

# ENCOUNTERS AND THE MAKING OF PERCEIVED REALITIES

How the lifeworlds of Christian communities and major humanitarian and religious actors are shaped in encounters before, during and after the Iraqi displacement crisis.



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# ENCOUNTERS AND THE MAKING OF PERCEIVED REALITIES

**A field study on the lifeworlds of Iraqi Christian communities and major humanitarian and religious actors and how they are shaped in encounters before, during and after the Iraqi displacement crisis.**

**Cover Picture:** A picture, taken by the author, of a painting by Matti Alknoon. This painting was part of the exhibition 'the suffering of the displaced' about the Iraqi displacement crisis, in the Syriac Heritage Museum in Erbil. All other pictures in this report are taken by the author and are painted by the same artist and belonged to the exhibition.

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## Abstract

The conflict with *Daesh* in Iraq caused large numbers of displaced people in the region. Many of these displaced people belonged to the Christian Iraqi community. This study analyses encounters between actors during the IDP crisis and how actor encounters shape actor's perceptions, lifeworlds and outcomes. Norman Long's (2001) approach of an actor-oriented and social constructionist form of analysis has been adopted for analyzing encounters at the interface. This study has adapted this research approach by introducing a strong focus on narratives, portrayal, and perceptions to make it more sensitive for analyzing actor encounters in a humanitarian crisis setting.

The main actors in this study are the Christian IDP community, religious institutions, church leaders, local and international NGOs, military actors, *Daesh* and the media. The study analyses key actor encounters covering the four main stages of the IDP crisis, 1) pre-flight; 2) conflict and flight; 3) displacement; 4) return.

Lifeworlds are shaped by encounters between actors. The lifeworld of the main actor in this research, the Christian IDP community, is strongly shaped by the violent encounters with *Daesh* and other militant actors previous, which led to flight and displacement. During each stage of the conflict, a religious narrative is observed to be influential, which is encouraged by their religious encounters. Humanitarian praxis is also shaped by the religious narrative, and vice versa, as the church can be seen as one of the largest humanitarian actors. Humanitarian actors close to the displaced, as local NGOs and Faith-Based Organisations that understood the Christian lifeworld of the displaced, were perceived to be more effective.

For the future, the displaced require firstly, guaranteed security, which is organized by their own or by external actors, and second, places to celebrate their religion. When these conditions are met, the reconstruction of economic and social structures are important.

The observed encounters show that during the Iraqi IDP crisis, religious actors are most influential and religious narratives, also amongst humanitarian actors, are observed to be important for shaping the lifeworlds of the displaced and will continue to shape them in the future.

**Keywords:** conflict; actor; Encounters; Iraq; Christians; displaced; perception; portrayal; narrative; interfaces;

## Acknowledgements

Doing research and writing an MSc thesis is a path with many turns. Sometimes I was running the track, but more often I saw myself strolling, or even crawling. Several times I thought the path ended or I realized that I took the wrong path and had to make a U-turn back. But, the journey is finished, and the research is done. Therefore, I want to thank all those people that joined me, for a longer or a shorter time, on this journey.

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**| Introduction | Background |  
| Research Outline |**

# 1. Introduction

*'It is a Thursday evening in May 2016, the sun has set, and the lights are starting to shine. I left my hotel and am feeling the vibe of the Iraqi Kurdish city of Erbil. The air is still hot, attempting to recover from the 30 degrees in the Iraqi sun the hours before. People moved out of their homes and are now strolling on the streets. The smell of shish kebab finds its way out of the restaurants in Ankawah, the Christian area of Erbil. Laughing and shouting fills the air. In the Mar Elia camp, children and teenagers are playing volleyball, while in the background the church choir can be heard. One of the priests is joking with a group of children. On the benches around the playground, grandparents are chatting while watching their grandchildren play. City and people seem to breathe serene peace, visualized by the children whose world only of their volleyball game, at least for that moment. Behind this apparent peaceful picture, a lot of suffering is hidden. Two years ago these children, parents, and grandparents got displaced from the Iraqi Nineveh plains and had to escape a rapidly advancing ISIS, or Daesh how they call them. Within 24 hours they grabbed their belongings and ran to Erbil, on an exhausting journey. Some by car, many by foot, traveling for hours in the burning Iraqi August sun. In Erbil, they found shelter around churches and in parks. Currently, they are already residing in Erbil for more than 1,5 year, waiting for what's next. They moved from living outside in the open air to tents, which were incredibly cold en incapable of providing warmth in the cold Iraqi winter. Now they live in their caravans, airconditioned containers, although they are muddy and packed, they provide shade in the summer and warmth in the winter. Life normalized. At least that how it seems to be, with aid from churches and NGOs, who provided water, shelter, training, and education. Striking is the inspiring leadership of two priests, who forbid anybody to refer to his people as refugees or so-called internally displaced people (IDPs), but calls them his residents, residing in this IDP camp, the so-called 5-star camp. The camp to which all other displaced long to go to'. (Fieldnotes)*

I visited Erbil during the displacement crisis which was caused by the invasion of Mosul and the Nineveh plains in Iraq by *Daesh* in 2014. During the time I spent in Iraq, one of the visits to the internally displaced people (IDPs) was to the Mar Elia camp as described above. The story tells that I perceived that visit to the Mar Elia camp as a peaceful encounter with smiling children that were playing volleyball and made fun in the midst of a serene and peaceful night. However, I knew that they were survivors that escaped the atrocities of one of the cruelest militant groups the world has seen in recent times. Different descriptions can be presented about these displaced people. They are happy people playing volleyball, as I encountered. However, they are also traumatized displaced people, as I met the same population at another visit to a trauma center.

This research aims to look to these displaced people and analyze who they are and how their lifeworlds are shaped through encounters during the different stages of the crisis, looking to the period before the conflict, the conflict, flight, and displacement. It reveals how their lifeworlds are not only shaped by the crisis, but also by perceptions of others and by encounters with other actors. At the humanitarian scene in Erbil, I observed other influential actors as international and local humanitarian organizations providing support, religious institutions, and church leaders, military actors and media agencies reporting on the crisis. These different actors all shape each other and especially the displaced community, as they are the major actor around which all others organized themselves. Therefore, this study analyses the various encounters between the major actors during the different stages of the conflict and how these encounters have an impact on the future.

## 2. Background of the IDP Crisis

### 2.1. Introduction

This chapter sketches the background of the displacement crisis in Iraq. In paragraph 2.2. the Christian community in Iraq, to which the displaced belong, is described. Paragraph 2.3. briefly describes the political context, the rise of *Daesh* and their invasion of Mosul and the Nineveh Plains in 2014. Paragraph 2.4. present the context of displacement of the Christian communities in Erbil.

### 2.2. Christian community in Iraq

#### The Christian Community in Iraq

The majority of the Iraqi population belongs to the Muslim religion, with around 60% belonging to Shia and around 40% belonging to the Sunni tradition of Islam (in 2016). Although Iraq is a Muslim nation, for centuries Iraq always had been home to many different groups of people. A large part of the Iraqi population used to consist of Christians. These Christians originally belonged to the Iraqi population for thousands of years, since Christianity was introduced in the first century by the apostle Thomas. These Christians belong to our different groups, the Assyrians, the Chaldeans, the Syriacs, and the Armenians. Besides being home to these Christians, several other non-Christian minority groups lived for centuries in Iraq. The most important ones are the Yezidi's, Kaka'i, Shabak, Turkmen, and Bahá'í. (MRGI, 2015)

The IDPs on which this study focuses, belong to the Christian population of Iraq. Before the displacement, they used to live in Baghdad, Mosul, and the Nineveh plains. Before the 2003 war, led by the USA government, Christians were a large part of the Iraqi population and estimated to be around 12 percent, approximately 1,5 million. After the 2003 invasion and the different succeeding Iraqi governments, the Iraqi Christians were marginalized. Many of them immigrated to North America, Europe or Australia. The total number of Christians dropped by approximately two third. (Smith and Shadarevian, 2017).

#### Assyrians

The most significant group of Christians are the Assyrians or Syriacs. In 2011, around 250,000 Assyrians were living in Iraq. According to official statistics of the Iraqi government, they are regarded as Iraqi Arabs, however, identify themselves as Assyrians. They are descendants of old Mesopotamian traditions and speak the Aramaic language. Economically most of them provide income through businesses or as independent farmers in the northern region of Iraq. Due to increased tension and war with Sunni Arabs, many Assyrians left for the United States already around 1932. In the 1980s, Assyrians were a major victim of the Saddam Hussein genocide in the Kurdish region. The so-called 'Arabization' policy of Saddam forced them to choose between Kurdish and Arab nationality. Identifying themselves as Assyrians was prohibited. After 2003 the Assyrians were allowed to gain more independence and authority in the northern regions of Iraq. Governments reasoning behind was to decrease the ongoing exodus from Assyrians out of Iraq. However, the increase in violence towards the Assyrians since the US-led invasion forced an increasing number of them to flee to other countries in particular Canada, the USA, Australia and Europe. Christians who remained in Iraq increasingly were targeted. Not only Christian buildings as churches and monasteries were attacked, but also Christian businesses and homes, as well as Christians working for official or international organizations. Even only being in targeted Christian areas already was dangerous for not only Christians, but for anybody. (MRGI, 2014a)

#### Chaldeans

The second Christian minority group, the Chaldeans, are strongly related to the Assyrians, and formally belong to the same group. However, they distinguish themselves on a religious basis. In 1778, due to

conflicts with the Assyrian Ancient Church of the East, they united with the Roman Catholic Church. Compared to the Assyrians, they assimilated more within the Arab Iraqi culture. Due to this, many of them held high positions in the Ba'ath regime of Saddam Hussein.

Within the Iraqi Christian community, and also broader in Iraq, the affiliation of the Chaldeans with Rome is regarded as problematic. This indicates that they are not real Iraqi Arabs but too much related to the West. Chaldeans encounter, despite their embeddedness in the Iraqi culture and elite status, increased violence, similar to the other Christians. Due to the displacement from Mosul, 15 June 2014 was the first time in 1600 years that no mass was held in their church in Mosul. (MRGI, 2014b)



Figure 1: Ethno-religious population distribution in Iraq before 2014 (MRG, 2016, p.9)

Armenians

A third group, which is distinct from the Assyrians and Chaldeans, are the Armenians. Most of the Armenians lived in Baghdad, but also several were living in and around Mosul and Kirkuk. The Armenians are Christians and belong to Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches. They are descendants of the Armenians that fled to Iraq to escape from the Armenian genocide in 1915-1918. Although being not regarded as ethnic Iraqis, they strongly feel attached to and are part of the culture of Iraq. (MRGI, 2014c) The presented map (Figure 1) shows the situation in 2014, with the Christians clustered in the northern region of Iraqi, between Nineveh, Dohuk, and Erbil.

2.3. The political context of the displacement and the rise of Daesh

Increase of violence since 2003

Since 2003, The Iraqi Christians had to cope with a rapid increase of marginalization and violence, targeted towards them as Christians. Therefore, the Iraqi invasion, which expelled Saddam Hussain and his regime, was an unfortunate development for the Christians. Under Saddam’s regime, they had relative freedom to live as a minority group and were even represented at the highest level of the Saddam regime. Because of their loyalty to Saddam, and the increased power of Islamic groups which left little space for other minorities, the Christians got marginalized since Saddam’s fall and religiously motivated violence increased. Although respondents currently referred to Saddam’s era as more positive, even during that period violence to them was used. Also before Saddam, violence occurred towards Christians. Important to realize is that violence for the Christians in Iraq, as encountered

during the last years with *Daesh*, was not unique, but a continuation (and increase) of existing practices of marginalization and violence. The rise of *Daesh* cannot be seen without taking the aftermath of the USA invasion of 2003, into consideration. This invasion provided space for Islamic regimes and various Islamic militant groups, which targeted Christian minority groups. Chapter 6 presents in-depth information on this stage which led to the conflict with *Daesh* which led to the displacement.

#### Invasion of Mosul and the Nineveh Plains

In June 2014 *Daesh* attacked the northern Iraqi city of Mosul, the second large city of the country. Within three days they conquered the city, while the Iraqi army and the ISF (Iraqi Security Forces) fled. This rapid invasion of the town caused the minorities to escape to the neighboring towns in the Nineveh plains, such as Qaraqosh, Bartella, and Karamles. Around 50,000 people left Mosul in these first days after it was conquered. Respondents referred to this moment as 'the first migration.' The Christians who decided to stay in Mosul were forced to pay the *jizya*, a tax for non-Muslims. However, the situation for them deteriorated quickly, and on the 18<sup>th</sup> of July, the ISIS authorities announced that the day after, the 19<sup>th</sup> of July, all Christians should have left, staying in Mosul meant execution. In the first five months of the ISIS domination of Mosul around 20,000 people of the different minority groups, but mainly from Yezidi minorities, were imprisoned. Many of them were executed. After capturing Mosul ISIS continued its destructive march through the Nineveh plains. In June they moved to Tal Afar, the Turkmen region of the Nineveh plains. In August they attacked the Sinjar region, the home ground of the Ye'zidi's. The Kurdish Peshmerga forces who were assigned to protect the area were outnumbered and had to withdraw. Over 200,000 Yezidi's fled the area while around 50,000 of them were trapped in the mountains of Sinjar. Their story became known internationally and their escape, weeks later after a corridor was created by Kurdish troops assisted by US airstrikes, was international news. Then, in August 2014, *Daesh* moved towards the Christian towns on the Nineveh plains. They moved forward at an unexpected pace and arrived at the borders of the Karamles, Bartella, and Qaraqosh and forced the Christian citizens to flee. (MRGI, 2015)

#### 2.4. Displacement

The total number of people that fled from the towns in the Nineveh plains is approximately 200,000. They took refuge in the larger cities of the northern regions of Iraq and the KRI, mainly in Duhok, Erbil, and Suleimaniya. The two phases of displacement and the movements of the Christian refugees are shown in figure 2. (below). The first stage (red) showed the displacement after the invasion of Mosul when Christians from Mosul fled to the cities in the Nineveh plains. The second phase (blue) shows the displacement after *Daesh* invaded the Nineveh plains in August 2014. (REACH Initiative, 2014) The IDPs arrived in large numbers in Erbil and filled the streets of Ankawah, the Christian neighborhood of Erbil. People gathered in parks, around churches or slept in abandoned buildings, trying to cope with the Iraqi hot season, with temperatures reaching 45 degrees Celsius. People moved to informal settlements or, those who were able to afford it, rented apartments or rooms in one of the many hotels in Ankawah. Over time the situation normalized, the influx of displaced reduced and several IDP camps were constructed. Initially, most of the IDPs were living in tents, or in the skeletons of unfinished buildings. Due to the winter season, the tents were changed to caravans, and more permanent structures were created. In 2016 the situation did not improve since *Daesh* was still in charge of the Nineveh plains and the Mosul area. The IDPs tried to cope with their situation in the various IDP settlements. International and local NGOs, churches and other actors assisted the IDPs in providing the essential livelihoods, shelter, food, as well as education and medical care.

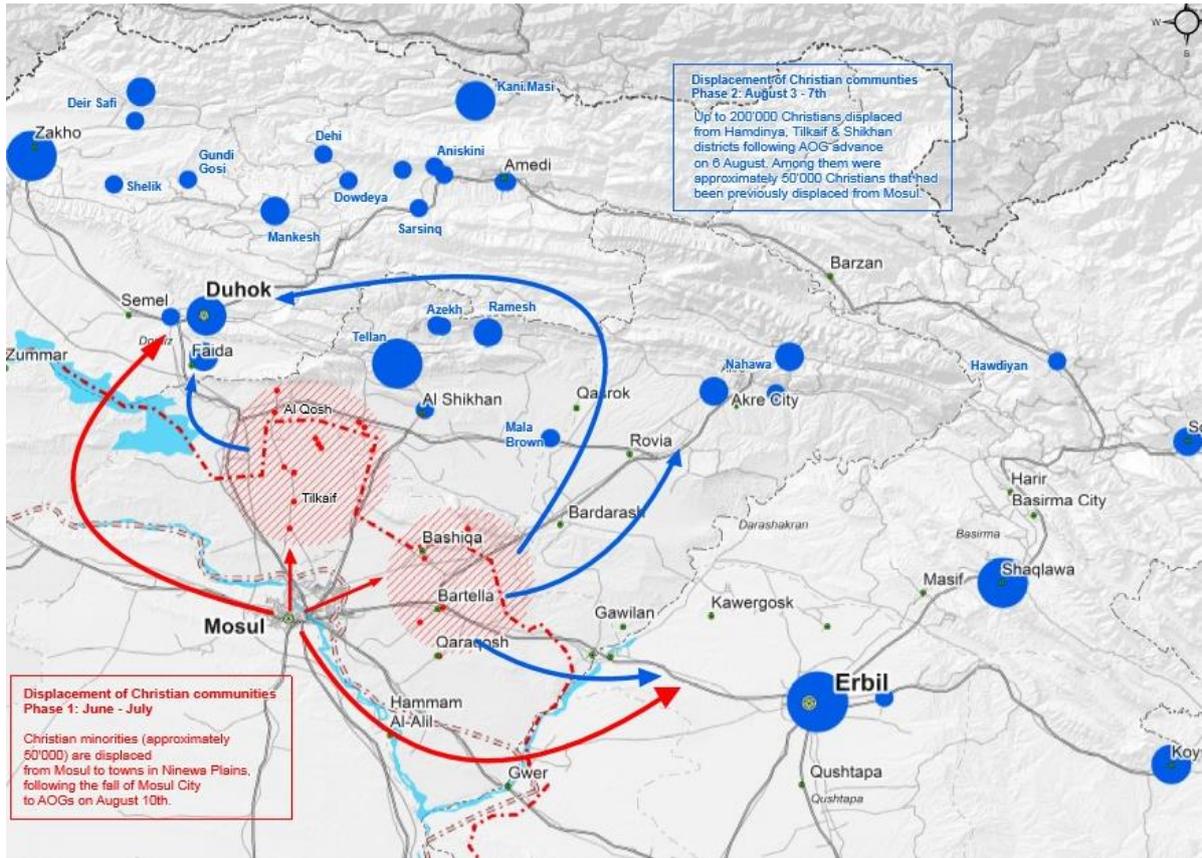


Figure 2: Phases of displacement of Christian communities from June – August 2014 (Reach Initiatives, 2014)

## 3. Research Outline

### 3.1. Introduction

Based on the background of the displacement crisis, sketched in the previous chapter, this chapter introduces in 3.2. the relevance of this research, in 3.3. the problem statement, followed by 3.4. with the aim of the research and research questions and in 3.5. the structure of the report.

### 3.2. Relevance of this research

The focus of this research is to analyze actor encounters at the interface of what constitutes the displacement crisis in Iraq. Each of the actors in this research has their lifeworld, the reality as they perceive it and on which their actions are based. This lifeworld is based on their perception and shaped through encounters in the past. Interventions or actions done by actors are shaped in encounters between different actors. This planned intervention is a continuous process shaped by the context, culture, politics and by other actors. In these actor encounters each of the actors define and defend their own perceptions, social spaces, and position in the field, in this case, the displacement crisis. Actors therefore analyze and interpret the situation and act on that in line with their interpretation and position. They are shaped in the encounters with other actors, as this study will show. Since actor encounters at the interface reveal how different realities and lifeworlds meet and (re)shape each other.

This study adopts an actor-oriented approach, based on Long's work in development settings (Long, 2001). This can be effectively used in humanitarian settings to study actor interventions and actions in crisis situations. In doing this, this study focuses on two highly relevant topics. First, to understand religious (displaced) communities coping with conflict, violence and displacement, and how they give meaning to these circumstances. Secondly, this study is also relevant for actors providing humanitarian assistance in order to understand how perception influence humanitarian assistance, and also how religious contexts influence the recipients and the provider of humanitarian aid. Thirdly, this study has an academic relevance in order to understand religious and humanitarian actors in conflicts and displacements, and it also shows how an actor-oriented approach, based on Long (2001) can be effective for humanitarian settings.

### 3.3. Problem statement

The problem statement in this research is the misunderstanding between actors in a humanitarian crisis ('problematic encounters at the interface') and the limited understanding by key actors regarding the role of religion in humanitarian crises.

In the preparation of this research and observing the humanitarian field in which different actors are working, ranging from local actors as recipients or local authorities, to international actors, varying from NGOs, donors, and governments, I realized how often miscommunication occurs between actors. Reading works from several scholars, as Autesserre in *Peaceland* (2014), who touched upon this topic, triggered me to dig into this topic. Second, I also observed a lack of academic research on religious actors and their role in humanitarian crises. A request from an NGO, to look how external actors can be better capable to understand recipients in the fields, was the beginning of this research.

### 3.4. Research objective and research question

Little is known about how encounters shape actors in a religious humanitarian context. The objective of this research is to contribute to a better understanding of religious communities and their encounters with other often powerful and even armed actors and how these encounters during different stages of the displacement shape the actors and their interventions. Key to increasing this

understanding is the analysis of the role of religion in making sense of conflict and displacement and how religiosity is perceived and given meaning by key actors, including the humanitarian system.

The research question is:

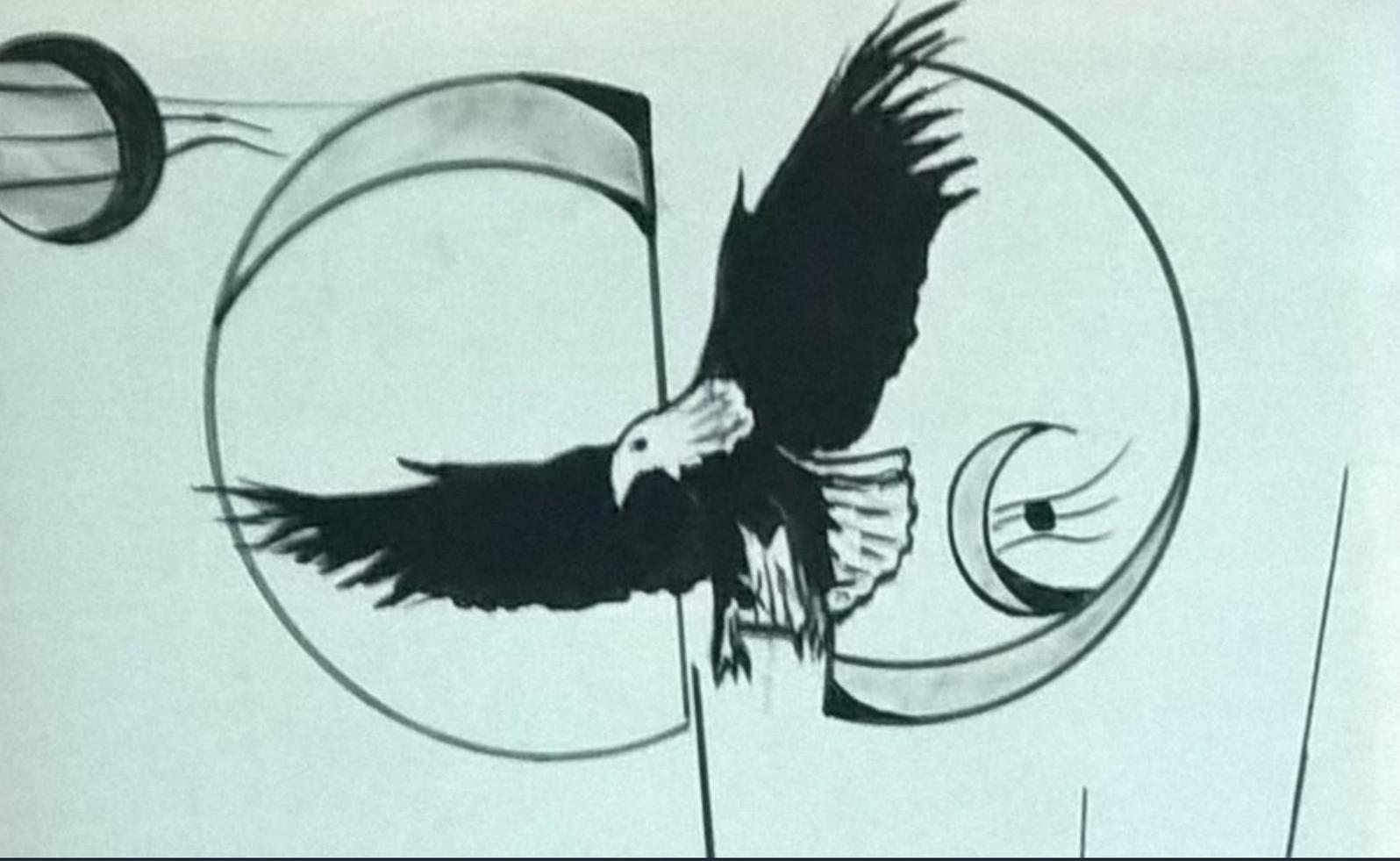
*How do encounters between actors in the Iraqi (displacement) crisis shape (and re-shape) the responses and strategies by Christian displaced communities in Kurdish Iraq?*

In order to answer the main research question, three sub-questions are formulated.

