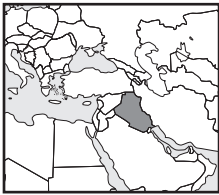


IRAQ

Youth bear the brunt of violence, insecurity and poverty



Young people have been especially hard hit by the violence and humanitarian crisis situation facing Iraq. Many must work to help support their families, yet face an unemployment rate estimated at 50%. Literacy rates in young adults are declining, largely because of growing numbers of girls being kept out of school for questions of safety or religious restrictions. Youth aged 13 to 35 account for 65% of the victims of military operations and terror attacks, and most of these young victims are civilians.*

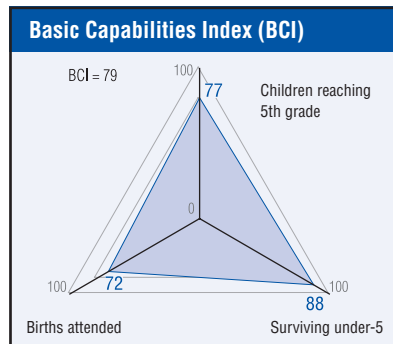
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This report focuses primarily on youth in Iraq, as they represent a large section of society: 28% of the total population is aged between 15 and 29 and another 10% between 30 and 35. For the past three decades, the younger generations have grown up in a society marked by oppression, despotism and arbitrary policies, and have suffered the effects of economic sanctions. They have been used as a tool in wars, targeted by every power that wants to control the country, and forced to assimilate changes in religious, cultural, social and political practices. Violence and humanitarian crisis have become a part of daily life. Because of all this, social security is more essential than ever as a basis for the young to play a role in rebuilding their nation.

Employment opportunities limited by violence

Decades of armed conflict have made Iraq a markedly 'young' society. Many members of the older generation were killed in wars, leaving young people with the responsibility of working to help support their families. Under the previous regime, young men were obliged to enter into military service after graduating from secondary school and college, but since this has not been the case in the last four years, there have been a rising number of young people flooding the job market.

The proportion of youth among job seekers in the private sector or in government rose from 30% before 2003 to 70% between 2003 and 2005. After 2005, those seeking work in the private sector decreased to 50%, while those looking for government jobs rose from 70% in 2004 to 97% in 2007. The reason for this is that terror attacks on private sector establishments have led more and more people to aspire to the security of a job in the government, even if they are already working in the private sector. On the other hand, the increased activity of militia groups has led to a decrease in private sector employment opportunities, since most foreign investors withdraw after only a few months of work. Since



2003, because of the threat of violence and the kidnapping of their employees, many foreign business owners have been forced to move their operations to safer areas or leave the country for good.

The Iraqi economy was essentially a war economy from the 1980s until 2003, with the vast majority of government resources channelled to military spending. Under the previous regime, young men entering the job market at the age of 29 after completing their military service were faced with salaries of between USD 5 and USD 20 monthly in government jobs and USD 20 to USD 50 in the private sector. Young female workers received similar salaries but had far fewer employment opportunities. Meanwhile, between 1990 and 2003, a family needed an income of at least USD 100 monthly to meet their minimum needs for survival.

After 2003, the influx of foreign investors drawn by the drastic cuts in trade tariffs and the lucrative opportunities to participate in rebuilding the country, along with a new salary system established by the government, raised salaries to between USD 100 and USD 300 month. At the same time, however, agreements struck between the government and international banks led to a rise in fuel prices and service fees and a collapse in the electrical system, leading to a whole new set of needs for Iraqi families: fuel for electricity generators, heating and cooking gas, and water filters. As a result, a family now needs an income of between USD 200 and USD 300 a month to survive. Therefore, more than ever before, young people have an obligation to contribute to family income. Yet with the ongoing violence making jobs outside the government less and less available, and the threats from armed groups against those who work in the government, many young people end up sitting at home and waiting for relief.

Meanwhile, the number of females working in the private sector has decreased over time, because in many areas of the country, restrictions are being placed on women's style of dress and freedom of movement in accordance with the Islamic religion – despite the fact that the Iraqi Constitution states that all people have the right to work and live free from discrimination.

The government has attempted to decrease the high rate of unemployment among the country's youth by opening offices where young people can register to seek work. However, the large numbers of job seekers and limited numbers of job openings have created the conditions for corruption, while the youth unemployment rate remains critically high, and has been estimated at up to 50%.

Between 2006 and 2007, the Iraqi Youth Civil Dialogue Programme undertook a project to compare the living and employment conditions of young people in three areas of the country: the north (Sulaimaniya), the south (Dhiqar) and Baghdad. As can be seen in Table 1, despite the regional variations observed, the situation throughout the country is troubling.

Declining literacy rates

The government has always supported the educational system and school attendance is mandatory for the country's children. However, the violence and economic hardship of recent years have left many families without support and forced many young people to leave school and accept low-paying jobs, although some attempt to study and work at the same time.

According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2004), the literacy rate for youth aged 15 to 24 was 74% in 2004, which was lower than the literacy rates for the 25 to 34 age group, reflecting deterioration in educational performance. Today, some estimates place the literacy rate for youth aged 15 to 24 as low as 55%. This decline is largely the result of decreasing literacy rates among girls, an increasing number of whom are being kept out of school, sometimes out of fear for their safety, and other times because they must stay at home and work.

