Inter Yazidi and Sunni-Shabak Tensions and Conflicts in Bashiqa, Bahzani, and Fadhiliya, Nineveh - Iraq

Produced by: Sustainable Peace Foundation (SPF), Tomooh Organisation for Development (TOD) and Naseej Organisation for Relief and Development

Acknowledgment

This research is a result of 10 months of research and the joint efforts of three (L)NGOs: Sustainable Peace Foundation (SPF), Tomooh Organisation for Development (TOD) and Naseej Organisation for Relief and Development (NORD) as part of their 'Blue Peace' project implemented within the framework of Un Ponte Per's TATWEER II Programme, which is supported by European Union - Iraq (EU-Iraq).

Project Summary

Blue Peace is an integrated peacebuilding and environmental justice intervention led by the Sustainable Peace Foundation (SPF), implemented in partnership with Tomooh Organisation for Development and Naseej Organisation for Development and Relief. Operating across eight districts of Nineveh, the project addresses the dual challenge of climate change and intercommunal tensions - most notably between the Yazidi and Sunni-Shabak communities in Bashiqa and Fadhiliyya. Drawing on findings from prior assessments and grounded in participatory engagement, the initiative empowers local community members, civil society actors, and local authorities to collaboratively identify and prioritise climate-induced challenges and conflicts.

Through a combination of capacity building, participatory research (including KIIs, FGDs, and surveys), and multi-level advocacy, the project fosters inclusive dialogue, resilience, and transformation of environmentally driven tensions. A cornerstone of the intervention is the production of a scoping report on the Yazidi–Sunni-Shabak conflict, alongside practical reconciliation initiatives and a high-level advocacy conference in Baghdad. By amplifying local voices and promoting environmental peacebuilding, *Blue Peace* seeks to lay foundations for equitable climate adaptation, social cohesion, and sustainable peace in Nineveh Governorate.

Disclaimer

Table of Content

1. Executive Summary

This research explores the complex intercommunal tensions between the Yazidi communities of Bashiqa and Bahzani and the Sunni-Shabak community of Fadhiliyya in Iraq's Nineveh Plains. Drawing on ten months of qualitative and quantitative fieldwork - including key informant interviews (KIIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), and survey questionnaires - the study examines the historical dynamics, the impact of the Islamic State (ISIS) invasion, and the role of environmental degradation in exacerbating local conflict. It also identifies viable entry points for reconciliation and sustainable peace.

Prior to the 2014 ISIS invasion, Yazidis and Sunni-Shabaks coexisted in relative harmony, bound together by shared economic interests in agriculture and trade. Customary dispute resolution mechanisms and everyday interdependence sustained this relationship despite cultural and religious differences. However, the rise of ISIS triggered mass displacement, widespread destruction, and the breakdown of trust - particularly as some Yazidis accused individuals from Fadhiliyya of collaboration or silence during their persecution. In turn, Sunni-Shabaks voiced feelings of unjust collective blame and marginalisation.

Post-ISIS realities have entrenched mistrust and grievance. Disputes over destroyed or occupied properties, fragmented security control, and inequities in reconstruction aid have all served to deepen the divide. Climate change has further compounded these tensions by straining already limited natural resources and dismantling traditional patterns of cooperation. As both communities face dwindling water supplies, degraded agricultural land, and growing environmental insecurity, the risks of renewed conflict increase.

Despite these challenges, the study reveals a shared - if cautious - willingness among both communities to pursue reconciliation. Entry points include truth-telling processes, restorative justice mechanisms, joint livelihood initiatives, community-based security arrangements, and cross-community climate adaptation projects. These must be rooted in local leadership, supported by neutral facilitation, and embedded in a broader strategy of structural justice and inclusive governance.

Ultimately, this research underscores that peaceful coexistence cannot rely solely on historical memory or symbolic gestures. In places like Bashiqa, Bahzani, and Fadhiliyya - where wounds remain raw and vulnerabilities persistent - reconciliation must be actively cultivated through inclusive dialogue, shared recovery, and long-term investment in both social cohesion and environmental resilience.

2. Introduction

This research delves into the complex intercommunal tensions between the Yazidis of Bashiqa and Bahzani and the Sunni-Shabaks of Fadhiliya, located in the Nineveh Governorate of Iraq. These communities, despite decades of coexistence, have experienced profound disruptions, particularly in the aftermath of the Islamic State (ISIS) invasion in 2014, a deterioration of relation exacerbated by climate induced factors. The study seeks to analyse historical relations, the transformation of these relations due to conflict, and the ongoing socio-political challenges that continue to shape interactions between these groups and how climate changes affect these relations.

Bashiqa is a mixed town located in the plains north of old Mosul. It used to be a main transport node on the route between the cities of Mosul and the town of Dohuk. Before August 2014, Bashiqa was home to Yazidis, Assyrians (also known as Assyrian-Chaldean-Syriac) Christians, Arabs, Turkmen, Shabak and Kurds.[1]
During the Arabisation campaigns implemented by the Ba'ath regime in the late 1970s—particularly following the 1970 Iraqi-Kurdish civil war—Bashiqa experienced state-led demographic engineering through the resettlement of Arab tribes. These measures were part of broader attempts to consolidate state control and reshape the ethno-political composition of northern Iraq. Over time, such interventions, compounded by weak governance, uneven development, and local grievances, created a fragile socio-political environment. These structural vulnerabilities were later exploited during the rise of ISIS, which established a strong presence in the Nineveh Plains, including Bashiqa. The aftermath of ISIS's expulsion in 2016 revealed deepened mistrust and strained relations between the Yazidi and Sunni-Shabak communities, underscoring the long-term impact of unresolved historical tensions and the absence of inclusive, community-based recovery mechanisms.[2]

Fadhiliya is a situated village located in the western part of the Nineveh province. It is populated by Sunni-Shabaks, lying near the northeastern border of the oat-growing Nineveh Plains and the hilly ranges directing to the mountainous Bahdinan region, the Fadhiliya Oasis has been known for centuries as highly fertile and economically lucrative.[3]

It is vital to understand why this particular dyad of Yazidi and Sunni-Shabak is in conflict, given the potential broader implications of such conflicts in terms of future stability and

[1] BOARETTO, M., The Yazidi Experience: their struggles as a minority in a Muslim-dominated region, the 2014 ISIS-led genocide against them, and their consequent migration to Europe. Accessed on the 20th of February 2025:
https://thesis.unipd.it/bitstream/20.500.12608/63927/1/Boaretto_Martina.pdf
Usman, M., 2021. History of Shia, Sunni and Yazidi Conflict: A Political, Social or Religious Conflict and its Impact on the Peace Process in the Middle East.
Accessed on the 20th of February 2025:
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/353394537_History_of_Shia_Sunni_and_Yazidi_Conflict_A_Political_Social_or_Religious_Conflict_and_its_Impact_on_the_Peace_Process_in_the_Middle_East_With_Special_Focus_on_Kurdistan_-Northern_Iraq
[2] O'Driscoll, D., 2018. Emerging Trends of Conflict and Instability in Iraq.
Accessed 0n the 20th of February 2025:
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5c18d35ee5274a468ba7fab3/433_Emerging_Trends_of_Conflict_and_Instability_in_Iraq.pdf
[3] Savelsberg, E., Hajo, S., & Dulz, I., 2016. Effectively Urbanized.
Accessed on the 20th of February 2025: https://core.ac.uk/download/223551878.pdf

cohabitation between different ethno-religious communities in Iraq. On a micro-level, the analyses of the tensions in Bashiqa and Fadhiliya show how historical, political, and environmental factors contribute to shaping tensions against the perceived "Other." Demographic policies, property, territoriality, and resource conflict are the most powerful stimulants in the interaction of these different levels of inter and intra community relations. Taking Bashiqa and Fadhiliya as examples, the argument will show that when cry-politics and counter-cry-politics become central to each community's identity form hard returns to soften conflicted resolutions. In conclusion, the coherence of geographical scales and policy frames fit the patterns of conflict transformation, while practices targeting a sustainable approach to interaction among different communities in a region puzzle the lack of cooperation in Iraq.