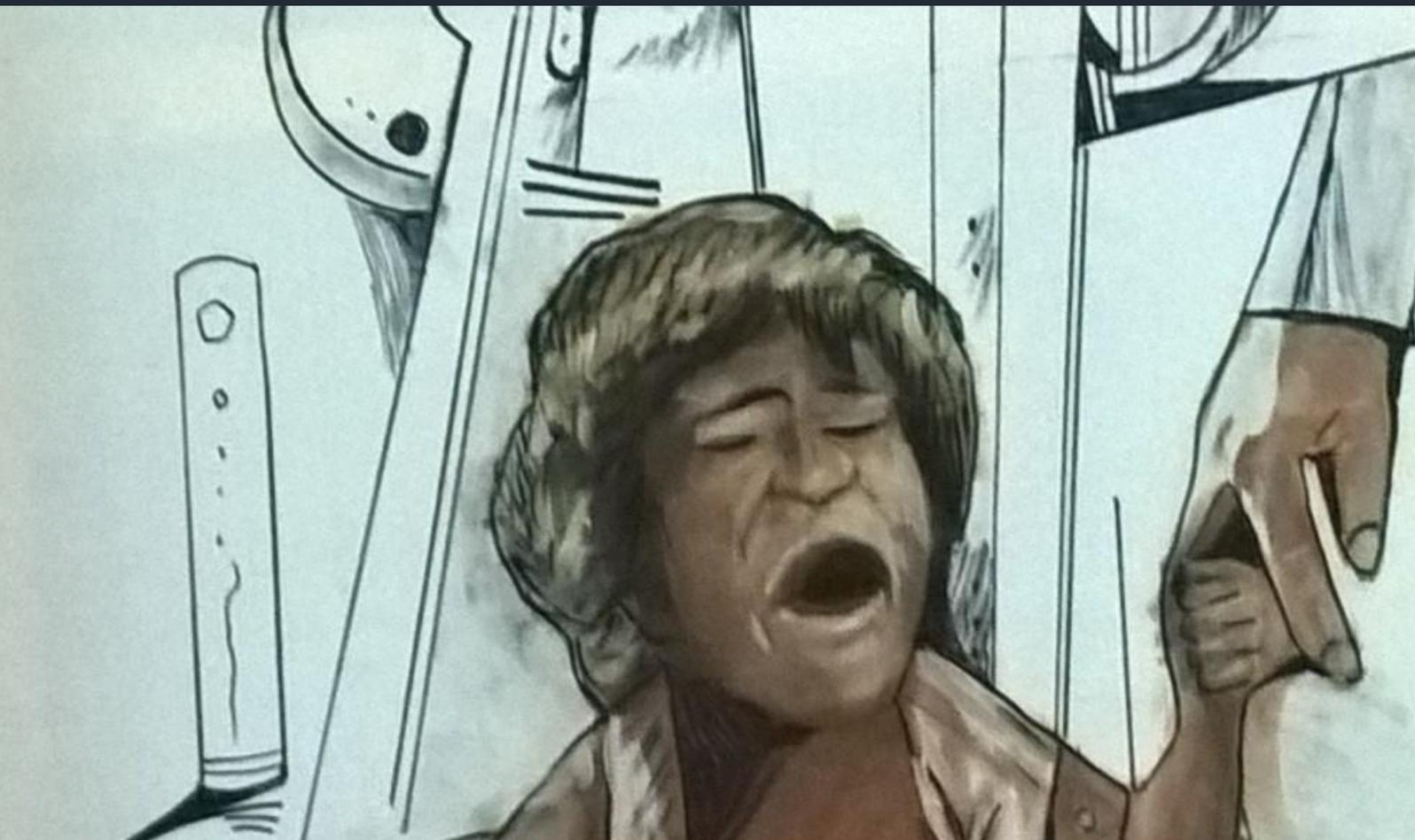
1. *What are the key actors in the Iraqi displacement crisis and what are their main actions and interventions?*
2. *How are the lifeworlds of the displaced Iraqi Christian community shaped and re-shaped by encounters at the interface by interacting with powerful actors during the conflict, flight and in displacement?*
3. *How do these encounters (at the interface) transform the lifeworlds of the displaced Iraqi Christian community and what does this mean for the return of the displaced to areas of origin?*

### 3.5. Structure of the report

To answer the research questions, the chapters in this report present the different components that will lead to an answer. In chapter 4, the conceptual framework is presented. This chapter explores an actor-oriented approach in order to understand actors and their encounters in a humanitarian and religious context. In chapter 5, additional literature is reviewed, exploring what other scholars wrote about portrayal in the humanitarian field, and the role of religion during traumatic experiences, and the role of religious and humanitarian discourses in humanitarian settings. In chapter 6 the methodology is described, dealing with the fieldwork, obstacles, ethical questions, security and other relevant methodological issues. Chapter 7 presents the findings of the fieldwork conducted in Erbil in 2016. Actor encounters are described in 4 chronological categories 1) Pre-flight; 2) Conflict and Flight; 3) Displacement and 4) Return. In chapter 8, the findings are discussed in relation to the conceptual framework and existing theory. Chapter 9 presents the conclusion and the answers to the questions formulated in this study. In the last chapter suggestions are done for further research, and recommendations, based on the findings of this research, are formulated for the different actors.



**| Conceptual Framework |**  
**| Literature Research |**



## 4. Conceptual Framework

### 4.1. Introduction

This chapter introduces the conceptual framework of the research. Section 4.2. elaborate on Long's concept of an actor-oriented approach. Section 4.3. explores why an actor-oriented approach is relevant for humanitarian settings. Section 4.4. presents a schematic overview of Long's framework. Section 4.5. explores the role of three lenses to observe encounters through. The following section, 4.6. presents a schematic overview of Long's framework with the lenses. Section 4.7. summarizes the main concepts of this chapter.

### 4.2. Encounters at the interface

#### Introduction

The conceptual framework adopted by this research is based on the theory of Norman Long (2001) about encounters at the interface. In this theory Long describes how actors plan interventions, other actors are intervened upon, and how actors create social forms of arrangements and engage with other actors in development settings. These engagements are referred to as encounters at the interface. Long's theory contains the following important elements, 1) actor orientation and actor agency; 2) conflicting Encounters and lifeworlds; 3) interface analysis.

#### Actor orientation and actor agency

The focus in this model is on actors, referred to as an **actor-oriented approach**. Analysing actors, with their behavior and decisions, gives insight into processes of decision making and relationships. In this model, in general, two categories of actors can be distinguished, a) The intervenors, actors that purposely plan and act on interventions; b) The intervened, those that are recipients of the intervenors.

Actors, in their behavior toward other actors, influence a setting and by doing so, a social construction of reality is taking place. Long chooses such an actor-oriented approach on encounters and social construction because it *"offers valuable insights into the processes of social construction and reconstruction. It also enables one to conceptualize how small-scale interactional settings or locales interlock with wider frameworks, resource fields and networks of relations."* (Long, 2001, p.49).

An actor-oriented approach also reveals that both similar and different actors behave differently in a similar situation. Essential is to realize, that for all actors, every situation of social (inter)action is heterogeneous and diverse. There is no given standard. No context of actor encounters is homogenous, even if it seems to be. Social action and encounters take place within networks or relationships and are context specific. For each of the actors, *"meanings, values, and interpretations are culturally constructed, but they are differentially applied and reinterpreted in accordance with existing behavioral possibilities or changed circumstances, sometimes generating new cultural standards."* (Long, 2001, p.50). An actor-oriented approach reveals the different lifeworlds, interpretations and social constructs of each of the actors.

Long assumes that all actors, both intervening and the intervened, have **agency**. This means that each of them is able to actively manoeuvre their position within the developmental setting in which they are present, and also manoeuvre their relationship with other (intervening and intervened) actors. This assumption of actor agency seems to be logical, however, is frequently neglected in the development practices and likely stronger neglected in the humanitarian field, in which recipients of aid can be portrayed as hopeless victims.

## Conflicting encounters and lifeworlds

The model of Long is built around actor encounters. These encounters, when actors meet and interact, is where the analysis takes place. The context of encounters is referred to by Long as the problematic situation around or in which actors meet. Based on this problematic situation, intervenors plan and intervention, intervened ask (or just receive) for an intervention.

To do an intervention, or to execute an actor analysis, the context in which actor encounters take place is to be analyzed. Long introduces, in relation to this context analysis, the concept of **cultural repertoire**. Cultural repertoires are: *“the way in which various cultural elements (value, discourses, organizational ideas, symbols and ritualized procedures) are used and recombined in social practice, consciously and consciously or otherwise”* (Long, 2001, p.51).

This, summarised, means that the context of encounters is a constructed (cultural and social) reality, which is constructed by each of the actors. To gain a deeper insight into this constructed reality and the way in which actors operate Long uses a **discourse analysis**, in order to understand the context. By doing a discourse analyzing one focuses on:

*“a set of meaning embodied in metaphors, representations, images, narratives and statements (...) about objects, persons, events and the relation between them. Discourse, produce texts, written and spoken, and even nonverbal texts, such as the meaning embedded in architectural styles or dress fashion.”* (Long, 2001, p.51-52)

Through the conduction of a discourse analysis, the position of an actor is revealed. It will show the actor’s decisions, thought processes, expressed in words, images, and acts. Discourse analysis, therefore, provides insights into the lifeworld of an actor, but also in the position of actors (and their setting) a particular actor is working with or intervening.

Actors continuously use discourses, and frame, transform or manipulate them for a variety of reasons. Taking or employing an actor-oriented approach is a valuable way to gain an understanding of these encounters between different actors. Especially since different lifeworlds of each actor are often taken for granted. Actors tend to neglect that their lifeworld is a personal construct with their own created categories, codes, and experiences. An actor-oriented approach *“must, therefore, address itself to the intricacies and dynamics of relations between differing lifeworld’s and to processes of cultural construction.”* (Long, 2001, p.51) This means in practice, in-depth analysis of any specific given situation, with its perceptions, not generalizing or taking anything for granted and accepting the concept of heterogeneity. Realities change and are hybrid, especially in encounters between different actors, according to Long. Through such discourse analyses, actors can become aware of the paradigm they use, the assumptions they have and which other discourses exist besides their own.

## Interface analysis

The third element mentioned by Long are the interfaces. Interfaces are the places or moments in which different, conflicting lifeworlds intersect. Long defines the concept of social interfaces as:

*“a social interface is a critical point of intersection between different lifeworlds, social fields or levels of social organization, where social discontinuities based upon discrepancies in values, interests, knowledge, and power, are most likely to be located”* (Long, 2001, p.243)

This quote focuses on the critical point, the confrontation of conflicting lifeworlds, which is a complex network of different, conflicting interests and relationships. A social interface is the place were these conflicting lifeworlds are likely to meet. This does, according to Long, not mean that only conflict occurs when actors encounter at these interfaces, it also is the place for negotiations between actors. Conflicting actors or representatives from each of the various actors meet and negotiate their position.

Long shares that a danger of interfaces (and interface analysis) is that certain divisions between actors, especially those based on e.g. class, ethnicity or gender, are assumed. An actor-oriented approach, analyzing actor encounters at the interface, ultimately aims to challenge such assumptions.

Another danger is that at the interface, at negotiations or conflicts, the actors are assumed to be homogenous. However, it cannot be taken for granted that an individual operating at the interface as a representative from a particular actor is acting on behalf of the interest of the actor he represents. Often, individuals (and actor groups) can have different roles at different interfaces, as will be shown in the results of the fieldwork. (Long, 2001).

#### 4.3. Long's approach adopted for humanitarian contexts

The previous paragraph presented the theory of Long for analyzing planned interventions, actor agency and actor encounters at the interface. However, Norman Long (2001) analyses actor encounters during peace, in a context of development. The context of this study is different and encounters take place in the context of conflict, displacement and humanitarian assistance. Which is a setting in which the context and the actors are likely to be, sometimes literally, more volatile and dynamic. This research adopts Long's framework, as developed to analyze actor encounters in a more or less structured development context, to be used in a context characterized by chaotic, insecure and tense environments including violent conflict. The rationale for this is the following.

First, planned interventions also take place in the context of crisis and conflict. Planned interventions are done by humanitarian actors as they are done by development actors. These planned interventions are well prepared, rolled out, evaluated and negotiated and the same elements are relevant for humanitarian contexts.

Second, a strict separation of humanitarian and development contexts cannot be made. Often, there is a vague boundary between humanitarian and development, and they are strongly intertwined on many occasions.

Thirdly, the same elements that Long uses in a development context occur in a humanitarian context. Interfaces, as the critical points of intersection of between different actors with their lifeworlds, discrepancy in value, interest, knowledge, and power are also present in humanitarian crises. Also in a humanitarian context actors present themselves through images, narratives, statements, persons, events, architecture and other aspects. In a humanitarian setting, these discourses can even be stronger as conflicts and crises often occur around conflicting narratives, statements and representations.

Fourth, an actor-oriented approach requires researchers and actors to step back, analyze, reflect and demands them to understand themselves and others in relation to their interventions, and the context in which they operate. This is even more important in the context of crisis and conflict which are characterized by volatility and dynamic change. A solid understanding of the context and actors present, with their background and lifeworlds, provides actors with the tools to understand them and work with them or counter-act them in an effective manner. Therefore, adopting an actor-oriented approach analyzing actor encounters at the interface is highly relevant for a humanitarian context.

#### 4.4. Schematic overview of Long's framework

The theory as described in the previous paragraphs can easily be visualized by the following figure.

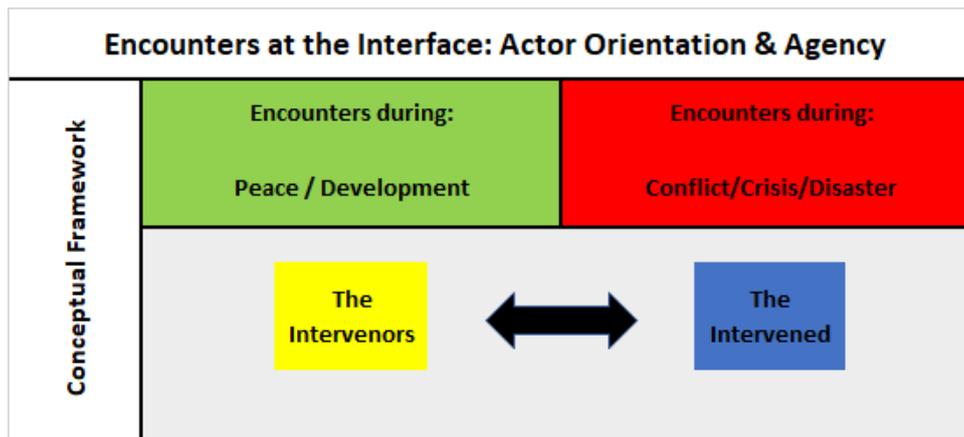


Figure 3: Encounters at the Interface: Actor Orientation & Agency (by author and based on Long, 2001)

Figure 3 shows that both in settings of peace and development, as well in situations of conflict, crisis, and peace actors encounter. Actors can be divided into Intervenors and the Intervened. Intervenors, for example, are NGOs with their planned interventions providing food, shelter, and livelihoods and the Intervened a group of Internally Displaced People. The arrow visualizes the encounter and that both intervenors and the intervened have agency and influence each other and have agency. In the figure both 'The Intervenors' and 'The Intervened' are located in the same grey area. This grey area represents the interface in which the encounters take place.

#### 4.5. Narratives, portrayal, and perceptions

##### Lenses

Important in the theory of Long, as described above, is that actors have their own lifeworlds, frame of reference, background, cultural repertoire through which they understand the context and the other actors and that these can be explored through a discourse analysis. This study proposes the concepts of narratives, portrayal, and perceptions as explorative lenses through which actors and their encounters can be observed. Although narratives, perceptions, and portrayal are strongly related, they are not the same. In the following paragraphs, the similarities and differences between the three concepts are described.

##### *Narratives*

The first explorative lens to analyze the encounters at the interface and actor interventions are the narratives. Narratives are defined by Autesserre as *"the stories that people create to make sense of their lives and environments"* (Autesserre, 2014, p. 33) They are constructed over time and exist not only in the minds of people but are *"embedded in social routines, practices, discourses, technologies and institutions (...) they can be assumptions, taken as given, paradigms, shared definitions, etc."* (Autesserre, 2014, p.33). Many characteristics that Autesserre uses to describe narratives are also mentioned by Long, as he describes how lifeworlds are constructed and discourse is created. Therefore, analyzing narratives, stories, is a great lens through which these lifeworlds, discourse and the contestation during encounters can be analyzed. So, firstly, narrative is important, looking to *"the stories that people create to make sense of their lives"* (Autesserre, 2014, p.33)

##### *Portrayal*

Portrayal is close related to narratives. However, stronger than narratives, portrayal is an active method of creating a particular image of a particular occasion. Narratives often are created over time, and are embedded in social routines, practices, discourses; narratives are processes which continuously are adapted, based on new information. This is different to portrayal. Portrayal is more

static, based on a particular image (or story) in a particular moment about a particular occasion. Da Silva Gama (2013) uses an example to explain this. He analyses a campaign of MSF and describes how certain photos are used to construct a picture of a crisis. MSF purposely uses a particular way of portrayal to communicate a particular message to their audience. So, especially through media, and campaigns, portrayal takes place. Portrayal influences the way both intervened, and intervenors perceive themselves and the other. Long talks about discourses that are created by “*metaphors, representations, images, narratives and statements*” (Long, 2001, p.51) Analysing through a lens of portrayal, enables us to see the creation of a discourse, by analyzing these images and portraits.

### *Perception*

Perception is different from narratives and portrayal. Perception is how particular actions or actors are perceived by others or by actors themselves. Therefore, one needs (to be aware of) narratives and portrayal in order to be able to create a particular perception. Or to say, a cumulative result of existing narratives and portrayal leads to certain perceptions.

According to Hugo Slim (2004), perception is the new buzzword in the humanitarian world. No action of any actor is neutral since anything that occurs alters the view (perception) towards an actor. Organisations like MSF started doing perception studies (Abu-Sada, 2012), in order to know how people and other actors perceive them, and where these perceptions were based on. According to Slim, especially in humanitarian context perception increasingly gets more powerful and can lead to a politicization of humanitarian practices. Offeringer also mentions this adding that, mass media and globalization strongly impacts how beneficiaries, humanitarians, donors, or intervenors and the intervened, perceive each other (in Abu-Sada, 2012, p.173). According to Offeringer, carrying out perception studies is a core solution to cope with conflicting lifeworlds at the interface of humanitarian practices.

Offeringer claims (in Abu-Sada, 2012, p. 177-178) that perception studies provide actors with:

- a) A reliable picture of the general attitude and specific issues present, which is the basis for the operational decision and the formulation of strategies.
- b) Provide input for continuous dialogue and informed interaction with all actors.
- c) Provide actors with the information about how they are perceived, instead of assuming a certain perception.
- d) Perception studies need to go hand in hand with monitoring of the debate, information, construction, and adaptation of existing perceptions at different actors.

So, actors should be aware of how they are perceived and how this perception is created. Perceptions should not be taken for granted but require a continuous process of monitoring and adaptation. So, analyzing perception in the context of the framework of Long means that all the actors, both the intervening and intervened, are analyzed according to how they are perceived and how this perception is created, especially during encounters at the interface.

## 4.6. Schematic overview of Long’s framework and the three lenses

Narratives, portrayal, and perception influence the actors, the encounters and the context in which the actors operate and the encounters take place. In Figure 4 the influences of narratives, portrayal, and perception are visualized through the arrows: they point towards the context (grey area), the actors (both the intervened and the intervenors) and the encounter (black arrow).

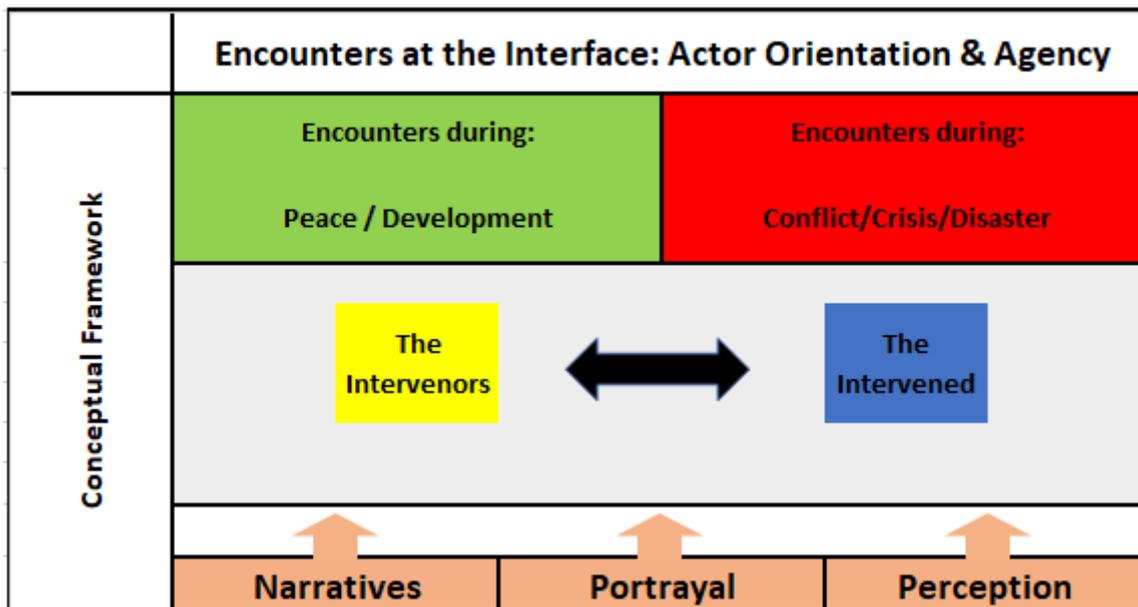


Figure 4: Encounters at the Interface: Actor Orientation & Agency and the influence of Narratives, Portrayal, and Perception. (by author and based on Long, 2001)

#### 4.7. Summary

This chapter presented the conceptual framework based on the actor encounter analysis of Norman Long. This framework uses an actor orientation, analyzing actors with the agency they have. Actors consist of both intervening actors and those who are intervened. Actors are never homogenous and operate in a heterogenous changing and challenging surrounding. Due to this, each actor has its own lifeworld and social construct of reality. This is visible in the cultural repertoire, the way in which actors presents themselves.

Through a discourse analysis, one can understand the context in which actors operate. An actor-oriented approach addresses itself to the dynamics of the relations between differing lifeworlds and actor's process of cultural construction. The moment in which these dynamics are visible is at the interface, the moment in which different lifeworlds of actors meet and intersect.

Lenses to observe these encounters at the interface are to look to narratives and portrayals that are used and how actors are perceived and perceive each other. In this study, analyzing actor encounters, the religious and humanitarian context is important in order to understand actor encounters. Therefore the role of a religious and humanitarian discourse amongst various actors operating in a complex humanitarian setting is added to the conceptual framework. This chapter presents a conceptual framework that forms the foundation for the analysis of the data collected in Iraq, which is presented in chapter 7.

## 5. Literature Research

### 5.1. Introduction

The previous chapter presented Long's conceptual framework and adopted for a humanitarian setting, with the lenses of narratives, portrayal, and perception for analyzing actor encounters. This chapter elaborates on several elements of the conceptual frameworks, through analyzing existing literature. This is relevant for an appropriate use of the framework in the context of Iraq.

Section 5.2. explores the use of portrayal and agency in humanitarian contexts. Section 5.3. describes religious discourse in humanitarian settings. Section 5.4. deals with religious and humanitarian discourse practiced by humanitarian actors in the field.

### 5.2. Portrayal and agency in humanitarian crisis contexts

This paragraph elaborates on the use of portrayal in the context of humanitarian crisis situations and its use to enhance the functionality of Long's framework for this study to analyze encounters.

#### Portrayal captures agency

Portrayal is creating a particular perception through the presentation of particular images to an audience. Using portrayal to present a humanitarian scene is not a neutral activity according to Da Silva Gama. (2013). He is critical towards many methods of portrayal practiced by humanitarian aid organizations in their various campaigns. He argues that images (real images, but can be defined broader by other methods of portrayal) can act as disempowerment devices (Da Silva Gama et al., 2013, p.39). Often recipients of NGOs are not voiceless but made voiceless. Aid campaigns, therefore, can be subject to "*politics of silencing*", through sharing stories and images of victims. Silencing happens since actors as NGOs or humanitarian campaigns do not only provide knowledge, (in sharing facts and stories) but are in doing so, are powerful knowledge shapers (Da Silva Gama et al., 2013, p.41). Intentionally, or unintentionally. Da Silva Gama concern is that:

*"by playing with sentiments like pity, guilt, and charity, images can approximate different social worlds, but they can also be invoked to erect borders between self/others, therefore creating a hierarchy in which aid receivers become ones lacking agency" (2013, p.41)*

Playing with sentiments is almost unavoidable in humanitarian campaigns. According to Da Silva Gama, it is the aim of humanitarian campaigns. Foucault goes even further, as quoted by Da Silva Gama, "*the act of portrayal itself can be seen as a way of capturing agency*" (Da Silva Gama et al., 2013, p.41). Portrayal is not only influencing perceptions but capturing the agency of people. Every act of portrayal, done by an actor which is not the one portrayed, reduces and captures the agency of the one portrayed. Therefore the portrayed is a victim of portrayal. "*The observer has the power of agency over the observed*" (Da Silva Gama et al., 2013, p.44). This is in line with Long's encounter at the interface in which actors shape each other. The portrayed is totally passive and incapable of acting in response to the portrayal. Especially in a digitalized global world, the portrayed often does not know that he/she is portrayed. This totally deprives them of the ability to interfere and respond to the way in which they are portrayed. Stories and images do not contain only facts but are influenced by those who made them and shared them. Watching images, listening to stories, looking to aid campaigns or even to news about humanitarian crises is never neutral since it establishes an interaction of meaning between the image, story, video and the one that is receiving the information. (da Silva Gama et al., 2013, p.43).

The aim behind certain portrayals is often pervaded according to da Silva Gama as they mainly trigger awareness to needs in order to receive the required donations for the execution of their work. The biggest harm is done to those portrayed, as "*their true agency is not only taken away but also modified*

*into an appropriate function*" (Da Silva Gama et al., 2013, 45) which benefits in the first place the NGO instead of themselves. Any form of portrayal abducts agency, despite the good (or bad) intentions of the ones that are portraying, according to Da Silva Gama (2013).

### Portrayal creates a non-world

Another scholar dealing with how portrayal influences perceptions is Baudrillard. He analyses how perceptions are created and how different truths existed about the Gulf War (Baudrillard, 1995).

According to Baudrillard *"we are all hostages of media intoxication"* (1995, p. 24). While we watch, read and listen we are *"hostages in situ, our site is that screen on which we are virtually bombarded day by day, even while serving as exchange value"* (Baudrillard, 1995, p. 25). No information we receive is neutral. At NGOs, it is the communication department that is taking us as hostages, or in the media it is the journalist deciding what to write, or even people in humanitarian need deciding what to share with us, in this research it's me taking you hostage, sharing the reality how I perceived it. Every writer, photographer, and their audience is victim to this. Those watching the scene are constantly played with.

This does not mean that portrayal is wrong, but awareness is needed that portrayal always is a subjective presentation of a reality. This is especially the case in today's world in which, according to Baudrillard all reality is transformed into a virtual reality, a non-world (Baudrillard, 1995). A dangerous move according to him, since the virtual has overtaken the actual. We are in a *"hyperrealistic logic of the deterrence of the real by the virtual"* (Baudrillard, 1995, p.27) " This means that the virtual, the image, the man-made, is far stronger today than the actual, the reality. We live in the midst of a constant creation of a non-reality which is shown to us as the reality.

The argument that Baudrillard uses focus on war. He argues that in the Gulf War the Americans (and broader, similar western nations) are only able to fight against an enemy which is similar to theirs. Often Western countries (especially the Americans according to Baudrillard) *"cannot imagine the Other"* (Baudrillard, 1995, p. 37). This lack of capacity to imagine and understand the Other, is because they continuously project their own image, perceptions, and way of life on the world. We tend to see through lenses and receive, interpret and sent information through them. We project the reality in order that it fits our purposes and aims and recreate the Other so that this Other is beneficial to us. Continuous mental exercise is needed to reflect upon who the Other is. Besides, the Other is not a static person, but prone to change. For example, an IDP who fled yesterday from his home is different than the same IDP living in caravans for two years already, and again different to the same IDP hearing that his hometown is liberated. Realities are not only contested but are continuously changing as well. (Baudrillard, 1995).

### Malversation of the real

Baudrillard talks about war porn and the non-world that is created through the *"malversation of the real"*. (Baudrillard, 1995, p.27) A fascinating research, on how certain portraits are made during food crises, is done by Campbell (2012). He analyzed how narratives are created through pictures and images.

Campbell mentions in his article called the *'iconography of famine'* (2012) that photographs often suggest a victim without a context. This is not only happening with iconic photographs but can occur with other methods of portrayal. Photographs are purposely designed to have an emotional impact on their audience. In this portrayal, the victim is disconnected from their context, surrounding, local structures and local actors. *"This structure of an isolated victim awaiting external assistance is what invests such imagery with colonial relations of power"* (Campbell, 2012, p. 8) This has an incredible

impact on the perception and leads to a us/them relationship which is non-hierarchical and often emphasizing existing stereotypes.

Pictures create a narrative which is static and fixed and therefore can be a visualization of passivity. Silently portrayed on paper or screen, unable to respond to immediately. *“All these pictures overwhelmingly showed people as needing our pity – as passive victims.”* (van der Gaag and Nash in Campbell 2012, p. 14) Campbell concludes that *“public silence is perhaps more terrifying than being overwhelmed by public images of atrocity”* (Campbell, 2012, p.17).

The picture on the cover page and throughout this research, are an example of how images are created to share a message, already during a crisis itself. The painting associates with feelings of pity, showing passive victims whose agency is captured and can be regarded as an example of an *‘isolated victim awaiting external assistance’*. The painter connects with this picture to existing dominant concepts about displacement and war.

