

PAVE

Preventing and Addressing Violent Extremism
through Community Resilience

Policy Brief for Iraq



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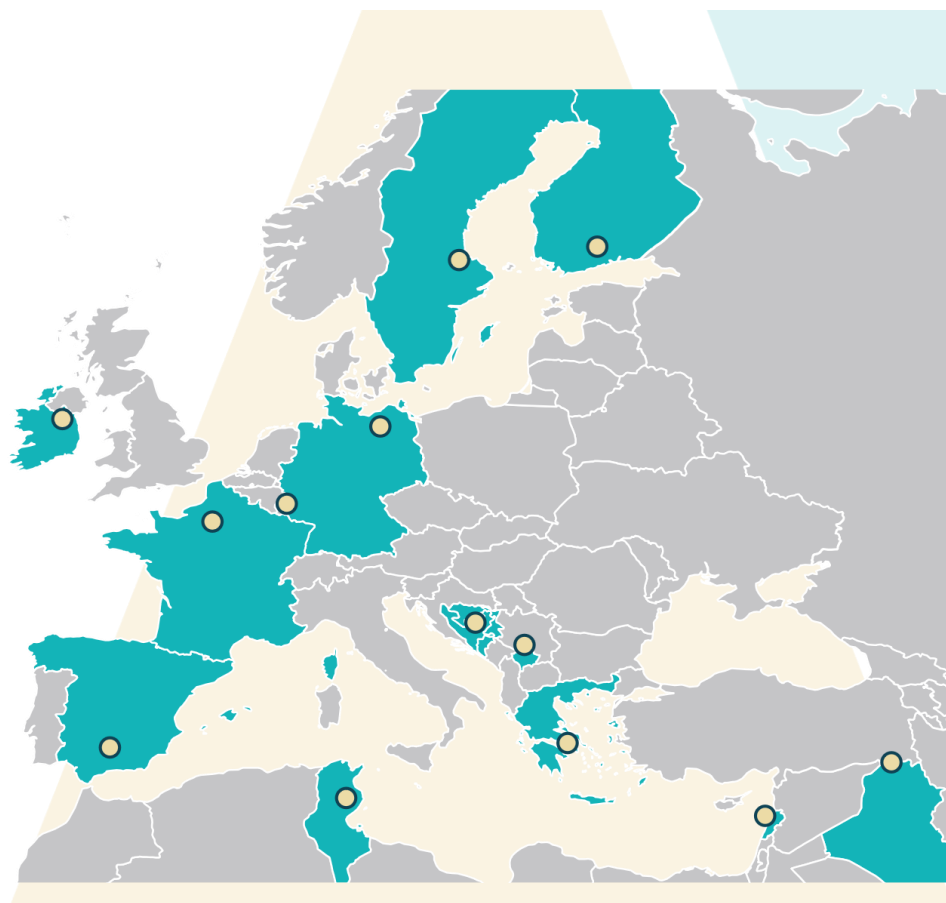


Introduction to the PAVE project

The PAVE research project (2020-23) collects evidence-based knowledge on trends in radicalisation and violent extremism in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and Western Balkans. Its aim is to strengthen the capacity of policy-makers and community leaders for the development of an effective prevention strategy between the European Union and its neighbourhood. In addition to research reports and policy briefs, innovative training tools for stakeholders are developed based on the project's findings.

The PAVE consortium consists of 13 partner organisations based in 12 countries, and places particular emphasis on locally-led research with deep contextual familiarity and stakeholder access within the regions under study. It brings together partners with unique and complementary strengths as well as shared areas of interest, in order to foster joint learning and development. In all countries, community leaders such as local state representatives, religious leaders, educators, youth organisations and women's organisations were consulted to validate first the research plans and later the research findings.

Empirical data was gathered in seven case study countries through a variety of qualitative, quantitative and mixed-method approaches and compared across selected communities (e.g. municipalities) which are unevenly affected by violent extremism. Factors of vulnerability and resilience were identified at the meso level of community dynamics and actors, based on three thematic clusters: the interface between religious, political and ethnic/sectarian extremisms; the interaction between religious and public institutions; and the interplay between online and offline narratives on (de)radicalisation.





