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“They Hear Us But They Do Not Listen to Us”: Youth Narratives on Hope and Despair in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

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"They Hear Us But They Do Not Listen to Us": Youth Narratives on Hope and Despair in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

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Most of the recent academic literature has focused on the macro politics of the Kurdish situation within Iraq and there is little scholarship about the younger generation of Kurds coming of age during the autonomous Kurdish rule. Unlike their forebears, they have no direct memory of the decades-long repression campaigns. For them, the history starts with the inception of a semi-autonomous Kurdish enclave and de facto self-rule after the first Gulf War in 1991. Studying 'Generation 2000', the Kurdish millennials who came of age in the aftermath of the United States invasion of Iraq in 2003 offers vital insights into the dynamics of a region that experienced great socio-political transformation.

Keywords: Kurdish youth, Kurdistan Region of Iraq, waithood, corruption, protest

In May 2021, Hazhin Salah, a young Kurd from Sulaymaniyah, in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), lost his life at a traffic accident at the Turkey-Greece border while he was trying to migrate to Europe in search for a better life. He was a successful graduate as a top student from his school.¹ He was not the only young Kurd who perished this way. Last year, another young Kurd from Duhok, Manaf Ibrahim, froze to death on the same perilous journey. He took this life-changing decision due to unemployment, according to local media.² Last year, the dire economic situation saw thousands of Iraqis, mostly from the KRI, flee the country, with many ending up stranded at the Belarus-Poland border, some even froze to death in sub-zero temperatures.³ These tragic stories are just the

tip of the iceberg. Young Kurds are leaving the KRI en masse via education, marriage or work, in search of a better future not found at home.⁴ Others constantly dream about it but have not acted on the idea just yet. Unemployment is not the only driving force, but also the dysfunctional political system, lack of freedom of speech (UNAMI 2021; Nouri 2021), corruption and nepotism (Hama 2018)⁵ and protracted conflicts in the region (O'Driscoll et al. 2020). Is this a recent trend? Why are the young people so desperate to leave when the KRI is in a state-building phase after

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⁴ 'Why Iraqi Kurds risk their lives to reach the West', BBC, 26 November 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-59419953>

⁵ Saeed, Yerevan. 'Corruption and partisan politics can bring down the KRG', *Aljazeera*, 1 Mar. 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/3/1/corruption-and-partisan-politics-can-bring-down-the-krq>; Jameel, H., 'Bin Diwar, Fazaee (Iraq and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq)', *Global Informality Project*, [https://www.in-formality.com/wiki/index.php?title=Bin_Diwar,_Fazaee_\(Iraq_and_the_Kurdistan_Region_of_Iraq\)](https://www.in-formality.com/wiki/index.php?title=Bin_Diwar,_Fazaee_(Iraq_and_the_Kurdistan_Region_of_Iraq))

¹ 'Kurdish migrant dies in traffic accident on way to Greece', *NRT*, 27 May. 2021.

² 'Kurdish man freezes to death on perilous journey to Europe', *Rudaw*, 15 Oct. 2020.

³ 'Iraqi Kurd's death in Belarus underscores migrants' despair', Associated Press, 16 Nov. 2022. <https://apnews.com/article/lifestyle-belarus-poland-europe-germany-7f79e6->

years of struggle? What drives young people away when the dream of a free Kurdistan is nearer than it ever was?

The contemporary history of the KRI is marked by war and ethnic cleansing campaigns under Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath regime, which had a significant impact on the political situation of the Kurds in the Middle East. Most of the recent academic literature has focused on the macro politics of the Kurdish conundrum within Iraq and beyond and tended to ignore the sociological issues concerning their everyday lives and the future. There is little scholarship about the younger generation of Kurds coming of age under autonomous Kurdish rule. They are a generation that, unlike their forebears, has no direct memory of the decades-long repression campaigns. For them, the history starts with de facto self-rule after the Gulf War and the inception of a semi-autonomous Kurdish entity. Their experience is important for political scientists and policymakers as they will be the future of Kurdistan. Studying and examining the rise of Kurdish young millennials who came of age in the aftermath of the United States invasion of Iraq ('Generation 2000') offers a unique approach to understanding the dynamics in a region that underwent enormous socio-political transformation after 2003.

