

Networks of Authority: Informal Governance, Religious Boundaries, and Social Liability in Contemporary Iraq

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Abstract

Contemporary Iraq is commonly analyzed through constitutional institutions, sectarian power sharing, electoral competition, political parties, militia organizations, and relations between Baghdad and the Kurdistan Region. These perspectives illuminate important dimensions of the post-2003 political order but provide an incomplete account of how authority operates in everyday social life. This article argues that governance in Iraq occurs through a hybrid institutional environment in which formal state structures intersect with networks of family, tribal leadership, religious authority, political patronage, and armed organizations.

Drawing on theories of social capital, social liability, network sociology, and informal governance, the article examines how these relationships distribute resources, mediate disputes, establish obligations, and maintain communal boundaries. Religious dissent provides a particularly revealing case. Apostasy, atheism, agnosticism, conversion from Islam, and criticism of religion occupy different legal and social positions, yet each can bring individual belief into conflict with family expectations, religious identity, and community relationships.

The article develops the concept of decentralized social governance to explain how interconnected actors can regulate conduct without centralized direction. Families, tribes, religious authorities, political organizations, armed actors, and community networks may exercise overlapping forms of influence through reputation, exclusion, economic dependence, threats, or coercion. The same relationships that provide solidarity and protection can therefore become sources of social liability when individual identity conflicts with network norms.

This tension is conceptualized as the solidarity-conformity paradox: network cohesion can increase both the capacity to support members and the capacity to enforce norms. The Iraqi case consequently demonstrates why religious freedom cannot be evaluated solely through constitutional guarantees or criminal prohibitions. It also requires attention to the relationships through which dissent becomes visible, sanctions become possible, and effective protection is obtained or denied.

Keywords: Iraq; informal governance; religious authority; social liability; religious freedom

1. Introduction

The political transformation of Iraq after 2003 produced a new constitutional order, competitive elections, decentralized institutions, and an extensive restructuring of political authority. It also generated a political system in which formal institutions operate alongside relationships of patronage, religious authority, tribal affiliation, party organization, and armed power. Much of the scholarship on post-2003 Iraq has understandably focused on sectarian competition, state weakness, institutional design, corruption, militia politics, and the distribution of power among political elites (Dodge, 2012, 2020; Haddad, 2011; Mansour, 2021).

These approaches explain a great deal about Iraqi politics. They explain less about how authority is experienced in everyday social life.

Formal institutions do not operate separately from society. Individuals approach government through families, professional relationships, political parties, tribes, religious communities, and local networks. These relationships can provide employment, protection, information, mediation, political access, and economic assistance. They can also shape expectations concerning marriage, reputation, family obligation, religious practice, and acceptable behavior. Understanding governance therefore requires attention not only to institutions but to the networks through which institutional and social power is exercised.

Social capital provides one way of approaching this problem. Coleman (1988) emphasized the role of relationships in generating obligations, information, and enforceable norms, while Bourdieu (1986) drew attention to the resources available through durable networks. Portes (1998), however, cautioned that the same relationships that create solidarity can impose excessive obligations and restrict individual freedom. Leenders and Gabbay (1999) similarly treated network structures as potential sources of advantage and disadvantage. Gabbay's later work applied this distinction between social capital and social liability to political and strategic networks in the Muslim world (Gabbay, 2014a, 2014b).

Iraq offers a particularly useful setting in which to extend this perspective. Informal networks are not simply alternatives to weak state institutions. They intersect with those institutions and sometimes operate through them. Political parties influence bureaucracies, armed organizations possess political and social networks, tribal actors mediate disputes, religious authorities exercise influence beyond formal religious institutions, and families remain central sources of material and social support. The result is an institutional environment in which formal and informal authority frequently overlap (Dodge & Mansour, 2021; Mansour & Khatib, 2021).

Religious dissent provides an especially revealing lens through which to examine this system. Iraq's Constitution recognizes important protections for religious belief and practice, yet individual religious identity remains embedded in family, personal status, community, and political relationships. Leaving Islam, converting to another religion, identifying as atheist or agnostic, or publicly criticizing religion may therefore have consequences that cannot be inferred from constitutional law alone.

The relevant question is not whether Iraqi society is uniformly intolerant of religious dissent. It is not. Responses vary considerably among families, communities, regions, and individuals. Rather, the question is how a change in belief becomes socially consequential and why similar beliefs can produce very different outcomes depending on the relationships surrounding the individual.

