

# CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION IN PRACTICE

## Building Social Cohesion in Iraq

January 2024

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CORDOBA PEACE INSTITUTE

GENEVA

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Any opinions expressed in this report represent the views of the author alone, and not necessarily those of Cordoba Peace Institute – Geneva (CPI)

## About Cordoba Peace Institute – Geneva

Cordoba Peace Institute – Geneva (CPI) is an independent, non-profit organisation working on violence prevention, conflict transformation, social cohesion and peacebuilding. It aims to improve the theoretical and practical resources for conflict transformation and has extensive experience in West Asian and African contexts. CPI is inspired by the Andalusian city of Cordoba, a renowned historical centre of interfaith dialogue, and Geneva, a modern centre of humanitarian action and international dialogue. CPI promotes a methodology that is adapted to and accepted by local communities, conflict parties and peace actors, and uses internal peace resources within the societies in which it works. It applies the following guiding principles in the implementation of its projects: (1) non-violence, (2) inclusiveness, (3) conflict sensitivity, (4) gender sensitivity, (5) cultural sensitivity, (6) promotion of locally owned and demand-driven processes, (7) do-no-harm approach. CPI has Special Consultative Status with the United Nations.

## Acknowledgement

CPI is grateful to the German Federal Foreign Office (FFO), the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), for supporting the work presented in this report.



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## Executive Summary

This report\* provides an overview of the work of Cordoba Peace Institute – Geneva (CPI) in Iraq since 2017 in addressing two important issues: a) the right to know the fate of missing persons and b) social reintegration and cohesion, particularly concerning refugees returning to Iraq after seeking safety abroad during the ISIS period.

The report begins with a background outlining the political context and causes of the sectarian conflict in Iraq, with attention to the areas of Samarra, Salaheddin Governorate, and Talafar, Nineveh Governorate, the principal geographical locations of CPI's work. It then discusses the development of several projects carried out by CPI, emerging from its Middle East Platform, which was established in 2015. These different initiatives led up to the Iraq-focused projects carried out since 2017 and supported by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and the German Federal Foreign Office (FFO).

The issue of missing persons in Iraq is a significant burden on the country and barrier to reconciliation and social cohesion across the sectarian divide. To address this issue, CPI has carried out two projects during the past 6 years. After extensive exploration and network building with political and religious actors in 2017, a pilot project was launched in Samarra (funded by the Swiss FDFA), to encourage social cohesion in this highly polarised city, seat of one of the most important Shia shrines, with a Sunni-majority population. It had been the focus of sectarian tensions over many years, and the bombing of the shrine in 2006 marked the beginning of the civil war. One tension which rapidly emerged was the issue of missing persons among the city's population. The cooperation of the city's authorities, tribal and religious leaders and the Popular Mobilisation Forces gave rise to information-sharing at the local level, and also led to an understanding of the magnitude of the issue, not just in Samarra, but nationally. This led to consideration of how the issue could be addressed country wide. In 2020, therefore, a new project was launched, funded by the German FFO, incorporating Iraqi legal experts, and with the support of the religious authorities (including the Najaf *marja'iyah*) and political actors, with the purpose of developing a federal law and mechanism to give the right to individuals to obtain information about their missing relatives. The relevant laws were drafted during 2020 and 2021 and presented at a conference organised by CPI in Najaf in December 2021, in the presence of officials, political and religious leaders and the public. The laws have since been adopted by the government and merged into one law which is now awaiting final parliamentary debate and approval before being implemented.

The other focus of CPI's work during this period has been on the encouragement of the return of refugees and social cohesion efforts between those who left during different stages of the ISIS period and those who remained. This project has mainly taken place in the city of Talafar in Nineveh Governorate, which has a majority Turkmen population, many of whom found refuge in Ankara, Türkiye, when they were forced to flee either during the advance of ISIS or during the retreat. Talafar suffered severe damage during this period, as well as trauma inflicted on its population, and this period of conflict caused huge levels of distrust between different communities, and between those who stayed or left. CPI's initial project in 2019-2020 (funded by

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\* A shorter, conceptual, methods-oriented publication based on the empirical case study experience outlined in this report is forthcoming: Mae Chokr et al. Leveraging Informal Political and Religious Authorities: Insider-Outsider Mediation Fostering Social Cohesion in Iraq. Center for Security Studies (CSS), ETH Zurich (2024).

GIZ) concerned Talafar's education sector, and attempted to reconcile teachers and school principals, some of whom had taught under the ISIS regime and some of whom had left. There were different factors driving suspicion and mistrust between these two groups, and the aim of the project was to encourage understanding and social cohesion, for the sake of children, families and the population as a whole. This project achieved some positive results, despite activities being hampered by the COVID-19 pandemic. More importantly, this project demonstrated the challenges of social cohesion in Talafar, as well as the need to encourage refugee returns and ensure adequate reintegration and positive coexistence within the population as a whole. This led to the initiatives funded by the German FFO within the project phases which have taken place since 2020, and which have resulted in the return of significant numbers of refugees, their successful reintegration, and the development of a whole host of social cohesion initiatives. These have included cultural, sporting and social activities, workshops for youth, women and families, and interaction with government, tribal and other leaders. The activities have served as a model for encouraging social cohesion generally, and CPI aims to replicate the approach in other cities. A further offshoot of the approach will be to facilitate the reintegration into communities of returnees from transitional detention centres (such as the Jed'a 1 camp).

Through its work in Iraq, CPI has identified and addressed a number of challenges and, building on the lessons learned, intends to continue accompanying efforts towards post-conflict reconciliation and social cohesion. This work is essential to overcome the trauma suffered by Iraq's multiplicity of communities, and the mistrust engendered by the past decades of conflict. The results of the projects carried out so far are encouraging, and a source of hope that such efforts can lead to a more stable and cohesive Iraq, equipped to face the challenges of the coming years.

# 1. Introduction

This report describes three projects implemented by Cordoba Peace Institute – Geneva (CPI) as part of its programme in Iraq, which started in 2018 and is still ongoing. The programme started with a preparatory phase, which progressed to project design and implementation. During the preliminary phase, CPI worked with Iraqis inside and outside the country, conducted action research and exploratory missions in Iraq, Jordan and Türkiye, and organised workshops and bilateral meetings, culminating in the selection of projects and their geographical scope, starting with a pilot initiative before a national expansion. The preliminary phase resulted in a roadmap, informed by data and recommendations, to tailor the pilot and pave the way for subsequent national-level efforts. This roadmap included tracks to guide CPI's activities across Iraq. During the preliminary phase, CPI identified the city of Samarra as an appropriate starting point for its pilot. This report begins with presenting the context of Iraq and that of Samarra and Tal Afar where aspects of the projects were implemented, explaining how the programme started and describing the methodology used. It then provides an overview of the three projects that have aimed to consolidate social cohesion and to promote peace in Iraq: (1) addressing the issue of missing persons, first in Samarra and then at the national level; (2) promoting mutual trust and peaceful interaction in education in Tal Afar; (3) facilitating the voluntary return of Tal Afari refugees from Türkiye and supporting their reintegration in their areas of origin. Through these projects, the report illustrates the application of conflict transformation methodology and highlights key challenges and lessons learned.

## 2. Political and social conflicts in Iraq

### 2.1. The political context

Iraq's recent history is marked by turbulent political conflict since the establishment of the new Iraqi state in 1921, exacerbated by the rise of the Baath Party, Saddam Hussein's regime, the US invasion in 2003 and the consequent emergence of various armed groups. The Baath took power in 1968, and Saddam became the party's leader in 1979. During that period, Iraq experienced repression and human rights abuses. In 2003, the US-led invasion of Iraq led to the removal of Saddam and his regime and to the establishment of a new government. The US intervention has been widely criticised for its failure to stabilise Iraq, leading to a prolonged period of violence and sectarian conflict.

After the 1991 Intifada (Shia and Kurdish uprising against the Baath regime), Saddam Hussein's regime and the Baath Party began to openly play the sectarian and nationalist card. In 1993 they launched the “Faith Campaign” (*Al-Hamla Al-Imaniah*). This was an orchestrated effort by the Baath Party to adopt a more socially and publicly extreme sectarian Sunni Islamic agenda, along with a harsh campaign against Iraqi Shia, which culminated in the assassination of several Shia religious figures, such as Sheikh al-Gharawi in 1998 and Sayyid Muhammad Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr and his sons in 1999.

The campaign covered a wide range of policies, including increased freedoms for Salafi Islamic groups, strong support for the Naqshbandi Sufi order, increased funding for the government's Islamic Sunni programmes, and the use of Islamic punishments. It was overseen by Izzat Ibrahim Al-Douri, who later succeeded Saddam as leader of the Baath Party, and who used the campaign to promote his Naqshbandi Sufi ideology, which later formed the core of the “Army of the Men of



the Naqshbandi Order”, whose members led attacks and helped establish various armed movements after 2003, helping to pave the way for the fall of the Sunni provinces to the “Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant” (IS). The Naqshbandi Army consisted mainly of former Iraqi military, intelligence personnel and special guards, as well as fighters recruited from the “Saddam's Fedayeen” militia, which was formed in 1995 and was a military force directly linked to the Baath Party and former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. They were not part of the regular Iraqi army but reported directly to the presidential palace under the command of Saddam Hussein's son Uday Saddam. Although they had no heavy weapons, they were fiercely loyal to Saddam Hussein and included many Iraqis and Arabs with extreme and radical ideologies.

This approach laid the groundwork for an extremely intense religious and sectarian divide, which was exploited by the Baath Party leadership after 2003 under the banner of the “Resistance to the American Occupation”.

The role of neighbouring countries in fuelling sectarian and religious conflict in Iraq for political purposes cannot be denied. Before 2003, the Iraqi political scene was almost devoid of genuine opposition parties. The leadership of these opposition parties was mostly based in neighbouring and European countries with which they had agreements and understandings.

After the political changes that took place in 2003, two main issues were raised in Iraqi society:

- (1) After decades of discrimination among different components of Iraqi society by the previous regime, the Shia demanded their religious and political rights, sometimes at the expense of rights previously enjoyed by Sunni communities.
- (2) A section of Iraq's Sunni community maintains that the rights granted to them under the previous regime must continue, fuelling opposition to the post-2003 political structure.

The Iraqi Governing Council<sup>1</sup>, the first governing body in post-2003 Iraq, comprised 25 members, six of whom were Sunni Arabs (24%), but the Sunni regions did not recognise them as legitimate voices of the Sunni community, aiming to safeguard previous regime-acquired benefits.

Therefore, important Sunni regions refused to participate in the political process after 2003 and turned to military action to undermine the political process. Meanwhile, Shia regions took advantage of this unprecedented opportunity to participate in politics. This sectarian polarisation exacerbated the divisions in Iraq that had already existed but were not spoken of because of the bloodshed of the previous regime.

