

**Promoting Religious Freedom and Preventing Discrimination in Iraq**  
**Venue: Hyksos Hotel, Ankawa, Erbil**  
**Date: 1-2<sup>nd</sup> April 2021**

**Summary:** On April 1-2, 2021, the Religious Freedom Institute co-sponsored a two-day working meeting of the Iraq Religious Freedom & Antidiscrimination Roundtable (IRFAR) in Erbil, Iraq. The purpose of this event was to bring the roundtable members together, discuss the current situation of religious freedom and discrimination in Iraq, and to identify practical and collaborative solutions for addressing these challenges.



More than 20 individuals participated over the two days, representing large swaths of Iraq's geographic and religious landscape and various sectors including universities, humanitarian and development NGOs, government officials, and religious and tribal leaders.



The agenda covered key concepts related to religious freedom and discrimination. There was a frank

discussion of the challenges being faced by various communities and the opportunities to make a positive impact. The deliberations from the roundtable will inform the production of an RFI Iraq Religious Freedom Landscape Report. There were connections made with global efforts to promote religious freedom in the Middle East. The IRFAR discussed its own next steps as they work to secure future funding and the implementation of follow-up activities that individuals and institutions can take.

**Next Steps:** Since the conclusion of the working meeting, a seminar series was started at the University of Kirkuk on the role of educational institutions and civil society organizations in strengthening and promoting the culture of peace and preventing religious prejudice. are also being planned for Baghdad, Basra, and Nineveh. Projects are being planned for primary-aged children in Nineveh, to engage religious and tribal leaders to promote social cohesion, and online and in-person seminars related to media and religious freedom are being planned for youth and others.

# Agenda

## Day 1:

Mr. **Youhanna Touma**, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Nineveh Humanitarian Relief Organization, presented an introduction and working agenda for the working meeting. Youhanna has extensive experience working in Mosul and on the Nineveh Plains, including documenting abuses against religious minorities, providing humanitarian assistance, and training projects for teachers and students.



**Salah Ali**, General Coordinator of IRFAR laid out the vision for the roundtable, its structure, and started the conversation around the key challenges that the IRFAR members can work to address. He highlighted the overall lack of awareness and understanding of religious freedom across Iraq. This results in discrimination that occurs at the government and social levels. In general, there is an absence of engagement between the various religious communities. The lack of knowledge of the other and the prevalence of isolation and social barriers between the components, whether within the same region or between different regions allows for discrimination to continue. The IRFAR, with representation from across these communities, has an important role to play in breaking down these barriers and in increasing awareness and understanding.



The final two sessions of the day examined what religious freedom is and why it matters and then gave an introduction and connection to efforts to promote religious freedom globally and in Iraq. **Jeremy Barker**, Director of RFI's Middle East Action Team, presented a lecture on key dimensions of religious freedom or equality of religious practice. The presentation highlighted the importance of religious freedom because of its connection to who we are as people who ask religious questions and then our answers about them impact not only our private but our public lives also. Then the day closed with connections to a number of civil society networks and programs around the world that can support the work of the IRFAR in Iraq. These included, **Gillian Dare**, of the UK FoRB Forum's Iraq Working Group, **Greg Mitchell**, Chair of the International Religious Freedom Roundtable, **Brian Grim**, President of the Religious Freedom and Business Foundation, and **Shirin Taber**, Director, Empower Women Media.



## Day 2:

The second day was full of engaged open discussion facilitated by different participants. The conversation took a deep dive into the current situation in Iraq in regard to religious freedom and discrimination, with the aim of highlighting practical solutions for these challenges.

The conversation highlighted social and legal challenges including:

- The widespread use of religious platforms to spread extremist religious discourse and incitement to hatred.
- Conflicts over natural resources and personal property disputes
- Weakness of the law enforcement, absence of accountability, and widespread impunity
- The political exploitation of religious differences, especially during the election campaigns
- The deficiency of educational curricula in schools in relation to the culture and religious freedoms, as well as the ineffectiveness of teaching staff
- The negative role of some media institutions and outlets (traditional and modern media) and their endorsement of extremist media stances and discourse.
- Political domination, especially by religious parties, over constitutional contents and interpretations, especially by political parties that have a strict religious character
- The marginalization of some ethnic components within the Iraqi constitution of 2005



The day ended with developing a range of potential project ideas that could be implemented to address specific challenges and then each of the participants was pushed to identify action steps that they can take in near future to start addressing key challenges.

- Spreading awareness and preventing discrimination in schools, which includes developing resources, training of teachers, activating the extra-curricular educational and entertainment activities and school trips, cultural festivals that enhance the culture of diversity and religious freedoms for all.
- Contribute to the development of traditional media discourse and its role in promoting religious freedoms and preventing discrimination, through a sustainable media center, which works to implement intensive and comprehensive programs, to train and empower a number of prominent and influential local media professionals.
- Utilizing the interest of young people in social media and empowering a number of active bloggers and enabling them to contribute to the promotion of religious freedom.



**Action Steps:** Since the IRFAR currently has limited financial resources, the participants agreed to organize activities that would not require waiting for additional funding.

