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IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON SOCIAL COHESION IN IRAQ

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CONTENTS

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1. FOREWORD

This report is the third in a series of policy papers examining the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Iraq. The first paper looked at effects on fragility, while the second examined the macroeconomic consequences.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) will present additional thematic policy papers in the coming months on the implications for social protection, environmental sustainability and the socioeconomic fallout on vulnerable households. The aim of these policy documents is to offer a comprehensive overview of how the pandemic is affecting the social and economic context of Iraq. This responds to the recent call from the United Nations Secretary-General for ideas on surviving and recovering from the pandemic so that families and businesses can stay afloat, and the foundation for an inclusive recovery can be laid to ensure attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

This current paper examines the impact of COVID-19 on social cohesion in Iraq. It is intended to inform the pandemic responses of the Government of Iraq, the United Nations system and donor partners. The methodology employed by the paper includes a review of relevant literature on social cohesion, as well as key informant interviews with stakeholders from the Government at the national and local levels, civil society and international partners.

The paper draws on various sources from both within and outside the United Nations, using the latest sources available at the time of writing. As the COVID-19 pandemic is a rapidly evolving global phenomenon, economic and social circumstances for both Iraq and the wider world are likely to change rapidly.

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2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Social cohesion is fundamental to the successful functioning of societies, especially diverse ones such as Iraq. A lack of social cohesion can increase tensions among different social groups, enhance the likelihood of conflict and undermine trust in the State. This report examines the impact of COVID-19 on social cohesion in Iraq. Research conducted between July and September 2020 included a comprehensive literature review and 22 interviews with key stakeholders comprising members of the Government at the national and local levels, international organizations, donors and civil society organizations from different parts of the country.

Without social cohesion, it will be difficult to attain the SDGs or reach the objective of leaving no one behind.[1] In practice, this means taking explicit action to end extreme poverty, curb inequalities, confront discrimination and fast-track progress for the furthest behind. Social cohesion is also vital for achieving SDG 16, with its commitments to building peaceful and inclusive societies, realizing access to justice for all, and establishing effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.[2] Enhancing social relations among different groups and strengthening the social contract between citizens and the State are prerequisites for all of these ends, especially in post-conflict Iraq.

Definitions of social cohesion

Social cohesion is an elusive and contested concept. Analysts generally identify it as having horizontal and vertical dimensions. The horizontal dimension describes the trust, relationships and interactions among people in a society across divisions such as identity or other social constructs, including race or class. Vertical cohesion entails trust between a government and society. This includes trust in political, economic or social leaders, institutions and processes such as elections, access to justice, taxation, budgeting and the delivery of public services. It is generally agreed that social cohesion has political, economic, social and security aspects.

Social cohesion in Iraq and the impact of COVID-19

Many challenges have disrupted social cohesion in Iraq over the last 20 years. The pandemic came at a time when public trust in the Government was low, the economy was weakened through reductions in revenues from oil sales, protests across the country were a regular occurrence and violent extremist attacks were resurging. COVID-19 has exacerbated existing and sometimes deeply rooted political, economic, social and security challenges. Its impact on social cohesion represents another point of stress on top of many others afflicting communities across the country.

Political

Popular discontent with the *muhasasa*[3] system of government and corruption, compounded by high unemployment levels, often poor service delivery, and a lack of social protection and rule of law meant that vertical social cohesion was fragile prior to COVID-19. Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi came into power in May. Bridging long-festering gaps has been among his top priorities. But he has faced numerous challenges, and has thus far only been able to take small and largely symbolic steps. Despite the willingness of the new Government to improve social cohesion, the challenges remain significant, with COVID-19 entrenching old problems even as it creates additional ones. The Government faces a daunting task in addressing structural reform issues while tackling the pandemic.

Economic

Prior to COVID-19, 4.1 million people in Iraq required humanitarian support. Extreme poverty and inequality have meant that significant portions of the population are in urgent need of employment, health care, education, sanitation, hygiene and access to justice. Shortfalls have worsened with

the oil price drop, which has had a major effect on government revenues and fiscal space. Thousands of jobs are at risk, and while food prices have remained relatively stable, continued reliance on imported food makes the country vulnerable to shortages or major price increases.

The economic impacts of the pandemic have disproportionately affected marginalized groups. Over 66 percent of people are employed in the informal sector; they were deeply affected by lockdown measures and restrictions on movement. The IOM reports that between March and April 2020, the number of paid people working in the private sector fell by approximately 40 percent.

Social

Iraq is a diverse country with highly complex and multidimensional social divides spanning generations, religions, rural and urban groups, internally displaced people (IDPs) and host communities, and political interests. Youth activism in different governorates indicates that the new generation is increasingly seeking to break away from the sectarian group thinking of the past, and embrace a citizenship model that is not only more inclusive, but allows greater rights and responsibilities of citizens vis-à-vis the State. Despite this, sectarian identities still damage social cohesion in specific locations. COVID-19's effect on these tensions appears mixed. Existing grievances could be further aggravated, as pressure on services, the economy and communal relations intensifies. At the same time, COVID-19 has fostered a common narrative that could unite the population, in a way similar to Iraq's response to the Islamic State in the Levant (ISIL).

COVID-19 has disproportionately affected marginalized and vulnerable groups, including women, IDPs and young people. Cases of gender-based violence have reportedly increased in many locations. Restrictions on movement have hampered the return of IDPs. Many tribal councils and local fora for dialogue between returnees and host communities have been unable to meet, and key partners could not support such processes. As a result, reconciliation activities have paused.

Security

The multiplicity of armed groups in Iraq poses significant challenges to social cohesion, both horizontally between different communities, and vertically between citizens and the State. Trust in the Iraqi security sector was low in the lead up to COVID-19, in part due to violent responses to the popular protests. There was also evidence of an increase in ISIL-associated threats. The security situation has further deteriorated under COVID-19 as tension has at times escalated between security forces and the population, particularly regarding the implementation of lockdowns.

Policy recommendations

Without social cohesion, it will be difficult to attain the Sustainable Development Goals or achieve the central objective of leaving no one behind. With evidence that the pandemic is exacerbating a number of existing political, economic, social and security issues key to social cohesion, it is vital to identify mitigating measures to prevent further negative effects. There are also opportunities to develop a more comprehensive approach to social cohesion that acts on both horizontal and vertical challenges. The report makes several policy recommendations to the Government, civil society and international partners.

At the national level, a more strategic national approach to social cohesion should be developed alongside immediate and short-term responses to COVID-19 and its effects on relations within society. Long-term strategic partnerships between the Government of Iraq and the international community could cultivate an environment enabling an inclusive national approach to social cohesion. A strategic approach requires covering all parts of the country and leaving no one behind, as well as maintaining special attention to areas formerly occupied by ISIL.

A legislative framework should be developed to create a regulatory environment for social cohesion and peaceful coexistence. National and subnational institutions should be mandated to address social cohesion and community reconciliation so they can operate within a consolidated, inclusive and shared vision. The response to COVID-19 should not detract from progress in delivering on government commitments made in the wake of recent popular protests, including to a new election cycle.

At the local level, support to the COVID-19 response should be inclusive and conflict sensitive, and do no harm. Clear and consistent COVID-19-related communication to citizens and the establishment of local dialogue forums are vital.

Despite the pressures of responding to immediate COVID-19 priorities, and the political demands articulated through popular protests, the Government should maintain existing commitments to reconciliation. Support for local peace committees and tribal dispute resolution structures should continue despite COVID-19 restrictions.

3. GLOBAL AND REGIONAL CONTEXT

COVID-19 is profoundly affecting the world, including the Arab States. Not only is it threatening the health of communities, but also economies, societies, political systems and security. Although the pandemic did not reach the Arab States until March 2020, the region,[4] with a population of roughly 436 million people,[5] has witnessed alarming trends in recent months, with an average of around 14,900 reported new cases per day[6] in late August.[7] The uncertainty of the pandemic caused the Arab stock market to fall by 23 percent in the first quarter of 2020, leading to predictions that the regional economy will shrink by 5.7 percent, and the number of those in poverty will increase by 14.3 million.[8] See the earlier UNDP policy paper detailing COVID-19's impacts on the Iraqi Economy.[9]

COVID-19 is exacerbating long-standing challenges to social cohesion across the Arab region by intensifying both inter- and intracommunal tensions, reducing trust in States, threatening state legitimacy especially in fragile countries where the social contract is weak, increasing societal inequality, stretching limited state capacity to provide social welfare, worsening the already precarious positions of IDPs and other marginalized groups, creating conditions where gender-based violence has increased even as survivors struggle to access assistance, and enabling or worsening violations of human rights.[10] While some countries implemented early measures to curb the virus, others have been severely affected by its rapid spread.[11] The region was already suffering from a range of complex and multidimensional issues, particularly following the drop in oil prices, and especially in oil-producing countries. The pandemic represents a further challenge to countries, many of which have serious gaps in access to basic services, including health care.

As a starting point for looking at social cohesion, the following section examines global and regional definitions and lessons before assessing its status in Iraq before and during COVID-19.

3.1. Global definitions of social cohesion

Social cohesion is an elusive and contested concept. It is understood differently depending on people's experiences and context. Definitions include varying points of focus, and are multifaceted, engaging several disciplines, including social sciences, law, economics and anthropology.[12] Global analysts generally identify social cohesion as having horizontal and vertical dimensions (Box 1).

The **horizontal dimension** describes the trust, relationships and interactions among people in a society across divisions such as identity or other social constructs, including race or class.[13, 14] It encompasses ideas of social harmony and inclusion and the inclusive well-being of a community—notions that draw on ideals of solidarity and collective consciousness.[15] Improving the horizontal dimension of social cohesion entails two principal elements:

- The reduction of disparities, inequalities and social exclusion.
- The strengthening of social relations, interactions and ties.[16]

The first element requires engaging excluded groups. Exclusion can take different forms—political, economic, social, religious and cultural. Promoting horizontal dimensions of social inclusion involves tackling power relations and confronting social groups or institutions responsible for the exclusion. Its objective is to ensure that people from different backgrounds have similar life opportunities. The second element requires developing social capital. This is the invisible glue that keeps a society together even in difficult, stressful times.

Vertical cohesion rests on trust between a government and society.[17, 18] This includes trust in political, economic or social leaders, institutions,

and processes such as elections, access to justice, taxation, budgeting and the delivery of public services. This dimension is similar in many ways to the idea of a social contract.[19]

Key dimensions of global approaches to social cohesion include the extent to which people feel they belong in a society (or feel isolated), are included (or excluded), are able to participate in social decision-making and the management of public affairs (or are not allowed to be involved), and are accepted despite their differences (or rejected). It encompasses the extent to which public institutions represent people's interests and are seen as legitimate (or illegitimate), and the extent to which societies are equal (or unequal).[20]

3.2. Social cohesion in the Arab context

The concept of social cohesion in the Arab region can be found as far back as the 14th century, from the scholar Ibn Khaldun, "one of the founding fathers of modern sociology."[28] His writing Muqaddimah assessed the social ties that bring communities together, with assabiya (often described as 'social cohesion') employed as a concept to demonstrate the power relations between different groups, how they interact and the causes of conflict across different actors.[29] Despite these early writings, there is a lack of contemporary literature on what social cohesion means in the Arab region, leading to differing understandings and perceptions across different countries.[30]

Box 1: International definitions of social cohesion

The horizontal and vertical dimensions of social cohesion are seen to varying extents in definitions adopted by international organizations. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defines social cohesion as "a cohesive society which works towards the well-being of all its members, fights exclusion and marginalisation, creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust, and offers its members the opportunity of upward social mobility."[21]

The World Bank's definition centres around "the willingness of members of a community to cooperate to survive and prosper – (and) reflects the state of relationships within a community based on the behaviours and attitudes of individual community members and the levels of trust and collaboration among them."[22] Similarly, the Council of Europe states that social cohesion is "the capacity of a society to ensure the well-being of all of its members – minimising disparities and avoiding marginalisation – to manage differences and divisions and ensure the means of achieving welfare for all members."[23]

The United States Institute for Peace (USIP) considers social cohesion as "a situation in which basic human needs are met and communities are able to coexist peacefully – and its two basic underlying facts of governance and security."[24] Organizations adopting approaches like this include the Inter-American Development Bank, the International Labour Organization and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). The last has a specifically child-centric definition.[25]

UNDP takes an all-encompassing approach, bringing together the ideas outlined above and defining social cohesion as **"the extent of trust in government and within society and the willingness to participate collectively toward a shared vision of sustainable peace and common development goals."**[26] Within this, UNDP has established several dimensions of social cohesion for measuring progress, including:[27] trust, belonging, inclusion, perceptions of safety and positive relations with other social groups. A full overview is in Annex I.

The region is highly diverse, with each country having its own unique history and characteristics. There are some common social cohesion challenges, but the way and extent to which these manifest differ by country. A key issue is inequality within and between countries. "The sociopolitical context of the Arab region before the 2011 uprisings was extensively documented in a series of in-depth reports by the United Nations. The reports revealed high levels of illiteracy, vast disparities in wealth within nations, the majority of citizens living in poverty, gender inequities, and significant deficits in health care provisions and educational benefits across the region. The bleak social realities were accompanied by widespread authoritarianism, corruption and abuse of power by ruling elites, compounded by foreign military interventions, occupation and war."[31]

The Arab Spring and the events of 2011 "significantly transformed the socio-political dynamics of the region"[32] and demonstrated the importance of social cohesion both from a vertical and horizontal perspective.[33] The popular uprisings that spread across the region represented widescale, serious underlying grievances, including disillusionment with the status quo, a lack of trust in government institutions, a push against corruption, and calls for social and economic equality. For many, the movement reconceptualized the relationship between society and the State, causing many leaders to step down and constitutions to be reformed.[34]

The Arab Spring led to long-running conflicts in many countries such as Libya, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen. It fuelled sectarian conflict and the rise of political Islamic and radical movements such as ISIL. The impacts of these conflicts have included huge costs in human life and destruction of basic infrastructure and services, significant displacement, expanded ethno-sectarian tension, a rise in political Islam, an increase in violent extremist groups such as ISIL, and pressure on social services to support population increases stemming from displacement.[35, 36] These pressures have exacerbated tensions between citizens and States, and weakened the already strained social contract across the region.

