

Progress Study on

UN Resolution 2250: Youth, Peace, and Security:

Focus groups with hard to reach youth in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Research conducted by

Megan Kelly, Researcher, Initiative for Peacebuilding through Education, Center for Global Affairs, New York University School of Professional Studies/ Executive Director, Youth Speak

Mamoun Zawity, Researcher, Supportive Spirit for Solidarity Organization/ Lecturer, Department of Peace and Human Rights, Faculty of Humanities, University of Duhok

Adnan Hussein, Researcher, Supportive Spirit for Solidarity Organization/ Lecturer, Department of Peace and Human Rights, Faculty of Humanities, University of Duhok

Sadiq Hamid, Researcher, Supportive Spirit for Solidarity Organization/ Lecturer, Department of Peace and Human Rights, Faculty of Humanities, University of Duhok

Zeravan Germavy, Researcher, Supportive Spirit for Solidarity Organization/ Lecturer, Department of Law, Faculty of Law and Political Sciences, University of Duhok

Terms

Asayish..... security forces	“Security” in Kurdish. KRI
Daesh..... ISIS. The Islamic	Arabic name for ISIL, IS, or State of Iraq and Syria
Ezidi..... minority in Iraq,	Ezidis are an ethnoreligious predominantly residing in Ninewa governorate. Also spelled “Yazidi,” “Yezidi,” or “Yesidi.” Preferred spelling within the community is increasingly “Ezidi”.
IDP.....	Internally displaced persons
KRI.....	Kurdistan Region of Iraq
Kurdish (Kurmanji, Bahdini).....	Kurdish is an ethnic minority language spoken in Iraq, with multiple dialects including Bahdini (in Duhok) and Kurmanji (by Syrian refugees)
Sinjar..... Ezidi town located	Sinjar is a predominantly on Sinjar mountain in Ninewa Governorate, and the site of the Ezidi genocide in August, 2014
Wasta..... nepotism, clout,	An Arabic term referring to or who you know. Generally seen as a system reliant on personal connections and discouraging of meritocracy.

The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent the views of UNFPA, PBSO, the United Nations or any of its affiliated organizations. The boundaries, colors, denominations, and other information shown on any map in this work do not imply any judgement on the part of the United Nations concerning the legal status of any territory or the endorsement or acceptance of such boundaries.

Overview



1

Duhok Governorate is located in the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), in the northern part of the country bordering Ninewa Governorate, Turkey, and Syria. Its proximity to these active conflict areas has ensured that the region has been disproportionately impacted by displacement, with the second highest rates of both displaced Iraqis (356,676 individuals)² and Syrian refugees (83,993 individuals)³ in the country. Most displaced Iraqis in Duhok come from regions such as Sinjar and the surrounding villages, as well as Mosul City, and most are of

¹ http://adst.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/iraq_kurdish_regions_map5_600px_02_2f6f597f72.jpg

² IOM (August 30, 2017) Displacement Tracking Matrix (<http://iraqdtm.iom.int/IDPsML.aspx>)

³ UNHCR (27 July, 2017) Syrian Regional Refugee Response (<http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=103>)

Kurdish ethnicity, with smaller numbers displaced from Anbar, Baghdad, and Salah ad Din⁴. While Syrians have come from across the country due to the relatively higher mobility in Syria for work and education opportunities, most Syrians who have crossed the border into Duhok are of Kurdish ethnicity as well.⁵ Duhok Governorate is incredibly difficult to access for those of Arab ethnicity, but longer term Arab IDPs do continue to live in the region, many since the early 2000s who consider themselves to be a part of the host community. The confluence of its geographic location, the civil war in Syria, which began in March 2011, the resurgence of Daesh (also known as IS, ISIS, or ISIL) in both Iraq and Syria in 2014, as well as the drastic decrease in oil prices starting in 2014 have led to an increased humanitarian aid presence in the region and an increasingly strained host community.

For the progress study on *UN Security Resolution 2250: Youth, Peace, and Security* (commissioned by the UNFPA/PBSO Secretariat supporting the development of the Study, and funded thanks to the support of SIDA), three focus groups were conducted in an effort to capture these various viewpoints. In addition, individual interviews were conducted to supplement the findings of the focus groups, particularly with young people who identify as peace activists from the IDP, host, and refugee communities. The focus groups included one comprised of IDPs and refugees ages 18-29, a second one of host community members ages 18-29, and a third focus group with participants from mixed IDP, refugee, and host communities, ages 15-18. Overall, marked differences were apparent between both the three communities and the various age brackets.

