

Investigating the role of religious institutions in the prevention of violent extremism in Nineveh province, Iraq

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Abstract

This article investigates the role of religious institutions in the countering and prevention of violent extremism (C/PVE) in Nineveh province, Iraq. It addresses a major gap in the literature that offers largely descriptive accounts of C/PVE policies, without considering the different stakeholders involved in their implementation and the complex network of relationships among them. The actions and legitimacy of religious institutions are analysed against the background of the post-2003 Iraqi state apparatus. The hybridity of the new political system of the second republic (2005-present) justifies the focus on the initiatives of both formal and informal religious institutions towards key C/PVE sectors such as education and peace-building. Building on 59 interviews conducted in Hamdaniyyah and Tel Afar four years after the official victory over the Islamic State, this paper introduces new data and innovative insights into the relationships between religious institutions, state apparatus and civil society. The findings suggest that i) while the legitimacy of religious institutions is contested across Nineveh province, there is a consensus on the need for these institutions to be involved in C/PVE; ii) interactions between religious institutions, political systems, and civil society have increased but remain limited; and iii) the fragmentation of the state apparatus is reflected in uncoordinated and unregulated C/PVE strategies. The importance of religious institutions in fostering community resilience to violent extremism in Nineveh province should not overlook the need for a transversal and inclusive approach to healing the scars left by two decades of rampant conflicts.

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Introduction

Since the inception of the War on Terror initiated by the Bush administration following the attacks of 11 September 2001, countering and preventing violent extremism (C/PVE) approaches have been predominately securitised and implemented in the form of

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counterterrorism strategies aimed at combatting groups labelled as “terrorist” (Hoffman, 2015; Laqueur, 1999). Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) were the two first military targets of these strategies. Under the Obama administration, the paradigm gradually shifted towards approaches to understanding violent extremism, together with the realisation that C/PVE should focus on “the various societal factors and drivers that lead individuals and small groups to embrace or otherwise support militant ideologies” (Holmer, 2013). C/PVE lexicon and strategies entered the international realm in 2015 following the White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism, and a few months later, President Obama’s call for global partners to unite against extremism in his address to the UN General Assembly. His appeal triggered debates all around the world as well as the adoption of national and regional agendas to prevent radicalisation and extremist violence (Mandaville and Nozell, 2017). Despite tremendous momentum, C/PVE is still in its infancy and further efforts are needed to define the terms, challenges, and opportunities of these strategies to contribute to sustainable peace and development.

Since 2001, Iraq has been one of the main ‘zones of concerns’ and targets of C/PVE measures, while failing to coin its own national strategy. Well-documented examples of such measures are the US-led prisoner rehabilitation programs ran at Iraqi detention sites such as Camp Bucca (Angell & Gunaratna, 2012). While US authorities put tremendous efforts into the design and delivery of these programmes and hoped to showcase a model of inclusive and community-based counterterrorism, Camp Bucca has instead earned a reputation for prisoner abuse scandals and a role in the growth of extreme violence at the hand of Islamic State and al-Nusra groups (ICRC, 2004:14; McCoy, 2014; Chulov, 2014). Meanwhile, since the removal of Saddam Hussein in 2003, Iraq has been considered an example of a failed state and a system crippled by sectarian politics, corruption, and extreme violence (Haken et al., 2022). Qualificatives such as “failed”, “fragile”, and “collapse” have been used repeatedly by academics and practitioners to describe the disintegration of political institutions and the military incapacity to protect the Iraqi people against threats, especially against the spectre of violent extremism that relentlessly shook the country between 2005 and 2017 (Trip, 2007; Parker, 2012; Ismael and Ismael, 2015; O’Driscoll 2017; Cordesman, 2018 and 2019). Violent

extremism as the main cause, and also consequence, of perceived state collapse² has been attributed to the marginalisation of the Arab Sunni community in the post-2003 political settlement, followed by the institutional penetration of the Iraqi state by religion, be it in the form of sectarian politics or the official integration of Shia militias in March 2018 (Alaaldin, 2015; Weiss and Hassan, 2015). While incredibly complex, the Iraqi context came to be largely interpreted as a textbook example of violent extremism in the form of religious extremism (Helfont, 2018).

Iraq is not an isolated example and this dominant perception justified the exclusion of religious actors in the implementation of C/PVE strategies around the world (Gopin, 2000; Appleby, 2000; Abu-Nimer, 2003). Instead, early C/PVE measures were the preserve of secular institutions, under the supervision of (international) government agencies (Abu-Nimer and Kadayifci, 2008). For instance, the ‘Terror has no Religion’ ad campaign run in Iraq in 2006-2007 by the US – in collaboration with the Iraq government – thought to show ‘the true image of Islam and combat extremist ideology’ (Al-Rawi, 2013: 185-187). However, the initiative failed to attract audiences’ support as some of the messages challenged their cultural or religious values and were perceived as foreign intrusion into their core beliefs (Ibid: 192). The progressive realisation that efficient C/PVE strategies must include religious figures (Karam, 2016; Mandaville and Nozell, 2017; UNDP, 2019) led to the well-spread, yet uneven engagement of religious stakeholders (Rabasa et al, 2011; Abu-Nimer, 2018: 8). They have often been instrumentalised and the reluctant participants in so-called Islamised C/PVE programmes (Ibid; Wilton Park, 2016; Sheline, 2017). This negative involvement of religious institutions and figures impacted their legitimacy and led to stigmatisation, damaging community relations, and causing further harm. In their review of counter- and de-radicalisation programmes in eight Muslim-majority countries, El-Said and Harrigan concluded that “Preparing and providing competent, qualified and autonomous [religious] scholars is one of the key challenges that counter-deradicalization programmes face around the world” (2012: 870).

² For a critique of the link between violent (religious) extremism and state collapse, see Devlin-Foltzand and Ozkececi-Taner, 2010.

Iraq somehow escaped this exclusionary approach, and the strict political balance of ethno-sectarian groups was also adopted by international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and governmental agencies when developing and implementing C/PVE initiatives. Hence, while religious institutions and leaders were not necessarily chosen as primary partners, C/PVE initiatives featured a fair representation of religious groups. Moreover, a number of inter-faith initiatives have provided opportunities to encourage collegiate debate on the role of religious leaders in contributing to sustainable peace in Iraq. This was the case of the Conference on Interfaith Dialogue for Social Cohesion in Iraq, hosted by the World Council of Churches in December 2017, which aimed at “restoring inclusive multi-religious and multi-cultural communities in Iraq”. More recently, in March 2022, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Iraq and the National Committee on the Implementation of the Strategy to Prevent Violent Extremism launched the first dialogue session on the establishment of the Network of Religious Leaders to Prevent Violent Extremism in Iraq (UN, 2022).

Despite these positive developments in Iraq and the global impetus to encourage more inclusive C/PVE strategies, the scholarship failed to assess the role and impact of religious actors on C/PVE initiatives. Rare accounts of the role of religious institutions/figures in Iraq mostly focused on the Shia community and failed to consider and critically analyse the presence, impact, and interactions of different stakeholders involved in the implementation of C/PVE initiatives (Wainscott, 2019; Alshamary, 2021), which led to an incomplete picture of the role and impact of religious institutions/figures in C/PVE strategies.

This paper contributes to filling this gap. Using the case of Nineveh province, it investigates the role and legitimacy of Iraqi religious institutions in the prevention of violent extremism, and community resilience. It also introduces new data and innovative insights into the fragmented relationships between religious institutions and two other key stakeholders of C/PVE strategies: the state apparatus and civil society. It concludes by using the field of education to demonstrate that despite strong legitimacy, religious institutions suffer from multi-layered fragmentations that prevent the implementation of coordinated and efficient C/PVE strategies.

