Education in Iraq

Impact of COVID-19, protests, and pre-existing crises on needs

Overview

Iraq's education sector has faced obstacles for decades due to multiple crises including prolonged conflict, protracted displacement, economic crisis, and subsequent social and political tensions. New crises emerged at the end of 2019 and beginning of this year, including: public discontent and waves of protests that started in October 2019, and the economic repercussions of COVID-19 containment measures in March 2020 coupled with a severe drop in oil prices. These new crises are applying even more pressure on the already fragile education system and affecting access to education. This analysis, which is based on primary data gathered in group discussions involving a variety of operational actors as well as secondary data, illustrates the potential impact on humanitarian needs that these crises are likely to have at individual, family, community and state levels. The analysis also identifies population groups that are likely to be disproportionately affected by these crises.

Overview of education needs, 1.2 million people in need, Iraq

PEOPLE IN NEED

SEVERITY OF NEEDS

SEVERITY OF NEEDS
1 2 3 4 5
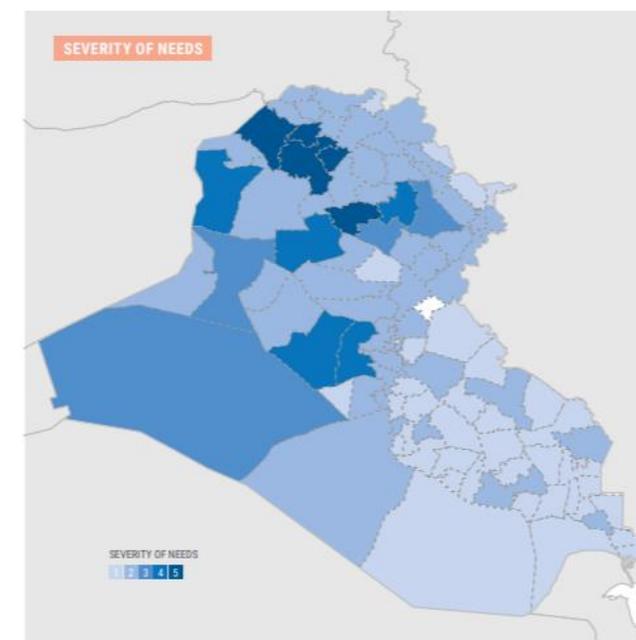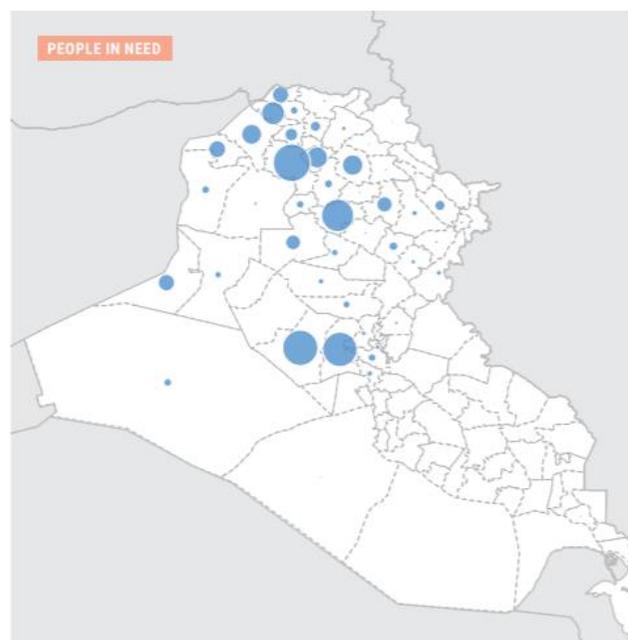
Source: HNO 17/11/2020

Key considerations

In the academic year 2019/2020 children in areas affected by protests and then by the national COVID-19 emergency might have lost at least five months of in-school education.[1]

In the short term, current crises will likely lead economically vulnerable families to adopt negative coping mechanisms such as child labour, begging, and child marriage (Mercy Corps 02/2020).

In the long term, negative coping mechanisms will likely have an impact on children's emotional and mental development, potentially undermining their wellbeing as adults, too. The exclusion of disadvantaged children from distance learning because of school closures and uncertain re-openings, and continued high dropout rates, will likely cause significant losses in learning and a reduction in the formation of human capital. Low levels of participation in education are likely to leave many children with fewer life chances and limited opportunities to participate in the development of the Iraqi economy and society.
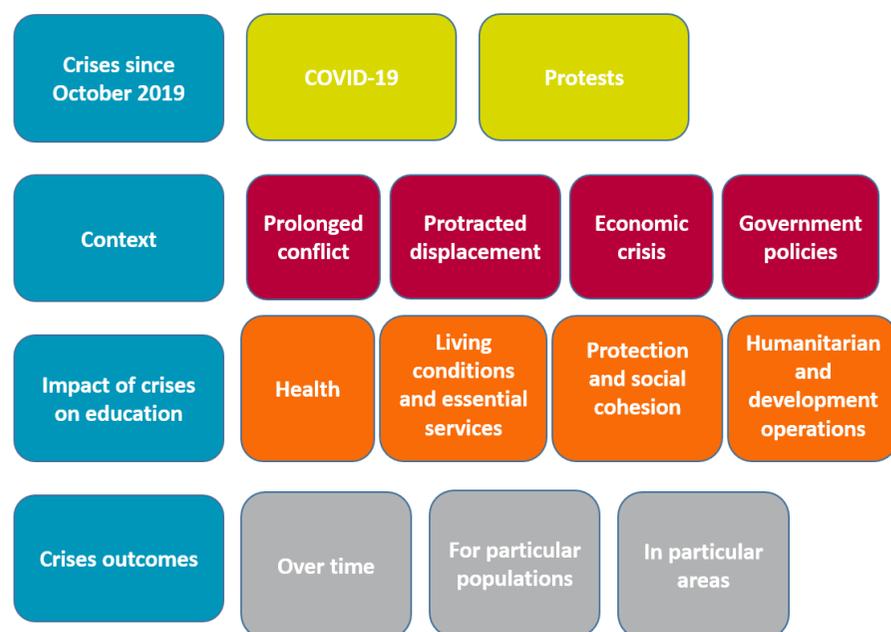
About this report

This report was produced in collaboration with partners in the Iraq Education Cluster to support the documentation and analysis of current education needs of children in Iraq. This report is based on a review of publicly available information and discussion groups with operational actors.

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[1] The Iraqi school year runs from September to June.

Methodology and analytical framework

This report is based on a review of publicly available information through a process of data collection, synthesis, and analysis. The report also benefits from inputs given in discussion groups with operational actors working in the Iraqi education sector, and utilises recent assessments on education needs in Iraq. However, there are still information gaps and limitations in this research. The diagram below shows the components of the analytical framework used in producing this analysis. The first tier represents 'new' crises that Iraq has faced since October 2019: protests and the COVID-19 pandemic.[2] The second tier is the existing context, which covers all issues that are aggravating the new crises, but also creating impacts of their own. The third tier is the impact of such crises on the education sector. The impacts of these crises on education fall within four pillars – health, living conditions, social cohesion and protection, and humanitarian and development operations. The final tier, which is the end result of the analysis, identifies the crises outcomes resulting from these impacts. These are considered over time, and within and between different population groups, across different geographical areas.

Crises since October 2019	COVID-19	Protests	
Context	Prolonged conflict	Protracted displacement	Economic crisis	Government policies
Impact of crises on education	Health	Living conditions and essential services	Protection and social cohesion	Humanitarian and development operations
Crises outcomes	Over time	For particular populations	In particular areas

Information gaps and limitations

- Limitations in local **information management and tracking systems** for the education sector reduce the availability of baseline data and up-to-date information (ODI 11/05/2020).

- Lack of national and systematic **monitoring and evaluation** mechanisms for education makes it more difficult to understand which inequality gaps are being closed and which still need work (UNICEF 21/05/2017).

- Data on the educational **needs of returnees** is less readily available compared to IDPs and refugees (ODI 11/05/2020).

- Information on education challenges in **governorates not affected by conflict,** and with low numbers of IDPs and returnees, is more scarce than in areas where clashes occurred.

- Updated information on **dropout and repetition rates** is missing, and gaps in education statistics for specific years are reported in conflict-affected governorates such as Ninewa and Anbar (UNICEF 21/05/2017).

- Data is missing on **distance learning through online platforms**. There are gaps in the availability of lessons for all subjects, at all grades. It is not known how these platforms are used and how many of the students who received registration codes signed up. The extent of support services provided is also unclear. Finally, due to the recent introduction of virtual learning platforms, no data is yet available on their effectiveness.

- Data on the impact of COVID-related school closures on children's **nutrition**, is often missing or not sufficiently detailed.

- Little data is available on specific educational challenges faced by **non-Syrian refugees** (mainly Turkish, Iranian, Palestinian, and Sudanese) (UNHCR 2019) and stateless children.

- Data is lacking on the short and long-term **impacts of the protests**, which have been ongoing since October 2019, on the education sector.

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[2] November 2019 was the publication of the last Iraq Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) with coverage of events until October 2019.

