The strategy alignment action plan serves to:

1. Map the Iraq Country Office’s programmatic priorities (project themes, locations, partners, target participants) for 3 years from 2022-2025, in-line with the Greater Levant Strategy Objectives
2. Provide tangible programmatic approaches and milestones to help address each of these priorities
3. Outline contextual information that will provide relevance and direction to business development process and programmatic strategy aligned with these priorities

Greater Levant Strategy Objectives

Search’s 10-year Greater Levant Strategy seeks to address a set of highly consequential conflicts in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan, in a way that explicitly acknowledges their transnational dimensions. In order to tackle this conflict system, Search takes a conflict geography approach, meaning that it will work around the natural boundaries of the conflict, rather than focusing exclusively on country-specific pathways.

The strategy has six strategic objectives (SOs), which target key driving factors that are central to the conflict system and take advantage of opportunities for peace:

1. Catalyze popular demand for meaningful reconciliation
2. Capitalize on internally displacement persons (IDP) and refugee movements to shape social norms around diversity and inclusion
3. Advance inclusive and responsive governance
4. Enable young people to develop multi-dimensional identities
5. Catalyze broad inclusion in brokering and implementation of political agreements
6. Transform external proxy power engagement towards collaboration for peace
# Table of Contents

## Acronyms

## Overview

- Methodology
- Context
- Operational Goals
- Target Areas
- Partnership Approach
- Value-add and Impact
- Monitoring & Evaluation Approach
- Milestones

## Strategic Objectives

- **Objective 1**
  - Catalyze popular demand for meaningful reconciliation

- **Objective 2**
  - Capitalize on internal displacement persons (IDP) and refugee movements to shape social norms around diversity and inclusion

- **Objective 3**
  - Advance inclusive and responsive governance

- **Objective 4**
  - Enable young people to develop multi-dimensional identities

- **Objective 5 (Aspirational)**
  - Catalyze broad inclusion in brokering and implementation of political agreements

- **Objective 6 (Aspirational)**
  - Transform external proxy power engagement towards collaboration for peace

## Annex 1: Key Contextual Sections

## Annex 2: Programmatic Ideas and Language (SOs 1-5)
Acronyms

CDA - Community Dialogue Approach
CGA - Common Ground Approach
CO - Country Office
CoP - Community of Practice
CSO - Civil Society Organization
DRL - United States Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor
GBV - Gender-Based Violence
GoI - Federal Government of Iraq
IDP - Internally Displaced Person
ISIS - Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
KAP - Knowledge, Attitude and Practice
KRG - Kurdistan Regional Government
KRI - Kurdistan Region of Iraq
LPC - Local Peace Committee
MENA - Middle East and North Africa
NGO - Non Governmental Organization
R&R - Rehabilitation and Reintegration
SO - Strategic Objective
UNSCR - United Nations Security Council Resolution
YLC - Youth Leadership Council
Overview

Methodology
How was the Iraq Action Plan conceptualized and developed?

The Iraq team conducted desk research, consultations, and reflection sessions over the course of 3 months from September to November 2020. Desk research and subsequent context development positioned the team for a successful Action Plan design process, which began with two consultation sessions. The first consultation focused on introducing the team to the Levant Strategy, familiarizing the strategic objectives (SO), and brainstorming Iraq-specific challenges, opportunities, stakeholders, and geographies for each SO. The second consultation identified priorities and possibilities through reflections on Search’s established impact in Iraq, new directions, and necessary capacity building needs to achieve our desired impact. Each team member answered a questionnaire with in-person one-on-one follow up meetings to foster deeper unpacking of each SO as it relates to the Iraq context. The Iraq team compiled all data collected into a master reflection document that fed directly into the Action Plan drafting.

From December 2021 to February 2022, the team drafted the Action Plan, solicited reviews from global and regional offices, and integrated reviews. Towards the end of March and throughout April 2021, the Iraq team consolidated the Action Plan into a standardized regional template in preparation for finalization and operationalization in the second quarter of 2022.

Context
Current dynamics and recent changes that affect (positively or negatively) our strategic objectives and programming opportunities.

(Click on the hyperlinked titles for further information in the Annex)

Overview of Iraqi Context
After decades of protracted conflict, Iraq is finally entering a reconstruction phase. The reconciliation process is strongly influenced by political dynamics, the lack of a cohesive and accountable security sector, and the needs and grievances of Iraq's many ethnic and religious groups.

Sectarianism: Ethnic and Religious Tensions
In Iraq, religion and ethnicity are closely bound identity markers. While Iraq is a religiously and ethnically diverse country, Saddam Hussein's Arabization policies undermined social cohesion, which has continued to break down over the last 17 years due to political instability, sectarian violence, and the ISIS insurgency.

Politics
A stagnant government formation process following Iraq's largely peaceful elections in October 2021 is stalling. The elections determined the representatives of the parties who will, in turn, elect the president of the republic and ratify the prime minister.

Iraq's Disputed Areas
Contested between the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and federal Government of Iraq (GoI), the disputed areas represent one of the country's most intractable issues. They have been a core concern for many Arabs, Kurds and Turkmens, especially since the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the subsequent political restructuring.
**IDPs and Refugees**
The displaced population in Iraq and the KRI proliferated rapidly between 2013 and 2015, when a massive influx of refugees poured across the border from neighboring Syria to escape civil war. Currently, Iraq has around 1.1 million IDPs, 200,000 returned IDPs and 285,000 refugees and asylum-seekers (89% Syrian) and more than 46,000 stateless people. This influx has created significant demand for services, overwhelming sectors such as education, health, and employment. [...] 

**Youth Empowerment and Inclusion**
Over half of Iraq’s total population of more than 40 million are under the age of 25. Youths are one of the most valuable resources for building a prosperous and inclusive Iraq. They have grown up in a country at a pivotal stage of development, a deeply dysfunctional state without a vision or concrete prospects for the future. [...] 

**Gender Equality and the Inclusion of Women**
Entrenched social discrimination against Iraqi women has been aggravated by decades of violent conflict, generating new obstacles to women's rights and empowerment. According to the 2021 Global Gender Gap Report, Iraq is the country with the second highest gender gap in the world and the smallest economic participation and opportunity gaps at (22.8%). [...] 

**The Influence of Proxy Powers**
Global and other regional actors - engaged in conflict either directly or working with aligned proxy groups and movements - fuel and influence conflict in the Greater Levant. Iraq has the fifth largest oil reserves in the world, therefore drawing global powers’ attention. [...] 

**Other Challenges to Social Cohesion**

**COVID-19**
According to UNDP, Prior to COVID-19, 4.1 million people in Iraq required humanitarian support. Lockdown measures have reduced access to justice, adversely affecting social cohesion. Formal courts have been closed and legal proceedings paused or significantly delayed, particularly impacting women who have not been able to access family courts. The rise of many traditional dispute resolution mechanisms, including tribal courts. [...] 

**Socioeconomic Context**
According to the World bank, Iraq’s economic conditions are gradually improving as international oil markets recover, this recovery is fraught by major risks posed by structural bottlenecks, including public investment management constraints that have impacted public service delivery, the slow clearance of arrears especially those related to public wages, and large exposure of state-owned banks and the central bank to the sovereign. [...] 

**Environmental Challenges**
Iraq is considered one of the Middle East and North Africa’s (MENA) most climate-vulnerable countries because of its arid climate, rising temperatures, downstream positionality, lack of precipitation and increasing temperatures. Iraq could suffer a 20 percent drop in water resources by 2050, with nearly one-third of the irrigated land in Iraq left parched, with increased dust storms and climate migration. [...]
**Operational Goals**

*What does the Iraq CO need to successfully align with Greater Levant strategic objectives?*

In order for Search-Iraq to implement effective programming strategies and successfully align with the six Greater Levant Strategic Objectives, the Country Office (CO) aims to progress on the following capacities:

1. **Growing reach**: expand its portfolio, foster donor engagement, and secure geographic expansion to the whole of Iraq.
2. **Visibility, establishment, and acceptance**: introduce Search for Common Ground with the government officials and local NGOs in Baghdad, acquire visibility on its mission, disseminate its vision and program implementation, and establish acceptance as a strong and reliable organization through transparent and participatory forms of downward accountability that engage and include local communities beyond program cycles.
3. **Engagement with people and communities in Iraq**: ensure the CO is supporting local and vulnerable communities across Iraq by expanding peacebuilding efforts to post-war areas, difficult and hard to reach areas (e.g. disputed territories), and southern Iraq, all the while consistently promoting gender equality.
4. **Stronger partners**: develop a better understanding of the local partner and INGO landscape, engagement with government officials, ministries, and municipal councils, paired with robust and smoothly operating partnerships.
5. **Stronger understanding of local contexts**: establish frameworks to ensure the CO has a systematized method of operationalizing its priorities, and streamlining these into each proposal.
6. **Funding diversification**: expand funding sources beyond DRL, engage foundations and private individuals for unrestricted funds and, with support of Search Brussels, engage European donors.
7. **Measuring impact**: record and measure real impact among beneficiaries through evaluations and research. In addition, collect and translate data on the Search Global Impact Framework indicators into visualization and communication products that resonate with key stakeholders.