Methodology

The research was conducted in two districts located in Nineveh province, in the west of Mosul, namely Hamdaniyyah and Tel Afar. These two field sites provide promising case studies, as they combine elements of most-similar case design and most-different case design. Most strikingly, both have been subjected to the violent rule of the Islamic State (IS): from June 2014 to August 2017 for Tel Afar; from June 2014 to October 2016 for Hamdaniyyah. In addition to a high level of material and human destruction, the two districts saw an important demographic shift after their liberation from IS between 2016 and 2017, as well as a process of militarisation with the multiplication of armed groups along ethnic and confessional lines (Gaston and Domisse, 2019; Assyrian Policy Institute, 2020; Lucent, 2020). Moreover, both districts share similar socio-economic features in terms of poverty and unemployment, which can provide a fertile ground for violent extremism. Also, their demographic diversity can potentially lead to social polarisation, which may constitute a vulnerability to violent extremism. Finally, the presence of IS in Nineveh attracted massive attention and support from foreign states and humanitarian actors to tackle the extremism challenge. Ever since its liberation from the Salafi-jihadi groups, funds and international staff have poured into the poor districts to implement and support initiatives aimed at healing the scars of and preventing further violence linked to violent extremism. This is an opportunity to assess the role of C/PVE community-based and humanitarian activities and, more precisely, the role and impact of religious institutions in these initiatives in relation to a number of different implementing stakeholders.

On the other hand, the socio-demographic landscapes of the two districts are different. While Tel Afar is inhabited by a majority of Shia Turkmen, Hamdaniyyah is one of the oldest Christian centres in the region, composed of middle-sized Assyrian towns surrounded by smaller Shabak villages and a small minority of Arab, Kurdish, and Kakai populations. Yet, the demographic composition of Tel Afar is more ethnically diverse than Hamdaniyyah as it includes Turkmen, Arabs, and Kurds. Moreover, Hamdaniyyah and Tel Afar districts have very different histories of violent extremism. In Hamdaniyyah, violent extremism is a new phenomenon and can be considered a spill-over effect of the latest developments of Salafi-

jihad in the Middle East and Iraq. Conversely, violent extremism in Tel Afar grew its roots in the history of state-sponsored exclusion of the Turkmen minority from the early 1960s (al-Sumer, 2012; Batatu, 1978; Gaston, 2017; Smolansky, 1967: 293) and later, in sectarian violence during the 2006-2008 civil war (van Zoonen and Wirya 2017). Finally, military presence and authority in the two districts differ. Several villages located in the north and northeast of Hamdaniyyah district were liberated from IS in a matter of weeks or months by the Kurdish Peshmerga forces and remain disputed territories between the federal government in Baghdad and the regional government in Erbil. As they faced threats in the post-IS era, Christian inhabitants of Hamdaniyyah chose to put their protections in the hands of different armed groups, such as the Kurdish Peshmerga, Christian militias, and the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) (Assyrian Policy Institute, 2020: 30-40). Reversely, after the military victory against IS, Tel Afar fell back under the full control of the federal government, and its security landscape is characterised by the strong presence of the Iraqi army and the PMF. To conclude, the exposure to violent extremism of Hamdaniyyah and Tel Afar, under the light of different historical paths, demographic characteristics, and state institutions, provides interesting conditions in which to investigate the main research questions.

A total of 59 face-to-face in-depth interviews were conducted in Hamdaniyyah (39 interviews in Qaraqosh³ and its surrounding) and Tel Afar (20 interviews in the city of Tel Afar and its surrounding) between June and November 2021. All participants were met in person in a space they considered to be safe, after the Iraqi government loosened Covid-19 restrictions and the study could be conducted safely. Four categories of participants were identified for the purpose of the research: i) civil society (15 interviews), ii) political representatives at the local and central levels (14 interviews), iii) grassroots communities (20 interviews), and iv) religious representatives affiliated with formal and informal institutions (10 interviews). Potential participants were initially recruited by the authors with the support of local informants who have direct access to key stakeholders through their personal and professional network. The socio-professional positions of participants were used as key criteria for recruitment. The pool of initial participants was then asked to nominate more

³ The town of Qaraqosh is also known as al-Hamdaniyyah and Bakhdida.

participants who met the eligibility criteria for the study. In areas such as Hamdaniyyah and Tal Afar, where tribal and personal relations remain at the centre of social networks, this snowball sampling method seemed particularly well adapted as it increased the likelihood of establishing trust with participants as the researchers were introduced through a trusted social network. Besides gathering data on the impact of religious institutions on C/PVE initiatives, the authors also collected socio-demographic indicators to ensure the representativeness of the sampled populations, including the representation of gender and ethno-religious groups in Nineveh province. However, participants were not asked to reveal their ethno-religious identity; they were only asked if they considered themselves a minority. The traditional and patriarchal nature of the society in Iraq in general, and Nineveh province in particular, rendered ensuring safe access to women participants particularly challenging. Access was further complicated by the lack of safe public or private spaces for women to freely express themselves. These predicaments might explain why women were initially reluctant to participate in the study. By the end of the data collection stage, women amounted to 28.3% of participants, with higher gender inclusiveness in Hamdaniyyah than in Tal Afar.

Ethically, the research was assessed and conducted to abide by the highest academic standards. All participants were carefully informed and asked for their consent to be interviewed and for their answers to be either recorded or directly transcribed by researchers. Participants were also given the option to be anonymous contributors to the study and withdraw their answers at any point before the publication of agreed outputs. After each interview, transcripts or recordings (in Arabic) were then sent to an online file protected by a password via an encrypted messaging tool. Key ethics challenges included the need to obtain security clearance from the different armed groups in control of the areas to access participants due to the sensitivity of the topic. Additional challenges included gaining the trust of vulnerable populations with recent exposure to violent extremism, and selecting a representative sample in terms of gender and ethno-religious representation. The researchers chose to conduct semi-structured interviews to lessen the formality of the research process for participants, and to gather personal perspectives on violent extremism in Nineveh province and the role of a number of key stakeholders – mainly religious leaders – in the phenomenon. Given the sensitivity of the topic and the general fatigue of inhabitants of Nineveh to discuss

violent extremism, interviews were deemed particularly appropriate to contextualise the narrative of participants, and to help researchers avoid biased analysis and maintain the integrity of the data. The authors conducted an inductive analysis of interview transcripts through narrative analysis with the aim of highlighting important aspects of participants' stories that best resonated with the topic under investigation, and to identify common perspectives and different interpretations across respondent groups.

