

# SOCIAL COHESION IN NINEVEH – AN ASSESSMENT



**Research Lead:** Javier Fabra-Mata, PhD, Senior advisor for programme analysis and research, Norwegian Church Aid (NCA).

**Field Coordinator:** Mustafa Abdalla, NCA Iraq.

**Reference Group members:** Anna Levin, Programme Manager, Middle East Unit, Church of Sweden; Arne Sæverås, Senior Peacebuilding Advisor, NCA; Erik Apelgårdh, Senior Advisor, Church of Sweden; Johanna Svanelind, Regional Representative, Middle East, Church of Sweden; Karin Axelsson-Zaar, Acting Head of Middle East Unit, Church of Sweden; Margrethe Volden, Head of Division, Middle East and Asia, NCA; Rania Salameh, Humanitarian Programme Officer, Church of Sweden; Stefan Jansen, Country Director, NCA Iraq.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Social cohesion refers to togetherness in a society – bonds between individuals and across groups. It considers the individual – including their well-being, inter-personal relations and group relations – reflecting on negative as well as positive forces.

This study aims to increase contextual awareness of community-level conflict and social cohesion dynamics in two districts of Iraq, Tall Kayf and Sinjar. These are situated in Nineveh, one of the largest and arguably the most ethno-religiously diverse governorates in Iraq.

The study combined a review of secondary data with primary data collection. A survey of 599 households, community-based focus group discussions and key informant interviews took place in February and March 2019.

All communities surveyed have shortfalls in social cohesion, although there are differences between communities. Young people are a positive force for social cohesion common to all districts covered by this research.

### *Social cohesion deficits*

The most acute needs of these communities can be grouped around job creation, health, education and justice, and reconciliation. Social cohesion factors and dimensions (e.g. well-being and reconciliation among community members) are self-identified by community members as priority needs. In general, men and women share a similar view. Women give more importance to the following needs: well-being and coping strategies; primary health assistance; reconciliation among community members; education for children; and access to the job market.

### *Security and perceptions of safety*

Most of the people report feeling safe or very safe in their communities. There are no significant gender differences in this regard. When asked about what is causing tensions in their communities now, community members in all areas frequently refer to unemployment, sectarianism and mistrust. There are some geographic specificities, though.

### *Living together*

Community members express a belief that the different social groups<sup>1</sup> can live together peacefully, providing that trust is restored. Rebuilding trust is a long-term process connected to a state of law and respect for that legal environment. This view is commonplace among community members consulted in this study. Again,

significant geographical differences are found. Moreover, there is a marked divide in opinions between the youngest generations (15 – 32 years old) and the oldest (61-75 years old), with the younger generations overwhelmingly more positive about changes towards peaceful coexistence than the elder generations.

### *Civic participation*

The feeling of total exclusion from decision-making processes that affect the community is more acute among women than men. The generational gap is, however, much wider than the gender one when it comes to decision-making, with those feeling totally excluded from such processes being on average (median) 32 years old.

### *Enabling social cohesion*

Several actors have a role to play in building a more cohesive society, according to research participants. Paramount among them are government institutions and authorities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and the Iraqi central government, followed by religious leaders and tribal sheikhs. This general ranking of actors masks a far more complex reality; men and women have strikingly different opinions about these actors, as do inhabitants of the various surveyed communities and younger and older generations. Geographically, Sinjara in Sinjar sticks out from the other locations surveyed in this study – respondents from that area have a more positive view of the social cohesion role played by the UN and NGOs.

The study finds that youth engagement is important in social cohesion. This is linked to gaining the agency and empowerment to participate in community matters. To make this happen, young people themselves recognise the need to team up with those who can help eliminate some of the barriers to social cohesion (e.g. Iraqi authorities, and local and international civil society).

Community members describe trust building as the most important precondition for the various components of society to be in solidarity and support each other. What trust building means varies from individual to individual and, to a certain extent, from area to area. Other necessary social cohesion actions are: promoting the spirit of tolerance, social interaction, making communities more homogeneous (ethno-religiously) and sensitising community leaders.

### *Civil society actors promoting social cohesion*

Even though the study did not have a primary objective to systematically investigate what type of social

<sup>1</sup> Respondents usually employed the term 'social component' (المكون الاجتماعي in Arabic) to refer to various Iraqi ethno-religious groups. Both 'social groups' and 'social components' are used interchangeably in this report.



cohesion interventions have been carried out in Nineveh Governorate, interviews and focus group discussions conducted during the research gave a valuable insight into this theme. Some of the shortcomings of these interventions relate to a narrow approach to social cohesion, insensitivity to specific contexts and limited programme adaptations to meet local needs, and a tendency to plan for change with short-term horizons.

The following recommendations are drawn from this study's findings:

1. **Recognise and support transitional justice efforts.** Both retributive and restorative justice measures are needed. Transitional justice efforts must account for existing geographic differences, which largely depend on Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)<sup>2</sup>'s dominance in certain locations and its targeting of certain groups as well as local demographics.
2. **Rebuild social capital and trust with a long-term and multi-actor perspective inclusive of youth.** While acknowledging geographic differences, the best way to strengthen social cohesion is by building networks of young people from different ethno-religious groups. Social cohesion training should be paired with other services and activities co-created and facilitated by the young people themselves and include empowerment components.
3. **Engage religious leaders carefully.** Religious leaders are important actors for social cohesion but are not equally trusted by all segments of society. It is essential to carry out a detailed stakeholder analysis as the basis for an action plan that includes different types and degrees of engagement with religious leaders.
4. **Consider internal group dynamics.** Social cohesion actions – irrespective of the form they take – should also consider the in-group, the harmful and positive dynamics within each social component, and generational and gender divides. Furthermore, the timeframe for such support cannot be limited to a few months but requires a mid- or long-term plan.
5. **Strengthen state responsiveness.** The empowerment of communities and involvement of civil society actors must be accompanied by a focus on the state as duty bearer to address powerful drivers of conflict. The state must make itself present to, representative of and responsible for all components of society, enforcing democratic principles and the rule of law.
6. **Counter hate and dehumanising narratives of 'the other'.** Exclusionary constructions of a collective national identity and the dehumanisation of social groups in the public sphere must be countered and delegitimised. Peace education should be included in education materials and learning tools at all levels.

<sup>2</sup> The study follows terminology used by the United Nations in Iraq, based on language guidance developed by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), dated 12 October 2016.

## INTRODUCTION

There is plenty of evidence that cohesive societies are also more peaceful and that inclusion and social cohesion is key to preventing violence.<sup>3</sup>

This context analysis and social cohesion study aims to increase contextual awareness of community-level conflict and social cohesion dynamics in Nineveh Governorate in Iraq. As a joint initiative by ACT Alliance organisations Church of Sweden and Norwegian Church Aid, it provides a basis for designing integrated programmes for development, resilience and social cohesion at community level.

