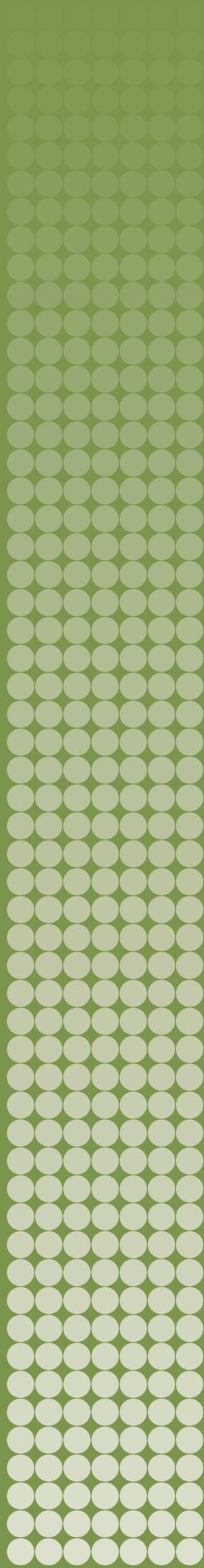


POST-CONFLICT RECONSTRUCTION IN THE NINEVEH PLAINS OF IRAQ

Agriculture, Cultural Practices and Social Cohesion

AMAL BOURHROUS, SHIVAN FAZIL AND
DYLAN O'DRISCOLL



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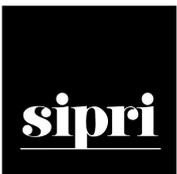
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Signalistgatan 9
SE-169 72 Solna, Sweden
Telephone: +46 8 655 97 00
Email: sipri@sipri.org
Internet: www.sipri.org

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November 2022



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Preface

During its occupation of Nineveh between 2014 and 2017, the Islamic State (IS) particularly targeted ethnic and religious communities. Its aim was to erase all traces of the long-standing pluralism and coexistence in one of the most diverse regions of Iraq. IS deliberately destroyed sites of cultural, spiritual and religious significance to these communities and devastated their farming-based livelihoods. The unprecedented level of damage caused means that it will take several more years and considerable resources before Nineveh and its communities can recover from the traumatic experience of the IS occupation.

In this insightful study, Amal Bourhrous, Shivan Fazil and Dylan O'Driscoll stress the need for a holistic approach to post-conflict reconstruction in the Nineveh Plains. By listening to those most directly affected, they offer a new perspective that looks beyond the rebuilding of the physical environment and the re-establishment of economic structures. They conclude that post-conflict reconstruction must pay adequate attention to restoring the ability of communities to engage in the very cultural and religious practices and traditions that IS tried to destroy. These practices can then be used as tools to mend social and intercommunity relations in the Nineveh Plains.

The authors' fresh analysis and concrete recommendations will be of interest to policymakers in Iraq, actors engaged in post-conflict reconstruction in Nineveh and elsewhere, humanitarian and development aid providers, as well as local actors who are part of reconstruction efforts on the ground. Their relevance also extends beyond the Nineveh Plains to post-conflict settings around the world.

Dan Smith
Director, SIPRI
Stockholm, November 2022

Acknowledgements

This publication was made possible through support provided by the Innovation, Technology and Research Hub of the United States Agency for International Development, through the Long-term Assistance and Services for Research–Partners for University-Led Solutions Engine (LASER PULSE) under the terms of Cooperative Agreement No. 7200AA18CA00009. The opinions expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the US Agency for International Development. The hub, together with USAID’s Bureau for the Middle East and Iraq Mission, also provided invaluable feedback. The authors would like to acknowledge the immeasurable support of Brian Bingham and Clint Hanna during the review process.

Special recognition is due to the data-collection team of Dr Remonda Armia, Dr Hassan Najman Muhamed, Dr Atheel Najib Yousef, Dr Wafaa Sabah Khudr, Dr Ban Hikmat, Mirna Raad Azzo, Dr Nabaz Mohammed and Rayan Hilal Khalat from the University of Dohuk and Shivan Fazil from SIPRI. The authors would also like to extend a special thanks to those who shared their experiences and insights in the survey and in interviews.

Sincere gratitude also goes to Luc van de Goor, Dr Farah Hegazi and the independent reviewer for their feedback. Thanks are also owed to the SIPRI outreach and editorial departments for editing, publishing and promoting the report.

Last but not least, the authors would also like to show appreciation to all those who supported them throughout the research process, noting in particular colleagues from the LASER PULSE programme and the University of Notre Dame’s Pulte Institute for Global Development. Without their drive and dedication for this project, it would not have been possible.

Summary

Between 2014 and 2017, tens of thousands of Iraqis were killed and millions were displaced as a result of the brutal occupation by the Islamic State (IS) group and the subsequent military campaign to defeat it. IS particularly targeted ethnic and religious communities living in Nineveh province in northern Iraq, including Assyrians, Chaldeans, Kaka'i, Shabaks, Syriacs, Turkmen and Yazidis. Members of these communities were executed, enslaved or forcibly converted to IS's radical form of Sunni Islam. Infrastructure and houses were reduced to rubble, and livelihoods based on crop and livestock farming were devastated. In addition, the destruction of many historical, religious and cultural heritage sites resulted in a sense of spiritual loss and community estrangement.

Given the unprecedented level of destruction, it will take many years and considerable resources before Nineveh and its people can recover from the traumatic experience of the IS occupation. Substantial reconstruction and reconciliation efforts are needed to address the compounded social, cultural and economic effects on ethnic and religious communities in Nineveh.

Post-conflict reconstruction must not focus exclusively on rebuilding the physical environment and re-establishing economic structures. It should also pay adequate attention to restoring the ability of communities to engage in their cultural and religious practices and traditions and to mending social and intercommunity relations. In Nineveh, such an approach would call for the restoration of agricultural activities as an integral part of reconstruction efforts, as these activities are both economically and culturally important and, at the same time, have implications for intercommunity relations. In restoring agricultural activities, however, it is important to also address other current challenges, such as the impacts of climate change and water scarcity.

This SIPRI Research Policy Report explores how actors engaged in different types of intervention in the Nineveh Plains can better assist communities in rehabilitating economic activities and livelihoods, reinstating cultural and religious practices, and strengthening social cohesion. It draws on data from 216 interviews with community leaders, civil society activists, farmers and villagers, and internally displaced persons as well as on survey data from 892 farmers and villagers in Al-Hamdaniya, Tal Kayf and Bashiqa.

The findings show that farmers have struggled to restore agricultural activities due to the lack of financial resources to buy agricultural input such as equipment, seeds and fertilizers. In a region where agriculture is predominantly rainfed, limited rainfall and drought, coupled with the limited ability to install irrigation systems, has resulted in significant income losses and economic hardship.

The study also shows that restoring the ability of people to engage in cultural and religious practices is crucial in the aftermath of conflict. The survey findings show that in Nineveh the ability to engage in cultural and religious practices has a considerable bearing on people's identity and on their sense of belonging to the area and to Iraq in general. For many people, it has largely informed decisions to return home from displacement. In addition, the findings show that questions of religion, culture and identity are crucial in efforts to strengthen social cohesion and ease intercommunity tensions in Nineveh.

Restoring agriculture and reinstating religious and cultural practices are both key areas where assistance is needed. In these efforts, however, it is important to recognize the strong linkages between economy and culture, and between agricultural activities and cultural meaning. Close attention to the cultural and social significance of farming practices allows reconstruction actors to identify effective ways to address multiple

aspects of local needs at the same time. Moreover, it gives substance to the holistic approach to restoring life in Nineveh.

Drawing on the findings from this study on the Nineveh Plains and its people-centred approach, a number of principles and lessons learned have been identified that are relevant for and can be tailored to apply to reconstruction processes in other post-conflict contexts. These lessons include the need for action to be guided, above all, by the 'do no harm' principle in order to avoid exacerbating existing inequities, tensions or vulnerabilities. They also include the need to engage with those affected, to restore their livelihoods in line with the realities on the ground, and to restore their ability to engage in their cultural and religious practices. Reconstruction actors should, furthermore, harness the potential of existing resources, knowledge and traditions of intercommunity exchange and cooperation. They should also pay close attention to social dynamics and ensure that their interventions contribute to promoting social cohesion. Last but not least, reconstruction efforts should be viewed as an opportunity to address issues that, while not directly related to the conflict, can nonetheless influence recovery. Reconstruction should therefore be an opportunity for reform to address issues that predate the conflict, as well as an opportunity to strengthen long-term resilience by fully integrating climate change response and adaptation.

Abbreviations

IED	Improvised explosive device
IS	Islamic State
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
KRI	Kurdistan Region of Iraq
NGO	Non-governmental organization
PMF	Popular Mobilization Forces

1. Introduction

The three-and-a-half-year occupation by the Islamic State (IS) group left deep scars on Nineveh province in northern Iraq. Between 2014 and 2017, tens of thousands of Iraqis were killed and millions were forced to flee their homes to seek refuge elsewhere in Iraq or in other countries. Many people suffered disease and starvation. The livelihoods of local communities were devastated, with impacts still evident to this day. IS systematically ravaged farms, sabotaged wells and irrigation systems, cut down trees, vandalized machinery, and stole livestock—destroying the means of subsistence and the sources of income on which these communities depended. In the Sinjar district of Nineveh, IS perpetrated a genocidal campaign against the Yazidi community, and thousands of Yazidi women and girls were abducted and held in sexual slavery.¹ Cities, towns and villages as well as infrastructure were also reduced to ruins as a result of the intense fighting between IS and the military forces deployed to defeat it. Assessments conducted by the United Nations show the colossal destruction of Mosul, its homes, its water and electricity infrastructure, its schools and healthcare facilities, and its roads and bridges.² The old city of Mosul was almost entirely devastated, with some of the oldest and most prominent historical landmarks destroyed or vandalized.³ The damage to museums and libraries, cultural heritage and archaeological sites as well as sacred spaces was also considerable.

A joint assessment by the World Bank and the Iraqi government estimated the cost of damage to historic religious buildings at around 56.2 billion Iraqi dinar (US\$47 million).⁴ Yet the destruction of tangible heritage has also had an impact beyond the demolition of monuments that have historical and aesthetic importance: it has caused immense grief and suffering to local communities for whom the sites have meaning as places of intangible heritage—a heritage that is constitutive of their identity and their sense of community.⁵ IS particularly targeted ethnic and religious communities living in Nineveh province—Assyrians, Chaldeans, Kaka'i, Shabaks, Syriacs, Turkmen and Yazidis, among others. In desecrating sites of cultural, spiritual and religious significance to these communities, such as churches, mosques and temples, IS sought to prevent people from living as Assyrians, Chaldeans, Kaka'i, Shabaks, Syriacs, Turkmen and Yazidis. The destruction of these sites thwarted the ability of the minorities in Nineveh to engage in their cultural and religious practices, such as rituals, celebrations and pilgrimages. By targeting these communities and their ways of life, IS sought to destroy the diversity and the pluralism of a historically multicultural area where different ethnic and religious groups have long lived side by side. This was a deliberate attempt to erase the traces of centuries of ethnic and religious coexistence.

With destruction on such a large scale, it will undoubtedly take several more years before Nineveh and its people can recover from the traumatic experience of the IS occupation, and considerable resources are needed to finance reconstruction efforts in the area. Moreover, given that the destruction caused by IS has affected all aspects of life in Nineveh, it is important that reconstruction be comprehensive. Reconstruction is a complex process that needs to connect and integrate multiple elements and levels

¹ Iraqi Government and World Bank, *Iraq Reconstruction and Development, part 2, Damage and Needs Assessment of Affected Governorates* (World Bank: Washington, DC, Jan. 2018); and Ibrahim, P. and Ismael, M., 'Yazidi post-genocide plight—Severe challenges eight years on', *Newsweek*, 2 Aug. 2020.

² UN Human Settlement Programme (UN-Habitat), 'Mosul multi-sector damage assessment', 8 July 2017.

³ Curry, A., 'Here are the ancient sites ISIS has damaged and destroyed', *National Geographic*, 1 Sep. 2015.

⁴ Iraqi Government and World Bank (note 1).

⁵ Isakhan, B. and Shahab, S., 'The Islamic State's destruction of Yazidi heritage: Responses, resilience and reconstruction after genocide', *Journal of Social Archeology*, vol. 20, no. 1 (Feb. 2020).

to be successful.⁶ To date, however, reconstruction in Nineveh has mainly focused on the more visible physical aspects—such as rebuilding houses and infrastructure and demining the landscape—and on restoring economic activities and sources of income. These are undoubtedly crucial for facilitating the return of the hundreds of thousands of people who are still displaced. However, it is important to remember that the IS occupation has also had a deep impact on the ability to engage in cultural and religious practices and on social cohesion and intercommunity relations.⁷ To help communities heal and for recovery to be sustainable in the long run, it is necessary to adopt a broader and more holistic approach to reconstruction in which these issues are addressed as well.

