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# The Politics of IDP Education Provision: Negotiating identity and schooling in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

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## ABSTRACT

The expansion of Islamic State control in Iraq led to massive internal displacement. Iraq now has one of the largest internally displaced populations in the world. Many families found relative safety in government-controlled towns throughout the country; a large proportion sought refuge in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), having fled from its northern territories where Arabs, Kurds, Yazidis, Assyrians and Turkmen each claimed demographic dominance. Consequently, the KRI has become a sanctuary to almost a million Iraqi IDPs of varying ethnic backgrounds and cultures. This article draws on extensive regional fieldwork to explore the relationship between education provision for displaced populations and broader ethno-sectarian and socio-political influences. The article will unpack the research question: “In what ways does education for IDPs in KRI exacerbate or mitigate conflict?” and will highlight key areas in which misunderstanding of identity politics has resulted in reduced quality education for displaced populations.

## INTRODUCTION

Iraq is currently facing one of the most volatile and complex humanitarian crises in the world. The territorial conflict with the Islamic State (IS) forced over 3 million people to flee their homes in large waves of displacement. Many families found relative safety in government-controlled towns and cities throughout the country, with a large proportion of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) seeking refuge in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KR-I). This influx of IDPs added to the existing 245,000 displaced Syrian refugees currently registered in the region (UNHCR, 2015). The so-called “mega-crisis” caused the KR-I’s population to increase by 28 per cent in a matter of months, with the total number of refugees and IDP’s now amounting to roughly 1.4 million, while the Kurdish population stands at only 5-million (World Bank, 2015).

The devastating human cost of the conflict continues to be felt across the region, and the needs of the affected populations have reached an unprecedented scale. The impact on children and youth has been particularly overwhelming, with interrupted education, exposure to severe harm and abuse and a lack of opportunities for the future. Such violence has left many IDP children in danger of becoming increasingly marginalized as the conflict continues. The international community has recognized the danger of a “lost generation” in Iraq and Syria, and global emphasis has been placed on the need to improve services to children affected by the regional crisis (UNICEF, 2014).

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Finding sustainable ways to help re-empower children and youth is crucial to the future of Iraq. As such, ensuring access to quality education for displaced children will form the cornerstone for long-term stabilization efforts. Access to education during emergencies is not only considered a human right but can also serve humanitarian aims. During times of crisis, schools can provide the stability, structure and routine that children need to cope with conflict-induced loss and fear. Furthermore, attending school can help protect children from risks, including gender-based violence, recruitment into armed groups, child labour and early marriage.

Yet the delivery of emergency education has a two-way interaction with the promotion of stability and conflict. Education provision can interact with debates over return, identity and equality, each of which requires careful negotiation in the Iraqi context. If education interventions are not sensitive to the conflict, the provision of schooling for displaced populations can become politicized or feed into conflict narratives by creating resentment and division. It is, therefore, necessary to understand the relationship between the crisis context and education delivery to ensure that education minimizes negative impacts for displaced children in the KR-I. Unfortunately, while academic recognition has been given to the political and sectarian dimensions of the Iraq crisis, the relationship between these issues and emergency education provision has lacked rigorous analysis.

In this respect the article will explore the nexus between IDP education provision in the KR-I and broader ethno-sectarian influences. It will demonstrate that the socio-political environment in the north of Iraq necessitates concerted attention when providing education for IDPs in the KR-I. By unpacking the central research question of: ‘In what ways does education for IDPs in KRI exacerbate or mitigate conflict?’ the article will highlight key areas in which identity and politics have hampered or constrained access to quality education for displaced populations.

The findings will be organized and presented in three central sections. Firstly, the article will locate the research within the wider academic literature on education in conflict and emergencies. It will then move on to provide the necessary contextual background to the current crisis and the pre-existing issues of territorial dispute and ethnopolitics. The third section will present the findings on the current state of emergency education provision in the KRI and the factors that require negotiation to enable equitable access for all IDP communities.

## EDUCATION IN EMERGENCIES

During displacement, educational opportunities are frequently one of the highest requested services for communities. Dryden-Peterson (2011) notes that three central rationales underpin the provision of education in emergencies. Firstly, education can form a component of the immediate response to displacement, providing children with protection and serving as an entry point for psychosocial support and referral mechanisms to highlight children at risk. The second rationale falls within a human rights approach. Access to education is a fundamental human right recognized by the 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; with subsequent treaties reaffirming the rights for specific groups, such as girls, persons with disabilities, migrants, refugees and indigenous people; as well as in specific contexts, such as during armed conflicts or after natural disasters. The importance of education is also articulated as an “enabling right,” a right through which other rights are realized (UNHCR, 2011: 18); as such, education is framed as providing “skills that people need to reach their full potential and to exercise their other rights, such as the right to life and health” (INEE, 2010: 7).

