

Women Faith-Based Mediators in Iraq

Challenges and Opportunities
Within Peace Mediation


Berghof Foundation

The Network
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& Traditional
Peacemakers



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CONTENTS

| | |
|---|----|
| 1. Introduction | 4 |
| 2. Understanding Religion, Traditional Customs, and Conflict in Iraq | 5 |
| 3. Women, Religion and Mediation | 6 |
| 4. Navigating Risks and Challenges | 9 |
| 5. Opportunities for Meaningful Engagement with WFBMs | 11 |
| 6. Conclusions and Recommendations | 14 |
| 7. Bibliography | 15 |
| 8. About the Researcher | 17 |

1. INTRODUCTION



Photo: Nuha Andrious conducting a conflict analysis and mediation session in the Nineveh region in September, 2019.

This case study examines the experiences of Women Faith-Based Mediators (WFBMs)¹ in Iraq, introducing their journeys, the challenges they encounter, as well as their support needs and opportunities for effective peace mediation within the national context. Generally, women's participation in Iraq's public life has been limited² due to various cultural, social, and political factors. Overtime, women have taken tangible steps to advocate for their participation within the public space. In recent years,³ there has been progress to increase women's representation in the political arena, including a national quota system that reserves a percentage of seats for women in parliament. Despite the progress, women continue to face obstacles such as discrimination, violence, and limited access to education and economic opportunities, which continue to impede their equality within private and public settings.

This case study focuses on the experiences of twelve WFBMs who engage in mediation within conflict settings throughout Iraq. Many of the women have a specific focus in facilitating the return of Muslim Sunni displaced families, specifically those whose members were accused of fighting with the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sha (ISIS). These women navigate intricate social dynamics, employing their faith-based perspectives to foster understanding and acceptance.

1 WFBMs are working on various tracks for ceasing violence and finding agreements to prevent and stop violence. They convene stakeholder, liaise, and negotiate with armed groups and relevant decision makers for ensuring humanitarian access, safety of civilians and helping with the releasing of hostages. In doing this work, their tools and methods are inspired by faith, and/or they are cooperating within or with faith-based structures and/or with faith-based actors, and/or they are gaining motivation and inspiration for this work through faith.

2 Al-Saffar, A. "Women's Political Participation in Iraq: Obstacles and Opportunities." *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 20(1), 146-158, 2019.

3 Al-Ali, N. & Pratt, N. "Promoting Women's Participation in Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding in Iraq." *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 20(1), 158-172, 2019.

2. UNDERSTANDING RELIGION, TRADITIONAL CUSTOMS AND CONFLICT IN IRAQ

Iraq has a complex political, tribal, and religious landscape that has suffered due to long years of conflict, foreign interventions, and sectarian tensions.⁴ The country consists of diverse populations, including several religious and ethnic groups, such as Sunni and Shia Muslims, Christians, Yazidis, Sabeen-Mandaeen, Shabak, and other religious minorities. This also includes a variety of ethnic groups including Arabs, Kurds, Turkman, Assyrians, and others. Historically, religion plays a significant role in the Iraqi society, with Islam being the predominant religion. Shia Muslims constitute the majority, followed by Sunni Muslims and other minorities. The Iraqi legal system is based on Islamic Sharia, and religious leaders have significant influence in shaping societal norms and political discourse. Nevertheless, sectarian tensions have been a major source of conflict and violence in Iraq, with political and armed groups often mobilizing around sectarian identities.

The tribal systems are well-grounded across the country and play a role in shaping its social and political scenes. Being a member of an Iraqi tribe involves having a strong tribal identity, loyalty, and following a hierarchical social structure, led by a Sheikh. It is based on shared kinship and lineage, with a sense of pride and connection. Tribes make collective decisions, provide mutual assistance, and have mechanisms for solidarity and conflict resolution.⁵

⁴ Al-Khafaji, A. "Religion, ethnicity, and identity in Iraq." *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Religion and Politics in the U.S.*, 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118526693.wbcrp508>, 2017.

⁵ Ismael, Tareq Y., and Jacqueline S. Ismael. "Tribalism and State in Iraq: A Historical Perspective." *Middle East Critique*, 25(1), 67-82, 2016.

