraqi government and the Sunni community found itself at a crossroads. There were several attempts to create a body of Sunni scholars that could serve as the counterpart to the Shia Marjayya,

26 See for example: IOM, "Addressing the Complex Challenges Related to the Return and Reintegration of Iraqi Families with a Perceived Affiliation to ISIS" and IOM, "Proposed Measures to Counter the Risk of Radicalization in Iraq's IDP Camps"; Mara Revkin (UNDP), "Pathways to Reintegration: IRAQ Families Formerly Associated with ISIS".

27 ONSA National PVE Strategy, p. 15.

28 For more on the history of religion during the Ba'athist era, see: Helfont, Samuel, *Compulsion in Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.)

29 For a full overview of the different religious groups in Iraq, see: Ann Wainscott, "Engaging the Post-ISIS Iraqi Religious Landscape for Peace and Reconciliation", *United States Institute of Peace,* November 2019.

including the Association of Muslim Scholars in Iraq and the Fiqh Council of Senior Scholars for Preaching and Fatwas (the latter was tasked with approving the head of the Sunni Endowment Office).[30] Despite these attempts, the Sunni religious leadership in Iraq is more decentralized than the Shia one, which presents both a challenge and an opportunity for those seeking to work with them.

The Christian landscape in Iraq is perhaps more complex than the Muslim one, but its complexity is often overlooked due to the pressing concerns of rapid Christian emmigration from Iraq. Of the 14 official Christian sects in Iraq, the largest is the Chaldean Catholic Church, which is headquartered in Baghdad and headed by Cardinal Louis Sakho. There is, additionally, the Syriac Orthodox Church, the Syriac Catholic Church, the Assyrian Church of the East, the Ancient Church of the East, the Armenian Orthodox Church, the Coptic Church and other smaller protestant denominations. Both the Catholic and Orthodox Churches are hierarchical with clearly identifiable leadership structures. Iraq's Christian community is dispersed throughout the country, with significant populations in Baghdad, Ninewa and Erbil. Iraqi Christians come from various ethnic groups but are predominantly Chaldean or Assyrian with some Armenians, Arabs and others.

The Yezidis are among the oldest ethno-religious communities in the Middle East and reside in the Ninewa Plains. Despite being an ethno-religious group, they are also centralized and hierarchical with a social class system that includes a secular leader (the Yezidi prince) and a spiritual leader (the Baba Sheikh). In addition to these individuals, there are forty other sheikhs divided among three factions and forty pirs, who manage the religious affairs of adherents.[31] They are, of course, one of the communities that suffered most brutally under the ISIL invasion and as such have an important voice in the P/CVE space.

Finally, the Sabaean Mandaeans are a linguistic and religious group that live close to the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, in Baghdad and in southern Iraq. The priesthood is extremely difficult for Sabaean Mandeans, and they have a class system as well as a centralized religious structure with a leading priest. In addition to these groups, there are also Bahai'is and Kakai'is in Iraq. Historically, there were also many Jews in Iraq, but the numbers have dwindled over the years. Although this report is focused mainly on religious institutions pertaining to Muslims, Christians and Yezidis, it emphasizes that learning from the experience of Iraq's many religious communities is essential to any work in the P/CVE space.

Religious persecution has been a recurring theme in Iraqi history, and nearly every religious community was targeted at one point or another, oftentimes by the Iraqi government. In 1933, the Kingdom of Iraq killed thousands of Assyrians in what became known as the Simele Massacre. Starting in 1948, successive Iraqi governments made life increasingly difficult for Iraqi Jews and many had to flee as a result. The Shia were persecuted under the Ba'athist government of Saddam Hussein and, following 2003, minority groups in Iraq faced persecution in various forms, including kidnappings, violence and subjugation leading to mass migration. This reached its height under the ISIL invasion, which orchestrated genocidal campaigns against Christians, Yezidis and Shia Turkmen and Shabak. In Iraq's long history of religious persecution, apologies, acknowledgments and reparations have been few and far between. Moreover, this history of religious persecution is not presented in schoolbooks and has not been part of the national history and memory at all.[32]

Photo 3: © Ali Al-Baroodi

30 For more on the landscape of Sunni Islam in Iraq, see: Nathaniel Rabkin, "The Sunni Religious Leadership in Iraq", June 2, 2018, https://www.hudson.org/research/14304-the-sunni-religious-leadership-in-iraq.

31 For more on the Yazidis, see: Dave van Zoonen Khogir Wirya, "The Yazidis: Perceptions of Reconciliaton and Conflitc", *Middle East Research Institute,* October 2017, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/Yazidis-Perceptions-of-Reconciliation-and-Conflict-Report.pdf.

32 For the impact of excluding narratives from Iraqi history, see: Sargon Donabed, *Reforging a Forgotten History: Iraq and the Assyrians in the Twentieth Century* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

4. FINDINGS

In this section, I briefly outline nine findings. I develop policy recommendations based on these findings in section 5.

FINDING 1: RELIGIOUS LEADERS HAVE A VERSATILE DEFINITION OF EXTREMISM

Most religious leaders in Iraq view extremism as being able to manifest in many forms: social, political, economic and religious. Muslim and non-Muslim clerics alike do not equate religious extremism exclusively with Islam. Moreover, Shia clerics do not equate Muslim religious extremism with the Sunni branch of Islam, either. On the surface, the broad definition of extremism that Iraqi clerics espouse suggests that there is little space for generalization or stereotyping among the clerical class. However, there are certain opposing views on a religion's susceptibility to instrumentalization by violent extremists. For example, a Sunni cleric insisted to me that "all religions on earth have their extremist forms", while a Christian cleric insisted that Christianity is less susceptible given that it has a "rhetoric of love". This speaks to the multivocality of all religions – that they have the tools and rhetoric to be the agents of peace or the agents of conflict, depending on how the message is controlled. This, of course, presupposes an audience that is primed to listen.

There is also some tension as to how the UN and its agencies view religious extremism in Iraq, with some Muslim clerics perceiving the UN as behaving as though "extremism is a Muslim problem". At the same time, clerics acknowledge the convening power of the UN. A challenge in Iraq is that the most traumatic manifestation of violent extremism, ISIL, was a result of Muslim Sunni extremism, and thus, the ability to speak of violent extremism broadly and violent extremism in Iraq between roughly 2014 and 2017 became tangled.

Some clerics are chiefly concerned with the ISIL variant of VE, which draws from religious ideology, while others are more concerned about VE broadly, identifying multiple channels from which it can and has emerged. The association with Islam, and with Sunni Islam specifically, is a sensitive topic that is often skirted around and rarely directly addressed. However, what research has shown is that clerics are welcoming of a complex and precise definition of extremism – one that: first, acknowledges the types of extremism (e.g. religious, political, social, etc.); second, acknowledges the variables that make individuals susceptible to extremism; and third, distinguishes between those who wield ideological tools and the institutions through which those ideologies have developed and emerged. In other words, to distinguish between "when there is extremism *in* a religion as opposed to the extremism of those who are part of that religion".[33] Although clerics agree on this distinction in theory, there is still a thirst for a thorough and honest discussion in practice.

