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Iraq's young agents of change

Supporting youth-led civic
engagement after Tishreen

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Summary

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- Over the past two decades, successive national and international initiatives – along with waves of protest movements – have failed to adequately address one of the key grievances of young people in Iraq: the lack of opportunities that can properly prepare them for a future in which they can be active participants in government, the economy and wider society.
 - Many studies have examined the links between youth grievances and protest movements in Iraq, but there is limited research on what comes after such protests for young people, especially when their demands are unmet. This research paper focuses on what the Tishreen movement has taught the current generation of youth activists about civic engagement, and how the legacy of the 2019 protests has spurred many to contribute purposefully to society through political activism, entrepreneurship and youth-led civil society movements.
 - The paper draws on a set of interviews with young people who are pushing for constructive change within Iraq’s political process, economy and civil society. Their experiences and insights are presented through case studies that illustrate how young Iraqis are taking the initiative and, through their ‘everyday politics’, acting as forces for change within their communities in areas including politics, entrepreneurship, women’s rights, human rights, and climate and environmental activism.
 - The case studies also illustrate the systemic challenges – in the form of red lines and red tape – that young Iraqis encounter in their efforts to challenge existing structures and norms, advocate for change and drive incremental reform.
 - Iraqi governments have often treated the country’s youth as a group to engage with – including through initiatives such as youth councils and parliaments – when doing so aligns with wider administrative and political interests. International stakeholders have typically viewed young Iraqis primarily as recipients of aid or funding, in line with donors’ predefined priorities. These perspectives overlook the potential of young people to be genuine and proactive partners, capable of leading initiatives and influencing strategic decisions.
 - The current absence of a mass protest movement in Iraq should not be interpreted as a sign that young people’s appetite for change has diminished, or that they are more accepting of the status quo. The paper sets out recommendations for how reform-minded officials within Iraq, along with the country’s international partners, can better support the ambitions of the current generation of young political and civil society actors and entrepreneurs.

01

Introduction

Five years on from the start of the Tishreen movement, the current absence of a mass protest movement in Iraq should not be interpreted as a sign that young people have become less ambitious, or more compliant with the system. But there has been a strategic shift in their approach to activism and civic engagement, as a response to the high risks of more direct political confrontation.

The October 2019 Tishreen uprising was a transformative moment in the lives of many young Iraqis, presenting them with a vision of what an alternative Iraq might be. The government's eventual resignation and the subsequent amendment of the electoral law to allow early elections to take place represented considerable shifts, and opened possibilities for systemic change. This has motivated young Iraqis to continue working for reform in their daily lives, even after the violent suppression of the protests.

Over the past two decades, successive national and international initiatives have failed to adequately address one of the key grievances of young people in Iraq: the lack of opportunities that can properly prepare them for a future in which they can be active participants in government, the economy, environmental politics and wider society. The problem of lack of provision for the country's youth is particularly acute given that annual population growth in Iraq currently stands at 2.2 per cent (as at 2023), compared with an average of 1.5 per cent for the Middle East and North Africa region as a whole, and 0.9 per cent globally,¹ and more than 60 per cent of Iraq's population are under the age of 25.²

¹ World Bank (2023), 'Population growth (annual %)', <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.GROW> (accessed 22 Aug. 2024).

² UNICEF (2019), *MENA Generation 2030: investing in children and youth today to secure a prosperous region tomorrow*, Amman: UNICEF, <https://www.unicef.org/mena/media/4141/file/MENA-Gen2030.pdf>; UNICEF (2023), 'Country Office Annual Report 2023: Iraq', 2023, <https://www.unicef.org/media/152576/file/Iraq-2023-COAR.pdf>.

Young Iraqis have been one of the largest groups taking part in the mass protests that have periodically shaken Iraq since 2011, with their numbers gradually increasing between then and Tishreen in 2019.³ But many analysts have argued that it is difficult to imagine another mass street protest movement gaining traction in the near future, not least because of the authorities' brutal suppression of the Tishreen uprising,⁴ resulting in the death of over 600 protesters,⁵ and the eventual co-option of the protests' momentum by elements of the establishment whose principal interest was in upholding the political status quo.⁶

The shrinking of the civic space in Iraq following the Tishreen protests does not mean that young Iraqis are any less disillusioned with their country's political and social infrastructure; nor have they lost their ambition to push for change. The current generation – both those who joined or supported the protests five years ago, and younger people who have been inspired by the legacy of Tishreen – are turning to what Ben Kerkvliet calls 'everyday politics'⁷ to access services, navigate bureaucracy, find meaningful work and pursue their ambitions for a decent life, in ways that might not be considered traditional forms of political expression and participation.

The formative experiences and current grievances of today's young Iraqis have been shaped by the post-2003 environment, particularly the systemic challenges at the root of the Tishreen protests.

This new generation has little or no personal memory of Saddam Hussein and the Baath regime. The formative experiences and current grievances of today's young Iraqis have been shaped by the post-2003 environment, particularly the systemic challenges at the root of the Tishreen protests.

³ For further background on the Tishreen protests, see Bobseine, H. (2019), 'Iraqi youth protesters: Who they are, what they want, and what's next', *Middle East Institute*, 14 October 2019, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/iraqi-youth-protesters-who-they-are-what-they-want-and-whats-next>; Hassan, H. (2019), 'Iraq Protests: A New Social Movement Is Challenging Sectarian Power', Carnegie Middle East Center, 4 November 2019, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2019/11/04/iraq-protests-new-social-movement-is-challenging-sectarian-power-pub-80256>.

⁴ Given the current climate of relative economic and political stability in Iraq, the likelihood of a protest movement arising soon seems low. However, in a discussion between the author and an Iraqi political sociologist in Baghdad in March 2023, the latter highlighted profound discontent simmering among young Iraqis, suggesting that should another uprising occur at this juncture, it would dwarf the Tishreen protests in scale and intensity: 'If another uprising emerges now, it will be bigger and bloodier. It will make Tishreen look like a joke.'

⁵ Amnesty International (2020), 'Iraq: Protest death toll surges as security forces resume brutal repression', 23 January 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/01/iraq-protest-death-toll-surges-as-security-forces-resume-brutal-repression>.

⁶ Associated Press via France 24 (2022), 'Iraq's Sadrist told to quit parliament but keep protesting', 2 August 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220802-iraq-s-sadrist-told-to-quit-parliament-but-keep-protesting>.

⁷ Kerkvliet defines everyday politics as 'people embracing, complying with, adjusting, and contesting norms and rules regarding authority over, production of, or allocation of resources and doing so in quiet, mundane, and subtle expressions and acts that are rarely organised or direct'. Kerkvliet, B. (2009), 'Everyday politics in peasant societies (and ours)', *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 36(1), pp. 227–243, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150902820487>.

While there is a significant body of research examining links between youth grievances and protest movements in Iraq,⁸ there is limited research on what comes after such protests for young people,⁹ especially when their demands are unmet. This research paper examines what the Tishreen movement has taught young people about calling for reform, and how its legacy has spurred them to contribute purposefully to their society through political activism, entrepreneurship and youth-led civil society movements.

Replacing confrontation with 'constructive resistance'

While the work and insights of the current generation of youth activists in Iraq might, at first glance, seem less radical than the actions of those who took to the streets in 2019, the anti-establishment and system-changing ideals of the Tishreen movement exert a subtle but powerful influence on how today's activists frame and engage with their causes. Young people are no less ambitious, or more accepting of the status quo, than they were at the time of the mass protests five years ago. But there has been a strategic shift in their approach, as a response to the high risks associated with more direct political confrontation.

The forms of resistance discussed in this paper are in line with what Sørensen et al. have termed 'constructive resistance'.¹⁰ By highlighting these practices through the lives and stories of young people in Iraq, the paper sheds light on how, faced with an ever-shrinking civic space, the political radicalism of the Tishreen uprising has taken on new forms.

Overcoming red lines and red tape

The ambition of young people in Iraq who are working for constructive and sustainable change is often frustrated by barriers created and upheld by the current political system – described by many as a 'red line' (خط أحمر – khat Ahmar). In this paper, red lines are used to describe the impediments, enforced by state and parastatal groups, that young people encounter, and that prevent them from

⁸ See, for example, International Crisis Group (2021), *Iraq's Tishreen Uprising: From Barricades to Ballot Box*, Middle East Report No 223, 26 July 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/223-iraqs-tishreen-uprising-barricades-ballot-box>; Jiyad, S., Küçükkeleş, M. and Schillings, T. (2021), *Economic Drivers of Youth Discontent in Iraq: The Voice of Young People in Kurdistan, Baghdad, Basra and Thi-Qa*, Global Partners Governance, February 2021, <https://gpgovernance.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Economic-Drivers-of-Youth-Political-Discontent-in-Iraq-The-Voice-of-Young-People-in-Kurdistan-Baghdad-Basra-and-Thi-Qar.pdf>.

