

Next Generation

Iraq

Youth in the
Kurdistan Region of Iraq



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Executive Summary

Comprising 30% of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq's (KRI) population, youth aged 15 to 29 – 1.7 million of the total 6.17 million residents – represent a vital demographic for the region's workforce and future leadership. Their role is critical to shaping the KRI's political and economic trajectory, which in turn influences migration patterns, foreign investment, and competition among regional powers.

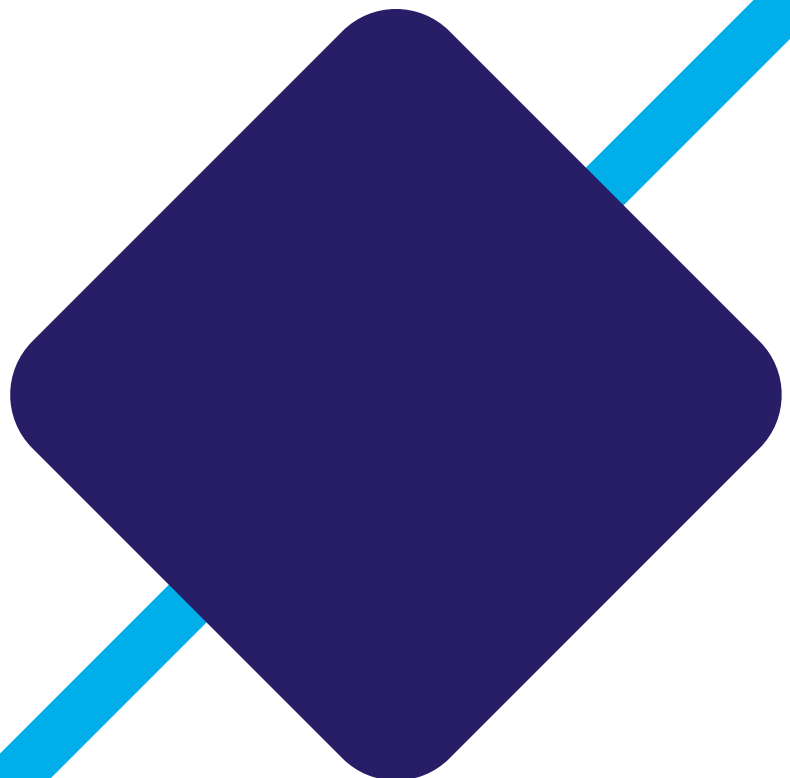
Understanding the priorities and concerns of Kurdish youth is therefore not only a local imperative but also one with international significance. The *Next Generation Iraq* research project, commissioned by the British Council, highlights common concerns among youth across Iraq, including employment, education, and livelihoods. Addressing these shared priorities offers opportunities to bridge divides across Iraq's diverse communities and foster unity through governance reforms and equitable development.

However, the KRI's distinct political and governance framework necessitates a contextualised approach to analysing its youth. The federal status of the KRI, its unique historical trajectory, and its distinct socio-political dynamics shape the aspirations and challenges of Kurdish youth in ways that differ from their counterparts in other regions of Iraq. This report builds on the findings of the *Next Generation Iraq* research to explore these dynamics, emphasising the transformative potential of youth engagement in addressing governance, economic challenges, and social equity.

The report draws on quantitative and qualitative data from the *Next Generation Iraq* project, which surveyed 1,268 respondents aged 18-30 across Iraq in 2024. Of these, 222 respondents were from the KRI. In addition to surveys, the project included 12 individual immersion sessions and six group deep-dive discussions, along with youth engagement studio sessions designed to foster collaborative dialogue among young people.

Kurdish youth are grappling with local challenges as well as broader regional and global issues, such as climate change, economic instability, and political crises. Their aspirations for better governance, improved education, and meaningful employment underscore the need for systemic reforms. Despite facing significant obstacles, Kurdish youth are not passive. They actively seek opportunities to shape their futures, making their perspectives crucial for understanding not only the KRI but also broader trends in the Global South.

The report also highlights the distinct experiences of KRI youth compared to their peers in other regions of Iraq. While shared challenges such as unemployment and educational disparities exist, the unique political and governance framework of the KRI creates a different set of expectations and frustrations among Kurdish youth.



Introduction

Youth aged 15 to 29 make up approximately 30% of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq's (KRI) population (1,728,000 out of 6,171,000).¹ Furthermore, nearly 35% of the population in the KRI is under the age of 15 (around 2,159,879).² This youth majority represents a significant portion of the region's current and future workforce, as well as its future leadership. This generation of KRI youth has no direct memory of the Ba'athist regime (Baser and Fazil, 2021), which ended in Kurdistan in 1991, nor of the internal violent conflict between Kurdish parties in the mid-1990s. Over the past decade, KRI has experienced significant shifts in its political economy, marked by a substantial decline in public sector employment and increasing economic challenges for its youth. KRI youth today have had markedly different experiences compared to previous generations. This generation has developed new understandings and perspectives on governance in the KRI (Fazil and Connelly, 2023; Palani, 2021). Examining their views is not only essential for understanding this youthful demographic but also for gaining valuable insights into the changing nature of governance in Kurdistan and its future trajectory (Palani, 2022, pp. 106-107). Moreover, understanding their political behaviour, needs and challenges hold an international importance as KRI's future is highly influential in shaping political undercurrents in Iraq and the wider region. Political and economic development of the region and its prospects have an impact on regional dynamics and migration trends, as well as economic initiatives including foreign direct investment in the region.

The comprehensive quantitative and qualitative data collected through the British Council's Next Generation Iraq research project illuminate shared concerns among youth across Iraq's diverse communities (British Council, 2024). Employment, improved livelihoods, and education emerge as primary priorities for youth throughout the country, including those in the KRI. This presents a valuable opportunity to promote unity among communities by addressing these core concerns in governance, livelihood development, and social equity. These findings align with recent literature suggesting that traditional sectarian and ethnic frameworks alone are increasingly inadequate for capturing the full scope of people's needs and conditions in Iraq. However, the data from the research also underscores the distinct status of the KRI, Iraq's sole federal entity, highlighting the necessity of a contextualised analysis that accounts for its unique political, societal, and cultural dynamics. Youth experiences and perspectives in this region are shaped by its historical background and distinct governance model, which differentiates it from other parts of the country.

¹ We reached out to a senior KRG official, who stated that the statistics on youth demographics, employment status, and migration are not fully accurate, as they are based on estimates.

² <https://rudawrc.net/en/publication/youth-perspective-in-the-kurdistan-region-2023-2023-08-06>

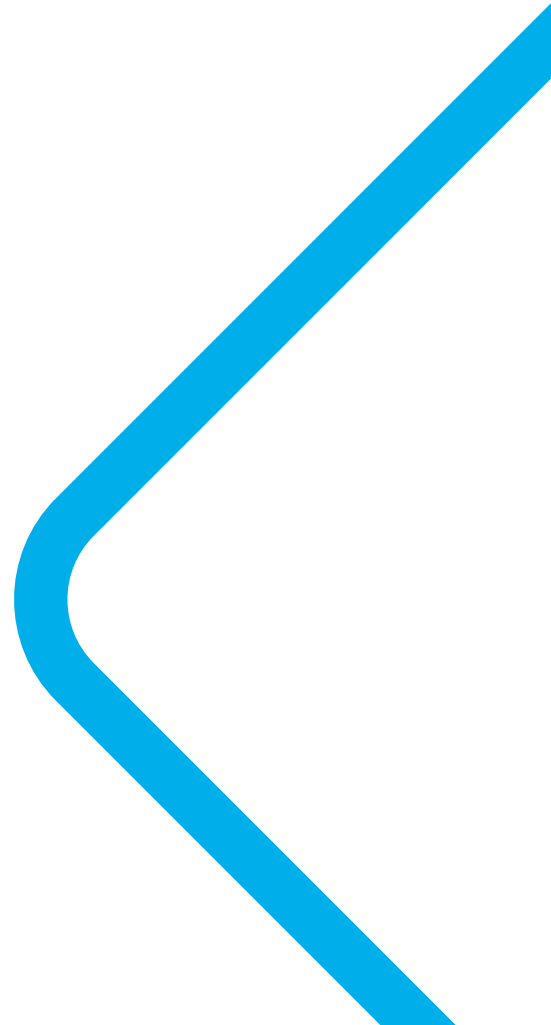
Building on data and insights from the Next Generation Iraq research, and situating these findings within the broader socio-political, cultural, and economic landscape of the KRI, this report provides an analysis of youth in the KRI. It investigates how the attitudes and aspirations of young people in the KRI, as reflected in the Next Generation Iraq data, compare with those of their peers in other regions of Iraq. Additionally, the report assesses the impact of recent social, political, and economic developments across Iraq, including within the KRI, on the prospects of Kurdish youth.