Introduction to PAVE research in Iraq

In the framework of PAVE research in Iraq, Open Think Tank (OTT) explored the interplay between state and religious actors and their influence on community vulnerability or resilience to patterns of violent extremism in Iraq. The research was intended to answer the main research question: *To what extent is the rise of violent extremism linked to (or influenced by) the absence or dysfunction of state/governance institutions in affected communities, or inactive and mistrusted formal religious institutions?*

The research was conducted in two districts located in Nineveh Province, namely Hamdaniyyah and Tel Afar. The two districts located in the west of Mosul, while having different socio-demographic landscapes and legacies of inclusion and grievances (Batatu, 1978; al-Sumer, 2012), witnessed the rule of Islamic State between 2014 and 2017 and the devastating consequences of violent extremism (Gaston and Domisse, 2019; Assyrian Policy Institute, 2020). A total of 59 face-to-face in-depth interviews were conducted in Hamdaniyyah (39 interviews in Qaraqosh¹ and its surroundings) and Tel Afar (20 interviews in the city of Tel Afar and its surroundings) between June and November 2021. All participants were met in person in a space they considered to be safe after the Iraqi government loosened Covid-19 restrictions and the study could be conducted safely. Four categories of participants were identified for the purpose of the research: i) civil society (15 interviews), ii) political representatives at the local and central levels (14 interviews), iii) grassroots communities (20 interviews), and iv) religious representatives affiliated with formal and informal institutions (10 interviews). Besides gathering data on the impact of religious institutions on C/PVE initiatives, the authors collected socio-demographic indicators to ensure the representativeness of the sampled populations, including the representation of gender and ethno-religious groups in Nineveh Province.

PAVE research in Iraq addresses major gaps in the literature, which offers largely descriptive accounts of policies on Countering/Preventing Violent Extremism (C/PVE) without considering the various stakeholders involved in their implementation and the complex network of relationships among them. Despite tremendous momentum in policy and academic circles, and the global impetus to encourage more inclusive C/PVE strategies, the scholarship has failed to assess the role and impact of different stakeholders, such as religious actors, on C/PVE initiatives. The PAVE research in Iraq analyses the actions, legitimacy and interaction of the religious and political spheres against the background of the post-2003 Iraqi state apparatus. Iraq's hybrid politico-legal system after the removal of Saddam Hussein laid the ground for a shared space of governance and challenged 'the old dichotomies of formal-informal and secular-religious' (al-Qarawee, 2019). In other words, while religious representatives beyond the Endowment Offices are non-state actors, in practice, their constant interactions with and role in legitimising the political order progressively formalised their status in Iraq. The hybridity of the new political system of the second republic (2005-present) justifies the focus on the impact of both formal and informal religious institutions on key C/PVE sectors such as education and peacebuilding.

The research also offers an alternative perspective to the dominant narrative that analyses violent extremism in Iraq as the main cause and consequence of perceived state collapse resulting from the sectarianisation of politics and the rise of non-state, violent, Islamist actors (Weiss and Hassan, 2015; Helfont, 2018). By contrast, PAVE research in Iraq suggests that violent extremism and the sustainability of the Iraqi political structures and elite, despite overwhelming accounts of 'state

¹ The town of Qaraqosh is also known as al-Hamdaniyyah and Bakhdida.

collapse', are part of a mutually reinforcing loop. Despite the international community's fatigue after two decades of cumulative crises in Iraq, the country remains stuck in transition. The absence of a functioning state – or what Iraqi intellectuals call the 'state of no state' (Jabbar, 2019; Aziz, 2020) – has hindered social transformation and change from below, thereby contributing to violent extremism which is fuelled by a series of grievances and a desire for radical change. Yet preventing violent extremism without the state seems impossible. The failure of bottom-up and top-down strategies calls for an innovative, transversal and inclusive approach to heal the scars left by two decades of rampant conflicts. This observation speaks to the need to look at resilience and vulnerability to violent extremism as the two faces of one coin. It suggests that C/PVE measures should create synergies between different forms of resilience and look at a given country/area as an ecosystem where all stakeholders are interdependent rather than offering C/PVE measures that target a specific group. A key challenge to the success of C/PVE strategies is thus the reconciliation of this complex network of stakeholders with various backgrounds, objectives and affiliations.

