

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

YOUTH IN IRAQ

FES MENA Youth Study: Results Analysis

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December 2022

Youth associate the term »politics« with party policy or the public policy of the country in which they live, as well as with corruption, an incompetent political elite and their money wasting, and the roles and practices of political parties trading in favours, dividing up riches, and evading punishment and accountability.



Young people described the challenges resulting from the pandemic as the most prominent and important of the changes they have faced recently.



Generally, youth in Iraq find it difficult to choose between migration and continuing their lives in their own country. Many have a strong attachment to their families and where they live, do not view migration as an easy or perfect solution at all, and have conflicting feelings about the idea of leaving home.



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Religious and political affairs no longer occupy the thoughts and interests of young people as they did in previous generations. Despite the breadth and abundance of religious and political material, activities and programmes, and the frequent media appearances of personalities categorised as religious or political figures, their impact on young people has receded due to the large number of promises, speeches and rules adopted by political Islam and the lack of implementation or fulfilment of those promises. Thus, political and religious affairs are of less importance when it comes to why young people use social media.



The young people surveyed described the challenges resulting from the pandemic as the most prominent and important of the changes they have faced recently. It should be noted that of the nine negative events and incidents presented to the young people surveyed, six were events directly related to the pandemic the impact of those events was exacerbated by the pandemic. These included food shortages, job loss, changes inside the family, lack of social stability and increased violence and isolation from the outside world, not to mention the threats directly resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic. This indicates that various and complex negative changes occurred that severely shook the lives of young people over the last five years.



Young people display an awareness of the distinction between physical mobility and increasing social mobility. While the wish to find work or continue their education remains, some are motivated to emigrate abroad, while others focus on accepting employment under unfavourable conditions within their own country or marrying someone from a higher class or another religious group. It seems that they are well aware that migration does not necessarily guarantee a better life. Many have a strong attachment to their families and the residential areas they grew up in, do not view emigration as an easy or perfect solution at all, and have conflicting feelings about the idea of leaving home.

Further information on the topic can be found here:

<https://mena.fes.de/topics/youth-study>

<https://iraq.fes.de>

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1

INTRODUCTION

Following the uprisings of 2011 and the health and economic crises caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the social movements and ongoing protests in Arab countries were both a sign of hope and an uncertain future and signalled that the region is once again on the verge of change. The protesters, fuelled by social and economic injustices, had long demanded political change. And now their effectiveness has increased. The challenges that young people face in forming a credible political position might be something they can overcome to create a better future, or they might just lead to further chaos and destruction. In several Arab countries, including Iraq, political movements benefited from the disappointments of 2011, 2013, 2015 and 2019. Unlike in 2015, however, in 2019, these protest movements faced exceedingly difficult economic, political and social conditions, together with regional and international positions that came into conflict with the protests and trajectory of change.

The Iraqi protests, which were sparked by corruption, oppressive working conditions, a crumbling infrastructure and the brutality of the security forces' crackdown on the movement, dramatically developed into young people demanding reform and regime change in October 2019. After 2003, the new regime regulated access to state resources and public positions, which led to political mobilisation on the basis of ethnicity, sectarianism and communitarianism, operating within a quota system controlled by a narrow political elite. Instead of being invested in rebuilding a country that had been destroyed by wars, oil revenues were used to expand public sector employment. More than eight million people are now in the employ of the state and 25 per cent of public funds are lost to corruption. As in most Arab countries, young people in Iraq know that without a change in the politics of their country and the nature of the system, their future will remain bleak.

Young people, who are particularly vulnerable and lack resources, are undoubtedly more susceptible to losing hope. They are also the most adept at undermining security. The uprising against those viewed as part of a corrupt political elite continues. Confidence in that elite is non-existent, as they are incapable of implementing successful solutions to the crises and problems. It has become clear that change in the Arab countries that have witnessed social movements, including Iraq, will not happen overnight.

On the other hand, the problems of young people must be understood against a specific demographic background. In Iraq, as in many developing countries, young people make up the largest share of the population pyramid. However, Iraqi youth have faced a plethora of complex problems and have been victims of irresponsible policies that left them uneducated and their lives in tatters. These policies failed to create sufficient and suitable work opportunities for them or to include them in public life. Nor did they provide them with the training, empowerment, or the health and cultural services they deserve. The experiences of several other countries reveal that when wars end, thousands of young combatants find themselves in the midst of a new crisis as they search for work. This crisis intensifies when the state is slow to create suitable opportunities to absorb these ex-soldiers or provide safety nets offering at least a minimum of services and support.

Iraq relies heavily on oil revenues, which represent 99 per cent of export revenues, 90 per cent of government revenues and 60 per cent of the country's GDP (Ministry of Planning 2019). At the same time, the business environment in Iraq is exceedingly poor, with just 22 per cent of the population engaging in business in Iraq. The country also has one of the lowest employment-to-population ratios in the region. Social unrest has led to short-term policies to appease demonstrators, and the state continues to expand employment in the civil service and public sector and provide financial assistance (as social bribes). Public wages and salaries now represent 51 per cent of the country's total expenditure and electricity is subsidised at 91 per cent. However, social and infrastructure services continue to deteriorate. Public investment collapsed at a time when, after the war against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), reconstruction needs alone were estimated at around 1 billion US dollars (Ministry of Planning 2017:4). At the same time, the financial sector is deteriorating, with a public debt-to-GDP ratio of around 50 per cent in 2019.

2

METHODOLOGY

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) views young women and men as instrumental for democratic development in the region and is keen to strengthen their potential to initiate change in the world of politics and across society. Based on the results of a long-term survey, launched in 2016 (which did not include Iraq at the time), the FES seeks to provide insight into young people's situation in the MENA region.

In 2021, the FES launched its second large-scale representative survey in Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Sudan, among Syrian refugees in Lebanon, as well as in Tunisia and Yemen. With the 1,000 in-depth interviews conducted for each country, the FES MENA Youth Study generates a large database of answers to around 200 questions concerning the personal background of the interviewees and their views on a variety of topics.¹

2.1 SAMPLING AND DATA COLLECTION

For reasons of feasibility, a nationwide quota sampling method was chosen, with the aim of conducting 1,000 interviews per country. This sample size is considered adequately representative of the target group as well as socio-demographic and regional subgroups (e.g., age, gender, level of education).

In Iraq, the local institute responsible for fieldwork and sampling was the Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies. The institute has an established set of methods for selecting sampling points and identifying eligible households to survey, with the aim of randomising the selection process as much as possible. The aim was to ensure a geographic spread of respondents that was as close as possible to the distribution of the survey universe in the respective country. For each geographic area, the institute provided a list of sampling points.

Fieldwork was conducted in September 2021. The survey ultimately reached 1,000 Iraqis aged between 16 and 30 years. The data was collected in face-to-face interviews

conducted using computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) technology. All interviews were carried out in the local Arabic dialect. Interviews were held at respondents' homes or in public places, such as cafés, community centres and the like. It was of major importance that the respondents felt comfortable, and the interview locations were chosen accordingly.

The data collected was stored in a central CAPI database. During the fieldwork, Kantar Public, a specialist research, evidence and advisory business, carried out data validation with sets of interim data via Excel and SPSS (statistical software program) syntaxes. In parallel, Kantar Public and the University of Leipzig conducted the final comprehensive data check. To ensure that the final structure of the sampling reflected the structure of the survey universe, differences were reduced with factorial weighting. The survey data was weighted for all target groups with respect to the structural variables of age, gender and region, based on available statistics.

2.2 SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

Of the population surveyed (youth aged 16-30), 28 per cent lived in rural settlements (with a population of up to 20,000 inhabitants), 50 per cent in cities (20,000-500,000 inhabitants) and 21 per cent in large cities (500,000 inhabitants or more).

A total of 37 per cent of the respondents were in the 16-20 age group, 34 per cent were in the 21-25 age group and 30 per cent were in the upper age group (25-30). In addition, 67 per cent of the total sample was not married (including those who reported being engaged) at the time of the survey (this percentage was higher among males at 74 per cent than females at 60 per cent) and 29 per cent stated that they were married (higher among females at 35 per cent than males at 23 per cent).

When it came to their living situation, most respondents (74 per cent) stated that they lived in the same household as their parents (84 per cent of males, 64 per cent of females) and 19 per cent said they lived with their families (with their partner/without their parents).

¹ For more information on the FES MENA Youth Study: <https://mena.fes.de/topics/youth-study>

More than a third (39 per cent) of the respondents stated that they were students at the time of the survey, and 61 per cent stated that they were not students. A total of 56 per cent of the student group stated that they were enrolled in school education and 40 per cent said they were studying at university.

Concerning education, 12 per cent of respondents had no formal education and 25 per cent reported having only primary level education, whereas 31 per cent had intermediate education (secondary/intermediate), and 32 per cent had secondary (tawjihi) education and higher.

Finally, 66 per cent stated that the head of household was their father, 14 per cent stated that their mother was the head of the household, and 17 per cent stated that the husband/wife was the head of the household (multiple responses were possible).

In addition to the survey data referred to above, the current study is based on an analytical review of relevant literature and contains theoretical and analytical aspects drawing on the available data on the following topics: political mobilisation and participation, the Covid-19 pandemic, and mobility, movements and migration.

3

THEORETICAL APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING THE FIELD

Based on the facts on the ground and analytical observations of the events that have taken place in Iraq, a series of shifts can be observed, which affected the formation of memory and the tendencies among and attitudes and contradictions of young people, especially within the three age groups included in the survey. The characteristics of these shifts and the processes they involved wove together various and conflicting narratives that help us understand and assess the current reality, as well as the recent past. The term »uncertainty« thus aptly characterises these shifts, as some respondents have firmly established convictions that have impacted their vision and assessment of events, people and facts, while others, by virtue of their young age, experienced the shifts as a mere succession of events interpreted through distorted oral memory conveyed to them through the understanding and perceptions of the adults around them. These shifts also impacted, in one way or another, how young people experienced political, social and economic events, whether through a lens of alienation, disregard or interest. These shifts, divided into five periods, will now be briefly presented and then linked with the trajectories of the current study.

3.1 THE INVASION OF KUWAIT AND DEFEAT IN THE WAR (1990-2003)

Iraq had recently emerged from a bloody eight-year war with Iran, weighed down by debt and destruction, when it invaded Kuwait, a move of unprecedented recklessness, from which it emerged with a devastated army, debilitating economic sanctions, extreme international isolation, a dictatorship that brutally crushed any opposition or uprising or even differences of opinion, and endless international sanctions and financial reparations. Overall, this produced a younger generation that was insecure, defeated and deprived, that felt persecuted and burdened with pain and anger directed at a ruling regime that had seen the country regress to a preindustrial, premodern age. This period also saw significant external migration and high levels of crime, primarily fraud, bribery, forgery, theft and kidnapping.

3.2 SALVATION FROM DICTATORSHIP AND ENTERING THE DEPTHS OF ARTIFICIAL DEMOCRACY (2003-2006)

By April 2003, the fire of the US-led international coalition had died down, and the world witnessed the final seasons of the Ba'ath regime in Iraq and the opening of new horizons for the formation of a multi-party democratic system. However, this system was imposed by external actors and the conditions for it grow domestically were not favourable. This was accompanied by an official declaration and international recognition that Iraq was under the authority of the occupation forces. The army was dissolved and the security forces dismantled. This created an institutional vacuum and a near total absence of the rule of law, a conducive atmosphere for the emergence of acts of looting and theft and the first waves of violence, in addition to party and political polarisation fuelled by religious, national and confessional affiliation. Iraq was released from the eternal shackles of economic sanctions and there was a notable increase in income level, yet insurgency and violence marked the period: a distorted present and an uncertain future. The social hierarchy also witnessed dramatic dynamics, as some groups that were marginalised and suffered from deprivation and alienation moved to the top of the pyramid, while others who had been influential were relegated to the margins. Some members of the elite continued with the purges and prosecutions, which created a conflicting narrative around the deposition of the Ba'ath regime (with, against, with and against at the same time).

3.3 SECTARIAN VIOLENCE AND THE ENTRENCHMENT OF COMMUNITARIANISM (2006-2013)

The bombing of the Al-Askari Shrine in Samarra in February 2006 exposed the sectarian tensions between the Shia and the Sunni. Waves of displacement and forced migration followed, a population concentration policy based on sectarian and national division was born, and communities were

reorganised and redistributed in regional cantons. There was fear, silence, and the rediscovery and redefinition of the »self« and the »other«. This was accompanied by the formation of the first elected national government, which was held together by the legitimacy of the ballot box and quotas (national, confessional, party). From this, political norms were created, power and influence were distributed among the largest and most dominant groups (Sunni Arabs, Shia Arabs, Kurds). The doors were thrown open to trading in political favours, corruption and resource wastage, in addition to increasing insurgency, resistance to the occupation and a rejection of the resulting system on the part of the losers.

In spite of two electoral cycles, fiscal savings and skyrocketing budgets, in reality, services, security and reconstruction remained no more than unfulfilled promises. This undermined confidence in the governing political elite, the nascent democratic process and the new regime. It was also accompanied by waves of protests and demands for secession, regionalisation and the provision of services, in addition to government accusations of sectarian discrimination and bias. These demands and the resulting slogans were prominent in the demonstrations of 2011 and 2013.

3.4 ISIS TERRORISM AND THE FALL OF CITIES (2014-2018)

On 10 June 2014, Iraqis woke to the shock of three Iraqi governorates, representing an area of over one-third of the country, being occupied by ISIS terrorist gangs. This was followed by the group declaring the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and commissioning crimes that can only be described as atrocious, including taking captives, rape, murder and forced displacement. This coincided with the flight, withdrawal and inaction of the military and security units on the ground in these regions. It was also accompanied by waves of unprecedented internal displacement impacting around 5.5 million people, in addition to the external migration of tens of thousands, mostly youth, headed towards Europe by sea on death boats, seeking asylum and fleeing a country that had failed to provide its people with a decent life.

This was soon followed by a declaration of civil war, this time with mobilisation being led by religious fatwas ordering believers to fight to liberate the country and expel the invaders. Subsequently, forces parallel to the army were formed to fill the gap left after the withdrawal and flight of the security units, and residents of central and southern Iraq, mostly Shia, joined their ranks. This, in turn, led to a new polarisation of religious identity and tensions between the Sunni and the Shia, and resulted in accusations of negligence and actions being taken by both sides. The faint hope that democracy would develop and correct the course was quashed, and all confidence in the leading politicians was lost. The war to liberate the entire territory continued until

the beginning of 2018, leaving behind destruction of cities and public and private property valued at around 100 billion US dollars, according to official data.

3.5 THE OCTOBER PROTESTS AND THE START OF THE PANDEMIC (2019-2021)

The October protest movement in Iraq cannot be examined in isolation from the general pattern of protests seen in other countries in the region and the world in the past decade. This model is characterised by a lack of central leadership and the decentralised nature of protest activity, the predominance of youth, internal diversity, a mistrust of partisanship and the absence of political ideology governing the discourse of the groups protesting. This time the demonstrators did not limit their demands to better services and welfare, and the mechanisms they employed went beyond slogans and protests to blocking roads, disrupting business operations, forcibly closing institutions, general strikes, and calls to action driven by an unbridled desire to revolt and confront the authorities. The demands seemed revolutionary in nature and impossible to achieve: the overthrow of the regime or comprehensive reform, starting with the removal of the government and its replacement with a salvation government made up of impartial technocrats not representing any of the political entities participating in the regime. This salvation government was to be assigned the tasks of restoring the authority of the state, restricting and disarming the militias, putting corrupt officials on trial and recovering stolen funds. It would also be responsible for establishing all of the prerequisites for holding fair, free and impartial elections with international oversight, allowing for a change to the political map and the rise of independents.

The protests were met with outrage and heavily suppressed, and their actors and supporters were viewed with scepticism and accused of treason and of following external anti-national agendas. Upcoming young political activists succeeded in changing the government and pushing for changes to the election law as well as the formation of a new board of commissioners that included judges working on election administration. However, the Covid-19 pandemic took everyone by surprise and upended life and public space overnight. Gas prices fell rapidly and global markets deteriorated. Thus, unexpected external events served as a catalyst for the dismantling of the protestors tents erected in squares across Baghdad, and the new government's demand that it be given sufficient time to achieve the tasks entrusted to it seemed an acceptable reason to disband the protests.

For the first time, people were confined to their homes, focused on fighting an invisible enemy that might come for them at any moment, by any means, and put an end to their lives. Work and hopes were suspended. The pandemic resulted in needs and demands that people lacked the resources to meet, devastating political and economic environments, and major challenges for a young and promising crisis government that had inherited complex problems the

solution of which required nothing short of a miracle. There was a genuine absence of certainty and a sense of nothing to look forward to.

The five shifts described above give an impression of the type of young people that were interviewed for this study. The oldest age group lived through all of this uncertainty and inevitably drew comparisons between the two regimes (pre- and post-2003), as they had experienced all different types of wars, promises, movements and mobility. The middle age group (aged 21-25) had a distorted image of the previous regime and with sufficient experience of the present course, it was also able to draw some kind of comparison, despite the fact that those belonging to this age group received some of their impressions second hand rather than experiencing them directly. Meanwhile, the youngest age group represented a break with the past. Members of this group confront the present more confidently and fervently. They have a weaker link with the traditional authorities (religious and tribal) and a stronger desire for chaotic and unorganised change. These are some of the findings of our survey and the present study.

