

STRENGTHENING SOCIAL COHESION IN THE NINEVEH PLAINS OF IRAQ: ISSUES OF COMMON CONCERN AND LOCAL COOPERATIVE SOLUTIONS

AMAL BOURHROUS, EMELIE POIGNANT KHAFAGI AND ALAA TARTIR*

I. Introduction

Nineveh is one of the most ethnically and culturally diverse regions of Iraq, home to Arab, Christian (Assyrian, Chaldean, Syriac), Kaka'i, Kurd, Shabak, Turkmen and Yazidi communities.¹ When the Islamic State was in control of the region between 2014 and 2017, it sought to destroy the diversity and pluralism of Nineveh by targeting ethnic and religious communities and their ways of life. The Islamic State was eventually defeated, but the traumatic experience of its occupation of the Nineveh Plains has severely undermined the already fragile social cohesion in the region. It has eroded the social bonds that make living together possible and exacerbated tensions and distrust between communities.

Because the Islamic State targeted people's cultures and ways of life, Nineveh's diverse communities have felt the need to preserve their identities, traditions and cultural heritage. However, perceptions of threats to cultural identity have also often led to community insulation and resulted in social fragmentation. Expressions of cultural identity have thus occasionally become a source of intercommunity tension and dispute. Furthermore, social cohesion in the Nineveh Plains has suffered from the ongoing struggle between the Iraqi government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) for authority over disputed territories (see figure 1). The authorities in Baghdad and Erbil respectively have tried to get minority groups on their side and gain their loyalty. Conflicting loyalties and diverging political preferences have therefore aggravated tensions between minority groups, and sometimes even within the same group. Additionally, the multiplicity of security actors affiliated with either the Iraqi government or the KRG present in the region constitutes one of the main reasons why communities feel insecure.

SUMMARY

- When the Islamic State was in control of the Nineveh Plains of Iraq between 2014 and 2017, it sought to destroy the region's cultural diversity by targeting ethnic and religious communities and their ways of life. This has severely undermined social cohesion in the region. Mending intercommunity relations is therefore a peacebuilding priority. For peacebuilding to be sustainable, however, the engagement of community members is crucial. This SIPRI Research Policy Paper highlights some of the issues of common concern to communities in the Nineveh Plains and presents local cooperative solutions proposed by community members during intercommunity dialogue meetings. With adequate support from the relevant national and international actors, they offer opportunities for inclusive peacebuilding driven and owned by local communities and anchored in their everyday life.

¹ It is important to note that group designations are subject to debate. E.g. some people consider 'Assyrian' to encompass all Christians in Iraq, including Chaldeans and Syriacs, whereas others consider 'Christian' to be the broader term. This project uses the latter, as many research participants have used it to identify themselves or to refer to their group.

* This SIPRI Research Policy Paper is a deliverable of a broader project on 'Developing Local Peacebuilding Capacity in Nineveh', generously funded by the Robert Bosch Stiftung and implemented in partnership with the Al-Tahreer Association for Development (TAD).

