

**LASER PULSE**

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**Minorities, Cultural Practices, and  
Destruction by the Islamic State - Tal Keif  
and Hamdaniya**

**SUPPLEMENT TO AGREEMENT NO. AID-7200AA18CA00009**

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## Acronyms

IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
IS	Islamic State
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
GoI	Government of Iraq
PMF	Popular Mobilization Forces
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party
KRI	Kurdistan Region of Iraq
DTM	Displacement Tracking Matrix
IOM	International Organization for Migration (UN Migration Agency)
UNIDP	United Nations Industrial Development Organization
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
WFP	World Food Programme
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
INGOs	International Non-Governmental Organizations

## Assessment of the Existing Literature

The literature review provides a detailed overview of the cultural and agricultural practices of the ethnic and religious minorities in the districts of Hamdaniya and Tal Keif in Ninewa Province. It provides a brief demographic and geographic background on the minority groups and examines both the intra- and inter-community dynamics in the wake of the Islamic State (IS) occupation. It also looks into the factors behind protracted displacement in Iraq by analyzing the main districts of origin and identifying the obstacles to return for the minority Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), as well as the driving factors behind the minority IDPs' decisions to return or remain displaced among four ethno-religious groups (Christians, Ezidis, Shabaks, and Turkmen).

However, the existing literature views the minority communities as homogenous and does not take into account the variations that the impact of the IS occupation and the resulting displacement may have had on different sections of the population. For example, the proposed political annexation of Hamdaniya villages by other sub-districts tie closely to matters of security and land conflicts that highlight the broader range of competition present in our sites of study. Moreover, when discussing cultural and agricultural practices, the existing literature is often gender-blind and fails to offer an understanding of the ways in which different parts of the population practice culture and agriculture. As a result, it is not possible to accurately portray in the literature review how different sections of the population engage with agricultural and cultural practices. This is a key understanding that needs to be identified in our research in order to identify exactly who needs what type of assistance. Thus, the knowledge gaps stemming from this review will inform our next phase of research: an intersectional approach will be adopted in order to understand how the different fields of difference – such as age, gender, economic position, etc. – impact how people practice culture, who prepares the necessary elements, and the division of agricultural labor. An intersectional understanding, for example, clarifies whether it is the men or women – and of which age – who are responsible for the production and/or processing of olives for olive oil, and thus makes it easier to know which population section should be targeted for extension services and other forms of interventions.

Our research takes an intersectional approach in a number of ways. Firstly, the survey asks questions in relation to ethno-sectarian identity, gender, age, economic situation, area of origin, etc. This allows for the answers to subsequent questions to be disaggregated into one or more of these fields of difference. For example, when a question asks how much time people spend on agricultural labor, we can subsequently understand the difference between men and women, or even how much time a young Ezidi woman from a poor family spends on agricultural labor. Secondly, interviews will be done with people that represent the different fields of difference within each minority. Questions posed will help us to understand how their cultural and agricultural practices have changed and what assistance they feel they need, which can then be compared and analyzed across the different sections that make up each group. Moreover, direct questions to understand aspects of culture that are unique to men and women will be posed, as well as questions in relation to who is involved with the preparations involved for such activities. Additionally, questions that are of specific relevance to each minority group will be posed. Thirdly, focus groups will be conducted separately for both men and women of each minority, which enables us to understand the differences. Again, questions directly relating to gendered understanding will be posed and the focus groups allow us to witness dialogue within the groups on this issue. Finally, and most importantly, our research will be presented through an intersectional lens, so these understandings of how the different fields of difference within each group influence behavior will be highlighted and analyzed with regards to what this means for any interventions.

With the exception of the Ezidis, the existing literature does not provide the desired level of understanding of cultural practices for the other minority groups especially the Turkmens and Shabaks, who are simply grouped into either Shia or Sunni. Detailed understandings of cultural practices are mainly conducted by academics, and then again mainly by anthropologists, and there is an existing research culture of working within the Ezidi community. For this reason, the literature review may give the impression that Ezidis have more cultural practices and a greater connection to agricultural elements, but this is actually due to the fact that research is limited in

this regard with the other minorities. Through our research, we aim to rectify this, by offering a direct understanding of the cultural practices of each minority community. This will not only be done through surveys, interviews, and focus groups, but also through our own observations in the field.

While the literature covers the scale of IS destruction of agricultural practices and its impact on the livelihoods of minority groups, it does not highlight the needs of these communities in relation to the sorts of interventions required to help them restore and reinstate their agricultural and cultural practices. Additionally, it does not offer an understanding of which of the minority groups have the most social and economic dependence on specific crops, and whether the pattern of IS destruction constitutes a mostly (targeted) economic/livelihood destruction or a cultural destruction. The literature also does not highlight whether IS was specifically targeting the minority group, or rather if this destruction was based on territory IS managed to take control of. Again, these research tools aim to give us a specific understanding of how IS targeted these groups and what impact it has had on them, allowing us to fill this research gap.

Finally, the existing literature does not offer any understanding of the adaptations made by minority groups in the wake of the conflict with IS, the resulting displacement, and the impact of the conflict on their ability to freely practice their religions and cultures, group identities, solidarity and sense of belonging to Iraq. For instance, amongst Ezidis, the onslaught by IS accelerated changes and exacerbated tensions between the need to preserve tradition and the need to modernize (adapt) in the face of intense trauma and displacement. The conflict not only gave the Ezidi community a stronger sense of religious identification over ethnic Kurdish identification, but also necessitated innovation in the Ezidi religion, allowing survivors of IS captivity to be re-baptized and reintegrated into the community. However, the literature does not address whether the adaptations in cultural or religious practices require specific items and if so, whether the whole community has access to them.

These highlighted gaps in the existing literature have been used to inform the design of the assessment tools in the research phase of this project. The research will address and fill these gaps with the aim of better informing where assistance is needed and how it should best be implemented. While the main focus is on cultural practices related to agriculture, the research tools will include other cultural practices, as it may transpire that agricultural practices are not as important for certain groups. We plan to begin our research with focus groups, as the open dialogue allows for topics to come up within the group discussion that we may not have come across in the literature review. This allows for us to adapt our survey and interview questions if needed. The survey and interviews will be conducted concurrently, although the survey will be set at this stage, interview questions can be adapted as we go on. The survey will primarily consist of close-ended multiple-choice options to help to broadly understand trends within each group, as well as an intersectional understanding through the further desegregation of data by age, gender, income group, etc. The survey results will be complemented by more nuanced understandings from the focus groups, interviews, and field observations.

The interviews will be done with both key-informants and people in the localities. Interviews present the opportunity to understand the position of particular groups and how the communities understand their cultural practices. The open-ended questions will help to gain a better understanding based on the interviewees' perspectives on cultural destruction, cultural practices, and reinstating cultural practices.

In summary, the literature review has been used to inform the project's research design process through ensuring that the research questions answer a number of gaps in the existing literature. This is of extreme importance in order for the implementation side of this project to have a chance of success. The review of the literature has clearly highlighted that the project is examining an area that needs further research, thus the research phase of this project will not only feed into the implementation side but also add to a further understanding of the cultural practices of minority groups in northern Iraq.



## Introduction

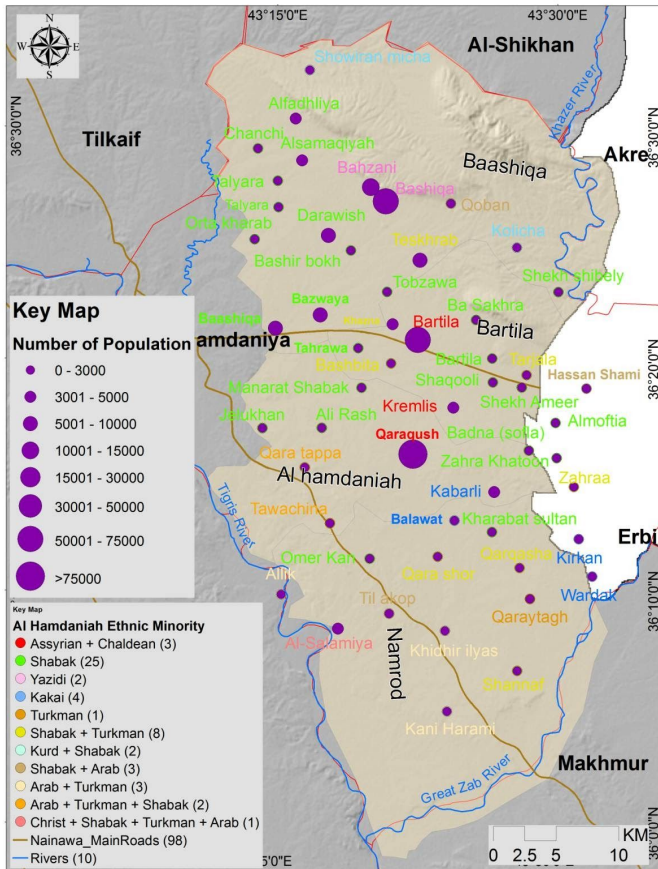
This literature review summarizes the Arabic and English literature in relation to the cultural and agricultural practices of Assyrians, Chaldeans, Ezidis, Kaka'is, Shabaks, and Turkmen in the districts of Hamdaniya and Tal Keif in Ninewa Province. The purpose is to inform the research design of the USAID-funded 'Support to Traditional Cultural Practices' project. Additionally, this literature review examines inter- and intra-group relations and the current relevant extension programs in Ninewa in order to better inform the project. This process has highlighted a number of gaps in the existing literature that need to be addressed in the research phase of this project. Namely:

- Existing research tends to view the communities as homogenous and fails to offer an understanding of how different sections of the population practice culture and agriculture. An intersectional lens that offers an understanding across a number of fields of difference – age, gender, class, etc. – is needed in order to better target assistance.
- With the exception of Ezidis, the existing literature fails to give an in-depth understanding of the minorities' cultural practices. Turkmen in particular are missing from the literature, as they tend to be grouped simply as either Sunni or Shia Muslims. Therefore, this research needs to give a better understanding of the cultural practices of the minorities in question.
- Information on post Islamic State (IS) cultural practices and the adaptations to the current dynamics that minorities have made is missing from the literature and needs to be addressed in the research. As does the link between the ability to practice culture freely and group identity/belonging in Iraq.
- Finally, the existing literature does not give an understanding of minorities' needs in relation to restoring their cultural practices, which is a key aim of the project's research.