This article makes three contributions. First, it extends the social capital-social liability framework to the regulation of individual religious identity. Second, it develops decentralized social governance as a mechanism through which overlapping social actors can regulate behavior without centralized coordination. Third, it proposes the solidarity-conformity paradox to explain why network cohesion can increase both the resources available to members and the capacity to impose costs on members who depart from important norms.

The article uses a qualitative analytical approach combining scholarship on Iraqi political and social organization with Iraqi legal materials, institutional research, and contemporary country-of-origin evidence. The purpose is not to estimate the prevalence of persecution or predict outcomes for all religious dissenters. It is to identify the social mechanisms through which religious identity can become a source of vulnerability and the conditions under which formal protection may or may not counterbalance informal authority.

2. Religious Freedom and the Formal Institutional Order

Iraq's constitutional framework contains meaningful protections for religious freedom. The 2005 Constitution establishes equality before the law and protects freedom of thought, conscience, and belief. It also recognizes Iraq's Islamic identity while guaranteeing religious rights to several communities (Republic of Iraq, 2005).

These provisions coexist with a more complicated legal environment. Islam remains constitutionally significant, personal-status matters are closely connected to religious affiliation, and conversion away from Islam does not receive the same legal recognition as conversion to Islam. Under Iraqi personal-status law, conversion from Islam to another religion is prohibited, while conversion to Islam is permitted; converts to Christianity continue to be regarded as Muslim for legal purposes (European Union Agency for Asylum [EUAA], 2025). Iraq does not maintain a general criminal offense of apostasy, but this absence should not be confused with complete legal neutrality toward religious departure.

Blasphemy presents a separate issue. Article 372 of the Iraqi Penal Code criminalizes certain acts involving insults to religious beliefs, sacred persons, ceremonies, and symbols (Republic of Iraq, 1969). Apostasy and blasphemy should therefore be analytically separated. The former concerns religious departure, while the latter concerns expression perceived as offensive to religion. In practice, however, public declarations of atheism, conversion, or criticism of religious teachings can blur the distinction.

This legal structure illustrates a broader feature of Iraqi governance. Formal law recognizes individual rights while simultaneously operating within an institutional order in which religious

identity retains legal and social significance. The resulting tension does not mean constitutional protections are meaningless. It means that their practical effect depends partly on the institutions and relationships through which individuals attempt to exercise them.

The distinction between formal rights and effective freedom is central to the analysis that follows. A person may possess a constitutional right while confronting social costs that make exercising it difficult. Conversely, social conservatism does not establish that state institutions will necessarily refuse protection. Formal law and informal authority interact, but neither can simply be inferred from the other.

3. Informal Governance, Social Capital, and Network Authority

Informal institutions are generally understood as socially shared rules and practices that shape behavior outside formally codified procedures (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004). In Iraq, however, informal authority is not confined to spaces where the state is absent. Political, tribal, religious, and social networks frequently intersect with formal institutions.

This overlap is particularly visible in post-2003 political organization. Party networks have influenced public employment and bureaucratic access, while armed and political organizations have developed relationships extending across state, economic, and community institutions. Dodge and Mansour (2021) describe corruption and patronage not merely as individual misconduct but as mechanisms embedded in political organization. Mansour's (2021) analysis of the Popular Mobilization Forces similarly demonstrates that armed organizations operate through networks spanning political, economic, administrative, and social domains.

Tribal authority provides another example. Tribal relationships can mediate disputes, mobilize support, and provide protection. Their continued importance does not imply that tribes replace courts or police. Individuals may use formal and informal mechanisms simultaneously, choosing among them according to accessibility, effectiveness, relationships, and the nature of the dispute.

Religious authority also operates through multiple institutions and networks. Post-2003 changes to religious endowments, clerical institutions, shrines, and political organizations created new relationships between religious authority and state resources (Hasan, 2019). Religious actors vary substantially in ideology, political engagement, and social influence, but their authority cannot be understood solely through formal office.

These structures are significant because networks provide resources. Families offer housing and economic support. Tribal relationships facilitate mediation. Political connections may provide access to institutions. Religious communities offer belonging and assistance. Such relationships constitute forms of social capital insofar as individuals gain resources through membership and connection (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988).

Yet networks also create obligations. Coleman (1988) recognized that network closure facilitates norms and sanctions, while Portes (1998) emphasized that cohesive communities may impose

substantial demands on members. Social capital is therefore not inherently beneficial to every actor in every circumstance.

The concept of social liability captures this relational dimension. A network that benefits an individual under one set of conditions can become constraining under another. The network need not change. The individual's position within it may change instead.

