

## Policy Briefing Note

# Controversies and Challenges of Peacebuilding in Nineveh: Revisiting Post-IS Reconciliation in Iraq

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## Purpose

Five years after Mosul's liberation from the extremist reign of Islamic State (IS), competing approaches to peacebuilding continue to stir up controversy among Nineveh's conflict-affected communities. The proliferation of mediation interventions with few tangible results has led to growing donor fatigue, while also increasing local scepticism of externally sponsored peacebuilding initiatives.<sup>1</sup> Securing funding for social cohesion programmes has turned into an extremely politicised process in which multiple stakeholders compete, with often conflicting agendas, to impose their vision for peaceful coexistence in a highly contested environment. The prioritisation of the concerns of international sponsors over the needs and fears of local citizens threatens further to erode public trust in the feasibility of dialogue formats and reconciliation exercises.

This policy briefing note highlights principles for better embedding international and federal support for post-conflict social recovery within this local context. The analysis is based on over 30 semi-structured interviews conducted with residents of Nineveh province, representatives of international development aid agencies, as well as Iraqi religious and communal elites, and practitioners and professionals working in the peacebuilding field.<sup>2</sup> The findings concern both the theory of change linked to Iraqi peacebuilding initiatives and residents' willingness to endorse and engage in some of these often disjointed approaches.<sup>3</sup> The policy recommendations are of relevance to both international donors and political decision-makers, particularly those committed to supporting the revival of the province's spirit and the recovery of its multi-ethnic and multireligious social fabric.