This literature review will first give a brief overview of the study area and minorities in question, before highlighting the issues in relation to displacement. It will then move on to agricultural and cultural practices, before offering an understanding of how the IS destroyed these. Finally, the

literature review will examine inter- and intra-group relations and the current cultural and agricultural extension programs.

## Districts of Minority Groups Origin



**Hamdaniya** (or Bakhdida) is a district in the northeast of the Ninewa Province of Iraq, which lies approximately 32km southeast of Mosul and 60km west of Erbil (Mahmoud et al., 2019). Hamdaniya district is divided into the following five sub-districts:

1. **Aski Kalak or “Khabat”**: This sub-district has been governed by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) since 1991 because its inhabitants are mostly Kurds. A small minority belong to ethnic groups such as Assyrians and Ezidis.

2. **Nimrud**: Out of the 44 sub-divisions of the Nimrud sub-district, roughly 32 are inhabited primarily by

Arabs, five by Turkmen, two by Kaka’i and one by Shabak. The rest are mixed and include Shabak, Turkmen, and Arabs. The sub-district center, al-Khidhr, is home to Arabs, Shabaks, and Assyrians. Six of the sub-divisions were historically Assyrian.

3. **Bartella**: Out of the 27 sub-divisions of the Bartella sub-district, roughly four are inhabited mostly by Assyrians, 21 mostly by Shabak (five of these were historically Assyrian), one by Arabs, and one by Turkmen.

4. **Qaraqosh or “Bakhdida”**: Out of the 57 sub-divisions of the Qaraqosh sub-district, roughly 21 are inhabited predominantly by Assyrians, eight mostly by Shabak (four of these were historically Assyrian), 13 by Arabs, five by Turkmen, two by Kaka’is, one by Kurds. The other sub-divisions are mixed and include Shabak, Turkmen, Arabs, and Kurds.
5. **Bashiqa**: Formerly a sub-district of Hamdaniya, Bashiqa is now a sub-district of Mosul. Bashiqa consists of 52 villages that are inhabited by Christians, Ezidis, Shabaks, and Arabs.

In December 2018, the Iraqi Ministry of Planning proposed administrative changes in the Ninewa Plains that would include the annexation of a number of Bartella villages to the Bashiqa sub-district and also the annexation of some of the Hamdaniya villages to the Khabat/Aski Kalak sub-district. This decision was rejected by the Shabak community, which has the support of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)<sup>1</sup> Brigade 30, who denounced the move as an attempt to dilute their representation in Hamdaniya. Christians have also called for the suspension of residential project construction in Bartella. The Ninewa Provincial Council has also rejected the federal government’s proposal, arguing that any administrative redistricting (redrawing of the administrative units) should be in collaboration with the subnational government in Ninewa, as the sole administrators of such decisions. Yet, the Council has assigned a committee to look into the issue of Ninewa Plains, with broader discussions among the different components (KirkukNow, 2019).

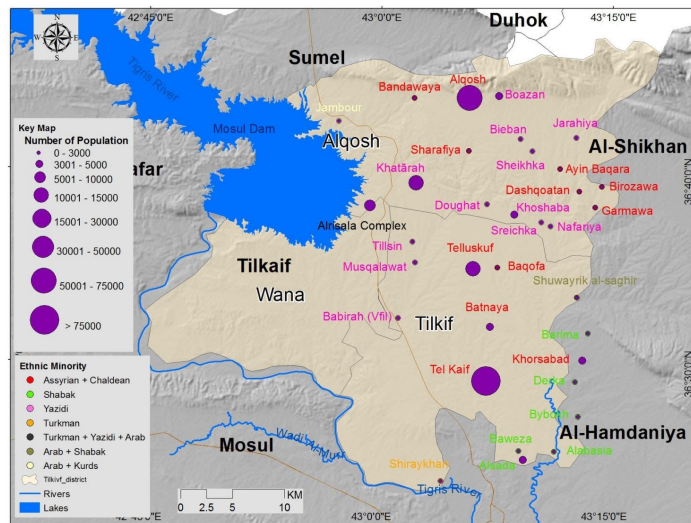
**Tal Keif district (or Tel Keppe)** is a district in the northeast of the Ninewa Province of Iraq, which lies approximately 12 km northeast of Mosul and 100 km northwest of Erbil. It is a predominantly rural district: 87.70% rural and 12.30% urban (IOM Iraq, 2019a). Before the onslaught of the Islamic State, the district was composed mostly of Chaldeans and Assyrians, as

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<sup>1</sup> The PMF, also known as the Hashd al-Shaabi, is an Iraqi state-sponsored umbrella organisation composed of a number of militias. Although predominantly Shiite, there are also Sunni, Christian, Shabak, Yazidi, Turkmen, etc. militias.

well as a small minority of Ezidis and Sunni Arabs. Tal Keif district is divided into three sub-districts:

1. **Alqosh:** This sub-district has been governed by the KRG since 1991 and is under the control of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and its Peshmerga. It is predominantly Christian Chaldean. In July 2017, two months before the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) referendum for



independence, the residents of Alqosh protested the removal of Mayor Fayez Jawahreh and the appointment of his replacement Lara Yousif. The decision, made by the head of the Ninewa Provincial Council, sparked fear amid the Alqosh residents of a KRG attempt to annex the town (Al Shibeeb, 2017).

2. **Wana:** It is composed of mostly Arab Sunni and some Kurds. The town's villages were destroyed as a result of the conflict and it has since witnessed low return levels.
3. **Tal Keif Center:** It is now predominantly inhabited by Arab Sunnis and some Kurds in the rural areas of the district, but previously almost all of its population was Chaldean (Social Inquiry, 2018).

## Background on Minorities

It is estimated that there are currently fewer than 250,000 Christians remaining in Iraq, down from an estimated 800,000 to 1.4 million pre-2002. The majority, around 200,000, live in the Ninewa Plains and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). Approximately 67% are Chaldean Catholics and nearly 20% are members of the Assyrian Church of the East. The remainder are

Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Armenian Catholic, Armenian Apostolic, and Protestants (Home Office, 2019).

Shabaks live in approximately 56 villages and towns in the districts of Hamdaniya and Sheikhan. The size of the Shabak community is estimated to be between 200,000 – 500,000 (van Zoonen & Wirya, 2017). Shabaks are distributed in the Ninewa Plains in the form of a triangle whose base forms the Tigris River in the left coast of the city of Mosul, and their villages extend in the form of a crescent, extending from the west bank of the Khusr River (from the Tal Keif side) to the east bank of the Great Zab River in the direction of Nimrud. Between these two shores, Shabaks are distributed over the sub-districts of Bashiqa, Bartella, and the Hamdaniya district (Al-Abadi, 2017).

The Ezidi “Yazidi” is an ethnic and religious community that mainly live in the Ninewa and Duhok provinces in northern Iraq, while others live in Turkey, Syria, Armenia, Georgia and Russia. The total population of Ezidis in the world is about one million people; between 500,000 to 650,000 Ezidis are estimated to live in Iraq (Saydo, 2016). Khalid (2019) estimates the Ezidi population in Iraq to be 600,000 from which 400,000 live in IDP camps, and about 100,000 immigrated to Europe following the Islamic State’s onslaught on Sinjar and the surrounding areas in August 2014. The Ezidis who live in Ninewa province constitute 90% of the Ezidis in Iraq and the rest live in Duhok. Bashiqa, the main Ezidi town in the Ninewa Plains, is located 12 km northeast of Mosul, the capital district of Ninewa province, and its population according to the Iraqi Ministry of Planning is around 140,000 people (Al-Tae, 2019). Ezidis have a strict caste system and intermarriage is forbidden.

Turkmen, another ethnic-religious group, are divided into about 55% Sunni and 45% Shia (Omer, 2018). Doman (2016) reported that in addition to Tal Afar district, Turkmen also live in villages in the Hamdaniya district, which include Tiz Khrab, Qrayataq, Sita, Salamyia, Sdnna,

and Shamsiya as well as in the Tal Keif district in Qraqwin, Razaqiya, Sad Boawiza, and both upper and lower Sheikhan villages.

The Kaka'i (Yarsan), estimated to be around 120,000 people, are another small minority faith scattered throughout the provinces of Ninewa, Sulaymaniyah, Halabja, and some villages in the southeast of Kirkuk. There are existing disagreements on the classification of Kaka'i, between those who see the Kaka'i as an independent religion and those who claim it is a sect or subgroup of Islam, a division exacerbated by the community's fear of being labeled as infidels and attacked by the Islamic State. The 2005 Iraqi Constitution makes no reference to the Kaka'i as a religious minority. The majority of Kaka'i, especially the urban educated elite in Halabja, claim they are independent of Islam because their social environment is less radical and more tolerant towards other religious denominations. Kaka'i ethnically associate themselves with Kurds, but some community leaders claim Kaka'is are a distinct community and demand political representation. Internal division has prevented the Kaka'i from forming independent political parties and gaining representation in Iraq's Council of Representatives and the Kurdistan Parliament (Salloum, 2016b).

