



The 'Youth Bulge' and Political Unrest in Iraq: A Political Economy Approach

Asha Amirali

Institute of Development Studies

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Question

What is the relationship between the 'youth bulge' and political unrest in Iraq?

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1. Summary

This report reviews existing research on the relationship between the ‘youth bulge’ and political unrest in order to understand when and why young Iraqis resort to violence or disruption. There is some disagreement in the literature about whether youth bulges can be said to *cause* political violence and disruption or not. Some studies posit a simple causal relationship. Others argue – more convincingly – that neither demographic nor economic factors alone are enough to incite violence. The latter perspective maintains that the effects of protracted conflict and the specific nature of the country’s political economy significantly shape young people’s strategies for subsistence and social status.

In Iraq, widespread youth unemployment combines with high levels of political exclusion, sectarian politics, militarization, perceptions of injustice, frustrated aspirations, war-related trauma, and the rapid breakdown and transformation of traditional institutions such as family and tribe. Together, these factors (and others not covered in this review) produce violence in specific moments. A systematic study of how Iraq’s youth ‘bulge’ affects the country’s political dynamics is warranted.

There is little academic work on youth behaviour in Iraq but development organizations have conducted relevant small-scale studies in recent years. While these studies are locality and time-specific, they are an important source of information for this report. The academic literature is mined for cross-national analysis as well as comparative cases. The cross-national analyses are quantitative and their findings should be treated with the caution appropriate to all studies that do not account closely for contextual variation and those things which cannot be put in numbers.

2. Understanding the focus on youth and the ‘youth bulge’

What is the ‘youth bulge’?

The ‘youth bulge’ refers to the numerical dominance of young men aged 15-29¹ relative to other age groups in a society. The term gained prominence in the 1990’s as individuals working within the US security establishment sought to explain political instability in the Arab world and recruitment to international terrorist networks (Urdal 2006: 608). These origins continue to be reflected in how the term is used today as much of the literature on the youth bulge appears driven by an interest in security, the maintenance of political order, and economic growth.

Sukarieh and Tannock (2019: 856) maintain that within academic and policy circles the concept is used as a ‘politically acceptable euphemism for talking about the problem of expanding surplus populations in the post-welfare era’. In other words, **the concern seems to be less with full and equal inclusion** and more about what to do about a large, restive population that is ‘structurally irrelevant to capital accumulation’ and threatens the prevailing national and/or global political order. Similar concerns are expressed elsewhere (eg: PAI 2007), namely that it is often easier to think that youth ‘cause’ unrest and violence rather than accept that deep political and economic problems are eliciting desperate responses.

¹ Age boundaries for the category of ‘youth’ are not consistent across the literature. Some include 15-24 year olds, other 15-29 year olds. And while the word youth in theory includes females, the literature on the youth bulge almost exclusively considers young men.

The limitations of ‘youth’

It is important also to observe that there are limitations to the term ‘youth’², especially in a context such as Iraq. Given that an estimated 60 percent of the country’s population is under 25 years of age, it is not clear how policies and programmes could specifically target a separate ‘youth’ population. **‘Youth’ may be too broad a category to inflect much meaning for policy purposes** and may misinform policy development by collapsing crucial identity markers and relative positionalities into sameness. For example, gender, religion, tribal affiliation, class position, and other identities strongly impact young Iraqis’ social, political, and economic options – not explicitly building these into youth policy development will seriously undermine the efficacy of development interventions.

Most of the quantitative academic literature reviewed did not seem sufficiently alive to these differences; by contrast, recent field-based research by development organizations and qualitative academic studies are more so.

3. Youth in Iraq: a snapshot

Iraq has one of the youngest populations in the world, with seven million people aged 14-29. Nearly 60 percent are below 25 years of age, and the youth population is projected to increase from seven to ten million between 2015 and 2030³. Two broad factors strongly shape young Iraqis’ lives today: i) the multi-dimensional impact of war and ii) the nature of Iraq’s oil economy.

War

The country has been in a state of war since 1980. The current generation of young people has grown up in a society still reeling from the effects of some of the toughest international sanctions ever imposed (1991-2003) and an extensive war on Iraqi soil that began in 2003 with the US-led invasion. The effects of protracted war on young people have been severe.

