Social Cohesion in Iraq:
Leveraging Religious, Political, and Tribal Authorities for Conflict Transformation

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Foreword by Zaidan Khalaf

With preface from Klemens Semtner,
and contributions from Jean-Nicolas Bitter
and Charlotte Farel

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Foreword

I am pleased to present this academic paper on the project "Building Social Cohesion in Iraq," which was designed and implemented by Cordoba Peace Institute – Geneva (CPI), through its branch in Iraq, in the period between 2018 and 2024, and of which I followed some of the implementation stages after taking up my duties at the Prime Minister's Office.

The importance of the project lies in the fact that its contribution to strengthening social cohesion in Iraq was not based solely on dialogue meetings between different parties but went beyond dialogue through words to dialogue through joint field work. CPI was able to select two important and sensitive issues for joint work. The first is in the field of humanitarian work, related to helping Iraqi refugees in Turkey return to their original home in the Tal Afar district and reintegrate into society. The second is in the field of human rights, related to promoting the right to know the fate of missing persons and addressing the suffering of their families.

CPI has adopted an effective approach that is inclusive and respectful of the local cultural context. It is based on an in-depth study of the reality of the local community, its cultures and beliefs, as this is the party concerned with the project and its beneficiary. It relies on the involvement of local partners from governmental and non-governmental organisations, not only in the implementation of the project, but also in its design from the outset. In doing so, CPI has avoided one of the major pitfalls of many peace and development organisations, which is to apply models designed abroad without considering the specificities of the local context.

The advantage of this research paper is that it summarises the characteristics of the methodology used, the success factors of the project, the challenges faced during its implementation and the lessons learned. It offers guidance to peace practitioners based on CPI's work in Iraq. In doing so, it sees the project as an experience that can be useful in other contexts outside Iraq.

Dr Zaidan Khalaf
Advisor to the Prime Minister for Human Rights, Iraq

Preface

This publication showcases what can be done when internal and international peacebuilders work together in a fragile context such as Iraq with the goal of alleviating the impact of armed conflicts. The primary goal of Germany's stabilization efforts in Iraq over the past years has been to make sure that the gains made against ISIS on the battlefield are secured for the long term by employing civilian means. The efforts undertaken by the Cordoba Peace Institute (CPI) with our financial support and that of our Swiss colleagues were one building block on the long road towards achieving this objective. The impact pursued by CPI in the areas of return, reconciliation and reintegration of displaced persons on the one hand, and advancing the right to know the fate of the many missing persons on the other was not easy to come by. It required taking many small steps over several years, in-depth context knowledge and perseverance. We appreciate the efforts made here to make these lessons learned available to a wider audience, so as to inspire future peacebuilders who find themselves facing similar challenges and help them turn these challenges into opportunities for more successful peacebuilding.

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Abstract

How can we foster social cohesion by engaging with informal religious and political authorities in conflict contexts, such as present-day Iraq? This report answers this question by outlining a conflict transformation approach developed by Cordoba Peace Institute – Geneva (CPI), and in Samarra, Talafar, and Iraq as a whole, between 2018 and 2023. The methodology used was a combination of: 1) a 'safe mediation space' approach and *diapraxis,* 2) collaboration between insider and outsider mediators, and 3) leveraging formal and informal sources of influence, including religious, political, and tribal. The report aims to learn from the experiences of case studies to guide practitioners applying such methods in other similar contexts.

1. Introduction

The aim of this report is to explore the nature of conflict transformation activities that engage informal religious and political authorities to foster social cohesion in polarized societies, such as Iraq. To this end, it draws learnings from three conflict transformation processes that took place in Iraq between 2018 and 2023. It draws on interviews, unpublished project documents, and a published CPI report[1] on the project. These three processes had as their primary goal the promotion of social cohesion in Iraq on specific conflicts at a sub-regional level, but with national implications and links. Thus, they can be considered "case studies", with insights that may be scaled up or out to other contexts under relevant conditions. The selection of cases was based on the recommendations of Iraqi experts from a variety of backgrounds, which emerged during an in-depth pre-project analysis and scouting phase.

The essence of the project's approach was to leverage parallel formal and informal religious, political, and tribal structures that cut across many of the conflict cleavages causing divisions in the country. The working hypothesis was that leveraging such informal sources of authority would be key to enhancing social cohesion in a polarized context where formal sources of authority may be contested. This approach also contrasts with the tendency of some Western peacebuilding and mediation agencies to rely too heavily on the more obvious and formal state structures as entry points for peacebuilding activities.

The report is structured as follows: First, we provide a summary of the context, the nature of actors, and a presentation of the case study contexts; second, we outline the elements of the conflict transformation approach that were adopted and developed. Third, we provide an overview of how the conflict transformation approach played out in the cases. Fourth, we draw some lessons. Fifth, we discuss the specificity – generalizability of the findings to other similar contexts, helping peace practitioners reflect on what lessons can be transferred.

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1   Ali Al-Ahmad. Building Social Cohesion in Iraq. Conflict Transformation in practice. Cordoba Peace Institute – Geneva (2024).

2. Context of Iraq

This contextual section provides a historical overview[2], introduces some key actors with characteristics of informal authority, and describes the case study geographical areas.

2.1 Historical context

"The political context in Iraq has been defined by decades of political and social turmoil beginning with the establishment of the state in 1921, and thereafter escalating along with the rise of Saddam Hussein's regime, the Baath Party, since the 1980s, the US invasion in 2003, and the subsequent emergence of armed groups.

Following the 1991 Shia and Kurdish uprising against the Baath regime, known as the Intifada, Saddam Hussein's regime adopted a nationalist and sectarian political approach, further widening the religious divide. The Baath Party's 'Faith Campaign' *(Al Hamla Al Imaniah)* in 1993 exacerbated sectarian tensions by promoting a Sunni ideology with a wide range of policies, laying the groundwork for the post-2003 religious and sectarian divide. The 'Faith Campaign' was an orchestrated effort by the Baath Party to adopt a more socially and publicly extreme sectarian Sunni Islamic agenda, along with a harsh campaign against Iraqi Shia, which culminated in the assassination of several Shia religious figures, such as Sheikh al-Gharawi in 1998 and Sayyid Muhammad Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr and his sons in 1999 among others. Neighboring countries also played a role in fueling sectarian conflict for their own political gains and purposes.

The campaign, led by Izzat Ibrahim Al-Douri, included a range of policies such as strong support for the Naqshbandi Sufi order, increased freedoms for Salafi Islamic groups, as well as additional funding for government-led Islamic Sunni programs. Al-Douri went on to succeed Saddam Hussein as the leader of the Baath Party and used the campaign to promote his Naqshbandi Sufi ideology. This ideology became the core of the 'Army of the Men of the Naqshbandi Order', whose members played a significant role in attacks and the establishment of armed movements after 2003. The army consisted mainly of former Iraqi military and intelligence personnel, special

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2   Adapted from Ali Al-Ahmad (2024). *Op. Cit.*

guards, and fighters recruited from Saddam Hussein's Fedayeen militia. This campaign consequently contributed to the fall of Sunni provinces to the 'Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant' (IS) and paved the way for subsequent developments in the region.

Two of the main issues that emerged after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 were Shia demands for religious and political rights; and second, the Sunni opposition to the post-2003 political structure. As a result, sectarian polarization deepened, with Sunni regions rejecting the ongoing political process, ultimately leading to military responses. While the Shia population in Iraq is seen to be in the majority, it is unclear how large this actually is in relation to the country's Sunni population.[3]

Some of the main causes of sectarian conflict in Iraq's recent history include: 1) the US decision to disband the Iraqi military, leading to former Iraqi military staff joining IS[4]; 2) the role of the Baath Party in the initial formation of violent groups after 2003; 3) the defense of Shia areas by the 'Mahdi Army' (Shia Sadrists) due to the weakness of the government security forces; 4) the support of various sectarian parties by neighboring countries; 5) the use of the concept of jihad to expel the occupier, especially among young Sunnis (albeit this is a legitimating factor, as opposed to a cause, strictly speaking); 6) the sectarian and ethnic quota system in the Iraqi government; 7) internal Shia-Shia tensions; 8) the absence of a genuine Sunni leadership; and, finally, 9) the political ambitions of Sunni leaders, leading to conflicts within the Sunni community. The aftermath of the conflict has therefore resulted in a lack of social cohesion across the country, widespread displacement of Iraqis, and a fragmented political landscape."[5] The number of missing persons in Iraq is amongst the highest in the world, with estimates between 250,000 and 1 million.[6]

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3   One estimate was that Shia represent 60–65% and the Sunni represent 32–37% of the Iraqi population. See: Mae Zoabi, Population Composition in Iraq, Al Jazeera network, 5.10.2005.

