Mediating Governance in

Sinjar

Bridging the Public-Authority Gap

A MERI Publication

About MERI

The Middle East Research Institute (MERI) engages in policy issues contributing to the process of state building and democratisation in the Middle East. Through independent analysis and policy debates, our research aims to promote and develop good governance, human rights, rule of law and social and economic prosperity in the region. It was established in 2014 as an independent, not-for-profit organisation based in Erbil, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Mediating Governance in Sinjar
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MERI
Middle East
Research Institute

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Executive Summary

More than a decade after the liberation of Sinjar from ISIS, the district remains engulfed in political paralysis, stalled recovery, and a protracted governance deficiency. Despite recurrent pledges and multiple locally and internationally backed interventions, neither the federal nor the provincial governments have been able to institute effective mechanisms of governance. The on-going administrative stalemate and obstructive security dynamics have led to a disconnect between the public and the authorities, undermined prospects for communal reconciliation, and generated structural impediments to a sustainable aid provision, recovery and economic development. Without decisive, depoliticized, and inclusive action, Sinjar risks remaining a fragmented, marginalized district mired in mistrust.

In attempt to develop practical solutions for bridging the citizen-authority gap and mediating governance, the Middle East Research Institute (MERI) conducted an extensive field study, including a comprehensive literature review, surveying 656 current residents of Sinjar and internally displaced persons, and interviewing 78 key informants. These were followed by 11 intra-community focus group discussions and two inter-community dialogue sessions, leading to the creation of a new platform for engaging Sinjaris and the provincial government of Nineveh.

Key Findings on the Ground

- Political gridlock and fragmented governance: Competing actors exercise unwieldy influence over Sinjar, often at the expense of effective local administration. The collective failure to appoint a mayor in Sinjar has become the lynchpin for lack of progress in the 2020 Sinjar Agreement and the state's inability to arbitrate conflicts or enforce decisions.

- Stalled reconstruction and deficient service delivery: Despite substantial funds allocated to Sinjar, reconstruction has been slow and uneven following the near-total destruction of public infrastructure and residential homes during the ISIS war. Public services remain rudimentary and often politicised: water supply is scarce, healthcare facilities are understaffed or non-functional, and the education system is fragmented along competing and incompatible tracks. As a result, thousands of displaced students remain unable to access Iraq's tertiary education system.

- Compensation bottlenecks: As of mid-2025, only a small minority of Yazidis benefited from the offer of land deeds, and a much smaller group of Yazidi survivors received promised land plots. Lengthy procedures, absent documentation and reported corruption have fuelled despair and cynicism. Survivors' Law No. 8 has been further undermined by politicized procedures, bureaucratic delays and impractical requirements.

- Competing communal victimhood: Yazidis and Sunni Arabs inforce parallel and antagonistic narratives that obstruct reconciliation while keeping many from both sides displaced. Yazidi narratives emphasize existential victimhood, genocide, and betrayal, while Sunni Arabs highlight retaliatory abuses, exclusion, and demographic fears.

- The growing confidence gap: Across Sinjar's communities, Baghdad and Erbil are seen as politicizing displacement for electoral and economic gain. Grievances are often expressed in isolation and in the absence of a convening mechanism that brings together the public and the relevant government bodies.

The Sinjar Stakeholder Platform: A Participatory Governance Model

To bridge the void, MERI developed and piloted a structured, stepwise process to lay the foundation for the creation of a semi-formal governance mechanism, the Sinjar Stakeholder Platform (SSP). Launched in November 2024, the SSP convened diverse community actors with the local executive of Nineveh, including the Governor and Deputy Governor as well as directors of different public services. The SSP has proven its capacity to:

- Create direct communication and engagement channels between authorities and citizens.

- Translate grievances into actionable demands (e.g., roads, health, education, survivor support).

- Build incremental trust and collaboration between communities through inclusive, shared problem-solving dialogue and engaging local government.

Policy Implications

The pilot SSP project demonstrated that:

1. Delivery of essential services can be depoliticised. Provision of water supply, health, education and roads can be insulated from factional and political interference to rebuild citizen trust.

2. This participatory form of governance can be institutionalized: The active involvement of the provincial leaders showed the value of the SSP model in facilitating action in mutually rewarding manner, therefore, can pave the way for its adoption and formalisation within decision-making mechanisms. The SSP was not seen as an alternative to the Nineveh Provincial Council or any other formal body, but complementary.

3. It can facilitate compensation & survivor support by simplifying procedures, removing impractical legal requirements and ensuring transparency in disbursement.

4. It can address competing victimhood by providing opportunities to enhance accountability mechanisms, tackle grievances and prevent hard-line narratives from triggering renewed conflict.

5. It is a novel and impactful model for transplantation in other conflict-affected areas of Iraq and beyond.

Sinjar: The Yazidi Genocide and the Evolving Power Dynamics

When the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) invaded Sinjar in August 2014, the district entered a period of profound transformation that reshaped its governance, power dynamics and social fabric. The group's rapid capture of the area exposed the fragility of the state of Iraq and its disputed territories, transforming Sinjar from a tenuous but intact periphery into a contested arena for competing local, national, and transnational actors. Governance quickly became a focal point of rivalry, as various groups sought to assert authority in the wake of ISIS's defeat.[1,2] This struggle for influence not only exacerbated and further fragmented political order but also stalled institutional recovery, deepening Sinjar's marginalization and reinforcing broader patterns of state weakness in Iraq's peripheries.

Upon their occupation of Sinjar, the self-proclaimed Caliphate established absolute control in Sinjar and over its communities. Fearing their brutality, hundreds of thousands of the residents of Sinjar including the Yazidi (Yezidi, Eizidi) residents of Sinjar, who constitute the majority across the district, began fleeing their homeland, seeking refuge mainly in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). The Yazidis were particularly vulnerable due to ISIS's hostile ideology toward their faith. ISIS did not govern Yazidis as subjects but treated them as a population to be eradicated, enslaved, or assimilated, violations amounting to an act of genocide.[3,4,5] Recent estimates of the scale of atrocities cite an estimate of around 5,000 fatalities; 93 mass graves;[6] and 6,417 individuals abducted, many of whom were subjected to sexual enslavement or forced recruitment.[7]

Other communities, including Shia Kurds,[8] Sunni Kurds, Turkmen and Christians also left the area en masse, again settling mainly in the KRI. As for the local Sunni Arabs, they were split between those who were displaced and the those who remained. The latter group's fate or contribution to ISIS rule remains a strong point of controversy. While accepting that many of their members were co-opted into low-level administrative or security roles under ISIS oversight,[9,10] leaders of the Sunni Arab community also report sacrifices and loss of lives amongst their ranks to ISIS.[11] Acts of concealing and smuggling Yazidis to safety along with the deaths of numerous Arabs who served in the government security forces, are often overlooked and discounted in light of the enormity of damage afflicted on the Yazidis. Not surprisingly, relations between the district's two largest communities, Yazidis and Sunni Arabs, came under immense strain, if not severed entirely.

Power and Security Dynamics

The cascade of events that followed the fall and subsequent liberation of Sinjar paved the way for the emergence and entrenchment of rival actors who filled the void and contested local governance. In particular, they included the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and its Peshmarga forces; the Shia-dominated Hashd (Hashd al-Shaabi, Popular Mobilization Forces); as well as the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and its affiliates, including the Sinjar Resistance Units (YBŞ, Yekîneyên Berxwedana Şingalê) and the People's Protection Units (YPG, Yekîneyên Parastina Gel). Many Yazidis who were already traumatized by genocide and frustrated by unresolved grievances, became embedded in these multiple armed formations.

Over the subsequent years, competition among various actors intensified, leading to a protracted power struggle that stymied efforts to re-establish a functional and legitimate local government. None of the political parties or state- and non-state actors were able to unilaterally shape political outcomes in Sinjar. This was manifested by the years of collective failure to appoint a new district mayor, by far the greatest barrier for progress for the governance of and normalization in Sinjar.

In the absence of a solid and responsive local government, and amid the collapse of a war-torn economy, recruitment into armed groups became one of the few lucrative sources of income for many residents of Sinjar. This shift accelerated the departure from the area's traditional agricultural economy, which had constituted a major pillar of local livelihoods before 2014,[12] and led to further fragmentation of authority at the district and community levels.

The Deadlock

Despite formal agreements between Baghdad and Erbil (including the Sinjar Agreement of 2020), and active interventions from local, national and international stakeholders, progress on establishing the local government has been slow, with no major breakthroughs to date. Numerous initiatives aimed at generating the political will to find an off-ramp from the current impasse have failed to break the deadlock or significantly improve conditions on the ground. Meanwhile, the district continues to bear the scars of ISIS war with no functioning administration in place, a stalled reconstruction scheme, and a protracted displacement challenge. Presently, Sinjaris' grievances and lack of confidence in local and national governments remain high, and both Federal Government of Iraq (FGoI) and the Kurdistan Regional government (KRG) have failed to agree a way forward on how to overcome the numerous political and administrative barriers.

Deciphering the Post-ISIS:

Governance and Administration in Sinjar

2014-2015: A Displaced Administration

After seizing Sinjar, the official local government, including the mayor, subdistrict directors, and their staff, was forced to flee and re-establish itself in exile in Faida, Dohuk, within the KRI. ISIS replaced it with its own system of governance, and authority was concentrated in the hands of appointed emirs (ISIS military commanders), who governed via the Diwan al-Zakat (taxation office), Diwan al-Hisbah (religious police), and Sharia courts (ISIS judges), all enforcing a strict and punitive interpretation of Islamic law. Governance was subordinated to security needs: villages were turned into supply bases, and routes were used for moving fighters, weapons, and captured Yazidis.[13]

2015-2017: The Tale of Parallel Administrations

In November 2015, Kurdish Peshmarga forces, backed by U.S.-led coalition airstrikes and with support from Yazidi armed groups and PKK-affiliated groups, recaptured Sinjar's Sinuni (Al-Shimal) and Sinjar Centre (Markaz) subdistricts, while, ISIS remained occupying the Al-Qayrawan (Blej) subdistrict in the south, until this was also liberated in May 2017. By this time, the liberated areas were left devastated, the Yazidi population had been displaced or subjected to mass killings, and security remained a great concern.[14,15,16,17] Hence, the official Administration never returned to Sinjar Centre, except for a brief period.

In the absence of the official administration in Sinjar Centre, the PKK, a long-standing political and military rival of the KDP, created a Self-Administration Council, commonly referred to as the Mejlis, to act as a shadow governing body.[18] Despite its continuity until now, this Mejlis was never officially recognized by Nineveh or Baghdad governments.

The Mejlis was based in Sinjar Centre but asserted its authority from the PKK stronghold in Sardasht, Mount Sinjar.[19,20,21,22] The Mejlis provided security and nominal services in these areas, with varying success, without relying on official Iraqi funding sources.[23,24] They ran schools that attracted hundreds of students early on, only for these numbers to dwindle to near nonexistence in the absence of official recognition from Baghdad.[25] However, the Mejlis has been efficient in providing limited services such as garbage removal and nominal service projects of road construction and repair. Extension of electricity cables and water tanks were also provided to few villages on Mount Sinjar.[26]

> *"The Mejlis helped in extending electricity and some water tanks to the villages on top of the mountains. They also used their own finances for some minimal reconstruction across Sinjar" (Yazidi male politician, Sinjar Center)*

> *"The PKK municipality department provides services here [Sinuni], but their services are limited to garbage removal and very small repairs of roads." (Yazidi male civil servant, Sinuni)*

Tensions between competing forces eventually culminated in open confrontation in Sinuni on March 3, 2017, where the Peshmarga and PKK-aligned forces clashed in a bloody encounter that claimed nine lives,

including that of a civilian woman.[27] These power struggles inevitably overshadowed the provision of services and, more critically, the establishment of a governance model capable of addressing the severe harms inflicted on Sinjar's communities. At the communal level, each rival administration sought to mobilize support from the Yazidi population, deepening divisions along political and territorial lines. This dual system of governance has predictably obstructed efforts to create a unified, non-partisan, and functional local administration in Sinjar, an essential prerequisite for restoring stability and a sense of normalcy. [28]

A part from aid distribution and management of displaced persons, the local government carried out little in Sinjar between 2014-2017. In fact, Sinjar's budgetary share was kept in Mosul unspent since 2014, due mainly to the administrative limbo. [29,30]

As for security, the areas under the control of the Mejlis were covered by the PKK affiliates, whereas the rest of the liberated areas were covered by the KRG-affiliated Asayish and Peshmarga forces.[31] While these groups were largely consumed between 2015 to 2017 with fighting nearby ISIS incursions, they were also entangled in ongoing tensions between them.[32] As a result, governance and development received little attention compared to the overriding political and security calculations. Consequently, thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs) remained in displacement, while Sinjar languished in physical ruin and psychological distress.

In this volatile and fragmented security and administrative environments, marked by unmet demands for justice and widespread retributive sentiment, prospects for good local governance and meaningful reconciliation were severely compromised. Efforts to build inclusive decision-making mechanisms, address community needs, and ensure fair political representation failed to take hold. Instead, entrenched party rivalries and power struggles among competing political actors diverted attention from genuine community-led governance and post-conflict recovery. Put simply, Sinjar remained in ruins and very little progress was made to restore governance and normalcy in this area.

> *"Rozh forces clashed with the PKK on this area. Rosh wanted to close the crossing and the PKK wanted to keep it open. Many locals in the war died in the clashes between these two forces" (Yazidi Male politician, Sinjar Center)*

May-October 2017: New Actors on the Block

Up to this point, the Hashd projected power over Sinjar from Baghdad, with hardly any presence on the ground. However, by mid-2017, the Hashd established a foothold in southern Sinjar areas, including the Al-Qayrawan sub-district, following its participation in liberating the area.[33] The Hashd soon threw its weight behind the PKK in opposition to the KDP. In both 2017 (and later in 2020), the Hashd made overtures toward integrating segments of the YBŞ into its structure, resulting in the marginal incorporation of some YBŞ fighters into the Hashd framework.[34] Over time, more Hashd-linked Yazidi forces were established, including Brigade 74, headed by Murad Sheikh Kalo; Kocho Regiment, led by Naif Jasso; and Lalish Regiment commanded by Khal Ali.[35,36]

In the meantime, the Mejlis sought to advance its vision of self-administration in the district, and Baghdad, with possible facilitation of the Hashd, agreed to finance the YBŞ.[37,38] However, these developments hit roadblocks in the face of the KDP's political and military presence on the ground, while also provoking negative reactions from the US and Turkey.[39] Consequently, the plan was put on hold and the Mejlis' ambition was not realized.

Post-2017 Referendum: Institutionalisation of Fragmentation

Amidst this complicated security and political interplay in Sinjar, another added layer of complexity was brought to the scene: the Kurdish plebiscite for independence in September 2017. In the KRI and the disputed territories, including Sinjar, voters cast their ballots for independence despite Iraqi state and international objections. Three weeks after the vote, Iraqi forces swept into the district, displacing the Peshmarga forces and rendering the Hashd as the dominant power broker in the district.[40,41] The KDP-aligned local government staff fled the Sinjar town, and forced once again to operate from Faida in Dohuk. The YBŞ swiftly named Fahad Hamid as the new district mayor and Khudeida Chooki, as the director for the Sinuni sub-district, reshuffles that were endorsed by the Hashd. This shift created a dual-mayoral system: one operating in exile from Dohuk with formal government recognition and access to bureaucratic infrastructure; and an 'alternative' Sinjar Centre-based, supported by the Mejlis and the Hashd. However, the latter authority lacked recognition from Baghdad and was primarily limited to facilitating coordination with international organizations on the ground.