## **Protracted Displacement in Ninewa Province**

The Ninewa province also remains the most severely inflicted governorate by the conflict, with over 331,170 still displaced (according to the IOM Iraq Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM), March 2020). The International Organization for Migration (IOM) examined the factors behind protracted displacement in Iraq by analyzing the main districts of origin and identifying the obstacles to return for IDPs (IOM Iraq, 2019b). The study revealed average to very low intention to return among both out-of-camp and in-camp IDPs.

- Hamdaniya district: 13% of Out-of-camp IDP households, originally from locations in Hamdaniya, have reported intentions to return to their places of origin in the short-medium term, which is very close to the average reported by out-of-camp IDPs

from other districts throughout Iraq (Avg. = 13.3%). Moreover, the damage/destruction of former homes (59%) is the main obstacle to return for IDPs, followed by discrimination along ethnosectarian lines (30%) and fear/trauma (28%).

- Tal Keif district: Out-of-camp IDP households originally from the district have reported average intentions (14%) to return in the short-medium term, whereas those in camps are generally not willing to return (83% stay, 17% undecided). The in-camp IDPs' intentions can be linked to the higher percentage of families mentioning a lack of revenues to return (50%), in addition to frequent house damage and destruction (63%) as their main obstacles to return; three quarters of out-of-camp IDPs were missing housing, land and property documents.

Another IOM study examining factors driving IDPs' decisions to return or remain displaced among four ethno-religious groups, Christians, Ezidi, Shabak, Sunni and Shia Turkmen, found that a lack of services, safety, and opportunities in locations of origin are among the strongest factors influencing decisions not to return (IOM Iraq, 2019c). More precisely, lack of services in their location of origin is a very strong factor influencing the decision to remain displaced for 75% of interviewed IDPs. The group most likely to report this are Christian IDPs (85%). Lack of safety is identified as a second determining factor, mentioned by 68% of IDP households, with higher averages among Christian (85%) and Ezidi (79%) IDPs. Lack of employment was mentioned as a significant factor by 62% of IDPs, particularly Christian IDPs (76%). The findings reiterate that while these decisions are driven by factors related to the situation in displacement and affected by changes in the location of origin, the specific influencing factors vary from one group to another. As such, future mediation processes and other efforts to return these populations to their homes must be tailored to address the specific concerns of each community.

Returnees cited various reasons that play a strong or very strong role in their decision to return. Four reasons stood out, such as missing home (95%); return of acquaintances (76%) and family members (56%); improved security situation (59%); and saving on living costs 51%. Another

important response was that 47% of interviewed Christian IDPs said that religious leaders encouraging IDPs to return was a significant factor in their decision to return. Whereas among Ezidi IDPs, 15% mentioned that community/religious leaders were discouraging return—the highest proportion among the four groups. Turkmen Shia were the group most likely to return from displacement due to a lack of financial means (54%) and 69% mentioned lower living costs in the areas of return as a strong or very strong factor to return (IOM Iraq, 2019c).

In terms of what layers are most important to each group's identity, Christian and Ezidi respondents identified first with their religion, followed by ethnicity. Christians, particularly returnees, also ranked religion and ethnicity higher than any other group, indicating a strong bonding identity (elements were neighborhood, family, town, religion, ethnicity, tribe, nationality, birthplace). For Shias (Shabak and Turkmen), ethnicity carries more weight. In terms of perceptions of vulnerability, Christians and Ezidis perceive their group to be more vulnerable than Shabak Shia and Turkmen Shia, both for IDPs and returnees. Turkmen Shia IDPs feel their group is the least vulnerable. When asked about whether they felt accepted by other groups living in their location of origin, less than 1% of returnee respondents felt rejected by other ethno-religious groups living in the same location of origin, but almost 18% of IDPs reported this issue. This proportion was highest among Ezidis (22.4%) and lowest among Shabak Shias (15.5%) (IOM Iraq, 2019b).

Long-term intentions within each group, such as intentions to return, stay in displacement, or migrate abroad, differ between groups. Among Christian IDPs, female-headed households are four times less likely to intend to return than those headed by males (IOM Iraq, 2019b). Why is this the case? It is important to assess women separately and implement security policies that can facilitate their return given that feelings of safety may be a larger priority for them than for the group overall (men and women). Factors increasing likelihood to return include property ownership and group identity. Among Ezidi IDPs, female-headed households were also half as likely to return than males, but overall they were more likely to return if they perceived that their group was more empowered (IOM Iraq, 2019b). If group vulnerability impacts negatively on



Ezidi IDPs' intentions to return, one could argue that it is necessary to assess grievances affecting Ezidi (some of these are outlined in this document) in order to promote their return.

Among Shabak Shia, three factors increase their intention to return: higher education, decisions taken by other members in the community, and living standards in the host community. Interestingly, among the group, there is no link between male- or female-headed households and their intentions to return. Also, neither property ownership nor employment are significantly associated with the intention to return (IOM Iraq, 2019b). Among Turkmen Shia IDPs, the housing situation and living costs seem to affect the intentions to return (IOM Iraq, 2019b). Overall, it would seem that among all groups there is the question of how and why group vulnerability and identification to one's group are important factors affecting the likelihood to return and that is something that should be researched more thoroughly.

## **(Agri)Cultural Practices**

### **Crops and Wild Plants**

The fertile plains of Hamdaniya, Tal Keif, and Sheikhan historically have served as a “breadbasket” of Iraq. Profits from wheat and barley in the winter, and fruits and vegetables in the summer, provide 70-80% of annual household income. Animal husbandry (raising livestock) constitutes between 20-25% of agricultural activity. The area is famous for cultivating chickpeas, lentils, sesame, yellow corn, and sunflowers, as well as wheat and barley. Annual cereal crops constitute around 45% of overall production in Iraq (Khames, 2017). The area is also famous for cultivating olives, vegetables, and fruits (The labor force in Ninewa, 2017).

### **Wheat and Barley**

Ninewa province annually produces 20% of Iraq's wheat and 38% of its barley. In the Ninewa Plains, agricultural output is 99% rainfed given the favorable weather and precipitation conditions (IOM, 2019). These rainfed growing areas in northern Iraq account for one-third of national cereal production. Ninewa province alone accounts for 27% of Iraq's total annual wheat

production (RFSAN, 2016). Over 40% of the arable land in Iraq is used for wheat, but production remains low as a result of low yielding wheat varieties, frequent droughts in rainfed areas, and low soil fertility (ACF-FAO, 2014). In southern Iraq, agriculture depends on irrigation from the Tigris and the Euphrates and is more diverse in terms of output (RFSAN, 2016).

### **Hamdaniya**

Farmers in Hamdaniya cultivate a more diverse mix of crops than those in Tal Keif. They largely rely on rainfall and flooding of the Great Zab river to produce the district's primary cash crops (Zoa and JDA, 2018). Shabak farmers in Bartella grow wheat, barley, fava beans, lentils, and chickpeas; Kaka'i villagers close to the Great Zab also grow French beans, black eyed beans, cucumber, eggplant, okra, onion, pepper, pumpkin, zucchini squash, melon, and tomato (Zoa and JDA, 2018).

Bashiqa and Bahzani serve as the largest cities in Iraq in terms of production, preparation, and cultivation of olive groves. The olive tree occupies a distinctive place in the economic and social life of local people, many of whom consider the olive tree a symbol of peace and district identity (Al-Sanjare, 2017a). Estimates assert that over 40,000 olive trees are grown in the district, some of which are hundreds of years old. Bashiqa olives have a distinctive flavor and are prized for their size, oil content, and richness in vitamin E and antioxidants (Alouka, 2016b; Al-Rawi, Desokey, & Al-Hakim, 1977). Unfortunately, many of these trees have been damaged or destroyed due to lack of water and care during the Islamic State's occupation of the town (Alouka, 2016a). Bashiqa olive orchards require seasonal irrigation water of 400-650 mm with an average of 100 mm during summer months (Sheet, Gazal, & Dawood, 2008).

Obstacles to Bashiqa olive production include the price of fertilizer and pesticides; the lack of machinery and equipment required for harvesting; and a lack of export opportunities leading to post-harvest losses (Hussein & Shaba, 2017). Throughout Hamdaniya, olives are used in soap and olive oil manufacturing. In Bashiqa, small factories produce olive oil and soap (Hussein & Shaba, 2017; Al-Tae, 2019).

Prior to the arrival of the IS in 2014, Bashiqa supported a vibrant tahini production industry hosting 25 factories (UNIDO, 2019). Sesame is used to produce tahini “*rashi*”, a staple breakfast food eaten with bread. Bashiqa is well known for the local variety of sesame seeds. Sesame is grown from mid- to late-February to mid-March (Al-Jameel, 2019a). Besides tahini, the city is also famous for producing arak, a wine manufactured in over 200 home factories, as well as pickles “*torshi*” (Ibrahim, 2016; Lalesh Media News, 2017).

Hamdaniya’s wild plants include desert truffle, foraged at the end of winter and the beginning of spring in the Ninewa countryside. Many families consider truffle collection an important source of income (Hejazi, 2019). However, truffle collectors take risks due to contamination, unexploded ordnances, and the lack of security in these recently liberated areas. Truffle is the most expensive food on the traditional Iraqi menu, with a kilogram of truffle being sold for \$8 to \$41 depending on its quality (Hejazi, 2019).