4   Mark Thompson. How Disbanding the Iraqi Army Fueled ISIS. Time magazine, May 28, 2015.

5   Adapted from Ali Al-Ahmad (2024). Op. Cit.

6   International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP), "Iraq" accessed 22 February 2024.

2.2 Formal and Informal Authority

The meanings, forms and sources of authority in human societies have evolved over time. Frank Furedi[7] eloquently demonstrated this in his study of thirty centuries of Western social and political thought. In our context, we look at one aspect of authority, which is the power to influence[8] and the ability to effect or promote social change (bearing in mind, of course, that conflict transformation is about social change). To be effective in this task, authority must be legitimate and not exclusively coercive. It does not necessarily have to be formal, i.e. rooted in the official structure of the state, and can be informal, as long as it is accepted and approved in society.

In diverse societies, authority is closely linked to a sense of belonging. Individuals and communities that make up society may have multiple allegiances. In the case of Iraqi society, context analysis shows that there are at least three layers of belonging: the tribe, the religious community, and the state. This multi-layered type of social structure was accepted in the early days of Islam, and included in the "Charter of Medina"[9], which recognized the tribe as a social reality (the first layer of belonging), introduced religion as a set of shared values (the second layer of belonging) to mitigate tribal chauvinism, and considered the City (*Al-Madina* – the third layer of belonging) as a broader space of interaction, to mitigate religious bigotry. In such a setting, an individual is a member of a tribe, a believer, and a citizen, at the same time. The Charter of Medina was established by the Prophet, in consultation with the various stakeholders, to ensure social cohesion and positive interaction between the components that made up Medina, and to ensure that the associated authorities have clear roles, and work together to establish peace in Medina. This may be considered as an example of the "collaborative governance" of the city, based on what Mason and Abdi have called the "harmonization of state and nonstate governance processes"[10] (Figure 1).

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7   Frank Furedi. Authority: A Sociological History. Cambridge University Press (2013).

8   For George Mailath et al., authority is "the ability of an individual or group to influence the actions of others by what they say". See George J. Mailath, Stephen Morris, Andrew Postlewaite. Laws and authority. *Research in Economics,* Volume 71, Issue 1 (2017). The Oxford English Dictionary notes that authority encompasses "the exercise of influence".

9   Abbas Aroua. Niveaux d'appartenance dans la « Charte de Médine ». In Dépolarisation idéologique en Afrique du Nord. Cordoba Research Papers. Cordoba Peace Institute – Geneva (2021). See also: Abbas Aroua. Ideological Polarisation and Social Cohesion. In Introduction to Conflict Transformation. Cordoba Peace Institute – Geneva (2022).

10   Dekha Ibrahim Abdi and Simon J. A. Mason. Mediation and Governance in Fragile Contexts: Small Steps to Peace. Kumarian Press (2019).
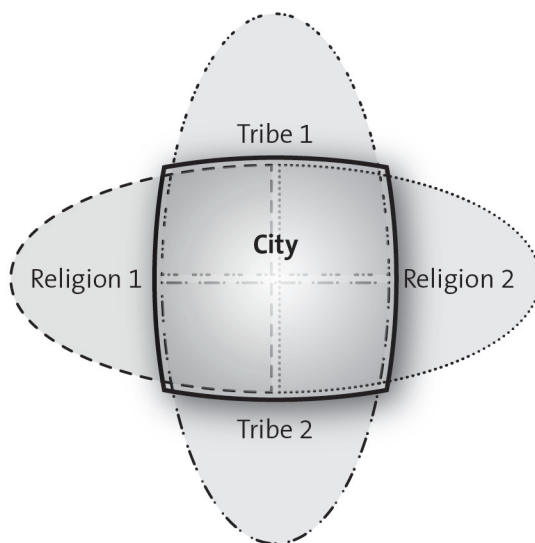
Figure 1: Vision of tribe and religion living in peaceful co-existence in the city.

From the outset of the projects and throughout their implementation, CPI sought the support of Iraq's formal authorities at federal, provincial, and local levels, liaising with the Federal Government of Iraq (FGI), the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the mayors of the cities where the projects were implemented. It also engaged with informal tribal and religious authorities. This engagement was prepared by an action-research paper[11] on the potential role of influential tribal and clerical actors in social cohesion in Iraq. A field mapping exercise was then carried out to identify these types of informal authorities within the different communities that make up Iraqi society. From the analysis of the Iraqi context, it appeared that three layers exist:

- *First layer of belonging and authority:* Tribal authority is vested in tribal leaders, who retain the power of decision and influence.

- *Second layer of belonging and authority:* For religious authorities, however, the situation is more complex. In some religious traditions, such as Sunni

11   Renad Mansour. Tribes and Religious Institutions in Iraq. Cordoba Research Papers. Cordoba Peace Institute – Geneva (2017).

Islam, religious authority is fragmented among various religious actors, individuals such as respected scholars, and institutions such as Dar Al-Ifta' (the Office of the Mufti). In other religious traditions, such as Shia Islam, religious authority is highly structured around institutions, most notably the *Marja'iya* in Najaf.

- *Third layer of belonging and authority:* Ideally, jointly negotiated political space and "citizenship" would be the third layer of belonging, resulting in state structures that are seen as legitimate by all constituencies. Formal state structures do exist and are in a longer process of evolving, so that one day the gap between the current formal state structures and the ideal vision of the "City" in the charter of Medina can be bridged.

Tribal, religious and state political lines are not aligned. While this complicates analysis, it is a potential source of social cohesion, as different forms of alliances can be built across conflict lines. Most Iraqi tribes, for example, are made up of Sunni and Shia components. Thus, whilst formal political authority, tribal authority and religious authority are distinct, they sometimes overlap, and we can have a situation where the same person, for example, holds both tribal and religious authority. Indeed, it is essential to keep in mind that formal authority is not completely independent of tribal and especially religious authority. For example, the *Marja'iya,* which does not participate directly in politics and prefers metapolitics, has an enormous influence on government policy. It therefore has both a direct influence on the Shia community and an indirect influence – through the government – on Iraqi society as a whole.

2.3   Case Study Contexts

The three projects outlined in this paper addressed the following issues, which arose directly out of the ongoing decades-long conflict:

Missing in Samarra: CPI's work in Iraq began with a project to address the issue of persons who have disappeared as a direct result of the war against IS. Specifically, the project aimed to address the mistrust between communities of different religious affiliations and accusing each other of abuses, which led to polarization at both the political and armed groups levels. This polarization meant that the question of how to deal with the miss-

ing persons could not be addressed, even if the actors saw and understood the need to do so. CPI decided to focus its efforts on Samarra first, as it is a unique city, holy to Shia Muslims because of the Al-Askari shrine in the heart of the city, but inhabited by a predominantly Sunni population. Subsequently, the missing persons project was extended to the national level.

Education in Talafar: The second project was an initiative of peace through the education system in the district of Talafar which aimed to foster communication between communities by addressing local grievances caused by the war. In particular, it focused on schoolteachers who had become marginalized within their communities because they were forced to teach a curriculum imposed by IS to children living under the group's occupation.

Refugees in Talafar: The developments of the above project led to the third project in the same area on how to deal with the refugees who want to return to their area of origin. This activity focused on the Talafar population (mainly Turkmen) who fled to Türkiye during and after the IS occupation of their area. As a result, the refugees asked for the possibility of returning to their home city. In this context, the project aimed to facilitate the return of the refugees and enable their reintegration into the Talafari community.

3. Conflict Transformation Methodology

This section explains the structure and guiding methodologies used in the three projects. There are different understandings of the conflict transformation method,[12] yet what they all have in common is the individual, collective, cultural, and structural elements in transforming conflicts from violent to non-violent forms. Where understandings differ is in the focus and emphasis placed on different aspects of this broader approach. For our understanding here, we focus on visioning, cultural sensitivity, and "do no harm". First, the idea of visioning is that any mediation and conflict transformation initiative should be guided by a vision that is rooted in all sectors and constituencies of society, not just the elite. It is therefore essential to include all actors and marginalized groups in the analysis phase (including those of differing genders and ages, where relevant). Second, the principle of religious and cultural sensitivity means that particular emphasis is placed on respecting local customs and norms, for example by conducting conflict transformation training that is rooted in local cultural and religious values, rather than imposing a Western-driven or Western-minded conflict resolution process. This goes hand in hand with the approach of engaging only in demand-driven processes. Third, the "do no harm" principle aims to minimize negative impacts. Activities in conflict contexts can harm individuals (physically, or reputationally) and even lead to an escalation of violence on a collective scale. While there is no guarantee that no harm will be done, ongoing, in-depth conflict analysis, along with communication with a wide range of actors at both local and national levels, can help mitigate negative effects.

