



POLICY DIALOGUE REPORT

# Youth, Peace, and Security in Iraq: Creating New Spaces for Youth Activist Voices and Engagement



Arab  
Reform  
Initiative

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### **Acknowledgements**

**The Arab Reform Initiative would like to thank all participants who gave of their time to join the discussion.**

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Cover Photo: Iraqi artists paint pro-peace graffiti in Mosul ©EPA-EFE/  
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In December 2020, the Government of Iraq, under the auspices of the Ministry of Youth and Sport, with the support and cooperation of UNFPA, Folke Bernadotte Academy and Peace and Freedom Organization, formally launched the National Coalition on Youth, Peace, and Security (YPS). As part of the government's commitment to fulfilling the vision of UNSCR 2250, the Coalition seeks to act as bridge linking grassroots Iraqi youth peace activists and community leaders with formal decision-making circles. In practice, the Coalition's membership and according to the Iraqi young people's feedback, it's limited to specific people, and the space is not open and transparent for everyone, as expected., and the points of intersection between the government's official YPS implementation efforts and what grassroots youth peace activists are doing on the ground remains limited.

Yet, creating legitimately open spaces for youth peace activists to voice their opinions and participate in peacebuilding and decision-making processes is of prime importance at this critical juncture in Iraq's history. In the aftermath of ISIS's defeat, the wave of popular mobilization in the south largely led by youth, and recent elections, Iraq is an important phase of reconstruction. The country's challenges are numerous, and include maintaining stability and securing the sovereignty of the state, reinforcing pro-democracy forces and the rule of law, improving the economy and provision of services, and ensuring that redistribution meets citizens' demands for social justice. Importantly, Iraq's youth are keen to participate in these various processes of reconstruction, and youth peace activists and community leaders have already been conducting myriad actions on the ground to contribute to rebuilding Iraqi society. Fulfilling the YPS agenda and creating successful mechanisms for Iraqi youth's inclusion and incorporation in policy-making and development processes is thus essential to the reconstruction of the Iraqi nation-state and its prosperity and stability going forward.

On 09 December 2021, the Arab Reform Initiative, in collaboration with a number of Iraqi young civil activists, organized a closed policy dialogue bringing together Iraqi youth peace and civic activists who are currently facing exclusion or marginalization from the formal Iraqi YPS agenda. This discussion – organized as a brainstorming session – sought to bring to the fore their priorities for peace and development, their aspirations in terms of inclusion and how they would like to be participating in the YPS agenda, and the types of legitimate spaces and mechanisms they can envision for meaningful inclusion. The discussion also involved collective reflection regarding the ways in which external allies can help support meaningful youth inclusion in policy- and decision-making processes in Iraq. In so doing the closed discussion, held under Chatham House Rule, aimed to contribute to the implementation of the UNSCR 2250 in Iraq by taking a bottom-up approach to collectively reflect on the priorities and proposals of those working in parallel to the formal top-down process.

## Identifying Priorities, Differences in Approach, and Current Challenges in the Implementation of the YPS Agenda

For those activists and youth civil society groups that are either not participating in the YPS Coalition or indeed have been subsequently excluded, the approach of the Government of Iraq to the implementation of the UNSCR 2250 has been met by many with a degree of skepticism and/or disappointment. Among some activists, there is a feeling that no meaningful initiative has been taken toward the country's youth since 2003, and that, as a result, there is a need for advocacy campaigns towards the government but also towards youth regarding the Youth, Peace, and Security agenda and its implications. Even for those youth civic activists that state that the situation today is better than in 2008 or 2015, given the formal adoption of the 2250 Agenda and the launch of the YPS Coalition, there is still a benefit to raising awareness among average youth about the YPS framework and to mainstreaming the agenda across all ministries.

Indeed, despite the launch of the YPS Coalition, many activists still feel that there is much room for improvement with regards to achieving meaningful youth participation but also progress on the ground in terms of policies and programming for youth. While the Coalition seeks to invite youth in decision-making, the decision of the Ministry of Youth and Sports to exclude certain groups from membership undermines confidence in the ability of the Coalition to act independently. Indeed, there is a sentiment that the manner in which the Coalition has been rolled out represents a form of hijacking and reflects the continuation of hegemony of the Iraqi government over youth and their ability to have a say in decision-making processes. There is also a sentiment that the launch of the Coalition has been undertaken purely out of a sense of obligation, and not because of true dedication to the spirit of UNSCR 2250. In this sense, the worry among youth civic activists is that the Coalition risks becoming a façade, giving the impression of genuine youth participation in decision-making processes but in reality, facing cooptation by the State. As an example, the Coalition was not involved in the development of the national Preventing Violent

Extremism strategy, despite the obvious implications with regards to strategy and policy for youth.

