



## "Kullina Muwatinin, we are all citizens"

### Brief description of the PAX program on citizenship, freedom of religion and belief and minority rights in Iraq and Syria

2012 – 2016

Kullina Muwatinin is a program developed by PAX and its partners in Iraq and Syria to promote citizenship and prevent sectarian tensions and violence in Iraq and Syria. The program is funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Netherlands and runs from 2012 to 2015. An extension of the program in Iraq is funded by the European Union and runs from 2013 to 2016.

#### Background

Both Iraq and Syria have a population that is ethnically and religiously diverse. Both countries have a long history of authoritarian rule by the Baath party, which ended in Iraq in 2003 with the US led invasion. Only in 2011 the Syrian people started a massive uprising against the Baath regime which still is in power in Damascus. The Syrian and Iraqi authoritarian regimes have always presented themselves as tolerant towards minority religions and protectors of religious minorities. Yet, years of authoritarian rule and divide and rule policies have created an atmosphere of distrust and suspicion. When in 2003 the Saddam Hussein regime collapsed, the Iraqi society became extremely unstable and dangerous. Violence, often with a sectarian character, has touched all groups in society and led to large numbers of refugees and IDP's. In Syria, the regime portrays the conflict between protestors and the Syrian army mainly as a sectarian struggle, of Sunni Islamists against the rest of the population. The opposition however tries to present an inclusive agenda for all citizens of Syria. Yet, as violence continuously intensifies in Syria, sectarian tensions and violence are deepening.

Like several European countries, the Netherlands regards 'freedom of religion and belief' as one of the key issues in its human rights policy. From the side of PAX and its partners in Iraq and Syria, it has been stressed that a policy that singles out religious minorities, in particular Christians, might be counter-productive. In stead we have proposed a policy that focuses on citizenship and respect for diversity as the best approach.

#### Objective

The program targets the following problems and the objectives to which they give rise:

- a) Iraq and Syria lack a social framework of people able to advocate respect for rights, diversity and civic responsibility. The programme expressly works to develop the capacities of local partners and of young civil activists with the potential of becoming community leaders.
- b) This programme focuses on the fact that the majority of the population in the programme countries consists of young people who have grown up in an environment dominated by sectarian thinking, who have grown up in fear and ignorance of the other. It enlarges upon the new dynamic in this generation. The innovative educational component concentrates on overcoming this mindset in the future generation; a participatory component aims at involving these young people in monitoring and defending human rights, minority rights and, especially, freedom of religion.
- c) Repression may quell expression of sectarian division, but it will also cultivate its roots. It will politicize religious and ethnic identity and fail to create mechanisms to mitigate conflict. That is why this programme wants to depoliticize religious and ethnic identity by promoting a human rights approach that puts people's rights and duties first. Linking Iraq and Syria in an educational component envisages a preventive effect, especially in Syria. The programme also envisages establishing an early warning mechanism to prevent conflict and to resolve incidents.
- d) By and large, the legal framework guarantees all people's equality regardless of religion or ethnic background, but it does have flaws. These include family law and, in Iraq, the mix of sharia and human rights in the new constitution. Current laws are inadequately observed and their violations go unpunished. That is why this programme's goal is to watch over and improve the legal framework, to contribute to better compliance with legislation and to counter impunity.



- e) Finally, this programme addresses the role of the international community. Its objective is to have international actors adopt a more inclusive approach that is aimed at the rights and responsibilities of minorities and majorities and that gives priority to conflict prevention.

### **General Objective**

The security, human rights and social position of minorities in Syria and Iraq will have been improved as a result of greater awareness among and action by local groups of activists and young people with international support stressing a human rights approach and conflict prevention.

This shall be apparent from:

- A stronger framework of people in Iraq and Syria able to stand up for rights;
- Greater cooperation and trust between religious and ethnic groups;
- Fewer attempts by political leaders and opinion makers to play off religious and ethnic groups against one another;
- Legal reform and law enforcement.

### **Specific Goals**

1. Seven partner organisations and 40 trainers/counsellors will have the skills and materials to train and guide local activists groups; they will also produce effective advocacy for religious freedom and minority rights in their own societies.
2. Close, operational networks of local civil and media activists and young people will exist in Iraq and Syria; they will help promote minority rights and religious freedom and prevent sectarian conflict. This will lead to effective dialogue from a rights approach to improve relations and cooperation between and within communities as a means of preventing conflict.
3. Dialogue between partners/young people and political actors (political leaders, opinion leaders, leaders of religious communities [clergy]) will produce a new discourse and will improve religious freedom and minority rights and will contribute to conflict prevention
4. Early warning networks of representatives of minority groups, religious leaders, civil and media activists will conduct enhanced monitoring of sectarian violence and violations of minority rights. A mobile phone application will facilitate mechanisms of reporting.
5. Political leaders in Iraq and Syria (nudged by civil society) will act to protect religious freedom and minority rights by law and partners', activists' and young people's actions will help encourage compliance.
6. PAX and its partners will have effective policy dialogue with decision makers and political leaders in international intergovernmental organizations (EU, League of Arab States and UN, including UN Human Rights Council). It will help develop an effective, joint European policy agenda on religious freedom in the Middle East that is based on a rights approach and conflict prevention.