

The Islamic State group (IS) left Talkeif in 2017, leaving behind fractured social cohesion and coexistence among ethnic and religious groups in the area. A dramatic demographic change occurred in the center of the city. Where previously most families were Christians, now, only a few remain. Meanwhile, the Christian community nationwide continues to migrate away from Iraq. This drastic demographic shift may hinder attempts to restore peaceful coexistence.



This policy brief addresses issues of social cohesion and the variables that promote or inhibit trust, and recommends new policies for the area that may mitigate tensions.

Findings:

Part of the larger USAID-funded project, ‘Support to Traditional Cultural Practices in Northern Iraq,’ this research attempts to address issues of social cohesion and factors promoting or hindering social cohesion in Talkeif. Critical data was collected through 47 semi-structured interviews conducted between September and November 2022 in Talkeif, Alqosh, and adjacent villages with influential actors including political leaders, community leaders, religious figures, young activists, and prominent farmers. In addition, further data was collected through an accountability session held in the Talkeif district on February 14, 2023, with the participation of 20 key figures from all communities in Talkeif, including Christians, Yazidis, Shabaks, Kakais, and Turkmen. The collected data shows that in the wake of IS, the tension and mistrust between different communities had increased significantly.

IS’ prevalent use of hate speech against people of other religions and ethnic communities, particularly Christians and Yazidis, had a significant negative impact. In neighboring Yazidi and Christian villages, mistrust and fear still exist, especially towards Sunni Muslims and Arabs, due to the way Arab villages are associated

Key Takeaways

- In Talkeif, IS purposefully created rifts between various communities.
- After the defeat of IS in 2017, the tension and mistrust between different communities, particularly Christians and Yazidis towards Muslims, has increased.
- For Talkeif to become a place where all groups feel safe, respected, and valued, the fears and concerns of Christian and Yazidi communities need to be addressed.
- Once their fears and concerns are dealt with, Christians and Yazidis will be more likely to return home and resume their former way of life.

with IS. This association extended to instances of robbery, murder, and looting. Christians or Yazidis, who have moved away from the area as a result, find it hard to return home. Additionally, there is still a discourse of intolerance and rejection of the other, especially among some Arabs.

A leader of the Yezidi community told interviewers: "Some imams keep saying that no one will enter Paradise except Muslims, and some still do not eat Yezidi food because it is haram, and do not accept us as we are. This speech and this position is very dangerous because it can eventually lead to hostility and murder." (Jarahiya village Yezidi leader, October 2022)

A displaced Christian from Talkeif said: "When we left Talkeif, a group of Arabs betrayed us and stole our property. After IS was defeated, neighbors and people in the area burned my house, which was then robbed after IS fell" (Talkeif Christian male, October 2022 interview). A Teslqof female Christian activist summed up the situation, saying, "Christians and Yezidis cannot return to their homes, and their neighbor is the one who stole and looted his house. How can I go back and see my stolen things in my neighbor's house?" (interview, October 2022)

Additionally, according to a survey conducted by the advocacy team of 20 key figures, including community and religious leaders and civil society activists from various communities, 90% of respondents confirmed that IS used the religious discourse of extremism and infidelity to target Christians and Yezidis. While 60% of respondents underlined that extremist ideology still existed in the region after IS, 70% admitted that discrimination based on religious affiliation existed.

In addition, all participants confirmed the need to harmonize the religious speech of the clergy to promote social cohesion in Talkeif. One male Yezidi leader in Shexka village told interviewers, "Some mullahs and religious figures continue to encourage discrimination through certain practices like not allowing their congregants to congratulate other religions on their holidays or framing other faiths as blasphemy." (October 2022)

What is to be done in Talkeif?

The national governorate of Nineveh, local governments, NGOs, Key communities, and religious actors and their institutions all have important roles to play in helping to improve social cohesion in Talkeif. Specific policies could help support and strengthen social cohesion there. These policies should prioritize fostering trust between all groups as the primary means of reducing Christians' and Yazidis' fear of returning to their homes and lands, clearing the way for them to restore their way of life:

Dispel Christian and Yazidi misconceptions about Islam: Community Councils and local government should encourage religious leaders, local notables, and mukhtars to organize dialogue and awareness sessions, seminars, and workshops with Christians and Yazidis that stress the distinction between mainstream Sunni Muslim practices and beliefs and the ideology of IS.



Plan events that promote social cohesion: Ministries in the region could create sporting and arts events, to increase interaction between various groups and, as a result, their mutual understanding and trust. This could include creating welcoming spaces that allow all communities to participate. Joint agricultural projects could accomplish the same goal.

Pay attention to the younger generation: Youth are presently the least likely to carry an existing influence from IS ideologies, however, they might be exploited by armed or extremist groups if they remain neglected and excluded from the decision-making processes. They should participate in decision-making processes with local government, as well as in community councils, which elders currently dominate. In addition, formal or informal youth committees should be established that can monitor and reject hate speech on social media, while encouraging tolerance and social cohesion.

Develop curricula for students from primary to higher education: Education Bureaus should advance curricula that instill in the new generation tolerance and acceptance of differences.

National Legislators should improve laws to prevent further demographic change, including land ownership laws, and tighten the requirements for non-Talkeif residents wishing to live there.

National Legislators should change laws that affect peaceful coexistence. One example is Article 14 of the *Law of Municipalities Imports No. (1) of the year 2023*, which “Prohibits importing, producing, and selling alcoholic beverages of all kinds.” This article should be amended in a way that preserves the privacy of non-Muslim communities without touching on their specifics, and at the same time puts restrictions on using or dealing with alcoholic products in places where the Muslim community is dominant.

Who will support and apply the recommended policies? Although non-governmental organizations, religious leaders, civil society institutions, and local government may actively participate in the implementation of these policy recommendations, the national government and the governorate of Nineveh should be the main supporters to give validity to local policies. Additionally, the local government in TalKeif is crucial to implementing policies that improve societal peace and social cohesion in the TalKaif area.

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First Photo: Accountability session with key Talkeif actors, Second Photo: Advocacy team with Yazidi leaders. Credits: Research Team.