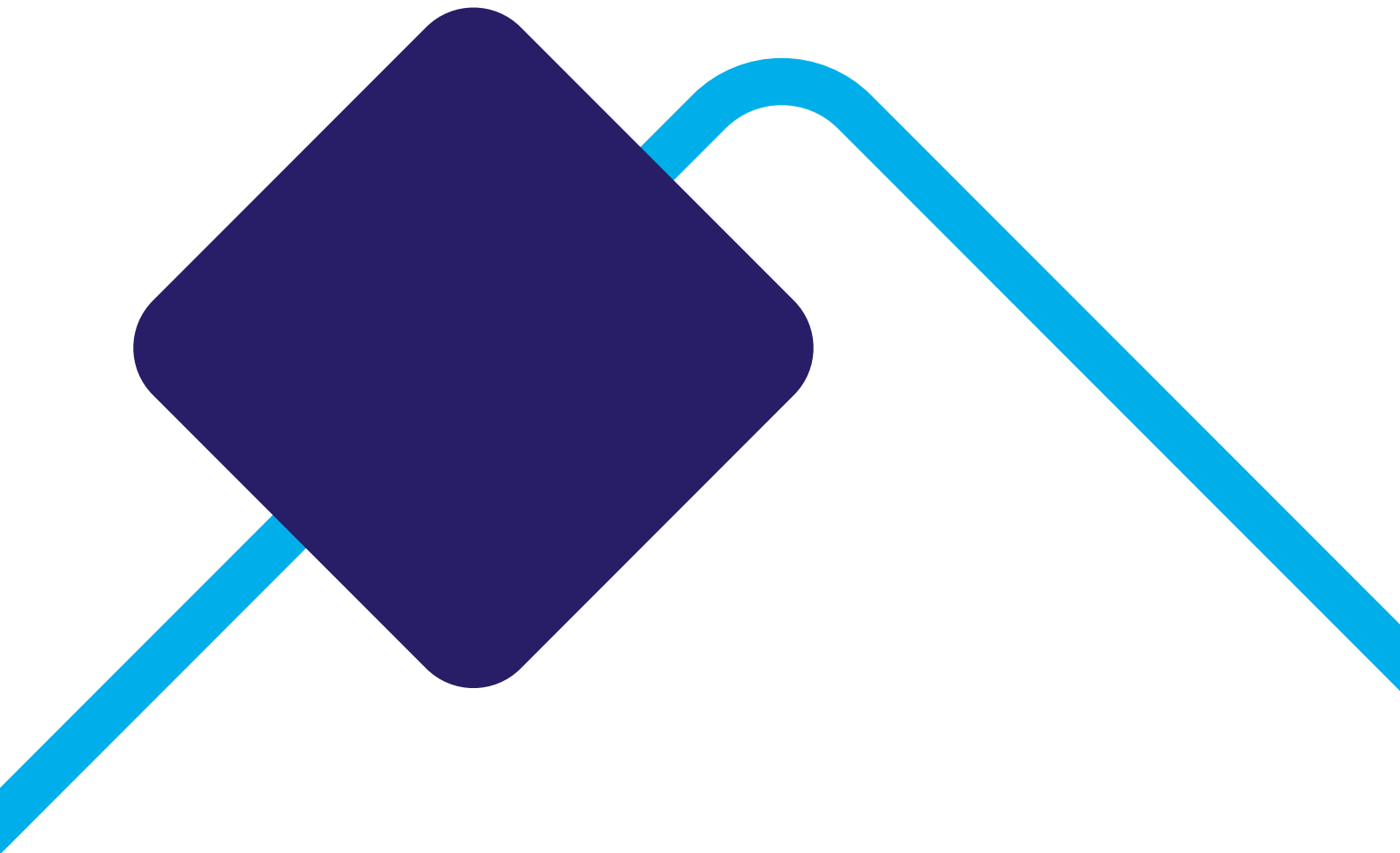
The report's findings enable the readers to better understand the attitudes and aspirations of youth in the KRI as these issues are closely linked to the KRI's future development, in terms of governance as well as stability. The Next Generation Iraq project, therefore, creates opportunities to familiarise ourselves with the perceptions of Kurdistan's next generation of leaders, workers and voters. Young people in the KRI not only have challenges at the local level but also suffer from the consequences of regional and global challenges including climate change, lack of human security due to conflicts as well as political and economic crises. Examining youth perceptions in the KRI therefore has broader implications for our understanding of young people and their concerns in the Global South in general. Secondly, by adapting a comparative approach, the report highlights Iraq's unique political landscapes and the versatile economic, social and political dynamics it creates for youth coming from different ethnic backgrounds.

Methodology

This report primarily draws on a survey conducted as part of the British Council's Next Generation Iraq research, which examines the perceptions, views, and lived experiences of youth in the KRI and those of their counterparts in other parts of Iraq. The survey was conducted in 2024 and included a total of 1,268 respondents aged 18-30. Of these, 222 respondents were from the KRI, representing two provinces – Erbil and Slemani. The KRI respondents consisted of 167 identifying as Kurdish, 45 as Ezidi, 8 as Arab, and 2 as Assyrian. Moreover, the Next Generation Iraq project included 12 one-on-one immersion sessions that were conducted with young people aged 18-30 as well as six group deep dive sessions with specific segments of Iraqi youth to support the exchange of ideas among young Iraqis. Next Generation Iraq also hosted youth engagement studio sessions, guided workshops in which young people themselves came together to interrogate the research stimulus and findings collaboratively. This analysis builds upon the data generated by the Next Generation Iraq project, incorporating fieldwork data and other research that we have conducted over the past decade from various regions of the KRI.

The upcoming chapter will situate young people in KRI within the broader framework of governance and public policy (Baser and Fazil, 2021; Palani, 2021). The chapter will highlight a number of key economic, social and political events that shaped the trajectory of the entity between 2003 and 2024, with particular focus on education, employment and identity, and its impact on shaping the perceptions and livelihoods of young people, and the KRI as a whole. Against this contextual background, the following chapter will provide a snapshot of how young people in KRI perceive their livelihoods today, before expanding on key discussions around education, employment and entrepreneurialism, identity and national cohesion, migration and future outlook. These chapters will highlight and compare key findings from the Next Generation Iraq research and other studies, contextualising them within the governance and public policy developments of the KRI and wider Iraq. The final chapters reflect on the October 2024 parliamentary elections in KRI and what it can tell us about youth engagement with politics and concludes with a series of recommendations.





Youth and Governance in The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) between 2003–2024

Youth and governance in KRI are deeply interconnected, and addressing youth-related issues cannot be separated from an analysis of the entity's governance and political system over the last two decades. Following the regime change in Iraq in 2003, while much of Iraq was engulfed in insecurity and sectarian tensions, the KRI experienced notable political stability. This stability fostered a significant level of satisfaction among the people, including the youth, who viewed the political system favourably due to the opportunities it provided, particularly in terms of education and public sector employment.

In the field of education, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) incentivised young Kurds and bolstered youth satisfaction through a variety of educational initiatives. In addition to the expansion of and increasing access to higher education institutions in the KRI, university students were also provided with guaranteed monthly allowances and fully subsidised accommodation for those coming from outside their local areas, fostering incentives for the communal integration of youth across the KRI. Additionally, the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research's fully funded scholarship programme provided over 4500 scholarships between 2010 and 2013 for young graduates and public employees to pursue master's and doctoral degrees abroad.³ During this period, the Iraqi federal government also offered scholarships. These initiatives motivated hundreds of students and employees and allowed hundreds of young Kurds to pursue postgraduate education internationally, contributing to an increasingly educated workforce.