**Target Areas**

*Are there particular target areas of the country where the CO will focus work in order to align with the strategy objectives? What are the particular needs and opportunities in the areas identified?*

- **Disputed Areas (Kirkuk and parts of Diyala, Salah Al-Din, and Ninewa)**
  - Inclusive and responsive decision-making, governance, and political processes for communities lacking KRG/fGoI attention
  - Social cohesion efforts in highly diverse disputed areas *(Kirkuk city, Sinjar, Khanaqin)*
  - Supporting young women and men to develop multidimensional identities through working across identity differences on unifying, highly impactful themes
  - Ensuring women, youth, and minorities are included and actively participating in any political agreement/settlement processes between the KRG and GoI, as well as working to ensure and build the capacity of mid-to-high level governance structures and justice systems.
  - Context: [Youth Community of Practice in Ninewa, LPCs in Ninewa, Local Reconciliation and Community Dialogue in Kirkuk and Diyala, Inclusive Political Processes](#)
- **Ninewa Plains (ISIS-impacted communities)**
  - Understanding local perceptions of social cohesion and reconciliation, keeping in consideration the increasing saturation of formerly affiliated ISIS women and children reintegration focus.
  - Establishing safe spaces for community dialogue and Common Ground learning
- Fostering inclusive and responsive governance and political processes from the bottom up and the top down.
- Capitalizing on IDP/refugee movements to foster inclusive identities.
- Context: Youth Community of Practice in Ninewa, LPCs in Ninewa

- **South of Iraq (Basra, Thi Qar, Maysan, and primarily in Arab Shia areas)**
  - Productive youth inclusion in political processes through constructive communication channels between political leaders and formal and informal youth organizations, utilizing issues that matter to all Iraqis, regardless of age, affiliation, or background
  - Supporting young women and men to develop multidimensional identities
  - Context: Inclusive Political Processes, Expanding Youth Leadership Councils

- **Continued presence in the KRI**
  - Sustaining existing inclusive governance and social cohesion efforts through multilevel efforts
  - Sustaining young women's empowerment efforts
  - Capitalizing on IDP/refugee movements to foster inclusive identities through facilitating access to economic activities that contribute to host community integration and/or improved resilience among refugee and IDP communities.
  - Catalyzing broad inclusion in implementation of political agreements, while strengthening governmental capacity to maintain and implement agreements made
  - Context: Inclusive Governance, Expanding Youth Leadership Councils

*Search-Iraq will concentrate its efforts in urban centers over the next three years, to: a) implement programming in highly diverse areas and b) acquire experience in environments that are more open, later expanding to more conservative communities.*

**Partnership Approach**

*How does the Iraq CO define its partners and collaborate with them? Who are the strategic stakeholders to whom Search can partner to work towards achieving the strategic objectives?*

For the purposes of this Action Plan, partners include any entity with which Search-Iraq works. Therefore, our definition of partners includes local formal and informal civil society groups and organizations, local and international non-governmental organizations, institutions and think tanks, government ministries, committees, and officials, and donor organizations, such as foundations, UN, and governments.

**Local Partners**

1. Search actively engages local Iraqi organizations as a central component of our CO’s programmatic approach. Search has existing relationships with local NGOs, research institutions, and think tanks. Search will continue to involve local partners from the design of the projects, throughout the implementation, to the close-out and end.

2. Search needs to establish an outreach strategy to engage local partners in target areas with little to no visibility or reach, such as southern Iraq. Local partners to target include NGOs, government officials, municipal councils, local leaders, and research/education institutions.

3. Search-Iraq emphasizes complementarity roles, building on local partners’ existing capacities and areas of expertise. While Search-Iraq’s role is often as technical advisor, proposing curricula, providing toolkits and training, and ensuring program implementation benchmarks are met, local partners possess the networks, community buy-in, and localized contextual understanding necessary for effective and successful project implementation. Search-Iraq will aim to build on existing initiatives and further strengthen their capacity and legitimacy by weaving together links and connections between local partners, networks, and communities that complement each
other, and working to strengthen the capacity of the local organizations in place to conduct the majority of programming together with Search.

4. One of Search-Iraq’s guiding values is elevating affected communities’ perspectives. Search’s credibility it derived from its local networks and programmes, and fundamentally believe that local solutions work best.

5. How can Search-Iraq best design programs to elevate local voices and solutions?
   a. International representation: horizontal linkages between civil society coalitions in key policy hubs around the world, utilizing social media in particular as a localized global platform for communication and advocacy on climate issues, online hate speech and gender empowerment.
   b. National/regional representation: better linking with domestic organizations on the ground in conflict zones, including linking these organizations to each other. Priority will be given to organizations that offer more than just intangible solutions but actual services as a means to meeting current needs while building the ability for end-beneficiaries and local partners to be activated and utilized.
   c. Direct representation by those working or living in affected communities to policymakers who rarely get to engage community members directly.

INGOs

1. In the past year, Search engaged with INGOs such as CARE, UPP, PAX, SPARK, ECES, Tearfund, and IREX.

2. Search-Iraq needs to conduct a mapping of INGOs working across Iraq in the following sectors: social cohesion, MHPSS, DDR, GBV, livelihoods, inclusive politics and governance, democracy support, youth and women's engagement. It is important to include the implementation areas, short project description, and donor.

3. Search-Iraq will conduct engagement activities with INGOs in target areas (such as southern Iraq, SalahAl-Din, and Diyala) and seek to partner on concept and proposal development.

4. Search should strive to insert into Consortiums for large projects by strengthening INGO knowledge and outreach and maintaining contacts from previous opportunities.

5. Search-Iraq will seek to identify potential partner media organizations, in and outside of Iraq, in an effort to expand Search’s media for peacebuilding programming approaches.

Donors

1. Search maintains good relations and is working (or worked) with donors such as: the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, USAID, the US State Department Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labour (DRL), the UK Government’s Conflict, Stability, and Security Fund (CSSF), and the German Corporation for International Cooperation (GIZ).

2. Search must continue strengthening existing relations with Embassies and donor bodies, such as the Dutch, British, EU’s IcSP, and UNICEF, UNDP, and commit to outreach with the following: German FFO/Embassy, Global Affairs Canada, IOM, Swedish Foreign Affairs.

3. Search-Iraq requires support from Search Brussels to continue engaging European donors to diversify our portfolio and secure funding streams and continued regional support to develop concept notes to circulate.

Over the next three years, one of Search-Iraq's top priorities is to establish CO programmatic activity across Iraq, generate acceptance and trust, develop its network, and transform connections into collaborations. Search will begin increasing visibility with government bodies across the KRG and Gol and reconnect with donor government bodies. Search will also seek to connect with Foundations and private individuals interested in contributing funds to social cohesion and peacebuilding in Iraq.
Value-add and Impact
What is Search-Iraq’s niche and which objectives are likely to be more successful? How does our track record support our value-add? What major impacts from previous programming exemplify our overall impact in Iraq?

Search-Iraq has a solid track record in fostering community motivation and buy-in to support sustainable local peace and reconciliation initiatives. Search-Iraq and local partner, Sanad for Peacebuilding, led the implementation of six Local Peace Committees (LPCs) in Southwest Kirkuk, enhancing local-level social cohesion by promoting collaboration between diverse actors. The project enabled Search-Iraq to build sustainable and healthy relationships with the LPCs, introducing communities to systematized and effective reconciliation processes underpinned by the Common Ground Approach. Following the end of the project, LPC members’ community initiatives facilitated the return of over 100 families to Hawija District in Southwest Kirkuk. Search-Iraq’s experience in supporting reconciliation processes will contribute to the success of SO 1 and 2 of this action plan.