This SIPRI Research Policy Report thus stresses the importance of adopting a holistic approach to post-conflict reconstruction to tackle the complex and multidimensional issues that confront communities in post-IS Nineveh. It argues that, in order to achieve sustainable results, reconstruction efforts must be informed by the larger cultural, religious and socio-economic context of the area and anchored in local everyday life. Physical environments and economic structures, for example, arguably form part of a cultural context and bear cultural meaning, and it is important that actors engaged in post-conflict reconstruction understand this cultural context. However, a holistic approach to post-conflict reconstruction does not only mean that the reconstruction of buildings and economies needs to take local cultural contexts and prevailing social dynamics as its point of departure. It also means that reconstruction must include efforts to restore the social and cultural fabric of the area, by reinstating religious and cultural practices and strengthening social cohesion. Finally, it means that reconstruction actors recognize and take into account the interconnectedness of physical environments, economic structures, cultural practices, and social relations and intercommunity dynamics in reconstruction processes. There will always be a pragmatic need to set priorities in post-conflict reconstruction, but a holistic approach also helps guide the setting of these priorities in being mindful of how intervention in one area usually has implications for other areas and how challenges may be located at different levels.

In a holistic approach to post-conflict reconstruction in Nineveh, one natural focus would be on assisting communities in restoring agricultural activities. These agricultural practices have traditionally been the main source of income for households, and restoring them is crucial not only for rebuilding the economy but also for restoring a variety of religious and cultural practices linked to them and for improving social relations. Restoring agricultural practices thus also facilitates and contributes to the fulfilment of other important tasks in post-conflict reconstruction: reinstating religious and cultural practices and reinforcing social cohesion.

In Nineveh, however, it is also important that reconstruction initiatives combine actions to address the impacts of the IS occupation and the grievances of communities with effective responses to other current pressing challenges, such as the effects of climate change.⁸ Addressing reconstruction needs while at the same time integrating measures to mitigate the impacts of water scarcity and climate change would ensure a sustainable reconstruction process that improves on what was there before—‘builds back better’—and facilitates durable solutions for local communities.⁹

⁶ O’Driscoll, D., ‘Physical and societal (re)construction in Nineveh post Islamic State’, eds M. Lynch and M. Yahya, *The Politics of Post-conflict Reconstruction*, Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) Studies no. 30 (POMEPS: Washington, DC, Sep. 2018).

⁷ Buffenstein, A., ‘A monumental loss: Here are the most significant cultural heritage sites that ISIS has destroyed to date’, *Artnet News*, 30 May 2017.

⁸ SIPRI and NUPI, ‘Iraq’, *Climate, Peace and Security Fact Sheet*, Apr. 2022.

⁹ Hallegatte, S., Rentschler, J. and Walsh, B., *Building Back Better: Achieving Resilience through Stronger, Faster, and More Inclusive Post-disaster Reconstruction* (World Bank: Washington, DC, 2018).

Key issues and challenges in post-conflict reconstruction

Traditional approaches to post-conflict reconstruction tend to focus on rebuilding the physical environment and reconstructing the economy, while paying little attention to restoring cultural practices and social relations.¹⁰ Post-conflict reconstruction does not take place in a vacuum but rather in a context that has its own political, socio-economic and cultural structures. The experience of conflict and violence may create shifts in these structures, but it is a fallacy to think that the change is so sweeping that it results in a blank slate on which external interventions can freely sketch according to some existing blueprint of what the new society ought to look like. While reconstruction processes can be transformative, the role of external actors is to help the local communities build peace and to support them in bringing about those transformations that they choose according to their own needs and visions for the future. Too often, however, reconstruction initiatives build predominantly on economic assessments and international benchmarks and, despite the best intentions, they tend to have only a limited engagement with the people directly affected by the conflict and its aftermath.¹¹

It is also important to recognize that reconstruction processes are never neutral or merely technical. Reconstruction is eminently political, with power relations embedded at various levels. These include, for example, power relations left over from and shaped by the period of conflict and power relations rooted in the interaction between local communities and external actors.¹² A critical examination of post-conflict reconstruction, and external interventions more broadly, reveals the relations of power and violence (symbolic and structural) involved in these processes.¹³ This is particularly the case when peacebuilding is construed as state-building, often through top-down, securitized policies that undermine legitimacy, impede processes of transitional justice and create the conditions for recurring cycles of violence.¹⁴

Moreover, although the phrase ‘post-conflict reconstruction’ suggests a clear demarcation between conflict and peace, this is misleading, as tensions and violence of various sorts often persist even after the conflict is considered to have ceased.¹⁵ This means that reconstruction initiatives need to be particularly attentive to social relations and mindful of tensions to make sure that interventions do not end up unintentionally exacerbating them.

Other issues also need to be taken into consideration when developing post-conflict reconstruction programmes. One of them is how to manage reconstruction in ways that, as much as possible, enable reform and avoid reproducing past failures.¹⁶ This demands a deep understanding of the root causes of conflict and of the ways in which the conditions that led to it can be transformed to avoid relapses and the renewal of violence. In other words, reconstruction understood as a return to the status quo ante is neither possible nor desirable, and some degree of reform needs to be built into reconstruction plans and interventions. This can, for example, mean implementing

¹⁰ Pugh, M., ‘The political economy of peacebuilding: A critical theory perspective’, *International Journal of Peace Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2 (autumn/winter 2005); and Barbara, J., ‘Rethinking neo-liberal state building: Building post-conflict development states’, *Development in Practice*, vol. 18, no. 3 (2008).

¹¹ Lynch, M. and Yahya, M., ‘Introduction’, eds Lynch and Yahya (note 6).

¹² Kirsch, S. and Flint, C., ‘Geographies of reconstruction: Re-thinking post-war spaces’, eds M. Turner and F. P. Kühn, *The Politics of International Intervention: The Tyranny of Peace* (Routledge: New York, 2015).

¹³ Newman, E., ‘The violence of statebuilding in historical perspective: Implications for peacebuilding’, *Peacebuilding*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2013).

¹⁴ Mako, S. and Edgar, A. D., ‘Evaluating the pitfalls of external statebuilding in post-2003 Iraq (2003–2021)’, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, vol. 15, no. 4 (2021).

¹⁵ Mac Ginty, R., *No War, No Peace: The Rejuvenation of Stalled Peace Processes and Peace Accords* (Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke, 2006); and O’Driscoll, D., ‘Everyday peace and conflict: (Un)privileged interactions in Kirkuk, Iraq’, *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 42, no. 10 (2021).

¹⁶ O’Driscoll (note 6).

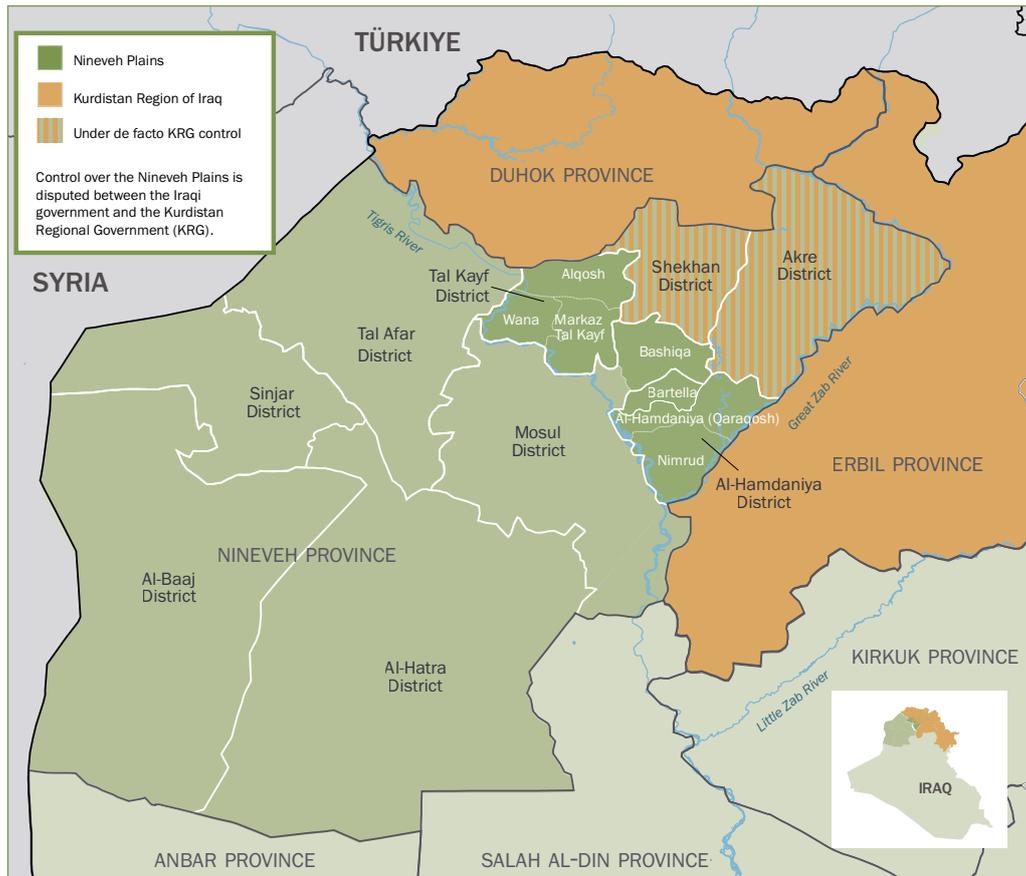


Figure 1.1. Map of Nineveh province and the Nineveh Plains

projects and initiatives that not only rebuild what existed in the past but also try to address the new challenges of the present. Perhaps the most pressing of these challenges is the impact of climate change and environmental degradation. Combining processes of peacebuilding and reconstruction with climate change response and adaptation is increasingly seen as the way to respond to multiple levels of fragility and insecurity.¹⁷

A key component of post-conflict reconstruction is to restore the socio-economic fabric of society.¹⁸ Traditionally, post-conflict economic reconstruction has followed norms and implemented policies that, broadly speaking, can be put under the liberal peace agenda, including privatization, market liberalization and growth. However, these policies are often disconnected from local contexts. What is needed, instead, is an approach that pays special attention to the local political economy, particularly everyday economic realities, structures and relationships.¹⁹ Anchored firmly in the local, such an approach would thus also be mindful of the implications of economic structures for other aspects of society, such as cultural practices and social cohesion. Accordingly, initiatives and plans would be developed to meet the needs of communities in ways that correspond to the distinctive characteristics of the local context.

Moreover, all reconstruction efforts must in general strive, as much as possible, to be just and inclusive, as different segments of society tend to have different needs and expectations.

¹⁷ Black, R. et al., *Environment of Peace: Security in a New Era of Risk* (SIPRI: Stockholm, 2022).

¹⁸ Del Castillo, G., *Rebuilding War-torn States: The Challenge of Post-conflict Economic Reconstruction* (Oxford University Press: London, 2008).

¹⁹ Vogel, B., 'The economic local turn in peace and conflict studies: Economic peacebuilding interventions and the everyday', *New Political Economy*, published online 5 Mar. 2022.

Contextualizing post-conflict reconstruction in Nineveh

Nineveh is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious province in the north of Iraq, bordering Syria and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). The Tigris River crosses Nineveh from north to south, running through Mosul. On the left bank of the river lies the Nineveh Plains, home to Assyrian, Chaldean, Kaka'i, Shabak, Syriac, Turkmen and Yazidi communities. The right bank is predominantly inhabited by Sunni Arabs.

Nineveh is considered to be the breadbasket of Iraq. Prior to the IS occupation, production of wheat and barley in Nineveh province represented 23 per cent and 38 per cent, respectively, of national production.²⁰ Agriculture is the main economic activity in the area, and a large number of households rely on crop production and livestock farming for their livelihoods. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), agricultural activities account for 70 per cent of household income in Nineveh.²¹ Livestock or pastoral farming (i.e. cattle, sheep and goats, poultry, etc.) account for 20 per cent of agriculture activity.²² However, problems related to climate change and water scarcity are a major concern, as agriculture in Nineveh is predominantly rainfed and thus particularly vulnerable to variations in rainfall and water supply.

Nineveh's boundary to the north-east is disputed between the Iraqi government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), which have competed for administrative authority in the aftermath of the United States-led invasion in 2003. The two governments' competing territorial claims in the Nineveh Plains include the districts of Tal Kayf and Al-Hamdaniya, as well as the subdistrict of Bashiqa (see figure 1.1). The KRG brought the Nineveh Plains under its control in June 2014, when the Iraqi Army collapsed during the advance of IS through large swathes of Iraq. In 2017, as the major military operations to defeat IS came to an end, the competition and the tensions between the Iraqi government and the KRG further intensified, as the latter's push for greater autonomy led to the organization of a referendum for independence that also included the disputed territories.²³ In response, the Iraqi government retook parts of the Nineveh Plains and other disputed territories from the KRG's control after the Iraqi Army, supported by Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)—a state-sponsored paramilitary organization composed of different militias—forced the retreat of the Kurdish military forces, known as the Peshmerga. To this day, security remains fragmented in Nineveh, with various security forces—the Iraqi security forces, the PMF and the Peshmerga—controlling different parts of the province. This struggle over authority has been partly responsible for government failure to meet the needs of the population, and for gradually increasing insecurity and tensions, including within and between different ethnic and religious communities.