The third rationale highlights education’s developmental focus. It acknowledges education as a long-term investment for society. Education’s intersections with societies’ social, economic, political and security sectors leave it well placed to have far-reaching impacts across a range of conflict stabilization and developmental objectives. Politically, educational governance provides the

opportunity to reinforce the legitimacy of government actors (Thyne, 2006; Østby et al., 2009) within the security agenda schools can provide safe spaces, teach non-violent conflict resolution, fight radicalization and aid reintegration of young combatants into the community to de-escalate fighting (Sinclair, 2001; Burde et al., 2017) and economically, education can build the skills for the development of livelihoods (Dryden-Peterson, 2011). Neglecting these aims during displacement can, therefore, have further long-term impacts on a society's reconstruction.

These rationales reflect education's important role within society; yet it is no longer considered a neutral technical pursuit, especially in fragile contexts. Over the past decade the international education agenda has shifted to recognize education's potentially harmful influence over social dynamics and the spheres of security, governance and economics. The theoretical relationship between education and conflict has now been well documented. The seminal report by Bush and Saltarelli (2000) that described education as having "two faces," one that can exacerbate conflict and one that lessens those risks to build peace has given rise to a subfield of education research in this topic. It is now widely acknowledged that education structure, content and management can serve to influence conflict (Bush and Saltarelli, 2000; Gaigals and Leonhardt, 2001; Davies, 2004; Smith, 2010; Mundy and Dryden-Peterson, 2011; Østby and Urdal, 2011; Conflict Sensitivity Consortium, 2012).

There are many entry points from which education can exercise influence over conflict drivers. Education provides the knowledge and skills necessary for economic development and societal mobility. Therefore, equity between groups is essential to avoid grievances generated by "horizontal inequalities" (Stewart, 2011). Unequal access to education can result in disparities between communities creating conflict, reinforcing political dominance or marginalising certain societal groups (Sommers, 2004). Furthermore, education content holds significant influence over the transmission of values, with every area of the curriculum carrying the potential to communicate implicit and explicit political messages (Gallagher, 2004; Kirk and Winthrop, 2007; King, 2011) as such education holds the potential to further ensconce inequity, divisions, discrimination and structural violence along religious, cultural, ethnic or linguistic lines (INEE, 2017).

It is crucial, therefore, to pay attention to the overlapping interactions between education policy, planning and implementation and the dynamics of a conflict. Merely ensuring that children and youth are provided with basic education services during displacement does not automatically translate into positive societal outcomes. The provision of education for IDPs and refugees during times of conflict is a fundamentally political process. The delivery and content of education for those who are displaced hold the potential to exacerbate conflict and alienate children along ethnic or geographical lines. However, unfortunately, as Dryden-Peterson (2011, 62) notes "deeply-rooted assumptions that children transcend geopolitical differences have shaped the ways in which refugee education is conceived". To counter this, emergency education planning requires concerted efforts to recognize that education does not exist in isolation from the broader social, political and economic influences that may have created displacement.

Educational policy and practice are overwhelmingly impacted by the interests and political priorities of a disparate range of stakeholders. In order to examine the power structures that drive or inhibit education delivery for IDP populations in Iraq, we require a theoretical framing that is particularly sensitive to these dynamics. The article, therefore, proposes drawing on a political economy framework in this respect. Political economy analysis offers a useful theoretical tool for educationalists and has been noted for its utility in relation to the exploration of the social, political and economic influences on education (Kingdon et al., 2014; Novelli et al., 2015). Political economy can be defined as 'the interaction of political and economic processes in a society: the distribution of power and wealth between different groups and individuals, and the processes that create, sustain and transform these relationships over time' (Collinson, 2011: 3). Therefore, applying such a framework champions the examination of "relationships between individuals and society" (Novelli et al., 2015: 10) and encourages the exploration of causes and consequences of unequal

and asymmetric power relations between social groups (Dasgupta, 1985; Caporaso and Levine, 1992). This framing is deemed particularly relevant to our investigation due to the ethno-political competition over power, territory and resources that is driving displacement in Iraq.

When applied to education, political economy analysis highlights the use of policies and practices that “are concerned with access to education, quality of learning and teaching, the language of instruction, curriculum, teacher recruitment and resource allocation across ethnically and geographically diverse regions” (Pherali and Sahar, 2018:243). The UNICEF Peacebuilding Education Research Consortium has developed an education-focused framework that builds on political economy to explore education delivery from the perspective of what it terms “the 4Rs”; Representation, Recognition, Reconciliation and Redistribution (Novelli et al., 2015). This investigation will draw on this understanding to explore the extent to which education provision for IDPs can be seen to be creating conflict in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

## BACKGROUND

Identity is central to the conflict in Iraq; many commentators agree that the roots of the current crisis can be found in the sectarian political system perpetuated by former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki (Laub and Masters, 2014; Gulmohamad, 2014; Hagan et al., 2015; Stansfield, 2014). Maliki’s political marginalization of Sunni leaders and sectarian command of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) led to anti-government protest movements in Sunni areas such as Anbar and Salah ad-Din in 2013 (Adnan, 2014; Katzman, 2014). The increasing Shia representation in the ISF alienated Sunnis, who reported abductions, deliberate killings and unlawful arrest. Consequently, the Sunni community increasingly turned to ethnically and religiously affiliated militias for protection, such as neighbourhood watches and tribal insurgent groups (Krieg, 2014). Groups representing a variety of positions, from Salafist-jihadists to Sunni nationalists, mobilized against Baghdad after 2013, sharing a common platform of grievance, accusing the government of failing to represent the interests of Iraq’s Sunni community (Adnan, 2014). This growing divide was used to the advantage of the group known locally as Da’esh, who channelled Sunni discontent towards their own aims, taking control of territory throughout the country.

