

Case Study: Iraq

Social Welfare and Conflict in Iraq

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1. Introduction

Iraq underwent profound changes after implementing consociationalism, power-sharing, and neoliberal policies in 2003. Regrettably, these changes had a detrimental effect on social service provision, employment, and other services. Limited and unjust social services provision has become a shared concern for the population in the central and southern parts of the country, which is the focus of this study.

The rampant spread of corruption has significantly worsened social service provision, a crucial factor contributing to inadequate social services and social welfare: the misuse of state funds and their uneven distribution among political leaders have further increased the population's needs. This dire situation, particularly the lack of services and unemployment, has sparked widespread protests, especially among the youth who are grappling with persistent unemployment and a shortage of social services such as electricity. The absence of these services has significantly reduced people's satisfaction, widening the vertical and horizontal inequality gap. This dire situation has eroded the state's legitimacy and undermined social cohesion, leading to protests and conflicts with far-reaching consequences, which will be discussed in detail in the following sections. The case of Iraq confirms what the literature discusses. When people feel frustrated due to a lack of social services, they seek different means to express their discontent.

The researchers adopted a qualitative approach to unravel the intricate connection between social welfare and conflicts. This research is based on a comprehensive literature review and in-depth interviews with key stakeholders. It explores the intricate connection between the lack of social welfare and the emergence of conflicts and protests. The research draws on 13 in-depth interviews with seven representatives of different ministries in Iraq, five interviews with representatives of civil society organisations, and one civil activist.

This study focuses on how vertical inequality can drive social protest. It pays less attention to horizontal inequalities in Iraq, which have driven armed conflict between sectarian groups. Key findings include:

- Iraq has a set of social protection programmes, yet they need to be stronger and more effective. The lack of available assistance has left the most significant segment of the population, particularly the unemployed youth, without social coverage. The failure to address the population's needs has many consequences including the emergence of protests in different parts of the country.
- Corruption and the deficit in wealth distribution are the main causes of the state's failure to provide social welfare and services. This underscores the urgent need for institutional reform to address chronic corruption.
- Patronage politics and the distribution of jobs, benefits, and other services on the basis of nepotism and political affiliations greatly exacerbate the issue of vertical inequality.¹
- The feeling of alienation is widely spread particularly amongst the youth, who do not feel their lives and dignity have been protected in their country. Demanding to have a state that secures a decent way of life was one of the main slogans of the Tashreen uprising in 2019-2020.
- Widespread protest has been the main strategy used by the population and youth in particular to demand their socio- economic rights. Four popular and mass protests took place during the last decade in addition to hundreds of local protests.

¹ ILO, 2024, 'Iraq National Strategy', ILO. Available from: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---arabstates/---ro-beirut/documents/publication/wcms_916523.pdf

- The use of violence by the state and quasi-state organisations against protesters has damaged state-society relations; on one side, the state neglects the fair demands of the population, accusing them of being politically driven. On the other side, protestors claim that the political elite pursue their own interests and fail to provide economic opportunities.
- Formalising the informal economy is a prerequisite to reducing vertical inequality. Although some existing laws provide security for the people in the private sector, these are poorly implemented.
- Social protection policies play an important role in ensuring that violence and counter violence is not used by both the state and societal forces.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section two provides some background to the Iraq context. Section three examines evidence from the literature about the relationship between social welfare and conflict, while section four examines the same relationship using findings from the interviews. Section five explores the dynamics of protests and violence in greater detail. Section six provides some conclusions about the relationship between social welfare and conflict from the interviews.

2. Context and Background

Iraq's recent history witnessed episodes of violence and conflict, both internal and external. The Iraq-Iran war (1980-1988), the 1991 Gulf War, and following years of sporadic wars in the Gulf region, coupled with the 13 years of economic sanctions, hit the population of Iraq severely before the start of the 2003 invasion.² A report published by the World Bank in 2015 stated that “the country has been a nexus of conflict and fragility since the early 1980s and has experienced multiple types of conflict: insurgency, international war, sectarian strife, persistent terrorism, regional fragmentation, and spillovers from conflict in other countries”.³ The subsequent sectarian war in 2006-2008 and the ISIS attack on Iraq during 2014-2017 had a major impact on the livelihoods and the welfare of the population.

The post-war political system based on power-sharing, or *al-muhasasa al-taifia*, permitted the political marketplace to dominate the socio-economic and political scene. Three elements have impacted the post-war state's social provision: state formation based on an informal political consociational settlement⁴, power sharing, and adopting neoliberal policies. These influenced the distribution of the financial resources and the provision of social protection and social services.

2.1. The Post War Political Consociational Settlement and Power Sharing

The failure of social welfare (SW) provision and social services (SS) in Iraq could be attributed to different factors. First, the adoption of both formal and informal consociationalism and power-sharing arrangements. The constitution acknowledged different components of Iraqi society; the first are the Shi'a in the south and the second, the Kurds in the north. The Sunnis in the western part of Iraq had joined what had been known as the 'political operation' later on in 2005, in addition to 'small components' of Iraqi society, such as religious 'minorities'. This system has been in place for

² Parker, C & Moore, P. (2007). The War Economy of Iraq. <https://merip.org/2007/06/the-war-economy-of-iraq/>, 2007, 'The War Economy of Iraq'. Available from: <https://merip.org/2007/06/the-war-economy-of-iraq/>

³ World Bank, 2015, 'Addressing the Consequences of Iraq's Difficult Legacy', World Bank, p.1. Available from: <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/606251468039000276/pdf/938600BRIOP1470yBrief20Eng00PUBLIC0.pdf>

⁴ Ltaif, E., 2015, 'The Limitations of Consociational Arrangements in Iraq', Ethnopolitics Papers. Available from: https://www.psa.ac.uk/sites/default/files/page-files/AbulTaif_EP_No38.pdf

the last 20 years and has seen the nationalistic-ethnic-religious and sectarian political parties struggle to assert their share of state power and economic resources. Failure to secure what was perceived as a 'rightful share' led these groups to engage in conflict and violent action. Election results did not lead to changes in the distribution of power since if groups did badly in the elections, they would be accommodated through negotiation with the winners to enhance their positions.

