



POLICY DIALOGUE REPORT

# Youth, Peace, and Security in Iraq: Operationalizing Youth Peacebuilding Priorities in Practice Policy Dialogue Report

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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: Copyright @FBA - 11 November 2021; Baghdad, Iraq - The Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA) and UNFPA, in collaboration with the Ministry of Youth & Sports, held the first Organizational Development Leadership training for the Iraqi Coalition on Youth, Peace, Security (YPS)

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# Introduction

In December 2020, the Government of Iraq, under the auspices of the Ministry of Youth and Sports, together with UNFPA and the Folke Bernadotte Academy (Swedish Agency for Peace, Security and Development), formally launched the National Coalition on Youth, Peace, and Security (YPS) in Iraq. As part of the government's commitment to fulfilling the vision of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 (UNSCR 2250) and its subsequent resolutions 2419 and 2535, the Coalition seeks to act as a bridge linking grassroots youth peace activists and community leaders with formal decision-making circles in Iraq. The Coalition advocates for the implementation of the YPS agenda through policies and programs, facilitates the exchange of experiences, knowledge, and information amongst Coalition members and YPS actors, and supports the empowerment of youth to meaningfully participate and take leading roles in peace-building processes.

The success of this Coalition is of prime importance at this critical juncture in Iraq's history. In the aftermath of ISIS' defeat, the wave of popular mobilization in the central and southern provinces largely led by youth, and the recent parliamentary elections in October 2021, Iraq is in 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 economic, political, and social justice. More importantly, there exist important cohorts among young women and men in Iraq that are keen to participate in these various processes of reconstruction and to leave conflicts and disputes behind. Youth peace activists, youth-led grassroots initiatives and community leaders have already been conducting myriad actions on the ground to contribute to rebuilding the Iraqi society and many are of the opinion that this is one of the main paths to sustainable peace.

The YPS agenda can be used as a common framework for dialogue and partnerships between youth and decision-makers. Moreover, including youth in decision-making processes can render policies not only better adapted to the needs and aspirations of citizens, but can also help increase the legitimacy of the process itself and ensure sustainability. Fulfilling the YPS agenda and creating successful mechanisms for Iraqi youth's inclusion and incorporation in building, sustaining, and taking ownership of peace and development processes is thus essential to the reconstruction of the Iraqi nation-State and its prosperity and stability going forward. Yet, in order to ensure that youth's participation is meaningful, it is essential to take as the point of departure youth's own priorities for peace and security in practice, and what youth-owned political participation looks like on the ground. In other words, operationalizing the YPS agenda should aim to operationalize into practice the priorities that young women and men themselves set, with the support of decision-makers and YPS actors.

On 7 December 2021, the Arab Reform Initiative and the Folke Bernadotte Academy organized a virtual closed policy dialogue, held under Chatham House Rule, bringing together governmental actors, youth activists (members of the YPS Coalition), researchers, policy makers, and advisors to collectively reflect on what meaningful youth inclusion in peace and development in Iraq looks like. This discussion included exploring what "peace," "security," and "participation" actually mean to Iraqi youth in theory and practice and considering examples of youth participation in peacebuilding on the ground and what good practices can be derived from them. The discussion also drew insights from good practices in other contexts in the region, and assessed the types of policies, approaches, and programs that can support Iraqi youth's participation on both formal and informal levels. In doing so, this policy dialogue contributed to defining the various means and methods to operationalize a youth-owned YPS agenda in Iraq.

## **Panel 1: Identifying Opportunities and Challenges for the YPS Coalition in Iraq**

### **Context of the Coalition's Launch at the National and Regional Levels**

Given its binding nature, UNSCR 2250 represents one of the most important resolutions that has been passed and has attracted significant interest from governments, national and international actors and youth. In the Iraqi context, the will and interest in implementing the YPS agenda has been spearheaded by the Ministry of Youth and Sports (MOYS) who, since 2015, has been working to raise awareness of the agenda and support its operationalization. Indeed, the Ministry's interest in YPS has only increased considering the conflict with ISIS and how it has affected young women and men in Iraq. The will to operationalize the UNSCR 2250 came to fruition in December 2020, with the launch of the YPS coalition in Iraq, which gathers youth peacebuilding activists, NGOs, government officials, and members of the international community. At this stage, the Coalition's Terms of Reference and guiding documents have been adopted and a 5-year program laying out the vision for the YPS agenda in Iraq has been drafted. For the MOYS, the manner in which the Coalition has been conceived must rest on the pillars of autonomy and independence: Iraqi young women and men represented in the Coalition should be free to decide their own activities, and the MOYS having an advisory role and allocating funds to the work of the Coalition.