Religious dissent provides a clear example. A family may remain a source of housing, financial assistance, affection, and identity while simultaneously becoming a source of pressure when a member openly rejects a religious norm. Social capital and social liability can therefore coexist within the same relationships.

4. Overlapping Networks of Authority in Contemporary Iraq

The Iraqi state should not be understood as a single center of authority surrounded by separate informal actors. Authority is better understood as distributed across institutions and networks whose boundaries frequently overlap. This pattern is particularly visible in post-2003 Iraq, where political parties, armed organizations, tribal structures, religious institutions, and state agencies have developed relationships that cross conventional distinctions between formal and informal power (Dodge & Mansour, 2021; Mansour & Khatib, 2021).

Political parties operate within parliament, ministries, and other state institutions while maintaining patronage networks outside them. Armed organizations may simultaneously possess formal security roles, political representation, economic interests, and local constituencies. Mansour's (2021) analysis of the Popular Mobilization Forces demonstrates how armed groups can function through networks extending across political, security, economic, administrative, and social spheres. Their influence therefore cannot always be located neatly either inside or outside the state.

Tribal authority illustrates a different form of institutional overlap. Tribal leaders and networks continue to play roles in dispute resolution, mediation, protection, and the management of local relationships. Their persistence does not mean that tribes simply replace courts, police, or other state institutions. Formal and tribal mechanisms may coexist, and tribal actors themselves may maintain relationships with political parties, government officials, and security institutions. Informal dispute resolution can therefore complement, compete with, or intersect with formal state authority depending on the actors and circumstances involved.

Religious authority is similarly dispersed. Clerics, religious endowments, seminaries, shrines, political organizations, and community institutions occupy different positions within Iraq's religious landscape. The restructuring of religious endowments after 2003 also created important connections between religious authority, political competition, institutional resources, and the state (Hasan, 2019). Religious influence consequently cannot be reduced either to formal religious institutions or to clerical authority alone.

This institutional permeability helps explain why state capacity and informal governance can coexist. Patronage, tribal mediation, religious authority, and political networks should not automatically be interpreted as evidence that the state is absent. In some circumstances, these relationships operate alongside formal institutions; in others, they operate through them. Post-2003 governance is therefore better understood as an interaction between formal authority and networks that shape how institutional resources are accessed and exercised (Dodge & Mansour, 2021).

The same pattern is visible at the household and community level. Individuals are commonly embedded in several networks at once. Family relationships may overlap with employment and economic dependence. Tribal affiliation may intersect with political or security connections. Religious communities may provide social belonging as well as practical assistance. A conflict originating within one relationship can consequently acquire greater significance when it moves into others.

This is particularly important for religious dissent because the consequences of disclosure depend partly on network reach. A disagreement over atheism, agnosticism, conversion, or religious criticism may remain a private family matter with limited consequences. The situation changes if information moves through extended kinship, employment, religious, tribal, political, or community relationships. The significance of disclosure therefore depends not only on who initially objects to the individual's beliefs, but also on which other actors can be reached through that person's network.

Network power in this sense is cumulative rather than necessarily centralized. No single actor needs to coordinate the response. Pressure can emerge through several relationships at once, with one actor affecting family support, another reputation, another employment, and another access to protection. Overlapping networks can therefore produce consequences greater than those available to any single actor acting independently.

The same structure can also operate in the opposite direction. Networks may interrupt rather than reinforce pressure. A supportive family member can prevent a dispute from spreading. Employment and professional relationships can provide economic independence. A religious community may offer a convert alternative social support. Civil society organizations, lawyers, or state institutions may provide resources capable of counterbalancing hostile relationships. The outcome depends on the relative strength and reach of constraining and protective networks.

Iraq's informal networks should therefore not be characterized as uniformly conservative, coercive, or hostile to religious dissent. Networks are structures through which resources, information, influence, and protection circulate. Their consequences depend on the norms involved, the resources available to different actors, the individual's dependence on particular relationships, and the existence of countervailing connections. This relational understanding of authority provides the foundation for examining how religious identity can shift from a source of belonging to a source of vulnerability.

5. Religious Identity and the Boundaries of Belonging

Religious identity in Iraq is not solely a statement of personal belief. It may also signify family membership, communal history, personal-status identity, marriage expectations, and social belonging. An individual can therefore change privately without immediately changing how others classify him or her. This distinction between internal belief and socially recognized identity is especially important when examining apostasy, atheism, agnosticism, and conversion.