### **Tal Keif**

The district includes 36,924 dunums<sup>2</sup> encircling twelve districts; its agricultural lands include 26 villages (Klla, 2014). Approximately 4,008 farmers produce cereals in Tal Keif on over 87% of the district’s land (ACF-FAO, 2014). Tal Keif hosts four directories of agriculture: Alqosh, Faida, Wana, and Tal Keif. Agricultural activities depend on a rainfed winter growing season from December to May. The district’s main crops are wheat and barley, 97% of which is rainfed (Laso, 2012; ACF, 2014). Teleskuf (a town in Tal Keif) is historically one of the most famous melon cultivation areas in Iraq, attributable in part to its suitable soil quality. Melon is grown in Teleskuf and adjacent areas in rainfed orchards called *orza*. Melon varieties include common melons, Alqosh which is characterized by its large size and sweetness, and *Muluki* “king”, a striped, large and flavorful melon (Rafael & Eazbu, 2008). The people of Tal Keif store melon for the winter by breaking it into small pieces and sun drying it; they call this Haluchak. Melon

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<sup>2</sup> Dunum is a unit of area used in Iraq. One Dunum is equivalent to 2500 m<sup>2</sup>.

seeds “kly” are used on Sundays and holidays (Eazbu, 2009). Farmers export much of this crop to Mosul market. Moreover, cultivation of many potato varieties thrives in Tal Keif. Potato cultivation accounts for 35% of the district’s total cultivated area (Younis, 2013).

## **Livestock**

In Ninewa Province as a whole, animal husbandry makes up between 20-25% of agricultural activities (IOM, 2019). The province, known for its sheep production, raises 16.2% of the country’s sheep, 3.1% of its cows, 7.7% of its goats, and 4.9% of its buffaloes (Al-Awadhi, 2017).

## **Poultry**

Hamdaniya is one of the largest poultry raising districts in Ninewa. One hundred and fifty production fields in Bakhdida (Qaraqosh) produce meat or eggs (Kaki, 2008). The breeding process and its high costs do not cover the value of its sale; the product is unable to compete with the price of foreign chicken in the local market. The heavy losses incurred by the breeder from the poor health status of chickens, the unstable price, diseases, and continuing mortality forced the majority of the breeders to leave this profession (Kaki, 2008 & Shmendlmen, 2010). However, in Bashiqa, a private modern hatchery was established in 2012, which has increased the production of eggs (Muhamed, 2019). It is noteworthy that most of the poultry fields belonging to the minority groups were destroyed and looted by the Islamic State. Before the IS’s invasion, Qaraqosh was home to Iraq’s largest Christian community and had some 100 poultry farms. The IS killed or displaced the city’s residents and destroyed their farms. Today, however, as conditions improve, chicken farmers are returning to the area. The organizations Stand with Iraqi Christians and International Christian Concern are helping farmers establish farms (Wilson, 2019).

## **Cattle**

The Shabak village, Kokkjali is well-known for breeding and fattening calves, which are also imported from Brazil, Colombia and Australia. Four hundred families occupy the profession of

breeding calves and the village of Kokkjali is one of the main sources of red meat in Iraq (Al-Dulaimi, 2016). Tal Keif was also once well-known for Arab cheese and other milk products, which it exported to Mosul market in large quantities (Muhammad, 2014).

## Sheep

Sheep production for meat, fiber, and dairy products remains important. Women feed and care for livestock and play important roles in dairy processing; men participate in market activities such as buying and selling livestock (Zoa and JDA, 2018). Lack of access to fodder, vaccinations, and veterinary care hinder the return to livestock production after IS (Zoa and JDA, 2018). Kaka'i and Shabak villages in Hamdaniya use wheat and barley straw for fodder (Zoa and JDA, 2018).

Lamb plays an important role in Ezidi holiday celebrations. Ezidis pick the fattest lamb to slaughter on the Ezidi New Year, “*Sere Sal*” or “*Charshama Sor*”. This would lead to the making of *shawwi* (barbecued heart, kidneys, liver, and other organs) for breakfast. *Tashrib* is an important dish for Ezidis that is served on holidays, weddings, funerals, and is particularly important for *Sere Sal*. It consists of slow-simmered lamb, chickpeas, dried limes, and spices and is served poured over flatbread. *Sere Sal* focuses on fertility and new life. In the village of Kukajli, eastern Mosul on the commercial road between Mosul and Erbil, sheep breeding is one of the most prominent professions. The sheep fattening process is called *halal linking*; one villager claimed that 2000 families in Kukajli village practice fattening sheep, and each of these families has the ability to fatten (30-50) sheep in six months.

## Other Livestock

Other animals involved in agriculture include mules, camels, and donkeys. Some people acquire donkeys for transport to Mosul, neighboring villages, and to inspect the fields and other economically important animals like sheep, goats, cows, poultry, bees, and pigeons (Teleskuf, 2004). Livestock also enables industries such as spinning fabric, sewing, and embroidery (Ajamaya, 2008). Kaka'i villages in Ninewa practiced fish farming prior to widespread

destruction of their fish farms by the IS (Ali, 2016). Kaka'is also once benefited from the production of milk, eggs, meat, and used cattle waste for bread baking (Al-Harzani, 2006).

### ***Minorities' agricultural practices***

#### **Chaldeans**

Historically, Chaldeans used garlands, chaplets, and wreaths with plants collected locally. In antiquity, Chaldeans valued the cedar tree for good omens. However, it is uncertain if these practices continue. Iraq has ancient varieties of grains and bread still used in religious ceremonies among Christians (Folkard, 1884). A history of grape cultivation also exists in Ninewa among Christians, forming an aspect of Assyrian and Chaldean culture representing the blood of Christ in church services (Ainsworth, 1841).

#### **Shabak**

Most Shabak in the Ninewa Plains work as farmers cultivating wheat, barley, and cattle-ranching. In Fadhiliyah north of Bashiqa, Shabaks grow olives for olive oil and soap (EPIC, 2019). Shabak inhabits about 70 villages in the Ninewa Plains between the west bank of the Tigris River to the Khazar River in the east and from the Al-Nuran mountain in the north to the Nimrud side in the south. Many Shabak also live in district centers of Bartella, Qaraqosh, Nimrud and Bashiqa (Al- Jidi, 2012). Shabak rely on rain to cultivate wheat, barley, lentils, and chickpeas, as well as fodder crops for cows and sheep. Chickpeas and lentils are also grown in *Fadhiliyah* in the summer due to its favorable climate and soil devoid of gypsum stones (Al-Dulaimi, 2016).

Perceptions of crop profitability differ among Shabak and Kaka'i communities in Hamdaniya. Shabak farmers in Bartella regard chickpeas, fava beans, lentils, wheat, and barley the most profitable crops, though they regard wheat and barley to be less risky as it can serve as animal fodder (Zoa and JDA, 2018). In comparison, Kaka'i consider okra, tomatoes, cucumber, green beans, wheat and barley, green pepper, eggplant, and zucchini to be the most profitable crops (Zoa and JDA, 2018). Hamdaniya residents, including Shabak farmers in Bartella, value the

market of Mosul to sell their produce and livestock (Zoa and JDA, 2018). While the farmers also sell their produce in Qaraqosh, they tend to receive a higher price for their crops in Mosul where they also purchase farm supplies, tools, and agricultural inputs (Zoa and JDA, 2018).

### **Assyrians**

Syrian Assyrians use the mallow plant - dwarf mallow, marshmallow, cut leaved mallow, and wild mallow - for the preparation of Assyrian holiday and Lent dishes cooked with butter, eggs, or oil and eaten with bread. Artichoke is an important plant cooked with lentil soup in the final days of Lent. Artichoke root is also simmered with meat and onions on holidays (Abdalla, 2004).

### **Ezidis**

Many Ezidi religious practices and rituals include agricultural elements (Khatami n.d; Lalish Media Network, 2014; Khalat, 2007a; Khalat, 2007b). Traditionally Ezidis make a sacrifice to the Angel of Earth before sowing crops. A tree, decorated with fruit and sweets, is also presented at a wedding (Stepanyan-Gandilyan, 2015). Plants play an important role in Ezidi culture where wild plants are collected both to eat and for medicinal purposes (Stepanyan-Gandilyan, 2015).

The most important crops for Ezidis are olives and vegetables (Kunji, 2007). Ezidis make olive oil soap from olives grown in Bashiqa and Bahzani. The Ezidis venerate the olive tree and consider it one of the sacred trees providing benefits to human beings. Every year a special olive oil is made in Lalish temple in Shiekhan district to be used in religious ceremonies and rituals. They produce this oil from an olive tree grove in Lalish temple used only for lighting the wicks and as medicine. Many Ezidis, both men and women, volunteer every year at harvest season to pick up the olives and manually squeeze them on a religious event. The oil is extracted using a traditional mill located in the valley of the temple. The olives are pressed with water by foot, then the oil is boiled in order to vaporize the water remaining in it for high-purity oil. Following this, a religious service takes place and the oil is stored inside the temple in a place called Hasan Dana. The oil is used to illuminate the 365 lamps that are lit on Wednesdays and Fridays of each

week in Lalish mountain valley. It is also given to people for the purpose of treatment (EKurd Daily, 2014; Kheder, 2017).