In addition, the vision of the Iraqi YPS Coalition also includes a regional dimension: implementing the YPS agenda should be a collective effort throughout the MENA region, and support the already established YPS regional coalition to empower Arab youth in policy making processes needs to be a common goal. Iraq's experience, combined with lessons learned from the Jordanian and Tunisian contexts, can in turn serve to influence the establishment of other national YPS coalitions and operationalize the UNSCR 2250 in other Arab countries, including Egypt and Libya. The Arab League, for example, together with UNFPA Arab States Regional Office, can support the advancement of the regional Coalition to help meet

the priorities as defined by youth and their aspirations for participation in policy-making processes.

### **Operational Challenges Facing the YPS Agenda in Iraq**

Perhaps the most important challenge that Iraq and indeed other Arab countries face in implementing the YPS agenda stems from the relative newness of the resolution, which was only adopted 6 years ago. There is, as such, a lack of sufficient awareness and knowledge of the UNSCR 2250 and its implications in practice with regards to youth inclusion and the operationalization of their priorities for peace, security, and development.. This lack of awareness can be seen at several different levels. First, there is a dearth of experts who can extensively talk about and analyze the resolution in terms of its implications from a legal perspective. Unfortunately, such expertise is not currently widespread in the Arab region, let alone Iraq. Likewise, another challenge that needs to be addressed is the adoption of specific YPS jargon that is understandable and relatable by young women and men. The UNSCR 2250 and its implications in practice needs to be explained and understood by youth in order for its operationalization to be embraced. Related to this is the challenge that ministerial shuffling creates, which can cause considerable delays to the implementation of the YPS agenda in Iraq. When ministerial seats change, it can take up to six months for a new minister to understand all the programs that s/he will oversee, including those under YPS agenda and prioritize them. This in return becomes time consuming and can cause projects to be delayed.

Related to the issues that arise from lack of sufficient awareness is the financial challenge facing the programmatic dimensions of the YPS agenda. The Iraqi budget is very much dependent on oil prices; therefore, the effective implementation of any project is hinged upon successful international partnerships. Such challenges are of course not unique to the YPS agenda and its operationalization, as any new policy framework can and will face similar challenges. Moreover, every country has different dynamics when it comes to youth aspirations, political participation, and civic engagement that must be taken into consideration to successfully operationalize YPS. The skills-set of young women and men in Iraq and the experiential knowledge they have gained in their own forms of activism and peacebuilding as well as their own experiences of insecurity and conflict, must be acknowledged and supported. This can support in

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developing a successful model for the YPS Coalition in Iraq and help to ensure that youth's priorities are met.

### Iraqi Youth Priorities and Forms of Political Participation

To be able to successfully build an Iraqi YPS agenda, there needs to be a comprehensive understanding of young women and men in Iraq, their aspirations, needs, and challenges, as well as how they seek to engage as political actors. Currently, there is no systematic standardized collection of YPS data in Iraq by government offices; nonetheless, external actors such as NGOs, think tanks, and universities are conducting a variety of qualitative and quantitative research on Iraqi youth and their political, social, and economic priorities. As part of its Youth Trajectories in Conflict Contexts project, Arab Reform Initiative conducted in May-June 2021 a quantitative survey with 676 Iraqi youth from Baghdad, Basra, and Mosul to assess how they understand concepts such as peace and security and the implications for the YPS agenda.

