What role does the media play in reconciliation and social efforts in post-IS Iraq

Mosul / Erbil
23 March - 10 April 2018

Documentation
“What role does the media play in reconciliation and social efforts in post-IS Iraq” is a documentation of the Mosul Talks conference funded by the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, Germany Federal Foreign Office and jointly organized by Canal France International (CFI) and Media in Cooperation and Transition (MiCT).

Mosul Talks workshops were held in Mosul on 23/24/25 March 2018 and in Erbil on 10 April 2018.

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Mosul Talks Impressions:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=krrfCj8wmyU

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Mosul Talks:
What role does the media play in reconciliation and social efforts in post-IS Iraq

Overview

It is becoming widely recognized that cooperation and dialogue between different stakeholders who are active in the areas of reconciliation and reintegration should be supported and enhanced. Coordination and shared knowledge can increase understanding and provide opportunity to begin to build resilient societies with diverse communities at their heart. To facilitate this discussion for a post-IS Ninewah, the Tasalah project, funded by the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs and jointly organized by CFI and Media in Cooperation and Transition, developed a series of events entitled #MosulTalks. The aim of these events was to connect the various stakeholders working on reconciliation, reconstruction, and reintegration efforts in the newly-liberated territories of Ninewah in order to explore the role that media can play in supporting social cohesion and reconciliation in Mosul and Ninewah. #MosulTalks took place in two parts: firstly, a series of three workshops, held on the 23rd, 24th and 25th March at the Mosul Book forum brought together local CSOs, academics, media and politicians from across the province to consider key issues and challenges in relation to education, transitional justice and governance; secondly, a conference held in Erbil on the 10th April opened the discussion and debate up to the wider and international community. The following report will provide an outline of the key points discussed at each event as well as highlight some of the recommendations and actions that were discussed.
The liberation of Mosul and Nineveh from IS in July 2017 left the city and province with a considerable number of challenges across political, social and economic levels. On one level, what has emerged is an urgent need to rebuild the city’s infrastructure with over 70,000 houses, schools, bridges, and water systems destroyed. There is also work to be done in Mosul clearing mines and other explosive devices left behind by IS. As attempts to resume ‘normal’ life return to the province, reconstruction efforts become all the more imperative.

Presently, there are a number of different security forces who provide safekeeping across the province. The Iraqi Army, the Hashd as-Shabi, and the Hashd al-Asha’ir are amongst many who have been tasked with providing the security needed for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) to return to their homes. However, the return of thousands of IDPs to Ninewah has highlighted the lack of awareness of and capacity for reconciliation and reintegration amongst the many communities that make up the social fabric of Nineveh: Christians, Yezidis, Kurds, Turkmen, Shabak, Shia, and Sunni. The exclusion issues that existed before the capture of Mosul by IS still exist and are heightened by the lack of economic and social empowerment felt by many.

The fate of those who are considered to be IS collaborators and affiliates and the potential for their reintegration into society is also proving to be a huge challenge. Alleged collaborators and their families continue to be subjected to violent retaliatory attacks in the absence and lack of awareness of official mechanisms for transitional justice. But is there truly a potential for reconciliation in this case?

Local governance has a great potential to support reconciliation efforts. It enables the participation of elected representatives from the many of Ninewah’s communities. Despite the reassembly of the Ninewah provincial council and the initiation of some peace-building efforts, it is still struggling to deliver sufficient guidance to its citizens. Strengthening local governance and representation on a community level is key to mitigating ethno-sectarian tensions.

Education is another key challenge to reconciliation efforts in Ninewah. After capturing Mosul, IS seized control of the education system, closing a number of schools and replacing the Iraqi curriculum with its own heavily ideological course of study. Universities were closed, depriving students of higher education opportunities. IS attempts to propagate its radical ideology amongst Nineveh’s youths is also of mounting concern. It is essential that the trauma suffered by children and youth is addressed and that they are provided with adequate education facilities and an appropriate curriculum in order for them to move forward and secure their future. It will also be integral to the governorate ensuring against the return of extremist ideologies.