1. **University of Kirkuk:** Led by Prof. Omar Najm Al-Din Anja, Dean of the Faculty of Arts, the University is hosting a series of seminars on the topic of “The role of educational institutions and civil society organizations in strengthening and promoting the culture of peace and preventing religious prejudice.” The first session was held on Monday, April 5 with contributions from RFI, IRFAR, and five departments of the university. Topics included: Sharia and Legal Texts in Preserving Religious Freedom; The Role of the Media in Spreading a Culture of Peace and Religious Freedom; The Importance of History for Religious Communities; The Role of the University in Promoting a Culture of Peace and Religious Freedom.
2. **University of Basra:** Led by Prof. Tayseer Ahmid Abel in the College of Law will organize an event on the impact of online platforms and hate speech
3. **Mustansiriyah University (Baghdad):** Led by Prof. Lamia Yassin Zugheer, College of Education, will organize an event on the role of youth in promoting religious freedom
4. **IRFAR** will organize meetings between the Roundtable and religious and ethnic community leaders to promote social cohesion
5. **RFI and IRFAR** will organize a meeting with the Empower Women Media organization in order to expand efforts promote religious freedom through empowering women using the means of media, including by providing translation of materials into Arabic.

## Feedback / Quotes

### What Does Religious Freedom Mean To You?

*Religious freedom implies legal protection and social respect of the religious belief and practice of all citizens despite their numerical count or their backgrounds in the country -*

**Dr. Tahira Abdul-Razzaq Sadiq, Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist, Duhok and Member of the Official Representation Office of Baha'is in Kurdistan**



*Freedom of religion is an individual and collective freedom, and it enables individuals to manifest their religion or belief and to practice their religious rites openly without harassment from either the authorities or members of society. - Ghanim Ilyas Saleem, Executive Manager, Ghasin Al-Zaiton Organization for Youth*

### Why Does Religious Freedom Matter to You and Your Community?

*Because society is not complete without religious, national and ethnic pluralism, Iraq is a bouquet of flowers of different colors, and the image does not show its brilliance and beauty except with this multiplicity. - Prof.*

**Tayseer Ahmid Abel, College of Law, Basra University and Tribal Sheikh**



*Because it helps him to confront extremism in all its forms, especially extremism based on the perception of people's beliefs and opinions, and then exposes the individual to the violation of his basic rights. - Dr. Mahmoud Ezzo Hamdo, Faculty of Political Science, University of Mosul*

### What is something you learned or gained from the IRFAR meeting?

*It was an interesting meeting that opened new perspectives for me and gave me the opportunity to meet others and think with them how we could work together for a fruitful result respectively. – Prof. Lamia Yassin Zugheer, College of Education, Al-*

**Mustansiriyah University**



*I learned some challenges and solutions during the peer review, also how to find solutions to problems. Also, I gained some new models or experiences during the lectures and the speeches of the lecturers - Barzan Baran Rashid, Head of Religious Sermon's Committee, Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs, Kurdistan Regional Government*

## Participants

Participants in the working group meeting came from across the country, including Basra, Baghdad, Kirkuk and Mosul, Hamdaniya, Sulaymaniyah, Erbil, and Duhok, and included, Sunni and Shi'a, Christians, Yazidis, and Baha'i.

1. Salah Ali, General Coordinator/  
Iraq Religious Freedom and Anti-  
discrimination Roundtable
  2. Jeremy Barker, Director, Middle  
East Action Team, Religious  
Freedom Institute
  3. Barzan Baran Rashid, Head of  
Religious Sermon's Committee,  
Ministry of Endowment and  
Religious Affairs, Kurdistan  
Regional Government
  4. Dr. Divar Nizar, Ankawa  
Humanitarian Committee
  5. Vida Habib, Director of Public and  
International Relations, Catholic  
University in Erbil
  6. Hozan Abdulrahman Hassan,  
Political Assistant for Human  
Rights, U.S. Consulate Erbil
  7. Ghanim Ilyas Saleem, Executive  
Manager, Ghasin Al-Zaiton  
Organization for Youth
  8. Prof. Lamia Yassin Zugheer,  
College of Education, Al-  
Mustansiriyah University
  9. Prof. Omar Najm Al-Din Anja,  
Dean of the Faculty of Arts -  
University of Kirkuk
  10. Amir Othman Mawloud, Director  
of Interfaith Coexistence at the  
Ministry of Endowments and  
Religious Affairs, Kurdistan  
Regional Government
  11. Dr. Mahmoud Ezzo Hamdo,  
Faculty of Political Science,  
University of Mosul
  12. Dr. Salah Oreibi Abbas, College of  
Arts, University of Kirkuk and  
President of the Yaman Foundation  
for Humanitarian Affairs
  13. Youhanna Youssef Touma,  
Chairman of the Board of Directors  
of the Nineveh Humanitarian  
Relief Organization,
  14. Falah Tala'a Sadiq Al-Alusi,  
Director of the Al-Rafidain Peace  
Organization
  15. Menat Allah Nuri Muhammad  
Aziz, Al-Rafidain Peace  
Organization
  16. Sarmad Muqbel Kikhsroo, Baha'i  
representative in the Kurdistan  
Region Ministry of Endowments  
and Religious Affairs
  17. Ta'mim Jalil Ibrahim Al-Azzawi,  
Lawyer for the Peace of Al-  
Rafidain Organization
  18. Dr. Hisham Ezz Al-Din Majeed  
Al-Jaf, University of Baghdad
  19. Prof. Yassin Muhammad Hamad  
Al-Ithawi, University of Baghdad,  
President of the Peace Academics  
Organization
  20. Prof. Tayseer Ahmid Abel, College  
of Law, Basra University
  21. Dr. Tahira Abdul-Razzaq Sadiq,  
Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist,  
Duhok and Member of the Official  
Representation Office of Baha'is in  
Kurdistan
  22. Dr. Waad Ibrahim Khalil, College  
of Arts, University of Mosul
- Guest Speakers:**
23. Gilian Dare, UK FoRB Forum Iraq  
Working Group
  24. Greg Mitchell, International  
Religious Freedom Roundtable
  25. Brian Grim, Religious Freedom  
and Business Foundation
  26. Shirin Tabor, Empower Women  
Media