The division of power facilitated access to wealth distribution through the division of the ministerial seats as they have been distributed to the alliances of larger political parties regardless of election results.⁵ It is well-documented that the larger political parties control the government ministries and use them for their interests. The core interest of these parties is to secure their political bases by distributing jobs, benefits, and services that are not available to all on an equal basis. These parties use employment and government payrolls to bribe supporters, offering rewards for "political loyalty with public sector employment, government contracts to enrich allied businessmen, and personal theft from ministerial budgets".⁶ Dodge et al. confirmed in their report that the "leaders of the ethno-sectarian parties divided government ministries amongst themselves, using the resources the ministries brought, in terms of civil service payrolls and ministerial budgets, as patronage to solidify their political base".⁷ The control of the ministries have enabled these parties to siphon off state funds.⁸

Political parties have used state revenue to benefit their interests instead of pursuing long-term social policies or development agendas. Parties issue "*tazkiya*" or letters of recommendation to their supporters, enabling them to secure jobs in the ministries under their control. Consequently, ministerial payrolls expand to accommodate party members and individuals associated with party leaders.⁹ Therefore, social provision is not solely based on sub-national forms of identity, such as religion, tribe, or sect, as stated by Kivimaki¹⁰, but primarily based on political support.

The power-sharing settlement has prevented accountability and achieving justice. Political parties engage in corruption, prevent accountability, and subvert justice. This corruption has meant that social welfare has failed to reach those most in need and the misuse of social services. The prime minister and the central government have struggled to maintain authority. Dylan O'Driscoll explains that to shore up the premiership, the prime minister would allow the ministries to 'become miniature fiefdoms'.¹¹

The culture of clientelism has thrived in Iraq's economic and political landscape. Exchanging political loyalty for material benefits has been a long-standing practice, dating back to the regimes before 2003. As in other MENA countries, public sector employment has been used as a strategy to maintain political stability.

⁵ Jiyad, S., 2023, 'Corruption is the Lifeblood of Political Iraq', LSE p.8. Available from:

https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/120883/3/Corruption_is_the_lifblood_of_politics_in_Iraq_published.pdf

⁶ Dodge, T., Kaya, Z., Luchtenberg, K. N., Mathieu-Comtois, S., Saleh, B., Van den Toorn, C., Turpin-King, A., & Watkins, J., 2018, 'Iraq synthesis paper: Understanding the drivers of conflict in Iraq'. Available from:

<https://core.ac.uk/download/161929474.pdf>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Bourhous, A. et al., 2021, 'Reform within the System: Governance in Iraq and Lebanon', SIPRI, Policy Paper 61 p.18.

Available from: <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2021-12/sipripp61.pdf>

⁹ Dodge, T., Kaya, Z., Luchtenberg, K. N., Mathieu-Comtois, S., Saleh, B., Van den Toorn, C., Turpin-King, A., & Watkins, J., 2018, Iraq synthesis paper: Understanding the drivers of conflict in Iraq. p.5. Available from:

<https://core.ac.uk/download/161929474.pdf>

¹⁰ Kivimaki, T., 2021, 'The Fragility-Grievances-Conflict Triangle in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA): An Exploration of the Correlative Associations'. Available from: <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0760/10/4/120>

¹¹ O'Driscoll, D., 2018, 'Governance and Development in Iraq', K4D Helpdesk Report p.10. Available from:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5b4328c4e5274a3764524d48/Governance_and_Development_in_Iraq.pdf

Whether appointed or elected, the political elite are vested in sectarian identities, capitalising on the latter to advance their political projects to maintain power, positions, and access to wealth. These benefits are typically distributed according to ethnic and religious affiliations.

2.2. The Adoption of the Neoliberal Policies

The public sector constitutes around 38% of the labour force, consuming 40% of its annual budget, the highest proportion in the region.¹² Young entrepreneurs receive little support and lack funding, facing complex regulations and high taxes, all of which limit private sector growth. Complex regulations burden the creation and expansion of businesses significantly. Additionally, about 700,000 young Iraqis enter the labour market yearly for job opportunities.¹³ This poses a significant challenge for the unemployed youth and puts pressure on the government to create new jobs each year to keep the unemployment and underemployment rates from rising.

After the Iraq war, international organisations worked to reintegrate Iraq into the global economy. The occupying forces, along with international financial institutions, supported by the UN Security Council, started transitioning from a state-planned economy to a free-market economy. This was reflected in resolutions focused on reducing the state's role, privatising state-owned enterprises (SOEs), liberalising the market, promoting exports, and opening up to foreign investment to boost economic growth.

In 2004, Paul Bremer, the leader of the Coalition Provisional Authority, issued 100 binding orders to establish a free market economy and privatise the public sector.¹⁴ In 2005, the IMF imposed limitations on the government wage and pension bill, which constitutes almost 75 percent of its budget.¹⁵ Despite calls for privatisation and encouragement of private sector intervention, subsequent governments have failed to create a free and vibrant economy. These conditions contribute to the new socio-political reality of continuous protest, the use of violence, and the spread of societal crimes, and immigration.

2.3. The Characteristics of Social Protection in Iraq

Social protection in Iraq is limited and has failed to address people's needs. Iraq has two central social protection policies: contributory and non-contributory. The first social security system targeted employees in the public sector based on their own and their employee's contributions to the programme's fund. A new law issued in 2023 targeted employees in the private sector, calling for both employees and their employers to contribute to the social security and pension fund.

The other, a non-contributory system, includes social assistance provision directed to families and individuals in need, with the first programme being the public distribution system (PDS). Starting in the 1990s, the PDS provides food rations for almost all households in the country.¹⁶ The former component of Social Safety Net or SSN, regulated by Law Number 11 in 2014, targets a specific set

¹² IMF, 2022, 'Iraq: 2022' Article IV Consultation-Press Release; and Staff Report', IMF. Available from:

<https://www.elibrary.imf.org/view/journals/002/2023/075/article-A001-en.xml>

¹³ Wilford, D., 2023, 'Trudeau government to spend nearly \$10M to support unemployed youth in Iraq'. Toronto Sun.

Available from <https://torontosun.com/news/national/trudeau-government-to-spend-nearly-10m-to-support-unemployed-youth-in-iraq>

¹⁴ Whyte, D., 2006, 'The Crimes of Neo-Liberal Rule in Occupied Iraq', *The British Journal of Criminology*, 47 (2).