This study was conducted in August-September, 2017, predating the Kurdistan Regional Government's referendum on independence in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The referendum, which was held on September 25, 2017, passed with overwhelming support (92%).⁶ The referendum marked a dramatic shift in policy from the central government, neighboring countries, and international influencers such as Europe and the United States to the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Region, and in turn, it is not implausible that some views indicated in this report, particularly pertaining to the role in the international community, may have shifted in the region.

Overview of Focus Group Discussion Participants

Focus group participants were recruited in partnership with Supportive Spirit for Solidarity Organization, Sumel Youth Center, Domiz Youth Center, and Duhok Youth Center. Despite efforts to recruit older youth (in particular, from ages 25-29), these youth largely failed to attend, citing work or other previous commitments despite previously agreeing to attend. Many sent younger siblings in their stead, skewing the groups younger than intended.

⁴ IOM (August 30, 2017) Displacement Tracking Matrix (<http://iraqdtm.iom.int/IDPsML.aspx>)

⁵ UNHCR (27 July, 2017) Syrian Regional Refugee Response (<http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=103>)

⁶ BBC, Iraqi Kurds decisively back independence in referendum, 27 September, 2017 (<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41419633>)

Unfortunately, given the time and financial constraints surrounding the project, no further focus groups were conducted with older youth. All findings should be interpreted through this lens, and recommendations for further study would include focus groups with older youth, as well as with young people from elsewhere in Iraq, particularly in areas heavily impacted by conflict such as Mosul, Kirkuk, and Baghdad.

The focus group for representatives of displaced communities (refugee and IDP), ages 18-29 (**Group A**) included 10 females and 4 males for a total of 14 group participants. In the 18-23 age bracket, there were 11 participants (7 female, 4 male). In the 24-28 age bracket there were 3 participants (1 male and two female).

The focus group for host community members, ages 18-29 (**Group B**), included 9 male and 6 female participants for a total of 15 participants. In the 18-23 age bracket, there were 13 participants, of whom 8 were male and 5 were female. In the 14-19 age bracket, there were two participants, one female and one male.

For the focus group that included a mix of IDP, refugee, and host community youth, ages 15-18 (**Group C**), there were 16 participants. However, one female IDP participant was outside of the age range assigned and was 19 years old. Within the age bracket were a total of 10 male and five female participants. Of those, 8 were between 15-16 years old (four male, four female), and seven were between 17-18 years old (six male, one female).

Group A - Displaced Communities (Syrian Refugees and Iraqi IDPs, 18-29)

Overall, Syrian refugee youth, ages 18-29, were the most optimistic and well connected of the three groups. They were overwhelmingly pro-government (Kurdistan Regional Government, as opposed to the Iraqi central government), had strong supportive relationships with NGOs (both local and international), and had more trust in themselves and the surrounding environment to make positive change. This could be in part due to the fact that when the Syrian Civil War began in March 2011, international and regional governments and agencies were quick to respond with both financial and moral support. As one of the largest conflicts at the time, the Syrian response was well coordinated and well-funded. Additionally, Syrians, especially those who arrived early in the conflict, often came from relatively affluent backgrounds and had strong skills and education, as well as fluency in both Arabic and Kurdish (Kurmanji dialect), which made them employable by aid organizations. In fact, of the four Syrians participating in the focus group, two were employed by aid organizations. In addition, many of the Syrian participants have, in their time in Duhok, learned Bahdini Kurdish (closely related to the Syrian dialect of Kurmanji), indicating a high level of integration.

In contrast, IDP communities were deeply cynical not just of their own ability to impact change, but also of the government response to the conflict, and of the various and competing political parties in KRI and Iraq in general. Many of the participating IDPs were of Ezidi faith from Sinjar, with some Muslim participants originally from the villages surrounding Sinjar. They expressed frustration with the way the governments of KRI and Iraq were handling the conflict, with one

highlighting a story of needing to be illegally smuggled back to Sinjar after it had been reclaimed from Daesh because of the competition and hostility between the various Iraqi and Kurdish political parties maintaining control of the areas between his camp and Sinjar. Despite the skepticism expressed regarding government, two of the female participants did report working with the Kurdistan Women's Union, which is government affiliated. Additionally, despite the religiously-based persecution of residents of Sinjar at the hands of Daesh, Ezidi youth expressed skepticism of religious leaders of their own faith and others. In addition to their lack of strong, favorable connections to government or religious leaders, and despite the massive international aid response to Sinjar, IDPs also indicated a weaker connection to local or international organizations. These views were shared both by urban residents of Sinjar as well as those of the rural villages surrounding the area, indicating that there is no notable urban/rural divide in their perspectives. Additionally, IDPs, despite being predominantly Kurdish-speaking, spoke a distinct dialect from the Duhok host community, indicating a lower degree of integration than demonstrated by Syrian refugees.