The majority of Search-Iraq’s implemented projects are youth-focused considering over half of the Iraqi population is under 21 years old. Central in the youth engagement approach is Search-Iraq’s commitment to ensuring women’s ability to access and engage in all implemented projects. Search’s Youth Community of Practice project in Ninewa enabled diverse groups of youth to meet and collaborate across religious and ethnic dividing lines, building relationships and spearheading initiatives lasting well beyond the project’s end. Search-Iraq’s Promoting Inclusive Governance for Youth and Women established Youth Leadership Councils with the support of two local partners in 7 rural communities across the KRI. Over 200 young women and men (50:50 gender balance) participated in these councils, strengthening their leadership, advocacy, and communication skills, while creating relationships with local authorities and community members. Search-Iraq’s experience fostering gender-sensitive inclusive governance and youth engagement will position the CO for achievement of SO 3 and 4. In addition, Search-Iraq will develop a gender mainstreaming strategy ready for operalization across all programmes in Q2 of 2022.

Monitoring & Evaluation Approach
Monitoring and Evaluation processes are crucial to Action Plan’s operationalization. While the Action Plan has no specific indicators, the M&E approach will align the Iraq CO’s project goals and objectives with the strategic objectives of the Action Plan. For that purpose, the Iraq office’s DME team will integrate and utilize project indicators and evaluation findings to feed into the Action Plan’s strategic objectives. To accomplish this, the DME team will ensure that new projects’ objectives will include indicators that directly and indirectly connect to the Search Global Impact Framework (GIF) and this Action Plan’s milestones and objectives, ensuring that these objectives are met through research, studies, and evaluations conducted by the Iraq CO. The DME team will also create a system of project evaluations and learning approaches that centralize all Search-Iraq projects and include key themes and data that should be collected beyond that of what is required by donors. This data collection will be invaluable to ensure the progress of the Iraq office but will also provide data that can be used to draft future project bids.
Milestones

- **SO 1**: Search-Iraq will empower 2 communities (1 existing KRI relation and 1 new GOI relation) to begin reconciliation efforts, with an emphasis on empowerment through meaningful purpose that builds community capacity, strengthens cross-community ties, and enables local initiatives to grow and develop sustainably.

- **SO 2**: Search-Iraq will identify humanitarian or government actors with whom we can collaborate to provide IDPs and returnees with social cohesion, (re)integration, and relationships building programming between returnees, local communities, and stakeholders.

- **SO 3**: In the first year, Search-Iraq will ensure the sustainability of existing YLCs and youth engagement efforts. In the second and third years, Search-Iraq will expand existing mechanisms and identify opportunities in which young people and women have a legitimate role in governance processes. Search will zoom into specific issue areas in which local partners are working and in which Search can contribute to clear capacity gaps, including M&E, report writing, and analysis, and supporting these organizations in developing and solidifying organizational structures and methods of measurement and monitoring.

- **SO 4**: Search-Iraq will launch a youth-led campaign on Iraqi identity (i.e. what does it mean to be an Iraqi?) and involve stakeholders such as CSOs, influencers, and officials who are diverse in their identities and sectors to engage with youth beyond ethnic/religious/tribal dividing lines through meaningful issue areas impacting communities at all levels, such as justice and legal systems or environmental conservation.

- **SO 5**: Search-Iraq will join the respective UNSCR 1325 and 2250 committees and promote and streamline each UNSCR in our project design, proposals, and program implementation.

- **SO 6**: Search-Iraq will support female leaders, such as academics and minority party candidates, by creating a platform for them to further share views on external proxy powers and support the dissemination of their ideas. Search will place an emphasis on the integration of gender across all issue areas, not specific to “women’s issues”.

**Gender Sensitivity**: In the first year, Search-Iraq will ensure that all efforts towards meeting the SOs mainstream gender, taking into account gender sensitive dynamics. Search-Iraq will also identify gender-focused and women-led CSOs with whom Search-Iraq can partner on project implementation. In addition, Search-Iraq will develop a gender mainstreaming strategy in year one, which includes the identification of potential local partners that can help achieve the strategy’s aims. The strategy will integrate gender as a component and lens across program activities, empowering women to take on leading roles in their communities and governments across themes and subjects, not only those directly to women. In year two and three, Search-Iraq, together with identified gender-focused and women-led CSOs, will work with local communities and CSOs to transform gender dynamics ensuring women’s involvement at community level. Search-Iraq will aim to mainstream its own approach to gender sensitive programming through integrating gender as a component and lens across program activities and working to empower women to take on leading roles in their communities and governments across themes and subjects, not only those related directly to women. Finally, Search-Iraq will begin engaging and implement programming with the identified local partners. Collaboratively, Search-Iraq and its partners will seek to empower women and increase participation, ensuring women’s involvement at community level.

**Meaningful Partnerships**: In the first year, Search-Iraq will acquire a strong Search representation in Baghdad with the goal of building and strengthening relationships with GoI Ministries as well as creating a MoU for future partnership. In the second and third year, Search-Iraq will pursue collaborations with various government entities, academic institutions, and think tanks with the aim of developing and increasing advocacy efforts. Search will work to effectively engage with officials in both Erbil and Baghdad on a quarterly basis in order to demonstrate
commitment to serving the whole of Iraq and the Iraqi people, and to maintain contact with key officials to enacting change at all levels of society.

## Strategic Objectives

**Pillar 1: Facilitating reconciliation and horizontal cohesion, with a focus on weaving and reweaving relationships fractured due to violent conflict, competing group identities, and population movements**

### Objective 1

_Catalyze popular demand for meaningful reconciliation_

#### Objective Explanation

Search will catalyze the mobilization of broad societal demand for tangible and implementable reconciliation processes. By "meaningful reconciliation," Search distinguishes between ostensible claims for reconciliation with hollow action from concrete and evidenced steps for people-driven and voluntary reconciliation processes.

In the _short-term_, Search will support rebuilding trust within communities most recently and most deeply affected by rounds of violent conflict. In the _long-term_, Search will catalyze incremental reconciliation processes—both local and national—on protracted and unredressed grievances from previous cycles of violence.

#### Key Challenges

_Factors or considerations that if addressed could substantially reduce violence and promote success, relevant to this objective. This can refer to a range of conflict dynamics as well as social and political barriers, economic and market factors, negative incentives for peace, etc._

- Dividing lines may serve certain constituencies' personal interests (e.g. community and religious leaders) and limit buy-in for reconciliation efforts
- Lack of awareness and/or interest: certain communities don’t recognize a need for reconciliation
- Exclusion of certain groups in reconciliation processes (e.g. women, religious or ethnic minorities)
- Reconciliation requires multi-year programming, which is not always possible
- Online polarization and hate speech

#### Key Opportunities

_Forces for peace and positive trends for overcoming divisions or challenges, relevant to this objective._

- Widespread demonstrations since 2019 promote a cross-cutting national identity, which Search needs to foster through engaging diverse groups who are tired of the sectarian status quo
- The large youth population is eager to see change and open to undertaking it - but often unsure of the next steps to take, which positions Search well to engage with civically minded youth who have a desire to participate in reconciliation and can foster demand in their communities
- Digital technologies can be used to build trust, promote peace, reduce polarization, counter hate speech, and foster horizontal and vertical cohesion. Social media creates an open space for raising
peacebuilding awareness and positive media narratives to encourage hope and ambition as well as counter narratives of intolerance and extremism, especially among young people

Programmatic Approaches
Where can Search leverage its expertise and value add to effect impactful change and transformation under this objective? What Search methodologies, tool kits, approaches? What needs are these approaches meeting?

- Knowledge, Attitude, and Practice (KAP) research surveys to understand localized perceptions on reconciliation, peacebuilding, and social cohesion
- Promote social cohesion through cultural heritage education, the conservation of endangered environmental zones and positive media use combating disinformation, hate speech, and rumors
- Build resilient communities and strengthen violence prevention mechanisms through capacity building, local leadership buy-in, education, economic empowerment, and dialogue, such as leveraging Search’s CDA
- Legitimizing/local reconciliation efforts, such as peace committees, within national frameworks and legislations
- Prevent and transform violent extremism by facilitating community-level gender sensitive Rehabilitation and Reintegration (R&R) of vulnerable groups, including former combatants, ex-detainees, and individuals/families with alleged links to ISIS, or supporting the redress of grievances related to these individuals and families through the strengthening of the justice system and legal avenues for recompense
- Capacity building of government and justice systems, taking an approach of a bottom-up/top-down midpoint, through empowering judicial systems to handle the capacity and need of the communities they are meant to serve
- Utilize digital marketing tools and innovative data capture and analysis tools to serve Search’s peacebuilding goals of inclusion, collaboration and participation and drive enduring change

Objective 2
Capitalize on internal displacement persons (IDP) and refugee movements to shape social norms around diversity and inclusion

Objective Explanation
The next 10 years will see continued population movements across Iraq. The manner in which host and displaced communities manage resource competition, identity issues, and political power dynamics will shape conflict, social and gender dynamics.

