



# Interreligious Dialogue Mapping of the Middle East

## Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Iraq





**Interreligious Dialogue Mapping  
of the Middle East:  
Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Iraq**

**Published by:**

**Adyan Foundation**

Institute of Citizenship and Diversity Management  
and Rashad Center for Cultural Governance

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Beirut, 2020



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# Executive Summary

This report evaluates contemporary interreligious dialogue activities in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Iraq. In order to do so, it introduces a theoretical framework for analyzing interreligious dialogue activities in the Middle East and presents a cross-national analysis of contemporary dialogue trends and challenges. The report profiles the major dialogue initiatives active in each country and provides resources to learn more about them.

In general, the report offers a portrait of a dynamic field in motion whose development reflects both common regional trends and specific national dynamics. Dialogue activities face many political and religious challenges in the region, and the recent decline of interreligious dialogue activity in Turkey highlights its continued vulnerability in the Middle East. Despite these challenges, many of the actors interviewed for this report continue to place great hope in the capacity of dialogue to catalyze spiritual solidarity, social renewal and positive political reform. In many ways, interreligious dialogue activities have become central laboratories in the region where new models of religious and political development are being continuously constructed and tested. These models have the potential to shape the future of religious concerns, social relations and regional politics in the Middle East.

The report formulates seven lessons about the organizational success and social relevance of interreligious dialogue activities in the region:

-  **1.** Interreligious dialogue in the Middle East is a relatively young field and its growth is directly connected to the major political and social dynamics shaping the region, including the growth of religiously expressed violence.
-  **2.** The political context of each country affects the development and opportunities for interreligious dialogue in powerful ways. While regional and global dynamics are also important, most interreligious dialogue organizations perceived local and national political challenges as the most difficult dilemmas they faced in their work.
-  **3.** Although globally minded, government-sponsored interreligious dialogue activities have grown in recent years, much of the interreligious dialogue activity in the region remains local in scope, at the initiative of faith-based organizations, and oriented to serving basic community needs.
-  **4.** There is great sensitivity from multiple types of organizations to the foreign interests and influences that may be tied to interreligious dialogue activities.

-  **5.** There is great diversity in the political, social and religious goals of interreligious dialogue organizations in the region. At the same time, there is growing support for interreligious dialogue activities which strengthen citizenship values, even as the exact meaning of those values may change across national contexts.
-  **6.** Interreligious dialogue organizations have sought a wide variety of audiences in the region. Yet, there is room for more substantive participation and dialogue outreach to youth, women, conservative religious communities and religious groups that are considered to hold extremist beliefs.
-  **7.** Most interreligious dialogue organizations have adopted strategies of action which aim to increase awareness and build local capacity for religious coexistence and peace. Strategies of education were recognized as an essential component in this task which might effectively build dialogue organizations' capacity to participate in the reform and renewal of religious education or education on diversity in the region.

# Introduction

Interreligious dialogue is a young and growing field in the contemporary Middle East. The dynamism of this growth has attracted the attention of scholars, policy-makers, religious and political leaders. These leaders and practitioners have recognized the potential of dialogue initiatives to aid development in the region, reduce religious tensions, and create new models for living together well in religiously plural societies. This report, carried out by the Adyan foundation in Lebanon, through its two departments, the Institute of Citizenship and Diversity Management and the Rashad Center for Cultural Governance, explores the growth of interreligious dialogue in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Iraq. Drawing on field research in all four countries, the report maps out contemporary dialogue activities in each country and evaluates their organizational success and social resonance. Through a cross-national analysis, the report highlights the various typologies, goals and approaches to interreligious dialogue present in the region and introduces the key personalities, thought leaders, organizations and initiatives shaping the practice of interreligious dialogue in each today. It articulates the challenges and conditions which impact the quality of dialogue activities in these countries and their capacity to either transform social, religious and political tensions or, simply, to manage them better.

The first chapter of this report introduces a theoretical framework which defines interreligious dialogue activities and reviews debates about their social, political and religious meaning in the contemporary Middle East. This framework draws on recent scholarship to construct a typology for categorizing interreligious dialogue activities in the region and a survey instrument which was then employed in the field research for this project. The survey was designed to register the broad variety of dialogue activities present in the region and to measure both the organizational success of these activities as well as their social relevance within local and regional contexts.

Following the introduction of this framework, the second chapter offers a comparative overview of the data gathered through the fieldwork conducted in each of the four countries. This cross-national analysis highlights seven important lessons about dialogue in the region. The first three lessons regard the typologies of interreligious dialogue organizations in the region and their growth over time. In general, the report confirms the young and dynamic nature of dialogue initiatives in the Middle East: the majority of dialogue activities considered in this report were established in the last two decades alone. The data also highlights the importance of political contexts and the role of the state in shaping this growth. The variable political context, in fact, represents one of the greatest challenges facing dialogue initiatives in the Middle East and can determine whether a national dialogue field

will grow, as it has in places like Lebanon and Iraq, or shrink, as it has recently in the case of Turkey. Despite the importance of state influence and political context, the report also confirms the robust and overwhelming presence of civil society organizations operating in the dialogue landscape, many of which have explicit affiliations with one or more religious traditions.

Lessons four and five regard the great variety of goals that characterize interreligious dialogue activities in the region. Some dialogue organizations, for example, could be described as seeking transformative social and political changes in their countries (and region). The vision of transformative change which these organizations seek, however, varies a great deal. Thus, while some dialogue activities may be linked to broader projects in favor of religious freedom, democracy or pluralism, other dialogue activities might be linked to broader projects of religious renewal in the region. Still other dialogue initiatives might be connected to more specific goals which do not entail transformative change, such as protecting the rights of a particular religious minority. One theme that emerged as a common element of many dialogue projects in the region was the theme of “citizenship.” Once again, however, the framing and understanding of “citizenship” as an ideal could vary greatly from one initiative to another.

Lessons six and seven regard the types of audiences sought by interreligious dialogue activities and the strategies employed by these activities for achieving their goals. An important lesson in terms of audiences in the region has to do with efforts to reach women and youth participants. While many dialogue initiatives report high levels of enthusiasm for dialogue among youth and women participants, many of these same initiatives have difficulty engaging youth and women audiences in substantial ways. Another important lesson with respect to audiences is that very few initiatives are able to sustain successful dialogue activities with religious conservatives and Islamists in the region. Finally, perhaps the most important lesson with regard to interreligious dialogue strategies was the recognition of a need to develop more substantial education programs across a wide variety of sectors in the field of dialogue. The need for more interreligiously-friendly education, or for education on religious diversity, and the development of more regionally-grounded, broadly-legitimate models of dialogue were key themes of concern for many dialogue actors surveyed in this study.

After articulating and discussing these lessons, the second half of the report offers four in-depth country profiles which map out their respective interreligious dialogue landscapes. Each profile includes a brief introduction which charts out the historical development of dialogue in the country and offers some comments on the major political, social and religious challenges facing the dialogue field today. It then introduces a number of key interreligious dialogue activities and organizations; profiles their nature, goals and challenges; and highlights insights about the hopes and dilemmas attached to interreligious dialogue drawing on interviews with key personalities in the field. Each country profile closes with a conclusion that summarizes the main lessons and recommendations drawn from the case.



Finally, it should be noted that the report was designed to be user-friendly, with graphs and tables throughout on key trends in each country and information about national religious and political trends. The appendices at the end of the report gather together a number of further resources on interreligious dialogue in the region, including a bibliography on interreligious dialogue in the Middle East, raw data information, a directory of interreligious dialogue organizations in each country, and a list of names of the key personalities interviewed for this report.

# 1. Theoretical Framework for Evaluating Interreligious Dialogue

## Preliminary Considerations: Defining and Naming Interreligious Dialogue

As various scholars have recognized, there are a number of diverse activities which might fall into the category of “interreligious dialogue,” including various activities which do not employ, or even reject, that title.

**This report defines interreligious dialogue activities<sup>1</sup> as,**

*“activities which are intentionally constructed to include two or more different religious communities or individuals and with the purpose of furthering collaboration, peaceful coexistence, or general knowledge between them.”*

This definition recognizes the existence of a minimal normative framework that generally structures interreligious dialogue and which aims at increasing social, religious and political peace. The nature and extent of that normative framework, however, as the cases in this report illustrate, can differ considerably from one activity to another.

In some national and religious contexts, as the case of Turkey in this study highlights, interreligious dialogue has taken on a pejorative meaning. As a result, groups interested in promoting the construction of peaceful communication and relationships between religious groups sometimes avoid using the term “interreligious dialogue,” and have opted to describe their activities in different terms. Thus, various movements and organizations in the Middle East have described their activities as fostering “peaceful coexistence,” favoring “societies inclusive of religious diversity,” working for “multifaith friendship,” striving to “live together peacefully in a diverse world,” or as fostering “intercultural” or “intercivilizational” communication. This report takes interreligious dialogue activities to include a broad range of activities largely focused on facilitating, structuring or encouraging interreligious relationships and action for a diverse array of goals.

## Typologies of Interreligious Dialogue

Scholars have proposed a number of categorizations to highlight the different aims and natures of interreligious dialogue initiatives. These typologies help place interreligious dialogue activities within their appropriate geographical, religious

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<sup>1</sup> For a fuller discussion on this and other definitions of interreligious dialogue, see Driessen (forthcoming).

and political contexts by identifying who is involved in these activities, what their aims are, and what dilemmas they encounter, create and respond to.

These categorizations are also necessary to evaluate interreligious dialogue activities according to their own stated intents and purposes. In this perspective, establishing a meaningful typology of interreligious dialogue helps evaluate not just what interreligious dialogue activities do or how efficient they are, but what interreligious dialogue activities actually mean and represent in their specific religious and political landscapes, including the sorts of longer run social and religious changes that they may be reflecting and advancing, and their political and cultural resonance in doing so.

This report has chosen four broad categories which distinguish different types of interreligious dialogue activities, by **1)** type of organization, **2)** goals and theories of change, **3)** audiences and participants, and **4)** strategies of action and output. As in most categorization exercises, the boundaries between these categories are often fluid, interconnected and not mutually exclusive or exhaustive. The following section briefly describes the various components included in each of these categories with some notes on their importance for interreligious dialogue evaluation.

## I. Type of Organization

There are a number of ways of categorizing interreligious dialogue activities according to their type of organization and in ways which can greatly impact their goals and activities. This report includes the following eight commonly used categories of organization:

- Governmental Affiliation
- Civil Society Organization
- Religious Organization
- Level of Institutionalization: Formal, Informal, Professional, Grassroots
- Academic Organization
- Geographic origin and nature
- Personality-based Organization
- Funding Streams

Some scholars like Haddad and Fischbach (2015) have detected a phased progression of interreligious dialogue activities over time in the Middle East, in which interreligious dialogue first developed as an activity closely linked to religious organizations and theological reflection; then increasingly took on a political and policy dimension, particularly following the growth of religious violence in the region; and, finally, more recently, has taken on a broader civil society and grassroots dimension. While this progression might not describe all interreligious trajectories in the Middle East, most scholars agree that the recent growth of interreligious dialogue activity as a policy instrument employed by

states represents a distinguishing feature of interreligious dialogue development in the region. These policy dimensions have raised a number of questions for scholars (see, for example, Wolff 2017, Markiewicz 2018, Mahmood 2006, Driessen forthcoming) about the political agendas of interreligious dialogue activities, both official and hidden, as the rest of the report illustrates.



*Evolution of interreligious dialogue in the Middle East (Haddad and Fischbach, 2015)*

## II. Goals and Theories of Change

A number of scholars and organizations (Marshall et al. 2017, Knitter 2013, Cornille 2013, Greira and Nagel 2018, KAICIID 2015) have highlighted the importance of understanding the theories of change which animate diverse typologies of interreligious dialogue activities. As a category, “Theories of Change” can apply to the philosophies or normative commitments of specific organizations and initiatives, but it can also apply to the participants and audiences of interreligious dialogue as well. This category begins to answer the following questions: what do these organizations or personalities hope to get out of interreligious dialogue? What does interreligious dialogue mean to them? What is the intended outcome of dialogue? Do the organizations or participants associate the practice or activity of interreligious dialogue with a more or less explicit change in mentality, awareness or attitude? If so, what?

This report adopts the following seven categories as capturing significant categories of goals and theories of change within various interreligious dialogue activities in the Middle East:

- Exclusivism, inclusivism, or pluralism worldviews?
- Transformative Change?
- Inclusive Citizenship?
- Religious Social Responsibility?
- Human Rights?
- Freedom of Religion and Belief?
- Minority Rights?

Although it has been criticized recently by important theologians and scholars of religion (Moyaert 2012, Clooney 2010), these categorizations draw heavily on the classic trichotomy of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. This trichotomy, as developed especially by scholars like Hick and Knitter (2005) and Eck (2006), has strongly influenced much research on interreligious dialogue across a range

of disciplines and scholarly interests (Abu Nimer et al 2007, Fahy and Bock 2018, Coda 2003). In this categorization, exclusivism describes a participant, organization or philosophy which believes that their religious faith alone represents the true or correct one; inclusivism describes a participant, organization or philosophy which believes that their religious faith holds most or a good deal of the truth, but are open to learning and recognizing truth in other religious traditions; finally, pluralism describes a participant, organization or philosophy which believes that there are many, equally legitimate, paths towards the truth, and that no religious tradition holds a monopoly on the content of ultimate truth and meaning.

In the exclusivism-inclusivism-pluralism typology, theology matters quite a lot for understanding and evaluating an interreligious dialogue activity and can have a major impact on the type of systemic change that is pursued and enacted. Although the second part of this report will detail this relationship across a number of specific initiatives, it is useful to raise a couple of points here about how scholars think that various interreligious dialogue initiatives' philosophies of change might impact the kinds of activities they engage in as well as their success in doing so.

Much attention, for example, has been paid to positions of pluralism within recent scholarship on interreligious dialogue. In some cases, pluralism is the goal that interreligious dialogue should be evaluated against. As Abu Nimer et al (2007) has observed, many interreligious actors, organizations and philosophies could be described as seeking "transformative change," which is often linked to an emancipative vision of society and a pluralistic ideal of interreligious collaboration in favor of social justice. In this theory of change, interreligious dialogue might itself represent the catalyst or mechanism of change through which religious and other actors are themselves transformed and become committed to worldviews of peaceful coexistence. Some scholars also loosely link these transformative dialogue positions to explicit projects of political and religious change, whose agents Röttig (2007) refers to as "religion-cultural democrats" (see also Lehmann and Koch 2015). These positions often focus on the communitarian nature and social mobilizational potential of religious forces, and their capacity to generate social and political solidarity, often for democratic ends (Driessen forthcoming). By increasing religious and interreligious literacy, or simply getting to know each other, or participating together on common public tasks, religious traditions begin to appreciate and recognize the spiritual and civic value of religious others, a discovery which can, in turn, lead to a deepened and renewed, but also transformed, individual religious belief.

Some pluralists claim that exclusivist religious claims, which categorize the religious views of others as false, are inherently repressive and will naturally lead to religious discrimination and conflict. As Greira and Nagel (2018) point out, exclusivist actors might be using (or subverting) interreligious dialogue in the interests of improving their religious identity, or presenting themselves in a more positive light in order to gain adherents. Röttig (2007) has referred to exclusivists of this type as "Orthodox Adapters," in which there might be hidden or not so hidden elements of proselytization and interests of self-preservation.

Within this perspective, following the formula of Hans Küng (2004), peace among religions, and, by extension, peace in this world, is often understood to

require a change of religious mentality in the direction of pluralism, and interreligious dialogue is viewed as the means through which this change can occur.

Other scholars have rejected this position and argue that it is unhelpful to imply that pluralism is necessary for the success of interreligious dialogue or to evaluate interreligious dialogue initiatives according to the degree to which they hold pluralist worldviews. In fact, a number of scholars have pointed out that a wide variety of exclusivist religious actors, from quietist salafis, to protestant fundamentalists, to radical orthodox Jews, have been key agents and defenders of conditions and politics that facilitate interreligious dialogue (Bretherton 2014, Yang 2014, Burhani 2011, Firestone 2015, Volf 2011).

As Yang (2014) argues in this respect, religious exclusivists might be particularly motivated to pursue and defend policies of pluralism precisely on account of their uncompromising spiritual and moral commitments to values such as peace, stability, order or freedom. Alternatively, exclusivists, particularly those who are minorities within society, might promote interreligious dialogue because they fear that their own communities may be marginalized in a society where dialogue and pluralism are not upheld as essential social ideals. In this context, participation in interreligious dialogue activities could be driven by a perceived need to defend the rights of religious minorities to worship and practice their doctrines freely. Dialogue activities which imply an ideal of religious transformation might be perceived negatively by these participants and rejected as a foreign imposition.

An important point that this discussion brings to light is that many participants and organizations might be dedicated to an ideal of interreligious dialogue which is aimed at reducing conflict between religious communities but which does not imply a philosophy of religious transformation. Rather than systemic change in mentalities, interreligious dialogue activities might be promoted for the sake of cultural harmony, or for acquiring social peace in communities marked by conflict.

Although successful interreligious dialogue projects are often linked to theories of inclusivism or pluralism, therefore, it is important to be cautious about limiting such projects entirely to pluralist or inclusivist theories of change alone. Some exclusivist groups, sometimes in reaction to dominant pluralist demands, have also been steadfast participants and agents of these dialogue-based projects of transformative social and political change in the region, even as they might reject transformative religious change, as examples from Turkey and Iraq will illustrate below. It is useful to point out that exclusivists are often the most sought after target of interreligious dialogue efforts, and reaching and engaging them is a key to dialogue's success, especially for those organizations who view their interreligious dialogue efforts as a way to raise interreligious awareness, combat negative religious stereotypes, and reduce religious extremism and violence against religious minorities. As various scholars have noted (Marsden 2018), it is doubtful that exclusivists will come to the dialogue table if they are required to adopt pluralist positions in order to do so.

This report has adopted a social scientific approach to this debate among scholars. It has not assumed that either pluralism or transformative change is better or more efficient than exclusivism or cultural peace strategies. Rather than assigning normative judgement or a priori assuming what efficient dialogue

looks like, the categorizations of this report have sought to simply describe the multifaceted ways by which these organizations understand and present their own strategies, goals and normative positions and then to measure what the organizations actually do, and how they are received within society.

One final note on philosophies of change. The categories employed in this report were designed to measure interreligious dialogue as an activity which aims at some range of religious, social and political change. A growing number of interreligious dialogue organizations in the Middle East can certainly be described as action-oriented in this sense, who seek to build partnerships with other religious, governmental and civil society groups for common humanitarian goals. The categories of goals used in this report, including increased minority rights, religious freedom and belief, or inclusive citizenship, capture this broad range of activities.

At the same time, some interreligious dialogue activities might not be action oriented at all, or might not explicitly seek social or systemic change. Interreligious dialogue participants and leaders might not espouse and may even shun any theory of change. Thus, scholars have noted the category of “pilgrims” or “seekers” who engage in interreligious dialogue as part of a personal or communal spiritual quest. An example of this is the intermonastic dialogue or scriptural reasoning. In assembling this report, the researchers sought to measure this non-active dimension in various organizations, what the report has termed as forms of contemplative interreligious dialogue and “presence” as a philosophy of change.

### **III. Audiences and Participants**

In many ways the sections above began to introduce the importance of distinguishing between the different types of participants and audiences that an interreligious dialogue activity might seek to target. The categorizations of the report formulated the following questions to explicitly categorize these varieties of participants and audiences: Is the interreligious activity primarily addressing a global, regional, national or local audience? Does the activity target youth? Or women? Or religious leaders? Is it a dialogue activity focused on dialogue between elites, or is it focused on grassroots dialogue among everyday participants in local communities? Does the dialogue activity include governmental officials and political elites? Does the activity target marginalized religious or ethnic groups? Does the dialogue activity actively engage religious conservatives or seek to involve religious communities who are suspicious of dialogue or reject its premises?

### **IV. Strategies of Action**

Finally, scholars and mapping projects (KAICIID 2015, Marshall et al. 2017) have noted the importance of registering the strategies of change adopted by organizations, what KAICIID’s (2015) mapping project refers to as “Forms of Action.” Oftentimes these forms of action will be closely linked to the typology of organization and its goals or philosophy of change.

As in the previous categories, strategies of action might be more or less explicit and more or less “active.” Some religious communities, like Deir Mar Musa or Monastic Interreligious Dialogue, might strive to stand witness to an intangible interreligious presence of peace, with little action implied by it other than the interior work of prayer. Some organizations or singular interreligious activities might be highly symbolic or artistic in nature, again, without any connotation of “action.” Thus, various organizations, like Darb Maryam in Lebanon, organize interreligious pilgrimages or seek moments of shared prayer with religious others. Both of these more contemplative modes of doing interreligious dialogue might still, nonetheless, influence wider social change in more subtle, but persistent and long run ways. The components of this category used in the report include registering the extent to which organizations employed media strategies; sought legislation and political change; engaged in advocacy work or capacity building; targeted education reform; and invested in spiritual events and prayer.

## **Scope of the Study: Mapping and Evaluating Interreligious Dialogue Activities**

Using this theoretical framework as a guide, four in-country researchers were charged with the task of mapping the broadest range possible of extant interreligious dialogue organizations, activities, initiatives and personalities in each of their four countries. A comprehensive list of these interreligious dialogue initiatives was compiled into an interreligious dialogue directory that includes contact information and websites and is listed in the Appendix. Following a seminar with the directors of the research project, each in-country researcher was subsequently tasked with carrying out fieldwork on a smaller number of the most significant dialogue activities, organizations and key personalities in their country and to write profiles of their activity for the report. The final number of organizations profiled ranges from eight in Iraq and Jordan, twelve in Turkey and thirteen in Lebanon.

In order to produce a comprehensive mapping and evaluation, the researchers sought to register three different dimensions of each organization and initiative. First they provided a descriptive account of the interreligious dialogue organization’s identity and goals. Second, they analyzed the organization’s cultural context and social relevance. Finally, they evaluated the extent to which the organization could be considered to be effective in achieving their desired goals.

### **Descriptive Dimension**

For the first, descriptive dimension, the researchers gathered primary data on each group’s source materials, including the narrative the group presented on its websites and publications and through any evaluations the organization had produced of its work. The researchers also visited the group’s physical centers and homes. The maps included at the beginning of each country chapter mark the cities visited by the researchers in each country.

Each researcher also conducted between 15 to 20 interviews using a structured survey instrument with the leaders of each organization. They also interviewed key stakeholders in the interreligious dialogue landscape of their country, including figures and personalities who were not necessarily attached to any specific interreligious dialogue activity. All in all, more than sixty key dialogue actors, scholars and religious personalities were interviewed for this report. The Appendix lists each interview by country.

The survey instrument, designed by the research director in collaboration with a professional evaluator, was crafted to measure the groups' social relevance and evaluate their organizational success. The full survey questions in English are included in Appendix<sup>2</sup>.

## **Social Relevance Dimension**

Questions regarding the social relevance of the interreligious dialogue activity included asking the stakeholders to reflect on whether interreligious dialogue had become harder or easier in their countries over the last ten years; whether it had increased in its religious and political legitimacy; and the social support and enthusiasm for dialogue in their country.

The choice of these questions sought to take stock of interreligious dialogue organizations' presence in any given context and register how they navigate the problems and tensions associated with their activity. These questions also sought to understand delicate themes regarding outside political and religious influence on these activities and the ways in which they might serve hostile purposes. This included understanding whether there might be hidden or exogenous agendas that were driving an organization's activities or if it had set red lines for itself that it would not cross. The survey questions also attempted to elicit the personal narratives of each interviewer in order to capture their own vision of interreligious dialogue and the sorts of social and religious changes, both hoped for and unexpected, that their interreligious activities aimed to produce.

## **Organizational Success Dimension**

Questions regarding the success of the organization attempted to evaluate their dialogue activities for what they are. In other words, how does each organization define its success? Are there specific changes that the organization can point to as a result of their efforts? If the organization, for example, has named education reform as its principal strategy of action, what has this organization done in that regard? The survey questions sought to gather illustrative examples of change that might suggest whether the strategies of the organization were working, including through personal transformation stories and examples of best practice within their own organization. In all of these questions, the survey attempted to register change over time and the types of conditions which

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<sup>2</sup> The survey questions were also translated into Turkish and Arabic, the language in which most of the interviews were conducted.

facilitated successful change or decline in each country's interreligious dialogue context. Finally, the questions invited the interviewers to think "big" about the future of interreligious dialogue in their countries and to make recommendations to potential donors about what they might be able to achieve with funding and other forms of aid.

## 2. Comparative Overview of the Results and Challenges

### Type of Organization

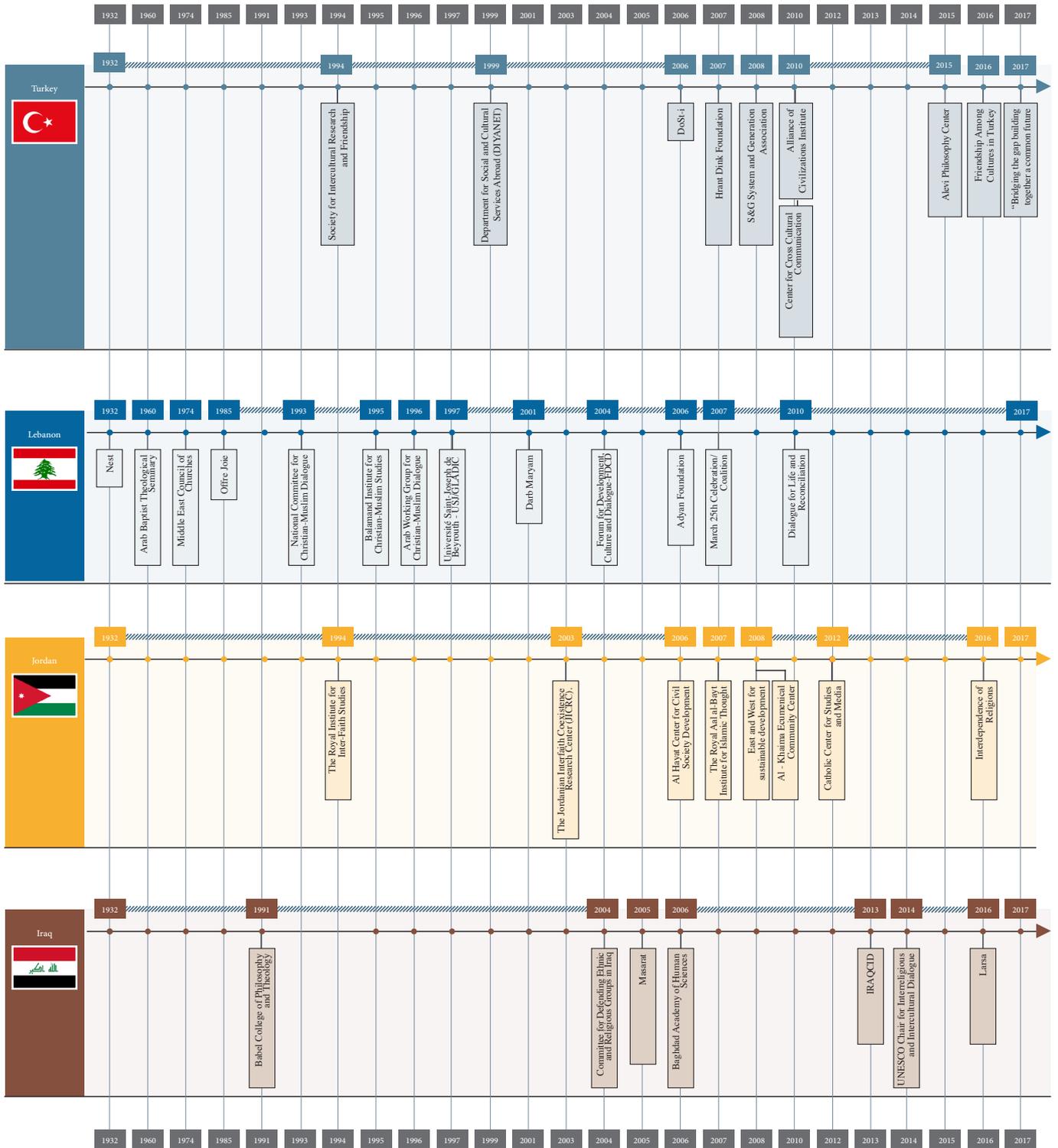
#### Evolution of the Dialogue Landscape over Time

The interreligious dialogue mapping created by this report offers a portrait of a field in motion over time whose development reflects both common regional trends and specific national dynamics. Table 1, which lists several of the more important interreligious organizations profiled in the report for each country, illustrates these dual influences well. Thus, on the one hand, the table illustrates a common dynamic of recent interreligious growth across the region, with the majority of the organizations in the table being established in the past 15 years alone. This includes most of the more important interreligious dialogue institutes in these four countries, such as organizations like the Forum for Development, Culture and Dialogue (est. 2004), Adyan Foundation (2006), and Dialogue for Life and Reconciliation (2010) in Lebanon; the Iraq Council for Interfaith Dialogue (2013), the UNESCO Chair at the University of Kufa (2014) and the Defense Committee in Iraq (2004); and the Alliance of Civilizations (2010), DoSt-I (2004) and Alevi Center (2015) in Turkey. Other important organizations, such as the Royal Institute for Interfaith Studies (1994) in Jordan or the Khoei Institute in Iraq, which have earlier origin dates, have also significantly developed their interfaith activities in the past fifteen years.

#### Lesson 1:

Interreligious dialogue in the Middle East is a relatively young field and its growth is directly connected to the major political and social dynamics shaping the region, including the growth of religiously expressed violence.

# Evolution of Interreligious Dialogue in the Middle East



At the same time, the table also begins to illustrate some of the important, singular, country-level dynamics in this report. Lebanon, for example, has a longer history of interreligious dialogue initiatives, with organizations dating back to interreligious encounters following WWII, and to the period of the Lebanese Civil War. Jordan also boasts several institutes whose origins predate the 2000s, including, especially, the Royal Institute of Interfaith Studies (RIIFS) which was established in 1994. RIIFS began as a Royal-backed project meant to respond to increasing concerns in the 1990s of what appeared to be growing civilizational tensions between the Muslim majority world and the West. The creation of RIIFS put Jordan at the forefront of interreligious dialogue development in the early 2000s and enabled it to coordinate regional efforts within the Muslim majority world to enter into dialogue with the West. These efforts included, especially, the creation of the Amman Message (2001) and A Common Word Between Us (2004) projects which were organized through the Royal Aal al Bayt Institute.