Religious Institutions, the State, and the Spectre of Violence

In the complete reform of the state system after 2003, Iraqi legislators replaced the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs (MERA) – the body in charge of religious affairs – with three state-financed, yet autonomous confessional offices: Shia Endowment, represented by the *Marjaiyyah*; Sunni Endowment, which is fragmented and lacks a unified religious authority; and a third common endowment for some of the religious minorities present in Iraq, including Christianity, Yezidism and Sabeanism/Mandeanism. While ethno-religious inclusion and fair representation are pillars of the new state apparatus and political system, some of the religious minorities in Iraq are not officially represented at the state level, such as Yasarnism, which is followed by up to 200,000 Kakais in the country. Beyond these three offices, religious institutions and representatives are not included in the state system. Nevertheless, these religious institutions and representatives, such as the Shia *Marjaiyyah*, the Association of Muslim Scholars (*Hayat Ulama Al-Muslimin*), or the Christian Patriarchs, are considered important actors in the post-2003 order. Notably, these informal religious figures have a crucial supporting and legitimising role. The Iraqi informal entity whose role has most evolved since the establishment of the new Constitution in 2005 is without doubt the *Marjaiyyah*, under the leadership of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. In the early age of post-Saddam Iraq, al-Sistani's office closely monitored the constitutional and political process and constantly reaffirmed its devotion to a united Iraq, especially through periods of crisis. For instance, when the country was officially liberated from IS in December 2017, al-Sistani was personally thanked and congratulated by Iraqi political leaders and the UN Special Representative for Iraq for his mobilising role against the Salafi-jihadi group. In just over a

decade after the demise of Saddam Hussein, the *Marjaiyyah* differentiated itself from other religious institutions and “became effectively an extra-constitutional authority that monitors and morally guides mundane politics, and intervenes when those politics fail to protect the social order or deal with imminent threats” (al-Qarawee, 2018). Today, the *Marjaiyyah* is considered by its peers as “guardians of the political process”, “paternalistic” and “a safety valve” to be activated during crises, particularly in instances of war and violence (al-Qarawee, 2019). The Shia representation also gained importance through its connection to the *Atabat* (shrines) administration related to the management of Shia religious sites. Under the so-called *Atabat* law of December 2005, these holy sites passed under the administration of the Shia Office of Religious Endowment (SORE) and each of the five most important Shia shrines was assigned to a secretary-general nominated by the director of the SORE and approved by Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani in his capacity as the highest authority of the *Marjaiyyah*. Within a few years, each of the administrations of the holy shrines grew up as semi-autonomous foundations. Building on mixed sources of funding including the SORE’s budget and private donations, the *Atabat* administrations became powerful entities whose role goes beyond the support of the culture of Shia Islam; and they expanded into a complex web of sections, divisions and cultural centres that spread across and beyond Iraq. To conclude, Iraq’s hybrid politico-legal system laid the ground for a shared space of governance and challenged “the old dichotomies of formal–informal and secular-religious” (Ibid). In other words, while religious representatives beyond the endowment offices are non-state actors, in practice, their constant interactions with and legitimation role of the political order progressively formalised their status in Iraq and justifies their inclusion in this research paper.

Religious institutions in Iraq have repeatedly used their voices and legitimacy to mitigate crises, including the threat of violent extremism. In the face of the collapse of the Iraqi military in Mosul and its incapacity to confront the advance of IS towards Baghdad in June 2014, the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani called all Iraqis (in the form of a religious verdict or *fatwa*) to take arms against the group and defend their country and its holy sites. The call highlighted the need for national unity to confront a common threat. In the words of the Grand Ayatollah’s representative: “The responsibility for confronting and fighting [the terrorists] is the responsibility of all, not of one sect or one party alone” (quoted in

Moughania, 2021). Despite the apparent wish of the Shia leadership in Iraq to distance itself from politics and sectarian discourses, the call was used by a number of “pre-existing paramilitary units with a concerning track record of human rights violations” and aligned with Iran to reactivate their struggle under the newly established PMF (Rudolf, 2018: 5-6). As a reaction, the *Marjaiyyah* commissioned the creation of additional units loyal to Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani and Iraqi national interests. Although this was not a call for peace properly speaking, since it encouraged Iraqis to take on weapons to eradicate IS, military confrontation with the group was the only envisaged solution at that time, considering the weakness of the Iraqi army and its inability to protect Iraqi citizens. Indirectly, the Shia religious establishment not only encouraged fighting violence with violence but also contributed to the multiplication of armed groups whose violent actions are partly based on religious ideology. A few months after al-Sistani’s *fatwa*, and in an unprecedented demonstration of multi-faith solidarity, religious leaders from Sunni, Shiite, Christian, Mandaean, and Yazidi communities from Iraq, Syria and the broader region issued the Vienna Declaration, “United against Violence in the Name of Religion”. The Declaration rejected all violence in the name of religion and attempts by groups like IS to claim legitimacy for their actions within the teachings of Islam (KAICIID Dialogue Centre, 2014). More recently, in Iraq, the Chaldean patriarch, Cardinal Louis Raphaël I Sako, disassociated his church from the so-called Christian Brigade or Babylon Brigade of the PMF, led by a Christian figure named Rayan al-Chaldani, and notably active in Nineveh Province.⁴ Cardinal Sako stated: “From our side, we are officially announcing our ‘refusal’ of the presence of any Iraqi armed movement that uses the term ‘Christian’ as part of its name or description” before urging people not to join the Christian Brigade or to form any Christian armed group (Glatz, 2019). Sako’s decision came after the Babylon Brigade was accused of committing crimes against Sunni populations in Nineveh Plain.

Despite repeated calls for peace and inter-faith peace initiatives, the voices of religious representatives are not always heard, either because of a lack of leadership, such as in the case

⁴ The US Treasury Department has listed Rayan al-Kildani in the Executive Order (E.O.) 13818 and accused him of being “responsible for or complicit in, or who has directly or indirectly engaged in, serious human rights abuse [...] In May 2018, a video circulated among Iraqi human rights civil society organizations in which al-Kildani cut off the ear of a handcuffed detainee” (US Treasury Department, 2019).

of the Sunni community, or the role of foreign religious establishments in undermining peace calls. In this fashion, the 2018 call of Iraqi Syriac bishops for the establishment of an international peacekeeping force in Nineveh Province to prevent the return of sectarian violence was ignored (can International, 2018). Similarly, Shia religious authority in Iraq remains divided between the leadership of Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani in Iraq and Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in Iran. Finally, the research conducted by the authors in Nineveh province highlighted two additional challenges to the meaningful involvement of religious institutions and figures in C/PVE and peace initiatives: contested legitimacy and multi-layered fragmentation. The rest of this paper critically investigates these two challenges in the post-IS context in Hamdaniyyah and Tel Afar.

Findings

The Legitimacy of Religious Institutions/Figures

This paper adopts Hough's definition of legitimacy, which refers to people's subjective assessment of authority (2020). Perceived legitimacy means that a given authority is entitled to command people's compliance and that people feel a "duty, or moral obligation, to comply with what the authority requires of them" (Ibid: 15). In this sense, the legitimacy of the religious institutions and figures in Iraq is mostly based on traditional Islamic and charismatic authority of religious figures such as Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. Other, more formal, religious authorities enjoy Weberian rational-legal legitimacy that they derive from an official appointment, such as the endowment offices.

The majority of grassroots respondents in Nineveh province consider religious institutions/leaders (across communities) as legitimate, with perceptions ranging from 'legitimate' (40%) to 'legitimate to some extent' (25%) (Figure 1). In this sense, religious authorities enjoy a greater deal of public legitimacy than political authorities in Nineveh province in particular and in Iraq in general. Political mistrust was reflected by the perception of grassroots communities in Hamdaniyyah and Tel Afar, where 55% of participants said that they had no trust at all in political representatives and 35% only trusted them to some extent. Political mistrust is one of the consequences of the inability of the Iraqi state to protect

citizens and provide basic services. Since the state failed to establish itself as the sole ruler in Iraq, its legitimacy and authority have been challenged by several non-state groups (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Do you think that religious institutions in your areas are legitimate? (Grassroots)