The takeover of territory by Da’esh (or the Islamic State as they became known internationally) and the counter-insurgency operation launched by the government, have led to Iraq now contending with massive internal displacement (IOM, 2017). The retake of territory has seen population movements come in waves, with families fleeing both Da’esh control and the subsequent government response. Place of settlement was primarily affected by travel restrictions imposed throughout Iraq, preventing easy access into safe areas controlled both by the Government of Iraq in Baghdad, and the Kurdish Regional Government in Erbil. Population movements were often controlled by check-points enforcing a system of entry requirements (World Report Human Rights Watch, 2016). These policies were noted to be inconsistent between locations and changed periodically without notice.

Disturbingly, reports demonstrated that freedom of movement was often linked to ethnic identity or place of origin, disproportionately affecting Sunni Arab civilians World Report Human Rights Watch, 2016. Human rights groups have suggested that in the south, this limited the movement of Sunni IDPs into mostly Shia provinces – such as families from Anbar trying to access places like Baghdad, Karbala and Basra. While in the north the Kurdish authorities were more stringent with Arab IDPs than they were with Yezidis, Christians and those with a perceived Kurdish ethnicity, resulting in Sunni and Shia Arabs and Turkmen being stopped at the border (see Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Minority Rights Group). Such identity driven policies were highlighted when IS seized control of large swathes of land across what is known as the disputed territories or disputed internal boundaries (DIBs); districts bordering the KRI that are disputed between

the central Baghdad government and the Kurdistan region's seat of power, Erbil. The region has been defined by ethnically distinct contests over historical homelands and competing strategic interests for decades (Anderson and Stansfield, 2011). The religiously defined and sectarian agenda of IS therefore played out against an already fragile backdrop of ethnically defined tensions (Shanks, 2016). The multi-ethnic make-up of the region saw the first large-scale influx of IDPs towards the KR-I being made up of families from varied ethnic backgrounds.

Christians and minorities with perceived Kurdish ethnic markers were able to enter the KR-I more freely due to procedures that prioritized residency for those with sponsors in the region. Consequently, during the initial outbreak of the conflict, interviewees and focus groups participants reported that many without local connections, such as Shabak, Shia Turkmen and Sunni Arabs, were denied entry. Numerous Turkmen and Shabak from Tel Afar and other regions subsequently fled to Baghdad, Najaf and Karbala for resettlement in Shia areas, while, countless Sunni Arabs from Mosul – who feared both IS rule and the subsequent aerial bombardment by the Iraqi air force – failed to meet the sponsorship requirements and ultimately returned to their homes. However, subsequent military movements in Anbar, Salah al-Din and Diyala changed this dynamic as the region opened its doors to many more desperate families fleeing violence in Sunni Arab dominated areas.

The influx of IDPs into the KR-I varies from the rest of the country in terms of its diverse ethnic makeup. IDPs represent a number of community groups, each with their own opposing cultural environments and political perspectives. Both the geographical proximity to the demographically varied Ninewa, and the KRG entry restrictions, have resulted in the IDP population being composed of a number of distinct minority identity groups with complex inter-communal dynamics. The pre-existing territorial dispute in the region also serves to shape the relationship between the host government and the arriving IDPS. Despite their welcome into the region on the grounds of a shared “Kurdish” identity, some elements within both the Christian and Yezidi IDP populations have suggested this to be an imposed identity due to territorial claims on their homelands by Kurdish political authorities. One interlocutor commented, “they call us Kurds because they see our land as theirs. However, this does not make us Kurdish”.

Regardless of the territory being reclaimed from IS, IDPs return to their place of origin continues to be restricted, as liberation is seen as an opportunity for actors to assert power over contested towns and villages. In the disputed territories that border the KRI, the battle with IS has been a prelude to a multitude of localised conflicts between actors scrambling for administrative control. Subsequently, across the DIBs and within the IDP population, minority groups have been pulled into a clash over demographic composition as each disputed district faces ethnically or politically defined claims. Such broader political and security driven agendas have ramifications for those communities displaced from their homes, and require scrutiny when delivering humanitarian aid, in particular, emergency education, to ensure no harm is done.

## **Methodology**

In order to address the central research question: “In what ways does education for IDPs in KRI exacerbate or mitigate conflict?”, the researcher employed a purposive sampling method involving qualitative data collection tools. Focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews formed the key modality of primary data collection, with consultations conducted in Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Duhok and Kirkuk. This was further supported by secondary document analysis; local and international media, social media, NGO field reports and cluster meeting minutes, and various ethnically affiliated human rights agency reports were examined to triangulate field findings.