By integrating quantitative data from survey-questionnaires and qualitative data from Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with a review of scholarly literature, this research provides a nuanced understanding of the tensions, conflict and potential pathways for reconciliation. It highlights historical grievances, economic struggles, security dilemmas, and prospects for restoring trust between these two communities.

2.1. Background of the Yazidis of Bashiqa and Bahzani and the Sunni-Shabaks of Fadhiliya

The Yazidis of Bashiqa and Bahzani belong to an ancient ethno-religious group indigenous to Mesopotamia, with a religious tradition distinct from Islam, Christianity, or Judaism. Yazidis have historically engaged in agriculture, particularly olive farming, and small-scale trade, making them economically significant within the region. It is worth noting that these two towns of Bashiqa and Bahzani have long been considered important cultural and religious centres for the Yazidi community. Prior to the 2014 ISIS invasion, these towns were renowned for their religious shrines as well as for their olive orchards and production of soap and olive oil - key aspects of the local economy.[4] Historically, the Yazidis of Bashiqa and Bahzani developed a strong, agriculturally based economy that was complemented by artisanal crafts and trade with neighbouring communities, including Muslims, Christians, and Shabaks.[5]

The Sunni-Shabaks of Fadhiliya represent a lesser-studied and distinct component of the broader Shabak population in Iraq. Shabaks are an ethno group concentrated primarily in the Nineveh Plains, with scholarly debates surrounding their origins. While the majority of Shabaks are Shiite Muslims, a significant Sunni Muslim minority exists, primarily concentrated in villages such as Fadhiliya.[6] Unlike their Shiite co-religionists, the Sunni-Shabaks of Fadhiliya maintain closer cultural and political affiliations with Arab Sunnis in nearby Mosul. This positioning has often placed them in a politically ambiguous situation, caught between competing ethno-sectarian blocs.[7]

Agriculture remains a significant component of Sunni-Shabak life, with farming and livestock herding constituting the economic backbone of villages like Fadhiliya. In addition to agricultural activities, many Sunni-Shabaks engage in seasonal labour and trade within Mosul

[4] Kizilhan, J. I. (2018). Treatment and care for Yazidi survivors of sexual violence and torture. Global Health Action, 11(1), 1-7.
[5] Kreyenbroek, P. G. (2009). Yezidism – Its Background, Observances and Textual Tradition. Edwin Mellen Press; Omarkhali, K. (2017). The Yezidi Religious Textual Tradition: From Oral to Written. Harrassowitz Verlag.
[6] Leezenberg, M. (2017). Between Assimilation and Independence: Shabak Identity in Northern Iraq. International Journal of Middle East Studies, 49(1), 145–164.
[7] International Crisis Group (2008). Iraq's Civil War, the Sadrists and the Surge. Middle East Report No. 72.

and other urban centres in Nineveh, contributing to a shared economic space with Yazidis from Bashiqa and Bahzani. Historically, both communities utilised the same markets and trade routes, fostering a level of socio-economic interdependence, even if religious and cultural differences prevented deeper forms of integration.[8]

Despite centuries of coexistence, political developments - especially since the U.S.-led invasion in 2003 - have contributed to the fracturing of intercommunal trust. The collapse of central governance, the proliferation of militias, and the rise of ethno-sectarian clientelism have reshaped the dynamics between historically cohabiting communities.[9] The emergence of ISIS in 2014 and the subsequent mass violence inflicted particularly on the Yazidi population of Sinjar and Bashiqa further deepened communal rifts, as narratives of betrayal and complicity began to circulate widely (Cetorelli et al., 2017).[10]

In recent years, environmental stressors - including water scarcity, desertification, and erratic rainfall - have exacerbated these tensions. Both Yazidis and Sunni-Shabaks in the region rely heavily on rain-fed agriculture and groundwater resources. The degradation of shared natural resources has generated new competition over land and water, especially as displaced populations return and agricultural land becomes increasingly contested.[11] In the absence of coordinated governance and equitable resource management, these environmental challenges risk becoming a new front for intercommunal conflict.

In sum, the Yazidis of Bashiqa and Bahzani and the Sunni-Shabaks of Fadhiliya have deep-rooted historical presences in the Nineveh Plains. Their socio-economic relations have traditionally been defined by interdependence, but the cumulative impacts of political instability, sectarian violence, and climate stresses have eroded the foundations of this coexistence. Understanding their respective histories, beliefs, and socio-political positioning is critical to any serious effort at conflict resolution and peacebuilding in the region.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods qualitative approach grounded in a conflict-sensitive and community-based framework. The research is designed to explore intercommunal tensions, conflict narratives, and potential reconciliation pathways between the Yazidis of Bashiqa and Bahzani and the Sunni-Shabaks of Fadhiliya. The data collection process involved multiple complementary methods to ensure triangulation and analytical rigour.

3.1. Primary Data Collection

To ensure the research was grounded in the lived realities of the communities in question, the study prioritised the collection of rich, qualitative data directly from local stakeholders. Primary data collection comprised key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and

[8] Donabed, S. G. (2015). Reforging a Forgotten History: Iraq and the Assyrians in the Twentieth Century. Edinburgh University Press.
[9] Isakhan, B., & Mako, S. (2020). Post-Saddam Nation-Building and the Rise of Sectarianism. In B. Isakhan (Ed.), The Legacy of Iraq: From the 2003 War to the 'Islamic State' (pp. 101-118). Edinburgh University Press.
[10] Cetorelli, V., Sasson, I., Shabila, N., & Burnham, G. (2017). Mortality and kidnapping estimates for the Yazidi population in the area of Mount Sinjar, Iraq, in August 2014: A retrospective household survey. PLOS Medicine, 14(5).
[11] Al-Muqdadi, K. S., Mahdi, H. S., & Al-Faraj, F. A. M. (2021). Climate Change, Water Crisis and Conflict in the Tigris–Euphrates Basin. Environmental Challenges, 3, 100030.

structured survey questionnaires. These tools were designed to capture diverse perspectives within and across the Yazidi and Sunni-Shabak communities, enabling a nuanced understanding of their historical relationships, experiences of conflict, and attitudes towards reconciliation. The methods were selected to balance depth and breadth, and to illuminate the micro-level dynamics often obscured in broader policy or security analyses.

