

Iraq Community-Based Conflict Assessments

A synthesis

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ABSTRACT

This report synthesises the findings of sixty conflict assessments carried out by the Iraq Community-based Conflict Mitigation (ICCM) programme in sub-districts across the country. The assessments show that despite an improvement in the situation, particularly on the security and political front, some of the fundamental causes of instability and potential triggers of violence remain. Weak governance, at various levels, continues to be a core issue. Lack of improvements in most people's socio-economic situation is another. People who participated in the assessments consistently mention poor access to quality services, and limited employment opportunities, mostly for women and young men, as key concerns and potential destabilising factors. The situation of women is reported as deteriorating. Major investments in service delivery, job creation and reforms to stimulate the private sector would help consolidating peace. Strengthening the accountability of the political process and of the government and institutions, especially at the local level, and ensuring the protection of the rights of vulnerable groups, in particular women, are also perceived as necessary to build a peaceful relationship between the State and citizens. Continued improvements in the security situation and the capacity of Iraq security forces to protect citizens underpin these efforts and are perceived as top, short-term priorities.

Introduction: The community-based assessments & this report

The community-based assessments synthesised in this report were conducted by Iraqi conflict assessment facilitators (CAFs) working on the Iraq Community-based Conflict Mitigation Program (ICCM, also known as *Nahwa Al-Salaam*). Facilitators collected data from primary and secondary sources (official and unofficial) within selected sub-districts. The analysis and summary of the individual assessments was compiled by members of Relief International and Columbia University's Center for International Conflict Resolution.

This synthesis report, prepared as part of the Iraq CCA/UNDAF process and under the guidance of the Inter-Agency Information and Analysis Unit (IAU), aims at informing the CCA pre-analysis phase.

The report:

- provides an analytical summary of the key findings from the community-based assessments on the causes and consequences of the recent conflict in Iraq;
- it then highlights potential conflict triggers;
- it identifies the key conflict actors; and
- lastly, it outlines key priority changes perceived by people as key for peace consolidation.

The report acknowledges that the great diversity of the country context makes it difficult to over-generalise about past and present causes of conflict and possible responses. However, the information collected through the field assessments allows identifying consistent patterns that need to be considered in further and more detailed analysis and in policy making.

Note: The community-based assessments and this report are not a comprehensive analysis of the Iraq conflict in its various phases and characteristics and of the national level political process. The report does not analyse in any detail the pre-2003 context and the specific role of international and some national actors since then. This report does not aim at providing strategic and programming recommendations for future peace building or development initiatives. It rather highlights key problematic issues and areas and suggest, on the basis of communities' feed-back, immediate and longer term changes that need to happen, at the local level, to address existing or potential sources of tension.

Key findings 1: Causes of conflict

Widespread insecurity and absence of rule of law, low state legitimacy (to a good extent a result of the previous regime), human rights abuses, and foreign armed presence are known factors of instability across the country. These are considered, and are mentioned by communities, as main causes for the lack of service delivery and low economic and employment prospects. Lack of services and jobs, among others, increases frustration and grievances within communities and can push people, in particular young men, to seek access to opportunities through other than peaceful means. Divisions and tensions among and within communities are also mentioned causes of tension.

The findings of the community assessments confirm this.

However, what these assessments also say is that the cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity of the country has been more often a richness than a problem in the long history of Iraq. In a context of severe deprivation (e.g. insecurity, poverty, lack of open political system/democracy), this diversity has been and is easily exploited by individuals and groups that operate beyond the law and for their own self-interest.

What the analysis of the assessments' findings also suggests is that all of the factors mentioned above, and the conflict itself, are results of a protracted situation of weak governance, e.g. of the incapacity of the state to mediate an inclusive political process, and to perform, in a cost-effective and service delivery oriented manner, its core and expected functions. These include security, the transparent management and reinvestment of resources to stimulate growth and support economic activities (e.g. agriculture, small businesses) and employment. They also include the delivery of services to the population (e.g. health, education, water and sanitation, electricity), in urban as well as in rural areas. And lastly, they include the protection of vulnerable people.