Participants were selected through existing local networks, consultation with staff within the camps and community leaders. The criteria for participant selection centred around two focal points. The first was the general rule of achieving a purposive sample which was representative of the IDP communities. In this respect, it was necessary to achieve equal representation of interlocutors from the different ethnically and linguistically defined groups in each location. Secondly, the participant needed to be knowledgeable about the research questions on education. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were conducted in each governorate with over 20 education providers, practitioners and those with a stake in education provision, and IDPs and refugees between the ages of 16–21 were invited to take part in focus group discussions. Twelve focus groups involving a total of 119 young people aged between 16–21 were conducted. Of the focus group participants, 55 per cent were female, and 45 per cent were male. Focus groups included youth and community representatives from the host communities, Karakoash, Mosul, Salah al-Din and Shingal. Ethical considerations with regard to conducting FGDs with youth were reflected upon carefully.<sup>1</sup>

The political realities of the situation impacted on the data collection and consultation process. The environment of insecurity led to a degree of distrust and a number of steps were taken to overcome this obstacle to data collection. Firstly, where the use of a translator was necessary care was taken to ensure that he or she came from within the community being interviewed. In addition, focus groups were closed spaces for participants only; when camp management requested admission, diplomatic measures were taken to ensure separate space was created to speak with them. Finally, it became apparent that note-taking made some participants uncomfortable. In these cases, interview notes were written up directly after interviews but without direct quotes, for fear of misquoting participants.

## KRI IDP EDUCATION PROVISION

Tomaševski (2001) notes that in order for education to be effective it must be of high quality, providing available, accessible, acceptable and adaptable provision. The provision of emergency education for internally displaced children is often understood to be more straightforward than that of refugees who have crossed borders into neighbouring countries. An assumed shared linguistic and cultural heritage negates debates over curriculum choice and language of instruction; and shared national education structures simplify issues regarding certification. However, Iraq's history of complex ethno-politics has resulted in communities divided by strong linguistic and cultural identity markers. Consequently, the IDPs arriving in the KR-I represent a variety of linguistic, cultural and religious groups. In addition, the country has two seats of governance, the Kurdish regional government in Erbil (KRG) and the Central government of Iraq in Baghdad, each with its own jurisdictions and Ministries of Education.

The two Iraqi education systems differ in terms of delivery and structure. The KRG regional education system has moved away from the central system, with a different updated curriculum that reflects the place of the Kurds in Iraqi history (Shanks, 2015). Furthermore, they have restructured the Kurdish school year, which has been divided into two semesters, each ending in final exams. By contrast, the Ministry of Education Baghdad continues with the old system, which facilitates examinations at the end of the year and runs on a separate curriculum and timetable. Interviewees reported that responsibility for the provision of education for IDPs is therefore officially dependent upon the IDPs' place of origin. IDPs from al-Anbar, Diyala and Salah al-Din previously all fell under the remit of the Central government's Ministry of Education in Baghdad, and therefore continue to do so while displaced.

However, consultation revealed that IDPs who arrived in the first wave of displacement fleeing IS movements in the north of Iraq have a more complicated allocation of responsibility. The

districts from which they fled in the Ninewa governorate have been highly contested between Baghdad and Erbil since 2003. Thus, prior to IS takeover, the administration of these districts, known as the Disputed Internal Boundaries, was mixed between the two regional powers, with an often-overlapping system of service delivery based on language and identity (Shanks, 2015). Subsequently, education in the region was managed through a complicated mix of both the KRG and Ministry of Education, Baghdad involvement. In short, the area had both KRG curriculum Kurdish schools and central curriculum Arabic schools due to an unofficial system of Kurdish patronage. Despite it being outside their official remit, since 2003 the KRG took responsibility for all the ethnically homogenous Kurdish language schools and provided Kurdish instruction to many Kurdish speaking Christian, Assyrian and Yezidi villages outside of their official jurisdiction.

Consequently, regardless of the central Ministry of Education's official obligation towards all IDP education, the KRG ministry has continued to take responsibility for the provision of education to all those who choose to continue to learn in Kurdish while displaced, while the central ministry took responsibility for Arabic provision for IDPs. To address the burgeoning needs of linguistically appropriate education for Arabic IDPs, the Regional Directorate of Education from Ninewa was relocated to Erbil and representatives from the central Baghdad ministry opened offices in the KR-I to facilitate and oversee Arabic IDP education. The central Government of Iraq continued to pay the salaries of civil servants who fled their homes due to the conflict and displaced teachers were therefore reallocated to IDP schools throughout the KRG. The MoE Erbil allowed enrolment of displaced Kurdish speaking children into KRG schools and selected KRG schools were asked to accommodate Arabic "shifts". In addition, Ministry of education officials noted that the MoE Baghdad purchased buildings and UNICEF provided prefabs for the establishment of Arabic language schools. Within the camps, tents and prefab schools were provided, for both languages, with the assistance of international actors like UNICEF and UNESCO.