Ezidis also value onion and mandrake. The onion was historically used in ritual practices such as the use of onion juice during funeral rites; however, it is not clear if this continues. Onions grown in Bashiqa and Bahzani are considered the best onion varieties in Iraq. Grains and wheat are also cultivated there (Khalat, 2017). Mandrake is used in traditional medicines and is also used as an aphrodisiac. However, references to the mandrake plant mainly concern Armenian Ezidis. Ezidis also value trees, especially during festivals to be celebrated under them. Trees can also be important for where they grow, their shape, or their age (Arakelova, 2014).

Ezidi New Year “*Sarsal*” is celebrated on the first Wednesday of April also known as “*Charshama Sor*” or Red Wednesday. Ezidis regard April as a sacred month of the spring season due to its symbolism as nature’s renewal and flourishing. Ezidis believe that “*Melek Taus*,” Peacock Angel, landed on the earth on this day (Khalid, 2019). The earth froze in honor of the peacock angel’s coming, the fields increased, and the flowers and roses emerged in various varieties and colors. On this day, every Ezidi family begins preparing themselves for the celebration. Boys and girls go to the fields and mountains near their villages to pick bouquets of red flowers (anemones) to attach to the gates of their houses and rooms; they also start coloring eggs to represent the beautiful colors of nature. Each family attaches anemones at the doors of their houses and fills rooms with colored eggs. Farmers eat the eggs in their fields and spread the shells of the colored eggs to give fertility blessings (Khalat, 2007a). A dish of chopped hard-boiled eggs and green onions sautéed in olive oil is also served. During *Sere Sal* women also go to the cemetery with special foods and sweets for those who have died in the past year (Wolf, 2018).

The holiday of the forty days of winter and summer also demonstrates the relationship between Ezidis’ religious beliefs and agriculture. This set of holidays falls on the twelfth of eastern December and the twentieth of eastern July. These two occasions have a clear relationship with



the four-season cycle and ritual changes in the climate. During the summer events, the Ezidis recognize the wind's role in ripening summer fruits and vegetables. This period occurs between the completion of the harvesting, filtering, and storing of grains while maintaining the next year's share of the seed and sowing it later (Khalat, 2007b).

Another Ezidi holiday is the feast of Khidr Elias which falls in February (the Sabbat) of the Ezidi calendar and is the eleventh month in the Ezidi solar calendar. The feast of Khidr Elias differs from other feasts in the Ezidi religion, during which it is forbidden to slaughter livestock and make offerings. Instead, Ezidi women in every family fry wheat, barley, chickpeas, and beans with other seeds. The product is called *qalank*, a Kurdish word meaning “burning these grains” (or frying them to a certain degree). Then, the roasted *qalank* is ground together to make flour. This flour is known as *Pikhon*, which means “bloodless.” Ezidis regard this practice as a “punishment of the soul” affirming the value of the Creator’s creation for man from the blessings and virtues of the planet. The feast of Khidr Elias has a strong relationship with the planting and germination season. It indicates that the season for growing winter crops like wheat and barley is about to come to its end, and it is also an indication of the beginning of a new year (Al-Jundi, 2019).

Ezidi also observe “Beilanda.” This celebration occurs at the beginning of the forty days of winter, or “Chilla” a Kurdish word meaning forty. The celebration continues for three days: Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday. They bake a special circular piece of bread called “Khawlera” in which they put one piece of raisin or an olive kernel. The rituals begin on Thursday evening as every family lights fires in their homes burning a wild dry bush called “Rashk” to welcome the return of farmers from their fields. In the past, farmers returned home accompanied by oxen which had to jump over the ceremonial fire (Khatami n.d; Lalish Media Network 2014; Khalat 2007b). Ezidis observe this religious holiday when farmers start sowing their agricultural lands. They also light fires on the agricultural roads and the roofs of their houses; this fire is called, in Kurdish, “Gorga Gaie” meaning “the flame of the ox.” The ox, in turn, has a symbolic implication as to the power of fertility (Khalat, 2007a). This ritual has a

philosophical agricultural implication: early humans had to secure the permanence of the land's fertility, keeping the seeds intact under the soil, and securing the rains necessary for their growth. Thus, they resorted to formal magic acting as a representation of the fertilization processes in various ways, including sacrificing a bloody offering and spraying the blood of the victim in the fields. Hence, the sacrifice of the ox plays an important role during this celebration. The sacrifice of the ox signifies the end of the summer season and the beginning of the winter when farmers start sowing their agricultural lands (Khalat, 2007a).

The Ezidis fast three days a year in preparation for readying the lands for cultivation as well as raising livestock. Two days before fasting begins, Ezidis sacrifice an animal. By sunset, Ezidis bring their livestock back home so that all members of the family, including those who were grazing their livestock, break the fast together (Khatari, 2019). They break the fast first by kissing a '*Barat*,' which is a round piece of clay taken from Lalish, and then by eating a special piece of bread called 'Soak.' For the fasting event and the New Year event, all Ezidi families have to sacrifice an animal depending on their economic and financial capabilities; that animal could be a lamb, sheep, bull, or a hen (Khalat, 2007a).

Another religious practice among Ezidis, called "Sefra Masta," which means the "trip of the yogurt or milk." Ezidis who raise livestock take milk and yogurt to Lalish temple as a contribution from their livestock products. This occasion is observed on the fifteenth eastern March when the weather is compatible with the fullness of the herd of livestock, and the flow of milk requires giving thanks and gratitude to God. Ezidi livestock owners look forward to this occasion because it declares a stop to providing fodder to their livestock. Weeds and grass start to grow green in the fields, which are good for their livestock to feed on. Some Ezidi households, who also cultivate olive trees and who have already extracted oil, present it to the Lalish temple with their milk due to the urgent need for olive oil in the many rituals uses of lighting the wicks in Lalish (Khalat, 2007b).

## Gender

Women in Hamdaniya play key roles in agriculture and animal husbandry. Shabak women living near Bartella cultivate home gardens which assist household food security (Zoa and JDA, 2018). Such gardens produce celery, lettuce, onions, green beetle, okra, zucchini, and radish (Zoa and JDA, 2018). By contrast, Kaka'i villages in Hamdaniya do not report relying on greenhouses and home gardens (Zoa and JDA, 2018). Kaka'i women in Hamdaniya participate in important decisions such as planning which crops to grow and determining crop prices for sale (Zoa and JDA, 2018). Many women in Hamdaniya produce poultry, dairy products, eggs, goats, sheep, ducks, wheat, okra, and barley (Ajemian et al., 2018). A greater focus on the agricultural sector will benefit rural and urban households with increased production of local goods and lower prices, particularly for vulnerable populations, such as female-headed households, who tend to spend a higher proportion of their incomes on food (RFSAN, 2016).

## Cultural Practices

### Hamdaniya

*Tahini*, a sweet made of sesame seed meal and sugar, is one of the main food products for Bartella's residents. This industry thrives in part due to the high quality of *tahini* manufactured in Bartella used for local use and export (Aprim, 2004).

### Tal Keif

Tal Keif is famous for its knitting industry. Many households possess a *Jomah* for preparing textiles sold to neighboring districts and throughout Iraq (Hanna, 2004). The area is famous for making men's gowns of cotton fabrics and Bedouin tent fabrics made of goat hair. Sesame paste, bulgur and grains, bread, and white cheese are also manufactured in Tal Keif (Tellskuf, 2004; Gardenia, 2014). *Takharaatha*, *Dkarsa*, or crushed grain bread, is produced using mill stones to produce wheat flour and then baked in a clay oven. Some women bake *Saj* bread and sell it in the city (Tellskuf, 2004). Bulgur bread, *Takharaatha*, *Dakrakar*, is made from fine bulgur and is smaller than *Dkarsa*. This bread is prepared to avoid waste of any unused bulgur (Tellskuf, 2004).

## Christians

Assyrian Christians constitute 96% of Bakhdida's population, a town of 30,000 (Aprim, 2004). These members of the Syrian Catholic Church and Orthodox Church converted to Christianity over a millennium ago (Aprim, 2004). Tell Yatha and Kharbat Zakaria are important archaeological sites in Bakhdida (Aprim, 2004). Chaldeans in Hamdaniya also value the Christian Church as an essential community institution (Zoa and JDA, 2018).

Significant Christian holidays in Ninewa include the observance of Palm Sunday at the Mar Quryaqus Church in Batnaya. It begins with the ringing of the church bells. This commences a procession in which worshipers carry olive branches and sing hymns through the town's streets and alleys (Azeez, 2017). The Feast of Saint George's Monastery, located northeast of Mosul, involves the preparation of foods such as *kolicha*, *dolma*, and *burghul kubbeh* by local families. These families begin preparations two days before and bring them to the monastery. Easter occurs between the end of March and April, close to the Muslim holiday of *Eid al-Fitr* after "Good Friday" on which Christians believe that Christ was crucified. Easter follows a 50-day fasting period. Women and girls boil eggs and stain them red, blue, green, yellow, orange, or multiple colors. On Easter morning, children play a game in which they smash these eggs against each other and declare the player with the unbroken egg the winner (Walid, 2019).

A coriander and tahini disk, *Takharaatha Datawil*, is made on Wednesdays in the middle of the Great Fasting. Onions and garlic are mixed with tahini and finely milled coriander. This is mixed with flour dough and then baked in the oven. *Jellah (Jadduh Dudwaita)* is a bread kneaded with the residue of melted sheep fat, butter, and bulgur. *Harissa* produced from the grain *Hibbia* and mixed with chickpeas and pressed meat is also popular. *Maraqah* (Broth) is chickpeas with meat, onions and the meat of sheep, goats or a calf; *Maraqah* is also used with *Paja*. *Shabbat* is produced from whole lentils (*Hibbia*) and chickpeas. It is eaten without meat during the Great Fast on Wednesdays and Fridays when it is not permissible to eat meat. *Qaliok* is *Hibbia* and chickpeas without meat in which the fat is sometimes fried or tahini and melon is mixed. It is eaten on the days of Great *Booshala* ("Cooking" in Syriac language). Ingredients include local

sheep's milk, carrots, moss (Farfahin), hot or sweet peppers, and bulgur soaked barley and rice. It is also prepared on Christmas and Easter. (Agha Jan, S., Haddad, B., & Matti, K. 2013).