From 2003 to around 2010, a strong expectation developed among youth and university students that they would secure public sector employment within a few months of graduation. Employment in this sector was not only a means of securing a stable monthly income, but it also served as a foundation for young people to establish businesses and families, further integrating them into the region's socio-economic fabric. During this period, government institutions across the KRI were filled with young employees, many as young as 22 years old, the typical age of graduation from undergraduate programmes in the KRI. Within a decade after 2003, the number of public employees and pensioners surpassed one million, representing approximately 25% of the total population (See: Wahab, 2023). This dramatic expansion of the public sector workforce was a key element in sustaining Kurdistan's economic and political stability and addressing the needs of its youth.

While many young graduates successfully secured positions in the public sector, the employment process was influenced by political considerations. Public sector employment served as a means for the two leading political parties, the KDP and the PUK, to expand their networks of support, strengthen their governance capacity, and foster political stability. Through employment opportunities, these parties were able to build public goodwill and contribute to a stable social environment (Jiyad, Kucukkeles, and Schillings 2020; Fazil and Baser, 2021a). This strategy proved effective, particularly as it contributed to curbing migration trends. During this period, the outflow of Kurdish youth to Europe, which had been significant in the 1990s and early 2000s, sharply declined. Moreover, many young Kurds who had previously emigrated began returning to the region, buoyed by the improving economic and political situation. This return trend has been observed by Baser and Toivanen (2019) who argued that beyond the improved economic and political conditions, nationalism as well as dedication to Kurdistan's prosperity also played a significant role in return decisions.

In addition to increased access to higher education, the offer of educational scholarships and public sector employment, the KRG implemented a range of support programmes aimed at assisting the youth population (Baser and Fazil, 2021, p. 4). These initiatives included loans for small businesses, financial assistance for newly married couples, and support for those wishing to build new homes. The combination of increased education opportunities, stable public sector employment and these government support mechanisms created a generally satisfied youth population during this period.

Although socio-economic conditions were favourable, this does not imply that the region was entirely free from dissent. During this period, the KRI witnessed significant political movements, particularly among its youth. The most prominent of these occurred in February 2011 in Slemani, which experienced one of the largest and most sustained protests since the uprising of 1991. Notably, these protests were not primarily driven by socio-economic grievances, but rather by demands for greater political freedom, liberty, and democracy (See Fazil and Connelly, 2023; Fazil and Baser, 2021b). Youth were at the forefront of these protests, highlighting their engagement in the political landscape despite the relative economic stability they enjoyed. The emergence of a new opposition party in 2009, known as the Change Movement, also signalled a shift in the political attitudes of the youth.

³ A high number of students preferred the United Kingdom as their main destination for their studies.

In 2014, two key developments significantly altered KRI's political economy, and particularly affected its support for youth. The first was the cut of KRI's share in the Iraqi national budget, accompanied by a sharp decline in oil prices and the onset of the fight against ISIS, which began in the summer of that year (Palani, 2023, p. 15). As a result, public sector employment ceased, and government support for university students and youth was either halted or substantially reduced and delayed. Public employees faced delayed salary payments, with reductions reaching as much as 70% (Kurdistan24, 2018). From 2014 to 2024, many of these issues persisted. Tens of thousands of university graduates, who once expected secure employment in the public sector, were now required to seek jobs in the underdeveloped and unregulated private sector. This shift to the private sector was publicly announced in public engagements and conferences, where KRI officials advised youth not to rely on the government for public jobs but instead to seek employment in the private sector. Consequently, young people were increasingly required to acquire skills suited for employment in the private sector, for which many were unprepared (to be discussed in a later chapter).



Between 2014 and 2024, the KRG also implemented new policies aimed at diversifying internal revenues, primarily by increasing taxes and reducing public spending. These measures, while successful in boosting non-oil revenues,⁴ also placed additional economic pressure on the population. During this period, the federal government of Iraq continued to increase public spending, including in public employment (see Palani and Mohammed, 2023), contrasting with Erbil's fiscal challenges.

Youth responded to these growing difficulties in various ways (Perry and Wirya, 2020). As to be discussed further on, some opted to migrate in search of better opportunities, whilst others increased their participation in protest movements or became involved in local civil society initiatives, both as a means of contributing to their communities and as a source of income (Palani, 2021).

⁴ For example, in 2022, non-oil revenues rose to 30% of KRI's total revenues, marking the highest proportion in post-2003 Kurdistan.

Perceptions on youth livelihoods in the KRI

Over the past decade, and as outlined above, the KRI has faced budget constraints and economic instability, especially when contrasted with the political and economic support of previous decades, and the current expanding budget and public spending in other parts of Iraq. This economic disparity has fuelled widespread discontent among KRI youth regarding their standard of living and overall socio-economic conditions.

The British Council's *Next Generation Iraq* study highlights this, as shown in Figure 1. Whilst the majority of young Iraqis are largely pessimistic about their standard of living today, young people in KRI are significantly more pessimistic and more likely to perceive their standard of living as bad or very bad, when compared to their counterparts in other areas of the country, and significantly less likely to perceive it as good or very good (British Council, 2024, p. 125).

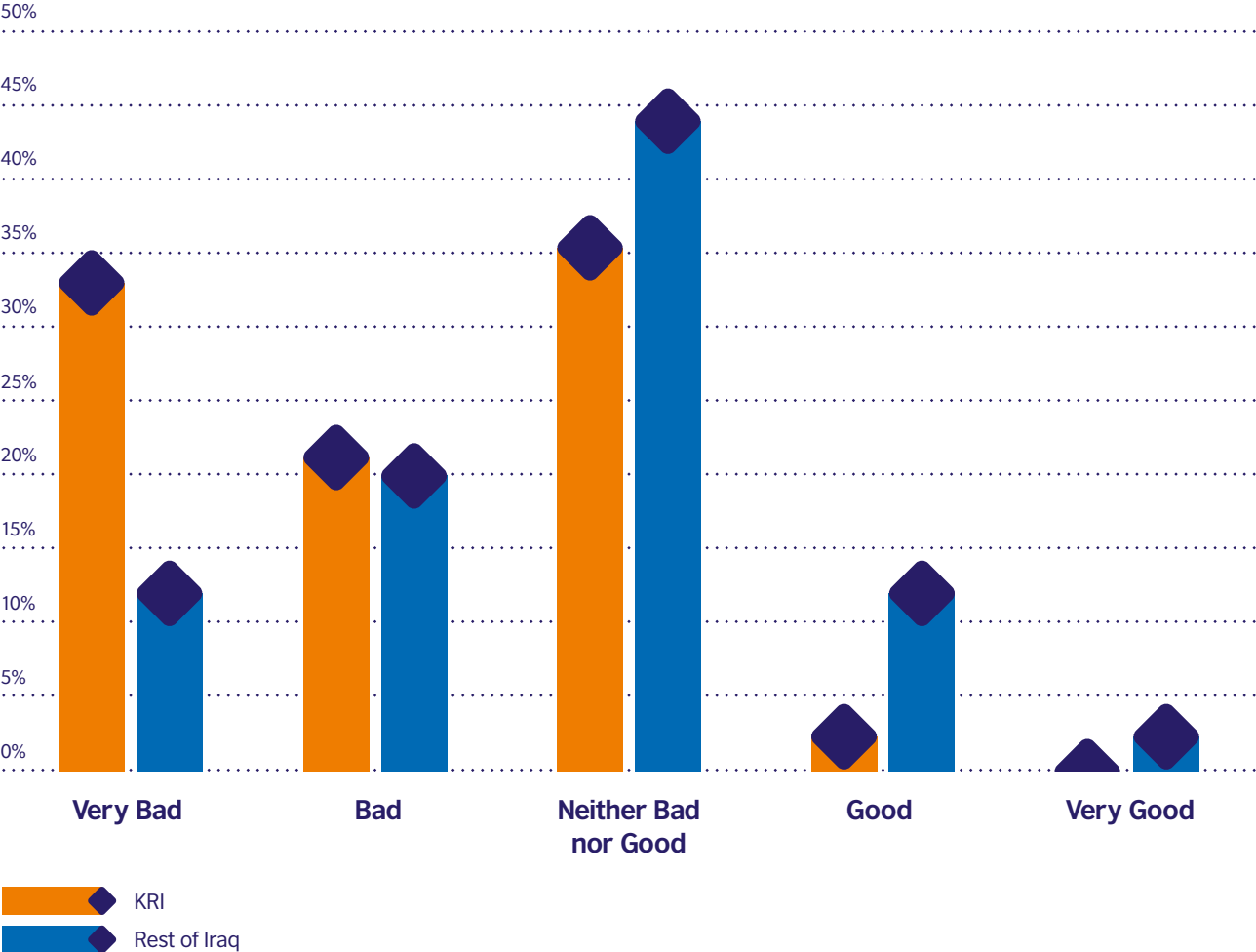
Other studies have also highlighted how the current economic situation has translated into a sense of hopelessness, a sentiment shared by many young people in the KRI (See: Perry and Wirya, 2020; Palani, 2021; Fazil and Connelly, 2023). For instance, a 2020 survey conducted by the Middle East Institute identified better livelihood prospects, alongside improved educational and personal development opportunities, as the top concerns for young people in the KRI (Perry and Wirya, 2020). In this context, some participants in the British Council's *Next Generation Iraq* interviews expressed challenges they perceive in the job market, which they attribute in part to existing patronage networks. These findings align with previous research, including Baser and Fazil (2022), which suggest a level of mistrust in some areas of governance. Several interviewees observed that factors such as personal connections, or "wasta," sometimes appear to influence employment processes more prominently than merit. As such, ensuring that recent graduates and other job seekers have equitable access to opportunities was identified as an important area for consideration.