However, interview and focus group data supported Education Cluster reports stating that all IDP schools are overstretched, operating in double and triple shifts, to meet demand. A lack of qualified teachers undermines the quality of education provided, and funding remains low across the education spectrum. UN and NGO reports note that enrolment in education has only been possible for a small proportion of IDP children, with availability of school places and family-driven economic responsibility listed as reasons for preventing attendance by interviewees and focus group participants. Lack of textbook availability in Arabic, due to large-scale destruction of books in IS-held areas, further restricts the availability of schooling in Arabic. Education delivery faces multiple restrictions due to the emergency context and the weak status of education infrastructure even prior to the crisis. Moreover, in addition to these obstacles, education delivery for IDPs in the KRI face a number of nuanced contextual challenges that can be seen to arise out of the wider conflict fragility and ethno-political environment. In order to present these challenges, the article will categorise them into issues of 1) Access and learning environment 2) School management and teacher recruitment and 3) Content and learning.

### **Access and learning environment**

The INEE foundational standards for education provision in emergencies states that all children should be provided with access to education and that learning environments need to be secure and safe and promote the protection and psychological well-being of learners and teachers alike (INEE, 2010). In some circumstances, however, the realization of these aims was hampered in the KRI education response due to a lack of understanding of the political and social context and its impact on children's experience of schooling.

During the initial emergency response phase in 2014, little consideration was given to the implications of integrating children from different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds within schools.



Education programming concentrated on providing school access without consideration of the effects of shared space on learning environments. Therefore, the researcher discovered that in some IDP camps, children from different communities, with different conflict experiences, were brought together in classrooms. While the provision of joint education services for different communities can potentially promote social integration, this outcome is dependent on understanding existing inter-communal relations and education content providing strong peace education elements to promote cohesion where necessary. The recognition of cultural diversity and acknowledgement of difference is a key component of a conflict sensitive education system. Through the representation of linguistic, religious and cultural variety, an education system can serve to build mutual respect and tolerance (Bush and Saltarelli, 2000; Smith, 2010; Novelli et al., 2015). Yet, if these issues are neglected, denied or addressed in a negative manner, integrated education can feed into conflicts.

In the KRI, IDP schools have limited capacity to deliver peace education. The two Iraqi curriculums differ in the degree to which they represent Iraq's minority identity groups, although both fail to adequately represent the multicultural diversity of Iraq (Shanks, 2016). Moreover, the overstretched and time-limited nature of IDP and refugee education provision in Iraq means that there is little room for subjects that may address such issues. Furthermore, teachers are mostly from within the displaced community and have their own conflict trauma to contend with, limiting their ability to serve as peace negotiators. Focus groups frequently referenced the high levels of trauma in camps and the lack of professional health services. Lastly, education personal in Iraq lacked the specific tools to deliver peace education even before the crisis (Shanks, 2016). Therefore, IDP emergency schools were ill equipped to manage the integration of children from different communities.

However, although not widespread, the research found that integration was attempted during the emergency response phase in the KRI. Unfortunately, these attempts failed to consider not only the limited capacity for such an undertaking, but also the contextual challenges of such a venture. One striking example was presented in Arbat IDP camp located 20km southeast of the city of Sulaimani. This camp, formally a closed refugee camp, became home to a mixed demographic of Arab, Yezidi and Shebak IDPs in 2014. The Yezidi and Shebak IDPs came from the Ninewa governorate in the aftermath of the fall of Mosul, while Arab residents of the camp were principally Sunni Muslims and came from two separate places of origin: those from the Nineveh region, who arrived at the camp with Yezidi and Shebak IDPs in August 2014 and those from the Salah ad-Din region who began arriving in November 2014 after being displaced when Iraqi forces retook ISIS-held territory.

Education actors opened a school in a converted warehouse in Arbat IDP Camp and despite initial high enrolment from all communities, interviews with community leaders and focus groups with youth both noted that Yezidi and Shabak student enrolment dropped drastically within the first school term. The most commonly cited explanation during consultations with community leaders was that pupils experienced ethno-religious discrimination within the school environment. Community leaders claimed that Yezidi and Shebak children were subjected to verbal abuse, mostly based on their religious faith, by Arab students. With closer examination and understanding of the wider conflict, such a negative dynamic might have been predicted. The camp demographics do not reflect the ethno-religious population distributions found in the places of origin of the camp residents and each community has a distinctly different conflict experience.

The residents from Salah ad-Din, who made up the majority Arab community in the camp, had no previous residential exposure to Yezidi or Shebak communities. Negative stereotyping of minorities is prevalent in Iraq, but more so in areas without mixed populations. Furthermore, the Salah ad-Din residents had lived under IS occupation, only fleeing during the government retaliation. This in no way assumes that the Arab IDP community supported IS; many Sunni Arabs were unable to flee while IS had control of their districts. However, it can be suggested that many minority IDPs would assume that some Sunni Arabs stayed because they supported IS, and so tensions would occur. Therefore, these IDPs faced suspicion over their ideological status and sectarian beliefs. For integrated emergency education to have provided a safe and stabilizing environment for

all children in this context, the school and its teachers would have required specific training to deal with such complex inter-ethnic dynamics.