⁹ For a notable exception, see Alkhudary, T. (2023), 'From Muhasasa to Mawatana: Consociationalism and Identity Transformation within the Protest Movement in Federal Iraq, 2011–2019', *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 30(1), pp. 145–163, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537113.2023.2230712>.

¹⁰ 'Constructive resistance' embodies the initiative to independently forge the desired societal changes, stepping away from traditional power structures. While it can be an individual effort, it's more commonly a collective endeavour. To qualify as 'constructive resistance', actions must be creative and oppositional, encompassing a broad spectrum of activities. Resistance may subtly or overtly challenge prevailing power dynamics, such as state authority, corporate dominance, or patriarchal norms. The constructive aspect can manifest in various ways, from tangible projects that spark inspiration to symbolic gestures that challenge or even dismantle entrenched behaviours and ideologies. See Sørensen, M., Vinthagen, S. and Johansen, J. (2023), *Constructive Resistance: Resisting Injustice by Creating Solutions*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

advancing or achieving their full potential. These red lines take various forms, from the violent suppression of the Tishreen uprising to less overt restrictions on young people's access to political institutions, jobs and funding for civil society initiatives. For young entrepreneurs in particular, red lines can manifest as red tape.

This paper argues that social, political and economic change can happen through different models of everyday politics and constructive resistance. In other words, groups of ordinary young people, working on similar or complementary activities that challenge existing structures and norms in Iraq, can be among the most important agents of change. Together, they have potential to shift the systemic barriers – the red lines and red tape – that young Iraqis encounter in their efforts to advocate for change and drive incremental reform inside the system.

The next chapter presents case studies that illustrate how young people in Iraq are navigating the political, business and civil society spheres to push for change. Chapter 3 then discusses how the efforts of young activists and entrepreneurs can bring about positive change within their own communities, but also describes how systemic challenges continue to constrain the broader impact of these efforts. Chapter 4 identifies lessons for future policymaking, drawing on the record of past and current youth-oriented interventions and programmes. The final chapter offers a set of policy recommendations, intended to help reform-minded officials within Iraq, international stakeholders, and youth groups themselves, foster an environment in which young people can work together to bring about lasting change in the country.

02

Forces of change: political, business and civil society activism

The four interview-based case studies presented in this chapter reflect the stories and experiences of young people who have been working, within their communities across Iraq, to push for change in the country's political process, economy and civil society.

This section introduces four persona-based case studies, each highlighting projects and initiatives by young Iraqis who are working to forge alternative futures and challenge and circumvent existing power structures. The case studies represent diverse manifestations of 'constructive resistance', collectively serving as a rallying point for the broader struggle of young Iraqis. This collective momentum embodies a force that has the potential to bring about substantial change.

The four case studies are presented as a distillation of the stories and experiences of young people who have been pushing for change within Iraq's political process, economy and – by advocating for human rights, women's rights or environmentalism – civil society. The personas are based on insights from 40 interviews, conducted by the author in person in Anbar, Baghdad, Basra, Erbil and Sulaimaniya, as well as by phone with young people in Dhi Qar, Misan, Muthanna, Najaf and Wasit governorates, between March and September 2023. Personal details have been changed to protect the identities of the interviewees.

Mustafa, from protests to politics

Mustafa, a political activist from Dhi Qar, in southern Iraq, has played a central role in post-Tishreen political activism. Born in the late 1990s, Mustafa has few memories of Iraq under Saddam Hussein but harbours significant grievances towards the current government. Despite his family's reservations about political engagement, Mustafa's desire to see a better future led him to become an activist. He has participated in numerous protests across Iraq since 2015, notably in Dhi Qar and Baghdad, and played an active role in mobilizing the mass October 2019 demonstrations in his home town. Reflecting on these experiences, Mustafa said: 'It was only during these protests that I truly felt Iraqi – seeing everyone united, demanding dignity and equality.'¹¹ His sentiment echoes the slogan that resonated across Iraq in 2019: 'We want a country.'¹²

For many young protesters, Tishreen offered an alternative community, a substitute for the political and social infrastructure that the political elite was failing to provide.

'Tishreen revolutionized my perspective; it illuminated the potential of Iraq and the energy of our youth,' Mustafa said.¹³ His involvement at various protest sites across the country opened his eyes to the unity and resolve of Iraqi citizens: 'These protests transcended mere demonstrations; they were a crucible for community-building.'¹⁴ For many young protesters, Tishreen offered an alternative community, a substitute for the political and social infrastructure that the political elite was failing to provide. Mustafa recalled:

We didn't just protest; we cultivated a community. We exchanged stories, learned skills, and pursued new hobbies. Our days were filled with discussions, learning, singing and painting. All this was mixed with tears because of the continuous oppression, or laughter since we were all there for each other.¹⁵

This shared experience profoundly impacted young people as they sought to understand and engage with the political landscape. Mustafa noted the emergence of libraries, discussion forums and events within the protest sites, all aimed at dissecting the political process and charting a path forward. These spaces became hubs for learning and activism, signalling the increasing involvement and engagement of young Iraqis in shaping their nation's future.¹⁶

¹¹ Author's interview with a young political activist, Baghdad, March 2023.

¹² BBC News (2019), 'مظاهرات العراق: هل تنجح الاحتجاجات المتوقعة في إحداث علامة فارقة في تاريخ البلاد؟', [Iraq demonstrations: Will the expected protests succeed in creating a milestone in the country's history?], 22 October 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/inthepress-50133131>.

¹³ Author's interview with a young political activist, Baghdad, March 2023.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Alsalihi, A. (2019), 'ثورة وكتاب.. ساحات مظاهرات البصرة تتحول إلى مراكز ثقافية', [Revolution and a book: Basra's demonstration squares turn into cultural centres], Al Jazeera, 29 December 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.net/culture/2019/12/29/ساحات-تظاهرات-البصرة-تتحول-إلى-مراكز>.

Prior to 2019, many Iraqis had become increasingly disillusioned with the mainstream political parties that emerged after 2003 under the Muhasasa system – the country's power-sharing arrangement based on ethno-sectarian identities. They viewed these 'traditional' parties as thriving on a system where political parties share national resources among themselves, for their own benefit and to the disadvantage of their constituents. In 2021, according to the findings of a survey conducted by the Arab Reform Initiative, more than 63 percent of young Iraqis thought that the political system as they experienced it was worse than before the US-led invasion in 2003.¹⁷ Moreover, in a 2022 survey conducted by Gallup, 63 per cent of respondents said that they lacked confidence in their national government, compared with 44 per cent in 2008.¹⁸

The authorities violently dispersed Tishreen's visible presence on the streets from 2019 through tactics of repression, co-option and demonization. However, they underestimated the movement's influence on young people like Mustafa. As the Iraqi sociologist Faris Kamal Nadhmi had previously observed:

It's not a novelty to see the authorities betting on their ideology rooted in spreading fear, helplessness, despair, nihilism, and alienation. However, a generation of free youth emerges out of the womb of the current [2015] protest movement. Unyieldingly, they confidently and cautiously move from the bottleneck of the Iraqi tragedy towards a horizon of light and change. Their sole ideology: a remaining hope for a civil nation and social justice.¹⁹

The discussions during the Tishreen protests sparked a new determination in Mustafa and his peers, fuelling a transition towards a more serious engagement in politics: 'Our conversations evolved into deep analyses of optimal electoral systems, the governance structure of Iraq, the significance of decentralization, and strategies to curb corruption.'²⁰ These dialogues also laid the foundation for the demands articulated through the protests²¹ – some of which were achieved, including the resignation of the government, the revision of electoral laws and the scheduling of early elections.²²

Despite these relative successes, and even though a few 'Tishreeni' parties won seats in the 2021 parliamentary elections, Mustafa acknowledged the difficulties faced by the movement:

The entrenched system proved resistant to change. The lack of experience in politics, coupled with the immense expectations from the people, and the relentless opposition from established political factions, hindered our progress ... Some of the politicians

¹⁷ Al Shami, F. (2022), *Perceptions and Trajectories of Youth in Baghdad, Al-Basra, and Mosul after the 2014 Conflict with ISIS: Survey Findings*, Arab Reform Initiative (ARI), p. 33, <https://s3.eu-central-1.amazonaws.com/storage.arab-reform.net/ari/2022/09/12161139/arab-reform-initiative-2022-09-EN-perceptions-and-trajectories-of-youth-in-baghdad-al-basra-and-mosul-after-the-2014-conflict-with-isis.pdf>.

¹⁸ Vigers, B. (2023), 'Iraqis Look Back: Is Life Better Today?', 20 March 2023, Gallup, <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/472253/looking-back-iraq-life-better-today.aspx>.