Whilst this regional comparison is useful to understand the differing trajectories and perceptions of young people across different parts of Iraq, there are two considerations to factor in. Firstly, rather than solely comparing their situation with peers in other Iraqi regions, young people in the KRI evaluate their circumstances within the specific context of Kurdistan itself, focusing on its unique resources, history, and potential. Interviews conducted by the *Next Generation Iraq* project show that KRI youth shape their aspirations with Kurdistan's past successes and potential in mind, maintaining a distinct sense of identity and goals separate from Iraq as a whole. They are mindful of how conditions have evolved in Kurdistan and assess their well-being against local benchmarks and the experiences of their parents and older generations.

Secondly, and tied to the above, this also underscores that fact that economic indicators alone do not fully capture the sentiments of KRI youth regarding governance and development. Their sense of well-being and dissatisfaction is rooted in broader aspirations for Kurdistan's governance and future, emphasising their focus on a Kurdish context rather than national comparisons.

Figure 1.

Perception of standard of living of Iraqi youth



Youth, education and employment in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)

As mentioned previously, the KRI has seen a substantial increase in Higher Education attainment in recent decades and is a trend that continues today. The result of this is reflected in the *Next Generation Iraq* research. As shown in Figure 2, the study highlights that 76% of youth in the KRI have completed higher education, compared to 58% of young people in the rest of Iraq.

Starting in 2003, KRI authorities have made substantial efforts to expand higher education institutions. From just four institutions in 2003, the region now hosts approximately 50 public and private higher education institutions (KRG, n.d). This expansion has led to the establishment of higher education institutions in nearly every town, reducing the need for students to travel to other cities or districts within their governorates to pursue their studies. In the KRI, approximately 40,000 students graduate from high school each year and apply to public universities. This year, that number has risen to 60,000, reflecting an increase of 20,000 students compared to previous years (Rudaw, 2024d). In recent years, public higher education institutions have largely accepted all high school graduates. As a result, most high school graduates immediately enrol in either public or private higher education institutions, continuing their studies without significant delay.

The rapid expansion and availability of higher education institutions across every region in the KRI, coupled with the KRG Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research's policy to accept nearly all high school graduates, and governmental support for studying abroad, has significantly increased the number of young people obtaining higher education degrees.

However, several challenges have arisen with the expansion of higher education institutions. Firstly, better access to education does not necessarily translate into high quality education and preparation for the job market. The *Next Generation Iraq* research and other sources (see: Issa, 2024) highlight how the education system fails to adequately prepare young people for the job market. In *Next Generation Iraq*, young Iraqis were asked if education has prepared them for work. In the KRI, a higher proportion of youth do not feel that it has prepared them well for work (51%) when compared to their counterparts in other parts of the country (33%), and are more likely to see the curriculum as the area most in need of improvement (36% in KRI compared to 31% in the rest of Iraq) (British Council, 2024, p. 125).

This is often framed in terms of the disconnect between education and the “*bazar*” (market) and an issue that has been amplified by the cessation of youth employment in the public sector, which in the past required fewer skills and qualifications than the private sector does today.

Furthermore, the language of instruction can provide significant challenges when it comes to seeking employment in the private sector. In the KRI, education – including higher education – is predominantly taught in Kurdish, while the private sector demands proficiency in other languages, particularly English and Arabic. This language gap, combined with inadequate skills training, contributes to the difficulty young graduates face in securing private sector jobs.

Additionally, whilst the increase in access and higher education attainment has produced a pool of graduates wanting to enter the workforce, the growth of private education providers has further exacerbated the challenges outlined above and contributes to a growing inequality between students-turned-jobseekers in the KRI. Education, particularly in major urban centres like Erbil and Slemani, has become increasingly privatised. Currently, over 132,000 students are enrolled in private schools (Kurdistan24, 2024b), where English is becoming the dominant language of instruction, giving these students an advantage in preparing for the job market. The number of private schools is steadily rising, and the lack of adequate support for public schools is encouraging – if not forcing – many families to opt for private education (Rudaw, 2024a). While this trend is more pronounced at the school level, it is also emerging in higher education. Graduates of public universities increasingly feel less prepared for the job market compared to their peers from certain private universities.⁵ This widening gap in access to quality education is fuelling concerns about social inequality and limited opportunities for less privileged youth.

⁵ Private universities in the KRI vary in quality and accessibility. Here, we focus on those accessible to a select few, offering graduates enhanced access to job markets compared to public universities. At some of these institutions, admission costs exceed \$8,000.

⁶ According to the KRG Ministry of Planning, the proportion of males and females in the region's population is nearly equal.

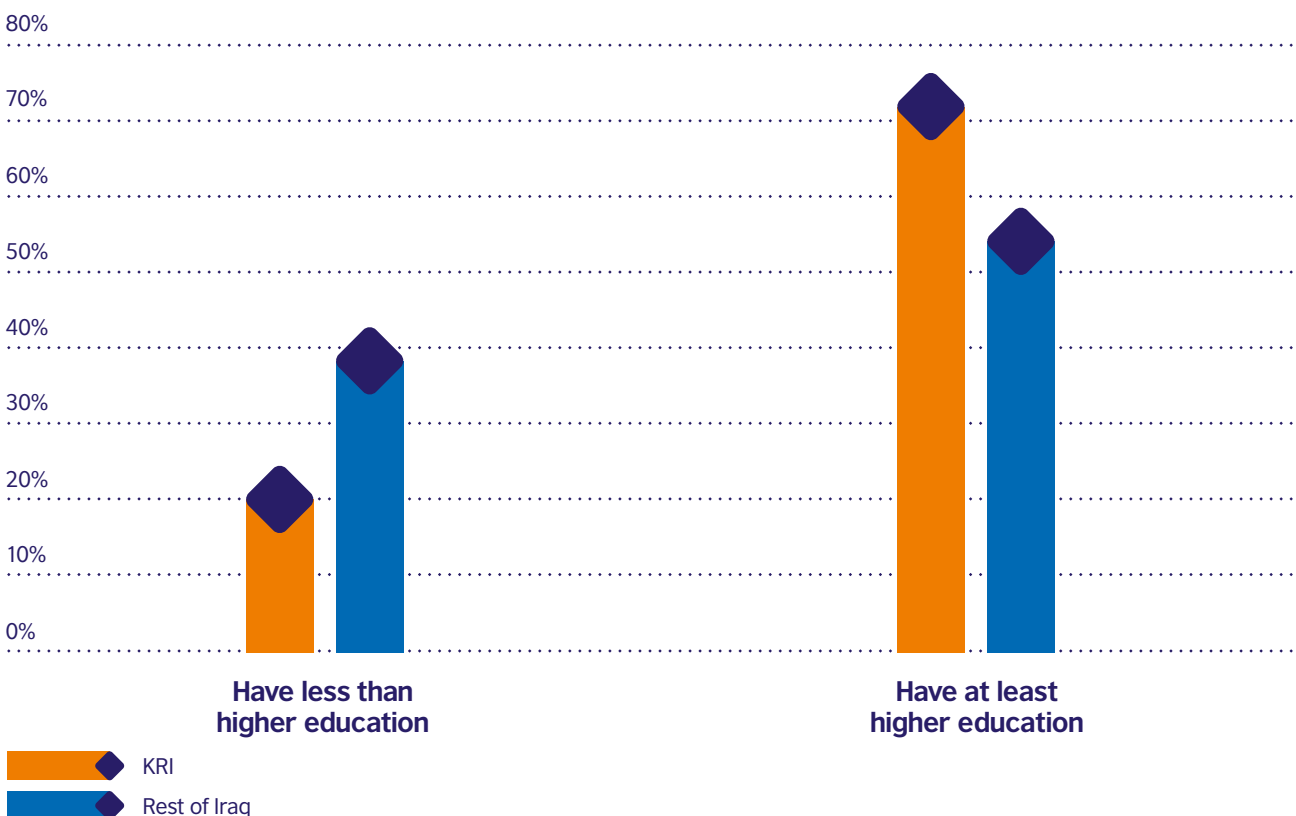
When it comes to economic and employment opportunities, there is also an urban-rural divide that have had a disproportionate impact on young women in the KRI. Employment opportunities in the private sector, which has become the primary source of jobs, are mostly concentrated in major urban centres. In contrast, rural areas offered fewer opportunities, and cultural traditions often discouraged young women from traveling to cities for work, further limiting their access to employment. Young women, who face lower participation rates in the labour force compared to men, are doubly marginalised in this competitive environment and especially so, if based in rural areas.⁶