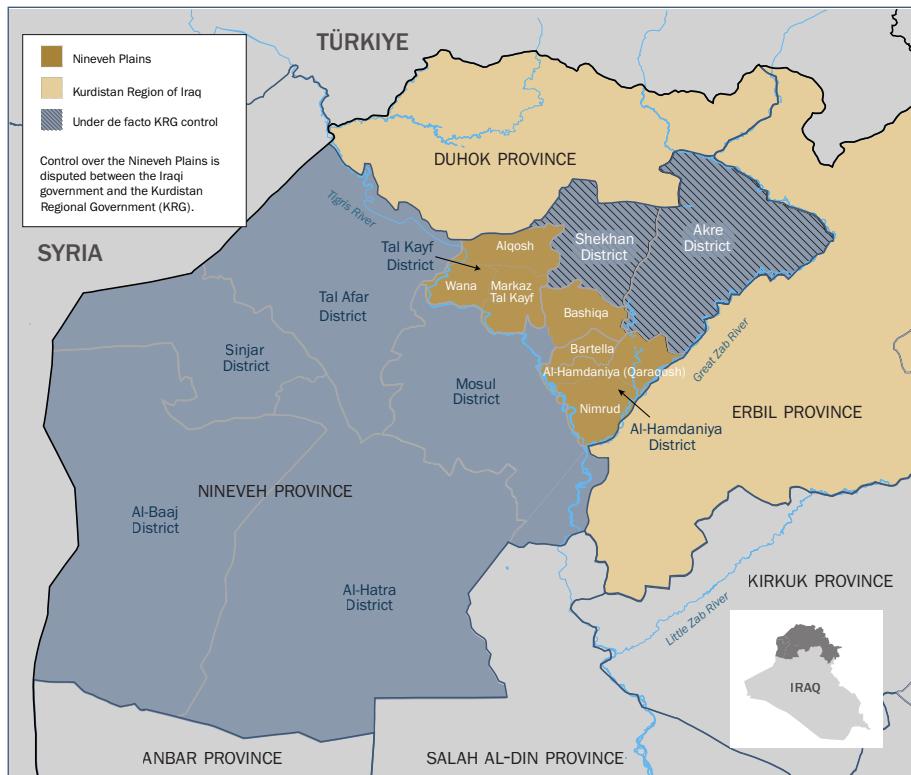


Figure 1. Map of Nineveh province and the Nineveh Plains

Source: SIPRI.

Mending relations between communities and strengthening social cohesion is a priority for peacebuilding in the Nineveh Plains. While political and economic elites and community leaders have a role to play in peacebuilding and reconciliation, the sustainability of these processes is contingent on the engagement of the members of the communities themselves.² Greater cooperation between people from different communities on shared issues has the potential to build relationships and create better understanding of different world views, positionalities, cultures and traditions.³ This in turn has the potential to go beyond individuals and spill over to the community level, improving relations between communities and contributing to nurturing social cohesion.⁴

Many of the tensions and issues

of concern are local in nature and grounded in everyday life. Some of these issues can arguably be addressed through intercommunity dialogue and cooperation, with adequate support from community leaders and local policymakers, as well as assistance from external actors.

This SIPRI Research Policy Paper highlights some of the issues of common concern to ethnic and religious communities in the Nineveh Plains following the defeat of the Islamic State. It is part of a broader project on 'Developing Local Peacebuilding Capacity in Nineveh', which aims to understand local perceptions of coexistence between communities and to identify areas in which intercommunity dialogue and cooperation are possible.⁵ This paper is primarily based on findings from a household survey with 696 respondents and interviews with 42 community members and leaders, conducted between February and April 2022. Data collection took place in the districts

² Donais, T., *Peacebuilding and Local Ownership: Post-Conflict Consensus-Building* (Routledge: London, 2012).

³ Bourhous, A. and O'Driscoll, D., 'Everyday peace in the Ninewa Plains, Iraq: Culture, rituals, and community interactions', *Cooperation and Conflict*, vol. 58, no. 4 (Dec. 2023).

⁴ On everyday acts of peace, see Mac Ginty, R., 'Everyday peace: Bottom-up and local agency in conflict-affected societies', *Security Dialogue*, vol. 45, no. 6 (Dec. 2014); O'Driscoll, D., 'Everyday peace and conflict: (Un)privileged interactions in Kirkuk, Iraq', *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 42, no. 10 (2021); and Ware, A. and Ware, V.-A., 'Everyday peace: Rethinking typologies of social practice and local agency', *Peacebuilding*, vol. 10, no. 3 (2022).

⁵ The project was led by the SIPRI Middle East and North Africa Programme in partnership with the Al-Tahreer Association for Development, with funding from the Robert Bosch Stiftung. The joint project team facilitated over 40 issue-based community dialogues in the Nineveh Plains in 2022 and 2023, particularly in Al-Hamdaniya, Tal Kayf and Bashiqqa. For more information, see 'SIPRI and its partner organize community dialogues in Iraq', 23 Sep. 2023.