The survey results reveal that Iraqi youth show aversion towards formal politics. While this aversion may be genuine, as in a true lack of interest in formal politics, it could also be related to fear and security concerns. Participants were visibly reluctant to answer questions related to voting and their voting intentions, fearing possible consequences. Yet in addition to fear, another source of Iraqi youth's reluctance to participate in formal political processes is their perceived lack of agency. Iraqi youth do not see themselves as the "right" agents for peacebuilding. They attribute these responsibilities to government officials, which is perhaps surprising considering the October 2019 revolution. Indeed, when the October revolution failed to produce tangible results, Iraqi youth's interest in direct political participation weakened and retreated.

Yet, the same is not necessarily true for civic engagement. Especially after the October revolution, the majority of survey respondents express that they prefer civic engagement to direct political participation. They state that this is not only necessarily because they fear any form of direct political participation but because they believe in the power of civic engagement in bringing effective and gradual change rather than fruitless stagnation.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that any form of political

participation, even civic engagement, is of secondary importance to the Iraqi young women and men. Their main concern is the economy and their own livelihoods. The uprising of October 2019 was for many initially sparked by economic grievances, with other claims related to fighting corruption and demanding improved public services only coming later. For Iraqi youth, without income and/or employment opportunities, they are not able to commit themselves fully to the peacebuilding agenda and political participation. Iraqi youth demonstrate strong ownership of their country and want to provide a better future for subsequent generations, but they are convinced that they can only do this if they have stable professional opportunities in their country. To that end, they look to international organizations, CSOs, and NGOs to provide them with the necessary skills, to address their livelihood concerns, and - only after - to start supporting them in the political scene.

To this point, safety and livelihood concerns emerge as the primary reasons why the landscape of youth political participation in Iraq today has been very selective. If and when given the opportunity, young women and men choose to be activists and not conventional political actors. According to them, being activists, raising their voices, and/or protesting is not only a form of political participation but indeed, in the Iraqi case, the "best" one. And indeed, over the last couple of years, more and more political movements are being led by young people, which has led to a change in the electoral law and lowered the age of eligibility to 25. In this sense, elections have only become more youth-inclusive as youth have taken to the streets and forced the hand of the political elite. This example shows the need to bridge the gap between the decision-makers and youth who are politically active but outside formal political processes in order to ensure that the latter is constantly and sustainably included in political processes.

### Panel 2: Comparative Lessons Learned and Insights for the Iraqi YPS Coalition Moving Forward

To bridge youth grassroots activism and formal political processes to ensure a meaningful YPS agenda in Iraq, there is a need for clarity from political actors regarding the steps

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they are willing to take to successfully implement the agenda, but also a need for compromise. Both parties should be willing to meet the other in the middle, especially when it comes to contexts where youth political participation is not traditionally common. Such processes require more work and activities, which requires patience from both parties. The Jordanian YPS Coalition, which was created in 2017, can serve as a relevant model and provide insights with regards to successful steps and lessons learned that can inform an Iraqi-specific YPS agenda and the operationalization of the Coalition. Firstly, it is important to accept that this process will take time. The Iraqi Coalition is relatively young and could not advance much on its work due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which incurred many delays in the roll-out of the programmatic dimensions. Members of the Coalition and the MOYS should acknowledge the fact that implementing youth-led programs on the ground, especially in politically tumultuous countries, will take time. Secondly, as stated previously, the YPS agenda can be hindered because of ministerial reshuffling, lack of funding mechanisms, and the lack of sufficient expertise. To resolve this issue in Jordan, a technical unit was created within the Ministry of Youth that aims to accelerate the implementation of the agenda regardless of changes at the level of the minister. In this way, the commitment as well as the expertise of the Ministry remains the same towards the YPS cause. A similar unit can be conceived in the MOYS in Iraq.

