



# **ECONOMIC DRIVERS OF YOUTH POLITICAL DISCONTENT IN IRAQ:**

The Voice of Young People in  
Kurdistan, Baghdad, Basra and Thi-Qar

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## About the project

*'Improving Policy, Service Delivery, Gender Equality and Responsiveness to Iraqi Citizens'* is a multi-year Sida funded project implemented in partnership by Global Partners Governance (GPG) and the Iraq Foundation (IF). It aims to support the Iraqi Council of Representatives (CoR), the Speakership, Parliamentary Committees, Regional CoR Offices, citizens and CSOs by adopting inclusive and evidence-based policy mechanisms, examining how legislation and policies operate in practice, and making constructive proposals for improvements.

The project aims to achieve both intermediate and longer-term results, built around four specific objectives:

1. Strategic and Reform-Focused Political Leadership within Parliament.
2. Parliamentary Committees adopt more inclusive and evidence-based policy mechanisms.
3. Linking the Parliament with the Provinces and Constituencies on Service Delivery.
4. Cross-cutting Support to Women Politicians.



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## CONTENTS

<b>Executive Summary</b>	Page 5
<b>Introduction</b>	Page 10
<b>Part 1: Context Analysis</b>	Page 13
1.1	Macroeconomic analysis
1.2	Poverty and Youth
1.3	Survey evidence
1.4	Sectarian or secular? A brief literature review to consider the source of protest and violence amongst the Iraqi youth.
<b>Part 2: Sub-Regional Economic Analysis</b>	Page 23
2.1.	Inequality in Iraq
2.2.	City level analysis
2.3.	Inequality amongst the provinces
<b>Part 3: Qualitative Data from Federal Iraq</b>	Page 29
<b>Part 4: The Kurdistan Region</b>	Page 35
4.1.	Iraqi Kurdistan's recent economic challenges and its young population
4.2.	Synthesis of interviews I. Economic Challenges and Youth II. Political Perceptions and Nationalism III. Forms of youth political engagement in Kurdistan
<b>Part 5: Conclusions</b>	Page 51
<b>Appendix</b>	Page 55
<b>End notes</b>	Page 65





# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY & INTRODUCTION

Since 2003, the people of Iraq have not experienced a reliable level of peace, stability and security. That is 17 years ago, the entire lifetime of many young people now coming of age in Iraq, whose views, opinions and attitudes can no longer be ignored. Any young Iraqi born in and around 2003, has witnessed nothing but a country in turmoil. The popular protests in October 2019, in which young people played a central role, were a major political turning point, which resulted in the Prime Minister, Adel Abdul-Mahdi and his government stepping down, leaving Iraq with a caretaker government for approximately 6 months, until May 2020. During this period, Iraq was the locus for US-Iranian tensions with the killing of Qasem Soleimani, as well as suffering both the economic devastation of the oil-price crash and the full force of the global pandemic, Covid-19. What impact have these events had on an already growing sense of mass discontent amongst young Iraqis?

Almost exactly one year on from the start of widespread popular protests on 1 October 2019, this rapid piece of research aims to respond directly to the tumultuous events of the past year and explore perceptions and attitudes of young people in Iraq and Kurdistan in their own words. In particular, it compares their views of their economic prospects with those of their parents' generation and their peers in other regions of Iraq and its near neighbours. On the basis of this primary research, the report formulates recommendations for policymakers, as well as further questions which deserve exploration in greater depth.

## The key themes emerging from the research are:

- Iraq's very youthful demographic (including in the Kurdistan region) is both an opportunity and challenge for policymakers. A keen, well-educated motivated young workforce could contribute significantly to the country taking advantage of post-ISIS stability, but there are structural, political and economic obstacles to realising this vision in practice.
- Addressing youth unemployment must be a central part of Iraq's economic diversification plan.
- Labour laws need revision to level the playing field between young people employed in the public and private sectors.
- The creation of more sophisticated policies and strategies to develop the private sector through young entrepreneurs could have a significant impact. This might include access to finance, supporting start-ups and private or social enterprises. Targeted support should be provided to young women, for example in procurement incentives and other support for businesses led by women.
- More broadly, Iraq's business environment is deteriorating. Economic development for all Iraqis, including young people, requires better regulation of the private sector, improved financial services and reform of the banking system.
- There is a need for political leadership to fill the vacuum in youth representation. At present, young people do not feel that mainstream political parties represent their interests. If this situation does not improve, it is likely that the worrying increase in those rejecting democratic systems entirely may continue.
- Digital platforms are clearly the preferred means for expressing political discontent, and represent the best potential for a new, more constructive method of political engagement.
- Efforts to combat corruption have historically generated some noise but little real effect. More sophisticated approaches need to be found to deal with the pervasive corrupt networks embedded in Iraq's economy.
- In the Kurdistan region, the extent of frustration with the party-led division of the region is growing. Projects in the region need to be based on partnerships that do not further entrench this division.

- Employment and career choices are the biggest concerns for young people. There has been a longstanding mismatch between university education in Iraq and the demands of professional life and the job market. Young people feel at a disadvantage compared to well-qualified workers from abroad, who are perceived as taking the most attractive jobs. This situation has been exacerbated recently by the economic, political and Covid-19 impacts. These disproportionately affect young people, even as the pervasive corruption tends to benefit older, more entrenched sectors of society.
- Young women face very pronounced economic barriers, with dramatically lower labour force participation, even in Kurdistan which is perceived as a relatively more gender equal society. Women in southern Iraq feel marginalised by a conservative and patriarchal society that restricts their choices and women are more likely to be involved in the informal economy, which has been hard hit by Covid-19.
- Young adults in Iraq can cooperate with each other, provided the right tools are developed. The evidence suggests that this generation of young Iraqis are more patriotic and less sectarian than previous generations, and have the potential to contribute positively to developing national identity.
- Young people want the private sector to thrive and proactive support to be provided, for example through microfinancing for entrepreneurs.
- Trust in the political system is non-existent and young people want very significant reforms. Overall, young Iraqis do not really identify with, or feel commitment to, the current political structures. Instead, there is support for changing the political system, with a rejection of the parties in power and politics more generally. Whatever the structures of government, reform must include genuine opportunities for young people to be heard and have an impact on improving the situation in Iraq; this would require cultural and behavioural shifts in the political class. The distance between Iraqi young people and the political elite has grown to a dangerous extent, with increasing numbers preferring a return to authoritarian rule to their current situation.

## Key recommendations:

It is clear that further research is required to examine in greater detail the sectors which provide the best opportunities for young people, which should aim to understand at a more granular level, the challenges facing Iraqis with different levels of education, household finances, political views and gender equality. Our recommendations, from this research, fall into four main areas, which all need to be addressed in order for Iraq to maximise the potential of its young population, and reduce the risk of discontent resulting in further cycles of violence, exclusion, instability and economic underperformance.

### 1. Improving Skills and Training

- Review of the university provision and teaching methods to provide the right qualifications for employment with additional skills training to foster entrepreneurial talents. Further studies to understand how Iraq has slipped behind regional and international comparators and how it can attract higher education talent.
- Development of continuing professional and personal development skills programmes: This would include training programmes on a wide range of skills such as start-ups, project management, fundraising, public speaking, communication, policy making, political participation, active citizenship, technological development(s) and sustainable energy.
- Organising a (virtual) talent camp or skills development programme. The programme can involve free technology education and job readiness training. There is a high demand for digital skills in the Kurdistan region, as digital entrepreneurship in the region (such as delivery services) is growing.

## 2. Providing Better Economic Opportunities

- Creation of a national jobs and training website to give young people better access to opportunities. This would be aimed at both private and public sectors to advertise for upcoming jobs, training, development and apprenticeship opportunities. This would both give young people better access to job opportunities and help employers and companies to access and develop talent.
- Using existing donors and supporters of Iraq to create provincial level micro-financing projects for new businesses, including start-up assistance such as legal, space and equipment. Focused support to be available for young women. This would require good regulation and supervision, as mentioned in further recommendations.
- Internships Initiative. This would build a network that would place students into internships in government, business and civil society. It would also them to broaden their network through alumni and participating organisations.
- Better regulation and supervision by the Government and Parliament of private and public companies in their recruitment and equality standards and practices, to address corruption, and help provide equal opportunities to young Iraqis.

## 3. Removing Legislative and Regulatory Barriers

- The Government of Iraq should develop reform plans for the public and private sectors, as part of diversifying its economy and levelling the playing field between the public and private sector. This includes regulating and holding to account the private sector, whilst encouraging robust public sector jobs for young graduates.
- Further studies should be undertaken into the mismatch between the level of education for young graduates and the available job market, as part of ongoing efforts to encourage the Government to reform the job market in Iraq.
- Review of legislation and labour market regulations through a gender lens to identify regulation which has a disproportionate effect on women.
- Review and improvement of banking regulations and supervision, and the business sector to widen access to finance for young people, start-ups, women and entrepreneurs.
- Review rules and regulations for international organisations and employers in Iraq to focus on the local labour market requirement, and more concerted rules to employer young Iraqi skilled workers.

## 4. Creating Genuine Political Representation

- Creation of national and subnational networks for young people to engage with each other and with policymakers on specific issues of interest to them, perhaps using existing online platforms (e.g. Facebook) and/or physical town hall meetings.
- Existing political parties may need support in improving their offer to young people, but young people are also interested in cross-sectarian political forums, outside the traditional party-political structures.
- Local or national Representative Councils for young people which consider real issues and result in specific policy recommendations can help to train a new generation of young active citizens.
- A youth debate programme at the regional and federal levels as a platform for young people with different political backgrounds to come together to develop their opinions on social and policy issues. These platforms can take the model of a Youth Parliament, such as that in the UK, and grow into a large network of youth engaging with politicians and parliamentarians (starting with Youth and Sports Committee of the Council of Representatives).
- A dedicated series of leadership and entrepreneurial programmes for young women graduates, young women in hard to reach areas in Iraq and KRI with limited access to opportunities and education.



This report aims to take the reader through a journey. Firstly, it explains the context and deep-rooted issues young people have faced since 2003. These help to frame the current political, economic and social challenges being experienced by young people in Iraq. Next, the literature review sets out the data and statistics, and surveys the specific regions the research has examined, to highlight the gravity of the challenges facing young people, and the underlying causes for political discontent among young Iraqis including those in the Kurdistan region. The main body of the report then looks at youth perceptions, attitudes and views through fieldwork and in-depth interviews that have been undertaken to inform qualitative analysis, specifically in three regions in Iraq mostly impacted by the protests (Baghdad, Basra and Thi-Qar) and the provinces of the Kurdistan region where a well-educated youth have faced high levels of unemployment and social discontent. The conclusions, key findings and recommendations at the end of this paper analyse and reflect on this primary data, with a view to informing policymakers in Iraq, Kurdistan Region-Iraq (KRI) and the wider international community.

We sincerely thank the people who have supported this research with their time and honest opinions, and the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida) for enabling this initiative. We hope the findings of this research will inform more effective policies that positively impact young people in Iraq and Kurdistan, at the local, regional and national levels and enable them to rise to the challenge of ensuring that the current and next generation of young Iraqis have an optimistic future, and a genuine chance of building a peaceful, prosperous and secure Iraq.

Iraq is going through one of its most challenging times since 2003. In under a year, since October 2019, the country's economy, political stability and infrastructure have nosedived after waves of protests, an absent government, oil demand and prices crashing, along with the global pandemic; all of these are having huge repercussions upon its citizens, particularly young people. Young people in Iraq have suffered disproportionately from recent conflicts and poor economic conditions, including high rates of youth unemployment, insufficient educational provision, little support for start-ups or young entrepreneurs and difficulty accessing affordable housing. The formal political process is dominated by older men, and the political party structures do not facilitate young people's voices. Young people's frustration with these circumstances has been visible in the recent protest movements.

The Kurdistan region is sometimes seen as an island of stability and relative prosperity within Iraq, but it too is suffering due to a confluence of factors: the crash in global oil prices, its budget disputed with Baghdad, as well as an incomplete – and stalling – reform process. While the region has not experienced anything on the scale of the protests in the rest of Iraq, public discontent with the economic and political situation is growing. Sporadic protests over the failure of the government to pay the salaries of public servants have been met with harsh crackdowns by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). As in the rest of Iraq, the region's young are disproportionately affected by economic crisis and political repression. Youth unemployment is rising, while political channels for young people to express their discontent are shut. In the face of diminished opportunities and unfulfilled aspirations, Kurdistan's youth is increasingly disconnected from official institutions and the political process.

In Iraq, on the other hand, young people still come out to protest in large numbers. Despite curfews and restrictions on movements and gatherings in response to Covid-19 remaining in place across Iraq, there has been an increase in protests since early May as attention has shifted to what the new government of Mustafa Al-Kadhimi can do to deal with the several crises facing the nation. The current protests are much smaller in size than the ones that swept Baghdad and the southern provinces in October 2019, but have grown through the summer as the typical issues around service delivery came to the fore.

Following the summer protests of 2018 which led to violent clashes and much political agitation in the wake of elections which were perceived to be tainted, there was some relief with the formation of the Abdul Mahdi government in October 2018. However, the underlying issues that drove some of those protests continued, and despite an expansionary budget in 2019 the lack of employment opportunities for young people became a key driver of discontent throughout the year. On 12 September 2019 groups of postgraduate degree holders demonstrated near the Prime Minister's Office in central Baghdad, calling for jobs to be prioritised for them, after over 3 months of similar demonstrations, but met with no significant response.<sup>1</sup> Several cities in southern Iraq saw a coordinated campaign throughout September to destroy illegal housing which led to protests in Karbala on 19 September as well as in Basra.<sup>2</sup> On 25 September 2019 a larger demonstration of postgraduates was met with water cannons from security forces and led to widespread criticism of the PM Adil Abdul Mahdi.<sup>3</sup> Just two days later the decision to remove the popular military officer Lt Gen Abdul Wahab Al-Saadi from command of the Counter Terrorism Service, Iraq's special forces which spearheaded the liberation campaign against ISIS, led to angry responses on social media<sup>4</sup>.

These incidents contributed to a sense of injustice and belief that a corrupt system beholden to vested interests was incapable of offering fair opportunities to the average citizen. As a response to this perceived injustice a social media campaign led to protests being organised in Baghdad, Basra and Nasiriya on 1 October with numbers in the hundreds in each city. Clashes with security forces at all three protests led to several deaths and injuries with an accusation that riot police were heavy handed and launched unprovoked attacks on peaceful protestors.<sup>5</sup> Protestor demands were focused on calling for improved services, employment opportunities and countering corruption, priorities for Iraqis throughout the country as polling had repeatedly shown. That day's violence provoked massive increases in the number of protesters in the following days and weeks. These set off a spiral of clashes that led to over 220 deaths in October alone<sup>6</sup> and despite government curfews and security measures, including an internet blackout, protests continued well into this year.

At the height of the protests the atmosphere was part carnival part defiance<sup>7</sup>, as thousands of young people congregated to call for change. For many that participated it was an opportunity to congregate with like-minded people and feel some power was being retaken from an older, unrepresentative political class that they did not identify with. Protestor demands evolved from those mainly based around economic issues to becoming more maximalist, including a complete change in the government.<sup>8</sup> Although no unified leadership emerged in public for the protests, their demands could be summarised into four broad categories; nature of the state, the political system, economic instability, and Iraq's security. On the state, demands included a change in the constitution with regards to local governments and the parliamentary system, the electoral system and process, and early elections. For political demands these included a complete change in local and federal governments, a ban on some parties competing in elections, comprehensive change in senior public positions, corruption trials for Iraq's political leaders, and a turnaround in foreign policy towards Iran and the United States. The economic demands revolved around improving services and increasing employment and fair distribution of wealth and resources. Security demands focused on justice for protestors who were injured and killed, reform of the security forces especially the PMF, and accountability for security decisions during the protests and other major events such as the fall of Mosul.

The makeup of the protests was surprisingly diverse, especially in Baghdad. Over 80 permanent protest tents were set-up in Tahrir Square. Some belonged to political parties overtly (such as the Iraqi Communist Party) or covertly; some came from specific areas such as districts in Sadr City; others were based on a specific identity such as postgraduates or former PMF members, or a specific cause such as a call for liberalism. Participation was dominated by under-25s with a notable portion of them being women. While it would not be accurate to characterise the protests as a youth movement it certainly was made possible by youth participation and their continued presence has kept the protests going. While protestors represent only a very small section of Iraqi society, the issues they have campaigned on find broad sympathy and acceptance among the public. Protest demands have risen above ethno-sectarian and local or specific community-based grievances to national concerns and concepts that many if not most Iraqis can identify with and support. Certainly the protests have contributed to a greater sense of national civic identity, but this is still a process and various interests and political players can reverse some of this. Iraq is not yet a truly united nation nor is the national identity fully formed but the protest movement shows there is a possible base for this to develop from in the future.

The underlying issues that drove the protests remain and will sustain demonstrations into the future. The economic ones are the most visible to citizens and as Iraq's population continues to increase rapidly and the economy struggles from the fall in oil prices and the effects of Covid-19<sup>9</sup>, protestors will continue to call for an improvement in living standards. The government will find it difficult to improve services and enact austerity measures at the same time, so the millions of young unemployed will continue to find triggers for discontent and protest. This points to a situation where protests can increase in size and intensity and where the status quo can no longer be maintained.<sup>10</sup>

Despite this the political elite seem prepared to wait out the protests and close ranks in an effort to protect their position and post-2003 gains.<sup>11</sup> While it may seem that they are not heeding the warning signs, the various elements of power at their disposal, including money, media, weapons and supporters, means they will attempt to deflect calls for reform to other issues, break-up protests or infiltrate them, and engage in partial reforms that do not undermine their power or interests. Because the political elite control the state in all aspects, including the legislature, executive and judiciary, and hence patronage, the distribution of resources and the ability to use violence, they are able to impede reforms and frustrate protestors. The fact so many have died in the last year shows that the political elite are willing to use extreme measures to prevent reform of the system. The appointment of the new Prime Minister came about through internal negotiations among the elite, with an agreement to maintain the system of ethno-sectarian power-sharing known as muhasasa, that has governed the country since 2003. This is an indication that power firmly remains with the elite and protestors have a long road ahead of them to reach real and lasting reforms.

***“At the height of the protests the atmosphere was part carnival part defiance.”***

***“Iraq is not yet a truly united nation nor is the national identity fully formed but the protest movement shows there is a possible base for this to develop from in the future.”***

The deal between its elites that has governed the Kurdistan region since 1991, too, remains entrenched. The two political parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) of the Barzanis and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) of the Talabanis maintain their tight control within their respective territorial zones. The last elections strengthened the KDP's power in the region's governmental institutions, leading to the accession of two powerful Barzani cousins to top government posts. While the former prime minister Nechirvan Barzani assumed the presidency from his uncle Massoud Barzani, his cousin Masrour Barzani succeeded him as the new prime minister of the region. In response to growing KDP power within the government, the PUK has stepped up efforts to unify its party ranks and expanded ties to tribal leaders. However, the parties' control over the political system depends on their increasingly tenuous ability to keep patronage networks. The recent economic crisis and the government's plan to reduce public employment under the pressure of international governance agents, if implemented, risk the viability of the patronage system as a whole.

The many crises Iraq is facing do not inspire much optimism that there will be any short to medium-term improvements in the national situation nor any successes for the protest movement.<sup>12</sup> The best that can be hoped for is some stability to prevent a worsening of the outlook but there are still the dangers of specific internal grievances<sup>13</sup> or external events such as US-Iran tensions triggering a reversal. For the longer term the generational change Iraq has started going through, with more issues-based politics and demands taking hold, gives more reason to be optimistic that a more united and progressive Iraq is possible.

This report aims to take the reader through a journey. Firstly, it explains the context and deep-rooted issues young people have faced since 2003. These help to frame the current political, economic and social challenges being experienced by young people in Iraq. Next, the literature review sets out the data and statistics, and surveys the specific regions the research has examined, to highlight the gravity of the challenges facing young people, and the underlying causes for political discontent among young Iraqis including those in the Kurdistan region. The main body of the report then looks at youth perceptions, attitudes and views through fieldwork and in-depth interviews that have been undertaken to inform qualitative analysis, specifically in three regions in Iraq mostly impacted by the protests (Baghdad, Basra and Thi-Qar) and the provinces of the Kurdistan region where a well-educated youth have faced high levels of unemployment and social discontent. The conclusions, key findings and recommendations at the end of this paper analyse and reflect on this primary data, with a view to informing policymakers in Iraq, Kurdistan Region-Iraq (KRI) and the wider international community.

This research does not claim to represent the whole youth of Iraq and the Kurdistan region and acknowledges its limitations. It does not present public opinion polls of statistical breadth. Rather, the analysis emphasised the points of common perceptions, and singular opinions were either used as representative of exceptional opinions or ignored.

This research aims to highlight the extensive and complex nature of many political, social and economic issues facing young people, and merely touches the surface of several, complex deep-rooted problems and factors, which should be covered in a series of much longer studies. The timescale of this research was three months and focused on all provinces in the Kurdistan region and three provinces in the rest of Iraq (Baghdad, Basra and Thi-Qar), which have seen the most consistent protests and unrest since October 2019



# PART 1: CONTEXT ANALYSIS

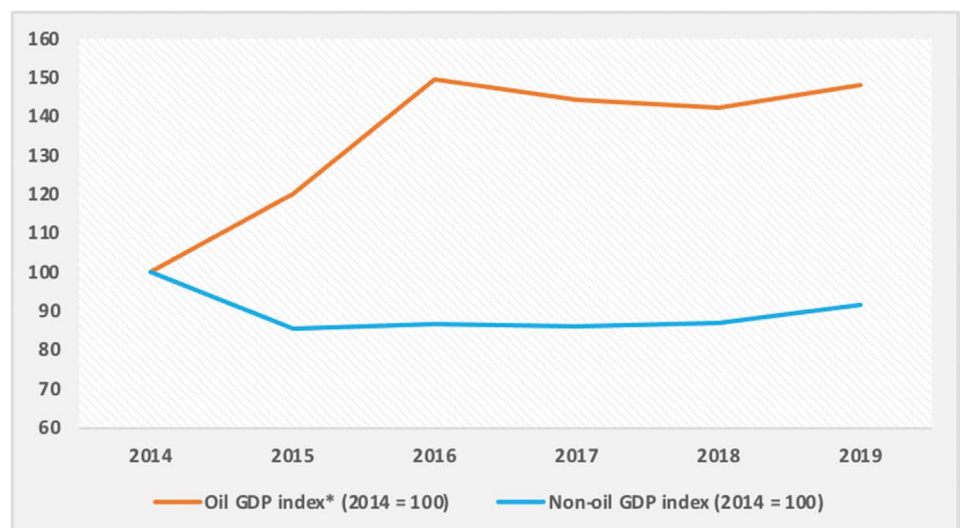
**“The economy of Iraq has one dominant, overwhelming feature: oil”**

## 1.1 Macroeconomic analysis

Iraq’s economy has suffered a variety of challenges in the post-Saddam era, exacerbated by limited economic reform, a bloated public sector and a lack of diversification. During the mid-noughties, a reduction in violence and strong oil prices allowed the government to drastically increase spending and infrastructure investments, although this did not translate into improvements in the lives of ordinary Iraqis. More recently, the economy has suffered from the war with ISIS, civil unrest, and fluctuating oil prices, leaving a mixed economic record.