Someone may cease believing in Islam while continuing to be regarded by family members, state institutions, and the wider community as Muslim. The individual may retain a Muslim name, participate in family religious occasions, observe certain practices for social rather than theological reasons, or simply avoid discussing personal beliefs. In such circumstances, a significant change in private belief may produce little immediate change in social position.

The situation can become different when religious departure becomes visible. Explicitly declaring atheism or agnosticism, converting to another religion, publicly criticizing religious teachings, refusing practices expected by family members, or joining another religious community can transform what was previously an internal matter into a social one. Contemporary country evidence indicates that converts and nonbelievers in Iraq may conceal their religious positions because of stigma and concern about reactions from families and communities (EUAA, 2022, 2024, 2025). The importance of concealment itself suggests that the social consequences of belief depend partly on whether religious difference becomes known.

Haddad's (2011) analysis of sectarian identity cautions against treating Iraqi communal categories as timeless or fixed. Their political and social significance changes according to historical and institutional circumstances. The same principle can be applied at the individual level. Being socially identified as Muslim does not establish the intensity of a person's religious belief, practice, or attachment. Nor does private nonbelief necessarily alter the individual's position within family or community networks. What matters for the present analysis is the point at which others interpret religious difference as crossing a meaningful boundary of belonging.

Family, Dependence, and Religious Identity

Family relationships are especially important because they frequently constitute an individual's most immediate source of social capital. Housing, financial assistance, employment contacts, marriage relationships, emotional support, caregiving, and access to wider social networks may all operate through kinship. The consequences of religious disagreement therefore depend partly on the individual's position within these relationships.

For an economically independent adult with supportive relatives, religious disagreement may produce argument or disappointment without seriously affecting everyday life. The situation may be very different for someone who depends upon family for housing, employment, financial assistance, or access to other resources. In the latter case, religious disagreement can affect relationships that are important to material as well as emotional security.

This does not mean that family opposition should automatically be equated with coercion or persecution. Families disagree about religion in Iraq as elsewhere, and disagreement can remain within the ordinary boundaries of family conflict. The sociological issue is not disagreement itself but the resources attached to the relationship. Pressure acquires greater significance when the actors applying it can alter the individual's access to housing, income, marriage, social support, or physical security.

Conversion may be particularly consequential because it can make religious change institutionally and socially visible. Iraqi law does not recognize conversion from Islam in the same manner that it recognizes conversion to Islam, and converts from Islam may continue to be legally treated as Muslim. Socially, conversion can also connect the individual to another religious community while potentially disrupting relationships within the community of origin (EUAA, 2024, 2025).

The issue is therefore not simply that the individual has adopted a different theology. Conversion may be interpreted by others as a change in communal membership.

Visibility and the Circulation of Information

Community networks can extend the consequences of religious disagreement beyond the household. Information about conversion or nonbelief may move through relatives, workplaces, neighborhoods, religious communities, tribal relationships, and digital networks. Network closure facilitates both cooperation and norm enforcement because information circulates among connected actors (Coleman, 1988).

This circulation matters because religious dissent does not produce social consequences in isolation. An individual may disclose atheism to one relative, discuss religious doubts with friends, post criticism of religion online, or attend the services of another religious community. Each act creates different possibilities for information to reach additional actors.

Digital communication has made this boundary increasingly difficult to control. Statements originally directed toward friends or a limited audience can be copied, shared, or brought to the attention of relatives and community members. Public religious identity is therefore not simply a matter of formal declaration. It can emerge gradually through relationships and communication.

The public visibility of a belief does not by itself determine vulnerability. What matters is who learns of it, how those actors interpret it, and what capacity they possess to respond.

This helps explain why two individuals expressing similar beliefs may experience very different consequences. One may belong to a family that treats religion largely as a personal matter. Another may be embedded in relationships in which religious identity is closely connected to family reputation, marriage, communal membership, or moral obligation. The content of the belief is similar; the surrounding network is not.

Concealment as a Network Strategy

Concealment should also be understood relationally. An atheist, agnostic, or convert may avoid disclosure not simply because of fear of physical harm but because disclosure could threaten valued relationships. Contemporary country evidence reports concealment among atheists and converts in Iraq in response to stigma and anticipated social consequences (EUAA, 2022, 2024).

From a network perspective, concealment can function as a strategy for preserving social capital. An individual may participate in family religious practices, avoid discussing nonbelief, or maintain a publicly Muslim identity while privately holding different convictions. Such behavior does not necessarily demonstrate continuing religious commitment. It may reflect an effort to preserve relationships that provide belonging, support, or material resources.