## Conclusion

This sections showed that portrayal is not a neutral act but a deliberate choice in order to present and create a reality that fits a particular actor. Portrayal therefore actively shape the actors and the perception about the agency of actors. Analysing portrayal is highly effective to analyze how actors are shaped through this mechanism. Especially in Long’s conceptual framework in which central elements are the actor orientation and agency. Portrayal influences both actor orientation and agency.

The following paragraph zooms in on another aspect of Long’s framework. Especially on actors and the context of a humanitarian crisis in a religious context, as Iraq, by looking to how religion functions as discourse amongst actors in a context of crises.

### 5.3. Religious discourses in humanitarian crises

Long describes how discourse and lifeworlds are created, and how they are relevant in order to understand how actors act and react during encounters. Analysing actor encounters in the context of Iraq, necessitates one to look at the role of religion and religious symbols, in particular with regard to this research which looks at religious minorities.

#### Religion as coping mechanism during traumatic encounters

Many people interpret their situation through the religious framework they have and religion is also important as a coping mechanism being defined as a *“process that people engage in to attain significance in stressful circumstances (...) and more likely to occur as the seriousness of the consequences of a situation increases.”* (Ai et al. 2009, p.30). Analysing, or working with religious communities in the midst of a crisis, therefore, should draw attention to this coping mechanism. Research shows that for many people persecution, threats, displacement are not neutral occasions which happen to them by fate. People tend to interpret them as a punishment from God for their sins. For others, crisis situations, persecutions and even death, are not interpreted as a punishment, they perceive it to be a test, or even a gift, from God. (Phillpott et al. 2017).

#### Role of churches and belief systems

Research on religion as a coping mechanism after traumatic events focuses on natural disasters, recently some studies have been done relating religion to conflict and terrorism. Fischer et al. (2006) looked how religiosity affected the fear and response of people to increased terror threats and terror attacks. Levav et al. (2008) looked at responses to violence by people living in Gaza and the Westbank. Both conclude that when religion is an important part of one’s life, and one is participating in religious affairs mechanisms to cope with terror threats are better developed. Jonas (2006) and Park (2005)

confirms this, mentioning that religion is a proven method for coping with traumatic events, but only when religiosity is intrinsic.

Although some scholars argue that religion enables people to cope with traumatic events, McIntosh mentions that trauma can lead also initially to religious doubts. (1995, p.11). He agrees that on most occasions the traumatic experience can be explained through an existing belief system. However, a traumatic experience which is extremely devastating can lead to essential doubts as the existing belief system is unable to explain what happened. Crucial, according to McIntosh (1995) is how well developed the belief system is, and to what extent it on theoretical level incorporates traumatic experiences. By giving meaning, through religion, people seems to be better able to cope with traumatic experiences and adjust to the situation. The belief system, or so-called religious scheme, is in these cases powerful enough to cope with the traumatic event, instead of the traumatic event influencing their religious beliefs. (McIntosh, 1995). Often, after religious doubts, over time, people are again able to understand their experiences through their religion. McIntosh refers to this as a religious conversion after the initial doubts that occurred.

Carmil and Breznitz (1991) found that victims of traumatic events do not experience either doubt or conversion but go through both the doubts and the conversion after which a revival of religion occurs. They refer to this as God's death and his revival in traumatic experiences. Carmil and Breznitz quote a study of Lifton (1967) who researched survivors of Hiroshima. Lifton concludes that *"survival was attributed to the power of God. In confronting a collapsing world, remaining alive was considered a miracle, one that could have happened only by the intervening of something so powerful as a God"* (in Carmil and Breznitz, 1991, p403).

Other scholars argue that religion is not the only factor that operates as a coping mechanism arguing that also (religious) community is very influential, especially during traumatic events. Since, these traumatic experiences can lead to social community bonding as it connects people to others with whom they share both the traumatic experience as well as their religion (Kelley and Chan, 2012).

### Traumatic experiences as religious ritual

An even stronger expression of religious coping is when traumatic experiences are seen as a religious ritual. In such cases, persecution and pain are seen as an integral part of religious life. Persecution is glorified and those who went through it and survived, tested their faith and were found worthy members of the religion.

A religious leader said the following about the persecution of Christians in Iraq: *"Carrying their wounded bodies in my little arms became my Eucharist"* (Yaqob, 2005, p.10). Eucharist is one of the most important rituals in the Catholic church in which the suffering and death of Jesus are remembered. The horrific experience of death and despair, 'carrying wounded bodies', seems to evoke a religious experience or at least appeals (by some) to a religious interpretation. Helping the victims was religiously inspired for this religious leader as he said: *"I have felt Jesus heart looking with pity on our wounded humanity, waiting for us members of his church"* (Yaqob, 2005, p.10).

### Encounters at the interface of religious space

Religion is not only used as a spiritual support but is practiced at religious places. Religious places are therefore important for people in need. Also, religious spaces are locations in which encounters take place. Here people meet with their God; people meet with their past; people meet with their enemy or people find shelter for their enemy. Religious spaces, as temples, mosques and churches can be safe havens in times of conflict, according to Spencer et al. (2015).

Spaces allow people to step outside the constraints of everyday life. Religious spaces are the places where people feel heard and get help. These places are regarded safe since they are perceived as under the protection of God. Places are given symbolic meaning due to particular experiences connected to them and the encounters that take or took place at this location. (Mazumdar and Mazumdar, 1993). *“place attachment is more than an emotional and cognitive experience, it is a symbolic relationship formed by people giving culturally shared emotional/affective meanings to a particular space or piece, forged through linkages of genealogy, cosmology, pilgrimage, narrative and economics”* (Low, 1992 in Mazumdar and Mazumdar 1993, p. 232). People exist, create and have their identity in relation to place, building, architecture, homes, and property (Bevan, 2016). Because of this existing relationship of people to these places, displacing people is an act of tearing people apart from their identity based on these places. When churches are the target in conflicts, churches turn into an unsafe place. This for many is a contradiction, as churches are regarded to be safe. In those cases, religious spaces as particular safe havens become a delusion. Due to hostile encounters between two actors, the perception is changed and a religious space becomes unsafe (Spencer et al. 2015).

Long argues that identity of actors can be connected to architecture: architecture is part of the broader cultural repertoire, as it is a way in which cultural elements are used. A church, therefore, is the identity of people and act as visualization and symbol of one’s communal identity.

### Destruction and reconstruction of the sacred space

Long mentions that meaning can be embedded in architecture. Architecture can be part of the cultural repertoire, as it is a way in which cultural elements are used. A church as visualization and symbol of one’s communal identity and religion. Previous sections mentioned that identity can be found in religious property. Destruction of heritage, cultural or/and religious heritage is a method often used in war. It means that one actor is trying to destroy the identity of the another. Bevan (2016) on purpose calls his book *“The destruction of memory”* when he elaborates on the concepts of destructions of culture. As *“there is both a horror and a fascination at something so apparently permanent as a building, something that one expects to outlast many a human span, meeting an untimely end”* (Bevan, 2016, p. 8).

As Bevan (2016) called the destruction of such architecture as a method used by actors to erase identity, history, and memory from a particular place, he refers to the rapid construction of religious architecture as a revival and method to reclaim this place. By constructing new buildings, like churches, a community again marks their identity and even create a new identity, showing off to the enemy that deconstruction at one place does not mean the total eradication of them. Especially when attributes of the previous place, like crosses, images, sculptures are given a new life in the building, the new place is connected to the previous one, and history, identity continues.

Construction is an act against the previous destruction and therefore *“intentional monuments to the events that caused their destruction”* (Bevan, 2016). New buildings always will remind of the past, because they only exist now because of the destruction caused to the previous ones.

### Sacred objects

Not only religion and religious spaces are important for people, also religious sacred objects are functional during and after traumatic events. Sacred objects are a visualization of religious discourses. It can be attributes which connect people to the godly authorities, e.g. cup used in the Eucharist, a cross, as symbols of the suffering of Jesus of ancients books as visualization of the ancient roots of the church. Often these sacred objects are given from the one generation to a new generation and already belong to individuals or a community for decades. A community and individuals can feel emotionally attached to these objects and identify themselves with it. (Mazumdar and Mazumdar, 1993).

## Conclusion

This paragraph described how religion functions as a discourse to provide meaning to actors in conflict. It is a method through which violent and traumatic encounters can be coped with, but religion is also the place which is especially prone to attacks. For understanding encounters in both violent and religious context of the IDP crisis in Iraq, understanding how religious functions in actor encounters is beneficial in order to analyze the findings.

The following section adds to the understanding of the context and actors in a religious humanitarian setting, as it describes how humanitarian actors operate in a religious context, by using discourse which is based on both religious and humanitarian practices.

### 5.4. Humanitarian and religious discourses among humanitarian actors

Besides the religious discourse present in many of the encounters in with the Christian IDP minority groups, a humanitarian discourse is also present. This humanitarian discourse is strongly connected to the religious discourse since many humanitarian actors are based on religious (in this case Christian) principles. This section describes the following humanitarian actors: Local NGOs, Faith Based Organisations (FBOs) and Churches.

#### Local NGOs

One of the most important actors operating in a humanitarian context are local NGOs. Often they are less visible than international NGOs, but these local NGOs are rooted in the society in which they are operating. They mainly emerged from within the local community, and therefore do have local knowledge and existing local networks and often a better perception of what the actual needs are. Local NGOs are dependent on international networks, governments, and INGOs for their funding. This dependency creates an unequal hierarchical relationship with their funders. Additionally, these funders may be politically motivated, having their own agenda, *“unquestioningly carry out programs that seldom resonate with the political situation on the ground”* (Pitner, 2000, p.36).

The relationship between large NGOs, small NGOs, International NGOs and their local partner NGOs, should preferably be equal. Dependency on funding on the international NGO should not lead to a power disbalance, and an international NGO should prioritize the local NGO in its strength of better knowledge of the local situation (Drabek, 1987). Additionally, local NGOs should be able to operate independently of INGOs and other funders, adapt their programs to continuously changing local context during the execution of the program. (Hellinger, 1987).

The largest obstacle for local NGOs is that they often lack the knowledge of how to write proposals and obtain funding. Especially so because the humanitarian discourse is characterized by a set of rules and vocabulary, which is rooted in western rational traditions. Local NGOs therefore *“need to master an economy of targets and grants, a language (often English) of logframes, mission statements, aims, objectives, outputs and outcome and social conventions such as working groups, minuted meetings, documentation of activities, emailing and applying for funding”* (Ancker and Rechel, 2015, p. 518). In obtaining funding, knowing to write proposals seems to be more valued than having knowledge of local realities.

Secondly, local NGOs get torn apart by many actors pulling at them, their (local) government with their priorities, their donors with their inputs and their local recipients, which often they are part of themselves. Local NGO leaders can lack the skills, knowledge, and attitude to find and balance their position in the midst of these actors. Donors, INGOs, and other actors should adopt a professional attitude in which they value local NGOs as equal to them. Many NGOs still are stuck to the North-South, Us-Them, dichotomy, probably not formally on paper, but visible in their programs and on the

ground. One of the reasons behind is, as Auteserre (2014) mentions, that many organizations prefer expert knowledge to local knowledge.

Also, organizations tend to work through existing programs and knowledge and take too little effort to adapt them to the local context. Long (2001) in this respect uses the term of lay-knowledge which confronts the expert knowledge. Ancker and Rechel (2015), in their case study on the HIV/Aids sector in Kyrgyzstan, describe that a virtual reality is created and donors are not interested in the 'real' reality.

The expert knowledge of the donors or international NGOs is overvalued and local NGOs adapt to the expectations of them. This virtual reality that is created is characterized by the humanitarian languages, proposals, donors funding systems, one needs to be part of this virtual reality and understand it, in order to survive in the humanitarian arena.

### Faith-based NGOs

Faith-based NGOs are a big part of the humanitarian landscape, both in the form of large international NGOs as well as small local NGOs. Many organizations at least do have a religious background. For some of them, it still is an important motivation for their work, others do not actively mention their religious background. Faith-based organizations (FBO) is defined as *"any organization that derives inspiration from and guidance for its activities from the teachings and principles of faith or from a particular interpretation or school of thought within a faith"* (Clarke and Jennings, 2008, p.6 in Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2011, p.430). Ferris (2011) show that, based on the flows of money, the contribution of faith-based NGOs is substantial. Striking, she mentions that most likely, the amount of money flowing through informal ways within the religious context, e.g. from one particular church community to another, is even larger.

Fiddian-Qasmiyeh mentions that a danger of FBOs can be that they mainly focus on particular groups, or only Christians or even those of a particular denomination, that the international humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality are likely to be disrespected. However, faith-based organizations have a background in a particular faith, and therefore do have an understanding of the role of faith and religion in the lives of people. This is an asset which can be used in building relationships with the aid receivers, of which many are religious as well, especially in the areas of the current conflict in e.g. the Middle East. Since religion is playing a crucial role in the lives of people, some understanding of religion is crucial to understand the framework of interpretation of the recipients.

A question often asked is whether faith-based NGO work differently from similar secular NGOs. Ferris (2011) argues that often the day-to-day work is similar to secular organizations. Many faith-based NGOs works with professionals and stick to the high quality of work. According to her, a difference can be seen in working in religious contexts and in the way religion is visible in a mission and approach of an organization. Additionally, FBOs do not only work through local church communities but should seek the best way to connect with a local community. However, with the strict separation of the state and religion, this can be an obstacle enforced by government rules not to work only through religious structures. This is especially the case with the rules and regulations connected to governmental funding to NGOs. However, if a religious community is the best existing network to work through, NGOs should not feel hampered to work through them. Regulations from donors can lead to a situation in which NGOs, both secular and faith-based, overlook existing structures as for example churches or other religious communities are and establish own structures to work through.

Strengths of faith-based organizations are a) they get additional funding through faith communities, and therefore less reliant on labeled government funding. b) faith-based organizations often are part

of a global network of communities and can easily make use of these networks in the areas in which they operate. This provides them with easy access in certain regions.

According to Ferris (2011), there is a tendency to look to professionalism and faith-based as opposites. Professional NGOs are those who value academic education, experience, and knowledge of standards, while faith-based, especially more local-focused organizations, value knowledge of the local context. Faith-based organizations are as Bradley suggests: *“more firmly rooted or have better networks in poor communities than the non-religious ones and that religious leaders are trusted more than any others. Faith-based organizations are thus seen as essential agents both for influencing the opinions and attitudes of their followers and for carrying out development work at grassroots”* (Bradley, 2005, p.339). As discussed previously, this rootedness and well-developed network reduces the risks of such a way of portrayal which does not fit the reality of the aid recipients.

Although Bradley agrees with this sketch of faith-based organizations, he also argues that long-term presence, having rooted and better networks do not automatically lead to a better dialogue and an equal relationship with the aid recipients. Compassion is leading for most of the Christian organizations, and it is a keyword which most of them use, according to Bradley (2005). However, compassion is not the solution to any humanitarian problem. *“compassion operates through symbolic projections of an objectified image of suffering (...) This symbolic construction of Other, blocks the potential for direct dialogue with target communities and groups. The relationship is one-sided in that the compassionate being is attempting to communicate with a fictitious image created by them for the purposes of fulfilling their religious obligation”* (Bradley, 2005, p.341).

### Humanitarian churches

Church and church-related organizations find the foundation for their humanitarian activities in the Bible. For example the International Orthodox Christian Charities, connected to the Syrian Orthodox Church in Syria and Iraq, established as a mission of Orthodox Churches focussing on humanitarian needs use the following Bible passage as inspiration for their work: *“If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, Depart in peace, be warmed and filled, but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body what does it profit? Thus faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead (James 2:5-17)”* (Papouras, 2016, p. 56).

Those churches see humanitarian action as an essential part of their faith, both as a community as well as for every individual believer. Papouras argues that in the early church the Apostles appointed individuals to serve the people in their daily (humanitarian) needs. They were the first appointed humanitarian commission in church history. *“Orthodox Christianity as a faith is sacramentally unified firmly within the embrace of Christ and IOCC, through its partnerships, seeks to extend this divine embrace, on behalf of the Orthodox Christians, to those who hunger and thirst, to the displaced and the refugees, to the poor who walk barefoot, to sick and the imprisoned. Through the Love of the laity, the clergy, and the Hierarchy, this will continue to be accomplished.”* Papouras, 2016, p.57).

Next, to the biblical foundation for humanitarian actions for the Orthodox churches, they do have historical track records for this. They established hospitals, shelters, schools, and libraries in the early and medieval times. Prodromou and Symeonides (2016) explain that especially because the Orthodox Churches is experienced to live in violent regimes and survived several wars and decades of persecution (e.g. Ottoman Empire), they since long have been committed to a humanitarian role of their church. The Orthodox church is a large actor having around 300 million members globally and constitutes the World's third largest Christian community with approximately 15 percent of the world's Christians. (Prodromou and Symeonides, 2016, p.2).

The Orthodox church aim is not to focus on their own church members but *“by assisting all people, including those beyond formal faith community of the ecclesia, (...) the faith commitment is to address the needs of all people, based on the notion of Imago Dei [all people reflect the image of God and therefore are equal]”* (Prodromou and Symeonides, 2016, p.6). Since they aim to target all people not making any distinction they also mention to cooperate and work with any actor. *“Orthodox churches and NGOs and local communities are partnering with other secular and faith-based NGOs and, concomitantly are deliberately mining and relying on the organic strengths of Orthodox theology, as a socially transformative and locally contextualizable endeavor that deploys local volunteers and institutions”* (Prodromou and Symeonides, 2016, p.6). So, the Orthodox churches can act as a catalysator for merging experts (other NGOs) with the local knowledge of context, as well as volunteers, that are present in their local church communities.

To see a church, and other existing local (religious) actors, as catalysator through which NGOs, governments and other actors can provide aid is something actors must be more aware of, as it enlarges their own access to the communities they are trying to reach. Prodromou and Symeonides mention that *“the strict division between secular and religious when it comes to practices of humanitarianism, as well as (...) the association of humanitarianism as a modern enterprise, aggravates the politicization of humanitarianism and undermines the effectiveness of humanitarian initiatives”* (2016, p.7)

## Conclusion

This paragraph provided an overview of the various actors that operate in a humanitarian context and showed that especially a humanitarian and religious role can be intertwined. This is crucial for analyzing actor encounters and understanding actors. It shows that a humanitarian actor, in some occasions also can have religiously inspired characteristics.

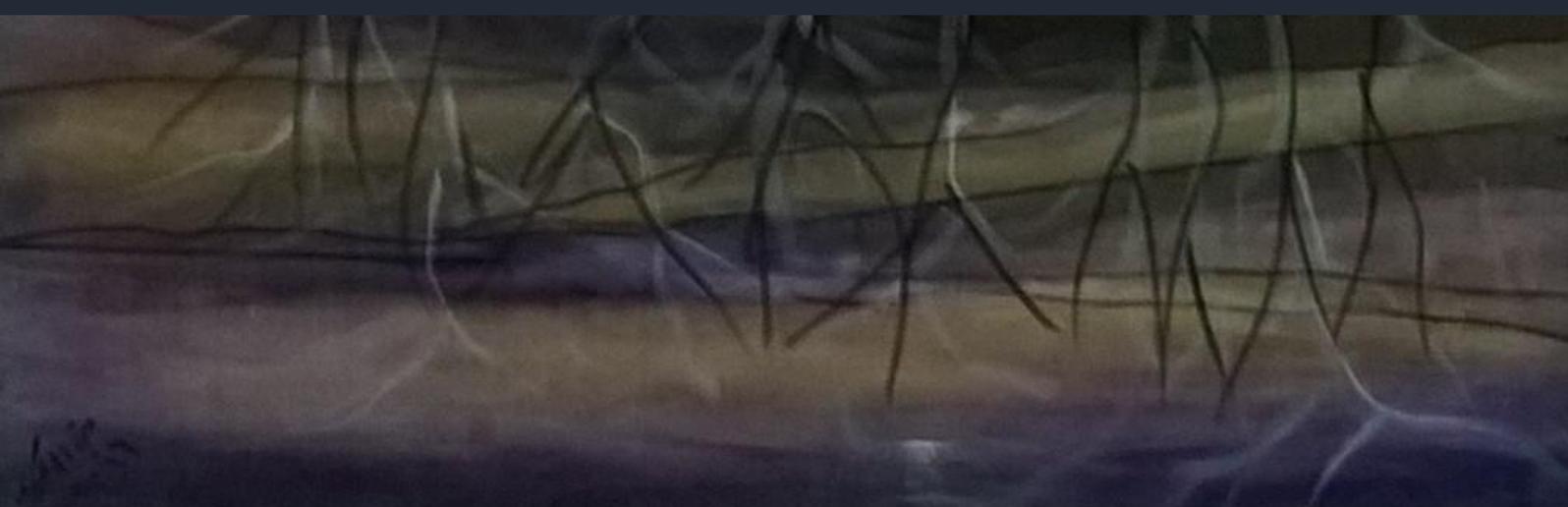
## 5.5. Summary

This chapter showed that portrayal is not a neutral act but a deliberate choice in order to present and create a reality that fits a particular actor. Portrayal therefore actively shape the actors and the perception about the agency of actors. Which is important to understand how portrayal influences actors, as presented in the framework of Long.

This chapter also described how religion functions as a discourse to provide meaning to actors in conflict. It is a method through which violent and traumatic encounters can be coped with, but religion is also the place which is especially prone to attacks. It also presented how religion and humanitarian practices and discourses can be intertwined. This is relevant in order to understand the actors and their observed encounters during the displacement crisis in Iraq, as they are presented in chapter 7.



# | Methodology |



## 6. Methodology

### 6.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the research methodology. In section 6.2. the research development is presented. Section 6.3. elaborates on the methodological approach. In section 6.4 the framework for fieldwork and the analysis of actor encounters is presented. Section 6.5 discusses issues related to the fieldwork, as security, access and building trust. Section 6.6. describes how the data is collected in the field. Section 6.7. describes the process of data analysis, as the last section mention the limitations of the research and how they are countered.

### 6.2. Research development

This Master Research was requested by an international NGO based in the Netherlands which provides humanitarian assistance to Christian communities which are a victim of violence and conflicts. Additionally, they advocate for the rights of religious freedom for Christian minority communities worldwide.

The aim of this research project and envisaged trajectory developed differently than originally envisaged. Initially, the study was designed as a comparative study to explore the similarities and differences between religious minority communities in three different countries; Iraq, Lebanon, and Nigeria. The aim was to compare the different contexts of the IDP communities, the role of religion in their lives and how humanitarian actors dealt with these issues in each of the specific contexts drawing out similarities as well as differences. Through the analysis, the NGO, which requested this research, aimed to get a better understanding of their capability to understand the lifeworlds and context-specific needs of these religious refugee- and IDP communities. Through comparing these different settings in these three countries, was thought to provide a unique insight into how different humanitarian actors relate to, interact and develop interventions for and with their recipients.

After a first field visit to Iraq the NGO, which facilitated the research, decided that visits to Lebanon and Nigeria were not advisable. This related to an internal discussion within the organization on how to deal with the research as such, how best to manage field visits and deal with external factors. There was quite some support for the research to be undertaken by agency staff, but the management of the organization decided that it was better not to facilitate visits to Nigeria and Lebanon.

These developments illustrated the sensitive nature of research into displacement, the role of religion in displacement and the interventions by religious agencies in support of the displaced. Nevertheless, a second data collection trip was undertaken to Erbil with the full support of the team in Iraq, however NGO headquarters once again raising concerns and voicing hesitation with regard to the research, its approach and its possible implications.

As of June 2016, the research focus shifted its focus away from a comparative study to a focus on the IDPs in Iraq. Instead of collecting most of the data through field visits and interviews with IDPs and NGO employees and humanitarian aid workers on the ground, the data collection process shifted to using the data already gathered supplemented with secondary data collected through analyses of reports, newspaper articles, and other means. Not to harm interests or evoke further uneasiness amongst NGO management a further decision was made to step back from the NGO and not to continue with interviews of agency staff at headquarter level. A welcome break was created with the research first undertaking an internship at the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Nairobi to pick up on the research by April 2017.

This research provides the reader insights in the encounters of the researcher in Iraq with representatives from both local and international NGOs, IDPs and bishops and priests from the different churches present in Erbil, through which, in combination with the other data collection approaches, understanding grew the larger context of displacement, how the international community deals with minority rights in man-made crisis and the role of religion in coping with displacement, minority rights, and the relationship between religion and humanitarian aid. Although this study is not representative of the Iraqi IDP community as a whole, it presents interesting and unique insights in ambiguous and complex relationships between religion, humanitarian aid and the displaced people and other major actors in this field. The research provides important pointers for further research in this underserved but intriguing and important dimensions.

### 6.3. Methodological approach

This qualitative study aims to analyze the encounters between different actors in the humanitarian arena in Erbil, in Iraqi Kurdistan and to understand why different actors have their perceptions, take their decisions and by doing so (dis)connect with other actors. The main approach is to analyze the Christian minority population that displaced into Erbil and the way they perceive their situation, cope with it, and interact with other actors. The IDPs, therefore, are regarded as key actors for this research. Other crucial actors looked at are international and local NGOs, religious leaders and their churches and journalists and other media related actors.

Two fieldwork trips to Erbil were undertaken in March and May of 2016. Respondents were introduced to me by the local NGO I joined. I conducted several semi-structured interviews with respondents exploring their background in relation to the IDP crisis and their perception on the humanitarian arena, of which they were part. Often I just let the people talk, since by doing so, they were able to give voice to their lives, experiences, and worries. (Slim and Thompson 1993). As Slim and Thompson (1993) refers to listening and understanding as the most difficult part of interviews, I acknowledge that it is likely that I frequently interpreted the stories not correct, however through triangulation, in particular, debriefing with the translator, I tried to address this. Two other methods practiced were observations and informal conversations, for triangulation and data collection.

For this research, an inductive research approach was applied to allow insights and understanding to emerge from the data gathered. Especially in the interviews, I had topics to discuss but gave relatively much space to the respondent to share his or her stories with me, with little steering. After the first series of interviews, I was able to reflect on it, look what information was provided and base my theories and approach on that. The second field trip allowed to collect additional information and explore emerging topics and issues in more depth.

Taking a flexible approach is appropriate for doing research in complex and volatile areas as Iraq, where context is uncontrollable and subject to unexpected changes.

### 6.4. Framework for fieldwork and the analysis of actor encounters

During the fieldwork, data about actor encounters were collected. Framework 5 presents how Long's actor encounter framework is used for analyzing the Iraqi IDP crisis. The major actors are mentioned and categorized into the categories of 1) Armed Actors; 2) International Actors; 3) Local Actors; 4) Religious Actors and 5) Community. The Encounters between these actors are categorized into 4 periods. The first period in which actor encounters are analyzed is the period between 2003 and 2014. The second period is the period of the conflict with Daesh and the flight following the invasion. This period is approximately between June and August 2014. Encounters in the third period are during the displacement, which lasted from August 2014 to 2016. The last period of return started the end of

2016 en still continuous. In Figure 5 the actors which had a key role in actor encounters during a particular period are marked with an X. In the following chapter, the results of these observed encounters are described.