Within this broad understanding of conflict transformation, we have adopted and developed more practical methods, which include: 1) the mediation space approach combined with *diapraxis,* and 2) the insider-outsider mediation set-up of the third party (discussed below), in order to leverage formal and informal religious, tribal, and political authorities, i.e. that we found to be the essence of our conflict transformation approach in Iraq.

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12 John Paul Lederach and Michelle Maiese. <u>Conflict Transformation: A Circular Journey with a Purpose</u>. *New Routes* Vol 14, 1/2009. Life & Peace Institute, Uppsala (2009).

3.1 Safe Mediation Space and *Diapraxis*

The safe mediation space[13] is a specific approach to conflict transformation that lends itself well to considering actors' narratives, both in terms of the substance to be discussed and in terms of their concerns and wishes about how to design the process. This leads to more complicated, longer, but also more nuanced understandings of what can be done, as well as by whom, when, and how. The idea is to focus on concrete conflict issues, but in a way that respects the different narratives and frames of reference that are used by the actors involved to give meaning to these issues. The advantage is that actors who feel that their point of view is understood and respected are much less likely to block the process or escalate a conflict. Any proposed process and outcome that fits an actor's narrative has a chance of being seen as legitimate and therefore is more likely to be sustainable. While the "non-judgmental" approach is common to all mediation, the safe mediation space approach seeks to go one step further to not only not judge actors' positions and interests, but also to not judge the different actors' value systems, narratives, and "logic", i.e. the reasoning they use to make sense of, and to frame, their interests. It does this by seeking a common vision, creating a safe space for actors to meet, and finally letting the actors come up with concrete actions to resolve conflict issues.

The most challenging question in the safe mediation space approach is who to involve. The idea is not to look for "power" as derived from institutions and formal state structures. Rather, it is to consider, and look for, who has "power in discourse", in relation to the different narratives. This kind of power is often found in informal structures and procedures. The term "informal" is used to refer to authorities that do not necessarily function as part of the official state apparatus or central government. Informal authorities by this definition have a degree of influence where they are able to facilitate and set things in motion, even if they are not mandated by the formal state.

The mediation space approach is often combined with the *diapraxis* methodology, "dialogue through practice" (a term coined by the Danish

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13   Jean-Nicolas Bitter, Simon J. A. Mason, Emanuel Schaeublin and Angela Ullmann. Mediation Space: Addressing Obstacles Stemming from Worldview Differences to Regain Negotiation Flexibility. CSS Mediation Resources. Center for Security Studies (CSS), ETH Zurich (2022).

theologian Lily Rassmussen[14]) where dialogue is strengthened through the implementation of joint initiatives carried out by the conflict actors. This addresses the challenge of communication between actors and communities, where the exchange of words is not sufficient to overcome the lack of understanding and trust between the different parties. This is because "meaning" (i.e. the concrete effects of utterances) can be constructed in different ways, as each community experiences a conflict differently. Diapraxis can produce innovative projects which in turn can serve as references for broader solutions required by the conflict context. The working method allows partial or sectorial implementation to take place before or in parallel with official negotiations – sometimes thereby helping to unblock them. Thus, the usual (and sometimes problematic) broad phases of pre-negotiation – negotiation – and implementation are transformed into a series of mini-negotiations and implementations that build understanding and trust for further negotiations and implementations. Putting in place concrete joint projects allows the stakeholders to build trust further by turning words into actions and gradually creating a common goal. Working with relevant actors who are influencers or "guardians of narratives", such as religious authorities or tribal leaderships, can enable conflict issues to be addressed at a practical and local level with links to the national level.[15]

3.2 Third Parties

The main approach taken in this project was to combine insider and outsider mediators[16] in order to make best use of their comparative advantages. Local actors have a unique understanding of the specific cultural context and

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14   For more on diapraxis as a methodology, see Jean-Nicolas Bitter. Diapraxis in Different Contexts: A Brief Discussion with Rasmussen. In Politorbis 52, 2/2011. Religion in Conflict Transformation. Edited by Simon J A Mason and Damiano A Sguaitamatti. Swiss FDFA and Center for Security Studies, ETH Zurich (2011).

15   This approach to social cohesion also differs from those that seek to address explicitly worldviews or value systems. Rather, worldviews are addressed indirectly through joint actions. See for example, Jeffrey R. Seul. Introduction to Special Issue: Negotiating Across Worldviews. Negotiation Journal, Volume 38, Issue 3 p. 357–361 (2022). In a sense, it is similar to a "confidence building measures" approach (CBM), but diapraxis focuses more on understanding between actors in addition to the trust-building component of CBM. Furthermore, diapraxis tends to focus on practical but "hard" conflict issues, while CBMs seeks to avoid the hard conflict issues, to rather work on those topics where incremental, reciprocal trust building is seen as being feasibly.

16   In this project, the insider mediators consisted of the CPI team in Iraq, who are Iraqis, and the outsider mediators that consisted of the CPI team based in Geneva, with methodological inputs from Jean-Nicolas Bitter (Swiss FDFA).

narratives of the different actors, as well as networks that have been built up over time and that cut across formal and informal levels and different conflict cleavages. This allows the identification of relevant entry points in the given context, to clarify specific social cohesion goals, and to ensure that the process design and the project methodology working towards these goals are developed in an incremental way. The advantage of having local mediators to lead conflict transformation projects is that they increase the sense of local process ownership, commitment, legitimacy, and the sustainability of local efforts.

At the same time, international third parties can play an important supporting role with method know-how, expertise, and funding. Often the outsider is more familiar with different conflict transformation methods but struggles to apply and communicate them in a given context. They may also be seen as more impartial because they are not from one community or the other in the given context.

Insider-outsider collaboration has many advantages. To make it work, the joint insider-outsider mediation team needs to reflect on its own perceptions and references and how these affect the process. This process of awareness includes non-judgmental listening to understand interpretations of events and issues. This helps to build positive relationships with unfamiliar actors. As a result, practitioners tend to gain a more flexible understanding of the different practical outcomes that may be possible, based on different interpretations of the worldviews of the actors involved. The insider-outsider mediation set-up, therefore, allows for the third party to map the relevant sources of authority in a given context. In Iraq, this included the tribal, religious, and formal state, and this on a local, regional and national level. Such an analysis is complex, but this complexity also offers opportunities. If one level is blocked, another level or dimension can be used to bypass the blockage.

4. Case Studies

The three case studies presented can be seen as three phases, each one of which builds on the work and the contacts established in the previous phase/case and applies the conflict transformation method described above.

4.1 Missing Persons and the Right to Know

The first social cohesion and reconciliation initiative in Iraq took place in 2018–2019 in the city of Samarra. Here is a summary of the project's objectives, context, actors, phases, outcomes, and learnings.[17]

Objectives

The aim of the project was to bring together a range of stakeholders to think about how to support families of missing persons to know what had happened to them. This 'right to know' is enshrined in the international law of human rights. It is based on the premise that knowing the fate of the missing will alleviate the suffering of victims. The objectives of the project were: 1) to reduce the high tensions between the parties on how to deal with the issue of missing persons; 2) to address the marginalization of influential political and/or religious actors; 3) to foster mutual trust and promote a peaceful and inclusive common civic space. Focusing on the missing persons was seen as the best way to alleviate the suffering of the families, thereby promoting stability and cohesion in the city, and avoiding violent escalation.

Context

In Iraq, missing persons are presumed dead four years after their alleged disappearance, at which point no further legal action can be taken. While enforced disappearances are an unfortunate and common phenomenon in times of war, they have been particularly extreme in Iraq. The country has witnessed various episodes of enforced disappearance in its recent history,[18] but the project focused only on the persons who went missing as a result of the war against IS. To understand the context in which the project took

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17 For more details, see Ali Al-Ahmad (2024). *Op. Cit.*

18 The practice was common under the former regime of Saddam Hussein, but also resulting from the Iran-Iraq war in the eighties, or more recently following the US invasion in 2003 and the civil war that ensued.

place, it is necessary to understand the geography and the cultural background of Samarra. This city is located in the province/governorate of Salaheddin, north of Baghdad. It is encircled by desert areas from which the IS cells could easily operate and launch attacks on neighboring villages and on the Baghdad-Mosul highway on which Samarra lies. While the city itself was not occupied by IS, Samarra was surrounded and suffered from several attempts at incursion. At the height of IS's takeover of territory in 2014, Samarra was attacked by the IS group, which managed to take control of key buildings on the outskirts of the city, which was besieged for almost a month. The city, already traumatized by the bombings of the holy Al-Askari shrine by Al-Qaeda back in 2006 that triggered the civil war[19], took up arms to defend itself with the help of the Iraqi army and, to some extent, with the support of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), notably Moqtada Al-Sadr's *Saraya Assalam* (Peace Brigades). The Peace Brigades were already present in Samarra to provide more general security, but also to guard the entrance to the shrine, allowing safe passage to pilgrims. To this end, a first wall was built separating the shrine from the old city where the inhabitants lived, while a second wall was built around the city.