The literature reviewed for this report unanimously agrees that the **basic needs of large numbers of young people are going unmet**. The fighting has destroyed at least 8,850 educational facilities across Iraq, Syria, and Yemen in recent years; in 2018, 50% of Iraqi children were out of school (WB 2018: 2). As expected, literacy levels are low: 33 percent of youth between the ages of 15 and 29 are illiterate or only semi-literate, 33 percent have completed primary school, 28 percent have finished middle or high school, and only seven percent have completed post-secondary education.

Protracted war has also led to the proliferation of **militarized sectarianism**. The recent battle between Islamic State (IS) on the one hand, and the Iraqi state and US forces on the other has involved armed young men on a large scale. The state itself has actively recruited unemployed young boys and men from internally displaced persons (IDP) camps to join Iraqi government-

² A point argued widely in the sociology of childhood and youth literature. See James and Prout (1997).

³ Population growth is expected to begin slowing down in the coming decades but remain positive: by 2050, 14 of the 20 countries in the MENA region are expected to have fertility rates below replacement levels of 2.1. However, the projected fertility rates for Iraq and Sudan are the highest at 3.0 children per woman (UNICEF 2019:19).

backed militias. 'We are fighting alongside the ISF [Iraqi Security Forces], and our salaries are paid by Baghdad [US 375 a month], we are basically part of the Iraqi military' said a 20 year-old recruit in an IDP camp near Mosul (Human Rights Watch 2016). Some observers think the extensive experience with sectarianism, both militant and less overtly violent, will shape the future in its own image:

'The millennial generation has an amorphous identity: depending on the context and who seeks to mobilise them, ethnic, sectarian, tribal, locally geographic or other sub-national identity will emerge as the avenue through which members see and challenge the establishment. Iraqi youth were the most vulnerable to deepening sectarian polarisation after the Syrian uprising, and this pitted young against young along sectarian lines even as they all shared an anti-establishment animus' (ICG 2016:12).

Others are more hopeful about the future, including the prominent Iraqi sociologist Faleh Jabar (2018), who thinks that Iraqi youth are ready to embrace a more inclusive, national politics. It is certainly the case that the post-Saddam generation has not been exposed to programmatic politics or inclusive 20th century ideologies such as pan-Arabism; however Jabar believes that youth – young men and women both – are beginning to *reject* identity-based politics in favour of issue-based mobilization. Through a survey of participants in the street protests of 2015, most of whom were under the age of 30, he concludes that **this generation seeks reform rather than regime change**. Not swapping one faction or sect for another, but rather an end to corruption, more jobs, and a better distribution of Iraq's wealth.

The 2015 protests Jabar and his colleagues studied can be seen as precursors to the protests that have since continued to rock Iraqi cities. In October 2019, young Baghdadis on the streets were also emphasizing that their fight was not sectarian, chanting 'Secular, secular, not Sunni, not Shia' (Al-Fanar 2019) although the protests have become more charged and Jabar's reading of what protestors want is contested: 'what we see today is an explosion of raw anger rather than a focused protest with specific demands. Overhaul rather than reform is what those on the streets are pushing for' (Haddad 2019).

However, Haddad (2017) too sees stirrings of **a new Iraqi nationalism** and thinks that it is a consequence of legitimacy gained by the extremely difficult and ultimately successful war against IS. The efforts of the non-state armed Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) volunteers in particular are thought to have been much appreciated by people. Such unifying sentiments have not been present in Iraq since the Iran-Iraq war of 1980 and he thinks this is an opportunity for positive change: 'The resurgent Iraqi nationalism felt across Arab Iraq, the goodwill generated by the fight against IS, the cooperation it engendered and the related decline in sect-centric politics provide Iraq with a window of opportunity. It is an undoubtedly time-limited window but with enough political will, it may help Iraq move beyond the politics of perpetual crisis that have pervaded Iraq since 2003' (ibid: 3).