		<b>Actors and their presence during the stages of the displacement crisis in Iraqi Kurdistan</b>			
		Pre-Flight	Conflict/Flight	Displacement	Return
<b>This Study</b>	<b>Armed Actors</b> (Daesh/Peshmerga/Iraqi Army/Militia)		X	X	X
	<b>International Actors</b> (INGO/UN/Donors)			X	X
	<b>Local Actors</b> (Local NGOs/FBOs)			X	X
	<b>Religious Actors</b> (Churches/Church Leaders)	X	X	X	X
	<b>Community</b> (IDP's/Christian community)	X	X	X	X

Figure 5: Actor Encounters during the IDP crisis in Iraqi Kurdistan

### 6.5. Fieldwork

For conducting the fieldwork several concerns had to be taken into consideration. This sections will elaborate on these issues.

#### Security

The largest concern related to doing fieldwork in Iraq is the security and safety. Iraq is regarded as an unsafe area, and during my visits in March and May 2016, the northern area of Iraq was marked orange by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which means that traveling to, and being in this area is highly discouraged.

In order to get permission to do research in Iraq, I wrote a security analysis for the Wageningen University in which I elaborated on all the security threats in Erbil and how I could cope with these threats and mitigate risks.

I took the following steps to reduce risks. Firstly, I got briefed on the actual security issues by the NGO in the Netherlands and upon arrival, by the local NGO in Erbil. Second, I was during my stay embedded with a local NGO. They provided me with a working place in their office and facilitated my interviews, translator, and travel to different interviews. I always was, during working hours, accompanied by one of the NGO employees.

## Access

Access to the IDP population, their leaders, NGOs, churches and other actors was an aspect of my fieldwork that had to be well arranged since, with only a field visit of 2 weeks, no time was to be wasted on building relationships and exploring whom to talk to. However, before departure, the international NGO and their employees who traveled frequently to Erbil convinced me that it was easy and that nothing had to be planned, as long as the local NGO knew when I was there. In Erbil, it worked out well. The first day I already interviewed people that just entered the office and held positions as NGO leader or church leader. Within the Iraqi culture interviews are not planned far in advance, so basically, the deputy director of the NGO arranged my interviews and called her contacts if they were willing to talk to me. So, access was surprisingly easy. A limitation was that on some occasions I was not allowed to talk to some people because I was associated with that local NGO. I once wanted to interview a friend of one of the NGO directors I interviewed, who was involved in a more political and advocacy campaign to raise a voice for the Christians. However, since it was political and sensitive, and I was associated with them, it could potentially be harmful to the NGO.

Several interviews were conducted at the office of the NGO who facilitated me with the space to work, and employees were anytime willing to translate. During interviews outside of the office, I traveled with a translator. Since she owned a car, traveling to these different interview locations in and around Erbil was easy. My visits to the youth festival and the opening of a church were together with the director and the deputy director of the NGO. The NGO office was within walking distance from my hotel, which was a safe journey. The NGO office was located in the Ankawah area of Erbil, which is a safe area, only a 10-minute drive from the airport.

## Building trust

Trust is a crucial condition in order to have a good interview. If trust is lacking, people are not willing to share their information. Especially in an Iraqi context, I expected people to be less open. However, the local NGO had, as I realized, a very good reputation at all the actors. Mentioning that I knew them through that particular NGO, opened a lot of doors. Beneficial was that the local NGO frequently used expat trainers to organize training. So, their connections were used to various people visiting them through that NGO. Another benefit was that the local NGO was already present for more than 10 years, and had a positive track record. I benefited incredibly from the good reputation of this NGO, which provided me with the trust I needed in order to do the interviews. A side effect was, that I had to be aware of not ruining the relationship of the NGO with their recipients, through asking inappropriate questions. The first interviews this felt uncomfortable and limiting, however, this rapidly disappeared. Overall, I recognized a willingness of my respondents to share their story. The feedback I got from them, through the NGO, was that they appreciated my capacity to listen to them, hear their stories without imposing my view on them through the questions I asked, which, according to some of them, could happen with western biased media reporters. My access through this local NGO definitely had a benefit on the trust between the respondents and me.

## Culture and language barriers

Culture and language barriers were present. Cultural barriers were not occurring frequently. Before departure, the local NGO briefed me to make sure I was dressed properly, which means wearing neat trousers, a shirt, and neat shoes. A funny recommendation he did was to take black shoes with me, which would increase the level of trust of the religious actors in me. Looking back on the field visit, this advice on clothing were valuable. Iraqi men (and women) are dressed well fashioned. Since the Iraqi Christians are very 'western', there were little to no occasions in which cultural behavior was an obstacle. I only remember one occasion in which I was eating with my translator (who was female) in

a *kebab* restaurant in the center of Erbil, where more Muslims were, and she mentioned that for some of them it was inappropriate for us to eat there together.

The language barrier was everywhere. Most of the Iraqis I interviewed knew some English but preferred talking in Aramaic or Arabic. As mentioned previously, I had a great translator who went with me to all the different interviews. She had worked with the UN before, and with some foreign NGOs and therefore was able to understand me, know my culture and adapt to that. During interviews, she frequently provided more information in order to clarify the context in which things were to be understood. This was a benefit of using a translator. There are quite a few disadvantages for using a translator. The largest one I encountered was that a conversation was not translated word by word, but more or less paraphrased.

### Ethical dilemmas

Doing research in a violent and complex context as Iraq leads to some ethical questions to be thought about. The first is to be aware of the potential dangers for the respondents. Iraq has a history of decades in which one could not freely talk, secret services of the regime were (and are) everywhere. The stories people share with me, can (and did) contain sensitive topics. In some occasions, respondents asked me to switch off a recorder, or asked me to not record at all. Before any interview, I asked if the recording was an obstacle or not. In some occasion, I, based on the information I had about the interview, decided not to record. I one occasion a respondent first doubted, seemed to be uncomfortable with recording but agreed, however, I decided not to record. Several people shared the reasons with me why they were afraid of recording and sharing certain issues, and I realized that those issues were real issues, which potentially could bring them or others in danger. A second issue is what to do with the content of the interviews, especially when recorded. I never asked the names of people and other information like age. Such information could have been relevant for the research, but the safety of the respondents is more important. In this research, therefore, no names and detailed information of the respondents is used. I refer to the different interviews in this research by using numbers. In the appendix, an overview is provided with the different interviews and a short summary of why they were relevant for this research, e.g. as IDP, or NGO leader or other. The recorded interviews are on a hard drive at the researcher and not online in the cloud.

## 6.6. Data collection

In this research, a number of data collection methods were used the most important of which were semi-structured interviews, informal conversations and observations.

### Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviewing is a frequently used method to gain in-depth knowledge of people, their life and the situation they are in. Initially, I aimed to do around 30 in-depth interviews, approximately 10 in each of the three countries I aimed to visit. When I returned from Iraq, and my research plans changed, I was left with fewer interviews. I realized that this is a limitation of this research, however, I had valuable information to use for a qualitative study. I interviewed a variety of people, ranging from IDPs, NGO employees, religious leaders and others. The majority of them were displaced from the Nineveh plains in Iraq and belonged to the Christian community.

The duration of the interviews varied from 30 minutes to 180 minutes. I structured my interviews by using a topic list (Annex B), with the following topics to be touched upon: displacement; religion, minority; humanitarian needs; humanitarian aid; life before displacement; future expectations. Not in all interviews, all topics were covered as this depended on the background of the respondent.

During the interviews, I tried to be aware of the surrounding realizing that it can present relevant information is. Additionally, I was aware of emotions, silences, hesitations, which are meta-data that can be valuable (Sriram et al., 2009). However, only in a few cases, during the interviews, I realized that this meta-data showed up and added information to my interviews. Partly, because I was unable to understand the Arabic of Aramaic languages used, and was dependent on my translator. During several observations, at a youth festival, church services this meta-data was more relevant and visible.

### Informal conversations

Informal conversations are conversations which are unplanned but do provide relevant information on the topic of research. The semi-structured interviews were planned and organized, informal conversations occurred on various occasion. Beneficial to informal conversations was that I was based at a local NGO. This local NGO provided assistance to many other local NGOs as well as churches. I was sitting in the room of the financial employee and the deputy director of the NGO.

Frequently different people entered my room to collect money or discuss issues with the deputy director. Often I had short talks with the visitors, and several of the interviews we arranged there. I had several extremely interesting informal talks, e.g. with an Iraqi bishop who was still living in a monastery in no-mans-land, beyond the last checkpoint of the Peshmergas, just before a *Daesh* checkpoint, some kilometers from Mosul. Second, I visited a youth festival and the opening of a new church, on both of these occasions, I was able to talk to a variety of people. Even in my hotel, I met a fascinating group of Americans, who were making a documentary on the position of Christian minorities in Iraq. Besides that, I had many informal conversations with my translator, the NGO employees. All those encounters and informal conversations I had, contributed to building a better picture of the field I was researching.

### Observations

Observations were done everywhere and it is part of being aware of the environment one is part of. In anthropology, participant observations is a partaking in the daily life of the community and carefully observing and recording what is happening (Strang, 2009).

Participating in the life of people was not frequently possible during the visits, however, observations were sometimes important. Examples of observations conducted include visiting families in the IDP camps, visiting church buildings at various locations, participating in a youth festival for Christian IDPs, visiting NGOs, or a visit to a trauma healing center. During all those visits the aim was to observe how these locations are used, what they look like and how people act and interact with their surroundings.

Frequently observations confirmed what people said in interviews or ideas I already had on certain issues. Vice versa, observations provoked questions which I was able to ask in interviews or informal conversations during various occasions. Therefore, data gathered through observations are valuable information for this research.

### Secondary data

Due to the short amount of time I spent in the field, secondary data was important. Additional data to the results of the interviews, was collected through the internet, by reading newspaper articles, watching YouTube video's or through several Facebook pages. Additionally, the majority of the encounters described in the next chapter, is based on secondary information. I did not attend most of the encounters, but described based on the information provided by my respondents and the other channels I gained information through.

### 6.7. Data analysis

The recorded interviews were listened to, and in most cases transcribed. The interviews were analyzed and several labels were used to code all the data. The labels used were based on the topics I asked questions about, as well as on the information that came out of the interviews. Some new labels were created, based on the content of the interviews. Additionally, field notes were analyzed, and when relevant for the research, documented in a separate file.

### 6.8. Limitations of the research

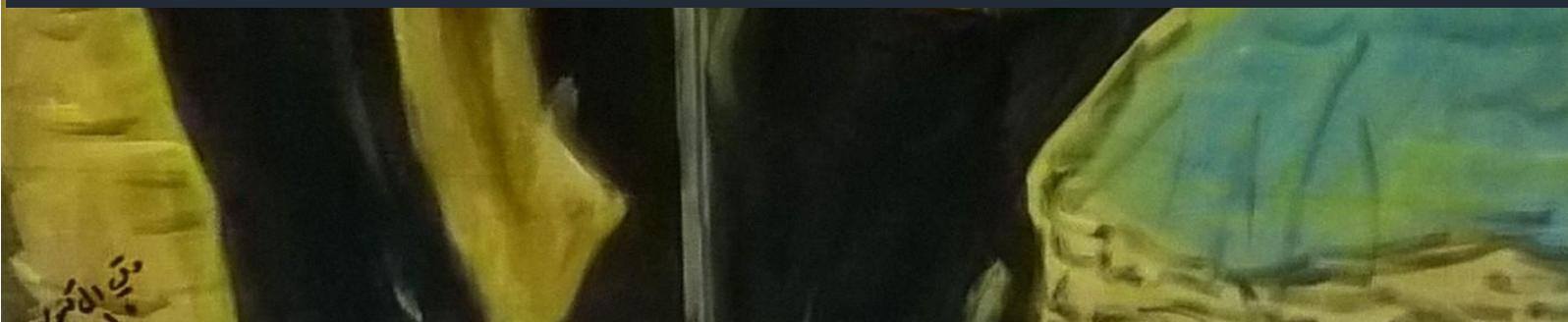
Doing research and collecting data is always accompanied with limitations. The most important limitations of this research were, the little amount of time to conduct fieldwork and the significant changes in the research plans after the fieldwork visit to Iraq.

The little amount time in Iraq, a period of 13 days for the first visit, and 3 days for the second visit is not much. Within these days I had to adapt to the Iraqi context, do several interviews, adapt my questionnaires and approaches based on the realities I encountered, which were different than the realities I expected from my desk studies. Such a short period means that an incredible amount of work is concentrated in this short time span, which leads to stress, little time to reflect and long working days. I countered this limitation by the following actions. First of all, I had close contact with the office in Iraq and ensured that they knew about my research, had the topic list for my interviews reviewed by them and ensured that the team in Iraq was able to already schedule interviews. I also ensured that side-issues, as where to stay, where to eat, etc. were covered and I was able to focus fully on my research and be effective in the short amount of time.

A second limitation was the fact that my research plan changed significantly after my field visit to Iraq. Instead of a comparative study between three countries, it changed to an in-depth study of the Iraqi situations. If I had known this before, it would have been likely that different questions were asked. I countered this by taking my gathered data as a starting point to look how it could be used as single and core input for an in-depth thesis. I also decided to move from only analyzing gathered data to secondary data. Additionally, I added a section in which I analyzed existing theories which are relevant to the research. The focus shifted more towards a theoretical approach in this thesis, compared to the initial research focused on qualitatively collected data.



| Observed Encounters |



*“What it means today to be a Christian. For me to be a Christian means to be a martyr. A martyr in my language is really different from the English term. The Arabic term means to be a witness, a witness for the events of persecution, a witness for what is going on. So, being a martyr is being witness of what happened to us. It is to tell people about what happens to us and telling people about who is doing that to us, all these bad things.”*

*“The second thing is that we as a Christian are always a religion of peace, we are calling people for peace. We are not people with guns, we are not terrorist killing or bombing others. If they are coming to kill us, we just show them love. We tell them we just want peace. We don’t know why this happens, why they don’t like us anymore, why we are being persecuted. For Christians, now today, we are the role model of this country. Being Christian is being role model for all the other religions. Because what happened to Yezidi today, as they took their woman as slaves, all they want is revanche against ISIS, against Muslims. When they go back they will kill all the other Muslims. So, when you come to tell them you need to love the Muslims, and show them peace they will ask you, we do not have a role model, who is your role model? So, the existence of a Christianity is like giving all the religion a role model for forgiveness, for love, for peace.”*

*We are like a mirror, you know, if a mirror is dirty, we cannot reflect the light. Jesus said, I am the light, we can’t reflect the light into the warzone if we are dirty. We won’t reflect the light. If the mirror is really clean it can reflect the light of peace and love and forgiveness for all the other countries, people and religions.”*

*“I can tell you from my experience here with the refugees when we receive them. On the first day we receive them, it was on the 7<sup>th</sup> of August 2014, that day in my calendar in the church, it is the day of the martyrs, so we have a celebration, a holy mass. I was bringing the holy mass, after that I went out and saw all the people gathering in here, you know, many woman were crying and shouting and grieving. So I told them, what happened? They said: we lost our houses, our jewelleries, we lost everything and we have nothing, and we are blaming God because we have nothing left. And he did not help us.”*

*“I did not face something similar to that before. I was threatened by al-Qaeda in Baghdad. We left everything but my father was staying there in Baghdad, so we could go and come back to Baghdad. But, for them it is finished, they can’t go back. You know, when ISIS was spreading the videos of cutting heads, of corporal punishment, it gave us fear from inside, it is like the psychological war. They were playing on that card. The psychological war.”*

*“You know when these people came to me, I saw God in the eyes of these people. I saw God when they came here in what they needed to eat. If I could have a billion dollar I would do the best for them, but I have limited means, as a man and as a priest, so we did our best.”*

*“What can we do? We have faith in God. We have hope. Sharing love will have effect on the other side. Are you are doing that for me? They will ask. I will tell that I know someone that is called Jesus. Who told me to do so.” (Fragments adapted from Interview 4)*

## 7. Observed Encounters

### 7.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the findings based on the data collected during the field visits in March and May 2016 to Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan. The findings will shed light on several encounters that took place between the various actors present in the Iraqi context. Through the presentation of the findings, the three sub-research questions are answered.

In the following paragraphs, first, the key actors and their role in the displacement crisis is described. Next several encounters are shared, based on their chronology. They are divided in 1) Pre-flight; 2) Conflict/Flight; 3) Displacement. In the fourth paragraph, the focus will be on how encounters shape the future expectation of the various actors in relation to a potential return of IDPs to their homes. Each of the encounters is analysed through the lenses of narratives, portrayal, and perception.

### 7.2. Key actors in the Iraqi displacement crisis

#### Introduction

This section describes the key actors present in the humanitarian IDP crisis in Kurdish Iraq. The describes actors are perceived to be relevant as I observed them during my fieldwork, encountered them, or as they were referred to by the respondents. All of the actors were prominently present during one or all of the stages of the displacement crisis and were influential in the encounters with the displaced. This paragraph provides an overview of the major actors.

#### Overview of the actors

The following actors are present in or around the humanitarian context of Iraq. Some of them are present on the ground, others related to the field in a more abstract distant manner.

#### *IDPs*

Internally Displaced People. They are the most important actors in this research. In Erbil, mainly Christians, Yezidi and Muslim minorities belong to the displaced community. In this research, the focus is on the Christian communities. All of them were displaced due to the invasion by *Daesh*. The majority of them originally came from Mosul and the towns on the Nineveh plains, which were home to Yezidi and Christian communities. The IDPs live in a) IDP camps; b) abandoned buildings c) rented apartments. The IDPs encountered all other actors during the different stages of the conflict.

#### *Christian Iraqi communities*

The Christian communities as referred to in this study, are part of the larger IDP community in Iraq. The Christian IDP consist of Iraqis belonging to the Assyrian, Chaldean, Syriac and Armenian minority groups. Members of these communities do not only reside as IDPs in Iraq, but have large communities in the diaspora, living in Europe, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and also closer by, in neighboring Jordan. The Iraqi IDP community is strongly connected to, and also dependent on their fellow Christians in the diaspora.

#### *Religious institutions*

Related to the mentioned Christian communities are the religious institutions which are connected to the community. Religious institutions are powerful actors within the Christian IDP communities. Especially churches, as a religious institution play a significant role. People attend churches frequently to get spiritual support and are also dependent on religious institutions for the basic supports during their displacement. Church buildings are crucial in the lives of IDPs, as will be analyzed later. Religious institutions also function as a bridge towards others religious institutions abroad, as the Iraqi church gets connected with the international Christian community in Europe, the USA and other places. The

three major religious institutions in this research are the Syrian Catholic Church, the Syrian Orthodox Church and the Chaldean Church.

#### *Church leaders*

The religious institutions are represented and lead by a variety of church leaders. Church leaders range from monks, nuns and deacons, to priests, bishops and the archbishop. Church leaders, priests, and bishops are regarded as authorities in the Christian communities and also outside their own community. They act as brokers between their community and other religious communities or political actors. Within the humanitarian response in Iraq, they frequently have a leading position as they are in charge of the IDP camps, monitor the needs, advocate for funding and represent the IDP community towards media, international donors, political actors and others. In various occasions, religious leaders also acted as NGO or IDP camp leaders.

#### *God*

Related to the previous actors, Church leaders and the religious institutions they represent, another religious actor which is relevant to the IDP community is God. God as a transcendent actor is a proven reality for the majority of the Iraqi Christian IDP community and an obvious actor within the religious context in which the humanitarian crisis in Iraq takes place. Many of the respondents referred to God as the actor who guided them through conflict, flight and displacement, and is the actor they trust upon regarding their return to their homes. God as an actor provided the IDPs safety, security and spiritual support. God is not only present amongst the IDP community but his presence as an actor is also perceived as a relevant powerful actor by several local and international NGOs that are faith-based organizations (FBOs).

#### *Local NGOs*

Local NGOs make up a large part of the humanitarian environment in Erbil. Many of such local NGOs provide aid to the IDPs, give training and arrange activities. IDPs themselves established the majority of these local NGOs. All of the local NGOs I encountered were FBOs and strongly integrated into the Christian IDP community. The local NGOs are funded by churches (local and international) as well as international donors and international NGOs and are powerful partners who, on the ground, execute the programs of international actors.

#### *International NGOs*

Besides the local NGOs, also international NGOs are large players operating in and around Erbil. These international NGOs have expertise in humanitarian aid operations and are working in similar crises around the globe. INGOs are funded by international donors as national governments, through European Union funding and similar channels. Some of them execute their own programs in the humanitarian setting, others work through local NGOs as their partners.

#### *Daesh*

*Daesh*, or mostly called IS or ISIS, is the Islamic terrorist organization that caused the displacement from the Nineveh plains and Mosul. The rise of *Daesh* or ISIS, the militant jihadist organization in Iraq and Syria, is rooted in this post-2003 era. Although it was established in its current form recently, already in 1999 a militant group called *Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad* was founded. Their reputation for suicide attacks spread rapidly. In 2004 the leader at that moment, al-Zarqawi became loyal to al-Qaeda, the name was changed to *Tanzim Qa'idat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn* or known as Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). In 2006 Al-Qaeda in Iraq merged with other rebel groups into the Mujahideen Shura Council. Later in this Sunni council joined with some Sunni tribes and established the Mutayibeen Coalition. Soon after this, they found the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as emir of this new state, consisting of several Iraqi governorates. Wikipedia, 2017a)

In 2013 ISI merged with the Syrian Al-Nusra front, or formally called *Jahbat al-Nusra li Ahl as-Sham* and formed ISIL, Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. On 29<sup>th</sup> of June 2014, their leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi established in Iraqi Mosul the Islamic State. The meaning of ISIS is Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or Islamic State in Iraq and Al-Sham. The specific definition of Al-Sham is unclear but can be translated to 'The Levant, Greater Syria, Syria or Damascus. An even geographical broader definition of Al-Sham also refers to the area under the rule of the Caliphs from the 7<sup>th</sup> century, which incorporates parts of Turkey and Egypt. The term *Daesh* is mainly used in the Middle East. It is the Arabic acronym for the first letters of the former Arabic name of the terrorist group "*al-Dawla al-Islamiya fil Iraq wa al-Sham.*" *Daesh* also refers to a word which sounds similar to a verb that points to trample down, crush something. (BBC, 2015)

Most of the IDPs did not encounter Daesh face to face and fled before they invaded their towns. However, the atrocities of *Daesh* as they executed mainly members of the Yezidi's and Muslim minorities, were widespread and spread fear among the IDPs and the Christian minority groups.

#### *Militia/Peshmerga*

Several armed forces existed and were established to fight *Daesh*. The most important armed force during the fight against *Daesh* were the Iraqi-Kurdish forces, the Peshmerga. The Peshmerga consist of 36 brigades that operate more or less separately. Some of the units are commanded in line with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which is a faction of the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) which commands some other Peshmerga units. Previously in 1996, the units from the KDP and the PUK fought out civil war, in which the KDP was backed by the Iraqi forces and the PUK was backed by Iran. (Tracking Terrorism 2015, NOS 2014).

The Christian IDPs from the Nineveh Plains established their own force in 2014, the Nineveh Plains Protection Unit (NPU), while in 2015 also the Nineveh Plain Forces (NPF) were established. Before the invasion of *Daesh*, Christian communities on the Nineveh plains already had their own security forces, due to the increase of violence towards them. In 2004 the Quaraqosh Protection Committee was formed. The unit was organized by local churches and worked together with the Iraqi police. After 2014 they reorganized and formed the Nineveh Plain Security Forces (NPSF), which is a different faction than the NPU and NPF. The Peshmerga, NPU, and NPF together fought *Daesh* during the liberation of the Nineveh Plains in 2016 and 2017. However, the NPU is working independently. The NPF is funded and armed by the Peshmerga, the KDP, and two Christian political parties. The NPU is backed by the Christian Assyrian Democratic Movement and, although cooperating, do not trust the Peshmerga, because the Peshmerga withdrew in August 2014 when they had to protect the inhabitants of the towns in the Nineveh Plains and left them behind. (NPDF 2016, Wikipedia 2017, Cetti-Roberts, 2015)

#### *Politics*

Political actors ranging from local political actors, as members from the Kurdish parliament, especially the MP's from Christian parties. Important for the Christian IDPs was also the national government of Iraq in Baghdad, who was the ultimately responsible actor for their situation as IDP in the Iraqi Kurdish region. Besides national political actors, also international political actors were present and actively involved in the Iraqi IDP crisis. These actors, for example, were western governments or the United Nations.

#### *Media*

During crises, media played an important role sharing the atrocities of *Daesh*, pictures, and stories from the flight and the displacement to a broader international audience. Media fulfills this crucial role, sharing what is happening, even in the midst of violence and conflict. Especially the crisis in Iraq

was famous and attracted a lot of attention of international media and campaigns. Press, journalists, therefore, are an actor present in and around the crisis in Erbil. I met several journalists that visited IDP camps or traveled to the frontlines. At several occasions during the fieldwork local Christian and Kurdish media were present at events reporting on the occasion. NGOs and the religious institutions had their own media personnel, which I met on various larger events. Additionally, media strategies were present at various actors as the churches and local NGOs.

### 7.3. Encounters at the interface

#### Introduction

The previous paragraph presented an overview of the various actors operating in the humanitarian IDP crisis in Kurdish Iraq. This paragraph presents a variety of encounters between the actors. The described encounters are chronologically ordered in 3 periods. The first period is the pre-flight period, which covers mainly the period between 2003 and early 2014. The second period described, is the conflict and flight period. This period describes encounters during the conflict with Daesh which started in early 2014 and the subsequent flight from Mosul and the Nineveh Plains around August 2014. The following section focuses on encounters during the displacement period. This period is from August 2014 onwards. In March and May 2016, within this displacement period, the field visit was done and the majority of the data was gathered. The observed encounters, as described in this paragraph, are the foundation for future analyses and expectations, as will be described in paragraph 7.4.

#### Pre-Flight

The Pre-flight phase is the period before *Daesh* emerged in 2014. This paragraph will focus on the position of the Christian minority groups prior to the appearance of *Daesh* in Iraq. Firstly, the relationship and encounters between the Christian minority and the political situation in Iraq are described. The second paragraphs deal with violent encounters, looking to examples of violence between Muslim and Christians in the last decade.

#### *Christian life before 2014*

While having conversations with people from the Christian minorities in Erbil, it is impossible not to hear something related to the Gulf Wars and the invasion of Iraq by the United States and the international coalition in 2003. The Christian IDP community and the churches to whom they belong see 2003 as a turning point. Before that, the Christians were loyal to the Iraqi government of Saddam Hussain and the Baath regime and members of the Christian community, especially belonging to the Chaldeans, held high-level positions in the Iraqi government.

Even decades before, in the 60s and 70s life of Christians was peaceful in Iraq. At least, in the image that currently exists in the minds of the older generation of IDPs. An Iraqi Christian author I met shared stories from his youth in which he explains that image. He played with his Muslim friends around the rivers near his village, or he went to the cinema with them during his years as a student, or hang out in the streets of Baghdad with fellow Iraqis, whatever their religious or ethnic background was. Today, for him, things changed. Displaced, leaving more than a thousand books behind. Left in the hands of *Daesh*.

Other respondents indicated that previous to the *Daesh* invasion in 2014, tensions already rose, also due to political decisions made in Baghdad. Several respondents referred to the National Identity Card Law, which basically means that only non-Muslims can convert to Islam, and that in an interreligious marriage the child only can adopt the Muslim religion. This means that when one of the two parents convert to Islam, the children automatically become Muslim. Leaders of the different minority groups, amongst which were the Christian religious leaders, strongly opposed this law. This example, for the

respondents, was a proof of how the character of Iraq and its religion was changing. Respondents affirm that decades ago they used to identify according to their Iraqi nationality instead of their religion, as shown in the example of the Iraqi author. The recent example of the National Identity Card Law shows that instead of national identity, the religious identity is gaining importance. This process, according to a respondent, is ongoing since the war between Iran and Iraq in the 1980s. From then onwards, religious identity became more important and the government started to favor Muslims.