¹⁹ Nadhmi, F. (2016), 'سيكولوجيا الأمل والتغيير السياسي القادم في العراق' [The psychology of hope ... and the upcoming political change in Iraq], Ahewar, 1 March 2016, <https://www.ahewar.org/debat/s.asp?aid=507183>.

²⁰ Author's interview with a young political activist, Baghdad, March 2023.

²¹ Ajam discussed the alternative culture that emerged from the Tishreen uprising, where the youth have changed their political perceptions. See Ajam, A. (2022), 'انتفاضة تشرين العراقية: الثقافة البديلة' [Iraqi Tishreen Uprising: Alternative Culture], in Al-Jaffal, O. (ed) (2022), *The Scent of Crushed Pepper: Narrative, history, and analysis of Iraq's uprisings*, Baghdad: Dar Al-Rafidain.

²² Enabling Peace in Iraq Center (2021), 'The Long Game: Iraq's 'Tishreen' Movement and the Struggle for Reform', October 2021, https://enablingpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Tishreen_Report_October_2021.pdf.

we initially supported eventually joined parties connected to the political elite. These elites were adept at co-opting them through financial incentives, coercion, or by deceiving them with promises of reform.²³

To illustrate this point, Mustafa gave several examples of Tishreeni MPs who ultimately became part of factions linked to the largest bloc in parliament, the Shiite Coordination Framework (SCF).²⁴

The creation of new parties has been just one way of working towards a new way of doing politics in Iraq. Recognizing the system's resistance to change, and the control over state resources and connections to armed groups enjoyed by the country's elites, Mustafa and his peers understand that winning seats at elections does not necessarily translate into governing power. In response, young political activists remain committed to educating themselves and their community, striving to develop and promote alternatives both within and outside the existing system.

While trying to support newly established political parties and raise awareness about the political process, Mustafa and his colleagues have also encountered internal challenges, primarily because they have limited resources – especially when compared with Iraq's mainstream parties. The latter, having benefited from state resources, have built a strong client base by providing jobs and social security for their supporters.²⁵ In contrast, newer political entities have struggled with their inexperience in political organization, leading to disagreements, coordination issues and other internal conflicts. This was evident as parties that emerged from the Tishreen protests experienced a decline in membership and support. One such example is Imtidad, which won 16 seats in the 2021 elections but then quickly lost members and support.²⁶

At the same time as the Tishreen activists were grappling with these internal difficulties, the wider public's expectations of what the protest movement could achieve remained high. Mustafa and his friends reflected:

Frequently, we would question new parties' contributions, and how they differ from other parties ... In upcoming elections, we anticipate a decline in support for such parties, or any party for that matter, as many see no value in participating in a system perceived as unchangeable.²⁷

Describing the harassment of young political activists by political elites or government institutions, Mustafa said: 'Some of us received phone calls urging us to stop our social media posts, others were co-opted to work with them, and a few even faced judicial warrants.' He joked: 'Now, we post common but critical content on social media, then compete to see who gets harassed the most.'²⁸

²³ Author's interview with a young political activist, Baghdad, March 2023.

²⁴ The SCF was established following the 2021 elections, bringing together Shiite parties with a common interest in maintaining the political status quo. The Tishreen protests had been primarily directed against these parties and their dominance over the government.

²⁵ Dodge, T. and Mansour, R. (2021), *Politically sanctioned corruption and barriers to reform in Iraq*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/06/politically-sanctioned-corruption-and-barriers-reform-iraq>.

²⁶ Shafaq News (2022), 'Five members of Imtidad resign, the Movement was shocked', 23 May 2022, <https://shafaq.com/en/Iraq/Five-members-of-Imtidad-resign-the-Movement-was-shocked>.

²⁷ Author's interview with young political activists, Baghdad, March 2023.

²⁸ Author's interview with a young political activist, Baghdad, September 2023.

Iraq's 'traditional' parties have not hesitated to employ intimidation tactics and circumvent accountability mechanisms to target political adversaries.²⁹ Mustafa said that he has personally been subject to threats from Iran-aligned groups, and even from Iraqi government officials, due to his opposition to Iran's interference in the country's affairs.³⁰

International organizations and policymakers have seen hope in Mustafa and his peers, viewing them as representatives of a younger generation of Iraqis with fresh perspectives. Eager to support and swiftly integrate newer political parties into the governance system, they have facilitated capacity-building training for groups established since Tishreen. Despite finding these sessions informative, Mustafa expressed scepticism about their applicability in Iraq, stating: 'While the training on democracy and governance could be relevant in Europe, the dominance of Iraq's political elite makes it challenging to implement these learnings here.'³¹ He highlighted that these external training initiatives fell short of equipping new politicians and MPs to stand on an equal footing with the political establishment, especially since the political system has proved to be resistant to change through the insertion of new political actors alone. In Mustafa's view:

Rather than focusing on these training sessions, we would have greatly benefited from understanding lessons from other contexts where change was achieved through political opposition. Learning how to maintain unity and coordination among diverse opposition groups would have been incredibly valuable.³²

Recognizing that holding seats in parliament is insufficient in itself, Mustafa and his fellow activists are re-evaluating their approach to pushing for change, including through a shift in focus towards more grassroots politics. Mustafa acknowledged:

We're grappling with over two decades of compounded issues, leading to a significant erosion of public trust and interest in the political process. It's crucial to rekindle this trust by engaging directly with the community.³³

Activists like Mustafa have adopted the motto 'consciousness leads' (الوعي قائد – *alwaey qayid*), reflecting their commitment to fostering political consciousness across Iraq. They work with various institutions across a number of governorates, emphasizing the critical need for accountability, political and economic reform, and the preservation of freedom of expression at a time of deepening restrictions. Mustafa actively participates in media discussions where he emphasizes the importance of tackling politically sanctioned corruption and impunity. With his peers, he is preparing a new cohort of political candidates for upcoming elections, campaigning against the continued crackdown on free speech, and opposing restrictive proposed laws and the arrests of fellow activists.

²⁹ Mansour, R. (2023), *Tackling Iraq's unaccountable state: A networked approach to mobilizing reformers*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://doi.org/10.55317/9781784135911>.

³⁰ Author's interview with a young political activist, Baghdad, September 2023.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

Mustafa and his colleagues are determined to work collaboratively to improve the existing political framework. He aims to be part of a robust accountability system that actively reduces the impact of politically sanctioned corruption by working with a wide network of partners – including reformist bureaucrats, legal experts, media institutions and civil society.³⁴ By pushing for the inclusion of additional reformist candidates in the political process, Mustafa's ambition is not only to inspire others to follow suit, but also to initiate change from within the system itself.³⁵ He and his peers are challenging the status quo and raising awareness by engaging with formal politics, particularly through collaboration with reformists within the system who can offer support or protection. In this way, activists like Mustafa are no longer just confronting the political system on the streets; instead, they are working towards creating solutions by initiating constructive forms of resistance.

Leyla's journey as an entrepreneur

Leyla, from Sulaimaniya in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), is an entrepreneur with a small business selling handmade goods that reflect the rich heritage of Iraq and Kurdistan. She has been actively engaged in Iraq's entrepreneur community for the past six years, contributing to the growth and innovation within the sector by building her own business and sharing knowledge and experience within the network. A computer science graduate from the University of Sulaimani, Leyla – like many graduates in the KRI and across Iraq – felt under pressure, both from her family and from wider society, to get a job in the public sector. She said that her parents had even identified a relative who could secure a position for her in return for a payment of some 10 million Iraqi dinars (around \$7,500).³⁶ Leyla and her contemporaries noted that such payments are widespread across Iraq.³⁷ Although it is illegal for public officials to accept bribes,³⁸ some still take advantage of limited transparency as to how public sector jobs are allocated, taking payments to facilitate employment.³⁹ However, Leyla was determined to take a different career path, particularly after seeing protests in both Baghdad and Sulaimaniya

³⁴ Renad Mansour argues that an effective approach to accountability could involve 'connectivity-building' among reformists in the bureaucracy, legal professionals and members of civil society. See Mansour (2023), *Tackling Iraq's unaccountable state*.

³⁵ Iraqi sociologist Faris Kamal Nadhmi has observed that the Tishreen movement has evolved into distinct segments, with certain factions gaining momentum, particularly those involved in protest activities since 2014. Individuals who took part in the Tishreen protests and played active roles in its processes are emerging as the foundation of what could be described as a post-Tishreen generation which can influence the political process. See Muwaffaq, R. (2021), 'الجيل التشريعي: مع «الجيل التشريعي»', *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, 16 October 2021, <https://www.alquds.co.uk/ال-باحث-الاجتماعي-ال-عراقي-فارس-كمال-نظ>.

³⁶ Author's interview with a young entrepreneur, Sulaimaniya, March 2023.

³⁷ Author's interview with young entrepreneurs in Baghdad and Sulaimaniya, March 2023.