## **Kaka'i**

Kaka'i men meet for teaching and singing sacred songs during *jam*. *Jam* are held in a circle and are presided over by the *Sayyed* who knows the holy prayers. The food provided for *jam* arrives in the form of three types of sacrifices given by one or more of the followers. The first, *niyaz*, is given to ask for something or as thanks for something given. It can be anything edible that has not been cooked – for example, sugar lumps, fruit, and nuts. The second sacrifice “*qurbani*” is given to fulfill a vow made in a time of distress. It can be “bloodless” in the form of pomegranate, fish, nutmeg, ceremonial bread, or grains roasted with sugar. Or it can be a blood sacrifice in the form of an unblemished male chicken, ox or goat that is less than a year old. The third sacrifice is called *khedemat* and is only made on special occasions. It consists of three kilos of rice prepared with ghee and a blood sacrifice. *Qurbani and khedemat* are given with bread which is made by women; all other dishes must be prepared by men. All food designated as a sacrifice is considered sealed until the *Sayyed* prays over it during the *jam* (Servant Group International, 2020).

Kaka'i observe Dawoud, named after a Zoroastrian priest, during which they give animals milk and provide a portion of their crops free of charge to other Kaka'is and non-Kaka'is believing that this will bring blessing to these products (Al-Aqidy, 2019). Historically, in addition to agriculture, Kaka'i practiced sewing, carpet and fiber making, and “Kalash” or “Giveh” (a special handwoven cotton shoe) making (Al-Harzani, 2006).

## **Shabaks**

Shabak communities celebrate the new year on the first ten or second ten days of January. They prepare food and visit the house of *Pir*. During the Friday of the Night of Sympathy or Forgiveness, Shabak people hold a special meeting to remove grudges and hatred from their hearts. During the Night of Confession, Shabak confess their sins. When a death occurs, the

Baba<sup>3</sup> attends the house of Shabki and washes the dead. After burying the deceased in the village cemetery, the family of the dead distributes food to members of the community, or a funeral council is held in a tent in which seats and tables are distributed and food, drink, and cigarettes are provided by Muslims, Arabs, and Kurds (Al-Jidi, 2012).

## **Ezidis**

Food plays an important role in bringing together Ezidi communities (Nianias, 2019). Ezidis often cook traditional foods with unwritten recipes passed down through generations. This valued aspect of Ezidi culture includes the use of a variety of plant and animal products in various dishes (Wolf, 2018). For Ezidis, festivals and social events hold great importance and occur at holy sites and shrines. These sacred places serve as sites of burial, ritual practice, memory-sharing, oral history transmission, and the maintenance of culture and traditions (Fobbe, 2019). Numerous rituals connect Ezidis to their land, such as local festivals around village shrines that celebrate a holy figure (Kreyenbroek & Omarkhali, 2016). Each village possesses such a shrine or holy place, around which the dead are buried and brides visit on their wedding day. Ezidi women also lay special food on these graves during holidays (Spät, 2016). Spät asserts that “participation in rituals ... constitutes the backbone of religion as experienced by the majority of the Ezidi community” (Spät, 2016). These ritual connections to place makes the return of the IDPs and the rebuilding of shrines essential to upholding/sustaining Ezidi identity (Spät, 2016).

*Kibbeh*, an important meal for Ezidis, is a mixture of bulgur wheat, minced onions, spices, and ground meat. Ezidi dishes often include yogurt and Ezidis often brew their own arak. Shilik, a pancake cooked in lard, sugar, and salt and Mier, a porridge-like dish of fried ground wheat are also important Ezidi dishes (Nianias, 2019). On Ajwa day, Ezidis give Ajwa (a sweet dessert bread) to their friends and relatives (Salloum, 2016a). Ezidis believe that no family should be

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<sup>3</sup> Baba and Pir (father or old man) are used interchangeably, it is the highest religious rank among the Shabaks.

without meat on the Ezidi New Year “Sar Sal.” Wealthy families slaughter an animal and share it with those less fortunate (Allan, 2014).

When a male child turns one year old, he undergoes the Ceremony of the Nutmeg. The child is brought to a spiritual leader or *Sayyed* along with four other men of the parents choosing. Nutmeg is placed on the child’s head and a prayer is said over him. The nutmeg is split into five pieces with one piece given to the *Sayyed* and four to the accompanying men. In this way, the child pledges to follow the *Sayyed* and the five men pledge to protect and guide the boy. During the feast of *Ajwa*, or the Day of the Dead, families bake bread with currants. After a few days, a family member divides it among the household; the finder of currants in their bread receive luck for the year. Among Ezidis, the *Alkharqa* is a sacred garment made of sheep wool and dyed black with leaves from the *Zirgon* tree (Walnut tree). Ezidi clerics called “*faqir*,” which means (poor) wear these garments (Koro, 2018). For Ezidis, circumcision takes place seven days to three months after birth. Circumcision is an opportunity to build relationships between Ezidis and the Muslims. The ritual starts by selecting a Muslim person – either a Kurd or Arab (*Kraevin Khoyni*, or Brothers of Blood). On the day of circumcision, the child is placed on a person’s lap. When the drops of blood flow from the child onto the garment of the person holding the child, the mother washes this spot of blood; in return, the child’s mother is honored by this person with a gift of money, or a sheep. Thus, this person becomes one of the family and called Brother of Blood, similar to a Godfather in Christianity. If the child to be circumcised is from a wealthy family or a lineage of village elders, a large celebration is held and all the villagers participate in the occasion. Animals are slaughtered to feed the party (Mezore, 2012).

### Other Practices

In some areas of Ninewa province and the KRI, residents use locally-produced hibiscus oil, *tulle*, for hair care to prevent hair loss. Some use hibiscus to treat swelling, wounds, burns, and scars (Urak news, 2017).

## **Destruction of Cultural Heritage**

### **Agriculture**

Agricultural practices suffered significantly under the IS, as its members not only destroyed farmlands, equipment, and livestock, but also neglected farmlands, trees, and so on. (UNIDO, 2019). For instance, the IS sabotaged irrigation wells, burnt orchards, looted livestock and machinery, pulled down and stole vital electricity lines, and laid landmines in farming areas. The destruction of water sources, in an already water scarce area, had a particularly negative impact on farming (Amnesty International, 2018). Despite the territorial defeat of the IS in 2017, the repercussions of its rule still have an impact on agriculture production, as farmlands have been destroyed, resources are lacking, and there are even mines preventing farming in many locations in Ninewa. Farmers lost olive trees, 68% of wheat cultivation land, 57% of barley land, and 75% of their livestock (UNIDO, 2019; Ajemian et al., 2018; Amnesty International, 2018). Moreover, 90% of the water infrastructure has been destroyed. In 2017, only 20% of farmers in Ninewa had access to irrigation in comparison to 65% prior to the conflict (IOM, 2019). Crop production has suffered significant damage and losses, mainly due to the loss of machinery, displacement (mostly farmers), insecurity, fields littered with unexploded ordnances, looting, destroyed silos, storage and crop processing facilities, lack of seeds and fertilizers, the collapse of government support in providing agricultural inputs, limited integration between stakeholders, and the absence of technical services. Wheat and barley production losses alone amount to as much as 75-80%, and in Ninewa province, virtually no grains or other foods were produced during the IS' rule (FAO, 2018).

Not only does the above make returns of IDPs more difficult for those who lived off the land in Ninewa, it also impacts the type of farming; due to the limited resources, and time it takes for land to regenerate, there is a focus on cash crops. In turn, crops that have a cultural significance are not immediately prioritized (Fox, 2019). Farmers in Hamdaniya have not been able to restore orchard and livestock activities, but have restored wheat and barley production. Those who have restored production are still impaired by supply chain interruptions, access to resources, delays in



access to capital that was looted, lack of financial resources, and damage to water irrigation infrastructure (Obelisk, 2017). Moreover, farmers who have managed to rebuild their destroyed farms have returned but are still facing problems such as marketing and storage (Mathieu-Comtois, 2017).

Before IS, Bashiqa and Bahzani area was the home to the majority of Ninewa province's olive production, but the IS burnt and chopped down the trees and some olive farms were left without water for three years (Fobbe, 2019; Obelisk, 2017; Khalat, 2017). Due to the time it takes for olive trees to grow and bear fruit, this has a significant negative impact. In Bashiqa, the renewal of the orchard may require 10 years (Al-Sanjari, 2017b). Farmers have complained about the lack of support and subsidies from the government, particularly as they face competition from cheap imports. Moreover, even after the liberation, due to poverty, people in Bashiqa and Bahzani cut down olive trees and sold them in markets in Duhok (Al Shahid, 2018). The IS also destroyed and looted tahini-making factories in Bashiqa. Tahini is an important ingredient used for breakfast with date syrup or for hummus and due to the particular local variety of sesame, Bashiqa's tahini is important to Christians and other locals (UNIDO, 2019).

