



In the Bashiq District, social cohesion between different communities was intentionally disrupted by the Islamic State (IS) group. In the Bashiq District, IS tried to impose a monolithic culture centered on an extreme interpretation of Sunni Islam in an area where the majority of people are Yazidis. After IS, many people feel that those who were not violently antagonized by IS were part of the terrorist group or supporters of the group's actions. In short, coexistence has been replaced with tensions and visible rifts remain between different ethnic and religious communities.

This research project, part of the larger USAID-funded project, 'Support to Traditional Cultural Practices in Northern Iraq' attempts to identify and evaluate policies that enable or hinder the rebuilding of trust and peaceful coexistence among different Bashiq communities (religious and ethnic groups). It focuses on social cohesion and rebuilding trust among the communities that were impacted by IS.

Research was conducted in late 2022 and early 2023.

Key data were collected through 35 semi-structured interviews in Bashiq, Bahzani, and adjacent villages, and were conducted with important stakeholders and influential actors in the area, including political and community leaders, religious figures, civil society activists and farmers. Data was also collected through an

Key Takeaways

- IS purposefully undermined social cohesion between various communities in Bashiq.
- Though IS was vanquished years ago, miscommunication and hostility persisted among the various communities.
- Each ethnic group should work to rebuild ties. Sunni leaders need to lead in reaching out to other communities. Policies should reinforce that IS' violent activities do not speak for local Sunni Muslims.
- This region now has an historic opportunity to work at rebuilding social cohesion.

accountability session held in the Bashiqa district in December 2022, with 20 key figures from all communities in Bashiqa, including Yezidis, Christians, Shabaks, Muslims, Turkmen and Kakais. Data shows that the tension between Bashiqa communities, particularly between Yezidis and Shabaks, has increased after IS' defeat. Currently, there is a considerable lack of clear and effective policies on the ground that would restore and enhance trust in Bashiqa. This region now has an historic opportunity to implement policies to support and strengthen social cohesion.

Findings:

The IS specifically targeted social cohesion in the Bashiqa District in 2014 with the intention of imposing Sunni culture in a region where Yezidis make up the majority of the population. In reality, the data gathered indicates that tension and misunderstanding between the various populations persisted both during and after IS' occupation. In addition, some locals are still known as supporters of IS ideas. For instance, Yezidis, and to a lesser extent Christians, still feel bitterness toward the people of the village of Al-Fadiliya, who stayed during the occupation and who are suspected of collaborating with or supporting IS.

What Should Be Done in Bashiqa?

The governorate of Nineveh, local governments, NGOs, and religious leaders and institutions all have an important role to play to improve social cohesion and should be in regular communication with one another. *Our findings suggest that policies should emphasize the key message that the violent actions of IS do not represent a specific ethnic or religious group, and that local Sunni Muslims are not represented by IS. They should pursue the policies below and establish a cross-community committee to carry them out.*

Address Popular Misunderstandings Toward Local Sunnis: Christians and Yezidis Leaders should work to clear the misunderstanding of Islam in Yezidi and Christian communities. Sessions and workshops or through social networking sites, such as Facebook, can resolve misunderstandings. Moreover, dialogue meetings among Leaders and key actors of all sects, can raise awareness and strengthen trust and cohesion between groups.

Sunis Should Take Steps to Rebuild Ties: On the other hand, since IS was associated with the Sunni Muslim population, practical initiatives must come from the Muslim majority and not just rhetoric. Yezidis and Christians must feel embraced by the Muslim majority through frequent visits, participation in religious and social events, and discourse gatherings. Through the next two recommendations, community and religious leaders from all sects can effectively enhance social cohesion:

Cross-Recognize Other Communities' Rituals and Religious Practices, and Announce Festivals in Places of Worship: Places of worship from all religions can proactively encourage congregants to express solidarity with other communities during their respective religious festivals.

Every Group Should Actively Work to Reduce Tensions: All leaders should stress in social and religious occasions, awareness sessions, seminars and in their mutual visits that IS' actions do not represent the Sunni



community. In Sunni villages, especially Al-Fadiliya, people must be encouraged to build relationships with other communities, in particular the Yazidis.

Organize Activities Supporting Peaceful Coexistence: This can include sports and art activities that create interaction and sympathy between different groups, increasing levels of understanding and acceptance.

Use Media Platforms to Enhance Social Cohesion: Develop a media campaign to introduce the idea of brotherhood and the common history that links the communities to each other. Moreover, work on preventing any content that incites hatred and disharmony between the communities, for example, through a local committee that monitors media and reports it to local leaders and authorities.



Use Education to Support Peaceful Coexistence: Schools can help spread the culture of tolerance and acceptance, through curriculum development and capacity building for teachers.

Participate in Decision-making: The government should work to involve all sects in making administrative decisions in Bashiqa. Partnership should be based on population proportions without marginalizing any ethnic or religious community. This will help groups feel confident that their government represents them.

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Photos: Different religious groups plant a tree together near Bashiqa (credit: research team)
Advocacy Team with Christians, Yazidis and Muslim leaders in Bashiqa (credit: research team)