³⁸ As stipulated in paragraph 319 of Iraq's penal code (No. 111 of 1969, as amended), any public official who accepts a bribe is liable to a penalty of up to 10 years in prison. See https://sherloc.unodc.org/cld/uploads/res/document/irq/1969/penal_code_html/Iraq_The_Penal_Code_1969ENG.pdf.

³⁹ Maher, A. (2021), 'Iraq corruption: how ministry officials make millions in 'cash for jobs' schemes', *The National*, 26 March 2021, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/iraq-corruption-how-ministry-officials-make-millions-in-cash-for-jobs-schemes-1.1190570>.

where young people were variously demanding better services and working conditions, the prompt payment of salaries, and stronger measures to root out corruption. As Leyla put it:

I don't want to rely on a precarious system where salaries are inconsistent, productivity is low, and personal growth is stifled. I aspire to achieve more for myself and my community.⁴⁰

While the Tishreen protests didn't extend to the KRI, Leyla stayed connected with her friends in the south, supporting them and sharing insights and lessons from past protests in Sulaimaniya. Tishreen was fuelled by young Iraqis who wanted better economic opportunities, especially since, at the time of the protests, the government could not resort to its habitual response to the problem of youth unemployment – expanding the public sector – due to Iraq's worsening economic situation.

Aware of the stark realities of the jobs market, with hundreds of thousands of young Iraqis competing for limited opportunities, and the government apparently unprepared to address recent graduates' needs, Leyla thought about leaving the KRI. She contemplated a future in the UK, attracted by the prospect of further education and career opportunities, and an improved quality of life. However, she was acutely aware of the challenges such a move entailed, particularly for a young Kurdish woman.

To boost her chances of building a successful career, Leyla actively sought to enhance her proficiency in English as well as her 'soft' skills. To do this, she joined training courses and seminars, either in person or online via platforms like YouTube and educational websites. These activities brought her into contact with a vibrant community of like-minded young people, all keen to work together to develop creative solutions to strengthen the economy and redefine the trajectory of their country.

Wanting to showcase her culture, and with the support of this active community of young people, Leyla launched an Instagram account to promote her small business. She explained: 'I realized there was a lack of culturally representative gifts for people to take abroad, showcasing the beauty of our country.'⁴¹

During the Tishreen uprising, Leyla was inspired by the enthusiasm among young Iraqis for Iraqi-made products and businesses. Activists launched campaigns with slogans like 'Made in Iraq' and, more provocatively, 'Let it Rot' (خليها تخبس – Khaleiha Tkhees – encouraging a boycott of Iranian goods), which gained significant influence across Iraq.⁴² Such campaigns underscored the underlying issue, in the eyes of many young Iraqis, of the extent of foreign interference in their country's affairs. In particular, many young people spoke out against Iran's involvement in Iraqi politics, and decried what they saw as an influx of low-quality Iranian products.

⁴⁰ Author's interview with a young entrepreneur, Sulaimaniya, March 2023.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Al-Husseini, Z. (2019), 'العراقيون يدعون لمقاطعة البضائع المستوردة دعماً للمنتج المحلي', [Iraqis call for a boycott of imported goods in support of the local product], 7 December 2019, <http://newsabah.com/newspaper/200371>.

Despite her ambition, Leyla had substantial difficulty in securing financial support for her business. Her attempts to secure a loan from banks or government institutions were impeded by a mix of unclear procedures, red tape and, at times, corruption. Eventually, she resorted to using her savings and a family loan to fund her venture. Acknowledging her advantageous position,⁴³ Leyla reflected:

I realize that my more privileged background played a significant role in enabling me to start this business comfortably. I know that many others, without similar resources or support, may not have the same opportunities.⁴⁴

Young entrepreneurs in Iraq find that red tape, rather than explicit red lines, poses a significant challenge to setting up a business. While such obstacles are common in many countries, the extent of the bureaucracy manifests in a specific way in Iraq, sometimes serving as a mechanism for elites to further their own interests. Bureaucratic processes are often chaotic and lacking in clarity, which can hinder business operations and make it difficult for new entrants to navigate the system effectively.

While red tape is common in many countries, the extent of the bureaucracy manifests in a specific way in Iraq, sometimes serving as a mechanism for elites to further their own interests.

Leyla considered formally registering her business as her customer base grew, but she struggled at first with the bureaucracy this entailed. Parts of the process became easier once the KRI government introduced new measures to streamline business registration,⁴⁵ although Leyla pointed out that the path to establishing and growing a business in the KRI remains difficult, reflecting the lack of a start-up culture as well as widespread corruption. Her counterparts in Baghdad and Basra have encountered challenges similar to – and sometimes more severe than – Leyla's. In those cities, problems of corruption and bureaucracy have significantly complicated the efforts of people looking to start their own business.⁴⁶

Leyla's opinion of Iraq's recently introduced Riyada programme – set up by the prime minister's office to nurture young entrepreneurs through the provision of training and small loans to selected projects⁴⁷ – was mixed. She recognized the initiative's potential, but remained sceptical: 'Such programmes, though well

⁴³ In Iraq, many young entrepreneurs, particularly those participating in international projects, tend to be university-educated and have the financial stability required to invest their time and resources into entrepreneurial endeavours. For these younger generations, entrepreneurship transcends mere business; it embodies creativity, self-expression, social activism and a commitment to the public good. See Küçükkeleş, M. (2021), *Women's Economic Empowerment in Iraq: Voices of Female Entrepreneurs*, Report, Global Partners Governance, November 2021, <https://gpgovernance.net/publications/womens-economic-empowerment-in-iraq-voices-of-female-entrepreneurs>.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ KRI Government website (undated), 'Business Registration System', *Kurdistan Regional Government*, <https://business.digital.gov.krd/en>.

⁴⁶ Norwegian Refugee Council (2023), 'Iraqi Youth Entrepreneurship Barometer Report', 2023, Oslo: Norwegian Refugee Council, <https://www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/reports/iraqi-youth-barometer/iraqi-youth-barometer--en.pdf>

⁴⁷ Riyada (undated), 'ريادة: نحو مجتمع ريادي' [Entrepreneurship: towards an entrepreneurial community], <https://riyada.iq>.

intentioned, won't yield the desired outcomes unless we confront and resolve the fundamental barriers to private sector growth in Iraq – namely, pervasive corruption and excessive red tape.⁴⁸

Leyla also reflected on the impact of international projects designed to promote private sector growth in Iraq. Notably, she appreciated the crucial support and knowledge such schemes offered:

It was invaluable to receive their backing. The resources, space and funding they provided were fundamental in kick-starting businesses.⁴⁹

However, she pointed to the systemic impediments within Iraq that can undermine the gains from external support:

While these international organizations equipped us with the know-how for starting a business and even advocated for legislative reforms, the absence of political will and the prevailing inequality in opportunities present substantial barriers. Young entrepreneurs face an uphill battle in making progress without the right connections.⁵⁰

For Leyla, entrepreneurship is about more than pure financial gain. She views her business as part of a broader mission within her community: 'I've found more than a business here; it's a space of mutual growth, learning and support.'⁵¹ But despite the support that she gets from fellow entrepreneurs and like-minded groups both locally and nationally, Leyla is well aware of the harsh realities faced by many entrepreneurs in Iraq. Demands for bribes are commonplace, and political connections are needed to help navigate the system.⁵²

Leyla understands that there can be ethical dilemmas for people looking to expand their businesses – including the temptation to engage in bribery, enter into dubious but politically expedient alliances, or otherwise take a risk and confront intimidation. In one particularly telling experience:

A politically connected businessperson once offered to back my business in exchange for public acknowledgment as my sponsor. I declined, preferring to keep my business small rather than aligning it with that political faction.⁵³

Iraq's young entrepreneurs are trying to play their part in advocating for the economic reforms demanded as part of the Tishreen uprising. They have been doing this through setting up organizations, meeting with officials and publishing evidence-based research to support their calls for reforms.⁵⁴ But fundamental changes are needed to tackle an oversized public sector, and a private sector under the sway of political elites and often marred by nepotism. Without such changes,

⁴⁸ Author's interview with a young entrepreneur, Baghdad, September 2023.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Al-Shadeedi, H., al-Waeli, M., Alshamary, M. and Tabaqchali, A. (2021), *Expanding Access to Banks in Iraq: Challenges & Pathways to Reform*, Report, Institute of Regional and International Studies, September 2021, https://auis.edu.krd/iris/sites/default/files/iris_iraqeconomicreview_digital_1.pdf.

⁵³ Author's interview with a young entrepreneur, Sulaimaniya, September 2023.

⁵⁴ One example of this is KAPITA, a youth-led organization that is working towards economic development. See Hameed, M., Munir, E. and Salim, S. (undated), 'Fueling the Iraqi Entrepreneurial Scene: Insights from KAPITA's Programs', KAPITA, <https://www.kapita.iq/content/issue/fueling-iraqi-entrepreneurial-scene-insights-kapita-programs>.

young people will continue to face significant barriers in their careers, and a burgeoning group of young entrepreneurs will struggle to find their footing in a system that seems stacked against them.