Minority groups in the Nineveh Plains often complain of being caught in the middle of this ongoing struggle for administrative control. In their competition for the political loyalty of minorities, the Iraqi government and the KRG have each tried to sway community leaders to support their policies. In the wake of the conflict, they have also sought to allay the fears and security concerns of different communities by creating security units and brigades composed of members of minority communities (whether

²⁰ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), 'The Republic of Iraq: Drought in the northern parts of the country', Global Information and Early Warning System on Food and Agriculture (GIEWS) Update, 11 June 2021.

²¹ Food and Agriculture Organization (note 20).

²² International Organization for Migration (IOM) Iraq, *Rural Areas in Ninewa: Legacies of Conflict on Rural Economies and Communities in Sinjar and Ninewa Plains* (IOM: Baghdad, 2019).

²³ Park, B. et al., 'On the independence referendum in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and disputed territories in 2017', *Kurdish Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2 (Oct. 2017); and O'Driscoll, D. and Baser, B., 'Independence referendums and nationalist rhetoric: The Kurdistan Region of Iraq', *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 40, no. 11 (2019).

under the PMF or the Peshmerga) in the name of community self-defence.²⁴ Thus, while the Nineveh Plains is caught in the wider struggle for administrative control between the Iraqi government and the KRG, the proliferation of security actors with competing political objectives undermines social cohesion, as it fuels intergroup competition and exacerbates ethnosectarian tensions in the province. This is also linked to the divergent political affinities of minority groups, with some supporting Kurdish parties and others more in favour of following the Iraqi government, as well as tensions within the communities themselves. Tensions between the different security actors operating in Nineveh also have repercussions for the rest of Iraq.

As these political and security dynamics make abundantly clear, post-conflict reconstruction in Nineveh takes place in an extremely complex context. Further adding to this complexity are the deep scars left by decades of Arabization campaigns by the former Ba'athist regime. These campaigns aggressively sought to alter the demographic composition and the cultural identity of northern Iraq through ethnic cleansing and killings, torture, forced displacement, land expropriations, and forced conversions.²⁵ The persecution of minorities in Nineveh in the past and again under IS, together with the pervasiveness of violence and insecurity in Iraq since the US-led invasion in 2003, is at the root of enduring grievances and feelings of distrust among minorities.

A note on methodology

This report relies on data collected between May 2020 and April 2021 through a survey and two rounds of interviews conducted by local multilingual enumerators who received full training by SIPRI. In the first round of interviews, in August–October 2020, 94 interviews were conducted with community leaders from the Nineveh Plains, such as civil society activists, religious figures and political leaders. In the second round, in February–April 2021, 107 interviews were conducted with farmers and villagers, and 15 with internally displaced persons. In between the two rounds of interviews, enumerators conducted surveys of 892 farmers and villagers. The survey was programmed on tablets in Arabic, Syriac and Kurdish, and respondents were given the option to complete potentially sensitive information such as ethnosectarian affiliation directly on a tablet without the enumerator seeing the responses. Apart from this, all aspects of the survey were completed by the enumerators. In addition to seeking gender balance and proportional representation of ethnosectarian groups throughout the data-collection process, sampling was also designed to ensure geographical representation of various parts of the districts of Al-Hamdaniya and Tal Kayf and of the subdistrict of Bashiqa (in the north of Mosul district) depending on their estimated population sizes, as well as to ensure an even balance of farmers and villagers across the region.

It is also important to note that the designations used to refer to groups are fraught with difficulties and often reflect narratives and processes in which certain cultural, ethnic and linguistic identities are dominated, marginalized and eclipsed. For example, there are many debates over whether the term 'Assyrian' encompasses all Christians in Iraq, including Chaldeans and Syriacs, and over whether referring to these groups as Christians emphasizes their religious affiliation but obscures the

²⁴ Fazil, S., 'The political marginalisation of ethnic and religious minorities in Iraq', *Manara Magazine*, 17 Mar. 2022.

²⁵ Human Rights Watch, 'On vulnerable ground: Violence against minority communities in Nineveh province's disputed territories', 10 Nov. 2009.

cultural, ethnic and linguistic dimensions of their identity.²⁶ In this report, the term 'Christians' was chosen, as it is the broader term and also a term that the Assyrian, Chaldean and Syriac participants often used to refer to themselves.

The report proceeds as follows. Chapter 2 focuses on the importance of restoring agricultural activities in the Nineveh Plains as a locally grounded approach to post-conflict economic reconstruction in the area. At the same time, it demonstrates the need to integrate responses to the mounting challenges and risks caused by climate change and water scarcity. Chapter 3 highlights the crucial task of restoring cultural and religious practices as an essential part of post-conflict reconstruction in the region while also stressing the significance of agriculture for these practices. Chapter 4 addresses the role of social cohesion and intercommunity relations in supporting processes of recovery and healing as part of post-conflict reconstruction in Nineveh. It underscores the importance of both agricultural activities and religious and cultural practices for intercommunity relations and social cohesion. Finally, chapter 5 concludes by reiterating the interconnectedness of these economic, cultural and social aspects in Nineveh and identifies some of the areas where assistance and support can be most effective. Insights from the case of Nineveh are then used to formulate lessons learned and key principles for a holistic approach to post-conflict reconstruction that are relevant for other contexts.

²⁶ Hanish, S., 'The Chaldean Assyrian Syriac people of Iraq: An ethnic identity problem', *Digest of Middle East Studies*, vol. 17, no. 1 (spring 2008); and Donabed, S. G., *Reforging a Forgotten History: Iraq and the Assyrians in the Twentieth Century* (Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, 2015), pp. 3–5.

2. Post-conflict socio-economic reconstruction: Restoring agriculture and livelihoods in Nineveh

While dominant approaches to post-conflict economic reconstruction have typically focused on policies that privilege growth and market liberalization, there have been growing calls for a 'local turn' in economic reconstruction. In this approach, the focus is on promoting 'peace economy formation processes'.²⁷ These connect economic policies and initiatives to the realities on the ground and to the needs of people and communities, thus anchoring them in everyday life and local culture.

In Nineveh, crop production and livestock farming have traditionally been the main sources of household income. With the agriculture sector devastated by the Islamic State occupation, the restoration of farming activities is a crucial dimension of post-conflict reconstruction in the area. The agriculture sector needs to be prioritized not only because it will restore livelihoods, generate income, and reduce poverty and precarity but also because farming is inextricably tied to a variety of religious and cultural practices, with implications for intergroup relations and social cohesion (as shown in chapters 3 and 4). However, while it is important to restore agriculture and livelihoods in Nineveh to pre-IS levels, reconstruction efforts must also integrate plans and measures to respond to the impact of climate change and water scarcity.

The impact of the Islamic State on agriculture and livestock farming

The livelihoods of all communities in Nineveh were dramatically affected by the IS occupation. Communities reported considerable damage to their agricultural lands and livestock. Orchards, olive groves, and crops of wheat and barley were destroyed. A joint assessment by the World Bank and the Iraqi government estimated the total cost of damage to the agriculture sector in Nineveh at around 1377 billion dinars (\$95 million).²⁸ In Bashiqa, for example, IS decimated olive groves containing hundreds of thousands of olive trees, some of them centuries old.²⁹ The town's once-thriving olive trade specializing in oil and soap suffered gravely as a result. Animal husbandry was another economic mainstay of many communities, and the industry was devastated by losses of livestock during the occupation, as animals were stolen, slaughtered or abandoned.³⁰

In the aftermath of the occupation, agricultural activities also declined. The survey results show that the proportion of respondents who no longer farm vegetables or fruit had increased by about 10 percentage points (to 46 per cent) compared to pre-IS times. With regards to livestock, the proportion of those surveyed who said that they no longer keep livestock increased by 12 percentage points (see figure 2.1). Moreover, respondents reported a significant shift in the types of livestock kept, as they have generally managed to recover smaller livestock such as chickens but have been less successful with larger livestock such as cows and sheep.

There are also variations in how the different religious and ethnic communities of Nineveh have been affected by IS's destruction of agriculture. Inasmuch as they rely on crops and livestock to varying extents, the communities have been affected in different ways. As Christians tend to keep less livestock than other groups, they

²⁷ Distler, W., Stavrevska, E. B. and Vogel, B., 'Economies of peace: Economy formation processes and outcomes in conflict-affected societies', *Civil Wars*, vol. 20, no. 2 (2018), p. 140.

²⁸ Iraqi Government and World Bank (note 1).

²⁹ CGTN America, 'Iraq's olive region looks to rebuild after severe damage by ISIL', YouTube, 15 Dec. 2016.

³⁰ Regional Food Security Analysis Network (RFSAN), 'The impact of ISIS on Iraq's agricultural sector: Situation overview Iraq', Dec. 2016.

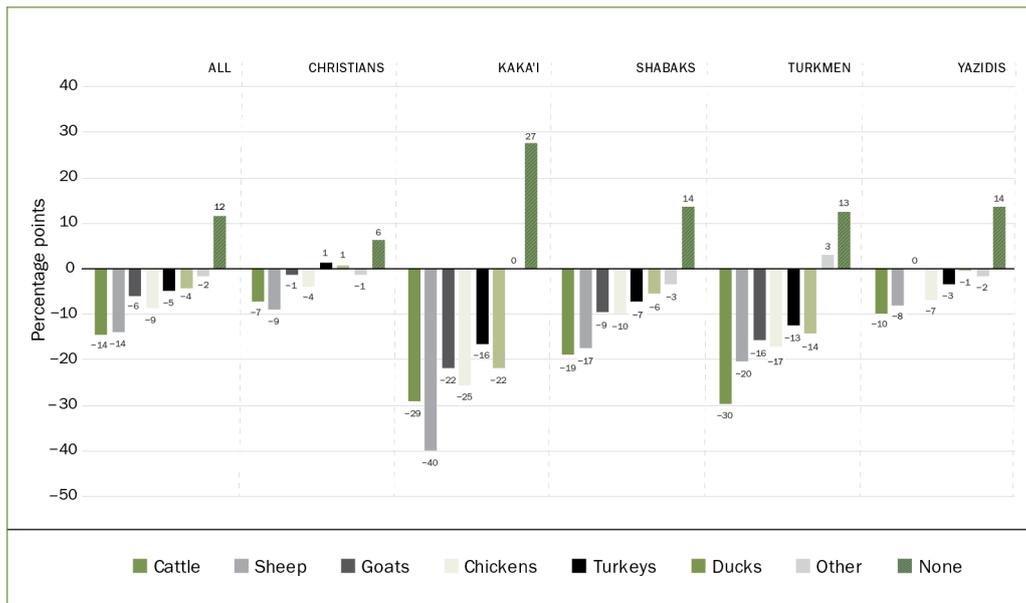


Figure 2.1. Change in livestock kept before and after the Islamic State occupation, by group

Note: The graph shows the differences (in percentage points) in the shares of respondents who, at the time of the survey, reported having owned livestock before the occupation and reported currently owning livestock. Participants could provide more than one response.

Source: Survey respondents, May 2020–Apr. 2021.

were affected less in this regard. In contrast, Kaka’i, Shabaks and Turkmen have traditionally been known for cattle breeding and rely more on livestock than on crop farming. According to the survey data, Kaka’i reported the highest livestock loss and agricultural destruction at the hands of IS in general: 71 per cent of Kaka’i respondents reported that their agricultural lands and livestock were destroyed by IS, compared to the overall average of 46 per cent. Among Kaka’i respondents, the share who reported not keeping any livestock after the IS occupation was 27 percentage points higher than the share who reported that they did not own any livestock before the IS occupation. There were also significant reductions in the number of Kaka’i people keeping cattle, sheep and goats (see figure 2.1). Many rely on livestock as a source of steady income through selling its various products such as milk, cheese, yogurt, wool, meat and so on. It is therefore unsurprising that Kaka’i reported the highest livelihood-related losses as a result of the IS occupation, according to the survey findings.

Obstacles to recovery in the agriculture sector

Several years after the defeat of IS and the liberation of the areas it controlled, the agriculture sector in Nineveh is still facing enormous difficulties. The primary difficulty reported by farmers is the lack of financial means to repair or replace what IS destroyed. However, there are also other problems such as inadequate irrigation systems, restrictions on mobility, and limited competitiveness and access to markets. These difficulties are compounded by the challenges posed by climate change.