Contextual information

Prolonged conflict

Iraq's education sector has struggled through decades of conflict and insecurity, which have led to significant social and political instability, weakened social institutions, and insufficient funding of the education sector since 2003. The eruption of armed conflict in Iraq in 2014 has created additional strains on the education system. Despite the formal end of hostilities with the Islamic State (IS) in 2017, the country remains in crisis. Deep-running sectarian tensions continue to limit the country's political and economic development. There is also a deterioration in the security situation in parts of the country, which is affecting rebuilding efforts. This situation has caused mass displacement, depletion of livelihoods, **destruction of critical infrastructure**, erosion of social cohesion and **disruption of basic services**, including education. The cost of the conflict damages to the education sector in the seven most affected governorates – Ninewa, Anbar, Kirkuk, Salah al-Din, Diyala, Baghdad and Babil – is estimated at USD2.4 billion (World Bank 01/2018; discussions with operational partners).

Many children have lost years of schooling due to conflict and severe shortages of schools and teachers. At the end of 2019, there were approximately **345,000 children remaining out of school**, with school dropouts continuing to be an issue in 2020 (OCHA 17/11/2020; discussions with operational partners).

Children and young adults who live in areas previously **controlled or influenced by IS** have **missed years of education**. In areas under IS control, children and young adults were being taught IS curriculum, which promoted IS ideology and exposed children to violent and radical content. Many families in IS-controlled areas opted to remove their children from school to protect them from radicalisation (UNAMI 17/02/2020; NRC 11/2019). Also, many of these children who were born or lived in IS-controlled areas between 2014 and 2017 **lack civil documentation**. In 2019, there were around 460,000 children missing national identity cards, which are necessary to access essential services (OCHA 17/11/2020).

Children whose parents or families have a perceived **IS affiliation** are particularly at risk of losing access to education, as thousands of these children are reportedly being denied access. Such families already face wider restrictions due to their affiliations under the current legal, security, and related policy measures put in place by the government to address crimes committed by IS. These families mainly reside in IDP camps, and face severe movement restrictions. In addition, those living in camps with segregated areas for families perceived to be affiliated with IS typically **face restricted access** to the civilian documentation that would enable their movement in and out of those camps, and allow them to access key services, including education (UNAMI 17/02/2020; MEI 16/03/2020).

The Iraqi government requires such documentation for school enrolment, but administrative procedures to acquire it are known to be quite lengthy and burdensome. In September 2018, a governmental decree was issued allowing children missing civil documentation to attend school, but it is not binding as such to support enrolment or sitting exams or other certifications. Therefore, many cases show that **children lacking documentation remain barred from enrolling in government schools**, highlighting the need for advocacy to support the enrolment of children missing civil documentation. (UNAMI 17/02/2020; HRW 28/08/2019; discussions with operational partners).

A constant source of tension and conflict between the federal government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) remains the **disputed territories**. These territories are located in northern Iraq, primarily in Erbil governorate in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), and in the Kirkuk, Diyala, Salah al-Din and Ninewa governorates (EASO 11/2018). Political development after the defeat of IS in Iraq increased tensions between the Iraqi government and the KRG. On 25 September 2017, the KRG staged an independence referendum in areas under its security control. More than 92% of voters in KRI voted "Yes" choosing independence from federal Iraq. As a result, on 16 October 2017, the Iraqi federal government launched an operation to restore Iraqi sovereignty over the disputed territories. Kurdish forces lost territory in the disputed areas to the Iraqi security forces and units of Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) known also as Hashd Sha'abi – militia groups that have been transformed into a military unit in the army structure (ICG 17/10/2017; The Guardian 28/09/2017; Reuters 08/03/2018). Despite the political nature of these developments, consequences have been felt across the **education sector** as well. The number of teachers in schools in the KRI were negatively affected in two ways, many teachers were displaced due to the rising tensions, and also the federal government stopped transferring the allocated budget to KRG causing **long delays in paying teacher**s on the payroll of the KRG. The lack of teachers and overcrowded classes have driven enrolment down. For example, officials in the disputed territory of Tuz Khurmatu, Salah al-Din, say Kurdish-language education is in decline. Of the 50 Kurdish schools in the city, located 155km south of Erbil city and near Kirkuk, 10 are closed. Prior to those events, there were 8,000 students attending Kurdish schools in the district. The number is now reduced to 6,000. Some 100 of the area's 650 Kurdish are thought to have left (Rudaw 07/10/2020; Kirkuk 10/10/2020).

Protracted displacement

Years of conflict and violence have left many Iraqis in a **constant state of displacement**. Today, Iraq struggles with the impact of both regional and internal crises: Syria's civil war and families fleeing to seek refuge in Iraq since 2012; and the insurgency of IS militants

in Iraq since 2014, leading to millions fleeing the country or being displaced within its borders (ODI 11/05/2020).

As at 31 August 2020, there were around **1.3 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Iraq**, dispersed across 18 governorates, 38 districts, resulting from conflict with IS. Most of the displaced people (more than 300,00 individuals) live in Ninewa. Large numbers of IDPs are also present in Duhok (281,000), and a significant number in Erbil (232,000) and Sulaymaniyah (137,000) (IOM 08/10/2020; ODI 11/05/2020; REACH 23/09/2020).

Since April 2020, there has been an **increasing trend in the number of returnees**, reaching 4.7 million people. Most of the displaced returned to Ninewa (1.8 million), Salah al-Din (1.5 million) and Diyala (almost 700,000). Many of the new IDPs across the country come from other areas of displacement, constituting **secondary displacement** (IOM 08/10/2020). The upward trend of returnees is likely to continue as the Iraqi government transitions from emergency response towards sustainability and development, initiating **a plan to close IDP camps** and facilitate returns. However, there have been reports of forced or coerced returns driven by provincial-level policies. Many of the IDPs forced to leave the camps prematurely likely end up becoming out-of-camp IDPs (TNH 11/03/2020; discussions with operational partners).

Services and infrastructure in **overcrowded camps** are severely overstretched, and struggle to meet minimum standards. This is also true of access to education in camps. Schools, particularly in displacement camps, are chronically overcrowded, **understaffed** and, in many instances, teachers are not being paid their salaries. For example, there are only two teachers on the Ministry of Education's (MoE) payroll in one IDP camp in Kirkuk, for more than 1,700 students enrolled in two primary schools. In a nearby camp in the same area, there are eight teachers for more than 700 primary school students. This shortage of staffing and overcrowding contributes to high dropout rates and low performance in basic skills (NRC 11/2019; NRC 10/10/2020).

The **lack of civil documentation** is also a widespread issue affecting millions of IDPs and returnees. Many IDPs and returnees are unable to obtain and renew their civil documentation as many Civil Affairs Directorate Offices were damaged or destroyed due to the conflict (UNHCR 10/2019). Education for the IDP population is also hindered by the distance of learning facilities from places of residence, which prevents parents from sending their children to school due to security or economic constraints (ODI 11/05/2020). The problem of **lack of documentation** is also true when these children leave camps and return to areas of origin, affecting their access to basic services. As a result, many of the

same children who lost years of education under IS rule, are now disadvantaged due to lack of civil documentation, but also the widespread **lack of schools** and teachers, due to the **destruction of schools**, the **displacement of teachers**, and **shortages in funding** affecting the salaries of teachers and as a result leaving their jobs (UNAMI 17/02/2020; discussions with the Iraq Education Cluster; NRC 30/12/2019; Kurdistan24 10/11/2019).

Iraq also hosts significant number of **refugees**, primarily Syrian, despite not being a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol. As at 30 September 2020, there are 242,704 Syrian refugees in Iraq, with around 98.3% of the total Syrian refugee population in Iraq residing in Erbil, Duhok and Sulaymaniyah in KRI. The majority of Syrian refugees live out-of-camp (61%) (UNHCR 08/2020; UNHCR 30/09/2020). The overall **provision of education** for the refugee population in Iraq is **limited**. KRI has limited financial capacity and overstretched services (ODI 11/05/2020).

Economic crisis

Iraq is a highly oil-dependent country, with 56% of GDP, 99% of export revenues and 90% of taxes coming from oil. With oil prices crashing in 2016, and experiencing a historic drop in early 2020, it is projected that oil and gas revenues for a number of key producers will fall by 50%– 58% in 2020 compared with 2019 (Iraq-business 13/05/2020; LSE 10/2019; OECD 30/09/2020). **Iraq's budget deficit** is expected to reach an unprecedented level of nearly 30% of GDP in 2020 (UNDP 06/10/2020).

Years of conflict have burdened the budget. The overall damages incurred by the IS conflict totals USD45.7 billion, with needs resulting from the conflict amounting to approximately USD88 billion (World Bank 01/2018). Iraq now faces a significantly **worsened economic situation**, with the economic downturn of **the pandemic** compounded by a massive reduction in national revenue due to the **collapse of oil prices** (UNDP 10/2020).

Lack of diversification in national revenue sources and the heavy dependence on oil mean that the Iraqi government's budget, including that of both the federal and KRG MoE, is expected to be affected by the forecast budget deficit (UNDP 10/2020).[3] The Iraqi government is expected to struggle even further with **keeping the teachers on its payroll** and providing the students with the adequate material and infrastructure needed for access to education. Since 2013, government spending on education has been continuously declining, currently representing the strongest decreasing trend in the investment budget of the government. In at 2015 Iraq allocated less than 6% of its national budget to education – the lowest share in the Middle East. The international humanitarian and development community contributes to the education budget of both the federal and KRG ministries, and channels additional resources to support the education sector. However, levels of support have been relatively low (ODI 05/2020; World Bank 04/05/2020).