In general, both IDP and refugee groups expressed a certain degree of disenchantment with religion as a dominant feature of their lives, indicating that they felt that they were not influenced by religion or religious leaders and that they try to avoid these kinds of conflicts. Across both groups, women demonstrated more optimism than men, who largely felt that the situation was hopeless. Women were also able to offer more concrete examples of their involvement, whether through work or volunteerism, than men, which may account for this difference in optimism. Additionally, across both groups, it was apparent that those who had participated in workshops or trainings on peace education, community involvement, or similar sessions were more likely to have taken on a more proactive role in forming groups, volunteering, or providing support in their communities than those who had not been exposed to similar ideas.

Group B - Host Community (ages 18-29)

Overall, the host community group was somewhat less engaged and passionate about issues involving peace and security in their community than their displaced counterparts. This could be in part due to the lack of direct impact that the surrounding conflicts have had on Duhoki youth. As a rule, this group expressed being deeply connected with their friends and family, but less so with organizations or government institutions. Young people in the host community reported no functional relationship with the government and no understanding of how to develop the relationship, and thus do not feel like the government supports their initiatives. This could reflect the decrease in funding available from the regional government since oil prices dropped in 2014⁷. While there used to be small grants available in the Kurdistan Region to support youth initiatives, these have largely ended in the last several years as the financial

⁷ Arango, Tim (January 31, 2016). Battered by War, Iraq Now Faces Calamity From Dropping Oil Prices. *New York Times*. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/01/world/middleeast/battered-by-war-iraq-now-faces-calamity-from-dropping-oil-prices.html>)

situation has become more clear and persistent⁸. However, the lack of government support was not perceived solely as financial, but also as a lack of trust, respect, encouragement, or empowerment.

Given the extreme shifts in the financial situation in the Kurdistan Region, it is perhaps no surprise that the main social issue that youth in the host community are concerned about is class disparity. Young people reported class issues being more readily apparent and pressing than issues of gender, religious, or ethnic disparity. Similar to the IDP and host community participants, the host community expressed no particular attachment to tribal or religious affiliation, but did not go so far as to express a distrust of these institutions.

Group C - Mixed Youth (Iraqi IDPs, Syrian refugees, and host community, ages 15-18)

The final focus group narrowed in on the differing views of younger people, ages 15 to 18. In general, this group demonstrated much better levels of integration than either of the previous groups, with participants going out of their way to switch between Arabic, Kurdish, and various accents to ensure that everyone felt included. Additionally, as compared to the 18 to 29 year olds, particularly those from the host community, they demonstrated a more knowledgeable and nuanced view of the context of the region.

However, despite their generally stronger integration with one another, they also highlighted a unique level of disenfranchisement as compared to the IDP, refugee, or host community participants 18-29. Perhaps due to their age and normal adolescent behavior, this group indicated feeling not only disconnected from the government, organizations, or religious and tribal leaders, but also to their own families. Some participants expressed that they were unable to trust anyone, with one stating “If we can’t trust our families, who can we trust?” This group felt a greater need to push back on societal and cultural norms and to advocate for greater equality for themselves, in part because of their lack of faith in traditional community institutions. Despite this, young people were not turning in any notable way to social media as a method of advocacy or making change.

Similar to the host community, this younger group identified not class issues, but economic opportunity and availability of work to be the most important issues facing them today, not only for themselves but for their families. In fact, it was the one issue that cut across community lines, with two of the most vocal participants on the issue of economic opportunity coming from IDP and refugee backgrounds, indicating a shift from their older peers.

What are the main peace and security challenges that affect you, and how do these impact your life (locally, nationally, regionally, or globally)?

⁸ Middle East Research Institute (January, 2016). In the Best of Times, In the Worst of Times: Addressing Structural Weaknesses of the Kurdistan Region’s Economy. (<http://www.meri-k.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/MERI-Economic-Report-with-Executive-Summary-in-Kurdish-January-2016.pdf>)

Across all three focus groups, young people identified the number one challenge to peace and security as the lack of communication between people of diverging opinions, particularly when it comes to politics. In the view of young people, this lack of communication leads to misunderstanding between different religions, communities, and tribes, which often break down along political alliances.

Other challenges to peace and security that were mentioned across all focus groups included war, child labor or violence against children, and particularly among female participants, harassment, violence against women, and early marriage. Despite these shared concerns, there were some areas in which particular types of violence disproportionately impact certain groups. For example, in Group A, IDPs were more likely to cite religious and ethnic discrimination than other groups, whereas Syrians were more likely to cite early marriage as a primary concern.