International terrorist-designated organisations have used this division to launch activities inside Iraq. This led to extremist acts and violent reactions, culminating in 2014 when IS took control of vast territories in Syria and Iraq. In 2017, after years of non-stop fighting on its soil, Iraq went through the liberation of all the cities and areas that had been invaded by IS. But this victory was bittersweet because of the growing mistrust between the various factions. All parts of the country were officially under government control, but in reality, each governorate or town was under the control of a paramilitary group. On the humanitarian side, there were approximately 1.8 million internally displaced persons and 6.7 million people in need of humanitarian assistance. Insecurity, lack of social cohesion and livelihoods, and destroyed or damaged homes hampered people's ability to return home.<sup>2</sup>

## 2.2. Main causes of the sectarian conflicts

The main causes of sectarian conflicts in Iraq can be summarised as follows:

- (1) The deliberate intention of the Baath Party to create violent groups after 2003.
- (2) Due to the weakness of the government's security forces, the "Mahdi Army" (Shia Sadrists) decided to defend Shia areas, leading to an escalation of sectarian conflict, especially after 2006 when Al-Qaeda bombed the Askari Holy Shrine in Samarra.
- (3) Neighbouring countries played a role in supporting various sectarian political parties.
- (4) The idea of jihad to expel the occupier was a factor that legitimised violent operations, especially among young Sunnis.
- (5) The sectarian and ethnic quota system set up by Paul Bremer contributed significantly to the division among the components of the Iraqi population.
- (6) Some Shia-Shia political tensions have led to divisions within the Iraqi Shia community and in some cases to fighting.
- (7) The absence of genuine Sunni leadership has led the central government, and at times even neighbouring countries, to attempt to create Sunni political leaders who have been unable to convince the Sunni community that they can represent their interests within the government, resulting in the fragmentation of the Iraqi Sunni community.
- (8) The political ambitions of many Sunni leaders in Iraq led them to join coalitions with the central government in order to gain political advantage, leading to Sunni-Sunni political conflicts.

## 2.3. The Samarra context

Samarra, built by the Abbasid Caliph Al-Mu'tasim Billah 125 km north of Baghdad, was the capital of the Abbasid Caliphate between 835 and 892. Nowadays, the city is divided into two parts: the historic city and the holy shrine area.

Historically, the shrine has been directly maintained by Shia clerics and their families since Nasser Al-Dawla Al-Hamdani (Shia), who was the prince of Mosul, built a dome on the house of Imam Al-Hadi because of the presence of his tomb and the tomb of his son Imam al-Askari. Al-Hamdani attracted and employed a group of Shia to take care of the dome, where he sent this group from Mosul because the city of Samarra was abandoned after the return of the Caliphate from Samarra to Baghdad in 892. Only a few agricultural villages remained in the area, some Shia, some Sunni and some Christian, and because of the interest of the Shia in the pilgrimage to the tombs of their Imams, the Shia built markets in the area of the holy shrine, gradually transforming this area into a marketplace where the products of the agricultural villages are sold.

There was a great deal of coexistence between villagers of different religious backgrounds, and this coexistence continued until the period of wars between the Safavids (Shia) and the Ottomans (Sunnis), the last of which was the Battle of Samarra in 1733. The Ottoman forces took over the city of Samarra, carried out several massacres against the Shia in the city, demolished the city walls and allowed their soldiers to settle in the homes of the Shia. Due to the violence of the Ottoman army against this city and the surrounding villages, the city in general acquired a Sunni majority and the Shiites maintained a smaller presence in it, mainly near the city of Balad due to the presence of the tomb of the son of Imam Al-Hadi, Sayyid Muhammad, as well as in the villages of Dujail. Christian villages and monasteries were demolished, Christians were displaced to Erbil and Mosul, and there has been no Christian presence in the city since the 18th century.

The Shia continued to establish their religious schools in the Holy Shrine area in the 19th and 20th centuries, but after the abolition of the monarchy in Iraq, the Republicans began to exercise severe sectarian practices against the Shia in Iraq in general and in Samarra in particular, which almost eliminated the Shia presence in Samarra, especially after the Baath Party came to power, where many Shia were executed and displaced.

Although Saddam Hussein's regime vigorously pursued its policy of repression and displacement against the Shia, in Salah Al-Din governorate in general and Samarra in particular, it did not like the Sunni tribes in Samarra (rivalry between the cities of Samarra and Tikrit, home of Saddam Hussein) and executed many of the Sunni Samarrai leaders from the time the regime came to power until the late 1990s such as Shaikh Ali Al-Alayan Al-Bazi, Shaikh Abdul Aziz Al-Badri, and Abdulkhaliq Al-Samarri.

Before 2003 there was no Shia endowment. After 2003 there was a governmental division of Islamic endowments (Shia and Sunni), and there was a significant legal battle over the Al-Askari Holy Shrine and its assets, and whether it belonged to the Sunni endowment, since the city has become predominantly Sunni, or to the Shia endowment. The Al-Askari Holy Shrine was directly managed by the Head of the Sunni Endowment Office, who was responsible for appointing all the employees of the holy shrine. Then, the judiciary ruled that the Al-Askari Holy Shrine belonged to the Shia Endowment Office. But on 22 February 2006 a major shock occurred when Al-Qaeda blew up the Al-Askari Holy Shrine, before the Shia Endowment Office took responsibility for the holy shrine, and Al-Qaeda also targeted pilgrims going to the holy shrine. This led the Shia "Mahdi Army" of Sayyid Muqtada al-Sadr to react radically. As a result, the holy shrine was separated from the rest of the city of Samarra by a security wall, and many researchers believe that what happened in Samarra was the starting point for sectarian division in Iraq.

Al-Qaeda and the Baathists began armed attacks against international parties in Iraq in 2003, when Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi carried out the bombing of the United Nations headquarters at the Al-Qanat Hotel in Baghdad on 19 August 2003. Ten days later, on 29 August 2003, Al-Qaeda targeted the Imam Ali Holy Shrine, and blew it up with a car bomb. This resulted in the death of the Iraqi Marji' Sayyid Muhammad Baqir Al-Hakim. Al-Qaeda carried out hundreds of bombings, car bombs and random killings against government institutions, religious shrines and Shia pilgrims in the southern provinces and Baghdad. But the first military responses by Shia non-state militias began after the bombing of the Al-Askari Holy Shrine in Samarra on 22 February 2006.

#### **2.4. The Tal Afar context**

The city of Tal Afar is in northwestern Iraq and is administratively part of Tal Afar District in Nineveh Governorate. There is no precise population figure but estimates for 2019 put the population of the entire Tal Afar district at between 400,000 and 600,000. The majority of Tal Afar's population is Muslim Turkmen. There are no statistics on the exact number of Shia and Sunni in Tal Afar, but the ratio between Shia and Sunni is considered to be fairly even. The city is located about 55 km west of Mosul, about 63 km south of the Turkish border and about 60 km east of the Syrian border.

In general, districts in Iraq are named after their centres. Tal Afar district is made up of four sub-districts: Tal Afar, Zummar, Al-Ayadiyah and Rabia.

There was no sectarian division among the Turkmen of Tal Afar before 2003. On the contrary, there were many signs of social unity, as they had an ancient cultural heritage that transcended religious sectarianism and dogmatic loyalties. However, the people of Tal Afar, like the rest of Iraqi society, had suffered from the previous dictatorships, especially during the reign of Saddam Hussein's regime.

According to Tal Afar's social heritage, the district has historically suffered from marginalisation by Mosul (the centre of Nineveh governorate) towards Tal Afar, as Tal Afar district is a Turkmen-majority agricultural area that administratively belongs to Nineveh governorate, which has an Arab majority population.

The Tal Afar community is made up of several tribes, the majority of which migrated with the Bayat tribes from southern Azerbaijan some 800 years ago. There are also several families who migrated to Tal Afar from Türkiye. In addition, there are a few families of Arab or Kurdish origin, but they have been assimilated into the strong Tal Afar culture for hundreds of years and can only be referred to as Turkmen.

Since the beginning of the political changes in 2003, armed extremist organisations have emerged in Tal Afar. One of the main reasons for the presence of such organisations in Tal Afar is its proximity to the Syrian border. This proximity has made it easier for foreign armed actors to infiltrate Tal Afar and for outlawed Baathist organisations to escape from Iraq when under pressure from Iraqi security forces. From the outset, these organisations targeted the social unity enjoyed by the Tal Afar community and encouraged sectarian polarisation to create flashpoints, and they succeeded in creating divisions within the community.

It can be assumed that virtually every Iraqi citizen of Tal Afar has either been displaced, migrated or become a refugee at some point since 2003 due to security and political changes. For example, in 2014, when IS occupied the city, not a single Shia Muslim remained in the city. They were either displaced to southern Iraq or killed. Similarly, there was a significant migration of Sunni residents to cities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq or outside Iraq. During the ousting of IS in 2017, approximately 120,000 residents of Tal Afar fled to Syrian territory and later to Türkiye.

### **3. Programme outline and project in Iraq**

CPI launched in 2015 its “Middle East Programme” in collaboration with, and with the financial support of, the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA). This programme aimed to promote peaceful coexistence between groups with different worldviews (in particular Sunni and Shia) in West Asia by strengthening non-violent conflict transformation mechanisms. To this end, three platforms were organised over two years, under the title of “Promoting social cohesion and interaction through the notion of citizenship”, bringing together participants from all over the Middle East.

The first platform<sup>3</sup> was held in Istanbul on 2-4 June 2016. The aim of this meeting was to discuss concrete engagement in practical joint initiatives to promote inclusive citizenship and a sense of common interest in an inclusive and diverse society. The participants from Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Yemen were able to work in country-based groups and present a road map for different initiatives to be implemented in their respective countries. More specifically, two initiatives were selected in Lebanon, one dealing with detainees and the other with collaboration between charities. As the situation in Bahrain was very tense, an exploratory mission was needed

as a first step. In Saudi Arabia, a WhatsApp group was created directly after the meeting and the participants exchange regularly on the situation; they explored the feasibility of different initiatives, including domestic peace tourism, particularly to respective centres of worship.

The second platform<sup>4</sup> took place in Montreux on 22-24 November 2016, bringing together delegations from Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. The specific objectives were to expand and strengthen CPI's network of regional experts, to discuss regional and local issues, and to identify possible initiatives to be implemented. Each delegation was asked to come up with an idea for a local project and identify what could be done locally in terms of conflict transformation, peace building and social cohesion. CPI had already carried out exploratory missions in Lebanon, so the second platform was also an opportunity to present the Lebanese initiative to the other participants and to follow up on activities.

The third platform<sup>5</sup> was held on 9-10 October 2017, in Istanbul. The participants from the first and second platforms from Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Yemen were invited in addition to a small delegation of Syrians. This meeting presented the fruits of the seeds that had been planted over the previous one and a half years. The changes in attitude, in individual and group behaviours were obvious. Moreover, a diminution in polarizing geopolitical arguments and an increase in trust and serenity among the participants permitted more efficient exchanges that were more focused on the subject. This indicated that the participants took a greater ownership of the space and were eager to take full advantage of this platform for exchanging on actions, entry points, challenges and ways to overcome them. It also highlighted the appropriation by the participants of the rules and principles of the space to a point where they could show self-regulation.

With regard to Iraq, several entry points were identified, in particular the idea of engaging/working with tribal and religious leaders. This idea stemmed from the fact that Iraq is still a tribal society and that tribes are usually cross-sectarian (both Sunni and Shia members) and that there were no projects with tribal leaders in Iraq at the time. It was also emphasised that there was a need to work more locally rather than nationally for two reasons:

- (1) There have already been several “national dialogues” organised by other NGOs.
- (2) More direct and tangible results are expected at the local level.