FINDING 2: RELIGIOUS LEADERS RECOGNIZE THE ECONOMIC DRIVERS OF EXTREMISM

Iraqi clerics from various religious backgrounds are concerned about the economic drivers of VE, given Iraq's increasing poverty and unemployment rates. Clerics recognize that economic grievances make individuals susceptible to extremism, as violent extremist organizations provide them with both economic opportunities and a sense of purpose. Indeed, research has demonstrated that economic motivations drive recruitment into armed groups and even impact the prevalence and duration of civil war. Large youth cohorts are correlated with unrest. These academic views are shared by Iraqi clerics who fear that the continued difficult economic situation in Iraq presents opportunities for youth radicalization. Other drivers that clerics identified include psychological reasons, political manipulation by foreign and regional powers and the effect of the media. Most clerics focused on the role of economic drivers, but nevertheless urged a holistic approach.

FINDING 3: RELIGIOUS LEADERS ARE CONCERNED ABOUT TRIBAL VIOLENCE

Iraqi clerics are concerned about tribal violence in the upcoming years. From their perspective, tribal violence is a form of *societal extremism* that is more alarming to them than religious extremism or political extremism (both of which were identified, as well). Shia clerics, in particular, are concerned about the role of tribes in southern Iraq and their impact on the development of exclusivist and extremist social mores and norms. They are also concerned that the Iraqi state does not have the capacity to curb the power and arms of tribal actors and that they are also not investing in safeguarding youth from tribal influence. This is particularly true of elite clerics at the urban level, who betray a classism when it comes to their perception of tribes. At the local level, the power of tribes and their relationship with local-level clerics is more nuanced. For example, there are many community-level Muslim clerics who are distant from the central religious institutions who nevertheless are influential because of their personal charisma and their folkloric allure.

33 Author interview Abbas Al-Qurashi, Najaf, Iraq, April 28, 2022.

FINDING 4: A CLASS OF PUBLIC-FACING CLERICS HAS EMERGED

There are clerics devoted to specific tasks within each religious institution in Iraq. In every religious group, there are clerics that are devoted entirely to research and learning and others who are interested in youth guidance and mentorship and others yet who have adopted an activist role. In some instances, as with the Christians and Yezidis after 2014, the activist role was imposed by the necessity of the situation. Certain Christian and Yezidi religious leaders played a large role in highlighting the plight of their communities to international media and harnessing humanitarian actors. Perhaps these clerics did not have the intention of becoming a public face in the beginning of their careers, but they responded to a challenge facing their communities.

Within the Muslim communities in Iraq, there are clerics who have taken on the task of representing religious institutions at government functions, peacebuilding workshops, civil society events and interfaith dialogues. Over the years, these clerics have become the go-to figures that serve as a bridge between the public sphere and the religious institution. The clerics who gravitate towards this responsibility tend to be public facing in the sense of being friendly to the media and present on social media. Although they are ideal partners, given their connectedness to the religious establishment and to the public, they tend to not be representative of the typical cleric and as such should be considered as more of a bridge than an ambassador.

The development of a public-facing class of clerics is a positive one in the Iraqi context because it reflects a prioritization of peacebuilding, communal outreach and religious dialogue among the religious establishment. It is also a new phenomenon, given that clerical activity was heavily monitored prior to 2003. At the same time, the fact that many clerics – particularly those working to serve vulnerable minority communities – have begun to act as both spiritual guides and as heads of NGOs is an alarming development, because it risks overburdening clerics with additional responsibilities.

FINDING 5: TENSIONS PERSIST IN THE RELIGIOUS PEACEBUILDING SPACE

Public-facing clerics have developed the language and toolkit for participating in peacebuilding conferences and interfaith dialogue. This language reflects the priorities of the international community that have been adopted by clerics. Terms like "peacebuilding", "social cohesion", "peaceful coexistence" and even "preventing and countering violent extremism" are priorities that have seeped from international organizations to religious institutions through these public-facing clerics. As such, they are not organically developed terms with agreed-upon definitions and therefore are occasionally a source of tension. For example, some Christian clerics find the use of "tasamuh" or "mutual forgiveness" to be problematic because it suggests that victimization was not unidirectional.

Tensions also exist in the actual spaces for dialogue. In government institutions, for example, there is a clear power hierarchy among representatives of different political parties and religiously-based political parties. Oftentimes, members of minority communities must comport themselves strategically to accomplish their objectives in such circles. In other spaces, like workshops and conferences, representatives of minority groups sometimes feel overpowered by the Muslims who are present. There are no best practices in place in either government institutions or in international organization-hosted workshops for ensuring adequate representation and participation for those present.

FINDING 6: THERE IS AN INTERNATIONAL DIMENSION TO RELIGIOUS PEACEBUILDING IN IRAQ

Iraqi clerics may be new to dialogue and peacebuilding but their increased interest in dialogue has not only been internal, but regional and international as well. For example, the religious establishment in Najaf has ties to Catholic universities in Lebanon and Sunni Islamic universities across the Middle East. The Vatican itself has played a large role in interfaith dialogue in Iraq.

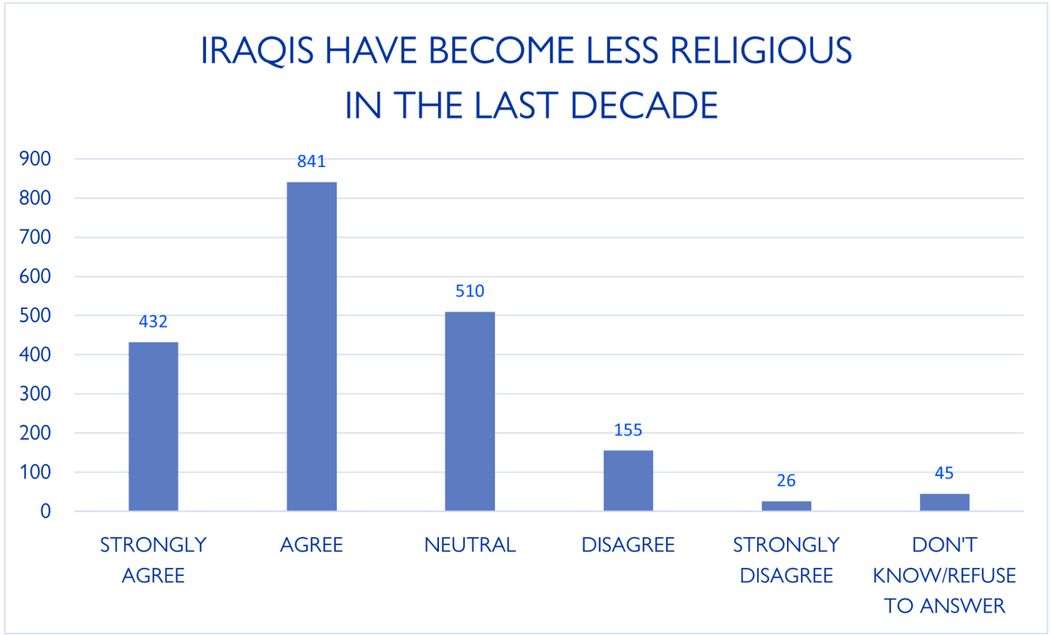
For transnational faith groups – like Islam and Christianity – the international dimension is perhaps natural and can trickle down to impact interfaith relations within the country. This is particularly important for hierarchical faith groups – like Shia Muslims and Catholics. However, it can have a positive effect for members of other faith groups because it also increases the interest and capacity of religious institutions within the country to engage in peacebuilding endeavors. For a topic as sensitive as P/CVE, experience in dialogue and exchange is crucial.