Limited financial resources and support

The survey results show that the lack of finances and equipment is the biggest obstacle to agriculture in post-IS Nineveh. Among the respondents, 59 per cent reported that limited access to funding is a major problem confronting farmers (see figure 2.2), making it difficult for them to restore agricultural activities in the aftermath of IS’s destruction. The lack of equipment was identified as a significant challenge by 26 per

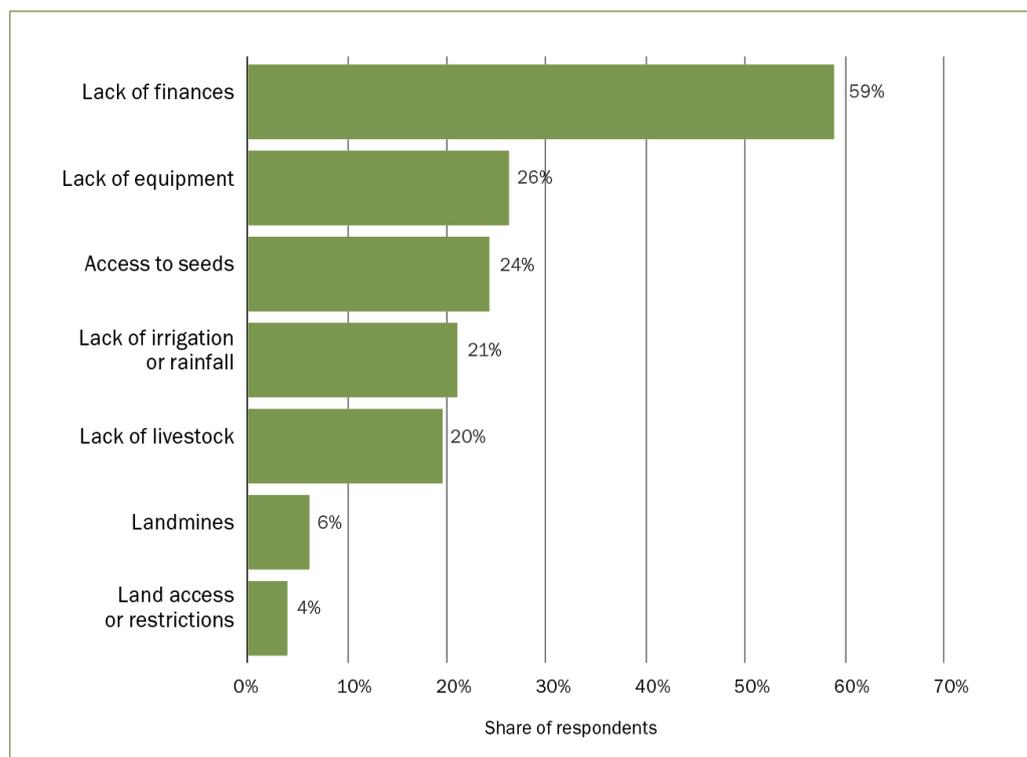


Figure 2.2. Obstacles to farming in Nineveh following the Islamic State occupation

Note: Participants could provide more than one response.

Source: Survey respondents, May 2020–Apr. 2021.

cent of respondents. These obstacles are obviously connected. Poor finances coupled with limited financial support from the state have meant that many farmers who lost their livestock, machinery and equipment have not been able to replace them because of their inability to cover the costs. Access to capital is thus one of the most pressing needs when restoring agricultural activities, as it enables farmers to acquire machinery, fertilizers and irrigation systems and even hire labour to increase productivity and make the best use of their agrarian lands.

To make up for the loss of livelihood, some farmers reported having been forced to sell part of their farmland to generate income. However, the notable trend is that more and more people are abandoning agriculture to seek wage labour elsewhere. Increasing numbers of families now rely on day labour and other jobs in the informal sector for income. As one Shabak farmer summarized it, ‘We used to have agriculture and livestock before. Now we have employment.’³¹

Households are large and the levels of income are low: 43 per cent of respondents reported a monthly household income of less than \$500. Supporting agricultural activities is thus crucial for restoring livelihoods, and all forms of assistance will need to take into account the economic hardships of many households as an underlying factor that needs to be addressed.

Unreliable rainfall and inadequate irrigation systems

Lack of irrigation systems and unreliable rainfall are other major obstacles to recovery in the agricultural sector after the IS occupation. Farmers across ethnic and religious communities report the negative impact of the reduced rainfall on grain farming, most of which is rainfed. For example, a Christian farmer from Tal Kayf stated that ‘We don’t have an irrigation system; it is all rainfed. When there is a delay or no rain,

³¹ Male Shabak farmer from Al-Hamdaniya, Interview with enumerator, Feb. 2021.

we are in serious trouble and we cannot do anything about it because we have no other options.³² Similarly, a Kaka'i farmer from Al-Hamdaniya lamented that 'We have had a serious drought for many years now. If there were an irrigation system, then we could manage, but now we face serious problems. If it does not rain, we will lose everything we have cultivated this year.'³³ Some grain farmers have resorted to cultivating lentils and chickpeas because of their relative tolerance to drought and to cope with delays in seasonal rains. For example, the Christian farmer indicated that 'Instead [of wheat and barley], we sometimes grow chickpeas, which are usually cultivated in February and do not need a lot of rain.'³⁴ Nevertheless, because these crops are far less profitable than wheat and barley, the households that switched crops still experienced an overall reduction of income.

With most farmers lacking access to irrigation systems, limited rainfall and drought often result in substantial reductions of production and crop failure. Moreover, while many farmers indicated their preference for switching to more profitable crops based on irrigation, they are unable to because of a lack of access to adequate irrigation systems and affordable electricity.

Farmers that do have access to irrigation are still confronted with the limited availability and high cost of electricity to pump water from wells. As one farmer put it, 'There is no national electricity, and we have it for just 2 hours in every 24 hours. Honestly, the services are non-existent. This affects us negatively because, if there is no electricity and water, there is no agriculture.'³⁵ With supply of national grid electricity being either absent or intermittent, many farmers are forced to operate private generators. The costs of electricity and fuel for generators increase farmers' overall production costs, which reduces their already low profit margin. As an olive farmer from Bashiqa put it, 'Electricity is very expensive, and there is no support for farmers like subsidized electricity or fuel. We used to sell a tonne of olives for a million dinars before IS; now we sell the best variety of olive for half of that or even less.'³⁶

Restrictions on mobility

Limited mobility is also an obstacle to the rehabilitation of agricultural activities in Nineveh. For example, the line that separates the territory controlled by Iraqi government security forces from that controlled by the KRG lies near Nimrud (in Al-Hamdaniya district). Kaka'i in nearby villages report having difficulties accessing their agricultural lands that lie beyond this line. As a Kaka'i farmer from Al-Hamdaniya explained,

We don't have access to our agrarian lands on the other side of the trench; that's why we rent our land to others to cultivate and, in return, we get half the produce. There should be political cooperation between the KRG and the Iraqi government to facilitate movement between the areas under the control of the two sides so we can freely move and cultivate our lands.³⁷

To go through checkpoints, farmers are required to show permits to access these areas and must process paperwork in Qaraqosh. As a result, many are discouraged from cultivating land that they may not be able to access during the harvest season. Some farmers make long detours to reach their villages and lands, which incurs additional costs for transporting equipment, seeds and crops.

³² Female Christian farmer from Tal Kayf, Interview with enumerator, Feb. 2021.

³³ Male Kaka'i farmer from Al-Hamdaniya, Interview with enumerator, Mar. 2021.

³⁴ Female Christian farmer from Tal Kayf (note 32).

³⁵ Female Kaka'i villager from Al-Hamdaniya, Interview with enumerator, Apr. 2021.

³⁶ Male Shabak farmer from Bashiqa, Interview with enumerator, Feb. 2021.

³⁷ Female Kaka'i farmer from Al-Hamdaniya, Interview with enumerator, Feb. 2021.

Communities also tell of the negative repercussions on their livestock farming activities because of restrictions on mobility due to the multiplicity of checkpoints and fragmented authority. As a Yazidi farmer from Bashiqa put it,

Most sheep breeders used to walk the mountain road, but now it is forbidden to go up there because of military checkpoints. I mean 300 metres away from my house, there is a Hashd al-Shaabi [PMF] checkpoint; after that, there is the [Iraqi] army checkpoint; after the army checkpoint, there is a Asayish [Kurdish internal security forces] checkpoint; and after, there is a Peshmerga checkpoint. The Turkish armed forces also have a military base here, as you can see in front of my house on the mountain.³⁸

Other factors limiting mobility are landmines or improvised explosive devices (IEDs) that remain scattered across swaths of the landscape. While some respondents reported that mines have been cleared and movement had become less restricted, many knew someone who had died due to a device exploding, and many were afraid to cross the landscape to gather wild plants or to access certain sites. They were also afraid to graze animals and cultivate crops. According to the Yazidi farmer, ‘Everyone fears for his or her life because of mines. The area east of Bashiqa, which was famous for its agricultural lands, has not yet been cleared up of mines. Not long ago, a person lost his life to mines. People are afraid to take their sheep there.’³⁹

The lockdown measures imposed by the Iraqi government and the KRG in response to the spread of Covid-19 in 2020 also severely restricted the movement of people, goods and services. Farmers were unable to travel between rural and urban areas and thus unable to market their produce, obtain veterinary products and animal feed, and service their machinery before harvest.⁴⁰ These restrictions on mobility resulted in a substantial loss of income among the vegetable and grain farmers and livestock producers in the Nineveh Plains.

Limited access to markets and weak competitiveness

Producers and smallholder farmers in the Nineveh Plains face strong competition from imported products, and there is a lack of government support to help with the marketing of local produce and livestock and to increase the value of local high-quality goods. Many survey and interview respondents also noted that lack of access to markets is a particular obstacle to economic recovery. According to them, high-quality products from the Nineveh Plains are often not able to compete with less expensive imports. This is true of local specialties including tahini, olive oil and its products, and cheeses, among other artisanal products.

Along with crop failures and other income losses, limited access to markets has led to a growing perception among farmers that agriculture cannot be relied on as a primary source of income unless there is immediate and long-term support and guarantees from the state in relation to production and marketing. For example, a Turkmen farmer from Al-Hamdaniya said, ‘We cannot depend on agriculture as a main source of income because it is not as profitable as it used to be.’⁴¹ Similarly, a Yazidi farmer from Bashiqa stated that he would return to agriculture as the main source of family income ‘only if there is support to farmers in terms of seeds and marketing. Currently, we farmers plant, but we have difficulties in marketing. One or two years from now, we will all have to give up.’⁴²

³⁸ Male Yazidi farmer from Bashiqa, Interview with enumerator, Feb. 2021.

³⁹ Male Yazidi farmer from Bashiqa (note 38).

⁴⁰ Mercy Corps, *The Economic Impact of COVID-19 on Agriculture and Financial Services in Ninewa: A Rapid Market Analysis of Agriculture Needs in Ninewa* (Mercy Corps: Portland, OR, May 2020).

⁴¹ Female Turkmen farmer from Al-Hamdaniya, Interview with enumerator, Feb. 2021.

⁴² Male Yazidi farmer from Bashiqa (note 38).

Climate change and post-conflict reconstruction

As discussed, IS inflicted considerable damage on the agriculture sector in Nineveh, and there are many barriers to recovery. To restore farming activities in the area, reconstruction actors must grapple with a range of interconnected challenges, including a fraught political and security environment, loss of productivity and livelihoods, and limited access to the financial resources needed to restore irrigation systems and replace machinery and equipment. In addition to all these complex issues, the people of Nineveh must deal with the consequences of climate change.

The growing threats of climate change constitute an additional layer of difficulty, as they increase extreme weather events (such as heatwaves and floodings) and further aggravate water scarcity problems, therefore complicating the restoration of agricultural activities and livelihoods. These threats not only exacerbate existing vulnerabilities but also create new challenges that actors engaged in reconstruction need to address in the planning and implementation of projects.⁴³

Yet, it is noteworthy that few participants in this research explicitly linked issues such as unreliable rainfall and water shortages with climate change. Farmers understandably tend to focus more on the concrete and technical matters that have immediate impact on their farming activities and livelihoods, so few framed their concerns in connection to the broader phenomenon of climate change. However, actors engaged in reconstruction need to take into account the impacts of climate change and integrate climate change response into their efforts. Responding to climate-related challenges is an integral part of a holistic approach to post-conflict reconstruction, as this has implications for long-term sustainable development and community resilience.

A 2021 report by the Norwegian Refugee Council shows how water scarcity, heat stress and fluctuating rainfall patterns are driving a twofold food security and migration and displacement crisis in several provinces of Iraq, including Nineveh.⁴⁴ The severe drought conditions that have hit northern Iraq since early 2021 have caused crop failures, resulting in decreasing availability of food products and increasing prices of crops and produce. With many farming communities losing their sources of livelihood and experiencing economic hardship, more and more people are struggling to afford food. Many have abandoned farming and moved to urban centres in search of job opportunities in other sectors. In the Nineveh Plains, access to a secure water source is so critical that for 62 per cent of Kaka'i it constituted the most important factor influencing their prospects and their feeling of confidence about the future (see figure 2.3). This is most likely connected to their higher dependence on agriculture compared to other groups. A secure water source was also important for 39 per cent of Turkmen, and overall this was the third most important factor influencing their feelings of security about the future, after security and employment. Variations across localities can also be observed. In Nimrud, 45 per cent of respondents considered reliable and sustainable access to water as a key factor in feeling secure about the future, compared to only 10 per cent in Alqosh (in Tal Kayf district) and 6 per cent in the town of Tal Kayf.

While water shortages in Nineveh—and in Iraq more generally—are connected to the global climate crisis, in many ways they are also the result of poor governance, at both the national and the regional levels. Although irrigation could help mitigate and alleviate some of the effects of drought and unreliable rainfall, water resource management policies in Iraq are often inadequate and short-sighted, which worsens

⁴³ O'Driscoll, D. and Fazil, S., 'Why climate change will exacerbate inequalities and grievances in Iraq', *New Security Beat*, 9 May 2022.

⁴⁴ Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), *Iraq's Drought Crisis and the Damaging Effects on Communities* (NRC: Oslo, Dec. 2021).