4

POLITICAL MOBILISATION AND PARTICIPATION

This section will focus on the importance of politics to Iraqi youth and aims to understand how close to or removed from politics they are, especially as the impact of the October 2019 protests endures, regardless of their position on the protests (with, against, with and against). The 2021 elections were a pivotal event in Iraq. In addition to being the first experience of the caretaker government of al-Kadhimi, the elections were organised in a manner that can be described as non-partisan, not favouring one political entity, which was one of the most significant outcomes of the mass demonstrations in October, in which the majority of participants were young people.

Over the last two years, the new government has dealt with many thorny and hot-button issues. These included the end of the strike and dismantling of the demonstrators tents, surviving the Covid-19 pandemic, addressing the decline in global oil prices, weathering the devastating economic crisis and continuing to pay salaries, attempting to curb the defiance of the armed militias to a limited degree, addressing the remnants of ISIS, providing aid and support to displaced persons and facilitating their return, providing water, electricity and fuel, recovering the authority of the state and introducing the rule of law, balancing foreign relations, and, finally, creating a suitable environment and meeting the requirements for conducting impartial parliamentary elections. According to the findings of this study, Iraqi youth see their country as being in political tumult. The survey provides an opportunity to discover the extent of their politicisation through social movements and protests, the extent of their participation and interest in politics, as well as how they view the state, the government and the political system.

This section examines the extent to which young people feel politically alienated. To this end, not only will the positions and opinions of the young people surveyed be presented and analysed but an attempt will also be made to assess the importance of political issues to them and to look at how they take an interest in politics. Any general interest in politics can be considered a prerequisite for active participation in political mechanisms, although such an interest does not always necessarily translate into full civic engagement and political mobilisation. This section also considers how much confidence Iraqi youth have in the various institutions, especially governmental, and how driven they are to play a role

in society, whether large or small. There are other relevant aspects, but these are somewhat separate from the issue of confidence in the government, which is largely reflected in young people's positions on the political system more generally. The issue here is not limited to whether youth accept the political system under which they live but also pertains to their preferences regarding the possible alternatives. This study also discusses young people's perspectives on the events of the Arab Spring in the MENA region with a focus not on whether they welcomed specific developments or not but rather on their views on its impact on political and social change.

4.1 INTEREST IN AND AVERSION TO POLITICS

Yet, the statements and claims made by young people regarding politics and their interest in it must be treated with caution. The survey data indicates that among the Iraqi youth surveyed, interest in politics is low. However, it is essential to link this data with other characteristics and issues to have a clearer view of its meaning, as often very different concepts hide the actual meaning of »politics«, and thus the interest in it. In some cases, youth associate the term »politics« with the political parties or public policy of the country in which they live, thus not being interested in politics should be understood as not being interested in this type of politics, and usually reflects a loss of confidence in and frustration with politicians and their performance as well as the ineffectiveness of the political system in meeting their needs and expectations.

When it comes to gender, males are notably more interested than females in politics. This could perhaps be interpreted as them being required (in a patriarchal society) to liaise with government institutions and representatives and get involved in public affairs in order to pursue their individual and family interests (a responsibility that is largely borne by men). This necessarily requires knowledge of the laws and the bodies enforcing and controlling the country's affairs as well as what aspects of politics must be avoided and what they must distance themselves from in order to protect themselves and their family from the dark side of politics.

If we look at the individual age groups, it is clear that interest increases with age. The older a person gets, the more responsibility they have for themselves, their family and society. This is also the case with education, in other words, interest in politics increases with education and the accompanying increased awareness and social responsibility. Interest in politics also increases as the economic situation improves. This might be, on the one hand, driven by the individual's need to protect their economic interests and, on the other, because they have more spare time to engage in public affairs. According to milieu of residence, those living in urban areas and large cities show greater interest than residents of rural areas. This is because cities and urban areas represent the administrative and political centres where decision-making and political debate take place.

Iraqi youth associated four main concepts and descriptions with the word »politics«. At the top of the list is corruption, followed by government, then party politics and finally problems. Overall, these descriptions are negative, reflecting the reality of young people's experience with political affairs in Iraq. Four other positive concepts and descriptions associated with politics were ranked low by the respondents: civic engagement, power, empowerment, hope and other. This can be explained by the fact that young people had no sense of these aspects in political and social reality.

On the other hand, around 12 per cent of respondents responded with »don't know« when asked what people associate with the word politics. One possible explanation for this phenomenon could be the high illiteracy rates among

youth, which prevents them from learning about many issues, including political affairs.

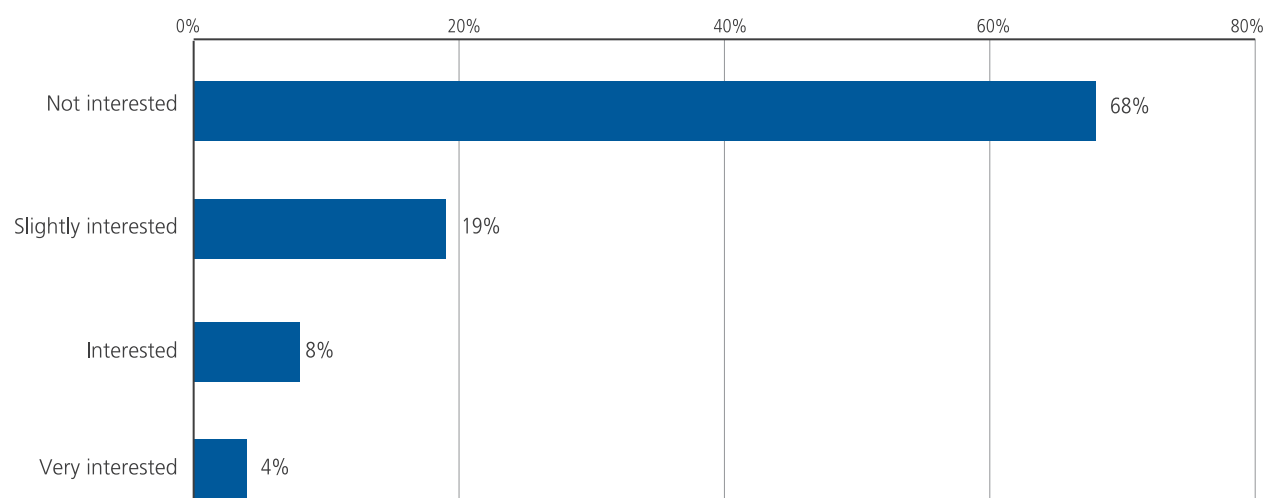
Generally, which opinions are held and which concepts and descriptions dominate is associated with the political, social and economic conditions in which individuals live. Additionally, the media plays a significant role in shaping and steering public opinion. The performance and effectiveness of institutions and public satisfaction with officials and leaders has an impact, one way or another, on individuals' views and their association of some practices and activities with politics and not others. In Iraq there is broad discussion on a daily basis on the disappointing performance of successive governments, corruption, the incompetent political elite and its money wasting, and on parties trading in favours, dividing up riches, and evading punishment and accountability. Together these processes have shaped young people's understanding and negative assessment of politics in their country. Thus, the survey results show that only a very low percentage (around 16 per cent) of Iraqi youth actively gather information on matters related to politics. Most of the remaining individuals surveyed were more interested in other aspects of life related to directly meeting their needs, sustaining relationships and sharing information with others, or recreation, alleviating stress and entertainment.

With regard to the sources used to actively obtain political information, social media was ranked first, followed by television, then websites, then direct conversation, with radio and print media at the bottom of the list. This can be explained by young people's current way of life. They

Figure 1

Interest in politics

Are you interested in politics?



National population, 16-30 years

can be described as a digital generation par excellence. They follow public and private affairs by mobile phone, and no longer choose to sit in front of television screens or a radio for hours as their parents did in the past. Nor is the print media any longer the primary source of news or primary medium for cultural, social and economic exchange. This has been replaced by social media, which gives them immediate access to events. The survey results also provided detailed information on the reasons young people use social media such as Facebook, social forums and WhatsApp and the activities they engage in via these media. Six of these reasons were limited to an individual's personal affairs. The first reason given was to communicate with friends and family and follow their news without incurring financial expense or spending time travelling from one place to another. This was followed by use of digital media for personal entertainment, then for sharing music, videos and pictures. In fourth place was use of social media for organising gatherings with friends, since through this type of media it is easy to find out where individuals are and what they are doing so as to arrange times to meet. Next was looking for employment opportunities by scanning for job announcements or visiting the official pages of organisations, companies and employers, as most now have websites where they promote their products and needs. The last use of social media for personal interest reported by respondents was to look for a life partner. Although only a small percentage, this reflects two significant aspects. First, in the shift to looking for a life partner online, actual interaction is no longer the only way to search for a partner as it was in the past. Second, the majority of young people surveyed still lack the confidence

to try and make a connection in this way, which explains the low percentage. It is worth noting that religious and political affairs no longer occupy the thoughts and interests of young people as they did in previous generations. Despite the breadth and abundance of religious and political material, activities and programmes and the frequent media appearances of personalities categorised as religious or political figures, their impact on young people has receded due to the large number of promises, speeches and announcements made and the lack of implementation and honesty. Thus, political and religious affairs were of less importance when it came to the reasons why youth use social media.

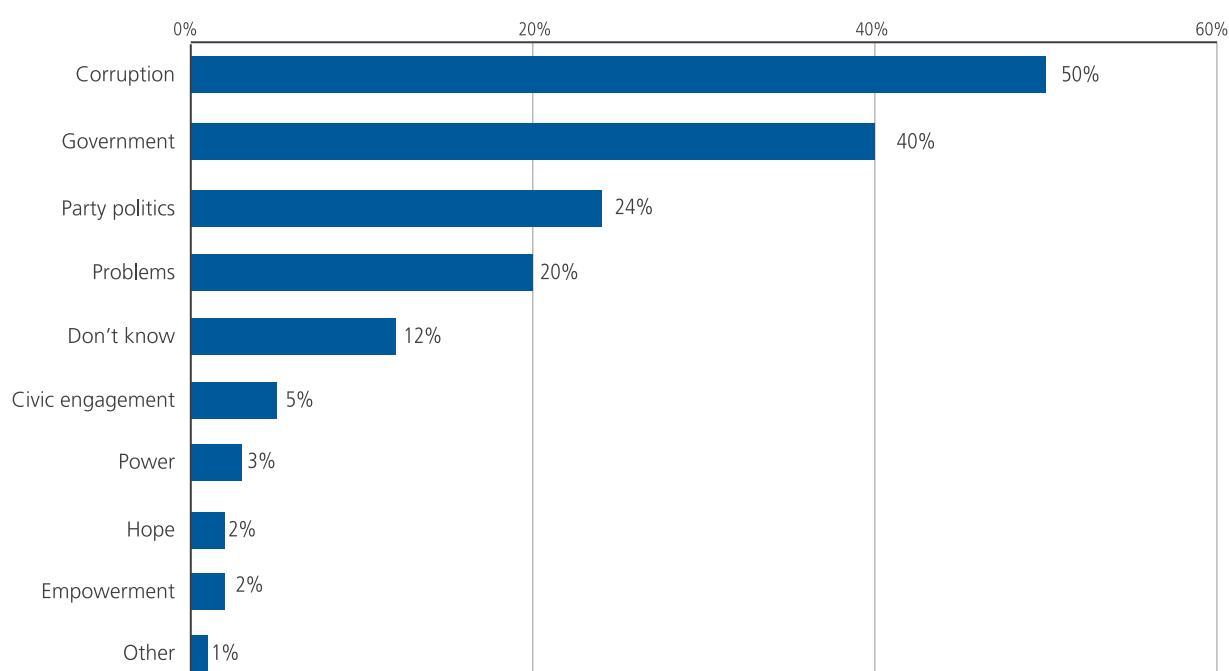
The above results are in line with the views of young people on what they believe they can achieve in their lives through their positions and behaviour as individuals, interacting with facts, events, practices and issues which they classify as highly important and thus pursue, or as entirely unimportant and thus ignore. The survey showed that youth ranked many issues of a personal nature very high. These were largely related to the hopes and aspirations of individuals for themselves and the type of life they wanted to and had decided to live, such as believing in God, having a life partner they can trust, consciously living a healthy life, having a good family life and so on.

In contrast, the matter might be related to power and political participation. Young people ranked these of lower importance than the aforementioned areas. Having power and exercising influence were given an importance rating of 5.2, while the importance of participating in different areas

Figure 2

Associations with the word »politics«

When people use the word »politics«, what are your associations?



National population, 16-30 years

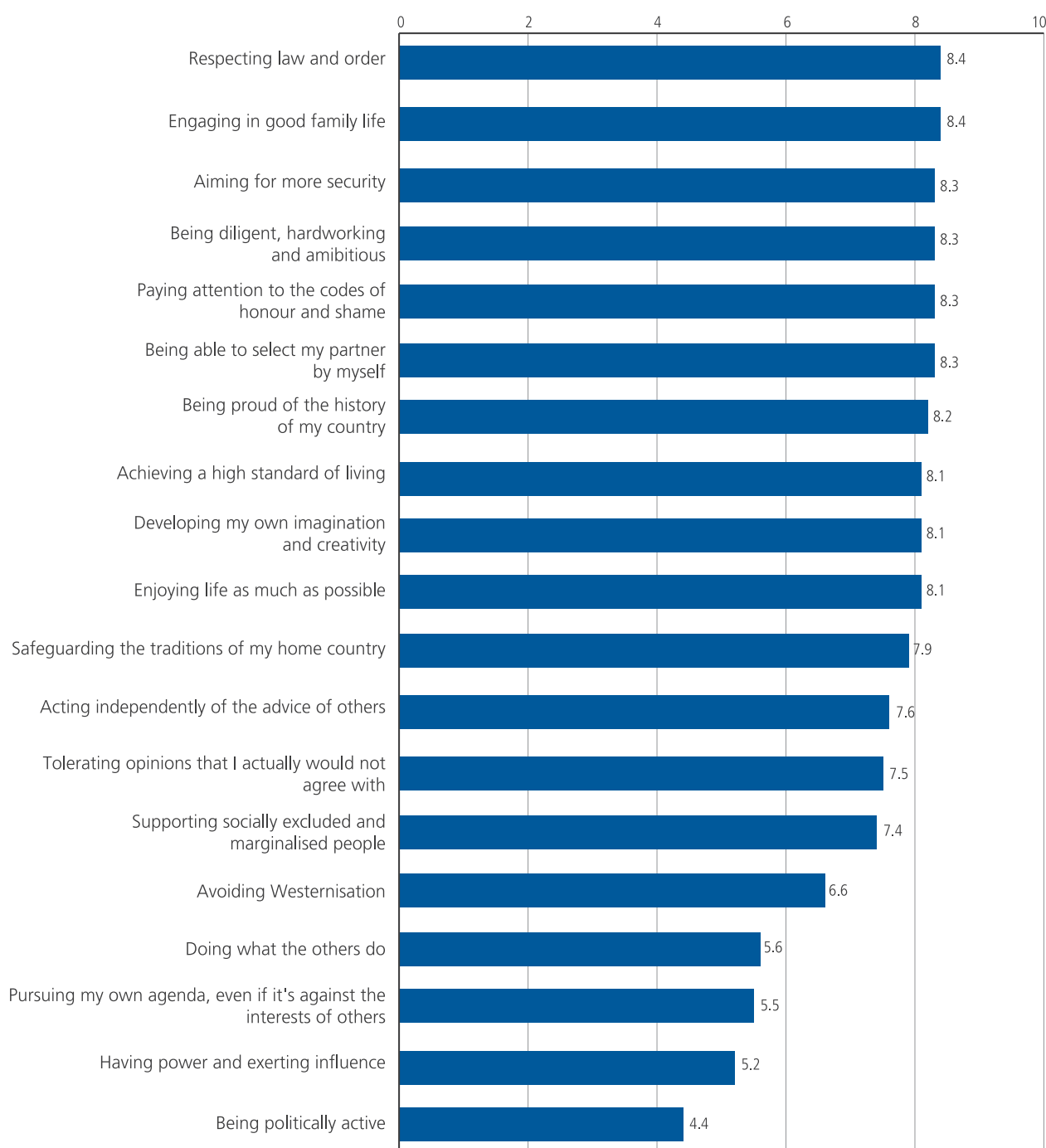
of politics was given a rating of 4.4. This supports the indications of the importance of and aversion to politics among young people in Iraq, which was previously discussed in relation to a variety of indicators, most of which confirmed youth's alienation from politics due to the corruption of politicians, their money wasting and the nature of the fragile

quota system. That is, politics and the political elite no longer represent young people's belief in achieving the desired change in their country, which they want to be positive and capable of providing them with a decent life.

Figure 3

Importance of specific aspects

As individuals, we have ideas and visions about our personal lives, attitudes and behaviour. If you reflect on possible achievements in your life, how important are the following for you?



Scale from 1 = absolutely unimportant to 10 = absolutely important

4.2 POLITICAL SYSTEM PREFERRED BY IRAQI YOUTH

When Iraqi youth were asked about their preferred political system, their responses were both shocking and surprising, a grim reflection of their experiences with the political systems they had grown up in and also largely expressive of their hopes for the political system within which they aspired to live. At the top of their preferences is a political system governed by a »strong man«. This pervasive attitude can perhaps be explained by the fragility of the nascent, as yet unestablished democratic system in the country at present. Only one-fifth of those surveyed stated that their preference was for a democratic system. That is, over half of Iraqi youth long for a system involving a strong man leading the country to safety, well-being and prosperity.