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs):

A total of ten in-depth key informant interviews were conducted - five with individuals from the Yazidi community in Bashiqa and Bahzani, and five with Sunni-Shabak respondents from Fadhiliya. Participants were selected purposively to represent a broad spectrum of community voices, including religious leaders, tribal elders, educators, civil society actors, and administrative figures. These interviews provided invaluable insight into individual and communal experiences during and after the ISIS occupation, local perceptions of injustice, and understandings of peacebuilding and reconciliation. The KIIs also surfaced sensitive themes such as narratives of betrayal, identity-based trauma, and barriers to coexistence that may not be readily shared in group settings.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):

Two focus group discussions were organised separately for each community, ensuring that participants could speak freely without fear of intergroup surveillance or misunderstanding. Each FGD involved 8–10 participants of diverse age, gender, and professional backgrounds. The Yazidi FGD was held in Bashiqa and included internally displaced returnees, while the Sunni-Shabak FGD in Fadhiliya included participants who remained during the conflict as well as those who had returned post-ISIS. The discussions explored key themes such as community grievances, experiences of displacement, perceptions of the other community, trust-building opportunities, and recommendations for social cohesion initiatives.

Survey-Questionnaires:

To strengthen the qualitative findings with broader community perspectives, 129 structured survey questionnaires were administered. These included 68 Yazidis from Bashiqa and Bahzani and 61 Sunni-Shabaks from Fadhiliya. The surveys were designed to capture demographic information, perceptions of security and trust, intercommunal relations before and after 2014, and openness to future reconciliation. The survey data provided a quantifiable layer to analyse patterns in community attitudes, allowing for cross-validation of qualitative insights and identification of broader trends.

3.2. Secondary Data Sources

The research was further supported by an extensive literature review of peer-reviewed academic publications, reports from international and national NGOs, and official government and UN documentation on the Nineveh region, ethnoreligious minorities, post-ISIS recovery, and community-based peacebuilding. This secondary data helped contextualise local findings within broader national and historical dynamics, providing comparative depth and helping to identify best practices for reconciliation interventions.

3.3. Triangulation and Analytical Rigor

To enhance the reliability and credibility of the findings, a triangulated research design was employed. Data from key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and survey questionnaires were cross-compared to identify convergences and divergences in narratives. This process helped ensure that conclusions were not drawn from isolated or anecdotal accounts but reflected broader patterns within the communities. Thus, triangulation was achieved through the convergence of three primary sources of data: KIIs, FGDs, and survey-questionnaires, supported by secondary literature. This methodological integration enhanced the reliability of findings, allowing the study to distinguish between widely shared communal experiences and those that were more individual or exceptional. It also helped to mitigate the influence of social desirability bias and retrospective distortion, particularly when discussing sensitive topics such as perceived complicity with ISIS or intercommunal violence i.e. facilitating critical validation of emotionally charged or politically sensitive claims, thereby strengthening the analytical integrity of the study.

3.4. Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive and potentially retraumatising nature of the research topic - particularly in the context of communities affected by conflict, displacement, and intercommunal mistrust - ethical considerations were at the core of the research design and implementation. All participants were fully briefed on the purpose and scope of the study and gave their informed consent prior to participation. Emphasis was placed on the voluntary nature of their involvement, with participants retaining the right to withdraw at any point without consequence.

To ensure privacy and data protection, each key informant was assigned a unique code, and only these anonymised codes are used when citing individual responses or quotations in this report. No identifying personal information has been disclosed or retained beyond what was absolutely necessary for the integrity of the data. This measure was taken both to preserve participant confidentiality and to encourage open dialogue on topics that are socially or politically sensitive.

Special attention was also given to creating safe, inclusive, and culturally sensitive environments, particularly during FGDs. Group composition was carefully considered to avoid power imbalances or social pressures that might inhibit free expression. Moderators and enumerators were trained in trauma-informed facilitation techniques and conflict-sensitive communication, ensuring that participants were not exposed to harm or undue emotional distress during the data collection process.

The study adhered to established ethical standards for conducting research in post-conflict and transitional justice settings, including the principles of do-no-harm, informed consent, confidentiality, and respect for local norms and sensitivities. The research also ensured that findings would be used solely for constructive purposes - namely, informing peacebuilding, reconciliation, and policy dialogue - without exacerbating existing tensions or fuelling political narratives.

4. Historical Context: Relations Before ISIS's Invasion in 2014

4.1. Socio-Economic and Cultural Interactions

Prior to 2014, intercommunal relations between the Yazidis of Bashiqa and Bahzani and the Sunni-Shabaks of Fadhiliyya were marked by a complex but functional coexistence. Though ethnically and religiously distinct, both communities were deeply embedded in the agricultural economy of the Nineveh Plains - particularly in olive farming, soap production, and seasonal trade. Markets in Bashiqa, for instance, served as key regional commercial nodes where Sunni-Shabaks from Fadhiliyya routinely traded livestock and bought Yazidi-grown olives, cheese, and soaps. As one Yazidi key informant put it:

> *"They worked with us, bought from us, and helped during the harvest season. We depended on each other".*[12]

These relations were further reinforced through shared participation in local customs and socio-cultural activities. Religious holidays and social events such as weddings and funerals were often mutually attended, especially among older generations. A Sunni-Shabak tribal leader from Fadhiliyya explained:

> *"We used to celebrate each other's holidays. There was never a problem. Our grandfathers and theirs were like one family".*[13]

These accounts are consistent with academic assessments, such as those by Fuccaro (1999) and Leezenberg (2017),[14] who note that in multi-ethnic parts of northern Iraq, cross-communal interactions in rural areas were historically mediated by tribal codes, customary law, and shared economic dependency, rather than sectarian conflict; however, religious differences remained evident and respected. Yazidis follow a monotheistic but esoteric tradition with strong pre-Islamic roots, while the Sunni-Shabaks of Fadhiliyya adhere to a localised form of Sunni Islam, distinct from the Shia-majority Shabaks of nearby villages. Despite theological contrasts and cultural conservatism on both sides, these differences were largely kept out of everyday economic and social exchanges.

The Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with Yazidis also confirmed the absence of systemic tension prior to 2014, one Yazidi participant asserting:

> *"Before ISIS, there was no problem with them [Fadhiliyya]. We worked together, they were our neighbours. The conflict started after what happened during ISIS."*

This is echoed by the Sunni-Shabak FGD, during which one participant stated:

---

[12] KII_002_YBS_CL
[13] KII_008_FDH_TL
[14] Fuccaro, N. (1999). The Other Kurds: Yazidis in Colonial Iraq. I.B. Tauris; Leezenberg, M. (2017). Between Assimilation and Independence: Shabak Identity in Northern Iraq. International Journal of Middle East Studies, 49(1), 145–164.

"From 2003 to 2014 there were no sectarian problems. The problems started during and after the ISIS occupation when everyone became suspicious of each other."