The IS insurgency further contributed to the polarization of the Sunni and Shia populations, both physically (with the wall preventing normal daily interaction between the city's residents and pilgrims) and figuratively with the simplistic Sunni against Shia narrative of IS. The city, and the holy shrine in particular, were protected first and foremost by the Sunni population, which then enabled the Peace Brigades to secure the shrine. Thus, many Sunni actors wanted some kind of recognition from the Shia clergy for the positive role played by the Sunnis in this matter.

Actors

The actors who were consulted, and were thus more or less directly involved in the project, can be categorized as religious leaders, state representatives, tribal leaders, local state representatives, local informal influencers, and, to some extent, international actors. An actor may also fall into more than one

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19 "On 22 February 2006 a major shock occurred when Al-Qaeda blew up the Al-Askari Holy Shrine, before the Shia Endowment Office took responsibility for the holy shrine, and Al-Qaeda also targeted pilgrims going to the holy shrine. This led the Shia "Mahdi Army" of Sayyid Muqtada al-Sadr to react radically. As a result, the holy shrine was separated from the rest of the city of Samarra by a security wall, and many researchers believe that what happened in Samarra was the starting point for sectarian division in Iraq." see Ali Al-Ahmad (2024).

group, meaning that these categories are liable to overlap. This allowed for useful synergies and bridge-building functions.

- *Religious leaders:* Meetings with religious leaders were key to the development of this project and the selection of those to be involved. These leaders included those of the Shia groups in Karbala and Najaf, members of the Al-Hakim family, the religious authorities of the Imam Hussein and Imam Abbas holy shrines, and representatives of the legal authorities of these shrines.

- *State representatives:* At the national level, government officials involved included the Deputy Head of the Directorate of Tribal Affairs Office in the Ministry of the Interior, the National Reconciliation Committee, the Adviser to the Prime Minister, and the head of the NGOs section in the Prime Minister's Office. They stressed the need to involve the tribes as they have 'power' in their respective constituencies which can improve social cohesion.

- *Tribal leaders:* The presence of large tribal networks and communities are an intrinsic part of Iraq's sociological makeup. Their involvement in social cohesion projects is therefore relevant not only at the local level, but also in linking local communities to the national level.

- *Local state level:* At the local level, key actors included the then Mayor of Samarra, a Sunni from the Al Bu Baz tribe. His opinions were key to the project phases. To paraphrase, he suggests that: although trust building between parties may seem difficult, it can be built over time. For trust to grow, it is important for third parties working on social cohesion to gain local knowledge and understand the vision of the community. This constitutes the groundwork in identifying how the international community and its organizations can help to develop appropriate solutions in a given context. Despite the general feeling of hopelessness among the population, community members involved in the activities expressed their willingness to work together and to overcome mutual mistrust.

- *Local informal influencers:* Local actors operating outside of the authority of the central government were essential for accessing and building trust across the community divides. These actors included the head of the

Samarra Council of Tribes. The Al-Badri tribe is one of the most prominent tribes in the city of Samarra; its members are predominantly Sunni, but there is also a smaller constituency of Shia members. The outcome of the discussions with the Al-Badris revealed different narratives: namely, those among the Sunni counterparts who focused on the impact of the wall on the residents of Samarra. They argued that it would only widen the gap between the Sunni and Shia communities. Meanwhile, Shia voices emphasized the security and protection dimensions and needs of the city. Organizations also played a role in helping the project gain local knowledge and experience. For example, a representative from the Karbala Center for Studies and Research and a researcher and practitioner in interfaith dialogue were involved in the project. Also present were a member of the Gilgamesh NGO, which focuses on education and relief, and the founder and president of a human rights NGO working on women's rights. The Peace Brigades also advised that tribal representatives should be consulted first. The Peace Brigades are an important actor to consider, not only because of their role in the conflict, but also because they are generally accepted by the local population for their humanitarian actions on the ground in the aftermath of the IS attack.

- *International actors:* From the international community, members of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) were involved as they work at both national and community levels. From their years of experience, they advised on the importance of using the right terminology and language to communicate any effort or project, as this can affect the momentum of activities. For example, they advised using the term 'national settlement' rather than 'national reconciliation' as this is more acceptable to most parties and is a goal that most local and national actors would be willing to participate in, given the involvement of foreign actors.

Identifying the relevant participants for the various projects was difficult, as participants needed a process of validation from various interlocutors to agree to their role or involvement in the project. This was particularly challenging for obtaining the agreement of tribal leaders, as it was difficult to know which leaders had the most influence within their communities and whether they were formally appointed by government agencies. Moreover, some actors were inconsistent in their level of involvement during the

projects. For example, during the activities in Samarra, representatives of the holy shrine who had given their consent in earlier meetings eventually withdrew from the project. While no reasons were given as to why actors refrained from further involvement, from the general suspicion of foreign interference in Iraqi society, one might infer a fear of being involved in a project that has a hidden agenda. Thus, there may have been a lack of trust. Other difficulties in engaging with some actors included expectations of hidden benefits, both political and economic. This also affected the development of the projects.

Phases

The project evolved in four phases:

- *First, analysis:* initial exploratory missions were carried out to understand the situation, explain the 'safe mediation space' approach to each actor and confirm their willingness and interest to participate. The main aspects we discussed were security and economics. Listening to each party and understanding their perspectives and grievances about the conflict enabled CPI to develop a narrative document for the subsequent mediation process. This highlighted the tensions that existed between Sunni groups, mainly along political lines and often linked to doctrinal differences.

- *Second, workshop:* Subsequent missions focused on actors working on post-arrest (or enforced) disappearances. This led to the organization of the first workshop in Samarra with selected participants. We continued to inform the Shia religious authorities in Najaf of project developments to ensure their support for the continuation of the project. After the project held a safe mediation space, lawyers for the missing persons handed to the state and the PMF a list of 900 arrestees, in order to find out their fate.

- *Third, phasing out:* The phase-out of the project focused on strengthening efforts to ensure its sustainability without CPI. Therefore, in addition to building strong support from key actors, training sessions and action-oriented dialogues focused on the need to implement concrete joint initiatives to enable actors to continue building trust, creating common goals and implementing diapraxis. Some of the ideas that have emerged from this project include work on education and youth, cultural or historical landmarks, and refugees.

- *Forth, resumption of the project and extension to the national level:* Following the initial phase that took place in the city of Samarra (2018–2019), and with the availability of new funding, the project was resumed in November 2020 and extended to the national level, with a strong involvement of the Najaf *Marja'iya* and both the KRG and the FGI through the Ministry of Justice and the Permanent Committee for International Humanitarian Law of the Prime Minister's Office.

Outcomes

The project had wider political implications, with "political" not meaning that of party politics and political polarization but rather the public governance and cohesion of society. The local ownership of the process was ensured by enabling and promoting channels of communication between key actors through an implemented joint action *(diapraxis)* on the issue of the missing persons. In the case of Samarra, efforts were made to develop a teaching by the *Hawza* on the issue of the "right to know". The *Marja'iya* agreed to issue a fatwa about the "right to know" only when the project moved to the national level, as this included all Sunni, Shia and Yazidi. This illustrates the importance of how perceptions of stakeholders in a conflict resolution process can be shaped and leveraged at the national level to avoid one party appearing as "a target" and solely responsible. On a practical level, however, the process of approving who should be considered "missing" was difficult. There were many duplicate claims over the years, and some names included were of individuals who disappeared during the Saddam Hussein regime, which this project did not address as it focused on the more recent conflict timeline of the city.

As a result of this project the *Marja'iya*, as a key political and religious actor supporting the process, decided to support the "right to know" issue and then convened a conference to advocate the Iraqi government for a law. With the support of the religious authority, a 12-member steering committee was appointed and held a meeting in Erbil, where the idea of drafting a law on the issue was born. This can be seen as a successful "spin off" from the project. It marked a significant breakthrough and positive cooperation between the KRG and the FGI. "The draft law was finalized and handed over to the Minister of Justice in person on 19 December 2021 during a national conference organized by CPI in Najaf. The conference was attended by representatives of all sectors of the Iraqi people, relevant ministries, political leaders, a representative of the Prime Minister of the KRG, ministers, as well

as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and representatives of the *Marja'iyyah* in Najaf. The conference was also an opportunity for the KRG to launch its Human Rights Strategy from the city of Najaf, which in turn had a highly positive impact on both the KRG and the federal government, as well as on other segments of the Iraqi population".[20]

Learnings

CPI faced some difficulties in convincing the relevant leaders to participate in the process, as some actors did not see the benefit of participating. This was partly due to years of mistrust and suspicion between Iraqis and international actors. In addition, given the highly polarized environment of the conflict areas, there were security and accessibility risks associated with the activities in Samarra. Some meetings were held in other cities to minimize these risks. In some cases, there were political sensitivities that were difficult to address. For example, working on access to the Al-Askari shrine was particularly difficult as it was protected by a powerful group, the Peace Brigades.