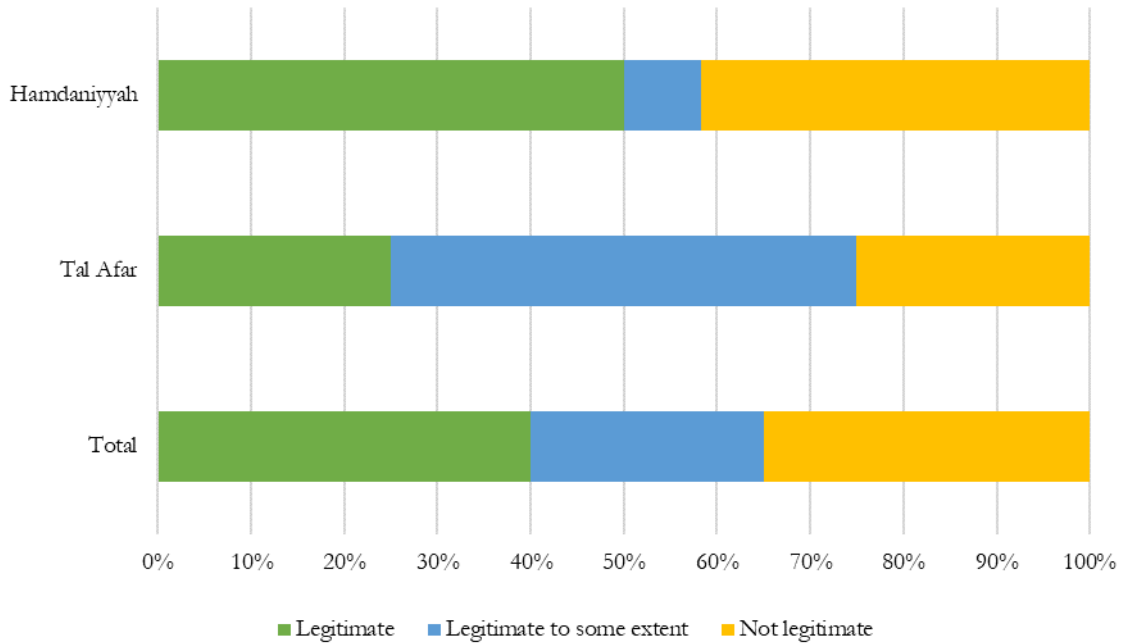
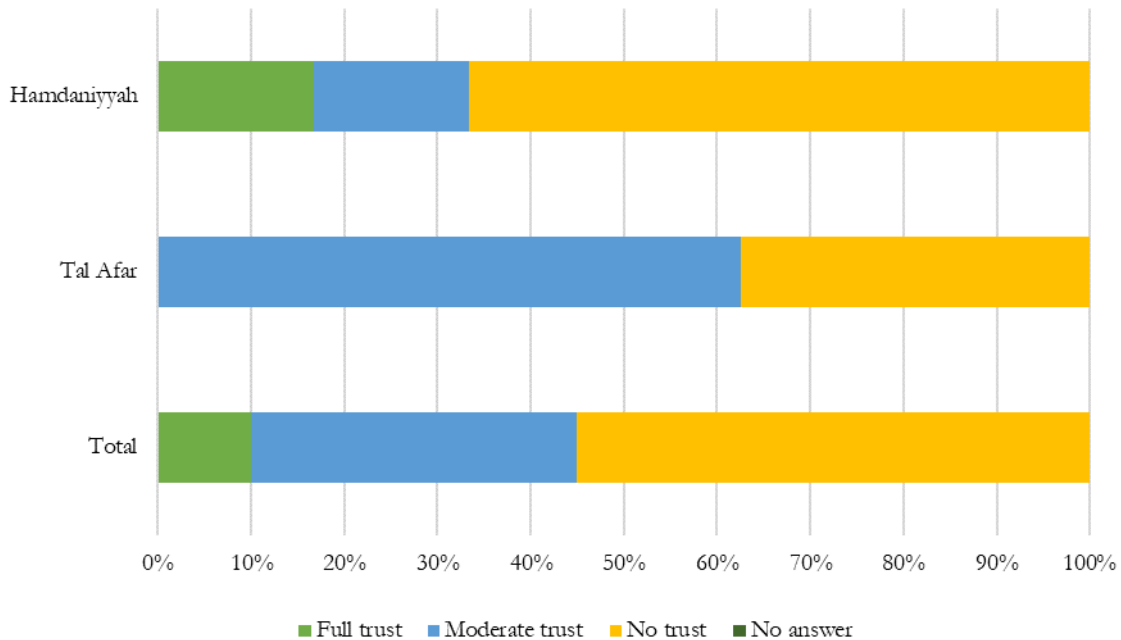


Figure 2: Do you trust political representatives in your area? (Grassroots)



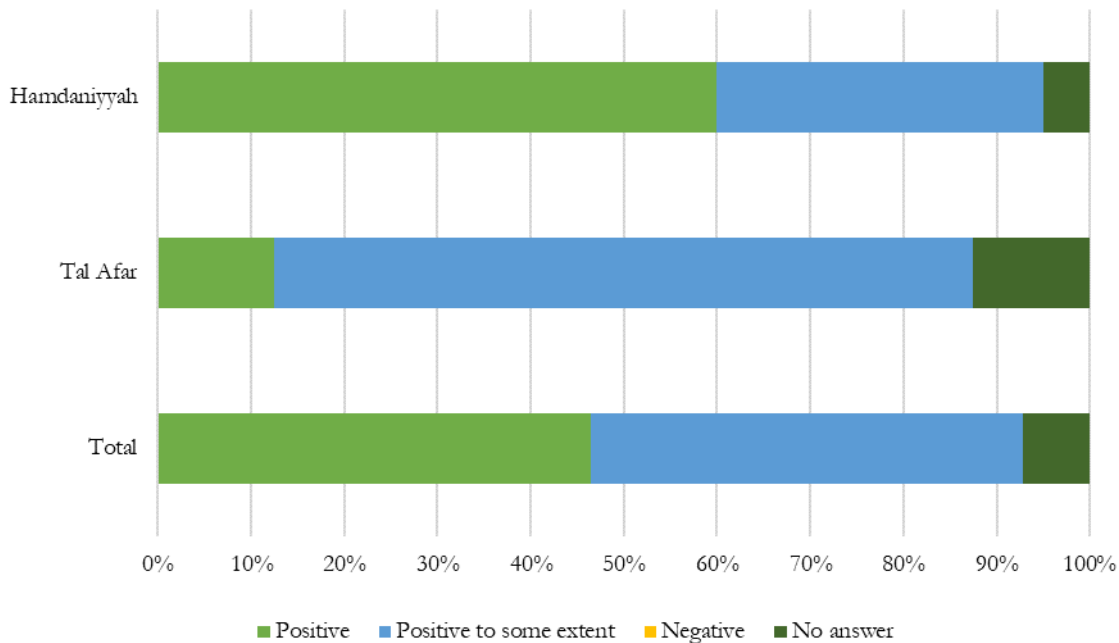
Religious institutions/leaders at the national level were cited as most legitimate compared to their local counterparts. It is interesting to observe that the unfortunate use of religion to incentivise and justify the use of extreme violence did not dramatically shatter the legitimacy of formal religious leaders and institutions in Nineveh province.

Interestingly, twice as many respondents in Hamdaniyyah (50%) saw formal religious institutions/leaders as fully legitimate compared to Tel Afar (25%). These results are somewhat surprising given that Tel Afar is a historical centre of religiosity, be it Shia or Sunni Islam. One could hypothesise that the experience of religious violent extremism in Tel Afar – that witnessed the long and impactful presence of Salafi-jihadi groups since 2004 – may have resulted in the relative mistrust of grassroots towards religion and its representatives. One could also argue that Sunnis lost faith in their representatives after they failed to disassociate themselves from IS and its atrocities.