The political system in Iraq is a federal parliamentary democratic republic. While the federal government is based in the capital city of Baghdad, the country is divided into 18 provinces, each with its own governorate and local government.⁶ Since the US-led invasion in 2003, Iraq has experienced sectarian violence between Shia and Sunni, as well as attacks by jihadi troops, such as ISIS. In 2014, ISIS invaded major cities in northern and mid-Iraq, resulting in the displacement of millions of Iraqis, including women and children who were forced to flee their homes.⁷

In parallel to the mentioned contexts, there have been continuous efforts to promote peace and reconciliation in Iraq mainly through civil society organizations, community leaders, and religious figures. These actors have predominantly engaged in peacebuilding initiatives through reconciliation and dialogue between ethnic and religious groups. The United Nations has also played an active role in supporting mediation efforts in Iraq,⁸ including initiatives such as the National Reconciliation Initiative and the appointment of a Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Iraq. Despite these efforts, there is still a long way to go in addressing the underlying causes of conflict and fostering sustainable peace and stability in the country.

⁶ Al-Tamimi, A. *Iraq's federalism: a critical analysis*. Springer, 2017.

⁷ United Nations Population Fund. *Responding to the Displacement Crisis in Iraq: A Gender Analysis*. https://iraq.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/UNFPA_Iraq_Gender_Analysis_Displacement_Crisis_April_2019.pdf, 2019.

⁸ United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq. *About UNAMI*. https://www.uniraq.org/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&layout=item&id=39&Itemid=300&lang=en, 2021.

3. WOMEN, RELIGION AND MEDIATION

Violence in Iraq has resulted in women⁹ being subjected to forced displacement, violence, exclusion, and other forms of harassment. Despite these challenges, women have persisted to play a meaningful role contributing to peacebuilding efforts, especially after the US invasion of Iraq. In recent years,¹⁰ women have been involved in mediation initiatives amongst the local communities, political parties, and civil society organizations. Simultaneously, there has been a growing recognition of the impactful role of women mediators, and the valuable insights they bring to the table within peace negotiations and decision-making processes. Furthermore, WFBMs play a significant role in mediating tribal conflicts within Iraq in order to resolve tribal disputes and foster a sense of unity amongst diverse communities.¹¹

Their Muslim faith commonalities were stronger than their ethnic differences.

Basma Habib

⁹ Oweisat, F., & El-Khatib, L. Iraqi Women's Role in Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding. *Journal of Arab & Muslim Media Research*, 11(1), 59-76, 2018.

¹⁰ Gürel, A. Women and Peacebuilding: A Critical Analysis of UNSC Resolution 1325 and its Subsequent Resolutions. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 20(7), 1-16, 2019.

¹¹ Kavar, Linda. "Religion and Gender Justice in Post-Conflict Iraq: The Case of Women Faith Leaders." *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 17(4), 117-131, 2016.

In Iraq, there is a unique self-understanding among WFBMs, as they recognize their wide contributions to conflict resolution throughout the country and the role in which faith is integrated within their practices. In the experience of Basma Habib, a senior mediator in the Sinjar area of northern Iraq,¹² her source of inspiration to conduct mediation efforts was predicated upon the attacks against the Kurds in the Al-Sulaymaniyah area of northern Iraq. 'Their Muslim faith commonalities were stronger than their ethnic differences,' explains Basma. She relied on examples of Muslim faith figures, such as caliph Umar Bin Al-Khattab¹³ to resolve the conflict.



Photo: Wasan Al Hamad conducting a mediation and gender-based violence awareness raising session in the Al-Anbar Region in June, 2023.

¹² Basma Habib, senior mediator in Sinjar area in northern Iraq.

¹³ "Umar Ibn Al-Khattab - The Second Righteous Caliph. Umar Al-Faruk: The Life Path and Virtues of the Second Righteous Caliph Who is Umar Bin Khattab." KidsPlaneta. <https://kidsplaneta.ru/en/umar-ibn-al-hattab---vtoroi-pravednyi-halif-umar-al-faruk-zhiznennyi-put-i/>.

I listed out Islamic history which support WFBMs to play key roles in resolving conflicts with the Sheikh, sharing that Islam is a religion of peace.