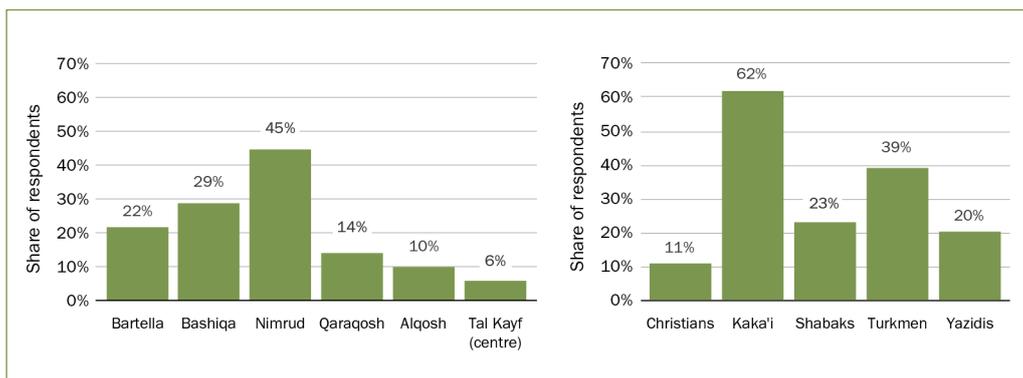


Figure 2.3. Access to water as a factor in feeling secure about the future in the Nineveh Plains, by locality and by group

Source: Survey respondents, May 2020–Apr. 2021.

the impacts of climate change in the country. Apart from the destruction caused by IS, water infrastructure and installations have been deteriorating over time due to the lack of investment in maintenance projects.⁴⁵ Some efforts have already been made to rehabilitate irrigation systems, mainly with funding and support from international organizations.⁴⁶ However, much remains to be done to overhaul and modernize infrastructure, develop better irrigation techniques, and improve the overall management of water resources.⁴⁷ At the regional level, insufficient cooperation on sharing transboundary water resources exposes Iraq to frequent water shortages as a result of reduced water flows from upstream neighbours.⁴⁸ Intensive damming in Türkiye, particularly the filling of the Ilisu Dam, has reduced the volumes of water downstream in the Tigris River, which in turn has reduced water levels of the Mosul Dam. Similarly, Iran's upstream dams also result in decreased availability of water for farmland elsewhere in Iraq.⁴⁹ Internal political divisions mean that Iraq is not well equipped to negotiate fair water-sharing arrangements with its neighbours and ensure continuous adherence to their provisions.⁵⁰ In an area like the Nineveh Plains, where agriculture is predominantly rainfed, insufficient regional cooperation on water and inadequate irrigation systems leave farming communities particularly exposed to recurring water shortages and the effects of climate change.

As the impacts of climate change and water scarcity create more insecurity, post-conflict reconstruction processes in Nineveh should integrate solutions that respond to emergency and short-term needs while at the same time seeking to achieve long-term goals. This is in line with growing evidence showing that 'carefully planned interventions in the water sector can significantly contribute to the post-conflict peace-building process, from immediate recovery and rebuilding to long-term sustainable development goals and lasting peace'.⁵¹

⁴⁵ SIPRI and NUPI (note 8); and von Lossow, T., 'More than infrastructures: Water challenges in Iraq', Clingendael Institute, July 2018.

⁴⁶ Arbeiter-Samariter-Bund (ASB), 'Rehabilitation of northern Al Jazeera irrigation project', 28 Oct. 2020; Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), 'The rehabilitation of North Al-Jazeera irrigation scheme is restoring the vital water supply in Rabea, Ninewa', 30 May 2022; and SIPRI and NUPI (note 8).

⁴⁷ Fazil, S., 'Fixing the economy and public service provision in Iraq', SIPRI Policy Brief, Dec. 2021; and Bourhous, A. et al., *Reform within the System: Governance in Iraq and Lebanon*, SIPRI Policy Paper no. 61 (SIPRI: Stockholm, Dec. 2021), pp. 24–25, 46.

⁴⁸ International Organization for Migration Iraq (note 22).

⁴⁹ Abdullah, M., Al-Ansari, N. and Laue, J., 'Water resources projects in Iraq: Irrigation projects on Tigris River tributaries', *Journal of Earth Sciences and Geotechnical Engineering*, vol. 9, no. 4 (2019); and SIPRI and NUPI (note 8).

⁵⁰ Bruneau, C. and Rasheed, A., 'As its rivers shrink, Iraq thirsts for regional cooperation', Reuters, 8 Sep. 2021.

⁵¹ Swain, A., 'Water and post-conflict peacebuilding', *Hydrological Sciences Journal*, vol. 61, no. 7 (2016), p. 1313.

3. Restoring cultural and religious practices in Nineveh

Post-conflict reconstruction processes often pay only scant attention to culture, heritage and social relations. Yet, for their outcomes to be more sustainable, it is important that recovery plans focus on more than solely rebuilding the physical environment and economic structures. Restoring cultural and religious practices and improving social relations are therefore essential for more sustainable outcomes and constitute a key component of a holistic approach to post-conflict reconstruction.

This chapter discusses the importance of restoring cultural and religious practices in post-conflict reconstruction processes in Nineveh. It looks at the destructive impact of the occupation by the Islamic State on the ability of ethnic and religious communities to engage in their cultural and religious practices, and underscores in particular the significance of agriculture for restoring them. Rebuilding the agriculture-based economy in Nineveh is therefore not only important for economic reasons but also because agricultural practices are linked to a variety of religious and cultural practices and the ability to engage in them.

The impact of the Islamic State occupation on cultural practices

Traditions and cultural practices are what demarcate an ethnic or religious group as a distinct community, different from others. The meanings they have and the emotions they evoke for group members create a sense of shared belonging and togetherness. The ability to engage in cultural practices thus constitutes a crucial part of a group's shared identity.⁵² In Nineveh, the ability to perform rituals, celebrations and pilgrimages is important to all communities, and many people consider it to be constitutive of what it means to be Christian, Kaka'i, Shabak, Turkmen or Yazidi. The survey results show that 86 per cent of respondents considered the freedom and ability to engage in cultural and religious practices as an important aspect of their identity and of their community membership. Furthermore, the ability to engage in cultural practices affects ethnic and religious communities' sense of belonging in Iraq as a historically diverse and multicultural society and also shapes people's perceptions of the future and the prosperity of their community in the country.

The destruction of sacred places and heritage sites by IS thus means more than just destruction of the physical environment. For all communities in the Nineveh Plains, it also means intense grief and a thwarted ability to practise their religion and customs. For example, the access of Yazidis and Kaka'i to their sacred sites became severely constrained under IS. While Christians and Shabaks had access to alternative places of worship and could continue to practise rituals during displacement in the KRI and in southern Iraq, the ability of Yazidis and Kaka'i to engage in their cultural and religious practices was impeded, as their temples and shrines are located solely in their places of origin in the Nineveh Plains. A Yazidi community leader, for example, lamented how 'For the three to four years that we lived away from our areas, especially from Bashiqa and Sinjar, we were grieving, as we could not celebrate our feasts and occasions. Those were hard days that affected us a lot, both psychologically and financially.'⁵³ Similarly, a Kaka'i respondent explained that 'Our shrines are located inside the Kaka'i villages

⁵² Bell, V. (ed.), *Performativity and Belonging* (Sage Publications: London, 1999).

⁵³ Female Yazidi community leader from Bashiqa, Skype interview with enumerator, Sep. 2020.

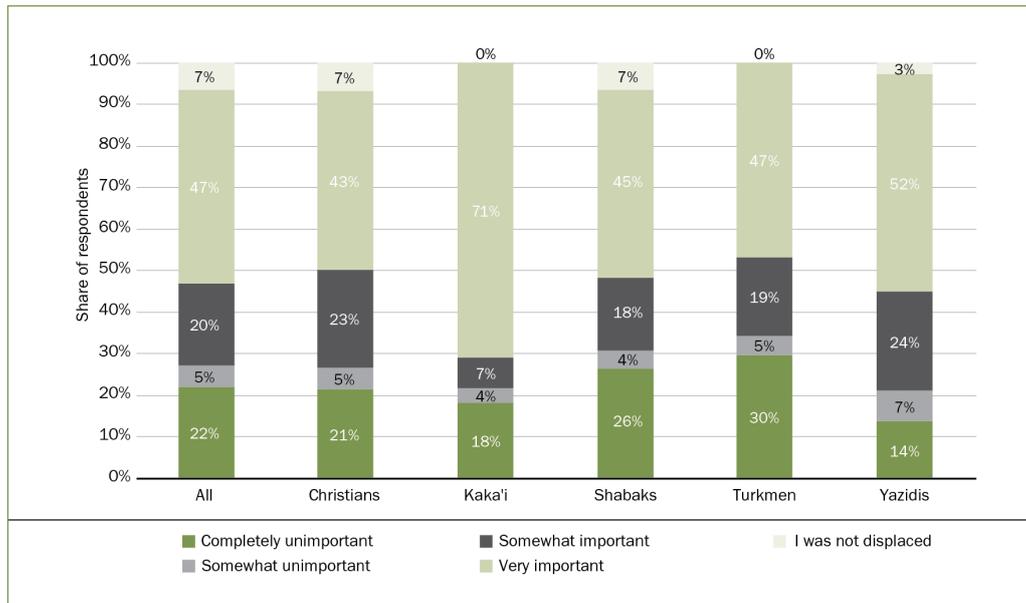


Figure 3.1. The importance of culture in deciding whether to return home following the Islamic State occupation of Nineveh, by group

Source: Survey respondents, May 2020–Apr. 2021.

[in Al-Hamdaniya]. During the IS occupation of the area, for three years we could not practise any rituals or visit our shrines.⁵⁴

Culture and the ability to engage in cultural and religious practices are so important that, for many people, they constituted a major factor informing the decision on whether or not to return to their homes, remain in displacement or leave the country. Among displaced populations, lack of security and limited livelihood opportunities are usually considered to be the most important barriers to returning.⁵⁵ However, the survey found that a large proportion of respondents that were displaced also viewed their ability to practise cultural and religious rituals as having influenced their decision to return home. This perhaps helps explain why the ability to engage in cultural practices had a greater impact on the decision to return home among Yazidi and Kaka'i respondents: 76 per cent of Yazidi and 78 per cent of Kaka'i respondents considered that the ability to engage in cultural practices was very or somewhat important in their decision to return to their homes and villages in the Nineveh Plains (see figure 3.1).

The cultural significance of agriculture: The wider impact of the Islamic State's devastation of agriculture

Cultural and religious practices in Nineveh are closely linked to its agriculture-based economy. The destruction that the IS occupation inflicted on agriculture and livestock farming thus also had a devastating impact on the ability of communities to engage in the cultural and religious practices linked to them.

Animal sacrifice is one of the local customs that was negatively affected as a result of the massive losses in livestock wrought by the IS onslaught on agriculture. Among survey participants, 87 per cent considered animal ritual offerings as very or extremely important. While there was some variation across communities—for example, 75 per cent of Christians and 94 per cent of Shabak respondents consider animal sacrifice as

⁵⁴ Male Kaka'i community leader from Al-Hamdaniya, Interview with enumerator, Sep. 2020.

⁵⁵ International Organization for Migration (IOM) Iraq (note 22); IOM Iraq, *Protracted Displacement Study: An In-depth Analysis of the Main Districts of Origin* (IOM: Baghdad, Apr. 2019); and IOM Iraq, *Understanding Ethno-religious Groups in Iraq: Displacement and Return* (IOM: Baghdad, Feb. 2019).

very or extremely important—in general, animal sacrifice is a common practice among the different ethnic and religious communities in Nineveh. For some, the ritual is part of religious events and commemorations; for others, animal sacrifice is performed as a spiritual vow and an offering to God to express gratitude or to ask for prayers to be answered. As a Kaka'i farmer from Al-Hamdaniya stated, 'It is very important. If someone has vowed, he makes a sacrifice. When we slaughter the animal, we direct it to the *qiblah* [Mecca] and say "in the name of God the merciful" and we slaughter it.'⁵⁶ These religious and cultural traditions often bring together people from both within and outside the community and provide a space for intercommunity interactions. The meat from animal sacrifice is also typically distributed to the poor as an act of charity. As one respondent put it, '[Give the meat from sacrifice to] whomever you want. But the most important thing is that you cook it. These are our traditions, and they must be maintained.'⁵⁷ However, the decrease in the number of households keeping livestock in the wake of the destruction caused by IS has reduced people's ability to practise animal sacrifice. In other words, the inability to keep livestock also acts as a significant impediment to cultural and religious practices, which is felt by many people in the Nineveh Plains as alienation and loss of cultural identity.