Turkey also positioned itself as a global leader of interreligious dialogue in the early 2000s, by sponsoring major international projects like the Alliance of Civilizations, and by creating a political context which facilitated the dialogue activities of the Gülen/Hizmet movement. At that time, many scholars and policy-makers celebrated the Gülen movement as a paragon of Turkey's democratic aspirations and as a promising model of Islamic modernity. The subsequent split between the Turkish government and the movement, and the designation of the movement as a terrorist organization following the 2016 coup attempt dramatically reversed Turkey's support for interreligious dialogue. As a result, as table 1 illustrates, Turkey's interreligious dialogue field was essentially shut down after 2016.

Finally, of these four countries, Iraq's interreligious dialogue field is the newest, with most initiatives only forming in the post-Saddam Hussein years, in part as a response to the religious tensions and violence which developed following the United States invasion of Iraq, and in part because the post-Saddam political context created new opportunities (and new needs) for national dialogue initiatives.

## **Political Context and the Role of State-promoted Dialogue Organizations**

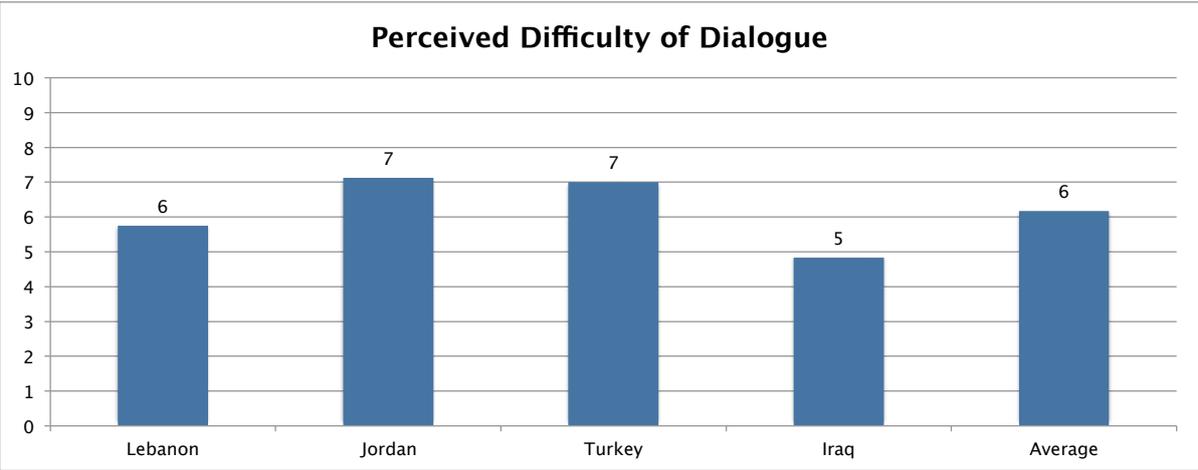
As the previous section began to highlight, the development of interreligious dialogue activity in each country is intimately linked to local and regional political contexts. The data gathered for this report confirms this observation in several ways. Thus, on the one hand, the data highlights the importance of state-sponsorship of interreligious dialogue activities. In each country, important dialogue activities are promoted directly or indirectly by the state, including the Alliance of Civilizations Institute in Turkey, the Royal Institute for Interfaith Studies in Jordan (through the Hashemite Royal family), the Kurdistan Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs in Iraq and the National Committee for Christian-Muslim Dialogue in Lebanon.

As much recent scholarship on interreligious dialogue has highlighted, state agendas powerfully shape the meaning and context of interreligious dialogue activity in any country, and they often do so through state support for specific dialogue initiatives, including through the institutional channels of official state

ministries of religious affairs, like the Diyanet in Turkey. As the Turkish example highlights, the state can set national goals and moods with respect to interreligious dialogue and, even, marginalize dialogue activities entirely from the country. As the Turkish profile will examine in more detail below, following the 2016 coup attempt in Turkey and a growing perception of European hostility towards its process of political reform, the Turkish government dramatically changed course on interreligious dialogue. It dropped support for various dialogue activities, renamed its dialogue office in the ministry of religious affairs to the Department of “Social and Cultural Services Abroad,” and publicly accused past interreligious dialogue efforts as malign exercises in foreign interference. These changes have resulted in the formulation of new conceptualizations of dialogue in Turkey (as elsewhere in the region) which have emphasized models of dialogue that support national and religious ideals, promoting thus an islamo-centric or turko-centric dialogue, as opposed to western-centric dialogue frameworks.

Given the purge of Hizmet movement leaders from all ranks of public service in Turkey, and the association that the Hizmet movement had with interreligious dialogue, most interviewees for this report avoided describing their work as a “dialogue” activity, and many refused to speak about their work for fear of being targeted by the state as associated with FETO, i.e. the “Fethullah Gulen Terrorist Organization,” as the movement was renamed by the state.

Different political contexts, characterized by more or less secure religious environments, more or less explicit levels of social-religious hostility, and more or less recent histories of religiously expressed violence also impact the goals and challenges faced by dialogue activities in the region. Perhaps not surprisingly, for example, as Table 2 illustrates Lebanese organizations find it easier to do dialogue in their current context than either Jordan or Turkey. Perhaps even more surprising, organizations in Iraq also reported more conducive environments for doing dialogue than in in either Jordan or Turkey, and more ease in dialogue than in Lebanon.



**Table 1:** *Perceived Difficulty of Doing Dialogue, on a scale of 1-10 with 10 representing most difficult<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> Each column represents an average of the reported perceived difficulty of doing dialogue recorded in fieldwork interviews for this report. For a comprehensive list of interviews by country, please see the Appendix.

Specific political institutional environments also determine the challenges and goals sought by various national interreligious dialogue activities. In Iraq, for example, the exclusion of certain religious minorities from official recognition in the Iraqi Constitution, such as the Sabeans, Kakai, Bahais, Jews and Zoroastrians, shapes the work of multiple interreligious dialogue organizations in the country. In similar ways, the political and legal challenges faced by Christian communities in Jordan or Alevis in Turkey shaped various dialogue activities in these countries.

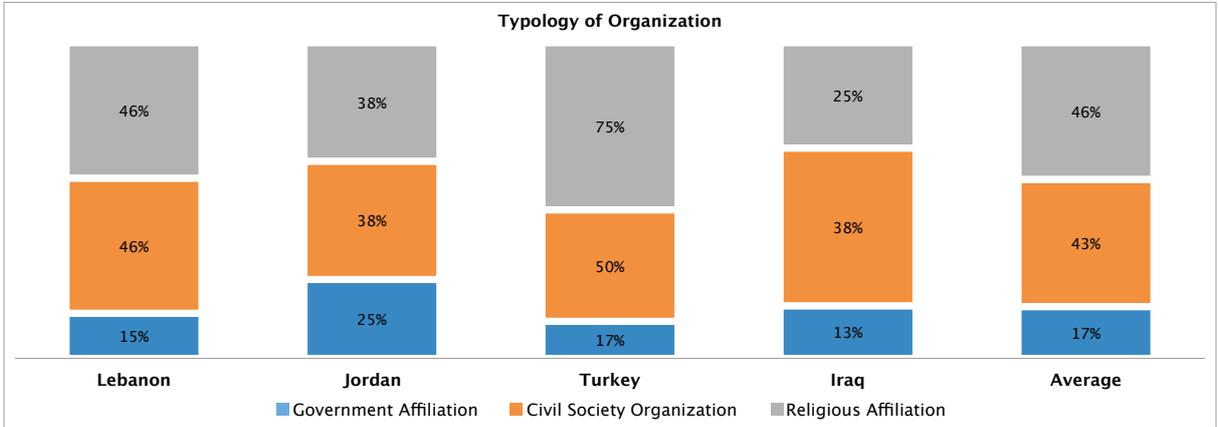
**Lesson 2:**

The political context of each country affects the development and opportunities for interreligious dialogue in powerful ways. While regional and global dynamics are also important, most interreligious dialogue organizations perceived local and national political challenges as the most difficult dilemmas they faced in their work.

**Civil Society and Religious Groups**

Despite the great attention to the growth of state-promoted interreligious dialogue initiatives in the Middle East by scholars, policy-makers and practitioners, as table 3 illustrates the overwhelming majority of interreligious dialogue activities in the region remain non-governmental civil society organizations, many of whom also share an explicit religious affiliation or affiliations. Most of these organizations are locally-based who do not target political elites in their activities nor explicitly advocate for political change. In Lebanon alone, which can boast of over 50 interreligious dialogue initiatives and organizations (see Appendix), less than a handful of these organizations have identifiable governmental links.

Table 3 reports the percentages of organizations (by country) that were categorized as having governmental, civil society or religious affiliations. Each organization could be categorized as having more than one affiliation. The Diyanet in Turkey, for example, was coded as having both governmental and religious affiliations.



**Table 2:** *Typology of Organization*

There are interesting variations among these four countries which, again, reflect the nature of the interreligious dialogue context in each case. As the example above hints, Lebanon has the highest aggregate number of interreligious dialogue initiatives of all these countries, even as it is the smallest country of the group in both size and population. Lebanon is also exceptional in that it is the only country in this study with a sizable non-Muslim population. Together with Turkey, Lebanon also boasts the highest percentage of non-governmental interreligious dialogue activities which, in part, reflects the strength of both countries' civil society and democratic traditions. The influence of the state in the interreligious dialogue field is more evident in both Iraq and Jordan, especially through the sponsorship of Jordan's two leading interreligious dialogue institutes, the RIIFS and the Aal al Bayt Institute by the Royal Hashemite family.

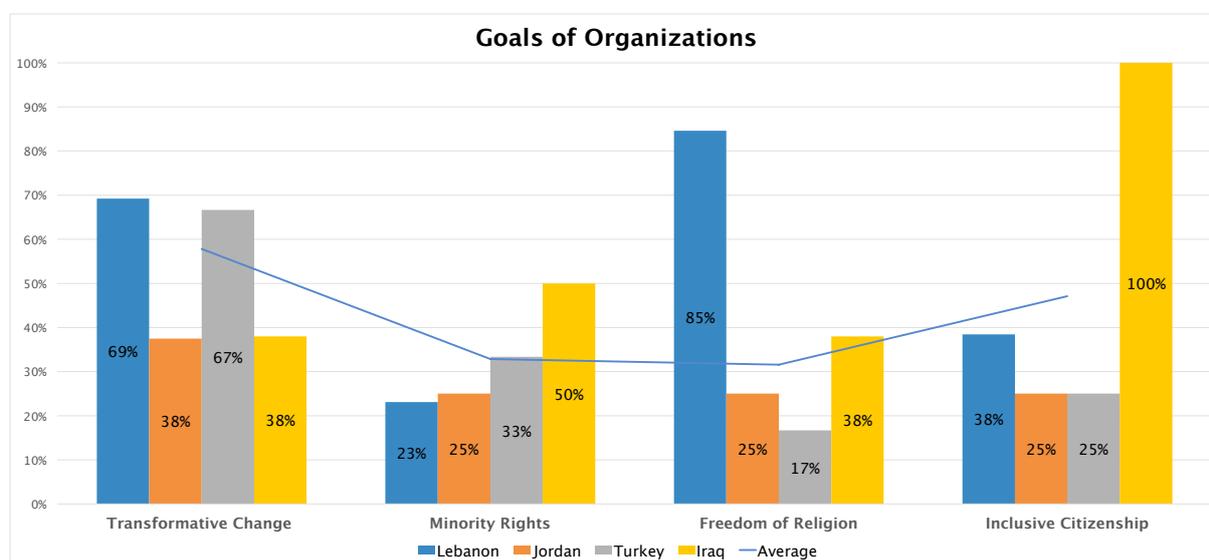
Although many of these civil society and religiously affiliated initiatives identify themselves as formal or professional organizations, the majority of them rely on volunteer or semi-volunteer help and have little funding or organizational capacity. With only a few rare exceptions, most of these organizations do not employ a professional staff nor regularly conduct evaluations of their activities.

### **Lesson 3:**

Although globally minded, government-sponsored interreligious dialogue activities have grown in recent years, much of the interreligious dialogue activity in the region remains local in scope, at the initiative of faith-based organizations, and oriented to serving basic community needs.

## Goals of Organizations

The data collected on the goals prioritized by these various dialogue organizations revealed important trends and distinctions in the worldviews and philosophies of change adopted by interreligious dialogue entrepreneurs in each country.



**Table 3:** *Goals of Organizations*

Table 4 reports the percentages of organizations by country that were categorized as prioritizing the following four goals: transformative change, freedom of religion, minority rights, and inclusive citizenship. Once again, each organization could be categorized as prioritizing multiple goals- the Forum for Development, Culture and Dialogue (FDCD) in Lebanon, for example, was coded as prioritizing minority rights, religious freedom, inclusive citizenship and transformative change.

A first insight from the data on this point is that many of the organizations are interested in affecting what could be described as transformative change in their societies (see Table 4). This transformative change, however, comes in different varieties. For some organizations, transformative change means political and religious reform in the direction of democratization and religious pluralism. These organizations could be aptly described by the label “religion-cultural democrats” highlighted in the theoretical framework above.

For other organizations, however, transformative change was linked to what could be described as a more conservative religious vision. In some cases, especially for certain Muslim organizations operating within a Muslim majority context, part of the attraction of interreligious dialogue was that it offered an opportunity to reshape their community’s response to religious pluralism on their own terms, in a way that renews, strengthens or re-proposes the image of Islam. In these cases, transformative change was linked to a project of constructing a positive model of managing religious diversity within an explicitly Islamic framework.

Oftentimes, the development of this model was directly linked to expressed sensitivities over the potential for foreign influence related to interreligious dialogue activities. It should be emphasized that a majority of organizations in these

four countries registered these sensitivities. Many organizations faced constant challenges by various components in their respective societies who identified them as explicitly or implicitly participating in a successive attempt at secularization by the West which would inevitably weaken both Islam and Arab (or Turkish) societies. Some interviewees expressed a suspicion which they encountered in their work that interreligious dialogue activities were, at root, Christian projects which smuggled in Western and secular ideas and values under the premise of promoting pluralism. At the same time, other interviewees expressed suspicions about interreligious dialogue projects where Christians were not involved in the leadership of dialogue activities. In this respect, one prominent (non-Christian) leader of interreligious dialogue in Jordan, who wished to remain off record, said that he feared that new models of interreligious dialogue were at risk of being “hijacked” by conservative Muslim forces for undemocratic ends.

#### Lesson 4:

There is great sensitivity from multiple types of organizations to the foreign interests and influences that may be tied to interreligious dialogue activities.

Thus, on the one hand, various organizations in Lebanon, Turkey and Iraq have faced sustained criticism and even attempts to delegitimize their activities because of the finances they have received for specific projects from European and American sources. On the other hand, while most organizations are interested in making interreligious dialogue “their own,” in ways which reflect the concerns, desires and values of their communities, there is also sensitivity that the national contextualization of interreligious dialogue might also become a means to further exclusivist religious agendas.

Some of these differences and challenges can be seen in the cross-national data collected on specific organizational goals, including the promotion of minority rights, the promotion of freedom of religion and belief, and the promotion of inclusive citizenship. In Lebanon, all three of these goals tended to bundle together in a number of organizations’ missions and activities. Protecting minorities, promoting freedom of religion and belief, and educating values about citizenship were understood as integral parts of the transformative, and often democratic, change that these dialogue activities sought to generate within their communities. These goals did not bundle together in the same way across other countries. Thus, in Jordan, the two organizations which explicitly promoted minority rights were smaller, Christian-identified groups who did not seek either religious or socio-political transformative change and for whom the promotion of citizenship was not a central organizing ideal. They might be aptly described as “orthodox adapters.” In Turkey, there is a great deal of internal variety of

organizational goals: some organizations seek pluralist-oriented transformative change which might strengthen minority rights, while other organizations seek more exclusivist-oriented transformative religious change in which minority rights are not central. Finally, in Iraq, while the absolute majority of organizations understood their dialogue activities to be tied to the promotion and cultivation of values of citizenship, and oftentimes minority rights as well, few organizations could be said to explicitly promote freedom of religion and belief as a goal of their activities.

**Lesson 5:**

There is great diversity in the political, social and religious goals of interreligious dialogue organizations in the region. At the same time, there is growing support for interreligious dialogue activities which strengthen citizenship values, even as the exact meaning of those values may change across national contexts.

**Audiences**

A number of observations can be made about the types of audiences that the various interreligious dialogue activities surveyed in this study both attract and seek, and in ways which illustrate some of the dilemmas and gaps in the current field.

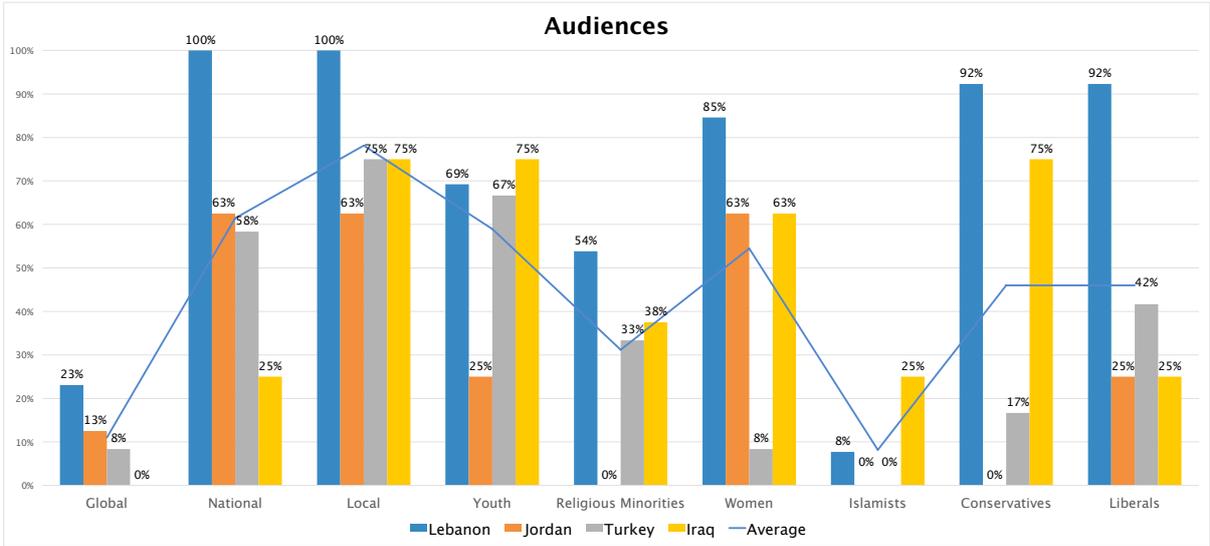


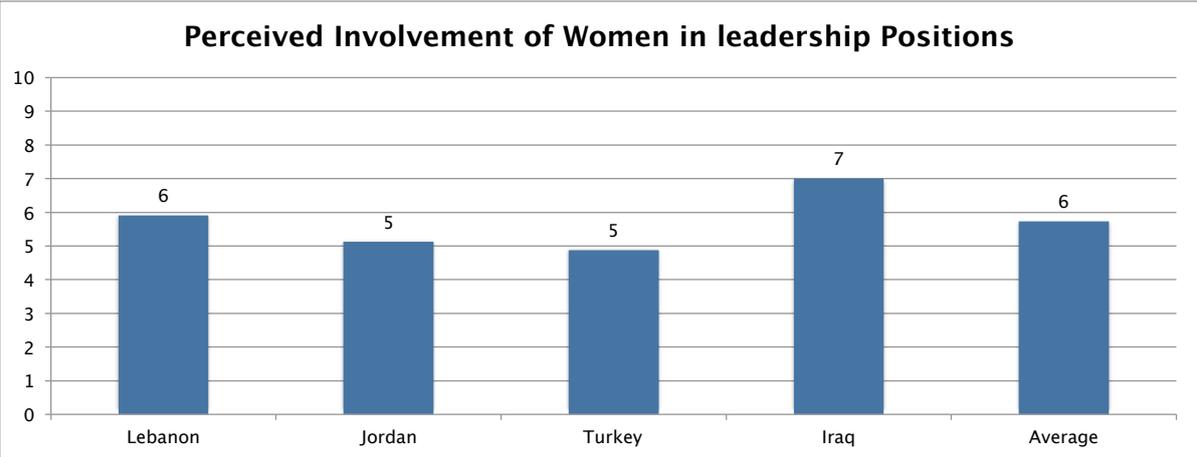
Table 4: Audiences

First of all, as table 5 reconfirms, while a few, important organizations have global or regional aspirations, the majority of interreligious dialogue organizations in this study are focused on national and local audiences, including at the level of villages and local communities. The data also confirms that most of these same organizations tend to target religious elites and everyday citizens, as opposed to political elites or parties. In this respect, many organizations noted the importance of including religious authorities into their dialogue activities as well as the importance of constructing models of interreligious dialogue in the region which could find wide religious legitimacy. Many viewed the success of their work as dependent on building broader religious support, including through the support of prominent religious authorities, for interreligious dialogue.

### Youth Participation and Outreach

Many dialogue organizations in the region also recognized a growing, grassroots attraction to interreligious dialogue in their communities and have sought to engage youth participants in their activities. Leaders of dialogue activities in very diverse political, social and religious contexts noted the enthusiasm and interest of youth for interreligious dialogue, even as organizations struggled to provide sufficient formation and substantive grounding in dialogue for the youth. In Iraq, for example, interreligious dialogue has offered a new chance for youth to experience the religious diversity of their country and to work for a culture of peace. In Lebanon, interreligious dialogue has offered the youth a chance to participate in the renewal of civil society and to deepen their spiritual awareness and knowledge alongside youth of other religious and belief traditions in a way that was not available to their parents or grandparents.

### Involvement of Women in Interreligious Dialogue Activities



**Table 5:** *Perceived Involvement of Women in Leadership Roles, on a scale of 1-10 with 10 representing most involvement<sup>2</sup>*

<sup>2</sup> Each column represents an average of the reported involvement of women in leadership roles in country level dialogue activities as recorded in fieldwork interviews for this report. For a comprehensive list of interviews by country, please see the Appendix.

In a similar way, there was much support for the participation of women within interreligious dialogue activities, even though many organizations recognized that the effective or substantive participation of women in their activities remained quite low, as table 6 illustrates. The absence of substantive participation of women in dialogue activities across the region is particularly notable in their broad absence from leadership roles in most of the dialogue organizations featured here. Lebanon, in many respects, is an outlier in this trend, with a high percentage of organizations which actively reach out to women with their activities. Lebanon also hosts several important dialogue organizations where women hold high levels of leadership, including at the Adyan Foundation (where Dr. Nayla Tabbara is the vice-President and co-founder), the Middle East Council of Churches (where Dr. Souraya Bechaalany serves as the current Secretary General), and where other leading women personalities like Dr. Rabab el Sadr, Ms. Therese Farra and Dr. Hosn Abboud have strongly impacted the dialogue landscape. Although interviewees in Iraq reported a high level of involvement of women participants in their dialogue activities, few women held organizational leadership positions in either Iraq or Jordan and most organizations across the region viewed the further incorporation of women into their dialogue activities as a major challenge and opportunity.

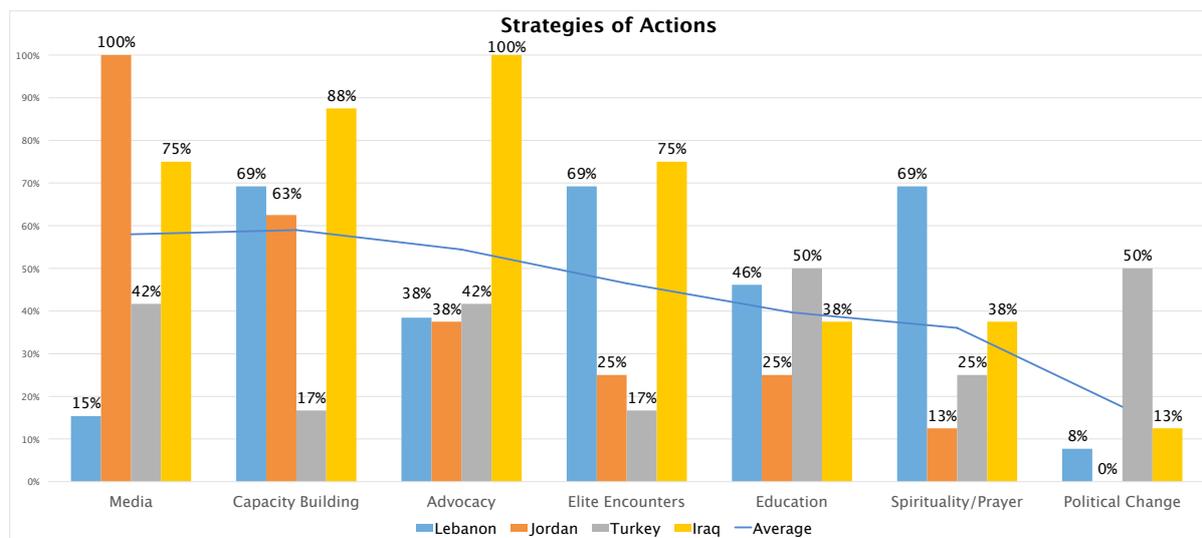
## Religious Conservatives and Dialogue Activities

Finally, while a number of organizations across the region could be characterized as attracting more liberal or progressive religious participants and organizations, much fewer organizations could be characterized as reaching out to conservative religious groups (particularly in Turkey and Jordan), and only rare organizations (like the Arab Working Group for Dialogue and the Adyan Foundation in Lebanon) could be characterized as reaching out to religious groups with political agendas and aiming to influence extremist circles. The hurdles to including these groups into dialogue activities, both political and religious, are not to be underestimated. That said, the inability of interreligious dialogue to include powerful religious groups within society represents a central dilemma for dialogue efforts across the region.

### Lesson 6:

Interreligious dialogue organizations have sought a wide variety of audiences in the region. Yet, there is room for more substantive participation and dialogue outreach to youth, women, conservative religious communities and religious groups that are considered to hold extremist beliefs.

## Interreligious Strategies



**Table 6:** *Strategies of Action*

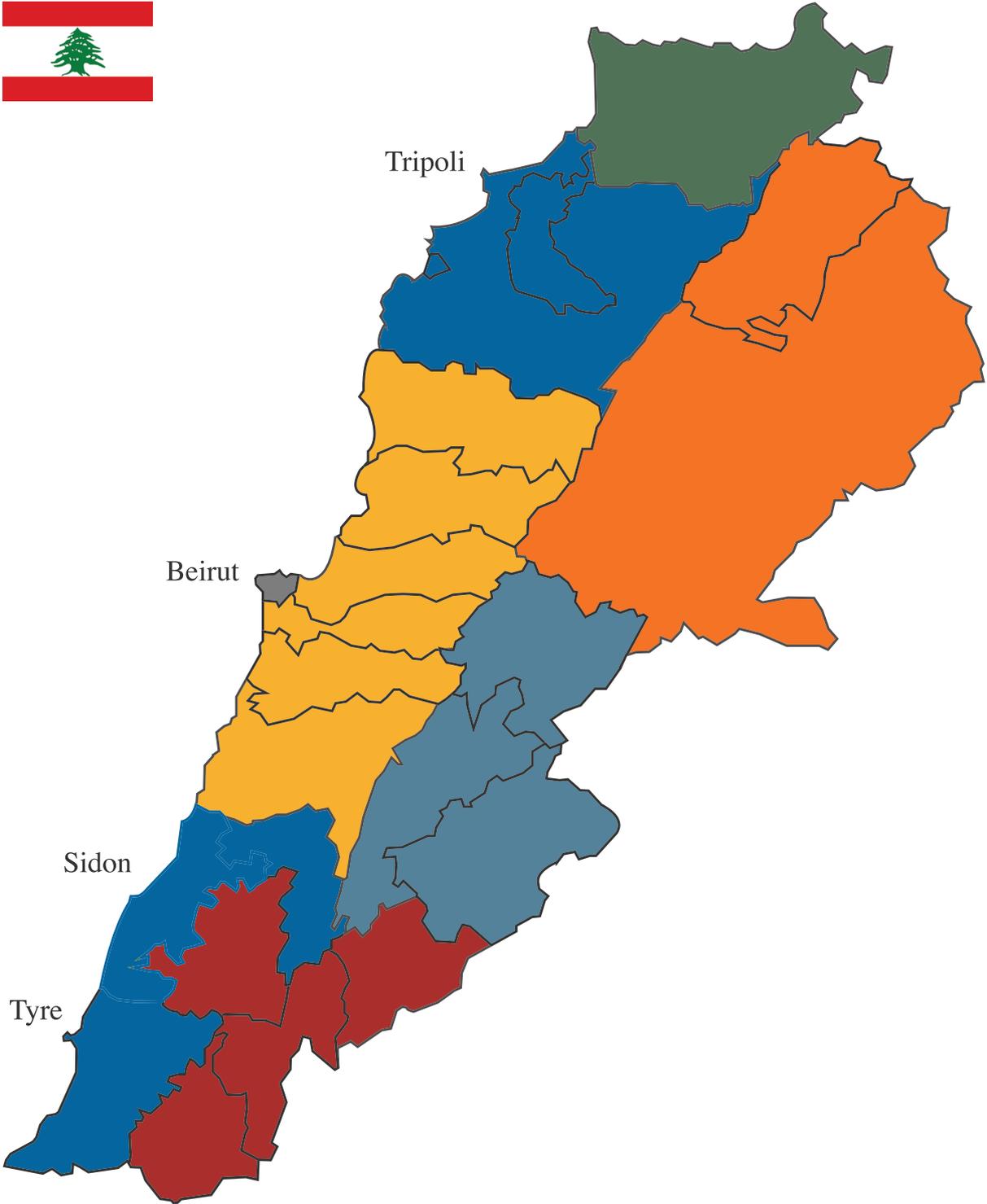
Table 7 illustrates several of the dominant strategies of action adopted by interreligious dialogue organizations across the region. In general, activities aimed at increasing capacity building and doing advocacy or awareness work were the most common strategy of action adopted across interreligious dialogue organizations in the region. With the exception of Lebanon, most organizations also employed social media strategies in their dialogue activities. In surveys and interviews, most organizations emphasized educational reform, particularly through a revision of religious education curricula, as a priority for the future development of interreligious dialogue. Given that emphasis, surprisingly few organizations could be characterized as targeting education as an important strategy of action. Similarly, despite the centrality that many organizations placed on faith and spirituality in their understanding of interreligious dialogue, relatively few organizations incorporated faith-based activities into their strategies. Finally, as table 7 highlights, few organizations focused their activities on affecting political, policy or legislative changes.

### Lesson 7:

Most interreligious dialogue organizations have adopted strategies of action which aim to increase awareness and build local capacity for religious coexistence and peace. Strategies of education were recognized as an essential component in this task which might effectively build dialogue organizations' capacity to participate in the reform and renewal of religious education or education on diversity in the region.