¹⁵ Yorulmaz, R. and Duman, B., 2019, 'Protests in Iraq and the Economic Grounds Behind Them', ORSAM, Policy Brief 101 p.10. Available from: https://orsam.org.tr/d_hbanaliz/Bakis_101_eng_1.pdf

¹⁶ ILO, 2021, 'Social Protection Programme for Iraq: Leveraging Effective Response and Accelerating Reform', ILO. Available from: <https://www.ilo.org/projects-and-partnerships/projects/social-protection-programme-iraq-leveraging-effective-response-and-0>

of groups eligible for cash transfers. This includes widows, divorced women, married students, disabled, blind, paralyzed, and families of the imprisoned and missing persons.¹⁷

Other social protection programmes in Iraq, regulated in Labour Law 37 issued in 2015, Iraq National Health Policy 2014-2023, Social Security Law No. 9 of 2014, and Unified Retirement Law, another entitlement regulated by a law issued in (2006 and, amended in 2013), regulate the compensation for political prisoners and martyrs' families from the previous regime, as well as for those who fled to Rafha Camp in Saudi Arabia in the war of 1991.

Despite these laws, social protection still needs to be more cohesive and effective in supporting those in need. For example, although universal health coverage is supposed to be provided to all in Iraq regardless of their socioeconomic, geopolitical, or ethnic status, the health services are weak, leading people to seek services from the private sector to meet their needs.

Social protection programmes currently fail to reach those in need, and many potential beneficiaries are excluded. These programmes also failed to deliver for IDPs and female-headed households.¹⁸ Only 26.9% of the population benefits from protective measures, even though 1.3% of GDP was allocated to social assistance in 2021.¹⁹ The elderly received 5.6% of GDP, while the working-age population received only 2% of the total allocation in 2020, and only 1.4% of people with disabilities received cash transfers. Informal jobs lack social protection benefits such as unemployment insurance, pensions, or injury protection.²⁰ Meanwhile, the unemployed receive little support from the state. The impact of weak and ineffective social protection has impacted on three of the mechanisms that link social welfare and conflict: (1) vertical and horizontal equality, (2) social cohesion, (3) state legitimacy. These three aspects will now be examined in turn.

3. The Relationship Between Social Welfare and Conflict: Evidence from the Literature

3.1. The Lack of Social Welfare and Vertical Inequality

The literature has emphasised the connection between inequalities of social services and jobs and civil unrest and fragility. While vertical inequality (VI) is embodied in the disparities of living conditions of citizens within the same community (e.g. the Shi'a population) that usually provokes protest, horizontal inequality (HI) occurs amongst different communities, which may lead to armed conflict. This paper focuses on the impact of the lack of social protection on VI. The research finds that these vertical inequalities within social groups are compounded by inadequate social protection systems that are poorly targeted. The underlying inequalities outlined below have provided the grounds for the protests discussed later in the paper.

There are significant regional inequalities. The poverty rate has increased in the Shi'a-dominated southern and central parts of Iraq. 25.8% of Iraqis live under the poverty line, while 39% live just above the poverty line. There is a disparity in the living standards between rural and urban areas.

¹⁷ Partow & Kulaksiz, 2017, 'Iraq Systematic Country Diagnostic', World Bank. Available from: <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/542811487277729890/pdf/IRAQ-SCD-FINAL-cleared-02132017.pdf>

¹⁸ UNICEF, 2023, 'How to improve the effectiveness of social protection in Iraq'. Available from <https://www.unicef.org/iraq/media/3301/file/%20Policy%20Brief%20-%20Iraq%20SSFR%20Social%20Protection.pdf>

¹⁹ ILO, 2024, 'Iraq National Strategy'. Available from: <https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40arabstates/%40ro-beirut/documents/publication>

²⁰ UNDP, 2021, Impact of COVID on Social Protection in Iraq, UNDP p.12. Available from: <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/iq/32ace0acb6ff3c23d515ab0cbae178c25355bbe11cded5888d5c1a8e6dba708f.pdf>

The former has a higher poverty rate than the latter areas, and poverty is higher in the South and North of Iraq than in the Kurdistan region.

Iraqi women comprise half of the total population yet are among the world's most disempowered. The Iraq National Strategy (2024-208) indicated that Iraq ranked 145th out of 191 countries, at the value of 0.558 for this index in the Gender Inequality Index (GII). Women in Iraq suffer from inequality in the labour market, as the proportion of women working is one of the lowest in the world, with 84% of women outside the labour force compared to 32% of men. The hourly earnings for women are 18.4% lower than for men. Female-headed households comprise about 10 % of women's population, and 80 % are widows. In education, girls' illiteracy rates are double those of boys. Social norms restrict women's freedom of movement and their ability to find job opportunities. Laws in Iraq put women on an unequal footing with men. Male members of the family are permitted to control women's behaviour under Article 41 of Law 111, issued in 1969, as men have the right to 'discipline' women. This enforces the submission of women to the men's will. Nothing has changed despite women's organisations working to change these laws. This has caused a loss of trust in the justice system and increased anger and frustration among them. The benefits received by IDPs vary considerably: the larger the size of the family, the less they benefit from the monthly ration by up to 30 percent if there are more than 12 members. Workers in the private sector and those working precariously have fewer economic rights. Their social condition is precarious and vulnerable to any shocks. Iraq has the lowest employment-to-total-population ratio in the world; only 33% of the working-age population (15 years old and over) were employed in 2020/21.

Marginalised groups including the elderly, people with special needs, injury, children/family, and maternity, have no adequate coverage in any of the critical social protection benefit areas. Almost 59.5% of those needing social protection do not receive any social support, with only 20% receiving social assistance in 2018 and only 40.5% in 2020. Unemployed Youth receive none.²¹

Iraq has very high levels of income inequality. The top 10 percent% of the population receives 32 percent% of the income, while the bottom 40 percent% receives only 16.3 percent.%. The consumption of the top five quintiles has increased by 2.0% compared to 0.7% for the poorest 20%.