4.2. Existing Trust and Informal Conflict Resolution Mechanisms

Prior to the collapse of state authority and the emergence of ISIS, both communities relied heavily on informal, customary conflict resolution mechanisms to manage disputes. These included mediation by *Mukhtars* (Village Elder), tribal sheikhs, and religious elders. These actors were entrusted with resolving conflicts over land boundaries, water access, theft, and other local grievances in a non-confrontational manner. The mechanisms were grounded in communal honour codes (*ʿUrf*) and religious principles of forgiveness and restoration, rather than punitive legalism.

A Yazidi elder recalled:

"If there was a problem, we would go to the elder or the tribal sheikh. They would sit down and resolve it in one session. We did not need police or courts".[15]

Likewise, a Sunni-Shabak tribal leader noted:

"We settled things among ourselves. If a sheep crossed over or land was disputed, we handled it with the other side's elders"[16]

These mechanisms were not only more accessible than the formal judicial system but were also perceived as more legitimate and just, especially in a context where the Iraqi state's presence was weak and inconsistent. As Chatty[17] and Isakhan and Mako[18] point out, such forms of customary justice have historically played a stabilising role in multi-ethnic rural areas in Iraq by enabling pragmatic and culturally resonant dispute resolution.

4.3. Fragility and Seeds of Mistrust

While surface-level relations were peaceful and cooperative, underlying vulnerabilities were present. Economic inequalities, lack of equitable administrative representation, and political marginalisation created a latent fragility. This was exacerbated by the state's failure to provide consistent public services or mediate disputes through equitable governance. The FGD in Fadhiliyya highlighted perceptions of neglect:

"Even before ISIS, our area was forgotten - no water, no services, no roads. Then when things happened, we were blamed for everything"

Moreover, the unequal distribution of resources - particularly in infrastructure, education, and public-sector employment - fostered perceptions of favouritism and grievances. The Yazidi FGD stressed concerns over administrative appointments and perceived marginalisation:

[15] KII_003_YBS_CL
[16] KII_009_FDH_TL
[17] Chatty, D. (2010). Displacement and Dispossession in the Modern Middle East. Cambridge University Press.
[18] Isakhan, B., & Mako, S. (2020). Post-Saddam Nation-Building and the Rise of Sectarianism. In The Legacy of Iraq (pp. 101–118). Edinburgh University Press.

"They [Fadhiliyya] took over the positions, the services, the benefits, and now we are the ones who are questioned."

These sentiments reflect Gurr's[19] theory of relative deprivation, where communities that perceive themselves as disadvantaged or unfairly treated - even if not objectively worse off - are more likely to develop feelings of grievance and potential for mobilisation. In Bashiqa and Fadhiliyya, these grievances remained dormant prior to 2014 due to the functional interdependence of the communities and effective informal mediation.

However, these peace mechanisms proved too fragile when confronted with the existential threat posed by ISIS. The rapid collapse of state control, the trauma of displacement and genocide (particularly for the Yazidis), and unverified but powerful rumours of local complicity in ISIS crimes shattered the previously functional trust. As a Yazidi participant in the FGD put it:

"We saw videos of them [Fadhiliyya] welcoming ISIS. Even if some of them are innocent, how can we know who is who now?"

This rupture has had lasting and deeply felt consequences on the social fabric of the region. Although some signs of reconciliation and renewed interaction are emerging, the damage to intercommunal trust remains profound. While there is evidence of social reintegration - particularly through renewed participation in mutual social events - this recovery is partial, uneven, and fragile. For instance, a Sunni-Shabak acknowledged in an FGD:

"At first, the relationship was very bad, but now it has improved by about 80%. We attend their occasions, and they attend ours… but some among them [Yazidis] still require more awareness raising to rid themselves of stereotypes against us."

This testimony suggests that while interpersonal and ceremonial contact have resumed to some degree, reconciliation is not yet deeply embedded within the broader population, and residual suspicion remains. Indeed, the restoration of social rituals has not fully addressed the emotional and psychological scars left by the conflict. Yazidi community leaders reflect a cautious optimism tempered by deep-seated mistrust. As noted by one KI:

"Our relationship with the people of Fadhiliyya is old and we are in good terms with each other… but some cannot forget what happened because the pain was too great."

This underscores the importance of acknowledging that reconciliation cannot be reduced to surface-level social interactions. There remains a clear divide between formal or symbolic participation and the emotional security needed for full reconciliation. This is especially significant given the perceived betrayal by some Yazidi residents who fled during the ISIS occupation, only to return to find their homes looted or lands damaged - allegedly by individuals from neighbouring communities.
Moreover, several Yazidi respondents noted that while some figures from Fadhiliyya condemned the acts committed during the ISIS period, the collective memory within Yazidi

[19] Gurr, T. R. (2000). Why Men Rebel. Princeton University Press.

communities still associates Fadhiliyya with complicity, even if only a few individuals were involved. This was articulated by a Yazidi KI who stated:

> *"Some social relations have returned, but we cannot forget that during our absence, houses were built on our lands, and our trees were burned while we were displaced."*

This sentiment is echoed in the Yazidi FGD, where participants voiced scepticism about the sincerity of reconciliation efforts. One participant remarked:

> *"Now we see them and visit them, but no one feels fully safe… we lost trust after what happened."*

On the other hand, Sunni-Shabak leaders in Fadhiliyya stress that they have been unfairly stigmatised for the actions of a few and highlight efforts to demonstrate good faith. A Sunni-Shabak community leader from Fadhiliyya noted:

> *"We handed over the man who engaged in trading by purchasing olives of Bashiqa from ISIS authorities and sold these in Mosul. He was sentenced and is now serving his sentence in prison. This man should not be projected against all the people of Fadhiliyya. We do not accept the approach of wide brushing the actions of a single man, who we ourselves handed over to the authorities, against all of the Sunni-Shabaks of our village; this is totally unacceptable."*[20]

These contrasting perspectives reinforce the conclusion that the apparent thawing of relations is not uniform across individuals or sectors of society. While community leaders may engage in symbolic gestures of reconciliation, grassroots mistrust lingers, particularly among families directly affected by displacement, property loss, or violence.

Furthermore, multiple informants alluded to a generational and informational divide: younger or politically unaffiliated individuals may be more open to reconciliation, while older or more traumatised individuals retain a cautious or resentful posture. As observed by one KI:

> *"Relations have returned but not completely. Some still believe the other side was at fault, and some are not ready to forget."*[21]

In sum, while intercommunal relations have not returned to the nadir of post-ISIS hostilities, they remain brittle, performative, and vulnerable to re-escalation, particularly in the absence of justice mechanisms, collective truth-telling, and inclusive reconciliation efforts. The persistence of mutual grievance narratives and the slow pace of restitution and rebuilding are constant reminders that trust, once broken by war and betrayal, is not easily restored.