In recent years, entrepreneurial interest among the youth in the KRI has risen significantly compared to their peers in other parts of the country.

According to the British Council's *Next Generation Iraq* survey, a substantial proportion of respondents from the KRI (52%) expressed that they are "very interested" in starting their own business within the next five years, in contrast to only 25% of respondents from the rest of Iraq (British Council, 2024, p. 85). This trend can largely be attributed to the necessity of working and investing in the private sector, given the decline in public employment opportunities for most young people over the past decade. While this represents a positive shift, particularly as both the Iraqi federal government and the KRG must eventually reduce public sector spending – an effort already initiated by the KRG – young people still face significant challenges in the short term. In *Next Generation Iraq* and other research, key issues highlight that their educational background does not adequately prepare young people in KRI for this new entrepreneurial reality, and that there is a lack of financial funding to start a business.

Figure 2.

Higher Education Attainment



Youth and Migration

After 2003, the economic, political, and social developments in the KRI sparked a new wave of return migration. Individuals who had left Kurdistan during various conflict-driven migration waves, through family reunification programmes, or on student visas were encouraged to return and contribute to the region's prosperity. Members of the diaspora, spanning multiple generations, demonstrated transnational mobility by either returning to Kurdistan permanently or maintaining temporary connections. Their motivations ranged from patriotic sentiments and economic or political opportunities to familial obligations, such as caring for elderly relatives (Baser and Toivanen, 2019). Diaspora youth also participated in this trend, with noticeable instances of youth return migration contributing to skills transfer and regional development (Keles, 2022). However, in recent years, this return migration has slowed significantly – or in most cases reversed – due to broader developments in the Middle East, coupled with KRI's ongoing economic and political challenges. Instead, a growing trend of 'brain drain' has emerged over the past decade, as many young individuals seek better opportunities abroad, further complicating the region's development prospects.

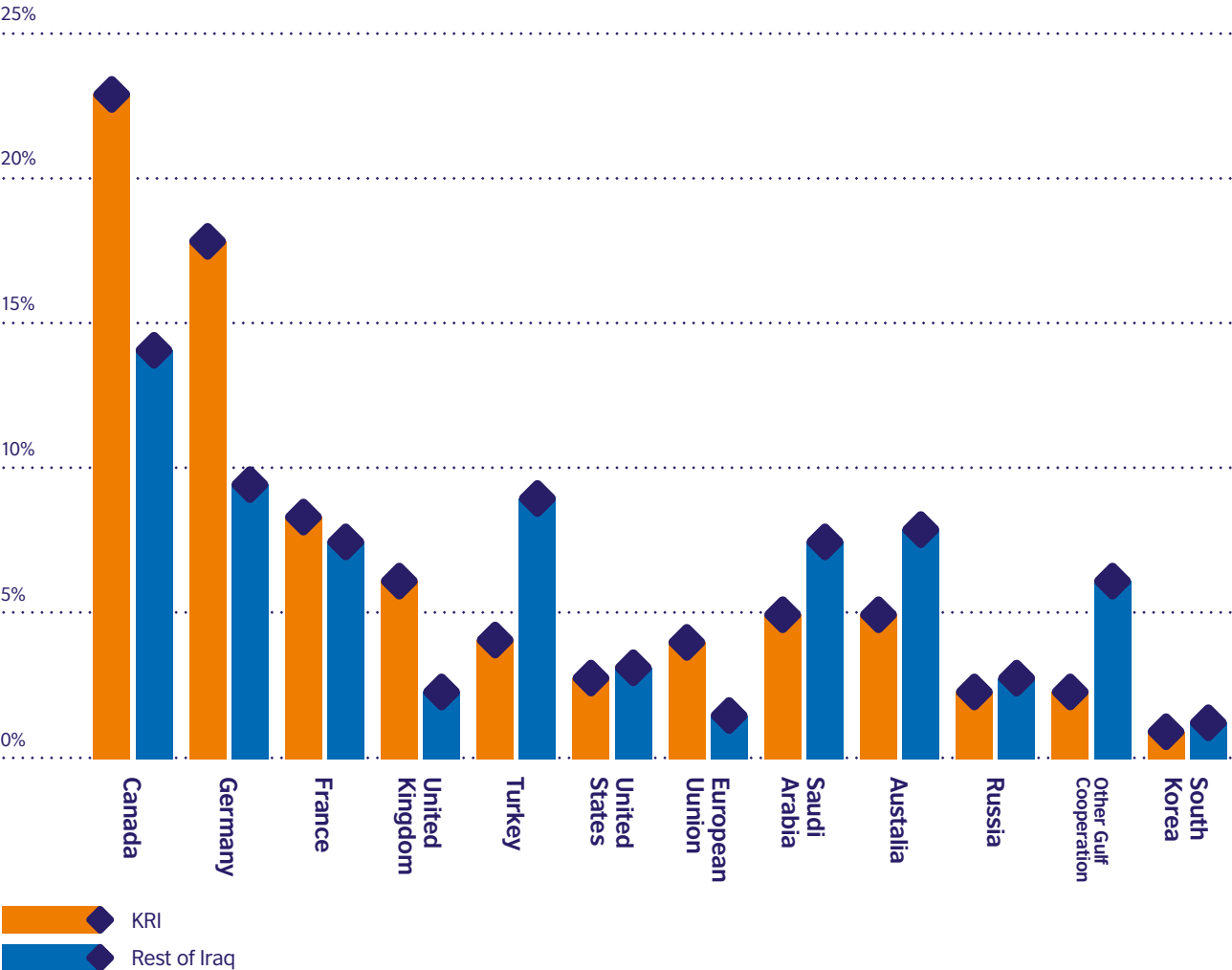
The motivations surrounding the Kurdish youth's immigration decisions vary. Firstly, it can be argued that many Kurdish millennials have already grown up in a post-conflict environment with the legacy of war on economic, political, social and cultural processes in the region. Through post-memory, they inherited a sense of insecurity despite the relative stability and prosperity that the KRG found itself in. However, recent developments including the war with ISIS, compel young people to seek safety and a fresh start elsewhere. Economic crisis in the region and a lack of employment prospects also contribute to their feeling of despair.

Taking the decision to migrate takes a long time for many young people as they have patriotic feelings towards Kurdistan, have fears about leaving for an unknown destination or feel the duty to take care of their elderly family members (Baser and Fazil, 2021). However, some circumstances create the urge to leave, sometimes by using illegal and perilous ways. It should also be mentioned that migration experience of friends and family members create psychological pressure on those who stayed. The tradition of migration from the region towards Global North, creates a culture of prioritising migration in cases of feeling hopeless about future. The fact that the Kurdish people have a long history of displacement and migration due to political turmoil and repression creates a culture of normalisation of migration as a survival strategy, which sometimes leads to unrealistic expectations from the migration experience as well (See van Bruinessen, 1998; Wahlbeck, 1999; Eliassi, 2016; Ata 2017).