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[3] Education in Iraq is free (though note that children attending public schools still need to pay for some education and writing materials, and possibly transport (see 'Crisis impacts'), and primary education (Grades 1–6) is compulsory.

Protests

Since October 2019, Iraq has witnessed waves of protests across the country, primarily due to the **deterioration in economic conditions**. Protesters are demanding more jobs, basic services, and an end to corruption, with the public expressing general discontent with the political order and its members. The protests can be traced back to previous localised protests over the years that have targeted specific sectors and government failures in providing water resources, electricity, and fuel. **The protest movement is ongoing**, despite being paused at the beginning of the COVID-19-related lockdown in March 2020 (AW 19/01/2020; Al Jazeera 09/12/2020; MEI 31/01/2020; Al Jazeera 25/10/2020).

In response to the popular demands made by protestors, the government decided to further **expand public sector employment**. As a result, the number of employees in the public sector significantly grew in 2019 – by 13%. Funding the payroll of these new hires in the public sector is expected to be challenging due to the already growing budget deficit and since the government had struggled to pay public sector employees – including teachers – since the fall of oil prices in 2016. Local reports indicate that teachers are being paid only once every few months and have had their salaries cut by more than 20%. **Delays in paying public sector employees remain an issue**. This is pushing more public school teachers to leave their jobs. At the end of 2018, the MoE employed 1,500 less people on a permanent basis than it did in 2016, due to economic shortcomings. Therefore, the additional payroll of the growing public sector is expected to divert funds from development initiatives, including education (LSE 10/2019; Rudaw 27/09/2020; Kirkuk Now 13/09/2020; AW 16/10/2020; NRC 10/10/2020).

Additionally, many students, especially university and secondary school **students, have joined the protests** since October 2019, causing **disruption in classes**. This particularly affects Baghdad and in the southern provinces (MEO 28/10/2019; AP 28/10/2019; Al Jazeera 10/02/2020).

COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has hit Iraq at a time when the country is facing multiple challenges, **deepening socioeconomic vulnerabilities**, and disrupting access to services and delivery of aid. As at 27 October, there are 455,398 confirmed cases of COVID19 with 10,671 deaths (WHO 27/10/2020). Iraqi authorities are now slowly beginning to relax the mobility restrictions that have been in place since February, which aimed to help curb the spread of the virus. These measures included the closure of schools (OCHA 10/03/2020; IOM 13/07/2020). **Schools under the federal MoE remain closed** while primary and secondary **schools under the KRG started to reopen** at the beginning of October – a month after the start of the regular Iraqi school year, which usually runs from September to June (Asharq Al-Awsat 15/10/2020).

While there are technological solutions being offered to deal with school closures, such as delivering educational content to primary, secondary, and tertiary students through virtual classrooms, many of these remote learning methods are not feasible options for impoverished segments of the population, especially those residing in IDP camps (Iraq Education Cluster 11/06/2020; Rudaw 15/10/2020; NRC 10/10/2020). As a result there are around **7.4 million students** who are affected by school closures that **do not have the means to access remote schooling** (OCHA 19/07/2020; UNESCO 19/10/2020; Rudaw 15/10/2020).

Implementing an **adequate online education system** in camps across Iraq is challenging due to the limited capacity to provide students with internet and required electronic tools, especially in federal Iraq. KRG managed to negotiate with internet service providers in the region to **provide access to the e-school portal** for free to registered students. The federal government has not made such arrangement (Kurdistan 25/04/2020).

The closure of schools has left children and young adults without the protective environment schools provide and might expose them to sexual and gender-based violence (GBV). 65% of the service provision points reported an increase in one or more types of GBV in their areas of intervention. Of which, 94% reported a sharp increase in domestic violence reportedly perpetrated by a spouse or other family member/s within the household. Also 123 GBV-related suicide attempts or incidents were reported involving women and girls, with the majority of reported incidents in Ninewa, Diyala and Kirkuk governorates (GBV Sub-Cluster 10/05/2020).

Crisis impacts

The **compounded impact** of new crises (COVID-19, protests) and old (economic crisis, conflict, displacement) in Iraq is analysed in this section. Thematically, the interaction and overlap of **needs across sectors** is highlighted: first, education, living conditions, and essential services; second, education and health; and finally, education, protection and social cohesion. The analysis looks at **concentric levels of impact** starting from the individual child, moving onto families, then schools and communities, and finally touching upon issues of relevance to the Iraqi state.

Impact section: levels of analysis
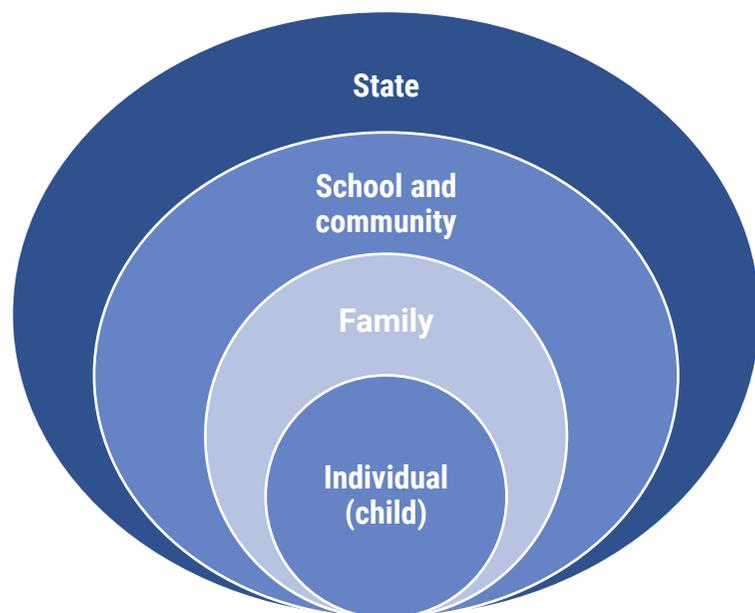
Education, living conditions, and essential services

Individual

Children in Iraq face multiple obstacles on their educational path. Pointing to this are **low school attendance and completion rates** as highlighted in the 2018 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS):

School cycle	Attendance rate[4]
Primary	92%
Lower Secondary	58%
Upper Secondary	33%

School cycle	Completion rate
Primary	76%
Lower Secondary	46%
Upper Secondary	44%

Source: MICS 02/2019

A 2020 assessment of selected districts in former conflict areas, and mainly surveying returnees, painted an even bleaker picture with **only half of the boys and girls enrolled finishing primary education,** and confirming low rates of high school attendance for both girls and boys (Education Consortium of Iraq ECI 02/2020). Before the pandemic, children saw their access to education limited due to conflict, displacement, distance from educational facilities, household financial difficulties leading to cuts to education expenditure, as well as bullying and discrimination based on gender, disability, and perceived affiliation to extremist groups.

Children have lost years of education and risk losing more with the pandemic as schools are still closed for most grades and learning from home poses new and unexpected challenges for the estimated **7.4 million students affected** in the country (NRC 10/2020;

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[4] Defined as "percentage of children of: (a) primary school age currently attending primary or secondary school; (b) lower secondary school age currently attending lower secondary school or higher; (c) upper secondary school age currently attending upper secondary school or higher" (MICS 02/2019).

UNESCO 19/10/2020). Children might also not be fully aware of the value of education and the opportunities it offers. Data from the 2020 Multi-Cluster Needs Assessment (MCNA VIII) illustrates how the second most reported reason for not attending school among IDP and returnee households was lack of interest from children (REACH 10/2020).[5]

Family

While only private schools impose fees, the families of children attending public schools still need to **pay** for some **education and writing materials**, along with **transport** if the school is far away – this includes children with disabilities (CwD) (Save the Children 2016, HI 07/2020). Anecdotal evidence collected from Yazidi university students also points to transportation as an unaffordable cost (Wendt et al. 2019).The poorest families, including IDPs and returnees, already struggled to keep up with the **cost of education** before the pandemic (REACH 10/2020). Cost was reported as one of the top reasons for school dropouts in surveyed districts across Anbar, Diyala, Dohuk, Kirkuk, Ninewa, and Salah al-Din (with a strong presence of returnees among households surveyed) (ECI 02/2020).

Reasons for dropping out of school
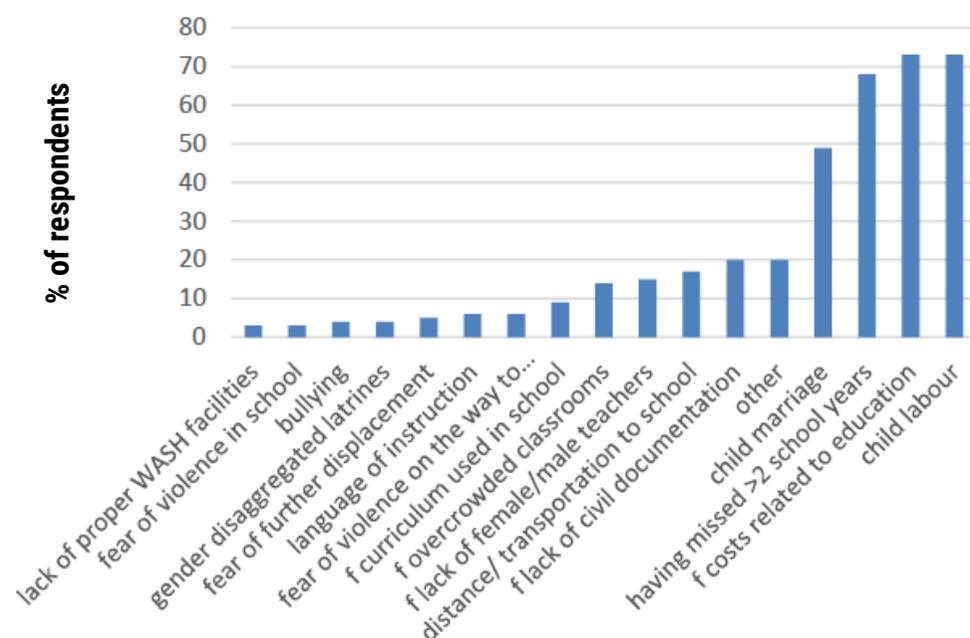
Source: ECI 02/2020

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[5] Households having at least one child out of formal education.