The economy of Iraq has one dominant, overwhelming feature: oil. Iraq enjoys the world’s fourth-largest oil reserves, which are projected to last over 100 years at the current rate of extraction.<sup>14</sup> This provides huge potential for the country, allowing Iraq to strengthen its fiscal position and export earnings; the oil sector represents 67% of the overall economy and provides 92% of government revenue.<sup>15</sup> In 2019 the oil sector grew by 4.2 percent year on year, with the Ministry of Oil noting record production of 4.7 million barrels per day.<sup>16</sup> However, the sector is expected to suffer in 2020 due to falling oil prices and a reduction in output as per the OPEC+ deal, with a projected 13% contraction in 2020.<sup>17</sup>

**Figure 1:**  
**Growing disparity: The Iraqi economy is the least diversified across the region.**  
**Over the past five years the oil economy has expanded by almost 50%, whilst the non-oil economy has not grown at all.**



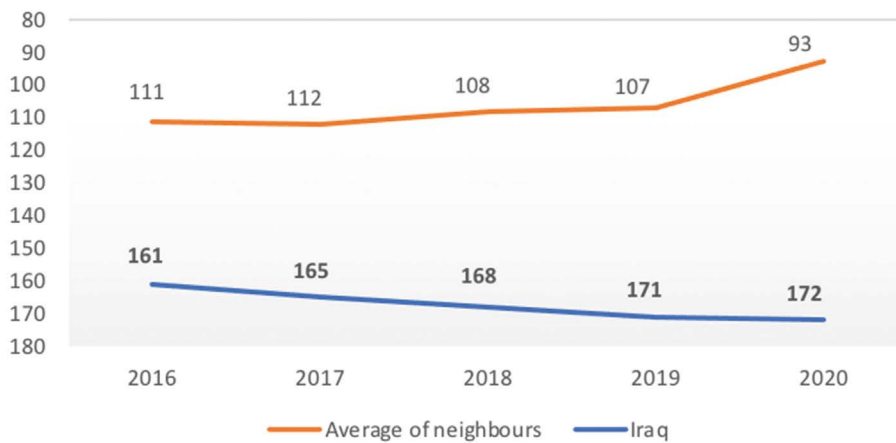
\*Proxied with oil production

Iraq’s non-oil economy grew 4.9% in 2019, and includes a mixture of agriculture and electricity production - which were two of the main drivers of growth due to high rainfall and an expansion of the electricity supply, boosting peak generation by nearly 20 percent - along with religious tourism, construction, and a state-dominated banking sector which is notoriously ill-equipped to facilitate economic growth.

The banking system is dominated by under-capitalised and under-supervised state-owned banks, crowding out private banks who lack size and liquidity to compete. This leads to a lack of competition, encouraging inefficiency and an absence of innovation. As a result, both credit intermediation and financial inclusion are remarkably low; almost 70% of banknotes are saved in households rather than banks.<sup>18</sup> This particularly hits Iraq’s Small and Medium Enterprise (SMEs), a sector which traditionally forms the bedrock of developing economies. SMEs, which generally sit within the informal sector, are large employers of Iraq’s youth meaning financial exclusion and a poorly operating financial system indirectly exacerbate youth employment challenges. For example, there has been a decline in the number of micro-finance institutions within Iraq, with only three now operating, commanding a portfolio of USD 100 million<sup>19</sup> which restricts credit and limits growth of the sector. The private sector accounts for less than 2% of total R&D expenditure in Iraq,<sup>20</sup> demonstrating the constraints and challenges it faces.

Iraq ranks 186 out of 190 for ease of getting credit in the World Bank's 2020 Doing Business report.<sup>21</sup> This has inhibited economic growth in the private sector, but also reflects a broader trend of weak institutions and oversight within the Iraqi economy; Iraq ranks 172 out of 190 for its overall score in ease of doing business, and its ranking has worsened over the past five years whilst the average of its six neighbours' has improved, reflecting a growing disparity in business environment across the region.

**Figure 2:**  
Divergence in the business environment: Iraq is falling in the ease of doing business rankings, whilst the average of Iraq's six neighbours is improving.



This narrative of excessive bureaucracy and a poor business environment is backed up with other data: Iraq performs poorly in The Heritage Foundation's annual measurements of economic freedom<sup>22</sup>, which considers the rule of law, government size, regulator efficiency, and openness of markets. Likewise, think tank Legatum Institute's Global Index of Economic Openness,<sup>23</sup> which ranks countries ability to trade and benefit from both domestic and international commerce<sup>ii</sup>, also ranks Iraq poorly.

**Table 1:**  
Iraq performances poorly compared to its neighbours across a range of different measures.

Performance measure	Iraq	Jordan	Kuwait	Saudi Arabia	Iran	Turkey	Syria
Ease of doing business rank	172	75	83	62	127	33	176
Economic openness rank	133	61	73	55	129	63	145
Economic freedom score*	48	61	59	60	55	61	43

\* Geometric average of all availability indicators that were measured for Iraq. The higher the score the more economic freedom the country enjoys.

Another serious challenge is the size of Iraq's informal economy, estimated at almost 75% of private economic activity,<sup>24</sup> rendering the Iraqi government unable to regulate, monitor or tax them. This is evident in Iraq's non-oil tax revenue, which at 3 percent of GDP<sup>25</sup> is one of the lowest in the world and reflects the challenges the government faces in domestic revenue mobilisation.

<sup>i</sup> Taking the geometric average of the World Bank's ease of doing business rankings for Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Kuwait, and Syria. Whilst the average of Iraq's neighbours has shown year-on-year improvements, the ranking of Syria and Iran has fallen.

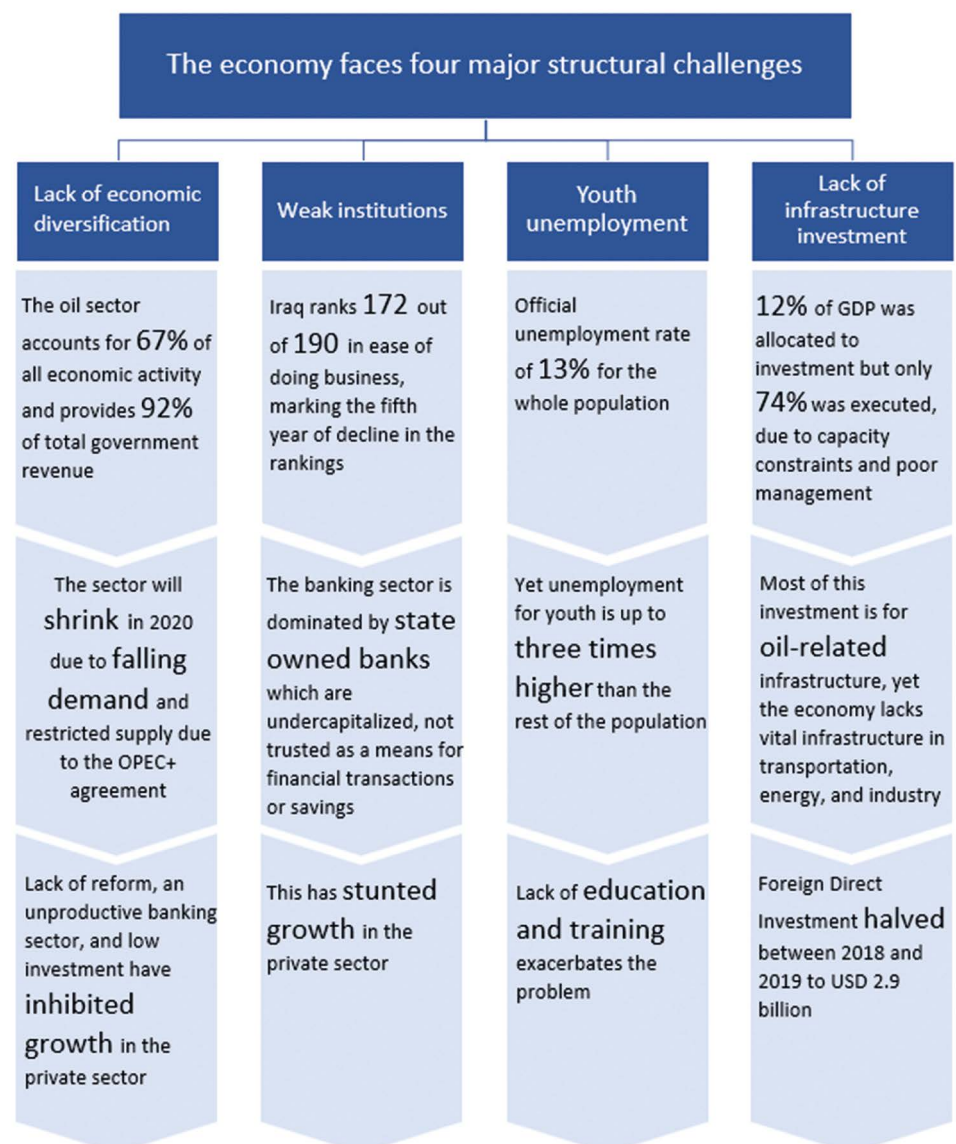
<sup>ii</sup> By assessing infrastructure, investment environment, burdensome regulation, and governance.

# Context Analysis

***“it is not the employment rate of the youth per se that matters, but the quality of jobs available.”***

Youth are highly represented in sectors such as food, accommodation services or construction, which are associated with high levels of informality. As a result, young people are much more likely to rely on the informal sector for employment compared to the older demographic, who are less likely to engage in casual, temporary, and vulnerable employment.<sup>26</sup> The dependency of Iraq’s youth on the informal sector is of public policy interest; workers in the informal sector often lose out on employment protection, a legally binding contract, and social security. Furthermore, given the lack of government oversight and regulation, the informal sector lacks proper safety standards.<sup>27</sup> This can disenfranchise the youth and can lead to disdain and frustration even amongst those who have a job. As such, it is not the employment rate of the youth per se that matters, but the quality of jobs available.

The state represents the largest employer in the country, and the number of civil servants increased further last year, creating an unsustainable burden on the country’s finances. Figures from the Bayan Centre, a Baghdad based think-tank, suggest over 70% of the work force are employed by the government either directly or indirectly.<sup>28</sup> State owned enterprises (SOEs) are one such vehicle used to distribute jobs, and in a 2016 letter of intent to the IMF, the Iraqi government acknowledged that 30 – 50% of the half a million jobs provided through SOEs are excess labour, with many of the SOEs having a “limited rationale beyond providing public employment. As a result, they are structurally loss-making and present a large burden for public finances.”<sup>29</sup>





Despite this, Iraq suffers from stubbornly high unemployment rates. The most recent government statistics date back to 2017, where unemployment is measured at 13%.<sup>30</sup> This figure is misleading, however, as the workforce in Iraq is small given the majority of women who stay at home and are not seeking a job – the estimated labour force participation rate for women is 11.2%, compared to 72.4% for men.<sup>31</sup> Unemployment is particularly pertinent amongst the youth, reported officially at 25.6% but with other organisations estimating higher rates.

Covid-19 adds an additional challenge to an already fragile economy. The lockdown measures implemented to contain the pandemic have hampered oil exports, which declined in the first quarter of 2020 by over 4%,<sup>32</sup> and prevented shops from opening, curtailing activities in the services sector such as trade, religious tourism, transport, and banking, which constitute approximately half of the non-oil economy.

Given the multifaceted challenges facing the Iraqi economy, the IMF in their April 2020 World Economic Outlook forecast a contraction in Iraqi GDP of 4.7% this year.<sup>33</sup>

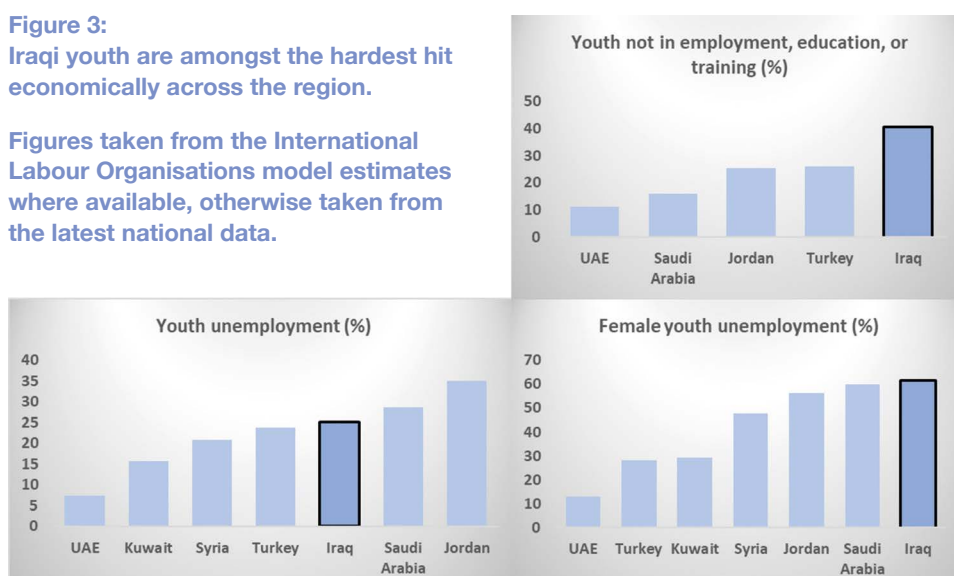
## 1.2 Poverty and Youth

The economic challenges Iraq faces are immense, and the demographic that is affected most is the youth. A staggering 57.9% of Iraq's population are under the age of 24,<sup>34</sup> and it is this age group that has been the main driver of the recent protests. Job opportunities, or lack thereof, is the predominant cause of anguish amongst the youth, who are in a state of limbo as external factors such as limited job and livelihood opportunities prevent their development and ability to demonstrate autonomy.<sup>35</sup> This is particularly the case for young women, whose mobility outside the household is often heavily constrained; modelling from the International Labour Organization estimates only 5% of female youth are participating in the labour market.<sup>36</sup> It is also important to acknowledge that this demographic represents a huge potential for the Iraqi economy as future workers and leaders that innovate, create, and drive economic growth.

Youth unemployment was recorded at 36% in a 2018 World Bank primer,<sup>37</sup> with projections suggesting there will be an additional five to seven million Iraqis in need of new jobs over the next ten years. This underscores the point that the job crisis amongst youth is a long-term phenomenon that must be addressed. Employment prospects are hampered by a lack of skills and education; relative to other Middle East and North African countries Iraqi students spend less time in the classroom<sup>38</sup> and a survey of 20,000 Iraqi families in 2016 by the World Food Programme found that over 70% of surveyed children under the age of 15 were working to help feed their families, rather than going to school,<sup>39</sup> despite an official primary school enrolment rate of 92%. As such, many Iraqis lack the required skills to find employment in a fragile, post-conflict country. This creates a vicious cycle, where lack of adequate education leads to poverty, which leads to a further lack of adequate education.

**Figure 3:**  
Iraqi youth are amongst the hardest hit economically across the region.

Figures taken from the International Labour Organisations model estimates where available, otherwise taken from the latest national data.



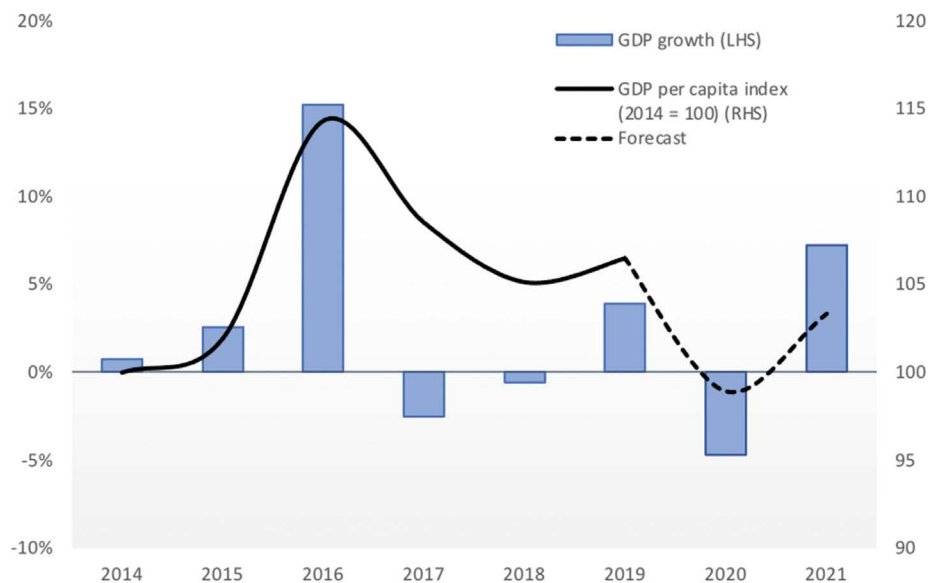
**“A staggering 57.9% of Iraq’s population are under the age of 24.”**

**“modelling from the International Labour Organization estimates only 5% of female youth are participating in the labour market”**

In the absence of such opportunity for skills development, human capital has been depleted in Iraq. Simultaneously, Iraq suffers from brain drain: 36% of migrants leaving the country have an undergraduate degree,<sup>40</sup> an alarming erosion of human capital when compared with the small proportion of the total population that has an undergraduate degree.

Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that national poverty rate remains high, recorded by the World Bank at 20% in 2018.<sup>41</sup> The sporadic shoots of economic growth Iraq has enjoyed have not had a meaningful impact on poverty because the growth has not been distributed evenly, and high fertility rates mean that GDP per capita has hardly grown, even as the overall economy has. The projected fertility rate for Iraq is the highest across the MENA region.<sup>42</sup>

**Figure 4:**  
GDP per capita is projected to hardly increase from 2014 – 2021



***“For all the challenges the Iraqi economy faces, it simultaneously has huge potential. For the first time in years, Iraq is on the cusp of utilising a peace dividend with no costly war or deteriorating security situation”***

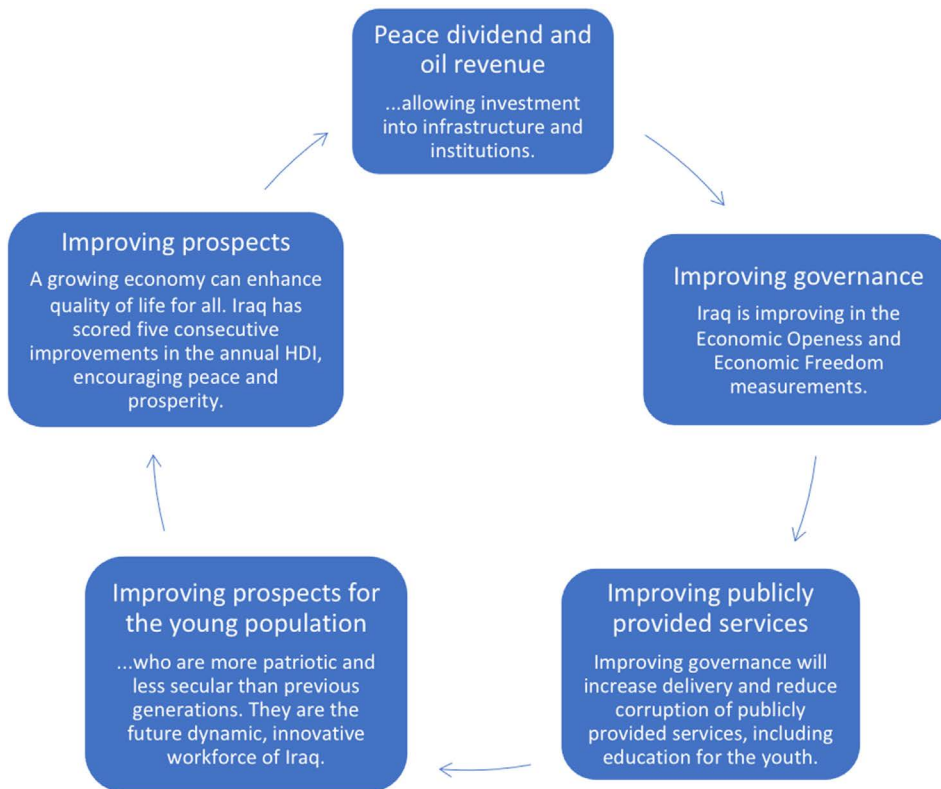
***“survey evidence shows this generation of young Iraqis are more patriotic and less sectarian than previous generations”***

For all the challenges the Iraqi economy faces, it simultaneously has huge potential. For the first time in years, Iraq is on the cusp of utilising a peace dividend with no costly war or deteriorating security situation. Combined with demonstrably large oil reserves, the Iraqi government enjoys fiscal space to invest in much needed infrastructure and public services. Targeted investments to improve public institutions will quell unrest and boost confidence in the government. Furthermore, Iraq’s lagging institutions have shown an improvement over time in some dimensions: its scores in the Economic Openness and Economic Freedom indexes, displayed in Table 1, have been improving.

Simultaneously, the government should utilise the peace dividend to fund large scale investment in public services targeting the youth. A large, young, educated workforce has massive potential to power the Iraqi economy, and survey evidence<sup>iii</sup> shows this generation of young Iraqis are more patriotic and less sectarian than previous generations.

Iraq’s score in the Human Development Index has improved for four consecutive years, which means despite the economic challenges discussed in this chapter, quality of life and standard of living are improving.

<sup>iii</sup> See section 3.1 for survey evidence and Box 1 for a discussion surrounding the secular nature of the recent protests.



Under the right set of policies and external factors, this could create a positive cycle of economic growth: a peace dividend and oil revenue leads to a strengthening of institutions, which improves the delivery of public services, generating a well-educated young workforce, which results in a further strengthening of the economy and fiscal position of the government, and so on. As such, whilst this report acknowledges the economic weaknesses and challenges that are present, the reader should not be disheartened; massive potential also exists.

### 1.3 Survey evidence

It has long been documented that political and economic stability are closely linked to one another. This seems particularly pertinent in Iraq, where a 2019 survey<sup>43</sup> showed half of all respondents believe the most essential characteristic of democracy is to ensure job opportunities. If the economy is the yardstick by which Iraqis are judging the effectiveness and success of the government, then the recent spate of political unrest is unsurprising.