The findings of the research – collected in a number of outputs (Beaujouan and Rasheed, 2022; Al-Baalbaky et al., 2022; Kortam, 2022; Rasheed and Beaujouan, 2021) – suggest that i) while the legitimacy of religious institutions is contested across Nineveh Province, there is a consensus on the need for these institutions to be involved in C/PVE; ii) interactions between religious institutions, political systems and civil society have increased but remain limited; and iii) the fragmentation of the state apparatus is reflected in uncoordinated and unregulated C/PVE strategies. Moreover, the research findings highlight the importance of offering a more nuanced account of the concept of resilience. In Iraq, our research showed that different forms of resilience interact and compete against one another. In other words, it seems that the resilience of the state or the political system undermines community resilience to violent extremism; hence resilience is not necessarily normatively good when a system favours a hierarchy over the interdependence of actors of resilience. Authoritarian government, nepotism and the capture of the state by corrupted elites may prove to be resilient systems which undermine community resilience. The fact that these systems often deprive communities of leadership in the form of social or political representation is another strong impediment to communities' capacity to mobilise on common ground to resist violent extremism.

Violent extremism in Iraq is not an exceptional phenomenon but rather a recurrent and cyclical predicament. As a result, the research findings imply that it should not be dealt with through P/CVE measures funded by emergency aid but by inclusive development policies. This change of consciousness is crucial for Iraq, as the country's humanitarian response plan (HRP) will terminate in January 2023. The UN announcement is symptomatic of a global trend caused by the succession of humanitarian crises, and donors face the dilemma of selecting where to allocate support. In this competition for relief, some will be forgotten. This will inevitably be the case in Iraq, which is considered a mere harbour for Syrian refugees, although the country is dealing with several constitutional, political and security crises. As a result, the UN decision not to present a HRP for 2023 could lead to yet another humanitarian crisis and the potential return of violent extremism in the country. Moreover, European policy-makers and funders are facing unprecedented competition from new C/PVE actors. The Chinese model of 'Peace through Development' is gaining traction in Iraq and its neighbours. European policy-makers and donors will need to innovate to remain trusted, long-term partners of the Iraqi and Kurdish governments.



1. Recommendations for the government

- Lead efforts to **rehabilitate areas that have been liberated from IS** to encourage the displaced to return. This process can be facilitated, but should not be negotiated, by armed groups present in the area.
- The reconstruction of Nineveh Province must not only focus on material reconstruction but encourage the establishment of programmes aimed at **psychological reconstruction** for local populations that bear the trauma of violence and displacement. The psychological elements must be adapted to the religious, tribal and traditional nature of society in Nineveh Province. The use of artistic forms of expression for children should be prioritised in these programmes.
- **Support women's engagement in public life** and post-conflict institutions such as local peace committees. This should also include raising female awareness of political participation through voting.
- Create **local support commissions for women and their children** who have been forced into IS-controlled territory by a male family member. A key role of the commissions should be to decide on the fate of children with no family as a result of the conflict.
- Resume the issuing of **civil documentation** for those hosted in the Qayyarah-Jeddah 5 camp in Nineveh province as soon as possible. Exclusionary policies are not compatible with a peaceful environment and will only increase future grievances.
- Support the creation of a network of local peace committees at the sub-district (*nahiyya*) level. Members of any military groups should not be allowed to sit on local peace committees. Where such committees already exist (i.e. Tal Afar), support for their work is needed to investigate and collect evidence on the activities of suspected IS members, in cooperation with intelligence services and the police.
- Use existing local peace committees to record cases and feed into a **central registry of victims** of violent extremism to facilitate legal recognition of their status and access to reparations.
- At the local level, train legal staff and establish more committees to **record reparation cases** as per Law 20 (2009) which requires the presence of three committees per governorate. At the moment, there is only one committee in Nineveh Province (Hamdaniyyah) and it is under the influence of PMF. At the national level, train legal and paralegal experts to specifically deal with cases of suspected IS members in order to support faster and more professional processing of legal cases. Additional legal support should also be provided in Nineveh for cases relating to disputes over lands and properties.
- Reform the existing legal framework, especially Law No. 20, to **facilitate the legal recognition of the status of victims** and their compensation. Expand the scope of the law to cover harmful behaviours committed after 2014 and include mental and sexual violence on the list of harms triggering reparation.
- Where suspected IS members have been found not guilty, create local programmes to support their **social and professional reintegration** and that of their close family in any part of the country.