Zainab Al-Suwaij

Similarly, Zainab Al-Suwaij, the Executive Director of the American Islamic Congress and a mediator in Iraq,¹⁴ views religion as a positive driving force to her efforts to successfully mediate between tribes. She notes, ‘Prior to and after every mediation, prayer gives me strength and a sense of meaning.’ Her faith identity as Shia allowed her to forge commonalities and trust with Shia men, and ultimately granted her a position to overcome societal obstacles and gain acceptance within male-dominated spaces, especially within tribal councils in southern Iraq. When a tribal conflict struck, women were, by default, not allowed to intervene. However, Zainab raised her case to participate with the Shia leader by highlighting the example of the wife of Prophet Muhammad, Zainab bint Jahsh, who participated in mediation operations after several military campaigns, later known as the “Treaty of Hudaibiya.”¹⁵ Word of Zainab’s encounter with the religious leader spread locally and helped her gain local acceptance as a mediator. Her perseverance was widely recognized and furthermore, was asked by Sheikhs from multiple tribes to help mediate their internal conflicts. As she explains, ‘I listed out cases in Islamic history which support WFBMs to play key roles in resolving conflicts with the Sheikh, sharing that Islam is a religion of peace.’

In a similar lens, Amina Al Thahabi, the Director of the Masarat Center for Dialogue and Mediation in Bagdad City,¹⁶ stresses the importance of utilizing religious teachings to support mediation arguments as, ‘religious discourse should be used in mediation as it holds positive impact.’ Amina is often faced by false claims that ISIS terrorism does represent Islam, and hence predicating mediation upon religion is inaccurate. In response, Amina relays, ‘religious teachings and Qur’anic phrases can make progress in mediation cases.’



Photo: Nuha Andrious conducting a conflict analysis and mediation session in the Nineveh region in September, 2019.

¹⁴ Zainab Al-Suwaij, the Executive Director of the American Islamic Congress and a mediator in Iraq.

¹⁵ Moosa Lakhani, & Hafiz Shoaib Ahmed kalhoro. Sustainable Conflict Resolution: The Study of The Treaty of Hudaibiya To Re-Imagine The Peace Process Today. Al-misbah Research Journal, 02(03), 52–60. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7738642>, 2022.

¹⁶ Amina Al Thahabi (Baghdad city) the Director of Masarat Center for Dialogue and Mediation.

I will continue to introduce myself as a WFBM on behalf of my community.

Naveen Samouqi

Naveen Samouqi,¹⁷ a journalist and a local WFBM mediator in Sinjar, primarily populated by Yazidi minorities, insists on identifying herself as a mediator with beliefs rooted within her Yazidi faith background. ‘I will continue to introduce myself as a WFBM on behalf of my community,’ she asserts.

Within their mediation tactics, WFBMs often place a strong emphasis on dialogue and trust building to meaningfully engage with involved parties. Furthermore, WFBMs in Iraq assume the role as bridge builders and peace advocates, actively seeking to mend divisions between different religious and sectarian groups. WFBMs work towards promoting understanding, and cooperation within the Iraqi social fabric. Positioned as neutral, and unharmed peace facilitators, WFBMs in Iraq exhibit a strong sense of self-awareness, active engagement, effective working methods, and a strategic positioning within the field of mediation.

However, not all female mediators in Iraq incorporate their faith identity within their mediation practices. For instance, Mirna Raad Ezzo¹⁸ conducts monitoring and evaluation for peace processes in the northern region of Iraq and is actively engaged in collaborative mediation initiatives in Duhok area of Northern Iraq. While Mirna adheres to the Christian faith, she does not perceive herself as a WFBM through a Christian faith lens. ‘I hold my human identity only; I don’t rely on my Christian religious identity as a mediator,’ she states. Similarly, Zaman Al-Ittabi¹⁹ works at the Al-Basra governate legal unit in Southern Iraq to facilitate the return of internally displaced families. She suggests that, ‘I may do good and work for God, but I am not a religious mediator.’ Despite their prominent role within the community, many avoid identifying themselves as women faith-based mediators. This stance often stems from the stereotypes associated to religious professions in Iraq, particularly in the post-ISIS era.



Photo: Zaman Alintabi conducting a mediation capacity-building workshop in Baghdad.

I hold my human identity only; I don’t rely on my Christian religious identity as a mediator. I may do good and work for God, but I’m not a religious mediator.