The desire to leave and resulting brain drain is reflected strongly in the *Next Generation Iraq* research and demonstrates a heightened challenge in the KRI region when compared with the rest of the country. The *Next Generation Iraq* survey found that a higher percentage of youth in KRI (60%) expressed a willingness to migrate compared to those living outside of the KRI (46%). Canada, Germany, France and the United Kingdom are more attractive to those in the KRI, while Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Australia are also attractive to respondents from other parts of Iraq (British Council, 2024, pp. 97-98).

Figure 3.

Most attractive countries



This harsh reality of irregular migration from the KRI over the last decades is well discussed, with media outlets regularly reporting on young people who try to cross several borders illegally and sometimes lose their lives while trying. Media outlets reveal that many Kurds who are interviewed at refugee camps either in northern France or Belarus-Poland border state that they are leaving due to economic hardship with the hope of building better lives (BBC, 2021). It is reported that a considerable number of these young people hold university diplomas and had successful careers before taking those risky decisions. Media outlets report that according to KRG's official statistics in 2024, more than 5000 people attempted to migrate to Europe. Among these attempts, the UK is regularly seen as the most preferred destination (Peregraf, 2024a). While other young people are not taking those risks but still evaluate the options to leave by finding study opportunities or jobs abroad.

The desire among KRI youth to migrate is driven by a range of push and pull factors. Key push factors include unemployment, uncertainty about the future, and a pervasive sense of hopelessness regarding governance reforms in the KRI (Bakr, 2022; Saeed, 2021; Saleem and Al-Shakeri, 2024). Such sentiments are corroborated when referring to research conducted in recent years. For instance, a study by Rudaw Research Centre in 2023 highlights that over 20% of the region's youth, aged 18 to 29, are unemployed, making up most job seekers (Rudaw Research Centre, 2023). Additionally, about 65% of unemployed young men between 25 and 34 have lost hope of finding employment (IOM, 2018).

On the pull side, many young Kurds are drawn by the opportunities available to refugees in Europe, as well as the presence of established Kurdish communities in Europe, which offer support and connections to those seeking to migrate. Although the desire to migrate is most prevalent among youth, it is important to note that this aspiration is shared across other age groups as well (Rudaw, 2023).

Policy makers in the KRI show awareness of such problems and the recent election debates addressed brain drain as an issue to be addressed by governing parties. For instance, candidates who were running for the 2024 Kurdistan parliamentary elections joined public debates on media outlets where they acknowledge the problem and discussed underlying factors of youth migration such as mismanagement, corruption, and unemployment (Rudaw, 2024b). It is important to highlight here that these problems are not unique to the Kurdish youth as the *Next Generation Iraq* data also demonstrated, Iraqi youth perceive unemployment and poverty as the most pressing challenges for young Iraqis across the country.

However, these challenges are difficult to address through short-term policy interventions, as both the lack of stability and the ongoing uncertainty are rooted in complex, longstanding issues involving multiple interconnected factors. Additionally, it is also essential to contextualise migration within the socio-cultural reality of the KRI, as it cannot be solely understood in relation to the regional and national economic conditions.

In the KRI, migration has become an entrenched part of Kurdish communities and families, with many people noting that in cities like Rania, Zakho, Chamchamal, and Kalar, it is common to find families with at least one member abroad, often in Europe (see Rudaw, 2023). Among KRI youth, migration is frequently linked to social status within both the family and broader society. Many young individuals, particularly those considering irregular migration to Europe – especially the UK – spend years discussing their plans before embarking on the journey. This discourse serves to signal status and assert their aspirations to be taken seriously.

For many, successfully reaching Europe is seen as an achievement that enhances their social standing within their community and family. As a result, they maintain active communication with those who remain in the KRI, reinforcing their presence in Europe and affirming their success. While this phenomenon is widely recognized in or qualitative observations on migration in KRI, it is difficult to conceptualize within policy frameworks or translate into immediate and effective interventions. However, its significant role in shaping migration behaviours and aspirations underscores the need for a deeper understanding of its implications.

This reality complicates policy prescriptions, as the aspiration to migrate is not solely a technical issue; it has evolved into a deep-seated societal and cultural phenomenon with emigration being a common experience across Iraq, even if marginally more so in regions outside the KRI (British Council, 2024, p. 7). Any meaningful policy response must account for these social and cultural dynamics, rather than focusing solely on economic or security-related factors.

These migration trends and potential brain drain will have long-term consequences for the KRI's future prosperity, governance and development.⁷ Such trends, which are also common across the Middle East, means loss of future workforce, a weakened future labour market, stunted innovation and a reduction in potential leaders who can create positive change. There is also a psychological impact among young people who remain. Our previous observations in the region reveal that the feelings of desperation and hopelessness are perpetuated by young people observing the exodus others are making from their country. Seeing others leave, and contemplating leaving, can make those who stay feel disillusioned with the government as well as with the current conditions in the KRI in general. This increases the potential to lose faith in potential meaningful future reforms aimed at ameliorating the region's economic, political and social prospects (Baser and Fazil 2022). Policy makers in the KRI need to take urgent action to address the underlying factors in brain drain trends and formulate policies to reverse it, as was previously done in the early 2000s.



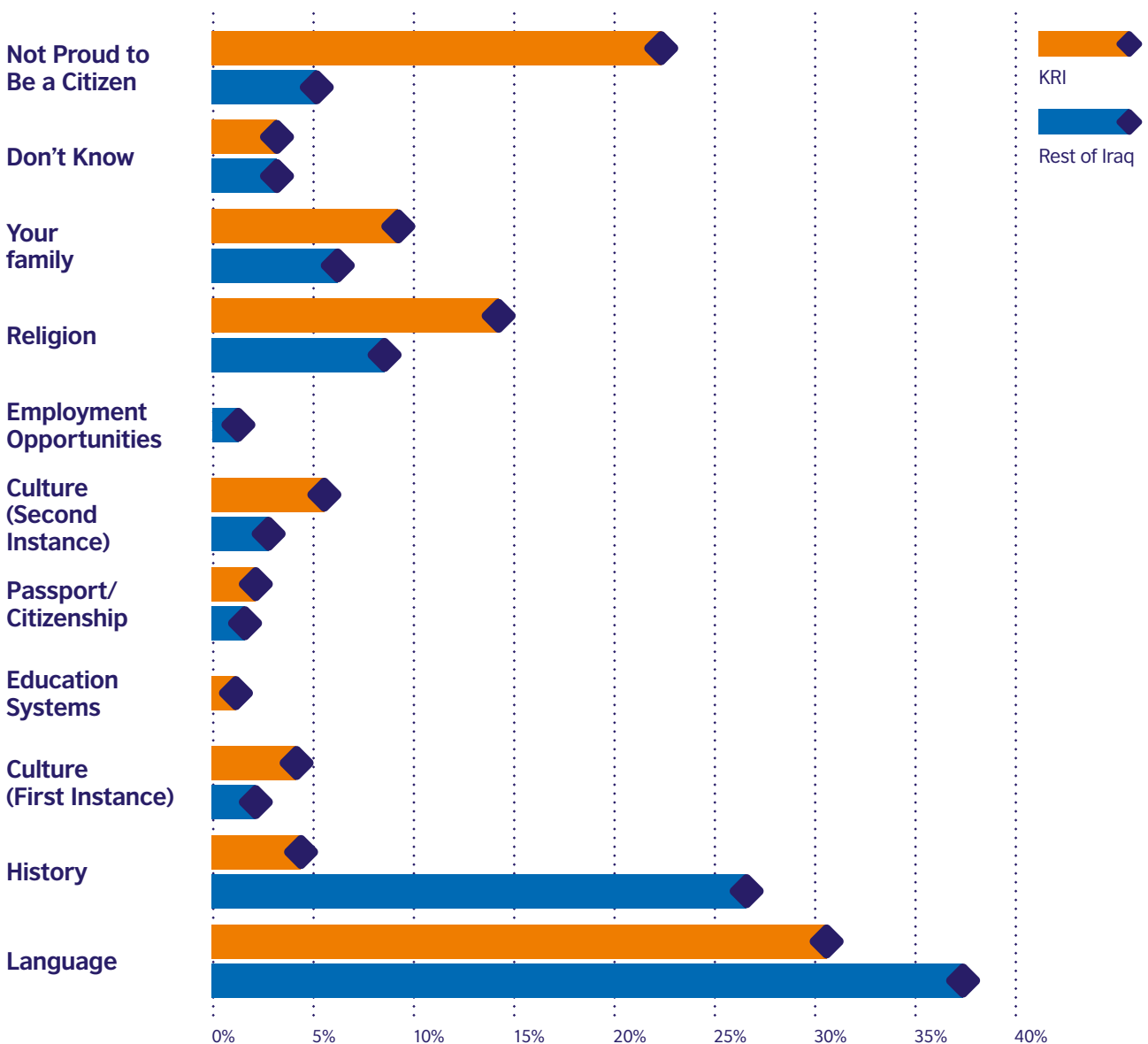
Youth, The Kurdistan Region of Iraq and National Cohesion