The state's poor provision of public services places additional burdens on low-income families. Iraq has very low levels of electricity generation compared to other MENA countries such as Lebanon. The public water infrastructure had deteriorated due to decades of armed conflict and tap water has been undrinkable since the 1990s. This has forced most households to purchase water privately from mobile tankers or bottles. In 2020, one ton of water, covering the needs of an Iraqi family for about seven days, cost about 8000-10000 Iraqi dinars (US \$5.50—\$6.80 US dollars). This). Since this cost is too high for all households; low-income people households, many rely on unsafe tap water.

3.2. The Lack of Social Welfare and Social Cohesion

There is some evidence that horizontal inequalities amongst the Sunnis and other communities in the south or north of Iraq have driven Sunni youth to join the insurgency, to defend their political aspirations, and claim their economic rights. The sentiment of political grievance. Political grievances spread as a result of the dismissal of the Sunni political officials and ministries. These grievances, coupled with the feelings of economic marginalisation and deterioration of the living

²¹ ILO, 2024, 'Iraq National Strategy'

standards as well as lack of social services, led some to engage in civil conflict. The politicisation of social welfare and patronage politics had reduced Sunnis' confidence in the government even before the ISIS attacks on their areas.²²

The armed conflicts in Western Iraq during different phases of sectarian war from 2006-2007 and then during the ISIS in 2014-2017 have led to successive waves of displacement, widespread destruction, horrific suffering, and the fraying of the social tapestry.²³ Nearly 6 million persons were displaced between 2014 and 2017.²⁴ IDPs have been left with a wide range of needs such as food, shelter, health support, and obtaining personal IDs. Those who lost their IDs have fewer opportunities to access welfare programmes such as the Public Distribution System (PDS). Difficulty securing livelihood-generating opportunities appeared to be the most challenging issue faced by the IDPs, alongside an absence of political representation.²⁵

After the defeat of ISIS in Mosul in 2017, the efforts to build the cities in the western areas started with the return of many displaced people to their towns. For example, by the end of 2020, 4,851,816 individuals had returned to their places of origin. And by 28 February 2021, over 1.2 million people remained displaced.²⁶ Yet, the returnees suffered from various challenges that were already the focus of the Iraqi government and the international organisations' efforts.

Research conducted by the UNDP shows that participants have been less optimistic about finding jobs in recent years. Ironically, the young Shi'a unemployed has have less hope of finding jobs in comparison to citizens from the Sunni sects or Kurds. According to a World Bank report, "17 percent of Shia adults believed that it is a good time to find a job, while the share is 24 percent among Kurds and 34 percent among Sunnis" even though the Shi'a political parties form the majority of the higher authorities and have led Iraq's governments since 2005 in line with the consociationalism division.

The internal migration from drought-stricken areas to those with more resources has led to competition over scarce resources. The lack of social services and welfare has led to tribal conflicts in rural areas with no intervention from state authorities, as the tribal armed forces sometimes outnumber those of the state.²⁷

The challenges to social cohesion highlighted above have been compounded by the state's failure to maintain law and order. The politicisation of the legal and justice system has affected citizens' trust in the government's rule.²⁸ Consequently, there is a strong tendency to seek informal institutions to achieve justice, such as using tribal law instead of the state.²⁹ The tribal court and its social mechanisms are more effective in resolving conflicts between tribes or communities, contributing to an increase in the tribal role in enhancing social cohesion compared to the state. This is not to say that tribal laws ensure justice for all. While tribal law may resolve community

²² Ansar, S., Celiku, B., Klapper, L. and Mansour, W., 2021, 'Changing Perceptions of Institutions and Standard of Living in Iraq'. World Bank. Available from: <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/547911631555194474>

²³ OCHA, 2022, 'Iraq Humanitarian Needs Overview'. Available from: <https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/iraq-humanitarian-needs-overview-2022-march-2022>

²⁴ IOM Iraq, 2017, 'Strategy to Support Reintegration and Durable Solutions of Displaced Populations', IOM, Available from: <https://crisisresponse.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1481/files/appeal/documents/IOM%20Return%20Strategy.pdf>

²⁵ IOM Iraq, 2020, 'An Overview of Displacement in Iraq'. Available from: https://iraqdtm.iom.int/files/ILA/2021322157136_iom_DTM_ILAV_An_Overview_of_Displacement_in_Iraq.pdf

²⁶ Ibid., p.6.

²⁷ Bobseine, H., 2019, 'Tribal Justice in a Fragile Iraq', The Century Foundation. Available from <https://tcf.org/content/report/tribal-justice-fragile-iraq/>

²⁸ UNDP, 2021, The Impact of COVID on Social Protection in Iraq, UNDP

²⁹ Ibid.

conflicts through financial arrangements, it tends to have a patriarchal view towards women's rights when it comes to gender equality.

The utilisation of violence against protesters in local and nationwide protests has further undermined citizens' trust in the state. The governments of Iraq and state-affiliated armed groups or militias failed to acknowledge the legitimate rights of the Iraqi segments to practice their democratic rights in organising peaceful protests. A loss of trust in government has subsequently reduced turnout in local and national elections.³⁰

3.3. The Lack of Social Welfare and State Legitimacy

Eriksson and Grief have argued that the legitimacy of the Iraqi state has been undermined by ineffective social welfare provision, lack of effective political participation, and the state's inability to impose law and order.³¹ The state's lack of legitimacy can be traced to a range of factors, most important amongst which are the following. First, the government's failure to address the job aspirations of the youth. According to the United Nations Country Analysis (CCA), 55% believe life has deteriorated over the last decade, and only 24% have confidence in their government's ability to address poverty and unemployment. Second, the state's reliance on oil has made the entire social welfare system vulnerable to fluctuations in global oil prices. A decline in oil prices has directly impacted living costs while rising oil prices have not translated into improvements in social welfare or services, creating sentiments of financial insecurity for the public. Third, the state's failure to provide proper services despite the budgetary allocations for the ministries to provide services has angered broad segments of society, leading to continued protests since 2011. This has reduced confidence in the government and created the ground for demonstrations and conflicts.