The understanding of social cohesion applied in this report

Most definitions of social cohesion above share some key commonalities: horizontal and vertical dimensions, and the recognition of political, economic, social, and, in many cases, security aspects. This paper uses UNDP's definition in considering both horizontal and vertical dimensions, and examining the interplay between the two. The analysis will explore political, economic, social and security aspects in Iraq, and the extent to which these have been impacted by COVID-19.

3.3. Lessons from social cohesion approaches

A number of lessons come from initiatives to enhance social cohesion across the world. They include:

- **A lack of a unified definition makes the measurement and analysis of social cohesion difficult.** This can obscure the true impact of or limit insight into whether social cohesion has 'improved' within a given context.[37] What might be perceived as successful social cohesion from one perspective could be seen as damaging from another.
- **Social cohesion should not solely focus on resolving communal tension.** A number of studies have found that the international community has often focused too much on intercommunal tension while failing to adequately look at the vertical dimension of social cohesion.[38, 39]
- **Much of the contemporary literature on social cohesion is produced in the West.** Specific notions of social cohesion are thus often biased towards Western ideals,[40] such as ideas around integration and nationalism. There has also been a failure to understand the complex history of issues within individual countries.[41]

- **Social cohesion must be understood as a process and not a static objective.** Lessons from previous approaches to and understandings of social cohesion have demonstrated that it cannot be perceived as a stationary goal. It is subject to change over time in line with differing priorities, tensions and social norms.[42]
- **Conflict sensitivity is central to social cohesion initiatives.** Any approach to social cohesion must recognize diverse views across society.[43] It must consciously work to reconcile current and long-standing causes of tension through an inclusive approach sensitive to history and recent conflict.[44]
- **Any approach to social cohesion must consider the nature of the existing social contract.** For example, many places with low social cohesion experience a fractured trust between the government and society. The government therefore may not be the most appropriate actor to lead social cohesion processes.
- **Local ownership is critical for sustainable and successful social cohesion.** Long-term impacts require attempts to improve social cohesion to be rooted in local ownership. These should both build on, and work with, existing structures, including in defining what social cohesion constitutes to ensure that the process is organic and not enforced.[45] Local mediators, for example, can be very effective in recognizing and responding to conflicts as they arise, and preventing them from intensifying into larger-scale disputes.[46]
- **Women and youth must be explicitly engaged in a meaningful way from the beginning.**[47] These groups are often marginalized, which can drive instability. Inclusion and conflict sensitivity require their involvement, with lessons from previous approaches affirming that not doing so limits results and progress.[48] In many locations, traditions and customs reduce their participation unless specific mechanisms make their representation compulsory.

4. APPROACHES TO SOCIAL COHESION IN IRAQ

In Iraq, there is no single definition of social cohesion, nor of how it can be improved. It is seen by some as a loaded concept meaning different things to different people, depending on factors such as access to political and economic power, demographics and the extent to which communities have been affected by violent conflict.[49] In recent years, the term has become more commonplace, used in lieu of 'reconciliation', which is linked to a number of failures.

Furthermore, many Iraqis see reconciliation as synonymous with forgiveness. Some communities are unwilling to consider reconciliation before justice and accountability has been ensured. Early reconciliation approaches attempted to seek justice for crimes committed by the Ba'athist administration,[50] but the concept was then adapted to focus on reconciling Sunni-Shia divisions.[51] Following the rise and then demise of ISIL, understandings of social cohesion evolved to centre on reconciling communities that had suffered under the group, and encouraging the return of displaced people.[52]

Interviews with key stakeholders revealed varying understandings of social cohesion. For example, some in both Basra and Anbar claimed that there were no social cohesion problems as tribal structures ensure that disputes are resolved, and communities remain cohesive and connected. This understanding makes social cohesion an intracommunal issue rather than an intercommunal one.

Some groups perceive social cohesion as encouraging them to forgive or accept the presence of others. Interviewees reported that this has been a prominent notion in areas with historical cohesion challenges, including the governorates of Nineveh, Salahuddin and Anbar. In Anbar, the focus of social cohesion efforts has been to reconcile those affiliated, or seen as affiliated, with ISIL, and those who were not, as well as building social cohesion among different clans and tribes. This is welcomed by some groups but resisted by others. One key driver of resistance is the lack of measures to redress the harm caused at the hands of ISIL.

A number of efforts to advance horizontal cohesion and enhance social relations among different communities have been attempted, but with few meaningful gains and minimal engagement. Vertical cohesion initiatives have primarily focused on enhancing dialogue and accountability between local governments and citizens. The importance of increasing vertical social cohesion has grown over the past year amid ongoing popular demonstrations demanding accountability from the State.

4.1. National, international and local approaches to social cohesion in Iraq[53]

National initiatives to foster reconciliation and social cohesion began in 2005 with Arab League-led efforts to bolster unity across the country. This process did not generate significant momentum or progress, and was terminated in 2006.[54, 55] It was followed by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's "Reconciliation Dialogue Plan," which prioritized amnesty for certain groups.[56] Despite generating widespread support, the initiative reached a stalemate in mid-2007 due to the withdrawal of Sunni political blocs over the lack of control of armed groups.[57]

In 2014, following the emergence of ISIL, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi formed the Supreme Permanent Committee for Coexistence and Community Peace (Order 128), which was charged with taking forward the Government's social cohesion agenda amid ongoing insurgency. Since then, different political blocs have promoted visions of social cohesion and reconciliation. These include Ammar al-Hakim's "Historical Settlement," which aimed to reconcile social and sectarian divisions post-ISIL, and Muqtadar al Sadr's "Initial Solutions"

for newly liberated Mosul in 2017. Both failed to generate widespread political commitment and have not been implemented.[58, 59]

A number of approaches have been criticized for their lack of inclusivity and failure to recognize the cumulative effects of conflict and political and economic instability over many years. They focused on specific problems rather than embracing a more holistic approach,[60] taking siloed approaches to complex problems despite close connections to a spectrum of policy and governance concerns (for example, governance and economic reforms).[61] Where initiatives have translated into policy (such as the establishment of the Supreme Permanent Committee for Coexistence and Community Peace), they have been criticized for inconsistent implementation and a lack of sustained political engagement.[62]

In 2019, the Government established the Committee for Coexistence and Community Peace (CCPC) following the merger of the Supreme Permanent Committee for Coexistence and Community Peace, and the National Reconciliation and Follow-up Committee.[63] The CCPC is currently responsible for central government policies promoting social cohesion across Iraq, ranging from facilitating the return of IDPs, to fostering social cohesion across communities, to mitigating the impact of COVID-19 on social stability. The CCPC has faced a number of challenges in delivering its mandate, however.[64] Without a national strategy or approach to social cohesion, the committee has found it difficult to effectively carry out its role or implement large-scale activities. It has also been struggling with a combination of mandate restrictions, and challenges in securing funding and appropriate staff. Recent changes in the leadership of the CCPC may provide it with additional capacity to deliver its functions effectively. Though it is too early to judge the extent to which it will be successful in carrying out its full mandate, given its limited existence (during which there has been considerable political upheaval and the overwhelming fallout from COVID-19 on all areas of governance), positive signs suggest the new Government is committed to furthering social cohesion.

The international community backs a range of social cohesion programmes.[65] These include initiatives fostering social cohesion through community dialogue,[66] supporting access to services and critical infrastructure in areas previously occupied by ISIL,[67] assisting the Government to foster community cohesion,[68, 69] setting up local peace committees[70] and supporting other local peace structures including youth and women's groups and networks. Other contributions comprise providing psychosocial support to address the root causes of conflict across communities,[71] assisting youth in social inclusion[72] and backing community dialogues. Many of these programmes are focused on areas formerly under ISIS control.

The impacts of these approaches vary. Peace committees and other local peace structures have been particularly successful in generating local buy-in and resolving issues such as the return of IDPs. Work with youth has reduced social tension among communities. International support has generally been hampered by the lack of a national strategy on social cohesion, however, as well as by weak coordination,[73] inconsistent follow-up, and a lack of awareness of the contextual complexity of the issues and locations where programmes take place.[74]

At the local level, civil society groups have led several social cohesion initiatives.[75] Many of these have had significant impacts in communities and successfully generated community buy-in. Local initiatives have struggled to increase their scale and sustain their activities over the longer term, however. They are hampered by limited access to funding, the inability to replicate successful projects across different areas and logistical challenges resulting from complex social sensitivities.

4.2. Lessons from social cohesion approaches in Iraq

- There is **no unified approach to reconciliation or social cohesion,** including guiding policies and monitoring mechanisms, at the central government level.[76] This leaves local actors

defining approaches based on differing interpretations. It is difficult for them to 'scale up' to reach large numbers of people.

- **In recent years, interventions supporting social cohesion have mainly focused on areas affected by ISIL.** This has been the case from 2014 onwards, particularly in the governorates of Anbar and Ninewa. These efforts have met with various degrees of success, and have focused on cohesion within and between specific population groups in areas with a more mixed population. There have been criticisms that other parts of the country and population groups have not had similar levels of support,[77] despite displaying some level of need. Development partners could face a challenge in being perceived as supporting some groups to the exclusion of others.
- **The absence of a national framework for social cohesion has led to a disconnect between local social cohesion programming and national level political and policy directions.** While many local programmes appear successful on the ground, albeit confined to specific areas and population groups, these have not been as effective or sustainable as hoped in the absence of a national framework paired with strong national supervision and coordination.
- **Social cohesion efforts risk being politicized.** Political parties may have their own interpretations of what social cohesion is, based on issues in their own constituencies, which prevents approaches from being inclusive. A politically inclusive approach is important to speak to the needs and priorities of constituencies across the board.
- **Social cohesion approaches must be sustainable.** Their deep-rooted and multifaceted nature means support must be long-term. A project-by-project approach risks damaging the credibility of the concept and project implementers.
- **Socioeconomic conditions impact social cohesion.** The concerns of communities must be addressed,[78] a notion reiterated in many interviews. This highlights the importance of addressing structural factors driving instability in conjunction with reconciliation efforts.
- **Social cohesion must be recognized as essential to a larger political process.** The importance of the vertical dimension is evident in work on disputed internal boundaries, constitutional and legislative affairs, national dialogue and reparations for survivors of conflict-related sexual violence. All of these are key political issues that need to be addressed to foster an environment that enables social cohesion.

5. KEY ASPECTS OF SOCIAL COHESION IN IRAQ AND THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

This section assesses key elements of social cohesion and the impact of COVID-19. It considers political, economic, social and security dimensions, highlighting both horizontal and vertical cohesion.

5.1. Political aspects of social cohesion

5.1.1. Challenges in governance

Popular discontent with the *muhasasa*[79] system of government and corruption, compounded by high unemployment levels, poor service delivery and inefficient social safety nets, have made vertical social cohesion highly fragile, between the State and society, and among the major political blocs.[80] The nature of the political system introduced after 2003, which allocates positions along quotas based on ethno-sectarian identity, has been criticized for deepening sectarian divisions and creating competition for control over state resources.[81] This has weakened vertical social cohesion by increasing distrust between citizens and the State, with many arguing that the system only represents a small proportion of people and fosters socioeconomic inequality.

A survey by the National Democratic Institute in 2019 found that "unchecked corruption" across both the central and governorate levels feeds perceptions that the Government does not provide citizens with their basic needs.[82] Corruption and the absence of employment were outlined as major drivers of negative views towards governing institutions.[83] Corruption has largely fuelled recent mass demonstrations.

Poor service delivery and inequality in access to basic services have undercut trust in the Government and created social tension, with some citizens stating that different communities are prioritized over others. Electricity blackouts, a lack of water and sanitation, inadequate waste management and poor infrastructure for transportation have exacerbated resentment towards the political elite. These acute service delivery challenges have worsened through the recent crash in the oil price and economic crisis.[84] Likely reductions in government expenditure could further curtail essential services, with major implications for public dissatisfaction and social cohesion.

Increasing levels of dissatisfaction with the political system ultimately led to protests in October 2019 (although intermittent protests had occurred in Basra since 2015), with protesters citing "corruption, governance failure, such as water resources, electricity and fuel, or economic empowerment"[85] as primary reasons for heading to the streets. When COVID-19 struck, the protests were still taking place, predominantly in Baghdad and the south of the country, and were generally understood as led by young people disillusioned with the current system and seeking major reforms.[86]

Overall, protesters' demands have centred around calls for the termination of the *muhasasa* system, protection under the rule of law, an end to corruption, a reformed Constitution and new elections.[87, 88] One specific fissure is the pressure to put a new electoral law into effect that would reduce the size of voting districts and enable independents to run as election candidates.[89] The electoral law has the support of the protest movement, but delay in its adoption continues to exacerbate vertical social fractures. Further demands relate to the active implementation of the existing political parties' law, including the prohibition on parties being connected to armed groups or collecting external financial assistance, with all financial accounts required to be made public.[90]

Unfortunately, the protests led to violent confrontations with security forces and armed groups.[91] These actions reportedly led to the deaths

of approximately 487 demonstrators,[92] injuries to 7,715 others and thousands being arrested.[93] There were allegations of increasing restrictions on freedom of speech and expression.[94] The violent response ultimately led to the resignation of Prime Minister Abdul Adil Mahdi in November 2019, resulting in six months of political stalemate as the country faced increasing political pressure. The deadlock exposed gaps in social cohesion between the Government and society, and between different political parties, as two other candidates were nominated for the role of Prime Minister but were vetoed by different political blocs.[95]

On 7 May 2020, Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi came into power, expressing early commitments to regain public trust (particularly of the protest movement), guarantee justice for protesters harmed by security actors, pursue elections in 2021, regain state power over non-state groups, and ensure that Iraq remains a sovereign country.[96, 97, 98] Examples of the Prime Minister's early actions to foster social cohesion included releasing protesters from jail, appointing representatives from different political blocs as well as key members of the protest movement to his Cabinet, and outlining his commitment to pursue free and fair elections, and implement legislative changes, including reforming the Constitution.[99, 100, 101, 102] The Prime Minister has consistently promised improvements in social cohesion between the State and society, including by pledging to tackle corruption and increase trust in politicians.

Despite the willingness of the new Government to improve social cohesion, prior to COVID-19, more should have been done. Damaged relationships between the State and society are deeply entrenched and require significant changes.

