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IOM ILLIATION

# VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN THE KURDISTAN REGION OF IRAQ: POTENTIAL DRIVERS AND PREVENTATIVE MEASURES

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Photo 1: Anjam Rasool/IOM Iraq

## LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

<b>CSO</b>	<b>Civil Society Organization</b>
<b>CT</b>	<b>Countering Terrorism</b>
<b>CVE</b>	<b>Countering Violent Extremism</b>
<b>FGD</b>	<b>Focus Group Discussion</b>
<b>ISIL</b>	<b>Islamic State of Syria and the Levant</b>
<b>KRI</b>	<b>Kurdistan Region of Iraq</b>
<b>KRG</b>	<b>Kurdistan Regional Government</b>
<b>NGO</b>	<b>Non-Governmental Organization</b>
<b>PoA</b>	<b>Plan of Action</b>
<b>PVE</b>	<b>Prevention of Violent Extremism</b>
<b>VE</b>	<b>Violent Extremism</b>

## 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While radicalized environments are not prominent in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), this study has identified several issues, factors and motivators that can increase the risk of violent extremism (VE) in this region. The findings also indicate a well-founded concern that the polarization of the KRI society and its dissatisfied youth foster an environment conducive to future youth radicalization and VE. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and local governments need to adopt a solid, evidence-based and interagency collaborative approach to prevent violent extremism (PVE).

Based on a qualitative methodology, including 49 interviews and 10 focus groups discussions (FGDs), as well as quantitative data collected through a survey with 419 participants in three key regions in the KRI, this research identifies and analyses the drivers of VE and presents policy recommendations to prevent violent extremism. This report presents the following major findings:

1. With multiple risk factors at play in the KRI, the data suggests that the environment is conducive to VE. The relative low levels of VE that the KRI has experienced over the past years cannot be taken for granted.
2. Unlike the rest of Iraq, the KRI currently lacks a unified, whole-of-government and whole-of-society PVE strategy and workplan.
3. The data show that although support for VE is low among the surveyed population, a significant proportion of surveyees believes that violence is justified to effect political change.
4. Most research participants in Halabja, Garmian and Raparin see unemployment, perception of corruption and injustice as the primary structural motivators increasing the risk of support for VE.
5. Research participants reported that people do not join violent extremist groups due to religious convictions, rather, the root causes of joining such groups stem from poor governance and lack of access to economic opportunities. This finding highlights the need to change the KRG authorities' narrative and approach to VE, as well as allocating more resources to improving governance and development rather than to religious or interfaith dialogue programmes.
6. The KRG has introduced new measures and programmes to counter and prevent VE, yet these efforts are not organized within a coherent and unified policy. KRG officials reported that the lack of coordination has been a challenge to effectively address the issues and potential drivers of VE.

Based on these findings, this report provides the following main recommendations to the KRG, local authorities and international organizations.

1. The KRG needs to develop a plan of action (PoA) to address the underlying problems that can create a conducive environment for the emergence of VE. The KRG should also consider that the current challenges society faces can decrease the population's resilience against violent extremist organizations' messaging and narratives.
2. To design an effective PoA, more consultations between government institutions and local civil society organizations (CSOs) are needed to assess and validate the drivers of VE. The POA should be designed with existing challenges and resources in mind, requiring prioritization during the drafting process.
3. Further research is needed to identify the drivers and factors contributing to VE in different regions within the KRI, and how to address them.
4. Currently, no government institution is responsible for leading and owning the PVE effort in the KRI. Thus, appointing a government institution to oversee and lead the process of drafting a PVE plan specific to the KRI is necessary. This plan should be approved and endorsed by the KRG's Council of Ministers. The process of developing the PVE POA should ensure inclusivity and wide consultation with both government and non-government actors.

This report starts with an introduction, followed by an overview of KRI's history of VE, particularly focusing on post-2003 but including a discussion of the post-2014 phase – a stage where new dynamics and threats of VE emerged in the KRI. The overview is followed by sections presenting the empirical findings and identifying the issues and drivers that can contribute to an enabling environment for VE. Finally, the main recommendations for different stakeholders are presented.



Photo 2: Anjam Rasool/IOM Iraq

## 2. INTRODUCTION

The dramatic rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in 2014 attracted hundreds of young people in the region and across the world, including young Iraqi Kurds. Around 530 Iraqi Kurds joined ISIL, the majority (300–330) killed in Syria and Iraq from 2014 to 2017, while around 150 returned and surrendered to the KRI authorities.<sup>1</sup> To date, ISIL continues to target young Kurds for recruitment. Very recently, the security forces in Sulaymaniyah announced the arrest of 17 suspected members of the group who ‘confessed’ to have planned to assassinate prominent religious figures and Peshmerga commanders.<sup>2</sup> ISIL has continued its Kurdish language propaganda, seeking to recruit young Kurds into their ranks.

The risks, conditions, and drivers of VE vary across communities and regions; hence, they should be evaluated according to their local contexts. The KRI has become increasingly polarized in recent years,<sup>3</sup> a polarization fuelled by rising youth dissatisfaction and disillusionment with authorities. A new identity is emerging among many young Kurds within which the political class is viewed as “the other”.<sup>4</sup> In this context, the most dangerous variety of polarization in relation to radicalization and VE is the division of the KRI society into two opposing camps: “the people” versus “the authorities.” This broad social split has not yet been fully conceptualized or analysed in the existing literature. The problem of polarization is not unique to the KRI but a widespread regional problem. In a polarized society, individuals are more likely to operate in an antagonistic manner and therefore be drawn into engagement with violent groups and actions.<sup>5</sup>

This research aims to identify drivers that might increase support for VE in the KRI, and to provide evidence-based recommendations to address the potential drivers of VE. To

achieve these objectives, this research relies on a comprehensive fieldwork in three separate locations: Halabja Governorate,<sup>6</sup> Raparin Administration<sup>7</sup> and Garmian Administration.<sup>8</sup> Limited knowledge and research on extremism and radicalization in the KRI are available – particularly research based on robust methodology. Most of the existing literature on VE in Iraq excludes the KRI and its dynamics. In addition, within the KRI universities and research centres, there is hardly any trace of research on VE. This research tries to fill the gap through providing new empirical evidence.

Although the KRI has two decades of experience in fighting terrorist and extremist groups, the government has not adopted clear definitions of extremism, radicalization or VE. In the KRI, both the authorities and the public tend to define extremism almost entirely from a religious perspective. The findings of this study highlight an environment conducive to VE in the KRI and indicate a well-founded fear that an increasing polarization, anti-authority sentiments and dissatisfied youth increase the risk of VE. Since 2014, the KRG has been overwhelmed by financial crises and internal political rivalry.<sup>9</sup> In addition, there is also a perception among authorities that the people’s attachment to *kurdayati* (Kurdishness), as well as the dominant practice and understanding of religion among Kurds, historically more spiritual than politicized, are two major factors creating resilience against extremism, especially religious-based VE.<sup>10</sup> Though these perceptions are largely shared by government and non-government stakeholders, recent research indicates a diminishing sense of belonging among young Kurds, and therefore the erosion of a factor that had been a bulwark against religiously framed VE.

1 Kamaran Palani, ‘Youth Radicalization in Kurdistan: The Government Response’, In *Youth Identity, Politics and Change in Contemporary Kurdistan* (Transnational Press London, 2021), p.p. 223–237, p. 227.

2 Rudaw. Sulaimani security forces arrest 17 ISIS suspects. Available from: <https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/23082022>

3 Polarization can be between more than two groups. Polarization refers to the process through which complex social relations come to be represented and perceived in ‘black and white’ terms. See: McNeil-Willson, Richard, Vivian Gerrand, Francesca Scrinzi, and Anna Triandafyllidou. *Polarisation, Violent Extremism and Resilience in Europe Today: An Analytical Framework* (BRaVE Project, 2019), p. 5.

4 Kamaran Palani, *Youthful Anger and the Crisis of Legitimacy in Iraqi Kurdistan*. Available from: <https://research.sharqforum.org/2021/01/06/iraqi-kurdistan/>.

5 McNeil-Willson, et al., *Polarisation*, p. 8.

6 Halabja is the fourth governorate in the KRI, with an estimated population of 120,000.

7 Raparin is an independent administration within the province of Sulaymaniyah. Its population is estimated at around 400,000 people.

8 Garmian is also an independent administration within Sulaymaniyah, with a population of 500,000. The administration consists of Kalar, Kifri and Chamchamal districts. Kalar is its administrative centre.

9 Erik Skare, Ahmad Mhidi, Georges Fahmi, Nouran Ahmed, Myriam Ababsa, Olivier Roy and Dlawer Ala’Aldeen, *Preventing Violent Extremism, the Middle East: Policy Brief Summarizing Lessons Learnt on the EU’s Measures to Prevent Violent Extremism in the Region*, (2017), p. 13.

10 Palani, *Youth Radicalization*, p. 230.

## 2.1 KNOWLEDGE GAPS

Available journalistic information and analysis on the dynamics, drivers, and conditions of youth radicalization and VE in the KRI is limited and fragmented. With the rising threat of ISIL in 2014, interest on this topic among some local and international organizations increased in the KRI.

The Middle East Research Institute's (MERI) recent study, *Violent Extremism in Mosul and the Kurdistan Region: Context, Drivers, and Public Perception*, provides a comparative analysis to examine public perception of the presence and drivers of VE in Nineveh and the KRI. The study is useful as it looks at cases of occurrence and non-occurrence of VE and argues that VE should be contextualized within the broader security, governance and identity crises, both locally in the governorate and nationally in Iraq.<sup>11</sup>

Salahaddin University's Centre for Political and Strategic Studies conducted a study on VE in Iraq as part of a broader research project, *Testing the Feasibility of a Human Security Approach to Combat Violent Extremism in Palestine, Egypt, and Iraq*.<sup>12</sup> While the study offers a useful look into the political and social context of VE in Iraq, its main limitation is that it is rooted in a research hypothesis that allows no specific focus on the dynamics and process of VE and radicalization in the KRI. A study conducted in 2020 by a local non-governmental organization (NGO), Peace and Freedom Organization, investigated the causes of VE and strategies to prevent its emergence, adopting a methodology of qualitative analysis that used interviews and document analysis. The study's main findings indicate a wide range of factors and issue that contribute to VE, including poor governance, extremist political Islam and the lack (or weakness) of alternative narratives, poor prison conditions, and the KRG's weak education system.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, the study neglects to incorporate the conditions and concerns of youth into the discussion on radicalization and VE in the KRI.

Adel Bakawan's study provides a good mapping of changes and transformations that have occurred in Kurdish religious extremist movements since the 1980s. The study concluded that, unlike previous generations of religious extremists, the recent generation of jihadists had limited knowledge of Arabic and, interestingly, limited or no affiliation with the existing Kurdish

Islamist parties. Bakawan found that among the identified 257 profiles, 27 per cent out of 257 were unemployed, 41 per cent were daily wage workers, 25 per cent were students, and only 7 per cent were government employees, with 75 per cent between the ages of 14 and 29 years.<sup>14</sup> The study, however, lacks a reliable and robust methodology and analysis of the root causes and drivers of VE beyond religious extremism. Bakawan's methodology for collecting information on ISIL members and his methods of data analysis are also unclear.

Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens and Ranj Alaaldin conducted a policy analysis in 2016, *The Kurds of ISIS: Why Some Join the Terrorist Group*. The study contextualizes the phenomenon of ISIL Kurds within the broader history of Kurdish jihadists, beginning in the 1980s. The study used interviews with Kurdish security officials, Peshmerga commanders, intelligence officers, and Kurdish prisoners who had joined ISIL. Meleagrou-Hitchens and Alaaldin find that the existing Islamist parties did not play a role in the radicalization of Kurdish youth, nor were they instrumental in their decision to join ISIL. The authors instead highlighted the internet as a key source of radicalization and recruitment.<sup>15</sup>

The studies mentioned above have two fundamental limitations. First, they lack a robust methodology of data collection and data analysis. In relation to methodology, the studies have not identified or studied vulnerable regions within the KRI. Second, they do not focus on how the growing frustration and disappointment of people may exacerbate the factors compelling them to engage in VE, and what needs to be done to address the underlying issues.



Photo 3: Anjam Rasool/IOM Iraq

11 Dlawer Ala'Aldeen, Kamaran Palani, and Khogir Wirya, *Violent Extremism in Mosul and the Kurdistan Region*, (The Middle East Research Institute, 2022).

12 Omar Sheira, Rabha Allam, and Ziad Akl, *Testing the feasibility of a human security approach to combat violent extremism in Palestine, Egypt, and Iraq*, (2019). Available from: [www.humansecurity2cve.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/NWO-WOTRO\\_CVE-final-report.pdf](http://www.humansecurity2cve.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/NWO-WOTRO_CVE-final-report.pdf)

13 Sanger Yousif and Abdulsamih Muhammad. *Violent extremism: Factors and approaches to prevention in the Kurdistan Region-Iraq*. (Peace and Freedom Organization, 2020).

14 Adel Bakawan, *Three Generations of Jihadism in Iraqi Kurdistan*. Available from: [www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/bakawan\\_jihadism\\_iraqi\\_kurdistan\\_2017.pdf](http://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/bakawan_jihadism_iraqi_kurdistan_2017.pdf)

15 Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens and Ranj Alaaldin, *The Kurds of ISIS: Why Some Join the Terrorist Group*, 8 August, 2016. Available from: [www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2016-08-08/kurds-isis](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2016-08-08/kurds-isis).

## 2.2 ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Inhibiting the effectiveness of some previous research, the terminology around VE is confusing and problematic. The 2015 United Nations Plan of Action on Preventing Violent Extremism states that VE “is a diverse phenomenon, without clear definition. It is neither new nor exclusive to any region, nationality or system of belief.”<sup>16</sup> IOM defines VE as “a phenomenon aimed at advancing an exclusivist ideological agenda by advocating, committing, or supporting acts of violence, typically based on racial, religious, or ethnic supremacy or opposition to democratic principles. It is not specific to any religion, ethnicity, ideology, or group.”<sup>17</sup> While there is no universal, agreed upon definition of racialization, the term refers to the process through which an individual or a group of individuals gradually doubt an extreme set belief to impact social change using undemocratic practices that may lead to violence.<sup>18</sup>

To distinguish PVE efforts from counterterrorism (CT) and countering violent extremism (CVE), CVE and PVE use different approaches to address the drivers of VE. PVE relies on the whole-of-society approach, bringing together all relevant institutions, organizations and authorities. IOM defines PVE as a set of non-coercive measures to address the drivers of VE, to create resilience among potentially vulnerable populations, and to prevent recruitment or mobilization to extremist violence. CVE is a noncoercive form of programming involving, for instance, media messaging, interfaith dialogues and training of State governance and security actors.<sup>19</sup> CVE adopts a soft approach to persuade individuals or groups not to move towards violence, to limit people’s access to extremist groups, and reduce people’s participation and support for a terrorist ideology that seeks to use terrorism and violence to achieve political goals.

Regarding the drivers of VE, this research adopts the analytical framework developed by the Royal United Services Institute, which distinguishes between structural motivators, individual incentives and enabling factors.

**Structural motivators** include repression, corruption, poor governance, unemployment and general lack of socioeconomic opportunities, inequality, discrimination and marginalization, a history of hostility between identity groups alongside prolonged and unresolved conflict, violations of human

rights and the rule of law, external state interventions in the affairs of other nations, and so on.

**Individual incentives** include a sense of purpose (generated through acting in accordance with perceived ideological tenets), adventure, belonging, acceptance, status, material enticements, fear of repercussions by violent extremist entities, expected rewards in the afterlife and so on.

**Enabling factors** include the presence of radical mentors (including religious leaders and individuals from social networks, among others), access to radical online communities, social networks with violent extremist associations, access to weaponry or other relevant items, a comparative lack of state presence, an absence of familial support, and so on.<sup>20</sup>



Photo 4: Anjam Rasool/IOM Iraq

<sup>16</sup> United Nations General Assembly. *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism: Report of the Secretary General*, A/70/674, 24 December 2015.

<sup>17</sup> IOM [International Organization for Migration]. *IOM Preventing Violent Extremism*, Department of Operations and Emergency, Transition and Recovery Division (2020).

<sup>18</sup> EU [European Union], *The contribution of youth work to preventing marginalisation and radicalisation potentially resulting in violent behaviour*, (Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2017), p. 12.

<sup>19</sup> James Khalil and Martine Zeuthen, *Countering Violent Extremism and Risk Reduction: A Guide to Programme Design and Evaluation* (Whitehall Report, 2016), p. 2.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, p. 9.

## 2.3 METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed methods approach, including 49 interviews and 10 FGDs, integrated with quantitative data collected through a survey with 419 participants. A mixed-methods approach is useful to understand the complexities and dimensions of VE in various locations. Fieldwork was conducted in Halabja, Garmian and Raparin. The identification of these areas was the result of consultations with local and national authorities as well as existing research on regions vulnerable to VE. To conduct fieldwork in these locations, six enumerators and an assistant researcher were recruited for data collection. The team was trained by IOM senior researchers on ethical practices of research, conducting interviews, surveys and FGDs, and data management. Survey questions, interviews and FGDs were prepared in consultation with the research team, which was composed of local researchers from the targeted areas. This exercise helped us to ask research questions in an appropriate way and aligned with the context of the communities in which the research is conducted. Three members of the team were women, which contributed to providing suitable participation opportunities for women during fieldwork.

### 2.3.1 Interviews

Forty-nine interviews were held during July, August and September 2022 in Halabja, Raparin, and Garmian, with representatives of the local governments, local CSOs, academics and researchers, teachers, youth and women activists. We adopted both unstructured and semi-structured interviewing. Unstructured interviewing allows exploring

new issues and obtaining a deeper understanding of the topic. This allowed us to create questions in the second phase of the data collection. The interviews were held face-to-face in Kurdish. Each interview lasted from 40 to 90 minutes. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, we will maintain the identity of interviewees anonymous.

### 2.3.2 FGDs

We held 10 FGDs with various local and national stakeholders in Erbil, Halabja, Garmian and Raparin in August and November 2022. Five FGDs were conducted with local government representatives, four with local civil society representatives, and one with a wider participation from the KRG. These FGDs allowed us to gain a deeper, reliable and detailed analysis of VE in the KRI. In addition, on 22 August 2022, we organized a consultation session for 21 senior representatives of the KRG, Kurdistan Presidency, Kurdistan Parliament and other government institutions in Erbil. The preliminary findings of this study were presented and validated with relevant stakeholders. The identity of the FGD participants will be kept anonymous.

### 2.3.3 Survey

To support the research, IOM designed a survey to shed light on tendencies and risks associated with supporting or participating in VE among the public. The survey was key to develop an understanding for prevention and self-protection programmes and plans.<sup>21</sup> The survey was conducted in July and August 2022 with 419 people in Halabja, Garmian and Raparin (Table 1) The survey was conducted face-to-face, with each interview taking 10–15 minutes.



Photo 5: Anjam Rasool/IOM Iraq

<sup>21</sup> Matthew Nanes and Bryony Lau, *Surveys and Countering Violent Extremism: A Practitioner Guide* (2018), p. 8.

TABLE 1: PARTICIPANTS' INFORMATION

QUESTIONS	OPTIONS	RESULTS
<b>TOTAL OF RESPONDENTS = 419</b>		
1. Gender	• Female	186 or 44%
	• Male	233 or 56%
2. Age	• 18–25	114 or 27%
	• 25–39	196 or 47%
	• 40–60	109 or 26%
3. Where do you live?	• City	251 or 60%
	• District	140 or 33%
	• Village	28 or 7%
Please specify	• Chamchamal	60 or 14%
	• Halabja	124 or 30%
	• Kalar	67 or 16%
	• Rania	146 or 35%
	• (blank)	22 or 5%
4. Religion	• Kakai	11 or 3%
	• Shia Islam	1 or 0%
	• Sunni Islam	402 or 96%
	• Zoroastrian	1 or 0%
	• I do not want to say	4 or 1%
5. To what ethnic group do you belong?	• Kurdish	418 or 100%
	• Arab	1 or 0%

6. What is your financial status?	• Very high	2 or 0%
	• High	26 or 6%
	• Moderate	304 or 74%
	• Low	73 or 17%
	• Very low	14 or 3%
7. What is your current employment status?	• Employed full-time	93 or 22%
	• Employed part-time	167 or 40%
	• Unemployed	109 or 26%
	• Other status	37 or 9%
	• Prefer not to say	13 or 3%
8. What is the highest degree or level of education you have completed?	• Bachelor's degree	151 or 36%
	• Diploma	91 or 22%
	• High school	83 or 19%
	• Master's degree or higher	21 or 5%
	• No education	9 or 2%
	• Prefer not to say	3 or 1%
	• Primary school	61 or 15%

The survey results were remarkably close in all three areas of the study, so the data were not separated by location. However, in interviews and FGDs, we analysed the different situations and conditions of each location of the study. These nuances further highlight the importance of employing a mixed methods approach.

### 2.3.4 Barriers and limitations

#### The terminology of VE

Translating the term of VE into Kurdish was difficult. The problem was not only linguistic; in the Kurdish literature, the concept is rarely used. People, including government officials, often confused VE with terrorism. To address this problem, researchers explained the definition and term of VE before conducting the survey, interviews and FGDs. In addition, a definition of VE was shared in written form with FGD participants and interviewees. In our FGDs, we also dedicated a session to define these terms and translate them into local language and perspectives.

#### Research population

The survey, conducted in Halabja, Garmian, and Raparin, is not representative of the entire KRI. Although the results were very similar in the three areas targeted by this research, the results are likely to change from one area to

another in the KRI. Nevertheless, the population of these areas is about 20 per cent of the KRI's population, and officials recognized that these areas are high-risk and require in-depth investigation.

### 2.3.5 Research ethics

A study on VE or its prevention in the context of Iraq and the KRI needs to pay considerable attention to ethical considerations during data collection and analysis. The identity of the research participants was kept confidential and anonymous throughout the process. In terms of informed consent, interviewees and FGD participants gave verbal consent. Written forms of 'informed consent' are less plausible in the KRI, as they tend to trigger reactions of suspicion. The consent clearly explained the project's background, the aim and objective of the research, clearly stated that the research is voluntary, that participants could withdraw from the research at any given time, and the future use of the collected data.