Fourth, unfair implementation of social protection programmes has reduced public confidence in the state. These programmes suffer from substantial administration costs, which account for up to 86% of the total budget. Targeting errors mean that only 20% of those entitled receive state support.³² Fifth, there is a widespread lack of faith in the political process and in the electoral commission, which is perceived as being under the control of political parties.³³ This loss of legitimacy has provided a key driver for protests and the use of violence.³⁴

4. The Links Between Social Welfare and Conflict: Evidence from the Interviews

The following section outlines the key findings from the interviews. These findings have been structured around three mechanisms linking social welfare and conflict – inequality, social cohesion, and state legitimacy.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Eriksson, J. and Grief, I., 2023. The Iraqi state's legitimacy deficit: Input, output and identity-based legitimacy challenges. *Global Policy*, 14(2), pp.363-372.

³² UN, 2023, Iraq Common Country Analysis, UN. Available from: <https://www.iraq-businessnews.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/UN-Common-Country-Analysis-Iraq-2023.pdf>

³³ Hussein, H. (2023) 'The Iraqi Political System's Legitimacy Problem: Low Expected Turnout for Provincial Elections, The Washington Institute. Available from: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iraqi-political-systems-legitimacy-problem-low-expected-turnout-provincial>

³⁴ Ibid.

4.1. The Impact of Lack of Social Welfare and Employment on Inequality

Iraq's social protection programmes are designed to treat everyone equally under the law. However, the fieldwork shows the following realities about the reveals a different reality regarding their impact of the current social protection on inequality. These programmes provide inadequate assistance and fail to meet citizens' basic needs. Interviewees noted that social protection initiatives such as the Public Distribution System (PDS) and the Social Safety Net (SSN are meant), although intended to provide for support all those in need equally, but they are largely ineffective. The food items distributed through the PDS are limited, and their allocation does not ensure equitable access among recipients. Some beneficiaries of PDS are relatively well-off, while other deprived groups are in more desperate need are left underserved. This contributes to both vertical and horizontal inequality.

Displaced persons who have lost their legal documents in conflict-affected areas, such as those in western parts of Iraq who fled their cities because of sectarian violence or the attack of ISIS, usually lack access to the PDS and other social benefits. This compromises the horizontal equality between communities regarding receiving the PDS based on their legal status.

The Social Security Number (SSN) regulated by the 2014 law does not adequately meet the needs of low-income individuals. This is because most people who rely on SSN benefits do not own their own homes, and a significant portion of their cash assistance goes towards paying for housing rent. One interviewee stated, "Those receiving social assistance cannot afford housing costs or access medical services in private clinics and hospitals. Additionally, they face a high cost of living and increasing prices of food, goods, and services" (FIJ-NGO). As a result, these programmes have a limited impact in reducing vertical inequality.

Clientelism has impacted the distribution of job opportunities. Employment is crucial for reducing wealth inequality and ensuring access to social services. However, there is unequal access to job opportunities. Interviewees revealed that most job opportunities are secured through nepotism or political party affiliation. Those loyal to political elites have a significant advantage. One interviewee stated, "Obtaining jobs and privileges are often tied to political party affiliations" (ABR-NGO). Another interviewee explained, "Political parties usually hire people from their social bases, as they need them for elections. This creates a sense of injustice and inequality for those without these affiliations" (AAR-NGO).

Gender-based discrimination is a significant cause of current inequality. Women, especially those with little education and working in the private sector, face limited job opportunities. There are also disparities in wage rates and benefits for working women compared to men. Women entitled to state financial support, such as widows and divorced, or those who live under the poverty line with no male breadwinners, might find themselves subjected to sexual harassment and blackmail to receive their in-cash transfer. An interviewee explained: "We receive complaints from divorced women facing sexual exploitation and blackmail by some employees in the social care department. We have referred these complaints to the relevant authorities, but often there is secrecy, and complaints are closed for social and reputational reasons". (QMA-BGO).

4.2. The Impact of Lack of Social Welfare on Social Cohesion

The lack of social programmes has impacted the population in various ways, and the unjust and unfair social welfare distribution created feelings of division among citizens. According to the interviewees, the current social protection programmes are unlikely to promote social cohesion.

One interviewee doubted that state social protection has contributed to social cohesion by stating: "There is no clear impact of social protection programmes on social cohesion" (FIJ-NGO). Another interviewee explained, "The inability of social protection programmes to achieve their goals creates a class-based inequality among families and individuals in society, leading to a lack of social cohesion" (NA-NGO).

The lack of service provision weakens the sense of belonging among citizens, leading to sentiments of alienation within their country; according to one interviewee: "The displacement and migration of youth, caused by the weakness of the social protection system and lack of economic opportunities, increases the feeling of disengagement in the country's future growth and leads to growing disparities" (FIJ-NGO). Another interviewee explained, "Youth leave the country due to unsuitable living conditions, often choosing to emigrate abroad or seek asylum for better life conditions. During the October uprising, protesters chanted "We want a homeland" or "Noreed Watan," expressing their desire for a nation that could fulfil their aspirations." (JKA-NGO).

Providing pensions and other social support for political reasons has provoked resentment among young people without jobs or income. An interviewee stated, "Existing laws that grant privileges, such as the Martyrs Foundation Law, contribute to inequality, creating dissatisfaction among the impoverished citizens, even if they are not part of social protection programmes" (IMJ-CoR). The previous regime's political prisoners and the families of martyrs, who may not necessarily be poor, are entitled to generous social support regardless of their economic needs. This support may come from cash transfers, land distribution, or monthly pensions. According to one of the interviewees: "Youth felt disadvantaged because substantial benefits were granted to previous Iraqi refugees while Iraqi citizens were denied their rights to proper social and health insurance" (IMJ-CoR). This situation led to social tension among different social groups and conflict over the state's distribution of its financial resources.

There is a shared sentiment among the local unemployed that foreigners have taken Iraqi job opportunities, especially in the crucial economic sector of oil. One interviewee explained, "All appointments are made by foreign companies that bring in workers from outside Iraq, despite the law requiring at least 50% to be Iraqis. However, corruption in the Thi Qar Oil Company and the South Oil Company in Basra allows companies to manipulate and not enforce the law, thus depriving Iraqi youth of their right to work in their natural oil fields" (AAS).