Only 8 per cent disclosed their preference for a »strong woman«. The majority (91 per cent) of these were women, most of whom were from the youngest age group with an intermediate to higher level of education, and mostly from urban areas and large cities rather than rural areas. Despite the low percentage opting for this response, it is an important indication of the awareness of certain women and their confidence that they are capable of playing a bigger part in politics and the country's affairs.² It also reveals a cultural and social shift (albeit limited) vis-à-vis women and their roles in society and lower sensitivity towards gender differences among young men, perhaps indicating greater acceptance that women are capable of engaging in politics in a markedly patriarchal society. The activities of international and local civil society organisations and the workshops, symposiums and dialogues held by universities, research centres, cultural symposiums and volunteer groups to promote feminism, combat gender disparities and encourage women to take on a greater role in society may partially explain this shift and the increasing awareness around it.

Other hybrid or traditional political systems were ranked lower, representing from 1 to 4 per cent of young people's overall preferences. These included a joint democratic-Islamic system, a religious state based on the Sharia, a socialist system or other. This indicates that young people have only a weak preference for political systems of a religious nature, whether pure or hybrid and combined with a more modern system. This is perhaps an explicit reflection of their current experience with and distaste for political Islam, and their leaning towards a civil system that protects religious rights and does not allow religious affairs to dominate public life. Young people's demands are, after all, for welfare and services, not immersion in rituals and slogans and a focus on religious practices. They also do not want to return to the socialist system (the Ba'ath dictatorship which ruled Iraq prior to 2003 and proved a failure). Around just 6 per cent responded with »don't know« which again hints at the impact of illiteracy, lack of education and ignorance among some youth.

² In fact, this is the highest value of all 12 countries in the region where this question was asked, closely followed only by Lebanon.

4.3 CONFIDENCE IN INSTITUTIONS AND THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

The survey results indicate the immediate, interim, pragmatic and direct impact of youth's assessment of institutions. During the Covid-19 pandemic, they were astonished to see how their families dealt with the situation to protect them and provide them with the necessities of life despite the difficulties. They also observed the increased level of solidarity and mutual support among individuals in society who grew closer to one another during the lockdown. Family (as well as extended family, and to a lesser extent the tribe) remained the institution that enjoyed the most confidence among youth. Generally, people place high levels of confidence in their families, especially in societies where there is a high level of solidarity and that function on the basis of direct and informal relations.

The Higher Committee for Health and National Safety (assigned by the government to manage the pandemic), the Ministry of Health, doctors and workers in the public and private health systems and volunteers, also with the support of the security agencies (the police and army alongside their role in combating terrorism, fighting crime and defeating ISIS), as well as businessmen and donors all played an active role in mitigating the crisis. There was thus a high level of satisfaction with the health sector and its supporting bodies. The education sector saw a similar development. Educational alternatives were provided and the shift from full-time in-person teaching to online education facilitated by the quick response of the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Higher Education. This boosted the importance of these two institutions and increased confidence in them, despite the failures and problems they suffered, which confirms the impact of the immediate and direct response to the pandemic on the assessments and confidence of the respondents.

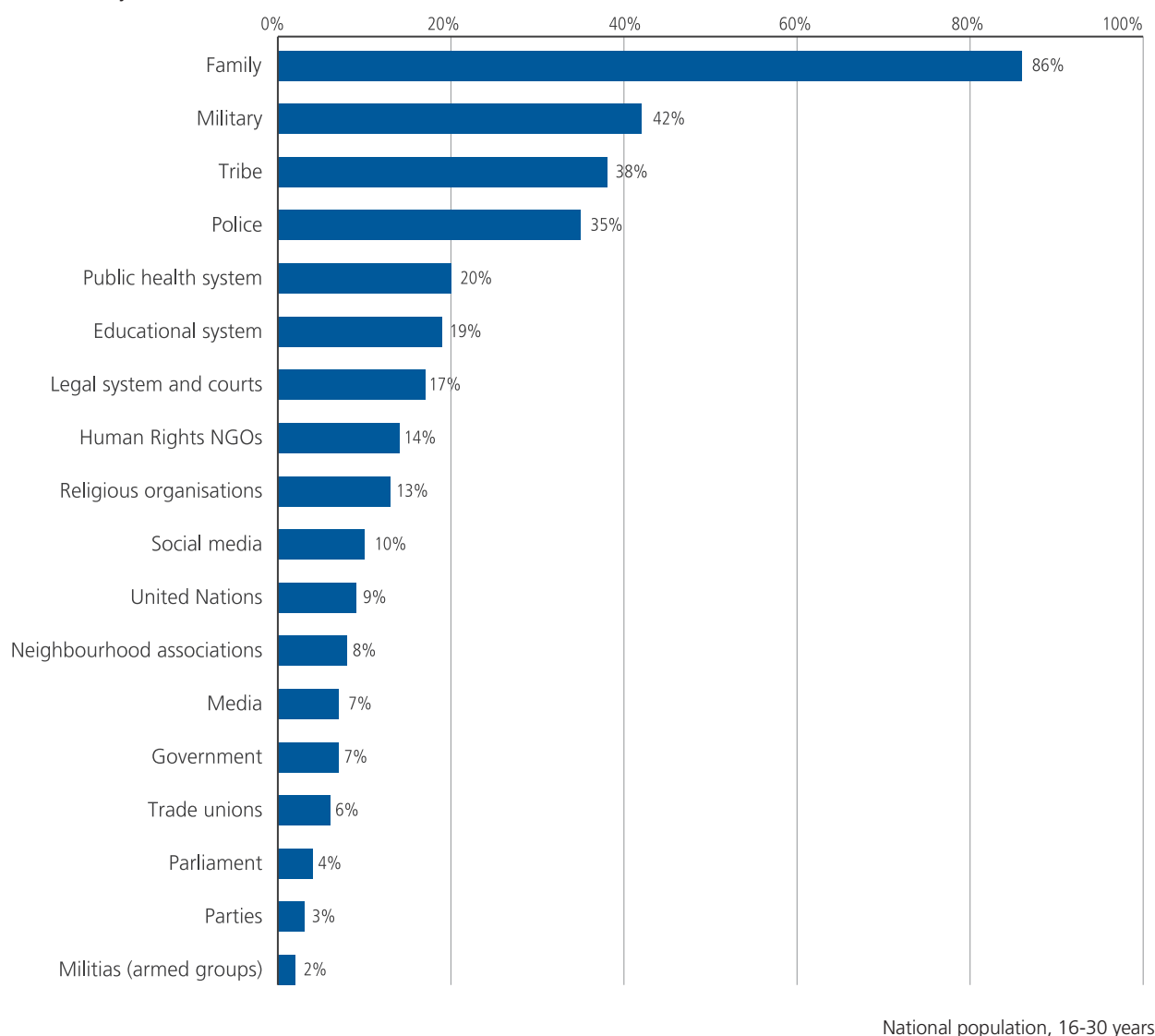
In the survey, youth were asked about their trust in 18 different institutions and bodies, which were presented to them in a long and varied list. Eight of these institutions received high ratings from the respondents. At the top of the list was the family, then the police, followed by the army, then the tribe. These were followed by the educational system and the public health system, the judicial and court system and human rights organisations. In other words, in their assessment of institutions, young people focused on practical principles: direct services, tangible acts and activities equal a higher level of satisfaction and higher assessment of the institutions.

In contrast, seven other institutions and bodies were ranked low when it came to trust. These were social media, then religious organisations and neighbourhood associations, then the media, followed by worker syndicates, the United Nations and finally the government. This was either because the activities they conduct and events they organised were unreliable, biased or substandard, because their impact was limited and ineffective, or because they served limited and narrow segments. There may also have been a low level of awareness of these activities among youth.

Figure 4

Trust in institutions

What about your trust in different institutions?



Meanwhile, youth expressed greater disappointment and lack of trust in the parliament and political parties in power due to their inability to play a more productive role in the country. They were more fearful for their lives and their future due to the presence of armed groups. As a result, there were very low levels of confidence in all of these institutions.

In terms of the young people's views with regard to the role the state should play in society compared to the role that it currently plays, the study found that the state in fact enjoyed a high level of acceptance among Iraqi youth. Despite the fact that their confidence in its ability to realise its full responsibilities and fulfil its promises was weak, around three-quarters of all survey respondents would prefer the state to play a bigger role in daily life. They wanted the state to monopolise power and ban influential groups, interests and militias from interfering in people's affairs, freedoms, convictions and attitudes. In contrast, around 13 per cent believe that the role of the state is fine as it is, perhaps because they fear that its power would be increased if it were

given a greater role. In contrast, according to the survey, a very small share of youth would prefer the state to play a secondary role in daily life, as they believed that their interests and freedoms required the state to have a smaller role than it does at present.

The above results indicate a high level of political awareness among young people with regard to legislation, the maintenance of the rule of law and keeping this in the hands of government as the legal and legitimate representative of the state. Social disparities between the young people surveyed did not mean that there were substantial differences in their responses—quite the opposite, in fact, as their answers were nearly the same, despite their varied social backgrounds. To understand the reasons for this it may be helpful to refer to the liquidation of the state and its institutions in Iraq following regime change in 2003, the fragility of the subsequent governments, the performance of the institutions that were formed thereafter, as well as the multiple authorities that made decisions and influenced

the government. As a result of these developments, young people were generally sceptical and began to demand that the government play a greater and more effective role. This was the case despite the fact that governmental institutions failed to fulfil the promises they had made to Iraqi citizens, such as combating violence, holding corrupt officials and those who break the law accountable, securing basic needs and guaranteeing freedom of opinion and expression.

These different preferences also show that the demand for government to play a larger role in daily life is not necessarily related to the wish for the state to acquire greater influence but is often accompanied by the desire for state institutions to perform efficiently, effectively and legitimately.

4.4 LEVELS OF LIFE SATISFACTION: INDICATORS OF EQUALITY AND DISCRIMINATION

Young people's responses to questions regarding equal rights or marginalisation and discrimination among citizens provides some initial pointers to help us interpret the reasons for the increased demands and hopes related to the state, government and political system as a whole. It also provides a clearer understanding of the extent of their sense of equality and justice or marginalisation and exclusion in the society in which they live, as the deterioration of a state where there is already an absence of justice impacts every aspect of young people's lives. Thus, social and material security as a traditional responsibility of the government represents the most significant factor for those surveyed, regardless of their age. The distribution of income and wealth and the level of political and civic engagement, based on a just society which provides everyone with opportunities, reflects how balanced and impartial the regime is in dealing with its citizens. This also indicates the type of laws in force and how seriously and consistently institutions apply them.

The survey data illustrates the widespread use of quotas and factional, communitarian and partisan involvement in filling public positions and granting privileges and gifts, in the distribution of income and wealth, and in the representation and participation of certain groups and communities more than others. The latter may be based on the size of the group, its political dominance, or representation in parliament, the government, and state institutions. There is also an emphasis on and repetition of certain expressions that indicate a fundamental divide (religious, national, tribal, regional) in laws, government announcements and budgets. This confirms young people's feelings that there are social and political disparities in the country between those who feel unequal or marginalised or are in the minority and those who feel that they have equal rights as they have achieved greater representation, participation and privileges.

On the other hand, and in the same context, the young people surveyed ranked life satisfaction in Iraq at 5.9, on average (on a scale from 1=lowest to 10=highest satisfac-

tion). In terms of gender, women rated people's satisfaction (as well as their own) higher. This may be due to the fact that they live in more conservative environments, in which men bear most responsibilities and they are less exposed to risks and feel more resigned to and accepting of reality. The youngest age group had slightly higher expectations than the other groups when it came to people's satisfaction, as they were still in the prime of life and had higher hopes. Those with higher levels of education, on the other hand, thought the general population was less satisfied, but rated their own satisfaction as higher than that of the less educated. Those with a good economic situation also had higher expectations of people's satisfaction with life, as financial security allows for a greater sense of satisfaction among those who enjoy it. With regard to milieu of residence, residents of rural areas rated the level of satisfaction slightly higher than residents of urban areas and large cities, as residents of rural areas may have a tendency to be more resigned to fate and live a simpler life than residents of urban areas and large cities.

Young people also ranked their own satisfaction with life in Iraq as middling, with some slight variations. In terms of gender, women assessed their satisfaction with life as being higher. When it comes to age groups, the youngest group showed slightly higher rates of life satisfaction than other groups, while those with middle and higher levels of education showed slightly higher rates than those with lower levels of education. Those with a good economic situation also showed a higher level of life satisfaction. In terms of milieu of residence, assessment of own life satisfaction was very similar.

As for youth's views on the differences between people's levels of life satisfaction in Iraq and the level of satisfaction of the survey respondents themselves, around half of those survey respondents who saw a difference (56 per cent) viewed this negatively, while approximately one-quarter of this subset said that their feelings were positive. The others said that they did not care. The above data can be interpreted as nearly half of the respondents in this group being disappointed with their personal situation because of the general conditions in the country caused by political and economic disorder, the deterioration of services, limited work and leisure opportunities and unequal distribution of income and wealth, on top of their frustration with the general situation. One-quarter of this set might be from the groups that were granted more opportunities and privileges through being sponsored by the government and influential political parties and forces. These additional advantages were offered to public sector employees and their families, members of party organisations, families of martyrs and the wounded, families of victims of terrorist operations, members of armed groups, businessmen and contractors (and their »families«) who have contracts with the government, government institutions and parties, etc. On the other hand, around one-quarter of the group who saw a difference between general and personal levels of satisfaction expressed feelings of isolation and apathy related to the events and incidents that occurred as a result of the

repeated disappointments, lack of empowerment and inability to effect change, which pushed them towards a state of resignation and indifference.

4.4.1 Assessment of and Mobilisation for the Protests: Events Post-2011

Historical events show that the MENA region has witnessed stalled revolutions since the 1950s and 1960s, and, in each case, following their success, the revolutionaries became bureaucrats and dictators. As a result, the revolutionary ideal has largely disappeared in the region. This has led to widespread despair and disappointment among those who witnessed the uprisings and revolutions that took place in their countries. Thus, in the context of the failure of the post-colonial period during the second half of the twentieth century, revolutions were viewed negatively. Instead, reform became the ideal for realising change.

Thus, the demands of the 2011 protests clearly favoured reform and did not aim to change the social and political systems. The methods adopted by demonstrators were not aimed at seizing power and the protestors did not even prepare for this. As a result, the uprisings failed and are seen as something negative and destructive by both those who supported and opposed them. Many young people spontaneously participated in a demonstration without having planned to do so. But others who had participated in the past did not even consider participating or being active in the future due to their disappointment with previous political activity.

In the past, political events in one country impacted neighbouring countries or regions. There was both a high degree of similarity between the social and political

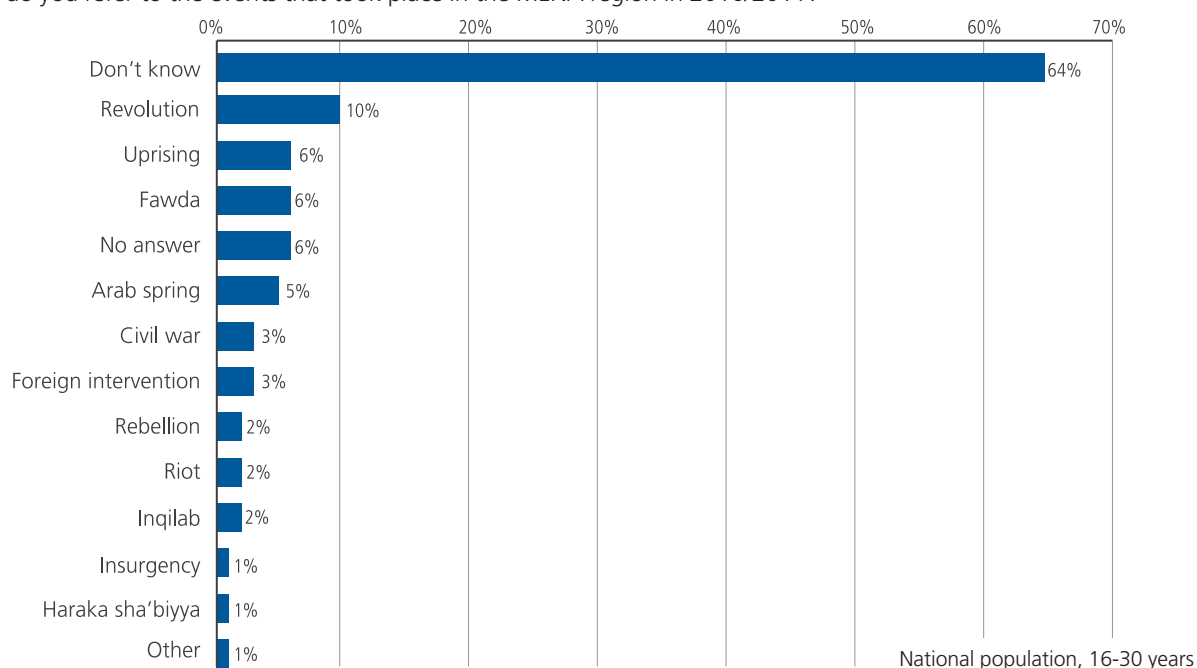
circumstances and strong feelings of Arab nationalism and shared history, which had a significant impact on the generations who lived through those events. To compare today's youth with this previous generation, and to understand the extent of their engagement and the impact of events taking place in the region and to shed light on how the study participants viewed the events that took place more than ten years ago in 2011, it is useful to examine the terms they used to refer to these events, as well as their assessments of them. Participants were asked the following question: How do you refer to the events that took place in the MENA region during that period? Shockingly, more than half of the youth surveyed in Iraq answered with »I don't know«, while a small number preferred not to answer at all. That is, around 70 per cent were too young and unaware of such events/had not heard of them, since the youth surveyed in the 16-20 age group were aged 6-10 in 2011 and thus had not yet developed an interest in politics and an understanding of public affairs. This also means that some of the respondents did not follow the events at the time and they did not occupy their interest enough for them to be able to describe and name them now. This indicates a kind of dissociation and disinterest, unlike in the past where affairs and events that affect the peoples of the region aroused the interest and national sentiments of all citizens.