In the short-term, Search will focus on three elements: incorporating conflict sensitivity into humanitarian action related to displacement; promoting social cohesion between displaced and host communities by convening key stakeholders, building enduring relationships, and fostering collaboration to utilize resources; and building a constructive, intersectional dialogue on gender roles at every level of society to address the social norms around the women and men’s roles.

Key Challenges
Factors or considerations that if addressed could substantially reduce violence and promote success, relevant to this objective. This can refer to a range of conflict dynamics as well as social and political barriers, economic and market factors, negative incentives for peace, etc.
- Lack of access to relevant communities, due to government-imposed restrictions
- Economic integration for IDPs, and women in particular, in a context of scarce livelihood opportunities
- Language (and cultural) barriers between refugee/IDP and host communities
- Destruction of community spaces and increasingly scarce resources due to climate change
- Lack of female participation in society, economy, and politics/governance due to social norms and other challenges, including GBV
- Tensions and various groups exploitation of sectarianism, religious extremism, lack of security (recruitment or extortion by militias)
- Lack of effective governance or provision of public services, coupled with endemic corruption of authorities
- Lack of education and growing youth population resulting in few prospects for future success among young people
- Lack of technical capacity and ability for governance and justice systems to operate effectively
- Little to no private sector transformation and growth leading to lack of opportunities

### Key Opportunities

**Forces for peace and positive trends for overcoming divisions or challenges, relevant to this objective.**

- International community acknowledges the importance of supporting the rights of IDP/refugee groups, and are dedicating significant resources to support this vulnerable group. Search can leverage networks to find entry points into social cohesion programming with government ministry by-in and identify advocacy campaigns with international governorate ministries
- With all IDP camps closing by December 2022, more IDPs will reside in the contested territories which are cosmopolitan in nature, which means these communities have centuries of peaceful coexistence history which could form the basis of solid community cohesion and mutual understanding that Search-Iraq can foster
- Search can work towards the actively inclusive integration of IDP/refugee communities through facilitating community-centered activities built on locally expressed needs and cross-communal sectors such as environmental conservation
- In some instances, female leadership has increased in camp settings, paving the way for greater women’s empowerment and employment opportunities, should they be supported with MHPSS and equipped with skills needed to heal from the traumas that have resulted in placing them in the position to take these opportunities. Search will also address these root traumas’ impacts on relevant cultural norms and the shifts that have been necessitated by changes in demographics among communities

### Programmatic Approaches

**Where can Search leverage its expertise and value add to effect impactful change and transformation under this objective? What Search methodologies, tool kits, approaches? What needs are these approaches meeting?**

- Focus programs in diverse regions of Iraq with ongoing movements of people, such as Ninewa, Kirkuk, Diyala, Basra, Thī Qar, Maysan, Dohuk, and Erbil Governorates, as well as those with more homogenous populations (Basra) at risk of climate change induced migration
- Strengthen conflict sensitivity, resilience, reconciliation, and social cohesion by working with agencies focused on gender and peacebuilding
- Equip community leaders and trainers with Common Ground Approach (CGA) training and leverage the Community Dialogue Approach (CDA) especially in areas such as, Basra and Diyala
- Catalyze collaborative social cohesion processes to enable joint problem solving, such as cultural exchanges, cultural/religious site rehabilitation, R&R processes, and peace committees, focusing on developing women’s capacities to engage as changemakers and leaders
- Utilize media, such as social media, TV, and online platforms to create spaces for communities to hear diverse voices on displacement and returnee experiences, and building the capacity of local partners to effectively implement media centered programming

**Pillar 2: Improving governance by strengthening service delivery and inclusive governance in areas resilient to violent conflict, and countering the manipulation of identities and divides for political aims**

**Objective 3**

*Advance inclusive and responsive governance*

**Objective Explanation**

Search will work with communities, local authorities and government institutions to strengthen their capacities and will to engage with one another. This will enable government institutions to shift away from a security-based response to citizen actions and protests, and engage with civic actors collaboratively to concretely act upon reform demands.

In the short-term, Search will build government officials’ capacity to engage citizens and activists in dialogue, as well as communities’ capacity to voice their needs to authorities. Search also aims to transform government norms to include traditionally-marginalized voices via interventions that address gender inequality, harmful gender norms and GBV.

Search will focus its inclusive and responsive governance programming on the KRI in the short-term, while hoping to expand to other relatively stable areas of Iraq in the long-term, once the reputation of Search-Iraq is established in the Federal Government of Iraq near year two.

**Key Challenges**

*Factors or considerations that if addressed could substantially reduce violence and promote success, relevant to this objective. This can refer to a range of conflict dynamics as well as social and political barriers, economic and market factors, negative incentives for peace, etc.*

- Militia control over political parties
- Corruption, and its impact on citizens’ trust in political leaders
- Navigating multiple levels of government and political engagement, including KRI/ GoI division and tribal/ municipal/ community authorities
- Lack of capacity of government institutions and officials

**Key Opportunities**

*Forces for peace and positive trends for overcoming divisions or challenges, relevant to this objective.*

- Government officials are open to engaging youth and understand the power of youth movements, especially in an era where some young women are beginning to raise their voices, participate in politics, and advocate for change
Youth constituencies are increasingly active, and demanding political change which is an entry point to engagement in inclusive and responsive governance programming. Recently elected officials from the 2021 elections are to be targeted to put forward new/different agendas and strengthen citizens' knowledge and practices around democracy, voting, and rights.

Programmatic Approaches
Where can Search leverage its expertise and value add to effect impactful change and transformation under this objective? What Search methodologies, tool kits, approaches? What needs are these approaches meeting?

- Identify key champions in government to engage with local civil society through networks and event participation
- Develop Memorandum of Understanding with key government ministries to align on engagement and programming strategies
- Equip key stakeholders in formal and informal civil society, especially marginalized groups (i.e. youth, women, and minority-led initiatives), to engage in collaborative actions with authorities and officials focused on dialogue, problem-solving, and decision-making (through town halls, social media, and programming, etc).
- Encourage stakeholders to engage both young women and men in decision making taking into account different barriers, needs, and potentials, as part of a wider effort to promote gender equality in Iraq’s governance processes
- Develop citizen-led accountability mechanisms, such as participatory budgeting, public town halls, and community-based initiatives to address identified priorities, making sure to include key champions in government, and taking into consideration the need to strengthen government and institutional capacity as well as the geopolitical influences that impact the types of citizen-led mechanisms that will be effective and accepted.
- Work to strengthen existing government institutions at every level, from provincial councils to parliament, in order to build both capacity and legitimacy of the governance system, and support governance structures in maintaining agreements reached and implementing legislation, while supporting local communities in utilizing these structures and holding authorities accountable.

Objective 4
Enable young people to develop multi-dimensional identities

Objective Explanation
Search will seek to transcend ethnic and sectarian divisions by engaging young women and men in their identity formation process, encouraging them to develop multi-dimensional identities that go beyond their religion, nationality, tribal affiliation, and gender. By embracing multi-dimensional identities, youth will be resilient to identity-based political manipulation, reducing political leaders’ capacity to build sectarian or ethnic-based political constituencies.

In the short-term, Search will identify and embolden key influencers who promote pluralism, online and offline; identify and mobilize youth-led organizations - formal and informal - to work collaboratively, with equal gender engagement; and foster collaboration among youth across traditional identity lines, age, gender, rural/urban divides, and geographies.
Key Challenges
Factors or considerations that if addressed could substantially reduce violence and promote success, relevant to this objective. This can refer to a range of conflict dynamics as well as social and political barriers, economic and market factors, negative incentives for peace, etc.

- Physical barriers/distance reinforce historically, culturally and socially rooted divisions, isolating communities and limiting interactions between them
- Attachment to identity labels is strong among youth especially considering familial and societal pressures to fit in to a specific group, driven further in particular by online hate speech and reinforcement of identity affiliations and divisions
- Prevalent pressures to adopt political affiliations further polarize identity
- Influence of leaders who benefit from divisive discourses and narratives
- Lack of economic opportunity leaving youth in particular more vulnerable to exploitation, extremism, and identity-based pressures, as well as resulting in feelings of hopelessness combined with the continued failures of the ongoing protest movements to enact any real change

Key Opportunities
Forces for peace and positive trends for overcoming divisions or challenges, relevant to this objective.