A key feature of the recent literature on Iraq has been acknowledging and analysing the development that younger Iraqis exhibit weaker attachments to sectarian identities compared to previous generations. These studies regard this shift as an opportunity to strengthen national identity and social cohesion (see: Haddad, 2023; Alkhudary, 2023; Palani, 2024).

The non-sectarian demands of the 2019-2020 protests further substantiate these findings (Dodge and Mansour, 2020). In recent years, new political parties have emerged, placing less emphasis on sectarian and ethnic identities, in contrast to more traditional political movements.

Figure 4.

National Pride



However, efforts to foster cohesion between youth in the KRI and the rest of Iraq continue to face challenges. While many young people in the KRI do not completely reject their Iraqi identity, they are also not particularly proud of it. This sentiment is reflected in data from the *Next Generation Iraq* survey, as shown in the figure below. As noted in Figure 4, a notably higher proportion of respondents in the KRI – 22% – do not feel proud to be citizens of Iraq. This contrasts sharply with other parts of the country, where only 6% of respondents express a lack of national pride (British Council, 2024, p. 22).

Despite the contextual differences between the KRI and the rest of the country, there have been sporadic efforts to promote social cohesion among youth across regions over the past decade, with varying success. For instance, past initiatives aimed at fostering unity included policies to allocate a certain percentage of higher education seats in the KRI to students from other parts of Iraq, and vice versa. However, these initiatives have not been part of a systematic or sustained approach to bridge regional divides among young people in Iraq. The insecurity brought on by the rise of ISIS in 2014 undermined these efforts, making them less effective in achieving their goals of national integration. The current higher education system in the KRI and the rest of Iraq hinders social integration and cohesion at both regional and national levels. In Kurdistan, recent financial difficulties, combined with the absence of financial support for students studying outside their home areas, have led to over 80% of public university students attending institutions within their own region. Nationally, while there are no legal restrictions preventing students from KRI applying to public universities in other parts of Iraq, and vice versa, in practice, very few students pursue higher education outside their home regions.⁷ The only exception is for students from disputed territories, where KRI accepts and encourages their enrolment.

Over the past decade, particularly following the rise of ISIS in 2014, many civil society organisations – funded and supported by international donors – have implemented numerous projects aimed at fostering community cohesion all over Iraq. However, these initiatives did not adequately address the gap between youth in the KRI and their counterparts in the rest of Iraq. Instead, they primarily focused on promoting cohesion at a more localised level, without prioritising the broader need for national youth integration. As a result, these projects fell short in uniting youth across regional divides. While youth unity projects have had positive impacts, it is important to note that they have only reached a limited number of young beneficiaries. A key challenge remains the language barrier: most of the population in KRI speaks Kurdish, while the population in the rest of Iraq speaks Arabic. The current generation of KRI youth speaks less Arabic compared to previous generations. This linguistic divide presents a long-term structural obstacle to integration and connection.⁸

Addressing the lack of cohesion and integration between youth in the KRI and other regions of Iraq cannot be resolved solely through technical recommendations. Political solutions are also crucial, as the tensions between Erbil and Baghdad are deeply rooted in political conflict. KRI has experienced intense polarisation in recent years, with many young people becoming politically mobilised by various factions. Different political groups in the KRI have shaped the perceptions of youth regarding their sense of national or broader Iraqi identity in divergent ways. While some Kurdish parties have developed relations with political actors in Baghdad, these relationships are based on political positions rather than concrete and comprehensive plans to foster social cohesion and integration. Political resolution and collaboration between parties in Erbil and Baghdad is crucial and a priority precondition for creating communal cohesion, particularly among the youth.

Methodology

⁷ Some privileged private universities, such as American University of Iraq- Slemani, have attracted students from different parts of Iraq, albeit in limited numbers.

⁸ Before 1991, education was in Arabic, which enabled the majority of educators and students in Kurdish regions, particularly those in high school and higher education, to speak the language well. This is no longer the case. Additionally, before 1991 Kurdish regions were underdeveloped, prompting many residents to move to other cities for medical treatment, employment, and other necessities. This compelled them to learn Arabic.

Youth and their future outlook on the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Numerous studies, including the British Council's *Next Generation Iraq* study, have attempted to understand the perceptions of KRI youth regarding their future, and many look at it in the context of migration drivers (see: Saleem and Al-Shakeri, 2024; Palani, 2023). A recurring theme in these discussions is the youth's pessimistic outlook on their own futures and that of the KRI, which is largely attributed to governance and political challenges.

In the *Next Generation Iraq* survey, participants were asked how they felt about their future. Youth in the KRI were more likely to be pessimistic when thinking about their future career (36% in KRI compared to 17% in the rest of Iraq), and future quality of life (40% in KRI compared to 16% in the rest of Iraq). Furthermore, youth in KRI were also more pessimistic when thinking about the future of their local community (40% in KRI compared to 25% in the rest of Iraq) and their country (49% in KRI compared to 22% in the rest of Iraq) (British Council, 2024, p. 125).⁹ These findings align with other recent studies. For instance, a 2023 survey conducted in KRI's regions of Halabja, Raparin, and Garmian among 419 respondents revealed that 79% (330 respondents) believed Kurdistan was heading in the wrong direction, while 13% (54 respondents) were uncertain. Only 7% (31 respondents) expressed the view that the KRI was moving in the right direction (Palani, 2023, p. 41).

When reflecting on the negative perceptions that youth in KRI hold in relation to the current state (as noted in an earlier chapter) and future prospects of Kurdistan, these sentiments stem from aforementioned past events that have led to polarised and weakened governance (Palani, 2021, p. 9; Baser and Fazil, 2021, p. 9). Disillusionment with the current governance structure in Kurdistan is widespread but is particularly acute among the region's youth. After the regime change in 2003, there was a surge of hope among Kurdish youth for the establishment of a "new social contract" based on citizenship rights rather than party loyalty. However, these expectations were soon dashed as the deeply entrenched party-based political system failed to transition into more effective and responsive governance. Instead, successive political crises within the KRI exacerbated the rivalry between the two dominant parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), undermining democratic processes. These political dynamics have disproportionately affected young people, hindering the KRG's capacity to tackle high unemployment, provide adequate livelihood opportunities, and ensure economic stability in the region as discussed above.

⁹ It is important to note that in the context of the KRI, the terms "local community" and "country" may hold distinct meanings. Kurdish respondents often refer to the Kurdistan Region or Kurdish society rather than Iraq as a whole, reflecting the unique political, cultural, and socio-economic identity of the KRI and its autonomous status within Iraq.

Reflections on the October 2024 Parliamentary elections

Since the *Next Generation Iraq* data was collected towards the end of 2023 and early 2024, parliamentary elections in the KRI further reveal how youth perceive their own future and their outlook for KRI. Although youth boycotts and political apathy have been discussed in the literature as responses to the social, political, and economic conditions in the region, our observations, supported by data from the *Next Generation Iraq* project, suggest a more nuanced reality. Young people are enthusiastic about voting and participating in elections when they believe their engagement can lead to meaningful change.