In this article, we provide brief background information on the current situation with its political, social, and economic dimensions and examine the perceptions of youth about their future in the KRI. The last decade saw a rapid emergence of scholarly work on the role of youth in building sustainable peace, focusing on a wide range of topics from deradicalisation to youth employment as a peacebuilding strategy. These studies warn policymakers and practitioners that youth should be an indispensable component of post-conflict nation-building and development strategies (Berents and Mollica 2020; Berents and McEvoy-Levy 2015; Borer, Darby, and McEvoy 2006; Hayes-Conroy and Montoya 2017; Natil 2021). In line with these debates, we strive to bring young peoples' voices forward to present a snapshot of youth politics in Kurdistan. Our findings will shed light on simmering tensions but also on the recent events such as the violent protests that took place in late 2020.

Our arguments are based on two strands of fieldwork in the KRI. The first was conducted in Kurdistan in July 2018 based on semi-structured interviews with twelve university students and graduates from Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Duhok. The second strand of fieldwork was conducted online in May 2021 and included focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews with twenty-four university students across the KRI. We relied on snowball sampling to select the interviewees and strove for a diverse sample to capture different points of view, including different economic backgrounds and localities (central/peripheral) as well as different fields of education (i.e. medicine, engineering, political science and economics). We also paid attention to gender balance and our sample had an equal number of male and female participants, aged between 18 and 28. The interviewees were asked general questions relating to the current political situation in the KRI with a specific focus on the political situation after the referendum, and the economic and social dynamics. This was followed by specific questions such as "How do young people participate in political and social life in Kurdistan?", "What are the main challenges that young people currently face in Kurdistan?", "How can young people contribute to the future of the region?", "What reforms have the current ruling elites introduced in order to accommodate young people's needs and expectations?". The individual interviews started with these questions and the interviewee answers guided the rest of the interview. The focus groups also had a few guiding questions and each discussion touched upon different issues according to the topics discussed among the interviewees themselves. In order to protect the identities of participants, we anonymised their names, ages and affiliations. The limitation of the paper is that it only focuses on urban youth who are university graduates or students and therefore cannot present the views of young people who live in rural settings or those considered the most marginalized. Our findings can be said to scratch the surface of youth realities in the KRI and more systematic studies are needed to explore the perceptions of youth from more diverse economic, social and cultural backgrounds.

1 Youth in Post-conflict Settings

Since the twentieth century, youth have been part of political movements. Recently the Arab Spring demonstrated that youth play a significant role in opposition movement and protests, rebellions and revolutions and have the power to rattle existing regimes by grassroots mobilisation (Bayat 2010; Murphy 2012; Roberts 2015; Murphy 2017). While youth participation in protests has already been widely studied in the literature, what happens to youth during post-conflict and nation-building processes has to date received less scrutiny by academics.

The literature on youth politics has so far been dominated by two views which either portrayed youth as potential danger to the ruling regimes and therefore discussed how to bring them under control or discussed youth as potential agents of positive change in post-conflict environments. This could be rooted in the historical dichotomy of "youth as hope of the nation against youth as threat to social order" (Murphy 2018, 21) or youth as peacemakers or troublemakers (McEvoy-Levy 2006). While peace and conflict studies mostly focused on child soldiers and youth victims, development studies mostly focused on how and why development can benefit youth in a post-conflict society without significantly paying attention to youth as partners in these processes (Abebe 2020, 587). The tendency to study youth in post-conflict settings through the lens of demobilisation of fighters and their reintegration is gradually way to other studies which look at youth agency from different angles and also consider youth who did not get involved in political violence as agents of change. Scholars recognise that in post-conflict settings where lingering traumas of genocide and mass atrocities still prevail, youth may have varying experiences and their contribution to rebuilding the society and politics may vary accordingly. There is a growing literature which focuses on the idea that youth may play a significant and positive role in post-conflict reconstruction or state-building practices and their inclusion in such processes is integral to achieve sustainable peace in these settings. Having said that, scholars also underline that "youth" does not exist as a homogenous group as they have varied priorities and perspectives and how they negotiate their future depends on a variety of factors in-

cluding the cultural and national context (Wyn and White 1997, 1).

The youth has been an indispensable part of nation-building processes throughout history, although their agency has been undermined in many of these processes. They are usually considered as an audience for state propaganda rather than a partner in creating a new political, social and economic future for the country. While ruling elites seek youth's loyalty, the political processes do not include them as core actors during major transition periods. Research suggests that young people may stay active when violent conflict ends, but during restructuring periods they are usually demobilised by the new rulers or controlled by adults or political parties' specific youth branches (Mokwena 2007). This also happens when young people fail to create alternative models to political parties but criticize the current political structures for being corrupt and inadequate (Honwana 2019,17). Authors such as Blum (2006) have demonstrated that successful nation-building depends on enlisting the loyalty and participation of the youth. In other words, youth are included in such processes in rhetoric, but these projects are successful only when youth participate as actors rather than passive receivers.