Regardless of the justifications advanced by both parties, the dual governance structure severely undermined the prospect of establishing a non-partisan, functional, and locally responsive government, something that was urgently needed in post-ISIS Sinjar.[42] The KDP and the exiled administration struggled to reassert their authority in Sinjar and were bent on keeping the local administration under their control, away from the reach of the Hashd and the YBŞ. In doing so, the official local administration refrained from relocating government cadres to Sinjar, a situation their rivals tolerated as it effectively kept the exiled administration, and by extension the KDP, out of Sinjar. On the other hand, the Mejlis, the YBŞ and the Hashd sought to win hearts and minds by capitalizing on their role in resisting ISIS and rescuing Yazidis during the genocide. The administrative split inevitably fuelled communal resentment toward the local authorities in Sinjar.[43]

> *"They [YBŞ] imposed their rule on us [the communities in Sinjar]. They recruited whoever they wanted including Arabs who partook in the genocide against us [the Yazidis]. We could do nothing. They [YBŞ] are quite powerful." (Yazidi male community figure, Sinjar Center)*

> *"Just like the rest, the Hashd is also one of the political players. Their aim is to divide our community and control the administration of the area." (Yazidi military commander within the Hashd, Sinjar Center)*

> *"What is happening in Sinjar is that certain militant groups are so powerful that they can, and have done so many times to the police stations, releases prisoners at whim and in front of the people. These are messages that destroy the standing of the government in the eyes of the people." (Senior security official, Baghdad)*

Over time, the authority of the Mejlis-backed mayor buckled under the weight of legitimacy constraints, yet the YBŞ and the Hashd retained effective control on the ground, while Baghdad government largely stood by, unable or unwilling to assert decisive authority in the district's volatile environment. Consequently, Sinjar and Sinjaris lingered in disrepair with no official authority capable to stand up to the challenges therein.[44] Even for basic services such as renewing national identity cards, residents of Sinjar were forced to undertake unnecessarily long and hazardous journeys to Dohuk, where the exiled mayor and officials operated.[45] The route itself was treacherous for long : riddled with potholes, eroded stretches, and punctuated by checkpoints of various hoes.[46] Despite repeated appeals for rehabilitation and reconstruction, the road remained neglected for a long period of time before it was rehabilated recently.[47,48] The fear of insecurity, potential retributive acts, and the absence of a functioning government have, as a result, kept thousands of families, including Yazidis, Sunni Arabs, Shia Kurds, Christians and other communities of Sinjar, in prolonged displacement.

"The administration is so bad that they even transferred the National ID Card Directorate from Al-Qahtanya to Al-Ba'aj, and as a Yazidi woman I find that place troubling given the history of the genocide." (Displaced Yazidi woman, FGD, Khanke)

"As a woman, I find it particularly annoying to see that women are compelled to travel all that long road to Dohuk in order to get a stamp for the renewal of their ID card." (Displaced woman, FGD, Khanke)

"The highway linking Sinjar and Tel Afar is full of potholes. It needs to be repaired. Many have died because how bad the road is. We have seen many fatal traffic accidents. This and the worsening security conditions are all happening because of the rivalry between Baghdad and Erbil." (Displaced Yazidi woman, FGD, Khanke)

"The Iraqi government does not provide services here. I mean the government of Nineveh and the Iraqi government. They do not pay any attention to this area. It is all words, and no action. Kadhimi [former Prime Minister] came and paid lip service here. Sudani [incumbent Prime Minister] also came here and we have seen nothing so far. He promised many things, but we are yet to see them." (Male Yazidi civil society activist, Sinuni)

"The incumbent director is a Kurd and we have not seen him for long. He was away for 10 years. He is aligned with the KDP. It is really difficult for us to process paperwork. We need to travel to Dohuk for one stamp. It is very long. It is around 250 KM just to get there. The residency office is in Talkef. For the ID cards, I would need to get all my family to go there and that costs me more than a 100,000 IQD." (Male Sunni Arab public employee, Al-Qayrawan)

"Thousands of our people are still in displacement and cannot return. Who would facilitate their return? No one would. There are too many armed actors on the ground who are at the same time part of the government." Sunni Arab tribal leader, Al-Qayrawan

The Sinjar Agreement:

Process, Response and Perception

With the entanglement of the competing forces pursuing divergent agendas, Sinjar remained locked in a vicious political circle, while the broader conditions in Iraq only compounded the impasse. The 2018 parliamentary elections resulted in a protracted deadlock and ultimately produced a compromise government, lacking the authority to take decisive actions, particularly when such decisions risked alienating its competing political backers. This was a period of Iraq's national paralysis which soon gave way to a powerful wave of youth-led protests in late 2019, which shook the foundations of the Iraqi political order and led to the resignation of Adil Abdul-Mahid's government and its substitution with Mustafa Al-Kadhimi's government.

The Agreement

Against this backdrop, Sinjar remained a backwater, its governance ills unaddressed, and its chronic instability left to fester. However, another attempt at stabilizing Sinjar surfaced under the watch of Al-Kadhimi in 2020. On October 1st of that year, the Sinjar Agreement (SA) was signed between the FGoI and the KRG. The deal laid out a process comprising a number of administrative, security and reconstruction provisions. Appointing a new, independent, qualified, and collectively approved mayor for the district, topped the deal. A joint committee between the FGoI and the KRG was to preside over appointing the other administrative positions concomitantly. [49]

In terms of security provision, the Agreement stipulates handing the responsibility to the local police, the National Security Advisory and the National Intelligence Services only, while also removing all the other armed entities inclusive of the Hashd, Peshmarga and other Yazidi armed groups to the outskirts of the district. In fact, the Agreement explicitly states ending the presence of the PKK and its auxiliaries both in Sinjar and other surrounding areas. The security measures would also entail appointing 2500 new recruits from Sinjar including the displaced into the security forces.

For reconstruction, the agreement calls for the establishment of a joint committee between the two governments to rebuild the district, in coordination with the Nineveh governorate's administration. The signatories demand the establishment of yet another joint field committee to follow up on the implementation of the administrative and security axes of the SjA. [50]

The reasons behind devising the SjA remain speculative, but it served numerous purposes.[51,52] Among them is that both the FGoI and the KRG were responding to mounting pressure emanating from displaced communities, local actors, and the international community, to address the protracted displacement dossier and to resolve the paralysis caused by dual administrations in Sinjar.[53,54]

Regardless of the underlying motives, the Agreement was designed to prevent Sinjar from slipping further into political abandonment. Furthermore, it momentarily created space for Baghdad to assert itself as a credible arbiter for restoring state presence in a contested space. Beyond rhetorical endorsement from both Baghdad and Erbil, not only Baghdad squandered the opportunity to arbitrate, but the Agreement also remained largely unimplemented.[55,56]

Reactions

The KRG Response

In the KRI, Officials, including the President and Prime Minister, publicly applauded the deal and called on all relevant actors to take the necessary steps to ensure the deal's successful implementation. President Nechirvan Barzani framed the agreement as a potential catalyst for improving relations between Erbil and Baghdad,[57] while Prime Minister Masrour Barzani highlighted the deal's potential in facilitating the return of IDPs to their areas of origin, and hoped that it marks "the beginning of the implementation of Article 140 of the constitution." [58]

International Response

Jeanine Hennis-Plassschaert, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General (SRSG) and the Head of UNAMI described it as a milestone that would usher in "a new chapter for Sinjar" that could facilitate the return of the IDPs, provided that stable governance and security are provided.[59] Similarly, the international community including the US and EU welcomed the agreement.[60] Turkey hastened to bless the deal, given the clause within the Agreement that called for the dismissal of the PKK in Sinjar district.[61] Turkey had long accused the PKK of transforming Sinjar into a base for logistical and operational activities, and warned of military operations to drive out this group its fighters.[62,63] Unlike Turkey, Iran refrained from expressing opinion about the SjA, while the hardline pro-Iranian Hashd leaders rejected the deal. Qais al-Khazali, leader of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq claimed that the Agreement was designed to expel the very forces that had helped liberate Sinjar. Likewise, Hassan Al-Kaabi, the head of the Badr Organization's parliamentary bloc denounced the Agreement as a US and Israeli conspiracy aimed at cleansing Sinjar from Hashd.[64]

The Yazidi Community and Civil Society

Broadly speaking, the Yazidi community and members of Yazidi civil society cautiously welcomed the SjA early on, but grew sceptical in due course. Findings from the Conflict and Stabilization Monitoring Framework of the United States Institute of Peace indicate that the public in Sinjar believed that the SjA, if implemented, may help address some of their security and governance concerns, including the unification and depoliticization of the district's governing body.[65] The Lalish-based religious and community leaders considered the SjA a crucial first step for stability. The Yazda Foundation, a prominent Yazidi civil society organization, viewed the deal with caution, lamenting paucity in details and warning about difficulties that may hinder a full and transparent implementation of the deal.[66]

Critics among Yazidis felt they were not consulted, and excluded in the process. They claimed that the draft agreement was never shared with Yazidis before it was made public, and neither side of the negotiating teams included representatives from Sinjar's ethno-religious communities, bar Said Khidhir, the Yazidi member of the Council of Representatives (CoR), who was involved in discussions in Baghdad.[67] These gave rise to frustration and vitriol among the Yazidi population as they saw the deal void of any mentions to transitional justice matters.[68] Many of Sinjar's Sunni Arabs also rejected the deal,[69] claiming that they were not consulted in the formulation of the pact, despite comprising "at least 45% of the populace in Sinjar district."[70]

Yazidi women, who have been the main victims of ISIS atrocities and remain among the most vulnerable, have expressed little confidence in the SjA. Women activists openly express concerns that they foresee greater problems upon their return to their towns and villages, while the Agreement itself contains no

provision for recruitment of women into the police force or in any other sector. They ask for introducing a quota for women recruits in the new police force and consider it key to persuade displaced women to return.[71]

With time, civil sentiments grew even more sceptical given the FGoI's and the KRG's inability to impose their authorities over the deeply entrenched Hashd and YBŞ who rejected the deal from the outset.[72] The civil society were sceptical of the FGoI and KRG's commitment to Sinjar's interests, arguing that the authorities might not only advance their own political interests over Sinjar's public good, but also are unable to fend off future violence in the area given the precedence of 2014.[73] Worse still, some believe that policy makers in FGoI may try to "Arabize" Sinjar, while the KDP and Kurdish authorities might try to "Kurdify" the district.[74] As such, it is not uncommon to find Yazidis who argue that the Hashd and Hashd-backed Yazidi militias can act as a useful counterbalance to the KDP.

Moreover, various 'agreements' have been struck in Sinjar, but failed to be followed through and produce tangible and meaningful results on the ground.[75] Therefore, people may harbour little confidence in yet another 'agreement'. Taken together, the lack of confidence in the process, and the absence of international guarantors, finally eroded local buy-in and raised serious questions about the feasibility of the SjA.

Perceptions of the Sinjaris

To systematically gauge societal views of the SjA, MERI conducted an extensive survey about local perceptions of the Agreement. The dataset comprised of a total of 656 responses distributed representatively across the district's diverse communities and all its sub-districts, as well as two IDP camps in Duhok province. In each area, a minimum of 100 individuals from each community (Yazidis, Shia Kurds and Sunni Arabs)[76] took part in the survey. Overall, 32% of the respondents were women, with the highest women participation being in Al-Qayrawan (51%) and the lowest in Sinuni (17%). In terms of representation, Yazidis comprised 48%, Shia Kurds 17%, and the Sunni Arabs constituted 36% of the sample.

Table 1. Ethno-religious distribution of the sample

Groups	Numbers	%
Yazidi	313	48%
Shia	110	17%
Sunni	233	36%

Table 2. Gender representation of survey respondents at sub-district and IDP camp levels

Gender	IDP Camps	Al-Qayrawan	Sinjar Centre	Sinuni	Total
Female	36	82	58	33	209
Male	69	79	109	190	447
Total	105	161	167	223	656

Awareness, or lack of it

Analysis of survey data revealed a considerable divergence of opinions about the SjA. It showed that the Yazidis and the Shia exhibited the highest levels of awareness, with 71% and 84% respectively reporting familiarity with the agreement or its components. By contrast, a large majority of the Sunni Arab participants (77%) indicated that they were unaware of the agreement and its provisions. Notably, lack of awareness was also reported by 29% of the Yazidis and 16% of the Shia respondents. Four years after its announcement in 2020, this notable unfamiliarity, especially amongst the Sunnis and a significant and surprising share of the Yazidis, lends support to the broader understanding that the agreement was developed with limited community consultation and participation. These findings not only indicate outreach deficiencies with the communities of Sinjar, but also raise broader questions about the legitimacy and the sustainability of the Agreement in the eyes of the public.

Table 3. Awareness of the Sinjar Agreement (or its components) among the district's diverse communities (total respondents: 656)

Communities	Yes	No	Total (100%)
Yazidis	222 (71%)	91 (29%)	313
Shia	92 (84%)	18 (16%)	110
Sunni	54 (23%)	179 (77%)	233
Total	368 (56%)	288 (44%)	656

The Agreement's Utility

It is not surprising therefore that the SjA failed to take roots at the society level, as indicated in Figure 1 which shows that significant portions of the Sinjari communities were uncertain, albeit to varying degrees, about the communal utility of the Agreement. Ultimately, in the absence of local buy-in, agreements like the SjA risk being perceived as externally imposed, further deepening the disconnect between local populations and decision-making authorities.

Figure 1. Question: Do you think the Sinjar Agreement serves your community?
(DnK = Do not know. RtA = Refused to Answer)
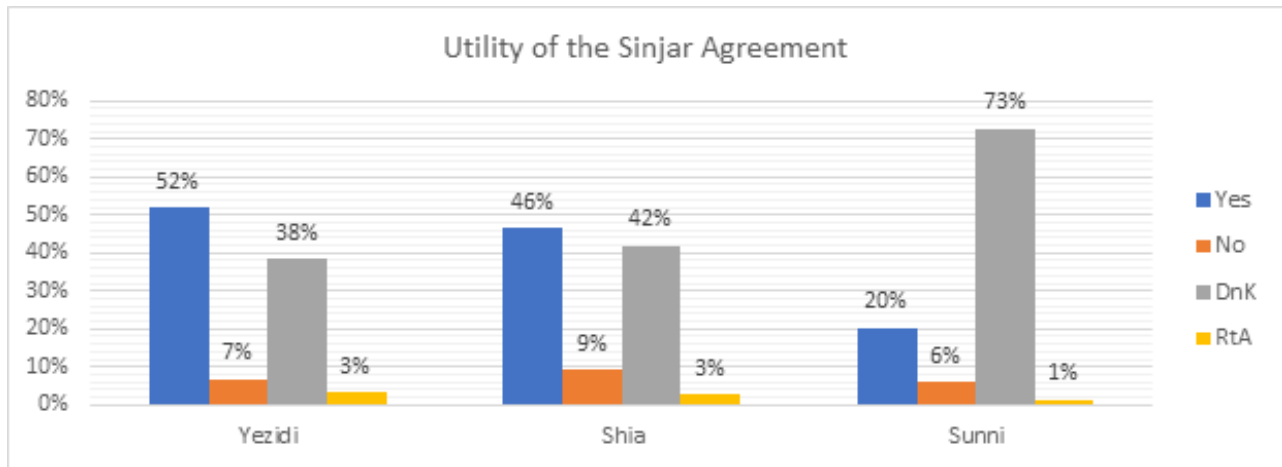
Despite these concerns, in the eyes of the locals and in its totality the SjA could still bring about positive change on the ground. When the survey participants were exposed to the contents of the SjA, the authors were able then to gauge participant perceptions on various aspects including overall security, economy, and social relations.