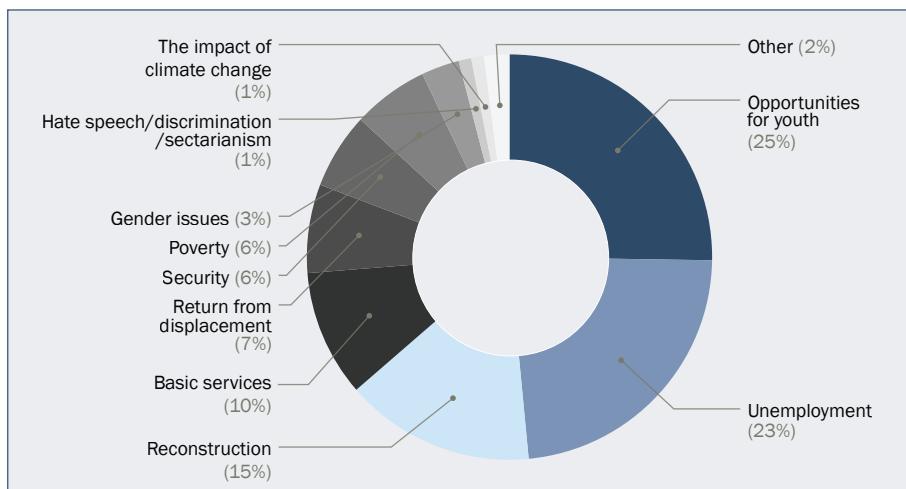


Figure 2. Most concerning issues for people in the Nineveh Plains

Note: Participants could provide more than one response.

Source: SIPRI and TAD, Household survey, Nineveh Plains, Feb.–Apr. 2022

of Al-Hamdaniya and Tal Kayf, and the Bashiqa subdistrict of Mosul. In addition to seeking gender balance, a controlled quota sampling technique was used to ensure (as far as possible) proportional representation of the ethno-sectarian groups and a balanced geographical representation throughout the data collection process, based on estimated population sizes, in the absence of official census data.⁶

The paper also builds on the proceedings of 22 local community dialogues, organized between June and December 2022. These meetings brought together community members and leaders to discuss research findings and create space for participants from the different ethnic and religious groups to share their experiences, as well as to discuss and develop concrete local cooperative solutions to address some of the issues of common concern. The community dialogues were facilitated by the Tahreer Association for Development (TAD), while research for the broader project was jointly conducted by SIPRI and TAD.

II. Issues of common concern in the Nineveh Plains

Unemployment and opportunities for youth

Unemployment and opportunities for youth are by far the most important issues of common concern facing communities in the Nineveh Plains. Among the respondents to the household survey, 25 per cent viewed opportunities for youth as the most pressing issue to them and to their communities, and 23 per cent viewed unemployment as a major problem (see figure 2). These two issues are also clearly connected, as the lack of opportunities for youth

⁶ When conducting surveys, it is important to draw a sample that is, as far as possible, representative of the population. However, in conflict and post-conflict settings, data on the composition of the population may not be available or can be misleading. In addition, a randomized sampling technique can under-represent the voices of minority groups. Quota sampling can be used to ensure that the diversity of the population is reflected in the sample, by dividing the population into subgroups or strata based on certain demographic characteristics (e.g. age, gender, ethnic group). Quotas are then set for each subgroup, and participants are selected in a non-random manner until the quotas for each stratum are filled.