Youth constitute an especially vulnerable group in post-conflict settings, after women and children. Young people, whether they experience war and trauma directly or indirectly, are still vulnerable as they often face "additional barriers of a lack of sufficient education, health care, protection, livelihood opportunities, recreational activities, friendship, and family support" (Pandey 2016, 153) even after a conflict ends. The difficulties that young people face in accessing economic, political and socio-cultural resources explains why the impact of youth peacebuilding activity is sometimes limited. Many young people also experience a 'double' marginalisation because of their gender, disability, religion or ethnic status, yet current literature and programming often fails to take account of this when seeking to understand barriers to youth participation. It is no surprise that "youth as a cohort with distinct needs and interests were still not a significant target constituency for public policy-makers" (Murphy and Sika 2021, 395). When youth's problems are not addressed adequately by the policy

makers, they feel a sense of alienation from politics especially where there is corruption, poverty, and social exclusion (Murphy 2018, 26) and they become more vulnerable to polarisation and radicalisation. Previous studies have clearly shown that unemployment, poverty and social exclusion drive young people towards crime and extreme measures as a survival strategy, so much so that during armed conflicts they become targets for recruitment by extremist groups or other crime networks (Agbiboa 2015, 30).

In recent years several authors addressed youth related issues in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) from a variety of perspectives and managed to foreground youth perspectives. For instance, Gertel and Hexel (2018, 11) underlined that in the contemporary MENA region, increasing numbers of young people cannot find a job when they leave school or graduate from college. Thus, they lack the necessary resources to buy or rent an apartment or get married. Therefore, Gertel suggests, young people cannot enter adulthood but remain in a constant stage of "wait-hood"⁶ and "this phase is characterized by ambivalence and uncertainty" (Gertel and Hexel 2018, 11). Wait-hood is also a concept that is attributed to African youth by Honwana (2014; 2019), who demonstrated that youth in Africa are also subject to a difficult and prolonged transition into adult life. Scholars of youth politics, therefore, demonstrated that "the structural violence of economic exclusion and the direct violence of war make it very difficult for young people to become adults in traditional terms and they may become trapped in a prolonged or even permanent state of social, cultural and economic limbo" (McEvoy-Levy 2014, 312). This "wait-hood generation", Honwana (2019) argues, has been losing their faith in the ability of the political elites to address youth's problems and demands, and the youth protests all around the world have not brought about systematic change concerning youth related-matters. Emma Murphy suggests that the difficulties South and East Mediterranean (SEM) youth face are "compounded by the undemocratic, even authoritarian, political structures which govern them and which continues deny them the political, civil and human rights enjoyed by their counterparts in post-industrial countries" (2018,

22). These arguments also hold for the Kurdish youth in the KRI. So far, except for some well-written pieces such as Jiyad, Küçükkeleş, and Schillings (2020) and Aziz (2011) or a recently published edited volume by Fazil and Baser (2021), no comprehensive study specifically addresses the perceptions and problems of young people in the KRI – a cohort that warrants more academic attention.

2 Youth in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

At the turn of the century, the future looked bright for the Kurds in Iraq. While the rest of the country descended into sectarian strife following the U.S. invasion in 2003, the KRI enjoyed peace and stability, and started to flourish, and the Kurdish people, as the sole and unlikely winners of the war, began to hope. Oil was a big part of this now short-lived prosperity (Banco 2018). They were promised that revenue flows from Baghdad and exports from the KRI's oil fields could end poverty. The new oil wealth began to fund sprawling gated communities presumably for the region's middle class, as well as shopping malls, apartment blocks, and office buildings. Kurdish leaders vowed to build the 'next Dubai', an idea that seemed to be fast becoming a reality. Many in the KRI believed the promise, but today not much of it has come to fruition. While money did flow into the region, little has reached or trickled down to ordinary people, either directly or indirectly. The years of economic boom turned to bust in 2014, triggered by the triple shocks of a falling oil price, the conflict with the so-called Islamic State (IS) and the start of what has become a protracted revenue-sharing dispute with the Iraqi government (DeWeaver 2015). The economic recession is frustrating an entire generation of Kurdish youth, who are bearing the brunt.