Mirna Raad Ezzo

¹⁷ Naveen Samouqi, a Yazidi journalist, activist, and a mediator.

¹⁸ Mirna Raad Ezzo, from the Al-Hamadanyia Region works on peace process monitoring and evaluation.

¹⁹ Zaman Al-Ittabi, from the Al Basra, Southern region works at the governate legal unit related to internally displaced families.

4. NAVIGATING RISKS AND CHALLENGES

WFBMs face multiple layers of risks and challenges stemming from societal and cultural norms. Addressing these risks and challenges requires synergized efforts to ensure their safety, challenge social norms, and provide financial support and resources to advance their participation and leadership within peace mediation efforts.

Lack of awareness of women's roles within broader peace mediation processes

In Iraq, there is generally a lack of understanding in communities on the role of women in peace mediation and broader peacebuilding efforts. This lack of understanding coupled with conflicts and disputes that are often fueled by demographics, political rivalries, and sectarian tensions, pose significant challenges to the efforts of WFBMs. As a result, the phenomenon of ex-communication or 'Takfir' is often used against WFBMs. This term is used in the Islamic context to label individuals as apostate or unbelievers. This is confirmed by Amina Al Thahabi,²⁰ 'Some people fail to understand mediation at large and the role of WFBMs specifically. As a result, they level accusations of ex-communication for WFBMs.' This accusation stems from the perception that WFBMs are deviating from their religious path to engage in mediation efforts, which in turn damages their credibility. These allegations can lead to severe social and legal repercussions within the country.

²⁰ Amina Al Thahabi (Baghdad city) the Director of Masarat Center for Dialogue and Mediation.

Competing political agendas

Nuha Androus²¹ shares that the operational landscape of WFBMs in Iraq is highly affected by diverse political agendas. 'The political agenda in the country, together with external interventions prevent mediation initiatives from having effective results,' she explains. She further highlights how, 'Local non-governmental organizations and the United Nations have attempted to support the return of families, yet, due to a lack of trust and security within local communities, these initiatives have failed.' This example is one of many in showcasing how the political environment impacts the ability of WFBMs to do their job and be seen as a neutral party, with no ties to these various political agendas. To help combat this problem, many WFBMs volunteer for a larger cause for social cohesion, which aids them in being perceived as neutral to the process.

Political funding can also impact mediation processes in Iraq. Drawing from her own experience, Amina shares that funded mediation processes are often, 'manipulated in their proceedings, for the donors' own benefit.' This is further exemplified when Amina Al Thahabi's organization was accused of promoting normalization with 'considered enemies' in Iraq. As a result, no foreign or politically associated funds were considered any further.

Some people fail to understand mediation at large and the role of WFBMs specifically. As a result, they level accusations of ex-communication from WFBMs.

Amina Al Thahabi

²¹ Nuha Androus (Northern region) a Member of the Iraqi National Facilitators and Mediators' Network.

Socio-cultural constraints and resistance

WFBMs recognize that patriarchal structures often limits their meaningful inclusion within mediation processes. Zaman Al-Ittahi,²² like several of her WFBM counterparts, affirms that, ‘It is a male-dominated society. Women are often not seen as legitimate mediators.’ Muna Sahib Al Hilali, a member of the Iraqi Facilitators Network, specializes in female oppression resulting from the aftermath of the ISIS invasion. She serves as a mediator between captive women and their families, facilitating their safe return. Despite her evident success, Muna²³ is often hindered by dominating tribal systems and traditions. ‘Many Iraqi tribes are against women participation in any form,’ she explains.

Religious leaders may use theology as justification to prohibit the engagement of women in mediation processes. ‘Religious leaders challenge me with Quranic verses referring to the limitation of women,’ states WFBM Amina Al Thahabi.²⁴ Furthermore, even if a woman holds a government position, they still encounter difficulties to engage with tribal systems. ‘I am unable to intervene in any tribal mediations, it’s male dominated systems,’ states Walliet Korkees,²⁵ founder of the Security and Peace Network for Mediation in Iraq.

It is a male dominated society. Women are often not seen as legitimate mediators.

Zaman Al-Ittahi

²² Zaman Al-Ittahi, works in official governmental legal unit related to internally displaced families.

²³ Muna Al-Hillali, founder of Ur organization that advocated for women rights and protection in Iraq.