Security

With regards to the overall impact of the agreement on the security conditions in Sinjar, the vast majority of each community expressed a collective anticipation of enhanced security outcomes, should the deal be implemented (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Question: Do you think the Sinjar Agreement will improve security in your area?
(DnK = Do not know. RtA = Refused to Answer)
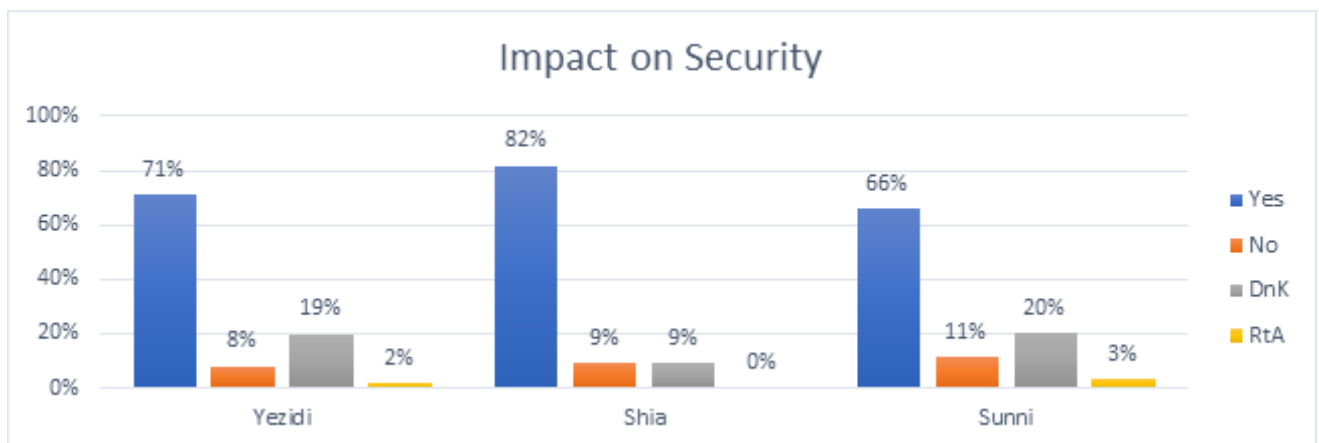
Economic Impact

As for the potential economic impact of the SjA, the data points to a common expectation that the Agreement can have economic potential across all the communities investigated. The Sunni Arabs tend to express less optimism compared to the Yazidis and the Shias, but still score a noteworthy majority as they foresee a positive return. This could denote to a lingering disconnect, possibly rooted in limited access to information, lack of consultation, or distrust in the process. Yet, the absence of strong rejection (only 4% said No) indicates that this is not resistance, but rather hesitation or cautious optimism (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Question: Do you think the Sinjar Agreement will help the economy in your area?
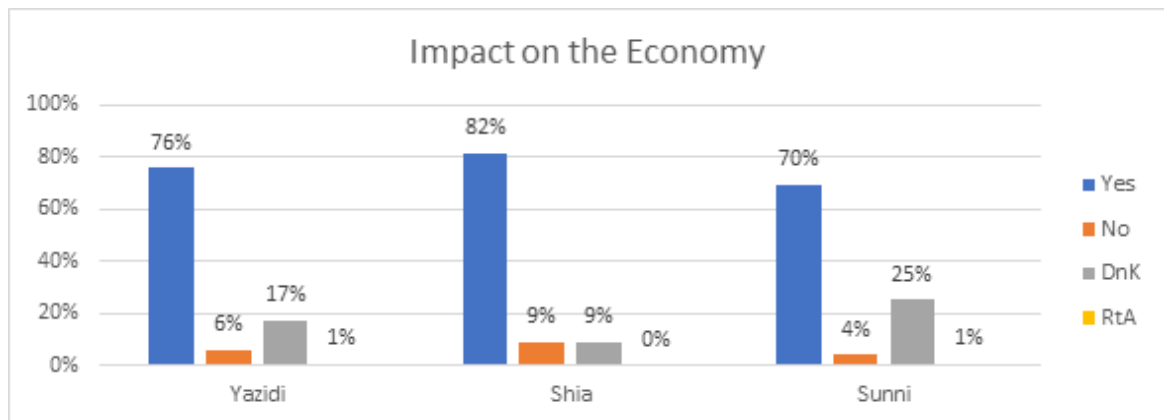(DnK = Do not know. RtA = Refused to Answer)

Potential Impact on Communal Relations

When assessing perceptions of the SjA's potential impact on communal relations, the responses are more cautious and less optimistic. Take the Yazidis, for instance, most of whom expressed concern that the Agreement may exacerbate communal tensions. In contrast, Shia respondents appear to be largely uncertain on whether the agreement might lead to a deterioration between communities. Over half of the Sunni Arabs, on the hands, indicate no concern about the potential for increased communal tensions (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Question: The implementation of the Sinjar Agreement will cause tensions between the communities in Sinjar. DNK = Do not know.
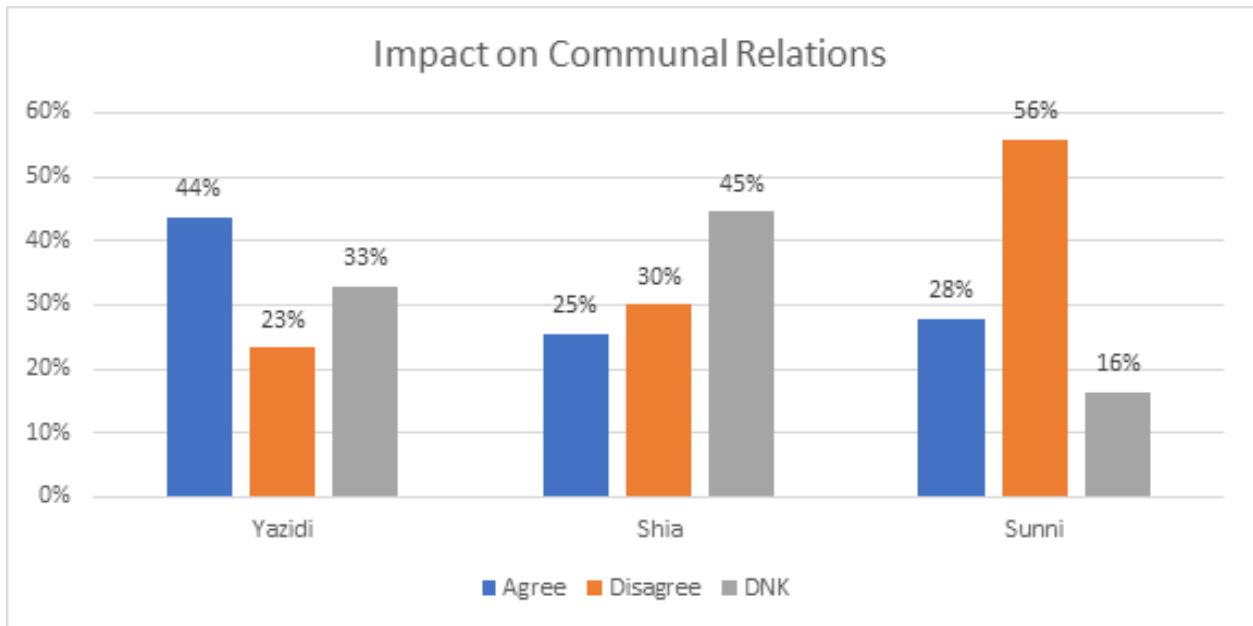
These divergent perceptions likely reflect each group's varying historical experiences, awareness of the Agreement, exposure to conflict, and levels of political inclusion. For many Yazidis, the fear of renewed tensions may stem from their community's politicization, fragmentation, continued marginalization, and the perceived failure of the Agreement to adequately address core grievances, such as justice, and equitable representation. The inconclusive stance of the Shias may point to a sense of distance from the local dynamics in Sinjar or ambivalence regarding the Agreement's impact. Sunni respondents' relative lack of concern could suggest either limited engagement with the Agreement's political dimensions or cautious optimism that it might stabilize the area.

Overall, the data underscore the complex and uneven ways in which different communities interpret the Agreement, not only in terms of material outcomes, but also in its implications for social cohesion and intergroup trust.

The Sinjar Agreement: Protracted Progress, or Lack of it

With no mayor in Sinjar district and tens of thousands in displacement, progress on the implementation of the SjA has clearly been sluggish, at best. While several factors contribute to the persistent delay in its implementation, political obstacles appear to be the most prominent. As Claudio Cordone, Deputy UN-SRSG, observed: "The key obstacle to the return of Yazidis is politics, and the [lack of] true will to implement the agreement."[77] Although the Agreement is straightforward in its provisions, its execution has been hindered by Baghdad's fragmented political will and its failure to independently design and implement a coherent policy for Sinjar. While it is true that local governance remains largely dysfunctional, Baghdad has been unable to assert meaningful authority over Sinjar's administration even after the KDP's withdrawal from the area.[78] Conversely, the political deadlock could also be attributed to the KRG's lack of enthusiasm or cooperation, especially around the mayoralty.[79] Amid this polarizing rhetoric, hardly any meaningful steps were taken on the ground, leaving the agency of Sinjar's local population eclipsed and progress effectively stifled.

> *"The KDP does not abide by the SjA, which stipulates the appointment of an independent and professional mayor. The KDP does not want this" (Senior Iraqi government official, Baghdad)*

> *"The ball is now in Baghdad's court. There is no KDP in Sinjar and the Nineveh Provincial Council is controlled by the Hashd which is part of the Coordination Framework. Therefore, Baghdad should be able to do things on the ground, and clearly it has not." (Yazidi academic, Mosul)*

The Stubborn Knot: Appointment of a New Mayor

The SjA was hailed as a breakthrough in resolving mayoral appointment, considered a cornerstone upon which the rest of the SjA elements could be built. Ironically, this very step has remained unresolved consequently stalled the rest of the provisions. The decision to appoint a new mayor for Sinjar has been repeatedly deferred, and referred to the central government in Baghdad. However, Baghdad remained susceptible to pressure from multiple actors, including regional powers, Hashd, and the KDP itself, culminating in a permanent stalemate. To overcome the administrative barriers, Iraq's former Prime Minister, Mustafa Al-Kadhimi, asked the Governor of Nineveh on 26 April 2022, to temporarily assume mayoral responsibilities. However, he swiftly revoked this decision in response to political pressure from opposing sides.[80]

Hence, the zero-sum game continued, pending the 2023 provincial elections (held on 18 December 2023), where the Nineveh Provincial Council (NPC) would assume responsibility to elect a new mayor.

The mayor appointment process within the NPC, however, was mired in political dispute, postponed twice before finally proceeding on 2 July 2024, amid a formal boycott by the KDP, which contested the legality and legitimacy of the process.[81,82] The governor of Nineveh (Abdul-Qadir Al-Dakhil) filed a complaint with the Federal Supreme Court, objecting to the legal mechanisms employed by the NPC in appointing new administrative heads of the districts and subdistricts across Nineveh province. They accused the 'Future of Nineveh Alliance', a Hashd-aligned bloc, of pushing to replace over 20 officials across Nineveh province, including Sinjar's district mayor, ignoring the traditional consensus-based approach.[83,84]

Notwithstanding the merits of the justifications, the complaint and political lobbying in Baghdad prompted a suspension of the NPC decision.[85] However, the Federal Supreme Court delivered a verdict against the complaint on 18 March 2025 and upheld the validity of the appointment procedures.[86] Nonetheless, to date the administrative transitions have not been fully materialized, an indictment showcasing how politics overrides government institutions in Iraq. At present, the nominated candidate for the mayor of Sinjar (Saido Khairi al-Ahmadi) still awaits formal endorsement by the governor of Nineveh, an eventuality that may linger pending the next parliamentary election in Iraq (planned for 11 November 2025).

The Sinjar Coordination Commission

In an attempt to fill the representational void, certain community figures and representatives of local political parties- such as the 'Yazidi Movement for Reform and Progress' and the 'Freedom and Democracy Party'[87] were organized into the Sinjar Coordination Commission (SCC), claiming to advocate for the interests of Sinjar's population. Although the group did not include members of the KDP and lacked its endorsement, it was regularly consulted by Baghdad officials, including advisors of the Prime Minister.[88] This engagement seemingly conferred a veneer of legitimacy on the SCC, allowing it to assume the agency to articulate positions that diverged from those of the KDP.

At one point, the SCC laid claim to a share of governance roles by proposing a deal: endorsing a KDP-backed candidate for the position of district mayor in exchange for appointing its own candidates as directors of Sinjar's sub-districts. The KDP, however, flatly rejected the proposal, arguing that the composition of the entire local administration should fall under the authority of the newly appointed mayor.[89] Interestingly, the engagement of this ad hoc commission falls outside the contours of the SjA which specifically states that administrative positions beyond the mayor should be considered by a joint committee formed between Baghdad and Erbil.

Yet despite its involvement in negotiations, the SCC faced serious legitimacy and recognition challenges. On the ground, its presence and assumed role were familiar to only a small circle within the local political elite. In fact, across the 11 FGDs conducted for this study, only a handful of Yazidi participants reported any knowledge of the Commission. Among the Arab population, awareness was even more limited. None of the Arab interlocutors made any reference to the SCC.

Reconstruction and Rehabilitation

In early 2023, the FGoI Prime Minister Al-Sudani announced the allocation of 50 billion Iraqi dinars from that year's federal budget law specifically for Sinjar.[90] However, by the end of the year, the fund remained unspent, even as Sinjar continued to suffer from acute shortages in basic services.[91] Officials in Baghdad attributed the delay to unstable security conditions and ongoing political disputes with the KRG.[92] Certain officials were of the view that Baghdad lacked political will to successfully deal with the dossier, given pressure from Iran and the Hashd, both of whom want to maintain control and influence over the area.[93] Other senior officials, by way of contrast, contended that Sinjar was stable and conducive to reconstruction.[94] Whatever the actual scenario, reconstruction in Sinjar lagged severely behind the expectation of the people who have grown increasingly cynical of the State's ability to conclusively intervene and provide for the urgent recovery need of the area.

Furthermore, the UN allocated $3 million to support peacebuilding through business development initiatives in Sinjar.[95] In addition, the UN secured a $50 million infrastructure reconstruction program for the district.[96] These international efforts were complemented by funds already earmarked by the Iraqi government for the reconstruction of areas affected by terrorism and for facilitating the return of IDPs.[97] However, these governmental programs remain mired in bureaucratic ambiguity and corruption, severely undermining their effectiveness on the ground. What is more is that while Sinjar urgently requires substantial and sustained investment to recover from large-scale destruction, the existing funds pale in comparison to the actual financial needs of the area.

In addition, the Prime Minister tasked Zaidan Khalaf, his Advisor for Human Rights, to lead the SjA dossier with a clear mandate to make tangible progress, and appointed Khalaf Shingali, as an Advisor for Yazidi Affairs.[98] Moreover, the Iraqi Parliament had also endorsed Law No 8 of 2021, mandating the government to compensate, rehabilitate and re-integrate the Yazidi female survivors.[99] Under this reparative scheme, survivors are entitled to plots land. However, progress has been limited. As of July 2025, only 227 survivors have actually received land.[100] In parallel governmental efforts have included an effort to grant Yazidis official ownership of land in Sinjar. Many have submitted their paperwork to the relevant authorities but continue to await confirmations for the status of the lands on which they reside.[101] Authorities have initiated the demarcation process in residential areas which should be followed by ownership deeds. To date, more than 4,000 plots have been officially demarcated of which 1,570 of ownership deeds been issued.[102]

These steps, however, have encountered serious hurdles. For instance, political discord has prevented the disbursement of funds allocated for reconstruction.[103] The implementation of Law No. 8 has also faced significant delays, primarily due to the federal government's failure to pass the national budget and enact the legislation. Another key obstacle has been the lack of coordination between the KRG and the FGoI, particularly in sharing information and aligning procedures related to survivor claims. Additionally, the committee overseeing the law's implementation introduced a procedural requirement that applicants must submit a criminal court complaint filed in their areas of origin as a prerequisite for consideration. This condition is neither stipulated by the law, nor is it practical in that survivors are still displaced, lack access to functioning courts in their areas, or face serious risk in pursuing such complaints. Court procedures are convoluted, time-consuming, causing erosion of trust and widespread frustration among survivors.[104]

Service Provision

The devastation wrought in Sinjar was undoubtedly harsh, leaving residential areas and public service infrastructure critically damaged. According to UN estimates, the conflict with ISIS resulted in the destruction of approximately 80% of public infrastructure and 70% of civilian housing in Sinjar and its peripheries.[105] For years, these staggering levels of damage, among other factors, hindered the return of displaced residents to their homeland. Sadly, even a decade after its liberation from ISIS, Sinjar's public service infrastructure remains far from being fully restored, while large parts of the district are still strewn with ruined homes and wholly destroyed neighbourhoods. While the devastations were significant, governmental efforts of recovery have not been commensurate with the service needs in Sinjar.

Water Scarcity

Access to clean water remains one of the major deficiencies across much of Sinjar district. Large portions of water infrastructure were either damaged or fell into disuse during the ISIS conflict. While efforts have been made, largely through UN agencies and other international organizations, to rehabilitate water networks, many residents, particularly in Sinuni, the settlements (Mujama'at), and surrounding rural areas of Sinjar centre, are forced to purchase water, as government supply is provided only once a month.[106] In Sinjar centre, water scarcity is also grave but comparably less sever with water being supplied once a week.[107] To address water shortage, the FGoI has formerly announced the construction of a mega water project that would connect Rabia, Sinjar and Baaj districts together.[108] However, this project remains ink on paper with little public trust in it given the considerable financial resources it requires.