Dealing with missing persons leads to the question of how to protect people who are ready to speak up, so that they are not later targeted. This also shows the limits of a small NGO such as CPI to do this work alone, as informal, insider mediators can minimize a lot of potential harm through their contacts and leveraging religious and tribal authorities, but sometimes larger, more robust organizations such as the ICRC are needed to guarantee protection of victims who are ready to speak up.

Another challenge was funding. Once the program reached its end date and funding allocation, it was unclear how the process could be scaled up beyond the local level. On a positive note, this phase of the project laid the groundwork for the next phase, as it created trusted networks from which further ideas could be developed, as discussed below.

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20   Adapted from Ali Al-Ahmad (2024). *Op. Cit.*

4.2 Reconciliation and Social Cohesion within and through Education

The second social cohesion and reconciliation effort took place in the district of Talafar, Iraq from November 2020 to (initially) April 2021[21].

Objectives
The objective of the initiative was to support social reconciliation through the school curriculum. It sought to achieve this objective by facilitating channels of communication between relevant actors: tribal and religious leaders, teachers, school directors, and families. The idea was that the concrete issue could reduce the potential for violent escalation between communities in the territories recovered from IS. It was also intended to promote a broader process of post-IS social reconciliation.

Context
Years of conflict in Iraq had severely impacted the education system, with internally displaced school-age Iraqi children out of school and deprived of any education. While the Iraqi government took the matter seriously, it lacked the effective means to address the issue comprehensively. In addition to the damaged physical state of the infrastructure, the political process of decentralization affected education, as not all governorates had the capacity or resources to take over the sector. Their capacity had to be strengthened in terms of policies, plans, and human resources. In particular, the Ministry of Education had undertaken significant efforts to reform and revitalize the Iraqi education system following the return of IS-occupied northern areas to Iraqi control. The general structure, timetable, and key examination periods of the education system had remained the same as in previous eras, but the Ministry had been slowly working to improve security, curricula, and literacy and enrolment rates in primary and secondary schools – all of which had suffered significantly under IS influence. More worryingly, young people (but also teachers and educational staff) who had lived in areas formerly under IS control had been exposed to highly violent content through the

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21   The project was funded by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH. CPI's efforts focused on dialogue and reconciliation in the Talafar district for a period of six months. Unfortunately, the project was disrupted after three months of implementation due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which slowed down the ability to meet and travel. Therefore, the progress and development of the project was limited due to unforeseen circumstances. Nevertheless, the first meetings and workshops led to some positive outcomes.

group's imposed curricula, which promoted the ideology of IS to children from an early age.

In such a context, the need to promote a culture of peace and tolerance in school curricula was urgent. The recognition, by both the state and its humanitarian partners, of the importance of promoting tolerance and inclusive education as a positive contribution to conflict transformation efforts – along with their willingness to involve local students and community members whenever possible – was seen as a valuable step towards a hopeful future for Iraq. The combined knowledge and skills of well-trained education professionals and Iraqi students eager to participate in positive change in Iraq were expected to contribute to thriving school systems and educational outcomes, both in and out of the classroom.

Actors

Based on the field analysis, it was clear that various stakeholders needed to be involved, namely the local authorities, religious, tribal, and community leaders, activists and, most importantly education personnel (both teachers and school directors) in Talafar district. There were two types of education staff:

- *First, teachers under duress:* those who had been teaching under IS occupation and who, during this period, were forced to teach the program, and thus the ideology of IS, to the children living under their control. "After the liberation of the area, these teachers were cleared and vetted by the authorities without any suspicion that they belonged to the militant group, and consequently no legal proceedings were brought against them. However, they suffered from the suspicion of a significant part of the community, (e.g. families of pupils) who somehow suspected them of still teaching extremist ideologies or of not agreeing with the official national curriculum".[22]

- *Second, teachers who continued in the same vein:* those who, "mostly unintentionally, continued to teach divisive narratives that promoted extremist ideologies and indirectly rehabilitated the reputation of IS in the area, making members of the community uneasy and fearful that this could perpetuate or even strengthen the sectarian divisions. These feelings of mutual suspicion and fear arose mainly from the lack of proper

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22   Adapted from Ali Al-Ahmad (2024). *Op. Cit.*

communication and constructive engagement between the teachers and school directors, but also from the lack of interaction between pupils' families and schools".[23] Put simply, these feelings stem from a lack of knowledge and understanding of "the other".

Phases

The project developed in four phases, but the planned intervention was disrupted by the outbreak of COVID-19, so only two workshops were held for two working groups composed of all conflict parties:

- *First phase, analysis:* The project team made efforts to map the relevant actors and issues at stake, as summarized above. This helped to clarify an acceptable process objective for the participants to be invited to a first "strategic workshop".

- *Second phase, strategizing:* An initial strategic workshop highlighted the need to reinforce and build on the work of the Teachers' Syndicate. At the time, it was not as active as expected, due to a lack of funding, coordination and logistical capacity. However, it was activated by encouraging stakeholders to set up a strong network of teachers and school directors, which in turn became a forum designed to develop and host activities that stimulate social interaction and reconciliation.

- *Third phase, activities:* Putting the strategic insights into practice involved a series of meetings and workshops. These meetings and workshops showed that there were specific barriers that could be addressed collectively. For example, some teachers were still teaching divisive narratives that could be seen as promoting extremist ideologies. To overcome this obstacle and the legacy of the previous curriculum, the project proposed to develop and provide training and "training of trainers" to selected teachers in the district, in order to equip them with a neutral, non-divisive, and acceptable teaching methodology which they could then pass on to their colleagues. In addition, the school directors were encouraged to organize regular exchange visits of school pupils and teachers within the district, which went hand in hand with efforts to promote school exchange programs and activities, such as sports competitions and art

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23   Adapted from Ali Al-Ahmad (2024). *Op. Cit.*

exhibitions. School administrations were encouraged to involve pupils' families in school assemblies and to organize regular parent-teacher meetings. Furthermore, the experience of retired teachers could be used by actively involving them in the teachers' network.

- *Fourth phase, training and phasing out:* In the fourth phase of the project, which aimed to improve the skills of teachers, a three-day training workshop on "Mediation and Conflict Transformation" with a focus on the education sector in Talafar, was organized in Erbil from 27 February to 1 March 2020. A total of 54 participants attended the workshop, and were divided into two groups. The training sessions thereafter aimed to provide participants with knowledge on the theory and practice of conflict transformation, how to apply conflict analysis skills, and practical ideas for culturally appropriate approaches to conflict transformation. CPI's local facilitator consulted with all the actors and stakeholders, who were all keen to participate as these groups were directly impacted. In this case, CPI had to turn down some actors due to the large number of participants and the need to ensure equal participation of all groups, but encouraged the actors involved to replicate the idea at their own level in order to benefit the maximum number of people.

Outcomes
Participants realized the extent to which the government had not played a direct role in addressing the issue of education, and thus the need to empower themselves and their local community members to actively work together on this issue. They also realized that this would require capacity building in mediation, conflict analysis and conflict resolution to equip the teachers with the skills to mediate with parents and families.

Learnings
Where there is a mutual interest, i.e. a non-polarized education system, dialogue, joint analysis, conflict transformation training, joint efforts can unblock a system characterized by a legacy of mistrust and misunderstanding. Depolarizing the education system is a key way to achieve long-term impact, as it helps to bridge generations.

4.3   Reconciliation between Returnees and Remainees

This project in Talafar focused on the safe return of refugees.

Objectives
The objective of the initiative was to promote reconciliation and dialogue channels of communication on the issue of the return of Talafari refugees from abroad.

Context
It is important to note that the area is an ethnic Turkmen territory and is made up of a predominantly Turkmen population, both Sunni and Shia. When IS attacked the area around 2014, it was mainly, but not exclusively, the Shia population that was persecuted by the militant group, and this saw a first wave of emigration, around 2014. Then, the Iraqi army, along with state-sponsored armed groups and the international coalition, gradually regained the territory through fierce fighting. At this point, also due to rumors spread by IS that the Shia would come and kill all the Sunni in the city, much of the exclusively Sunni population formerly living under IS occupation feared being persecuted, or perceived as IS sympathizers or even IS fighters and so many of them left (thereby constituting the second wave of emigration in 2017). This occurred while the first wave of Shia emigrants began to return. To this day, a large number of Iraqi refugees are still living in Türkiye and some of them long to return to their area of origin, but face obstacles, whether administrative (e.g. lack of proper documentation), economic (e.g. lack of economic opportunities) or security (e.g. fear of reprisals). The CPI project focused on the first and third ones.