*“In Bartella, it was like 99,9 percent Christian. The government has a policy to mix people in the communities. They gave free land to them, to people from the Muslim area, and asked them to live here. Like, we never heard mosques. When they started preaching in the morning, 4 o’clock, it affected us and we felt against them. It was something new for our area. In 1982 this was. Even there was an economic effect. Those new Muslim started fighting people in the area to take jobs. The policy was to make the area Arabic. The same happened in Kirkuk” (Interview 3)*

According to this respondent the Iraqi government, already for years, was marginalizing the Christian communities and favoring Muslims. Several respondents mentioned that according to them, Iran was behind these plans, which should lead to an Islamic country, with no space for Christians. This respondent from Bartella even makes a comparison between what the Iraqi government did then during their Arabization campaign, and what *Daesh* did do recently:

*“It [government plans of Arabization] was a demographic change for the area, to make it Arab (...)They [government] wanted to have Christians migrate from the area. Similar to what Daesh did” (Interview 3).*

This respondent perceived the political actions that happened from the 1980s onwards, as conscious attempts to get rid of the Christian communities. Although the plan was executed in a different way than the attacks of *Daesh*, the aim was the same, to remove Christianity from Iraq.

In the encounters of the Christian communities with political actors, the following aspects are striking. Most of them are positive about the pre-2003 government of Saddam Hussain’s Baath party. In their stories, I discern a strong narrative that sketches a positive picture of that period. People are aware that not everything was good, but at least better. An older generation especially shared a narrative of decades ago, in which, according to them Iraq was the leading country in the region in terms of their educational institutes and their culture. Christians, as my respondents share, feel to be victims of the powerplay between the world’s nations. They explain their current situation only because of what happened during and after the USA invasion that removed Saddam and the Baath party. The vacuum created afterward led to a fight between Sunni and Shi’a Muslims, since the Interim government established by the international community was not effective. Fights for power between Sunni and Shi’a factions continued since then. In this struggle for power, Sunni *Daesh* gained power.

Their perception of the IDPs is strongly influenced by the fact that the USA invasion only led to an increase of instability and the struggle for power between Shi’a and Sunni militants, and ultimately led to the rise of *Daesh*. An expat NGO leader shares with me that it is difficult for the Iraqi Christian population to judge the Saddam period, which also was difficult for many of them. However, compared to the atrocities that increased after 2003, it can be understood why they regard the Saddam regime as more pleasant.

#### *Violent encounters*

Violence did not start with the establishment of *Daesh* in 2014, but occurred in the chaotic context after 2003. A rapid increase in the frequency of violent occasions, combined with an increase in the

intensity of violence, can be distinguished from 2003 onwards. Not only violence increased between Shi'a and Sunni Iraqi, but also towards the Christians.

This increase of violence is visualized in a publication given to me by one of the local NGO leaders. The publication is called: *'Christian victims of terrorism, Chaldean, Syriac Assyrian and Armenian of Iraq from 2003 through 2014'*. The religious council of the Chaldean, Assyrian, and Syriac in Iraq listed all the known victims from their community and published it. This booklet confirms that before *Daesh* came to power already *"1107 citizens have been killed, and 114 Christian churches, temples and monasteries were attacked in Iraq"* (Chaldean, Syriac, Assyrian and Armenian Council Iraq, p.5). In the publication, all the names of the 1107 Christian martyrs that were killed are listed, specifying place and date of the attack and murder. With Mosul and Baghdad being by far the deadliest places. In the booklet, the attacks are explained in phrases as *"cross landing, robbery, blown up, smashing and seizing of statues, bombing, firing bullets, explosive device, attack, killing of guards, grenade was thrown, car bomb, firing mortars"* (Chaldean, Syriac, Assyrian and Armenian Council Iraq, p. 45-52).

A Chaldean priest and leader of the Mar Elia refugee camp in Erbil, was a victim of this increased violence towards Christians. He told me that years ago he used to live in Baghdad, where he was a priest in one of the Chaldean churches in the city. In 2006, he was kidnapped by Muslims, al-Qaida affiliates. He was taken hostage for several days and got beaten and tortured. After that, he decided it was not safe to stay and moved to Erbil. (fieldnotes)

One of my respondents, a female student of 18 years shared her story, why she and her family moved from Baghdad to the Nineveh plains.

*"We were very young, kids. We were in the house of an uncle and his family. We had a funeral. My father left the house and we were with 7 kids at the house of the uncle. We lived in Dora area in Baghdad. No one was on the street after 7. Then terrorists attacked the house. We were kids. Put in a store. Mom, cousin, uncle and his son staid with the terrorist. They kicked mum with guns and shot uncle in his head. He was injured and fell down on the place. They had a gun in the house because of security. My cousin took the gun and started shooting to fear them and go away. They run away and did not take anyone hostage. "* (Interview 7)

Not all of the encounters between Christians and Muslim related militants groups were as violent as in these shared stories. Less violent, but still humiliating encounters between Christians and Muslims took place as well. My interpreter shared a story which illustrates the growing tensions from 2003 onwards. She owned a plot of land in Mosul, lived in the city for a while and still had apartments there. Whenever she traveled to Mosul, she said: *"as a woman you had to dress differently, cover up. Often people started shouting, 'Why do you look like this?'"* (Interview 6) It was an aggressive environment, especially for non-Muslims. One of the respondents shares that it was normal for Christians to be spit upon in Mosul or that Muslims would come and put a burning cigarette on them, or take their shoes and hit them. Christians felt betrayed and uncomfortable. However, respondents said that such stories were perceived to be common and the Christian minorities were used to it. The interpreter remembers that as a child she had to flee from Tikrit. When she and her family returned, all their belongings were stolen and destroyed. Due to such experiences, respondents were not surprised at all by the way in which *Daesh* operated.

*"I personally was expecting this. I was so, because I had friends living in Mosul, and houses in Bartella. They chat with us. I knew how Muslim treat them in Mosul."* (Interview 3).

Various violent encounters, especially during the last decade led to a more negative perception of Muslims by the Christian minorities. Before these respondents still were able to see Muslims as their

friends, and many of them had Muslim friends, colleagues, and employees. Today, especially after the *Daesh* invasion, the fear towards Muslims increased. The impact of the increase in violence and altered perception of Christians towards their fellow Iraqis is visible by the fact that the number of Christians in Iraq reduced from 1,5 million before 2003 to an estimated amount of 250,000 in 2011. The current number after the invasion by *Daesh* is expected to be even lower. Most of these Christians moved to the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Europe.

### *Lenses*

Looking to the previous shared encounters through the three lenses of narrative, portrayal, and perception, the following observations can be done. The narratives that are shared amongst the Christian IDPs strongly focus on marginalization and violence as their reality before 2014. Examples of the portrayal used to strengthen their reasoning about the increase of violence are visible in the 'martyrbook'. This book was specially created to be shared in order to increase attention for their case as Iraqi Christians. That is why it was given to me, in order to share the story and show the numbers back home. A second example of portrayal is the kidnapped priest I referred to. This priest, Douglas Al-Bazi, uses his experience of being kidnapped as a portrayal of the situation of the Christians in Iraq. He shared his story at many international podia, and always showed his blood-stained shirt he wore during his kidnap in 2006. (Christian Post, 2016) Interesting is that this happened before *Daesh* existed, but this story is increasingly shared after 2014. He also has his own Wikipedia page on which especially the story of his kidnap is shared. (Wikipedia, 2017b). This priest is presented as the image of the desperate situation of the Iraqi Christians. As the perceptions of the Christians themselves are strongly shaped by the violence and marginalization they encountered before, they actively attempt to present this reality to others and by doing so alter the perception of other influential actors.

### *Conclusion*

This section described the encounters with political and military actors which led to increased marginalization and an increased suffering from violence. The impact of the described encounters is significant, especially for the Christian communities in Iraq. It caused the dramatic decrease of their population presence in Iraq.

Although the Iraqi Christians showed resilience, more than ten years of increased violence and marginalization left a lasting impact. The narratives shared about this period increasingly focus on the violence, threats and dangers in which they live. The perception altered, the Christians don't see a future for themselves in the country, although they see themselves as the original people of Iraq. The marginalization by the political actors in Baghdad and the increase of violence ultimately led to the conflict with *Daesh*, as the next section will show.

### **Conflict and Flight**

Following years of increased violence, in July 2014, *Daesh* launched the attack on Mosul, the beginning of the conflict for the Christian communities. The following sections present their encounters during the conflict with *Daesh* and the flight.

### *Encounters with Daesh*

In June 2014 *Daesh* attacked the northern Iraqi city of Mosul, the second city of the country. Within three days they conquered the city, while the Iraqi army and the ISF (Iraqi Security Forces) fled. This rapid invasion of the town caused the minorities groups to escape to the neighboring towns in the Nineveh plains, such as Qaraqosh, Bartella, and Karamles. Around 50,000 people left Mosul in these first days after it was conquered. Respondents referred to this moment as 'the first migration.' The Christians who decided to stay in Mosul were forced to pay the *jizya*, a tax for non-Muslims. However,

the situation for them deteriorated quickly, and on the 18<sup>th</sup> of July, the ISIS authorities announced that the day after, the 19<sup>th</sup> of July, all Christians should have left, staying in Mosul meant execution.

In the first five months of the ISIS domination of Mosul around 20.000 people of the different minority groups, but mainly from Yezidi minorities, were imprisoned. Many of them were executed. After the capture of Mosul, ISIS continued its destructive march through the Nineveh plains. In June they moved to Tal Afar, the Turkmen region of the Nineveh plains. In August they attacked the Sinjar region, the home ground of the Ye'zidi's. The Kurdish Peshmerga forces who were assigned to protect the area were outnumbered and had to withdraw. Over 200,000 Yezidi's fled the area while around 50,000 of them were trapped in the mountains of Sinjar. Their story became known internationally and their escape, weeks later, after a corridor was created by Kurdish troops assisted by US airstrikes, was international news. Then, in August 2014, *Daesh* moved towards the Christian towns on the Nineveh plains. They moved forward at an unexpected pace and arrived at the borders of t Karamles, Bartella, and Qaraqosh and forced the Christian citizens to flee, especially after the following event:

*"6<sup>th</sup> of August, in the morning, they bombed one of the houses. A family at breakfast, two kids and the wife died. That alerted most of the people to go. Most of them left that same night."*  
(Interview 6)

One of the respondents, a farmer, one of the last that left Qaraqosh, recalled his experience of that moment:

*"Before the 6<sup>th</sup> of August [2014], the Peshmerga informed us that they [Daesh] would bomb the area. The battle started at 2 o'clock AM. We could see Daesh from a 1-kilometer distance. So, in the morning they started bombing with heavy weapons. All the farmers gathered together and decided not to sleep that night. We finished work on the farms and went to the house. At half-past nine, that evening people started escaping from the area. But, the situation was calm at that time. Nothing happened, no bombing, no shooting. At half-past eleven, at night, I went to the church. I saw no guards. Even the guards had gone to escape from the area. They decided to leave. I went to the intersection of Qaraqosh, Karamles, and Bartella [the place where the Peshmerga forces were located], they left as well. (Interview 6)*

Most of the respondents I talked to, did not participate in or see active fighting with ISIS. Most of them mentioned the one bombing event, the fact that *Daesh* arrived that rapidly, and the retreat of the Peshmerga's as indicators that they really had to leave their towns, in order to be able to survive. One of the respondents I talked to in an informal setting, was the bishop of a monastery near Mosul, located 4,5 kilometers from the front line, behind the last checkpoint of the Peshmergas. He resided there during the fights and shared his experiences of fighting and shelling. According to him, he got used to the sounds of shelling, it could not harm him, only kill him. But he was prepared for that and willing to happily die for the Iraqi Christian case.

Stories like this showed me that the perception of violence and the perception of conflict, especially by the religious leaders is strongly connected to a religious narrative of martyrdom. The way they tend to look to the violence, is from a Biblical point of view. According to them, it is normal for them as Christians to be persecuted. The story of the bishop from the Mar Mattai monastery, mentioning that he prefers to die instead of fleeing terror, shows the strong impact of this religious narrative. This biblical narrative is combined with historical narratives of the Iraqi church, which is more than 2000 years old and contains many stories of martyrs. These stories are shared amongst the Christians, and especially known amongst the religious leaders.

### *Role of religious actors during flight*

During the flight, religious actors were very important to coordinate the flight and to make sure everybody left. It is interesting to see how the community life of the Iraqi Christian communities from the town in the Nineveh plains was centered around their churches and religious leaders, and how this was visible during the conflict and displacement in August 2014.

One of the respondents, a priest, shared his story about the flight:

*“It was the feast of the Transfiguration. 200 - 250 people were in the church, only 25 people left the village. The people attended at 5 o’clock. People were terrified. They were going to me, asking what to do, to stay or to leave. The situation was bad. I was advising them to leave the area. People started gathering in the church for shelter. We used trucks, the car for funerals, to help people leave the area. We advised everyone to leave. We used the cars. We placed 60 people in one truck. Even old men. We went in convoy. With cars, trucks, 150 left in the convoy. I was staying with the guards of the church. People asked me to leave. I will follow in the end. At 00:30 in the morning I took the guards. I did a tour through the city. I saw a poor family with 3 people walking in the city. With their bags, wife, and daughter. Going back home with their bags. They could not find a car. So they were going back home. I put them in my car. And drove them to Erbil. At a point, the bridge, people gathered, was blocked. Thousands of families and cars waiting there. They just stayed there. I turned back to Bartella. We went back to the guards to take them as well. So I tried to convince the guards, but they refused. At 3 o’clock in the morning, I came back and said now everyone should leave because Daesh was very close. So everyone should leave immediately. I took 3 guards and another car. I saw people in the street, took them also and went out of Bartella at 03:30 in the morning.” (Interview 8)*

Three things are fascinating in this story of the priest. Firstly, it is interesting to see that the church was regarded as the safe haven, as people fathering in the church for shelter. Second, it is striking that the citizens of Bartella seemed to be depending on the advice of the church leaders if and when they should leave. Third, the role of the church is such, that the church leaders took on the responsibility that most of the people left and that they were one of the last to move out, together with the security guards of the church.

This shed light on how religious actors are perceived by the community. They are perceived by the community as their leaders whose advice is required in order to make a decision. Also, the church is perceived to be a place of safety, as in the story of this priest and of the farmer, showing that in both Qaraqosh and Bartella, the church was seen as a safe haven. However, this story is the narrative as shared by the priest himself, which portrays himself as the main actor, the savior that saved his people. As the last man that walked through Bartella, to save the lost. This is narrative, centered around the religious leaders is interesting, as other encounters during the displacement, as described later, show a different narrative about the religious leaders.

### *Encounters with God during flight*

The flight from the towns in the Nineveh plains to Erbil was chaotic. The previous quote showed that the roads were blocked. Other respondents shared that they were forced to leave the cars and had to walk to Erbil. The weather conditions were harsh in the Iraqi summer with temperatures above 40 degrees Celsius. However, although the people on their flight had to cope with these tough circumstances, some of them especially encountered God during those moments. The Christians I interviewed shared how they encountered God and got strength out of their religion during their flight. A respondent shared the following about his flight:

*“What God did for us was a miracle. All cars were empty in few hours. Nobody got hurt. It is like God get all these people out. 50 000 people. Most of them did not have cars. While many had no cars. Gods will for everyone was to get out of the area in time. God was with us. (...) God is love. God is a humanitarian. God is brave and powerful. We are only tools in his hand. And he can move us the way he wants. So, if it was not Gods will we would not be here until now.” (Interview 1).*

Although the circumstances were difficult, this respondent perceived God to be in charge of him and his fellow citizens, during their flight. For him, this experience was an encounter with God. He saw God as a protecting force, a godly authority interfering in their life and guiding them while fleeing. God was the acting actor, the humanitarian who saved them.

Not all IDPs responded similar to their flight and not all of them perceived God to be in charge of them. A priest mentioned that several of the people blamed God, expressed their anger.

*“So, that is was on the first day, they blamed God for what happened to them and they were saying, we won’t go to church anymore because God has done this to us, he did not help us, all of these things.” (Interview 4)*

For these persons, God was the absent actor during the conflict and their flight from their homes. If God would have been there, *Daesh* would not have been able to destroy their lives. Although people perceived their situation like this in the first moment of their flight and displacement, their perception altered.

*“After 2 months, the same woman started to say we do not blame God for what happened but we thank God for saving us from what they wanted to do to us. So they understood ISIS is done by men and not by God.” (Interview 4)*

Through the narratives of all the respondents, God is portrayed as the most influential actor who ultimately saved them and guided through the conflict and flight. The perception of the displaced on this period is, as the quotes show, strongly shaped by their encounters with God.

### *Conclusion*

The described encounters during the Conflict and Flight period show the following. First of all, it is important to see how religious actors were involved in the encounters. Religious leaders had a leading role during the flight. Besides this, the Christian communities perceived God, as a guiding securing force for them. Religion, therefore, is important in the encounters that occurred during this period and is also important in how the respondents perceived what happened to them.

A religious narrative definitely can be observed in how respondents refer to this period, as narratives are the stories that people create to make sense of their lives. The strong religious components of the stories about the conflict and flight they shared, show that religion and God are influential shaping actors for how the IDPs perceived this phase and the encounters that took place. Secondly, the encounters show the role of the community as a powerful actor to cope with the invasion of *Daesh*. The farmer described how the community cooperated and decided what to do, which is also shown in the example how the community gathered around the churches.

### **Displacement**

The phase of displacement is a period in which many encounters took place with various actors. During the displacement, which at the time of the fieldwork, was already going on for more than a year, many new actors entered Iraq and encountered with the IDPs. IDPs met with churches and religious leaders for initial shelter and spiritual support. Besides that, many international NGOs entered the scene and

started the provision of humanitarian to them. From within the IDP community, many grassroots initiatives started and local NGOs became valuable actors providing aid to their own community. And, due to the international attention for the situation in Iraq and the fight against *Daesh*, the media became an important actor operating in the Iraqi IDP context. In the following sections, several encounters are described and is analyzed how portrayal, narratives and perceptions shape the encounters.

#### *Actor encounters around food distribution*

Actor encountered around the needs of the displaced community and the required humanitarian response to that. The following example shows how different perceptions, and conflicting portrayals occur around food distribution to the displaced and how actors had conflicting ideas.

During the field visit in March 2016, a discussion amongst both local and international humanitarian NGOs was if food distribution to the displaced should be continued or not. The point of discussion was if humanitarian NGOs, after 1,5 year of displacement, continued to be responsible for the majority of the food distribution or if the IDPs themselves should care for that. The motivation for this discussion were conflicting perceptions around nutrition and food in relation the Iraqi displacement crisis amongst different actors.

One of the perceptions around food distributions in is visible in aid campaigns. In aid campaigns and also through media actors, the displacement crisis in Iraq is on some occasions framed as a food crisis. This happened at least on one occasion which was shared to me by an IDP-camp leader.

*“You need to put a policy (...) A reporter came without permission and started filming. They started filming at the entrance. One of the crew had bread with them. Old bread. And started to distribute to the people, before the camera. To have good shots. So that the people knew they were doing good things and providing food (...) We need to keep the privacy. These are people, not animals. They come and bring so many gifts for the people, especially for the children. So, they tell them to dance, or sing, and then we will give you gifts. So we talk to them, they are no monkeys. Give them, but they are not going to perform. Otherwise, we do not want your gift.” (Interview 4)*

This occasion caused the camp leader to establish a media policy. According to him, NGOs frame the displacement crisis in order to make it beneficial for themselves, without looking to the actual needs. It is an interesting insight, how through a certain way of portrayal (handing out old bread to displaced people in front of running camera's) a perception is created that Iraqi displaced are in a food crisis. Probably because this links to an idea that whenever you are an IDP, you are in a food crisis. However, in the same interview, the respondent said: *“we don't need bread. Iraqis don't need food. They can bring their food to Africa, our children need education and our people need jobs.”* (Interview 4) In this quote, the camp leader refers to Africa. This is interesting, since Africa has the connotation of a food crisis. So for that particular NGO handing out food was probably a logical way of portraying the crisis, since IDPs had a connotation of food crisis as IDPs probably have in Africa. For the camp leader, handing out food also has a connotation to Africa, but a negative connotation, as he does not want to be compared to Africans. The narrative he shared assumes that for him, the very fact of being Iraqi, means that they don't need food aid.

Framing the displacement crisis as a food crisis is common. Googling pictures on 'humanitarian aid Iraq' presents many pictures of food distribution, showing people desperately lifting up their hands to get food.

Food aid was not only an issue between media actors but also between IDPs and some NGOs, and also between IDPs and their religious leaders. Several humanitarian organizations decided to reduce the food rations. The local NGO I visited, also decided to stop the food delivery within two months. After the 1,5 year of displacement, people should start to look for other means to gain income and not be aid dependent. *They just need a kick under their pants*" (field notes) said the leader of the local NGO. According to him, a right response to the Iraqi IDPs was not through the provision of food but through providing education, vocational training, and job opportunities. This was shared by the camp leader and priest referred to above, as he also said that education and jobs were more important than food aid.

The IDPs were upset about the decision to reduce food rations. For them their situation was difficult, food was required, and earnings from labor were not to be expected, because of the lack of jobs in and around Erbil.

### Lenses

In these examples, several aspects can be mentioned regarding the three lenses. Especially existing perceptions are interesting to observe. Firstly, media actors seem to frame an displacement crisis as a food crisis, linking it to existing perceptions which are based on African displacement and food crisis, as it is referred to by the priest. Based on this existing perception, the decision is made to portray the Iraqi crisis as such, probably because images linking to these existing perceptions stimulate people to have attention for this crisis and provide financial support. For audience watching food distribution to displaced people due to war in a country as Iraq, food shortage and starvation is a logical picture, based on the stories, images, and videos they have seen previously about similar cases on the globe.

For the camp leader, the perception on food aid is also linked to Africa. For him this perception is problematic. As Iraqi, he likely does not want to be perceived like Africans that need aid, since it does not fit his own perception of the Iraqi people. That is why he uses the narrative that his people are regarded as animals who are offered food. However, the perception of this priest is also influenced by the fact that he was not depending on food aid, as he was not an IDP.

The perception of the NGOs to reduce the food rations is likely to be based on financial rationales. They basically must be able to spend donor money on food distributions, which do have a short-term positive effect but does not have any sustainable impact for the longer term.

### Portrayals around security

The previous section showed how different perceptions on food aid led to different ideas about intervention, amongst the various actors. In relation to portrayal and how that is done through media actors, an example from the American ABC News is interesting to observe.

For several actors, their perception about Iraq is based on the different wars and conflicts that occurred in the country during the previous decades. The latest developments with *Daesh* and the images of conflict, war, displacement, bombings and more cruel pictures and videos are strong elements to confirm such an negative existing perception on Iraq. It is interesting to see how this perception is confirmed by the way in which ABC News decides to portray the displaced in the Mar Elia camp in Erbil.

ABC News reported about a 'rescue' campaign by two Americans who were planning to save Iraqi Christian IDPs from Erbil. The video is called: 'How two Americans Planned Mission to Save Refugees from ISIS'. In this news item, ABC News shared the story of how several Iraqi families are rescued from Iraq to Slovakia and can be watched on Youtube (ABC News, 2015).

In the video, they refer to Iraq and the IDP camps as a dangerous place, as they start the video with fragments of explosions. The clip contains sentences as *“The countdown has begun, for a journey that will rescue 149 people from the cramped containers that have been their haven from the tyranny of ISIS.* (ABC News, 2014). The children in the camp are portrayed as scared, playing war games with each other. Another fragment from this ABC video shows kids at the Mar Elia Church ground in Erbil, filmed behind a fence. Interesting is an episode in which the security personnel and camera crew explore the route from the camp to the airport:

*“The security personnel begins the crucial dry run of the ride to the airport. It is a mission with danger. The perfect route, the one with the fewest turns. (...) Another checkpoint, please no camera’s”* (ABC News, 2014)

These examples from the video shows how the IDP camp and the context of Erbil is portrayed as an extremely dangerous place. The decision to film children behind a fence, increases this feeling of danger in Iraq and only being safe behind a fence.

Perceptions can differ. When I visited the same camp, I had another experience, as formulated in the introduction. My experience was a feeling of astonishment. People in the camp were playing volleyball, adults were peacefully chatting with each other. In my field notes I wrote down that the camp felt like watching a school camp on holiday. In the months of displacement this camp evolved towards the 5-star camp of Erbil, as it was referred to. However, filming that place, making the decision of filming children behind a fence, pretending insecurity and danger, is a consciously made decision in order to portray the Iraqi IDP crisis in such a way. Presenting the route from the camp to the Erbil as that dangerous that a *crucial dry run of the ride* is needed, and that the *perfect route with the fewest turns* need to be found, is interesting, since this camp was located in the Christian area of Erbil, Ankawah, and this IDP camp was very close to the airport. To refer to traveling the route from the IDP camp to the airport as a mission with danger is at least an exaggeration of reality.

When I asked the leader of the camp how he looked to the situation portrayed in this video, he immediately understood what I meant and he started laughing. *“they are Americans, you know, that is the way they show it”*.

The narrative this video used, of a dangerous mission to rescue the people from the tyranny of ISIS, can be understood when one looks to the audience of this video. This video is aimed at the American audience who was needed to donate in order to get the funding for this resettlement project. In the United States, an ‘rescue organization’ was behind this project, with a famous TV star in charge. Analysing the narrative of this rescue organization when they report about rescue operation is interesting. On their website they shared the following:

*“It was not two Americans saving Christians, it was thousands of Americans who saved 149 Christians by donating to the Nazarene fund ABC failed to report that the rescue was made possible because of the faithful audience and donors of Mercury One. They failed to report that donors sold their wedding rings, homes, property, jewelry, baked goods and more, in order to save the families. You made this possible! Because of you, 149 Christians arrived in Slovakia to begin their new journey in life. Your generosity and sacrifice have not gone unnoticed. The call is great, and Mercury One is proud to stand alongside you helping our brothers and sisters in Christ.”* (Mercury One, 2015)

The narrative they use contains vocabulary as *‘your sacrifice’*. However, this not used in relation to the IDPs, who sacrificed lives, homes, dangers to survive the terror, but the term is used in relation to the Americans who sold ‘baked goods.’ So, the tables seem to be turned. Narrative is created. A narrative

in which sacrifice does not belong mainly the IDPs and victims of terror and genocide, who sacrificed life, danger, health, jobs, children, etc., but to those in freedom who have to *sacrifice* some dollars. By doing so, this organization, through this campaign, portrays the American saviors as acting hero's, while the IDPs are portrayed as mere victims.

This encounter again shows how through portrayal (behind a fence, explosion) a perception is created which often differs from the reality. It also showed how this perception is strengthened through narratives (of danger, of the need to rescue from the tyranny) used in the video. The influence of the portrayal and narratives used is significant, as it leads to the 'sacrifice' of Americans for this project. It shows how portrayal, narratives, and perceptions that are not according to the reality as it is perceived by others, can be (mis)used for financial gains.

#### *Portrayed as voiceless victims*

After looking to portrayal in relation to food aid and security, this example also focus how actors like INGOs, in encounter with politics and donors, present the IDPs in Iraq.