5.1.1.1. Impact of COVID-19 on challenges in governance

Many Iraqis appear cautiously optimistic about the new federal Government. COVID-19, however, among other challenges, has hindered its efforts to foster public trust. There are allegations that the previous Government responded too slowly to the pandemic, and a perception by some citizens that not all communities have been treated equally in the response.[103] Furthermore, significant divisions exist across Iraqi society over whether the pandemic is real or a conspiracy.[104] Such notions have been particularly evident in rural populations, where entrenched mistrust in the political elite and a lack of clear communication on the status of the pandemic have undermined knowledge and awareness about the existence of the virus and methods to contain it.[105, 106] This was outlined in interviews as a key issue in some rural locations in Anbar but has also been reported in other parts of the country.[107]

A survey by Mercy Corps found that 85 percent of those interviewed did not trust the Government on COVID-19 and did not think that its response had been adequate.[108] A UNDP survey of four locations[109] found that in Habaniya (Anbar Governorate), 83 percent of respondents reported that they either had no trust or not very much trust in the central Government. Responses varied across the other locations, with Toz Khormatu (Salahuddin Governorate) almost evenly split. Trust was much higher in both Qaim (Anbar Governorate) and Muhalabiya (Nineweh Governorate).[110]

Respondents in all locations were roughly evenly split on whether they think the Government's COVID-19 measures were appropriate or not strict enough. Furthermore, an average of 91 percent of respondents across all four locations said that they had not received any economic or humanitarian assistance from the local government related to COVID-19, such as food or face masks.[111] A disconnect between the federal and municipal governments on the COVID-19 response is apparent, particularly in the allocation of government resources and the specific requirements of local communities.[112]

The pandemic has also revealed widespread mistrust in the health-care system and major challenges from a lack of infrastructure, funding and decades of violence. In Sinjar and across Nineveh, "there are currently only two hospitals and one ventilator to assist the current population

of around 160,000 people in the region."[113, 114] There are also reports of significant corruption in the health-care sector, with an estimated 40 percent of all medicine being sold on the black market,[115] making it unaffordable for many citizens and leading to hospital shortages. Such issues deepen divides between the State and society, and intensify criticism of public service delivery.

The lack of trust has led to reports of families refusing to turn over sick members, particularly women,[116] to medical teams visiting households with confirmed or suspected cases.[117, 118] In Baghdad and Basra, for example, fear in poorer areas has reportedly caused some to believe that being taken into quarantine is synonymous with being arrested, leading people to prohibit their family members from going to the hospital.[119] There have also been increased attacks on health-care workers, particularly in Thi Qar, Basra and Baghdad.[120] These not only undermine social relations between the health-care sector and society, but also between health personnel and the Government, as workers are already under significant pressure to treat COVID-19 patients.

Findings on trust in the health-care system varied by location. Respondents in Qaim and Muhalabiya reported very high levels of trust (100 percent and 95 percent of respondents, respectively), whereas in Toz Khormatu and Habaniya, over half of respondents reported not very much or no trust. Almost all respondents across each location[121] reported that they would take a family member to the hospital if they became ill.[122] This finding varies from statements in key informant interviews, which reported that families would prevent female members from being taken to the hospital due to social norms that prohibit women from sleeping away from the home. Existing data suggest a very high percentage of people dying within several days of admission to hospital, implying that they are only seeking care when severely ill.[123]

There are reports that lockdown measures have been used to justify restrictions on freedom of speech, freedom of movement and freedom of opinion, especially related to popular demonstrations. Interviewees raised examples of activists being arrested for criticizing COVID-19 procedures or instructions, as well as killings of key activists in Baghdad and southern Iraq.[124] The Reuters news agency had its licence suspended for three months after reporting on COVID-19 cases, leading to public questions about a lack of transparency in official figures.[125] Concerns regarding misinformation and true COVID-19 statistics further erode social relations and the effective handing of the virus. Contradictory messaging can perpetuate fear and mistrust among different groups and in the government response.

All of these issues make the COVID-19 pandemic another challenge to Iraq's already strained political system. There are reports that the protest movement is planning the return of large-scale anti-government mobilization across Baghdad and the southern provinces in the latter part of 2020.[126] As pressure increases for the Government to pursue the reform agenda, it has to tackle the pandemic, and ensure its actions do not exacerbate the situation, given the very real risk of heightened tension and further deterioration in vertical social cohesion.

5.1.2. The rule of law and social cohesion

The legitimacy of the justice system and rule of law are essential to rebuilding trust among communities in Iraq.[127] They ensure that people are treated fairly, minimize tension among social groups and foster trust that the State will protect community interests. The effective rule of law and legal infrastructure provide a social safety net for IDP returnees, host communities and victims of crimes, and uphold equal treatment of citizens. A lack of legal infrastructure, underfunding and corruption, however, have led many to argue that the justice system has become politicized.[128] Concerns have been raised over the independence of the judiciary, with reports of political influence,[129] and even of paramilitary groups[130] committing serious crimes with impunity. This gives the impression that certain groups are above the law and that victims cannot seek justice for crimes.

Research from the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) in 2020 on anti-terrorism laws and their impact on justice found evidence that human rights were not upheld in a number of legal cases between May 2018 and October 2019.[131] Miscarriages of justice for certain groups have led to allegations of a policy of collective punishment.[132] There are also examples of the legal system undercutting the status of women. Several articles in the Penal Code disproportionately affect women, with Article 41 (1) stating that "no crime is committed while exercising a legal right" including "the punishment of a wife by her husband."[133] Additionally, Article 128 allows a lower penalty for certain cases, including crimes committed "with honourable motives." Article 398 allows sexual assault perpetrators to avoid punishment should they marry their victim.[134]

In recent years, several draft laws that tackle social cohesion, counter hate speech and promote peaceful coexistence have been developed by the Parliament Permanent Committee on Reconciliation, Tribes and Religions. But these have not been passed, despite the significant need to strengthen the legislative framework to protect diverse communities and groups.

The informal justice sector plays a critical role in social cohesion, particularly the tribal courts and tribal law. With the formal legal system often failing to effectively resolve conflict, victims may seek justice through the tribal system, or seek help first from a family member or tribal leader.[135] In some instances, the formal system actively passes cases to the tribal courts to resolve disputes.[136, 137] Generally, the tribal system is recognized as critical to regulating social relations and preventing the escalation of violence. It may interact with the security sector following an incident, including to assist in finding offenders and to work alongside the formal justice system to resolve conflicts.[138]

Tribal custom can also lead to a range of activities that contravene domestic and international law, however. It is known to be particularly harmful for women. Dispute resolution can include revenge killings, honour crimes and 'blood feuds', which can "give rise to long cycles of retaliatory violence and revenge, sometimes passing from generation to generation, and can sometimes flare up after being dormant for many years."[139, 140] Women are disproportionately affected as their "ability to influence or interact with the tribal structure without a male intermediary is extremely limited."[141]

5.1.2.1. Impact of COVID-19 on the rule of law and social cohesion

Lockdown measures to tackle COVID-19 have reduced access to justice, adversely affecting social cohesion. Formal courts have been closed and legal proceedings paused or significantly delayed "with the exception of urgent cases."[142] The closure of courts has had a particular impact on women who have not been able to access family courts. While the judiciary committed to "continue to dispense custody and dowry payments to affected women," at the time of writing, the extent to which this has been done is unknown, with some reports of single mothers unable to access any child maintenance support during the pandemic.[143]

Many traditional dispute resolution mechanisms, including tribal courts, have been unable to convene due to lockdown measures.[144] United Nations organizations have reported that "movement restrictions reduce the capacity of trusted community leaders and civil society organisations to address complex mediation challenges in their communities, including those associated with return, reintegration, social cohesion among other issues."[145] The traditional work of local peace committees on conflict resolution and reconciliatory dialogue sessions has been hindered, delaying the resolution of some conflicts. Yet these mechanisms have been active in responding to the socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19, especially on vulnerable groups. They have provided food and hygiene packages as well as basic personal protection equipment (PPE), and supported outreach to the most vulnerable in their communities. Partnerships with local governments have cleaned schools and other public spaces.[146] To some extent, the pandemic has led traditional dispute reconciliation mechanisms to refocus their activities.

The pandemic is deepening a number of pre-existing gender inequalities, exposing vulnerabilities in social, cultural, political and economic systems that amplify fallout from the pandemic.[147] Across every sphere, from health to the economy, security to social protection, the impacts are worse for women and girls simply by virtue of their sex. For one, lockdowns caused a significant increase in domestic and gender-based violence at a time when the formal justice system was inaccessible. Survey findings highlighted that gender-based violence increased in Habaniya and Qaim, with over 92 percent and 61 percent of respondents noting a rise since COVID-19 began.[148, 149] Other groups cited as vulnerable to the closure of courts include IDPs, refugees and migrants.

An increase in human rights violations has been evident.[150] For example, in Basra, violent actions by security groups have reportedly been on the rise, as they cannot be resolved in the usual way. If dispute resolution structures continue to be unable to function, heightened social tensions are likely in the coming months, which would undermine the well-being of vulnerable and marginalized groups, and encourage mutual distrust to intensify. Given the case backlog and logistical challenges facing the justice sector, it is unclear how quickly cases will be addressed even with the lifting of lockdown measures.

5.1.3. Relations between the Kurdish Regional Government and Government of Iraq

Fifteen years after the creation of the Second Republic, relations between the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and the federal Government of Iraq have been a source of social fracture. Both governments have yet to successfully commit to the federal Constitution.[151] A key source of tension remains the unresolved demarcation of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Disputed territories or internal boundaries outlined in Constitutional Article 140 include Nineveh, Kirkuk, Salahuddin and Diyala.[152] Tensions rose following the defeat of ISIL, as the Kurdish Regional Government became increasingly vocal about its political ambitions for independence. Disagreement over the status of these areas exacerbates tension at both the government and societal levels, as a multitude of ethnic groups, security actors and communities compete for autonomy.

An example can be found in Kirkuk, where many ethnic groups have longstanding claims to the area,[153] and the existence of oil fields intensifies tensions between the regional and central governments. Conflict over the status of the area escalated following the defeat of ISIL, when the central Government gained control. Many different groups operate in the area, as well as security actors, including the Iraqi military, the counter-terrorism service, non-state armed groups, the Kirkuk police forces and several intelligence agencies, all with different objectives. Competition among the security actors can increase ethnic tension as different actors may represent diverse groups, and expose the area to ISIL attacks due to a lack of coordination.[154] Social divisions have also emerged around governance of the area and key political figures in the governorate.

A further source of contention is the allocation of oil barrels in return for a percentage of the federal budget. Friction intensified in April 2020 when the economic pressure of the oil crash, as well as disagreements over the arrangement, resulted in the Federal Government of Iraq terminating the payment of public sector salaries for the Kurdish Regional Government. This significantly weakened relations between the two governments and within the Kurdish Regional Government as pressure mounted for the salaries to be paid. The regulation of border-crossing revenue also remains an issue, with tension around transparency and the practicalities of revenue sharing.

Relations have improved since the inauguration of Prime Minister al-Kadhimi in May 2020. He received early backing from the Kurdish Regional Government, as the Kurdish Democratic Party and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan declared their support for his designation before he was officially nominated by President Barham Salih.[155]

Immediately on taking office, the Prime Minister committed to resolving disputed issues with the Kurdish Regional Government and reinstated payment of the salaries. Negotiations on salaries and border crossings have been positively progressing between Baghdad and Erbil in recent months. There are reports that Erbil has agreed to share 50 percent of all border-crossing income with Baghdad. Further, the Federal Government of Iraq and the Peshmerga will negotiate new security arrangements in the disputed territories, and four joint security centers will be formed along the disputed internal boundaries to tackle ISIL attacks.[156] These positive developments could improve social cohesion both at a government level and across society.

5.1.3.1. Impact of COVID-19 on relations between the Kurdish Regional Government and the Federal Government of Iraq

Both the Kurdish Regional Government and the Federal Government of Iraq are facing mounting pressure to respond to the health, economic, social and political challenges associated with the pandemic. An area of particular concern is the economic impact of COVID-19 and the ability to pay public-sector salaries given the drop in oil revenues,[157] let alone to invest in infrastructure and the modernization of public services.[158] The salary issue has the potential to undermine improving relations between both governments as well as public legitimacy.

There is limited evidence of coordination in the responses to COVID-19. The pandemic in general has become yet another distraction in resolving the disputed internal boundaries and the future relationship between the Kurdish Regional Government and the Federal Government of Iraq. Given pressing needs to addressing COVID-19, maintain the economy, preserve the public sector and deal with increased security issues, there is a danger that the relationship between the two governments will no longer be a priority, and social divisions will become further entrenched.

5.1.4. External actors

Iraq's global and regional positioning has left the country vulnerable to the influence of external actors, which also can deepen internal tensions.[159] Hostilities between Iran and the United States of America have increased over the last year, playing out in Iraq with an increase in attacks on Iraqi and United States bases across the country.[160] Tensions significantly intensified following the killing of Iranian Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani by a United States airstrike on Iraqi soil in January 2020.[161] This led to protests especially by politically affiliated armed groups across major cities and towns with predominantly Shia populations, with many calls for the withdrawal of external forces, particularly those of the United States.[162] Any intensification in violence either between or on behalf of Iran and the United States would further destabilize Iraq and worsen social relations.[163]

Tension between Iran and the United States also puts political pressure on the Iraqi Government, raising prospects for increased violence and social fragility. For example, the United States supports Iraq in its fight against ISIL, while Iran supplies Iraq with energy and has significant political and economic influence.[164] Finding a neutral ground between competing geopolitical interests has been one of the major tasks facing the Prime Minister, with diverse views across the country regarding external involvement in domestic issues. The Prime Minister has recently engaged in two rounds of strategic dialogue with the United States around future relations, with major points of discussion including the withdrawal of United States soldiers and the future economic relationship of the two countries.[165] These issues will have significant consequences for social cohesion, since some communities still support involvement of the United States, but many others are seeking to regain Iraqi autonomy and prevent external engagement.