This distinction is important because the same observable behavior can have different meanings. Participation in Ramadan, attendance at a religious event, or silence about personal beliefs may reflect genuine religious attachment, cultural identification, family solidarity, strategic concealment, or some combination of these.

The relevant question is therefore not whether an individual outwardly conforms, but why that conformity occurs and what consequences the individual anticipates from behaving differently.

Alternative Communities and Countervailing Belonging

Religious departure does not necessarily result in social isolation. Individuals may develop alternative relationships through friendships, employment, universities, civil society, professional networks, or new religious communities. These connections can provide resources that reduce dependence on family or local community networks.

For converts, membership in a new religious community may provide both religious identity and alternative social support. For atheists and agnostics, professional or friendship networks may create environments in which religious identity has less importance. The availability of these relationships can substantially change the practical consequences of dissent.

Their existence also demonstrates why social capital should not be treated as belonging to one network alone. Individuals participate in multiple networks, and the effect of losing support from one depends partly on what is available elsewhere. A person with independent employment, supportive friends, and alternative housing may absorb family exclusion more easily than someone whose economic and social resources are concentrated within the family.

Religious dissent can therefore be understood as a potential change in network position. The individual's beliefs may alter which relationships provide resources, which relationships impose obligations, and which relationships become available as alternatives.

The boundaries of religious belonging are consequently neither purely legal nor purely theological. They are maintained and negotiated through social relationships. Religious identity becomes most consequential when changes in belief alter an individual's position within networks that control meaningful resources or define important forms of belonging.

This provides the bridge to the question of vulnerability. Religious difference alone does not determine social risk. The consequences depend on visibility, dependence, the reach of relevant networks, the capacity of actors to impose sanctions, and the availability of relationships or institutions capable of counterbalancing them.

6. Religious Dissent and Network Vulnerability

Contemporary evidence concerning religious dissent in Iraq supports a conditional rather than universal interpretation of vulnerability. Converts, atheists, agnostics, apostates, and individuals accused of blasphemy do not constitute a single social category, nor do they encounter identical responses. Experiences vary according to family relationships, locality, economic independence, social visibility, and the reach of the networks in which individuals are embedded. The significance of religious dissent therefore lies not only in the belief or identity itself but in the social environment through which it becomes known and consequential.

Conversion from Islam

Conversion from Islam is particularly significant because it can make religious departure difficult to separate from family and communal identity. Conversion may affect participation in family religious practices, marriage expectations, relationships with relatives, and membership in a new religious community. Iraqi law further complicates this position because conversion from Islam does not receive the same legal recognition as conversion to Islam, and a person who converts from Islam may continue to be legally classified as Muslim (EUAA, 2025).

Country evidence indicates that conversion from Islam remains socially sensitive and that converts may encounter stigma, family pressure, ostracism, discrimination, threats, or, in some circumstances, violence (EUAA, 2022, 2024, 2025). These reports do not establish that such consequences follow every conversion. They demonstrate instead that conversion can activate relationships extending beyond the individual's private religious choice.

Family response is especially important. Conversion can be understood not only as a change in personal belief but as a departure from expectations associated with family identity and belonging. This may be particularly consequential where the individual remains dependent on relatives for housing, financial support, employment contacts, or other resources. In such circumstances, the ability of family members to influence behavior arises partly from resources that ordinarily function as social capital.

The position of a convert with supportive relatives, independent income, and an established alternative community is different from that of a person economically and socially dependent on relatives who strongly oppose the conversion. The religious change may be similar, but the surrounding network structure is not. Conversion therefore illustrates why religious identity alone is an inadequate measure of vulnerability.

Atheism, Agnosticism, and Nonbelief

Atheism and agnosticism create somewhat different dynamics. Unlike formal conversion to another religion, nonbelief can remain entirely private and may require no change in institutional or communal affiliation. An individual may cease believing while continuing to participate in family and cultural practices and remaining publicly identified as Muslim.

Visibility changes the situation. Public declarations of atheism, criticism of religious doctrine, refusal to participate in expected practices, or online expressions of nonbelief may expose an individual to reactions from relatives, community members, religious actors, or others. Country evidence has reported that some Iraqi atheists conceal their beliefs because of stigma and concern about adverse family and social reactions (EUAA, 2022, 2024, 2025).

This distinction between private and public nonbelief is important. Concealment can reduce immediate exposure while simultaneously limiting the individual's ability to express an important aspect of identity. The absence of visible conflict therefore does not necessarily establish the absence of social constraint. In some cases, it may reflect an individual's decision to avoid disclosure.