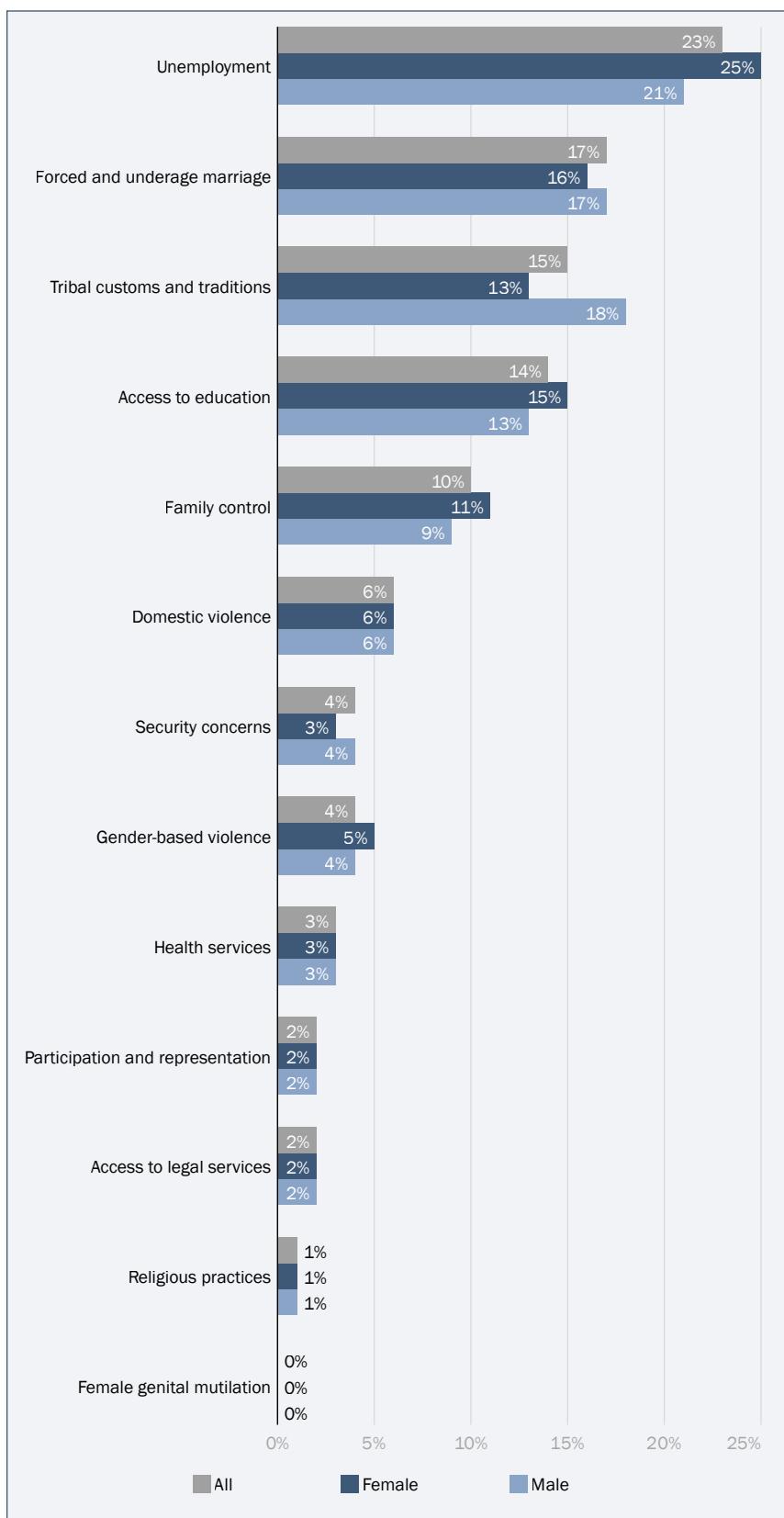


Figure 3. Perceptions of the most pressing issues affecting women and girls in the Nineveh Plains, by gender

Note: Participants could provide more than one response.

Source: SIPRI and TAD, Household survey, Nineveh Plains, Feb.–Apr. 2022

(e.g. access to education and vocational training) increases the likelihood of unemployment. There are some slight variations across localities, but the general trend is that unemployment and lack of opportunities for youth are the main concern for people in the Nineveh Plains.

As the interviews and community dialogues made clear, these challenges are very much gendered. Limited opportunities and rampant unemployment are believed to increase the likelihood of forced and/or early marriage for girls and young women, while among men these challenges are widely viewed as a key driver of migration. The tendency of young men to join security actors, including state and non-state armed groups, is also considered to be the result of limited opportunities and scarce employment. The increasing militarization of society that results from this perpetuates distrust and constitutes a threat to social cohesion. As one Kaka'i respondent explained, '[a major challenge is] the unemployment issue, within my component we have many graduated Kaka'i young men who became soldiers, police, and Peshmerga, and this is an unfortunate reality, because anyone can work within these organizations even uneducated people, unemployment is the reason that made them join these forces because there is no work'.⁷

The survey data also highlights some noteworthy differences between ethnic and religious groups as regards other pressing issues. For example, the availability of basic public services was a particularly important concern for Kurdish (22 per cent) and Turkmen (28 per cent) respondents (higher than the overall average of 10 per cent for all respondents). Similarly, the issue of security was a high priority

⁷ Kaka'i male from Qaraqosh, Al-Hamdaniya, Interview with enumerator, Mar. 2022.



for Yazidi and Christian respondents (11 per cent respectively) compared to other groups (6 per cent on average, 4 per cent respectively for Kaka'i and Shabak respondents, and not mentioned at all by Turkmen respondents). These variations are likely to be connected to the experience of Islamic State occupation, which was traumatic for all groups, but perhaps particularly so for Yazidis and Christians. They are also likely to be connected to the security dynamics in the region and the role of the different groups within organizations that provide security.

Challenges and opportunities for women and girls

Unemployment also comes first among the challenges facing women and girls in the Nineveh Plains. According to the survey results, 23 per cent of respondents indicated that unemployment is the most pressing problem affecting women in their community, with quite similar trends among female (25 per cent) and male (21 per cent) respondents (see figure 3).