# 3. LEBANON



## Introduction

Throughout its history, stretching back to pre-modern and ancient times, Lebanon has been known as a country of refuge for various communities and minority groups fleeing persecution from neighbouring areas. In its first constitution in 1926, in ways which preceded regional neighbors, Lebanon formally enshrined the concepts of freedom of conscience and coexistence without reference to state religion. Diversity and coexistence were further expanded in the 1943 National Pact, and controversially reiterated in the 1989 Taif Agreement which put an end to fifteen years of war and civil strife. In part, the inclusion of these concepts reflected the particular religious diversity of Lebanon, which hosts a large population of Christians (including Maronite, Latin, Greek Orthodox, Melkite, Syriac Catholic, Syriac Orthodox, Armenian Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Assyrian, Chaldean, Coptic Orthodox and Protestant denominations), who constituted as much as 50% of the Lebanese population at independence and continue to represent one of the largest religious groups in the country. Although official numbers are difficult to establish given their political sensitivity, various surveys indicate roughly similar percentages of Lebanese citizens identifying as Christian, Sunni and Shia (roughly 30% each), together with an important population of Druze (estimated at around 5-7% of the population) and other smaller religious groups, including Alawi, Isma'ili and Jewish communities (Minority Group Rights, 2020). Other religious groups exist in Lebanon but are not formally recognized by the State as one of the 18 historic communities officially present in the country. This also includes the presence of non-religious persons, estimated at 3-4% (Religious Characteristics of States, 2015)

As a form of managing diversity, confessionalism became the adopted system of political representation in Lebanon in which the power of political representatives depended on the social and economic dynamics of the various groups present within different communities (Baroudi and Tabar, 2009). Despite the fact that the Lebanese Constitution respects and protects the freedom of religion and belief, official recognition from the government is required for religious groups to receive certain benefits, such as tax exemptions, the right to construct houses of worship, and the right to apply for autonomous religious jurisdiction pertaining to personal status matters (Lebanon International Religious Freedom Report, 2014). This fact is quite evident in the recognition of the Personal Status Regime (in Arabic: Nizam Al Ahwal Al Shakhsiya) which offers religious tribunals and authorities autonomy over personal matters such as marriages, births, burials, custody, and inheritance, while adopting a civil judicial system for administrative and criminal matters. Some scholars have argued that this sectarian system of governance has fostered discrimination and hindered efforts to overcome religious and cultural differences which create spaces for encounter, dialogue and social interaction (Cox, Orsborn, and Sisk, 2015). Another challenge to cross-communal peacebuilding and reconciliation in Lebanon is that past grievances remain unresolved. Although the 1989 Taif agreement put an end to the physical violence of the Lebanese Civil War, it did not formalize channels for public dialogue nor other mechanisms of transitional justice, interreligious engagement, or social cohesion (Zakharia, 2016). In addition

to external influences, scholars have also argued that Lebanon's state-building project reinforces the creation of patriarchal communities which increase the level of inequality within and across religiously diverse groups (Joseph, 1997).

In many ways, the conflict in Lebanon was never about theology itself; it was and still is about the role of religion as an identity marker and as an instrument used by elites to reinforce sectarian differences among people who share the same basic cultural and linguistic traits (Berkley Center, 2013). Much work on interreligious dialogue (*hiwār* in Arabic) emerged in Lebanon's post-war period as an attempt to bridge those differences and to re-articulate Lebanon as a model of interfaith relations. Before the Civil War of 1975, the "First Muslim-Christian Convocation" of 1954 and the establishment of the Institute for Research and Training in Development (IFRED) in 1959 were considered as early steps made by secular elites to develop Christian-Muslim dialogue in Lebanon (Fleihan, 2006). It was only after the end of the Civil War, however, that religious authorities established the "National Christian-Muslim Committee for Dialogue" where pressing sectarian issues were discussed and where official religious institutions were given a platform to voice their concerns. It was then that some of the key players in the fields of inter-religious dialogue emerged, including Dr. Mohamed El Sammak and Emir Hareth Shehab, who founded the Committee together. Recently, Lebanon's President Michel Aoun has appointed a new *chargé de mission* for dialogue (Nagi Khoury) and presented a UN proposal for the establishment of an Academy for Human Encounters and Dialogue in Lebanon which was approved in 2019.

Over the last decades, the aims and goals of interfaith dialogue have shifted from elite-focused theological discussions to practical conversations between people from different backgrounds (Abu-Nimer, Khoury, and Welty, 2007). Nevertheless, the term "Christian-Muslim" dialogue still evokes a feeling of scepticism across various Lebanese factions (Dagher, 2001). Many feel that the type of post-war dialogue implemented in Lebanon did not lead to an open and frank national debate, nor did it offer the Lebanese people the opportunity to face the past, discuss fundamental issues, or understand the importance of moving forward as one entity (Dagher, 2001).

As a result, moving from theological dialogue to practical dialogue has been increasingly understood to be a crucial means towards social cohesion in Lebanon. Although Lebanon's civil society is generally seen as community-oriented, it has recently developed trans-sectarian associations working on peacebuilding, social reconstruction, forgiveness and reconciliation, as well as human and political rights (Abi Yaghi, 2012). Some of these organizations have adopted interreligious dialogue as a tool to restore social solidarity within the Lebanese context.

There are a number of important contemporary religious personalities across the religious spectrum who are developing, consolidating and renewing theological and social discourse on dialogue and pluralism in Lebanon today. These key dialogue personalities include actors such as Fadi Daou and Nayla Tabbara (of Adyan Foundation), Sheikh Sami Abil Mona (from the Druze community), Mufti Ahmed Taleb (of the Shiite Islamic Council), Sheikh Mohammed Abou Zeid (of the Sunni Sharia Court of Saida), Dr. Ibrahim Shamseddine (of the Christian Muslim Dialogue group of the Focolare Movement), Sayyid Ali Fadlallah (founder of the

Forum for Dialogue) Dr. Martin Accad (of the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary), Rev. Riad Jarjour (of the Forum for Development, Culture and Dialogue), and Dr. Rabab El Sadr (of the Imam al Sadr Foundation). Dr. Rabab, one of several important women working in the field of interreligious dialogue in Lebanon, has advocated for the deeper integration of women in theological dialogue to further advance the religious and social legitimacy of dialogue in Lebanon. For Dr. Rabab,

*“Dialogue is like prayer, it is a duty more than it is a choice. It has been at the basis of human life since the creation of Adam and Eve; therefore, there is no valid reason to refuse it.” (Rabab El Sadr, 2019).*

Given the large number of interreligious dialogue organizations active in contemporary Lebanon, this report has chosen to focus on a relatively short list of organizations which the researchers were able to contact and interview. While these organizations are representative of the dialogue landscape in Lebanon and introduce most of the key actors of dialogue in the country, several important organizations, such as Sayyid Ali Fadlallah’s Forum for Dialogue, were unable to be interviewed for the report.

Although much research on faith-based organizations treats all actors as one – religious leaders, religious institutions, faith-based organizations (FBOs), and NGOs who do not declare a faith but who value intrinsic faith-based values – their operational frameworks vary distinctively (Browne, 2014). This variety of dialogue frameworks and approaches is best demonstrated through the presentation of the organisations below, and through a profile of their modus operandi, their success stories, the challenges they face, and their sources of hope for the future.

# Evolution of Interreligious Dialogue in Lebanon



## **Mapping of Organisations, Personalities, and Initiatives:**

### **Adyan Foundation for Diversity, Solidarity, and Human Dignity**

Registered as a non-governmental organization in 2008, Adyan Foundation has been working locally, regionally, and internationally on the concepts of diversity, pluralism, inclusive citizenship, community resilience, and spiritual solidarity since its initial founding in 2006. The regional and international profile of Adyan has grown significantly over the last five years and it earned the Niwano Peace Prize in 2018 for its dialogue efforts. Adyan's central objective is to help people understand how to positively deal with different forms of diversity on personal, national and international levels. It does so through the work of around twenty team members and through four main departments, including:

#### **The Institute of Citizenship and Diversity Management:**

The projects within this department aim to produce tangible resources on topics that help advance the general objective of the organization: education on diversity (cultural and religious), active and inclusive citizenship, as well as freedom of religion and belief. In addition, the Institute develops theologies for diversity, citizenship, and living together (such as the concept of Religious Social Responsibility) and offers training to participants on how to become resource persons for diversity.

#### **The Rashad Center for Cultural Governance:**

Adyan also works on bringing different stakeholders together, whether government bodies, political leaders, policy-makers, or civil society organizations in order to conduct an efficient and effective policy dialogue and to play a bigger role on both legal and political levels.

#### **The Community Engagement Department:**

Adyan Foundation highlights the importance of creating networks of people who live the values of diversity, solidarity, and human dignity. It has developed youth, volunteers, ambassadors, and family networks who are trained and engaged on a yearly basis, through capacity-building and community service programmes, in order to play an influential role in their respective local communities.

## **The Media (Communications) Department:**

Through its Taadudiya (Pluralism) platform, Adyan aims to make public all of its concepts and definitions especially those related to diversity and citizenship. One of its main strategies is the implementation of an existential narrative concept which highlights the real experiences of positive heroes who have done something to inspire change in their own communities. These stories offer proof that living dialogue is essential, and that online conversations can be accompanied by practical experiences which can sustain strong interfaith relations and counter violent extremism.

Adyan aims, whenever possible, to engage its youth constituents, whether volunteers or employees, through capacity-building workshops, training of trainers' seminars, as well as "Religion and Public Affairs" courses to bolster religious and social understanding among its networks. However, over the past few years, there has been increased demand for training on Adyan topics as well as on monitoring and evaluation techniques rather than on interpersonal skills. Currently, an internal system of evaluation is being developed to unify and better identify the outcomes and impacts of implemented projects and programmes. This system hopes to be beneficial not only for Adyan but as a tool of measurement for dialogue projects around the world.

Although Adyan Foundation plays an important role in diversity education and manages to engage different stakeholders through various techniques, it faces a number of challenges in its day-to-day work. Because the issues of sectarianism and identitarian politics have increased significantly during the past two decades, exacerbated by a tense geopolitical situation, certain groups (especially minorities and marginalized communities) have become more insecure and, consequently, the process of dialogue has become harder. Moreover, financial challenges sometimes become a hindrance to work progress, especially when demand for the organization surpasses its capacity.

There is a strong female presence at Adyan Foundation, both in its governing board and in various cross-departmental managerial positions. Around 80% of its employees, volunteers, and board members are women. Although the presence of women in organizations does not necessarily influence concepts per se, it tends to approach theories and ideas in a different manner. This has helped encourage young women to engage in more interactive dialogue spaces where they have the chance to speak and discuss issues that concern them, to serve, and to act together.

Adyan has set its strategy for 2017-2026 according to four global goals subdivided into strategic objectives. All its projects (an average of 25 running projects yearly) fit into those strategic objectives. Based on its experience in Lebanon, and on demand from Iraqi youth and policy makers, Adyan has recently expanded its activities to Iraq.

## Dialogue for Life and Reconciliation (DLR)

Dialogue for Life and Reconciliation's (DLR) inception dates back to 2010, as a response to a perceived need to generate spaces for dialogue between youth from different backgrounds, to discuss substantial and sensitive matters related to religious diversity, and to equip them with the necessary skills to break stereotypes and create a positive outlook for the future. Dr. Ziad Fahed, founder of DLR briefly shares the story of the organization's origin:

*"After coming back to Lebanon, I couldn't help but notice that stereotypes were increasing and that hate and fear were commonly present wherever I turned, even after almost two decades of "relative peace". I couldn't just stand there and be a passive witness. This is why I tried to do something, to create a tool for interactive peace, to build something positive for my kids. It was apparent that religion was there, and that it was not going anywhere anytime soon. This is when it clicked. I could use religion to create peace, to disseminate positive vibes, to bring the youth together, and to promote the message of diversity."*  
Ziad Fahed (2018)

DLR recognizes that the Lebanese youth are particularly vulnerable to the heritage of violence and narrative of fear that are sometimes propagated through the older "war generation". Since no official channels or platforms of dialogue and reconciliation were created after the war, the organization tries to connect people, to increase mutual understanding as well as to break stereotypes and prejudgments through the process of interreligious dialogue. A prominent example of creating a shared space of encounter is DLR's annual interreligious academy which brings together youth from different backgrounds to enjoy their time together, to discover their similarities, to understand their differences, to increase their knowledge, and to raise awareness in their respective communities.

DLR promotes the dignity of being different through constantly transforming itself, for eight consecutive years now, into a secure and free platform where the younger generation is given the opportunity to meet various religious leaders, engage with their peers from different geographical areas and religious backgrounds, discover their multi-layered identities, and recognize themselves as humans first. This approach humanizes the "other" by breaking the barriers that people have created through narratives of "us" versus "them."

Another example of their work in interfaith dialogue is "The Sustainable Network for Religious Leaders in the North," a project that was first launched by DLR in late 2015, and which aims at building a sustainable network for religious leaders who have met over the course of several training sessions, preparatory discussions, and a variety of bridge-building activities on peacebuilding, interreligious dialogue, and active citizenship. As a result of this project, those leaders were inspired to jointly implement several community service activities targeting diverse community groups in their respective conflicted areas.

## Forum for Development, Culture and Dialogue (FDCD)

The Forum for Development, Culture and Dialogue (FDCD) began its work in the field of dialogue and conflict transformation in 2004 through various workshops, seminars, conferences and dialogue groups and which developed out of the work of Rev. Riad Jarjour at the Middle East Council of Churches (FDCD - Home, n.d.) During the past year, the organisation has tried to develop and alter its approaches to dialogue and peace-building based on the needs of its constituents; moving primarily from conflict transformation to conflict prevention through acknowledging the fact that religion plays a prominent role in managing diversity. FDCD were successful in engaging their stakeholders in the design and creation of projects and activities; in other words, they welcomed ideas that came from the participants themselves. Adopting a more grassroots-oriented approach, the organisation managed to engage a number of communities all over Lebanon through initiative implementation and community service projects. Both staff members and volunteers are continuously trained on concepts related to active citizenship, reconciliation, and mediation, which they consequently use in training and capacity-building programmes that they organise for their local communities.

Although FDCD monitors each project individually based on pre-identified criteria, it has been able to identify three main strengths in design, networking and mobilisation. The activities, being mainly participatory in nature, have created spaces for dialogue in all their forms: sports, arts, youth camps, conferences, and dialogue groups. In addition, FDCD has been able to create partnerships and engage local communities in various geographical areas. Last but not least, FDCD lends great focus on capacity-building programmes for the youth and greatly acknowledges their role in maintaining a healthy political, social, and economic system. It considers that one of its “star” projects, “My Citizenship, My Freedom” implemented in Tripoli, Nabatieh, Baalbek and Zahle, is key to increase awareness on the concept of active citizenship as well as to overcome prejudices and stereotypes through a collective decision-making process (FDCD, 2019).

Ms. Mireille Hamouche, assistant to the president of FDCD, considers that interfaith dialogue is moving forward despite all of the challenges it currently faces.

*“The culture of dialogue is becoming more accepted and widespread especially among the youth. Although there is still a bit of fear to dig deeper into controversial issues and to open pages that have not been open yet, religious leaders are increasingly showing interest in interfaith dialogue. Lack of financial resources and the presence of external agendas are sometimes challenges that we have to overcome, but we always make sure not to compromise our values and reiterate the importance of dialogue being open and inclusive.” (Mireille Hamouche, 2019)*

Some of the latest documents on inter-faith dialogue, such as the Charter on Human Fraternity, emphasize the concepts of citizenship and human rights. FDCD considers that those documents are necessary to protect the rights of minorities

and to engage both men and women, youth and religious leaders to move from resilience to immunity, to overcome confessional cadres and sectarian identities, and to create partnerships that increase outreach and impact.

## Offre Joie (Farah El Aata')

Offre Joie (aka Farah El Aata') is considered by its founder, members, and volunteers as more than just an organisation, but rather as a way of life; an example of how diversity is celebrated, how prejudices and stereotypes are overcome, and how common spaces are created. Founded in 1985, in the midst of the Civil War in Lebanon, Offre Joie presented itself as a hopeful alternative for bringing people together in order to create and develop a better future. In addition to organising a number of summer camps joining people from different religious and cultural backgrounds together, Farah El Aata' also facilitated a number of workshops tackling social problems, played a role in the renovation of schools, and raised awareness on the values of love, forgiveness, and respect, both through words and actions. Based on the success of its summer camps and its volunteer-based post-conflict reconstruction initiatives in Lebanon, Offre Joie has started to implement similar activities in Iraq. Furthermore, Offre Joie prides itself on adopting a youth-oriented approach and playing an important role in engaging religious leaders in dialogue. For instance, it was one of the first groups in Lebanon to organise a "common prayer" (in 2003) with the participation of different religious institutions with the aim of overcoming the image of the war and turning words into action. Offre Joie has won several awards for its work, including Le Prix de la Paix au Liban 2014 from La Fondation France.

Dr. Mehlem Khalaf, founder of Offre Joie, considers Lebanon as a model for dialogue and living together. This is why it is necessary to overcome the challenges of inter-faith dialogue in Lebanon: to overcome the gap in transmitting knowledge and the culture of peace from one generation to the other and to engage youth who are more pre-occupied with ensuring a better financial future for them and their families. Dialogue is a natural process, he argues, and this is why all individuals, men and women, have equal standing in the process itself. "Every new-born is a potential source of hope", says Khalaf, and this is why dialogue is an inseparable component of life (Melhem Khalaf, 2019).

## The Middle Eastern Council of Churches (MECC)

The Middle Eastern Council of Churches (MECC) was inaugurated in 1974 at the first General Assembly in Nicosia, Cyprus. Originally seeking to unite different Christian denominations (Orthodox, Evangelical, and later Catholics in 1990) together, the council was among the first organisations to work on the role of inter-faith dialogue in the Middle East in the areas of peace-building and reconciliation, youth engagement, migrants and refugees' integration, as well as policy-making and human rights. Active in different countries in the region, including Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Iraq, and Cyprus, the MECC is currently partnering with other

organisations working in the field of inter-religious dialogue such as Adyan Foundation, Religions for Peace, and KAICIID. In addition, the Middle Eastern Council of Churches is presently involved in a project with Wilton Park, the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies and Adyan Foundation on inclusive citizenship and freedom of religion and belief.

The council aims to assist churches and religious institutions in developing their vision based on the study of theological anthropology which they view as understanding the other through understanding one's self and one's own beliefs. It does this through activities conceived and run by its theological and ecumenical department, its communication and Public Relations department, its Diakonia (economic, social and education support) department, and its department of Service for Palestinian Refugees. Dr. Souraya Bechaalany, Secretary General of the MECC, believes that the council can inspire considerable change especially taking into consideration that it is one of the major voices of churches in the region, and that it focuses a lot on policy-making and vision development, not only on activity implementation.

Some of the main challenges of inter-faith dialogue come from religious institutions and laypeople themselves. There are a lot of ideas and concepts that are internally debated, and that a lot of religious leaders of the same sect disagree on. In addition, the lack of a unified monitoring system delays the measurement of impact and sometimes impedes the development of other related projects. As a result, the council emphasised the importance of creating an efficient evaluation strategy, of building the capacities of women and youth in the field of interfaith dialogue, and of respecting the particularities of every country and every religion (Bechaalany, 2019).

## The National Committee for Christian-Muslim Dialogue

Since 1993, the National Committee for Christian-Muslim Dialogue has been working 'for freedom and dialogue between the followers of the divinely revealed religions and a land of life shared in common between Christians and Muslim on the basis of a free republican, parliamentary, democratic system, under the protection of complete equality in rights and duties between all the people of one single country.'<sup>1</sup> The committee has organized more than twenty-two religious summits over the past sixteen years held in religious and governmental institutions in order to encourage dialogue and inter-faith relations. Mohammad al Sammak, secretary general of the committee, highlights the fact that the summits and activities do not aim to increase tolerance (as he considers this term to be pejorative), but to increase awareness of acknowledging the "different other and, by that, acknowledging his or her truths and beliefs."

Although the committee has successfully helped to decrease tensions in various situations (such as the role it played after the skirmishes in Mount Lebanon

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<sup>1</sup> From the National Committee for Christian-Muslim Dialogue website "Chrislam," available at <http://www.chrislam.org/actions.html>

during the month of June 2019), it also faces many challenges. These include: the rigidity and exclusivity of its organised meetings and activities, the fear of non sustainability of the framework of dialogue, and the lack of inclusion of youth within their discussions. The committee aims to promote an open dialogue, one that does not impose one point of view over the other, but rather one that brings ideas together on topics of common interest. The committee is headed by two persons, Dr. Mohammad Sammak, representing Islam, and Emir Hareth Chehab, representing Christianity.

## Arab Working Group for Christian-Muslim Dialogue

The Arab Working Group for Christian-Muslim Dialogue first started as an arm of the Middle Eastern Council of Churches (MECC) in order to bolster inter-faith relations in countries where “living together” has been a bedrock of their running histories. The Group, which was initiated by Rev. Riad Jarjour (see FDCD) has organised, over the past twenty-three years, a number of workshops, seminars, and conferences in several countries such as Egypt, Sudan, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, the Gulf, and even Cyprus. Topics have included: the Abrahamic heritage, Christian Fundamentalism in the West, Cases of Living Together, and many more. Two of the most prominent charters that were published by the Arab Working Group are ‘The Document on Dialogue and Living Together: An Arab Christian-Muslim Charter’ (2006) and ‘The Document on Mutual Respect among Religions’ (2018). Both documents stressed the importance of mutual respect and considered that ‘[dialogue] begins by respecting the right of others to their beliefs, and by strengthening the religious foundations for coexistence in one nation’(Document on Mutual Respect between Religions, 2018).

Despite the various activities that it was able to hold over the past two decades, Judge Abbass El-Halabi, the Group’s president, considers that the work of the organisation has decreased because of many challenges, such as: the decision of some members to pursue the mission of inter-faith dialogue on their own, the lack of human and financial resources, political sensitivities, and the presence of a large number of similar organizations who work independently and do not seek to partner up with like-minded groups. He also considers that there is still much to be done in the area of intra-faith dialogue.

‘Charters are important, but we don’t need any more of them. What we need is a framework to start applying what is written in those documents’, says El-Halabi. This framework has to be developed with the participation of women, as they might be the only ones capable of breaking male hegemony in the field of inter-faith dialogue.

*‘We should see our active open-minded youth as a main source of hope, and it is about time to stop putting personal interests above national interests. This is the way to move forward.’ (Abbass El Halabi, 2019)*

## Academic Institutions (USJ, NEST, Balamand, and ABTS)

There are a number of academic institutes in Lebanon with centers or programs dedicated to interreligious dialogue. The Institute of Islamic-Christian Studies at Saint Joseph University – Beirut founded in 1977, for example, admits students from various religious backgrounds interested in studying religions and open to working in the field of inter-religious dialogue. The institute encourages academic research in the field of dialogue and the implementation of inter-faith initiatives by its students and graduates. Its methodology prizes giving interfaith classes, i.e. classes on one topic seen from both Islamic and Christian perspectives, and given by two teachers, one Christian and one Muslim. Dr. Roula Talhouk, coordinator of the Masters in Christian Muslim Studies, considers that one of the major success stories of the Institute is the number of people that have graduated from its program and went on to do important things in the realm of inter-faith dialogue (Roula Talhouk, 2019).

The Near East School for Theology (NEST) is an evangelical school of formation founded in 1932. Although the school curriculum includes courses on inter-religious dialogue, NEST also addresses the issue through various quarterly conferences, talks, workshops and seminars where academics and laypeople from different backgrounds are invited to discuss a number of topics from different religious perspectives. The school also encourages ecumenical dialogues and invites people from the same religious backgrounds to discuss topics that they might not agree on.

The Christian-Muslim Studies Center at Balamand University – Koura is another interreligious dialogue center founded in 1995 by a group of Lebanese and non-Lebanese scholars. The Center manages a Master's degree in Muslim-Christian relations, a summer research circle on topics related to inter-faith dialogue, and the formation of dialogue groups between different personalities that aim to increase knowledge and widen horizons. Dr. Elias El Halabi, the current director of the center, considers that women and youth are mostly absent in the field of inter-faith dialogue, but that they can both play a particular role in conflict resolution, peace-building, and reconciliation should they be given the chance to do so.

*'I see that there is an increasing number of people interested in inter-faith dialogue, and when I see the interest of those people to engage academically, I become more and more convinced of the role and importance of inter-faith dialogue in Lebanon.'* (Elias El Halabi, 2019)

Finally, the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary, founded in 1960, seeks to build bridges between Christians in the East and the West. It has three main strategic goals: education, peace-building, human rights and advocacy. From the educational side, the seminary holds its annual consultation and conference on Muslim-Christian relations and provides a Master's program of Religion in the Middle East and North Africa. It also manages a blog that tackles issues of current

affairs on a weekly basis. From the peace-building side, ABTS, through the person of Martin Accad, its Chief Academic Officer, works on several initiatives including: 'Bread and Salt', a project that joins young people from different backgrounds to talk about faith-related issues. 'The Friendship Network' joining religious leaders together to become a nucleus of people of faith and an inspiration for people working together; 'The Forum for Current Affairs' which presents topics of interest for people from different backgrounds; and 'Tawasol', a programme that aims to build relations with political leaders whose vision for the future is one of peace-building and reconciliation.

## March 25<sup>th</sup> Annunciation Celebration

*'It all started with a dream. I saw myself in a tent-like structure filled with religious leaders all looking towards the sky, all praying for one God, all prayers heard by the Lord. This dream was ever-recurring as if it were a sign from God. I was always open to interacting with people from different religious backgrounds and once I started my role as an educator, I tried to transfer this idea to my students as well.'* (Nagi Khoury, 2019).

This dream became a reality when Mr. Nagi Khoury met with Sheikh Mohamed Noccari, a Judge at the Sunni Courts in Beirut, and who was at that time the Secretary General of Dar al Fatwa, Lebanon's official Sunni Institution. Together, they decided to establish the ritual of having a joint celebration on March 25<sup>th</sup>, the Feast of the Annunciation.

*'I was getting sick of theories and ideas; I needed to experience the practical side of dialogue. I needed to experience unity, and who better at uniting us other than the Virgin Mary?'* (Mohamed Noccari, 2019).

The first joint celebration took place at Jamhour school in 2007 and received wide media coverage. It was well-received by audiences from different backgrounds, and, although some commentators considered the celebration as an act of syncretism, support grew for the idea of making March 25<sup>th</sup> an official Christian-Muslim holiday. In 2009, then Prime Minister Fouad El Siniora approved the date as a national celebration which then became a joint Christian Muslim holiday by the declaration of the new Prime Minister Saad El Hariri. Due to the large support from different religious institutions, including Al-Azhar and the Vatican, more than thirty organisations are now involved in the 25<sup>th</sup> of March Coalition. In addition to religious support, the initiative has also received political support. In 2019, the celebration was held in the Grand Serail, the seat of Lebanon's Prime Minister, while in 2020 it is set to take place in Parliament. The success of this initiative has also reached countries such as Jordan, Malta, Italy, France, and Poland who are seeking to organize similar holidays.

Both Mr. Nagi Khoury and Sheikh Mohamed Noccari are prominent figures in the field of inter-faith dialogue. Mr. Khoury continues to develop various projects connected to interreligious dialogue in Lebanon, including a youth conference for “living together.” In 2019, he was appointed by the president of the republic as head of mission for Christian-Muslim dialogue in Lebanon. For his part, Sheikh Noccari suggests three practical steps towards more effective inter-faith dialogue: 1) Creating an information portal including tools on how to organize dialogue sessions between people from various backgrounds; 2) organizing religious trips and encouraging people to make religious pilgrimages together; and 3) adopting a spiritual solidarity approach which plays an important role in bringing people together and creating lasting friendships (Noccari, 2019).

*‘Amidst the hardest challenges, there is always something that pushes us back. What we have to do now is to stop using religion as a gateway to politics and to understand that to each his/her own belief; to each his/her own truth’* (Mohamed Noccari, 2019).

## **Darb Maryam (Mary’s Path)**

Darb Maryam is a movement that encourages Christian-Muslim meetings and exchanges through religious pilgrimages on the path of the Virgin Mary, founded by Ms. Therese Farra, and currently co-headed by Ms. Farra and Dr. Husn Abboud. Since Mary is a bridge between Christianity and Islam, she occupies an important place in both religions. One of the major activities organised by Darb Maryam is regional religious touristic visits in various areas in Lebanon. It not only introduces citizens to various institutions and shrines, but it also encourages them to communicate with local actors in order to consolidate dialogue and the value of solidarity.

Although all of the movement’s founders are women, Dr. Husn Abboud highlights the fact that women are rarely included in inter-religious dialogue initiatives.

*“People have to understand and acknowledge that women have different perspectives regarding theological and religious matters. It is time to give women and youth space to speak about religions and a chance to modernize certain ideas and concepts. I consider that dialogue nowadays is moving backwards due to the increase of hatred and violence. Our source of hope is the love we all share for the Virgin Mary herself.”*(Husn Abboud, 2019)

## Holy Lebanon

Dr. Nour Farra Haddad is the founder of “Holy Lebanon,” the first mobile app organizing a comprehensive database for multi-faith tourism in Lebanon. She highlights the natural and spontaneous dialogue that takes place between people of different backgrounds in religious sites. Dr. Farra Haddad wanted to develop religious tourism in Lebanon for four main reasons: to present the large number of religious sites present in Lebanon; to show that Lebanon was and is still is (historically and presently) part of the Holy Land; to feature Saints who have lived in Lebanon; and to confirm Lebanon as a center for inter-faith dialogue.

The app not only promotes the value of spiritual solidarity, but it also raises awareness between people on beliefs, rituals, and the different practices in religious communities. It is a tool to promote the culture of peace and to highlight shared practices and devotions.

*“People are sometimes surprised with the number of rituals that they share with others from a different religion, and this is our aim. We want people to meet and interact. Isn’t this the general objective of inter-religious dialogue?”*  
(Farra-Haddad, 2019)

Although the tool is one-of-a-kind, Dr. Farra Haddad still faces a number of challenges on the levels of financing and promotion. This app is capable of going viral if it were promoted the right way, and if partner organisations encouraged their stakeholders to use it, share it, and spread it. This is what is meant by “lived dialogue”.

