

Iraq's Labour Market Report

Youth unemployment a major challenge for Iraq's next government. By Robert Edwards and Mohammed Rwanduzy



Students consider their options at Ishik University careers day in Erbil, May 15, 2018. Photo: Robert Edwards / Rudaw

ERBIL, Kurdistan Region – Iraq's next government has a problem. Almost half the population is under the age of 19 and unemployment among 15-24 year olds already stands at 18 percent. Unless opportunities are created for them, their disillusionment will only grow.

According to the latest figures from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the unemployment rate across Iraq stands at 11 percent.

Unemployment among young people is a particular concern. Judging by the low turnout in the May 12 parliamentary election, the ongoing mass migration to Europe, and the continued appeal of militia groups offering alternative paid employment, many are losing faith in government pledges to address the problem.

Many will be surprised to learn that the rate of youth unemployment is actually higher among young people with higher education. This politically engaged group has high

Iraq's Labour Market Report

expectations and, like those who initiated protests across the Arab world in 2011, won't respond well to disappointment.

"Especially in Kurdistan, due to this financial crisis, finding jobs has become very difficult," said Bahouz, a student of International Relations and Diplomacy at Erbil's Ishik University.

"There is a crisis in every aspect. You can't find a good job. It was easier before, but it has become difficult now," he said.



Bahouz says he could emigrate if the financial situation does not improve. Photo: Robert Edwards / Rudaw

The Kurdistan Region has been bedeviled by financial woes for the past four years, beginning with the loss of its budget from the central government in 2014, then exacerbated by the crash of 2016, an expensive war against ISIS, and the loss of oil revenues in Kirkuk.

"Generally, in Iraq, working is difficult because the economy of the area is very backward due to politics, due to the financial crisis, the war with Daesh [ISIS] terrorists, and internal party rivalries," said Mustafah, a fourth year law student.

"Of course the Kurdistan Region was better [in terms of job opportunities], but you know any country that is at war with the biggest terrorist group in the world, and if its finances aren't like those of a big country, it will certainly be marred with crisis."

Iraq's Labour Market Report



Mustafah believes there are few opportunities for work in the diaspora. Photo: Robert Edwards / Rudaw

This environment is made worse by a pervasive culture of ‘wasta’ – the use of family ties to secure work known colloquially as ‘Vitamin W’ – which can leave some of the smartest and most skilled on the scrapheap.

“The governmental sector is full of wasta – occupied by wasta,” said Sarhang Othman, head of Ishik University’s career development centre.

“Sometimes I ask my students, why are you not looking for a job? And they say, sir, I don’t need to look for a job. Why? Because my uncle is the owner of this company so he will employ me.”

Ishik held a career fair on Tuesday, inviting 30 companies to speak to students about job opportunities, volunteering, research, and options to work and study abroad.

Iraq's Labour Market Report



Sarhang Othman, head of Ishik University's career development centre. Photo: Robert Edwards / Rudaw

"We have companies here who say they don't want someone from wasta," said Othman. "They say we want candidates that have good skills and can do my requirements."

Not everyone sees wasta as a barrier to climbing the social ladder. Shang, a fourth year law student, said there are plenty of opportunities for those with the grit to persevere.

"They all think that because of nepotism and backing, they can't find jobs," Shang said of her fellow students. "This is very wrong because you need to look for jobs on your own. If you don't get accepted for a job, you don't need to lose hope. You need to try more."

She agreed the financial crisis has taken its toll on hiring, but insists young people with skills and ability can succeed.

"Kurdistan has given ample opportunities to the youth, but it is the youth who are at fault for giving up too soon."

Iraq's Labour Market Report



Shang says it's too easy for young people to blame the culture of 'wasta' for their own failures. Photo: Robert Edwards / Rudaw

For all this can-do attitude, many students will continue looking overseas for a better offer if the economic fortunes of Kurdistan and Iraq don't improve soon. This brain-drain effect will only undermine economic recovery and development.

"There are fewer opportunities here," said Shead, a first year student of architecture. "I'm thinking about going to the Netherlands – there are really great architecture firms there."



Shead says private sector opportunities are limited in Iraq and Kurdistan. Photo: Robert Edwards / Rudaw

She's not the only one to contemplate emigrating. According to the Iraqi Ministry of Migration, over 25,000 people from the Kurdistan Region, mostly young men, left the

Iraq's Labour Market Report

country between 2015 and 2017 hoping for asylum in Europe. The figures could be considerably larger as no accurate data is available.

"If there is the opportunity, I will leave," said Bahouz. "Life is better [in the west] compared to Kurdistan and Iraq. Certainly I have thought about that. After finishing university, if Kurdistan remains the same, then yes [I am leaving]."



Students learn about opportunities to work and study abroad. Photo: Robert Edwards / Rudaw

Mustafah isn't convinced.

"No, no I don't plan to emigrate to any foreign country," he said. "I haven't had the idea to live anywhere other than Kurdistan. I believe an individual, in their country, amongst their family and with people they share the same language with, if they can't find a job, I don't believe they, in diaspora, in a place where the language differs, can find a job."

Shang also says she'll stay to contribute her skills.

"I frankly don't want to leave Kurdistan because Kurdistan needs people like us. It is necessary that we work in Kurdistan. I am not thinking about living abroad. If it is for tourism, it is okay, but for living? I have never thought about leaving Kurdistan," she said.

Iraq's Labour Market Report



Ishik University invited 30 companies and organizations to its careers day on May 15. Photo: Robert Edwards / Rudaw

A possible remedy to the dearth of opportunities is to attract more private sector investment and diversify the economy away from oil. But Othman said this must go hand-in-hand with proactive efforts by government to help young people into work.

“The government should open a department for employing people. There is a ministry of labour, and they are taking care of workers, arranging training course for people who can't study in universities, but they are not caring about employing people. We need to make this department more active,” he said.

The call for a proactive government response to youth unemployment is echoed by his students.

“Give attention to the young people. There are really good, talented people, but they are ignored by the government,” said Shead.

“Start reforms and establish a better cabinet this time, to invest more in projects, to encourage our youth in every way,” said Bahouz.

Mustafah thinks Baghdad and Erbil need to get their houses in order so young people can begin planning ahead with certainty.



Iraq' s Labour Market Report

"The government, especially the Iraqi government, should protect the areas and the provinces it considers Iraq and invest more in it," he said.

"We call on the Kurdistan Regional Government for the internal problems and the problems with the Iraqi government to be solved urgently so that people can think about their future in peace and tranquility."

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