Finally, **the effects of living through war on young people's psychosocial development are immense** and flagged by organizations working closely with them as determining for Iraq's future (Oxfam 2017; Save the Children 2017, 2018). A significant number of young people now have direct experience of the 2003 US-led offensive, the sectarian fighting plaguing the country, IS occupation, and the fight against IS. They carry significant trauma as a result. Save the Children reports that 'children experience intense sorrow and extreme sadness with nearly 43 per cent of children reporting feeling grief always or a lot of the time. Caregivers reported their children as having very high emotional and behavioural difficulties...[and] also reflected that 66 per cent of

their children displayed grief most of the time' (Save the Children 2018:8). Oxfam (2017) too reports serious mental health issues amongst the youth population of Mosul and it can be expected that young people in other areas similarly affected by fighting would be the same.

Oil

The post-Saddam period has coincided with an **exceptional oil 'windfall' that has significantly shaped young people's expectations as well as their possibilities** for realizing themselves as adults, providers, and respected members of society.

'Iraq's young people do not remember life under Saddam Hussein, only the period under elected Iraqi governments flush with oil wealth' (Patel 2018:2). Oil prices have remained significantly higher than pre-2003 levels for most of this period, touching \$100 per barrel in September 2007 and hovering around this point until dropping in mid-2014 to \$50 (ibid: 4). Approximately 90-94% of Iraqi state revenues come from the sale of oil and the country strongly manifests symptoms of the 'resource curse' such as high levels of corruption, the use of state revenues to 'buy' governmental legitimacy, and an overwhelming reliance on the public sector for employment.

It is widely acknowledged that the post-2003 regime was not – and is not – based on a national consensus. Lacking popular legitimacy, those in control of the state have distributed oil wealth through dense patronage networks to shore up support. One of the most valued 'handouts' has been employment and the numbers are dramatic: public sector employment in Iraq tripled from 2003 to 2015, going from about 1 million to just over 3 million (or approximately 22% of all jobs in 2003 to 42% of all jobs in 2015). The percentage of total government expenditures devoted to wages rose from 7% in 2004 to almost 40% by 2015. In 2013, the Iraqi government employed 6 million people, or 71% of the labor force (ibid). The cessation of hiring since 2016 means that these numbers are not likely to be much different today; yet, such a rapid and sustained rise in public sector employment and the scarcity of jobs in the private sector has meant that young people expect employment from the state. The hiring freeze, imposed as part of a deal with the IMF as Iraq tries to rebuild after the wars, is understandably not a popular measure with young people.

Oil has also allowed Iraqi elites to maintain a high degree of autonomy from society. This is problematic to the extent that it renders the state unaccountable and unresponsive to social groups and classes. 'Fiscal contract' theorists argue that there are beneficial political effects of 'co-producing' national wealth with social groups as well as taxing them (eg: Moore 2015, Ross 2013). This is because the arduous process of tax collection increases state capacity and because taxation can lead to taxed groups and classes politically engaging the state, making it 'listen' as well as be more accountable. The literature reviewed on Iraq is in agreement – implicitly or explicitly - that oil has allowed elite factions significant autonomy from their social bases and that this has had deleterious effects on politics, political institutions, and the economy.

4. Youth unemployment and political violence

At 36 percent, Iraq's youth unemployment is very high and 'could reach crisis proportions' if not urgently addressed (WB 2018:1). By 2030, the number of Iraqis (not just youth) in need of new jobs is projected to range between five and seven million, which represents an increase of 100 to 180 percent over the next 11 years.

This rapid review has not found any studies examining the link between youth unemployment in Iraq and political unrest/violence. However, there are some fairly obvious reasons for thinking there may be some direct causation: unemployment is one of the most frequently cited reasons for young people's involvement in the protests of recent years⁴ and young men joining militias have often done so to provide for their families, feel 'empowered', and gain respect from the community.

Save the Children's interviews with young people who lived under IS occupation in Mosul reveal that 'while the youth within this study now universally reject ISIS, they have not rejected all non-state armed actors. Many feel that having an affiliation with other militia groups is either necessary or beneficial - a way to provide for their families, protect their communities, and gain status within society. This is highly problematic not only from a child and youth protection standpoint, but from an overall societal one as well' (2017:25). The International Crisis Group writes that 'the [militias] also gave youths unprecedented symbolic and material power to play a dominant role in their direct environment and a social ladder that bypassed the patriarchal family, tribal groups and patronage networks of Iraqi society' (2016:17)

It is therefore reasonable to assume, and has also been demonstrated by literature from elsewhere⁵, that **the choice to join an armed group is made in lieu of other strategies for subsistence, control, and social respect that are less easily available – if at all – to young men** in particular moments.