While relations between Iraq and the Gulf states have been unsettled since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, positive developments with certain countries, including Kuwait and Saudi Arabia,

have unfolded in recent years. Kuwait was a critical influencer in the Baghdad-Gulf Cooperation Council Interconnection Authority Agreement in September 2019, which would supply 500 megawatts of electricity per hour to Iraq's southern port of Faw.[166] Furthermore, there are indications of Saudi Arabia looking to increase its financial and energy involvement in Iraq, as well as "cross-border road development, petrochemicals, agriculture and other infrastructure."[167] Improved relations with both countries might have positive effects on the Iraqi economy and social cohesion.[168] Major issues facing these bilateral relationships, however, include the oil crash and its impact on internal relations within Iraq.

Other regional actors influencing social cohesion in Iraq include Turkey and its relations with the Kurds in Syria and across Iraq. Since late 2019, tension has escalated between Kurdish forces and Turkey both within and outside of Iraq. Developments in north-east Syria in October 2019 "compounded existing insecurity and uncertainty on Iraq's western border, and the prospect of significant numbers of refugees coming into northern Iraq, as well as the uncertain status of Iraqi citizens in Syria perceived to be affiliated with ISIL."[169] In recent months, military engagement between the Kurdistan Workers Party and Turkey has intensified in Sinjar and surrounding areas.[170] The has led to Iraqi soldiers being killed, undermined Baghdad-Ankara relations, intensified insecurity particularly in the disputed areas and further damaged ties between Kurds and other groups.[171]

5.1.4.1. Impact of COVID-19 on external actors

The full impact of the pandemic on external relations is not yet known. But pressure on external actors could alter the dynamics of key players in the region and affect social cohesion in a range of ways. There are reports that the pandemic has made many countries divert their focus to their immediate internal issues and away from Iraq.[172, 173] Although not directly related to COVID-19, during the last few months the United States Government has announced further troop withdrawals and the closure of some military bases. This might alter power dynamics within the country, especially among armed groups, which could escalate tension. There has already been an increase in improvised explosive device (IED) attacks against remaining United States troops; coalition convoys have experienced similar acts.

Prime Minister al-Kadhimi has continued to attempt to maintain Iraq's external relations during the crisis and called for the reduction of interference by all external partners. The strategic dialogue between Iraq and the United States has been ongoing, and the Prime Minister has engaged with Egypt, France, Iran, Jordan and Saudi Arabia on a range of issues.

5.2. Economic aspects of social cohesion

The economic aspects of social cohesion are not covered in depth in this report as they are examined in detail in other UNDP policy briefs. This section provides a brief overview of dimensions of poverty and inequality that are key to social cohesion.

Prior to COVID-19, 4.1 million people in Iraq required humanitarian support.[174] Extreme poverty and inequality meant that significant portions of the population urgently needed income, employment, health care, education, sanitation, hygiene and access to justice.[175, 176] Shortfalls were exacerbated by the oil price drop and the major impact on government revenues. Food prices had remained relatively stable, with a bumper harvest in 2019, but Iraq's reliance on importing half of its food made it vulnerable to shortages or major price increases.[177, 178, 179, 180] Nonetheless, food security still seems stable based on the latest data on access and supply.[181]

Another concern has been low labour force participation. Before the pandemic, only 49 percent of the population was in the labour force, with the country facing a lack of economic diversification, corruption and increasing levels of inequality.[182] Insufficient income and employment can undermine social cohesion by amplifying socioeconomic pressures on individuals, taking away a sense

of purpose, and increasing risks of individuals engaging in violent extremism and armed conflicts. Competition for jobs and resources presents other risks.

Inequality can fuel social conflict through perceptions of 'haves and have nots'. As people struggle for resources and services, intercommunal tension can sharpen.[183] Inequality also undermines trust in the State, with perceptions from some citizens that certain groups are being supported by the government apparatus at the expense of others. The protests, largely inspired by outrage over inequality, called for an end to corruption and a more equitable political, social and economic system.[184]

5.2.1. The impact of COVID-19 on economic aspects

The United Nations Iraq Stabilization Forecast envisages that the COVID-19 pandemic "is likely to create further inequalities between social classes and ethno-sectarian groups, particularly if certain regions or groups are viewed to be relatively better or worse off during the impending economic downturn."[185, 186]

For those still employed, some have had to make difficult decisions over whether to go to work, risk contracting the virus and potentially not see their families for prolonged periods, or remain at home in a caring role.[187] A huge strain on family members, groups and neighbors has come with some families becoming increasingly reliant on them for food and subsistence.[188]

Interviews with local stakeholders in many governorates highlighted that the economic impact of the pandemic has affected marginalized groups disproportionately. Over 66 percent of people are employed in the informal sector,[189] meaning that they have been particularly affected by lockdown measures and restrictions on movement. Between March and April 2020, the number of paid people working in the private sector fell by approximately 40 percent.[190] Within small- and medium-sized enterprises, "(e)mployment reduction and job loss were a major concern in Basra and Salahuddin, which witnessed 98 per cent and 57 per cent reductions respectively."[191] Economic activity in these enterprise "was most significantly reduced in Basra (63%) and Anbar (62%), with Baghdad close behind at 54 per cent."[192] Concerns have also been raised regarding the prospect of evictions across Iraq, and the rise of "negative coping strategies, such as child labour, to increase their ability to pay rent and other fees."[193]

The lack of a social safety net for most of the population means that the economic impacts of COVID-19 are felt more acutely, especially among the most vulnerable groups, with lockdown restrictions emerging as a new driver of tension.[194] A survey by Ground Truth Solutions found that "of the 4000+ calls the IIC [Iraq Information Centre) handled between March and June 2020, the primary COVID-related issue has been loss of employment opportunities."[195] This finding is reinforced by the UNDP survey, which revealed that unemployment, access to basic services and corruption at the national and local government levels were the most worrisome issues for communities in Toz Khormatu, Qaim, Muhalabiya and Habaniya. Most respondents indicated that they faced food shortages despite the Public Distribution System, and declared that a significant number of people in the community had lost their livelihoods due to COVID-19.[196]

5.3. Social aspects of cohesion

5.3.1. Sectarian and regional tensions

Iraq is a diverse country with highly complex and multidimensional social divides spanning generations, religions, rural and urban groups, IDPs and host communities, and political actors. Youth activism in different governorates indicates that a new generation is increasingly breaking away from the sectarian group thinking of the past and embracing a citizenship model that is not only more inclusive, but allows greater rights and responsibilities for citizens vis-à-vis the State.

Despite this, sectarian identities continue to deter social cohesion in specific locations.

There are varying perceptions regarding tensions between and within religious communities prior to COVID-19.[197] Between 2006 and 2014, sectarianism was recognized as a key source of tension, particularly between Sunni and Shia communities,[198] with different groups feeling marginalized by the political elite.[199] Worsening tensions came with the declaration that religious identity would be included on national identity cards, but only the religions of Islam, Christianity or 'Sabaean-Mandaean faiths', with no reference to minority faiths.[200]

More recent developments have led some to argue that sectarian tension has been waning. For example, protests that ignited following a lack of electricity and services in 2015 quickly spread across the country from Tahrir Square in Baghdad to cities such as Najaf, Nasariyyah and Basra, and were supported by Ayatollah Ali al-Husseini al-Sistani.[201] The protests were not sectarian in nature and represented the coming together of different groups to oppose corruption across the country.[202]

Anti-sectarian sentiment could also be seen in the 2018 parliamentary elections, particularly through the movement of Muqtada al-Sadr, which centered on tackling corruption and demonstrated the willingness of political groups to cooperate outside sectarian lines.[203] The International Republican Institute in 2018 found the population demonstrating "fatigue with sectarian politics,"[204] while a 2019 National Democratic Institute survey calculated that "Iraqis are also four times more likely to first identify themselves as Iraqi than by their religion or sect."[205]

The decline of importance of sectarian identity seems to appear as well in the 2019-2020 protest movement, which involved young Iraqis who explicitly rejected sectarian divisions, and who have limited memory of historical sectarian divisions.[206, 207, 208] These protests have been most active in the south of Iraq and predominantly Shia areas, but enjoy widespread support by most communities around the country.[209] This is important for the future of social cohesion, as the protest movement, led by youth, expresses real demands and political grievances, rather than sectarian divisions.

Despite evidence of change, sectarian identity continues undercutting social cohesion, with examples of mistrust among different ethno-sectarian groups found across the country.[210, 211] ISIL and the mass displacements that it triggered reignited historic mistrust between Sunni and other communities, and led many to describe all Sunnis as ISIL supporters.[212, 213] The USIP found that "perceptions of mistrust are common across identity groups," with almost all those surveyed expressing ideas that they "are marginalized and misunderstood compared to others."[214] Surveys of Christians, Shabaks, Yazidis, Sunnis and Shias in Sinjar and Hamdaniya found common perceptions that "other local ethno-religious communities mistrust them."[215] When assessing levels of perceived marginalization, USIP found that "respondents from almost all communities persistently perceive their community's grievances are misunderstood by other communities."[216] Similar findings emerged when assessing access to services, with many groups feeling unequal to others.[217]

Among and within Sunni communities, issues of social cohesion have remained delicate. The role of Sunnis in Iraq changed significantly in the post-Saddam Hussein era, with the community losing much of its influence.[218] This fanned mistrust between the Sunnis and others, especially as different groups became more powerful in the Iraqi political sphere. Trust between the Sunni community and other religious sects significantly deteriorated during ISIL's presence.[219, 220] This mistrust is prevalent in Iraq today with many attributing the significant trauma they endured to the Sunni community. [221] The Sunni community also experiences internal tensions at the political and local levels, such as when some Sunni politicians exhibit "a pro-Sunni stance, (while) others have embraced nationalism and trans-sectarianism."[222]

Rising intra-Shia tensions materialize in several ways. The 2018 elections saw five major Shia coalitions compete for parliamentary seats.[223] The election and subsequent political developments revealed divisions among these parties related to support for Prime Minister al-Kadhimi; the make-up of the Government, including the Cabinet and other top posts; policy positions on Iran and the United States; and the role of armed groups.[224] Such differences extend across society and the protest movement, which is predominantly pushing for a non-sectarian identity, directly challenging others who back the importance of being Shia. The presence of armed groups in certain areas can further inflame intrasectarian tension as factions compete for resources and influence.[225]

Social instability occurs within the minority Christian and Yazidi communities, which grapple with challenges to their identity, structural violence and an inability to access justice.[226] Both faced significant hardship at the hands of ISIL, with many expressing fears regarding changing dynamics in their localities.[227] For the Yazidi community, which suffered extreme violence under ISIL,[228] reports prior to COVID-19 outlined "a debilitating mental health crisis among Yazidis in Iraq, including a rising number of suicides."[229, 230] People of particular concern include women and girls subject to extreme sexual violence.[231] While research has indicated that Yazidis recognize the importance of reconciliation with different groups in Iraq, they have very low social trust. Many state that reconciliation is not possible, and carry strong feelings that there must be retribution, reimbursement and an acknowledgment of the crimes committed against them.[232] This desire to seek truth and reconciliation was not shared by Sunni Arabs interviewed in Sinjar, with many stating that this would not allow people to effectively move on from what happened in the past.[233]

The Christian population has faced a major decline in numbers in recent years.[234] Tension both within and outside the community has arisen particularly over political representation, where different Christian groups have varied opinions regarding a Christian identity.[235] A lack of trust between Christians and other groups is evident, with the former highly critical of previous approaches to reconciliation.[236] Many surveyed by the USIP stated that a "lack of knowledge and incompetence in current approaches are significant obstacles" to achieving social stability in Iraq.[237]

The path to stronger social cohesion takes time, and is intrinsically linked to the restoration of trust among communities, and between communities and the Government. Where older generations seem to have a slightly more negative outlook on the feasibility of this, younger generations seem highly positive about changes to realize peaceful coexistence.

One of the best ways of strengthening social cohesion is by building networks of young people from different ethno-religious groups as it enables them to pursue constructive dialogues with their peers within and outside their own communities.[238] In light of this, UNDP supported youth camps in Ninewa that brought together youth representatives from a wide range of cultural and religious beliefs, and allowed interfaith dialogues to take place in a safe and positive atmosphere. Talks were paired with multiple visits to temples, churches and mosques to expose participants to various cultural and religious communities.[239] Other initiatives aimed at strengthening the peacebuilding skills of religious leaders, and providing youth with specific avenues, such as informal youth councils, to enhance their voice in community decision-making and the identification of issues raising the risk of conflict.[240] Monitoring of these activities has indicated that they increased tolerance, countered extremist perceptions and views, and fostered continued dialogue across religious and ethnic groups.[241]

The disputed internal boundaries in Constitutional Article 140 (areas in Nineveh, Kirkuk, Salahuddin and Diyala) continue to challenge social cohesion as localities contest control of these areas. Without an agreement to define boundaries, "competition between rival ethno-sectarian nationalisms within the disputed territories for ownership and control has already led to conflict, and is likely to

continue to do so, as the issue of control remains unresolved."[242] For northern Diyala, a key area displaying intraregional tension is Khanaqin, which is "strategically important for commercial, security and political reasons,"[243] and has a complex social makeup of Kurdish, Shia, Sunni and Turkmen communities. The area "is rich in oil and produces major revenues via two border crossings with Iran, the Mouzariah and Paruezkhan crossings."[244] The dispute over control of Khanaqin has brought many security actors to the area, inflaming social tensions among different ethnic groups, as well as between the Federal Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government. In Salahuddin, Toz Khormatu represents a major fault line for intraregional tension and has experienced high levels of intercommunal violence. Similar levels of tension can be found in Nineveh and Kirkuk.

Tension around the perceived focus of international support has also impacted social cohesion. Some argue that international attention has centred on Anbar, Mosul and Nineveh, while abandoning areas of Kirkuk and Diyala.[245] Less support in the latter areas has fostered ideas of unequal treatment of different communities, leading to tensions. Other areas of concern include Sinjar, where pressure has increased between Muslim-dominated areas and Yazidis, causing many of the latter to fear returning to Sinjar, given historical memories of the Islamic State, concerns over future attacks and worries that the land will be divided.[246]

5.3.1.1. Impact of COVID-19 on sectarian and regional tensions

The pandemic has spurred significant concerns of further aggravating existing grievances, particularly as pressure on services, the economy and communal relations intensifies. Examples of escalating tension, especially with state institutions, have already been reported in the south of the country, with increased "public distrust in the state and tribal violence."[247] The majority of respondents to the UNDP survey stated that they felt they belong in their community. But the level of trust in communities was particularly low in Habaniya. Almost 80 percent of respondents there stated that they either only trust a small number of people or none at all.[248] These findings were echoed in responses to a question on feeling free to express opinions. Almost half of those responding in Habaniya stated that they were somewhat uncomfortable.[249] Growing distrust between communities is likely especially if government restrictions (both federal and governorate) are not imposed consistently, and certain sectarian groups feel that they are not being treated equally.