In the main, these challenges have been addressed by loosely-organized but very vibrant civil society initiatives. They work in education, reconstruction, social cohesion, and justice, filling the vacuum that a lack of clear governance structures has created. Within the course of rebuilding the city and reviving social norms, the media in Mosul can play an important role as a source of information about reconstruction, public services, and local government activities. Media can provide education to children and youth as well as serve as a platform for exchange and dialogue amongst citizens, whilst also connecting them to politicians and civil society. It is essential that the role of media is strengthened in order that they can support the process of establishing inclusive governance and outcome-driven dialogues around reconciliation.
The Mosul workshops began with the session on Education, March 23rd 2018, a full day that brought together 28 participants and representatives from: schools, colleges and universities across Ninewah including Mosul University, Al Hadba University College, and Noon Center for Studies; policy makers including the head of Ninewah City Council; youth activists and CSOs including Al Faz3at, UPP, and Save the Public Library; journalists and media practitioners active in Mosul and Ninewah. The first half of the day consisted of an open discussion, moderated by well-known journalist and media trainer Saman Noah where key challenges for the education sector in Ninewah were discussed. These challenges split into three categories: physical damage, psychological and sociological damage, and capacity building.

Physical damage:
Participants in the workshops raised serious concerns with regards to the physical damage to infrastructure of schools and colleges. This has resulted in restricted access to many key education facilities in the province, a factor which is now contributing to overcrowding in classrooms, particularly in neighbourhoods that are repopulating post-IS. There also remains a shortage of academic resources for students, teachers and researchers, many of whom have not been paid regularly over the last few years.

Psychological and sociological damage:
Poverty is having a direct impact on illiteracy, increasingly an issue with young women and girls. There is also an on-going issue of how to manage the reintegration of IS-educated students returning to schools and colleges across the province. The on-going threat and existence of IS, as well as a lack of security and economic opportunity, is fueling a brain drain of good educators leaving the province for other cities in Iraq and beyond.

Capacity building:
A key issue for the academics in the group was the lack of professional training programmes aimed at educational staff. They felt there was a lack of expertise and knowledge on how best to represent minority religions, sects and ethnicities in education establishments and curricula. It was also felt that there was an absence of any solutions-driven response from the Ministry of Education with regards to the reform of IS curricula.

Participants thought it was important to note, however, that the focus of the international community and international organisations tended to be on producing tangible results – such as rebuilding schools - rather than the less tangible work involved in rehabilitating and reintegrating communities. Providing support for education in all its facets was key to overcoming IS rule and entrenched dogma.

They also had a number of messages to convey to legislators, policy makers and those working in the education arena.

1. Support the reform of school curricula immediately in order to address Ninewah’s most urgent needs in the field of education.

2. The appointment of an educational committee within Ninewah City Council will provide a much needed focus on key issues at a local level.

3. Programmes to raise awareness of hate speech, incitement to violence, sectarianism and racism need to be integrated into teaching curricula and media literacy programmes.

4. Reconciliation and co-existence programmes should be supported at all education levels, from tertiary to higher education.
The second half of the day saw participants develop a selection of media content ideas aimed at improving the education sector and delivery in Ninewah. Ideas included the following:

**Idea one:**
Infographic:
+ A public service video aimed at children and their parents that will demonstrate the benefits of education and motivate young people to succeed at school
+ It would bring to life the differences of life with and without an education

**Idea two:**
Cartoon:
+ A cartoon that builds on the theme of reconciliation
+ Characters will represent the different groups, religions and ethnicities of Ninewah
+ Developed for television and social media in order to encourage it to go viral

**Idea three:**
Drama:
+ A one-off drama that explores the concept of waiting and how this is contributing to the lack of cultural development in Ninewah

**Idea four:**
Facebook page:
+ A social media page where content is produced and populated by local CSOs
+ It would provide coverage of real events in the region
+ Users could interact with CSOs and their contemporaries to discuss their concerns and share advice