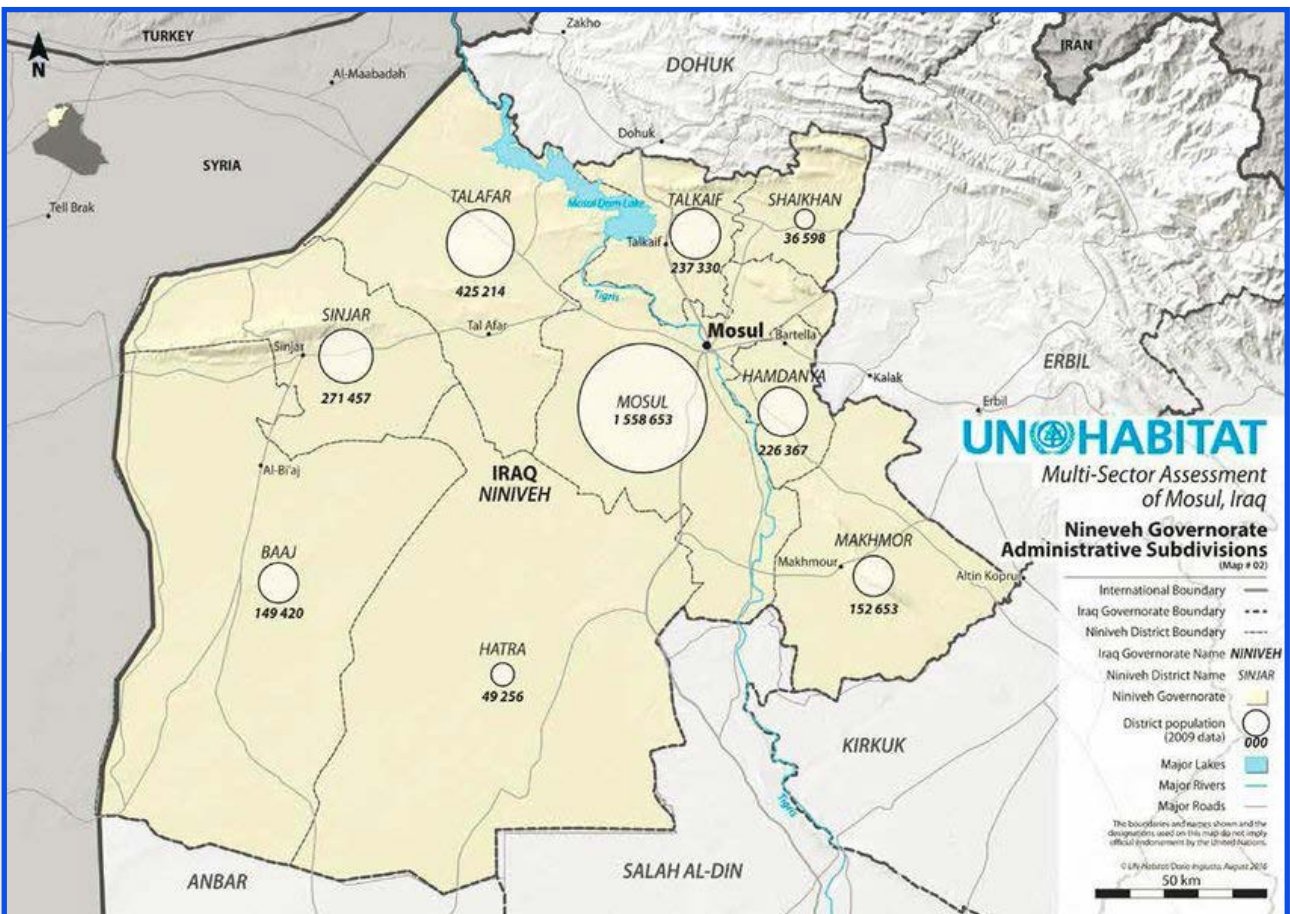
# Key Findings and Policy Implications

- ▶ **The lack of long-term engagement and strategic planning by international donor organisations remains a significant impediment to the development of sustainable conflict management interventions.** Local practitioners, often dependent on international funding, are frustrated by short-term donor projects, intermittent interventions and the inability to scale up successful initiatives that build on forward-looking holistic strategies towards social recovery in the Nineveh province.
- ▶ **International peacebuilding actors must understand and seek to shape local Iraqi post-conflict dynamics while recognising that their interventions often reify local elite power structures (tribal, political, religious), patronage networks and corrupt practices.** Local peacebuilding is not a romantic emancipatory alternative but rather provides the contextual parameters for peacebuilding interventions.<sup>4</sup>
- ▶ **There exists a vast gap between the liberal peacebuilding language of Western NGOs and local understanding and usage in post-conflict settings.** This is not merely a challenge of translation and cultural adaptation but reveals a diverging understanding of what 'peace' entails in contexts of recurring violence. The linguistic and conceptual gap raises key questions around the limits and potential of 'reconciliation'. Should reconciliation programmes aspire to communal re-integration or rather elite co-operation and segregated co-existence? Greater local feedback is required around defining 'peacebuilding terms', which will encourage further targeted discussions around expectations for justice, recovery and rehabilitation.
- ▶ **Past injustices will need to be addressed so that a future peace is sustainable.** While Nineveh residents provide conflicting responses to the challenges of and future options for social justice and communal restoration, they all acknowledge the importance of these. Questions remain over how practically to address sensitive issues, such as loss of property and land; competing victimhood narratives; the stigmatisation of communities (perpetrators or collaborators); the viability of public inquiries and the potential of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRCs).
- ▶ **The timing and sequencing of peacebuilding interventions is crucial.** For vulnerable and impoverished communities, peacebuilding should not be prioritised over socio-economic stability and recovery. Confronted with multiple existential grievances, including a lack of services, employment opportunities, healthcare and affordable housing, many Nineveh interviewees have pointed out the importance of improving the general economic situation before plunging into more complex, emotionally charged dialogue formats.<sup>5</sup>
- ▶ **There are no magic fixes or universal solutions that can be exported from one violent context to another without adjustment to the local context.** On the contrary, even within the same province in Iraq, there are significant nuances and communal perceptions around peacebuilding often linked to understandings of victimhood, exposure to post-conflict grievances and relationships with the central state authorities. Mediation interventions therefore require creative adaptation to ensure local acceptance and legitimacy by wary participants who have little faith in the state or external partners and even less trust in neighbours from different ethnic and religious groups.
- ▶ **Buy-in often depends on training, capacity building and established prior relationships.** Levels of engagement with and enthusiasm for reconciliation, mediation and negotiation projects often depend on a given individual's own involvement with and personal stakes in the peacebuilding sector. Interviewees who had graduated from foreign-sponsored capacity-building programmes were generally more convinced of the necessity of developing and adopting new tools for conflict resolution and learning from international best practices. Residents with no professional or personal investment in peacebuilding initiatives tended to be more reticent. Reconciliation interventions that enjoyed familiarity with or proximity to tribal leaders led to successful collaborations, often prompting local truces and returns. Nevertheless, engaging with tribal sheikhs should be practised with a degree of caution, as it may create precedents or incentives for non-state actors to perpetuate, expand or cash in on their extra-institutional leverage.