Fundamental changes are needed to tackle an oversized public sector, and a private sector under the sway of political elites and often marred by nepotism. Without such changes, young people will continue to face significant barriers in their careers.

It is important to acknowledge, meanwhile, that some entrepreneurs are willing to draw on their connections to the country's political elite to establish and expand businesses in the private sector. Where this involves financial support, a significant injection of capital might go some way towards getting a particular business off the ground, but there are concerns about the uneven playing field this perpetuates. As Leyla put it: 'I know that there is always competition within businesses, but it feels like there are certain people who can overcome bureaucracy and corruption very easily, and within a few months they have a fully developed business.'⁵⁵ Her remark points to a broader issue: enterprises backed by political affiliates and certain influential business figures in Iraq tend to flourish, giving rise to concerns about unfair advantages and potential monopolies in some sectors.

Leyla sees herself as part of a transformative wave aiming to enhance livelihoods through economic development. She understands the necessity of a collaborative, multi-stakeholder approach, involving a government fully willing to promote job creation, investors on the lookout for viable business opportunities, and a vibrant youth population eager for employment in a country brimming with potential. She emphasized the significance of collective effort, stating:

Only by uniting forces with various players in the government, civil society and the economic sector can we truly effect change. Whether it's shaping policy or shifting societal attitudes towards public/private sector employment, our strength lies in our collective effort.⁵⁶

For independent entrepreneurs like Leyla, everyday politics and constructive resistance mean challenging the traditional expectation of public sector employment in Iraq. Aware that relying on jobs in the public sector is not a sustainable solution, they are actively seeking alternatives through entrepreneurship. Leyla and her peers hope that their efforts contribute to developing a foundation for the private sector in Iraq that will in turn enable more diversified economic opportunities.

⁵⁵ Author's interview with a young entrepreneur, Baghdad, September 2023.

⁵⁶ Author's interview with a young entrepreneur, Sulaimaniya, September 2023.

Sarah's mission to advance women's rights

Sarah is a human rights activist who has been working with a women's rights NGO for a number of years. A native of Baghdad, Sarah has long been an advocate for equality and justice, initially while still at school and then throughout her university career. Her journey has not been without personal challenges. She was abused by a distant family member when she was a child. When she confided in her mother, she was advised to remain silent, to avoid drawing attention to herself or to the family, and to hope the abuse would not happen again. Reflecting on this, Sarah said:

I was deeply disturbed by this advice, but I felt obliged to respect my mother's guidance. With time, I've come to understand her perspective. She acted out of fear, aware of the societal judgment we might face and the absence of legal protection for women in our society.⁵⁷

As she grew older, Sarah found her voice and gained awareness of her rights. She has channelled her experience to become a force for change, and is proactively involved in campaigns aimed at combating harassment of women and girls in Iraq, advocating for robust legal frameworks and striving for societal equality. She remarked:

My family's stance was to remain silent, not to speak out. But we need to speak out, and we need to make things better, if not for us, then for the generation after us.⁵⁸

Having weighed up her options between trying for a career in politics or engaging more deeply in civil society, Sarah eventually chose the latter, recognizing the formidable challenges facing women in political life in Iraq:

Venturing into politics, especially as a woman, is hugely challenging. It demands strong political alliances, and I haven't found any party that aligns with my values and lets me advocate for them freely.⁵⁹

Even so, she has not ruled out a transition into politics in the future, and is building useful networks through her advocacy work:

At present, I've managed to cultivate some influential connections within ministries and parliament. While their ability to assist is limited by their own allegiances, their support has been instrumental for our initiatives in civil society.⁶⁰

As she started out, Sarah connected with others who shared her vision for change. Meeting fellow activists in advocacy campaigns and protests propelled her into a community committed to championing human rights and women's rights. This marked the beginning of her journey as an advocate, driven by her resolve to transform personal hardship into collective action for a more just society. She is seemingly not alone in this ambition: a national youth and adolescent survey found that more than 80 per cent of young Iraqis want to see gender equality.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Author's interview with an activist, Baghdad, June 2023.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ United Nations Populations Fund (2021), 'National Adolescents & Youth Survey | Health & Women [Infographic]', <https://iraq.unfpa.org/en/publications/national-adolescents-youth-survey-health-women-infographic>.

Sarah aligned herself with an organization that was deeply involved in women's rights and legislative advocacy, contributing to key campaigns to defend freedom of expression, human rights and women's rights. A significant focus was advocacy for an anti-domestic violence law – a movement met with strong resistance from Islamist political parties intent on preserving patriarchal norms. Sarah and her colleagues in women's NGOs demonstrated remarkable resilience in the face of such opposition: 'Through concerted efforts, we blocked regressive legislation, including the controversial Jaffari law, which would have permitted the legal marriage of girls as young as nine.'⁶²

The struggle goes on, however, as restrictions on women's rights deepen in Iraq – especially after Tishreen⁶³ – with the government and armed groups attempting to suppress women's increased participation in politics and society. Recent campaigns against use of the term 'gender' in public communications (including traditional and social media) reveal an effort to suppress discourse around women's rights, resulting in scrutiny and harassment of women's rights activists.⁶⁴ According to Sarah and her peers, state interference extends to financial control, project approval and monitoring of organizations, placing unwarranted pressure on civil society.⁶⁵

The struggle goes on, as restrictions on women's rights deepen in Iraq – especially after Tishreen – with the government and armed groups attempting to suppress women's increased participation in politics and society.

The work of many of Iraq's civil society organizations, particularly those focusing on human rights and women's rights, is supported by international funding. While this financial assistance has been crucial for sustaining entities like the one Sarah is involved with, it has not been without its drawbacks. Sarah pointed out the complexities involved, observing: 'Some organizations undertake activities that aren't seen as urgent simply because they align with the donors' stipulations.'⁶⁶ Her remarks refer to capacity-building programmes where the same groups of people participate in multiple training sessions even when these have little or no relevance to their work. Sarah also noted that competition for funding among organizations can at times hinder collaboration on projects, leading to inefficiency. In her view,

⁶² Author's interview with an activist, Baghdad, June 2023.

⁶³ Zahraa Ali discusses how the Tishreen uprising has been instrumental for Iraqi women in reclaiming their space within a context traditionally dominated by militarization, patriarchy and privatization. Through active involvement in the protest movements, women have found unprecedented opportunities to assert their presence and voice in public life. See Ali, Z. (2022), 'عراقيات وثائرات' [Iraqi and revolutionary women], in Al-Jaffal, O. (ed.) (2022), *The Scent of Crushed Pepper: Narrative, history, and analysis of Iraq's uprisings*, Baghdad: Dar Al-Rafidain.

⁶⁴ Amnesty International (2023), 'Iraq: Authorities must immediately reverse media ban on the terms 'homosexuality' and 'gender'', 9 August 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/iraq-authorities-must-immediately-reverse-media-ban-terms-homosexuality-and-gender>; Alkhudary, T. (2023), 'As Iraq backslides on gender equality, where are its women MPs?', Al Jazeera, 9 September 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/9/9/as-iraq-backslides-on-gender-equality-where-are-its-women-mps>.

⁶⁵ Author's interviews with activists in Baghdad, Anbar and Basra, 2023.

⁶⁶ Author's interview with an activist, Baghdad, June 2023.

there are two types of civil society activists in Iraq: 'There are those genuinely committed to driving change, and those primarily looking to benefit personally from the available funding.'⁶⁷

Sarah's NGO has suffered severe setbacks since being blacklisted from working with universities (both public and private) and other official institutions.⁶⁸ She described the mounting challenges for her organization, as well as the personal impact of the clampdown – including on her own safety:

We're grappling with serious hurdles. Online trolls target us, our activities are hindered due to funding constraints, and we face intimidation from armed factions. Rather than receiving protection from the government, we find our work increasingly restricted ... I was compelled to relocate because of a smear campaign against me. They spread false narratives about me and our organization, accusing us of undermining Iraq's cultural values. In reality, though, our sole aim is to advocate for women's and girls' rights and foster a safe environment for them.⁶⁹

Women in southern Iraq face even graver risks, as was starkly highlighted by the assassination of Reham Yaacoub in Basra in 2020. Prior to her murder, Yaacoub, a medical doctor and prominent social entrepreneur who ran a women's gym in the city, had been subject to harassment as militias orchestrated misinformation and disinformation campaigns against her, falsely associating her with political involvement with the US consulate in Basra.⁷⁰ Sarah had herself escaped an assassination attempt while carrying out work with an international organization in southern Iraq.⁷¹

In response to the mounting pressures and risks, Sarah and her colleagues had to rework their strategies and scale back operations. The proliferation of misinformation campaigns, the surge of populist rhetoric in political discourse, and the misuse of state apparatus to suppress dissent have significantly hampered their ability to function openly. Sarah explained:

We've had to adopt a more discreet approach, curtailing our public engagements and interactions with the international community. Even our language has been carefully revised to avert potential backlash. In extreme situations, some of our fellow activists have had to relocate to different cities to ensure their safety.⁷²

These remarks underscore the critical need for solidarity and support in the fight for women's rights in Iraq. As Sarah put it: 'It's crucial for both the international community and Iraqis to rally behind locally driven initiatives that champion women's rights and counteract the misinformation campaigns targeting women's rights defenders.'⁷³

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Al-Alem Al-Jadeed (2023), 'ماذا وراء حظر التعامل مع منظمات المجتمع المدني؟' [What is behind the ban on dealing with civil society organizations?], 30 November 2023, <https://al-aalem.com/ماذا-وراء-حظر-التعامل-مع-منظمات-المجتمع-المدني/>.