Following the second Middle East Platform, and as a follow-up, CPI commissioned a consultant to undertake field research. The research paper<sup>6</sup> examined the Iraqi dynamics within tribal and religious circles and their role in the political process. The paper also aimed to explore the feasibility of a project involving such actors and the best way to do so (identifying entry points).

As a direct follow-up to the research paper, an Iraq-specific expert meeting was organised in Istanbul in October 2017, where a dozen Iraqis from all different worldviews, religious and political affiliations were invited to discuss and somehow validate the findings of the research paper. Although there was some disagreement about the format and some of the details, the paper was generally recognized as a great source of data and information (particularly the names of all the tribes, sub-tribes, families and names of leaders). Several ideas emerged that allowed for brainstorming on possible projects that could be implemented jointly by the different actors. The recommendation to implement at local rather than national level was reiterated.

CPI also participated in several external events on Iraq, where the feasibility of implementing a programme in Iraq was discussed, including:

- (1) the meeting on “Religious Actors and Reconciliation in Iraq”, co-sponsored by the European Union together with the Governments of the United States and Spain and held in Madrid on 28-29 November 2016;
- (2) the meeting on “Youth in Iraq: Developing Capacities for Active Citizenship”, co-organised by PRIO in Kyrenia (north Cyprus) on 2-4 February 2018, with the support of the Norwegian Foreign Ministry and the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs;
- (3) the meeting on “Fostering National Consensus on Reforms in Iraq”, sponsored by the European Union and held in Brussels on 14-15 March 2018.

A formal invitation for CPI to visit Iraq came from the two Holy Shrines in Karabala (Imam Hussain and Al Abbas Holy Shrines), spiritually led by Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, the most influential Marjia' (religious leader) among all Iraqis. CPI took the opportunity to visit Iraq to understand the mechanisms and dynamics of the country's socio-political fabric. A formal invitation was extended to attend a conference in Karbala in April 2018.

Based on CPI's previous experience and understanding of the dynamics of power and its key role in conflict, the influence of traditional actors is often neglected when designing a project without prior and sufficient knowledge of the context and culture. Sources of power and influence are context specific. Insider mediators who are familiar with a given context can identify such actors and their respective influence, and “power” should not be equated with formal structures and procedures, since these may sometimes be irrelevant.

Following the preparatory steps, CPI had the following resources to design a project on social cohesion and reconciliation in Iraq:

- (1) *Insider-outsider*: Combining the skills and networks of local/insider mediators with those of international mediation experts.
- (2) *Traditional authorities*: using different *sources of influence* to break deadlocks in different dimensions of conflict. CPI has had the opportunity to work with tribal leaders on the tribal dimension of the conflict, where religious authorities have also supported CPI where necessary. This is based on an understanding of “power” where influence does not necessarily come from formal state structures, but rather from traditional and religious actors such as the *Marja'iyah*, religious leaders and/or tribal networks.

The overall vision, aim, objectives and theory of change of the project are as follows:

*Vision*: The overall vision of the project is peaceful interaction between parties with different religious and/or political affiliations in Iraq.

*Aim*: The overall aim of the project is to support reconciliation and promote social cohesion and peaceful interaction, building on the notion of common citizenship.

*Objectives*: The objectives of the project are to contribute to non-violent conflict transformation processes with key actors from different backgrounds by implementing a concrete activity in which all actors work together to foster mutual trust and promote a peaceful and inclusive common civic space.

*Theory of change:* If a process of dialogue and confidence-building is reinforced by a jointly implemented initiative of practical relevance, the likelihood of a peaceful society increases, because jointly led initiatives provide the most promising framework for promoting reconciliation by building trust through translating words into deeds.

As a first step, it was recommended to implement the project in a limited area with the perspective of extending the proven results of the project to other localities/regions. CPI decided to launch the pilot phase of the project in Samarra. The reasons for choosing Samarra as the starting point for the implementation of the CPI pilot project were:

- (1) Samara is a “unique” city because it is home to one of the most important Shia holy shrines: the Al Askari shrine, where the 10<sup>th</sup> Imam Ali Al Hadi and 11<sup>th</sup> Imam Hasan Al Askari are buried. However, unlike other “Shia shrine” cities, the population of Samara is predominantly Sunni. The bombing and destruction of the shrine in 2006 marked the beginning of the civil war in the city. Since then, the city has been divided between the shrine compound, which is closed and guarded by Moqtada Al Sadr's Peace Brigade, and the rest of the city. As a result, the (Sunni) population has lost access to its main economic activity, which came from pilgrims visiting the shrine.
- (2) Samara is home to several important tribes, which are also mixed (Sunni and Shia).
- (3) Symbolically, Samara was the capital of the Abbasid Caliphate and remains an important historical and archaeological site.
- (4) Samara is a city in the Salaheddin governorate that had been “forgotten” by the humanitarian community as the focus was on Nineveh governorate (the strongest IS stronghold).
- (5) No projects/NGOs focused on this region; therefore, the absence of any international organisation has led to a great need for work in this geographical area.
- (6) Many see it as the obvious dividing line in Iraqi society.
- (7) The desire of the then Mayor of Samarra and his invitation to CPI to work in Samarra.

#### **4. Methodology**

Before embarking on its projects, CPI undertook a preliminary “diagnosis” phase to analyse the contexts and map the conflicts. The implementation of the projects was largely based on the findings of this initial phase. In addition, CPI worked with a range of partners, including influential religious and tribal figures, as well as a range of politicians, government representatives and security officials, who formed an extensive network that CPI carefully cultivated.

In organising its workshops and meetings in Iraq, CPI relied on the use of the *safe mediation space* (SMS) methodology. The SMS is defined by Jean-Nicolas Bitter as a “process of meeting or confrontation of two discourses or two narratives seeking to coordinate their actions.”<sup>8</sup> The immediate aim of the SMS is to create “safe social spaces where parties can come together to discuss and develop practical joint projects for addressing aspects of the conflict and this is an approach of particular relevance to conflicts where parties hold different worldviews.”<sup>9</sup> It is a place where the parties can feel safe and secure, particularly in the sense that their worldview will not be threatened or disrespected.<sup>10</sup> It is a “process of exchange convened by a mediation team who bring together people from across different worldviews in order to coordinate their actions and to agree on ways for practically addressing specific aspects of an ongoing conflict. [...] The aim of the approach is to create spaces for discussion where conflict actors feel safe that their worldview and perception of conflict issues will not be denigrated or repressed. The idea is that in such spaces,

conflict actors can constructively address practical problems arising from a specific aspect of the conflict or the polarization of society more broadly.”<sup>11</sup>

An important element of the SMS methodology is *diap Praxis*, a process of dialogue that is reinforced by the implementation of joint and inclusive initiatives carried out by the conflict actors. Indeed, offering actors from different backgrounds and with different references the opportunity to meet in a “safe space” allows them to exchange and actively discuss in order to find a common understanding; setting up concrete joint projects allows them to build trust by turning words into action and creating a common purpose. In addition, CPI has promoted local ownership of processes on the ground.

As part of the SMS methodology, CPI has used the Chatham House Rule at its meetings to encourage open discussion and foster the sharing of often sensitive information. This rule states that “When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed”.<sup>12</sup> To this end, the names of participants are not disclosed in public reports and other communications, allowing stakeholders to discuss their views openly, while at the same time making the subject and nature of the debate public and contributing to a wider conversation. In addition, CPI has taken particular care to protect data throughout the project.

CPI is committed to building trust with the participants in its projects and has never withheld information about the funding it receives from the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and the German Federal Foreign Office (FFO). In a country like Iraq, withholding this kind of information is riskier than being transparent, because years of foreign interference have made Iraqi society highly suspicious, trust in foreigners has diminished, and mistrust of foreign projects is widespread for fear of a hidden agenda.

## **5. The right to know the fate of missing persons**

### **5.1. Background**

In 2014, the breakdown of the social contract between the Iraqi central government and its people had a devastating impact on security in the country. The loss of trust in the Iraqi police and security forces, which were seen as corrupt and abusing their power over civilians, led to an increased reliance on traditional justice mechanisms and paramilitary groups, some of which were formalised and legalised under the official umbrella of the “Popular Mobilisation Forces” (PMF), which were established mainly following a religious fatwa from the Marja’iyyah in Najaf. In this context, the main objective of these forces was primarily to fight IS and liberate the areas it occupied.

Following the liberation in 2017 of areas occupied by IS,

- The security forces that liberated these areas, especially the PMF, faced accusations of bloody reprisals against Sunni residents, forced disappearances, etc.
- On the other hand, the security forces and the PMF accused families from the liberated towns and villages of trying to hide the fact that their relatives were killed because they were IS fighters by giving false information that they were killed just because they were Sunni.



- The security forces and the PMF admitted that many IS fighters arrested, while accusing the families of IS fighters of hiding information about the whereabouts of their relatives who fled inside Iraq to other cities or outside Iraq to Syria, in order to claim that the security forces and the PMF had arrested their relatives.
- The central government took steps to integrate the PMF into the official security apparatus, and many families began to accuse the government of hiding the fate of their missing relatives.

## 5.2. Aim of the project

The numerous consultations held during the exploratory phase (2017-2019), the action research and the multiple field missions, allowed CPI to identify concrete actions that could promote social cohesion in the Samarra district. One of the main issues identified was the need to provide information to their families on persons who were detained and disappeared after their arrest. This was raised several times by different communities, and later confirmed by Samarra residents and key members of the security forces, as well as Iraqi Sunni clerics. The idea of a concrete activity to address this issue therefore emerged. This would consist of setting up a working group to obtain information on detained and disappeared persons and to locate their whereabouts. The proposed activity was conceived as a purely humanitarian one, aimed at alleviating the suffering of the families and promoting social cohesion. The proposed project did not seek accountability/sanctions or compensation/reparations (these activities must be carried out independently by the government), but rather the cooperation of various actors who have the means to provide the information on the missing persons to the families in distress, in accordance with the “right to know” principle.

*Goal:* The goal of the process is to facilitate a process of agreement on the religious position on “conflict-related missing persons” and the need to share information on their fate and whereabouts.

*Theory of change:* If a constructive dialogue between high-profile Iraqi clerics is implemented, then an agreement on the religious position with regards to “conflict-induced missing persons” will be reached. This should encourage better cooperation between the security forces and family representatives in a joint effort to document, research and retrieve information on these disappearances, as religious leaders in Iraq are widely recognised in their communities as having concrete influence on the actions and views of their constituents. This clearly makes them key actors in reconciliation efforts.

## 5.3. Phase one: Samarra

Even though Samarra was not occupied by IS and the PMF were not present in Samarra city, many families claimed that the central government, the security forces and the PMF had arrested their relatives and failed to provide information about their fate. Therefore, a pilot project, supported by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), began in 2018 on the missing persons who disappeared in the city of Samarra and CPI established cooperation involving:

- (1) The city’s local authorities.
- (2) Lawyers from the city of Samarra.
- (3) The legal department of the PMF.
- (4) Tribal leaders from the city of Samarra.
- (5) Shia and Sunni religious figures.

- (6) State representatives.
- (7) International actors.

After several bilateral meetings with the Mayor of Samarra, Samarra lawyers authorised by the families of the missing, representatives of Samarra's tribal leaders, representatives of the PMF, Shia and Sunni clerics, a person close to the Marja'iyah, and a representative of the High Committee for Coexistence and Social Peace (HCCSP), CPI decided to bring together eight people with different profiles from the above parties in a workshop in Baghdad in April 2019, in order to assess the feasibility of the pilot project and outline the mechanisms that could be put in place to implement it. The participants were selected based on their ability and willingness to contribute, which are key to ensuring the sustainability and success of the project.