Food also has cultural significance for people in Nineveh. A large majority of those surveyed considered meals for special occasions (72 per cent) and dishes connected to religious events (62 per cent) as playing an important role in their lives. Local food traditions promote social cohesion by bringing different groups together for specific religious events. Food manufacturing is as much an expression of identity and a distinctive cultural trait of the area as it is a source of income. For example, pickle manufacturing (46 per cent) and the production of olive oil (46 per cent) and tahini (41 per cent) are important for Yazidis, while cheesemaking is important for Kaka'i (35 per cent) and Turkmen (27 per cent). In addition to constituting an important source of employment and household income, these artisanal products also have distinct cultural significance and connect to local knowledge, meaning and memory. For example, in addition to their economic value, olive trees are symbols of peaceful coexistence and are objects of veneration for different communities in Nineveh.⁵⁸ However, many people in Nineveh now feel that there has been a substantial decline in traditional methods of producing culturally significant food products due not only to the destruction of many of the raw materials used (e.g. olive trees) but also to the destruction of factories and production facilities.⁵⁹ Most communities used to make their own bulgur, groats and other food staples from wheat after the harvest season, but the destruction of the mills in Karamles (Al-Hamdaniya district) and Tal Kayf, along with the destruction of grain farming, pushed many households to buy bulgur and other milled ingredients off the shelf and often imported from Türkiye or Iran.

Wild plants constitute another example of the wider impact on people in Nineveh of the destruction of the landscape by IS. Wild plants play an important role in the cultural practices of all minority groups. Among respondents, 77 per cent reported collecting and using wild plants, whether for cooking, medicinal or cosmetic purposes. Explaining the cultural importance of wild plants, a Yazidi farmer noted that 'On New Year's Day, which is our annual religious ritual in April, we collect wild red flowers to adorn the gates of our homes and kitchens. This is part of our culture and heritage. There is another plant that women collect, grind and use like henna during

⁵⁶ Male Kaka'i farmer from Al-Hamdaniya (note 33).

⁵⁷ Female Yazidi farmer from Bashiqa, Interview with enumerator, Feb. 2021.

⁵⁸ Fazil, S. and O'Driscoll, D., 'Cultural reconstruction is crucial after Islamic State occupation', SIPRI, 10 Nov. 2020.

⁵⁹ Male Shabak farmer from Bashiqa (note 36).

special occasions.⁶⁰ While many people continue to collect wild plants, many others say that they no longer do so for fear of landmines and remnant explosive devices. For example, a Shabak villager noted, ‘Currently we cannot collect wild plants; we are afraid of going to areas that are further away from our village because we are afraid of the presence of IEDs.’⁶¹

Obstacles to cultural reconstruction

Although several years have passed since the liberation of their areas from IS control, communities in Nineveh continue to face an array of challenges that impede the ability to practise religion and customs. The survey showed that more than half of the respondents found that engaging in cultural practices has become more difficult than before, and 30 per cent reported that their ability to take part in religious and cultural events has been significantly reduced compared to pre-IS years. This also varies by group: for example, 65 per cent of Christian and 46 per cent of Turkmen respondents reported that it had become more difficult for them to perform religious and cultural rituals.

As agriculture is closely linked to cultural and religious practices in Nineveh, one of the major obstacles to restoring these practices is the difficulties facing the agriculture sector. In order to restore cultural and religious practices, it is therefore crucial to restore the agricultural economy and thereby the agricultural activities linked to these practices.

In addition to the destruction of agriculture and livestock farming, another serious obstacle is the destruction of the physical spaces—the sacred sites and buildings—linked to these cultural and religious practices. During its onslaught, IS destroyed ancient heritage sites and sacred religious structures of various communities, such as Christian churches, Yazidi temples and Kaka’i shrines.⁶² Some of these landmarks were elements of common heritage that bridged ethnosectarian divides. They were also sites of common national heritage shared by all Iraqis, regardless of linguistic or ethnosectarian differences.⁶³ Their destruction was thus a deliberate bid to erase the province’s cultural identity and the traces of ethnosectarian coexistence forged over centuries through shared culture, heritage, and the rites and rituals that brought different communities together. Some restoration efforts are already underway to rebuild Nineveh’s religious heritage, including rebuilding al-Nuri mosque, al-Tahera church and al-Saa’a monastery in Mosul, and Mar Behnam monastery near Nimrud. Heritage restoration efforts that extend beyond the physical aspect and strive to be inclusive of different communities provide an opportunity to revive the spirit of ethnic and religious diversity and coexistence that IS sought to exterminate.

There are also obstacles connected to limited or absent access to sites of cultural and religious significance. With multiple security actors controlling different parts of Nineveh and imposing checkpoints throughout the region, local people face considerable restrictions on their freedom of movement. These challenges hinder the ability of religious and ethnic groups to reach the areas where their sacred shrines and temples are located. For example, Yazidis reported facing difficulties in visiting the holy temple of Lalish in Shekhan district, preventing them from participating in religious commemorations and pilgrimages and from conducting religious and cultural rituals. A Yazidi community leader expressed her concerns about restrictions

⁶⁰ Male Yazidi farmer from Tal Kayf, Interview with enumerator, Feb. 2021.

⁶¹ Male Shabak villager from Al-Hamdaniya, Interview with enumerator, Feb. 2021.

⁶² UN News, ‘UNESCO chief deplors destruction of iconic mosque and minaret in Iraq’s Mosul’, 22 June 2017; and BBC, ‘Mosul’s landmark Great Mosque of al-Nuri to be rebuilt’, 24 Apr. 2018.

⁶³ Tripp, C., ‘The artifice of the destruction of art in Iraq’, *Middle East in London*, vol. 11, no. 4 (June–July 2015).

on mobility, stating ‘We have problems when it comes to reaching Shekhan. Lalish is located there, and it is important for us to be able to visit it. Sometimes we cannot visit Lalish because of road closures between our areas and the KRI.’⁶⁴ Another Yazidi community leader stated that ‘If I cannot reach Lalish temple, how am I supposed to practise my religious rituals? When there is a checkpoint, it obviously hinders our ability to [reach Lalish and] practise rituals.’⁶⁵ Other minority groups are also affected by restrictions on movement. For example, a Christian community leader from Al-Hamdaniya, which has been under the control of the Iraqi government since October 2017, reported, ‘We cannot visit Mar Mattai monastery because it is located within the areas under the control of the KRG. It is more of a political issue than a security one.’⁶⁶

Restrictions on mobility also have an impact on people’s sense of community. They fragment communities, cutting members off from each other. As one Christian interviewee put it, ‘As people from Batnaya, we want to be able to freely visit Telskuf, Alqosh, Baqofa. All of these are Christian areas in Tal Kayf. We are one [community]—we don’t want to be disconnected.’⁶⁷ Respondents noted that cultural and religious rituals and celebrations no longer involve large numbers of participants, primarily due to lack of mobility.

⁶⁴ Female Yazidi community leader from Bashiqa (note 53).

⁶⁵ Male Yazidi community leader from Bashiqa, Skype interview with enumerator, Aug. 2020.

⁶⁶ Male Christian community leader from Al-Hamdaniya, Skype interview with enumerator, Sep. 2020.

⁶⁷ Male Christian community leader from Tal Kayf, Interview with enumerator, Sep. 2020.

4. Restoring intercommunity relations and social cohesion in Nineveh

This chapter discusses the detrimental impact that the occupation by the Islamic State had on social cohesion in Nineveh. It underlines the importance of restoring intercommunity relations and rebuilding trust between communities as an essential part of post-conflict reconstruction in the area. To promote social cohesion, actors involved in reconstruction can draw on local resources, including cultural practices and existing traditions of intercommunity cooperation in agriculture, which yet again show themselves to be key in a holistic approach to post-conflict reconstruction in Nineveh. In doing so, however, they need to be mindful of the potentially negative impact of aid and assistance on social cohesion, as unequal distribution and perceptions of unfairness are likely to exacerbate tensions and vulnerabilities.

Intercommunity relations in post-Islamic State Nineveh

In post-IS Nineveh, underlying grievances between and within different groups have emerged or re-emerged as displaced communities have returned to their homes and their areas of origin. Although most research participants reported having good relations with people from other communities, these relations are fragile, and there are tensions simmering below the surface. Even if people do not readily admit it, IS occupation has had a profound and enduring impact on intercommunity relations in the Nineveh Plains.

Overall, there is a prevailing distrust of Sunnis, whether they are Arab, Shabak or Turkmen, due to suspicions of connection or complicity with IS. Perceptions of Sunni collective guilt are not uncommon, and this has created tensions and divisions both between and within communities. As a Shabak respondent explained, ‘Before IS, relations were good between Shia and Sunni Shabaks. There was intermarriage between Shabak Shias and Sunnis. . . . But when the Shia Shabaks were displaced as well, relations between the two sides started to cool off. After the liberation, there was fear or mistrust among the Shabak people themselves.’⁶⁸ Among the Turkmen, the events in Tal Afar district have also created a sense of division between the Shias and the Sunnis in Nineveh.

Tensions between Christians and Shabaks in particular are undermining social cohesion in the Nineveh Plains. As part of a broader concern by the Christian community about the influx of Shabaks (after successive waves of displacement) into areas where Christians have traditionally resided, tensions over land ownership stand out. Christians, particularly community leaders, believe that Shabaks are receiving financial support from external actors in order to buy historically Christian land and properties often above market price. This is interpreted by many Christians as an attempt to change the ethnocultural landscape of the area by changing its demographic composition. Coupled with the land ownership issue, perceptions of demographic re-engineering have perpetuated a belief that there is a concerted strategy by the Shia political actors in Baghdad to support the Shabaks over Christians and others in the Nineveh Plains.

Shabaks reject such claims and attribute their desire to move into historically Christian areas to the fact that these areas have better functioning local government and better services, particularly healthcare and education. They also claim that population growth in their community has created a greater demand for housing and services

⁶⁸ Male Shabak community leader from Bashiqa, Interview with enumerator, Sep. 2020.

that are mainly available in Qaraqosh and Bartella in Al-Hamdaniya district. According to them, the main issue is the lack of access to municipal services and to economic and job opportunities in their areas, which tend to be more rural, compared to the areas that are predominantly Christian. In addition, Shabaks maintain that they have the right to buy property and live in the area. In the words of a Shabak respondent, the allegation of a deliberate attempt to alter the demographic makeup ‘contradicts the sense of national belonging [citizenship]. When you belong to a specific country, you have the right to live anywhere in the country as long as it does not conflict with the law.’⁶⁹

The tensions between the two communities also stem from concerns over cultural identity, including the preservation of the communities’ ways of life and displays of religiosity. Widespread perceptions of threats to ethnic and religious identity often create a sense of distrust of other communities and tend to trigger attempts to protect one’s identity and culture by isolating from others. The same Shabak respondent added that

The Christians’ viewpoint is that they have their own customs and convictions, and they want to live according to these convictions, which are opposed to those of the Shabaks. The Shabak person would say, ‘I belong to Al-Hamdaniya, and it is my right to live in any district or village within it.’ Yet at the same time, when a Shabak refuses to allow a stranger to come to live in their village, there is a contradiction between the right I grant myself and what I grant to others. The same is true for Christians. The problem is really that everyone wants to preserve their own community and way of life.⁷⁰

Some Shabaks argue that many Christians want to sell their property because they have migrated abroad, mainly to Western countries, and do not intend to return to the area. However, it is presumed by some that their community and religious leaders are dissuading them from selling to non-Christians. These intercommunity dynamics create a fraught atmosphere where, according to a Shabak community leader from Al-Hamdaniya,

Even when someone has been living in the area for 50 years and wants to buy a house in the same area for his son who got married, it is not allowed to buy from a Christian. Christians are forbidden from selling their properties to anyone who is a Muslim. Even a Shabak who wants to sell his house to another Shabak is not allowed. It is also forbidden to rent. A Shabak is also not allowed to open a shop in Qaraqosh . . . These practices negatively affect coexistence between minorities.⁷¹

Another source of resentment and tension between communities is related to the occupation of public space through displays of religiosity. Rituals and religious commemorations celebrated by some communities are considered by others as excessive. Some Christians complain about the tendency of other communities, particularly Shabaks, to monopolize the public space in ways that they perceive as disruptive. As a Christian respondent put it,

We find that some Shabak brothers want to impose themselves and exaggerate the practice of these rituals, which creates sensitivity on the other side, especially in Muharram [the first month of the Islamic calendar], when flags are brandished in an exaggerated way. Processions also pass by Christian areas even though another path can be taken to be mindful of the feelings of others.⁷²

However, Shabaks view the Christian’s position as an infringement on their freedom and rights to religious expression and practice. Finally, when the religious celebrations of both communities coincide moods can collide, when some are, for example, mourning while others are celebrating a joyous occasion.

⁶⁹ Male Shabak community leader from Al-Hamdaniya, Interview with enumerator, Sep. 2020.

⁷⁰ Male Shabak community leader from Al-Hamdaniya (note 69).

⁷¹ Female Shabak community leader from Al-Hamdaniya, Interview with enumerator, Oct. 2020.

⁷² Male Christian community leader from Al-Hamdaniya, Interview with enumerator, Oct. 2020.

The tensions between Shabaks and Christians are exacerbated during periods of political and security tensions.⁷³ Other communities also point to the harmful impact of hate speech and propaganda on intercommunity relations and social cohesion in the Nineveh Plains. For example, a Kaka'i respondent explained that 'The internet contains incorrect and very ugly information about Kaka'ism. Anyone who reads this and does not have information about Kaka'ism will believe what is written. This can generate hatred against Kaka'i and will have an effect in the future. People may attack the Kaka'i or refuse to accept them.'⁷⁴

In addition to these tensions between communities, disputes between farmers over land ownership and land rental agreements are common. Some farmers who do not own their own land either rent or cultivate the land of others in exchange for sharing the profit. This can give rise to conflicts and tensions when the farmer is unable to pay the rent or when profit margins are low and barely cover input cost. Land disputes were also reported by farmers who returned from displacement to find that someone else had made a claim on their land while they were absent. Others reported landlords renting out land that is unusable due to mines, preventing renters from earning enough to pay for rent.