Studies from other countries show a clear association between large populations of young men, unemployment and violence (both armed insurrection and more common instances of rioting). The quantitative literature offers much more simplistic causal analysis in comparison to qualitative work but there is some agreement that the propensity to violence is higher under conditions of an authoritarian regime, political exclusion, and high levels of actual and relative material deprivation.

Henrik Urdal is one of the most cited political demographers working on the issue. In a well-known paper (2004) he notes that while youth bulges⁶ are strongly associated with increased levels of domestic armed conflict, the reasons for this are not easily generalizable, cannot be assumed, and must be empirically investigated. However, **the combination of youth bulges and widespread unemployment clearly increases the likelihood of violence**, particularly when young people cannot easily migrate away from their societies in search of a better life as they did in 19th century Europe. Migration was a 'safety valve' but one that is no longer available to young people from developing societies.

Similarly, using cross-country panel data from 169 countries, Apolte and Gerlin (2015) have investigated the link between armed insurrection and large youth cohorts. They find that it is not the demographic structure or the relative size of the youth cohort as such but rather the reality of large youth populations facing significant unemployment that coincides with insurrection.

⁴ See for example reporting of the 2015-2019 protests by Al-Jazeera, the Guardian, and Al-Fanar.

⁵ See for example Enria (2018) on unemployment and youth violence in post-conflict Sierra Leone and Rezyk (2016) on Egypt.

⁶ Defined as youth cohorts of 15–24 year-olds relative to the total adult population (15 years and above)

Box 1: The 'unlimited supply of labour'

The problem of ensuring employability is particularly pronounced for countries with large, young, but poorly-educated populations today. Surprisingly, this has not received much attention in recent years despite Arthur Lewis (1954) famously identifying the problem of the 'unlimited supply of labour' in developing countries. He argued that as long as excess labour existed, wages would remain low and poverty would persist. Driven as it was by profit-seeking, the private sector could not be expected to invest at the scale necessary to increase labour productivity and create new jobs in manufacturing. Government would have to support industrialisation programmes and create jobs to absorb large numbers of workers. In the model, this would eventually push wages up, eliminate poverty, and create a new and improved developmental equilibrium.

While statistical analysis may be useful in establishing broad trends, a great deal of criticism has been levelled against how these studies have causally linked violence with unemployment (see Oosterom 2018 for a comprehensive review of this literature). Violent conflict cannot be reduced to the single factor of un/underemployment or access to economic opportunities these scholars argue. Instead, **high unemployment only tips over into unrest and violence when combined with other social and political factors**. For example, Rezyk (2016) studies the political-economic factors that contributed to the uprisings in Egypt in 2011 and 2013. She argues that it was not the extremely high and increasing rates of unemployment amongst Egyptian youth or increasing poverty on its own but rather people's perceptions of the political handling of the situation that drove them to revolt. Similarly, drawing on empirical data about young people in Sierra Leone's capital, Freetown, in the wake of its civil war, Enria (2018) argues that violence is not inherent to unemployment and 'the impact of joblessness on political activism is mediated by social factors and the specific nature of the post-war political economy. For Freetown's youth, labour market exclusion is seen to have implications for social status, identities and social relations...[t]his in turn shapes their political subjectivities and claims on the state, and structures the opportunities and constraints to their collective action'.

The recent wave of protests and rioting in Iraqi cities is still too fresh to provide answers to big questions. What do young people want? Is it jobs and improved social welfare or is it a new more inclusive political order? To what extent is violence a preferred strategy for articulating and achieving their goals? What other strategies are available to them? Most analyses of the recent protests concur that the turn from protest to rioting has been a direct consequence of the 'heavy-handedness' of the state (Haddad 2019, Abdul-Ahad 2019) but there is not yet enough systematic evidence on how youth anger and aspirations are taking shape.