**Idea five:** Weekly talk show:
+ A programme that will take an in-depth look at a specific subject in the curriculum on a weekly basis and facilitate a discussion between parents and education policy makers around each subject
+ It would provide citizens with opportunity for direct interaction with decision-makers
The second workshop took place on the 24th March 2018 and its thematic focus was the issue of transitional justice in post-IS Ninewah. Moderated by Dlovan Barwari, a lawyer and media consultant with the Media Academy Iraq, it included input from media practitioners such as Al Sharqiya, Roh Moslya, and Al Mosul Awalan, as well as a number of policy makers and legal practitioners from across the province. A discussion around transitional justice-related challenges in post-IS Ninewah highlighted two interlinked areas for focus: retaliatory justice, and justice for victims of IS. The question of how IS family members might be reintegrated into Ninewah was a key discussion point, with the suggestion that IS camps could act as ghettos and echo chambers for IS doctrine as well as have a long-term impact on the psychological development of children. At the same time, retaliation attacks on suspected IS members and their families, which started as far back as 2015, continue to be an uncontrolled issue with a proliferation of hate speech across all media and digital platforms further exacerbating incitement and violence. It was remarked that there was an absence of any clear legal framework to ensure legitimate accountability and prosecution for those responsible for IS crimes. This has been further aggravated by the sense of impunity held by those seeking to take justice into their own hands. Workable solutions need to be found to deal with reintegration in order to ensure that social cohesion and reconciliation remain possible in this context.

Participants thought it was important to note that transitional justice is a process not an outcome and one that should be dealt with in an inclusive manner, by a multitude of actors and not only by the state. They felt that political will and governmental backing to support new and existing transitional justice-related civil society and media initiatives was just as important as financial support.

They also had a number of messages to convey to legislators, policy makers, and those working in the field of transitional justice:

1. Legislation that deals with the issue of transitional justice needs to be developed, debated and implemented in order to manage and regulate the situation.
2. There is a need to raise awareness of legal options as alternatives to extrajudicial retaliation and revenge killings.
3. Victims of sexual harm by IS should be given special attention in order to address their specific issues.
4. Witness protection and whistleblower programs that are supported by the documentation of IS crimes need to be instigated.
5. There is a need for the inclusion of more peace-building initiatives that operate on a local level in Ninewah. On the whole, management of reconciliation programmes is considered to be weak with very few intercommunal, inter-ethnic programmes promoting dialogue and peaceful coexistence.
6. Laws to protect journalists covering sensitive transitional justice-related themes must be enacted in order to safeguard them from intimidation and harassment, as well as physical attacks.
Once again, the second half of the day saw the production of a number of media content ideas related to the theme of transitional justice:

Idea one:
Documentary:
+ A series exploring the rich and varied history of Mosul
+ It would combine rarely seen archive footage with interviews from different representative groups/ethnicities/religions in the city
+ It would offer an exploration of the impact of each stage in Mosul’s history

Idea two:
Daily radio show:
+ A discussion programme that gives voice to victims, allowing them to tell their own stories of suffering
+ It would allow citizens and ordinary people, women, children, and non-city dwellers to express themselves

Idea three:
Social media campaign:
+ A social media advocacy campaign to raise awareness of what makes good citizenship

Idea four:
Multimedia campaign:
+ True stories of intercommunal cooperation and collaboration
+ It would shed light on the positive aspects and truths from a post-IS Ninewah
+ This could send a message that IS does not represent peaceful Iraqis

Idea five:
Talk show:
+ A series of talk shows that focus on the achievements of officials, hosting experts from all walks of life
+ It will shed light on humanitarian success stories
+ The purpose would be to highlight projects that have enabled and facilitated unity
The third and final workshop to be held in Mosul focused on the issue of governance, namely local governance in the region. In addition to representatives from civil society, academia and the media, this session also included a number of policy makers and MPs standing in the up-coming local and national elections. The session was moderated by Dr. Mahmood Ezzo, Professor of Political Science at Mosul University. Key challenges raised in this session focused on a lack of transparency in official processes and institutions as well as the endemic corruption that exists across many levels including local in government. Participants noted that it was these very issues that contributed to the rise in IS in the province. Without adopting mechanisms to address them, long-term reconciliation and social cohesion efforts will fail to resonate. Once again, the lack of political will to develop solutions to combat ethno-sectarian practices was underlined as a major contributing factor to the deep lack of trust in public institutions and politicians.

Participants thought it was important to note that reconciliation must take place on a number of different levels: between citizens; between political parties; and also between politicians and citizens. For this reason, the up-coming elections in May 2018 were seen as a huge opportunity for newly liberated areas in post-IS Iraq.

Messages to policy-makers and legislators in the field of governance included:

1. Local government representatives and public communicators need to establish a stronger and more transparent system of communication between themselves and the media.

2. Public consultations and conferences accompanied by media will enable a more inclusive solutions driven approach and peaceful resolution of differences.