In line with what has just been said, the community-based assessments consistently list the following as causes of tension and violence in the concerned districts:

- *Political process and state-citizens relationship/interface.* People recognise progress and new opportunities for participation at the local level. However, reports of "occupation" by powerful local persons or groups of key political and administrative positions suggest that the political space, in many (not all) instances, has been captured by few individuals, and that power struggles are going on. Elections were quoted at the same time as an opportunity and as a threat.¹ Corruption, the lack of merit based recruitment processes and the weak state of rule of law are mentioned as key reasons for ineffective performance of local governments, for insecurity and disruption to social and economic activities. Systems of accountability are weak; people say that local leaders do not represent all the communities in the area, and do not respond to the population for their actions. People reportedly do not know how to influence local decisions. This appears to be the case more in poor rural areas with highly factionalised communities, than in urban centres.

There seems to be confusion as to what to expect from the central government, still looked at as the main deliverer of services and protection, and what to demand from the local government, the only direct interface most people have. This reflects the fact that the balance between the centre and the periphery still needs to be defined, and that political, administrative, and fiscal responsibilities of local governments have to be better understood.

Security features high in what people see as a cause of instability² and of their poor access to services and opportunities. However, the analysis of the findings suggests that at the local level the causal relationship goes the other way around: weak legitimate state presence (pre-dating 2003, and only slowly and recently improving) and the slow progress in delivering services, certainly affected by nation-wide violent events of the last few years, is what pushes people, particularly young men and others who feel excluded, towards violence.³

According to the community assessments, in areas where the legitimacy of leaders and institutions is considered stronger, people's perception of security and of how things

¹ The community-based assessments were carried out before and short after the elections, therefore they do not contain an assessment of the impact of elections results and the follow up political context.

² Perception of security is highly sensitive to the geographical location of the districts where the assessments were carried out, with some districts quoting it as the number one problem, and others pointing at visible improvements.

³ The word criminality is referred to consistently, but it seems to encompass a variety of situations, from the activities of militias, to common crimes, to political criminality.

are going in general seems better. The incidence of violence in these areas seems lower.

To summarise, still limited (real or perceived) participation in political and decision-making processes at the local level and weak local institutions with unclear mandates and scarce resources and capacities seem to contribute to creating a sense of frustration among great part of the population. This, combined with other factors, could spark violence and undermine a national project of reconciliation and development.

- *Socio-economic factors.* The two key issues that are consistently mentioned by people, as causes of frustration and local level tension, are: the disruption of basic services; and the poor status of the economy, which, at the local level, translates into limited economic opportunities and access to funding, for instance in critical sectors like agriculture and trade, and in low access to employment. The poor management of resources, for instance water, and environmental degradation are also mentioned as concerns. The extensive system of social benefits not only does not replace access to services and opportunities, but does not seem to provide sufficient support to the most vulnerable groups, as persistent levels of poverty, high school drops out and the extreme vulnerability of some groups (e.g. women's headed households, children, elders, disabled) show.

Levels of unemployment, high across the country, reach such figures as 80% in some districts, according to the community assessments. The loss and/or the capture of state jobs by powerful members of the community is also a source of grievance, in a context where jobs in the public sector remain the main source of formal employment.

The poor situation of services and the lack of economic opportunities are a consequence of several years of neglect, inefficient management, and of conflict. However, in the current context and as things seem to improve in other sectors (e.g. security), these appear to be becoming increasingly causes of grievances and local level tension. Also, it is important to note that the perceived deterioration of services (even in circumstances where they have neither improved nor worsened) can act as a powerful de-stabilising factor. This combined with other factors (for instance real or perceived corruption around resources management) could lead to violent outbreaks.

High illiteracy amongst the adult population and in rural areas and population displacement and return are also worrying factors that might contribute to future tension.