More than one-fifth of the survey respondents described these events using four positive descriptions expressing support for them. These were as follows: revolution, uprising, Arab Spring and popular movement. In contrast, seven negative descriptions, expressing opposition, were used by a number of survey respondents. These were: chaos, civil war, foreign intervention, insurgency, riots, coup d'état and armed insurrection.

Figure 5

Events in the MENA region 2010/2011

How do you refer to the events that took place in the MENA region in 2010/2011?



Once again, these results indicate the dissociation and disinterest of some youth in Iraq or their lack of knowledge of the events that occurred in the region. Indeed, approximately half of all survey respondents explicitly stated that they do not know the terms they were asked about, or do not wish to answer this question.

That said, the responses of the survey participants showed that they overwhelmingly believe that opposing the regime, even with its corruption, undermines security and stability. Respondents felt that this stops the regime from conducting its affairs and protecting the country's interests, fosters violence and opens the door to foreign intervention, as well as causing incitement and discord among the country's people, and results only in some political figures being replaced with others who perpetuate the same destruction. A large percentage (33 per cent) described the events as having been started by young people and hijacked by others. A similarly large number of survey respondents (32 per cent) also held that the events were responsible for widespread violence. A total of 29 per cent also suspected that active outside powers had incited the events. A number of survey respondents (32 per cent) believed that the events did not change anything. The most common response to all these various statements, however, was »I don't know«, accounting for around 45 per cent of responses in each case.

In this vein, between one-tenth and one-third of survey respondents reacted positively to these events.

The young people who participated in the survey believe that change is the way to achieve a better life in Iraq, and

they are prepared to bear the immediate losses and damage of that change in the hope of achieving a political system that guarantees freedoms, balances freedoms and duties, and creates justice and prosperity, even if this takes place with international help or outside intervention. They view the events as ongoing (they will not end until the dreams of a better country, preserving the dignity of its citizens, are fulfilled). Thus what has been achieved because of these events (revolution and mass demonstrations) to date makes them feel that they are better off today than they were before, and they hope to achieve more by continuing to struggle and fight for victory.

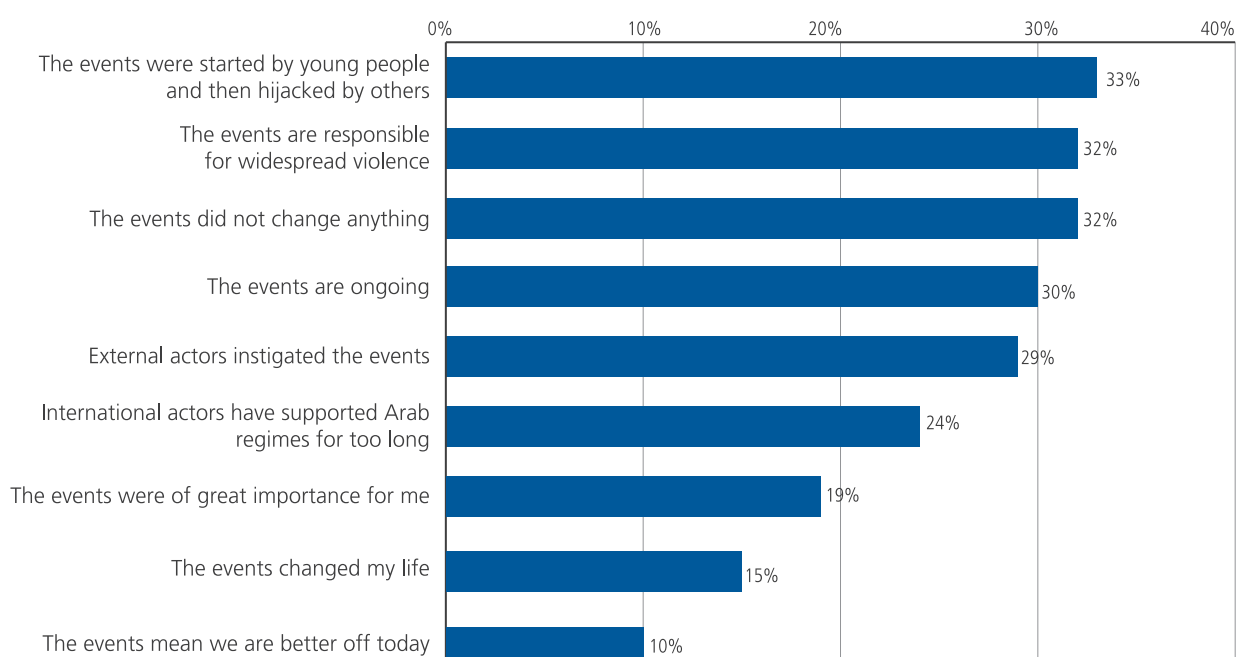
4.4.2 Demonstrations and Protests in Iraq: Assessment, Mobilisation and Participation

To understand the extent to which Iraqi youth are aware of the similarities between the events or movements taking place in their country and those that took place at the end of 2010 and early 2011, they were asked this question directly. A high percentage of survey respondents either did not know of any similar events (53 per cent) or asserted that they were not similar (27 per cent). This surprising data can partly be explained by the fact that the youngest age group would not have been aware of the events that took place in 2010-2011, as they were between five and ten years old at the time. The middle age group was also young, between 10 and 14, that is, in general, they had no interest in or awareness of politics when these events occurred. In addition, when assessing the similarities between events in some

Figure 6

Assessment of the events

Talking about these events, how would you judge the following statements?



National population, 16-30 years

of the countries of the region (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen) and those in Iraq, survey respondents might compare the mechanisms, slogans, interventions and groups involved, as well as the fact that they resulted in the fall and change of the regime and the waves of violence and instability that these countries subsequently faced. Thus, when comparing these with similar cases in Iraq, the picture may be distorted for the respondents, as most of the demands made by the Iraqi protesters were focused on reforming the system. With regard to other events taking place in the country, besides respondents' assessments, it is also useful to examine the terms they use to refer to them. The 19 per cent who had confirmed that similar events had taken place in Iraq were asked the following question: How do you describe the recent events in your country? The majority described these events using four positive terms, which expressed their support for them. These were: revolution, uprising, popular movement and movement. On the other hand, more than half of this group used seven negative descriptions for these events, expressing their opposition to them. These were: anarchy, foreign intervention, insurgency, civil war, riots, armed insurrection and coup d'état.

4.5 YOUTH AND POLITICAL ACTIVITY

Interest in political matters is of course different from being active in the political sphere. With regard to political activity, it is also necessary to distinguish between considering participating in all the various types of political work, on the one hand, and actual activism, on the other. Thus, a dis-

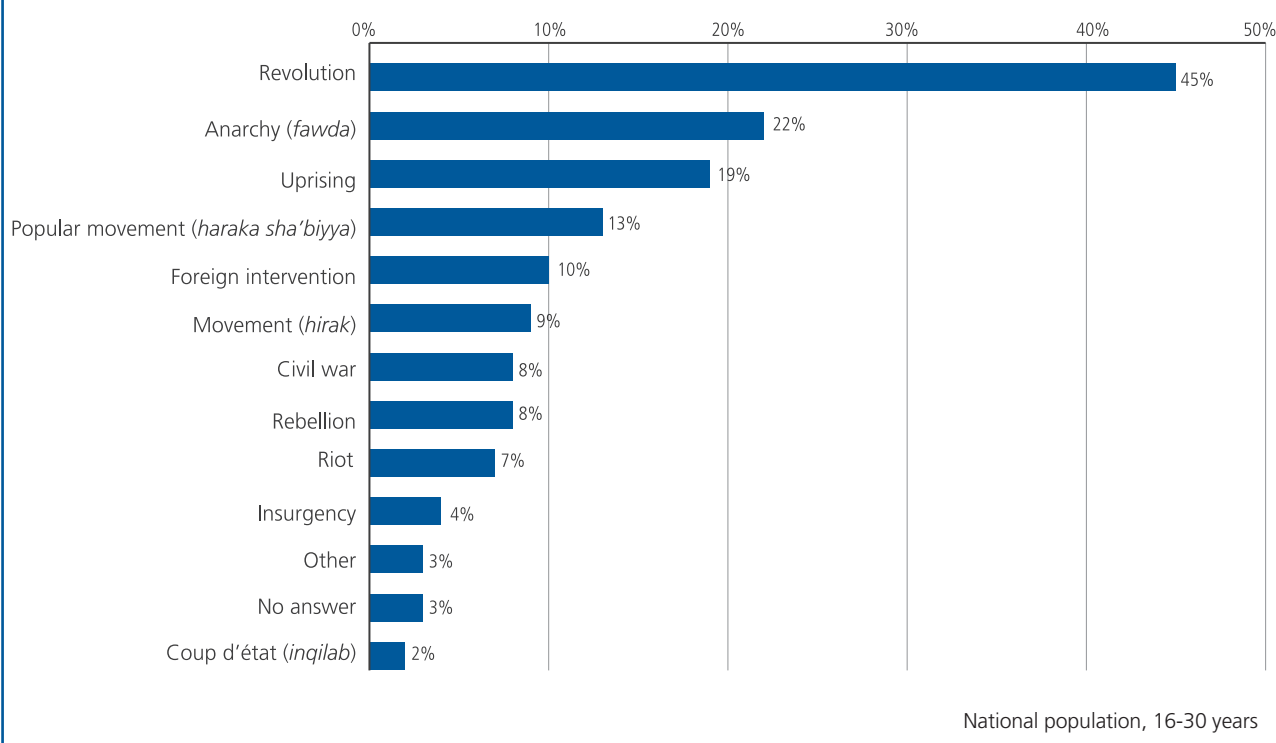
inction should be drawn between thoughts and intentions with regard to the activities that individuals would engage in if given the opportunity or forced to do so and those activities that they actually engage in in reality. In this section, the activities youth consider resorting to in order to make their voices heard and have a political impact will be highlighted. These are distributed as follows.

Top of the list was participation in elections and demonstrations, which approximately one-quarter of the participants said they would »probably« or »certainly« consider. This was followed by participation in a strike. The next type of activity was boycotting certain products for political reasons, as although it is nothing exceptional, the survey respondents consider boycotts to be a type of political work, which requires less commitment in terms of resources. Boycotting products is also a prominent type of political work in the Middle East, where boycott, divestment and sanctions movements have been popular in recent decades. This suggests that survey respondents would be sufficiently aware of this method and its impact as a form of protest and a way of making their voices heard. Next was encouraging others online to participate in a certain activity, then came gathering information online or through Twitter to join an existing group, followed by participating in an association, then distributing fliers and signing petitions online, although these last options were ranked fairly low. When the survey respondents were asked about the other political activities they considered engaging in, mobilisation by participating in a political group scored low, although male survey respondents and those with higher levels of education, a good economic situation, and residents of urban areas and

Figure 7

Terms to describe recent events

How do you describe the recent events in your country?



large cities were more inclined than the other corresponding categories to consider such political activities to make their voices heard.

In comparing the political activities that the survey respondents tended to consider and those that they had previously participated in, the survey showed that nearly two-thirds of respondents either showed reluctance to take part in political activities or their social and family situation did not permit them to engage in them. On top of this, some respondents were too young to take part in such activities.

That said, more than half of those surveyed had participated in one or several political activities or events, which had a direct impact (mainly protest activities) to make their voices heard and express their opinions. The top four actions were demonstrations, elections, strikes and boycotts. This suggests that youth tend to prefer activities that involve direct confrontation to push for change over indirect practices.

Other political activities were also chosen by participants, although at lower rates: encouraging others online to participate in a certain activity, followed by seeking information online or on Twitter to join an existing group or association, then distributing fliers and signing petitions online and finally participating in political party work. According to the above information, the youth surveyed tended to be less interested in political activities that require organisation,

mobilisation, rallying or attracting public attention, which were all described as indirect practices. In their view, these activities have a weak impact and are ineffective in the context of an unstable society and a political system with complex problems and significant corruption, not to mention the broad influence of armed groups. In light of this situation, activities involving direct confrontation are required to achieve tangible change.

In sum, male survey participants and those with higher levels of education, a good economic situation, and residents of urban areas and large cities showed a higher level of involvement in these kinds of political activities to make their voices heard than the other corresponding categories.

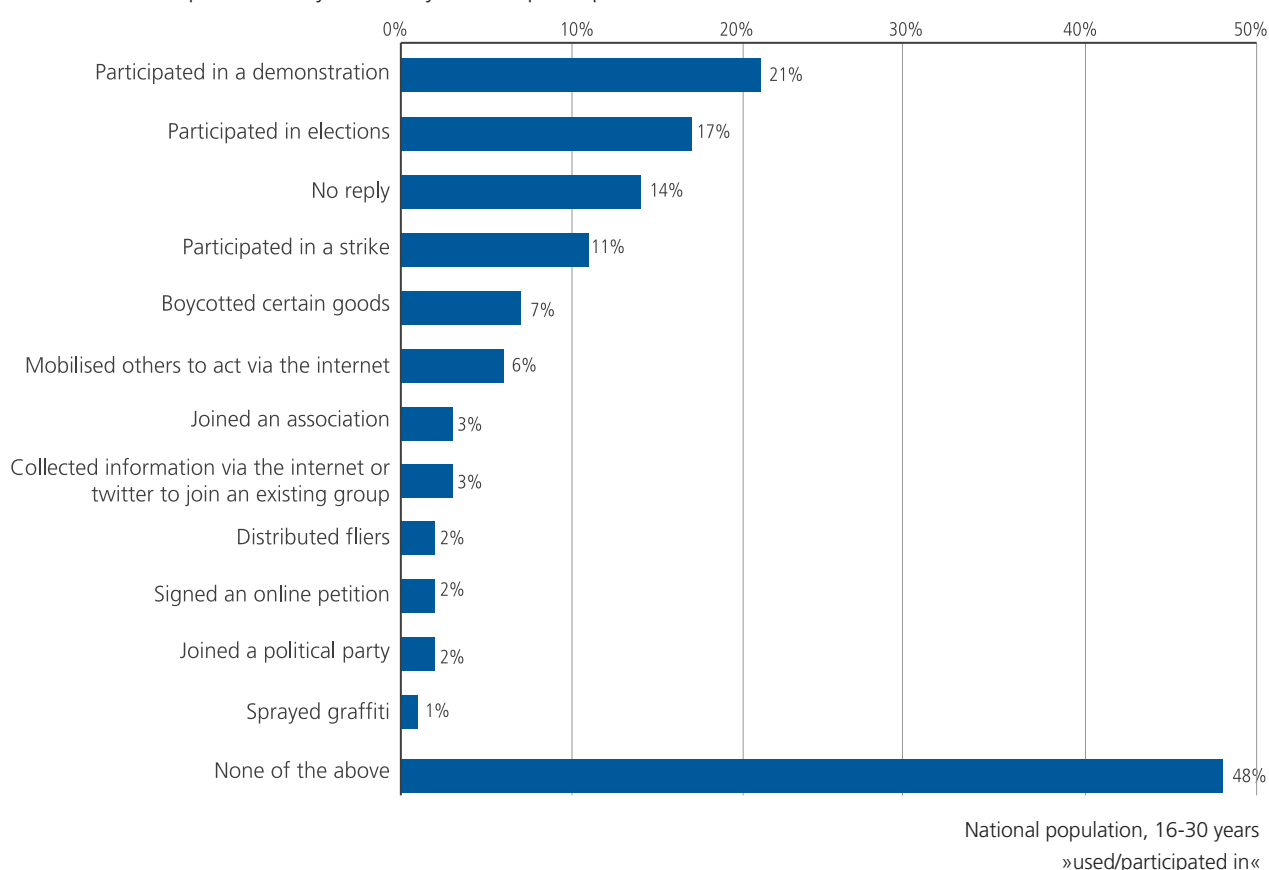
4.6 MOBILISATION AND PARTICIPATION IN PURSUIT OF SOCIAL AND POLITICAL GOALS

The 2019 protests represented the height of mobilisation of Iraqi youth, who played an important role and demonstrated their ability to develop and change relations between society and the state. Following the protests, the government resigned and was replaced with a caretaker government whose cabinet included technocrats to manage the crisis. Then the election law was changed, and the members of

Figure 8

Political actions participated in/mechanisms used by survey respondents

Which of these options have you already used or participated in?



the independent elections commission were replaced with judges. Young people rather abstained from participating in the early elections that were held in 2021. Following this, the focus of researchers and decision-makers on youth mobilisation shifted towards the role young people play in changing the country's policies. However, this does not mean that young people did not participate or did not attend rallies, for political, social or economic reasons, in the period following the large-scale protest. On the contrary, the results indicate that despite the social and economic problems, the mounting dangers of the Covid-19 pandemic after the October uprising, and the government's excessive suppression of political activists at the time, a large number of young people continue to participate in the movement and mobilise for change. Now, however, their focus is more on achieving greater social and economic change and thus mobilisation has taken on more varied forms.