However, opinions in Hamdaniyyah are more polarised than in Tel Afar and more than 40% of grassroots participants believe that religious institutions/leaders are not legitimate at all. According to the participants in the research, this perceived lack of legitimacy stems from

a lack of power or authority, and issues of corruption and politicisation of religion. While one could have expected such perceptions from Shia participants due to strong relations between the *Marjaiyyah* and political circles, this perception was common to all religious backgrounds. For instance, an inhabitant of Hamdaniyyah who identified as Christian and “99,9 committed to my religion” clearly explained his loss of trust in religious figures: “The recent events forced religious leaders to overstep their role and intervene in politics and government formation”. Another research finding points to the fact that Shia Muslim participants seem to support the legitimacy of religious leaders more than their Sunni or Christian counterparts. This grassroots perception undoubtedly reflects the great legitimacy of the *Marjaiyyah* and al-Sistani, who also gained recognition from political representatives at the central level and is even considered an “extra-constitutional” authority in Iraq (al-Qarawee, 2017: 7). The results of the research show that while the legitimacy of religious institutions/leaders is contested by grassroots communities in Nineveh province, these actors gained high levels of recognition when it comes to their role in C/PVE and peacebuilding policies. Their positive role was acknowledged by over 90% of respondents across grassroots, civil society members, and political representatives. None of the respondents stated that religious circles had a negative impact on C/PVE and peace policies (Figure 3).

Figure 3: How do you consider the role of religious institutions/leaders when it comes to C/PVE and the promotion of peace in your area? (Aggregated)



Here again, Hamdaniyyah and Tel Afar reflected a difference in opinions, with 60% of respondents in Hamdaniyyah strongly believing in the positive role of religious institutions/leaders in the promotion of C/PVE and peace in their areas, compared to just 12.5% in Tel Afar.

Interactions Between Key Actors of C/PVE Strategies

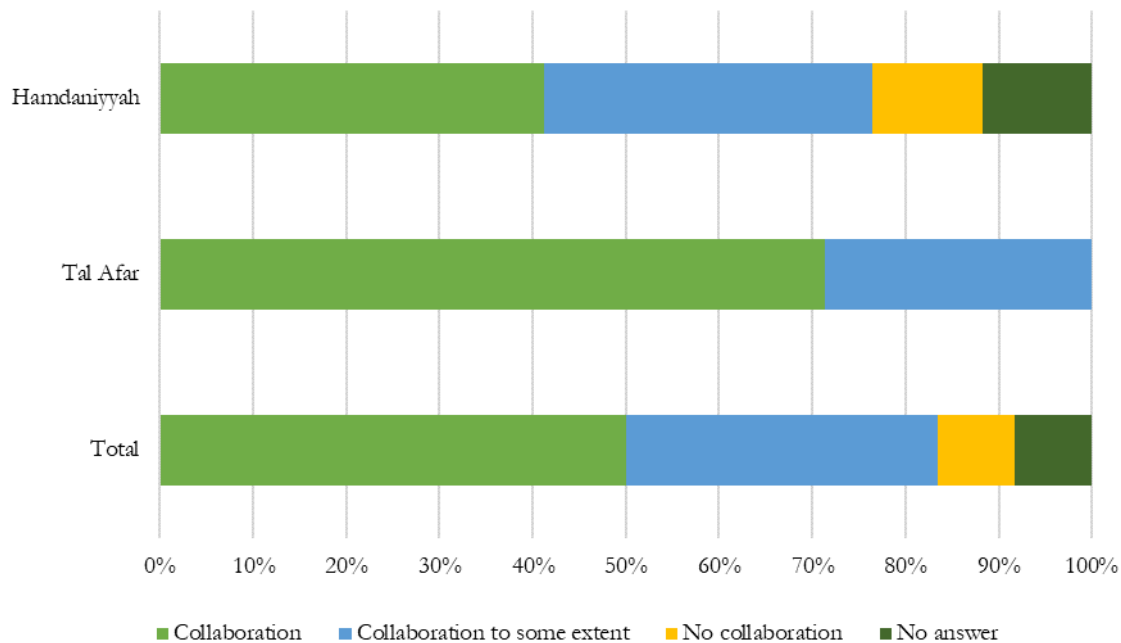
In Iraq, like elsewhere, C/PVE initiatives are the result of a long development and implementation process that involves a number of stakeholders with various backgrounds, objectives, and affiliations. As such, a key challenge to the success of C/PVE strategies is the conciliation of this complex network of stakeholders. Since the official victory against IS in December 2017, Iraq witnessed positive developments in the relationship between religious institutions/leaders, political representatives, and civil society.

The most proactive and fruitful collaboration in Nineveh province occurs between civil society and religious institutions/leaders, as stated by over 70% of participants in the

study. Interestingly, the success of joint initiatives was attributed to the lesser involvement of political institutions and bureaucratic hurdles linked to the clearance and approval process of C/PVE efforts initiated by state-affiliated institutions. Participants also emphasised the greater legitimacy and grassroots trust towards both civil society and religious institutions/leaders, as well as a history of acting towards peace, as factors of success. Importantly, religious representatives are not considered the mere implementers of C/PVE initiatives led by civil society organisations (CSOs), and their role varies according to the programmes and policies. Religious figures may have a supporting and legitimising role by attending topic-specific sessions and activities organised by local CSOs in Nineveh Province, or may be more directly involved in the mediation of conflicts between individuals and/or communities. In Tel Afar, for example, the Peace Committee that was established by a decree from Prime Minister's office in September 2018 is a successful example of inclusive peace initiatives. In the words of the Committee's head, it brings together "civil society, religious figures, and political representatives around the common aim to normalise life in Tel Afar and coordinate the safe return of displaced residents. As the head of a local NGO, I also coordinate with local preachers to foster moderate religious discourse and prevent the emergence of radical Friday sermons that played a role in the history of violence in the city".

The study's findings reveal that political and religious institutions/leaders also interact to a good extent when it comes to the promotion of peace and stability in Tel Afar and Hamdaniyyah, with 50% of participants stating that they fully 'collaborate' and nearly 35% of them saying that they 'collaborate to some extent' (Figure 4). Just over 8% of the respondents emphasised a lack of cooperation, and the same share refused to answer. It seems that full cooperation between the two sets of institutions is much higher in Tel Afar (71.4%) compared to Hamdaniyyah (41.2%). One explanation might be found in the fact that Hamdaniyyah is highly contested politically and militarily, and home to greater ethno-religious diversity. For example, the area is disputed between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Erbil and the federal government in Baghdad. In contrast, the post-IS period in Tel Afar was characterised by the homogenisation of the population and its political and religious representatives, which resulted in the clear domination of the Shia Turkmen (Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor, 2021).