- *The situation of women and other vulnerable groups.* The gravity of the situation of women, as reported by recent data (e.g CCA pre-analysis) and confirmed by the community assessments, deserves particular attention. With extremely few exception, and with slightly different degrees of severity, the assessments report the following: women are increasingly excluded from public life and political participation; they are excluded from access to jobs and services; in very poor rural areas in particular, but not exclusively, women are married at very young age; widows lack basic protection; women's headed households experience high levels of poverty and neglect. Honour killings and other severe violation of women's basic human rights are also increasingly reported.

Such widespread rights violations are not only important as such, but they need urgent consideration as their consequences highly impact on the stability of communities in the immediate term and on development prospects in the medium and long term. The decreasing level of education of children, for instance, the impoverished status of health of children and women, and the lack of gain to the local

economy due to women's exclusion from the social and economic development contribute to creating unhealthy societies. Lastly the exclusion from the process of re-defining, through political participation, the nature of the state, might have an impact on long-term reforms.

The situation of neglect of other vulnerable groups is also mentioned as worrying.

Key findings 2: Conflict triggers

The above-mentioned causes of tension are mostly structural. Whilst they can lead to high levels of dissatisfaction with the state of affairs, to tension among and within communities, and to more or less peaceful protests against the government, normally they would require the intervention of other factors to lead to overt violence.

Also, responses to structural causes are long term in nature, e.g. it will take several years before a flourishing private sector emerges or the skill-base for a services oriented economy is built. Therefore, whilst planning and implementing medium to long-term reforms and improvement in services, it is important to understand and manage triggers that can sparkle violence, and that could thus undermine longer-term efforts.

Participants to the assessments identified as main conflict triggers: a potential deterioration of the security situation, included of criminality, due to reduced US military presence and, mainly in border areas, to the continued interference of foreign armed groups; political violence, e.g. violence around the election outcomes and other political negotiations, ⁴ in particular the power sharing deals at the national and the local level, most likely in areas with a recent history of sectarian and violence and tribal conflict; competition over scarce resources and services in densely populated areas (aggravated by the high population growth), in areas of displacement and return of displaced people, and in environmentally stressed areas; manifest issues of abuse of power, favouritism and nepotism in allocating benefits and access to economic opportunities, principally involving local councils and police; extremist discourses by tribal and/or religious leaders. Land disputes and border settlements (including the application of Art 140 of the Constitution), in particular in the North Eastern region, have a high potential to trigger local or regional level violence.

Key findings 3: Actors

Several actors have played a role in the conflict and continue (or are perceived to be contributing) to fuel tensions. These include foreign forces, militia and armed groups of various natures. All of these were mentioned in the assessments.

However, some national and local level actors are recognised by communities as playing a particularly important role not only because of their involvement in the recent conflict and potentially in future tension, but also for their potential contribution to peace. They include:

- *Politicians and political parties.* The assessments' findings suggest, as mentioned earlier, that the newly created political space (e.g. political process, election) would be a more positive development, weren't it captured by restricted groups/powerful individuals who are not fully representative of local communities. Politicians and political parties, some of whom fall short of the basic elements of democratic political

⁴ Most of the community-based assessment were carried out before the elections and identified election violence as a conflict trigger.

institutions, often play a divisive role. They do not mediate between the centre and the local context and they do not ensure that the interests of people are addressed. There are few exceptions, according to the assessment. The role of politicians and political parties need to be explored in so far as they prevent the strengthening of governance practices and the consolidation of a national and local level political reconciliation.