FINDING 7: CLERICS PERCEIVE A DECREASING RELIGIOSITY AND DECREASING PUBLIC TRUST IN RELIGIOUS FIGURES AND INSTITUTIONS

As Iraqi clerics are building their toolkits for engagement with non-co-religionists, they are faced with a crisis of confidence from within the Iraqi population. According to the Arab Barometer, in 2013 only 12 per cent of Iraqis said that they had "no trust at all" in religious leaders but by 2018, the number had shot up to 40 per cent.[34] In the survey that IOM ran in several key districts (Mosul, Tel Afar, Hawija, Basra and Fallujah) 63 per cent of respondents agreed and strongly agreed with the statement that "Iraqis have become less trusting of religious leaders in the last decade." When disaggregated by regions, 71 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that "Iraqis in the center have become less trusting of religious leaders in the last decade" in comparison to how they perceived the situation in the south (40% agreed or strongly agreed) and the north (56% agreed or strongly agreed).

Among the interviewed clerics and religious leaders, many shared the sentiment that both religiosity and trust in religious institutions were decreasing among Muslim communities, but the answers were mixed among the other religious groups.

Citizen perception of decreased religiosity is nuanced. According to the IOM survey, many respondents agreed with the sentiment that religiosity has been declining in Iraq.



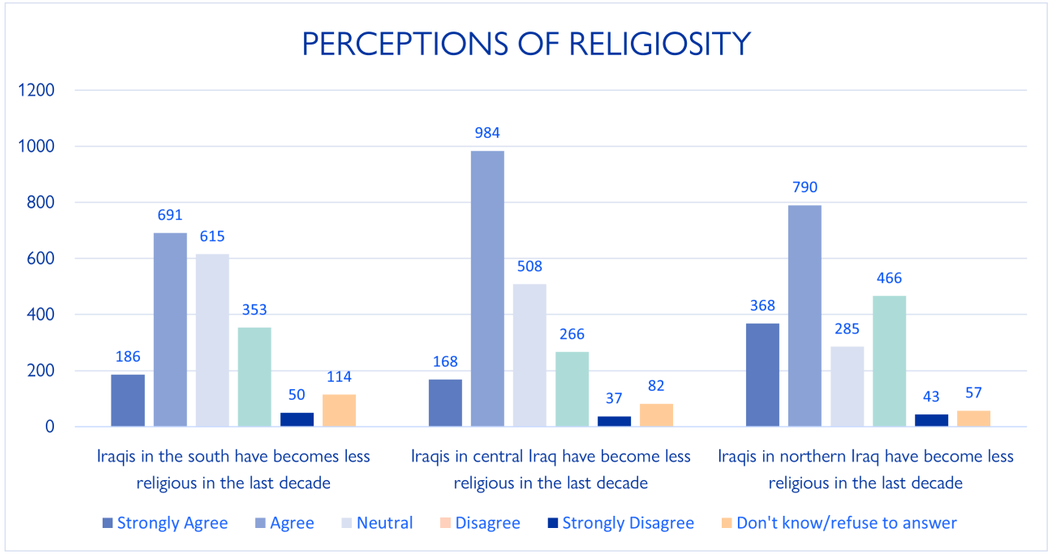
When disaggregated by *perceptions* of certain geographic locations, respondents perceive religiosity to have declined the most in central Iraq. This is not a measure of religiosity in these areas – which is notoriously difficult to capture in surveys – but a measure of how some Iraqis perceive levels of religiosity in different parts of the country.

The reasons for a decrease in religious trust *and* in religiosity differed among the religious groups as well. Among the Shia, for example, the decrease in trust (and even in religiosity) is attributable to the politicization of clerics. Once clerics became associated with a poorly performing political elite, the public lost trust in them as well. Father Amir Jaje, an Iraqi member of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, explained that the structural roots of decreased trust in religious figures and decreased religiosity is common across faith groups.[35] According to Father Amir, a crisis of trust emerges when the religious institution appears rich at a time when citizens are suffering, as happened with the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages. Similarly, when the Shia of Iraq are suffering from poor service provision and rising poverty and unemployment, they find that many of their religious leaders are better off and some even share ties to the wealthy political elite. Iraq's numerous Christian denominations are facing a similar challenge, as the Church is unable to alleviate the economic suffering of its adherents and is losing their trust in the process. Among Iraq's other religious groups, including the Yezidis and the Sabaean Mandeans, a similar process does not appear to be unfolding, perhaps due to the different nature of religious leadership.

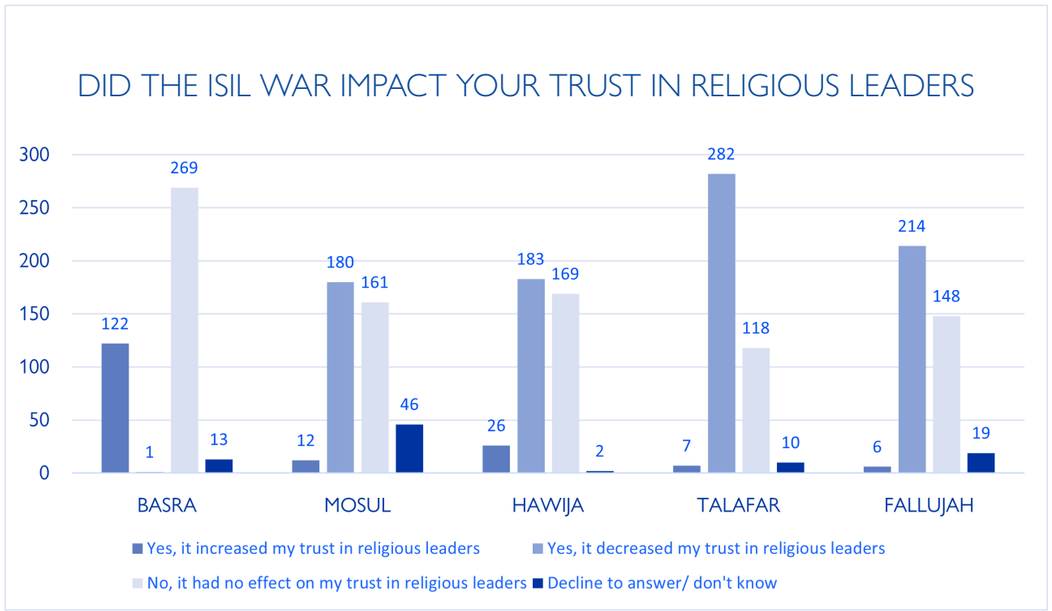
With regards to Iraq's Sunni community, however, the process of decreased trust in religious authority is also unfolding, albeit for different reasons. On one level, individuals are less willing to appear visibly religious in liberated areas due to a perception that religiosity is associated with ISIL sympathizers.