To ameliorate the issue of funding, the Jordanian YPS Coalition also agreed to amend its bylaws and add an article that obliges member institutions to pay yearly dues, calculated based on their revenues and earnings. This secures a minimum of resources that are necessary for the functioning of Coalition. Moreover, in order to ensure a youth-owned agenda, the Jordanian Coalition has actively sought to include young women and men in all stages of decision-making. In practice, this has meant including youth not only in voting instances but also in the design and conception of the decision-making processes themselves. Lastly, the private sector has proven an important stakeholder that needs to be included in the YPS process. So far, there has not been much of a positive involvement of the private sector in supporting YPS, but the private sector needs to be encouraged to support the Coalition as well as the Agenda 2030 and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. In this way, three different flows of funding can be created for the implementation of the YPS agenda: the private sector, institutional participation, and general government contributions. Lastly, it is important to realize the strengths of the mechanisms that are already in place. For example, the Jordanian Coalition was efficient and quick to adapt to the digital transformation during the pandemic. This allowed a wider outreach to more young women and men living in Jordan. Other coalitions in the region can also use this

situation to their own advantage and try to get more parties involved in the YPS process by making sure the youth in the country receive sufficient training on the digital systems

Taking these lessons learned into consideration, not just in Jordan but in the Arab region in general, it is possible to say that the region is a pioneer in implementing the YPS agenda. Among other things, beyond the national YPS coalitions that have already been established, it is the first region to be actively conceiving of a regional YPS strategy and a regional YPS coalition. Moving forward, the goal of international and national actors in the region is to concretize the foundations of a regional YPS coalition, which should be based on full and equal partnerships, direct and transparent operations, and efforts to mobilize more groups and advocacy actors.

### Recommendations for the Operationalization of the Iraqi YPS Coalition Moving Forward

1. Consolidate and sustain support to the established Coalitions. There is a global tendency to support YPS agendas only at the initiation stages and not follow through. This negatively affects all the stakeholders and hinders the activities of the Coalition and their ability to be sustained.
2. Ensure the integration of YPS goals in all national youth policies and strategies. The mainstreaming of YPS across policy frameworks is essential to shoring up national commitment. YPS is not an independent vertical program or a one-off project, and its operationalization will not be sustainable if it's perceived as such. Also, policy implementation in Iraq should be undertaken with the YPS agenda in consideration and making decision-making spaces more welcoming to younger generations.
3. Invest in YPS data collection. Research on youth needs, priorities, and aspirations must be systematic. It is imperative to have qualitative and quantitative data on youth if sustainable youth-led and/or oriented policies are to be successfully designed and implemented.
4. Draw synergies with the Women, Peace and Security agenda. The WPS and the YPS agendas should be integrated, as the gender component of youth political participation should not be overlooked, and insights from WPS can inform a better implementation of YPS. Although the UNSCR 1325 has been one of the most supported resolutions, its global implementation has not been a resounding success. The reasons for its shortcomings

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should be investigated when operationalizing the YPS agenda.

5. Develop autonomous funding streams. The YPS Coalition should secure sustainable and independent funding and should be empowered to utilize that funding for programmatic purposes.
6. Invest in capacity-building. Additional capacity building for young women and men in Iraq beyond the initial capacity trainings should be deployed. The UN programming Handbook, Y-PEERr manuals and other resources are successful tools in this matter and can be built upon.
7. Identify and elevate champions. The YPS agenda needs champions like any other policy framework in the world. Such champions, which include youth activists and government officials, should act as advocates to raise awareness on the YPS agenda, its importance for both the Government of Iraq as well as Iraqi youth, and how it is moving forward.

These recommendations can be put into practice at both the national and international levels if there are strong and successful relationships between coalition members and the governments. In Iraq, the government's willingness to establish a YPS coalition is a promising step of political actors towards engaging youth in peacebuilding processes. Yet, there is still room for improvement. On one hand, a mutual understanding and regular interaction between youth and the government should be in place to strengthen the relationship. Young women and men need to be invited to spaces where they can share their ideas, challenges, and views to these stakeholders; in turn, these concerns and statements should be taken seriously and should be integrated into government strategies and policies. In addition, more youth should be given leading positions in policy processes, while ensuring gender equality while doing so. The Coalition needs to analyze the structure of the government and determine where the YPS agenda and the Coalition fit into this structure. A clear YPS national action plan can include all these actions points mentioned previously and make sure real action is on the horizon. On the other hand, youth need to feel confident and empowered enough to raise their voice and take action and having an enabling environment to do so. The lessons learned from other countries in the Arab region suggest that it is up to the young women and men raise their voices to the decision-makers and push for their needs and aspirations.

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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,

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