Iraq remains economically vulnerable, and any recovery is currently hampered by political instability. The recent protests have been driven by a powerful youth uprising, directing their anger towards corruption and nepotism throughout government, along with poor economic management and excessive foreign influence from Iran and the US, a stance which is ubiquitously present in survey data, both past and present.

Whilst the size of these protests is unprecedented, the frustration with government corruption is nothing new, and there has been a constant stream of smaller, less violent protests over several years. In a 2012/13 public opinion survey,<sup>44</sup> only 34% of Iraqis said the performance of government was either good or very good. In 2019, only 16% indicated they are generally satisfied with the overall performance of the government. Starting from a low base, satisfaction with the government has eroded even further, and this frustration is shared across ethnic and sectarian lines, which makes dealing with the crises more difficult for the government.

With ISIS now weakened to a shadow of its former threat, the main problems for Iraqis have shifted from safety and security to good governance. Corruption is consistently one of the biggest sources of frustration: In 2019 Baghdad-based polling company IACSS found 47% of respondents rank corruption as their biggest concern,<sup>45</sup> whilst the Arab Barometer also showed corruption to be one of the biggest concerns for survey respondents.

***“political and economic stability are closely linked to one another”***

***“Starting from a low base, satisfaction with the government has eroded even further, and this frustration is shared across ethnic and sectarian lines”***

In all four measures of corruption this report analysed, Iraq consistently ranked worse than all of its neighbours, with the exception of Syria. Results are presented below in Table 2.

**Table 2:**  
**Comparison of corruption with Iraq's neighbours. In all four measures, a higher score indicates a higher degree of corruption.**

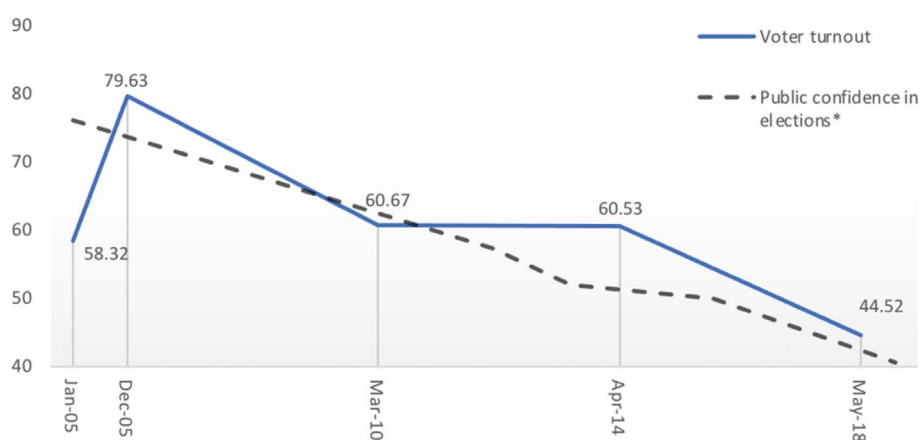
Corruption measure	Iraq	Jordan	Kuwait	Saudi Arabia	Iran	Turkey	Syria
Corruption Perception Index	162	60	85	51	146	91	178
Global Corruption Index	192	67	88	121	180	133	197
World Values survey*	7.31	7.29	5.82	-	-	-	-
2019 Arab Barometer**	74	58	43	-	-	-	-

\* Response to "From 1 – 10, how widespread is corruption within the government in your country?" (Mean score from survey respondents)

\*\* Perceived extent of National Corruption by Country, % of respondents reporting a large extent.

Protestors lament that politicians are not answerable to the local electorate, meaning there is little accountability. Many Iraqis actively boycotted the May 2018 election, which led to the lowest voter turnout since elections began in 2005, of 44%. Voter turnout has consistently decreased for the past four elections, whilst public confidence in the elections has shown a similar decrease during the same time period, reflecting the importance and interdependence of public confidence and public participation in democracy within Iraq.

**Figure 5:**  
**The elections last year marked the lowest recorded voter turnout. Meanwhile, public confidence in the elections has shown a similar, falling trend.**



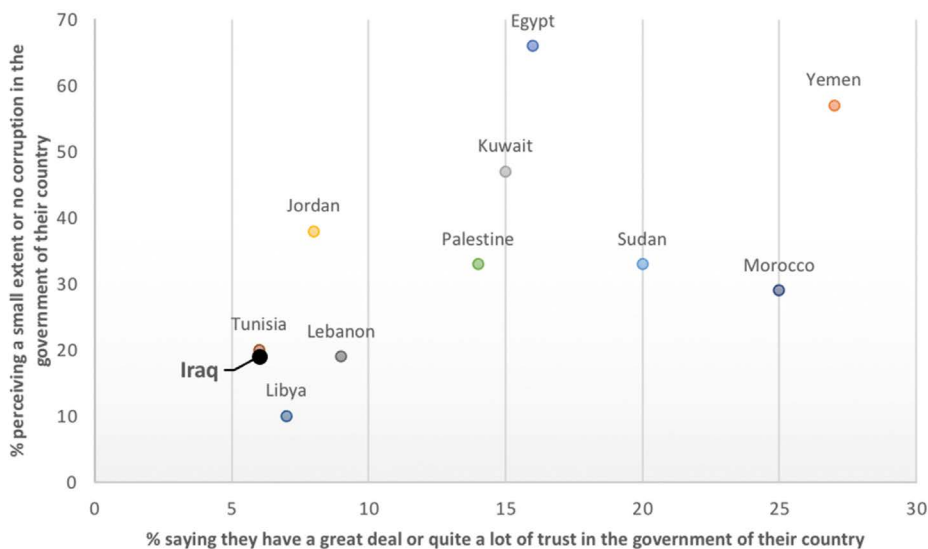
\* Public confidence in elections is defined from 2010 onwards as the percentage of survey responses who evaluated the previous elections as "Completely free and fair" or "Free and fair, with some minor breaches". Data from various waves of Arab Barometer. Pre-2010 public confidence in elections is defined as the percentage of survey responses who responded to the question "How much confidence do you have that the elections will create a stable Iraqi government?" with "Great deal of confidence" or "Quite a lot of confidence". Data from Oxford Research International.<sup>46</sup>

Iraqi youth feel as if they have been consistently left out of the country's social and political considerations. The widespread belief – and anger – about corruption also goes some way towards undermining trust in the government, a phenomenon this report discovers is well established across the Middle East, whereby the more corrupt the public perceives their government to be, the less trust they place in it. This is observable both graphically (see below Figure 6), and statistically by examining the correlation coefficient.<sup>iv</sup> Analysis show a correlation of 0.59, confirming the graphic representation of the phenomenon. The Iraqi government suffers the lowest trust from its citizens across the Middle East, with trust in parliament and the judiciary experiencing double-digit drops since 2011.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>iv</sup> The correlation coefficient is a statistical measure of the strength of the relationship of two variables that is bounded within the values -1 (indicating a perfect negative relationship), to +1 (indicating a perfect positive relationship), with a value of 0 indicating no relationship.

Along with falling participation in elections and eroding trust in the government, 2018 fieldwork in Iraq from Marsin Alshamary suggests youths are expressing “authoritarian nostalgia”,<sup>48</sup> looking favourably upon the dictatorial rule and military strength of Saddam Hussein and contrasting it with Iraq’s current state of affairs. She suggests disillusionment with the present system encourages romanticising of an authoritarian past. This is likely to remain until the government becomes both more democratic and more accountable; for example, in three separate parliamentary elections since 2003, the winning candidate of the largest party has not become prime minister. Almost 50% of Iraqis believe democracy is not the best form of government for their country,<sup>49</sup> an alarming conviction that presents a formidable challenge for the government to overcome.

**Figure 6:**  
Perceiving a low rate of corruption is correlated with having a greater degree of trust in the government. Iraq scores poorly in both measures.



An additional source of anger stems from the influence of outsiders, most notably Iran and to a lesser extent the US. The proportion of Iraqi Shiites who express favourable attitudes towards Iran has declined by two-thirds between 2016 and 2019, from 75% to 25%.<sup>50</sup> This frustration is driven by a multitude of factors, most notably: Iranian influence in Iraqi politics, backing the violent crackdown during the protests, and a variety of economic influences such as the dumping of cheap, low quality goods in local markets, intermittent electricity supply, and cutting the river supply of clean water to areas close to the border.<sup>51</sup>

After years of military occupation, the majority of Iraqis do not favour improving ties with the US, although there is significant regional variation, with the North and West regions of the country generally being more positive about policies and relationships with the US than Baghdad and the South.<sup>52</sup>

## 1.4 Sectarian or secular? A brief literature review to consider the source of protest and violence amongst the Iraqi youth.

The Iraqi sociologist Faleh Jabar (2018)<sup>53</sup> rejects the notion of sectarianism within Iraqi youth, acknowledging a movement for more inclusive politics. One reason for this is the lack of identity-based politics, such as pan-Arabism ideology, that the younger generation has been exposed to post-Saddam. He studied the 2015 protests, which in many respects can be considered a precursor to the 2018/19 protests, and noted an absence of sectarianism driving the protests. For example, protestors chanted “Secular, secular, not Sunni, not Shia”. See footnotes for examples of newspaper coverage noting, at the time of the protests, that the majority of protestors were secular.<sup>54, 55</sup>

This view is supported by Haddad (2017),<sup>56</sup> who claims the war with IS has “created unlikely partnerships [...] gone beyond the sort of zero-sum sect-coded conflict of earlier years”. Sectarian underpinnings, he argues, should not be seen as an existential threat, and a new form of Iraqi nationalism is what underpins the protests. Zahra Ali (2019) suggests the protests are driven by the Iraqi middle class, reasserting themselves after decades of violence and repression under previous regimes. Having grown up in a sectarian war and witnessing the corruption and nepotism that has taken place, “Islamism and identity-based political formation are rejected all together.”<sup>57</sup>

Interestingly, whilst academia posits a weakening sectarian movement and consequent strengthening of secularism amongst the Iraqi youth, various development agencies have warned of the opposite.

For example, the International Crisis Group posits that Iraqi youth have remained vulnerable to sectarian influences and resultant violence, given the proximity and exposure to the Syrian uprising and civil war, itself a sectarian conflict.<sup>58</sup> Likewise, during interviews with youths who lived under IS occupation, Oxfam noticed the tendency for youths to affiliate with militia groups as a necessity to provide for their families and gain status in society.<sup>59</sup> The risk of inciting sectarian violence is clear, as it “may create or add to a new generation of Iraqis who see armed resistance and response organized along tribal and/or sectarian lines as a desirable solution for survival.” This may then encourage a sectarian movement within the protests.

An alternative hypothesis put forward by Amirali (2019),<sup>60</sup> suggests it is not sectarian violence that underpins the youth protests in Iraq, but rather a generational divide based on cohort effects, that is, the societal impact of being born within a certain cohort. Post-2003, Iraq has enjoyed record high oil prices, allowing Iraqi officials to get away with incompetence and corruption whilst supporting a modicum of services and cash handouts through patronage networks. Public sector employment and social welfare, supported by a decade of oil windfall, have come to be seen as entitlements amongst the youth, whose elevated expectations are formed based on the post-Saddam era, compared with older generations who have lived through alternative political systems.

The decade of extraordinarily high oil prices, from 2005 to 2014, thus left a legacy that shapes attitudes and expectations. Amirali argues that tensions within Iraq are not sectarian based, but rather between generations.

Ultimately, sectarian, generational, or economic reasons, in isolation, are insufficient to explain the violence. It is, rather, a combination of these influences. Sectarian politics, political exclusion, perceptions of economic injustice and unfulfilled aspirations, along with staggering levels of youth unemployment, all play a role in inciting the protests, anger, and violence.



## **PART 2: SUB-REGIONAL ECONOMIC ANALYSIS**

## 2.1 Inequality in Iraq

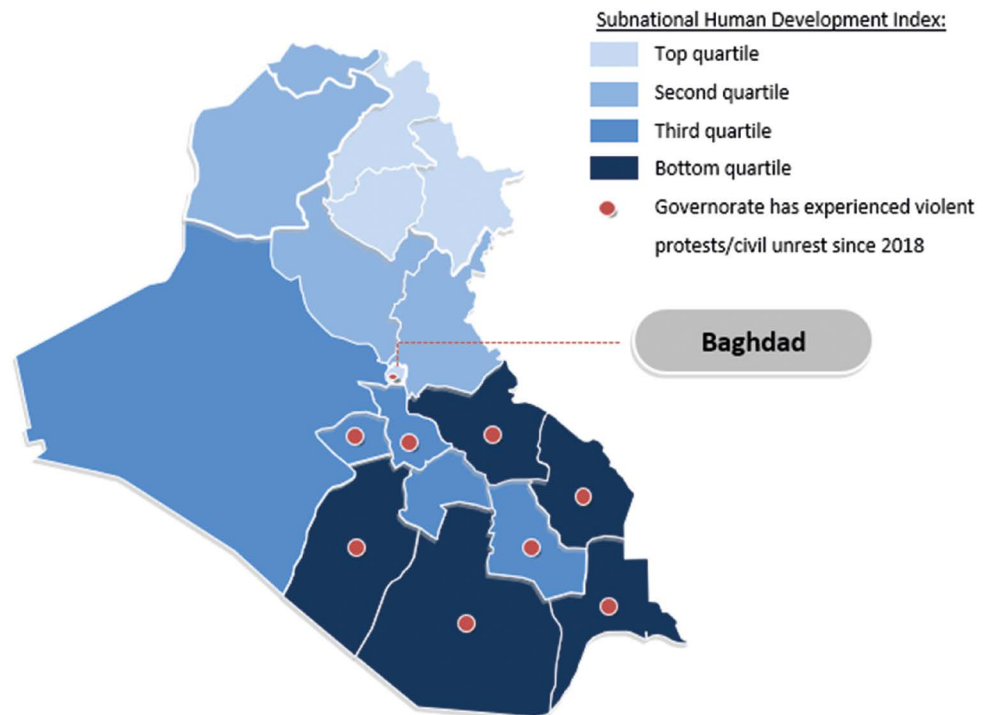
There is abundant evidence to suggest economic inequality can lead to social unrest,<sup>61</sup> with evidence showing regions that believe they have been treated unfairly by the government are likely to participate in civil unrest.<sup>62</sup>

Measures of income inequality are notoriously unreliable across the Middle East. However, certain measurements do exist, such as the Gini Coefficient, a measure of income inequality across the population, and the Palma Ratio, which compares the income of the richest 10% compared to the bottom 40%. Iraq outperforms its neighbours in both of these measures, suggesting income inequality is not as severe as other Arab states.<sup>63</sup>

That said, inequality is still an issue within Iraq, demonstrated most succinctly in Iraq's rural-urban divide: 39% of rural residents are poor, compared to only 16% of urban residents, whilst the severity of poverty is also greater within rural areas i.e. conditional on living in poverty, the rural poor suffer greater than the urban poor.<sup>64</sup>

Analysis of the sub-regional human development index sheds light on other dimensions of inequality, such as education and health, and shows a stark contrast between the Kurdistan region and southern provinces of Iraq; those scoring the lowest in the subnational human development index are all based in the South. Figure 7 below maps this phenomenon, whilst also marking the provinces which have experienced violent protests since 2018.

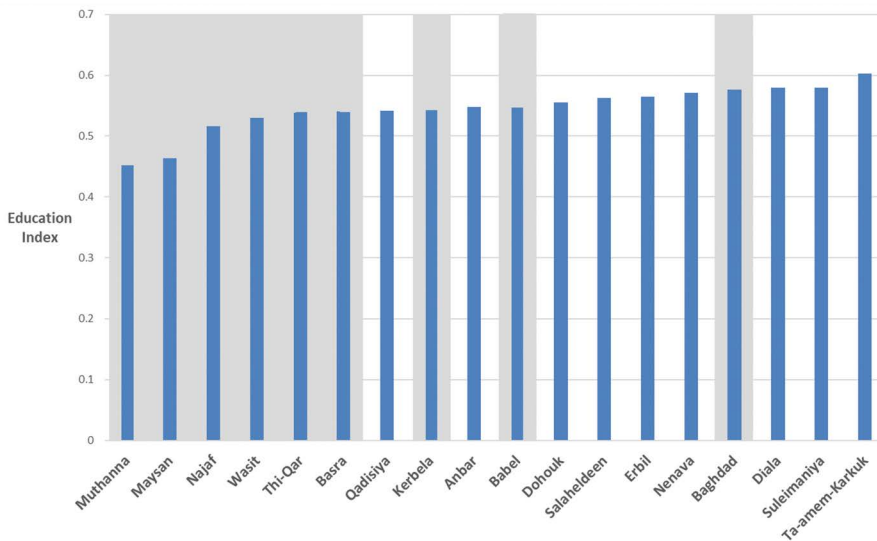
**Figure 7:** The bottom two quartiles of provinces ranked in the Subnational Human Development Index correspond to the most Southerly regions of Iraq, where protests and civil unrest has occurred. Data from UNDP Human Development Index. <sup>65</sup>



Breaking down the Subnational Human Development Index into its individual components – income, education, and health – reveals stark inequality in the health index, and even more so in the education index. Figure 8 below reveals the extent of regional variation in the education index; the six lowest ranked provinces all experienced civil unrest and violent protests over the past two years.



**Figure 8:**  
The majority of protest sites, shaded in grey, occurred in provinces who scored low in the 2018 education index. Data from UNDP Human Development Index.

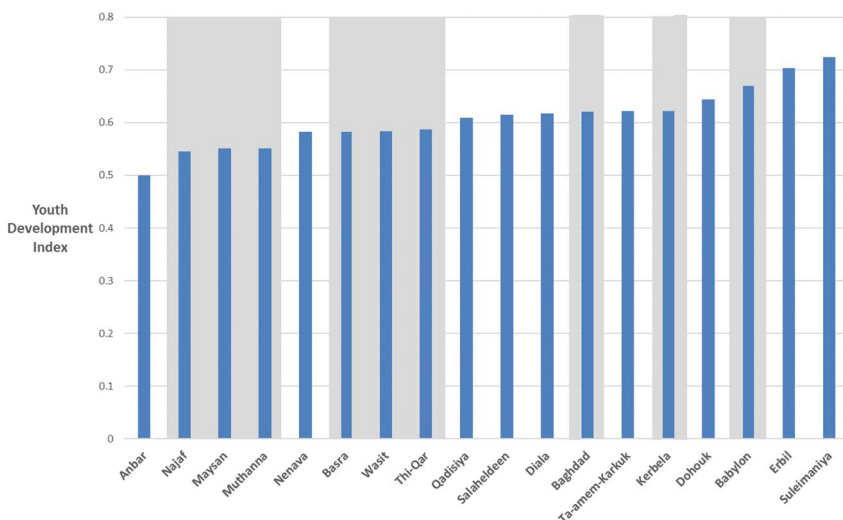


Low levels of educational attainment lead to a low skilled, underqualified workforce less able to find jobs, causing unemployment, frustration, and anger.<sup>66</sup> These educational inequalities are translated into grievances, which may explain the apparent relationship between the low education index and civil unrest.

A similar pattern emerges when looking at the youth development index, which is similar in nature to the subnational HDI but with the metrics specifically aimed at Iraqi youth. The index considers education, employment prospects, health, security, and freedom. Out of the bottom eight ranked regions in the youth development index, six of them experienced violent protests and civil unrest.

The analysis shows an interesting insight into inequality across Iraq: income inequality exists yet is less than that of its neighbours. Instead, multi-dimensional inequality, across health, education, and youth development, seem the likely drivers of frustration and protest.

**Figure 9:**  
Regions with a lower Youth Development Index had a higher incidence of protests, shaded in grey. Data from the UNDP Youth Development Index.<sup>67</sup>



It is an oversimplification, however, to conclude there is only inequality between the North-South provinces. Kurdistan region performs significantly better on human development index. The situation of the southern provinces varies considerably; Baghdad is prosperous, for example, whilst Basra, the source of Iraq's oil wealth, lags behind on various measurements. To complement the above analysis, this report will now conduct a city level analysis of Baghdad, Basra, and Nasiriyah, three hotspots of the recent protests.

## 2.2 City level analysis

### Baghdad

Baghdad city ranks as the one of the biggest across the Middle East, with a population of 7 million, smaller only than Cairo, Tehran, and Istanbul. As the capital city of both the Baghdad province and, more broadly, Iraq, it represents one of the wealthiest and most economically diverse areas of the country.

The city's principal economic activity is oil refining. It is well connected with the oil rich areas of Southern Iraq and has modest oil reserves in the east of the province. Its development has thus been linked to the growth of the oil industry, experiencing rapid economic and population growth during the 1970s, but stagnating more recently due to lower oil prices.

Apart from the oil industry, Baghdad houses various textile factories, along with production of cement, tobacco products, leather, and carpets, making it the manufacturing hub of the country. It serves as an important trading centre, hosting Iraq's largest international airport and serving important trading links with its neighbours and further afield. The Rawabet Center for Research and Strategic Studies notes that Iraq's three largest banks and three largest insurance companies are headquartered in Baghdad, and the city acts as an important tourist hub, attracting more than one million tourists a year.<sup>68</sup> Various military industries are also located there.

Along with a broader pattern across Iraq, Baghdad is experiencing a population boom, putting pressure on utilities and housing. About 18% of Baghdad's population suffer from daily water service interruptions,<sup>69</sup> exacerbated by the lack of housing which is leading to a large and growing number of informal settlements. Only 52.6% of survey respondents reported feeling 'socially secure' in 2014, suggesting that whilst the economic situation is better, on average, for residents of Baghdad, a variety of social problems remain.<sup>70</sup> 9.6% of Baghdad youth are illiterate, and the city's dependency ratio, the number of under 14s and over 65s relative to the rest of the population, stands at 67, relative to a country average of 71.<sup>71</sup>

### Basra

Basra, located along the Shatt al-Arab river, is the second largest city by population and in 2017 was named the economic capital of Iraq.

The local economy of Basra is dominated by the oil and petrochemical industries. Basra has the largest oil reserves in Iraq and has received a swath of foreign investment in exploration, drilling, and refining. Such investment, originally the cause of optimism and high expectation of local jobs and high wages, has more recently become the cause of anger and frustration. Under the majority of service contracts, foreign oil companies are obliged to employ at least 85% of their employees from Iraq's labour market,<sup>72</sup> which is widely thought not to be honoured by the majority of investors. Even when locals are employed the hiring process is politicised, used as a means for patronage and appeasement of different tribes and loyalties.

Frustration has grown rampant among the local population, who live next to a flourishing oil industry yet enjoy little benefit, since revenues are collected by the central government in Baghdad and employment opportunities are not realized. The 2018/19 protests in Basra thus had a specific focus towards the patronage and corruption within the oil industry.