An international NGO working for and with Christian minorities in Iraq, had the following title for their congressional briefing in Washington DC (USA): "*being a voice for the voiceless: a congressional briefing on Iraq and Syria*" (Open Doors, 2014). In the letter the following two comments were made:

*"We have received an overwhelmingly positive response to this Congressional briefing, and a heightened interest in the work of (...) from our contacts on Capitol Hill" (Open Doors, 2014).*

*"Thank you for being a voice for those who are persecuted. Your voice matters – in your community, on Capitol Hill, and around the world. (Open Doors, 2014).*

In this letter, the IDPs in Iraq are presented as voiceless. Since the IDPs have no voice, somebody should stand up to act as their voice. Donors are encouraged to support the NGO, who acts as the voice of the IDPs towards governments, and by doing so, be the voice themselves.

However, observing the 'voiceless' in the field and through media analysis, it can be doubted if they are voiceless. In Iraq, I met religious leaders who traveled to UN institutes, governments, INGOs and others international players to open up their voice for their own Iraqi Christian IDP communities. Even more fascinating is that acting as a voice in Capitol Hill was not necessary, since 8 Iraqi leaders were able to talk to President Obama in 2014, just after their displacement. (National Catholic Reporter, 2014). Another NGO leaders told me that he is "*using Facebook, email to reach my network, international from Lebanon, French, Turkey, Germany, and America (...) help is still there, supporting even if it is a small amount of money*" (Interview 2). During my research, I met priests from Iraq and Syria in the Netherlands, because they were able to travel to the Netherlands to raise their voice on behalf of their people in the Netherlands, at the Dutch parliament and at Dutch churches. One of the priests I met in Iraq was a keynote speaker some years ago at a conference in the Netherlands, in which he addressed the needs of the Iraqi Christian population.

The largest problem, which should be targeted by NGOs, is not that the community is voiceless, but that they are unable to raise their voice effectively. In informal talks, somebody shared that during the informal meeting of the church leaders with Obama, the different leaders all had their own agenda's, and did not speak as one voice. Which created, according to him, more confusion than clarity.

This encounter shows that the Christian displaced are portrayed as voiceless, by an NGO who presents this portrayal towards the American population. It also showed that in my encounters with the displaced they perceive themselves as able to speak up for their case, as they use social media to spread news about their situation and the religious leaders speak at international podiums and even at Capitol

Hill. These show how two opposite perceptions occur, according to one party they are perceived as voiceless and need to be represented at Capitol Hill, while the displaced perceive themselves as able to speak up.

#### *Religious places as places of contested encounters*

During the conflict and the flight, the church was an important place for people to find shelter, as it was described earlier. The important character of religiosity and religious places is also visible during the displacement in Erbil, but also shows how religious places became contested dangerous places.

In Ankawah, the Christian area of Erbil, I was able to participate in an opening celebration and first mass in the newly constructed Mart Henna (St. Ann) church. This church was constructed especially for the IDP community from Bartella, one of the towns on the Nineveh plains. I went to the celebration with some representatives of a local NGO. As we drove through the gate our car was controlled by an armed Iraqi soldier who asked us who we were and what our purpose was. Only after his permission, we were allowed to enter the compound. We entered the new concrete church building and got seated for the opening ceremony. During the ceremony, time and time again, I saw several military armed men strolling by, doing their patrolling round around the church. Safety within the concrete walls of the church is only safeguarded by patrolling military personnel, with their rifles ready to respond to any surprise. It became a normal picture in Iraq and Kurdistan, as I experienced it during another visit. I attended a ceremony with thousands of Christian IDP youth. The festival was in a church on the outskirts of Erbil. In front of the building, armed guys kept watch over the flocks. Also, church leaders needed to be secured. During this attended festival the archbishop of the church, normally based in Lebanon, came by, to visit his congregation members in Iraq. He arrived with an armored vehicle with an armed police and a military escort to secure his visit.

Observing these encounters at religious places while using the lenses, the most element is how the religious places are perceived as unsafe places, shown in the fact that military actors had to protect the place and the people. It is also possible that armed people were used to presents an image of security towards the displaced that visited the ceremony, and towards potential violent actors to present an image of power.

#### *Humanitarian NGOs and their encounters with IDPs*

During the displacement, many humanitarian actors were present in Erbil. From large INGOs, local NGOs to the United Nations. Also, the local churches were core actors in the humanitarian response. The following paragraphs describe and analyze some of the encounters I observed between different humanitarian actors. The first example is about the UN and International NGOs in relation to IDPS, secondly local NGOs are described, next, the role for Faith Based Organisations, and finally how churches operate in encounters at the interface.

#### *UN and international NGOs*

International NGOs and the UN were not perceived positively amongst IDPs, local NGOs and church leaders. One of them, a priest and leader of a refugee camp was clear about the UN and NGOs.

*“I kicked many NGOs out many of this area [church compound on which the refugee camp was located]. If the UN gets here, there are out in some second as well. We don’t need them. They left us behind.” (Fieldnotes)*

According to him, and others, the UN left them behind in the first days after the response, as they were absent. However, the lack of initial response from international actors, both NGOs and the United Nations can be understandable. The progression of ISIS, conquering the cities in the Nineveh plains and moving towards Erbil was extremely fast and totally unexpected, both for the Iraqis and the

international community. Nobody was and could have been able to cope with such a rapid invasion and such large amount of refugees in such a short period of time. (Fieldnotes)

In encounters with Iraqi Christians and their leaders, I recognized that they had also mixed feelings towards NGOs. Most of them appreciated their work and realized that those NGOs were present to provide them with aid. They were perceived different from the United Nations, UNHCR, and OCHA, who, according to several refugees, was totally absent during the first moments of the displacement. International NGOs were present and tried to provide the displaced with their basic needs as shelter and food provision. However, at least two refugee camp leaders expressed their concern and frustration about International NGOs. One of them, a monk who was the leader of a small refugee camp just outside of Erbil, was explicit and said the following, especially frustrated about Christian and international NGOs: *“Aid organizations are like the Muslim. They enforce you to do their ideas. We have to fit their requirements and strategies. Otherwise, we are in trouble”* (Fieldnotes)

The perception that international humanitarian actors were failing, was strong among the IDPs and their leaders. Their narratives confirm this perception as they shared extremely negative stories, referring to international humanitarian NGOs as to be *‘kicked out’* or *‘they are like Muslim who enforce their ideas’*. This perception of the IDPs seems to be based on first, their lack of support in the first phase of the displacement and second, their enforcing character and unwillingness to listen to the aid recipients. This perception seems to be different regarding local NGOs, as the next section will describe.

#### *Local NGOs*

In Kurdistan, many local NGOs worked among the refugee's communities. Many of these NGOs were established after the displacement in 2014. They started as small organizations providing food and shelter to their own community. Often, the current leaders are the ones that organized shelter, food and other first aid just after the displacement. One of the representatives of a local NGO I interviewed shared how his NGO started:

*“When the first family arrived here I cleared the big house, which was used for workers that work in the restaurant which I was managing. They cleared the house, the workers sleep in the restaurant and I put 32 families in the house. (...) A small idea started, let’s make food for everyone. We prepared food for 3000 people.”* (Interview 1)

NGOs who started small, like this one established from the restaurant, kept doing their work and were asked to continue doing so, by their church leaders or their recipients. Many of them decided to continue their work and registered themselves as an NGO at the Iraqi government. I encountered different Local NGOs in Erbil, as for example, a team that was in charge of a project which constructed apartments above a shopping mall in the center. Another NGO focused on other issues and arranged activities for children while others provided vocational training. A third NGO I met focused on trauma healing. They gave psychological support to refugees traumatized by their experiences while fleeing their villages. This NGO was established by one of the priests of a church, who was also the leader of a refugee camp and followed courses for trauma training. A team of IDPs was trained and started to provide medication to traumatized IDPs as well as training new people. One of the employees of the trauma center told me that he was living in one of the IDP camps and saw the psychological need around him. It was visible in the kids who were fighting together, or fathers who were desperate and a substantial number of them died from heart attacks. Together with the refugee camp leader, they decided, based on these signals, that trauma training and healing was required for the IDPs. With funding from donors (western organizations, individuals, and churches) they realized this trauma center, which was the first one ever in Iraq, according to them.

The asset of local NGOs is that they know what the local context is, and which needs are to be addressed. *“Of course I know what the families need. I live with the family. I visit the family monthly so that I know. I know this family needs money for an operation, or this needs food because there is no young man, all of them is old”* (Interview 1). Another priest showed me all his statistics, with the detailed information which family had disabled, which of them were ill, which moved out and which families arrived in which camp.

Another benefit of local NGOs is that they already have existing relationships and connection to different actors. This can be extremely beneficial as in the case of the NGO which was doing the construction work in the shopping mall in the center of Erbil. The brother of the current director of the team knew the Christian owners of the shopping mall. This director took the idea to use the still unfinished upper floors of this building to create apartments in there. He got permission from the owners and started the construction. Budget was directly coming from a French Catholic church.

A problem with local NGOs is their funding. They depend on funding from INGOs, governments and other actors. All of them require well-written proposals, realistic budget plans, log frames, etc. Most of these local NGOs were inexperienced in this. One of the respondents, an expat NGO leader who funded several grassroots NGOs shared that most of them requested funds for projects that were not well prepared and requested far too much budget. The INGO backing this local NGO, therefore, trained local NGO staff to increase their capacity in order to be more effective in grant acquisition.

In the encounters between local NGOs and the displaced community and their religious leaders, local NGOs are perceived to be effective as they are closely connected to the community, or are rooted in the community and thus are aware of their needs. Only positive narratives were shared with me about local NGOs.

#### *Faith-based NGOs*

A substantial part of the humanitarian actors observed in Iraq are Faith Based Organisations (FBOs). Encounters with these FBOs present a diverse picture of how they are perceived by the displaced community, churches and church leaders. These sections present some problematic encounters.

The role of faith-based NGOs can be problematic in Iraq because of the ambiguous relationship between the traditional churches and modern evangelical western organizations. One of the respondents was fierce. First, he did not allow my translator to translate this but approved to do so. *“They don’t understand us [Catholic and Orthodox church], they don’t respect our tradition and our churches”* (Fieldnotes) This is what I heard more often.

Many international faith-based NGOs, especially those from an evangelical background had difficulties getting access to the Iraqi traditional Christian communities. I heard an INGO director sharing that often visitors from Europe or the United States visit the churches in Iraq. They have the mindset that all Iraqi are Muslims and that the current Christians are Muslim converts. Those visitors, mainly from Evangelical churches ask, according to the traditional Christians, inappropriate questions like: *“when were you converted to Christianity? How did you meet Jesus? When did you give your life to Jesus?”*. The traditional Christians respond that they have been Christian since birth. It also happens that visitors from those trips start to pray with and for random people they meet in the streets of Erbil, reasoning: *“we felt the burden on our heart to pray for those people”*. The NGO mentioned that in the rules for visitors they explained why such actions were discouraged. In general, the traditional churches see the evangelical churches as a threat to their own church, as they steal their members from their century-old Iraqi tradition. Evangelical churches are regarded as not respectful towards the traditions and culture of the Assyrians. Many of the local NGOs are FBOs as well, but belong to the Iraqi churches. Understanding of Iraqi Christianity, and respect towards them, are important for the

Christian Iraqi community, in order to be able and willing to accept FBOs. Large international FBOs, especially those rooted in Catholic or Orthodox churches, were perceived as positive humanitarian actors. The Iraqi Christian communities made a strong distinction between Evangelical and traditional rooted FBOs.

#### *Church as humanitarian actor*

The church as a humanitarian actor is not a logical thought at first hand. However, in Iraq, the church was the first humanitarian actor providing aid to the IDPs in and around Erbil. Priests were in charge of the refugee camps, did the management, administration and arranged programs. However, one of the respondents shared that the church and their leaders did not take the humanitarian role immediately after the flight and their arrival in Erbil, and had difficulty starting their intervention in the midst of the overwhelming needs.

The church as a humanitarian actor was not new according to the people themselves.

*“We have done this since a long time, in the 90s conflict between the Kurds. People from other governorates came and we [the church] supported them. In 2003 the same happened. [...] I was one of the team than who supported the people. We learned from the church to do these things” (Interview 4).*

According to this priest, it is a common task for the church and their leaders. Since they, as leaders, moved with their members to Erbil, they know their members and know their needs. Staying closely together as existing community, with the leaders that are known to the people, is a strong benefit for the Christian IDPs compared to others. It provides the refugees with normalcy in the midst of uncertainty.

That the church is doing a lot is what I heard from a priest, leader of a camp in the midst of Erbil:

*“You know, all the churches here in the region of Kurdistan are working as a set of beasts. All the day long you know, I do not want to talk about myself or (...) it is the reality. Maybe we do sleep for 4-5 hours. Maybe in western counties that are going to be a job, you know, it is 7 of the 24 hours. For us, it is our duty, not our job. 24 hours out of 24 hours. Every time when they call me, I need to pick up the phone, to answer and to help. That is important. It is all about being a good leader, about leadership.” (Interview 4)*

The sacral and profane is totally mixed in this camp. At the one hand, the church provides in their classical spiritual needs, like having the choir and teaching at the catechism classes. During the religious festivals, I saw the priests having spiritual conversations with their people, praying for them and blessing them. At the other hand, they are providing support with projects for cooking and sewing, to provide vocational training and jobs for their IDPs.

Another respondent shared:

*“Without the church, we could not be. They are essential. And the church is helping people, providing accommodation. And people went to church, the only shelter that kept them. (...) Since a long time, in the '90s, there was the conflict between the Kurds. People from other governorates came and we supported them. In 2003 the same happened. A group from the church, I was one of the team, we supported people than. We learned from the church this thing.” (Interview 4)*

Another NGO leader mentioned that they did not see any response from the politicians,

*“It was the church that was taking the lead to help the IDP, the priests, and the bishops are the ones that take care. (...) People are already connected to the church, so it is normal for the church” (Interview 5).*

The narratives shared by respondents around the church as humanitarian actors shows that this is perceived to be a normal task for a church, the church is humanitarian and has been that decades before. It is part of the identity of the church. For the displaced Christians it was a confirmation of the important position of the church. Portraying the church as an important humanitarian actor was beneficial for the church, as by doing so, they were able to gain attention and funding.

#### *Encounters between local NGOs and an international NGO*

Previous described encounters already showed that western international NGOs can collide with local actors. One of the encounters observed, display miscommunication through the different perception present at local actors versus international actors.

In Erbil, I worked through a local NGO, which was backed by an international NGO as a donor. This local NGO was mainly assisting the local churches. The leader of this local NGO was an international expat. Far before the displacement crisis, this NGO and the director already were present in Iraq. As a result of this, they had well-established connections with the Iraqi Christian leaders. In my encounters with this NGO, I recognized that they, both their international and local staff, were able to understand and connect with the Iraqi Christians, due to this long-established relationship.

The downside of this NGO was that they originally were not established to provide mere humanitarian aid, but this crisis forced them to do so. However, according to me, this lack of experience in humanitarian aid was compensated by their strong relationship with the different Iraqi partners. This NGO operated with a small staff, which was led by the international director and his local Iraqi counterpart. The division in work was such, that especially this Iraqi counterpart had a leading role in connecting to the different church leaders, NGO representatives, and Christian community, while the expat director was able to connect to international actors. This structure provided them with the relevant insights in both the international community, the International NGO who was backed them as well as with the local Iraqi actors.

Fascinating was the observation that especially the local embeddedness of this NGO, led to struggles with the headquarter of the NGO that funded them. They kept pushing this local NGO to create detailed year plans. The response of the Iraqi staff was that the situation was so fragile and uncertain, and the Middle Eastern culture more focused on relationships and the day to day needs, that having a strict year plan to which one had to stick, was just unworkable. Besides, such an approach would hamper them in adapting their approach to the continuous changing realities, as they observed them on the ground.

A misunderstanding like this, as a disconnect between headquarters and the field, is can be due to a lack of local knowledge at headquarter level and the preference of theoretical knowledge. At this NGO I heard, when I visited the headquarter, one of the employees saying: *“ At headquarter level, we develop the programs, we do the research. In the field, they can implement our programs ”* (fieldnotes). At the field office, this exactly was the concern, the fear of blueprinted plans which were not adapted to the local context and only to be implemented by their field staff.

Another encounter between an expat headquarter employee and a local NGO is characteristic as well. I remember the following situation at the local NGOs office in Erbil. One of the headquarter managers had her first field visit to Iraq, which also was her first field visit to the Middle East. She had no experience in this region. She started her visit, with sharing her choice of clothing. She wore solid

shoes, trousers and a shirt, all easy fitting for the outdoor humanitarian purpose. She shared that she did not know what to wear but assumed that this was just good for the Iraqi humanitarian context. An Iraqi employee said that this was inappropriate clothing for an Iraqi context. Women should be dressed well, preferably in dresses, and with high heels. The director of the NGO in Iraq prepared me on my field visit and encouraged me to wear, besides neat clothing, at least black neat shoes, since the priests would take me more seriously during interviews. Besides that, I was surprised myself about how the Iraqi Christians dressed themselves, in jeans and fancy clothing. For me, this encounter was a small example how even clothing does have an impact on encounters, and how everybody is prone to certain perceptions about the humanitarian field.

Analysing this encounter between the international NGO and their local partner NGO strongly show the conflicting perceptions between the headquarter and the field. As the headquarter value their program development based on their expertise, they clash with the local perceptions, valuing the local dynamics. Interesting is how humanitarian aid workers are portrayed and portraying themselves. Working in a humanitarian setting seems to have a connotation of a certain clothing. This definitely clashes with how Iraqi are presenting themselves, especially at leading positions.

### *Conclusion*

The encounters at this interface of the displacement in Erbil showed the following. Firstly, it is striking to observe how the situation changed compared to the previous periods. Before a few actors were present and in charge, mainly the Christians with their religious actors, to a less extend political actors and a continued presence of military actors. During the displacement, the number and variety of actors increased. Local and international NGOs entered the scene, as well as international religious actors and journalists. This increase of actor led to a more complex environment with whom the IDPs, but also other actors had to cope.

Secondly, an increase in the number of actors also reveals that they all have their own perceptions and agendas. Actors seem to be fighting to claim their position at the scene, and create their own narratives around their position and aims, which can contradict with the reality.

Thirdly, encounters show that religion is highly relevant for the IDPs in order to make sense of their displacement. Many of the encounters take place at religious places or religious events. Humanitarian actors that understand this religiosity seems to be effective in Iraq, since a majority of the humanitarian aid towards the Christian IDPs is provided through local and international FBOs.

## **7.4. Transforming lifeworlds and return of the displaced**

During the field visits, early 2016, it was difficult to predict what would happen with the IDPs. *Daesh* was still present on the Nineveh plains and in Mosul. However, although the situation was desperate and the future unknown, the Christian IDPs had their ideas about the future. Some of them shared their thoughts about that with me. This paragraph describes how the IDPs, based on encounters observed in the previous paragraphs, look to the future and if they expect to return to their homes, and which rationales are behind their wishes and decisions.

### *Perceived as minority*

Observing the IDPs in relation to their future raises the question how the position of the IDPs will be. With the rapid decrease of their number they increasingly seem to be or to become a minority group, amongst a majority Muslim population. The number of people, and being a minority, strongly influences future decisions and the existing room for maneuvers as a minority community. However, conflicting ideas exist around the minority concept and what the impact of being a minority is for the future.

Minorities are formally defined by the United Nations as:

*“A group numerically inferior to the rest of the population of a State, in a non-dominant position, whose members - being nationals of the State - possess ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics differing from those of the rest of the population and show, if only implicitly, a sense of solidarity, directed towards preserving their culture, traditions, religion or language.” (OHCHR, 2010, p.2)*

According to the Minority Rights Group International (2016) the Chaldeans, Assyrians, Syriacs, and Armenians are Iraqi minority groups. Statistically, they are a minority in Iraq where the majority is Muslim. World Watch Monitor, an NGO analyzing the position of Christians in the world, also refers to the Iraqi Christians as a minority (World Watch Monitor, 2017). The international NGO who was responsible for the research, also refers in their documentation about the Iraqi Christians as minorities. Comparing the situation of the Iraqi Christians to the definition of the OHCHR, it seems a valid label. The Christians are in a non-dominant position, ethnic, religious and linguistic different and aim to preserve their culture and tradition. However, the OHCHR report also mentions that self-definition is an important factor, as it is important to which extend the particular group defines themselves as a minority group.

In most of the interviews, these topics were discussed and respondents shared their perception on their own community. Striking was that the majority of them perceived themselves not to be a minority. In one occasion, while I was interviewing at the office of a local NGO, people in the office were upset that I asked how they look to their minority position. The three people shake their heads, one man standing in the back of the office walked towards us and said:

*“People that talks in such a way, are a person that does not understand. He did not read a lot. Does not know history” (Interview 1).*

My second interviewee replied to my question about perceiving Christians as a minority group:

*“We cannot accept this concept. As a number, we are, maybe. And, we became a minority of the amount genocide and things against us. ” (Interview 2).*

And another IDP from Qaraqosh shared:

*“Government officials, when they talk, mention Christians as a minority. They should not mention this word. We are here for a long time. The word should not be mentioned. The definition of a minority is a group of people displaced from one to another area. Christians are not. We are original in this country, so we should not be minority”(Interview 5)*

The Christian IDPs do not see themselves as a minority, only because of the fact that they are the original population of Iraq and can be traced back in the country for centuries. According to them, the original inhabitants should never be perceived as a minority. For them, statistics and numbers were not valid qualifiers for being a minority community or not.

However, two young people from the Christian community I interviewed had a slightly different opinion. Without touching the topic yet, the female student of 18 whom I interviewed said: *“as a minority, no one is there to support you” (Interview 7).* Later she shared:

*“We are a minority, little in number. Strangers will not help us. We have to help each other. (...) the government does not protect the right of a person (...) as a minority we have no protection. (...) We are the original people, it is our country, they have occupied, it is over. It is not ours any more” (Interview 7).*

It seemed that this young generation was more aware of their position and accepted that they were a minority, with little protection and no rights. As a new generation, they have to deal with a new situation as a minority. They were not sure yet if staying or leaving was a better option. They loved their country as Iraqi but were well aware of the consequences of living there, as a member of a minority community.

Around the concept of minority different perceptions exist. NGOs, UN, and academics refer to the Iraqi Christians as minority communities. However, I observed that referring to them as such caused frustration and anger as the Christians, despite their number, did not regard themselves as a minority. It seemed that a new generation is more aware of this and are at ease with the minority definition, perception seems to be changing, especially regarding their own future in Iraq. However, I realized that in the narrative they used, referring to 'being small in number', they actual confirmed some elements of the definition of a minority.

### Religious places as portrayal

How the Iraqi IDPs perceive their future can be analyzed by looking to how they cope with the construction of religious property. Many of the encounters I had with the IDP community were at religious buildings. Several conversations I had with religious actors also dealt with religious property. Throughout these discussions, I realized how religious architecture plays an important role in the life of the IDP community and how their discourse related to churches can shed light on their perception on the future, as well as on the past and present.

The first religious building I visited was a white semi-permanent constructed building in a refugee camp just outside of Ankawah. The building was from the outside, marked as a church by the small wooden cross on top of it. Its function as the church was shown inside by a small cross in front and some photos of religious leaders. In another refugee camp, a similarly constructed building was shown to me. Pictures showed that before these semi-permanent building people used tents in which they celebrated church life. The semi-permanent character of this church (and the container homes in the camp) show that for the IDP population this is not a permanent solution but that they await a new solution.

In the conversations with IDPs, churches were important. Many of them talked about the churches they had before. During the youth festival, I participated in, many pictures were shown of the church back home on the Nineveh plains and the masses and celebrations that were celebrated there. At the festival, people prayed for a return to these properties. During one of the field visits the news came that ISIS destroyed the famous clock tower of a Christian church in Mosul. This shocked people and the IDPs talked about it. They were aware that destruction of religious property was a common practice of ISIS. They were scared about their own age-old churches.

However, since the displacement continued, the IDPs started to look for more permanent solutions. At least two new churches were constructed, especially for the IDP communities in Erbil. One I visited during a youth festival and the other one is the Mart Henna church referred to previously. As the semi-permanent white caravans can visualize the semi-permanent character of their stay as IDPs in the camp in Erbil, the construction of the new religious buildings can point to a more permanent character.

Through the construction of new churches the displaced express that they expect to stay in Erbil. It can be marked as a sign towards the atrocities of *Daesh* that Christianity cannot be removed from Iraqi territory and that the destruction of century-old religious property does not mean the end of Christianity. Within some month at the end of 2017, the largest church of Iraq is expected to open in Erbil. Thousands of people are able to celebrate in this church. With these facilities in Erbil, and many

new churches for the IDP communities, it was, during the field visit, still unclear if the Christians will decide to go back to their homes or create a new future in Erbil.

However, after the Nineveh plains were recaptured from *Daesh* in October, return became possible for the IDPs, but the situation, also of their religious property, was desperate. Pictures of the first mass held in the heavily damaged church of The Immaculate Conception in Qaraqosh spread around the world. The church was used by *Daesh* as fire range. The Syriac Catholic Archbishop of Mosul, Butrus Moshe led the mass and shared that:

*"Today Qaraqosh is free of Daesh, Our role today is to remove all the remnants of Daesh. This includes erasing sedition, separation and conflicts, which victimized us. Political and sectarian strife, separating between one man and another, between ruler and follower, these mentalities must be changed" (Christian Today, 2016).*

*"After two years and three months in exile, I just celebrated the Eucharist in the cathedral of the Immaculate Conception the Islamic State wanted to destroy. But, in my heart it was always there." (Al-Monitor, 2016)*

Pictures of the mass shown an surreal scene. A church building, black and burned, totally damaged and statues of the Holy Mary pulled down. The bishop and the priest stand at the altar. The formulas of the centuries old liturgy are shared. The audience consists of some brave citizens and a majority of armed Iraqi soldiers, most of them are Christians from the Nineveh Protection Unit (NPU).

People were celebrating. *"I can't describe what I'm feeling. This is my land, my church. They used everything against us: they shot at us, they sent car bombs, suicide attackers. Despite all this, we're here."* As one of the visitors shared to a reporter of Al-Monitor (2016).

Although the church is ruined, it still existed. For many of the Christians a very fact to return. The church is seen as a solid ground, still standing and a symbol of victory and survival. For one of the priests, this can convince IDPs to return: *"This church is such a powerful symbol that if we hadn't found it like this, damaged but still standing, I'm not sure residents would have wanted to come back,"* (Al-Monitor, 2016). This priest, and others, see the church as a sign of hope in the future. Through the church a new future is possible. Bishop Butrus Moshe said after the mass: *"The fact that it's still here gives us hope"* (Al-Monitor, 2016).

The examples above, show an interesting development throughout the phases of displacement regarding the churches. From temporal, semi-permanent, permanent to celebrating again in the ruined old church. It especially shows that portrayal at all these different churches is used to create an image of safety and hope. Especially when the ruined churches still are presented as the continuation of life as it was before 2014. The image is created of hope in the future. Narratives shared also aim to confirm and create this perception of hope in the future amongst the displaced.