In interviews and during community dialogues, the participants largely connected the issue of female unemployment to a range of other challenges confronting women and girls. In particular, they highlighted the role of conservative social norms in limiting the opportunities for women and girls in Nineveh. There is a widespread perception that the role of women consists primarily of performing domestic tasks, including raising children and taking care of the household.⁸ Widespread tendencies towards family control over women's conduct, presence and movement in the public space, together with the existence of certain conservative tribal traditions and customs, impose and perpetuate conservative gender roles that restrict women and girls' ability to access adequate education and receive professional training.

As a female Shabak teacher put it, 'many parents are not interested in educating their daughters, thinking that once they finish primary school, they will stay at home ... The girls are complaining to me. They tell me, Miss, we are not feeling good, once we finish the sixth grade, our parents will stop us from school and keep us at home'.⁹ Some participants also noted that while willingness to educate girls has generally increased in the past years, many girls are still forced to drop out, particularly those living in rural areas and remote villages where schools are lacking.

The disparities between urban and rural areas, particularly the unequal distribution of adequate education infrastructure, exacerbate these problems, as 'families are often reluctant to send girls to [distant] schools or cannot afford transportation ... most girls thus can only reach high school level'.¹⁰ Furthermore, even for those who complete their education, access to the job market remains constrained for women, as not all professions and sectors are open to them. The health and education sectors are viewed as the most appropriate for women, while jobs within, for example, security, politics, media and the diplomatic service are often out of reach. A female Yazidi respondent explained that 'they [the community] will help her get appointed as a teacher or a tutor, but if she desires another job, it is not acceptable. And if she tries to go beyond the boundaries of what is allowed,

⁸ Kaka'i female from Bashiqa, Interview with enumerator, Mar. 2022.

⁹ Shia Shabak female from Bartella, Interview with enumerator, Mar. 2022.

¹⁰ Shia Shabak female from Bartella, Interview with enumerator, Apr. 2022.

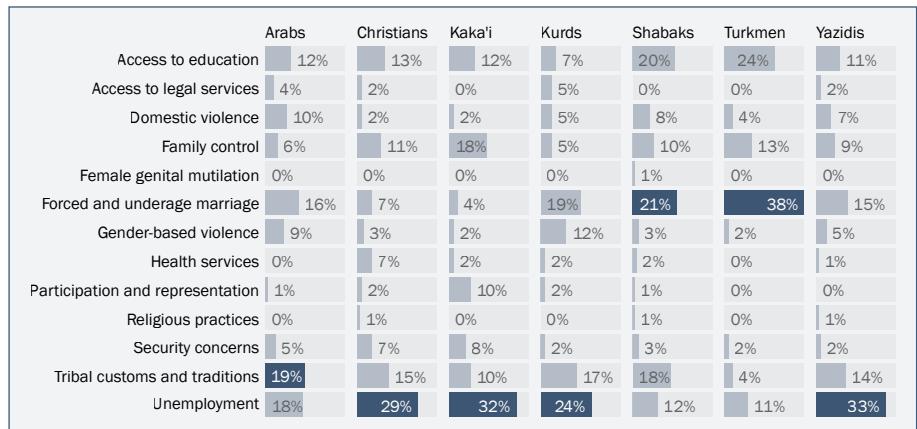


Figure 4. Perceptions of the most concerning issues affecting women and girls in the Nineveh Plains, by group

Note: Participants could provide more than one response.

Source: SIPRI and TAD, Household survey, Nineveh Plains, Feb.–Apr. 2022.

she will be considered [morally] bad. We all suffer from society's perceptions and such things'.¹¹

While the experience of these barriers and restrictions is shared by women and girls from all backgrounds in the Nineveh Plains, there are some differences in how the barriers are perceived to affect women within different ethnic and religious groups (see figure 4). For example, 38 per cent of Turkmen respondents considered forced and/or underage marriage to be the most concerning issue facing women and girls in their community, more than twice the overall average for all respondents (17 per cent), and far more than Christian and Kaka'i respondents (7 and 4 per cent respectively). However, tribal customs and traditions were perceived as a significant obstacle for women and girls by respondents from most groups but less so by Turkmen respondents (4 per cent).

These differences highlight the multidimensional nature of the issues facing women and girls in the Nineveh Plains. Although these issues are often intricately connected and unmistakably point to the generally more vulnerable situation of women across ethnic and religious groups, understanding which aspects are more relevant for which group can help identify the most effective approaches to bringing communities together to address common issues.