► **Iraqi NGOs are not immune to or above corrupt practices embedded within wider Iraqi post-conflict society.** The expectation that Western-funded civil society, through the proliferation of local NGOs, would transform Iraqi political practices is misguided. Instead, external intervention and funding has arguably fuelled patronage networks and dependency culture. Two important questions remain: can we expect higher standards from NGOs operating in a political context of structural corruption and Muhasasa (a system of spoils allocation based on ethnic and sectarian quotas)? Can Iraqi NGOs have a transformative effect on a specifically social level while navigating the murky waters of bureaucratic corruption over work permits, transit permissions and local security dynamics?

► **In contexts of recurring violence, should re-integration of displaced minorities be prioritised over creating secure and viable alternatives?** Peacebuilding interventions may have to settle for stability rather than recovery. This may involve donors and practitioners accepting that demographic changes as a result of large-scale displacement are long-term political realities and thus prioritising initiatives that seek to secure the human rights of minorities within secure enclaves and neighbourhoods. A number of Yazidi and Christian interviewees doubt whether there can be a viable return to a plural cosmopolitan urban existence within Mosul. This has implications for security arrangements and resettlement programmes.

**Figure 1.**  
Nineveh Governorate administrative subdivisions (UN-HABITAT)



## Peacebuilding in Nineveh (2017–2022)

For over a decade there has been a proliferation of local, national and international NGOs working on the theme of peacebuilding in Nineveh. Some of the most prominent include the Network of Iraqi Facilitators (NIF);<sup>5</sup> the Alliance of Iraqi Minorities (AIM);<sup>7</sup> INSAN Iraqi Society;<sup>8</sup> Sanad for Economic Development;<sup>9</sup> Al-Mesalla Organisation for Human Resources Development;<sup>10</sup> and Youth4Peace.<sup>11</sup> The SILM (Peace) network comprises 18 Iraqi organisations focusing on conflict resolution and peacebuilding in five Iraqi governorates (Baghdad, Kirkuk, Mosul, Diyala and Salah ad-Din).<sup>12</sup> These 18 organisations are grantees of the United States Institute of Peace, which supported the establishment and consolidation of the network.

Many of the local organisations, such as Hariwan,<sup>13</sup> have benefited from funding from the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance, part of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and subgrants from the International Organization for Migration. The USAID Office of Transition Initiatives has also supported the Iraq Community Resilience Initiative, Ta’afi (ICRI-Ta’afi),<sup>14</sup> which seeks to support the safe and voluntary return of IDPs and refugees in areas liberated from IS.

Another NGO, DAK,<sup>15</sup> has worked on strengthening the role of minority women in security and peacebuilding in Duhok and Nineveh governorates with a Cordaid subgrant as part of the funding from the British Consulate to Iraq. The Better World Organization for Community Development has received funding both from Hungarian Interchurch Aid and from the British Maypole Fund to encourage Iraqi feminist activism against militarism and war.<sup>16</sup> Voice of Older People and Family NGO has received support from IFA/ Zivik in Germany,<sup>17</sup> through which it has been able to establish a ‘wisdom house’ in Shekhan<sup>18</sup> and also to support peaceful co-existence and social cohesion in Kabarto 2 and Dawudiya IDPs camps and in the Northern Shekhan district.<sup>19</sup>

Having worked with, among others, UNICEF, WFP, UNFPA, PAX, The Halo trust, IHFOCHA, UNMAS and Oxfam, the al-Ghad League for Women and Childcare has implemented the TAHAWER

Dialogue project in Mosul with funding from the British Council and the EU.<sup>20</sup> The project focused specifically on improving the understanding of young Iraqis of religion’s relationship to peacebuilding.

Peacebuilding activities are also being supported by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development within the framework of their project ‘Strengthening Resilience in dealing with crises and conflicts in Nineveh’,<sup>21</sup> with the lead executing agency being the Iraqi Ministry of Planning.