During the two years after the protests, the political mobilisation of youth was very high in most parts of the country. Many protest movements appeared, demanding various political reforms, good governance, political accountability and the provision of services and work opportunities. The current government's reactions to them were different to the previous regimes and sought to quell the anger of disaffected elements within the system in order to implement a number of political reforms. The government measures led to a decline in political activity and a return to old forms of civic activity alongside a continuation of the new. This activity does not constitute a direct threat or challenge to the existence of the system; instead, it is focused on effecting more social, political and economic change. Mobilisation and participation might not necessarily be targeted at the regime itself, but may encompass collective action within the government or even take place with the government's support.

Social and mass activity is considered an important form of youth mobilisation, as young activists motivate other people facing the same challenges to join their cause and contribute to resolving or mitigating those challenges. The new types of mobilisation and participation also include establishing youth initiatives and entrepreneurial partnerships through which young people who lack access to good education or work opportunities can participate in training courses. Mobilisation may also be promoted through the media, which supports social cooperation and solidarity. Joining civil society organisations represents an effective alternative for young people to express their interests and take part in activities that they support, as the shift towards democracy has provided ample opportunities for participating and getting involved.

The data from the current study confirms and depicts in more detail a picture of widespread and large-scale mobilisation by providing the basis for a deeper understanding of youth activists. It is possible to describe youth activists as those who are willing to get involved in political and social activity and exercise political or civic influence for the benefit

of other people. Youth activists also show higher levels of political or civic engagement than others.

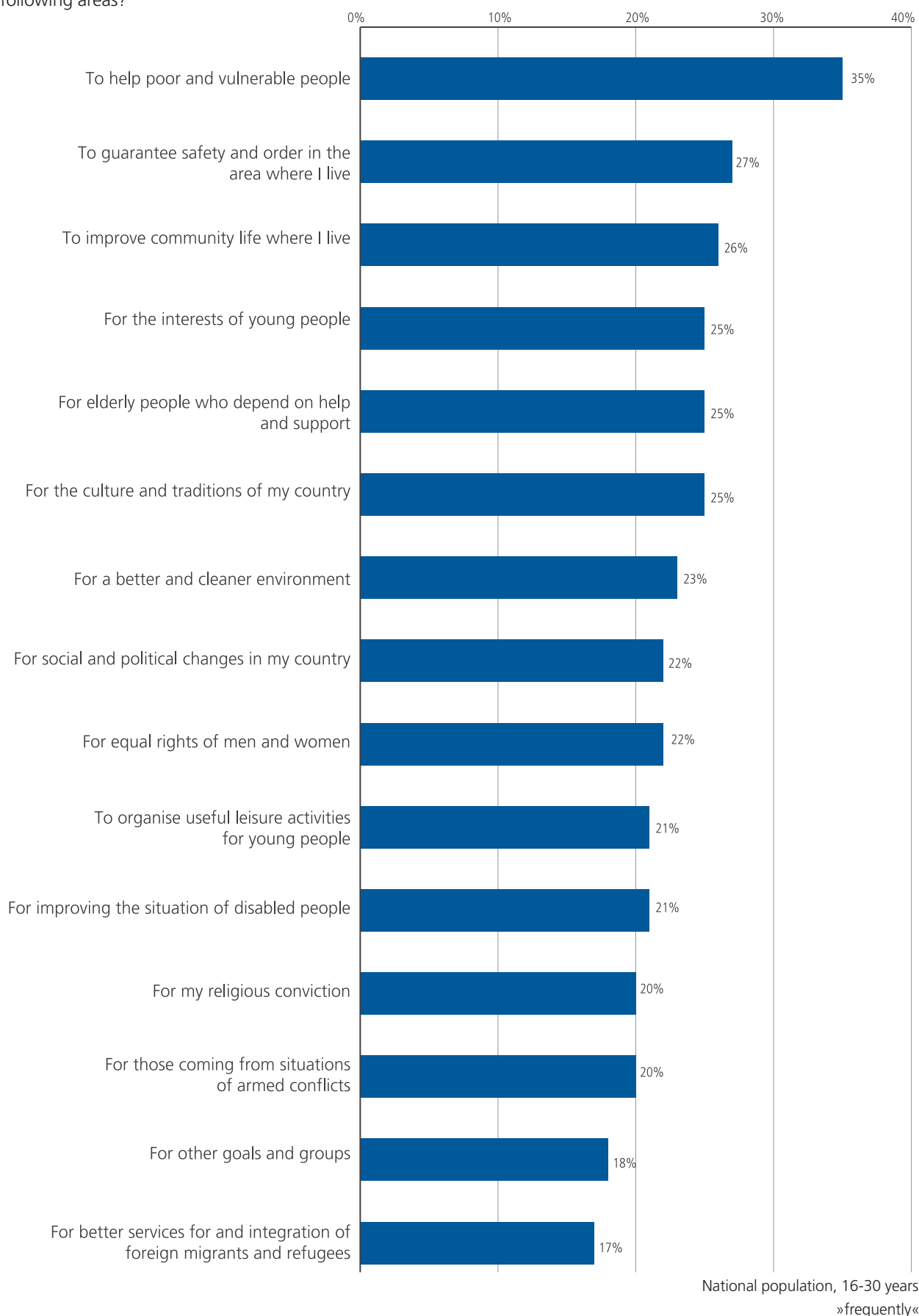
Those who responded to the question about civic and political engagement with »I usually participate« to achieve social or political goals and »I am committed to the interests of other people who need help« told us that the areas that most appeal to them to achieve this are as follows: 35 per cent of youth stated that they »frequently« help the poor and vulnerable, as in a country like Iraq there is a disparity in the distribution of income and wealth, high unemployment rates and not enough work opportunities for all those segments of society that suffer from poverty. Here the survey respondents showed a higher tendency to pursue goals that serve such segments of society. This was followed by activists working on ensuring safety and order in their residential area (27 per cent). Next came those interested in participating to improve coexistence in their residential area (26 per cent). Here young people demonstrated feelings of social responsibility towards their residential areas and aimed to improve them.

On a related note, the responses showed high rates of interest among young people in participating in projects and activities to benefit youth and the elderly and to preserve the culture and traditions of the country. The survey respondents also expressed an interest in participating in activities supporting the environment (23 per cent) and effecting social and political change in the country, achieving equal rights between men and women, improving the situation of people with special needs, as well as organising useful activities for young people (21 per cent). These were followed by an interest among respondents in participating in programmes related to their religious convictions and to support those coming from areas of armed conflict (displaced people). Finally, they expressed an interest in helping integrate migrants and refugees and in activities that further other goals and groups (18 per cent). These results clearly show that active young people are more interested in social and economic change than in political change. They also reflect the general social and religious discourse in Iraq, as decision-makers and religious leaders tend to prioritise economic and social reforms over political reforms. The low interest in gender equality is also a reflection of the patriarchal nature of the Arab societies in which these youth activists live. We might have expected the level of interest in refugee affairs to be higher among youth activists than others, especially in Iraq which hosts a significant number of Syrian and Palestinian refugees, in addition to the internally displaced, but this was not the case due to the number of and competition between vulnerable groups and areas that require intervention.

Figure 9

Youth civic engagement in Iraq

Do you engage in civic activities in pursuit of social and political goals or out of commitment to helping others in the following areas?



To help us understand where and how the survey respondents participate in order to further social or political goals that benefit other people, the survey results showed that the largest group (45 per cent) take part individually, which indicates low collective and organised activity among them and a preference for individual initiatives. This was followed by those participating spontaneously and outside institutions (36 per cent). That is, the dominant form of participation of youth activists to achieve their goals is unorganised and non-institutional. Civic engagement through a group at school or university (30 per cent) or an association (20 per cent) is less common.

In the same vein, a low percentage stated that they prefer to be involved in such activities through their membership in a youth organisation (17 per cent), religious institution (13 per cent), through a trade union (8 per cent) or through membership in a political party (6 per cent), which confirms the low level of confidence of youth in such institutions and the nature and quality of their activities. It is worth mentioning that these indicators are in line with and support the previous data, as the majority of survey respondents were not in employment, in addition to their aversion towards and lack of confidence in politicians, and their lack of belief in the success of the current parties in achieving their goals.

5

YOUTH, COVID-19 AND LOCKDOWN: AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

From a human development standpoint, the concept of security focuses on staying alive and overcoming the dangers of pandemics, illnesses, political repression or events that disrupt daily life and lead to upheaval, confusion and displacement. Human security provides a basic foundation for development and effective governance. The provision of security represents one of the most important basic functions of the state and involves protection from systematic arbitrariness that targets human rights and represents a physical threat, as well as major economic, social and environmental risks. Human security means the protection of important freedoms, shielding people from critical situations and dangers, and developing their power and opportunities to fulfil their aspirations by creating political, social, environmental, military and cultural systems that provide them with the foundations for survival and a life with dignity. It also pertains to both the individual and society. It is not limited to just protecting people, but includes empowering them so that they are able to protect themselves. Thus, human security includes individual human rights and comprises several dimensions related to the environment, food and development. Security is a comprehensive concept centred around humans and goes beyond the traditional view that is limited to the defence of territory and use of military force. In this sense, security is for all groups of society, where exceptions are not made for one group over another. However, a loss of security and its implications impact these groups to varying degrees, and in such times, women, children and teenagers are more vulnerable to and affected by the threat of an absence of security than others. This is perhaps best expressed in the challenges and risks of the Covid-19 pandemic as one of the biggest physical threats that the region and the world had faced.

This part of the project aims to acquire a better understanding of Iraqi youth—their perspectives and aspirations—by examining their situation in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, in addition to understanding the social, economic and political reality in which they have lived for the past five years. It will also attempt to understand their concerns and optimism for the future, the possible changes in their lives due to the pandemic and their feelings about those changes, as well as how the government dealt with the pandemic compared to other countries.

5.1 READINESS AND CONFRONTATION

The survey showed that the financial situation of approximately one-fifth of the survey respondents allowed them to save money, and around half of those confirmed that they saved money as a back-up during times of need. That is, about 10 per cent of the survey respondents tend to save money in anticipation of facing social, economic and political—as well as environmental and health—challenges and fluctuations, which are generally expected to occur in an insecure and unstable society such as Iraq. This is expressed in their concern with regard to their current situation and the immediate future. This must be taken into consideration when conceptualising the situation of youth during the lockdown and in facing the pandemic. The survey data also showed that most of the young people questioned did not have opportunities to save money. That is, the majority experienced a lack of resources and vulnerability during the pandemic and in its aftermath.

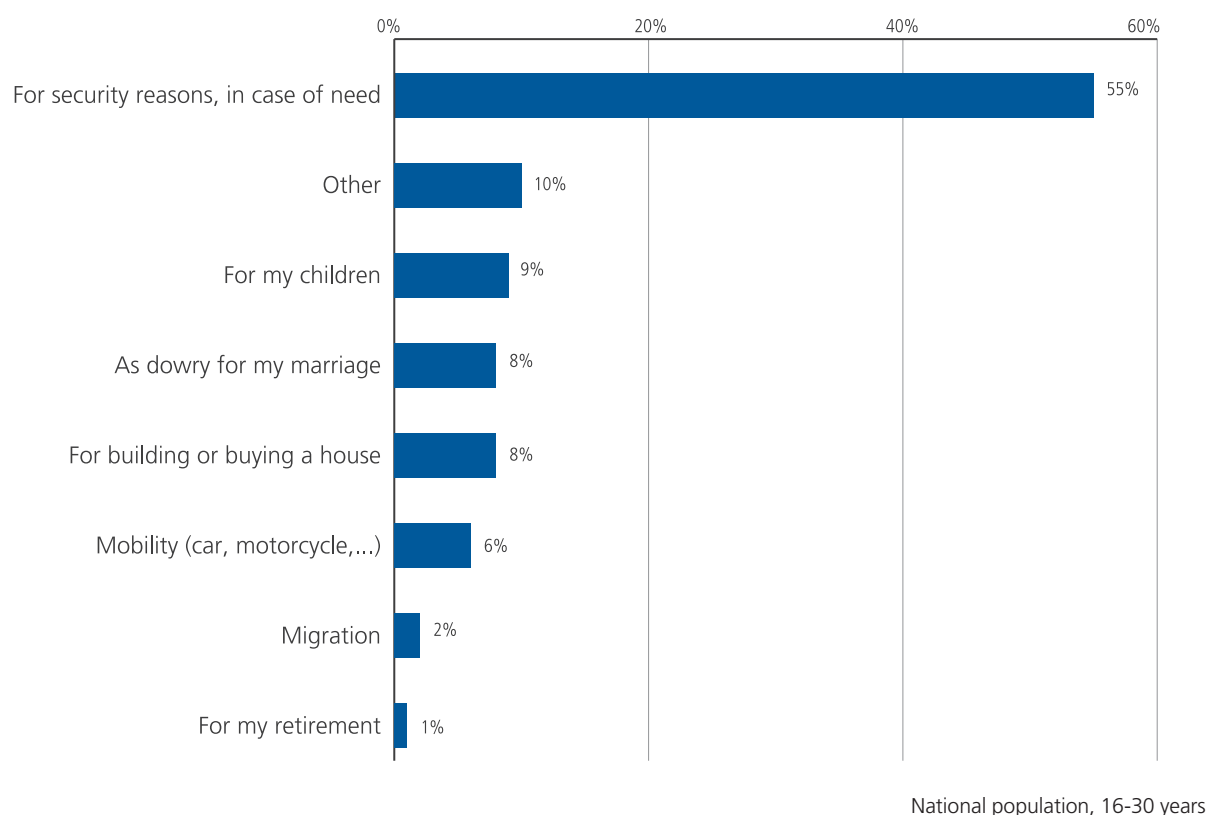
The survey showed that youth ranked a number of issues of a personal nature as having a very high level of importance. These were largely related to individual aspirations for themselves and the type of life they want and had decided to live. As far as the pandemic and a healthy lifestyle is concerned, youth also saw this as highly important compared to other areas. These findings confirm youth's interest in and awareness of health issues or that they see it as important to be aware of such issues in order to avoid them. It also indicates the impact of the pandemic, the health risks they faced and experiences they had, and suggests an increased awareness with regard to this, since, when the survey was carried out, approximately a year and a half had passed since they were first confronted with coronavirus.

On the other hand, and in the same context, it suggests a prevalence of causes for concern and fear of events taking place that must be anticipated in order to avoid harm. Here, the current data from the youth survey reveals the concern of the survey participants for the immediate future with regard to developing or contracting a serious illness. This was ranked second of all the other issues that concerned them. First in the list was their concern over the increasing insecurity, which may be strongly related to the consequences of the lockdown and the spread of the pandemic.

Figure 10

Reasons for saving money

For what purpose do you save money primarily?



5.2 COVID-19 AND POSSIBLE CHANGES

In general, young people in Iraq are facing many changes in their life—positive ones that strengthen them as well as negative ones that involve further costs and compound effects. In order to gain insight into the negative events and incidents that took place in the lives of the survey respondents in the last five years and understand their ranking according to how important these events were to them. Youth described the threats resulting from Covid-19 as the most prominent and the main cause of the significant changes they had faced recently (73 per cent «important» or «very important»), which indicates that a majority of the survey respondents had never faced a threat as imminent and lethal as the Covid-19 pandemic. This was followed by a shortage of food (67 per cent), which may have resulted from the enforcement of lockdown, the disruption of the work of most authorities, the restricted exchange of goods and services, and the closure of plants and factories. Next, changes inside the family (64 per cent), such as everyone (men, women, parents and children) being forced to stay at home and participate in performing routine activities and tasks led some to develop cooperative and close relationships and ways of life, while for others, it provoked a need to withdraw and exacerbated problems and violence.

This was followed by a lack of social stability (58 per cent) and the loss of jobs as a result of the lockdown, curfew and social distancing, which compounded unemployment and job loss rates. These concerns were followed by climate change (50 per cent), as some of the survey respondents connected the spread of the pandemic and diseases with climate change and environmental pollution in the region. Last were sectarian divisions and increased isolation from the outside world (46 per cent each) due to the lockdowns, travel bans, restrictions on movement and people remaining in their regions and places of residence, which exacerbated the isolation from the outside world.

It should be taken into consideration that of the nine negative events and incidents presented to the respondents, six were directly related to the pandemic or their impact and processes were increased because of it, such as food shortages, job loss, changes inside the family, lack of social stability and increased violence and isolation from the outside world. This indicates that various and complex negative changes occurred that severely shook the lives of young people over the last five years.

In order to better understand the possible changes the pandemic brought about in the lives of the survey respondents, they were asked about the time that they spend on various activities during one 24-hour period. This was asked in reference to two different occasions. The first was a retrospective look back to the beginning of 2020, just before the start of the pandemic, and the second was about the situation at the time the survey was conducted, i.e., in September 2021. The response options were split into four categories in order to observe changes, namely: sleep, work (at home or outside the home), study (at home or outside the home) and other activities (at home or outside the home). It turns out, however, that the average time spent on each activity was very similar at both points in time and across all categories of young adults, indicating that the situation had already normalised and most pandemic restrictions had been lifted by September 2021.