Agnosticism deserves separate consideration because self-identification and social classification may diverge. An individual may describe himself or herself as uncertain about religious belief rather than as an atheist or apostate. Relatives or community members may make a different classification and regard that uncertainty as rejection of Islam. The social consequences can therefore depend on perceived identity rather than the terminology chosen by the individual.

This distinction matters analytically. Categories such as atheist, agnostic, apostate, and convert describe different positions, but the response of other actors may depend less on precise theological distinctions than on whether the person is perceived as having rejected an expected religious identity.

Blasphemy, Expression, and Religious Dissent

Blasphemy presents another form of vulnerability because it concerns expression rather than religious affiliation alone. Article 372 of the Iraqi Penal Code criminalizes certain forms of insult toward religious beliefs, sacred persons, ceremonies, and symbols (Republic of Iraq, 1969). An individual therefore need not abandon Islam to encounter consequences associated with religious criticism.

Conversely, an atheist or convert may avoid criticizing Islam altogether. Apostasy, conversion, atheism, and blasphemy should consequently remain analytically distinct. They overlap when explanations of nonbelief, criticism of religious doctrine, online commentary, or statements made in the course of conversion are interpreted by others as insulting religion.

The distinction between identity and expression also affects visibility. Private nonbelief may remain socially unknown, while a public statement concerning religion can circulate beyond its original audience. Digital communication increases this possibility because statements, images,

or comments can be redistributed through networks connecting friends, relatives, coworkers, and community members. What begins as individual expression may consequently become known to actors far removed from the original interaction.

The resulting vulnerability depends not simply on whether a statement is controversial, but on who becomes aware of it and what resources those actors possess.

Family, Tribal, and Community Responses

Family relationships are central because religious dissent frequently becomes visible first within the household or extended family. A family may interpret conversion or nonbelief as affecting marriage, children, reputation, inheritance expectations, or collective identity. Responses can range from acceptance and disagreement to pressure, exclusion, threats, or more serious forms of coercion.

There is no basis for treating Iraqi families as uniformly hostile to religious dissent. Family attitudes vary considerably, and supportive relatives may be among the strongest sources of protection available to an individual. The relevant issue is the configuration of the particular family network and the resources controlled through it.

Tribal relationships require similar caution. Tribes remain relevant to dispute mediation and social organization in parts of Iraq, but tribal structures, authority, and practices vary. A religious dispute originating within a household may acquire a wider dimension where family and tribal relationships overlap, particularly if the dispute becomes connected to marriage, reputation, or relations between families. This possibility should be examined in the circumstances of a particular case rather than assumed from tribal affiliation alone.

Community response may also extend beyond formal tribal structures. Neighbors, coworkers, religious figures, employers, and extended kin can influence reputation, employment, housing, and social participation. Individually, these actors may possess limited authority. Their significance can increase when information and influence move across overlapping relationships.

Politically Connected and Armed Actors

The potential involvement of politically connected or armed actors changes the analysis because it introduces a different level of sanctioning capacity. Iraq's armed organizations vary considerably in ideology, territorial influence, political relationships, institutional status, and behavior. They should not be treated as a single category, nor should their involvement be inferred simply from the existence of religious dissent.

Mansour's (2021) analysis of the Popular Mobilization Forces demonstrates that armed organizations can operate through networks connecting political, economic, administrative, security, and social institutions. This does not establish that the PMF collectively targets religious dissenters. It does show why the network position of a particular threatening actor matters when evaluating an individual's access to protection.

A threat from an isolated private individual differs from one involving an actor with access to weapons, political relationships, security contacts, or influence over local institutions. The relevant questions concern the identity of the actor, the resources available to that actor, the geographic and institutional reach of the network, and whether state authorities are willing and able to intervene.

Specificity is particularly important here. General references to "militias," "tribes," or "religious groups" can obscure substantial differences among organizations and locations. Network analysis requires identifying the actors involved and examining the relationships through which they can realistically exercise influence.

A Conditional Model of Network Vulnerability

Across these forms of religious dissent, five variables are particularly useful for explaining why similar identities can produce different outcomes: visibility, dependence, network reach, sanctioning capacity, and countervailing protection.

Visibility concerns whether religious dissent is known and to whom. Private disbelief may have few immediate social consequences, while public conversion, online religious criticism, or disclosure to relatives can bring the individual's identity into a wider network.