²⁴ Amina Al Thahabi (Baghdad city) the director of Masarat center for dialogue and mediation.

²⁵ Walliet Korkees, founder of security and peace network for mediation in Iraq.

WFBMs also face stigmatization, especially those who challenge traditional gender roles and engage in public life. Mirna Raad Ezzo,²⁶ for example, encounters resistance from her community when engaging in mediation efforts, ‘my community often discourages me from engaging in mediation sessions.’ This discouragement can result in their isolation from community networks and even dissuade women from engaging in mediation efforts. Ultimately, this weakens the community support for WFBMs and poses to discredit their work, which hinders the effectiveness of their mediation efforts. This is exemplified through the community marginalization of Naveen Samouqi,²⁷ who faced societal rejections despite her mediation efforts to safeguard young Yazidi girls. ‘Their families accused me of affiliation to ISIS and other agencies,’ stated Naveen. Naveen frequently experiences accusations of treason when engaging in mediation efforts. ‘Each involved party accuses me, and my colleagues accuse me of being affiliated to the other side of the conflict,’ she explained.

The threat of marginalization is also completely linked to society’s expectations and norms of women and young women. Zainab Al-Suwaij²⁸ explains, ‘Immediately, WFBMs are accused of immorality and dishonor.’ Further, Anima Al Thahabi²⁹ shares that WFBMs are often perceived to be weak in traditional settings. Yet, as WFBMs, they are able to challenge this patriarchal notion and showcase how women can be active participants and leaders within broader peacebuilding spaces. ‘If they do not meet the traditional norms, such as wearing a veil, they may encounter misunderstandings and have to address allegations of defying cultural norms.’

²⁶ Mirna Raad Ezzo (Al-Hamadanyia Region) works on peace process monitoring and evaluation.

²⁷ Naveen Samouqi, a Yazidi journalist, activist, and a mediator.

²⁸ Zainab Al-Suwaij, the Executive Director of the American Islamic Congress and a mediator in Iraq.

²⁹ Amina Al Thahabi (Baghdad city) the Director of Masarat Center for Dialogue and Mediation.

Threats to personal safety

WFBMs often encounter marginalization, backlash and threats to their personal safety, ranging from intimidation to accusations of immorality, to physical violence from extremist groups. Alia Al-Ansari³⁰ explains, ‘We face the danger of defamation, and it may lead to murder in certain areas.’ Wasan Al-Hamad³¹ often finds herself vulnerable to tribal threats, sharing ‘I often receive threats of marginalization through family members from conflicting tribes.’ The risk primarily stems from the nature of the field, in addition to women being societally perceived as weak individuals. Naveen Samouqi³² can no longer travel to her city due to persistent ‘threats of violence.’ Furthermore, Amina Al Thahabi was shot and kidnapped during her mediation efforts between US troops and Shia religious leaders.

Masrouf Mohildeen Aswad³³ recognizes the great danger for WFBMs, ‘This is an eastern society, women are considered easy targets.’ Masrouf recalls the harrowing experience of Fatima Al-Bahadli, who tragically was killed along with her son as a consequence of mediating a local conflict that was perceived to be affiliated with ISIS individuals.

WFBMs use various strategies to help reduce the risk of threats to their personal safety, including taking trainings related to personal safety, utilizing location-tracking devices and working with other male mediators.

30 Alia Al-Ansari, Lawyer and the Director of Bent Al-Rafedayin NGO that works on national mediation and reconciliation in Iraq.

31 Wasan Al-Hamad (Al-Anbar governate), a young mediator and a researcher who works on protection of women affiliated to ISIS fighters within Al-Hol and Al-Jadaa camps.

32 Naveen Samouqi, a Yazidi journalist, activist, and a mediator.

33 Masrouf Mohildeen Aswad, former Human-rights commissioner in Iraq, and a Co-Founder of “She 4Dialogue” programme in the Arab region.

5. OPPORTUNITIES FOR MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT WITH WFBMS

Significant progress can be made in promoting inclusive peace mediation processes and challenging gender societal norms in Iraq if the potential of WFBMs is actualized. The diverse array of strategies employed by WFBMs contributes to their effectiveness, security, and advances of inclusive mediation processes. Despite strong internal strategies, there are still many ways to help advance the efficacy of WFBMs.