Hate speech, harassment and mistreatment

Harassment and hate speech constitute another issue of common concern for local communities in the Nineveh Plains. While the majority of survey respondents (57 per cent) reported that they had not been the victim of hate speech, those who reported having experienced it said the main source was social media (21 per cent), followed by direct verbal harassment from individuals (12 per cent). To a lesser extent, religious events and commemorations, media outlets, and political campaigns and propaganda were also perceived to be sources of hate speech.

¹¹ Yazidi female from Bashiqa, Interview with enumerator, Mar. 2022.

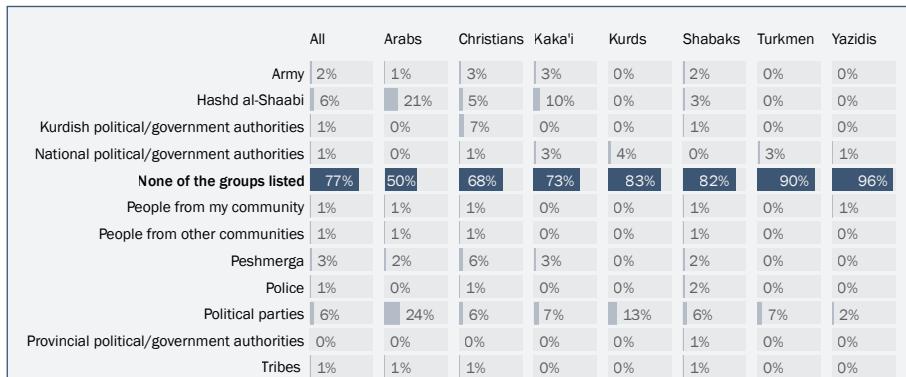


Figure 5. Perceptions of actors perpetrating harassment and/or mistreatment, by group

Note: Participants could provide more than one response.

Source: SIPRI and TAD, Household survey, Nineveh Plains, Feb.–Apr. 2022.

While 77 per cent of respondents said they had not experienced harassment and/or mistreatment, 6 per cent reported that they had been harassed by the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and political parties respectively (see figure 5). The share of respondents who reported facing harassment from these actors was higher among Arab respondents (24 per cent reported mistreatment by political parties, and 21 per cent by the PMF), while Christian respondents reported harassment from the Peshmerga (6 per cent, compared to the 3 per cent overall average), and Kurdish respondents reported harassment from the national authorities (4 per cent, compared to 1 per cent overall). Describing these issues, a Christian interviewee explained:

Relationships between Shabak, Arabs, Kaka'i, and Christians existed and still exist, but they have somewhat cooled after our return [from displacement]. But this happened because of individual cases, maybe caused by some party affiliates or undisciplined security members who might abuse citizens. Some people may wish for and await these problems to happen. Then this goes on social media, and if you open the comments section, you will find people insulting, fighting, accusing, and abusing each other.¹²

The impacts of climate change: Agriculture and environmental degradation

Findings from the survey show that climate change (with a mere 1 per cent) is not high on the list of the most concerning issues for respondents (see figure 2). However, when asked specifically about the aspects of climate change most affecting them and their communities, respondents emphasized droughts and the lack of rainfall (41 per cent), followed by health issues (16 per cent), increased temperatures (13 per cent) and food security (12 per cent) (see figure 6). There are also some variations in how the effects of climate change are experienced across localities. For example, within the district of Al-Hamdaniya, the share of respondents who perceived drought and lack of rainfall as having the biggest impact was highest in Nimrud (61 per cent) and lowest in Bartella (35 per cent). A possible explanation for this variation is that Nimrud is a largely agricultural area, whereas Bartella is an urban centre.

¹² Christian male from Qaraqosh, Al-Hamdaniya, Interview with enumerator, Apr. 2022.

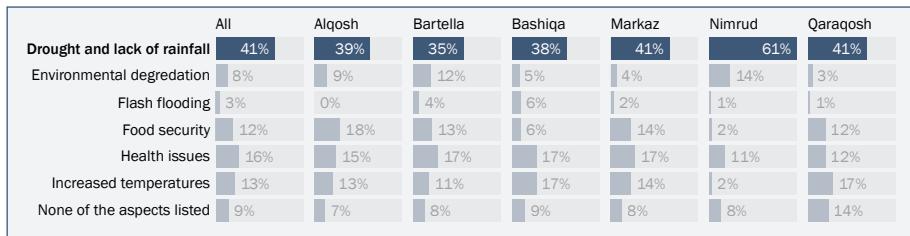


Figure 6. Aspects of climate change with the most impact on people in the Nineveh Plains, by locality

Note: Participants could provide more than one response.