The clientelistic approach used by political parties, providing incentives such as jobs and services to their followers while marginalising others, has led to the fragmentation of social cohesion in society. An interviewee explained, "Ministers and directors have used specific programmes for electoral purposes by including individuals affiliated with political parties or the dominant political entity in the Social Protection Network". This enables them to benefit from the advantages provided by these programmes. However, such practices can undermine social cohesion, especially when perceived favouritism is involved: "Although social programmes are meant to be delivered on an equal basis, corruption allows those in power to use them in a way that serves their interests" (IMJ-CoR).

The weakness of the state's social protection programme provides space for other institutions such as tribes to step in and play a role. An interviewee explained, "The tribes promote social cohesion more than the state through the solidarity shown by clan support" (ZF-MOLSA). Another interviewee explained that civil society organisations and religious institutions supported needy families, enhancing social solidarity but directed to local and specific communities. As a result, according to the interviewees, "Improving the components of the food basket involves benefiting all citizens, enhancing the electricity supply, providing sufficient quantities of quality drinking

water, alleviating road congestion, creating job opportunities, and simplifying procedures in government departments, which would contribute to state legitimacy and foster a sense of belonging, citizenship, and overall societal cohesion” (HH-PMO). Lack of state provision has also encouraged Shi’a youth to join sectarian militias where they often receive income and a pension. These trends have negative impacts on social cohesion.³⁵

4.3. The Impact of Lack of Social Welfare on State Legitimacy

The unequal and unjust distribution of social services has resulted in dissatisfaction and mistrust among the population. The fieldwork showed that the failure of the state to meet the population's needs has impacted on its legitimacy. The common sentiment among the Iraqi population is that they have the right to the natural resources revenues as constitutionally granted. An interviewee explained, "Citizens perceive securing jobs, employment opportunities, and state financial support as their rights" (ZF-MOLSA). According to the 2005 constitution articles 111 and 112, 1 and 2, "Oil and gas are owned by all the people of Iraq in all the regions and governorates".³⁶ Citizens consider oil their wealth and believe it should be distributed to benefit society, not just the political elite who control power.

The failure of the current programmes in achieving their goals, coupled with the absence of key education and health services, the unavailability of equal job opportunities, and persistent wage disparities all combine to undermine government legitimacy. The state's inability to provide for people experiencing poverty has led traditional institutions to fill the gap. Interviews revealed that tribes offer more support to families than the state. As noted above, this has led more families to rely on social and tribal connections. Religious institutions and CSOs have generally directed support to specific communities.

The state's weakness has strengthened reliance on traditional institutions. An interviewee confirmed that the tribes overpowered the state authority in providing support to the families, weakening the state's legitimacy. An interviewee stated, 'The solidarity shown by the clan support is more than that of the state' (ZF-MOLSA and others). On the other hand, the emergence of tribes and clans as traditional institutions that provide order to the community has replaced the state in creating stability and a sense of order within the communities. The tribal informal law became so powerful that it has replaced the state's laws. Citizens feel "they are accountable to their tribes and other tribes than the state" (HH-OPM). Therefore, Iraqi society has maintained some degree of law and order due to constraints and restrictions set by the tribes. This is not to say that tribal conflict did not occur; in fact, it could be triggered by any causes, such as a clash over the control of natural resources, water, land, social tension, or others, undermining the state's legitimacy.

The state's failure to provide security, law, and order has undermined public safety and eroded the population's trust in its ability to offer protection. This failure is largely due to the close ties between political parties and militias, as well as the widespread proliferation of weapons outside state control. Militias often appear to wield more influence and power than the official security forces or police. The lack of effective law enforcement, combined with the dominance of informal armed groups, has severely undermined the legitimacy of the state. As one interviewee noted, "The informal military forces (militias) appear to have more influence and power than the state's security forces or police" (ABR-NGO). Additionally, tribal conflicts further challenge state authority, particularly when tribes attempt to intervene in order to resolve disputes. The state faces considerable obstacles when trying to mediate or restore order in such situations.

³⁵ UNDP, 2021, The Impact of COVID on Social Protection in Iraq. Available from:

<https://www.undp.org/iraq/publications/impact-covid-19-social-protection-iraq>

³⁶ Government of Iraq, 2005, 'Iraq Constitution'. Available from https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iraq_2005

It is important to note that while protesters have demonstrated against state authorities, they have also directed their protests toward oil companies in an effort to make a more direct impact. Their aim has been to pressure these companies to provide employment opportunities. Many graduates, particularly those from oil-related institutions and colleges, expect to find jobs in the oil sector. As one interviewee from Thi Qar explained: “The protests began with sit-ins and the closure of several government institutions, followed by demonstrations in front of the Thi Qar Oil Company and the blocking of its entrance” (AAS – civil activist).

Another factor that has undermined the state’s legitimacy is its overreliance on oil revenue as a source of income. The state’s failure to create diverse economic opportunities has not only hindered sustainable development but also contributed to high unemployment rates. As a result, many citizens—especially young graduates—resort to protests when they are unable to find work, often targeting government institutions and oil companies. For example, in Thi Qar, demonstrations included sit-ins, the closure of government offices, and blockades of the Thi Qar Oil Company. Furthermore, the state’s use of violence—including the killing and kidnapping of protesters—has severely damaged its legitimacy. The nationwide uprising that erupted in October 2019 marked a turning point, with the killing of at least 600 demonstrators striking at the very core of the state’s legitimacy.

5. Protest and Violence

In Iraq, people employ various strategies to voice their concerns about the lack of social protection and services, often resorting to open protests only after other methods have failed. At the individual level, and according to interviewees, citizens typically begin by filing complaints against service providers when they experience injustice or are denied access to necessary services. If formal complaints are perceived as ineffective, individuals often turn to their social networks to seek redress. As one interviewee explained, in most cases, people rely on mediation and leverage political or administrative connections to process transactions and secure their rights (AAS – Civil Activist). Some express their grievances through traditional or social media platforms to bring attention to their needs. Others seek support from civil society organisations, particularly in the period following the October Revolution.

Additionally, some individuals use their political affiliations to gain access to services and benefits, often by aligning themselves with powerful political groups. However, relying on such networks can leave them vulnerable to exploitation. Another interviewee noted that citizens may be pressured to trade electoral votes in exchange for access to social protection services, particularly by those in positions of decision-making power (ABR – NGO).