⁶⁹ Author's interview with an activist, Baghdad, June 2023.

⁷⁰ For a fuller account of Reham Yaacoub's life and activism, see Robin-D'Cruz, B. (2020), 'Why Did They Kill Riham Yacoub? The Murder of a Civil Society Activist in Basra, 24 August 2020, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2020/08/24/why-did-they-kill-riham-yacoub-the-murder-of-a-civil-society-activist-in-basra>. See also Al-Hassan, A. (2022), 'البياء التي قتلت صاحبها' [The 'ya' that killed its owner], in Al-Jaffal, O. (ed.) (2022), *The Scent of Crushed Pepper: Narrative, history, and analysis of Iraq's uprisings*, Baghdad: Dar Al-Rafidain. (In Arabic, the letter ياء ['ya'] is added to verbs to indicate the feminine form.)

⁷¹ Author's interview with an activist, Baghdad, June 2023.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Author's interview with an activist, Baghdad, September 2023.

Ahmed and the fight for the environment

Ahmed, a lawyer from Basra, in southern Iraq, is an environmental activist. He now spends much of his time learning about, raising awareness of, and advocating for climate and environmental issues facing his city and country. Iraq is under immense threat from climate change, a reality not lost on the country's youth. Rivers and lakes are drying up, rural communities are experiencing severe droughts, and the impacts of increasing dust storms and intense heat loom large, with temperatures soaring above 50°C annually.⁷⁴

Ahmed is determined to do all he can to understand and mitigate the environmental crisis gripping his region. As environmental degradation deepens, he is informing himself about climate change and examining the government's actions – or lack of action – in addressing the challenges and risks:

The government is falling short, not even meeting the most basic requirements to ready Iraq for the impending consequences [of climate change]. Our city faces grave risk, with people being forced to migrate due to water scarcity. Yet it appears that the government's focus is solely on oil extraction, neglecting the pressing environmental issues at our doorstep.⁷⁵

Ahmed joined a group of volunteers dedicated to raising environmental awareness, using social media platforms to document degradation and initiating online campaigns to protect vital resources like rivers and marshes from pollution and depletion.

He is well aware of the influence of the Tishreen protests and previous mass demonstrations on the strategies now being used by environmental activists, stating: 'The protests taught us that we deserve and could achieve our rights, and we installed this idea in the minds of future generations.'⁷⁶ Pointing to a friend sitting next to him, he added:

See my friend here ... When the protests happened, he was very young, maybe 19 or 20 years old. He saw what we were able to achieve, and he was inspired by us and decided that he too could campaign for the rights of his [Marsh Arab] people.⁷⁷

Along with his peers, Ahmed actively lobbies and engages with government officials to ensure that key environmental legislation is implemented and that new measures introduced by the government do not do further damage to the environment. Most recently, he has been part of ongoing work to amend Iraq's 2009 law on the protection and improvement of the environment, in an effort to ensure it responds more effectively to the growing threats that the country faces due to climate change.

Ahmed is also part of a newly formed network of civil society actors, academics and activists in Basra who share the goal of improving and protecting the local environment. This network has created a sense of community and support for Ahmed and his peers. It functions both as a means of coordinating the activities

⁷⁴ For a fuller account of the impacts of climate change in Iraq, see Aziz, R. (2023), 'The Silent Enemy: How Climate Change is Wreaking Havoc in Iraq', International Organization for Migration, 28 November 2023, <https://storyteller.iom.int/stories/silent-enemy-how-climate-change-wreaking-havoc-iraq>.

⁷⁵ Author's interview with an environmental activist, Basra, January 2023.

⁷⁶ Author's interview with environmental activists, Basra, January 2023.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

of its members, and as a form of protection for all those working on climate and the environment by demonstrating to the Iraqi authorities that climate activism is a shared endeavour. As Ahmed described it:

The reason we are so vulnerable is because we are individuals working alone; we don't have crowds to back us up in the way that those who participated in Tishreen did ... Through this network, we will show them that if they go after one of us, they will have to go after all of us.⁷⁸

While environmental activism is often perceived to be 'safer' than political activism, it is increasingly coming under scrutiny, potentially putting activists like Ahmed at risk. In early 2023, for instance, Jassim Al-Asadi, director of the environmental protection NGO Nature Iraq, was reported to have been abducted and detained by an unknown armed group. After his release, more than two weeks later, Al-Asadi described having been tortured and interrogated by his captors.⁷⁹

One of the principal challenges relates to the substantial resources required for the work of environmental activists to have meaningful impact. Collaboration with government and local authorities is vital, yet a significant barrier exists in the form of political apathy and lack of political will. In the experience of one former minister: 'Environmental concerns are often sidelined or entirely neglected by political leaders preoccupied with other priorities such as political manoeuvring, security and economic issues.'⁸⁰

Additionally, in Ahmed's experience: 'The political elite's focus on immediate profits often leads to negligence towards environmental repercussions and public welfare.'⁸¹ A stark example is the water crisis in Basra. Despite the availability of financial resources and expertise and despite past initiatives aimed at improving the water system, corruption and neglect have thwarted progress over the past two decades. For residents, the consequences of poor access to clean water are severe. In 2018, for example, large protests erupted in the city after more than 100,000 people – among them Ahmed and other members of his family – needed hospital treatment after being poisoned by contaminated water.⁸²

In recent years, there has been a surge of initiatives aimed at addressing climate and environmental issues in Iraq, many bolstered by international support. However, Ahmed said that a lack of coordination across these projects has been a serious flaw. As he saw it: 'This disorganization has not only led to confusion within civil society, but has also fragmented efforts, diminishing their overall impact.'⁸³

The disjointed landscape has fostered a rivalrous rather than collaborative environment among environmental activists; as they compete for funding, they inadvertently work against each other's interests.

⁷⁸ Author's interview with an environmental activist, Basra, November and January 2023.

⁷⁹ Frontline Defenders (2023), 'Environmental human rights defender Jassim Al-Asadi released by his kidnapers after 2 weeks', Frontline Defenders, 15 February 2023, <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/environmental-human-rights-defender-jassim-al-asadi-released-after-2-weeks>.

⁸⁰ Author's interview with a former minister, Sulaimaniya, September 2023.

⁸¹ Author's interview with an environmental activist, Basra, January 2023.

⁸² Human Rights Watch (2019), *Basra is Thirsty: Iraq's Failure to Manage the Water Crisis*, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/07/22/basra-thirsty/iraqs-failure-manage-water-crisis>; author's interview with an environmental activist, Basra, January 2023.

⁸³ Author's interview with an environmental activist, Basra, January 2023.

Ahmed stressed the critical need to establish a robust accountability system for environmental policies. The absence of such a framework has historically allowed institutions to evade responsibility for environmental protection and sustainability. Ahmed highlighted the vital role of youth and civil society in bridging this accountability gap, emphasizing that activists, supported by the international community, have the power to advocate for and enforce comprehensive environmental policies. This collaborative push is essential not only for improving the present living conditions of Iraqis, but also to ensure a sustainable and prosperous future for the country's young people.

03

Advancing the forces of change

Collaboration among and between groups of like-minded young people can amplify their efforts to overcome systemic challenges and influence constructive change, through shared insights, mutual support and synchronized activities.

The stories of Mustafa, Leyla, Sarah and Ahmed show that young Iraqis are taking the initiative and acting as forces for change in their communities. In their ‘everyday politics’, they are making small changes to their immediate networks and communities in areas of politics, entrepreneurship, women’s rights and human rights, and climate and environmental activism. Unwilling to accept the status quo, they are pushing boundaries to influence constructive change. At the same time, they are raising awareness and inspiring others to join them in building a better country.

