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## COMBATING RELIGIOUS DISCRIMINATION IN IRAQ

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02.12.2016

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By Dr. Ali Nasser Muthanna

CNN, 01 Dec 2016

Sitting close together on the sofa in my office in Basra, Iraq, Marwa cannot stop talking about how happy she is; Sajjad just gazes adoringly into his new wife's eyes.

Like millions of other couples around the world, they are both enjoying those first few precious months of married life.

For this couple, things could have been very different. After they became friends and started going out together, they realized they had a very big problem. Sajjad is a Shiite Muslim; Marwad is a Sunni.

In this part of the world, this was a relationship that would normally have been doomed to failure. There has been much bad blood between the different Muslim sects over the years, especially since the fall of Saddam Hussein unleashed a wave of violence that tore our country apart. Now, many of the communities here are exclusively Sunni or Shiite.

The schism between the two sects dates back 1,400 years, following the death of the Prophet Mohammed. They still share many fundamental beliefs and practices, but there are many differences which have led to countless deaths and much misery for both peoples over the centuries.

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So, Sajjad and Marwa were forced to keep their love for one another secret, even from their closest relatives. Fear stalked their relationship.

Thankfully, they approached AMAR and asked for our help. They came to us because we are running a unique program to teach religious tolerance to thousands of people in the south of Iraq.

It's been so successful that the European Union has backed the project and helped us expand it.

Our aim is to tackle all forms of discrimination on the grounds of religious belief -- or indeed non-belief -- in order to reduce ongoing social, economic and political division and conflict. All religions are included in the program.

Iraq is a multi-ethnic country. We are a nation not just of Muslims, both Sunni and Shia, but of

Christians, Yazidis, Chaldeans and Mandaens.

Having worked in this troubled region since 1991, always with an entirely indigenous workforce, AMAR was acutely aware of the need for this project combating religious discrimination. Our staff in Iraq has firsthand personal experience of the problems that are caused by religious intolerance and are conscious of the need to address the root causes.

In fact, many staff -- including me -- have been refugees or internally displaced themselves and as such, they have personally suffered at the hands of religious intolerance and the conflicts that it creates.

Moreover, in its many years of providing health care and educational services throughout Iraq, AMAR has worked closely with civil society organizations, religious leaders, internally displaced persons, government organizations and many different religious and ethnic communities.

Our specific objectives are to reduce sectarian conflict, violence and the potential of violence between differing religious communities in southern Iraq. We aim to ensure equitable and fair access to social, economic and political life for religious minorities.

To achieve these objectives, AMAR has made changes designed to promote religious tolerance by strengthening civil society, as well as the educational capacity of the respective communities, religious leaders, education sector employees and government bodies responsible for promoting and safeguarding human rights.

AMAR is working closely with local university professors to develop a curriculum on religious tolerance, human rights and gender equality which is then taught to civil society organizations (CSOs), religious and community leaders, teachers and university professors in Basra, Maysan and Thi Qar in southern Iraq.

These CSOs and religious leaders then teach the curriculum's message of tolerance throughout their communities via different activities and lectures. Government teachers and professors also deliver lectures on these topics to their students. This inherently sustainable approach guarantees that skills are maintained by Iraqi activists, CSO members, teachers and professors who can continue to spread the message of tolerance throughout their careers.

As well as AMAR staff, government educators, CSO members and religious leaders, government officials are also responsible for implementing the changes. AMAR has worked closely with the Ministry of Education and the Directorates of Education in each of the three locations to implement the program and to select the most appropriate locations for the initiative.

So far, we've reached more than 3,000 school students and we're on course to teach more than 10,800 by the end of the three-year program. Ten CSOs have been fully trained as well as 36 religious and community leaders, representing all the faiths here in Iraq.

So we were able to offer help to Sajjad and Marwa. We contacted their community leaders, both of whom had trained on the AMAR program. Initially, both families were against the relationship, but the leaders used all their new knowledge to persuade them to allow this to happen.

It's a small breakthrough of course. Centuries of animosity are not going to be solved overnight. But at least we are taking the initiative. Something had to be done, and this is just the start. If governments across this difficult region could be persuaded to back this, you never know where it

could lead. We hope -- and pray -- it will one day bring harmony here in Iraq.

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