These expenditures might be especially difficult to cover once schools reopen as thousands have **lost their jobs** and have seen diminishing income due to the **economic crisis** and COVID-19 containment measures. A July 2020 survey found that a quarter of the Iraqis polled had lost their jobs during lockdown. Working youth were disproportionately affected, with 36% of those aged 18–24 reporting they were permanently laid off (ILO 03/07/2020).

The pandemic is also expected to have a larger impact on the most vulnerable segments of the population, particularly IDPs, returnees and refugees. These populations were already susceptible to poor access to education (World Bank 04/05/2020). Surveys on the impact of the pandemic show that marginalised communities, including refugees and IDPs, are some of the most affected economically, experiencing significant negative effects on employment and other income sources (UNDP 06/10/2020). According to one survey, 86% of respondents said they were unable to meet their basic needs, with refugees (92%) and out-of-camp IDPs (90%) being the most affected. Erbil and Anbar had the highest percentages of people responding negatively to being able to meet their basic needs (Ground Truth Solutions 08/2020). These areas and demographic groups thus require specific monitoring of their evolving education needs.

Poor families might not have the money to pay for **laptops, SIM cards, internet connection, or tablet/mobile devices** to ensure their children continue following the curriculum from home. In 2018, **only 20% of children in Iraq had a computer at home**, half had access to the internet, and only 6% had radios in their houses. On the other hand, 98% had access to a mobile phone and a television (MICS 2018). Whereas information on men's and boys' usage was not reported, the same survey revealed that only **4% of girls and women over 15 used a computer at least once a week**, while the percentage went up to 35% for internet usage, and to 78% for mobile. This baseline data becomes all the more important in identifying the most appropriate and widespread means of access to virtual learning. Still, differences in usage based on **income and rural/urban settings** (MICS 2018) and the location's conflict history also need to be considered in programming.

For example, a specific survey in governorates affected by displacement and affected by conflict such as **Anbar, Dohuk, Kirkuk, Ninewa and Salah al-Din** in May 2020 revealed that 24% (27% females; 23% males) of surveyed households do not have smartphones or internet access, while 11% (both females and males) of surveyed households have smartphones but no internet access (NRC 05/2020). This poses **a risk with blended and distance learning** solutions of an **increased divide**, potentially leaving at least one in every three children without access to digital learning owing to challenges with connectivity,

humanitarian and development community contributes to the education budget of both the federal and KRG ministries, and channels additional resources to support the education sector. However, levels of support have been relatively low (ODI 05/2020; World Bank 04/05/2020).

In the absence of access to expensive technology and printed materials provided by the government or humanitarians, poorer children might lose months' worth of learning as schools shut down in late February. **Printed materials** and regular **follow-ups from teachers** can ensure that children who are not receiving pedagogical support from their household have access to education even when schools are closed (discussions with operational partners 10/2020). Data from May 2020 gathered from IDPs in **Ninewa, Baghdad, Salah al-Din and Anbar** showed that **83% of surveyed children did not receive any education in April**, pointing to a significant shortcoming in the initial shift to remote learning (Mercy Hands 06/2020). Children in larger households living in overcrowded settings where multiple family members are always home might also be often disrupted in their learning, or struggle with study time over limited devices.

As parents and other caregivers in the family are required to take on a more active role in children's education, they might not have the time or the knowledge to do so, especially if they did not attend school themselves (NRC 10/2020). The **limited engagement of parents** in school life and curriculum decisions was an issue also before COVID-19. While parent-teacher associations (PTAs) were present in most schools assessed in districts of former conflict-impacted areas, they had no specific training and had not gathered in the month preceding the survey (ECI 02/2020). The lack of pre-existing relations and **communication channels between parents and teachers** might put children at further disadvantage during the pandemic since remote coordination among teachers and caregivers is even more important.

Community and school
The quality of Iraqi schooling has also declined in recent years owing to a **lack of quality teachers and schools** (UNICEF, last accessed 11/2020).

- In terms of teachers, not only might they be unqualified for their positions, and scarce in number (especially in remote and insecure areas), but also underpaid (OCHA 11/2019; NRC 03/12/2019). Only a minority of teachers are hired by the state, with the rest being paid by either humanitarian organisations or government as **volunteers or incentive workers** in what is an unsustainable financing model (NRC 03/12/2019; ECI 02/2020).

- In terms of schools, many have been destroyed or damaged by conflict, and construction and repairs have not kept up with increasing enrolment rates, while newly established private schools have prohibitive enrolment fees for many families (NRC 03/12/2019; Bayan Centre 19/09/2018).

As a result, public schools can be **overcrowded** with pupils lacking desks, chairs, and whiteboards (ECI 02/2020). The **teacher-student ratio** can also be very **high** when few schools accommodate hundreds of students. For example, **Ninewa** registered very large classroom sizes in sampled schools, with an average of 47 children per classroom (NRC 03/2020). Teachers are subsequently unable to provide enough attention to each student and their specific needs. Several schools resorted to at least **two teaching shifts** both in federal Iraq and the KRI in 2019 to ensure that all enrolled students could attend class (ODI 05/2020, INTERSOS and UNHCR 2020). This reduces the amount of time spent in class and puts pupils in the **afternoon shifts** at a disadvantage as both students and teachers are tired and less able to focus (Iraq Education Cluster (IEC) 09/02/2019). Exam results seem to be influenced by this dynamic with only 72% of primary school students in the evening shift passing final exams compared to 92% of children in the morning shift (UNICEF 2017). More recent data on exam results disaggregated by shift is not available to identify trends.

As students cannot be divided into smaller groups and attend even shorter shifts to respect social distancing in overcrowded classrooms, Iraqi schools and authorities, together with aid actors, need to go to greater lengths to ensure **the safe return of students** once the crisis phase is over, for example through the **Framework for Reopening Schools** and the **Safe Back to School initiative**. In the meantime, they have difficulties in providing offline and printed learning materials, which were lacking also before the pandemic, and are now in higher demand (IEC 09/02/2019; discussions with operational partners 10/2020).

Another key challenge is **tracking and monitoring the progress of students** during virtual learning (UNICEF 09/2020). The high number of students followed by each teacher, and uneven access to remote learning materials and communication with school personnel, might all be contributing to this. Some teachers also lack the skills and training to deliver the curriculum through virtual platforms (UNICEF 09/2020).

Years of missing state investments and, in certain governorates, conflict, have left schools throughout the country in an inadequate condition, with several lacking essential **WASH services**, such as a sufficient number of restrooms or separate sanitation facilities for boys and girls, soap and water (WFP and REACH 12/2019). If classes are to reopen safely this is a significant gap given the increased WASH measures required to try to reduce the spread of the virus.
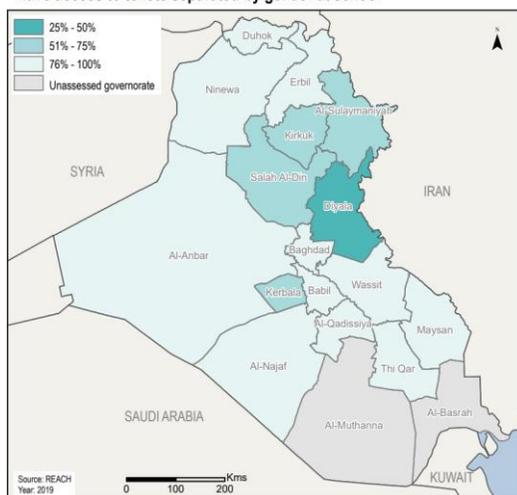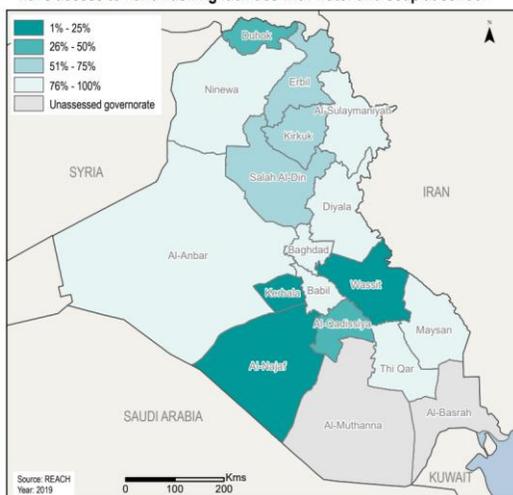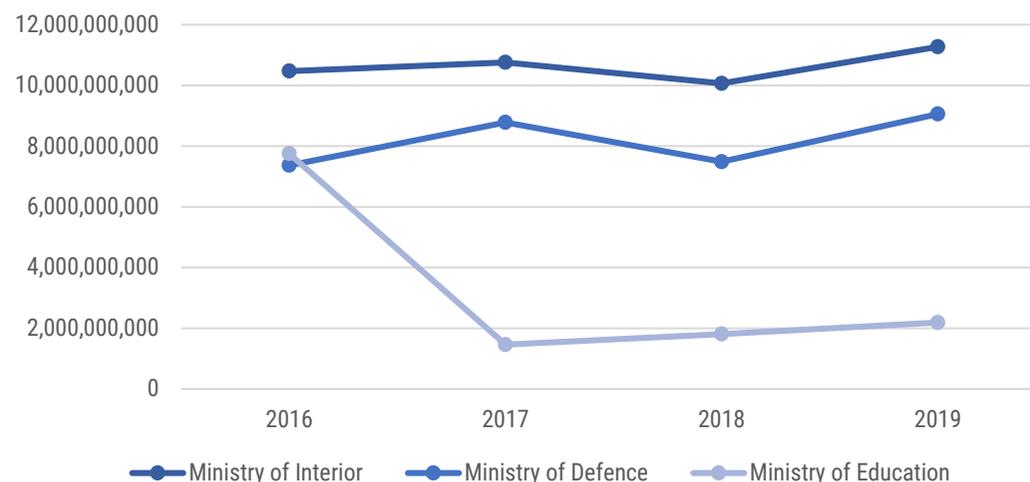
Source: WFP and REACH 12/2019