3. Contribute to transparency and fight against corruption: Access to information laws must be enacted.

4. Protection of journalistic sources, one of the basic conditions for press freedom, needs to be strengthened.

A number of media content ideas generated included:

Idea one:
Print:
+ A series of articles to encourage young people to constructively engage in rebuilding Ninewah’s society
+ These would demonstrate, through advice and case studies, how young people can become more involved in social and political affairs
+ It would promote decision-making opportunities for young people.

Idea two:
Multi-platform:
+ Interactive content that visualises how Ninewah can be rebuilt on a social and economic level
+ It would highlight which aspects of the city could flourish with investment and regeneration.

Idea three:
Television series:
+ A series exploring some of the key topics that are affecting Ninewah’s society
+ These would include social, health, culture, and science and how each of these areas play out on the local level through covering existing CSO initiatives
+ Each week a different expert on each topic will discuss potential solutions to that week’s topic with recommendations to policy makers and officials on how to deliver practical solutions.

Idea four:
Upscaling the Facebook page ‘Tech for Peace’:
+ A new approach that would include radio & television content and a YouTube channel
+ Content will explore how (local) government can use technology to better serve its citizens.
Shortcomings of the media as identified in the Mosul workshops

Across the board, participants in the workshops felt that the media were failing in their function to provide accurate information from a diverse number of sources which could ultimately contribute to a more peaceful and cohesive society. The following shortcomings were recognised:

+ Media remain highly sectarian, partisan and politicized, with a lack of independent and impartial reporting further aggravating an already volatile landscape.

+ Much of the media reporting is inaccurate and not fact-based, resulting in a lack of public trust in media’s coverage of governance and politics.

+ Media is not fulfilling its function by holding officials to account by keeping record of developments in governance and politics.

+ Media is not playing its function as an educator, at all levels. Not only are there not enough educational programs for youth and children, but it is neglecting to provide voters and citizens with the information required to fully participate in up-coming elections and political processes.

+ There’s a lack of inclusive, balanced and moderated discussion on related issues, in popular talk shows for example.

+ Media is not lobbying government or civil society for the urgent needs of Ninewah province.

Opportunities for the media identified in the Mosul workshops

The workshops also highlighted a number of opportunities for the media to contribute to reconciliation and reintegration efforts. These included the following:

+ The media needs to fulfil its role as an educator by supporting the development of educational programmes aimed at adults, children and young people with a focus on overcoming IS education and IS ideology.

+ The media should reach out to existing civil society, via non-partisan and related initiatives and programs to ensure accurate reporting and diversity of sources.

+ There is an opportunity to invest in building the capacities of journalists to improve the quality of reporting and support investigative journalism.

+ The media must perform its public responsibility of watchdog, holding those in power to account on behalf of the public. If it develops best practices to meet this role, the media can play an important role in facilitating the much needed outcome-driven dialogues amongst politicians, legislators and citizens.

+ The media should develop a framework of self-regulatory practice that will enable them to produce conflict-sensitive content and prevent the incitement of violence.
The #MosulTalks project’s key objective was to promote and facilitate a conversation around the key issues related to reconciliation, social cohesion and reintegration, across a broad range of actors, in order to strengthen the role of media and journalism in this field. To achieve this, it brought together the key stakeholders working in this arena at a conference in Erbil in order to showcase the issues and ideas discussed at the Mosul workshops and generate further debate and discussion about how to practically enable the media to fulfill its role of peace-builder. A full list of participants at the conference is available on the back of this brochure and they included a wide range of international NGOs as well as local CSO initiatives and activists. At the start of the conference, both the French and the German consuls in Erbil gave messages of support for the project.

The conference format, included two keynote speeches: firstly, from SANAD for Peacebuilding, who opened the event and laid out the key challenges for reconciliation and its agencies active in Iraq; secondly, from UNESCO Iraq, who closed the conference with a round-up of the key debates and messages for the media. Three presentations of the main ideas and discussions from each of the Mosul workshops were also presented throughout the day. A video message from Omar Mohammed, founder of the blog Mosul Eye, gave an oversight of the struggles that he faced when working and reporting from Mosul as well as some reflections on opportunities for the media working in a post-IS setting. A panel discussion in the afternoon, moderated by Mosul-born writer Dr. Mohammed Mofiti, included representatives from the media – Saleh Elias, freelance journalist and contributor to Niqash, Rasha Wahab, former Shariqya journalist and electoral candidate; from academia – Dr. Irada Al Jabouri, Baghdad University Media Department and Dr. Waad Ibrahim, Mosul University; Mosul based businessman and electoral candidate Jafaar Hadaad. The Erbil event appropriated some of the conversations and discussions that took place in the Mosul workshops and developed them further, delivering a perspective from the international community working in reconciliation. The key discussion topics are outlined in the following section:

1. What is reconciliation?

Throughout the day, participants discussed the importance of defining reconciliation in the context of Iraq and, more specifically, Ninewah. It was felt that there was a confusion, particularly on behalf of the international and donor community, between reconstruction and rebuilding versus reconciliation. While they were considered to be connected, it was suggested that social cohesion and peace-building need to take a more holistic approach, one that covers construction, health and the media as well as the socio-cultural aspects of Iraqi society. It was also stressed that reconciliation should be approached as a process not an outcome. Communications and outreach work that takes place at a grassroots level, combined with building partnerships with the different actors working on the ground, was considered crucial to delivering a successful reconciliation process. There was also a discussion about the importance of increased opportunities and economic empowerment amongst minority and marginalized groups which was seen as integral to resolving some of the issues that affect social cohesion in Iraqi society.

Media solution:
The media has a role to play in telling the stories of the marginalized, giving voice to minority groups and providing an alternative narrative to that of the state. It should amplify these voices, enabling the public to talk about their painful past, while also reporting on the current challenges and opportunities for reconciliation from diverse perspectives.
2. The term ‘IS affiliation’ is being propagated without any set definition or parameters for what the phrase means or to what it is referring.

Participants in the group debated the questions surrounding the issues of how to deal with those who were previously affiliated to IS, so-called IS collaborators, IS supporters and their families. For some participants, there was no question that reconciliation would ever be possible. For others, IS ‘concentration camps’ were not seen as a viable solution to resolving social cohesion and peace-building. It was suggested that more work needed to be done to define the different levels of affiliation that would encompass a more grassroots approach where local communities are involved in setting the demarcations and meanings. It was also suggested that a cross-level educational approach could support community outreach work by targeting all age groups at the required level. Across the board, it was echoed that there was a lack of awareness of the work that has been done by local and national CSOs in this field.

Media solution:
Journalism that is based on fact and accuracy can offer clarity and provides the public with the information they require to make informed decisions. On-going liaison with CSOs and public communicators will deliver the range of information that journalists need to fully inform citizens.

3. There is a lack of much-needed political will to support development and change in Iraqi society, with a particular lack of concern for rebuilding and reconciling newly liberated areas.

Participants across the board, from media and CSOs to academics and even politicians themselves, lamented this issue at both a local and national level. It was echoed that nothing has been done to deal with the reasons why IS initially gained support and how Ninewah arrived at its current condition. A few participants suggested that it was, in fact, politicians themselves who had created and fueled the conditions of ethno-sectarianism in Iraq and that peace-building had yet to be institutionalized, despite an expressed public desire for social cohesion. A lack of public trust in mechanisms for formal justice was resulting in violent acts of retribution whose perpetrators are treated with impunity. The question of how to overcome exclusion issues in an apathetic political environment was widely discussed; for example, the issue of reconciliation between those considered to be IS supporters and their families was not seen to be resolvable without the input of government.

Media solution:
Media advocacy to advance public policy initiatives, promote public debate and generate community support can put pressure on policy makers and politicians, calling them to account for their (lack of) action and highlighting areas for focus and concern. Even on a very basic level, media can use their social media accounts as means of exposing government inactivity and lack of support for community and grassroots initiatives.
4. While there are a number of opportunities for the media, they are currently failing to support the public and their audiences. This was seen as down to two reasons: a lack of capacity and knowledge in the media; the political affiliation of media institutions and, in some cases, the journalists who operate within them. In the case of capacity issues, not only was there seen to be a lack of journalists who possess the skills to cover issues related to reconciliation, there was also seen to be a lack of capacity to train journalists on covering topics related to reconciliation. Iraq is distinctly lacking any national institutions that can provide training for students and journalists or even offer internships and practical experience. Dr. Waad Ibrahim, professor of sociology and head of the media school at Mosul University, talked at length about the lack of practical support for his department’s students as well as the lack of knowledge at a staff level on how to teach journalism and media studies. There was an urgent call for greater involvement from international agencies and donors to support training, capacity-building and academic curriculum development at a university level. The issue of Iraq’s highly-politicized partisan media landscape was also discussed at length. Participants felt that the media had contributed to the current climate by being highly politicized, which was, in essence, a product of their political economy and how media organisations are financed. Media was seen to be fueling conflict and playing a political role, with the public having to deal with what was seen as propaganda from all sides: Iraqi government, the opposition, and IS. There was a concern that the financial reality of the Iraqi media does not incentivize them to cover topics and stories related to social cohesion as most media organisations are only reflecting the views of their owners. It was voiced that while there were indeed many professional journalists working in media organisations in Iraq, there were, in fact, no independent media organisations.