5. Education and political violence

Both access to education and the quality of education in Iraq are very poor. Relative to other Middle East and North African (MENA) countries, Iraqi students spend less time in the classroom (WB 2017: 79) and the World Bank estimates that half of the youth population is not in school (WB 2018: 2). In such a situation, education clearly needs to be a government and donor priority. However, in the wake of an increasing concern with terrorism and global security, some scholars have problematized the link between youth violence and education.

A large body of quantitative academic work explores the relationship between higher education and political violence. The conclusions are mixed. Some find increased levels of violence and political instability accompanying rapid expansions in higher (and in some cases, even secondary) education in youthful societies. Others find no connection between educational expansion and political violence. Both 'camps' are aware of the methodological problems bedeviling longitudinal, cross-national analysis and agree that these problems significantly affect the quality of the explanations generated. For example, Ostby et. al. (2019) note that **their conclusions do not explain the important question of why and how education influences peace and conflict, and the implications for policy are therefore limited**⁷.

Their systematic review of 42 quantitative studies (the majority of which were conducted after 2005) on education and political violence finds that **'education has an overall pacifying effect on conflict'** and that 'rapid expansion in tertiary education does not generally seem to be causing destabilization and violence' (Ostby et.al. 2019: 80). The authors note that this general conclusion is challenged by the fact that terrorists and genocide perpetrators have above-average levels of education; however they argue that 'there is little empirical support for concerns that governments should be cautious about expanding access to education rapidly'.

By contrast, Weber (2019) analyses data from 183 countries over a 20-year period (1996-2015) and concludes that 'youth bulges tend to become a threat to stability when coinciding with expansions in post-primary education among young people' (104). He believes that **expanding post-primary education in countries characterized by high fertility rates and low levels of education such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and Yemen will increase political instability**⁸ because newly-educated youth cohorts will have increased expectations that are likely to go unmet.

Qualitative studies focus attention on the specific political economic contexts within which youth violence occurs and find that **education might be positively linked with violence when combined with high youth unemployment, perceptions of injustice and political exclusion, and frustrated aspirations.** For example, Alfy (2016) seeks to explain the spike in youth-led political violence in Egypt after January 2011 and finds that in Egypt, large numbers of young university graduates were frustrated by the lack of job opportunities and their inability to influence the political process and the ruling elite. This frustration assumed the form of a "generational clash, exemplified in a statement issued by the White Knights football fan club, which noted that the clashes with security were an expression of 'the battle of an entire generation that only asked for a normal life, only asked that it be the master of its own affairs, as they know their affairs best". Similarly, Rezyk's study cited in the previous section also concluded that a number of factors contributed to 'tipping' youth mobilization into violence.

⁷ Specifically, 'if poorly educated, unemployed individuals are recruited into violent conflict due to low opportunity costs, then policymakers would be wise to maximize attainment across the population. If, however, individuals mobilize for violence due to grievances over the unequal distribution of education, then policymakers must pay careful attention to ensuring that marginalized groups are granted improved access to education' (Ostby et. al. 2019: 80).

⁸ The author is quick to caveat this hypothesis with the following: 'We are not suggesting postponing or halting progress in these domains: On the contrary, there are many good reasons to expand education and encourage lower birth rates which can be crucial for peace and prosperity in the long run. However, during a transitional phase that usually follows the onset of fertility decline, educational expansion in the presence of large youth bulges can be an explosive combination' (pp.105)

Finally, the idea that **better-educated individuals have higher expectations and are sensitive to perceptions of status** emerges from Campante and Chor (2011, 2012). They find that while better-educated individuals are more likely to engage in political acts such as demonstrations, boycotts, and strikes, this link between education and political protest is stronger among those individuals whose income-returns to their educational qualifications are lowest. Morocco, Iraq, Jordan, Egypt, and Algeria are among the lowest-ranked countries when compared with the rest of the world on this account, i.e. similarly educated individuals in these countries are earning significantly less than their equivalently-educated counterparts in other countries. In other words, they find that relative deprivation and perceptions of injustice are heightened amongst those with higher educational qualifications, leading to increased political violence.