Figure 4: Are you working collaboratively with other (political, religious) institutions to promote peace and stability in your area? (Civil society, political and religious representatives)



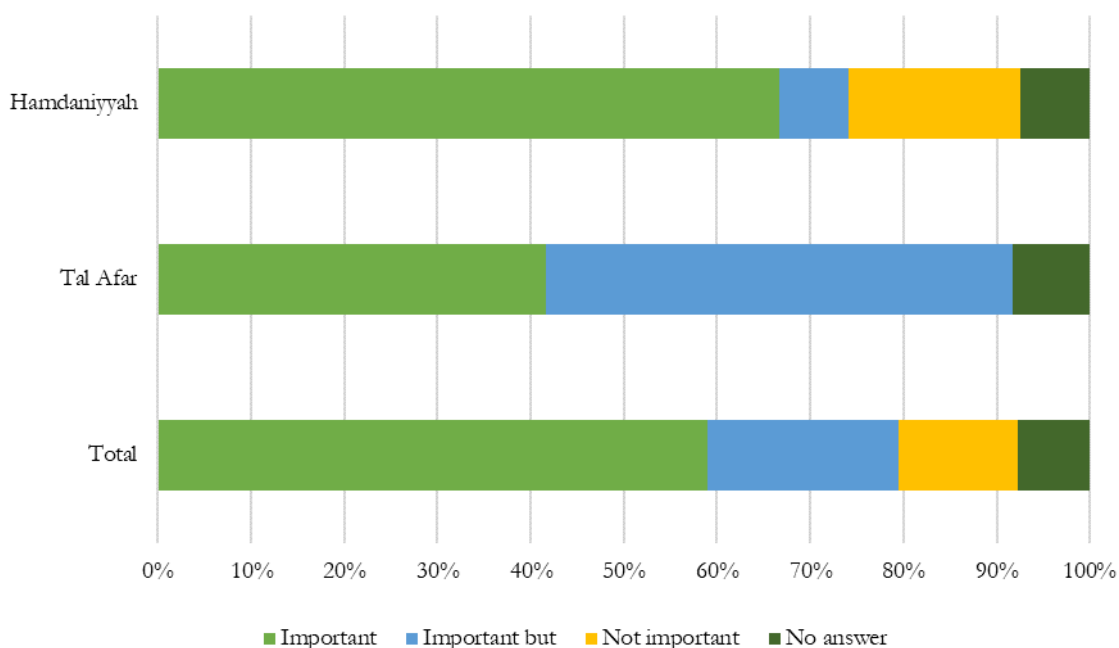
C/PVE Approaches in Iraq: The Case of Religious Education

After 2003 and under the impulse of Shia religious forces, the management of religious affairs was decentralised and fragmented in an attempt to preserve religious affairs from the state’s control and political dependency (Hasan, 2019). However, the state’s interference in religious affairs did not cease and the new state apparatus seems to have further divided the society along confessional lines, undermining inter-faith interactions and cooperation between religious and political leaders and institutions. For example, religious schools in Iraq are affiliated with one of the three endowment offices and each office follows different procedures for the recruitment and assignment of religious figures and executives, their training, and the development of religious curricula. In the official absence of the state and political affairs in religious matters, there is no common, overarching body that provides some sort of harmonisation between the three endowment offices and religious education

across religions in Iraq. Against this background, the question of whether religious education should remain as it is or be centralised as it used to be before 2003 is an open debate.

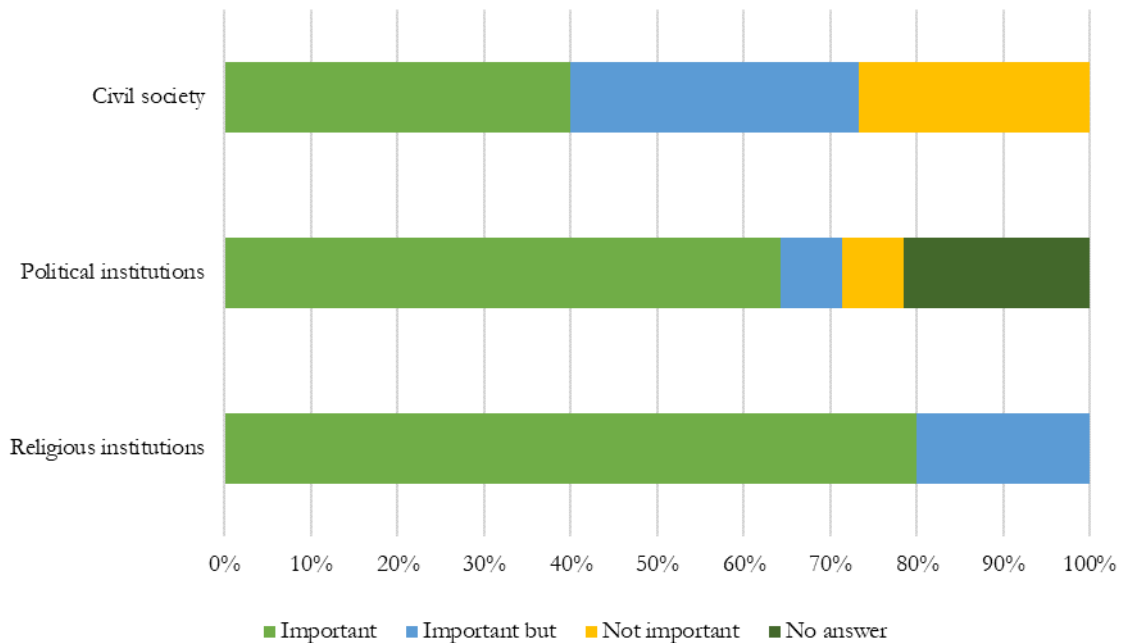
The adverse impact of religious education on tolerance and peaceful coexistence, to be further addressed in the discussion part of this paper, might account for the mixed perception of the importance of religious education in the prevention of violent extremism in Nineveh province (Figures 5). Nearly 60% of participants saw religious education as an important channel for building peace, while 20.5% had some reservations and 12.8% thought that religious education should not have any role. As observed in previous findings, respondents in Hamdaniyyah had more positive, yet polarised, opinions while half of the respondents in Tel Afar showed a greater level of caution on religious education.

Figure 5: Do you think that religious education is important to promote peaceful coexistence between ethnic and religious communities in your area? (Aggregated)



The case of religious education is interesting because it highlights how one topic can spark debate and how different stakeholders can have diverging opinions which might, in turn, prevent the adoption of a coherent C/PVE strategy (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Do you think that religious education is important to promote peaceful coexistence between ethnic and religious communities in your area?



Across respondent groups, civil society members were the most divided over the role of religious education in C/PVE and peacebuilding, while religious representatives showed consensus on the topic. Political circles and religious institutions showed stronger support for religious education as a key field of C/PVE strategies. Close to 65% and 80% respectively interviewed by the authors believed that “religious education is particularly important”, and the culture of tolerance purports to remove hatred in the conscience of people and to move away from violence.

Discussion

Contested Legitimacy

The results of the study reveal that the instrumentalisation of religion to justify extreme violence did not dramatically alter the legitimacy of religious leaders and institutions in Nineveh province. In fact, there is a large consensus on the need to engage these

stakeholders in C/PVE and peacebuilding strategies. In this regard, Iraq seems more advanced than many countries on the path to developing a representative and inclusive C/PVE approach. The general endorsement of religious institutions as implementers of C/PVE initiatives in Hamdaniyyah, for example, is arguably due to the high number of interfaith initiatives implemented in the district due to its sectarian diversity. Conversely, Tel Afar witnessed the homogenisation of society after the full liberation from IS, and peace and development strategies did not put much emphasis on the role of religious figures and interfaith reconciliation. The general positive perception of religious institutions/leaders in Nineveh province also stems from their role in local conflict resolution, whereby they often act as mediators between families and tribes when disagreement occurs.

The findings demonstrate the high potential for religious institutions/leaders to assume a central role in the fight against violent extremism in Iraq. As argued by the president of a local peace committee in the west of Nineveh province: “The general identity of the Iraqi society is religious and tribal, which is why we believe that religious institutions can have a positive impact and must be given a significant role in our activities aimed at fostering peace”. According to the former governor of Nineveh Province, Atheel al-Nujaiifi, legitimacy is key to enabling religious leaders to have a strong positive impact on C/PVE, and more generally, peacebuilding and stability in Iraq. He recorded an event that happened during the civil war that prevented the emergence of an efficient C/PVE strategy: “After the attack against the Sayidat al-Nejat Cathedral in Baghdad in October 2010, I met with [Muslim] religious representatives in Mosul and asked them to condemn the massacre. Only one of them agreed to publicly condemn the attack, the others feared retaliation from Jihadi groups. As for this one representative, I could not ask him to lead a public campaign because he had an infamous background in Afghanistan and was considered a terrorist in Baghdad. He simply had no public legitimacy or credibility”.