[20] KII_009_FDH_TL
[21] KII_001_YBH_M

5. The Impact of ISIS's Invasion: Transformation of Relations

5.1. Mass Atrocities Against Yazidis and the Perception of Sunni-Shabak Complicity

The 2014 invasion of Iraq's Nineveh Plains by ISIS - a group internationally recognised as a terrorist organisation - brought devastation to nearly all communities in the region. For the Yazidis of Bashiqa and Bahzani, the consequences were existential: mass displacement, systematic looting, the destruction of religious and cultural sites, and deep psychological trauma. While the worst atrocities, including mass executions and sexual enslavement, were concentrated in Sinjar, Yazidi communities in Bashiqa and Bahzani were not spared.
Although many Yazidis fled before ISIS fully captured Bashiqa, their properties were left vulnerable. KIIs and FGDs reveal a recurring accusation: that certain individuals from neighbouring Fadhiliyya - specifically Sunni-Shabaks - took part in looting, burning, or unlawfully occupying Yazidi homes and farmland during or immediately after ISIS's incursion. As one Yazidi focus group participant stated:

> *"They didn't leave when we were forced to flee. Later, we saw videos of people from Fadhiliyya welcoming ISIS. Our homes were robbed. Our trees burned. And now, they say it was just one person?"*

Multiple Yazidi informants echoed this perception, one of them explained:

> *"We returned and found our land taken, our trees burned. There were even new homes built on our plots. Even if not all from Fadhiliyya were involved, many stayed silent."*[22]

The symbolic and material loss is compounded by what many Yazidis perceive as a betrayal by neighbours who had previously enjoyed decades of cooperation and trade. One Yazidi KI underscored the depth of this rupture:

> *"We welcomed them in our markets, and in return, they watched as our homes were looted. We cannot forget that."*[23]

These collective memories and accusations, even if tied to the actions of a few individuals, have fuelled enduring resentment and a deep erosion of trust.

5.2. Sunni-Shabak Displacement and Grievances

Conversely, the Sunni-Shabak community in Fadhiliyya offers a markedly different narrative - one that centres on victimisation, marginalisation, and unfair collective blame. Several Sunni-Shabak informants acknowledged that while some individuals may have engaged with ISIS for opportunistic reasons, the majority of the community neither welcomed the group nor benefited from its presence. One KI made a forceful rebuttal:

[22] KII_004_YBH_CL
[23] KII_002_YBS_CL

"We handed over the one man who bought stolen Bashiqa olives from ISIS. He's in prison. We testified against him. But the whole village is blamed. That's not justice."[24]

Similarly, another KI argued that the idea of Fadhiliyya's collective complicity is unfounded:

"Some men fled when ISIS came. Some were forced to stay. But to say we all supported ISIS? That is wrong. We too suffered under ISIS."[25]

FGD participants in Fadhiliyya shared that this blanket accusation has created a psychological burden and contributed to their community's social exclusion:

"From 2003 to 2014, we had no sectarian problems with Bashiqa. But now we are seen as if we were part of ISIS. People look at us differently. It hurts."

Thus, while Yazidis carry the trauma of displacement and destruction, Sunni-Shabaks carry the burden of being stigmatised for crimes many claim they neither committed nor condoned. The conflicting narratives serve to deepen the post-ISIS social divide and complicate the path to reconciliation.

5.3. Post-ISIS Security and Displacement Challenges

The end of ISIS's territorial control did not herald a return to stability. Instead, it marked the beginning of a new and complex phase of securitisation, legal ambiguity, and contested return. Yazidis who returned to Bashiqa and Bahzani often encountered destroyed homes, stolen possessions, and in some cases, newly constructed buildings on their lands. As underscored by one Yazidi KI:

"We were displaced for years. When we returned, our home was gone. Others had build on the ruins of our home. How can we reconcile without justice?"[26]

This perception of unaddressed injustice and the absence of clear legal remedies has contributed to the Yazidi community's continued mistrust of their neighbours and state institutions alike.

Meanwhile, Sunni-Shabaks in Fadhiliyya faced their own challenges of reintegration and social reinvention. With Yazidis viewing them with suspicion, and Shiite-Shabak communities sometimes treating them as politically marginal, they exist in a liminal social space. This was highlighted by a KI:

"We are not with ISIS. We are not with the Shiites. We are our own people, and we just want to live in peace - but no one trusts us."[27]

The militarisation of the region has further entrenched these divisions. Yazidi areas are predominantly protected by Peshmerga and local Yazidi militias, while Fadhiliyya has ties to Sunni-leaning PMF factions. The result is a geography of fragmented security control that often aligns with ethno-sectarian boundaries rather than shared governance. One KI observed:

[24] KII_005_FDH_M
[25] KII_006_FDH_TL
[26] KII_003_YBS_M
[27] KII_009_FDH_TL

> *"Even the forces that protect us are divided. This one answers to Kurdistan, that one to Baghdad. We are caught in between."*[28]

This fragmented security environment reinforces physical and emotional barriers and limits informal interactions that previously served as peacebuilding mechanisms.
Thus, the ISIS invasion did not only displace people and destroy infrastructure - it profoundly restructured intercommunal relations. For the Yazidis of Bashiqa and Bahzani, the trauma of loss and perceived betrayal remains unhealed. For the Sunni-Shabaks of Fadhiliyya, the stigma of complicity persists despite efforts to demonstrate good faith. As both communities navigate post-ISIS recovery, their parallel victimhood and mutually exclusive narratives remain significant obstacles to reconciliation.

6. Core Factors Contributing to Intercommunal Tensions

6.1. Displacement and Property Disputes

A central grievance voiced by Yazidi returnees is the struggle to reclaim property lost during displacement. When Yazidis fled Bashiqa and Bahzani during the ISIS invasion, their absence left homes, farmland, and businesses vulnerable to looting and, in some cases, appropriation. Upon returning, many found their homes occupied, destroyed, or in legal limbo - issues that have fuelled long-term resentment and complicated prospects for reconciliation. As one Yazidi informant explained:

> *"We came back and found others living on our land or building new houses where our homes once stood. No one asked permission, and no one is being held accountable."*[29]

This sense of injustice is echoed in the Yazidi FGD:

> *"We saw our olive groves burned to the ground, our homes looted. They [Fadhiliyya] say it was just a few people whom we handed over to the authorities; however, we cannot rebuild our groves and homes anew while our property and everything is now gone."*

Yazidis also expressed frustration at the lack of formal legal mechanisms to address property claims, noting that many cases are stalled due to political fragmentation between the KRG and Baghdad authorities.
From the Sunni-Shabak side, there is recognition of the incidents, but also a strong emphasis on the individual nature of the wrongdoing. Multiple Sunni-Shabak informants were quick to distance the community from the actions of a few:

[28] KII_004_YBH_CL
[29] KII_003_YBS_M

"Yes, there was a man from Fadhiliyya who bought stolen olive oil from ISIS. We handed him over, and he is serving time. But we are all being blamed, even though we also lost things."[30]

However, as another informant observed, this defensiveness often clashes with Yazidi expectations for collective accountability and reparations, sustaining the cycle of mistrust:

"They want everyone to apologise for the actions of one or two. That is not fair. We also had our homes destroyed and were stuck without support."[31]