- National/ cross-sectarian participation in 2019-2021 demonstrations encourage national identity strengthening across ethnic/religious/tribal groups, reflecting a strong civil society community and national network of activism
- Increasing prevalence of social media and online platforms for cross-sectarian advocacy, opening vertical channels, and expanding horizontal connections
- Increasing involvement of women in advocacy and community initiatives and fostering youth ownership in community initiatives
- Utilizing sectors of heritage protection and environmental conservation as cross cutting opportunities for trust building and collaboration

Programmatic Approaches
Where can Search leverage its expertise and value add to effect impactful change and transformation under this objective? What Search methodologies, tool kits, approaches? What needs are these approaches meeting?

- Engage with key youth-led formal and informal organizations, and enable collaboration between men and women across identity groups on small initiatives, advocacy campaigns, community action plans, and gatherings (town halls, live streams, summits, roundtables)
- Ensure youths’ ability to play a key role in society, leadership, and decision-making processes, especially women’s equal access to and opportunities for participation and engagement to encourage identity formation and purpose outside of restrictive societal norms
- Provide role models and examples to youth through mentorship programs and coaching opportunities to build hope and inspiration, as well establish real pathways to be changemakers in their communities
- Contribute to adaptive narratives that counter existing social norms and address gender inequalities and stereotyping through media channels and positive social media use
- Engage with key institutions that shape identity, with special emphasis on ministries of education, schools, and universities to strengthen or develop curricula on pluralism
- Utilize digital tools such as social listening and AI to research polarization, trust, and vulnerability amongst young people online. Search can advocate for digital literacy, appropriate regulation,
Pillar 3: Political processes and political negotiation, both in terms of engagement in unresolved political disagreements and the ongoing interference in national politics by powerful international actors

<table>
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<th>Objective 5 (Aspirational)</th>
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<td>Catalyze broad inclusion in brokering and implementation of political agreements</td>
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**Objective Explanation**

This objective is built on the core assumption that a number of critical political disputes, such as can be resolved through negotiation over the next 10 years. The durability of such negotiations will depend on stakeholder engagement and buy-in, including women.

Search will foster the equal participation and engagement of youth, women, and marginalized communities in forming and implementing any long-term settlements on power sharing. In the short-term, Search will identify key constituencies for peace; bring traditionally marginalized group’s voices (including youth, women and minority groups) into both peacebuilding and the public domain; and strengthen relationships between key constituency groups and leaders.

**Key Challenges**

*Factors or considerations that if addressed could substantially reduce violence and promote success, relevant to this objective. This can refer to a range of conflict dynamics as well as social and political barriers, economic and market factors, negative incentives for peace, etc.*

- The KRI / Baghdad relationship has been strained, and occasionally violent for decades (disputed areas, disagreements about foreign policy, etc.)
- Prevalence of corruption networks complicates any political settlement efforts
- Search-Iraq currently lacks the capacity/ networks to address national level political agreements
- Influence of proxy powers (e.g. Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia) in any political settlement
- Women’s inclusion is challenging given cultural norms and gender roles, and is often overlooked as an integral part of political agreement sustainability
- CSOs currently have weak relationships with Baghdad and central authorities

**Key Opportunities**

*Forces for peace and positive trends for overcoming divisions or challenges, relevant to this objective.*

- KRI/ GoI relationship is stable, and new communication channels now exist
- Government recognizes youth’s presence, particularly since the protests
- Increasingly strong Iraqi civil society, including youth activists and lobbyists

**Programmatic Approaches**

*Where can Search leverage its expertise and value add to effect impactful change and transformation under this objective? What Search methodologies, tool kits, approaches? What needs are these approaches meeting?*
• Encourage groups to hold their political leaders accountable for engagement in constructive negotiated settlements (see Objective 3 for advancing inclusive and responsive governance)
• Engage top-level facilitators, negotiators, and political actors to effectively identify opportunities for broad-based political engagement and public participation in crafting political agreements
• Work to build institutional capacity through the separation and engagement of each branch of governance: legislative and judicial in particular, with an emphasis on strengthening the systems that are currently unequipped to handle internationally impactful issues, such as the sentencing or repatriation of former ISIS affiliates and families
• Promote the inclusion of women in the development and implementation of political agreements across a range of themes, and work towards ensuring that political agreements are gender-sensitive and gender-inclusive
• Promote UNSCR 2250 – support youth-led organizations and groups to play an active role in building peace
• Promote UNSCR 1325 – support women-led organizations/groups to play an active role in building peace
• Employ Track II dialogue tools (engagement between civil society organizations and authorities) to build relationships among key leaders from across dividing lines

**Objective 6 (Aspirational)**

*Transform external proxy power engagement towards collaboration for peace*

**Objective Explanation**

Through long-term Track I and II approaches, and strategic partnerships with key diplomatic players, Search will begin to create spaces and processes for direct dialogue among key global and regional actors to collaborate and build peace in the Greater Levant. Search will neither directly tackle global and regional power competition influencing proxy powers’ behavior nor resolve their heavy security interests. Rather, Search’s strategy is to build partnerships that empower actors to identify shared areas of concern and alignment on key interests.

In the short-term, Search will support the establishment of Track II dialogue opportunities around economic, security, and political issues. While Search-Iraq considers this objective as a long-term aspiration rather than an immediate priority, the following considerations will guide its approach to objective 6.

**Key Challenges**

*Factors or considerations that if addressed could substantially reduce violence and promote success, relevant to this objective. This can refer to a range of conflict dynamics as well as social and political barriers, economic and market factors, negative incentives for peace, etc.*

• Lack of confidence and trust between different political parties, compounded by the large number of official and unofficial authorities, including armed militia groups
• Groups’ interest in war, conflict, and maintaining power
• Finding a safe approach to these discussions that will not harm civilians/advocates
• Search-Iraq’s reputation and visibility are still developing and have not yet built the necessary acceptance and trust to engage in high level and sensitive processes
• The structural, legal and political flaws of the Iraqi Constitution

**Key Opportunities**

*Forces for peace and positive trends for overcoming divisions or challenges, relevant to this objective.*
• Waning popularity of non-state armed groups, especially Iran-backed militias in some geographic areas
• Desire for peaceful reform within some opposition political bodies, academics, independent analysts, etc.
• Political changes and new openness within certain countries (e.g. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia)

Programmatic Approaches

Where can Search leverage its expertise and value add to effect impactful change and transformation under this objective? What Search methodologies, tool kits, approaches? What needs are these approaches meeting?

• Support communities in easing their reliance on militia groups for security through resilience strengthening and local reconciliation processes
• Build capacities of unaligned, minority political party candidates, especially women, that do not obtain support from a proxy power
• Capitalize relations with authorities, officials, and political bodies who are working towards national ownership
Overview of Iraqi Context

After decades of protracted conflict, Iraq is finally entering a reconstruction phase. The reconciliation process is strongly influenced by political dynamics, the lack of a cohesive and accountable security sector, and the needs and grievances of Iraq's many ethnic and religious groups. The country is still facing a wide range of national challenges: the existence of violent extremist cells that continue to perpetrate deadly attacks in Iraq and around the world; a reconstruction estimated at $88 billion USD; historical intercommunal and interreligious conflicts in a country known for its ethnic and religious diversity; a declining political consensus due to various groups' aspirations for independence, notably in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI); and over 3 million IDPs' return to their homes. All IDP camps closed in the federal areas of Iraq, except for one camp in Ninawa that is still receiving returned Iraqi ISIS affiliated families from AlHol Camp in Syria.

In recent history (2003-2020), the US-led invasion which overthrew Saddam Hussein's Sunni-dominated Baathist Government in 2003 ended twelve years of tentative peace in the region. Iraq descended into an unrelenting cycle of violence, including an eight-year period of occupation, insurgency, rising violent jihadist extremist, and sectarian violence fueled by aggrieved Sunnis driven from power and a congruent assertion of Iran-backed Shia political might. While violent conflict simmered in the early 2010s, underlying resentment at Iraqi minority groups' marginalization—primarily Sunni Arabs—at the hands of Shiite political elites drove ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) recruitment. This culminated in ISIS' conquest of significant territory in central and northern Iraq, and the ensuing 2014-2017 Iraq Civil War.