Source: Iraqi Alliance for Education 2019

Local NGOs have reported that, in rural areas, some schools are made of **mud and clay**, which do not grant a safe and sanitary environment (Al Haboby Foundation 2019; Network of Iraq for Child Rights 2019). Lack of **electricity**, which means missing air conditioning in the heat of summer and heating in cold winters, also affected children in schools before the pandemic (ECI 02/2020), potentially making it harder for them to concentrate and making them more prone to illness. The same electricity challenge partially translates to a **disconnection from education**, should virtual learning be the only alternative offered to mitigate COVID-19 risks.

State

While not an issue exclusive to Iraq, earmarked **budget for the MoE** (both federal and KRI) has been kept at low levels compared to increased spending on security and defence in recent years of conflict (Iraqi Alliance for Education 2019; UNICEF 2017). Of the money spent on education only a small percentage went towards investment and school reconstruction, with the majority used for **recurrent expenses** such as salaries (UNICEF 2017). These issues persist in 2019 with a big gap between the budget allocated to the MoE and the education needs of the country (Iraqi Alliance for Education 2019).

Local actors have estimated that thousands of schools will need to be put into operation in order to resolve the current overcrowding problem (Iraqi Alliance for Education 2019). As at early 2019, over half of the schools in districts previously controlled by IS needed repairs (OCHA 17/11/2019). However, **structural solutions** such as reconstruction and refurbishment, which are also costly in terms of time and money, are **unlikely to materialise** in the short term. Funding for these activities is sporadic for all humanitarian and development actors involved.

The issue, however, is not only the quantity of investments on education but also their quality. High **dropout and repetition rates** imply a **waste of public money invested**, as the students concerned have lower wages in the long-term and limited employment possibilities, thereby not fulfilling their potential to give back to Iraqi society and the economy. The higher wages and job opportunities lost because of missing years of education will make them more likely to fall into poverty and start working prematurely (UNICEF 2017; discussions with operational partners 10/2020). More specifically, dropouts and repetition of school years cost federal Iraq 20% of its education budget and the KRG 14% of its education expenditure in 2014/2015 (UNICEF 2017).

With the **COVID-19**-induced closure of schools there is a risk that these economic and long-term losses for both the Iraqi state and the children will be exacerbated with additional **delays in learning**, permanent losses of tuition time and, as a result, of

children's intellectual development (World Bank 18/06/2020). Local actors also highlighted delays in the ministerial planning of the education response, including lacking guidance on systematic school reopening and blended learning (UNICEF 09/2020; discussions with operational partners 10/2020).

Displaced children have also encountered **language barriers** to accessing education and communicating with local peers in multicultural Iraq, which hosts Arabic, Kurdish (Sorani and Badini) and Turkmen-speaking communities, among many others. While not all dialects/languages spoken in Iraq are used for educational purposes, major language barriers exist. For example, Arabic-speaking IDPs and Syrian refugees living in the KRI can only attend **Arabic schools** if they do not speak **Sorani Kurdish**. Syrian refugees speaking **Kurmanji Kurdish** also had to adapt to the Kurdish used in the KRI; specifically, Syrians using the Latin alphabet had to start using the Arabic alphabet (ODI 05/2020; ECI 02/2020). Conversely, in certain disputed territories in northern Iraq, such as Tuz Khurmatu (Salah al-Din governorate), there has been a reported decrease in the tuition available in Kurdish over the last few years (Rudaw 07/10/2020; Kirkuk 10/10/2020). These language barriers pose short and long-term integration challenges. Some IDP and refugee children might struggle to follow the curriculum in a new language now and be asked to switch back to their mother tongue and need remedial and language classes in case of return to their areas of origin in the future.

Education and health

Individual

Children who have lived through conflict and displacement have witnessed **violence** and potentially experienced **traumatic events** whether in Syria or Iraq. For example, a **mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS)** survey conducted in Kirkuk in 2019 found several signs of distress among adolescents such as fears, worrying, depression, stress, tiredness and aggressiveness, sadness, and moodiness (Save the Children 2019). Their parents might also display the same or additional symptoms pointing to household-wide needs for psychosocial support in specific households (Save the Children 2019). Some children thus need specific MHPSS services to ensure their class attendance without long-term mental health complications (UNHRC 13/05/2020). With the surge and spread of COVID-19, some of these children might relive the **stress** they experienced in conflict zones as they see families and friends again confronted by threats to health (NRC 2020). **Fear of infection for themselves and their families** are the top two sources of stress for displaced children – returnees, refugees and IDPs – surveyed in Iraq (NRC 10/2020). Almost

half of the children surveyed in Iraq reported a rise in their stress levels, a quantitative increase second only to Yemen among the assessed countries (NRC 31/08/2020).

The **lack of social contacts and interaction at school**, as well the feeling of isolation during virtual learning, can also exacerbate previous mental health conditions or lead to new ones (NRC 2020). The possibility of an increase in the number of children in need of already overstretched MHPSS services cannot be excluded during the pandemic.

From a nutrition standpoint, over **630,000 children are missing out on school meals**, half of whom are girls (WFP 2020). While malnutrition was below emergency levels in pre-pandemic times and not reported as a priority concern, more data is needed on the impact of school closures on nutrition – especially among those children who would normally have a school meal provided by the government and humanitarian organisations, as their nutritional needs must now be met at home (WHO and Health Cluster 23/06/2020). In this context, local actors reported a decrease in the demand for nutrition services, including because of fears of contracting COVID-19 (UNICEF 09/2020).

Family

As more time is spent at home, family plays an increasing role in the oversight of the mental and physical health of children. However, some families might not follow the established procedures when their children present COVID-19 symptoms. A recent study showed that 20% of the IDP families surveyed in **Anbar, Salah al Din, Ninewa and Baghdad** with a child showing two or more COVID-19 symptoms did not seek medical attention. Furthermore, only 5% or less of children showing two or more symptoms were tested or isolated during illness (Mercy Hands 06/2020). **Failure to seek medical help promptly** potentially exposes parents and their communities to the virus and could endanger the health of the child too. For families struggling with unemployment and other financial difficulties, the **cost of personal protective equipment (PPE)** for the minority of children that can already go to school might be too high, creating a potential health hazard for fellow students and teachers.[6]

Community and school

Iraqi schools with staff working in double and triple shifts, are at a particular disadvantage in facing the pandemic. In fact, before 2020, teachers already noticed that **illness spread fast** among children in overcrowded classrooms (NRC 03/12/2020). Iraqi schools were also facing challenges in giving appropriate MHPSS services to children before the pandemic. There are a limited number of social workers in Iraq (Health Cluster and WHO 23/06/2020), and the presence of a **social worker** was reported only in a **minority of schools** in a recent assessment of KRI facilities (INTERSOS and UNHCR 2020). Teachers might also have received

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[6] The KRG MoE has allowed only students in Grade 1, 2 and 12 back in school at the start of the 2020 school year (NRC 10/2020).

no **training on children's mental health** issues and thus be unable to help or further refer their students.

State

A lack of political will for the provision of MPHSS services in certain areas and the **stigma around mental health** might also mean that many affected **children will go untreated**, especially during the pandemic. For example, recent data revealed that only 138 psychiatrists were operating in Iraq (WHO and Health Cluster 23/06/2020), posing a health risk to the many patients in need of specialist treatment who cannot cover long distances for medical appointments, including children, and miss out on specialist care as a consequence.

For a successful and secure reopening of schools, systematic **isolation, testing and contact tracing** of COVID-19 cases is necessary. It remains to be seen if Iraq can deal with the increased test and tracing load that a full reopening of schools would imply.

Education, protection, and social cohesion

Individual

Documentation-related protection issues are paramount. For children the main challenge is accessing schools when they **lack key documents,** such as attestations from previous schools they attended, but also birth certificates, which up to **45,000 children in displacement camps** were lacking as at April 2019 (NRC 30/04/2019). This protection challenge is relevant across all societal levels.