Religious discrimination against Ezidis is somewhat common in Duhok, where the predominantly Muslim community holds stereotypes of Ezidis as “unclean” or “devil worshippers⁹.” This community-level discrimination is formally illegal in KRI, but according to one Ezidi male, he was told by a university professor that “even if [he] graduated with a Political Science degree, [he] would never be an ambassador because [he] is Ezidi,” indicating that in practice this type of discrimination is still happening. Additionally, IDPs of all ages discussed the impact of sexual violence against Ezidi girls perpetrated under Daesh, as well as the violence they faced upon returning home within their own household, which could include forced marriage as a way to salvage the woman’s honor.

For Syrian refugees, who are disproportionately concerned with the issue of child marriage, the reasons are twofold. First, cultural differences between Syrian Kurds and Iraqi Kurds are notable. For example, the legal age of marriage in Syria prior to the civil war was 17 for women and 18 for men, and early marriage was considered uncommon¹⁰, while the KRI has seen an increase in rates of child marriage¹¹. Additionally, cultural norms allowed young Syrian men and women to date or spend time together one-on-one in their home countries, but those same young people find themselves faced with intense scrutiny for the same behavior in Duhok. These cultural differences are compounded by shifts in economic status and access to work, which is leading to increased reliance on negative coping mechanisms such as early marriage.

The participants in Group C, across ethnic and religious groups, held a highly negative view of the café culture of Duhok, seeing it as promoting negative coping mechanisms like smoking or gambling. They perceived cafes as fueling addictions that could lead to higher rates of unemployment and theft. However, while cafes are common in Duhok for men over 18 to

⁹ Asher-Schapiro, Avi. (11 August, 2014). Who are the Yazidis, an Ancient, Persecuted Religious Minority Struggling to Survive in Iraq?

(<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/08/140809-iraq-yazidis-minority-isil-religion-history/>)

¹⁰ Syrian Arab Republic. (2017). Girls Not Brides.

(<http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/syrian-arab-republic/>)

¹¹ UNFPA. (August, 2016). Child Marriage in Kurdistan Region - Iraq.

(<http://iraq.unfpa.org/publications/child-marriage-kurdistan-region-iraq>)

smoke hookah and play dominoes or backgammon, most young people under 18 and virtually all women would never have directly interacted within these spaces and seemed to be reporting off of a stereotyped casino-type environment.

Across all groups, young people identified the need for increased freedom and equality and the end of discrimination as the most important thing to establish a sense of safety and security. However, there was a breakdown in how to achieve this change. Among IDPs, particularly among the 18-29 subset (Group A), there was consensus that this equality was contingent upon individual behavioral change, whereas among the host community and refugee participants, as well as younger IDPs (Group C), there was a view that the government was the main mechanism for ensuring that everyone has equal protection under the law. This seems to reflect the general mistrust that the older IDP community holds of the government. Some possible outlets for ensuring increased equality included greater freedom of expression and rights for young people (Group C), more well-equipped youth centers (Group B), employment opportunities for women (host community, 18-29), moderating religious speech (Group A), and improved and accessible education for all (Groups A and B). In terms of education, young people were concerned about accessibility to higher education, but were also concerned about the content taught as well as the methodology of instruction, and requested increased emphasis on soft skills rather than simply rote memorization to teach young people how to handle conflict or differing opinions.

To resolve these various forms of violence faced by young people, all groups cited their families or friends as their first option, and explained that who they would trust to resolve violence depended greatly on the type of violence they were seeking to address. Fifteen to 18 year olds of all backgrounds (Group C) had the most limited number of people they trust. First and foremost, Group C participants trust their close friends and siblings to help them resolve various forms of violence. Depending on the issue, this group also discussed the possibility of approaching parents or Asayish (Kurdish Security Forces) if it were not something their friends or siblings could help resolve. However, this was the extent of who was trusted among the youngest group, indicating a high level of social isolation outside of their immediate peer group.

Group B participants also highlighted the need for nuanced responses to resolve these types of violence. Options included family or relatives, NGOs or organizations, or the government, including the court systems, police, women's directorate, or Asayish. One participant from the host community stated, "I always go to the Asayish. I love them," indicating the high level of trust in the government to respond to instances of violence within the host community. Among the host community, the consensus was that religious and tribal leaders' time had passed, and young people no longer trusted them to resolve conflict. However, despite their lack of direct influence on the lives of young people, all groups mentioned at least the possibility of bringing the issue to their parents or relatives, who may be bringing the issue to religious or tribal leaders for support.

