WE HAVE FORGOTTEN WHAT HAPPINESS IS

YOUTH PERSPECTIVES OF DISPLACEMENT
AND RETURN IN QAYYARAH SUBDISTRICT, MOSUL

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1. MAP OF RESEARCH AREA as of February 2017

Map of Iraq and Middle East region

Map of Qayyarah Subdistrict and Surrounding Areas

Key:

- Fieldwork locations
- Cities that are ISIS held
- Cities free of conflict
- Areas where there is open conflict
- Frontlines/ISIS areas

2. LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ECHO	European Commission Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection Department
HH	Households
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
ISF	Iraq Security Force
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
PMU	Popular Mobilization Units
UN	United Nations
SC	Security Council

Credit: Tommy Trenchard/Oxfam

3. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The current global youth population, or “youth bulge” is the largest the world has ever had and presents a distinctive demographic dividend that can actively complement inclusive decision-making and contribute to long term peace and economic prosperity.

The current internal conflict in Iraq, its ensuing displacement and emerging returns, coupled with political and economic crises facing the country, are just the latest in a series of ongoing upheavals that youth are experiencing. This is a grim set of circumstances for any young person, and is particularly troubling in Iraq where pre-crisis figures indicate that 61% of the population is below the age 24 and 20% between the ages of 15 and 24.

With the support of ECHO, Oxfam conducted an in-depth qualitative study of youth perspectives on experiences of displacement and return in newly retaken areas around Mosul. The main objective of this study is to investigate how circumstances for youth in Iraq may spur further conflict and shape displacement and return experiences; inform current policies around stabilization; influence the development of a durable solutions framework for displacement in Iraq; and support further development of conflict-sensitive programming as Oxfam moves its response from humanitarian to early recovery.

METHODOLOGY

The study design included a combination of key informant interviews with community leaders/elders as well as individual interviews with female and male youth between the ages of 15 and 22 years.

A total of 35 semi-structured qualitative interviews (30 youth and five adult key informants) were carried out in the vicinity of Qayyarah subdistrict, 60km south of Mosul city.

KEY FINDINGS

Perceptions of life before ISIS occupation

- Youth believed that intra-community relations and social cohesion was stable, strong and diverse.
- Youth perceived their quality and standard of life to be good to very good, with access to education, essential social services, and income generating

activities or employment. This was despite statistics from the period showing high rates of poverty and unemployment (including youth unemployment), perceptions of corruption, and inter-communal distrust relative to other regions of Iraq.

- Young people, including females, had freedom of movement within their communities and beyond, and could go about their social, educational and economic pursuits freely within the scope determined by their parents.
- Access to schools and other educational services were widespread and consistent. Co-educational schooling seems to have been broadly available to all and was well-resourced with good facilities and teachers from the federal level implementing the national curriculum.
- This seeming tranquility was also punctuated by regular violence particularly targeted at security forces and political and civic leadership by insurgent armed groups and sleeper cells within the community.

Perceptions of life during ISIS occupation

- Many youth reported that government security forces left the area as soon as ISIS arrived, which came as a shock to many respondents.
- In the first few months of ISIS occupation little changed in terms of living conditions. Thereafter, aspects of life such as mobile phone use, personal appearance, individual movement and school attendance was severely regulated in terms of ISIS dogma. Many female youth were effectively confined in their own homes because of severe public dress codes and the inability to move around without a male chaperon.
- Most schools continued to function unhindered during the first few months of ISIS occupation. Soon thereafter, student attendance dropped for a number of reasons, including the end of co-education in many areas (with female youth being forced to drop out), as well as harassment and intimidation by ISIS of the school administration, teachers and pupils. The implementation of a revised curriculum was also mandated.

- The suspension of teachers' salaries in ISIS-occupied areas led to an ever-decreasing presence of teaching staff and students, and to the eventual de facto closure of schools. This resulted in a significant portion of Iraqi youth losing two full academic years.
- Restriction of movement, as well as the closure of local shops, significantly impacted local economies.
- Some families decided to remain in their community of origin due to a fear of unknown conditions, elsewhere, dangers they might face while fleeing (e.g., sniper fire and IEDs), retaliation against relatives, being used as human shields or a desire to protect their house and other fixed or movable assets.
- Drivers for fleeing their community of origin include fear of being used as human shields by ISIS, avoidance of being caught in cross-fire and concerns over being perceived as ISIS sympathizers.
- Youth were exposed to extreme violence, with all respondents having lost a friend or relative to this conflict.
- Youth also joined local militias as military operations to retake these areas took shape.

Perceptions of life after ISIS occupation

- There was a strong desire to return to home communities to resume their lives, to be reunited with extended family, tribal members and neighbours.
- All respondents agreed on the need for screening processes during displacement and return. Most who had undergone such vetting noted that it was carried out in a professional manner. Testimonies of those who did experience detention were not captured here, as that was outside the scope of the study.
- Delays in the resumption of payment of salaries and social benefits have discouraged the return of families due to an inability to finance transport and access to basic essential services.
- Freedom of movement and expression, as well as access to education, were partly regained; but challenges remained, especially for female youth.

Looking forward

- While youth indicate that they feel safe for now, given the number of armed actors operating within the subdistrict, their greatest and primary fear remains a return of ISIS or some iteration thereof into their lives and communities.
- Respondents had mixed views of the possibility of those deemed ISIS-affiliated to return and reintegrate into their community. This raises greater questions about what the process of returns looks like and what constitutes ISIS affiliation.
- Both male and female youth expressed deep resentment and frustration at the loss of two academic years and the impact this had on their futures, with key immediate hopes to complete their education, to engage in gainful employment, and to contribute proactively to the recovery of a united Iraq.
- Young women particularly and adamantly stated they wanted increased visibility and opportunity to contribute to society.
- While the demand and desire for education is high, some male youth explained that they continued to work for the PMUs as this was a consistent wage provider for their families and that it was an effective means of continuing to provide peace and security in their communities. At least one young woman also reflected this view.
- A number of youth respondents and key informants, unprompted, stated that they wished for a single, peaceful and harmonious Iraq. Other respondents were more targeted in their hopes and dreams for the country, specifying that they wished for a country without religious, sectarian or tribal divisions and that they wish to be perhaps a part of this change.
- Though it was not explicitly stated by the youth during the interviews when expressing their frustration at the loss of education, it is apparent that they also lost an equal period of time just being normal adolescents. Some testimonies revealed symptoms of mental health issues.

- Young people requested the establishment of spaces where they could play, interact, and learn together as these had all but disappeared under ISIS, if there was much space for both young men and women to utilize previously.

ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Upon reflection of the communities' hopes, along with the ranking of aspirations, and despite all the trauma and disruption to daily life since mid-2014, the essential and fundamental nature of these priorities becomes clearly apparent. These individuals have not requested mass asylum in another country, nor have they demanded unreasonable or excessive levels of assistance or infrastructural repair. Remarkably, they have expressed consistent desires to return to their communities of origin, to resume their lives and livelihoods, and to rehabilitate their homes and community structures. The Government of Iraq and other stakeholders (including local authorities, civil society, and donor governments) are already working toward reconciliation, reintegration and reconstruction. However, these efforts must be inclusive of and sensitive to the needs of Iraq's young population who want to believe in their country and

be a part of making just, equitable peace for all.

The following are recommendations for the Government of Iraq, international partners to the government, and local and international humanitarian, peacebuilding, and development actors to take up at both policy and programming levels to better shape Iraq into a country worthy of its young people.