Actors
Based on this context analysis, the participants in the safe mediation space consisted of three distinct groups. First, representatives of the refugee community, which included a wide range of different tribal leaders and notables from the refugee community established in Ankara. Second, representatives of the Talafari remainee community, including religious leaders, humanitarian activists, and local authorities. Third, representatives of the Iraqi authorities, including ministry and embassy staff and security officials. These were necessary to address the legal and administrative aspects, as they are the only legal authorities able to issue proper documentation and oversee security clearances.

Phases

The project consisted of four phases:

- *First, analysis of narratives:* At the onset of the refugee initiative, CPI involved more than 300 influential people in workshops, conferences, and coordination meetings. Through these bilateral meetings and joint workshops, two narratives emerged that helped to understand the fears and accusations on both sides. These narratives and fears can be summarized as follows: The first narrative emerged from returning refugees who emphasized fears of reprisals against families with some members who belonged to IS or its affiliates. This included fears that the state and/or security forces would over-generalize and accuse them of terrorism on the basis of very limited evidence of guilt. There were fears of blanket accusations against all actors who had remained in IS territory, leading to abusive or illegal detentions, enforced disappearances, etc. Furthermore, this narrative was characterized by doubts about livelihood opportunities and fear of being marginalized by society because of perceived IS affiliation. The second narrative emerged from the remainees, who were concerned that the return of families perceived to be widely associated or affiliated with IS would prompt acts of revenge by the host community, leading to instability in the liberated areas. The remainees were also concerned that IS fighters would return along with the return of their families, through political deals struck in the capital. The narratives of the refugees and of the remainees seemed incompatible and mutually reinforcing.

- *Second, inception workshop:* The process was designed to start with an inception workshop to identify a mechanism for dialogue. Somewhat surprisingly, all the objectives were achieved within the first workshop. Trust was built rapidly, which enabled the project to progress much faster than CPI had expected in its earlier preparatory stages. While this did not necessarily have a negative impact on the project, one possible explanation for the element of surprise may have been a misinterpretation of the conflict analysis in the exploratory and preparatory phase. Meanwhile, the success of the workshop is most likely attributable to the shared history and identity of the participants from the area, both of which facilitated dialogue.

- *Third phase, implementation:* As a result of a series of workshops, a mechanism was set up to coordinate and implement the return of groups of

refugee families. The mechanism relied on encouraging Turkmen to re-connect with their Turkmen identity, rather than a sectarian affiliation as either Sunni or Shia. Moreover, an insider mediator, a prominent tribal leader from Talafar, was selected by consensus of all parties to be part of the delegation to Ankara. He was instrumental because he was respected by both sides of the conflict.

• *Fourth phase, spin-off activities:* Some of the project activities that emerged as spin-offs after the main part of the project included specific reintegration and rehabilitation programs. CPI supported and strengthened social and cultural activities to better reintegrate returnees in Talafar. The organization of social, cultural, and sports events involving returnee youth contributed to the success of the returns. For example, "the opening of the Cordoba Cultural Café on 15 February 2022 in Talafar was in response to a request made in December 2021 by the mayor of the city, who stressed the need to work on cultural, artistic, and sporting aspects to promote channels of communication between citizens. This space, dedicated to the youth and artists of Talafar, is now a place of meeting and exchange for all Talafaris, thus promoting the creation of an environment conducive to dialogue and social cohesion. The mayor encouraged CPI in this direction and offered his support in carrying out this activity. The Cordoba Cultural Café, dedicated to the promotion of peace and peaceful coexistence, is an informal meeting place for young people and is used daily by artists. It is intended to be a safe space where young people can interact freely and organize their own events. It is also used by some international and local NGOs to organize events, trainings, workshops and focus groups".[24]

Outcomes

The outcome and impact of the project was evident in the number of people who decided to return within the scope of the project, i.e., around 300 re-turnees. This highlights the positive impact on the community, as other refugees contacted the embassy on their own. The Turkmen Iraqis also had a council in Ankara, where they have an informal community. Representatives from this community provided a link between the Talafari stakeholders. Therefore, the strengths of this project included not only successful confidence building at the community level, but also at the government level,

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24   Adapted from Ali Al-Ahmad (2024). *Op. Cit.*

where the Iraqi Embassy in Türkiye provided assurances for the safety and protection of the returnees. Another outcome of the project has been unintended spin-offs, such as the Cordoba Cultural Café.

Learnings

One of the main challenges was the constant need to clarify CPI's role to stakeholders to ensure that CPI was not misunderstood as a humanitarian organization that neither played the role of the central government, nor provided infrastructure support. Ongoing role clarification was therefore key to overcoming misperceptions early on and managing unrealistic expectations. It also points to the need for sustained and coordinated efforts of dialogue facilitation or *diapraxis,* and the need to link these with other actors who can implement the outcomes of dialogues to help put them into practice.

5. Methodological Insights

What can be learnt methodologically from the case studies and the efforts to use safe mediation spaces, insider-outsider collaboration, and leverage informal authorities?

5.1 Safe Mediation Space and *Diapraxis* in Practice

In all three projects, efforts were made to ensure the engagement of various actors with different references from across the Iraqi political and cultural spectrum, who may have grievances with each other. When using this approach, it is important to remember that narratives need to be addressed in a contextualized way and not in isolation from the conflict issues, such as missing persons, education, and coexistence after the return of displaced people.

The safe mediation space approach, as applied in these cases, was based on a vision of the need to work on common citizenship as an element of national reconciliation. At the same time, this was to be made practical by working on concrete, specific conflict issues that were of concern to the actors involved at the local, provincial level, but also relevant at the national level. Concrete issues such as missing persons, refugees, or the role of teachers, are at the same time political, economic and cultural issues, and are all shaped by value systems. Different actors will have different interests and framing "logics" or value systems that come together at the concrete, tangible level if they can agree on a common set of steps and actions. The common steps can promote greater understanding and social cohesion, even if many of the underlying larger tensions in society remain.

Capacity building was a particularly strong element in the processes, as it created a common language and space for facilitating dialogue and initiating projects, which allowed *diapraxis* to continue throughout the project phases. Various ideas for local initiatives emerged from the participants in the projects, which could be jointly implemented in order to maintain the continuity of reconciliation efforts from the local level.

Continuity of the safe mediation space approach across all projects was seen both as key to building trust and credibility over time, and as one of the greatest challenges, largely due to limited funding. One project led to another, after sufficient networking, exploration, analysis, preparation, credibility building, and strengthening local ownership of the activities. This allowed

the project to become increasingly sustainable and to attract the participation of a wider network of actors. This was particularly evident when the local CPI representative gained the blessing and support of the *Marja'iya.* Such a blessing was an important contribution, as the religious institution viewed this conflict transformation effort from an Islamic perspective. At the same time, in order to gain this support, it was necessary to avoid issues that could potentially lead to political blockages and create disagreements. Therefore, the most important aspect of the method was to use, develop and strengthen local conflict management mechanisms, supported by external actors.

In terms of process design, the key to the safe mediation space is to allow issues and projects to emerge from the discussions between the parties involved. "CPI's work in Iraq was not based on a pre-designed set of projects; rather, all the projects it implemented emerged from the dynamics of Iraq and the evolving understanding of the country and were based on proposals made by the beneficiaries. This method has many advantages when there are joint proposals from different parties to the conflict. At the same time, however, it can be a challenging task with high expectations. For this reason, CPI was careful to explain to beneficiaries the framework within which it was allowed to operate as a foreign body in Iraq".[25]

5.2   Third Parties in Practice

A core task for both local and international third parties is to build trust with the key actors. CPI's approach was to invest heavily in building trust between CPI and Iraqis, including government, community, and informal religious authorities.

In terms of insider mediators, the use of an expert Iraqi "local mediator" and the employment of Iraqi staff in CPI's offices in Baghdad, Erbil and Talafar, was highly important for project buy-in. This was due largely to their access to key stakeholders and influencers, as well as a wide network across the sectarian divide. CPI engaged both local and national experts to create a network of grassroot and high-level stakeholders who were familiar with CPI. At the same time, CPI also engaged community influencers from outside the conflicts to triangulate insights. CPI also used these contacts to develop the process design and a risk management and contingency plan.

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25   Adapted from Ali Al-Ahmad (2024). *Op. Cit.*

The insider mediation approach was also implemented on the administrative side, as CPI was registered as a foreign NGO in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) in 2020, and in Federal Iraq in 2021, and was thus able to expand its operational capacity within Iraq and build trust by hiring local Iraqis who knew the context. This empowered local actors to find solutions among themselves for a more sustainable outcome. The principle of "do no harm" was put into practice through continuous analysis of the situation and close exchanges between insider and outsider mediators.