### *Geographic focus in perspective*

The study focuses on the northern Iraqi governorate of Nineveh, one of the largest and possibly the most ethno-religiously diverse province in the country. It covers Tall Kayf and Sinjar districts located in the area north and east of the city of Mosul known as 'Nineveh Plains' (see Figure 1).

Some grievances and conflicts in Nineveh are deep-seated, dating back to the forced displacement and assimilation of different social groups undertaken by the Iraqi administrations from mid-1970s until the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003 – what became to be known as the 'Arabisation programme'. The security conditions in Nineveh deteriorated rapidly in the period between the fall of Saddam Hussein and the emergence of Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). The number of civilian deaths from violence in Nineveh Governorate rose from representing on average approximately 11% of

the total deaths of this kind in Iraq in 2003–2007 to around 26% in 2008–2013.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, the population of Nineveh was estimated to be 9% of the total population of Iraq (2007).<sup>5</sup>

ISIL seized large areas of territory in Nineveh, including most of the geographic locations of this study (Sinune, Wana and Tall Kayf). Another study site (Talskuf) marked the last line of defence against ISIL and experienced heavy fighting. ISIL's brutal rule, together with the fighting to liberate those areas, have unarguably left a mark on these communities.

Despite ISIL's defeat and the liberation of the territory under its control, tensions in Nineveh remain and the resurgence of violent conflict is a real risk. The lack of unified and workable policies on ISIL members and supporters, displacement and the proliferation of security actors are three identified factors increasing the risk of ethnic and sectarian conflict.<sup>6</sup>

### *Approaching social cohesion*

Support for social cohesion in Iraq seems to have gained recent popularity in the development, humanitarian and peacebuilding sectors as well as within the research community. As a catch-all term, 'social cohesion' seldom comes with an explicit definition, let alone a description of its constituent parts.

**Figure 1 Household survey and focus group discussion distribution**



3 Stewart et al. (2006). *Social Exclusion and Conflict: Analysis and Policy Implications*. Centre for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity; World Bank (2011). *World Development Report 2011. Conflict, Security and Development*. Washington, DC: World Bank; United Nations and World Bank (2018). *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

4 Iraq Body Count Database, in World Council of Churches–NCA (2016). *The protection needs of minorities from Syria and Iraq*, p.15.

5 Inter-Agency Information and Analysis Unit and OCHA (2010). *Ninewa Governorate Profile*. November 2010.

6 Sanad (2018). *Challenges affecting social cohesion in Nineveh Plain and northern Nineveh*.



The analytical approach for this study understands social cohesion as togetherness in a society, that is, bonds between its individuals and across its groups. It defines a cohesive society as one that “works towards the well-being of all its members, fights exclusion and marginalisation, creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust, and offers its members the opportunity of upward mobility.”<sup>7</sup> This approach considers the following dimensions of social cohesion:

- Human development and horizontal inequalities
- Well-being
- Security perceptions
- Trust levels
- Interactions across group divides
- Civic engagement.

It focuses on the individual – including their well-being, inter-personal relations and group relations, reflecting on negative as well as positive forces (i.e. factors for and against social cohesion).

## Methodology

The study combined a review of secondary data with primary data collection. Cross-sectional study data was collected between February and March 2019 through a household level survey,<sup>8</sup> focus group discussions in communities and key informant interviews. Altogether, 599 households were surveyed. Women made up 41.4% of the respondents (see Annexes 1 and 2). The number and random selection of households surveyed made the findings representative with a confidence interval of +/- 6.

In total, 36 focus groups were conducted (see Annex 1), gathering the views of 244 people (66 women, 69 men, 62 young women and 47 young men). To complement information collected at the community level, 14 key informant interviews were conducted, mainly with staff from Iraqi and international civil society organisations and Iraqi academics.

NCA’s field coordinator trained 12 enumerators organised in two teams, each with responsibility for data collection in one district (seven women in Tall Kayf and four women and one man in Sinjar District/Sinune). Training took place from 27–29 January for the Tall Kayf team and on 5–7 February for the Sinune team. The Sinune enumerators accompanied the Tall Kayf team in the field for one day for first-hand observation.

When the geographic coverage of the study was discussed, NCA hoped to carry out the study in four sub-districts of Nineveh (Tall Kayf, Tal Afar, Sinjar and Baaj). However, security conditions and time constraints hindered access to Tal Afar and Baaj.

Challenges faced during the data collection process included negotiations with Iraqi authorities regarding permissions. In Tall Kayf and Wana, the team experienced more hesitance among residents about participating in the study, linked to the nature of the study itself as well as the gender of the enumerators. The fact that enumerators were women turned out to be a positive factor that helped in reaching other women and gaining social acceptability through them.

<sup>7</sup> OECD (2011). *Perspectives on Global Development 2012: Social Cohesion in a Shifting World*, Paris: OECD.

<sup>8</sup> Mobile data collection using KoBo.

## FINDINGS

**Table 1 Needs to be addressed according to survey respondents**

Most important needs that still need to be addressed <sup>9</sup>	
Bringing justice for victims of ISIL	83.14%
Secondary health assistance	82.97%
Vocational training to find employment	82.97%
Access to job market	82.14%
Access to higher education	76.46%
Mental health	75.79%
Well-being and coping strategies	74.96%
Primary health assistance	73.79%
Reconciliation among community members	70.28%
Legal assistance	70.12%

### Social cohesion deficits

The most acute needs identified in the researched communities can be grouped around job creation, health, education and justice and reconciliation (see Table 1). Social cohesion factors and dimensions (e.g. well-being, reconciliation among community members) are identified by survey respondents as priority needs.

Moreover, unemployment is a risk factor for radicalisation and social tensions. A high unemployment rate is associated with domestic violence and criminal activities, and a push factor for joining armed groups.<sup>10</sup> These elements also played out in the surveyed areas, as illustrated in the focus group discussions:

*“Providing job opportunities and employment [would help young people] to avoid joining ISIL.”*

*(young man, Wana)*

*“There is a big role for youth but if these young people don’t have jobs, then they are going to make trouble in the community. Young people are always in the parks drinking alcohol. What do you expect from them? If they have money it means they have gotten it through crime, either stealing or by killing someone.”*

*(young woman, Alqosh)*

The absence of job opportunities has also led to changes within the family in the region, forcing people to emigrate – and hindering their return. Another major factor in the transformation of the family unit is the legacy of war. Deaths and killings have contributed to a process that one community member defined as “family disintegration”:

*“Here, one person wanted to join ISIL but his father refused. The son complained against his father to ISIL and they killed him.”*

*(young woman, Tall Kayf)*

Conflict and displacement experiences often have profound effects on the mental health of the affected populations.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, psychological well-being is a foundation for positive social interaction. Geographically, self-reported well-being and coping needs are higher<sup>12</sup> in Talskuf (81.91%) and Alqosh (80.70%), followed by Sinune (78.57%) and Tall Kayf (74.74%). Wana is at the bottom of the ranking, some 15 points behind Alqosh (66.31%).