6. Policy implications

Creating Jobs

The state of the literature on youth unemployment in developing societies and how to address it is now fairly advanced. A large amount of funding has been channelled to creating jobs in recent years – most of it has been highly unsuccessful (see Oosterom 2018). **Youth employment programs that do not build existing political factors and on-going conflicts into their design will fail, and at worst, may even exacerbate the local dynamics that sustain conflict.** The problem as identified by this body of scholarship is that ‘all too often... the ‘peace dividend’ is assumed to be a ‘spill-over effect’. Theories of change do not articulate pathways that link the different activities to actual impact on peace and stability and pay little attention to other youth grievances, such as corruption inequalities in economic opportunities and experiences of substantive citizenship’ (ibid:12).

The World Bank’s recent primer on job creation in Iraq, while well-intentioned, does not contain the attention to political detail that Oosterom and others think is necessary to produce a successful intervention. It does however display a degree of openness to move away from ‘best practice’ in light of specific contextual needs. Labelling its policy prescriptions as an ‘unconventional approach’ to tackling the problem of youth unemployment in Iraq, the Bank notes that:

- there is an urgent need to create large numbers of jobs in a very short amount of time
- typical private sector-enhancing reforms are not likely to be successful in the current Iraqi context. Government must therefore be allotted a bigger role in economic rejuvenation than is customary for the Bank
- the legitimacy of the Iraqi state depends on meeting people’s expectations of a ‘peace dividend’ – scale and speed of job creation is therefore a central criteria by which the Iraqi government will be judged

The International Crisis Group (2016) also highlights the need to urgently expand public works and recommends that:

- Sunni youth groups in areas retaken from IS be engaged in reconstruction
- the volunteer combat groups set up in 2014 (*hashd al-shaabi* or the PMF) be converted into a civilian mobilisation directed to rebuilding communities within the framework of local administration

- the strategy of relying on militias and non-state military recruitment be immediately abandoned. It will be a challenge to add more people to the state payroll, but a fund needs to be built for this purpose and donor agencies must work with the state to this end

It is beyond the scope of this review to identify what might support effective job creation in Iraq. However, this is an important and urgent task. See Oosterom 2018 for a recent comprehensive analysis of factors affecting employment policy performance in fragile and conflicted affected states.

Political Inclusion

The approach advocated by Oosterom and others towards job creation, i.e. that it be sensitive to the political dynamics of the locality and include young people in design and implementation, is mirrored by those who have done fieldwork with Iraqi children. Reflecting on how peace can be re-established in regions recovering from long and protracted conflict, Save the Children stresses the inclusion of young people not as passive recipients of social welfare, jobs, or education programmes, but as active participants in the design of policies delivering these goods and reallocating resources: ‘indeed it is imperative that this process is also driven by community dialogue. Thus, **any programs or processes need to be designed to enable youth to access information, participate in political processes and be able to express their concerns and desires in a safe manner**’ (2017:26).

Softening Divides

An example of **how positive social relationships and solidarity can be built up across religious divides** is found in an innovative field experiment conducted by a Stanford researcher in 2017 in the predominantly Christian city of Erbil, Iraq⁹. The researcher organized a football league in which she randomly selected 14 Christian teams to participate on the condition that they would be assigned four extra players each which may or may not be Muslim. She found that Christians randomly assigned to football teams with Muslim players were more likely to attend a mixed social event, even more likely to continue training with Muslims four months after the experiment had been initiated, and more likely to believe in the possibility of peaceful coexistence.

Sport, recreation, and rebuilding shared public spaces were also proposed by youth themselves as measures to build peace and have fun together. Save the Children (2017:25) notes that ‘the following facilities were proposed by youth in interviews: football pitch, sports centre or gym, youth centre, swimming pool, park, bazaar, and craft workshop. An identical finding was made in a recent multisectoral needs assessment of Salah al-Din and Anbar governorates. Data from those governorates as well as Qayyarah subdistrict confirm that during ISIS occupation, residents lost access to social spaces such as parks, recreational centres and their related social activities, thus reducing opportunity for interaction and dialogue’.

⁹ Mousa, Salma, 2018, Overcoming the Trust Deficit: Intergroup Contact and Associational Life in post-ISIS Iraq. Accessed on October 27th at http://aalims.org/uploads/Mousa_Overcoming-the-trust-deficit_Aalims2018.pdf

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