Collectively, citizens in Iraq use various civil and political means to express their frustration and demands. Shared grievances often bring people together, leading them to organise and participate in sit-ins and protests. However, these actions are not without risk, as demonstrators frequently face violence from both state and non-state actors. One activist interviewed for this paper explained: “Because there is no other way for us except to take to the streets and protest... there is no alternative means, since there is no government department or institution where we can file complaints against the government” (AAS – Civil Activist).

Iraq has witnessed four major waves of mass protest: in 2011, 2015, 2018, and during the October Uprising of 2019–2020. The 2011 protests were triggered by public outrage over reduced food rations, shortages of water and electricity, and rising unemployment. The 2015 demonstrations began in Basra in response to electricity shortages and quickly spread to other parts of southern and central Iraq, evolving into protests over unemployment, corruption, and the dysfunction of

state institutions. In 2018, widespread protests were fuelled by unemployment and a public health crisis in the Basra district of Abu al-Khasib, where water contamination caused over 90,000 cases of diarrhea and stomach illness.

The 2019–2020 October Uprising encapsulated all these demands, beginning with calls for improved social services and job opportunities and eventually escalating to demands for comprehensive political reform and regime change.

The protests were widespread in scope, often beginning with a small number of participants and growing significantly—mainly in response to the use of violence. The level of participation was notable: in 2011, the protests began with around 10,000 participants over several months and eventually grew to over one million. Two of the four major protest movements began in Basra, Iraq's main oil-producing city, which has long suffered from poor social services and high unemployment. Thousands took part in the 2015 and 2018 demonstrations, while the 2019 uprising drew hundreds of thousands of participants.

Violence was a daily feature of all these protest waves. State police were responsible for making arrests, while militias often carried out targeted assassinations. The government's crackdown—including the use of force, internet shutdowns, and curfews—transformed initially peaceful protests into scattered and violent rioting, particularly in the outskirts of Baghdad and southern regions.

The protests were not limited to specific sectors, local areas, or factions but were widespread against the entire political system. They were organised by young Shi'a citizens aged between 20 and 30 protesting against a Shi'a-led state. The protesters rejected identity politics in favour of socioeconomic and political rights.

The slogans and chants evolved over the years, from "Reform the system" in 2011³⁷ to denouncing the use of religion to cover political corruption in 2015. In 2018, the protesters called for a civil state instead of a religious one, and in the October uprising of 2019, they chanted for regime change, "We want a homeland - *Noreed Watan*." This transformation demonstrates a shift from demands for tangible social welfare, social services, and jobs to targeting the whole political system.

The protests were spontaneous and leaderless, described by many as "neither organised nor expected." Social media influencers played a central role in mobilising participation, setting the time and location of demonstrations, and collectively shaping the demands through online discussions. The choice of protest sites was guided by their political and economic significance. Demonstrators targeted key economic centres, government institutions, political party headquarters, highways, border crossings, and oil fields.

Tactics included blocking roads and ports, shutting down border crossings—particularly with Iran in southern Iraq—and in some cases, setting fire to Iranian consulates, as was notably common in Basra. These actions underscored the protesters' frustration with both domestic governance and perceived foreign interference.

These protests lasted for months. For example, the 2011 protest lasted for one year, the 2015 protest lasted for five months, the 2018 protest lasted for four months, and the 2019 uprising

³⁷ Al-Shamary, H., 2020, 'Protestors and Civil Society Actors in Iraq'

lasted for five months, from October 2019 to February 2020, until the announcement of the lockdown following the spread of COVID-19.

Different groups hold protests or gatherings in main squares or the nearest public place accessible to everyone. A civil activist explained: "Violence accompanied the protests from the first day, despite our repeated announcements and slogans for peaceful protest. The government and the security forces are responsible for protecting the protesters and bear responsibility for these outcomes. They failed to maintain the peacefulness of the protests and contributed to the use of violence. The violence was a natural reaction from the protesters to defend themselves" (MJA-SM).

Security forces, riot police, and armed factions loyal to the authorities opened fire on protesters in an attempt to disperse gatherings and suppress the demonstrations. In response, angry and frustrated protesters targeted political party offices and government buildings. As one interviewee explained: "The protesters burned the headquarters of some political parties and movements, which were considered personal property, and disrupted the work of provincial authorities, departments, and institutions. These acts of violence resulted in casualties on both sides, further widening the gap between the government and the people. This ultimately led to a loss of governmental legitimacy, the collapse of the government, and a change in the political process at that time" (AAR – NGO). Another interviewee added: "Youth and citizens recognised that rights are not granted—they must be claimed. People became increasingly aware of the need to pressure the government to secure their legal rights, especially as they witnessed the widespread corruption affecting state institutions" (NA – NGO).

Engaging in protest placed the lives of protesters and social media users at significant risk. One activist explained: "Our message spread through social media and various media outlets. However, the fear of being targeted and assassinated prevented us from using these channels" (MJA – Social Media Activist). The interviewee further noted: "Protesters used various methods—media, social media, protests, and sit-ins—to escalate their actions. Initially, the government responded with repression, violence, arrests, internet shutdowns, social media blackouts, media censorship, the dispersal of protests, and the blockade of access to protest areas across different provinces". The government was widely accused of initiating violence against the protesters. As the same interviewee explained: "The protests shifted from peaceful demonstrations to violent confrontations due to the government's use of force, which tragically resulted in the loss of lives" (MJA – SM).

6. Social Welfare and Conflict: Concluding Remarks from the Interviews

Recent Iraqi governments have employed a "carrot and stick" approach in responding to citizens' demands for better socioeconomic conditions. Existing research and fieldwork for this paper indicate that, alongside the use of violence, the government also took steps to address popular demands, particularly those of the youth. As one interviewee noted, "Today, we see many decisions issued by the current government and the previous one in response to protesters' demands, which the government adopted" (AAS). Another interviewee highlighted some of the changes resulting from the protests, especially regarding political reforms: "The outcome was a change in the government, a revision of the electoral system, and the conduct of elections that allowed independent youth representatives to gain seats in the Iraqi Parliament" (AAR – NGO).

In addition, the government amended the labour law to provide better social protections for workers and improved public services through reconstruction campaigns, including building

schools, hospitals, roads, and other infrastructure projects. These efforts contributed to reducing social inequality, strengthening respect for the rule of law, and significantly decreasing violence (AAR – NGO).