Policy:

1. Donor governments (particularly the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, the European Union, Canada, and Japan) must continue to support and prioritize a peaceful and stable Iraq well after the military offensive against the major cities in Iraq has come to an end, including by supporting stabilization and reconciliation efforts led by Iraqi authorities that address root causes of conflict such as but not limited to human rights violations, political exclusion, economic marginalization and discrimination, gender inequality inequitable access to basic services and resources, land and governance disputes, poor governance, and lack of accountability.
2. National and provincial authorities must develop,

Credit: Tommy Trenchard/Oxfam

adopt, and operationalise a context-specific, inclusive, and participatory framework for durable solutions for displacement and reintegration so that all communities can prepare themselves for these vital processes at all levels.

3. Federal government bodies must provide guidance and procedures for community reconciliation and reintegration processes. These should be community-led, and inclusive of youth and women. They should be facilitated by recognized leaders and adhere to neutral frameworks.

4. The Government of Iraq must ensure that individuals under the age of 18 are not recruited and/or accepted into armed groups under their control, in accordance with Iraqi law and international standards. Furthermore, formal processes of security sector reform and disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration must be developed in a youth-friendly manner.

5. The Government of Iraq, with support of international partners must ensure greater engagement by young women and men in civic affairs throughout recovery, stabilization, and reconciliation processes and beyond, utilizing UN Security Resolution 2055 on Youth Peace and Security and Resolution 1325 on Women Peace and Security as guides in relation to prevention, protection, participation, partnership, and disarmament.

Programming

The Government of Iraq, humanitarian and development agencies, and donor governments should:

6. Ensure their programming is responsive to the youth target population that they aim to serve, providing spaces for dialogue, negotiation and consultation. To ensure this is the case, youth must have the opportunity to feed into program design, and should be told how their input is (or is not) then incorporated. Identification of opportunities for direct participation can also build a sense of ownership of the process.

7. Seek to understand changes in community leadership and power dynamics, as this will be particularly important from the perspective of youth. The evolution of these power dynamics, as well as youths' perceptions of them need to be taken into consideration when programming for dispute resolution, community reconciliation and reintegration.

8. Take into account changing gender roles and dynamics, and changing definitions of 'masculine' and 'feminine', in the post-ISIS context to ensure gender sensitive programming that supports the agency of both young men and women.

9. Initiate and support reconciliation processes that are inclusive of female and male youth, and that begin well before families return to their communities of origin. The role of national NGOs in facilitating these reconciliation and reintegration processes will be vital and should be supported.

10. Create, and where possible rehabilitate, multi-purpose buildings which could host a diversity of activities. Such activities could include peer-to-peer mentoring, skills training, educational enrichment, and psychosocial support. Youth should be involved in discussions about the design of these meeting spaces and how they can be used.

11. Ensure that greater attention and support given to the psychosocial needs of youth as well as other members of their communities, to help them cope with trauma stemming from this conflict, as well as longer-term legacies of violence and upheaval.

12. Consider the disbursement of small scholarships or educational grants to support completion of secondary and tertiary and to reduce the financial pressure on youth to work or join armed groups. Agreements between educational institutions and development partners for large numbers of students could be explored. To minimize cost, and account for some youth's limited mobility, distance learning models could be considered.

4. INTRODUCTION

The current generation of youth¹ is the biggest the world has ever had. They often also constitute the largest sector of the population adversely affected by armed conflict which has a direct impact on their access to education and income generation activities as well as the prospect of their participation in peace and reconciliation initiatives.² Such an impact can negatively affect humanitarian, stabilization, and longer term development and peacebuilding efforts, in part through increasing the likelihood of youth radicalisation when their needs are not met and their agency is not recognized across socio-economic contexts. At the same time, it is critical to note that the large youth population, or “youth bulge”, at this juncture presents a distinctive demographic dividend that can actively complement inclusive decision-making and co-lead peace negotiation processes, including repatriation, rehabilitation, reintegration, and post-conflict reconstruction activities. All of these factors can contribute to long-term peace and economic prosperity if properly taken into account.³

These dynamics are at play in Iraq now given its young population – pre-2014 figures indicate that 61% of the population is below the age 24 and 20% between the ages 15 and 24⁴. This generation, which came of age after the U.S. led invasion, has faced many shocks throughout their young lives: from sectarian warfare to the current internal conflict in Iraq, displacement and returns, and political and economic crises.⁵ Youth have been particularly hit hard: their education has been interrupted, and they have faced threats to their physical and social well-being, including the recruitment of male youth by armed groups and the early or forcible marriage of female youth. Given all of this, the implications of not appropriately addressing youths’ educational, socio-economic, civic, and psychosocial concerns are potentially far reaching. Repercussions of ignoring these issues have the potential to span generations, especially in states as fragile as Iraq.⁶ Understanding the concerns, hopes, and recommendations of youth then is critical to the long-term stability of the country.

As part of a broader ECHO-supported project⁷ focusing on the provision of integrated protection services to conflict-affected vulnerable families in Ninewa Governorate in 2016-2017, Oxfam Iraq conducted in-depth qualitative research in Qayyarah subdistrict within the Mosul corridor in order to gain greater insight into youth experiences in displacement and

return, to help in shaping policy and programming recommendations within the humanitarian and emerging recovery context of Mosul operations.

CONTEXT

The Mosul offensive officially started on 17 October 2016. At the end of January 2017, the Government of Iraq declared that they had retaken eastern Mosul including the corridor of smaller cities, towns and villages leading into the greater urban area. Military operations to retake western Mosul began 19 February 2017 and were officially declared over on 10 July 2017. While the ISF involved in these operations broadly respected the Government’s commitment to make civilian protection central to military operations, civilians still bore the brunt of the conflict, whether being targeted by ISIS or being caught in crossfire and/or airstrikes. Roughly one million people escaped Mosul and its surroundings, mostly fleeing to camps established by humanitarian partners, where protection and assistance conditions were often below accepted international humanitarian standards.⁸ At the time of writing, more than 200,000 people have already left these camps, potentially to return to their communities of origin, although an unknown number experienced secondary displacement when conditions were not conducive to safe returns.

The Qayyarah subdistrict, 60km south of Mosul is one such location. It was occupied by ISIS in June 2014 and one of the first areas retaken from ISIS when Mosul operations began. Given this distinction, it has also been and continues to be a place of both displacement and return: 9,325 displaced families have returned to the subdistrict and it currently hosts 29,028 families who fled conflict from elsewhere.⁹ This is despite gaps in security, services, and livelihoods provision and until very recently, the scene of large oil well fires set by ISIS on their retreat. Indeed, the absence or reduction of essential services such as water and electricity supplies; a lack of purchasing power to access functioning markets; and continuing insecurity created by ISIS attacks as well as the presence of armed “holding” forces, create significant protection risks. The area is also surrounded on three sides by areas under ISIS control or currently being contested as theatres of war.

1. The WHO defines youth as a person between the ages of 15 to 24.

2. United Nations Security Council, Resolution 2250 (2015) Adopted by the Security Council at its 7573rd meeting, 09 December 2015, New York.

3. Ibid.

4. World Bank and Central Statistical Office database for the 2012 Iraq Household Socioeconomic Survey.

5. Maria Fantappie, *Fight or Flight: the Desperate Plight of Iraq’s “Generation 2000,”* Crisis Group Middle East Report N°169, Baghdad / Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2016.