34 Arab Barometer Wave III & V (Iraq).

35 Author virtual interview with Fr. Amir Jaje. September 2022.



However, individuals are not only self-preservationist, but according to some clerics, youth were distrustful of religious leaders because of their inability to stave off or prevent an ISIL incursion. Some youth, due to their experience of life under ISIL, now associate Islam with religious violence. When asked "did the ISIL war impact your trust in religious leaders?", 43 per cent of respondents said that the ISIL war decreased their trust in religous leaders, 43 per cent said it had no effect, and 9 per cent said it increased their trust. When we disaggregate this data by geographic location, 66 per cent of respondents from Basra said that the war with ISIL had no impact on their trust in religious leaders, while 30 per cent said that it increased their trust in religious leaders, which is different from all the other sites that were surveyed. This makes sense, however, given that Basra's residents are predominantly Shia with no religious associations whatsoever with ISIL and with a geographic distance from the war. By contrast, 45 per cent of respondents from Mosul said that the war with ISIL decreased their trust in religious leaders.



FINDING 8: CLERICS WANT TO FOCUS ON YOUTH AND ON PREVENTION OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Clerics are predominantly concerned with preventing youth radicalization through education, awareness and programmes targeting vulnerable youth, including those in juvenile prisons. Sunni clerics, in particular, expressed an inability and unwillingness to design and implement programmes targeting older radicalized individuals within the Muslim community. Clerics view their role as being advisory and believe that youth are the segment in society that is most receptive to their advisory role. They are also concerned that youth are most susceptible to VE, given the previously discussed economic drivers that disproportionally impact youth. They believe in inculcating youth against extremism through educational programmes designed to highlight Iraq's diversity as part of its national identity. Most clerics are willing to discuss curricular reforms at the national level, and many clerics have begun creating educational materials that can be used by instructors at various academic levels. The focus on youth is in alignment with the strategy of the National PVE Committee.

FINDING 9: CLERICS ARE UNAWARE OF THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT'S EFFORTS IN THE PVE SPACE

Many clerics who are devoted to working on youth empowerment, peacebuilding and P/CVE are unaware of the presence of the National Committee and are unaware of its representatives that are most relevant to them. Even those who work with the endowments at the provincial level are unaware of the representatives of the endowments to the National Committee This suggests that there is room for the National Committee to further strengthen its engagement with religious institutions and leaders in Iraq.

There is a broader sense of the government being uncooperative with religious institutions. For example, Archbishop Avak Asadourian said that "with regards to our cooperation with the Iraqi government, it is not at the desired level because the government (whichever government it is) does not know what to do and when they do learn what to do, it is time for elections."[36] Archbishop Asadourian's remark, based on over forty years of experience in Iraq, reveals the need for government institutions that are not impacted by the vicissitudes of politics and that are allowed to build experience without disruption.

Other Iraqi clerics did not provide the same level of detail as Archbishop Asadourian on the shortcomings of government engagement, but they agreed that the Iraqi government could be doing more. To support this cooperation, it is important to note that there is strong theoretical overlap between the National Committee and between religious institutions when it comes to P/CVE. For example, they share a similarly nuanced definition of extremism and a thorough understanding of the causes of VE in the Iraqi context, including a focus on tribal factors. These commonalities are the appropriate background for a deepened partnership.

Photo 4: © Ali Al-Baroodi

36 Author interview with Archbishop Avak Asadourian, Baghdad, Iraq, April 25, 2021.

5. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION 1: COLLABORATE WITH GOI ON CURRICULAR REFORMS AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL

> *"There is a need to teach civicness, to teach Iraqi citizenship to students at a young age. We need a special programme to inform children about other religions, one that reduces sectarianism and extremism."*
>
> *–Head of the Yezidi Endowment in Ninewa*

Many interviewed clerics were concerned that the Iraqi education system does not promote cultural and religious awareness, whether for younger students or older ones, resulting in an alienation of minority communities. The lack of awareness also allows harmful stereotypes to emerge that may encourage, at best, disregard for co-nationals and at worst, violence against them. For example, Yezidi communities have been stigmatized by some Muslims for supposedly being "devil worshippers". Despite there being a mandatory civics class in Iraqi schools (wataniya), it does not provide a sufficient overview of Iraq's diverse religious and ethnic communities and their histories of persecution in the country. As such, Iraqi children are raised in siloed communities with their co-ethnics and co-religionists and have little understanding of the make-up of their country.

Both Christian and Yezidi community leaders complained about this phenomenon, but it was also raised by Sunni and Shia clerics who believed that the children raised in their communities were uninformed about the various Muslim sects in Iraq. There are, of course, some urban areas that escape this phenomenon, but as Iraq is becoming increasingly organized geographically around identity lines, the opportunity for organic socialization among different groups is lessening, and the need to provide it in school is increasing.

All religious clerics who were interviewed agreed about the need for a coexistence curriculum and offered different strategies for achieving it. For example, the Khoei Institute in Najaf has recently collaborated with a few other religious organizations to produce a short book introducing Iraq's different religions (published in both Arabic and English).[37] When asked, their representative in Najaf, Zaid Bahr Al-Uloom, expressed a desire to introduce the book to college students in Iraq.[38] Another Najafi cleric, speaking on condition of anonymity, explained how he had reached out numerous times to the Ministry of Education to work on introducing a coexistence curriculum but that his efforts were ignored by the ministry, despite him having the backing of one of the most elite clerics in Najaf.[39] In November 2022, the Commission for Religious Relations with Muslims within the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue will be holding a meeting in Baghdad (following two previous meetings in the Vatican) to discuss curricular reform in Iraq and the possibility of replacing the religion course that is currently in the curriculum with a general and more inclusive religious education course that does not focus on one religion.[40]

There have been attempts at introducing curricular reforms at a more directed level. The Sunni Religious Endowment in Ninewa has produced a series of Islamic education books for students from grade one through six, designed specifically to promote an inclusive and moderate religious education to youth in communities emerging from the war with ISIL.[41] Although the books are certified by the endowment and printed by it, they are not adopted as the official curriculum but are occasionally used as additional material at the discretion of individual teachers.

The Yezidi representative of the Endowment for Christians, Yezidis and Sabeans, at the National PVE Committee expressed the need to focus on youth, she says, "There were many attempts to create a curriculum, I met the Minister of Culture and asked for a fair, and he said he will have a Yezidi day, I told him instead of national committees for coexistence and peace, I want strategic curriculums that bring youth together, a cultural festival where they can sing the national anthem."[42]

Curriculum reform is difficult to accomplish in Iraq, but it a worthwhile endeavor for the international community to spearhead in collaboration with religious institutions. Given that the civics class already exists, a national committee tasked with reforming it to be more inclusive, informative and engaging will contribute to the P/CVE agenda in perpetuity.

37 *Religions and Religious Denominations in Iraq: A Brief Definition,* March 5, 2022, https://www.daralilm.net/upload_list/source/News/2022/03/05-51.6.pdf.