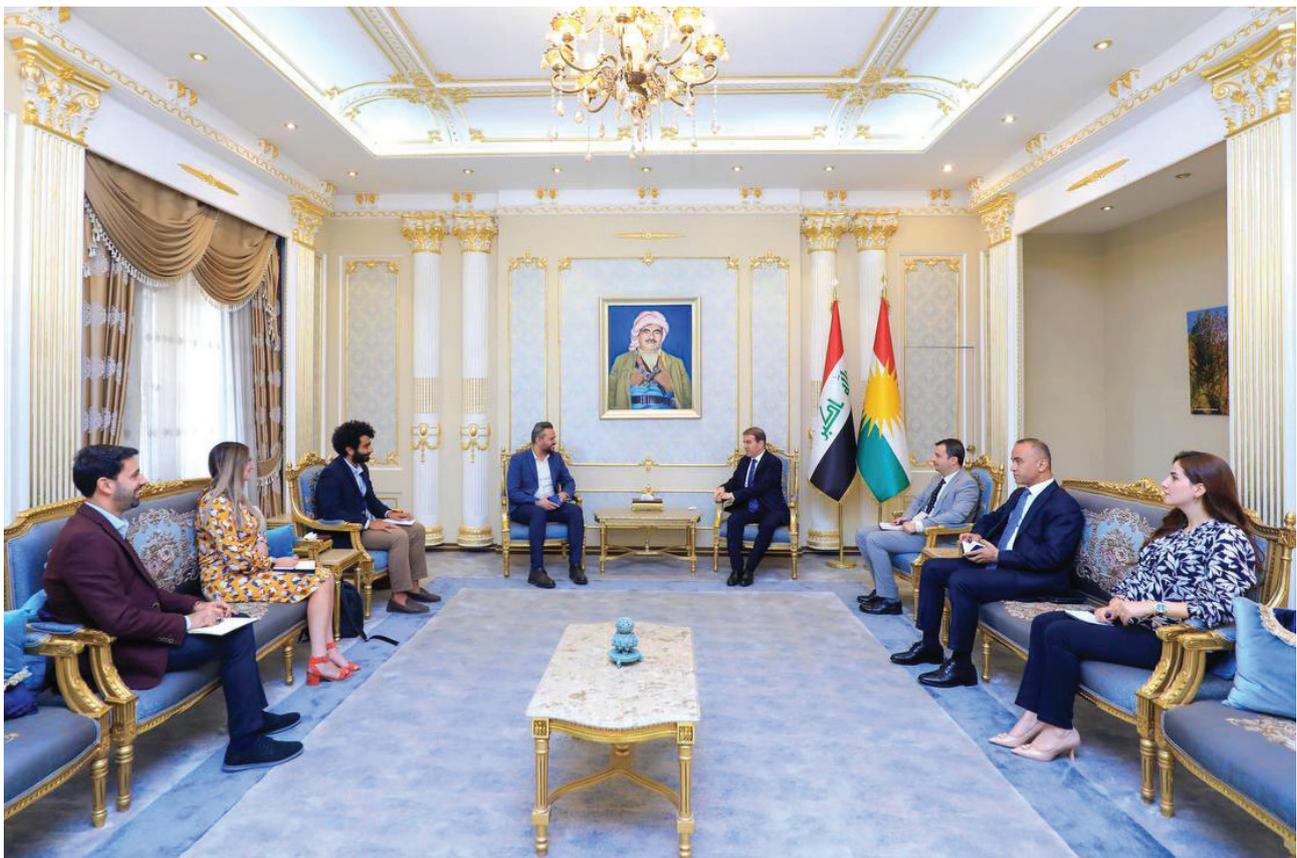


Photo 6: Anjam Rasool/IOM Iraq

## 3. VE IN THE KRI: HISTORY AND OVERVIEW

### 3.1 AFTER THE 1991 UPRISING

After the uprising against the Ba'athist regime in 1991, the KRI emerged as an autonomous region. Soon after the KRI faced internal fighting and the emergence of extremist armed groups. Some political parties had their own armed groups, which eventually ended in waves of internal fighting. Among these groups were Islamist forces. The emergence of Islamist parties and their public mobilization towards establishing an Islamic rule in the KRI dates to the late 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>22</sup> The first Kurdish Islamist parties, such as the Islamic Society Movement (*Haraka Al Rabita Al Islamia*) founded in 1984, and the Islamic Movement of Iraqi Kurdistan founded in 1987, were engaged in armed struggle against the Ba'athist regime, along with nationalist and leftist groups. After 1991, Islamist parties engaged in fighting with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in two periods in the early 1990s and early 2000s. The KDP and PUK dominated the newly established government in the KRI and the Islamists began to reject the KDP-PUK secular/nationalist rule as well as their traditional understandings and practice of Islam among the Kurds.<sup>23</sup>

Significant divisions within the Islamic Movement emerged in the 1990s. As a reaction to its armed approach, some members left the party in 1994 and created a new party, the Islamic Union of Kurdistan. The Islamic Union traces its roots to the Muslim Brotherhood, which appeared in Iraqi Kurdish regions for the first time in the 1950s. The party declared from its inception that it would not engage in armed struggle.<sup>24</sup> The Islamic Movement's internal divisions and continuous confrontation with the ruling parties of the KRI, as well as the intensification of Islamist insurgency in the KRI after the United States-led invasion of Afghanistan, gave rise to new organizations such as the Islamic Jihad Group under the leadership of Mulla Ameen Pirdawd Khoshnaw, Jund al-Islam led by Abu Abdullah Al-Shafi'i with its base of support mostly in Erbil Governorate, and Al-Islah, a splinter group from the

Islamic Movement led by Mullah Krekar. Jund al-Islam and Al-Islah merged in December 2001, creating a new Jihadist organization, Ansar al-Islam, with Mullah Krekar at the top of the movement.<sup>25</sup> This group has become one of the most radical groups operating in the KRI, rejecting the KDP-PUK rule and traditional practices and understandings of Islam.

### 3.2 FROM 2003 TO 2014: THE CASE OF RESILIENCE

After 2003, people's conditions improved. We saw how people began to enjoy their life and opened up to new cultures. When there are no opportunities, people's tolerance towards each other will be reduced (Halabja, interview, August 2022).

Compared to other parts of Iraq, the KRI has undergone a different security, economic and political transition after 2003. After the regime change in Iraq in 2003, the KRI experienced great stability and progress. The 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq gave the Kurds the opportunity to become kingmakers in Baghdad, taking the post of president, foreign minister, and other key government positions. Internally, the KRI became more stable thanks to the 'Unification Accord,' a power-sharing agreement between the KDP and PUK that came into effect in 2006 when a coalition government of unity replaced the previous two administrations. These developments strengthened the social contract between the people and authorities and provided a sense of representation among Kurds. From 2005 to 2013, the KRG's budget increased from 2.5 billion United States dollars (USD) to USD 13 billion. With oil prices at their peak between 2012 and 2013, the KRI experienced an unprecedented economic boom, with annual growth rates of 12 per cent. In this period, unemployment in the KRI reached the lowest level in Iraq and was lower than in many countries in the Middle East.<sup>26</sup> During this period, migration of young Kurds to Europe also decreased to its lowest level.<sup>27</sup> New schools and universities were built, and the private sector began to grow.<sup>28</sup>

22 Mohammad Baziani, *Mstaqbal al-haraka al-islamua fi kurdistan al-iraq* (The Future of Islamic Movements in Iraqi Kurdistan) (Erbil: Tafsir Institute, 2006); David Romano, *An Outline of Kurdish Islamist Groups in Iraq*, Occasional paper, The Jamestown Foundation, September 2007.

23 The traditional and dominant religious type in the KRI is a combination of Shafi, Sufi, tribal and conservative understanding and practice of Islam.

24 See: Mohammad Salih Mustafa, *Nationalism and Islamism in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq: The Emergence of the Kurdistan Islamic Union* (Routledge, 2020).

25 Brynjar Lia, *Understanding Jihadi Proto-states, Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 4 (2015): 31–41, p. 34.

26 Shmuel Abramzon, et al., *Capacity Building at the Kurdistan Region Statistics Office Through Data Collection*. (Rand Corporation, 2014), p. 28.

27 Ala'Aldeen et al., *Violent Extremism*, p. 13.

28 Ibid.

Regarding governance and political participation, in the first decade after 2003 the prospect of democracy was high compared to other historical phases of the KRI.<sup>29</sup> Importantly, Islamic political parties and their members were disarmed and became political actors in the new political process.<sup>30</sup> The region's three main Islamic parties all entered parliament.<sup>31</sup> This change was significant, especially for some Islamic groups that were established from the outset as armed movements and whose official political manifesto was that of 'jihad'.<sup>32</sup>

### 3.3 AFTER 2014

Concerns over surging youth inclinations for VE have been growing since 2014 in the KRI. Two key factors may explain these concerns: the rise of ISIL and increasing youth dissatisfaction.

#### 3.3.1 The rise of ISIL

The dramatic rise of ISIL in Syria and Iraq attracted many young people in the region and across the world, including some young Kurds. The KRI suddenly had a new, extremely aggressive neighbour across hundreds of kilometres of its border. In 2014, ISIL took control of large swathes of territory in northern Iraq, including parts of the KRI. ISIL was not only an external threat, but also a domestic security threat. Fully reliable statistics on the number of Kurdish youths who joined ISIL are lacking. However, statements and interviews with KRG officials indicate that around 534 young Iraqi Kurds joined the group. The number of young Kurds who joined ISIL is low considering the relative ease of joining, which was facilitated by geographical proximity, especially in the early months of the group's emergence in Iraq. However, this number would have been significantly higher if the Kurdish security forces had not arrested over 800 youth wishing to join ISIL before their plans could be carried out.<sup>33</sup>

In addition to the movement of some young Kurds to areas under ISIL control, there was a concern over how established Kurdish Islamist parties and groups would respond to this new threat. Tensions increased on social media and at conferences, with individuals and groups opposed to the Islamists attempting to undermine their legitimacy – calling them a “soft version of ISIL” or “ISIL on hold.” However, all the Kurdish parties, including the three Islamist parties<sup>34</sup> in Kurdistan, officially denounced ISIL and supported the Peshmerga's fight against the group. While Islamic movements and parties believe that they have a significant role in preventing radicalization and extremism among Kurdish youth, the KRI's security institutions are deeply distrustful of them because they believe that these parties are among the key sources of youth radicalization in the KRI.

#### 3.3.2 Increasing youth dissatisfaction

Over the past eight years, beginning with its financial crisis in 2014, the KRI has witnessed a great degree of youth dissatisfaction with the authorities.<sup>35</sup> Beneath the façade of the KRG's State-like institutions, the KDP and PUK maintain parallel systems of governance, each controlling economic resources. The private and public sectors, access to government contracts, and positions in the security forces, are all tightly controlled in the hands of the two parties. The excessive influence the two parties wield over governance creates a structural and administrative barrier, effectively precluding the participation of an increasingly unaffiliated and independent youth constituency.

Over a quarter of the population in the KRI is aged 18 to 34 years; many suffer from unemployment and increasing disillusionment with the governing authorities.<sup>36</sup> No accurate data on unemployment and youth migration in the KRI exists. Youth migration to Europe has significantly increased since 2014.<sup>37</sup> Migration is an outcome the deterioration of

29 Kamaran Palani, Jaafar Khidir, Mark Dechesne, and Edwin Bakker. Strategies to gain international recognition: Iraqi Kurdistan's September 2017 referendum for independence, *Ethnopolitics* 20, no. 4 (2021): 406–427, p. 411.

30 Tine Gade and Kamaran Palani. The Hybridisation of Religion and Nationalism in Iraqi Kurdistan: The Case of Kurdish Islam, *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal* 5, no 3-6, (2020): 221–241, p. 227.