As for perceptions of the need to bring justice for victims of ISIL, Sinune stands out – 96.95% of the respondents there state that this is very important. By contrast, in Alqosh the percentage of people with the same opinion is as low as 69.29%.

For half of these top 10 needs (see Table 1), men and women share similar views. Women, however, give more importance to the following needs.<sup>13</sup>

- Well-being and coping strategies
- Primary health assistance
- Reconciliation among community members
- Access to the job market.

During the focus group discussions, women from Tall Kayf and Wana who were asked about social cohesion needs referred to harmful practices and traditions affecting them, such as early and forced marriages and polygamy. Young women from Tall Kayf pointed to the neglect of gender equality and women’s participation: “Women are neglected, and their role is only giving birth to babies and housework”.

### Security and perceptions of safety

Most of the research participants feel safe or very safe in

<sup>9</sup> ‘Very important’ responses only. Likert scale: very important; important; moderately important; slightly important; not important. Survey respondents were asked to assess 17 items.

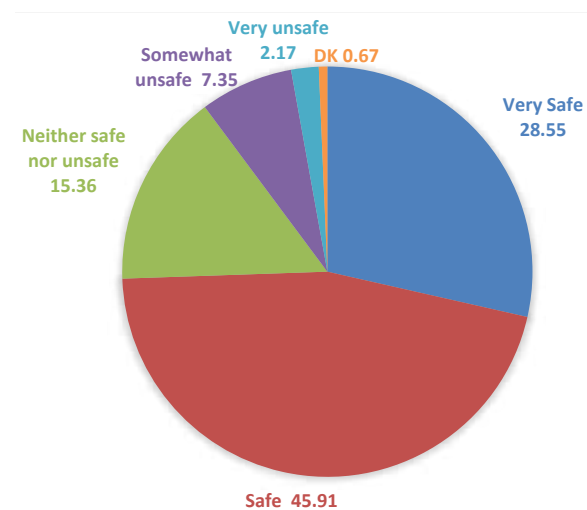
<sup>10</sup> Dudwick, N. (2013). *The Relationship between Jobs and Social Cohesion: Some examples from Ethnography*. Background paper for the World Development Report 2013; Beyer, K, Wallis, AB and Hamberger, LK (2013). *Neighborhood environment and intimate partner violence: a systematic review*. *Trauma, violence & abuse*, 16(1), 16–47; UNDP (2009). *Community Security and Social Cohesion. Towards a UNDP Approach*; Abdel Jelil, M, Bhatia, K, Brockmeyer, A, Do, Q-T and Joubert, C (2018). *Unemployment and Violent Extremism: Evidence from Daesh Foreign Recruits*. Policy Research Working Paper; No. 8381. Washington, DC: World Bank.

<sup>11</sup> Porter, M, and Haslam, N (2005). *Predisplacement and postdisplacement factors associated with mental health of refugees and internally displaced persons: a meta-analysis*. *Jama*, 294(5), 602–612; Hassan, G, Ventevogel, P, Jefe-Bahloul, H, Barkil-Oteo, A, and Kirmayer, LJ (2016). *Mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of Syrians affected by armed conflict*. *Epidemiology and psychiatric sciences*, 25(2), 129–141.

<sup>12</sup> ‘Very important’ responses only.

<sup>13</sup> Above the margin of error for the survey.

**Figure 2 Do you feel safe in your community? (%)**



**Table 2 Views on future security**

Over the next 6 months, security conditions will...	
Get a lot worse	2.67%
Get a little worse	7.01%
Stay the same	21.03%
Get a little better	27.37%
Get much better	11.68%
Don't know	30.21%

**Table 3 Perceptions of trust**

Can people be trusted?		
	Women (n248)	Men (n351)
Most people can be trusted	12.10%	12.54%
A few people can be trusted	49.19%	56.98%
Only my family can be trusted	30.24%	22.51%
No one can be trusted	8.06%	7.41%

**Table 4 Opinions on peaceful coexistence**

	Can groups of different faith or ethnicity live together in peace?	
	Yes	No
Alqosh	60.72%	37.19%
Sinune	36.10%	47.16%
Tal Kayf	87.88%	12.12%
Talskuf	48.94%	51.06%
Wana	91.58%	7.37%

their communities (see Figure 2). There are no significant differences between women and men in this regard. Geographically, the feelings of safety are substantially higher in Alqosh than in the other areas: “very safe” responses there are some 34 percentage points higher than the average. By contrast, the lowest levels of feeling safe are in Sinune, where 16.5% feel ‘somewhat unsafe’ or ‘very unsafe’ (i.e. some 8 percentage points higher than the average).

When asked what is causing tensions in their communities at this point (February 2019), community members in all areas commonly refer to unemployment, sectarianism and mistrust. However, there are some geographic variations here. In Alqosh, respondents pointed to political affiliations leading to family strife. Political conflicts are also mentioned in Sinune. Broadcasting of political news is cited in all focus groups in Wana (with men, women, and male and female youths). In Wana and Tall Kayf, fear and distress are also mentioned – many ISIL families came from the surrounding villages and ISIL members are present in the neighbouring areas. This is consistent with findings from other assessments.<sup>14</sup> The fear of ISIL is fuelled by rumours about dormant ISIL cells that will kill anyone working with international NGOs, Christians or Yezidis.

Community members from Tall Kayf underscore their longing for the return of other social components to the area as a sign of normalcy. But they add that the presence of security actors (Hashd al-Sha’bi militias<sup>15</sup>) deters their return.

### Living together

In focus group discussions, community members express a belief that the different social components can indeed live together peacefully, providing that trust is restored. Rebuilding trust is a long-term process connected with the rule of law and respect for that legal environment. This view is commonplace among community members consulted in this study.

There are, however, geographic differences in opinion in this area, likely related to experiences of the ISIL conflict and the population composition in these areas. Some level of mistrust exists, and stakes are extremely high – people’s experience of conflict means they fear that misplaced trust could have fatal consequences. There is therefore even more need for assurances to be provided by the state (the Iraqi Government and Kurdistan Regional Government) or, in the case of Sinune, a third party like the UN with an international protective presence. In a

<sup>14</sup> Sanad (2018). *Challenges affecting social cohesion in Nineveh Plain and northern Nineveh*; Sanad and Social Inquiry (2018). *Supporting peace and stability in Nineveh Governorate*; UNHCR, DRC, Social Inquiry (2018). *Population Return Trends, Protection, and Social Dynamics in Northern Ninewa*.

<sup>15</sup> For an analysis of security actors in Nineveh, see Ahn, J, Campbell, M and Knoetgen, P (2018). *The Politics of Security in Ninewa: Preventing an ISIS Resurgence in Northern Iraq*. Policy Analysis Exercise. Harvard Kennedy School.





similar vein, horizontal inequalities –real or perceived discrimination in employment opportunities and services because of group identity – erodes trust in the long run, creating a breeding ground for conflict.