Source: SIPRI and TAD, Household survey, Nineveh Plains, Feb.–Apr. 2022.

The fact that climate change is not high on the list of priorities may suggest that many respondents do not automatically associate droughts and limited rainfall with the wider phenomenon of climate change, because of limited awareness and knowledge. As one interviewee put it, ‘The majority in society does not have knowledge about climate change and its impacts, I myself don’t have sufficient knowledge despite being a civil society activist. Average citizens do not know, and that is why it is necessary to raise awareness about the effects of climate change’.¹³

The issue of climate awareness was also discussed at length during the community dialogues, where participants talked about how taking small everyday actions to save energy and water, sort waste, and reuse plastic and glass can help protect the environment and alleviate the impacts of climate change. There were also discussions about the important role of schools in raising awareness by educating children about climate change.

Moreover, many dialogue participants expressed deep concerns about the deleterious impact of water shortages and recurring droughts on farming activities in a region where agriculture is predominantly rainfed and lacks an adequate irrigation infrastructure to mitigate the repercussions of unreliable rainfall. As crop and livestock farming constitutes the main source of income for many households, the deterioration of agriculture in the Nineveh Plains seriously impacts people’s livelihoods. When seen through the lens of livelihood sustainability, it becomes clear that climate change is a significant challenge and a pressing concern for all communities in Nineveh: ‘If there is no rain, there will be no agriculture. And if the economic situation in the Nineveh Plains is bad, people will start to leave the area, either leaving the village for the city, or heading to Mosul, or heading to the region. Agriculture employs 70 to 80 percent of the population, and only a fraction are employees. So, we really depend on agriculture.’¹⁴

III. Intercommunity relations and attitudes towards cooperation and dialogue

Intercommunity relations in the Nineveh Plains remain fragile, as minorities are still reeling from the harrowing experience of Islamic State occupation, as well as the memory of suffering caused by decades of violence and persecution

¹³ Male Shabak community leader from Bashiqa, Interview with enumerator, Mar. 2022.

¹⁴ Arab Sunni male from Qaraqosh, Al-Hamdaniya, Interview with enumerator, Apr. 2022.



under the former Ba'athist regime. In post-Islamic State Nineveh, one of the main drivers of intercommunity tensions is the perception of unequal distribution of aid and unequal compensation for damages.¹⁵ According to one Yazidi respondent, his community suffered from 'injustice in compensations, maybe deliberately we don't know. There is injustice towards Bashiqa and its communities by Nineveh local government. Compensation is disproportionate to the scale of damage caused by theft and destruction'.¹⁶ Another threat to social cohesion in the region pertains to perceptions and narratives of demographic change, which have increasingly set communities against one another in recent years. Often pitting Shabaks against Christians, these narratives revolve around which communities have the right to reside in which areas, highlighting widespread fears of loss of cultural identity.

Despite these underlying issues and tensions, attitudes towards cooperation between the different ethnic and religious communities are generally positive, and there is an openness to collaborate with others to address issues of common concern. The survey results show that the vast majority of respondents consider the level of existing cooperation between communities to be very good (58 per cent) or good (41 per cent) (see figure 7). Research findings also show that while there is a strong tradition of cooperation in agriculture, business and trade, cooperation is largely lacking in other areas. To remedy this, many interview and dialogue participants called for strengthening cultural exchange and for greater cooperation in climate adaptation (e.g. through joint efforts to plant trees and protect the environment), while continuing to develop agricultural and commercial cooperation. Religious figures (28 per cent), tribal leaders (15 per cent) and local town officials (14 per cent) are widely perceived as constructive actors that can facilitate intercommunity cooperation.

IV. Local cooperative solutions to issues of common concern

During the community dialogues, a large number of the participants stressed that many of the issues confronting communities in the Nineveh Plains cannot be separated from the broader challenges of governance and political economy in Iraq, which require the implementation of strategic and far-reaching reforms. For example, some pointed to how Iraq's continued dependence on hydrocarbon resources and its lack of solid and ambitious diversification plans and policies worsen the impacts of climate change. This negatively affects farming and agriculture, which in turn undermines youth's ability to be part of the labour force and earn a living. Others mentioned the country's heavy reliance on the public sector and the deeply rooted expectations of employment in it, which debilitates the private sector and erodes the confidence and entrepreneurial spirit of Iraq's youth.