The incremental changes initiated by young activists are making a tangible difference within their immediate communities. But, as described in the four personas’ narratives, their broader impact is constrained by systemic challenges – in the form of both red lines and red tape. Nonetheless, collaboration among groups of like-minded young people can amplify their efforts to overcome obstacles by sharing insights, offering mutual support in their respective fields and synchronizing activities.

An example of the power of collective action is the adoption, in 2023, of a social security law in Iraq,⁸⁴ which was achieved through the efforts of civil servants working with academics, legal experts and civil society.⁸⁵ This law is crucial in guaranteeing that individuals employed outside the public sector receive

⁸⁴ Iraqi Official Gazette, ‘قانون التقاعد والضمان الاجتماعي للعمال’ [Retirement and social security law for workers], 20 August 2023, https://www.moj.gov.iq/upload/pdf/4734_50.pdf.

⁸⁵ Iraqi Al-Amal Association (2022), ‘ورشة عمل حول سبل تطوير نظام الضمان الاجتماعي للعمال في العراق’, <https://iraqi-alamal.org/?p=3736> [A workshop on ways to develop the social security system for workers in Iraq].

fair treatment from private employers, including fair salaries, pension benefits and employment rights comparable with those of public sector employees. Continued pressure from civil society will be essential to ensure the effective implementation of the legislation, underscoring the need for a united front in driving and sustaining change.

A further example comes from the southern governorate of Dhi Qar, where at the 2021 legislative elections a new generation of candidates associated with the Tishreen protests gained the backing of influential networks of lawyers and journalists, societal leaders, and even local civil servants. Several of these candidates went on to win major seats in the governorate: two even ranked among the 10 most-voted-for candidates nationally, together winning the support of over 75,000 voters.⁸⁶ Support for Tishreeni candidates was especially pronounced in southern and central Iraq, amid wider voter apathy, underscoring the potential of these combined forces of change, both active and passive, in shaping Iraq's future.⁸⁷

Recognizing that they face a common adversary – the deeply rooted corruption that the Tishreen uprising aimed to challenge – will encourage politically engaged young people to adopt a more coordinated approach to influencing lasting change.

If Iraq's agents of change are able to come together and strategize effectively, their impact could be significantly amplified. Recognizing that they face a common adversary – the deeply rooted corruption that the Tishreen uprising aimed to challenge – will encourage politically engaged young people to adopt a more coordinated approach to influencing lasting change. With the right support, they can collectively drive systemic reform by working within their respective domains while forging alliances on intersecting issues. For instance, those who understand the political system might advocate for legislation that bolsters the work of entrepreneurs or fosters engagement with civil society, thereby reinforcing the collective push for change.

The demands of the Tishreen protests have not been addressed, and the country's political elites have concentrated on demonizing the protest movement and taking steps to block similar future uprisings by – through a mix of red lines and red tape – preventing young people from organizing and progressing. With their grievances unresolved, and faced with an uncertain future, young people are exploring alternatives through their everyday politics and constructive resistance. Along with the sectors described in this paper, they are also active in areas such as cultural heritage initiatives or expressing their grievances via the arts.

⁸⁶ UltraIraq (2021), 'قائمة أعلى الأصوات. أسماء النواب العشرة الأوائل في العراق', [List of the highest votes ... the names of the top 10 representatives in Iraq], 17 October 2021, <https://ultrairaq.ultrasawt.com/>. في-العراق/الترا-عراق/سياسة

⁸⁷ Those political actors faced setbacks later on due to numerous challenges, as mentioned in Mustafa's story, highlighting the crucial need for ongoing support for change-makers who find themselves confronted with systemic barriers.

Importantly, however, the young people working to secure a better future for themselves and for future generations in Iraq should not be idealized. Often, there is a tendency in policy and academic circles to focus on and admire the resilience of individuals, but the core issue lies in a system that relies on state resources to sustain itself, that resists change, and that is failing to prepare for future challenges. Simply put, the conditions being challenged by the current generation of youth activists should not exist in the first place.

04

Policy initiatives and implications

Over the last two decades, there have been multiple national and international policy initiatives and programmes aimed at youth engagement and technical capacity-building. But the design of many of these interventions has overlooked the potential of young people to be proactive partners, capable of leading initiatives and influencing systemic change.

Over the last two decades, a range of policy interventions in Iraq have targeted the country's youth through primarily technical means, pushing for civic engagement through official channels. Yet often, as Mustafa pointed out, these efforts have had limited sustainable impact amid the prevailing political turmoil. This chapter identifies lessons learned from some of the national-level and internationally supported initiatives and projects of recent years.

National initiatives

In August 2023, Prime Minister Mohammed Shiaa al-Sudani announced the establishment of a Supreme Youth Council, with the aim of increasing youth participation and representation in the decision-making process in Iraq. The creation of the council was the first step in an ambitious programme intended to facilitate greater youth participation and representation in government, including providing suggestions from youth perspectives to the prime minister's office, and monitoring government performance in various ways, such as via the Ain Al-Shabab (Eye of Youth) platform to report possible instances

of corruption.⁸⁸ Additionally, al-Sudani's representatives across Iraq have designated more than 3,000 young ambassadors to represent their peers across all governorates.⁸⁹

Such bodies are nothing new to Iraq. A youth parliament, established in 2008 by the ministry of youth and sports under the government of Nouri al-Maliki, is now in its fourth term.⁹⁰ The same ministry also set up youth advisory councils in each of Iraq's governorates; the most recent round of applications was in 2021.⁹¹ While al-Sudani's new council looks promising in terms of the expectations it is setting, previous administrations have seemingly used such bodies as a tokenistic 'youth box', without also doing the work and making available the resources needed to ensure that young people are substantively included in decision-making.

The approach of successive Iraqi governments towards the country's youth has long been problematic, with young people often viewed not as genuine partners but either as a group to engage with when it suits a government's interests to do so, or simply as competitors. Moreover, successive initiatives have overlooked a crucial aspect: the need to actively involve young people in shaping their own future. There is a risk that this failing may persist under al-Sudani's administration, as evidenced by the fact that the Supreme Youth Council – members of which include government ministers and a senior adviser to the prime minister – notably lacks youth representation. While government-led youth initiatives have potential if there is a genuine commitment to engage with and include young people in decision-making, they often fail to address the core issues that deeply concern Iraq's youth – in particular, corruption and a lack of strategic vision for the nation's future.

In discussions with senior MPs, including one from the parliament's presidency, as part of the research that has informed this paper, it was unanimously acknowledged that there is currently no comprehensive plan to address the needs of Iraq's youth.⁹² One MP underscored that the foundations of the social contract are flawed, leading to unrealistic expectations among many young graduates that there will be job opportunities for them in the public sector.⁹³ Even so, many of the political elite still use the 'jobs card' as a means to attract youth votes.⁹⁴

⁸⁸ More information on the Supreme Youth Council can be found on the PMO website: <https://pmo.iq/?article=492>.

⁸⁹ Iraq Media Network (2023), 'أطلق المجلس الأعلى للشباب استمارة الترشيح لبرنامج (سفراء الشباب)', [The Supreme Council for Youth launched the nomination form for the (Youth Ambassadors) program], 29 September 2023, <https://www.ina.iq/194483--.html>.

⁹⁰ Ministry of Youth and Sports (2023), 'برلمان الشباب – الدورة الرابعة', [Youth Parliament – Forth term], https://moys.gov.iq/ar/forms_det/3976.

⁹¹ Ministry of Youth and Sports (2023), 'مجلس الوزراء العراقي يطلق الاستمارة الإلكترونية الخاصة بالتسجيل لعضوية مجالس الشباب الاستشارية للعام ٢٠٢١', [The Iraqi Council of Ministers launches the electronic form for registration for membership in youth advisory councils for the year 2021], 11 January 2021, <https://moys.gov.iq/ar/view/5833>.

⁹² Author's interview with MPs, Baghdad, April 2024.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Al-Anbari, M. (2021), 'انتلاف العبادي: وعود المرشحين بالتعيينات كاذبة. يجب أن يدرك الناخب ذلك', [Al-Abadi Coalition: Candidates' promises of appointments are false ... Voters must realize this], 24 September 2021, BasNews, <https://www.basnews.com/ar/babat/714233>.

Simultaneously, new red lines are limiting what young people and dissenting voices more broadly can say and do to push for change. A pertinent example here is the tabling of legislation to restrict freedom of expression.⁹⁵ There has also been an uptick in the use of the country's judicial and security apparatus to suppress dissenting narratives. For example, the authorities have used vaguely worded articles of the penal code to justify the arrest of individuals who criticize officials. Similarly, authorities organized a campaign to arrest individuals for promoting supposedly 'indecent content', without defining what indecent content is.⁹⁶

International initiatives

The international community often perceives Iraq's youth population primarily as recipients of funding or aid, in line with donor countries' set priorities, rather than recognizing young people as proactive partners capable of leading initiatives and influencing strategic decisions. A consequence of this is that young people are often included as a 'youth' component in bigger projects. Such programmes aim to provide young people with technical skills and training in the hope that they become involved in the official channels of governance.