Given Basra's proximity to neighbouring countries, it has also developed major industries in shipping, logistics and transport, with Basra housing all six of Iraq's ports. It also has an international airport.

For years the Shatt-al-Arab, a freshwater lifeline for much of the city, has suffered heavy pollution and poor environmental management, cumulating in a public health crisis in 2018 when 118,000 people were hospitalised due to water contamination. Low water levels and the risk of saltwater intrusions from the Persian Gulf continue to threaten water quality and put millions of lives at risk within Basra. 14.9% of youths are illiterate<sup>73</sup> and the city has a dependency ratio of 75 per 100, above the country average.<sup>74</sup>

## Nasiriyah

Nasiriyah is the capital city of Thi-Qar province, one of the most underdeveloped areas of Iraq. The area has experienced less urbanisation than the rest of the country, resulting in a higher reliance on the agricultural sector as a means of jobs, which provides a lower wage than the industry or services sector.

Nasiriyah's infrastructure, and that of Thi-Qar more broadly, has suffered from decades of underinvestment as a result of politically motivated neglect during the rule of the Ba'ath party. More recently the city has experienced jobs growth in the public sector and construction industry, and the city hosts a number of oil refineries and a university.

The oil industry in and around Nasiriyah is distinctly smaller than that of Basra and dominated by state-owned oil companies, having failed to attract international investment due to a clause requiring any investment into the oil field to be accompanied by the construction of a refinery.<sup>75</sup>

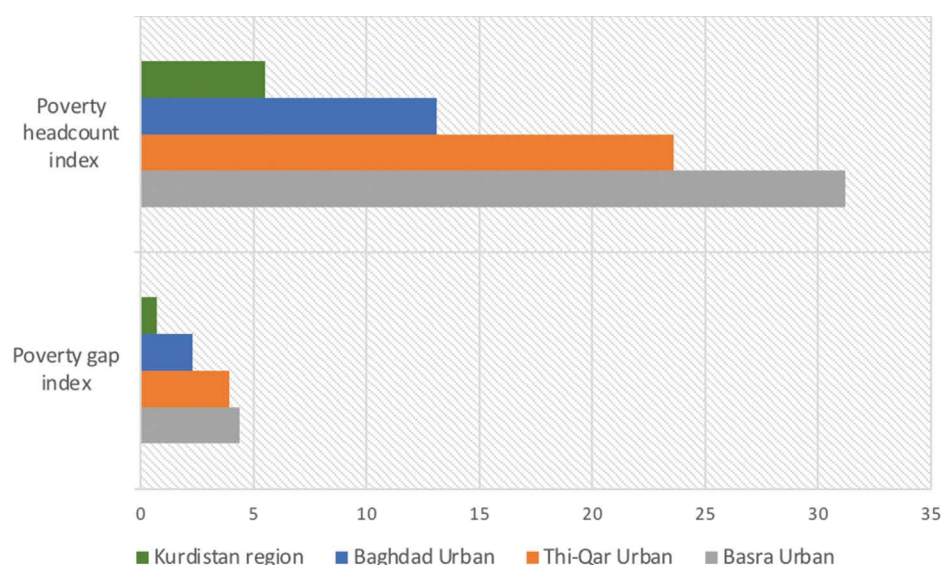
A UNDP survey in 2014 found 24.8% of youth are unemployed and seeking work, although the city enjoys a lower illiteracy rate (7.9%) than the other two cities.<sup>76</sup> A 2016 World Food Programme survey found 20.9% of respondents were recognised as 'food insecure'. Additionally, the city has a dependency ratio of 75, distinctly higher than the country average of 71.<sup>77</sup>

Since October 2019 Nasiriyah has become a rallying point for anti-government demonstrations, with the leadership of protests shifting from Baghdad to Nasiriyah. There have been reports of protestors storming the headquarters of Iranian militias, forcing the resignation of various government officials, blockading a bridge vital in the transportation of oil exports, and temporarily closing down an oil field in December 2019.

## 2.3 Inequality amongst the provinces

As well as the North-South divide, South-South inequality also exists, across a variety of measurements and dimensions. This is an important context to analyse, as intra-regional inequality may also be a source of anger and frustration for Iraqis.

**Figure 10:** Poverty headcount and poverty gap for the three provinces. The poverty gap is a measure of the intensity of the poverty.



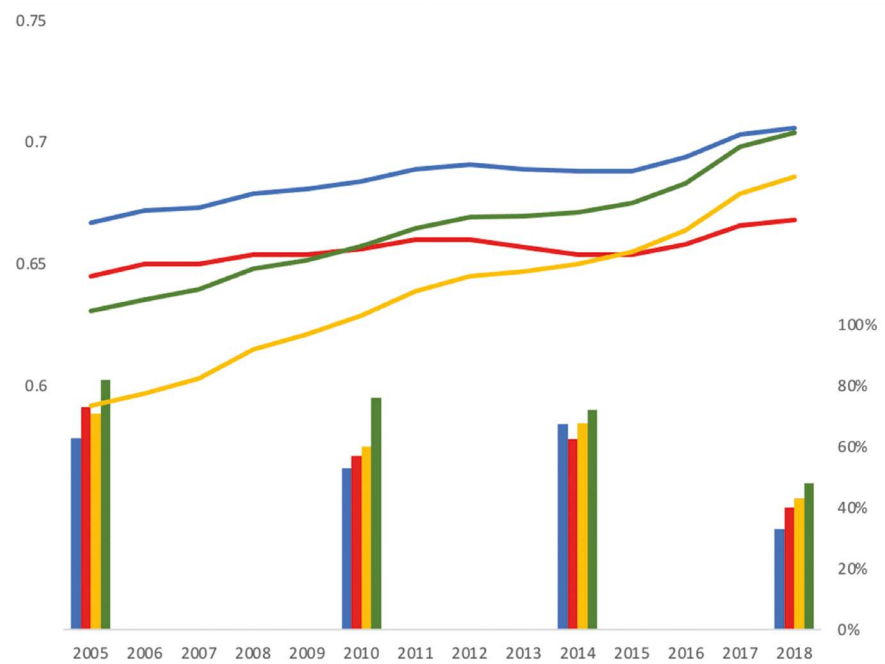
Compared to both Thi-Qar and Basra, the urban poverty headcount in Baghdad is distinctly lower, as is the poverty gap index, a measure of the depth of poverty.<sup>78</sup> Surprisingly, despite its rich oil reserves, Basra has both a higher poverty rate, and those in poverty are poorer than other poverty-stricken Iraqis in Baghdad or Thi-Qar.

# Sub-Regional Economic Analysis

In the 2018 and 2019 national budgets, Basra received a larger proportion of funding appointment for capital expenditure, which is likely ear-marked for oil infrastructure, whilst funding for operating expenses is lower than that of Baghdad and Thi-Qar.<sup>79</sup> This reinforces the narrative that citizens of Basra are overlooked and suffer from an oil sector that crowds out any other investment, whilst returning all revenues to the federal government.

Time series data shows Baghdad has consistently scored higher than the other two provinces in the Subnational HDI. Interestingly in 2005 when Basra enjoyed a far greater HDI than Thi-Qar voter turnout in the national elections was also greater. By 2010 Thi-Qar turnout had surpassed that of Basra, with this gap increasing in 2014, concurrently as the Subnational HDI score also surpassed Basra. Combining this data with that shown in Figure 5 earlier in this report tentatively suggests voter participation in elections is influenced by both satisfaction with the government and general standard of living.

**Figure 11:**  
Subnational Human Development Index (LHS) and voter turnout in national elections (RHS). The lines show the HDI and the bars the voter turnout.



\*Arithmetic average of Duhok, Erbil, and Sulaymaniyah



## **PART 3: QUALITATIVE DATA FROM FEDERAL IRAQ**

Since October 2019, the three provinces of Baghdad, Basra and Thi-Qar have witnessed the largest and most consistent protest. Unfortunately they have also experienced the most violent incidents, largely as a result of attacks and crackdowns against demonstrators. As of early September 2020, the protest sites in these areas remain flashpoints and as the one-year anniversary of the October 2019 protests approaches, there will likely be greater participation.

To present further context for the data previously presented, a series of interviews were conducted across the three provinces throughout July 2020. These were distributed equally across the provinces, with 15 in each. Some of the respondents were in employment or study, the majority were not. Of the 45 interviews in total, 42% of respondents were female. The age group targeted was 18-30. The majority of respondents were supportive of protests and had participated in them in some form. Some interviews were conducted in-person where Covid-19 restrictions and security concerns allowed, while others were conducted by telephone call.

A total of 10 questions were asked, guiding the interview to the themes of the research in this paper. Some selected responses which are representative of the sample in each province can be found in the Appendix under each question. This following section summarises the main findings, extrapolating the key emerging themes.

The majority of young people interviewed believe that the government should provide jobs and hire people directly into the public sector. Across the 3 provinces respondents focused on the need to provide an income for their families as a priority over any personal goals. Higher education was seen as a necessity for a career and barriers to that mentioned were high entry grades required and the cost of private university education. In Basra and Thi-Qar there were clear pressures from a conservative society, especially for women, that presented a career choice barrier. Some interviewees wanted to have a career in their own business enterprises but the prevailing economic conditions adversely affected that aim. Sports, arts and media were frequently mentioned as career aspirations, fields in which there are limited employment and education opportunities. In general, interviewees were despondent on this question, with lack of opportunities the prevalent theme.

## Main obstacles facing young people in Iraq

Every one of the 45 interviewees mentioned jobs and economic opportunities as the biggest obstacles facing young people. Some respondents mentioned political favouritism for jobs and control of the private sector by politicians. In Thi-Qar security conditions were brought up by several respondents more often than in the other two provinces, which when discussed further was not just due to crackdowns on protests but also on kidnappings and intimidation, pointing to a lack of rule of law. Several responses mentioned the lack of training programs and support to encourage private enterprises. All respondents placed responsibility for creating opportunities firmly with the government. A lot of anger came across when discussing the unemployment problem, reinforcing the notion that this will drive youth discontent in the short to medium term.

## Navigating the constraints

While several respondents wanted to see wholesale changes to the political system in Iraq, there was little hope that would happen. Suggestions for political reforms included: changes to the constitution to weaken parliament; a directly elected president; removal of the provincial councils; electing governors directly thus preventing ruling parties from contesting future elections; and ending the quota system for political appointments in key positions. Many pointed to the fact that protests had yet to achieve results but that protesting was all that could be done at the moment. Several women highlighted the patriarchy and restrictions placed on women, leading to frustration and sometimes desperation. Nearly half of all interviewees mentioned emigrating as they could not see their situation improving. The majority mentioned basic rights, complaining that they were deprived of things readily available to youth in other countries. One unusual theme that was observed throughout was pride, that despite the difficulties they faced the youth felt proud to be Iraqi and that they could withstand the pressures against them.

## What are the solutions?

Many of the respondents shared similar views, with encouraging private sector growth, provision of loans, and income support widely mentioned. The top response was providing jobs; this is seen as the key to dealing with the problems young people face in Iraq. Again the onus is placed on the government to drive these reforms, and though the private sector was repeatedly mentioned, most respondents called for the government to

***“One unusual theme that was observed throughout was pride, that despite the difficulties they faced the youth felt proud to be Iraqi and that they could withstand the pressures against them.”***

provide jobs directly. Some interviewees noted that the government should listen to young people, making clear that their voices weren't being heard despite the protests. When invited to expand, a dialogue between decisionmakers and young people was suggested, noting the distance young people felt from those in power.

## Youth voices and change

There were split opinions on this question, some believed young people had a voice or could be heard, others disagreed. Some believed protests were a way to make changes, others dismissed that by citing results thus far. Several women felt their voices were especially marginalised, even though they participated in protests. Common suggestions for changes focused on the system of governance or the make-up of government, imposing justice and fighting corruption, and change through elections. The majority of interviewees framed their responses in an adversarial manner with the political elite, mentioning that corrupt political parties had a stranglehold on power and using an 'us vs them' approach. Some expressed powerlessness at being able to make changes; even when encouraged to think hypothetically they could not get beyond the current situation and what little they could do to affect it.

## Perceptions of the protest and protesters

While the majority approved of protests and were positive about their potential to bring about change, a sizeable number of respondents were critical of their lack of results, disruption and infiltration by political parties. Leadership was mentioned in several responses, with interviewees believing the protests could have done more and protected participants better if there was more discipline. Some respondents believed protests should or will resume as soon as Covid-19 restrictions are lifted. The issue of critical mass not being achieved was brought up a few times as was the violent response to protests and the loss of hundreds of lives. Throughout the interviews it was clear that the October protests movement has had a profound effect on young people; even those who were critical of them felt their effects. Generally, respondents in Baghdad believed protests were more successful than those in the other two provinces and also held a more positive view of protestors themselves.

## Impact of economic and political uncertainty in Iraq

Increases in the price of goods, disruption to studies and employment, and the unknown future effects of Covid-19 were frequently cited as negative impacts of the economic and political uncertainty facing the country. There was a consensus on the tangible impacts on the working classes even if individual respondents did not relate their own experiences. Uncertainty about the future with a tendency to the pessimistic was a theme through most of the interviews. Nearly all respondents focused on the negative economic impacts rather than the political uncertainty. Mental health was also mentioned by some interviewees who felt the uncertainty had a psychological impact for them if not a more direct one. Across the board respondents did not see an immediate change in the situation beyond the possibility of things becoming worse, partially as a result of Covid-19. Interestingly there was few to no comments on the possibility of conditions improving on the political front, whether through elections or other means.

## Perceptions of Iraq's political parties, federal and local governments

Unsurprisingly this question generated near unanimous responses in every part. Interviewees had scathing criticism of political parties, blaming them entirely for the country's ills. Every respondent wanted to do away with them with some even expressing a wish to see a dominating president controlling the country. Federal government was also widely criticised though some responses were more muted or wanting to see the government do more beyond mere words and to illustrate a good start for the new Kadhim government. As for local government, almost every interviewee believed they were not doing their job and did not provide services, with responses from Basra and Thi-Qar especially critical. Common themes expressed were the corruption and power that political parties used through federal and local governments, the ability of parties to use armed wings to coerce and intimidate, and the loyalty of the elite to foreign powers. Interviewees did not view federal or local government as being representative of or accountable to them, instead focusing on state capture by political parties, without reflecting on the fact that parties came into power through elections. In oil-rich Basra, the overwhelming view was that political parties and governments were robbing the province, and that even local government was somehow foreign to the province.

***“Leadership was mentioned in several responses, with interviewees believing the protests could have done more and protected participants better if there was more discipline”***

***“Interviewees had scathing criticism of political parties, blaming them entirely for the country's ills.”***

## Best ways to achieve reform

Getting rid of corruption featured heavily in responses, with some calling for a complete overhaul of the higher tiers of public sector and government. Disbanding parliament, early elections, change to a presidential system, and trials for corrupt officials were mentioned frequently. Some respondents believed that continuing with protests was the best way to achieve reforms. There was a focus on laws and justice across the 3 provinces and some interviewees expected the government to lead on this, in some way reforming itself. A clear theme was appointing officials disconnected from parties, a government made up of technocrats.

## How representative are these perceptions and concerns across Iraqi and Kurdish youth, and is there scope for a cooperative youth generation.

While all respondents believed the youth of central and southern Iraq shared the same concerns and could cooperate, they differed when it came to the rest of the country and with Kurdistan in particular. Roughly half believed youth in Kurdistan shared their concerns and could cooperate with them while the other half had the perception that young people in Kurdistan were much better off and did not face the same issues that people in the rest of Iraq faced. Lack of acceptable civil society organisations was also mentioned as a barrier to cooperation in addition to language, communication, and freedom of movement. Some interviewees saw social media as a tool and platform to cooperate with other young people across the country. Interestingly, respondents in Basra and Thi-Qar did not see youth in Baghdad or other central and southern provinces as being in better circumstances than them.

## Common findings

Given the data above the natural question is what common threads can be drawn out to better help understand the views presented, and to aid with forming sensible recommendations for policymakers. Despite some questions providing a clear split in opinions, there was surprising consistency in views across the 3 provinces. Where different views were presented, they tended to coalesce around 2 sets of opinions, which again showed consistency. While the sample size is too small to be statistically significant, it does give us indications that young people across Baghdad and southern Iraq hold similar views. As such, the common findings can be summarised in the following themes.

- **Employment and career choices are the biggest concerns for young people**

The biggest driver of discontent and instability is unemployment and the government must do more to create opportunities. Providing training and improving education are important qualifiers for employment: *“Young people face many obstacles, the most important of which is the lack of job opportunities in the public and private sectors. There is a lack of institutions to give young people the qualifications they need to become independent or to train them to establish their own businesses.”* (Basra, Female, 28). The difficult economic environment along with limited opportunities mean that working to provide income has overtaken career aspirations for young people: *“Many young people cannot provide for their families, and we have many graduates who are forced to work in a job they cannot like and is irrelevant to what they studied just to be able to put food on the table.”* (Baghdad, Female, 30). This situation is also impacting the younger generations who are still in school as families become more desperate to bring in sufficient income: *“The obstacles facing youth in Iraq today are the lack of job opportunities and the terrible economic conditions of many families, which force them to get their kids out of school, so they can help providing for the family.”* (Basra, Male, 28).

- **Women feel marginalised by a conservative society that restricts their choices**

Particularly in southern Iraq women feel pressurised to forego certain choices from their family or community. Media and arts are two particular fields where some women felt their choices were restricted. As one young woman said *“I wish to be a TV presenter, but the society in Basra does not accept that. My family didn’t object but they didn’t encourage it. I’m now looking for anything just to be employed.”* (Basra, Female, 22). Young women wanted freedom to explore career and personal choices without restrictions. These restrictions mean some women go on to study in other fields despite the lack of opportunities there: *“I wanted to be a painter, but society does not accept art. In Basra, people look down on artists. So now I’m a literature graduate with no job because the government is not hiring.”* (Basra, Female, 23).



In terms of political participation women felt their voices mattered less or were powerless to make a difference: *“I do not have a role or a voice because of the marginalisation of women and youth by society and the state, in addition to the frustration that we have begun to feel because of these practices. If I could I would change what I mentioned above by giving power to women and young people.”* (Thi-Qar, Female, 30). While acknowledging the limitation they faced, some young women wanted the opportunity to prove themselves and were not willing to give up on their aspirations: *“Restrictions are restrictions, but we cannot wait for the opportunity. Therefore, we must invest in other opportunities to be able to live. My feelings as an Iraqi woman are filled with frustrations that Iraqi society is a patriarchal society and women are not given a decent role to prove their worth and presence in the community.”* (Basra, Female, 28).

- **Young people want the private sector to thrive and microfinancing for entrepreneurs**

Lack of funding for start-ups was a barrier to new businesses and there were few incentives for young people in the private sector. There is a recognition that the economy can only be stable if there is a better balance between the public and private sectors. Young people have business ideas and a willingness to become entrepreneurs but lack the support to do so: *“The solutions are improving the private sector, opening factories, and increasing taxes on imported goods to protect our local industry. The government must give loans to young people to open their own businesses. At the same time, the government must protect these businesses by enacting laws to reduce the amount of imported goods.”* (Baghdad, Male, 21). The private sector has been acutely impacted by Covid-19 and for young people the combination of an already weak private sector environment and a downturn in activity caused by lockdowns has proved impossible to overcome: *“The obstacles are many and manifold, which make them difficult to overcome most of the time, so my friends and I tried to launch businesses, but the circumstances that accompanied the Covid-19 pandemic caused us a great loss. I feel frustrated that there are no government solutions for young people to help them start a career.”* (Thi-Qar, Male, 26).

- **Trust in the political system is non-existent, young people want thorough reforms**

While recognising urgent change is necessary, young people see huge barriers to reform by entrenched political parties. This distance between the two and the fact that young people see a system controlled by those who do not represent them gives warning of a lack of participation in elections and increased protests and discontent. All respondents expressed a negative view of political parties, particularly the perception of control over all aspects of power: *“The best way to reform is by getting rid of the political parties because they control everything and prevent any reform initiatives.”* (Baghdad, Male, 30). Most responses also pointed out the futility of expecting reform from a system designed to protect itself at the expenses of the citizen: *“The parties are groups that are loyal to other countries. They control the country’s political and economic destiny and direct it to their own interests and the interests of their subordinates. The central government is tied to ministers affiliated to parties loyal to regional countries that do not want a stable Iraq. The local government have not provided any service to the citizens except for fictitious projects that have no use other than filling the pockets of the corrupt.”* (Baghdad, Male, 27). This led to some unlikely suggestions of complete change of the current system of governance, a result of frustration with minimal reforms: *“The best way to reform is by disbanding the parliament because it is controlled by the political parties. We need a temporary government who will be led by a single leader to get the country on the right track.”* (Baghdad, Male, 29).

- **Young people want to be heard and have an impact on improving the situation in Iraq**

Some believe they were making their voices heard through protests but there is a realisation that young people are marginalised and not heard by the older, powerful elites in general. Youth-specific platforms where young people feel they are listened to could empower them and allow their grievances to be aired safely and restore a sense of civic inclusion. While some respondents questioned the viability and efficacy of protests, others believed they were the best tool available to enforce change: *“Certainly, all Iraqi youth have a voice that forced the government to undertake some reforms and had it not been for the Covid-19 pandemic there would have been more reforms. There are no significant changes felt yet, but it was a step up in popular pressure on the government.”* (Thi-Qar, Male, 26). Most of the young people interviewed believed that reforms are

difficult to enact, and the term anger was mentioned several times in that regard. For some this translated into self-identifying young people as an entire group waiting for the right time to force change: *“The protests have affected the government and parliament, and we are waiting for the results. The protesters are role models for all of us. We can make the changes if the politicians refuse, we will decide as young people together the best way forward when their time runs out.”* (Basra, Male, 25).

- **Uncertainty due to the economic, political and Covid-19 situation is putting more pressure on young people**

As the economic situation becomes more difficult young people face greater pressure to provide incomes for their families. This impacts their mental health and some consider emigrating to escape this situation. Young people lack an outlet that they can communicate with which would alleviate some of the stress and uncertainty they face. Most respondents believed that government did not pay attention to their needs, tried to communicate with them or worked to alleviate the extra pressures they face. Young people believe that the challenges Iraq is going through affect them more than other groups: *“The instability of the economic situation has negatively affected everyone in terms of job opportunities and local production and contributed to raising the prices of most goods on the market. There are more unemployed people now, especially among the young. I study and work at the same time to provide for my family, both have been disrupted over the last year.”* (Basra, Male, 20). Emigration was mentioned frequently out of a recognition that things would not improve but for some it was not possible option despite it being attractive. Though the term was not mentioned directly, some respondents expressed pride at being resilient under the circumstances: *“Sometimes I wish to emigrate and leave the country, and other times I try to bypass obstacles by working with a group of friends in some temporary jobs to provide for my family. Sometimes I feel down as a young man in Iraq and other times I feel proud to be able to survive in such conditions.”* (Basra, Male, 25).