Like their peers in other groups, Syrian refugees from Group A cited their families as the first place they would turn, but also indicated a more highly connected network to call upon in the event that their family was unable to help. Refugees identified local and international NGOs they could turn to, as well as government institutions both inside and outside of the camp. Syrians highlighted the specific work of organizations in targeting youth for workshops and trainings as one of the key ways they built trust with these institutions and learned about what support they could offer the community. In contrast, IDPs from Group A were nearly as isolated as the participants from Group C, indicating that they would not trust the government, and few would trust organizations to support them in the face of violence. One female IDP indicated that she would “not trust anybody official” to help her to resolve an issue, and all indicated that the preferred method would be directly through their immediate family, without involving anyone else if possible. Similar to Groups B and C, Group A participants indicated that they would not turn to tribal or religious leaders to help them solve their problems, though particularly in the case of Ezidi IDPs, it is possible that their families are consulting these institutions without the young people's knowledge.

What factors prevent or inhibit your involvement in building peace and contributing to security? And what factors could promote and support your active involvement in building peace, preventing violence, and contributing to positive social cohesion in your community, society and/or institutions?

Across all three focus groups, young people identified lack of family support as being a primary inhibiting factor in building peace and contributing to security. Group C participants, regardless of gender, felt that their parents generally did not believe in them and would prevent them from participating in activities unless they could see a benefit for the entire community, rather than just for young people. Among Groups A and B, the concerns around family restrictions took on a much more gendered tone, with host community women speaking about the lack of family trust that leads to a lack of freedom of movement, as well as community level harassment for stepping outside of societal norms. “We were in a cleaning campaign in Domiz and people were laughing. People made jokes about how women are cleaning,” explained one female participant. Within the refugee and host communities, women also cited a lack of freedom of movement, as well as lower access to higher education, stating that given the financial burden of displacement families were more likely to pay for their son's education rather than their daughters. Similarly, host community members cited fewer opportunities for women within youth centers. Among host communities and IDP/refugee focus groups, tradition, culture, and tribal norms were cited as a reason for this lack of freedom for women. In order to address this challenge, host community women recommended gatekeeper training for parents or tribal leaders to help them see the benefit of allowing young women to participate in peacebuilding activities specifically and public life more generally. Gender was universally identified as the major factor that would impact young people's opportunity to participate in peacebuilding activities, more so than religion, ethnicity, or tribal affiliation. However, one Arab participant did mention that she would occasionally hear anti-Arab

sentiments, but that it was unusual and did not prevent her from participating in peacebuilding activities.

Additionally, shared across Groups B and C is a concern about the lack of support or attention paid to youth activities. This lack of attention paid to youth activities, according to host community members, discourages youth from participating and diminishes a spirit of volunteerism. They suggested that increased attention from the media or government highlighting the positive contributions of young people as a way encourage young people to get involved in their communities. In contrast, IDP communities felt strongly that a lack of freedom of expression was at the root of the lack of youth involvement, and felt that there was no encouragement or incentive for young people to participate. The majority of host community youth feel that they are marginalized from economic and political life, and feel like access to these areas is dependent on “wasta” or nepotism. In fact, they feel like efforts such as *UN Security Council Resolution 2250* have led to no change, stating that “two years ago, on International Youth Day, [the government] made many promises that they would do things for us, but they are always promising and not doing.”

In contrast to the views held by other communities, Syrian refugees from Group A felt strongly that much of the lack of community support came from poorly organized youth activities, with one participant stating that “if you are good and competent, then society will help and support you.” Overall, they felt that apart from gender restrictions, their voices as young people were heard and that they had the support of their community.

In general, youth in all groups did not feel that they benefitted from violence, though recognized that there had been some minor benefits to their families. For example, within the host community, youth identified that their families would occasionally benefit from violence in the case of land disputes, and some Ezidi IDPs felt that they had benefitted by having their voices heard internationally. Two Syrian refugee females mentioned that they had benefitted by gaining access to employment in NGOs, and learning information through their jobs that they were able to integrate into their daily lives. Additionally, one refugee woman stated that she had benefitted by learning more about the community she was living in, specifically citing the example of not knowing who Ezidis were prior to arriving in Iraq, but now having the opportunity to learn about them.

What are the peacebuilding and violence prevention activities, initiatives, and projects being undertaken by you and/or your organization? What is the impact of this work?