#### Narratives and symbols of hope

The previous example showed that the church is seen as a symbol of victory, survival and hope. Fascinating is to see how religious symbols are used to attract people back to the Nineveh plains. Photos on the Facebook page 'Christians in Iraq' (Facebook, 2017) show that on various locations crosses are planted. It is fascinating to see that a first act of returning is planting these crosses. The internet page of the magazine Atlantic contains a set of photos about Qaraqosh after the liberation. Striking is how religious symbols are visible. (Atlantic, 2017). Scrolling through the photos many crosses are shown in the town. Firstly, direct after liberation, crosses are shown, fallen from church towers. Later, a photo is shown of a construction team building a cross of several meters. The text

below the photos is: *“Volunteers from the Iraqi town of Qaraqosh build a giant cross on the main road, as they try to return to normal life after ISIS jihadists were expelled in October of 2016”* (Atlantic, 2017). Building religious symbols is a method to show that life is normal again. A Dutch NGO employee, working in Qaraqosh tells the same towards a Dutch reporter. He points to many crosses established on buildings. According to this NGO employee, these crosses are there to express that the situation is calm and life normalized. (Oneworld, 2017). These crosses as symbols of hope are used to portraying the image of hope and trust in the future, actively aiming to change the perceptions of the displaced as they encounter these symbols.

### Political actors and the future

Although previous encounters showed that religious actors are confident about the future and a return, politically the future of the Iraqi Christians is unsure. As Iraqi territory remain contested. Respondents mention that the only option for them is that the international community creates safe zones, protected areas to which they are able to return and reconstruct. According to them, safe zones, protected by the international community, are required since they lost all their trust in Iraqi, Arab and Kurdish authorities.

*“Visiting Qaraqosh from Irbil 40 miles away, it is easy to understand why people displaced from Qaraqosh and in the rest of the Nineveh Plain feel insecure and dubious about returning to their old homes, even where they are still standing. They know that if they do they will be at the mercy of Arab and Kurdish authorities eager to fill the vacuum left by the fall of Isis and wishing to stake new claims to territory and power”* (Independent, 2016).

This reporter from the Independent described the feeling of the Christians. They are dependent on the power struggles between the Iraqi and the Kurdish authorities. Political stability is not to be expected.

However, not all the Christians agree with the option of an own Christian province or the so-called safe zones. A meeting at the EU in Brussel, about the future of Iraq’s Christians, is referred to by the Kurdish news agency Rudaw as ‘controversial’. Several representatives from the Christian communities in Iraq, from the churches and Iraqi political parties were not present: according to them a conference only focusing on the situation of the Christians without taking the rest of Iraq into consideration is not good. They also blame the commission to enforce a new province for Christians only. According to some of the Christians in Iraq, this as a forceful effort and is not in line with their intentions for a position for the Iraqi Christians which is integrated and embedded in the whole of the Iraqi society. (Rudaw, 2017). According to the Swedish MP, Lars Adaktusson the aim of the conference was:

*“I have no other agenda than the one expressed by the representatives of the Chaldean/Syriac/Assyrian people. The purpose of this conference is the return of the people to the Nineveh Plain, and I call upon all Chaldeans/Syriacs/Assyrians to come together to ensure that their people can return home.”* ( Adaktusson, 2017)

However, *‘the one agenda’* expressed by the Iraqi Christians seem not to be clear yet. Options are many, a safe zone, a new province for Christians only, a province for minorities only, or fully integrated into the rest of Iraqi society. The Iraqi Christians themselves are divided upon the best solution.

### Religious actors and return

A reporter from the Dutch Reformatorisch Dagblad, visited Iraqi returnees in Qaraqosh. (Reformatorisch Dagblad, 2017). According to this reporter, the leading actor in the return and reconstruction of the Nineveh plains are the three Iraqi Churches. The Syrian Orthodox, Syrian Catholic and the Chaldean Church together appointed a commission who is in charge of the reconstruction of the Nineveh plains.

Father Georges Jahola is head of this commission. The aim of the commission is that through the reconstruction of the Nineveh plains and the towns Christians will decide to stay in or return to Iraq and return to their homes on the Nineveh plains. The commission expects that they need to rebuild 1200 destroyed or ruined homes. Expenditures for this are expected to be more than 200 million euro. Part of this is already pledged by the international Catholic aid organization Church in Need.

According to church representatives currently (2017), more than half of the number of people that escaped from the Nineveh plains is still residing in Iraq. Around 70 percent announced that they were willing to return. The remainder of the people is still in doubt. According to respondents interviewed in 2016, people would leave after liberation when they were confronted with their ruined properties, little economic opportunities and political instability.

Returnees share different stories with the Dutch reporter. Some say that although they are back in Qaraqosh they prefer to move to Europe. Others do not want to leave the towns in which they were born. One of them says that security is not the reason to move. The Christians currently have their own Christian Unit as part of the Iraqi Nineveh Plain Unit in the Iraqi army. This own army is now able to protect their home grounds. In November 2017 around 1000 families returned to their home villages the Nineveh Plains. The bishop expects that 3000 to 4000 families will return soon. (Reformatorsch Dagblad, 2017)

#### Own thoughts

The sections above showed how especially religious actors are advocating a perception of hope in the future in order to ensure the return of the displaced Christians still remaining in Erbil and other towns. Although these first signs of return and reconstruction can be hopeful, some concerns still exist, according to me. Even if the Christians are willing to return, and decide upon return, external actors may strongly influence return in a negative way. The following concerns are important to consider.

First, the political situation in Iraq remains highly unstable. The referendum of the Kurdish in September 2017 in order to gain an autonomous region led to clashes between the Kurdish and the Iraqi army. They clashed around the Christian town of Teleskof. 400 Christians who already had returned home, had to flee again. Developments as this are expected to strongly influence the decision of other displaced people. Safety has to be guaranteed. (Selbherr, 2017)

Second, already during the fieldwork in 2016 representatives from NGOs and the Christian communities expected the highest number of migration after the first people returned to their homes. They argued that after returnees saw the devastation, they would try to rebuild their lives, but eventually were expected to migrate.

Third, of influence will be the support of the international community, directly or through humanitarian organizations. The Christian communities put their trust in Trump and his foreign policy. A statement was recently done by the American vice-president Pence likely increased this trust. The White House pledged to cut the funding towards the United Nations, in order to fund the Christians in Iraq directly:

*“Our fellow Christians and all who are persecuted in the Middle East should not have to rely on multinational institutions when America can help them directly. And tonight, it is my privilege to announce that President Trump has ordered the State Department to stop funding ineffective relief efforts at the United Nations. And from this day forward, America will provide support directly to persecuted communities through USAID.” (Pence, 2017).*

The USA also decided to arm and fund the Christian militias in Iraq, especially the NPU. If they will fulfill this pledge, this will change the situation. Probably positive, with an NPU capable of protecting their communities, or negative, when other actors like Iraqi and Kurdish militias and political actors will react negatively on this American pledge. Also the Christians in Iraq responded differently to the idea of the USA. The Chaldean Church responded that such pledges only strengthen the enmity of the Islam towards the Christians in the region and this will isolate the Christians even further. (Christianity Today, 2017).

These three concerns stress the still volatile and unstable situation in Iraq. Perceptions are likely to keep changing. Encounters with new violence, as in the example of Teleskof, are expected to have a strong negative impact on the perceptions of the Christian community about the return. At the other hand, narratives used by the USA, talking about fellow Christians who will get direct support, and pledges to fund their NPU and to directly support their communities, are expected to have a positive changing impact on the perceptions of the displaced community.

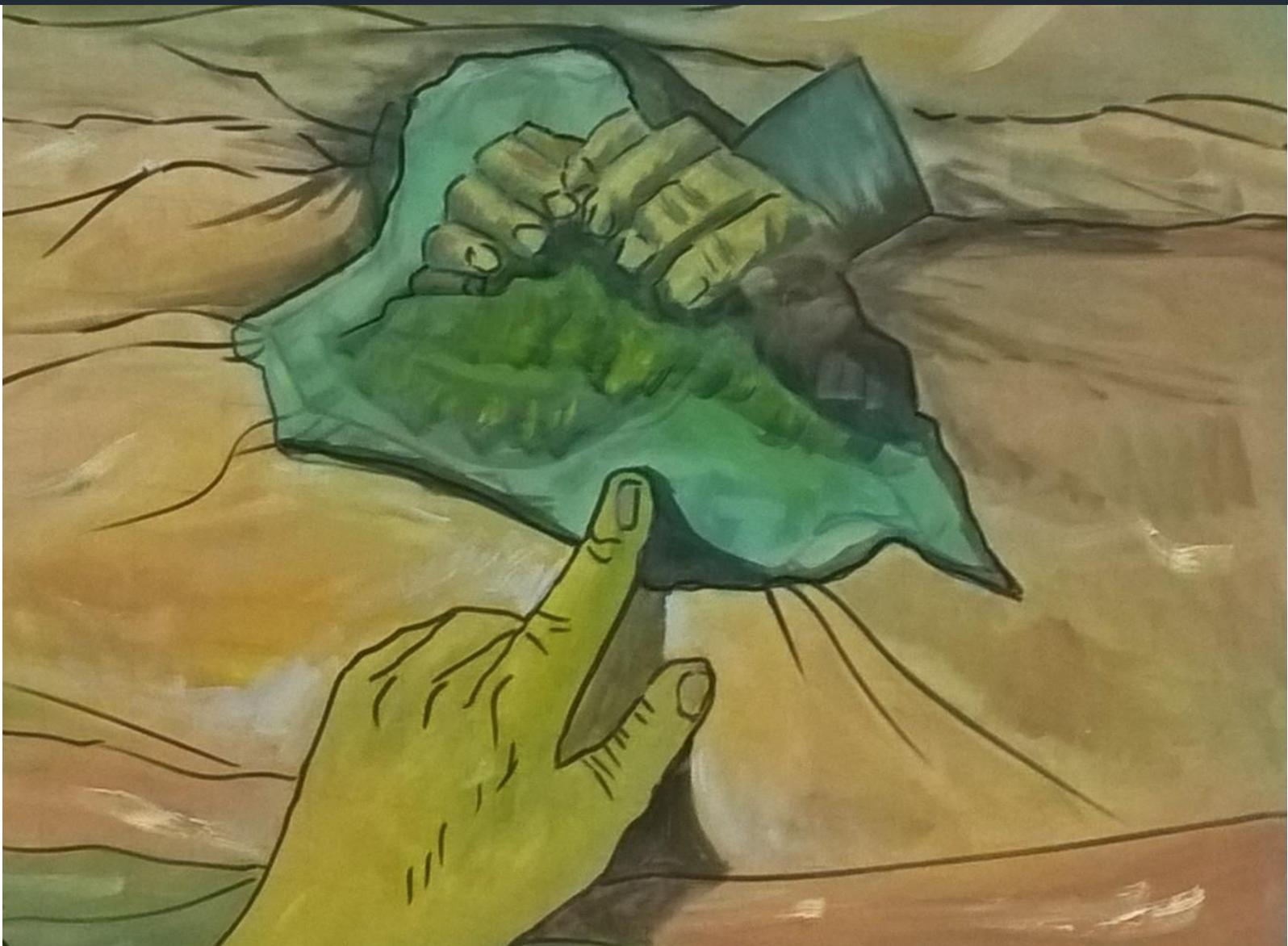
### Conclusion

The future is unknown, however, based on the findings some expectations about the future can be drawn. First of all, religion and religious property are of great importance to the Christians. Encounters showed that a return to their religious grounds can be a stimulant to return. Additionally, as the church had a leading position in the conflict, flight and during the displacement, again they take on a leading position in the return phase. The church likely can act as a binding factor and as a leading actor which can move people to return.

Secondly, security remains a large obstacle. Encounters with increased violence in the past and the atrocities of *Daesh* caused fear and uncertainty. An establishment of an NPU can solve this, however, it can be questioned if an NPU is able to safeguard the community, also in regard to the political changes in the region and globally.



| Discussion | Conclusion |  
| Recommendations |



## 8. Discussion

### 8.1. Introduction

In the previous chapter several encounters between different actors were sketched, in order to provide a picture of especially the lifeworld of the Christian IDPs in Erbil during the various stages of the displacement crisis, with the different actors involved. Earlier in this research, the theories of Long were described about the agency of actors, the discourses they create and how during encounters, these different lifeworlds can clash. Additionally, insights were provided in the role of religiosity in coping with traumatic experiences and conflict and how humanitarian organization operate in religious humanitarian contexts. In this chapter, the findings will be analyzed in relation to the existing theories, and remarks are made on the feasibility of the theory and conceptual framework for this research. Due to the diversity and abundance of results, this chapter is unable to provide a thorough analysis of every detail of the findings. It provides an in-depth analysis of a selection, which according to me, deals with the major findings of this research.

This chapter is structured according to the three sub-themes presented in the result chapter. The first paragraph discusses the actors observed during the IDP crisis, the second paragraph analyses the actor encounters, while the fourth paragraph focuses on the future of the different actors. In the fifth paragraph, some additional remarks are made on how the findings fit with the expectations I had before. Paragraph 6 mention some limitations, while the last paragraph presents some recommendations for further research.

### 8.2. Key actors in the Iraqi displacement crisis

The first question in this research aims to discern the key actors during the IDP crisis in Erbil in Kurdish Iraq. This paragraph first analyses why an actor approach worked out in this research. Second, it explores how to cope with changing actors . Thirdly, this paragraph discusses the process of discerning actors.

#### Why an actor approach

In this research, the actor approach is used, as it is explained by Norman Long (2001). According to Long, especially an actor approach focuses not on the context and surrounding, as passive changed realities, but on active actors, which through their acts *“change the contours and details of the social landscape”*. (Long, 2001, p.1). Through regarding actors as agents of change, looking to them *“offers valuable insights into the processes of social construction and reconstruction. It also enables one to conceptualize how small-scale interactional settings or locales interlock with wider frameworks, resource fields and networks of relations.”* (Long, 2001, p.49).

Through the actors defined for this research, the process of social construction and transformation of actors and their perception is observed. An option also was to focus, instead of on actors, more on the large picture of a humanitarian scene through analyzing processes or by using a system approach, analyzing the scene as a coherent whole. However, the actor approach worked out well, because in the chaotic humanitarian landscape as presented in this research, focusing on actors is a useful method to create a structured overview of the chaotic field. Besides, using an actor approach, looking to those actors that actively change the landscape, gives insights into the processes that shape actors. Therefore an actor-oriented approach is valuable in order to answer the questions how actor encounters shape lifeworlds.

#### Changing roles of actors

In the actor overview, the different actors are presented as different separate actors. However, in the encounters observed, actors changed and had different roles and representations in encounters with

other actors over time. The following example clarify this. One of the respondents I interviewed and met several times, had more roles. First, he was an IDP, displaced from Qaraqosh, as such he identified himself with the rest of the IDP community. Secondly, he also was a priest, acting as a religious actor and operating in different religious activities, and providing spiritual support to his community. Thirdly, he also was in charge of an IDP camp and involved in coordinating food distributions, and other humanitarian activities. He negotiated with humanitarian donors, NGOs, and other relevant actors. I encountered this man during his humanitarian role. I interviewed him in his office while managing the affairs of the IDP camp and the displaced were lined up in front of his office for some administration. Although he was dressed as a priest, a religious actor, the setting and the way in which this was portrayed was humanitarian, the narratives used were humanitarian, talking about the aid statistics, food and health programs and the number of people in different camps. Later I met this same priest during the opening ceremony of the new church, in which he had a leading role. At this occasion, he participated in the religious activities, met with the representatives from French churches and assisted the bishop. The narratives and setting were religious. So, at the different occasions, the interactions and the representation of this actor and the setting were totally different. Observed as manager of the IDP camp the humanitarian aspects were manifested, observed as a religious leader during a ceremony, the religious aspects were manifested.

This increases the complexity of an actor approach, as that one should be aware that an actor perceived to have a particular role, a particular mindset, and particular agenda at a particular place can have a totally different role when observed at another place. Awareness of the particular role an actor is in, is important, but also to be aware that his role can be shaped by encounters with this actor in another role. His actions and interventions are likely to be a result of these multiple actor roles and different actor encounters.

#### Discerning actors

When an actor approach is adopted, a question is who can be regarded as an actor, and how actors are defined. In this research, an actor is regarded as a coherent body who is able to act and through their acts influence the setting and other actors. However, this proved to be a difficult and ambiguous process. The actors were discerned based on how I observed them in the field based on their relevance. In some occasions discerning a particular group as an actor was difficult, and could be contested. Especially for the following actors.

IDPs were regarded as an actor group referred to as the IDPs or the displaced. However, referring to IDP as one single actor, as it is done by humanitarian and media actors, can deprive the IDPs of their diverse character, as it consists of different people which can be male or female, adults, children, educated, jobless or traumatized, and other characteristics can be mentioned. Second, religious institutions and church leaders were be regarded as homogeneous categories. However, church leaders presented as one actor does not take into consideration this contradicting opinions church leaders from different denominations can have. Therefore, in the presentations of the actor encounters, I tried to present nuances of the actors. This problem, for example, was visible in the occasion that church leaders presented their own agenda's during their visit to Obama and in the example that different churches were operating more or less separately in Iraq, and have different ideas regarding the future of Christianity in Iraq.

In the actor overview, God was mentioned as an actor. It is a choice I made, but a choice that can be contested. God as an actor cannot be proven or he cannot be encountered in reality on the ground. This makes it difficult to regard God as an actor from an academic point of view. However, in the accounts of the IDPs and the church leaders God was continuously referred to. Since God was a real actor for the respondents and referred to by them, I decided to regard God as a separate actor. As a

researcher, for me, it was important to define the actors, as they were found and presented to me in the field, and not to base them on my assumptions.

### 8.3. Encounters at the Interface

This section discusses the encounters, as presented in the results, in relation to existing theory. In this discussion, I start with discussing observed encounters in relation to Long, second remarks are made on violent encounters. In the third section, the observation is discussed why perceptions can be difficult to change. Section four, looks to hierarchy between actors, which is followed by an analysis of the role of time and an discussion on simultaneous encounters with opposite effects. The last sections discuss religious aspects of observed encounters.

#### Encounters observed in relation to Long

Long described encounters at the interface as the critical point where actors meet, where an intersection takes place between different lifeworlds and where social discontinuities occur based upon discrepancies in values, interests, knowledge, and power. (Long, 2001). Several of the observed encounters showed this intersection of different conflicting lifeworlds. One example of this was the IDP camp leader who compared aid campaigns of Christian NGOs to Muslims, "*Aid organizations are like the Muslim. They enforce you to do their ideas. We have to fit their requirements and strategies. Otherwise, we are in trouble*". This NGO leader did not feel understood by aid organizations, who with their best intentions, fail to respond to their needs properly. Another example of conflicting lifeworlds, which also relates to Autesserre's (2014) concept of valuing expert knowledge to local knowledge, is the mentioned conflict between the donor NGO and the local NGO, which almost literally said that the theoretical plans were created at headquarters, while the field was only good enough for just passively rolling out the plans.

#### Encounters with violent actors

Long describes the importance of analyzing actors in relation to their context and the past that shaped them since this enables a better understanding of the actors. This proved to be especially important for understanding the Christian IDPs and their perception of the violence they encountered. What I as researcher heard, through western media and through NGOs working in Iraq, was that what happened to the Christian was unique and never happened before. Although the Christians confirmed that what happened to them was devastating and was referred to by them as genocide, many of them presented the terror of *Daesh* as an escalated continuation of what was normal to them. They showed it through the book with the numbers of Christian that were martyred before *Daesh* entered the scene.

More Christians died from 2003 to 2014 than through encounters with *Daesh*. I was surprised to hear that from the community from the Nineveh plains only a few people were killed. Respondents only referred to the one example of the bombing which happened in the morning before their flight. This confirmed that the case of the IDPs in Iraq and the terror of *Daesh* should be analyzed in the context of the violence that occurred before 2014 and not only be reduced to the crisis with *Daesh*.

The case of the Christian communities in Iraq, according to me, and shown by this study, is too often deprived of its context and portrayed as a unique occasion. Likely because the *Daesh* crisis is a 'sexy' case which can appeal to the compassion of people. Awareness of the context and history in which the crisis occurred, is important to understand the Christians in their circumstances today. Since, when this is not done properly, a malversation of the real occurs (Baudrillard, 1995).

#### Stubborn perceptions

According to Long, through encounters perceptions of actors are shaped. However, findings showed that in several encounters, actors' perceptions did not change, or the change occurred at a low pace

or change even was invisible. It is difficult to discern why. However, it seemed that actors in some situations opt to stick to the perception they had before encounters and do not adapt their perceptions based on the new information that was provided. How difficult it is to change perceptions was visible in the example that some NGOs, in the eyes of local leaders, presented the Iraqi IDP crisis as a classic humanitarian crisis in which food distributions and basic relief were most required. Which did not respond to the perception of the leaders who mentioned that as Iraqi, they were not hungry Africans in need of food. Perceptions clashed.

Another example is the American ABC News which presented the situation in Erbil as extremely dangerous. This link to an existing perception people have about the situation in Iraq, however, this video was perceived by the Iraqi population and people who knew the context as ridiculous, contrary to reality. This case of the ABC video is a clear example of the theory described in chapter 5, about how ways of portrayal influence perceptions. Especially striking were the narratives and vocabulary used which normally refers to IDPs, as people who sacrifice their lives. In this case, this vocabulary of sacrifice was used for those who contributed to the aid campaign through funding.

Therefore, campaigns as such, reinforce existing distorted perceptions, amongst actors but also at a larger audience. Findings presented are examples of what Da Silva Gama regards as cases in which the agency is taken from the people and they are modified into an appropriate function for the NGO, the broadcasting company or the aid campaign. (Da Silva Gama, 2013)

I realized in this study that perceptions are difficult to change. This can also be part of unwillingness to have an open honest encounter with other actors. A critical review of common practices and perceptions amongst actors is not usual. Therefore I opt for an active approach from actors to review existing perceptions frequently. Passivity amongst actors, especially NGO actors is visible in the example of how the donor NGO approach their field. They stated that at their headquarters programs are developed, and only rolled out in the field. This approach assumes that at the local level little relevant knowledge about humanitarian issues is present. However, in Iraq, I encountered an IDP population who was well educated, knowledgeable and capable of developing programs, establishing local NGOs and negotiate with any actor both locally and international.

A perception of dependent recipients, with little to no agency, is difficult to change. NGOs formally value local ownership and local integration of their programs, however, this is not how it is perceived by recipients, local NGOs, and other local actors. Therefore, in some occasions, actor encounters do not lead directly to change because of dominant perceptions that already existed before the encounter. Delay in my research occurred because this donor NGO seemed to fear a critical review of an outsider of their programs. This links to notions of Autesserre (2014) where she addressed the culture at donors and international NGOs in which criticism is not accepted and frequently leads to dismissal of critical employees.

#### Hierarchy between actors

The previous examples also show that hierarchy often is influential. I observe that hierarchy can be critical to determine if an actor is likely to adapt their perception and position. Especially actors in a hierarchical position are less willing to proactively change their ideas, only through pressure and continuous raising of awareness about their perception, they can decide to change. This occurred during the donor visit to the local NGO, in which the hierarchy was visible in the way the headquarter managers approached the local NGO and their employees and the atmosphere (according to me as an observer) changed to a more tense environment.

Hierarchy often is common in environments in which crises take place, therefore it is something actors should be aware of in their encounters. Also, church leaders used their position. In their encounters with IDPs, they were perceived as authorities, which was visible in how they IDPs approached them. So, in encounters hierarchy should be considered as an influential factor if and to what extent actors change their perceptions.

#### The role of time in the shaping of perceptions

Time proved to be an important factor for how and to what extent encounters had an impact on actors. Especially around the confrontations with violence, which led to various reactions amongst the IDPs over time. Observations show that before the rise of *Daesh* the Christian communities already were used to violence. Although, due to increased encounters with violence their perception changed. Their feeling of security decreased, which led to large numbers of Christians leaving Iraq. The encounters with *Daesh* changed their lifeworld dramatically and rapidly. The encounter with *Daesh* led to fear and trauma's and caused them to flee. Eventually, it led to a radical change in their lifeworld. Within 48 hours some of them changed from wealthy Iraqi citizens to displaced people without belongings. Over time, the fearful encounters experienced with *Daesh* before lost their impact among the IDPs. After some months they were able to understand and cope with the traumatic encounters.

Therefore, the shaping impact of actor encounters does not only take place during the encounter but also has its impact when the encounter is already over and an actor looks back to an encounter. Encounters, therefore, can still shape actor's lifeworld and perceptions even when the actual encounter already is passed. Long does not refer to time as an important element in understanding the effect of actor encounters. I think that looking at a long and short-term shaping impact of actor encounters can be interesting since time is regarded to be an influential aspect.

#### Simultaneous encounters with opposite effects

Observed encounters also show that encounters can take place more or less simultaneously, but with a different contrasting impact. For example, in the encounters between the Christian community and *Daesh*, during the flight and displacement, which led to fear, also encounters occurred between them and religious leaders.

Simultaneously, the encounter with *Daesh* caused fear, while encounters with the religious leaders lead to relief and spiritual support. Respondents also referred to an encounter with God during their flight, as a supportive encounter. Therefore, encounters in a humanitarian context often are less planned and do occur simultaneously, with contradicting effects. This shows that encounters do not take place very logically, but occur in a chaotic unstructured way.

#### Power of religion as shaping actor

The findings show that religiosity is one of the strongest aspects of the life of the IDPs. Their lives are organized around churches, religious leaders and God in each period observed. These encounters with religious actors and God seems to be influential in shaping their perception, especially in re-shaping their traumatized and fearful minds. This links to the theory presented that after traumatic events, religion is one of the strongest coping mechanisms of people in order to cope with their negative experiences. (Levav, 2008).

The IDP community is a clear example of the findings of Levav (2008) that especially communities and individuals that are religiously active are better able to cope with their trauma's. This is for example visible in the example of the woman who started doubting God, but due to their religious background, was able to perceive God again as an actor who saved her life. Traumatic events, in the case of Iraq, seems to have a positive effect on the religious activities of the IDPs, as shown in the increased church

visits, and participation in activities of the church. Visits to houses of the IDPs, offices, and churches also confirm the role of religious symbols as encouraging after traumatic events.

The theory of McIntosh (1995) that extremely devastating traumatic events can lead to essential doubts was visible amongst the IDPs. Due to their well-developed belief system, however, in which traumatic experiences were already theoretically incorporated, they were able to overcome their doubts. The hundreds of years in which the belief system of the Iraqi Christians developed, conflict, violence, traumatic experiences always have been part of it. Although the current crisis with IDP was and is extremely devastating, even to the point that Christianity is likely to extinct in Iraq, the account of trauma's present in their histories, prepared them to be able to adjust to the situation. A shared history of violence as community leading to a better coping mechanism for traumatic events also proves to be true for the Christian community in Iraq.

In order to understand religiosity in humanitarian settings, religious places play an extremely important role. Low (1992), Bevan (2016) describe the connection between people and places in general. Applying this attachment to places in humanitarian areas the results from Iraqi showed that this attachment increases after conflicts and related traumatic events. Being torn away from religious places meant that partly their identity was broken. As Bevan argued that building new buildings can be an act of resistance, this is how the building of new churches in Ankawah can be perceived.

As Spencer (2013) analyzed that religious buildings are safe havens during conflicts, this was true in Iraqi. In every stage of the crisis, the church (as a building) was a crucial actor. Before the crisis as a place in which they celebrated their faith and celebrated with their community. During the conflict as a meeting point and as a point of reference if the situation was safe since when the guards fled from the church, the situation was perceived to be really dangerous. During displacement, the church was the place where most activities were organized and around which the IDP camps were built.

The various church buildings during each phase of the conflict can be seen as a visualization of how they perceived their circumstances. From the abandoned church, from which they fled, to finding shelter around churches. During the time of displacement, they first built tents as functioning as churches, which were replaced for semi-permanent caravans. Later they constructed large new permanent churches. The opening ceremony I participated in showed a discourse of hope, permanency, pointing towards a future for them in the country.