Significant peacebuilding initiatives in Nineveh have also been championed through UNESCO’s ‘Revive the Spirit of Mosul’ project,<sup>22</sup> as well as the work of Local Peace Committees engaging with minority groups and tribal formations.<sup>23</sup> Another Iraqi peacebuilding actor in Nineveh is the representatives of the Najafi Marja’iyya of the Shi’ite Grand Ayatollah Sayyid al-Sistani.<sup>24</sup> Their initiatives, which are framed as trust-building and inter-religious dialogues rather than peacebuilding, have taken the form of meetings with Sunni scholars and intellectuals from Anbar, Salah ad-Din and Mosul as part of the Najaf Initiative for Dialogue and Solidarity with Sunni Governorates and the Dialogue for Social Cohesion.<sup>25</sup>

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## Finding 1: The lack of long-term engagement and strategic planning by international donor organisations remains a significant impediment for the development of sustainable conflict management interventions.

Many local practitioners are concerned with what they see as the short-term approach of international donor agencies, which are keen to fund highly visible, temporally measurable projects while ignoring more complex underlying grievances and tensions. In the words of one local practitioner:

*“These international nongovernmental organisations lack strategy; they have no strategic vision. They only have a strategic vision for funding but not programming. Another mistake is that the projects in Iraq are very complex and there is no follow-up by these organisations to check on the projects they executed.”<sup>26</sup>*

Frustrations in the Nineveh peacebuilding sector seem to accumulate around **the funding process, inadequate follow-up and a lack of support for local initiatives**. In order to secure funding and remain financially viable, local NGOs have to adapt and adjust to funder calls, project language, documentation requirements and complex

financial budgeting systems. Such tasks sometimes create more burden for the local actors than long-term opportunities for organisational growth and development. Moreover, after implementation, local partners often struggle to secure funds to consolidate and build on positive momentum. Few donor organisations allocate sufficient resources to cover following up with target communities; instead, hopes of long-term communal engagement are unrealised and often create cynicism among project participants. Finally, while there is evidence of grassroots peacebuilding and restoration initiatives, these activities are often self-funded, ad hoc and under strain.<sup>27</sup> **A practical solution would be to develop more opportunities for local actors working in the field of peacebuilding to apply for institutional core funding, which would enable them to grow their teams, enhance their experience and plan programmes in a sustainable manner without having to cater to producing impact reports for international donor organisations.**

## Finding 2: Greater financial transparency, clearer communication of objectives and regulatory oversight of the peacebuilding sector in Nineveh are needed to increase communal confidence and buy-in.

While the more established international actors in the field of development aid and peacebuilding have adopted professional mechanisms for financial oversight and objective criteria for project evaluation, there is much room for improvement when it comes to communicating their grants management logic to local stakeholders and target communities across Nineveh.<sup>28</sup> One of the interviewed practitioners suggested that international donors should always make sure that staff tasked with managing a project’s activities on the ground should be competent, passionate and, most importantly, well informed of the local context and familiar with domestic power dynamics.<sup>29</sup> A number of interviewees expressed doubt that peacebuilding projects (past and present) have significantly contributed to social stability or quality of life in Nineveh, highlighting instead misgivings concerning the role of international organisations and their modus operandi in the field. Some

residents pointed to a common failure to explain why certain organisations – whether local CSOs or nationwide active organisations – have been awarded funding to conduct community dialogue projects, raising suspicions of corruption and nepotism and alienating important local actors, who often decide to boycott or ignore project activities altogether. While partner selection is a constant challenge for local peacebuilding initiatives, **clearer communication of project goals and a transparent description of the theory of change of the awarded institution may help to restore citizen confidence in externally funded projects**. Currently, citizens’ trust in the long-term impact of peacebuilding and reconciliation initiatives is being put to the test. As one interviewee laments: “Minority groups in Nineveh Valley are fed up with national reconciliation and building social cohesion and coexistence. Minority groups are in desperate need for services.”<sup>30</sup>

### Finding 3: The jargon of peacebuilding often imposed on local NGOs by Western donor organisations does not adequately reflect Iraqi attitudes towards post-conflict recovery.