With regard to outsider mediators, "the involvement of a foreign third party is often accompanied by certain sensitivities within Iraqi society, both among the general population and the government. However, the potential work that a foreign third party can do is far greater than that of any local organization, bringing expertise and funding, provided that the foreign third party can gain the necessary trust and prove its impartiality".[26] International organizations are accustomed to facing routine challenges of mistrust when embarking on a project in Iraq, due to the sensitivity of the various conflicting parties to the unknown third party or to a neutral mediator. Many religious, governmental, and even social partners in Iraq are skeptical of humanitarian programs involving international and foreign organizations. International organizations are often seen as foreigners pursuing an agenda based on inaccurate information, while other crises are ignored due to the limited sources of information. Many projects in Iraq have relied heavily on media information and reports, which have played an important role in analyzing the many conflicts that have occurred in Iraq since 2003. Although many conflicts existed prior to 2003, they were sometimes overlooked in media sources, and many international organizations working in Iraq were unaware of them. Whilst it is true that conflict parties in Iraq regard external mediators with suspicion, they also perceive all local actors as conflict parties. Some local actors may be exceptions to this, such as certain tribal leaders with respected historical positions, or actors representing the *Marja'iyyah* in Najaf, who enjoy a high level of acceptance among various parties. CPI took the time to ensure that interlocutors were convinced of the sincerity of each project's intentions and meanwhile established strong working relationships with locally respected actors as true partners. This in turn greatly facilitated the process of building trust with all other stakeholders. As Simon Mason

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26   Adapted from Ali Al-Ahmad (2024). *Op. Cit.*

points out, "international actors need to work in partnership with local actors, rather than using them as subcontractors."[27]

"When a third party enters a conflict without a direct interest, it often faces questions about its motives for getting involved. In Samarra, for example, CPI was directly questioned about the Swiss government's interest in investing funds in a conflict in which it was not a party and had no direct interest. Despite the transparency with which CPI operates, sharing private details and sources of funding, the parties to the conflict (e.g. in Samarra) did not initially understand the nature of the project and had very high expectations, such as the reconstruction of their city. Similarly, in the project concerning the voluntary return of refugees, some representatives (including former Iraqi military officers) believed that the project was aimed at restoring those missing to their former positions, i.e. in the Iraqi army leadership and other government roles. Transparency was key to dealing with these issues, and a conscious effort was needed to ensure that people understood the role of the Swiss and German governments (as international donors) in this project. The fact that CPI's projects in Iraq were funded by the Swiss and German governments has played a very positive role, since traditionally Iraqis have never had any negative experiences with either of these two countries. These two countries are widely accepted and seen as 'neutral' in the Iraqi context".[28]

Cooperation between local and international mediation actors has many advantages. The local mediator has access and local legitimacy, while the international third party can help protect and support local actors. The local mediator's access and network to work across different conflict lines is key to effective mediation. For the international third party, Switzerland's neutrality compared to the history of intervention by other colonial powers in the region was a very important advantage. Switzerland's "low key" image allowed CPI to gain support that was constructive for its local Iraqi mediator, who had to justify to his local connections and network that the project funding was trustworthy and not political. This was particularly important for maintaining trust with the *Marja'iya* on the national level. However, when interacting with locals, it became clear that Switzerland sometimes suffered from a "donor image", which led people to see any Swiss actor as a potential donor. This was seen when locals approached CPI with a list of demands for their respective areas,

27   Fritz Brugger, Joane Holliger and Simon J. A. Mason. Triple Nexus in Fragile Contexts: Next Steps. Policy Perspectives Vol. 10/9. Center for Security Studies (CSS) / ETH Zurich (2022).

28   Adapted from Ali Al-Ahmad (2024). *Op. Cit.*

such as the need for infrastructure support for airports or hospitals. Transparency is key to addressing these issues, e.g. "we are not businessmen or investors, there is no money or plan to build anything, we are focusing on social aspects". At the same time, it raises the question of "triple nexus" approaches, i.e. how development, humanitarian, and peace work can be better linked in a given context, in order to have an overall impact. Ensuring sufficient and long-term funding for the sustainability of the projects is key to their effectiveness.

5.3   Using Multiple Dimensions, Levels, and Sources of "Authority"

Different lines of tension in a given society are not only a challenge but also an opportunity. Where one line is blocked or polarized, moving to another line may help to overcome it. In the same vein, it is useful to think about different sources of "authority" (or "power" or influence), which are highly contextual. As mentioned previously, one source is that of the formal, state structures and procedures. But in some contexts, informal sources of legitimacy and influence are equally or more important. As has been described, when it comes to the case study areas in Iraq these related to religious and tribal authorities. The two forms of power can be contradictory or complementary. Indeed, a well-designed social cohesion project needs to focus heavily on this interface to create synergies between the formal and informal sources of power and legitimacy, rather than one set of actors blocking the other. This means that analysis is key. Identifying the causes of tension and sources of power from the perspective of the actors involved is the basis for conflict resolution efforts. The interaction between the formal and the informal is well illustrated in the third case study, working with refugees in Talafar, where a state minister attended meetings convened by CPI with local representatives. The actions of these parliamentarians, who are part of formal state structures and procedures, were made possible by the informal work of the local Talafari communities. Thus, this case shows how informal and formal forms of power are complementary, but depending on the context, the informal may need to take the lead, as in the case of the Najaf conference discussed below.

An example of this nuanced approach is the recognition that, beyond or within the broader Shia-Sunni tensions that seem to dominate at various levels, there are other tensions and sources of cooperation that occur among Sunni and among Shia, creating surprising alliances between Sunni and

Shia. Thus economic, political, or communal lines of conflict can cut across doctrinal differences. The value system or doctrinal differences remain relevant, but through flexible interpretation, space can be found for cooperation. In Samarra, for example, tensions appeared to be centered on economic issues. This was due to the location of residents' homes and businesses in the old city center, close to the shrine, which was sealed off and heavily controlled by the Peace Brigades who came to liberate the city from IS.

The approach of exploring different lines and dimensions of conflict also means doing so at the local level, as opposed to merely at the national level. The historical narratives between Sunni and Shia in one city are different from those in another, and consequently require their own conflict analysis and response. Accordingly, a gap in knowledge production or different framing of a conflict can contribute to potentially distorted or biased interpretations in favor of a particular narrative. However, this provides an opportunity for collaboration, where a mediation space is created with local actors, based on the analysis of a given/particular context. It requires a deeper understanding to lay the groundwork for the possibility of local actors reinterpreting these value systems to allow further exploration of new areas for cooperation.

This multifaceted approach to conflict transformation is not just about conflict issues and actor affiliations, but also about exploring the potential for different, customary approaches to dealing with conflict and what is seen as legitimate sources of power in the eyes of different communities. For example, tribal actors continue to play an important role in the lives of Iraqis. They are recognized as an essential resource for conflict resolution through their traditional justice system. Moreover, all of Iraq's major tribes have both Sunni and Shia components. They therefore have the potential to promote trans-sectarian mobilization and ease the tensions associated with such conflicts, thus helping to prepare the first steps in establishing a mediation space. In the Samarra case, the involvement of the mayor was also helpful as he was a relatively neutral actor who could play a mediating role. At the same time, in cases of inter-tribal conflict, the Shia or Sunni sense of belonging can often bridge the tribal divide. A key reflection on the overall outcome of these efforts, as well as the analysis of the multiple levels and dimensions of conflict and the sources of power, is that Iraq suffers from biased international reporting. For example, addressing the lines of tension in a region or a city requires going through the history of IS in each city or area. This needs to be taken into account when working on conflict analysis in a local context in order to develop more effective and targeted solutions to the problems at hand.

6. Guidance for Peace Practitioners

The following section provides guidance for insider and outsider mediators seeking to work in polarized conflict contexts such as Iraq. The guidance is based on the Iraq case studies, but also on other contexts in which CPI has been involved.[29]

1. Values

The projects carried out in Iraq are in line with CPI's goals, one of which is to promote inclusive societies, for communities with different worldviews not to co-exist passively but to interact positively and cooperate and thereby build a truly pluralistic society and consolidate social cohesion. This had to be made clear to all actors and stakeholders from the outset, alongside the values that underpin the work, such as non-violence, inclusiveness, impartiality, empathy, and independence. Explaining the motivation and the values of the peace organization at the beginning of the project goes a long way to ensuring local acceptance of the planned work and helps to build trust and dispel suspicion.

2. Analysis

The experience in Iraq showed that the context analysis made by an Iraqi expert at an early stage of the project was valuable but not sufficient. It had to be complemented and consolidated by field research and ongoing conflict analysis, which was ultimately carried out in joint exercises during conflict transformation training, bringing together an inclusive group of actors and stakeholders. This highlights the importance of multi-perspective analysis and the valuable complementarity of desk and field research.