As a result of this workshop held in the form of a safe mediation space, the lawyers handed over a list of 900 names of missing persons to the representatives of the PMF in order to know their fate; the representatives of the PMF promised to compare this list with all the names of the detainees in order to know which of these 900 names had been arrested.

This cooperation between tribal leaders and lawyers, on the one hand, and between the representatives of the state and the PMF, on the other, gave great impetus to the missing persons pilot project. The presence of religious figures from Najaf and Karbala in the workshops and coordination meetings played a crucial role in encouraging all Shia and Sunni parties, and especially the PMF, to cooperate in CPI's missing persons pilot project. CPI invested in building trust between the official authorities and the grassroots parties. To achieve this goal, four activities were planned:

- (1) A follow-up meeting with the working group in charge of the initiative on the disappeared to assess the developments of the initiative after the April 2019 Baghdad workshop, to discuss and plan the way forward, and to discuss improving the follow-up of the project.
- (2) A capacity-building workshop on case documentation, rule of law and international humanitarian standards on missing and enforced disappearances, in cooperation with the ICRC.
- (3) A strategic meeting with the working group in charge of the initiative in favour of the disappeared, in order to share the first results obtained by the group and to plan the next steps and the strategy for the best development of the initiative after the withdrawal of CPI.
- (4) Training in basic conflict transformation principles and approaches, and mediation.

The clear cooperation of all parties, which led to a genuine understanding of the magnitude of the problem of missing persons in Iraq and the urgent need to work on this file for its benefits in promoting peaceful coexistence and peacebuilding, prompted CPI to proceed with a second phase at the national level.

#### **5.4. Phase two: national level**

Following the completion of the Samarra pilot project, and after a hiatus of several months, during which CPI focused its work in Iraq on the education sector in Tal Afar (see the following section), a project with a national scope was launched at the end of 2020 with the support of the German Federal Foreign Office (FFO), with the aim of finding solutions for the families of missing persons, regardless of the date or reasons for their disappearance. The Missing Persons File has caused suffering that has affected all areas and ethnicities of Iraq in different periods of modern Iraqi

history due to political changes. Therefore, this phase of the Missing Persons Project was designed to address this file, despite its temporal and geographical dimensions.

CPI engaged with influential religious leaders representing all faiths and/or ideologies, as well as actors from the security apparatus and key community/tribal leaders and governmental/local authorities to identify the most appropriate and useful participants for subsequent activities and to bilaterally explain the proposed project and the methodology to be used, understand each party's narrative, and identify potential redlines.

A team of 11 experts (core group) was set up, including Iraqi legal experts, representing all segments of Iraqi society, and working in academic and official government institutions, and a partnership was established between CPI, the Iraqi Ministry of Justice, and the International Humanitarian Committee at the Prime Minister's Office. Working with local and national experts helped to build understanding, trust, and acceptance of the project. The expert team played a key role in:

- Aligning the project with the overall vision and objectives.
- Identifying implementation challenges.
- Developing pragmatic solutions.
- Transforming the missing persons project into an Iraqi project run by Iraqi experts, representing all provinces, spectrums, ethnicities, and religions. CPI's role was primarily that of coordinator and administrator.
- The presence of these local Iraqi experts, and their voluntary contributions, built trust in CPI's projects at grassroots, governmental, and religious levels.

In addition, religious figures, notably from the Najaf Marja'iyah, and representatives of all relevant Iraqi ministries contributed to supporting this team, which worked diligently on the legislation of the "Law on the Right to Know the Fate of the Missing Persons", and to reaching a national consensus on "conflict-related missing persons" and sharing information on their fate and whereabouts.

The Iraqi society is highly religious and extremely loyal to its religious leaders, who are eager to participate in a project aimed at peace-making in Iraq and bringing relief to society but cannot work or get directly involved in politically sensitive projects because their role and position requires them to remain "neutral". Therefore, CPI organised a series of workshops that brought together clerics from the main regions of Iraq, representing all faiths and schools of thought relevant to the project, to discuss the relationship between international humanitarian law and Islamic teachings related to warfare, and in particular the religious position on persons missing due to conflict and the need to share information on their fate and whereabouts. These workshops involved over 300 legal experts, academics, government officials, tribal leaders, and religious figures. Moreover, CPI carried out regular coordination and follow-up meetings with the established working groups in order to assess the progress of the project and to strengthen its local ownership.

During the core group meeting on 28 October 2021, the participants decided to work with the Ministry of Justice and the Permanent Committee for International Humanitarian Law of the Prime Minister's Office, to draft a law to address all issues related to missing persons in Iraq, based on the principle of "the right to know". The law was drafted by Iraqi legal experts who specialise in international law, in cooperation with representatives of the Kurdistan Regional Government. This marked a significant breakthrough and positive cooperation between the central government and

the Kurdistan Regional Government. The draft law was finalised and handed over to the Minister of Justice in person on 19 December 2021 during a national conference organised by CPI in Najaf. The conference was attended by representatives of all sectors of the Iraqi people, relevant ministries, political leaders, a representative of the Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Regional Government, ministers, as well as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and representatives of the Marja'iyyah in Najaf. The conference was also an occasion for the Kurdistan Regional Government to launch their Human Rights Strategy from the city of Najaf, and this action had a very positive impact on both the Kurdistan Regional Government and the central government, as well as on other segments of the Iraqi population. It was seen as a very positive indicator of the level of cooperation between the Federal Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government.

During the first three months of 2022, the law of the National Commission on Missing Persons was drafted and presented to the representatives of the relevant ministries during a meeting at the Iraqi Ministry of Justice in March 2022. CPI worked on the issue with the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP) and the ICRC during the summer and autumn of 2022. In addition, the ICRC, in collaboration with CPI, held two workshops to provide their comments and feedback on the law, with one of the key recommendations being the establishment of a national central register of missing persons, a crucial aspect that the ICMP is actively working to implement.

In 2023, the CPI sought to merge the “Law on the Right to Know the Fate of the Missing Persons” and the “Law on the National Commission for Missing Persons” into a single law entitled “The Law on Missing Persons Affairs”, and this was duly achieved. The merged law is awaiting final parliamentary debate and approval before being implemented.

As part of this process, CPI organised a series of capacity-building workshops, carefully tailored for an audience of clerics, academics and Peshmerga members, with a focused agenda on explaining the principles of Islamic law of war and IHL, particularly in the context of the issue of the “right to know” the fate of missing persons. In addition, the Iraqi Martyrs Foundation requested CPI's assistance in improving the skills of civilian officials tasked with interviewing families to gather information about missing persons. It is vital that these interviews are conducted safely, ethically and effectively. This approach not only addresses the trauma experienced by families, but also improves the overall efficiency of the process. In response, CPI organised two ToT sessions to strengthen the skills of civilian officials. These sessions emphasised the use of neutral, conflict-sensitive approaches and techniques when interviewing families of the missing. These sessions were strategically designed to build the capacity of civilian officials to use the most appropriate, neutral and conflict-sensitive interviewing techniques. Such skills are essential to ensure constructive engagement with the families of missing persons. Moreover, the project included initiatives to raise awareness of “the right to know the fate of missing persons” within communities. This work was further strengthened through the production of two academic papers entitled “The Right to Know the Fate of the Missing Persons from an Islamic Perspective”.

The culmination of this project was a major multi-faith conference held in Erbil on 10 December 2023. The conference was a gathering of diverse stakeholders, including 50 representatives from various religious institutions (churches, shrines, the Mufti's office and foundations), academia, civil society and tribal leadership. The agenda of the conference was dedicated to sharing insights and raising awareness on “the right to know the fate of missing persons”, underlining the overall objectives and achievements of the project.

## **6. Reconciliation through schools and the education sector in Tal Afar**

### **6.1. Background**

In 2014, the province of Nineveh was occupied by IS and faced mass displacement. In 2017, during the military operations to liberate the province, there was also a mass displacement of the population that did not leave the province in 2014, especially in the district of Tal Afar. During the liberation, the province faced massive destruction of homes and infrastructure, as well as the uprooting of livelihoods. Following the end of major military operations in Iraq in 2017 and up till April 2019, approximately 1.8 million IDPs had returned to Nineveh Governorate. While Nineveh Governorate is transitioning towards post-conflict recovery, the reintegration of returnees remains a challenge and significant humanitarian needs remain. As of November 2019, 2.2 million people were in need of assistance in Nineveh, making it the Iraqi governorate with the highest number of people in need. Nineveh is also characterised by the presence of diverse political and security actors, reflecting the complex socio-cultural composition and dynamics of the region. Nineveh is home to a variety of ethno-religious groups, including Sunni Arabs, Shia Arabs, Sunni Kurds and minorities such as Christians, Shia Shabak, Yazidis and Turkmen (Shia and Sunni). With some historical inter-communal grievances exacerbated by the recent conflict, distrust between different ethno-religious groups remains high. This has led to increased tensions and geographical segregation, affecting the level of social cohesion between these groups and the sustainable reintegration of returnees.

In this context of tensions, CPI decided to initiate in October 2019 a 6-month project for promoting reconciliation and social cohesion in Talafar, with the support of GIZ, which was already engaged in Iraq to strengthen the resilience of conflict-affected communities, notably by implementing measures in the field of peacebuilding and social cohesion. CPI chose to work in Tal Afar for the following reasons:

- (1) The city was in desperate need of international aid.
- (2) A quarter of the city's population was living outside of Iraq.
- (3) More than half of the city's exiled population was afraid to return.
- (4) CPI did not find any NGO working on the case of the Tal Afar refugees outside Iraq.

### **6.2. Aim of the project**

The overall aim of the project was to support reconciliation and to promote social cohesion and peaceful interaction in Tal Afar, by implementing a concrete joint-initiative in which all the actors work together to foster mutual trust and promote a peaceful and inclusive shared civil space. The joint initiative would be formulated and built on experiences from the past that the communities themselves specify as most hurtful, hence most crucial to resolve in order to build mutual trust.

The specific objectives were to:

- (1) Enable meetings of key actors; foster communication channels; implement joint actions.
- (2) Address the local communities' grievances triggered by the war as a measure to foster reconciliation and social cohesion.

The project was planned to primarily benefit vulnerable families who were most affected by the conflict and who, due to their poor living conditions in Tal Afar District, did not have easy access to institutions that could help them. The project was also meant to target key local actors such as security sector actors, local political figures, and community and religious leaders with capacity building activities to support them in establishing more resilient local mechanisms for negotiation and conflict transformation at the local level and in implementing the joint activities.

CPI identified the following stakeholders to be involved in the project:

- Community/tribal elders of Tal Afar (Tal Afar Wise Persons Committee)
- Mayor/local authorities of Tal Afar
- Tal Afar religious leaders
- Representatives of security forces in Tal Afar
- Tal Afar University professors
- Tal Afar University students
- Lawyers
- Social activists
- Religious representatives of the Marja'iyyah
- National-level authorities

### **6.3. Peacebuilding and social cohesion within the schools**

The primary objective of the preliminary phase of the project was to find out the line of tension on which a joint and inclusive initiative could be implemented by the stakeholders to reinforce the dialogue process facilitated by CPI. During the activities carried out with different stakeholders, namely local authorities, religious/tribal/community leaders, activists and most importantly teachers/principals of school in the district of Tal Afar, it was acknowledged during the meetings that there was a tension arising within the schools that is not being considered and that should be addressed.