Healthcare Challenges

Provision of healthcare is a major challenge in Sinjar. In the district center, the general hospital sustained significant damage during the ISIS conflict.[109] Although the facility was partially renovated with support from non-governmental actors, it remains only partially operational.[110] The FGoI has previously pledged to build a 100-bed hospital in Sinjar center and another 50-bed facility in Sinuni.[111] While these commitments are both urgent and commendable, it is equally important to consider the underlying reasons behind chronic staffing shortages.

In an effort to expand healthcare access, the Nadia Initiative, backed by French funding, constructed a new hospital near the entrance of Sinjar city. However, the facility is yet to open, reportedly due to a lack of skilled technicians needed to operate its modern medical equipment.[112] Compounding the issue, Sinjar suffers from a chronic shortage of specialized medical staff, including obstetricians and other specialists, which forces patients to undertake long and difficult journeys to hospitals in Mosul for basic procedures such as childbirth.

In Sinuni, health conditions are more dire. As of June, the six health centers present not only had no specialists, but lacked sufficient medications and proper management capacity to run the hospital meaningfully.[113] To address the staff shortage, health authorities ordered more than 40 specialists to take up positions at the main hospital in Sinuni. However, none of the doctors agreed to comply, citing concerns over the area's unstable security conditions.[114] While two of the assigned doctors who declined deployment were Yazidis, there is reportedly a severe shortage of Yazidi medical specialists available or willing to serve in the sub-district.

Education: A Three Track System

Education in Sinjar was significantly disrupted by the ISIS war and the ensuing power rivalries. Much of the district's pre-existing educational infrastructure, comprising over 200 schools, were severely damaged or looted and many of the 3,000 education personnel were displaced into the KRI in search of safety.[115] Additionally, in the after of the ISIS war, several schools were repurposed by armed actors, particularly the YBŞ, for military and administrative use. In Al-Qayrawan sub-district, access to schools remains limited by financial hardship and distance, and the area, like much of Sinjar, suffers from inadequate staffing, learning materials, and infrastructure.

The education system in Sinjar is divided along two distinct programs. One is administered by the KRG and the other is run by Baghdad. The former oversees 61 Kurdish schools while the latter operates 106

schools.[116] Not all of these schools have their own separate buildings. Given that there are only 81 Nineveh-administered school buildings, many of the schools operate on a double-shift schooling scheme. In fact, some of them take on a third to accommodate some Kurdish schools.[117] The Arabic track boards around 33,000 students, employs 705 teaching staff, and 643 teaching volunteers. There is, therefore, a dearth of teaching staff despite a recent employment of 700 teachers in the sector.[118] Baghdad limits employments in the education sector mostly to graduates of the Arabic track only. Students who opt to attend the Kurdish track, enrol into universities within the KRI and would therefore be employable by the KRG only upon graduation, a situation that has forced many families in Sinjar to send their students to Arabic schools administered by Baghdad.[119]

Interestingly, the YBŞ also established its own educational program in approximately 15 schools, using a Latin-based curriculum.[120] However, neither Baghdad nor the KRG recognized this program, leaving the students marginalized within the broader educational system and at risk of long-term exclusion from higher education or formal employment.

In displacement, around 16,000 students were housed in the IDP camps within the KRI, according to the director of the KRG's Kurdish Education department. These are administered by teachers, many of whom are on temporary contracts. As people in the displaced community move back to Sinjar, the need for more educational capacity increases. For the Kurdish education alone, it is estimated that around 400-600 classrooms are needed to absorb the retuning students.[121]

New Police Recruitment

As of October 2024, approximately 1,500 individuals had been integrated into the ranks of the local police and Hashd groups, but this recruitment process has since stalled due to oversaturation of security personnel in the area, leaving many to salary entitlements without holding any duties.[122] If anything, this outcome highlights how desultory and inconsistent this aspect of the agreement has been. Moreover, the recruitment process is widely viewed with scepticism. Community leaders and activists have repeatedly accused political parties and influential political figures of exerting control over the selection lists where they advance patronage networks to reward loyalists and reinforce political dominance. These concerns were echoed across ethnic and religious communities and may partially explain the incomplete implementation of the agreement's security provisions.[123]

The SjA does not specify how the proposed 2,500 security recruits are to be distributed among the various ethnic and communal groups. The only explicit provision is that 1,000 recruits are to be drawn from the current residents of Sinjar, while 1,500 are to be selected from among the displaced population. These have caused grievances concerning the transparency and inclusivity. Sunni Arabs claim that out of the proposed 2,500 recruits, only 100-150 of them were made part of their community. This not only falls short of their assumed demography, but constitutes a prominent security grievance among the Arab community who assert that their population in Sinjar district is larger than what is commonly acknowledged. They also demand proportional representation in local governance, particularly in the form of the deputy mayor position and the directorship of the Al-Qayrawan sub-district, where they believe they form a clear majority. These positions, they suggested, could serve as a pathway to increase what they viewed as minimal Arab representation within the security forces operating in the area.[124]

The relatively small number of Sunni Kurds, native to the district, who have returned to Sinjar's town centre, have also expressed discontent with their apparent exclusion from the allocated 2,500 security positions. From their perspective, there has been little to no mention of their inclusion in the new force. They contrast their inclusion with the Shia Kurds who have already secured representation within the Hashd. This reality has further deepened Sunni perceptions of exclusion and reinforced the view that the security dimension of the SjA is both politically biased and unevenly implemented.[125]

Inter- and Intra-Community Relations:

Isolation, Victimhood and Critical Engagement

Competing Victimhood

The scale and brutality of the violence inflicted on the Yazidis shattered longstanding intercommunal bonds, including the Kreev practice, an informal kinship tradition that once fostered ritual brotherhood between Yazidis and Sunni Arabs. This rupture has left a deep and enduring schism between the two communities, one that continues to obstruct efforts toward reconciliation and peaceful coexistence. Importantly, various narratives of victimhood and blame continued to shape relations between Yazidis and Sunni Arabs in Sinjar.

Yazidi Victimhood

Yazidis often frame their uncompromising stance as an act of self-protection against a recurrence of the 2014 genocide. Many openly state that they have lost trust not only in government institutions but also in the Sunni Arab community, arguing that neighbours, alongside external extremist groups, played a role in the atrocities by collaborating with ISIS.[126] The following quotes captures this pervasive sense amongst the Yazidis:

> *"I am from Hardan which is part of Sinuni. Almost all of perceptions are negative. I no longer trust them [Arabs]. We no longer trust our neighbors. We no longer say hi to them. This feeling is mutual. We do not want them and neither do they [the Arabs]." (Female Yazidi survivor, Sinjar Centre)*

> *"The reason behind our disagreement is fear. We do not trust them [Arabs]. We have lost our trust in relations to the Sunnis. Personally, If I am seen meeting with and engaging in politics with the Sunnis, I will become an easy target by my community. I will be socially and politically defamed." (Male local community figure and politician, Sinuni)*

This profound sense of betrayal is compounded by the continued unearthing of mass graves, the politicization of the Yazidi question, the slow pace of recovery and state response, and an entrenched perception of generational victimhood rooted in the memory of repeated atrocities, locally referred to as Farman. Together, these factors have further eroded Yazidi confidence both in the non-Yazidi community and in the state's capacity to deliver justice. More importantly, it has fostered the conviction that the Yazidi community must assume responsibility for its own security and justice needs, independent of conventional state mechanisms.

> *"What we want is that we should run our own affairs. We control nothing here. It is our right to have our say in our own affairs. Of course, we would not allow Arabs to determine this at all."(A Yazidi survivor from Sinjar).*

This sense, grounded in the brutality of the crimes committed against the Yazidis and the widespread involvement of the Sunni Arabs in the crimes, seem to even overshadow certain accounts that point to instances where Sunni Arabs and Kurds risked their lives to protect, shelter, and smuggle Yazidis out of ISIS-held territory.[127]

"I risked my own and my kids' lives when I rescued 75 Yazidis," (A Muslim community figure from Sinjar).

"There were many Arabs who took Yazidis to safety into Syria, risking their own life. Many kept animals belonging to the Yazidis and handed them to their Yazidi owners after the liberation." (A Sunni Arab tribal leader from Sinjar)

Sunni Arab Victimhood

For many Arabs, grievances stem from alleged crimes committed against the community by Yazidis armed groups during and after the liberation of the district. In FGDs, Arab participants recalled incidents of retributive violence that reportedly claimed the lives of individuals unconnected to ISIS. "The Yazidis killed my uncle and his family in 2015" said a Sunni Arab from north of Sinjar. Accountability for the reported loss of these lives is a demand Sunni Arabs pit against the Yazidi demands for justice.[128] This was clearly outlined when a prominent tribal leader from the northern areas of Sinjar exclaimed "what we continue to refuse and are adamant about is that we are not going to forgo those criminals who spilled the blood of our innocent people, our men and women. We will not back down from our tribal right."

Sunni Arabs also allege that concerns over vengeance-driven violence and property expropriation by Yazidis not only sustains displacement of the Sunni Arab but is also conceived as a Yazidi attempt to tip the Muslim majority demography in the district center in favor of incoming Yazidis.[129] These grievances along with a perception that Yazidis have monopolized attention away from the victimhood of the Sunni Arab community, were repeatedly mentioned in the FGDs with the non-Yazidis from across the district. While verifying these allegations are hard and remain subject to deep-seated controversy, they certainly derive reciprocal communal antipathy and potent apprehension of each other.

Victimhood and Peace-building

These dynamics illustrate a classic competing victimhood paradigm, in which all communities view themselves as primary victims while discounting or reframing the other's grievances. Such narratives do not merely reflect divergent memories of past events, rather they actively sustain mistrust, obstruct reconciliation efforts, and harden political positions which are exacerbated by the proliferation of arms and armed groups in Sinjar. Competing victimhood can erode the legitimacy of peacebuilding initiatives by making it nearly impossible to establish shared facts, agree on accountability measures, or develop inclusive governance structures. In Sinjar, these mutually reinforcing perceptions risk entrenching the stalemate, ensuring that even well-intentioned interventions, whether led by the state or international actors, are filtered through, and often undermined by, the lens of communal grievance.

Mutual Avoidance, Lack of Dialogue

The Yazidi-Sunni Arab Divide

Despite numerous local and international initiatives, the Yazidi-Sunni Arab communities have largely avoided one another and continue to hold serious grievances, leaving many from both sides in protracted displacement, with little hope of return.[130] Additionally, social contact seems to be minimal and generally limited to unavoidable, superficial encounters in marketplaces.[131] Arab tribal leaders noted avoidance from events and ceremonies to which they were used to be invited, a development which they view as emblematic of the scale of tensions and animosity towards each other.[132]

The mutual avoidance and distrust were repeatedly voiced by members of both communities during MERI's fieldwork and appears to be standing in the way of recovery in Sinjar. In fact, when questioned in the survey that MERI conducted, a clear majority of the participants including Yazidis, Shia Kurds and Sunni Arabs noted a lack of communication and dialogue amongst themselves (see figure 5). This erosion of trust was expressed poignantly on both sides.

> *"The collaboration of Arabs with ISIS dismantled the social bond between both communities. This caused the disruption of the social ties. This is what happened. Friends are no longer. The social dynamics are such that many do not have the courage to see us or visit us as they used to in the past. What they did was enormous." (A Yazidi FGD participant lamented)*

> *"The bond with the Yazidis is ruptured. This is not something we wanted. Prior to the conflict, many Yazidis would come to our villages when they used to elope girls. They would stay with us for a week or two and then would leave back to their families. That was normal. Now, even their girls do not want to look at us and we cannot visit them either. We are seen as IS." (A tribal leader from Al-Qayrawan reflected).*

Figure 5. Response to Statement: There is a lack of communications and engagement between the communities about their grievances and needs.
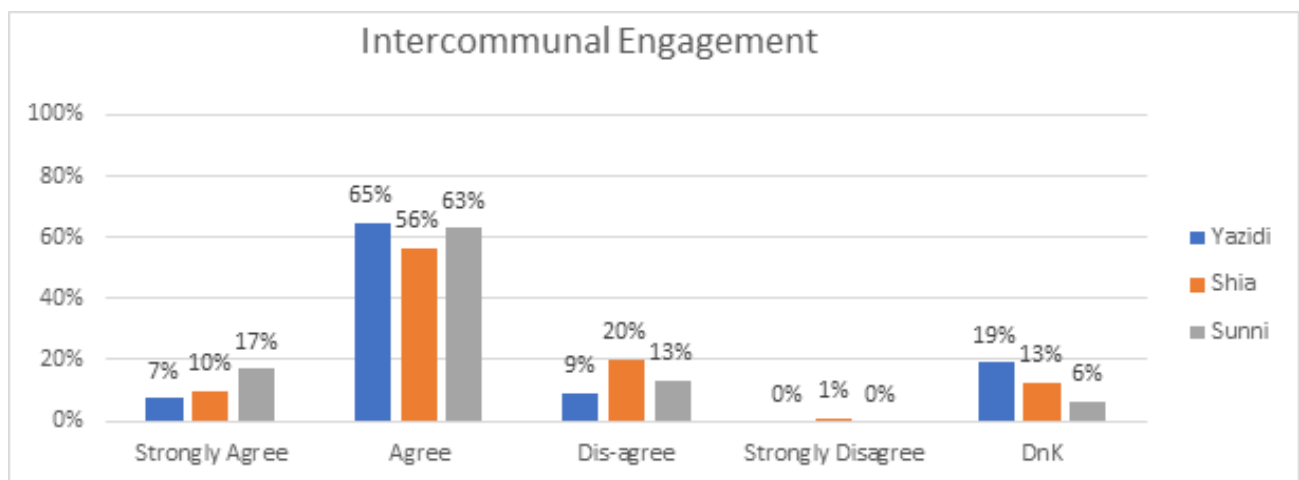
For some Arabs, the main obstacle to genuine dialogue lies with Yazidi military leaders who are reluctant to relinquish their military standing and the privileges it affords. Yazidis, on the other hand, hardened by continued marginalization, neglect, and the absence of a meaningful process of accountability and recovery, remain adamant that Sunni Arabs must hand ISIS perpetrators over to the courts. While Sunni Arab representatives claim they have already disowned such individuals and submitted lists to the authorities, Yazidis dispute this, insisting that the actual number of perpetrators far exceeds the lists provided.[133]

Yazidi-Shia divide

Communal tensions in Sinjar extend beyond the Yazidi-Sunni Arab divide. They also shroud relations between Yazidis and Shia Muslims. While the two groups appear, on the surface, to share a trouble-free relationship grounded in their common victimhood under ISIS, many Yazidi community figures and politicians express growing unease over the political influence and religious ambitions of the Shia actors, especially in Sinjar centre.

Emboldened through the military clout of their fellow Shia adherents of Hashd armed groups as well as their concomitant hegemonic political influence within NPC and Baghdad, Shias are perceived to be heavily influential in making decisions in Sinjar, despite their small presence in Sinjar Centre.[134,135] Beyond Sinjar's strategic and geopolitical importance, the district and its symbolic Mount Sinjar are seen by some Yazidis as central to Shia efforts to consolidate transborder influence. These concerns are compounded by a Yazidi perception of increased Shia political sway in the area by way of the cooption of Yazidis in NPC and allegations that Yazidis have been prevented from renovating homes in neighborhoods containing Shia shrines.[136]

However, the sway of the Shia seen to be reinforced by the 'marriage of convenience' between the PKK and the Hashd, forged largely through their shared opposition to the KDP, remains inherently fragile. Although both sides continue to cooperate tactically, their ideological divergence and competition for influence in Sinjar suggest that their bond could falter. The March 2025 clashes between the Iraqi Army and PKK-linked YBŞ units in Sinjar Centre underscore how volatile the balance of power in Sinjar remains, and how easily pragmatic alignments can unravel in Sinjar.[137] Worth noting though less pronounced, some Sunni Arab community members in the Sinjar district center have also expressed concerns over the rising influence of the Shia.[138]

Yazidi-Yazidi divide

Internally, the Yazidi community has not been able to escape the polarizing dynamics that define Sinjar. Political rivalries have severely fragmented the community, and disputes over who constitutes the legitimate Prince (Meer) stand as a telling indictment of this division. Recently, three Yazidi figures have claimed the title of Meer, each widely perceived as being enmeshed in the broader political struggles that surround Sinjar.[139] Beyond the contest over religious leadership, other community and military leaders have pursued divergent political trajectories, further deepening communal rifts and complicating efforts to forge a unified voice.