### **Non-Agriculture**

The IS targeted Ezidi culture, identity, and heritage and destroyed Ezidis' cultural and religious sites. In Bashiqa and Bahzani, around 38 cultural sites and shrines were destroyed. The IS atrocities against the Ezidis led to mass displacement and due to the importance of these heritage sites displacement had a negative impact on their cultural practices. Moreover, as the passing on of traditions, practices, etc. is usually done orally, this mass displacement prevents Ezidis from many cultural elements. Similarly, the strict marriage rules - not only having to marry Ezidis, but Ezidis from the same caste - makes marriage more difficult due to mass displacement (Fobbe, 2019; Alouka, 2016a). In order to practice their religion properly, Ezidis have been forced to rebuild religious temples themselves (Al Shahid, 2019). Religious sites, which are situated all across the Ezidi homeland, play a central role in the Ezidi community's life and religious identity. Participation in religious rituals, which include religious festivals and pilgrimages, are

central to Ezidism, which requires religious sites in order to practice them. Besides certain practices, animal slaughter and communal feasts play an important part in Ezidi festivals. The sharing of meat, particularly with those who cannot afford it, is an important element of Ezidi religious practices. Festivals connect Ezidis transnationally with Ezidis travelling from other countries to participate including those from diaspora. The importance of these sites for religious practice goes beyond the physical presence, their destruction has a significant impact on Ezidis' cultural identity (Isakhan & Shahab, 2020).

The IS destroyed 11 Christian monasteries in the Hamdaniya area, including "Mar Yohanna al Ma'amadan" (Saint John the Baptist), which is considered to be one of the largest monasteries in the Middle East. Additionally, IS militants excavated the tomb of Bishop Paul Faraj Rahho and many other Christians in Ninewa Plains during its reign. IS militants also detonated a number of churches and looted the Museum of Mar Touma Church (Saint Thomas Church) for Popular Heritage and Syriac Manuscripts, burning Christian books and manuscripts (Sputnik, 2016; Beshwar, 2016). The district mayor of Tal Keif, Basim Bello revealed that the rate of destruction caused by the IS for the Christian areas, which is the largest in Batnaya, reached more than 80% (IDU, 2018). The IS converted churches in Tal Keif into training camps for firing practice; IS members burnt the five churches in Tal Keif and later transformed the greater Tal Keif Church into a military camp named Abu Talha Al-Ansari where newcomers were trained (Pahlavi, 2017). In addition, Telskuf's Catholic Church was looted and destroyed. The statue of the Virgin Mary was desecrated, and the head was cut off from its body; the symbol of beheading is the signature of IS (ACN, 2016). Moreover, IS destroyed more than 30 archaeological sites, all of which were on the World Cultural Heritage list. It traded all the antiquities that could be sold on the black market, destroyed what could not be sold. What lies destroyed are the remains of buildings and ancient statues in the Assyrian city of Nimrud, the heritage of the historic city of Hatra in Ninewa province, and the heritage of the city of Dor Sherzkin, north of Mosul, the capital of the Assyrian Kingdom under the Sargon II (Khalil, 2017).

Additionally, the basis of coexistence and peace between Shia and Sunni Turkmens has been destroyed due to the IS (Abdul Karim, 2017). Furthermore, most of the main Kaka's religious places in Ninewa – such as Sayyid Baba Yadgar, Bawa Haider, Shahiyas and Beer Qambar Shahwi – have been destroyed (Al. Naadi, 2017).

## **Inter- and Intra-Group Relations**

Assyrian and Chaldean tensions with Arab and Shabak populations in Hamdaniya grew under Saddam Hussein's rule. The Arabization policy of the 1980s granted plots of land in majority Christian areas to Arabs and Shabaks who registered as Arabs (Gaston, 2017). The return of Shabaks and internally displaced Arabs into Bartella has contributed to Christian-Shabak tensions. Christians remain divided in their alliances between Baghdad and Erbil. The politics of the disputed territories has further exacerbated Christian-Shabak tensions, where local councils (provincial, district, and subdistrict) are filled by candidates backed by Erbil and Baghdad (Gaston, 2017). In Bartella, problems also stem from local security actors backed by different patrons; this has slowed the returns and reconstruction process. At the same time, the disruption of main supply routes has led to unexpected price hikes. In Qaraqosh, locals blame KRG roadblocks between Mosul and Hamdaniya as main impediments to food security and economic recovery in the district (Mathieu-Comtois, 2017). It has been claimed that some administrative officials in Ninewa sold Christians' properties in Tal Keif without their knowledge; therefore, Christians in the homeland and the diaspora called to review the relevant departments to confirm their properties (Zumaia, 2019). According to Al-Saleh (2019), the land title deeds and records were manipulated and as a result, the ownership of many Christian homes and agricultural lands were transferred to other people.

Tensions also exist between hardline Shabak and Christian community members in Ninewa Plains (EPIC, 2019). Christians accuse Brigade 30 of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) a Shabak Shia force headed by Waad Qaddo, and his brother MP Hunain Qaddo, of harassment and sexual assaults of Christian women in Hamdaniya and Tal Keif. The Christians view these actions as part of a bigger agenda to force them out of their areas so that the Shia Shabaks can

move in. (Home Office, 2019; Haji, 2019). Both Shabaks and Christians accuse each other of fostering demographic change in the Ninewa Plains. Additionally, the PMF, backed by Iran, are attempting to register lands in the region. The conflict is taking place particularly in Bartella and Bashiqa, their surrounding villages which are composed of Christians, Shabaks, and Ezidis (KirkukNow, 2019; Zaid, 2019). Assyrians argue that the increasing influence of powerful patrons, such as Iran, has allowed Shabaks to seize land belonging to Assyrian villages in the Ninewa Plains (Leezenberg, 2018). Additionally, the deep political divisions among Christians, Shabaks, and Ezidis in the Ninewa Plains has increased their level of dependence on external patrons among the Kurdish and Shia parties. Bartalla and Qaraqosh are considered to be the two places most affected by ethno-religious tensions, a conflict that is perceived to be largely between Christians and Shia Shabaks. Christians claim that both sub-districts were historically Christian and that the area has lost its ethno-religious character after the re-settlement of Shabaks. Christians argue that the fall of Saddam emboldened Shabaks, and with financial backing from Iran they have encroached on land, seized power in the local administration, and changed the demography of the area. Furthermore, Christians argue that Shabaks moved into Bartalla and inflated the prices of property there, resulting in many Christians selling their property and moving elsewhere (Wirya & Fawaz, 2017). There is also conflict between the Peshmerga, particularly "Zeravani" forces and the PMF's Brigade 30, a Shabak militia in the outskirts of the Ninewa Plains, north and west of Mosul (Salm, 2019).

At the same time, Christians are accused of abuses by Sunni Muslims in the Ninewa Plains. A spokesman for the Arab Ninewa tribes, Muzahim Ahmed al-Huwait, revealed that he submitted an official complaint to the United Nations, supported by documents proving that Christian militias affiliated with the PMF carried out killings, arrests, and the displacement of Arabs in Ninewa province. Al-Huwait said that the Christian forces in Tal Keif have committed many violations against the Arab tribes, including displacement from their areas and the looting of their homes before they were demolished (Shadid, 2017).

Ezidis have faced forced displacement since the mid-1970s under the regime of Saddam Hussein. They were not allowed to register land and as a result lack property documents. Many of their lands were given to Arab settlers up until 2003 with the fall of the Ba'ath regime, but an estimated 250,000 Ezidis still lack property documents. Their resettlement to 11 semi-urban townships to the north and south of Mount Sinjar lacked agricultural productivity. This has led to tensions between Ezidis and Sunni Arabs even prior to the rise of the IS (IOM, 2019).

Shabak political groups such as the Free Shabak Movement are aligned with the KRG, while Shabak Democratic Assembly is aligned with Baghdad. This has led to internal conflict between Shabaks (EPIC, 2019). Internal and external pressures to assimilate into either Kurdish or Shia communities has led to concerns that Shabaks will disappear altogether as a community (Leezenberg, 2018). There are difficulties in discussing Shabak identity, that is, whether Shabaks should be considered ethnically Kurdish - as it carries significant political implications for the legitimacy of KRG claims on disputed territories in the Ninewa Plains - or as a distinct identity group from Arab and Kurds. There is a push and pull between the two camps with an attempt to connect Shabaks to Baghdad or Erbil. However, many Shabaks feel unrepresented by either camp and claim that they advocate their party's interests above those of the community (van Zoonen & Wirya, 2017). Similarly, discussing Ezidi identity among Ezidis leads to differences and conflict among them. This is further exacerbated by the competition between Baghdad and Erbil, as they pull Ezidis in different directions causing conflict between the different groups (Ismael, 2019; Bibbani, 2018; Abduqader, 2019). Tensions also exist amongst Turkmen, as many Sunni Turkmen joined the Islamic State and started displacing Shia Turkmen from Tal Afar. The displaced Turkmen joined the PMF and returned and fought and displaced Sunni Turkmen (Mahmood, 2019; Abdul Karim, 2017).

The ongoing rivalry between the Government of Iraq (GoI) and the KRG further complicated the politics of Ninewa province. Since 2003 the two governments have been vying for influence in Hamdaniya and Tal Keif, and despite being part of the local government in Ninewa administratively, the KRG maintained influence through the security arrangements in the disputed territories with the GoI. Because of this paradox in the administrative and security

dependency in the management of these regions, a major neglect occurred in the infrastructure of services due to political conflict and administrative intersection; these regions were deprived of many financial benefits related to budgets due to the ongoing Erbil-Baghdad disputes over these areas (HHRO, 2016).