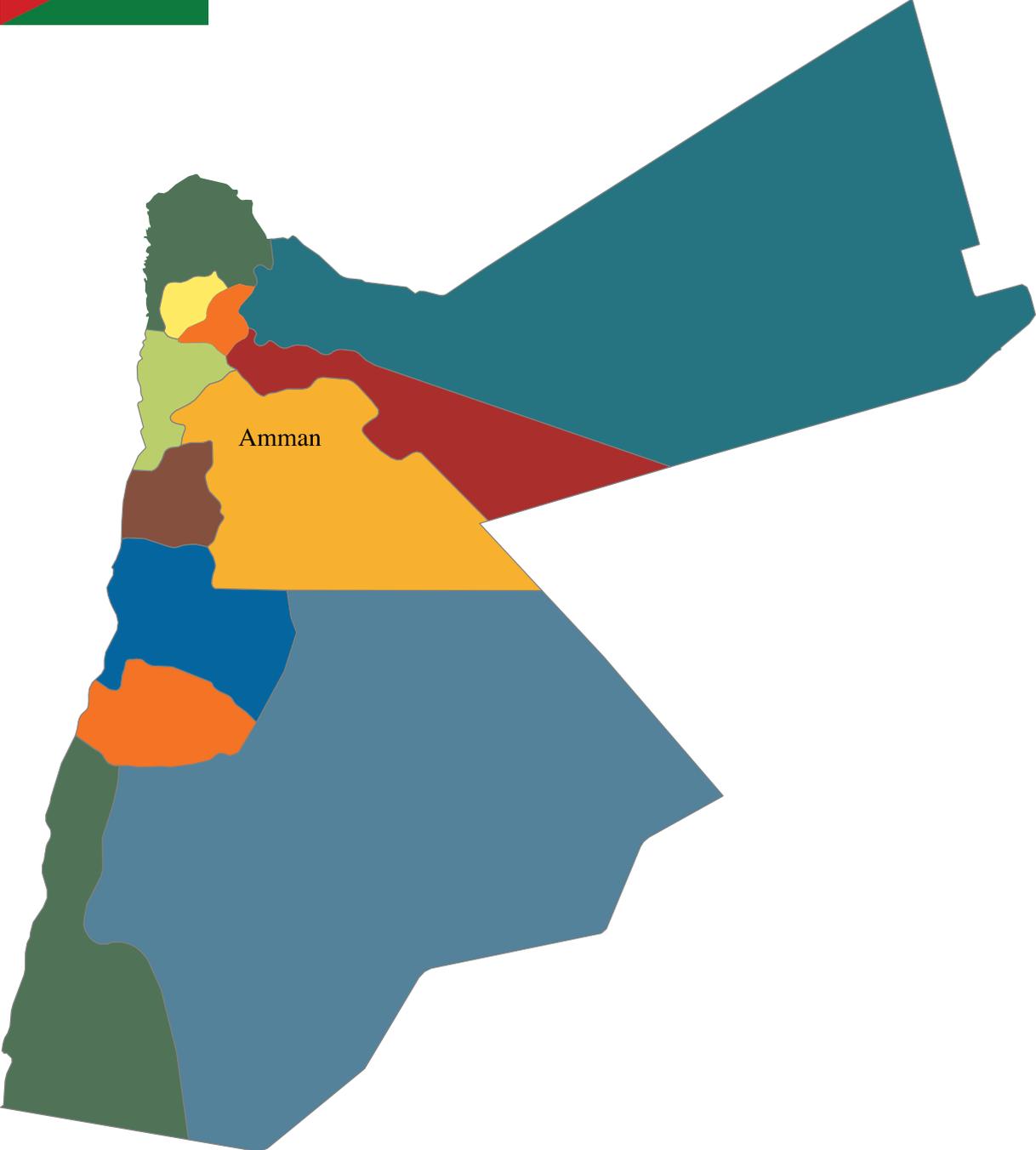
## Conclusions and Final Recommendations

Regardless of the various benefits of interfaith peacebuilding, the road to reconciliation, through dialogue, will require a great deal of patience, time, effort, and understanding. Leaving the past behind is not an easy ask, nor is forgiveness, especially among Lebanese who have suffered so much from the Civil War and its aftermath. Intrafaith dialogue, in this sense, can be a prelude to larger-scale interreligious dialogue because change starts within the community itself first and then propagates towards the outer society. Peacebuilding is not only about politics and structures; peacebuilding is about human beings: their needs, their interests, their feelings, and their thoughts. As Dr. Tabbara expresses, 'People need mercy, they need to feel included. They need to feel connected' (Tabbara, 2018). This is why understanding diversity goes beyond the concepts of "tolerance" and "coexistence" to the concepts of partnership, common responsibility, and a celebration of diversity.

Finally, due to its longer history in dialogue and to its specificity as a mixed country with a unique constitution in the area, Lebanon has the capacity to play a role in the enhancement of dialogue throughout the Arab region.

Two principal recommendations can be collected from the feedback of the organizations, personalities and stakeholders interviewed for this study in Lebanon. First, dialogue stakeholders emphasized the importance of developing comprehensive Inclusive Citizenship Formation which might reduce a culture of fear and promote religious values and identities that validate religious pluralism. This formation could better enable participants to face political and societal challenges through the development of a positive, multi-religious narrative of Lebanon. Second, dialogue actors expressed the importance of providing more space for women and youth to participate in theological dialogues and decision-making processes in the field of inter-religious dialogue, especially through innovative projects that think "outside the box.". These opportunities could help organizations develop and implement more effective and continuous education on pluralism, as well as broad public dialogue projects that deal with peacebuilding, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

# 4. JORDAN



## Introduction

Throughout the current reign of King Abdullah II, Jordan has forged a reputation as a global and regional pioneer of interreligious dialogue.<sup>1</sup> The historic ties of the Hashemite kingdom to Mecca and Medina, in addition to their custodianship throughout the 20th century of Holy sites across the Abrahamic faiths in both Jordan and Jerusalem, has facilitated a traditional position for Jordan in the realm of interreligious dialogue. In fact, while the majority of citizens in Jordan are Sunni Muslims (at nearly 90% of the population), the country also hosts historical populations of both Eastern Orthodox Christian and Shia sects. Although not as large as Lebanon, Jordan also hosts an important Druze community and religious adherents of newer religious communities, including Baha'i and Protestants, have also grown in recent years as well as the numbers of non-religious persons. The Jordanian Royal family has offered much support to internationally recognized interreligious dialogue institutes and initiatives. In this respect, Prince Hassan bin Talal, the former crown Prince under King Hussein bin Talal, has played a critical role, leading many of the Royal Jordanian efforts in this field, and acting as an important, global, at-large ambassador for interreligious dialogue. In 1994 Prince Hassan established the Royal Institute for Interfaith Studies (RIIFS), and, before that, led the Royal Aal al Bayt Institute Islamic Thought, which was founded in 1980 by King Hussein. Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad currently runs the Aal al-Bayt Institute, which was instrumental in the production of both the Amman Message and the Common Word Between Us and You documents, both fundamental, groundbreaking dialogue texts created from within the Muslim majority world in the early 2000s. The Jordanian government has also traditionally helped organize Papal visits to the Holy Land, including the historic visit of Pope Paul VI in 1964, and the more recent visits of Pope John Paul II (2000), Pope Benedict (2009) and Pope Francis (2014).

Despite Jordanian leadership on dialogue during a critical moment in relations between Islam and the West, many interviewees for this report expressed varying levels of concern for the state of dialogue in contemporary Jordan. In particular, they recognized an undeniable gap between the heights of Jordan's international dialogue activity and the lived reality of dialogue in Jordanian society. Several challenges stand out in this regard. First, while the interreligious dialogue landscape in Jordan has certainly profited from Royal support of dialogue, the forms of dialogue which have been produced have tended to remain elite-focused dialogue activities, with little resonance or outreach to wider sections of Jordanian society and often seemingly stuck in a loop of repeating the same sets of activities with the same sets of participants.

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<sup>1</sup> A position that has won King Abdullah II important prizes like the 2019 Lamp of Peace prize awarded by the Conventual Franciscans of the Sacred Covenant of Assisi.

Second, while there is a good deal of specific financial support to the major Royal institutes, other organizations working in the field of dialogue have little financial or organizational capacity. At times, the elite-based nature of interreligious dialogue in Jordan has also been characterized by rivalry.

Finally, there was fear expressed by many of weak or even declining social and religious support for dialogue in contemporary Jordan. This weakness was often associated with an image of dialogue as an elite show with little substance. Dr. Amer al-Hafi, a noted Islamic scholar and theologian who works at RIIFS, described the growth of an apologetic approach within the field of dialogue in Jordan, what he named as an atmosphere marked by “suspicion with the aim of skepticism.” As he noted,

*“The prevailing approach today involves a desire to transform the ideology of the other by highlighting the merits of one particular faith and the negatives of other faiths.” (Amer al-Hafi, 2019).*

The increase of negative attitudes towards dialogue were often linked to contemporary political challenges, including the Palestinian cause and the Arab-Israeli conflict, and debates over the legacy of Western colonialism, past and present, and its association with Christianity.

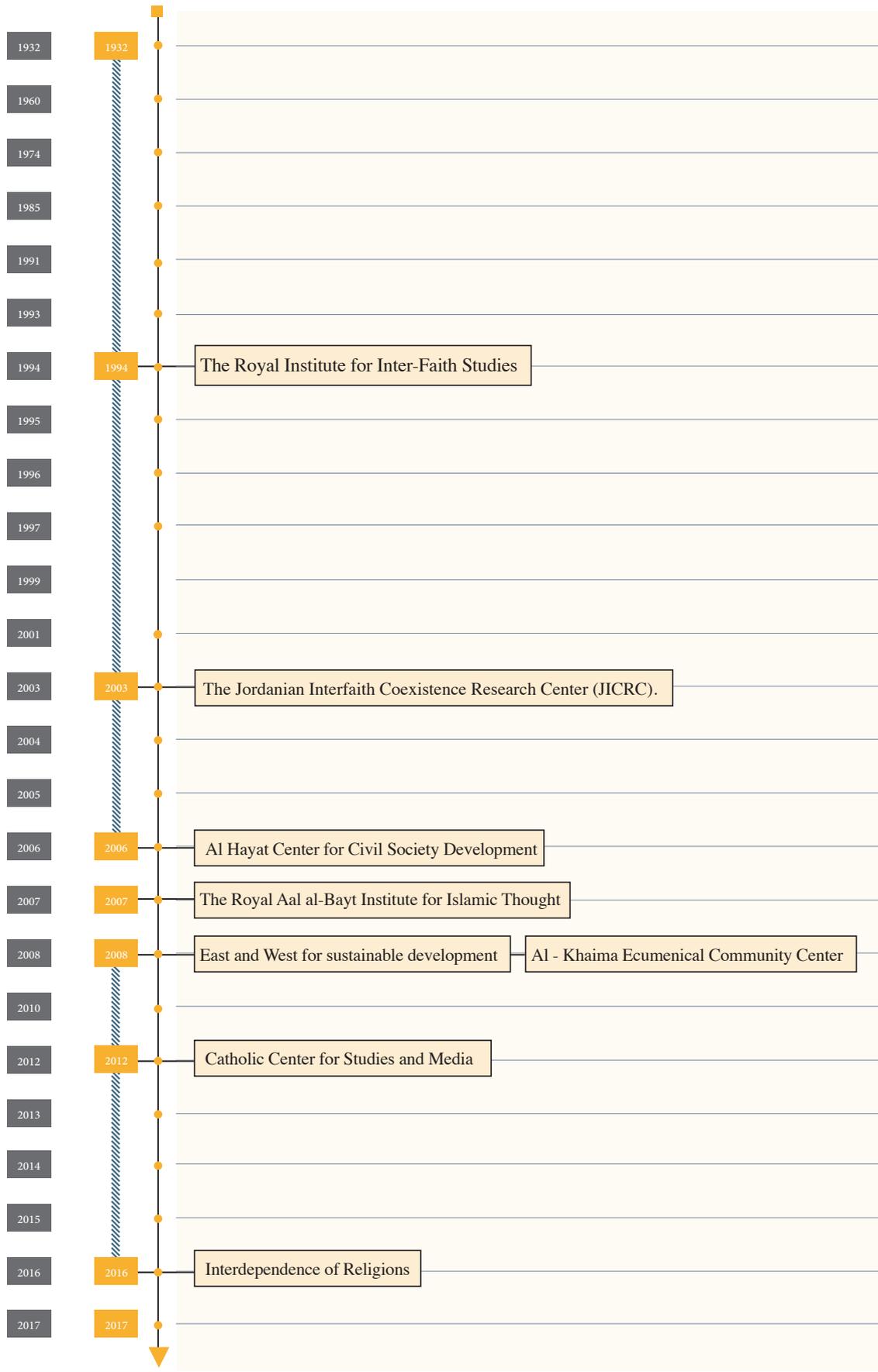
At the same time, interviewees for this research described multiple opportunities and hope for dialogue in Jordan, particularly in the form of youth interest in dialogue. In this perspective, through various interviews made for this report, dialogue actors in Jordan noted both the challenges and opportunities presented by the Arab Spring. The Arab Spring was seen by many as a disruptive force, which, however, had also awoken many youth to seek to understand, on their own, their religious and social context. These dynamics have led many youth to be interested in dialogue activities even as they often come to those activities ill-equipped to speak about their own religious tradition or those of their fellow citizens. As one interviewee noted, as a result of the Arab Spring, Jordanian youth nowadays are more likely to search for many answers on fundamental issues, and to publicly reflect on topics that were previously considered taboo.

The general recommendations highlighted in this section flow from these challenges and opportunities. Dialogue actors recognized a great need to substantiate interreligious dialogue in Jordan, especially through the education sector. They sought more opportunities to teach youth and young scholars about multiple religious traditions and to construct a thicker public discourse on the meaning of interreligious dialogue in contemporary Jordan. They also advocated for more substantive participation of women in dialogue activities and leadership positions. As one actor pointed out, while there are a growing number of women at Jordanian Universities who have degrees in sharia law, and important women dialogue actors, there are still large barriers to entry for their contribution to theological reflection and Islamic jurisprudence. Dialogue actors suggested the funding of summer camps, youth academies and scholarships for

young Jordanians and women scholars to study interreligious dialogue. They also recommended funding to help set up media programs to support interreligious dialogue. Finally, they recommended increased funding by international donors of multiple interreligious dialogue activities beyond the Royal institutes, to encourage a pluralistic dialogue field in the country.

In what follows, the report profiles seven key organizations promoting interreligious dialogue in Jordan, including interviews with key agents of dialogue in the contemporary Jordanian public sphere.

# Evolution of Interreligious Dialogue in Jordan



## Mapping of Organisations, Personalities, and Initiatives:

### The Royal Institute for Interfaith Studies (RIIFS)

The Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies (RIIFS) was established in 1994 in Amman, Jordan, under the patronage of Prince Hassan bin Talal. RIIFS is governed by a Board of Trustees, chaired by Prince Hassan bin Talal. The RIIFS Director at the time this research was conducted was Dr. Wajih Kalso<sup>2</sup>. RIIFS has been the Head of the Jordanian Network of the Anna Lindh Foundation for the Dialogue Between Cultures (ALF) since 2011.

RIIFS is a non-profit, non-governmental organization that describes itself as providing “a venue for the interdisciplinary study of intercultural and interreligious issues with the aim of defusing tensions and promoting peace, regionally and globally.”<sup>3</sup> The RIIFS vision is to build sustained, engaged communities and regional and international partnerships among specialists, including professionals and religious leaders, and to foster socially resilient and anti-radicalized environments.

RIIFS has evolved considerably since its inception in 1994, becoming more and more an interdisciplinary institute which seeks to engage civil society actors within the framework of the Anna Lindh Foundation’s 4D strategy, namely, “Dialogue, Democracy, Development and Diversity,” through a research focus on “cultural and civilizational interaction.” RIIFS supports research and publication on interreligious dialogue from both a social sciences and humanities perspective. It has both an Arabic publication program on Christianity and Muslim-Christian Relations and an English publication program on religious and cultural diversity, which includes the publication of the Bulletin of the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies (BRIIFS), a peer-reviewed academic journal.

RIIFS has a clear institutional framework. Unusual for the dialogue field in Jordan, RIIFS has full-time employees and provides employees with capacity-building programs to develop professional and personal skills. The institution operates on the basis of annual work plans that are developed based on the institution’s vision and goals but not within a strategic plan (short or long term). Additionally, the institution has implemented a Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) approach which uses an employee evaluation system with special indicators for performance evaluation.

It should also be noted that RIIFS has 40% females at many management levels, including top-level management positions<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. Kalso ended his term at RIIFS in October of 2019.

<sup>3</sup> From the Royal Institute for Interfaith Studies website, available at: <http://english.riifs.org/en/Home/About-RIIFS>

<sup>4</sup> The RIIFS director, Dr. Wajih Kalso remarked that the issue of the role of women in interreligious dialogue is closely related to the reality of women in the patriarchal Arab societies, which is reflected by their demands in the field of human rights in general and their citizenship rights in particular.

For Dr. Wajih Kanso, the aim of the institute is to transform interreligious dialogue from a profession of “good intentions” to a daily, behavioral lifestyle that is practiced by all communities and segments of society. According to Dr. Wajih, the failure of dialogue to “turn into a public attitude,” reveals the need for dialogue to evolve from intentions and discourse to “real cooperation” between religious individuals in society. As he noted,

*“Official papers and documents issued by several parties are still deployed at the level of holding lectures and seminars to discuss and publish them, but still they have not been incorporated at the level of legislation or at the level of community values.” (Wajih Kanso, 2019).*

In order to do this, RIIFS seeks to work against forms of religious stereotyping prevalent in society. It also combats negative attitudes towards interreligious dialogue which view it as a “conspiracy” against the Muslim Arab community by the West and which equates “dialogue and accepting the other” with “proselytizing.” As a result, education and youth outreach represent paramount activities for both for Dr. Kanso and RIIFS.

## **Catholic Center for Studies and Media (CCSM)**

The Catholic Center for Studies and Media (CCSM) was launched in Amman in 2012 under the patronage of the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem. It is a nonprofit institution registered with the Ministry of Culture. The main objectives for the CCSM is to cover news of the Latin Patriarchate and other churches in the Holy Land, the Middle East and the world within a highly ecumenical spirit; to raise new generations that respect the diverse religious and ethnic components of society; and to promote a culture of dialogue, understanding and cooperation in Jordan, the Holy Land, the East and the world. The Center organizes conferences and workshops and supports media coverage for community initiatives and projects through its “abouna.org” website.

The institution is run by two full-time employees. There is also a limited number of volunteers who assist in some tasks and responsibilities. Both the permanent staff and volunteers participate in some training courses and workshops for the sake of skills development and exchange of experiences with several other organizations, mostly international. The institution depends on annual work plans prepared by its Advisory team, but there are no strategic plans that provide a road map for the coming years. As a result, the Center’s Monitoring and Evaluation system is limited to what is allocated to a certain project and not the institution.

For Fr. Refaat Bader, the Center’s director, one of the goals of the Center is to help renew interreligious dialogue in the Jordanian context which, he believes, has stagnated and declined over the last decade, resulting in a superficial dialogue environment. Echoing the observations of various interviewees, Fr. Bader noted

how “You see the exact same people in every activity,” and that “once the activity is over, there is no more discussion over the topic and implementing what has been agreed on.” He fears a growing atmosphere of suspicion towards dialogue, with more questions about whether it is permissible or desirable to enter into friendship with religious others.

To overcome this situation, Fr. Bader recommends reinforcing the limited institutional capacity of organizations like his own and concentrating efforts on the youth in order to reconnect the bright start of Jordanian dialogue efforts to more serious interreligious dialogue activity. He recommended the prioritization of institutional development in terms of staffing, monitoring and evaluation, so that dialogue organizations could implement quality programs. He suggested, as an example, outside funding to help establish an Arab religious satellite, where moderate and open religious content could be offered to all beliefs and within an Arab context, and which would provide an objective platform or sources of knowledge so that Arab public opinion would be directed towards moderation, love, peace and equality.

## **East and West Center for Sustainable Development (WE Center)**

The East and West Center for Human Resources Development (WE Center) is a nongovernmental, nonprofit organization established in 2008 by Mr. Mahmoud Hishmeh in Amman. The WE vision is to contribute to building a Jordanian and International society that flourishes with peace, respect and dialogue; to empower youth to make creative and positive change in their societies; and to develop their social, economic, health and political lives based on the values of human respect, partnership and integration.

The East and West Center has been implementing the successful “Ambassadors for Dialogue” project since 2009 in partnership with the Danish Youth Council (DUF) and several other Egyptian and Tunisian organizations<sup>5</sup>. The project aims to spread a culture of dialogue and to combat stereotypes, assumptions and prejudices among the Jordanian youth, on the one hand, and between Arab and Danish youth, on the other hand. The project does this through the creation of dialogue workshops with university and school students as well as youth in local communities. Over the past ten years, the project's activities have reached over 20,000 young men and women. Within the framework of this project, a specialized team was trained to facilitate dialogue sessions in Jordan under the name of the National Team for Spreading the Culture of Dialogue.

One of the initiatives of the project is the "Dialogue Van" initiative which aims to reach a greater number of university and school students with the message of dialogue as an alternative to violence and as an alternative to rejecting the other.

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<sup>5</sup> For a review of the Ambassadors for Dialogue program see Seidenfaden and de Hemmer (2017), “Ambassadors for Dialogue – Extended Impact Study,” available at [http://www.alsresearch.dk/uploads/Report\\_march20%2017kopi.pdf](http://www.alsresearch.dk/uploads/Report_march20%2017kopi.pdf)

The “Dialogue Van” has visited all the governorates of Jordan, carrying a number of the national dialogue team members to conduct dialogue activities in universities and schools. The Center also sponsors “dialogue forums” and an annual “dialogue festival” which features, among other things, a dialogue marathon, dialogue bicycles, a dialogue taxi and a dialogue bazaar.

Mr. Hismeh observes that the Center’s activities are guided by an observation of a weak role played by educational institutions in Jordan in strengthening the culture of interreligious dialogue, which is absent from the Jordanian curriculum and teaching methods, but also absent on the level of familial and social relationships, where the topic is associated with fear, skepticism and negligence. Mr. Mahmoud also recognizes that this situation is exacerbated by the critical situation of Jordan’s economy, particularly high levels of unemployment which feed an attractive environment for ideologies and worldviews which adopt negative stereotypes of religious others and radical tendencies which are inward-looking.

For Mr. Hismeh, the youth are the solution and opportunity for dialogue, and must come out of the “backyard” of dialogue activities. To this end, the center focuses on offering youth life skills, critical thinking and knowledge which may open them to other cultures, religions and new ways of thinking, especially through the Ambassadors for Dialogue project, which he recommended, could be developed on a larger and more effective scale. Finally, he also recognized the importance of incorporating religious preachers into the center’s activities and to counter the negative influence of exclusivist ideologies in partnership with them.

## **The Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought**

The Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought is an international, Islamic, non-governmental organization which was established in 1980 by the late King Hussein bin Talal. Prince Hassan bin Talal was the center’s first director who was followed by Crown Prince Hamzah bin Al Hussein in 1999 and, finally Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad, who remains the chair of the Institute’s board today. The formal purpose of Aal al-Bayt Institute is to “serve Islam and humanity at large.” The institute sponsors various programs related to interreligious dialogue and promotion of Islamic thought. Among other things, the center describes its mission as “highlighting the Islamic intellectual contribution and its impact on human civilization; deepening dialogue and fostering cooperation between the schools of Islamic jurisprudence; and highlighting the achievements of Aal al-Bayt (Household of the Prophet) and their calling for middle ground, moderation and tolerance.” The Institute does this through conferences, research and the building of networks between Muslim scholars and universities across the globe.

Under Prince Ghazi, the Institute launched the internationally successful Amman Message and A Common Word Among Us document, both of which broke important new ground in intra-Islamic relations and Muslim-Christian relations, respectively. The Institute has also promoted the UN World Interfaith Harmony Week and, since 2009, has helped publish the Muslim 500 ranking of the most influential leaders in the Muslim world.

## The Jordanian Interfaith Coexistence Research Center (JICRC)

JICRC is a non-governmental organization established in 2003 by Fr. Nabil Haddad in Jordan. The Center's main activities are grassroots in nature and seek to build coalitions of religious leaders and "coexistence activists" from across Jordan.

JICRC defines its primary objective as providing "advice and assistance to governments, organizations and individual decision-makers on religious-based peacebuilding, based on fourteen centuries of peaceful interfaith coexistence in Jordan."<sup>6</sup>

One of the guiding concepts of the Center is the idea of "karamah," from the Arabic for "human dignity." The center invests in awareness raising on issues of dignity, through knowledge production, research and interreligious dialogue both in Jordan and with international partners. JICRC has established a "Karamah Community Peace Center" in Amman to educate and promote human dignity in Jordanian society. The Center hosts conferences and runs "coexistence" programs which cultivate peacebuilding concepts within an interfaith perspective that promotes democracy, human rights, gender equality and religious freedom. These programs include an "Imams for Coexistence" program, and "Women for Coexistence," "Youth for Coexistence," and "Media and Coexistence" programs. The Imams for Coexistence program brought Jordanian Imams to the United States to experience and study religious pluralism in the West. The Imams for Coexistence program, like the Youth and Women for Coexistence programs, is designed to empower Jordanian actors to be agents of change in Jordanian society.

## Al-Khaima Ecumenical Community Center

The "Al-Khaima Ecumenical Community Center" is an unregistered initiative run by Reverend Samer Azar and a team of volunteers from the Evangelical Lutheran parish. The first initiative was launched with the aim of reinforcing the role of the church in society. Thereafter, the initiative aimed to expand the scope of the church's work to include prayer and spiritual works, in addition to community service activities and cultural events that reflect the unity of Jordanian society.

The initiative is run by the members of Jordanian society, through the implementation of a preliminary work plan prepared by a team of consultants that supports the initiative's cause and directs it towards achieving its desired goals. However, the initiative has very limited resources, and it mainly depends on the church's resources. Also, the initiative does not receive any external donations or support, either from national or international sources.

One of the initiative's activities are weekly lectures on topics related to interreligious dialogue and the relationship between religion and citizenship as

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<sup>6</sup> From JICRC website:

<https://www.peaceinsight.org/conflicts/jordan/peacebuilding-organisations/jicrc/>

well as other topics linked to the historical, cultural, social and political reality. In addition, the initiative holds several social and recreational activities, including celebrations of national events, iftars offered during Ramadan, and awareness campaigns in many topics related to the needs of Jordanian Society.

Reflecting the observations of other interreligious dialogue actors in Jordan, Rev. Azar expressed his concerns about the need for more substantive, positive interreligious discourse in Jordan, which might filter beyond the international conferences and into the Jordanian public sphere, in the mosques, and on social media platforms. He also emphasized the need to take into account the phenomenon of the spread of terrorism and extremism not only among the recruits on the military side, but among all members of society, which negatively affects the system of values, concepts and practices that is increasingly becoming more discriminatory. In part as a response to this observation Rev. Azer is working to establish a summer camp aimed at building participants' academic capabilities related to the science of religions, skills related to leadership and persuasion, and the principles of dialogue and negotiation.

## Interdependence of Religions

Interdependence of Religions is an unregistered initiative run by Dr. Bayan Shboul and her team of volunteers. The initiative was launched with the goal of highlighting the role of religions in achieving peace and solidarity in the community. The initiative has an annual work plan based on ongoing issues or needs related to Jordanian and Arab society. Its team's work is organized through a clear organizational structure with defined roles and tasks. There are no financial rewards for the team members. The initiative is able to cover the expenses of its activities through the support of some national institutions and donations from members of the initiative. Moreover, the initiative does not receive any technical or financial support, neither from local nor international funding bodies.

"Interdependence of Religions" initiative's main activities are centered around the field of media. The initiative adopts other activities such as lectures, workshops and conferences in order to strengthen interreligious values and principles.

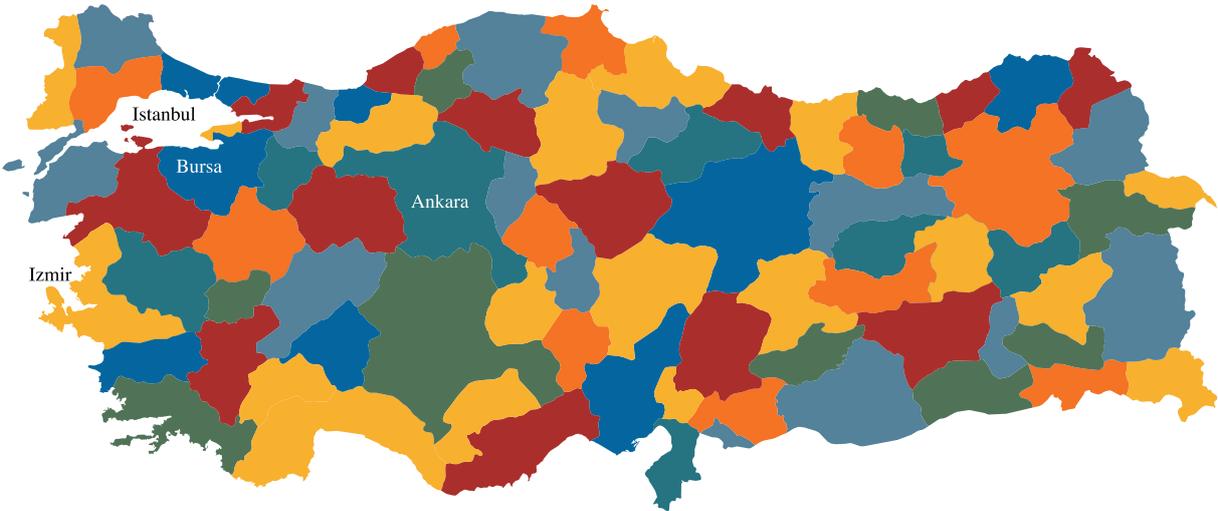
In February of 2019, in a first of a kind event, Jordan celebrated the Feast of the Annunciation as a national occasion, in an interreligious atmosphere, and with the support of the Jordanian government. At the celebration both the Al-Khaima Ecumenical Community Center and Interdependence of Religions were honored as effective and active initiatives, marking the growing importance of these initiatives within Jordanian society.

## Conclusions and Final Recommendations

In each interview in Jordan, participants were invited to “think big” about the future of interreligious dialogue in their country and to imagine what they would do if they were offered a million dollars for their organization. When responding to this question, most participants agreed on the importance of prioritizing funding for further institutional development in terms of staffing, monitoring and evaluation, scope of work and quality of programs. In this context, for example, Fr. Refaat Bader recommended the funding of an Arab religious satellite as detailed in this section’s profile of the Catholic Center for Studies and Media. Other suggestions in this context included improving religious tourism as a substantive reflection of the higher goals of interreligious dialogue, and using media through the preparation of radio programs, television or through social media which was considered to be the most prevalent and influential medium on public opinion. Other participants highlighted the need to fund the further intellectual and academic development of interreligious dialogue in Jordan, through, for example, the establishment of a specialized academy in the study of religions, theology and jurisprudence. Finally, as the Reverend Samer Azar of Al-Khaima Ecumenical Community Center suggested, funding should be directed to the development of youth programs, through, for example, the establishment of a summer camp.