- *Central government and local administration.* As mentioned earlier, overall, despite recent improvements, people fail to see central and local level authorities as actors capable or willing to improve their situation. As for politicians and political parties, nepotism, corruption, and pursuit of one own or group's interests are often quoted as key faults. In some instances, authorities are directly blamed for the lack of access to services. The confusion regarding the roles, responsibilities and capacities (including fiscal capacity) of local versus central government officials was mentioned above. What is important to note here, is that people's expectations are not being met, and authorities are largely blamed for this. The second important point to note is that even if major reforms were launched, tangible improvements would not be immediate. In the meanwhile, the limited trust and confidence of people in the government might fade.
- *Traditional (tribal) and religious leaders.* Their authority and role are widely recognised. Although, in some instances, they have contributed to fuelling tension, and in some areas they are still playing divisive politics, they remain key players within communities and potential powerful actors of peace. Their contribution is particularly appreciated in the resolution of local level disputed and in mediating between communities and authorities. Exceptions are the cases where traditional and religious leaders have promoted highly conservative and extremist discourses.
- *National security forces.* This is where the responses in the assessments were most diverse, ranging from increased trust to complete disillusion in the capacity of the police and, to a lesser extent, the army to ensure security and protect citizens. Accusations of abuse and corruption were reported, although it is difficult to understand the extent to which comments refer to the past, the present or both. In any case, people want to see a more effective role of Iraqi security forces in re-establishing security and peace.
- *Non-state actors.* These, according to the assessments, comprise of various militia, armed groups and criminal gangs, some of whom in addition to causing insecurity, have also taken control of positions of power. The reintegration of these actors into formal structures and communities present specific challenges that need to be considered early on, as the example of the *Awakenings councils* show.

Other actors mentioned for their either their role in fomenting violence or their potential role in re-establishing security or contribute to peaceful relations at the community level include the *displaced populations, the media, intellectuals, artists and eminent persons, civil society organisations* among others.

Conclusion: Peace factors

The key questions at this point are: What can and needs to change immediately to consolidate the modest gain of better security, to increase the trust in the authorities, and to support the political process, thus preventing the outbreak of new violence? What are the critical measures that will unblock people's access to services and economic opportunities, in particular jobs, even if in a gradual manner?

Given the structural causes of tension and potential conflict triggers identified above and the role played by key actors in initiating or allowing violence, or in consolidating peace, the following are what participants to the community assessments see as potential factors of peace.

- In the short term, enhanced security seems to be both a key concern and a needed answer. Whereas it's been argued that security alone is not a core cause of conflict, given the importance of people's perception of security rapid improvement there will contribute to peace consolidation. Also further decreasing violence and preventing it from happening again is necessary if progress is to happen in other areas. This, implies strengthening the presence and capacity of Iraqi security forces at the community level and there were security remain an important concern. This, and other measures to strengthen the governance at the local level (see below) are expected to contribute to enhancing the rule of law, beyond security.
- Although the conflict is not necessarily about politics (but rather, it has been argued, about decades of poor governance, among others) an inclusive political process is necessary to reduce the risk and address the consequences of violence. Mediating a political dialogue and, as appropriate, power sharing mechanisms at the local level will contribute to re-opening the space created by the national level process and the recent elections, which has often been captured by local elites. This, as intangible as it might sound, has a potentially high return in terms of community's engagement with process of re-building the state-citizens relationship, which has to underpin major governance reform and development plans. Traditional, religious leaders and excluded groups such as women and, in some instances, young people can play a positive role here.
- In regard to services, economic opportunities and employment, the community assessments, given their micro-level focus, did not provide major suggestions other than saying that improved services and opportunities are what people want, and that they are essential factors of peace. It is worth reminding here a point made earlier, e.g. that as needed as services and improved economic conditions are, progress in these areas might take years. What seems to be particularly important is to understand what needs to be done to get the job started. The answer will probably rest with the central government commitment to reform and willingness/capacity to reallocate funds. Suggestions in the assessments, however, included stronger local authorities with budget capacity, the reduction of corruption, the introduction of merit-based recruitment systems, and major investment in such services as those in support to agriculture, in addition to the basic ones (e.g. health, education, water and sanitation, electricity)
- The assessments provide no insight on how to promote and protect the rights of vulnerable groups, women in particular, and how to re-establish them as full members of the society, with active political, economic, and social roles is articulated as a problem. The strengthening of social protection systems being only a partial answer.

Concluding note. As mentioned at the beginning, this report is not a comprehensive conflict analysis and does not provide specific recommendations on how to address conflict factors and trigger. The follow up to this brief report and further analysis of some of the key conflict factors will be decided as part of the Iraq CCA/UNDAF process.