Attempts at integrated education provision were not limited to Arbat. Across the region, scarcity of school places led to calls for host communities to open schools to IDPs. In many locations, IDPs have settled within ethnically affiliated areas, for example, Christians living in the predominantly Christian area of Erbil named Ankawa, and schools have successfully accommodated some IDP pupils. However, in other areas, this call fed directly into broader ethno-political conflict narratives. For example, Ministry officials shared that in Kirkuk, Kurdish schools were requested by the Ministry of Education to open their doors to Arab IDP children in their districts.<sup>2</sup> Yet anecdotal reports of some headmasters refusing IDP children entry to Kurdish schools were reported during data collection in Kirkuk. This rejection was not framed in terms of lack of resources or fear of overstretching supplies. Instead, a more political motive was deemed to be behind the rejection.

Although under de facto Kurdish control since 2014, Kirkuk is a contested region and its resolution has been placed in the hands of Article 140<sup>3</sup> of the Iraqi constitution, which calls for a census and referendum. The fight for Kirkuk is therefore a numbers game which demands representation on the ground. A battle for demographic supremacy can be seen to be fought in order to demonstrate this. As such, protecting ethnically defined schools can be seen to be enforcing Kurdish claims to administrative control and therefore safeguarding their security in the region (Shanks, 2016). In this way, calls for schools to accommodate displaced children can be seen to feed into broader ethno-conflict narratives.

In many locations, such conflict-insensitive practices were avoided by the use of separate school shifts for each displaced language community: Arabic and Kurdish. However, as the Arbat example illustrates, in Iraq, linguistic indicators do not always denote a shared cultural, political or social understanding. Education actors required a deeper understanding of the conflict and ethno-political history in Iraq. Such examples illustrate the need for compulsory conflict or situational analysis to underpin education interventions in fragile contexts.

### **School management and teacher recruitment**

The INEE foundational standards for education in emergencies call for fair and equitable teacher recruitment and selection that reflects the needs of the recipients. It also demands that education interventions examine the conditions for teachers and that support and supervision are given to schools (INEE, 2010). The split in responsibility for IDP education in KRI based on language markers has resulted in the two ministries both functioning within each camp and sometimes utilising the same host school in shifts. Both ministries are dealing with different levels of need and managing different budgets, with the KRI suffering economic crisis and civil servants going unpaid for extensive periods. This has resulted in varied levels of education support and provision for each community.

The split in education management between two separate entities has resulted in communities being able to view their own education access in comparison to that of their linguistically different IDP neighbours. Relative deprivation theory, which posits that the perception that one group has received less than they are due can lead to social conflict, suggests that such comparisons can serve to deepen already fractured interethnic relations. This can cause resentment and tensions concerning the level, or lack, of access being provided. The research was provided with the following manifestations of this dilemma within emergency education provision in the KRI.

#### **Teacher salaries**

The economic crisis within the KRG limited the payment of all civil servant salaries, including teachers, whereas, in contrast, the civil servants paid by Baghdad continued to receive their salaries

even while displaced. This inequality was made apparent when schools administered by the different authorities were working in shifts within one building, causing tension and resentment towards Baghdad from the host community education officials. This can feed into the wider political conflict between the two regional seats of authority and also foster resentment of the Arab teachers and IDPs. Such resentment was illustrated by one interviewee, who commented “*Baghdad withholds our budget and we go without, we welcome the Arabs and help them, but they still have their salaries, it is us (Kurds) who are suffering*”. Furthermore, interventions by international organizations that pay volunteer teachers within IDP schools an incentive each month can also generate this dynamic and cause tensions between qualified contracted teachers and untrained volunteer teachers within schools.

### **Resource competition**

The apparent difference in available resources between schools under each ministry has led to conflict between school directors. Interviewees reported examples of conflicts between the head teachers of Arabic and Kurdish schools in IDP camps over access to supplies. In one instance, reported to the Education Cluster, the allocation of resources for a Kurdish language school from the KRG was far superior to the support received by the Arabic language school from Baghdad. The Kurdish school received desks and chairs while the Arabic school was left without. Despite sharing a school building the headmaster of the Kurdish school actively prevented the Arabic school from using the furniture, even when not in use by the Kurdish school – locking all resources away. Such protection over scarce resources during times of crisis is not uncommon. However, this conflict has the potential to deepen divides between communities. The apparent inequality in resource provision between the two groups can feed into perceptions of neglect and hamper government legitimacy in the eyes of the Arabic-speaking community. Furthermore, resentment between communities over the deliberate attempts to obstruct the Arabic schools’ access to resources can advance perceptions of Kurdish hostility to non-Kurdish IDPs.

The research was presented with further evidence of inequality factors within the Arabic speaking IDP education provision. The suggestion that the government-salaried Arab IDPs living within the host community in Erbil had better access to education and greater support and focus from the MoD Baghdad than the Arabic speaking minority communities living in the camps was prevalent during focus groups. As would be expected, the economic status of government officials affords them greater access to all resources required and does not necessarily reflect a resource bias. However, the perception of increased support can lead to grievances between communities and decreased government legitimacy.

Ensuring education provision is equitable is at the heart of conflict sensitivity. The complex system of divided responsibility based, not on place of origin, but on linguistic affiliation, risks hampering this aim.