Analysts place emphasis on the desire for change and democratisation as central incentives for the youth-led anti-government protests affecting Iraq and the KRI in the recent years (Bobseine 2019; Neurink 2020). However, both Iraq and the Kurdistan Region have a major demographic issue. Policy-makers must recognise the cultural and societal pressures that have left an entire young generation trapped in a pre-adulthood phase of social status that prevents them from full social, economic, and political participation and

⁶ A term coined by Singerman (2007).

becoming fully engaged with the society. The inability of youth in the KRI to access opportunities promised in the social contract including quality education, viable employment and family formation, has led to huge resentment motivating the youth to actively seek change. If the KRI fails to address the sources of youth frustration, the region will find itself vulnerable to the kind of unrest that Iraq has faced in recent years – its signs was all too visible during the recent protests that engulfed the economically distressed towns of Sulaymaniyah governorate (Neurink 2020). While the current youth generation runs the risk of becoming socially displaced in a region that once was hailed as “the other Iraq” (Glastonbury 2018) and experienced rapid social and urban development after the turn of the century – before a series of crises and miscalculations started to reverse the fortunes of the Kurds in Iraq.

The KRI has a largely youthful population. Its population pyramid resembles those of typical developing nations. Almost one third of the population are aged between 15–29, and a further 12 percent of the population are adolescents aged between 10–14, forming a high dependency ratio and requiring the government to have relevant programmes to meet their specific health and education needs (UNDP 2014). The other two young cohorts (15–19) and (20–25) have different needs as they stand on the verge of a new phase in life, mainly completing education, finding employment, and getting married. Nonetheless, the KRI has entered a demographic window. Declining fertility rates are moving the population towards demographic stability as evident in the reduction in average household size from 6.2 to 5.1 members. This population transition can be linked to the process of urbanisation, particularly intense in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah, as well as better working and living conditions that, until recently, brought rapid social and cultural change (IOM and UNFPA 2018).

This transition offers the KRI a window of opportunity to turn its youth bulge into a demographic dividend by realising the potential of its young population, facilitating their entry into the labour force, and encouraging them to work for the country rather than against it. Only then can this youth bulge turn from a curse into a blessing. In other words, the KRI’s large

youthful population can offer great potential for prosperity and growth, but economic opportunities are crucial when the youth try to enter the labour market. In recent years, youth unemployment has been a key driver of youth political discontent and instability in Iraq (Mahmod 2019; UNAMI 2020). In the KRI, years of austerity measures and unpaid salaries awakened popular anger in December 2020, which saw at least nine young people killed and hundreds more injured within only a week of protests (Sardar, AlShadeedi, and Skelton 2020). Like their counterparts elsewhere in Iraq, the youth in the KRI were protesting against unemployment and lack of opportunities for socio-economic participation. The KRI has an abysmal employment record. Young people are significantly underrepresented in the bloated public sector, while the private sector remains weak and not entirely independent from the public sector.

The expansion of the education system in the region since 2003 has led to a new stream of qualified young graduates entering the job market. However, just like Iraq, the KRI’s labour market (job growth) has been unable to keep pace with the expansion of its labour force. Prior to the onset of the economic crisis in 2014, the policy of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) was to absorb the labour force expansion by expanding the public sector (Jiyad, Kucukkeles, and Schillings 2020). Young graduates were offered public sector jobs/employment in return for their acquiescence and loyalty. However, the economic crisis and war forced the KRG to freeze public employment and introduce harsh austerity measures including slashing public salaries, while the universities in the region have kept contributing almost 25,000 graduates into the job market annually (RAND 2014). The region’s small private sector has been unable to absorb the surplus labour.

The combination of youth bulge, frozen public sector employment and spending cuts has resulted in greater and more chronic unemployment. In 2018, 65 percent of young unemployed males aged between 25–34 reported having lost hope of finding a job (IOM and UNFPA 2018). The KRI has the lowest female workforce participation rate in the MENA region, the overall rate for Iraq is 14.7 percent, Jordan 15.3 percent and Iran 16.4 percent (World Bank 2016). Over 90

percent of women in the workforce are employed in the public service sectors of education and health, the very same professions that were severely affected by austerity measures. Women still face social barriers when it comes to employment in the private sector. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated the already dire situation, and increased youth unemployment, especially among young women (ILO and Fafo 2020).