However, the legitimacy and positive impact of religious representatives was contested both in Hamdaniyyah and Tel Afar. The authors found that faith-based C/PVE initiatives often take the form of elite-based workshops and conferences that tend to be dominated by what Iraqis call “*mujamalah*”, or false courtesy. As described by a high-ranked political figure: “Everybody pretends that the situation in Iraq is fine and agrees on every

point raised during the meeting. Everybody is very friendly, and an outsider would not believe we gather to tackle issues as crucial as violent extremism. The truth is that no one is fooled. Rather, they have developed apathy and disinterests in C/PVE efforts, arguably because the structural pressures of the political system limit their agency role”. As a result, these talks fail to translate into clear actions or agendas and the impact of these gatherings is null.

Besides, the study highlighted that the motives of religious representatives to participate in such meetings are not often related to their potential positive impact on sustainable peace. Instead, participation is often driven by material incentives, such as accommodation in luxury hotels in Erbil, and in some cases, remuneration. This is especially the case when workshops and/or conferences are organised by international NGOs and governmental agencies.

Moreover, C/PVE initiatives that involve religious representatives may suffer from corruption and have a backlash on civic life and community resilience to violent extremism. These initiatives sometimes acted as boosters of agency role and social status for religious representatives and some abused their power by intervening in issues that exceed their mandate. This is the case in reconstruction and rehabilitation projects that are coordinated with the support of religious leaders to foster local ownership and legitimacy, social stability and do no harm. Religious figures are thus directly involved in the allocation of funding with very little supervision by donors. In Nineveh, this sometimes led to cases where religious figures used the funds to partly improve their individual houses with high-quality materials instead of allocating the funds to infrastructures in need of reconstruction.

Another adverse impact of the delegation of authority to religious leaders is that it might undermine the rule of law. This is what happened in Bashiqa, a town located in the heart of Nineveh Plain and home to a majority of Yazidi inhabitants. After the liberation of the town from IS in November 2016, a local committee consisting of Muslims (Sunni and Shia), Christians, and Yazidi representatives was created to preserve religious balance and mitigate social tensions in the midst of the return process of the displaced population. It was decided that any issue linked to city administration must be approved by each of the committee members. The committee, however, ended up undermining existing laws and

regulations (i.e., lands reforms and urban planning) and the role and legitimacy of the state in the town.

The authors recommend that the debate must quickly move from whether religious institutions/leaders should be included in C/PVE strategies to how this involvement must occur. Donors and government agencies should develop standards for the format and conditions of religious engagement to prevent and mitigate potential adverse consequences of violent extremism on the resilience of communities and state structures.

Lack of Interactions

Beyond the focus on religious institutions, this study offered novel insights into the challenges of conciliating a complex network of stakeholders involved in the development and implementation of C/PVE strategies. The results of the study showed that many efforts are needed to reach the stage of a fully cooperative endeavour to tackle the threat of violent extremism. While collaboration between key stakeholders – notably civil society, religious representatives, and political figures – has increased since the military victory against IS, interactions remain limited and exhibit major flaws.

In Nineveh Province in general, the pace of interactions between political and religious institutions/leaders drastically increased after the series of military victories against IS between 2016 and 2017. In this regard, a representative of the Sunni Endowment Office in Tel Afar explained:

“There is cooperative work [with political institutions] through the Supreme Permanent Committee for Peaceful Community Coexistence of the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers at the central level. At the level of the city, we work collaboratively with political figures but also notables and civil society members through the Council of Elders and the Dialogue Committee. The common purpose of the Council and the Committee is to promote peaceful coexistence between the people of the city and the regions affiliated with our city. Both institutions hold periodic meetings between all their members, which sustains coordination”.

According to the same religious figure, joint initiatives to foster stability and peace are essential because they create “bridges of trust” between religious and political institutions and between these institutions and grassroots communities. He argued that these initiatives must give a central role to institutions that promote a moderate discourse that can drive reforms and foster the inclusion of a number of political and religious ideologies into society. Among the most important joint initiatives in Nineveh Province aimed at preventing violent extremism is the negotiation and signature of several documents promoting peace and stability in the towns of Tel Afar, al-Ayadiyah, al-Mahlabiya, and Zummar. One of these documents is the Peaceful Coexistence Pact of Honour for the Tribes in al-Ayadiyah sub-district, signed on 9 August 2018 by more than 90 tribal and community leaders as the result of a conference that brought together central and local political and religious representatives. The pact notably commits tribal authorities in al-Ayadiyah to the Iraqi state and rule of law and the abandonment of sectarian identities and discourse to promote a national, common identity (Sanad for Peacebuilding, 2018). In another example, the Tel Afar Covenant Agreement was signed on 14 August 2020 by representatives of the *Marjaiyyah* and officials from the local Tel Afar government, including the mayor (among other signatories), to address drivers of tensions and conflict in the district, such as the issue of return of reintegration of displaced persons (Sanad for Peacebuilding, 2020). Hence, C/PVE measures that feature the joint engagement of diverse stakeholders such as religious and political representatives seem more efficient and sustainable. Instead of replacing the authority of the central state with the authority of local religious figures and resulting in potential power competition, these C/PVE measures can help foster shared ownership, and the inclusion of non-state stakeholders with strong grassroots legitimacy into existing political structures, thereby reinforcing the legitimacy of the state which suffered years of instability and contestation.

Yet, positive developments in the relationship between political and religious institutions in Nineveh province must be nuanced. First, accounts collected by the authors from local political representatives highlighted that cooperation with religious institutions/figures was highly dependent on individual willingness rather than the fruit of systematic interactions. Furthermore, cooperation seems to take the form of mutual exchanges

at the local level and occasional meetings and conferences rather than proactive and sustained exchanges. Second, according to a volunteer working with a Shia cultural centre affiliated to one of the Holy Shrines in Tel Afar, religious institutions engage with political institutions and their activities only within the space and scope imposed by political institutions. For instance, he explained that his institution is particularly involved in emergency programmes like those that were implemented to limit the impact of Covid-19, but less in long-term development projects. In fact, while all religious leaders interviewed by the authors praised positive developments through collaborative initiatives for peace, they also regretted that their relationship with political institutions, in general, is weak and their trust has been damaged by the harsh repression of popular demonstrations in late-2019, and corruption. A number of local political representatives in Nineveh Province who participated in the study admitted that corruption was a scourge in Iraq and a key obstacle to the restoration of trust between political institutions on the one hand, and grassroots communities and religious institutions on the other. Another reason given by religious representatives in both Hamdaniyyah and Tel Afar to justify their lack of engagement with political circles is the fear that public mistrust of politicians might damage the positive impact of initiatives. As a result, they prefer to implement C/PVE measures either independently or in coordination with local CSOs that enjoy good levels of public trust and legitimacy.