- Reactivate the role of the Supreme Permanent **Committee for Peaceful Community Coexistence** of the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers.
- Encourage the Council of Representatives and the President's Office to **amend the constitution** to include the presence of religious minorities that were not recognised in 2005 and create additional Endowment Office(s) for these minorities (i.e. Kakai).
- Maintain the **division between the state and religion** but bridges should be built between the two institutions and between the different Offices of Religious Endowment.
- Create a central committee that is common to the three **Offices of Religious Endowment**, to supervise the enactment of common and consistent policies and interfaith dialogue, notably in the education sector.
- Create a committee within the Ministry of Education composed of religious leaders (at least one representative for each religion in Iraq) to actively participate in the **reform and development of school curricula**.
- Support the reform of school curricula and the topic of religion. **Religion courses** should include all religions in Iraq but also religions that are not present in the country (e.g. Hinduism) and be compulsory for all students. It is recommended not to include direct references to sacred texts unless they are common to at least three religions. Religion courses should include specific sessions on tolerance and coexistence.
- Support the **reform of religious institutions** to focus on a moderate religious discourse and foster interreligious tolerance and cooperation.
- Form genuine **decentralisation mechanisms** to give power to local political and administrative institutions to decide on Countering/Preventing Violent Extremism (C/PVE) and development programmes in Nineveh Province.



2. Recommendations for civil society

- Encourage representatives of **all religions in Iraq to hold at least two annual conventions** to discuss common issues, foster interfaith dialogue and discuss joint C/PVE initiatives.
- Establish a joint network for local civil society organisations and support cooperation and **knowledge exchange** across Iraq and between Iraq and countries with similar experiences of violent extremism.
- Create indicators to **monitor the implementation of peace and resettlement agreements** (in Nineveh Province as a priority).
- Create and provide **training for media staff** in order to ensure the dissemination of a common positive narrative centred around shared national interests such as peaceful coexistence.



3. Recommendations for the international community

- Encourage the sustainability of the NATO Mission Iraq (NMI) and European Union Advisory Mission in Iraq (EUAM) to **support the Iraqi state in regard to Security Sector Reform (SSR) and C/PVE**. These two missions are the least controversial foreign military involvement in the country and do not crystallise and/or fuel divisions among political and religious groups.
- Play a supportive and advisory role in relation to the Iraqi federal government on **reconstruction** policy in areas affected by violent extremism.
- Encourage the Iraqi federal government to sustain the progress made in **anti-corruption policies** in order to better align the state budget towards the reconstruction of the country and regain the trust of INGOs that have recently left because of the increasing flow of petrodollars.
- Use the Committee of Civil Society Organizations of the Iraqi Council of Representatives (CoR) and the Non-Governmental Organizations Service of the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers as platforms to **foster cooperation between civil society and political institutions**. In the Kurdistan Regional Government-Iraq (KRI), create a Committee for Civil Society that is separate from the Committee on Culture, Civil Society, Sports and Youth.
- Violent extremism is not unique but cyclical in Iraq. It must be addressed through programmes with **long-term visions aimed at fostering development**. These programmes should not be funded by emergency aid; this approach would mitigate the uncertainty associated with donors' policies and priorities (for instance, the interruption of the UN emergency programme for Iraq in December 2022). This applies particularly to programmes conducted inside refugee and IDP camps. In the meantime, emergency aid funders and implementers must continue their work in the country to avoid new humanitarian crises.
- While the support of INGOs and government is crucial to the development of local civil society, the latter must be given a central role in C/PVE that reflects its full potential, knowledge of local specificities, and access to the most vulnerable populations. **External funding should reflect the needs assessment on the ground**, rather than be oriented towards the nature and missions of relief programmes.
- **Be patient** and do not hesitate to fund programmes that were already conducted in the past. Funders' priorities in Iraq evolve faster than people's needs, which creates a gap between providers and recipients of aid.



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