## Religion in humanitarian practices

### *Value of local NGOs*

In Iraq, a majority of the humanitarian work seems to be done by local NGOs, which are partnering with larger national or international NGOs. Most of the NGOs were grassroots NGOs and were established after the displacement. All of these grassroots NGOs were depending on funding from INGOs, governments and other actors. In order to acquire funds, they had to write proposals, log frames, aims, inputs, outputs and evaluation for each of the programs they were working on. This hampered them. However, their lack of professional knowledge and experience is largely compensated by their local knowledge. Their value is their local network, they know whom to reach and their knowledge of the needs of their own community members.

The value of local NGOs was shown in the example in which IDPs themselves, through their existing networks, were able to construct apartments for the IDPs in the shopping center in Erbil. Where INGOs kept focussing on the camps, assisting camps with food, education, and vocational training, the shopping-mall example was different. They mainly got support directly from a French church and minor attention came from NGOs. It shows the great role local actors can take, due to their local network.

### *Religiosity and humanitarian aid*

Religion and humanitarian aid and religious and humanitarian discourses are strongly intertwined. Papouras (2016) mentioned that all humanitarian work originally is rooted in Christian faith. This was the perception of the church and mainly local NGO representatives. They referred to Jesus as a humanitarian and their faith as a key motivation for them. In the conversations with local NGOs, such a religious discourse was present, also in how they looked to humanitarian practices. In recent decades and especially in the western world, humanitarianism is regarded as secular, especially with the humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence. However, with many humanitarian aid operations going on in areas where religion is important, and with many NGOs having a religious background, some observations and thoughts on these relationships will be discussed further.

### *FBOs*

Firstly it is important to look at the role of FBOs in the context of Iraq. During my field visits, I realized that a large part of the NGOs working in Iraq are FBOs. In Iraq, most encounters I had were with small FBOs working especially with the Christian IDPs, however, in one of the camps, I saw the large logos of Samaritan's Purse and Worldvision, two American FBOs. The concerns raised by Fiddian-Qasbiyeh (2011) that these FBOs mainly focus on fellow Christians is to some extent the case in Iraq. Especially the local NGOs, which were rooted in the Christian IDP community, mainly focused on their Christian fellow IDPs. Although in some cases a small number of Yezidi's and Muslims were residing in some of the camps led by Christians. Another example was the case of a Dutch broadcasting company targeting only Christians in Iraq. Additionally, FBOs and Christian newspapers tended to focus on the situation of Christians and neglected the more desperate circumstances of Yezidi and Muslim minority.

Beneficial for FBOs are their often already present relationships with the community they work in. The local NGO I worked with in Iraq, already was present in the country before 2003 and knew the different churches and their leaders before the *Daesh* crisis. To respond to the needs, they easily could use their existing network to provide aid through. Additionally, this local NGO was connected to an international NGO in the Netherlands which was funded through faith communities throughout the world. Therefore they had enough funding and were not bound by donor regulations.

The danger of some FBOs and other religious actors is that they are likely to perceive all violence towards Christian minorities as religiously inspired violence, while neglecting e.g. political and social root causes for violence.

### *Churches as humanitarian actors*

Historically, churches can be seen as core humanitarian actors, as their function is to care for spiritual and physical needs of people. However, especially in western secularised welfare states, this role of the churches decreased. In many occasions, NGOs took over this role of churches, in order to provide aid. Little research results and literature could be found on the role of churches (and other similar religious institutes). With this western mindset, I did not expect such a large role for churches.

To my surprise, the humanitarian scene in Erbil was centered around churches. Physically, since several camps were located on the compounds of churches. But also organisationally, churches and their priests, monks, and nuns were in charges of camps, aid programs, local NGOs and several activities. For most of the respondents, this was normal. As a church, they were used to providing aid and perceived it as part of their duty as a church. Many church leaders referred to previous occasions in which churches provided aid. This confirms the analysis of Prodromou and Symeonides (2016) that especially these churches living in violent context are more capable of executing their humanitarian task. As Papouras (2016) argued that especially for Orthodox churches in a violent context, caring for

those who hunger and thirst, the displaced and the refugees, is central to their theology and daily practices. This was exactly what was observed in Iraq.

Secondly, churches are more effective as humanitarian actors because they are part of a worldwide network of churches. Some parishes in Iraq belonged to the Roman Catholic Church, and therefore had access to aid from other Roman Catholic parishes or Catholic organizations. Most of the various churches in Iraq, as the Chaldean Church, Syrian Catholic Church, Syrian Orthodox Church and Ancient Church of the East have large congregations in the United States, Canada, New Zealand, Australia and Europe. The connections with these churches are strong, as all Iraqis I talked to, had family members in these communities across the globe. Additionally, the Iraqi situation was an 'attractive' crisis for other Christians. Fellow Christians attacked by a Muslim terrorist, displaced and in need, caused many Christians to provide financial and physical aid to their Iraqi brothers and sisters.

Thirdly, churches know their people and their needs. No, or few basic assessments were needed since the church leaders are part of the community. The church leaders already had their data about their members before the displacement. They knew who belonged to which family, who were disabled, who needed health care. With these statistics and overviews, they exactly knew what was needed.

When I asked how they knew their needs, the response was, how do we not know their needs? Although the churches know the needs, they did need assistance in coping with the large displacement. One of the expat NGO leaders shared that initially he had to encourage the church leaders to do something and had to guide them since the situation and needs were overwhelming.

These observations are specific for Iraq and if situations around other conflict and displacement crisis are similar and if churches and religious organizations are having and taking the same role there, is unclear. However, based on this information, I would encourage more research focussing on the role of religious communities and churches in aid provision.

#### 8.4. Transforming lifeworlds and return of the displaced

This section discusses the future encounters, as presented in the results, in relation to existing theory. It first discusses how previous encounters shape the perceptions about the future. Second, it elaborates about if future expectations (or encounters that can take place in the future) shape lifeworlds today. Finally, also this section deals with how religion shapes future encounters.

##### Future shaped by previous encounters

Encounters shape actors and influence the decisions people make for the future. Especially devastating previous encounters strongly shape the expectations for the future, as is shown amongst the Christian IDPs. Not only the encounter with *Daesh* shaped them, but especially the increased violence before *Daesh*, with the 1107 Christians killed since 2003 and 114 religious places attacked. The massive displacement due to *Daesh* 'only' was perceived as a continuation of existing practices. If things do not change for the good, the young generation mentions that "*it is over*" (Interview 7) and it is difficult for them to see a future for them in Iraq, especially due to the decades of marginalization and increase in violence. The large number of Christians that immigrated proof that this opinion is widely shared.

For others, encounters with religion and God as saving actor, encouraged them to stay and return. The fact that they survived the displacement and their hometowns are freed was a motivation for return. As God and the church were perceived to be trustworthy in the past, they are expected to care for them in the future. Also, the role of NGOs, who supported them during the displacement is shaping their decisions for the future. As NGOs supplied them in the past and pledged to do in the near future, is likely to be influencing the decision to return to their homes. Especially FBOs as the international NGO Church in Need and the local NGO I participated with during my fieldwork, were regarded as a

trustworthy partners during the displacement. Encounters between these NGOs and the IDPs were beneficial in order gain trust during the displacement. Their efforts to smoothen a return to the Nineveh plains through financial support for reconstruction is likely to be influential for the decision to return.

#### Future expected encounters shaping perception today

As encounters in the past shapes actor perceptions today, a hypothetical analysis, based on this study is that also future expected (imagined) encounters shape actors today. So, imagined future encounters can shape actors like real encounters do and influence their decisions today. For example, expected encounters with armed forces or militia's in the future, caused the Christians to establish the NPU. This decision is also based on previous encounters with violent actors, but not less influenced by expected future encounters. As to my knowledge, no research has been done to imagined encounters and how they shape actors, but according to me, this would be an interesting exercise. Also because an imagined, constructed reality of actors is not only based on what actually happened but also on what actors imagine.

#### The role of religion in future encounters

Throughout the encounters in each period, religion showed its relevance for the majority of the actors present. This is also the case for the future. Awareness of the importance of religion is important for future interventions in order to understand the community. What I observed was that on return people work together and spent money to repair or rebuild churches and erect crosses as the symbol of victory and hope. This, in a sense, can be seen as 'a portrayal of hope', to influence the perception of the IDPs in order to encourage them to return.

### 8.5. Expectations compared to the findings and key lessons

In this section, some general remarks are presented to what extent the findings confirmed my expectations.

#### Role of religious actors

Before I traveled to Iraq I was aware that I was going to meet religious actors, Christian IDPs, and their leaders. I knew that churches were doing a lot in order to provide assistance to their people. However, I did not expect such a key role for the church as a humanitarian actor.

I was surprised by the fact that religious leaders were in charge of IDP camps, negotiated with local and international donors, established NGOs themselves, and in between also continued providing spiritual support. I cannot compare this to the role of religious institutions in other humanitarian crises, but definitely religious actors cannot be neglected in the context of Iraq. This case showed that in Iraq, church-related structures were already present to provide assistance. Working through this churches by using it as an existing structure to provide humanitarian assistance can be efficient in order to provide support in a timely manner. Especially compared to standard humanitarian practices to create a structure as an NGO, through needs assessments, recruiting personnel, arranging logistics and buying or renting equipment. The international NGOs and local NGOs who worked through the churches in Iraq, were perceived to be efficient since their needs assessments were done by the church and they were able to use existing networks.

#### Role of religious leaders

Identifying key influential actors in a humanitarian setting is important. Since such key actors are able to have an influence on many other actors. In Iraq, these were the religious leaders. They were the only actors with access to any other actor. Religious leaders were in charge of IDP camps and knew all the IDPs personally. Through their status as a church leader, they were connected to other church

leaders and international religious actors, which provided them with a large international network. Also, because of their position they had political influence on the local and international level. Therefore, identifying, e.g. as an NGO, who the most influential key actors are, can enlarge the network and eventually the impact of one's work.

#### Power of existing perceptions

I expected existing perceptions to be very important and influential and this was indeed confirmed by the findings. I also had my own perceptions of Erbil, which were influenced by the common ideas of a city in a country torn apart by wars and terrorism, close to the frontline, with thousands of IDPs in the town and surrounding area. However, I landed in a city with a relatively safe and calm environment. In front of the IDP camps, good Lebanese restaurants were located, shisha bars seemed to be flourishing and Iraqis were doing their exercises on the sports fields. Life seemed to be normal.

This perception is totally opposite of what media and aid campaigns present. I realized that, as this study shows, that reality always is constructed through perceptions, which confirms the analyses of Long.

#### Complexity of observing encounters in a humanitarian crisis

Analysing actor encounters can work out very well if during the encounters actors are able to be observed and analyzed in an organized way. However, often encounters in humanitarian settings take place unorganized, and in a chaotic and complex setting. The 'critical point where actors meet and different lifeworlds meet' (Long, 2001) proved to be not easy to determine. I expected encounters to be more clear occasions. This was also due to the fact that many of the encounters described were based on secondary data, gathered through stories from the respondents. Therefore, the analysis of encounters in a humanitarian setting is more difficult compared to analyzing actor encounters in a development setting, due to the fact that security hampers access to the real encounters. Using the framework of Long in a humanitarian setting, therefore, should incorporate awareness of this and ways to mitigate this.

#### Actor fluidity

Previous to the fieldwork I expected actors to be separate demarcated entities, however, the findings show that actors are fluid entities, which makes actor-oriented approach and actor encounter analyses more complex than expected. The fact that one actor at different occasions can be IDP, church leader, NGO leader makes the actor analysis complex, as an actor has different motivations and aims, depending on his or her role.

Also, within a group I marked as an actor, differences were visible. For example, the church as a religious actor at first-hand sounds logical. However, in an actor analysis it shows that within the church as a broader concept, a variety of opinions are visible which lead to different responses. Therefore, doing an actor analysis and using an actor-oriented approach should beforehand be aware how complex actors are formed and cannot be regarded as single entities.

## 8.6. Limitations

In the methodology chapter, I mentioned some methodological limitations of this research. Other limitations identified in the course of this research are presented below.

#### Christian bias

This study focussed on the Christian IDPs. This can lead to a biased view on the IDP crisis. This study does not show how other groups of IDPs look to the Christian IDPs. Ankawah was the Christian area in Erbil, but the majority of the town was Muslim. I do not know how they perceived the many Christian

IDPs in their area, as I was not able to talk to representatives of non-Christian groups or the local host population representatives. So, this study in some mentioned encounters, lack the perception of the non-Christian IDPs, as the Yezidi or Muslim IDPs, which is expected to be different.

#### Secondary data

A second limitation, also in relation to the theoretical framework of Long, is that many of the encounters described were not observed by me but based on recollections and data from the respondents. Especially in a humanitarian conflict, it is difficult and impossible to observe critical encounters when they take place. Therefore secondary data, shared by respondents or through other channels is relatively important.

Triangulation of data, therefore, is more important for analyzing actor encounters in a humanitarian setting. The limited time in the field and no access to other IDP communities and other religious communities made it more or less impossible to check findings with the stories of others. In some occasions, I searched on the internet for the facts to confirm what respondents shared, as the displacement crisis is relatively well documented through reports and articles on the internet. Since I did not have access to my respondents after I returned from the field, it was difficult to ask clarifying questions about what they shared before.

### 8.7. Recommendations for further research

This study is regarded as an initial attempt to adopt the framework of Long in a complex humanitarian setting to study the role of religion during actor encounters in humanitarian crises. This research presents some useful explorations into this direction. Further research is however encouraged.

The following themes are interesting for more research.

1. The role of religion as a coping mechanism for dealing with traumatic experiences, in particular, those related to (violent) conflict. This is largely a neglected field of study and according to me is increasingly relevant in today's world in which religion is playing a role in conflicts.
2. More extensive research on alternative methods through which humanitarian aid is provided is to be encouraged. In particular, those focusing on methods which connect to existing structures in society, as it is done through the church in the context of Iraq. It would be interesting to analyze how religious communities and their institutions take on humanitarian roles in other crisis areas.
3. This research is an initial approach to use the framework of Norman Long in the context of a complex humanitarian setting to study the role of religion during actor encounters in humanitarian crises. This study showed that this is a valuable and useful approach, however, a better development and adaptation of the framework to a humanitarian context and the role of religion in the transformation of lifeworlds will be beneficial.

## 9. Conclusion

### 9.1. Introduction

This study analyzed the encounters between key actors during the IDP crisis in Kurdish Iraq and analyzed how these actor encounters shaped the lifeworlds and perceptions of the actors.

The following sections provide an answer to the three sub-research questions formulated in order to answer the main research question of this study: *How do encounters between actors in the Iraqi (displacement) crisis shape (and re-shape) the responses and strategies by Christian displaced communities in Kurdish Iraq.*

### 9.2. Key actors and interventions

The first sub-question is: *what are the key actors in the Iraqi displacement crisis and what are their main actions and interventions?*

#### Key actors

This study identified, based on fieldwork visits, the following actors to be key players in the Iraqi displacement crisis: IDPs; Christian Iraqi Communities; Religious Institutions; Church Leaders; God; Local NGOs; International NGOs; *Daesh*; Militia and Peshmerga; Politics; Media. This research analysis encounters between these actors in four periods: 1) Pre-flight; 2) Conflict and Flight; 3) Displacement; 4) Return.

#### Key interventions

In the Pre-flight period, encounters mainly took place between the Christian communities, religious institutions, church leaders and political actors. The main actions observed were marginalization and increased violence from political and violent actors towards the Christian communities, church leaders, and religious institutions. Christian communities responded to this by relocating within Iraq or migration outside of Iraq.

In the Conflict and Flight period, encounters mainly took place between Christian communities, religious institutions, church leaders, *Daesh* and the Peshmerga. The main action observed was the invasion of *Daesh* of the Christian communities caused their flight, partly due to the retreat of the Peshmerga. The main intervention in response to that was by religious institutions and their leaders through the coordination of the flight.

In the Displacement period, described encounters mainly took place between the Christian IDPs, Religious Institutions, Church leaders and local and international NGOs, political and media actors. Main interventions observed were humanitarian support from local and international NGOs towards the IDPs. Religious actors acted through providing both religious and humanitarian support and acted as brokers between the displaced and all other actors. Actions from media were observed through their coverage of the displacement crisis.

In the Return period, the major encounters take place between the IDPs and religious institutions and church leaders, militia and NGOs. Militias intervened through providing and ensuring safety and security towards the Christian communities. Religious actors and churches acted through the coordination of the return, while NGOs provided support for return and reconstruction. IDP communities acted through their return.

### 9.3. Encounters

The second sub-questions is: *How are the lifeworlds of the displaced Iraqi Christian community shaped and re-shaped by encounters at the interface by interacting with powerful actors during the conflict, flight and in displacement?*

The findings show that the perception of the IDPs about their fellow Iraqi Muslims changed over time. Due to their encounters by non-Christian population groups characterized by increased violence, betrayal by individual Muslims in their neighborhood and encounters with violent actors such as *Daesh* changed the perception of many Christian IDPs which led to an increase in the number of Christians leaving Iraq.

Findings also showed that religious actors, throughout each phase of the encounters, were important for IDPs and also for humanitarian actors. Churches and their priest can be regarded to be the most stable actors in an unstable changing environment. Encounters with God were more ambiguous and prone to change due to the traumatic events. However, eventually, compared to the pre-conflict period, the religiosity of the IDPs increased, the perception of God changed and God was perceived to be more close to them during the conflict, flight and displacement phase, and also expected to be relevant and important in the future.

Encounters with media strongly influenced and adapted the perception towards them by the IDP communities and their (religious) leaders. Increasing awareness that the media portrayed them different than the reality as it was perceived by the Christian communities themselves led to an increased distance to the media. However, the awareness that journalists are an essential channel to spread their ideas through also led to an ambiguous relationship with media related actors.

A similar relationship existed between IDPs, their leaders and with NGOs. Bad practices and a lack of local knowledge of NGOs caused frustration amongst the leaders of IDP communities. This was especially the case for International NGOs and occurred likely due to a lack of encounters between international NGOs, the UN, and local actors. Local embedded NGOs were better valued by the IDPs, Churches and religious actors, due to their long-term relationship with them. The perception of the IDPs towards NGOs was strongly influenced by encounters with NGOs in the past. Encounters with FBOs during the displacement led on most occasions to a positive perception about them, especially towards local FBOs.

The church as a humanitarian actor was valued positively throughout all phases, due to their expertise, local knowledge, and engagement. The church and their leaders operated as brokers between the Christian IDPs and all other actors as local NGOs, local and national governments and international actors, as international churches, international NGOs, and international governmental actors.

Encounters between local NGOs and donors during the period of displacement were difficult and deteriorated the perception of each actor. This occurred due to a lack of understanding of each other and a lack of shared ideas about the required decision to be taken.

### 9.4. Future

The third sub-questions is: *How do these encounters (at the interface) transform the lifeworlds of the displaced Iraqi Christian community and what does this mean for the return of the displaced to areas of origin?*

A central idea of this study is that through encounters actors are shaped and actively shape the lifeworlds of others. This question looks to how the observed encounters shaped actors for the future.

The IDPS are strongly changed by their encounters also towards the future. A minority of them decided to return to their home grounds, although their encounters with violent actors changed their lives. Security and safety became increasingly important to them and the establishment of an own military unit is an example of how their perception of safety and the future changed.

The future of the IDPs is expected to be also strongly influenced by their religious encounters, the positive role the church played during the displacement and the increased role they see in their lives for God. The church has been the leading actor throughout the periods of pre-flight, conflict, and flight, displacement and is also already fulfilling a leading role in the return.

International politics will be influential for the future. Unrest in the Middle East, especially between Saudi Arabia and Iran is expected to influence the internal politics in Iraq. Also, decisions of the USA to aid Christian minorities and Christian militias directly will have an impact. An unstable environment is to be expected on the Nineveh plains for the near future.

The encounters with some international and local FBOs were positive and the role both international and local FBOs play in the return and reconstruction, especially targeted at the Christian IDP communities are likely to be valued by them and influence returnees.

## 9.5. Conclusion

The main question for this study is: *How do encounters between actors in the Iraqi (displacement) crisis shape (and re-shape) the responses and strategies by Christian displaced communities in Kurdish Iraq.* Based on the answers to the sub-research questions the following answer is given.

This study presented the different key actors and their encounters throughout the different phases of the displacement. Encounters show that the various actors shape the displaced communities through their perceptions, showed in the narratives they used, and in the way in which they used portrayal. Three encounters are most influential for shaping the displaced communities, 1) religious encounters, 2) humanitarian encounters and 3) violent encounters.

First, a religious narrative and perception are especially influential in encounters during each phase of the displacement crisis, mainly for the Christian displaced communities but as well for other humanitarian actors. The religious perception provides the displaced with hope, and is a method to make sense of their situation. Their responses and strategies for the future are strongly shaped through encounters with religious institutions, church leaders, and God.

Second, conflicting perceptions caused misunderstanding and miscommunication between actors, especially between the Christian IDP community and (international) humanitarian actors and media actors. Especially the perceptions of local actors were different from the perceptions of international actors, which on some occasions led to the clash of actors.

Third, actors, and especially the Christian displaced community are shaped by violent and conflict encounters in the past, which led to fear and displacement. Their decisions and strategies during the displacement and for the future were strongly shaped by these violent encounters in the past.

Through this analysis, this study answers the objective of this research, as it aimed to contribute to a better understanding of religious communities and religious/humanitarian actors in conflict and forced displacement.

## 10. Recommendations

This chapter presents recommendations based on the findings of this research.

### 10.1. Recommendations for NGOs

For NGOs I recommend the following:

1. Be aware of the perceptions that exist within an organization and amongst employees at the organization about the recipient communities and the context one is working with. Perceptions are easily 'outdated' and frequently no investment is made to adapt them to the new realities in the field, which may change very fast. Incorporate perception studies as a standard approach in 1) the development of programs and 2) in the evaluation of programs. This to analyze how perceptions adapted throughout the period in which programs were implemented, how this shaped the program and which lessons can be learned for future interventions.
2. Make sure that there is a balance between valuing local knowledge and expert knowledge. Regarding program implementation, both of them are important. Based on this research I observe a tendency in valuing expert knowledge over local knowledge.
3. Be aware of the lens through which the conflicts in which one is working are viewed. With Christian human rights NGOs, I observe a tendency to explain any violence done towards Christian through a religious lens and regard it as religious violence. Social, economic, political or ethnic motivations are neglected. Besides this, Christians can therefore too easily be regarded as victims and non-Christians as perpetrators which are only responsible for violence or marginalization, while Christians also can (partly) be actors.
4. Make sure there is in-depth knowledge of the communities one is working with. Especially within different traditions of Christianity, traditional vs. modern, lacking knowledge of how to cope with them can be very harmful, as it was shown in how some local Christian leaders looked to western faith-based organizations who lacked respect for their traditions.
5. For NGO employees, frequent travel to humanitarian crisis areas, can cause them to perceive the field as an area they fully know and that are aware of the cultural characteristics. However, NGOs can encourage their employees to reflect on how they see the field, what they think the impact is of their presence in the field. Continuous cultural sensitivity and awareness are important.

### 10.2. Recommendations for media actors

For actors related to media or responsible for aid campaigns I recommend the following:

1. Awareness of the particular lens through one is framing the crisis is important. Continuous reflecting on this choice can produce an image which better corresponds with the reality.
2. Coordinate media activities and aid campaigns with the local actors and representatives of recipients. They can check the story, the chosen frame, and provide feedback on that.

### 10.3. Recommendations for religious actors

1. For local religious actors, as priests, bishops, it is important to be aware that their religious concepts and ideas are not necessarily easy understood by others. Vice versa, external actors, both Christian and secular actors, should be aware that their religious background and perceptions totally differ from those they encounter in the field. Being Christian does not guarantee that different Christian actors understand each other.

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## Figures

Figure 1: Ethno – religious population distribution in Iraq before 2014. Source: MRGI (Minority Rights Group International), 2016, No Way Home: Iraq's minorities on the verge of disappearance, Brussels.

Figure 2: Iraq – Nineveh Plains IDP Crisis: 6<sup>th</sup> June – 7<sup>th</sup> August, Successive phases of crisis and displacement of Christian minorities in the Ninewa Plains. Source: Reach Initiatives, 2014, Retrieved from [http://www.reachresourcecentre.info/system/files/resource-documents/reach\\_irq\\_internaldisplacement\\_map\\_august2014\\_ninewaplains.pdf](http://www.reachresourcecentre.info/system/files/resource-documents/reach_irq_internaldisplacement_map_august2014_ninewaplains.pdf).

Figure 3-5: Based on Long, N. (2001). *Development sociology: actor perspectives*. Routledge.

# Annexes

## Annex A – Overview respondents

**Interview 1:** Local NGO leader, Male, IDP, Qaraqosh.

**Interview 2:** Local NGO leader, Male, IDP, Qaraqosh.

**Interview 3:** Local NGO leader, NGO connected to Syrian Orthodox Church, Male, IDP, Bartella, Rented house.

**Interview 4:** Priest in the Chaldean Church, Leader of IDP camp, 26, Male, Erbil citizen.

**Interview 5:** Leader of IDP camp in an abandoned building, Works for government, 35, Male, IDP, Qaraqosh.

**Interview 6:** Focus group, with 3 men working for an NGO. The leader of NGO that is building apartments for refugees and two employees. All IDPs. Businessman and farmer. Qaraqosh and Bartella.

**Interview 7:** Two students. Male (26 years), Female (18 years), Both born in Baghdad, moved to Qaraqosh after 2003, moved in 2013 to Erbil. Families were in Qaraqosh during *Daesh* attack.

**Interview 8:** Priest of Syrian Catholic Church, Mosul Diocese, IDP from Qaraqosh, leader of the refugee community.

**Interview 9:** Writer, Male, IDP, Living in IDP camp, from town on the Nineveh plains.

**Interview 10:** Leader of Refugee camp, Monk in Syrian Catholic Church, Jesuit Refugee Care, Qaraqosh

**Interview 11:** Local NGO deputy director, female, Erbil citizen.

**Interview 12:** NGO employee, male, Erbil citizen.

## Annex B – Topic list

### Topic List Interviews Iraq

#### 1. General

- a. Background  
(personal/community/religiou  
s)
- b. Work
- c. History – before flight
- d. What happened, own  
experiences
- e. Situation today (Change)
- f. Future expectations

#### 2. Christian leader/Christianity

- a. Religious leaders
- b. Role towards community,  
politics, international world,  
NGOs.
- c. Christian persecution/conflict
- d. Religion in interpretation

#### 3. Minority

- a. Definition
- b. Visibility of being minority
- c. Future of minority
- d. Relationship to other Iraqi  
(Muslim)

#### 4. Other Actors

- a. Political
- b. Military

#### 5. Aid

- a. Needs (What, How, Where,  
Whom)
- b. Provided help (what, to  
whom, when)
- c. Role of NGOs
- d. Actors in providing aid (NGO  
or Church or other)
- e. Aid Recipients (Christian IDPs  
or also others minority  
groups)

#### 6. Culture/Interaction

- a. Culture what is it, how  
important
- b. Difference between cultures
- c. Interaction between cultures
- d. Example of success/failure
- e. Misunderstanding/Language
- f. Existing knowledge of NGO  
and recipients (both groups)
- g. Role for translator
- h. Relationship/Ownership

#### 7. Models/Programs (Staff)

- a. Which  
models/programs/trainings
- b. Who is in charge?
- c. Who created?
- d. Perceived/Ownership
- e. Role for religion/conflict in the  
programs