31 The Kurdistan Islamic Union, the Kurdistan Justice Group, and the Kurdistan Islamic Movement.

32 Gade and Palani, *The Hybridisation of Religion*, p. 227.

33 Palani, *Youth Radicalization*, p. 227.

34 The Islamic Union of Kurdistan; The Justice Group, and the Islamic Movement of Kurdistan.

35 Sajad Jiyad, Müjge Küçükkeleş, and Tobias Schillings, *Economic Drivers of Youth Political Discontent in Iraq: The Voice of Young People in Kurdistan, Baghdad, Basra and Thi-Qar*, (Global Partners Governance, 2020), p. 6.

36 The Kurdistan Regional Statistics Office [KRSO], The International Organization for Migration [IOM], and The United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA], Demographic Survey: Kurdistan Region of Iraq, (2018). <https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/demographic-survey-kurdistan-region-iraq>.

37 Mera Bakr, *Escaping from Duopoly Rule: How a two-party system drives* A Two-Party System Drives Iraqi Kurdish migration Migration en masse? (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2022); Abdulla Hawez, *Why are Iraqi Kurds migrating?* Available from: <https://abdullahawez.substack.com/p/why-are-iraqi-kurds-migrating>.

the economic and social situation and negatively impacts people's sense of belonging.<sup>38</sup> The fight against ISIL and the financial crisis, which both started early in 2014, put an end to the economic growth and progress the KRI experienced in the decade after the 2003. A collapse in oil prices, Baghdad's decision to freeze the KRI's budget, and an influx of 250,000 Syrian refugees and 1.5 million internally displaced persons fleeing ISIL further overwhelmed KRI. These factors have had significant implications for the well-being of its population, especially youth.

High rates of unemployment and economic deprivation pose structural barriers to youth participation and empowerment, locking many of KRI's youth into a subsistence bracket, where their energies are focused on the satisfaction of basic needs. Overall, the circumstances of

youth across the KRI remain precarious. Without viable recourse to the mechanisms that might allow them to transform these circumstances, the region's youth are growing increasingly hopeless and eager to migrate in search of a better life. While in the case of the KRI it is not clear how youth disengagement and feelings of powerlessness can transform into support for VE, research suggests violent extremist groups and viewpoints gain support while the government and State structures lose legitimacy and support.<sup>39</sup> As the literature demonstrates, a repetitive negative encounter with a member of the security forces, a civil servant, judge, etc., leads to anger and feelings of alienation, making young people vulnerable to radicalization. When societies fail to integrate youth in meaningful ways, young people are more likely to engage in political violence.<sup>40</sup>



Photo 7: Anjam Rasool/IOM Iraq

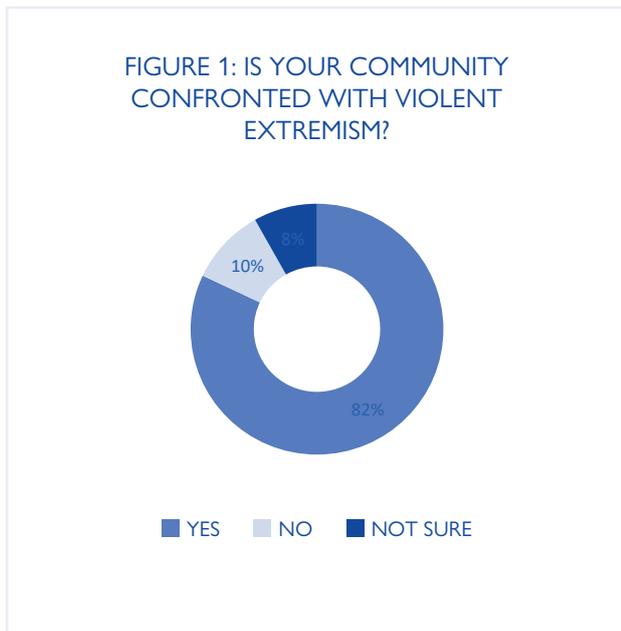
38 Bakr, *Escaping from Duopoly Rule*.

39 Harriet Allan, Andrew Glazzard, Sasha Tumu Jespersion, and Emily Sneha Reddy Winterbotham, *Drivers of Violent Extremism: Hypotheses and Literature Review*, (2015), p. 5.

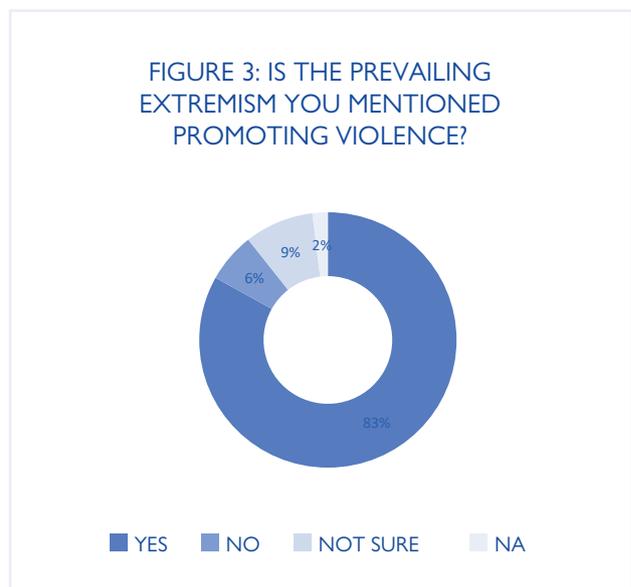
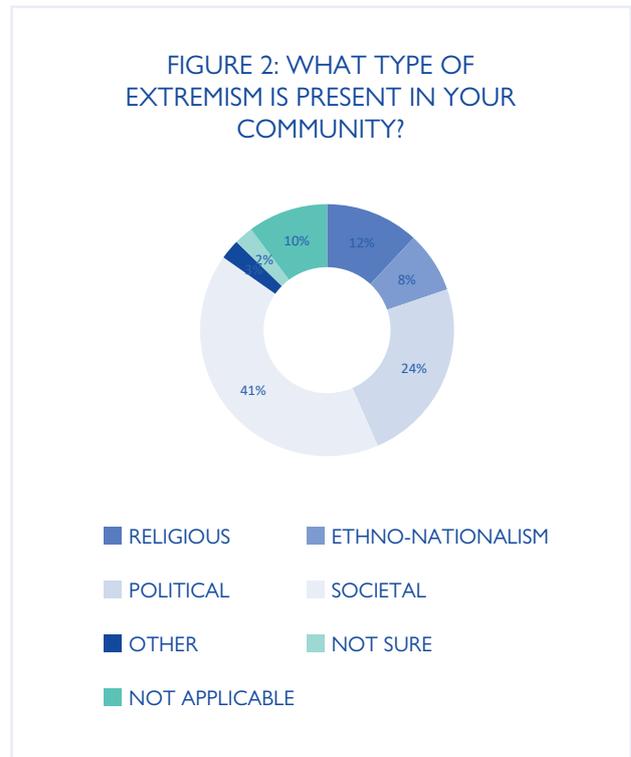
40 See: UNDP [United Nations Development Programme]. *Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment*, (New York: 2017), p. 5.

## 4. PEOPLE’S PERCEPTIONS

That extremism exists in the KRI’s society was a sentiment widely shared by the survey respondents, FGDs participants and interviewees. An overwhelming majority (82%, 342 respondents) said that the community is confronted with VE (Figure 1).

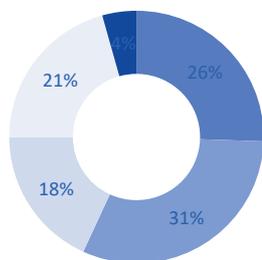


Regarding the question of what kind of extremism exists in society, respondents’ answers were divided (Figure 2). Forty-one per cent (291 respondents) reported a type of extremism grounded in geographical identity, 24 per cent (167 respondents) chose political extremism, 12 per cent (84 respondents) chose religious extremism, 8 per cent (55 respondents) selected ethnically motivated extremism. In addition, most respondents (83%, 344 respondents) believed that extremism, if not resolved, will lead to violence (Figure 3). This question was extensively discussed in FGDs and interviews, and we found that when respondents make a link between geographical identity and extremism, they mainly mean polarization: the divide between rural and urban settings. In Halabja’s FGDs, the divide between various locations and districts was one of the main themes of discussion.



A considerable number of survey respondents believed that people’s frustration with the authorities will increase the likelihood of being involved in extremist movements (Figure 4). This result can be explained within broader discussions on the need to improve State-society relations in the KRI. Therefore, enhancing people’s trust in political authorities should be part of PVE programming.

**FIGURE 4: HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT THIS STATEMENT? "WHEN PEOPLE GET FRUSTRATED WITH GOVERNMENT/RULING PARTIES, THEY ARE LIKELY TO GET INVOLVED IN EXTREMIST MOVEMENTS IN THE KRI."**



- STRONGLY AGREE
- AGREE
- DISAGREE TO SOME EXTENT
- DISAGREE
- STRONGLY DISAGREE

#### 4.1 PEOPLE'S VIEWS ON THE FUTURE

Survey respondents were asked if they believed the situation in the KRI is going in the right or wrong direction; 79 per cent (330 respondents) believed that the KRI is going in the wrong direction, followed 13 per cent (54 respondents) who said they were “not sure”. Only 7 per cent (31 respondents) believed that things are going in the right direction (Figure 5).

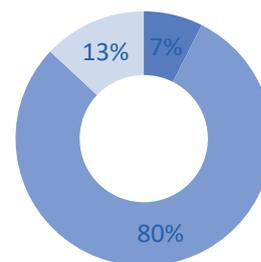
Negative perceptions about the current situation in KRI are rooted in past events that created a polarized and dysfunctional political system. Qualitative data show that people’s frustration and negative perceptions towards the

future have created two main sentiments that may contribute to an environment conducive to VE. First, these frustrations reflect a serious disconnect between authorities and the younger generation, highlighting a crisis in the “social contract.” The current disconnect between authorities and youth calls for a renegotiation and re-designing of the social contract, which has underpinned State–society relations for almost three decades. Second, a greater gap between youth and authorities has also contributed to the sentiment that what is needed is not “reform,” but “radical change.”<sup>41</sup> This sentiment is driven by the sentiment that the ruling political class is not willing or able to change the system. These sentiments are common across the KRI and are very widespread in Halabja.

It is okay for a young man to die, or to be killed, because they have nothing to lose (Halabja, FGD, August 2022).

The people of this city [Halabja] are so disappointed as they have been covered with dead dust (Halabja, FGD, August 2022).