A recent study by Mercy Corps found that over two thirds of those interviewed stated that social interaction had changed following COVID-19, with community mistrust and concerns regarding the management of the virus cited as key causes of the shift.[250] UNDP's research affirmed this finding, with 84 percent of respondents in Habaniya, 76 percent in Muhalabiya and 70 percent in Qaim stating that they feel less connected to their community than before COVID-19.[251]

Additional concerns regarding COVID-19 include psychological impacts on particularly vulnerable communities such as the Yazidis. These are compounded by social distancing and lockdown measures that have "resulted in the suspension of the limited psychosocial therapy support that was being provided."[252] A lack of access to friends and social structures has put mental health under further strain and could undermine social cohesion within the Yazidi community and with different ethno-sectarian groups. In Nineveh, social distancing combined with social pressure and geographical isolation has increased stress and instability among individuals. Interviews also outlined the psychological impact of wearing masks and seeing people in masks following experiences with the Islamic State; for some communities, this has been particularly challenging.

Physical restrictions on movement have exacerbated distrust in public health messaging, with evidence of families, tribes and communities ignoring directions from the Government and travelling to hospitals to see relatives suffering from COVID-19. Movement restrictions have been particularly problematic for groups that routinely

travel between the Kurdistan Region and Federal Iraq for economic and family reasons. The closure of the border between the two has been tightly enforced, with a serious impact especially on the Yazidi community displaced outside of Sinjar due to ISIL. At present, several hundred thousand Yazidis live in Dohuk, mainly in IDP camps. Prior to COVID-19, many relied financially on a family member who worked in Sinjar. The closure of borders has separated many families for long periods of time, infringing on mental health and feelings of safety. The border closure was also one of the triggers for the high rate of return of IDPs to Sinjar as it was not feasible for family members to move back and forth between Sinjar and an area of displacement during the crisis.[253]

Despite many challenges, there are some signs that COVID-19 has fostered a common objective that could help unite the population.[254] For example, a study of three governorates found that 76 percent of those surveyed felt that the crisis had improved social cohesion at least in some way.[255] A similar tendency was evident during ISIL control, when Iraqis came together to fight the same enemy. There is now an opportunity to harness this collective focus on tackling COVID-19.

Already, there have been significant increases in local community groups and civil society organizations rallying to support those in need. Interviews in seven locations revealed examples of these groups and individual citizens reaching out across sectarian lines to support people from different communities, religions and ethnic groups. In Toz Khormatu, Muslim, Turkmen and Kurdish communities all came together to help convert an old hospital into a quarantine facility. Civil society groups and members of the protest movement collaborated to disinfect streets, provide PPE and deploy strategic communications to raise awareness of the pandemic.[256] UNDP has supported a range of activities to enhance the role of local peace committees in reconciliation and fostering social cohesion,[257, 258] including by ensuring that all groups are treated equally in the response to COVID-19, and changing the perception that only IDPs benefit from donor programmes.

5.3.2. Marginalized and vulnerable groups

The deteriorating socioeconomic, political and security situation in recent years has disproportionately affected marginalized and vulnerable groups, including women, IDPs and young people.

Economic and financial pressures in communities have caused some to argue that 'hypermasculinity' has become prevalent.[259] Long-standing gender inequality and high levels of gender-based violence worsened during ISIL control with women and girls subjected to mass sexual, physical and psychological abuse.[260] This strained relations between men and women, and created a stigma against abused women, with many unable to gain access to required services.[261] More broadly, cultural norms mean "women do not enjoy their rights and freedoms the same way men do."[262] They face legal discrimination, less access to employment, and powerful social and gender norms around roles in the family, childcare, freedom of movement and access to services, including health care.

The status of IDPs following the defeat of ISIL puts significant pressure on communities and individuals.[263, 264, 265] Many IDPs experience severe psychological trauma, having been forced to leave their homes and live under significant risk of "physical attack, acts of gender based violence such as sexual exploitation and abuse," while lacking access to accommodation, sustenance and health care.[266, 267] For host communities, IDPs represent major challenges due to competition for resources, increased insecurity, tension between different social groups and inequality.

Official United Nations figures state that prior to COVID-19, there were up to 1.4 million remaining IDPs.[268, 269] Areas with the highest numbers included Nineveh and Dohuk. IDP camps are separated into those with ISIL-affiliated groups and families, and official camps for people not linked to ISIL.[270] Determinations regarding the categorization of these groups have been unclear, however. Residents in the former ISIL-affiliated camp

category reportedly face a number of challenges, and "most cannot prove their innocence, even if they have disavowed their brother, husband or son, and the government has not yet been able to process each of their cases."[271] The humanitarian situation in these camps is described as desperate with a lack of services, and non-governmental organizations sometimes unable to gain access without paying local militias.[272]

The official IDP camps in Nineveh are slightly better in providing services. People are able to leave the camps and work outside, and children are educated.[273] This is not the case in Kirkuk and Diyala, however, with recent reports finding "cyclical assault, extortion and violence in the camps at the hands of certain security forces" and non-state armed groups.[274] Attacks are particularly bad against women and children with widescale sexual assault.[275, 276] The attacks tear at social cohesion, arose tension among IDP communities, and divide host communities and IDPs. Around 18 percent of "IDP children in camps continue to face challenges in accessing both formal and non-formal education, 13 percent (of) out-of-camp IDP children have little to no access to education. Limited access to education is one of the factors increasing children's exposure to risk, including physical violence and abuse."[277]

The return of displaced people can ignite previous divisions, and, for some, can bring back trauma experienced at the hands of ISIL.[278] Several IDP camps in recent years have been closed by the Government of Iraq, even as many IDPs remain unable to return home and are forced to relocate to other areas.[279] Some returnees officially planned to go home but were forced to leave again when localities refused to allow their return.[280, 281] This has been particularly challenging for ISIL-affiliated families or small communities in rural areas that experienced extreme violence at the hands of ISIL.[282, 283, 284]

Following the return of over 500,000 IDPs to Anbar, social tension increased exponentially, as did revenge attacks and incidents where certain groups were barred from returning.[285] This raised criticism of government efforts to ensure that both local areas and IDPs themselves are ready for return.[286] The USIP found that, in Sinjar, "the majority of Sunni Arab IDPs from Sinjar Centre overwhelmingly blame their continued displacement on security actors in their areas of origin." Moreover, "Sunni Arab residents of Sinuni do not feel that they can express their ethno-sectarian identity without fear of violence against them."[287]

Local initiatives have attempted to resolve disputes and advance social cohesion in the aftermath of ISIL. For example, "in August 2017, the Anbar tribes released a document in which they rejected violence and retribution and committed to resolving problems stemming from the ISIL era. The document bans acts of vengeance, be they physical or moral, individual or collective, without referring to the judiciary or tribal customs."[288] Tribal councils have been extremely important in the return of IDPs and Islamic State-affiliated families,[289] with interviewees noting that acceptance from the local tribal council will ensure the safety of a family and initiate social cohesion.

Development partners have been significant supporters of local reconciliation, while Prime Minister al-Kadhimi has expressed a commitment to promote coexistence across communities and prioritize the return of IDPs across Iraq.[290, 291] Several local peace agreements have been successful in Anbar, Salahuddin and Ninewa, resulting in the return of many families, including those perceived to be affiliated with ISIL. Additional area-based programmes addressing, among other issues, livelihoods, basic services, the prevention of extremism and psychosocial support are required to enhance reintegration and ensure the sustainability of these agreements.[292] A common concern highlighted in key informant interviews in all three locations was that reconciliation initiatives risk being superficial and short-lived if they do not tackle structural drivers of conflict and provide compensation for previous losses. A major issue is the need for reparations for victims of ISIL who lost family members, livelihoods and houses. This highlights the need for a comprehensive approach going beyond immediate reconciliation.

Young people and children also represent a vulnerable group; people under 25 make up 60 percent of the population.[293] Among them, based on the most recent statistics, 85,450 are children[294] in temporary and informal settlements with limited access to education, justice and security. This is damaging for children at present, and could significantly detract from social cohesion in the future as constrained opportunities can amplify social tension.[295] The education system has suffered for decades, resulting in a lack of education infrastructure and qualified teachers, and outdated curricula.[296] Only 58 percent of children aged 12 to 14 attended school in 2018, with the number decreasing to 33 percent for those in upper secondary school.[297] Youth unemployment rates are very high,[298] leading to concerns of recruitment into violent extremist organizations such as ISIL.

5.3.2.1. Impact of COVID-19 on marginalized and vulnerable groups

Women have been disproportionately impacted by the secondary effects of COVID-19,[299] including through sharply rising rates of reported cases of gender-based violence.[300] In Habaniya and Qaim, over 92 percent and 61 percent of respondents to the UNDP survey noted an increase.[301, 302] Key informant interviews reported escalations during the last few months in Eastern Anbar, Nineveh, Salahuddin and Nimrud. Many women cannot independently gain information on the pandemic, are increasingly under pressure to care for their families and the sick, have less access to clean water or provisions to protect themselves from the virus, and saw particularly acute losses in income and livelihoods under the lockdown given their predominance in informal and public-sector jobs.[303, 304, 305, 306]

There are reports of women suffering excessively from COVID-19 when families deny them access to quarantine or health facilities due to strict social norms around women not being permitted to sleep outside of the home without their husband or father.[307, 308, 309] The vast majority of respondents to a survey in Habaniya stated that they would allow a female family member to go to the hospital, but almost a third of respondents stated that tribal customs or family values would not allow it.[310] Other reports indicate that women cannot obtain sexual and reproductive health care due to a lack of contraceptive provision, concerns regarding COVID-19 in hospitals and prohibitions on free movement.[311, 312]

Given an absence of women in positions of power, "women are largely absent from decision making fora and leadership roles in responses to the pandemic and its secondary impacts."[313] This poses a significant risk that responses will fail to recognize the needs of women and inadvertently widen gender inequality. A dramatic decline in the provision of services to respond to gender-based violence[314] has already had a devastating impact.

Tension towards IDPs and returnees has increased during COVID-19. Concern about potential camp closures to prevent the spread of the virus, additional stigma against IDPs due to the perception that they are diminishing public resources and may be carrying the virus, and disputes over identity and Islamic State affiliation are likely to increase the vulnerability of IDPs.[315] The Norwegian Refugee Council found that 78 percent of IDP respondents have lost their income, 55 percent have received reduced remittances, and 66 percent have cut the number of meals for their household since the pandemic began.[316] In addition, 83 percent of displaced Iraqis stated that they were less likely to send their children to school due to their weakened economic position.[317]

These pressures are compounded by a lack of resources in some areas for social cohesion activities to facilitate returns. In Nineveh, the local governorate has articulated a clear vision for returning IDPs, but reportedly does not have a budget to implement the strategy. Lockdown restrictions have also halted social cohesion activities. In Anbar, after most traditional social cohesion activities for IDPs and host communities stopped, communities reportedly became even more segregated and tensions grew.

Encouragingly though, the UNDP survey found that in three of the four survey locations the majority of respondents said that it was likely that people could coexist peacefully when someone from a different religion moved into their community.[318] However, results were mixed in Muhalabiya, with respondents almost equally divided on this issue.[319]

The IOM found that in 88 percent of places examined, three groups most disproportionately impacted by the lockdown were daily workers, IDPs and the older population.[320] Areas with the most worrying trends included Kerbala, Missan and Qadissaya. Restrictions on movement can prohibit IDPs from accessing work and essential services, creating fractures within IDP camps, and between them and host communities. There are also concerns regarding overcrowded and unsanitary conditions within the IDP camps, where reports from Médecins Sans Frontières state that social distancing is not feasible.[321]

The lack of dispute resolution structures has been acutely felt in areas with a large displaced population waiting to return. Even if some IDPs have returned, due to reasons including fear of the spread of the virus in the camps, continuous support for social cohesion and conflict resolution are vital to ensure peaceful reintegration. In west Nineveh, tribal leaders play a key role in resolving disputes over land and supporting the reintegration of IDPs. But they have been unable to come together due to the ban on group meetings. If dispute resolution structures continue to be unable to function, it is likely that social tensions will flare in the coming months, harming social cohesion, particularly for already vulnerable and marginalized groups.

The pandemic could have lasting consequences in undermining social cohesion among the largest population group, young people and children. The IOM found that for communities across Iraq, the most pressing issues were a delay in the school year, reported by 89 percent of respondents, followed by a loss of livelihoods, noted by 81 percent.[322] An assessment of vulnerable populations by the International Labour Organization found "younger workers and those in informal employment disproportionately affected."[323] Among those who were 18 to 24 years old, 25 percent reported losing unemployment due to COVID-19, with 36 percent serving as the primary source of income for their households. "Children make up the majority of the 4.5 million Iraqis at risk of falling into poverty and deprivation due to the impact of COVID-19."[324]

5.4. Security aspects of social cohesion in Iraq

The role of formal and informal security providers, and the safety and security of citizens have been major challenges for many decades. The position of security providers in protecting the State and enforcing highly coercive policies against opponents of the Government during Saddam Hussein's regime left a powerful legacy. Widespread and deep insecurity felt by many following the Iraq invasion in 2003 magnified popular concern over the activities of security providers. Before and after 2003, perceptions of these actors were conditioned by identity, religion, sect and geography. Without trusted state security forces, others emerged, offering protection to particular groups or areas.

As part of the post-conflict reconstruction effort, the Iraqi military in particular received very substantial international capacity-building support. Despite this, it was initially unable to resist the rise of ISIL and its progress towards Baghdad. This led to the mobilization of volunteer forces from around the country. Together, these formal and informal groups, with support from an international coalition, were able to militarily defeat ISIL in 2017. Following their victory, the groups were held in high regard by communities across the country, with some (such as the Counter Terrorism Service) feted as heroes, and casualties (referred to as martyrs) venerated by the public.