While recognizing the structural nature of many of these issues and challenges, participants maintained that there is still a space for cooperative, community-driven initiatives to address issues of common concern. No matter how seemingly small or modest their impact, such local initiatives may help alleviate some of the problems, while also potentially contributing

¹⁵ See also Bourhous A., Fazil, S. and O'Driscoll, D., *Post-conflict Reconstruction in the Nineveh Plains of Iraq: Agriculture, Cultural Practices and Social Cohesion* (SIPRI: Stockholm, Nov. 2022).

¹⁶ Yazidi male from Bashiqa, Interview with enumerator, Apr. 2022.

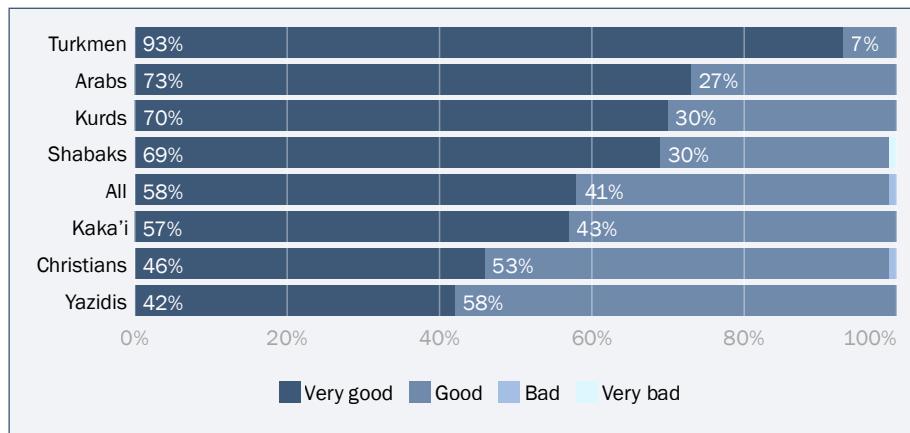


Figure 7. Perceptions of the state of intercommunity cooperation in the Nineveh Plains, by group

Source: SIPRI and TAD, Household survey, Nineveh Plains, Feb.–Apr. 2022.

to building peace and strengthening social cohesion in the Nineveh Plains. The following proposed initiatives are the product of the local community dialogues. With adequate support from the relevant Iraqi authorities, donors, and local and international non-governmental organizations, they offer opportunities for inclusive and sustainable peacebuilding that are developed and owned by local communities and firmly anchored in their everyday life.

Unemployment and opportunities for youth

- Organize training courses for youth to help them develop their capacities and skills (e.g. in marketing, entrepreneurship, information technology and foreign languages).
- Establish cultural centres open to youth from all ethnic and religious communities.
- Create online platforms for sharing employment and training opportunities in the region.
- Launch an advocacy campaign to reopen some of the local factories (e.g. olive oil factories) to create job opportunities that benefit youth.

Challenges and opportunities for women and girls

- Provide safe and affordable means of transportation (e.g. carpools) to facilitate women's and girls' access to education and employment opportunities.
- Conduct periodic workshops, dialogue sessions, school visits and awareness campaigns about women's rights.
- Create and support women's cooperatives to make and sell local, handmade and artisanal products.
- Create safe, women-only public spaces in which women and girls from different communities can access recreational activities.



Hate speech, harassment and mistreatment

- Launch awareness campaigns on social media to counter hate speech and dispel misconceptions about people's religious beliefs and customs, as well as to promote peace and coexistence in the region.
- Facilitate greater community interaction by organizing sports tournaments and public festivals in which people from all communities can participate.

The impacts of climate change: Agriculture and environmental degradation

- Plant trees and create community gardens and green spaces. Encourage people to plant trees in front of their houses by providing seedlings and nursery plants.
- Organize campaigns for schoolchildren to plant trees in various places, in coordination with district authorities.
- Provide agricultural extension training courses and share knowledge and information about best practices in farming and crop cultivation.

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SIPRI RESEARCH POLICY PAPER

STRENGTHENING SOCIAL COHESION IN THE NINEVEH PLAINS OF IRAQ: ISSUES OF COMMON CONCERN AND LOCAL COOPERATIVE SOLUTIONS

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