6. World Bank, *World Development Report 2011. Conflict, Security, and Development*, Washington DC: WB, 2011.

7. Oxfam, *Providing life saving WASH assistance with integrated protection to conflict affected vulnerable families in Ninewa Governorate, Iraq*, 2016.

8. International Organization for Migration, *Iraq, Displacement Tracking Matrix, Mosul Response*, last accessed 14 May 2017.

9. Ibid.

Even before 2014, statistics depicted the region as facing a host of socio-economic challenges. They point to potential motivations for the choices made by local households within this crisis (see Table 1).

Table 1. A snapshot of fragility right before ISIS¹⁰

	QAYYARAH	MOSUL	NINEVEH	IRAQ
HHs under poverty line	31%	31%	43%	20%
Youth unemployment and underemployment	50%	34%	24%	26%
HHs feeling corruption is more pervasive than 2 years ago	69%	70%	67%	53%
HHs feeling insecure	12%	12%	15%	10%
HHs not satisfied with trust levels in the community	25%	26%	13%	10%

The data shows almost 50% of households survived below the poverty line while similar high levels of youth unemployment and underemployment existed in Qayyarah before ISIS's arrival. The data also shows that close to three quarters of the population felt that corruption was significantly on the increase. These numbers were considerably higher than those found for the whole of Iraq. Added to this economic fragility, sectors of the population felt insecure, with low levels of trust existing within the community itself. The vulnerable patchwork of indicators highlights that the subdistrict was fragile even before ISIS appeared in its current form.

10. Data was originally sourced from the Iraq Household Socio-Economic Survey 2012 and the Iraq Knowledge Network 2011.

5. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was taken to this research in order to gain more in-depth information related to youth experiences before, during, and after ISIS within the Qayyarah area. The methodology then entailed a combination of key informant interviews with community leaders (sheikhs, mukhtars, teachers, school administrators and shop owners) as well as individual interviews with female and male youth aged between 15 and 22 years. Youth interviewees were identified via referral by community leaders. Individual interviews, as opposed to focus group discussions, were carried out to ensure confidentiality and that individuals would be more comfortable to share their responses. Because the majority population in Qayyarah subdistrict pre- and post-2014 remains predominantly Sunni Arab, this study, given its small scale and limited time frame, 'was limited to this demographic group.'

Credit: Tommy Trenchard/Oxfam

"Do No Harm"¹¹ principles were strictly adhered to in the design and implementation of the research considering the sensitive nature of the topics for data collection and also due to the tensions present within the geographical areas.¹² Interview questions were developed in a conflict-sensitive manner and focused on life before, during, and after ISIS, decisions to stay, flee, and/or return, screening processes, and hopes and fears about the future. All respondents were interviewed separately.

All data collected was anonymous with verbal informed consent established, including parental consent for those interviewees under the age of 18. Participation in the research was voluntary and participants were entitled to stop responding to all or individual questions if they chose. The research team comprised of Oxfam Iraq Campaigns & Advocacy and Protection team members as well as an external research consultant. The team included both men and women to ensure the comfortable participation of both young men and women. Furthermore, the research team worked closely with Oxfam Iraq's security personnel to understand security concerns and ensure the safe participation of interviewees and field teams throughout the study.

A total of 35 one-on-one interviews (five key stakeholders and 30 youth) were carried out in the vicinity of Qayyarah and addressed diverse contexts within that area including:

- Camp: Jeddah, n=5;
- Village/rural setting: Mahana, n=5;
- Towns/mid size: Oswija, n=6 and Hajji Ali, n=7
- City: Qayyarah Centre, n=12

The number of interviews provided the research team with a window of insight into the issues being explored. Interviews were analysed by the researcher through basic theme and code development, and based on emerging trends from interview responses. To prevent bias and ensure consistency in definitions of themes and terms, data was cross-checked with research team members.

It should be noted that none of the youth interviewed volunteered information about their involvement with or links to ISIS. Due to time and access constraints, Oxfam did not specifically seek out youth with links to ISIS; therefore this report may not reflect their experiences.

11. See, www.conflictsensitivity.org/do-no-harm-local-capacities-for-peace-project/

12. For example, youth were interviewed alone, with children given the choice to be joined by a parent/guardian; names were kept anonymous; and interviews were conducted in the presence of protection staff.

6. FINDINGS/RESULTS

6.1 LIFE BEFORE ISIS OCCUPATION

Quality of life

In response to questions about the quality and standards of life prior to ISIS's occupation, a vast majority of respondents identified having a good to very good quality of life, with access to education, essential social services, income generating activities or employment as well as enjoying a high degree of social cohesion and stability in their home communities. Youth explained that intra-community relations were strong and diverse:

"We had a normal life. Everything was good, no worries at all. Qayyarah was safe for living. Everyone was busy with daily work. We had a small market shop in our house garage. My father was working in it and he received his retirement salary. Our economic [situation] was quite good and we didn't need anything. Me and my two brothers attended school as usual....We visited our family and family friends [freely]."

Female, 18 years old, Qayyarah Centre

This sentiment was also corroborated by older key informants:

"People enjoyed prosperity; relations among people were very good. Interactions among people were strong including people from diverse ethnicities and religions."

Female, School teacher, Qayyarah Centre

Young people, especially young women, explained that they had full freedom of movement within their communities and beyond, and could go about their social, educational and economic pursuits

unhindered within the scope determined by their parents. In their responses, many youth placed a high value on their freedom of social interaction prior to ISIS occupation. Most common activities included playing football, swimming, visiting the park or spending time in recreation centres.

Education

Youth respondents confirmed that access to schools and other educational services was widespread. Co-educational schooling seems to have been broadly available to all and were well resourced with good facilities, equipment and teachers from the federal level implementing the national curriculum.

Male youth attended school through to the baccalaureate level, taking an external federal exam at the end of their final high school year. Key informants from the education sector confirmed that many male high school matriculants went on to pursue tertiary education in Mosul or other larger urban centres of the country.

Only a minority of female youth appear to have been supported to complete their education to the same level. It seems the norm that young women terminated their schooling at the end of grade nine, around the age of 15 years. In most cases it was the head of household who decided whether girls and young women would be able to pursue further education, or whether the needs of the family outweighed the benefits of further education. Young women were most commonly expected to remain in the home to support domestic chores as well as a variety of home-based activities such as sewing, jewellery making and running small home shops. Added to this, other family expectations, such as early marriage, prevented most girls from attaining educational parity with their male counterparts.

Economy and services

In terms of employment, in Qayyarah Centre and surrounding towns and villages, there appears to have been a mixture of un-skilled and skilled labour opportunities for all sectors of the community as well as professional employment in the private and public sectors. Small businesses provided goods and services but also afforded valuable daily and full-time employment opportunities to many of the youth. The Government was also a large employer for professions such as the army and law enforcement services as well as the health and education sectors.

Many of the youth respondents' parents and/or relatives depended on the state for their salaries, pensions or social service payments, each of which often supported a number of individuals in the typical extended family unit.

Youth and key informants also confirmed that they had consistent access to basic social services including consistent power supplies; clean, potable running water; state hospitals and private medical clinics located within a close proximity of homes; social protection benefits (pension and disability allowances) and traffic safety. Health clinics were staffed with doctors and a variety of specialized health care professionals.