Media solution 1:
International media development organisations can strengthen the capacity of local media by offering media practitioners and media students thematic training to enhance practice in areas such as post-conflict reporting, social cohesion and peace-building, online and social media, documentary-making, ethics in the media, and many more. Further work developing university and media school curricula to incorporate practical skills training alongside theoretical approaches will ensure that future generations of journalists acquire the knowledge and expertise to perform their roles professionally.

Media solution 2:
Equally important are the audiences and end users of the media. Media and information literacy programmes will provide the public with the skills they need for critical reception of media messages. This is particularly important for young people in schools and colleges.
5. Hate speech is being perpetuated by the media

Participants all related numerous accounts of hate speech and incitement on social media and a lack of public awareness of how to avoid sharing and disseminating such content. There was also a concern about the mainstream media’s role in further exacerbating the situation. There was also widespread trepidation about the issue of politicians appropriating social media for their own political and often hate speech-filled purposes. Participants recognized the important role of both education and media literacy programmes in tackling the issue of hate speech and its proliferation.

Media solution:
Media and journalists must be trained to identify hate speech and develop clear guidelines as to what can be considered hate speech and in what context. This must cover everything from language to imagery, enabling the media to report ethically and responsibly in all situations.

6. There is a need to build greater trust in the media in order to establish better conditions for reconciliation and social cohesion through journalism

In this environment, how can the media build trust with the public in order to ensure that it can contribute to reconciliation in the long term? The conference discussions pointed towards strengthening the media in two ways. Firstly, the norms and standards of professional journalistic practice need to be adhered to and maintained. This begins with the government who need to enable an environment for a free, independent media in Iraq by nurturing and supporting better legislation around freedom of expression and access to information for journalists. The media also need to uphold their side of the bargain by ensuring that their practice reflects professional journalistic principles, such as accuracy, transparency, ensuring a diversity of sources in order to inform, representing and amplifying the stories and voices of minority groups and those who have felt marginalized in Iraqi society. There needs to be a greater emphasis on investigative journalism that uncovers corruption in business, government, and at all levels of society. Secondly, there needs to be a greater emphasis on stories and topics related specifically to social cohesion and reconciliation. It was suggested that in the case of Mosul, the media have been focusing on the destruction of the city rather than the positive stories of cooperation and reconstruction.

Media solution:
Capacity-building initiatives will be integral to the promotion of stronger journalistic skills and professionalism. International agencies must also focus on ‘Training the Trainers’ in order to ensure that in-country training skills are also enhanced on a long-term basis.
7. Coordination, knowledge sharing and closer regular engagement amongst all key stakeholders working in areas of reconciliation would enable a more supportive environment for reconciliation mechanisms to flourish.

For participants this could work on two levels. Firstly, knowledge sharing through experts and examples from countries who have experienced similar pasts – such as Rwanda, Bosnia and South Africa – could provide useful insights and learnings for Ninewah. This could also assist in other newly-liberated areas in Iraq, such as Anbar and Salahuddin. It was suggested that learning by previous examples would demonstrate to both the government and the Iraqi public that fixing one wrong with another cannot solve societal challenges and problems. Secondly, it was suggested that a coordination group and network of key stakeholders, including the media, working in reconciliation could provide a platform for discussion and information sharing. It was suggested that a coordination group could provide the resources needed by sharing and working together.

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**Media solution:**
There is currently a proposal, subject to funding, to form a coordination network for reconciliation actors, facilitated by SANAD for Peacebuilding. Media are invited to join and contribute to this group, going forward. It was also suggested that such a group could create its own platform – an app or mobile site - following the example of alsouria.net.