In Sinune, most of the survey respondents reject the possibility of peaceful coexistence of ethno-religious groups (see Table 4). Both positive and negative responses on this topic are qualified through focus group discussions; coexistence is possible only if those responsible for ISIL crimes are brought to justice. Retributive justice emerges as a precondition for peaceful coexistence. Bringing ISIL fighters and supporters, who were engaged in criminal activities like killings, violence, rape, harassment and looting of Yazidis, to court for fair trials is crucial for their belief in their future coexistence with other components of society. A process of opening mass graves and identifying victims started in March 2019. This process is important for relatives' closure and will contribute to shifting the focus from the past to the future.

Financial compensation is often mentioned by respondents in Sinune, together with state recognition of the Yazidi genocide ('moral compensation'), state investment in developing the area and security guarantees. Those rejecting the possibility of peaceful coexistence explain their views by pointing at differences in religion – something that is immutable – as well as acts committed by ISIL:

*"We Yazidis cannot live normally because the residents of the surrounding villages betrayed us on 3 August 2014*

*and joined ISIL, kidnapped our women and killed our men and looted our properties. And all this despite the fact that we had good relationships with them before, we were kref (brothers in blood)."*

*(woman, Sinune)*

In Alqosh, community members tend to stress respect for the rule of law and education (curriculum and teaching methods) as conditions for peaceful coexistence. Positive opinions towards the possibility of peaceful coexistence are significantly higher in Tall Kayf district, as shown both in the household survey and the focus group discussions:

*"Yes, [peaceful coexistence is possible] and this is what we were experiencing before ISIL. We were living together with other different components but after ISIL there is almost no trust, especially from Christians and that's why they didn't return to their areas."*

*(youth, Tall Kayf)*

*"We can live with them but not with all because of the gap that happened between us and them, and ISIL was the reason behind creating this gap. Because they accused us for opening the houses of Christians for [internally displaced people] from the surrounding villages during ISIL's incidents, looting and using properties of Christians. But all of these charges are not correct."*

*(young woman, Tall Kayf)*

When considering generational differences, there is a marked difference in opinions between the youngest and the oldest generations (see Figure 3 Views on peaceful coexistence, by age group). Nearly half of those aged 15–32 (n176) have a positive stance towards peaceful coexistence, compared to 7.18% of those aged 61–75 years (n28).

Interaction levels between different social components in the research area is limited. Approximately half of those surveyed had personally interacted socially or economically with people from different faiths or ethnicities in the previous three months. Only 17.7% had experienced any support from people of different faiths or ethnicities in the previous 12 months. This lack of interaction is explained by limited inter-group trust, compounded by the relatively large segregation of different communities.

### Civic participation

A feeling of total exclusion from community decision-making processes is more acute among women (60%) than men (49%) (see Figure 4). The generational gap is, however, much wider on this issue. Unsurprisingly perhaps, there is an inverse correlation between age and inclusion; the younger the person, the more excluded they feel (see Table 5). Considering the magnitude of the problem (53.6% of the survey respondents do not feel included in community decision-making at all), civic participation (or a lack thereof) emerges as a significant hindrance to social cohesion.

Figure 3 Views on peaceful coexistence, by age group

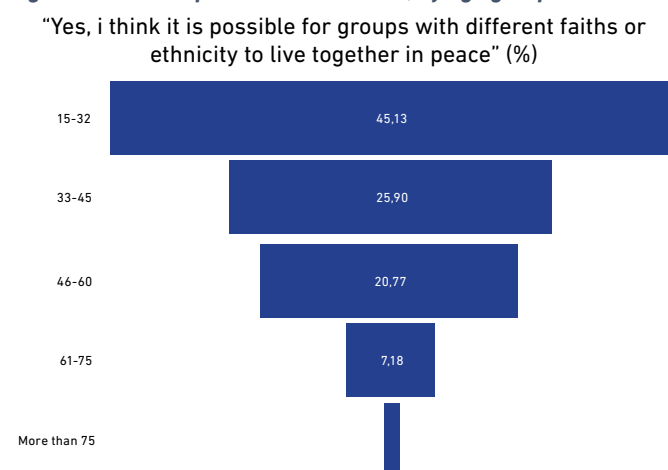


Figure 4 Perceptions of inclusion in community decision-making

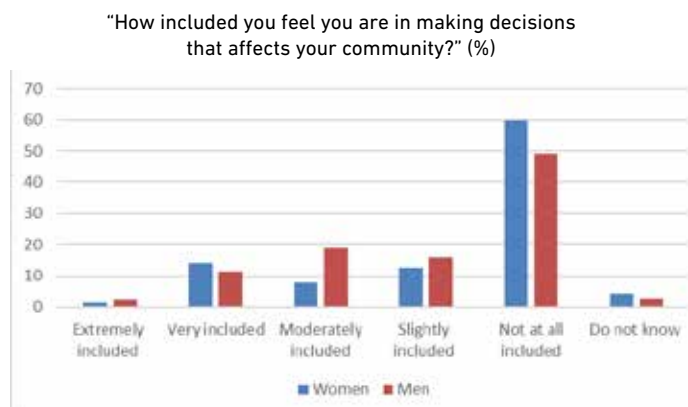


Table 5 Age difference in feelings of inclusion in community matters

	N	Age (median)	SD
'I feel extremely included'	12	50 years old	9.3
'I feel very included'	75	43 years old	13.8
'I don't feel included at all'	321	32 years old	14.9

### Enabling social cohesion

#### Actors

Research participants regard several types of actors as having a role to play in building a more cohesive society (see Table 6). Paramount among these actors are authorities and government institutions, both in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and the Iraqi central government. As duty-bearer, the state has a multi-faceted responsibility towards citizens, from generating job opportunities to providing services (security, education, health clinics, etc.). Government authorities are also perceived as norm-setters in social cohesion, in separating religion from politics and in promoting a culture of peace and respect for all social components. Religious leaders and tribal sheikhs are also among the three types of social cohesion actors most commonly cited by research participants.

This general ranking of these types of actors obscures a far more complex reality, which is unveiled when disaggregating the data. Men and women have strikingly different opinions about these actors, as do inhabitants of the various surveyed communities and the younger and older generations. Women are more sceptical about the social cohesion role of traditional and religious authorities (religious leaders, mukhtars and tribal sheikhs) than men. In the household survey responses, this difference is as high as 10 percentage points.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Women are more positive towards authorities and government institutions than men when it comes to feeling they have a role to play in social cohesion, but the

There are significant differences between responses from Sinune and the other areas in relation to two types of actors: the UN and NGOs (cited by 42.1% and 26.4% of Sinune respondents respectively as having a role in social cohesion). When survey results for Sinune are excluded from the analysis, the UN drops from fourth to eighth place in the ranking of social cohesion actors. The emphasis placed on the UN in Sinune relates to widespread support for justice for Yezidi people and calls for on-the-ground protection. At the same time, the support in Sinune for religious actors as forces for social cohesion is lower than in the other research areas. Another significant geographic variation relates to support for tribal sheikhs: the overall support rate for this group would have been higher had it not been for Talskuf, where the support is as low as 3.2%.