In Tal Afar district, some of the schoolteachers taught under IS occupation and were therefore forced during this period to teach the “program”, and consequently the extremist ideology of IS, to children who lived under the group’s occupation. After the liberation of the area, these teachers were cleared and vetted by the authorities without there being any suspicion of them having belonged to the militant group, and consequently there was no legal procedure against them. However, they suffered from mistrust from a significant part of the community, (e.g. families) who, often wrongly, suspect them of still teaching extremist ideologies or of not agreeing on the official national curriculum. Conversely, there were some teachers who, mostly unintentionally, were still teaching divisive narratives that encourage extremist ideologies and indirectly supported IS’s reputation in the area, which made people in the community uneasy and afraid that this could maintain or even strengthen the sectarian divisions. These feelings of mistrust and mutual fear came from a lack of communication between these teachers/school directors but also the absence of exchanges between students' families and schools.

After conducting three exploratory missions to Tal Afar and meeting with all stakeholders, CPI concluded that the project should be implemented on a smaller and more localised scale. One of the main reasons for reducing the scope of this project to a smaller area was that with a project duration of only 6 months, it was essential to achieve concrete results. Rather than expanding

horizontally, the focus should be vertical to ensure effective and impactful work within the given timeframe.

CPI noted during the exploratory missions that in Tal Afar the school staff, including teachers, supervisors, and principals, represent a significant proportion of the above stakeholders. CPI observed that some school principals also have influential roles in their tribes and identify themselves as tribal leaders before identifying themselves as school principals. Moreover, CPI found social activists working as education supervisors within the Ministry of Education, as well as religious figures. Another observation made by CPI was that the geographical division between the Shia and Sunni communities in Tal Afar was not evident within the schools, either among students or teachers. This was largely due to the severe shortage of qualified schools, education staff and teachers in the area. In addition, working in the education sector is still highly respected in the city. As a result, it reaches every family and household, as the profession is highly valued and respected by the Tal Afar community.

CPI believed that the peacebuilding and social cohesion process within the schools would have tangible results in building sustainable peace within the Tal Afar community. The project was therefore oriented towards the goal of promoting reconciliation and social cohesion through education by involving educational staff, pupils, and their families, with the following specific objectives to:

- (1) Promote peaceful coexistence by building the capacity of educational staff in peaceful and inclusive education methodology.
- (2) Expand the district's educational staff to promote trust building and reduce the tensions arising from misunderstandings and misconceptions of the “Other”'s worldview.
- (3) Mitigate the tensions arising from mistrust and promote social exchange between families, students, and educational staff through dedicated joint activities.
- (4) Facilitate the development of an ethical methodology/teaching programme that fosters interreligious and intercultural tolerance and inclusion.

#### **6.4. Project activities**

The project started with the identification of the participants in December 2019 in the cities of Tal Afar, Erbil, Baghdad, and Najaf where several direct and indirect stakeholders were met: local community leaders, officials from the Kurdistan Regional Government and the Federal Government of Iraq, religious leaders of the Marja'iyah. A first group meeting was held in Tal Afar on 28 December 2019 and a strategic workshop followed by a second group meeting was held on 18-19 January 2020 in Tal Afar during which the strategy and the intended project of CPI were explained, to obtain the approval of participants and stakeholders, and consequently to confirm their participation in the project.

During the strategic workshop, it was decided by the stakeholders and CPI to reinforce and build on the work of the “Teachers Syndicate” (not as active as expected, due to the lack of funds and coordination/logistics capabilities), by building a strong network of teachers and schools directors which would form a forum – or working group – to develop activities promoting and stimulating social interaction and reconciliation. The activities discussed during the strategic workshop and the coordination meetings were the following:

- (1) Develop and provide training to all teachers of the district to equip them with a neutral, non-divisive, and accepted-by-all teaching methodology.
- (2) Organize regular visits among school students and teachers within the district.
- (3) Promote school exchange programs and activities, such as sports competitions and art exhibitions.
- (4) Encourage the schools' administrations to involve the students' families in school gatherings and organize regular parent-teacher meetings.
- (5) Benefit from the experience of retired teachers by involving them in an active manner in the teachers' network.

CPI held several meetings in Tal Afar, resulting in the creation of a network of teachers and education supervisors in the city. This network was well received by the schools, as the Iraqi Teachers' Syndicate has traditionally been aligned with specific political parties, and this situation persists in most Iraqi provinces. As a result, there is a lack of real interaction and engagement between teachers and the Iraqi Teachers' Syndicate. The establishment of this network of teachers and educational supervisors in Tal Afar provided an opportunity for educators to come together and collaborate regardless of their ethnic, religious, or political affiliations. This allowed for a more inclusive and cohesive educational environment, promoting unity and fostering a sense of belonging among the community members in Tal Afar. As a result of these meetings, CPI decided to hold a training workshop for schoolteachers and principals and education supervisors.

A 3-day training workshop on “Mediation and Conflict Transformation”, focusing on the education sector in Tal Afar, was organised in Erbil from 27 February to 1 March 2020. A total of 54 participants attended the workshop, divided into two groups. The training sessions aimed to provide participants with knowledge on the theory and practice of conflict transformation, how to apply conflict analysis skills, and practical ideas for culturally appropriate approaches to conflict transformation. The training was divided into the following seven sessions, each of them followed by a group discussion/Q&A and/or a group exercise: (1) Conflict Transformation concepts, (2) Conflict Transformation approaches, (3) Conflict Analysis tools, (4) Importance of Social Cohesion, (5) John Rawls' overlapping consensus, (6) the Medina Charter, and (7) the Swiss Model. The training was used as a capacity building tool as well as a first step towards reconciliation as the discussions and the practical work of conflict analysis allowed the participants from different areas and diverse backgrounds to get to know each other better and share their views without exposure to their tense local context. The training also served as a means to initiate meetings between teachers and to establish communication after the training.

Shortly after the training, restrictions were put in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19, which resulted in schools being closed and meetings being banned. This resulted in limited opportunities for participants to use the skills they had acquired. However, despite the COVID-19-related restrictions that made it difficult for them to act in the short term as mediators and use the skills trained, the majority of teachers and principals have already found opportunities to use the knowledge gained from the training. This includes dealing with different types of conflict, mostly small-scale social conflicts between students or teachers, as well as between individuals or families in their community.

Most of the participants in the training workshop reported that their ability to work together with and mediate between members of other groups and/or tribes had improved since taking part in the CPI programme. Over a third of the participants reported that the types of disputes they were involved in were mostly related to their role as educators, for example disputes between pupils,



teachers or involving parents. In general, the participants reported that they were better able to deal with pupils, colleagues and parents as a result of the training. At least 97% of the participants reported that they felt better able to (1) talk to other colleagues about problems and conflict issues; (2) transfer their knowledge to their colleagues so that they could benefit from it; and (3) coach/train their colleagues on their role when a conflict arises.

In addition to improving their skills in dealing with teachers and teaching them how to deal with conflict, some participants gave examples of how they had resolved disputes between teachers. A principal from Al-Ayadiyah described how he used the skills he learned in the training to resolve a dispute between two teachers in his school about how lessons should be conducted. As soon as the principal noticed that there was a conflict, he intervened by investigating and analysing the issue and then bringing the disputants together to discuss possible solutions. In the end, a solution was found that the respondent felt was in the best interests of the pupils, the other teachers and the school as a whole.

The participants in the training workshop were satisfied with the programme and reported that their conflict management skills had improved as a result of the training. In addition, 20 of the 39 respondents explicitly stated without being asked that they were happy to have participated in the programme and 10 respondents suggested that additional training should be offered to learn more about conflict mediation and transformation. The reasons given for the need for additional training days were to gain more in-depth knowledge of mediation strategies and to continue networking with other teachers and to get to know each other better. Targeting teachers and principals as conflict mediators in disputes appears to be relevant in the areas studied, as respondents repeatedly highlighted instances where they were approached to resolve disputes because of their position in the community, and alluded to the wide range of community members with whom they interact by virtue of their role.

CPI found that one of the fundamental problems facing education in Tal Afar is the severe shortage of education staff due to their migration out of the city. This includes not only teachers but also other qualified community members who have left the city due to the violence and conflict. CPI had also found out through dialogues, workshops and meetings with people that the media reports about not accepting the return of refugees who left after 2017 are deliberately spreading misinformation to perpetuate the conflict for various purposes, some of which are political and some geopolitical. Based on these findings, CPI decided to focus on assisting refugees who expressed a desire to return to the city of Tal Afar from outside Iraq. CPI recognised that facilitating the return of refugees would not only contribute to building genuine peace but would also promote social cohesion within the community.

## **7. Facilitating the voluntary return of Tal-Afari refugees from Türkiye**

### **7.1. Background**

According to the data collected by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) in April 2020, there were approximately 1.4 million displaced persons and over 120,000 Iraqi refugees in Türkiye after 2017, over 70,000 refugees from Tal Afar in Ankara alone, and another 4.1 million people in need of humanitarian assistance. Insecurity and fear of reprisals, lack of social cohesion and livelihoods, destroyed or severely damaged housing, and the deterioration of basic community services are hampering people's ability to return to their areas of origin. In addition, although

precise data are not available, both the IOM and the UNHCR are dealing with thousands of Iraqi refugees in neighbouring countries (mainly Türkiye), awaiting repatriation or resettlement, usually to a Western country. These population movements have taken place in different phases, first after the American occupation and the sectarian violence that followed, then in 2013-2014 when IS gained control over large parts of Iraqi territory, and finally during the subsequent military offensive to retake these areas from IS.

The city of Tal Afar is perhaps the most affected of all the cities in the IS-occupied provinces. This may be due to the relatively equal number of Shia and Sunni residents in the city. As a result, almost the entire population of Tal Afar has left the city as internally displaced persons (IDPs) or refugees outside of Iraq, and CPI had observed this during its previous project in Tal Afar's education sector, as there was a noticeable lack of qualified people returning to Tal Afar. In addition, through its discussions, workshops and meetings with people, CPI found that the news circulating in the media about not accepting the return of refugees who left after 2017 was deliberately perpetuating problems for political and geopolitical purposes. Therefore, CPI decided to work on supporting refugees who are willing to return to the city of Tal Afar from outside Iraq, recognising the potential for building peace and social cohesion through this effort. A project was then launched at the end of 2020 with the support of the German FFO.

## **7.2. Aim of the project**

The overall aim of this project was to promote dialogue between Tal Afar refugee leaders in Türkiye and Tal Afar stakeholders, religious figures, tribal leaders and security forces in order to reach a consensus on the conditions for the return of refugees who may be perceived by some local actors as IS-affiliated, and facilitating the vetting process by establishing a clear mechanism that is accepted by all parties.

The specific objectives of the project were to:

1. Build a process of reconciliation and dialogue by facilitating meetings of key actors and promoting channels of communication.
2. Facilitate a process leading to the implementation of small-scale projects jointly developed and implemented by the parties to the conflict, that support confidence-building and reconciliation on the issue of the return of Tal Afari refugees from abroad.