An example of this is a UNDP-led €47.5 million project on local area development, funded by the EU, which included a component focused on youth. Under the programme, 880 young people received social, political and vocational skills-training, intended to equip them for participation in businesses, local councils or the national youth parliament. Two years after the project's conclusion, however, the youth parliament and councils supported through this project were found to be minimally or no longer active. UNDP's own evaluation suggested that such initiatives require a robust sustainability strategy to ensure their continued effectiveness and impact.⁹⁷

Similarly, members of the UN team in Iraq working on youth training and capacity-building, interviewed as part of the research for this paper, acknowledged the constraints within their programming. One noted that the government officials they work with often nominate youth representatives who may not truly represent the wider youth population. Another highlighted the limitations imposed by the annual UN mandate, budget constraints and overarching priorities, noting that these factors sometimes result in rushed projects that lack sustainability, particularly those related to capacity-building.⁹⁸

Regarding young people primarily as beneficiaries of assistance overlooks the potential of Iraq's youth population to contribute meaningfully to efforts to address the challenges they and their country face, which in turn limits the impact and

⁹⁵ There have been a few attempts to restrict freedom of expression in Iraq by different authorities. For example, the Iraqi parliament introduced a draft legislation to limit freedom of expression and general assembly in December 2022. The draft has gone through its first reading, and parliament can vote on it following the second reading. For more information, see Amnesty International (2023), 'Iraq: Draft laws threaten rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly', 18 July 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/07/iraq-draft-laws-threaten-rights-to-freedom-of-expression-and-peaceful-assembly>.

⁹⁶ Iraqi Human Rights Observatory (2023), 'Arbitrary arrests over "low-quality content" may pave way for restricting freedoms', 2 February 2023, <https://iohriq.org/114-.html>.

⁹⁷ Hassan, N. (2023), 'Final Evaluation Supporting Recovery and Stability through Local Development in Iraq', March 2023, UNDP Iraq, <https://erc.undp.org/evaluation/documents/download/22179>.

⁹⁸ Author's interview with UN staff, Baghdad, March 2023.

relevance of international support. Engaging young individuals as key stakeholders and contributors, including through the everyday politics described in this paper, is essential for the creation of effective, sustainable and locally resonant solutions.

Importantly, too, several of the young interviewees whose insights are distilled in the case studies pointed out that international funding often focuses on technical capacity rather than addressing the systemic challenges faced by young people. From their perspective, the dominance of Iraq's political elite complicates the implementation of technical approaches in Iraq. Therefore, supporting the constructive resistance of young people is crucial for enabling them to effect change. However, many international programmes tend to focus on formal institutions and processes, contributing to the 'NGO-ization' of youth movements. This phenomenon has been observed in some human rights and environmental organizations in Iraq, where grassroots efforts are often absorbed into more structured but ultimately less impactful initiatives.⁹⁹

Young activists struggling to build financial support locally may turn to international organizations for funding. But dependence on external funding raises questions about sustainability, and risks diluting the effectiveness and trust invested in grassroots movements as they increasingly rely on external support rather than securing backing within their own communities. Addressing such issues calls for a shift in emphasis, within both government-led and international initiatives, to prioritize long-term commitment and genuine engagement with the everyday politics young people are practising, along with a focus on promoting systemic change rather than implementing more superficial trainings and awareness-raising campaigns.

⁹⁹ The term NGO-ization is used in relation to the transformation of social movements into non-governmental organizations; this shift, while professionalizing and stabilizing such movements, has also depoliticized their discourses and practices, altering the nature of social activism. See for example, Lang, S. (1997), 'The NGOization of Feminism', in Scott, J., Kaplan, C. and Keates, D. (eds.) (1997), *Transitions, Environments, Translations: Feminisms in International Politics*, London: Routledge; Ali, Z. (2021), 'From Recognition to Redistribution? Protest Movements in Iraq in the Age of 'New Civil Society'', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 15(4), pp. 528–542, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2021.1886794>.

05 Policy recommendations

Creating an environment in which a new generation of political and civil society actors and entrepreneurs can work together to overcome systemic barriers to change requires the sustained backing of reform-minded officials within Iraq, alongside durable support from international stakeholders.

In Iraq, both the national government and international actors often focus on integrating youth into formal systems. However, this approach may not always resonate with the public, particularly young people, whose experience has been that, under the Muhasasa system, political influence is in reality often wielded outside of Iraq's formal institutions. Many young Iraqis see their everyday politics as a more relevant form of civic engagement. Therefore, it is crucial to create an enabling environment through which young people can work together to bring about the changes they want to see in their country. This requires the sustained backing of reform-minded officials within Iraq, alongside durable support as well as from the international community.

The following recommendations are intended to help foster this environment. Rather than direct specific actions at either the Iraqi government or external stakeholders, it is intended that both of these groups, together with young activists themselves, will engage with and support the recommendations and see opportunities to work together to take the initiatives forward.

Refocus capacity-building programmes to foster cross-sector collaboration among youth

While the thematic projects and technical capacity-building programmes so far offered by the international community have been useful in empowering young people in Iraq, systemic barriers – in the form of both red lines and red tape –

continue to impede the work of a new generation of political and civil society actors, and to hold back young entrepreneurs. Supporting initiatives that connect young people and allow them to work together and share lessons learned in their respective areas of activity is an important step in helping them push against such barriers. This can be facilitated through two linked routes: refocusing capacity-building programmes to better target networks of young people working on specific issues, so that overlap and duplication are avoided; and establishing a multi-disciplinary collaboration hub – operating both in physical spaces and online – to foster dialogue and build networks of young people working in different fields.

A multi-disciplinary hub would not only focus on the technical aspects of politics, civil society or entrepreneurship, but also facilitate connections between these sectors and foster an environment in which young people can work more effectively together and build support within their communities to tackle common challenges.

Similar initiatives have been successful in other regions, among them the Young Leaders for Active Citizenship in India, and the Youth CoLab project across the Asia-Pacific region. These programmes focus on empowering young people, fostering interconnections, and building a supportive ecosystem that enhances their effectiveness in influencing societal change.¹⁰⁰

Forge strategic international partnerships to ensure more effective allocation of resources

The numerous initiatives by international and local organizations to support youth programming can sometimes mean that efforts are duplicated across projects. Establishing a coordinated funding mechanism among international donors, with a specific focus on projects targeting young Iraqis, is crucial to eliminating unwarranted overlap and streamlining support for youth-led initiatives, and to ensuring that aid provision best aligns with the diverse needs of young people and fosters better ways of working with them. An example of such a mechanism in practice is the Iraqi Economic Contact Group (IECG), initiated in 2020 by the UK, with the participation of the G7, the EU and the World Bank, to coordinate and streamline support for economic reform efforts.¹⁰¹

Build connections between young activists and reformists to advocate for youth support and protection

Within Iraq, there are reform-minded civil servants and politicians who recognize the potential of young people and are committed to improving the system. Connecting young people with reformist figures is important, as it allows them to build trust and collaborate in specific activities and sectors. For young activists and reformists

¹⁰⁰ For more information on the Young Leaders for Active Citizenship, see <https://theylacproject.com>. For more information on Youth CoLab, see <https://www.youthcolab.org>.

¹⁰¹ Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (2020), 'UK hosts Iraqi Prime Minister for talks – October 2020', press release, 23 October 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-hosts-iraqi-prime-minister-for-talks-october-2020>.

within the system alike, working together boosts the chances of success for their respective efforts to advance policy initiatives and reforms that enhance youth inclusion and protection.

Importantly, too, forging connections between networks of youth activists and reform-minded politicians and civil servants can provide a protective buffer for young people as they push against the systemic barriers – the red lines and red tape – described by interviewees. For example, expertise can be pooled in examining and influencing proposed new legislation – as already seen with the 2023 social security law – as well as to challenge the status quo via revisions to existing laws and policies. The proposed multi-disciplinary collaboration hub, described above, can serve as a mutually beneficial rallying point for such connections, helping to ensure the continuity and effectiveness of reform efforts.

Guarantee the independence and accountability of youth councils

Programmes such as youth parliaments and youth councils – including the present Supreme Youth Council – have the potential to amplify young voices in Iraq's decision-making processes. However, for such initiatives to be truly empowering, they must be able to operate independently of prevailing political agendas. Commitment to government programmes focused on youth, and ensuring these initiatives are held accountable by youth groups themselves, are crucial steps towards ensuring more meaningful engagement. Guaranteeing their independence and longevity is key, and is reliant on both establishing dedicated independent funding streams and ensuring their coordination is managed by youth representatives.

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Cover image: Protesters draped in Iraq's national flag walk on the Mohammed al-Qasim highway, in east Baghdad, 22 January 2020.

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