Ensuring access to diverse, flexible and impartial financial resources

While mediation initiatives should not be influenced by financial enticements, financial resources are imperative to both the women mediators and those whom they are representing. Due to the competing nature of various political agendas, it is essential that funding opportunities for WFBMs come from an array of international organizations to ensure that communities feel that the funding is being offered in an impartial manner.



Photo: Nuha Andrious conducting a conflict analysis and mediation session with tribe members in December, 2019.

More funding is needed for the specific work of WFBMs, including flexible funding. Nuha Androus,³⁴ a member of the Network of Iraqi Facilitators³⁵ has personally covered the costs associated with the mediation sessions. She explains that international donors often neglect time to budget for WFBMs miscellaneous expenses, as exemplified when an international organization did not budget for her travel or accommodation for a mediation session 400 km away from her hometown according to Nuha.

**Support the development of WFBM networks
and multi-stakeholder engagements**

The establishment of WFBM networks supports knowledge exchange and capacity building with other WFBMs from diverse backgrounds. These normative networks can help women build relationships between each other, with the communities and ultimately be accepted to conduct mediation work. Zainab³⁶ established the ‘Peace Ambassadors Network,’ for WFBMs within her region. She notes, ‘This network has allowed me to build the capacity and connect leading WFBMs resolving tribal disputes and allowing them to gain larger credibility and acceptance.’

This network has allowed me to build the capacity and connect leading WFBMs resolving tribal disputes and allowing them to gain larger credibility and acceptance.

Zainab Al-Suwaij



Photo: Zaman Al Intabi conducting a safety awareness raising campaign in the city of Baghdad.

WFBMs generally have increased access to communities when they engage with local and federal government as well as international organizations. Walliet³⁷ explained how their collaboration with such entities, especially the United Nations, helps to bolster the legitimacy of the women. Walliet supported in drafting a National Action Plan on UN Resolution 1325³⁸ for Iraq. As a result of participating in the official process, she and other WFBMs increased their legitimacy amongst the local communities and, ‘were able to access senior officials and local leaders for mediation purposes.’ Furthermore, Masrouh Mohildeen Aswad, former Human-rights commissioner in Iraq highlights the current landscape in Iraq provides an opportunity for WFBM to engage in peacebuilding and mediation process. ‘There is a conviction among national politicians that women should be involved in peace processes and mediation provisions,’³⁹ explains Aswad.

³⁴ Nuha Androus (Northern region) a member of the Iraqi national facilitators and mediators’ network.

³⁵ ‘Promoting Reconciliation and Moderation in Iraq.’ United States Institute of Peace. <https://www.usip.org/reconciliation-in-iraq#:~:text=Network%20of%20Iraqi%20Facilitators&text=Since%202004%2C%20USIP's%20Academy%20for,and%20mediation%2C%20and%20problem%20solving.>

³⁶ Zainab Al-Suwaij, the Executive Director of the American Islamic Congress and a mediator in Iraq.

³⁷ Walliet Korkees, Founder of Security and Peace Network for Mediation in Iraq.

³⁸ Iraqi National Action Plan: <http://1325naps.peacewomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Iraq-NAP3.pdf>, October 2022.

³⁹ Masrouh Mohildeen Aswad, former Human-rights commissioner in Iraq, and a co-founder of ‘She 4dialogue’ programme in the Arab region.

Strengthening support and engagement with male counterparts

WFBMs can be more trusted than their male counterparts, particularly when it comes with religious minorities. As exemplified by Nuha Androus⁴⁰ in her mediation efforts with Yazidi communities, ‘The Yazidi communities are rather open-minded and prefer WFBMs, as women hold larger trust, leading them to perceive us as unharming.’ However, WFBMs from conflict-affected backgrounds often apply their own strategies to mitigate further risks, overcome challenges, increase their mediation efficacy and visibility, and foster positive change in mediation processes through partnering with their male counterparts. For instance, Walliet⁴¹ recognizes that a collaborative approach with men helps to support a successful mediation process, as when she was supporting Yazidi women obtain legal reform. Another mitigation strategy is to maintain strict confidentiality and align actions with tribal systems under male leadership, which helps to mitigate societal stigmatization and reduce false accusations. Wasan⁴² is a supporter of this approach, noting, ‘I keep my work confidential, and I adhere to head of tribe rules and customs to achieve my goals.’