This groundswell of public support, initially largely non-sectarian, has not been sustained, with negative consequences for social cohesion. Accusations of corruption and resource capture have emerged particularly at local levels in

areas formerly under ISIL occupation, and areas disputed by the Federal Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government. The response of security actors to public protests in 2019 and 2020 is well documented and further eroded trust.[325] Given Iraq's recent history of insecurity, and the roles of armed actors in safeguarding or undermining it, security remains both a genuine day-to-day concern for many, and a reference point for wider contestation among different population groups, and between citizens and the Government.

The multiplicity of armed groups in Iraq poses significant challenges both horizontally between different communities and vertically between citizens and the State. Impacts on social cohesion operate on several levels. First, the groups highlight the challenges faced by the Iraqi security services and the wider state structure in protecting society from existential threats (particularly amid the resurgence of ISIL since late 2019).[326] Second, the sectarian identity of many armed groups means that other communities are often negatively affected by their presence, which intensifies sectarian tensions.[327, 328] Third, there have been allegations that different groups have committed human rights abuses with impunity.[329] Finally, the presence of multiple security actors in some areas (including the Iraqi Security Forces, counter-terrorism command, intelligence services, armed groups and sectarian groups), such as in Kirkuk, can intensify local tensions. In Mosul, over 14 militia groups are reportedly present, which increases tensions not only among the groups but also more widely across different sections of society.[330]

Interviews in Fallujah and some parts of Nineveh Governorate highlighted positive local initiatives to facilitate dialogue among armed groups, tribal leaders and community representatives. These have provided fora to identify local security problems, including deconfliction between security actors and human rights abuses, and to discuss how to address these. Interviews in other parts of Nineveh Governorate highlighted significant local tensions around armed groups and a consequent pressing need for similar dialogue structures.

A major social cohesion issue is that of future policy towards the multifaceted and highly complex armed groups operating across the country. The Government has made multiple attempts to control these groups, including by disbanding them, or bringing them under the control of the Iraqi Security Forces or the Government.[331] Prime Minister al-Kadhimi has pledged to reform the security sector, with early political appointments demonstrating this commitment.[332] Yet to date, a long-term plan on how to engage with armed groups has not yet been decided or implemented successfully.

Prior to COVID-19, the security situation had become more tenuous as ISIL reignited attacks across northern and central Iraq. This sparked concerns over the possibility of new attacks on vulnerable groups such as the Yazidis, Christians and Turkmen; reprisal attacks on groups identified as connected to the Islamic State, such as Sunni Muslims; and further displacement causing communal, regional and sectarian tension.[333, 334]

Operation Inherent Resolve predicts that there were between 14,000 and 18,000 ISIL members in Iraq and Syria in 2019,[335] with May 2020 seeing 194 ISIL attacks, the highest figure for more than two years.[336] The attacks varied in complexity, with the most sophisticated being in May 2020. It involved a strong and continuous attack on Popular Mobilization Forces units in Samarra. The attack propelled concerns over the strengthening of ISIL in Iraq and Syria, and the ability of the group to transfer armed extremists between the two countries, an "activity reminiscent of the group's build-up in 2012 and 2013."[337]

5.4.1. Impact of COVID-19 on security aspects of social cohesion

The security situation has deteriorated under COVID-19 as tension increases between the security forces and the population, particularly through securitized lockdowns and growing external tension leading to an uptick in IED attacks.[338] COVID-19 has seemingly provided room for different armed groups and security actors

to gain a stronger social presence. For example, certain groups have become particularly active in supporting communities, ensuring lockdown measures and assisting with health-care facilities.[339] As a result, some communities have started to look favourably on these groups.

The current focus on COVID-19 could expose Iraq to a further resurgence of ISIL,[340, 341, 342] which has started to engage its cells and encourage attacks.[343] With security services involved in implementing lockdown measures, ISIL members have travelled more freely to engage in new attacks.[344, 345] Evidence of this can be found in Kirkuk, Diyala and Salahuddin, all areas suffering from a lack of trust between the public and government security forces.[346] ISIL is attempting to create rural bastions across Iraq and maintain a sustained pressure,[347] and seems to be specifically locating itself in Sunni areas, prompting concerns around social cohesion between the Sunnis and other groups.[348] The United Nations Stabilization Forecast highlights a "threat of further extension of securitized control over areas formerly occupied by ISIL. This raises the potential for an increase in abuses against vulnerable populations, who are often collectively blamed for insurgent activities, and the possibility of secondary displacement of recent returnees."[349]

The increase in ISIL attacks could exacerbate vertical tensions by raising concerns that it may resume control of large swathes of Iraq. The underlying conditions that permit terrorist organization to act across Iraq have yet to be tackled.[350] Competition between security forces, a focus on COVID-19 and the deterioration of relations between Iran and the United States all create a suitable context for ISIL to re-emerge.[351] It is crucially important to step up reconstruction and stabilization efforts, build public trust, and take a comprehensive approach to social cohesion that addresses political, economic, social and security tensions contributing to insecurity.[352]

6. SUMMARY CONCLUSIONS—DILEMMAS AND IMPLICATIONS

COVID-19 has and will continue to have immediate and longer-term effects on social cohesion in Iraq, predominantly by exacerbating existing tensions and issues. National and local government responses, and the roles of the international community and civil society organizations will determine the extent to which the pandemic disrupts social cohesion and opportunities for reconciliation and social peace. The principle of 'do no harm' is crucial, and should be fully considered in developing response strategies and interventions. This will help ensure that unintended negative consequences are fully understood and will not foment violence or instability, or widen the social cohesion deficit.

Earlier sections of this report identified horizontal and vertical dimensions of social cohesion. They underlined the importance of understanding the political, economic, social and security elements. While it is not yet possible to determine the longer-term effects of COVID-19 on social cohesion, it is likely that measures to control the virus will be maintained until a viable vaccine is developed and administered. This is likely to limit recovery options and further affect social cohesion. The following discussion of some potential dilemmas and implications could help in developing policy responses.

6.1. Political

The vertical dimensions of social cohesion are explicitly political. The Government at the national and local levels has to balance the requirements of the COVID-19 response, including social distancing, provision of health care, and avenues for socioeconomic recovery through income substitution and other coping mechanisms, while maintaining and fast-tracking the reform agenda articulated by the Prime Minister and the wider Government. Additional challenges to social cohesion are likely to be generated if COVID-19 responses are not explicitly sensitive to the potential for increasing division and distrust, either within and between communities, or between the Government and the public.

The dilemma in maintaining reform momentum while meeting short-term public health and socioeconomic objectives is perhaps most explicit in terms of national elections. Keeping a commitment to a new election cycle in the context of restrictions on public movement is challenging, as is ensuring confidence in an elections process through effective election administration, especially when local and national government officials may be reassigned to COVID-19 duties or unable to access particular areas.

Tensions among different parts of the country in terms of the perception and reality of income distribution may become more explicit if resources to tackle the direct and indirect consequences of COVID-19 are perceived as benefitting mainly specific areas, particularly those liberated from ISIL, and population groups. A public health requirement for targeting, for example, may not be accepted without highly effective public communications strategies, and may be seen by those who do not 'benefit' as discriminatory. This issue has implications for international support and highlights the importance of conflict sensitivity. It also suggests the value of a broader understanding of social cohesion that ventures beyond a narrow focus on tensions created by ISIL.

The roles and resourcing of different layers of the political system can be a flashpoint. For instance, municipal governments may argue that government resources will be better spent locally, and should be allocated through municipal budgets than through the federal Government. In some countries, the devolution of resources and responsibilities for addressing COVID-19 is seen as one of the key elements of success. Taking a similar approach in Iraq, however, would run the risk of destabilizing the balance between different levels of government

and the mechanisms through which resources are allocated, given a longstanding lack of consensus on allocations to different levels. Seeking to alter the current arrangements would likely require considerable consultation and negotiation to avoid catalysing negative fallout.

6.2. Economic

There is a close interplay between economic, political and social issues in addressing COVID-19 policy dilemmas. Examples include the reduction in government revenues limiting funding for essential government programmes; the competition for jobs and resources with potential social impacts, including familial violence, arising from reduced household incomes and self-esteem among those made economically redundant; the emergence of alternative service providers who may be aligned with particular groups; and the inability of the Government to transfer resources to parts of the country in which disputes over revenue sharing cause vertical and horizontal tension (especially Basra and the southern governorates, and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and disputed areas).

As with political, social and security issues, the effects of COVID-19 on the economy and social cohesion are conditioned by time. In the short-term, the most pressing challenges are likely to be around funding for basic services, particularly health care; competition for access; and the ability of families to afford living costs. Movement restrictions are likely to further compound these problems by reducing opportunities for people predominantly in the informal economy, or for those aiming to resort to the informal economy to replace formal jobs that may have been lost.

In the medium to longer term, as with other countries in the region and around the world, COVID-19 measures might need to be maintained for longer than anticipated. Jobs may not return in the same numbers or sectors, there will be increased competition for employment from a rapidly expanding young population, and government and business investment will be progressively reduced as economic activity slows, undermining overall growth prospects.

6.3. Social

The social dimensions of cohesion are vertical and horizontal. Beyond the vertical issues discussed in the political section above, key horizontal issues comprise relationships among communities, and effects on marginalized and vulnerable groups, including women and IDPs.

Cohesion across different communities, historically affected by periods of intercommunal violence, has not so far been significantly impacted by COVID-19. Service provision may become more localized, however, and potentially more sectarian in nature, including through an increased role of armed groups in local governance and services. The increasing role of civil society organizations, while positive in many ways, may reduce trust in the State as a service provider. It is unclear to what extent progress towards the reform agenda presented by the Prime Minister will address the potential for intercommunity tension. Also ambiguous is the extent to which a lack of progress may have a unifying effect, as was the case with many who participated in the public protests in 2019 and early 2020.

COVID-19's disruption of the economy and much-reduced government revenue to address the increasing volume of basic needs will likely impose a significant drain on health care and education in particular. This has the potential to undermine social cohesion through increased competition for access, both among population groups and within communities. Severe reductions in support to more vulnerable groups could result, whether they be IDPs or poorer families in disadvantaged areas of the country, particularly in poor areas in major cities.

Women will be particularly affected by COVID-19. Social norms appear to be reducing their access to medical facilities. Increased unemployment and reduced incomes could increase familial violence.

As with other large-scale social shocks, COVID-19 may shift attitudes and behaviours, including regarding women's roles. This issue is outside the scope of this report, but changes could potentially occur in terms of increasing women's access to employment and loosening damaging social norms, including those limiting access to health care. The extent to which this relates to social cohesion is a challenging and complex area. As with any change to social norms, there is likely to be short-term resistance from those who perpetuate them. For longer-term social peace in the context of rapidly changing national population dynamics, however, these changes may be essential.

As in countries around the world, young people have been particularly affected by COVID-19, and standard response measures that include closing schools and colleges and introducing movement restrictions. A dramatic curtailing of job opportunities has left young people in a period of limbo, stalling their transition to adulthood and independence. The longer-term effects on social cohesion are not yet clear, but as with countries around the world, great challenges can arise with a large part of the population being economically unproductive and socially disenfranchised. In the short to medium term, perhaps the most significant concern relates to the Government maintaining its commitment to the reform agenda articulated through the popular protests, which involved young people from all sects and communities around the country. If the understandable government focus on COVID-19 prevents progress on promised reforms, there is considerable potential for young people to again take to the streets, reigniting vertical tensions closely associated with low levels of social cohesion in recent years.

6.4. Security

The relationship between security and security actors and social cohesion has horizonal and vertical aspects. Despite a number of serious risks, there are potentially some opportunities from COVID-19 that could produce beneficial effects.

The relationship between security actors and the public has become increasingly fraught over the past year, due in part to perceived heavy-handed policing responses to the public protests in 2019 and 2020, and the perception that armed volunteer groups are taking roles in politics and the provision of services and public goods. Just before COVID-19 hit, there were worrying signs that volunteer groups were taking explicit roles in the tensions between Iran and the United States. Should this continue, there is a significant threat of security provision becoming atomized, with different actors performing different roles, and with confused, sometimes differing political and policy positions and levels of legality.

The response to COVID-19 has the potential to entrench some of these challenges. Confusing policies and communications regarding public safety and security could inflame grievances, especially if some groups or parts of the country are perceived to be treated differently, with, for instance, more coercive methods to ensure social distancing. Similarly, unofficial security actors enforcing decisions, particularly at a local level without the requisite accountability for their actions, could fuel public mistrust.

ISIL's resurgence in parts of the country adds additional risks. Circumstantial evidence suggests that the COVID-19 period has provided space for dispersed elements of ISIL to regroup, and that their isolated locations, primarily in the western deserts, have provided an element of protection from infection. If a resurgent ISIL again becomes a threat to security and stability, even locally,[353] then there is likely to be a reprisal of the role of informal groups and a refocusing of formal security actors to meet the threat. As with previous insurgencies in 2005 and 2014, there is considerable danger that security responses seen as heavy handed, particularly in liberated areas and among the Sunni community, will damage social cohesion. They could undermine a remaining sense of coherence associated with the previous campaign against ISIL and some aspects of collective concern around the pandemic.

The re-emergence of ISIL could renew tensions between communities perceived as supporting the group and others, particularly in areas at greater risk of exposure to ISIL-related violence, such as territories formerly occupied by the group, areas disputed between the federal Government and Kurdistan Regional Government, and in mixed urban centres. This could reduce interactions among communities, preventing the movement of goods and people, and having a negative effect on the COVID-19 response in terms of the availability of health facilities and the distribution of food and other essentials. Some concerns are around the potential for forced displacement or punishment of families with perceived ISIL affiliation. This is already occurring in areas where security incidents claimed by ISIL take place, and represents a further risk of exacerbating social tension.

Despite COVID-19's potential to negatively affect security and vice versa, it could also bring people together. For instance, while the notion of volunteer armed groups providing services, including for aspects of public safety, concerns many, in some cases, these groups are perceived as 'of the area' where they operate. As such, they enjoy a degree of confidence and acceptance. The availability of additional groups to provide limited services and support, including in managing the safe movement of citizens, could be beneficial. For this to work, however, such groups would need to work closely with local governments so as not to create parallel service provision and run the risk of generating competition. The social and familial requirement to remain close to family during periods of stress and uncertainty may also encourage some group members to focus on family and community priorities. This could have the effect of reducing some tensions, although it is unlikely to resolve any underlying challenges.

7. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

This report has assessed key dimensions of social cohesion in Iraq and examined the extent to which these have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. With evidence that the pandemic is exacerbating a number of existing political, economic, social and security issues key to social cohesion, it is vital to identify mitigating measures to prevent further negative effects. There are also opportunities to develop a more comprehensive approach to social cohesion that acts on both horizontal and vertical challenges.

Without social cohesion, it will be difficult to attain the Sustainable Development Goals or achieve the central objective of leaving no one behind. SDG 16 depends on social cohesion, with its call for building peaceful and inclusive societies, access to justice for all, and effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. Enhancing social relations among different groups, easing social exclusion and strengthening the social contract between citizens and the State are prerequisites for these aims.

The following policy recommendations can support the Government, civil society and international partners in working on these issues.

National level

A more strategic national approach to social cohesion should be developed alongside immediate and short-term responses to COVID-19 and its effects on relations within society. This approach should be conflict-sensitive, people-centred and inclusive, with a dual focus on horizontal and vertical factors affecting social cohesion. It should combine urgent responses to the political context as well as longer-term commitments to providing services and opportunities that will reset the social contract, and relationships between communities, the government and citizens at large. Several actors currently work on social cohesion, but the absence of an overall national framework to guide these efforts has hindered positive results. Developing such a strategy could significantly contribute to social cohesion and reconciliation.

Long-term strategic partnerships between the Government of Iraq and the international community could cultivate an environment enabling an inclusive national approach to social cohesion. In addition to backing responses to COVID-19, international support for social cohesion and reconciliation should be maintained and predictable for the coming years. A more coherent and complementary approach among development partners could support government reconciliation priorities and processes addressing the main factors undermining social cohesion. This could build on joint strategies and plans, political support for the Government and commitment to multiyear funding. Ultimately, such measures will only be sustainable with significant government commitment and buy-in to a national process.

A strategic approach requires covering all parts of the country and leaving no one behind, as well as maintaining special attention to areas formerly occupied by ISIL. The liberated areas will remain a vital focus for social cohesion efforts, but there are important horizontal and vertical social cohesion challenges in all parts of the country. A particular focus should go to marginalized groups and communities disproportionately affected by deterioration in social cohesion.

Ensure the development, modernization and implementation of the necessary legislative framework to create a regulatory environment for social cohesion and peaceful coexistence. Several bills developed by the Parliament Permanent Committee on Reconciliation, Tribes and Religions to promote peaceful coexistence and counter hate speech, among others, have not yet been passed. This should be prioritized.

Support and empower national and subnational institutions mandated to address social cohesion and community reconciliation so they can operate within a consolidated, inclusive and shared vision. This would address current fragmentation. It includes support at the operational and policy levels; a clear definition of roles and responsibilities; and guaranteed links among relevant national and subnational institutions to ensure complementarity

and coordination, and avoid competition. Sufficient resources will be required to bring this process to fruition.

The response to COVID-19 should not detract from progress in delivering on government commitments made in the wake of recent popular protests. The underlying social cohesion challenges highlighted by the protest movement and exacerbated by COVID-19 demonstrate the need for a more inclusive national dialogue process. International support could help facilitate this.

The Government's commitment to a new election cycle should be maintained. A transparent, free and fair electoral process is vital; international support for monitoring will help build public confidence. This is in line with the expectations of the protest movement, which has been highly critical of the current system. A new election cycle perceived as fair and legitimate would significantly strengthen vertical social cohesion and demonstrate to protesters that their demands are being heard.

Local level

Support to the COVID-19 response should be inclusive and conflict sensitive, and do no harm. Care should be taken in national and international responses to COVID-19 not to deepen existing social divisions, and, where possible, to use COVID-19 responses to promote peace and reconciliation. Support should be seen as fair and equitable by different communities and in different parts of the country. It should involve local peace committees and other groups in promoting social cohesion through decision-making on service provision, rigorously avoid risks of fuelling large-scale corruption, and prevent parastatal or non-state actors from entrenching themselves further in service provision. Participatory methods should be used to identify responses and encourage community involvement where appropriate (for instance, in cleaning communal areas and providing support to those in isolation).

Clear and consistent COVID-19-related communication to citizens and the establishment of local dialogue forums are vital. Coherent public messaging from all levels of government and the security forces is needed to explain the reasons for COVID-19 containment measures. Local dialogue among government officials, security force representatives and community leaders can provide a channel for developing and communicating key messages, and an opportunity for citizens to highlight their concerns and solutions.

Despite the pressures of responding to immediate COVID-19 priorities, and the political demands articulated through popular protests, the Government should maintain existing commitments to reconciliation. This should include maintaining progress where possible on the return and reintegration of ISIL-associated families and IDPs, which should be seen in the context of the re-emergence of ISIL in parts of the country and the need to counter current rejectionist narratives. Demonstrating a commitment to social peace and reconciliation will undermine a core element of the ISIL message. Preparations to support the return of Popular Mobilization Forces volunteers to their communities, particularly in the south of the country, should be continued.

Support for local peace committees and tribal dispute resolution structures should continue despite COVID-19 restrictions. Community-led resilience and response systems can be essential tools in strengthening social cohesion among and within communities. They deserve more investment. The local peace committees and tribal dispute resolution structures in particular are uniquely placed due to their connections with local communities and understanding of local dynamics. Initiatives could include considering travel permissions and permits to allow meetings to take place under COVID-safe protocols, or facilitation of online meetings.

ANNEX I: UNDP MEASUREMENTS OF SOCIAL COHESION

UNDP measures progress through several dimensions of social cohesion, including:[354]

- **Trust:** this can be defined in different ways, including trust in a State or across communities, notions of threats and mutual trust.
- **Belonging, or a common or shared destiny**: where values are shared and there is a common sense of 'togetherness'.
- **Inclusion in economic, social and political spheres**: inclusion needs to be a choice, where 'individuals are encouraged to partake and share'.
- **Interdependence:** that is inclusive of different community, identity and religious lines.
- **Human security**: ideas of being secure in every way including financially, having access to food and not being physically targeted.
- **Negative stereotypes**: includes perceptions of other groups including suspicion or having any negative thoughts about groups of people.
- **Intergroup anxiety**: the experience of feeling at risk in the presence of competing groups.
- **Social distance**: includes whether there is stigma surrounding the engagement of adversarial groups.
- **Perceptions of social threat**: can include the measurement of notions of fear of a group's survival in society.
- **Positive feeling:** assesses the levels of positive perceptions between different groups.
- **Cultural distance:** examines perceptions of cultural similarities and differences across different groups.
- **Propensity for forgiveness:** looks at the levels of people who feel that a dispute can be resolved and crimes forgiven.
- **Propensity for retribution:** assesses the desire for retribution or justice.
- **Intergroup contact:** investigates the levels of intergroup engagement.

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ENDNOTES

1 Verbeek and Dill 2017.
2 Danish Institute for International Studies 2015.
3 The sectarian-based quota system in Iraq permits government institutions to be run by political groups based on an agreed allocation. The system risks undercutting social cohesion as it permits the allocation of power and official function to groups with mutual interests, potentially to the exclusion of others.
4 The Arab States region includes all countries that are part of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia: Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the State of Palestine, Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen.
5 United Nations 2020, p. 2
6 There are concerns that the actual figures could be much higher due to a lack of testing, access to testing and limited trust in seeking medical attention for symptoms.
7 Al-Bab 2020.
8 United Nations 2020, pp. 2-3.
9 UNDP 2020b.
10 United Nations 2020, pp. 2, 12.
11 Roess 2020
12 UNDP 2020f, p. 20.
13 The importance of vertical cohesion is increasingly recognized globally.
14 UNDP 2020f, p. 19.
15 Catholic Relief Services 2020, p. 59.
16 UNDP 2020f, p. 19.
17 Ibid, p. 18.
18 Tanzler and Grimalda 2018.
19 UNDP 2020f, p. 18.
20 Jenson 2010, p. 17.
21 OECD n.d.
22 World Bank Group 2020, p. 13.
23 Council of Europe 2010, p. 2.
24 USIP 2020a, p. 9.
25 UNICEF 2019, p. 8.
26 UNDP 2020f, p. 18.
27 Ibid., pp. 30-31.
28 Ibid., p. 10.
29 Ibn Khaldun 1958.
30 Abumelhim 2018, p. 109.
31 UNDP 2017, p. 9.
32 Ibid., p. 10.
33 Ibid., p. 15.
34 "These social movements produced varying results: proactive moderate reform in the case of Morocco's constitutional reforms in 2011; progressive change in the case of Tunisia's democratic election and new constitution; polarization in the case of Egypt; and sustained open conflict in the cases of Libya, Yemen, Syria and Iraq. The Arab political landscape similarly ranges from stable to disintegrating states" (ibid., p. 10).
35 The World Population Prospects 2019 report states that the population of the region has grown and will continue to do so over the coming years: "While population growth in Northern Africa and Western Asia [defined as including Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia, Western Sahara, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Cyprus, Georgia, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, State of Palestine, Syrian Arab Republic, Turkey, United Arab Emirates and Yemen] has been slower than in sub-Saharan Africa over recent decades, the region is also projected to continue to grow through the end of this century, adding 237 million people between 2019 and 2050 and another 170 million people between 2050 and 2100" (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, p. 6).
36 Refugee and IDP flows from conflicts have put particular pressure on some countries in the region. The IOM reports that: "At the end of 2018, the Middle East subregion hosted the largest number of refugees globally, including the refugees registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). Neighbouring countries inevitably share a disproportionate burden when it comes to hosting people seeking refuge in other countries, and this dynamic is a key feature of contemporary displacement patterns in the subregion. As countries bordering the Syrian Arab Republic and the principal hosts of Syrian refugees, Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan were all among the top 10 host countries in the world in 2018 (Turkey is 1st, Lebanon 7th and Jordan 10th). The depth of their responsibility is particularly apparent when the number of refugees in each country is compared against the national population – in Lebanon, there were 156 refugees per 1,000 inhabitants; in Jordan, 72 per 1,000; and in Turkey, 45 per 1,000.210 Other countries in the subregion, including those affected by conflict, also host many refugees, including Yemen and Iraq, and even the Syrian Arab Republic. The almost 5.5 million refugees registered with UNWRA are also located in the subregion" (IOM 2020f, pp. 83-84).
37 De Berry and Roberts 2018, p. 5.
38 USAID, MERI and USIP 2020, p. 40.
39 Mansour 2018, pp. 12-13.
40 De Berry and Roberts 2018, pp. 7-8.

41 UNDP 2020f, p. 23.
42 Ibid., p. 4.
43 Ibid., p. 23.
44 World Bank Group 2020, p. 31.
45 UNDP 2020f, pp. 23, 48.
46 Ibid., p. 50.
47 Ibid., p. 53.
48 UNDP 2020f, p. 53.
49 Norwegian Church Aid and Church of Sweden 2019, p. 3.
50 Al-Marashi and Keskin 2008, p. 247.
51 Abbas 2015.
52 Zeed 2019.
53 Due to the interchangeable use of reconciliation and social cohesion by many stakeholders in Iraq, approaches deemed as 'reconciliation' processes are included here.
54 Abbas 2015.
55 Al-Marashi and Keskin 2008.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
58 Constantini 2017.
59 Mansour 2018.
60 Wasty and Martin 2013.
61 Norwegian Church Aid and Church of Sweden 2019, p. 15.
62 Mansour 2018.
63 This Committee was established in 2007 under Order 39 and had specific responsibility for the post-conflict rebuilding of Iraq.
64 These findings were corroborated in a recent paper written by First Call Partners in 2019 and commissioned by the Danish Government, entitled "Political Economy Analysis – Promoting Social Cohesion, Peaceful Coexistence and Community Reconciliation at central level in Iraq."
65 Key international actors supporting social cohesion programming and approaches in Iraq include UNDP; UNAMI; IOM; USIP; the governments of Denmark, Germany and the United Kingdom, and a wide range of international non-governmental organizations (NGOs).
66 UNDP 2019c.
67 UNDP 2019b.
68 UNDP 2019e.
69 UNAMI 2020.
70 Local peace committees established in 2017, with support from UNDP, had official approval from the Government and were able to address a number of challenges that were negatively affecting social cohesion. Particular success occurred in supporting the returns of a significant number of families perceived as affiliated with ISIL as well as IDPs to their chosen communities through the establishment of a number of peace agreements. Some critics raised concerns with regard to the composition of the committees, despite the fact most of their members reflect different segments of the communities. Currently, UNDP is working to strengthen the capacities and representation of the committees. UNDP 2019d, 2019e.
71 IOM 2020e.
72 World Bank 2020.
73 Mansour 2018
74 Norwegian Church Aid and Church of Sweden 2019, p. 15.
75 For example, in Nineveh, approaches include projects run by PAX for Peace-Iraq such as 'The Day After' programme supporting social cohesion through dialogue between citizens and local governments; the 'Kulluna Muwatineen' (We Are All Citizens) programme that supports youth and aims to reduce ethno-sectarian tension; and other actors including Sanad for Peacebuilding, Al Messala, Peace and Freedom Organisation, and the Peace Paradigms Organisation. Other actors working on social cohesion across different locations in Iraq include Kurdistan Human Rights Watch; the Iraq Centre of Negotiation, Skills and Conflict Management; and the Tahreer Association for Development.
76 Ibid., p. 39.
77 Halawa 2020a, p. 2.
78 UNDP 2018b, p. 36.
79 The sectarian-based quota system in Iraq permits government institutions to be run by political groups based on an agreed allocation. The system risks impacting social cohesion as it permits the allocation of power and official functions to groups with mutual interests, potentially to the exclusion of others.
80 National Democratic Institute 2019a.
81 UN Habitat, IOM and UNDP 2020, p. 4.
82 National Democratic Institute 2019b.
83 Ibid, p. 19.
84 For a more detailed analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on the macroeconomic landscape of Iraq, see UNDP 2020b.
85 Halawa 2020b.
86 Bobseine 2019a.
87 Hasan 2019.
88 The New Arab 2020.
89 Al-Shadeedi, Skelton and Saleem 2020.
90 Ibid., p. 6.
91 UN Habitat, IOM and UNDP 2020, p. 5.