Interviews conducted with young voters ahead of the October 2024 parliamentary elections revealed a complex interplay of resentment, disappointment, hope, and resilience (Kurdistan24, 2024b). These conversations, especially with first-time voters, highlighted their active engagement in the electoral process, often viewing it as a crucial opportunity to advance youth-centric policies. Notably, some young voters expressed their use of protest votes as a deliberate strategy for advocating change, contrasting this with the political statement of election boycotts. This shift reflects a growing recognition of elections as a platform for influence, rather than mere disillusionment with the status quo.

The outcomes of the 2024 KRI parliamentary elections demonstrate that political apathy among young people is not an inherent or static condition but rather a reflection of the limited opportunities available for substantive engagement (Rudaw, 2024c; Kurdistan24, 2024c; Peregraf, 2024b). While statistical data on voter turnout by age group is not yet available, qualitative evidence and anecdotal observations indicate a significant turnout among youth across the region. This demonstrates that when avenues for meaningful participation are available, young voters exhibit a strong willingness to engage – whether as an act of protest or as a deliberate effort to effect positive change. When provided with avenues to express their perspectives, young voters show a clear propensity to participate, either as a form of protest or as an intentional effort to drive positive change.

The *Next Generation Iraq* report highlights that among Iraqi youth willing to engage in political participation, many would be more inclined to do so if politics better reflected their views and addressed their concerns. Similarly, our fieldwork observations, combined with data from the *Next Generation* research project, reveal that young people in KRI, like their peers across Iraq, reject the notion of being mere victims of circumstances.

Instead, they actively seek to make their voices heard, challenge existing boundaries, and drive change. This proactive attitude is evident in their vocal demands for accountability and reforms that align with their needs and aspirations.

Qualitative interviews conducted in the *Next Generation Iraq* research reveal that young people increasingly view social media platforms as effective venues for grassroots mobilization and advocacy. Over the past few years, various NGO efforts have focused on equipping youth with skills to leverage social media as a tool for making their voices heard and engaging with diverse stakeholders.¹⁰ Although there is a lack of clear data on the direct impact of these social media trainings on youth participation in the 2024 parliamentary elections, many Kurdish youth are actively utilising social media, civil society platforms, and grassroots initiatives to amplify their voices and advocate for their rights. This proactive approach highlights their determination to overcome structural barriers and make contributions to their communities, despite the numerous challenges they face.

The notable rise in voter turnout during the 2024 parliamentary elections, particularly among youth, illustrates the potential impact of these mobilization efforts, though this increase must be contextualized. The heightened engagement was driven largely by the polarized nature of the electoral campaign and the innovative strategies employed by the ruling parties, the KDP and PUK. By focusing on their rivalry rather than traditional opposition forces, the campaign created a competitive political environment that resonated strongly with first-time voters.¹¹ Many of these new voters, previously disillusioned with the political system, were drawn to the dynamic and unconventional nature of the campaigns.

Importantly, the campaign strategies marked a significant departure from tradition. Parties employed direct and often humorous critiques of political opponents, a tactic that particularly appealed to younger audiences. For the first time, many parties showed a serious commitment to understanding voter behaviour and tailoring their campaigns accordingly. Notably, a substantial portion of new KDP and PUK supporters were not traditional beneficiaries of the patronage networks historically associated with these parties. This shift challenges long-standing assumptions about youth participation in the region and calls for a critical re-evaluation of how political engagement among young people is understood.

¹⁰ An example of these efforts is a program implemented by the Dutch organization SPARK, aimed at empowering KRI youth to effectively use social media as a tool for advocating their rights and fostering participation. See their website: <https://spark.ngo/programme/networks-of-change-noc/networks-of-change/>

¹¹ The KDP increased its votes compared to the 2018 elections by approximately 125,000 votes, while the PUK saw a rise of around 90,000 votes.

Conclusions

This policy brief aimed at presenting an overview of youth related matters within the context of the KRI. Our insights were drawn from our own observations that we have conducted during the past decade in Kurdistan combined with the British Council' *Next Generation Iraq* research project's survey, interviews and focus group discussions, as well as other recent research which examined the complexity of the challenges that the Kurdish youth are facing in the KRI today. Our departing point was to better understand the aspirations, attitudes and perceptions of the Kurdish youth with regards to KRI's socio-economic and political conditions as well as the challenges they face because of these conditions. Understanding these matters would enable researchers and policy makers to better understand Kurdistan's future leaders as well as voters. However, the insights that this brief presents can also explain certain dynamics that will have an impact beyond the KRI, due to the geopolitical importance of the region.

As explained in the sections above, the *Next Generation Iraq* data demonstrated striking results especially with regards to the Kurdish youth's subjective perceptions of well-being and prosperity compared to the other groups in the rest of Iraq. Despite relatively better security and socio-economic indicators compared to the rest of Iraq, Kurdish youth demonstrated dissatisfaction and disenchantment with the current governance mechanisms (including labour market, education among others) in the KRI. Previous research, as well as the *Next Generation Iraq* survey and interviews reveal that youth have unmet expectations as well as frustration with governance in general.

Hopelessness, for example, was often cited in research as a response to these frustrations. Such trends may help explain the current aspirations for migration – whether through legal or illegal means – which could have long-term impacts on the future of the KRI, especially considering the adverse effects that brain drain can have on developing countries.

The *Next Generation Iraq* survey highlights the positionality of KRI's youth within the broader context of Iraqi youth attitudes. Additionally, in-depth interviews indicate that young people remain focused primarily on issues specific to the KRI, with their expectations directed largely towards KRI's political parties and local governance mechanisms, rather than extending to national concerns across Iraq.

A key avenue for understanding the perspectives, experiences, and attitudes of young people in the KRI, as this report briefly demonstrates, is examining the KRI's evolving political economy since 2014, with particularly drastic shifts occurring after 2018. KRI has sought to transition gradually from an economy largely dependent on oil revenue and public sector employment to one marked by economic diversification, reductions in public spending, decreased support loans for citizens, and increased taxation. These changes unfolded amid broader challenges, such as the war against ISIS (2014-2017), the COVID-19 pandemic, and disputes between KRG and the national government. These economic shifts have significantly impacted the population, especially young people, who have increasingly been expected to work in the private sector despite an economy, government, and educational system largely unprepared for this transition. Although certain aspects of KRG's new economic policies can be justified by the need to reduce public spending, widespread disillusionment grew during this period, as seen in protests, teacher strikes against public education, and increased youth migration. In the light of the findings of this report, the following policy recommendations are listed for a range of actors – government policy- and decision-makers, local and international development partners, and leaders across the public and private sector – who are involved in actions that can determine trajectories of youth in the region:

1. Strengthen Links Between Education and Employment:

- Align educational systems with labour market demands, particularly in growth sectors and the private sector, informed by labour market analysis.
- Promote vocational training and skill development to facilitate the transition of youth into the workforce.

2. Support Entrepreneurship:

- Leverage the positive disposition of Kurdish youth towards entrepreneurship by creating an ecosystem that fosters innovation and provides pathways for young entrepreneurs.
- Strengthen access to financial and technical support for start-ups and small businesses.

3. Promote Fair Access to Opportunities:

- Ensure transparent recruitment processes in public institutions and equitable access to employment opportunities.
- Enhance accountability in governance to rebuild trust among youth.

4. Address Inequalities in Education:

- Develop policies to close the growing gap between public and private education, ensuring all students have access to high-quality education.
- Reform curricula to better align with broader economic needs.

5. Mitigate Migration and Brain Drain:

- Engage with young people to understand the root causes of migration, such as disconnection and hopelessness.
- Develop initiatives to provide youth with a stronger stake in their future at home, such as economic incentives, improved public services, and meaningful avenues for participation.

6. Enhance Language Learning for Employability:

- Prioritize policies and services for Arabic and English language learning, recognizing their role in the domestic economy and broader employability.

7. Foster Connections Across Iraq:

Create opportunities for young people in the KRI to connect with peers across Iraq on shared interests, such as employment and livelihoods, promote joint educational, cultural, and employment initiatives to build bridges, foster mutual understanding, and strengthen a shared identity.

However, the need to address grievances related to governance, and ways to strengthen relations between Erbil and Baghdad is paramount in enabling these steps, which if implemented, can empower Kurdish youth, restore their trust in governance, and create pathways for sustainable development in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. If similar efforts are undertaken at the national level, they can foster greater unity among Iraq's youth, enhance their trust in state institutions, and contribute to the country's overall stability and development.

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