Iraqi practitioners working in the ‘peacebuilding’ field tend to avoid the use of ambitious concepts such as reconciliation and peace. Instead, they prefer to frame their interventions as a contribution to social cohesion or intra-communal dialogue with a focus on common grievances and shared interests. **Our research suggests that defining the current interventions as conflict management or even conflict mitigation helps to avoid creating false expectations. The overuse of loaded terms, such as tasamuh (forgiveness) or musalaha (reconciliation) may alienate local populations and discourage them from engaging actively in externally sponsored dialogue formats.** As one interviewee explained: “musalaha in Iraq means that you go to the criminal and thank him for their crimes ... Reconciliation means to leave your right for the benefit of the other.”<sup>31</sup> The scepticism over the term is linked to its politicisation and former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki’s dubious creation

of a Committee of Reconciliation.<sup>32</sup> According to the interviewee, due to Maliki’s misuse of the term, “the word reconciliation became unpopular and synonymous with politics, violence and conflict.” Representatives of Christian and Yazidi communities are similarly reluctant to endorse the use of tasamuh (which in Arabic suggests a level of reciprocity) as a unifying banner for a meeting, especially as, in their view, victim communities should not be the ones seeking forgiveness. Peacebuilding terminology matters in Iraq and deserves greater scrutiny, sensitivity and wider communal discussion. As one Iraqi expert succinctly explains:

*“Defining peacebuilding, social cohesion, social reconciliation, forgiveness, and pardoning is paramount. We should know how to use these terms and in which context to apply them to ensure all sides are content.”<sup>33</sup>*

### Finding 4: Past injustices will need to be addressed in a culturally sensitive manner so that peacebuilding endeavours stand a chance in the future.

Interviews with practitioners and residents in Nineveh reveal communities desirous of social justice but wary of the personal costs and official processes involved. Most recognise current Iraqi insecurity and political instability render public inquiries and TRCs a distant or impossible dream, but this does not preclude the importance of localised everyday inter-communal dialogue and engagement. The real challenges remain how to overcome competing victimhood narratives and the stigmatisation of communities as perpetrators or collaborators. For one Iraqi peacebuilding actor, the answer is equivalence: “in the Iraqi context, almost every victim has at least once been in the role of the victimiser.”<sup>34</sup> According to this local expert, reconciliation measures should be designed in a way to address different cycles of violence and victimisation, instead of merely labelling one community or set of actors as the source of all current evil. IS, Shi’a militias, Kurdish peshmerga and Ba’athist violence all must be acknowledged as contributing to the ethno-religious violence and polarisation of Iraqi society. Another Iraqi practitioner instead emphasised the priority of currently oppressed communities: “we need to talk

about the struggles faced by victims and the need to receive compensation, and then we can address the return of refugees and the return of IS-affiliated families.”<sup>35</sup>

Yazidi victims still expect a sincere acknowledgement of the atrocities inflicted on them and they continue to blame some of their Arab neighbours for not stepping in to protect them from IS. Sunni Arabs from Nineveh province and Mosul, however, have legitimate concerns that such sweeping accusations affect the integrity and credibility of their whole community, which has suffered its own share of violence and trauma during the brutal IS reign over the province.

One recurring recommendation raised by Iraqi practitioners is that of emphasising Iraq’s shared history and the benefits of plural co-existence. An Iraqi facilitator who was personally involved in the mediation between Yazidi IS-victims and members of the Arab Juhaysh tribe in northern Sinjar indicated that **the prioritisation of socio-economic issues such as the provision of services and the reconstruction**

**of damaged infrastructure tends to help those participating in the dialogue to find some common ground:** “By focusing on improving services for both Arabs and Yazidis we were trying to achieve reconciliation and build bridges between both groups and with other NGOs and the government who can help the situation.”<sup>36</sup> The facilitators had consciously avoided tackling the question of abuse and victimhood, instead acknowledging that both groups have sought to avenge their fallen family members. The focus and the language adopted during the first mutual session appeared to have played a major role for the progress of the consecutive interventions. By 2021, the participants had managed to agree on a code of conduct document outlining how members of the two communities were to co-operate and

collaborate with each other in order to improve the living conditions in their respective areas.