Precarious security situation

Against this articulated backdrop of comparative normality and social unity, the research team noted a tendency by both youth and key informants to romanticize the period and way of life prior to ISIS occupation in mid-2014. However, while highlighting positive touchstones of community life, similar reference was also made to latent and discreet presence of organic resistance to the existing law and governance establishment of the time.

A vast majority of respondents also qualified this overview of societal stability with reminders that personnel from federal and sub-national government, civic leaders as well as military and other law enforcement officials were regularly violently or fatally targeted. This took the form of threats, assassination attempts by shooting, use of "sticker bombs" placed on vehicles and widespread use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs).

Apparently, police and army officers were afraid to venture out at night for fear of personal attack, while senior military officers maintained full time security details and blocked the roads with their security convoys. Respondents also expressed frustration at federal authorities' restriction of individual movement, in the form of checkpoints and curfews, which were imposed in 2013 as a result of protests held in 2012 by many Sunni Arabs against the perceived sectarianism and apparent anti-Sunni measures imposed by then Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

The causes of such violence and unrest were most commonly described as coming from "sleeper cells" existing within the communities themselves, and not external (foreign) individuals who took up residence in the community over an extended period of time. In

fact, many respondents referred to the presence of ISIS-linked sleeper cells as early as two years prior to the occupation of Qayyarah and Mosul in early June 2014:

"The security situation was not stable. The security was suspicious of people, and there (were) random arrests including my friends."

Male, 21 years old, Jeddah Camp

"We had several incidents before 2014, some interference. People in the village did not do anything, they could not condemn those actions or they would have been killed when going to other locations. People were scared, you had to be silent all the time, they were afraid for themselves and their families. This was for two years before ISIS arrived. People who did this were from this location. The objective was to create chaos and a vacuum in the system, to help for the eventual insurgency of ISIS."

Male, School teacher, Hajji Ali

Therefore, when reflecting on the direct interview testimony relating to targeted killings, assassinations, bombing and protests, combined with the perturbing pre-2014 statistics noted earlier and secondary analysis of young people caught up in this conflict on both sides, it is evident that the youth in these communities were subjected to a relative mixture of violence, social disunity and disharmony long before the current crisis erupted.¹⁴

13. See, Lydia Wilson, "What I Discovered from Interviewing Imprisoned ISIS Fighters," *The Nation*, 21 October 2015, <https://www.thenation.com/article/what-i-discovered-from-interviewing-isis-prisoners/>; and Luke Mogelson, "The Desperate Battle to Destroy ISIS," *New Yorker*, 6 February 2017, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/02/06/the-desperate-battle-to-destroy-isis>

6.2 LIFE DURING ISIS OCCUPATION

ISIS arrival and security retreat

Respondents described various patterns of ISIS occupation of their communities. Most communities had little to no forewarning of the arrival of ISIS military forces, which similarly caused a rapid and wholesale retreat of ISF personnel. Many individuals spoke of seeing bodies of ISF and other security service personnel in military and police compounds which were stormed unexpectedly, routed and gutted. Key military and civil government installations were the first to be occupied by ISIS.

A noted implicit tone in many of the responses inferred dismay and resentment at the lack of defence, and speed of retreat, by the ISF and other federal law enforcement personnel when ISIS forces entered these communities:

"We didn't know how they came and how the Iraqi military left Qayyarah without any resistance or fighting."

Female, 18 years old, Qayyarah Centre

"There was no fighting. The government and the system just disappeared."

Male, 15 years old, Jeddah Camp

"We never imagined they (ISIS) would stay in control and we thought the army would come back."

Male, 19 years old, Hajji Ali

"The police left Mosul when ISIS came. Now we need to give an amnesty so the police can resume services to all areas, including Hajji Ali. Now we only have a few police in Hajji Ali."

Male, School teacher, Hajji Ali

While community relations with these security actors may have been tense and problematic pre-ISIS, respondents did expect to be protected by them and indicate a sense of having been abandoned; a situation that may further compound existing grievances if not addressed. As the last quote highlights, it also points to a concern for safety, security, and protection going forward.

Beyond this very noticeable shift in the community with relation to security, many respondents explained that during the first one to three months of the ISIS occupation, little actually changed in terms of living conditions. Thereafter, aspects of life such as mobile phone use, personal appearance, individual movement and school attendance was severely regulated in terms of ISIS dogma.

Loss of freedom and taxation

Youth consistently identified the infringement of personal freedoms as the most egregious and invasive dimension of their time under ISIS authority. Common examples of this include males' requirement to grow, and the prohibition of, cutting their beards and hair. Men were also strongly encouraged to wear their trousers above the ankle, in close accordance with traditional Islamic teaching. Smoking, playing football and listening to popular music was also forbidden. At first, the use of mobile phones was tolerated, however after a couple of months this seems to have changed with confiscations and punishment being exacted for use.

Young women in the sample mentioned the claustrophobia of having to remain indoors and the lack of freedom to go about their business publicly without male accompaniment. They also complained of the oppressive nature of the niqab¹⁴ being worn in public in conjunction with gloves and eye coverage. One respondent mentioned that ISIS imposed a tax of IQD50,000 (approximately US\$42) on young women who did not wear the niqab in public.

Failure to comply with these stringent measures for both young men and women resulted in swift punishment. Regularly reported types of punishment include whipping, often in public, and/or taxation. Many female respondents reported that male family members risked being punished on their behalf for failing to adhere to these regulations, such as being fully covered in the niqab, or going out in public without a male chaperone.

14. Female garment covering the full body

"We have forgotten what happiness is; there were frequent killings and chaos."

Male, 20 years old, Qayarah Centre

Enforcement of shariya law and other ISIS guidance was implemented through the Al Husba religious courts. Beyond fees for rule breaking, respondents also commonly noted general taxation and/or extortion of community members by ISIS. This severely undermined community trust and cohesion. Furthermore, this division occurred at the community level, within some families as well as among those with relatives who aligned themselves with ISIS's cause. As mentioned, these relatives apparently enjoyed a "normal life", relatively speaking. They were allowed certain benefits and access to services which other community members did not, such as emergency health care. Many families did not speak against ISIS in front of extended family members for fear of reprisal. Additionally, as cash became increasingly scarce, ISIS exploited the prospect of corporal punishment and/or taxation as a means of extorting precious funding for their operational purposes:

"There was no trust among us. It was like going back 200 years. . . There were no services for us, but ISIS supporters had everything."

Female, 22 years old, Qayarah Centre

Education

Most schools appear to have continued to function unhindered during the first few months of ISIS occupation. In Qayarah Centre, some schools were visited by ISIS who apparently removed the Iraqi flag and destroyed school materials. However, soon thereafter, student attendance dropped for a number of reasons, including females not being permitted to move about unaccompanied in public as well as harassment and intimidation by ISIS of the school administration, teachers and pupils. In addition, a few months after occupation, ISIS mandated the implementation of a revised curriculum. Universally among this sample, administrators tacitly avoided promoting the curriculum, teachers refused to teach

it and students stopped attending classes once the new curriculum was in practice.

The heads of schools interviewed explained that while they were checked up on to ensure the new curriculum was being implemented, they actively encouraged students to stay away from school. Combined with this, around the same time, federal education authorities declared that any academic qualifications issued during the 2014/2015 and future academic years under ISIS occupation would not be officially recognized. In a further effort to combat the inculcation of ISIS ideology within the education system, in June 2015 the Federal Department of Education suspended payment of teachers' salaries in ISIS occupied areas. This led to an ever-decreasing presence of teaching staff and students, and the eventual de facto closure of schools across these areas. In effect, this resulted in a significant proportion of Iraqi youth losing two full academic years for which they are now struggling to compensate and recover from.