3 New Challenges for the Kurdish Youth Amid Regional Instability and Uncertainty in the Middle East

When Honwana (2019, 10) talked about the waithood generation in the context of Africa, she asserted that "the realities of young women's and young men's daily lives expose the gap between the promise of equity, individual freedoms, and prosperity, and their lived experience of marginalization, exclusion, and lack of opportunities." This is a valid argument for Kurdish youth as well, who are trapped between the struggle against oppression and the glorious rebellions of the past and the shadow of traumatic experiences that the older generations cast on the younger generations. For the older generation who dedicated all their lives to a struggle for Kurdish autonomy and independence, what has been gained so far is precious. For young people though, this hard-fought autonomous status is just the beginning, and the future does not look as bright. For them, Kurdistan is a tale of two generations that perpetuates a two-tiered society: the rulers, mainly ageing men (and their sons) who have been running the region since its inception; and the ruled masses at the heart of which lie the young millennials who have grown up under the Kurdish self-rule with no direct memory of Saddam Hussein's tyranny, who anticipate employment and good governance not from Baghdad but from their own rulers. Recent studies show that Kurdish youth are disengaging from politics due to their dissatisfaction with the governing authorities and the absence of systematic reform to create a better future for them (Salih and Fantappie 2019). Identification with political parties is gradually decreasing where youth are in desperate need of alternative solutions to the KRI's

multidimensional problems.⁷ What is obvious from our observations is that the youth do not blame the armed conflict and legacies of genocides for their waithood but they place the blame squarely on the ruling elite for failing to deliver on their promises of a good life, economic security and stability.

Many youth-focused civil society initiatives, such as Youth Deserve,⁸ Alind Organization for Youth Democratization,⁹ or SPARK, bring young Kurds together to discuss how they can create a less polarised and more inclusive society. SPARK encourages young people's involvement in social, political and economic discussions and contributes to solutions to enduring problems in the KRI such as youth unemployment, women's rights, and emigration.¹⁰ Sofia Girls Society, a grassroots initiative, promotes literacy and awareness among women, while also demanding an end to the pandemic of violence against women – another area which the ruling parties have shown little political will to address – notwithstanding the proud history of Kurdish women's engagement in the armed resistance for decades along with their male counterparts. Such platforms not only advocate for justice and women's place in the society, but also give the Kurdish women an overdue opportunity to voice their experience (Bindel 2019). Although these initiatives constitute hope for youth mobilisation, they are still not widespread enough to enforce leverage over political affairs.

We observed that, during the interviews, participants used words such as "confused", "lost" and "hopeless". One interviewee asserted, for instance: "Young people do not know what to do, they do not know what they want" (M, Sulaymaniyah, 2021). When the research participants were asked about the main problems they are facing, the most important issue they mentioned was education, followed by un-

⁷ SPARK, 'Why not? Kurdish youth campaign against polarization', <https://spark.ngo/why-not-kurdish-youth-campaign-against-polarisation/>

⁸ 'Iraq Kurdish Youth Foundation', <https://www.iky-found.org/programs>

⁹ 'Alind Organization for Youth Democratization', <https://daleel-madani.org/civil-society-directory/alind-organization-youth-democratization>

¹⁰ SPARK, 'Why not? Kurdish youth campaign against polarization', <https://spark.ngo/why-not-kurdish-youth-campaign-against-polarisation/>

employment. The common understanding was that the rates of unemployment were very high in the KRI and the education they received did not improve their employment prospects. One interviewee from Erbil complained that even her teachers did not know the topic they were supposed to teach, and she felt hopeless during her studies at the university (F, Erbil, 2021). The pandemic conditions which compelled studying from home only made this situation worse. Another interviewee said: "We don't have good education. We cannot use this education as a key to find jobs" (M, Erbil, 2021). Other participants from Sulaymaniyah confirmed this view. One said, "they do not teach you how to find your potential" (focus group discussion with university students from Sulaymaniyah, 2021). Some mentioned that they went to a science high school but ended up in social sciences departments without any prerequisite knowledge or background in these subjects. This made them feel insecure during their university education and they blamed the system for assigning them to disciplines that they are not interested in. They gave examples of friends and family members who had diplomas in engineering and information technology but ended up working in the informal service or retail sectors like restaurants and markets due to various factors including lack of relevant skills and networks (focus group discussion, Sulaymaniyah, 2021). The education system is not adequate, and hence graduates are unable to develop skills and competencies required in the job market. This means there is a longstanding skills mismatch between the university education and the demands of professional life and the job market. For instance, most private sector jobs require language and computer skills that graduates cannot gain adequately during their university education. The curriculum is outdated, or in their words "out of touch with real world issues" (M, 2018). It does not provide important skills that are relevant for this digitalised age we live in and is not based on active learning and problem solving. It would help if they were given more freedom to debate. Universities in the region still tend to emphasise rote learning over critical thinking. Like the media, they tend to parrot the popular narrative and partisan lines. One interviewee from Erbil stated that "opportunities are numbered in