6.2. Security and Paramilitary Presence

The post-ISIS security architecture in the Nineveh Plains has been marked by fragmentation, overlap, and politicisation. Various armed actors - including the Peshmerga, Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), local tribal militias, and federal police - compete for territorial control, often aligning along ethno-sectarian lines. This has created a patchwork of authority in which different groups feel protected or threatened depending on who controls the local checkpoints, patrols, and decision-making.
Yazidis, who rely heavily on the Peshmerga and local Yazidi militias for protection, often view PMF-affiliated forces with suspicion - particularly in areas adjacent to Fadhiliyya. As one Yazidi leader noted:

"How can we trust the forces who are friends with those accused of helping ISIS? We need neutral protection, but instead, we have competing factions."[32]

This security fragmentation not only perpetuates fear but also limits freedom of movement, economic activity, and social interaction between communities. Yazidis avoid travelling through Fadhiliyya, while Sunni-Shabaks report feeling unwelcome or monitored in Bashiqa. One Fadhiliyya informant explained:

"We cannot even visit the cemetery in Bashiqa without being stopped. It feels like they think we are all suspects."[33]

Meanwhile, the Sunni-Shabak FGD participants noted that even internal movement within the subdistrict has become politically sensitive, with security forces treating them unequally:

"When we go through checkpoints, they look at us as if we're guilty. We've become strangers in our own region."

Such dynamics contribute to entrenched segregation and limit opportunities for organic trust-building or informal reconciliation efforts.

[30] KII_005_FDH_M
[31] KII_009_FDH_TL
[32] KII_004_YBH_CL
[33] KII_006_FDH_TL

6.3. Economic Disparities and Reconstruction Efforts

The uneven pace of reconstruction in the aftermath of ISIS has further fuelled intergroup tensions. While some Yazidi neighbourhoods in Bashiqa and Bahzani have benefited from NGO-led rebuilding programmes, the Sunni-Shabaks of Fadhiliyya often report being neglected in terms of infrastructure, development aid, and basic services. As one Fadhiliyya elder put it:

> *"We still don't have water, electricity is weak, and the roads are terrible. But they [Bashiqa] get projects because they are considered victims. Weren't we victims too?"*[34]

This sentiment was reinforced in the Sunni-Shabak FGD, where participants complained about unbalanced development:

> *"All the organisations go to Bashiqa. They say it's because of the genocide. But we also suffered. We are just ignored."*

From the Yazidi perspective, however, the perception is quite the opposite. Several informants highlighted the slow progress in agricultural recovery, lack of compensation, and persistent damage to olive groves, one FGD participant asserted:

> *"They say we got help? Look at our groves. They are all burned, they are all gone. They [Fadhiliyya] did not lose their olive groves and now their economy is thriving, they are selling olive products while we are merely replanting and in itself is highly challenging; consequently most of us have been forced to abandon their groves."*

Thus, both communities perceive themselves as marginalised, albeit in different ways. This mutual sense of grievance, coupled with real disparities in service delivery and project targeting, sustains a zero-sum narrative that has become a major obstacle to rebuilding intercommunal cohesion.

Thus, displacement-related property disputes, securitised boundaries, and inequitable reconstruction efforts have collectively hardened divisions between the Yazidis of Bashiqa/Bahzani and the Sunni-Shabaks of Fadhiliyya. These issues go beyond interpersonal conflict and reflect systemic structural challenges that require institutional responses, coordinated peacebuilding, and context-sensitive development to prevent further polarisation.

7. Climate Change and Its Impact on Intercommunal Relations

Environmental degradation, driven by climate change, has emerged as a powerful stressor on Yazidi and Sunni-Shabak relations in the Nineveh Plains. While often overlooked in favour of political and security explanations, climate-induced challenges - particularly declining water availability, erratic rainfall, and land degradation - are exacerbating existing socio-economic grievances and contributing to renewed intercommunal tensions.

[34] KII_008_FDH_TL

7.1. Shrinking Resources and Rising Competition

Both Yazidi and Sunni-Shabak communities are heavily reliant on agriculture, and their livelihoods are particularly sensitive to climate variability. In Bashiqa and Bahzani, olive cultivation has traditionally formed the backbone of Yazidi economic life. However, in recent years, yields have dropped due to drought, reduced water tables, and higher summer temperatures. As one Yazidi elder noted:

> *"Our groves used to produce enough for our families and trade. Now, with less water and hotter weather, half of the trees are dying. We're losing not just income, but our history."*[35]

In Fadhiliyya, similar pressures are being felt on wheat and barley farming, livestock rearing, and access to irrigation. A Sunni-Shabak tribal leader observed:

> *"We had good seasons in the past, but the land is no longer as fertile. The water sources are less, and people are digging their wells deeper just to find enough to grow."*[36]

This mutual dependence on a deteriorating natural environment has created new grounds for contestation, particularly over land use and water access. The problem is compounded by poorly coordinated land restoration efforts, absent state support, and fragmented governance, especially between federal and regional authorities.

7.2. Displacement, Return, and Environmental Stress

The return of displaced Yazidi families to Bashiqa and Bahzani has intensified pressure on already degraded lands. Many returnees find their former groves unviable or occupied, prompting tensions with neighbouring Sunni-Shabak communities. A Yazidi FGD participant described the situation:

> *"When we returned, the land was drier, the wells were deeper, and the trees were dead. But people in Fadhiliyya expanded their farms while we were away. Now they are telling us the land cannot support everyone."*

From the Sunni-Shabak side, there are anxieties that the return of displaced groups may lead to renewed resource competition, especially in the absence of equitable planning. A participant in the Fadhiliyya FGD remarked:

> *"We also depend on this land, but now that they are back, everyone wants to claim more. There is not enough water for everyone."*

This convergence of environmental strain and repopulation of contested areas is triggering low-level disputes and reinforcing intercommunal suspicion, especially as many believe that external support (NGOs or government aid) is being distributed unequally, often along ethno-sectarian lines.

[35] KII_002_YBS_CL
[36] KII_006_FDH_TL

7.3. Erosion of Traditional Environmental Cooperation

Historically, Yazidis and Sunni-Shabaks cooperated in managing agricultural cycles, irrigation sharing, and seasonal labour exchange. But as climate pressures have increased, these practices have frayed. As one Yazidi key informant recalled:

> *"We used to share water channels, and they helped during harvests. Now, everyone is digging their own wells and accusing each other of taking more."*[37]

Similarly, a Sunni-Shabak elder pointed to the breakdown of cooperation:

> *"Before, we worked together in the fields. Now, with so much need and little to go around, there is more jealousy than teamwork."*[38]

The shift from shared stewardship to individualised and competitive farming practices is not only a result of environmental decline, but also a product of distrust and weakened social contracts following the conflict. Environmental cooperation, once a foundation of peaceful relations, has thus become another casualty of climate fragility and intercommunal mistrust.

7.4. Perceptions of Environmental Inequity

One of the more insidious ways climate change exacerbates tensions is through perceptions of unequal benefit or burden. Many Yazidis, for instance, perceive that Fadhiliyya - being less damaged by ISIS - has retained better land and water resources, enabling a faster agricultural recovery. As a Yazidi FGD participant expressed:

> *"Their groves are alive; their wells are full. Ours are dry. But we are the ones still waiting for support. It feels like we are being punished twice."*

Conversely, Sunni-Shabaks argue that aid and development have disproportionately targeted Yazidi communities due to international sympathy. As one Fadhiliyya KI stated:

> *"They got the attention of the NGOs because of what happened in Sinjar. But we also lost. We also have needs."*[39]

This perception gap - between being overlooked versus being favoured - further deepens identity-based divisions, with environmental deterioration reinforcing rather than diffusing conflict narratives.