38 Author interview with Zaid Bahr Al-Uloom. Najaf, Iraq. April 27, 2022.

39 Author interview with anonymous Shia cleric. Baghdad, Iraq. March 2022.

40 Author virtual interview with Amir Jaje. September 22, 2022.

41 A copy of these books has been gifted to the IOM Erbil office for perusal.

42 Author virtual interview with Ummia Bayzaid. June 2, 2022.

A new committee does not necessarily need to be created, as the current PVE committee includes representatives from both the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education as well as from various religious institutions.

In order to create the environment to support curricular reform and to provide immediate-term inclusive civic education while curricular reform is being developed, the international community can also support Iraqi civil society in training teachers on the importance of creating an inclusive and moderate learning environment. As an example, UN Women supported the Sawa Organization for Human Rights in implementing training workshops for female teachers across Salah al-Din Anbar, Muthanna, Basra and Karbala that served nearly 600 schools and focused on monitoring and confronting violent extremism through education.[43]

RECOMMENDATION 2: WORK WITH CLERICS AND RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS ON PVE, BUT NOT CVE

> *"We can't do much about older people – they need monitoring – but children and youth, the key is to impact them."*
>
> *– Safaa, Head of the Christian Endowment in Ninewa*

One of the other points of agreement between the various clerics and representatives of religious institutions in Iraq is that once a person becomes religiously radicalized, there is very little that can be done to deradicalize them, as they reject traditional religious authority. Instead, clerics believe that their limited resources should be focused on those at risk of radicalization. Discovering whether this is the most effective strategy is not the task of this report, but it is the task of this report to outline areas of collaboration with religious institutions. Accordingly, there is much more common ground between international organizations and religious institutions when it comes to PVE work, rather than CVE work. For the most part, clerics believe that CVE work is the domain of the government and its security apparatus.

For example, Ali Usama Al-Rifai, the cleric responsible for promoting moderation at the Sunni Endowment in Ninewa identifies four stages an extremist goes through: searching for information, exiting society, joining a terrorist group, and finally executing an act of terrorism. Rifai believes that the first two phases – searching for information and exiting society – are where religious institutions can be particularly helpful. In later stages – joining a terrorist group and executing an act of terrorism – Rifai and his colleagues believe that the state is best suited to respond.[44] Accordingly, the Sunni Endowment in Ninewa focuses on sending clerics to juvenile prisons and training Islamic Studies teachers. Rifai, and members of the Sunni community broadly, are not the only ones who believe that there is an ideal timing for religious involvement. The representative of the Christian Endowment in Ninewa, who strongly promoted focusing on youth and education, was of the view that it was difficult to extinguish ideology, "we can't do much about the older ones, they need monitoring".[45]

Despite clerics' preference for PVE work over CVE work in Iraq, there is no clear research suggesting that cooperation with clerics on PVE is a more successful strategy. In fact, different Muslim countries in the region are divided on whether to adopt what researchers call a "multi-axiom strategy" versus a "de-radicalization strategy", both with the cooperation of religious institutions and leaders.[46] Despite the disinclination of Iraqi clerics, the literature on de-radicalization shows that there is a role for religiouss leaders in de-redicalization and re-integration programmes. Many clerics already play this role in Iraq, but nevertheless believe that they can play a stronger role in prevention. In the survey conducted by IOM, 26 per cent of respondents said that their religious leaders and religious institutions contributed to post- ISIL recovery by challenging extremist ideology and rejecting hate speech. 19 per cent of respondents said that religious leaders and institutions have provided psychological and moral support, and 16 per cent said that they worked on interfaith dialogue. 21 per cent of respondents said that they helped contribute to post-ISIL recovery through other ways. This displays a range of both preventive and counteractive engagement.

RECOMMENDATION 3: IDENTIFY AND WORK WITH SOCIAL MEDIA CLERICS

One of the tools clerics identified to prevent violent extremism among youth is to rely on the pulpit, particularly the social media pulpit. Clerics from across Iraq's various religious groups agreed on the important role that both the media and social media play. Most religious institutions have websites, some more carefully curated than others, and there are many clerics who have active social media

43 UN Women Iraq, "Sawa Organization implements 28 training workshops for female teachers in five governorates", June 23, 2021, https://iraq.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2021/06/sawa-organization-implements-28-training-workshops-for-female-teachers-in-five-governorates.

44 Author interview with Ali Usama Al-Rifai. Mosul. Iraq. June 1, 2022.

45 Author interview with Safaa, representative of Christian endowment in Ninawa. Mosul, Iraq. May 31, 2022.

46 Kruse. (2016). Countering Violent Extremism Strategies in the Muslim World. The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 668(1), 198–209. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716216671706.

accounts.[47] In hierarchical religious systems – like Shia Islam and Catholicism – social media has created an equalizing space that has allowed popular preachers to gain influence among youth without necessarily ignoring traditional spaces. As such, social media has expanded definitions of clerical influencing, and this is a domain worth researching further in the proposed survey.

Clerics believe in the power of the pulpit to deliver messages and to direct individuals away from VE in its many forms. For example, the Abbas Holy Shrine's Iraqi Center for Documenting Crimes of Extremism held an online event titled "The Role of the Hussaini Pulpit in Facing Extremism and Terrorism" to discuss how clerics can best use their platforms, particularly during religious holidays, to spread a message of moderation. In these hierarchical institutions, messaging is easier to control as the broad brushstrokes tend to come from the top. However, in non-hierarchical institutions, individual clerics have more control over their own content, which can present both an opportunity as well as a challenge.

Photo 5: ABDULATEEF Rafal/IOM Iraq

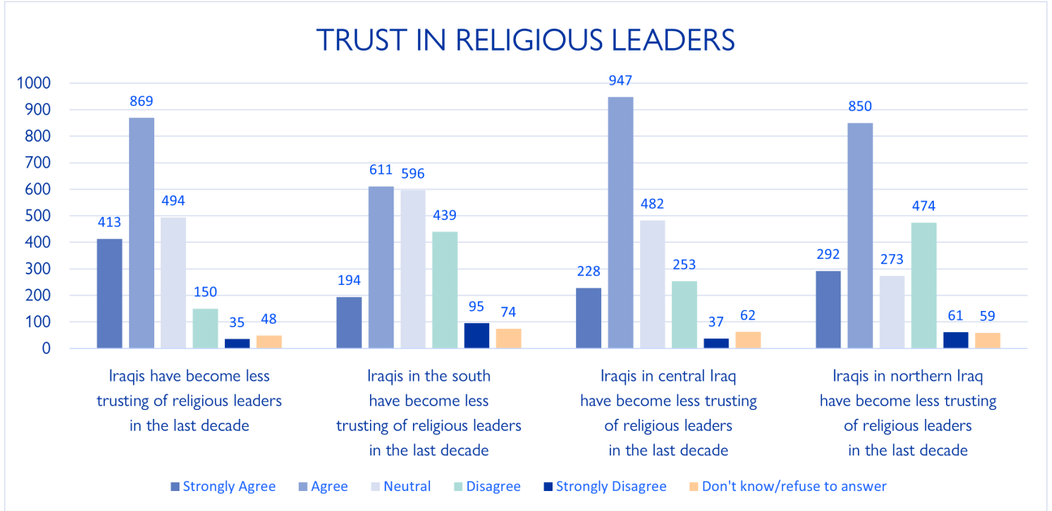
47 See for example: Archbishop Bashar Warda's Instagram.