- ISIS' rise and fall was a particularly traumatic and brutal episode, leaving communities in tatters. The extremist group remains active despite its territorial losses, and possesses resources that could allow it to reemerge or morph into a new armed actor. As internally displaced families return to their homes, new tensions have developed between them and non-displaced groups. For example, family members who have suffered losses may blame formerly ISIS-affiliated families, or target them for retribution.

- Mass protest movements erupted in October 2019 in Baghdad and Shia-majority Basra, Thi Qar, and Maysan governorates in southern Iraq. Ongoing demonstrations are driven by pan-sectarian populations tired of government corruption, mismanagement of resources, and the instrumentalization of sectarian identity for political gain. This in turn reflects a popular desire for, and possible transition to, accountable, technocratic and transparent non-sectarian governance. Furthermore, large scale demonstrations led the government to resign and move into early election preparations. During this time, the parliament appointed AlKadhimi to be the caretaker of the government until elections took place in late 2021.

- The unresolved issue of Kurdish autonomy and the group's contested political and social rights further compound conflict in the region. Tentative agreements between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the Government of Iraq (GoI) have consolidated the KRI's semi-autonomy, but recent conflict following the 2017 Kurdish Referendum reveals the fragility of these agreements.
Sectarianism: Ethnic and Religious Tensions

In Iraq, religion and ethnicity are closely bound identity markers. While Iraq is a religiously and ethnically diverse country, Saddam Hussein’s Arabization policies undermined social cohesion, which has continued to break down over the last 17 years due to political instability, sectarian violence, and the ISIS insurgency.

- Iraqis overwhelmingly identify as Muslim (95-98% of the population in 2015), and hosts both Shi’a and Sunni groups. The population of Iraq was estimated to be 39,650,145 in 2021 (residing in Iraq) with the following breakdown: Shi’a Arabs (15 million), Sunni Arabs (9 million), Kurds (8.4 million), Turkmen (3 million), Assyrians and Armenians (0.5 million), Yazidis (500,000), Marsh Arabs, and Shabaks (250,000). Other minorities include Mandaean (3,000), Roma (50,000), and Circassians (2,000). The most spoken languages are Mesopotamian Arabic, Kurdish, Syriac, and Iraqi Turkmen dialects. The percentages of different ethno religious groups residing in Iraq vary from source to source due to the last Iraqi census having taken place over 30 years ago. A new census of Iraq was planned to take place in 2020, but this was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and is planned to begin in November 2022.

- While ethnic and religious minorities (ERMs) make up roughly 5% of the country’s population, 20% of the overall Iraqi IDPs are from ERM backgrounds and still cannot safely return to their homes. Isolation and conflict often prevent groups from mixing or engaging in dialogue, thus reinforcing distrust, fear, and escalating sectarian violence. ERMs faced oppression and violence at the hands of ISIS. Perhaps the most horrific account of ISIS violence was the assault on the Yazidi community in Sinjar district, Ninewa governorate. Mass killings of no less than 5000 men, forced conversions, the abduction of young children and the sexual enslavement of 7000 women and girls show a campaign of ethnic cleansing widely recognised as an act of genocide. According to the Directorate General of Yazidi Affairs in the KRG, approximately 3000 Yazidis remain missing since ISIS’ attack in 2014. Christians also faced ISIS oppression in the Ninewa Plains, with most were forced to flee. The perception of Arab Sunni linkages to ISIS continues to damage Christian-Sunni relations. These atrocities have shattered trust between Iraqi communities. Since the liberation of ISIS to date, Christian and Yezidi families are struggling to return to their homes due to lack of government services, security concerns, and ethnic and religious disputes between Muslim Sunnis and Yezidi/Christian.

- The principal cause of sectarian tension in Iraq is the Sunni/Shia divide. However, Sunni Muslims and Shi’a Muslims are not singularly focused on oppressing each other. Each group faces internal power struggles and tensions. However, particular Sunni or Shia identity markers have resurfaced during periods of sectarian violence, namely after 2003, a dictator from the Sunni minority who ruled over a Shia-majority country. The bombings of the Shi’a Al-Askari Shrine in Samarra in 2006 and 2007 by Arab Sunni extremists also fueled a continuing cycle of sectarian violence that has forced Iraqis to pick sides. This schism has become more pronounced over the last decade with ISIS’ rise influencing some Arab Sunni Muslims to join or be sympathetic towards the group’s aims. In addition, Arab Sunnis have faced a lingering suspicion from members of other ethno-religious groups due to ISIS presence in regions inhabited predominantly by Arab Sunnis and to some Arab Sunnis’ involvement with ISIS. However, Arab Sunnis were also the ethno-religious community that suffered most from Iraq’s post-2003 violence including violence perpetrated by ISIS; they constitute half of all victims since 2003 yet only represent one fifth of Iraq’s population. While other groups, such as the Yazidis, suffered tremendously (and were the target of an ethnic cleansing campaign), Arab Sunnis have made up the most victims in post-2003 Iraq, due to ISIS capturing largely Sunni areas.
• Within the Iraqi legal framework establishing religious laws and practices, Islam is the official state religion, without distinction between Sunni and Shi’a. The constitution secures freedom of religion, belief and practice for all individuals so long as they are not anti-Muslim. Muslims cannot convert to other religions and children born into a family with one Muslim parent, even as a product of rape, must be designated as Muslim. Non-Muslim women can marry Muslim men, but civil status law continues to prohibit Muslim women from marrying non-Muslims.

• The Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), composed of more than 40 mostly Shia militias originally created to fight ISIS, continue to impede progress towards peaceful reconciliation in Iraq. ERMs such as Kurds, Turkmens, Kaka’i, Christians, and Yazidis experience displacement, abductions, threats, pressure, and harassment at the hands of the PMF and the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), who limit their movements and make their hometowns increasingly inhospitable.

Politics

Parliamentary elections were held on October 10th, 2021. The elections determined the representatives of the parties who will, in turn, elect the president of the republic and ratify the prime minister. The parties are still in disagreement on who will take the position of prime minister causing delays to the formation of government. The Shia political blocs are witnessing their worst political conditions since 2003, as their interpersonal differences seem virtually irreconcilable. If they fail to find a common cause between now and the election of the new Iraqi president, their divisions will characterize the next legislative term.

Historically, Iraq has experienced intercommunal tensions during the months preceding and during the forming of the government. This risks heightening tensions, especially by diverging ethnic, religious, and tribal identities that are likely to be leveraged by political parties in an effort to secure power and high positions in the new government.

Iraq’s Disputed Areas

Contested between the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and federal Government of Iraq (GoI), the disputed areas represent one of the country’s most intractable issues. They have been a core concern for many Arabs and Kurds, especially since the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the subsequent political restructuring. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) gained control of territory to the south of the Kurdistan Region after the US-led invasion in 2003, taking over land they claimed as part of Iraqi Kurdistan. The disputed areas include parts of Ninewa, Diyala, Salah alDin, Kirkuk, Erbil, and Duhok. The GoI and the KRG have failed to find a mutually acceptable formula for the territories’ long-term administration despite adding article 140 in the Iraqi constitution which aims to explicitly address this issue. The collapse of the federal government’s security apparatus in 2014 in Sunni’s areas has fragmented their authority, leaving considerable variance in the degree and nature of the GoI’s control. Physical infrastructures have been devastated, basic services are lacking, and social and economic opportunities are nearly non-existent for its residents. Many people in the disputed territories feel abandoned—not just by their own government and security forces, but also by the international community, which is all but absent in these governorates.

Amid rising human insecurity, deteriorating social cohesion is adding to suspicion and disenfranchisement, increasing the risk of violent confrontation and raising the currency of militias, such as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and other armed non-state actors. Deteriorating social cohesion disproportionately affects the most vulnerable. In the disputed territories where women’s freedom of movement is already restricted, the unstable security situation further affects women. Safety risks strengthen restrictive gender norms. Families are preventing women from going to work for fear of kidnapping or becoming a victim of violent extremism. Ethnic, political and sectarian divides, coupled with
historical injustices and extreme inequalities, have tained relationships within and between diverse communities. For example, Diyala and Kirkuk have dramatically changed in the last 15 years, becoming more isolationist and homogenous as trust deficits among social groups grow. This level of human insecurity and torn social fabric, left unaddressed, will only breed more anger among marginalized communities Although communal conflicts mainly play out at the local political level, tensions tend to spill over into the civilian populations at highly charged political moments.