Family

The pandemic has caused an **economic crisis**. As families struggle to cover expenses, negative coping mechanisms, also at crisis and emergency level, have kicked in, including for IDPs and returnees (REACH 12/10/2020). These might include **child labour, begging, and child marriage**. In six months of monitoring by the Protection Cluster, an increasing number of respondents, especially out of camps, mentioned child labour as one of the key protection violations affecting children. As at October 2020 **child labour** was the third most reported violation of children's rights in Iraq (Protection Cluster 13/10/2020). Around 6% of children aged 5–14 were already engaged in economic activity and household chores in Iraq in 2011, indicating that child labour is an established coping mechanism (UNICEF and ILO 2011). If the family no longer has income to cover all expenses, parents might renounce all education-related costs and put their children to work instead (OCHA 21/07/2020). The opposite dynamic can also occur as pupils start with "side jobs", then fall behind with the curriculum, are no longer able to catch up and risk dropping out of school. Due to the COVID-19 economic crisis and the fact that most learning is still done remotely, more children might drop out with fewer possibilities for teachers and social workers to

identify problems and intervene. These children are also at a **higher risk of not returning to schools** once they reopen (discussions with operational partners 10/2020).

The same risk is run with **child marriage,** which can be used by families as a form of financial relief, as the responsibility for economic support of the bride falls on the spouse and his family. Again, teachers and social workers might have more difficulties in monitoring girl brides' attendance during extended remote learning periods. **Women and girl-friendly spaces** providing support to sexual and GBV survivors, girl brides, and girls at risk of early marriage were offering fewer services in September 2020 than the previous year (UNICEF 09/2020) and might offer limited help to female students in difficulty. Among a general increase in perceived protection violations affecting children since March 2020, child marriage was mentioned as a key protection concern by 7% of respondents (Protection Cluster 13/10/2020). Child marriage was not uncommon in Iraq before the pandemic, with 7% of married women aged 20–24 reporting they had got married when they were 15 or younger (MICS 2018). While correlational and causal relations need to be investigated, one of the reasons might be families' perception of lack of quality in their children's education. If they feel children are not learning anything valuable, they might more easily think of child labour and child marriage as "worthwhile" investments (NRC 03/2020).

Remote learning can also be undermined by other protection issues. In April and May 2020, the number of reported sex and GBV cases increased – specifically **domestic violence cases** – with 95% of those reporting being female (GBV subcluster 05/2020). This does not mean, however, that boys and men are not at risk of abuse. In fact 12% of the respondents surveyed nationally by the Protection Cluster reported that **abuse, violence and neglect within the household** were key protection issues for all children (Protection Cluster 13/10/2020). In case of violence and tensions within the home, the mental and physical health of boys and girls, either as survivors or witnesses, is threatened and so is their capacity to focus and follow classes for extended periods of time (discussions with operational partners). This risk is further exacerbated during lockdowns and curfews when children cannot leave a potentially violent household for hours on end.

Girls also face potential protection violations **on their way to school.** This pre-dates the pandemic and might resurface as schools reopen. Girls might have stricter **mobility restrictions** than boys and find more difficulties in accessing school if this is far away as they are thought to be more exposed to violence and harassment in the public sphere (Save the Children 2016, HI 07/2020, GBV Sub Cluster 2020)

Finally, families face huge **documentation challenges** if they have lost their documents while fleeing or in displacement, if they were confiscated by IS or Iraqi authorities and, if they lived in IS-controlled areas and were provided with documents that are now invalid (NRC 30/04/2019). According to a 2019 assessment, nearly **2.9 million individuals**, including

camp-based and out-of-camp IDPs as well as returnees, are missing at least one form of civil documentation (UNAMI 17/02/2020). The September monitoring exercise by the Protection Cluster documented that 24% of the respondents – the vast majority of whom in-camp – reported the lack of civil documentation as a key protection issue (Protection Cluster 13/10/2020), almost three years after the official end of the war against IS (BBC News 09/12/2017). To enrol a child in school and obtain his/her ID, **marriage certificates** and the **death certificate** of the father in the case of widows are required. For certain households **security clearance** is also a pre-condition to access documentation. Those households unable to meet these requirements, either because of perceived affiliations, lack of money to travel and research documents, mobility restrictions and other factors, have their children barred from accessing education and might also be shunned or actively discriminated against in the community (NRC 30/04/2019; HRW 28/08/2019).

Community and school

There are also numerous protection concerns at the community level. The acceleration in the closure of camps from August 2019 onwards poses risks for **premature returns** to under-served areas of origin that are still not properly rehabilitated. There are also risks in terms of education infrastructure, with some school buildings being unsafe and not satisfying WASH standards, and protection risks because of the **stigma** that surrounds those with perceived affiliations to extremist groups, including children who manage to enrol in school (discussions with operational partners 10/2020; OCHA 17/11/2019; NRC 30/04/2019; HRW 14/06/2019, ECI 02/2020).

School principals and teachers might be reluctant to accept children without the required documentation because of fear of IS affiliation of students and parents or because of specific instructions given by authorities against enrolment. This leads to the rigid application of documentation requirements and leaves children with fewer possibilities of promptly accessing education (NRC 30/04/2019; HRW 14/06/2019; HRW 28/08/2019).

There is a risk that these children might gradually become **disenfranchised** and be targeted by recruitment campaigns by non-state armed groups active in Iraq and neighbouring countries (HRW 14/06/2019). While there are multiple factors leading to child recruitment, the lack of access to education, as well as dwindling income during the current economic crisis, might also play a role.

Schools were attacked and damaged during the years of conflict (UNICEF 30/10/2015; UNICEF 23/11/2018) and have more recently been used by Iraqi security forces to carry out **security screenings** in camps, not only disrupting children's education but also potentially reviving painful memories of conflict for children and adults (NRC 03/12/2019). The number of these incidents declined in 2019, however (GCPEA 2020).

State

Like many other states marred by conflict, Iraq is also dealing with de-mining operations. Landmines and **explosive devices** still pose a major threat to children, especially returnees moving back to locations previously affected by conflict, as they might be placed in and around schools once used as military bases (Education Cluster and UNICEF 12/03/2020; HRW 14/06/2019). Children are still affected by mental and physical disabilities as a result of these recurring explosive incidents. **693 children** were killed or injured by explosive devices in Iraq between 2011 and 2019, with this figure likely to be an underestimation (Action on Armed Violence 22/10/2020).

Federal, KRG, and governorate authorities have not maintained a consistent approach on documentation, with **exemptions unequally applied**. Authorities can also discriminate against families and individuals with perceived affiliations, refusing to issue documents that are essential for children's school enrolment and access to health services, including vaccinations (HRW 14/06/2019; NRC 30/04/2019; discussions with operational partner 10/2020). These administrative difficulties are likely to be worsened by the pandemic. Field actors reported a drop of over 50% **in the provision of civil registration services** – including birth and death certificates – in September 2020, compared to one year before (UNICEF 09/2020). This administrative backlog can further delay access to formal education for children waiting for their documentation.

Response capacity

The federal MoE administers all aspects of the federal education system, excluding the KRI. The KRG MoE oversees the regional education system as it is specific to the KRI (ODI 11/05/2020). There are some local NGOs, such as Barzani Charity Foundation, the Iraqi Institution for Development, and Afkar, operating in education response.

While the international response is coordinated through the Iraq Education Cluster, the cluster leads on coordinating education for IDPs and returnees and contributes to the overall refugee response to the Syrian crisis, led by UNHCR. The cluster lead agencies are UNICEF and Save the Children International (ODI 11/05/2020).

Humanitarian and development constraints

NGOs in Iraq **require access letters** to allow them through the multiple security checkpoints that are present in areas where they operate. By the end of 2019, all access authorisation letters had expired; one-off alternative methods have been put in place, but no overall solution has been agreed (OCHA 21/07/2020). As of August 2020, the lack of national-level access authorisation letters for NGOs issued by the National Operations

Center was reported as one of the most restrictive issues to humanitarian access. **COVID-19 containment measures have added further difficulties to the roll-out of operations** (OCHA 18/10/2020; OCHA 09/09/2020).

The Government of Iraq officially announced a nationwide curfew starting on 17 March, while the KRG established a curfew from 14 March covering Dohuk, Erbil, and Sulaymaniyah governorates. Curfews and movement restrictions were imposed by the government nationwide from mid-March – until August – with very few exemptions. **International flights** into and out of the country stopped, but have **now resumed**. On 23 August, the KRG announced that inter-governorate travel between Dohuk, Erbil, and Sulaimaniyah governorates is now allowed (Health Cluster 03/2020; WFP 25/08/2020).

Suspensions of operations were most commonly reported in the initial phase of the pandemic in March 2020. Initial closures of banks and government offices also created problems for operations. Beginning in September, humanitarian access has improved compared to previous months. Anbar and Ninewa governorates had the most reported access-related incidents[7] in September (OCHA 23/08/2020; OCHA 21/07/2020; OCHA 05/10/2020).

Conflict and violence also hampers humanitarian operations. Despite active fighting having ended with the defeat of IS in 2017, attacks by IS militants hiding in the mountainous region of Makhmour and Hamrin remain a threat to those in the neighbouring regions. IS increased its operations at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. From January to August 2020, IS increased activity in Diyala, followed by Anbar, Kirkuk, Salahaldin, Mosul, Erbil, and Baghdad. The withdrawal of the coalition forces' troops because of COVID-19 has created a security gap, which IS is exploiting. The hostilities have constrained the access of some organisations (iMMAP 01/09/2020; The Conversation 28/01/2020' ODI 11/05/2020).