Overall, trainings and workshops have been the most common activities that youth have participated in, particularly on peaceful coexistence and social cohesion. In each group, youth discussed the value of these workshops by providing them skills to do community-level mediation, offer advice in times of conflict, interact with people from different communities, and create volunteer projects. Among Group C participants, youth were unable to come to a consensus on the value of volunteerism, with some saying that there is no reason to volunteer,

others discussing the value of gaining experience for their CV, and a few participants advocating for volunteerism as a way to give back to your country and community. Volunteer projects included activities such as cleaning or awareness campaigns, as well as, for Ezidi IDPs, providing humanitarian support to communities in Sinjar. Overall, youth mentioned that their activities, initiatives, and projects have helped to build awareness, freedom, and cultural exchange.

Additionally, all groups reported helping to facilitate or organize meetings with parents to shift negative cultural traditions. Within the host community, youth were able to double the number of female participants in youth center activities from ten to twenty by meeting with parents to encourage them to allow girls to participate. Similarly, within Domiz Camp for Syrian Refugees, youth met with parents to discuss the negative impacts of early marriage, and through ongoing advocacy and meetings with parents, were able to see a marked decline in rates of early marriage.

Across all communities, young people felt strongly that youth had a different approach to peacebuilding than older generations, including new techniques like social media to reach out to wider communities. Adults, on the other hand, were said to rely on traditional methods for resolving conflict which rely heavily on tribal affiliations and religious leaders. In all groups, there was discussion around whether the older generation's approach to peacebuilding and conflict resolution was more effective or less effective than the approaches taken by young people. Some participants felt that the older generation was more peaceful than today's society, others saw the approaches of older generations as complementary to the approaches of youth and would like to see youth play a stronger role. However, the majority of young people across all groups saw that "the time for the older generation has passed. It's our turn."

Across all groups, common mechanisms for increasing youth mobilization in peacebuilding included awareness campaigns, both on and offline, working with gatekeepers to ensure that young people are able to participate, and setting a positive example by doing good work. Group C participants in particular made a point of clarifying that while social media is a powerful mechanism for spreading awareness among their peers, online outreach alone was not sufficient to gain the support of wider segments of the community. They were careful to clarify that not everybody could be reached or convinced online, and that social media activism alone was not enough to make a sustained difference. For those who cannot be engaged online, they recommended building bridges through activities, work, school, and getting to know people from different backgrounds in their communities.

When working to prevent violence, youth from all communities stated that the best mechanism they had available to them was by offering advice, though different groups identified different spheres of influence. Younger participants largely felt that they could not influence their friends, but said that they were better equipped to reach out to their younger siblings. All groups mentioned that because they were not authority figures, they were better equipped to make a difference, but they were not always able to prevent violence. "Because we have soft contact," one IDP female explained "we can't impose concepts. There are cases we can't

prevent. One of my friends is still young, but he lost his father and older brothers and he became the head of household. He is very aggressive because of the situation he's been through. I've tried to help many times, but it hasn't helped."

In general, Group B participants and Syrian refugees from Group A felt strongly that their efforts at minimizing violence and building peace were recognized and appreciated by their communities. Syrian refugees felt most strongly that their efforts were also being recognized by local government, particularly within their school systems and camp management. As one young woman stated, "the headmaster of the school gave us activities to do regarding peacebuilding. If he hadn't respected and recognized us, we wouldn't have been given the opportunity."

IDPs from Group A and Group C participants overall felt that their efforts were largely not respected, with Group C participants significantly less pessimistic. In general, younger participants felt that their efforts were respected by less than half of the population, but as one participant stated, "even if only five percent of the population recognizes your activity, they can influence others." In contrast, IDPs were deeply cynical about their efforts to make change, stating that it was impossible in the current climate to be neutral or apolitical. They indicated feeling fear of doing volunteer activities, because "if you are apolitical, different (political) groups will make it hard." According to one volunteer, "We (Ezidi IDP youth) had 43 volunteer groups in Kurdistan after Sinjar fell, but now there are only three active" because of this pressure from the government.

What would help enhance your contribution and leadership in building sustainable peace and preventing violence? Do you have particular views on how your government, state institution, civil society organizations, media, or the international community could help support you?

In terms of government or state institutional support, the biggest request across all groups was for moral support and encouragement of youth activities, including the encouragement of ideas and creative thinking and ensuring that activities are promoted to continue. Among Group C participants, they gave the example of a youth project in Saudi Arabia that was designed to provide free wifi at malls, and stated that even if a youth here had a similar idea, it would be difficult to get permission because the government doesn't support such initiatives. Additionally, more youth centers were identified among both Group B and C participants as a useful government infrastructure through which to encourage youth activities. Financial support was also mentioned among Groups B and C. In contrast, refugees and IDPs from Group A primarily discussed the removal of barriers, whether personal (such as freedom of movement for women or freedom of expression) or political. As one 19 year old male IDP participant stated, "they think we are a threat to national security." Among the host community, "wasta" or nepotism was another major area of concern that prevented them from being fully engaged in the peace process, and one they felt the government had a role in managing.