- **Young adults in Iraq can cooperate with each other provided the right tools are developed**

National civil society organisations can help connect young people, as do social media platforms. Distance and communication present some barriers but young people identify with each other across Iraq, sharing some concerns. Currently links seem to be superficial but would benefit from networking activities. This is based on the understanding that young people in every part of Iraq face a common set of issues that they want to see change on: *“Young people in all of Iraq have one goal, which is to reform the country, and Kurdish youth certainly share the same views and opinions with the rest of us. The youth of Kurdistan, despite the distance and the difference in the language, they share a few common issues with us like the incompetent central government and parties’ corruption.”* (Baghdad, Male, 30). While a national youth network or platform would bring young people together on common interests there is also a need for provincial level networks to address more local issues: *“Young people in all provinces have similar goals, which are achieving reforms and creating jobs, but the conditions in each province are different. Some provinces have services as their first priority, some aim for employment, some have a political agenda, and some are driven by the parties’ interests.”* (Basra, Female, 22).

These views raise wide-ranging questions for Iraqi and foreign actors seeking to address them. Certainly more data would be useful in shaping any programmes; and this could look at what gaps exist in terms of knowledge and capacity for young people that could be filled easily and quickly and would help them in career choices. A follow-up survey to determine programmatic preferences for youth specific projects would give a clearer picture of the priority areas. Also, more work is needed on what can be done to assist young women seeking personal development without exacerbating the sensitivities of a conservative society. A more comprehensive data collection project could help build a better picture in each province of what young people need most in terms of skills for life.



## **PART 4: THE KURDISTAN REGION**

## 4.1 Iraqi Kurdistan's recent economic challenges and its young population

### 2005-2014: on the rise

Iraqi Kurdistan developed from a marginal region within the pre-2003 “old Iraq” to an autonomous region within the post-2003 federal “new Iraq.” The 2003 invasion is significant since it marks the point at which Arab-majority parts of Iraq descended into civil war, while the Iraqi Kurdistan region enjoyed a period of unprecedented economic prosperity and political stability. In 2005, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) became a constitutionally recognised region of Iraq under the authority of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in the provinces of Erbil, Duhok and Sulaimani. As a federal region of Iraq, the Kurdistan region has its own executive, parliament, judiciary and security forces. In 2006, its two dominant parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) agreed on forming a unified central government. This was a historic moment, initiating a period of institutional development, economic growth and reforms.

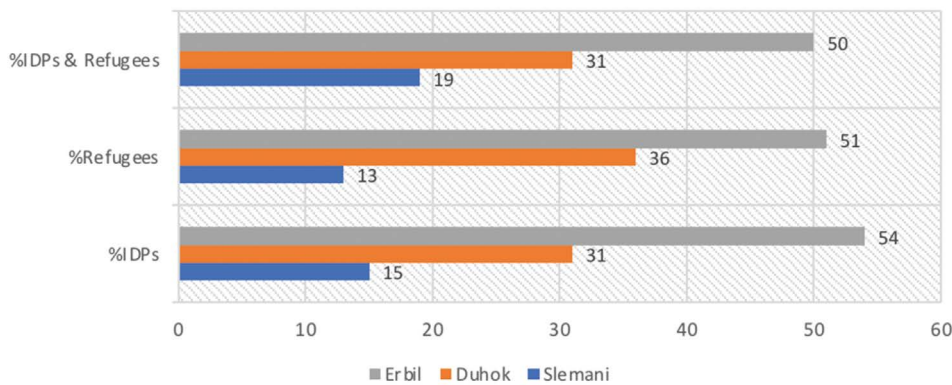
The KRI's constitutional status provided the region with extensive powers to engage in external relations with international firms and foreign countries. Market liberalisation and the opening of petroleum fields have brought new public-private, and global-local partnerships to the region. From 2008 to 2011, the region's GDP registered an increase of around 12 percent.<sup>80</sup> In 2013, Kurdistan's economy grew by 8 percent and its budget amounted to 13 billion dollars, an almost tenfold increase over the past decade.<sup>81</sup> The region also saw a boom in foreign direct investment from 2007 to 2013. 2,830 foreign companies were registered in the KRI by 2014. Over half of these companies arrived after 2010.<sup>82</sup> All this indicates that within a very short time frame, the region became a site of economic prosperity and openness while the rest of Iraq was struggling.

One source of instability is the KRG's heavy dependence on oil. The KRG receives a proportionate percentage of Iraq's overall national budget, which is itself derived from oil sales. In addition to its share of the federal budget, the KRG generates significant amounts of revenue from border customs and taxes. Buoyed by increasing oil revenues from 2008 to 2013, the capital city Erbil experienced an unprecedented scale of construction. Roads were constructed, expensive commercial and residential compounds were erected, shopping malls were opened, and sleek international restaurants sprang up in the city's wealthy quarters.<sup>83</sup> Economic growth at more than 10% – unequally spread as it was – significantly improved the quality of life in the region. The KRI ranked 76th out of 188 countries on the Economist Intelligence Unit's (EIU) Human Development Index (HDI), ahead of Iraq, which ranked 97th.<sup>84</sup>

### 2014-2018: the crisis years

In 2014, the KRG faced a severe revenue shortage combined with a series of security and humanitarian crises. The KRG had been pursuing a pipeline project to sell its oil to Turkey independently, and in response Baghdad cut its constitutionally mandated share of the country's oil revenues. In 2014, the KRG received only \$1.1 billion of its share of about \$12 billion from the Iraqi federal budget.<sup>85</sup> In 2015, no fiscal transfer was made from Baghdad to the regional government. The rapidly-escalating conflict with the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the resulting influx of internally displaced people (IDPs) and refugees from Iraq and Syria compounded the pressure on the regional economy. Oil production slowed due to attacks from ISIS and a drop in global prices. Refineries went offline and export quality dropped dramatically. By December 2014, the region was hosting more than one million IDPs from Iraq and 20,000 refugees from Syria.<sup>86</sup> In 2019, the total number of refugees and IDPs in the region has risen to over 1.5 million people.<sup>87</sup>

## % of IDPs and Refugees in Each Province

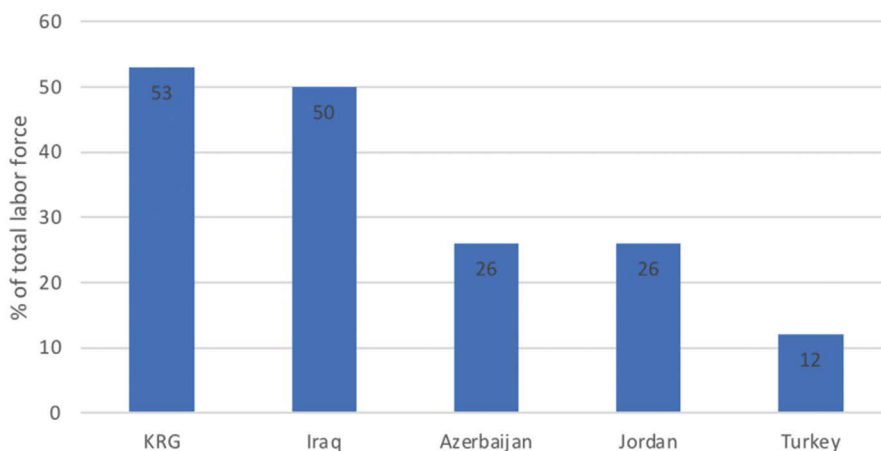


Source: Joint Crisis Coordination Group, 2019

The combination of financial, security and humanitarian challenges in 2014 resulted in a full-blown crisis. The KRG slashed its public spending by half, as the salaries of civil servants were reduced and delayed for several months.<sup>88</sup> Much of the public sector was paralysed and various government institutions, including in the health and education sectors, went on strike. Sporadic protests took place in various provinces. In response, the government resorted to more nationalistic discourse and pushed for an independence referendum. In September 2017, Kurds overwhelmingly voted for independence amidst the international community's opposition to the referendum.<sup>89</sup> In October, however, nationalistic euphoria turned into defeat as the Iraqi government took back control of the oil-rich city of Kirkuk, with the blessing of the United States.<sup>90</sup> This meant that the KRG would lose more than half of its oil revenue. Iran closed its border with the KRI, the Iraqi government imposed a blockade on international flights to Kurdistan, and relations with Turkey were strained. The KRG's isolation posed a striking contrast to greater levels of international engagement it enjoyed only a few years back.

It was against this background that the Kurdish government announced its plan to diversify its economy away from oil in 2019.<sup>91</sup> A recent 2016 World Bank report outlined the cost of the KRG's high dependency on oil. Oil revenues constitute 85% of the regional government's budget.<sup>92</sup> The oil-based economy has meant a high percentage of public sector employment in the KRI. Public sector employment in the region is 53% compared to 50% in federal Iraq, 26% in Azerbaijan and Jordan, and 12% in Turkey.<sup>93</sup> In total, 1.2 million of the KRI's 6 million citizens work for in public sector jobs.

## Public Sector Employment, KRI 2014



Source: World Bank 2016

# The Kurdistan Region

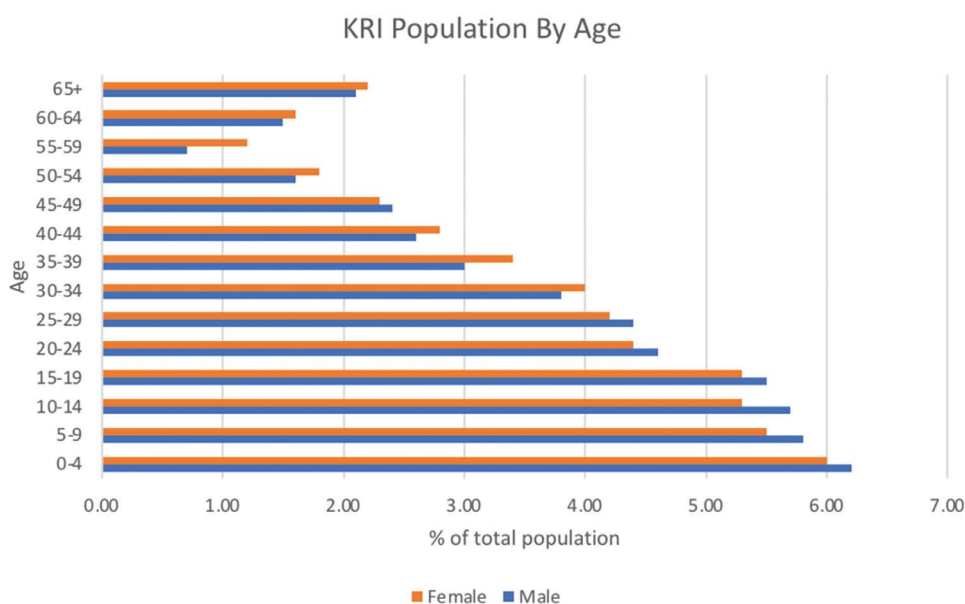
Massive levels of public sector employment also pave the way for high levels of corruption. Most of the corruption analyses on Iraq do not disaggregate results for the KRI, thus it is hard to know the exact level of corruption in the region.<sup>94</sup> Yet, the KRI scores only slightly better than the rest of Iraq on the EIU's corruption index. Ranking seven MENA countries, the EIU places the UAE at the top and Iraq at the bottom of its scale. The KRI is fifth, closely behind Turkey and substantially ahead of Iran. Iraq as a federal entity places last.<sup>95</sup> In an attempt to mitigate the public discontent about corruption, the KRG hired Deloitte and Ernst and Young – international accounting firms – to conduct internal audits of its oil and gas sector.<sup>96</sup> The firms wrote reports in highly technical language that might provide some data for the international firms involved, but do not reflect the nature of the endemic corruption in the region. The fact that no high-level official has been charged with corruption also creates confusion about the government's intent in fighting it.

In July 2019, a new government was formed under the premiership of Masrour Barzani, who succeeded his cousin Nechirvan Barzani, the new president of the region. The government includes the Kurdistan Democratic Party, which won 45 seats of the parliament's 111 seats, Patriotic Union Party (21 seats) and the Gorran Party (12 seats).<sup>97</sup> Having the support of almost 80% of the parliament, the new government embarked on its ambitious reform agenda of good governance and economic diversity.<sup>98</sup> While the fruits of the reform agenda are yet to be seen, the regional economy saw some recovery in 2018-2019.<sup>99</sup> Oil exports increased, suspended projects resumed, debt payments began. Unemployment rates also decreased from 16% in 2016 to 9% in 2019. Likewise, the poverty rate went down from 12% to 5%.<sup>100</sup> Some of the economic damage done since 2014 was gradually being rolled back.

## The KRI today, with a focus on youth

After a brief period of recovery in 2018-2019, the KRI's economy is suffering again. The global crash in oil prices, its budget dispute with Baghdad and the COVID-19 pandemic, have reversed the region's recent recovery. In the first half of 2020, the government was able to pay only two months' worth of salaries. Unemployment rates are increasing. Poverty is also on the rise. According to market research, more than 29,000 firms, about 4,000 factories and 1,850 restaurants were closed in late March due to government measures against the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>101</sup>

The KRI's economic problems are affecting its young people the most. Like the rest of Iraq, Kurdistan has a young population. According to the Kurdistan Regional Statistical Office, half of the KRI's population is under the age of 32, and 35% under 15.<sup>102</sup>



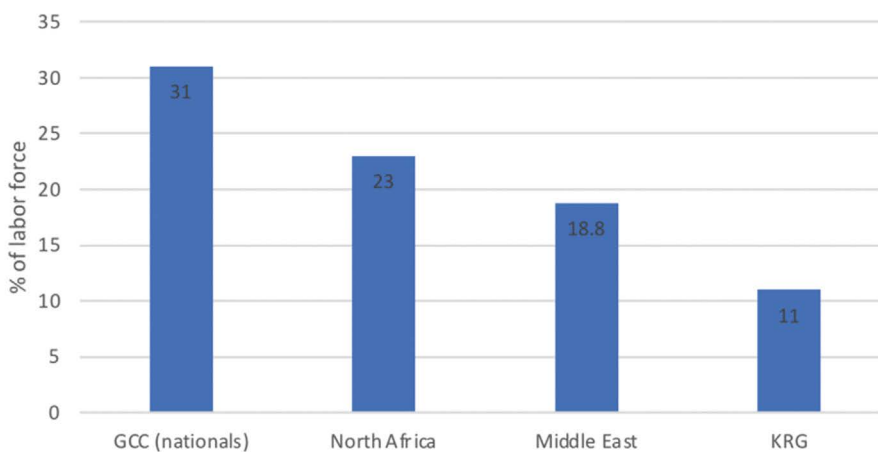
Source: IOM/ KRSO, 2018

The region's young population is both an opportunity and a challenge. It is an opportunity because with the recent expansion of the education system across the region, a new stream of qualified graduates is coming. Yet, at the same time, just like Iraq, the region's job growth is unable to keep pace with the growth in its labour force. Until the economic crisis in 2014, the KRG responded to labour force growth by expanding the public sector. Since 2014, the government has had to impose a cap on public employment. Meanwhile, the region's universities put around 24,000 graduates (with two- or four-year degrees) into the job market every year<sup>103</sup>, and the private sector is unable to absorb them. According to The Economist Intelligence Unit, the KRI ranks the 67th on labour market index, just ahead of Iraq.<sup>104</sup>

The youth bulge combined with cuts in public spending results in greater and more chronic unemployment. According to the UN Migration Agency's July 2018 survey, almost a quarter of those aged 15-34 in Kurdistan are unemployed.<sup>105</sup> These figures are worse for the female workforce, which stands at 12.2%. This is the lowest female work participation rate in the MENA region, with Iraq (overall) at 14.7%, Jordan 15.3% and Iran being at 16.4%.<sup>106</sup>

***“The region’s young population is both an opportunity and a challenge.”***

Female Labor Force Participation Rate



Source: World Bank, 2016

Of the women employed in the KRI, 75% work in the public sector, and are severely affected by the government's salary cuts.<sup>107</sup> With the COVID-19 lockdown the situation has only deteriorated. According to a recent rapid household survey conducted by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and FAFO in the KRI and in some northern provinces, unemployment rates among youth and especially among women have further increased during the lockdown. The survey concludes that 19% of all respondents were unemployed and unemployment rates are highest among women (29%) and youth (42%).<sup>108</sup> Without swift reforms, unemployment rates are likely to get worse in the near future.

The next section will analyse how young adults in Kurdistan are coping with these economic challenges and the ways in which economic troubles are affecting their political views and orientations about Kurdistan's contemporary predicament.

## 4.2 Synthesis of interviews

This research is based on in-depth Skype interviews with 20 young people from the Kurdistan Region-Iraq (KRI). The interviewees were selected to represent a diverse group of people in terms of their geographic distribution, socio-economic conditions and political views. 7 of the interviewees are female, 8 are students and 2 are unemployed. They are all within the age group 20-30. Those who are employed work in as private firms of various sectors, civil society and humanitarian organizations.

Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured way, meaning the list of questions guided rather than dictated the conversations with the respondents. The below analysis emphasised the points of common perception, and singular opinions were either used as representative of exceptional opinions or ignored.

***“The picture of the Kurdistan’s economy and politics that emerged from the interviews is marked by frustration.”***

***“Respondents see the party dominated political system and the region’s division as exacerbating the region’s vulnerability to economic shocks.”***

***“the majority of young people supported the government’s plan to reduce public employment. This is quite a shift of mentality in a region marked by a history of political patronage”***

This research also includes informal consultation with a number of scholars based in Iraqi Kurdistan. This was meant to help contextualize the formal interviews and enrich their analysis.

## **Main findings**

The picture of the Kurdistan’s economy and politics that emerged from the interviews is marked by frustration. The economy was the most important topic for the interviewees, and the one they spent the most time talking about.

Generally, respondents were deeply frustrated with the current state of the economy and political situation. While frustration with the political leaders of the country runs deep, many respondents were confident in the abilities of their own generation to bring about change for the better. On the other hand, they were eager to discuss systematic problems that they saw around them. Many of these were issues that Western millennials and “generation Z” voice frequently, such as the mismatch between university education and professional life, or the plight of internships. In other instances, the problems are specific to the KRI, such as the difficulty of navigating between political factions, or the absence of a financial services industry.

Respondents see the party dominated political system and the region’s division as exacerbating the region’s vulnerability to economic shocks. Frustration with the economic and political situation translates into the emergence of alternative and changing forms of political engagement among the youth. Elections and protests are less preferred ways of expressing political discontent for the many respondents while social media and more micro-level community works emerge as new means of political engagement.

Kurdish nationalism also takes its share from changing social dynamics in the region. Many respondents posit opposition to party-defined nationalism and articulate more liberal and civic form of Kurdish nationalism. This new nationalism in Iraqi Kurdistan is closely linked with broader developments that are taking place in Kurdistan’s transnational space.

## **I. Economic Challenges and Youth**

### **Unemployment & Salary cuts**

The issues of unemployment and public sector salary cuts came up most often during the interviews.

Although none of the interviewees had public sector jobs that could be subject to salary cuts, they felt its effects through their families. One respondent said *“unemployment is bad, but it gets worse when your families are not paid to support you.”*<sup>109</sup> Another explained that the reason why unemployment has not caused big social problems in Kurdistan is that young people live with their families and are supported by them. He added *“who do we look towards when our families are deprived of their salaries”*.<sup>110</sup> The region’s economic problems are depressing to all of its citizens, but to young adults with higher education, it can mean a false start to their professional lives.

Massive youth employment was the overarching theme of the interviews. Since its establishment in 1991, public employment in the KRI has operated as the most comprehensive social security system. The system works like this: Parties allocate state resources including public employment to their clients, and in return clients are expected to provide their political support and vote during election times.<sup>111</sup> This turned the regional governmental institutions into a massive machine for employment and resource allocation for the parties. The state, one respondent says, has been captured by informal networks of families.<sup>112</sup> Most often, he continued, those who are influential over state functionaries do not assume any formal role.<sup>113</sup> Real power, according to him, lies with the political parties which are handing out jobs in return for getting votes.<sup>114</sup> This employment structure worked until 2014 when the regional government continued to receive its regional budget share from Iraq. The Kurdistan government’s decision to sell oil to Turkey independently of Baghdad, however, led to the latter to freeze the federal budget. In its absence, the government’s massive employment structure has stumbled into crisis. Payments have constantly been delayed for several months and serious cuts have been made.

Actually, the majority of young people supported the government’s plan to reduce public employment. This is quite a shift of mentality in a region marked by a history of political patronage. One respondent said *“our parents knew that they would be given jobs after they graduated. We do not believe that government should employ everyone.”*<sup>115</sup> Another



says “government should definitely reduce public employment, this mentality needs to change.”<sup>116</sup> They complained, however, that the government’s austerity measures have not been mitigated by any policy towards development of the private sector. Since 2014, the KRG has worked on plans to encourage the private sector. Yet the region’s vulnerability to external shocks and the fight against ISIS upset these plans. The massive flow of refugees and internally displaced people into the region from Syria and Iraq also created tremendous pressure on the economy. As the formal economy was not able to absorb all these shocks, the informal and war economies (such as scrap metal collection) emerged as the only alternatives.<sup>117</sup>

## Underemployment

In developed economies, it is not unusual for young university graduates to be working in sectors such as the food service industry or retail, before settling into a career path of their choice. In the KRI, however, (partly due to low labour costs) it is considered a significant step down for university graduates to take blue collar jobs, or any jobs involving menial labour. The fact that this is still happening is indicative of the desperation many young people feel. Interviewees reported of engineers becoming day labourers in farms, teachers becoming taxi drivers, and recent graduates becoming scrap collectors. One respondent said “university graduates are now taking any job they find, most are doing things that have nothing to do with what they have studied.”<sup>118</sup> It seems to be that students from mid-ranking universities and lower middle class incomes are more prone to take blue collar work, while students with more prestigious degrees live on family allowances rather than working for a subsistence income. If underemployment was a more viable in-between option for young people, it might soften the unemployment problem to a certain extent. In the current situation, young people look for other options. “I have been looking for a job for a long time now” said one interviewee, “but there is nothing. So I’ve started looking for options outside Kurdistan.”<sup>119</sup>

## Emigration

All of the interviewees were at least thinking about leaving the KRI, mostly for Western countries. Most indicated that they would leave if they were granted an opportunity (professional or educational) abroad. This is not just the case for the unemployed, but also for those who have had considerable success. An interviewee working for an NGO explained the reasons why he wants to leave:

*“I’ve a good job here, working at an NGO. I have done so much to finally get this. I had worked when I was studying at a university. I invested in myself, got all the skills. I’ve been working for 8 years now. I have done everything: logistics, accounting, project management, my portfolio and responsibilities have increased. Yet, I’ve been paid the same salary in years. That never changes. It’s frustrating; your responsibilities and portfolio expand but your salary does not. No matter what you do you can’t hope for a better life. But I want to leave and come back eventually to do something here.”<sup>120</sup>*

The decision to leave is not an easy one. It is loaded with a moral dilemma for especially the educated youth. A female student who is also a social media activist said “I understand people who want to leave. I know things are not easy here. Change will take a lot of time, but if all of us leave, then who would do the change? Those who leave should also know that they leave their sisters and brothers here. Who will provide a better future for those?”<sup>121</sup> Another respondent thought that young Kurds should go abroad to get the best skills and come back to build a better future.<sup>122</sup> This sort of sentiment is often expressed, but it is difficult to say how effective it is in getting young people to stay, should they have an opportunity to leave.