To this point, there is a general feeling that youth, even those in the Coalition, will not be meaningfully included in decision-making processes or be able to exert policy influence. There is a feeling that it will be necessary to exert pressure on policy-makers to involve youth in decision-making processes and not relegate them to a role of down-stream service provider. There is also a need for a shift in the logic of how the YPS agenda should be implemented in Iraq. At the moment, there is a prevailing sentiment that youth should support government commitments, whereas the logic should instead flow in the other direction: the Government of Iraq should support youth and their initiatives, ideas, policy influence, and ability to act independently.

With regards to actual policies and programming that have been put into place as part of the YPS framework, youth activists also express a degree of frustration with both the lack of concrete progress but also the piecemeal approach of the Ministry of Youth and Sports. On one hand, there is a need for an Action Plan in which programming and policies for youth, as well as their participation in decision-making processes, are mainstreamed across all ministries. This would not only increase the space for youth in decision-making processes and leadership roles but would also demonstrate the seriousness of the commitment of the government of Iraq to implement the UNSCR 2250 in full. On the other hand, from the perspective of youth civic and peace activists, the various dimensions of youth integration – political, social, and economic – should be taken together as parallel tracks. At the moment, though, the perception is that the State is working without proper planning or projects, and that the State only extends development planning to select regions. To both meet the vast needs of the country's youth but also promote the capacity of youth to take the lead in their own development, the feeling among activists is that the Ministry of Youth and Sports should develop a medium-term road map that includes specific projects to be implemented and that covers all regions of the country, and planning should not consist of one-off activities but rather broader programming.

Likewise, even after programs and projects for youth are proposed and put into place, youth activists express that ministries should not intervene in activities themselves: youth should be granted a degree of operational independence, and there should be a clear delineation of tasks and responsibilities. Building partnerships between different ministries with civil society organizations and youth grassroots initiatives would allow for both a mainstreaming of youth integration across different domains and a greater capacity to achieve impact.

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Yet crucial to the successful implementation of the UNSCR 2250 is also the extension of the YPS agenda beyond the confines of either the formal coalition or even youth activists. Other networks of youth civil society and activist groups exist, including the Network 2250 and the Network of Youth, as well virtual networks, and pathways for their inclusion should also be built. The Coalition should not have a monopoly on access to decision-making processes and representation, and should not be viewed as such by either the Government of Iraq or the international community. In addition, other actions can be taken to strengthen the capacity of youth more broadly to participate in decision-making processes and implementation of activities on the ground. This includes experience-sharing across the MENA region, capacity-building for youth to better understand the policy-making process and development of policy positions and recommendations, and providing fora for youth to express their priorities and advocate for themselves.

Importantly, for youth civic activists that are not currently included in the formal YPS Coalition, there is a recognition that meeting youth's needs and priorities and achieving political, social, and economic integration requires multiple partnerships and collaborative work. They call for deeper relations with the Government of Iraq – working with ministries and decision-makers and not in parallel to them – and increased programming that is extended across all spheres, regions, and population group. Youth in Iraq make up more than 60% of the population today, and as such youth must be a pillar of any development project: youth economic integration, focusing on entrepreneurship and economic transition, as well as the development of social systems that promote equality and the protection of freedom of expression and the rights and security of youth, should be the basis of any approach taken by the State.

## Message to the International Community

For members of the international community who seek to support Iraqi youth integration and meaningful participation in political processes, and the implementation of the YPS agenda more broadly, efforts should be taken to support the rights of youth, their freedom of expression and association, and the mainstreaming of their participation across decision-making spaces. Likewise, the international community should also work to ensure that strategies for youth are related to all dimensions of the YPS agenda and not relegated only to those areas deemed priority by the Government of Iraq. The international community can thus assist the government in adopting a national strategy while also exerting pressure to ensure that youth are neither politically marginalized for instrumentalized. Indeed, youth can be included not only in the development of such a national strategy but also in the monitoring of its implementation and achievement of milestones and impact.

Finally, members of the international community can advocate for funding mechanisms in support of the YPS agenda to not be managed top-down by the Ministry of Youth and Sports only: youth have a crucial role to play in monitoring the use of funding, for example, and should be given a degree of operational autonomy when funding is utilized for projects and activities.

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### About the Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is an independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change and social justice. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality, and gender equality.

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