Crisis outcomes

Over time

PAST

2014–2020
Conflict and attacks against civilians and infrastructure, including children and schools.

2019–2020
Protests involving school and university students and teachers. Disruption to classes starting from 28 October and continuing into December (UNAMI 11/12/2019).

PRESENT 2020

COVID-19-related **school closures** and a switch to remote learning for most students.

FUTURE 2020–2021

(1) Expected continuation of **education disruption** because of COVID-19 and unequal access to distance learning.

(2) Children lose the protective environment that schools offer against negative coping mechanisms, such as child labour and early marriages. This could lead to a long-term rise in **MHPSS needs** even after the pandemic is over. Some IDPs and refugees were already exposed to traumatic events and needed MHPSS, with COVID-19 and containment measures potentially worsening mental health needs.

(3) **Losses in learning and reductions in development of human capital** because disadvantaged children are excluded from distance learning, and a continuation of pre-existing issues. These include high dropout rates, extended learning gaps in children's lives, and difficult reintegration of over-age students. The stretched capacities of the MoE and families to ensure the safe reopening of schools might lead to weariness from both children and parents regarding the return to school and/or risks of COVID-19 transmission.

(4) Some children might have **new social and emotional needs** upon returning to school after at least eight months of absence. They might have lost the skills they need for learning in a classroom environment, with social and emotional gaps potentially worsened by COVID-19 and the above-mentioned protection and social issues.

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[7] These are incidents that hamper humanitarian access in any way including restriction of movement of personnel or goods within or into Iraq, ongoing hostilities, violence against humanitarian personnel, assets and facilities, interference in humanitarian activities, presence of mines and unexploded ordinance, and a difficult physical environment.
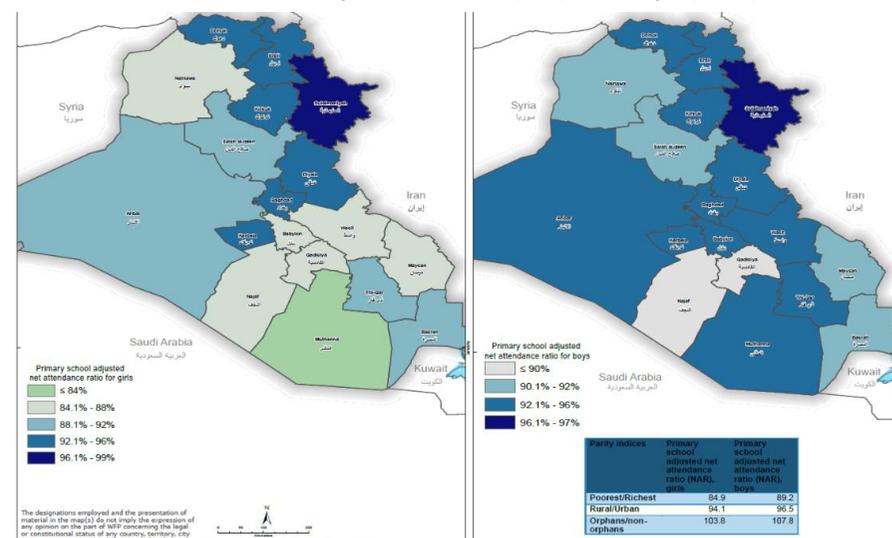
Specific categories among the affected population

This section is not intended as a comprehensive overview of all demographic groups experiencing difficulties in accessing education in Iraq. Categories of people not listed below who might face limitations to their right to education because of **statelessness** and other factors include **Palestinian refugees** and the **Bidoon** (Stateless Journeys 11/2019).[8]

Girls: family and society dynamics, along with pre-established gender roles at the community and household level, have historically limited girls' access to education, their perceived and actual insecurity on the way to school, and low quality of teaching and education infrastructure, especially in remote areas (UNICEF 2010; Save the Children 2016; UN Women 19/05/2019; UNICEF 11/10/2020). The 2018 MICS showed a positive trend in terms of attendance, with 93% of boys compared to 90% of girls of primary school age enrolled in school. The net attendance ratio is the same for both girls and boys in lower secondary school (58%), while in the upper secondary stage slightly more girls are attending than boys (35% vs 31%) (MICS 02/2019). The picture becomes more nuanced if we look at completion rates,[9] with 80% of boys completing primary school compared to 73% of girls, 47% of girls completing the lower secondary cycle compared to 46% of boys, and 43% of girls finishing upper secondary education compared to 45% of boys (MICS 02/2019). While girls' enrolment rate has grown, data from 2017 and 2018 show they have higher out-of-school rates compared to boys (MICS 02/2019; UNICEF 2017). Lower attendance and completion rates, especially at the primary level, have a long-term impact on girls' access to preferred professional careers, as well as to higher wages which are related to higher levels of education – as girls and women in Iraq are less likely to successfully make up for lost years of education with work experience compared to their male peers (UNICEF 2017). Adding to these pre-existing challenges, girls run the risk of taking on additional caregiving responsibilities during the pandemic with a subsequent reduction of time and energy spent on learning (CARE 28/06/2020).

Net attendance ratio,[10] primary school, girls (left) and boys (right)

Source: WFP 30/03/2020. Data source: MICS 02/2019

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[8] Literally meaning "without", the Bidoon descend from nomadic tribes originating from the Arabian peninsula and are often considered as stateless in Iraq (Stateless Journeys 11/2019).
[9] "Percentage of children age 3-5 years above the intended age for the last grade who have completed that grade (primary, lower secondary and upper secondary school)" (MICS 02/2019).
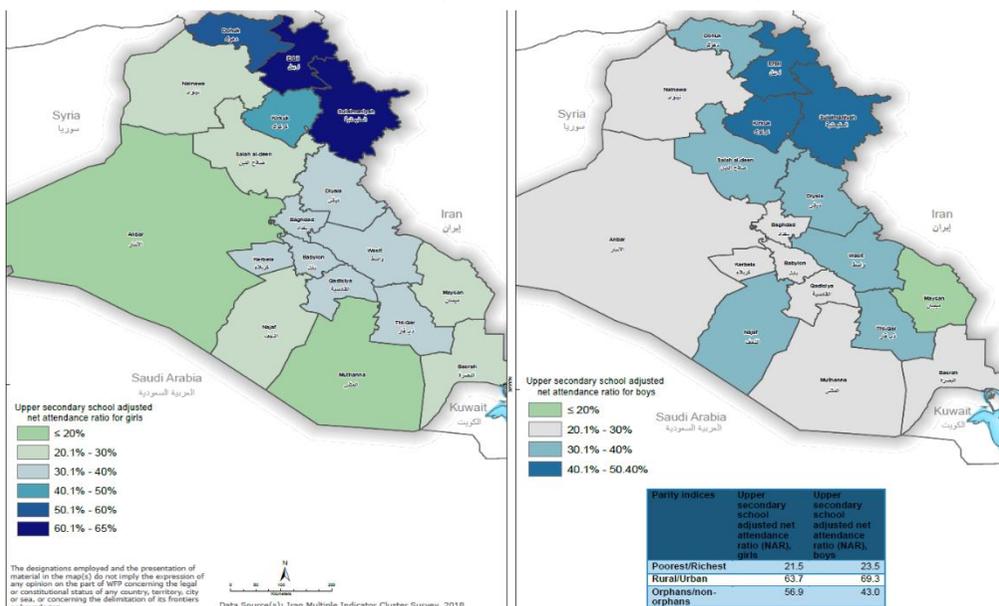
[10] Defined as "percentage of children of: (a) primary school age currently attending primary or secondary school; (b) lower secondary school age currently attending lower secondary school or higher; (c) upper secondary school age currently attending upper secondary school or higher" (MICS 02/2019)

Net attendance ratio, lower secondary school, girls (left) and boys (right)

Source: WFP 30/03/2020. Data source: MICS 02/2019

Net attendance ratio, upper secondary school, girls (left) and boys (right)