RECOMMENDATION 4: AVOID WORKING WITH POLITICIZED CLERICS

> *"The Shia youth see that some of the political and religious men have joined forces and have enriched themselves at the expense of the people."*
>
> *-Father Amir Jaje*

As previously mentioned, there is reason to believe – based on the interviews, surveys conducted and public opinion polling – that religious influence is declining to Iraq. Most clerics agreed with this statement and believed that the main cause was the politicization of clerics. Interestingly, non-Shia clerics (including Sunni clerics) believed that the problem is most pronounced in the Shia community in southern Iraq because of its increased politicization. The head of the Sunni Endowment in Ninewa Dr. Nashwan Hayali, believed that "solving it [decline of religious authority] is easy: they need to separate religion and the state, but this is not right, as the prophet was a state leader. The problem is with the person who implements this [religious-political leadership]".[48] Bashar Warda, the Baghdad-born Archbishop of Erbil, similarly cautioned against the "turban going to the [political] street" and the backlash it can create among followers, particularly youth who are increasingly disenchanted with the performance of politicians.[49] Many clerics, Warda included, do not believe that Islam is particularly susceptible to politicization, citing the history of Christian involvement in political life in both Europe and the United States.

The Shia clerical community that was interviewed acknowledges the decline in public interest in the religious establishment and similarly cites reasons of politicization. Members of other faith groups also view a decline in adherent trust among the Shia in the south, but only some acknowledged this as an issue within their own communities. For example, the head of the Christian Endowment in Ninewa said "things have changed, but the cleric in Christianity is still doing well because we are not politicized",[50] and, at the same time, Archbishop Warda said that the issue of decreasing religious trust is an issue that everyone (all religious groups) in Iraq are facing.[51]



48 Author virtual interview with Nashwan Hayali. June 2, 2022.

49 Author interview with Arhcbishop Bashar Warda. Erbil, Iraq. June 4, 2022.

50 Author interview with Safaa, representative of Christian endowment in Ninawa. Mosul, Iraq. May 31, 2022.

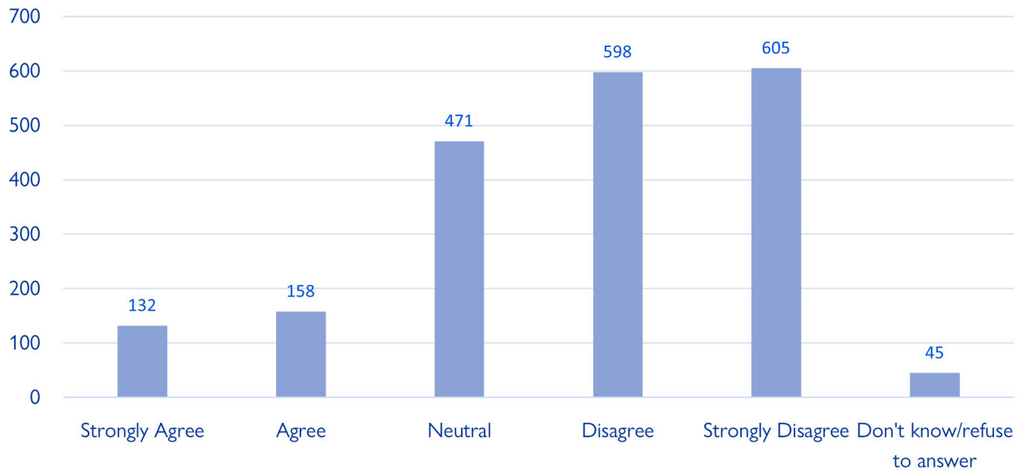
51 Author virtual interview with Nashwan Hayali. June 2, 2022.
Author interview with Arhcbishop Bashar Warda. Erbil, Iraq. June 4, 2022.

According to the survey fielded by IOM, there is agreement that Iraqis have become less trustful of religious leaders in general in the last decade. When asked about their perception of trust levels across different regions of Iraq, respondents' pereption of decreased trust was in fact strongest in central and northern Iraq, rather than in the south. This disparity between clerical perception and citizen perception can be explained in several ways. First, that it may be easier for clerics to criticize or to diagnose other clerics outside of their religion. Second – perhaps because the sample surveyed is estimated to be over 50 per cent Sunni – it may reveal their limitations in assessing the situation in a community outside their own. Similarly, because only 20 per cent of the survey took place in a Shia majority district – Basra city – it may be skewed towards the perception of those who are not familiar with the Shia community.

Further research is needed to confirm that, first, the relationship between clerics and the public is faltering, and second, that the cause is the politicization of clerics. However, in the meantime, there is sufficient data emerging from Iraq to suggest that politicization of religion is unpopular with Iraqi citizens. In the IOM survey, an overwhelming number of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that "Iraq is better off if religious people hold positions in the state"

Accordingly, and as a precautionary mechanism, international organizations and actors seeking to maintain their public legitimacy should avoid working with clerics who are clearly politicized and should seek out those who define their role as serving a community. It is important to remember that the cleric entering politics is not necessarily just clerics running for parliament, occupying high office or heading political parties, it also includes clerics who have access to and control over state institutions, including the endowments.

IRAQ IS BETTER OFF IF RELIGIOUS PEOPLE HOLD POSITIONS IN THE STATE



RECOMMENDATION 5: TAKE ADVANTAGE OF GALVANIZING HISTORIC MOMENTS

> *"The ISIL invasion rang the alarm bells, anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand, as it is stated in the verse of the Holy Bible. Pope Francis' visit was a courageous step that focused the world's attention on Iraq, and for a brief period Iraq became, once more, the land of civilizations and peaceful coexistence."*
>
> - *Avak Asoudarian*

When asked about the history of peacebuilding and interfaith work in Iraq, most clerics could identify critical junctures in Iraq's contemporary history that galvanized religious institutions to become more involved. These galvanizing moments can be dark – like the bombing of the Our Lady of Salvation Church in Baghdad's Karrada district in 2010 or the Al-Askariyan shrine in Samara in 2006 – or they can be hopeful and powerful moments, like the visit of Pope Francis in March 2021. What these moments have in common

however, is that they tend to galvanize the population and religious institutions, perhaps due to the deluge of media attention. Regardless of the cause, many of the programmes activities and endeavors that are spearheaded by religious institutions were established in a catalyzing moment.

Thus, when a catalyzing moment takes place, international organizations should be intentional about creating programming that builds off its momentum and feeling comfortable in evoking the words and symbolism to launch initiatives and activities. This is also a strategy that can help with donor engagement, as it situates an activity in an event that is accessible and publicized and creates a sense of continuity and responsiveness that donors can easily understand and sympathize with.

Pope Francis' visit to Iraq was a galvanizing moment for many non-Catholic Iraqi clerics. Members of minority faith groups, like the Yezidis, Bahais and SabaeanMandeans found it restorative and appreciated the attention it brought to Iraq in highlighting its diversity. The Shia religious establishment's interest in interfaith dialogue grew modestly as a result of the Pope's visit to Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, and the Christian community in Iraq, particularly the Catholic community, was moved immeasurably by the gesture. These moments are few and far between and represent rare opportunities that should not be squandered. However, these opportunities can be recreated in some ways – for example, the anniversary of the Pope's visit can be utilized as an annual galvanizing moment.