Most participants from across the various dialogue activities in Jordan agreed on the need to work on program and project localization, where the local context is more readily taken into account when designing programs, in order to ensure their effectiveness and impact on target groups. Targeting multiple institutions working in the field of interreligious dialogue is necessary for the sake of diversifying and providing an opportunity for emerging institutions to break out of the workshop-conference cycle and develop their capacities, increase the number of activists in the field, and reduce monopolistic control over funding. This could be achieved by providing grants to several local institutions and not to one party specifically in order to ensure transparency and fairness.

# 5.TURKEY



## Introduction

Interreligious dialogue is a complex and problematic field in modern day Turkey. It is linked to unresolved questions and traumatic events in recent Turkish history, a lack of knowledge and research on the multi-religious landscape of the country, recent political events and economic instability. The diversity and invisibility of non-Muslim communities, the strong secular-religious divide in society, as well as the plurality of views on interreligious dialogue add to the complexity.

The vast majority of the population living in Turkey, as much as 99%, is Muslim. When it comes to non-Muslim religious minorities in Turkey, there is no government data available and available numbers are based on estimates from international organizations or the communities themselves. After the Sunni, the Alevi, who are considered a Shia Muslim sect, are the largest religious minority in Turkey and their number is estimated at between 10% and 40% of the total population (Minority Rights Group International, 2007). In addition to Alevi, around 3 million Shiite Jaafari Muslims (Caferi) live in Turkey with a high concentration in Istanbul (Minority Rights Group International, 2007). The population of non-Muslim religious communities is very diverse and relatively small. These include Christians (Orthodox, Armenian, Syriacs, Chaldeans), Jews, Ezidis and others, in addition to non-religious. The distribution of these minorities is disproportionate within Turkey, although many religious minorities, including Armenian Christians, Syriacs and Jews live in Istanbul.

With the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and the formation of the Turkish Republic, the majority population and non-Muslim communities in the geography entered a dramatic and turbulent period. The First World War, the Armenian issue, uprisings, population exchanges, and forceful deportations created an environment of insecurity and suspicion against "the other." During the formation of the modern Turkish nation-state, religious identity became intertwined with national identity. In this way, all Muslims became Turks and all Turks became Muslims. Non-Muslims who were Turkish nationals started to be called minorities. The civil, religious and political rights of these non-Muslim minorities are guaranteed and protected by the Lausanne Peace Treaty signed in 1923. However, only three non-Muslim religious minorities are recognized by this treaty: Greek Orthodox, Jewish and Armenian. Today, non-Muslim communities have places of worship, schools, hospitals, nursing homes, orphanages and media outlets, and they organize their religious life within the community. However, they struggle with legal recognition and property rights. Over the last decades the number of non-Muslim minorities in Turkey has decreased. Members of the non-Muslim minorities feel that they are second-class citizens. They experience hate speech, prejudice and suspicions, and face discrimination and physical attacks. Because of these challenges the non-Muslim minorities have difficulties in keeping their religious communities alive.

National political events and dynamics at the international arena have also greatly impacted the overall discourse and direction that interreligious dialogue is taking in contemporary Turkey. The first years of the Justice and Development

Party's government in the early 2000's were described as flourishing years and an opening towards Europe and local minorities. However, gradually, with the Arab spring, the Syrian war, the migration crisis, the Gezi Park protests and terrorism in Turkey, the political relations between Turkey and Europe and the United States have become more strained. In a particular way, the attempted coup in 2016 has further deteriorated the relations with the West and had detrimental effects on the field of interreligious dialogue in Turkey. According to government statements, the 2016 coup attempt was the product of a forty-year long process of infiltration by the Gülen movement into the military, police and judiciary with an intent to overthrow the government. As a result, the Gülen movement has now been relabeled the Fetullah Terrorist Organization (FETO) and defined as "an armed cult of fanatics led by the retired imam Fetullah Gülen" (Department of Corporate Communications of the Presidency, 2016, 26). According to state estimates, over 10,000 members of the FETO, civilians and soldiers, were involved in the planning and implementation of armed attacks against the Turkish parliament, Presidential Complex and police headquarters. The coup attempt killed 251 civilians and police officers, and wounded over 2,740. In response, the Turkish state has placed more than 30,000 individuals under arrest under suspicion of aiding the movement and a large number of employees from public services in the military, police and academia were expelled from their work on the suspicion of being Gulenist.

Interreligious dialogue activities began in earnest in Turkey in the late 1990's in the form of meetings, conferences and symposiums<sup>1</sup>. Many of these activities were promoted and realized by the Gülen movement, which, at the time, was a close ally of Erdogan's Justice and Development party. Many international scholars and observers at the time viewed the Gülen movement as embodying Erdogan's new style of "Muslim Democracy," and the movement's promotion of interreligious dialogue, which was well-received globally, was a key element of that embodiment. In 1998, Fethullah Gülen wrote a widely-read letter to Pope John Paul II and began establishing centers for dialogue in Rome, the United States and elsewhere. As a result of this close association, the general population of Turkey now identifies interreligious dialogue with the Gülen movement or "FETO." Because of the popular rage, suspicion and fear about FETO in Turkey, most activities which were even loosely linked to interreligious dialogue activities have been stigmatized. Therefore, scholars, institutions, activists, and the general population in Turkey are now reluctant to talk about or participate in interreligious dialogue activities.

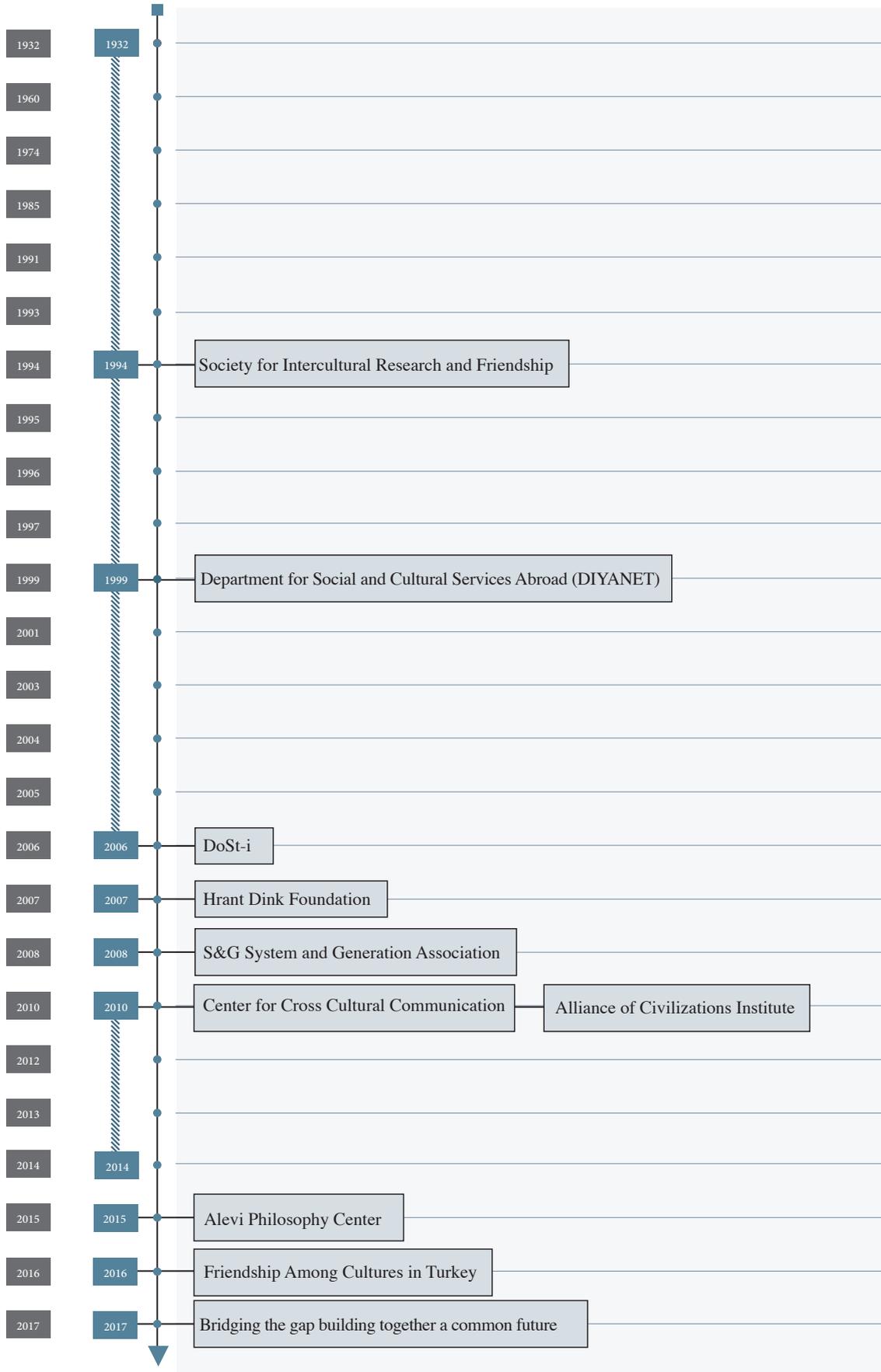
The following profiles portray the ongoing activities of dialogue initiatives in a post-Gülen Turkish dialogue context. Most of the interreligious dialogue activities and projects that are not financed by the government directly are supported by the European Union or international organizations who have representatives in Turkey. In general, we can divide the current interreligious dialogue activities into three groups: non-Muslim minority initiatives, government initiatives, and academic work. It is notable that non-Muslim groups encourage and organize interreligious dialogue activities more than the majority Muslim population, each with their different goals and visions. The Dominican Study Institute Istanbul, or the

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<sup>1</sup> Mehmet Alici mentions for example "In the Footsteps of Abraham" in Urfa-Harran in 2000, "Intercultural Dialogue Symposium" in Istanbul in 1998; "International Symposium on Interfaith Dialogue" in 1998; "International Symposium Dialogue for Peace" in 2002.

Focolare group, for example, consider interreligious dialogue an important part of their religious and spiritual life. Hakan Gülerce, a Muslim activist inspired by the teachings of Said Nursi, on the other hand, wants to unite Muslims and Christians in good action that will serve the society. For Laki Vingas, from the Greek Orthodox Church, dialogue is a way to ensure political equality and social presence for the religious minorities. On the other hand, the Alliance of Civilizations Institute and the Department for Social and Cultural Services Abroad are institutions supported by the government. The Department sees interreligious dialogue as a tool to create peace and ensure religious freedom and rights inside Turkey and abroad.

# Evolution of Interreligious Dialogue in Turkey



## Mapping of Organizations, Personalities and Initiatives

### Department for Social and Cultural Services Abroad at the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet)

The Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı or “Diyanet”), the highest religious institution organizing religious life and rendering religious services to Muslims in Turkey, was an important actor in the field of interreligious dialogue from the early years. The first recorded instance of the Diyanet’s involvement dates back to 1976 when it sent its observers to the Tripoli Christian-Muslim Dialogue Seminar in Libya (Olgun, 268). The Diyanet’s first statements and position on interreligious dialogue were in 1996 at the Euro-Asian Islamic Council. In 2000, the participants of the 4th Euro-Asian Islamic Council defined dialogue in the following way:

“Interreligious dialogue activities should not be understood as attempts to combine religions or to melt them in the same pot, rather interreligious dialogue should allow in mutual tolerance and understanding communication on common issues, discussions and promotion of collaboration by allowing each religion to keep its borders and by conserving its differences without any coercion.” (Olgun, 2009, p. 274)

In 2004, during the 3rd Council of Religion, the Diyanet declared that it was open to dialogue and cooperation with members of other religions and faiths (Olgun, 2009, 275).

The Department for Social and Cultural Services Abroad (Yurtdışı Sosyal ve Kültürel İçerikli Din Hizmetleri Daire Başkanı) is a government department under the Presidency of Religious Affairs and its current President is Dr. Sema Yiğit. In 1999, during his term as president of the Diyanet, Mehmet Nuri Yılmaz established the Directorate of the Office for Interreligious Dialogue (Dinlerarası Diyalog Şubesi Müdürlüğü). Later in 2018, the name was changed to Presidency of the Department for Relationships between Religions and Cultures (Dinler ve Kültürler Arası İlişkiler Daire Başkanlığı)<sup>2</sup>. The third change was in the early 2019 and today the name of the institution is Department for Social and Cultural Services Abroad (Yurtdışı Sosyal ve Kültürel İçerikli Din Hizmetleri Daire Başkanı).

The aim of the Department is to promote a form of interreligious dialogue that is based on the Qur’an and tradition and which is faithful to Islamic ideas and beliefs and teachings, without adjusting Islam to Christianity or leaving the framework of Islam. The Department rejects the interreligious dialogue project of

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<sup>2</sup> Secretary for Relations Between Religions and Culture was the suggested name for an academic institution within the Presidency of Religious Affairs that would research and be an academic advisory board for all those interested in issues relating to Turks living in Europe and other countries. The suggestion for the establishment of this office was made during the International European Union Council in 2000.

the Holy See because it understands it as a missionary activity that has the goal to change Islam. Also, the Department distances itself from an understanding of interreligious dialogue as it was promoted by the FETO. Instead, it argues that Islam has its own definition of interreligious dialogue. Interreligious dialogue is a dialogue between individuals and not religions. Interreligious dialogue should create a common ground for life, a system where differences are respected and accepted. Its primary aim should be to promote peaceful coexistence, religious tolerance, basic human rights and religious freedoms for all religious groups in Turkey and abroad.

In the initial period of its work, representatives of the Department attended international conferences, workshops and symposiums relating to interreligious dialogue and organized local conferences and meetings with religious representatives in Turkey. The Department also signed shared declarations such as the "Tarsus Declaration" in 2000, "Istanbul Call" in 2002 and the "Proclamation of Good Intention" in 2002. During these meetings the representatives of the Armenian Patriarchate, the Syriac Orthodox Church, the Greek Patriarchate, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, the Chaldean community, the Jewish community and its Chief Rabbi, the Latin Church, the Syriac Catholic Patriarch, and the Catholic Church came together to discuss problems they face and made statements against war and economic exploitation.

Olgun classifies the Office for Interreligious Dialogue's activities in the first period into three action areas: participation at international conferences and signing of shared declarations, local governance activities such as iftars, mutual visits to mosques and Churches in cities where non-Muslims are living, and the activities of religious service employees and attachés abroad such as "open days" and common prayer for peace (Olgun, 277-282). After 2016, the Department's new areas of activity include youth, women and family projects for Turkish Muslims living in the diaspora, de-radicalization programs and research on Islamophobia<sup>3</sup>. The Department organizes seminars and workshops, conducts research and prepares reports on these topics; this comprises the majority of its activities today. According to Yiğit, the Departments interreligious dialogue activities have decreased.

The interreligious dialogue activities organized by the Department were high-level and elite-targeted interreligious events. Their interreligious dialogue activities involved high-ranking religious representatives from Turkey and abroad and the

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3 The mission of the Department as indicated in the official webpage:

- a) Follow the recent developments about Islam and other religions in the foreign countries; keep abreast of the scientific works and publications and appraise them; and provide the publications if required.
- b) Follow the discriminative and racist incidents against our citizens and cognates in foreign countries; evaluate the reports, documents and complaints about these incidents.
- c) Conduct activities in accordance with European Union relations which make part of the department's responsibility sphere.
- d) Receive periodical reports on the issues related to the duties of the department from the agencies abroad and assess them.
- e) Do other duties which belong to the department's responsibility area.

<http://disiliskiler.diyenet.gov.tr/sayfa/46/Dinler-ve-Kulturler-Arasi-Iliskiler-Daire-Baskanligi>

Department sent their own employees to be present at international conferences. The Department is mostly interested in addressing global interreligious interests rather than local interreligious concerns. Their projects were not directed towards the Turkish population and its religious communities nor did the Department design educational programs or curricula.

The position of the Department is that Turkey is an example for Muslim and Western countries on how the state treats religious minorities and how interreligious dialogue needs to be practiced. Recent examples for this claim are the restoration of the Bulgarian St. Stephen Iron Church in the beginning of 2019, the property restoration for the Assyrian Orthodox Monastery of Mor Gabriel to the community in 2014 and President Erdogan laying the foundation stone to the Syriac Orthodox Mor Ephrem Church in August 2019.

The Departments and its activities were not well-received by the population and it was accused of continuing the interreligious dialogue project of the FETO. Yiğit explains that the last change in the name was necessary because of the increasing sentiments against the term “interreligious dialogue” in the Turkish population, its association with the Gülen movement and continuous accusations of the Presidency of Religious Affairs by the media of continuing the work of the FETO group. These kinds of accusations could also explain why the Presidency of Religious Affairs decided to obscure its activities in the field of interreligious dialogue, has not expressed a clear and official position on interreligious dialogue or developed a framework on what interreligious dialogue means and how it should be practiced. Most of the interviewees regard the interreligious dialogue activities of the Department as non-existent or insufficient.

## Alliance of Civilizations Institute

In 2005, the United Nations, in cooperation with Turkey and Spain, established the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations Initiative with the goal to address “roots of polarization between societies and cultures today, and to recommend a practical program of action.”<sup>4</sup> In 2010, the Alliance of Civilizations Institute (Medeniyetler İttifakı Enstitüsü – MEDIT) was established by the Turkish government as the academic basis for the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations Initiative, with whom it shares a protocol of cooperation. Since 2017, the Institute has been hosted by the Ibn Haldun University. The Institute is a unique Turkish academic institution that offers postgraduate Master and PhD programs for Turkish and international students. The main goal of the Institute is to promote dialogue and understanding between cultures and civilizations and remove existing prejudices and unfounded generalizations between them in order to enable cooperation for global peace and a just economic and political order between the societies. The Alliance of Civilizations Initiative was formed as a counterbalance to Huntington’s idea of the Clash of Civilizations and the political situation after 9/11.

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4 From the Institute’s website:  
<https://medit.ihu.edu.tr/akademik/yuksek-lisans-programi/program-hakkinda/>

The Institute does this through knowledge production in the academic field of civilization studies, specifically, Ibn Haldun's theory of civilization. The Institute's focus area is Islamic Civilization and Ottoman history and the study of classical texts in Islamic law, philosophy, political and social theory in comparison to works in the Western and other Civilization. One of the aims of the Institute is to revive and promote ideas, concepts and historical experiences established in the traditions of civilizations that have the potential to create peaceful coexistence and that can serve as examples for a just global system. For example, the Institute promotes the ideas of "open civilization"<sup>5</sup> and adamiyyah (humanity in Arabic). "Open civilization" refers to a society that has a multiplex worldview (a multiplex ontology, epistemology, and methodology) which enables its members to accept multiplex meanings and truths and to accommodate different views within and outside its own society. The concepts of adamiyyah (humanity) or huquq al-adamiyyin (the rights of Humans in Arabic) are found in classical Islamic law books and refers to the inviolability of every human being in the Islamic law. At the Institute students learn about the conceptual basis of "open civilization" and adamiyyah as well as how these concepts were put into practice in the Medina Declaration or the Ottoman millet system.

The Institute promotes these ideas and concepts to guest students, at public appearances in TV and radio programs and lectures at other universities, conferences, symposia and workshops and through the supervision of PhD theses and research on these concepts. The project, however, has not received enough political support<sup>6</sup>.

## **Dominican Study Institute Istanbul (DoSt-I)**

The Dominican Study Institute Istanbul (DoSt-I meaning friend or partner in Turkish) is an intercultural and interreligious dialogue center that was established by the Dominicans in 1996. In the early 2000's Claudio Monge was sent to Istanbul to serve as a priest at the Church of Saint Peter and Saint Paul and to engage in intercultural and interfaith dialogue. The DoSt-I team consists of Claudio Monge, Luca Refatti and Antonio Visentin and two associate fellows Silvia Pedone and Vanessa De Obaldia.

The group promotes interfaith and intercultural dialogue with three focus areas. First, DoSt-I is a training center that aims to educate and train the local Christian community about its own Catholic tradition and prepare its members to understand the challenges facing a religious minority operating in a secular, modern, pluralistic society. The second focus area consists of cultural, artistic, historical and philosophical activities. These activities are designed as non-confessional forms of contact and usually include talks and conferences on the multilayered Turkish cultural and historical tradition. For example, DoSt-I organized a conference on

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5 A term coined by Dr. Recep Senturk of the institute.

6 <http://www.gelenektengelecege.com/mehmet-aydin-ile-mulakat-medeniyetimiz-ve-medeniyetler-ittifaki-uzerine/>

the figure of Saint George in Byzantine art culture. DoSt-I offers scholarships to Dominican Friars who plan to enroll in Istanbul's universities in order to increase the knowledge about Turkey, its art history and archeological heritage. The group wants to promote the idea that the Ottoman Empire was a universal empire; it was a broad umbrella under which there were diverse minorities and the Ottomans did not discriminate against them. Third, DoSt-I is a platform for specifically interfaith and primarily Christian – Muslim dialogue, but also ecumenical dialogue. DoSt-I, for example, organizes seminars in which participants discuss common topics from the point of view of their own religious tradition, such as the ecumenical and interreligious study seminar on holiness in May 2019, or the theater play “Pierre and Mohamed” in April 2019.

The group sees interreligious dialogue activities as a form of academic and spiritual exchange and as a means to stimulate a deeper understanding of one's own religion. Interreligious dialogue is also seen as a way to create a presence as a Christian community in a majority Muslim society and a means to offer Muslims an opportunity to meet Christians. Monge believes that the starting point for a meaningful interfaith dialogue is spiritual exchange. For him, building spiritual presence and solidarity is impossible without believing in the seriousness of the faith of the other. Spiritual exchange means

*“to give a real importance to the faith of the other, being convinced of the goodness of your own faith”. (Claudio Monge, 2019).*

As a result, DoSt-I tries to reach out to individuals and not groups and to have as diverse a network as possible, especially through the organization of small initiatives that do not require large financial means but that create an intimate atmosphere for people of different faiths. The key strategy of the group is to building long-term friendships, networks, intimate relationships and trust between individuals rather than “religious universes” consisting only of religious leaders and communities.

Scholars, student groups, and secular Muslims are the main groups that they have had success reaching out to because many Muslims have barriers to enter a priory or church and attend meetings. In the last few years previous participants have kept a distance from DoSt-I and considered it too close to the interreligious dialogue activities of the Gülen movement. Monge writes academic articles and contributes to magazines and newspapers and utilizes social media to promote their activities. DoSt-I has recently opened an account on social media and built a webpage but until now there are very few activities and updates available publicly.

## Focolare Community in Istanbul

The members of the Focolare in Istanbul try to establish long term relationships, friendships and collaboration between spiritual individuals. They believe that a lot can be learned from every human being and that contact with other believers and learning from others enriches their own religious experience and brings them closer to God. As Süleyman Saikali of the Focolare in Turkey reflected,

*"[Interreligious Dialogue] is enriching both sides, it is impossible not to be touched and transformed. Sometimes we enter into dialogue with someone without a strong religious background and this contributes to a misconception about interreligious dialogue ... It is simply that people are looking for spirituality and God." (Süleyman Saikali, 2019).*

The Focolare's mission is to unite humanity into a big family, preserving all its richness and diversity. The group builds trust and personal relations with members of other religious communities, organizes small initiatives and tries to enlarge and interconnect its circles of friends. They believe that small initiatives in neutral fields such as sports, arts, science, ecology and humanitarian aid are good topics that can bring people easily together. Some of their activities include iftars, walks through the forest or cleaning the shores with a mixed group of Muslim and Christian friends. Umberta Fabris manages a WhatsApp group for women who are interested in sharing their thoughts on religion and spirituality. Some of their friendships are based on academic interests (Hakan Gulerce) while many others are at the mystical and spiritual level, such as those with the Nakshabendi sufi order.

## Cooperation Circle of United Religions Initiative in Turkey "Friendship among Cultures"

Lejla Hasandedić is the Assistant of the Coordinator of the United Religions Initiative (URI) in Europe and head of the Cooperation Circle of URI in Turkey. In 2016 she founded the "Friendship among Cultures in Turkey" Cooperation Circle in Antalya and worked on projects with partners in Istanbul, Izmir, Ankara and Antalya, including with the Erasmus+ program in Ankara and the "Africa Friendship Association" in Istanbul. The group consisted of 25 permanent volunteers but since 2018 the circle is frozen because many partners left Turkey following the attempted coup.

The purpose of the circle is "to promote understanding among cultural traditions in Turkey; to enable dialogue and cooperation among faith and cultural groups in Turkey; to combat prejudices and discrimination towards the cultural

“others” in Turkey.”<sup>7</sup> While establishing the circle Ms. Hasandedić realized that there was no support for interreligious dialogue activities by the local authorities nor communication between the Christian and Muslim representatives. Therefore, she decided that the only way to build dialogue is through international students and started to reach out to foreigners living in Turkey and began engaging them in activities about intercultural dialogue. The main elements of her activities were presentations on culture, food, music and dances. The activities were designed to attract as many people and offer them the opportunity and safe environment to spontaneously share and ask questions about each other’s culture and religion. Their activities also raised awareness among the local population about the existence of local Christian communities and churches. Between 2015 and 2017 in Antalya and Izmir they organized five festivals of culture where international students and the local population came together and around twenty smaller activities such as meetings in coffee shops. For example, in Izmir, Indonesian, Malaysian, Dutch, German and local students came together at the Indonesian center. After that event many of the students became friends and organized later on smaller activities. Thus as a result there were interesting stories and strong friendships. She estimates that she reached out to at least 250 individuals and many others who spontaneously joined her activities.

Ms. Hasandedić reports that these activities were not approved of and often the local authorities would not give permission for the facilities or financial support. For example, in Antalya the local authorities did not give permission for using the public square for the festival of cultures. They relocated their activities to cultural centers or local mosques and churches but therefore could not reach out to as many people as they would have hoped.

## **Association for the Support of Greek Community Foundations (RUMVADER)**

The Association for the Support of Greek Community Foundations (Rum Cemaat Vakıfları Destekleme Derneği - RUMVADER) was founded in 2010 as a coordinating body for the Greek community foundations and to represent the Greek community and scholars in Turkey<sup>8</sup>. Laki Vingas, who founded RUMVADER and served as its first acting President, had been actively working on the integration of the remnant Greek community living in contemporary Turkey since 2006. His goal was to give religious minorities a space in Turkish political structures and help to make non-Muslim minorities more visible in Turkish society. Vingas notes that many non-Muslim religious groups in Turkey lived their faith in secret as a form of survival. Vingas took a different approach:

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7 From the URI website available at <https://uri.org/who-we-are/cooperation-circle/friendship-among-cultures-turkey>

8 <http://www.rumvader.org/Page/84/anasayfa.html>

*"I was different. I think that we need to communicate, to be transparent and you need to produce in order to be visible and considered. This is the opposite way of survival - this is a way of sincere dialogue. Dialogue is not a solution ...It is when you open your heart and mind and when someone is respecting your views." (Laki Vingas, 2019).*

The RUMVADER Association has also raised awareness about the Greek community and its history in Turkey. The Association, for example, implemented an EU-funded project "Bridging the gap, building together a common future," beginning in 2018.<sup>9</sup> In the first phase of the project, eighteen university students from non-Muslim minorities (Jewish, Armenian, Greek and Syriac) were trained to present and lead discussions during "Meeting to know each other" workshops. The project also produced a feature-length documentary drawing on oral histories about the social lives and contemporary situations of non-Muslim minorities. For a segment of the video called "Encounter", the team recorded four narrators speaking in Syriac, Ladino, Armenian and Greek. Currently, the video has nearly 45,000 views. The project was promoted to students at universities and the Armenian, Jewish, and Syriac communities.

The project as a whole was professionally implemented and successful. In Van, one participant of the workshop commented:

*"I thought the worst at the beginning, that other religions are dangerous; I am afraid that it will do me harm, that I could be converted. But I felt a great respect today. I realized that there are only small differences between us." (Participant, 2019).*

Laki Vingas was also the first political representative of the Community Foundations. Community Foundations are charitable organizations of non-Muslim Turkish citizens that were established before the Turkish Republic. In 2008, as part of the process of EU reforms, the representatives of minority communities were given one seat out of 15 seats in the Assembly of the General Directorate of Foundations. The Community Foundations is a body that consists of the representatives of seven non-Muslim communities (Greek, Armenian, Jewish, Assyrian, Chaldean, Bulgarian and Georgian communities) and these members decide on the management of the Community Foundations' properties and assets for common activities and scholarships. The Representative serves as a channel between the minorities and the government. This office is the first of its kind for religious minorities in the government bureaucracy. It has created a precious space for representatives of the different minorities in Turkey to cooperate, begin to know each other and communicate. Constant cooperation has created new solidarity and trust between these communities which were previously isolated. The idea that a Jewish representative could advocate for the Armenian community through this office, or vice versa, is a sign of acceptance and trust.

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<sup>9</sup> [http://www.rumvader.org/Page/123/yeni\\_ab\\_programi.html](http://www.rumvader.org/Page/123/yeni_ab_programi.html)

## Conclusions and Final Recommendations

Since the attempted coup, all interviewees have described interreligious dialogue as a term that is stigmatized, suspicious, problematic and even dangerous in Turkey. Out of fear to be labeled supporters of FETO or spies, many participants of previous interreligious dialogue activities stopped attending interreligious dialogue events. Scholars of Islamic theology do not want to invite Christian and Jewish lecturers. Many interviewees describe the Turkish population as closed, not open to pluralism and diversity and protective of their own culture, history and religion. Today, the general population does not support interreligious dialogue activities and believes that they are not religiously legitimate. Many interviewees feel that their work is not taken seriously, and that they are at the margin of their own religious communities and labeled as too tolerant.

Support of political and religious leaders for interreligious projects, public interreligious dialogue discussions, school education on Ottoman's multicultural and multireligious history, and the promotion of a broader understanding of citizenship were mentioned as possible facilitators of change. The Presidency of Religious Affairs could popularize the interreligious dialogue and imams could mention dialogue and other religions in Friday sermons more frequently. Public debates on interreligious dialogue and different faiths would encourage many people to rethink their positions. Open support and discussions on interreligious dialogue could destigmatize the field encourage the population to speak freely.