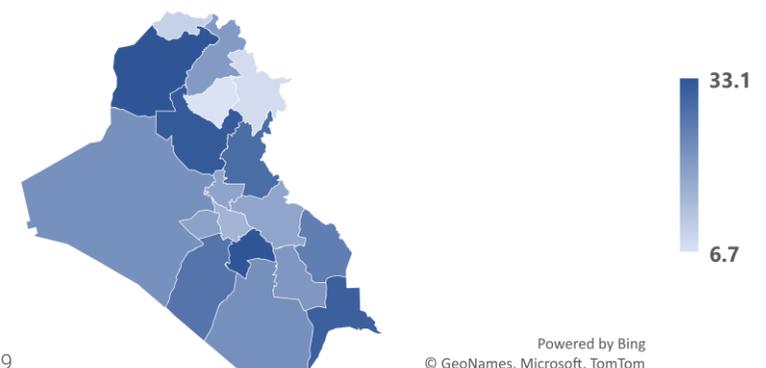Source: WFP 30/03/2020. Data source: MICS 02/2019
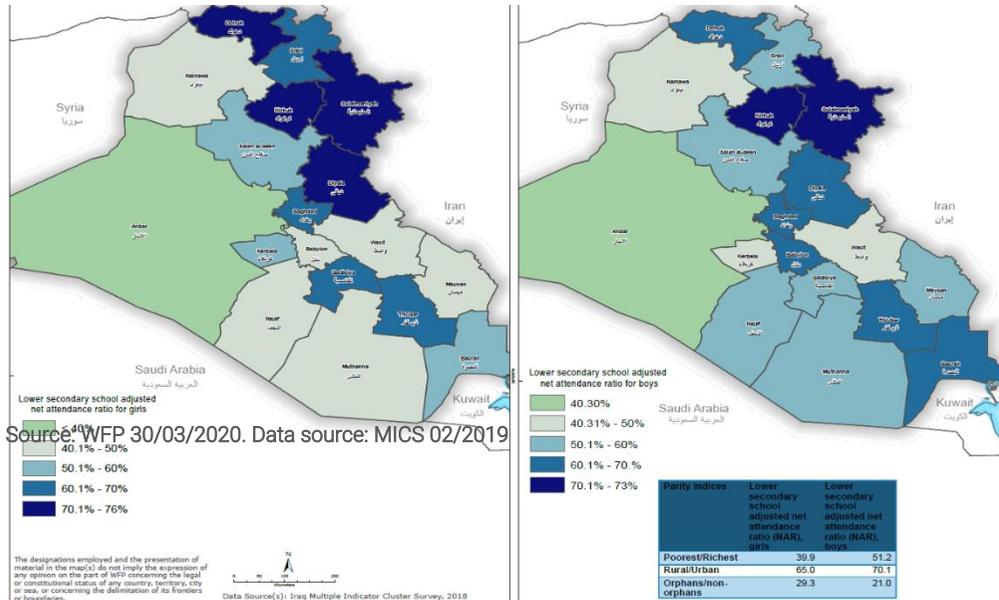
Children with disabilities (CwD): a recent study on people with disabilities in Basra governorate shows that their main obstacles in accessing education are inadequate and far-away schools and too few institutions catering for their specific disability. Some family and community members also believe that the education of CwD, especially girls, is not a priority in light of the fewer job opportunities available once they finish school. This might be one reason why more than half of people surveyed with disabilities over the age of 17 had not completed primary school (HI 07/2020). Teachers surveyed in mainstream secondary schools and universities had not received trainings on teaching to people with disabilities and some showed low levels of awareness of their needs. Specialised and mainstream schools face different challenges regarding the curricula (HI 07/2020). While the curriculum is targeted to the needs of CwD in specialised institutions, it might lack the formal approval of the MoE and is therefore not aligned with international regulations. Mainstream secondary schools reported having no specific learning materials for CwD, making it more difficult for them to meet the needs of CwD (HI 07/2020). Two years after the implementation of the Comprehensive Educational Integration Act – which allowed the entry of 13,000 CwD into mainstream schools (OHCHR 22/08/2019) – nationwide assessments would give a more detailed picture of the challenges that CwD are still facing.

As most learning is now virtual and CwD might need more support from parents, there is a risk that their education is being deprioritised (World Bank 18/06/2020), especially in larger households. CwD require books and efficient information and communications technology services, as well as assistive devices and an adapted curriculum that can be followed from home in order to meet their specific needs (UNICEF 04/2020). These are resources that poorer households and under-funded schools might not provide during the pandemic for financial and logistic reasons.

Percentage of children age 5-17 years with functional difficulty in at least one domain: governorate level

Data source: MICS 02/2019

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Refugee children: the 69,000 school-aged Syrian refugee children mostly living in the KRI have faced obstacles in integrating into the local school system, in spite of governmental efforts (UNHCR 24/03/2020). With too few Arabic schools in the KRI, the challenge to learn Sorani Kurdish and use it in school is slowing down KRG efforts to smoothly integrate the refugees into the local education system (ODI 11/05/2020). Enrolment rates of Syrian refugee children are higher in camps than in urban settings, but only a few children manage to progress to upper secondary education in either setting – with an 8% urban enrolment rate and a 30% in-camp rate (UNHCR 24/03/2020).

A memorandum of understanding signed between the KRG and the Syrian government allowed for the equalisation of education certificates in the two countries to facilitate access to education for all refugees. The certificates of Syrian refugee students wishing to enrol in universities are still going unrecognised, however (ODI 11/05/2020). This limits their professional ambitions as well as the kind of socioeconomic contribution they will be able to bring to KRI and Syrian societies in case of return.

Returnee children: of the 2,700 returnee households surveyed in the 2020 MCNA, 9% reported that at least one child was not accessing any education before the pandemic, with the most frequently mentioned barrier to attendance being the closure/dysfunctionality of schools (REACH 12/10/2020). A lack of qualified teachers in return areas is also a key issue (ODI 11/05/2020; OCHA 17/11/2019). Similarly to IDP children, returnee children face difficulties in accessing documentation, including for education purposes, especially if suspected of IS affiliation. This can lead to their isolation and stigmatisation in the community, and their exclusion from school (UNHRC 13/05/2020).

IDP children: with an increase in camp closures in 2019, thousands of IDP children found themselves secondarily displaced to other camps or urban settings where provision of adequate education services is not always guaranteed (UNHRC 13/05/2020). The 2020 MCNA shows how, in February 2020, 24% of the surveyed in-camp households and 26% of the out-of-camp households had at least one child not regularly attending classes (REACH 12/10/2020). In-camp and out-of-camp IDPs receive different levels of humanitarian assistance and support, with a tendency for more access to education services in-camp because of the presence of NGOs there, which allows for easier coordination of services (ODI 11/05/2020; discussions with operational partners 10/2020). Just like returnees, IDP children suspected of IS affiliation and who attempt to return to their communities can face discrimination and threats by locals and might be sent back at checkpoints, especially if coming from Anbar, Kirkuk, Ninewa, and Salah ad Din, and they can encounter the same administrative difficulties in enrolling in school (ODI 11/05/2020). Arabic-speaking IDPs in the KRI – like Syrian refugee children – find too few Arabic schools in the area, with their educational progress potentially slowed down (ODI 11/05/2020).

Over-age children and children who have been out of school for multiple years: for those children who have been out of the school system for years – mainly as a result of the conflict – getting back to education might seem an unsurmountable obstacle, especially without governmental support and re-entry paths that fit their needs. Adolescents might be put in the same class as much younger children, something which they find embarrassing and which discourages their attendance. Conversely, when these children are placed on the same levels as their peers, they struggle to follow the curriculum after their prolonged absence (UNAMI and OHCHR 02/2020). As the country is facing a health and economic crisis, long-term out-of-school children might find even more difficulties in following classes and being monitored and engaged by school staff in their reintegration. They are at higher risk of not returning to schools once they reopen (discussions with operational partners 10/2020).

Children in prisons and orphanages, and orphaned children: Challenges in providing education and legal and protection services targeting children in institutions and prisons – including 984 underage children detained on national security charges as of December 2019 (Watchlist 2019) – might be deepened because of COVID-19 access limitations. Orphans who end up living with their extended families might not be granted education and MHPPS services owing to the limited financial possibilities of the household (The New York Times 31/08/2018).

Minority children: Iraqi children of African descent – the majority of whom live in Basra governorate[11] – can be subject to discriminatory practices and verbal abuse, reducing their access to schooling. The long-term effect of this is the perpetuation of high poverty levels within the Iraqi community of African descent, paired with severely restricted social mobility (Institute for International Law and Human Rights 05/2013; MADRE 11/2018). Similar challenges in accessing education and rewarding employment opportunities were reported for Roma children as well (OHCHR 11/01/2019).

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[11] The estimated number of African-Iraqis living in the country is of 400,000 people (Al Fanar 30/06/2020).

Specific geographic areas

Giving a detailed governorate-level overview of education issues in Iraq goes beyond the scope of the report. Key geographic fault lines to be considered in analysis are illustrated here, however. When looking at the overall situation of education in Iraq, it is important to distinguish between the government of **federal Iraq and the KRG**, as the two adopt different policies and face common, but also context-specific, challenges. For example, for both governments underspending and lack of investments on education are serious issues. But there are also different challenges, such as more numerous language barriers in the KRI, because of the demographic groups it hosts (UNICEF 2017; Government of Iraq 2019), while net school attendance rates in federal Iraq tend to be lower than in the KRI (MICS 02/2019). Data also needs to be assessed to evaluate **governorate and district peculiarities**. Most assessments have focused on governorates previously affected by conflict and/or hosting the highest numbers of IDPs, returnees, and refugees, such as **Anbar, Diyala, Kirkuk, Ninewa, and Erbil.** These governorates had to tackle spikes in enrolment rates, infrastructure damaged by conflict, different languages and curricula for teaching, as well as missed integration opportunities for IDP, refugee, and returnee children in the mainstream education system. While other governorates in the centre and south might not have faced all of these problems, local assessments indicate that school infrastructures are also lacking in these areas – for example, registering very low scores in multiple WASH indicators (REACH and WFP 12/2019) – and that exclusionary practices affecting vulnerable children such as students with disabilities also emerge in those governorates (HI 07/2020). Long distances to school and lack of choice in terms of educational centres might also be a nationwide challenge for children living in **remote and rural areas**, including in some camps, where even non-formal education opportunities can be challenging to provide (HI 07/2020; UNAMI and OHCHR 02/2020; discussions with operational partners 10/2020). This shows how social cohesion and infrastructural problems are cross-cutting challenges that still need to be solved in the Iraqi education sector.