Post IS, patterns of conflict between communities reveal that ethno-religious tensions are stronger in urban locations. In Ninewa Plains and Sinjar, only a fifth of the people in these locations report being somewhat or very concerned about inter-ethnic or tribal tensions. This could be attributed to a relatively homogenous population background in the area. Nevertheless, Ninewa has seen a proliferation of armed groups along ethno-religious lines, which is arguably one way for young men to obtain employment, but it could also come with a sense of social power and prestige (IOM, 2019). Observations by the IHCHR reveal that there remain many obstacles towards peaceful coexistence among ethno-sectarian groups. For example, the presence of multiple security forces with different security measures has prevented/impeded return and has also delayed the reconstruction/rehabilitation of other villages and sub-districts in the Ninewa Plains, which has prevented the returns of Christians, Ezidis, and Shabaks (IHCHR, 2018).

## **Agricultural and Cultural Extension**

### **Agricultural**

In Bashiqa, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) assists with the reestablishment of the tahini industry by providing training on factory operation techniques, food hygiene, and by providing some technical assistance (UNIDO, 2019). Since December 2018, AFD (French Development Agency) supports rural and agricultural activities in Ninewa with a focus on Hamdaniya through PERMA, a €10 million, 3-year grant administered by Mercy Corps. The project targets poultry farming and fruit and vegetable production, provides funding for SMEs, rehabilitates irrigated areas, and supports inter-community economic interactions (FAD, 2018). As of 2018, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) provided animal fodder to 788 livestock producers in Hamdaniya (Ajemian et al 2018:12).

Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Nadia Murad, also launched an initiative with a pilot project in southern Sinjar to help Ezidi farmers rehabilitate their farms. The project was individually tailored to provide the farmers with what they were missing during the seeding season (October to March), including seeds, generators, electrical wires, greenhouses, pipes, and water tanks. However, it operates at a small scale, initially focusing on only up to 15 households in Tal Qasab. Such projects also face obstacles, for example, although farmers may have generators, they need to run on transistors from an energy supply and not all villages are linked to electricity. Farmers can therefore not maximize the potential of their farms through irrigation driven by transistor-run generators, and they are forced to rely on rain. Farmers also face difficulties in accessing fertilizers due to its bomb-making capacity, despite there being no ban on them. Finally, funding to support Ezidi is drying up as their needs are no longer seen as urgent (Fox, 2019).

Yazda, a Ezidi NGO, launched a project in January 2019 aimed at the rehabilitation of 17,000 olive trees in Bashiqa. The communities of Bashiqa (Ezidi, Christians, and Shabaks) rely on agriculture, and olives are also of significant cultural and economic importance. The project, which is funded by the World Food Programme (WFP) aims at drilling two new boreholes and rehabilitating 6 km of soil canals and 200 m of concrete canals in order to reactivate the supply of water to 84 hectares of land helping 130 farmers and 17,000 olive trees (Yazda, 2018).

Christians in the Ninewa Plains received funding from two organizations, Stand with Iraqi Christians and International Christian Concern, to set up two chicken farms as part of an economic revitalization program. Both organizations were planning to help farmers establish two more farms in July and four in October (2019); each farm creates 134 jobs, including farm laborers, chicken sellers, hatchery workers, butchers, grocers, feed sellers, veterinarians, and truck drivers (Wilson, 2019).

FAO and Iraq's Ministry of Agriculture also launched an emergency animal health campaign. The campaign seeks to protect the livestock of 210,000 people who rely on it for food and income in Ninewa province. FAO's campaign includes vaccinating almost 1 million sheep, goats, cattle, and buffalo and providing 1,500 tons of high-nutrient feed for 60,000 animals. FAO plans to vaccinate the animals against six diseases: sheep and goat pox, brucellosis, enterotoxaemia, blackleg disease, lumpy skin disease, and foot-and-mouth disease (FAO, 2017). Sub-program interventions by FAO seek to ensure tangible improvements in the daily lives of Iraqi people at the start of the reconstruction process. It focuses on four groups of target beneficiaries:

- Vulnerable smallholder farming families who will benefit from social safety interventions (aligned with existing platforms), e.g. cash transfers and cash for work, agricultural input packages and trainings to reduce household food insecurity and malnutrition.
- Small-scale farming families producing cereal and legume seeds, vegetables, milk, and animal fodder. Support includes agricultural equipment and input packages, training and value chain development initiatives to increase income generation and employment while improving food security and nutrition among the population.
- Value chain actors such as individual producers and producer groups, input suppliers, traders/buyers, agrifood processors, etc. who will benefit from increased quantities and improved quality of agricultural produce through increased collaboration in a collective (horizontal) production system.
- Community-based facilitators and workers (e.g. farmer field school and farmer business school facilitators and community-animal health workers) drawn from the government, NGOs, community leaders, unemployed graduates, the private sector, among others. These facilitators will provide field kits and training in climate-smart crop and animal production practices, small agribusiness development, group-based adaptive research and participatory learning methodologies, and surveillance and reporting of plant and animal pests/diseases (FAO, 2018).

FAO also aims to rehabilitate 18 irrigation systems (with a commanding area of 113,900 ha) in Ninewa. Most of these schemes are inefficient and are often attributed to water losses along



canal and pipeline structures. Farmers' low farming technology, improper practice of intermittent irrigation, and lack of agricultural inputs are some of the other reasons for low productivity. FAO proposes rehabilitated irrigation systems and improved water governance and operation, including training of farmers (FAO, 2018).

Iraq relies on the flow of water from the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Upstream countries such as Turkey, Syria, and Iran control 81% of Iraq's water supply and have been building infrastructure since the 1990s, slowly reducing Iraq's supply. They have modern infrastructure to divert three quarters of the Euphrates' flow from Iraq. A lower water level not only reduces the amount of farmland but also affects the salinity and contaminates water downstream (IOM, 2019). The Republic of Turkey's new Ilisu Dam Hydroelectric Power Plant project reduces the flows from the Tigris River into the Mosul dam lake. This paired with the IS' destruction of irrigation infrastructure have been attributed as reasons for Ninewa becoming a dust bowl. The GoI has also been accused of not providing enough support. It is argued that some farmers have become disillusioned and have joined local militias to get a regular wage (El Dahan & Jalabi, 2018). The government alleges that it has worked to clean up the water supply in Ninewa and dug wells to help farmers. But as part of the bigger issues afflicting Ninewa, critics argue that the government is corrupt and inefficient. This has prevented Ninewa from receiving funds and from coming up with a successful water plan. Poor harvests are already resulting in growing costs for the government. The state Grain Board expects to import around two million tons of wheat at a cost of around 1.5 billion USD. The north Al-Jazeera pump in the Mosul dam lake provides farmers with a steady supply of water, enabling them to grow summer vegetables and winter grains. It reaches over 60,000 hectares of land, around a quarter of Ninewa's potentially fertile land. When the IS seized the dam in 2016, they damaged equipment supporting the main pump and subsidiary pumps, including bridges and canals. Following its liberation in 2017, 100 of the irrigation system's 280 canals were still out of commission, filled with debris and explosives. In 2018, the government pledged to demine, restore power to, and fix the main pumping station, in addition to pledging its full functionality within two years. Yet, a more immediate problem for farmers is the lack of governmental support. Many require financial assistance to produce crops,

and many are due back payments for grains sold to the Ministry of Trade in 2014. These payments have been delayed due to government background checks to make sure the individuals have no affiliation with the IS. Long term obstacles to revive farmland in Ninewa province involve low water levels in Mosul dam lake that feeds the irrigation systems. The water level has receded from 330 meters above sea level before the drought to around 306. The current level is considered too shallow to operate the north Al-Jazeera pump all year-round when it is finally functioning again (El Dahan & Jalabi, 2018).

The destruction of olive trees in Hamdaniya had impacts beyond agricultural production, including on the climate, but also by taking away culturally important picnic sites (Khalat, 2017). Un Ponte Per, an Italian humanitarian organization, with Qandil, a local NGO, brokered a social cohesion agreement among the communities in eleven villages in Hamdaniya to support peaceful coexistence and to reforest some of the area through tree plantation. (Al-Jamel, 2019a).

FAO (2019a) reported that Ninewa will benefit from €15 million in European Union contributions to the FAO to restore agricultural livelihoods. The project is part of the FAO's overall response in Iraq. It is expected that approximately 10,000 vulnerable families (about 60,000 people) will benefit directly, in addition to the local service providers and workers. The project will support farmers of small fields who couldn't repair their lands through irrigation systems, grain supplies, fertilizers, forages, and animal breeding projects. Additionally, the project will encourage women to contribute to enhancing the family income via participation in agriculture (vegetable and dairy production) and agricultural graduates by involving them in training campaigns and extensions mainly in animal health and food security data collection. The project responds to the urgent needs of the families for food and provides long term job opportunities.

## Cultural

In 2019, Un Ponte Per brought together representatives of all the ethnic and religious communities in the province (Shabaks, Arabs, Turkmen, Kaka'i, Ezidi, and Christians) to sign an agreement pact. The representatives of eleven villages from the Hamdaniya district signed the document. The document pledges the communities' commitment to maintaining peaceful coexistence (Al-Jamel, 2019b).

Furthermore, UNESCO and the United Arab Emirates have pledged to repair the damages to Christian churches in Mosul. While the restoration is in Mosul, it is still important to all Christians in the province (UNESCO, 2019).

The IS destroyed the cultural and religious sites of the Kaka'is in Ninewa, including Sayyid Baba Yadgar, Bawa Haider, Shahiyas. and Beer Qambar Shahwi. After the liberation of these areas, Kaka'is restored and rebuilt most of them through community donations and help from INGOs (KirkukNow, 2019).

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