The Yazidi communities are rather open-minded and prefer WFBMs, as women hold larger trust, leading them to perceive us as unharming.

Nuha Androus

Strengthening protective legal frameworks

Strengthening protective legal frameworks is crucial for securing the success and protection of WFBM’s mediating efforts, especially in the aftermath of the ISIS invasion and helping families return home. This is particularly important to address challenges faced by children born to ISIS fighters and their families, who must deal with societal rejection.

In the region of Sinjar in northern Iraq, Basma Habib,⁴³ a senior mediator, has been mediating conflicts between Muslims and Yazidis, particularly in the aftermath of a tragic massacre of the Yazidi minority by ISIS.⁴⁴ Basma emphasizes the need for legal intervention to avoid potential repercussions. ‘Families are left to suffer from societal rejection, marginalization and the absence of protective laws. It is imperative to address these issues to also help our mediation efforts,’ she explains. In 2020, following the establishment of the Jadaa Camp, which housed Iraqi women and children related to ISIS fighters, Basma took the initiative to present an official report to the government to facilitate the safe return of the women and their families to their home. ‘These families are left without any hope, they are in fear of retaliation. Only legal frameworks can validate our mediation efforts and facilitate these families return.’ This underscores the pressing need for policymakers to create and implement protective laws that address the needs of affected individuals and families. These laws can help ensure a more secure and enabling environment for both mediation efforts and the socio-economic prosperity of the communities.

⁴⁰ Nuha Androus (Northern region) a member of the Iraqi National Facilitators and Mediators’ Network.

⁴¹ Walliet Korkees, Founder of Security and Peace Network for Mediation in Iraq.

⁴² Wasan Al-Hamad (Al-Anbar governate), a young mediator and a researcher who works on protection of women affiliated to ISIS fighters within Al-Hol and Al-Jadaa camps.

⁴³ Basma Habib, senior mediator in Sinjar area in northern Iraq.

⁴⁴ United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. “They Came to Destroy”: ISIS Crimes Against the Yazidis. Retrieved from https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoISyria/A_HRC_32_CRP.2_en.pdf, 2016.

6. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

WFBMs in Iraq face many risks and challenges in their work, including around the lack of general awareness on the importance of WFBMs within broader peacebuilding processes, as well as competing political agendas and the patriarchal nature of socio-cultural life. In recognizing and addressing some of these challenges, WFBMs require further impartial financial support and resources, protection measures and acknowledgment from religious leaders to policymakers at all levels.

Recommendations provided by WFBMs

- 1 Raise awareness on the vital role that WFBMs play within mediation and broader peacebuilding processes within local communities.** Policymakers, faith actors and other key community influencers are encouraged to recognize and acknowledge the critical role of WFBMs in mediation and conflict resolution efforts. WFBMs should be provided with opportunities to meaningfully participate in high-level national negotiations and given recognition for their contributions.
- 2 Provide more diverse, flexible and impartial financial support to WFBMs.** WFBMs require financial support to facilitate smooth mediation operations and continue to support their livelihood. Policymakers are urgently invited to encourage international organizations to provide WFBMs with necessary resources to have a stronger position in their work and the ability to remain be viewed as impartial by the communities that they serve.
- 3 Ensure WFBMs have access to protection measures for themselves and the communities they are serving.** Policymakers must implement protection measures for WFBMs, including trainings on personal safety, the adaptation of zero-tolerance policies towards any form of harassment and procedures to report harassment cases to ruling authorities.
- 4 Support the creation of WFBM networks and provide further capacity-strengthening opportunities.** The creation of WFBM networks will strengthen the capacity-sharing and relational support of WFBMs. Policymakers should ensure tailored educational programs for WFBMs to advance their mediation skills as well as secondary skills including conflict analysis, negotiations, interfaith dialogue, and effective communication.

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About Berghof Foundation

The Berghof Foundation is an independent, non-governmental and non-profit organization supporting people in conflict in their efforts to achieve sustainable peace through conflict transformation and peacebuilding. Their work spans many regions and societies, encompassing conflicts between and within states, whether new or entrenched. We also work to address underlying social grievances which, if ignored, only deepen divisions and inflame tensions.



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