## **7.3. Project activities: returns**

### ***Field missions to Tal Afar***

CPI organised several missions to Tal Afar and meetings with influential figures in the city and found that the potential for refugee return was initially there, and that, due to the large number of refugees and IDPs, the city was facing a shortage of experienced people and human resources. Despite the tragedies that have occurred and the significant divisions that exist, the people of Tal Afar, especially the representatives of the religious institution, have a strong desire for tolerance and forgiveness. As stated by M. J. Al-Moussawi, one of the religious figures of the city of Tal Afar, “cities do not perish; they need spiritual faith and a diversity of beliefs. In order to preserve our existence, we must forgive.”

## ***Exploratory mission to Türkiye***

The majority of Tal Afari refugees are based in Ankara, and it was important to meet with various influential figures, tribal leaders, the head of the Council of Notables and Intellectuals of the Turkmen of Tal Afar in Ankara (CoNT), and the Ankara office of the Turkmen Front, which is the umbrella organisation of all Turkmen political parties, who would play an important role in identifying trusted individuals to work with, and to seek the help of the representatives of the Iraqi Ministry of Migration and Displacement (MoMD) in Türkiye and the Iraqi Embassy in all stages of the project. A mission to Türkiye took place in the spring of 2021, with the aim of:

- (1) Introducing the CPI project to the refugee community in Türkiye and, consequently, to assess the acceptability of the proposed project and methodology.
- (2) Assessing their willingness to participate and learning more about the obstacles preventing them from returning to Iraq.
- (3) Selecting the most relevant participants for the future workshops.
- (4) Informing the Turkish authorities and assessing possible cooperation with them.

Despite a number of challenges, notably Ramadhan and the lockdown imposed by the authorities on the first day of the mission, the mission was successful. Several meetings were held with a group of Turkmen refugees from the city of Tal Afar, and the Iraqi embassy showed its willingness to cooperate and participate in the project. Selecting 20 people who were proven not to be members of IS, who had clearly not carried out crimes and who were not wanted by the Iraqi judiciary, out of 70,000 people who lived in areas under IS administration, and who were also acceptable to these 70,000 refugees was a challenging task. That is why a special coordinator, Abduljabbar Azeez Al-Agha,<sup>13</sup> was appointed to facilitate contact between the communities in Türkiye and Iraq.

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The CPI team was also able to meet with the Turkish authorities and inform them about the project.

The project was warmly welcomed by the Tal Afari community in Ankara and their representatives emphasised the importance of carrying out such a project. They all agreed to take part in future activities and collectively nominated other members of the community to ensure fair representation. The representatives of the Tal Afar refugees were concerned that there were rumours in Tal Afar that could affect any person in Türkiye as a suspected member of IS, or even linked to armed terrorist operations, and therefore they insisted that a representative of the Najaf religious authorities should be with the delegation that would come from Tal Afar, so that they would be a guarantor of the smooth running of the meetings and of the work.

Following this mission, it was decided to: (1) meet and brief a delegation from Tal Afar to attend a workshop with nominated refugee leaders in Türkiye; and (2) organise a workshop in Ankara in early June 2021 to bring together the refugee and host communities.

## ***Workshop in Ankara***

A workshop was organised in Ankara on 5-6 June 2021, which brought together three different groups of participants, namely:

- (1) A delegation from Tal Afar consisting of leading personalities and activists;
- (2) A delegation consisting of representatives of the Iraqi refugee community in Ankara;
- (3) Iraqi government representatives.

The main objectives of this workshop were to:

- (1) Break the ice between the different parties and begin the process of building trust;
- (2) Address the needs and grievances of all sides and to discuss the reasons and obstacles preventing refugees from returning to their AoO.
- (3) Hear and understand the narratives of the different sides in order to begin to identify possible common ground and areas of cooperation.

Two narratives emerged from the discussions with the different parties:

- (1) Narrative of the Tal Afari refugees in Türkiye.
  - Fear of reprisals against families, some of whose members were affiliated to IS.
  - Fear of a generalisation of terrorism charges by the state and/or security forces against all components remaining in IS areas of influence, with very limited evidence of guilt, leading to abusive or illegal detentions, enforced disappearances, etc.
  - Lack of livelihood opportunities and fear of social ostracism due to perceived IS affiliation.
- (2) Narrative of the Tal Afari community within Iraq.
  - Fear that the return of families perceived to be IS would lead to revenge attacks by the host community, causing instability in the liberated areas.
  - Fear that IS fighters would return with the return of their families.

During the workshop, the representative of the MoMD gave a presentation on the role of his office and the results achieved so far. The Türkiye office of the MoMD has been operational since 2016, and its first achievement was the submission of 1,430 requests with the names of refugee workers in Türkiye for their security clearance. In addition, the Türkiye office of the MoMD submitted 1,600 requests with the names of refugees in Türkiye to the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, but this initiative failed due to the working mechanism of the said ministry, which requires the screening of the beneficiary family by a social worker. Due to the lack of such social workers in Türkiye, the initiative was stopped. With regard to voluntary return, the MoMD contributed to the return of 11,642 citizens from Türkiye or from camps on the border with Syria. The MoMD formed a committee to receive the returnees at the Iraqi border and to provide them with food and facilitate the issuance of their passports. In cooperation with some humanitarian organisations, the MoMD also provided free transport for the returnees.

For a refugee in possession of an official or temporary passport, this means that the holder has already been screened and will not be screened again by the security services. However, if a refugee does not have such documents, he/she must be screened. The process of obtaining a passport begins with an appointment at the Iraqi embassy's security office, after which the embassy sends the names of the family members who wish to return to the authorities in Baghdad for security screening. This process can take up to 45 days, after which – if no security problems are found – the passports are handed over to the applicants, who are then allowed to return to Iraq. With regard to the demands made to the MoMD by the participants, the MoMD agreed to meet the three most important ones, namely: (1) “quick” security check/screening; (2) addressing the issue of squatted houses; (3) the repatriation grant provided by the MoMD to the returnees. Regarding the latter, the MoMD needed to know the total number of families wishing to return in order to determine whether or not the

MoMD's budget would cover the grants. Regarding security screening, the minister agreed to work directly with the security apparatus on security screening procedures. The Iraqi National Security Service (NSS) agreed to complete the security screening in order to obtain security clearance for the families wishing to return as soon as possible and within the estimated time frame of two to three days. "There are no security problems in Tal Afar in general or against individuals in particular. Individuals and families who have security clearance have complete freedom and no one can arrest them, everything else is a rumour", the NSS participant stated.

The participants agreed on the following steps with a planned timeline: (1) The names of the families wishing to return were to be submitted by the Ankara delegation to the MoMD Türkiye office for passport issuance. At the same time, the names on the list were handed over to the Tal Afar authorities to begin security screening in cooperation with the relevant security forces of the Joint Operations Command (*1 July 2021*); (2) The passports were issued and handed over by the Iraqi embassy following security checks in Iraq (*23 July 2021*); (3) The families returned from Türkiye on buses provided by the MoMD (*25 July 2021*); (4) The families were met at the Iraqi-Turkish border by a committee from the MoMD and partner organisations, and then they travelled to Tal Afar, where they were met by a committee from the district (*26 July 2021*); (4) A second workshop was organised in Tal Afar once the whole process had been completed for assessment and possible readjustment of the process. After an assessment of the situation, it was agreed that it would be too early to bring all the participants to Tal Afar, so the workshop was to be held in Erbil (*1-2 August 2021*).

### ***First group of returnees***

The working group established during the Ankara workshop started to work and cooperate on the return mechanism. Tasks for each member were well defined and the coordination and communication went smoothly through a shared WhatsApp group. At the beginning of July 2021, the names of the families who submitted a request to return were handed over by the representatives of the refugees (CPI focal points in Ankara) to the Ankara Delegation to the Ministry of Migration and Displacement as well as to the Iraqi Embassy for passport issuance. At the same time, the list was handed over to the authorities in Tal Afar to start the security screening in cooperation with the relevant security forces of the Joint Operations Command. In total 30 families submitted a request, and 25 were approved on time (the others would be part of the second group), making a total of 103 individuals. Two weeks later, mid-July, the travel documents and passports were issued by the Embassy and handed over to the families. Meanwhile, the Tal Afari participants, such as the Mayor, worked on preparing and securing housing in Tal Afar for the returnees, and held some talks to inform the population and to ensure a smooth and successful integration of the returnees. By the end of the month, buses had been chartered by the CPI focal point from the Ministry of Migration and Displacement to bring back the families to Tal Afar. The refugees departed Ankara on July 28th for a 4-day journey back to Iraq. At the border crossing between Türkiye and Iraq, the returnees were received by a committee from the MoMD and partner organizations, and thereafter headed to Tal Afar where they were received by a welcoming committee composed of the CPI initiative's participants.

### ***Workshop in Erbil***

Following several bilateral meetings and consultations with actors from different backgrounds that were held from January to May 2021 in Iraq and Türkiye, and the first workshop that was held in Ankara in June 5-6, 2021, which led to the creation and implementation of a mechanism to bring

back a first group of voluntary refugee families, a second workshop was organized in Erbil on 29–30 August 2021, which gathered three different groups of participants, namely (1) a delegation from Tal Afar composed of notables and activists, (2) a delegation from Ankara made up of representatives of the Iraqi refugee community in Ankara, and (3) representatives from the Iraqi government. The main objectives of this workshop were to: (1) Debrief and present the results of the mechanism for the first group of returnees; (2) Assess and evaluate the positive outcomes and the shortcomings of the mechanism; (3) Find concrete ideas to improve the mechanism and prepare for the second group of returnees.

### ***Second group of returnees***

As a result of the Erbil workshop and in continuation of the voluntary return, a second group was safely repatriated from Türkiye by the MoMD through its office at the Iraqi Embassy in Ankara and in coordination with the relevant security forces of the Joint Operations Command, the Mayor of Tal Afar and the Ministry of Interior of Kurdistan and with the follow-up of the CPI local coordinator.

In mid-September 2021, a list of names for 16 Iraqi Turkmen refugee families (93 persons) with all required civil documents were sent by CPI's local coordinator to the MoMD representative in the Iraqi embassy to proceed with the security screening for the families wishing for voluntary return to obtain the security clearance for them. The Mayor of Tal Afar directed the Police Directorate and Mosul Municipality to evacuate the houses of returnee families in Mosul and Tal Afar. When the security clearance obtained for the families after the security screening was completed, 13 families (77 persons) departed to Iraq from Ankara on 14 October 2021. Two days later, the returning families reached their homes in Tal Afar and Mosul city.

### ***Encouragement for return***

The two groups of returnees assisted by CPI opened opportunities for other Tal Afaris to return home. Indeed, the fear of returns has been alleviated, and trust building was put in place to ensure a peaceful environment to encourage durable additional returns. According to the Iraqi Embassy in Ankara and the Iraqi Ministry of Migration and Displacement, the number of Turkmen refugees (among others) applying individually for voluntary repatriation has drastically increased following CPI's successful programmes in Ankara. Hundreds of families (who have sufficient finances and proper official documents and were able to return to Iraq but were in doubt about their fate if they returned) have now registered with the Iraqi Embassy in Ankara for their voluntary repatriation. The number of these individuals and families has increased, especially after the CPI delegation to Türkiye in June 2021 to hold a conference and discuss the paternity of Iraqi Turkmen refugees who wanted to return to Iraq voluntarily, and other obstacles to their return. The CoNT is building on its previous successful collaboration with CPI, building on the growing trust that CPI has given them through their previous project with the CPI network, the Iraqi Embassy in Ankara and the Iraqi Ministry of Migration and Displacement. The CoNT has assisted in the voluntary repatriation of more than 9 groups of Turkmen refugees to Iraq since its previous collaboration with CPI, including more than 6 groups of Turkmen refugees who returned voluntarily to Iraq from Ankara, Türkiye in 2023.