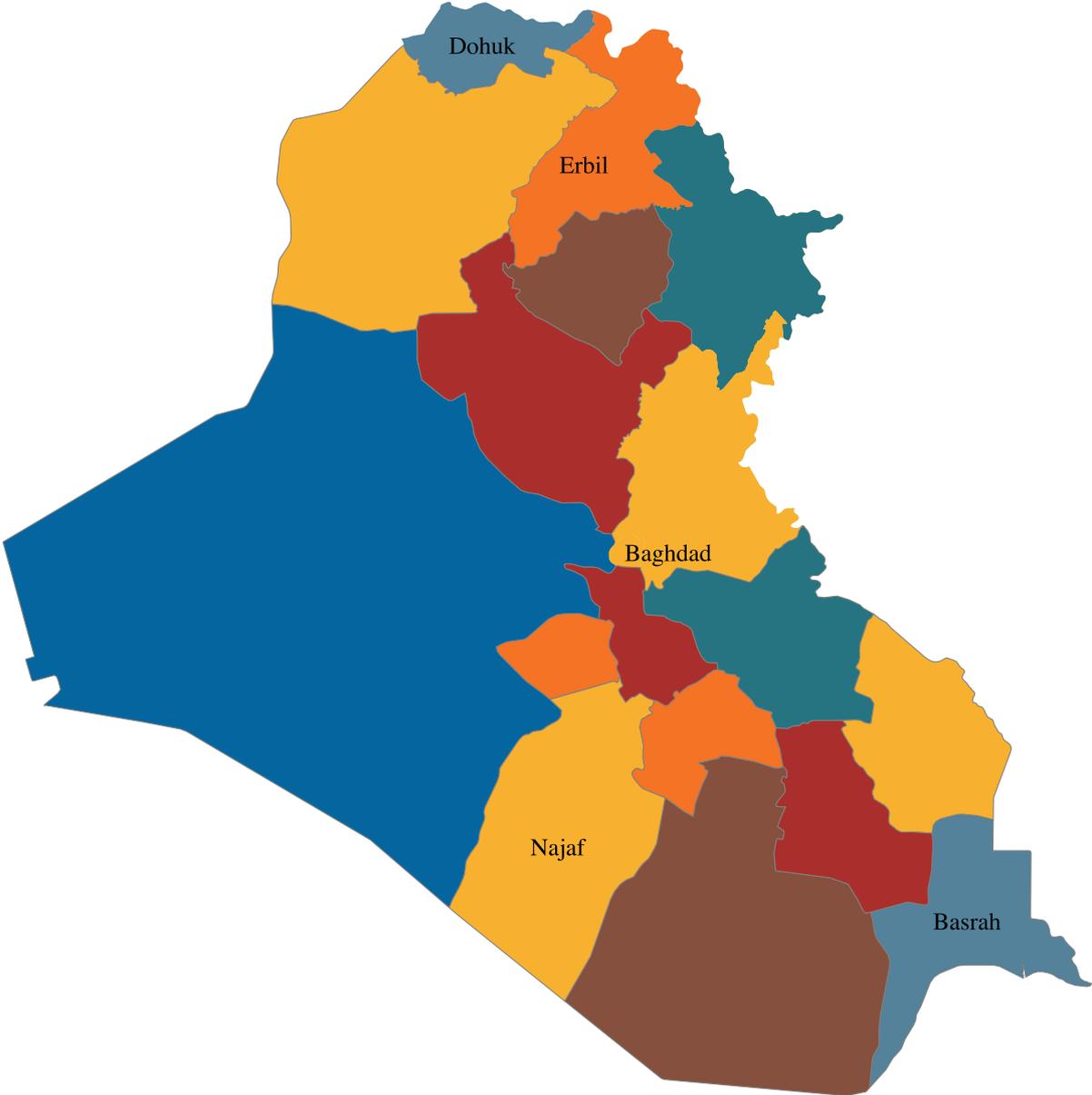
Interreligious dialogue activities are not supported openly by religious representatives today. Most of the interviewees argue that the Islamic civilization has a strong religious foundation and a rich historical experience of positive political and social relations between Muslims, Christians, Jews and other religions. Scholars argue that interreligious dialogue is ordered by the Qur'an and that it represents a religious necessity, but, at the same time, many scholars are against "corrupted" forms of dialogue. A majority of theologians and religious leaders prefer a more apologetic approach or think that interreligious dialogue is not an urgent issue. They understand dialogue as "selling out religion," "twisting doctrines," and "compromising on religious principles." They point out that Muslims should remember the Islamic concepts of *adamiyyah* or *tawalli* (friendship or mutual support) as a more appropriate foundation for interreligious dialogue which would preserve the core of Islamic tradition and theology. In a similar fashion, they would prefer the use of terms such as "relations between civilizations" or "open civilization" as opposed to interreligious dialogue by itself.

Young scholars of history of religions, activists and students who have an experience of multiculturalism, who have studied abroad, have a personal interest in the field or personal experience of conflict and discrimination are more open towards and ready to promote dialogue. In particular, young scholars of history of religions and young students are more interested in learning about different religions and cultures and are intellectually and spiritually more flexible. It is difficult to attract Muslim religious leaders, imams and those with political positions to interreligious dialogue. In comparison, representatives of religious minorities are more interested and involved in interreligious dialogue activities because they see dialogue as a means to secure a better position for themselves in the society.

However, Protestants and the historical non-Muslim minorities were mentioned as more reluctant to engage in interreligious dialogue.

The government funded interreligious dialogue activities are elitist and symbolic involving only high-representatives. The activities do not educate the general population or give them the opportunity to meet, develop an attitude and change their mentality towards the religious "other." Non-Muslim communities find the approach of the Presidency of Religious Affairs insincere and superficial. The non-Muslim minorities cannot open theological faculties, their religious communities lack legal status, they struggle with a population decrease, and feel like they are second-class citizens. The small initiatives that involve ordinary people remain in small circles and are relatively unknown to the general population. Many of the initiatives do not have stable financial and human resource and struggle to organize their activities in the long-term. DoSt-I until now has no appropriate institutional framework to register the cultural center which makes cooperation with other institutions impossible.

# 6. IRAQ



## Introduction

Iraq is a famous country in terms of civilization and diversity. There are many ancient religions, cultures, and ethnicities in Iraq with historical roots that trace back to the time of the Mesopotamian civilization, literally, the land between the two rivers. Today, the diversity of Iraq is often referred to as the “third river” of Iraq that will never run dry, and dialogue among these diverse faiths, cultures and groups is viewed as an important endeavour which protects this true identity. In fact, while a majority of Iraqis are Muslims, split between Shia and Sunni (roughly 60% and 35% of the population, respectively), Iraq continues to host a rich diversity of historic, ancient religious communities, including Ezidi, Zoroastrian, Jewish, Sabeian Mandaean, Christian and Kaka’i, communities, in addition to newer religions such as the Baha’i faith, and to a growing number of non-religious. Various estimates exist on the numbers of the current Ezidi and Christian populations in Iraq and both populations have been dramatically affected by the violence in the region. While many estimates put the current Christian population at around 350,000 in Iraq (Religious Characteristics of States, 2015), estimates for the Ezidi population range from 70,000 to 500,000 (Minority Rights Group International 2020). The estimates for the size of the Kaka’i, Mandaean and Zoroastrian communities in contemporary Iraq are much smaller.

Despite its long history of diversity, the contemporary practice of interreligious dialogue in Iraq is relatively new and only really began to be possible following the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003. During the regime of Hussein, the state restricted Shiite, Kurdish and other minorities’ movements and there were no opportunities for international or local NGOs to promote dialogue. The United States-led international military action in Iraq in 2003, the “de-Baathification” process which followed it, and the violent conflict between Sunni and Shia communities throughout 2006-2007 all created a very difficult environment for dialogue in Iraq. Finally, in 2014 the possibility to pursue interreligious dialogue was closed off by the growth of the Islamic State (ISIS), and its crimes perpetuated against religious minorities in Iraq, including Ezidis, Christians, Kakai, and others. Many Iraqi Shia during this period came to view most Sunnis as if they were ISIS members themselves.

At the same time, for many dialogue actors in Iraq, the intervals directly following these events also presented immense opportunities for interreligious dialogue to grow and mature in Iraq, in part as a response to this violence and conflict. And as Wainscott (2019) has recently argued, the continued strength of the religious authorities in post-ISIS Iraq has created important opportunities for religious-led efforts towards peace and reconciliation in the country. Thus, major, innovative efforts at interreligious dialogue were also launched during this period, supported by innovative dialogue pioneers like Saad Salloum, Sayyed Jawat al Khoei, Fr. Amir Jaje and Archbishop Thomas Mirkis. Courageous episodes of interreligious solidarity have also been celebrated in the recent Iraqi national narrative, including the story of the young Iraqi sunni, Osman Ali, who gave his life saving dozens of Iraqi shia during a suicide bombing in 2005 in Baghdad, or

the story of a young Ezidi man named Shahin who died saving the life of a Sunni woman from a sniper attack in 2017. Finally, it should be noted, several of the highest religious authorities in Iraq, including Patriarch Louis Raphael I Sako, the head of the Chaldean Church, Baba Sheikh, the Ezidi spiritual pope, and the Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani have all offered notable public and theological support in favour of dialogue.

That said, interreligious dialogue in Iraq continues to face many challenges. This includes the impact of regional and international conflicts, which have made Muslim-Christian and Sunni-Shia dialogue more difficult. It also includes internal challenges, including those posed by the current Iraqi Constitution, the Iraqi religious environment, and the contemporary Iraqi political context.

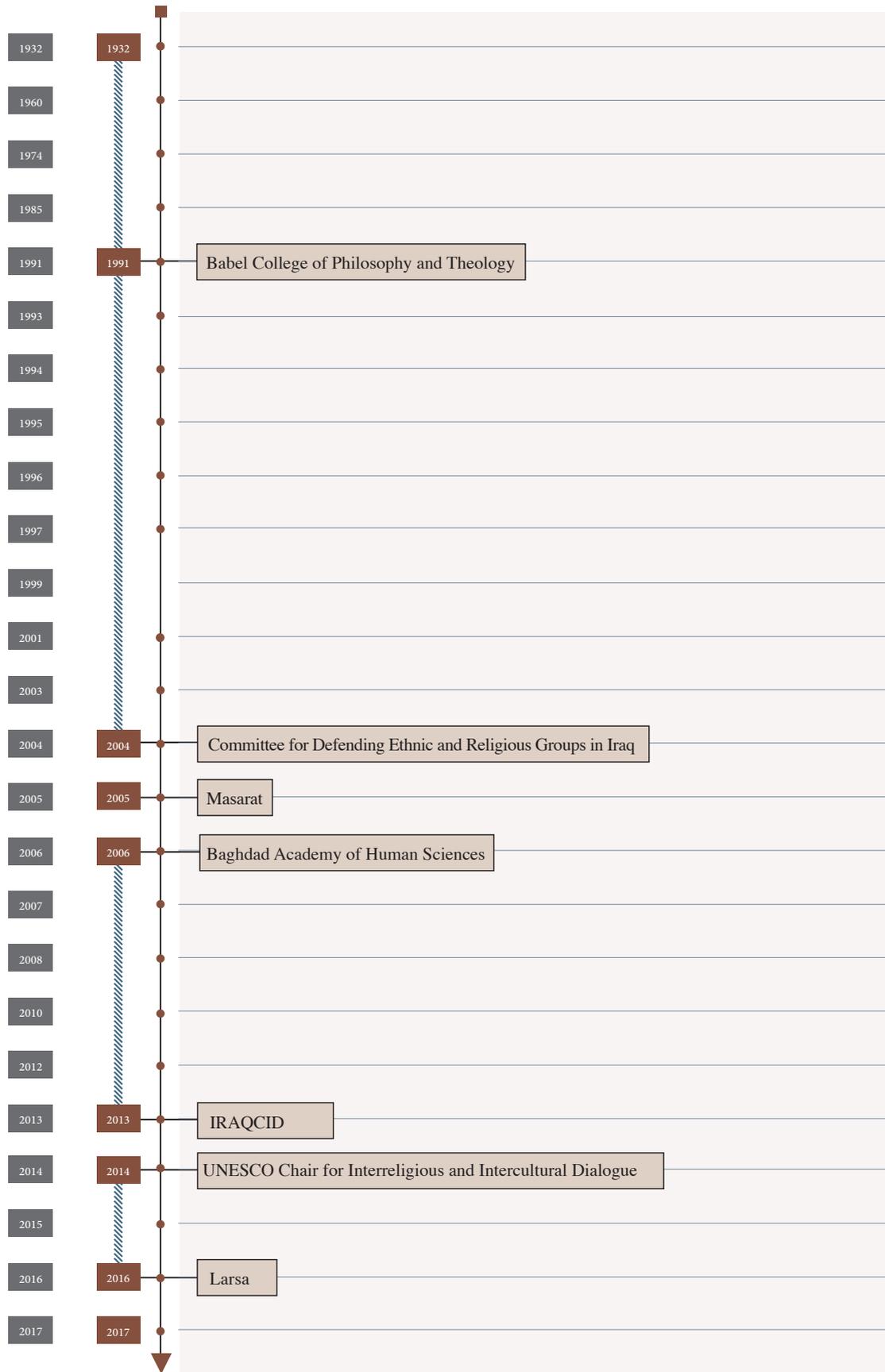
With respect to the Iraqi constitution, dialogue faces the challenge of the unequal recognition of religious communities under the law. Although there are many religions and beliefs in Iraq, the Iraqi Constitution only formally recognizes the “full religious rights” of Christians, Ezidis and Mandaeans, in addition to Islam. This means that other religious minorities, such as the Kakai, Baha’i, Jews, Zoroastrians and others, do not have the same legal status. There are also important legal asymmetries linked to religious conversion and birth by mixed religious parents. In some ways, these constitutional challenges inform the religious challenges facing interreligious dialogue in Iraq, which significantly differ from one religion to another and from one geographical area to another. In general, for example, in the regions of Iraq where there are historic religious minorities already built into the social texture, including in Baghdad or Duhok, there is already an inherent propensity to communicate via dialogue activities. The religious challenges are much greater in those provinces entirely inhabited by Sunnis, such as the Anbar province, or all Shiite provinces and cities, such as in Najaf or Karbala. While an important body of religious leaders across Iraq’s religious traditions have supported interreligious dialogue as a response to Iraq’s recent history of conflict, other religious leaders have rejected dialogue on the very same basis. The needs for religious security and survival have not necessarily made dialogue more possible in Iraq and its future remains uncertain.

Finally, interreligious dialogue in Iraq faces many political challenges due to the state’s contemporary geopolitical dynamics. On the one hand, many dialogue actors lamented the politicization of religion, and, especially, the rise of political Islam as an obstacle to dialogue in the region. They viewed the religious political parties dominating Iraqi politics as promoting exclusivist, winner-take-all religious politics. What is more, most of these political parties have rooted relations in neighbouring countries outside Iraq which magnify Iraq’s religious-political divides and undermines interreligious dialogue initiatives. Thus, dialogue initiatives between Sunni groups and any other religious group might be considered by Iraqi Shiites to represent a Saudi or Turkish-supported political activity. At the same time, any dialogue activity between Shiites and other religious groups might look like an Iranian-supported initiative to Sunnis, and dialogue activities initiated by Christians as a Western political activity. Thus, international dimensions of conflict between Islam and the West, regional dimensions of Sunni-Shia conflicts and national dimensions of Arab-Kurdish conflict all present major challenges to interreligious dialogue in Iraq.



Regardless of all the mentioned obstacles and challenges, there are many initiatives, organizations, and personalities that have a very significant role in promoting dialogue in Iraq. The following paragraphs profile seven of them. Below is the geographical map of the initiatives and personalities targeted in Iraq for the purposes of this study followed by the list of profiles.

# Evolution of Interreligious Dialogue in Iraq



## Mapping of Organizations, Personalities and Initiatives

### Masarat Organization, Iraq Council for Interfaith Dialogue (IRAQCID) and National Center to Combat Hate Speech

Masarat is a non-profit organization founded in 2005 by the Iraqi journalist Dr. Saad Salloum. The organization is dedicated to research and activities on Iraqi religious minorities and promoting interreligious dialogue. Dr. Salloum has won multiple awards<sup>1</sup> for his defense of religious freedom in Iraq and his coverage of the conditions of religious minorities. In 2013, Salloum, together with a Dominican friar, Fr. Amir Jaje from the Baghdad Academy, and Sayyid Jawad al-Khoei, from the al-Khoei Institute in Iraq, founded the Iraq Council for Interfaith Dialogue (IRAQCID). Salloum, Jaje and al-Khoei met for the first time following an attack on the Catholic Church of Notre Dame de Secours in 2010. Fr. Amir describes the meeting as almost spontaneous, the three of them coming together, as young Iraqis, in an unofficial capacity, seeking to do something about the religious environment, but not knowing what. The three began to meet regularly and were invited to the city of Najaf by Sayyid al-Khoei, where they were welcomed warmly and, in 2013, during the World Interfaith Harmony Week, they officially launched the council, which has adopted a pedagogy of inclusive citizenship and education as its guiding principles. IRAQCID seeks to defend diversity, modify Iraqi legislation on religious minorities, and reform the country's religious curriculum and include education on diversity in school curricula. As the IRAQCID's Constituent Statement affirms:

*"The initiative came in the context of realizing the urgent need for interfaith dialogue with its active role in promoting peace and reconciliation in our Arab societies that have been plagued by endless conflicts, fueled by extremist interpretations of religion, and because religion can be part of the solution rather than seen as a source of the problem. It is a bridge to achieve civil peace and an important source for building lasting peace, which will have a profound impact on building the societies of the East in general and moving them from the difficulties of the transitional period to the world of permanent stability."<sup>2</sup>*

Both Masarat and the IRAQCID have focused their energies on raising awareness about Iraq's rich interfaith diversity, visiting important Mandaean and Ezidi places of worship, praying together and seeking ways to dialogue with them.

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<sup>1</sup> In 2019, Dr. Salloum and Fr. Jaje were jointly awarded the Stefanus International Prize for Religious Freedom in Oslo for their work on the Iraqi Interfaith Council, the Masarat Organization and the Baghdad Academy. See coverage on the Masarat website:

<http://masaratiraq.org/11/10/2018/stefanus-international-prize-to-mcmds-general-coordinator/>

<sup>2</sup> From the Iraqi Interfaith Council's website: <http://iraqid.org/councils-work-program/>

For Dr. Salloum, these experiences of dialogue, especially between Muslims, Mandaean, Ezidis and Christians are brand new experiences with little past example to guide them. As he observes,

*“While for role models, there are many fathers in the Islamic-Christian dialogue, but in the Iraqi experience .... there are no previous experiences of role models in the Islamic-Ezidi dialogue or Ezidi-Christian dialogue, for example. It is a new experience and a pioneer and unique in its kind. One of the most important dilemmas is the lack of internal religious dialogue, that is, there is an internal division of Ezidi, Christian and Islamic, because there is no internal Sunni-Shiite, Christian-Christian dialogue, etc. The interfaith dialogue in our region lacks, in short, the internal dimension of dialogue.” (Saad Salloum, 2019).*

Dr. Salloum has founded several other initiatives out of the Masarat organization, including a National Center to Combat Hate Speech, which was launched in 2018<sup>3</sup> and an Institute for Diversity Studies that has published a number of books on Iraqi minorities. For Dr. Salloum, Amina Dhahbi and others in Masarat and its various initiatives, the political integration of religion in the state of Iraq is one of the greatest challenges they see facing interreligious dialogue. They fear that the domination of political Islam leaves no room for religious minorities or authentic dialogue. Citizenship and secularism, for Salloum and others at Masarat are the way forward in Iraq. As Dr. Khalil Jundi, a close collaborator of Salloum at Masarat and the national Center for Combatting Hate Speech, put it,

*“I firmly believe that the best and only alternative solution to the dialogue of religions is to work and strive to separate religion from the state and politics, and to build a modern civil state whose legislation derives from the positive laws and the establishment of a citizenship state that respects the principles of human rights, equality, freedom, social justice and non-discrimination on the basis of human beings, religion, sex or nationality.” (Khalil Jundi, 2019).*

## **Ministry of Endowment and Religious affairs – Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)**

The ministry of endowment and religious affairs in the Kurdistan region declares the right of every inhabitant to chose their faith or belief freely. As a result of this declaration, it opened eight separate offices for each faith in the region<sup>4</sup>. Even as they face legal challenges given the nature of the Iraqi

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3 With funding from the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung. See <https://www.kas.de/web/syrien-irak/veranstaltungsberichte/detail/-/content/gruendung-eines-nationalen-zentrums-gegen-hassrede-im-irak>

4 Following rule no.5 issued by the Kurdistan parliament in 2015 and signed by the president of Kurdistan region.

constitution, this regional legal rule has created a safe space of religious freedom in Kurdistan. Thus, unrecognized Iraqi religious minorities, like the Baha'i, Kaka'i and Zoroastrians can freely participate in conferences in the Kurdistan region even as their participation sometimes creates tensions with Iraqis from outside the region<sup>5</sup>.

The Kurdistan Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs has taken several important steps to decrease ideologies of extremism and promote dialogue. In order to symbolize their representation of the entire Iraqi religious community, the Ministry formally changed its name from the "Ministry of Endowment and Islamic Affairs" to the "Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs." The Ministry reformed its Islamic studies schools and integrated them into the Ministry of Education, so that all students studying Islamic studies also take courses in philosophy, psychology, life sciences, and biology. The Ministry also opened a new "Department of Cohesion and Coexistence." Finally, it has aimed at managing the Mosque and Imam formation system better in the region, by unifying the topics of Friday prayer sermons through a Ministry committee with the aim of promoting sermons that support dialogue and positive peace as opposed to hate speech and extremist ideologies. Many of those initiatives have been conceived and implemented by Mr. Mariwan Naqshbandi, who heads interreligious relations at the Ministry, and is one of the key figures of dialogue in Kurdistan.

## **Babel College of Philosophy and Theology and Baghdad Academy of Human Sciences**

The Babel College Faculty of Philosophy and Theology is a college founded in 1991 by the Chaldean Catholic Church in Baghdad. The aim of the Faculty is to teach Christian philosophy and theology to the students of the Patriarchal Seminary, priests, monks, nuns and lay people. The College established an approach of teaching both the religious history of the Eastern churches as well as the history of Mesopotamia and the Middle East in general. In particular, the College teaches the histories of other religions, including Islam.

Archbishop Thomas Mirkis, a Dominican priest and the present Bishop of Kirkuk and Sulaimaniya, was one of the co-founders of the College and a champion of dialogue in Iraq. Archbishop Mirkis went on to found an "Open University" in Iraq on the model of the College de France, which they named the Baghdad Academy of Human Sciences. The Academy evolved out of a series of workshops in 2006 and now admits on average 200 students a year. Significantly, although the college is run by the Dominican order, 80% of the students are Muslim. Fr. Amir Jaje, the former director of the Academy (and a co-founder of the Iraq Council for Interfaith Dialogue), describes the Academy's experience as a "breath of fresh oxygen." The Academy was designed to allow students to pose whatever questions they had to pose, without any red lines. It has become a precious space of dialogue and

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<sup>5</sup> At some of the dialogue events led by the Ministry of religious endowments in Kurdistan, Iraqi participants have left the conference on account of the participation of these religious minorities.

freethinking in Iraq. Archbishop Mirkis has supported the growth of other schools in other places of Iraq, including the Mariamana school in Kirkuk. For Mirkis,

*“Dialogue represents the best formation for citizenship which goes beyond the defense of minority rights and enters into the formation of the Human. The Dream of Martin Luther King, Ghandhi and Mandela was greater than simply to recognize the rights of minorities- they wanted to go beyond that, to overcome divisions of minorities and majorities and to heal their countries. In Iraq, for over fifteen years, I have been waiting for a prophet like Martin Luther King to come. Today, the prophets have arrived and they are the Iraqi youth.”* (Thomas Mirkis, 2019).

Despite this breath of fresh air, and the creative possibilities that Fr. Amir and Archbishop Mirkis attribute to reform of education in Iraq, they both remain realist and recognize that their position is a minority one. For Fr. Jaje, the social and spiritual wounds inflicted by the recent violence of Iraq will take long to heal and scars will remain. The youth need security and jobs as well as education to work for reconciliation in Iraq. Nevertheless, they regard their work as a sign of hope and witness to a different possible Iraq.

## **UNESCO Chair for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue at Kufa University**

The UNESCO Chair for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue was established at the University of Kufa in 2014 and is the first of its kind in Iraq. Prof. Dr. Hassan Nadhem<sup>6</sup> was elected chair and began his duties in March 2015. The chair has targeted programs in the field of dialogue, coexistence, and cross-cultural development. The programs of the UNESCO Chair hosts conferences, workshops, training programs and seminars and lectures for students from different backgrounds. In addition to these programs, the UNESCO Chair undertakes scientific research and publishes numerous books and research projects. It also enjoys working partnerships with universities and institutions in the United States, United Kingdom, Iran, Lebanon and Jordan.

The location of the UNESCO Chair at the University of Kufa is in the holy city of Najaf, the most important city for Shia after Mecca and Medina and the center of Shia influence in Iraq. Thus, the location of the UNESCO Chair is of special importance because of its closeness to the religious institutions and religious authorities of the city. Some of the clerics of Najaf have become professors and advisors in the network. The Chair also leverages the level of scholarship and scientific production of the University environment.

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<sup>6</sup> In June 2020, Dr. Hassan Nadhem became the minister of Culture of Iraq, in the cabinet of prime minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi.

Importantly, the UNESCO Chair program has invited religious leaders from other religions including Ezidis, Christians and Sabeans, as well as Sunni leaders to visit the holy city of Najaf and to meet with clerics, academics and activists from the city to strengthen ties and promote the concepts of dialogue. The UNESCO chair faced some challenges at the beginning because the concept of dialogue was a new one for the region and is viewed with suspicion especially in a private city such as Najaf. That said, the environment towards dialogue in Iraq is positively changing. For Professor Nadhem,

*“The institutions in Najaf, which are the center of Shiism and the front of Shiites in the world, have a genuine desire and institutions working on the need for dialogue with the Sunni faith are determined to communicate with Sunni religious leaders.... This progress is, in my view, the result of increased awareness among the people that they have benefited from the experiences they have gone through, lived in bloody stages and the bitter experiences they have lived” (Hassan Nadhem, 2019).*

Professor Nadhem is especially optimistic about the youth, who have responded positively to the educational programs produced by the UNESCO Chair. In his opinion, the positive attitude towards dialogue is becoming the dominant one and needs to be sustained through educational programs to overcome the residues of ISIS and other extremist ideologies. As he states, learning from a recent youth activity they organized,

*“What we concluded from this meeting is that the Iraqi youth are heading towards a new stage of accepting the other and accepting to live together. This activity opened our eyes to the possibility of coexistence among the youth in Iraq.” (Hassan Nadhem, 2019).*

Some of the greatest challenges his office faces are the difficulty of obtaining funds and filling staffing needs. Although they have an advisory panel of academics, clergy and experts, their reliance on governmental funds makes implementation of their programs difficult. Prof. Nadhem is currently in the process of renewing the UNESCO Chairship and seeking funds to do so. He will be making his case to donors and to UNESCO that there are few places more deserving (and more promising) of support in interreligious dialogue in this moment than in Iraq.

## **Al-Khoei Institute - Al-Balaghi Academy for Interreligious Dialogue**

Al-Balaghi Academy is one of three departments of Al-Khoei Institute directed by Dr. Sayyid Jawad Al-Khoei. The academy is located in the holy city of Najaf and is indirectly associated with the office of the Ayatollah Sayyed Ali al-Sistani, the highest religious authority in Shiite Islam in Iraq. Al-Balaghi Academy works on issues of

dialogue, especially interfaith dialogue through the management of activities and workshops for University students. The academy promotes interreligious dialogue through education, spiritual encounters and networking between religious leaders and other organizations. There are currently around 100 students housed at Al-Balaghi Academy who are required to not be engaged in political work or affiliated to a political party, and it is building an important library that will soon hold a total of 75,000 books. Al-Balaghi Academy consists of a director, a secretary, a scientific and cultural consultant, a scientific advisory board, and administrative staff (accounting, logistics and media).

One of the success stories of the Academy has been its ability to host religious figures from different religions and host them in a holy city with such a singular character as Najaf. Various clerics from other religions imagined that it would never be possible to visit Najaf, so these exchanges, in and of themselves, were extremely important.

Internally, the Academy seeks to work within Shiite theology to create a dialogue with personalities who do not accept the idea of dialogue and who have felt marginalized, oppressed and closed to themselves in the past. They want to cultivate a positive religious approach regarding dialogue, and they seek the support of religious authorities on the importance of dialogue and acceptance of religions and religious freedom.

Externally, the Balaghi Academy and the Al-Khoei Institute in general have sought to internationalize the experience of their students, teaching students in English, for example, and sending them abroad to learn the language. Innovatively, the Al-Khoei Institute became one of the first institutes to employ Christian and other minority religious scholars to teach their seminarians about non-Muslim religious traditions.

Echoing the reflections of other dialogue actors in Iraq, the members of the Academy expressed their fears of the regional environment in Iraq and the breakdown of security in the country, with all of its negative impact on the dialogue environment. At the same time, they had high aspirations for a prosperous Iraq in which Muslims, Christians, Ezidis, Sabeans, and all components and religions of Iraqi society live together without distinction. They especially saw a better future for interreligious dialogue among the youth in Iraq, who seek a healthy sense of patriotism and citizenship and dialogue for rights without discrimination. For the Academy, they believe that their mission is like the mission of the prophets because the prophets came to reform societies and deliver heavenly messages to them. Their interest in dialogue is as a moral responsibility and a commitment to future generations to building a developed and advanced society for them.

## **Larsa Organization**

Larsa is a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) that promotes pluralistic heritage to preserve the unity and diversity of Iraq. The organization was founded by a group of Iraqi youths from different ethnic and religious backgrounds.

Their initial idea in establishing the organization was to take care of the religious heritage in their own city. They are now trying to broaden their work in all of Iraq. The headquarters of Larsa is located in the state of Basra, in the south of Iraq. The main goal of the organization is to spread peaceful coexistence between the components of the Iraqi people and to preserve the ancient places, especially religious ones, such as churches, mosques and places of worship. The organization consists of the president of the organization, Mr. Bassam al Wachi, of Christian background, a vice president, three members, and about fifteen volunteers. Larsa is a new organization founded in 2016 on a voluntary basis.

Larsa's activities include meetings between religious and political leaders and the organization of visits to places of worship of different religions, especially for the youth, as well as short publications that aim at the sensitization of the population on religious diversity in Iraq, and the concise presentation of different faiths. The organization is interested in raising funds to develop the dialogue skills of students and to develop the capacity of teachers in the area in the field of dialogue. While it fears the sustainability of the security situation in Iraq, Larsa would like to expand its activities and religious visits across the country. In general, Larsa sees the situation of dialogue in Iraq improving, with an increased number of organizations working in this field and networking among these organizations which, all together, promote dialogue in the country. The organization believes that dialogue and the defense of human rights are both a religious and a human principle. All religions call for peace and emphasize the need for dialogue and coexistence as well as the concept of human rights.