7.5. Climate Change as a Conflict Multiplier

While not the root cause of Yazidi–Sunni-Shabak tensions, climate change is undeniably acting as a conflict multiplier in Bashiqa, Bahzani, and Fadhiliyya. Diminished resources, degraded land, and water scarcity have created new fault lines between communities with already fragile trust. The environmental crisis intersects with issues of displacement, economic inequality, and identity-based grievance, reinforcing patterns of competition rather than cooperation.

[37] KII_003_YBS_M
[38] KII_008_FDH_TL
[39] KII_005_FDH_M

Unless addressed through inclusive environmental governance, sustainable agricultural recovery, and cross-community climate resilience initiatives, these ecological pressures risk becoming new drivers of communal resentment and instability in the Nineveh Plains.

8. Entry Points for Reconciliation and Community Cohesion

Despite the deep fractures left by the ISIS invasion and its aftermath, Yazidis of Bashiqa and Bahzani and the Sunni-Shabaks of Fadhiliyya have repeatedly expressed in interviews and focus group discussions a shared desire for peaceful coexistence - albeit with caution and preconditions. The challenge, therefore, lies not in inventing reconciliation from scratch but in rebuilding the pathways and practices of intercommunal trust that once existed.

To this end, several interlinked entry points for reconciliation and social cohesion emerge clearly from the research.

8.1. Truth-Telling and Acknowledgment of Past Harms

One of the most recurrent themes in Yazidi narratives is the demand for acknowledgment of suffering and betrayal. The absence of a collective reckoning - both at the community and governmental level - has left wounds open. Yazidis repeatedly cited the need for the people of Fadhiliyya to publicly acknowledge what happened during their displacement, particularly in terms of looted property and moral complicity, this was clearly articulated by one Yazidi FGD participant and resonated by the rest of the participants:

> *"We are not asking for revenge. We are asking for the truth to be said out loud. We cannot move forward if they act like nothing happened."*

While Sunni-Shabak respondents often felt unfairly blamed, there was also recognition that some form of collective dialogue about the past is necessary. As one key informant in Fadhiliyya put it:

> *"Yes, some things happened. But if we sit together and speak honestly—not just accusing each other—maybe we can understand and forgive."*[40]

A community-led truth-telling initiative, facilitated by neutral actors (such as local NGOs or international peacebuilding organisations), could allow both communities to articulate their experiences, correct falsehoods, and begin to validate each other's pain. This must be done in a safe, culturally sensitive space and could draw upon local practices of *Sulh* (reconciliation) and tribal mediation, which traditionally emphasise verbal recognition and symbolic repair.

8.2. Restorative Justice and Local Dispute Resolution Mechanisms

The desire for justice among Yazidi returnees is rooted not only in symbolic acknowledgment but in practical restitution - especially regarding property, land, and livelihoods. However, the legal system is perceived as politicised, distant, or ineffective. Many cases are stalled due to

[40] KII_007_FHD_TL

the jurisdictional divide between the federal government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) prompting one KII to state:

> *"We filed our case three years ago. Nothing moved. We know who took our land. Still, we wait."*[41]

In contrast, some Sunni-Shabak informants shared that efforts had been made to hold individuals accountable - for instance, turning over a man who had traded with Bashiqa's olives during the displacement of its people by purchasing them from ISIS authorities and selling them in Mosul - but that these acts were ignored or undervalued by the Yazidis:

> *"We did what we could. We brought him to the authorities. Yet they still say we are all guilty."*[42]

This highlights the need for restorative justice approaches that are community-based, visible, and inclusive, focusing on repairing harm rather than punishing entire groups. Reviving traditional conflict resolution councils (*Majlis* or *Mashayikh* forums), in coordination with trained mediators, could provide a trusted alternative to state mechanisms. These forums can prioritise material compensation, symbolic gestures (like public apologies), and agreed-upon codes of renewed conduct.

8.3. Joint Economic Ventures and Cooperative Livelihoods

Economic collaboration was once a key feature of Yazidi–Sunni-Shabak relations, particularly in agriculture and local trade. The loss of these economic ties, coupled with uneven reconstruction aid and climate-induced resource pressures, has created both poverty and resentment. Rebuilding these interdependencies through shared livelihood initiatives offers a tangible pathway to rebuild trust.
Yazidis and Sunni-Shabaks alike emphasised this point in FGDs:

> *"Before ISIS, they worked in our fields. We traded together. We didn't ask who was Sunni or Yazidi. Work made us close."*[43]

> *"If we farm together again, maybe we will talk again. Sitting in our homes, blaming each other, won't solve anything."*[44]

Potential initiatives could include:

- Joint agricultural cooperatives to rehabilitate olive groves and shared irrigation systems;
- Youth skills training and apprenticeship exchanges;
- Market revival programmes that incentivise cross-community trade;
- Seed funding for mixed-business initiatives, especially for women and returning IDPs.

These efforts would not only generate income but also facilitate structured, routine contact, which remains a powerful predictor of reduced intergroup prejudice.

[41] KII_003_YBS_M
[42] KII_005_FDH_M
[43] Yazidi only FGD
[44] Sunni-Shabak FGD

8.4. Community-Based Security Dialogue and Agreements

Security is a foundational concern for both groups. Yazidis distrust PMF-affiliated forces, while Sunni-Shabaks fear surveillance or harassment at Peshmerga checkpoints. Both communities want safety - but defined on their own terms:

> *"We want security, not control. Let us agree on who protects us, not others deciding for us."*[45]

> *"We are afraid to go to Bashiqa. They are afraid to come here. Who benefits from this?"*[46]

Community-based security agreements - brokered by neutral actors with support from local authorities - can address these fears by:

- Establishing mixed-community liaison committees to monitor security forces;
- Agreeing on rules for freedom of movement and safe zones;
- Promoting training for local security actors in non-discrimination and conflict sensitivity;
- Introducing joint patrols or checkpoint observers in key areas of contention.

Such arrangements would allow both sides to feel protected without reinforcing militarised boundaries that deepen segregation.

8.5. Climate-Resilient Cooperation and Natural Resource Governance

Given the growing environmental stress across the Nineveh Plains, climate-related cooperation offers a novel entry point for peacebuilding. As both communities are affected by water shortages and land degradation, joint environmental management projects could provide a common, non-political cause. One KI underlined this whilst noting:

> *"We all need water. We all suffer when the olive trees die. Why not work together to fix this?"*[47]

Creating shared water management committees, tree-planting campaigns, and cooperative access to irrigation technologies can foster both ecological and social recovery. International partners may be more willing to support such initiatives, given the growing prioritisation of climate adaptation in development funding.