### **Content and learning**

Schools can have a significant influence on children through curriculum content, providing the opportunity to reproduce dominant language and culture and ensuring their transmission to future generations. A curriculum can teach history, religion and even geographical interpretations of homelands through the channels of history and geography. As such, the curriculum and content are often used to deny shared history and oppress minority language rights (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2002). Therefore, to assess whether the content of education for IDPs in the KRI interacts with conflict requires an analysis of the political control and administration of education. In terms of an emergency situation, this issue may not take precedence as efforts are placed on providing basic

protection. However, the extent to which the education system supports fundamental freedoms through the representation of all groups should be examined.

In this respect, the provision of education for the linguistically divided Yezidi community was a recurrent issue presented in focus groups. Yezidi IDPs have been displaced from areas that are highly contested between Baghdad and Erbil. The population is split between Kurdish and Arabic speakers, and also between those who identify as ethnically Kurdish those who reject this identity in favour of a Yezidi ethno-religious identity. Therefore, IDP education provision for this group technically continues to be split between both Baghdad and KRG. However, some IDP respondents questioned the freedom to access Arabic language education and express non-Kurdish Yezidi identity within the education system.

A survey conducted by REACH in 2014 noted that 24 per cent of IDP children in Duhok governorate who previously studied in Arabic were now enrolled in KRG Kurdish language schools. Education literature demonstrates that children are more able to secure literacy in their first language and then to transfer those skills to the second language of instruction (August and Hakuta, 1998; Brock-Utne and Holmarsdottir, 2004; Rolstad et al., 2005; Abadzi, 2006). Therefore, the change in language potentially placed this 24 per cent at an educational disadvantage. Yet, when faced with the alternative of no access to education, delivery in a second language may have been deemed the best solution. The overburdened IDP education system in Iraq has numerous obstacles to overcome, and this change may well have reflected the dichotomy in funding between Arabic and Kurdish schools at the time of the survey.

During consultations, however, the origins of this shift in medium of instruction were often presented in terms of the wider political and social divisions in the region. Some sections of the Yezidi community perceived the shift to be a result of Kurdish authorities failing to respect Yezidi communities who do not identify as Kurdish. Interviewees evidenced this accusation by highlighting: the repeated reference to the “Kurdish Yezidi population” by the local media; a report of a camp manager prohibiting Arabic music in a child-friendly space in a Yezidi majority camp;<sup>4</sup> and Kurdish language teachers being quick to negate the need for Arabic instruction for Yezidi pupils.<sup>5</sup> Such events appeared to fuel fears that displaced Yezidi who did not identify as Kurdish risked having their right to representation and mother tongue instruction in Arabic denied.

To understand this fear, we must further unpack the broader ethno-political environment. The historical homeland of the Yezidi community in Ninewa was unofficially claimed by the KRG after the fall of the Ba’ath party in 2003, with an official narrative of ethnically Kurdish Yezidi villages falling under their protection. While there is substantial evidence to support Kurdish claims to Sinjar, accusations have been heard of a process of ‘Kurdification’ in a region that did not self-identify as Kurdish (Natali, 2015; Smith and Shadarevian, 2017). Yezidi populations have registered threats to their identity from Kurdish assimilation attempts since 2003, especially communities that champion administration of disputed territories by the central government and chose to use Baghdad administered services (Barber, 2017). Calls from within the Yezidi community for greater recognition of the group as ethnically Yezidi have become even more vocal during displacement and in the aftermath of Peshmerga’s withdrawal from Yezidi villages in June 2014.<sup>6</sup> Despite the territorial claim to Sinjar, Kurdish Peshmerga withdrew from the region immediately before the IS attack in 2014, that the United Nations says could amount to genocide. Consequently, many Yezidis have also blamed the Kurdish Peshmerga for the IS atrocities, stating that they abandoned the residents of the region (Barber, 2017).

If we take a constructivist stance on ethnicity formation we understand that social, political and historical forces construct identity and that individual identities change over time as social contexts change. Furthermore, people exhibit different identities in different contexts (Gee, 2000) and identities disappear and return, sometimes re-invented. From this perspective, we can see that the position of education in most societies allows it to take on an essential role in the socialization of ethnic identity. The content of education curricula can shape how children see themselves; it can

influence their understanding of the conflict and their perceptions of the future. By encouraging the use of the Kurdish curriculum in schools while in displacement, the Kurdish authorities are viewed by some Yezidi as attempting to strengthen the claim to govern the disputed areas through strengthening the perception of the Yezidi community as ethnically Kurdish. Youth focus groups in IDP camps in Duhok defiantly stated that they were not Kurdish and spoke of their rejection of what they regarded as an “imposed” Kurdish identity. Social media sites also reflect this stance and increasingly provocative anti-Kurd Facebook pages have expanded under Yezidi headings.