Finally, addressing and resolving past injustices in Nineveh is indelibly tied to the issue of displacement and repatriation. Iraqi peacebuilding initiatives tend to prioritise re-integration of displaced minorities over creating secure and viable alternatives. The issue is not only around timing or rebuilding infrastructure, but whether demographic shifts are reversible and whether inter-communal trust can be restored to a level to facilitate plural co-existence. **A number of minority interviewees remain pessimistic of ever “going back” to Mosul and instead seek reparations for their loss and guarantees for their future rights and security within bounded communities.**

### **Finding 5: While tribal leaders should be engaged as important stakeholders in local peacebuilding and reconciliation interventions, international NGOs and donors should seek ways to mitigate the risk of directly or indirectly empowering non-state armed actors as ‘executive’ partners.**

Interviews with international experts, local consultants and peace practitioners have all confirmed the leverage of Iraqi tribal leaders as necessary brokers in different kinds of conflict management initiatives. Nevertheless, interviewees also warn of the risks of delegating mediation tasks to tribal sheikhs in their capacity as non-state actors with often unregulated access to arms, cash flow and loyal manpower. While excluding tribal leaders from reconciliatory talks can potentially antagonise them and alienate large number of tribal members, the success and sustainability of local interventions depends on fostering a working relationship with the sheikhs without creating false expectations about their prospective gains from co-operation.

International organisations and their local partners can benefit from building trust with relevant tribal leaders, communicating with them clearly the goals of the project and their desired contribution. Tribal support and confidence building will ensure sheikhs develop feelings of ownership over the process. **Achieving mutual respect, trust and a shared vision will mitigate the risk of the commissioning organisation resorting to the tribal sheikhs as highly paid fixers and equally prevent tribal counterparts from treating the co-operative exchange as a transactional opportunity.**

A final important contribution that international peace actors can offer is to emphasise the need for improving coordination between tribal sheikhs and state authorities, especially when it comes to the issue of re-integrating IS-affiliated families into local communities. One Iraqi practitioner pointed out that “the tribal sheikhs are the ‘foundation’. The government cannot ignore them and should always check with them prior to signing any legal terms because the sheikhs are the ones who would then face problems.”<sup>37</sup>

The interviewee provided a concrete example of a tribal sheikh feeling embarrassed after the government had facilitated the return of IS-affiliated families to the Al-Jada’ area in Nineveh without his knowledge. These families were even offered accommodation close to houses inhabited by IS victims. As the interviewee explained, this lack of communication caused unnecessary tension in the area and ended up antagonising the victims of IS, who were then liable to seek revenge. Therefore, international actors working on IDP issues with Iraqi organisations should discuss ways of improving the communication channels between local stakeholders, government representatives and state security agencies.

# Conclusion

This policy briefing note has outlined how conflicting peacebuilding visions, ambiguous terminology and divergent outreach approaches, as prioritised by external donors and local practitioners, tend to hinder the success of projects focusing on social cohesion and post-conflict recovery. In the Nineveh context, programmes aimed at supporting the re-integration of displaced populations and the rehabilitation of IS family members or former supporters remain disjointed and inconsistent in particular. While donor fatigue and funding deficits contribute to time-limited and fragmented approaches, there is also no coherent strategy of co-operation with government stakeholders. The lack of transparency regarding the responsibilities of national security agencies and the most appropriate communication channels to ensure logistical support and protection from them, or at the very least non-interference, remains a thorny issue. Only by aligning approaches and improving the means of coordination can local and international peacebuilding actors succeed in increasing the pressure on state authorities to fulfil their obligations vis-à-vis the countless victims of the conflict, who still await reparations and monetary compensation.

In summary, the active engagement of local powerbrokers (religious leaders and tribal, municipal

and commercial elites) remains indispensable to the implementation of intra-communal dialogue platforms and reconciliatory initiatives. **Empowering local NGOs and civil society actors as the main drivers of post-conflict social recovery is essential, though not necessarily sufficient to guarantee lasting results.**

**This should therefore not be ‘romanticised’ as a universal solution.<sup>38</sup> Rather, in addition to equipping local agents of positive social change with the right tools and providing them with institutional core funding, the international community needs to play a stronger role in broader socio-economic support.**

To improve the livelihoods of conflict-affected communities, Iraq’s international partners must continue to attract foreign investment and to support the reconstruction of Iraq’s devastated infrastructure. The international community, particularly in the eyes of Iraqi residents, has a moral responsibility to keep official government partners in check by imposing stricter control mechanisms to prevent the misappropriation of funds and resources designated for the country’s stalled reconstruction. As highlighted by most interviewees – both practitioners and community leaders – dialogue and mediation initiatives cannot thrive on empty promises of a better future but must be accompanied by tangible material assistance for those suffering the daily grievances of a still fractured post-conflict reality.

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