In spite of this, among Iraqi youth who are able to undertake tertiary studies, females made up 55.4% of university admissions in 2006, and accounted for 63.3% of the highest grades among university students.

As Iraqi youth started to open up to technology in the past three years their applications to higher

* There are no available data on GEI components.

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education institutions have increased by 14% yearly. At the same time, however, tribal traditions and religious regulations affect their ability to seek an education, as some ethnic groups in southern Iraq prohibit girls and young women from entering internet centres or public libraries. There is also an increasing tendency to segregate male and female students, as well as campaigns against female students who refuse to wear veils.

Meanwhile, military operations sometimes make going to school or university impossible for many days on end, and this situation obviously has a serious impact on the education process. In addition, the growing influence of militia groups in some schools and universities forces many students to move to other institutes where there is a majority of students from their own ethnic group.

Factors like these have made many students aspire to finishing their education outside Iraq. A recent survey found that 66% of male students and 34% of female students said they would prefer to study abroad.

Violence and insecurity has also had a profound impact on the academic community. As of 2006, an estimated 172 scholars had been kidnapped, between 100 and 200 had been killed, and 66% said they feared for their lives. Not surprisingly, some 3,000 scholars have emigrated in recent years.

Most victims of military operations are young

While the government has historically provided people with the right to be treated free of charge or with minimum fees in government hospitals, the current conditions facing the health sector have made this commitment impossible to uphold.

According to a 2007 report from Oxfam International, 90% of the country's 180 hospitals lack essential resources such as basic medical and surgical supplies. In addition to the shortage of medical supplies, hospitals have also been seriously affected by the destruction of water supply networks and the restricted supply of electricity.

Youth between the ages of 13 and 35 account for 65% of the victims of military operations and terror attacks, and most of these young victims are civilians. The large numbers of people left wounded as a result of the ongoing violence exceed the ability of any hospital to provide adequate care. In addition, the need for assistance for people left disabled as a result of their injuries far outstrips the country's current capabilities.

Meanwhile, attacks against doctors and medical sector workers have led to the loss of experts in the medical field, putting more pressure on young graduates to fill the vacancies. It is estimated that since 2004, between 25 and 40 doctors have been killed, 160 to 300 doctors have been kidnapped, and some 3,000 doctors have left the country.

Women's freedom increasingly curtailed

As a party to the U.N. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Iraqi state has an obligation to "take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women

	Dhiqar	Baghdad	Sulaimaniya
Employed youth working in government jobs	20%	50%	45%
Youth leaving their jobs to look for jobs in government	70%	24%	70%
Youth who believe violence and terror affect their sources of income	80%	94%	53%
People living under the poverty line	84%	63%	28%
People living on a minimum survival income	68%	71%	32%
Unemployment among young women	80%	67%	35%

by any person, organization or enterprise," as well as to "modify or abolish existing laws, regulations, customs and practices which constitute discrimination against women."

Despite this international commitment, Iraqi women are seeing their freedoms increasingly curtailed by the ongoing violence and the spread of new ideas that seek to control women in the name of tradition and radical religious belief. While Iraqi society provided women with a relatively high degree of freedom in the last five decades, today there is growing influence on the part of militia organizations and armed groups that have severely limited women's movement by prohibiting them from driving cars or leaving their homes without a veil. Military operations further restrict women's opportunities by forcing them to work and study near their homes.

Concluding remarks and recommendations

- Government commitments to human rights and international conventions must be made more active and effective through government action to ensure that its obligations to the people are fulfilled.
- Violence is the major source of insecurity in all branches of life in Iraq, and all major players in the country must take responsibility for what is happening and the crises that people are facing.
- International organizations and the Iraqi government must work towards enhancing human security by promoting dialogue, the exchange of experience and joint work among young people, and empowering young people in the democratic transformation by rejecting violence and fostering participation in the development process on all levels (political, social, economic and cultural).
- The country's citizenship must be mobilized through a call for national unity amongst Iraqis by adopting dialogue as the only way to achieve national reconciliation, based on unity within diversity, non-violence, respect for human rights, and national independence, to preserve the country's natural resources from waste and corruption.
- Effective cooperation between the Iraqi government and civil society organizations will provide greater opportunities for incorporating social security into laws and government policies.
- Children's and women's rights must be given more support to be fully realized, and NGOs must be given greater space to work to spread awareness of these rights.
- Youth need to be trained to participate in the rebuilding of the country by learning their human and social rights.
- The concepts of social security and human rights should be linked through civil society work in order to build a new generation able to stand against all challenges in Iraq.
- The United Nations and international organizations from all over the world should be called on to take a larger part in helping to address the humanitarian crisis facing the country.
- Priority must be placed on the needs and role of women as key players in the process of human security.
- All citizens of Iraq must be made beneficiaries of the wealth derived from oil production by supporting social and human security programmes and projects.
- Cooperation between NGOs and donors or local banks is needed to provide small loans for youth and women to implement income-generating projects in towns or villages, especially for widows or women with no source of income.
- More aid must be directed to the two million internally displaced persons and two million refugees to provide them with food, water, education and health services. ■

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