Due to their educational background and financial means, the interviewees were interested in legal emigration. Still, it is worth noting here that most people in the KRI think of the prospect of illegal emigration to the West, primarily Europe. There is no public data on the exact numbers of Iraqi Kurds who made their way to Europe through illegal ways. Yet from the images of Iraqi Kurds who died while trying to cross the sea or from daily conversations with ordinary people, one gets the sense that the numbers are on the rise in the last few years. The operation conducted by Dutch and French police against a network of human smugglers gives an idea about the extent of illegal emigration from the region. According to the statement made in the aftermath of the operation, this group was suspected of illegally transporting nearly 10,000 Kurdish migrants to the United Kingdom.<sup>123</sup>

**“Most indicated that they would leave if they were granted an opportunity (professional or educational) abroad.”**

**“While educated Kurds favour the overall reduction of public employment, they also share social mistrust towards private sector in its current form.”**

**“Most respondents noted what they called a “huge gap” between what they learn at the university and the demands of professional life.”**

Some responses from interviewees suggested that they were themselves not too far from considering illegal emigration. One respondent with a degree from a foreign country said *“I do not want to go to Europe illegally, but I have many friends who went to Britain through such ways.”*<sup>124</sup> Another said *“young people feel suffocated here, they are depressed, they do not feel that things will change for better, so they collect money and set on a dangerous journey.”*<sup>125</sup>

## Shift to Private Sector

In most mid-tier developing countries such as Brazil, Turkey or Mexico, public sector employment is considered safe, but comparatively low status, while private sector jobs are high volatility-high reward. In the KRI, too, the public sector also offers high job security, but low upward mobility, and most importantly, an uneven income. While educated Kurds favour the overall reduction of public employment, they also share social mistrust towards private sector in its current form. Private companies are poorly regulated and often look at local staff as being easy to replace.

One NGO worker said *“I work at an international NGO<sup>v</sup>, which has operated in the region for a long time, but despite this, my parents and family are concerned that I may be unemployed.”*<sup>126</sup> These concerns are actually justified within the context of the region. Cycles of war, displacement and conflicts have prevented the development of a stable private sector. As one respondent said *“private companies open to shut down in the next crisis”*.<sup>127</sup> The recent COVID-19 has also negatively affected businesses. Many private enterprises have shut down. Another reason for mistrust towards the private sector is related to the absence of labour laws. One respondent said *“I was working in a private company before shifting to an NGO. I could not stand there; there was no law, no regulation. They were making up their own rules which were completely hostile to labour rights.”*<sup>128</sup>

## Training and Education System

The KRI has 35 universities in total.<sup>129</sup> According to the estimates of Rand Cooperation’s labour market analysis, about 9,500 graduates with two-year degrees and 14,500 graduates with four year degrees have annually entered the labour market annually from 2012 to 2020.<sup>130</sup> Despite the region’s challenges, decades of educational expansion has created a resilient and energetic youth, well informed about global developments and ideas.

The problem is with both the supply and demand of education: universities are not set up in a way to respond to the needs of the economy, and the private sector does not have the capacity to absorb this growing young labour force. While this is a common problem across the world, it seems to be significantly more acute in the KRI.

Most respondents noted what they called a “huge gap” between what they learn at the university and the demands of professional life. One said *“we are taught things that have no practical application in professional life.”*<sup>131</sup> Another said *“the education system here has nothing to do with real life. It is a waste of time and money.”*<sup>132</sup> Respondents specified the theory-oriented teaching structure of the higher education in Kurdistan as the primary problem. Especially in fields such as engineering universities provide very limited technical and vocational skills. One graduate of engineering school said *“when we enter the job market, we usually do not have any experience of internship or technical skills.”*<sup>133</sup> The presence of this phenomenon in fields like engineering is concerning, and sets the KRI apart from neighbouring Turkey, where engineers generally report a strong connection between their educational and professional lives.

While some universities have career development offices or services, they exist only in name. The link between the private sector and universities is very limited. As one respondent said *“I graduated from the school without seeing any career fair.”*<sup>134</sup> Another said *“I learned how to apply for a job or write a CV after my graduation, universities do not provide any such support.”*<sup>135</sup> Interviewees cited only a handful of private universities as supporting the development of professional skills.

<sup>v</sup> Most of the respondents referred to NGOs as being part of the private sector.

There are roughly two tiers of universities. The top tier is made up of a few English-language institutions such as the American University of Iraq – Sulaimani (AUIS), University of Kurdistan – Hewler (UH), The American University of Kurdistan – Duhok (UKD). Most of the other universities are public and provide education in Kurdish.

In a region of six million people, where the private sector is already limited, this creates a deep sense of inequality. One public university graduate said *“there is no justice here; we have to cope with inequalities of all sorts”*.<sup>136</sup> Another public university student confirmed *“private universities such as AUIS or UH provide better education, so their graduates are always companies’ top picks”*.<sup>137</sup> This has created a situation where only English department graduates from public universities can compete with private university graduates thanks to their language skills.

## Early Career

Another cause of frustration concerns the expectations of private companies. While private companies complain about the lack of skills, as Rand Cooperation’s Labour Market analysis shows, they generally lack internship or early career programs for young graduates.<sup>138</sup> One respondent who did an internship while studying said *“you do not learn anything in internships because they don’t let you do anything”*.<sup>139</sup> Many respondents also talked about the unrealistic expectations of private companies, saying that companies expect five, six years of experience for ostensibly entry-level positions. One recent graduate complained *“how are we expected to have that much of experience on the day we graduate?”*<sup>140</sup> This mismatch results in employment of foreign nationals in the region’s already limited private sector. This is even more salient in the oil sector, where most of the jobs are occupied by expatriates. As the World Bank 2016 report shows oil sector corresponds to only 1 percent of the local employment.<sup>141</sup> This creates resentment towards foreigners and expatriates among the highly educated. One respondent said *“we are treated as a second-class citizen in our country, even our own companies privilege foreign nationals.”*<sup>142</sup>

While some of these problems are common to many recent graduates across the world, others are particular to the KRI. Respondents identified political boundaries, informality and a uniquely inefficient government apparatus as serious hurdles to success. One entrepreneur said:

*“People come to me to ask about what needs to be done to start business. As a start-up owner, I have difficulty explaining. Regulations are complex, taxes are high, and rules are not standard. We are expected to pay the same amount of taxes as big companies. This discourages me from developing other projects.”*<sup>143</sup>

Another entrepreneur who recently started his small digital company noted the lack of funding opportunities as an important challenge for entrepreneurs. He said *“I can’t get a loan to initiate my business. Entrepreneurs have to self-fund themselves”*.<sup>144</sup> This is a big challenge in a region laden with economic crises. Banking is notoriously difficult in the KRI, and it is common for people to store their money in large vaults and to borrow from relatives or informal organizations.

The lack of funding for entrepreneurial projects leads people to continue to follow more conventional ways of doing business. Another self-employed respondent working in the oil sector identified monopolies as the biggest challenge in the region.<sup>145</sup> He argued that the political parties’ dominance of businesses does not leave any space for development of small and medium sized enterprises. Explaining his failed attempt to start a business in solar energy, he said that the government does not allow alternative energy sources because they want to control and monopolise the whole sector.<sup>146</sup> In order to do something in this sector, he said, *“you have to start big”*.<sup>147</sup> This sentiment is shared by other respondents as well. One entrepreneur accepts the monopolisation of big businesses but thinks that there are still opportunities for SMEs outside the monopolised sectors.<sup>148</sup>

One recurring theme when discussing early careers is the involvement of political parties in the economy. Most of the private businesses in the KRI are either owned or controlled by the parties. This not only limits the space available for entrepreneurial activity, but also creates challenges for ordinary young people to find employment in the private sector.

***“One recurring theme when discussing early careers is the involvement of political parties in the economy.”***

As one respondent says *“connections are not only necessary for government jobs, you need to be affiliated with parties to find employment in the private sector too.”*<sup>149</sup> Another adds that *“they dominate everything here. Most companies have two CV files, one for ordinary people and one for party-connected people. Even CVs are divided here.”*<sup>150</sup>

## The Humanitarian Sector

Employment at NGOs in high-income economies is associated with foregoing private sector salaries for more abstract things, such as idealism or political activism. In the KRI, however, as in many developing regions, NGO work is considered prestigious, well-paid and a potential gateway to employment abroad. In an environment marked by patronage and personal relationships, the humanitarian sector and international NGOs have emerged as a popular site of employment away from party control for the region's qualified and skilled workforce. Since its establishment in 1991, the region has been a site of transnational involvement.<sup>151</sup> International NGOs have long operated in the region, engaging in diverse work ranging from humanitarian assistance to capacity building, women rights to peace building. The humanitarian crisis that resulted from the fight against ISIS, followed by the massive displacement of people into the region has increased the number of humanitarian organisations operating in Kurdistan.

The expansion of the humanitarian sector in the region provided its youth with employment opportunities under the conditions of war and economic crisis. One respondent said *“many young people want to work in international organisations”*.<sup>152</sup> She thinks that while higher salaries appeal to people, parties' lack of influence over employment processes also attract people. An NGO worker said that her reasons for working for an NGO include the professional working environment they provide for their employees. She said *“before working here, I was working in a local private company. It was not a professional working space”*.<sup>153</sup> Another NGO employee said that the skills she acquired at work was helpful in launching her own local NGO.<sup>154</sup> While NGOs seem to be seizing the region's most qualified youth, they are also a means of skills transfer to the local workforce.

## Entrepreneurship

In the last few years, Kurdistan has seen the growth of online businesses in the service sector. Most of these businesses, as identified by one respondent, are small enterprises.<sup>155</sup> They provide services in such diverse sectors as digital media strategy and planning, social media management, online advertising, wedding and event planning and handmade crafts.<sup>156</sup> The recent COVID-19 lockdown has also created a push for online businesses. Despite the absence of a credit card system, online start-ups have begun running in food delivery, clothing, bakery and childcare services.<sup>157</sup> Some female entrepreneurs have also emerged in the region. Supported by the entrepreneurial programs, these young women have overcome societal barriers and initiated their own start-ups in the fields of software, artificial intelligence, e-commerce, arts and crafts.<sup>158</sup>

While a new landscape of entrepreneurialism is emerging in the private sector, the government is also working on its reform agenda to make its public management more efficient. One crucial aspect of the reform is the region's civil service system. In January 2020 the Kurdish Parliament passed what was hailed as a historic piece of legislation: the law on pensions, salaries and allowances. The law seeks to modernise government payments, regulate the pension system and clear payrolls of ghost employees.<sup>159</sup> While some civil servants and NGOs criticised the law for retaining generous pensions for lawmakers and high ranking government officials<sup>160</sup>, the enactment of the law by the majority of the parliament suggests the government's willingness to undertake reform in this crucial area.

## II. Political Perceptions and Nationalism

While economic challenges are at the heart of their frustration, they are aware that economic challenges are a result of more systemic problem: the region's political division and political party-led system.

Not long ago, the KRI's inhabitants were full of enthusiasm. After the civil war in the 1990s, the two major political parties, the KDP and PUK, split the region into two party-led administrative zones. In 2006, they finally agreed to form a unified government, which sparked hopes that “one Kurdistan” was finally within reach.<sup>161</sup>

***“While economic challenges are at the heart of their frustration, they are aware that economic challenges are a result of more systemic problem: the region's political division and political party-led system”***

The subsequent creation of a centralised Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), however, failed to unify the region.

But neither party showed any real interest in transferring power to the regional political institutions. They have kept their armed forces and budgets separate. As new institutions and business ties evolved, they were not geared towards executing the functions of the KRG, but rather towards perpetuating party control over society and regional governmental institutions.<sup>162</sup> Buoyed by petrodollars, political parties also expanded their patronage networks within their territorial zones.

## Patronage networks

Patronage networks are present in all aspects of life in the KRI and shape citizens' everyday interactions with the authorities. As one respondent says *"there is nothing in Kurdistan that stays outside of parties and their patronage web."*<sup>163</sup> Another explains in more detail:

*"There is no government here. There are parties, and within those parties, there are different people. These different people control different sectors in economy, different media outlets, different branches in the Peshmerga [the armed forces] and different Asayish<sup>164</sup> units within their territorial zones. People know who controls what. Don't think that it is only Kurdistan that is divided. It is everything. You need to have contacts in order to get anything done in Kurdistan. If you are in PUK controlled region, then you need PUK contracts, if you are in KDP area, then you need KDP contacts."*<sup>165</sup>

Kurds use the term "wasta" for personal connections that help them in anything ranging from daily bureaucratic errands to major business deals. It is an Arabic term that refers to individuals who act as intermediaries between the state and citizens.

Wasta is widespread in the KRI. Many respondents referred to it in explaining the functioning of the patronage system. While people often complain about it and view it as corruption, it is often justified as a mean to tackle Kurdistan's overwhelming bureaucracy. Getting a driver's licence takes months of meticulous paperwork and reporting a stolen item to the police can be a harrowing affair in which the police might threaten the victim with jail time. "Wasta" serves to soften the harshness of the authorities, and turn byzantine bureaucracies into manageable channels. One interviewee with a civil society job said that it was impossible to do work with the government without any connections. She explained that she spent her first year at work building up connections in the state, and that only after she has enough wasta within the province that their program could start running properly.<sup>166</sup> In her account, as in most other accounts, the terms "state," "government" and "province" were all used interchangeably in one sentence. When asked what exactly she was referring to, she clarified that she was using all these terms to refer to PUK-controlled political structures at the provincial level. This, rather than a sign of confusion or a language mistake, indicates the fusion of the party and state in the public imagination.<sup>167</sup>

The operation of parties as state-like governments within their respected zones stands in contrast to rising popular demands for unity. As one respondent says *"I don't think there is any other example of governance in the world where there is one ethnic group but [they are] having to live divided because of the political parties."*<sup>168</sup> The majority of respondents note that this division does not take place at the macro level of politics only, but affects every aspect of their lives and ambitions. *"It feels suffocating"* one says.<sup>169</sup> Another concurs *"we are like two different countries."*<sup>170</sup> A former NGO activist from Sulaimani clarifies:

*"I'm not affiliated with any of the political parties. When I tried to do work in Duhok, they told me that I was PKK<sup>171</sup>. In Erbil, they told me that I was PUK. In Sulaimani they told me that I was KDP. They limit you to only one region. It is really exhausting. They force political labels on you and create difficulties for your work if you remain independent."*<sup>172</sup>

Several other respondents raised similar sentiments. One university student who aims to find a job in Erbil thinks that being from Halabja, which is outside the KDP control might be a handicap. She thinks that she might have to need contacts with the KDP to increase her chances of employment in Erbil.<sup>173</sup>

***"The operation of parties as state-like governments within their respected zones stands in contrast to rising popular demands for unity."***

# The Kurdistan Region

***“The political division within the KRI comes at a time when pan-Kurdish sentiment is gaining ground across wider Kurdistan and the diaspora at large.”***

***“As well as frustration with the governing elites, new nationalism in the KRI also features liberal conceptions of social well-being and government-citizen relationship.”***

***“Seeing Iraq as a foreign government does not hint at a negative picture from the perspective of relations.”***

The political division within the KRI comes at a time when pan-Kurdish sentiment is gaining ground across wider Kurdistan and the diaspora at large. Especially since the growing threat from ISIS in 2014, Kurds across the world have been experiencing a resurgence of pan-Kurdish feeling.<sup>174</sup> In the KRI, there are two parallel trends among the youth with respect to nationalism: growing endorsement of trans-border Kurdish nationalism while rejecting the nationalism of political parties within the KRI. Another way of thinking about it is that young people are reacting against the attempt of the PUK and KDP to monopolize Kurdish nationalism.

Most of the respondents contend that their approach to nationalism is different than that of former generations. They distanced themselves from exclusionary forms of identity politics and pursued a more friendly form of identity in their Kurdishness. One young woman said that she was raised with ideas that Arabs were enemies. While she understands the context in which such thoughts were formed, yet she said she does not see Arabs the same way.<sup>175</sup> Another respondent said *“my father kept telling us the brutality of the Saddam regime. I respect all our freedom fighters, but what did they die for?”*<sup>176</sup> A young woman also does not believe that the two parties are nationalists. She said *“whatever these parties do is because of their own interests”*.<sup>177</sup> Although the interviewees are far from being a representative sample, they do suggest that questioning the claims of the KRI’s political parties has become mainstream, and might have become stronger with the surge of pan-Kurdish patriotism.

As well as frustration with the governing elites, new nationalism in the KRI also features liberal conceptions of social well-being and government-citizen relationship. While independence still animates collective emotions, growing numbers of educated middle class Kurds prioritise self-reliance, good governance and effective delivery of public services over large-scale political questions. The liberal elements of this new civic Kurdish subject are best expressed by one entrepreneur who suggests that the priority should be the self-development rather than self-determination.<sup>178</sup>

## Relations with Baghdad

The growing disconnect between the parties and the youth reflects onto the latter’s views about the relations with the central government in Baghdad. Born after the establishment of the KRG, Kurdistan’s youth have no experience of life under direct governance from Baghdad, and many see Iraq as a foreign government. Conversations are instinctively dotted with references of “we/us” and “them.” Most interviewees did not speak Arabic and had little interest in what was happening in the south. Even the recent protests in Iraqi cities did not generate much interest. Most respondents reported that they heard about the protests and broadly support them, but they do not feel involved. Iraq usually features as a *cartography of violence and underdevelopment* in the collective imagination of Kurds. The lack of security, infrastructure and services are often cited as reasons for disinterest of Kurds towards Iraq. One respondent rhetorically asked *“what do they have to offer us?”*<sup>179</sup> Another is in the view that Iraq could not play any role in Kurdistan because of its own problems.<sup>180</sup> Most are in agreement that despite their frustration, Kurdistan is a much better place to live than Iraq.

Seeing Iraq as a foreign government does not hint at a negative picture from the perspective of relations, however. Since young people do not have the experience of their parents, they can be more neutral towards Iraq and Arabs. Almost all respondents agree that relations, especially in the economic realm, should further improve. They also favour increasing interactions between young people in Kurdistan and in the rest of Iraq to overcome what they call decades of mutual bias.

Approaches to Iraq take different shapes depending on the issue at hand. The budgetary issue (regarding Baghdad’s allocation of oil proceeds to the KRG) is an especially delicate point. Most of the interviewees found the KRG responsible for the dispute. One wittingly says *“our government thinks that they are so clever, they can sell oil independently and expect Baghdad to pay the salaries. This worked for a long time, but not anymore.”*<sup>181</sup> Another concurs *“if you decide to sell your oil, that is fine, but then you should be able to pay the salaries instead of expecting Baghdad to pay. Why would they do so?”*<sup>182</sup> A similar reaction emerges in relation to the salary issue. Growing frustration with the salary delays and cuts has increased calls for direct payments of salaries from the federal government. Most respondents support this. Yet rather than suggesting a well-articulated thought formulating a different form of relationship with the Iraqi government, it is more of an expression of finding a foreign pressure (or ally) against the political parties in times of crisis, a feature that has long dominated Kurdish politics.

## III. Forms of youth political engagement in Kurdistan

### Electoral disengagement

Most respondents did not believe that political change was possible in the near future, and were open about expressing their apathy towards the system in the KRI. They believed that the two major parties would not allow any change that would threaten their hold on power. This belief has led some to lose interest in the electoral processes. This is in line with public data. In the 2018 elections, the KRI registered a turnout of 58 percent, the lowest in its history. In the KDP stronghold of Erbil alone, turnout dropped from 76 percent in 2010 (and 70.6 percent in 2014) to just 43 percent in 2018.<sup>183</sup> While the Kurdish Electoral Commission does not break down electoral data by age, analysts and public observers believe that the biggest portion of absentees were among the youth. Many interviewees for this study said they did not vote, adding that this was the case with their friends as well. Many speculated that the parties engaged in fraud, and that the electoral process was otherwise corrupted. The lack of compelling opposition figures adds to this frustration. As one respondent put it, the political elites were *“all the same, all corrupt. They only are pursuing their self-interest. No one cares about the nation.”*<sup>184</sup>

This is all the more significant since before the 2009 elections, a third way political party called Gorran (meaning “change”) was formed under the charismatic leadership of Nawshirwan Mustafa. It came in second that year, seizing a total 25 seats in the Kurdish Parliament.<sup>185</sup> For the first time, a third party was able to shake the entrenched elite. Gorran’s success lay in its ability to channel growing public frustration with the two parties into a political movement that campaigned against corruption, regional division and party dominance over judiciary. In subsequent years, however, it became evident that Gorran’s ability to challenge the duopoly was limited. Under a strict power sharing system, social mobilisation that found its expression in Gorran was unable to rise above the elite divisions at the macro level. In 2015, a dispute over the extension of then-president Masoud Barzani’s term culminated in the decision to put parliament in recess. Gorran’s parliamentary speaker was banned from entering Erbil and the party was excluded from the political process.<sup>186</sup> After the death of its leader Nawshirwan Mustafa in 2017, the party has increasingly been co-opted by the major political parties, which eventually led to its incorporation into the coalition government founded by Masrour Barzani in 2019. Gorran’s trajectory from being a ferocious opposition force to a member of government is a reminder to some young Kurds to treat any opposition with suspicion. When discussing the duopoly, one interviewee said *“Look at Gorran now. They are also bought by the KDP,”* justifying his apathy.<sup>187</sup>

The young respondents’ unwillingness to vote, however, should not be seen as an apolitical act. None of the respondents failed to vote because they did not care, or were uninformed about KRI politics. They actively chose not to vote, which makes their abstention itself a political act. One respondent clarified his position by saying that he did not vote because he thought the political parties would steal the votes and engage in fraud to win the elections. For him, *“elections won’t change the power of the parties here”*<sup>188</sup> Abstention to this group of people, was a vote against the system and the two parties that control it. Reflecting on his decision not to vote, one respondent said *“this was my way of punishment, a warning, if you call, that if they go on like this, they will not find many people to go to ballot box.”*<sup>189</sup>

Despite its popularity, electoral abstention is a divisive issue among young Kurds. Many who express frustration with the system feel a moral imperative to continue engaging with it. One respondent says she understands why some might not want to vote, but that this should not be an excuse for inaction. *“If you think that there is no one to vote for,”* she says, *“then go found your own party, do something.”*<sup>190</sup> Another respondent raises similar sentiments, saying *“I get very angry when I hear from my friends that they won’t vote any longer. Elections are important. There must be one person in each party that you should vote for. Change takes time and those very few people can do something good for the people.”*<sup>191</sup> Electoral disengagement is an emotionally loaded topic among the youth. While it seems a legitimate way to object to an inherently corrupt political system, it also invokes fears that it may lead the way to delegitimising the region’s fragile existence in the absence of statehood.