This does not mean, however, that all intercommunity relations—including relations between Shabaks and Christians—are adversarial and conflictual. Rather, findings from this research suggest that community leaders are more likely than community members to report greater intergroup tensions and irreconcilable differences. Some see in this an attempt by elites to instrumentalize intergroup divisions for personal political interests, particularly in the context of disputes between the Iraqi government and the KRG and competing claims for administrative control in the Nineveh Plains. For example, a Christian community leader in Al-Hamdaniya blamed the political parties for resorting to identity politics and sowing divisions instead of fostering coexistence, saying that 'Some political parties of a religious nature spread poison in societies and divide them with the aim of controlling them.'⁷⁵

Strengthening social cohesion: Mobilizing local cultural resources in processes of post-conflict reconstruction

Strengthening social cohesion and rebuilding trust between communities is a fundamental task for post-conflict reconstruction. Local culture, heritage and traditions offer important resources and opportunities that actors engaged in reconstruction can mobilize to reinforce social cohesion and support community resilience, recovery and healing in the long term. In Nineveh, respondents across different groups also expressed a determination to rebuild not only their homes and livelihoods but also the intercommunity relations that have been deeply affected by the conflict. The findings from interviews with both community members and community leaders show that, despite the existence of tensions and disputes at various levels, people from different ethnic and religious communities display a strong willingness to cooperate with each other to find ways to improve social relations.

While cultural and religious celebrations sometimes engender intercommunity tensions, respondents also repeatedly underlined the importance of these events as a way of bringing the different communities together. Some reinforce solidarity between communities, especially when attended by elders, religious figures and other notables

⁷³ Salloum, S., *Barriers to Return for Ethno-religious Minorities in Iraq: Identity Politics and Political Patronage among Yazidi and Christian Communities from Ninewa Governorate* (International Organization for Migration Iraq: Baghdad, 2020), pp. 28–31.

⁷⁴ Female Kaka'i community leader from Kaalar, Interview with enumerator, Sep. 2020.

⁷⁵ Male Christian community leader from Al-Hamdaniya, Skype interview with enumerator, Aug. 2020.

from other communities who enjoy the trust and respect of their people. These occasions provide opportunities for strengthening social cohesion as they facilitate contact, interaction and cultural exchange between communities. As one respondent put it, ‘Shabaks, Christians and Yazidis participate in each other’s religious commemorations and celebrations. During these occasions we emphasize tolerance, brotherhood and building bridges.’⁷⁶ Other life events—whether joyous or sad—also constitute an occasion for intercommunity gatherings. For example, people from different communities often attend memorial services held in each other’s places of worship. Finally, the threat that IS posed to different communities and the need to redress the damage that it inflicted reinforces the willingness of these communities to bridge ethnosectarian divides in resistance to IS and its ideology. This willingness offers a glimmer of hope to the prospect of peaceful relations, intergroup solidarity and healing in post-IS Nineveh, and cultural awareness and cooperation in farming offer concrete opportunities in this direction.

Cultural awareness

Among survey respondents, 37 per cent expressed an interest in initiatives that aim to increase cultural awareness in the Nineveh Plains. Yazidis expressed a stronger desire for cultural awareness training (43 per cent) than the average, which may be related to the particular suffering and mistreatment that Yazidis experienced as a consequence of the lack of general knowledge—and widespread misconceptions—about their religion and culture. Yazidi respondents pointed out that hate speech directed towards their community stems from a lack of understanding of their faith and culture. Similarly, Kaka’i respondents also underlined how misconceptions about their faith, rituals and cultural practices engender prejudice against them, particularly by Muslim communities. As many respondents pointed out, much of the abuse and hate speech occurs on social media. However, many also indicated that social media platforms are also a place where information about cultural practices and religious beliefs can be shared to enlighten the public, dispel common misconceptions and counter prejudice against ethnic and religious communities in Nineveh. In other words, the positive aspects of social media can be harnessed to enhance cultural understanding and coexistence.

Easing the tensions between Shabaks and Christians should be a focus of reconciliation processes and efforts to strengthen social cohesion in the Nineveh Plains.⁷⁷ Although these tensions are, at least in part, the result of decades of systematic marginalization of minority groups in general, people often feel that their own community has been specifically targeted. The fallout from the IS occupation—including not only problems of displacement and return but also the threat to cultural identity that spurs a strong desire to preserve one’s culture and identity by insulating it from others—has unveiled and exacerbated these tensions. If grievances on both sides are not addressed, there is a risk that they will fester and further undermine social cohesion in the area. As one respondent put it, the tensions between Shabaks and Christians ‘have a big impact on society because people become like a balloon: if you keep blowing it up, it eventually explodes. Restrictions and the divisions between Shabaks and Christians will lead to an explosion.’⁷⁸

Many respondents pointed to the crucial role of community centres in fostering peace and community cohesion. They lamented the absence of designated cultural centres where the community members can gather and where youth can learn about

⁷⁶ Male Shabak community leader from Al-Hamdaniya, Skype interview with enumerator, Aug. 2020.

⁷⁷ van Zoonen, D. and Wirya, K., *The Shabaks: Perceptions of Reconciliation and Conflict* (Middle East Research Institute: Erbil, 2017).

⁷⁸ Female Shabak community leader from Al-Hamdaniya, Interview with enumerator, Oct. 2020.

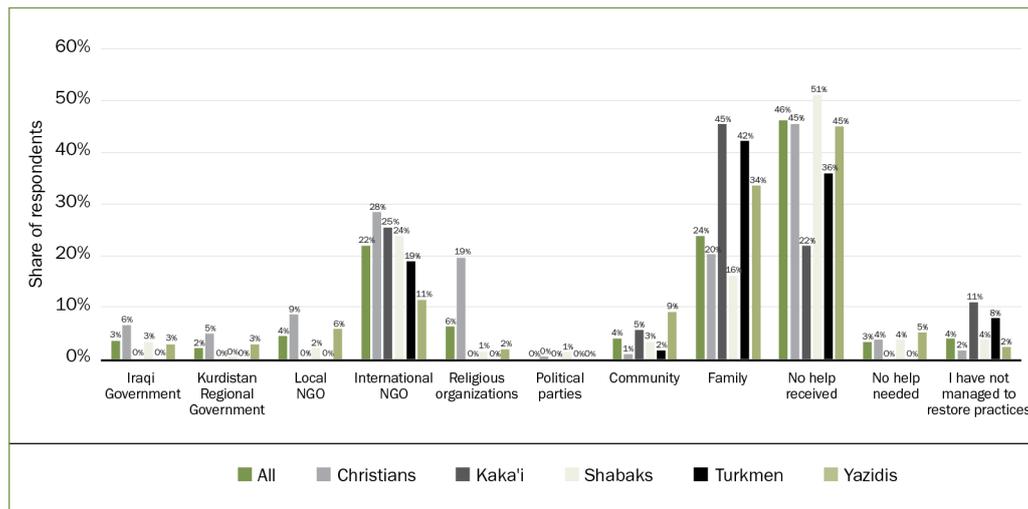


Figure 4.1. Sources of assistance for those who have restored cultural or agricultural practices following the Islamic State occupation of Nineveh, by group

NGO = Non-governmental organization.

Note: The graph shows the share of all respondents that reported receiving assistance from each source. Participants could provide more than one response.

Source: Survey respondents, May 2020–Apr. 2021.

their own culture and heritage as well as the culture and heritage of others. Creating cultural centres and making them accessible to all, regardless of ethnosectarian background, helps increase contact between people from different communities, which may encourage them to learn about each other's cultures and traditions and focus on their commonalities rather than their differences.⁷⁹

Cooperation in farming

Local farming activities and the production of artisanal goods that have cultural meaning for communities are also resources that can be mobilized to rebuild trust and improve social cohesion in the Nineveh Plains. These activities have not only an economic value but also a shared and sustainable cultural and social meaning to which local people are attached.⁸⁰ Farmers across communities highlighted that they regularly cooperate with each other, mainly through sharing equipment and storage facilities. Farmers with limited finances and machinery report seeking cooperation with other, more large-scale farmers who are self-sufficient and have their own machinery. For example, a Yazidi farmer stated that 'We have Christian neighbours. They help us, and we help them with agricultural machinery, equipment and other things.'⁸¹ Farmers also indicated that they often exchange information about crops, seeds, pest control, irrigation and livestock well-being in order to learn the best farming practices from one another. For example, a Kaka'i farmer said, 'Our neighbour has better experience and information about growing onions. He shares his information and ideas with me and shows me how to grow onions. I am better at growing peppers and chickpeas, so I do the same and share my information with him, meaning we teach one another.'⁸²

The vast majority of farmers, regardless of their ethnic and religious background, see a need for greater cooperation and exchange in agriculture. They view increased

⁷⁹ Pettigrew, T. et al., 'Recent advances in intergroup contact theory', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, vol. 35, no. 3 (May 2011).

⁸⁰ Rider, J., Skillings, D. and De Taisne, F., 'The role of culture in post-emergency reconstruction: Case studies from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Indonesia', *Asian Affairs*, vol. 51, no. 3 (2020), p. 639.

⁸¹ Male Yazidi farmer from Tal Kayf (note 60).

⁸² Male Kaka'i farmer from Al-Hamdaniya (note 33).

collaboration as being crucial in the face of growing challenges and show a willingness to take part in programmes and initiatives to support agriculture through greater cooperation between farmers. Programmes can build on this willingness and on the history of farmer cooperatives in the region to facilitate community organizations and farmer associations designed to increase access to resources and markets. For example, farmers in Bashiqa reported that they have formed an agricultural cooperative society to coordinate with veterinarians and agricultural experts on information and on extension services (including the provision of technical assistance and agricultural inputs such as seeds, pest control or irrigation systems). Such initiatives should be encouraged and given the necessary means to succeed, not only for their agricultural and economic value but also for their contribution to creating spaces where farmers can meet and collaborate with each other, which in turn offers opportunities for cultivating solidarity and strengthening social cohesion. In the words of one Christian farmer, ‘Increasing cooperation will help to develop agriculture and improve relations between different communities.’⁸³ Support can take different forms, including financial and technical assistance, agricultural extension activities to improve productivity, better access to markets, training, and similar.

The impact of humanitarian aid and assistance on social cohesion

Reconstruction actors must bear in mind that existing tensions and vulnerabilities are likely to be exacerbated by unequal distribution and perceptions of unfairness. They must therefore be mindful of the potentially negative impacts of aid and assistance on intercommunity relations and dynamics. They can nonetheless draw on local resources such as cultural practices and existing traditions of intercommunity cooperation, including farming, to promote social cohesion in the Nineveh Plains.

Of those surveyed, 46 per cent reported that they had received no help in bringing back their cultural and agricultural practices (see figure 4.1). Those who had benefited from support stated that they mainly received assistance from their family (24 per cent of respondents) or international non-governmental organizations (NGOs, 22 per cent). In addition, farmers repeatedly pointed to the lack of government support to address or mitigate the obstacles and challenges faced in production and marketing. With regards to cultural practices, many respondents across all groups lamented the limited government action in restoring cultural heritage and in helping ethnic and religious minorities to preserve their cultural practices.

Some variations across ethnic and religious communities can also be observed (see figure 4.1). Yazidi respondents reported receiving more than the average help from their family (34 per cent) and community (9 per cent) and less from international NGOs (11 per cent). Kaka’i mainly identified receiving help from their families (45 per cent), followed by international NGOs (25 per cent), with 22 per cent reporting that they received no help at all. Turkmen mainly identified that they had received help from their families (42 per cent) and international NGOs (19 per cent), with 36 per cent stating that they had received no help at all. Christians reported receiving the most help from international NGOs (28 per cent) and religious organizations (19 per cent). This finding is consistent with the recurring assertions from the interviews that Christians tend to receive more assistance than other ethnic and religious communities, which fuels resentment and tensions in the region. Shabaks also received a relatively high level of assistance from international NGOs (24 per cent), but there was also a high percentage of Shabak respondents who received no help at all (51 per cent).

⁸³ Male Christian villager from Al-Hamdaniya, Interview with enumerator, Feb. 2021.