Kurdistan, and despite hard work, one cannot find employment. Nepotism 'wasta' plays a crucial role. I feel disaffected. I am losing my hope" (F, Erbil, 2018). Her concerns were echoed in the interviews of 2021 as well. There is overwhelming mistrust not only towards the ruling parties but also the entire government bureaucracy, owing in part to a system that requires unwavering loyalty and *wasta*, or connections, to get jobs. While corruption undermines confidence in the system, the ruling parties encourage people to think of politics in zero-sum or apocalyptic terms: if another group or party takes power, they will not be able to maintain their physical security from threats of extremism.

There were also complaints about corruption. Allegations of high-level corruption in the KRI are nothing new. According to a U.S. diplomatic cable, reported by the *Financial Times*, corruption was at extreme levels in the KRI and some claimed that it deters foreign investors and that the situation is worse than the rest of Iraq.¹¹ According to a report published by Transparency International in 2015: "While progress has been made on delivering the government's 2009 'Good Governance and Transparency Strategy' and the 'Vision for 2020', there have been few high-profile convictions for corruption cases. A challenging media environment remains a serious constraint on effective anti-corruption reform" (Pring 2015). It is no coincidence that party and government officials are seen as complicit on account of their clashing business interests and blamed for siphoning off much of the wealth accumulated from oil sales, customs and other revenue streams (Cornish 2021; Saeed 2020; Rubin 2018). However, there is limited information regarding the extent of corruption. The existing indicators do not disaggregate the results for Iraq by region, making it difficult to assess the level of corruption in the KRI (Pring 2015).¹² Based on the available resources such as reports by Transparency International (ibid.), it can be said that while corruption is less widespread in the KRI compared to the rest of Iraq, it does remain high

¹¹ Cornish, C., 'Iraqi Kurdistan's authoritarian turn: Western ally 'discards idea of democracy'', *FT*, 10 May 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/cd943209-b26b-45b2-a34a-e0d432b2e3f1>

¹² Iraq is regularly ranked among the world's most corrupt countries.

in comparison with some other countries in the MENA region.

Many interviewees mentioned that they feel insecure in the job market because they are not well connected to the political parties or members of the ruling elite. This not only demotivated them in their studies, but also encouraged the idea that even if they succeed, they will not be able to achieve their dreams: "Even though I graduate as top of my class, I am not sure I will find a job. I do not know the right people who can help me" (M, Erbil, 2021).

This complex picture created an atmosphere of uncertainty and instability for young people who had financial issues, feared unemployment, and lacked the resources to form their own household and family and realise themselves as adults in the society. Referring to the concept of waithood we mentioned above, it can be said that the youth were aware of this stagnation in their future prospects, and felt that something needs to be done to address these issues:

[There is] a growing sense of hopelessness, lack of prospects and employment opportunities. Compounded by lack of interest, bad economy, and the political situation. Many among my circles are thinking to leave. My friend got divorced because of unemployment. Many twenty-seven- to thirty-year-olds are still unmarried, delaying their marriage because they don't have a source of income. Dowry gold and other expenses of marriage... (M, Erbil, 2021)

The post-2003 KRI which the current young generation grew up in experienced a multi-year economic boom thanks in part to exceptional oil wealth and other revenue streams that have shaped the young people's expectations and their possibilities for realising themselves as adults, providers, and respected members of their societies. The redistribution of oil wealth through public employment for acquiescence and the minimum levying of taxes has enabled the ruling elite to maintain an autonomy from their social bases and the society. It has in effect rendered the ruling elite and institutions unaccountable and unresponsive to pressure from within the society. Many interviewees mentioned that they are trying to "save themselves" first, before they mobilise to help other young people. There was an understanding that change comes from the individual level first. Securing a future, which means "improved wellbeing, social upward mobility, individual and national progress, the

fulfilment of citizen's needs, and aspirations formulated by children, youths and their kin regarding their future" (Häberlein and Maurus 2020, 571), is believed to be realisable only if one succeeds at the individual level as a result of individual efforts. Civil society initiatives were received as a positive development but regarded as insufficient and ineffective when it comes to pushing for long overdue socio-political change in Kurdistan. Most interviewees had no links to civil society organisations running initiatives for youth.