As for perceptions by age group, there are clear trends in beliefs that authorities, religious leaders and tribal sheikhs have a role in social cohesion. The older a person is, the more likely they are to think religious leaders have a role in social cohesion – and the less likely they are to think authorities and tribal sheikhs have a role in this. (see figure 5<sup>17</sup>)

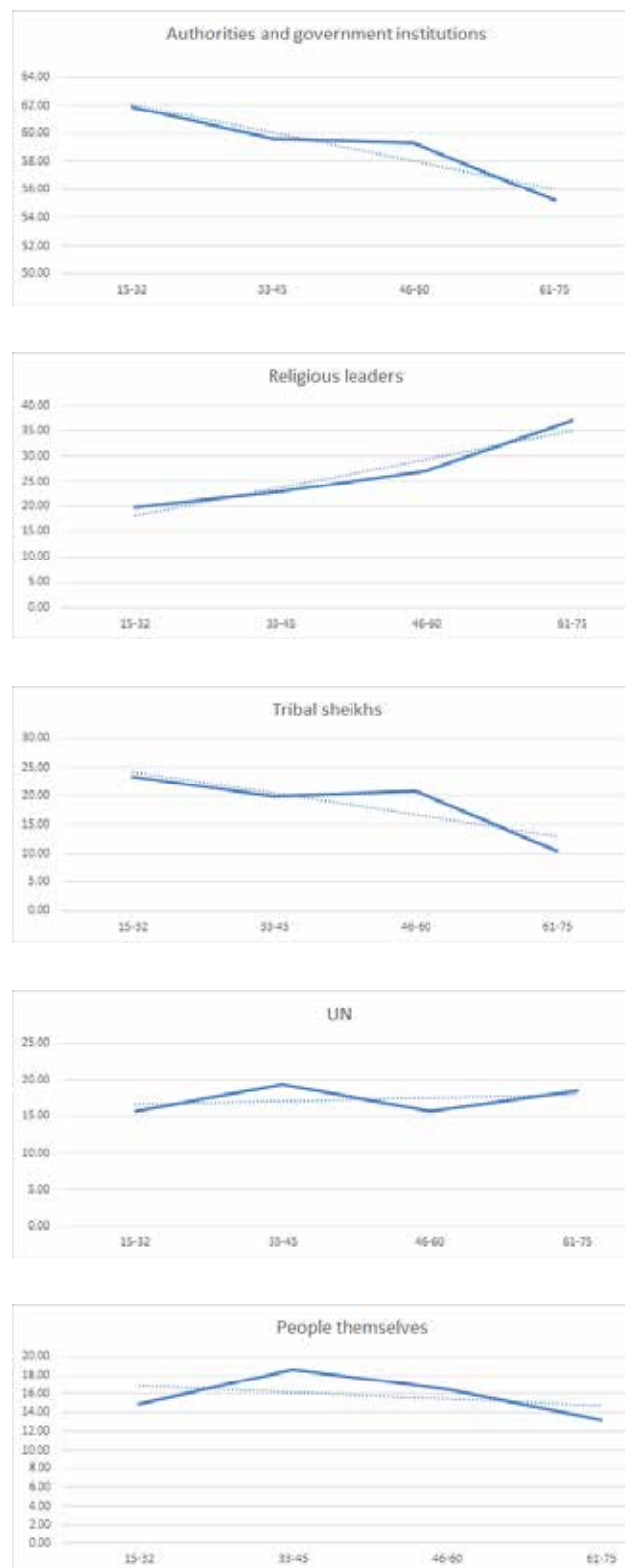
There is a very strong positive correlation ( $r = .91$ ) between believing that authorities and government institutions and tribal sheikhs have a role in social cohesion. When the belief that authorities are actors in social cohesion increases (or decreases), so does belief in the role of tribal sheikhs. An explanation could lie in how authorities are defined by respondents, which may include tribal authorities.

A second, less pronounced but still strong, correlation exists between authorities and religious actors, negative in this case ( $r = -.57$ ). Survey respondents' belief that authorities play a role in social cohesion is in part inversely proportional to their belief that religious actors have a role in this.

Religious leaders have the power to influence people's mindsets through prayers and sermons, promoting peaceful coexistence and spreading a message of respect towards different components of society. That said, there is wide suspicion (an even open anger) among respondents at the role some of these actors have played in the past – they are perceived as hate instigators, advocates of sectarianism and forces against peace. As became evident during the focus groups, recent experiences before and during ISIL's conflict have led many people to call for a secularisation of the public domain, leaving religious beliefs to the private sphere.

*"An incident happened in front of our eyes, when ISIL entered Mosul City in June, tensions took place in the area which led to [a] lack of services such as water and electricity. A priest*

**Figure 5 Perceptions on different actors' roles in social cohesion, by age group**



difference (3.7 percentage points) is within the survey margin of error.

17 Responses from survey respondents older than 75 years were not counted (six responses only).

**Table 6 Social cohesion actors**

Actor	Percentage of support
Authorities and government institutions	59.9%
Religious actors	23.2%
Tribal sheikhs	20.7%
UN	16.8%
People themselves	16.2%
NGOs	12.8%
Mukhtars	6.6%
Young people	4.8%
Other	4.8%
Civil activists of various types	4.3%

*provided the area with a water tank. There was a cross sign on this water tank in order for the people of the area to get benefit from this, regardless of their difference. Then a Mullah deleted this sign. This led to the withdrawal of this tank..., which negatively affected the families and people who were left without water... We don't want religious leaders, and through ISIL we discovered that the religious leaders are the source of sectarianism."*

*(young woman, focus group discussion, Tall Kayf)*

While their influence is not under question, the private agendas of religious actors are part of the note of caution many respondents attach to references to religious actors as forces for peace. In terms of constraints to religious actors' potential social cohesion work, respondents also refer to the fractionalisation of religious groups and personal security concerns for people who dare to speak out against ISIL's ideology.