Following the October uprising, the government issued a 'White Reform Paper' outlining its commitment to addressing various issues. These included creating job opportunities for the youth, improving service delivery, particularly in the electricity sector, and diversifying the Iraqi economy (AAR-NGO). As part of these efforts, the government has initiated measures to transition individuals on temporary contracts to permanent positions in the public sector. One million citizens have also been enrolled in the Social Protection Network (QMA-BGO).

However, some interviewees believe these measures have not effectively tackled unemployment or generated new job prospects. They argue that the government's focus on social protection initiatives has resulted in hidden unemployment and increased operational costs (IMJ-CoR). On a positive note, the government has pledged to streamline procedures and adjust salary caps as part of its programme (QMA-BGO).

Electronic platforms have been set up to receive citizen complaints and suggestions. Additionally, an online portal for services has been established to simplify administrative procedures. These initiatives address various issues, including obtaining national ID cards, passports, market permits, job applications, social care network registration, and medical committee referrals (QMA-BGO).

Despite the government's efforts, there is still widespread belief in its illegitimacy. This was evident in the low voter turnout in the elections of 2022 and subsequent city council elections in 2023. The fact that the government responded to their demands with force and insincere promises further complicates the situation (JKA-NGO), contributing to maintaining a fragile and unsatisfactory situation, especially for the youth. Thus, there is a risk of new protests in the future (JKA-NGO). One of the interviewees explained that: "Administratively, the governments formed after the Tashreen uprising worked on opening the door for appointments and including a more significant number of citizens in the social protection system. Unfortunately, only 10% of the youth's demands have been met" (JKA-NGO). Another interviewee complained that "Today, four years after the October revolution, the identity of those responsible for the assassinations of activists remains unknown, and despite the government's promises, those who killed the protesters have not been publicly tried" (ASS- civil activist).

The concluding remarks from the interviewees raised the question of how many measures the government needs to take to fulfil the needs of the youth and other segments of society to prevent violence. A report published by the ACF in 2023 shows that "people with disabilities and the elderly, those who live in remote and rural areas, IDPs, families lacking official documents and refugees, female-headed households, with women reportedly facing difficulties and barriers such as harassment and stigma, and also orphans were noted as groups facing more barriers due to a lack of necessary documents".³⁸ The lack of social security for female workers may disproportionately affect the participation and representation of women, which could exacerbate gender inequality.³⁹ Despite these measures, new protests are taking place in many parts of Iraq, and violence is being used. This leads to the conclusion that a greater effort to address socio-economic needs is needed to prevent conflict.

³⁸ ACF, 2023, 'Accessing Social Protection in Iraq: Mapping of Programs and Analysis of Barriers (April 2023)', ACF, p.29. Available from: <https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/accessing-social-protection-iraq-mapping-programs-and-analysis-barriers-april-2023>

³⁹ Ibid.

The research shows that citizens lack trust in government. The former sees the political elite as corrupt and focused on their interests. Even if elites provide services or job opportunities, this is perceived as being motivated by their own interests rather than an effort to meet the population's needs. As a result, there is no vertical social cohesion between the state and society. Different population segments use different methods to make their claims for their rights. However, the limited state response leads some of them to turn to protest or violence.

7. Conclusion

The research shows that there is a clear connection between the lack of social services, social welfare and societal conflict. Lack of social welfare within the same community has led to growing inequality within certain communities. In Iraq, these inequalities have particularly affected the population in the Shi'a-dominated central and southern regions. The persistence of vertical inequality despite continued citizen demands have had a direct impact on these citizens' declining confidence in the state. The lack of welfare has also reduced social cohesion. Some segments of the population have identified their fellow citizen as competitors with them preventing them from securing better living opportunities, but lack of social welfare has also widened the gap between citizens and the state the latter is seen as a corrupt body that controls the country's wealth and distributes it unfairly. The lack of trust and legitimacy has led different segments of the society to engage in protests that reached in some cases to uprising. These protests were faced with the use of violence by the state and semi-state organisations. However, this did not deter the protesters from claiming their demands; it provoked counter-violence, with many casualties on both sides.

To deal with the protests, seek a sense of stability, and appease the conflict, successive governments of Iraq have used a carrot-and-stick approach. First, by ignoring these demands for a long period of time, then by using violence to suppress protests and creating instability for the whole country in the hope that it would end the protest. If this second step proved ineffective, governments would start to engage in long negotiations with protesters, which would normally start with the promise of providing jobs and services. These negotiations have normally been protracted, lasting for months or sometimes a year.

Increased public sector recruitment creates tensions with international organisations who have pushed for the Iraqi state to reduce spending in this area. In a context where the private sector remains weak and continues to be undermined by a lack of state support, regulation, and basic law and order, the most important path for Iraq to address these conflicts remains becoming more responsive to the population's need for better social protection and services.

Annex 1: A List of Interviews

Seq	Initial	Setting	Institution	Position
1	RFH	In-Person Interview	Governmental (GO)	External Relations - Ministry of Trade.
2	AAR	In Person Interview	NGO	Al Monqith Association for Human Rights
3	HH	In-Person Interview	GO	Advisors Bureau - Office of the Prime Minister
4	QMO	In Person Interview	GO	Public Affairs Department Baghdad Governor Office
5	RJB	In Person Interview	GO	Training and Vocational Employment Department Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs
6	MJA	Online Interview	Social movement	a member of the October Demonstrations – the Central Coordination for Demonstrations - Thi Qar Province.
7	FIJ	In Person Interview	GO and NGO	Public Relations Department, Social Protection Authority - Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs Economist and Member of the Media Centre for Civil Society Organisation in Iraq.
8	IMJ	In Person Interview	GO	the Secretary of the Labour and Social Affairs Committee, Iraqi Council of Representatives
9	NAA	In Person Interview	NGO	Media Centre for Civil Society Organisation s.
10	ZF	In-Person Interview	GO	Department of Studies and International Relations - Directorate of Training and Vocational Employment, Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs
11	AA	In-Person Interview	NGO	Omnyat Watan Organisation - Baghdad
12	JKA	In-Person Interview	NGO	President of Saqar Relief and Development Society for Human Rights
13	NAA	In Person Interview	NGO	Afaq Organisation for Women and Child Rights