In Mahana, an individual explained that he continued to attend school during the first year of ISIS's occupation but stopped during the second year when ISIS enforced their own curriculum. Other enterprising individuals explained how they transitioned to home-based learning, relying on the Internet. This eventually became all but impossible as communication links were progressively blocked, mobile phone use banned and power cuts increasingly commonplace.

It is interesting to note that ISIS tolerated dwindling school attendance rates as well as the eventual closure of schools. It is to a degree surprising that ISIS did not require school attendance as an effective means of systematic spreading and inculcation of their ideology. The fact that ISIS imposed a new curriculum would indicate a conscious desire to influence the education and thinking of children and youth but it is a confusing incongruity that they did not exploit the school system as has been done by other regimes. One reason posited for this by youth and key informants is that they could not afford to pay teacher salaries nor prevent the closure of schools as a result.

Economic situation

In June 2015, the federal government suspended monthly payment of federal worker (including teachers) salaries and the Public Distribution System (for food). This was done in an attempt to undermine

the success of ISIS influence and control in these communities. The only federal payments that continued were state pensions and benefits executed through the Smartcard (national debit cards) system. This was an absolute lifeline for those families who had the privilege of this channel, but they were in the minority. While this primary government objective was understandable, the secondary impact on individual households was severe and debilitating, resulting in families' reduced ability to feed and care for themselves and the adoption of negative coping strategies, such as the selling off of household assets.

The impact on local economies was immense after the occupation by ISIS due to the simple restriction of movement as well as closure of many small outlets such as mobile phone retailers, barber-shops and leisure facilities. Food supplies became more difficult to source and the ability to continue individual livelihoods was also compromised. The progressive lack of cash as a result of these factors also led to eventual stagnation of the local economy.

Decisions to remain or flee

Among the first to flee on the arrival of ISIS were families whose members were employed by the army, law enforcement agencies or served as political or civic leaders. This is because these figures were priority targets for ISIS when they first occupied these communities. On their leaving, their homes were often demolished as a result, or were occupied and converted into operational or bomb production facilities.

The bulk of respondents in this study however remained in their communities of origin. They provided a variety of reasons for not choosing to flee if the opportunity presented itself. Beyond a pervasive sense of extreme fear to leave the known reality of their prevailing situation, residents faced the following risks should they choose to flee (or a similar addition): execution by ISIS if they were caught, presence of snipers, extensive mining as well as booby-trapping with IEDs of potential escape routes and possible demolition of their houses. Furthermore, many individuals explained that they feared retaliation against residual family members who remained in the community if there was evidence of escaped relatives. Some families feared attack by sectarian armed groups on their escape route while others dreaded being used by ISIS as human shields in the event they tried to escape:

"I felt unsafe all the time, we had no freedom, ISIS controlled everything here. I was so unhappy, it was like living in hell. I was scared of ISIS, they slaughtered my nephew who tried to escape. They caught him, along with eight others and killed them all. I have his name tattooed on my arm to remember him. It wasn't safe but we had no choice, there was mortar shelling every day and we were scared. There were airstrikes but we knew they were for ISIS not to get us. Once there was a mistake and an airstrike killed twenty civilians in my village. If I could go back to that day I would run away straight away. I wouldn't stay, I'd leave straight away."

Male, 18 years old, Hajji Ali

From an economic standpoint, protection and care of family assets (such as houses, crops and livestock) was also a key deciding factor. Some households simply did not have cash to finance transportation, fees or house rental in a new location. Other families explained that they were just too large in number to easily plan and execute an escape. Additionally, many families did not expect ISIS to remain in control of their villages as long as they did, anticipating an earlier re-taking of the country by the ISF.

While no interviews explicitly admitted that life under ISIS occupation was desirable or acceptable, some families explained that ISIS made certain promises that conditions and services would improve under their watch. It should also not be ruled out that there were sectors of the community that might actually have been happy or satisfied with the state of affairs during the ISIS occupation, or at least in the early stages thereof. The final decision to flee for those families that had stayed for the bulk of ISIS occupation came in response to heavy mortar and gunfire attacks as military operations against ISIS began. Other reasons for eventually leaving their communities are similar to those for staying in the first place: fear that ISIS

might capture them and use them as human shields while retreating and that if they did not leave at this stage and move toward security forces, they may be seen as being ISIS sympathisers or collaborators by remaining. This highlights just how complicated it was for youth and their families in making calculations for what the best option would be in protecting their lives and their futures.

In terms of decision-making processes to remain or flee, in almost all cases, all members of the family were consulted, regardless of age and gender. While not all individuals had their recommendation accepted, family members did respect the final decision, invariably taken by parents. There was only one case of a decision to depart that was made at the community level. This was taken by the mukhtar (of Halabe area), based on security assistance from the ISF.

Human rights violations

The ISIS abuses here listed in terms of targeting of public officials and security personnel as well as beatings for minor infractions and deterioration of

living standards is also well documented across areas where ISIS was in control.¹⁵ Nearly every youth respondent interviewed had witnessed extreme violence and had lost friends and relatives as a result of ISIS and the fight to expel them. Some youth witnessed ISIS brutality firsthand as they joined ranks with the PMUs who had come to retake their areas in 2016:

“Some of them fought us and others put on suicide belts and wanted us to arrest them, so we just fought until they died. ISIS were using really small children; they put suicide belts on them and sent them towards us. They told them we were their family and when they go close to us they used a remote control to detonate them. One little boy cried but one little girl stood there crying until an engineer could take off the belt.”

Male, 18 years old, Mahana

Not only is such testimony harrowing, it points to another concerning trend reported by respondents: able-bodied male youth, including those under the age of 18, joining local PMUs. This occurred during ISIS occupation with encroaching military operation:

“I liked being in the [PMU] on the frontline and I wanted to stay with them so that I could support my family. I liked it because I was with my father and I especially liked it when we liberated our area.”

Male, 16 years old, Hajji Ali

As will be highlighted in the following sections, this is continuing to some extent in the aftermath of ISIS in the area.

15. Lahib Higel, Iraq's Displacement Crisis: Security and Protection, CEASEFIRE and Minority Rights Group International: London, 2016.

6.3 LIFE AFTER ISIS

Factors in return

It appears common that families who were displaced to IDP camps or host communities prudently decided to stay put while they assessed the conditions for return and weighed these against the levels of service provision and living environments within which they existed. This was achieved by dispatching male family members on a go-and-see visit to the home and community of origin and/or by contacting relatives, neighbours and community leaders. Decisions to return home were consistently made at the individual family level (rather than community level) and most family members, regardless of age or gender were at least consulted by the head of the household on their opinion about when it would be appropriate to return.