***“The young respondents’ unwillingness to vote, however, should not be seen as an apolitical act. None of the respondents failed to vote because they did not care, or were uninformed about KRI politics.”***

## Protests

Most of the protests in the region, especially since 2014, have focused on the issue of salary cuts and delays. While Sulaimani, due to its relatively permissive atmosphere, has traditionally been the epicentre of protests, recently salary protests have also been held in the KDP strongholds of Erbil and Duhok.<sup>192</sup> These protests are usually initiated by civil servants with the support of NGOs and some minor political parties. Organised tightly around policy issues such as salary payments or opposition to COVID-19 lockdowns, the protests have not developed into anti-government movements. When their demands are met, protesting quickly ends, to be resumed until the next demand arises. This stands in contrast to the rest of Iraq, which was shaken by large scale anti-government protests.

There are several reasons why Kurdistan has not seen such big anti-government movements. First, it is, relative to the rest of Iraq, well governed. Despite all its problems, residents of the KRI know that they can count on some basic public services and infrastructure. The KRG has rapidly increased its electricity production and supply, has abundant water resources, and has expanded access to education and health services. The KRI is much more secure than the rest of Iraq. Interviewees were aware of this relative advantage, and brought it up when talking about the anti-government protests in Iraq.

A second reason for the lack of large-scale protests in the KRI is that surveillance is much tighter than in the rest of Iraq. The security and intelligence force Asayish have built an extensive network of surveillance across Kurdistan, controlling the population movement effectively.<sup>193</sup> While the extent of surveillance is justified given the region's war-torn environment, it is also a crucial mechanism through which the parties control internal dissent against their rule. This surveillance is particularly effective in KDP controlled Erbil and Duhok, a factor that explains the relative silence in those cities. On occasions when protests did spill over to become more systematic, the KRG's political apparatus did not shy away from drawing a line with heavy force. In December 2017 and March 2018, for instance, when Kurds demonstrated in Sulaimani, Duhok and the region's capital, Erbil, over salary cuts, they were met by tanks on the streets.<sup>194</sup> In a more recent case in August 2020, security forces suppressed protests in Duhok and arrested a number of activists without any judicial order.<sup>195</sup>

A third reason is that the geopolitical climate the KRI is in is not conducive to anti-government protests. There is pressure on the KRI on different parts of its border, which creates relative social unity among its inhabitants. Turkey's long-standing fight against the various offshoots of the PKK, its invasion of Northern Syria and its frequent military operations in the KRI, create constant pressure. The expansion of ISIS was up until recently a pressure point, as are disputes with Baghdad, which has ongoing territorial, legal and budgetary disputes with the KRG. With these existential pressures on all sides, citizens of the KRI are inclined to give their government a large margin of error.<sup>196</sup>

The closest the KRI came to big anti-government protests was in 2011, at the time of the "Arab Spring." Inspired by the events in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere in the region, young people took to the streets in Sulaimani to protest corruption, economic inequality and the ruling parties' dominance over the political system.<sup>197</sup> The police forces of the two parties put them down forcefully, and a few people were killed, many more injured. Those events loom large in the region's collective memory<sup>198</sup> and reinforce the belief that protests would not change anything. Most of the interviewees were too young to have taken part in those protests, but they still referred to them to explain why they did not see protests as a means of change. One said *"they [the KDP and PUK] acted together to repress the protests, this showed that when it came to their power, they could act in unity."*<sup>199</sup> 2011 helped to draw the line between issue-driven protest and systemic anti-government protest, and the line has held firmly ever since.

As a rule, protestors are careful not to turn their demands into something that could be seen threatening by the parties. One respondent explained that people know what they are allowed to demand. He said *"it is fine as long as criticisms are limited to certain government policies and actions, once your criticism extends to parties' control then you are in trouble"*.<sup>200</sup> He thinks that this is why protestors focus on certain demands like salary payments from the government rather than raise any criticism of the parties.<sup>201</sup> In their slogans and demands, issue-based protestors pretend that there is a distinction between "the government" and political parties. This is more as a matter of courtesy to political bosses than anything else. By acting as if political parties have not monopolized the apparatus of state, citizens of Iraqi Kurdistan reclaim some of their right to criticism in public space.

***"While the extent of surveillance is justified given the region's war-torn environment, it is also a crucial mechanism through which the parties control internal dissent against their rule."***

***"By acting as if political parties have not monopolized the apparatus of state, citizens of Iraqi Kurdistan reclaim some of their right to criticism in public space."***



## Social media as a new venue of political engagement

The use of social media came up in the interviews while discussing a wide range of issues, ranging from entrepreneurship to international politics. Most of the respondents were actively engaged on several social media platforms and cited these as important venues for discussion and information. As with much of the data, it is difficult to isolate the KRI from the rest of Iraq. According to Statcounter Global Statistics, YouTube is the most popular online platform in Iraq with 48.11% market share, followed by Facebook (44.18%) and Twitter (5.37%).<sup>202</sup> In Kurdistan, the most popular virtual venue for political debates is Facebook. In explaining his preference for social media, one respondent complains about the “enemy rhetoric” used by the party-led media outlets. He sees the Kurdish media as a “propaganda machine” for the parties in their rivalry with one another.<sup>203</sup> Another respondent confirms that the media is not independent in Kurdistan.<sup>204</sup>

An overwhelming majority of the media in Kurdistan is owned, controlled and funded by the political parties and their affiliates.<sup>205</sup> According to the Committee to Protect Journalism press freedoms are on the brink of extinction in Iraqi Kurdistan. Journalists continuously face harassments, attacks, detention, imprisonment and even killings by the security forces affiliated with both parties.<sup>206</sup> This has made independent journalism a highly risky endeavour. For young Kurds, the significance of digital platforms is particularly important because of the growing limits imposed on freedom of media. One respondent said “I don’t believe what their media tells us. Their reliability is very low with the people”.<sup>207</sup> The expansion of access to the internet as well as the government’s inability to exert control over online platforms allowed young Kurds to mobilise and campaign via social media. A recent graduate said that young Kurds discuss everything on social media, noting that she herself actively uses online platforms to raise awareness on women’s right and many other things.<sup>208</sup> Online platforms such as Facebook and Twitter provide a new map of social relations among a wired transnational Kurdish community and generate a virtual public space where they can openly exchange ideas related to regional Kurdish affairs.

Digital networking platforms also offer a new means through which young Kurds directly communicate with governing elites. This is particularly important in Kurdistan, where the contacts and interactions between ordinary people and elected officials are usually very limited. One important factor in this is the region’s electoral system that has defined Kurdistan as one single district. Candidates run on the party lists and once elected they represent the whole of Kurdistan. Under this system, citizens vote for party lists, not for candidates. In the absence of multi electoral districts, candidates do not have to campaign face-to-face with voters. They are elected almost with no interaction with voters.<sup>209</sup> This system allows for party dominance over the political system and prevents voters from strong representation in the parliament. In such a context, digital platforms emerge as a virtual public space where young Kurds communicate their grievances with local governing authorities and reveal human rights violations and other cases of injustice.<sup>210</sup>

The increasing use of social media in articulating opposition sentiment has also been acknowledged by government officials. In one instance, the Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani called the critics of the government on social media “Facebook parties,” hinting that these were not to be taken seriously.<sup>211</sup> The Increasing importance of social networking sites as a venue for youth political engagement has also pushed the parties to use online platforms to propagate their views vis-à-vis one another. In May 2020, Facebook closed several accounts and pages linked to Kurdish intelligence in Iraq. The pages were, according to Facebook, used by the PUK in its political rivalry with the KDP.<sup>212</sup> This shows that the parties are also moving their rivalry to online platforms.

## Shift towards micro politics

With the growth of the educated middle class, there has recently emerged another form of political engagement among Kurdistan’s youth, albeit limited in scope and scale. As the political system resists change, growing number numbers of urban, educated young adults are turning to what could be called “micro politics,” an issue-based approach, often on the local level.

Groups of friends, small NGOs and other organizations undertake projects on the environment, women’s rights, in a way that does not directly reflect on the two big political parties. This is often done on a volunteer basis, but can scale up to professional involvement. Activists are mobilising groups to clean up the streets of Erbil, environmental

***“Digital networking platforms also offer a new means through which young Kurds directly communicate with governing elites.”***

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# The Kurdistan Region

groups are running awareness festivals for clean water, university students are organising events on religious dialogue and mutual understanding. One former tobacco factory in Sulaimani has been transformed into an art and community space. In addition to their contribution to local engagement, these are also venues where Kurds from the diaspora take active role in transferring civic activism skills to young residents of the KRI.<sup>213</sup>

The shift towards community is a way to avoid political repression. The aim, as one respondent said, is *“to achieve change bit by bit.”*<sup>214</sup> *“Bit by bit”* has almost become the mantra of this new politics.<sup>215</sup> Another respondent acknowledges that change will take time, but she thinks that Kurdistan is not all about political parties. Believing the young generation’s ability to bring about change, she believes that investing in the community and education is the best way forward.<sup>216</sup> The intentions of the interviewees here are not significantly different from those of young people working on political campaigns in the UK or United States. Both used key words like “change” to describe what they are doing. One said *“we should gain skills to transfer to our friends, surroundings and the community.”*<sup>217</sup> Only through supporting the community, she thinks, the situation can improve. In explaining his approach to politics, one respondent summed up the sense of minor politics: *“for me, politics is not voting or protesting. My understanding of politics comes down to the question of whether we have made any difference in community’s life.”*<sup>218</sup> While growing, this burgeoning civic activism still remains an elite affair, and is largely restricted to the KRI’s large cities.



## PART 5: CONCLUSIONS

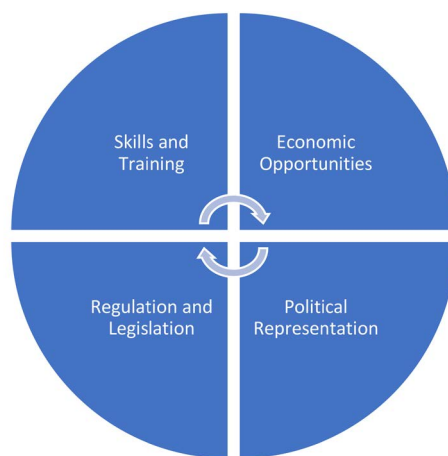
Young people are under tremendous pressure given Iraq's current climate. While chronic economic problems have the heaviest impact on this demographic, there is a widespread understanding that these are products of the country's political divisions. This generates strong anti-elite sentiments among youth that translate into different forms of disengagement with institutional political processes, ranging from voting apathy to street protests. This dynamic sometimes amounts to a wholesale rejection of the political system, and can feed into radical movements. There are clearly not enough efforts being considered and implemented by decision makers for addressing the grievances, barriers and challenges young Iraqis are facing. There are also direct areas of support that young people can receive through better international funding mechanisms, local and national programmes, that targets the upskilling of young people and how they can better impact, engage and influence policies that impact them. There is a huge gap between the two actors (political decision makers and young people), and there needs to be a multi-angled approach to bridge that gap.

1. Employment is the biggest concern. The lack of private sector development and the government's inability to address the growing youth unemployment problem are likely to exacerbate the problem. The decades-long patronage system in Iraq has created a culture of dependency, where the state is expected to provide direct employment. This understanding is changing in Kurdistan, where most of the respondents voiced their support for reducing public employment and expanding the private sector. This requires legislative and regulatory reforms in labour rights and the pension system, but also, an improvement in university and vocational education to provide graduates with professionally relevant skills that enable them to compete for higher quality jobs. Iraq and Kurdistan's high youth population is both an opportunity and challenge for policymakers. A well-educated and motivated young workforce could contribute significantly to the country, taking advantage of post-ISIS stability, but there are structural political and economic obstacles to realising this vision in practice. Addressing youth unemployment must be a central part of Iraq's economic diversification plan.
2. Regional and gender inequalities in young people's experience are clear. Women are disproportionately excluded, both politically and economically, and those from poorer areas of Iraq face greater challenges in achieving a standard of living comparable to their parents' generation. Despite this, there is an emerging sense of purpose among young people across the country and a pride in Iraqi identity that represents an opportunity to move beyond the sectarian political divisions. Labour laws need revision to level the playing field between young people and women employed in the public and private sectors.
3. There is no trust in the political system and little belief that genuine reforms will happen. This widespread disillusionment makes protests a daily occurrence. The lack of a clear leadership or representative structure for the protest movement, alongside the reaction of security forces, has harmed the potential for constructive dialogue between young people and those who are supposed to represent their interests. It is unclear how young people might attain a greater voice within the current political structures, captured by an ageing elite and controlled through patronage. There is a need for political leadership to fill the vacuum in youth representation. At present, young people do not feel that mainstream political parties represent their interests. If this situation does not improve, it is likely that the worrying increase in those rejecting democratic systems entirely may continue.
4. Conditions are brewing for discontent to drive young people into more desperate measures. The next 18 months will be crucial – early elections have been promised, but may be difficult to deliver. Even if the parliament is not dissolved prematurely, the prospect of genuine reform prior to the end of its term in 2022 is highly uncertain. Iraq's economic woes will take time to address, but small and immediate actions which demonstrate a real willingness to take account of the precarious situation in which many young Iraqis now find themselves are required as an immediate step.
5. The creation of more sophisticated policies and strategies to develop the private sector through young entrepreneurs could have a significant impact. This might include access to finance, supporting start-ups and private or social enterprises. Targeted support should be provided to young women, for example in procurement incentives and other support for women-led businesses.
6. Iraq's business environment is deteriorating. Economic development for all Iraqis, including young people, requires better regulation of the private sector, improved financial services and reform of the banking system.

7. Efforts to combat corruption have historically generated some noise but little real effect. More sophisticated approaches need to be found to deal with the pervasive corrupt networks embedded in Iraq's economy.
8. In Kurdistan, the extent of frustration with the party-led division of the region is growing. Projects in the region need to be based on partnerships that do not further entrench this division.

## Recommendations:

Further research is required to examine in greater detail the sectors which provide the best opportunities for young people and that they most want to be involved in as well as understanding at a more granular level the challenges facing Iraqis with different levels of education, household finances, political views, etc. Based on the findings of this research, however, our recommendations fall into four main areas, which all need to be addressed in order for Iraq to maximise the potential of its young population, and reduce the risk of discontent resulting in further cycles of violence, exclusion, instability and economic underperformance.



### 1. Improving Skills and Training

Review of the university provision and teaching methods to provide the right qualifications for employment with additional skills training to foster entrepreneurial talents. Understand how Iraq has slipped behind regional and international comparators and how it can attract higher education talent.

Development of continuing professional and personal development skills programmes: This would include training programme on a wide range of skills such as start-ups, project management, fundraising, public speaking, communication, policy making, political participation, active citizenship, technology development and energy sufficiency.

Organising a (virtual) talent camp or skills development programme. The programme can involve free technology education and job readiness training. There is a high demand for digital skills in the Kurdistan region, as digital entrepreneurship in the region (such as delivery services) is growing.

### 2. Providing Better Economic Opportunities

Creation of a national jobs and training site (online) to give young people better access to opportunities. This would act as a jobs board and increase awareness of training and apprenticeship programs to be funded and managed by a public-private partnership.

Using existing donors and supporters of Iraq to create provincial level micro-financing projects for new businesses, including start-up assistance such as legal, space and equipment. Focused support to be available for young women.

Internship initiative: This would build a network that would place students into internships in government, business and civil society. It would also them to broaden their network through alumni and participating organisations.

Encouraging transparency and anti-corruption programs that can lead to Iraq improving its investment environment and encourage private sector development.

### 3. Removing Legislative and Regulatory Barriers

Support for governmental and parliamentary initiatives aimed at levelling the playing field between the public and private sector, reducing the barriers for new companies and investors.

Review of legislation and labour market regulation to identify policies which have a disproportionate effect on women and address challenges to increasing women's participation in the labour force.

Central Bank schemes to support new and existing banks to offer better access to finance for retail and business customers with a special incentive for digital banking schemes.

### 4. Creating Genuine Political Representation

Creation of national and subnational networks for young people to engage with each other and with policymakers on specific issues of interest to them, perhaps using existing platforms (e.g. Facebook) and/or physical town hall meetings.

Existing political parties may need support in improving their offer to young people, but young people are also interested in cross-sectarian political forums, outside the traditional party-political structures.

Local or national Representative Councils for young people which consider real issues and result in specific policy recommendations can help to train a new generation of young active citizens.

A youth debate programme at the regional and federal levels as a platform for young people with different political background to come together to develop their opinions on social and policy issues. These platforms can take the model of youth parliament in the UK and grow into a large network of youth engaging with politicians and parliamentarians (starting with Sports and Youth Committee).

Dedicated programmes for young women including training on community organising and education on why proper representation matters and how to become politically active.



پەرله مانی کوردستان - عیراق

برلمان کوردستان - العراق  
KURDISTAN PARLIAMENT - IRAQ

# APPENDIX

## Selected responses to the 10 questions set for Baghdad, Basra and Thi-Qar, representative of the sample in each province.

### 1. What is your goal for a career? What is preventing you from achieving it?

*I want to be employed in the public sector anywhere. What prevents me from achieving this is the lack of employment opportunities in this country. (Baghdad, Female, 24)*

*I wish to be employed in the public sector. However, the quota system has prevented me from that because all jobs are given to those who belong to the political parties. (Baghdad, Male, 30)*

*I want to be able to invest and open a business. Many youths don't have their own business. We have to improve the youth to be able to manage large projects and give them funding so they can start. (Baghdad, Male, 28)*

*I wanted to work in the fashion business but got a job in the public sector. The conditions and the situation in the country limit our choice. We have to hold onto any chance we come across or we won't be able to work. (Baghdad, Female, 29)*

*I wanted to be a pharmacist. So far nothing has prevented me from achieving this dream because I am studying to be a pharmacist now. (Basra, Female, 19)*

*Carpentry is the profession I loved and practiced, but the depression of the market forced me to leave the profession. I have no income at the moment and will work in any job available. (Basra, Male, 26)*

*I wanted to manufacture miniatures and robots, but the financial condition of my family and my limited education prevented me from pursuing this dream. The cost of private universities is too high and there are no training programs. I work in a store now to help my family. (Basra, Male, 25)*

*I wish to work in journalism. The barrier is the lack of job opportunities, the government's lack of interest in youth, and the marginalisation of young people, perhaps deliberately. No one can change the reality because those who rule the country are criminals and only care about their personal interests. (Thi-Qar, Female, 27)*

*I want to be an architect. The economic conditions of my family prevented me from pursuing my studies. One day I hope I get the chance. (Thi-Qar, Male, 26)*

*I was hoping to complete my education and choose the college I like, maybe medical sciences. The country's conditions have affected my family and that prevented me from finishing my studies, and now it is too late. (Thi-Qar, Female, 28)*

*I wanted to be a flight attendant, but my family and community prevented me from achieving that. (Thi-Qar, Female, 25)*

*I wanted to be a doctor, but my grades were not enough. Now I have no goals besides earning an income. (Thi-Qar, Male, 28)*

### 2. What are the obstacles for young people in Iraq?

*The obstacles are lack of job opportunities in the public sector. We have to bribe officials to get a job. Therefore, graduates hit the streets and protest against this injustice. (Baghdad, Female, 29)*

*The obstacles are not having the chance to improve ourselves, the absence of laws that protect the youths working in the private and public sectors, and the absence of programs that support and educate the youths. (Baghdad, Male, 30)*

*The obstacles are many like the security situation, lack of jobs, not having the basic rights and services, and having homes. Living in Iraq is an obstacle itself. (Baghdad, Female, 28)*

*There is no future for the young people. There is no respect for our degrees and our graduates. (Baghdad, Male, 22)*



*The obstacles are the large number of imports at the expense of the local industry and the lack of job opportunities. The government does not support local industries. (Basra, Male, 26)*

*There are no jobs for young people and their role is restricted, and there is no support for small and medium businesses of young people. (Basra, Male, 25)*

*The obstacles facing the youth in Iraq are the government's negligence of the youth by not providing job opportunities, the bad economic situation cause, and the lack of jobs even in the private sector. (Basra, Male, 21)*

*The obstacles are lack of job opportunities, the private sector does not hire people especially women, the society constraints on working women, and lack of government projects that hire people. (Basra, Female, 22)*

*The obstacles are poverty, lack of work opportunities, neglecting the challenges faced by the youth of Iraq, as the number of unemployed began to increase over the years, which was met with carelessness by the government and parliament, not improving the private sector, and making jobs in the public sector the only hope for the Iraqi youth. (Thi-Qar, Female, 30)*

*The obstacles facing youth in Iraq are not understanding their demands, lack of job opportunities, lack of workshops to motivate young people to achieve their dreams. (Thi-Qar, Male, 19)*

*Restrictions were put in place to prevent any Iraqi from achieving any security gains or having the opportunity to have a personal business. And jobs in the public sector are based on favouritism and party relations. (Thi-Qar, Female, 27)*

*The obstacles are the lack of job opportunities, the lack of support for the projects they want to establish, the lack of security, and the unstable political and health situation. (Thi-Qar, Female, 25)*

### **3. What do the constraints you mentioned make you want to do? How do you feel as a young person in Iraq?**

*I want to leave the country because we cannot make any move here without facing obstacles from the parties and from the people who do not want to see us succeed. We as young people feel desperate because we cannot achieve our dreams here. We don't have the basic rights other people in the world have. (Baghdad, Male, 30)*

*They motivate all young people to change the situation, not just me. I feel down being a young woman in Iraq. Nothing is provided for us. Our society has prevented us from pursuing our dreams. (Baghdad, Female, 24)*

