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## Confronting Violence Through Dialogue: Iraq in the Post-ISIS Era

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*Demand for interfaith dialogue initiatives is growing in Iraq, particularly among the youth. But so is the use of bigotry as a political tool to mask corruption.*

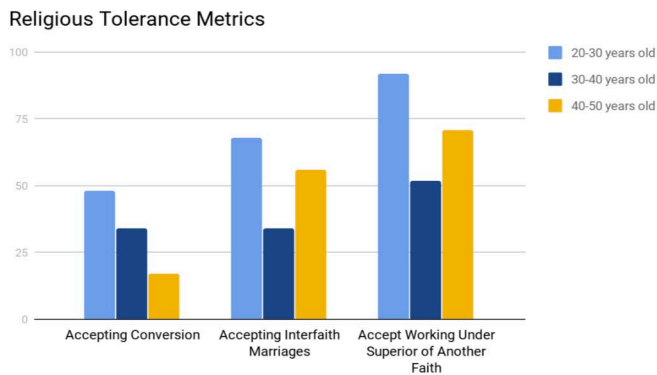
To outsiders, Iraq might seem to be one of the most forbidding territories in the world for interfaith dialogue. For decades, it has been ravaged by war and violent sectarianism, the predations of the Islamic State, the excesses of nongovernment armed groups, and a media environment saturated in both casual and deliberately amplified sectarianism. Yet despite

— and perhaps, because of — these tragedies, there is a rising tide of demand for interfaith dialogue in Iraq.

Based in Baghdad, the Masarat Institute, which I lead, aims to promote reconciliation and tolerance across all boundaries of sect, religion, and ethnicity. After ISIS massacred dozens of worshippers at the Sayedat al-Najat church in Baghdad in October 2010, we partnered with the Imam Al-Khoei Foundation and the Dominican Fathers Monastery to form the Muslim-Christian Dialogue Initiative. What began as a spontaneous and *ad hoc* response to a shocking atrocity eventually evolved into the Iraqi Council for Interfaith Dialogue, an institutional forum for systematically advancing the practice. It

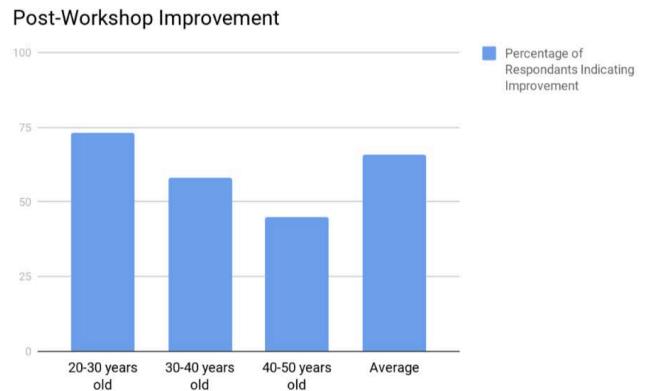
provided a framework for bringing together religious and civic actors from all of Iraq's religions — including Sunnis, Shi'a, Christians, Jews, Yazidis, Sabeans, Mandaeans, Zoroastrians, Kaka'i, and Bahai. The Council has conferred a kind of a recognition on the latter, smaller faiths, which do not yet enjoy official status with the Iraqi government. Our work also holds the promise of bridging the gap between Iraqis inside the country and the spectrum of Iraqi exiles and their offspring.

In waging these efforts, we garnered numerous insights and identified key opportunities to catalyze effective interfaith dialogue in the Iraqi environment. Our fieldwork, collected in surveys of Iraqis during the workshops we convened, indicates that young people — particularly those under age 30 — are more open to interfaith efforts and the principles of religious tolerance than older generations. As the accompanying table shows, the youngest set of Iraqis are more likely to accept Muslims who have converted to other faiths or married outside the faith. They are also more comfortable with the idea of working for a non-Muslim supervisor in the workplace.



Our fieldwork indicates as well that support for religious tolerance can be successfully cultivated. Following an initial survey, we conducted a follow-up outreach program involving 357 Iraqis in 13 workshops across the governorates of Baghdad, Diwaniya, Najaf, Mosul, Karbala, Irbil, Nasiriya, and Maysan. On the basis of questions similar to those addressed in the first table, an average 66 percent of participants across all age brackets manifested greater openness and acceptance of the “Other” at the end of the workshop than they had at

the beginning.



This data suggests that there is a waiting audience for interfaith reconciliation. And yet significant challenges remain. For starters, proponents of extremism and chauvinism in Iraq enjoy deep pockets and institutional backing. They enjoy perches at satellite television networks broadcasting incitement round the clock, and have the means to provide a range of social services that win loyalty to their ideas.

Efforts at interfaith dialogue must have the wherewithal to compete on an even footing. Proponents of peace and reconciliation must construct their own enduring institutional platforms that can provide meaningful resistance to prejudice and polarization. Similarly, just as extremists enlist supporters from every walk of life, attempts at interfaith reconciliation must build as broad a tent as possible — spanning genders, professions, identities, and walks of life.

The next major hurdle to interfaith dialogue is the politicization of religion, now endemic across much of the Middle East. As Iraqis' experience with electoral politics deepens, they have grown increasingly aware of the extent to which partisan elites are mobilizing sectarian identities to mask profiteering and power-hoarding. Sectarian prejudice, though real enough, has been methodically exacerbated in an elite-driven process.

Fortunately, Iraq's religious landscape also carries the seeds of a solution. Even as religious extremism has gathered force, major strands of Iraq's diverse religious life remain firmly rooted in moderation and even quietism.

Viewing the situation with a measure of optimism, one might say that Iraq has less a religious problem in need of a political solution than a political problem which moderate religious leaders can help solve.

Perhaps the clearest example is the constructive influence wielded by Sayyid Ali al-Sistani in Najaf. He has pressed for sectarian reconciliation and worked to hold back the forces of political polarization. In a similar vein, Archbishop Louis Sako, who has been the elected Head of the Chaldean Church since February 2013, has also worked to forge a cross-sectarian future in Iraq. Equipped with extensive knowledge of Islamic theology, coupled with his outstanding experience in promoting inter-communal dialogue in Kirkuk, he has created a platform for sustained Christian-Muslim dialogue. Sako has since been appointed a Cardinal by the Vatican. (For more on Sako's work, see my book, *Christians of Iraq: History and Present-Day Challenges*.)

Several religious institutions have also registered a notable impact. One such is the Imam al-Khoei Foundation in London, which opened a branch in Najaf in a bid to showcase the city as a forum for

dialogue — both among Islamic sects and between Shi'ite Islam and other faiths.

For Iraqis in the interior who strive to reclaim the tolerant, cosmopolitan ethos that marked our brightest days, local initiatives in support of interfaith dialogue are among our brightest hopes. Outsiders, presumably less attached to Iraq as a polity but nonetheless vested in its security and stability, should also be concerned to see our efforts succeed. As ISIS recedes from the battlefield, the question of what values and ideals will supplant its extremist teachings is an urgent one. The principles of interfaith harmony and understanding are a crucial part of the answer.

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