A vast majority of youth respondents articulated a strong desire to return to their home communities to resume their lives and to be reunited with extended family, tribal members and neighbours. Despite this widespread desire, some youth were more reluctant to do so in the short term. Reasons for this include families whose houses had been demolished through targeted attacks by ISIS as a result of them fleeing during occupation. Another factor for delaying return to communities of origin included a lack of essential public services such as electricity and water supplies, educational services, medical facilities and/or a general prevailing sense of insecurity and uncertainty for the time being. Additionally, if a family member had managed to secure paid employment in the IDP camp or surrounding community, the family was loath to sacrifice this in order to return to what could arguably be a relatively unknown home environment. Delays in the resumption of payment of government salaries and social benefits have also discouraged the return of families due to an inability to finance transport and access to basic essential services that support reintegration into communities of origin. Finally, and perhaps more difficult to resolve, is the concern related to actually being allowed to return in the first place given any alleged ISIS affiliation and whether such families would be welcomed back by their communities.

Screening processes

All respondents confirmed undergoing security screening (vetting) procedures at least once, or more commonly, on numerous occasions upon fleeing ISIS, entering ISF territory, entering into IDP camps,

and/or upon final return to their communities of origin. Screening is used to establish and identify any individual(s) suspected of cooperating with or representing ISIS interests. A vast majority of individuals mentioned that screening procedures were conducted in an orderly and dignified manner. Individuals understood, and categorically supported, these procedures. They were in favour of any potential subsequent screening as this would apparently successfully avoid any escape by ISIS individuals from law enforcement authorities:

“If Iraqi military and [PMU] don’t do screening all the time, sleeper cells of ISIS will stay and they will appear again so life will be like before.”

Female, 17 years old, Qayarra Centre

Male individuals 16 years or older were required to undergo screening, normally at the local mosque in the first instance. Initial procedures appear to have entailed a simple inspection of individuals’ identification papers and checking of their names against a computer database of suspected individuals. For example, in Qayarra Centre, men were gathered in the local mosque for three days of screening and a number of individuals were arrested and imprisoned in town. Most female respondents were screened once or twice, whereas males were processed three to four times, often being detained for a period of several hours to several days. In isolated cases, individuals were held for weeks or months.

In the event that individuals were identified as possible ISIS members, either through identification by other community members in the group, or matching names on the database, these individuals were removed and taken away for questioning. No respondents could provide further information on the status or whereabouts of these suspected individuals. Community members and leaders were routinely asked to vouch for other community neighbours and individuals during screening procedures. Individuals who could not be vouched for were reportedly removed for further questioning.

A minority of male respondents indicated screening activities where procedures and conditions were less than satisfactory. In one case, men were apparently interviewed at a checkpoint and then required to strip down to their underwear where they were then photographed and taken to Debaga Camp. Another respondent mentioned that males had to undress as part of the screening process. This extent of individual search does not appear to have been the norm for respondents.

Testimony from this study provides one dimension of the population's experience of the screening and detention process. As has been mentioned earlier, the study methodology did not allow questioning of individuals or families who were removed and detained through the screening procedure. While the interviews have not yielded gross human rights violations of children and youth in this process, other actors, including Human Rights Watch have documented numerous events and facilities that have indicated this to be the case. These abuses against young people occurred in a number of detention facilities, including two located in Qayyarah itself, one of which held at least 80 detainees who were under the age of 18.¹⁶

Freedom and security for now

Overwhelmingly, and unsurprisingly, youth and key informants expressed relief when regaining their freedom of movement, freedom of expression and access to education. Related to this, many respondents were genuinely happy and reassured by the sustained presence of the ISF and now mostly the PMU forces in their communities. They were accepting of the numerous checkpoints that still remained, seeing these as necessary measures to maintain peace and security meanwhile avoiding any possible return by ISIS:

"Qayyarah is where most forces are stationed, police, [PMUs], etc. I see them in military uniforms. It makes me feel safe, no matter which group they are from."

Female, 18 years old, Qayyarah

"We don't feel insecure anymore. The [PMUs] are here. They belong

to. . . the Sheikh and they are our relatives. We know them. They are looking after our safety."

Male, 19 years old, Hajji Ali

"The presence of security and checkpoints in the area is reassuring. People are not bothered or scared of having security forces in the town."

Male, Shopkeeper, Qayyarah Centre

Despite this new found security, youth conversely yet predictably, noted their greatest and primary fear remains a return of ISIS into their lives and communities.

6.4 LOOKING FORWARD

A potential return to violence and instability

A widespread and regularly mentioned fear of youth was the return or re-emergence of ISIS, either in its current form, or in a similar iteration. This is of interest, according to some youth and key informants, that ISIS-sympathetic individuals or groups did actually exist endemically within individual communities themselves before, rather than ISIS just being a purely external, foreign force that occupied communities overnight. Reference is also made to the earlier observation on the noticeable pattern of targeting of federal government and law enforcement personnel by sleeper cells and related cycles of war and violence that communities endured prior to June 2014:

"ISIS is gone now, I am afraid if another group appears and they will be worse than ISIS. Enough war, we spent our whole life with war."

Male, 16 years old, Qayyarah Centre

There should be security procedures in place to make people feel safe. The Government should promote jobs for the youth. I am afraid ISIS could return because of sectarianism."

Male, 21 years old, Jeddah Camp

16. Human Rights Watch, "Iraq: Hundreds Detained in Degrading Conditions," Human Rights Watch, 13 March 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/03/13/iraq-hundreds-detained-degrading-conditions>

"I'm worried there may be sleeper cells here or maybe ISIS is still amongst us. ISIS is not yet finished."

Female, 16 years old, Hajji Ali

"They have to bring more military force and more screening and searching about remaining IEDs and more investigation with suspect people. May be there is still sleeper cells. They have (to) find out all of these."

Female, 17 years old, Qayyarah Centre

"The community has to be more helpful with ISF if they suspect about especially sleeper cells they have to inform the military about it."

Male, 16 years old, Qayyarah Centre

Some respondents admitted that they felt fooled by ISIS when they guaranteed that conditions would be better under their rule, rather than under the previous federal administration. Apparently, over time, the realities of life were not as initially promised:

"Yes, we went back to square one . . . We were fooled by the "resistance."

Female, Teacher, Qayyarah Centre

The use of the word "resistance" here refers to pockets of Sunni resistance to federal government structures, policies and measures during then Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's tenure. Testimony from some youth respondents highlighted their own frustration and understanding of previous government actions that may have furthered ISIS's cause in their communities:

"We blame the government. The first few months of ISIS we thought they were better than the government because they gave us everything, but then they started with their religion and doing bad things and now everyone has learned that even if the government doesn't give us anything they are still better than having ISIS."

Male, 15 years old, Hajji Ali

"You see, people were tired of the

government; they kept making promises that they didn't keep . . . Once, before an election, the government promised us they would build a football stadium for us but they didn't . . . The government also promised us a second-hand car market – somewhere people could buy and sell cars for a cheap price . . . Obama said after 2008 there would be no terrorists in Iraq but we're still waiting."

Male, 15 years old, Qayyarah Centre

This indicates that support for ISIS may not have been entirely religiously motivated and rather also based on grievances held under the previous status quo which young people themselves experienced and remember.

Return, revenge, and who is really ISIS

Many respondents indicated that returning families with relatives who were involved in ISIS activities would be welcome to resume their place within the community without fear of any retaliation or revenge. Other respondents explained that it would only be families who had immediate family members involved in ISIS activities that would not be welcomed back:

"Others, we will not welcome them back because they had ISIS members in the family or relatives. First-degree family members and cooperatives will not be allowed to come back . . . dad, son, brother. Even if they want to return, they are not welcome, not only in our village because of revenge. Better for them not to return. They should be de-radicalized in a camp."