Along with the encouragement from the government, youth requested that media take a more active role in covering stories of young people making positive change in their communities. They saw this as a means for encouraging young people to get involved in peacebuilding and violence prevention activities, and as a way to help encourage family members and community to see value in their work.

Local and international civil society organizations were primarily requested to continue providing training opportunities for young people, including workshops, awareness campaigns, and projects. Additionally, youth from the 15 to 18 age group, as well as IDP and refugee participants, requested that the international community play a stronger role in advocating on behalf of youth through gatekeeper training, education reform, and stronger demands for female participation in civic and economic life.

While there was some difference between the various groups, the primary factors for enhancing youth participation in peace came down to a stronger sense of community respect, particularly in instances of differing opinions, ethnicities, cultures, or traditions. Youth spoke of the need for increased trust and equality between various groups in Iraqi and Kurdish society, in contrast to the current levels of discrimination and lack of cooperation. This sense of different groups failing to cooperate was noted not only on the societal level, but particularly among IDP and refugee groups who had higher levels of interaction with the international community and government than younger or host community counterparts, also within the aid community. In particular, increased NGO coordination, cooperation between political parties, and depoliticization of issues were among the most important issues for displaced Syrians and Iraqis. In order to ensure that these key issues are addressed, participants were asked who they most trust to listen to their concerns and help them to address issues. Among all three groups, levels of skepticism regarding tribal and religious leaders remained high. Among older groups, skepticism of the government was also high. Across all groups, family structure and peer groups were the most likely to be trusted within this context, though 15 to 18 year olds and IDPs expressed lower rates of trust even here, with some in both groups mentioning explicitly that they don't trust anyone in this regard.

Recommendations

While there were some marked cultural differences between the various groups interviewed for this report, some common threads did appear across all youth, regardless of background. Based on the feedback of young people in these focus groups, one of the key ways to ensure that their voices are heard is to work directly with government officials on civil society and democracy building programming, helping to build their understanding of concepts like volunteerism and community-level activism. Only by ensuring that directorate-level government officials understand and do not feel threatened by these initiatives will young people not feel that their ideas are stifled.

Young people are looking to strengthen and mainstream ideas of inclusivity, gender equity, and diversity of thought, politics, and ethnicity in their efforts, and are finding older generations, particularly those in political positions, at odds with these ideals. By continuing to invest in and support civil society initiatives that work not only on the ground, but also with gatekeepers, media representatives, and government officials, funding agencies can shore up support for youth voices in peace and security processes. In addition, international donors can help young people to identify supportive allies within the government and media, and help to deconflict concerns around young people being engaged in track II and III diplomacy and informal democracy building activities.

Young people are aware that many of their activities go against traditional cultural norms, but are willing to conduct nuanced outreach within their communities to ensure that they win over supporters. To that end, advocacy programming that provides support as young people identify their audiences and develop outreach strategies to reach them would help to capitalize on this motivation, while providing the tools to execute successful campaigns with greater support. Financial support of activities, while important, was not perceived to be as critical as providing skills training on issues such as advocacy or working with government officials to establish an environment that promotes and values volunteerism as a way to improve oneself and one's community. In order to achieve their goals in peacebuilding and conflict resolution, young people noted the need for greater freedom of expression and freedom of movement, increased trust in their abilities, and the ability to operate outside of political affiliations. Counterintuitively, youth spoke of the need for programming that focused not on themselves, but rather with government officials and gatekeepers as their key beneficiaries, with the goal to establish an understanding of the value of empowered youth and civil society.

An additional obstacle to guaranteeing support of government officials is the ongoing economic crisis in Iraq, particularly in the Kurdistan Region. At present, many government officials are receiving a quarter of their normal salary, and this has continued for the better part of two years. Given the lack of salaries, motivation among government employees, particularly those in key ally positions such as the directors of government-operated youth centers, is low and any volunteer initiative may be perceived as extra, unpaid work. Despite this, many youth center directors and other government officials coordinate in an unpaid capacity with UN and other institutionally funded programming, with some receiving a small stipend for their efforts. Current policy by donor agencies is to not pay salaries of government employees. However, this policy also antagonizes the relationship between government employees and youth who want to be engaged in peacebuilding processes. In order to ensure that government employees are compensated for time spent on the youth initiatives tied to their programming, donor agencies are recommended to reconsider this policy. Instead, they may consider allowing government employees to serve as part-time staff on projects, thus compensating them for meaningful support of the projects implemented under their supervision, and providing incentive for them to better meet the needs of young people.