Finally, as explained by the representative of the Sunni Endowment Office in Tel Afar, the lack of cooperation between religious and political circles in the field of C/PVE is the result of the absence of religious representatives in political structures which, he believed, was a direct consequence of the fact that citizens “became more repulsed by political Islam and secular politics”. Other religious leaders from all sects shared his opinion and insisted that, even though religion and politics are integrated in Iraq, religious leaders should “stay far away from politics and political parties”. This desire of the religious establishments to maintain their independence and to protect themselves from control of the Iraqi state has rarely been documented (Alshamary, 2019) and yet has important implications on the role of religious institutions in the promotion of sustainable peace in the country. Indeed, besides general peace initiatives, the findings of the research highlight a serious lack of cooperation between political and religious institutions regarding C/PVE policies in the fields of education

and religious life. The absence of a collaborative approach and bridges between the two sets of institutions prevents the implementation of two key elements that can fuel violent extremism in the future: i) The reform of school curricula, and ii) The control over the religious discourse of local imams, especially during the Friday sermon that gathers large audiences. The next section delves into the fragmentation of C/PVE measures in the field of education.

The Fragmentation of C/PVE Approaches: Religious Education

The fragmentation within the Iraqi state apparatus is reflected in the fragmentation of C/PVE policies, as showed in the case of religious education. There is a general perception among the participants that the state should not interfere in religious matters in general and religious education in particular. At the same time, they acknowledge that the autonomy of religious affairs has allowed several mosques to circumvent the government's control and play an active role in the radicalisation of Iraqi society since 2005. This partly justifies the need to reform the training of imams and the control of their discourse – even though all religious leaders interviewed confirmed that they receive instructions from their office of endowment on what should be included or prohibited in their preaching. However, these instructions were vehemently criticised by an imam the authors interviewed in Tel Afar: “The role of the endowment officers is shameful, and I do not see them fulfilling even a small part of the great responsibility they hold. Had they fulfilled their tasks, things would have been different from the bitter reality we have witnessed [...] The instructions we receive are not of a good level [...] and they are not studied with sufficient care, especially when it comes to the Friday sermons”.

Besides the fragmentation between different sects, religious education in Iraq is divided between education given in religious schools – thus affiliated with and managed by one of the three endowment offices – and that given in public schools, managed by the Ministry of Education. As a result, religious education suffers from a two-layer fragmentation and multiple sources of authority. In public schools, only the teachings of Islam and Christianity are included in the curriculum. This means that all school children are not necessarily taught about their own beliefs nor about other minority religions that exist in Iraq

and the world. Yasarnism and Yezidism, for instance, are only taught at home within family circles. The exclusive teaching of Islam and Christianity in schools is potentially a strong impediment to the spirit of tolerance toward all religions and beliefs, since schools provide the only public and free educational platform to learn about other faiths than those practised at home. That being said, school children are not forced to learn about other religions than the one they believe in. For instance, non-Muslim children are given the opportunity to leave the classroom when their classmates are taught about Islam. However, this practice disadvantages children belonging to religious minorities that do not share the foundations common to monotheistic religions. In Nineveh province, this is the case of Yazidi children, who can leave the class during religious education. This leads to the common situation where one or two children spend forty minutes alone in the playground while watching their classmates learn together about Islam or Christianity. Similarly, one could argue that the content of religious education in public schools only promotes knowledge about most-similar religions and thus tolerance towards these religions only, implicitly stigmatising dissimilar sects and beliefs. This fact must be analysed in light of the practices of religious extremist groups in Iraq and across the region. These groups often have double standards for non-Muslims: while the People of the Book (Jews and the Christians) can avoid the worst treatments by paying a tax (*Jizya*), non-Abrahamic religious communities are not given such an option and must often choose between a forced conversion or death. The infamous case of Yazidi women being reduced to slavery and human trade by IS is a consequence of such radical religious narratives. In this situation, religious education in Iraq can be regarded as a factor of exclusion and division rather than tolerance and integration.

Across respondent groups, civil society members were the most divided over the role of religious education in C/PVE and peacebuilding, while religious representatives showed consensus on the topic. Among the main concerns voiced by civil society members was the need to reform the current religious curricula in order to delete all references to sectarian vocabulary and the exclusion of certain religious groups. However, this argument was countered by some of their peers who argued that religious education must be part of any C/PVE strategy because, in the past, radicalisation happened in mosques and through truncated religious education. In this regard, a civil activist in Hamdaniyyah suggested: “The

Arabic material needs reform because it contains verses from the Noble Quran. But our society, especially in the Hamdaniyyah region, is diverse and includes many sects. This is why it is preferable to replace Quranic references with diverse and common utterances, whether they are verses from the Quran, the Bible or Yazidi holy texts, or even secular sciences”. An important number of respondents also emphasised the need to limit religious education to religious places such as churches, mosques, and Shia *hussainiyas* and encourage secular education in public schools.

Political circles showed stronger support for religious education as a key field of C/PVE strategies, although the state apparatus evidently hinders cooperation in the search for the perfect school curricula. At the central level, the Ministry of Education is responsible for the content of the public religious curricula for all levels of education. The Ministry is theoretically assisted by religious figures who provide guidance on what should be included and how. Yet, the investigation conducted for this research paper clearly demonstrated that the Ministry of Education and the three endowment offices do not interact regularly to develop and adapt religious education. A number of religious representatives in both Hamdaniyyah and Tel Afar denounced their lack of meaningful involvement in the drafting of religious teaching delivered in public schools. Conversely, the Ministry of Education and education specialists do not have any role or right to examine the content of the curricula delivered in religious schools that are not affiliated with the state. This is not to say that the topic of religion is disregarded. A number of the staff members at the Ministry of Education responsible for the development of school curricula have an academic background in exclusively Islamic studies. Yet, any reform attempts are hindered by the lack of interactions between key stakeholders within political and religious circles. The minor role of religious figures in the development of public education was found to be particularly problematic and a great source of concern for non-Muslim and non-Shia religious representatives in Nineveh province. Their fear must be analysed against the background of the domination of state institutions by Shia political forces and officials in the post-2003 state apparatus. In their accounts, they described their concern about a potential “Shianisation” of religious education in public schools and of politics in general (Zaafan, 2017). One dynamic the authors witnessed might corroborate this sense of fear that one religious community might impose its

domination over others based on its preferential relationship with political circles. Indeed, the observed lack of interaction between religious and political institutions seemed less present at the provincial level, especially in Tel Afar, which is home to a majority of Shia inhabitants.

Finally, the need to reform religious education emphasised by civil society and political participants was strongly rejected by religious figures, of whom only 20% supported reform to promote moderate and federating forms of religion in both religious and public schools. This great discrepancy is a telling example of the difficulty of coining inclusive, joint C/PVE approaches in Iraq. It also serves as a reminder that categories can be misleading and that identifying the right partner, in consideration of their capacities and limits – whether they are material or ideological – must prevail over the inclusion of religious institutions/figures at any cost.

These findings demonstrate that the importance of religious institutions in fostering community resilience to violent extremism in Nineveh province should not overlook the need for a transversal and inclusive approach to healing the scars left by two decades of rampant conflicts.

Using Nineveh province in Iraq as a case study, this research provided critical insight into the role and impact of religious institutions/figures in C/PVE initiatives. While Hamdaniyyah and Tel Afar provide promising case studies due to their unique socio-demographic characteristics and history of violent extremism, further research is needed at the national level, notably to compare former IS-held areas and locations that have been spared by the most recent developments of violent extremism. Moreover, while acknowledging the predominant role of the Shia religious representation in Iraq, this study offered an analysis across sects and religions by choosing to integrate all religions present in Nineveh province. However, the authors echo al-Nimer's call to de-Islamise C/PVE strategies and promote religious literacy (2018). In future endeavours, additional insights are needed to fully understand the opportunities and challenges of each religious community in the promotion of peace in the country.

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