## **Committee for Defending Religious and Ethnic Groups in Iraq**

The committee for Defending Religious and Ethnic Groups in Iraq was founded in 2004. It seeks to defend believers of different religious traditions in Iraq drawing on the rules of human rights and respect for freedom of belief and doctrine. The main goal of the committee is to respect human rights and the freedom of belief. The committee has especially invested in lobbying activities, through the hosting of conferences and seminars, and the production of statements, petitions, denunciations, convictions, support campaigns and appeals signed by civil society personalities and organizations. It has also sought to promote values of spiritual solidarity with oppressed religious traditions through visits, fundraising and other activities. Finally, the Committee has sought to communicate with government legislators and dialogue with them on the implementation of legal and religious legislation through meetings or conferences.

The Foundation relies mostly on voluntary work and in a democratic manner. The organization consists of a General Secretariat of the Commission and thirteen commission members, including ten members who are distributed among all Iraqi provinces.

The Committee has sought to build a culture of respect for human rights and social justice in the country. With respect to interreligious dialogue, it has

specifically worked to amend paragraphs of the Constitution concerning religious minorities and sought to end majority domination of the minority through an emphasis on equal and inclusive citizenship.

Like most organizations, their committee faces the dilemma recruiting and sustaining volunteers, and keeping their members connected to one another across the Iraqi territory. They also face political resistance, especially in their advocacy for religious minorities. Perhaps more so than other organizations in Iraq, they fear that interreligious dialogue is not legitimate in the country and interest in dialogue remains focused on partisan, factional and narrow interests.

The participation of both youth and women in their activities is modest, due, in part to the abnormal economic and social conditions faced by the young Iraqis today. The hope of the committee is that the establishment of peace and security in Iraq will make dialogue easier and help Iraqi society overcome religious partisanship and prejudice.

## **Conclusions and Final Recommendations**

The Iraqi context of interreligious dialogue is directly related the challenges of its time and place. Thus, in the intervals beyond conflicts the pulse of interreligious dialogue initiatives and activities in Iraq rose very sharply while in other times the concern for dialogue has been weaker. Also, the activity of dialogue is less in regions of Iraq where one religious tradition dominates, but is more prevalent in regions marked by higher levels of religious diversity. The need for intra-religious dialogue in Iraq is very essential and complementary to the work of interreligious dialogue. Women and youth play a major and significant role in Iraqi interreligious initiatives and the youth have a very positive vision for Iraqi future which aspires to a deeper culture of dialogue and citizenship. The regional and international politics' conflicts have a direct impact on the activity of interreligious dialogue in Iraq. Iraq is a diverse and rich country and the international community can play an important role in supporting interreligious dialogue in Iraq, especially through funding the growing experience of dialogue's success stories in Iraq, including the UNESCO Chair at the University of Kufa, the Baghdad Academy of Human Sciences, and the activities of the Iraqi Interfaith Council.

# Additional Resources

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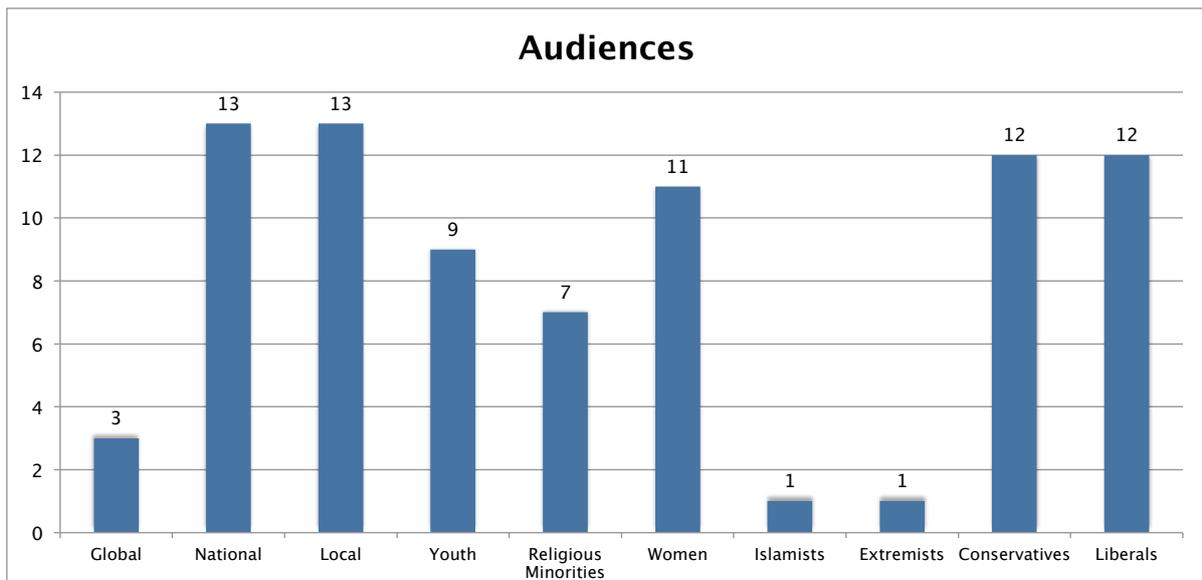
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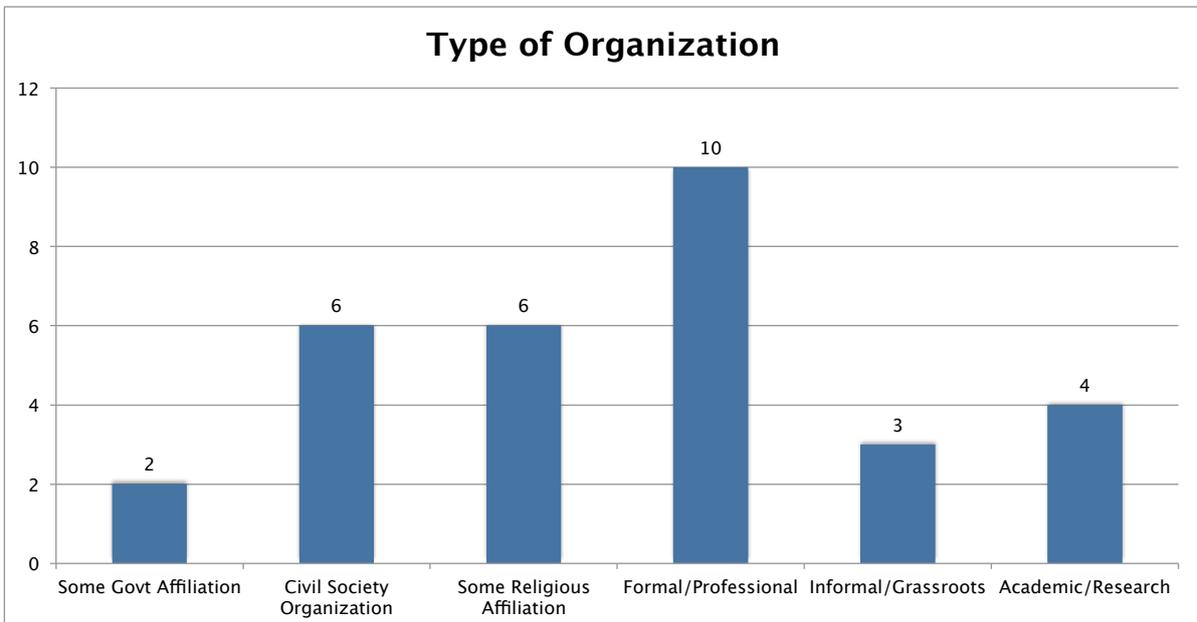
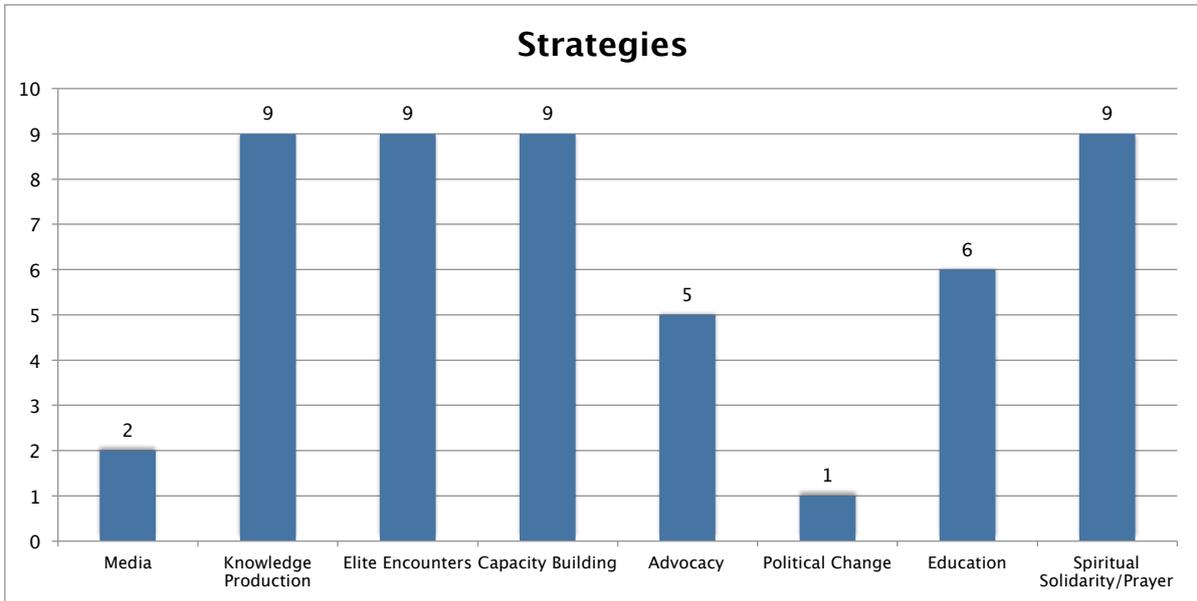
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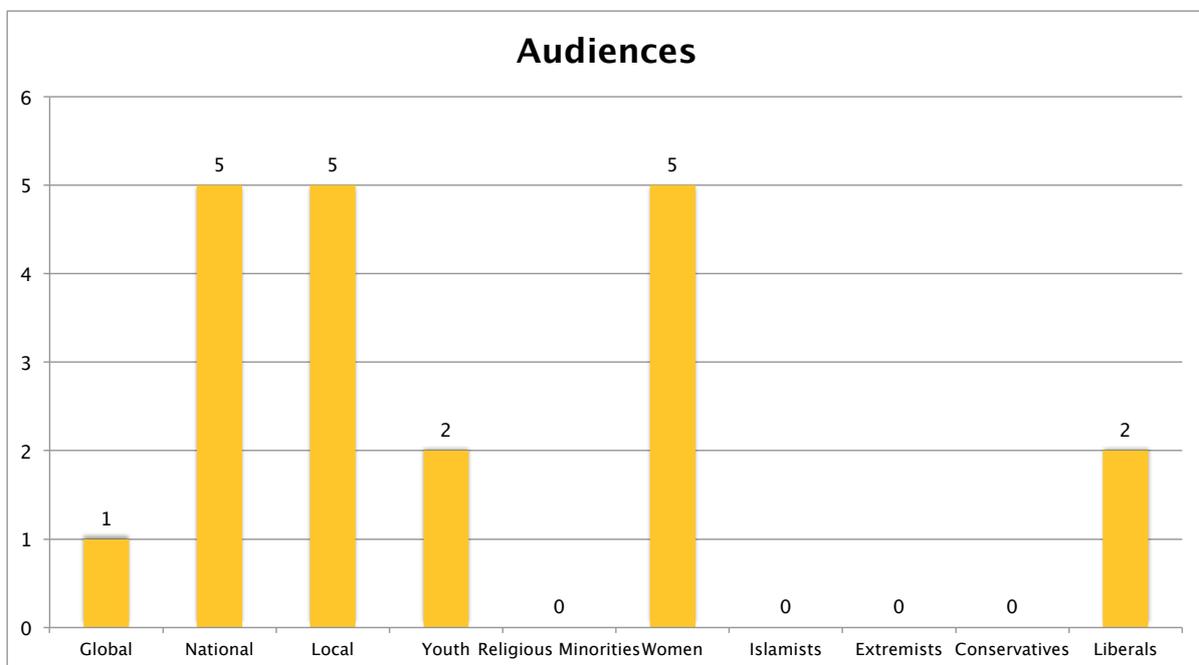
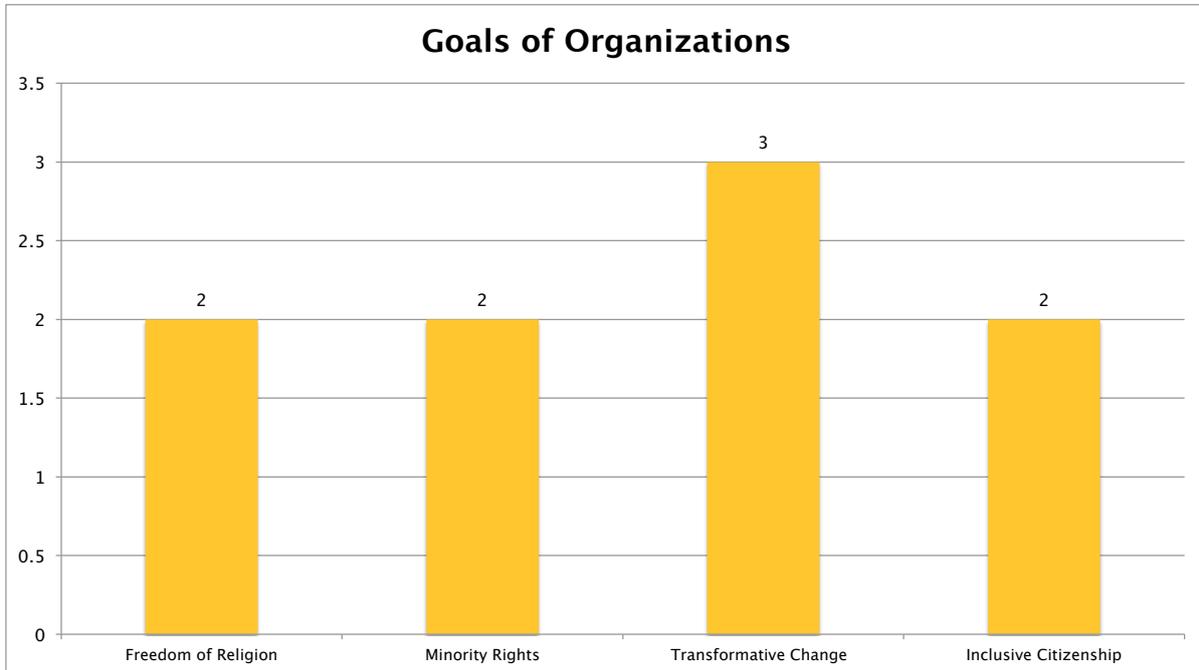
# Aggregate Survey Data by Country

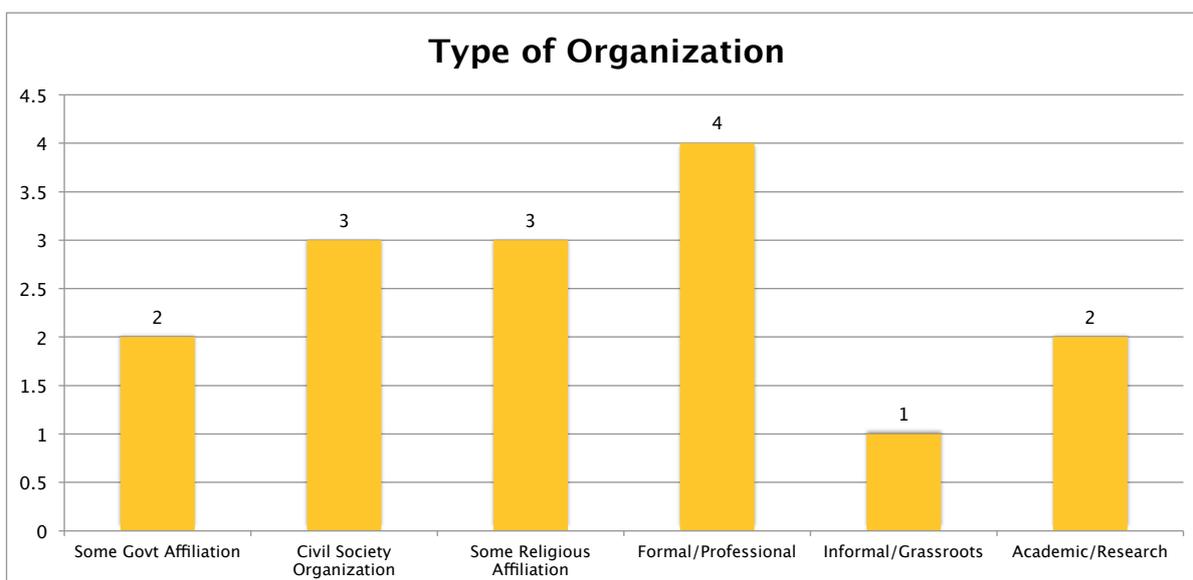
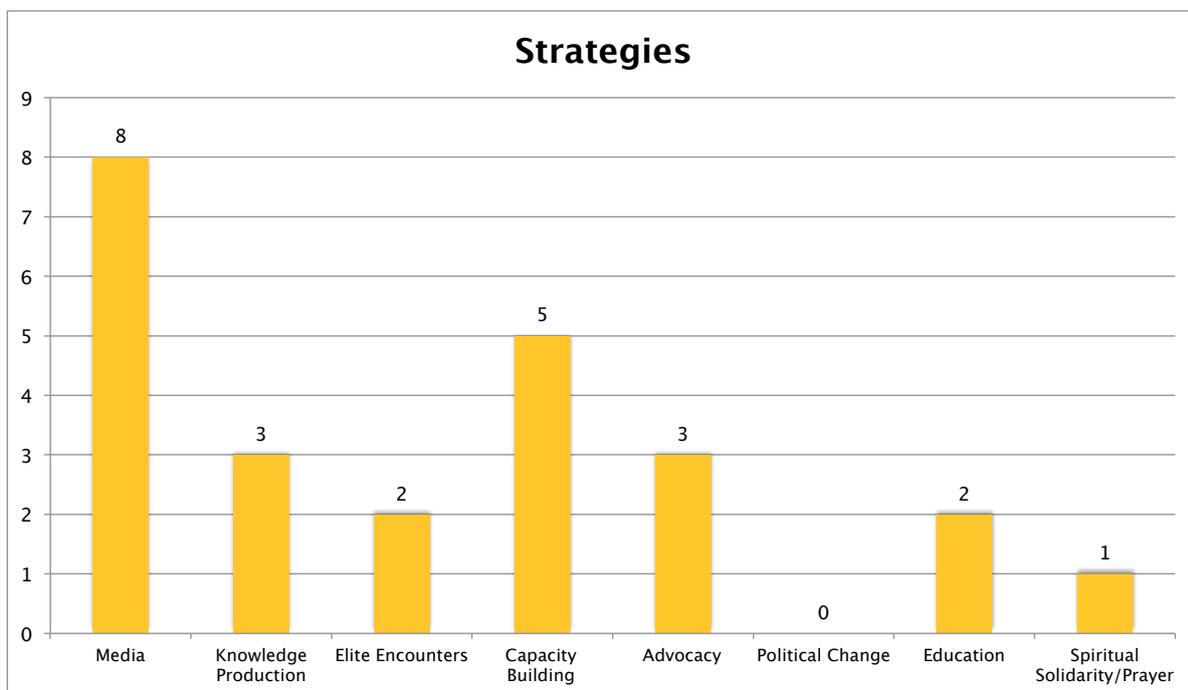
**Note:** each chart reports the numbers of organizations corresponding to each category of analysis by country.

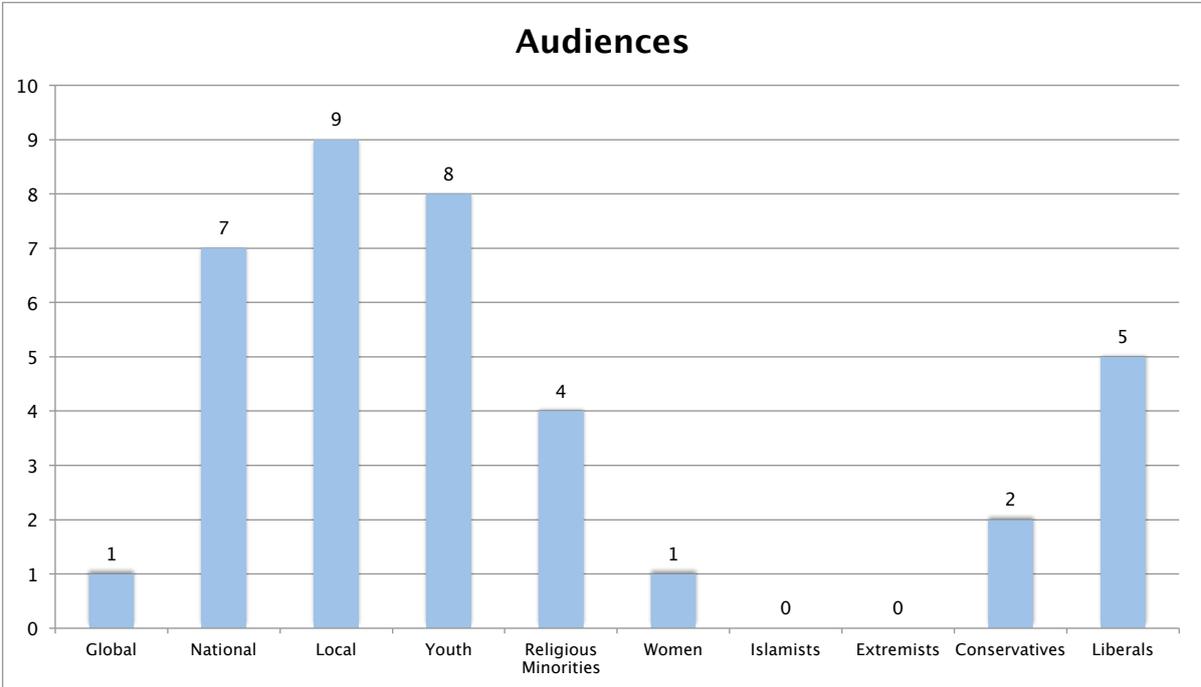
## Lebanon

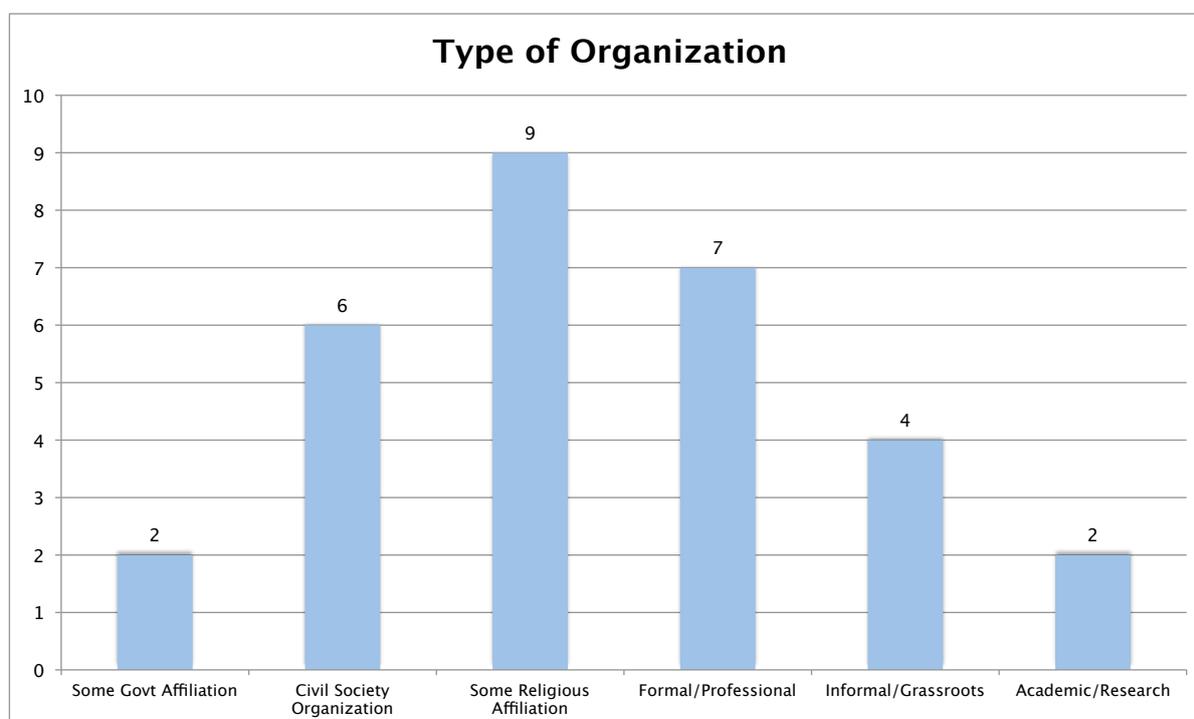
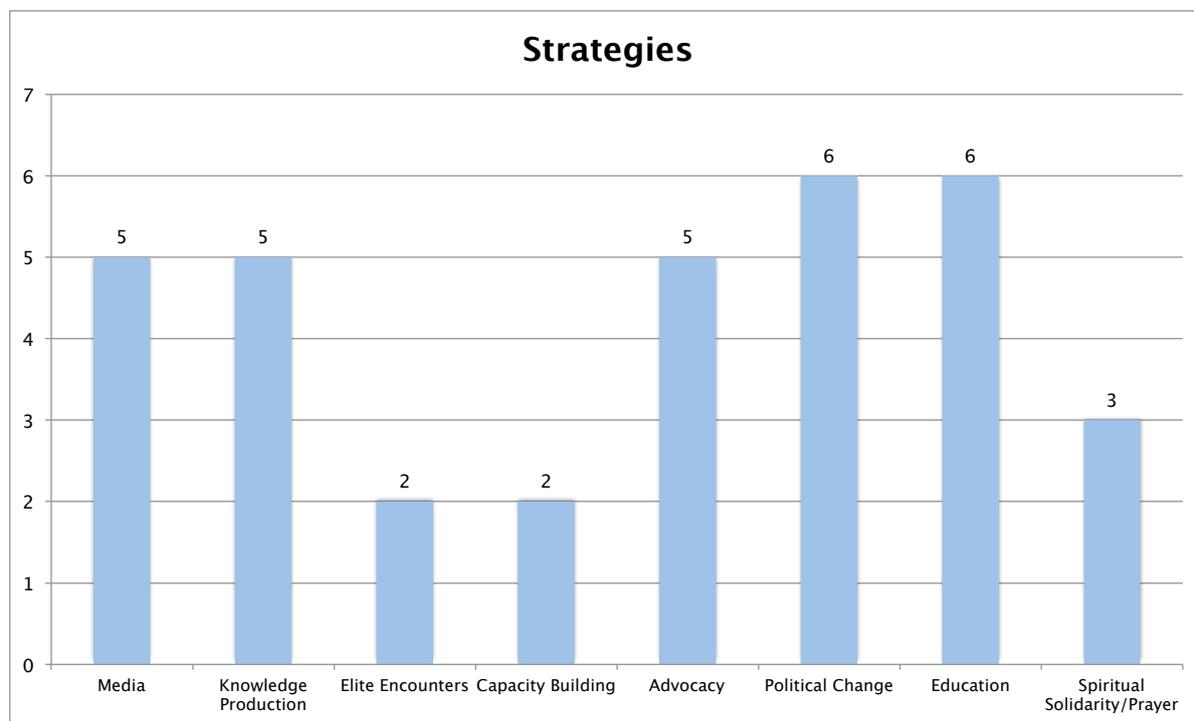


