



**Middle East
Research Institute**

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MERI Forum 2019

Ending Wars – Winning Peace in the Middle East

4 - 6 November, 2019,

Erbil, Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Panel Three:

Beyond Barriers: Contours and Complexities of IDP Return

- Nathanael Nizar Semaan, Archbishop of Hadiab Syriac Catholic Diocese
- Karem Sleman, Spokesperson of Yazidi Spiritual Council
- Elie Abouaoun, Director of MENA Programs, United States Institute of Peace
- Henriette Johansen, Research Fellow, MERI (Moderator)



Panel chairman **Henriette Johansen** explained that internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Nineveh Province experience multiple layers of barriers to their return, some of which are unarticulated or invisible in the milieu of societal concerns stemming from Nineveh's

history of violence and its ongoing challenges with security and public administration. Within Nineveh's minority communities, historic legacies of socio-economic and political disenfranchisement, war, genocide, and foreign invasion have enervated the will to return. While 4.3 million IDPs have returned, 1.5 million still remain in displacement. Recent government measures, such as rapidly consolidating and closing IDP camps across Nineveh, have sent a new wave of IDPs into critical shelter and extreme living conditions. Expectation and hope for sustainable, voluntary return are diminishing, along with IDPs' expectation that authorities will deliver on their promises. After protracted displacement, IDPs are feeling the push to integrate into their host communities or emigrate abroad. Johansen explained that, in the ensuing discussion, panelists would be solicited for any actions within their respective remits that could rectify this situation for their constituents.

In his remarks, **Nathanael Nizar Semaan** praised the "great hope" that has sustained the Christian minority through a long history of injustice, difficulty, and persecution. Despite disappointing rates of return among the Christian community, he argued that his constituents feel rooted to their ancestral lands, and were among the first to attempt a return to their areas of origin in the Nineveh Plains following liberation. He highlighted the example of Qaraqosh, which has seen approximately 22,000 Christian returnees out of an original population of 50,000. Unfortunately, however, continued deficits in services, limited career opportunities, and a poor standard of living have rendered most returns unsustainable. Additionally, after years of persecution and inequality, governmental inaction in the face of political disputes and demographic change has enervated the confidence of Christian constituents in the federal government's ability to provide safety and prosperity for their children. As a result, many have chosen to remain in the KRI or to migrate abroad.

"Our country is bleeding. Many are leaving... it is very painful for us." - Semaan

He acknowledged that religious leaders have a responsibility to incentivize return and remind their constituents that they belong to Iraq, but noted that stymieing the flow of migration is impossible without sufficient political will, attention, and provision from the government. He urged the government to rectify its neglect of the disputed territories and provide practical solutions. "Our areas need to be given more," he said.

"Christians are like an olive tree that is cut and burned, but the root will appear and grow again. We are rooted to this ground, though we face different difficulties and [...] persecution." - Semaan

Semaan stated that religious leaders have renewed their vows to serve their constituents. To support the implementation of Iraq's National Action Plan (INAP) on UNSCR 1325, he emphasized the need for assistance and training from the international community, as the Church has very little experience rendering psychological treatment to women and children. He also urged the international community to expend significant effort in securing the inclusion of youth and providing opportunities for them to make positive contributions to Iraq's reconstruction. He explained that, while the Church offers social activities, cultural events, and entertainment to engage with young people, it does not have the power to dissuade them from migration or offer them a prosperous life. "If we lose them," he admitted, "we will vanish." Finally, he highlighted the church's involvement in housing reconstruction

projects, and invited the partnership of engineers and economists to assist in the planning and strategizing process.

Semaan concluded his remarks by encouraging a spirit of optimism. He emphasized that Christians consider all Iraqis their brothers, and noted that securing the lawful rights of the Christian minority need not come at the expense of other components. He promoted a vision of the future predicated on dignity and respect, and reassured listeners that “our common language will be the language of love.”

Karem Sleman argued that Yazidis are the “number one” victims of the IS invasion in Iraq and the broader region. For Yazidis, he emphasized, the calamity is not over, but is simply entering its 5th year. At this stage, 80-90% of displaced Yazidis have been living in camps since 2014; thousands of women and girls remain missing; and mass graves continue to be unearthed in Shingal. These recent atrocities are layered atop a long history of violence, inordinate taxation, and marginalization, in which Yazidis have been relegated to adverse living conditions without adequate schools and medication. Frustration over insufficient assistance and services since the invasion has weakened hope and belief throughout this community. As a result, over 100,000 Yazidis have migrated in the past 5 years, abandoning their homeland.