**FIGURE 5: IN GENERAL, DO YOU THINK THAT THINGS IN THE KRI ARE GOING IN THE RIGHT OR WRONG DIRECTION?**

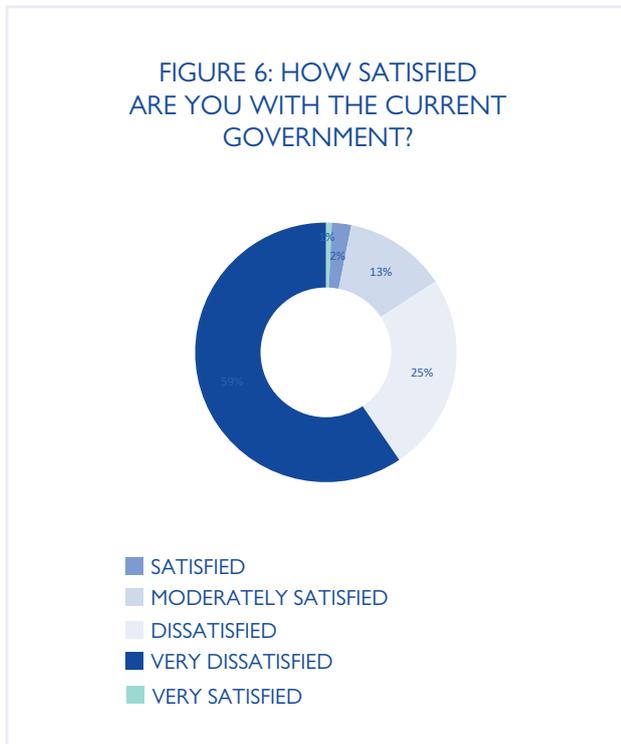


- HEADING IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION
- HEADING IN THE WRONG DIRECTION
- NOT SURE

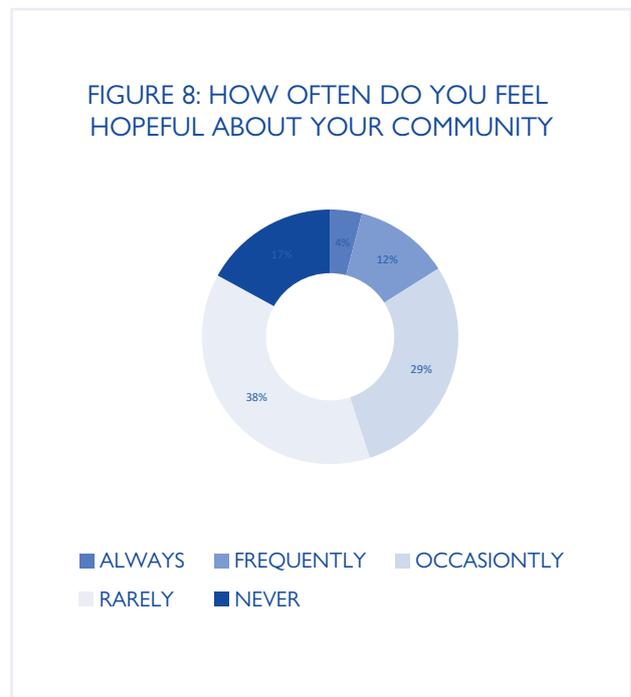
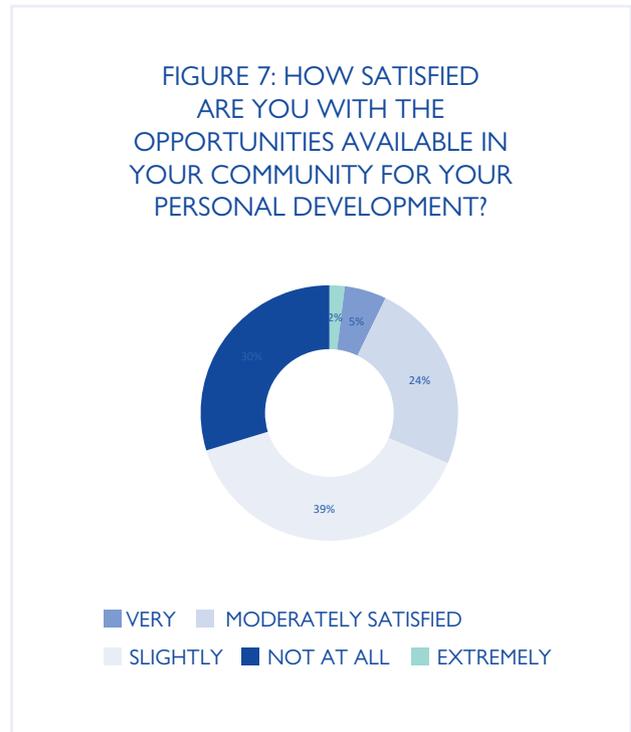
41 Palani, *Youthful Anger*.

### 4.2 LEVELS OF SATISFACTION

In terms of levels of satisfaction with the governing authorities, data reveal elevated levels of dissatisfaction across the locations. The majority (59%, 248 respondents) were very dissatisfied, followed by dissatisfied (25%, 103 respondents) and moderately satisfied (13%, 53 respondents). An exceptionally low level of satisfaction was reported by a small minority of respondents.



Survey respondents were asked about their satisfaction with the opportunities available for their personal development. The majority (39%, 162 respondents) were “slightly” satisfied, followed by “not satisfied at all” (30%, 124 respondents), “moderately satisfied” (24%, 101 respondents); (Figure 7). Many respondents (38%, 157 respondents) reported that they only “rarely” felt hopeful about their community, followed by 29 per cent (123 respondents) who chose “occasionally”, and 17 per cent (71 respondents) chose “never” (Figure 8). However, these levels might change depending on the region of KRI. The current protests in the KRI have been confined to Halabja, Garmian and Raparin, highlighting the failure of the KRG’s economic policies in creating equal opportunities between different regions, with opportunities being concentrated in large cities such as Erbil.<sup>42</sup>



42 Ibid.

### 4.3 TRUST IN AUTHORITIES

Respondents were also asked how much they trust authorities. The majority (60%, 249 respondents) had extremely low trust in the government, followed by low (21%, 88 respondents), medium (16%, 65 respondents). Only 2 per cent (8% of respondents) reported that they trust the government (Figure 9).

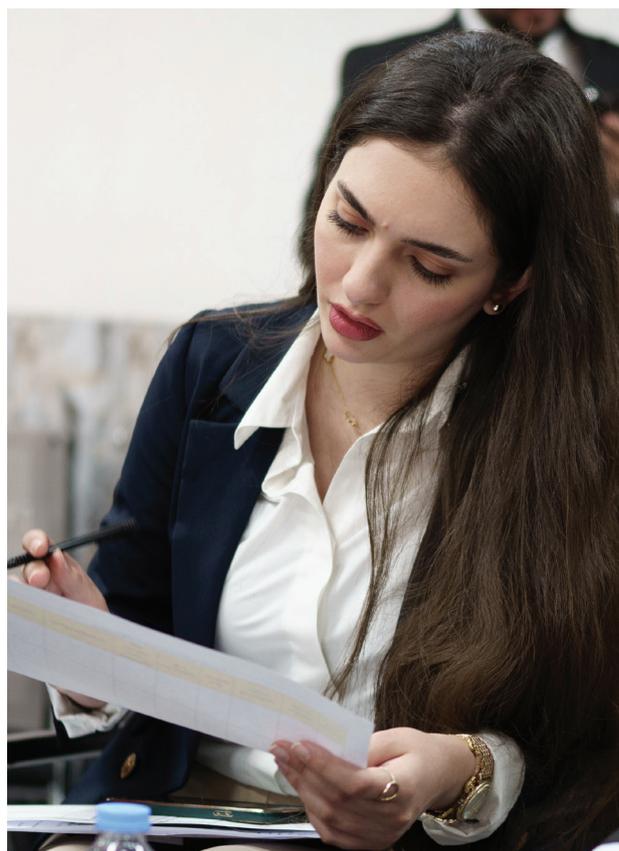
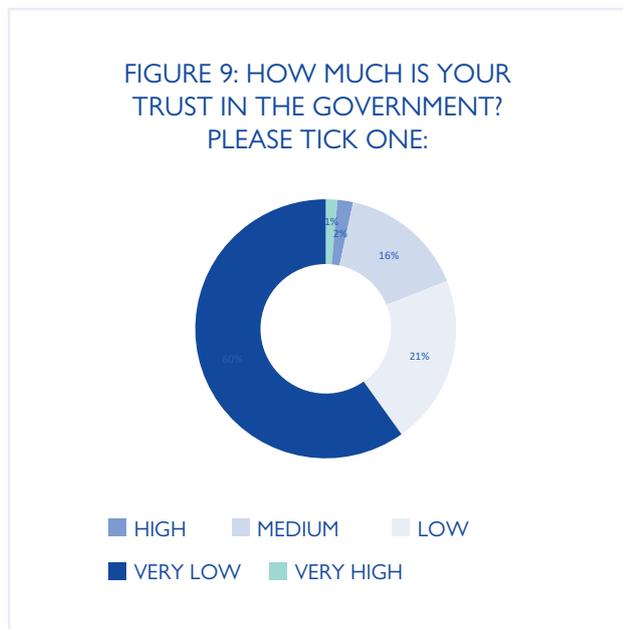


Photo 8: Anjam Rasool/IOM Iraq

Table 2 shows people’s trust in the following institutions: the KRG, local governments, political parties, security forces and the justice system. Responses showed low trust in all these institutions, except for security institutions, about which people have fewer negative views. However; the majority (46%, 191 respondents) still do not trust the security forces, as they are seen as part of the KDP-PUK establishment and control. Security officials interviewed for this research and who participated in the FGDs argued that they still enjoy a high level of trust and cooperation with the people, especially when it comes to identifying certain individuals at risk.

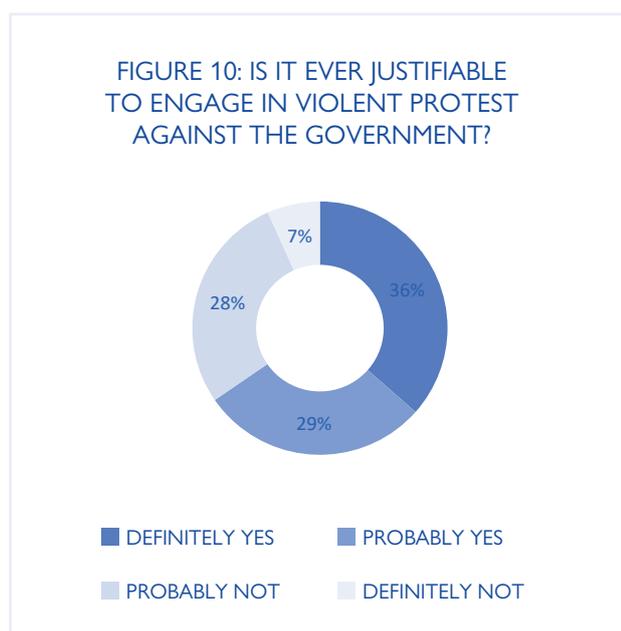
TABLE 2: DO YOU THINK YOU CAN TRUST THE FOLLOWING INSTITUTIONS?		
Local government	• Strongly distrust	188 or 45%
	• Distrust	126 or 30%
	• I have some confidence	61 or 15%
	• Trust	29 or 7%
	• Strongly trust	11 or 3%
Government	• Strongly distrust	224 or 54%
	• Distrust	124 or 30%
	• I have some confidence	39 or 9%
	• Trust	20 or 5%
	• Strongly trust	10 or 2%

Political parties	• Strongly distrust	229 or 55%
	• Distrust	111 or 26%
	• I have some confidence	41 or 10%
	• Trust	22 or 5%
	• Strongly trust	9 or 2%
Security forces	• Strongly distrust	0 or 0%
	• Distrust	191 or 46%
	• I have some confidence	114 or 27%
	• Trust	50 or 12%
	• Strongly trust	55 or 13%
Legal system	• Strongly distrust	147 or 35%
	• Distrust	131 or 31%
	• I have some confidence	91 or 22%
	• Trust	30 or 7%
	• Strongly trust	15 or 4%

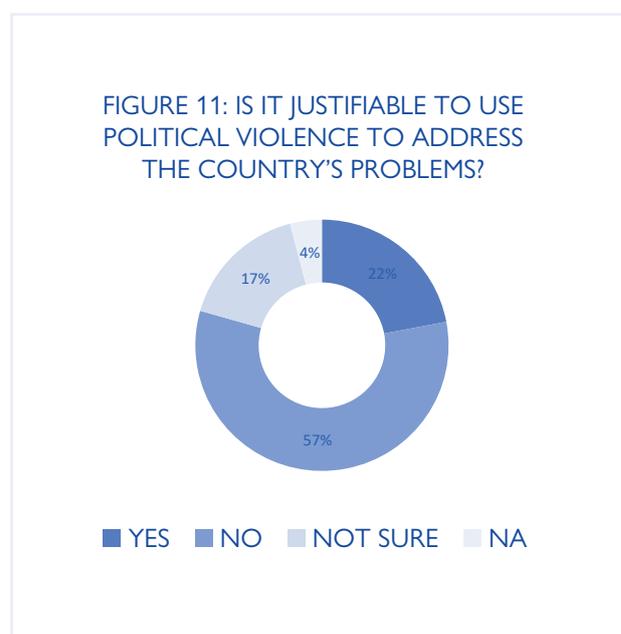
#### 4.4 IS IT LEGITIMATE TO USE VIOLENCE?