8.6. From Coexistence to Sustainable Cohesion

Rebuilding Yazidi–Sunni-Shabak relations in Bashiqa, Bahzani, and Fadhiliyya requires multi-level and multi-sectoral interventions. Each of the above entry points targets a specific layer of mistrust - symbolic, legal, economic, security-related, and environmental. Their impact will be greatest when coordinated, sequenced, and led by communities themselves, with external actors serving as facilitators - not drivers - of reconciliation.

[45] Yazidi only FGD
[46] Sunni-Shabak only FGD
[47] KII_002_YBS_CL

What remains clear from both qualitative and quantitative evidence is that coexistence is not enough. Only through mutual recognition, practical cooperation, and restorative processes can these communities move beyond survival and toward shared resilience and peace.

9. Conclusion

This research has examined the multifaceted and evolving relationship between the Yazidis of Bashiqa and Bahzani and the Sunni-Shabaks of Fadhiliyya, with a particular focus on how historical coexistence has been fractured by violent conflict, political marginalisation, and environmental stress. Drawing from primary data collected through key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and community surveys—as well as a review of academic literature—the study has offered a grounded and nuanced account of how trust was built, broken, and how it might be restored.

Prior to the 2014 ISIS invasion, both communities maintained a pragmatic, if culturally distinct, relationship rooted in shared economic interests and localised conflict resolution mechanisms. This coexistence; however, proved fragile in the face of existential threats. The rise of ISIS acted as a rupture point that unleashed long-suppressed grievances, generated new cycles of displacement and loss, and gave rise to competing narratives of betrayal and victimhood. For Yazidis, the trauma of genocide, looting, and the destruction of religious heritage became intertwined with feelings of abandonment and suspicion toward their Sunni-Shabak neighbours. For Sunni-Shabaks, the post-ISIS period brought with it the burden of collective blame and a persistent sense of stigmatisation, even as many of them also endured displacement and hardship.

Post-ISIS dynamics have not restored pre-conflict normalcy. Instead, they have ushered in a fragile and uneven process of re-engagement marked by performative social interactions, persistent mistrust, and segregated geographies. This mistrust is further entrenched by displacement-related property disputes, securitised communal boundaries, and inequities in reconstruction assistance. Each of these layers of tension is amplified by a broader governance vacuum - characterised by overlapping jurisdictions between Baghdad and Erbil, fragmented security actors, and a legal system often inaccessible or ineffective in addressing communal grievances.

Climate change has emerged as a significant and under-acknowledged conflict multiplier in this context. Dwindling water resources, land degradation, and erratic weather patterns are not only affecting agricultural livelihoods but also reinforcing identity-based fault lines. As competition over shrinking resources intensifies and perceptions of environmental inequality deepen, what were once shared practices of stewardship have given way to suspicion and isolation. This adds an additional layer of urgency to reconciliation and peacebuilding efforts in the region.

Despite these challenges, the research also identifies tangible opportunities for transformation. The data demonstrates a shared - if cautious - willingness among both Yazidi and Sunni-Shabak communities to pursue reconciliation, provided it is accompanied by accountability, justice, and meaningful inclusion. Truth-telling processes, restorative justice mechanisms, and joint economic ventures represent realistic starting points for rebuilding intercommunal trust.

Community-based security agreements and climate-resilient cooperation further offer avenues to address both the root and proximate causes of division, enabling communities to move from coexistence to sustainable cohesion.

In conclusion, this case study reinforces a broader truth: that communal peace cannot be sustained through symbolic gestures alone. It must be anchored in structural justice, inclusive governance, and locally owned solutions. The Yazidi–Sunni-Shabak dynamic in Bashiqa, Bahzani, and Fadhiliyya is emblematic of wider ethno-religious tensions in Iraq, and as such, it offers critical lessons for national and international actors engaged in peacebuilding, recovery, and climate adaptation. Healing historical wounds requires more than memory it requires transformation. And transformation, in this context, can only begin when voices from both communities are heard, their dignity affirmed, and their futures shared.

10. Bibliography

- Al-Muqdadi, K. S., Mahdi, H. S., & Al-Faraj, F. A. M. (2021). Climate change, water crisis and conflict in the Tigris–Euphrates Basin. *Environmental Challenges*, 3, 100030.
- Boaretto, M. (n.d.). *The Yazidi experience: Their struggles as a minority in a Muslim-dominated region, the 2014 ISIS-led genocide against them, and their consequent migration to Europe*. Retrieved February 20, 2025, from https://thesis.unipd.it/bitstream/20.500.12608/63927/1/Boaretto_Martina.pdf
- Cetorelli, V., Sasson, I., Shabila, N., & Burnham, G. (2017). Mortality and kidnapping estimates for the Yazidi population in the area of Mount Sinjar, Iraq, in August 2014: A retrospective household survey. *PLOS Medicine*, 14(5), e1002297.
- Chatty, D. (2010). *Displacement and dispossession in the modern Middle East*. Cambridge University Press.
- Donabed, S. G. (2015). *Reforging a forgotten history: Iraq and the Assyrians in the twentieth century*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Fuccaro, N. (1999). *The other Kurds: Yazidis in colonial Iraq*. I.B. Tauris.
- Gurr, T. R. (2000). *Why men rebel* (Revised ed.). Princeton University Press.
- Isakhan, B., & Mako, S. (2020). Post-Saddam nation-building and the rise of sectarianism. In B. Isakhan (Ed.), *The legacy of Iraq: From the 2003 war to the 'Islamic State'* (pp. 101–118). Edinburgh University Press.
- Kizilhan, J. I. (2018). Treatment and care for Yazidi survivors of sexual violence and torture. *Global Health Action*, 11(1), 1–7.
- Kreyenbroek, P. G. (2009). *Yezidism – Its background, observances and textual tradition*. Edwin Mellen Press.
- Leezenberg, M. (2017). Between assimilation and independence: Shabak identity in northern Iraq. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 49(1), 145–164.
- O'Driscoll, D. (2018). *Emerging trends of conflict and instability in Iraq*. Retrieved February 20, 2025, from https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5c18d35ee5274a468ba7fab3/433_Emerging_Trends_of_Conflict_and_Instability_in_Iraq.pdf
- Omarkhali, K. (2017). *The Yezidi religious textual tradition: From oral to written*. Harrassowitz Verlag.
- Savelsberg, E., Hajo, S., & Dulz, I. (2016). *Effectively urbanized: Yazidis in the collective town of Mahad*. Retrieved February 20, 2025, from https://core.ac.uk/download/223551878.pdf
- Usman, M. (2021). *History of Shia, Sunni and Yazidi conflict: A political, social or religious conflict and its impact on the peace process in the Middle East*. Retrieved February 20, 2025, from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/353394537_History_of_Shia_Sunni_and_Yazidi_Conflict_A_Political_Social_or_Religious_Conflict_and_its_Impact_on_the_Peace_Process_in_the_Middle_East_With_Special_Focus_on_Kurdistan_-Northern_Iraq.

Inter Yazidi and Sunni-Shabak Tensions and Conflicts in Bashiqa, Bahzani, and Fadhiliya, Nineveh - Iraq

Produced by: Sustainable Peace Foundation (SPF), Tomooh Organisation for Development (TOD) and Naseej Organisation for Relief and Development