4 Coping Mechanisms and Narratives on Hope and Despair

There are many ways in which youth can engage with political mechanisms in post-conflict settings. Some youth segments might opt to become part of the system and therefore do not challenge existing structures but, to the contrary, enforce them (Cornish 2021). Each young person tailors different coping mechanisms which involves a variety of strategies from individual initiatives to collective action.

Many interviewees were very critical about the government. One interviewee from Halabja stated that the feeling of hopelessness comes from the government's inability to address youth-related issues (F, Erbil, 2021). Another student from Sulaymaniyah said: "Youth are never prioritised by politicians. There is always something more important. We do not believe in politics" (F, Erbil, 2021). The shared idea was that the ruling elites were working for their own benefit rather than the good of Kurdish society as a whole. A majority of the participants did not believe that elections would bring about change in the KRI, hence voting was not considered as a strategy to push for their needs. One interviewee mentioned that each party has its youth branch and there is a façade of youth activism. But he underlined that in these organisations youth do not have much autonomy and the party line is followed (M, Erbil, 2021). Moreover, the focus groups revealed that even though youth conferences are organised and the political parties seem to be interested in what young people say, when it comes to acting on their concerns they just follow the party strategies and try to woo young people to support them. One participant drew our attention to the fact that there is a gap between words and action:

"They hear us but they do not listen to us" (F, Erbil, 2021). For many, youth need other platforms to get things done and pave the way for the change that they desire:

You can not easily spread awareness without party interference, they want to monopolise your platform... The parties want to co-opt the active and capable ones and the youth around them. But people reject working under any party banner because they have lost faith. (M, Sulaymaniyah, 2018)

This does not come as a surprise when we think about the literature on other case studies from the MENA region. For instance, in her work on Tunisia, Honwana (2014, 2441) found that "many young activists denounce old-style party politics and object to being manipulated by politicians, whom they regard as corrupt and self-serving." However, the participants' narratives included the idea that not everything should be expected from the politicians. Most of the interviewees acknowledged that government outreach has limits, and the will and agency should also come from the young people themselves. One interviewee from Erbil said for instance, "it is not only government, but the current situation is also our fault as well" and another suggested "there is some change in youth, we realised that we are on our own" (M, Erbil, 2021).

The feeling of hopelessness also comes from the fact that the KRI is vulnerable to outside threats and the feeling of insecurity never ends. One interviewee from Sulaymaniyah said that:

"If there is no peace, no future. You plan, you work and you see conflict. External also internal [between political parties in the KRI]" (F, Sulaymaniyah, 2021).

Some interviewees mentioned that political rivalries between the main parties were exaggerated and many opportunities were lost as a result of internal competition and partisan squabbles but also the elite capture of public resources. When it comes to talking about the recent protests, many students suggested that there was no direct link between young people and the protests and they were mostly among party lines. However, some commented on the fact that freedom of speech is under threat in the KRI, which is one of the reasons why young people hesitate to get organised and operate at the individual level when seeking change. Students do not feel they are completely free to criticize the government and ruling parties publicly

in open platforms such as Twitter, Facebook or Clubhouse due to fear of retribution:

"I am careful when I speak, at any event, I assume there are 'parastin' (intelligence) agents among some of the attendees" (F, Sulaymaniyah, 2018).

The lack of free media was also mentioned by participants as an obstacle to establishing the truth. Mass media was perceived as corrupt and parroting the official line, while social media was perceived as a potentially dangerous forum to show their true colours. However, there were also interviewees who defined social media platforms as an opportunity for young people:

The fear factor is no longer there, people are no longer afraid to express their ideas ... Facebook has allowed people to see behind the headlines/scenes ... I use Facebook to get my news, I don't follow news on TV. (F, Erbil, 2018)

Some interviewees mentioned the generational gap as a serious issue. There was this feeling that the older generation expects young people to be "grateful" for what has been achieved as result of decades-long struggle. However, interviewees asserted that they do not have a direct memory of the past and their expectations and aspirations are different from those of their forebears. Although many young people are told by their parents not to get their hopes up or expect too much from their future, the tendency among the participants was towards realising their dreams through sustained hard work and resilience. One interviewee from Sulaymaniyah said: "Our parents do not believe in our potential. They do not think it can get better than this" (M, Sulaymaniyah, 2021). In a focus group interview with students from Sulaymaniyah, the meaning of patriotism was discussed in connection with the discussions on generational differences. The participants asserted that their understanding of patriotism was different from the older generation who defined Kurdish nationalism according to their loyalties to the ruling parties. For young people today, patriotism was pushing for change and institutional reform to create a better future (focus group discussion with university students from Sulaymaniyah, 2021). One female participant in the focus group asserted:

We do not begin from zero [like the older generation did]. We cannot ignore their [the ruling political parties'] corruption. We are not going to be oppressed again, neither by others nor by our own leaders.