While young people are not among the most commonly mentioned actors in the household survey, they emerge as a relevant factor for cohesion within and between communities, from interviews, focus groups and the analysis of social cohesion deficits and needs. Their participation in social cohesion is emphasised by young people themselves, linked with gaining the agency and empowerment to participate in community matters. To make this happen, young people themselves recognise the need for teaming up with those who can help eliminate some of the barriers to social cohesion (e.g. authorities, and local and international civil society organisations). Research participants provided examples of concrete actions towards social cohesion undertaken by young people. In Tall Kayf, for example, young people have formed inter-ethno and inter-religious groups on social media to defuse tensions:

*"Robberies are happening currently in the area. These youths go out and do guard duty and they call youths from different components to join them through social media."*

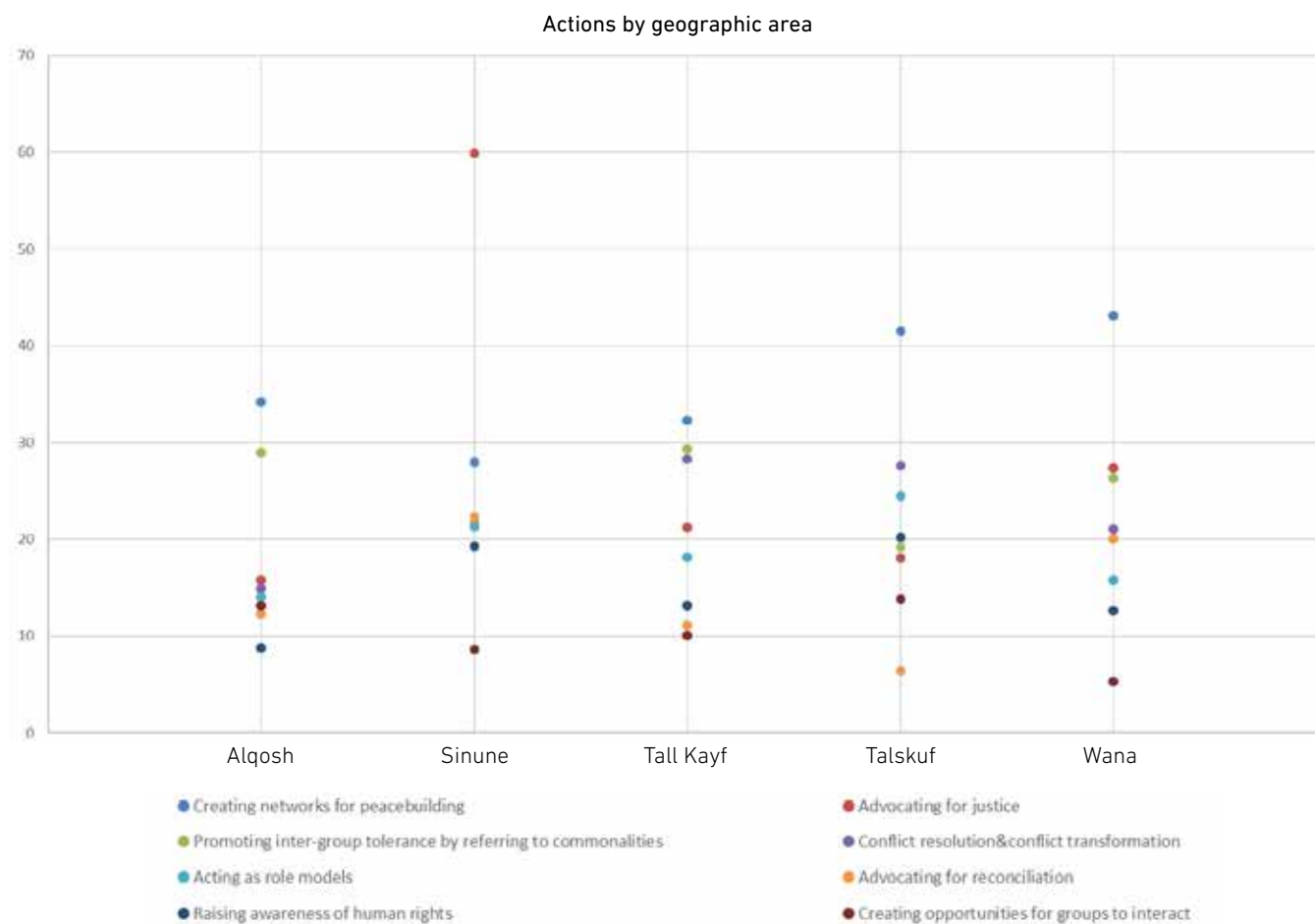
*(young woman, focus group discussion, Tall Kayf)*

**Figure 6 Potential actions by social cohesion actors cited by survey respondents**

### What can these actors do



Figure 7 Actions by social cohesion actors, disaggregated by area



### What social cohesion actors can do

The example above illustrates one of the many ways that local actors can – and do – contribute to social cohesion, by joining forces across ethno-religious divides around issues that affect the community as a whole. Creating networks for peacebuilding (i.e. collaboration among individuals committed to peace across ethno-religious groups) was the local action most commonly mentioned by survey respondents (34.4%) (see Figure 6 Actions by social cohesion actors).

Some of these actions are easily connected with specific actors (i.e. religious actors act as role models). Consistent with some findings related to social cohesion needs and actors, there are also some geographic differences in this regard (see Figure 7 Actions by social cohesion actors, disaggregated by area). In Alqosh, five activity types are clustered as they were mentioned by 12–15% of survey respondents, while in other areas there is more dispersion. Advocating for justice is an outlier in Sinune, with respondent mentions that are more than 30 percentage points higher than the next action.

Study respondents believe that the local Arab Shammar

tribe – which did not join ISIL – can work as mediators and resources in a process where relations are being restored between Muslims and Yezidis. But court cases against war criminals (ISIL members and some members from the neighbouring communities) must take place before this can happen.

### Connectors

Shared history and the desire to live in peace are the two main connectors linking all components of Iraqi society across ethno-religious lines. By and large, shared history (54.2% of survey responses) is a connector irrespective of gender and geographic location. The desire to live in peace (41.24% of survey responses) is heavily affected by people’s experience of ISIL conflict. In Sinune, the percentage of respondents citing the desire to live in peace as a social connector drops to 20.3%. Similarly, men in all areas are more inclined to define the desire to live in peace as a connector than women are (a seven-point percentage difference). Other connectors where broad consensus exists include shared resources (such as land or geography, cited by 20.8% of respondents), the sense of

Table 7 Actions to improve neighbourhood peace, by area<sup>18</sup>

	Alqosh	Sinune	Tall Kayf	Talskuf	Wana
Increase employment opportunities	71.93%	64.47%	97.78%	73.40%	74.74%
Peace education	37.72%	20.30%	42.22%	37.23%	33.68%
Equity (political, economic & social)	18.42%	50.25%	16.67%	27.66%	16.84%
Increase the role of young people in conflict resolution	18.42%	16.75%	25.56%	17.02%	32.63%
Create spaces and activities for interaction among groups (sports, arts, etc.)	11.40%	12.18%	8.89%	14.89%	15.79%

responsibility towards society (mentioned by 13.6%) and national laws and legislation (referenced by 8.6%).