Sometimes I say, it is not enough to commit a suicide attack against the government only once (Chamchamal, FGD, August 2022).

The use of violence to change or influence the governing system was one of the main discussions during FGDs and interviews. Many survey respondents said that it is justifiable to engage in violent protests against the government (Figure 10).

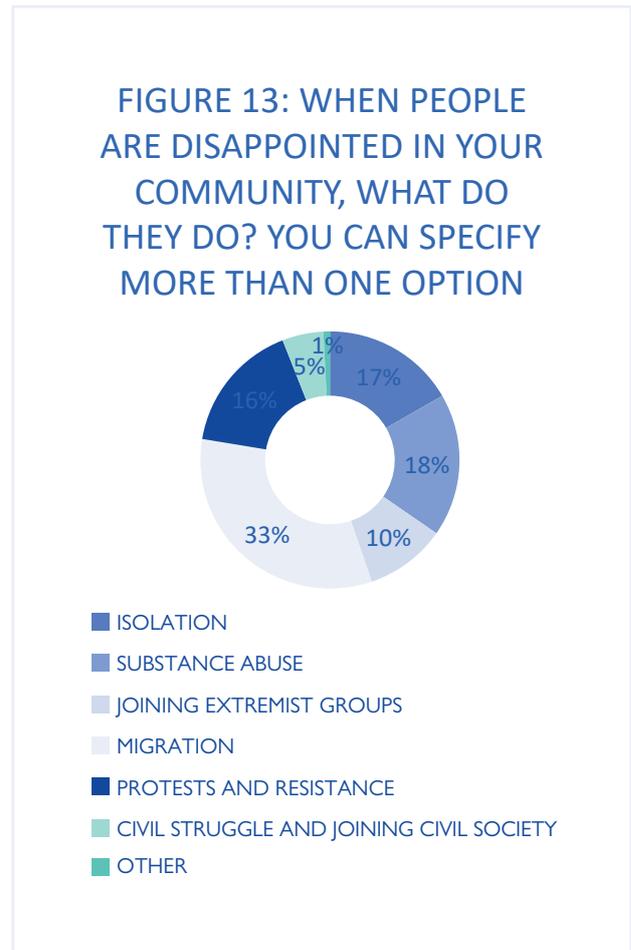
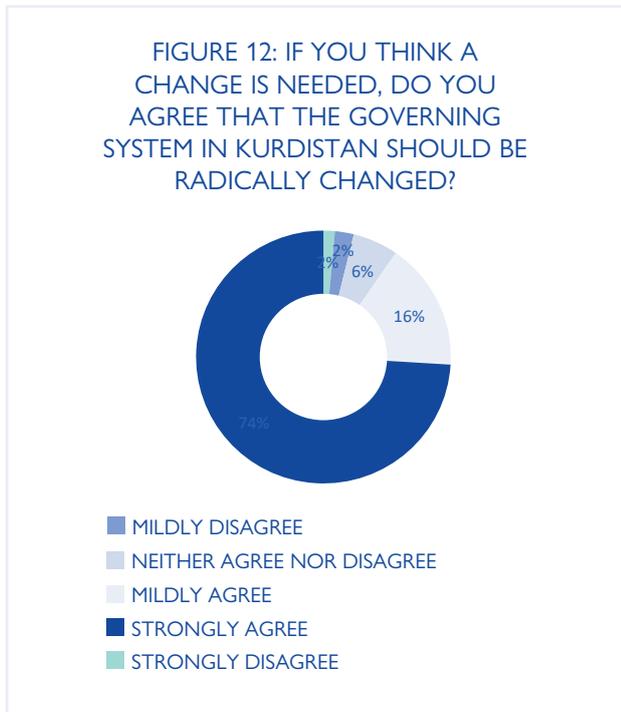


In a similar question, we asked the respondents whether they thought using political violence to address the KRI's problems is justifiable. More than half 57 per cent (240 respondents) said no, 22 per cent (92 of respondents) responded yes and 17 per cent (69 of respondents) were not sure (Figure 11).



As the above findings show, people's frustration with the authorities might explain why respondents justify the use of violence against the government. The use of violence and

attacking public and party buildings and properties by young protesters validate the concern over youth radicalization leading to violence in the future. Such finding highlights the growing risk and vulnerability of the KRI, especially combined with the respondents' belief that a radical change should be made in the region's governing system (Figure 12).



These results will lead us to ask the following question: what are the potential outcomes of people's frustration? Many respondents believed that when people are disappointed, they will migrate (33%), followed by substance abuse (18%), isolation (17%), protests and resistance (16%), joining extremist groups (10%), civil struggle and joining civil society organizations (5%).

Although the context is suitable to VE, the majority of respondents still thought the outcome of people joining extremist groups is less likely compared to other options. However, just a few individuals drifting into extremism can result in serious acts of violence.

#### 4.5 AT-RISK GROUPS

Asked as to who they thought would be most likely to support VE groups, many respondents signaled unemployed youth as the group most susceptible to be attracted to VE, followed by members of political parties (29%), victims of State or authorities' violence (23%) and religious figures (8%) (Figure 14).

Interviews and FGDs extensively discussed the vulnerability of children and women to VE. Women and children are facing additional challenges, as families are becoming more fragmented and children can access all online tools without protection and support. Representatives of the

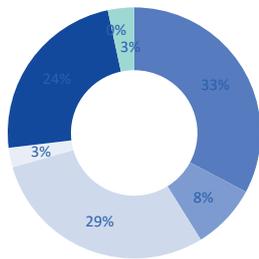
departments for Combating Violence Against Women and Families, who participated in our FGDs, spoke of the negative impact of people’s deteriorating livelihoods on family relationships, and of increasing divorce rates. In matters of divorce, where governmental protection and support institutions are very weak, children are the first victims.

The girl had an argument with her mother, and she left home for two nights. Because there is no shelter in the city, the girl slept in a public garden (Halabja, FGD, August 2022).

There are 10th and 11th grade students who use drugs from the other side of Iran. They have formed bands and groups (Halabja, FGD, August 2022).



**FIGURE 14: FROM THE FOLLOWING CATEGORIES OF PEOPLE, WHO DO YOU THINK WOULD BE MORE LIKELY TO SUPPORT EXTREMIST GROUPS OR IDEOLOGIES?**



- UNEMPLOYED YOUTH
- RELIGIOUS LEADERS
- POLITICAL PARTY MEMBERS
- COMMUNITY ELITE
- VICTIMS OF STATE VIOLENCE
- OTHER
- WOMEN



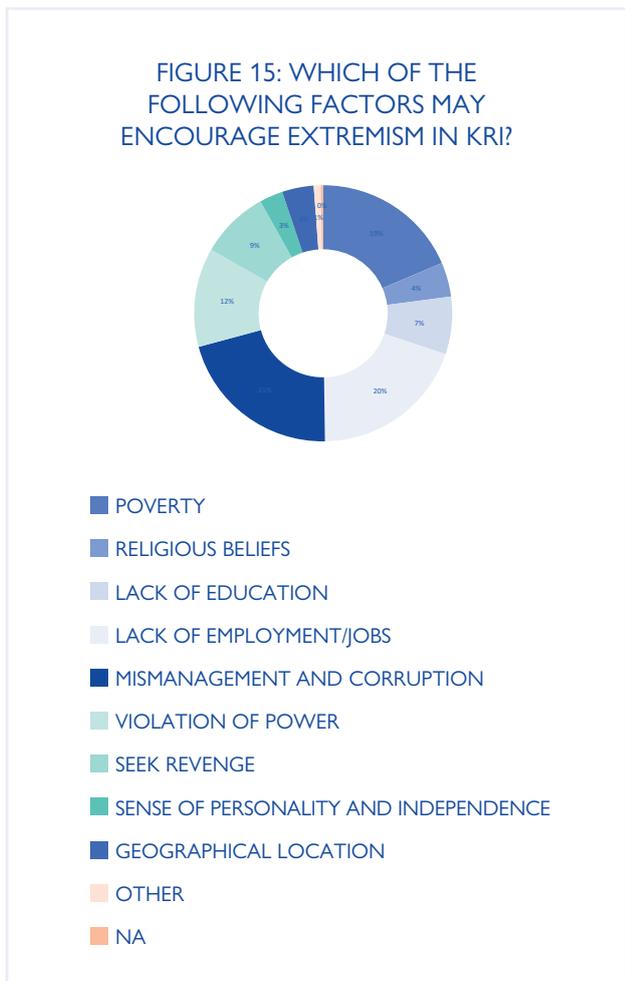
Photo 9: Anjam Rasool/IOM Iraq

## 5. FACTORS FAVOURING VE IN THE KRI

### 5.1. STRUCTURAL MOTIVATORS

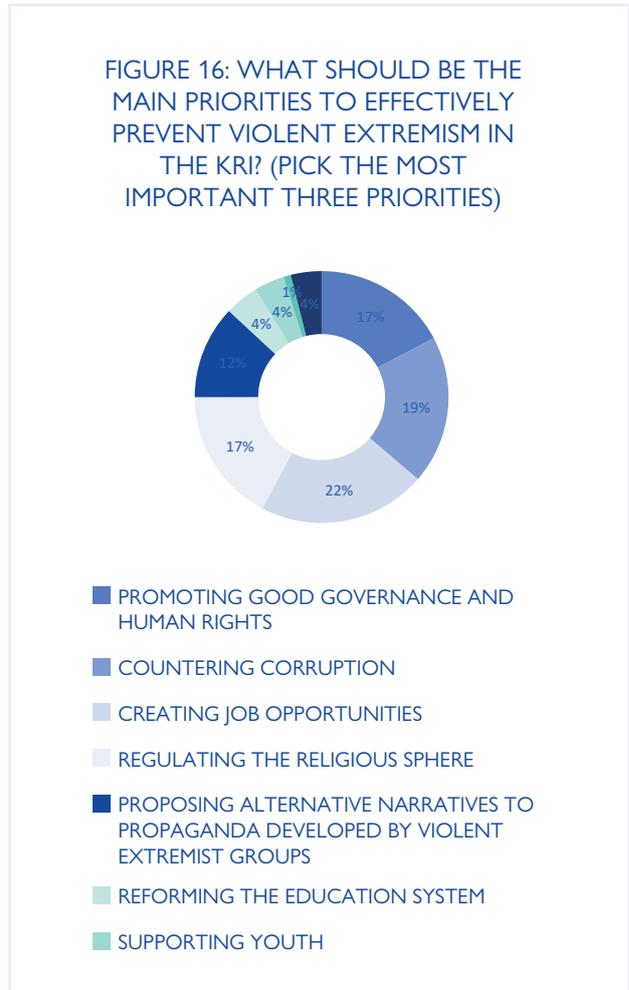
If young Kurds joined extremist groups in 2014 because of ideology, they now would join them due to corruption. They are now so rebellious that there is nothing left in the name of ethnic belonging (Halabja, interview, August 2022).