5.3 THE PANDEMIC AND LOOKING TO THE FUTURE: THE OPTIMISM AND PESSIMISM OF YOUTH

With regard to young people's views on the future and their personal lives, the survey results show that a good percentage of all respondents stated that they tend to be optimistic, and the same applies to their views on the future of the society in which they live. Here the survey respondents are more optimistic on the personal level (by 8 percentage

points) than they are with regard to society. This can be explained by the fact that they can change and have an impact on their personal reality to a much larger extent than the social reality. As such, they view their personal problems as being easier to solve than the complex problems of society, which require organised and planned institutional work. The latter is the responsibility of the government and its institutions, the parties in power, the academic elite, and researchers and experts, along with the various segments of society. The relatively pronounced tendency towards optimism is due more to the nature of young people dreaming of a better tomorrow than to a view based on actual data.

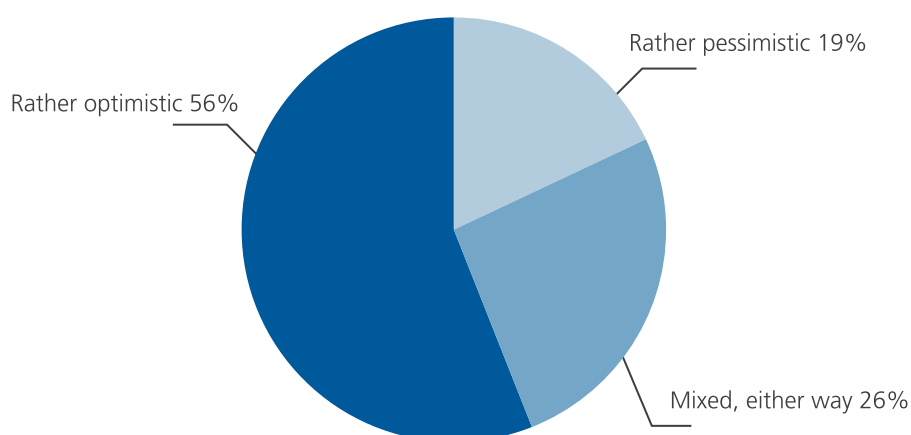
5.4 ASSESSMENT OF THE HEALTH, SOCIAL AND GOVERNMENTAL SITUATION: EFFECTS AND REPERCUSSIONS

Mapping the spread and reach of the pandemic helps us understand the resulting health, social and governmental reality in Iraq, and provides insight into the scale and dangers of the challenges. It was highly important to know the rate of infections among the survey respondents and their families and friends in order to understand the gravity of the health situation, as well as to gather information on the type of infections (mild, severe, fatal).

Figure 11

Survey respondents' views on the future of society

What about the future of our society? Do you perceive it as...



National population, 16-30 years

When it came to survey respondents being infected personally, the survey results revealed that more than half of them had been infected with Covid-19 by the time of the survey.³ Of these, most had mild infections, given that young people have a stronger immune system and better ability to fight diseases. A smaller number had friends and family who had died from the virus, although the majority of these may have had other illnesses that made them more susceptible, did not have sufficient money for treatment or had died as a result of the poor health and medical care they received while infected. On the other hand, the experience of a dangerous virus like Covid-19 necessarily leads to a change in individual perceptions with regard to health and illness. It is natural and normal for youth to be filled with energy, health, vitality and activity, which means healthy eating, sports and disinfection measures are of secondary importance for most of them. However, the pandemic affected eating patterns, health awareness and people's understanding of the importance of diet and proactively tackling the risks resulting from pollutants and viruses. It arguably also improved the awareness of issues of illness and health among young people.

Infections among family members and friends were relatively high (around two-thirds of respondents). These findings can be explained by the number of infections and the reach and spread of the pandemic and its impact on society in Iraq, which also indicates the extent of the psychological, social,

economic and health pressures to which the survey respondents and their families and acquaintances were exposed. It also reveals the scale of the threat that the health sector, the government and its institutions faced due to the pandemic.

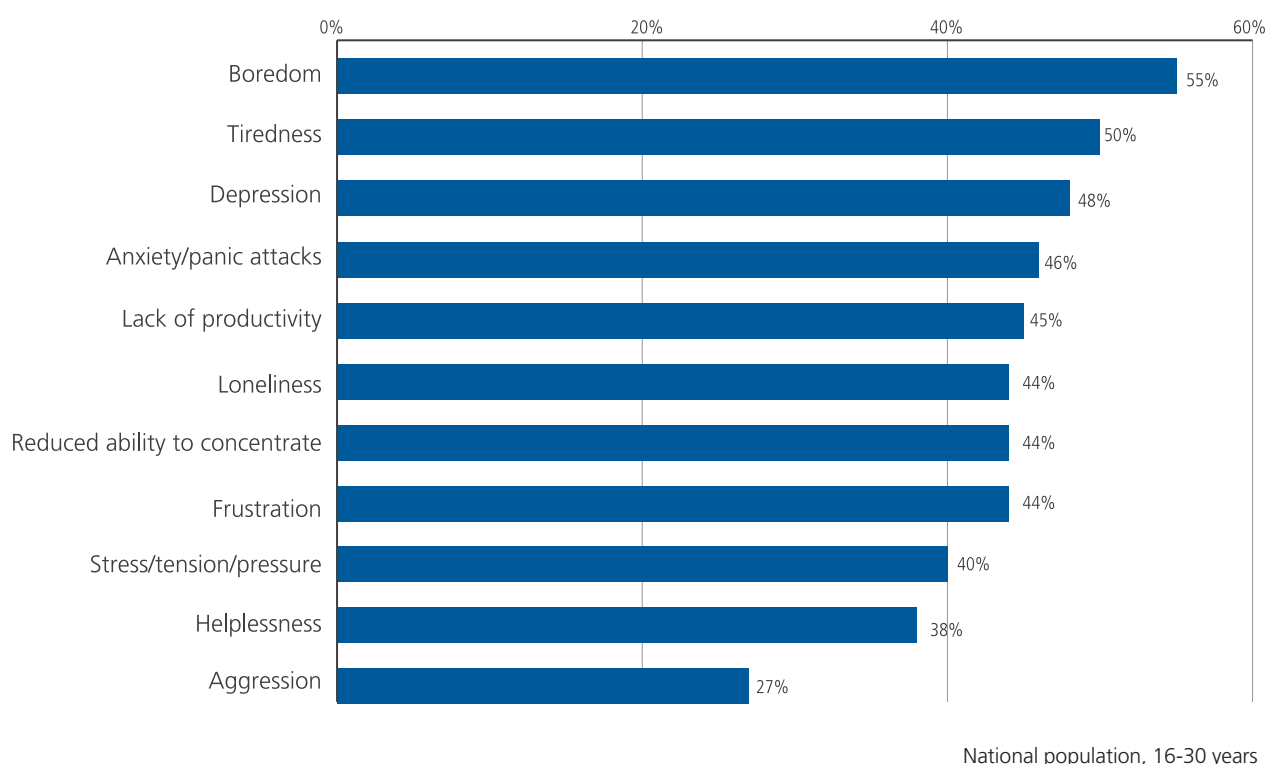
In the same context, the spread of Covid-19 infections among the survey respondents and their families, acquaintances and friends, as well as across society, and the associated lockdowns and deterioration of economic conditions, left their mark and placed individuals in general, and the youth surveyed in particular, under even more pressure. The survey data shows that the survey respondents experienced many negative feelings due to the pandemic, which remained with them in the months preceding the survey.

The numbers show that, due to the pandemic, between one-quarter and just over half of the survey respondents were frequently subjected to psychological stress and experienced negative feelings, which impacted the course of their lives and the nature of their daily interactions. These feelings thus also influenced, in one way or another, their assessment of their reality and their future, the extent of their satisfaction with themselves and their social and health situation, as well as their satisfaction with the government and its institutions in dealing with the pandemic, its risks and effects.

Figure 12

Emotional life during the pandemic

The following feelings are mentioned by many young people in connection with the pandemic. How frequently have you felt these emotions in recent months?



³ This is actually the highest percentage of all 12 countries in the survey.

In general, women had these feelings more than men, possibly due to their increased work in the home and the restriction of their activities resulting from the need to take care of their families. Those with medium to high levels of education experienced these negative emotions more frequently than those with low education levels, given that their lives had previously been focused on work and study, something the pandemic deprived them of. Those with a poor personal economic situation were more affected by this, to some extent due to the fact that the pandemic exacerbated poverty and need. Residents of large cities and urban areas were more impacted than those in rural areas, likely due to the density of housing and the large amount of entertainment and services which the pandemic deprived them of.

With regard to the negative impact of the pandemic, a large number of survey respondents (77 per cent) »rather« or »fully« agreed that their professional opportunities were greatly diminished, probably due to the suspension of work outside the home and the increase in unemployment rates because of the pandemic. Most respondents (76 per cent) stated that the pandemic forced them to fundamentally change their consumption priorities. For example, they were forced to eat healthy food to strengthen the immune system and prevent them from becoming ill. Also, in assessing the public health system in the country, the same percentage of survey respondents said they felt it was »useless«, as the number of infections were more than the hospitals and medical staff could cope with. More than half of the survey respondents indicated that due to the lockdown and social distancing because of the pandemic, their relationships with friends had notably weakened. A large number of respondents reported that their personal debts had increased due to depleted savings, loss of work and increased medical and living costs as a result of the pandemic. To some extent, these indicators explain why some survey respondents described themselves as adults and not youth, since they took on responsibility at an early age and had experiences that made them feel older than they actually are. The above data also confirms the type and number of difficulties and challenges faced by young people due to the pandemic and the changes in their living and economic situations, as well as their consumption patterns.

On the other hand, and on a more positive note, most of the survey respondents (76 per cent) stated that they got closer to their family members due to the pandemic, perhaps as a result of spending more time inside the home. More than half indicated that they had begun to view vaccinations against Covid-19 more positively. The same percentage of survey respondents confirmed that social solidarity in their community was strengthened due to the pandemic, possibly because of the increased tendency to make donations and participate in charitable volunteer work to support the poor and those in need. Respondents mostly described their concerns as having been sufficiently taken into consideration throughout the pandemic period (63 per cent).

Finally, surprisingly, a notable number of the young people surveyed (62 per cent) viewed the Covid-19 crisis as providing an excellent opportunity to change their society for the better. Overall, the survey respondents tended to strongly support the social, economic and healthcare changes taking place, whether positive or negative, with from slightly less than two-thirds to a little more than three-quarters of them giving this response. Young people's awareness of the health challenges and risks and the conditions caused by the pandemic is seen as having contributed to improving the domestic situation in Iraq. Perhaps this hints at the lull in political protests during the pandemic period, as well as reduced levels of violence and respite from the war on terrorism, not to mention increased social solidarity and family cooperation, which caused respondents to take an optimistic view on some of the changes taking place because of the pandemic.

The young people surveyed also assessed the performance of the government and its institutions with regard to responding to and dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic and working to mitigate its effects and ramifications at varying levels. On the one hand, 22 per cent of the survey respondents gave the government a positive assessment, while 33 per cent had neutral or mixed feelings. This tendency is explained by the support for some of the measures adopted by the government and its institutions to address the dangers of the pandemic (such as reducing the number of workers in the public sector by 25 per cent and continuing to provide full wages until the end of the pandemic, overcoming the economic crisis, reducing oil prices and securing salaries despite the pandemic, distributing food and medical supplies to poor and low-income families, encouraging social distancing, the introduction of lockdowns and strict measures, etc.).

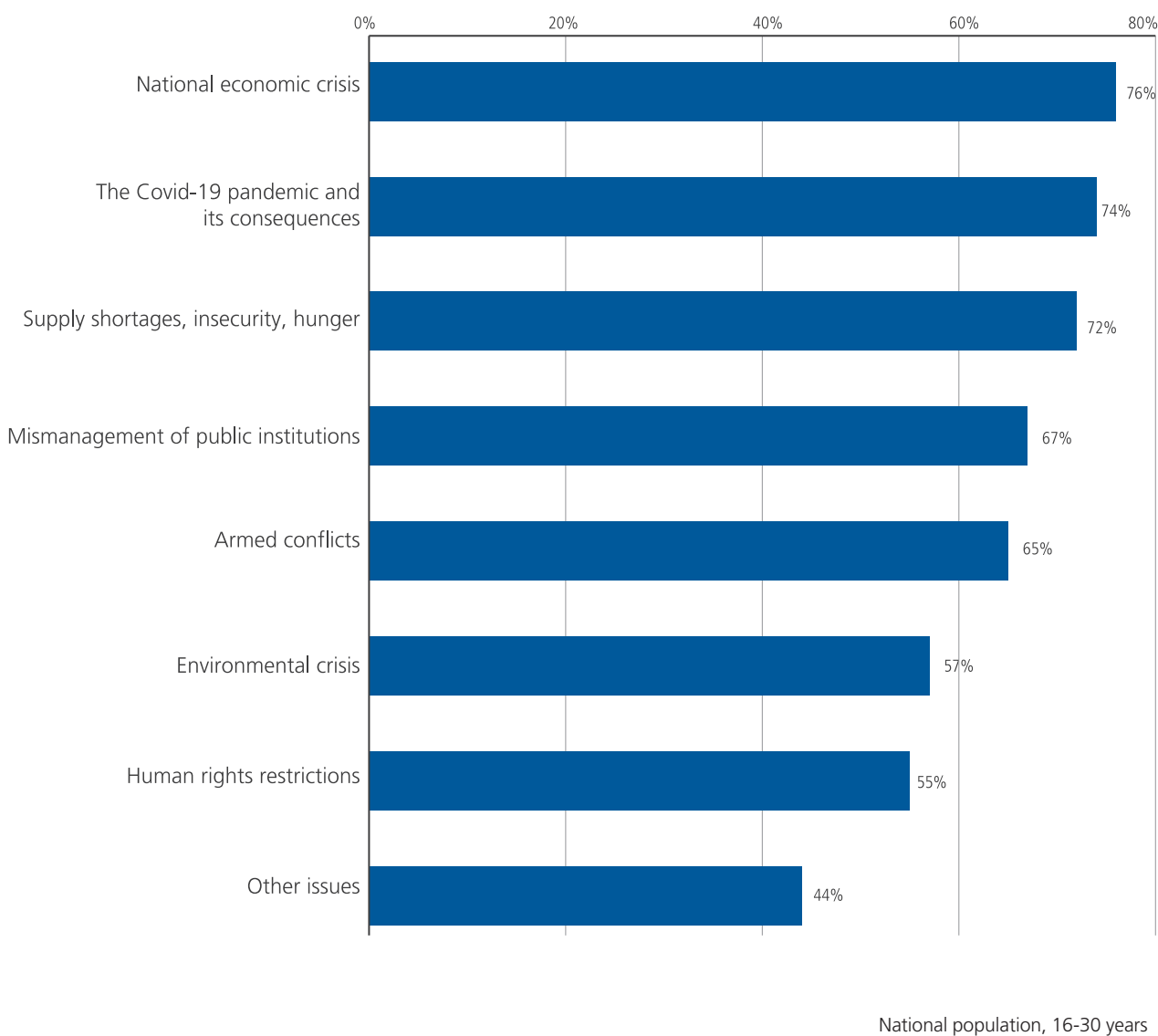
On the other hand, in contrast, 43 per cent of the total survey respondent viewed the government's handling of the crisis negatively compared to other countries. This attitude might be explained by young people's lack of support for some of the measures adopted by the government and its institutions (such as providing only a limited number of vaccines against the virus, supplying only certain hospitals (with significant distance between them) with a limited number of tests at certain hospitals, not including all families in the grant and assistance programmes, not equipping hospitals to receive the large numbers of infected patients, etc.).

On a related note, the young people surveyed expressed their views on the importance of the problems and crises listed below, which in some respects reveals the extent of their personal exposure to these issues in their daily lives.

Figure 13

Importance of problems/crisis in daily life

How important are the following problems/crisis in you daily life? Please indicate how you perceive your personal exposure to these issues.



The Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on Iraqi society. Although the Iraqi authorities adopted several important measures to help contain the spread of the pandemic, these restrictions and the broad and complex social and economic effects of the pandemic increased the hardships suffered by the Iraqi people. Vulnerable groups, such as poor families, the displaced, individuals with special needs and the unemployed were more susceptible to the risk of poverty due to the confinement or loss of the breadwinner or loss of livelihood. Thus, these groups felt the ramifications of the Covid-19 pandemic more keenly than other groups in society.

But what Figure 13 also clearly shows is that besides the significant impact of Covid-19, young people suffer from other crises as well. And when these come together, their accumulated impact on young people can be hard to deal with in daily life.

6

MOBILITY, MOVEMENT AND MIGRATION: ILLUSIONS OF FLEEING HELL FOR PARADISE

Migration is usually described as a nation's loss of human power, especially that of youth. The UNDP's Human Development Report for Iraq referred to the effects of violence and a loss of confidence in state institutions, in addition to the exceptional circumstances that pushed most young people to think about migrating, as causing the country to lose its development power (especially qualitative) and continue to do so, albeit to a limited extent (Bayt al-Hikma 2014: 176). For young people, migration is about moving towards international borders and permanently changing their place of residence from Iraq to another country. Although there are many motives for migration, it seems to be a particular challenge when it comes to young people who are driven by the desire to fundamentally change their lives and circumstances at all levels.