Iraqi youth, particularly IDPs, are far more disconnected from and mistrustful of people in authority than their Syrian refugee counterparts, who are among the most well connected and optimistic groups of young people in Iraq. Group C participants (mixed IDP, refugee, and host community youth, ages 15-18) also share a heightened mistrust of authority figures, including their parents, but are on the whole more optimistic than IDPs. Additionally, Group C participants demonstrate greater integration and understanding of the social and political situation of Iraq than their older peers. Further research on the social connectedness and trust of institutions is recommended to fully understand the dynamics at play in these findings. From a programmatic standpoint, however, project proposals could be adapted to include sections on youth inclusivity and on demonstrating increased bridging social capital, in much the same way that many donors now require project proposals to include language on reaching women or vulnerable groups.

Host community youth across all ages were more disconnected from peacebuilding activities than those who had been displaced, highlighting that direct negative impact of violence is one of the strongest motivators for engaging in peacebuilding and conflict resolution activities. Development programming priorities are already starting to shift to better integrate host community members into programming. However, these results indicate that proximity to people affected by conflict is not enough to motivate host community members to feel motivated to engage with peacebuilding initiatives. This issue is likely exacerbated by the sociopolitical disconnect between the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and central and southern Iraq, giving Kurdish youth the sense that the lack of security in the rest of Iraq is less their problem as it is happening outside their borders. Programming should seek to cultivate a sense of empathy between program participants and a stronger sense of global solidarity that allows young people to engage in issues that do not impact them directly.

Existing institutions like schools and youth centers were identified as key spaces for young people to organize, plan, and implement peacebuilding activities regardless of gender, ethnicity, age, or displacement status, and youth were eager to see these spaces equipped and active. However, young people identified gaps in the services provided by these centers, including not enough physical space, ill-equipped centers, lack of staffing or open hours, or lack of electricity or generator fuel to keep the spaces usable in summer and winter. Programmatic recommendations would include ensuring adequate funding for upkeep of community spaces, including staffing and renovation budgets. Additionally, it is common for youth centers to be fully funded for the duration of a program, while little forethought seems to be given to sustainability of a key community space for young people, leaving the sites without the ability to operate once internationally funded programming ends. Programs should integrate sustainability plans that work within the given context to ensure that these community spaces are not merely functional when in use by international agencies. In contrast, social institutions like places of worship or tribal leaders that are critical to older generations hold little appeal to

young people. Unanimously, young people spoke of these institutions as being out of date and lacking influence in their day to day lives.

Finally, youth identified the need for staff in these centers who are willing to work with young people to minimize barriers to entry. School and youth center staff are also well respected in the community, and thus can play an essential role in normalizing youth activities, working with gatekeepers, and coordinating with media institutions to ensure that youth initiatives are recognized. The international community can partner with these existing youth spaces to provide trainings and learning opportunities for community members and staff, as well as to advocate for better inclusivity, promote gender equality, and establish apolitical opportunities for engagement in peace and security processes. By ensuring that spaces are well-equipped and staffed with supportive teams, these government spaces can serve as a key bridge between young people and the government.

Conclusion

Key findings include the following:

- Syrian refugees are among the most well-connected of the groups surveyed due to the depth of investment of resources in response to the Syrian refugee crisis.
- IDP youth feel most mistrustful of the government and of international and local organizations.
- Host community youth feel least involved in the peacebuilding and security efforts in their communities, perhaps due to the lack of direct impact of conflict on their lives compared to their displaced counterparts.
- Financial support, across all groups, was considered important, but of lesser concern than continuing to build skills and promote autonomy of young people in the peace process
- Religious and tribal institutions are no longer applicable to young people as institutions for change

Key recommendations include the following:

- Invest in programming that works closely with government officials at the directorate level to help establish understanding of volunteerism and civic engagement.
- Partner with local media organizations to promote stories of youth activism, helping to raise awareness of the role of young people in their communities and motivate them to get involved.
- Mainstream ideas of inclusivity, gender equity, and diversity of thought, politics, and ethnicity in programming by working with gatekeepers such as parents who may feel uncomfortable with these concepts.

- Invest in advocacy training for young people to help them better conduct outreach to their communities and strengthen their programming.
- Provide part-time salaries for government employees in key positions to serve as program staff, motivating them to serve as support rather than a barrier to activities.
- Require implementing partners to address how their programs will integrate the voices of young people and increase bridging capital.
- Invest in youth centers, which are key points of contact between young people and government, and work toward sustainability in all efforts to support them.