The provision of assistance to help farmers restore their farming activities has created competition for aid, and many farmers have felt deliberately left out: according to one, ‘We have not received any assistance. But they helped farmers in Qaraqosh. Farmers there received seeds, machinery, even cows, sheep and financial assistance.’⁸⁴ Moreover, many farmers believe there is a bias in the distribution of aid and the selection of beneficiaries. According to another farmer, ‘We have not received any assistance, nothing at all. Most of the villages received tractors and other machinery. The farmers in Teskhrab and Karamles received assistance, but we, the farmers in Khazneh, received nothing.’⁸⁵ Another Christian farmer indicated, ‘We have received no assistance from either the state or any organization. Some people have received assistance, but there are deserving people who have not received any.’⁸⁶ Finally, there have also been problems with ineffective or inappropriate aid. For example, one farmer reported that ‘There were a couple of organizations that brought us olive trees to plant, but they were not good enough—they brought us olive trees without roots that would not survive or would take 10 years to grow. In addition, those who brought them were not qualified.’⁸⁷

It is important to note and reflect upon the fact that aid from other organizations is reported by respondents to have created competition and tension. Some community leaders interviewed connected the lack of restoration support to community representation. They believe that some communities are getting more support due to their strong community leadership or because some international NGOs and humanitarian actors prefer some communities over others. Community leaders also pointed to the fact that some individuals get assistance from multiple organizations, while others get no assistance. They argued that international NGOs need to do their assessment on the ground by meeting the community members, and they hoped that reconstruction efforts also include developing and building communal spaces to facilitate inter-community interactions and help strengthen social cohesion in Nineveh. In interviews with farmers, some complained that assistance was not effective due to nepotism and corruption, as some of those who received help were not farmers but employees, and some ended up selling the machinery and extension materials that they received. It is thus important to assess and take into account the impact that the provision of humanitarian aid or assistance could have on wider intercommunity dynamics to avoid aggravating tensions between different communities and individuals.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Female Christian farmer from Al-Hamdaniya, Interview with enumerator, Mar. 2021.

⁸⁵ Female Shabak farmer from Al-Hamdaniya, Interview with enumerator, Feb. 2021.

⁸⁶ Male Christian farmer from Al-Hamdaniya, Interview with enumerator, Feb. 2021.

⁸⁷ Male Yazidi farmer from Bashiqa (note 38).

⁸⁸ See e.g. Riddell, R. C., *Does Foreign Aid Really Work* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2007); and Lowe, C. et al., *Humanitarian Assistance and Social Protection in Contexts of Forced Displacement: Effects on Social Cohesion* (Overseas Development Institute: London, May 2022).

5. Conclusions: Post-conflict reconstruction in the Nineveh Plains and beyond

Processes of post-conflict reconstruction affect people's lives. They touch on complex and interconnected political, economic, cultural, social and environmental issues. Recognizing the interconnectedness of these issues calls for a holistic approach to post-conflict reconstruction in which plans and initiatives are designed and implemented to respond to a range of complex and multidimensional challenges at the same time. This chapter summarizes the findings of this study on post-conflict reconstruction in Nineveh and points to some of the areas where action and assistance are needed. Insights from the Nineveh Plains are then used to highlight some lessons for a holistic approach to post-conflict reconstruction that are pertinent to other contexts.

Post-conflict reconstruction in the Nineveh Plains

The Islamic State not only targeted infrastructure, heritage sites and economic activities but also the ways of life and the religious and cultural practices of communities and the social relations between them. The resulting destruction had a devastating impact on all aspects of life in Nineveh. To help people recover from this traumatic experience, post-conflict reconstruction processes need to adopt a holistic approach in order to address all these issues, while taking into account other current pressing challenges such as climate change and water scarcity. As previously discussed, in Nineveh restoring agricultural activities is a key priority for economic reconstruction that is attuned to the local context and anchored in people's everyday life and in their social dynamics. These activities have traditionally constituted the main source of income for many households. However, several years after the defeat of IS, farmers across different communities and localities in the Nineveh Plains still struggle to restore them, and many have been forced to abandon farming because they can no longer earn a living from it.

Limited financial resources were consistently mentioned as one of the main obstacles preventing small-scale farmers from repairing the damage inflicted by IS on agricultural activities, as they lack the means to replace equipment to buy seeds and fertilizers. This underlines the close connection between income and farming sustainability, as only farmers who generate sufficient and steady income from land cultivation and livestock farming in the Nineveh Plains will remain motivated to continue to cultivate their lands. Therefore, financial support needs to be part of reconstruction efforts to help smallholder farmers cover the costs of inputs and access equipment and irrigation systems.

These challenges and vulnerabilities are compounded by climate change, recurring droughts and water stress, which further complicate the task of post-conflict reconstruction. Farmers expressed deep concerns about the future of their agricultural activities and livelihoods given the dwindling water supply and the increasing frequency of heat waves and droughts. In Bashiqa, for example, farmers have called for the construction of irrigation projects in order to mitigate the impact of erratic rainfall on agriculture and to better manage and use rainwater. This highlights the importance of developing and implementing strategies to address water scarcity as part of reconstruction efforts in Nineveh. It also stresses the need for climate change response and adaptation to be considered as a fundamental and indispensable aspect of reconstruction.

With high-quality, high-value artisanal products made across the Nineveh Plains, there is a real potential for economic development projects focused on the promotion of local products. However, farmers and producers are in dire need of support, particularly in terms of product diversification and access to markets. Farmer cooperatives and associations in the Nineveh Plains provide an important space for intercommunity cooperation through information-sharing and the pooling of resources. By encouraging these associations and giving them the necessary support (e.g. financial and technical support, agricultural extension, marketing and training), actors can address various local needs at the same time.

Agriculture is not only the main economic activity and the main source of income in Nineveh. It is also an integral part of the way of life of the different ethnic and religious communities in the area and has significant cultural meaning for them. In supporting the recovery and sustainability of agricultural activities in the area, reconstruction efforts and initiatives also contribute to fulfilling other fundamental tasks in a holistic approach to reconstruction: restoring cultural heritage and the social fabric. By restoring the ability of communities to engage in their cultural and religious practices, actors involved in post-conflict reconstruction can support community resilience, recovery and healing over the long term. At the same time, reconstruction processes can mobilize these local cultural and religious practices—including culturally and socially significant agricultural activities, products and relationships—to promote understanding, trust and peaceful relations between the different ethnic and religious communities in the Nineveh Plains. In other words, cultural reconstruction is key to recovering the ways of life of communities, but mobilizing local cultural resources is also a crucial asset for reconstruction efforts to succeed in restoring the social fabric and social relations between communities in Nineveh.

Designing and implementing reconstruction projects in Nineveh must, above all, always be guided by the ‘do no harm’ principle to manage community sensitivities and expectations as well as to avoid exacerbating intercommunity tensions. Unequal distribution of aid, whether real or perceived, can give rise to feelings of marginalization. It reinforces the perception that some communities are given preferential treatment, which fuels resentment and ultimately undermines social cohesion. Reconstruction actors in Nineveh must therefore constantly strive to be fair and inclusive when providing support. This means prioritizing initiatives that support intercommunity cooperation, such as farmer associations, and that create spaces for intercommunity gathering and interaction, such as cultural centres open to all.

Post-conflict reconstruction needs to address the underlying issues that people face in the region, including removing landmines, replacing expensive agricultural equipment, replenishing livestock and rebuilding infrastructure. These are large-scale yet urgent projects. Actors engaged in reconstruction can, however, work with communities to help determine specific needs and identify concrete ways to address them, in close collaboration with other reconstruction actors that focus on these important issues.

Lessons for post-conflict reconstruction in other contexts

The findings from this study on Nineveh as well as the people-centred approach that it adopts highlight a number of principles and lessons that can be relevant for processes of post-conflict reconstruction in other contexts. Many of these principles are well known, and many actors routinely refer to them and mobilize them in discourses about local ownership of and participation in peacebuilding processes. However, in practice, these principles often fail to be realized and to guide action. These principles

are nonetheless crucial in a holistic approach to reconstruction, and donors and practitioners should pay adequate attention to them when designing and implementing projects.

Do no harm

All reconstruction initiatives and programmes should be guided, above all, by the ‘do no harm’ principle and should not exacerbate community inequities, tensions or vulnerabilities. The ‘do no harm’ principle in humanitarian aid and development focuses on identifying and reducing the potential negative impacts of interventions. It means recognizing that aid can have negative impacts and requires those involved in interventions to think before they act and to ‘look at the broader context and mitigate potential negative effects on the social fabric, the economy and the environment’.⁸⁹

Although ‘do no harm’ is considered as a standard operating principle, it is not an easy process and requires significant engagement with communities at all stages of reconstruction as well as real reflection on actions. The research presented here demonstrates that, in many circumstances, this has not occurred in Nineveh, causing tensions between communities. Taking a holistic approach grounded in the local context is consistent with the ‘do no harm’ principle, as it helps to address the issues and challenges in post-conflict reconstruction. It allows actors to identify the effects, unintentional or not, that intervention might have on other parts of people’s lives, and it helps ensure the sustainability of outcomes.

Engage with local communities

Donors and practitioners need to work closely with local communities to identify their needs and how to respond to them as part of reconstruction efforts. People need to be consulted and involved in interventions that affect their lives and their environment at all stages of the process. As this report demonstrates, this needs to go beyond those who international actors identify as ‘the local’ and engage in the more difficult and time-consuming task of gaining community consent. In engaging with communities, reconstruction actors need to be guided by a proper understanding of social dynamics and sensitivities. This is important to ensure fair and inclusive interventions and to avoid misperceptions and resentment.

Focus on livelihoods

In post-conflict settings, restoring economic activities is a key task for reconstruction efforts. People should be at the centre of these efforts. This means restoring their livelihoods and sources of income through efforts that respond to their needs and to the realities on the ground. The research presented here demonstrates the importance of focusing on livelihoods from the outset, as it plays an intrinsic part in the success of all other elements of reconstruction.

Restore the ability to engage in cultural and religious practices

This report demonstrates that, while cultural and religious practices have significant importance to communities, they are often relegated in the reconstruction process. Greater attention should be given to cultural reconstruction in post-conflict reconstruction processes. This means restoring not only heritage sites and the physical environment but also the ability of communities to engage in their cultural and religious practices. Cultural elements—both tangible and intangible—play a crucial role in supporting healing, resilience and recovery of communities in the long run.

⁸⁹ Charanle, J. M. B. and Lucchi, E., *Incorporating the Principle of ‘Do No Harm’: How to Take Action without Causing Harm* (Humanity & Inclusion/F3E: Lyon, 1 Oct. 2018), p. 16.

Mobilize local resources and integrate culture in reconstruction

Actors involved in reconstruction processes should understand how their programming can connect to local culture and traditions. As the research presented here demonstrates, when initiatives are grounded in local culture, they are not only culturally sensitive but also build on the possibilities offered by local cultural resources. This contributes to reinforcing local ownership and ensures sustainability. This includes, for example, building on traditional practices and harnessing the potential of already existing resources to strengthen social cohesion and build peaceful relations. Some concrete examples include building on local cuisine and food-sharing customs, local modes of association and collective action, as well as the sense of commonality provided by shared agricultural and artisanal traditions and products. However, determining which traditional practices and local resources to mobilize and how will largely depend on the context.

Promote social cohesion

Post-conflict reconstruction efforts must pay close attention to social relations and must promote reconciliation and social cohesion if they are to be sustainable in the long run. In multicultural societies, this means, for example, creating inclusive spaces where people from different communities can interact with each other.⁹⁰ It also means encouraging community-based organizations and local joint initiatives to tackle some of the issues of common concern. As this report demonstrates, both culture and the everyday are important starting points for enhancing social cohesion.

Address existing issues that predate the conflict

Reconstruction should not only address the impacts of conflict but also be an opportunity for reform. In addition to addressing issues directly caused by the IS occupation, it is important to also address the problems that predate it, including those conditions, structures and drivers that led to the conflict in the first place. This can help avoid reproducing past failures and ensure a reconstruction process that ‘builds back better’.

Fully integrate climate change response in interventions

Recognizing the nexus between environmental security and peace is key to post-conflict reconstruction. Reconstruction actors need to understand and take into account how climate-related risks and challenges, from extreme weather to water scarcity, can breed insecurity and impede recovery, healing and sustainable development. It is therefore indispensable for post-conflict reconstruction to incorporate climate change response in all processes from the outset.

⁹⁰ O’Driscoll, D., *Building Everyday Peace in Kirkuk, Iraq: The Potential of Locally Focused Interventions*, SIPRI Policy Paper no. 52 (SIPRI: Stockholm, 2019).

About the authors

Amal Bourhrou (Morocco) is a Researcher with SIPRI's Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Programme. Her research interests include the dynamics of identity, citizenship and nation-building as they relate to statehood and sovereignty; the relationship between securitization trends and the political process; and the ways in which the wider geopolitical transformations and the new challenges to international security affect MENA.

Shivan Fazil (Iraq) is a Researcher with SIPRI's MENA Programme. His work focuses on conflict analysis, building resilience and social cohesion, and promoting the rights of ethnic and religious minorities in Iraq, where he worked for over five years with various governmental and non-governmental organizations. His research interests include democracy and governance, gender and youth, particularly in Iraq, Türkiye and Iran.

Dylan O'Driscoll (Ireland) is an Associate Senior Fellow with SIPRI's MENA Programme. He is also Associate Professor at the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations (CTPSR) at Coventry University. Dylan's work focuses on the drivers of conflict and pathways to peace in MENA and beyond. He is particularly interested in understanding people's behaviour in relation to acts of peace and conflict at the everyday level.



**STOCKHOLM INTERNATIONAL
PEACE RESEARCH INSTITUTE**

Signalistgatan 9
SE-169 72 Solna, Sweden
Telephone: +46 8 655 97 00
Email: sipri@sipri.org
Internet: www.sipri.org

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