Dependence concerns the resources received through relationships that may become hostile. Housing, employment, financial assistance, caregiving, and emotional support can make the consequences of disagreement more significant. Dependence is therefore not merely economic. It can also be social and institutional.

Network reach concerns the ability of information and influence to move beyond the original relationship. A dispute confined to one household has a different structure from one that extends through kinship, tribal, employment, religious, political, or security relationships.

Sanctioning capacity concerns what opposing actors can actually do. Disapproval, exclusion, loss of financial support, employment consequences, threats, and physical violence represent very different levels of capacity. The existence of hostile attitudes alone does not establish the ability to impose serious consequences.

Countervailing protection concerns the resources available to resist or offset those pressures. Supportive relatives, independent employment, alternative housing, professional networks, religious communities, civil society, and effective state institutions can alter the individual's position substantially.

These variables interact. High visibility does not necessarily produce serious vulnerability where the surrounding network is tolerant or the individual possesses strong alternative support. Strong hostility may have limited practical effect where the hostile actor lacks reach or sanctioning capacity. Conversely, an individual may become substantially more vulnerable where dissent is visible, dependence is high, hostile networks extend across several domains, meaningful sanctions are available, and countervailing protection is weak.

Religious dissent in Iraq should therefore not be approached through a simple question of whether apostates, converts, atheists, or agnostics are "at risk." Such categories are too broad to explain individual outcomes. The more useful question is how religious identity interacts with the individual's social position and with the resources available to both constraining and protective networks.

This conditional model also connects the empirical discussion to the broader argument of the article. Vulnerability is not produced by informal networks merely because they exist. It emerges when an individual's position within those networks changes in ways that transform relationships previously associated with belonging, assistance, or protection into potential sources of constraint. The next section develops this process theoretically through decentralized social governance and the solidarity-conformity paradox.

7. Decentralized Social Governance and the Solidarity-Conformity Paradox

The evidence above presents a broader theoretical problem. Religious dissent can be regulated even where no central institution organizes the response. Family members, relatives, religious actors, community figures, employers, tribal actors, and politically connected individuals may respond independently, yet their combined actions can shape the individual's choices.

This article describes that process as decentralized social governance.

The concept does not imply that families or communities function as governments. It refers to the capacity of overlapping relationships to establish expectations, circulate information, and impose consequences without centralized coordination. Governance emerges from the cumulative effects of actors embedded in connected networks.

Information is crucial. A norm cannot be socially enforced against conduct that remains unknown. Once religious dissent becomes visible, network structure influences how far information travels and which actors become involved. Digital communication further weakens the boundary between private and public identity by allowing statements to circulate beyond their intended audiences.

Sanctions also vary in severity. They may begin with argument, disappointment, reputational pressure, or demands for conformity. More serious consequences can involve withdrawal of financial assistance, housing problems, exclusion, threats, or violence. The existence of severe sanctions should not be inferred from ordinary family disagreement. What matters is the range of resources actors possess and the individual's dependence on them.

This brings the analysis back to social capital. Networks capable of imposing meaningful costs are often powerful precisely because they also provide meaningful benefits.

The relationship can be described as the solidarity-conformity paradox:

As network cohesion increases, both the capacity to provide support and the capacity to enforce important group norms may increase. Whether cohesion functions primarily as social capital or

social liability for a particular individual depends on the individual's relationship to those norms and the availability of alternative sources of support and protection.

The proposition does not claim that cohesive networks are inherently intolerant. Cohesion creates organizational capacity, not a predetermined use of that capacity. A close family that accepts religious difference may provide strong protection to a dissenter. A similarly cohesive family that regards religious departure as unacceptable may possess substantial capacity to pressure the same individual.

This distinction separates normative hostility from network capacity. Neither alone determines vulnerability.

Strong hostility combined with little ability to affect the individual may have limited practical consequences. Strong network capacity combined with tolerant norms may be protective. Vulnerability becomes greater when strong objection, extensive network reach, meaningful sanctioning resources, individual dependence, and weak countervailing protection coincide.

The paradox also explains concealment. A person may hide atheism or conversion not because the surrounding network lacks value but because it has considerable value. Concealment can preserve family relationships, housing, employment, emotional support, and community belonging. The network remains a source of social capital while simultaneously limiting open expression of identity.

Alternative networks can reduce this dependence. Professional relationships, friendships, religious communities, civil society, independent employment, and supportive relatives may provide resources that reduce the costs of disagreement. Bridging relationships are therefore important not because they are inherently more tolerant than bonding ties, but because they diversify the individual's sources of social capital (Putnam, 2000).