RECOMMENDATION 6: BE MORE INTENTIONAL ABOUT WORKSHOPS TO AVOID EVENT FATIGUE

Being deliberate about how programmes are presented includes being more aware of duplication of efforts and its impact on target communities, including religious institutions. In many of the research interviews, clerics complained about having to attend too many events with unclear outcomes. Dr. Abbas Al-Qurashi, the director of the Iraqi Center for Documenting Crimes of Extremism (an affiliate of the Abbas Holy Shrine) went so far as saying "It is unfortunate and painful that there is no real control over the work of NGO civil society organizations, including international ones, which has caused many large thefts in the name of social peace and rehabilitation, preventing extremism, advancing the reality of society, empowering women, and with the photographs and the touristic trips for the attendees, we can say that thefts are happening in the name of humanitarianism.".

The international community appears almost as disorganized as the Iraqi government, with multiple UN agencies working on similar programmes without coordination. Regardless of what is happening between international agencies, the view from the other side is that there is a clear lack of coordination and that resources – including participants' own time – are being wasted.

The typical clerical workshop includes rounding up the usual suspects of public-facing clerics for a few sessions, resulting in either the formation of a committee or the publication of a joint statement. Without doubt, the committees and the statements serve an important role, particularly when they are disseminated in the media and serve as a reminder of national cohesiveness. They also can bring clerics from across religious groups together in friendship, particularly those who attend multiple events. However, this cannot be the only exercise that is supported by the international community, and there should be better lines of communication among IOs and CSOs about attendees, goals and outcomes of events.

RECOMMENDATION 7: FOCUS AND TAILOR APPROACHES TO THE AUDIENCE

In addition to decreasing event redundancies, workshops and events involving religious institutions in P/CVE work should encourage participants to narrow their goals to their target audience. As mentioned in previous sections, clerics are particularly concerned about VE and radicalization among youth, but sometimes enact programmes that are not necessarily directed at this cohort. As part of the strategy to reduce redundancies, workshops and conferences should promote problem-solving skills and the narrowing of goals and mechanisms, and the identification of a theory of change in partnerships with religious and community leaders.

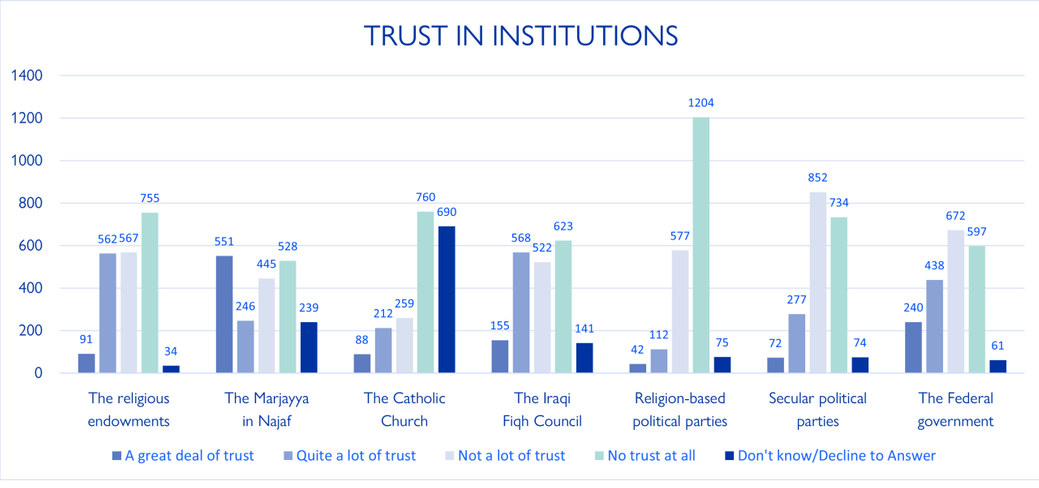
Photo 6: ABDULATEEF Rafal/IOM Iraq

RECOMMENDATION 8: DISTINGUISH BETWEEN RELIGIOUS MONITORING AND CENSORSHIP

Due to a legacy of authoritarianism, Iraqi clerics and government officials alike display a familiarity and acceptance of religious monitoring with a disregard for the thin line separating monitoring from censorship. While monitoring is doubtlessly important work in the P/CVE space, international organizations have a unique opportunity to promote a holistic approach for religious institutions in P/CVE, one that recognizes that censorship – not monitoring – can antagonize potential partners and, even more worryingly, can even lead to radicalization. This is perhaps more important for the GoI to understand. International organizations can promote discussions about what constitutes appropriate monitoring and what constitutes censorship between religious institutions and the GoI. International organizations can also impress on GoI the harmful repercussions of state monitoring by drawing on Iraqi history and by relying on the presence of representatives of the Communications and Media Commission (CMC) in the national PVE committee to engage in these discussions.

In addition, it is also important to have discussions about how the work of religious endowments in unifying religious sermons can be perceived by adherents and citizens, given that the endowments are part of the Iraqi government. This is a sensitive topic and should be broached first through research and then raised with government officials. For example, in the survey IOM ran as part of this report, 66 per cent of respondents had either no trust or little trust in the three religious endowments offices. Respondents had slightly more trust in non-state religious actors and institutions than in the endowments. This suggests a tax that religious leaders and institutions pay for association with the state, one that makes them less effective as conduits of moderation and de-radicalization. It is worth thinking about what the ideal balance is for state-clerical relations without inadvertently rendering religious institutions ineffectual.

In addition, this data (as well as the data discussed under recommendation 4) also raises the question of whether there is any merit at all to working with religious leaders, or if they are not influential enough in society and particularly among youth. While the quantiative data suggests that there is indeed a crisis of trust, there is still reason to believe that they can be effective partners in key areas. These areas are outlined by the clerics themselves, who expressed a preference and capacity for prevention over countering and for avenues like curricular reform. Moreover, research relying on panel data from other public opinion polls, at the national level, has shown that trust in religious leaders has plateaued and is not on a steady decline.[52]



52 Marsin Alshamary, "Shia Clerics in Iraq Haven't Lost their Authority," *The Century Foundation*, November 18, 2022, https://tcf.org/content/report/shia-clerics-in-iraq-havent-lost-their-authority/.

RECOMMENDATION 9: CONSIDER THE NEED FOR A TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION

> *"Socially, we won't go back to the way it was before Da'ish, especially not between Muslims and others, there will always be question marks. Only the media pretends it was like before. We need justice and the simplest thing is an apology, no one apologized to us in Iraq. Iraq is a land of knives to your back, and we are trying to work on peace, but we are working haphazardly"*
>
> - *Yezidi activist from Bashiqa*

In government institutions, candid discussions on religion and violence in Iraq are often hampered by power dynamics and reveal the lack of a thorough truth and reconciliation process in the country. In particular, members of minority groups victimized by ISIL have to comport themselves strategically in order to achieve any of their priorities. In turn, members of majority groups put on a display of anti-sectarianism and humanism. On the surface, these interactions are reflective of a national intent on peacebuilding, but there is cause to worry that these interactions belie deeper unaddressed grievances. For example, religious leaders whose communities were victimized by ISIL feel that they are owed an apology and have not received it. Some of them also believe that international organizations have glossed over the apology in pursuit of conflict resolution. Although there have been reconciliation attempts at the local level, there is no national-level conversation about religious persecution and, indeed, no apology forthcoming.