Sleman observed that many Yazidi victims returned to Bashiqā and other areas of origin after liberation. However, unique barriers are impeding return in Shingal. Among these, he cited geopolitical competition between Baghdad and Erbil, the lack of adequate security services, the proliferation of militias and armed groups, and the absence of a legitimate administrative apparatus. On this last point, he observed that the legitimate administration, installed prior to 2014, is now practicing in an area close to Duhok Province; meanwhile, other entities, neither legal nor legitimate, have been imposed on Shingal. The resultant duality, as well as the absence of a trusted local administration, makes it difficult for civil society organizations to provide necessary services, opportunities, and security in the region. Sleman therefore asked the international community, the Iraqi government, and the KRG to demonstrate greater seriousness in their efforts to promote return to this area. He emphasized that no prince, tribe, or spiritual council has any power to motivate IDP return without the provision of safety and services.

When pressed to address social cohesion needs in the Yazidi community, Sleman emphasized that reconciliation is a complex topic, and that the victims of the 2014 invasion need more time.

“Those who paid the high price should be the ones deciding on reconciliation.” - Sleman

Intracommunal fragmentation is also an issue, as many Yazidi constituents have splintered over disparate political affiliations and personal interests. The prospect of reconciliation among these components remains difficult, as Yazidis continue to receive support from different political parties. Finally, Sleman addressed the particular social integration needs represented by former IS sex slaves and their children. While the Yazidi Spiritual Council made the decision to reintegrate formerly enslaved Yazidi women, religious and legal obstacles remain, challenging the ability of these women to lead “a normal life.” For this

reason, Sleman would like to see the international community assist Yazidi women who wish to relocate to another country. Children born to Yazidi women in IS captivity, similarly, face communal and legal barriers to reintegration, as Iraqi legislation dictates that children of anonymous parental lineage must be listed as Muslim. According to religious precedent, these children cannot be accepted as Yazidis. In order to protect these children from further victimization and allow them the freedom to choose their own religion, the Yazidi Spiritual Council would like the international community to grant them refugee status and facilitate their relocation to non-tribal, secular societies. Sleman expressed his willingness to engage in a high-level conference for religious leaders to discuss alternative solutions to this issue.

When asked to distill relevant learnings from the work of the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) in Iraq, **Elie Abouaoun** encouraged panelists to view problems holistically. Many root causes of current conflict, he argued, existed prior to the regime change in 2003 and must be addressed in order to encourage the return of IDPs to their communities.

“Take a holistic view of the problem. Look at the root causes of the conflict.” - Abouaoun

Abouaoun identified several challenges to stabilization and IDP return in Nineveh Province. One of these is a pervasive, widespread distrust that registers at multiple societal strata: between communities; within communities; and between citizens and the local, provincial, regional, and central governments. Overlooking this factor and its impacts on displacement will lead to the implementation of half-baked solutions, he cautioned. Additionally, he warned against generic descriptions of problems, such as “demographic change.” Demographic change, he reminded listeners, can be intentional or natural. While naming and shaming the regional powers behind politically-motivated demographic change projects may be fair and necessary, the crux of the work on this issue must occur at the civilian, communal level rather than geopolitical one. He recommended outcome-oriented dialogues to explore solutions and increase the resilience of affected communities. Finally, Abouaoun expressed concern over the heavy, widespread militarization of communities; if left unchecked, this can spawn further violence and conflict. It is now imperative to find solutions that will effectively engage the thousands of young people who have been fighting in non-state armed groups for years.

When asked about reconciliation projects, Abouaoun clarified that reconciliation should never require victims to waive their right to justice. The first step toward restoring social cohesion, he argued, is convincing affected communities to pursue rights and reparations without resorting to violence. Current obstacles to reconciliation in Nineveh Province include a lack of adequate governmental attention to improving the security environment, and political fragmentation within communities. Addressing the latter involves helping communities develop a common vision on specific issues.

Abouaoun celebrated recent progress on the implementation of UNSCR 1325, and noted that Iraq is one of the most advanced countries in the region on this front. To facilitate continued progress, USIP is providing technical assistance to some of Iraq’s multiple coordination platforms to increase their capacity.