Asked about the factors and motivators increasing support for VE, survey respondents prioritized mismanagement and corruption, unemployment, and poverty (Figure 15). There is considerable research on how experiences of injustice and corruption were used by extremist organizations in the recruitment process worldwide. However, only 4 per cent of respondents think that religious beliefs are now the factor of VE in the KRI.



The emphasis on institutional and governance-related issues is also found in the question about what needs to be done to address underlying drivers and vulnerabilities of VE. Providing job opportunities was given priority by 22 per cent of respondents,

followed by addressing corruption (19%), and improving good governance and human rights (17%); (Figure 16).



The research suggests that widespread corruption and perceptions of injustice, and inequality create grievances that can be harnessed to promote extremist violence. These perceptions are very widespread across the locations.

Job opportunities and employment are controlled by the ruling parties. A German organization came, and workers who were employed in their project had to go through by party filters (Halabja, interview, July 2022).

Another recurrent theme during the interviews and FGDs with representatives of local civil society and local government institutions in Halabja, Garmian and Raparin was the weakness of justice institutions. Participants mentioned their fear that the weakness of the justice sector might force people to seek other ways to resolve their problems.

In this region, the courts do not work properly, and problems remain unresolved for years. Some issues are resolved in the courts through the political party [referring to KDP and PUK]; (Halabja, interview, July 2022).

Two years ago, we did a survey on young people's trust in the courts. Of 513, only 85 voted yes (that they trusted the courts). The courts need to reconsider themselves radically (KRG representative, roundtable of government representatives and other regional institutions, August 2022).

### Socioeconomic issues

Socioeconomic circumstances are a central risk factor for why some young people become radicalized. Interviews and FGDs participants paid great attention to the deterioration of socioeconomic conditions throughout the KRI, and why this factor can be relevant to discussing PVE as well.

We have had examples of young people in this city who joined ISIL. Their only problem was unemployment (Halabja, interview, July 2022).

Our young people and children are mentally deformed, and they are emptying all their hatred and anger in their motorcycles (Halabja, FGD, August 2022).

Twenty per cent of our youth have already left Halabja. The rest thinks that buying a motorcycle and harassing people is how they can retaliate against the government and society (Halabja, interview, August 2022).

There may be 100 young people going into terrorist groups, only 10 of them going out of knowledge, the rest going because of unemployment (Halabja, interview, August 2022).

I know a person who joined ISIL in Mosul. He said it was because ISIL would give him cars and weapons. And he could get a wife (Halabja, FGD, August 2022).

Young people have nowhere to go here. That is why it is a miracle that they did not become a terrorist (Chamchamal FGD, August 2022).

Young people's unemployment, anger and dissatisfaction with the authorities have also led to feelings of uncertainty and negative views of the future.

I do not know what to tell my children. Tell them if they die in poverty or war? I often tell them not to get married and think about leaving the country (Halabja FGD, August 2022).

Justice is important for young people, particularly as they continue to build their identity and position in society. People's feeling of injustice is growing and there is fear that it may fuel the notion that violent acts and actions are legitimate to address the inequality and injustice they perceive. As the opportunities for public employment of university graduates have almost come to a halt since 2014, participants discussed whether the private sector can provide alternative jobs to university graduates.

Cutting salaries makes people feel that they have the right to seek violence against the government. You may say this is wrong, but if you are a teacher and do not receive your salary on time, you will also think in this way (Rania, interview, July 2022).

The sons of officials easily buy and travel in expensive cars, and they get jobs, while no one supports poor children. For this reason, the children of poor people bear hatred and are trying to take revenge on this government and society (Rania, FGD, August 2022).

People and young people's dissatisfaction is not only confined to a specific area, but is widespread throughout the KRI.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, in Sulaymaniyah and Halabja, especially in districts and subdistricts, this feeling is deeper.

The government has created a small class of very wealthy people. They own companies and oil fields. There is no equality (Halabja, interview, August 2022).

<sup>43</sup> In addition to existing literature, this statement was validated in our consultation session with senior representatives of the government, presidency and parliament on 22 August 2022 in Erbil.

I feel bad when I hear the word 'government' (Rania, FGD, August 2022).

In Kurdistan, there is a limited rule of law. Any single violation of a right is a factor of extremism (Rania, FGD, August 2022).

Some of the participants at the special meeting with high-level government representatives and other institutions in the region discussed the relationship between young people and political instability.

Erbil has fewer young people compared to Sulaymaniyah, but more children. That is why there is more violence in Sulaymaniyah. Erbil and other cities will also face the same problem soon (KRG representative, August 2022).

The weakness of the private sector in Halabja, Garmian and Raparin was raised in many interviews with the government officials. In Halabja, there is a widespread feeling that the city is “abandoned” and has “no gateway or connection” with the rest of the KRI, which also contributes to people’s perception of being discriminated against, especially when they compare their conditions with the centres of Erbil and Sulaymaniyah cities. Moreover, as these regions are located on the border with Iran, they have become subject to instability, including due to the movement of extremist organizations’ members. The local government officials say that this is a central barrier to the development of the private sector in their areas.

## 5.2 ENABLING FACTORS

Research participants discussed some key enabling events, such as the emergence of a suitable environment for attracting young people into extremist groups from 2011 to 2014. Discussions have clearly identified two key enabling factors in the KRI, especially in Halabja: the old networks of extremist organizations and family connections taking young people to extremist groups. According to an interview with a security official, around 300 young Kurds who joined extremist organizations during the period 2011–2014 were recruited and radicalized by the networks of the extremist organizations that were formerly present in the KRI. These networks and family connections are identified by authorities. Security forces do not arrest extremists or people who hold radical views; instead, they try to monitor their movements on the ground and seek to deradicalize them through informal and indirect social channels, such as parents and imams.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Palani, *Youth Radicalization*, p. 232.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 233.

### Absence of family support

The KRG’s security officials see certain families among the main sources of youth radicalization. There are families “that have long provided a space for youth radicalization, and from which are drawn a significant proportion of extremists. The Asayesh closely monitors these families.”<sup>45</sup> Moreover, based on discussions with the research participants, we have identified two key issues. First, families in need are unable to give attention to their children. Second, there are certain families who enable their children to adopt radical ideologies.

I have a friend who has many children. He prefers one to the others. He always says that the reason he likes this son is because he sees him that if he grows up, he will not accept any insults against Islam (Halabja, interview, August 2022).

Parents are busy providing basic needs for their families. They will never devote time to educating their children (Chamchamal, FGD, August 2022).

### Ideological and religious dimensions

Research participants do not see religious and ideological factors as a primary reason supporting and joining violent extremist organizations in the KRI. Nevertheless, they mentioned that many in Halabja and other regions travelled to Syria to join ISIL for religious and ideological reasons. Some participants also mentioned that many people feel that religion is under threat – by the KRI authorities. People’s negative perceptions towards the government are increasing because it is perceived as controlling the religious sphere and institutions, including mosques. In addition, two other problems were noted within the context of religious factors: first, the complexity of religious orientation and education in the KRI, because the religious sphere is becoming more divisive with diverse groups mobilize the population differently; second, interfaith dialogue has been only superficial, taking place among elites only; it has not been translated at the society level.

### Online radicalization, polarized media and misinformation

Our media is open to everyone. There are people who say, you will go to heaven or hell. This creates psychological instability. We have both extremist religious discourse and secular extremist discourse (Kalar, interview, August 2022).

Government officials and representatives of CSOs are deeply concerned about the increase in online radicalization and misinformation, particularly in the social media platforms. There was a consensus among research participants that social media has further contributed to polarization in society.

We lost the ideological and moral war to social media. It is out of our control (Kalar, interview, July 2022).

Senior security officials, interviewed for this research, stated that they lack expertise and capacity in countering and preventing online radicalization.

We are aware that social media is used to radicalize people towards violence, but we do not have enough technical skills and a systematic approach to deal with it. We need a unit with advanced equipment as well as practical training by international experts on how to use social media to detect and counter radicalization (Erbil, interview, March 2022).

While participants' negative views of the government and authorities are high, they suggest online regulation and alternative monitoring and government-led narrative. The participants' main suggestion is to emphasize the need for a national media platform to inform young people of the dangers of extremism and violence, promote cohesion and tolerance, and foster dialogue between authorities and young people. The voices of women, youth, religious leaders, as well as victims and survivors of VE are essential in this process.

Educational institutions have not been able to develop the required curricula and programmes to provide youth with knowledge about the media. Moreover, parents, particularly in rural areas, do not have technical skills to protect or educate their children about the dangers they may face in their online activities. Civil society and social media platforms are crucial in solving issues of false information and fake news in the process of PVE and countering polarization.

#### Media is a reason or tool?

Part of the debate was whether media was a tool for VE, or a reason of VE. Media can be both. However, as one of the participants of the special panel for the government and other institutions said:

Media problems make us forget the main problems. The media does not create a violent person if there are no other structural issues. Therefore, we must focus on the roots of the problems, including corruption, lack of economic opportunities and development.

### 5.3 PERSONAL INCENTIVES

Research participants have highlighted a growing detachment of youth from family and community and their exposure to a polarized social media in the KRI. They also mentioned some family members have a history of violent extremism influencing the family members. Moreover, evidence exists that radicalization is a social process, and identity is a factor that influences individuals' involvement in violent movements.<sup>46</sup> The desire for rebellion, and the weakening of the family structure and position in the community, as well as of parental authority, may play a role in transforming ideas or grievances into violent extremist action.

Regarding personal drivers of VE, the memory of violence is also cited in many interviews and FGDs as a major issue. Halabja witnessed the worst chemical attack in 1988 in the history of the region, still impacting its residents. Most of the mass killings during the Anfal campaigns took place in Garmian.

We have a history of violence in this area. In the past, the Iraq-Iran war took place here, and then the KDP-PUK war. The violence from the late 1990s and early 2000s, and the emergence of extremist religious groups in the area, create violent individuals, preventing progress in the region (Halabja, interview, August 2022).

Five times in front of my eyes, our houses were destroyed. Do you want me to act like a normal person? I know a friend who often says his two fathers were killed. His father was martyred by the Ba'athist regime. His mother married another man, and he was also martyred (Chamchamal, FGD, August 2022).

What is obvious in Halabja is the city's background and the history of extremist groups. Wherever there is a war, some young people join, for example ISIL and the Syrian war. Ten to 20 people are being arrested annually on charges of terrorism (Halabja, interview, July 2022).

We are a post-war community. From 1961 until now, we have been a community at war (KRG representative, August 2022).

46 Allan, et al., *Drivers of violent extremism*, p. 4–5.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has identified several structural, enabling and personal factors that can contribute to people's engagement in and support for VE. While at this stage no evidence exists that the issues and risk factors highlighted in this study will automatically lead to VE in the KRI, their identification is fundamental to reducing risk and enhancing population's resilience. Underlying drivers and structural motivators exist, but there is still no identifiable group, or enabling and charismatic Kurdish leader or ideology that can reach deep into Kurdish society to promote extremist narrative.