Reconciliation vs Dialogue

No Time for Reconciliation

One of the initiatives deliberated on accountability measures and communal cohesion in Sinjar was supported by the USIP, a leading international peace organization with an extensive track record in the district. The dialogue sought to bring together representatives of the Yazidi and Sunni Arab communities to discuss accountability and foster social cohesion.[140] However, when the final declaration was announced, several prominent Yazidi figures and political parties, including the Yazidi Hashd commander Murad Sheikh Kalo and the Yazixan Peshmarga leader Haider Shasho, rejected both the initiative and the signed declaration that emerged from the initiative. They denounced it as an attempt to impose premature reconciliation without addressing core grievances and demands for justice.[141,142]

The backlash within the Yazidi community effectively derailed the initiative, and may have deepened skepticism, and arguably pushed the prospect of meaningful reconciliation further out of reach. What is more is that this episode also underscores a broader challenge beyond the complexity of the conflict and its fallouts: the fragmentation of the Yazidi community and the difficulty of identifying a unified and legitimate Yazidi voice capable of representing its diverse perspectives.

Paradoxically, despite this uncompromising stance and a clearcut Yazidi conditionality grounded in avoiding reconciliation, there appears to a cross-community recognition among both Yazidis and Sunni Arabs, that dialogue and communication are indispensable for envisioning a more hopeful future for Sinjar (see Figure 6). This sense did not only emerge from the survey, but was also expressed, though cautiously, in the one-to-one interviews with members of both communities. In the view of a Yazidi armed commander, dialogue forms an essential part of any settlement for Sinjar, noting "without dialogue we will not make any headways in Sinjar." Similarly, an academic from Al-Qayrawan stressed that "dialogue would be successful if people from the area lead it and when the government participates in it."

Figure 6. Response to Stateement: Encouraging dialogue and communication between communities helps improve my trust in the future of Sinjar."
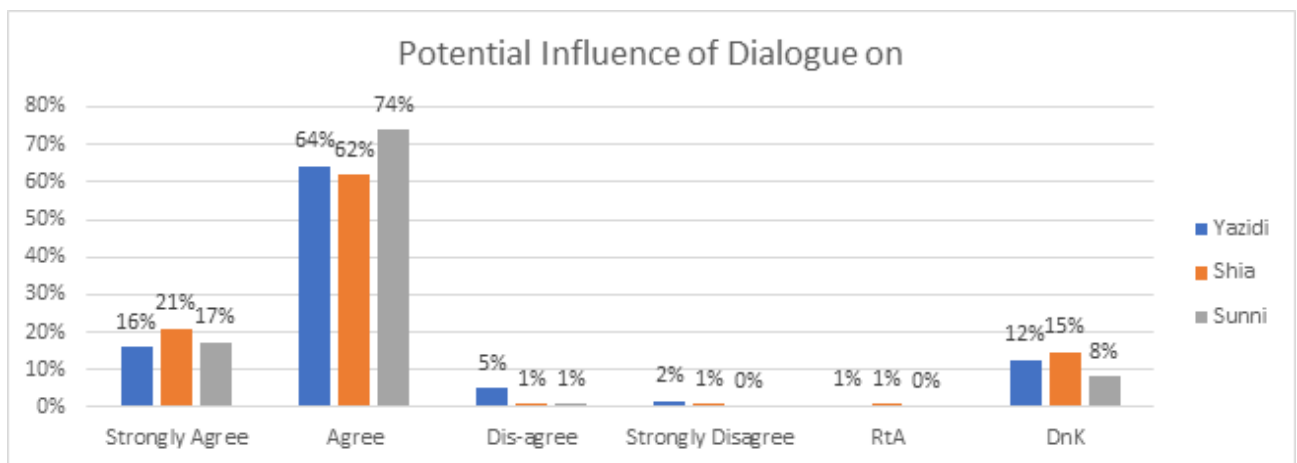
Dialogue is Necessary

While the communities in Sinjar have made clear their concerns and needs for accountability and cross-community engagement, some have, as stated, also underscored the need for and importance of dialogue both between and within themselves as well as engagement with the authorities as a means of ensuring that their voices are genuinely heard.

> *"Dialogue is important as long as it is not on reconciliation because we are psychologically tired." (Yazidi politician and armed group commander, Sinjar Centre)*

> *"Without dialogue we will not make any headways in Sinjar. It is essential for any solution. However, the future administration should be apolitical and service oriented. It also should focus on the rights of the people. Sinjar should be treated as a special case. " (Yazidi armed group commander, Sinjar Centre)*

> *"Dialogue would be successful if people from the area lead them and when the governments would participate in them. The support of the government is very much needed." (Arab tribal leader, Al-Qayrawan)*

> *"If the process [of dialogue] is official and enjoins the participation of international counterparts, then yes, people would support it." (Female civil society activist, Sinjar Centre)*

> *"Dialogue is very much needed with the other communities in Sinuni. There is no doubt that it will help in conveying our concerns and perhaps come up with a common understanding about the way forward." (Yazidi female, Sinjar Center)*

"Our views should also be taken into account. The people of Sinjar have the right to be heard. Tribal leaders and community figures are not enough, our voice matters as well and people should have meetings with the government so that we convey our sufferings." (Female Yazidi IDP, Khanke, Dohuk)

"The solution is to hold dialogue with the Yazidis and their tribal leaders, and the question that should be asked is where should start to find a way forward. We need to sit down with the Yazidis and understand their demands." (Sunni Arab tribal leader, Mosul)

By contrast, community-driven initiatives, and locally facilitated mechanism, such as the one piloted in this study, show that when processes are anchored in inclusive and representative collaboration, organically linked to official and institutional channels, and grounded in the lived realities of affected groups, they can foster trust and open pathways for depoliticized cooperation.

Lack of Trust in the Justice System

The severity of the atrocities committed against the Yazidis, has fuelled a pervasive perception that the Sunni Arabs as a community bear responsibility for the crimes.[143] These views, while sweeping, are invoked despite the presence of specialized legal frameworks to address ISIS crimes against the Yazidis; processes many survivors describe as opaque and painfully slow.[144] Additionally, as sited by numerous survivors, the court procedures in Mosul are seen to expose identities and testimonies of the survivors, thereby increasing the risk of retraumatizing victims and discouraging participation.[145] They further argue that legal proceedings remain vulnerable to political interference, clientelism, whereby certain perpetrators evade persecution.[146] In fact, some argue these deficiencies in the accountability measures stand behind the reluctance of various survivors to file complaints and return home.[147] Altogether, these factors could have contributed to the generation of weak trust towards the courts which have been defied numerously in Sinjar.[148]

Sunni Arabs for their part, have raised concerns about arbitrary detention and unjust legal treatment under Iraq's broad and ambiguously worded counter-terrorism legislation. During and after the liberation of Sinjar, the use of vague legal standards has permitted the detention of individuals based on tenuous or circumstantial evidence, a factor that has challenged public trust in the justice system within this community as well.

While the involvement of many Sunni Arabs with ISIS entails little doubt, the extent of their complicity in the ISIS conflict remains contentious, partly due to the absence of a credible, independent state-led fact-finding mechanism. At the core of this dispute is the question of who exactly qualifies as an "ISIS perpetrator" and the extent to which Iraqi courts can be trusted to adjudicate such cases. Within both the Yazidi and the Sunni Arab communities, ambiguity over definitions and accountability persists, while perceptions of the courts are clouded by inefficiency and susceptibility to political manipulation. Among Yazidi women survivors and Yazidi community figures in particular, these doubts have further eroded confidence in judicial remedies. Such doubts will undoubtedly raise serious challenges even if comprehensive lists of suspected perpetrators were to be submitted to the authorities.

The Confidence Gap

Presently, Sinjar seems to exhibit a remarkable calm. Yet and in spite of this quiet, communal fault-lines risk resurfacing if left unaddressed. Beneath the present stability lie unmet grievances, conflicting narratives, and partisan, self-serving interests, altogether dynamics that derive and sustain the current stalemate and hinder recovery, service provision, and the return of displaced persons. Furthermore, deep trust deficits in public institutions, coupled with ineffective mechanisms to deliver justice and accountability, have undermined prospects for reconciliation.

One of the drivers of the communal and governance challenges in Sinjar is arguably the weakness of the FGoI and its inability to be rigorously present in the area. The fact that Sinjar remains unsorted years after its liberation from ISIS should serve as a clear indictment of the state's failure "to show leadership and resolve the issue of governance in Sinjar."[149] More than once, high-profile officials including the incumbent and the former prime ministers, have visited the area, but tangible results are yet to materialize. It has not been able to deal with the proliferation of armed forces in Sinjar, which is considered one of the most troubling challenges that blocks many from going home. "The government is not strong enough to remove them [armed forces] from Sinjar", stated a Yazidi politician in Sinjar. Moreover, the protraction of the displacement dossier and the complications this has caused, has also raised serious concerns about the FGOI and the KRG's intention to resolve it. In the words of a Yazidi civil society from Sinuni "the Iraqi government is not serious about the IDP camps and the KRG benefits from the IDPs during elections and economically." These concerns were echoed by a high-profile official from Baghdad who noted deficiencies in dealing with challenges, stating

> *"They [Iraqi Government] are making some silly decisions. The government announced each IDP returning 4,000,000 IQD and some household items including fridge, TV, and a few utensils. These people do not have a house to put the fridge in! The priority is housing, livelihoods and documentation so that their children could go to schools. And the money is not enough. The issue has been politicized."*

Prime Minister Al-Sudani's recent visit in July 2025 to inaugurate Mosul Airport and other infrastructure services in Sinjar, generated mixed feelings: a seemingly strong sense of optimism on the ground, with deep-seated frustration and derision on the social media in light of Sinjar's persistent and urgent needs.[150]

Promises, Promises

Repeated promises of reconstruction, compensation, and administrative reform remain largely unfulfilled. While, the issuance of 1,338 ownership letters and 100 title deeds to Yazidi residents in Dugrey and Tel Uzair collectives, in addition to the recent allotments mentioned above, are commendable achievements,[151] compensation cases for lost lives and the physical damages inflicted by ISIS and the liberation operations, as well as reconstruction of damaged infrastructure in Sinjar remain largely unpaid. Property compensation in Sinjar faces major obstacles due to a lack of documentation. When Yazidis were forcibly relocated into settlements, they were denied the right to own the land upon which their houses were built. As a result, many of the houses they have lived in since then lack official ownership records. This has created bureaucratic bottlenecks, as authorities struggle to verify legitimate land and property claims. It is worth noting that Sinjar District is dotted with illegal housing and informal settlements, factors that further complicate efforts at

compensation and restitution. Additionally, some appear to have had land ownership deeds, but appear to have lost them to the conflict: "[w]e received only compensation for the furniture in the house but not the house itself because I do not have the document for the ownership. I lost it all. I lost my sheep and cattle, and I did not receive any compensation for that." Stated an Sunni Arab tribal leader from Al-Qayrawan. Rasing a similar concern, a Yazidi politician from Sinjar noted,

> *"The state is making our lives difficult through paper work. I might be able to get compensation for the furniture I lost, but that is it. The prime minster said that they have finalized 8,500 compensation cases and, in reality, we have not heard anything from the government since. Why are they not providing it?"*

The Tel Afar Compensation Committee, through its Sinjar Branch (known as the Third Secondary Committee), is responsible for administering compensation for property damage and destruction caused during the liberation of the district from IS. This committee administers a long-winded and time-consuming procedure that requires the coordination of multiple public bodies.[152]

Applicants must first file an investigation case with the court, supported by witnesses and official land deeds. In the absence of documentation, they are required to secure a stamped letter confirming property ownership from the mayor, who is based in Faida (Dohuk), as well as approvals from service directorates such as water and electricity. These materials, together with additional witness testimonies, are compiled into a case file, processed by the court, and then transferred to the compensation committee. The committee then sends out a team to itemize and evaluate losses before recommending a compensation amount, which, once approved, is written in cheque to the Ministry of Finance in order to be cashed.

Frustration for Expectation

This lengthy process has generated widespread frustration among applicants; many of whom must wait for protracted periods and stand in long queues at each stage. In addition to the delays which has caused serious inefficiencies, corruption has also undermined the system; as one Yazidi researcher and civil society activist explained, "To get your application across and get a handsome estimate, you will have to grease some palms along the way." Yet

despite these challenges, the committee has reported some progress. Out of the 28,000 applications received, around 18,000 cases had been finalized with cheques issued by August 2024. However, the actual number of applicants who successfully managed to cash their cheques remains unknown, leaving the effectiveness of the process in doubt.

Communities across Sinjar have consistently expressed deep frustration over the FGoI's failure to meet their expectations for basic services and reconstruction. This perception is not only widespread across the communities but also perceived by some as a deliberate and systematic neglect by Baghdad. Moreover, current recovery efforts are seen to be incommensurate with the actual needs in Sinjar and mostly led by the international community. The following examples, drawn from field interviews, illustrate this growing sentiment:

> *"There is no government here [in Sinjar]. It is only organizations that provide services. Health services are scanty here. It takes so long to get to here if you are from a distant place of Sinjar. The hospital would not work without the support of the NGOs. The government here does not even cover expenses for state owned cars. The government here pays salaries only, nothing more." (Male Shia Kurd, Sinjar)*

"The Iraqi government does not provide services here. I mean the government of Nineveh and the Iraqi government. They do not pay any attention to this area. It is all words, and no action. Al-Kadimi came and paid lip service here. Sudani also came here and we have seen nothing so far. He promised many things, but we are yet to see them. The minister for migration talked about return. Most of us are still displaced." (Male Yazidi public employee, Sinuni)

"The government [FGoI], is building a hospital in Sinuni and another one in Sinjar. But, despite all this, I keep saying that the Iraqi government is not serious about Sinjar." (Senior government official, Baghdad)

"Most of [the reconstruction] is done by USAID through Nadia Initiative. UNDP did some projects and UN-HABITAT is doing some in Sinuni. The government is almost absent in this regard." (Female Yazidi NGO employee, Sinjar)

"I do not know about any agreement…. There has been no [Mayor] and I do not really care about this. This does not interest me. We need roads, electricity and services. But the truth is they would not provide anything, I know. Sinjar will remain marginalized." (Female Yazidi survivor, Sinjar)

"Services are almost nonexistent. Whatever we get are from NGOs. The budget does not get released by the local government in Nineveh." (Yazidi religious leader, Sinjar)

Government Failure

If anything, these statements underscore the extent to which the Iraqi state is seen to be unable to rise above political rivalries. They reveal a serious government failure to act as an impartial and effective arbiter in the disputes surrounding Sinjar. Rather than addressing the area's pressing needs or making meaningful efforts to restore peace and stability, the federal government has remained vulnerable to political pressure, most notably in relation to the appointment of a new mayor.[153] Even after reaching an agreement with the KRG about a candidate, Baghdad could not uphold the deal following behind-the-scenes pressure from political actors.[154] Furthermore, in an apparent effort to avoid upsetting KDP, Baghdad pulled a last-minute call to suspend an NPC's session that was intended to finalize the appointment of Sinjar's mayor in June 2024.[155]

The ongoing stalling of the ratification of the recently appointed NPC mayor stands as an indictment of Baghdad's limited structural capacity for dispute resolution, a capacity where political accommodations often takes precedence over legal, political, administrative and even communal considerations.