There is no conversation about what form an apology should take and who should direct it and towards whom. This is doubtlessly a difficult and painful conversation to have, but without it, there is a true fear that all the other work on peacebuilding and social cohesion is hollow. The GoI has made superficial attempts to work on national reconciliation and dialogue, but they have not amounted to much. Iraq has also had a history of eschewing national conversations and truth and reconciliation commissions, as even the process of de-Ba'athification was controversial.[53]

6. CONCLUSION

Iraqi clerics and Iraqi religious institutions can be valuable partners in the prevention of violent extremism. Clerics across religious groups agree on core concepts that are of importance to the international community, including, critically, the multivocality of religion, the complexity of religiously-motivated violence, the importance of educating and cultivating newer generations, and the dangers of the politicization of religion. Of course, there are also points of tension, including on the acknowledgement, apology and reparations for certain events, as well as concerning the degree and seriousness of declines in religiosity and trust in religious leaders across faith groups. Among Iraq's many clerics and religious institutions, there are key public-facing figures who are keen on working with fellow community and religious leaders, with the international community and with the Government of Iraq on peacebuilding and the PVE agenda. These clerics have pursued their own vision for healing Iraq, and many of them have focused their energies on interfaith dialogue and on youth education and curricular reform. As such, despite the breadth of findings and recommendations, I would like to conclude this report by suggesting that the most effective partnership with Iraq's religious institutions is one that narrows its focus on national curricular reform. There is no PVE strategy that is as universally accepted and supported in Iraq's religious institutions as one that creates a curriculum of coexistence for Iraqi children. This endeavor would be welcomed by all sides and would have a tangible and long-term impact on the future of Iraq.

53 For more on de-Ba'athification, see: Shamiran Mako (2021) Subverting Peace: The Origins and Legacies of de-Ba'athification in Iraq,Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding, 15:4, 476-493, DOI: 10.1080/17502977.2021.1937467

7. METHODOLOGICAL APPENDIX

7.1 BASIC INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. How do you define "violent extremism" and how do you define "peace-building" in the Iraqi context?
2. Is violent extremism in Iraq always tied to religion or have you seen other types of violent extremism in Iraq's history?
3. In your capacity as a cleric, have you interacted with other religious communities to work on peace-building? If so, which religious communities? Have these efforts been spearheaded by Iraqi civil society, by other religious leaders, by the government, or by the international community mostly? Are you optimistic about the outcome of these efforts?
4. [For Christians only] I know the Christian community was persecuted by ISIS and by Al-Qaeda and are victims of violent extremism, what effect has this had on your community in Baghdad? What is the long-term effect of violent extremism on your community? [For everyone else] What is the long-term effect of violent extremism on your community?
5. The Marjayya is the most powerful religious institution in Iraq, because of this power, do you think they have a responsibility to use that to protect all religious groups in Iraq? Do you feel that they are fulfilling this role?
6. Who in your view is responsible for working on preventing violent extremism in Iraq? The government? Religious leaders? The international community?
7. Have you worked on peace building or PVE with the national security advisory or with the endowments?
8. Do you think religious leaders are losing influence with the youth in Iraq? Is this an issue for some religions but not others?
9. You have extensive experience working with this country and have seen many governments come and go, what is your advice to organizations - international and governmental - that work on violent extremism? Where do you recommend we start? What programs do you recommend for us to work on?
10. How do you recommend we engage with religious leaders and religious institutions?

7.2 SURVEY INSTRUMENT

Enumerator to make note of: Gender, Location [district], and ethno-religious group.[54]

1. What year were you born? [drop-down menu options]
2. In what city were you born? [drop-down menu options with all Iraqi districts]
3. How long have you lived in [location]?
4. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
   a. No education
   b. Primary education
   c. Secondary education
   d. High School
   e. Vocational/technical training
   f. Bachelor's degree
   g. Master's degree
   h. PhD or higher
   i. Decline to answer/ Don't know.
5. Are you employed?
   a. Yes, in the private sector
   b. Yes, in the public sector
   c. No
   d. Other
   e. Decline to answer/ Don't know.
6. To what extent do you agree with the following statements [Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree, don't know/ decline to answer]
   a. Iraqis youth have become less religious in the last decade.
   b. Iraqis in the south have become less religious in the last decade.
   c. Iraqis in central Iraq have becomes less religious in the last decade.
   d. Iraqis in northern Iraq have becomes less religious in the last decade
   e. Iraqis have become less trusting of religious leaders in the last decade.
   f. Iraqis in the south have become less trusting of religious leaders in the last decade.
   g. Iraqis in central Iraq have becomes less trusting of religious leaders in the last decade.
   h. Iraqis in northern Iraq have becomes less trusting of religious leaders in the last decade.
   i. Iraq is better off if religious people hold public positions in the state
7. How much trust do you have in the following? [A great deal of trust, quite a lot of trust, not a lot of trust, no trust at all, don't know/ decline to answer)
   a. The Religious Endowments
   b. The Marjayya in Najaf generally
   c. The Catholic Church
   d. The Iraqi Fiqh Council
   e. Religion-based political parties
   f. Secular political parties
   g. The federal government
8. Did the ISIS war impact your trust in religious leaders?
   a. Yes, it increased my trust in religious leaders.
   b. Yes, it decreased my trust in religious leaders.
   c. No, It had no effect on my trust in religious leaders.
   d. Decline to answer/ Don't know.
9. How have your religious leaders and religious institutions contributed to post ISIS war reconstruction? [Select all that applies]
   a. Religious leaders and institutions have helped rebuild destroyed areas
   b. Religious leaders and institutions have compensated victims
   c. Religious leaders and institutions have worked on interfaith dialogue and peacebuilding
   d. Religious leaders and institutions have provided emotional support
   e. Religious leaders and institutions contributed to changing extremist ideology and rejecting hate speech
   f. Religious leaders and institutions have contributed in other ways
   g. Decline to answer/ Don't know.
10. How have other religious leaders and religious institutions contributed to post ISIS war reconstruction? [Select all that applies]
    a. Religious leaders and institutions have helped rebuild destroyed areas
    b. Religious leaders and institutions have compensated victims
    c. Religious leaders and institutions have worked on interfaith dialogue and peacebuilding
    d. Religious leaders and institutions have provided emotional support
    e. Religious leaders and institutions contributed to changing extremist ideology and rejecting hate speech
    f. Religious leaders and institutions have contributed in other ways
    g. Decline to answer/ Don't know.

Photo 7: ABDULATEEF Rafal/IOM Iraq

54 After discussion, the survey development team decided to not ask directly for ethno-religious identity but to infer it based on context if applicable, given sensitivities in some areas. Because the inference is not 100% accurate, we analyze data based on location rather than ethno-religious identity.

The Role of Religious Institutions in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism in Iraq

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