6.1 CONCEPTUAL DEFINITIONS AND ANALYTICAL DISCOURSES

We are living in a time characterised by rapidly accelerating movement of people, products, goods, information and expertise across international borders. The MENA region is an important hub within a network of global communications. However, much is still unknown about how young people in the region conceptualise this mobility, and how they are impacted by migration and travel. What are their attitudes and preferences on this issue? The protest movements witnessed in some Arab countries and the ensuing large-scale displacement and migration have increased young people's interest in moving to Europe. Thus, it is highly important to understand youth attitudes on migration and their opinions as potential migrants. Such information makes a valuable contribution to academic research in general, and policy-making more specifically.

In this section, the various aspects related to Iraqi youth's migration decisions will be investigated. Specifically, the section will look at how mobility is connected to their personal experiences, and how travel abroad became part of their life journey and desire to explore, to exchange one reality for another, or to explore the world virtually. The data revealed that a very small number of Iraqi youths are intent on migration (only 2 per cent of respondents are »sure«

they will emigrate, 63 per cent said they would »definitely not«, and the remaining 35 per cent were unsure, which is a striking finding given the numerous crises they face. It seems that migrating is a far more complicated project than it is assumed to be, as it depends on a lot of preparation and various strategies for drawing on resources within one's network of relations and society. It is often also a collective decision-making process that seeks to select the most suitable migrants according to their willingness and qualifications. The next section will outline some of the possible considerations involved in migrating with a view to contextualising the results. Subsequently, the data from the 2021 MENA Youth Survey (Iraq) will be presented to show young people's flexibility with regard to changing their present circumstances, the extent of their acceptance or rejection of various types of movement, as well as their motives and plans for migration.

6.2 AN ATTEMPT TO UNDERSTAND MOBILITY

The arrival of the internet created a new social space, and social interactions became increasingly liberated from the necessity of being in the same place at the same time. Virtual migration (at least temporarily) suspended the restrictions the pandemic imposed on spatial movement. For example, internet chat rooms provided an opportunity to communicate across gender, national and linguistic lines. But this virtual mobility had an impact on reality, and fuelled aspirations to migrate in real life. The internet is now more vital than it was in the past. Through the internet, individuals receive news about all manner of foreign countries, whether through work or through news about other people or places they wish to visit, discover or live in. They can easily find information on travel and many other things. This makes life easier and much more flexible. It also provides new opportunities to go abroad. Moreover, virtual spaces have increasingly started to creep into the worlds of different groups of society, even those deprived of education, and is no longer the exclusive domain of the educated.

In order to understand the numerous forms of spatial and social mobility and to incorporate virtual mobility and flexible forms of identity formation, it should be taken into consideration that there are many different types of mobility. Human mobility is inseparable from the wider exchange of goods, money, technology and ideas, which all contribute to the formation of a wide range of movements of individuals and peoples. When it comes to defining migration, significant focus is now also placed on the role of social differences, ethnicity, gender and religion. Economic conditions are not the sole determinant of the ramifications of migration, but the impact of material and social circumstances on the shape of the migration process itself, i.e., decision-making processes, pathways and attitudes, should also be taken into account.

Here human mobility expresses the ability and freedom of people to choose the place in which they wish to live. This suggests that migration needs to be redefined, as it is more than just a choice between moving or staying. This new definition should make it possible to go beyond the artificial distinction between the push and pull factors of migration or voluntary and forced migration.

Would Iraqi youth agree to live a different life and make difficult decisions to do so? To work out the answer to this question and to obtain a comprehensive picture of youth's willingness to accept life changes, three dimensions of the

flexibility indicator of social mobility should be examined. These are: marriage, remaining with or leaving family, and work.

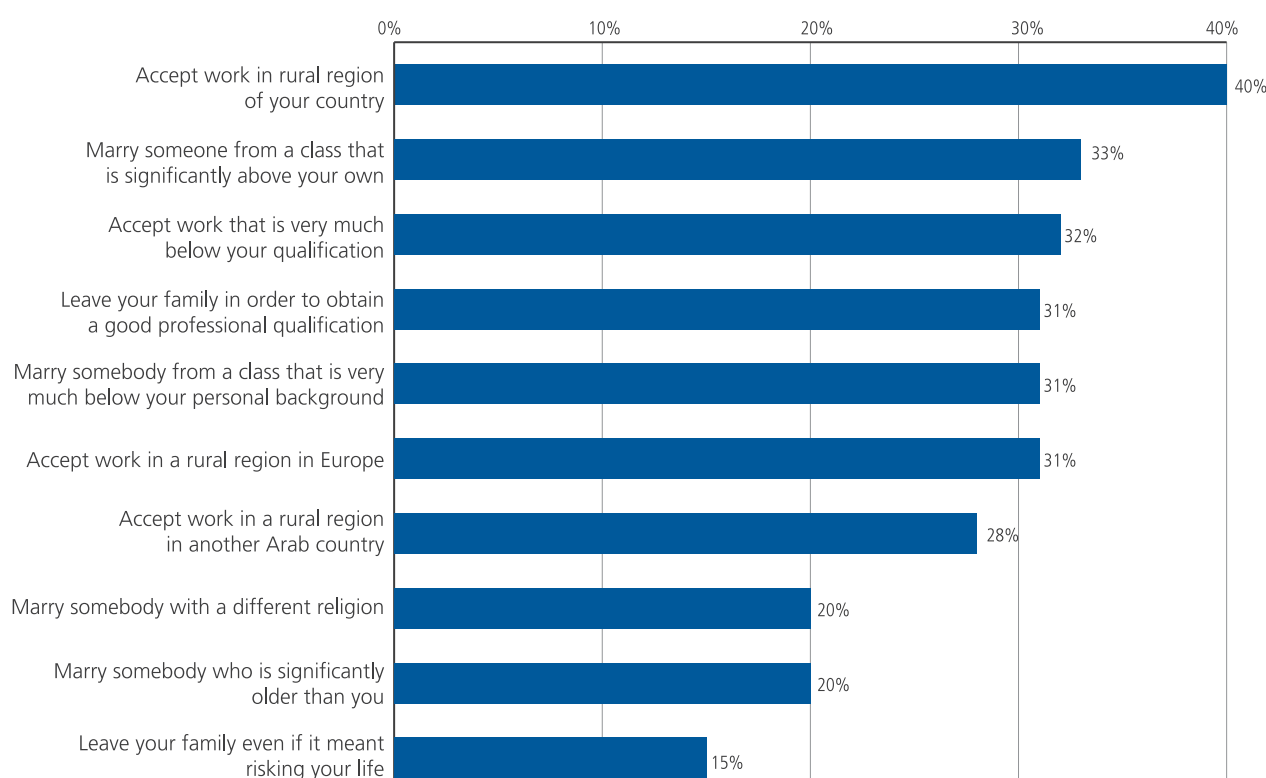
6.2.1 Marriage: Readiness and Flexibility

Individual readiness to move is linked to social readiness to accept some real-world changes in daily and practical life. In order to understand how flexible young people are with regard to movement and mobility, we focused on three types of »readiness« and the extent of their receptiveness to these was examined. These are: the readiness of survey respondents to marry someone from a higher or lower class or from another religion; the extent to which they are willing to leave their parents and family to pursue professional training or obtain a good professional qualification; acceptance of living conditions that enable them to earn money through work. One-fifth of the survey respondents showed readiness (»agree« or »rather agree«) to marry someone significantly older than them. That is, a large number of survey respondents would prefer not to do so, and age compatibility was deemed just as important as sexual, intellectual and generational compatibility, all of which increase when harmony is achieved between partners, and they are able to adapt to one another.

Figure 14

Readiness to change in the current situation

In order to change your current situation, would you be ready to....?



National population, 16-30 years

The survey respondents showed little readiness to marry someone from a different religious group, with around just one-fifth of them agreeing to this. This is a low percentage, which means that the majority of the youth surveyed would rather not marry someone from another religious group, perhaps because they believe that this difference increases the possibilities of incompatibility and conflict, which in turn affects their children, family harmony and stability. It may also reflect the implications of social and family reality and their impact on young people's decisions and attitudes, as families and religious groups prevent their members from marrying someone from another religion. If they do, their life may be at risk, not to mention that they may be banished, excluded and cut off. Thus, young people prefer to steer clear of this type of marriage.

Furthermore, with regard to marital arrangements, one-third of respondents reported that they would, in principle, be prepared to marry someone from a much higher class than their own. There were no gender differences with regard to this response. Respondents from the younger age groups were more inclined to make this choice, as they dreamt of achieving a better and more comfortable life through their partner and did not believe it would cause any problems for adaptation or harmony in their relationship. As for the relevance of education to respondent willingness to marry a person from a much higher class, those with a low level of education were more inclined to make this choice in order to change their economic and social reality. That is, the lower the educational level the higher the inclination to marry a person from a higher class, as a good education is traditionally linked to a higher income level and vice versa. Thus, youth with a low level of education were inclined to compensate for their low incomes and improve their standard of living by marrying a person from a higher class. Likewise, those with a poor economic situation were somewhat more inclined to marry someone from a higher class. There were only marginal differences by residential milieu on this matter, as it was in fact an acceptable option for everyone, regardless of where they live.

Slightly less than one-third of the young people surveyed said that they would agree to marry someone from a much lower class than their own. In terms of gender, male respondents expressed greater readiness to marry someone from a lower class than female respondents. This can be explained by the fact that according to the values and customs of Iraqi society, men have the main responsibility for supporting the family financially and meeting their partner's needs. The wife's assistance with family expenses (if she is well-off and capable) is considered a voluntary act and not something that is required of her. Indeed, some men even consider this to be shameful and unacceptable. Here respondents from the younger age groups show a greater inclination towards marrying someone from a lower class, as they consider it one of the fundamentals of becoming a man and taking responsibility. When it comes to the relevance of education for this issue, those with lower and medium levels of education showed a greater readiness to make this decision. Surprisingly, a relatively large percentage of those

with a fairly poor economic situation reported willingness to marry someone from a lower class, as some may prefer to marry those with a lower social status than them perhaps to ensure that demands on them will not increase and so that they feel satisfied with their situation, given that their partner would be from similar or lower social class. Differences by milieu of residence were limited and did not provide serious indications.

6.2.2 Leaving Home and Family: Readiness and Flexibility

Apparently, the aim of obtaining good professional qualifications constitutes an acceptable motive (at least among some youth) for a person to leave their loved ones and travel, as slightly less than one-third of the young people surveyed in Iraq stated that they were willing to do so, reporting that they either agreed or completely agreed with the idea. In terms of gender, males were more flexible and willing to do this than females. This can be explained by the greater restrictions imposed on women with regard to mobility, movement and employment, in addition to the fact that, unlike men, they are generally not asked to work or bear responsibility for supporting their families. This tendency is approximately the same across the different age groups. There appeared to be no significant relationship between level of education and agreeing to leave family to obtain good professional qualifications. Those with a poor economic situation, however, are somewhat more likely to make this decision in order to improve their standard of living. Milieu of residence showed scattered differences on this, as responses were similar among residents of rural and urban areas, but higher among residents of large cities where competition for work opportunities is constantly increasing, which makes leaving family and travelling to obtain work more acceptable.

It is also worth noting that most of the survey respondents do not take migration at all lightly. Some are split between the desire to continue their lives with their family and friends, providing a service and dedicating achievements to their home country and overcoming the obstacles to finding a suitable employment opportunity and personal fulfilment. A total of 63 per cent of the young people surveyed in Iraq indicated that they would not agree to leave their home and family if it meant risking their lives, compared to around only 15 per cent who seemed prepared to do that. This inclination prevailed among the majority of young people across all groups, which reflects their survival strategies and priorities even in a time of political instability, poor services and a deteriorating economic situation.

6.2.3 Work in Unfavourable Environments (Readiness and Flexibility)

The survey results also revealed that more than one-third, or around 40 per cent, of the young people who participated in the survey could imagine accepting work in rural areas of Iraq. In terms of gender, males were more willing to do this than women due to their freedom of movement and the fact that fewer restrictions were imposed on them than on women. This tendency is approximately the same across the different age groups. Here, age is therefore not a decisive factor in acceptance or rejection of this as an option, unlike with the other factors and changes. As for the relationship between level of education and willingness to accept work in a rural part of the country, those with lower levels of education had a greater inclination towards this, as their work opportunities are limited or non-existent compared to those with medium and higher levels of education. Those with a poor economic situation are somewhat more likely to make this decision to improve their living situation and increase their income. Milieu of residence showed distinct differences for residents of rural areas with regard to readiness to accept this type of work as they were presumably accustomed to engaging in agriculture and saw no shame in doing so as residents of urban areas and large cities may have done.

To a lesser extent, some young people showed readiness to work in a rural area of another Arab country (just 28 per cent) or of a European country (30 per cent). However, in general, working in agriculture, whether abroad or in Iraq, is not appealing to many people: from just under two-thirds to almost three-quarters of respondents reported that they would not be willing to work in a rural setting, whether in their own country, another Arab country or a European country. The flexibility and willingness of those who agreed to take a job in a rural area was higher among males, those in the younger age group, those with a low level of education, as well as, to some extent, those with a poor economic situation and residents of rural areas or peri-urban areas.

On the other hand, and in the context of flexibility with regard to work, a little less than one-third (32 per cent) of the young people surveyed said they would accept unappealing work below their qualifications. As for the relationship between education level and accepting unappealing work, this inclination is greater among those with lower levels of education, as their work opportunities are limited or non-existent compared to those with medium and higher levels of education, and the nature of the work they perform is usually strenuous and unskilled anyway.

6.3 MISGIVINGS ABOUT FORCED MIGRATION: CONCERN FOR THE FUTURE

Concerns and fears that events might occur that force them to move in order to avoid damage and harm weigh heavily on young people. The current youth survey data reveals

their concerns about the immediate future and being forced to leave the country for political reasons, with around 33 per cent of all respondents stating that they were »very« or »fairly« concerned about it. This concern is justified and can be explained by the weak law enforcement when it comes to holding corrupt officials, criminals and armed militias accountable. This is due to political interference and the protection provided to these individuals by their parties. Intense struggles also prevail between these groups and individuals for more influence and power, not to mention their tendency to prosecute and eliminate their opponents and critics, which generates a sense among young people that they may be forced to emigrate to protect themselves.

Around 37 per cent of all respondents affirmed that they were anxious about the near future in terms of being forced to leave the country for economic reasons. Iraq is suffering from an acute economic crisis due to the pandemic and the drop in global oil prices (at the time the survey was conducted), not to mention increased unemployment rates, limited work opportunities, and increased prices for food, goods, and services. Being forced to leave the country as a result of these circumstances was thus a concern of the youth surveyed.

6.4 DISPLACEMENT AND INTERNAL MOBILITY: EXPOSURE AND EXPERIENCE

Exposure to a situation or living and experiencing it provide ample opportunity for an individual to develop a sense of that situation. Those who experience the situation directly learn to adapt to it or acquire the ability to deal with it if it happens again in the future. Those who have experienced particular situations possess greater flexibility with regard to other similar situations and feel prepared to enter those or similar situations if it will improve their lives for the better. The current section will focus on two areas. First, the extent of young people's participation in or use of an activity with the aim of helping certain groups or supporting their goals. Second, whether youth have experienced expulsion or been vulnerable to displacement from their usual places of residence.

With regard to youth's feelings of responsibility and their participation in or use of activities for certain groups, around one-third of survey respondents indicated that they used or participated in activities and actions to help those who had come to their area having fled armed conflict (displaced people). These findings confirm the magnitude of population movements and internal displacement as a result of armed struggles as well as the unstable security situation in the country. They also indicate young people's empathy and feelings of responsibility towards vulnerable groups requiring assistance.

The data from the survey also indicates the extent to which young people have experienced expulsion or forced displacement and been forced to move from one location to

another, more secure one. Little more than one-tenth of survey respondents confirmed that they had been subject to expulsion or displacement from their usual areas of residence. The country witnessed several waves of displacement after 2003 as a result of regime change, increased sectarian tension, the absence of the rule of law, the weakness of state institutions, and the Iraqi state's monopoly of violence, in addition to the political struggle between national and religious elements to achieve greater influence and power. These and other reasons forced many individuals and families to leave their usual areas of residence for other areas of the country.