**IDPs and Refugees**

The displaced population in Iraq and the KRI proliferated rapidly between 2013 and 2015, when a massive influx of refugees poured across the border from neighboring Syria to escape civil war. Currently, Iraq has around 1.1 million IDPs, 200,000 returned IDPs and 285,000 refugees and asylum-seekers (89% Syrian) and more than 46,000 stateless people This influx has created significant demand for services, overwhelming sectors such as education, health, and employment. These displaced populations are often more vulnerable to protection violations such as arbitrary arrest and detention, trauma and psychological stress, threat of eviction from their homes and camps, and lack of access to essential services at a higher rate than the population at large. Nearly one in five Syrian refugees rely on charity and cash assistance for food, and more than half report experiencing difficulties accessing healthcare services.

In 2019, the Iraqi government announced a plan to close IDP camps. However, the camp's closure was put on hold in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The government resumed camp closures in October 2020: 11 camps were closed before the end of 2020, while four were classed as informal sites. The KRG has acknowledged the challenge of closing IDPs camps in the region, revealing that there are 26 camps in the region, 16 in Dohuk Governorate, 6 in Erbil, and 4 in Sulaymaniyah, with a population of roughly 350,000 displaced people.

The economic crisis in the KRI, where the majority of IDPs are located, the KRI's stalled budget negotiations with Baghdad and insufficient humanitarian funding have all impacted the KRI's ability to adequately address this displacement crisis. Existing resources are stretched thin; critical infrastructure is overburdened; and the delivery of essential services to communities in need remains inadequate. In this context, perceptions of inequitable or politicized interventions have flourished among the displaced community, eroding trust in implementing actors and exacerbating conflict between vulnerable identity groups who feel forced to compete for limited attention and resources. While overt conflict between refugees, IDPs, and host communities remains limited, in part due to the overlapping cultural heritage of Syrian and Iraqi Kurds, tension persists as a result of difficult humanitarian conditions and transforming social dynamics. Gaps in protection and inability to meet basic needs for IDPs, refugees, and host communities could worsen community tension if left unaddressed.

While returns of displaced Iraqis to their home governorates consistently outnumber new displacements, several of those still displaced are unable to return for a number of reasons, including property loss, a lack of livelihood opportunities, vulnerability, fear and trauma, and perceived extremist affiliation. 90 percent have been displaced for more than three years, and 70% have been displaced for more than five years. Nevertheless, many Iraqis who have been allowed to return home continue to live in dire circumstances, struggle to reintegrate, lack livelihood opportunities, and require aid and assistance to better access and meet their basic needs.
Youth Empowerment and Inclusion

Over half of Iraq’s total population of more than 40 million are under the age of 25. Youths are one of the most valuable resources for building a prosperous and inclusive Iraq. They have grown up in a country at a pivotal stage of development, a deeply dysfunctional state without a vision or concrete prospects for the future.

The Iraqi government's inability to support their “Generation 2000,” designating youth raised after Saddam Hussein’s fall, has created a void fuelling youth recruitment to IS and Shia militia groups, and increasing sectarian divides. Youth are at particular risk of being left out of national and local reconciliation efforts. This marginalization is compounded by a lack of concrete experience with democratic processes, little opportunity to engage in or influence local and national politics, and the exclusion from opportunities in religious and political leadership.

If such a large percentage of Iraq’s population remains excluded from the governance process, this could lead to a conflict-affected generation who do not have confidence in democratic institutions and who may resort to alternative means of resolving their own grievances. Interventions should focus on promoting female and youths’ political participation, and on creating an environment in which women and young people are valued and recognised as leaders.

Protests led by Iraqi youth have focused on denouncing the sectarian political elite and the influence that politico-religious ideologies have on their lives, due to the exclusionary and corrupt perception of politics among youth. Given the exclusion of youth from leadership and decision-making processes, joining extreme Islamist factions in Iraq has also often been often the only way for youth to earn a living, and feel a sense of belonging and respect.

Following decades of conflict, unrest and instability, many young people across Iraq face mental health issues. According to a 2007 World Health Organization study – the last reliable healthcare survey conducted in the country – mental health disorders were the fourth leading cause of ill health in Iraqis over the age of five years. The lack of mental health professionals in Iraq results in difficult access to mental health support for a large number of Iraqis.

Increasing drug use also plagues youth empowerment and inclusion in Iraq. There has been an increased use of alcohol and prescription and illicit drugs in Iraq since 2009, especially among adolescents. While there have been security campaigns to stop drug dealers and trade, the spread of drug use continues given that there is a lack of education, support, and prevention plans. There are few to no educational plans involving family and students, school administration, community, government and community institutions.

Gender Equality and the Inclusion of Women

Entrenched social discrimination against Iraqi women has been aggravated by decades of violent conflict, generating new obstacles to women’s rights and empowerment. According to the 2021 Global Gender Gap Report, Iraq is the country with the second highest gender gap in the world, and the smallest economic participation and opportunity gaps at (22.8%).

It ranks last with regards to economic opportunities for women (155th out of 156). In terms of women’s health and survival, it is 96th out of 156 countries, and 109th out of 155 in terms of women’s political empowerment. Historically, restrictive social and religious norms have oriented women towards traditional domestic roles. During the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, the shortage of men, and the sense the country was taking a socialist turn, facilitated women’s access to rights and roles that were previously unattainable. By the early 1990s, however, Iraq had seen a shift in policies and laws towards more
conservative religious and tribal values which curbed women's freedoms. Subsequent conflict waves, sanctions, and displacement have had a disproportionate impact on women, with new challenges emerging following IS' takeover of Iraqi territory, the deterioration of the security situation, as well as widespread war crimes perpetrated against women.

Legally, the Iraqi Constitution gives women and men equal rights, and mandates quotas for women in Parliament of **no less than 25%**. Property ownership rights are guaranteed without discrimination based on gender, while domestic violence is prohibited, but not criminalised. The Iraqi Government has drafted a **Family Protection Violence Bill** which has yet to be voted into law. Conflicts and crises in the country have reversed advances in terms of girls' education: adolescent girls are now twice as likely to be out of school than their male counterparts, and the female literacy rate is 80%.

Recently, the government has made efforts to advance women's status through the National Development Plan (2018-2022). By ratifying several international treaties including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Iraq has also committed to gender equality measures. However, for the first time in the country's history, Iraqi women secured 97 parliament seats, and female candidates surpassed quota, winning over 29% of seats. However, female MPs have frequently expressed their concerns with regards to lack of power within their own parties and exclusion from senior party positions, policy discussions and decision-making.

Adolescent men are also considered one of the most vulnerable groups in Iraq. Due to the lack of livelihood opportunities, many adolescent men continue to join armed groups or militias. Participants in an **Oxfam and UN Women study** (women and men alike), underlined the importance of implementing programs targeting young men and boys, to prevent them from enlisting in illegal armed groups. In terms of sexual violence, evidence suggests that violence against men and boys is also widespread during conflict. Furthermore, stereotypes surrounding masculinity are prevalent in Iraq, and may lead to a lack of reporting of sexual violence against men.

**The Influence of Proxy Powers**

Global and other regional actors - engaged in conflict either directly or working with aligned proxy groups and movements - fuel and influence conflict in the Greater Levant. Iraq has the fifth largest oil reserves in the world, therefore drawing global powers’ attention. Iran, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, and Turkey have long engaged in strategic competition in the region, pouring funds and weapons to distinct factions, exacerbating local divisions, building alliances with local militias and political leaders, and contributing to violent conflict.

- Iran emerged as a major power broker in Iraq after the American invasion in 2003, as attempts to build regional clients has driven it to support key political actors and an array of Shia-based militias in Iraq. Iran wields significant political influence in Iraq, largely through political parties and some armed groups within the PMF. Iraq also relies on Iran for natural gas and electricity supplies among other vital imports. With the Shia civil society's support, Iran maintains its influence through militia groups and its influence on politics.
- Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the Emirates, and Turkey have likewise backed non-state combatants. Russia, Turkey, the United States, UK, and European NATO countries have competed for influence and play a major role in the unfolding of events in Iraq. Turkish airstrikes targeting the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in northern Iraq have grown in significance: the double ground and air offensive launched in June 2020 into the KRI is unprecedented. Turkey's long-term aim is to
prevent the emergence of an independent Kurdistan by stopping Kurdish factions from uniting or becoming too powerful.

- The stakes for the external proxy actors are high, alliances shift quickly on the ground, and major global economic forces — particularly in the energy market — cause twists and turns. This is a volatile and rapidly changing context, with its combination of local faultlines and highly resourced interventions from global and regional powers. Armed conflicts’ human toll in Iraq has been immense, and the lack of basic trust at every level, overwhelming. A multi-generational effort is needed to determine how power and resources can be shared, and to bring about a modicum of trust, reconciliation, and social cohesion to the region.