Religious dissent thus reveals a broader limitation of treating social capital as an aggregate good. A highly cohesive network may function effectively for the group while imposing significant costs on particular members. Collective solidarity and individual autonomy are related but distinct outcomes.

8. Effective Protection, Geography, and Relocation

Formal rights become most important when individuals can rely on institutions to protect them against coercion. The existence of constitutional protections, police, and courts therefore answers only the first part of the protection question. Effective protection requires both willingness and capacity.

An individual must be able to approach the relevant institution. Officials must be willing to respond to the conduct involved, and they must possess sufficient authority and resources to constrain the threatening actor. These conditions vary across locations, institutions, and cases.

Family-based religious conflict illustrates the difficulty. Officials may encounter a dispute involving conversion or atheism as a family or interpersonal problem rather than primarily as a religious-freedom issue. Mediation may sometimes prevent escalation and provide a satisfactory resolution. In other circumstances, an approach centered on family reconciliation may conflict with an individual's desire to live openly according to a changed belief.

Network position can also affect access to protection. Individuals differ in economic resources, political relationships, education, legal knowledge, and family connections. Threatening actors differ in the same respects. Research on Iraqi political networks demonstrates why formal institutional access should not automatically be assumed to be socially equal (Dodge & Mansour, 2021; Mansour, 2021).

This problem is particularly important where a specific threatening actor possesses political or coercive connections. Such connections should not be presumed merely because an individual refers to "militias" or tribes. Analysis requires specificity: which actors are involved, what resources do they possess, what is their geographic reach, and can state institutions constrain them?

Large urban environments may provide greater anonymity, employment opportunities, and possibilities for establishing new social ties, although the feasibility of relocation depends on individual circumstances and access to support. The Kurdistan Region also has a distinct political, administrative, and security environment from federal Iraq. Neither Baghdad nor the Kurdistan Region, however, should be treated as automatically protective for religious dissenters; the relevance of relocation depends on the individual's circumstances, available support, and the reach of the actors involved (EUAA, 2024, 2025). Relocation is better understood as a reconfiguration of network position.

Physical distance may weaken local monitoring and reduce the influence of particular relatives or community actors. It may also remove the individual's housing, employment, financial assistance, and established support. Family relationships can continue across cities, tribal and political networks may cross governorate boundaries, and digital information is not geographically contained.

The practical value of relocation therefore depends on two processes: whether movement weakens the network producing vulnerability and whether the individual can construct viable alternative networks.

An economically independent individual with professional skills, supportive relationships, and access to housing may be able to establish substantial autonomy elsewhere. Someone dependent on family or local connections may find the same movement far more difficult.

The relevant question is consequently not whether a city is safe in the abstract. It is whether the proposed location changes the balance between constraining and protective relationships sufficiently to allow the individual to live there with meaningful autonomy and access to effective protection.

9. Conclusion

Religious freedom in contemporary Iraq cannot be understood through constitutional provisions or criminal law alone. Individuals experience religious identity through families, communities, religious institutions, tribal relationships, political connections, and other networks that shape everyday life. These relationships can provide protection and opportunity while also establishing expectations about belonging.

Religious dissent exposes this duality. Apostasy, conversion, atheism, agnosticism, and religious criticism do not generate uniform consequences. Their significance depends on whether dissent becomes visible, how relevant actors interpret it, what resources those actors possess, how dependent the individual is on the relationships involved, and whether alternative support or effective institutional protection is available.

The concept of decentralized social governance explains how separate actors can collectively regulate behavior without centralized direction. The solidarity-conformity paradox identifies the deeper tension underlying this process: the organizational characteristics that make networks capable of supporting their members can also make them capable of enforcing important norms.

This does not make social networks inherently restrictive. The same family, community, or institutional relationships may protect a dissenter. What matters is the individual's position within those relationships and the norms governing them.

The Iraqi case therefore cautions against two opposite conclusions. Formal religious freedom does not establish that every individual can exercise that freedom without substantial social constraint. At the same time, documented hostility toward some converts, atheists, or apostates does not establish uniform vulnerability among all religious dissenters.

The analytical task lies between these positions. It requires examining how belief becomes socially visible, how authority travels through networks, what sanctions are realistically available, and what sources of protection can counterbalance them.

More broadly, Iraq demonstrates why the study of governance should extend beyond the formal state. Between legal permission and individual autonomy lies a dense field of relationships through which resources, obligations, influence, and protection are distributed. Understanding those relationships is essential not only to the study of religious freedom but to understanding how authority itself operates in contemporary Iraq.

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