92 While this is the official number reported by UNAMI and OHCHR, they also refer to Prime Minister al-Kadhimi's 31 July 2020 report that 560 deaths were associated with the protests. The figure includes deaths of both demonstrators and members of the security forces.
93 UNAMI and OHCHR 2020, p. 6.
94 Human Rights Watch 2020a.
95 Ibrahim 2020.
96 Security Council Report 2020, p. 15.
97 Higel 2020.
98 Mansour 2020.
99 Ibid.
100 Halawa 2020a.
101 Knights 2020.
102 Frantzman 2020.
103 Bahiya 2020.
104 Al-Ruabie 2020.
105 Rubin 2020b.
106 Salem 2020.
107 Ibid.
108 Mercy Corps 2020, p. 5.
109 The UNDP survey was a questionnaire on livelihoods, social cohesion and COVID-19 Impact. It was conducted in four project locations which are all liberated areas situated in the north of Iraq: Toz Khormatu, Qaim, Muhalabiya and Habaniya. A limitation of this survey is that it was just conducted in these four locations, all of which were formally targeted by ISIL, and therefore it is not representative of the whole of Iraq.
110 In all locations except Habaniya, trust in the Government was higher among female respondents than among men. In Muhalabiya and Toz Khormatu, around 60 percent of female respondents reported a lot or some trust in the central Government.
111 In Toz Khomarto, 93 percent of respondents had not received any economic or humanitarian support from the local government (87 out of 93), in Qaim 95 percent had not received support (80 out of 84), in Muhalabiya 91 percent (83 out of 91), and in Habaniya 84 percent.
112 Chatham House 2020.
113 Joint NGO Statement 2020, p. 1.
114 Aziz 2020.
115 Coppola 2020.
116 This was mentioned in interviews held by First Call Partners to inform this paper.
117 Mansour, Skelton and Hussein 2020.
118 UN Habitat, IOM and UNDP 2020, p. 11.
119 Ibid., p. 11.
120 Al-Ruabie 2020.
121 With the exception of two respondents in Toz Khormatu and one respondent in Muhalabiya.
122 The findings did reveal higher levels of trust in the health-care system among women. For example, over 90 percent of female respondents in Muhalabiya and 63 percent of female respondents in Toz Khormatu and Habainya stated that they either have a lot of trust or some trust in the system.
123 See: **https://www.independent.co.uk/independentpremium/world/coronavirus-china-update-news-american-reporters-expelled-a9409521.html**. This statement was also made by WHO Iraq in a number of meetings attended by UNDP.
124 UNAMI and OHCHR 2020, p. 9.
125 Ottaway 2020.
126 UN Habitat, IOM and UNDP 2020, p. 5.
127 Norwegian Church Aid and Church of Sweden 2019, p. 3.
128 DCAF 2020.
129 USIP 2020c.
130 DCAF 2020.
131 UNAMI and UNHCR 2020, pp. iv-v.
132 Revkin 2018, p. 28.
133 Cited in Alkhudary 2020.
134 Ibid.
135 UNDP 2020a.
136 UNHCR 2018, p. 3.
137 Integrity 2018, pp. 2, 17.
138 Ibid., p.17.
139 UNHCR 2018, p. 3.
140 Integrity 2018, p. 24.
141 Bobseine 2019b, p. 11.
142 Tarzi 2020.
143 Ibid.
144 UN-Habitat, IOM and UNDP 2020, p. 12.
145 Ibid.
146 UNDP COVID-19 Response in Iraq Bimonthly Update (June-July, August-September 2020).
147 UN Women 2020.

148 While only 30 out of 91 respondents in Muhalabiya, and 27 out of 93 respondents in Toz Khormatu stated that gender-based violence had increased following COVID-19, the majority of respondents in both locations were men, which could impact the status of answers.
149 UNDP 2020a.
150 Human Rights Watch 2020b.
151 Rasheed 2018, p. 58.
152 Skelton and Saleem 2019.
153 International Crisis Group 2020.
154 Ibid., p. 13.
155 Ala'Aldeen 2020.
156 Ibid.
157 Aldroubi 2020a.
158 Ala'Aldeen 2020.
159 Alaaldin 2019.
160 Alaaldin 2020a.
161 BBC News 2020b.
162 Ibid.
163 Jiyad 2020, p. 8.
164 Felbab-Brown 2020.
165 Schiavi 2020.
166 Occhiuto 2020.
167 Ibid.
168 Ibid.
169 Humanitarian Programme Cycle 2020a, p. 12.
170 McKernan 2020.
171 Al-Monitor 2020b.
172 Hamasaeed 2020.
173 Watson 2020.
174 Humanitarian Programme Cycle 2020a, p. 4.
175 Ibid.
176 Norwegian Church Aid and Church of Sweden 2019, p. 3.
177 Coppola 2020.
178 FAO 2020.
179 See WFP, World Bank, IFAD and FAO 2020 for further information on the impact of COVID-19 on food security.
180 Additional information can also be found at ibid.
181 Ibid.
182 IOM 2020c, p. 3.
183 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2020, p. 20.
184 Halawa 2020b.
185 UN-Habitat, IOM and UNDP 2020, p. 12.
186 Mercy Corps 2020, p. 4.
187 UN-Habitat, IOM and UNDP 2020, p. 12.
188 Ibid., p. 12.
189 Coppola 2020.
190 IOM 2020c, p. 8.
191 Ibid, p. 9.
192 Ibid, p. 9.
193 Norwegian Refugee Council and Danish Refugee Council 2020, p. 2.
194 Mercy Corps 2020.
195 Ground Truth Solutions 2020, p. 4.
196 UNDP 2020a.
197 Haddad 2019, p. 2.
198 Wainscott 2019, p. 8.
199 Ibid.
200 Ibid.
201 Alaaldin 2018, p. 17.
202 Ibid.
203 Ibid, p. 19.
204 Ibid, p. 17.
205 National Democratic Institute 2019b, p. 23.
206 Craft 2020.
207 Mikail 2020.
208 Haddad 2019, p. 6.
209 Halawa 2020b.

210 Clausen 2019, p. 35,
211 Mikail 2020.
212 Dodge et al. 2018, pp. 21-22.
213 USIP 2020a, p. 16.
214 Ibid.
215 Ibid., p.17.
216 Ibid.
217 Ibid., p. 18.
218 Mikail 2020.
219 Dodge et al. 2018, pp. 21-22.
220 USIP 2020a, p. 16.
221 Ibid.
222 Mikai 2020.
223 Ibid.
224 Jiyad 2020, p. 7.
225 Alaaldin 2020b.
226 Clausen 2019, p. 26; Joint NGO Statement 2020, p. 1.
227 USIP 2020a, p. 145.
228 Of the 550,000 Yezidis in Iraq in 2014, an estimated 360,000 were displaced, 6,417 were kidnapped, 1,293 were killed and 2,745 children were orphaned during Islamic State control (Salloum 2020, p. 16).
229 Joint NGO Statement 2020, p. 1.
230 Medicins Sans Frontieres 2020b.
231 Ibid.
232 USIP 2020a, pp. 8, 13.
233 Ibid, p.13.
234 Since 2003, the number of Christians in Iraq has fallen from 1.4 million to approximately 120,000-150,000 (Salloum 2020, p. 12).
235 Ibid., p. 6.
236 USIP 2020a, p. 9.
237 Ibid.
238 Norwegian Church Aid and Church of Sweden 2019.
239 UNDP 2019a.
240 The specific districts in Nineway were targeted as they are known for having very diverse constituencies prone to tension and flare-ups. They were the Hamdaniya and Tall kayf districts, and the Qayyarah, Bashiqa, Hamam al-Aliland Al-Shura subdistricts.
241 UNDP 2020d.
242 O'Driscoll 2019, p. 11.
243 Skelton and Saleem 2019, p. 12
244 Ibid.
245 Halawa 2020a, p. 1.
246 Salloum 2020, p. 16.
247 USIP 2020b, p. 1.
248 Levels of distrust were slightly lower in Toz Khormatu (40 percent) and Muhalbiya (22 percent).
249 As mentioned above, these communities suffered intensively at the hands of ISIL, meaning that there is a significant lack of trust between different groups living in the area. The region has also been impacted by severe socioeconomic concerns.
250 Mercy Corps 2020, p. 5.
251 In Toz Khormatu, 79 percent of respondents reported no change, while 21 percent felt less connected.
252 Joint NGO Statement 2020, p. 1.
253 IOM 2020b, p. 2.
254 Hamasaeed 2020.
255 Beaujouan, Rasheed and Taha 2020, p. 22.
256 Coppola 2020; Al-Shadeedi, Skelton and Saleem 2020, p. 7.
257 Examples include training 60 women on sewing facemasks for PPE in Ninewa with Kurdistan Human Rights Watch; local peace committees in Anbar, Nineveh and Salah al-Din sterilizing streets and public spaces, including markets; UNDP supporting women-led initiatives and assisting local peace committees to distribute food, clothes and sterilization equipment; training social workers to provide psychological support; assisting youth group members and promoting social cohesion through art; and capacity-building and interfaith cooperation (UNDP 2020f, pp. 2-5).
258 UNDP 2020f, p. 1.
259 Dodge et al. 2018; O'Driscoll 2018, pp. 15-16.
260 Ibid, p. 16.
261 Ibid.
262 National Democratic Institute 2019a, p. 4; Oxfam 2020b, p. 21.
263 Revkin 2018, p. 4.
264 Dodge et al. 2018, p. 21.
265 USAID, MERI and USIP 2020, p. 37.
266 Ibid., p. 6.

267 Humanitarian Programme Cycle 2020b, p.18.
268 Humanitarian Programme Cycle 2020b, p.5.
269 Humanitarian Programme Cycle 2020a, p.19.
270 International Republican Institute 2018, p. 21.
271 Ibid., p. 21.
272 Halawa 2020a, p. 3.
273 Ibid.
274 Ibid.
275 Ibid., pp. 3-4.
276 Oxfam 2020, p. 14.
277 Humanitarian Programme Cycle 2020a, p. 20.
278 USAID, MERI and USIP 2020, p .37.
279 Halawa 2020a, p. 2.
280 IOM 2020d, p. 6.
281 Slim 2019, pp. 24-25.
282 UNDP 2018a, p. 47; Oxfam 2020b, p. 16.
283 IOM 2020d, pp. 5, 11.
284 USIP 2020a, p. 26.
285 IOM 2020d, p. 6.
286 Halawa 2020a, p. 6.
287 USIP 2020a, p. 6
288 Zeed 2019.
289 IOM 2020d, p. 17.
290 Zenit 2020.
291 Rubin 2020a.
292 UNDP 2020e.
293 Humanitarian Programme Cycle 2020a, p. 11.
294 Here children are defined as those aged between 0-17 years-old, as stipulated by the Iraq 2020 Humanitarian Response Plan (Humanitarian Programme Cycle 2020b).
295 Humanitarian Programme Cycle 2020b, p. 48.
296 IRFAD Foundation for Development Research (2020) 'Iraq Education'.
297 World Bank 2019.
298 See UNDP 2020b for specific details on youth unemployment rates.
299 Alon et al. 2020.
300 Oxfam 2020a, p. 4.
301 While only 30 out of 91 respondents in Muhalabiya, and 27 out of 93 respondents in Toz Khormatu stated that gender-based violence had increased following COVID-19, the majority of respondents in both locations were men, which could impact the direction of the answers.
302 UNDP 2020a.
303 Oxfam 2020a, pp. 4, 9.
304 UN-Habitat, IOM and UNDP 2020, p. 13.
305 Mercy Corps 2020.
306 Aydin 2020.
307 Oxfam 2020a. p. 24.
308 GBV Sub-Cluster 2020, pp. 1, 7.
309 Aydin 2020.
310 UNDP 2020a.
311 Oxfam 2020a, p. 4.
312 Medicins Sans Frontieres 2020b.
313 Mercy Corps 2020, p. 6.
314 This carried severe consequences for victims of gender-based violence as service providers were unable to access victims, and could not refer them to other essential services, move them to secure housing, help them access justice, or ensure that they could get access to services and know their rights (GBV Sub-Cluster 2020, p. 13).
315 UN-Habitat, IOM and UNDP 2020, p. 14.
316 Norwegian Refugee Council 2020, pp. 10, 11, 16.
317 Ibid., p. 21.
318 In response to this question, 100% of respondents in Qaim, 97% in Habaniya and approximately 70% of respondents in Toz Khormatu stated that it was either very likely or somewhat likely that someone moving to the community from a different religion would be able to coexist in peace.
319 In Muhalabiya, 52% of respondents stated that it was either very likely or somewhat likely, with 48% stating that it is either somewhat unlikely (12%) or very unlikely (36%).
320 IOM 2020a, p. 1.
321 Medicins Sans Frontieres 2020a.
322 IOM 2020a, p. 1.
323 ILO 2020, p. 2.
324 Iraqi Ministry of Planning et al. 2020.
325 UNAMI and OHCHR 2020, p. 6.

326 Al-Shadeedi, Skelton and Saleem 2020, p. 6.
327 International Institute for Strategic Studies (2019) 'Iran's Networks of Influence – Chapter Four: Iraq'
328 Jiyad 2020, p. 8.
329 Ibid., p. 6.
330 USAID, MERI and USIP 2020, p. 37.
331 Ibid., p..15.
332 Knights 2020.
333 UN-Habitat, IOM and UNDP 2020, p. 11
334 Social Inquiry 2020.
335 Operation Inherent Resolve 2019, p. 2.
336 Jiyad 2020, p. 14.
337 Ibid., p. 14.
338 Ibid., p. 15.
339 UN-Habitat, IOM and UNDP 2020, p. 11.
340 Joint NGO Statement 2020, p.2.
341 Mehrl and Thurner 2020.
342 Ochab 2020.
343 Joint NGO Statement 2020, p. 2.
344 UN-Habitat, IOM and UNDP 2020, p.11.
345 Rubin, Jakes and Schmitt 2020.
346 UN-Habitat, IOM and UNDP 2020, p.11.
347 Rubin, Jakes and Schmitt 2020.
348 Rubin, Jakes and Schmitt 2020; Ochab 2020.
349 UN Habitat, IOM and UNDP 2020, p. 11.
350 Ibid., p.15.
351 Ibid.
352 Ibid.
353 UN Deputy Secretary-General, closing remarks to the High Level Meeting of Ministers of Finance, 8 September 2020
354 UNDP 2020f, pp.30-31.

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