### Actions

Community members in the research communities describe trust building as the most necessary action for the various components of Iraqi society to be in solidarity and support each other (mentioned by 61.4% of the survey respondents). What trust building means varies from individual to individual and – to a certain extent – from area to area, as outlined above. From the analysis of the survey responses and statistically significant correlations between them, it is possible to identify activities perceived as associated with trust building:

- Sensitise community leaders ( $r = .80$ )
- Not considering social affiliations in projects and social activities ( $r = .57$ )
- Develop the capacity of individuals to enter dialogue with those from other backgrounds ( $r = .48$ )
- Enhance communication between different groups ( $r = .14$ )

Together with trust building, the top five of necessary social cohesion actions mentioned in survey responses are: promote the spirit of tolerance (cited by 28.3% of respondents), social interaction (24.8%), make communities more (ethno-religiously) homogeneous (24.7%) and sensitise community leaders (16.6%).<sup>19</sup>

Community members were asked about what they think would make their neighborhood better in relation to peace and conflict. Table 7 outlines the most commonly mentioned intervention areas.

Similar answers were given in the focus group discussions, especially those on reducing unemployment and the role of young people. When asked about suggested

actions, community members repeated points about:

- Security and non-discrimination (in Sinune focus groups)
- Reducing hate speech by religious leaders (Alqosh focus groups)
- Accountability and justice (Sinune and Wana focus groups)
- The return of internally displaced people (Sinune and Tall Kayf focus groups)

Other social components were also mentioned, particularly in discussions in Tall Kayf. Also in Tall Kayf, explicit mentions were made of the need to change people's perceptions of families who lived under ISIL, "to make them understand that they had no choice, only to stay in Tall Kayf, and they don't belong to ISIL". (young man, focus group discussion, Tall Kayf)

<sup>18</sup> Multi-responses were permitted.

<sup>19</sup> There were no major geographic differences. The standard deviation in all cases is within a range of 0.7 and 2.9 points, except for "promote the spirit of tolerance" (4.5 points).



### *A glimpse into social cohesion programmes by civil society organisations*

Even though this study did not have a primary objective to systematically investigate what type of social cohesion interventions have been carried out in Nineveh Governorate, interviews and focus group discussions conducted during the research gave a valuable insight into this theme. Some examples of bottom-up activities have been mentioned already (i.e. young people using social media). Local and international civil society organisations have supported social cohesion activities in the locations covered in this study at various points in time, but not in all areas and not necessarily in a sustained manner.

Some of the shortcomings of these interventions derived from interviews<sup>20</sup> and group discussions with community members include:

- *Focusing on just one or several aspects of social cohesion without taking a holistic perspective:* For example, increasing knowledge of ‘the other’ is not always done in combination with a focus on mental health, or working with religious actors at a national or regional level may occur without connecting with the local reality. Moreover, social cohesion is often narrowly defined and ignores work within communities. In Tall Kayf, young people questioned joint activities like planting trees if those were not complemented with sustained direct action on sectarianism and value systems through peace education.
- *Context insensitivity and implementor arrogance:* Informants referred to pre-assembled interventions based on a pre-established idea of what was needed and not on thorough contextual analysis and community consultation. Several informants mentioned the complexity of the landscape of religious actors and tribal relations in Iraq. These types of self-portrayed social cohesion interventions revolved mainly around short-term workshops and isolated activities. An example of context and conflict insensitivity was shared in a focus group discussion, referring to NGOs asking locals whether they were Sunni or Shia Muslims.
- *Short-termism, isolation and lack of follow-up actions:* Even when the local context has informed project design, some community level social cohesion interventions only last for a short period – as little as one week. Examples included a four-month project with young people from different social components with job creation as an umbrella for social cohesion and small mixed groups of young people visiting holy sites and learning about each other’s religion as a one-off activity.
- *Limited transparency:* Especially on how a programme’s location was chosen or project participants recruited.
- *Lack of training and qualified staff on social cohesion.*
- *Lack of coordination and collaboration among social cohesion actors.*
- *Peacebuilding work in social cohesion clothes:* Some of the activities labelled as social cohesion are in fact part of the peacebuilding efforts that flourished in Iraq from 2006–2007 onwards, with little adaptation to meet current social cohesion needs.

<sup>20</sup> Interviews with Iraqi and international civil society organisations working in Nineveh. Many of these organisations also work in other parts of Iraq.

## LEVERAGING SOCIAL COHESION: FINAL REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Social cohesion deficits are visible in all of the Iraqi communities surveyed. There are, however, differences between and within specific communities. In spite of various sources of tensions, there is an overall feeling of safety among community members, who expect security conditions to stay the same or improve in the near future. Young people are a positive force for social cohesion common to all districts covered by this research.

Community members have different stances on religion and social cohesion, which are not mutually exclusive. To some extent there is a desire to relegate religion to the private sphere, to de-emphasise its significance in public discourse and politics. In this view, removing religion from the public arena would open space for building bridges across social components. It is understandable that this comes as a reaction to recent brutality by ISIL as well as painful direct experience of the 'enemy next door' – betrayal by neighbours, which also predates ISIL. In the words of a woman from Alqosh, "humans were created before religion and humans should come before religious considerations".

This standpoint coexists with a line of thought that focuses on religion as an actor for societal peace. This does not necessarily dispute the need to downplay religion in public affairs, but it concedes that religion does play a role in today's Iraq. Against that backdrop, it calls for changes in teaching practices and the curriculum to reflect the ethno-religious mosaic of Iraq and to make sure that religious literacy does not promote hate. Furthermore, respondents holding this view welcome working with religious leaders as forces for social cohesion, spreading peace and reconciliation and acting as role models in their constituencies. There is, however, a cautionary note about engaging religious leaders in social cohesion. In people's minds, religious leaders are not necessarily neutral nor truly committed to peaceful coexistence. The 'religious landscape' is no less than a minefield. Adding to that, women are much more sceptical of religious leaders than men, something cohesion stakeholders should note and investigate further when designing their interventions.

As the data shows, some geographic differences exist, likely related to experiences of the ISIL conflict and the population demographics in these areas. Similarly, there are marked generational differences in important dimensions of social cohesion, for better (e.g. young people's openness to the possibility of peaceful coexistence) or worse (e.g. their feelings of exclusion from decision-making). While there is no single pathway to extremism, feelings of exclusion play a part. So do narratives dehumanising 'the other' and legitimising the use of violence. Unemployment hits young people and their hopes for the future, increasing their vulnerability to violent behaviour and recruitment into armed groups. At the same time, young people are positive about the future and a key actor in helping to bring about social cohesion. Young people emerge as a connector across social groups, a positive force to create networks for peacebuilding.

For many people in Iraq, formal education came to a halt the moment ISIL took control of their area. Moreover, education in a broader sense is often invoked as a solution to the mistrust, hate and conflicts that affect the country. The conflicts of today can only be transformed, the argument goes, by turning the spotlight on the next generation and how they are taught about 'the other' in school, at home and by religious actors.