3. Participation

Identifying and involving relevant actors and stakeholders in a peace initiative is key to its success. Experience shows that this is not a one-off exercise, but rather an incremental process. An initial nucleus is formed through desk and field research, but over time, the dynamics of exchange could reveal the missing key actors/stakeholders, and those who are considered but who are not relevant to the project. To maximize the chances of success, this incremental process should involve formal and informal authorities and connect the local, provincial and national levels.

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29   See also: Cordoba Peace Institute – Geneva (CPI) www.cpi-geneva.org/charter-of-cpi.

4. Third parties

One of the guiding principles of CPI is local ownership. The emphasis is on building "on existing local capacities for peace, designing and implementing peace initiatives jointly with local partners, and supporting local initiatives"[30]. This means that the Geneva-based CPI mediators, who bring technical expertise, rely heavily on Iraqi insider mediators who are seen as full partners and who bring legitimacy and access to key actors/stakeholders, in both the design and implementation of their projects. Genuine outsider-insider collaboration is necessary to achieve good results, and trust between insider and outsider mediators is a prerequisite for building trust between the mediators and the parties, to then build trust between the parties themselves.

5. Method

Since its inception, CPI has been committed to the conflict transformation approach, and operates with a reasonable degree of agility. This means that the methodology used depends on the context and can evolve over time in the same context as circumstances require. In contexts such as Iraq, the "safe mediation space" methodology has proved appropriate, including diapraxis as an effective way to consolidate trust between the various parties. Herein, concrete joint actions appear to be more impactful than abstract exchanges of words, alongside training, which is designed not only to build capacity but to carry out joint conflict analyses and create a common language between the parties and a collectively shared knowledge.

6. Objectives

Once the overarching goal and the methodology of the project have been established, the specific objectives will be identified collectively by the actors/stakeholders, who will decide on what type of initiative is to be launched as a diapraxis, and this will emerge from the discussions during the first rounds of dialogue. It is better not to impose a theme, but to let stakeholders choose one that is relevant and topical.

7. Funding

Funding is an important factor for trust and acceptance by the local actors, as well as for the sustainability of efforts. Mediators, both outsiders and insiders, need to be transparent about the source of funding to the actors and

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30   Cordoba Peace Institute – Geneva (CPI) www.cpi-geneva.org/charter-of-cpi.

stakeholders they are dealing with. Failure to do so will lead to suspicion and mistrust. In addition, the interruption of funding has a huge impact on the development of the projects and the networks and relationships that have been built up[31]. This was the experience of CPI in Iraq, where its activities went through three phases, which were supported by three different donors, with each transition from one to the next resulting in a temporary loss of momentum as the projects were suspended in lieu of funds.

8. Process-outcome
CPI focused less on the signing of formal agreements by the parties than on the building of trusted relationships between the parties and setting up sustainable platforms and networks at the local, regional and national levels, involving formal and informal authorities, where ideas are discussed, and initiatives for joint action are decided. Mediators are not solely responsible for the content and the process of the mediation; the actors and stakeholders are integral to both.

9. Progress monitoring
In addition to statistical metrics, qualitative indicators are also highly useful. While the former might include, for example, the number of refugees who have returned to their place of origin or the number of actors who have become supporters of the draft law on the "right to know the fate of missing persons", qualitative indicators include such things as changes in attitudes and behaviors, both individually and collectively, along with the development of relationships between actors and stakeholders, and the subsequent reduction of mistrust.

10. Dilemmas
CPI faced several challenging issues in setting up the Iraq processes. One was to gain trust in an environment characterized by suspicion of foreign interference and hidden agendas. The motivations of both the outsider mediator and the foreign donor needed to be explained, and their honesty demonstrated. An effort was necessary to explain the articulation of interests

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31 "Inconsistent or restricted funding limits opportunities and undermines activities essential for effective mediation, including the taking of calculated risks, long-term engagements to build relationships, and efforts to establish connections between different initiatives." In Whitfield, T (ed.), Still time to talk: adaptation and innovation in peace mediation, Accord 30 (London: Conciliation Resources, 2024). Teresa Whitfield (editor). Accord 30: Innovation and Adaptation in Peace Mediation. Conciliation Resources. London (2024).

and values in the foreign policy of the donor countries in a transparent way. The fact that Switzerland and Germany were perceived positively in Iraq helped to reduce suspicion. Two other factors were important: the culturally sensitive methodology of CPI, which integrated Islamic peace resources, and the buy-in of the process by the Iraqi formal and informal authorities. Another challenge was the real or perceived asymmetry between the Shia and Sunni authorities. Great care was taken to ensure that the process was balanced and as inclusive and representative of all the communities as possible. CPI wanted to ensure that the Sunni counterparts to the Shia *Marja'iya* had sufficient influence. This was necessary to avoid a pure advocacy scenario and to maintain the conflict transformation framework of the projects.

Finally, it is important to emphasise that the dimension of trust is crucial for the success of any mediation process, and for all relationships in the process: namely, mediators, parties, various authorities, and other stakeholders. In a society such as Iraq's, with various interrelated forms of authority, governed by a collaborative governance model that is reminiscent of the "Charter of Medina", it is indeed very useful to leverage religious, political and tribal authorities at all levels of society for successful conflict transformation.

The Cordoba Peace Institute – Geneva (CPI) is a Swiss, non-governmental, non-profit organization working on peace promotion. It was established in Geneva in 2002 to foster research and dialogue on peace issues, and to promote joint projects which address tensions between people and communities holding different ideologies or worldviews. CPI has a particular focus and expertise in enhancing theoretical and practical conflict transformation resources in Muslim majority contexts. CPI works with an extensive network of partners, including think thanks, civil society organizations, research centers, foundations, governments, and individuals, to initiate and support activities that build trust and favor mutual respect and reconciliation. CPI provides a distinctive expertise and a culturally sensitive approach in dealing with conflicts. CPI has Special Consultative Status with the United Nations. CPI has a track record of programs, mediation initiatives and training interventions focused on the promotion of peaceful political participation of all sectors of society, including those with a religious reference. The activities of CPI cover West Asia, North Africa, the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin, West Africa, and East Africa.

The Center for Security Studies (CSS) ETH Zurich is a center of competence for Swiss and international security policy. It offers security and peace policy expertise in research, teaching, and consultancy.

Culture and Religion in Mediation (CARIM) The CARIM program is a joint initiative of the Center for Security Studies ETH Zurich (CSS ETH Zurich) and the Thematic Area of Religion, Politics and Conflicts of the Peace and Human Rights Division of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA). CARIM aims to improve the way conflicts with religious dimensions are dealt with. It supports actors from conflict contexts, peace practitioners and policy makers to ensure that the role of religion in conflict is better understood and addressed.

CSS Mediation Resources is a series that aims to provide methodological guidance and insights to mediators, negotiators and peace practitioners working to address violent political conflicts. It is produced by the Mediation Support Team of the Center for Security Studies at ETH Zurich, with contributions from occasional guest authors. Previous issues include:

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"This paper is a good summary of six years of work in Iraq to promote social cohesion by addressing the issues of return and reintegration of Iraqi refugees and the right to know the fate of missing persons. It highlights the importance of cultural sensitivity and respect for the local context in building the trust that has enabled a wide range of relevant actors to work together, including the Federal Government of Iraq, the Kurdistan Regional Government, and tribal and religious leaders." *Dr Dindar Zebari, Coordinator for International Advocacy, Kurdistan Regional Government*

"If locally and nationally rooted peace and governance support is the goal, then third parties need to engage with those authorities that are seen as legitimate and effective in the eyes of the people concerned. This thoughtful analysis of engaging with traditional, religious and political authorities in Iraq is key to improving our understanding and approaches to working towards peace in such fragile contexts." *Ambassador Simon Geissbühler, Head Peace and Human Rights Division, Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs until July 2024*

"This publication showcases what can be done when internal and international peacebuilders work together in a fragile context such as Iraq with the goal of alleviating the impact of armed conflicts. The primary goal of Germany's stabilization efforts in Iraq over the past years has been to make sure that the gains made against ISIS on the battlefield are secured for the long term by employing civilian means." *Klemens Semtner, Head of Division S03, Stabilisation, Crisis Prevention, Peacebuilding (Policy and Instruments), German Federal Foreign Office*

"This valuable resource on building social cohesion in Iraq offers several practical lessons and ten guiding principles and values, generated based on careful analysis of three concrete cases. Generating such local knowledge with clear and concise analytical insights is essential for advancing peacebuilding with a sincere consideration of its local context dynamics." *Professor Mohammed Abu-Nimer*