At the local level, the mishandling of Sinjar is felt across the communal spectrum and the repercussions have been dire especially for the survivors. In an FGD, many Yazidi survivors poignantly expressed their feelings. One of them noted:

"As a survivor, I am afraid of going back to Sinjar. There is full with political parties and I do not really know who is in charge of the area." (Female Yazidi survivor, Khanke, Dohuk)

Another stated,

"The local administration in Sinjar is a failure. Each department is controlled by a political party which advances their own interests, not the people's." (Female Yazidi survivor, Khanke, Dohuk)

And yet another cautioned that the politicization has eroded her trust of the government's ability to fend off future harms, noting:

"There are too many political parties and armed groups in Sinjar. Who would protect us if we were to be harmed? The Yazidis will suffer again and the government does not care." (Female Yazidi survivor, Khanke, Dohuk)

The Blame Game

With the continued absence of the local government in Sinjar, the communities of Sinjar have tended to advance their own understanding as to why the administrative predicament remain unresolved. The non-displaced Yazidis in Sinjar, for instance, tend to see the KDP as the culprit. They accuse it of being a barrier against attempts to appoint a mayor, and blame it for disallowing a reshuffling of the local administrative architecture in a way that benefits the people of Sinjar.[156] This view stands in contrast to other Yazidis and the Dohuk-displaced Arabs who blame the PKK, and the Hashd for the continued administrative stalemate: a stable administration requires stable security conditions which have been undermined by the presence of the PKK. Additionally, numerous Yazidis express concern over future political aspirations of the Shia and their armed wings. "Politics plays a role in keeping the mayoral position vacant. The Shia would want to control this area whatever it takes.", stated a displaced Yazidi community figure,[157] while, the absence of the mayor helps the Hashd, " keep their interests and their future aspirations to control this area."[158]

Arabs, especially returnees and those still displaced in Nineveh, see segments of the Yazidi armed leadership as one of the barriers to progress. This assumption appears to be driven from an understanding that the persistence of the conflict provides the military commanders with opportunities to stay in power and make financial gains. Another common understanding amongst this segment of the Arab population also attributes the stalemate to KDPs unfruitful attempts to reassert itself in Sinjar and regain its control over the local government.[159]

The protracted nature of the conflict has segregated the communities on the ground with little cross-community interaction. As a result, the communities, especially Arabs and Yazidis, in Sinjar and in displacement, tend to express views in isolation from each other. Views, channelled this way, can risk becoming self-reinforcing and untested against alternative perspectives. This not only entrenches parallel narratives but also fuels misunderstanding, mistrust, and ultimately solidify polarization among communities.

The Disconnect

Without solid dialogue mechanisms, assumptions harden into grievances that are difficult to verify, leaving policymakers and authorities with fragmented accounts that hinder the formulation of inclusive solutions. Sinjar is running this very risk where the continuation of stalemate can blur facts and reinforce unsubstantiated grievances and eventually entrench communal segregation and fragmentation. It, therefore, behoves the authorities to first realise this danger and act outright to find common grounds in Sinjar. There is little doubt that the current dynamics undermine opportunities for collaboration and prevent the emergence of commonalities. It is precisely to counter these risks that MERI has sought to establish a tailor-made dialogue platform that can bring diverse voices together in a structured and inclusive manner where competing perspectives can be confronted, tested, and reconciled in pursuit of shared governance and service delivery objectives.

It is unfortunate that for more than a decade since Sinjar's liberation, the Iraqi state is still largely absent as an arbiter of conflict, overshadowed by a myriad of state and non-state actors and unable to deliver meaningful governance. Implementation of SjA has been nothing more than patchy and piecemeal, leading to outcomes that are limited in impact, perceived as biased, and, importantly, fall short of the Agreement's core aspiration: restoring normalcy and dismantling the area's fragmented armed presence.

What is more, governance failures have had a profound impact on the public psyche. Many residents refrain from political engagement or even from claiming their basic rights, fearing association with any particular political faction. The absence of effective governance, paired with the state's failure to address the public's needs, has fuelled a growing perception that the challenges in Sinjar are being deliberately perpetuated and that there is little political appetite to resolve the political conflicts over this marginalized district. Locally, the challenges in Sinjar appear to be hindered by a breakdown in the relationship between public institutions and the wider community. This disconnect is largely driven by the perceived absence of institutional leadership on the ground and the co-optation of institutional actors into broader political rivalries.

The Gap is Mendable

Despite the difficulties, the gap in trust between the Sinjaris and authorities as well as between communities is mendable. While political considerations may continue to influence public appointments, the delivery of basic services should be depoliticized and shielded from factional interference. Restoring this institutional credibility is essential not only for effective service delivery, but also for rebuilding citizen trust, supporting return, and reinforcing the legitimacy of the local administration.

The way forward is to establish a depoliticized, representative, accessible, and institutionalized mechanism that could connect the public with decision makers at the local and national levels. This mechanism could serve as an effective tool to demand service needs, express grievances, access information and more importantly engage with decision and policy makers at the local level. Such a process could assuage public concerns, advance local ownership about the local government and may eventually facilitate the much-needed return of the displaced communities. With homes still in ruins, roads neglected, and essential services largely absent, such a mechanism can set forth a process to reverse all that.

Bridging the Gap: A Bottom-Up Opening

After examining the overall governance dynamics of Sinjar, MERI sought to establish a dialogue-based mechanism that could organically bridge the public with the authorities. Such a mechanism would serve as a platform that brings together community representatives and relevant authorities, along with international guarantors to discuss grievances, debate needs, and propose solutions to pressing governance and communal challenges.

This approach drew on an extensive field research with key stakeholders, including representatives of Sinjar's communities, national and local authorities, as well as relevant international actors. This overarching methodology made it apparent that Sinjar lacked a functioning linkage that assemble the public and the authorities: a connection that gives agency to the locals, fosters cross community engagement and collaboration and, importantly, establishes an institutionalized mechanism of dialogue with the relevant authorities from the various local and national governmental departments.

The absence of such an institutional platform has had profound consequences for governance and recovery in Sinjar where communities have remained distrustful of each other, with little agency in the processes of governance and recovery, and with no viable means to resolve conflict, and seek amicable solutions for the challenges that have beleaguered Sinjar.

A Systematic, Stepwise Approach

Following the identification of this vacuum, MERI first sought to substantiate this diagnosis and hence undertook a process to better understand the dynamics. It commenced with carrying out a thorough context analysis from the available literature. This helped to decipher the complexities and identify appropriate local stakeholders that could ultimately be part of the future dialogues. It also helped to identify drivers of change, and barriers for progress. In doing so, the legal foundation of local governance (legislative and executive) was studied and legitimate authorities, religious and community leaders, armed state- and non-state actors and power hierarchy, were examined. This process also helped to map population movement, frame return conditions of IDPs, conceptualise the state of women and girls (including survivors of conflict-related sexual violence, S-CRSVs), and comprehend ethno-religious demography and their geographic distribution across Sinjar district. Furthermore, previous dialogue-based efforts and local-led community 'agreements', mediated by national and international peace- building organizations, were examined to assess their efficacy. Ultimately, this helped lay down detailed academic and logistical plans for further data collection and identification of potential participants in the upcoming program activities.

Then, to systematically measure public perceptions of local dynamics and of the Sinjar Agreement, MERI conducted a representative face-to-face survey in Sinjar as well as among displaced populations in IDP camps in the KRI with a sample size of 656 participants. The survey targeted the three communities that constitute a numerical majority in Sinjar District: Yazidis, Sunni Arabs, and the Shia in Sinjar Center, Al-Qayrawan and Al-Shimal sub-districts.

After the completion of the survey, MERI then engaged stakeholders individually to better understand their views, grievances, and potential areas of communal contentions. This process involved 78 in-depth discussions (key informant interviews, KIIs) with community and tribal figures, civil society organizations, academics, politicians, military commanders, S-CRSV, relevant international agencies, and decision- and policy-makers at district, province, KRI, and Baghdad levels.

Collaboration, Not Reconciliation

Among numerous findings, the interviews revealed that reconciliation remained a deeply contentious issue for the Yazidis. Specifically, many expressed unwillingness to engage in any cross-community dialogue that could promote reconciliation. The interviews revealed that this conditional abstention was interpreted by some Arabs as well as Muslim Kurdish stakeholders as a Yazidi attempt to entrench the current realities on the ground as a fait accompli- a scenario the non-Yazidi communities strongly reject. The interviews also indicated a widespread disconnect between decision-makers and the wider public at the local level.

MERI subsequently convened representatives of each community separately in intensive FGDs, facilitated by local experts familiar with the dynamics of Sinjar. These intra-community sessions were designed as precursors to later inter-community discussions in that they were designed to serve as dialogues within the targeted communities. The FGDs, nonetheless, proved challenging given the extent of political divergence and the inherently conflicting demands and expectations within the groups. This required extensive, carefully structured discussions within each community to help lay the groundwork and address obstacles that might jeopardize future discussions between the communities.

To preserve the integrity, and avoid potential break-down of the discussions, MERI sought to select the FGD participants with care, avoiding politicisation of grievances or exacerbation of tensions. Additionally, MERI aimed to focus the participants minds and the flow of the discussions by zeroing on practical service provision challenges and potential solutions. In so doing, MERI was able to anchor the FGDs in practical shared challenges between communities, thereby minimizing the risk of recrimination and politicization.

Over the course of 11 FGDs held with the communities of Sinjar, exchanges were still charged and often marked by sharp back-and-forth deliberations. Yet despite the challenges, it became evident that cross-

community discussions were still possible provided that the contentious issue of reconciliation was kept off the table. This important outcome illustrated both the depth of resistance to reconciliation from the Yazidi community and, at the same time, the potential for inter-community progress through pragmatic, issue-based dialogue.

Importantly, MERI utilised he FGDs and the KIIs to identify individuals willing to participate in the planned inter-community dialogue (ICD) sessions. From each community, MERI compiled a participants list and then gauged perceptions of, and reservations about, the selections. This process proved essential and paved the way for the next phase of dialogue between Sinjar's ethno-religious groups.

MERI-Mediated Inter-Community Dialogues

Holding the ICDs would not have been possible without adopting this stepwise systematic approach of starting with a review of the literature, followed by a comprehensive survey, intensive KIIs with stakeholders, and finally the intra-community FGDs. This helped foster trust within Sinjar's communities and lay the right groundwork required to hold dialogue sessions between the communities. Here, it is worthy to note that the ICDs were not designed to launch a peace-building process from scratch or to 're-invent the wheel'. Instead, MERI built on the extensive work exerted by other organizations and on MERI's FGDs. In this way, focus was shed on shared local governance challenges and service delivery.

In the ICDs, facilitators guided participants to map their community's collective assets, values, challenges, and aspirations. Facilitators also emphasized the importance of engaging with, and influencing, local governance. To encourage open and constructive dialogue, they used semi-formal and informal methods to promote open-mindedness and mutually engaging outlooks. By practicing active listening, sharing, and questioning, participants were encouraged to provide constructive criticism of government initiatives, including the SjA. This process helped them build acceptance of change, work toward a shared vision, and strengthen engagement capacities with legitimate authorities.

The Yazidi-Yazidi Dialogue

The first ICD was held in Mosul. It brought together the displaced Yazidis from the IDP camps and Dohuk, and Yazidi returnees. Despite having a shared identity, this session proved to be very sensitive and charged with tension, given how divided and divergent the views were. The IDPs, for instance, were particularly vocal in expressing their frustration and perceived feelings of neglect, while returnees took a more moderate stance about the dynamics in Sinjar, emphasizing overall improvement, albeit gradual and precarious. The returnees also tended to highlight the importance of community collaboration while the displaced Yazidis tended to exhibit a more pessimistic outlook about the future of Sinjar.

Despite differences, most participants agreed, following heated debates and measured facilitation, on the urgency of addressing the challenges in Sinjar, establishing local governance, engaging the relevant authorities, and resolving the issue of mass graves. The latter was especially pronounced amongst the survivors. Participants took stock of the most critical priorities to help stabilize Sinjar and ultimately facilitate the return of the IDPs. Discussions around reconciliation were met with unanimous refusal, reflecting the depth of the community's unresolved grievances and trauma.

Yazidi-Muslim Dialogue

The second ICD assembled Yazidis and Kurdish Muslims of Sinjar. The former comprised members from the displaced community in KRI as well as Yazidis in Sinjar. The Kurdish Muslim community included IDPs as well as returnees. This session helped shed light on key challenges, explore the communities' needs, and identify priorities for recovery and development. Participants were represented different areas of Sinjar District, and included women and survivors.

The participants expressed divergent views, mixed with frustration and despair over Sinjar's challenges and recovery prospects. Some participants aired a more sanguine tone by noting improvements in reconstruction and compensation schemes. Concerns about governance were pervasive, with participants lamenting governmental neglect, poor service provision, protracted displacement, slow reconstruction efforts, and deficient compensation for the lives lost during the conflict and damage inflicted. They blamed the presence of multiple official and unofficial armed groups for the lack of a clear administrative structure and decision-making authority in Sinjar. Some explained that abductions and impunity underscore the fragile security situation in Sinjar. Allegations of property confiscation by armed groups, affiliation to IS, and community militarization were expressed, denoting unresolved tensions between the two communities.

With regards to social dynamics, the second ICD noted erosion of social cohesion between these two communities due to widespread mistrust and unresolved grievances. When mention was made to ISIS affiliates and perpetrators of crimes, tensions flared over accusations of involvement of certain community members in crime, generating a heated debate. If anything, such disputes highlight the challenges to fostering coexistence in Sinjar not only between communities but also within.

Despite these challenges, participants did outline several priorities for recovery and development in Sinjar. These included establishing a functioning and representative local government, releasing and streamlining compensation funds for victims and returnees, and nurturing trust and social cohesion among community members. Economic revitalization through job creation and government-led reconstruction efforts was deemed essential to stabilize the region. Security was identified as a critical priority, with participants stressing

the need for a unified state authority to replace the current fragmented control by armed groups. The full implementation of the Yazidi Survivors Law, including its psychosocial and land distribution provisions, was also seen as an unmet need.

Shared Priorities

In short, the participants agreed on three main priorities that need urgent treatment: establishing a unified and functional administration in Sinjar, ensuring safety and security, and fostering social cohesion. To achieve these objectives, forming a representative committee to advocate for Sinjar's needs and aspirations with relevant authorities was noted. This committee would aim to promote a unified vision for the region, free from sectarian or communal biases. Other recommendations included organizing advocacy campaigns to encourage peaceful demonstrations, empower religious leaders to promote peace, and cultivate a sense of communal responsibility. These initiatives were seen as important for preparing the ground in such a way that allows the community to actively participate in decision-making processes.

At the conclusion of each session, participants expressed deep appreciation for the opportunity to engage in dialogue and called for more similar initiatives to build on the progress made during this discussion. To some of the participants, this session marked the first time such a dialogue had been conducted between the two communities: "This is the first time I attend a meeting along with the Yazidis. I am grateful for the opportunity and I am sure such initiatives would be fruitful."[160]

Impact of the Inter-Community Dialogues: Pre and Post-Test

MERI's ICD sessions seems to have contributed to fostering collaboration among the participants. In addition to increasing willingness of cross community engagement, the participants denoted a positive change in their perception of the importance of intercommunal engagements. The dialogue sessions also appear to have contributed to enhancing confidence levels of engaging in future joint collaborative efforts provided. These results while encouraging, are contingent upon various factors including selection of venue, participants, facilitators and discussion topics.

To assess the impact of the ICDs, a pre and post-test were obtained from the second ICD session which was attended by 32 individuals from both the Yazidi and Muslim communities. Before the start of the dialogue, participants were handed a set of questions designed to assess their willingness to engage in intercommunal activities and their views of the importance of such a dialogue session. Following the completion of the session, partakers were provided with another set of questions to complete so as to evaluate the impact of the session on the same variables set in the pre-test.

Willingness to Collaborate with Other Communities

This vector was assessed by a pre-test question asking to scale willingness to collaborate with other communities (Figure 7). This was juxtaposed by another question in the post-test to measure the impact of the dialogue session (Figure 8). Results indicate that levels of willingness were high to begin with. In the pre-test, most participants (29 of 32) stated that they are willing or very willing to engage in intercommunal collaborative arrangements to tackle common problems. Nonetheless, the post-test results demonstrate that the dialogue session increased (slightly or significantly) the participants' enthusiasm to engage in collaboration.

Figure 7. Question: On a scale of 1 to 5, how willing are you to collaborate with members of other communities in Sinjar to address shared challenges?
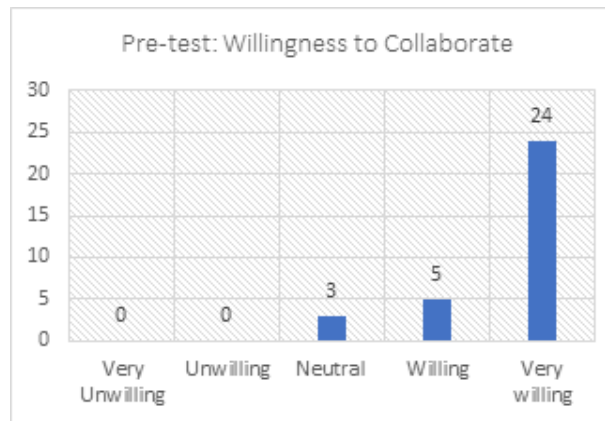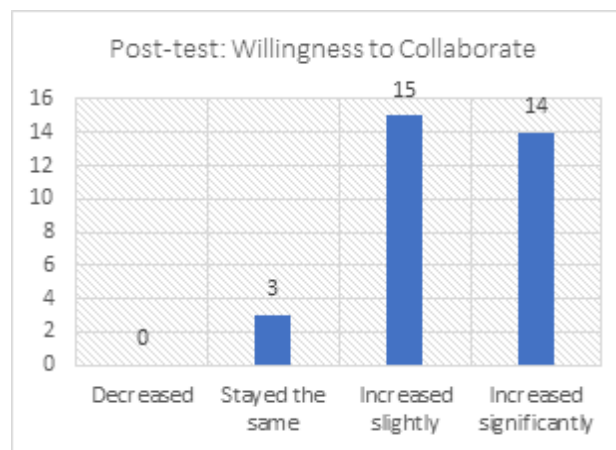

Figure 8. Question: After participating in the community dialogue, how has your willingness to collaborate with members of other communities in Sinjar changed?