### *Assisting with identity documents*

According to the last report by CoNT to the MoMD, the number of Tal Afari refugees in Ankara is between 55,000 and 60,000 refugees. Among them are thousands of families who want to return to Iraq but face many difficulties, including underemployment and unemployment, lack of infrastructure and housing, and most importantly issues of Iraqi identity documents:

- Loss of identification documents (civil ID and Iraqi citizenship certificate) during displacement or expiration of the validity of these documents, which becomes an obstacle to obtaining travel documents and other required documents.
- Lack of official documents for newborn children and citizens who died during the period of IS control (2014-2017).
- Lack of official documents for newly married couples (Iraqi marriage contract).

CPI continues to work in Iraq for the safe voluntary return of Iraqi refugees from Türkiye. To this end, and to respond to the request of many Tal Afari refugees in Türkiye who desire to return to their area of origin, but need assistance on the issue of IDs (birth certificates, etc.), CPI has set up in 2023, in coordination with the MoMD, a legal clinic to assist the refugees in obtaining their lost or missing documents, which is the main obstacle for them to return to Iraq.

#### **7.4. Project activities: reintegration**

The returnees need specific reintegration and rehabilitation programmes in Tal Afar in order to consolidate social cohesion in Tal Afar by promoting positive interaction between them and the local community. CPI has supported and strengthened the social and cultural activities to better reintegrate the returnees in Tal Afar. The organisation of social, cultural and sports events gathering youth from among the returnees has contributed to the success of the returns.

The opening of the Cordoba Cultural Café on 15 February 2022 in Tal Afar was a response to a request made in December 2021 by the Mayor of the city, who stressed the need to work on cultural, artistic and sporting aspects in order to promote channels of communication between the citizens of the city. This space, dedicated to the youth and artists of Tal Afar, is a place of meeting and exchange for all Tal Afaris, thus promoting the creation of an environment conducive to dialogue and social cohesion. The Mayor encouraged CPI in this direction and offered his support in the implementation of this activity. The Cordoba Cultural Café, dedicated to the promotion of peace and to peaceful coexistence, is an informal meeting place for young people and is used daily by artists. It is intended to be a safe space where young people can meet, interact freely and organise their own events. It is also used by some international and local NGOs (AVSI, I Will Build Myself Team, Jussor, Masalla, Nama, Nawaya Al-Khair Foundation, PAX, Shafaq, Tal Afar Community Police, UPP, Youth Sustainable Development, ZOA) to organise events, trainings, workshops and focus group meetings.

The following social, cultural and sporting events<sup>14</sup> have been organised in consultation with the local authorities, the mayor, the Tal Afari tribal leaders and the director of the Tal Afar Youth and Sports Centre:

1. Poetry Festival, 5 March 2022
2. Artwork Exhibition, 5 March 2022

3. Informative Cultural Trip, 26 March 2022
4. Football competition, from 11 April to 29 May 2022
5. International Youth Festival – Mosul, 13 August 2022
6. Drawing and Painting Courses – Tal Afar, 3–17 September 2022
7. “Our Heritage is Our Identity Festival”: a cultural and artistic festival, 7 October 2022
8. Football Competition in Mosul – Tal Afar Sport Academy, 7 November – 20 December 2022
9. Journey to Erbil City for Children, 19 November 2022
10. Tal Afar Citadel Mural, December 2022
11. 2023 Arabian Gulf Cup in Basra, 6-19 January 2023
12. Khader Elias Holiday Carnival, 22 February 2023
13. Reintegration Through Football in Tal Afar, 21 March 2023
14. Planting Flowers in Tal Afar General Hospital, 10 July 2023
15. Tour to the Orchards of Tal Afar, 14 July 2023
16. Advocacy Session on the Water Shortage, 14 July 2023
17. Enhancing the “Books’ Sidewalk”, 9 August 2023
18. Young Painters Workshop, 14-17 August 2023
19. Young Female Readers Contest, 18 August 2023
20. Caring for Individuals with Special Needs, 21 August 2023
21. Capacity Building for Youth in Conflict Transformation, 23-25 August 2023
22. Paintings in Support of Refugees and Displaced Persons, 29 August 2023
23. Content Creation for Peacebuilding, 3 September 2023
24. Justice for the Survivors of Tal Afari Turkmen Children and Women, 15 September 2023
25. Youth Travel Visit to Mosul, 25 September 2023
26. An Evening of Poetry in Tal Afar, 27 September 2023
27. Artistic work on the Citadel Mural in Tal Afar, 9 October 2023
28. Supporting Tal Afar’s Academy’s Football Team, 11 September – 14 October 2023
29. Josoor’s Youth Camp in Mosul, 28 October 2023
30. Rehearsal for the Kids Play “My School”, 20 October – 4 November 2023
31. My School and an Evening of Music and Art, 20 October – 10 November 2023
32. Facilitating Nama’s Activity on Social Cohesion, 11–14 November 2023
33. Facilitating ZOA’s Activity for Supporting Farmers, 18 November 2023
34. Facilitation for Al-Iraqiya TV Channel, 27 November 2023
35. Facilitating AVSI’s Activity Straightening Resilience in Ninewa, 29 November 2023
36. Tal Afar’s Community Police’s Activity on Domestic Violence, 9 December 2023
37. Opening Ceremony of Public Park in Tal Afar, 10 December 2023
38. Empowering People with Special Needs in Legal Matters, 12 December 2023
39. From Pain, We Create Hope, 25 December 2023
40. Training Sessions on Citizen Journalism, 19–26 December 2023
41. Enhancing the Role of Educational Counselors in Schools, 27-30 December 2023
42. “I Will Build Myself” Activity for Orphans, 30 December 2023

## 8. Challenges

### 1. Building networks of influencers, experts and stakeholders

CPI’s strategy has been to facilitate the expansion of the network established during the diagnostic phase, not just among stakeholders, but also at the grassroots level. This was a direct consequence of the growing confidence in CPI’s projects. This network’s development was pivotal in selecting the most suitable key players for each project. For instance, at the onset of the missing persons



initiative, CPI engaged more than 300 influential individuals in workshops, conferences, and coordination meetings. While cultivating trust and an expert network might seem straightforward, there are challenges which are meticulously evaluated based on field research, evading any missteps that might jeopardize the project. The selection process of CPI's representatives in Iraq, both local and international, profoundly shaped a thorough comprehension of the Iraqi context. Their expertise in identifying red lines and minimizing risks enabled effective engagement with beneficiaries to tackle challenges constructively.

## **2. The legitimacy and acceptance of the projects**

CPI's work in Iraq has not been based on a pre-designed set of projects; rather, all of the projects it has implemented emerged from the dynamics of Iraq and the evolving understanding of the country and were based on proposals made by the beneficiaries. This method has many advantages when there are common proposals from different parties to the conflict. At the same time, however, this approach can be a challenging task with high expectations. For this reason, CPI has taken an extremely cautious approach in explaining to beneficiaries the framework within which CPI is allowed to operate as a foreign body in Iraq. The use of an Iraqi expert with access to key stakeholders and influencers, and with a broad network across the sectarian divide, to run CPI's programme, and the employment of Iraqi staff in CPI's offices in Baghdad, Erbil and Tal Afar, has been important to the acceptance of the projects.

## **3. Building trust in the third party**

Although the involvement of a foreign third party is often accompanied by certain sensitivities within Iraqi society, both among the general population and the government, the potential work that a foreign third party can accomplish is far greater than that of any local organisation, provided that the foreign third party can earn the necessary trust and prove its neutrality. The parties to the conflict in Iraq view any mediator with suspicion, fearing hidden agendas, and may be wary of foreign involvement because of its foreign status. Paradoxically, however, the parties to the conflict also perceive all local actors as parties to the conflict. Some local actors may be exceptions to this, such as certain tribal leaders with respected historical positions, or actors representing the Marja'iyah in Najaf, who enjoy a high level of acceptance among various parties. CPI took the time to ensure that the interlocutors were convinced of the sincerity of the intentions of each project and established strong working relationships with locally respected actors as true partners, which greatly facilitated the process of building trust with all stakeholders. As Simon Mason points out, "international actors need to work in partnership with local actors, rather than using them as subcontractors."<sup>15</sup> Co-operation between local and international mediators has many advantages, with some local mediators having access and local legitimacy. The local mediator's access and network to work across different conflict lines is key to effective mediation.

## **4. Building trust between the conflict parties**

Beyond the trust between beneficiaries and CPI lies a more central reality: the lack of trust between the conflicting parties themselves, whether it is distrust between communities or between communities and the government. CPI has used several approaches to rebuild trust among beneficiaries. In the project to facilitate the safe return of refugees from Türkiye to Iraq, there was deep mistrust between the Tal Afari community in Türkiye and their counterparts in Tal Afar. The Tal Afar community who had remained feared the return of individuals who might have supported IS, while the Tal Afar refugees in Türkiye were concerned about their safety upon return. Based on

the findings of the preparatory phase, CPI identified local figures who could provide credible reassurances to the parties. Moreover, by addressing issues in a way that benefited all parties, CPI was able to significantly rebuild trust among the beneficiaries. In the missing persons project, the issue of missing persons was often manipulated for political agendas, with different parties claiming specific times and places of disappearance. In order to reduce mistrust between these parties, the optimal approach was to work at the national level and beyond specific time frames. The willingness of different parties to work together played a crucial role in rebuilding trust.

## **5. Engaging in a true dialogue**

In public debates and conferences, influential personalities play to the emotions of their constituencies and deliberately deliver speeches in line with the political messages of certain parties, while in safe meetings they tend to be more open and honest, proposing objective ideas, safe in the knowledge that their audiences will not know their personal opinions. In some cases, certain personalities refused to participate in conferences, although they used to meet with CPI to discuss tensions, conflicts and solutions, and to provide support by introducing CPI to actors who could play an influential role and make valuable suggestions for the success of the projects. The safe mediation space (SMS) methodology proved effective and allowed good results to be achieved.

## **6. Management of the expectations**

When a third party enters a conflict without a direct interest, it often faces questions about its motives for getting involved. For example, in Samarra, CPI was directly questioned about the Swiss government's interest in investing funds in a conflict in which it was not a party and had no direct interest. Despite the transparency with which CPI operates, sharing private details and sources of funding, the parties to the conflict (in Samarra, for example) did not initially understand the nature of the project and had very high expectations, such as the reconstruction of their city. Similarly, in the voluntary return of refugees project, representatives of the refugees, some of whom are former Iraqi military officers, believed that the project was aimed at restoring them to their former positions within the Iraqi army leadership and other government roles. Transparency is key to dealing with these issues, and a conscious effort must be made to ensure that people understand the role of Switzerland and the German government (as international donors) in this project. And it is very important to explain the objectives of the project and the role of CPI and other partners. The fact that CPI's projects in Iraq are funded by the Swiss and German governments has played a very positive role, since traditionally Iraqis have never had any negative experiences influenced by the intentions of either of these two countries. These two countries are widely accepted and seen as "neutral" in the Iraqi context.