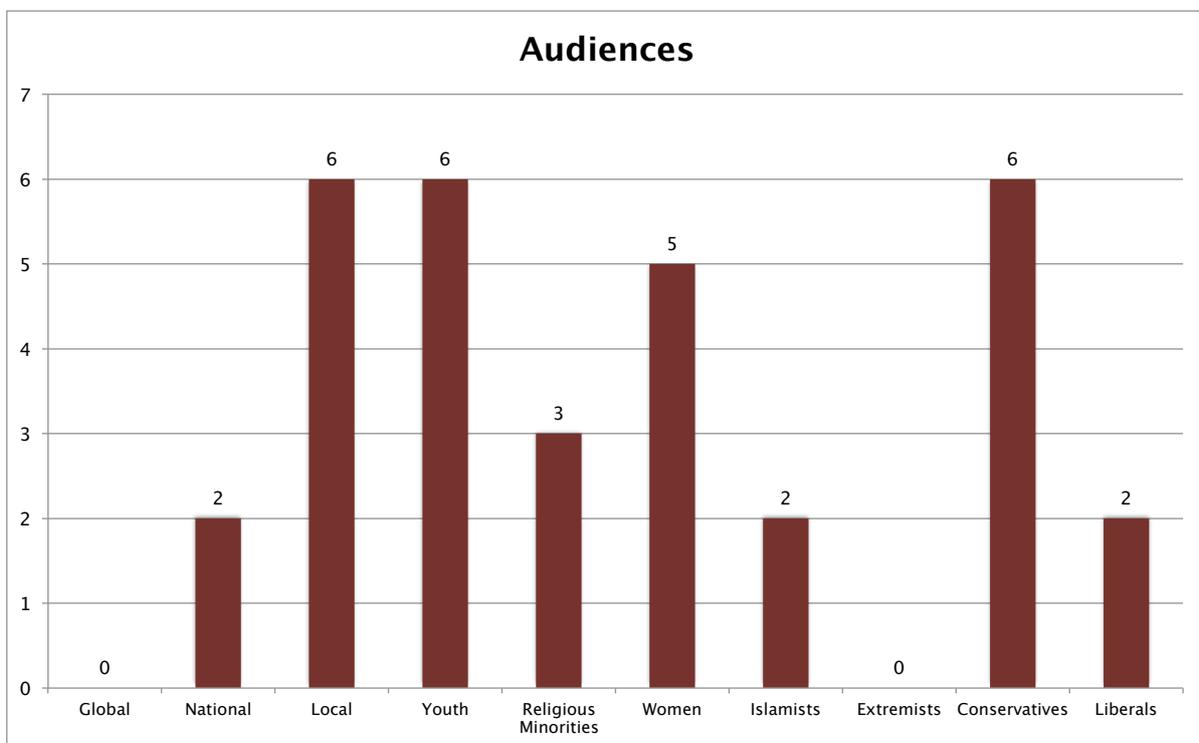


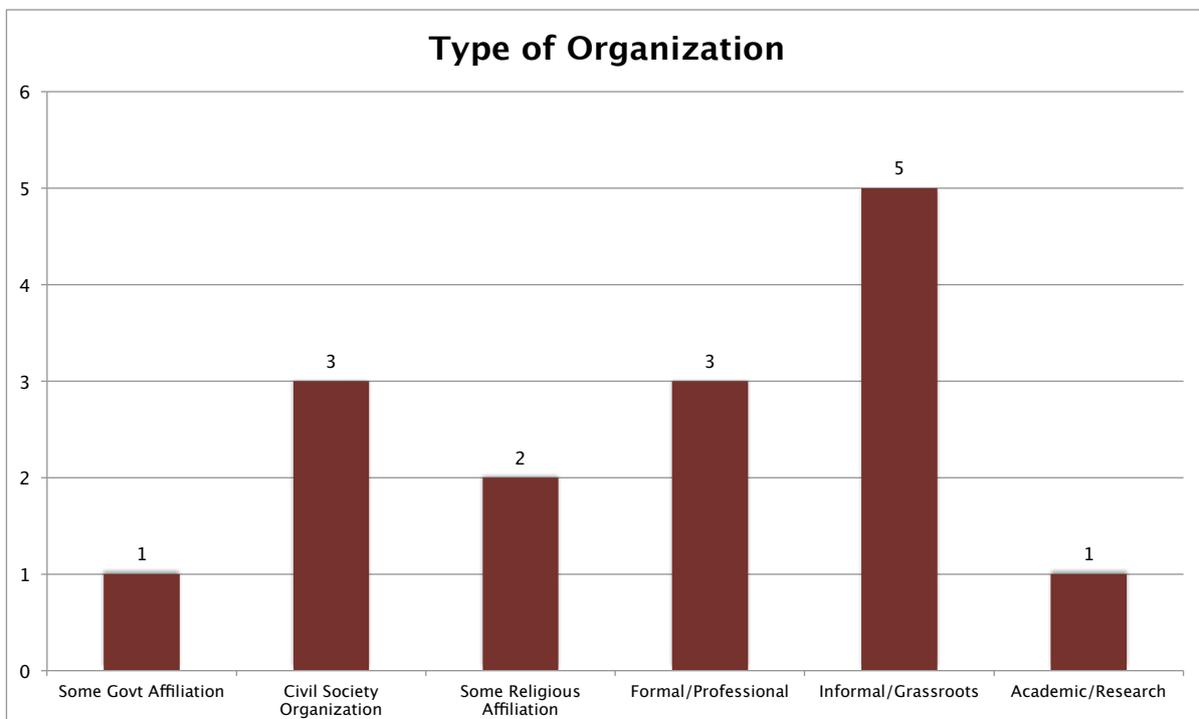
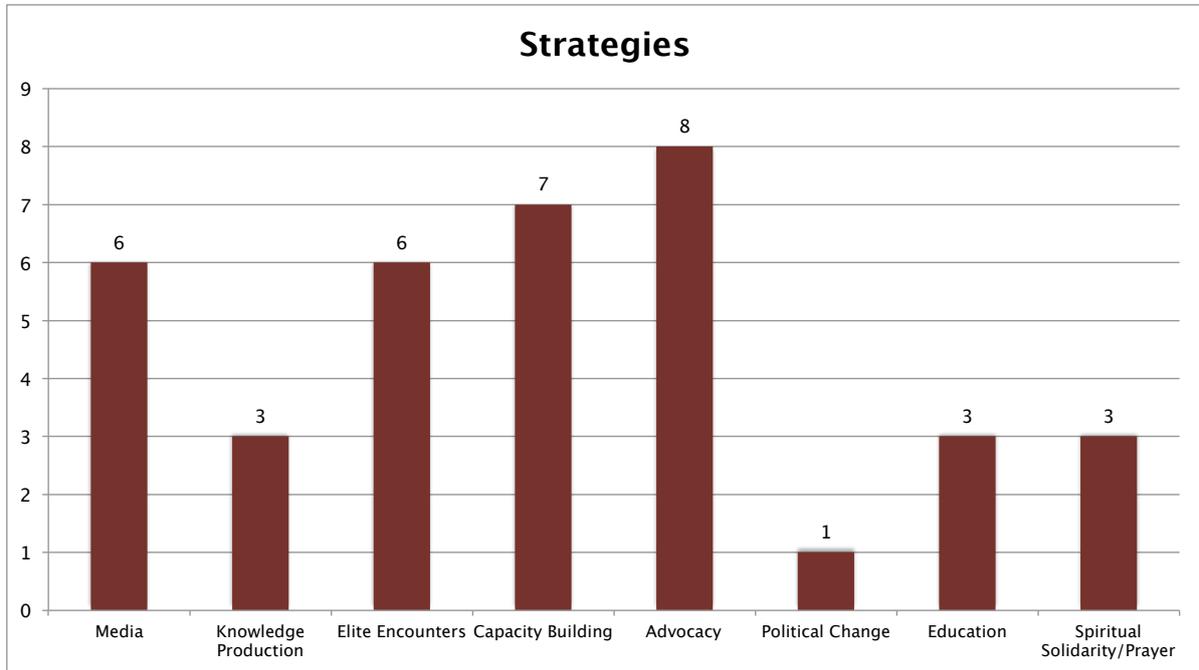












# Survey Instrument for Interreligious Dialogue Organizations

## Basic Interview Questions for NGOs/Formal/Professional Organizations

(Note: OE indicates questions which measure the organizational evaluation of dialogue initiatives; SR indicates questions which measure their social relevance)

- 1) (OE) I have been reading a lot about your organization and becoming familiar with its goals and vision. In your own words, how would you describe the main objectives of your organization?
- 2) (OE) What are some of the most important strategies you use in your interreligious dialogue activities?
  - a. Media work
  - b. Education
  - c. Political lobbying
  - d. Creating spiritual presence and spiritual solidarity?
  - e. Building networks between religious leaders and other organizations
  - f. other
- 3) (OE) (Optional, if you have not already figured it out): Does the organization run on the basis of an employed staff or does it mostly rely on volunteers?
- 4) (OE) Do you offer capacity building for members of your organization? How do you do that?
- 5) (OE) What would you say your organization does very well? Can you share with us some success stories?
- 6) (OE) Do you have a system of monitoring and evaluation of your projects? Internal or external? If yes, can you give us an example of lessons learned? Would you be open to sharing these evaluations with us?
- 7) (OE) Can you share with us the organizational chart of your organization? Do you have a renewed Strategic plan for every few years? Can you share the current one with us?
- 8) (OE) I want to invite you to “think big” about interreligious dialogue in your region. If you were given a \$1 million dollars today, how would you use it for your organization?

- 9)** (SR) Of course, interreligious dialogue is not easy and there are many obstacles to promoting dialogue in the region. Would you say interreligious dialogue has become easier or harder to do over the last ten years? Why?
- a. On a scale of one to ten (1-10) with 10 meaning most difficult, how difficult do you think it is to promote interreligious dialogue in your country today?
- 10)** (OE) What sorts of unexpected dilemmas has your organization faced in its work? How have you tried to respond to them?
- 11)** (SR) Do you think Dialogue is seen as a religiously legitimate activity in your country today? Why or why not? What sorts of criticisms do you hear about interreligious dialogue activity in your country? What sort of context has been helpful (or unhelpful) in creating this environment?
- 12)** (SR) Several of recent interreligious declarations in the region, like the A Common Word letter, the Marrakesh Declaration, the Human Fraternity document signed between Pope Francis and Sheikh Ahmed al Tayeb of al Azhar, link interreligious dialogue closely to religious freedom, citizenship-building, democracy and other civic capacity-building projects. In your experience, is there support for such projects? Do you engage with these ideas and projects in your work?
- 13)** (OE/SR) Do women take on roles as leaders in your activities? How much on a scale of 1 to 10? Has this shaped the way you understand interreligious dialogue?
- 14)** (OE/SR) Are young people attracted to your interreligious dialogue activities and discourse? Why or why not? Do they see it as a credible source of hope for the future?
- 15)** (SR) Are the people who most need to be in dialogue willing to be in dialogue? Do your activities include actors who are skeptical or even reject dialogue?
- a. What groups do you have the most success reaching out to?
- b. From the religious landscape of your country, are there groups that are left out from the dialogue scene? Are there groups that are more on the forefront than others?
- 16)** (SR) Could you name one hope and one fear that you have for dialogue in your country over the next 5 years? What could be the biggest “gamechanger” for dialogue in your country today, i.e.: What might dramatically improve the success of dialogue in your country? What might dramatically worsen it?
- a. What would be your message to international funders in this regard?

# Interreligious Dialogue Directory: Key Personalities and Organizations

## Iraq

1. Ministry of Endowment and Religious affairs – Kurdistan Regional Government, <http://mera-krq.org/ku/>. Mariwan Naqshabandi.
2. UNESCO Chair for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue at Kufa University, <http://chair.uokufa.edu.iq/ar/>. Dr. Hassan Nadhem
3. Babel College of Philosophy and Theology
4. Iraqi Council for Interfaith Dialogue, <http://iraqid.org/en/>
5. Al – Balaghi Institute for Interreligious Dialogue (Al-Khoei Institute). <https://daralilm.net/en/news/35>. Zaid Bahr Alalloum
6. Larsa Organization. <https://twitter.com/larsaorg?lang=en>. Hind Al Aubaidy
7. Committee for Defending Religious and Ethnic groups in Iraq. <http://ensania.org/%D9%85%D9%86-%D9%86%D8%AD%D9%86/>. Swzan Khudida.
8. Masarat Organization, Dr. Saad Salloum. <https://twitter.com/saadsaloum?lang=en>.
9. Dr. Khalil Jundi. <https://www.mofa.gov.iq/manila/ar/>. Khalil Jundi
10. Ali Bakht. <https://twitter.com/abaltmeme>, Ali Bakht

## Jordan

1. The Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies, [www.riifs.org/](http://www.riifs.org/)
2. The Jordanian Interfaith Coexistence Research Center (JICRC), <http://www.coexistencejordan.org/jicrc.wordpress.com>
3. Al Hayat Center for Civil Society Development, [www.hayatcenter.org](http://www.hayatcenter.org), Amer Bani Amer
4. East and West Center for Sustainable Development, [www.wecenterfordevelopment.org/](http://www.wecenterfordevelopment.org/), Mahmud Hismeh
5. Ministry of Education, [www.moe.gov.jo](http://www.moe.gov.jo)
6. The King Abdullah II Fund for Development (KAFD), [www.kafd.jo](http://www.kafd.jo)

7. Caritas Jordan, <http://www.caritasjordan.org.jo/> Wael Sulaiman
8. Religions Solidarity Initiative Foundation, Dr. Bayan Alshoboul
9. Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development (ARDD), [www.ardd-jo.org](http://www.ardd-jo.org)
10. United Religions Initiative in Middle East & North Africa, <http://www.urimena.org>
11. The Community Ecumenical Centre, Fr. Samer Azar
12. Arab Thought Forum, <http://www.atf.org.jo>
13. KAICIID fellows, Wafa Makhamreh
14. Rula Samain, Journalist
15. Hamdi Murad, Professor at The World Islamic Science & Education University
16. Omar Alhafi, Professor in Islamic Sciences (Comparative Religion Division)
17. Catholic Center for Studies and Media, [www.abouna.org](http://www.abouna.org). Fr. Refaat Bader

## Turkey

1. Department for Social and Cultural Services Abroad at the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Yurtdışı Sosyal ve Kültürel İçerikli Din Hizmetleri Daire Başkanı), Sema YİĞİT, <http://disiliskiler.diyamet.gov.tr/detay/220/Dinler-ve-Kulturler-Arasi-Iliskiler-Daire-Baskani>
2. Alliance of Civilizations Institute (Medeniyetler İttifakı Enstitüsü – MEDIT), Recep Şentürk, Vahdettin Işık  
<https://medit.ihu.edu.tr/en/from-director/>
3. Dominican Study Institute Istanbul (DoSt-I – that means friend, partner in Turkish), Claudio Monge  
<https://www.facebook.com/Dosti2019/>
4. Cooperation Circle of United Religions Initiative in Turkey “Friendship among Cultures,” Lejla Hasandedic
5. Laki Vingas: “Bridging the gap building together a common future,”  
[http://www.rumvader.org/Page/87/%CE%B1%CF%81%CF%87%CE%B9%CE%BA%CE%AE\\_%CF%83%CE%B5%CE%BB%CE%AF%CE%B4%CE%B1.html](http://www.rumvader.org/Page/87/%CE%B1%CF%81%CF%87%CE%B9%CE%BA%CE%AE_%CF%83%CE%B5%CE%BB%CE%AF%CE%B4%CE%B1.html)
6. Community Foundations Representative (Azınlık Cemaat Vakıfları Temsilcisi), Moris Levi  
<https://www.facebook.com/CemaatVakiflari/>
7. FOCOLARE in Istanbul, Umberta Fabris, Suleyman Saikali

8. Hrant Dink, Nayat Karaköse  
<https://hrantdink.org/tr/>
9. Center for Cross-cultural Communication (Kültürlerarası İletişim Merkezi), Fatih Özkan  
<https://www.kim.org.tr/?lang=en>
10. Alevi Philosophy Center (Alevi Düşünce Ocağı), Doğan Bermek  
<http://aleviocagi.org/>
11. Institute for the Study of Religion in the Middle East – ISRME, Daniel Brown  
<https://www.isrme.org/>
12. System and Generation Association: ALF Network Coordinator, Gürkan, Akçaer  
<http://www.systemandgeneration.com/en/>

## Lebanon

1. The National Committee for Muslim-Christian Dialogue:  
<http://www.chrislam.org/index.html/> Dr. Mohammad El Sammak
2. The Episcopal Committee for Christian-Muslim Dialogue:  
<http://www.apec.org/arabic/index.php/2013-06-11-19-55-00/>  
Catholic Churches in Lebanon
3. The Arab Working Group on Muslim-Christian Dialogue:  
<https://www.peaceinsight.org/conflicts/lebanon/peacebuilding-organisations/mcd/>  
Dr. Abbass El Halaby
4. Danish-Arab Interfaith Dialogue (Beirut Statement/Declaration):  
<http://danisharabdialogue.org/about> (Forum for Interfaith Dialogue)
5. Dialogue for Life and Reconciliation (DLR):  
<https://www.peaceinsight.org/conflicts/lebanon/peacebuilding-organisations/dlr/>  
Dr. Ziad Fahed
6. Adyan Foundation for Diversity, Solidarity and Human Dignity:  
<http://adyanfoundation.org/> Rev. Dr. Fadi Daou and Dr. Nayla Tabbara
7. Forum for Development, Culture, and Dialogue (FDCD): <http://www.fgcd.org/>  
Rev. Riad Jarjour and Ms. Mireille Hamouche
8. Religions and Cultures Forum for Development and Dialogue:  
<http://bit.ly/2npCwKz/> Dr. Sheikh Hussein Shehadeh
9. Ibrahim Shams Al-Din: [https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ibrahim\\_Chamseddine/](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ibrahim_Chamseddine/)
10. Sayyed Ali El-Amine: <https://www.facebook.com/Sayed.ElAmine/>

11. Arab Baptist Theological Seminary: <https://abtslebanon.org/>  
Dr. Martin Accad
12. Institute of Islamic-Christian Studies (The Center for Islamo-Christian Studies/ USJ) – Islamic/Christian Dialogue Committee: <https://ieic.usj.edu.lb/>  
Dr. Roula Talhouk
13. Middle Eastern Council of Churches (MECC): <https://mecc.org/>  
Dr. Thouraya Bechaalany
14. Near East School of Theology (NEST) – Interreligious meetings called “Forum of Muslim-Christian thought”: <http://www.theonest.edu.lb/en/Home/>  
Dr. Georges Sabra
15. Liqaa International Centre for Dialogue (Melkite-Greek Catholic Patriarchate): [http://www.melkitepat.org/news\\_and\\_events/view/Inauguration-of-the-Liqaa-International-Centre-for-Dialogue-in-Rabweh/](http://www.melkitepat.org/news_and_events/view/Inauguration-of-the-Liqaa-International-Centre-for-Dialogue-in-Rabweh/) Mr. Kamal Bkassini
16. Initiatives of Change (Lebanon)/Moral Re-armament – part of Initiatives of Change International: <https://www.iofc.org/lebanon-centre-dialogue/>  
Mr. Assaad Chaftari
17. Garden of Forgiveness to heal the wounds of war: <https://www.voanews.com/a/lebanon-garden-forgiveness/1639831.html/>  
Ms. Alexandra Osseily
18. Ship of Peace – Qouzah village (Bent Jbeil/South): <https://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2018/Aug-06/459231-french-nun-launches-ship-of-peace-in-south-lebanon.ashx>
19. Makassed Higher Institute of Islamic Studies: [http://www.higher-edu.gov.lb/french/Private\\_Univ.htm](http://www.higher-edu.gov.lb/french/Private_Univ.htm)
20. Youth for Tolerance (Y4T): [http://youth4tolerance.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=section&id=2&layout=blog&Itemid=7](http://youth4tolerance.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=section&id=2&layout=blog&Itemid=7)
21. March 25<sup>th</sup> annunciation + other spiritual solidarity events ("Rencontre islamo-chrétienne autour de Marie") <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1162907/le-liban-seul-pays-au-monde-dote-dune-journee-nationale-pour-le-dialogue-islamo-chretien.html>  
Dr. Sheikh Mohammad Nokkari
22. The Department of Ecumenical Relations in the Armenian Church Catholicosate of Cilicia – Antelias Lebanon/ Armenian Orthodox Church: <https://www.armenianorthodoxchurch.org/en/>
23. Media Association for Peace – MAP: <https://maplebanon.org/>  
Ms. Vanessa Bassil
24. Catholic Relief Services (some programmes): Advancing Interreligious Peacebuilding/ <https://www.crs.org/solr-search?search=dialogue>

25. The Bible Society (more of intra-faith programmes):  
<https://biblesociety.org.lb/>
26. Groupement Libanais d'Amitié et de Dialogue Islamo-Chrétien (GLADIC):  
USJ/ <https://www.annalindhfoundation.org/members/groupement-libanais-damitie-et-de-dialogue-islamo-chretien-gladic/>  
Dr. Roula Talhouk
27. Institute of Middle East Studies:  
<https://arab.org/directory/institute-of-middle-east-studies/>
28. Fighters for Peace: <http://fightersforpeace.org/>  
Mr. Assaad Chaftari
29. RISE – Lebanon:  
<https://www.daleel-madani.org/civil-society-directory/rise-lebanon/>
30. MARCH – Lebanon: <https://www.marchlebanon.org/>  
Ms. Lea Baroudi
31. Unite Lebanon Youth Project: <https://www.unitelebanonyouth.org/>
32. Permanent Peace Movement: <http://www.ppm-lebanon.org/>  
Mr. Fadi Abi Allam
33. Peace of Art: Northern Beqaa/  
<http://www.peaceofartlb.com/> mehdi.yehya@peaceofartlb.com
34. Lebanese Foundation for Permanent Civil Peace (collective memory/faith-based reconciliation/HR): <http://www.lfpcp.org/LFPCP/History/>
35. Citizenship League:  
<https://www.daleel-madani.org/ar/civil-society-directory/rbt-lmwtn/>  
Ms. Joumana Merhy
36. Danmission – Lebanon:  
<https://english.danmission.dk/blog/category/news/country/lebanon/>
37. Strong Cities Network: <https://strongcitiesnetwork.org/en/>
38. Nahwa Al Muwatiniya (IC/dialogue):  
<https://www.peaceinsight.org/conflicts/lebanon/peacebuilding-organisations/nahwa-al-muwatiniya/>
39. Lebanon Dialogue Initiative : <http://www.lebanondialogue.org/>
40. RET – Liban: <https://www.daleel-madani.org/civil-society-directory/ret-liban/>
41. Peace Labs (Resilience/Youth Dialogue): <https://peace-labs.org/en/projects/>  
Mr. Jean-Paul Chami
42. Holy Lebanon – The first religious-based tourism application in Lebanon:  
<https://www.zoomaal.com/projects/holy-lebanon/60517?ref=171653314/>  
Ms. Nour Farra Haddad

43. Beit Beirut Museum (project): <http://www.beitbeirut.org/english/>
44. Wahdatouna Khalasouna Coalition: <http://www.wahdatouna.org/ar/>
45. Nadi Lekol Nas (Club for all people):  
<https://www.nadilekolnas.org/production.php> (production house)
46. Christian Muslim Studies Center – Balamand University, Lebanon:  
<http://www.balamand.edu.lb/AboutUOB/Pages/ResearchCentersInstitutes.aspx/>  
Dr. Elias Halabi
47. Arab Center for Development: promote local and democratic development and advocate towards a culture of peace and dialogue:  
<https://arab.org/directory/arab-center-for-development/>
48. The Focolare movement: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/category/Organization/Focolare-Movement-Lebanon-1644773589162050/>
49. Dr. Tarek Mitri: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tarek\\_Mitri/](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tarek_Mitri/)
50. Secours Catholique/Caritas France:  
<https://www.secours-catholique.org/actualites/au-liban-sauver-le-vivre-ensemble>
51. Anna Lindh Foundation:  
<https://www.annalindhfoundation.org/networks/lebanon>
52. Mohammad Abou Zeid:  
<http://www.humandevlopment.va/content/dam/sviluppoumano/eventi/sdgs-2019/bio-speakers/7-%20ZEID%20Mohamad%20Abou%20bio.pdf/>
53. Rev. Habib Badr:  
<https://www.facebook.com/NationalEvangelicalChurchBeirut/posts/rev-dr-habib-badr-senior-pastor-of-the-national-evangelical-church-of-beirut-hel/669062993153645/>
54. CERDIC (Centre de Recherche pour le Dialogue Islamo-Chrétien)/ Melkites:  
[http://www.melkitepat.org/fre/melkite\\_greek\\_catholic\\_church/Society-of-the-Missionaries-of-Saint-Paul](http://www.melkitepat.org/fre/melkite_greek_catholic_church/Society-of-the-Missionaries-of-Saint-Paul)
55. Center for Dialogue and Development (Saida): <http://bit.ly/2AR1xRL>
56. Offre Joie (Joint Community Service/ dialogue/réconciliation):  
<http://www.offrejoie.org/> Mr. Melhem Khalaf
57. Darb Maryam (SSD/living together):  
<http://nna-leb.gov.lb/ar/show-news/255706/nna-leb.gov.lb/ar/>  
Dr. Husn Abboud
58. Linaltaki (dialogue/acceptance/ conferences/panels):  
<https://lkdg.org/node/257>

# Interviews

## Lebanon

- **Abbas El Halaby**, President of the Arab Working Group for Christian-Muslim Dialogue, August 7<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Beirut, Lebanon.
- **Ahmad Taleb**, Mufti at Jaafari Shiite Court, August 14<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Beirut, Lebanon.
- **Alexandra Asseily**, Founder of (incomplete) Garden of Forgiveness, August 14<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Aley, Lebanon.
- **Elias El Halaby**, Director of the Christian-Muslim Center at the University of Balamand, August 7<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Tripoli, Lebanon.
- **Georges Sabra**, President, Academic Dean & Professor of Systematic Theology at Near East School of Theology (NEST), July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2019, Beirut, Lebanon.
- **Hosn Abboud**, Co-Founder of Darb Maryam, July 24<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Beirut, Lebanon.
- **Ibrahim Shamseddine**, President of Imam Mehdi Shamseddine Foundation, July 25<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Beirut, Lebanon.
- **Martin Accad**, Chief Academic Officer & Associate Professor of Islamic Studies Arab at Baptist Theological Seminary, August 5<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Beirut, Lebanon.
- **Melhem Khalaf**, Founder of Offre Joie, July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2019, Beirut, Lebanon.
- **Mireille Hamouche**, Assistant to the President at Forum for Development, Culture and Dialogue, July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2019, Beirut, Lebanon.
- **Mohammad Abou Zeid**, Senior Judge at the Family Court of Saida, July 30<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Sidon, Lebanon.
- **Mohammad El Sammak**, Secretary-General of the National Committee for Christian-Muslim Dialogue, August 6<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Beirut, Lebanon.
- **Mohammed El Noccari**, Sunni Judge and Co-Founder of Ensemble Autour de Marie, July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Beirut, Lebanon.
- **Naji Houry**, Co-Founder of Ensemble Autour de Marie & Consultant of the President of the Republic for Inter-Religious Dialogue, August 7<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Beirut, Lebanon.
- **Nayla Tabbara**, Co-Founder at Adyan Foundation & Director of the Institute for Citizenship and Diversity Management, August 24<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Beirut, Lebanon.
- **Nour Farra Haddad**, Founder of Holy Lebanon, August 8<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Beirut, Lebanon.

- **Rabab El Sadr**, President of Imam El Sadr Foundation, August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2019, Tyr, Lebanon.
- **Roula Talhouk**, Head of the Center for Christian-Muslim Studies at Saint Joseph University (USJ), July 18<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Beirut, Lebanon.
- **Sami Abil Mona**, Secretary General of Al-Irfan Schools, July 24<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Beirut, Lebanon.
- **Tarek Mitri**, Director of the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at American University of Beirut (AUB), August 6<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Beirut, Lebanon.
- **Therese Farra**, Co-Founder of Darb Maryam, August 5<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Beirut, Lebanon.
- **Thouraya Bechaalany**, Secretary General of Middle Eastern Council of Churches, July 24<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Beirut, Lebanon.
- **Ziad Fahed**, Founder & President of Dialogue for Life and Reconciliation (DLR), July 24<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Beirut, Lebanon.

## Jordan

- **Amer Alhafi**, Professor in Islamic Sciences (Comparative Religion Division), July 29<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Amman, Jordan.
- **Bayan Alshoboul**, Founder and director of Religions Solidarity Initiative Foundation, July 11<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Amman, Jordan.
- **Hamam Haddad**, Project manager in the Royal Institute for inter-faith studies, June 27<sup>th</sup>, 2019 Amman, Jordan.
- **Mahmoud Hishemeh**, Director of East and West center for sustainable development, July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2019, Amman, Jordan.
- **Nabeel Alsaheb**, The Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, July, 2019, Amman, Jordan.
- **Refaat Bader**, Director of Catholic Center for Studies and Media Director, June 25<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Amman, Jordan.
- **Samer Azar**, Founder and director of The Community Ecumenical Centre, July 8<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Amman, Jordan.
- **Wafa Makhamreh**, Kaiciid fellows, August 8<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Amman, Jordan.
- **Wajih Kanso**, Director of The Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies, July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Amman, Jordan.

## Turkey

- **Bekir Zakir** Çoban, Professor of History of Religions at Dokuz Eylül University, August, 27<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Izmir, Turkey.
- **Betül Avcı**, Professor of History of Religions at Ibn Haldun University, July 9<sup>th</sup>, 2019.
- **Bülent Şenay**, Professor of History of Religions at the Uludağ University, July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Bursa, Turkey.
- **Claudio Monge**, Priest at the Church of Saint Peter and Saint Paul and Head of the Dominican Study Institute Istanbul (DoSt-I), August 5<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Istanbul, Turkey.
- **Doğan Bermek**, President of Alevi Philosophy Center (Alevi Düşünce Ocağı), June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Istanbul, Turkey.
- **Elif Tokay**, Professor of History of Religions at Istanbul University, July 19<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Istanbul, Turkey.
- **Gürkan Akçaer**, Director of System and Generation Association and coordinator of the Anna Lindh Foundation Network, August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2019, Ankara, Turkey.
- **Hakan Gülerce**, Professor of Sociology of Religions at the Harran University, August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019, Istanbul, Turkey.
- **Kemal Başçı**, founder and previous president of Society for Intercultural Research and Friendship (Kültürlerarası Araştırma ve Dostluk Vakfı - KARVAK) August, 28<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Ankara, Turkey.
- **Kenan Gürsoy**, Former Ambassador of Turkey to the Holy See, August 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2019, Istanbul, Turkey.
- **Laki Vingas**, Project Manager of “Bridging the gap building together a common future” and first Representative of Community Foundations (Azınlık Cemaat Vakıfları Temsilcisi), July 8<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Istanbul, Turkey.
- **Lejla Hasandedić**, head of the Cooperation Circle of United Religions Initiative in Turkey “Friendship among Cultures”, August 15<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina.
- **Nayat Karaköse**, Programme Coordinator at Hrant Dink Foundation, July 16<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Istanbul, Turkey.
- **Ömer Faruk Harman**, Professor of History of Religions at Ibn Haldun University, September 6<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Istanbul, Turkey.
- **Recep Şentürk**, Director of the Alliance of Civilizations Institute (Medeniyetler İttifakı Enstitüsü – MEDIT), August 26<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Istanbul, Turkey.

- **Sema Yiğit**, President of the Department for Social and Cultural Services Abroad (Yurtdışı Sosyal ve Kültürel İçerikli Din Hizmetleri Daire Başkanı), August 29<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Ankara, Turkey.
- **Süleyman Saikali and Umberta Fabris**, members of the Focolare movement in Istanbul, July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2019, Istanbul, Turkey.
- **Vahdettin Işık**, Secretary of the Alliance of Civilizations Institute (Medeniyetler İttifakı Enstitüsü – MEDIT), July 12<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Istanbul, Turkey.

## Iraq

- **Ali Bakht**, CEO of Aufq org. August, 2019, Baghdad, Iraq.
- **Hassan Nadhem**, head of UNESCO Chair, Kufa University, July, 2019, Najaf, Iraq.
- **Khalil Jundy**, Ezidi writer and founder of Iraq Council of Interfaith Dialogue, August, 2019, Mosul, Iraq.
- **Saeed Alo**, Lecturer at Babel College for Theology and Philosophical Studies. Duhok, August 2019, Duhok, Iraq.
- **Saad Salloum**, CEO of Masarat, Baghdad, August, 2019, Baghdad, Iraq.
- **Amir Jaje**, Cofounder Iraq Council of Interfaith Dialogue, October, 2019, Baghdad, Iraq.
- **Hind Al-Ubaidy**, Larsa Org. Executive member, August, 2019, Basra, Iraq.
- **Mariwan Naqshabandy**. Relationships Department Manager at Ministry of Endowment, KRG, July 2019, Erbil, Iraq.
- **Archbishop Thomas Mirkis**, OP, Chaldean Bishop of Kirkuk, October, 2019, Iraq.
- **Sheikh Bahr-Alalloum**, Al Balaghi Institute, July, 2019, Najaf, Iraq.
- **Suzan Shingaly**, member of Committee for defending religious and ethnic groups followers. June, 2019, Baghdad, Iraq.





**Published by:**

Adyan Foundation  
Institute of Citizenship and Diversity Management  
And Rashad Center for Cultural Governance

**Beirut, 2020**

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