6.5 MOBILITY BEHAVIOUR OF YOUTH IN IRAQ AND EXPERIENCES OF MIGRATION

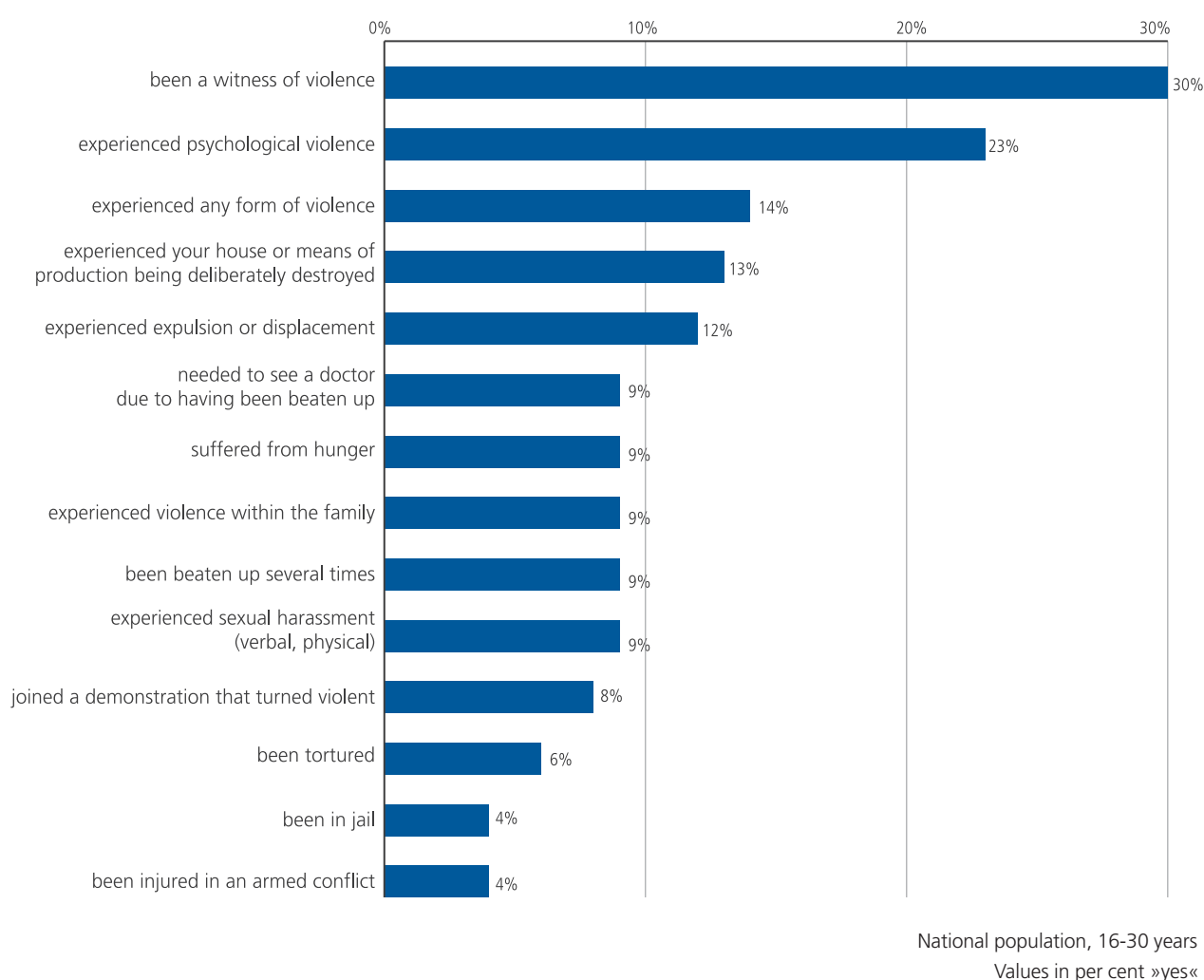
If Iraqi youth were forced to migrate, what countries would be their main destinations? Before we answer this, however, who does this apply to? Is everyone willing to leave their home? In this section, four aspects of migration will

be examined: the number of survey respondents who are determined to migrate, the links between personal aspirations to migrate and prior experiences of living abroad, migration experiences among relatives and the respondent's broader social network, and finally, the desire to migrate will be linked to individual readiness, driven by factors such as socio-economic situation.

6.6 PERSONAL FLEXIBILITY AND THE DECISION TO MIGRATE

Overall, nearly two-thirds of the Iraqi youth surveyed categorically dismissed the notion of emigrating, stating that they »definitely will not emigrate«. The desire to stay was stronger among female respondents than male, which reflects the conservative environment in Iraq and the restrictions imposed on women and their movements under the prevailing social system. Those with lower levels of education reported a stronger desire not to migrate, possibly because of linguistic barriers and the educational skills usu-

Figure 15
Experience of violence
Have you ever....



ally required to emigrate and work abroad. The data also showed that regarding the personal economic situation of the survey respondents, when it came to not wanting to emigrate, the percentages of those with good and poor income were nearly the same. With regard to residential milieu, those in large cities and urban areas were more inclined not to want to emigrate than residents of rural areas. This latter tendency can be explained by respondents wanting to flee from the poor services and limited work opportunities in rural areas to a more vibrant civic life and all that accompanies that outside the country. Across the different age groups, there is only a minimal difference, with a slightly greater tendency among those from the younger group, since the challenges and risks they face are largely similar.

It is worth noting that the data shows a small percentage of respondents (4 per cent) experienced migration themselves, to Europe, Asia or Latin America. It is highly likely that most of the younger generation in Iraq do not have strong historical and linguistic links with Europe and America like those they have with some of the neighbouring Arab countries and also possible that their perceptions are impacted by the colonial period.

The survey respondents also demonstrated greater awareness of migration through the experiences of relatives who had been abroad. This clearly shows that experiences of emigration within an individual's family have an impact on the young people surveyed, as more than half of the 8 per cent of respondents concerned by this stated that the emigration of a relative was important to them personally, perhaps due to what they learned about their experiences. Prior experiences of migration within the family makes a person less prone to rejecting migration outright. Of those with prior migration experience in their family, 35 per cent said they were »definitely not emigrating«, compared to 66 per cent among those without such family experience. This also makes them more capable of imagining the possibility of emigration for themselves (without making a firm decision on it), and it expands their views on migration.

This attitude applies to both males and females, as clearly shown in the study. Personal readiness also impacts the aspirations and decision to migrate. Those survey respondents who indicated low flexibility were more determined to stay and less inclined to imagine themselves as migrants. This attitude appears to be a result of prior experiences of migration within the family. Overall, the survey respondents with high flexibility, most of whom were young people aged 21-25 who were familiar with migration experiences and stories, were more inclined to consider the possibility of emigrating themselves.

In general, youth's views on mobility and their aspirations to emigrate from Iraq have long been misinterpreted. In fact, only a very small number are determined to migrate, despite the various crises the country suffers from. Generally, young people find it difficult to choose between emigration and continuing their lives in Iraq. Many have a strong attach-

ment to their families and the residential areas they grew up in, do not view migration as an easy or perfect solution at all and have conflicting feelings about the idea of leaving home. Thus, half of the survey respondents with a family member who had emigrated viewed the departure of one of their loved ones as a loss or even expressed strong reservations about migration.

Most migration patterns of labourers are confined to the Arab countries due to the shared culture, language and history. That said, the attitudes towards migration may sometimes be formed by historical and linguistic links with some European countries as well. However, aspirations to emigrate should not be understood as being driven solely by the aim of finding work abroad, as youth are also interested in travelling for leisure and expanding their horizons, and sometimes motivated by a desire for discovery and adventure. In addition, mobility behaviour is not of a gendered nature or linked to social circumstances alone, but is also linked to prior migration experiences of family members, personal readiness for change, economic situation and social networks. In general, the desire to emigrate is highest among flexible individuals whose social network has witnessed successful and positive migration experiences.

The relatively low interest (among most of the survey respondents) in travelling abroad and permanently changing their place of residence is perhaps due to the more negative migration experiences of some relatives and acquaintances, which discouraged them from trying to emigrate themselves. This may also have been because of an inaccurate or distorted understanding of migration processes, experiences and difficulties. The expansion of virtual mobility and media has been accompanied by the effective tightening of external borders, along with stricter asylum, naturalisation and residence laws in most Western countries. At the same time, the costs of (actual) migration make it more difficult, especially for the lower classes. Many young people today understand, through practical and virtual experiences, the positives and negatives of travelling abroad, as well as the cultural, vocational and legal obstacles to adapting to another place, as they are perfectly well aware that the prosperous European countries with their high levels of welfare and well-being will always remain a dream.

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CONCLUSION

Youth in Iraq suffer from a complex vulnerability, lack resources and are more susceptible to losing hope. They are also the most capable of undermining security as a result of being deprived of the requirements for a decent life. They still view the ruling political elite, political parties and influential armed groups as a corrupt class to be blamed for ruining the country. Confidence in them is non-existent, as they are incapable of implementing successful solutions to the crises and problems devastating the country. They have failed to create sufficient and suitable work opportunities for them, did not involve them in public life, and have not provided them with the training, empowerment, and health, cultural, and educational services they deserve.

According to the findings of our survey, Iraqi youth live amidst political tumult. The survey provided insight into the extent of young people's politicisation through social movements and protests, the extent of their participation and interest in politics, as well as how they view the state, the government, and the system of government. Interest in political matters was somewhat low, and for the most part, young people associated this term with party policy or public policy in the country in which they live, corruption, an incompetent political elite and their money wasting, and the roles and practices of political parties in trading in favours, dividing up riches, and evading punishment and accountability. Thus, they are not interested in this type of politics, which usually reflects a loss of confidence in politicians and their performance, as well as feelings of frustration with politicians or with the ineffectiveness of the political system in meeting their needs and expectations. Together these processes shaped young people's understanding and negative assessment of politics in their country.

Iraqi youth also showed a weak interest in actively learning about political matters. Instead, they focused on other areas of life and activities through which they felt they could fulfil their needs, achieve lasting relationships, and share information with others, or which would contribute to their leisure, relieving tension, and entertainment.

In the past, political events in one country impacted neighbouring countries or regions. There were strong feelings of Arab nationalism and shared history, which had a significant impact on the generations who lived through the various

events that took place across the region. Comparing this situation with that of the youth of today, the survey results show that when it comes to the events that took place in the region, including those of 2011, around three-quarters of the survey respondents were not interested in them, did not respond to them or were not aware of them. That is, young people today tend to be more interested in issues that have a domestic or national dimension.

The 2019 protests represented the height of mobilisation of Iraqi youth, who played an important role and demonstrated their ability to develop and change relations between society and the state. According to the survey results, the majority of respondents described these events using four positive descriptions, expressing support for them. These were as follows: revolution, uprising, popular movement and movement. They saw these events as offering great hope for change. As a direct result of the protests, the government resigned and was replaced with a caretaker crisis government, whose cabinet included technocrats. Then the election law was changed, the members of the independent elections commission were replaced with judges, and early elections were held in 2021. The results also indicate that despite the social and economic problems, the mounting dangers of the Covid-19 pandemic after the October uprising and the government's excessive suppression of political activists at the time, a large number of young people have continued participating in the movement and mobilising for change. Now, however, their focus is more on achieving greater social and economic change and thus mobilisation has taken on more varied forms.

On average, the results showed that young people had a preference for four political activities or practices, which had a direct impact (mainly protest activities) in terms of making their voices heard. These included participating in demonstrations, participating in strikes, boycotting certain goods for political reasons and participating in elections. All of these actions involve direct confrontation to push for change and this seems to be preferred over indirect practices such as encouraging others online to participate in a certain activity or action, gathering information online or through Twitter to join an existing group, participating in an association, distributing fliers and signing online petitions, participating in a political party, and spraying graffiti. These

require organisation, mobilisation, rallying or attracting public attention and in their view have a weak impact and are ineffective in the context of an unstable society and political system suffering from complex problems and significant corruption, not to mention the broad influence of armed groups. In light of this situation, activities involving direct confrontation are required to achieve tangible change.

Religious and political affairs no longer occupy the thoughts and interests of young people as they did in previous generations. Despite the breadth and abundance of religious and political material, activities and programmes, and the frequent media appearances of personalities categorised as religious or political figures, their impact on young people has receded due to the large number of promises, speeches and rules adopted by political Islam and the lack of implementation or fulfilment of those promises. Thus, political and religious affairs are of less importance when it comes to why young people use social media.

The young people surveyed revealed choices that are both shocking and surprising, a grim reflection of their experiences with the political systems they had grown up in and also largely expressing their hopes for the political system within which they aspired to live. Around three-quarters of the survey respondents stated that they would accept a democratic system or a system ruled by a »strong man« who would lead the country to safety, well-being and prosperity. Others revealed their preference for a »strong woman« to lead the country. Although this was a low percentage and was a preference mainly shown by female respondents, it is an important indication of the awareness of certain women and their confidence that they are capable of playing a bigger part in politics and the country's affairs. It also reveals a cultural and social shift (albeit limited) vis-a-vis women and their roles in society, perhaps indicating greater acceptance of these new roles and lower sensitivity towards gender differences among young people.

The survey results also indicate that young people only have a weak preference for political systems of a religious nature, whether pure or hybrid and combined with a more modern system. This is perhaps an explicit reflection of their current experience with and distaste for political Islam, and their leaning towards a civil system that protects religious rights and does not allow religious affairs to dominate public life. Young people's demands are, after all, for welfare and services, not immersion in rituals and slogans and a focus on religious practices.

On the other hand, and in the same context, from a human development standpoint, the concept of security focuses on staying alive and overcoming the dangers of pandemics, illnesses, political repression or events that disrupt daily life and lead to upheaval, confusion and displacement. This is perhaps best expressed in the challenges and risks of the Covid-19 pandemic as one of the biggest physical threats that the region and the world had faced.

The survey results showed that the financial situation of only one-fifth of the survey respondents allowed them to save money, and that these respondents saved money as a back-up for times of need. In other words, they saved in anticipation of facing social, economic and political—as well as environmental and health—challenges and fluctuations, which are generally expected to occur in an insecure and unstable society such as Iraq. Through this, they express their concern for their current situation and the immediate future. This should be taken into consideration when conceptualising the situation of youth during the lockdown and in facing the pandemic, as the majority stated that they experienced shortages and vulnerability during the pandemic and in its aftermath.

Concerns and fears that events might occur that force them to move in order to avoid damage and harm weigh heavily on young people. Along similar lines, the current data from the youth survey reveals the concern of the survey participants for the immediate future with regard to developing or contracting a serious illness, in addition to their concern over the increasing insecurity, which may be strongly related to the consequences of the lockdown and the spread of the pandemic.

In general, young people in Iraq are facing many changes in their life, positive ones that strengthen them as well as negative ones that involve further costs and compound effects. The young people surveyed described the challenges resulting from the pandemic as the most prominent and important of the changes they have faced recently. It should be noted that of nine negative events and incidents presented to the young people surveyed, six were events directly related to the pandemic or the impact of those events was exacerbated by the pandemic. These included food shortages, job loss, changes inside the family, lack of social stability and increased violence and isolation from the outside world, not to mention the threats directly resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic. This indicates that various and complex negative changes occurred that severely shook the lives of young people over the last five years.

The survey results revealed that there were widespread infections among the survey respondents and their families and acquaintances, and the spread of the pandemic and its impact on society was significant. This indicates the extent of the psychological, social, economic and health pressures to which the survey respondents and their families and acquaintances were exposed. It also reveals the scale of the threat that the health sector, the government and its institutions faced due to the pandemic.

The experience of a dangerous virus like Covid-19 necessarily leads to a change in individual perceptions with regard to health and illness. It is natural and normal for youth to be filled with energy, health, vitality and activity, which means healthy eating, sports and disinfection measures are of secondary importance to most of them. However, the pandemic affected eating patterns, health awareness and people's understanding of the importance of diet and proactively

tackling the risks resulting from pollutants and viruses. It arguably improved the awareness of issues of illness and health among young people.

Most young people in Iraq struggle to cope with the ramifications of armed struggle and the difficult circumstances resulting from this, which have unfortunately become a part of daily life for Arab youth in general, and those in Iraq in particular. Balancing these difficult circumstances against the costs, risks and challenges of migration is something they struggle with on a daily basis.

Most respondents who had made the decision to leave were fleeing rising unemployment in their home countries, and usually enjoy a high level of education. However, the opportunities available to them tend to leave them with only two options: joining a workforce with low and temporary wages in an industrialised country or moving within the borders of the countries of the MENA region, which are still developing and struggling with the effects of underdevelopment and decline of the post-colonial period. In both cases, the absence of promising work opportunities to achieve a fixed source of income and build a successful career expose them to another type of loss, that of existential security and increased concern for the future. In sum, it seems that restrictive migration policies, dire living conditions and threats of expulsion are an established fact for many migrants.

Based on the above, and according to the survey results, it is not at all surprising that young people display an awareness of the distinction between physical mobility and increasing social mobility. While the wish to find work or continue their education remains, some are motivated to emigrate abroad, while others focus on accepting employment under unfavourable conditions within their own country or marrying someone from a higher class or another religious group. It seems that they are well aware that migration does not necessarily guarantee a better life. A very low number of respondents were determined to emigrate, despite the various crises the country suffers from. Generally, young people find it difficult to choose between migration and continuing their lives in Iraq. Many have a strong attachment to their families and the residential areas they grew up in, do not view emigration as an easy or perfect solution at all, and have conflicting feelings about the idea of leaving home. Many mechanisms and processes are involved in shaping this decision.

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ABOUT THE FES MENA YOUTH STUDY

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) views young women and men as instrumental for democratic development in the region and is keen to strengthen their potential to initiate change in the world of politics and across society. Based on the results of a long-term survey, launched in 2016, the FES seeks to provide insight into young people's situation in the MENA region.

In 2021, the FES launched its second large-scale representative survey in 12 MENA countries: Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Sudan, among Syrian refugees in Lebanon, as well as Tunisia and Yemen. With its 1,000 in-depth interviews conducted for each country, the FES MENA Youth Study generates a large database of responses to more than 200 questions concerning the personal background of the interviewees and their views on a variety of topics.

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Scientific supervision
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