## **7. Selecting the legitimate local partners**

"Quantity serves quality", CPI needed to meet and listen to all the people who might have a connection with CPI's projects. CPI needed to understand the dimensions behind these individuals in order to have a clear picture of the benefits of taking on board their suggestions, whether there was a real possibility of relying on them, and the feasibility of their suggestions. This was one of the most challenging tasks, especially in the early stages of CPI's work in Iraq. The CPI team in Iraq had to engage in numerous internal discussions to determine what information could be relied upon.

## **8. Role of spoilers**

One of the major challenges that CPI faced, especially after the projects had begun to be successful, was attempts by certain political entities and organisations to “hijack” these successes and redirect the project towards agendas that served their interests. The level of cooperation with each party was therefore carefully defined. However, when CPI set clear boundaries for such cooperation, some of these entities tried to end their cooperation with the projects.

## **9. Dealing with the properties of the local culture**

In some cases, local cultures are in conflict with European standards. However, respect for local culture is the key to opening all doors, and without the high level of expertise of CPI's team of experts, whether international or local, in dealing with different cultures, especially Middle Eastern cultures, CPI's projects could have taken undesirable paths.

## **10. Challenging work of international organisations in Iraq**

International organisations are accustomed to facing routine challenges of mistrust when embarking on a project in Iraq, due to the sensitivity of the various conflicting parties to the unknown third party or to a neutral mediator. Many religious, governmental and even social partners in Iraq are sceptical about humanitarian programmes that involve international and foreign organisations. International organisations are often seen as foreigners pursuing an agenda based on inaccurate information, while other crises are ignored due to the limited sources of information available to these international organisations. Many projects in Iraq have relied heavily on media information and reports, which have played an important role in analysing the many conflicts that have occurred in Iraq since 2003. Although many conflicts existed before 2003, they have sometimes been overlooked in media sources and many international organisations working in Iraq were not aware of them. In fact, many of Iraq's current conflicts are the result of demographic changes that took place before 2003. For example, between 1968 and 1991, the Baath regime displaced many Kurdish tribes from their villages in Nineveh and Kirkuk provinces.

This resulted in the so-called “disputed territories”<sup>16</sup> created after 2003 between the Kurdistan Region and the federal government, as defined in Article 140 of the Iraqi constitution. There is no significant work by international organisations on social reconciliation in these areas. There are also tribal, social and sectarian crises, such as the Badush prison massacre, where IS killed at least 670 Shia prisoners in an attack on Badush prison near the city of Mosul. IS first separated the Sunni inmates before executing the remaining prisoners,<sup>17</sup> and the Speicher massacre in Tikrit, a genocide that took place in June 2014<sup>18</sup> at the hands of Sunni Iraqi tribes in collaboration with IS, resulting in the killing of more than 1700 Shia Iraqi youth. This massacre was not adequately covered by the international media. The families and tribes of the victims continue to search for the remains of their massacred relatives and demand justice for their sons. Despite this, at the time of writing, no international project has been implemented to alleviate the sectarian tensions (Shia-Sunni) caused by these massacres. These attitudes lead the international organisations to always face questions from the Shia religious institutions or even from some Kurdish and Turkmen active entities about the reasons why the international organisations don't work on programmes that deal with all social components and areas, and all this has caused mistrust between different groups of Iraqis (social, religious and governmental) and the international organisations. The international programmes in Iraq should be balanced between all Iraqi areas, and the only way to understand the conflicts and

give the priorities and balance is to conduct sufficient field studies to have comprehensive solutions to the different conflicts.

## 9. Lessons learned

The conflict in Iraq is often portrayed as a sectarian religious conflict (Shia-Sunni or Sunni-Yazidi etc.), because the divisions in society are largely along religious lines. However, the conflict also has a political and authority-based dimension, as well as a geopolitical aspect that affects both the religious and ethnic components of society, where political entities achieve certain political goals while leaving the grassroots conflict unresolved. Many international and UN organisations have implemented humanitarian and national reconciliation programmes in Iraq. The success of these programmes has varied depending on how well these organisations have understood the nature and causes of the crises in Iraq. Cooperation between Iraqis and these organisations depends on the level of trust between them, which is greatly improved when Iraqis are involved in the design and implementation of programmes. This approach has been central to CPI's projects. CPI has also been keen to collect and analyse information directly from the beneficiaries themselves, regardless of their background or level of expertise.

The development of programmes that contribute to peacebuilding in specific areas can eventually be expanded to a national level, like the Missing Persons Project, which was initially piloted in Samarra and later expanded to a national level.

Some small and targeted projects contribute to a better understanding of the level of conflict and pave the way for more significant projects. This was the case with the education project in Tal Afar, which led to the creation of a very important initiative: Facilitating the Voluntary Return of Tal Afari Refugees from Türkiye.

There are often spill-over effects that occur during the implementation of a specific project. For example, the workshop in Erbil on the voluntary return of Turkmen refugees from Türkiye to Tal Afar helped build trust between the official authorities in the Kurdistan Regional Government and experts from the Ministry of Migration and Displacement in Baghdad. This cooperation led to the return of 47 Kurdish refugees from Türkiye to Syria and then back to Iraq, in coordination between the Ministry of Migration and Displacement and the KRG. Interestingly, this programme was not originally part of CPI's planned activities in Iraq.

In addition, there has been significant convergence between various religious, governmental and tribal entities, both Arab and Kurdish, Shia and Sunni, as a result of the Najaf conference on the "Right to Know" law. These unexpected convergences, which were not initially included in CPI's programme, later allowed CPI to coordinate between these entities to address and resolve issues unrelated to the Missing Persons Programme. CPI was also able to invest these side effects in peacebuilding efforts.

Another example of spillover is when a request was made to approve a 'proof of citizenship' mission to Türkiye to prove the citizenship of Iraqi Turkmen citizens in Türkiye. The Ministry of Migration and Displacement subsequently sent another mission, funded by the Iraqi government, to the Iraqi refugee camps in Iran. These refugees were forcibly displaced by Saddam's regime in 1980 and have not received any official documents proving their Iraqi nationality for themselves or their children born there.

Based on the principle of investing in the side effects. CPI has tried to take advantage of every positive opportunity for peacebuilding, even when it was not part of its programme. CPI's work is still ongoing, and the considerable expertise CPI has gained in Iraq can be of benefit to a wide range of beneficiaries, on many levels.

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- <sup>1</sup> At the London Conference of the Iraqi Opposition, 14-17 December 2002, the Iraqi Governing Council was set up to govern Iraq after the US invasion and the removal of Saddam's regime. The Iraqi Governing Council was based on a quota system based on faith and ethnicity.
- <sup>2</sup> For more information, see the UN [OCHA page on Iraq](#).
- <sup>3</sup> Kheira Tarif and Sarah Franck. [Promoting social cohesion and interaction through the notion of citizenship](#). Istanbul, 2–4 June 2016. Cordoba Workshops Reports Series. Cordoba Peace Institute - Geneva, June 2016.
- <sup>4</sup> Catherine Germond. [Promoting social cohesion and interaction through the notion of citizenship](#). Montreux, 22–24 November 2016. Cordoba Workshops Reports Series. Cordoba Peace Institute - Geneva. November 2016.
- <sup>5</sup> Catherine Germond. [Promoting social cohesion and interaction through the notion of citizenship](#). Istanbul, 9–10 October 2017. Cordoba Workshops Reports Series. Cordoba Peace Institute - Geneva. October 2017.
- <sup>6</sup> Renad Mansour. [Tribes and Religious Institutions in Iraq](#). Cordoba Research Papers Series. Cordoba Peace Institute - Geneva. September 2017.
- <sup>7</sup> While acknowledging that the Marja'iyah as such belongs to the category of “religious leaders”, it enjoys a special status of respect among Iraqis (Muslims and non-Muslims) and is thus placed in a separate category, while other religious leaders can only have influence among their followers.
- <sup>8</sup> Jean-Nicolas Bitter. Transforming Conflicts with Religious Dimensions: Using the Cultural-Linguistic Model. In Religion in Conflict Transformation, ed. Simon J A Mason and Damiano A Sguaitamatti. [Revue de politique étrangère, Politorbis, vol. 52](#), pp. 27-32. Swiss FDFA and Center for Security Studies, ETH Zurich (2011).
- <sup>9</sup> Jean-Nicolas Bitter. Mediation Space and Diapraxis. In [Approaches to conflict transformation: Lessons from Algeria, Denmark, Egypt, Kenya, Morocco, Tajikistan and Yemen](#), ed. Owen Frazer and Lakhdar Ghattas. Conflict Transformation in Practice. Cordoba Research Papers. Cordoba Peace Institute - Geneva (2013).
- <sup>10</sup> Anaël Jambers. [Mediating the Space: Women and Religion in Morocco](#). Cordoba Research Papers. Cordoba Peace Institute - Geneva (2020).
- <sup>11</sup> Jean-Nicolas Bitter, Simon J. A. Mason, Emanuel Schaeublin and Angela Ullmann. [Mediation Space: Addressing Obstacles Stemming from Worldview Differences to Regain Negotiation Flexibility](#). CSS Mediation Resources. Center for Security Studies (CSS), ETH Zurich (2022).
- <sup>12</sup> <https://www.chathamhouse.org/about-us/chatham-house-rule>
- <sup>13</sup> Abdul Jabbar Azeez Al-Agha, the head of the Turkmen Council of Elders in Tal Afar, is a highly respected figure. He is the general sheikh of the Halaybek Turkmen tribe (Sunni) and enjoys a high level of trust among Turkmen parties in Iraq and Türkiye, as well as Iraqi government officials. He left the city of Tal Afar after it fell to ISIS because of his previous stances against social and sectarian division in the city. These positions made him the target of numerous assassination attempts by al-Qaeda prior to 2014. After he left Tal Afar in 2014, ISIS carried out attacks, including bombing the compound that housed his residence, the homes of his sons, and a private guesthouse used to host tribal elders from across Iraq. He later died as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. His death was a significant loss for projects aimed at rebuilding social cohesion and peace in Tal Afar, as well as for CPI-led initiatives in the city.
- <sup>14</sup> <https://cpi-geneva.org/category/activities/ongoing-programmes/middle-east/iraq/>
- <sup>15</sup> Brugger, Fritz; Holliger, Joane; and Mason, Simon J. A. [Triple Nexus in Fragile Contexts: Next Steps](#). Policy Perspectives. Vol. 10/9. Center for Security Studies (CSS) / ETH Zürich (2022).
- <sup>16</sup> Coles, Isabel (November 18, 2012). [Iraqi Kurdish leader says region will defend itself](#). Reuters. Retrieved 1 September 2023.
- <sup>17</sup> Nebehay, Stephanie; Rasheed, Ahmed (25 August 2014). [U.N. accuses Islamic State of mass killings](#). Reuters. Archived from the original on 2 December 2020. Retrieved 1 September 2023.
- <sup>18</sup> Nordland, Rod; Rubin, Alissa J. (15 June 2014). [Massacre Claim Shakes Iraq](#). The New York Times. ISSN 0362-4331. Archived from the original on 28 March 2022. Retrieved 1 September 2023.