Kurdish families also play a big role in discouraging the youth from engaging in activities that demand change from the government, but at the same time they expect their children to get married as soon as possible. The youth are encouraged to stay passive but at the same time compelled to end their wait-hood despite lacking the basic resources. These pressures were especially hard on female participants who reported that pursuing their dreams in terms of career and education was harder for them than for their male counterparts. Interviewee accounts show the extent of pressure that young people are facing about these issues:

[My family is] holding me back from expressing my thought, they tell me that you are girl, this is not for you. My brother punishes me for my decisions. He does not want me to take just any job, he has to approve. (F, Erbil, 2018)

It is possible to bring together youth to discuss and participate in events that address their concerns and grievances, but you have to be very careful. Back in the days I wrote about Barzani and his party, somehow, they told my dad, tell your son to be careful. My dad told me that I should stop posting on Facebook. He is a party cadre, and he is paid \$400 in return. He needs the money, because his financial condition is not good. Many people like my dad join the patronage network for the money rather than the loyalty. (M, Erbil, 2018)

As family expectations and the lack of future prospects put young people between a rock and a hard place, many start dreaming about migrating somewhere else at all costs. Among the interviewees, many desired to go abroad to the Global North to study and work: "I dream to leave this country, because we are told constantly that we can't change the reality. We cannot fix it that is why we want to leave" (F, Sulaymaniyah, 2018).

Others think about temporary migration as an option. For instance, there were interviewees whose dream is to go abroad, improve their skills and return to contribute to serve their people. Other factors such as family also keep young people in Kurdistan despite all the odds:

While I am optimist in life, I reached the point of zero. There is no life here [in Kurdistan], you feel you have to leave. I have thought about leaving but I am still undecided because of my parents. (M, Erbil, 2018)

Our observations revealed that young people desire to leave but a majority of them want to do it temporarily until things get better in Kurdistan and through routes of education or skill-building rather than illegal

methods if possible. Reforms in education and employment should be a priority for the KRI to stop the brain drain as the youth are vital components of nation-building. A Kurdistan without a youth culture that believes in its future will not prosper. Although there is despair and hopelessness, there is also resilience in youth narratives and given the opportunity, young people are ready to make their voice heard, challenge existing norms and contribute towards building a better future. However, there is still a significant gap between capabilities and expectations; in other words, youth are advanced with their imagination of a better Kurdistan yet there is confusion about what can be done in practice to realise their imaginations.

5 Conclusion

The fact that Kurdish youth demands a revolution that transforms the existing political system rather than cosmetic reforms that keep the system intact, has been voiced by many analysts and experts. However, this is not an easy task. Our interviews and observations revealed that youth discontent with the current ruling elite is simmering, however there is no organised mass movement at the civil society or political level which can put leverage on political processes in the KRI. There is also the lack of space for youth to express themselves freely and mobilise for social and political change. Discontent translates into despair and hopelessness as much as resilience and desire to succeed at the individual level. Although there are civil society initiatives driven by external or internal incentives, their outreach remains limited. Young people develop coping mechanisms within the system which vary from dreaming about leaving for good to becoming part of the system for survival. It should also be noted that many young people, despite having criticisms towards the ruling elite, still try very hard to become a part of it to leave the phase of "wait-hood" behind. Family, as a social institution, still wields significant influence in deterring youth from mobilisation. Despite the generational gap in terms of loyalty and nationalism, many are still subject to pressure from the older family members when they want to express themselves. There is wide gulf between how the youth define patriotism and how the older

generations think, with the youth separating Kurdish nationalism from partisan interests, patronage and loyalties.

What other scholars observed in other cases from the Middle East and Africa in terms of "waithood generation" could also be valid for the Kurdish youth in the KRI. We also observed that waithood is a concept that can also be applied to the situation of the KRI in regional and global politics as well. As many research participants underlined, youth related issues are sidelined in Kurdish politics because other "more important" political issues such as internal competition, disputes with Baghdad or KRI's potential independence and security are prioritised. Since KRI is constantly waiting for better days to come amid uncertainty and instability, young people's "waithood" is destined to be tied to the "waithood" of Kurdistan, a state in the making. A mentality which perceives the youth as the future of Kurdistan is required to turn youth potential into assets for development and to reverse the brain drain.

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