*Iraq is suffering from corruption and people protested. However, nothing has changed. Young people have voices and awareness, but their voices are not heard by the government. If I get a chance to leave Iraq, I will not stay here for another day. I have nothing here that encourages me to stay. (Baghdad, Male, 21)*

*I want to participate in just and not corrupt elections to change the situation. I feel good. I believe the situation will change for better. (Baghdad, Male, 20)*

*I have not been able to make any changes. I wanted to participate in the protests, but I know I would not have gained anything from that because my peers have not benefited from the protests. We as young people feel very frustrated because we don't have life, aim, or purpose in this country. (Baghdad, Female, 29)*

*These obstacles have encouraged young people to change the situation by protesting. This is what we see in the streets right now. I feel frustrated. We do not have our basic rights. (Baghdad, Male, 26)*

*I wish I had magic to change everyone in the government and the parliament with Iraqis who want to make the country the best in the Arab world. I feel proud and sad at the same time, proud to be Iraqi, and sad because I do not have anything in my country. (Basra, Male, 21)*

*These obstacles motivated me to open a business with loans from some relatives, but Covid-19 has added a new burden in repayment since most businesses closed. I feel good despite this. (Basra, Male, 25)*

*We must change the political situation first and the rest will follow. I feel awfully bad since no services are provided for the citizens of Iraq. We have no electricity. Our health services are horrible, and there are no job opportunities. (Thi-Qar, Female, 25)*

*The restrictions are very difficult, so overcoming them is difficult too. I had to work in a market to provide for my family. As a young person in Iraq, I feel very frustrated, and I always think about emigrating and leaving the country. (Thi-Qar, Male, 28)*

*We have to change the entire political system and remove all the current political figures from their positions. We have to bring capable people to rule this country. I feel very uncertain about the situation. (Thi-Qar, Male, 29)*

#### **4. What are the solutions for young people?**

*The solution is providing job opportunities. People who have been working in the public sector for many years should step down to allow young people to have a job. (Baghdad, Female, 29)*

*The solutions are providing job opportunities, giving loans for youth, and qualifying young people to work in the private sector. (Baghdad, Male, 30)*

*Opening training centres. People must pass an exam to be able to attend the training sessions. Many young people believe they can earn money while sleeping in their beds. We must change this attitude. (Baghdad, Male, 25)*

*There are many solutions like supporting the private sector, providing loans for youth projects, and enacting laws that ensure equal opportunities, as some families have all their members in work, and other families can barely support themselves. (Basra, Female, 28)*

*The solutions are giving them more opportunities to take up important positions in the state, providing them with job opportunities, paying salaries to those who have no income, and improving the private sector to provide additional job opportunities for youth. (Basra, Male, 27)*

*The first thing to do is to listen to the youth's problems, and the government has to provide job opportunities, support small projects, and improve the education sector. (Basra, Female, 22)*

*The government must pay attention to youth in terms of providing jobs and salaries, and support to the private sector and private enterprises by giving loans and supporting the products they produce. (Thi-Qar, Female, 28)*

*Providing job opportunities, disbursing social wages, and supporting young people, as is done in some other countries, until they find a job opportunity. (Thi-Qar, Female, 20)*

*Establishing educational and awareness-raising sessions for all, motivating them to express their opinions regarding their personal lives, supporting capabilities to gifted youth by providing them with the means they need to develop their skills, opening job opportunities in the public sector, and giving youth loans to help them achieve their dreams. (Thi-Qar, Male, 19)*

*The solutions are facilitating studies, providing jobs for young people, providing the appropriate ground to support this segment, working on developing the private sector, and supporting small enterprises. (Thi-Qar, Male, 22)*

#### **5. Do you believe you have a voice and a role in the current political system? What changes would you make?**

*I do not have a voice because no one listens to us. If my voice is heard, I will be killed just like many protestors. I have not been able to make any changes but if I could I would get rid of all the politicians in charge since 2003. (Baghdad, Male, 30)*

*Yes, I have a role, but the government does not hear my voice. I have protested against the government to make my voice heard. I would change the political system to make elections fairer. (Baghdad, Female, 20)*

*Of course, I have a voice in the political system. Government work depends mainly on the energy of young people, who are future leaders. The changes I did not make by myself, but with the combined efforts of the young demonstrators, we were able to pressure the government to make changes and reforms. We will keep this up until all the right changes are made. (Baghdad, Male, 29)*

*After the October protests, I believe young people's voice has been heard. The government has started to fear the anger of youth. Protesting is the way to change the situation. (Baghdad, Male, 20)*

*I don't have a role or a voice. No one is listening to us, and it is impossible to make any changes that would make the government listen. Young people have sacrificed their lives in the protests, but still the government have not listened. (Baghdad, Female, 23)*

*I do not have a voice, and when politicians respond to our voices, they do it to serve their personal interests. I have not made, or participated in making, any changes and don't believe I have the power to do so. (Basra, Male, 26)*

*I do not think I have a voice in the political system, nor is my vote necessary for them. The changes I would make would be to clean up the government, prevent corruption, hold criminals accountable no matter their affiliation. (Basra, Female, 22)*

*I am a female and have no role in the political system. I cannot do anything, but if I could it would be to turn us into a presidential system, remove weapons from the streets, impose the law on everyone. (Basra, Female, 28)*

*No one has a voice in the current political system since it is controlled and ruled by political parties who do not allow anyone to express their needs. We cannot make any changes. My dream is to make Iraq like the developed countries, with freedoms and laws. To do this we have to change society and its way of thinking, not just removing the corrupt politicians. (Thi-Qar, Female, 27)*

*No, we do not have a voice. I believe that the voices of young people concern politicians, as they carry new and promising ideas that may harm their political and economic interests. There are no changes we can make by ourselves. One sector I would improve before anything else is education, it needs a lot of work. (Thi-Qar, Female, 20)*

*Currently, I might have a voice and a role. We tried to break out of this situation, but we were unable to make any worthwhile changes because of what we faced from the government. (Thi-Qar, Male, 22)*

*Yes, I have a voice, and the government must listen to my voice. I participated in the demonstrations and demanded change and reform. We will make the changes happen, sooner or later. This will include justice for what has happened to us and a new competent government. (Thi-Qar, Female, 25)*

## 6. What are your views on protests and protestors?

*The protests are a result of people's desperation. They protested to demand their basic right. I support them and what they do, but unfortunately, the political quotas system has negatively affected the protests. Political parties also participated in the protests and caused many problems in the streets. (Baghdad, Male, 29)*

*I support the protests and the protestors, but they are having to slow down now because the spread of Covid-19. After the end of the pandemic, protests must be resumed because they will be able to make huge changes. (Baghdad, Female, 28)*

*I hope the protests will be successful and be a tool to change the situation. I don't know how to feel about the protestors, but I hope what we are hearing about them negatively in the media is not true. (Baghdad, Female, 30)*

*The protests were a successful means of putting pressure on the government and forcing it to undertake reforms in the political system. The demonstrators have proven that they are qualified to lead the country in the future because of their ideas, opinions, and determination to improve the country. (Baghdad, Male, 30)*

*I think the protests are an excellent means of preventing corruption because corrupt individuals will know that people will hold them accountable if they misbehave. The protestors are really good people, but the participation of some people who are affiliated with parties has changed some people's opinions about them. (Baghdad, Male, 22)*

*The protests were on the right path at the beginning. Their leaders had the right goals, but then people affiliated with parties entered the protests and sabotaged them. I respect the protestors a lot. They are heroes. (Baghdad, Male, 24)*

*I participated in the protests. However, we cannot change the situation unless everyone participates in the protests. Some protestors are there for good reasons, to bring change, others are there just for fun or bad reasons. The protests are a good move to make the government listen to the people. Only those who live under terrible living conditions participated in the protests. (Baghdad, Female, 20)*

*The timing of the protests was bad because it prevented students from finishing their studies. The protestors are young people who are desperate. Therefore, they went out onto the streets to protest against their government. (Basra, Male, 21)*

*Protests are a way people use to express their anger over the government's response to what the people are demanding. These protests will resume after Covid-19 ends. It will always be peaceful. These protestors represent the people who have chosen to sacrifice everything so their voice can be heard. (Basra, Male, 28)*

*Protests are a positive phenomenon we as young people have to support because it is the only way to force the government to reform. Some protestors are members of the political parties, and the rest are young people who want to change the situation to have a better future. (Basra, Female, 22)*

*The recent protests were patriotic and not political, and many parties tried to penetrate them, but they failed, so they resorted to striking, kidnapping and terrorising the demonstrators in various ways to stop the protests, but the demonstrators proved their patriotism against all expectations. (Basra, Female, 28)*

*The protests affected the country's security situation, led to the martyrdom of many young people, and disrupted ordinary life, especially the lives of students who were injured. Education was interrupted by these protests. The demonstrators are young, wanting to express their opinion of the government and political figures, but they were hurt, and that has affected the majority of young people. (Basra, Female, 27)*

*The protests have undermined the confidence of politicians and made them feel people's anger. The demonstrators in these demonstrations have reflected a positive image of the Iraqi youth and their loyalty to their country. (Basra, Male, 23)*

*The protests have been used by the parties to blackmail each other by flexing their muscles in the streets of Iraq. Some of the demonstrators are serious in their demands, and others are affiliated with the parties. (Basra, Male, 25)*

*The protests did not represent any demands of young people, but rather was a stumbling block for their studies and completing the schooling year. Then Covid-19 worsened the situation. The demonstrators did not represent the youth segment, but rather the parties that were paying them to hold these demonstrations. (Basra, Male, 26)*

*The demonstrations are about the legitimate demands of the young people who lost their most basic rights, but the Covid-19 epidemic has caused many people to stop demonstrating. However, many stayed in the streets, but most of them are affiliated with parties. The real demonstrators are people who demand their rights and express their voice about the issues facing the Iraqi youth. (Thi-Qar, Female, 27)*

*The protests are a great phenomenon that aims to put pressure on the politicians to make reforms and changes in the country, but the parties have politicised these protests and shifted them towards their partisan and political interests. As for the demonstrators, they are ambitious young people who want political change and services, and I think they managed to make some change. (Thi-Qar, Male, 28)*

*The protests are now a waste of time. They have hurt the students and the private businesses and have not achieved anything. The protests could have succeeded, but the outbreak of Covid-19 changed the equation. (Thi-Qar, Female, 28)*

*I think they are a failure because they are without real leadership, and most of their leaders are young people who do not know what their demands are. If a powerful person or a group of conscious youth led them, they would have succeeded and be able to reform the situation. (Thi-Qar, Female, 20)*

*The recent protests were a milestone in the history of Iraq, as the people of Iraq, across all its spectrums, rallied around the youth and supported their legitimate demands. The demonstrators are ambitious, educated, and conscious youth who managed to make their voices heard without leadership. (Thi-Qar, Male, 26)*

*We hoped the protest would bring some changes, and the way the government dealt with the protests in Baghdad and the rest of the provinces made us believe that more people will participate, but that did not happen. Protestors are people who want the most basic rights, jobs, electricity, water, and excellent health services. (Thi-Qar, Male, 29)*

*The protests were useless. The protestors have not achieved anything. Many people have died for nothing. Ordinary lives were disrupted and then most of the protestors turned out to be members of the political parties who went to the streets to gain more leverage. (Thi-Qar, Female, 24)*

## **7. How does economic and political uncertainty in Iraq affect you?**

*The economic instability has a negative impact on my life. It has affected my living and financial conditions including our family income. As for the political situation, the government failures are because of the political parties fighting each other to gain more benefits while leaving the people behind and this impacts us through poor services and corruption. (Baghdad, Female, 28)*

*It has a huge negative impact on me, my family, the next generation, the financial conditions of the country, and job opportunities. I don't know what decisions to make because nothing is clear. We sit and wait helplessly. (Baghdad, Female, 30)*

*The economic and political situations have negative impacts on our lives. We have been deprived of ambitions to change the situation. We only think how to provide for our families. (Baghdad, Male, 25)*

*I am not directly affected, but I feel for other people suffering. If my neighbour is not working, this will affect me negatively. (Baghdad, Male, 26)*

*The economic conditions have gotten worse because of what we are going through with the spread of Covid-19 pandemic. The political situations are getting worse every day. The politicians cannot agree on anything. This impacts us by dividing us, increasing our mental stress and making more people unemployed. (Baghdad, Female, 25)*

*It affects us in an extremely negative way. We live day by day, and what we get depends on the situation. It also affects the health of families. I know many people in my situation, we are all suffering. (Basra, Male, 28)*

*The instability of the economic situation for me increases the difficulty of life and having job opportunities that are already scarce and limited to extortion and bribes. (Basra, Female, 22)*

*The instability of the economic conditions has negatively affected the Iraqi families. Many private companies have not given salaries to their workers. Food prices have increased. Youth suffer the most from an unstable economy. (Basra, Female, 19)*

*A massive negative effect for families like us that rely on daily wages through labour jobs or small businesses, and these businesses have been affected by the bad economic and political situation. (Basra, Male, 27)*

*The economic situation has negatively affected me. I cannot go to Baghdad to buy the materials I need for my business. Covid-19 has made things worse. (Thi-Qar, Male, 27)*

*They have negative impacts on everyone, especially the poor. Many have lost their jobs in the private sector. In addition, prices of goods have increased in the markets, which has negatively affected everyone. (Thi-Qar, Female, 27)*

*The unstable economic situation in Iraq has an impact on everyone, including young people, as many of them have been forced to leave school in order to work and provide for their families, and the political situation is the primary influence on the economy in the country. (Thi-Qar, Male, 28)*

## 8. What is your view of Iraq's political parties? The federal government? Local government?

*My opinion on the political parties is like any other Iraqi. The political parties have ripped this country from its wealth. They only care about their interests. The federal government has failed, we have protested to change this political system to the presidential system of governance. The local governments are a means to protect the interests of the political parties. (Baghdad, Male, 30)*

*The political parties are failures. I prefer to have a president ruling us instead of these parties. The current federal government is doing a good job. The local government is okay but should do better. The two governments must free themselves from parties' control. (Baghdad, Female, 20)*

*I hope to sleep and wake up the next day and all the parties are gone. The federal government is not competent. It cannot provide the basic needs of the people. The local government is the same. Their absence is clear. They have no role. (Baghdad, Female, 29)*

*The political parties after 2003 proved that they are not parties. All parties in the world have goals and aims. Our parties don't. They are gangs who want to benefit their own interests and steal the wealth of the country. The federal system of governance has failed. The local governments are controlled by political parties. They are the first cycle of failure since they are in direct contact with the people. (Baghdad, Male, 29)*

*One of the most important demands of the protestors is the end of the current political parties who have destroyed the country in every aspect. The federal government is trying to challenge the political parties, but they are strong. The local government does not have any role but stealing people's wealth and not providing for the most basic needs of the citizens. (Basra, Male, 28)*

*Political parties are corrupt and persistent in their corruption. They have stolen public money through their arms in the central and local governments. The fact that Basra suffers every year from electricity and water shortages is a clear indicator of parties and politicians' corruption. (Basra, Female, 28)*

*Sectarian parties' main concern is their interests, their members, and their armed militias. They do not care about the people at all. Most of the central government members are affiliated with corrupt parties. The local government consists of employees who are members of the corrupt parties. They want to steal the province's wealth. (Basra, Male, 25)*

*Parties are an important phenomenon in every country as they are a tool of pressure on the government, but in Iraq the situation is completely reversed. They support the government against corruption. No government has succeeded in Iraq because of its affiliation with the parties. Corruption of local governments is beyond description. They only care about the parties' interests. (Basra, Male, 24)*

*The parties have not presented any achievements to the people. On the contrary, they have presented many corrupt and incompetent politicians who work for the benefit of their parties. The federal government was and is still formed by the corrupt parties, so it will surely fail to serve the citizens. The local government, especially in Basra, has failed and has not provided any services to the people of the province. (Basra, Female, 19)*

*The political parties are groups of criminals who steal people's money without considering the country's critical situation, and they continue to steal and sabotage the country. The federal government has failed in many aspects, so I think the presidential system is better. The local governments have failed for the same reasons. The political parties control everything. (Thi-Qar, Female, 27)*

*They are group of thieves and criminals who lived abroad for a long time and returned to rob the country and steal its goods. The central government does not move without consulting the parties. The local governments do not offer any services to the citizen and they work only to satisfy the ruling parties. (Thi-Qar, Female, 20)*

*Their presence is a heavy burden on the country and the citizens, and it affects the ability of ordinary citizens to obtain the most basic rights for themselves and their families. The federal government never thinks about the people. Its main concern is benefiting the parties. It does not care about people. The local governments have not worked for the citizens, and people are getting angry with them. (Thi-Qar, Male, 19)*

*The parties are useless, and their main concern is to steal. They do not care about people. The current federal government works very slowly, and the citizen needs services quickly, and the government may not be able to provide services to citizens. The local government is tied to the political parties that run it to take care of their partisan and personal interests. (Thi-Qar, Male, 22)*

## **9. What is the best way to achieve reforms?**

*By replacing the current officials with people who can rule, change the situation, and serve the people. We have to put the right person in the right place. (Baghdad, Female, 28)*

*The solutions are we cooperate as one people and have one vision. Many countries have achieved this and were able to change their destiny like Singapore. For now we can only achieve reforms by protesting. (Baghdad, Male, 25)*

*The best ways to achieve reform are through the abolishing of all parties, listening to people, and holding fair and just elections with new candidates who do not belong to the current parties. (Basra, Male, 28)*

*The best ways to achieve reforms are through excluding the corrupt and prosecuting them, tightening control over state institutions, spreading the names of the corrupt and the nature of their crimes in the media so that they become an example to others. (Basra, Female, 28)*

*The best paths to reform are by prosecuting the corrupt, tightening anti-corruption measures, and carrying out the sentences issued against them. (Basra, Male, 26)*

*Reform must be integrated and serious for all parts of the state and the most important thing is to review educational curricula and develop them in line with developments in the world. Also, the government must enact laws to eliminate corruption and support monitoring agencies in chasing down the corrupt, arresting them, and bringing them to justice. (Basra, Male, 25)*

*The best ways to achieve reform are by eliminating the corrupt and those who failed to provide services to the citizen, holding corrupt officials accountable, and establishing strict laws to eliminate corruption and wasting public money. (Basra, Female, 19)*

*Removing all people, in the government and local governments, who are affiliated with the parties and replacing them with impartial, non-partisan professionals who care only about the country and its people. (Thi-Qar, Female, 20)*

*The best ways of achieving reforms are activating the integrity law, making services electronic to eliminate bureaucracy, and tightening control over all people and parties and putting qualified people in charge of managing state institutions. (Thi-Qar, Male, 29)*

*The best ways to achieve reforms are by hearing the voices of the demonstrators who demand changes, the most important of which is a change of government, going to early elections, providing job opportunities, and improving services. (Thi-Qar, Male, 22)*

*The best way to achieve reforms is by protesting to force the government to change its practices. (Thi-Qar, Male, 25)*

## **10. Do you believe young people across Iraq, including Kurdistan, share the same views as yourself and are concerned about the same issues? Is there ground for cooperation between them?**

*I believe that youth in Kurdistan have a better life than us. They are not suffering from the same problems we suffer from. There is little ground for cooperation between the youth of Kurdistan and the rest of the provinces. (Baghdad, Female, 29)*

*The youth across the whole of Iraq share the same views and opinions. They are all against the political parties. There is ground for cooperation between Kurdish youth and the youth in the rest of the provinces especially since social media has facilitated communicating with each other. (Baghdad, Male, 20)*

*I don't believe we face the same problems or share the same opinions. They have more job opportunities and better living conditions. They have the basic rights they deserve. As for the rest of Iraq yes there is good ground for cooperation but the political forces will try their best to prevent that. (Baghdad, Female, 20)*

*Yes, I believe everyone shares the same opinion and views because the youth in Kurdistan suffer from the same injustice and oppression. There is ground for cooperation. If we put our hands together, we can remove the corrupt and bring people who really represent us. (Basra, Male, 21)*

*All groups of Iraq share the same concerns and issues because everyone was harmed by the government's policies, whether in Saddam's time or in the current political parties' time. Of course, there is a platform for cooperation, and it has existed because everyone has suffered and is still suffering in the southern, the centre, the western, and northern parts of Iraq. (Basra, Male, 28)*

*Young people in the central and southern provinces have almost the same views and concerns, and many of them are in constant contact. An example of that is when they communicated with each other to have the same goals in the recent protests. Unlike the youth of Kurdistan, whose governments differ from the Baghdad government when it comes to providing services. (Basra, Female, 28)*

*The youth of the south and Baghdad tried to confront corruption. As for the western and northern regions, they moved away from these situations because of what they had previously gone through with ISIS. (Basra, Female, 27)*

*There is no ground for linking views between youth due to the absence of civil society organisations that are acceptable to young people. As for the youth of Kurdistan, they are not linked with the youth of the centre and the south because of the difference in the problems and the solutions. (Basra, Male, 26)*

*Young people indirectly agree that their problem is one and the cause is one, which is the corruption of the government, parliament, and local governments. Social communication shortens distances between young people across the whole of Iraq and unites their goals, visions, and solutions. Yes, there is a platform for cooperation between the youth of Kurdistan and the rest of the provinces due to social communication, but many Kurdish youth are influenced by Kurdish politicians and their ideas against Arabs. (Basra, Male, 25)*

*Young people in Iraq, except Kurdistan, have the same interests and problems. As for Kurdistan, they consider themselves another country. There is no basis for cooperation or understanding unless the political situation in the region changes. (Thi-Qar, Female, 28)*

*I am sure that youth in Baghdad and the southern provinces share and care about the same issues. As for Kurdistan, I imagine there is a segment among them that shares our concerns and problems. There is a platform for cooperation between all of Iraq's provinces from north to south. (Thi-Qar, Male, 19)*

*Young people in Iraq have almost the same views, except for the youth of Kurdistan. They differ because of their economic and political situation, and there is no basis for cooperation with the rest of the provinces. The youth of Kurdistan have some basic services available to them, unlike the youth of the rest of the provinces who are deprived of all elements of success. (Thi-Qar, Male, 29)*

*Yes, the youth in Kurdistan and other provinces are all concerned with the same issues. The youth of Kurdistan also face a dictatorial government, and certainly there is grounds for cooperation between us. (Thi-Qar, Female, 20)*



BAGHDAD - به عدا  
KIRKUK - كهركوک

پارکی مناره  
Minaret park

Sheki Choli - شیخی چولی  
Media Hall - هوئی میدیا



Parliament - پهرله مان  
MOSUL - موصل

فرۆکه خانەى نیوده و نه تی شه و نیێر  
Erbil international airport

هۆلى شه هید سه عد عه بدو نلا  
Saad Abdulla Hall

موصل - برلمان  
مصار اربیل الدولی



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