The choice of an education provider is therefore inherently political and is often contentious. Language and curriculum choices can be perceived to benefit some while marginalizing others. Dryden-Peterson (2011: 70) notes that “Language decisions highlight for refugee children the power dynamics of their situation”. In this case, some Yezidi perceive Kurdish administered schooling as a symbol of assimilation, which translates to feelings of marginalization and disempowerment in relation to the wider conflict and territorial dispute. Yet it is important to note that this reflects a split in the community and a section of the Yezidi group self-represent as indeed ethnically ‘Kurdish’ and welcome the provision of Kurdish language education while in displacement. This counter-narrative is equally vocal in their position. The complex social-political alignment of Iraqi ethnic groups once more demonstrating the need for heightened contextual awareness for humanitarian actors.

In order to ensure that education is conflict sensitive in such a complex ethnopolitical and social context, extensive community consultation is required. Understanding that in Iraq ethnic groups do not represent a homogenous political or social stance is vital when negotiating neutral and constructive education access.

## CONCLUSION

Education in conflict-affected areas has been examined in terms of its negative impact on the wider conflict by a broad array of commentators. Yet, in terms of international practitioners and educationalists working in such environments, the same practical indicators and assessment tools are still prevalent: enrolment figures, school buildings and textbook supply are often prioritized over evaluations of education’s interaction with conflict. Contextualization of education policy remains an often-neglected process in conflict-affected countries.

Therefore, this article strove to shift the emphasis from a standard evaluation of education services for displaced populations to one that examines education’s wider role and political impact. In order to address the adverse interactions of education with conflict, we must first have a clear understanding of their origins. A conflict-sensitive analysis of education is being championed by organizations like the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) and UNICEF’s Peace-building Education and Advocacy programme (PBEA), but their efforts have yet to be mainstreamed into standard practice and remain unfocused and broad in their application, failing to influence everyday education assessment and planning methodology.

The article has demonstrated the complexity of IDP education delivery in the KRI, providing examples of how the current conflict, ethno-political background and education can interact. Ethnic diversity, historical and territorial disputes and current sectarian-driven agendas each overlap to ensure that education delivery for displaced populations is inherently political. IDP education provision in the KRI fails to be conflict sensitive and currently intersects with debates over territorial control and return, identity-driven security and issues of equality.

This is due to a lack of contextual understanding in terms of both the operating environment and education’s potential influence. The provision of schooling for displaced populations has therefore fed directly into conflict narratives on a number of occasions. Ensuring conflict sensitivity within emergency education provision is no doubt an arduous task and Iraq represents one of the most

complex operating environments for humanitarian actors, yet there two critical aims that can be further developed to support this objective.

Firstly, the systematic generation and use of evidence and knowledge related to education, conflict and the socio-political environment is required. This would aim to ensure that activities are evidence-based and sensitive to ongoing fluctuations in stability. The use of community conflict-monitoring systems and organizational conflict analysis tools should be routine in education interventions to monitor levels of tensions and provide contextual understanding.

Secondly, there is a need to clarify administrative responsibility. Currently, there is no one single institution or body in charge of IDP education delivery and overlapping jurisdictions have contributed towards the problems documented. However, this requires political will and economic commitments. Hence, while the article can recommend a number of technical and policy suggestions on how to tackle the delivery of education for displaced communities in the KRI, their implementation will ultimately depend on the sustained political will to resolve the different issues in a fair, transparent and non-discriminatory fashion. Therefore, first and foremost, the political commitment to provide equality of education is required.

## NOTES

1. For Focus Group Discussions (FGD), IDP and refugees between the ages of 16–21 were invited to take part. Ethical considerations with regard to conducting FGDs with youth were reflected upon carefully in consultation with local groups working on protection. In response to this, the researcher provided a clear explanation of the project and sought participant (if under 18, caregiver's – only two participants in total) oral consent in advance of the group. The introduction to the FGD was specific in making clear that the research was only a reporting mechanism that could not guarantee any form of deliverable or change in camp policy. Before consent was obtained it was explained that participation was entirely voluntary and that non-participation (or withdrawal after starting) would have no adverse practical consequences for the participants.
2. Article 140 of the new Iraqi constitution necessitates a three-stage process: normalisation, census and referendum. Normalisation would be achieved by the assisted return of internally displaced people and the recovery of their property
3. References to the Yezidi population in Kurdish media systematically refer to them as Kurdish Yezidi, despite rejections of this by many in the community
4. This accusation was triangulated with education cluster meeting minutes and found to have been documented once
5. Kurdish language teachers in three Duhok camps denied that any Yezidi IDPs need Arabic instruction, stating that 'all Yezidi speak Kurdish'
6. The escape of many Yezidi IDPs to Syria and Duhok has instead been accredited to the actions of neighbouring Kurdish groups the PKK and the People's Protection Units (YPG). Sinjar was eventually liberated through a joint assault by the local Yezidi forces, the PKK and KDP Peshmerga in 2015, but it remains largely unpopulated. The liberating forces each rushed to raise their partisan flags over significant government buildings and claim the victory; demonstrating the competing interests and agendas of actors in the city. This prompted Barazani to declare that only the Kurdistan flag could be raised as the victory was deemed a Peshmerga one, dismissing the role of Yezidi militias and PKK fighters and causing further tensions.

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