Frequency and Importance of Intercommunal Collaboration

To assess the frequency of engagement among the participants in intercommunal efforts, they were asked to indicate how often they interacted with other communities in order to solve shared challenges. The results are rather mixed indicating a possible infrequent rate of interaction between the two communities. To be specific, only 7 of the interlocutors indicated in the pre-test frequent engagements with other communities. Yet and despite this lack, Figure 10 shows that such engagements are considered to be very important by an absolute majority of the respondents.

Figure 9. Question: How often do you engage in discussions with individuals from other communities in Sinjar to solve common issues?

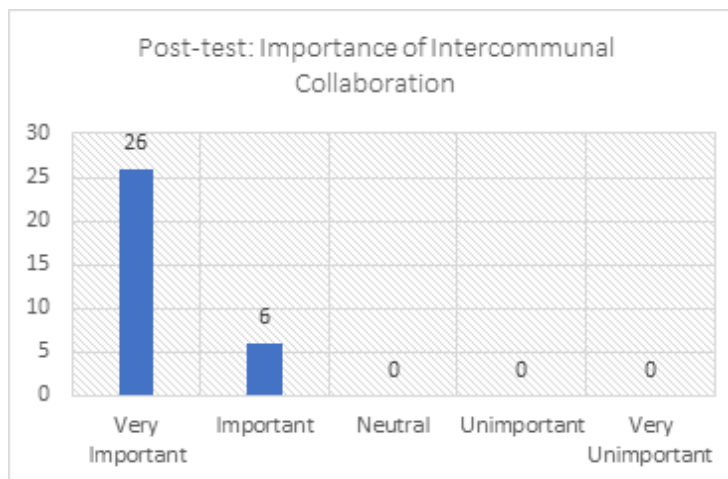Pre-test: Frequency of Intercommunal Collaboration
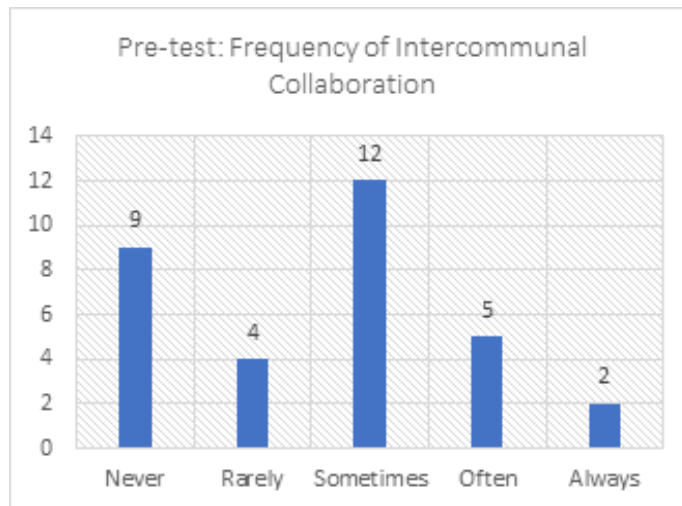
Figure 10. Question: Do you believe that collaboration between communities in Sinjar is important for solving common problems given the current circumstances?

Post-test: Importance of Intercommunal Collaboration

Confidence Levels of Participation in Intercommunal Activities after the Dialogue

The ICDs seems to have markedly contributed to the alleviation of distrust levels and had a dramatic impact on the participants' confidence levels in working with other communities to settle concerns. The pre-test shows that 62.5% of the dialogue participants exhibited distrust or strong distrust in collaborating with other communities to tackle shared challenges, while a third remained hesitant or undecided. Only two of the participants expressed confidence in engaging other communities, denoting serious strains on communal bonds (Figure 11). Post-test results, demonstrated in Figure 12, shows with clarity that the vast majority, 27 of 32 respondents, grew confident in working collaboratively with other communities to tackle common challenges. Only one participant remained unconfident and four undecided, while the reset had shifted positions. This is a rather significant change, indicating the value of calculated interventions in changing perceptions.

Figure 11. Question: To what extent do you feel confident working with people from other communities to find solutions to common challenges?
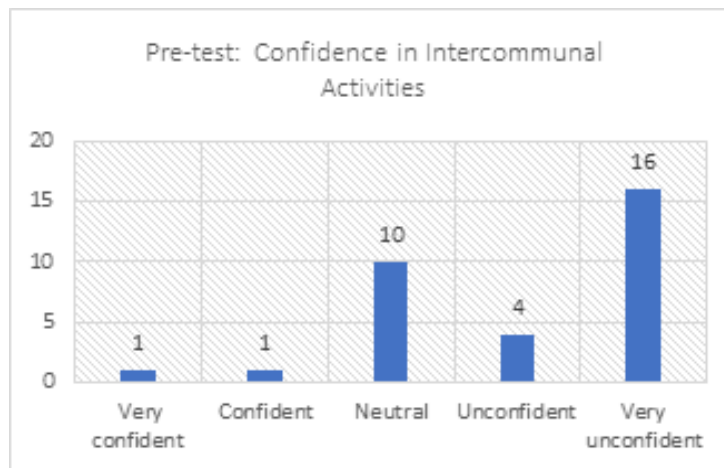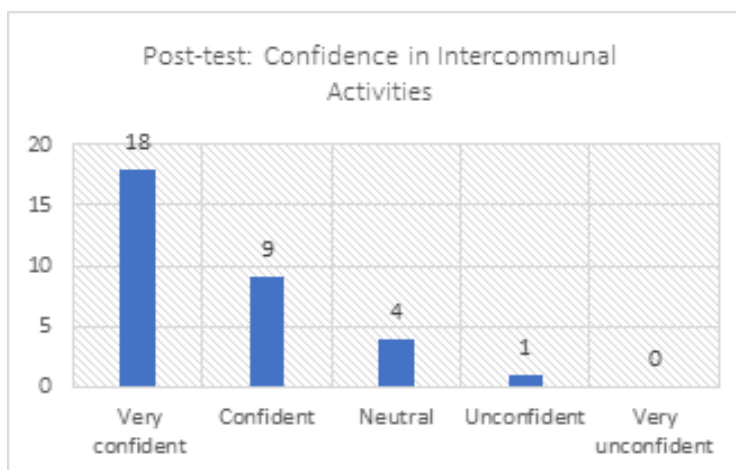

Figure 12. Question: After participating in the dialogue, how confident do you feel about working with people from other communities to solve shared problems?

Sinjar Stakeholder Platform:

A Bespoke Collaborative Governance Mechanism

The Platform in Action

After extensive groundwork and preparation involving discussions around the list of participants, discussion topics, venue and organization, the SSP entered its operational phase. This was when the platform's potential was examined in real life, as diverse community members and officials came together to deliberate on certain challenges openly and behind closed doors. In action, the SSP provided a unique and tailored space where dialogue turned into engagement, grievances were translated into demands, and joint commitments began to take shape.

The first SSP was held in Mosul, considered a neutral place for all the communities involved, on Monday, November 4th, 2024. In this closed and vibrant three-hour meeting, 25 members of the Sinjar community, including Yazidis, Arabs, Shia Kurds, and Sunni Kurds engaged directly the governor of Nineveh Abdul-Qadir Al-Dakhil and his deputy Sirwan Rozhbayani. From the communities, the attendees included civil society activists, tribal leaders, religious leaders, journalists, women's rights activists, S-CRSV, lawyers, former government officials, and civil servants from the public sector. A total of 25 participants representing Sinjar center, the northern and southern parts of Sinjar, and IDPs were present at the SSP.

Each participant had a unique opportunity to engage directly with the governor, voice their concerns and request government actions on their communities' priorities. The discussion, organized to explore potential pathways forward for the recovery of Sinjar, focused heavily on the urgent need for improved service delivery and infrastructure repair in Sinjar.

The Narrative

In the meeting, the complex dynamics in Sinjar were highlighted by MERI, emphasizing the importance of dialogue and engagement between decision-makers and the public as a pathway to progress, underscoring the importance of depoliticizing Sinjar and the return of IDPs. MERI added that such a process would require active, mutual support from the Nineveh local government and the people of Sinjar. This way the platform was set off and marked a meaningful discussion on Sinjar's future. The governor of Nineveh expressing his appreciation for this type of advocacy for Sinjar and acknowledging the importance of the SSP in bringing communities closer to the authorities.

The SSP encompassed compassionate appeals and calls for placing importance to Sinjar and the need for urgent action to address challenges besetting the area. The governor pledged to complete all compensation applications for material damages inflicted by ISIS by mid-2025 and voiced hope that services in the likes of the national water extension project would be approved and implemented. Al-Dakhil also made note of other projects including the construction of Modern Kocho Village with USAID support, a 100-bed hospital in Sinjar, and a 25-bed hospital in Sinuni.

The Sinjaris' Needs and Priorities

During the remainder of the discussion, participants shared their concerns and needs. Numerous key needs and priorities were identified as detailed in Table 4. The list shows that the demands articulated by community representatives overwhelmingly pertain to basic service provision, infrastructure rehabilitation, education, healthcare, and livelihood support. Notably, these demands are non-political in nature, practical in scope, and financially feasible and as noted by the governor in the meeting "feasible and within the budgetary allocations." What is more is that the formulation of the list of demands was made possible through SSP, which provided an inclusive space for structured dialogue.

By steering discussions toward concrete service delivery needs and away from contentious political issues, the SSP succeeded in depoliticizing the process, fostering constructive cross-community engagement, and enabling the articulation of actionable and shared priorities without generating tensions among the participating community representatives.

Sinjaris are Objective and Appreciative

The Sinjaris' approach to this process, and their engagement during participation in the SSPs and ICDs, proved to be remarkably objective and constructive. Feedback from the representatives who attended the various dialogue meetings was very positive but cautiously optimistic, while also expressing deep appreciation for the efforts invested in this study and for any action that might be taken by the authorities.

Participants expressed gratitude for the SSP which brings together the public and decision-makers with a focus on shared challenges including service delivery, and community-centered approach to conflict resolution. Recognizing the platform's value, the governor personally committed to another meeting to review progress on his promises and the demands made. He promised that "90% of the demands are doable and fall within [his] purview, and for the rest, [he] will do [his] best to meet them as well."

Reflecting on the SSP experience, a Sunni Arab participant shared that "this is the first time we sit together and do not end up fighting."[161] A Yazidi commented, "to sit in a room with the governor and express our concerns and demands is a dream come true for me."[162]

Table 4. Key Local Demands in Sinjar Expressed in the SSP Participants

#	Local Priorities, Requested by Sinjaris	Location
1	Establish alternative national ID issuance offices for IDPs in Mosul and the KRI, given long queues in Sinjar.	Mosul, Duhok, Erbil, Sulaymaniyah
2	Prioritize graduates from Sinjar for government appointments, particularly within the education sector.	Sinjar District
3	Increase compensation rates; the current amount of 3 million IQD is insufficient compared to the value of destroyed property and houses.	Sinjar District
4	Construct a health clinic.	Kon Ru (Jahr al-Tha'lab)
5	Build a school.	Kon Ru (Jahr al-Tha'lab)
6	Extend the water network.	Kon Ru (Jahr al-Tha'lab)
7	Reduce or suspend taxes on shops and factories in Sinjar, as many are destroyed or non-functional.	Sinjar District
8	Rehabilitate and provide lighting for the main streets of Sinjar.	Sinjar District
9	Construct a sewage system in Domiz Complex, in light of the return of 105 families.	Domiz Complex
10	Extend potable water supply to Domiz Complex, due to the return of 105 families.	Domiz Complex
11	Rehabilitate Domiz markets.	Domiz Complex
12	Renovate schools in Tel Banat.	Tal Banat
13	Rehabilitate the five-a-side football field in Tel Banat.	Tal Banat
14	Address low-voltage electricity problems in Tel Banat.	Tal Banat
15	Provide adequate staffing for the Tel Banat electricity department.	Tal Banat
16	Ensure water supply for Tel Fahd village.	Tal Banat
17	Resume social welfare payments for widows and divorcees, which were suspended on the grounds that they were receiving aid in the Kurdistan Region despite their return.	Sinjar District
18	Reduce water salinity in Rajm al-Abd, al-Khazouka, and neighboring villages.	Rajm al-Abd / al-Khazouka and surrounding villages
19	Provide compensation.	Rajm al-Abd / al-Khazouka and surrounding villages
20	Renovate two schools.	Rajm al-Abd / al-Khazouka and surrounding villages
21	Provide adequate teaching staff. Currently, 500 students are taught by only two teachers, despite 82 local graduates available for recruitment.	Rajm al-Abd / al-Khazouka and surrounding villages
22	Build a health center and appoint medical staff.	Rajm al-Abd / al-Khazouka and surrounding villages
23	Open a Directorate of Education in al-Shamal Sub-District.	Al-Shamal
24	Address the general shortage of teaching staff. Forty percent of the workforce previously commuted from outside Sinjar, but due to security concerns they no longer report.	Sinjar District
25	Construct additional school buildings; due to shortages, schools currently operate in three shifts per day.	Sinjar District

#	Local Priorities, Requested by Sinjaris	Location
26	Issue appointment orders for the 1,000 teaching posts allocated to Sinjar. Of these, 130 were transferred to Qayrawan, 200 to camps, leaving 640 unissued.	Sinjar District
27	Follow up on the governor's pledge of 100 job positions for Sinjar.	Sinjar District
28	Facilitate retirement procedures, as retirees are asked for military service records which are difficult to obtain.	Sinjar District
29	Increase the number of fuel stations and their operating hours. Currently, Sinjar Center has only one, with long queues.	Sinjar District
30	Form a committee to search for abducted persons. The Iraqi government has not taken this issue seriously, despite thousands still missing.	Sinjar District
31	Address mass graves seriously, as their continued neglect exacerbates trauma within the Yazidi community.	Sinjar District
32	Establish a psychosocial support center for survivors.	Sinjar District
33	Rehabilitate and expand the road connecting Mosul, Tal Afar, and Sinjar; the current condition has caused fatalities.	Mosul–Tal Afar–Sinjar road
34	Facilitate disbursement of return grants, particularly for urban IDPs.	Sinjar District
35	Provide municipal equipment.	Sinjar District
36	Reduce bureaucratic obstacles within service departments.	Sinjar District
37	Ensure provision of water and electricity to villages.	Sinjar District
38	Create employment opportunities for residents of villages surrounding Sinjar Center.	Sinjar District
39	Construct three pedestrian bridges near schools to ensure student safety.	Sinjar District
40	Pave streets in Qabusiyah and Shahabiya.	Sinjar District
41	Open a fuel station in Qahtaniyah, which remains the only Iraqi town without one.	Qahtaniyah
42	Establish branches of the Education Directorate, the court, and the police station in Qahtaniyah.	Qahtaniyah
43	Build new school facilities; currently, 1,800 students attend only two schools.	Qahtaniyah
44	Pave the roads in Um al-Shababit leading to Sinjar.	Sinjar Center
45	Asphalt the connecting roads between Zurafa and al-Shamal, and from Wardiya to Bab al-Sheer.	Al-Shamal
46	Provide basic services in al-Adnaniyah Complex.	Sinjar Center
47	Establish a Directorate of Women's Affairs, which exists in Mosul but not in Sinjar.	Sinjar Center
48	Open a Center for Combating Violence Against Women.	Sinjar Center
49	Ensure opportunities for Sinjari women to participate in decision-making within Mosul's local government.	
50	Asphalt the main road between Qabusiyah and Sinjar.	Mosul
51	Exempt farmers from taxation in order to encourage return in Qabusiyah.	Sinjar Center