**Other Challenges to Social Cohesion**

**COVID-19**

According to UNDP, Prior to COVID-19, 4.1 million people in Iraq required humanitarian support. Lockdown measures have reduced access to justice, adversely affecting social cohesion. Formal courts have been closed and legal proceedings paused or significantly delayed, particularly impacting women who have not been able to access family courts. The rise of many traditional dispute resolution mechanisms, including tribal courts. In 2021 the budget allocated by the Ministry of Health for the purchase of medicines and medical supplies was more than one trillion dinars. By 2022 Iraq had over 2.31M recorded cases, which led the government to impose more mitigation measures, in fear that the country’s debilitated health infrastructure was on the verge of collapse.

In a context of existing inequality, the pandemic’s toll has weighed disproportionately on Iraqi women and girls, precipitating increased exposure to gender-based violence (GBV), restricting access to vital support services, and suppressing economic activity and livelihood opportunities. About 1.32 million people in Iraq (75% women and adolescent girls) are at risk of different forms of GBV, with 77% of GBV incidents linked to domestic violence, which has reportedly increased during COVID-19 Women’s incomes and livelihoods have also suffered more than those of men, with a June 2020 report indicating that while 15-30% of women maintained some form of economic activity prior to the crisis, most of this work has been lost since the introduction of confinement measures.

**Socioeconomic Context**

According to the World Bank, Iraq’s economic conditions are gradually improving as international oil markets recover, this recovery is fraught by major risks posed by structural bottlenecks, including public investment management constraints that have impacted public service delivery, the slow clearance of arrears especially those related to public wages, and large exposure of state-owned banks and the central bank to the sovereign. Iraq’s poverty rate stood at about 20% before the pandemic but this has risen between 7 and 14%, after the Iraqi government’s decision to reduce the value of the Iraqi Dinar and the accompanying rise in food prices. According to a report by the Food and Agriculture Organization "FAO", the World Food Program and the World Bank, The Iraqi authorities opted for an 18.5% devaluation for the Iraqi Dinar against the US$ in December 2020, which boosted oil receipts. However, the decision to devalue the local currency will lead in the short term to an increase in the number of poor in the country between 2.7 million and 5.5 million Iraqis. The report added that these numbers will be added to the approximately 6.9 million Iraqis who were already poor before the outbreak of the pandemic crisis. Despite the increase in oil revenue, the KRG is not able to provide its employees monthly wages, which has led to lack of livelihoods, increase in youth migration, increase in domestic violence, and child labor.
The recent rise in oil prices provides an opportunity to accelerate reforms. Oil prices and reform efforts are adversely related, as Iraq has frequently demonstrated. Low oil prices and the need for fiscal consolidation pushed successive governments to implement reforms. This combination of chronically high perceptions of corruption and poor public service delivery has resulted in societal and political conflicts that have hampered the effectiveness of most reform efforts. Iraq is at a crossroads, as economic and fiscal rigidities have built up to the point that short fixes are no longer an option, and the economy requires a major change if it is to produce jobs and possibilities for the country's ever-growing youth. As a result, with oil prices hovering around $100 per barrel, Iraq could vigorously pursue the white paper changes and use the windfalls to mitigate the reforms' possible negative consequences.

Environmental Challenges

Iraq is considered one of the Middle East and North Africa's (MENA) most climate-vulnerable countries because of its arid climate, rising temperatures, downstream positionality, lack of precipitation, prevent or limit water flows by Turkey and Iran to Tigris, Euphrates, and Sirwan rivers, and increasing temperatures. In recent decades, water flow in Iraqi rivers has decreased by 40%, and it is continuing to shrink and the country could suffer a 20 percent drop in water resources by 2050, with nearly one-third of the irrigated land in Iraq left parched, with increased dust storms and climate migration. Increasing water salinity, coupled with the extreme rise in temperatures, is a fatal blow to the Iraqi agricultural sector, which accounts for 5 percent of the gross domestic product and employs 20% of the country's total labor force that is forced into displacement. Such environmental developments are having a detrimental impact on livelihoods and food security in Iraq, with 2 million Iraqis currently listed as food insecure. There are heightened communal tensions over access to food and water, especially in the case of rural communities that are dependent on agriculture for their livelihoods. Diminished agricultural livelihoods also increases local support for terrorist groups, considering groups such as ISIS, that deliberately operate in water scarce regions, and exchange access to basic resources, livelihood security or other services not provided by the state for support and recruitment.
Annex 2: Programmatic Ideas and Language (SOs 1-5)

**Objective 1 - Catalyze popular demand for meaningful reconciliation**

- KAP surveys: *Search’s Emerging Practices Handbook*, p. 48; *KAP surveys for conflict analysis* (p. 2)
- Preventing and Transforming Violent Extremism: *Rehabilitation and Reintegration programs, Preventing Electoral Violence*. To be implemented only in areas where there is established trust.
- Community Dialogue Approach: *CDA in Iraq, Reconciliation and Local-Level Peacebuilding using CDA*, with particular focus on introducing such programmes to Diyala and Basra.
- Promoting Social Cohesion: *Virtual Cultural Exchange* (p. 1), *Cultural Exposure TV Show* (p.2), *Strengthening intra-, inter-, and extra group religious freedoms, Environmentalism, Rumors Management Manual* and *Activities*
- Engaging women and girls to shape social gender norms and roles on *females in leadership and peacebuilding* and *men and boys' role* in achieving gender equality.
- *Digital peacebuilding tools*

**Objective 2 - Capitalize on IDP and refugee movements to shape norms around diversity and inclusion**

- Programs tailored to implementation in areas with a high concentration of ethnic and religious diversity and movement of people: *Peace Committees in Ninewa, Peace Committees in Southwest Kirkuk, Social Cohesion in Kirkuk and Diyala, COVID-19 Response Among IDPs/Refugees in Dohuk and Erbil*, South to North climate migration
- Conflict sensitivity: *Support Effective and Accountable Humanitarian Responses*
- Strengthening *freedom of religious belief and expression* by *transforming intra-, inter-, and extra-religious engagement* in Sinjar, Ninewa Plain, and Kirkuk City.
- Engaging women and girls to shape social gender norms and roles on *females in leadership and peacebuilding* and *men and boys' role* in achieving gender equality
- *Media for peacebuilding*
- Strengthen judicial systems to effectively handle high caseloads and enact restorative justice

**Objective 3 - Advance inclusive and responsive governance, particularly in geographic areas which have been resilient to conflict**

- Identifying and equipping key stakeholders: *engaging political actors in civil society, political parties*
- Developing long lasting relationships with Baghdad authorities and decision makers
- Enhancing civil society capacity for collaboration by strengthening the agency of women- and youth-led, human rights and democracy focused civil society groups: *Iraqi Community of Practice, Levant Community of Practice,* and *Reinforcing and Advancing Women's Agency and Networks*
- Strategies for *youth-government partnerships*
- *Inclusive and responsive governance* for Iraqi youth and women: *strengthening and expanding youth leadership committees*, town halls, advocacy and community initiatives leveraging media combined with strengthened capacity of legislative and judicial systems of governance
- Support youth leaders and activists who have been participated in protest movements in transitioning to the next stage of political activism
### Objective 4 - Enable young people to develop multi-dimensional identities

- Unleashing the power of existing informal youth groups and youth-led civil society organizations (CSOs): Youth Community of Practice in Peacebuilding
- Bring young women and men of different backgrounds together to forge relations with their communities and stimulate inclusion in politics and governance
- Additional programming for young women to support them in breaking barriers towards inclusion, acceptance and leadership: socioeconomic integration and female participation in climate activism and environmental conservation (p. 3)
- Approaches to youth inclusive peace processes to be implemented across all programmes
- Mentorship programs for youth: CoP Mentorship Program Handbook (example)

### Objective 5 - Catalyze broad inclusion in brokering and implementation of political agreements

- Leveraging media and online platforms, establish channels in which the public can interact with political leaders, such as policy panels and live Q&A sessions
- Engaging women in peacebuilding: women’s dialogue sessions and peacebuilding/leadership academy for girls and women, strengthening women’s civil society networks
- Promote UNSCR1325: Rethinking Gender in Peacebuilding and The Better Peace Tool (Practical Steps to Include Women Peacebuilders).
- Promote UNSCR2250: Agreed UN Language on Youth, Peace, and Security