Bringing justice for victims of ISIL remains a critical social cohesion need, especially among people from areas seized by ISIL. For example, research respondents from Sinune believe peaceful coexistence cannot be achieved in without retributive justice. The prospects for success in social cohesion programmes ignoring this reality are dim. There are also clear demands for restorative measures including public acknowledgement and compensation for the harm inflicted by ISIL.

Some of these considerations underscore connections between social cohesion at local, regional and national levels in Iraq. At the local level, there is room for knowledge and skills generation – on social cohesion values and principles, life skills, human rights and conflict transformation, to mention a few. This should be done with actions to create opportunities for safe interaction between individuals and groups around common interests and joint goals. Community leaders have a responsibility towards the groups they claim to represent.





### *Programming recommendations*

The following recommendations are drawn from the findings of this study:

- 1. Recognise and support transitional justice efforts.** Both retributive and restorative justice measures are needed in the research communities. Transitional justice efforts must account for existing geographic differences. Such differences are to a large degree explained by ISIL's control over certain locations and its persecution of specific groups, the process of retaking those areas and population demographics. In early 2019, Sinune appears to be the most challenging location for social cohesion and inter-group contact of the sort facilitated by civil society organisations. The area needs some form of retributive justice and accountability process facilitated by duty bearers before social cohesion initiatives can succeed.
- 2. Rebuild social capital and trust with a long-term and multi-actor perspective inclusive of youth.** While acknowledging geographic differences, the best way to improve social cohesion in the study area is by building networks of young people from different ethno-religious groups. Community-level social cohesion programmes should facilitate physical and virtual spaces for young people's constructive interaction and positive collective action in community matters, combining practical social cohesion and peacebuilding knowledge and skills development with local connectors (e.g. shared identity). Social cohesion training should be paired with other services and activities co-created and facilitated by young people themselves, which include empowerment components and consider the links between livelihoods and mental health.
- 3. Engage religious leaders carefully.** Religious leaders are important actors in social cohesion but are not equally trusted by all segments of Iraqi society. In addition to acknowledging differences in age and gender, social cohesion programmers should consider the diverse views within communities on the role of religion in social cohesion. Furthermore, programmers should conduct a detailed stakeholder analysis as the basis for an action plan that includes different types and degrees of engagement by religious leaders.
- 4. Consider internal group dynamics.** Social cohesion actions – irrespective of the form they take – should also consider the internal harmful and positive dynamics within each social component, along with generational and gender divides. Furthermore, the timeframe for such support cannot be limited to a few months but requires an underlying mid- or long-term plan.
- 5. Strengthen state responsiveness.** Empowering community members and involving civil society actors must be accompanied by a focus on the state as duty bearer to address powerful drivers of conflict. The state must make itself present, representative of and responsible for all components of society, enforcing democratic principles and the rule of law.
- 6. Counter hate and dehumanising narratives of 'the other'.** Exclusionary constructs of the Iraqi national identity and the dehumanisation of social groups in the public sphere (in schools, the media and places of worship) must be monitored and countered as part of a comprehensive effort to delegitimise destructive ideologies. Peace education should be incorporated into education materials and learning tools at all levels.

## ANNEXES

### Annex 1: Household survey and focus group discussions distribution

District	Sub-district / area	Village	# Households surveyed	# Focus group discussions
Sinjar	Sinune	Sinune	19	4 (men, young men, young women)
		Dohla	14	2 (men, young women)
		Girshabak	14	-
		Hardan	16	-
		Borak	16	-
		Bakra	11	-
		Bayvay	16	-
		Doggire	10	-
		Adeeka	15	-
		Baleef	9	-
		Gohbal	15	-
		Zorava	12	-
			Golat	30
<b>Subtotal</b>			<b>197</b>	<b>8</b>
Tall Kayf	Tall Kayf	Tall Kayf centre	97	6 (men, women, young men, young women)
		Wana	97	5 (men, women, young men, young women)
		Talskuf	94	4 (men, women, young men, young women)
	Alqosh	Alqosh	8	4 (men, women, young men, young women)
		Jambur	45	4 (women, men, young women)
		Sarechka	20	5 (men, women, young men, young women)
		Badrya	37	-
		Bandawaya	2	-
		Bozan	2	-
<b>Subtotal</b>			<b>402</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Total</b>			<b>599</b>	<b>36</b>

## Annex 2: Household survey – Respondent profiles

Sex	Count	%
1. Female	248	41.40
2. Male	351	58.60
<i>Total</i>	<i>599</i>	
Marital status	Count	%
1. Single	127	21.20
2. Married	447	74.62
3. Separated /divorced	3	0.50
4. Widow/er	22	3.67
<i>Total</i>	<i>599</i>	
Is the respondent the head of the household?		
	Count	%
1. Yes	355	59.27
<i>Female</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>40.32</i>
<i>Male</i>	<i>255</i>	<i>72.65</i>
2. No	244	40.73
<i>Female</i>	<i>148</i>	<i>59.68</i>
<i>Male</i>	<i>96</i>	<i>27.35</i>
Average household members		
	8	
What is the estimated household income? <sup>21</sup> (in Iraqi Dinars)		
Mean	1,381,288,82	
Median	427,500,00	
Standard deviation	5,389,339,61	

Occupation of the respondent	Count	%
<i>Female</i>	<i>248</i>	
<i>Homemaker</i>	<i>174</i>	<i>70.16</i>
<i>No occupation</i>	<i>30</i>	<i>12.1</i>
<i>Student in school</i>	<i>16</i>	<i>6.45</i>
<i>Public sector employee</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>4.03</i>
<i>Other</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>2.82</i>
<i>Private sector employee</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>2.42</i>
<i>Daily worker</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>1.21</i>
<i>Teacher</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>0.81</i>
<i>Male</i>	<i>351</i>	
<i>Daily worker</i>	<i>99</i>	<i>28.21</i>
<i>No occupation</i>	<i>81</i>	<i>23.08</i>
<i>Public sector employee</i>	<i>58</i>	<i>16.52</i>
<i>Other</i>	<i>53</i>	<i>15.09</i>
<i>Student in school</i>	<i>29</i>	<i>8.26</i>
<i>Private sector employee</i>	<i>14</i>	<i>3.99</i>
<i>Teacher</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>2.28</i>
<i>Mukhtar</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>1.99</i>
<i>Homemaker</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>0.57</i>
<i>Total</i>	<i>599</i>	

Have you been displaced from your home after the 2014 crisis?		
	Count	%
1. Yes	543	90.65
2. No	55	9.18
89. Refused to answer	1	
<i>Total</i>	<i>599</i>	

Total	542	
	Count	%
Less than 1 month	13	2.40
1–2 months	27	4.98
3–4 months	16	2.95
5–6 months	24	4.43
7–8 months	32	5.90
9–10 months	19	3.51
11 months to 1 year	22	4.06
More than 1 year	389	71.77

<sup>21</sup> N=420, excluding those who reported no income (36 respondents).