#	Local Priorities, Requested by Sinjaris	Location
52	Remove rubble and debris from local markets.	Sinjar Center
53	Provide a CT scanner for Sinjar Hospital.	Sinjar Center
54	Establish recreational facilities to alleviate social and psychological hardship.	Sinjar Center
55	Organize youth and sports festivals in Sinjar.	Sinjar Center
56	Hold regular meetings with heads of service departments to identify problems and provide support.	Sinjar Center
57	Remove physical traces of the genocide in Sinjar.	Sinjar Center
58	Facilitate the work of NGOs, particularly at checkpoints, to ease suffering and accelerate reconstruction.	Sinjar Center
59	Resolve land allocation issues to provide plots for survivors; currently no land is available.	Sinjar Center
60	Allocate part of the "Empowerment Project" to Sinjar's youth.	Sinjar Center
61	Ensure press freedom in Sinjar, as journalists and media professionals face harsh treatment.	Sinjar Center
62	Complete the paving of the road linking the Air Force Camp to Sulaigh.	Sinjar Center
63	Follow up on the construction of Sinjar University.	Sinjar Center
64	Complete the paving of the silo road.	Sinjar Center
65	Disburse compensation funds for IDPs.	Sinjar Center
66	Resolve issues relating to the French Hospital and open it to the public.	Sinjar Center
67	Ensure the availability of medical specialists in district hospitals.	Sinjar Center
68	Address the low-voltage electricity supply in Tel Banat.	Tel Banat / Al-Qayrawan
69	Rehabilitate streets in Tel Banat.	Tel Banat / Al-Qayrawan
70	Clear rubble and debris in Tel Banat.	Tel Banat / Al-Qayrawan
71	Relocate the police from al-Waleed Secondary School, which is currently occupied by security forces.	Tel Banat
72	Support persons with disabilities by establishing a rehabilitation center; there are currently 1,715 persons with disabilities in Sinjar District.	Sinjar District
73	Renovate the disability center and provide proper services; the current facility is housed in a private residence.	Sinjar District
74	Extend the fiber-optic cable project to Sinjar.	Sinjar District
75	Pave streets in villages within al-Shamal Sub-District.	Al-Shimal (Sinuni)
76	Simplify procedures for issuing death certificates in villages.	Sinjar District
77	Establish police stations in rural villages.	Sinjar District
78	Provide a notary office in Sinuni.	Sinuni Sub-District
79	Rehabilitate and expand roads in Sinuni.	Al-Shimal (Sinuni)
80	Provide adequate teaching staff. One school with 450 students currently has only one formal teacher.	Al-Shimal (Sinuni)
81	Officially recognize those displaced to Mosul as displaced persons by the Ministry of Migration and Displacement.	Sinjar District

A Model for Conflict Areas

The logical progression of the bottom-up scheme culminated in the Sinjar Stakeholders Platform (SSP). Tailored to mitigate Sinjar's multi-layered political dynamics by advancing agency and fostering cross-community collaboration, the SSP provided a consultative and participatory space where members of different ethno-religious communities would engage directly with authorities to address shared governance challenges. This way, the mechanism would bridge the gap between the public and the local authorities.

Participation in the SSP drew heavily from the gradual and the step-by-step methodology MERI purposefully charted, which in turn was instrumental in identifying potential candidates who could engage constructively in the SSP. As such, from the pool of KIIs, FGDs, and ICDs, MERI carefully sought to select around 25 individuals to join the platform, including S-CRSVs and a minimum 25% quota for women.

Local Ownership

To start with, MERI sketched the SSP tentatively, feeding the idea to the stakeholders and soliciting initial input while carrying out interviews and the intra and intercommunity activities. In this way, MERI not only gauged perceptions of, and procured preliminary feedback for, such a process, but also provided space for public ownership through sustained back and forth engagement. While some were skeptical of such a platform due to the Iraqi government's continued negligence of, and a perceived disregard for, the area, many were in favor of the idea of SSP. In fact, they provided valuable insights into potential risk factors and considerations that could contribute to the success of such an initiative.

Closing the Citizen-Authority Gap

The creation of an inclusive platform that could organically link communities with the relevant authorities constituted an essential aspect of the initiative to MERI, leaving the details of discussion topics, levels of partnership and collaboration with the authorities up for discussion during the SSP sessions. When it comes to participation in the SSP sessions, this was left open ranging from having the opportunity to comment on finished project designs, to partnership and collaboration, to grievances discussion. But importantly, MERI made sure to clarify to all stakeholders that the SSP is a semi-formal engagement platform, designed only to complement existing structures, such as the elected District Councils, and not to replace them or add new bureaucratic layers. The SSP will serve to demonstrate that strategically important initiatives that are co-designed in collaboration with, and implemented in partnership with local stakeholders are likely to have a sustainable impact in bridging the gap between authorities and the public.

A Flexible Model

It is worthy to note that this participatory process will remain dynamic with sufficient room for adjustment reflecting SSP discussions. Its success can be a transformative experience in itself for the people of Sinjar. For participants, being active agents, listened to and heard, and having a say on how a project is run, can be a great empowering experience in and of itself. For the national policy makers and local decision makers, this process can serve a model to be piloted in other conflicts in Iraq.

Added Value

What is more, the SSP can be utilized as a sensitive early warning and response system as it readily provides direct communication channels to solve or otherwise prevent conflicts as soon as they emerge. In addition, the SSP can be utilized to strengthen and accentuate the numerous unifying historic and sentimental ethno-religious and national anniversaries, as well as common values, needs and challenges in Sinjar. In this sense, it could, therefore, be used for reconstructing a unifying Sinjar identity; building bridges, facilitating dialogues and collaborative interactions; fostering effective vertical communication channels for local and national authorities; and proposing ways of removing barriers for progress and minimizing mutual fear, threats of or escalation violence.

From Initiative to Institutionalisation: The Sustainability of the SSP

Over the years since 2014, numerous peacebuilding initiatives have sought to promote stability and communal cohesion in Sinjar through various pacts and agreements. Yet, the lack of political will, the complexity of local dynamics, and the absence of sustained advocacy and pressure have stymied these efforts, and thus contributed to a growing sense of fatigue and apathy among communities. Existing instruments, including the committees envisioned in the 2020 SjA and the local coordinating committee managed by the Prime Minister's advisor, have largely collapsed. This vacuum has undermined governance and recovery, deepening mistrust among communities and leaving residents without credible means to resolve disputes, convey grievances, or advance shared priorities. Despite repeated local and international initiatives, the gap between citizens and authorities remains wide, causing dissatisfaction with the ongoing rates of recovery and reconstruction.

Advocacy for Adoption

Aware of this, MERI has consistently kept Sinjar on the policy agenda, bringing it to the attention of both the public and decision-makers through open and closed roundtables, as well as the MERI Forum, its flagship annual event. To sustain the momentum of the SSP, MERI has engaged both FGoI and KRG, highlighting the mechanism's potential to transform local governance in Sinjar. Relevant members of parliament have been kept abreast of the platform and encouraged them to participate actively as a means to inspire trust and motivation among the members as well as the wider public. Additionally, in order to further bolster its impact, international organizations such as the UN were also encouraged to join the SSP. The involvement of the governor and his deputy, combined with the minimal funding required to operationalize the SSP, lay an important foundation for the SSP's gradual institutionalization.

To retain of the public trust gained out of this step-by-step study and to keep the sustainability of the SSP, it is important to embed the SSP within formal governance processes. For this to happen, local authorities and national decision-makers must demonstrate political will and provide consistent support, while international partners can reinforce the platform's legitimacy through technical and financial assistance and advice.

In addition, not Instead

Moreover, it is important that the SSP is not viewed as an isolated initiative specific to the conflict in Sinjar, but rather as a model of participatory governance that channels community voices into decision-making, reduces the risks of marginalization, and helps bridge the gap between authorities and the public.

If nurtured and institutionalized, the SSP can have the potential not only to transform governance in Sinjar and help ameliorate tensions and grievances, but also has the capacity to serve as a replicable approach for other post-conflict districts across Iraq. In this process, MERI can continue to play a facilitative role in contextualizing, adapting, and convening roles, ensuring that dialogue remains constructive, inclusive, and firmly connected to the broader policy agenda at both the federal and regional levels.

Methodology at a Glance

This study adopted a stepwise and systematic methodology designed to increase and reinforce dynamics understanding, foster local ownership, and gradually build the foundations for a constructive dialogue and collaboration mechanism on Sinjar. The research unfolded in progressive stages, each layer reinforcing the next, and culminating in the creation of the Sinjar Stakeholder Platform (SSP).

This study employed a narrative literature review, synthesizing academic research, policy reports, and humanitarian assessments relevant to governance, displacement, and recovery in Sinjar. The review was problem-driven and integrative, aimed at identifying governance and adminstration gaps and contextualizing MERI's fieldwork within the broader body of evidence. It commenced with a desk review and context analysis, which examined existing literature, legal frameworks, governance structures, political and security landscape, societal relations, population movement, and past peacebuilding initiatives. This step helped better understand the conditions, and facilitated the identification of key actors, power dynamics, and structural barriers while also informing the design of subsequent research steps.

Following the literature review, MERI conducted a representative survey of 656 individuals across the district and in IDP camps in Dohuk in order to capture local perceptions of Sinjar's diverse communities. The survey provided a quantitative data set to measure levels of awareness, trust, and attitudes towards governance, security, and the Sinjar Agreement.

Sampling Method

Sinjar is an ethnically and religiously diverse area. Yazidis, Kurds, Arabs, and Christians have historically lived in Sinjar and practiced their variegated faiths and religious denominations. To capture this diversity, a stratified random sampling was utilized for this survey. Participants were randomly approached by trained enumerators and asked to take part in the survey after obtaining their consent which detailed the project, approximate time the survey takes, participants' rights, and modes of data and privacy protection.

Target Locations

Given the diverse composition of Sinjar communities, the survey was administered in four areas:

- South of Mount Sinjar, including Sinjar center and its surrounding villages

- North of Mount Sinjar, including Sinuni subdistrict and its surrounding villages

- Tow IDP camps in Duhok province (Sharya and Qadya camps)

Target Populations

Given a lack of a recent census and the absence of reliable data on population size in the Sinjar, the study relied on the Data Tracking Matrix of the IOM for the sampling of the participating populations. This dataset tracks the number of the IDPs and returnees across Iraq. The return index was used as an approximate indicator of the number of residents in the district of Sinjar which was broken down to subdistrict levels as well. The numbers were compared against estimates provided by MERI local researchers to Sinjar to draw a reliable estimate of the numbers of the communities across Sinjar. Worth noting that the survey results have a margin of error of ±10 percentage points and a 95 percent confidence interval for group-level findings

Table 5. Sample Size Distribution

	Community
South of Mount Sinjar	Arab Sunni
	Yazidi
	Shia (Kurd/Arab)
Sinuni subdistrict	Arab Sunni
	Yazidi
IDP Camps	Yezidi

Building on these the literature review and the survey results, MERI then carried out 78 in-depth Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). KIIs were utilised as a qualitative tool to capture in-depth insights from people with specialized knowledge or influence over governance, displacement, and recovery issues in Sinjar. These interviews, which are not intended to be statistically representative, provided context, interpretation, and offered detailed and granular perspectives on community grievances, competing narratives, and potential areas for cooperation. They also helped in identifying potential collaborators for the next research activities. Participants in the KIIs included tribal leaders, politicians, civil society actors, survivors of conflict-related sexual violence, academics, and decision-makers at local, regional, and national levels. MERI researchers sought participants' consent prior to commencing the interviews. At this stage, the researchers explained the purpose of the interview, its expected duration, and the measures taken to ensure privacy and data protection, while also emphasizing that participants retained the right to withdraw at any point or to decline answering any questions they wished to avoid.

Following the completion of the KIIs, MERI convened 11 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with Yazidi, Sunni Arab, and Shia Kurdish constituencies separately. The FGDs helped to further ground the findings and facilitate internal community reflection. Importantly, the FGDs were intentionally used as pre-dialogue tools not only to corroborate the findings, but also as pre-dialogue tools that could set the stage for the upcoming inter-community dialogue sessions. These intra-community dialogues helped unearth divergent views, helped to pinpoint intra-communal tensions, and helped identify potential participants for cross-community engagement.

The next stage introduced structured Community Dialogues (CDs), bringing together carefully selected participants from the Yazidi and Muslims communities to deliberate on shared challenges such as communal grievances, services, reconstruction, and security. By deliberately setting aside the contentious issue of reconciliation, these sessions created space for pragmatic cooperation between local authorities and representatives of the communities of Sinjar.

Finally, this cumulative, dialogue-based process enabled the establishment of the SSP, a semi-formal, participatory mechanism that assembled community representatives face-to-face with local authorities and decision-makers away from the media and behind closed doors. In this way, the SSP institutionalized dialogue, depoliticized service delivery, and offered a replicable model of collaborative governance. This multi-layered methodology, combining rigorous data collection with participatory engagement, ensured that the research not only produced evidence-based analysis but also generated tangible policy outcomes and a durable framework for constructive dialogue and government to public engagement.

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114.   Ibid.

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116.   Interviews with heads of the Kurdish and Arabic Education Departments, Sinjar and Dohuk, July, 2024.

117.   Interview with the director of the Arabic Education System, Sinjar, 2024.

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119.   Interview with the director of the Kurdish Education System.

120.   Ibid

121.   Ibid.

122.   Interview with a senior Iraqi government official, Baghdad, August, 2024.

123.   Interviews with Yazidi, Kurdish and Arab community and political leaders, Sinjar, Al-Qayrawan, Dohuk, July-September, 2024

124.   Interviews with tribal leaders in Al-Qayrawan, and FGD in Mosul, June-September, 2024.

125.   FGDs, Mosul, August, 2024.

126.   Interviews with local politicians, community figures, and civil society activists, Sinjar, May-September, 20204.

127.   FGD with Sunni Arabs from North and Center of Sinjar, Mosul, August, 2024.

128.   FGDs with Sunni Arabs from the South of Sinjar, August, 2024.

129.   FGDs with Non-Yazidis from Sinjar center, Mosul, August, 2024.

130.   FGDs with Yazidis and Sunni Arabs, Sinjar and Mosul, July-August, 2024.

131.   Interviews with community figures and CSOs from both communities, Mosul and Sinjar, June-September, 20204.

132.   FGDs with Non-Yazidis from the South of Sinjar, Mosul, 2024.

133.   FGDs with Arabs and Sunnis, Mosul and Sinjar, July-September, 2024.

134.   FGD with Non-Yazidis from Sinjar Center, August, 2024.

135.   Interviews with Yazidi community figures and politicians, Sinjar, May-August, 2024.

136.   Interviews with civil society activists, Sinjar, Dohuk, May-September, 2024.

137.	https://kirkuknow.com/en/news/71018?utm_source=chatgpt.com

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144.	KIIs with Yazid survivors, Sinjar, 2024.

145.	Interviews with survivors, June-September, 2024.

146.	Interviews with survivors and civil society academics.

147.	Interview with Women Rights Organization, May, 2024.

148.	The recent case of Khalo Balo and the numerous detention orders against Qasim Shasho are examples of this challenge. For Khalo Balo's case consider https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2VQJ2Ap7etA

149.	Interviews with tribal and community leaders in Sinjar, and FGD with Yazidis, June-September, 2024

150.	Interviews with tribal and community leaders in Sinjar, and FGD with Yazidis, June-September, 2024

151.	https://iraq.un.org/en/292797-recognition-yazidi-land-ownership-sinjar-historic-achievement-underscoring-un-and-iraqi?utm_source=chatgpt.com

152.	Interview with the head of the Tel Afar Committee, Sinjar, August, 2024.

153.	Interview with a high-ranking official, Baghdad, August, 2024.

154.	Ibid.

155.	Interview with a high-ranking official, Baghdad, August, 2024.

156.	FGD, Sinjar, August, 2024

157.	FGD, displaced Yazidi, Baadre, July, 2024

158.	Ibid.

159.	FGDs, Non-Yazidis, Mosul, August, 2024

160.	A male Muslim participant of the ICD, Mosul, October, 2024.

161.	Male Arab participant, Mosul, November 2024.

162.	Female Yazidi civil society activist, Mosul, November, 2024.

Acknowledgments

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