Male, Teacher, Oswija

"Families who had one ISIS member cannot return. This is our culture, our tribal custom. In other areas, if only one family member was in ISIS, they can come back but here they cannot. That is because in Hajji Ali, 200 people from the security forces or civil servants have been killed by ISIS."

Male, 19 years old, Hajji Ali

This sentiment seems to be made clear to those families still not back as well. Some complete families have apparently not returned out of fear due to relatives being involved in ISIS activities. These families were said to have lost the respect of their community members, while other residents did not want their reintegration into the communities. Understandably this feeling is strongest where some community members may have lost their entire home and/or family due to ISIS. Being able to return however does not necessarily remove the stigma some families face within their communities of origin given perceived ISIS affiliation. There have been reports of some families' homes in Qayyarah Centre being targeted in retaliation for their apparent alignment with ISIS during the occupation, despite their severing ties with ISIS-affiliated relatives.¹⁷ The fact that there are differing views on what constitutes ISIS affiliation and who can and cannot return further highlight the complexity of the context within these communities the youth are navigating.

Resentment over loss of education and eagerness to return to it

Both young men and women expressed deep resentment and frustration at the loss of two academic years and the impact this has had on their career prospects. The Iraqi federal government previously ruled that the 2014/2015 and 2015/2016 academic years would not be repeated: that all students who missed these years would progress directly to the grade within which they would normally have found themselves should they have been able to complete these years normally, the loss is still profoundly felt:

17. Belkis Wille, "Iraq's new marginalised population," Al-Jazeera, 28 March 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2017/03/iraq-marginalised-population-isis-families-170327102713024.html>

"I lost years of education. Now I should be graduating but they ruined everything."

Female, 22 years old, Qayyarah Centre

"The final exams are getting closer. I hope to do them in May or June. Even if I pass, I have lost three years, I lost what I had in my brain. I am slower to learn and I don't feel confident. There is a gap, and I won't feel happy even if I pass the exams."

Male, 22 years old, Jeddah Camp

"My biggest worry is that I can't finish school. . . studying is the most important thing right now. Education is the most important and necessary thing in life. Without it you will be tired and struggling all of your life doing something you don't like."

Male, 18 years old, Mahana

Some, mainly male, youth explained that they had enrolled in evening classes after work to make up for the two years of lost education during the ISIS occupation. Key informants' primary hopes were for the youth to complete their education, to engage in gainful employment and to avoid being radicalized by extremist groups:

"My concerns for boys: that they look back to ISIS, are influenced by Daesh thoughts. It is our duty at school to guide them away from these thoughts."

Male, Teacher, Hajji Ali

Many female respondents were unequivocal about wanting to complete their education, to be able to work and depend on themselves, to move freely

alone in public and to make a positive contribution to the improvement of their own communities. This need for young women to have more opportunity and visibility, was expressed, even if crudely, by a small number of male respondents as well:

"I wish if it is possible [for the] government or NGO to open a stadium place for playing football and opening an activity centre for girls for learning something important not wasting whole of their time at home just cleaning and cooking."

Male, 17 years old, Oswija

That young people wished urgently to complete their secondary or tertiary education further highlights their resilience. In this sample, youth ranked the pursuit of educational activities second only to safety and security in their environment, listing income generation and marriage lower than would be expected. What youth predominantly wanted was to move on from conflict and resume their lives, to be a support to their families and communities and to contribute proactively to the recovery of a united Iraq.

Employment within PMUs

While the demand and desire for education is high, some male youth explained that they continued to work for the PMUs as this was a consistent wage provider for their families and that it was an effective means of continuing to provide peace and security in their communities. This was corroborated by key informants as well:

"Some who joined PMU are paid [while] others are still waiting for their paperwork to be sorted. Not having any other source of income has encouraged the youth to join PMU. Most of them join the PMU, because there are no other choices and families need income. They are often aged around 17-20."

Male, Shopkeeper, Qayyarah Centre

Within this sample five youth respondents noted being part of these forces, with many people across the sample reporting that they knew others who were still in them. These youth had joined while under the age of 18.

One young woman also expressed interest in participating in security, highlighting further the desire for a more active role in their societies as women:

"I would love to be a soldier . . . I wanted to be a surgeon before ISIS but now if possible I would like to be a soldier, because I have a high sense of responsibility and the soldiers are handling the responsibility of liberati[on]."

Female, 18 years old, Qayarah Centre

It may also however point toward growing militarization of the young population as a way to promote change and keep peace, which is a worrying trend particularly given the different political agendas the various armed actors operating in the area have. As an older member of the community noted:

"Having multiple competing military actors is a problem. ISIS will come back if our politicians continue to have competing conflicts of interest."

Male, Teacher, Oswija

Unity and agency

In the midst of such divisive politics, a number of youth respondents and key informants, unprompted, stated that they wished for a single, peaceful and harmonious Iraq. Other respondents were more targeted in their hopes and dreams for the country, specifying that they wished for a country without religious, sectarian or tribal divisions and that they wish to be perhaps a part of this change:

"All I want to see [is] peace in the whole of Iraq. No war anymore. No more separation between Sunni and Shia all together, and I want to be a pharmacist too. That is all my wish and dreams."

Male, 16 years old, Qayarah Centre

"I want one Iraq, a united Iraq. No separation due to religion or tribes or geographical location. I want everyone to be safe. And for all children to have access to education."

Male, Community leader, Jeddah Camp

I put together a team of girls and boys who want to help their community, I want to work with NGOs to mobilize the community to do entertainment and organize things but I haven't had support to do that."

Male, 22 years old, Jeddah Camp

That this is a desire across generations in Qayarah subdistrict is important to note and provides an opportunity to better engage youth with other members of society in such civic rather than military discourse, particularly as young people seem eager to contribute to the betterment of their communities. It is also striking to note that no respondents in this sample had any desire to leave their communities and/or country. There remains a strong desire to return to their original homes and rebuild their lives and the life of their communities.

Social engagement and healing

Though it was not explicitly stated by the youth during the interviews when expressing their frustration at the loss of education, it is apparent that they also lost an equal period of time just being normal adolescents:

“Now I have the courage to face people, to be open. I changed through experience, it made me grow. I saw a lot of things I should not have seen at my age. . . I am not afraid of anything, I am stronger than ever, after what I have been through.”

Female, 18 years old, Qayyarah Centre

The resilience and perseverance stated here is hard to miss, but it is also tempered with other youth testimony that illustrated symptoms of post-traumatic stress as well as substance abuse. Examples of this included anxiety, difficulty in concentrating, inability to return to formal studies and alcohol abuse. Given the cultural taboos of discussing such issues, future studies and programming may wish to consider culturally-appropriate approaches to measure and address these challenges.

Perhaps as a consequence of wanting to take back some time for themselves to be able to have some fun, reengage with one another in more “normal” ways, and as a way to help them heal, youth highlighted the need for facilities for sports and social and leisure activities beyond the existing presence of shisha teashops and internet cafes in their communities. The following facilities were proposed by youth in interviews: football pitch, sports centre or gym, youth centre, swimming pool, park, bazaar, and craft workshop. An identical finding was made in a recent multisectoral needs assessment of Salah al-Din and Anbar governorates. Data from those governorates¹⁸ as well as Qayyarah subdistrict confirm that during ISIS occupation, residents lost access to social spaces such as parks, recreational centres and their related social activities, thus reducing opportunity for interaction and dialogue. Communities in Salah al-Din and Anbar governorates apparently have prioritized reconstruction of these facilities and public spaces, often placing equal importance on the reconstruction of social spaces to the reconstruction of roads and water facilities. Youth in Qayyarah advocate the same. Investment in the rehabilitation or construction of safe recreational or multipurpose buildings also hold the potential for reducing household and community tensions, reducing movement restrictions, strengthening parent-child connections, facilitating youths’ need

for sport and physical activity as well as a safe meeting space for social interaction.

7. ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In collecting these narratives of young people within Qayyarah subdistrict, what is most apparent is how much they are cognizant of their communities’ histories and of what is going on now. They are paying attention and critically, not only to what authority figures say, but what they do as well. These youth are able to articulate what they need and what kind of support is necessary to achieve their aims.

While the youth within this study now universally reject ISIS, they have not rejected all non-state armed actors. Many feel that having an affiliation with other militia groups is either necessary or beneficial – a way to provide for their families, protect their communities, and gain status within society. This is highly problematic not only from a child and youth protection standpoint, but from an overall societal one as well given that if this trend is left unchecked, 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 creates a self-perpetuating cycle of violence and potential for radicalization within communities themselves, particularly when rights needs of all groups are not met in equitable ways by the state. Furthermore, curbing any growing radicalization and violent extremism does not only refer to countering ISIS, or any future iteration it may have. Both Sunni and Shia PMUs have political views and not addressing issues in the community can have adverse short and long term effects on youth turning toward more radical political ideologies on all sides.

Government policy on youth as well as development partners’ programming should therefore strive to understand why these factors resonate so deeply with this generation and take constructive advantage of these lessons when developing durable solutions for the future. A critical piece of this however is that youth need not necessarily be seen as a threat to society and the state or only as a vulnerable group susceptible to exploitation and radicalization, but rather as an opportunity for change, renewal and optimism.

18. Simone Carter and Luisa Dietrich, Summary Report: Multi Sectoral Needs Assessment with Gender and Protection Analysis, Oxfam Iraq: Erbil, 2017.

The data presented here indeed highlights that there is room for optimism in Iraq, even as areas like Qayyarah remain fragile and the political context more complex. The young people of this area want to see their country united and peaceful and have expressed interest in trying to help make it so. This was stated by young men, but firmly stated by young women too. They want to be in the public sphere, helping shape their communities for the better. Their efforts in the civic space must be encouraged, considered and supported.

The establishment of partnerships to expand secondary and tertiary education, provide youth employment opportunities, promote vocational training and encourage youth entrepreneurship among affected communities can effectively break negative cycles of behaviour. Furthermore, encouraging constructive political engagement and cultivating a culture of peace, tolerance, intercultural and interreligious dialogue that involve youth and discourage their participation in acts of violence, terrorism, xenophobia, and all forms of discrimination must be prioritized at national and international levels.¹⁹

Creating any kind of lasting peace will involve the state engaging in understanding and addressing root causes that have led to this conflict, across all groups. Because children and youth have specific needs and unique experiences within this landscape, they must be provided opportunities to engage in related communication and decision-making processes – as indeed it is imperative that this process is also driven by community dialogue. Thus, any programs or processes need to be designed to enable youth to access information, participate in political processes and be able to express their concerns and desires in a safe manner.²⁰

The essential and fundamental nature of youth's priorities are clear. These individuals have not requested asylum in another country, nor have they demanded unreasonable or excessive levels of assistance or infrastructural repair. Remarkably, they have expressed consistent desires to return to their communities of origin, to resume their lives and livelihoods, and to rehabilitate their homes and community structures. The Government of Iraq and other stakeholders have done much already to propel reconciliation, reintegration and reconstruction – including the provision of substantial humanitarian and development funding. However, they must make

sure these efforts are inclusive of and sensitive to the needs of Iraq's youth population, who want to believe in their country and be a part of making just, equitable peace for all.

The following are recommendations for the Government of Iraq, international partners to the government, and local and international humanitarian, peacebuilding, and development actors to take up at both policy and programming levels to better shape Iraq into a country worthy of its young people.

Policy:

- 1.** Donor governments (particularly the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, the European Union, Canada, and Japan) must continue to support and prioritize a peaceful and stable Iraq well after the military offensive against the major cities in Iraq has come to an end, including by supporting stabilization and reconciliation efforts led by Iraqi authorities that address root causes of conflict such as but not limited to human rights violations, political exclusion, economic marginalization and discrimination, gender inequality, inequitable access to basic services and resources, land and governance disputes, poor governance, and lack of accountability.
- 2.** National and provincial authorities must develop, adopt, and operationalise a context-specific, inclusive, and participatory framework for durable solutions for displacement and reintegration so that communities can prepare themselves for these vital processes at all levels.
- 3.** Federal government bodies must provide guidance and procedures for community reconciliation and reintegration processes. These should be community-led, and inclusive of youth and women. They should be facilitated by recognized leaders and adhere to neutral frameworks.
- 4.** The Government of Iraq must ensure that individuals under the age of 18 are not recruited and/or accepted into armed groups under their control in accordance with Iraqi law and international standards. Furthermore, formal processes of security sector reform and disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration must developed in a youth-friendly manner.

19. UNSC, Resolution 2250.

20. Clara Ramirez-Barat, *Engaging Children and Youth in Transitional Justice Processes: Guidance for Outreach Programs*, International Center for Transitional Justice: New York, 2012.

5. The Government of Iraq, with support of international partners must ensure greater engagement by young women and men in civic affairs throughout recovery, stabilization, and reconciliation processes and beyond, utilizing UN Security Resolution 2055 on Youth Peace and Security and Resolution 1325 on Women Peace and Security as guides in relation to prevention, protection, participation, partnership, and disarmament.

Programming

The Government of Iraq, humanitarian and development agencies, and donor governments should:

6. Ensure their programming is responsive to the youth target population that they aim to serve, providing spaces for dialogue, negotiation and consultation. To ensure this is the case, youth must have the opportunity to feed into program design, and should be told how their input is (or is not) then incorporated. Identification of opportunities for direct participation can also build a sense of ownership of the process.

7. Seek to understand changes in community leadership and power dynamics, as this will be particularly important from the perspective of youth. The evolution of these power dynamics, as well as youths' perceptions of them need to be taken into consideration when programming for dispute resolution, community reconciliation and reintegration.

8. Take into account changing gender roles and dynamics, and changing definitions of 'masculine' and 'feminine', in the post-ISIS context to ensure gender sensitive programming that supports the agency of both young men and women.

9. Initiate and support reconciliation processes that are inclusive of female and male youth, and that begin well before families return to their communities of origin. The role of national NGOs in facilitating these reconciliation and reintegration processes will be vital and should be supported.

10. Create, and where possible rehabilitate, multi-purpose buildings which could host a diversity of activities. Such activities could include peer-to-peer mentoring, skills training, educational enrichment,

and psychosocial support. Youth should be involved in discussions about the design of these meeting spaces and how they can be used.

11. Ensure that greater attention and support given to the psychosocial needs of youth as well as other members of their communities, to help them cope with trauma stemming from this conflict, as well as longer-term legacies of violence and upheaval.

12. Consider the disbursement of small scholarships or educational grants to support completion of secondary and tertiary and to reduce the financial pressure on youth to work or join armed groups. Agreements between educational institutions and development partners for large numbers of students could be explored. To minimize cost, and account for some youth's limited mobility, distance learning models could be considered.

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