Drivers of VE are complex, fluid, and tied to the broader scheme of governance in the context of Kurdistan. An effective strategy of prevention infuses itself with broader political and governance reform. Such an infusion would require strengthening public institutions, provision of decent and equal job opportunities, as well as reduction of corruption. Such an approach would by nature call for having targeted recommendations and potential solutions for governance challenges.

### 6.1 RECOMMENDATIONS

In formulating policy recommendations, this study identified the following five priority areas necessary to prevent violent extremism in the KRI:

- I. Planning and policy development
- II. Improving governance through transparency and accountability
- III. Tailored economic development
- IV. Youth engagement and empowerment
- V. Community resilience and supporting families in PVE.

**First, Planning and Policy Development:** There are several gaps at play in the KRI when it comes to implementing an effective PVE programming. First, an engagement with government officials in the KRI indicates the lack of a clear understanding and definition of VE across government institutions. On multiple occasions, government officials who participated in this research stated that they are not aware of each other's efforts in this field. Thus, a clear conceptualization and definition of VE across government institutions in the KRI is needed. To address these gaps, efforts should, therefore, aim to localize the Iraqi National Strategy through a KRI-specific PVE plan that is translated into implementable PoAs for regions with high risk factors.

- Develop and implement an evidence-based, community-led PVE plan for the KRI and its local contexts.
- Establish multisectoral mechanisms and coordination between governmental and non-governmental actors, outlining the roles and responsibilities in the development and implementation of the KRI's PVE efforts.
- Conduct more research on drivers, motives and factors that could increase and mitigate the risk of VE in different regions and locations within the KRI.
- Facilitate and enhance coordination, cooperation, and expertise exchange between the KRG and Baghdad – with an emphasis on engagement with the National Committee for the Implementation of the National Strategy – in the development and implementation of PVE programs and activities in the KRI.
- Develop a comprehensive education policy to improve the role of the education system in playing a more proactive role in PVE. This should also include improving the capacity and well-being of school-teachers and school staff.

### Second: Improving Governance

Research shows that violent extremist organizations exploited people's experiences and perceptions of corruption and injustice in the KRI in the past. Perceptions of corruption and injustice decrease communities' resilience against violent extremist narratives; therefore, understating and addressing real and/or perceived grievances is a key component in effective preventive measures in the KRI.

- Enhance integrity measures to rebuild and strengthen trust between local and regional (KRI-level) authorities and their communities to increase communities' resilience against violent extremist narratives.
- Support and oversee local authorities' transparency and accountability measures to ensure just service delivery, especially when it comes to government-led economic opportunities and the provision of legal service (courts).
- Prioritize good governance and service provision over social cohesion programs, such as promoting religious coexistence in the KRI.
- International organizations should also allocate more resources to improve governance and economic development in the KRI.

### Third: Youth Engagement and Empowerment

Youth are a primary target of violent extremist organizations and are an essential partner in preventing VE and polarization. Empowering youth and addressing their concerns and grievances is a key pillar for an effective PVE efforts in the KRI. A dissatisfied and angry youth could be a major barrier to a successful PVE policies and initiatives.

- Provide vocational training and economic development support to at risk youth in the KRI, including young women.
- Ensuring that youth are consulted and included in decision-making on both local and KRI-level when possible. This could be accomplished through consultations, public forums, and through online forums that are open to youth to participate in.
- Facilitate collaborative and consultative interfacing between youth and local and KRG-level government authorities.
- Use effective and established methods and tools, such as social media and role models networks to engage with YOUTH on PVE issues. This could also include and highlight the role and voices of victims and/or former followers of VE.<sup>47</sup>
- Mobilize and support youth to play a more prominent role in PVE online through partnering with higher education institutions and relevant CSOs to train young people on using digital media and to promote positive alternatives to extremist narratives.

### Fourth: Economic Development

While there is mixed evidence regarding the relationship between economic factors and VE, employment opportunities reduce grievances, and hence reducing the risk of violent extremist among communities.

- In consultation with local authorities and relevant stakeholders, conduct a comprehensive needs assessment in at-risk groups/communities in the KRI. Specific demographics require particular attention in relation to targeted economic development in specified geographic areas, such as women, children, and youth, families with possible ties with violent extremist organizations, recognizing the limited resources for economic development to address the wider needs of these groups, including job creation, infrastructure, and basic service provision.
- Prioritize employment through diversifying economic opportunities, focusing on agriculture, tourism, and empowering and enabling the private sector.
- Allocate a budget to support residents of urban areas in Halabja, Garmian and Raparin who suffer from deteriorating socioeconomic opportunities.

### Fifth: Community Resilience and Supporting Families in PVE

Community and family members have a critical role to play in preventing violent extremism on the local level. This includes providing mentoring to youth, increasing social cohesion within communities, strengthening citizenship and public participation in governance, and being role models to community and family members. Thus, investing in increasing the capacity, awareness, and participation of community members is another pillar in an effective PVE efforts in the KRI.

- Increase awareness and provide know-how and basic skills and tools on PVE to community members and families. These efforts should aim to enable communities to be able to protect their family members effectively and safely from the influences of violent extremist organizations through recognizing and responding to potential signs of radicalization in their communities.
- Collaborate with local educational authorities to equip educators with the knowledge, tools, and skills, such as critical thinking, multi-perspectives, and understandings of complexity, to strengthen preventive measures in schools.
- Provide mental health and psychosocial support to families who have members that joined or were influenced by violent extremist organizations. These families have received limited support and feel stigmatized and alienated by the wider society, thus making them at more at risk to VE in the long term.
- Engage faith-based actors in promoting moderation and restorative approach to reconciling with past..



Photo 10: Anjam Rasool/IOM Iraq

<sup>47</sup> Research has shown that former combatants are ones of the most effective voices in PVE/CVE. For more details see: Tore Bjørge. Preventing Radicalization and Violent Extremism: Lessons Learned from Criminology, *European Journal of Criminology* 14, no 2, (2017): p.p. 169–191.

## 7. ANNEXES

### Survey questions

#### Demographic and socio-professional profile

- Gender
    - Male
    - Female
  - Age
    - 18-25
    - 26-39
    - 40-60
    - 60+
  - Where do you live?
    - City
    - District
    - Village
  - What is your religion?
    - Sunni Islam
    - Shia Islam
    - Kakai
    - Zoroastrian
    - Other
    - NA
  - To what ethnic group to you belong?
    - Kurd
    - Arab
    - Other
    - NA
  - What is your current employment status?
    - Employed full-time
    - employed part-time
    - unemployed, retired
    - prefer not to say
  - What is the highest degree or level of education you have completed?
    - No education
    - primary school
    - high school
    - Diploma
    - bachelor's degree
    - Master's degree or higher
    - prefer not to say
1. In general, do you think that things in Kurdistan are going in the right or wrong direction?
    - o Heading in the right direction
    - o Heading in the wrong direction
    - o Not sure
  2. Is your community confronted with violent extremism?
    - o Yes
    - o No
    - o Not sure
  3. What type of extremism is present in your community?
    - o Religious
    - o Ethno-nationalism
    - o Political
    - o Societal/Geographical
    - o Other (please specify)
    - o Not sure
    - o NA
  4. Is the prevailing extremism you mentioned, promoting violence?
    - o Yes
    - o No
    - o Not sure
    - o NA

5. How do you feel about this statement? "When people get frustrated with government/ruling parties, they are likely to involve in extremist movements in your community."
- Strongly disagree                       Neither agree nor disagree                       Strongly agree  
 Disagree                                       Agree
6. Which of the following factors may encourage extremism in KRI?
- Poverty                                       Mismanagement and corruption                       Other (please specify)  
 Religious believes                       The state is provoking them                       Not sure  
 Lack of education                       Seeking revenge                       NA  
 Unemployment                       Seeking a sense of belonging
7. From the following categories of people, who do you think would be more likely to support extremist groups or ideologies?
- Unemployed youth                       Community elites                       Other  
 Religious leaders                       Victims of state violence                       NA  
 Political party members                       Women
8. How much is YOUR trust in the government? Please tick one:
- High                                       Medium                                       Very low  
 Very high                                       Low
9. How satisfied are you with the current government?
- Very satisfied                       Moderately satisfied                       Very dissatisfied  
 Satisfied                                       Dissatisfied
10. Is it ever justifiable to engage in violent protest the government?
- Definitely yes                       Probably not  
 Probably yes                       Definitely not
11. Is it justifiable to use political violence to address the country's problems?
- Yes                                       Not sure  
 No                                       NA
12. Do you think you can trust the following institutions?
- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Local government</li> <li>Strongly trust</li> <li>Trust</li> <li>I have some confidence</li> <li>strongly distrust</li> <li>Distrust</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Political parties</li> <li>Strongly trust</li> <li>Trust</li> <li>I have some confidence</li> <li>strongly distrust</li> <li>Distrust</li> </ul> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Government</li> <li>Strongly trust</li> <li>Trust</li> <li>I have some confidence</li> <li>strongly distrust</li> <li>Distrust</li> </ul>       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Security forces</li> <li>Strongly trust</li> <li>Trust</li> <li>I have some confidence</li> <li>strongly distrust</li> <li>Distrust</li> </ul>   |

- Legal system
- Strongly trust
- Trust
- I have some confidence
- Strongly distrust
- Distrust

13. If you think a change is needed, do you agree that the governing system in Kurdistan should be radically changed?

- Strongly disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Strongly agree
- Mildly disagree
- Mildly agree

14. How satisfied are you with the opportunities available in your community for your personal development?

- Extremely
- Moderately satisfied
- Not at all
- Very
- Slightly

15. How often do you feel hopeful about your community?

- Always
- Occasionally
- Never
- Frequently
- Rarely

16. What should be the main priorities to effectively prevent violent extremism in your community? (Pick the most important three priorities)

- Promoting good governance and human rights
- Countering corruption
- Creating job opportunities
- Regulating the religious sphere
- Proposing alternative narratives to propaganda developed by violent extremist groups
- Reforming the education system
- Supporting youth
- Empowering women
- Other priorities (please specify)

17. When people are disappointed in your community, what do they do? You can specify more than one option

- Isolation
- Drug addiction
- Joining extremist groups
- Migration
- Protests and resistance
- Civil struggle and joining civil society
- Other

## Interview and FGD questions

### General situation analysis

1. How would you describe the current state of your community?
2. What are the main problems in your area in general?
3. What are the causes of these problems?
4. Who are the major actors affected by these issues?
5. Who are the major actors driving these issues and why?
6. What key actors can address these drivers?
7. What relationships need to be established or strengthened to build community capacities to address ongoing conflicts?

### Violence and extremism

8. Is violence widespread in society? If yes, what are the causes of violence?
9. Is extremism widespread in society? If yes, what are the reasons, and if no, what is preventing it?
10. What are the main violent actors in the area?
11. In your opinion, who are the causes of instability in your society?
12. Who do you think can prevent extremism?
13. Regarding groups of society, what groups and classes of society are under threat and need to be protected? (e.g., widows, youth, university graduates, girls, ...)

### What has been done and what should be done?

14. What has the local government done in the area to prevent violent extremism?
15. What have you done to prevent violent extremism?
16. What do you think needs to be done, and what do you need, to increase society's ability to combat extremism?



Photo 11: Anjam Rasool/IOM Iraq

**VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN THE  
KURDISTAN REGION OF IRAQ:  
POTENTIAL DRIVERS AND  
PREVENTATIVE MEASURES**



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